

The Condor Trilogy

Jin Yong

Table of Contents

THE CONDOR TRILOGY

THE LEGEND OF THE CONDOR HEROES

The Legend of the Condor Heroes Book 1

- Chapter 1 – Incident in the Blizzard
- Chapter 2 – Seven Freaks of the South
- Chapter 3 – The Winds of the Steppes
- Chapter 4 – Twin Killers of the Dark Winds
- Chapter 5 – Crooked Bow Shooting Eagles
- Chapter 6 – Mysterious Happenings on the Summit of the Cliff
- Chapter 7 – Joust to Find a Spouse
- Chapter 8 – Each One Demonstrating His Skill
- Chapter 9 – Iron Spear, Broken Plow
- Chapter 10 – Enemies Meet

The Legend of the Condor Heroes Book 2

- Chapter 11 – Changchun Admits Defeat
- Chapter 12 – The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse
- Chapter 13 – The Crippled Person of Five Lake
- Chapter 14 – The Master of Peach Blossom Island
- Chapter 15 – The Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail
- Chapter 16 – The Nine Yin Manual
- Chapter 17 – Mutual Hands Combat
- Chapter 18 – The Three Tests
- Chapter 19 – Great Waves, School of Sharks
- Chapter 20 – The Altered Manual

The Legend of the Condor Heroes Book 3

- Chapter 21 – The Thousand-catty Rock

Chapter 22 – Wandering on a Shark's Back

Chapter 23 – Big Trouble in the Imperial Palace

Chapter 24 – Healing in the Secret Room

Chapter 25 – Desolated Inn in the Village

Chapter 26 – New Allies, Old Arrangements

Chapter 27 – In front of the Xuanyuan Platform

Chapter 28 – Peak of the Iron Palm Mountain

Chapter 29 – The Lady of the Black Marsh

Chapter 30 – Reverend Yideng

The Legend of the Condor Heroes Book 4

Chapter 31 – Lovers' Handkerchief

Chapter 32 – Rushing River Rugged Shore

Chapter 33 – Upcoming Disaster

Chapter 34 – Radical Changes on the Island

Chapter 35 – In the Temple of the Iron Spear

Chapter 36 – Expedition to the West

Chapter 37 – Descending From the Sky

Chapter 38 – Secret Order in Embroidered Pouch

Chapter 39 – Discerning Good From Evil

Chapter 40 – Sword Meet of Mount Hua

THE RETURN OF THE CONDOR HEROES

The Return of the Condor Heroes Book 1

Chapter 1 – No Love under the Wind and Moon

Chapter 2 – A Friend's Son

Chapter 3 – Seeking Tutelage at Mount Zhongnan

Chapter 4 – Under the Teaching of Quanzhen Sect

Chapter 5 – Tomb of the Living Dead

Chapter 6 – The Jade Heart Manual

Chapter 7 – Chongyang's Markings

Chapter 8 – Girl in White

Chapter 9 – A Hundred Ideas to Avoid the Enemy

Chapter 10 - The Young Hero

The Return of the Condor Heroes Book 2

Chapter 11 – A Pause from Roaming

Chapter 12 – The Heroes' Feast

Chapter 13 – The Chancellor of Wulin

Chapter 14 – Defending against Custom and Tradition

Chapter 15 – The Disciples of Eastern Heretic

Chapter 16 – Avenging a Father's Death

Chapter 17 – The Secluded Passionless Valley

Chapter 18 – Valley Master Gongsun

Chapter 19 – The Old Woman Underground

Chapter 20 – A Hero's Imperative

The Return of the Condor Heroes Book 3

Chapter 21 – Fierce Fighting at Xiangyang

Chapter 22 – The Baby Girl of the City in Danger

Chapter 23 – Sibling Rivalry

Chapter 24 – Turbulent Emotions

Chapter 25 – Domestic Strife, Foreign Aggression

Chapter 26 – Divine Eagle's Heavy Sword

Chapter 27 – Fighting Strength with Wisdom

Chapter 28 – Wedding Festivities

Chapter 29 – Ultimate Disasters

Chapter 30 – Strange Encounters

The Return of the Condor Heroes Book 4

Chapter 31 – The Other Half of the Antidote

Chapter 32 – What is Love

Chapter 33 – Tales in the Night

Chapter 34 – Settling a Dispute

Chapter 35 – The Three Golden Needles

Chapter 36 – The Birthday Celebration

Chapter 37 - Gratitudes and Grudges Over
Three Generations

Chapter 38 - Life and Death Are Boundless

Chapter 39 - Battle of Xiangyang

Chapter 40 - The Summit of Hua Shan

THE HEAVEN SWORD AND THE DRAGON SABRE

The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre Book 1

Chapter 1 - Pondering on the Gentleman Far
Far Away

Chapter 2 - At the top of Mount WuDang the
Pines and Cypresses are grown

Chapter 3 - Refined for a Hundred Years the
Precious Saber Creates a Mysterious Light

Chapter 4 - Among the Misfortune and
Disorder, the Characters Showed the Way

Chapter 5 - Plum Flower Decoration on the
Pure White Arm

Chapter 6 - Floating Northward in the
Endless Sea

Chapter 7 - Who Sent the Ice Boat to This
Heavenly Village

Chapter 8 - The Journey Home after Ten Years

Chapter 9 - Eternal Delight as the Seven
Heroes Reunited

Chapter 10 - Hundred Years Celebration
Brings Heartbreak

Notes

The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre Book 2

Chapter 11 - A woman whose tongue is
sharp as spear

Chapter 12 - Needles and Prescriptions for
Diseases Beyond Cure

Chapter 13 - No Regrets for Second Chances

Chapter 14 - Meeting Zhongshan Wolf*
Along the Way

Chapter 15 -Strange Scheme and Secret
Intrigue Like in a Dream

Chapter 16 - If All Failed, Consult the Nine
Yang

Chapter 17 - Green Wing Appears and
Vanishes with a Laugh

Chapter 18 - The Cold and Bright Ray of the
Yitian Sword

Chapter 19 - Disaster Arose Within the
Broken Impenetrable Fortress

Chapter 20 - Help From the Son To Fight the
Enemies*

The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre Book 3

Chapter 21 - Solving Problems, Resolving
Disputes and Combating the 6 Forces

Chapter 22 - Placating the Crowd and Three
Conditions

Chapter 23 - Intoxicating Lotus of the Green
Willow Manor

Chapter 24 - Tai Chi - The Origin of Soft
Subduing Hard

Chapter 25 - Lighting a blazing fire to burn
the sky.

Chapter 26 - Self Deformation of a
Handsome Jade Face

Chapter 27 - Soaring Down from a Hundred-
foot Pagoda

Chapter 28 - Broken Kindness, Lost
Friendship, Purple Robed King

Chapter 29 - The Hopes of Four Women on
the Boat

Chapter 30 - East and West Will Always Be
Divided like Enemies

The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre Book 4

Chapter 31 - Saber and Sword Lost, People
Perish

Chapter 32 – Ignorant Grievance, Vain
Anxiety, Conceited Desire
Chapter 33 – Long Flute, Short Zither,
Flowing Yellow Clothes
Chapter 34 – The Bride Tore the Red Dress
Barehanded
Chapter 35 – Casualties of the Lion-slaying
Assembly
Chapter 36 – The Three Withered Pine-trees
Sprouting Green Leaves
Chapter 37 – No Hero Under the Heavens
Able to Withstand
Chapter 38 – A Gentleman is Vulnerable to
Deceit
Chapter 39 – The Hidden Military Strategy
Manual
Chapter 40 – Didn't Know This Zhang Fellow
was The Mr. Zhang

The Legend of the Condor Heroes

Jin Yong

She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan Eagle Shooting Hero Book 01

by

Jin Yong



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Unfortunately there does not appear to a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to fan translators for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience.

Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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 - Understanding of, and enthusiasm for, wuxia, martial arts, Chinese literature and history.
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If you or a friend would like to help, please get in touch at N1ghtT1iger71@gmail.com

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 - Incident in the Blizzard](#)

[Chapter 2 - Seven Freaks of the South](#)

[Chapter 3 - The Winds of the Steppes](#)

[Chapter 4 - Twin Killers of the Dark Winds](#)

[Chapter 5 - Crooked Bow Shooting Eagles](#)

[Chapter 6 - Mysterious Happenings on the Summit of the Cliff](#)

[Chapter 7 - Joust to Find a Spouse](#)

[Chapter 8 - Each One Demonstrating His Skill](#)

[Chapter 9 - Iron Spear, Broken Plow](#)

[Chapter 10 - Enemies Meet](#)

Chapter 1 - Incident in the Blizzard

Translated by Minglei Huang



The Taoist suddenly let out a huge laugh as his right palm rose; fast as lightning it struck the middle of the spear. 'Crack!' Yang Tiexin felt his

*hand go numb and hastily let go, the spear fell
onto the snowy ground.*

Day in and day out, day after day, the Qiantang River majestically winds through and around Ox Village, near the city of Linan, on its journey toward the sea. On the shores there stood thirty or so tallow trees, leaves red like fire, yet another sign that it was now August. The wild weeds and grass around the village had just started to turn yellow. The sun shone down at a low angle on the grass, adding even more to their bleakness. Underneath two giant pine trees there gathered a group of villagers; the crowd included both men and women along with more than ten children. All of them were listening to a thin old man, giving him their complete attention.

The old man was about fifty or so, the green robe that he was wearing had been washed to a bluish-gray. He banged two pieces of wood together a couple of times, with the little bamboo stick in his left hand he started to beat on a little drum to keep pace. He started to sing: "The peach blossoms without fail, vast unused fields feeding the crows. After the soldiers by the well, families gather in sorrow."

The old man banged the drum with the stick a couple of times more, and then continued: "Old Man Yie had a wife, a son, and a daughter. They lost each other when the Jin invaded. Finally, after many hardships and much difficulty, they were able to get back together. They returned to their home to find that the Jin soldiers had burned it to the ground. They had no choice but to head off to Bianliang (modern day Kaifeng, capital of North Song). 'The heavens produce unexpected storms, people have unforeseen misfortunes'. As soon as the four of them got to Bianliang, they ran into a troop of Jin soldiers. The leader of the soldiers looked down and saw that Young Miss Yie was quite beautiful; he jumped down from his horse, and grabbed her.

With a laugh, he threw her onto his saddle and said: 'Pretty little girl, you are going to go home with me.' How could young Miss Yie agree? She struggled with all her might. The leader yelled out: 'If you don't stop struggling, then your family will die!' He picked up his 'wolf fang' club and smashed it down on her brother's head."....'The nether world gains a new ghost, the real world loses one more soul.'

"Old Man Yie and his wife fell onto their son's body and started to cry their hearts out. That Jin soldier lifted up this 'wolf fang' club twice more and took care of them. Young Miss Yie did not cry, she simply said: 'Sir, please stop killing people. I'll go with you.' This made the soldier extremely happy. Just as he let his guard down, Young Miss Yie suddenly grabbed the saber at his waist, pulled it out, and thrust at his heart. It looked like she was about to avenge her family's death; but alas it was not to be. That soldier had much experience on the battlefield; with out thinking, he merely pushed her forward very naturally, sending Young Miss Yie to the ground. He had just enough time to say: 'Little bitch!' But Young Miss Yie has already brought the blade to her neck. Poor girl: 'With a flower's beauty and the moon's grace, such a sweet soul dying sadly so young.'"

He alternated between talking and singing. Every single one of the villagers was now sighing in sadness and rage. The man continued: "Dear audience members, as the saying goes: 'Treat others with an honest heart, hold your head up on high with pride. If evil deeds go unpunished, only the evil will survive.' The Jin has conquered half of our Great Song, killing, burning, raping and pillaging; not an evil deed left undone. Yet no punishment whatsoever seems to be forthcoming. Our Great Song's officials are responsible for this. China has plenty of healthy and available soldiers; yet every time we go up against the Jin

armies, all they do is turn around and run, leaving us peasants behind to suffer. There are stories, like the one about Young Miss Yie and her family, by the thousands north of the river. Living here south of the river is truly like being in heaven on earth, but we fear the day the Jin soldiers come invading. 'Rather be a dog in peace, than a man in troubled times!' My name is Zhang Shiwu, thanks everyone for listening to the story of 'Miss Yie, the Young Martyr'." After banging the drum several more times, he held up a tray.

Many of the villagers placed a coin or two in the pan, which quickly filled up. Zhang Shiwu thanked the villagers and gathered the sixty or seventy coins into his travel bag. He got up and started to walk off.

A young man of around twenty years of age walked out from among the villagers. He asked: "Mr. Zhang, did you just come from the north?" The young fellow was very tall and very well built with big eyes and a pair of very bushy eyebrows. Zhang Shiwu answered: "Yes." The young man answered: "Then let's have a couple of drinks. I'll pay, what do you say?" Zhang Shiwu replied: "I dare not receive such a favor as a stranger." The young fellow laughed and answered: "Once we've had a couple of drinks, then we are no longer strangers are we? My surname is Guo, given name Xiaotian" Pointing at a clean, white-faced fellow behind him, he continued: "This here is Yang Tiexin. The two of us were just listening to your story. As expected, it was a good story; but we still have several questions we wanted to ask." Zhang Shiwu replied: "No problem, no problem. To run into the two of you today is probably fate doing its work." Guo Xiaotian led Zhang Shiwu to one of the small wine shops in Ox Village and sat down at one of the tables.

The owner of this little wine shop is a cripple. Supported by two crutches, he slowly brought out two jugs of wine, a plate of peas, a plate of salted peanuts, a plate of dried bean curd, and a plate with three salted eggs. Afterwards he sat down on the stool by the door and stared at the setting sun, not even glancing at the three men.

Guo Xiaotian poured the wine and made Zhang Shiwu down two bowls before he began: "Here in the country, we only get to buy meat on the 2nd and the 16th, so we don't have any meat to go down with the wine. Please forgive us." Zhang Shiwu replied: "At least we've got wine, can't complain about that. From your accents, seems like you two are from up north." Yang Tiexin answered: "We are both from Shandong province. We moved away three years ago because we couldn't stand the Jin running loose around there. When we arrived, we fell in love with the people here and settled down. Just now you were saying that us living here south of the river is like living in heaven itself, fearing only an invasion by the Jin. Do you really think that the Jin will invade?"

Zhang Shiwu sighed: "Gold and silver could literally cover the ground and there are beautiful women every which way you look; such is the richness and enchantment of the south. There isn't a day that passes without the Jin thinking about invading. But the final decision about the invasion of the Jin is not made by the Jin, but is made by the Imperial Court of our Great Song in Linan!" This took both Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin by surprise. They asked as one: "Why do you say that?"

Zhang Shiwu continued: "We Han Chinese outnumber the Nuzhen by more than one hundred to one. If only the Imperial Court started using honest and loyal men. With one hundred of us going up against one of them, how could the Jin army win? The northern half of our country was

literally handed over to the Jin in the past by Hui Zong, Qin Zong, and Gao Zong. Those three emperors, from grandfather to grandson, trusted and used corrupt officials, oppressed the masses, and then they either killed or somehow got rid of all the generals that were fighting the Jin. Such a beautiful land, and they literally put it right into the hands of the Jin. Of course the Jin people respectfully accepted it. If the Imperial Court continues to do what it did then, trusting and using corrupt officials, then it is as if they are kneeling on the ground asking the Jin army to come. How could the Jin refuse?" After hearing that, Guo Xiaotian couldn't help but to slam his hand down onto the table in rage. All of the bowls, plates, and chopsticks on the tables jumped from the impact.

Zhang Shiwu continued: "Thinking back, Hui Zong was all set on trying to live forever and become immortal. He was surrounded by corrupt and useless officials: Zai Jing and Wong Yu only knew how to raise taxes and skim off the top. Tong Guan and Liang Shichen were eunuchs that only knew how to suck up. Gao Qiu and Li Bangyan only knew how to lie around and get girls for the emperor. The emperor did not attend to official matters at all; if he wasn't going off to visit monks to ask for guidance, then he was traveling around in search of rare and interesting looking rocks. Once the Jin came, he became a turtle, hiding in his shell and passing the throne to his son, Qin Zong. At that time Li Gang was defending the capital Bianliang and fought off the Jin army. But who would think that Qin Zong would believe some rumors that were started by corrupt officials and dismiss Li Gang. On top of that, he did not replace Li Gang with another experienced and able general. Instead he put the defense of the capital in the hands of a self-proclaimed "Ambassador from the Gods" named Gao Zong and asked him to invite the Army of Heaven to defend the city. The Army of Heaven did not show up. How could we not lose the

capital? At last both Hui Zong and Qin Zong were captured by the Jin army. These two fools had it coming and got what they deserved. But they also brought disaster to millions of Chinese peasants who did nothing to deserve it."

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin were just getting madder and madder. Guo Xiaotian said: "We have all heard about the capture of the emperors, and the disgrace of the year of Jing Kang, many times. We have also heard about the 'Army of Heaven' talk before, but we just thought it was a joke or some unfounded rumor. Could this possibly be true?" Zhang Shiwu answered: "Absolutely true." Yang Tiexin added: "Afterwards Lord Kang declared himself emperor in Nanjing. He had under him such able and loyal generals as Yue Fei and Han Shizhong. If he had immediately attacked north, although he might not have reclaimed all the lost lands, he would have had no problem recapturing the capital Bianliang. But that hated traitor Qing Hui only wanted to negotiate; he did an about face and killed our beloved General Yue." [Note: the year of Jing Kang translates to A.D. 1127.] Zhang Shiwu poured a bowl of wine for all three of them and downed his bowl in one gulp. He went on: "Beloved General Yue once said these two lines: 'Only aspire to eat Tatar flesh, and chat away while drinking Hun's blood.' This poem conveyed what is in the heart of every Chinese. Ay! This traitor Qing Hui is awfully lucky. It's a shame that we were born 60 years too late." Guo Xiaotian asked: "What do you mean?" Zhang Shiwu replied: "Then you two heroes would go into Linan and kill this traitor. Then the three of us would eat his flesh and drink his blood and there would be no more need for us to come here to eat peas and drink cold wine anymore!" All three of them laughed heartily at that comment.

Yang Tiexin noticed that the jug of wine had been emptied and ordered another one. The three of them just sat there

cursing Qing Hui. The cripple placed another dish of peas as well as a dish of peanuts on the table. Hearing the three men's spirited cursing of Qing Hui, he suddenly let out a rather loud snort.

Yang Tiexin turned to him and asked: "Qu San, what's the matter? You don't think we are wrong to curse at Qing Hui do you?" Qu San, the cripple, answered: "Good cursing! Great cursing! There's nothing wrong with that. It is just that I have heard that Qing Hui wasn't the chief culprit in killing Yue Fei in order to negotiate peace." The three men asked in surprise: "Qing Hui wasn't the main culprit? Then who was?" Qu San replied: "Qing Hui was the Chancellor; whether or not peace was negotiated he still was and would keep on being Chancellor. But our beloved General Yue only wanted to destroy the Jin and bring back the two emperors Hui and Qin. Once those two emperors return, how do you suppose Emperor Gao Zong was going to keep his crown?" As soon as he finished saying what he said, he turned around and struggled back to the stool, and returned to staring at the sky as if in a trance. Qu San's face looked no older than twenty something, yet he was hunched over, with traces of white in his hair. From the back, he looked like an old man.

Zhang Shiwu and the two men looked at each other in silence. After a while, Zhang Shiwu spoke up: "That is so true! Sir, you have really hit on something! The real culprit behind the killing of our beloved General Yue could very well not be Qing Hui, but Emperor Gao Zong. This Emperor Gao Zong was shameless to begin with, he definitely could do something like that!"

Guo Xiaotian asked: "Is he really that shameless?" Zhang Shiwu replied: "Back when the beloved General Yue had just beaten the Jin army in several battles in a row, along with the rebellion of our patriotic brothers in the north, we

had the Jin army against the wall. The Tatars were just beginning to panic wondering what to do, when suddenly Gao Zong sent them a letter of surrender and asked for peace negotiations. Naturally the Jin Emperor was ecstatic, but he replied: 'There will be no peace negotiations unless Yue Fei is killed.' So Qing Hui went about his evil plan and our beloved General Yue was killed in the Pavilion of Changes. The beloved General Yue was killed November of the 11th year of Zhao Xing. One month later, peace was agreed upon. The boundary between Song and Jin was drawn at the River Huai and Emperor Gao Zong called himself a subject of the Jin Emperor. How do you think the letter of surrender was written?" Yang Tiexin answered: "Shamelessly, of course."

Zhang Shiwu replied: "Of course! I happen to know what was written in the letter. It read: 'Your humble subject asks for forgiveness and mercy. If received, your subject will be forever grateful; our humble sons and descendants will forever be of service to your majesty. Your humble subject also swears to give yearly tribute in the amount of two hundred fifty thousand taels of silver and two hundred fifty thousand bolts of silk. Not only did he sell himself as a servant, but all of his descendants as well. Him becoming a servant is really no big deal, but is that not like saying that every Chinese is their servant as well?"

Bang! Guo Xiaotian slammed down hard onto the table again, this time tipping one of the bowls over, spilling wine all over the table. In anger, he shouted: "Shameless! Disgraceful! How did this sorry excuse of a man ever become an emperor?"

Zhang Shiwu continued: "When our nation heard about this treaty, there was not a person on the street who was not enraged. Those Chinese people north of the River Huai were especially grief stricken because they saw that our

country is no longer whole. Gao Zong, knowing that his seat on the throne is secured, immediately rewarded Qing Hui for his 'meritorious service'. Qing Hui was already Lord of Lu, and now Gao Zong added the title of Grand Marshall to his name, giving him almost supreme power under the emperor. Xiao Zong succeeded Gao Zong, and Guang Zong succeeded him; all the while the Jin are still controlling half of China. Now Emperor Qin Yuan has succeeded Guang Zong. He has been on the throne for 5 years now, mostly going along with what the Chancellor Han Tuo Zhou says. What is the future going to be like? He...he, it's hard to say, hard to say!" During the last few words, he did not stop shaking his head.

Guo Xiaotian replied: "What's so hard to say about it? This is the countryside and not like Linan where you might get your head cut off! There isn't a person in the world that doesn't call Han Tuo Zhou a crook! If you compare his betraying the country and oppressing the people, the man is practically a sworn brother of Qing Hui!"

Now that they were talking about current affairs, Zhang Shiwu was starting to feel a little tinge of fear and dared not criticize and talk straight from his heart as he did before. He downed another bowl and said: "Thanks to both of you gentlemen for the wine. May I offer a modest word of advice? I know both of you gentlemen are passionate men, but it is still most wise to be cautious in words and deeds so as to avoid any possible calamities. At this point, the most that us normal folk can hope for is to muddle along and do the best that we can. Ay! Just like the saying: "Surrounded by the mountains in the halls, when will the West Lake parties finally go? Southern fragrances intoxicate all, happily mistaking Hangzhou for Bianliang!"

Yang Tiexin asked: "What's the story behind those four lines?" Zhang Shiwu answered: "There is no story. It is just

a saying indicating that the officials of our Great Song dynasty only care about partying and drinking on the shores of the West Lake. They want to pretend that Hangzhou is our capital and never bother thinking about taking back our land and moving back to Bianliang again."

By the time Zhang Shiwu said goodbye he was dead drunk. As he stumbled toward Bianliang, one could hear him muttering to himself the words of "River Soaked in Red" by Yue Fei: "Jing Kang's Disgrace, still fresh in mind; people's hatred, when will it stop? I drive my cart...."

Guo Xiaotian paid the tab and walked home with Yang Tiexin. The two of them lived right next to each other; after walking a short distance, they made it back to their homes.

Guo Xiaotian's wife Li was just chasing a chicken into a little trap. Turning around, she smiled and said: "You two went drinking again? Brother Yang, why don't you and your wife come over for dinner tonight? We are going to cook a whole chicken."

Yang Tiexin smiled back and answered: "Alright, I guess we are going to inconvenience you two once again. We have so many chickens and ducks to waste food on, but we can't part with any of them." Li replied: "Well your wife is just that kind hearted. She says that she raised those chickens and ducks since they were babies; how could she possibly kill them?" Yang Tiexin laughed and replied: "I told her that I would kill them if she can't make herself do it, then she started crying. Ay! What can I do? Tell you what, tonight I'm going to go hunting and we'll invite the two of you over tomorrow night!" Guo Xiaotian cut in: "We are family! Quit talking about who's inviting who and who is not! Tonight we go hunting together!"

At midnight, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin went into the woods 3.5 li west of the village, hoping to catch a boar or something of that nature. But after waiting for more than two hours, they heard nothing. Just as they were about to lose patience, they suddenly heard faint sounds of metal banging together coming from outside of the woods. They looked at each other, both wondering: "What's going on now?"

At that moment, from afar, there came the sounds of several men shouting: "Where do you think you are going?" "Stop this instant!" Then a shadow jumped into the woods. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin finally were able to see the person now that he is in the moonlight. The two of them were shocked. For this man was the crippled owner of that wine shop in the village, Qu San. He thrust his left crutch onto the ground, producing a "Zeng sound". His body flew off the ground and behind a tree. This was a display of an incredible level of Qing Gong. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin looked at each other again in astonishment, both of them thinking: "We had no clue that Qu San's kung fu is this good, and we have been living here for three whole years!" Both of them stayed hidden in the bushes, not daring to move or come out.

Footsteps keep on getting closer until three men had made it to the edge of the woods. They whispered something to each other and started to walk slowly into the woods. All three of them were dressed in military clothing and each of them had a saber in hand. In the moonlight, the sabers gave off a faint green glow. One of them shouted: "Damned cripple! Your old man here can see you, better quickly surrender and come out!" Qu San kept still behind the tree. The three men started waving their swords wildly, swinging and taking a cut at anything in their way. Very slowly, the three of them got closer and closer. Suddenly there came a

faint thump. Qu San had thrust his right crutch out from behind the tree, hitting one of the men squarely on his chest. That man gave out a muffled groan before flying backwards and falling on the ground. The other two men immediately began to hack at Qu San.

Qu San gave his right crutch a push and jumped several feet to the left, avoiding the sabers. His left crutch immediately went straight for one of the men's face. The man's kung fu was not that bad either; he tried to parry the crutch with his saber. Qu San did not wait for the two to meet before withdrawing his crutch to support himself again. His right crutch came swinging in at the other man's waist. He used his crutches with great speed and quickness. Even though he always had to use one of them to support himself, leaving only one to fight with at all times, he was not losing to the men. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin noticed that he was carrying a huge bundle on his back, seemingly very cumbersome. After some more fighting, one of the sabers came down and hit the bundle. "Dang!" The bundle ripped and the objects inside spilled onto the ground. Qu San took advantage of his temporary distraction and smashed down hard on the head of the man with his crutch. The man fell onto the ground without so much as a whimper. The only man left was by now scared to death; he turned around and started to run. Qu San took out something from his bosom and raised his arm very quickly. A ball-like object flew through the air in the moonlight, followed by a muted thump as the object hit the back of the man's head. The man let out a ghastly scream and dropped his saber as his arm started to swing wildly out of control. Slowly, he fell back and crumpled to the ground. After a couple of twitches, he stopped moving.

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin had just witnessed Qu San kill three men in succession while displaying a level of kung fu

that neither one of them had ever seen before. Both of their hearts were racing, afraid to even breath too loudly, for both of them were thinking the same thing: "He'd just killed government officials; that is a huge crime. We don't stand a chance if he finds us here and wants to kill us to keep this quiet."

Qu San turned around and slowly spoke: "Brother Guo, Brother Yang, you can come out now!" Once the two of them got over their shock, they had no choice but to step out of the bushes, although both of them were holding their pitchforks rather tightly. Yang Tiexin snuck a look over at Guo Xiaotian and the pitchfork in his hand and took two extra steps. Qu San smiled: "Brother Yang, your Yang Family Lance Technique (Yang Jia Qiang Fa) can be used with a pitchfork, but your sworn brother uses a pair of short halberds and the pitchfork does not fit his skills, so you step up in front of him. Such righteousness...such friendship!" Yang Tiexin, hearing Qu San spell out exactly what he was thinking, suddenly felt very exposed and couldn't decide what to do. Qu San continued: "Brother Guo, let's say you had your double halberd in hand. Do you think the two of you together can beat me?"

Guo Xiaotian shook his head: "No, we can't. The two of us must have been blind, living here together with you for all these years and not even noticing that you knew kung fu, let alone were a master."

Qu San shook his head and sighed: "I can't even use my legs, how can I be considered a master?" As if his spirits were waning, he continued: "Before I lost their use, would I have had so much trouble with several armed guards? Ay! I'm useless now! Useless!" Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin glanced at each other, not sure how, or should they, dare to respond. Qu San continued: "Would you two help out this cripple and bury these three bodies?" The two of them

glanced at each other again, Yang Tiexin answered: "Alright!"

The two of them dug a big hole using their pitchforks and tossed the three bodies in. While they were moving the last body, Yang Tiexin notices that part of the black object was still sticking out of the back of the man's head. He gave it a good tug with his right arm and pulled it out. Turned out it was an Eight Diagram throwing weapon made out of iron, he wiped the blood off on the body and handed it back to Qu San. [The Eight Diagram is made of eight combinations of three whole or broken lines used in religious, mostly Taoist, ceremonies. The eight combinations usually surround a yin-yang symbol. The flag of South Korea is very similar except it has only four of the eight diagrams.]

Qu San took the Eight Diagram weapon and said: "So sorry for troubling you." He puts the Eight Diagram weapon back into his pocket. He then laid the piece of cloth that used to be his bundle onto the ground and started to put the objects that were scattered on the ground back into it. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin finished putting dirt back into the hole, turned around and saw three rolled up paintings on the ground as well as many other bright and shiny metal objects. Qu San left out a golden jug and a golden bowl. After putting everything else back in the bundle, he held those two things up to Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin, saying: "These things were stolen by me from the Royal Palace in Linan. The emperor has done enough harm to the peasants; taking a little bit of what he stole from them isn't really a crime. Consider these two things a present from me."

The two of them couldn't believe that he was actually brazen enough to break into the Royal Palace and steal. Neither one of them dared to accept his gifts.

Qu San said in a stern voice: "Are you guys afraid to accept, or do you two not want to?" Guo Xiaotian replied: "The two of us did nothing to deserve such gifts and that's why we can't accept them. As for what happened tonight, you don't have to worry about a thing brother, neither one of us is going to let this secret get out." Qu San replied: "Hmph! Why should I be worried about you two leaking this secret? I know all about you two and your backgrounds; why else would I let you two leave here alive? Brother Guo, you are the descendant of Guo Sheng, one of the heroes of the Water Margins of Mount Liang. You use the halberd skill that is taught in your family, only the halberd is short instead of long, and has two blades instead of one. Brother Yang, your ancestor is Yang Zaixin, one of the generals who served under the beloved General Yue. You two are descendants of two patriotic heroes. When the Jin army conquered the North; you two began wondering the martial world and became martial brothers. And then the two of you moved to Ox Village together. Am I right so far?"

[Note: Those familiar with Heroes of the Water Margins should remember two characters that used halberds that are always together: Lu Meng and Guo Sheng. The nickname of Lu Meng was "Little Vassal" while Guo Sheng's was "Benevolent Aristocrat". They joined the rebellion at the same time and were always deployed in battle in pairs. The two of them even died together, smashed by rocks while attacking a higher position during the effort to quell the Rebellion of Fang La, who is the head of the Ming Cult mentioned later on in this novel and in Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber.]

The two of them, now knowing that Qu San knew their pasts inside out, were even more shocked. All they could do was nod.

Qu San continued: "Guo Sheng and Yang Zaixin were both rebels before going over to the government's side to fight for the Great Song Empire. Both of them have stolen from the thieving government. So tell me, are you two going to accept my gifts or not?" Yang Tiexin thought to himself: "If I refuse, then it will surely offend him." So he took the gifts from Qu San's hands and said: "We are very grateful for this. Thanks."

Qu San was pleased by this; he picked up the bundle and put it back onto his back. Turning around he said: "Time to go home." The three of them walked side-by-side out of the woods. Qu San said: "I got a couple of prize pieces tonight; two paintings by this Emperor Dao Jun and a sheet of his writing showing off his calligraphy as well. This fellow is no emperor, but his Red Green Plume and Thin Gold Form is indeed supreme in the world."

The other two men had no idea what in the world "Red Green Plume" or "Thin Gold Form" is, so all they did was nod in agreement. [Red Green Plume is a style of ancient Chinese painting featuring birds and animals with emphasis on the colors of red and green, obviously. Thin Gold Form is a style of calligraphy.]

After walking for a while, Yang Tiexin spoke up: "Earlier today you said that half of our Great Song's land was lost to the hands of Emperor Dao Jun. So what is so good about his paintings or writings? Why would you bother to go to such trouble and take such a big risk as to go into the Royal Palace to steal it?" Qu San smiled: "This is something that I guess you just won't understand." Guo Xiaotian spoke up as well: "If the Emperor Dao Jun can be so good at painting and writing, he must be pretty smart. It's pity that he does not concentrate on being a good ruler. When I was little my dad told me that a person, no matter what he does, must concentrate on doing one thing. If he tries to learn a little

bit here, do something there, in the end he will get nothing accomplished."

Qu San answered: "For a normal person, this is true. But in this world there is someone who is a genius at everything. From language to kung fu; including writing, painting, music, and Go [Weiqi]; from math to military tactics; even medicine, astrology, and the five elements; there is not a thing that he does not understand, not a thing he has not mastered. It's just that you guys won't ever meet him." He looked up at the waning moon, and let out a long sigh.

Under the moonlight, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin suddenly noticed tears on Qu San's face. When the two of them got home, they buried the two golden objects deep within their backyard, not even telling their wives about it. After that night the two of them acted as if nothing had happened; they lived off their farms and whatever they caught and when there was spare time they practiced their kung fu. Even when by themselves, neither ever brought up what had happened that night. The two of them still visited the little wine shop occasionally for a couple jugs of wine. Qu San still served the wine along with some peas, peanuts, and other snacks that helped the wine go down. Afterwards he always went and sat down by the door and went off into his own little world, lost in his thoughts. It was as if that night had never happened. The only difference was that when Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin look at Qu San, their eyes were filled with respect.

Autumn slowly gave way to winter; the days just keep getting colder and colder. One night, with the cold north wind blowing, it started to snow. The day after that it continued to snow even more. The whole sky was filled with snowflakes and the ground looked like it was covered with precious jade, white as far as the eye could see. Yang Tiexin told his wife that tonight he is going to get some wine and

food so that they can invite his sworn brother and his wife over so all of them can have a nice dinner and enjoy the snow. After lunch, he grabbed two big gourds and went off to the wine shop to get some wine. When he got there, he noticed that the door was shut tight; even the wine shop sign was taken down.

Yang Tiexin knocked on the door a couple of times and shouted: "Brother Qu San, I'm here to buy three liters of wine." No response came. After waiting a bit, he called out again and still no response came. He walked over to a window and looked inside, everything in the room is covered in a layer of dust. He thought to himself: "I haven't come here for several days; turns out that Qu San hasn't been here for several days as well. I hope nothing's happened." So he had to brave the blizzard and walk to the wine shop 5 li away in Red Plum Village to get the wine as well as a chicken. When he got back he killed the chicken and gave it to his wife to take care of the rest. His wife's surname is Bao, and her given name was Xiruo. She's the daughter of a teacher at the private school in Red Plum Village. They have been married for a little under two years now. She put the chicken along with some cabbage, bean curd, and thin noodles made from bean starch (fen si) into a big pot. While the pot is boiling on top of a fire, she cut a plate of cured meat and cured fish. At dusk, she went over to the Guos' and invited them over for some wine, food and to enjoy the snow.

Guo Xiaotian happily came over. His wife Li was not feeling very well for the last couple of days because of her pregnancy. She had been throwing up anything she eats, so she decided not to come over. Li's given name is Ping. She and Bao Xiruo are like sisters and the two of them chatted for a long time. Only after making her a pot of tea did she finally return home. When she got back she saw that the

two men had already moved the charcoal stove onto the table to keep the wine warm. The two of them had already started.

Guo Xiaotian said: "Sister, we weren't patient enough to wait for you. Please come and join us." The two men has always gotten along and both are men of character, add that to the fact that in the country nobody really cares about the rules regarding men and women gathering together. Bao Xiruo smiled and nodded, putting some more charcoal onto the stove; she picked up another bowl for the wine and sat down beside her husband. She noticed that there are hints of anger on both men's faces; she smiled and asked: "Something wrong again? What's gotten the two of you so angry?" Yang Tiexin answered: "We were just talking about the stuff that goes on in the Imperial Court in Linan."

Guo Xiaotian added: "I was at the Joyful Rain Pavilion, the tea house at the head of the Tranquility Bridge, yesterday when I heard some people talking about that bastard, Chancellor Han Tuo Zhou. It didn't sound like they were making the stuff up either. One man said that no matter which official is filing a report, if the report does not have the words: 'Also present this -whatever - to the Chancellor', this bastard Chancellor does not even give the report another glance!" Yang Tiexin sighed: "When you have this kind of emperor, you'll get this kind of chancellor. When you have this kind of chancellor, then you'll get these kinds of officials. Big Brother Huang, who lives outside of Gushing Gold Gate of Linan, told me this story. One day he was cutting trees for firewood at the side of the mountain, when he suddenly saw a bunch of soldiers protecting a crowd of officials coming his way. It turned out that Chancellor Han Tuo Zhou was taking a sight seeing trip with all his underlings. He kept on minding his own business and went

on cutting his trees. Suddenly he heard Han Tuo Zhou sighing and say: 'The bamboo fences and thatched cottage here really do make an extraordinary country scene. Pity it's missing the sounds of chickens crowing and dogs barking.' Soon after he said this, there suddenly came barking from the bushes." Bao Xiruo laughed a little: "That little dog really knew how to please." Yang Tiexin answered: "It sure did, after barking for a bit, it jumped out of the bushes. What kind of dog do you suppose it was? Turns out it was our dignified and honorable Magistrate from the city of Linan, His Excellency Zhao!" Bao Xiruo doubled over with laughter. Guo Xiaotian observed: "This little dog act by His Excellency Zhao has probably insured that he will be promoted very quickly." Yang Tiexin answered: "Of course, it's only natural."

The three of them drank for a while. The snow outside was coming down even harder, but with some wine in their bellies, all three of them felt very warm and cozy. Suddenly, from the east, there came the sound of footsteps on the snowy road. The footsteps were very rapid. The three of them looked out and saw a Taoist priest.

The Taoist priest is wearing a bamboo hat and a cape, but snow covered his body. There was a sword on his back and the yellow tassel hanging off the handle of the sword swung back and forth in the wind. Snow filled the sky, and a lonely figure was walking in the snow; such a grand and gallant scene. Guo Xiaotian spoke up: "This Taoist knows quite a bit of kung fu, he looks like a real man of honor." Yang Tiexin replied: "That's right. Let's invite him in for a couple of drinks and make friends with him." Both men loved to make new friends, so they both stood up and stepped outside. They noticed that the Taoist was already past them by more than two zhangs [1 zhang = 3.3 meters / approx 11ft] even

though he is only walking. Such levels of qing gong [lightness kung fu] are rarely heard of in the world.

The two of them looked at each other in astonishment. Yang Tiexin yelled out: "Reverend, please stop!" The Taoist turned around and nodded at Yang Tiexin. Yang Tiexin continued: "With such weather outside, Reverend, why don't you come inside and drink a couple of bowls to warm up."

The Taoist sneered and in an instant arrived in front of them. Face full of disdain, he asked coldly: "You want me to stop, what for? Be frank and tell me!"

Yang Tiexin thought the Taoist's rudeness was completely uncalled for, so he just lowered his head and didn't bother to answer. Guo Xiaotian cupped his fist and replied: "The two of us were just sitting by the fire keeping warm and drinking wine when we saw the Reverend walking alone in the snow. So we boldly asked Reverend to join us, please forgive us for our offenses." The Taoist rolled his eyes and said rather loudly: "Alright, alright! If you want to drink, then let's drink!" And he walked through the door.

This made Yang Tiexin even madder, he grabbed the Taoist's left wrist, and with a pull he shouted: "You still haven't told us how to address the Reverend." Suddenly he felt as if he was grabbing onto a slippery fish rather than a hand as the Taoist's hand escaped his grasp. He knew he was in trouble and tried to back away; but before he could a pain shot through his wrist as the Taoist grabbed it. It was as if he was cuffed, and feeling both enormous pressure and heat, he hurriedly tried to struggle out of the Taoist's grasp. His entire right arm felt lifeless and weak, and his wrist was in great pain.

Guo Xiaotian knew, judging from his blood red face, his adopted brother was getting the worst of it. He just wanted to make an acquaintance and wanted to avoid offending the Taoist; or anyone in the martial world for that matter. So he spoke up: "Reverend, please sit here." The Taoist sneered a couple of times more and let go of Yang Tiexin. He walked to the center of the room and sat down with a rather arrogant manner before saying: "The two of you are obviously from Shangdong, yet are here pretending to be farmers. It's a pity that your accents are still obviously the Shangdong accent. Why would a peasant know any kung fu anyway?"

Yang Tiexin felt both embarrassed and angry as he walked into the backroom. He took out a small dagger from the drawer and hid it in his shirt before walking back out again. He poured out three bowls of wine and toasted one for himself, all the while not saying a word.

That Taoist just stared at the snow outside of the house with an arrogant look on his face, not drinking any wine nor saying anything. From the hostility on the Taoist's face, Guo Xiaotian figured that he is suspicious of trickery in the wine. So he took the bowl of wine in front of the Taoist and drank it. Then he said: "Wine gets cold very quickly. Reverend, let me get another warm one for you." He poured another bowl for the Taoist, which the Taoist drank down in one gulp. Afterwards the Taoist said: "Even if there were knockout drugs in the wine, it wouldn't affect me." Yang Tiexin finally had about all he could take: "We nicely invited you to come and have a drink with us, why would we try to harm you? If you plan to keep talking to us in such a manner, then please leave now! It's not like we had sour wine and rotten food that we can't get rid off!"

The Taoist ignored him and grabbed the wine gourd. Pouring and drinking, he downed three bowls in a row.

Then he suddenly took off his bamboo hat and cape and threw them on the floor. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin looked him over carefully. The Taoist is about thirty or so, squared faced with slanted eyebrows and a hint of redness. His eyes were bright and piercing. Next he untied the leather bundle on his back and threw it on the table. Immediately, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin jumped up. Because from the leather bundle rolled out a bloody human head!

Bao Xiruo screamed in fear and ran into the back room. Yang Tiexin felt his chest to make sure the dagger was in place. The Taoist gave the leather bundle a shake and two more bloody objects fell out: a heart and a liver. From the looks of them they are probably not a pig's heart and pig's liver, but very likely human. Yang Tiexin shouted: "Taoist bastard!" as he took out the dagger and thrust it towards the Taoist's chest.

The Taoist snickered: "Eagle Talon. So you want to fight now?" He lightly hit Yang Tiexin's wrist with his left hand. Yang Tiexin felt a numbing pain in his wrist as his fingers lost all their strength. Before he knew it, his dagger had been taken away.

Guo Xiaotian was shocked to see all this. He knows that his adopted brother is the descendant of a renowned hero and, from their daily sparring, knows his family's kung fu is slightly superior to his own. But seemed as though he was nothing in front of this Taoist; the move that he just pulled off was obviously the 'Bare Hand Seizes Blade', was a skill that he had only heard off in the martial world. He immediately picked up the wooden bench that he was sitting on, waiting to block the dagger when the Taoist inevitably stabbed his sworn brother.

But the Taoist completely ignored them. He just wildly cut the human heart and liver to pieces with the dagger. Suddenly, he let out a huge roar, so loud that it rattled the tiles on the roof. He lifted up his right hand and brought it down hard, so hard that the contents on the table jumped at the impact. The two men looked over and saw he had just smashed the head's skull bones to smithereens; even the middle of the table was cracked. The two of them were still recovering when the Taoist shouted: "Shameless scoundrels, the Reverend will today have to really break the no-killing rule!"

Yang Tiexin couldn't get any madder; he grabbed the iron spear that was leaning against a corner of the room and jumped outside. He shouted back: "Come on! Let's teach you a lesson in the art of the 'Yang Family Spear'!" The Taoist snickered a bit: "You think you are worthy enough to use the 'Yang Family Spear' based on all this fake bravado?" He walked out of the door as he was finishing the sentence.

Seeing the situation deteriorate to this point, Guo Xiaotian ran back to his house and got his double halberds. When he got back the Taoist was still standing there with his sword still in its sheath and his sleeves flapping noisily in the wind. Yang Tiexin yelled out: "Unsheathe your sword!" The Taoist replied: "Even if the two of you come at me together, I would still fight you with my bare hands."

Yang Tiexin made a gesture signaling that he is about to start and followed it with a 'Poisonous Dragon Coming Out from the Cave'. The red tassel on his spear shook, creating a huge flash of red heading towards the heart of the Taoist. The Taoist was briefly surprised and praised: "Excellent!" His body went along with the spear and dodged to the left. His left palm spun around and came up to meet the spearhead in an attempt to grab it.

Yang Tiexin has worked hard with this spear since he was a little kid and had fully received his father's skills. The 'Yang Family Spear' is nothing to scoff at. Years back, Yang Zaixin took a spear and three hundred Song soldiers into battle against forty thousand Jin soldiers at the Little Merchant Bridge. In the battle, they killed more than two thousand Jin soldiers, not to mention one commander of ten thousand men, as well as more than one hundred commanders of one thousand men and one hundred men. Actually, the Jin arrows came flying in like rain; as soon as he was hit by an arrow he would break the wooden part off and keep on fighting. At last his horse got tripped up in mud and he finally gave his life for his country. When the Jin army burned his body, the amount of melted metal from the arrowheads topped an amazing two jins [1kg / 2.2lbs]. This battle shocked and frightened the Jin army and made the 'Yang Family Spear' famous in all of China.

Although Yang Tiexin is not as great as his forefathers, he does almost fully understand the spear skill inside out. So there he is, parrying, thrusting, swinging, flicking, blocking, fending, and obstructing. The point of the spear flashed silver, the tassel blurred red. What a spear skill!

Yang Tiexin pulled out all the stops and his moves were swift and agile, changing and faking as if they were an illusion. But the Taoist's body followed the spear around, easily dodging forward and back, making him almost impossible to hit. After using all seventy-two moves of the 'Yang Family Spear', Yang Tiexin couldn't help but be anxious and upset. He turned around and walked away carrying the spear backwards. As expected, the Taoist started to chase very close behind. Yang Tiexin let out a big shout, held the spear with both hands, suddenly twisted his waist and extended his arms, and thrust the spear back right at the Taoist's face. This move was ferocious, for it is

the move in 'Yang Family Spear' that is used to break an enemy formation and kill enemy generals, called the "Return Horse Spear". Back before Yang Zaixin changed his allegiance to the Song army, when he battled Yue Fei, he used this exact move to kill Yue Fei's younger brother Yue Fan.

The Taoist, seeing that the spears had already arrived in front of him in an instant, couldn't help but praise: "Excellent move!" Smacking his hands together, he was able to clamp onto the spear point. Yang Tiexin gave one mighty push, but spear did not move at all. Shocked, he tried with all his might to pull the spear back. But it seemed as if the spear was caught underneath a mountain, with no chance at all of pulling it out. His face turned red as he tried three times more, but the spear still would not leave the Taoist's hands. The Taoist let out a hearty laugh; suddenly his right palm came up and with the speed of a lightning strike hit the handle of the spear. Yang Tiexin felt the part between the base of his thumb and index finger go numb and immediately released the spear, letting it drop onto the snow covered ground.

The Taoist smiled and said: "You are really using the 'Yang Family Spear'. Sorry for any offense. Please honor me with knowing your surname." Yang Tiexin still hadn't recovered from the shock of all this, so he replied without much thought: "My surname is Yang, given name is Tiexin." The Taoist asked: "Are you related to General Yang, Yang Zaixin?" Yang Tiexin answered: "He's my great grandfather."

The Taoist cupped his fist and saluted: "I mistook the two of you for scoundrels, turns out that you are descendants of patriots, please forgive me. May I be so bold as to ask this gentleman's surname?" Guo Xiaotian answered: "Surname is Guo, given name is Xiaotian." Yang Tiexin added: "He's

my martial brother, he is the descendant of Guo Sheng, one of the Heroes of the Water Margins of Mount Liang." The Taoist replied: "Your humble Taoist acted rashly and rudely, please forgive me." Then he saluted again.

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin both bowed and cupped their fist and saluted back: "No problem, no problem at all. Would Reverend please come in for three more bowls?" Yang Tiexin quietly picked up his spear. The Taoist smiled and said: "Of course! I just got the urge to drink it up with you two."

Bao Xiruo was worried that her husband might get hurt, so she stood in the doorway anxiously observing. Seeing the three of them stop fighting and become friends, she felt greatly relieved and started to set the table back up.

After the three of them sat down, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin asked the Taoist for his Taoist name. The Taoist replied: "My name is Qiu Chuji..." Yang Tiexin jumped up and shouted: "Ah Ya!" Guo Xiaotian was shocked as well: "elder 'Eternal Spring' (Chang Chunzi)?" Qiu Chuji smiled and replied: "That's the name that my Taoist friends gave me, I do not dare to claim such a name." Guo Xiaotian replied: "The hero elder 'Eternal Spring' of the Quanzhen Sect, I am honored to make your acquaintance!" The two of them threw themselves onto the floor and saluted.

Qiu Chuji hurriedly helped them up and said while smiling: "I personally killed a traitor today. The government's men were chasing me very closely, and you two gentlemen suddenly invited me in for a drink. This is the capital area and neither of you are normal farmers, so I became suspicious." Guo Xiaotian replied: "This martial brother of mine has always a temper. Before we entered he tried a hand move at Reverend, I think that probably furthered Reverend's suspicion." Qiu Chuji agreed: "How could a normal farmer be that strong? I thought that you two

gentlemen were dogs of the government who were waiting here, undercover, for me. That's why I was so rude, too rash and rude." Yang Tiexin smiled and replied: "Can't blame those who don't know." The three of them laughed heartily. After several rounds of drinks, Qiu Chuji pointed at the head that is now in pieces on the floor: "This man's name is Wang Daokun, a traitor! Last year when the emperor sent him to pay respects to the Jin emperor on his birthday, this man actually started to collude with the Jin in their effort to invade the South. I chased him for ten days before finally getting him." The other two men had long heard in the martial world of elder 'Eternal Spring' Qiu Chuji's amazing kung fu and heroic character. Seeing his patriotism at this moment, killing a traitor for the country, they admired him even more. The two of them seized the opportunity to ask him some questions about kung fu, Qiu Chuji was only too happy to help.

Even though the 'Yang Family Spear' never met an enemy on the battlefield, when going up against a kung fu master, it seemed rather lacking. Although Qiu Chuji's inner and outer kung fu cannot be considered at the highest of levels, they are nevertheless of a very high level, how could Yang Tiexin last umpteen moves against him? It turned out that Qiu Chuji was surprised to see his skills, so he purposely yielded in order to make him use up all seventy-two moves of the 'Yang Family Spear' to make sure that it was authentic. If they were really going at it, Yang Tiexin's spear would have been knocked out of his hand in a few moves. At this point, Qiu Chuji observed that the 'Yang Family Spear' was intended to be used on horseback; if used on foot, then one had to be more creative and imaginative and not use it in a rigid fashion. The two men could not stop nodding upon hearing this. The 'Yang Family Spear' has always been a skill of the Yang males, so even though Qiu Chuji is very knowledgeable, he still did not fully understand the inner

workings of the skill. So he asked Yang Tiexin a few questions about it as well.

The three of them had their ears turn warm from the wine and were really hitting it off. Yang Tiexin suggested: "We two brothers are really fortunate to be able to meet Reverend today. Reverend, why don't you stay a couple of days?"

Qiu Chuji was just going to answer before his face suddenly froze: "Someone is here for me. No matter what happens, you two stay inside and don't come out, understand?" The two men nodded. Qiu Chuji picked up the human head, walked out of the door, jumped up in a tree, and hid among its leaves.

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin didn't really understand his strange actions, there were no noises whatsoever other than the howling of the wind. After a while, there came faint hoof beats from the west. Yang Tiexin thought: "The priest's ear is incredible." Then immediately his thoughts followed: "This Priest's kung fu is amazing, but compared with Qu San, who would come out on top?" After another while, the hoof beats got closer and closer. Finally, about twenty riders, all dressed in black, appeared out of the flying snow. Galloping, they arrived in front of the door.

The leader of the group suddenly pulled his horse to a stop and yelled out: "The footprints stop here. It looks like there's just been a fight." Several people behind him jumped off their horses and inspected the footprints in the snow.

The head of the pack ordered: "Search the house!" two more men jumped of their horse to knock on the door. Suddenly an object flew from the trees, hitting one of them on the head. The object was thrown with such an incredible

amount of force that it smashed the skull of the man. The other men all started to yell and scream as several men surrounded the tree. One man picked up the object that was thrown and yelled in shock: "It's His Excellency Wang's head!"

The leader pulled out a saber and let out a loud yell. Quickly ten or so men surrounded the tree. He gave out another command and five men raised their bows and shot five arrows toward Qiu Chuji.

Yang Tiexin picked up his spear and was just about to go outside and help when Guo Xiaotian grabbed him and whispered: "Reverend Qiu told us not to go out. Besides, if he starts having trouble with their numbers, then it still won't be too late for us to help." Just as he finished, an arrow came screaming down from the top of the tree. Turned out Qiu Chuji had dodged four of the arrows and caught the last one, and then he just threw the arrow back down like a throwing weapon. With a scream of "Ah!", one of the men in black was hit and fell off his horse. His body rolled into a bush and stopped.

Qiu Chuji pulled out his sword and jumped down. The sword had just started flashing when two men were hit. The leader shouted out: "Bloody Taoist! It's you!" "Sha, sha, sha!" He made three short bows, and then his horse came forth as his saber came slashing through the wind. Qiu Chuji's sword continued to flash in the snow as two more men were hit and fell off their horse. Yang Tiexin was awestruck, knowing that even if he practiced kung fu for 10 more years, he still would not be able to even see such a sword clearly, much less fight back. If Qiu Chuji wasn't holding back just then, he would have been a dead man by now.

Qiu Chuji moved as if carried by the wind and now is fighting the rider with the saber. That man's saber skill was not bad, each move, be it a parry or a slash, came out ferociously. After fighting for a bit more, Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin both figured out that Qiu Chuji was prolonging their duel on purpose so as to use openings and breaks to pick off the other opponents. He was doing this in order to kill every one of the enemy; if the leader was killed, the rest might just turn and run for their lives, making it impossible to kill all of them.

After more fighting, there were only six or seven of them left. The leader knew he was not good enough, so he turned and tried to escape. Qiu Chuji reached out with his left hand and grabbed the horse's tail. With a slight pull, his body jumped off the ground. Before even landing on the back of the horse, his sword had already penetrated the man's back all the way out of his chest. Qiu Chuji threw down the body, grabbed hold of the reins, and started to chase the others. Silver colored iron horse shoes danced in the snow as silver flashes of his sword danced in the air. Amidst the screams, one body followed another onto the ground. Blood stained the ground, that was covered in pure white snow, to a deep red.

Qiu Chuji stopped and looked around. Seeing only several rider-less horses running off, he laughed heartily. Turning to the two men by the door, he waved and said: "How did you men like that?"

Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin had just opened the door and walked out, so they had not completely calmed down from what they just witnessed. Guo Xiaotian asked: "Reverend Qiu, who are these people?" Qiu Chuji replied: "We'll know when we search their bodies."

Guo Xiaotian searched the body of that saber using man and found an official document. It turned out to be an order from that very Magistrate Zhao, who had pretended to be a dog, saying that the Ambassador from Jin has ordered that the Song government troops and Jin troops to work together to catch the man that murdered Wang Daokun as soon as possible. Guo Xiaotian was just about to explode in rage when Yang Tiexin yelled out. In his hand were some tags found on the bodies of some other men, the tags were written in the Nuzhen language. It meant that within this group of men, there were several Jin soldiers.

Guo Xiaotian spoke up: "The enemy soldiers can do whatever they want, including capturing and killing, within our borders, and our Song officials are actually obeying orders from their Ambassador! What kind of world is this?!" Yang Tiexin sighed: "Even the Emperor of Great Song has to refer to himself as an official of the Jin emperor, so it's no surprise that our officials and generals are becoming their servants as well." Qiu Chuji bitterly said: "We priests are supposed to be merciful and benevolent in our hearts and actions. But then we see a bunch of traitors and enemies that do nothing but add to the suffering of our people, and I could never be merciful nor benevolent." The two other men replied at the same time: "You were right to kill them! They deserved to die!"

This small village did not have many people to begin with. Now with the blizzard blowing, nobody was coming out at night. Even if someone witnessed what just happened, they would have ran back home a long time ago. Who had enough guts to come out to inspect and ask questions? Yang Tiexin took out shovels and hoes and the three of them buried all of the bodies in one big grave.

Bao Xiruo picked up a broom and started to sweep all traces of blood on the snow. After a while, the smell of blood

went straight to her stomach. Her eyes went blank for a second as she let out a little moan and sat down on the snow-covered ground. Yang Tiexin was shocked and immediately ran over to help her up, all the while asking over and over: "What's the matter?" Bao Xiruo's eyes were closed and she did not answer. Seeing her white face and feeling her cold hands, Yang Tiexin just got more and more worried.

Qiu Chuji came over, grabbed Bao Xiruo's right wrist, and felt her pulse for a bit. Suddenly he burst out laughing and said: "Congratulations! Congratulations!" Yang Tiexin was quite taken aback and asked: "What?" At this time Bao Xiruo suddenly woke up with a grunt. Seeing the three men standing around her, she can't help but feel a little shy and immediately walked back into the house.

Qiu Chuji said with a smile: "Your wife is pregnant!" Yang Tiexin couldn't quite believe it and asked: "Really?" Qiu Chuji smiled and replied: "Of all the things I learned in my life, I take comfort in saying that I know a little something about only three things. First is medicine, I couldn't master inner strength, but came into contact with a lot of medicinal and herbal knowledge because of that. The second thing is writing a couple of messed up lines of poetry. The little cat-like tricks called kung fu that I know can only be placed third." Guo Xiaotian replied: "Reverend, if your kung fu can only be called 'little cat-like tricks', then we two brothers can only lay claim to 'not even rat-like skills'!" The three of them finished burying the bodies while talking and laughing. After that they went back into the house and started on the food and drinks again. With all the Jin that Qiu Chuji killed today, all of them felt great joy and excitement.

Thinking about his wife's pregnancy, Yang Tiexin could not stop smiling. He thought: "Reverend here knows poetry,

then that means he excels in all facets." So he suggested: "Brother Guo's wife is pregnant as well. Could we bother the Reverend to think of two names?" Qiu Chuji thought for a bit and said: "Brother Guo's child will be called Guo Jing, and Brother Yang's child will be called Yang Kang. It doesn't matter if they are boys or girls, they can still use these names." Guo Xiaotian replied: "Great! Reverend's reminding us two to remember the disgrace of the Year of Jing Kang, the humiliating capture of the two emperors."

Qiu Chuji replied: "That's right." He reached into his shirt, took out two daggers, and put them on the table. The pair of daggers are identical in everyway with a green leather sheath, gold hand guard, and ebony handles. He picked up one of the daggers and carved the words "Guo Jing" on the dagger's handle. Then he carved "Yang Kang" on the handle of the other dagger. He carved with great speed and quickness, faster than most people can write. Before Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin figured out what he was doing, he had already finished carving the words. Smiling, he said: "I do not have anything else worthy with me, only this pair of daggers. Why not leave them for the two kids?" The two men thanked him and took their respective daggers. When the daggers were unsheathed, a sinister coldness came from them. Their blades were obviously very sharp.

Qiu Chuji explained: "This pair of daggers came into my possession by coincidence. Although they are sharp, their small design does not fit me at all. But the kids can use them to protect themselves. Ten years from now, if I'm lucky to be still in this world, I will come to this place again and teach the kids some kung fu. How does that sound?" The two men could not be any happier and thanked him repeatedly. Qiu Chuji concluded: "The Jin are occupying the north and torturing the people there. This situation cannot last long. Gentlemen, please take care of yourselves." He

picked up his bowl of wine and downed it in one gulp. Then he got up and walked out of the door. Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin jumped up to try to invite him to stay. But his steps were fast and steady as he was already very far away.

Guo Xiaotian sighed: "Masters like him are always coming and going like the wind. We were lucky to make his acquaintance today, I was thinking of talking to him and asking for his views a bit more. But alas, it was not to be." Yang Tiexin smiled and replied: "Big Brother, at least Reverend Qiu was able to kill many Jin today and vented some of our anger for us as well." He held up the dagger and unsheathed it again. Gently stroking the blade, he suddenly spoke up: "Big Brother, I have a stupid idea, tell me what you think of it?"

Guo Xiaotian asked: "What is it?" Yang Tiexin explained: "If both our kids are boys, then they will be sworn brothers. If they are girls, then they'll be sworn sisters...." Guo Xiaotian cut in: "And if it is a boy and a girl, then they'll be husband and wife." The two of them grabbed each other's hand and laughed heartily.

Bao Xiruo came back out from the sleeping room, smiled, and asked: "What has made you two so happy?" Yang Tiexin repeated what they just said to her. Bao Xiruo blushed, but she was happy in her heart as well. Yang Tiexin suggested: "Let's trade daggers right now as a pledge to the engagement. If they turn out to be sworn brothers or sisters, we can still switch back. If they are a little couple...." Guo Xiaotian joked: "Then I'm really very sorry, for both daggers would belong to my family then." Bao Xiruo laughed and replied: "You never know, maybe they will both belong to our family instead." So the two men switched daggers right there. Actually, arranging marriages before a child is born happens very often, there was nothing unusual about it.

Guo Xiaotian took the dagger and happily ran back home to inform his wife. When Li Ping heard it she was quite happy as well.

Playing with the dagger and drinking by himself, Yang Tiexin was drunk before he knew it. Bao Xiruo helped her husband onto the bed and collected the dishes and bowls. Noticing that it is quite late, she went out to the backyard and collected the chicken cages. As she was closing the back door, she suddenly saw some drops of blood in the snow just in front of the door. Startled, she thought: "So not all of the blood was taken care off. If some official sees this, then we will all be in trouble." So she hurriedly grabbed a broom and started sweeping.

The drops of blood led all the way to the woods behind the house. There were also traces of someone crawling along in the snow. Bao Xiruo's suspicions rose as she followed the blood trail into the pine trees. She arrived behind an old grave and saw something black curled up on the ground.

Bao Xiruo walked closer for a better look. Turned out it was a corpse. The man was covered in black, obviously one of the men that came for Qiu Chuji earlier. He probably didn't die right away after being wounded and crawled here. She was just about to go wake her husband to take care of this corpse when she suddenly thought: "What if someone came and saw him right at this moment?" So she summoned up her strength and went over to the corpse. She wanted to pull it into a bush close by and then go get her husband. But just as she gave a pull, the corpse suddenly twitched and groaned.

This scared the wits out of her, thinking it was a zombie; she wanted to turn around and run for her life. Yet it was as if her feet were nailed to the ground, she could not move at all. After a long wait, seeing that the corpse did not move

again, she gently nudged it with her broom. The corpse groaned again, but this time much weaker. Only now did she realize that the person was still alive. She looked closer and saw that the back of his shoulder had been hit by a 'wolf fang' arrow. The arrow was embedded deep and the arrow shaft was covered in blood. Snow was still falling and there was already a thin layer of snow on his face. It would only be a little while longer before he is frozen to death.

She had always been kindhearted ever since she was little. If she saw an injured sparrow, frog, or even a bug, she just had to take it home and take care of it until it had fully recovered. Only then would she release it. If for some reason she couldn't nourish it back to health, she would be unhappy for an entire day. This little quirk of hers never changed with her age and led to her house ending up crawling with small critters of many kinds. Her father, being the time-tested country scholar that he was, gave her a name that went along with this personality of hers: Xiruo, meaning weak or compassionate. The Bao family in Red Plum Village had an unusually high number of old roosters and hens. This was because once Bao Xiruo had taken care of a chick; she would never allow it to be killed. If her parents wanted to eat one, they would have to go and buy one at the market. So the chickens that the family raised all lived to a very old age before dying. Because Yang Tiexin loved this flower-like beauty that is his wife, he always went along with whatever she wanted. So naturally, the yard of the Yang house had become a haven for chickens, ducks and other little critters as well. The little chicks and ducklings have slowly grown to be adult chickens and ducks. There weren't any old chickens or ducks because she hadn't been in this household for very long. But if things continued as they were, it would only be a matter of time.

Right now, seeing this man lying in the snow about to die, her kind heart started to react. Even though she clearly knew that this man was not good, she couldn't just watch him bleed and freeze to death. She hesitated for only a second before running back to the house to discuss this with her husband. But Yang Tiexin was deep in sleep because of the wine, no matter what she did he wouldn't wake up.

Figuring that she should save the person first and then worry about the rest, she took out her husband's blood clotting powder. Grabbing a small dagger, some pieces of cloth, and half a jug of warm wine that was on the stove, she ran back to behind the grave. That man was still lying on the ground, not moving. Bao Xiruo helped him sit up and slowly poured the leftover wine in the jug into his mouth. She had been taking care of and curing animals ever since she was little, so she had a little bit of medical knowledge. The arrow had embedded itself deep inside of him, pulling it out might cause blood to shoot out of him and kill him. But if the arrow isn't pulled out, there will be no way to start taking care of the wound. So she gritted her teeth, cut open the flesh around the wound using the dagger, grabbed a hold of the arrow shaft, and gave one hard pull. The man let out a tortured scream and passed out. Blood shot out of the wound as Bao Xiruo's shirt was covered with little specks of blood, but that arrow had been pulled out. Bao Xiruo's heart was beating wildly as she anxiously and hurriedly applied the blood clotting powder onto the wound and firmly bandaged it with the pieces of cloth. After a while, the man slowly began to come around, but was too weak and tired to even make a sound.

Bao Xiruo had been frightened to the point that there was no way for her to gather up enough strength to help move this man. Suddenly an inspiration came to her, she went

back home and grabbed a door plank. She dragged the man onto the door plank and then pulled the door plank along the snow, as if she was pulling a sled. She pulled him back into the house and set him up in the barn. After being fully occupied for so long, only now did she get the chance to calm down. She changed out of her bloodied shirt and washed her hands and face. She poured out a bowl of unfinished chicken soup, grabbed a candle, and went to the barn once again to check on the man. When she arrived the man's breathing was weak but steady. Bao Xiruo felt a little better and started feeding him the chicken soup. The man drank down half a bowl before suddenly breaking out in a violent coughing bout.

Startled, Bao Xiruo held up the candle for a closer look. Under the candlelight, she saw the man's delicate features and rather high bridged nose. He was actually a very handsome young man. Her face suddenly flushed and her left hand shook, disturbing the candleholder and several drops of wax fell onto the man's face.

That man opened his eyes. In front of him was a face as beautiful as a flower, cheeks blushing red, and eyes like twinkling stars, filled with both sympathy and bashfulness. It was as if this was a dream and he couldn't help but become spellbound.

Bao Xiruo whispered: "Feeling any better? Here, drink the rest of this bowl of soup." That man tried to take the bowl in his hands, but he had no strength in his hands whatsoever and almost spilled it on himself. Bao Xiruo immediately grabbed the bowl back. At this time the most important thing is to save a life, so she fed him the soup little by little.

After drinking all of the soup, that man's eyes slowly gained back some life. He stared at her, obviously grateful beyond words. But Bao Xiruo was getting embarrassed by the

stare. So she grabbed some straw, put it on him to keep him warm, and went back into the house with the candle.

She did not sleep well at all for the rest of the night and she had several nightmares in a row. Suddenly she would see her husband spearing that man to death. But then she would see that man killing her husband with a saber and then start to chase her; she was surrounded by darkness and had no where to run or hide. Several times she was frightened awake by her dreams and was covered with a cold sweat. When she woke up in the morning, her husband had already gotten up. Seeing him grinding the head of his spear, her dreams of last night came rushing back into her mind. She anxiously made her way to the barn and pushed open the door. Even more startling, there was nobody in the barn, only a messed up pile of straw. The man had disappeared.

She ran to the backyard and noticed the backdoor was only half-closed. The snow showed the traces of someone crawling and rolling toward the west. She stared at the traces and became lost in thought. After a long while, a gust of wind blew in her face as she suddenly felt a pain in her stomach and her legs felt weak. Sleepy, she walked back to the main room. Yang Tiexin had already made some porridge and put it on the table. Smiling, he said: "See, my porridge isn't that bad after all." Bao Xiruo knew that her husband is being even more considerate because of her condition. She smiled, sat down, picked up the bowl, and started to eat the porridge. She figured that if she told her husband about what happened last night, he would be jealous and angry. He would no doubt chase the man down and kill him. Wouldn't that be the same as her killing the man? So she decided to never mention it ever.

Winter ended and spring returned. In a blink of an eye several months had passed. Bao Xiruo's stomach slowly got

bigger and she began to feel more and more tired. The incident of that night when she saved a man gradually slipped from her memory.

On this particular day, the Yang family had just finished dinner and Bao Xiruo was sitting by a lamp working on a new pair of trousers for her husband. Yang Tiexin was hanging up on the wall the two pairs of straw sandals he just finished. Remembering that he broke the head of the plough while working in the fields earlier that day, he turned to Bao Xiruo and said: "The head of the plough is broken. Tomorrow I'll go to Zhang Mu'Er on the east side of the village and have him add a bit of iron and take care of it." Bao Xiruo replied: "Alright." Yang Tiexin looked at her and said: "I have enough clothing already. Your body is weak and is carrying a baby, you should rest as much as you can. Don't worry about making clothes for me anymore." Bao Xiruo turned her head towards him and smiled, but her hands did not stop. Yang Tiexin walked over and gently took the needle and thread out of her hand. Only then did Bao Xiruo let out a yawn, blew out the lamp, and went to bed.

At midnight, Bao Xiruo was suddenly snapped out of her dreams by the sound of her husband sitting up. Faint sounds of hoof beats could be heard coming from very far away. The sound came from the west. After a while, hoof beats started coming from the east and followed by sounds coming from north and south. Bao Xiruo sat up and asked: "How come there are horses in all four directions?" Yang Tiexin jumped out of the bed and started to put on cloths. Soon, the hoof beats were getting closer from all four directions and the dogs in the village started to bark. Yang Tiexin replied: "We are surrounded!" Shocked, Bao Xiruo asked: "What for?" Yang Tiexin replied: "I don't know." He handed the dagger that Qiu Chuji gave him to his wife and said: "Take this, to protect yourself!" He took down a spear

from the wall and firmly held it in his hands. By now the horse neighs and the human voices from all four directions were loud and chaotic. Yang Tiexin opened up a window and looked outside. A group of soldiers, with torches in hand, had already surrounded the entire village. Seven or eight of them were galloping back and forth on horseback.

The soldiers shouted as one: "Catch the traitors, don't let them get away!" Yang Tiexin thought to himself: "Are they here to catch Qu San? I haven't seen him around recently. Luckily he isn't here, otherwise there is no way he could beat all of these soldiers, no matter how great his kung fu is." Suddenly one of the men on a horse shouted: "Guo Xiaotian, Yang Tiexin. You two traitors come out now and get what's coming to you!"

This shocked Yang Tiexin and Bao Xiruo's face turned white. Yang Tiexin whispered to her: "I don't know what's gotten into the authorities, they only know how to malign us normal citizens. We won't stand a chance with them. The only thing we can do is run for our lives. Don't panic, with this spear of mine, I can assure you that we'll get out of here." His kung fu was good and had made a living in the martial world before. So even though he was in grave danger, he did not panic. He put a bow and arrow bag onto his back and grabbed his wife's right hand.

Bao Xiruo spoke up: "I'll pack." Yang Tiexin replied: "Pack what? We are leaving everything!" Bao Xiruo's heart suddenly trembled as tears rolled down her cheeks. She said in the shaking voice: "What's going to happen to our home?" Yang Tiexin answered: "All we need to do is to survive. We can start another home somewhere else." Bao Xiruo asked: "What about these little chicks and ducklings and cats?" Yang Tiexin sighed: "Silly, why are you still worrying about them?" After a pause, he tried to console

her: "Why would the authorities bother the little chicks, ducklings and cats?"

Just as he finished his sentence, the light from the torches outside fluttered. The soldiers had just lit two thatched cottages on fire. Two more foot soldiers were heading this way with torches to light this house on fire, all the while shouting: "Guo Xiaotian, Yang Tiexin. If the two of you don't come out now, we'll burn all of Ox Village down to the ground!"

Yang Tiexin had about all he could take, so he opened up the door and walked out. He shouted at the top of his lungs: "I am Yang Tiexin! What do you people want?" The two foot soldiers were shocked and they dropped their torches, turned around, and ran back. In the firelight, a man rode forth on his horse and shouted: "Good, so you are Yang Tiexin. Come with us to the magistrate. Seize him!" At once four or five foot soldiers ran up. Yang Tiexin twirled his spear, swung a 'White Rainbow in the Sky' move, and swept three of the soldiers onto the ground. He followed it up with the 'Madly Deafening Spring Thunder' move as he picked up a soldier by the spear shaft and threw him into the crowd. He shouted: "If you want to arrest me, first tell me what crimes I committed."

The man shouted back: "Traitor! How dare you resist arrest?" Even though he was calling him names, he nevertheless feared his foe's courage as well as skill and was afraid to get any closer. Another man on horseback behind him shouted: "Just come with us to the courthouse peacefully, that way there won't be more punishments added to your crimes. We have the official document for your arrest here." Yang Tiexin replied: "Let me see it!" That man replied: "What about the other traitor, Guo Xiaotian?"

Guo Xiaotian stuck half of his body out of a window with his bow and arrow in hand and shouted: "Guo Xiaotian is here!" The arrow was aimed at the man on horseback.

The man's heart felt all fluttery as cold waves of fear washed up his back. He shouted: "Put down your bow, and then I'll read the document to you." Guo Xiaotian viciously shouted back: "Read it now!" He pulled his bow full draw. Seeing that he had no say in the matter, the man brought up the document and read aloud: "Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin of Ox Village of the Prefecture of Linan colluded with traitors and criminals with intentions of wrong doing. Capture them and bring them in to be strictly judged by the law." Guo Xiaotian asked: "Which official issued the order?" The man replied: "Chancellor Han himself."

Both Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin were shocked by this: "What could be so important that Han Tuo Zhou himself got involved? Could it be that Reverend Qiu's actions that night were discovered?" Guo Xiaotian asked: "Who is the plaintiff? Based on what evidence?" That man shouted back: "We only worry about capturing you guys, if you want to plead your case then come to the courthouse with us." Yang Tiexin shouted back: "Chancellor Han only knows how to do harm to us good honest people, everyone knows that! We won't fall for that lie!" The leader shouted in response: "Refusing arrest! That is another crime to your sheet!"

[Actually Han Tuo Zhou is not as bad as portrayed in the book. Between Yue Fei's execution in 1142 and Han Tuo Zhou's ascension as head chancellor in 1206, the Southern Song emperors did not once invade the Jin territories in an attempt to reclaim some lands. Only after Han Tuo Zhou became chancellor was another attempt was made. However, this attempt was poorly planned and general preparations were lacking. On top of that add the internal conflicts within the imperial court, and it is no

surprise that it failed. Ning Zong, the emperor at the time, and a bunch of officials favoring peace executed Han Tuo Zhou and presented his head to the Jin emperor as a show of their willingness for peace. This was the last attempt by the Southern Song dynasty to drive out the Jin. So Han Tuo Zhou was actually a patriot who died for his country instead of how he is portrayed in this book.]

Yang Tiexin turned toward his wife and said: "Quickly put on some more clothes. I'll go get his horse for you. Once I shoot down the leader, the rest of them will panic." The sound of bow being released was followed by a meteor-like arrow hitting the leader's right shoulder. The leader let out an "Ai-Yo!" before tumbling down onto the ground. All the soldiers shouted in surprise. Another official shouted: "Seize them!" All the soldiers came rushing forth. The two men were shooting arrows one after another and in an instant, they had already shot down six or seven soldiers. But there were too many of them and they still managed to charge to the front of both houses.

With a loud shout, Yang Tiexin jumped out of the door with his spear making the soldiers back up in surprise and fear. He jumped to the side of an official that was riding a white horse and thrust the spear at him. The official tried to parry with his spear but the 'Yang Family Spear' was too fast; Yang Tiexin's spear flashed down and hit the official on his leg. He then lifted his spear up and flipped the official off his horse.

Yang Tiexin put his spear shaft on the ground and pushed off, jumping onto the horse. He squeezed his legs, making the horse neigh and gallop towards the house. Yang Tiexin killed a soldier by the door with a thrust, leaned down, extended his arms, grabbed Bao Xiruo, and lifted her up onto the horse as well. He then turned and shouted: "Brother, follow me!" Guo Xiaotian was waving his twin

halberds and protecting his wife as he charged out from the crowd. Seeing the ferocity of the two men, none of the soldiers dared to get any closer. So they started to shoot arrows at them.

Yang Tiexin made his horse run to Li Ping's side and shouted as he jumped off: "Sister, get on!" Li Ping anxiously said: "That won't be any good." Yang Tiexin didn't care what she said and threw her onto the horse. The two sworn brothers followed behind the horse and slowly walked off while battling off the soldiers.

After a bit of walking, they suddenly heard loud shouting coming from ahead as another group of soldiers came charging in. The two men silently groaned. As they were looking for another direction to run, arrows started coming in from ahead. Suddenly, Bao Xiruo screamed: "Ai-Yo!" Her horse was hit by an arrow and it fell over, throwing the two women on its back off. Yang Tiexin said: "Brother, you guard them; I'll go get another horse." He charged toward the crowd of soldiers. Ten or so soldiers lined up, pointed their spears at Yang Tiexin, and let out a yell together.

Seeing the overwhelming number of enemies, Guo Xiaotian thought: "For us two brothers, escaping is not hard. But with enemies in front and behind, there is no way our wives can escape. It is not like we broke any laws, so going to the courthouse in Linan to argue our case is much better than dying here for no reason. When Reverend Qiu Chuji killed all of the men there, not a single one of them got away. Therefore there is nobody to prove we did it, so the court can't say for sure that we were guilty of anything. Besides, the two of us didn't kill any officials or Jin soldiers." So he yelled: "Brother, stop! Let's go with them!" Yang Tiexin was very surprised by this and ran back dragging his spear behind him.

The leader of this group of soldiers ordered the men to stop shooting and surround the two men. Then he shouted: "Throw down your weapons, and your life will be spared."

Yang Tiexin spoke up: "Brother, don't fall for their lies." Guo Xiaotian shook his head for a while and then threw his twin halberds onto the ground. Yang Tiexin looked over at his beloved wife and could not bear the frightened look on her face. He sighed and threw his spear on the ground as well. As soon as both of their weapons fell on the ground, ten or so long spears immediately came and surrounded the four of them. Eight foot soldiers walked up and tied the four of them up with their hands behind their backs.

Yang Tiexin held his head up high and sneered. The leader of the group lifted his horse whip up and smacked Yang Tiexin squarely on his face: "Damn traitor! Do you really want to die?" A welt appeared on Yang Tiexin's face from his forehead all the way down to his neck. In rage, Yang Tiexin replied: "Ok! What is your name?" That official got even madder as his whip came down like rain: "This old man is Duan Tiande! Remember that? When you get to the gates of hell you can tell them all about me!" Yang Tiexin did not back down or flinch as he stood there staring at him. Duan Tiande continued: "I got a knife scar on my forehead and a birthmark on my face! Can you remember all that?" His whip came down again.

Seeing her husband being treated like this, Bao Xiruo cried out while tears rolled down her cheeks: "He's a good man and has done nothing wrong. Why are you... you beating him? Don't... Don't you know anything about justice?" Yang Tiexin suddenly spit at him, hitting him on the face. Furious, Duan Tiande pulled out his saber and screamed: "I'm going to kill you traitor, right now!" He brought his saber up and swung it down. Yang Tiexin sidestepped the strike. The two foot soldiers by him pushed their spears up against his sides

to stop him from moving as Duan Tiande chopped down once again. With nowhere to dodge on the sides, Yang Tiexin could only jump back to avoid the strike. It turned out this Duan Tiande knows a little bit of kung fu, even though he missed again, he immediately thrust his saber forward. The saber he was using was saw-toothed and with his move he sawed a gash on Yang Tiexin's left shoulder. He then immediately followed it with another chop.

Seeing that his sworn brother's life was in grave danger, Guo Xiaotian suddenly jumped up and aimed his feet at Duan Tiande's face. In shock, Duan Tiande brought his sword back to parry this away. Even though Guo Xiaotian's hands were tied behind his back, his footwork was still quite formidable. So before his body fell down, he twirled his left leg and brought it back and at the same time sent out his right leg, hitting Duan Tiande in his stomach.

In extreme pain and rage, Duan Tiande shouted: "Stick those spears in them! Orders from above, if the traitors resist arrest, kill them all!" The soldiers thrust with their spears. Guo Xiaotian kicked down two soldiers in a row, but having his hands tied behind his back was restricting his quickness as he had to jump away from the spears. Duan Tiande came up from behind him and swung down hard, chopping Guo Xiaotian's entire right arm off at the shoulders. Yang Tiexin was trying to struggle out of the ropes but could not, no matter how hard he tried. Suddenly seeing his sworn brother wounded on the ground, a surge of strength came from somewhere inside him and he snapped the ropes from his body, punched a soldier, grabbed his spear, and whipped out the 'Yang Family Spear'. This time he was fighting without regard for his own life; it was as if he could take on tens of thousands of soldiers all by himself. He had just started but had already taken down two soldiers.

Seeing that the situation had turned, Duan Tiande immediately backed away. The last time, Yang Tiexin was holding back somewhat, not really wanting to kill government soldiers; but now he could not care less. Flicking right and swinging left, he killed several soldiers in an instant. Seeing his ferociousness, the rest of the soldiers scattered at once.

Yang Tiexin did not bother chasing them as he helped his sworn brother sit up. Blood was gushing from where Guo Xiaotian's arm was chopped off and by now his whole body was covered in blood. Yang Tiexin could not stop tears from falling at the sight. Guo Xiaotian gritted his teeth and shouted: "Brother, don't worry about me... leave, leave now!" Yang Tiexin replied desperately: "I'm going to get a horse, and then I'm going to fight until I die to make sure you escape." Guo Xiaotian faintly replied: "No... no...." He passed out. Yang Tiexin took off his outer shirt so he could bandage up the wound. But Duan Tiande had chopped off his shoulder and portions of his chest as well; the wound is almost half-a-body in length and impossible to bandage up. Guo Xiaotian slowly came to and shouted: "Brother, go save our wives. I... I can't... make it..." Before he finished what he was saying, he slumped over and died.

The two sworn brothers always thought of each other as real blood brothers. Seeing his brother die like this, a phrase popped up amidst the anger and the rage in Yang Tiexin's mind. It is the phrase that they said when they became sworn brothers: "Hope to die on the same day of the same month of the same year." He lifted his head up to look around. The two wives had gone missing in all the chaos. He screamed: "Brother, I'm going to avenge your death!" He grabbed his spear and ran toward the crowd of soldiers. By now, the soldiers had already lined up in formation. Duan Tiande issued an order and immediately

arrows flew towards him. Yang Tiexin did not care, as he knocked the arrows out of the way and charged ahead. An official swung the saber in his hand down hard at Yang Tiexin's head. Yang Tiexin ducked and suddenly scrambled underneath the belly of his horse. That official was just about to turn his horse around when a spear penetrated through his heart from the back. Yang Tiexin threw off the corpse and jumped onto the horse. Waving his spear around, none of the soldiers dared to come closer to battle and they started to run off.

After chasing for a while, he suddenly saw an official running away as fast as he could with a woman in his arms. Yang Tiexin jumped off his horse and knocked down a foot soldier. Picking up the soldier's bow and arrow, he aimed the best he could in the dim fire light and let loose. The arrow hit the horse's behind, making the horse kneel down all of the sudden. The two people on the horse came tumbling off. Yang Tiexin let loose another arrow and killed the official. Running up he saw that the woman on the ground, who was now trying to sit up, is his wife.

Overwhelmed with surprise and excitement upon seeing her husband, Bao Xiruo jumped into his arms. Yang Tiexin asked: "Where's our sister-in-law?" Bao Xiruo answered: "Ahead, with... with more soldiers." Yang Tiexin instructed: "You stay here and wait for me. I'm going to save her." Bao Xiruo suddenly said in shock: "But there are more soldiers coming from behind!"

Yang Tiexin turned around and, as she had said, there really was a group of soldiers coming this way with torches in hand. Yang Tiexin gritted his teeth and said: "Brother is dead. No matter what, I have to save Sister-in-Law to save the Guo family bloodline. If the heavens pity us, there will be a day when we meet again." Bao Xiruo put her arms around her husband's neck and would not let go. She said

in between sobs: "We'll never be apart, you said it yourself, even if we die we will die together! Remember? You said it yourself!" Yang Tiexin's heart went sour for a moment as he picked up his wife and gave her a kiss. Then despite every part of his heart not wanting to, he shook free of her arms and charged forward with his spear. After charging for ten steps he turned around and saw that his wife was sobbing in a cloud of dust and the soldiers had already arrived at her side.

Wiping away the sweat, blood, and tears on his face, Yang Tiexin threw his consideration for own life out and thought only about saving Li to make sure that his sworn brother had descendants. After chasing for a while, he got another horse. After grilling an official, he found out that Li was just a bit ahead. So he raced on as hard as he could on the horse. Suddenly, he heard the cries and screams of a woman coming from the woods by the path. He immediately turned the horse and charged into the woods. Li had freed her hands from the ropes and was desperately fighting off two foot soldiers. Being born and raised on the farm, she was very strong for a girl; so although she did not know any kung fu, her desperate fighting was quite tough to handle. The two foot soldiers were cursing and laughing at her, but, at the moment, still could not quite handle her. Yang Tiexin did not bother to say anything and just charged up and killed the two soldiers with two thrusts. He then helped Li up onto the horse. The two of them rode back together, trying to find his wife. When they got back to the place where they parted ways, nobody was there. By now the sky is getting slightly brighter, so he jumped off the horse to inspect the ground. There were traces of someone being dragged away; his wife was probably captured by the soldiers again.

Yang Tiexin immediately jumped up onto the horse and gave the horse several wild kicks in the stomach. In great pain, the horse shot forward. Just as they were galloping at full speed, a bugle suddenly sounded to the side of the path and ten or so warriors clad in black charged out. The first one lifted up his 'wolf fang' club and smashed down. Yang Tiexin parried it with his spear and answered with a thrust. That man replied by swinging his club sideways. His club techniques were very unique, as if it wasn't a skill from the Central Plains.

When Yang Tiexin and Guo Xiaotian used to discuss kung fu and kung fu techniques, they talked about one of the Heroes of the Water Margins, Thunderclap Fire Qing Ming, who used to be the best in the world in 'wolf fang' club techniques. But outside of him, it was very rare to meet someone in the martial world who uses this weapon. Because of the sheer weight of the weapon, it required that the user had to have enormous upper back strength. However, the Jin army loved to use this weapon. This was because the Jin people lived in the freezing cold climate of Liaodong, so they were all very strong. When using this weapon on the battlefield, its heaviness gave them a distinct advantage. Back when the Jin invaded and defeated the Song armies using the 'wolf fang' club, the rage and anger of the peasants and farmers, resulted in a joke that went around. The first person said: "What's so scary about the Jin army? For any one thing they have, we have one thing to counter them." The second person responded: "They've got Acute." The first replied: "We've got Protector Han." The second went on: "They've got Crippled Horse." The first replied: "We got Thin Coarse Saber." The second said: "They've got the 'wolf fang' club." To which the first replied: "We've got the crown of our heads." Meaning that when 'wolf fang' club comes down, the farmers of Song could only

meet it with the top of their heads. This joke is actually filled with bitterness and anger.

By now Yang Tiexin had fought several exchanges with this man with the 'wolf fang' club. Remembering his discussion with Guo Xiaotian, he became more and more suspicious. From the moves and techniques of this man, it was obvious that he was a Jin army official. What's he doing here? Several more exchanges passed when he suddenly quickened his spear moves and stabbed the man off his horse. The rest of them turned around and ran in shock.

Yang Tiexin turned around to check up on whether or not Li was hurt in that last fight. Suddenly an arrow was shot out from the woods. It caught Yang Tiexin by surprise and hit him from behind. In utter panic, Li shouted: "Brother Yang, arrow! Arrow!" Yang Tiexin's heart went cold: "So this is when and where I die! But I have to at least disperse these bastard soldiers before I die, that way Sister-in-Law can get away." So he waved his spear wildly and charged straight at an area crowded with soldiers. But the pain from the arrow in his back was too much and his eyes lost focus as he fainted.

Back when her husband pushed her away, Bao Xiruo felt as if her heart had been shredded. In a blink of an eye the soldiers made it to her side. Before she had time to run away, she was already tied up and thrown onto a horse. One of the army officials brought a torch up to her face and gave her a good look-over. Nodding, he said: "Hard to believe those two bastards could actually do a thing or two, and wounded so many of our men." Another official smiled and said: "Well, finally we can call an end to it and a job well done. After all that trouble, I would have to say that everyone deserves at least ten taels, or more, of silver each." The first official replied: "Hmph! Let's hope the higher ups don't take it all for themselves." Turning around,

he instructed the bugler: "Let's head back!" The bugler brought up his bugle and blew several notes. Bao Xiruo could only sob because all she could think about was her husband and whether or not he's still alive. By now the sky had brightened up somewhat and people are slowly appearing on the path. Seeing a group of soldiers, all of the farmers quickly got out of the way as far as they could. At first Bao Xiruo was worried that the soldiers might get ideas about her; but surprisingly these men actually were polite in their actions and words, so she slowly stopped worrying about it.

After several li, shouts suddenly came from ahead as ten or so armed men dressed in black came charging in from the side of the path. The leader of the group yelled: "Shameless scum! Killing good innocent people! Come down here at once and get what's coming to you!" The leading official was furious and shouted back: "Who do you think you dogs are, making trouble here in the outskirts of the capital? Get out of the way, now!" The gang of men in black did not reply as they charged into the soldiers. Even though there were more soldiers than they, the men in black were all well versed in kung fu, so neither side seemed to have gained an advantage for the moment.

Bao Xiruo was silently excited as she thought to herself: "Maybe Dear Tie's friends heard the news and came to rescue us." In the chaos of battle an arrow came flying in and hit the butt of the horse she was on. Driven by the pain, the horse ran off as fast as it could to the north. In utter shock, Bao Xiruo grabbed hold of the horse's neck with both arms in fear of falling off. The sound of hoof beats came as another horse chased up from behind. In an instant a black horse overtook her. The man on the horse twirled a lasso in the air a couple of times and skillfully tossed it around her horse's neck. The two horses galloped side-by-

side. The man slowly shortened the lasso and together, the two horses gradually slowed down. After several more steps, the man whistled and the black horse immediately stopped dead in its tracks. Because of the lasso, Bao Xiruo's horse could not continue forward and reared up on its hind legs, neighing loudly. Bao Xiruo had been worn out by the events of the night. In a mixture of sadness and horror, she could no longer hang on to the reins. She fell off the horse and fainted.

After sleeping for what seemed like forever, she slowly woke up. It felt like she was sleeping on a very soft and comfortable bed with a thick cotton quilt over her; she felt warm all over. She opened her eyes and the first thing that she saw was the green colored canopy of a bed, as it turned out, she really was sleeping on a bed. A lamp was lit on the table by the bed and it seemed like there was a man dressed in black sitting by the bed. Hearing her turn, that man immediately stood up, parted the bed curtains, and quietly asked: "Are you awake?" Bao Xiruo hadn't completely recovered her consciousness; all she could tell was that this man was somewhat familiar. The man placed his hand on her forehead and gently said: "Still very hot, don't worry; the doctor will be here soon." In a daze, Bao Xiruo slowly fell back to sleep.

After a while, it seemed like a doctor was examining her and then someone was feeding her medicine. After that, all she could do was sleep. She snapped out of a dream and screamed: "Dear Tie! Dear Tie!" followed by someone patting her softly on the shoulder and gently consoling her.

The next time she woke up it was in the middle of the day and she couldn't help but groan. A person walked up and parted the bed curtains. This time as they faced each other, Bao Xiruo saw the face clearly. She was shocked; for this handsome, smiling man in front of her was the very man

she'd saved from certain death in the snow several months ago.

Bao Xiruo asked: "Where am I? Where's my husband?" The young man waved his hand, telling her not to be loud and then lightly replied: "The soldiers are outside looking all over the place. Right now we are borrowing a room at a farmer's place. I'm very sorry, I had to lie and say that I am your husband, please don't accidentally tell them the truth." Bao Xiruo blushed and nodded, but she asked again: "Where's my husband?" The man answered: "Your body is very weak right now. After you get better, then I'll tell you everything."

Bao Xiruo was shocked and from his tone of voice, it seemed like something had happened to her husband. She grabbed the corner of her quilt tightly with both hands and asked in a shaking voice: "He... What... What happened to him?" The man only replied: "Worrying will accomplish nothing now. The most important thing is your health." Bao Xiruo kept on asking: "Is... Is he dead?" The man's face showed that he realized he had no choice in the matter so he gently nodded: "Mr. Yang was killed by those bastard soldiers." He shook his head and sighed. Bao Xiruo felt as if her heart was being torn and she fainted. When she came to after a long time, she started crying her eyes out.

That man gently consoled her. In between sobs, Bao Xiruo asked: "He... How did he die?" That man replied: "Was Mr. Yang a tall, broad-shouldered man around the age of twenty, and uses a spear as a weapon?" Bao Xiruo answered: "Yes, that's him." That man answered: "Earlier today I saw him fighting with several soldiers, killing a couple of them. But... ay! But one of the army officers snuck behind him and stabbed him squarely in the back with his spear."

Bao Xiruo fainted again. She did not drink nor eat for that entire day as she felt obligated to die with her husband. The man didn't try to force her either and he just talked to her in a very gentlemanly manner to keep her company. As this continued Bao Xiruo started to feel as if she was neglecting him, so she asked: "What is your name? How did you know that we were in trouble and come to help?" The man replied: "My surname is Yan, given name is Lie. My friends and I were just passing by yesterday, when we saw soldiers causing trouble. We didn't like what we saw so we decided to help. Who knew that I would end up rescuing my savior? It was as if we were destined to meet like this."

Hearing the words "destined to meet", Bao Xiruo's face turned a little red as she tried to ignore him by turning her face away. She thought about all this in her head for a while. Suddenly something suspicious popped up in her mind as she found a hole in his story. She turned and asked: "Are you on the same side as the soldiers?" Yan Lie was shocked: "Wh... What?" Bao Xiruo explained: "Back on that day, weren't you with the soldiers that tried to catch that Taoist Priest? That's why you were injured right?" Yan Lie answered: "Such bad luck on that day. I came from up north and was heading for Linan, passing by your village. Who was to know that an arrow was going to come out of nowhere and hit me in the shoulder? If it wasn't for your benevolent heart and kindness I really would have died without even knowing why or how. Why were they after that Taoist Priest anyways? Taoist Priests catch ghosts, but soldiers catch Taoist Priests, what kind of logic is that?" When he got to that point he couldn't help but laugh a little.

Bao Xiruo observed: "Oh, so you were just passing by and were not with them. I thought you were one of the people that were there to catch the Taoist. I really didn't know whether or not I should have saved you." She then went on

to explain why the soldiers were there and how Qiu Chuji killed them all.

After talking for a while, Bao Xiruo suddenly noticed that he was staring at her with an entranced gaze and immediately stopped talking. This snapped Yan Lie out of his trance, he smiled and said: "Sorry. I was just thinking about how we can escape without being caught by the soldiers."

Bao Xiruo started to cry and replied: "My... My husband is gone now, how can I live on? Why don't you just escape by yourself and not worry about me?" Yan Lie replied with a straight face: "Madame, your husband was murdered by those bastard soldiers; his death has not been avenged. Yet you are not trying to bring the culprits to justice and are only seeking death. Your husband was a hero among men when he was alive, I'm afraid he won't rest in peace when he finds out about this in the underworld."

Bao Xiruo replied: "I'm only a weak female, how can I possibly avenge his death?" In anger, Yan Lie replied: "Madame's burden, I will gladly take upon my shoulders. Do you know who the culprit is?" Bao Xiruo thought for a bit and answered: "The leader of the soldier's name is Duan Tiande. He has a knife scar on his forehead and a birthmark on his face." Yan Lie replied: "With a name and a way of recognizing him, no matter how far away he runs off, we have to bring him to justice!" He went outside and came back with a bowl of porridge with some salted eggs. He spoke up: "If you don't take care of your health, how can you get your revenge?" Bao Xiruo thought what he said made some sense, so she took the bowl and started to slowly eat its contents.

The next morning, Bao Xiruo arranged her clothes and got off of bed. She brushed her hair properly in front of a mirror, found a piece of white cloth and placed a white

flower in her hair to pay respects to her husband. What she saw in the mirror was a beautiful woman in the prime of her life, yet her husband had already left her behind. Overwhelmed by sadness and loneliness, she put her head down and started crying. Yan Lie walked in and saw her. He said softly: "The soldiers are gone now, let's go." Bao Xiruo followed him out. Yan Lie gave a bit of silver to the master of the house and then led two horses over. The horse that Bao Xiruo had ridden on was hit by an arrow, but Yan Lie had taken care of the wound.

Bao Xiruo asked: "Where do we go to now?" Yan Lie gave her a look, signaling her not to talk so much in front of others. He helped her onto the horse and the two of them rode side by side northward. After riding for many li, Bao Xiruo asked again: "Where do we go now?" Yan Li replied: "Let's find a place where we can settle down for a while and wait out this storm. After the soldiers stop looking for us and let their guard down, then I'll go and find your husband's body so we can give him a proper burial. After that I'm going to find that bastard Duan Tiande and kill him."

Bao Xiruo had a very tender and selfless personality; rarely did she come up with ideas of her own. Besides, right now she's all by herself in the world, and seeing that he had it all figured out, she could not help but be touched. She said: "Mr. Yan, how... how will I ever be able to repay you?" Yan Lie confidently replied: "Madame, this life of mine was saved by you. Even if I have to jump into boiling oil or be smashed into dust, I will serve you for the rest of my life." Bao Xiruo replied: "I only hope that we can avenge my husband's death and kill that evil Duan Tiande as soon as possible so I can join him on the other side." When she had that thought, tears started to roll from of her eyes again. The two of them rode for the rest of the day and then

stopped at a little inn in Changan for the night. Yan Lie put the two down as a couple and got one room. Bao Xiruo could not help but feel that there was something wrong about this. She did not utter a word during dinner and she secretly touched the dagger that Qiu Chuji gave her to make sure it's there. She made up her mind: "If he gets any ideas, I will kill myself right there on the spot."

Yan Lie instructed the floor manager to bring him two bundles of straw into the room. He waited until the floor manager left before locking the door and laying out the straw on the floor. He lay down on the straw and covered himself with a felt blanket. He turned to Bao Xiruo: "Goodnight Madame." And then he closed his eyes.

Bao Xiruo's heart was beating a mile a minute. Remembering her dead husband, she felt all torn up inside. She blankly sat there for over an hour before finally sighing and blowing out the candle. Still clutching the dagger tightly, she climbed onto the bedding with her cloths on.

When Bao Xiruo woke up the next day, Yan Lie had already packed and readied everything, as well as instructing the floor manager to get some breakfast ready. Bao Xiruo was very thankful for his gentlemanly actions and let most of her guard down. By the time she ate breakfast, she noticed that there was a dish of chicken fried noodles, a dish of ham, a dish of sausages, a dish of smoked fish, and a small pot of deliciously smelling rice and stock gruel. She was raised in a moderately well off family. Even after marrying into the Yang family, she had always led the life of typical farmer. Usually, breakfast for her was a couple of salted vegetables and half a salted egg. Other than the New Year and weddings, she had never eaten such delicacies. As a result she felt quite uncomfortable during the breakfast.

Once she finished eating, the floor manager came in with a bundle. By now Yan Lie had left them room. Bao Xiruo asked: "What is this?" The floor manager replied: "Mister went out as soon as the sun rose and bought a change of clothing for Madame. He told me to ask you to change into it." Once he finished he put down the bundle and left. Bao Xiruo opened the bundle and was shocked. It was a completely white mourning dress made out of silk with matching white socks, shoes, inner garments, and jacket. Also included were a matching scarf, bandanas, and other accessories. She thought: "It's hard for a young man like him to think of everything." When she changed into the clothing, she thought that Yan Lie bought these himself made her blush. She had left her home in a hurry in the middle of the night, so her clothing was not very neat to begin with. After a whole night of misadventures, she was covered in dirt and sweat. Now that she had cleaned up somewhat, her spirits picked up somewhat as well. When Yan Lie returned, she noticed he had changed into colorful and expensive attire as well.

The two of them got on their way again. Sometimes one of them rode in front while the other one followed, other times they rode side-by-side. The season of spring was in its full glory south of the Yangtze; willows brushed people's shoulder on the road, flower fragrances filled the air and people's hearts. Now plants were starting to sprout on the farms.

In order to distract her thoughts and ease her troubled mind, Yan Lie kept on talking to her about various random subjects. Bao Xiruo's father was an unaccomplished scholar in a little village, her husband and his sworn brother were both straightforward and unrefined men. She had never met someone as refined, gentlemanly, and knowledgeable as Yan Lie. When they talked, she felt that every word,

every sentence that he spoke were highly intelligent and thought-provoking; she could not but secretly look at him in wonder. However, they kept on heading north and getting further and further away from Linan; not only that, he never once mentioned revenge or even bring up the subject of a proper burial for her husband. Finally, she could not keep it in anymore and asked: "Mr. Yan, what are your plans regarding my husband's body?"

Yan Lie relied: "It's not that I don't want to search for your husband's body and give him a proper burial; but I killed government officials when I rescued Madame. Right now it is very dangerous for me there. As soon as I show myself around Linan, I would no doubt be killed by the soldiers. Besides, right now the soldiers are all over the place looking for Madame. After all, your husband did commit treason by killing officials, this is a huge crime. If his relatives are captured, the men will be executed and women made into prostitutes for the soldiers. Dying for me is no big thing, but if nobody was around to protect Madame and the soldiers catch you, I could not bare to think of the consequences. Even in the underworld, I would be saddened beyond my own imaginings." Seeing how honest and sincere he looked and sounded, Bao Xiruo nodded. Yan Lie continued: "I have thought this over thoroughly; the most important thing right now is to give your husband a proper burial. So we are going to Jiaxing so I can obtain some money and get someone to take care of it in Linan. If Madame has to do it herself, then let me settle you down in Jiaxing and take the risk by myself."

Bao Xiruo felt she was expecting a bit too much for him to take such a big risk for her and replied: "If you can find someone reliable to take care of the whole matter, then that would be for the best." She continued: "My husband had a sworn brother with the surname of Guo; he died with my

husband. I am sorry to trouble you by asking you to try to give him a proper burial as well. I... I..." She started crying.

Yan Lie replied: "It's no trouble at all, just leave it all to me. As for revenge, that bastard Duan Tiande is a government official; killing him is not so easy. Besides, he will be extra careful right now, all we can do is wait patiently for our chance." Bao Xiruo wanted to kill Duan Tiande to avenge her husband and then follow him into the underworld. Even though Yan Lie's every word seemed true, she didn't know how long she would have to wait for this to happen. In a moment of impatience, she started to sob loudly. In between sobs, she replied: "I really don't know about revenge. Even a hero like my husband could not defeat him. I... I'm just a weak woman, what... what can I do? Just let me die and join my husband and that'll be that."

Feeling that the situation was truly difficult, Yan Lie thought for a long while before finally saying: "Madame, do you trust me?" Bao Xiruo nodded. Yan Lie continued: "The only thing we can do now is to head up north to avoid the soldiers. The Song officials can't chase us if we are in the north. As soon as we cross the Yangtze, we should be out of danger. We'll wait until things have cooled down before returning south and avenging your husband. Madame, please be rest assured that I will take care of this whole matter of justice for your husband."

Bao Xiruo hesitated: "I am homeless without any relatives in the world, if I don't follow him, where can a woman like me settle down in this world? The faces of the soldiers that night were beastly; if I had fallen into their hands, I would have definitely suffered a fate worse than death itself. Yet this man is not a friend or a relative, should a widow like me be traveling together with a young man like him? If I tried to kill myself right now, he would without a doubt stop me." She felt lost; the only thing she was sure of is that the

future will be difficult. Thinking forward and looking back like this, she felt as if her insides were being twisted. For several days straight she had shed tears and now it seemed as if she had ran out of tears to shed.

an Lie spoke up: "If Madame feels that any part of my plan is bad, then please tell me. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you." Seeing how accommodating he is, Bao Xiruo actually felt a little bad about hesitating. Other than committing suicide, she really could not find another way out. Having no other choice, she lowered her head and replied: "Why don't you take care of it."

Yan Lie could not be happier: "I will forever be grateful that Madame saved my life. Madame...." Bao Xiruo interrupted him: "You don't have to mention that matter ever again." Yan Lie replied: "Yes, yes of course."

That night, the two of them stopped at an inn in the town of Xiashi, still only getting one room. Ever since Bao Xiruo agreed to go up north with him, Yan Lie's actions have not been as gentlemanly and proper as before. Once in a while his excitement would get out of hand. Bao Xiruo felt an indistinct notion that something might not be appropriate. But seeing that he had not shown even the slightest trace of getting any ideas, she figured that he must be a little too excited about being able to fully show his gratitude.

he two of them reached Jiaxing at noon the next day. Jiaxing is a big city in the western parts of Zhejiang. Since this was the place where many trade routes came together, it had always been a very prosperous place. When the Song dynasty moved south, Jiaxing had also become much closer to the capital, thus becoming even more prosperous and bustling.

Yan Lie suggested: "Let's find an inn and rest up for a bit." Bao Xiruo was worried about soldiers finding them and

said: "It's still early; we can still cover some ground." Yan Lie replied: "The stores here aren't half bad. Madame's clothing is old and worn; we'll have to buy some new ones." This surprised Bao Xiruo as she took a moment to recover and replied: "Didn't you just buy this yesterday? How is it already old and worn?" Yan Lie answered: "There was a lot of dust on the way, after wearing the same clothing for a couple of days it is no longer colorful anymore. Besides, as beautiful as Madame is, how can Madame possibly not wear the best clothing in the world?"

Hearing him praising her beauty, Bao Xiruo was secretly happy inside, but she lowered her head and said: "I am in the middle of paying my respects...." Yan Lie immediately cut her off: "Yes, of course. I understand." Bao Xiruo did not say anything more. Her husband had never praised her beauty to her face like this before; she peeked over at Yan Lie and saw only sincerity on his face. At once her heart shook, but she couldn't figure out if it was from happiness or sadness.

In Jiaxing Yan Lie asked about accommodations and was directed to the biggest inn, the 'Elegant Waters Inn'. After washing up, Yan Lie and Bao Xiruo ate some snacks together, sitting across from each other. Bao Xiruo wanted to ask him for a separate room but didn't know how to word it. Her face changed color several times for this was a heavy burden on her heart. After a bit, Yan Lie spoke up: "Madame, please make your self at home. I'm going out to buy some things and am coming right back afterwards." Bao Xiruo nodded: "Please don't spend too much money." Yan Lie smiled and replied: "Pity that Madame is wearing mourning apparel and can't wear any jewelry. Even if I want to spend too much I can't."

Chapter 2 - Seven Freaks of the South

Translated by Minglei Huang



Han Baoju's left foot hooked the stirrup, while both of his hands and his right foot were holding the copper vat, balancing it neatly on the saddle, not leaning the least bit to the side. That yellow

horse ran fast and steady, as if the stairs were flat ground to it.

Just as Yan Lie walked out of the door, he saw a middle aged scholar walking his way in the hallway, dragging his feet and yawning constantly. He was sort of smiling but not really and kept on giving him curious looks, all the while looking very relaxed and lazy. He was covered with dirt and oil and his clothing was a mess. He obviously hadn't taken a bath in a long time. He had an old broken black oil paper fan in hand that he was fanning himself with as he was walking.

Seeing such an obviously refined scholar looking so dirty, Yan Lie frowned and picked up his pace in fear of getting some dirt on himself. Suddenly the scholar began laughing dryly; a laugh that was very harsh on the ear. As he was walking by him, he casually reached out with his fan and patted Yan Lie on the shoulder. Even though Yan Lie knew martial arts, he was not able to get out of the way in time, this set him off and he shouted: "What do you think you're doing?"

The scholar laughed dryly again as he kept on walking, dragging his feet all through the hallway. He approached the manager and said: "Hey, fellow, even though I look really rough, I have lots of money. You have to watch out for some people though; they trick people with their nice and refined looks. They put up a show for everyone, seducing women, eat free food, live in inns for free, you know the type, so be on the lookout for them. To be safe, make them pay the bill beforehand." He didn't wait for the manager to respond before walking off, still dragging his feet. Yan Lie got even angrier, knowing that that whole conversation was aimed at him.

After that little comment from the scholar, the manager turned his eyes toward Yan Lie; he now couldn't help but feel a little suspicious. Walking up to Yan Lie, he yawned a little, smiled and said: "Sir, please don't mind too much, it's not that I want to be impolite...." Yan Lie knew what he meant as he humphed and replied: "Put this money in the drawer!" He put his hand into his shirt to take the money out and was shocked. There had been at least forty or fifty taels of silver in his shirt, but, now that he was reaching for it, there was nothing there. The manager saw the expression on his face and actually thought that the scholar's words were true. Immediately his expression became less polite as he thrust his chest out and asked: "What? No money?"

Yan Lie replied: "Wait here, I'm going to get some right now." He thought that he had forgotten his money because he was in a hurry to leave. As it turned out, when he went back to the room and looked into the bag that he had with him, even the taels of gold he'd had were gone as well. As to where his money went, he had no idea at all. He thought: "Just a bit ago Madame Bao and I both went to the water closet, but that only took several minutes or so, how could anyone have entered and messed around with the room? The thieves here in Jiaxing are really getting good."

The manager stuck his head in through the door and looked around; seeing that he did not have any money, he got angry: "Is this woman your wife? If you're doing something indecent, then don't come here because it'll bring us trouble as well!" Bao Xiruo was thoroughly embarrassed and her face turned burning red. Yan Lie took one quick step towards the door and swung his arm, slapping the manager so hard that his face was covered with blood and he lost several teeth. The manager had his face in his hands as he began to scream: "I see! First you don't pay, now you

want to fight!" Yan Lie added a kick to his behind and the manager went tumbling out of the room.

Shocked, Bao Xiruo suggested: "Let's get out of here; we can't stay here any longer." Yan Lie smiled: "Don't worry, if we don't have any money then we'll just ask them for some." He grabbed a chair and sat down by the door. Not long afterwards, the manager came back with twelve or so men, each with a club or stick in hand as they charged into the room. Yan Lie let out a big laugh and shouted: "So you men want a fight?" He suddenly jumped forward and confidently grabbed a stick from one of the men; faking left and hitting right, in a blink of an eye he had already knocked four or five men down. These ruffians usually got by using intimidation and bullying the weak, but seeing that their opponent was actually a match for them, they immediately threw down their weapons and scrambled out of the room. Those who were on the floor were crawling and rolling with all their might in fear of being left behind and hit again.

Bao Xiruo, who had been frightened a long time ago, said in a shaky voice: "Things are getting out of hand and the authorities might catch wind of this." Yan Lie smiled and replied: "I want the authorities to show up." Bao Xiruo could not figure out his plan, so she decided to stay quiet and see what happened.

In less than an hour's time, a ruckus occurred outside as ten or so government officials came bursting in with iron sabers in hand. The rings on the sabers were banging against each other, making all kinds of noise; they shouted above the cacophony: "Not only kidnapping, but assault as well, how dare he? Where is the scoundrel?" Yan Lie sat there motionless in the chair. Seeing his fancy clothing and his proud arrogance, the officials didn't really dare to charge up to him. The leader of the group shouted: "Ay!

What's your name? What are you doing here in Jiaxing?" Yan Lie shouted back: "Go get Gai Yuncong!"

Gai Yuncong was the governor of the prefecture of Jiaxing; hearing that he dared speak their superior's name directly, the government officials were both shocked and furious. The leader shouted: "Are you crazy? How dare you shout the Honorable Prefect Gai's name in public?" Yan Lie took out an envelope from inside his shirt and put it down on the table; he looked up at the ceiling and said: "Take this to Gai Yuncong and see if he comes or not!" The leader took the envelope, seeing the words on it, he took a step back in shock; unsure if it was real or not, he whispered to the other men: "Look after him, don't let him get away." He then went flying off. Bao Xiruo just sat there in the room nervously, not knowing what would happen next.

Soon another ten or so government men came running in, along with them came two men wearing official uniforms that scrambled in front of Yan Lie and knelt while saying: "Humble Prefect Gai Yuncong of the city of Jiaxing and District Magistrate Jiang Wen of the district of Xiushui are honored to meet your Excellency. Your humble servant did not know that your Excellency had arrived, so please forgive us for not welcoming you properly." Yan Lie waved his hand a little and shifted his weight slightly: "I lost a little bit of money in this county and would like to request that you two brilliant judges investigate the matter." Gai Yuncong immediately nodded: "Yes, of course." He then waved his arm, two of the followers came walking up with a plate in each of their hands; one of them was glowing yellow because of the gold yuan bao [boat shaped ingot] on it, the other one, needless to say, had silver yuan bao on it.

Gai Yuncong spoke up: "To think that there are such brazen thieves in my jurisdiction, it is my fault as well. I hope your Excellency will accept this as a slight compensation." Yan

Lie smiled and nodded. Gai Yuncong reverentially held up the envelope and said: "Your humble servant has just cleaned up my humble dwelling and would be honored if your Excellency and Madame would move there." Yan Lie replied: "This place is suitable; I enjoy the peace and quiet." His face suddenly darkened, "Don't come around disturbing us anymore." Gai Yuncong immediately nodded and said: "Yes, yes of course! If your Excellency still needs anything, then please do not hesitate to ask your humble servant." Yan Lie did not reply, he only shook his head and waved his arm repeatedly. The two men quickly led the other men away.

The manager was scared out of his wits as the owner of the place dragged him into the room. The owner kneeled down and kowtowed asking for mercy for them both. He said that as long as they are left alive, they would be willing to accept whatever other punishment might come their way. Yan Lie took out a silver yuan bao from the plate, threw it down on the floor, and said smiling: "Take it, it's a reward. Now get out of my sight." The manager couldn't quite believe it all, but the owner saw that Yan Lie had no ill will in his expression, so he immediately picked up the silver yuan bao, kowtowed a couple of times, and dragged the manager out of sight in fear that Yan Lie might change his mind.

Bao Xiruo could not quite believe what she had just seen: "What kind of magic does that envelope hold? How come the authorities were frightened out of their wits when they saw its contents?" Yan Lie smiled: "I actually have no power over them really, but these officials are hopeless. Zhao Kuo only has this kind of people serving him; if he doesn't lose this country, then there is no justice in the world." Bao Xiruo asked: "Zhao Kuo? Who is that?" Yan Lie casually replied: "The present Song Emperor Ningzong." Shocked, Bao Xiruo immediately admonished: "Quiet! How can you

say His Majesty's name out loud like that?" Seeing that she cared about his safety, Yan Lie was ecstatic; smiling, he said: "It's no big deal if I say it out loud. Up north, what would we call him if we don't call him Zhao Kuo?" Bao Xiruo was confused: "Up north?" Yan Lie nodded and was about to explain when hurried hoof beats suddenly come from outside as ten or so riders came and stopped in front of the inn. Some color had just returned to Bao Xiruo's white face; but upon hearing the hoof beats, the events of that night all came back to her. This made her face turn white as a sheet again. Yan Lie was frowning, looking as if he was not very pleased.

Then came sound of boots as several soldiers in fine clothing came walking in. Upon seeing Yan Lie, their faces immediately broke out in smiles as they simultaneously shouted: "Your Majesty!" All of them kneeled down and saluted. Yan Lie smiled: "So you're finally here." Hearing that they called Yan Lie "Your Majesty", Bao Xiruo was both surprised and puzzled. As those men got up off the floor, she noticed that they were all very strong and well built. Yan Lie waved his arm and said: "Go wait outside." The soldiers answered and quickly left. Yan Lie turned to Bao Xiruo: "How do you think my men compare with those Song soldiers?" Bao Xiruo was even more surprised: "They are not Song soldiers?" Yan Lie smiled: "I guess I have to be honest now, they are all Great Jin's elite soldiers!" He could not help but laugh out of pride.

Bao Xiruo suddenly realized: "Then... you... you are..." Yan Lie smiled and answered: "To tell Madame the truth, my surname needs one more word: 'Wan' and my given name also has one more word: 'Hong'. Wanyan Honglie, the Sixth Prince of Great Jin, and titled the Prince of Zhao, at your service."

Ever since she was small, Bao Xiruo had heard from her father the devious ways that the Jin used to take the land of her Great Song. The shame caused by the capture of the two emperors, and the cruelty with which the Jin torture and treat the Han peasants up north. It was the same after she married Yang Tiexin, who hated the Jin even more. To find out that the person that she had spent all this time with these last couple of days was actually a prince of the Jin, she was left speechless.

Seeing the expression on her face change, Wanyan Honglie smiled and continued: "I have always been fascinated by the south. Last year I asked my father to let me travel down to Linan as the good will ambassador for the New Year celebrations. Besides, the Emperor of Song still owed a couple hundred thousand taels of silver in annual tribute, so father wanted me to collect that on my trip as well." Bao Xiruo interrupted: "Annual tribute?" Wanyan Honglie replied: "Yes, the Song Emperors, in order to convince us not to invade, pay us a tribute every year in silk and silver. But they always complain that not enough revenue was generated through taxes, so they never gave us the tribute on time. This time I didn't leave any room for Han Tuozhuo to fall back on. I told him that if he didn't get all the money together within the month, I would personally lead an army down to collect it ourselves: then he wouldn't have to worry about it anymore." Bao Xiruo interrupted again: "What did Chancellor Han say?" Wanyan Honglie proudly replied: "What can he say? By the time I left Linan, the silk and silver were all north of the river! Ha...ha!" Seeing Bao Xiruo was looking downwards and not responding he went on: "Actually, this tribute stuff didn't really need me; any emissary could have done the job. What I really wanted was to see the south, to experience its beauty and to meet its people for myself. Who knew that I would meet Madame, I dare not hope for such good fortune." Bao Xiruo was at a

loss as to what to make of the situation and still did not reply. Wanyan Honglie offered: "I'm off to buy some clothes for Madame now." Bao Xiruo replied with her head down: "No need." Wanyan Honglie smiled and said: "The traveling money Chancellor Han gave me under the table wouldn't be gone if I bought a new set of clothes for Madame every day for a thousand years. Madame, don't worry, my soldiers are stationed all around this place, nobody would dare to trouble you." After he finished, he walked off. Bao Xiruo thought about all that had happened since she met him; a royal prince like him, treating her as politely as he does, what does he plan to do? Then her thoughts drifted to her husband's love and caring for her, yet he was killed and left her here alone. She really didn't know what she should do or could do. In desperation, sadness and confusion, all she could do is clutch her pillow and cry her heart out.

Wanyan Honglie, having put the gold and silver into his shirt, walked out onto the street. Seeing the friendly attitude of the place and the people, even though most of them were peasants, there were still many refined and educated people, he could not help but be impressed. Suddenly, hurried hoof beats came from ahead of him as a horse galloped through the streets towards him. This street wasn't very wide to begin with and now it was filled with people and merchants; added to that, people had sent up small vendor booths on both sides of the street, how could a horse gallop through it? Wanyan Honglie immediately dodged to the side of the street and, in the blink of an eye, a yellow horse came bursting through the crowd of people. This was no ordinary horse; it was tall and fit with muscles rippling throughout its body, obviously it was a very rare thoroughbred. Wanyan Honglie was admiring the horse and when he looked up at the rider he was surprised yet again. Such a beautiful horse, but its rider was a sorry looking fellow who was both short and fat; he looked like a giant

slab of meat riding on that horse. This person's arms and legs were amazingly short, he did not have a neck, yet his head was extraordinarily big, as if his neck was sucked into his shoulders. It seemed rather odd that horse was galloping through the crowd of people at full speed, yet it did not run into a single person or knock over a single object. Its hooves landed on the ground softly and nimbly, jumping over pottery, side-stepping vegetables; it seemed to be flashing through some non-existent gap in the crowd, as though this crowded street was a wide open plain. Wanyan Honglie could no longer contain himself and shouted out loud: "Excellent!"

Hearing that praise, that short chubby fellow turned his head and glanced at him. Wanyan Honglie noticed that his entire face was covered with red spots caused by drinking too much wine; his big and round as well as equally red wine nose looked as if there was a red tomato stuck on his face. He thought to himself: "Such an excellent horse; I have to have it, no matter the price." At this moment, two kids playing tag ran onto the street just in front of the horse. They came out of nowhere and gave the horse quite a scare as it had no room to get out of the way. The horse's left foot was just about to land on one of the kids when the rider lifted up the reins and jumped off of the saddle. Suddenly becoming lighter, the horse's stride became higher and longer, easily flying over the kid's head. That rider then softly and gently landed back onto the saddle.

Shocked, Wanyan Honglie immediately decided, that even though there were a great number of skilled riders among the Jin, none were a match for this man. If he could get this man to go back with him to train the cavalry, then his cavalry would be almost invincible; this was something much more important to him than a great horse. On this trip south, he made mental notes on where an army could

be stationed and where the rivers could be crossed; he even asked around about the skills and names of every administrator in the counties he crossed. Seeing the amazing skill of this short fellow, he couldn't believe how stupid the Song authorities were for letting a talent like this go to waste. He decided then and there that he was going to somehow convince this man to go back to Yanjing with him. Having made the decision, he immediately started running after them, fearing that, with the horse's speed, he would lose him. He was just about to shout at them when he saw the horse had run to the corner of the street and stopped. This was quite unexpected as he figured that, with the speed that the horse was running, he would have to slowly come to a stop, yet this horse was able to stop instantly. This is something he had never ever seen before; even some great martial arts practitioners wouldn't be able to come to a complete stop when they are exerting themselves like this. The short, fat fellow jumped off the horse and charged into a building.

Wanyan Honglie hurried to the front of the building, inside the building was erected a large wooden sign: "Handed Down from Venus"; it was a two-storied restaurant. Looking up, a huge sign hanging from the roof had the words "Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal" written on it; the calligraphy was very elegant. On the side was written, in smaller characters, "By Resident Dongpo", it turned out that the words were written by Su Dongpo [One of the greatest scholars of the Song dynasty as well as all of Chinese history.]. Seeing the grandeur of this restaurant, Wanyan Honglie thought: "Since he is here, then I might as well invite him to a great big meal; that way I can become great friends with him and everything after that would be simple." All of a sudden that fellow came running down from upstairs to the horse's side with a wine jug in hand. Wanyan Honglie immediately got out of the way.

Now that he was standing on the ground, the fellow looked even more out of proportion. He wasn't over 1.5 meters [5 ft] high, yet he was almost 1.5 meters wide as well. The horse was very tall in stature because of its long legs and the man's head was barely as high as the stirrup from the saddle. He placed the wine jug in front of the horse, gently hit the jug a couple of times, and then casually picked the top half of the jug off, turning the jug into a gigantic bowl of wine. The horse reared up on its hind legs and let out a loud neigh before coming back down and drinking from the bowl. From the sweet smell in the air, Wanyan Honglie could tell that the wine was actually the famed wine "Blushing Daughter" [Nu'er Hong] from Shaoxing county in Zhejiang province. From the fragrance, it had been left aging for more than 10 years.

The short, fat fellow walked back into the restaurant and tossed a huge silver ingot onto the owner's desk: "Prepare three tables of the best food; two of them can have meat and wine, the other one can't." The owner smiled and replied: "Right away, Mr. Han. We just received four Sai Lu fish from the Song River; they are the best when served with wine. Please take the money back Mr. Han, we'll sort all that out later." The short, chubby fellow rolled his eyes and shouted: "What's the matter? Eating and drinking are free? Do you think I'm broke and just beg off of other people?" Still with a smile on his face, the owner argued no further as he turned and shouted: "Men, prepare some really good stuff for Mr. Han!" The cooks and waiters around the place answered and went about their jobs.

Wanyan Honglie was taking all this in: "Although he's dressed plainly, he spends money like a wealthy man; judging from how everyone is treating him with such manners, he's probably a powerful man in Jiaxing. It would seem that convincing him to go up north with me to teach

horse riding is going to be quite difficult. Let's see who the people are he's inviting to lunch before going any further." So he went into the restaurant, sat down at a table by the window, and ordered a couple of small dishes along with a bottle of wine.

The Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal was situated on the shores of the South Lake. The lake surface was covered by a light fog and several small boats were slowly making their way around the lake. Green and smooth looking water caltrop leaves [water chestnut] cover about half of the lake. Seeing such a sight, he immediately felt relaxed and at peace. Jiaxing is a famous city of the ancient state of Yue; the plums grown here were sweet and delicious like the best wines. During the Spring and Autumn Period this place was called Zuili, meaning Drunken Plums. It was also here that the famed King of Yue, Gou Jian, had thoroughly defeated the famed King of Wu, He Lu. This place was the point at which travelers and merchants from the two states came together. The South Lake was famous for another thing, the green water caltrops [water chestnuts] grown in it. Not only are the fruit of the caltrops sweet and smooth, they are also crunchy and refreshing, deservedly proclaimed as the best in the world. This resulted in a lot of caltrop being grown in the lake. It was right in the middle of spring, the lake was clean and the leaves were green, as if someone had covered a sheet of jade glass with small pieces of jadeite.

Wanyan Honglie was just enjoying the scene when he suddenly noticed a single boat come flying into view. This boat was unusually narrow in width and the bow of the boat was extraordinarily high. Along the sides of the boat there were two rows of waterfowl. At first he didn't pay much attention to it, but in a blink of an eye, the boat had overtaken another boat that was far ahead of it. The speed

at which the boat was going was astounding. As soon as it got closer, Wanyan Honglie saw that there was a person sitting in the middle of the boat; another person wearing a straw cape sat in the back steering the boat, surprisingly it was a girl. She had only to lightly flick the oar in the water and the boat would shoot forward like an arrow. That one flick had to be at least powerful enough to move a 100 jin object. It was odd enough that a girl would be so strong, but how could she exert such a force through a wooden oar? A few more strokes and the boat neared the pavilion. The sun shone down onto the oar which appeared to be made of copper. The girl tied the boat to one of the wooden posts beside the stone staircase next to the pavilion and nimbly jumped ashore. The man sitting in the middle of the boat put a pole with a load of firewood on each end onto his shoulders and followed her ashore. The two of them walked up into the pavilion. The girl shouted happily at the chubby fellow: "Third Brother!" She proceeded to sit down next to him. The fat man greeted the two people: "Fourth Brother, Little Sister, you two showed up early." When Wanyan Honglie sized the two newcomers up, he noticed that the girl was about seventeen or eighteen years of age with a slender body, big eyes, long eye-lashes, and snow white skin; she was obviously a local girl from south of the Yangtze. She had the copper oar in her left hand and took off her straw hat with her right hand, revealing a head of soft, shining, black hair. Wanyan Honglie mused: "Although this girl isn't as beautiful as Madame Bao, she is still very attractive in another way."

The man carrying the firewood was about thirty or so; his clothing was green colored with a belt made of straw around his waist and straw sandals on his feet. His hands and feet were huge and his face appeared without emotion. He put down the two loads of wood and rested his carrying pole against the table. "Errrrr"! The entire table was

pushed several centimeters down by the weight of the pole. Shocked, Wanyan Honglie inspected the pole closely, but there seemed nothing out of the ordinary with this pole. It was black and smooth all over with a slight curve in the middle and two little caps on either end. For this pole to be that heavy, it had to be made of iron or some other kind of heavy metal. A wooden ax hung from the man's waist and there were some noticeable dents on the blade of the ax.

The two of them had just sat down when the sound of foot steps came from the stairs as two more men came walking up. The girl shouted: "Fifth Brother, Sixth Brother, did you two come together?" The first man was big and tall, at least 130 or 140 kilograms [around 285 to 308 lbs], he wore an apron around his waist. His body was naturally oily and the top of his shirt was open, revealing some of what must be a chest full of hair. His sleeves were all rolled up as well and his arms were covered with black hair that was several centimeters long and hanging from his waist was a foot-long knife. From his appearance he was a butcher. The one behind him was unusually short with a small felt hat on his head and a small scale and bamboo basket in his hands; he looked just like a street vendor. Wanyan Honglie could not help but wonder: "These three people obviously know martial arts, yet they call these two average city dwellers brothers?"

Suddenly there came a constant clunking outside on the street, like that made from metal hitting stone. The clunking slowly came up the staircase, and a blind man dressed in ragged clothing followed. He looked around forty years of age; his lips were thin and his cheekbones prominent. His face looked gray and seemed full of hate and anger. The five people sitting at the table all stood up and greeted: "Big Brother!" The girl lightly knocked on the seat of one of the chairs: "Big Brother, you sit here." The blind

man replied: "Alright, is Second Brother here yet?" The man that looked like a butcher replied: "Second Brother has arrived in Jiaxingg, so he should be here any time soon." The girl laughed: "Speak of the devil!" The sound of someone dragging his feet as he walked came from the staircase.

Before Wanyan Honglie figured it all out, up the stairs appeared a dirty torn fan which was flicked a couple of times, and only then did a poor, lackadaisical scholar come walking up. The very one that he had met earlier in the inn. A thought popped in Wanyan Honglie's mind: "He must have been the one that took my money..." Just as his anger was rising, the man shot a smile at him and then stuck his tongue out and made a face; only then did he turn to the others and greet them. It seemed that he was second among them. Wanyan Honglie speculated: "Looks like every one of them is a martial arts master; if I can somehow take them under my wing, they would be an enormous amount of help for our endeavors. As for the small matter of the poor scholar taking my money, that could easily be forgiven. It would be best to see what's going on first." The poor and pedantic scholar downed a cup of wine, then proceeded, still shaking his head from one side to the other, to loudly orate: "Dishonorable riches... let it go ... The Jade Emperor [Yu Huang Da Di, the Supreme Deity of Taoism] will get mad!" As he was reciting these lines, he reached into his shirt and took out one gold or silver yuan bao after another and neatly lined them up on the table. In total there were eight of silver and two of gold.

From these yuan baos' color and shape, Wanyan Honglie knew that these were his. But he did not get mad; on the contrary, this piqued his interest even more: "Entering my room and stealing the money wasn't hard; but he only tapped my shoulder one time with his fan, yet he was able

to steal all the money that was inside my shirt without my noticing. That magical hand skill of his is indeed something rarely seen in this world."

From the actions of these six men and a woman, it seemed like they were doing the inviting, and had invited two tables of men here for a drink. Because the guests hadn't arrived yet, the seven of them were only drinking some light wine and the dishes hadn't been brought out either. On the other two tables was only one pair of chopsticks each; that meant there were only two guests. Wanyan Honglie mused: "These seven freaks are waiting for guests; I wonder what kind of weird guests they'll have?" After waiting for about the time it would take to boil a pot of water, a voice came up from downstairs: "Amida Buddha!" The blind man spoke up: "The venerable monk Jiaomu [Burnt Wood] is here!" He stood up; the other six freaks followed him as they all stood up in preparation to welcome the guest. "Amida Buddha!" The voice said again as a monk that looked every bit like a burnt piece of wood came walking up the stairs. This monk was about forty or so, he was wearing a yellow monk's robe and in his hand was a piece of wood with one end burnt black. It's unclear what it's used for.

After the monk and the seven of them went through the formal greetings, the poor scholar led him to one of the empty tables and all of them sat down. The monk rose slightly out of his seat in respect and said: "When that person came all the way to our gates, I knew that I was no match for him. Now that the Seven Heroes of the South are willing to lend a hand, I could not be anymore grateful."

The blind man replied: "Venerable Monk Jiaomu, you do not need to be so polite. We seven brothers and sister have all been dependent upon the monk's hospitality now and then; now that monk Jiaomu is in trouble, how could we not get involved? Besides, that man came and, relying entirely upon

his martial arts skills, made trouble for the monk for no reason. It is clear that he thinks nothing of us here in the martial world from this area. Even if the Venerable Monk did not ask us, we would have come had we found out about...."

He hadn't finished what he was going to say when the stairs started groaning as if they were going to collapse. It was like a huge, heavy beast, like an elephant, or at least a huge water buffalo, was walking up the stairs. The owner of the place and the waiters were all screaming downstairs: "Ay! You idiot, you can't take that up there!" "The stairs are going to collapse!" "Quick, quick, stop him, get him back down here!" But the sound of wood bending got louder and louder. "Crack"! One of the wooden stair treads snapped. Soon two more snapped as well.

For a moment Wanyan Honglie wasn't sure he believed what he was seeing; a Taoist priest came walking up the stairs with a huge copper vat in his hands. After taking another look, he was frightened out of his wits; the Taoist priest was the 'Changchun Zi' [Eternal Spring] elder Qiu Chuji.

Wanyan Honglie's mission as emissary to the Song Imperial Court was to coerce some of the officials of the Song court, so that when they eventually invade the south, there would be agents lending a hand from the inside. The Song Emissary, Wang Daoqian, who accompanied him down from Yanjing (Present Day Beijing) was greedy and corrupt; he had already secretly sworn allegiance to the Jin dynasty. When they arrived at Linan, he was the one that did the legwork for Wanyan Honglie. But unexpectedly he was killed suddenly by a Taoist priest; even his head, heart, and liver was gone. Shocked and in fear that someone had found out about his plan, Wanyan Honglie decided to lead his bodyguards and, with the best city guards of Linan

leading the way, personally chase down the assassin. When they chased him to Ox Village they caught up with Qiu Chuji. Unexpectedly, this Taoist priest was a martial arts master. Wanyan Honglie hadn't even made a move before he was pierced through the shoulder by an arrow that Qiu Chuji threw back. The men that came with him were all killed. If Wanyan Honglie had not quietly crawled away during the confusion of the battle and was then rescued and treated by Bao Xiruo, the dignified and honorable royal prince of the Jin dynasty would have died there in a farm village without even really knowing how he had been killed.

Wanyan Honglie forced himself to calm down, and noticed that Qiu Chuji glanced at his face for a moment before moving his attention entirely onto the monk Jiaomu and the group of seven; obviously, he had not recognized him. Figuring that this was because he had been injured as soon as he showed up that night so Qiu Chuji was not able to see his face clearly, only then did he feel a little better. But when his eyes moved back to the copper vat, he was shocked again, so much so that he almost jumped out of his chair.

This kind of vat was common in temples and shrines and was commonly used for burning papers, incense and fake money for the dead. It was more than a meter across and was probably around 400 jins [200 kilograms / over 400 lbs] or so. From the vat came the sweet smell of wine, obviously it was filled with expensive wine, which without a doubt added a lot more weight to the vat. But he did not seem to be using any strength in his arm at all. Every step he took the floorboards moaned and bent from the weight. Panic engulfed the bottom level as the owner, waiters, cooks, all the patrons and everyone else scrambled out, fearing that the entire floor would collapse on top of them.

Coldly, the monk Jiaomu spoke up: "I am honored that my Taoist brother would show himself here, but what's the point in bringing the paper burning vat from our humble little temple? Let me introduce you to the Seven Heroes of the South!" Qiu Chuji made a respectful gesture with his left hand and said: "This humble Taoist has just visited your holy temple where I heard from the other monks that the Venerable Monk was inviting me for a drink at Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. I figured that you would have undoubtedly invited some other friends; it turns out I was right. I have long admired the Seven Heroes of the South; I am fortunate today to make your acquaintance." Monk Jiaomu turned to the seven people and said: "This is elder 'Changchun Zi' Qiu Chuji of the Quanzhen Sect, I'm sure everyone has heard of him." Turning around to Qiu Chuji, he pointed at the blind man and continued, "This is the head of the Seven Heroes, the hero Ke, 'Flying Bat Soaring through the Sky' Ke Zhen'E." He followed by introducing the others, all the while Wanyan Honglie giving this all of his attention and memorizing their names. Number two in rank was that poor and downtrodden looking scholar that stole his money, named 'Magic Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong. The fat, short fellow that arrived first was 'Horse God' Han Baoju, he ranked third. The peasant that carried the load of firewood was number four; his name was 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains' Nan Xiren. Ranked number five was that huge man that looked like a butcher, 'Smiling Dhuda' Zhang Ahsheng. The little fellow that looked like a merchant was surnamed Quan, Jinfa was his given name, and his nickname was 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City'. The fisher girl was called 'Yue Maiden Sword' Han Xiaoying, obviously the youngest of the seven Heroes.

All the while the monk Jiaomu was introducing everyone, Qiu Chuji would very respectfully bow a little as a sign of respect, but his right hand was still holding up the vat and

there was no sign of fatigue at all. A few of the braver ones of the people downstairs saw that there was no immediate danger and actually walked back in to see what was going on.

Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "People call us seven brothers and sister the Seven Freaks because we are a rather odd collection of characters; we dare not assume the name 'Seven Heroes' that the monk Jiaomu called us. All of us have long admired the famed Seven Masters of Quanzhen, especially the elder 'Changchun Zi', who's many chivalrous deeds we have all heard of. The monk Jiaomu is a most warm and friendly man; we can't understand how he could have offended elder Qiu. If the elder thinks anything of us, then please let the seven of us be a mediator for the dispute. Besides, even though Taoism and Buddhism worship different types of deities, you two gentlemen are still both monks or priests and members of the martial world. Why don't we forgive and forget so we can just gather here and have a nice little drink together?"

Qiu Chuji replied: "I have never met the Venerable Monk Jiaomu before, nor is there any gratitude or grudges between the two of us. As long as he hands over two people, then I personally will immediately go to the Fahua Monastery to ask for forgiveness." Ke Zhen'E asked: "Which two people?" Qiu Chuji replied: "I have two very good friends who were killed by corrupt officials working with the Jin. Their widows are all alone in the world. Hero Ke, do you think that I should step into this matter?" When Wanyan Honglie heard this, the cup in his hand suddenly shook and some wine spilled onto the table. Ke Zhen'E replied: "It wouldn't even matter if they are widows of the monk's good friends. Even if none of us have ever met them, if we knew about something like this happening, we would step in and do the best we can to take care of them.

This is something that should be done without any hesitation." Qiu Chuji loudly replied: "That's right! I just want the monk Jiaomu to hand those two widows over to me! He is a monk, how could he keep two widows in his monastery and not hand them over? The Seven Heroes here are reasonable and righteous people; please do the right thing!" When he finished saying this, not only were the monk Jiaomu and the Seven Freaks shocked, Wanyan Honglie was quite surprised as well. He thought: "Is he not talking about Madame Yang and Madame Guo but someone else?"

The monk Jiaomu's face was burnt yellowish to begin with, now it was even more burnt looking. He could not bring himself to reply for a while as he could only stammer: "You... you... are talking nonsense... nonsense..."

Qiu Chuji was furious: "You are a man of the martial world too, how dare you do such a shameful deed!" He pushed with his right hand and the several hundred kilogram heavy vat with the wine in it went flying towards the monk Jiaomu. The monk immediately jumped aside.

The people that gathered at the end of the stairs were frightened out of their wits and all of them turned around and pushed their way down the stairs in a panic.

'Smiling Buddha' Zhang Ahsheng figured that, although the vat was heavy, he would still be able to handle it with his strength. So he stepped up, channeled some inner strength into his arms, and waited until the vat arrived before he, with a shout, grabbed a hold of it. The muscles on his back and his shoulders bulged out as he was actually able to control the vat all by himself. As he lifted the vat up over his head, the amount of force exerted under his feet was too great and with one loud 'crack', his left foot went through the floorboards, causing the crowd downstairs to scream.

Zhang Ahsheng took two steps forward, bent his arms slightly, and, with the move 'Opening the Windows to View the Moon'; he threw the vat back at Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji caught the vat with his right hand and laughed: "The Seven Freaks of the South are just like the rumors say, very deserving of their fame!" Then his expression darkened as he turned to the monk Jiaomu: "What happened to those two widows? You are forcing two widows to live in your monastery, what for? If you dare to touch a single strand of their hair, I'll smash your bones until they are dust and burn down that monastery of yours!" Zhu Cong flicked his fan and said while shaking his head: "The monk Jiaomu is an honorable and respected monk, how could he do such a shameful thing? Elder Qiu must have heard of this from someone shameless and despicable. This kind of gossip can't be trusted."

Qiu Chuji was still furious: "I saw it with my own eyes, how could it be untrue?" The Seven Freaks were surprised by this. The monk Jiaomu finally spoke up: "If you want to come here and make a name for yourself here south of the Yangtze, that's fine. But you don't need to drag my name through the dirt... you... you... go out into Jiaxing and ask around, see how many people think I would do such a thing?" Qiu Chuji snickered: "Alright, you've got helpers and want to win by sheer numbers. I am involved in this matter now, so there's no way you can get away from this. You are using the sacred ground of your deity to hide women, that's bad already, but the women's husbands are the descendants of patriots and they were murdered."

Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "Elder Qiu accused monk Jiaomu of hiding two women, but monk Jiaomu denies it. Why don't all of us go to the temple and see who's right and who's not. Although I'm blind, my ears are still working fine." His six brothers and sister immediately agreed with him.

Qiu Chuji sneered: "Search the temple? I have already searched it inside and out. But two women walked in and apparently disappeared. The only possibility is that he hid them. I will forget this if the monk hands them over." Zhu Cong replied: "What if it turns out that those two women aren't women." Qiu Chuji was confused: "What?" Zhu Cong answered with a straight face: "They are fairies and either know how to become invisible or become one with the earth!" The other Six Freaks couldn't help but laugh at that remark. Qiu Chuji was furious: "So you are mocking me? Alright, it seems like you people are taking the monk's side, true?"

Ke Zhen'E righteously replied: "Although our martial arts might be laughable in the eyes of a master from the Quanzhen Sect, we still have a bit of a name here south of the Yangtze. Ask around, people will say: 'The Seven Freaks of the South? They may be crazy, but they are not cowards.' We wouldn't dare bully others, but we can't let others bully us either." Qiu Chuji replied: "I have heard much about the good name of the Seven Heroes of the South. This matter does not concern you so please do not get involved in this sticky matter. Let this monk and I settle it between us. Monk, follow me." He reached out toward the monk Jiaomu's wrist. Monk Jiaomu dipped his wrist and dodged this move. Seeing that the two of them have started to fight, 'Horse God' Han Baoju shouted: "Reverend Qiu, why are you being so unreasonable?" Qiu Chuji stepped back and asked: "What do you mean?" Han Baoju replied: "We trust the monk Jiaomu, if he says there aren't any women then there really aren't any women. Which man living in the martial world would lie?" Qiu Chuji replied: "If he isn't lying, then am I causing him trouble for no reason whatsoever? I saw it with my own eyes! If I'm wrong then I'll dig out these two eyeballs and give them to you. I am definitely going to see this to the end. It seems like the seven of you are

definitely getting involved right?" The Seven Freaks answered simultaneously: "Right!"

Qiu Chuji replied: "Alright, I'll drink a toast of wine to all seven heroes. Let the fight get started after we are finished toasting." He dipped his right hand and lowered the vat to his mouth. After taking a good gulp, he shouted: "If you please!" With one flick of the hand, the vat went flying towards Zhang Ahsheng again.

Zhang Ahsheng thought to himself: "If I catch it over my head like I did last time, then it would be impossible for me to drink out of it wouldn't it?" So he took two steps back, held his hands in front of his chest, and waited for the vat. Once it arrived, he threw his arms to the side and let the vat hit him straight in the chest. He was born chubby so his chest was covered with layers upon layers of fat and muscle, which acted like a cushion as the vat hit his chest. He immediately took a deep breath, flexed his chest muscles, brought his arms along the side of the vat, and caught the vat. He then lowered his head and took a huge gulp of the wine: "Excellent Wine!" He praised as he suddenly retracted his arms back to the front of his chest and, before the vat could fall onto the floor, executed the move 'Mountain Moving Double Palms', sending the vat flying back towards Qiu Chuji. This move was quick, powerful, and fast, obviously a move from a master of martial arts moves. Wanyan Honglie was secretly shocked by what he had just witnessed.

Qiu Chuji caught the vat and took another gulp before shouting: "A toast to Big Brother Ke!" And the vat went flying towards Ke Zhen'E.

A thought shot across Wanyan Honglie's mind: "This man is blind, how is he supposed to catch it?" But it turned out that not only was Ke Zhen'E the head of the Seven Freaks, his

martial arts were also the best and he could easily tell where the smallest of weapons were from the sound they made, so this huge vat was no problem for him. He just calmly sat there as if he didn't notice anything until the vat was just about to hit his head. Only then did he suddenly raise his right arm and hit the bottom of the vat with his staff. That vat spun endlessly at the top of the staff, just like those plates at the end of an acrobat's stick. Suddenly his iron staff moved a little off-center and the vat began to lean as if it was going to fall onto his head. For some reason the vat could not fall over and it stayed there, tilted. As the wine in the vat poured out of it in a neat little steam, Ke Zhen'E opened his mouth and the wine flowed neatly into it. After taking three or four mouthfuls, his iron staff moved and was again in the middle of the vat bottom. He pushed his staff upwards and the vat flew straight up; with a swing of the staff, he smacked the vat back towards Qiu Chuji with a loud "Bang!" The echoes could still be heard when Qiu Chuji caught it again.

Laughing, Qiu Chuji commented: "Hero Ke must like to spin plates in his spare time." Ke Zhen'E coldly answered: "When I was little, I used to live off of the money I got from that little trick." Qiu Chuji observed: "Not forgetting where he comes from is the sign of a real man! Fourth Brother Nan, a toast!" He took another gulp from the vat and threw it at him.

Nan Xiren didn't say a word as he waited for the vat to arrive and then lifted his carrying stick to block. 'Dang'! The vat was stopped cold in mid-air and began to fall. Nan Xiren cupped his hand, scooped up some wine from the vat, and downed it. While holding his carrying stick flat, he knelt down on his right knee with the middle of the carrying stick resting on his left knee. He pushed down on one end of the

stick with his right hand and caught the bottom of the vat with the other end, flicking the vat up in the air once again.

He was just about to hit the vat back to Qiu Chuji when the 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City' Quan Jinfa laughed and said: "I make a living selling stuff, so I like taking advantage. I might as well get a bit of wine without doing anything." He ran up to Nan Xiren's side and, when the vat fell back down again, scooped up a bit of wine and downed it. Suddenly he jumped up, curled his legs so that the bottom of both of his feet were on the vat, and as he pushed in midair, he caused his body to take off like an arrow and the vat to fly off in the opposite direction towards Qiu Chuji. His body landed on the side of the wall and he lightly clambered down. The fan in 'Magical Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong's hand did not stop flicking and he could not stop from commenting: "Beautiful, beautiful!"

Qiu Chuji caught the vat and took another big gulp before saying: "Wonderful, wonderful! And now a toast to Brother Zhu!" Zhu Cong shouted in desperation: "Aiyo! Don't do that! I'm not even strong enough to subdue a chicken, and I can't hold my alcohol at all! I'll surely drink to death if I'm not squashed to death first..." Before he finished, the vat was already heading his way. Zhu Cong was shouting at the top of his lungs: "Someone's going to be smashed to death! Help! Help..." He made a scoop with his fan into the vat and brought it up to his mouth. Then he turned the fan around and hit the bottom of the vat with it and sent it flying off. "Crack!" The floorboards beneath him suddenly collapsed, forming a huge hole in the floor and he fell through it, all the while screaming: "Help! Help!" Everyone present knew that he was just playing around so nobody was really surprised or worried. Wanyan Honglie however, seeing that he was able to flick away a huge vat with a small fan and

with a force that was no weaker than that which came from Nan Xiren's stick, was once again shocked.

The 'Yue Sword Maiden' Han Xiaoying shouted: "My turn for a drink!" She hopped off with her right foot and she took off like a bird. Just as she flew over the top of the vat, she lowered her head and took a gulp before nimbly and gently landing on the windowsill on the opposite side of the room. She was skilled at Qing Gong [lightness kung fu] and swordplay but her strength wasn't up to par with the others; she figured that there was no way she would be able to catch this vat when it came flying toward her. Tossing it back towards Qiu Chuji was even further out of the question; so she seized the opportunity and took her turn using her Qing Gong.

Meanwhile the vat was still flying out the window and into the street. With the street crowded as it was, it would be disastrous if the vat landed outside. Qiu Chuji was a bit worried and was just about to jump out onto the street to catch it. He suddenly heard a whistle as a person in yellow ran past him. Another whistle and the yellow horse that was downstairs ran out onto the street.

To the people gathered around, it looked as if the huge ball of meat suddenly hit the vat and fell as one with it. The ball of meat and the vat both landed on the back of the yellow horse. The yellow horse ran forward a couple of zhangs [1 zhang = 3.3 meters or 10+ feet] before turning around and running back into the pavilion and up the stairs.

The 'Horse God' Han Baoju's body was actually underneath the belly of the horse with his left foot in the stirrup and his right foot and both of his hands were holding the vat, balancing it neatly on the saddle. The horse was fast and steady, as if the stairs were flat ground to him. Han Baoju jumped back onto the horse, he put his head into the vat

and took a huge mouthful before pushing the vat off onto the floor of the room with his left hand. Letting out a hearty laugh, he cracked his whip and the horse jumped out of the window and, like a Pegasus, gently landed in the middle of the street. Han Baoju jumped off his horse and walked back up the stairs along with Zhu Cong.

Qiu Chuji complimented: "The 'Seven Heroes of the South' are really as good as the rumors say! I am speechless at the display of martial arts I have just seen. Giving the Seven Heroes face, I promise not to cause this monk anymore trouble if he hands over the two women and I will leave at once when he has."

Ke Zhen'E replied: "Elder Qiu, you are in the wrong here. The monk Jiaomu has been meditating and has cleansed of worldly emotions for several decades now, he is a truly enlightened monk. He is someone that all of us have admired for a long time. The Fahua Monastery [Temple of Oriental Zen] is also one of the famous sacred Buddhist landmarks here in the city of Jiaxingg. How could any females, not to mention widows, possibly be hidden inside it?" Qiu Chuji replied: "In this world, there are always those people who are hypocrites and do not deserve their reputations." Trying to control his anger, Han Baoju shouted back: "So is the elder saying that he doesn't believe us?" Qiu Chuji replied just as loudly: "I much rather believe my very own eyes." Han Baoju replied: "So what is elder Qiu planning to do now?" Even though he was short, he still was quite intimidating and heroic in his own way because of his loud and clear voice.

Qiu Chuji replied: "This matter originally had nothing to do with you seven, but since you are insisting on jumping into this matter, you are obviously quite confident of your abilities. Forgive me for daring to challenge the Seven Heroes; if I lose, then I'll do as everyone here wishes." Ke

Zhen'E replied: "If the elder insists on going through with this, then would the Reverend please choose how we should settle this matter."

Qiu Chuji thought for a moment and said: "We never had any grudges previously nor have we ever wronged each other. I have long admired the heroic name and reputation of the Seven Heroes of the South. I don't think any of us want to start fighting with swords or fists, so how about this?" He shouted: "Inn keeper! Bring fourteen big bowls!"

The innkeeper had been hiding on the floor below, but upon hearing his instructions and noticing that it had been quiet for a while upstairs, he immediately went to bring the bowls up.

Qiu Chuji instructed him to place the bowls in two rows and fill them to the brim with wine. Turning to the Seven Freaks, he said: "I challenge everyone to a drinking contest. For every bowl you guys drink, I will drink one as well until there is a winner. What do you say?"

Han Baoju and Zhang Ahsheng were both huge drinkers, so they immediately agreed without any hesitation. Ke Zhen'E frowned and replied: "This is one against seven; even if we win we didn't win it fairly. Could Reverend please choose something else?" Qiu Chuji frowned: "What makes you so sure that you'll beat me?"

Even though Han Xiaoying was a girl, she was still quite macho, so she immediately answered back: "Alright, let's go at it then! This is the first time I have met someone that dares to look down at us so much." As she talked she grabbed a bowl of wine and downed it in one breath. It was obvious she drank it too quickly as her face flushed red immediately.

Qiu Chuji complimented: "Miss Han really is a man among females! Everyone... please!" The other six of the Seven Freaks each picked up a bowl and drank it. Qiu Chuji responded by downing seven bowls of wine in an instant; each with just one gulp and without a single pause for breath in between. The innkeeper immediately shouted praise for everyone and filled up the fourteen bowls, which the eight finished off immediately.

By the third round of drinks, Han Xiaoying could only drink half a bowl before having to pause because her hands were shaking. Zhang Ahsheng took the bowl out of her hand: "Sister, I'll finish this for you." Han Xiaoying inquired: "Elder Qiu is that alright?" Qiu Chuji replied without hesitation: "Of course, it doesn't matter who drinks it as long as it is seven bowls." Another round and Quan Jinfa had to back out as well.

Seeing that after twenty-eight bowls Qiu Chuji was still looking sober and normal, the Seven Freaks were quite shocked. Wanyan Honglie thought as he looked on: "Hopefully this Taoist will get drunk and these Seven Freaks will finish him off before he can do anything."

Quan Jinfa calculated that his side still had five men left, each a heavy drinker and could probably drink three or four more rounds, the opponent could not possibly be able to hold another twenty or so drinks in his belly... or could he? Even if he really could not get drunk, his belly could only hold so much. Figuring that victory was in hand, he was feeling pretty good; then he accidentally glanced down at the floor and saw that the floorboards under Qiu Chuji's feet were obviously soaked through. Shocked, he whispered to Zhu Cong: "Second Brother, take a look at his feet." Zhu Cong only looked down for a moment before muttering: "Not good, he's using his inner strength to force the wine out through his feet." Quan Jinfa quietly replied: "That's

right; I didn't think that his inner strength would be so powerful, what should we do now?"

Zhu Cong thought to himself: "With this little trick, he could go a hundred more bowls without any problem. I have to come up with another contest or something." He took a step back before suddenly falling through the hole in the floorboards that he caused earlier and then climbing back up through the hole, all the while shouting: "So drunk, I am so drunk!"

Another round of drinks and now the floor boards under Qiu Chuji's feet were saturated with wine and a little bit of a fountain squirted out from the boards onto the floor below. By now Nan Xiren, Han Baoju, and everyone else had noticed, and everyone was secretly admiring such a powerful display of inner strength.

Han Baoju put his bowl back onto the table and was just about to admit defeat when Zhu Cong shot him a look and turned to Qiu Chuji: "Elder's inner strength is almost god-like and we can't but admire such a display. But it is still five against one; it doesn't seem quite fair really." Qiu Chuji was a bit surprised and asked: "Then what does Second Brother Zhu suggest we should do?" Zhu Cong smiled and said: "I say let the two of us battle it out to see who's best."

All the spectators were rather baffled by this; Zhu Cong was the one, of the group of five still going up against him, who was obviously losing, why would he go and lower his odds even more? But the other six Freaks knew that although this brother of theirs doesn't seem to take anything seriously, he's full of ideas and tricks and his actions were often pure genius. Figuring that he must have a plan in mind, the six of them didn't object.

Qiu Chuji let out a little laugh: "The Seven Freaks of the South really do want to look good no matter what. How about this? If Second Brother Zhu finishes the wine left in this vat with me, if neither is losing, then it'll count as a defeat for me...how about it?"

By now the vat was a little bit less than half full, with many bowls remaining; this would mean that only two drunken Buddha's with their big bellies could hold all of it. But Zhu Cong didn't seem to mind that as he smiled and said: "Although I am not a very big drinker, I once beat several pretty big drinkers during one of my adventures. A toast," he said waving his fan in his right hand and his left shirt sleeve, he downed a bowl.

So the two of them downed one bowl after another; in between drinks, Qiu Chuji asked: "What kind of big drinkers?" Zhu Cong replied: "Well, once I traveled to India and the king dragged out a water buffalo to challenge me in a drinking match. But in the end neither of us won or lost."

Knowing that Zhu Cong was poking fun at him, he just snorted in response and downed another bowl. However, he noticed that even though Zhu Cong was waving his hands all over the place while talking nonsense, he was still matching him bowl for bowl. There wasn't any wine spilling out from his hands or feet, so obviously was not forcing the wine out of his body with inner strength; but there was a huge bulge in his stomach so he figured that Zhu Cong may know how to expand and retract his stomach at will. He was feeling rather puzzled when Zhu Cong spoke up again: "The year before last I went to Siam, ha, now that's even more ridiculous. This time the King of Siam got an elephant to challenge me. That huge thing drank seven vats! How much do you think I drank?"

Even though Qiu Chuji knew he was just making stuff up, he

could not help but ask: "How much?" Zhu Cong's face suddenly turned dead serious as he lowered his voice and said: "Nine vats!" Suddenly he raised his voice again and shouted: "Drink up, drink up!"

So he just went on like this, sort of drunk but not really, kind of crazy but kind of not, and soon the two of them had finished off the entire vat. The rest of the Freaks had no idea that he could hold all of that wine and all of them were pleasantly surprised.

Qiu Chuji gave him thumbs up: "Brother Zhu really is amazing!"

With a smile, Zhu Cong replied: "To keep the wine out of our bodies, Reverend used inner strength, but I had to resort to merely outer techniques. Here, have a look." With a hearty laugh, he suddenly did a back flip and when he landed there was a wooden bucket in his hand. With a slight wave of his hand, the fragrances of the wine that filled half the bucket came pouring out. All of the people present were martial arts masters and, with the exception of Ke Zhen'E, were sharp enough to pick up on any trickery or fake moves, yet not a single one of saw where the bucket came from. Looking down, Zhu Cong's belly had suddenly returned to its normal flat shape; obviously the bucket was hidden underneath his robe. The Seven Freaks of the South all burst out laughing and Qiu Chuji was shocked.

As it turns out, Zhu Cong was best at trickery and illusions and that was where the nickname 'Magical Hands Scholar' came from. This little trick that he just pulled was passed down by magicians all the way to today. A magician would walk onto the stage with nothing in hand, with one back flip a goldfish bowl would be in his hand, another back flip and a bowl filled with water appeared; this would go on until there were enough bowls on stage and suddenly there was

one goldfish in each bowl. This is absolutely astounding when witnessed first hand and has to be seen to be believed. The second time Zhu Cong fell through the hole was when he hid the large bucket underneath his robe. All the crazy talk was to distract Qiu Chuji. When a magician does his trick right, even hundreds upon hundreds of pairs of eyes could not spot how the trick was done. Qiu Chuji did not even suspect that he would be pulling this kind of trick and was not able to catch him pouring one bowl after another into the bucket underneath his robe. Qiu Chuji snorted: "Hmph! You call this drinking?" Zhu Cong laughed: "And what you did was? The wine I drank is in this bucket, the wine that you drank is on the floor, any differences there?"

He paced back and forth as he talked, suddenly he accidentally slipped on the puddle of wine by Qiu Chuji's feet and fell towards Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji caught him and let Zhu Cong balance himself. After pacing back and forth once more, he suddenly said in a loud voice: "Wonderful poem! Such wonderful poetry! Mid-Autumn have always... moon most bright, cool winds lead the way... for refreshing night. A day's fortunes... sinks man and silver, the dragons in four seas... leap out water...." His voice was slowly dragging out as he began to sing the lines.

Shocked, Qiu Chuji thought to himself: "That's the poem that I started but didn't finish last Mid-Autumn; I always have it by my side in case I ever think of the next four lines. Nobody else has seen it, how does he know it?" Reaching into his shirt, he found that the scroll that contained the poem was missing.

With a smile, Zhu Cong unrolled the scroll and laid it out on the table: "Not only are elder Qiu's martial arts among the best in the world, his poetry and style is as well. Amazing... truly amazing!" He had slipped and fallen on purpose,

enabling him to use those magical pick-pocket skills of his to steal the scroll from Qiu Chuji.

Qiu Chuji thought to himself: "I didn't notice it at all when he reached into my shirt and took the scroll out. If he didn't intend to take my poem but was instead trying to stab me, would I still be alive now? Obviously he had my life in his hands and let me live." Now that he thought about that, the anger in him subsided and he said: "Since Hero Zhu has finished this entire vat of wine with me, I will do as I promised and admit defeat. In this little match today in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, Qiu Chuji lost to the Seven Heroes of the South."

Amid smiles, the Seven Freaks of the South replied: "No, no, that's ok. This kind of game can't be taken seriously." Zhu Cong added: "Besides, Reverend Qiu's inner strength is miles above all of us."

Qiu Chuji continued: "Although I have admitted defeat, those two widows have to be rescued." He saluted with his hands and lifted up the vat: "I'm heading off to the Fahua Monastery to get them." An angry, Ke Zhen'E demanded: "You have admitted defeat, why are you still troubling monk Jiaomu?" Qiu Chuji replied: "Lives are at stake, it has nothing to do with winning or losing. Honored Hero Ke, if your friend met an unfortunate end and his widow was suffering in the hands of others, would you do all you could to save them?" Suddenly his expression changed and he shouted: "Oh I see how it is, you had more people coming! Even if you get the entire Jin army here I'm still going to see this to the very end, even if it means giving up my life!"

Zhang Ahsheng replied: "There's just the seven of us, no need for more people." But Ke Zhen'E had heard several dozen of men running in this direction as well as the clanking of their weapons, so he immediately stood up and

commanded: "Everyone back off!" Zhang Ahsheng and all the others hid their weapons since all of them had heard the footsteps by now. Before long, several dozen men came running up the stairs.

These men were Jin soldiers. Qiu Chuji respected the Seven Freaks of the South and figured that they were being kept in the dark by the lies of the monk Jiaomu. He was careful of what he said so as not to offend them too much. But suddenly seeing dozens of Jin soldiers showing up, he could not control his anger any longer and he shouted: "Monk Jiaomu, Seven Freaks, how dare you people actually befriend someone, then ask the Jin for help against them! How can you still call yourself righteous men of the martial world?" Han Baoju shouted back: "Who's asking the Jin for help?"

These soldiers were actually the personal guards of Wanyan Honglie; they followed him into town and became unsettled because Wanyan Honglie had been out of sight a long time. Upon hearing that there was fighting in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal and fearing the worst, they came running.

Qiu Chuji snorted: "Hmph! Alright, alright! Please forgive me for not staying any longer! This matter between us is not over yet!" He picked up his vat and started to walk toward the stairs.

Ke Zhen'E stood back up: "Reverend Qiu, there's some misunderstanding here." Still walking, Qiu Chuji replied: "Misunderstanding? You people are supposedly righteous heroes? Why ask Jin soldiers to help you in a fight?" Ke Zhen'E replied: "But we didn't." Qiu Chuji rebuked: "I can see what's going on in front of me, I'm not blind." What Ke Zhen'E hated the most was the fact that he was blind and anything that reminded him of it. He slammed his iron staff

onto the floor and demanded: "And what if I am blind?" Qiu Chuji didn't answer as he lifted up his left hand and struck a Jin soldier on his forehead with his palm. The soldier did not even have a chance to mutter a sound before his head split open. Qiu Chuji shouted back: "He is a good example!" Flipping his sleeves in the Seven Freaks' general direction, he walked down the stairs.

Seeing one of their own die, the Jin soldier's actions immediately became chaotic as several of them charged at Qiu Chuji with lances pointed at his back. He did not even turn around and, as if there were eyes on the back of his head, he knocked each of the lances down one by one. The rest of the soldiers were just about to charge up from below as well when Wanyan Honglie ordered them to stop. Turning to Ke Zhen'E, he said: "This Taoist bastard is intolerable, why don't all of us sit down and have a nice drink while we discuss how to take care of him?" When he ordered the Jin soldiers to stop, Ke Zhen'E had figured out that he was the leader of the soldiers, so he shouted back: "Damn it [TaMaDe]! Get out of my face!" Wanyan Honglie hadn't even recovered from this shock when Han Baoju added: "My Big Brother told you to get out of his face!" He bumped Wanyan Honglie on his waist with his right shoulder. Wanyan Honglie stumbled back several steps as the Seven Freaks and the monk Jiaomu quickly filed out.

Zhu Cong was trailing behind them. As he walked by Wanyan Honglie, he gently tapped him on the shoulder with his fan and asked with a smile: "Have you sold off that girl? How about selling her to me? Ha...ha!" As he hurried down the steps he was still laughing. Although Zhu Cong did not know anything about Wanyan Honglie, he could tell from the way that he was treating Bao Xiruo that they were not a couple. Then he overheard him bragging about his wealth, so he had to take a bit of his money, just to cause a little

trouble. But now that he found out that he's a leader of Jin soldiers, how could he not take more of his money?

Wanyan Honglie reached into his shirt and, as expected, all the money that was in his shirt had, inexplicably, disappeared. Not only was he worried about the fact that all these men were such great martial arts masters, but if they somehow found out that he had Madame Bao with him, what a disaster that would be? Luckily, since Qiu Chuji and the Seven Freaks still haven't worked out their misunderstanding, this was the perfect time for him to get out of town. He immediately went back to the inn and headed north with Bao Xiruo that very night. They traveled until they arrived back at the capital of the Jin Empire, Yanjing. [Modern day Beijing]

As it turned out, after that night in which Qiu Chuji killed Wang Daoqian and met the two men, then killed another group of Jin soldiers, he arrived in Hangzhou in great spirits. He spent several days in a row by the lake. The Ge Peak at the north end of the West Lake, besides being a famous Taoist retreat, it was the place where Ge Hong concocted his medical pills at that time. Qiu Chuji spent his mornings enjoying the land and the people and his afternoons inside the Taoist temple on top of Ge Peak, making medicine and practicing martial arts.

One day, he was walking on a pier on the shore of Qing River when he suddenly saw a group of ten or so government soldiers walking by in a very sorry state with their armor falling apart and their weapons broken. Obviously they had just lost a battle. He was rather puzzled: "We aren't at war with the Jin nowadays, and I haven't heard anything about any ruffians or uprisings around here. Where in the world did they lose this battle?" He asked around but nobody knew about it either. His curiosity

piqued, he followed the soldiers back to their camp, at Command Post Six.

He waited until after midnight before he snuck into the camp and dragged a soldier out into a small alley to interrogate him. That soldier was in the middle of a dream when suddenly, out of nowhere, a sharp blade was put up against his throat. In shock and fear, he did not hide a thing and he spilled all the secrets about going into Ox Village to capture two men and everything else that happened that night. Qiu Chuji could not believe it when that soldier told him that Guo Xiaotian had died that night, and Yang Tiexin, gravely wounded, was missing and most likely dead as well. The soldier kept on saying that the two widows had been captured, but on their way back, out of nowhere, they had run into another group of soldiers and, for some weird and stupid reason, they fought and lost. Qiu Chuji was about to lose his temper when he realized that this man was merely a soldier who was following orders and not truly responsible for what happened. So he demanded: "Who's your superior?" The soldier answered: "The commander's... s... surname is Duan, given name Tiande." Qiu Chuji let him go and snuck back trying to find Duan Tiande, but to no avail.

The next morning, a pole was erected in front of the commander's house; a head was dangling off of the top of it, as a warning to other criminals. Qiu Chuji only took one look and recognized that it belonged to Guo Xiaotian. In sadness and anger, he thought: "Qiu Chuji, Qiu Chuji, this man is a descendent of a patriot. Out of kindness, he asked you to have a drink with him, yet you brought upon him such calamities. If you do not find justice for him, how can you go on pretending to be a man?"

After forcing himself to wait until nightfall, he climbed up the pole and took down Guo Xiaotian's head. He dug a hole

on the shore of the West Lake and buried the head there. After several kowtows, he wiped the tears away from his face as he silently swore: "I promised to teach the two hero's children martial arts. I've kept every promise I have ever made and if I can not turn your children into heroes among men, then let me never see my brothers in the afterlife; I will no longer deserve such an honor." He calculated that the first thing he needed to do was find that Duan Tiande and get revenge for his two dead sworn brothers. After that he would rescue the two widows and take them to some place safe, so that the two kids could be born and leave a legacy for those two heroes.

For two straight nights, he searched through Command Post 6, but was not able to find Duan Tiande at all. He became worried that this man, because of greed and corruption, did not follow military regulations and might not spend time with the soldiers under him at all. On the third night, he stepped out in front of the command post and shouted: "Duan Tiande! Come out here this instant!"

Because of the fact that Guo Xiaotian's head had been taken, Duan Tiande was inside interrogating Li Ping about any other criminal masterminds that her husband might know when, suddenly, there was chaos outside. He stuck his head out of a window and saw a big, tall Taoist, with incredible ferocity and style, grabbing a soldier with each hand and tossing them out of the way as he made his way through the crowd of soldiers. One of the commanders repeatedly shouted: "Let loose the arrows! Let loose!" In the chaos, some of the soldiers grabbed a bow but couldn't find any arrows while other soldiers gathered some arrows but did not grab a bow.

Furious, Duan Tiande pulled out his saber and charged forward screaming: "Want to rebel?" He swung at Qiu Chuji's waist. Seeing that he was an officer, Qiu Chuji did

not budge at all. Instead he tossed aside the soldier that was in his hands and, with one simple motion of his left hand, grabbed Duan Tiande's wrist and demanded: "Where's that bastard Duan Tiande?"

Writhing in pain, Duan Tiande immediately replied: "Is the Reverend looking for Mr. Duan? He... He's drinking by the West Lake; don't know if he's going to make it back today." Believing him, Qiu Chuji let him go. Duan Tiande turned to two soldiers by his side and ordered: "Take the Reverend to the lake shore so that he can find the commander." The two soldiers didn't catch on, so he shouted: "What are you standing there for? Hurry! The Reverend will get mad!" The two men finally caught on and began walking. Qiu Chuji followed them off.

Not daring to stay a moment longer, Duan Tiande took several guards and Li Ping and headed straight towards the 8th Command Post. The commander was his drinking pal and, upon hearing what had happened, immediately offered to dispatch some help for him to catch this Taoist bastard. He was just about to dispatch his troops when his camp suddenly broke out in chaos as one of the soldiers ran in and reported that a Taoist had come charging into camp. Turned out the soldiers that were with him couldn't take the pressure and told him about the places that Duan Tiande frequently went to.

Being the alert man he was, Duan Tiande did not hesitate and he grabbed Li Ping and ran. He ran to the 2nd Command Post outside of the city, figuring that he could lose Qiu Chuji because of its remote location. After he settled down, the images of that Taoist rampaging through the army haunted him. By this time his wrist began to hurt and swell again. He went to an army doctor in the camp and it turned out that two bones in his wrist had actually snapped. Too frightened to go home, he decided to stay in

the 2nd Command Post for the night. He slept till midnight when a disturbance outside woke him up, apparently one of the soldiers standing guard had disappeared.

Duan Tiande jumped out of his bed, somehow knowing that the guard must have been kidnapped by that Taoist. Deciding that no matter where he hides in the army camps, the Taoist would eventually find him, he had to find something else to do! This Taoist had already met him and was only coming for him and him alone. Even though there were lots of soldiers in the army, he was probably not going to come out unscratched. He was about to break down in a panic when he suddenly remembered that his uncle, whose martial arts were quite good, had retreated to the Yunlou Temple [Cloudy Pavilion Temple] to become a monk. Why not hide there? Figuring that this Taoist's attacks probably had something to do with Guo Xiaotian, he ordered Li Ping be changed into a soldier's uniform and then dragged her to the Yunlou Temple with him in the middle of the night. He thought that if he really got into trouble he could use her as leverage against the monk.

His uncle, given the Buddhist name of Kumu [Withered Wood], became a monk a long time ago and had become the Abbot of the Yunlou Temple. Before that he had been an army officer and his martial arts training came as a disciple of Xianxia Sect that was prevalent in the provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu and could be considered a branch of Shaolin martial arts. He had never approved of Duan Tiande's character and kept a distance between them. Seeing him stumbling into the monastery in such a sorry state in the middle of the night, he was quite annoyed and asked coldly: "What are you doing here?"

Knowing that his uncle hated the Jin to the bone, Duan Tiande knew that if he told the truth his uncle might kill him on the spot himself, so on the way here he had already

thought of a lie. Seeing his uncle's cold stare at this moment, he immediately knelt down and kowtowed: "Someone is troubling me, please help me uncle!"

Buddhist monk Kumu replied: "You are an army officer; it's a miracle if you don't go troubling others, who would dare to trouble you?" With an innocent look on his face, Duan Tiande replied: "I'm no good, but I'm hiding here and there from this Taoist bastard. I hope that uncle will, for the sake of late father, save me." Out of pity, the monk Kumu asked him: "Why is the Taoist chasing you?"

Duan Tiande knew that the more repentant he sounded the better off he was, so he said: "It's all my fault... my fault! Two days ago I went to the Wah-Zi on the west side of Clear Coolness Bridge...." The Abbot Kumu snorted and his face dropped. "Wah She", or "Wah-Zi", was the slang word for brothels back at that time; from that came the saying "Wahs gather when time comes, wahs scatters when time goes", which is used to describe something that comes easily and goes just as fast.

Duan Tiande continued: "There was someone there that I had met on many occasions and she was in the middle of a song when a Taoist suddenly burst in and said that she had to entertain him because her song was so good...." Abbot Kumu abruptly cut in: "Bull! What is a priest doing in a place like that?" Duan Tiande replied: "That's what I said and then I told him to leave. But it turned out that Taoist was a low-life and cursed me for enjoying myself in spite of the fact that I would lose my head in the next couple of days." Abbot Kumu asked: "What is he talking about?" Duan Tiande replied: "He said that the Jin army was going to cross the river and invade south soon and was going to kill every single one of us Song soldiers."

Furious, Buddhist Abbot Kumu demanded: "Did he really say that?" Duan Tiande nodded: "Yes! I guess my temper was not really good either and I got into an argument with him, saying that if the Jin really did invade, we would at least all die fighting and wouldn't necessarily lose." This really rubbed the Abbot Kumu the right way, so much so that he could not help but nod in approval as he thought this was the best thing that this nephew of his ever said. Seeing him nod, Duan Tiande's hope lit up and he continued: "We just kept on arguing until we began to fight, but I wasn't a match for the Taoist. He came chasing after me; I had nowhere else to go, so that's why I came here. Uncle, please help me!" The monk Kumu replied: "I am a monk, I'm not getting involved in this kind of name-seeking matters that you men get yourself into." Duan Tiande begged: "Just this one time, uncle, I will never do anything like this again."

Remembering his brother of yesteryear and quite angry at the Taoist for saying what he said, the Venerable Kumu finally relented: "Alright, you can hide here for a couple of days. I don't want any kind of trouble from you." Duan Tiande agreed to everything and anything he demanded. Abbot Kumu sighed: "An honorable army officer, pah... utterly useless! If the Jin army really does invade, then what will we do? Ay! Back then, I..." Frightened by threats from Duan Tiande, Li Ping just stood there by his side through all his lies, not daring to say a single word.

The next afternoon, the guest attending monk [Zhike Seng] ran in and reported to monk Kumu: "There's a Taoist priest out front, shouting all kinds of stuff and creating havoc, saying something about making Duan.... Commander Duan, come outside."

Abbot Kumu went and got Duan Tiande and told him. In a panic, Duan Tiande said: "It's him, it's him!" Abbot Kumu

asked: "Which sect does this vicious Taoist belong to?" Duan Tiande replied: "I don't know which hole that barbarian crawled out of, but his martial arts don't seem that great, it's just that his arm strength is enormous. The only reason I lost is because I didn't know any martial arts at all." Abbot Kumu replied: "Alright, I'm going to go meet him in person." Walking out to the Main Hall, he ran right into Qiu Chuji who was trying to break into the temple. The guard monks were trying their best to slow him down, but they were failing. The Abbot Kumu walked up to him and gently pushed Qiu Chuji's shoulder, using a bit of inner strength; he figured he would just push Qiu Chuji out of the Main Hall. But, to his surprise, it felt as if he was pushing down on a pile of cotton, there was nothing there that he could actually push against. Knowing he was in trouble, he immediately tried to pull back. But it was too late as he stumbled back out of control and backed into the offerings table. "Crack!" "Boom!" Half of the offerings table collapsed and all the offerings on it were scattered and fell onto the floor.

Shocked, a thought ran through his mind: "This Taoist's martial arts are truly amazing, much more than just enormous arm strength, undoubtedly." He immediately held his palm up and saluted: "May I ask why the reverend has come to visit our humble monastery?" Qiu Chuji replied: "I'm looking for an evil criminal with the surname of Duan." Knowing that he himself was no match for Qiu Chuji, Kumu replied: "We men of religion should always be merciful and forgiving, why is the Priest stooping to the same level as laymen?"

Ignoring him, Qiu Chuji walked into the Inner Hall. By now Duan Tiande had already hidden himself and Li Ping. Yunlou Temple's incense was very popular and it was the Spring Pilgrimage season, so the hall was filled with believers of

both genders. Realizing that it was impossible to search thoroughly, Qiu Chuji snorted and walked out.

When Duan Tiande came out from his hiding place, monk Kumu demanded angrily: "Barbarian? If he wasn't holding back, I would be dead by now!" Duan Tiande replied: "That barbaric Taoist is a spy for the Jin; why else would he make a point of specifically troubling us officers of the Great Song?" The Zhike Seng came back in and reported that the Taoist had left. Monk Kumu asked: "Did he say anything as he left?" The Zhike Seng replied: "He said that he would never give up until we turn over that... that officer named Duan."

The Kumu shot an angry look at Duan Tiande and said: "Judging from what you said, I can't figure out why you are hiding. This Taoist's martial arts are really too strong. You probably won't come out alive if you fall into his hands." After quietly thinking for a while, he continued: "You can't stay here any longer. My younger martial brother monk Jiaomu's martial arts are better than mine. He's the only one who has a chance of stopping that Taoist; why don't you go and hide with him for a while?" Duan Tiande didn't even dare to utter a single word fearing that he might anger his uncle. Later his uncle handed him a letter to give to the monk Jiaomu explaining the situation. He immediately rented a boat and headed for Jiaxingg in the middle of the night.

How could the monk Jiaomu have guessed that the person he dragged in with him was actually a woman? Since he had the letter from his elder martial brother, he naturally allowed Duan Tiande to stay. When Qiu Chuji found out about this, he came pursuing as well. He even spotted Li Ping in the back gardens of the temple. But by the time he'd burst into the temple, Duan Tiande had already dragged Li Ping into the underground storage room with him. Qiu

Chuji, still thinking that Li Ping was in the temple, demanded that she be handed over. Since he saw her with his own eyes, he did not believe any answers that the monk Jiaomu came up with, and their argument got worse and worse. As soon as Qiu Chuji revealed a bit of his martial arts, the monk Jiaomu knew absolutely he was no match. Having always been a good friend of the Seven Freaks, he set up a meeting with Qiu Chuji in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. That huge vat that Qiu Chuji had with him came from that very Fahua Monastery. When he ran into the Jin soldiers in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, Qiu Chuji's misunderstanding got even worse.

The monk Jiaomu really did not know much about the truth of the matter. On the way back to the Fahua Monastery from the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, he told the Seven Freaks about the two men that his martial brother Abbot Kumu sent to him. He added at the end: "I have heard that all of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen Sect are masters of martial arts, each receiving the direct teachings of Master Chongyang. Among them, elder Changchun Zi was known as the best, and it turns out that he's as good as they say. Even though he's rather rude, he doesn't seem to be the kind who doesn't care for reason, and there aren't any enmities between the two of us. There must be some great misunderstanding at work here."

Quan Jinfa suggested: "I think the best thing to do is to bring out the two men that your martial brother sent to you so we can sort this out." Monk Jiaomu acknowledged, "Good point, I haven't really interrogated them very well yet." He was just about to send some people to go get Duan Tiande when Ke Zhen'E spoke up: "That priest Qiu Chuji's temper is really something, quite explosive. He obviously does not consider us people in the martial world south of the Yangtze as worthy of respect. His Quanzhen Sect may be able to act

like bosses up north, but we can't allow them to act like bosses when they come down south like this. If we can't clear up the misunderstanding, then we have to sort this out with martial arts. If we go up against him one-on-one, none of us are a match for him. But he didn't come here with good intentions." Zhu Cong added: "Let's gang up on him together!" Han Baoju commented: "Eight against one? Not very heroic don't you think?" Quan Jinfa reasoned: "It's not like we are going to kill him, we are only trying to calm him down so he will listen to the monk Jiaomu's explanation." Han Xiaoying was rather worried: "If it gets out that monk Jiaomu and the Seven Freaks of the South ganged up on someone, wouldn't that tarnish our name?"

The eight of them hadn't worked out what to do yet when a thunderous noise came from the Main Hall of the temple followed by the thundering of metal banging on metal. Qiu Chuji was banging the huge bell that hung from the ceiling of the Main Hall with the bronze vat. After several hits, the vat began to crack. The look on his face was furious. The Seven Freaks didn't know that Qiu Chuji wasn't always this rash and unreasonable. He had been so frustrated by his own inability to capture Duan Tiande that he was about to lose control; that, added to his deep-seated hatred of the Jin, led to his behaving this way. The Seven Freaks all thought that he was trying to bully them with his reputation, so they decided to fight it out. The more famous the Seven Masters of Quanzhen were, the more determined the Seven Freaks were not to back down and appear to be bullied. If Qiu Chuji had been some unknown martial arts practitioner, this situation would have, ironically, been much easier to resolve and probably already would have been.

Han Baoju shouted: "Sister, let's take the lead." He was Han Xiaoying's first cousin on her father's side and, of the seven, had the least amount of patience. In one motion, the

'Golden Dragon' whip that was around his waist was now in his hands and he swept a "Wind Swirling the Crippled Cloud" causing the whip to snap toward Qiu Chuji's right hand which was holding up the vat. Han Xiaoying unsheathed her sword as well and thrust toward the center of Qiu Chuji's back. Attacked from both fronts, Qiu Chuji rotated his wrist, causing the whip to hit the vat instead. Then he turned his body slightly sideways and let the sword pass by his side.

In the last years of the Spring and Autumn era, the states Yue and Wu were mortal enemies. The King of the state of Yue, Gou Qian, in order to remind himself of the shame of defeat and to motivate himself to excel, tortured himself by sleeping on a straw bed and tasting everyday a gall-bladder that he hung from the ceiling. Nevertheless, the King of Wu had a general under him named Wu Tzushi who, being a disciple of Sun-Tze's school of war, was a great tactician and trainer. Seeing that his army was still no match for his enemy's, Gou Qian got more and more depressed. One day, a beautiful young girl with amazing sword skills suddenly appeared inside the Yue borders. Happy beyond words, Gou Qian immediately asked her to teach his soldiers her skills and was finally able to defeat the Wu army because of it. Jiaxing, being the meeting place between the two states, was a place where several battles occurred. It was no surprise that the entire sword technique was passed down in this area. The only problem was that the sword skill was designed to be most effective on the battlefield. It was mostly used to chop down numerous soldiers and bringing down horses in a crowd. It was not nimble or agile enough when used against martial arts practitioners in the martial world. It was only in the last days of the Tang dynasty that this sword technique received a much needed upgrade from a swordplay genius from this area. This sword master made the moves much more complex and speedier.

Although Han Xiaoying hadn't yet mastered the entire repertoire that she learned from her master, she was still very deadly. Her nickname "Yue Sword Maiden" was a reference to this. [Note: The entire story regarding this sword technique is covered in another Jin Yong short story, Sword of the Yue Maiden, or Yue Nu Jian.]

After only a few moves, Qiu Chuji had figured out her repertoire and decided to beat its speed with even more speed. She was fast, Qiu Chuji was even faster. Using his right arm to block Han Baoju's whip, his left hand came shooting out in an attempt to snatch the sword out of her hand by sheer force. In an instant, Han Xiaoying was forced to retreat to the side of the temple's statue of Buddha.

Nan Xiren and Zhang Ahsheng charged in and attacked from both sides. Nan Xiren was just as quiet as can be and let his carrying stick make all the sounds. But Zhang Ahsheng was completely opposite, shouting and screaming all kinds of street talk and all in his south Yangtze accent. Qiu Chuji didn't understand any of it, so he just pretended he didn't hear it.

In the flurry of the fight Qiu Chuji's left palm suddenly came straight out right at Zhang Ahsheng's face. Instinctively, Zhang Ahsheng bent himself over backwards to avoid it, but the move turned out to be a decoy. Qiu Chuji's right foot came flying out hitting Zhang Ahsheng's right wrist, knocking his knife loose. But Zhang Ahsheng is much better with nothing in his hands, so he did not miss a beat as he balanced himself with his left leg, faked with a right hand, and attacked with his left fist.

Qiu Chuji let out a shout of approval before dodging out of the way and uttering: "Pity, pity!" Zhang Ahsheng had to ask: "What?" Qiu Chuji replied: "Pity that you, such a martial arts expert, would bring on shame to yourself by

befriending evil monks and serving the Jin." Made furious by that accusation, Zhang Ahsheng shouted back: "Bastard Taoist, you are the one that's serving the Jin!" He took three swings at Qiu Chuji in quick succession during that exchange. Qiu Chuji dodged out of the way and tilted the vat, causing two of Zhang Ahsheng's punches to actually land on the vat.

Seeing that they were still losing despite of their four to one advantage, Zhu Cong made a gesture towards Quan Jinfa and the two of them charged into the scuffle. Quan Jinfa's weapon was a huge hand scale with which he used the scale handle as a bat, the scale hook as a flying hook, and the scale weight as a mace; literally three weapons in one. Zhu Cong, on the other hand, excelled at hitting pressure points. That dirty and broken fan of his was actually made of iron which he used like an extension of his arm. This facilitated hitting pressure points and deflecting other weapons or enemies coming at him. Qiu Chuji spun and tilted the vat in his right hand at will, making it a huge shield that guarded his front side while using his left hand to fight back and attack. With such a huge burden in his hand, he could no longer move around as nimbly as he should, but it was still quite advantageous for him because he could use the vat to block many of the attacks coming towards him.

The monk Jiaomu, seeing the fight quickly getting out of hand, figured that someone could be seriously hurt any moment now. He tried to get everyone's attention by shouting as loud as he could: "Everyone please stop! Please listen to what I have to say!" But who would actually stop in the middle of a fierce fight?

Qiu Chuji shouted back: "Hypocrite! Who wants to hear you talk? Watch this!" Suddenly his left hand turned ferociously towards Zhang Ahsheng as it shifted between fist and palm

over and over again without rhyme or reason. This move, called "Flying Mountain Outside the Heavens," was based on strange form and incredible speed, and was meant to take an opponent by surprise, as it did Zhang Ahsheng. Monk Jiaomu shouted: "No! Reverend! Please don't!" Qiu Chuji had been fighting for so long and against so many able opponents that he was afraid that the fight would last too long. Since there were two men standing on the sidelines waiting to jump in at any moment, he was worried very much about his own life. Now that he had found an opening in his opponent's defense, how could he just let it go? Therefore, he put all his strength and power behind this move.

In his martial arts training he trained his body specifically to strengthen the toughness of his skin. The fact that he liked to wrestle with wild bulls and buffaloes for work and as a hobby, Zhang Ahsheng's body was covered with a layer of thick and hard muscles, which resembled the thick skin of bulls. Even though he knew that this strike packed quite a force, and since he figured that he couldn't get out of the way, he immediately gathered his inner strength and prepared himself for a strike on his shoulder and shouted: "Come on!". Hence, he caught the palm full on. "Crack!" Incredibly, his collar bone, despite of all his preparation, snapped under the pure inner force of the Quanzhen Sect.

Shocked, Zhu Cong attacked aggressively with his iron fan, aiming right at a pressure point on Qiu Chuji. As the saying goes, offense is the best defense; Zhu Cong attacked to protect his sworn brother from further harm now that he was injured. But Qiu Chuji, having just gained the upper hand, immediately began trying to seize some of the weapons that were flying around him. "Ai-Yo!" Quan Jinfa shouted as Qiu Chuji got a hold of his scale. With a jerk, Qiu Chuji pulled him a meter closer. This put him between Qiu

and the two other attackers, Nan Xiren and Zhu Cong. Qiu Chuji's left palm flew toward Quan Jinfa's scalp.

Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying both immediately jumped in and thrust their weapons at Qiu Chuji's head in an attempt to stop him. Qiu Chuji had no choice but to dodge out of the way and let Quan Jinfa escape. Having just escaped death, Quan Jinfa was covered in sweat; nevertheless he took a kick to his side that made him writhe on the ground in pain, unable to get up.

The monk Jiaomu didn't want to actually come to blows. He'd hoped that his misunderstanding with Qiu Chuji would have been peacefully worked out by now. Seeing the friends that had come to his aid were going down one by one, he had to join in the scuffle. He tossed his long sleeve, raised the piece of burnt wood in his hand, and lunged at Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji thought: "So it seems that this monk is a master at hitting pressure points." He put up his guard against him.

Ke Zhen'E figured from all the shouting that his sworn brothers and sister were hurt, so he grabbed his iron staff and was about to charge into the fight when Quan Jinfa shouted: "Big Brother, fire your projectiles! First at 'Jin', then go for 'Xiao Guo'!" Before his voice even died down, two projectiles flew directly toward Qiu Chuji's forehead and right hip.

Qiu Chuji was shocked. It's not often that one meets a blind man able to fire projectiles so accurately, even with a person on the side telling him where to fire them. He immediately spun the vat in his hand and knocked the two projectiles down. These projectiles are used only by Ke Zhen'E, and had corners on all 4 sides like a diamond, but as sharp anyone could make them. He learned to use them after he was blinded because the projectiles were heavy,

making it easy for him to be accurate. After knocking the projectiles down with the vat, Qiu Chuji actually felt the vat shake! He thought: "Amazing, what strength!"

By now all the other Freaks had dodged out of the way. Quan Jinfa still kept shouting: "'Zhong Fu', now 'Lie'!.... Good, now the Taoist has moved into ' Ming Yi'...." He had done this with Ke Zhen'E so many times over the years that it almost seemed as if his eyes were Ke Zhen'E's. He was the only one among Freaks that could do this. Ke Zhen'E was firing as if he could see and in an instant he had fired dozens of projectiles. So many that Qiu Chuji was now forced to fend off the projectiles with no opportunity to fight back whatsoever.

Suddenly a thought came to Ke Zhen'E: "He's hearing sixth brother as well, so he's prepared every time, no wonder I can't hit him." Quan Jinfa's voice was getting softer and softer with moans sandwiched in between, obviously in great pain. Ke Zhen'E did not hear Zhang Ahsheng make a single noise at all and nobody was quite sure whether or not he's alive. Quan Jinfa struggled to get out: "Hit... hit... 'Tong Ren'...." But this time Ke Zhen'E did not follow his advice, instead he threw up both arms and fired four projectiles, one each at the "Jie" and "Sun" positions right of "Tong Ren" and the other two heading for the "Feng" and "Lie" position left of "Tong Ren."

Not expecting Ke Zhen'E to suddenly use trickery, Qiu Chuji took a big step left and dodged the "Tong Ren" position as two people suddenly screamed in pain. Qiu Chuji's right shoulder was hit, but the projectile aimed towards the "Sun" position hit Han Xiaoying's back. Surprised and pleased, Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Little sister, come here!"

Knowing that her big brother coated his projectiles with a virulent poison, Han Xiaoying immediately scrambled to his

side. Ke Zhen'E took out a small, yellow colored pill from his bag, stuffed it in her mouth, and instructed: "Go to the yard outside and sleep, do not move, I'll come and attend to you later." Han Xiaoying immediately got up and ran towards the yard. But Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Don't run! Don't run! Walk slowly!" Han Xiaoying immediately understood and cursed at herself for being so stupid. Because her blood will circulate faster when she ran and if the poison was carried into the heart, there would be no way she could be saved. She stopped and slowly walked out.

After being hit, Qiu Chuji just ignored it because it was not very painful and just kept on fighting against the rest of the group. However, in the midst of the fight he suddenly heard Ke Zhen'E shout "Don't run!" several times. A chill went through his heart as he suddenly noticed that his arm around the wound felt very numb. He realized that the projectile had poison on it. Not daring to hesitate, he collected his strength and aimed a punch at Nan Xiren's face as hard as he could.

Noticing that the punch coming his way, Nan Xiren bent his knees, held his iron carrying stick across his chest, and pulled a move called "Iron Chain Across the River" to block the punch. Qiu Chuji did not pull the punch at all. On the contrary, he actually took a deep breath and put even more force into the punch, hitting the stick squarely in the middle. Nan Xiren's body shook violently and he had to drop his stick as the part of his hand between his thumb and index finger split open and blood began rushing out. As it turned out Qiu Chuji wasn't keeping anything in reserve in an attempt to bring the fight to a speedy end so he could save his own life. He pretty much put everything he had into this punch, causing massive internal injuries to Nan Xiren. Feeling weak on his feet, numbness in his mouth as

well as seeing stars, Nan Xiren suddenly fell to the floor throwing up blood.

Although he had taken down another foe, the numbness in Qiu Chuji's shoulder was getting worse and worse, causing him to start having trouble controlling that huge vat in his hand. So with a shout, he swept his left leg, making Han Baoju leave his feet to dodge the attack. "Where do you think you are going?" Qiu Chuji yelled as he pushed the vat off so that it came down on top of Han Baoju. Because he was in midair, Han Baoju could not do a thing other than do a half flip. By then the vat had already covered his head. In an attempt to avoid any serious injuries, he immediately put his hands over his head and curled up into a ball. "Bang!" The vat hit the floor and conveniently and neatly covered up Han Baoju.

As soon as he let go of the vat, Qiu Chuji unsheathed his sword. With a little kick against the ground with his toes, he jumped up and cut the rope that held the huge bell to the ceiling. At the same time, he gave the bell a little push to aim the bell directly at the vat, making it come down right on top of the vat. Now Han Baoju was truly stuck. However, Qiu Chuji had really expended a huge amount of energy with these last two moves and as a result, all of his extremities were beginning to feel numb and huge drops of perspiration were beginning to bead on his forehead.

Ke Zhen'E shouted: "Drop your weapons and stop now! If you wait any longer, your life could be in danger!" But Qiu Chuji figured that since the monk was in league with both the Jin and the Song soldiers and hid women in his temple, then his friends, the Freaks, could not be anything better. He would rather die than to submit to these bastards. So he turned around and began to try and fight his way out.

With only Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong still unharmed and the condition of the others still unknown how could either one of them let him get away? So Ke Zhen'E held up his iron staff and stood in front of the door, blocking his way out. Desperate to get out any way he could, Qiu Chuji stuck his sword out right at Ke Zhen'E's face. Ke Zhen'E's nickname 'Flying Bat Soaring through the Sky' came about for a reason, so he easily heard what was going on and parried the sword with his staff, almost knocking the sword out of Qiu Chuji's hand. Shocked, Qiu Chuji said to himself: "How strong is this blind man's inner strength? Could it possibly be stronger than mine?" He immediately followed with another thrust, which was parried again. But Qiu Chuji had found out that it wasn't because Ke Zhen'E's inner strength was stronger, it was because his right arm was wounded and therefore he could not exert his full force through it. He switched the sword over to his left hand and began using a skill that he'd never used in combat before, 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise'. The sword flashed as one move after another came flying towards the vitals of Ke Zhen'E, Zhu Cong, and the monk Jiaomu; he wasn't defending at all, every single one of his moves was an attack.

The name 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise' was designed for a person to fight for his life against a much more powerful opponent. Every move is designed to attack the enemy in a vital spot with incredible force and without the slightest care for one's own life. Although this is a highly refined sword skill, it's actually very similar to those scraps between ruffians and the lowlifes of the streets. As it turns out the Quanzhen Sect has a nemesis that resides in the western regions. This man was much more powerful than any of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, and he was as ruthless as he was powerful. At one time only the disciples' master could subdue and control this man, but now that the

master had passed away, there was a chance that this man could come back to the central plains at any time and destroy the entire Quanzhen Sect. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen do have a "Big Dipper Formation" that could contain this man; however, this formation only works with all seven disciples present. There was the possibility that they might run into this man without every one being present. This 'Swordsmanship of Common Demise' was meant to be used against this man, especially in single combat, in the hopes that the two combatants would both perish and thus preserve the sect. Poisoned and surrounded by three martial arts masters, Qiu Chuji had no choice but to use this skill.

After about a dozen exchanges or so, Ke Zhen'E's leg was hit. Monk Jiaomu shouted: "Big Brother Ke, Brother Zhu, why don't we just let him go on his way?" But because of this little distraction, his right rib was hit, causing him to fall to the ground screaming.

By now, Qiu Chuji was having trouble keeping his balance as well. His eyes were bloodshot; Zhu Chong exchanged several more moves with him, all the while cursing at him nonstop. Ke Zhen'E, not being able to see, was completely baffled by the sound created by Qiu Chuji's sword and was hit again, this time on his right leg, and he fell to the ground.

Zhu Cong cursed: "Dog of a Taoist, bastard Taoist! The poison in your veins has reached your heart by now! Why don't you try and make three more moves with me?"

Furious, Qiu Chuji simply came charging at him, but Zhu Cong's lightness martial arts were very good and he flew around the hall. Knowing that he could not keep this up any longer, Qiu Chuji stopped and sighed. Suddenly every thing turned dark in front of him. He tried to shake his mind clear

and was just about to look for a way out when suddenly something smacked his back. It was a shoe that Zhu Cong had taken off.

Even though the shoe was soft, it still carried quite a bit of force with it because of Zhu Cong's inner strength. Qiu Chuji teetered as he fought hard to maintain consciousness. Suddenly something else hit the back of his head. This time it was a wooden fish [muyu] that Zhu Cong had found laying in front the Buddha statue. [Note: the wooden fish (muyu) is a wooden percussion instrument that Buddhist priests use to keep rhythm while chanting.]

Fortunately, Qiu Chuji's inner strength was very strong; a normal person would have undoubtedly died from that hit, but he did almost black out from it. Qiu Chuji yelled at the top of his lungs: "Forget it, forget it! 'Changchun Zi' Qiu Chuji shall die today at the hands of these shameless bastards!" Feeling his knees suddenly give away, he collapsed onto the floor.

Fearing that he might jump back up again, Zhu Cong reached down to hit the pressure point in the middle of Qiu Chuji's chest when he suddenly saw Qiu Chuji's left hand move. Knowing that he was in trouble, Zhu Cong immediately tried to bring his right arm back in front of his chest to block the blow. But a huge force came up from below his belly and shot him away. He was spitting out blood even before he landed. Even though he could not move, Qiu Chuji had put all the strength left in him into this strike. There was no way in the world that Zhu Cong could take such a force.

None of the other monks in the temple knew any martial arts; in fact, none of them even knew that their master knew martial arts. The sudden chaos in the main hall had sent them fleeing for their lives a long time ago. Only after

things had quieted down for quite a while did a couple of the braver monks stick their heads out to see what had happened. What they saw was, blood everywhere, bodies everywhere; this sent them screaming and scrambling to Duan Tiande.

Duan Tiande had been hiding in the underground storage room the entire time and was ecstatic on hearing the news that both sides were completely destroyed in the fight. Making sure that Qiu Chuji was among those fighting, he told the monks to go and check whether or not the Taoist had died. Only after the monks came back with the news that the Taoist was lying on the floor with his eyes shut did he finally feel safe and dragged Li Ping to the main hall.

He gave Qiu Chuji a kick, causing Qiu Chuji to let out an almost imperceptible moan. Duan Tiande pulled out his saber and shouted: "Do you have any idea how much suffering you have caused me you Taoist bastard? Well now your foe is going to send you on your way to the Western Paradise!"

Even though he was greatly injured, monk Jiaomu summoned all his strength and shouted: "Don't... don't harm him!" Duan Tiande asked: "Why not?" Monk Jiaomu, still recovering from the shout, got out between breaths: "He's a good man... just a little im... impatient, so there was some misunderstand...." Duan Tiande replied: "A good man? Who cares? Let me kill him!" The monk Jiaomu angrily rebuked: "Are you going to listen to me or not? Put... put down your saber!" Duan Tiande laughed heartily at that remark and shouted back: "Put down my saber? Then what? Become enlightened on the spot?" He lifted up his saber and began to swing it down at Qiu Chuji. [Note: Duan Tiande's becoming enlightened remark is a reference to a Buddhist saying that one could put down his weapon and become enlightened on the spot.]

Furious, the monk Jiaomu summoned up all his strength again and tossed the piece of burnt wood in his hand at Duan Tiande as hard as he could. Duan Tiande tried to dodge out of the way, but his martial arts were just not good enough and it caught him on the side of his mouth and knocked out three of his teeth. In pain and humiliated, Duan Tiande, ignoring the fact that he owed his life to the monk Jiaomu, lifted his saber and tried to chop off the monk's head. However, a small monk who was right beside him grabbed onto his right arm and held on for his life while another one grabbed his collar. In fury, Duan Tiande swung his saber back and brought it down upon those two monks. Even though Qiu Chuji, Jiaomu, and Freaks were all martial arts masters, every single one of them was gravely injured or kept from the battle and could not do a thing to stop him.

Li Ping screamed: "Bastard! Stop! Stop!" She had been dragged all over the place by Duan Tiande and had been patiently waiting for an opportunity to present itself to her to avenge her husband. Seeing the ground covered in blood and this man about to commit more murders, she could not hold back any longer. She charged up to him and began to fight him for all she's worth. The others had thought she was just an underling of Duan Tiande because of her uniform. Everyone was quite surprised when she suddenly attacked Duan Tiande.

Being blind, Ke Zhen'E's hearing was especially sensitive and knew that she was female as soon as he heard her. He turned to Jiaomu: "Monk Jiaomu, we are all going to die because of you. You really did have a girl hidden in your temple!"

After a moment of surprise, the monk Jiaomu understood what had happened. He thought that because of one slight oversight on his part, he had not only got himself hurt, he

had taken his friends down with him as well. In anger and humiliation, he punched the ground with both hands to help him stand up and charged at Duan Tiande with all his might. Seeing him coming with such ferociousness, Duan Tiande immediately dodged out of the way in fear. Not being able to control his own body because of the injury, the monk Jiaomu ran straight into one of the temple's columns head first and died on the spot.

Frightened out of his wits, Duan Tiande grabbed Li Ping and ran off as fast as he could. Li Ping's shouts for help got further and further away.

Chapter 3 - The Winds of the Steppes

Translated by Minglei Huang



Jochi was furious; lifting his horsewhip he struck again. Guo Jing rolled around on the ground and when he rolled close to Jochi, he suddenly jumped up and grabbed his right leg very tightly. Jochi

exerted his strength to shake him off, but the boy's grip was surprisingly strong and he couldn't get him off.

The monks were crying because of the venerable monk Jiaomu's death but some of them were still able to take care of the wounded by bandaging up their wounds and carrying them into the guest rooms. Suddenly there came an incessant banging from the vat underneath the huge bell. Not knowing what kind of monster was present, the monks looked at each other with blank faces. Not knowing what to do started to chant the 'Sutra of the High King' [Gao Wang Jing]. But the banging continued through all the chants of 'Help the Sufferers' and 'Amida Buddha'. Finally, a dozen or so of the more courageous monks pulled the huge bell back up again with a huge thick rope. As soon as they lifted the vat, a huge ball of meat came rolling out from underneath it. Scared beyond words, the monks scattered. That ball of meat suddenly stood up, it turned out to be Han Baoju. Being covered for the last half of the fight, he had no idea what had happened. Looking around, he noticed monk Jiaomu had died and all his sworn brothers were greatly injured and almost panicked. He walked over to Qiu Chuji and was about to strike down at his head with his 'Golden Dragon Whip'.

"Third Brother, NO!" Quan Jinfa shouted.

"Why not?" Han Baoju demanded in anger.

"You... just can't," was all Quan Jinfa could get out because of the pain in his abdomen.

Even though both of his legs were wounded, Ke Zhen'E's mind was still working fine. He took out the antidote for his poison and instructed the monks to give the right amounts

to both Qiu Chuji and Han Xiaoying, all the while explaining what had happened to Han Baoju. Enraged, Han Baoju was about to go chasing after Duan Tiande when Ke Zhen'E shouted: "We'll find that bastard sooner or later. First help those of your brothers who suffered internal injuries."

Both Zhu Cong and Nan Xiren had suffered severe internal injuries and that kick to Quan Jinfa's stomach was quite a blow too. Zhang Ahsheng's collar bone was broken and his chest was hit as well, knocking him out temporarily. Once he woke up, it turned out he wasn't in any mortal danger. He immediately began helping others in the temple.

The monks of the Fahua Monastery [Temple of Oriental Zen] sent a couple of errand runners to report the events to Abbot Kumu at the Yunlou Monastery [Cloudy Pavilion Temple] and also began to make funeral arrangements for the monk Jiaomu.

After several days, the poison in Qiu Chuji and Han Xiaoying's body was eradicated. Being the medical expert that he was, Qiu Chuji immediately began combining herbs and treating Zhu Cong and others as well as massaging and snapping bones back into place. Luckily, everyone's kung fu base was strong enough so that the internal as well as the external injuries were not serious. After several more days, everyone was able to sit up again. One day, all eight of them gathered in one of the monk's rooms and reflected on how they were manipulated into fighting each other, resulting in the death of the monk Jiaomu and injuries to all parties. All of them were silent, not knowing what to say.

After a while, Han Xiaoying finally broke the silence: "Everyone knows about Priest Qiu's intelligence and wit, and the seven of us didn't exactly begin wandering the world yesterday. Yet we were all manipulated into this by some little nobody. If this ever gets out, everyone in the

martial world will laugh at us. Reverend, do you have any idea as to how to clean up this mess?"

Qiu Chuji had been blaming himself for the last couple of days, thinking that if only he had sat down and calmly talked with the monk Jiaomu then all of this could have been avoided. So, in deference, he turned to Ke Zhen'E: "Big Brother Ke, what do you say?"

Ke Zhen'E's temper was bad to begin with; after his eyes were blinded it got even worse. The fact that Qiu Chuji himself brought down all seven of them combined was, in fact, what he considered to be one of the biggest embarrassments of his life. Coupled with the fact that the pain in his legs from the sword wound was still throbbing, he was barely able to hold back his indignation. He sneered and replied: "Priest Qiu uses his sword skills to take down anyone in his way and never needs to respect anyone. Why consult us over this matter?"

Qiu Chuji was taken aback for a moment, but immediately realized that he was still angry about the matter. He stood up, cupped his fist, and bowed to the Seven Freaks. "I was wrong in my actions; I was too rude and headstrong. This entire matter is entirely my fault and I ask you all for your forgiveness."

Zhu Cong and the rest of the Freaks returned the gesture. Ke Zhen'E pretended not to notice and coldly replied: "I say the seven of us have lost all of our rights to meddle in the affairs of the martial world. We should settle down here, fishing, chopping wood, or whatever. As long as Priest Qiu does not come around again, we would at least be able to spend the rest of our lives in peace."

Qiu Chuji blushed a little from that verbal slash. After a brief pause, he suddenly stood up and said: "Since I was at

fault this time, I will never dare step into this area again. As for retribution for monk Jiaomu's death, it will all fall on my shoulders and I will kill that bastard with my own hands and avenge him. Having said all that I need to say, it's now time for me to leave." Qiu Chuji bowed towards everyone again and began to walk out.

"Stop!" Ke Zhen'E shouted.

Qiu Chuji turned around and said, "Does Big Brother Ke have something else to say?"

"You have injured all of us," Ke Zhen'E replied, "and you expect all of this to just disappear because you said a couple of words?"

"Then what does Big Brother Ke want? As long as it is within my abilities I will try my best to do it."

"We just can't let this slide right now," Ke Zhen'E answered, "so it would be nice if Reverend gives us something more."

Although the Seven Freaks were all very righteous and moral individuals; they were also very proud and acted very strangely, making them well deserving the title of "Seven Freaks". Each is a master of kung fu and they always worked together, so they had never come out on the short end of a struggle when going up against others in the martial world. Several years ago they got into a fight with the Huaiyang Clan; the seven of them killed over one hundred or so of the Huaiyang Clan members on the shores of the Yangtze. Back then Han Xiaoying was still a child, but she still managed to kill two foes. The name 'Seven Freaks of the South' became famous throughout the martial world. Defeat by the hands of Qiu Chuji did not go down very well with any of them. Add that to the fact that the monk Jiaomu, a good friend of the Freaks, died, one could argue, because of Qiu Chuji's rashness. But there was still the fact that a

woman WAS hidden inside the temple and she WAS the widow of Guo Xiaotian, as Qiu Chuji had claimed. This made the Freaks partly to blame; however, at this moment, the Freaks had forgotten about that.

"I was hit by your projectile," Qiu Chuji replied. "And if it wasn't for Big Brother Ke's antidote, I would have been dead a long time ago. So for this fight, I wholeheartedly admit defeat."

"If that's the case," Ke Zhen'E replied, "then leave that sword that you carry on your back and you can go." He knew that if the two sides fought again at this time only the Han siblings would be able to put up a fight and that victory for his side was impossible. But all of the Freaks would rather die than to let the matter pass like this.

This angered Qiu Chuji greatly: "I have already given you people a lot of face and that should be enough. I also admitted defeat, what else do you want? The sword is for my protection," he continued, "just like that staff Big Brother Ke carries around."

"Are you poking fun at my blindness?" Ke Zhen'E shouted back.

"I dare not!"

"We are all injured right now, so it's hard to actually fight at this moment." Ke Zhen'E shouted angrily. "So I invite priest Qiu to come and duel with the seven of us a year from today at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal."

Qiu Chuji frowned at that remark. He thought, "Because the Seven Freaks weren't bad people, there was really no point in keeping this grudge going between us. The day after the Venerable Jiaomu died, Han Baoju could have killed me easily once he got out from underneath the bell."

Besides, this whole matter was caused more or less by my own rashness. A real man knows what's right and wrong. If he's wrong then he should admit it. To sort all this out with the Freaks won't be easy either." After thinking silently for a bit, an idea suddenly came to him, "If you really want to determine who is better between us, then we could do that," he said. "But only according to the rules I lay down. Otherwise, I have already lost to Hero Zhu at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, and I lost again fighting here in the temple. I have already lost twice and would inevitably lose the third time as well, there's no point in going any further."

Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying, and Zhang Ahsheng immediately stood up, the other four could not stand but all sat up as much as they could. They answered in unison: "When the Seven Freaks of the South duel with someone, we always let our opponent choose the time, place, and method."

Seeing how competitive they were, Qiu Chuji smiled: "So I decide how we should fight no matter what?"

Figuring that no matter what dirty trick Qiu Chuji would come up with, it wouldn't necessarily mean defeat for them, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa answered simultaneously: "That's right!"

"A man's word..." Qiu Chuji replied.

"... wild horses can't bring back!" Han Xiaoying finished, but Ke Zhen'E remained silent.

[The saying "A man's word can't be brought back by wild horses" is a famous saying in China about keeping one's word. When a person says it, it means that he will not go back on his word.]

"If you people feel that my way is unfair in any way," Qiu Chuji continued, "then I will admit defeat right here and

now." Obviously planning to gain ground by giving up a little, he knew that the Freaks would never let him admit defeat that easily because of their competitiveness.

"There's no need to play all these word games to anger us, just tell us what it is," Ke Zhen'E replied, as expected.

Qiu Chuji sat down and began to explain: "The method I have in my mind might be a little bit dragged out, but what it really measures is abilities and skills and is susceptible to some temporary mishaps or conditions. Everyone knows any martial artist can fight with blades and fists. We all have names in the martial world and absolutely cannot stoop down to the level of lowly underlings."

"What's left to fight with if we can't do it with blades or fists? Are we having a drinking contest again?" All of the Freaks wondered at that comment.

"This huge contest between us, you seven against me, will not only measure our kung fu skills, but also our will, determination, and wit. With this contest, we will see once and for all who the real hero is."

This entire conversation had all of the Seven Freaks shaking in anticipation and excitement. "Stop stalling, tell us!" Han Xiaoying demanded. "The harder it is the better!"

"If we are competing meditating, making medicine, fortunetelling, or ghost-banishing, then we are no match for priest Qiu at all." Zhu Cong said with a smile.

"And I don't really want to compete with Second Brother Zhu in stealing chickens or taking sheep." Qiu Chuji replied with a smile.

This caused a little bit of laughter from Han Xiaoying, who quickly went back to urging Qiu Chuji on: "Come on, say it!"

"At the very bottom of all of this and the misunderstanding that led to our fight, was saving the descendants of a couple of good men. This matter would be best ended in that way as well." Qiu Chuji went on to tell how he met with Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin all the way to how he pursued Duan Tiande to this temple. Throughout his entire explanation, the Freaks could not stop cursing the Jin as well as the Song government for its corruption.

After he finished the story, Qiu Chuji went on: "That woman that Duan Tiande dragged away was Guo Xiaotian's widow, Madam Li. Other than Big Brother Ke and the Han siblings, I'm sure the other four of you saw them."

"I remember her voice," Ke Zhen'E interrupted, "I will never forget that voice!"

"Great." Qiu Chuji continued, "As for Yang Tiexin's widow, Mrs. Bao, there is no clue as to where she might be. I have seen her before, but you people haven't. So what I propose we do is...."

"... the seven of us would go rescue Mrs. Li while you go save Mrs. Bao and that whoever succeeds wins. Right?" Han Xiaoying eagerly cut in.

Qiu Chuji smiled and replied: "Saving people, while definitely not easy, can't really be used to determine who's a hero and who's not. What I have in mind is much harder and more troublesome."

"So what are you suggesting?" Ke Zhen'E demanded.

"Both of the women are pregnant," Qiu Chuji explained. "After we save them, we must make sure they settle down nicely and allow them to give birth. After that I will teach the Yang child while the seven of you teach the Guo child...."

The Seven Freaks were getting more and more amazed with every word that he said. They were practically mesmerized when Han Baoju cut in: "Then what?"

"After eighteen years, when the kids are both eighteen, all of us, as well as invited friends from all over the martial realm, shall gather at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal once again for a huge feast. Then, when we are all sufficiently full and merry, we'll let the two kids duel to see whether it is my disciple who is better or is the disciple of the Seven Heroes really the best." The Seven Freaks stared at each other, completely speechless.

Qiu Chuji continued: "If the Seven Heroes fight me once more and defeat me, then it could easily be because you outnumber me; not much glory there. But if I pass all my kung fu to one person and you guys pass all of your kung fu to one person, then whichever one wins must mean that their master or masters were better."

Filled with pride, Ke Zhen'E slammed his iron staff onto the floor: "Alright! That's what we'll do!"

"What if that bastard Duan Tiande has already killed Mrs. Li? What then?" Quan Jinfa asked.

"That's just the luck of the draw," Qiu Chuji replied. "The heavens wanted me to win, what more could be said?"

"Alright!" Han Baoju pitched in with his opinion. "Rescuing widows and orphans was the right thing to do to begin with. Even if we weren't competing against you we would do it."

Qiu Chuji gave him a thumbs-up and declared: "Third Brother Han is exactly right. If the Seven Heroes are willing to care for the Guo child to adulthood, then I would like to thank everyone for my late Brother Guo." He bowed to each of them again.

"This idea of yours is rather cunning," Zhu Cong observed. "With those several sentences of yours, we brothers and sisters would have to give up eighteen years of our lives?" Qiu Chuji's face changed color a little and he suddenly let out a loud laugh.

"What's so funny?" Han Xiaoying demanded.

"I have long heard and admired the name of the Seven Freaks of the South," Qiu Chuji replied. "Everyone says that the Seven Heroes are truly righteous heroes who are always there when you need them. But today, I see that the rumors were greatly exaggerated."

This made all of the Freaks furious. Han Baoju slammed his fist down onto the bench that he was sitting on and was about to say something when Qiu Chuji cut him off: "Since ancient times, for real heroes and men, making a friend was for life in every way and giving one's life for a friend would be no big thing if loyalty and friendship called for it. Nobody has ever heard of Jing Ke and Nie Zheng haggling about some small thing. The Yang and Guo family are in need of help right now, how could anyone start haggling about it?" [In popular Chinese lore and most versions of Chinese history, Jing Ke and Nie Zheng were two great friends that had helped the Lord of Qi during the beginning of the Spring and Autumn Period. Their friendship was legendary and, in the view of most Chinese, including Confucius, the epitome of what friendship should be.]

After that little speech, Zhu Cong's face was flushed with embarrassment. He flicked his fan and replied, "The Reverend is right, I realize my mistake now. The seven of us will take on this matter!"

Qiu Chuji stood up and said: "Today is the twenty-fourth of the third month, eighteen years from today at noon, we'll

meet again upstairs in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. There, in front of all of the martial world, we will find out who's the real hero!" With a flick of his sleeve, he walked out of the door.

Han Baoju shouted: "I'm off to look for that Duan Tiande now, if he's crawled into a tortoise hole and disappeared, we are going to have to waste a lot of energy."

He was the only one among the Seven Freaks that wasn't injured, so he charged out of the door, mounted 'Wind Chaser', his yellow horse, and began to go chase after Duan Tiande and Li Ping.

"Third Brother...third Brother!" Zhu Cong shouted. "You don't know what they look like!" But Han Baoju wasn't the patient type and with 'Wind Chaser' well deserving of his name, he was long gone.

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Once he was out of the temple, Duan Tiande ran as fast as his legs would carry him, all the while dragging Li Ping. Only after he was sure that nobody was chasing after him did he finally stop and take a breath. Then he ran to the bank of the nearest river and jumped on the first boat that he saw. Taking out his saber and putting it up against the neck of the fisherman, he ordered the man to start moving the boat. The rivers and canals south of the Yangtze were as dense as a spider web and boats were the everyday mode of transportation; as common as horses and carriages were up North. Hence the saying: "Northerners ride horses, Southerners ride boats." With Duan Tiande looking as vicious as he did, as well as being dressed like an official, how could the fisherman dare disobey? He immediately undocked and guided the boat out of the city.

"What a mess! If I go back to Linan, if nothing else, my uncle will kill me on first sight." Duan Tiande thought to himself. "Probably the best thing would be to head north to get away for a while. Hopefully that bastard of a Taoist and those Seven Freaks have all died from their injuries and then my uncle will get so angry that he passes away. Then I can return and get my position back."

Once he made up his mind, he instructed the fisherman to start heading north. Even though Han Baoju's horse was faster, he was nevertheless searching on land, and thus let the two of them slip through.

Duan Tiande switched boats a couple of more times as well and changed his clothes and forced Li Ping to change hers. After ten days or so, he arrived in Yangzhou and decided to check into an inn. He was hoping to be able to settle down in the city for a while and wait out the storm. By an extraordinary coincidence, he just happened to overhear someone inquiring about his whereabouts. Shocked, he peeped through the little crack in the door and saw an amazingly ugly, short, and fat guy with a beautiful young girl. Both of them had a Jiaxing accent. Guessing that they were some of the Seven Freaks, he immediately grabbed Li Ping and ran out of the back door. Luckily, the Yangzhou native at the front desk did not quite understand their dialect and didn't understand what they were asking about. This made it possible for Duan Tiande to get away and rent another boat. Not daring to stop even for a second, he made his way north, up the Grand Canal, all the way to the shore of Ligu Post on the shores of Mount Wei Lake inside the borders of Shangdong province.

Li Ping, who was quite plain looking and whose stomach was bulging by now, was spending days on end cursing and crying. So even though Duan Tiande was by no means a gentleman, he never had any inclinations towards her. All

the two ever did was fight and curse at each other; there wasn't a moment of peace between them.

After several more days, that ugly dwarf and pretty girl showed up again. Duan Tiande had hoped to hide in the back of their accommodations. Li Ping, knowing that her rescuers were near, began to shout at the top of her lungs. Duan Tiande immediately stuffed a wad of cotton into her mouth and beat her. Li Ping struggled and shouted for all she was worth. Even though she wasn't successful in her attempt to get their attention, it was too much of a close call for Duan Tiande.

At first, Duan Tiande brought Li Ping along hoping to use her as a hostage and thereby help him get out of a jam should it ever come to that. But the situation had changed. Figuring that it would be much easier if he was by himself and that this feisty woman was a disaster waiting to happen, he decided that it would be best to kill her. Once the Han cousins had left, he took out his saber.

Li Ping had been waiting the entire time for an opportunity to avenge her husband's death. However, she was tied up every night, making it impossible. Now, upon seeing the murderous look in his eyes, she prayed: "Xiao Ge, please protect me and allow me to kill his monster. Then I will join you." She reached into her shirt and placed her hands on the dagger that Qiu Chuji gave her. She had hidden the dagger very well and was able to slip it past Duan Tiande's search. [Note: Xiao Ge is an affectionate term used by Li Ping with Guo Xiaotian.]

With a chuckle, Duan Tiande raised his saber and swung down at her. Prepared to die, Li Ping summoned all her strength, pointed the dagger at Duan Tiande, and charged. Feeling a burst of murderous cold air upon his face, Duan Tiande flicked his saber in an attempt to knock the dagger

out of her hand. Unexpectedly, the dagger was so sharp that, with a loud ping, it sliced the saber in half. The saber fell onto the floor as the tip of the dagger touched Duan Tiande's chest. Shocked, Duan Tiande instinctively jumped back. Nevertheless, the front of his shirt was slashed wide open. In complete shock and panic, he picked up the chair at his side and shouted: "Put that down this instant or else I'll kill you!" Li Ping was exhausted and the baby in her belly was kicking non-stop. Not able to fight any longer, she fell onto the floor and tried to catch her breath. But she was still clutching the dagger tightly.

Duan Tiande was afraid that Han Baoju would come around again. If he ran off by himself, he was afraid that Li Ping would reveal where he was going to those chasing him. So he immediately forced her onto another boat and went further north up the Grand Canal, passing Linqing, Dezhou, and arrived in Hebei province.

Every time he set up camp, no matter how remote the location, before long there would be several men arriving to look for him. Eventually, the ugly gnome and the girl were joined by a staff wielding blind man. Luckily, none of them recognized him, so he was able to escape every time.

Soon another troublesome thing happened; Li Ping suddenly began acting crazy. Every time they stopped somewhere, she would periodically begin shouting and screaming nonsense. Sometimes, she would even start to tear and rip at her clothes and make all kinds of weird faces and gestures. At first Duan Tiande thought that she really had gone crazy, but after a few days he suddenly figured it out. As it turned out, she was afraid that her pursuers had lost them and was purposefully leaving a trail for them to follow. This was what was making it even harder for him to lose them. By now the end of summer had passed and the cool breezes began to blow. In order to avoid capture, Duan

Tiande went well up into the North Country. The money he had taken with him was about to run out, yet the Freaks were still close on his trail.

"Back in Hangzhou, I was important, I was somebody. Meat, wine, money, women, I had it all. But I had to get greedy and go to Ox Village and kill this bitch's hubby and get myself into this mess." He cursed himself.

Several times, he was on the verge of leaving Li Ping and running off by himself. But each time, he could not summon up enough courage to do it. Every attempt to kill her ended in failure as well. What was supposed to be protection had somehow turned into a curse that he just could not get rid of. On top of everything else, he had to be constantly on guard against her attempts to avenge her husband. He was frustrated, frightened, and angry; yet there was nothing he could do.

Before he realized it, he had arrived at the capital of the Jin Empire, Yanjing. Duan Tiande thought for a bit and decided to try and find an out of the way place and finish off Li Ping. In such a huge and bustling city, there was no way those who were chasing him could find him.

Happy that things were finally going to work out, he made his way towards the city. Unexpectedly, just as he arrived in the front of the gate to the city, a team of Jin soldiers came walking out from inside. Not even bothering to ask any questions, they seized both him and Li Ping, handed them each a carrying stick, and commanded them to carry cargo for them. Because Li Ping was short and a woman, her load was reasonably light. But Duan Tiande was given two 50 kilogram [110 lb] loads and they were practically forcing him to his knees.

This group of soldiers followed an official as they headed north. As it turned out, that particular official was an emissary who was being sent out to present Royal Warrants from the Jin Emperor to the Mongolian subjects of the Jin Empire. The Jin soldiers that accompanied him were seizing any random Han Chinese that they ran into, forcing them to carry their heavy cargo and food supplies so as to save themselves from the labor. Duan Tiande argued back a couple of times and was immediately answered by several stinging lashes to his head. This situation he had seen many times before so it was all quite familiar to him; but before, he had been the one that was doing the whipping, not receiving it.

By now, Li Ping's belly was huge and doing all this heavy work was on the verge of killing her. However, so determined was she to get revenge that she tried her best not to let the Jin soldiers find out about her condition. Fortunately, she had been working on a farm ever since she was able to walk, and this made her strong and used to this kind of grinding work. Having basically resigned herself to death, she was barely able to manage the dozen of days they spent walking through the freezing and miserable steppe.

Even though it was only October, being as far North as they were, a blizzard hit one day that not only brought snow, but also a sandstorm. Having nowhere to hide from the sand and the snow, the entire group, all three hundred or so of them, lined up single-file and continued to make their way through the endless grasslands of the steppe. Suddenly, faint shouting could be heard approaching from the north. Through the sand filled air, an army of countless horsemen came charging at them.

Before any of them realized what was going on, the army had arrived. As it turned out they were an army from some

unknown tribe from the north that had just lost a battle. Chaos descended on the group as everyone tossed their weapons away and began running for their lives. Some of those who did not have horses were quickly trampled by those who had.

The Jin soldiers, seeing that defeat was inevitable, immediately scattered. Li Ping was originally at Duan Tiande's side, but lost him during the chaos of the attack. She threw off her share of the cargo and ran as fast as she could in the direction where there seemed to be the least number of people. Luckily, everyone was so concerned with their own survival that nobody harmed her.

After some running, her stomach began hurting intensely. Not able to go any further because of the pain, she lay down behind a sand dune and fainted. After what seemed like forever, she began to slowly come around. In the back of her mind, there seemed to be the crying noises of a baby. Not completely coherent, she still wasn't quite sure whether or not she was dead or alive. But the crying gradually got louder. She twitched and suddenly realized that there seemed to be a warm object between her legs. By now it was after midnight, the snow had just stopped and the moon had finally appeared from behind the parting clouds. She snapped wide awake and began to cry. In this impossible situation, the baby in her womb was born.

She immediately sat up and took the baby in her hands. It was a boy. Overjoyed and crying, she used her teeth to bite off the umbilical cord and hugged the baby as tightly as she could. In the moonlight, she saw that the infant's eyes were huge and bright and looked very much like her deceased husband and his crying was incredibly loud. Under normal circumstances, there should have been no way that she was going to survive after giving birth in such harsh conditions. But upon seeing her child, she suddenly found strength that

she didn't know she had and she slowly got up on her knees and with one hand, crawled into a small ditch close by to escape from the cold. Looking at the baby and thinking of her husband, bittersweet memories and emotions overwhelmed her.

The two of them spent the night in that ditch. The next morning, hearing nothing around her, she summoned up enough courage to climb out of it. Amongst the white snow and yellow sands, the ground was covered with discarded weapons and corpses. Nobody alive was to be seen.

She scrounged some preserved food from one of the dead soldiers as well as a fire making stone and knives. After carving some horse meat and cooking it, she searched around for some thicker clothing. She wrapped some around her baby and put some on herself as well. Luckily, the weather was so cold around this time of the year that nothing rots, so the horse meat was able to last her for a good few days, during which she was able to recover her strength. Then, carrying her baby, she began walking confidently towards the East. Even though she had lost the hated Duan Tiande, all the hatred in her heart submerged and turned into love and tenderness. All she wanted was to protect her baby's face from the harsh steppe winds.

After several more days, she noticed that the plant life around her was getting denser. This particular dusk, she suddenly spotted two horses galloping towards her. The riders noticed her and stopped to ask her what happened. Making wild gestures with her arms, she described her experience of meeting the defeated army and giving birth in the snow. These two riders were Mongolians. Even though they couldn't understand her at all, they, being the friendly and hospitable kind of people Mongolians are, felt sorry for her and invited her to spend the night with them in their Mongolian ger. Mongolians are a nomadic group of

people, migrating along with their herds and the seasons. They live in huge shelters called gers that are easily put up and taken down. The next morning this particular group of nomads departed, but they decided to leave her four small sheep to help her survive.

After much suffering and labor, Li Ping settled down on the steppe. She erected a little hut using tree branches and reeds and obtained food through barter using the sweaters she knitted from wool of the sheep.

Time flew, and the little boy was soon six years old. Following the wishes of her former husband, Li Ping gave him the name of Guo Jing. The boy was rather slow and only began to speak at the age of four. Luckily, he was a very strong boy and was able to herd the animals by himself. The two of them, mother and son, relied on each other, surviving on only the barest of essentials and leading a very simple and happy life. Both of them had learned Mongolian, and only when they were alone with each other did they speak in the Linan dialect of Chinese. Seeing the manly face on her son and hearing him speaking everything in the Linan dialect of her home frequently made her feel a bittersweet sadness: "Your father was a man among men in Shandong, you should by all means speak the Shandong dialect as well. But we weren't together a long enough time and I couldn't learn it from him, so I can't teach you."

It was October and the weather was slowly becoming colder and colder. Guo Jing climbed onto his own little pony and set out, with a shepherd dog, to herd the sheep. Around noon, a huge black eagle suddenly appeared in the sky and dove down towards the herd. A particular young sheep was frightened and began to run for its life towards the East. Guo Jing shouted several times at it to make the sheep stop, but it just kept on going.

Guo Jing immediately climbed onto his pony and went chasing after it. After 4 or 5 li or so, he finally caught up to the little sheep. Just as he was about to head back, he suddenly heard a very loud and constant rumble. Startled, he could not figure what the rumble was, even though he suspected that it might be thunder. The rumble got louder and louder until, after a while, he was able to detect the sounds of horses neighing and humans screaming within the rumbling. Having never heard such things before, he was frightened and hurriedly led his little pony and the sheep into a clump of bush on top of a nearby hill top. Only then did he dare to stick his head out to see what was going on.

What he saw was dust covering the sky as countless numbers of chariots rushed about. Several leaders were shouting out commands as the armies were lining up. One was to the East while another one was to the West and both contained more people than Guo Jing thought there were in the whole world. Everyone was wearing a white-colored bandana on their heads; some even stuck colorful feathers in them. By now Guo Jing wasn't frightened anymore; he was too curious and excited.

After another pause, from the left there suddenly came the sounds of horns and several rows of soldiers charged. They were led by a tall and thin looking young man wearing a blood red cape. He was holding his saber above his head, ready to strike at anyone he happened upon. The two armies clashed and gruesome fighting ensued. The attacking side was outnumbered and was slowly being overwhelmed and began to retreat. But reserves soon came in support and the fighting escalated to a deafening level once again.

It looked as if the attacking armies were about to collapse once again when the ten horns that had signaled the start

of the battle suddenly came to life again, making the noise level even more deafening than it had been. The attacking soldiers shouted: "Temujin is here! The Great Khan Temujin is here!" Even though the two armies were still fighting relentlessly, everyone's head periodically turned toward the East, where the horns were located.

Following their gaze, Guo Jing looked toward the East as well. Through all the sand and dust that was filling the sky, he saw a group of riders galloping forth. Within the group there was a huge pole, on which there were several white feathers. The cheering got louder as the riders got closer and the attackers seemed to fight more and more fiercely. The formations of the defending army were torn apart instantly. The huge pole slowly moved toward the very hill that Guo Jing was hiding on; he retreated even deeper into the bush, but was still peeking out with his huge, bright pair of eyes. He noticed a very big and tall middle-aged man in the midst of the riders who ridden onto the hill. He was wearing an iron helmet on his head and had a brown tuft of beard on his chin. His eyes were beaming with energy and force. What Guo Jing didn't know was that he was the leader of the Mongolian tribe, Temujin; but even if he did know, he wouldn't have known what a "khan" was.

On his horse, Temujin, accompanied by several riders, calmly surveyed the battle that was occurring at the foot of the hill. After a while, the young man with the red cape rode up the hill. "Father, there are too many of them, should we retreat a bit?" He shouted once he made it up the hill.

By now Temujin had already finished surveying the battlefield. In a low voice, he commanded: "Take your team and fall back to the East."

"Muqali, go with the second Prince and fall back to the west. Bogurchi, you and Tchila'un retreat to the north.

Kublai, you and Subotai take your army and head south." Temujin continued, never taking his eyes off the battlefield. "When you see my banner raised up high, that's my signal. Immediately sound the horns, turn around and counter-attack!" All the officers rode off with their orders. Within seconds, the Mongol troops began retreating on all fronts.

The enemy soldiers let out a great collective howl and, upon seeing Temujin's White Feathered Banner being raised high on the top of the hill, shouted in unison: "Capture Temujin... Capture Temujin!" Like ants, the opposing army began charging up the hill, completely ignoring the retreating Mongol troops. Horses and men charged with abandon; a yellow fog surrounded the hill from the dust they kicked up.

Temujin stood at the top of the hill, not moving and resolute. A score of foot soldiers held up their shields and were protecting him from arrows flying from all directions. Temujin's sworn brother Kutuku and standout general Jelme, along with three thousand elite troops, were defending the base of the hill with everything they could muster, determined to the last man.

Amid the flashing of blades and spears, the cries of battle were shaking the earth. Witnessing this, Guo Jing was at the same time excited and scared.

After an hour or so of intense fighting, and under the relentless charges of tens of thousands of enemy troops, Temujin's elite guard of three thousand had suffered about four hundred casualties while cutting down more than ten thousand enemies. Looking out, Temujin saw that even though the battlefield was covered with enemy bodies and rider-less horses running aimlessly, the number of enemy arrows flying in was still intense. On the northeastern end of the battle, the enemy attack was especially fierce and the defense looked closer and closer to collapse. "Father,"

Ogedai, Temujin's third son, anxiously asked, "is it time to raise the banner?"

"Their troops aren't tired yet!" Temujin answered gravely, not moving his eyes away from the battle, even for a moment.

By now there were three black banners at the northeast end of the battle, indicating that the enemy had gathered three standout generals there to command the troops. The Mongol defenders were steadily dropping back. Up the hill came Jelme, shouting at the top of his lungs: "Khan, we can't hold them any longer!"

"Can't hold them?" Temujin angrily shouted back. "What kind of man are you?"

Jelme's expression changed and he grabbed a saber from one of the foot soldiers. With a shout, he charged into the enemy formation. Fighting with utter abandon, he carved a path of blood to the black banners. The enemy commanders, seeing his ferocity, immediately pulled hard on their reins and backed away. Jelme, with three swings of his saber, cut down the three men that were carrying the banners. Throwing down his saber, he wrapped his arms around the three banners, took them back to the top of the hill, and stuck them into the ground upside down. Seeing this incredible display, the enemy's morale was rocked. The Mongol troops responded with fury and the hole in the defense on the northeast end was quickly plugged.

After more fighting, an enemy general with a black cape suddenly appeared in the southwest corner. Not wasting a shot, he quickly took down a dozen or so Mongol soldiers with his bow and arrows. Two Mongol officers turned and charged at him with their spears. Using only two arrows, he easily shot the two officers off their horses.

"Such amazing skill!" Even Temujin had to praise him after seeing that. By now, the general with the black cape had fought to near the foot of the hill. With the faint twang of a released bow, an arrow hit Temujin in his neck. Another arrow quickly followed, heading straight for Temujin's stomach. Realizing that he had been hit and another arrow was coming, Temujin immediately pulled hard on his reins, making his horse rear up on its hind legs. The arrow buried itself into the horse's chest all the way to the feathers, knocking the horse to the ground. Seeing the leader hit and falling, the Mongol troops were shocked. Screaming at the top of their lungs, and pouncing on the opportunity, the enemy charged forward like floodwater.

Ogedai had just finished helping his father pull out the arrow in his neck and was tearing off his shirt to bandage up the wound when Temujin shouted: "Forget about me, defend the hill!" Nodding quickly, Ogedai turned and immediately shot down two enemy officers.

Kutuku was commanding his troops guarding the west side of the hill, but, because they had run out of arrows and spears, he had to retreat. Jelme's eyes turned red as he saw him: "Kutuku, are you going to run like a scared rabbit?"

"Who's running?" Kutuku smiled back, "I ran out of arrows."

Temujin, still lying on the ground, took a handful of arrows and tossed them over to him. Kutuku quickly put an arrow onto his bow and shot the closest black bannered general off his horse. Quickly charging downhill, Kutuku grabbed that general's horse and returned.

"Brother, you are really something!" Temujin praised.

Covered with blood from head to toe, Kutuku quietly asked: "Can we raise the banner and sound the horns?"

"The enemy still isn't tired yet, just a bit longer." Temujin said, blood streaming down his palm that was pressing hard on the wound in his neck, trying to stop the bleeding.

Upon hearing that, Kutuku dropped to one knee and begged: "We owe our lives to you and have no reservations about dying here. But Khan, please, you have to take care of yourself."

Temujin shakily stood up, took the reins of the horse from Kutuku, and struggled mightily before finally mounting the horse. Waving his saber and shouting, "Hold the hill!" at the top of his lungs, he cut down three enemy soldiers that had charged up the hill. Seeing Temujin reappear, the opposing army's morale was shaken once again and the momentum shifted and they began to fall back down the hill.

"Raise the banners! Sound the horns!" Temujin commanded, seizing on the fact that their enemy's morale was at a low.

The Mongol army let out a collective howl as an officer climbed onto a horse, stood up, and raised the white feathered banner up as high as he could. The horns from all corners sounded. Immediately, the screaming of men drowned out the horns as row after row of Mongolian soldiers suddenly appeared from far away and approached with lightning speed.

The enemy outnumbered the Mongols, but they were gathered around the hill. As soon as the soldiers on the outer edge began to fall back, the middle of their formation became chaotic. The general in black, noticing that the tide was turning, immediately began giving orders in hopes of rallying his troops. But the formation had already collapsed and the soldiers had no desire to fight any longer. Within an hour, the army had been smashed into pieces; those who

weren't killed were running for their lives. The general in black, riding his black horse, turned and joined them.

"Fifty taels of gold for the man that catches that scoundrel!" Temujin shouted. This immediately sent several score of Mongolian elites after him.

The general in black, not missing a shot, turned and shot down about a dozen or so pursuers one after the other. The rest of the pursuers did not dare get too close and, in the end, let him get away. Seeing all this from inside the bushes, Guo Jing was in awe of that general's bravery and skill.

The battle was a complete victory for Temujin, destroying more than half of his nemesis, the Tatars, army. Surveying the battlefield, Temujin's memories of his past flashed before his eyes again: the poisoning of his father, being captured by the Taijiuts, and all the torture and shame he went through at their hands. Although his mental wounds were still not healed, his joyful heart was filled with the sweet taste of revenge. Unable to hold it in any longer, he leaned back and laughed in triumph. Every soldier joined in with cheers, which shook the earth as they began to organize into formations and leave the battlefield.

Guo Jing waited until even the gravediggers had left due to darkness before he came crawling out of the bush. It was midnight when he got home and his mother, who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown waiting for him to come back, was overjoyed to see him. Guo Jing described what had happened to his mom, as best as he could. Li Ping, seeing his face alight with joy and amazement and without a trace of fear, thought to herself, that even though he was just a kid and a bit dumb, he was still very much like his father in this respect. Bittersweet feelings filled her heart.

Two mornings later, Li Ping went off to the marketplace 30 li away with two hand made wool blankets. Guo Jing was guarding the sheep out in front of his house when his mind wandered back to what he had seen two days ago. Deciding to have a little fun, he raised his shepherding whip and began waving it around. Riding on his little horse, shouting at the top of his lungs, and moving the flock around, he felt just like a general commanding his own troops into battle. Just as he was really getting into it, he suddenly heard the sound of horse hooves from the east. A solitary horse slowly approached with a person lying on its back. The horse got close and stopped, causing the man on the back of the horse to lift his head and look up. The sight of the man made Guo Jing shriek in fear.

The man's face was covered with mud, dirt, and blood. It was the general in black that he had seen the day before yesterday. In his left hand was the bottom half of what had been a saber, which was stained purplish red with blood. The bow and arrows that he had fought so many foes with were gone. It looked as if he had another encounter with his enemies after escaping two days ago. His left cheek had been slashed open and was bleeding profusely. His horse was injured as well. His body shuddered as his blood-shot eyes fell upon Guo Jing, muttering in a hoarse and exhausted voice: "Water, water... some water?"

Guo Jing immediately ran into the house and brought out a bowl of water from the water tub. That man grabbed it out of Guo Jing's hand and drank it all in one gulp. "More!" He demanded.

Guo Jing retrieved another bowl for him. He drank half before the blood dripping off of his face turned the water red. The man let out a loud laugh, then suddenly, his face twitched and he fell off his horse and fainted.

Guo Jing panicked; he didn't know what to do. Luckily, the man came to after a while. "Give my horse some water too," he said, "and do you have anything to eat?"

Guo Jing brought out some roasted lamb for him and got a whole bucket of water for the horse. After gulping down the hearty meal, the man was thoroughly refreshed and got up off the ground.

"Thanks, brother." He said as he took off the gold bracelet he had around his wrist and held it out at Guo Jing. "Here, take it."

Guo Jing shook his head: "Mom said that we should take care of guests and not ask for or take anything in return."

The man laughed at this and commented: "You are a good kid!" He put the bracelet back on his wrist, tore off half of his sleeve, and began to attend to both his and his horse's wounds. Suddenly, from the east came the faint rumblings of horses galloping. The man's face dropped: "Huh, looks like they are not going to let me go!"

The two of them ran out of the door and saw that the land in the distance was covered by dust kicked up by countless horses heading this way.

"Kid, do you have a bow and arrows in the house?" The man asked.

"Yah, sure." Guo Jing replied just before darting back into the house. Hearing that, the man looked somewhat relieved, but that soon changed when he saw that Guo Jing had just brought out his own little toy bow and arrow. He let out a little laugh before frowning: "I need the fighting kind, the big one." Guo Jing merely shook his head.

The pursuers were getting closer, their banners could be faintly seen waving in the distance. The man figured that, with his horse injured, he wouldn't be able to get away. While hiding is always dangerous, he had no alternative. "I can't beat them all by myself, so I've got to hide." He said, turning to Guo Jing. He looked around and noticed that there was nowhere to hide in or around the hut. In desperation, he settled on the big pile of grass outside.

"I'm going to hide in there. Could you chase my horse as far away as you can? Be sure to find a good place to hide for yourself too and don't let them catch you." he instructed as he dug himself into the grass pile. Traditionally, as soon as the scorching summer has passed, Mongolians would immediately cut down all the available tall grass and pile it up. During the harsh winters, Mongolians relied on these grass piles for feed for the animals as well as fire for warmth. Often these grass piles would be bigger than their gers. The man was actually very well hidden inside the grass pile and probably wouldn't be discovered without careful inspection.

Guo Jing turned and gave the black horse a couple of good lashes, causing the horse to gallop off. Only until it was almost entirely out of sight did it finally stop and started to graze. Guo Jing jumped onto his little horse and took off to the west.

The pursuers, noticing that someone was there, sent two advanced scouts forward to give chase. Guo Jing's pony wasn't fast and the two scouts soon caught up. "Kid, did you see a man riding a black horse around here?" One of them demanded.

Guo Jing didn't know how to tell a lie, so he couldn't find the words to answer the question. The two scouts asked several more times, but there was still no answer. "Let's take him to

the First Prince!", one of them finally suggested, seeing blank looking face on the kid. The two scouts took hold of Guo Jing's reins and led him back to the hut.

"I just won't say." Guo Jing made up his mind on the way back.

A good number of Mongolian soldiers surrounded a tall and skinny young man. Guo Jing recognized the face, he had seen him on the hill two days before. Noticing that the soldiers were all obeying his commands, Guo Jing decided that he was an enemy of that black robed general. "What did the little kid say?" The First Prince shouted.

"This kid is scared stiff; he hasn't said a word."

The First Prince looked around and suddenly noticed the black horse grazing in the distance. "Is that his horse? Go and bring it here," he quietly ordered. Ten Mongols split into five groups and quietly surrounded the horse. By the time the horse noticed and tried to escape, it had already run out of places to run.

"Isn't this Jebe's horse?" The First Prince asked rhetorically in an arrogant voice. "Yes sir, it is!" The soldiers answered in unison.

The First Prince, using his riding whip, lashed the side of Guo Jing's head and shouted: "Where is he hiding? Spit it out. Think you can fool me?"

Hiding in the pile of dried grass, Jebe held his broken saber tightly. Seeing Guo Jing getting hit and a huge welt immediately starting to develop on his head, his heart began to beat wildly. He knew that this was Temujin's eldest son, Jochi, whose cruelty and savagery was famous throughout the entire Steppe. He figured that the kid would

undoubtedly be frightened into telling where he was hiding, and then he would have to jump out and fight to the death.

Guo Jing wanted to cry, but, trying with all his might, he kept back the tears. Holding his head up high, he asked: "Why did you hit me? I didn't do anything wrong!" He knew kids only get beaten when they did something wrong.

"Trying to be tough huh?" Jochi shouted angrily before he whipped Guo Jing again, making Guo Jing burst out crying.

By now other soldiers had already given Guo Jing's house a thorough search. Two of the soldiers even poked about the grass pile with their spears. Luckily, the grass pile was huge and they didn't hit Jebe. "The horse is still here, he couldn't have gone far. Kid, are you going to tell or not!" Jochi continued as he lashed at Guo Jing's head three more times. Guo Jing reached out and tried to grab the riding whip, but how could he?

Suddenly, they heard horns sounding from afar. "The Khan is coming!" All of the soldiers shouted as Jochi stopped and turned to greet his father. "Father!" He shouted as an army with Temujin at the head came galloping in.

The wound that Jebe inflicted on Temujin turned out to be severe. During the battle Temujin was able to fight through it, but after the battle was over he actually fainted several times from the pain. His trusted general Jelme and third son Ogedai took turns sucking the bad blood clots out of his wound. The officers and his sons waited by his bedside for an entire night until he was no longer in mortal danger. The next morning, swearing to catch Jebe and quarter him so as to avenge this wound to the Khan, the Mongol soldiers spread out in all directions. By dusk on the second day, a small scout team finally ran into Jebe, but was decimated by him. However, Jebe was injured as well in the melee. Upon

hearing the news, Temujin immediately sent his eldest son Jochi after him before taking his other sons with him as a rear guard.

"Father, we found that bastard's horse!" Jochi reported, pointing at the black horse.

"I don't want the horse, I want him!" Temujin replied.

"Yes father, we will find him." Jochi answered before returning to Guo Jing's side. Pulling out his saber, he swung it in the air a couple of times and shouted: "Are you going to tell me?"

His face covered in blood from the earlier beating, Guo Jing actually got feistier and shouted back: "I'll never tell! I'll never tell!"

From that response, Temujin noted how innocent the kid was, replying with "I'll never tell" instead of "I don't know", giving away the fact that he knew where Jebe was hiding. So he turned to Ogedai and whispered: "Go and trick it out of him."

Smiling, Ogedai walked up to Guo Jing, removed two gold studded peacock feathers from his helmet and said: "If you tell me, this is yours."

"I'll never tell!" Guo Jing still replied.

"Let loose the dogs!" Chagatai, Temujin's second son ordered as the soldiers immediately brought forth six huge hunting dogs.

Mongolians love to hunt and all of the aristocrats or people of wealth own hunting dogs and falcons. Chagatai especially loved dogs and this search for Jebe presented a perfect use for his dogs. So he ordered the dogs be taken around the black horse a couple of times before letting them loose to

find where Jebe was hiding. The dogs barked wildly as they ran in and out of the hut repeatedly.

Guo Jing had never met Jebe before, but two days ago he had greatly admired his bravery and skill on the battlefield. Being whipped several times by Jochi had brought out Guo Jing's natural stubbornness and feisty nature. He called his shepherd dog. By now Chagatai's hunting dogs were getting very close to the grass pile, so, on Guo Jing's command, the shepherd dog positioned itself between the grass pile and the hunting dogs, not letting any of them get closer. Chagatai gave a loud shout and all six huge hunting dogs leapt forward and the air was quickly filled with the cacophony of dog barking as the seven dogs fought. The shepherd dog, smaller to begin with and battling one against six, was quickly covered with bite marks but still fought back ferociously, not backing down one bit. Guo Jing was cheering his shepherd dog on loudly between sobs. Seeing this, Temujin, Ogedai, and everyone present knew that Jebe must be hiding in the grass pile, so they just smiled and enjoyed the show of the dog fight.

Furious, Jochi began to hit Guo Jing with his riding whip again, causing him to roll around in pain. He rolled next to Jochi's legs before suddenly jumping up and grabbing his right leg. Jochi tried to throw him off with a kick, but the boy's grip was surprisingly strong and he couldn't get him off. The other sons, seeing their older brother in such an awkward and embarrassing state, began to laugh loudly. Even Temujin began to snicker a bit. His face flushing blood red, Jochi unsheathed his saber and brought it down toward Guo Jing's head. Just as it looked as if the kid was about to be hit, a broken saber suddenly struck out from inside the grass pile. "Clang!" The two sabers collided and Jochi, feeling his hand go numb, almost dropped his saber.

The soldiers let out a collective gasp as Jebe jumped out of the pile.

Pulling Guo Jing behind him with his left hand, he sneered: "Bullying a little kid, have you no shame?"

The soldiers immediately readied their spears and surrounded Jebe. Seeing that he had nowhere to run, Jebe tossed aside the broken saber. Jochi charged at him and landed a punch on his chest with Jebe not even trying to protect himself.

"Kill me now!" He shouted, but then he added with in a quiet and heavy voice: "Pity that I cannot die at the hands of a true hero!"

"What did you say?" Temujin cut in.

"To die on the battlefields, at hands of the hero that beat me, is dying with no regrets. But today the eagle has fallen onto the ground and was bitten to death by ants!" Jebe replied with fury in his eyes and let out a tremendous howl. Chagatai's hunting dogs, who had collectively pinned Guo Jing's shepherd dog onto the ground and were relentlessly biting it, jumped at the howl and ran away whimpering behind their trainers.

"Khan, don't let this little bastard boast like that." A person stepped out from beside Temujin and shouted. "Let me duel with him!"

"Alright, have a duel with him." Temujin replied, happily discovering that the man was Bogurchi. "We don't have much of anything else, but we do have some heroes."

"I'm going to kill you by myself, so that you can die with no regrets." Bogurchi took a few steps forward and shouted at Jebe.

"Who the hell are you?" Jebe shouted back, noticing that the challenger was very well built and had a very deep and loud voice.

"I'm Bogurchi! Heard of me before?"

A cold feeling shot through Jebe's heart: "So this is him; rumors say that Bogurchi is the hero of heroes among the Mongols." Not wanting to reply, he simply shot a sideways look and hmpfhed.

"You boast about your skills with the bow and arrow, and others even call you Jebe. Why don't you and this friend of mine have a little shooting contest?" Temujin declared. In Mongolian, "Jebe" means both "arrow" and "divine archer." Jebe had another name, but because of his incredible skill with the bow and arrow, everyone called him Jebe and his real name had long been forgotten. [Note: According to Mongol records, when he first entered Temujin's tribe, Jebe gave his name as Jirgadei.]

"So you are a friend of his?" Jebe shouted at Bogurchi. "Then I guess I'll kill you first." This remark caused all of the Mongol soldiers to let out an audible laugh, for everyone of them knew that Bogurchi was unbeatable as a fighter and was famous through out the entire Steppe. Even though they saw how great Jebe was with the bow, claiming to be able to kill Bogurchi was just a bit too much for them to stomach.

Back when Temujin was still a boy, he was once captured by the Taijiuts, who placed him in a wooden neck collar. The many tribes of the Taijiuts gathered at the Onon River to celebrate by drinking and whipping him at the same time. After the gatherers were sufficiently drunk, Temujin knocked his guard unconscious with his collar and escaped into the nearby woods.

The Taijiuts conducted a massive search trying to find him. It was then that he met a young man named Tchila'un who, in spite of the enormous danger, took him into his house. It was Tchila'un who smashed the collar off of him and threw it in the fire; and it was also Tchila'un who hid him in a cart of fleece. When the Taijiut scouts came around and searched Tchila'un's house, they came upon the cart of fleece and began to take it off layer by layer.

Just as Temujin's feet were going to be revealed, Tchila'un's father suddenly interrupted: "Such a hot day, how could anyone hide in a pile of fleece? If he did he's probably roasted to death by now."

It was dead in the middle of summer and everyone was sweating profusely. The scouts thought what he said made sense and didn't look any further. Temujin's life was filled with dangerous moments and close calls, but this was the most dangerous and closest call of them all.

After he ran away, Temujin lived a squalid existence along with his mother and brother and they were forced to rely on captured prairie squirrels and marmots to survive. One day, the eight white horses that Temujin had were stolen by a small group of thieves from the Taijiut tribe. As Temujin rode after them all by himself, he ran into another young man who was milking his horse. When Temujin stopped to inquire about the thieves, he learned that the young man's name was Bogurchi.

"Our lives are full of the same hardships," Bogurchi said, "let's be friends."

The two of them rode off together. It was three days before they finally caught up to the thieving tribe. The two of them, by themselves, took on a couple hundred foes and took back

those eight horses. Temujin offered to split the horses with him and asked him how many he wanted.

"I did this as a friend, so I won't take a single one." was Bogurchi's answer. From that day forth, the two of them worked together and Temujin continued to insist on calling him his good friend. Theirs was a true friendship forged in times of trouble.

Bogurchi and Tchila'un, together with Muqali and Boroqul were the four foremost founding generals of the Mongolian Empire.

Knowing how great Bogurchi was with the bow, Temujin handed his own bow to Bogurchi and hopped off his white colt. "Ride my horse, use my bow and arrows, then it'll be as if I killed him."

"Yes sir!" Bogurchi hopped onto Temujin's treasured horse with bow and arrows in hand. Turning to Ogedai, he said: "Let Jebe use your horse."

"Well, lucky him." Ogedai commented before hopping off and ordering a guard to walk the horse over to Jebe.

"I am already surrounded," Jebe turned to Temujin after securing himself onto the saddle, "if you wanted to kill me, it would have been easier than killing a sheep. Since you have already showed mercy by letting me duel him with the bow, I dare not ask for anything more. Therefore I ask only for a bow and no arrows."

"No arrows?" Bogurchi shouted feeling insulted.

"That's right. I can kill you with just a bow!"

This time the laughter from the Mongolian soldiers was even louder. "What a braggart!" One of them shouted as Temujin ordered him to hand over his best bow to Jebe.

Bogurchi had seen Jebe in action during battle and knew very well what a great marksman he was and didn't dare to take him lightly. However, with no arrows, how could Jebe apply his great skill? Bogurchi, knowing that Jebe must be planning to use the arrows that he himself shot, gave his horse a good squeeze with his legs, urging it into a gallop. Not only was this particular colt fast, it had been through many a battle and was especially perceptive to the whims of its rider. Because of this, Temujin had taken quite a liking to it.

In response of the opponent's speed, Jebe pulled on the reins, making his horse slowly back up. Bogurchi fitted an arrow onto the bow and, aiming directly at Jebe's face, let loose. Jebe tilted his body and with incredible hand-eye coordination grabbed the arrow by the shaft out of mid-air.

"Oh that's good." Bogurchi muttered under his breath and shot another arrow.

Hearing the arrow's feathers slicing through the air, Jebe knew that he would not be able to catch this one. He leaned forward, laying his body flat against the neck of the horse. The arrow flew over his head, barely missing grazing him. Immediately he made his horse gallop forward with a little kick and sat back up. But what he didn't know was that Bogurchi was a master at shooting arrows one after another and two more arrows bore down on him. Not expecting such skill from his foe, Jebe was forced to immediately slip off his saddle and, hooking his right foot through the stirrup, leaned almost to the ground. The horse was still galloping at full speed, making it look as if there was a dancing bird at its side. Jebe twisted his body around. He had already loaded that arrow he had just caught onto the bow when he was barely half around, and let loose aiming at Bogurchi's belly. Then he immediately flipped back up onto the saddle.

"Excellent!" Bogurchi shouted as he aimed at the coming arrow and let loose. The two arrows met nearly head on and shot off in different directions before both arrows, still carrying a great force, stuck into the ground with their feathers up. The exchange caused Temujin and all other spectators to cheer in amazement.

Bogurchi feigned shooting to the left, waited until Jebe reacted to the right before suddenly letting off a shot towards the right. Jebe flicked his bow with his left hand and knocked the arrow down onto the ground. Bogurchi followed with another three shots, all of which were dodged by Jebe. Jebe, speeding his horse up, suddenly slipped off the saddle, reached down, picked up three arrows off the ground, sat back up, and shot one of them all in one motion.

Wanting to show off a bit of his own skills, Bogurchi jumped onto his saddle. Keeping his balance with his left leg, he kicked away the arrow with his right foot. Then, still standing, he used the height advantage and let loose an especially fierce shot. Jebe pulled his horse to the side to dodge the shot and responded with another shot, which, with a "crack", split the arrow that Bogurchi had shot, in half along the shaft.

"He doesn't even have any arrows and yet we are fighting to a draw up to now. How can I get revenge for the Khan?" Bogurchi thought to himself. Getting impatient, Bogurchi began to shoot arrows one after another nonstop, so much so that it all became a blur to the spectators. Not having enough time to grab the arrows, Jebe was forced into just dodging them. However, the arrows just kept on flying in and they kept on getting faster and more numerous until finally, he was hit in his left shoulder. Seeing this everyone present cheered in unison.

Ecstatic, Bogurchi was just about to shoot several more arrows and end Jebe's life when he reached down into his arrow bag and came up empty. He had actually used up all of his arrows while he was showering Jebe with them. He always brought a tremendous number of arrows with him when he entered a battle, two quivers on his side and six more on the horse for a total of eight quivers filled with arrows. However, this time he was using the Khan's own supply of arrows and, in the midst of battle, he had forgotten that there was a limit on arrows and resorted to his habitual way of using them. Shocked to discover that he had used all of his arrows, he immediately turned his horse around and reached down to pick up some arrows from the ground.

Clearly seeing all of this, Jebe pounced on the opportunity. Before the sound of the arrow piercing through the air had faded from everyone's ears, the arrow had already hit Bogurchi's back, right where his heart was. The spectators gasped in shock. But strangely, even though this arrow was shot with great force and caused a wave of pain to shoot through Bogurchi's back, it didn't penetrate his clothing and fell off onto the ground. Bogurchi reached down, picked up the arrow, and inspected it. It turned out that Jebe had actually taken off the arrowhead as a show of mercy. He flipped himself back onto the saddle and shouted: "I am seeking revenge for my Khan. I don't need your mercy!"

"I, Jebe, never show any mercy to my enemies! That last arrow was to exchange one life for another!"

When he saw Bogurchi hit, Temujin was devastated. However, now that he realized that Bogurchi was not dying, he was overjoyed. At this moment he would have absolutely been willing to trade all of the sheep, oxen, and horses in his tribe in exchange for Bogurchi's life without the

slightest bit of hesitation. Hearing Jebe's remark, he immediately answered: "Alright, there's no need to go any further. You let him go so I'm letting you go. His life for your life."

"I'm not asking to exchange my life for his life."

"What then?" Temujin was puzzled.

"I'm asking for an exchange for his life!" Jebe answered, pointing at Guo Jing, who was standing by the door of the hut. "I ask that the Khan not trouble this boy further."

"As for me..." He continued, raising one of his eyebrows higher. "I wounded the Khan and deserve whatever punishment that comes to me. Bogurchi, come on!" As he finished, he pulled the arrow from his shoulder and, with blood still dripping off of it, fitted it onto his bow. By now, Bogurchi's underlings had re-supplied him with six more quivers of arrows. "Alright, let's try this again!" Bogurchi replied as he showered Jebe with arrows. The arrows were coming so fast that they seemed almost connected, creating a chain of arrows in the air.

Seeing the situation, Jebe, holding himself up by hooking his foot through the stirrup, flipped himself beneath his horse's belly. Leaning sideways so as to not hit the ground, he aimed and fired a shot at Bogurchi's stomach. The white colt, not waiting for his master to pull the reins, instinctively dodged to the left. Unfortunately, the shot from Jebe was much faster than any normal shot and the colt was not able to get out of the way in time. With a thud, the arrow hit the colt in the head and instantly brought it down.

Lying on the ground, Bogurchi dare not risk Jebe shooting a follow up shot; he immediately twisted around and fired another shot, snapping the bow in Jebe's hand. Losing his weapon, Jebe cursed the fact he wasn't able to fight back

any longer, and he had to resort to zigzagging in an effort to dodge Bogurchi's shots. The Mongolian soldiers present all began to shout and cheer for Bogurchi as he loaded another arrow onto the bow. "He really is quite a hero!" Bogurchi thought as he aimed for Jebe's back and let loose.

A great marksman never misses when it matters and this arrow hit Jebe on the back of his head. Jebe's body shook and he fell off the horse, the arrow falling to his side. Bogurchi, not able to bring himself to kill such a hero, had also taken the arrowhead off of his arrow. Bogurchi loaded another arrow onto his bow and aimed at Jebe before turning towards Temujin: "Great Khan, I ask you to show mercy and let him go!"

By now, Temujin had grown to admire Jebe's courage and skill, so he shouted: "Are you still not going to surrender?"

Seeing Temujin sitting there in all his glory and magnificence, Jebe was suddenly won over. He ran over as fast as he could and, with his head lowered, knelt down in front of Temujin.

Temujin let out a hearty laugh: "Wonderful! Wonderful! From now on, you are with me!"

Mongolians frequently sing to express their feelings and thoughts. At this moment, still kneeling on the ground, Jebe began to sing: "Oh Great Khan, you showed me mercy and let me live. In the future, be it jumping into boiling water or walking on fire, I will do it. I would cross the black seas and crush the mountains to protect the Great Khan. Conquering foes, digging out their hearts! Just ask of me and I will do it. For the Khan I would lead charges and run one million li a day!"

Ecstatic at the turn of events, Temujin took out two gold ingots and give one each to Bogurchi and Jebe. Jebe

thanked him and asked: "Great Khan, is it permitted that I give this ingot to that boy?"

"My gold I can give to whoever I want," Temujin replied with a smile, "your gold you can give to whoever you want!"

Jebe walked over to Guo Jing and held out the ingot. But Guo Jing just shook his head: "Mom said that helping guests is the right thing to do and that it's wrong to take anything from guests."

Temujin had grown to like Guo Jing because of the unyielding toughness the boy showed earlier. Hearing those words now, he liked Guo Jing even more.

"Bring the boy into our tribe as well." He instructed Jebe before leading the soldiers back. Several of the soldiers stayed behind to put the white colt's corpse on the backs of two horses before leaving as well. Able to save his own life and find a master at the same time, Jebe was overjoyed and tired. So he lay down on the ground, rested until Li Ping returned from the market, and explained to her what had happened.

"Now that's a good son," Li Ping said to Guo Jing upon hearing of how courageous and loyal he was, even though she was greatly distressed by all the wounds on his face. "That's how a man should act and behave." She figured that joining the army and going through the vigorous training would be much better for Guo Jing than shepherding, especially if Guo Jing was to avenge his father. So the mother and son followed Jebe into Temujin's tribe.

Temujin made Jebe a Squad Leader under the command of his third son, Ogedai [Wo Kuo Tai]. After meeting with the Third Prince, Jebe met up with Bogurchi. Fueled by mutual respect, the two of them became fast friends. Feeling he owed Guo Jing a debt of gratitude, Jebe took great care in

looking after the mother and son. He decided that he would begin teaching Guo Jing about the bow as soon as Guo Jing got a little older.

On one particular day, Guo Jing was just tossing some rocks around with a couple of Mongolian kids when they saw two Mongolian riders flying into the camp, obviously carrying urgent news for the Khan. Not long after the two riders had entered Temujin's ger, the horns started to sound, causing the soldiers to pour out of their gers. Temujin had an iron fist when it came to the training and discipline of his army. Ten soldiers were organized into a squad, which was led by a Squad Leader. The squads were ordered into platoons made up of ten squads that were led by a Hundred Man Commander, ten Hundred Man groups were led by a Thousand Man Commander, which were then organized under one of the few Ten-Thousand Man Commanders. When Temujin gave an order, it was as if he just moved his fingers and no order was disobeyed or not carried out.

As Guo Jing and the other children looked on and at the end of the first blow of the horns, all the soldiers had already picked up their weapons and mounted their horses. When the horns sounded for the second time, the world shook from the sound of men and beasts moving. By the time the third sounding of the horns came to a stop, the plain just outside of the main gates of the encampment was covered with some fifty-thousand mounted men and soldiers in formation. Other than the snorting of horses, there wasn't another sound, neither chattering noises of conversations nor any sounds of weapons colliding.

Temujin, escorted closely behind by his three eldest sons, walked out of the main gate. "We have beaten many foes and news of our feats has reached the Great Jin Empire." He shouted at the top of his lungs. "At this moment, the great Emperor of the Jin has sent the Third Prince and

Sixth Prince here to officially anoint your Khan as a Jin officer!"

The soldiers, in unison, raised their sabers and shouted with joy. At that time, the Jin controlled Northern China with a fierce and strong army. Their empire was famous and powerful. On the other hand, the Mongols were just a small tribe among many in the middle of the Steppe. That was the reason why Temujin would feel honored to be an official of the Jin Empire. Temujin ordered the eldest son Jochi to take ten-thousand men with him to welcome and escort the guests while the other forty thousand men lined up in formation, waiting.

In reality, the Jurchen Emperor at the time, Wanyan Jing, who took the title of Zhang Zong, was apprehensive of growing power of some tribes on the Steppe such as Temujin's tribe, the Toghril, Ong Khan's tribe and the Keraites. Fearing that his northern neighbors would grow to be troublesome, he sent the Prince of Rong, his third son Wanyan Hongxi, and the Prince of Zhao, his sixth son Wanyan Honglie to anoint the leaders as officers of Jin. But in addition to tightening the ties of the tribes to Jin and increasing tributes, the princes had another mission: to scout the tribes and make note of the weakness of each so as to be able to gain the upper hand in case of future conflicts. The Prince of Zhao, Wanyan Honglie, was the same one that had traveled to Linan, was wounded by Qiu Chuji at Ox Village, and met the Seven Freaks at Jiaying.

Guo Jing and the kids stood at a distance, trying to catch a glimpse of this happening. After a long wait, a cloud of dust appeared on the horizon as Jochi met up with Wanyan Hongxi and Wanyan Honglie. The Wanyan brothers had with them ten-thousand elite soldiers, each wearing silk capes, iron armor and carrying a spear in the left hand and a wolf-fang club in the right hand while riding on their

horses. The clanging of the armor could be heard for many li around. As the army got closer the silk shone and the armor glowed even more under the bright sun, creating a spectacular scene. The two brothers approached shoulder to shoulder, while Temujin, his sons and generals waited by the roadside to welcome them. Seeing Guo Jing and all the other kids standing there staring at him, Wanyan Hongxi burst out laughing. He reached into his shirt and took out a handful of gold coins and tossed them towards the crowd of kids. "A gift for you kids!" He shouted with a laugh, figuring that the kids would undoubtedly cheer and scramble around on the ground for the money which would show off of his own magnanimity and wealth.

However, host-guest etiquette and respect was of utmost importance to the Mongolians. Not only were his actions inappropriate for the occasion, it was very disrespectful. The Mongol generals and soldiers were left aghast at his actions. Every one of the kids was a son or daughter of the Mongolian soldiers and generals. Even though they were little, each of them had a sense of self-respect. As a result, none of them picked up the coins. His joy dampened, Wanyan Hongxi tossed another handful of gold coins and shouted: "Come on! Fight over them little devils that you are!"

This caused an even bigger stir upon the Mongols. Even though the Mongolians had no written language at the time and little culture, they placed a great deal of importance on politeness and respect, especially regarding guests. Mongolians, traditionally, never curse, even when facing a lifelong nemesis or just joking around. When someone enters their gers, no matter if the person was a friend or not, that person would be treated with great respect and honor. By the same token, the guest must absolutely not disrespect his hosts either, for it was considered the

greatest of insults. Even though what Wanyan Hongxi shouted was in Jurchen and none of the Mongols understood it, everyone could tell that he was cursing at the kids from his body language and the tone of his voice.

Constantly being told stories of how the Jin rape, pillage, and steal from the people of China; of how the Jin corrupted officials and had Yue Fei killed, Guo Jing's young heart had long been filled with hatred for the Jin. Now, seeing how rude this Jin Prince was, he picked up a couple of gold coins from the ground and, taking a little run, threw them at Wanyan Hongxi with all his might. "Who would want your money?" He shouted. Wanyan Hongxi tilted his head sideways to avoid the coins; but nevertheless, one of them hit him squarely on the cheekbone. Even though Guo Jing wasn't strong and it really didn't hurt, he was still made to look bad in front of tens of thousands of people. Every Mongolian from Temujin downwards cheered on the inside.

Wanyan Hongxi was furious. When he was in China, he had many times killed people at his slightest displeasure. Never had he been humiliated like this. As his temper flared up, he grabbed a spear from the guard that was riding at his side and threw it at Guo Jing's chest with all his might and shouted: "You want to die you little bastard?"

"Third Brother...no!" Wanyan Honglie shouted, knowing this was bad. But he was too late; the spear was already on its way. Just as it looked as if Guo Jing was about die from the spear, an arrow suddenly shot out of the Mongolian army to the left. Like a meteor shooting around the moon, the arrow hit the spear dead on the head with a loud "bang!" Packed with incredible strength, the arrow was able to deflect the spear away despite being many times lighter. Guo Jing immediately scrambled away. The Mongolian soldiers all cheered in unison, shaking the

Steppe. The person who shot the arrow was none other than Jebe.

"Third Brother, don't bother with him anymore!" Wanyan Honglie whispered to his brother. Seeing and hearing the might of the Mongolian army, Wanyan Hongxi was a bit shaken, so he just shot a mean look at Guo Jing and cursed under his breath: "Little bastard!"

At this point, Temujin and his retainers had come forth to formally welcome the two Jin Princes and took them into the main ger. There they served up koumiss and vast quantities beef and lamb. There were translators on both sides, translating between Jurchen and Mongolian. Wanyan Hongxi read the royal decree out loud, granting the title of 'The Northern Ambassador of the Empire of the Jin' to Temujin. Temujin, who knelt on the floor during the reading, humbly accepted the official document and the Golden Belt, which signified his allegiance to the Jin Emperor. [Note: Koumiss is a very strong Mongolian alcoholic drink made from horse milk.] That night the Mongolians celebrated with a huge feast to entertain the honored emissaries.

"Tomorrow, my brother and I are going to bestow a post on Ong Khan." Wanyan Hongxi, somewhat under the influence of koumiss, said to Temujin. "Will the Ambassador join us?"

Temujin was overjoyed at the news and immediately agreed to come along. Ong Khan, a Toghril, was the leader among the tribes on the Steppe. His tribe was the richest and most powerful; furthermore, he was a good man, always treating others as equals. It was no great exaggeration to say that he was respected and liked by every tribe. Ong Khan had once been the sworn brother of Temujin's father. After Temujin's father was poisoned by his enemies and Temujin had nowhere to go, it was Ong Khan who took him as a

step-son. Not long after Temujin was married, his wife was taken away by the Merkits. It was only because of Ong Khan and Jamuka, Temujin's sworn brother, joining him that he managed to defeat the Merkits and save his wife. That was the reason Temujin was elated on hearing that Ong Khan would be granted a title as well. "Is the Great Jin Empire going to grant titles to anyone else?" He asked.

"No, that's all." Wanyan Hongxi replied. "But that's entirely because, up here in the North, there are only two great heroes: Ong Khan and the Great Khan yourself." Wanyan Honglie immediately added onto his brother's statement. "None of the others are worthy."

"There is another person around here that perhaps Your Excellencies haven't heard of." Temujin replied.

"Really? Who?" Wanyan Honglie asked.

"He just happens to be your humble servant's sworn brother, Jamuka. He's a righteous man who is very adept at commanding an army. I humbly request that the Third Prince and the Sixth Prince consider granting him a title as well."

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Temujin and Jamuka were childhood friends who grew up together and at that time they became sworn brothers. When Mongolians become sworn brothers, they call it swearing "anda", which was Mongolian for sworn brother. Mongolian tradition dictates that when swearing anda, the sides must exchange gifts. At the time, Jamuka gave Temujin a granite stone that resembled a deer thighbone while Temujin gave Jamuka a granite stone that looked like it was made of brass. Mongolians used small granite rocks to hunt rabbits, but Mongolian kids often played catch with them and competed to see who threw them the furthest.

After the two became andas, they went and threw rocks on the frozen Onon River. The next Spring, while the two of them were out shooting arrows with their own little wooden bows, Jamuka gave Temujin a noisy-arrowhead that he carved himself using two little ox horns, Temujin returned the gift with a cypress tipped arrowhead and the two of them swore to become anda once more. [Note: noisy arrowheads are arrowheads that are carved with slits in them so that they create a very loud screeching noise once they were shot. These arrows are often used to relay messages and orders in battle.]

After they grew up, both of them lived with Ong Khan's tribe and were still very close. Everyday they would compete to see who got up earlier; whichever one got up earlier would get to drink one cup of koumiss out of Ong Khan's own jade cup. Later, after Temujin's wife was kidnapped and was rescued with the combined help of Jamuka and Ong Khan, Temujin and Jamuka exchanged gold and horses and became sworn anda to each other for a third time. The two of them drank out of the same cup in the day and slept in the same ger at night. However, having to migrate with the changing weather and rain, they and their tribes parted. As Temujin's tribe rose in fame and power, Jamuka's tribe was growing nonstop as well. Their friendship was still as strong as ever and was deeper than blood brothers. That's why Temujin, realizing that his brother was not being honored, would ask for him to be honored as well.

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"There are so many Mongolians, where can we find all the titles if we give one to each of them? How many titles do you think we have?" Wanyan Hongxi, half drunk, casually answered back without much thought. Wanyan Honglie shot

his brother numerous meaningful looks trying to get him to stop, but was ignored.

Feeling slighted because of the remark, Temujin offered: "Might Your Excellencies consider giving your humble servant's title to him instead?"

"Are you belittling the titles of the Great Empire of the Jin?" Wanyan Hongxi slapped his leg and shouted. Temujin slammed his palm down on his table and stood up in anger. Finally, barely holding back his fury, he did not say another word and grabbed his cup and drank its conger in one gulp. Wanyan Honglie immediately told a joke and changed the subject.

The next morning, Temujin and his four sons organized five-thousand troops to escort Wanyan Hongxi and Wanyan Honglie to Ong Khan. By the time the sun was barely peeking over the distant horizon, Temujin had already mounted his horse and the five-thousand soldiers had already lined up in perfect formation. The Jurchen soldiers and generals, however, were still fast asleep.

At first, Temujin was impressed by the Jurchen army's grandeur and organization. But after seeing what an undisciplined and fun seeking group they were, he humphed and turned to Muqali, "What do you think of the Jin army?"

"A thousand of us Mongolian troops can defeat five-thousand of theirs!" Muqali observed.

"I've thought so too," Temujin replied with a smile. "But it's said that the Jin Empire has an army of over one million strong. We only have fifty thousand people."

"A million troops can't enter battle all at once," Muqali responded. "Divide and conquer, we can take down ten

thousand today and then sweep another ten thousand tomorrow."

"When it comes to military strategy, your opinions are always the same as mine." Temujin smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "A 50 kilogram man can eat ten cows that weigh over ten thousand kilograms. He just won't do it in one day." The two men burst out in laughter.

Temujin settled back straight in his saddle and suddenly saw that Tolui's horse was rider-less. "Where's Tolui?" He shouted in fury.

Tolui was just nine years old, but Temujin had always been a harsh disciplinarian whether he was training troops or bringing up sons; he never showed mercy to anyone who violated his rules. With him shouting so loudly in anger, all the generals and troops immediately got a bad feeling in their stomachs. General Boroqul, Tolui's mentor, almost panicked and offered: "The kid has never overslept before, let me check."

Just as he turned his horse to gallop off to search for Tolui, he saw two kids come running up hand in hand. One of them, with a silk bandana on his head, was Tolui while the other turned out to be Guo Jing. Tolui ran straight towards his father and shouted: "Dad!"

"Where were you?" Temujin demanded in a harsh tone.

"Guo Jing and I just became andas down by the river. Look, this is what he gave me." Tolui replied, waving a red handkerchief with a flower embroidered on it in the air. It was something that Li Ping made for Guo Jing.

Reminded of the time he and Jamuka became andas as kids, Temujin's face immediately became calm. "What did you

give him?" He asked the two cute and innocent kids standing in front of him.

"This!" Guo Jing replied, pointing to the top of his head, where Temujin saw the golden necklace that his youngest son often wore.

"Now you two have to help and look after each other in the future, you hear?" Temujin said with a smile. Both of the kids nodded.

"Now get on your horses," Temujin ordered, "Guo Jing can come with us too." Ecstatic, Guo Jing and Tolui both mounted their horses.

After another period of waiting, the Wanyan brothers finally finished dressing and exited their gers. Wanyan Honglie, seeing the Mongolian soldiers were already in formation, immediately ordered his soldiers to fall in. However, Wanyan Hongxi, determined to put the Mongolians in their place, took his time slowly drinking several cups of wine and ate a little breakfast before finally climbing onto his horse. After another hour of general chaos, the ten thousand Jin troops were finally in formations.

The army marched northwards for six days before meeting up with Ong Khan's welcoming committee, comprised of Ong Khan's son Senggum and adopted son Jamuka. Upon hearing that Jamuka was here, Temujin immediately rode forth to meet him. The two men hopped off their horses and bear hugged each other. Every one of Temujin's sons rode forth to greeting their adopted uncle as well.

When Wanyan Honglie first laid eyes upon Jamuka, he saw a tall and skinny man with a few strands of gold in his mustache and a pair of eyes that were filled with energy and enthusiasm. He looked strong and spirited. Senggum, on the other hand, was fat and pale, probably from living in

luxury all of his life and not at all like someone who grew up on the Steppe. Not only that, he had an arrogant look on his face and seemingly ignored Temujin whenever he felt like it; a stark contrast to the warmth of Jamuka.

After another day of riding, they were very close to Ong Khan's encampment when two of Temujin's advanced scouts suddenly returned with news. "There are Naimans blocking the way ahead. About thirty thousand of them," they reported.

"What do they want?" Wanyan Hongxi asked, panicking a bit after hearing the news through his translator.

"From the looks of it, they want to fight," the scouts reported.

"They... they have.... they really have thirty thousand troops?" Wanyan Hongxi stuttered. "That... that's more than us... this... this...."

"Go and find out what's going on," Temujin ordered Muqali, not waiting for Wanyan Hongxi to finish his sentence.

Muqali headed off with ten bodyguards while the rest of them stopped and waited. Muqali returned not long after. "The Naimans said that since the great Jin princes granted a title to our Khan, they want to be granted a title too," he reported. "If not, then they say they will take Your Excellencies the princes as hostages until they too are granted titles from the Great Jin Empire. They also said that they want a title that's higher than our Khan Temujin's."

"Demanding titles by force? That... that's rebellion! What do we do?" Wanyan Hongxi's face went pale on hearing this news. Wanyan Honglie began organizing troops into fighting positions in case of any unexpected escalations.

"Brother, those Naimans frequently steal our livestock and cause trouble for us. Are we really going to let them get away with this?" Jamuka said to Temujin. "I don't know what the Jin princes would have us do?"

By now, Temujin had thoroughly surveyed the surrounding landscape and was confident of victory. "Let's show the Princes how the two of us do things around here!" He replied to Jamuka before letting out a howl and cracking his whip in the air twice, causing the five thousand Mongolian soldiers to simultaneously howl in response and startling the unprepared Wanyan brothers.

A cloud of dust had appeared ahead as the enemy slowly approached, forcing the advanced scouts to return. "Brother, order our boys to charge now!" Wanyan Hongxi said. "These Mongols are of no use now."

"Let them fight first," Wanyan Honglie whispered back.

Immediately understanding his brother's intentions, Wanyan Hongxi simply nodded and sat back. The Mongolian soldiers let out another loud shout, but did not move. "What on Earth are these Mongols doing shouting like rabid dogs?" Wanyan Hongxi frowned. "It's not like they are going to scare the enemy away no matter how loud they are."

On the left side of the formation was Boroqul. "Follow me and don't fall behind. See how we defeat our foes," he instructed Tolui, who, along with Guo Jing, were shouting at the top of their lungs just like the others.

In a heartbeat, the approaching army emerged out of the cloud of dust only a few paces away. Yet the Mongolians still did nothing but shout. This time it was Wanyan Honglie who got nervous, seeing how spirited the Naimans were.

Fearing his formation would be broken if they continued unimpeded, he ordered: "Fire arrows!"

The Jin army discharged several volleys, but because of the distance between the two armies, most of the arrows fell onto the ground before reaching the enemy. Frightened by the ferociousness showing on his enemies' faces as they gritted their teeth and charged at full speed, Wanyan Hongxi began to panic. "Why don't we just give them what they want; give them some bullshit title and be done with all this?" he turned around and suggested to Wanyan Honglie. "So what if the title is a little big? It's not like we are going to lose anything."

Suddenly, Temujin cracked his whip in the air several times. The Mongolian army immediately stopped shouting and split into two groups. Temujin and Jamuka, each leading a wing, immediately heading towards the high ground on either side. The two of them leaned down into their horses and galloped along with their troops, shouting out orders as they rode. The Mongolian troops split up into smaller and smaller groups so that, in a very short amount of time, they occupied the high ground in every direction. With the height advantage, the Mongols loaded arrows onto their bows and aimed at the opposing army, but not firing.

The leader of the Naimans, sensing that he was in a disadvantageous position, ordered his troops to head straight for the high ground. The Mongolian troops set up soft walls made of several layers of fleece to shield themselves from arrows. The bowmen shot from behind the walls as the troops stationed on nearby high ground fired arrows in support as well. With the enemy on either side of them, confusion descended upon the Naimans as they tried to attack both sides.

"Jelme, attack the rear!" Temujin shouted, seeing the opposing army had become disorganized from his position on the left.

With a huge saber in hand, Jelme led a group of one thousand soldiers down in a charge and cut off the enemy's retreat. Jebe, determined to slay the enemy general in order to show his gratitude to Temujin for sparing his life, was at the front of the charge with his spear sticking out in front of everyone. Being hit head on by a charge like this, the Naiman rear collapsed in chaos, and their forward units were shaken as well. The Naiman general was at a loss as to what to do next, when Jamuka and Senggum began to charge down from their positions as well. Attacked from both sides, the Naiman army completely collapsed before long. The leading general turned around and tried to escape, followed by several retainers as they headed back in the direction they had come from. Jelme didn't order a pursuit and let most of the opposing army go by. Only when there were about two thousand enemies left did he order his army to charge out and block their retreat. With nowhere to go, the brave Naiman soldiers that were left either fought to the death or laid down their weapons and surrendered. In this brief battle, the Mongols killed over a thousand foes and captured over two thousand while sustaining only a little over one hundred casualties.

Temujin ordered all captives be stripped of their armor and split into four equal groups, one for the Wanyan brothers, one for his adopted father Ong Khan, one for sworn brother Jamuka, and one for himself. All Mongolian families that had a relative die in the battle received five horses and five captives as slaves as compensation. Only now did Wanyan Hongxi finally calm down from his fright. "They want a title? Brother, why don't we give them the title of 'Ambassador of

the Defeated Losers?' Ha...ha!" He could not stop talking about the battle that just occurred.

The Mongolian victory, in spite of being outnumbered, made Wanyan Honglie even more nervous than he was before the battle. "At this moment, the only reason that our northern borders are safe is because the northern tribes are battling amongst themselves. If Temujin or Jamuka ever brought all the tribes on the Steppe under their rule, our Great Jin Empire would no longer have any peace." he thought to himself.

Other things troubled him as well. Even though his own troop of ten thousand did not enter into battle, their formation began to waver when the Naimans initially charged and there was fear on every one of their faces. The battle had not yet begun but the outcome had already been determined. Such courage and efficiency displayed by the Mongolians represented a huge threat in the future. He was still pondering things over in his mind when a cloud of dust appeared up ahead as another army approached.

Chapter 4 - Twin Killers of the Dark Winds

Translated by Minglei Huang & Strunf



Han Baoju let go of his whip and, with a flip, came tumbling down from the tree. Mei Chaofeng followed after him with the five fingers of her claw bearing down upon him. Han Baoju immediately threw his body forward to escape the attack. At the sametime, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa were letting loose a torrent of projectiles at their enemy from underneath the tree.

“Alright, let's fight again!” Wanyan Hongxi proclaimed out loud.

Unexpectedly, the forward scouts came back with a different report. “The Ong Khan is here to personally welcome the two Jin Princes!” Temujin, Jamuka, and Senggum immediately rode forward to greet him.

From the dust clouds an army emerged. With several hundred personal guards with him, the Ong Khan rode up, rolled off of the back of his horse in one easy movement, then with his adopted sons Temujin and Jamuka at his side, approached and kneeled before the two princes. He was a rather chubby man with glittering silver hair. He wore a robe made of the finest black leopard furs that was held in place by a golden belt around his waist. The way he carried himself was one of great dignity and confidence. Wanyan Honglie hurriedly got off his own horse and returned the gesture, but Wanyan Hongxi remained on his horse and merely replied by cupping his fists.

“Your humble servant just heard the news of the Naimans' rudeness and was worried that Your Highnesses might have been disturbed. Your humble servant brought a force here as soon as possible. But fortunately, due to Your Highness's awe-inspiring presence, the three kids were able to defeat them.” The Ong Khan spoke.

Next, he took the lead and courteously led the Wanyan brothers all the way back to his own ger. The inside of his ger was covered with leopard and fox furs and well fitted with the finest furniture and wares. Even his personal guards were dressed in more luxurious clothing than those of Temujin's guard, not to mention Temujin and his son. The bellowing of horns continuously sounded for several kilometers surrounding the ger; men and horses bustled about, giving an atmosphere of something great going on. Never had the Wanyan brothers seen anything approaching such grandeur since they've been outside the Great Wall.

After the ceremony of bestowing the title was finished, everyone settled down. That night, Ong Khan held a huge banquet in the big ger to celebrate the arrival of the Wanyan brothers. Scores of female slaves danced for entertainment as the banquet progressed late into the night; it became quite lively, and was miles apart from the simple and slightly backwater reception they received from Temujin's tribe. Wanyan Hongxi was having one hell of a time; two female slaves had caught his fancy and he was pondering ideas in his head. It never occurred to him to talk to Ong Khan.

After about half of the koumiss had been consumed, Wanyan Honglie turned to the Ong Khan. "Your heroic deeds are known far and wide; even we who reside within the Great Wall have long admired your greatness. But I really want to meet some of the heroes of the younger generation of Mongolians." He said.

"Well, my two adopted sons just happen to be the two greatest heroes of Mongolia." The Ong Khan responded with a smile. Senggum, his own son who sat to one side, did not react well on hearing this and began downing one cup of koumiss after another.

"Your own son is another hero, why aren't mentioning him?" Wanyan Honglie asked, taking note of Senggum's displeasure.

"After I die, he will naturally take over my tribe." The Ong Khan smiled and replied. "But can he compare with his two adopted brothers? Jamuka is smart and intelligent. Temujin is even more brave and courageous; he started with nothing and made himself into what he is today with his own hands. What Mongol warrior wouldn't want to put his life in their hands and serve them?"

"Does that mean that the generals under hero Ong don't compare to Temujin Khan's generals?" Wanyan Honglie queried. Noticing that there was a hint of instigation in his words, Temujin shot a look towards Wanyan Honglie and mentally prepared himself for what might come next. The Ong Khan slowly stroked his beard and did not reply. Instead he took another gulp from his cup of koumiss.

"The last time, when the Naiman came and stole several thousand of my livestock, it was only because of Temujin and his 'Four Aces' that we were able to get the livestock back. Even though he doesn't have many men under him, each and every one of them is skilled and brave. Your Highnesses must have witnessed that first hand today." Senggum's face turned even angrier as he slammed the gold cup in his hand onto the table, causing a loud bang.

"What good am I really? What I have today is simply because of the attention and care that my adopted father showered on me." Temujin hurried to add.

"His 'Four Aces'? Who are they? I want to meet them." Wanyan Honglie changed the subject as well.

"Why don't you summon them inside?" The Ong Khan asked Temujin. Temujin lightly clapped his hands and four men

walked into the ger.

The first one looked gentle and scholarly with a white, clean face; he was the master of strategy, Muqali. The second man had a strong, sturdy build and his eyes were as piercing as an eagle's; he was none other than Temujin's good friend, Bogurchi. The third man was short but agile and his steps were light and swift; he was Tolui's master Boroqul. The last one's face and hands were covered with battle scars and his face was blood red; this was the man who had saved Temujin's life so many years ago, Tchila'un. The four of them were the founding generals in rise of Mongolia and were called the 'Four Aces' by Temujin.

After looking at them, Wanyan Honglie praised each one some what, and then awarded all of them with a big cup of koumiss.

"On the battle field today, there was a general with a black cape who led the charge through enemy formations, nobody could stop him; do you know who he was?" Wanyan Honglie inquired after the 'Four Aces' had finished their drinks.

"That's a Squad Leader that I just recruited," Temujin answered. "Everyone calls him Jebe."

"Then why don't we invite him in for a drink as well?" Wanyan Honglie suggested. Temujin turned and issued the command.

Jebe entered the ger and properly gave thanks for the reward of a drink. He was just about to drink when he was interrupted.

"How dare you, a measly Squad Leader, drink from my gold cup?" Senggum shouted. Jebe was shocked and furious, but stopped the cup as it came up to his lips. He looked over at

Temujin for the proper course of action. In Mongolian culture, stopping someone from drinking is an enormous insult. Not to mention that this was done in front of all these people, how could anyone bear such an insult?

“For my adopted father's sake, I'm going to let Senggum get away with this insult.” Temujin decided turning to Jebe.

“Bring it over here. I'm thirsty, let me drink it!” He took the cup from Jebe's hands and drank all of its contents in one gulp. Jebe shot an angry look towards Senggum, turned, and began to walk out of the ger.

“Come back here!” Senggum commanded fiercely, but Jebe just ignored him and walked out of the ger with his head held high.

“Even though Brother Temujin has his ‘Four Aces’, I have something that could defeat all four of them as soon as I let it loose.” Unhappy that things were not working out to his liking, Senggum changed the subject. He chuckled when he said that. Even though he called Temujin brother, he was not an anda of Temujin; he only did it because his father was Temujin's adopted father.

“Really? What could that be? What could be that powerful?” Wanyan Hongxi's interest was piqued by that statement.

“Well, we can go outside and I can show you.” Senggum said.

“We are having a good time drinking, what are you trying to stir up now?” Ong Khan objected.

“Just sitting here and drinking is getting boring, let's see something different.” Wanyan Hongxi very much wanted to see some trouble started, so much so that he had already

stood up by the time he finished his sentence and walked out. The others had no choice but to follow him.

The Mongolian troops had started several hundred camp fires and were celebrating beside them. When the Khans exited the ger, there was a huge rumble as the large section of troops to the west stood up immediately. They were lined up in perfect formation, not one of them was moving. They were none other than Temujin's troops. To the east, the Ong Khan's troops, slowly and disorganized, picked themselves up from the ground; there were even faint sounds of joking to be heard within their ranks.

"Even though the Ong Khan's troops are much more numerous, they can't compare with Temujin's troops!" Wanyan Honglie concluded upon seeing this display.

"Wine!" Temujin called. He had noticed, in the glow of the fire, that Jebe's face was still showing fury. So he ordered that a big jug of wine be brought to him.

"Today's tremendous victory over the Naiman was a result of everyone's hard work and dedication!" He loudly declared to everyone.

"It's because we were led by Ong Khan, Temujin Khan, and Jamuka!" All of the soldiers answered in one voice.

"Today, I saw someone who was especially brave, charging the enemy's rear no less than three times. He shot down several dozens of the enemy, who was he?" Temujin asked.

"Squad Leader Jebe!" The soldiers answered again.

"No, not Squad Leader, but Company Commander Jebe!" Temujin corrected. Everyone was momentarily taken aback before realizing what he meant and began to cheer.

“Jebe is a great warrior! He well deserves to become a Company Commander!” They all shouted with approval.

“Bring my helmet to me!” Temujin instructed Jelme. Soon Jelme returned with the helmet and presented it to him.

“This is the helmet that I wear onto the battle field! This is the helmet that I wear as I kill my enemies!” Temujin raised the helmet high above his head for everyone to see. “Now this will be a cup for a warrior to drink from!”

He opened the jug of koumiss and poured all of its contents into the helmet. Bringing it up to his lips, he took a huge gulp from the helmet, and then offered it to Jebe.

Overwhelmed with gratitude and with lowered head, Jebe knelt down on one knee to receive the helmet and finished the rest of the koumiss.

“Even the most precious diamond studded gold cup in the world cannot compare with my Khan's helmet.” He said in a low voice. Temujin smiled as he took his helmet back and put it back onto his head.

The Mongol troops had all caught word of how Jebe had been humiliated by Senggum and felt bad for him; even those troops under the Ong Khan had thought that Senggum was wrong in what he did. Now, seeing how Temujin treated him, they all burst out with a great cheer.

“What a man among men this Temujin is! At this moment Jebe would gladly die one thousand times for him!” Wanyan Honglie thought to himself. “Back in the Imperial Court all the officials insisted that the north is populated by brainless barbarians; it's obvious that they have grossly underestimated these people.” But Wanyan Hongxi was only concerned with finding out what was that thing that Senggum claimed could defeat all four of the ‘Aces’.

“So what is it that you have that's so powerful that it could defeat all four of the 'Aces'?” he said, as he casually sat back down onto the tiger-fur covered chair that his personal servants had carried out.

“I invite Your Highness to get ready to see something very special. 'Four Aces' my foot; they probably won't even measure up to those two bastards of mine.” Senggum quietly said with a smile before turning around to the troops and loudly asked. “Where are my Brother Temujin's 'Four Aces'?”

The four men came walking up and saluted their superiors. Senggum turned and whispered something to the trusted servant at his side who nodded before running off. Soon after, the sound of roaring beasts could be heard as a pair of huge golden leopards came gracefully out from behind the ger. As they slowly approached in the darkness, the leopard eyes glowed like a pair of jade lanterns. This gave Wanyan Hongxi quite a fright as he immediately gripped the handle of his saber tightly. Only when the leopards walked close to one of bonfires did he see that, in fact, there was a leash and collar around their necks and each leopard had a big fellow on the other end of the leash. Both had a long stick in their other hand, and, as it turned out, they were specially charged with raising and taking care of the leopards. Mongolians love raising leopards for hunting purposes. Not only do leopards run faster than hunting dogs, they are especially feisty; being caught by the leopard means instant death for whatever they are set upon. The only draw back was that the leopards consumed a great deal of food; so only royalty or top officials could afford to keep leopards. Although the leopards were restrained by men, they were still snarling and clawing while glaring viciously at everyone. The muscles on their bodies looked as if they contained boundless energy within them, ready to

explode at any moment. Wanyan Hongxi felt his heart get a little fluttery and he was exceedingly uncomfortable. From the power and might that these two leopards were showing, it looked as if they could easily break out of the grip of their masters should they choose.

“Brother, if those ‘Four Aces’ of yours are truly great warriors and can subdue these two leopards of mine bare handed; then I’ll be truly convinced.” Senggum said, turning towards Temujin.

The ‘Four Aces’ were furious as the same thought ran through their minds. “You humiliated Jebe, now you are going to humiliate us? Are we just game? Are we wild wolves? Why should we fight your leopards?”

Temujin was far from happy about this whole proposal as well. “I love my men like my own life, how can I let them fight a leopard?”

“Is that so?” Senggum burst out with a loud laugh. “Then why claim to be ‘Four Aces’ or whatever you want to call them. They’re not even brave enough to fight my leopards!”

Of the ‘Four Aces’, Tchila’un’s temper was the shortest and he could not stand such an insult any longer. He took a huge step forward. “My great Khan, it doesn’t matter if they laugh at us, but we cannot allow you to be shamed.” He said to Temujin. “I’ll fight the leopards!”

Wanyan Hongxi was ecstatic to hear this. So much so that he removed a bright red ruby-studded ring from his finger and tossed it on the ground, proclaiming, “If you can beat the leopard, then that’s yours.”

Tchila’un did not even give the ring a look before lunging forward, only to be held back by Muqali. “Our names are known throughout the Steppe because we have defeated so

many foes. Can a leopard command an army? Can a leopard ambush or surround enemies?" Muqali reasoned loudly.

"Brother Senggum, you win." Temujin said as he bent down, picked up the ring, and placed it in Senggum's hand. Senggum immediately put the ring on one of his fingers and let out a triumphant laugh as he raised his hand to show off his newly won ring. Ong Khan's troops began to cheer in response. Jamuka stayed silent throughout but was frowning heavily. Temujin kept a calm expression on his face. The 'Four Aces' bitterly retreated back to their ranks. Disappointed and terribly unhappy about not seeing a man versus leopard fight, Wanyan Hongxi asked Ong Khan for two female slaves and retired to his own ger.

Next morning, Tolui and Guo Jing ran off to play. Hand in hand, they made their way far from the main camp. Suddenly a white rabbit ran by right in front of them. Tolui brought up his little bow and arrow, aimed, shot, and hit the rabbit squarely in the belly. Because he was so young the arrow lacked power, so even though it was a direct hit, it was not immediately fatal and the rabbit scuttled off screeching with the arrow imbedded in it. The two little kids, screaming at the top of their lungs, chased after the rabbit.

After running for quite a while, the rabbit finally collapsed. The two kids let out a simultaneous cheer and were just about to retrieve the rabbit when seven or eight kids suddenly came pouring out from the woods from one side. One particular kid, who was of about 12 years or so, was quick to recognize the situation and grabbed the rabbit. He pulled the arrow from the rabbit's belly, threw it on the ground, shot a fierce look in Tolui and Guo Jing's direction, before stomping off with the rabbit.

“Hey, I shot that rabbit, why are you taking it?” Tolui shouted. The kid whirled around and came back.

“Who says that you shot it?” He laughed.

“Well, this arrow is mine isn't it?”

The older kid's eyebrows suddenly rose and his eyes bulged out. “This rabbit was my pet, you are lucky I'm not asking you to pay for it!” He shouted back.

“You are lying, this is obviously a wild rabbit.” Tolui shot back.

The kid became even angrier and he walked up and shoved Tolui. “Watch out who you are accusing! My grandpa is the Ong Khan, my dad is Senggum; do you know that? Even if you did shoot this rabbit, I'm taking it anyway; what can you do?”

“My dad is Temujin!” Tolui proudly answered.

“Pei! So what if he's Temujin? Your dad's a coward! He's scared of my grandpa and scared of my dad!” The kid's name was Dukhsh and he was Senggum's only son. After having a daughter, Senggum had to wait several years before finally having a son; after him he had no other offspring. He had always spoiled his son, letting him bully as he pleased. Temujin, Ong Khan, and Senggum had not met for a long time; even though their sons had met before, this was, for all practical purposes, their first true meeting.

Hearing someone make fun of his father, Tolui was filled with anger and proudly shouted back: “Says who? My dad's not afraid of anybody!”

“When your mom was kidnapped, it was my grandpa and my dad who went and took her back for your dad. You think I didn't know that? So what's the big deal if I just take this

measly little rabbit of yours?" Even in the past, Senggum was envious of Temujin's fame. When they helped Temujin that one time, Senggum made sure to tell everyone about it; even his son had heard it many times.

Temujin had always viewed that event as an incredible embarrassment for himself, he naturally never told Tolui about it. Hearing this at this moment, Tolui was so mad that his face turned purple. "You're a liar! I'm going to tell my dad!" He angrily threatened before turning around and walking off.

"Your dad's afraid of my dad, so what if you tell him?" Dukhsh laughed at Tolui. "Last night, when my dad brought out his two leopards, your dad's 'Four Asses' were so afraid they couldn't even move!"

Of the 'Four Aces', Boroqul was Tolui's master. Hearing this only made Tolui even angrier. So angry he could barely speak. "My master isn't even afraid of tigers, why would he be afraid of leopards? He just didn't want to fight wild animals." He finally stuttered out.

Dukhsh took a step forward and suddenly slapped Tolui squarely on his face. "How dare you talk back to me? Aren't you afraid of me?" He yelled. Tolui was startled as his cheeks instantly turned blood red. He wanted to cry, but would not let himself.

Guo Jing had been seething on the side all this time, but now he could no longer hold back. He suddenly lunged forward and rammed his head squarely into Dukhsh's stomach. This caught him by surprise and knocked him flat on his back.

"Yay!" Tolui clapped for joy for a moment before grabbing Guo Jing's hand and trying to run away.

"Kill those two boys!" Dukhsh screamed, still on the ground. Dukhsh's companions ran up to the two boys and a fierce fight quickly broke out. Dukhsh picked himself up from the ground and angrily charged into the fray. Dukhsh's gang was older than the boys to begin with and also outnumbered them; they were able to pin down Tolui and Guo Jing very quickly.

"Give up? Give up?" Dukhsh shouted as he continually rained punches onto Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing tried with all his might to get back up, but was weighed down by his foe's weight. At his side, Tolui was also being ganged up on by two kids.

It was at this precarious moment that the sound of horse bells could be heard coming from just over a sand dune as a small group of riders appeared. The leading rider was a short, fat fellow riding on a yellow horse. Seeing the kids fighting in the distance, he let out a little laugh.

"Hah, fighting!" Only when he rode closer for a better look did he realize that it was seven kids bullying two much smaller kids. They'd pinned them down on the ground and were beating them. The two smaller kids' faces were already full of bruises.

"Shame on you; let them go!" He shouted.

"Piss off!" Dukhsh shouted back. "Do you know who I am? I'll beat up whoever I want to, and you can't do anything about it!" His father was one of the most powerful men in the North, so he was used to bullying everyone and nobody dared to challenge him.

"How dare you act like that? Let go of them!" The rider on the yellow horse yelled back. By this time, the rest of his group had joined him.

"Third Brother, stop meddling in affairs that don't concern us, let's go." There was a woman in that group.

"Look at them, what kind of fighting is this?" The rider on the yellow horse replied.

These riders were the Seven Freaks of the South. They had followed Duan Tiande all the way north onto the Steppe before losing his trail. These past six years, they had roamed up and down the Steppe in search of Duan Tiande and Li Ping. All seven of them had actually learned Mongolian by this time, but they still could not find any clues as to the whereabouts of Li Ping. The Seven Freaks were all stubborn characters, and very competitive as well, so even if faced with ordeals ten times more difficult and more dangerous than this, they would not concede this bet to Qiu Chuji. Without ever conferring, the seven of them had the same plan, even if they never find Li Ping, they would still search until the eighteen years was up. At that time they would go to Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal in Jiaxing and admit defeat to Qiu Chuji's face. Besides, Qiu Chuji might not find Yang Tiexin's widow either. If neither side could find their widow, then a tie would result and then maybe another challenge would be issued.

"Two against one, we can't allow that." Han Xiaoying hopped off of her horse and pulled the two kids that were sitting on Tolui's back off of him. Suddenly realizing that all the weight was off of his back Tolui struggled to get up. Dukhsh paused for a moment and Guo Jing took advantage; he flipped his body violently and crawled out from between Dukhsh's legs. The two, having finally freed themselves, immediately tried to run away.

"Go after them!" Dukhsh yelled as he led the rest of his gang in hot pursuit.

Seeing these little Mongolian kids fight reminded the Seven Freaks of all the misadventures that they had together when they were little, causing them to smile quite fondly at the memories.

"It's time to go. Let's get to the market ahead before it disperses, or else we will miss a chance to ask the people there!" Ke Zhen'E suggested. By this time, Dukhsh's little gang had caught up to Tolui and Guo Jing once again and surrounded them.

"Do you give up?" Dukhsh demanded. Tolui, still looking very angry, did not reply but instead fiercely shook his head.

"Well you asked for it!" The kids converged upon one another yet again.

Suddenly there was a cold flash as a little dagger suddenly materialized in Guo Jing's hand. "You want some of this?"

Li Ping, out of love for her son, had already given him the dagger, that her husband left her, to carry around. She felt that this object was good for warding off evil and had intended that this dagger protect her son from evil spirits. Because of the bullying Guo Jing was receiving, he pulled it out.

Seeing that he had a weapon with him, none of Dukhsh's gang was brave enough to challenge him.

'Magical Hands Scholar' Zhu Cong was already on his way when a sudden flash caught his eyes. The way the dagger reflected the sunlight lit up his heart.

"This reflection is incredibly strong; I've got to see what this precious little toy is." Having stolen from government treasuries and rich gentry's vaults all his life, he was quite an expert at discerning precious objects. He immediately

pulled his horse around and saw that one of the kids had a dagger in his hand. The dagger reflected a blue light that flickered endlessly, obviously an extremely rare weapon. But how did it end up in the hands of a little kid? Looking over the kids again, he noticed that other than Guo Jing, all the other kids were wearing expensive shirts made of leopard skins. But Guo Jing made up for it by having a golden crown-looking ring on top of his head. Obviously the kids were all members of wealthy and influential Mongol families.

"The kid probably stole his father's favorite knife to play with. Stealing from kings and aristocrats won't cause too much harm." Once he made up his mind, he jumped off of his horse and smiled sweetly as he approached the kids.

"Come on everyone, stop fighting. Play nice." As he was talking, he suddenly flashed into the circle of kids and grabbed the knife. Having devoted an incredible amount of training to capturing weapons with bare hands, only the best martial arts masters could hope to stop him from taking their weapons, never mind a small kid like Guo Jing.

As soon as the dagger was in his hand, Zhu Cong immediately scuttled out of the circle and hopped onto his horse. With a jerk of the reins, he laughingly galloped off and caught up to the rest of his group.

"Well, today wasn't a total loss; I ended up with this little gem." He laughed quite heartily at his success.

"Second Brother, you won't ever get rid of that stealing habit of yours will you?" 'Smiling Buddha' Zhang Ahsheng joined in on the laughter.

"What little gem? Let me see it." 'Hidden Hero of the Bustling City' Quan Jinfa, being a merchant by trade, was curious. With a flick of his arm, Zhu Cong tossed the dagger

over. A streak of blue shot across the sky in the sunlight; the light from the dagger wavered, looking as if a small rainbow had just materialized, causing everyone present to shout in praise.

“Excellent!” Quan Jinfa involuntarily yelled as the dagger flew towards his face, sending a shiver down his spine. He reached out and caught the dagger by the handle. He “tch”ed endlessly in admiration as he examined the dagger. When his attention moved to the handle, he saw the characters ‘Yang Kang’ carved onto it. “This is a Han name! How did this dagger end up here in Mongolia?” A question shot through his mind. “Yang Kang, Yang Kang? I have never heard of a hero named Yang Kang. If he isn't a martial arts hero, why would he have such an exceptional weapon?”

“Big Brother! Do you know who Yang Kang is?” He called out.

“Yang Kang?” Ke Zhen'E searched through his memory for a while and shook his head. “I have never heard of him before.”

‘Yang Kang’ was the name that Qiu Chuji had given to the baby that was still inside of Bao Xiruo. The two fathers had exchanged daggers and that was how Li Ping ended up with the dagger that had ‘Yang Kang’ carved on it. Of course, the Seven Freaks did not know of this matter. Of the seven, Ke Zhen'E was the oldest as well as the most knowledgeable. If he did not know, then there was no way that the other six did.

“Qiu Chuji is searching for Yang Tiexin's widow, could this Yang Kang have something to do with Yang Tiexin?” Quan Jinfa's attention to detail made him ask.

"Well, if we find Yang Tiexin's widow, we would still have one-upped that Bull Nose." Zhu Cong joked. But having searched endlessly and fruitlessly for the past six years, this seemingly remote and completely unrelated lead was something that none of them were willing to let slip by.

"Let's go back and ask that kid." Han Xiaoying concluded.

Han Baoju's horse was the fastest, so he arrived back where the kids were first, only to discover that the kids were at it again. Tolui and Guo Jing were, once again, pinned down to the ground. Han Baoju ordered the kids to break it up, but none of them heeded his words. Getting impatient, he grabbed a couple of kids and threw them off to the side.

"You two dogs come back tomorrow and we'll fight again!" Dukhsh threatened Tolui, because he was too scared to carry on fighting.

"OK...tomorrow!" Tolui shouted back as Dukhsh led his gang away. He already had plans for what to do; he would go and ask his third brother Ogedai for help as soon as he got back. Of all his brothers, Ogedai was the nicest to him, and strong as well. He would surely help if asked.

"Give it back!" Despite having his face covered with blood from his nose, Guo Jing put his hand out to Zhu Cong.

"Sure, no problem," Zhu Cong waved the dagger back and forth in front of Guo Jing's face. "But you have to tell me where you got this dagger."

"My mom gave it to me." Guo Jing answered, wiping blood away from his still bleeding nose with a sleeve.

"What's your dad's name?" Guo Jing never had a father and was caught speechless by the question. All he could do was

shake his head.

"Is your surname Yang?" Quan Jinfa asked. Once again, Guo Jing shook his head. Seeing that this kid was rather slow, the Seven Freaks were quite disappointed.

"Who's Yang Kang?" Zhu Cong probed further. Guo Jing still only shook his head. The Seven Freaks had always valued their integrity above all else, so they always kept their word, even to a kid. Zhu Cong handed the dagger back to Guo Jing.

"You can go home now." Han Xiaoying took out a handkerchief and wiped off the blood from Guo Jing's face as she tenderly told him. "Don't fight anymore. You are still small, you can't beat them yet."

Afterwards, the seven of them climbed back onto their horses and began to leave. Guo Jing just stood there, watching them ride off to the East.

"Guo Jing, let's go back." Tului suggested.

The Seven Freaks were already quite a distance away, but Ke Zhen'E's hearing was incredibly sensitive. When he heard the name 'Guo Jing', his entire body shook violently; he immediately jerked his horse around and rode back to the kids.

"Boy, your surname is Guo? You are Han Chinese and not Mongolian, right?" He anxiously asked.

Guo Jing grunted an assertion, sending Ke Zhen'E's mind into the clouds with joy. "Who is your mother?" He hurriedly asked.

"Mom is mom." Guo Jing answered, making Ke Zhen'E scratch his head for a bit. "Can you take me to your mother?"

"My mom's not here."

"Sister, you ask him." Ke Zhen'E suggested, realizing that there was some hostility in Guo Jing's responses. Han Xiaoying hopped off of her horse and walked up to Guo Jing.

"Where's your father?" She asked in a warm voice.

"My dad was killed by bad people; when I grow up, I'm going to kill them and avenge my father."

"What was your father's name?" Han Xiaoying was so excited that her voice was trembling. But Guo Jing just shook his head.

"Who killed your father?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"His... his name is Duan Tiande!" Guo Jing could barely contain his anger as he said that name.

Because Li Ping knew that in such a desolate and remote place as the Steppe, any moment could bring with it many dangers. She knew that her chances of ever returning to China were nearly non-existent. If something should happen to her suddenly, her son would never know the name of his mortal enemy, and that would not do. She had long ago told her son, over and over again, the name and appearance of Duan Tiande. She was an illiterate farm girl and had always called her husband 'Xiao-Ge'. She had heard other people call him 'Brother Guo' but had never cared about what her husband's real name was. This was why Guo Jing had only ever known his father to be his 'dad' and did not know that he had other names.

'Duan Tiande'. That name did not come out of Guo Jing's mouth very loudly, but when the Seven Freaks heard it, the shock rendered them speechless. Even if three bolts of lightning suddenly struck beside them on this clear and

sunny day it would not have shocked them as much. In the blink of an eye, it felt as if the earth beneath them shook, as if the wind and air around them became colored. Only after a very prolonged silence did Han Xiaoying suddenly let out an ecstatic shout. At the same time, Zhang Ahsheng was beating his fists onto his chest like a mad man. Quan Jinfa had thrown his arm tightly around Nan Xiren's neck and Han Baoju was doing back flips on his horse's saddle. Ke Zhen'E reared his head back and laughed crazily, while Zhu Cong was spinning like a top. Seeing them act like this, Tolui and Guo Jing could not decide whether they were funny or just plain crazy. Only after a long time did the Seven Freaks finally, slowly, calm down, but their faces were filled with joy.

"Merciful Bodhisattva, thank you, thank you!" Zhang Ahsheng knelt down and prayed.

"Little brother, let's sit down and talk." Han Xiaoying said to Guo Jing. Anxious to get back and ask his brother Ogedai for help as well as having a bad feeling about these seven strangers with their strange accents and even stranger behavior, Tolui did not want to stay any longer. Even though these same strangers had just helped them in a fight, Tolui incessantly urged Guo Jing to start heading back.

"I need to go now." Guo Jing finally relented and began to walk away hand in hand with Tolui.

"Hey...hey! You can't go now. Let that little friend of yours go back by himself." Han Baoju almost panicked and yelled at the top of his lungs.

The two little kids were scared of the man's ugly complexion and immediately started to run as soon as he began to yell. Han Baoju chased them and was just about to

grab the back of Guo Jing's neck with his fat hands when Zhu Cong cut him off.

"Third Brother, don't be so rude." Zhu Cong lightly parried Han Baoju's hand and stopped it in mid-move, much to Han Baoju's surprise. Picking up a little speed, Zhu Cong quickly got in front of the two little kids.

"I'm going to do some magic, you guys just watch, ok?" He smiled at the kids as he picked up three stones. Guo Jing and Tolui's curiosity was immediately piqued and both of them stopped and watched him. Zhu Cong held his right hand out for all to see and placed the stones in the middle of his hand.

"Gone!" He shouted as he balled his hand into a fist. When he opened his hand again, the stones were gone, shocking the little kids.

"Get in there!" Zhu Cong pointed at the old hat that was on top of his head before taking it off. The stones were sitting right in the middle of the hat. Guo Jing and Tolui let out a loud cheer and applauded with joy.

At this moment, a flock of wild geese flew toward them in a spear formation. This gave Zhu Cong an idea.

"Now we'll let my Big Brother show you a trick." He fished out a handkerchief, handed it to Tolui, and pointed at Ke Zhen'E. "Put this blindfold on him."

"Is it hide and go seek?" Tolui hopefully wondered out loud as he put the blindfold on Ke Zhen'E.

"No. He will shoot a wild goose out of the sky while blindfolded." Zhu Cong answered as he produced a bow and an arrow.

"How could he? I don't believe you." Tolui concluded.

While the conversation was going on, the wild geese flew straight overhead. Zhu Cong flicked his arm and tossed the three stones in his hand up at the geese. Because of his powerful hands, the stones shot up and startled the geese, causing the lead goose to honk several times as he readied to lead the formation in a different direction. But Ke Zhen'E had already determined its location, drew his bow to the fullest, and let loose. He hit the goose squarely in the belly and the goose, with the arrow still in it, tumbled down onto the ground.

Tolui and Guo Jing exploded with another cheer. They ran off to retrieve the goose and brought it back to Ke Zhen'E, their young hearts filled with admiration.

"Remember how the eight boys ganged up on you two earlier? Well, if you know some martial arts, then you wouldn't have to worry about there being more than one of them." Zhu Cong told the kids.

"We will fight some more tomorrow and I'm going to get my older brother to help." Tolui told him.

"Get help from your older brother! Hmph, that's something that useless kids do. I'll teach you a couple of moves that I guarantee will help you win tomorrow." Zhu Cong replied.

"You mean the two of us beating the eight of them?" Tolui asked.

"Yes!"

"Yay! Come on, teach me!" Tolui was greatly excited at the prospect of beating Dukhsh.

"How about you, don't you want to learn too?" Zhu Cong asked him. He'd noticed that Guo Jing was standing to the side, seemingly uninterested.

"Mom told me that I shouldn't fight others; if I learn how to fight, then my mom will be unhappy."

"Little chicken!" Han Baoju lightly berated him.

"If that's true, why were you in a fight just now?" Zhu Cong asked again.

"Because they started it."

"So what are you going to do when you see your enemy, Duan Tiande?" Ke Zhen'E asked in a heavy tone.

"I'll kill him to avenge my father!" Just hearing that name made a fiery glare flash from Guo Jing's young eyes.

"Your father was an expert in martial arts yet was still killed by him; how could you kill him if you don't know any martial arts? How can you get your revenge then?" Ke Zhen'E rendered Guo Jing speechless with those questions.

"See? You have to learn some martial arts." Han Xiaoying concluded for him.

"See that peak over there?" Zhu Cong pointed at a deserted mountain top to his left. "If you want to learn martial arts and get your revenge then come to the top of that mountain tonight at midnight. But you have to come by yourself. Besides this little friend of yours, you can't let anybody else find out about it. Brave enough to do it; afraid of ghosts?"

Guo Jing was still stupidly standing there, but Tolui was getting impatient.

“Come on, teach me, please!”

Zhu Cong suddenly grabbed his wrist, hooked his left foot behind him, and gently tripped him, sending Tolui onto the ground.

“Why did you trip me?” Tolui angrily demanded once he got back up off the ground.

“That was martial arts, did you learn it?” Zhu Cong smiled as he answered. As it turned out, Tolui was quite smart and understood right away. He mimicked Zhu Cong and showed the move against an imaginary foe.

“Teach me something else.” He said to Zhu Cong. Zhu Cong faked a punch toward Tolui's face. Tolui dodged to the left, but Zhu Cong's right fist was waiting there for him. This punch had no force behind it and stopped the moment it touched Tolui's nose.

“Yay! Teach me something else!” Tolui was ecstatic. Zhu Cong suddenly braced himself and gently bumped his shoulders squarely into the little kid's stomach; sending him flying off. Quan Jinfa jumped up, caught him in mid air, and gently put him back onto the ground.

“Mister, teach me something else!”

“If you master those three moves, most adults won't be able to beat you, enough is enough.” Zhu Cong smiled and told him before turning towards Guo Jing. “Did you get them?”

Guo Jing was still dumbstruck and not really thinking of anything as he absent mindedly shook his head. When compared to the smart and intelligent Tolui, Guo Jing seemed incredibly stupid and slow to the Seven Freaks, who were very disappointed at this turn of events. Han Xiaoying let out a long sigh and her eyes reddened.

"I say that we stop wasting energy and just take the mother and son back south and hand them over to Qiu Chuji. As for the competition, let's just admit defeat." Quan Jinfa observed.

"This kid's make up is just too hopeless; he's not the kungfu practicing type." Zhu Cong agreed.

"There isn't a bit of fight in him; I don't see how it's going to work either." Han Baoju also agreed and the Seven Freaks began discussing the matter amongst themselves in their Southern dialects.

"You two can go home now." Han Xiaoying waved at the two little kids. Tolui grabbed hold of Guo Jing's hand and they happily skipped off.

Having searched for six long and hard years all over the boundless Steppe, the Seven Freaks were joyous beyond description when they finally found Guo Jing. As it turned out, the joy was only temporary; when they discovered that the kid was so dumb that it would be incredibly difficult for him to ever amount to much as a martial artist. They could not help feeling defeated. This set back could only be matched by the one they would experience had they, in fact, never found Guo Jing. Han Baoju, whip in hand, was relentlessly beating the ground, trying to vent his frustration and nobody could get him to stop. All this time, only the Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains, Nan Xiren, remained silent.

"Well, what do you think, Fourth Brother?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"Very good." Nan Xiren replied.

"What's very good?" Zhu Cong inquired.

"The kid's very good," he added.

"Fourth Brother always acts as if speaking costs him money." Han Xiaoying said, letting the frustration get to her. "He will never say a word more than he has to."

"I was also very dumb as a kid." Nan Xiren gently smiled. He was always very quiet and every word that he spoke had already been carefully thought over, meaning that he was rarely wrong. Hearing him, the other six Freaks found a glimmer of hope and instantly became more confident.

"Right...that's right! Since when have I been smart?" Zhang Ahsheng agreed, looking in Han Xiaoying's direction.

"Let's wait and see if he's got the guts to come tonight." Zhu Cong suggested.

"I say most likely not." Quan Jinfa replied. "I'm going to go find where he lives first." He jumped off of his horse and trailed far behind Tolui and Guo Jing until he saw them walking into their own gers.

That night, the Seven Freaks waited on the deserted mountain top. It was fifteen minutes to ten and the Big Dipper had noticeably changed its position, but Guo Jing was nowhere to be seen.

Han Baoju sighed, "The Seven Freaks of the South never lost to anyone in our lives. But in the end, we lose to that Taoist priest."

Zhu Cong said, "The Quanzhen Sect is fighting the Jurchens in the north and helping the poor Chinese citizens there. Everything the sect does is chivalrous and admirable. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen are great martial arts experts and honorable individuals, Qiu Chuji is even said to be the most exceptional one of the Seven Masters. Losing to him

won't damage our good name. Furthermore, we are trying to save the lives of survivors of an honorable man, which is a good deed. When people in Wulin learn of this, they can only praise us and say: "Well done!" The other six Freaks agreed and felt better.

Looking to the west, dark clouds were gathering on top of each other off on the horizon. But above their heads not a cloud could be seen in the dark blue sky. The winds were swirling around them from the northwest; sometimes it would gust, other times it would be still. In the middle of the sky hung the bright moon, but a faint yellow ring could be discerned around it.

"Looks like there's going to be a storm tonight." Han Xiaoying observed. "The kid is not going to come."

"Then let's go to him tomorrow morning." Zhang Ahsheng replied.

"Being a little slow is not a big problem. But if this kid is afraid of the dark... Ay!" Ke Zhen'E sighed and shook his head.

The seven of them were just wandering around when Han Baoju suddenly spotted something in a bush. "Hey what's that?" He pointed at three piles of white objects that looked awfully strange in the moon light.

Quan Jinfa walked over to investigate only to discover that they were human skulls placed neatly in three piles.

"It must have been those little kids that piled up the skulls like that." He laughed before suddenly noticing something else. "What...Second brother, come quickly!"

The sudden change in the tone of his voice was easily noticeable and unsettling for everyone. Other than Ke

Zhen'E, the other Freaks made their way over to him.

"Look at this!" Quan Jinfa picked up one particular skull and handed it over to Zhu Cong. When Zhu Cong inspected the skull closely, he noticed that on the dome of the skull there were five holes positioned as though they were made by fingers. He tried with his own hand and the five holes were positioned properly for his fingers. The hole for his thumb was a little bigger than the others, while the hole for his pinky was a little smaller. It seemed as if somebody had carefully carved the holes into the skull to match a particular hand. Obviously it was not a child's toy that the little kids had left here. Zhu Cong's expression changed dramatically. He bent over and picked up two more skulls and discovered that they also had these holes in them.

"Could somebody have made these holes with their fingers?" He wondered. But there had not been anybody in the world with martial arts skills so powerful as to be able to smash holes through bone just using fingers. With this realization, he was rendered silent and awestruck.

"Could it be some man eating beast or monster that lives around here?" Han Xiaoying said, almost yelling.

"That's right, it must be a monster." Han Baoju concurred.

"But if it is some beast, then why would it or could it put the skulls in such neat piles?" Quan Jinfa asked, deep in thought.

"How are they placed?" Ke Zhen'E said, after making his way over to them.

"In a three pyramid formation; every pile consists of nine skulls." Quan Jinfa answered.

"Are they stacked in three layers, with five skulls on the bottom layer, three in the middle layer, and one on the top?"

"Yes!" Quan Jinfa was shocked. "Big Brother, how did you know that?"

"Go one hundred steps northeast and northwest and tell me what you see!" Ke Zhen'E did not answer his question but instead, anxiously directed them.

His demeanor was one of extreme anxiety, almost bordering panic. This was so different from his normal calm steadiness that the other Freaks did not dare waste one second and in threes, they headed off in the two directions. Soon, Han Xiaoying, who went to the northeast, and Quan Jinfa, who went to the northwest, yelled out at the same instant.

"There are skull piles here too!"

"This is a matter of life and death!" Ke Zhen'E literally flew over to the pile of skulls at the northwest and forcefully, but quietly ordered. "Don't raise your voice, no matter what!"

The three Freaks were quite taken aback by his words and weren't quite sure what to make of them. Ke Zhen'E quickly made his way to Han Xiaoying's group to the northeast and told them the same thing.

"Is it monsters or mortal enemies?" Zhang Ahsheng asked, with a hushed voice.

"They are mortal enemies of mine. They are formidable experts and they killed my brother." By this time the Freaks in the other group had made their way over as well. Hearing his words, all of the Freaks were quite surprised.

The six knew that Ke Zhen'E's brother, Ke Pixie had higher skills than Ke Zhen'E and was also a very intelligent and cautious man. His killer must have been a lethal nemesis.

The Seven Freaks talked about everything with each other and about two years ago they learned of the death of Ke Pixie. But Ke Zhen'E never revealed how his brother died or who was responsible.

Ke Zhen'E picked up a skull and ran his hands over it inspecting it. After finding the holes he took his right hand and tried out the holes with his fingers. "They did it. They did it. They actually mastered it." He mumbled to himself before turning to the other Freaks. "There are three piles here as well?"

"Yes!" Han Xiaoying answered.

"Are there eight skulls in every pile?" Ke Zhen'E inquired.

"One pile has nine; the other two piles have eight." Han Xiaoying again answered.

"Go and count the other groups as well." Han Xiaoying swiftly ran over to the other group and then returned just as quickly. "There's a pile of seven over there; they are all decapitated heads and the flesh has not decomposed yet."

"Then that means they will be here very soon." Ke Zhen'E concluded quietly and handed the skull over to Quan Jinfa. "Carefully return this to where it was, and don't leave any trace of our presence."

Quan Jinfa quickly placed everything back in their original positions and returned to Ke Zhen'E. All of their eyes were upon Ke Zhen'E as they quietly waited for his explanation.

"It's Copper Corpse and Iron Corpse!" Ke Zhen'E looked as if he was looking up at the sky and his face twitched continuously.

"But aren't they dead? Can they still be alive?" This news shocked Zhu Cong tremendously.

"I thought they were dead as well. But it turns out that they have been hiding here training their 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'," Ke Zhen'E said. "Brothers, quickly mount your horses and ride south as fast as you can and don't come back! Wait for me after you have gone five thousand li. Wait for ten days. If I don't show up on the tenth day, then you need not wait any longer."

"What are you saying Big Brother?" Han Xiaoying anxiously asked. "We have all tasted each other's blood when we swore to live and die together! Why are you telling us to leave now?"

"Go! Leave!" Ke Zhen'E repeatedly waved his hand. "You don't have any time to waste!"

"What do you take us for; a bunch of heartless bastards?" Han Baoju angrily rebuked.

"If the seven of us lose, then we'll just end our lives together. That's what we have always said." Zhang Ahsheng said, voicing his objection. "Since when have we ever run away?"

"These two possess incredible martial skills. Now that they've mastered the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws', the seven of us are definitely no match for them. Why stay here and waste your life for no reason?" Ke Zhen'E protested.

The other Freaks knew how proud Ke Zhen'E was and that he would never admit defeat. Even when facing a master like Qiu Chuji he would still throw caution to the winds and fight with abandon. To hear him talk about these two people like this, it could be inferred that their power was something beyond comprehension.

"In that case, let's leave together!" Quan Jinfa proposed.

"They condemned me to a life of suffering; but that I can deal with." Ke Zhen'E coldly replied. "However, I have to avenge what they did to my brother!"

"Share the blessings, share the hardships!" Nan Xiren declared. He never says much, but he need say nothing more.

Ke Zhen'E thought about it. He knew that his sworn brothers and sister were people who valued honor and would never consider running to save their own lives. The words he just said were based on his worry for their lives and he now realized that they bordered on being offensive to them. With this thought, he sighed. "Alright, if that's the case, then please be careful," he said. "'Copper Corpse' is a man, 'Iron Corpse' is a woman and they are husband and wife. They are called the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. About two years ago, the two of them were just starting to train the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'. They killed a lot of innocent people. My brother was invited to join an expedition against them, so he sent someone to inform and invite me to join the expedition. However, at that time the seven of us were in Shandong and Hebei provinces looking for Li Ping. We'd just found some clues about her whereabouts. It seems that some years back someone saw a military commander and a pregnant woman in man's clothes shouting and screaming in the streets. That woman was seemingly mad and shouted that she wanted to kill that commander for killing her husband. They were on their way north, so it must have been Li Ping and Duan Tiande. I couldn't just leave and join the expedition, especially since we'd finally found some clues about where Li Ping went. When we were up north, we lost track of Li Ping and Duan Tiande. It was years later before we found out that Li Ping was in Mongolia and had given birth to Guo Jing. Last year in the spring, a messenger came to tell me that my brother

had been killed in the expedition against the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. It was also that messenger who informed who the 'Twin Killers' were and where they came from and what styles of martial arts they practised. I knew that I would be unable to avenge my brother then and decided not to tell you and we continued our search for Guo Jing."

Ke Zhen'E looked very serious now and said, "What all of you need to watch out for is those claws of theirs. Sixth brother, go one hundred steps to the south and see if there's a coffin there."

Quan Jinfa, as quickly as he could, counted his steps. When he made it to one hundred, he did not spot a coffin. But upon closer inspection, he suddenly noticed that there was a corner of a stone slab protruding out of the ground. He pulled on it, but the stone slab did not budge. So he turned around and waved his arms; soon the other Freaks joined him. Zhang Ahsheng and Han Baoju both got down and, together, could barely lift the stone slab. In the moonlight, they were able to see that there was a grave hidden beneath the stone slab. In the grave lay two bodies, both of them dressed in Mongolian attire.

"Those two monsters will come soon and use these corpses for practice." Ke Zhen'E hopped into the grave. "I'll hide here and ambush them. You hide yourselves around here and make sure that they don't find you. Once you hear that I have began fighting with them, attack at once and try to catch them off guard. Please don't hold anything back. This type of ambush might not be righteous, but our foe is too powerful this time. Ambush is the only way; otherwise, none of us may make it out of this alive." The other six Freaks listened intently to his every word.

"They are also extremely attentive and intelligent. They will spot even the slightest trace of disturbance from far away."

Ke Zhen'E continued. "Put the stone slab back and just leave a small slit for me."

The six Freaks nodded and gently placed the slab back where it had been. Afterwards, they grabbed their weapons and hid inside bushes and behind trees in the area immediately surrounding the grave.

Seeing Ke Zhen'E worry like she had never seen before, Han Xiaoying was worried as well as curious. When she looked for a hiding spot she made sure to find one close to Zhu Cong.

"Who are 'Copper Corpse' and 'Iron Corpse'?" She asked him as quietly as she could.

Zhu Cong answered, "Two years ago, Master Ke Pixie sent a messenger to contact big brother. Big brother was afraid the news would leak out and asked me to go with him to talk to that messenger. He also wanted my opinion as to whether that messenger was real or was trying to deceive him. According to that messenger, 'Copper Corpse' and 'Iron Corpse' are disciples of the lord of the Peach Blossom Island in the Eastern Sea...."

Han Xiaoying softly interrupted, "Disciples of Peach Blossom Island? That makes them people from Zhejiang province, just like us."

Zhu Cong nodded and said, "Yes, it is said that they were disowned by the Lord of the Peach Blossom Island. They are highly skilled and very vicious; they are also very secretive and cautious. After they killed Ke Pixie and some others of the expedition, they suddenly disappeared. Everyone thought that they'd paid for their crimes and were killed somehow. Little did we know that they were hiding here in Mongolia."

"What are their real names?" Han Xiaoying asked.

"‘Copper Corpse’ is a man; his name is Chen Xuanfeng. He has a burnt yellow complexion like copper, and never showed a bit of emotion on his face, like a corpse. That's why everyone referred to him as ‘Copper Corpse’."

"So does that woman, ‘Iron Corpse’, have a dark complexion?"

"Yes, her surname is Mei, full name Mei Chaofeng."

"Big Brother said that they were training something called the ‘Nine Yin White Bone Claws’. What kind of kungfu is that?"

"I haven't heard of it either."

Han Xiaoying looked over at a pile of skulls near her and saw that top skull was positioned in such a way that the holes where the eyes were faced directly at her, as if it was staring at her. She shuddered involuntarily and turned away, not daring to take another look.

"How come Big Brother never brought this up?" She asked.
"Could it be...."

She had not finished when Zhu Cong suddenly covered her mouth with his left hand and pointed to the bottom of the hill with his right hand. Han Xiaoying followed his finger and looked out from behind the bush. In the moonlight near the horizon, a faint black shadow could be seen quickly approaching at incredible speed.

"I should be ashamed!" Han Xiaoying reprimanded herself.
"I was too busy talking to Second Brother and did not watch for the enemy."

In a blink of an eye, the black shadow had made it to the foot of the hill. By now they could discern that it was actually two figures, which was why it looked so broad from afar.

“The ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ truly do have a bizarre kungfu.” The Six Freaks thought to themselves. “Running at that speed yet they were still able to stick together so closely to each other; it really is as if they are inseparable!”

The six of them held their breath and cowered even lower, quietly waiting for them to come up the hill. Zhu Cong clutched tightly to his pressure point hitting fan. Han Xiaoying quietly buried the blade of her sword in the dirt so as to avoid giving herself away because of reflections off the blade; nevertheless, her right hand held a tight grip on the handle.

The sounds of sand and rocks being kicked could be heard as feet traveled up the hill. Each and everyone’s hearts pounded with every step and each moment seemed to last an eternity. By this time, the northwest wind had picked up as well. The dark clouds to the west looked like individual mountain tops as they came rolling relentlessly in.

A few moments later, the sound of footsteps ceased. On the open space, on the top of the hill, two silhouettes could be seen. The first, immobile, with a leather hat on its head, looked like a Mongol; the second, with long hair floating with the wind, was visibly a woman.

“Here are ‘Copper Corpse’ and ‘Iron Corpse’,” thought Han Xiaoying. “Let’s see how they train themselves.” They saw the woman slowly move around the man, and heard her joints crack quietly. Then she accelerated and the crackling became drum-like; increasingly loud and closer together.

"Is her internal strength truly that strong?" Han Xiaoying wondered. "It's not surprising that Older Brother acts so prudently!" The woman moved her hands back and forth and, each time, the joints in her arms crackled. Her long hair was streaming nearly horizontally from the speed, and it gave her a terrifying presence.

Han Xiaoying felt a chill in her heart and the hairs began to bristle on her body. Suddenly, the woman raised her right palm and struck the man's chest with her left palm.

"This is strange", the six thought, "could it be that her husband's body is capable of resisting her palm strokes?" The man fell backwards, but she had already sped behind him and hit his back. Going back and forth at high-speed, she hit him with eight palm strokes, each time quicker, and each time more powerful. The man didn't make a sound. After the ninth stroke, she suddenly leaped very high, then, coming down like an arrow, raised the man's leather hat and planted the five fingers of her right hand in his head!

Han Xiaoying fought back a scream. The woman dropped to her feet and exploded with laughter. The man, who had collapsed on the ground, didn't move. She stretched her hand, spotted with blood and brain matter, and examined it in the moonlight still laughing. She turned her head, and Han Xiaoying saw that her face, although a little dark skinned, was rather pretty and she seemed to be about forty years old.

The six now understood that the man was not her husband, but had been captured as a living target for the purpose of her practice. The woman must be 'Iron Corpse', Mei Chaofeng.

She stopped laughing, stretched out her hands and tore at the dead man's clothing. In the north, where the weather

was extremely cold, everyone wore thick leather coats. Yet she tore these very resistant clothes as if they were paper, without any effort. Then she plunged her hand into the poor wretch's chest and withdrew the internal organs one by one, which she examined attentively in the moonlight. Afterwards she threw them on the ground. Even from a distance, the six could see that all the organs, heart, lungs, liver, spleen, had been completely destroyed. They now understood the intent of this practice: she had hit the body of this man with nine palm strokes and had succeeded in smashing the internal organs without breaking the bones of the skeleton. By examining the damaged internal organs, she could see the progression of her strength.

Very angry, Han Xiaoying wanted to attack immediately. She raised her sword ready to attack, but Zhu Cong silently restrained her.

"For the moment," the 'Magical Hands Scholar' thought, "'Iron Corpse' is alone. Although she seems dangerous, the seven of us should be able to make an end of her. If we get rid of her first, it will be easier to take care of 'Copper Corpse' later. We would be absolutely incapable of facing the two of them at the same time... But 'Copper Corpse' might be hidden, ready to fall on us unexpectedly. Older Brother knows well the habits of these two monsters; it's better to follow his instructions and wait for him to launch the first attack..."

After inspecting the internal organs, Mei Chaofeng seemed satisfied. With a smile on her lips, she sat down cross-legged facing the moon, and began to practice the regulation of breathing. With her back turned to Han Xiaoying and Zhu Cong, they could see her shoulders rising and falling as she inhaled and exhaled.

"If I use the stroke 'The Lightning Illuminates the Big Sky'," Han Xiaoying considered, "I am nearly certain I'll be able to pierce her right through. But if I miss my stroke, our entire plan will be compromised!" She was unable to decide what to do and her body trembled.

Zhu Cong didn't dare move either; he felt a trickling sensation down his back as he broke out in a cold sweat. Raising his eyes, he noticed that the black clouds coming from the west had covered half the sky, like a sheet of rice paper that someone had spilled ink on. Inside the dark clouds lightning flashed, increasing the anguish and fear in the hearts of the Six Freaks. The thunder roared dully, as if it was suppressed by the thickness of the clouds.

After practicing the breathing exercises for a period of time, Mei Chaofeng arose; then she dragged the dead man behind her towards the grave where Ke Zhen'E was hidden. She bent down to raise the stone slab. The six Freaks tightened their grip on their weapons, ready to attack her as soon as the slab was removed.

Mei Chaofeng, hearing a rustle of leaves that didn't seem caused by the wind, turned her head suddenly and saw a human shape at the top of a tree. Releasing a long scream, she leaped in that direction.

The man hidden in the tree was Han Baoju. Taking advantage of his small size, he had hidden himself perfectly in the foliage, but, as he got ready to jump, he made a slight move which alerted Mei Chaofeng. Her leap at him came with irresistible force! Han delivered a stroke 'The Black Dragon Inhales Water', slashing down with his whip at Mei's wrist. The woman, contrary to all expectations, did not try to avoid the stroke, but instead seized the tip of the whip. Han Baoju, who was very strong, pulled her quickly toward him. This was to her benefit since it brought her

nearer and she counterattacked with a lightning palm. Han Baoju felt the power of that stroke arriving and, knowing that he could not resist it, released his weapon and somersaulted down from the tree. 'Iron Corpse' didn't let him escape and followed right behind him, aiming her claw-like hands at the small man's back.

He seemed to feel an icy breath on the nape of his neck and made an extraordinary effort to move faster. At the same time, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfu, hidden at the bottom of the tree, threw their nearly invisible projectiles at the pursuer. A 'Piercing Bone' awl came from the first and a dart [fei biao] hidden in the sleeve from the second. She swept them away with a flick of her left hand, while her right hand tore off a piece of clothing from the back of Han Baoju. The small man touched the ground with his left foot and rebounded away immediately. However Mei, as agile as wind, was already in front of him.

"Who are you?" She shouted. "What did you come here to do?" At the same time, she planted ten fingers in his shoulders. Han felt the lightning flash of pain, as if ten iron awls had suddenly pierced his flesh. He sent a kick toward 'Iron Corpse's' stomach that she avoided while delivering a stroke with her right hand, nearly breaking his ankle. Barely escaping from her, he threw himself to the ground and rolled to clear himself.

As Mei was about to trample him, a heavy black rod struck her foot; it was Nan Xiren, the 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains'.

Abandoning Han, Mei Chaofeng quickly moved back to avoid the rod. In an instant, she found herself surrounded by enemies. A scholarly looking man, holding an iron fan, tried to hit the vital points on her meridians; while a girl handling a sword attacked from the right.

A big strong paunchy man armed with a large knife and a small skinny fellow with a weird weapon came from her left; facing her was a vigorous looking peasant-type moving his iron rod. The sound of footsteps behind her had come from the man with the whip. All these people were completely unknown to her, yet they seemed to be eminent experts in martial arts.

"They are too numerous," Mei Chaofeng thought, "It will be necessary to use strong methods and eliminate some of them without delay. No matter what their names or their origins... Aside from my beloved master and my bastard of a husband, I will kill anyone in this lowly world!" She jumped, all claw-like fingers extended, at Han Xiaoying. Seeing the power of this attack, Zhu Cong, fearing for her, jumped forward pointing his iron fan at her vital point 'Sinuous Pond' situated in the hollow of her elbow. However, it didn't seem to bother her. She stretched out her right hand while Han Xiaoying defended herself with the stroke 'White Mist on the Stream', with the intention of hitting her arm. But 'Iron Corpse' turned her wrist, trying to catch the sword with her bare hand, as if she didn't fear the blade. Han Xiaoying was afraid of this and moved back. At this moment, the fan of the Scholar accurately hit her 'Sinuous Pond' accupoint. This is a very important vital point on the human body and Mei's arm should have been paralyzed immediately. Zhu Cong was delighted at having succeeded with his stroke until he saw her arm suddenly move down and her dangerous nails were practically on his head! He moved back at the last moment and escaped death by a hair!

"Doesn't she have any vital points?" he wondered, surprised and afraid. Han Baoju had collected his whip by now, and the Six, moving their weapons, surrounded Mei Chaofeng. However, she didn't seem at all impressed. Her bare hands,

with which she tried to seize their weapons, appeared as efficient as claws made out of steel. The Freaks were particularly worried since it seemed that their adversary's nickname was not exaggerated. 'Iron Corpse' appeared to have, effectively, a body of iron! She had just received two strokes on the back, inflicted by the weighing scales of Quan Jinfa, without apparently causing her any injury. They knew that she had succeeded in pushing the resistance of her body to an extreme. Apart the sharpened tip of Zhang Ahsheng's large knife and the sword of Han Xiaoying, she seemed to not fear any of the other weapons. She didn't even try to avoid them! Her only desire was to attack.

She increased speed and seized Quan Jinfa's arm who was too slow trying to escape. The other five moved quickly, but were too late; Mei, with a violent stroke, pulled a piece of flesh from his arm.

"All those that practice the iron body technique," Zhu Cong thought, "must possess a nodal practice location which is impossible for them to protect using this technique. This point is particularly vulnerable and a small touch is sufficient to severely wound or kill them... Where could this shrew's nodal location be?" He bounded to the right, to the left, moving the fan, trying successively to touch the meridian point 'Meeting of the Hundred' on the top of the head, the point 'Screen of the Spring' on the throat, then the point 'Tomb of the Mind' in the hollow of the navel, followed by the point 'Hollow of the Middle' on her back... He tried about ten points, all the while thinking that, if she takes particular care to defend a point...that will be her nodal location.

The significance of his back and forth movements didn't escape Mei Chaofeng. "Lowly 'Scholar'," she shouted, "my

technique is perfect to the point that I don't have a nodal location!"

She struck and seized Zhu's wrist. Although surprised, this man fortunately had a quick mind and agile hands. Before Mei could plant her nails in his flesh, he had pulled back his wrist and slipped his fan into his adversary's hand while whispering, "Careful, there's poison on the fan!"

Suddenly feeling a hard object in her hand, Mei Chaofeng, speechless and afraid of the poison, threw the fan to the ground.

Zhu Cong used this opportunity to escape and move several steps back. He looked at his hand, the back of which showed five bloody grooves, and felt a flush of cold sweat. The fight had only lasted a short time and not only had the Freaks not finished her off, but three of their number were already wounded. If 'Copper Corpse' arrived, they would all lose their lives. Zhang Ahsheng, Han Baoju and Quan Jinfa were already quite tired and covered with sweat. Only Nan Xiren, whose neigong was more powerful, and Han Xiaoying, lighter bodied, didn't seem tired; whereas their enemy became more and more violent. Zhu Cong suddenly saw, in the pallid gleam of the moon, the three heaps of skulls on the left. He shivered, and then had an idea; he hurried towards the hole where Ke Zhen'E was hidden, while shouting. "Run for your lives!" The other understood and moved back while still fighting.

"Bastard children from nowhere," Mei Chaofeng sneered, "you wanted to trap me here, but now it is too late to run away!" She rushed after them. Nan Xiren, Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying did their best to engage her, while the three others united their strength to raise the slab of stone. It was just in time, because Mei Chaofeng had seized Nan

Xiren's iron rod and was moving her claws in direction of his eyes.

"Come quickly and help us", Zhu Cong shouted. He pointed his finger upward and made gestures with his other hand, as if calling for the help of someone hidden on the heights. Surprised, Mei Chaofeng couldn't stop herself from raising her eyes; but all she saw were the low clouds veiling half the moon... There was no one up there!

"Seven steps right!" Zhu Cong shouted. At these words, Ke Zhen'E threw six poisoned projectiles seven steps to his right, two at head height, two to the middle and two below, while bounding out of the hole. The other Freaks attacked from all sides at the same time. Mei Chaofeng let out a shriek of pain; two projectiles had reached her eyes! Fortunately for her, her agility allowed her to move her head back immediately, so that the invisible projectiles didn't penetrate into her brain, but she had definitely been blinded!

Feeling pain and rage, she struck downward with her two palms; but Ke Zhen'E had already escaped to one side. They heard two thuds, because her palms had hit a rock. Made even more furious, she sent out a kick that struck the slab and made it fly off. The Seven, afraid of the strength of her attacks, remained carefully to the side.

Since she couldn't see them any longer, she thrashed out with her senses, striking, scratching, and kicking. She looked like a furious tiger, or a demon, breaking everything in her path, while raising clouds of dust, breaking the branches of the trees, all without hurting any of her enemies, who were sufficiently far away, holding their breath. Later, her vision became completely dark, and she knew that the poison had taken effect. "Who did this?" she

said with a terrifying voice. "Say it quickly, so that I die knowing who killed me..."

Zhu Cong made a gesture in direction of Ke Zhen'E to ask him to be quiet and to let Mei die in ignorance. Then he remembered that his Older Brother was blind, how could he have seen his gesture?

"Mei Chaofeng." Ke said with an icy voice, "Do you remember 'Divine Dragon Soaring through the Sky,' Ke Pixie, and 'Bat Soaring Through the Heavens,' Ke Zhen'E?"

Mei Chaofeng responded with a thunderous and terrifying laugh. "So Old Bastard, you didn't die! You're the one that used the poisonous projectiles, aren't you? Have you come to avenge 'Divine Dragon Soaring Through the Sky's' death?"

"Precisely! Since you haven't died yet...that suits me well!"

Mei sighed and stayed silent.

The Seven Freaks remained on guard. At that moment, the moon was nearly hidden by the dark clouds, and everyone felt the insidious and penetrating cold. Mei Chaofeng stood immobile like a stone statue, her hands alongside her body, and the moon light reflecting off her sharp nails. The strong wind that blew from behind her raised her long hair. Han Xiaoying, who was in front of her, saw blood oozing from her eyes. Suddenly, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa shouted at the same time, "She attacks, Older Brother!"

As their voices resounded again, Ke Zhen'E sensed a hit was about to arrive on his chest. He bounded into the air by delivering a heavy stroke to the ground with his staff, and landed on top of a tree that was behind him. The blow delivered by 'Iron Corpse' missed its target; instead, she planted her ten fingers in the trunk of the tree. The Six

Freak's faces were pale with terror. Had Ke Zhen'E lingered for only one second, the nails would be planted in his body. How would he have been able to escape alive?

Having missed her adversary, Mei Chaofeng released a sudden long and weird howl, very piercing, but with a power that carried far.

"How unfortunate", Zhu Cong thought, "she calls her husband 'Copper Corpse' for help." Quickly, he shouted, "It is time to finish her!"

He mobilized all his energy into his arm and heavily hit Mei Chaofeng's back, while Zhang Ahsheng raised a big stone which he brought down at her head.

'Iron Corpse', who had just lost her vision, didn't yet know how to protect herself by using her hearing, like Ke Zhen'E. The big stone, while coming down, made a noise that she could hear and she quickly avoided it. But she could not avoid Zhu Cong's stroke. Even though she had trained her body for extreme resistance to accupoint strikes, the 'Scholar' not only had quick hands but also strong ones; she felt a stabbing pain in her back.

Zhu Cong wanted to take advantage of his position and continued to hit her, but Mei Chaofeng counter-attacked with a slash of her claws, and he moved back.

Just as the other Freaks got ready to step in, they heard a long howl coming from far away. It had the same tonal quality that Mei had used a while ago, and it gave them the creeps. Shortly, a second howl was heard, but this time a lot nearer.

"That person moves quickly," the Seven thought, alarmed.

"Be careful, that is 'Copper Corpse'!" Ke Zhen'E shouted.

Han Xiaoying ran over and looked down the hill; she saw a shadow approaching at a quick pace, howling. Mei Chaofeng had adopted a defensive stance, no longer attacking. She concentrated her internal energy to arrest the progress of the poison in her body, while waiting for her husband's arrival to help destroy the enemy.

Zhu Cong made a sign to Quan Jinfa and the two men hid themselves in the brush. 'Iron Corpse' was dangerous by herself, but from the speed of 'Copper Corpse', Zhu Cong suspected that he could be even stronger than his wife. It was obviously impossible to defeat them when they were together. On the other hand, a chance existed if they took them by ruse.

Suddenly, Han Xiaoying uttered a shriek of surprise; she saw, in front of the running shadow, another smaller silhouette that was also climbing the hill. This silhouette moved more slowly, and, because it was small, no one had seen it before. She watched more attentively and saw that it was a child, Guo Jing certainly. Surprised and delighted, she hastened to meet him.

She was not very far from him and the downward slope was easy to descend, but 'Copper Corpse', a remarkable expert in lightness kung fu, was gaining on him quickly. Han Xiaoying hesitated: "I am not skilled enough to face 'Copper Corpse'... But the child is going to fall into his hands, how can I not help?" She accelerated and shouted, "Quickly, child, run faster!"

Seeing her, Guo Jing uttered a yell of joy, unconscious of the imminent danger that threatened him.

For years, Zhang Ahsheng had been secretly in love with Han Xiaoying, but never dared express his feelings towards

her. Seeing her running into terrifying danger, he feared for her safety and sprang forward to catch up and protect her.

On top of the hill, the other Freaks had stopped attacking Mei and observed the slope of the hill, keeping their invisible projectiles concealed, ready to intervene.

In the blink of an eye, Han Xiaoying reached Guo Jing; she took his small hand and turned on her heels to run back with him. They had hardly started, when she felt Guo Jing's hand slip from her grip. The child uttered a loud scream; Chen Xuanfeng had grabbed him from behind. Han Xiaoying turned around with an agile move and, using the sword stroke 'The Phoenix Nods its Head', feinted towards the enemy's left armpit; then, moving to the side, raised the tip of the sword for a quick and precise thrust, aimed at his eyes. It was the very essence of the sophisticated technique of 'The Sword of the Yue Maiden'.

Chen Xuanfeng took the child under his left arm, parried the stroke with his right, deflecting the blade. He followed with the palm stroke 'To Push the Skiff while Following the Current'. The young woman retracted her weapon and moved away. But the arm of Chen Xuanfeng suddenly seemed to lengthen by half a foot. Han Xiaoying, who originally had the impression that she was outside of his range, was reached and struck on the shoulder. She fell to the ground.

This exchange took place in a flash. The merciless 'Copper Corpse' followed with a stroke of his claws directly at the top of Han Xiaoying's head. The 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' was a dangerous and cruel technique which destroyed flesh and broke bones. The stroke could not fail to penetrate the skull of the young woman. Zhang Ahsheng was some steps away and understood the danger; without thinking about his own safety, he threw himself on top of

her, protecting her with his body. The claw fell, and the five fingers of 'Copper Corpse' penetrated the 'Smiling Dhuda's' back. Zhang Ahsheng let out a terrifying howl and tried to reach his enemy's chest with his large knife. Chen Xuanfeng defended against it, causing the weapon to drop. 'Copper Corpse' returned with another palm against Zhang as he lay on the ground. Frightened, the other Freaks shouted as they hurried to their rescue.

"My 'Shrew'," shouted Chen Xuanfeng, "what happened here?"

"They destroyed my eyes!" Mei Chaofeng replied with anger while leaning against a tree. "If you let one of them escape, my 'Bastard' husband, you will deal with me!"

"No worries, my 'Shrew'," Chen Xuanfeng shouted, "Not one will escape alive. You... Are you hurt? Don't move..."

'Copper Corpse' slammed down his hand again at the head of Han Xiaoying. Han used the move 'A Lazy Duncie makes a Somersault', and she escaped rolling.

"Do you believe you will be able to escape me?" mocked Chen, raising his left hand.

Zhang Ahsheng, severely wounded and confused, saw that his beloved was in danger of being killed. Mobilizing every last bit of strength, he sent a kick toward the enemy's hand. Chen planted his fingers in Zhang's leg. Zhang, goaded by the pain, straightened up and wrapped his arms around his aggressor. Chen caught him by the neck, wanting to throw him far away, but the 'Smiling Dhuda', fearing still that he would hurt Han Xiaoying, stubbornly refused to release him. 'Copper Corpse' gave him a violent blow to the head that stunned him. The butcher fainted, and his grip relaxed.

The intervention of Zhang had given the young woman enough time for her to jump to her feet and take the fight to Chen. She didn't dare approach him closely and was content to whirl around the enemy using her lightness technique.

"Fifth brother," she shouted, "how do you feel?" She had made two whirls round Chen, when the others arrived and joined in. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa immediately threw their invisible projectiles.

'Copper Corpse' was surprised to see so many enemies of this strength. "We are in the middle of the deserted steppe," he thought, "where did these expert fighters come from? My 'Shrew'," he shouted, "these skilled people, who are they?"

It's the members of the 'Bat Soaring Through the Heaven's' group. The leader is the brother of 'Divine Dragon Soaring through the Sky'.

"Good, a group of bastards we've never met. Never mind, we will kill them anyway!"

Fearful of his wife's injury, he shouted, "And you my 'Shrew', are you seriously wounded? Tell me at least that it doesn't threaten your life?"

"Hurry up and slaughter them", Mei Chaofeng shouted furiously. "I am not dead yet..."

Seeing his wife leaning on the tree and not coming to lend him assistance, Chen understood then that, in spite of her usual stubbornness, she was seriously injured. Worried, he hoped to eliminate the enemy as soon as possible and take care of her. At this moment, five Freaks were surrounding him; only Ke Zhen'E remained aside ready to intervene at any time.

Chen Xuanfeng threw Guo Jing to the ground and sent a punch in the direction of Quan Jinfa. Quan, worried about the child, ducked to avoid the stroke and used this chance to snatch up Guo Jing. A somersault got them out of the enemy's range. This movement, named 'The Mischievous Cat Catches the Mouse', is used to avoid and save at the same time. It had been executed with agility and precision. Even Chen Xuanfeng was in awe of his move.

'Copper Corpse' was cruel by nature; the stronger his adversaries were, the more he wanted to make them die with atrocious suffering. Because they had injured his beloved wife he wanted it even more. The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had, for a long time, trained in two dangerous techniques; the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' and the 'Heart Breaker' palm. He had now mastered them to eight or nine tenths of their power. With a terrifying howl, he attacked his enemies without worrying about his own safety, attacking with deadly strokes every time.

The five knew that their lives were at stake at this precise moment and didn't take his attacks lightly. They mobilized all their strength to defend themselves. But they could not approach the enemy too closely since he was so dangerous.

Han Baoju decided to attack, using the technique 'Whip at the Even Soil', rolling on the ground and delivering whip strokes from all sides at Chen Xuanfeng's legs. Chen, troubled by this unexpected attack, received a stroke on the back from Nan Xiren's stick that made him utter a scream of pain. He turned around and stretched his claws towards the 'Wood Chopper'.

Nan didn't have the time to retract his stick for defense because he sensed the claws coming at him. He fell backwards to escape. Then he heard popping sounds coming from the joints of 'Copper Corpse', whose arm

suddenly stretched out an extra several inches. His hand was against the 'Wood Chopper's forehead. In a fight between experts, the murderous strokes were often avoided by one or two inches. Nan Xiren had thought that the extension of his adversary's arm had reached its extreme, yet it had stretched still farther! How would the 'Wood Chopper' escape this stroke? He soon felt the tips of Chen's nails on his forehead...

In panic, he raised his left arm and seized the enemy's wrist with a 'Catch and Control' technique, trying to block it. At that moment, Zhu Cong jumped on the back of 'Copper Corpse' and jammed his forearm onto the adversary's throat in order to strangle him. By doing that, he fully exposed his own chest, but to save the life of his sworn brother, he didn't worry about breaking the elementary precautionary rules of fighting.

At this moment, when the lives of the fighters were held by a thread, thunder sounded and the clouds covered the moon completely. It was total darkness; a person couldn't even see the fingers of his own hands and a heavy rain started to fall.

They heard the sound of two crunches and a plunk. Chen Xuanfeng had just broken the left arm of Nan Xiren and, at the same time, had given a stroke from his elbow to Zhu Cong's chest. Zhu Cong felt a terrible pain that forced him to stop the pressure on his enemy's neck and fall backwards. 'Copper Corpse', close to suffocating, stood to one side catching his breath.

"Move back everyone," Han Baoju shouted in the blackness. "Seventh sister, how do you feel?"

"Silence!" replied Han Xiaoying while moving several steps.

Astonished by the sounds of the movements made by his friends, Ke Zhen'E asked, "Second brother, what's happened?"

"The darkness is total," Quan Jinfa answered, "no one can see anything!"

'So the Heavens come to help us," Ke Zhen'E thought, delighted.

The Seven Freaks, three of whom were severely injured, were thinking that they had just lost the first part; but now dark clouds had covered the sky and it was raining heavily. Each of them kept their breathing silent and no one dared move. The extremely fine hearing of Ke Zhen'E allowed him to recognize that the breathless man that was standing seven or eight steps away from him, on the left, was not one of his brothers. He immediately threw six poisoned projectiles in that direction.

Chen Xuanfeng sensed the arrival of the invisible projectiles and jumped into air. He was indeed very strong and because of it, he succeeded in avoiding all six while at the same time, determined their source. Without making a sound, he suddenly leapt, all claws extended, toward Ke Zhen'E. Ke heard him, briskly moved to the side, and attacked with a stroke from his staff. For him, there was no difference between day and night. Since Chen Xuanfeng couldn't see anything, his power was greatly impaired. The two men were now on an equal footing. After about ten exchanges, 'Copper Corpse' had the impression that his enemy was attacking from all directions, without knowing for sure if his own strokes were directed in the proper direction. It was like living in a nightmare.

Slowly probing around, Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa were trying to help their injured brothers. The fate of

Ke Zhen'E also preoccupied them, but they weren't able to help him in this darkness. Amid the sound of the rain, they heard the hisses produced by the hands of Chen Xuanfeng and the staff of Ke Zhen'E. The two fighters had hardly exchanged thirty strokes, but, to the other Freaks, it seemed to last for an eternity. Suddenly, they heard two strokes, and 'Copper Corpse' started screaming in pain; he had been struck by the staff. The Freaks were delighted just as lightning flashed in the sky, illuminating the summit of the hill.

"Watch out, Older Brother!" Quan Jinfa shouted.

Chen Xuanfeng had benefited from this instant of vision to orient himself. He advanced, concentrating his energy in his left shoulder and suffered, without flinching, the staff's strokes. He then seized it with his left hand and his right hand grabbed at the blind man's chest. Ke Zhen'E, surprised, released his staff and leaped backwards. 'Copper Corpse' wasn't going to let such a great opportunity pass; the claw that had already torn his adversary's garment, turned suddenly into a fist. Without a single movement of his body, Chen's arm stretched and delivered a stroke loaded with internal energy, to the blind man's chest and he was propelled violently backward. At the same time, he threw the blind man's staff like a javelin. All these gestures were executed with smooth continuity; 'Copper Corpse' was very proud of it and issued a long howl of joy, accompanied by thunderous growls.

During another lightning flash that illuminated the area briefly, Han Baoju saw the staff flying towards his older Brother. Conscious of the danger, he lashed his 'Golden Dragon' whip, causing it to wrap around the projectile and make it fall.

"Now," Chen exclaimed, running towards him, "I'm going to take your dog life!" Carried away by his impetus, he stumbled on something that felt like a body; he bent over and grabbed it. It was a small boy, Guo Jing.

"Let me go!" the child shouted.

Then a new lightning flash illuminated the area. Guo Jing saw the face of the man that held him in air, a sallow face with a menacing look. He was so frightened that, instinctively, he drew his dagger and plunged it into the man's body, right in the middle of the navel, until he could push it no further.

Chen Xuanfeng let out a terrifying howl and fell backward. In the technique that he used to make his body invincible to the strokes, the vulnerable nodal location he'd chosen was situated precisely in his navel. Even though Guo Jing's dagger had an extremely sharp blade, even a simple knife, if it struck this place, would have been fatal to him. This was the reason that, during a fight, he took every precaution to protect this part of his body. When he seized the child, he didn't feel that he was a danger to him. After having caught him on the flank of the hill a little while ago, he knew that the youngster surely didn't know any martial arts. However, as the proverb says, "It is the good swimmer who drowns, and it is on flat land that the cart reverses itself". Who would have predicted that this dangerous expert was going to lose his life at the hand of a small, weak and ignorant boy!

After fatally injuring 'Copper Corpse', Guo Jing remained petrified, standing still without knowing what to do. He seemed on the verge of crying, but didn't dare let himself go.

Hearing her husband's long scream, Mei Chaofeng hurried, stumbled, fell and crawled to reach him. "My dear brother," she shouted, "how are you?"

"It is done, my little...sister", he mumbled, "hurry, flee... before you..."

"I am going to avenge you", she croaked.

"I will miss you, my little sis....little sister. I...I cannot take care of you anymore....." and with those last words Chen Xuanfeng died.

"Good brother... I will miss you too! Don't leave me!"

Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa, taking advantage of the first glow of the pre-dawn, rushed to the attack.

Mei Chaofeng had not only lost her vision, but she felt her head spinning from the poison's effects. While training in the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' the spouses had, for about ten years, absorbed arsenic acid in small quantities regularly. They neutralized the toxic effects with their internal energy. Using this dangerous method was the only way that Chen Xuanfeng had found to increase their internal and external strength. With time, Mei had been partially immunized against poison; otherwise the poisoned projectiles of Ke Zhen'E would have killed her long ago.

She defended herself so ferociously that the Freaks didn't even manage to reach her and were repeatedly put in danger. Han Baoju was beginning to get angry. He thought to himself, "If we can't manage to overcome her on a three against one basis, and even worse, she's injured and blind, what a blow to the reputation of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'!" He then attacked more furiously with his whip, focusing on trying to hit her back. Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa, noticing their enemy staggering, also increased the

vigor of their attacks. Just as it seemed they would carry the day against her, a storm arose and dark clouds covered the sky again. Suddenly, the mixed violent gusts of wind and rain blinded them again. The three Freaks dropped to the ground to protect themselves. Much later, the storm abated and the moon again showed from behind the clouds. Han Baoju jumped to his feet and uttered a scream of frustration; Mei Chaofeng and the body of Chen Xuanfeng had disappeared. What greeted him was the sight of his severely injured friends lying on the ground. The small head of Guo Jing slowly appeared from behind some rocks. Everyone was soaked to the bone.

The three uninjured survivors rose to take care of the injured. Nan Xiren had a broken arm, but fortunately no internal injuries. Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong, whose neigong was powerful, were not too affected either, even though they had been hit by several strokes from 'Copper Corpse'. However, Zhang Ahsheng had been hit two times by the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws' and also received a deadly stroke to the head. He was conscious but his life was on the line.

Seeing him close to death, the Six collapsed in sadness, especially Han Xiaoying who knew very well that the Fifth brother had been in love with her for a long time. But she was a bit of a tomboy, enjoying martial arts above all else, and had little to do with matters of the heart. Zhang Ahsheng, for his part, laughed it off the whole time; they had never admitted to any feelings. Thinking of how he had thrown himself under the enemy's claws to protect her, she hugged Zhang sobbing.

Zhang Ahsheng's plump face was normally cheerful and smiling. Even now he smiled slightly and his big hand softly caressed Xiaoying's hair. "Don't cry", he said to her trying to comfort her. "Don't cry. I am alright."

"Fifth brother", she said while hiccupping back her sobs, "do you want to marry me?"

Zhang gave a silly laugh, causing the pain from his injuries to make him suffer badly, and he began to lose consciousness.

"Fifth brother", she continued, "I assure you that I already consider myself your wife... I won't ever marry anyone else. After my death, we will remain together for eternity."

"Seventh sister", mumbled Zhang, "I have not taken good care of you... Me... I am not worthy of you..."

"You always took very good care of me", she sobbed. "I always knew it..."

With his eyes full of tears, Zhu Cong asked Guo Jing, "When you came here, was it to learn martial arts from us?"

"Yes", the child answered.

"Then you must obey us from now on."

Guo Jing nodded his head.

"We, the seven brothers and sister will all be your Shifus," continued Zhu Cong while wiping away his tears. "But now, your fifth Shifu's spirit is going to leave us, kowtow and pay him homage."

Guo Jing didn't know what precisely what 'spirit is going to leave us' meant, but he immediately obeyed, kowtowing and touching the ground with his forehead.

Zhang Ahsheng, his face white like linen, forced himself to smile. "That is sufficient... Brave boy, I won't be able to teach you my knowledge... Ah, but if I did and even if you had learned what I know, it would not serve you very well. I

am not naturally quick witted, and rather lazy about practicing... I relied on the little strength that I had... had I worked more, maybe I would not have met a sad end today..." He almost fainted and became even paler.

"Neither are you", he said while panting, "naturally gifted; it's absolutely necessary for you to put in a lot of effort. When you're tempted to be lazy, think about your Fifth Shifu and the state in which you see him..." He wanted to continue, but didn't have any more strength.

Han Xiaoying lowered her ear to Zhang's mouth, and heard him barely say, "Teach the child well... Don't let us lose to that cow-nose Taoist priest..."

"Be assured", said Han Xiaoying, "the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' will not lose!"

Zhang Ahsheng gave a small foolish laugh, closed his eyes, departed this world, and returned his soul.

The Six Freaks broke into sobs. Since they had become sworn brothers, a very strong bond united them. During the past years searching for Li Ping and her son, they had lived day and night together. And now, at this moment, one of them had tragically died in this foreign land. How could they not be overwhelmed with grief? After having cried themselves out, they dug a grave and buried Zhang Ahsheng. When they finished, they erected a big rock to mark the place of his grave. By then the sun had already risen.

Quan Jinfa and Han Baoju left to search for visible clues that could lead them to Mei Chaofeng. After the storm, the sand showed no traces of her passing and it was impossible to know where she had gone. They extended their search for several li around the mountain, but came up with nothing.

“In the steppe”, Zhu Cong said, “I imagine that this blind... this woman can’t go very far. The poisoned projectiles should have taken effect by now and she will probably die somewhere. Let’s take the child back home first and take care of our injured. After that, Third and Sixth brother, and Seventh sister can continue the search.”

All agreed and shed some more tears while saying farewell at the grave of their deceased brother.

Chapter 5 - Crooked Bow Shooting Eagles

Translated by Foreva and Strunf



Temujin smiled, aimed his bow and shot an arrow of iron that, like the lightning, slicing through the body of a black eagle. The crowd applauded. The Khan then gave his bow to Ogedai. "It's your turn!"

A row of people came down the mountain. After walking for a while, they suddenly heard the roars of wild beasts in front of them. Han Baoju leapt on his yellow horse, and went to see what was happening. After galloping for a while, the yellow horse suddenly stopped and no amount of urging would make it move.

Knowing in his heart that there was something strange ahead, he stood in the stirrups and looked into the distance; he could see a group of people with some leopards clawing at the earth. Knowing the yellow horse's fear of leopards, he jumped off and took hold of his Golden Dragon whip. Moving forward, he saw that the two leopards had uncovered a body. Continuing forward a few more steps, he saw that the body was that of 'Copper Corpse' Chen Xuanfeng. The area from his collar bone to his lower abdomen was a blood covered mess, as though the skin had been sliced off.

Surprised, he thought, "He was killed by the boy last night with a dagger thrust through his navel, so why is his corpse here? Since he is already dead, why would anyone do this to his corpse? Who did it and what is the meaning behind it? Do the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' have another enemy in the desert with hatred that strong?"

Not long after, Zhu Cong and the others arrived. No one could understand the reason behind the mutilation. They looked at Chen Xuanfeng's corpse, whose face still showed a fierce expression, which caused a quick shiver of fear in everyone. Thinking back to last night's terrifying fight on

the barren hills, they knew, that if not for Guo Jing's lucky hit with his dagger, the outcome might have been very different. Just thinking about it brought a chill to their hearts.

By this time, the two leopards were chewing on the corpse. To one side, there was a little boy on a horse loudly urging the leopard handlers to drag the leopards away. Turning his head, he saw Guo Jing, and shouted to him "Ha! So you are hiding here. You didn't have the guts to help Tolui fight, what a useless friend!" It was Senggum's son Dukhsh.

"You all fought Tolui again? Where is he?" worried, Guo Jing asked.

"I'm taking the leopards to eat him up. You'd better surrender now, or else I will include you too," Dukhsh replied smugly. He had seen the 'Six Freaks of the South' at one side, if not for them, Dukhsh would have already sent the leopards to attack Guo Jing.

Guo Jing persisted, "Where is Tolui?"

Ignoring him, Dukhsh shouted loudly, "The leopards will eat Tolui now!" as he led the leopard handlers away. One leopard handler advised him, "Little master, that boy is Temujin Khan's son." Dukhsh immediately hit the leopard handler with a slash of his riding whip, shouting, "What is there to be afraid of? How dare he raise his hand to hit me today? Move aside!" The leopard handler, not daring to disobey his order, followed Dukhsh. The other leopard handler was afraid that this might cause some irreversible problems; he turned and ran, shouting, "I'm going to inform Temujin Khan." He was gone before Dukhsh could stop him. Dukhsh said bitterly, "Fine, by the time Uncle Temujin comes, it'll be too late! Then we'll see what kind of

solution he comes up with.” He whipped his horse, forcing the group to move faster.

Although Guo Jing was terribly afraid of leopards, he was more worried about his sworn brother's safety. He said to Han Xiaoying, “Shifu, Dukhsh is going to get the leopards to eat my sworn brother. I need to inform him so he can escape.”

“If you hurry there, may be the leopards might eat you too? Aren't you afraid?” Han Xiaoying asked.

He replied, “I'm afraid.”

“Are you still going?”

After hesitating for a split-second, Guo Jing affirmed, “I'm still going!” before running away rapidly.

Because Zhu Cong's wound was still painful, he was quietly lying forward on his horse's neck. Noting Guo Jing's chivalrous heart, he mused, “This child may not be very smart, but he is, nevertheless, a person worthy of our generation.”

Han Xiaoying replied, “Fourth brother's perception is right! Let's go save them.”

Quan Jinfa cautioned the rest, “This little lord keeps leopards at home; he must be the son of an important general. We'd better be careful not to create trouble, since three of us are injured.”

Han Baoju used his lightness kung fu to catch, pick up, and place Guo Jing on his shoulders. Although Han Baoju is small with short legs, he can still move very quickly. For Guo Jing, sitting on his fat and sturdy shoulders was like riding on a good war horse, fast and steady. Han Baoju rushed to ‘Wind Chaser's’ side, and with a great leap, he took Guo

Jing with him onto the horse's back. Within moments, they caught up with Dukhsh and the leopard handlers. After a short gallop, they saw ten or more kids surrounding Tolui. It was Dukhsh's gang following his orders. They were not trying to attack him, just trying to keep Tolui from leaving.

Having been taught three skillful moves by Zhu Cong, Tolui had practiced the moves that night until he was familiar with them all. Come morning, he was not able to find Guo Jing or to get his third brother Ogedai to help him. Tolui bravely went to fight Dukhsh by himself. Dukhsh had brought along ten or so reinforcements. Seeing him alone rather surprised him. When Tolui requested that they only fight one on one and not attack him as a group, Dukhsh agreed immediately. He thought that there's no way Tolui could beat him. But once they started fighting, Tolui kept using the three moves that Zhu Cong taught him, and incredibly, he managed to best Dukhsh. Although the three moves that Zhu Cong taught him were simple, they were actually the essence of the 'Vacant Fist' technique. Furthermore, since these three moves had no complicated changes, Tolui, being very smart, picked it up immediately. So when he used them, the other Mongolian kids were no match for him. The Mongolians place great importance on keeping promises. Since they had agreed to battle one on one only and even though they were upset, they could not do anything about it. Tolui made Dukhsh fall twice, and even hit him on the nose. Dukhsh was furious, so he ran off to get his father's hunting leopards.

After single handedly winning against so many kids, Tolui was very proud of himself. That was why he stood quietly in the center of the surrounding kids, not even thinking about running away. Unknown to him, big trouble was coming.

From the distance, Tolui heard Guo Jing's faint shouts, "Tolui, Tolui, run away now. Dukhsh is bringing his leopards

to eat you up!”

Tolui was shocked and tried to rush out of the circle. But the kids surrounding him kept blocking him; there was no way for him to escape. Soon the Six Freaks of the South, together with Dukhsh, arrived one after the other. Following them, the leopard handlers led the leopards there. Though the Six Freaks of the South could have prevented the oncoming danger by catching Dukhsh, they did not want to create more trouble. They also wanted to see how Tolui and Guo Jing faced the danger, so they did not offer any help.

Suddenly, they heard sound of numerous horses coming like the wind. Someone shouted at the top of their lungs, “Don't let the leopards go, don't let go of the leopards!” Muqali, Boroqul and the rest of the ‘Four Aces’ had arrived. When they heard the leopard handler's report, they didn't have enough time to inform Temujin, and hurriedly rushed to the scene. Temujin, Ong Khan, Jamuka, Senggum and the others were at the Mongolian camp chatting with Wanyan Honglie and his brother. Hearing the leopard handler's report, they were shocked and ran out of the ger and leapt on their horses.

“Quickly inform them that I order Dukhsh not to do this. It is important that Temujin Khan's son is not injured,” Ong Khan ordered. His men rode their most spirited horses to where the trouble was.

Because Wanyan Hongxi was not able to see the leopards fighting against men yesterday, he was still feeling bored. Hearing this, he felt excitement rise and stood up exclaiming, “Let's all go take a look!”

Wanyan Honglie speculated, “If Senggum's leopards really kill Temujin's son, then their families will no longer be

friendly. After that happens, they may start fighting. Who knows, maybe both sides will suffer terrible losses and be severely weakened. That will definitely be good fortune for my Jin country!"

The Wanyan brothers, Ong Khan, Senggum, Jamuka and the others arrived at the scene, only to see that the two hunting leopards' chains had already been unfastened. The leopards crouched on the ground with low growling noises coming from their throats. In front of the leopards stood two kids, Tolui and his younger sworn brother Guo Jing. Temujin and his 'Four Aces' raised their bows and pointed them at the leopards; they were ready for action. Although Temujin saw his youngest son in a dangerous situation, he also knew that those two hunting leopards were very precious to Senggum. Senggum had caught the leopards when they were young; he reared and trained them until they grew strong and ferocious. Since that could not be achieved easily and took much time, Temujin felt that if the leopards did not attack, he wouldn't harm them.

Seeing the crowd arriving and relying on his grandfather's and father's adoration for him, Dukhsh felt even more courageous. He kept urging the leopards to attack.

Ong Khan then shouted, "Stop this now!"

The sounds of hooves were heard as someone riding a red horse arrived. On the horse was a middle-aged woman, clad in leopard fur, and in her arms, a little girl. It was Temujin's wife, Tolui's mother.

She had been chatting in the camp with Senggum's wife. When she heard the news, she immediately rushed out with her daughter Hua Zheng. Seeing the danger, she was both shocked and worried. She shouted "Quickly, shoot the arrow!" With all her being focused on her son, she

absentmindedly placed her daughter on the ground, forgetting about her safety.

As a little girl of four years, how was Hua Zheng supposed to know of the leopard's ferocious nature? She happily bounded over to her brother's side. Spotting the leopards with their pretty colored fur, she was reminded of her second brother Ogedai's hunting dogs. She stretched her hand out, wanting to pat the leopard's head. The crowd was startled, and yelled at her to stop; but it was already too late. The two leopards, already nervous and agitated, growled at the same time, and leapt forward fiercely. Alarmed, the crowd called out in distress.

Although Temujin had already aimed his arrow, Hua Zheng's sudden appearance was something that no one had expected. In the blink of an eye, the leopards were in the air. Hua Zheng was blocking Temujin's aim at the strategic spot on the leopard's head where they have to be hit to ensure an instant kill. A shot by Temujin now would only injure the leopard, and that would aggravate it further. The 'Four Aces' threw down their bows and drew their knives. As they moved forward, they saw Guo Jing roll forward to pick up Hua Zheng; at the same time one leopard's front claws was on Guo Jing's shoulder. The 'Four Aces' raised their knives, only to hear several faint sounds. When the noises passed, the two leopards suddenly fell growling and rolling from side to side. After a short time they were motionless.

Boroqul went forward to find out what had happened. He saw blood running from the leopards' foreheads. It was obvious that a kung fu master had used a hidden weapon to hit the leopards' brains. He turned around and saw six calm, composed Han people standing to one side watching the on-going scene. He knew that the hidden weapons had been thrown by them. Temujin's wife hurriedly picked up

the now bawling Hua Zheng from Guo Jing's arms and pulled Tolui to her bosom as she tried to comfort Hua Zheng.

Senggum asked angrily, "Who killed the leopards?"

The crowd remained silent and no one answered. Ke Zhen'E had heard the leopards' growls, and fearing that the leopards would harm Guo Jing, had thrown four projectiles with poisonous tips. Since that action only took a wave of the hand, and since everyone had their eyes focused on the leopards, there was no one who actually saw who fired them.

Temujin smiled and said, "Brother Senggum, I'll repay you with four good leopards when we get back, and I'll add eight pairs of black eagles."

Senggum was seething with anger when he heard that, but he remained silent. By now, Ong Khan was angrily scolding Dukhsh. Humiliated at receiving this treatment in front of the crowd, he tried to deflect the blame from himself. In a fit of temper he lay down on the ground and began rolling and hitting, crying and shouting. Ong Khan loudly commanded him to stop, but he did not care.

Because Temujin was still grateful for what Ong Khan had done for him in the past, he felt that it would be a pity to break up the two families' friendship over such a small matter. He smiled and bent over to pick up Dukhsh. Dukhsh was still crying and yelling and tried his best to struggle, but could not. Still smiling, Temujin tried to salvage the situation, "Step-father, the kids were only playing, there's no need to get worked up. I think he is a good boy and I'm thinking of betrothing my daughter to him. What do you think?"

Ong Khan saw that Hua Zheng had eyes like glistening dew, and skin like a baby lamb, fair and cute, and felt happy in his heart. Laughingly, he said, "What could be wrong with that? Let's have an even closer relationship; I'll betroth my eldest granddaughter to your son Jochi."

Temujin agreed, "Thanks Step-father!" He turned around and said to Senggum, "Brother Senggum, we are now in-laws!"

Senggum had always felt that he was of a higher status than Temujin. He was already jealous of Temujin, yet looked down on him. Although he was not happy about becoming in-laws with Temujin, he could not go against his father's wishes. He could only smile weakly.

At this point, Wanyan Honglie noticed the 'Six Freaks of the South', and he was shocked. "What are they doing here? I'm sure they are chasing me. I wonder if the temperamental Taoist priest with the surname Qiu is around here as well?" he asked himself. Since he currently had the protection of numerous soldiers, he was not afraid of them. But if he gave the command to capture them, he was afraid that it might cause trouble. The 'Six Freaks' were listening to Temujin's and the others' conversations and had not even noticed him. He turned and moved behind the crowd of soldiers, while at the same time thinking of ways to handle the matter. As for Ong Khan and Temujin's families' engagement, he did not think much of it.

Temujin knew that it was the 'Six Freaks of the South' that saved his daughter's life, and he waited for Ong Khan and the others to leave, before commanding Boroqul to reward them richly with furs and gold. He then reached his hand out to stroke the top of Guo Jing's head and repeatedly praised him for his courage and valor. Temujin said that risking his own life to save another, is something that not all

adults will do, much less a small child. When he asked Guo Jing why was he so brave, Guo Jing just stood there dumbly since he could not find an answer. After pondering for some time, he said, "Leopards will eat people."

Hearing that, Temujin laughed loudly. Tolui then told why he started fighting with Dukhsh. When Temujin heard how Dukhsh kept mentioning embarrassing events from his past, anger boiled deep in his heart. He said nothing about it, only saying, "In the future, don't bother with him." Temujin then turned to Quan Jinfa and asked, "How much gold do you want to stay in my camp to teach my son kung fu?"

Quan Jinfa thought, "We were thinking of finding a place to teach Guo Jing kung fu. If we can teach him here, there would no better place." He replied, "The Great Khan's willingness to accept the six of us is something we could not have asked for. You can pay us whatever you decide is suitable, we wouldn't dare to discuss or argue about the amount." Temujin was pleased and he told Boroqul to look after them; after that, he left to see off the Wanyan brothers.

The Six Freaks of the South rode slowly behind the others while they discussed the matter.

Han Baoju said, "The skin on the chest of Chen Xuanfeng's corpse was removed by someone; it must have been an enemy of his."

Quan Jinfa replied, "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' are cruel and ruthless; having many enemies isn't something to be surprised at. But I don't understand why his enemy didn't simply chop up his body, or slash him all over. Why only slice off a large piece of skin from his chest?"

"I have been thinking of that all this time, but I still cannot figure out the reasoning behind it," Ke Zhen'E replied. "The most pressing task at hand is to find out where 'Iron Corpse' is.

"Precisely! If that person is not killed, she will bring much danger to us in the future. I'm afraid that she will not die from the poison," Zhu Cong agreed.

With tears in her eyes, Han Xiaoying spoke up, "Fifth brother's dead, how could we not avenge him?"

So Han Baoju, Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfu, rode their fast horses to try to find 'Iron Corpse'. But after numerous days of searching, they were not able to find a trace of her. Han Baoju considered, "The woman's eyes were hit by elder brother's poison projectiles. The poison must have worked on her by now; she probably died in some mountain valley." The rest of them agreed. Ke Zhen'E knew in his heart that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' were very smart and devious. Unless he could touch her corpse with his own hands, it would always remain a heavy weight on his heart. He did not want to bother his younger brothers and sister with his worries and did not tell them of his concerns.

From then on, the Six Freaks of the South remained on the steppe, teaching Guo Jing and Tolui kung fu. Temujin knew that kung fu is for protecting oneself in close contact with an opponent. He wanted Tolui and Guo Jing to learn these techniques briefly, and to spend most of their time learning riding, shooting with their bows and arrows, and learning other important skills of the battlefield. The 'Six Freaks of the South' were not familiar with these Mongol skills so Guo Jing and Tolui learned these from Jebe and Boroquul.

In the evenings, the 'Six Freaks of the South' taught Guo Jing alone, teaching him fists, sword, hidden weapons, and

lightness kung fu. Although Guo Jing was slow by nature, he knew that he had to avenge his father in the future using kung fu, so he did not complain and worked as hard as he could.

Zhu Cong, Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying's kung fu was a bit too hard for him to comprehend. With Han Baoju and Nan Xiren's basic kung fu, he just followed their directions exactly and slowly but steadily learned it. This basic kung fu strengthened bodies but was not designed to overcome an enemy and win a fight.

Han Baoju often said, "Training you is like training a camel. Strong is strong, but can a camel be victorious over a leopard?"

Whenever he heard that, Guo Jing only showed a silly smile. When the Six Freaks taught Guo Jing, they only supervised his learning, instead of explaining it to him. Of the ten moves they tried to teach him, he couldn't learn a single one; they could not help feeling discouraged. Whenever they talked about it, they would only sigh and shake their heads. Although they knew that their chances of being victorious over Qiu Chuji's disciple were almost non-existent, an agreement had been made so they couldn't give up. As a business man, Quan Jinfa's talents lay in the field of intricate calculations. He often said, "For Qiu Chuji to find the Yang family widow, I figure he has about an eighty percent chance of success. That improves our chances by twenty percent. Whether the Yang family widow gave birth to a boy or girl, who knows? The chance that she gave birth to a boy is only half, with that, we potentially gain another forty percent. If it's a son, maybe he won't survive to adulthood, we then gain another ten percent. Even if he manages to grow up, maybe he'll be as stupid as Jing'er. Therefore, I'd say that we still have an eighty percent chance of winning."

The other five 'Freaks' thought that what he said wasn't wrong, however, saying that the Yang family's son's aptitude for learning martial arts might be the same as Guo Jing's, they had to know that Quan Jinfu was trying to console them. Luckily, Guo Jing had a good heart and he is exceedingly obedient, so the 'Six Freaks' really liked his character a lot.

On the prairies of Outer Mongolia, the coming of green summer grass and the brilliant white of winter snows, ten years quickly went by. Guo Jing had become a sturdy youth of sixteen. There were only two years left until the martial arts competition, so the 'Six Freaks' stepped up their supervision. They ordered him to stop practicing riding and shooting temporarily, and from dusk to dawn, concentrate on practicing fists and the sword. During these ten years, Temujin had many battles and had swallowed up numerous other tribes into his own. He commanded his subordinates strictly, and all his soldiers were courageous and excelled in fighting. He was both courageous and resourceful and knew when to attack using force or attack using strategy. In all of Mongolia, no one could be compared to him. As the livestock bred and numbers grew, the population also increased, so that the differences between Temujin and Ong Khan's tribes became smaller.

The violent winds gradually stopped and the heavy snows began to decrease, but the outer prairies of Mongolia still remained bitterly cold. A certain day arrived; it was the Pure Brightness Festival. (Note: Qing Ming Festival. A day for paying respects to the dead. The Chinese pay their respects at their ancestor's / family's graves, and may clean up the grave and pull out the weeds etc.) The 'Six Freaks of the South' arose early and Guo Jing with them; they took cows and sheep as sacrificial items to Zhang Aosheng's grave and swept it. Since the Mongolians are nomads, they

move around more or less continuously. They have no fixed place to stay. At this point in time, the Mongolian camp was quite far away from Zhang Ahsheng's grave. Even riding fast horses, it took them more than half of a day to get there. The seven of them climbed the barren hill and swept away the piled up snow from the grave. They then lit candles, burned incense, and knelt in front of the grave praying.

Han Xiaoying secretly prayed, "Fifth brother, for the past ten years we've given all of our energy and our hearts to teaching this child. His gift for learning isn't good and he can't learn our martial arts properly. I hope that fifth brother's spirit in the heavens will watch over him now and at the Jiaxing martial arts competition in two years time. Do not let this child spoil the prestige and name of the 'Seven Freaks of the South'!"

The 'Six Freaks' were born and lived their lives in the south, with its warm hills and waters. During the time they stayed in the Mongolian desert with its cold winds, they had become weaker and frailer and their faces looked lean and somber. The hair at their temples had started turning white. Although Han Xiaoying's charisma and attractiveness had not lessened, she was no longer the pink-cheeked young girl of yesteryear.

Zhu Cong surveyed the graveside piles of skulls. After ten years of enduring winds and snow, the skulls had not started to decay. In his heart, there was a feeling that he could not express. Throughout these years, he had searched all over the surrounding country for hundreds of li with Quan Jinfa. They searched in every mountain valley and in every cave, trying to find Mei Chaofeng. Had she died from poisoning, there should be a skeleton left behind. If she did not die, it would be very hard for a blind woman to live in seclusion for a long time and not leave a trail of

some kind. Nonetheless, she had vanished into thin air like a spirit. On this lonely hill in the wilderness, in this grave and the piles of white bones, lay the only marks that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had left behind in the desert. The seven stayed in front of the grave to have a memorial meal and drink; then returned to their dwellings. After a short rest, the 'Six Freaks' took Guo Jing to the hillside to practice his martial arts.

One day his fourth master, 'Wood Chopper of the Southern Mountains' Nan Xiren and he practiced using the 'Open Hills Palms' Technique (Kai Shan Zhang Fa). Nan Xiren intended that he use as much martial arts as he could. They sparred for around seventy or eighty moves continuously before Nan Xiren suddenly pushed his left palm outwards and flipped his body in the move 'The Hawk Hunting Rabbits' (Cang Ying Bu Tu), aiming the palm at Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing bent over to avoid his move; then moving his leg in a circular motion with the move 'Autumn Winds Sweeping the Fallen Leaves' (Qiu Feng Sao Luo Ye), he swept his leg towards his teacher's lower body. Nan Xiren countered using 'Iron Bull Tilling the Land' (Tie Niu Tian Di), attacking with his palms. Guo Jing had just started to withdraw his leg to change his stance, when Nan Xiren suddenly shouted "Remember this move!" His left hand swiftly moved out and tried to hit Guo Jing's chest from the front. Guo Jing's right palm hurriedly moved to block, because this palm is considered rather fast. Then Nan Xiren's left palm flew out, and with a slap, both palms connected. Although Nan Xiren only used about thirty percent of his power, Guo Jing could not help falling over. Both his hands hit the ground, but he immediately jumped up, with a look of shame showing on his face.

Nan Xiren was just about to instruct him about the essence of this move, when suddenly, from a grove of trees, came

two bursts of laughter. Then a youthful girl came out, clapping her hands and smiling. She shouted, "Guo Jing, are you beaten by your teacher again?"

Guo Jing's face turned red as he said, "I'm practicing now, don't bother me!"

The young girl laughed, "I like seeing you getting beaten up!"

The girl was Temujin's young daughter Hua Zheng. She, Tolui and Guo Jing were around the same age, and they'd played together since they were small. Because her parents doted on her, it is not surprising that she was a bit arrogant and willful. Since birth, Guo Jing's character was straight forward and simple; whenever she threw a tantrum without reason, they always clashed. However, after arguing, they would soon make up. Hua Zheng knew that she was wrong and would sooth his feelings with soft words. Hua Zheng's mother still remembered how Guo Jing risked his life at the leopard's mouth to save her daughter. She was especially fond of him and often gave gifts of clothing and livestock to his mother and him.

Guo Jing said, "I'm practicing with my teacher, go away!"

Hua Zheng laughed and said, "This is practicing? I'd call it getting beaten up!"

While they were talking, several Mongolian soldiers arrived. One Ten Soldier Leader got off his horse, and bowed to Hua Zheng, saying, "Hua Zheng, Great Khan is calling for you." Mongolians are simple by nature, and do not have the courteous customs of the Han people. Although Hua Zheng is the Khan's daughter, everyone still called her by her name. Hua Zheng said, "What for?" The Ten Soldier Leader replied, "Ong Khan's messengers have arrived."

Hua Zheng wrinkled her brow and said angrily "I'm not going."

The Ten Soldier Leader continued, "If you don't go, the Khan will be angry."

When she was very young, Hua Zheng had been betrothed to Ong Khan's grandson Dukhsh by her father. But over the years, she had developed a close relationship with Guo Jing, although it really couldn't be said that there are feelings between them. Yet, whenever she thought about having to part from Guo Jing to marry that infamously arrogant Dukhsh, she couldn't help but feel sad. She pursed her small mouth and kept silent as she thought. In the end, she did not dare disobey her father's command, and followed the Ten Soldier Leader back to the camp.

Ong Khan and Senggum decided that Senggum's son has grown up and wanted to pick a date for the marriage. Therefore, they sent people with gifts and Temujin wanted her to meet the messengers.

That night while Guo Jing was sleeping, he suddenly heard the soft sound of someone clapping three times outside the ger. He sat and heard someone speaking the Han language, "Guo Jing, come out."

Guo Jing was curious but didn't know the voice. He lifted up a corner of the flap of the door cover and peered outside. In the moonlight he saw a person standing near a large tree.

Guo Jing went out of the ger and moved forward to see that the person was dressed in a large sleeved long robe and hair combed into a bun; this person looked like neither a man nor a woman. The face was hidden by the shadows of the tree and couldn't be seen clearly. The person was actually a Taoist priest, but Guo Jing had never seen a

Taoist priest before and asked, "Who are you? Why are you looking for me?"

The person said, "You are Guo Jing?"

"Yes," Guo Jing replied.

The person demanded, "Where's your dagger that can cut iron as though it were mud? Take it out and show me!" He suddenly moved and leapt close by to him; then he sent out a palm aimed right for his chest. Guo Jing knew that the person attacked without reason and his attack was vicious; he was greatly surprised and moved sideways immediately to evade the palm. He shouted, "What was that for?"

The person said with a smile, "Just testing your abilities." Then with his left arm, he sent out a fist with strength that was fierce and swift.

Guo Jing, feeling anger rising, slanted his body to avoid the move. Then he raised his right hand and fiercely grabbed the enemy's wrist while his left hand moved to take his opponent's elbow. This move was the 'Strong Soldier Breaks the Wrist' (Zhuang Shi Duan Wan) from 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique (Fen Jing Cuo Gu Shou). You need only catch hold of the enemy's wrist, then the elbow, push forward a little, then a twist, and with a "kacha" sound, the right wrist bone will be twisted out of place. The 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique was passed on to him by his second teacher Zhu Cong. Although Zhu Cong's language and everyday behavior tends to be comical, his mind is actually very sharp. Ke Zhen'E and he had secretly held several discussions about Mei Chaofeng. Although both of her eyes were injured by poisoned projectiles, her martial arts are unusual and strange; perhaps she was able to resist the poison. If she did not die, she will definitely seek revenge.

The longer the time before she shows herself, the more thorough her plans will be and the more vicious and evil her methods. In the past ten years, even though no trace of Mei Chaofeng had been discovered, the 'Six Freaks' were never complacent; in fact, they were even more cautious than ever. Whenever Zhu Cong looked at the fingernail scars left on the back of his hand, he couldn't help but feel fearful. When he thought about her strong martial arts, he knew it would be very difficult to harm her. To resist the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw', why not use the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique? This kung fu set focuses on dislocating or breaking the opponent's bones, using ultra fast methods, to attack the other party's limbs, skull and neck bones.

In the past, back home in China, Zhu Cong regretted he had never asked for advice from any Masters that were experts in this style of kung fu. None of his brothers and sister knew it either.

After thinking for some time, he remembered that all the martial arts in the world were created by people. Since there is no one here to teach this technique to me, will it be hard for me to create my own version? His nickname, 'Magical Hands Scholar' (Miao Shou Shu Sheng), referred to his very fast hands. Furthermore, he was very familiar with attacking accupoints and knows their positions well. Using his unique talents, he re-created the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' method without too much difficulty. After numerous years of practice, the essence of this technique was deeply ingrained in him. Although his method may differ from Shaolin kung fu, it was still powerful. He analyzed and worked on it with Quan Jinfa, and then passed on his techniques to Guo Jing.

Guo Jing was battling a strong opponent, so when he started attacking, the first move he used was the

'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' move.

Although not an expert, he practiced this kung fu a lot, and the way he used the moves was close to perfect. That person's wrist and elbow was suddenly held by Guo Jing, and in surprise, he sent out his left palm swiftly, aiming for Guo Jing's face. Guo Jing wanted to twist the enemy's wrist bones out of place, but the enemy's palm suddenly came. With both hands holding onto his enemy, he had no way to defend. All he could do was let go and leap backwards. He felt the force of the palm sweeping past his face with an uncomfortable burning sensation.

When he turned around, he saw his enemy was actually a handsome youth of around seventeen or eighteen years, with a refined face and long lashes. He heard him say in a low voice, "Your kung fu is not bad. You did not waste the Six Freaks of the South's ten years of teaching."

Guo Jing was only using one palm to protect himself, so he was very cautious and asked, "Who are you? Why are you looking for me?"

The youth shouted, "Let's spar again." Before he stopped speaking, he'd already raised his palms from his side.

Guo Jing stayed calm and did not move; he waited until he could feel the movement of the air caused by the enemy's palm nearing his chest. He moved his body slightly and his left hand grasped the enemy's arm. He raised his right hand and pinched the enemy's cheek. He had only to hold onto the enemy's face, swiftly pull outwards, and the jaw joint will dislocate.

This move was given a humorous name by Zhu Cong; he called it 'Jokes will Undo the Jaws' (Xiao Yu Jie Yi), meaning laughing until the chin drops. This time around, the youth was more alert, and used his right hand to defend while

attacking horizontally with his left. Guo Jing still used the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separating the Bones' technique to defend. Within a short time, they had exchanged more than ten moves. The youthful priest's movements were light and graceful; his palms swift and powerful. Before the palm hits, his body had moved, and it was hard to tell where the palms came from.

This was the very first time that Guo Jing fought an enemy using martial arts, and it was against one with high kung fu skills. After battling for awhile, he felt despair. The youth's left foot flew out, and with a pat, hit Guo Jing's right hip. Luckily, the enemy did not use all his strength and Guo Jing's basic kung fu was very strong. His body only shook a little, and immediately both palms were flying again, protecting all the weak spots on his body, as he tried his best to defend and attack. The youthful priest kept pressing him hard, and Guo Jing knew that he could not cope for much longer. Suddenly he heard a voice from behind him shouting, "Attack his lower body!" It was his third teacher Han Baoju's voice, and he felt joy in his heart. He angled his body to the right then turned around. He saw that all of his six teachers had been standing behind him for a long time. With all of his concentration focused on battling the enemy, he did not notice that they were there.

His spirits rose greatly and he followed his third teacher's advice, fiercely attacking the priest's lower body. The priest's body was lightly built, and his lower body, as his third teacher was pointing out, was definitely not very strong. Since spectators could usually see the flaws from the sidelines, the Six Freaks of the South had seen his from the beginning. After being attacked by Guo Jing for a time, the youth couldn't help but fall back. Guo Jing felt that victory was near. Seeing his enemy stumble, he attacked with a series of 'Mandarin Duck' kicks (Yuan Yang), with

both feet flying. But his enemy was only trying to trick Guo Jing with this ruse; both Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying called out together, "Watch out!"

Because Guo Jing lacked experience, he didn't even know what to watch out for, when his right foot kicked out, it was instantly grabbed by the enemy.

The youthful priest took advantage of the way he kicked and sent his palm out to hit him. Guo Jing couldn't resist it, and with a somersault, he fell onto the ground. He landed on his back and it hurt terribly. With the move 'Carp Flipping Upright' (Li Yu Da Ting), he immediately sprang up to attack again, but saw his six teachers surrounding the youthful priest. The priest neither resisted nor tried to attack; he raised his hands together in the traditional greeting manner, and said in a clear voice, "Disciple Yin Zhiping is following the instructions of my honored teacher 'Chang Chun Zi' [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji, who asks if the masters are well." While saying that, he respectfully kowtowed.

Hearing that this person was sent by Qiu Chuji, the 'Six Freaks of the South' were curious but feared that it might be part of some scheme. They did not raise their arms to help him up. Yin Zhiping stood up and took out a letter. With both hands, he presented it to Zhu Cong.

Ke Zhen'E heard patrolling Mongolian soldiers coming nearer so he said, "Let's talk inside."

Yin Zhiping followed the 'Six Freaks' into their ger. Quan Jinfa lit a candle made of sheep's fat. It was the ger that the five male Freaks lived in; Han Xiaoying lived in another ger with other unmarried Mongolian women. Yin Zhiping saw that the furnishings in the ger were simple and rough and thought that the 'Six Freaks' everyday life must be quite

tough. He bowed again and said, "Every elder here must have suffered greatly from being here for all these years, my teacher is grateful to you beyond words. He specially commanded this disciple to come and thank each of you."

Ke Zhen'E let out a hmph, thinking, "If that truly is the reason you are here, then why did you fight Jing'er till he fell over? Were you trying to make us feel inferior before the competition?"

Zhu Cong had by now opened the envelope and taken out the letter. In his clear and resonant voice, he read out: "Quanzhen disciple, Qiu Chuji respectfully greets the 'Six Heroes of the South'. Master Ke, Master Zhu, Master Han, Master Nan, Master Quan and Heroine Han. The years have passed quickly since we parted in the south. The 'Seven Heroes' are people of their words and your righteousness and your integrity is awe-inspiring. Your benevolence and chivalry matches the ancients of old."

After hearing this, the wrinkled face of Ke Zhen'E looked somewhat pleased.

Zhu Cong continued: "Hearing that Master Zhang died in Mongolia was very saddening. I am still very shaken by Master Zhang's death. Due to your good fortune and my good luck, I was able to find the son of the late Mr. Yang nine years ago...."

"Ah..." the other five Freaks said simultaneously. They knew that Qiu Chuji was very capable and the disciples of the Quanzhen sect are spread throughout the country. It was to be expected that he would find Yang Tiexin's offspring. He must always have kept in mind the scheduled meeting for the competition in Jiaxing. Finding the mother, whose whereabouts were unknown, was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Whether the child was a girl or boy,

was up to the heavens. Had it been a girl, there would be a limit to the power of her martial arts. Hearing that the child had been found, gave them a momentarily shock. The six had never told Guo Jing's mother or him about this matter. Zhu Cong slid his eyes towards Guo Jing; seeing no change in his expression he read on, "After two years, when the flowers are blooming and the grass is long in Jiangnan, I will meet and drink with all of you masters at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. Life passes like the dew, and these eighteen years are like a dream. Will the brave heroes of the world laugh at my foolishness?" When he read to this point, he stopped.

Han Baoju asked, "What is below?"

"The letter ends there. It is definitely his handwriting," Zhu Cong replied. That day in the inn, Zhu Cong had stolen a piece of poetry from Qiu Chuji's pocket and recognized his handwriting.

Ke Zhen'E asked in a somber voice, "The Yang family's child is a male? His name is Yang Kang?"

Yin Zhiping replied, "Yes."

Ke Zhen'E continued, "So he is your junior brother?"

"He is my senior brother. Although this disciple is older than him by a year, senior brother Yang started learning from the Quanzhen two years earlier," Yin Zhiping replied.

The 'Six Freaks of the South' had seen his kung fu, and Guo Jing was definitely not his match. If the junior brother is already so good, his senior brother must be even more powerful. At this point, they felt their hearts sinking. It seemed Qiu Chuji knew of their actions in detail; he even knew of Zhang Ahsheng's death. They all felt that they were on the losing end already.

Ke Zhen'E said coldly, "When you sparred with him earlier, was it to test his abilities?"

Yin Zhiping heard the hostile tone in his voice and felt anxious. He hurriedly said, "Disciple would not dare."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Go back and tell your teacher that, although the 'Six Freaks of the South' may not be as good as he, they will definitely not miss the appointment at the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal. Tell your teacher not to worry. There will be no replying letter!"

After hearing these sentences, Yin Zhiping did not know whether to reply or not, and felt very awkward. He'd followed his teacher's instructions to come up to the north and pass on the letter, and Qiu Chuji had indeed told him to find a way to test Guo Jing's character and kung fu. The elder 'Chang Chun Zi' actually cared about his friend's son and his intentions were good. But Yin Zhiping, as a youth, was naturally more adventurous; upon reaching the Mongolian plains, he did not hurry to see the 'Six Freaks', but instead sparred with Guo Jing in the middle of the night. Seeing the unfriendly expressions the 'Six Freaks' were wearing, he felt afraid and did not dare to delay leaving. He bowed to everyone, saying, "The disciple will go now."

Ke Zhen'E suddenly said, with a sharp tone in his voice, "You should turn a somersault too!" Swiftly sweeping his left arm out, he caught hold of Yin Zhiping's collar. Yin Zhiping felt fear and used both his hands, trying to push Ke Zhen'E's arms away. He wasn't aware that if he had not attempted to get away, he would only have been made to fall with a somersault. By resisting, he only made Ke Zhen'E angrier. He bent his left arm, he lifted up Yin Zhiping's body and with a "hey" sound, threw the little priest heavily onto the ger's floor.

After landing, Yin Zhiping's back hurt badly as though it was cracked; but after awhile, he slowly struggled up and limped away.

Han Baoju said, "The little priest has no manners. It's a good thing that big brother taught him a lesson."

Ke Zhen'E was thinking, and after quite a long while, took a deep breath. The five 'Freaks' felt the same way and everyone was depressed.

Nan Xiren suddenly said, "No matter what, we still have to fight, even if it can not be won!"

Han Xiaoying said, "Fourth brother is right. After we seven became sworn siblings, we traveled over the world together. We went through many dangers and the 'Seven Freaks of the South' never retreated."

Ke Zhen'E nodded and said to Guo Jing, "Go back to sleep. We will work even harder starting from tomorrow."

Thereafter, the 'Six Freaks of the Jiangnan' were even stricter in their training. However, in studies or martial arts, as in music or mahjong, when someone tries for quick success, he risks getting precisely the opposite result and progress stops. The Six hoped for so much from their disciple that they put immense pressure on him. To make things even more difficult, Guo Jing didn't have a quick intelligent mind; on the contrary, he was slower than most young people his age. The more they wanted from him, the more he panicked and lost concentration. Since the nocturnal visit of Yin Zhiping, he hadn't made much progress for three months; he even seemed to have regressed somewhat. It was precisely what the popular belief says: 'The one that hurries too much doesn't arrive safely', and 'The one that swallows too much gets a stomach ache'.

The 'Six Freaks' were remarkable masters in their respective arts, acquired at the cost of constant effort over a long period. Wasn't it an illusion to wish for Guo Jing to acquire a mastery of all those arts in just a few years? An extremely gifted person would have a lot of trouble to accomplish such a prodigious feat; how could someone hope for the same thing from a young and not very gifted boy? The Six were conscious of the problem, and considering the character of Guo Jing, he could have practiced the techniques of Han Baoju or Nan Xiren alone and, after twenty or thirty years of fierce effort, maybe have half of their respective skills. If Zhang Ahsheng had not died prematurely, his teaching would have been the most compatible with Guo Jing's abilities. The Six wanted to beat Qiu Chuji so much that, even knowing it would be better to teach one skill rather than teach all, they could not restrain themselves and tried teaching everything they knew to this dumb disciple. During the last sixteen years, Zhu Cong had not stopped thinking about the fight in the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal and in the Buddhist Fahua Monastery. He reviewed with precision every movement and every stroke made by Qiu Chuji. Though he had a great memory and replayed them in his mind, he didn't succeed in finding any flaws. Sometimes, he even thought that only 'Copper Corpse' and 'Iron Corpse' would be able to beat the Taoist.

In the morning, Han Xiaoying taught Guo Jing two movements of the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden'. To execute the first, 'The Branch Hits the White Gorilla', it was necessary to leap, make two turns with the sword before straightening it to attack. Guo Jing had worked hard on the stability of his lower body, but lacked the agility for the jumps. He could hardly make a half a turn in air before landing heavily. After seven or eight attempts, he didn't succeed in making it any better. Han Xiaoying began to get angry and had to force herself to stay calm. She continued

her explanations, indicating to him how to land on tiptoe, how to make his jumps, etc. But when he jumped sufficiently high, he forgot to do the turns, and his landings remained clumsy.

Han Xiaoying thought that, after suffering the rigors of the Mongolian steppe for more than ten years, and Fifth brother losing his life here, the end result was so disappointing! She felt a pain in her heart and began sobbing. Throwing her sword to the ground, she left with her hands covering her face.

Guo Jing ran after her, but didn't catch her. He stood there, stupidly immobile, with his heart broken. He knew that he owed everything to his Shifus and had hoped to succeed in the martial arts to prove to them his recognition of their teaching. Though he made every effort, he still couldn't succeed and he didn't know what to do any longer. He was lost in thought when he suddenly heard Hua Zheng's voice calling him, "Guo Jing, come quickly! Come quickly!"

He turned around and saw her on her horse with an anxious and excited expression. "What's happened?" Guo Jing asked.

"Quickly, come and see," Hua Zheng answered. "There's a fight with two big eagles."

"I'm training now."

"You trained so badly that your Shifu scolded you, am I right?"

Guo Jing nodded his head miserably.

"It is indeed a terrifying fight, come let's see it..."

Guo Jing was very tempted, but he remembered the disappointment he caused the Seventh Shifu, and shook his

head sadly. "I won't go."

"I came especially to tell you," an excited Hua Zheng said. "If you don't come, don't expect to find me later!"

"Then quickly go alone. If you tell me later how it went, it will be almost the same thing..."

Hua Zheng jumped down from her horse and with a stubborn look on her face she walked up to him. "If you won't go, I won't go either. I wonder if it's the black eagles that are going to win, or the white ones..."

"Is it the pair of big white eagles, that live on cliff?"

"Yes! Even though the black eagles outnumber them, the white ones are still very dangerous; they've already killed three or four blacks with their beaks..."

On the top of the cliff, a couple of white eagles nested. White feathers were very rare amongst eagles, and these eagles were not only completely white but also of exceptional size. The Ancients used to say that they had never seen their equal, and considered those eagles 'Divine' birds. Some women even avowed them in a cult.

Listening to her, Guo Jing couldn't hold back any longer. He took Hua Zheng's hand and the two jumped onto the back of her horse and rushed to the cliff. When they got there, they saw the white eagles fighting against seventeen or eighteen black ones, attacking them with their beaks and their talons, making feathers fly. The white eagles were bigger and stronger. A single stroke of their powerful beak on the head was enough to kill an enemy, who then fell to the ground. The others flew away; but came back soon after to surround the pair again.

The spectacle had attracted many spectators; more than six hundred men and women, from many tribes, were gathered and commenting on the fight. Even Temujin, accompanied by Ogedai and Tolui, had come and watched the fight with interest.

Guo Jing, Tolui and Hua Zheng often played at the bottom of the cliff, and saw the white eagles nearly every day flying to their nest or leaving it when going to hunt. Sometimes, the children threw them some cuts of sheep meat; the eagles then dove and snatched them with precision while in the air. By doing this, they created close ties between them and the eagles. Because the white eagles were fewer in number, the children encouraged them with great vigor. "Go, white eagles! Attack! Watch out, enemy on the left! Quickly! Well done!"

Two more black eagles fell, but the white eagles were also wounded and their white feathers were covered with blood. Suddenly, a particularly big black eagle uttered several screams and flew away, followed by about ten of its companions. They disappeared into the clouds. Four other black eagles remained fighting. Thinking they had seen the victory of the white eagles, the spectators uttered shouts of joy. Shortly after, three other black eagles also flew away to the east, pursued by one of the white eagles. Soon, they were out of sight. The remaining black eagle tried to escape the single white eagle and was about to succumb, when suddenly, strident screeches came from clouds and about ten of the black eagles that had previously flown away appeared out of the clouds and attacked the lone white eagle.

"Excellent strategy!" exclaimed Temujin, admiringly.

The isolated white eagle was not able to, in spite of its bravery, resist the constant assault of its adversaries and

fell onto the cliff, overwhelmed by black eagles. The children were very worried, and Hua Zheng exploded in sobs. "Quickly, dad!" she said while crying. "Kill the black eagles!"

But Temujin was thinking about the ruse used by the winners. "The black eagles won," he said to Ogedai and Tolui, "thanks to a very clever strategy. Don't forget it!"

His two sons acknowledged this.

After having finished the white eagle, the black eagles flew towards a cavity in the cliff. One could see the heads of two white eaglets that would likely succumb to the attack of the aggressors.

"Guo Jing, can you see?" Hua Zheng cried. "The eagles have eaglets! How come we've never noticed them? Ah, father, shoot quickly and kill those black eagles!"

Temujin smiled, aimed his bow and shot an arrow of iron that, like the lightning, slicing through the body of a black eagle. The crowd applauded. The Khan then gave his bow to Ogedai. "It's your turn!"

Ogedai pulled back the bow and also knocked his target down, as did Tolui. The black eagles started to panic. Other officers and soldiers also started to help the white eaglets, but the remaining black eagles had gained height, and it became very difficult to reach them.

"A reward for those that will make a hit!" shouted Temujin.

Jebe, a skilled archer, wanted Guo Jing, his pupil, to have his moment of glory, and handed him his own war bow. "Knee on the ground," he recommended in a low voice, "aim for the neck."

Guo Jing complied, putting his right knee on the ground. His left hand firmly held the powerful bow, and he drew the bow with his right hand. After ten years of training with the 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan', even though he had not assimilated their sophisticated martial arts, nevertheless he had acquired strength in his arms and outstanding precision when aiming a bow. Seeing two eagles flying one above the other to the left, he turned, aimed for the neck and released his projectile.

It was precisely, as the popular expression described it: "The bow bent as the full moon, the arrow flashing like a meteor". The first eagle didn't have the time to escape before the arrow pierced its neck, continuing its way and planting itself in the flank of the second bird! Only one arrow for two eagles, which fell like stones! The crowd noisily applauded and the other eagles didn't stay any longer and rushed to disperse themselves.

"Offer the two eagles to my father," whispered Hua Zheng in the ear of Guo Jing.

He obeyed. He collected the two eagles, ran to Temujin, and kneeling, he offered the two eagles to him respectfully.

Temujin appreciated, above all, skilled fighters. He was delighted to see Guo Jing suddenly bringing two eagles down with a single shot; especially since these eagles from the North were dangerous birds. The span of their wings passed one meter, their feathers were as hard as iron, and they were so strong that they could seize and carry away in the air ponies or large sheep! Even tigers and leopards were afraid of them! To kill two eagles with a single arrow constituted a remarkable exploit. "Brave boy," Temujin said while accepting the offering. "You manage the bow quite well!"

"It is master Jebe who taught me."

"The master is Jebe," said Temujin while laughing, "the disciple is also jebe." [In Mongolian, jebe means 'skilled archer'.]

"Father," Tolui said, wanting to help his sworn brother, "you promised a reward to the one that could bring an eagle down. My anda killed two of them with one shot. What reward will you grant him?"

"Whatever he wants," answered Temujin still smiling. "Guo Jing, what do you want?"

"Is it true?" insisted Tolui, delighted. "What ever he wants?"

"Do I have the habit of lying... even to children?"

During all these years, Guo Jing had lived under the Khan's protection. Everyone in the tribe liked him for his simplicity and his kindness, and no one rejected him even though he was Chinese. Seeing the Khan in such a good mood all had turned towards the young man, hoping that he would get a good reward.

"The Khan is so good to me," said Guo Jing, "and my mother has everything that she needs, you don't need to trouble yourself giving me a reward..."

"That is a good example of filial piety," Temujin said. "You always think about your mother first... But for yourself, what do you wish? Speak without fear."

Guo Jing thought an instant, and then knelt before Temujin. "I don't want anything for me, but I have a wish for someone else."

"What is it?" asked Temujin.

"Dukhsh, the son of Senggum, is cruel and mean. If Hua Zheng marries him, she will be very unhappy. I implore the Khan to not give her in marriage to that dishonorable man."

Temujin was disconcerted at first, but then exploded in laughter. "These are indeed the wishes of a child! How could this be possible? I am going to give you a very precious object." From his belt he removed a dagger which he handed to Guo Jing. All the officers displayed their admiration and appreciation noisily; it was Temujin's favored weapon with which he had killed innumerable enemies. If he had not made a solemn promise, he would never have parted with it. "Take my golden dagger," Temujin said, "and kill some enemies for me."

"I will," Guo Jing answered. Guo Jing thanked him and took the dagger. He had often seen it on the Khan's belt, but it was the first time that he examined it closely. The girdle was of pure gold, and the end of the handle was decorated with the grinning head of a tiger, also in gold.

Hua Zheng, exploding in sobs, bounded onto her horse and left at full speed. Temujin had a hard heart, but he could not stop sighing while thinking of his daughter's pain. He then took the eagles to the camp, followed by his officers and soldiers.

After the crowd dispersed, Guo Jing drew the dagger and felt the coldness of the blade. He had the impression he could see traces of blood on it. It was a short massive weapon, and it impressed him because it had killed many people! He moved it about for a moment and then put it back in its sheath, which he attached to his belt. Then he drew his sword and started practicing the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden' again. In spite of all his efforts, he didn't succeed in executing the movements of 'Branch Hits the White Gorilla' correctly. He either didn't jump sufficiently high or he didn't

have the time to make the turns. The more frustrated he got, the less he controlled his breathing; the result was catastrophic and he was sweating heavily. Suddenly, he heard a galloping horse; it was Hua Zheng coming back.

She stopped not far from him, got off the horse and lay down on the grass with her chin on her hand, to watch Guo Jing train. Seeing that he seemed to be suffering a lot, she shouted to him, "Stop, rest for a while."

"Don't disturb me," Guo Jing retorted, "I don't have the time to chat with you."

Hua Zheng didn't say anything else, but observed him while smiling. Then, she took a handkerchief from her pocket, made two knots in it, and threw it to him. "Wipe off the sweat with it!"

Guo Jing grumbled, but didn't look up to catch it, and continued to train.

After a little while, she asked, "You asked dad to not marry me to Dukhsh. Why?"

"Dukhsh is very mean. He once released leopards so that they could devour your brother Tolui. If you marry him, maybe he will beat you..."

"If he beats me, you will come to defend me!"

"But," thought Guo Jing, speechless, "how would that be possible?"

"If I don't marry him, who WILL marry me?" Hua Zheng said with a tender look.

"I don't know," Guo Jing said, shaking his head.

"Pah!" Hua Zheng said, while the face that had blushed earlier became suddenly furious. "You never know anything!"

Some moments later, she softened her attitude. Then they heard the eaglets, on the summit of the cliff, calling. Loud screeches sounded in the sky; it was the second white eagle coming back after having been drawn afar by the black eagles. From the heights, it saw its beloved companion dead on the cliff; then it flew like a white cloud in concentric circles.

Guo Jing stopped and raised his head. The white eagle didn't stop whirling, still uttering screeches of pain.

"Watch," Hua Zheng said, "the eagle is unhappy!"

"Yes," Guo Jing agreed, "it must be very sad."

The eagle uttered a long call and suddenly flew off up towards the highest clouds.

"Why does it go up so high?" Hua Zheng wondered.

Suddenly the eagle came down again like an arrow and dove onto the cliff, where it smashed itself. Horrified, Guo Jing and Hua Zheng uttered a scream of surprise, and didn't know what to say.

Suddenly, they heard a loud voice behind them saying, "Admirable...admirable."

They turned around and saw a white-haired Taoist and with a red-face. His clothing was strange and to his hair were attached three high adornments. He wore the immaculate dress of a Taoist, which was a surprising sight on this windy and dusty plain. Since he had spoken in Chinese, Hua Zheng didn't understand him and lost interest.

"The two eaglets lost their father and mother," she said, looking up at the top of the cliff, "how will they survive now?"

The extremely steep cliff reached up into the sky, and it looked nearly impossible to climb. Obviously, the two eaglets, which had not yet learned to fly, were going to die of hunger in their nest.

"Unless," said Guo Jing, "someone has wings and flies there, it is the only way to save them..." He collected his sword and started to practice. In spite of all his efforts, he still didn't manage to execute the movements; just as he began to despair, he heard a voice behind him say coldly, "If you keep doing it that way, you will still be dragging your sword a hundred years from now, and you won't progress as much as a hair!"

Guo Jing turned around; it was the Taoist with the three adornments.

"What did you say?" he asked.

The man smiled, didn't answer, and suddenly advanced. Guo Jing felt like his arm was paralyzed and, without knowing how, saw his sword, that he had held firmly, in the hand of the Taoist! Zhu Cong had already taught him the technique 'To Seize a Blade with the Bare Hand'; even though he hadn't mastered it entirely, he had assimilated the principles of it. However, this time, he didn't have the slightest idea as to how the Taoist did it. Frightened, he moved back three steps. He stood in front of Hua Zheng to protect her and drew Temujin's knife.

"Watch closely!" the Taoist shouted.

He jumped as if it was nothing special, made six or seven turns with the sword, before softly landing again on his feet.

Guo Jing was awestruck.

The man threw the sword on the ground and said while laughing, "The white eagle was quite admirable, it is necessary to save its offspring!"

He sprang toward the cliff and began climbing at full speed using his feet and hands, as agile as a monkey and as light as a bird. The slope rose very steeply and was, in part, as straight as a wall. But the slightest bump was sufficient for him to climb up higher. Even when the rock appeared smooth as a mirror, he climbed like a lizard.

Guo Jing and Hua Zheng were very anxious; if he slipped, the fall would definitely kill him. The silhouette became smaller and smaller and gave the impression he was about to enter the clouds. The girl closed her eyes, afraid of seeing what could happen: "Where is he now?" she asked.

"He's nearly at the summit," Guo Jing answered. "There, he made it!"

Opening her eyes, she saw the Taoist fly off as if he was going to fall and let out a scream of fright. In fact, when he reached the summit, the large sleeves of his robe floated in the violent wind that blew there. One had the impression, seen from below, that he was a huge bird.

The man slipped his hand into the nest, caught the two eaglets and put them against his chest. Then, back to the slope he went, where he let himself slip, grabbing a hand on a bump here or giving a kick from time to time, to slow his fall, and reached the ground very quickly.

Guo Jing and Hua Zheng ran towards him. He took the eaglets and said to the girl, in Mongolian, "Will you take good care of them?"

“Yes, yes, yes,” she answered quickly. Hua Zheng, surprised and delighted, stretched out her hands.

“Be careful of their beaks,” warned the Taoist, “they are small, but their bite is dangerous...”

Hua Zheng undid her belt and attached it to the legs of the fledglings. Then she held them against herself, delighted, “I am going to look for meat to feed them.”

“Wait,” the Taoist said. “If you want the eaglets, you must promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“You must not tell anyone that I climbed the cliff to catch the birds.”

“Okay,” Hua Zheng said joyfully. “That’s easy. I won’t tell anyone.”

“While they are growing,” warned the Taoist while smiling, “these two white eagles will become aggressive. Be very careful while feeding them!”

Happy, she told Guo Jing, “Each of us will have one, and it will be me who keeps them in the meantime, okay?”

Guo Jing nodded his head. Hua Zheng got on her horse and happily rode off.

The young man stayed immobile, as if hypnotized, reviewing in his head the ease of the movements of the Taoist executing ‘The Branch Hits the White Gorilla’. The man grabbed the sword and kindly offered it to him and turned on his heels. Seeing that he was leaving, Guo Jing said, in panic:

“You... please... Don’t leave...”

"Why not?" asked the Taoist.

Guo Jing scratched his head, not knowing what to say. Suddenly, he kowtowed, knocking the ground with his forehead, without stopping.

"Why do you prostrate yourself before me?" the Taoist asked.

There was a deep ache in Guo Jing's heart. Seeing the kind face of the Taoist, he felt as if he had met a relative with whom he was able to confide. Suddenly, two big tears rolled down his cheeks and he said while choking back sobs. "Me... Me... I am very dumb, I can't manage to learn martial arts, and I am a disappointment to my six Shifus, to whom I owe everything..."

"What are you going to do?" the Taoist asked.

"I give all of myself, day and night, and still I don't manage to do it properly... I really can't manage to learn it..."

"Do you want me to show you a way?" he asked.

"Yes, please!" replied Guo Jing, kowtowing again.

The Taoist smiled, "It seems to me that you are full of sincerity. Very well, let's meet each other again in three days; we will meet on the fifteenth day of the month. When the moon is full, I will wait for you at the summit of the cliff. But you must not tell anyone!" Then he left.

"But I won't be able to climb up there," Guo Jing protested in a rush.

The Taoist didn't answer and it appeared, as he departed, that his feet didn't touch the ground at all, and he was already far away.

"He made that promise on purpose to embarrass me; he doesn't want to teach me." Then he said himself, "I am not yet without a Shifu and my six Shifus have caused themselves much pain trying to teach me; it's me that is stupid, what choices do I have ? This Senior is probably very strong, but I won't be able to learn any of what he knows from him anyway; why should I even try?" He contemplated the top of the cliff, and then he tried to not think more about it. He took his sword, and repeated the moves again and again of 'The Branch Hits the White Gorilla', until sunset, when hunger urged him to go back home.

Three days passed in the blink of an eye. That afternoon, Han Baoju taught him the 'Whip of the Golden Dragon'. This kind of flexible weapon required particularly close attention; if one didn't master all the refinements of it, not only would you not reach the enemy, but you risked getting injured by it yourself. Guo Jing, of course, made a false move, and "slash", the whip turned against him, striking him on the head causing a big bump. Han Baoju, who had a legendary harsh character, immediately gave him a slap. Guo Jing didn't dare to shy away and continued to practice. Seeing him putting in a lot of effort, Han Baoju regretted having lost his temper. Even though his pupil made mistakes several more times, the master didn't scold him again. He showed him five more movements, encouraged him, and recommended that he train by himself. Then he left on his horse.

To practice the 'Whip of the Golden Dragon' wasn't an easy task. After having executed the set of the sequences about ten times, Guo Jing's forehead, arms, and thighs were covered with blue welts. Tired and aching all over, he fell asleep on the grass. When he woke up, the moon had appeared from behind the mountains. He felt burning pains

on his whole body and notably on the cheek, where Han Baoju had slapped him.

Contemplating the top of the cliff, he had suddenly a burst of self-esteem, "If the Taoist can climb up there, why not me?" he thought. Clenching his teeth, he ran to the cliff and began to climb it, clinging onto the plants that grew there, slowly going up. At the end of six or seven zhangs, [1 zhang = 3.3 meters / approx. 11ft] the cliff became completely smooth without any vegetation or bumps to grasp. How could he advance further in these conditions? He gritted his teeth, tried two times, but his foot always slipped, and he almost fell. Understanding that any new attempt would be in vain, he wanted to go back down again. When he glanced behind him, he was terrified! He had forced himself to follow this path of ascent, and now found his feet were unable to use the same support points on the way down. If he jumped, he would certainly smash himself below!

Caught in a desperate situation, the words of his Fourth Shifu came to mind, "In this world, there's nothing impossible to the men of good will." Since death stared at him from all sides, rather than remain in an untenable position, it was better to continue. He drew his dagger and dug two small holes, in which he slowly placed one foot and steadied himself, and then the other. He rose thus a few more inches. Then he continued to dig in the wall, making more hand and footholds, rising laboriously a few zhangs. Because of the difficulty of the task, his head started to spin and his limbs burned with exhaustion.

He stopped to clear his mind, holding closely to the wall, controlling his breathing. Then he wondered how many holes it would take before arriving at the summit. As strong as his dagger was, it would probably be able to dig ten more holes, and then it would break. Since he had made it this far, he could no longer go back. After a brief rest, he

got ready to dig again; then he heard a burst of laughter coming from the summit of the cliff.

Not daring to lean backward to look, he remained, nose against the smooth wall of the cliff, wondering who this laugh came from. Then he saw a thick rope slip down and stop next to him. He heard the voice of the Taoist saying, "Tie the rope around your waist, I will pull you up."

Delighted, Guo Jing sheathed his dagger. Holding tightly with his left hand, he took the rope with his right hand and wrapped it around his waist two times and made two knots.

"Did you tie it firmly?" the Taoist shouted.

"It's done," Guo Jing said.

The Taoist seemed to not have heard. "Did you tie it?" He asked again.

"It's done," Guo Jing repeated, with out any response.

Some instants later, the Taoist laughed again and said. "Ah, I forgot...your breathing is not yet sufficiently powerful, your voice cannot carry as far as mine. If you tied it well, pull three times on the rope!"

Guo Jing obeyed and pulled three times. Suddenly, the rope grew taught; his body flew up toward the summit of the cliff. He knew that the Taoist was going to pull it, but not with such speed. In the blink of an eye, he landed again on his feet, right in front of the old man.

He knelt and got ready to kowtow, but the Taoist held his arm. "Three days ago, you kowtowed more than a hundred times, it is more than enough! You are a child with good character!"

On the summit of the cliff was flat ground covered with snow. The Taoist showed him two big round rocks that looked vaguely like stools, "Sit there."

"I will remain standing to serve you, Shifu," Guo Jing said.

"You don't belong to my school," the Taoist said, still smiling. "I am not your Master, and you are not my disciple. You may sit."

Guo Jing, perplexed, obeyed and sat down.

"Your six Shifus," the old man continued, "are well known in the martial arts realm. I don't know them personally, but I've always felt a lot of admiration for them. It would be more than enough for you to acquire the techniques of one of them to make yourself a name in the Jianghu. It is not due to a lack of effort on your part, yet, during the past ten years, you haven't progressed that much. Do you know why?"

"It is because I am too dumb. My Shifus have tried very hard to teach me the best they could, but it didn't help."

"It's not really because of you," the Taoist said. "It's, as the popular saying goes, 'If those that teach don't know how to teach, then those that try to learn won't learn anything'!"

"Shif... uh, I don't understand what you're saying."

"If we look only to the core martial arts, the level to which you've arrived is not negligible. At the time of your first real fight since the beginning of your training, when you were beaten by the Taoist youth, you questioned yourself and thought it was impossible for you to beat him. On this point, however, you are completely mistaken!"

"How does he know of this matter?" Guo Jing wondered.

"This Taoist youth made you do a somersault, but he did it with a trick. Comparing basic techniques, it's not at all certain that he surpasses you. Besides, your six Shifus are probably as strong as I am, that's why I cannot teach you martial arts."

"He's right," Guo Jing thought. "My six Shifus are very strong, it's me that's too dumb."

"Your seven Shifus made a bet," continued the Taoist. "If I teach you some martial arts, your masters will be sad when they learn of it. They are brave, and place a lot of importance on loyalty and honor. They would refuse to accept any sort of unfair advantage in a bet."

"What bet?" Guo Jing wondered.

"So you don't know about it then? Well, if your masters didn't tell you anything about it yet, it's because you don't have to know about it at the present time. During the next two years, they will certainly explain it to you in detail. Let's look at it this way: you are full of sincerity, and it seems that our meeting was written in destiny. I am going to teach you some methods of breathing, of sitting down, of walking and sleeping."

The astonishment Guo Jing felt knew no boundaries. "To 'breathe, to sit down, to walk, to sleep'," he thought to himself, "I know how to do that already, why would I have to learn it again?" He thought of a lot of questions, but didn't say anything.

"Clear the snow from this big rock," the Taoist ordered, "you will be able to sleep there."

Guo Jing thought it strange, but obeyed. He swept off the layer of snow and lay down on the rock.

"Not like that," the Taoist said. "If it was just sleeping like that, I wouldn't need to teach it to you. Here are four formulae, remember them well: 'When the thought fades, the feelings will be forgotten'; 'When the body empties, the breath will circulate'; 'When the heart dies, the mind will live'; 'When the sun rises, the darkness will vanish'."

Guo Jing repeated the formulae several times to learn them by heart, but he didn't understand the meaning of them.

"Before sleeping," the Taoist continued, "it's necessary to clear the mind, letting no thoughts or preoccupations remain there. Then, it is necessary to compose the body, while lying on your side, and to breathe in a continuous way through the nose, so that the soul doesn't wander inside and the mind doesn't go outside."

And so he taught Guo Jing breathing and the mastery of the breath, the technique of meditating and of eliminating worries.

Guo Jing did what the Taoist explained to him. In the beginning, his thoughts stayed chaotic and difficult to control. But after applying the breathing method, exhaling and inhaling deeply, after a certain time, he slowly felt his heart calm down, and a slow breath brought slowly into his 'dan tian' (the area between the groin and the navel) brought a warm feeling. An icy wind blew on the summit of the cliff, but he didn't feel any need to resist it. He remained immobile, stretched out on his side, for close to an hour, before feeling some "ants" in his limbs. The Taoist, who was sitting cross legged in front of him, practicing meditation, opened his eyes, "Now," said the Taoist, "you can fall asleep."

Guo Jing obeyed and fell asleep. When he woke up, the rays of the sun had begun to radiate from the east. The Taoist let

him down the cliff attached to the rope, telling him to come back this evening. He reminded him not to speak of it with anyone.

Guo Jing returned that evening and the Taoist brought him up with the same rope. During his practice with the six Shifus, he often did not go back home at night, but his mother didn't worry about him.

And so he went in the evening and left at dawn, practicing meditation and the mastery of breathing all night on the summit of the cliff. It was strange; the Taoist hadn't taught him any movements at all, not even the smallest sequence, and yet, in his daily practices, he became lighter and faster. Six months later, the movements that he hadn't managed to do before, now were executed perfectly. The sequences that he had never completed some months ago were executed with speed and precision. The 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan' believed that, with age and the regular practice, he was finally open to learning martial arts. They no longer felt the frustration they had at the beginning of his training.

Every evening, when he arrived at the cliff, the Taoist climbed with him, showing him how to use his breathing and his strength. They went up together until he was incapable of continuing, then the Taoist rushed to the summit and raised him with the rope. With the passing of the months, the young man climbed more and more quickly, and higher and higher. The steps once so difficult were cleared with only one jump! Only some particularly difficult places still required the help of the rope.

Another year passed, and only a few months remained before the competition. The 'Six Freaks of the Jiangnan' spoke of this event as though it was going to change the world of martial arts and attract the attention of all the brave heroes in the country. Observing Guo Jing's lightning

progress, the Six felt sure to win, and the idea of returning to their home in Jiangnan filled them with joy. However, they still hadn't explained to Guo Jing the reasons for this competition.

One morning, Nan Xiren said to Guo Jing, "Jing'er, in these last few months, you've mastered the weapons. It may be that you still lack enough practice fighting with bare hands. Today, we are going to work the palms more.

Guo Jing nodded his head.

They arrived at the place where they usually trained. Nan Xiren got ready to begin the lesson when they suddenly saw clouds of dust rising not far away, accompanied by screams and neighs. A herd of horses approached at a fast gallop and the beasts were agitated; the Mongol who herded them had problems retaining control of them with his whip.

Just when they'd barely settled down, one could suddenly see, coming from the west, a small red horse, with the hair the color of fire. It was speeding along in the herd, harassing it with hoofs and bites, before disappearing northward at the speed of the wind. Then, the red tornado came back in the blink of an eye, provoking a considerable tumult in the herd again. Furious, the herders tried to capture this spoilsport, but the horse was so fast that it was impossible to catch it. In an instant, the horse had moved off and stood several zhangs away, neighing proudly, as if he was very happy with the shambles he'd caused. The Mongols didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. When the small horse charged in for the third time, several guards sent arrows in its direction, but he was so astute and fast that he departed before the projectiles reached it. An expert in martial arts couldn't have done it any better!

The 'Six Freaks', along with Guo Jing, were fascinated. Even Han Baoju, who loved horses above all else, had never seen such a magnificent and fast animal. His own horse, 'Wind Chaser', had rare speed, unequaled even in Mongolia. However, the small red horse surpassed them all. Han asked the herders where this marvel came from.

"This wild horse," answered a herder, "comes from some mountains. We first saw it a few days ago, and found it so beautiful that we wanted to capture it, but did not succeed. Our attempt put it in a mean mood and, for these past few days, it keeps coming to bother us."

"It is not a horse," said a very serious old horse herder.

"What is it then?" Han Baoju wondered.

"It is a transformed celestial dragon, we shouldn't bother him!"

"A dragon transformed into a horse!" another horse herder mocked. "What nonsense!"

"What do you know of it? I've kept horses for several years, but I never saw an animal as fabulous as this one, ever!" He had not finished speaking when the small red horse sped again into the herd.

The equestrian arts of Han Baoju, nicknamed the 'Horse God', were remarkable. Even the Mongols, who constantly lived in the saddle, recognized his superiority. Seeing that the small horse had come back, and knowing well which way he was going to leave, he stood in a strategic position and awaited the passage of the animal. When it approached, he suddenly jumped, a very calculated jump, so that he should have managed to straddle the beast. He had tamed so many stubborn horses in his life that he had the conviction that once on its back, he wouldn't fall.

However, in a split second, the small red horse accelerated, making Han Baoju miss his mark. Furious, he ran after him, but how could he have caught up with such a fast animal?

Suddenly, someone jumped and seized the mane of the horse with his left hand. Surprised, the horse galloped even faster. Still clutching the horse's mane, the man let himself be pulled along with his body off the ground. The spectators noisily applauded.

Astonished and delighted, the 'Six Freaks' saw that it was Guo Jing that was being cheered!

"But where," Zhu Cong asked, "did he learn a lightness technique that sophisticated?"

"Our Jing'er has made immense progresses lately," Han Xiaoying said. "Could it be his dead father that guides him from the heavens? Or would it be Fifth brother?..."

How could they have known that, for the past two training years, the Taoist of the three adornments had taught him every evening, on the cliff summit, the art and mastery of breathing? Even though he didn't teach him any fighting skills, he had initiated him into the superior art of neigong.

[Neigong could be regarded as a form of internal martial arts involving controlled breathing, meditation and the awareness of what's happening inside one's own body and to some extent controlling it. It can be used as an aid in the recovery of one's health from illness or injury and improves the skills of external types of martial arts.]

Every evening, when he climbed and descended the cliff, Guo Jing practiced, without the knowledge of his teachers, a very subtle lightness technique called the 'Flight of the Golden Eagle'. Having a naturally simple and confident mind, he was completely unconscious of what he had

learned from the Taoist. His progress in the mastery of his internal energy and in this technique of the 'Flight of the Golden Eagle' only appeared when he practiced lightness techniques with Zhu Cong, Quan Jinfa or Han Xiaoying. He didn't realize it, and the 'Six Freaks' were pleasantly surprised at his improved performance, without suspecting the truth.

Observing the neigong of their disciple and his suppleness that didn't corresponded at all to what they had taught him, they looked on in astonishment, suspecting that the young man had another master.

Guo Jing suddenly executed a somersault in the air and dropped astride the horse. The horse reared, kicked with its hind legs and bounded to all sides as if possessed! But the boy clamped down with his thighs and didn't allow himself to be tossed off.

Han Baoju shouted some instructions to him and told him some tricks to master the horse, which ran with renewed vigor for more than an hour, apparently untiring.

His audience was in awe: the old horse herder knelt and whispered some prayers, imploring the sky not to punish the man for having offended the 'Dragon Horse', before shouting to Guo Jing to let him go. But he didn't hear a thing, and stayed glued to the horse as if he was attached by a rope, reacting to all of its movements smoothly.

"Come down off that horse," Han Xiaoying shouted. "Let your Third Shifu replace you..."

"Absolutely not!" protested Han Baoju. "Changing the trainer now would risk all of the work he has done up to now!"

He knew very well that such a stallion had to have a strong character. If someone managed to tame it, it would respect its master and would stay forever faithful to him. But if more than one tried to overcome it, it would rather die than submit!

Guo Jing also had an obstinate character. When he began to get tired, he slipped his arms around the neck of the horse and began to tighten them, making use of his internal energy. The animal bounded, jumped, and shook itself in all directions, without getting rid of this pressure that was suffocating it. It then knew that it had met its master, and stopped.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Han Baoju, delighted. "That's it! You have succeeded!" Fearing that the horse would run away again, Guo Jing didn't dare dismount. "You can come down," Han Baoju reassured him. "Now it will follow you all of your life. Even if you wanted to get rid of it you wouldn't be able to..."

The young man jumped to the ground. The horse licked his hand, showing affection that made everyone there laugh. A guard approached it a little too closely and the animal gave him a kick that made him somersault. Guo Jing led it to the water, to wash it and calm it down.

Since this session of horse breaking had tired him a lot, the Six released him from practice for now; but doubts still troubled them.

After the lunch, Guo Jing came into the ger of his masters. "Jing'er," Quan Jinfa said, "I would like to see your practice of the 'Crunching Mountains' palm strokes."

"Here, in the ger?"

“Yes. One can meet enemies in any place; it’s necessary to train to fight even in closed spaces.” He feinted with the left, and delivered a stroke with his right fist.

Guo Jing, respecting the rule of courtesy due to elders, defended three movements before responding. Quan Jinfa then attacked with violence. Suddenly his fists hit the young man’s chest, with a movement named ‘Penetrating Deeply in the Lair of the Tiger’. It was no longer a practice stroke, but a deadly, violent and heavy one, used to kill! Panicked, Guo Jing wanted to move back, but he already had his back against the wall of the ger. Trying to protect himself when confronted with danger is a natural reaction especially since he had a rather slow mind. Without even thinking about it, he turned his left arm, and blocked the attack of Quan by repulsing his arms. The fists had already touched his chest, when Quan realized with surprise, that it was as soft as cotton, without any resistance. Then he was repulsed with strength, and his arms were afflicted by a jolting pain; he moved back three steps before recovering his balance.

Guo Jing was speechless and knelt before saying, “I probably did something that I shouldn’t have,” he exclaimed, “I accept the punishment of the Sixth Shifu!” Afraid and surprised, he wondered what crime he could have committed that was worthy of his master’s anger, to the point of wanting to kill him!

Ke Zhen’E and the others got up, all with stern expressions. “You train with someone besides us,” Zhu Cong said. “Why did you hide it from us? If Sixth Shifu hadn’t tested you like that, you would have continued to lie to us, am I wrong?”

“There is only master Jebe,” Guo Jing said, “who teaches me the bow and the spear!”

"Do you dare lie to us again?" an angry Zhu Cong said, with a severe look.

"I would not dare to lie to my Shifus ever!" Guo Jing said with his eyes full of tears.

"Then where did you learn this mastery of neigong?" Zhu Cong insisted. "Now that you have the support of a powerful master, you no longer have any respect for us!"

"Neigong?" Guo Jing wondered. "But I don't have a neigong!"

"Pfui!" Zhu Cong spat, still doubtful. He moved his index finger toward a location situated two inches below the sternum, named 'Tail of Turtledove'. A stroke to this essential point on the body induces immediate unconsciousness. Guo Jing didn't dare to avoid or to defend against it and remained immobile. However, he had practiced for almost two years with the Taoist of the three adornments and, even though he didn't know it himself, his body was filled with internal energy. On contact with Zhu Cong's finger, his flesh naturally retracted and then expanded itself, repulsing the finger. The stroke still hit the point effectively, but caused only a certain amount of pain, without succeeding in affecting that point on the meridian. Zhu Cong had not used all of his strength, but Guo Jing's internal energy had succeeded in neutralizing him. When he realized it he was astonished and angry. "And that's not neigong?" he shouted.

"Could the Taoist master have taught me neigong?" wondered Guo Jing finally understanding. He said, "During these past two years, someone came, every evening, to teach me how to breathe, to sit and meditate and to sleep. I found it funny, but I followed his instructions. But he didn't teach me any techniques, but he did tell me to not talk of it

with anyone. Since I thought that there wasn't anything wrong with it and that it didn't affect my practicing, I didn't speak of it to any of you. I recognize my mistake; I won't go to him anymore." He kowtowed.

The Six looked at each other and thought, "The young man seems sincere, and he doesn't seem to be lying."

"Don't you know what the neigong is?" Han Xiaoying asked.

"I really don't know what the neigong is!" Guo Jing said. "He told me to sit and meditate and to breathe slowly, without thinking about anything while concentrating only on the way the breath circulates inside the body. In the beginning I couldn't manage to do it, but lately I've had the impression that, inside me, there was something like a hot small mouse running through all of my body; it was very funny."

The Six were surprised and delighted at the same time, to see that this simple-minded kid had succeeded in reaching such a level. This was not very easy, especially for him.

In fact, Guo Jing did have a simple mind. Compared to so-called intelligent people, he didn't have a head cluttered full of difficult and meandering thoughts to bother him. His type of mind encouraged progress in the acquirement of neigong. Thus, in barely two years, he had succeeded in reaching this level.

"Who taught it to you?" Zhu Cong asked.

"He doesn't want me to say his name," answered Guo Jing. "He said that the kung fu of my Shifus is not lower than his, and that's why he cannot teach me martial arts and cannot be my Shifu. He made me swear to not ever describe his appearance to anyone."

The Six Freaks were more and more astonished. In the beginning, they thought to themselves that Guo Jing had by luck met an expert, and were delighted for him. But this individual appeared so mysterious that they were now suspicious. With a gesture, Zhu Cong asked Guo Jing to leave.

"I won't dare go and amuse myself with him anymore," the young man said.

"You can go," reassured Zhu Cong. "We are not angry with you, but you don't need to tell him that we know."

Guo Jing acquiesced and, seeing that his masters weren't annoyed anymore, happily left. Outside of the ger, he saw Hua Zheng with the two white eagles, which had grown a lot. Standing next to her, they were nearly as tall as her.

"Come quickly," Hua Zheng said, "I've been waiting for you a long time."

One of the eagles fluttered over and came to perch on Guo Jing's shoulder. "A while ago," he said, "I tamed a small red horse that runs with incredible speed! I don't know if it will let you mount it..."

"If it doesn't let me," said Hua Zheng, "I'll slaughter it!"

"No you won't!"

The two young people, hand in hand, ran on the plain to have fun with their horses and eagles.

Chapter 6 - Mysterious Happenings on the Summit of the Cliff

**Translated by Strunf, Patudo, Taihan and Dugu
Seeking a Win**



Guo Jing shot three arrows with a rush of wind, killing the three closest pursuing soldiers, before interposing himself between the pursuers and the pursued. While continuing to shoot arrows he killed one more pursuing soldier. In the meantime Jebe had arrived and his arrows flew as well, swift and deadly.

Remaining in the ger, the Six quietly conferred with each other. "This man taught a superior neigong to our Jing'er," Han Xiaoying said. "He can't possibly want to hurt him..."

"Then why doesn't he want us to know about it?" Quan Jinfa asked. "And why he doesn't tell to our Jing'er that it's neigong that he's teaching him.

"I fear that he's someone that we know," Zhu Cong said.

"Someone we know?" Han Xiaoying wondered. "If it's not a friend, it can only be an enemy!"

"Amongst our friends," Quan Jinfa confirmed, "no one has kung fu this exceptional."

"But if it is an enemy," Han Xiaoying pursued, "what reason would he have to teach our Jing'er?"

"Maybe there is a devilish plan behind it." Ke Zhen'E said with a cold voice. The others froze thinking about his words.

"Tonight," Zhu Cong said, "Sixth brother and I will follow Jing'er discreetly to see who the expert is." The five approved.

That night, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa hid themselves not far from Guo Jing and his mother's ger. After a half-hour wait, they heard the young man say in a high voice, "I'm going, mom!" He left the ger, discreetly followed by his two masters, who were surprised at the speed of his leaving.

Fortunately, there weren't many obstacles on the arid plain and they could see him from afar. Arriving at the bottom of the cliff, he climbed it without slowing down. By this time, Guo Jing had made huge progress in his lightness technique. Since he climbed the cliff every evening, he didn't need the help of the Taoist anymore and went to the top very quickly. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa were more and more astonished and stood for a long time in silence until the other 'Freaks' arrived. Afraid of falling into the hands of enemies, they brought their weapons and their hidden projectiles. Zhu Cong explained that Guo Jing was already up the cliff.

Han Xiaoying raised her head and saw the summit of the cliff lost in the clouds and shivered. "We'll have a difficult time getting up there," she said.

"Let's hide in the bushes," Ke Zhen'E said, "we'll wait for them to come down again." The other five agreed. Han Xiaoying thought about the night ten years ago when they fought the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. She and her six brothers hid, waiting for enemies. It was as cold a night as this one and the wind cut to the bone. The lonely moon, the desolate hill, the swirling of sand, and the silence of the night only broken by some distant sounds... The only difference was that now she wouldn't see Zhang Ahsheng and his always smiling face. She felt sadness in her heart.

The hours passed and they didn't notice any movement on the cliff. Day broke and there was still no trace of Guo Jing or of his mysterious teacher. They tried looking up but couldn't see anything.

"Sixth brother," Zhu Cong said, "Let's see what's up there."

"Will we be able to climb it?" Han Baoju asked.

"I'm not sure; we'll only know after we try," Zhu Cong said. After running back to the ger, he returned bringing back two long ropes, two axes and several big nails. Quan Jinfa and Zhu Cong attached themselves to each other with the rope and began the climb. They dug some holes and planted the nails in them in order to provide sure hand and foot-holds. Sweating, they finally arrived on the summit. Hardly had they put their feet on the top of the cliff when they exclaimed loudly and became pale with fear.

Next to a big rock, they saw nine white skulls perfectly stacked - five at the base, three in the middle and one on the top. It was identical to the arrangement once made by the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Examining the skulls, they saw that each also had the five holes in the forehead. The edges of the holes were very clean and without any breaks as if cut with a blade. Obviously, the power of the fingers of the 'Killer' had increased considerably when compared to the ones they had seen ten years ago. With their hearts thumping like drums they cautiously examined the surroundings, but saw nothing else unusual. Then they climbed down to tell the others what they had seen. Seeing the look on their faces, Han Baoju was worried.

"It's Mei Chaofeng!" Zhu Cong said. The other four froze.

"And our Jing'er?..." Han Xiaoying asked.

"They must have come down the other side," Quan Jinfa answered. Then he told them what they had seen.

"Who would have guessed," Ke Zhen'E sighed, "that for eighteen years, all of our efforts only served to feed a snake amongst us!"

"Jing'er is an honest, straight-forward boy and good as gold," Han Xiaoying disagreed, "he would never betray us."

"Honest and straight-forward?" Ke Zhen'E sneered. "How could he learn those martial arts from that witch for two years and not tell us anything?" Han Xiaoying stayed uneasily silent, not knowing what to say.

"Unless," Han Baoju said, "a blind Mei Chaofeng wants to use Jing'er to harm us?"

"That's probably what she's planning," Zhu Cong confirmed.

"Even if Jing'er has bad intentions," Han Xiaoying protested, "he would never agree to betray us like that!"

"Maybe," Quan Jinfa suggested, "the witch hasn't decided when the moment to inform him has come."

"Ok, let's admit," Han Baoju said, "That Jing'er's lightness technique is good and he has a good basis in neigong; but what of martial arts? He still is far behind us. Why didn't the witch teach him any techniques?"

"The witch only uses him," Ke Zhen'E explained, "She doesn't want to make him good! Didn't her husband die by Jing'er's hand?"

"That's it! That's it!" Zhu Cong exclaimed. "She wants us all to die by Jing'er's hand, and then she will kill him. That way full vengeance will be gained!" They all shivered, struck by the logic of this reasoning. Ke Zhen'E struck the ground with his staff and quietly said, "Let's go back and act as if we don't know anything. When Jing'er arrives, we will eliminate him. Afterward, when the witch arrives to train him, we will take care of her. Even though she may have become stronger than before, she can't see anything; with the six of us together, we should be able to get rid of her once and for all."

“Eliminate Jing’er?” Han Xiaoying exclaimed, frightened. “And what of the challenge we made with Qiu Chuji?”

“Which is more important,” Ke Zhen’E replied coldly, “to keep our lives safe or to go to that challenge?” All remained silent.

“No,” Nan Xiren suddenly said. “We can’t do it.”

“What can’t we do?” asked Han Baoju.

“We can’t eliminate him.” Nan Xiren said, shaking his head.

“I agree with the opinion of Fourth brother,” Han Xiaoying said. “It’s necessary to interrogate him in depth in order not to make an irreparable mistake.”

“The problem is too serious,” Quan Jinfa said. “If we hesitate and show the slightest weakness and he benefits from that to secretly betray us, what will happen to us?”

“If we don’t make the right decision,” Zhu Cong said, “the consequences may be terrifying. Do not forget that our adversary is Mei Chaofeng!”

“What do you think, Third brother?” Ke Zhen’E asked.

Han Baoju wasn’t sure which way to decide, but he saw tears in the eyes of Han Xiaoying. She seemed so sad: “I’ll take Fourth brother’s side,” Then he said, “I won’t ever be able to kill Jing’er.”

Thus, three ‘Freaks’ were of the opinion to use violence on Guo Jing; the other three wanted a more measured approach.

“If Fifth brother was still among us,” Zhu Cong sighed, “it would be possible for him to break this deadlock...”

Hearing him mention Zhang Ahsheng, Han Xiaoying was heart broken again. Holding back her tears, she quietly said, "How could we not want to avenge our Fifth brother? Let's obey our elder Brother's wish!"

"In that case," Ke Zhen'E said. "Let's go back to the camp."

Back in their ger, they stayed silent, the air of death surrounding them.

That night, when Guo Jing arrived at the summit of the cliff, the Taoist was already there. Seeing the young man, he spoke to him in a low voice and showed him something next to the big rock where they usually trained.

"Look!"

Guo Jing approached and saw in the moonlight the pile of nine skulls. He jumped back. "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'!" he said with a trembling voice. "They've come again!"

"You know of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?" the Taoist asked. The young man told him of the terrifying fights that night, in the course of which his Fifth Shifu lost his life. He also told of how he frantically struck out with his knife and killed Chen Xuanfeng. The visions of that night were so vivid in his mind that he could not stop himself from shivering. When he stabbed 'Copper Corpse', he was very young, but the terrifying images had been engraved deeply in his memory.

"'Copper Corpse' caused so much suffering," sighed the Taoist, "yet he died by your hand!"

"My Shifus often speak of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. My Third Shifu and Seventh Shifu say that 'Iron Corpse' should be dead... But Eldest Shifu always says: 'Not

for sure! Not for sure'! For these nine skulls to be here, 'Iron Corpse' can't be dead..." He shivered. "Did you see Mei Chaofeng?" he asked.

"I arrived here not long ago," the Taoist answered, "And I immediately noticed this pile of skulls. Has 'Iron Corpse' come here to take revenge on your Shifus and you?"

"The Eldest Shifu made her blind," Guo Jing said, "we are not afraid of her."

The Taoist took a skull in his hand and carefully examined it. "This person has a kung fu of terrifying power," he said while nodding his head. "I fear that your six Shifus are not strong enough to face her. Even if I lend them some assistance, we still may not defeat her!"

He was so sure of what he was saying, that Guo Jing was stunned. "Ten years ago," he said, "she was not blind and yet she did not succeed in defeating my seven Shifus. Today, we are eight... You... will you help us in this danger or not?"

"I've thought about it for a little while," the Taoist answered after an moment of silence, "but I don't understand how her fingers can be this powerful... As says the proverb: 'Those that wish you well don't come to find you, those that come to find you don't wish you well'! Since she dares to come to take revenge, she is very sure of her chances."

"What reason did she have for arranging the skulls here? Won't we be extra cautious after seeing them?"

"I imagine that it must be a part of the ritual of practicing the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw'... Because it is so difficult to climb, she must think that no one comes to the summit of this cliff. By sheer luck, we stumbled on it!"

Fearing that Mei Chaofeng might already be going to fight his masters, Guo Jing said, "I am going to warn my Shifus."

"Well thought," the Taoist approved. "Tell them that you pass on a message from a good friend; they are to keep themselves aside for a while and take time to find the best solution... There's no reason to face her needlessly."

Guo Jing agreed; but at the very moment he was going to let himself slip down from the cliff, the Taoist grabbed him and jumped behind a large rock where they hid themselves. Guo Jing was going to ask him what was going on when the Taoist put his hand over his mouth. He shrank against the rock, not daring to make a sound, only risking a quick look.

A short time later, a shadow moved up the other side of the cliff. In the moonlight, long hair floated in the wind: it was Mei Chaofeng. The other side of the hill was even steeper than the cliff; because she was blind, she probably wouldn't have noticed the difference. That was a stroke of luck, because the 'Six Freaks' were hidden on this side. If she had come up here, she would not have failed to meet them, and they would be fighting already!

Mei Chaofeng turned around suddenly; a frightened Guo Jing lowered his head quickly. Then he remembered that she was blind, and he stood up slowly. He saw that she was sitting with her legs crossed on the big rock where he trained every day. Then she began breathing exercises. He now understood that this way of breathing and mastering the breath constituted the practice of the neigong. He felt a sudden appreciation for the Taoist's teaching.

A little later, he heard crackling coming from the body of Mei Chaofeng; at first occasional, then faster and faster, just like when one grills peanuts in a wok and they explode. The noise came from the inside of her body that remained

immobile. Guo Jing didn't know that it was a strange and superior form of the neigong, but he was still very impressed. The crackling lasted for a long time. Then the rhythm slowed until it stopped completely. Guo Jing saw her rise slowly, her left hand took something from her waist that she swung like a long silver snake. Startled at first, he then saw that it was a very long whip. The Golden Dragon Whip of his Shifu Han Baoju didn't exceed six feet, but this one had to be more than twenty feet long!

She turned around slowly and the light of the moon illuminated a face that still was very pretty. With her long hair and her eyes closed, she seemed sinister and frightening. In the silence, one could hear her sigh and whisper, "My bastard husband, could it be that in the Hell, you also think of me every day?" Holding her whip by its middle section, she quietly laughed and began to train. This whip seemed to dance in a curious way; the movements were slow and didn't make any noise. She made a stroke to the east, followed by an astounding one to the west; every strike more unbelievable than the last. Suddenly her hand slipped and caught the end of the whip so that all of its length reached a big rock. It wrapped around and raised it, as if it was a hand. Guo Jing was stunned by this. The whip, after flinging the rock far away, moved back towards his head. In the moonlight, he could see distinctly that the end of the whip held about ten very sharp hooks.

Guo Jing was already holding his knife. Seeing the whip coming his way, he was going to avoid the stroke, without even thinking about it. Then he felt his arm go numb and a hand pushed him to the ground. Like silvery lightning, the end of the whip passed above his head. Covered with a cold sweat he thought, "If my Taoist friend had not stopped me in time and my knife touched it, the whip would certainly have smashed my skull!" Fortunately, the Taoist did it

efficiently and quietly and Mei Chaofeng didn't notice anything.

She trained for a while, and then replaced the whip at her waist. From her bag she took a piece of cloth or leather that she unfolded and spread on the ground. She touched its surface, thought, then stood up to sketch some movements. She knelt again to feel the thing and to think again. Finally, she put it back in the bag and went away to the other side of the hill. Guo Jing sighed and stood up.

"We'll follow her," the Taoist said in a low voice. "Let's see what mischievous plan she's preparing for us!" He caught the young man by the belt and the two slowly slipped down from the hill. When they reached bottom, they saw Mei Chaofeng already far away to the north. The Taoist put his arm around Guo Jing who immediately felt a lot lighter and the two of them went at a great speed across the steppe, following 'Iron Corpse'. As dawn began, they saw a camp of several score large gers far away. Mei Chaofeng's shadow soon disappeared among them.

They accelerated their pace, avoiding the sentries and patrols, until they arrived at a big yellow ger. Guo Jing dropped to the ground and raised the flap of the ger slightly to take a look inside. He saw a man draw his large knife and strike a huge man, who collapsed to the floor. As he fell, his face was in the field of vision of the Taoist and Guo Jing. Guo Jing recognized him; he was Temujin's personal bodyguard! He was stunned. "How could it be that he came to be killed here?" He wondered raising the flap of the ger a little more. At this moment, the murderer turned around and Guo Jing recognized Senggum, the son of Ong Khan.

Senggum wiped the blade on his shoe's sole and said, "Now you don't have any more doubts, do you?"

"My brother Temujin is intelligent and courageous," answered a man, "this plan will not be easy to achieve." Guo Jing recognized him; it was Jamuka, Temujin's sworn brother.

"Since you like your sworn brother so much," Senggum sneered, "you could go and warn him!"

"You," Jamuka said, "are also my sworn brother. Your father has treated me with kindness, I won't betray you. Besides, Temujin has ambitions of absorbing my soldiers into his army, this I know very well. It is only because of our oath of brotherhood that I haven't broken our relationship yet."

"Could they be plotting against Temujin?" Guo Jing wondered. "How is it possible?"

"The one that takes the initiative always has the advantage," another man said. "If you wait for him to attack you, you are lost! After the victory, all of Temujin's goods, his herds, his wives, and his treasures, will come to Senggum. His men, on the other hand, will be incorporated into Jamuka's army. Accomplish that, and you will receive the title of 'Conqueror General of the North' from the Jin Empire."

Guo Jing could only see his back, so he crawled in a little further in order to see him better. He was clothed in a sumptuous yellow brocade tunic covered with sable. He knew the man, but he took a little time to remember his identity. "Ah yes, he's the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire."

Jamuka seemed convinced by his words. "If my adoptive father, Ong Khan, gives me the order," he said, "I will obey."

"Since you put it like that," a very happy Senggum said, "if my father doesn't give the order, he will offend the Jin

Empire. In a little while, I will ask him, he won't be able to refuse the Sixth Prince."

"Soon," Wanyan Honglie continued, "the soldiers of the empire are going to descend on the south to conquer the Song. At that time, each of you, at the head of twenty thousand men, will be able to participate in the invasion. After the victory, others rewards will await you!"

"I've always heard," Senggum exclaimed joyfully, "that the south was a marvelous world, paved with gold, and where all women look like flowers. If the Sixth Prince takes us along, it would be perfect!"

"Nothing could be easier," Wanyan Honglie said, smiling, "I only fear that there might be too many beautiful women in the south and you won't see all of them!" They exploded in laughter.

"Now," pursued the prince, "tell me how you intend to take care of Temujin... In fact, I already asked him to help us to destroy the Song, but he refused. He's a clever man; we can't give him any reasons to doubt us. That is why we need to double our precautions."

At that moment, Guo Jing felt the Taoist pull him by the sleeve. He turned around, and saw Mei Chaofeng a little way off. She had caught someone and seemed to question him. "Whatever this witch's intentions," he thought, "my Shifus aren't threatened for now. First I am going to find out more about the plot against the Khan and then decide what to do." Then he turned again to the ger.

"He promised his daughter to my son," Senggum said, while looking at the body on the floor, "and I sent an emissary to agree to the date of the marriage. I'll ask him to come here to confer with my father. He will surely come without much of an escort. I will place some men in ambush along the

way; even if he had three heads and six arms, he won't escape alive!" He exploded in laughter.

Jamuka said, "As soon as Temujin is eliminated, our armies will invade his camp."

Guo Jing was filled with anger and concern: "How could the man's heart be so cruel, even to the point of plotting against his sworn brother!" He was about to listen again, but the Taoist pulled him out by his waist. He moved back and was lightly touched by Mei Chaofeng, who was leaving very quickly, holding someone by the neck. The Taoist took Guo Jing by the hand and the two moved away from the gers.

"She's trying to find out where your Shifus are." the Taoist said in a low voice. "We must go there immediately; otherwise it will be too late!" The two used their lightless technique and ran briskly. When they arrived at the ger of the 'Six Freaks', it was already close to noon.

The Taoist said, "I didn't want to be seen, that is why I ordered you not say anything about me to your Shifus. But now there is an emergency, and I cannot worry about such details any longer. Go to them and say that Ma Yu, of the Quanzhen [Absolute Perfection] Sect, asks to see the 'Six Valiant Heroes of Jiangnan'.

For two years, Guo Jing had seen him every evening, but it was only at this moment that he learned his name. Without knowing who precisely this character 'Ma Yu, of the Quanzhen Sect was, he obeyed and ran in the ger shouting, "Eldest Shifu!"

As soon as he entered, his wrists were clutched brutally, and he felt a sharp pain in his knees that made him fall to the floor. He saw that it was his Eldest Shifu, Ke Zhen'E, who had knocked him down with his heavy iron staff.

Completely terrified, he didn't even try to struggle or defend himself. He closed his eyes and waited for death. He heard the clank of two weapons clashing, and then felt someone throw themselves over him. He opened his eyes and saw his Seventh Shifu, Han Xiaoying, protecting him with her body, while shouting, "Older Brother, one moment please!" Her sword, with which she had blocked the stroke, had flown away.

Ke Zhen'E sighed, and thrust his staff down heavily on the floor, "Seventh Sister has always had too tender a heart!" Guo Jing then realized that Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa had seized his wrists! He didn't understand anything anymore.

"Where is the person who teaches you neigong?" Ke Zhen'E asked with severity.

"Him ... He..." Guo Jing stammered. "He is... there... outside... He asks to see you..." Surprised at Mei Chaofeng's coming to find them in daylight, the 'Six Freaks' hurried outside, weapons in hand. But all they saw was a white-haired Taoist, hands joined in salute. There was no Mei Chaofeng!

"Where is the witch Mei Chaofeng?" Zhu Cong shouted, without releasing Guo Jing's wrist.

"I first saw her last night," the Taoist answered, "I fear that she may come soon!"

The Six looked at Ma Yu with puzzlement. He advanced briskly and greeted them. "For a long time I've admired the 'Six Valiant Heroes of Jiangnan'. Today, I finally meet them; it is a huge honor for me."

Zhu Cong, still holding Guo Jing, nodded his head in answer to the salute and said, "We don't dare to ask for the respected name of the Taoist master."

Guo Jing remembered that he had not announced the visitor and hastened to say, "He's Ma Yu, of the Quanzhen Sect."

The Six Freaks were hugely surprised. They knew that Ma Yu, who had the nickname 'Scarlet Sun', was the first disciple of the founder of the Quanzhen Sect, Wang Chongyang. After the death of the founder, Ma Yu became the Elder Master of the Sect. Qiu Chuji, 'Eternal Spring', was his younger martial brother. Since he usually lived a reclusive life in the temple, dedicating himself to meditation, he hardly ever set foot in the 'Rivers and the Lakes' region [Jianghu]. For this reason, his reputation in the world of the martial arts didn't equal Qiu Chuji's. As for the power of his kung fu, no one had ever seen him in action and could not judge how strong he was.

"We meet the Elder Master of the Quanzhen Sect," Ke Zhen'E said. "We are much honored. What brings the Taoist Master up into the steppe of the north? Does it relate to the competition in Jiaxing and our challenge with your martial brother?"

"My impetuous younger brother, when he should be dedicating himself to the practice of the Way, likes to duel with others. He often tries to win and impose his viewpoint; that is quite contrary to our principles. I've reprimanded him time and time again about this. I don't have any intentions of interfering in his bet with you, the 'Six Valiant Heroes', since it doesn't have anything to do with me. Two years ago, I met this child by chance. Finding him to have a pure and good heart, I took the liberty of teaching him some ritual formulae to fortify his body and to feed his character. This also has the virtue of encouraging longevity. It is true that I took this initiative without having asked for approval from the 'Six Valiant Heroes' beforehand; I hope they won't be angry because of it. I didn't teach him any

martial techniques and we don't have a master - disciple relationship. We could say that I merely made myself a young friend and that we never broke any rules of the martial world." After saying this, he smiled warmly.

The Six were very surprised, and could only accept his explanation. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa then released Guo Jing's wrists.

"So my pupil," a happy Han Xiaoying said, "it was the Senior Taoist who gave you some lessons? Why didn't you tell us about him earlier? We judged you wrongly!" She tenderly patted him on the shoulder.

"He..." Guo Jing stammered, "It was him who told me not to say anything..."

"How can you say, 'he', 'him'?" Han Xiaoying reprimanded. "Jing'er, that is very disrespectful, you need to say 'Senior Taoist'..." She scolded him, but her happy face showed her true feelings.

"Yes," Guo Jing agreed submissively. "The 'Senior Taoist'..." For two years he always treated Ma Yu on equal terms, without having ever thought to speak to him in the third person as a sign of respect. Ma Yu had never taken offense.

"I travel like a cloud," Ma Yu said, "without a schedule or final destination, and I don't like to impose on others. That is why, even though I was a neighbor, I didn't come to greet you. I ask you again to forgive me." He saluted them again.

In fact, after discovering the circumstances behind the journey of the Six Freaks to Mongolia, he felt great admiration for them. He interrogated Yin Zhiping, who confirmed that Guo Jing didn't have any neigong. As a Senior of the Quanzhen Sect he knew perfectly the principles of Taoism. He didn't want Qiu Chuji to impose this

challenge on the Six Freaks. He tried to convince his martial brother repeatedly, but Qiu would not hear of it. As last resort he came to the steppe to try to help Guo Jing without telling anyone. Otherwise, how could he have met the child, by accident, in the immensity of the northern plain? What other reason would he have for dedicating two years of his life to give Guo Jing this precious instruction? If Mei Chaofeng had not re-emerged unexpectedly, he would have discreetly left for the south once assured that Guo Jing's neigong foundations were well established. The result would have been that neither the Six Freaks nor Qiu Chuji would have suspected anything.

For displaying so much nobility and humility, which contrasted with the bravery and contrived arrogance of his martial brother, the Six bowed and saluted him. They were going to ask him about Mei Chaofeng when they heard the sound of horses galloping. They saw several riders heading towards Temujin's large ger.

Guo Jing realized that it was Senggum's emissaries who had come to entice him into a trap; he began to panic. "Senior Shifu," he said to Ke Zhen'E, "it is necessary that I leave for a short time."

Ke Zhen'E had almost seriously injured him a while ago and regretted it. He felt even more protective of this disciple and feared he'd meet Mei Chaofeng if he left. Therefore, he said, "No, you remain close to us!"

Guo Jing was going to explain to him why he had to leave, but Ke Zhen'E had begun to discuss the titanic fight against the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' with Ma Yu. In spite of his anguish, the young man didn't dare interrupt his Senior Shifu, who got angry for the smallest of reasons. He hoped to be able to benefit from a pause in the conversation to explain the urgency of the situation. Suddenly, a horse

arrived at a gallop. The rider was Hua Zheng wearing a short jacket of black fox fur. She stopped ten feet away, making signals. Fearing punishment from his Shifus, Guo Jing didn't dare move away, but signaled her to approach. The girl had red swollen eyes, as if she had cried a lot.

"Dad," she said while sobbing, "wants me to go marry that Dukhsh..."

"Quickly," Guo Jing said, "go warn the Khan that Senggum and Jamuka have prepared a trap and want to kill him..."

"Is it true?" Hua Zheng asked, stunned.

"Absolutely true," answered Guo Jing, "I heard it with my own ears. Go warn your father quickly."

"Okay!" Hua Zheng agreed. With a face filled with joy, she got back on her horse and left at great speed.

"Someone wants to murder the Khan and you seem happy?" Guo Jing wondered. Then he understood; she would not have to marry Dukhsh. He cared for the girl like a sister and had always protected her. He had wondered if she was going to be able to avoid this disgraceful marriage; now he was delighted for her and he smiled.

"I don't mean to glorify the enemy nor to belittle us," Ma Yu said, "but Mei Chaofeng knows the essence of the Senior of Peach Blossom Island's teachings. Her 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' is practically invincible, and the strokes of her 'Silver Whip of Two Zhangs' nearly unstoppable. If we unite our strength, we may not lose, but we certainly won't defeat her without suffering some harm."

"That woman is dangerously effective," Han Xiaoying said, "but we, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, avow her an implacable hate."

"Someone told me," Ma Yu said, "that your Fifth brother, Zhang the Valiant Knight, as well as 'Divine Dragon soaring through the Sky', the valiant Ke, had both been killed by Chen Xuanfeng. But since you killed 'Copper Corpse', one could consider that the debt has been paid. As the Ancients say: 'It is better to unknot a hate than to tie it'. Mei Chaofeng is a lone woman, affected by a serious handicap, and deserves some pity..." The Six stayed silent for some time.

"She's mastered this perverse and dangerous technique," Han Baoju said, "that will cause the deaths of innumerable innocents! Senior Taoist, even though you are moved by compassion, you can't let her go with impunity..."

"This time," Zhu Cong said, "she came looking for us and not the opposite..."

"And even if we avoid it this time," Quan Jinfa said, "if she wants to take vengeance on us, we will never be safe."

"I've thought of a small stratagem," Ma Yu said, "but it is necessary that the 'Six Valiant Heroes' be magnanimous and have mercy on this poor wretch. Let her have the possibility of redemption." Zhu Cong didn't want to speak, letting Ke Zhen'E make the decision.

"We, the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'," Ke said, "have a coarse and direct temperament. We only know how to fight the barbaric ones. If the Senior Taoist wants to show us a path, we would be very thankful. You only have to speak." From listening to Ma Yu, he understood that, during these past ten years, Mei Chaofeng had made considerable progress. It appeared that the Taoist was trying to save the life of 'Iron Corpse', but in reality he was trying to save the face of the Six Freaks. His real intention was to show them a way to escape the terrifying claws of Mei. The other

Freaks thought that their Senior Brother had become merciful and were astonished.

“By showing mercy, Senior Brother Ke,” Ma Yu said, “you will receive the blessings of the Heavens. There is something else that is very important. According to my inquiries, during these past ten years, Mei Chaofeng received more of the teachings of Huang Yaoshi [the Alchemist].”

“But they say,” Zhu Cong wondered, “that the Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ were renegade disciples of the Peach Blossom Island Senior. How would Huang Yaoshi justify teaching her again?”

“This is what I also believed,” Ma Yu said. “But according to the description of the fight you had, her kung fu was much lower than what she displays today. If she didn't receive the instruction of an illuminated Senior, it would be impossible for her, training alone, to arrive at her present level. If so, and if we kill ‘Iron Corpse’ today, we risk Huang’s anger...” Ke Zhen’E and Zhu Cong had already heard of the kung fu of Huang Yaoshi, often in such exaggerated terms that they had difficulty believing in the man's power. The Quanzhen Sect represented the orthodox martial arts. If Ma Yu felt fear regarding Huang, it was evidently something to take into account.

“The Senior Taoist thinks of everything,” Zhu Cong said, “we can only be filled with admiration. Please make us part of your undoubtedly wise plan.”

“This miserable plan,” Ma Yu said, “may appear a little snobbish I’m afraid; I ask the Six Valiant Heroes not to laugh at it.”

“The Senior Taoist is too modest.” Zhu Cong said, “The reputations of the ‘Seven Disciples’ of Wang Chongyang are

so well established that the admiration is general in the martial realm!" Zhu Cong felt a genuine respect for Ma Yu. Indeed, he would not hold such respect for Qiu Chuji, who was also one of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen.

"Thanks to the virtues of our deceased founder," Ma Yu said, "the seven martial brothers benefit from a small reputation in the world of martial arts. I think that Mei Chaofeng would not dare to come against us alone. This is why I thought of a ruse to make her leave, based on the belief in our vain reputation. This stratagem lacks nobility; but since our intention is good, the end justifies the means, and it won't harm the reputations of the Six Valiant Heroes." He then explained the deception. The Six Freaks found it rather depreciating. They thought to themselves that even though Mei Chaofeng had made great progress, and even if Huang Yaoshi came in person, what would they risk? At most they would lose their lives, as Zhang Ahsheng had ten years before. Ma Yu undertook to convince them. Finally the Six Freaks, out of respect for him and recognition for everything that he had done for Guo Jing, accepted.

After having sharing some refreshments, they moved towards the cliff. Ma Yu and Guo Jing undertook the climb ahead of them. The Six noticed that the Taoist didn't try to show off his skills as he slowly climbed behind Guo Jing. But his steps were firm and his movements displayed great stability, showing the power of his kung fu. "He is certainly not weaker than Qiu Chuji, so why is Qiu's reputation so great, whereas one hears practically nothing about Ma Yu? The explanation must be their difference in character..." Arriving at the top, Ma Yu and Guo Jing dropped long ropes, and then pulled the Six to the summit. There on the rocks they could examine the traces left by Mei Chaofeng's whip. They were stunned, and finally believed Ma Yu's words.

The eight sat down and waited. Night had fallen and it was already late. Han Baoju began to lose patience, "How come she's so late?"

"Quiet!" Ke Zhen'E urged, "There she is!"

They all listened carefully, without hearing anything. Only Ke Zhen'E, with his incredibly developed hearing, had discerned the footsteps of 'Iron Corpse' while she was still several li away. But she was coming. They saw, in the moonlight, a blurred black shadow that approached at a very quick pace. In the blink of an eye she'd reached the foot of the cliff and she began to climb with agility. Zhu Cong exchanged a glance with Quan Jinfu and Han Xiaoying; he saw that their faces were pale and full of anguish. He thought that his must look the same.

Very quickly, Mei Chaofeng reached the summit. She carried on her back someone who wasn't moving and they couldn't tell if the person was alive or already dead. Guo Jing had the impression that this person wore clothing that was familiar to him. He watched more attentively and recognized Hua Zheng's short black fox jacket. Alarmed, he was going to call out when Zhu Cong, with the quick eyes and fast moves, put his hand over his mouth, while saying in a high voice, "That vicious witch, Mei Chaofeng, if she falls into my hands, I, Qiu Chuji, won't let her escape!"

Surprised at hearing a voice on the summit, 'Iron Corpse' was even more astonished to hear the name of Qiu Chuji and her own. She hid behind a rock to listen to the conversation. Ma Yu and the Six Freaks clearly saw her intentions and, in spite of the tension, wanted to laugh. Only Guo Jing, worried about the safety of Hua Zheng, trembled with anguish.

“Mei Chaofeng arranged these skulls here,” Han Baoju said, “she is certainly going to come, and we only have to wait for her.” Not knowing how many powerful enemies were gathered in this place, she remained immobile behind the rock.

“She certainly caused us a lot of pain, but the Quanzhen Sect is always compassionate and merciful towards others. Let's give her the option of repenting.”

“The ‘Sage of Tranquility’ has always had a tender heart,” Zhu Cong said while laughing. “It’s not surprising that Master always said that you can reach the Way easily!”

Wang Chongyang, the founder of the Quanzhen Sect, had seven disciples, whose reputations are well established in the world of martial arts. The first in rank was Ma Yu, called ‘Scarlet Sun’, the second Tan Chuduan, called ‘Eternal Truth’, followed by Liu Chuxuan, called ‘Eternal Life’, Qiu Chuji, called ‘Eternal Spring’, Wang Chuyi, called ‘Jade Sun’, Hao Datong, called ‘Infinite Peace’, and finally the last disciple, Sun Bu’Er, was called ‘Sage of Tranquility’, and had been the wife of Ma Yu before she entered the Taoist religion.

“Brother Tan,” Han Xiaoying asked, “what do you think about it?”

“Her crimes deserve an extreme punishment!” replied Nan Xiren.

“Brother Tan,” Zhu Cong said, “of late you’ve made much progress in your technique the ‘Finger Calligrapher’. When this evil one arrives, will you give us a demonstration?”

“It’s better to let Brother Wang show us his technique the ‘Foot of Iron’,” Nan Xiren said. “One kick and he will send her down the cliff where she will lose both body and soul.”

Among the Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect, Qiu Chuji was the most well known, then came Wang Chuyi, 'Jade Sun'. Once, on a bet, he stood close to an abyss on one foot, swaying back and forth in a violent wind that blew his large sleeves wildly. Several heroes of Shandong and Hebei watched this event and were astounded. This exploit earned him the nickname of 'Foot of Iron'. He had lived as a recluse in an underground cave for nine years, dedicating himself to the practice of martial arts. Even Qiu Chuji appeared to much admire his kung fu. He had dedicated a poem to him, in which he told of the 'Nine summers standing in the sun, three winters laying down in the snow' celebrating the power of his neigong.

All of this conversation between them had been studied in advance. Only Ke Zhen'E, who had previously spoken to the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', remained silent, so that Mei Chaofeng wouldn't recognize him by his voice.

'Iron Corpse' was more and more astonished. "Apparently, the Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect are here! I am not really certain of being able to beat a single Taoist, how would I withstand the seven united! If they discover me, I am dead!"

At that moment, the moon illuminated the summit clearly. Zhu Cong said, "This night, black clouds cover the sky, one can't even see the fingers of his hand! Everybody be watchful so that the witch doesn't take advantage of the darkness to escape!"

"It's a good thing that it is a black night," Mei Chaofeng reassured herself, "otherwise they would have discovered me already. I give thanks to the Heaven and Earth, so long as the moon doesn't appear!"

Guo Jing had not stopped looking at Hua Zheng. He suddenly saw that she had opened her eyes. Delighted to see her regain consciousness, he made signals with his hands hoping that she would remain calm. However, the girl had also seen him, and yelled, "Help...Help!"

"Don't say anything!" Guo Jing shouted.

These shouts surprised Mei Chaofeng. She immediately pushed a finger onto one particular point on Hua Zheng's body which made the girl mute. But suspicions were roused in her mind.

"Zhiping," Zhu Cong said, "was that you that spoke?"

Indeed, Guo Jing was supposed to play the role of the young Taoist Yin Zhiping. "Yes... Yes, it was me..."

"I believe," Zhu Cong said, "that I heard a woman's voice."

"Precisely," confirmed Guo Jing.

"If this is a trap," Mei Chaofeng thought, "is it likely that the Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect would be together on the steppe and on the summit of this cliff? What a coincidence that would be! Maybe someone is trying to deceive me and take advantage of my blindness."

Ma Yu saw her slowly standing up behind her rock and understood that she had become suspicious. If she discovered the scheme and immediately went to the attack, he himself probably wouldn't risk much; but Hua Zheng would certainly die and the Six Freaks would, without a doubt, suffer some injuries. He was therefore quite upset. He'd never had a quick mind and he didn't know what to do.

Seeing Mei Chaofeng with her long silver whip in hand, seeming about to attack, Zhu Cong hastened to say, "Senior Brother, for all these years you've practiced the most

sophisticated techniques taught by our founder, you must have gotten extraordinary results. Would you demonstrate it for us?"

Ma Yu knew that Zhu Cong was asking him to show the power of his kung fu, in order to impress Mei Chaofeng. "I am certainly the eldest of our brothers," he then said, "but my slow nature makes me less capable than you. The formulas transmitted by our founder, I am ashamed to say, I hardly understood a sentence of it..." He pronounced each of his words very slowly, while feeding them his breath fully. The tone was quiet and humble, but the voice carried very far. He had not finished pronouncing his last words when the echo of the first came back with winds, like the growls of tiger and the screams of dragons. Witnessing this demonstration of extraordinarily powerful neigong, Mei Chaofeng, impressed, lowered herself slowly behind her rock.

"I have heard" Ma Yu said, "that this woman has lost her mind and that she is worthy of pity. If she repents her past sins, if she promises to no longer harm the innocent, we might be merciful. Should she also promise that she will not trouble the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, then we could let her continue to live because of our departed master's respectful relations with the Master of Peach Blossom Island. Brother Qiu, you are the friend of the Six; you should speak to them, and ask them to no longer seek a reckoning with her. If both parties make an effort, the vendetta can extinguish itself." This time, he spoke without using his internal energy, so that there did not appear to be such a great power difference between himself and the others.

"That will be easy," Zhu Cong replied. "But the real problem is knowing whether or not Mei Chaofeng will agree to redeem herself."

Suddenly, they heard an icy voice. "Many thanks to the Quanzhen Seven for their benevolence! I, Mei Chaofeng, am here!" Suddenly and surprisingly, she came forth. Ma Yu had hoped to frighten her and make her leave, regretting her deeds and would mend her ways. But, confident of her new power, she had the audacity to come and confront her opponents directly.

"Being a woman," Mei Chaofeng said, "I would not dare to test myself against the Taoist masters. But for a long time I have admired the kung fu of the 'Sage of Tranquility'; I ask for the honor of measuring myself against her." Armed with her whip, she stood at the ready, waiting for Han Xiaoying's response.

All the while, Guo Jing was acutely aware that Hua Zheng had fallen motionless to the ground. He'd grown up with her and felt the affection of an elder brother for the girl. Without a moment's thought, without even worrying about the terrifying presence of Mei Chaofeng, he leaped out and freed Hua Zheng. With a quick move, 'Iron Corpse' seized his left wrist. Guo Jing had practiced orthodox Taoist internal energy with Ma Yu for two years and his healthy body was strengthened by this natural force. With his right hand, he propelled Hua Zheng towards Han Xiaoying, while he pivoted his left hand with force and released himself from Mei's control. She possessed extremely swift skills so when she felt Guo Jing escape she moved her hand immediately to recapture him. This time, she held him firmly, compressing the point of the principal artery in his arm so precisely that he could no longer move.

"Who are you?" she demanded in a terrible voice.

"Zhiping," Zhu Cong called, "listen!"

Guo Jing, who had panicked because he could not free himself, was going to reply instinctively "I am Guo Jing!" when he heard Zhu Cong's warning.

"I am..." he stammered, "I am Yin Zhiping... Disciple... disciple of the Quanzhen... Spring." Although he had repeated those words thirty or forty times, in his panic he was not able to say it without stammering.

"He is only a simple apprentice," Mei Chaofeng said to herself, "yet his neigong already is capable. Not only did he succeed in saving someone from under my nose, he was even able to release himself from my first hold! I think it is better that I retreat this time." She dropped his hand. Guo Jing recovered and hastily returned to his masters. Five finger marks were deeply indented into the flesh of his left arm! He knew full well that she had not used all of her power; otherwise his wrist would have been broken.

Mei Chaofeng no longer dared to challenge the false Sun Bu'Er, played by Han Xiaoying. She suddenly asked, "Taoist Master Ma, what is the meaning of 'Lead and mercury preserve well'?"

"Lead is heavy," Ma Yu responded automatically, "it resembles the kidneys; mercury is liquid, it is a metaphor for internal warming. 'Lead and mercury preserve well' means that it is good to stabilize the kidneys and to extinguish the internal fire, in order to obtain results from meditation."

"And what is the meaning of 'Baby of the girl Cha'?" Mei Chaofeng pursued.

Ma Yu suddenly became aware that she was asking him to explain secret formulae of neigong! "Heretical witch," he shouted, "Do not try to extract the secrets of my sect from me! Leave quickly!"

Mei Chaofeng laughed, "Thank you for your answer, Taoist Master!"

She suddenly jumped forward, armed with her silvery whip, and glided to the bottom of the cliff at unbelievable speed. Those remaining looked on, relieved to have escaped a conflict. Far away on the steppe, a shadow sped away like a phantom.

Ma Yu unsealed Hua Zheng's accupoints which returned her ability to move. The girl lay on a boulder resting.

"In ten years," Zhu Cong said, "that woman made so much progress, that if the Taoist Master had not lent us a strong hand today, our accounts would have been settled!" Ma Yu responded modestly, but he was frowning, as if an inner worry tormented him.

"If there is some task to finish," Zhu Cong said, "even though we are not capable of great things, we can at least do your bidding. Do not hesitate to ask it of us."

"Because of my inattention," Ma Yu said, "I was tricked by that crafty woman!"

"Were you injured by a secret weapon?" the Six asked.

"No," replied Ma Yu, "it is nothing like that. When she asked me a question, I replied without thinking, and I fear that it might result in further evil." His friends were perplexed and seemed not to understand. The Taoist explained, "The external technique of 'Iron Corpse' has already reached a level that we cannot even imagine. Even if my brothers Qiu and Wang really had been present here, we might not have been able to overcome her. That the Master of Peach Blossom Island succeeded in producing a disciple of such strength...proves his own power. Only the neigong of Mei Chaofeng is not at all advanced. I do not know where she

succeeded in finding the secret formulae to practice Taoist neigong, but without pointers from a master, she was not able to understand them. When she asked me to explain a formula, it was because the lack of understanding had arrested her progress. I realized something was wrong and did not reply to her second question; but my first explanation will allow her to make great progress with her neigong."

"Let us hope," Han Xiaoying said, "that she will regret her past crimes and do no more evil."

"May it be so!" Ma Yu said. "If her neigong should become stronger, she will be more difficult to contain... Ah, this is my fault, I was too naïve and should have distrusted her..." After a moment's thought, he continued, "One thing intrigues me. The skills of the Peach Blossom Island are completely different to those of Taoism. Nevertheless, these two formulas that she quoted correspond precisely with our Taoist neigong. How is that possible?"

Hua Zheng suddenly leapt off her boulder, "Ah!" she cried, "Guo Jing! Father did not believe me, he left to visit Ong Khan!"

"Why?" Guo Jing asked.

"I explained to him," Hua Zheng said, "that Uncle Senggum and Uncle Jamuka plotted against him. He burst out laughing, saying that because I don't want to marry Dukhsh, I invented lies! I said to him that you had heard it with your own ears; but he didn't want to believe it. He even said that he would punish you on his return. I saw him leave with my three elder brothers and a small escort. I hurried to come to find you, but on the way, that blind woman caught me. She wanted to bring me to see you, isn't that right?"

"If we had not been here," one the Six said ominously, "you would have had five holes in your skull by now!"

"When did the Khan leave?" Guo Jing demanded anxiously.

"A long time ago," Hua Zheng responded, "father said that he wanted to get there as soon as possible. He didn't even wait for sunrise. Their horses are very fast; they must be far away by now. Is it really true that Uncle Senggum wants to harm Father? What will we do?" She began to weep. This was the first time in his life that he found himself confronted with a matter so grave and he was distraught.

"Jing'er," Zhu Cong said, "Descend the cliff quickly and take your little red horse and rescue the Khan. Even if it is not true, we'll send someone to ascertain Senggum's intentions. Hua Zheng, will you ask your brother Tolui to muster soldiers and follow to rescue your father." Guo Jing understood and quickly descended the cliff. Ma Yu, holding on to a long rope, went next descending with Hua Zheng.

The young man dashed to his ger, mounted his horse and set off at a frantic gallop. At that moment, the sun started to rise. Guo Jing, very worried, muttered to himself, "I fear that the Khan might already have fallen into Senggum's trap; then it will be impossible to rescue him!"

The small red horse loved to run without its bridle and its heart danced with joy. It galloped more and more quickly on the plain. Fearing that it would fall, Guo Jing tried to rein it in a little; but the animal resisted and rushed on whinnying with joy. Besides, even galloping at great speed, it showed no signs of fatigue. After more than two hours of galloping, Guo Jing slowed his mount to rest a little. Then they continued on their way. One hour later, they saw in the distance three groups of riders, three squadrons, it seemed. While approaching, he recognized the standards of Ong

Khan. The riders advanced, arrows strung and sabers drawn, ready for battle.

"The Khan is further ahead," Guo Jing lamented, "but his line of retreat is already blocked!" He pressed his thighs and his horse raced on like an arrow, passing Ong Khan's soldiers. They called for him to stop, but he was already long gone.

Guo Jing did not dare dally. He saw another three squadrons lying in wait, before he saw, far away, the high plume of white feathers that signaled the presence of Temujin. Escorted by several hundred riders, they rode tranquilly north. Guo Jing rose to his full height and called, "Great Khan! Stop, you mustn't go on!"

Temujin, taken aback, halted, "Why not?"

Guo Jing recounted to him what he had heard in Senggum's ger, and explained that his line of retreat had been cut. Temujin glanced at him skeptically, not knowing whether he should believe him, "I never got along well with that fool Senggum," he said to himself, "but my adopted father Ong Khan needs me now. Jamuka is my sworn brother; how could they plot against me... unless the Sixth Jin Prince is trying to sow dissension!"

He hesitated, and Guo Jing said, "Great Khan, you have only to send someone back the way you have just traveled and you will see..."

Since childhood, Temujin had lived in the middle of plots and treacheries; he had survived hundreds of battles thanks to his bravery and his caution. Even though he had said that it was absolutely impossible that Ong Khan and Jamuka could have allied themselves against him, he said: "To be careful ten thousand times is not excessive; but to die through carelessness one time is." He then ordered his

second son, Chagatai, to leave with Tchila'un. The two men went back the way they had come.

Temujin observed the lay of the land and ordered, "Let us go up that hill and make ready!" His escort was only made up of some hundreds of men, but they were all elite soldiers and officers. Without needing other orders, they dug trenches, raised barricades, and got ready to withstand a siege. Shortly after, they saw dust clouds rising in the south, raised by several thousand riders galloping in pursuit of Chagatai and Tchila'un. Jebe had particularly good eyesight and recognized the banners of the pursuers.

"They are Ong Khan's soldiers," he shouted. They had divided themselves into several detachments and tried to surround Chagatai and Tchila'un. The two men leaned forward on their saddles and desperately whipped their mounts.

"Guo Jing," Jebe cried, "to their aid!"

Both of them descended the hill. The small red horse, glad to meet its herd mates, arrived quickly in front of Tchila'un. Guo Jing loosed three arrows with a rush of wind, cutting down the three closest pursuing soldiers, before interposing himself between the pursuers and the pursued while continuing to fire his arrows in all directions. Jebe had arrived also and his arrows flew as well, swift and deadly. Nevertheless, Ong Khan's men, too numerous to overcome, rushed forward like an irresistible tide. Chagatai, Tchila'un, Jebe and Guo Jing at last reached the hill. Their companions rained arrows on their pursuers who did not dare to launch a frontal attack, and for the moment, waited out of range.

Standing on the hill, Temujin observed the surroundings. Soon, Ong Khan's regiments came rushing in from all directions. Under a yellow flag, a man rode on a great

horse; it was Senggum, son of Ong Khan. The Khan well knew that it was impossible to break the encirclement and that it was better to stall for time. "Why is Brother Senggum afraid to approach and parley?" he called.

Under the protection of his guards, who covered him with their shields, Senggum approached, confident and arrogant, "Temujin, make your retreat!"

"How," Temujin demanded, "did I offend my adopted father Ong Khan, so that you attack me?"

"For generations and generations," Senggum said, "the Mongolians lived in separate tribes, at the heart of which the flocks were spread and divided in common. Why do you want to run counter to the traditions of our ancestors, by mixing the tribes? My father has often said that you are wrong to want to do that."

"We Mongols," Temujin replied, "are subordinate to the Jin Empire that demands of us each year, a tribute of tens of thousands of cattle. Is this just? If that continues, all of us will starve to death! If we did not fight amongst ourselves, why should we be afraid of the Jin Empire? I have always maintained good relations with my adoptive father; there is no hatred between our two families. It is the fault of the Jin, who wants to sow disunity between us!" Senggum's soldiers, hearing this debate, thought that his words had merit.

"We Mongolians are valiant warriors," Temujin continued, "why should we not go and take the treasures of the Jin? Why should we furnish tributes to them every year? Amongst the Mongolians, there are some that work hard to husband the herds, and then there are lazy ones. Why should those that work tire themselves nourishing those that do nothing? Why should those that sweat not have

more cattle and sheep? Why do they not leave the lazy ones to die of hunger?"

At that time, the Mongolians lived according to a type of tribal socialism. Their principal wealth, cattle and sheep, belonged to all. During the last few years, the flocks had increased in size. The tribes had learned from the Chinese to work iron for the manufacture of tools and weapons. Most of the animal herders wished to keep the wealth that they produced for themselves; just as the warriors that, at the risk of their lives, won battles and did not want to divide prisoners and loot with those that did not go to war. These matters went straight to the hearts of all the soldiers.

Seeing that Temujin was beginning to influence his men, Senggum cried, "Lay down your weapons at once and surrender! Otherwise, it will take but a signal from my whip to rain down ten thousand arrows! You have no chance of escape!"

Guo Jing saw that the situation had become critical, but did not know what to do. Then he saw, at the foot of the hill, a young officer, his armor covered by a coat of grey fur, with a saber in his hand, proudly parading back and forth on his war horse. It was Dukhsh, the son of Senggum, with whom he had fought in his childhood. He was the villainous rascal that had wanted to unleash leopards on Tolui. Guo Jing did not really understand why this was happening, and especially why Ong Khan, Senggum and Jamuka wanted to plot against Temujin. "The Khan and Ong Khan have always lived in harmony," he said to himself, "it must mean that Dukhsh, at the instigation of the Sixth Jin Prince, has spread misleading and malicious lies. If I capture him and force him to admit his lies, then everyone will be able to reconcile!" Spurring his small red horse, he descended the hill and, taking advantage of the surprise, forced his way to Dukhsh.

Attacking with his blade, Guo Jing leaned out of his saddle, the blade held above his head, and with his right hand he trapped the principal artery on Dukhsh's wrist. It was a movement of the famed technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones' perfected by Zhu Cong and Dukhsh could not withstand it. With a pull, Guo Jing snatched him out of his saddle. He heard the hissing of heavy projectiles from his left, about to fall upon him. He pressed lightly with his knees; the small red horse obeyed immediately and flew like an arrow towards the hill.

Senggum's soldiers called, "Fire arrows!" Guo Jing placed Dukhsh behind him, using his body as a shield, so well that the enemy did not dare to fire.

Arriving at the summit of the hill, Guo Jing threw Dukhsh to the ground laughing, "Great Khan, this rascal is surely the person responsible for this treachery! Let us make him acknowledge it!"

Temujin, very happy, pointed his lance at Dukhsh's chest and shouted in the direction of Senggum, "Move your men back two hundred zhangs!" [1 zhang = 3.3 meters / 11+ ft]

Senggum, upset and worried to see his well armed son fall into the hands of the enemy, could do nothing but back up his army. He ordered them to encircle the hill with ordered ranks of wagons, so that Temujin's horsemen would be unable to sally out.

On the hill, Temujin praised Guo Jing warmly, and ordered him to tie the prisoner's hands behind his back.

Three times Senggum sent a messenger to negotiate. If Temujin released Dukhsh and left, his life would be spared. Each time, the Khan cut the ears off the messenger before he returned them to their master.

The sun moved towards the horizon. Fearing that Senggum would use the dusk to attack, Temujin ordered that everyone should double their vigilance.

Towards midnight, a man clothed in white approached the foot of the hill. "I am Jamuka," he called out. "I wish to see my sworn brother Temujin."

"You may come up!" the Khan said.

Jamuka ascended slowly and saw Temujin standing at the top of the slope. He advanced and made as if to embrace him, but the Khan, not letting his guard down, said roughly, "You still consider me a brother?"

Jamuka sighed and seated himself cross-legged. "Brother," he said, "You are already the chief of a tribe, why do you have this ambition to unify all of the Mongols?"

"What do you believe?" Temujin replied.

"The chieftains of the tribes say: 'our ancestors lived this way for hundreds of years, why does Temujin want to change tradition? Heaven will not allow it!'"

"Do you remember the history of our ancestor Lady Alan Qo'a?" Temujin said. "She had five sons that lived in discord. She asked all of them to come and eat with her. Then she gave an arrow to each and asked them to break it. This they did very easily. Next, she tied five arrows together, and asked again that they break them. Each tried in turn, but none were able to break the five arrows. Do you recall what she said to them then?"

"If you are not united," Jamuka said in a low voice, "you can be broken by those of no importance, just like a single arrow. If you unite, you will be as solid as the five arrows and no person will break you."

“So,” Temujin said, “you remember that. What happened next?”

“The five sons united their efforts and conquered an immense territory. They are the ancestors of our Mongol tribes.”

“Exactly! Both of us are brave and heroic; why not unite all of the Mongolians? If we do not quarrel amongst ourselves, we will be strong enough to destroy the Jin Empire!”

“But how?” Jamuka asked, “The Jin Empire is powerful and its armies and wealth are immeasurable; how can we Mongolians defeat them?”

“Then you prefer to remain submissive to the Jin?”

“The Jin Empire does not oppress us,” Jamuka protested. “The emperor has even made you a ‘Northern Ambassador’!”

“At first,” Temujin said honestly, “I also believed that they had good intentions. But the greed of the Jin has no limits, and they demand more from us each time. First they want cattle, next horses, and now they ask that we send soldiers to help them make war. The country of the Song is far removed from our lands! Even if the Song dynasty falls, all the lands conquered will belong to Jin alone. We will lose warriors, to win what? Since when would our cattle stop eating the green grass of our plains to go eat the sand on the other side of the mountains? If we must battle, it should be against the Jin Empire only!”

“Ong Khan and Senggum do not want to betray the Jin.” Jamuka said.

“To betray?” Temujin mocked. “Betray? And you?”

"I beseech you, brother, do not let your anger get the better of you; release Dukhsh, and Senggum and I will guarantee to let you leave safely."

"I have no confidence in Senggum; now I have no confidence in you!"

"Hear the words of Senggum," Jamuka said. "If a son dies, other sons will be born. If Temujin dies, there will never be another Temujin! If you do not release Dukhsh, you will not see another sunrise!"

Temujin knew well the characters of Senggum and Jamuka. If left in their hands, he knew that he would have no chance of survival. If Ong Khan was there, he might possibly live. He brandished his saber and whirled around.

"I would rather die in battle," he cried, "than to surrender! Under heaven, there is a Temujin who will die on the field of honour and no Temujin that flees!"

Jamuka said, "You give all of the loot to the warriors, saying that it belongs to them and not to the whole tribe. The chieftains of the tribes say that you do wrong; that you run counter to our traditions."

"But the young warriors are delighted!" Temujin said harshly. "The chieftains pretend that the treasures of war cannot be distributed equitably to each warrior, so they keep it all for themselves. Such practices insult the warriors who risked their lives to support them. When we are at war, do we need stupid and greedy chieftains, or do we need young courageous warriors?"

"Brother," Jamuka said, "You've always acted on your own and never listened to the leaders of the other tribes. Don't call me ungrateful or traitor. These past days, you've been sending people to convince my soldiers to join your army by

telling them that, once back home, the resources gained in battle belong to the ones that fought for them. They won't be distributed amongst all the tribe's members. Did you think that I didn't know of it?"

"If you are aware of it," Temujin thought, "then we won't ever live in peace with each other." He then took a small bag out of his clothing and threw it at the feet of Jamuka. "Here are the gifts that you offered me when we swore, three times, loyalty to each other. Take them. Later, when you cut off my head with your saber, you will only kill an enemy and not a sworn brother. I am a hero, you are also a hero. The plains of Mongolia are vast, but it cannot contain two heroes."

Jamuka picked up the bag. He then took a small leather bag from his own clothing, dropped it at Temujin's feet in silence, and moved down the hill.

Temujin looked at him as he moved away; then he stood a long time in silence. He slowly opened the bag, withdrew the stones and the arrowheads from it, and remembered the games that they'd played when they were children. He sighed, dug a hole with a dagger and buried the gifts he'd given to his former sworn brother in it.

Guo Jing was next to him, also feeling heart-broken. What Temujin buried, he well knew, was an infinitely precious childhood friendship.

The Khan stood up and studied the scene. As far as he could see there were fires lit by the armies of Senggum and Jamuka illuminating the plain, looking like the myriads of stars in the sky. He remained divided in his thoughts. He turned around and saw Guo Jing close to him. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

"I was thinking about my mother," answered the young man.

"Indeed, you are a brave son," said Temujin, "a true brave son!" He pointed to the thousands of fires on the plain, "They also," he continued, "are brave! We Mongols have so many brave sons, but we spend time making wars on ourselves. If we could unite them, we could take over the world and make it a huge field for our herds!"

Guo Jing, hearing these very ambitious words, felt even more admiration for Temujin. He stuck out his chest and said, "Great Khan, we are surely going to win, because we cannot be beaten by a coward like Senggum!"

"Precisely," Temujin answered with a smile. "Let's remember what we say tonight. If we manage to survive, henceforth I will consider you as my own son." He then hugged the young man.

As they spoke, the new day had begun. Horns sounded repeatedly in the ranks of the enemy.

"Help won't come," Temujin said. "Let's prepare ourselves to die on this hill." They heard, in the adversary's army, the jangle of the weapons and the neighs of horses; the attack was imminent.

"Great Khan," Guo Jing suddenly said, "my red horse is extremely fast. Take it and bring back help. In the mean time, we will remain here to face the enemy."

Temujin smiled and stretched his hand to caress the hair of the young man.

"If Temujin," he said, "was capable of abandoning his friends and his men to run away in fear for his life, he wouldn't be worthy of being your Khan!"

"That's true, Great Khan," Guo Jing acknowledged, "I was wrong..."

They hid themselves behind protective mounds of earth, ready to fire arrows at the attackers.

Shortly thereafter, three men left the enemy's ranks preceded by a yellow standard and moved forward. On the left was Senggum, on the right, Jamuka, and in the center, surprisingly, was the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire, Wanyan Honglie! He was covered with armor, a golden helmet and had a shield of gold on his arm. He shouted, "Temujin, do you dare betray the Jin Empire?"

Jochi, Temujin's eldest son, shot an arrow at him, but a man in his escort seized it from the air with astounding speed.

"Capture Temujin!" Wanyan Honglie shouted. At these words, four men hurried up the hill. Their movements were a surprise to Guo Jing. He noted that the newcomers, who used a lightness technique, were experts in martial arts and weren't warriors of the plains. Arriving at mid-hill, they avoided with agility the rain of arrows that Jebe, Borchu and the others shot. "We have officers and brave men of great strength here," Guo Jing worried, "but they won't be a match for experts in martial arts! What can we do?"

One among them, clothed in black, bounded to the summit of the hill.

Ogedai tried to stop him, but the newcomer hit his neck with a dart and swung down with his saber at the injured man. However, as quick as lightning, a sword came down to hit his wrist with a great speed and precision. The movement so well executed that he was forced to move back three steps. Surprised, he saw a young man with a strong build standing in front of Ogedai. Not expecting to

find an expert swordsman amongst Temujin's soldiers, he exclaimed, in Chinese, "Who are you? What is your name?"

"I am called Guo Jing!"

"I've never heard anyone speak of you! Surrender now!"

Guo Jing took a look around and saw that the three other attackers were on the summit of the hill and already engaged in an unarmed fight with Tchila'un, Borchu and the others. He struck again at the man with the saber who defended, then retaliated.

Just as Senggum's soldiers got ready to assault the hill, Muqali put his saber on the nape of Dukhsh's neck. "If you come," he shouted, "my blade will be without mercy!"

Senggum, very worried, turned toward Wanyan Honglie and said, "Lord Zhao, tell your men to come back, we will find another way! There's no reason to sacrifice my child!"

"Don't worry," Wanyan Honglie smiled and said, "Nothing will happen to him!" But in reality he wanted to force Temujin to kill Dukhsh and create a lasting hate between the two tribes.

Senggum's men didn't dare move, while those of the Prince were in a violent fight.

Guo Jing used the techniques of the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden' that Han Xiaoying had taught him. After several exchanges, he was faced with danger. His opponent's saber was powerful, his strength abundant and all his techniques were backed with internal energy so he was not a weak adversary. Guo Jing's long sword made swift movements and seemed to have turned into flashes of light. His sword tip was aimed at the critical places on his adversary and every technique was intended to harm his opponent. Guo

Jing's opponent felt a bit overwhelmed by his fast attacks and became flustered.

His three companions, who had already defeated several Mongol officers, saw him in difficulty. One among them, armed with a big spear, approached with a jump, "Big Brother, I've come to give you a helping hand!"

But the man with the saber shouted, "Don't move and admire the dexterity of your Older Brother!"

Taking advantage of his distraction, Guo Jing, delivered a stroke 'The Phoenix Flies off and the Snake Bounds', as he pointed the tip of his sword at the lower part of his opponent's body. The man moved back, but the blade had already split his left sleeve.

The man with the saber moved back and shouted, "Who is your master? Why do you look for death here?"

Guo Jing remained in a defensive posture and answered in the language of the Rivers and Lakes region [Jianghu] taught by his masters, "I am the disciple of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'. What are your honorable names and surnames?" He had practiced these polite forms of address for a long time, but this was the first time that he'd actually used them.

"Our names," the man with the saber said, while casting a glance towards his brothers-in-arms, "even if I told you, you would not know them. Defend yourself!"

After the first clashes, Guo Jing truly felt that his adversary was stronger than him. But the techniques taught by his Seventh Shifu were extremely sophisticated and provoked a lot of apprehension in his enemy; so much so that he could take the initiative and attack without moving back. The man with the saber used the stance 'Survey the Sea and Behead

the Dragon as his saber slashed towards Guo Jing's legs. In a matter of moments they had exchanged twenty or thirty stances. Both sides intently observed the fight. The man with the saber began to get nervous and his strokes became more and more violent. Suddenly, he attacked Guo Jing's waist. Guo Jing twisted and replied with a stroke called 'Turn Around to Pick the Fruit' towards the arm that held the saber. His adversary, seeing that he didn't bother about defending, believed that his hour had come: "When your sword touches its goal," he thought, "my saber will have already cut you in two!"

However, Guo Jing, sure of his strong neigong, moved his waist to the side without moving the rest of his body, and avoided the saber and planted his sword in the man's chest.

The man screamed, released his saber and struck the blade of the sword with his hand causing it fall to the ground. But the tip of Guo Jing's sword had already penetrated a half inch into his chest! He had saved his life, but his palm was cut and bled profusely.

He then heard the hiss of a weapon behind him and heard Jebe shout, "Watch out, behind you!"

Without even looking back, Guo Jing executed a backwards kick and blocked the stroke that came at him. At the same time, he grabbed the fallen saber and executed a saber cut at the hand of the enemy. Guo Jing delivered the stroke 'Advancing a Pace to Seize the Basket', deflecting the lance with his left hand. He turned his left palm and seized his opponents spear while his right hand holding the saber hacked towards the spear wielder. The man used all his strength to pull back his spear, but when he saw the saber about to hit him, he released his grip and retreated.

With this victory, the young man felt renewed again. With a flourish, he threw the saber to the foot of the hill, and picked up the lance. The fourth man jumped at him shouting and attacking with his two short axes. Guo Jing's spear techniques were taught by Quan Jinfu. After several exchanges Guo Jing feigned a flaw that the man with the axes was thrilled to see and he hacked at him. Suddenly, he felt pain in his stomach; he had been kicked by Guo Jing. He flew backwards while the force remaining in his left hand moved his axe towards his own head. The third martial brother of the axe man blocked it with his iron whip. When the two weapons met there was a 'clang' and sparks flew. The man released his axe when the weapons collided and sat down on the ground with a frightened look on his face, dumbfounded but alive. The man was a fool and it took him a minute before he realized that he had lost. He shouted angrily and picked up his axes to attack again. After a few axe slashes he hacked Guo Jing's spear into two pieces. Guo Jing had lost his weapon, so he used his palms to counter him. The man with the iron whip came to his martial brother assistance and Guo Jing saw that he was at a disadvantage but had no choice but to keep fighting.

This provoked indignation amongst the soldiers. Mongols are simple and direct and respect men of courage. They were scandalized to see these four men taking turns fighting Guo Jing, and now, they were pitting themselves two against one unarmed man! They regarded that as dishonorable, and shouted for them to stop. Guo Jing was a worthy opponent and they cheered him.

Borchu and Jebe drew their sabers and joined the battle; they did so well that the other two assailants also joined in the battle. The two Mongolians were invincible on the battlefield, but they were out of their depth in single combat against experts in martial arts. They fought only a

couple of exchanges with great difficulty before they were disarmed and had to retreat. Guo Jing saw that Borchu was in danger and stormed towards him to attack the man that used the saber. Guo Jing struck a palm towards the back of the eldest martial brother who used his saber to hack at Guo Jing's wrist. Guo Jing retracted his palm and used his elbow to attack the second martial brother to save Jebe. His attempts to provide some assistance to them proved futile.

The four assailants had only one obsession, to kill Guo Jing. They doubled their efforts to attack Guo Jing. The soldiers on the summit and at the foot of the hill redoubled their shouts and insults; but the four turned a deaf ear on them. The spearman had collected a javelin from the ground. Coming at him Guo Jing saw, at the same time, a saber, javelin, whip and axes! Since he was unarmed, he could not parry or reply, so his only option was to avoid the blows employing his lightness art [Qinggong]. He moved back and forth and avoided numerous attacks in him.

For another twenty odd stances the men continued their attacks on Guo Jing. His arm, cut by the saber, was bleeding and he was in a dire position.

Suddenly a disturbance disrupted the ranks of Senggum's army as six individuals nimbly brushed through the soldiers and ascended the hill. The Mongolians thought that they were more lackeys of Wanyan Honglie coming to lend assistance to their comrades, and noisily voiced their disapproval.

Temujin's men prepared to shoot arrows at them to prevent their approach when Jebe, whose vision was particularly acute, saw that it was the 'Jiangnan Freaks'. "Jing'er," he cried, "Here come your teachers!"

Guo Jing, nearly unable to resist any longer, was cheered up.

Arriving first, Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa realized right away the perilous position their disciple was in. Quan jumped forward and struck the four weapons with a blow of his balance scale, "Have you no shame!" he cried.

Feeling great pain in their hands, the four men realized that a more powerful opponent had just arrived and drew back. Zhu Cong had rescued Guo Jing. Meanwhile, the other Freaks arrived.

"Shameless scoundrels," Quan Jinfa scolded. "Be off! Have you no face?"

The man with the saber was well aware that they had lost their advantage, and if they continued the fight, they would be defeated. But if they backed down, they would lose face and could no longer dare to serve the Sixth Prince!

"Are you the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'?" he demanded, to give himself some breathing space.

"Indeed," Zhu Cong replied, laughing. "Who are you?"

"We are the disciples of the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group'."

The 'Freaks' were very surprised, for, given that these individuals had openly abused their numerical superiority, they believed that they must be vagabonds without a master. But the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', Sha Tongtian, is a weighty personality in the martial arts world.

"Are you misusing that name, or not?" Ke Zhen'E demanded in an icy voice. "The 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' is a renowned personage, how could he have disciples as miserable as you?"

"Misusing a name?" the axe man said. "This is Elder Brother Shen Qinggang, nicknamed 'Saber Breaks Down The Soul'; this is Second brother, Wu Qinglie, nicknamed 'Lance Seizes Life'; this is Third brother Ma Qingxiong, nicknamed 'Whip Captures Spirit'; and I, Qian Qingjian, am nicknamed 'Axe Buries Family'."

"So," Ke Zhen'E said, "it seems to be true. You really are the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. You occupy a certain position in the Jianghu world; how could you lower yourselves to attack four against one?"

Wu Qinglie said cunningly, "What, four against one?" he argued. "Isn't your disciple helped by all these Mongols? Indeed, we are four against several hundred!"

"Third brother," Qian Qingjian demanded of Ma Qingxiong, "this blind person appears to be very boastful. Who is he?"

He had asked the question in a low voice but Ke Zhen'E heard him. Very upset, he leapt forward and struck with his staff at Qian. Grabbing him by the collar he threw him to the bottom of the hill. Ke Zhen'E, already among them, grasped them one after the other and pitched them far away. The Mongolian soldiers called out joyfully. The 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', covered with sand, rose painfully to their feet with their limbs aching and shame on their faces.

At that moment, immense dust clouds rose in the distance, as if tens of thousands of horsemen were coming. A flutter of nervousness immediately moved through Senggum's army.

Temujin, delighted to see reinforcements arriving, knew that iron discipline reigned in the army of Jamuka. Its officers and soldiers were all battle hardened. Senggum, protected by the reputation of his father, was a less

formidable commander in chief. Temujin pointed to the left wing of Senggum's army and shouted, "Attack in that direction!"

Jebe, Borchu, Jochi and Chagatai signaled the first ones. One could hear the faraway cries of the warriors of the relief column. Muqali swept his saber down on the nape of the neck of Dukhsh and shouted, "Get out of the way! Get out of the way!"

Senggum, who was going to order his men to intercept them, hesitated upon seeing that his son menaced. In a wink, Temujin's small troop moved to the foot of the hill. Jebe carefully aimed and loosed an arrow headed for Senggum's head. He shielded himself quickly, but the projectile struck his left cheek and he tumbled down from his mount. Seeing their chieftain fall, his men made their escape in pitiful disarray.

Temujin and his companions broke out of the siege, firing arrows at those that pursued them. Several li away, in the cloud of dust, was Tolui and his soldiers. The pursuers had always feared the bravery of Temujin. Now that they no longer had the advantage of numbers, they turned tail.

It turned out that because Tolui was young, the chieftains and generals refused to obey him since he didn't have Temujin's command seal. He could only convince a few thousand young soldiers to follow him here. He then conceived the idea of attaching branches to the tails of the horses, so that quantity of dust thus raised concealed the number of his soldiers. The ploy was a success.

Temujin's army returned to his camp. On the way they met Hua Zheng leading a small company of soldiers. When she saw that they were unharmed, she was so happy that she wouldn't stop talking.

That evening, Temujin gave a large banquet to reward his soldiers, but he placed Dukhsh in the place of honor, which caused general indignation. The Khan offered three toasts to pay homage to Dukhsh and said, "Ong Khan, my adoptive father, and my brother Senggum have always treated me well. There is no reason for hatred between our families. Please present my excuses to them, which will be accompanied with gifts of great value. I won't hold a grudge against you because of what you have done. After you return, you will prepare for your marriage to my daughter. We will hold a great feast and we will invite the chiefs of all the tribes. There will be great rejoicing. You will be my son-in-law and thus my son. From now on the two families must be united as one and not let themselves be divided by gossip."

Dukhsh, relieved at not being killed, accepted all that was offered. He noticed that when Temujin spoke, he kept his right hand on his chest under his tunic, and coughed nonstop. He wondered, "Could it be that he's wounded?"

"This day," the Khan said, "I was hit by an arrow. It will take three months to recuperate before I'm healthy again; if this hadn't happened, I would accompany you back myself. He withdrew his hand from under his tunic; it was covered with blood! "There's no need to wait for my wound to heal before you get married. Otherwise...otherwise you'll have to wait too long."

All the officers present were amazed and outraged to see their Khan afraid and apprehensive about Ong Khan, and much too eager to marry Hua Zheng to Dukhsh. The son of the division commander that was part of Temujin's escort had been killed defending the hill. The commander, insane with anger, unsheathed his saber and wanted to kill Dukhsh. The Khan had him seized and beaten in front of Dukhsh, until he fainted, covered with blood.

“He will be imprisoned,” Temujin ordered, “and he will be beheaded with all of his family in three days time!” The following day, Dukhsh returned home, taking along two carts filled with gold and furs, a thousand fat sheep, one hundred war horses, and escorted by fifty soldiers. Temujin also sent an emissary known for his eloquence, to plead his cause with Ong Khan and Senggum. At the time of the departure, Temujin, who seemed not to have the strength to ride a horse, arrived on a stretcher and bade him farewell, still coughing.

Eight days later, Temujin brought his officers together. “Gather your soldiers,” he ordered, “we will attack Ong Khan!” All the officers looked aghast. He continued, “Ong Khan has a very large army, whereas we are few. If you can’t win a frontal battle, a ruse is needed. I let Dukhsh go, heaping him with gifts, while I pretended to be wounded by an arrow and near death. I did all that to take him off guard!”

The officers expressed their admiration. At this moment, Temujin freed the commander he had beaten and gave him a large reward. Learning that the army was going to attack Ong Khan, the commander felt joy. He knelt down to express his thanks and asked for the honor of commanding the vanguard, which Temujin granted him. The army of the Khan was divided into three columns, which marched during the night using little used trails and bivouacked during the day. When they met shepherds, they took them captive and brought them along, to avoid any indiscriminate talk.

In the beginning, Ong Khan and Senggum, fearing that Temujin would come to seek revenge, kept their guard up. But the triumphal return of Dukhsh, the gifts he brought back, the servile remarks of the emissary and the news of the serious wound to the Khan reassured them completely.

They even withdrew their forward sentinels and spent their time feasting with Wanyan Honglie and Jamuka. One night, the three columns of Temujin's army fell on them like lightning! The many soldiers of Ong Khan and Jamuka, panic stricken, lost much of their combativeness and the battle turned into a rout. Ong Khan and Senggum fled towards the west where they were killed shortly after by the Naïman and Liao. In the confusion, Dukhsh was trampled by horses.

Wanyan Honglie, for his part, escaped in the middle of the night, in the protection of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' and headed back to the Jin capital. Abandoned by his soldiers, Jamuka took refuge at Tangnu Mountain with his five bodyguards. They betrayed him and brought him to Temujin. Temujin was furious, "Bodyguards who betray their master!" he cried. "How can I let such people live?" He ordered them decapitated in front of Jamuka. Then he turned to Jamuka, "Shall we become friends again?"

"Even if you spare my life," answered Jamuka with tears in his eyes, "I haven't the honor left to live in this world. I only beg that you let me die without bloodshed, so that my soul will not leave my body."

[According to the beliefs of the shamans, the soul resides in the blood. Princes that are to be killed but still honored were put to death by strangulation.]

Temujin remained sadly silent for a long time. "Well," he finally said, "I agree to such a death and I will bury you at the place where we played as children. Jamuka knelt before him, then rose and left the ger. A few days later, Temujin united the tribes on the banks of the Onon River in a kuriltai (general assembly). The river's fame stretched beyond the steppe, and the tribes, warriors and all the shepherds fear and revere it. Ong Khan and Jamuka's men

had been integrated into Temujin's army. During the kuriltai, Temujin was acclaimed Grand Khan of all Mongolia; he carried, from that time on, the title of 'Genghis Khan', which meant 'Supreme Chief'.

Genghis Khan rewarded the most deserving soldiers: the Four Aces, Muqali, Borchu, Boroquul, Tchila'un, while the officers, Jebe, Jelme and Subotai were made generals. During the battle, Guo Jing had rendered exceptional service and he was made a general as well! A young man, who had not yet reached twenty years of age, was regarded as an equal to officers of great reputation! During the banquet, Genghis Khan accepted homage from his faithful ones and drank without restraint. Slightly drunk, he said to Guo Jing, "My good boy, I will give you the most valuable thing I have." Guo Jing knelt down to thank him. "I give Hua Zheng to you," Genghis Khan said. "From tomorrow onwards, you will be the Golden Saber Prince. [Jin Dao Fu Ma]"

All the warriors let out cries of joy and congratulated the young man, "Son-in-law, wearing the large golden knife! Well done, hurrah!"

The happiest with all this was, without any doubt, Tolui, who embraced his sworn brother. But the person at the center of interest remained dazzled. He had always regarded Hua Zheng as his sister and he did not feel any other kind of love. He had devoted all his time to martial arts; when had he time to think of other things? The words of Genghis Khan distressed him and he didn't know what to do. Seeing him speechless, everyone burst out laughing.

After the banquet, Guo Jing went to inform his mother. Li Ping remained thoughtful for a long time, and then asked him to invite the Six Freaks from Jiangnan to their ger. They were delighted to see their beloved disciple covered with

honors and they congratulated his mother. But she did not say a word. Then she fell suddenly to her knees in front of the Six.

"Please rise," they protested. "If you have something to say to us, do so, why such ceremony?"

Han Xiaoying helped her up. "Thanks to the teachings of the six Shifus," Li Ping said, "my child finally became a man. I can never express my gratitude to all of you. But now, I face a difficulty and I need your enlightened counsel." She then told about the marriage which had been arranged by her late husband and his sworn brother, Yang Tiexin. "That the Khan wants my son to be his son-in-law," she began again, "is of course a great honor. But if Brother Yang had a girl and I do not keep my husband's promise, how could I, in the underworld, face my husband and Brother Yang?"

"You don't have to worry," Zhu Cong said laughing. "The honorable Yang actually has a descendant, but it is not a girl...it's a boy!"

Li Ping was astonished and delighted at the same time. "How do you know, Zhu Shifu?"

"A friend, who remained in the Central Plains, wrote to inform us. By the way, he wishes that we take Jing'er to Jiangnan to meet the son of Yang, and to compare their kung fu."

The Six Freaks had never made known to Li Ping and her son about the challenge with Qiu Chuji. Whenever Guo Jing raised questions about the young Taoist Yin Zhiping, they merely murmured something without really answering. Knowing the kind nature of their disciple, they thought that, were he suddenly to know the story of Yang Kang, he would not show all of his potential at the time of the combat; it would distort the competition irretrievably.

Zhu Cong's words charmed Li Ping. She asked if the Mrs. Yang was still in this world, and asked questions about the character of Yang Kang, but the Six were unable to answer her. Li Ping and the 'Six Freaks' decided that the six would take Guo Jing to Jiangnan to meet Yang Kang. At the same time they would try to find Duan Tiande and seek vengeance. Afterwards they would come back and Guo Jing would marry Hua Zheng. Guo Jing went to report this arrangement to Genghis Khan.

"Well," Temujin said. "Since you go to the south, will you bring back the head of the Sixth Jin Prince, Wanyan Honglie, for me? My sworn brother Jamuka betrayed me and lost his life, and it's the fault of that scum. How many men do you need to achieve this mission?"

After unifying the Mongolian tribes, Genghis Khan posed a serious threat to the Jin Empire. Confrontation would take place sooner or later, it was inevitable. Having met Wanyan Honglie on several occasions, Temujin knew his intelligence and his competence, so it was important that he be gotten rid of as soon as possible. As for his break with Jamuka, the true reasons were elsewhere; he had uprooted traditions, had left the spoils of war to his own warriors, and had sought to attract Jamuka's soldiers to his own army. The truth was, they both broke their oath of fidelity and they did not want to recognize their responsibilities and preferred to blame it on Wanyan Honglie.

Throughout his childhood, Guo Jing's mother had told him stories about the past and he had developed a great hatred towards the Jin. This was reinforced by his battle with the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' who were employed by Wanyan Honglie. Thinking of an answer to Genghis Khan's question, he said to himself, "If my six Shifus will lend me a hand, certainly my mission will be a success. If I take along brave soldiers who do not know martial arts, they are likely

to be a hindrance." He then answered, "If my six Shifus accompany me, I won't need anybody else."

"Very well," Genghis Khan said. "We are still weak at the moment and we cannot face the Jin Empire directly. It will be necessary for you to be careful and not to let them guess our intentions."

Guo Jing agreed. The Khan gave him ten taels of gold for his journey and offered the Six Freaks a part of the spoils plundered from Ong Khan. Learning that he was to leave on a mission to the south, all of Guo Jing's Mongol friends also offered gifts to him.

"My Anda," Tolui reminded, "the people of the south don't keep their word, you must be careful, and not get duped ..."

At dawn three days later, Guo Jing and his Shifus left for the grave of Zhang Ahsheng to pay homage. Then they returned to bid farewell to Li Ping before taking the road to the south. Li Ping watched the tall silhouette of her son riding the small red horse as it disappeared on the steppe. She thought of his birth on that desolate battlefield, and felt her heart tighten with concern and sadness.

After riding about ten li, Guo Jing saw two white eagles soaring in the sky; Tolui and Hua Zheng had come to bid him farewell. Tolui offered him a valuable coat of flawless black sable which he had taken from Ong Khan. Hua Zheng, with glowing cheeks, looked at her future husband without saying anything.

"Oh go ahead, little sister," Tolui said, "speak to him! I will not listen to what you'll say!" He burst out laughing and moved away.

Hua Zheng bowed her head, not finding anything to say... "Return quickly!" she finally murmured.

Guo Jing nodded his head. "What else do you want to say to me?" he asked. She shook her head. "Then, I'll go ..." She lowered her head without saying another word.

Guo Jing leaned over, lightly pressed her to him, then rode towards Tolui and hugged him also. Then he urged his horse into a gallop in order to catch up with his six Shifus who were already far ahead.

Him being so formal and not showing any tenderness, even though they were promised in marriage and he was traveling faraway, Hua Zheng felt a surge of anger. As she rode off she violently whipped her horse even though the poor animal had nothing to do with the situation ...

Chapter 7 - Joust to Find a Spouse

Translated by Strunf, Patudo, Dugu Seeking a Win and SunnySnow



Guo Jing snatched the 'joust to find a spouse' banner and swept the banner pole across the

length of his arm; the banner flipped over the Young Prince's face. The Young Prince slanted his body aside and raised his spear. With a red circling shadow and a flickering spearhead he thrust the spear at Guo Jing.

The 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan' and Guo Jing took the southeastern route. The journey promised to be long and many days passed before they'd even left the steppe. One day, they were not very far from Zhangjiakou [known as Kalgan at this time]. It was the first time that Guo Jing had put his feet on Chinese soil; everything was new to him and he was full of enthusiasm. He loosened his hold on the reins of his horse and it ran so quickly that the wind whistled in his ears and the landscape changed quickly before his amazed eyes. The little red horse galloped without interruption until he reached the Black River [Amur River or Heilong Jiang], then Guo Jing stopped at a roadside hostel in order to wait for his masters.

After this long run, the horse was covered with sweat, so Guo Jing took a handkerchief to wipe it down. He was stunned to see traces of blood on the handkerchief! After passing his hand along its neck, he saw more blood when he withdrew it. He almost burst into tears, blaming himself for not stopping his horse and not taking better care of it. He was the one responsible for its loss! He embraced the horse and caressed him nearly one thousand times; yet somehow, the animal seemed to be very healthy and didn't appear to be suffering any ill affects.

While waiting for his Third Shifu, who would properly care for the horse, he couldn't stop turning his head toward the road, hoping to see him. Suddenly he heard the tinkling of bells as four snow white camels arrived running full speed

on the road. Each was ridden by an individual clothed in white. Guo Jing had grown up near the steppe, but he had never seen any camels as beautiful and couldn't stop staring fixedly at them. The four camel riders, of about twenty years in age, had similar faces with fine lines and attractiveness; a type of beauty rarely seen in Mongolia. With graceful agility they got down from their mounts to enter the hostel. Guo Jing could not take his eyes off them.

One of the four, embarrassed by his staring, blushed and lowered her head. Another one, who was bolder, got angry, "Little fool! Why do you look at us like that?"

Guo Jing, taken aback, turned his head in embarrassment. The newcomers whispered in low voices and laughed. "Congratulations!" one said to another. "You really dazzled that fool!"

Guo Jing knew that the speaker ridiculed him and felt ashamed. His cheeks turned red. Just as he was wondering if he should remain or leave, Han Baoju arrived on his stallion 'Wind Chaser'. The young man hastened to tell his Shifu of his misadventure with his horse.

"How is this possible?" Han Baoju wondered. He approached the horse, caressed it, examined his hand attentively, and then exploded in laughter. "It's not blood," he said, "it's sweat!"

"Sweat?" Guo Jing stammered, almost speechless. "Red sweat?"

"Jing'er, it is a horse that sweats blood, a rare beast and of inestimable value!" Guo Jing, happy beyond belief to learn that his horse was not injured asked, "Third Shifu, how can sweat look like blood?"

"I heard from my late Shifu, that there existed in the kingdom of Ferghana [a central Asian Valley, shared today by Uzbekistan, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan.] in the Territories of the west, celestial horses whose sweat was red as blood. At a gallop they looked like they were flying and could cover more than one thousand li per day. But that was just a story and since no one had ever seen one, I didn't believe it myself. However, here is this legendary animal and it let himself be tamed by you!"

By this time, the other Freaks had also arrived. They took a room in the hostel then ordered something to eat. Zhu Cong, whose learning was incomparable, said while nodding his head, "It is an anecdotal story confined to historic records in the dynastic history of the Han. The story tells that the Emperor Han Wudi, having heard rumors of the horse that sweats blood, sent an emissary to the Kingdom of Ferghana with a full size gold statue of the animal. The emissary asked to have one of them but the king of Ferghana refused."

"How did the emperor react?" Han Xiaoying asked. "Did he give up on having the horse?" Sitting at another table, the camel riders in white, turned to listen to the story. At that moment, more bells were heard and four more individuals, also clothed in white, entered and sat down with the others.

"Of course not," Zhu Cong said. "He became enraged and invaded Ferghana. He began a long and vicious war, during which the kingdom was destroyed. He finally captured one of the famous horses, but at such a price!" All commented on the madness of men and continued to eat.

The eight camel riders had listened to the story attentively and gave covetous looks at the red horse tied outside. They kept whispering in low voices. Ke Zhen'E, whose hearing

was especially acute, heard them distinctly even though the tables were relatively distant from each other.

"If we're going to take it," one of them said, "we need to do it right away. If he rides his horse again, we won't be able to catch him!"

"There are too many people here," retorted another. "And he has some friends..."

"If they dare to interfere," said a third, "we'll have to kill them all!"

"How can these eight individuals scheme so cruelly?" Ke Zhen'E wondered, but he didn't let anything show and continued to swallow his food greedily.

"We will offer this precious horse to the young Master," one of them said. "Mounted on such beast, his arrival in Yanjing will be a lot more spectacular! No one will be talked of as much as him, not even vain people like the 'Ginseng Immortal' or the 'Virtuous Supreme Lingzhi'!"

Ke Zhen'E heard them speak of the 'Virtuous Supreme Lingzhi', who was an eminent personality from a secret school in Tibet, known in the whole of the southwest for his technique 'Stamp of a Big Hand'. On the other hand, he didn't know anything about the 'Ginseng Immortal'.

"These past few days," another said, "we met a lot of outlaws on the road; they were all Peng Lianhu's men. They call him 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands'. They are probably going to the gathering in Yanjing. If they happen on this precious horse, do you think that we'll get another chance to take it?"

Ke Zhen'E froze. He knew that Peng Lianhu was a dangerous outlaw chief who terrorized the region of Hubei

and Shanxi. He had many henchmen under his command and acted with cruelty. He had killed so many people that he had received the nickname 'Butcher of the One Thousand Hands'. "Why," he wondered, "are all these sinister outlaws going to meet in the capital? And where did these eight women come from?"

The women continued to plot in low voices and decided to lie in ambush on the road outside of the town, in order to seize Guo Jing's horse. Then they chattered, talking of clothes and other things of that kind. "It's you that the young Master prefers", or "The young Master must be thinking about you now", etc. Ke Zhen'E angrily raised his eyebrows, but he could not close his ears and he heard everything in spite of himself.

"If we offer the blood sweating horse to the young Master," asked one of them, "what reward do you think he is going to give us?"

"He is surely going to spend more nights with you," answered another, laughing.

The first sulkily protested, and they continued to bicker while laughing. "Be quiet," one of them said. "Don't reveal our intentions, because they don't look to be that easy to..."

"The woman over there," another said in a low voice, "carries a sword; she practices martial arts for sure. And she is rather good looking! If she were ten years younger, the young Master would certainly be interested in her!"

Ke Zhen'E knew that they were speaking of Han Xiaoying and felt even angrier. "This 'young Master' that they speak of can't be someone very admirable!" The eight women finished their meal, mounted their camels and left.

After their departure, Ke Zhen'E asked Guo Jing, "Jing'er, what do you think of the abilities of those eight women?"

"What women?" Guo Jing wondered.

"They were disguised as men," Zhu Cong explained, "but you didn't realize it, did you?"

"Who knows of the 'Mount of the White Camel'?" Ke Zhen'E asked. No one had heard of it. Ke told them of the conversation that he had heard. The other Freaks decided that these shameless women didn't lack boldness, but their audacity in wanting to tackle someone stronger than them was something to laugh at.

"Two among them," Han Xiaoying said, "have big noses and green eyes; they probably aren't Chinese..."

"Very true," confirmed Han Baoju. "And those pure white camels only exist in the territories of the west."

"That they want to steal the horse," Ke Zhen'E said, "is not too serious, but they also said that numerous dangerous personalities are going to a meeting in Yanjing. It may involve an important plot to harm the Song dynasty. It could have disastrous consequences for our people! Since we accidentally discovered this business, we cannot wash our hands of it."

"Certainly not," Quan Jinfu said, "but the appointment at Jiaying is near, we can't waste any time." They hesitated, because it appeared impossible to reconcile the two missions.

"Jing'er goes there first," Nan Xiren suddenly said.

"What Fourth brother wants to say" Han Xiaoying interpreted, "is that Jing'er must go to Jiaying alone, and

that we will join him once we have dealt with this matter in Yanjing." Nan Xiren nodded his head.

"It's true," Zhu Cong said, "it is time that Jing'er traveled alone to acquire some experience by himself..." The young man was saddened to part with his Shifus.

"You are now grown up," Ke Zhen'E reprimanded. "Don't behave like a child!"

"You go and wait for us there," Han Xiaoying said, comforting him. "In less than one month, we will join you."

"We didn't explain the appointment in Jiaxing in detail to you before," Zhu Cong said. "When the time arrives, on the twenty-fourth day of the third lunar month, at noon, you absolutely must be at the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal', even if the sky falls on your head!" Guo Jing agreed.

"Those eight women want to steal your horse," Ke Zhen'E continued. "Don't look for a fight; your horse is fast and they won't be able to catch up to you. You have important things to attend to, so don't get involved in useless distractions."

"If those women dare to cause any trouble," Han Baoju said, "the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' will stop them!"

Zhang Ahsheng died more than ten years ago, but the six still called themselves the 'Seven Freaks', never forgetting to associate their dead brother with all their actions.

Guo Jing bade farewell to his teachers. They had witnessed his battle with the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', and were not greatly worried for his safety. The young man had proved that he knew how to use the skills that had been taught to him. Therefore they let him leave alone. On one

hand, the meeting of the outlaws in Yanjing worried them greatly and they couldn't just ignore it. On the other hand, a youngster has to travel Jianghu alone, in order to learn lessons that no teacher can pass on.

At the moment of parting, each gave his last bit of advice. As usual, when the Six spoke, Nan Xiren was the last one to express himself, "If you cannot defeat an enemy," he said. "Flee!"

Knowing Guo Jing's determined nature, he knew that he would rather die than to surrender. If he met a master, he would certainly fight to the bitter end, even at the risk of death. That was the reason Nan Xiren gave him this common-sense warning.

"The martial arts have no limits," Zhu Cong added. "As the proverb says: 'For every peak there is one higher', so for every man there is someone stronger. Whatever your power, you will one day meet a foe stronger than you. A true man knows to retreat when necessary. When facing grave danger, it is necessary to contain one's impetuosity and anger. This is what is meant by the adage: 'If one preserves the earth and its forests, one does not fear the lack of firewood.' It is not cowardly to take good advice! When the enemy is too numerous and you cannot face them, it is very necessary to avoid being too reckless. Keep in mind Fourth Shifu's advice!"

Guo Jing agreed and kowtowed to his teachers before mounting his horse to head for the south. He felt great sadness at parting from his masters with whom he had lived every day for the past ten years. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He thought also of his mother, whom he had left alone on the steppe. Of course, she didn't lack for anything, since Genghis Khan and Tolui had promised to look after

her, but his loneliness weighed upon him nonetheless, and he worried for her.

After traveling about ten li, he arrived in a mountainous region. The road wound along the bottom of a valley dominated by craggy slopes dotted with strange boulders. Since it was the first time that he had faced the outside world, he could not help but feel a little apprehensive at the sight of this threatening landscape. With one hand on the hilt of his sword, he paused and smiled, "If Third Shifu saw me thus, trembling and terrified, he would certainly make fun of me!"

The road climbed the mountain flank, becoming narrower and serpentine. Rounding a bend, he suddenly became aware of a group of white shapes in front of him; four women clothed in white, mounted on white camels, blocked the road. Guo Jing, pulling back the reins of his horse, halted. From a distance, he shouted, "Excuse me! May I please pass?"

The four women laughed. "Little man," one of them replied. "What do you fear? Why don't you come over! We won't eat you!" Red-faced, Guo Jing did not know what to do. Could he amicably negotiate passage, or would it be necessary to rush forward and make the pass by force of arms?

"Your horse is not a bad animal," another woman said. "Come here; let me have a look at him!" She spoke to him as if to a little child. Guo Jing felt anger rise within him, but the layout of the terrain worried him. To his right rose a craggy cliff, to the left, there was a mist-covered precipice, whose bottom could not be seen.

"Eldest Shifu," he said to himself, "has given me good advice not to seek trouble. If I ride at them swiftly, those girls will be obliged to let me pass!" He lashed his reins,

pressed with his thighs, and the red horse sped forward like an arrow. Sword in hand, Guo Jing cried, "Listen to me, you people! Let me pass! If someone is jostled and falls from the precipice, it won't be my fault!" In the blink of an eye, he arrived in front of the four women. They had leapt down from their camels and attempted to seize the bridle of the horse. With a whinny, the horse leapt over the camels! Guo Jing had the impression that he was flying in the clouds as he landed beyond his opponents, who were just as surprised as him!

Hearing them scream out in anger, he turned and saw the flash of two projectiles flying toward him. This being his first time traveling the Jianghu, he had taken heed of the prudent advice of his masters. Worried that the missiles were poisoned, he did not wish to seize them with his bare hand. He waved his leather cap and intercepted them.

"Well done!" two of the women called. "Pretty good kung fu!"

Guo Jing dipped his head and saw, inside his cap, two silver darts tipped with extremely sharp fish bones. Deadly weapons! He felt both disturbed and upset. "There is no ill-will between us," he said to himself. "You covet only my horse and yet you are ready to mortally injure me!" He placed the missiles in his pouch, and fearing to meet the other four women, he slackened his horse's reins, not holding it back any longer. It galloped like the wind and in less than an hour had covered 80 li. The other assailants must have been lying in ambush further down the road, but he passed by so quickly that they did not have the time to launch it. After a brief rest, he continued on. Before night fell again, he had arrived in Kalgan [the Mongolian name for Zhangjiakou], sure that he had left those following him far behind.

Kalgan, at the crossroads of commerce between the South and the North, was a small but very lively city, where the trade of the region was centered, especially the fur trade. Holding his red horse by the reins, Guo Jing glanced right and left with great curiosity. Never had he seen a town of such importance and everything appeared strange and new to him. Arriving in front of a large restaurant he felt the pangs of hunger. He tied up his horse in front of the door and went in. Once seated at a table, he ordered a dish of beef, with two pancakes, and having a good appetite, he ate in the Mongol manner, wrapping the meat in the pancake and taking bites out of it. While he satisfied his hunger, he suddenly heard a disturbance at the door of the inn. Fearing for his mount, he rushed to the doorway.

The little red horse was quietly eating its fodder while two inn boys were scolding a young, slender boy, clothed in rags. He appeared to be fifteen or sixteen years of age and on his head he wore an old leather hat with many holes. His face and hands were dirty; so much so that one could not distinguish his features clearly. He held a big bun in his hand and laughed foolishly, revealing two rows of beautiful white teeth that seemed out-of-place in comparison with his general appearance. His black, very lively eyes, shone with intensity.

“Hey you!” one of the boys screamed. “Get lost!”

“Sure.” the young lad said, “Since you want me to go, I’ll go...” As he turned on his heels the other inn boy interrupted, “Leave the bun!” He handed the bun back, but it was covered with the marks of dirty fingers and could no longer be sold. The inn boy was furious and launched a blow with his fist that the boy ducked.

Guo Jing, feeling pity for him and thinking that he had to be hungry, interposed himself. “There’s no need for violence,”

he said. "Put that on my account!"

He took the bun and gave it to the young man who took it and said, "This bun is no good! Poor thing, this is for you!" He threw the bun to a small skinny dog that started to devour it.

"What a waste!" the inn boy disgustedly said, "giving a dog such a good bun!"

Guo Jing was taken aback, for he had believed that the boy suffered from hunger... He returned to his table to continue his meal. The young man followed him inside the establishment and stayed there, looking at him fixedly. Guo Jing felt a little bothered and asked, "Do you want to eat here, too?"

"Gladly," replied the young man with a laugh. "I was bored being all alone and I've been looking for a buddy..."

He had a Jiangnan accent and its familiarity delighted Guo Jing. In fact, his mother was from Lin'an, in Zhejiang province, and the Freaks all came from Jiaying. Since childhood he had been immersed in the accent of Jiangnan. The young boy seated himself at the table. Guo Jing called the waiter. When he saw the rags and dirtiness of the new guest, the look on his face was not very nice. It was necessary to call him several times before he finally, dragging his feet, brought over a bowl and plate.

"You take me for a pauper," the young boy said, "and unworthy to eat here. Pah! Even should you serve me your finest dish, who knows if it'll be to my taste?"

"Ah yes," the waiter said coldly. "We will assuredly follow your orders, sir. The problem is that we don't know if anyone will pay!"

"Whatever I order," the boy demanded of Guo Jing, "will you treat me?"

"Of course...of course!" Guo Jing replied. He then told the waiter, "Quickly cut up a plate of roast beef and a half plate of mutton liver!" To him, roast beef and mutton liver constituted the ultimate in delicacies... "Do you drink wine?" he asked the boy.

"Wait," the boy replied. "Don't rush into the meat. Let us begin first with fruit. Eh, waiter! First we'll have four dry fruits, four fresh fruits, two salted sweetened ones, and four preserved fruit in honey."

Not expecting such an order the waiter was shocked,. "Which fruit and sweets do you wish, sir?" he inquired.

"In this little establishment, in this pathetic little town," the boy said, "I imagine it's impossible for you to come up with anything great. We'll have to content ourselves with lesser things. The four dry fruit are lichis, longans, steamed jujubes and ginkgos. For the fresh, you will choose seasonal fruits. For the salted sweetened, perfumed cherries and plums and filaments of ginger, but I don't know if you'll find those here. As for the honey preserved fruit, you will bring rose perfumed tangerines, preserved grapes, sugar frosted peaches, and pear slices." This knowledge of culinary matters impressed the waiter, who no longer dared to act superior.

"There are no fresh fish or fresh shrimp to accompany the wine," continued the boy, "so I will be content with eight average... dishes."

"What else do you desire, sir?" asked the waiter.

"Of course," said the boy with a sigh. "If I don't explain all the tiniest details, you will be incapable of doing anything

properly! Here are the eight dishes: steamed pheasant, fried ducks feet, chicken tongue soup, deer stomach in rice wine, beef ribs with chives, rabbit in chrysanthemum petals, stir-fried thigh of wild boar, and pork feet in ginger vinegar... I'm choosing simple dishes only; it's not worth mentioning more sophisticated ones." The waiter's mouth gaped.

"Those eight dishes," he said, "are rather expensive! For the duck feet and the chicken tongue soup, we will require a lot of poultry!"

"The gentleman is paying," the boy responded, pointing at Guo Jing, "Do you believe that he does not have the means?"

The waiter saw that Guo Jing wore a sable coat of great value. "Even if you have no means of payment," he thought to himself, "this coat will suffice to cover the expenditure!" Then he demanded, "Is that all?"

"You will also bring," the boy said, "twelve more dishes to accompany the rice and eight different dimsum." The waiter didn't dare to ask for details concerning the dishes, fearing that the boy would order dishes he could not provide. He went to the kitchen and told the cooks to prepare the best.

"Which wine do the gentlemen wish?" he returned to ask. "We have clear rice wine ten years of age. What would you say to two horns to start?"

"Why not," the boy said.

A little later the waiter brought fruits and cookies. Guo Jing tasted each plate and marveled at all these delicious things he had never known of. The boy talked continuously, telling of local customs and habits, describing famous characters

and anecdotes about the country of the South. Guo Jing was fascinated by his eloquence and his immense knowledge. Guo Jing's Second Shifu was a well-read man and a great scholar, but Guo Jing, who had devoted all of his time and energy to martial arts, and had only learned from Zhu Cong, during their rare free time, some basic characters. It seemed to him that this young boy was as cultivated as his Second Shifu and he was filled with wonder. "I believe," he thought, "that what seems a poor beggar is in reality a well-read man of culture. The people in China are definitely quite different from those in Mongolia."

Half an hour later the dishes were ready. It took two large tables together in order to serve them all. The young boy drank very little and ate in the same way and was satisfied with picking at the less spicy dishes. Suddenly, he called to the waiter and thundered, "This rice wine is five years old! How do you dare to serve it with the food?"

"Your palate is really very refined!" the manager came begging for forgiveness. "Please excuse us. The fact is, our humble establishment did not have it, and it was necessary to borrow some from the nearest larger restaurant, The House of Eternal Celebration. In general, one does not find aged wine in Kalgan."

The young boy made a gesture to remove it and resumed his conversation with Guo Jing, asking him a thousand questions about the steppe and Mongolia. Since his Shifus had urged him to be discreet so as not to reveal his identity, he was content to tell anecdotes of hunting for hares and wolves, shooting eagles, horse races etc. The boy listened with fascination, applauding the sharpest accounts and often bursting into fresh and childish laughter.

Guo Jing had lived all his life on the steppe. He had certainly had a close friendship with Tolui and Hua Zheng.

But Temujin, who loved his youngest son very much, often kept his son near him, so that Tolui didn't have much time for play. As for Hua Zheng, she had a headstrong character and often quarreled with Guo Jing, who was reluctant to do everything she wanted. Although they always reconciled in the end, the relationship wasn't an easy one. However, it was very different with this young boy; they were eating and conversing so that Guo Jing, without knowing why, felt a joy he'd never experienced before.

Usually he spoke little and expressed himself with difficulty. A person needed to ask him questions that forced him to hesitatingly answer. Han Xiaoying gently made fun of him by saying that he was the preferred disciple of his Fourth Shifu, because he had adopted Nan Xiren's motto, "silence is golden". But now, surprisingly, he could talk nonstop, not hiding anything of his life, except his martial arts training and things related to Temujin. He even told of all silly and stupid things. He spoke easily and, at a certain moment, forgot himself and grabbed the left hand of his questioner. He was surprised because this hand was soft, smooth and so flexible it seemed boneless. The boy smiled slightly and bowed his head. Guo Jing noticed that, whereas the boy's face was smudged with dirt, the skin at the nape of his neck had the whiteness of jade. Guo Jing found this a bit strange, but he did not give it further thought.

"Well we've chatted for such a long time," the boy said, withdrawing his hand, "everything is cold now, the dishes and also the rice ..."

"Yes," Guo Jing said, "but it is not spoiled. It is still good ..."
The boy shook his head. "Then we'll get it warmed up ..."

"No," the boy said, "When it's warmed up it isn't good anymore ..." He called the waiter, ordered him to throw everything away and prepare new dishes with fresh

ingredients. The manager, the cooks and waiters found this attitude quite strange, but they did it readily. The Mongols show extreme hospitability to their guests, and besides, it was the first time in his life that Guo Jing handled money and he didn't know its value. But even if he had known, he got along so well with the boy and he felt such pleasure in his company, he would have spent ten times as much without batting an eye. The new dishes were served and after a few mouthfuls he had had enough.

"You are really an idiot," the waiter thought, "This little urchin has taken advantage of you." He brought the bill, which amounted to nineteen taels, seventy-four bao. Guo Jing took out a gold ingot [yuan bao] and ordered the waiter to exchange it for taels at the money changer after which he paid for the food. As they left the restaurant the north wind blew strongly. The young boy seemed to feel the cold. He shivered and said, "I've disturbed you enough... Now, it's goodbye."

Seeing that the boy was not dressed warmly enough, Guo Jing felt concerned. He removed his black sable coat and covered the shoulders of the boy. "Brother," he said, "I feel like we've known each other forever. Please accept this coat." He had four gold ingots left; he took two and slipped them into the coat's pocket. Without even thanking him, the boy, wearing the sable coat, walked along dejectedly. After walking about ten steps, he turned and saw Guo Jing, holding his horse by its bridle, watching him. He knew that Guo Jing did not want to part like that; he made a gesture with his hand. Guo Jing approached him eagerly and asked, "Does the worthy brother still need something?"

"I haven't asked for the name of my big brother," said the boy smiling.

"That's true," Guo Jing said laughing, "we forgot about that. My name is Guo and Jing is my first name. And yours, brother?"

"My name is Huang and my first name is Rong."

"Where are you bound?" Guo Jing asked. "If you are heading towards the south, we could travel together. What do you think?"

"I'm not going south," Huang Rong said, shaking his head. Suddenly he said, "Big brother, I'm still hungry ..."

"Very well," Guo Jing happily said. "Let us eat something together."

This time, Huang Rong took him to the House of Eternal Celebration, the principal restaurant in Kalgan. Its decorations accurately imitated the great establishments of the ancient capital of Song, Bianliang [Kaifeng]. He did not order a feast this time, but only asked for four plates of fine pastry, a pot of longjin tea (aka Dragon's Well tea, famous green tea of the province Zhejiang), and they continued their rambling conversation.

Having learned that Guo Jing had tamed two white eagles, Huang Rong expressed a certain desire. "Very good," he said, "I did not know exactly where to go. Tomorrow I'll leave for Mongolia, to catch two white eagles for my amusement."

"They are not easy to find," Guo Jing remarked.

"Then how did you find them?"

Guo Jing didn't answer and only smiled. "The climate is severe in Mongolia," he thought, "and the north wind blows icy and hard, how would this slight young boy withstand it?"

"Where do you live?" he asked. "Why don't you return home?"

Huang Rong had tears in his eyes, "Dad doesn't want me anymore!"

"Why not?" Guo Jing asked.

"He locked somebody up," Huang Rong answered, "and did not wish to set that person free. I took pity on the prisoner because he was lonely; I brought good things for him to eat, and I tried to converse with him. Dad got angry and cursed at me, so I ran away in the middle of the night."

"I'm sure your dad thinks of you at this moment", Guo Jing said. "What of your mom?"

"She died a long time ago! I haven't had a mom since I was very small ..."

"If you've had your fun, it would be better to return home."

"Dad does not want me anymore," Huang Rong said crying.

"That's impossible!" Guo Jing said.

"Then why doesn't he look for me?"

"Perhaps he is still looking, but hasn't found you ..."

"You're probably right," Huang Rong said, who'd changed from crying to laughing. "When I've had my fun, I'll return. But first of all, I need to tame two white eagles!"

They chatted again about what they had seen or experienced. Guo Jing told of the incident with the eight women in white, disguised as men, and who wanted to take possession of his horse. Huang Rong asked questions about the small red horse, its capabilities, its character, and seemed full of envy. He drank a mouthful of tea and said

smilingly, "Big brother, I want to ask for something of great value to you. Would you agree to that?"

"Of course, why wouldn't I?"

"What I would like, is your horse that sweats blood!"

"All right," Guo Jing said without hesitating, "I'll give it to you gladly."

In fact, Huang Rong was joking. He knew very well that Guo Jing adored his invaluable horse. Since they had just recently met and by chance, he was curious to see how this good chap was going to refuse his improper request. However, Guo Jing answered with such generosity and simplicity that he was taken by surprise. Moved beyond words, he could not stop himself breaking into sobs and hiding his face with his arms. Guo Jing was even more surprised, "Brother," he asked with concern, "what's happened, don't you feel well?"

Huang Rong raised his head. He had been crying, but now a big smile lit his face. The running tears had washed away the dirt, revealing white skin like pure jade. "Big brother," he said, "let's go!"

Guo Jing paid and they left the restaurant. Guo Jing took his horse by its bridle caressing it gently and gave it the following advice, "I've given you to my good friend here. You will act obediently and especially do not show your foul temper!" Then he addressed Huang Rong, "Brother, mount the horse!"

The small red horse usually did not allow anyone else to mount it, but, during the past few days, it had quieted a lot. Since its master had ordered it to do so, it didn't make a fuss. Huang Rong leapt on the horse and Guo Jing let go of the bridle, and clapped him lightly on the rump. Rider and

horse disappeared in a cloud of dust. Guo Jing waited until he could see them no more before he turned back.

It was very late when he obtained a room at an inn. Just as he was going to extinguish his candle and to go to bed, he heard a scratch at the door. He thought that it was Huang Rong who had returned, and felt great joy. "Is that you, brother?" he asked. "That's great!"

"It's your old man!" replied a hoarse voice. "What's so great?"

Surprised, the young man opened the door and saw, by the glimmer of the candle, five men. Looking at them more closely, he felt a shiver go down his spine; four of them, armed with a saber, a lance, a whip and twin axes, were none other than the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', whom he had previously fought on the hill. The fifth one was a lean man of about forty years, with a long dark face with three big lumps on his forehead that gave him an extremely ugly appearance. The lean man sneered and swept grandly into the room. He seated himself arrogantly on the bed of bricks [kang], then turned his head to regard Guo Jing. [In northern China, sleeping arrangements generally were installed on top of a kind of brick "oven", that allowed for heating underneath.]

The senior brother of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', Shen Qinggang, nicknamed 'Saber Breaks Down the Soul', declared coldly, "This is our martial uncle, the renowned Hou Tonghai, known as 'Three-Headed Dragon'! Kowtow before Lord Hou right now!"

Guo Jing realized that he was cornered. He could never defeat the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' together, to say nothing of their martial uncle, who had to be fearsome.

"What do you want?" he demanded, while clasping his fists in greeting.

"Where are your teachers?" Hou Tonghai questioned.

"My six Shifus are not here."

"Huh," sneered Hou Tonghai. "Then I will give you a half-day respite. If I killed you now, people could say that the 'Three-Headed Dragon' was taking advantage of an opponent weaker than him. Tomorrow at noon, I will await your six Shifus in the 'Black Pine Wood', ten li to the west of here." He left without even waiting for Guo Jing's reply. Wu Qinglie, nicknamed 'Whip Captures Spirit', closed the door and locked it from the outside.

Guo Jing put out the candle, lay down on the bed, and saw, on the paper of the window, a shadow that came and went continuously. The enemy, clearly, were mounting a watch over him. A short time later, he heard a noise on the roof, someone was tapping the tiles with a weapon, while saying, "Little fellow, don't even think about running away, your old man is watching you." Knowing that escape was impossible, Guo Jing lay still, glancing at the ceiling, and wondering how he was going to leave tomorrow. He fell asleep before he found even the beginnings of a solution.

The next morning, the inn boy brought hot water for his bath and noodles for breakfast. He was closely followed by Qian Qingjian, armed with his two short axes. Guo Jing reflected that his Shifus were far away and probably would not arrive in time to save him. Since he could not flee, it would be necessary to fight and die like a man! His Fourth Shifu, who had advised him well, said, "If you can't beat the enemy, flee!" But to flee without even being beaten, would not be accurately following the advice... In fact, it would not have been difficult for him to escape from Qian Qingjian

alone, for he was not very quick or resourceful. If only Nan Xiren had said to him, "Flee from danger!" he probably would have taken to his heels, and Qian Qingjian certainly would not have been in any position to catch him. The 'Three-Headed Dragon', Hou Tonghai, believed that the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' were located in this area, and that, given their fame, they never would fail to keep an appointment. He never would have imagined that Guo Jing would flee on his own.

Seated on the bed, he practiced meditation and controlled his breathing according to the pointers given to him by Ma Yu. Standing next to him, Qian Qingjian whirled his axes while shouting and criticizing his methods. Guo Jing paid no attention to him. Towards noon, he rose. "Let's go," he said to his jailer.

He paid his bill to the innkeeper and both headed to the west. Ten li further on, they indeed came across woods of thickly foliated pines. Qian Qingjian left Guo Jing and entered the woods.

The young man pulled out the supple whip that he always carried at his side and cautiously entered the undergrowth. Progressing slowly and watching carefully in all directions, he followed the small path for a little more than one li without seeing anyone. All was silent, with an occasional bird call now and then. As he advanced, his apprehension grew. "No one is watching me," he said reassuringly to himself, "and since the wood is so thick, why not hide? Hiding is not fleeing!" Just as he prepared to slip into a bush he heard swearing above his head, "Little bastard! Idiot! Moron!"

Guo Jing jumped back, his whip held at the ready. He looked up, and then burst out laughing; there, at the top of four big trees, the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', hands tied

behind their backs and each hanging at the end of a rope, wriggled in the air. They struggled hopelessly but could not escape. Seeing Guo Jing, they renewed their cursing.

"You guys playing at swings?" Guo Jing asked, still laughing. "This is very funny, isn't it? Good-bye then, I'll take my leave." He took a few steps away, and then returned. "How did you guys end up like that?"

"Damn you!" Qian Qingjian growled. "We were taken by surprise; this is not worthy of a real man!"

"Little man," Shen Qinggang shouted, "if you're brave enough, let us down, and we will fight one on one to decide between us. If we all attacked you, we would be cowards!"

Guo Jing wasn't very intelligent, but neither was he completely stupid. He burst out laughing again and said, "I'll concede that you're brave, without needing to match blows!" Afraid that Hou Tonghai, the Three-Headed Dragon, might arrive, he had no desire to linger; he hastily departed and returned to the city. He bought a horse and resumed his journey south without delay.

"Who secretly helped me?" he asked himself. "Those 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' have excellent kung fu; who was it that succeeded in tying them up, and suspending them from the trees? And the Three-Headed Dragon that had seemed so frightening, why didn't I see him again? My Shifu always said, 'When an appointment is made, it is necessary to keep it, even if the sky falls on your head'. I kept his appointment; if he didn't arrive himself, that's not my fault."

The journey went on without incident. One day, he finally arrived in Yanjing. It was the capital of the Jin Empire and the most prosperous city in the country. Even the former capital of the Song, Bianliang, or the new one, Lin'an, could

not compare with it. Guo Jing, who had grown up on the steppe, had never seen anything even slightly similar. Red buildings of stunning architecture with decorated panels and majestic doors. Splendid attachments graced the front of the sumptuous residences. Fiery standards impeded passage in the streets. Merchandise of all sorts was displayed in immense stores. A colorful crowd of people in luxurious clothes crowded themselves in the tea parlors and the wine houses. The streets were full of brilliant signs, multicolored standards, and the air resounded with the sound of music. A hundred perfumes filled the air with fragrance. Guo Jing did not know where to turn his head. There were so many things before his eyes that he did not recognize one object out of ten!

Not daring to enter a restaurant that was too richly furnished, he chose a small stall where he ate quickly, then continued to walk randomly about. Suddenly, he heard continuous cheering and saw a crowd in the distance, massed around something.

Pressed on by his curiosity, he approached and slipped in amongst the onlookers. They pressed themselves around a wide open area, in the middle of which was planted an ornamental standard with the phrase 'Joust to Find a Spouse' embroidered upon it. Beneath the standard, two people faced each other in unrelenting combat; one was a girl dressed in red, the other a big fat fellow. Guo Jing saw right away that the girl, whose every movement was measured and controlled, had good kung fu, while the fat fellow was clearly not up to her level. After a few exchanges, the girl feigned lowering her guard, and the fat fellow advanced to attack with a blow 'Twin Dragons Leaving their Lair', projecting both fists towards the chest of his opponent. But the girl stepped back lightly; her left arm pivoted and struck the back of the fat fellow, who

tumbled to the ground. He got up, covered with dust and an embarrassed look on his face, before disappearing into the crowd. The spectators applauded and acclaimed the girl.

She rearranged a strand of hair and returned to the standard. Guo Jing regarded her more attentively; she was about eighteen years in age, very graceful and her face extremely pretty and lightly marked by life. Gusts of cold wind made the standard flutter. On either side of it an iron spear and two short halberds had been planted.

The girl exchanged some words in a low voice with a middle-aged man. He nodded, and stepped forward, clasped his hands and saluted the onlookers. "Your servant is named Mu Yi. I am from Shandong. Visiting your honorable city, I seek neither fame nor fortune. Because my girl is of the age to put a comb in her hair (after the age of fifteen years, the girls, now considered adults, can groom and hold their hair in place with a comb) and she has no fiancé. She made a vow and, though she does not desire a prosperous husband or a noble one, she will accept a valiant martial arts expert. That is the reason we have the audacity to propose a contest for her to find a husband. All young men, aged less than thirty years and who are unmarried, can match themselves against my girl. If he can vanquish her in a single move, I will give her to him in marriage. We've traversed the country from the south to the north, but all the renowned experts are already married, and the young brave ones doubtless did not dare to try...that is the reason we have not yet been able to find a good husband... Yanjing is a place where 'tigers and dragons hide in the shadows'. There are certainly many heroes and valiant men here. If my actions seem presumptuous, I beg your kind pardon!"

This Mu Yi looked sturdy and strong to Guo Jing, but his back was slightly hunched. He was white-haired and his

face wrinkled. He appeared melancholy and was clad in coarse fabric, patched in several places, while the girl was clothed in lively colors. After making his speech, Mu Yi listened for some time. He heard louts making vulgar comments, but they did not dare to enter the arena. He raised his eyes to the sky, saw leaden clouds gathering and the wind grew stronger.

"It appears that a blizzard threatens," he said in a low voice. "Ah, it was so dark, that day..." He turned back, took down the banner from the standard and prepared to stow it away. Two simultaneous shouts were heard from the east and west. "One moment!" and two men leaped into the open space.

Seeing them, the crowd burst out laughing. The one who had come from the east was obese and elderly. He had a large beard and had to be at least fifty years old. The one that come from the west was even more comical; he was a shaven-headed monk.

"What are you laughing at?" the fat one shouted to the crowd. "Isn't this a contest to find a spouse? I am not married, why can't I try my luck?"

"Venerable ancestor," the monk said, giggling, "Even if you win, you wouldn't want this girl, as beautiful as a flower, to become a widow right away!"

"And you," the fat one angrily said, "what are you here for?"

"If I can have such a pretty girl," the monk replied, "I'll return to the secular world!" The crowd was roaring again.

The girl frowned, apparently annoyed. She removed the cape which she used to cover herself and readied to continue the fight. Mu Yi held her arm, told her not to be irritated, and replanted the banner in the ground. The

monk and the obese person continued their bickering; each wanted to fight the girl first.

“Why don't you start by fighting against each other?” the spectators hilariously suggested. “The winner will have the honor of fighting the girl!”

“All right,” the monk said. “Old fellow, let's have a little fun!” He threw a blow with his fist; the obese one avoided it by lowering his head, before returning the blow.

Guo Jing recognized the style of the monk, the Arhat style from the Shaolin Temple. The obese one practiced the style of the ‘Five Movements’. Thus both were practitioners of external kung fu. The monk showed himself to be of great agility, whereas the obese one, in spite of his age, made use of heaviness and power. The monk stealthily struck three blows at the stomach of his adversary, who fought stoically, waiting to batter his right fist on the head of the monk. The blow succeeded and the monk fell to the ground, dazed; then he regained his senses, took a knife out of his robe and ran to the attack. The crowd let out a cry of surprise. The obese one leapt back before wielding an iron whip which had been rolled up around his waist. Both had come armed! The fight began again, still desperate, but more dangerous. The spectators applauded while moving back, fearing injury by straying blows.

Mu Yi approached the two men and said with a loud voice, “Stop! We are in the imperial capital, it is forbidden to display weapons! The two adversaries, carried away by their fight did not pay any attention to him. Mu Yi leapt forward suddenly, kicking away the knife of the monk while seizing the end of the whip. He pulled with force, and the obese one could not resist and released his whip. Mu Yi threw the whip onto the ground. The two adversaries, not daring to fight any longer, collected their weapons

shamefaced and disappeared enduring the jibes from the crowd.

Then the tinkling of small bells attached to the harnesses of horses was heard and a flamboyant company appeared. Several tens of vigorous servants accompanying a young nobleman had arrived. He looked at the brocade banner and examined the girl from head to toe. Then he smiled, got down from his horse and came forward. "Is this the girl who seeks a husband through a contest?" he asked. The girl blushed and turned her head without answering. Mu Yi advanced, clasped his fists and greeted him, "My name is Mu. What does the young Lord wish?"

"What are the rules of this contest?" Mu Yi explained them to him. "Then I want to try my chances as well..." He was a young and handsome nobleman of about eighteen or nineteen years old, dressed in a lavish brocade coat.

"At last a boy," thought Guo Jing, "who could make up a beautiful couple with this girl? Fortunately the monk and the old fat one a while ago were not up to par, if not... if not..."

"Your Lordship is joking," Mu Yi said, mortified.

"What do you mean?" the young man said.

"We are only wanderers without abode, how would we dare to measure ourselves against you? And it is not an ordinary contest, because it decides the marriage of my daughter ... Please forgive us."

"How long have you been holding this contest?" he asked.

"It has been more than six months that we have traveled the roads."

“That long and nobody could overcome your daughter?” the young nobleman said with disbelief.

“It is undoubtedly,” Mu Yi answered smiling, “because the experts in martial arts are all already married, or they won’t condescend to be measured against her.”

“OK, OK!” the young dandy exclaimed. “I will test ...”

“This is a young man with a refined and distinguished bearing,” Mu Yi thought. “If he came from an ordinary family, he would make a husband of choice for my child. But obviously, he belongs to the nobility. We are in the capital of the Jin and his family is perhaps well known at the Court. In any case, he is certainly rich and powerful. If my daughter wins, that could bring great trouble to us; if she loses, how could I marry her to such a person?”

“We are just wanderers in the realm of Rivers and Lakes [Jianghu],” he said, “We cannot measure ourselves with you. Please forgive us! We will leave!”

“This is an honorable contest,” the young nobleman said, laughing. “I assure you, I will not harm your daughter.” He then turned to the girl and said amiably, “It will be enough for the young lady to touch me to win, all right?”

“In a contest, it is necessary to comply strictly with the rules,” the girl protested.

“Hurry up with the fight!” a cry came from the crowd. “The speedier you fight, the more quickly you will be married, and the more quickly you will have babies!” The spectators burst out in laughter. The girl raised her eyebrows and removed her cape moodily. She greeted the young nobleman, who bowed in return.

"This young dandy grew up in affluence," Mu Yi thought, "Does he know martial arts? It is better to defeat him quickly and leave the city as soon as possible, in order to avoid trouble."

"All right," he said, "perhaps Your Lordship wishes to get rid of his coat."

"That is not necessary," the young dandy said, still smiling.

The spectators, who knew the abilities of the girl, thought that, for him to act that carelessly, he was going to suffer! But some of them thought that since the Mus have experience in the Jianghu realm, they certainly will not cause offense to the son of a noble family. They will probably make sure that he does not lose face.

"Do you believe," whispered some, "that they are really performing a 'Joust to Find a Spouse'? It's likely that old Mu only wants to benefit from the beauty and kung fu of his daughter to extract money from fools! This young dandy should watch his wallet!"

"Ready?" the girl said. The young nobleman swiveled toward the right, while his left sleeve flew with flashing speed towards the shoulder of the girl. She, surprised by the speed and skill of the attack, leaned and ducked, thus escaping the blow. But the actions of her adversary were stunning, and the right sleeve had already arrived near the head of the girl, endangering both sides. She had to leap back with the quickness of an arrow.

"Good!" the young nobleman shouted. Then he advanced without giving her the time to settle on her feet. The girl, still in the air, twisted and attacked to defend herself, kicking with her left foot in the direction of the young man's nose. He had to move back hastily, and both landed simultaneously on their feet. The young man had attacked

with three stances, and the girl had defended herself with agility; they both began to feel respect and watched each other closely. The girl blushed, and took the initiative. The battle started anew, but more desperate; it was performed so quickly that the young man looked like a shadow of shining brocade, whereas the girl resembled a red cloud.

Guo Jing was increasingly amazed: "These two young people are of my age," he said to himself, "and yet they possess such a high level of martial arts; it is really extraordinary! They would make a perfect pair. If they marry, they could, during their leisure hours, replay some of the 'Joust to Find a Spouse', and it would be fun!" With his mouth agape, he followed the spectacle with anticipation. Suddenly, the girl clutched the sleeve of her adversary and tore it off with force. She jumped back immediately, holding her trophy up.

"Young Lord," Mu Yi shouted, "We apologize!" Then he turned to his daughter. "Let us go now."

"Not so fast," the young man shouted with a grim look on his face. "Nothing is really decided yet!" He caught the two sides of his coat and pulled, causing the jade buttons to pop off. One of his servants helped him remove his coat, while another collected the buttons. Underneath, the young man wore a water green satin tunic, tightly held to his waist by a delicate green scarf, which gave him an even more captivating air. He raised his left palm and sent a blow, showing his true kung fu this time. An extremely violent gust of air passed very close to the girl.

Guo Jing, Mu Yi and his daughter were dumbfounded. "How could," they wondered, "a person of such distinction have such a cruel and brutal kung fu?"

The young nobleman was not looking for fun any longer; his blows were so powerful that his adversary could no longer approach him.

"We have a formidable expert here," Guo Jing thought, "The girl is no match for him. It appears that marriage is in sight. And I am quite content for them ... My six Shifus always said that there are legions of exceptional men in the Central Plains. Indeed, this young nobleman has an original palm style with sophisticated variations. Should we fight, I would probably not win against him!"

For his part, Mu Yi could also foretell the outcome of the duel. "My daughter," he shouted, "it is useless to continue. The young Lord is much stronger than you!"

"This young man has excellent kung fu," he said to himself, "thus he is not like one of those idle, gambling and whoring sons of certain families. I will ask for information about his family. If he is not related to the Jin government authorities, I will approve the marriage. My daughter's future will be secured ..." He shouted to both to stop their fight. But the battle was full blown and they did not stop.

"If I wanted to injure you now," the young man thought, "nothing would be easier; but I do not have the heart to do it." Suddenly, his left palm changed into a claw, and he clutched the wrist of the girl. Surprised, she sought to break loose. The young man pushed slightly forward and the girl lost her balance. As she was about to fall, the right arm of her adversary pulled her gently, and she fell into his arms. The spectators applauded and hollered with enthusiasm causing a great tumult.

Shame-faced and blushing, the girl begged in a low voice, "Release me, quickly!"

"Say 'my dear' to me," he answered, laughing, "and I'll release you!" Outraged by such impudence, she struggled, but he held her firmly and she could not break loose.

Mu Yi advanced and said, "You've won, please release my daughter!" The young nobleman burst into laughter but did not release her.

Losing patience, the girl directed a kick in the direction of the solar plexus of her adversary, trying to make him release her. He indeed released his right arm, parried the blow and caught the foot immediately; his qinna [grabbing and holding] technique was perfectly timed and he could seize anything he wanted. The girl panicked, and sought to release her foot by pulling with force. She at last succeeded, but in doing so she lost her small shoe which was embroidered with red flowers. She sat down on the ground, head lowered and flushed with shame, holding her foot covered by a white fabric sock. The young aristocrat smiled unsteadily, moved the embroidered shoe to his nose and sniffed it. In this situation, the hooligans were obviously not going to let this action pass without comment. "Bet that smells good!" they shouted in chorus. [Women's feet were considered erotic in ancient China, hence her embarrassment.]

"What is your name?" asked Mu Yi.

"It's not worth saying," laughed the young aristocrat. He put on his brocaded coat, cast a glance in direction of the girl, and placed the small embroidered shoe in his pocket. At that moment, the wind doubled in strength and large snowflakes began to fall.

"We live at the Inn of Prosperity," said Mu Yi, "in the western part of the city. Let us go there together, in order to make plans."

“To plan what?” the young aristocrat retorted. “It’s snowing now, it is necessary that I hurry home.”

Mu Yi turned pale. “You won this challenge, and I made a promise that I would give you my daughter in marriage. This is a serious business; one cannot treat it so lightly!”

The young aristocrat burst out laughing. “We had a little fun with martial arts,” he said, “it was rather interesting... as for the marriage, ha, I am obliged to decline that honor!”

Anger choked Mu Yi and prevented him from speaking, “You... You...”

“What do you take our young Prince for?” shouted a servant while laughing. “Do you believe that he would wed the daughter of vulgar traveling performers from Jianghu? Only in your dreams, old man, in your dreams”

Mu Yi was so angry that, with a blow, he struck the servant senseless. The young aristocrat did not seek any explanations. He had his servant carried away and was at the point of mounting his horse.

“You make fools of us!” Mu Yi shouted, clutching him by the left arm. “In any event, my daughter cannot marry such an insolent person as you. Please return the shoe to her!”

“It was her that gave it to me!” the young aristocrat said, laughing again, “Why do you make a nuisance of yourself? I won the tournament, I’ve declined your marriage, but I’ll keep the consolation prize!” He pivoted his arm, exerted some inner force and pulled away.

“It won’t happen like that!” Mu Yi exclaimed, trembling with anger. He leapt and struck with both fists, sending a blow called the ‘Bell and Drum Sound Together’, towards the temples of his adversary. The young man dodged, placed his

left foot in his stirrup and propelled himself from it into the arena.

"If I beat you, old man," he said, laughing, "then you won't try to force me to become your son-in-law any more?" The crowd, indignant at the impudent and arrogant attitude of the young man, remained quiet. Only some hooligans and good-for-nothings coarsely burst out laughing.

Without saying a word, Mu Yi tightened his belt, and attacked with the move 'Sea Swallow Skimming the Flood' at the young aristocrat. The young aristocrat knew that he was extremely angry and did not take the attack lightly. He dodged, replied with a blow to the belly, 'The Poisonous Snake Seeks its Den'. Mu Yi dodged, and struck with his left palm at his shoulder. The young man turned, advanced his right palm under Mu Yi's left arm. It was an extremely vicious blow, called 'Benefit from the Cloud to Change the Sun', executed without the knowledge of his adversary. However, Mu Yi parried effectively and clapped his two hands on the cheeks of the young aristocrat.

At that moment, no matter what move the aristocrat made, he could not avoid the blow! He frowned, bit his lips, and decided to employ another technique. His two hands flew like flashes and his ten fingers were planted in the back of the hands of Mu Yi. When he withdrew them, the ends of his fingers were smeared red! The spectators shouted in surprise. The girl, now in a panic, supported her father. She tore a strip from her tunic to wrap his hands, which bled profusely.

Mu Yi pushed his daughter back. "Move aside," he said. "This day, it's either him or me!"

The girl, pale faced, looked at the young aristocrat fixedly, and drew a dagger intending to plunge it into her own

heart. Surprised, Mu Yi sought to stop her hand, and the girl did not have time to pull the blade aside, which was planted in the hand of her father.

The spectators sighed. They deplored seeing a beautiful scene finishing in such a bloody way! Even the hooligans seemed indignant at such an outcome. The comments started to focus on the improper attitude of this young aristocrat.

Faced with such unrighteousness, Guo Jing could not remain standing by. He gently moved aside the people in front of him and advanced into the open space. "Ha!" he shouted, "to act like that, that's not good!"

Disconcerted for a moment, the young aristocrat laughingly retorted, "Ah, not good? Just why is it necessary to act well?" The young aristocrat's servants, noticing that Guo Jing was dressed like a peasant and that he spoke with a marked southern accent, made fun of him.

Guo Jing did not understand the mockery, and said seriously, "You should marry this young lady!"

"And if I don't marry her?"

"If you didn't want to marry her, why did you come down to fight? It was well marked, on the banner, 'Joust to Find a Spouse'!"

"Kid, why are you interfering?" the young aristocrat retorted, in a threatening voice.

"This young lady is not only very beautiful, but she has excellent kung fu. Why don't you want her? Didn't you see that she felt so offended that she wanted to commit suicide?"

"You're such a moron that it isn't worthwhile explaining it to you..." The young aristocrat turned on his heels to leave.

Guo Jing restrained him. "Huh! How can you leave like that?"

"What do you want?"

"Didn't I tell you to marry this young lady?" The aristocrat laughed and again was about to leave.

Mu Yi, seeing Guo Jing's intervention, understood that he was affronted but naive and little acquainted with the ways of the world. He approached and said to him, "Little brother, don't worry about him. So long as I have the breath of life, I will avenge this insult." Then he shouted at the young aristocrat, "At least leave your name!"

"I told you I can't call you 'father-in-law'," he retorted insolently, "why do you still want to know my name?"

Very annoyed by this, Guo Jing leapt forward while shouting, "Then return that embroidered shoe to the young lady!"

"Is this any of your damn business!" the nobleman said furiously. "You've taken a fancy to this young miss yourself, haven't you?"

Guo Jing shook his head and said, "No! Are you going to return it, or not?" The young aristocrat stiffened his hand suddenly and slapped Guo Jing heavily. Guo Jing moved instantly, and employed a qinna technique, seizing the wrists of his adversary by crossing his hands.

He sought to escape, in vain. "Do you want to die?" he shouted, surprised and annoyed, while aiming a kick towards Guo Jing's lower abdomen.

He flexed his muscles and pushed the young aristocrat back towards the open space. Obviously, this person had a good lightness technique [Qinggong], for, instead of falling on his back, he kept his balance and landed on his feet. He nimbly removed his brocaded coat and exclaimed, "Don't you want to continue living, little fool? If you've got guts, come and test yourself against me!"

"Why would I fight with you?" Guo Jing said, shaking his head. "Since you do not want to marry the young lady, return her embroidered shoe!"

The spectators, seeing the intervention of Guo Jing, wanted to see what he was capable of and didn't think that he would retreat. Some hooligans even hooted, "Talk without action, it's unworthy of a hero!"

For his part, the young aristocrat, having been caught by Guo Jing, realized that his kung fu wasn't insignificant and especially noted that he had powerful internal energy. He was happy not to fight; but, of course, he couldn't return the embroidered shoe without losing face! He therefore gathered his coat and laughing, turned on his heels.

Guo Jing caught him by the side of the coat and repeated, "How can you just leave?"

The young aristocrat had a sudden idea. He cast his coat over the head of his opponent and struck two fists into his chest. Wrapped up in the coat, Guo Jing could not avoid the impacts. Fortunately, he had practiced two years of orthodox neigong with Ma Yu, so that these blows, although extremely painful, could not truly injure him. Goaded by anger, he successively launched nine fast kicks while alternating stances; it was a skill technique developed by Han Baoju, which had already enabled him to beat other enemies. Even if the disciple did not yet have the skill of the

master, and even if the kicks were made while he was blinded, they disturbed the young aristocrat, who could avoid the first seven, but was caught by the last two fully on his chest.

The two young men simultaneously leapt back. Guo Jing, still amazed, got rid of the coat that hampered him. He could not believe such treachery on behalf of his adversary. "He knew full well," he thought, "that he'd entered a 'Joust to Find a Spouse'. He won, and yet refused to marry the young lady! Moreover, when I tried to reason with him, not only was it he who struck first, but he used a shameful trick! If I hadn't practiced neigong, he would have broken my ribs and crushed my internal organs!" Being of a simple and open nature, and since he had always lived with decent people, he did not know anything about the perfidy of human nature. Even though, during the past years, his Masters had not failed to warn him about tricks and treacheries which one might meet in Jianghu, he'd listened to them the way one listens to stories and they did not remain in his memory long since they had not been experienced. At that moment, he was furious and perplexed, not able to believe in the existence of such low methods.

The young aristocrat, angered by the two kicks he had received, advanced on Guo Jing with his fist raised. Guo Jing defended, but could not avoid the rain of blows which fell on him and he fell down. The servants were laughing. Their Master puffed out his chest and said while laughing, "So you think you can play the deliverer of justice with your three-legged cat technique? Go back home and tell your Shimu [this is a put-down of his Shifus since it means 'the wife of a teacher'] to give you lessons for twenty more years!"

Guo Jing got up, breathed in deeply, circulated his chi in his whole body so that the pain diminished. "My Shifu doesn't have a wife," he retorted.

"Then tell him to marry one quickly!"

Guo Jing was going to answer, "I have six Shifus, and one of them is a woman..." but did not have time. He saw that the other was going to leave, so he advanced on him, fist raised, and shouted, "Prepare yourself!"

The young aristocrat dodged, Guo Jing swung a left hook right at his face which the other blocked. They stood, their arms holding onto their adversary's, each one trying to use internal energy to overcome the other. Guo Jing was a little stronger but his opponent had better techniques and it was difficult to decide between them.

Guo Jing breathed in deeply to concentrate his internal energy, while the other suddenly loosened his pressure. Guo Jing fell forward. As he tried to regain his balance, he felt a stroke coming from behind. He hastened to avoid it but, not having regained full balance, he stumbled. While falling, he supported himself on his elbow, rebounded and, while spinning in the air, delivered a kick with his left foot. Watching this fast and spectacular recovery, the crowd applauded.

The young aristocrat moved away and attacked with two palms, one was a feint to confuse his adversary, while the other was the real stroke. Guo Jing then used the technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones'; his hands fluttered in all directions, aiming at all the tendons and joints of the body. Seeing the violence of this attack, the aristocrat suddenly changed tactics; he began to use the same technique! There was a difference however; the one learned by Guo Jing had been invented by Zhu Cong, the

'Magical Hands Scholar'. It diverged from the orthodox technique taught by the masters of the central Plains considerably. The two looked similar in their principles, but had some differences in execution. One extended his index and middle fingers trying to seize the opponent's 'Supporting the Old' [Yang Lao] accupoint behind the wrist; the other tried to hook and seize the opponent's knuckles. The two felt mutual apprehension and didn't dare to commit completely, barely sketching a movement before changing to another. After forty or so exchanges, they still couldn't tell who had the upper hand.

Snow continued to fall and a fine white layer covered the heads and the shoulders of the spectators that surrounded them. Suddenly, the young aristocrat seemed to leave an opening on his chest. Guo Jing saw it immediately and tried to benefit from it by pointing his index finger at the point 'Tail of Turtledove' on his adversary. But he had some reservations about using this action. "There is no hate between us," he said to himself, "I can't use such a deadly stroke on him!" He then diverted his finger and touched another point which had no effect on his adversary. The young aristocrat had enough time to catch his wrist and pull him, while hooking him with his foot. Guo Jing lost his balance and fell once again.

Mu Yi, whose hand had just been bandaged by his daughter, also watched the two. He saw Guo Jing fall for the third time and understood that he was not experienced enough to face the insolent youngster and he hastened to lift him from the ground. "Little brother," he said, "let it go. There's no point in staying among scoundrels of this kind any longer!"

Guo Jing had seen stars and was hurt, but he felt rage mounting in his head. He moved away from Mu Yi and rushed at his adversary, while increasing the number of strokes. The young aristocrat, surprised to see him insist on

continuing in spite of the beating that he had received, moved back three steps. "Don't you admit your defeat?" Guo Jing didn't answer and continued to attack.

"If you don't stop," the young aristocrat threatened, "I am going to be obliged to kill you!"

"If you don't return the shoe," Guo Jing retorted, "I will never be finished with you!"

"But this girl is not even your sister, why do you persist in wanting to be my brother-in-law?"

"To be the brother-in-law of someone," constituted an insult in the Jin capital, and the scoundrels in the crowd exploded with laughter when they heard it. Guo Jing didn't understand any of it.

"I don't even know her," he said, "and she isn't my sister!"

The young aristocrat no longer knew whether to laugh or to be angry! He ended up saying, "Then protect yourself you stupid fool!"

The two young people continued to fight. This time, Guo Jing was more prudent and didn't fall into the repeated traps that his adversary prepared for him. In fact, from a strictly technical viewpoint, the kung fu of the young aristocrat was superior, but Guo Jing never gave up and fought like a barbarian. Even after he received blows, he continued to attack with persistence and without retreating. He had fought like this when he was small, during the fights with the kids of Dukhsh's gang. Even though he had acquired more agility while learning martial arts, his way of fighting hadn't fundamentally changed and it was in his nature to fight with savagery. He had forgotten the recommendation of his Fourth Shifu. 'If you can't defeat the enemy, flee!' In his mind, the more important formula

had always been, 'If the enemy is unbeatable, persist!', except that he didn't realize it!

The spectacle attracted more and more spectators and the area was completely filled. The wind and snow had increased in intensity, but no one left.

Mu Yi, with much experience in the Jianghu region, well knew that, if the fight continued, the crowds were going to attract the attention of the authorities and maybe provoke their intervention. He knew that it would be better to not expose themselves to that possibility! But, this young man had generously come to help them; he could not leave him here alone. He felt very anxious. He raised his eyes and was vaguely viewing the assembly, when he noticed in the crowd, several individuals who seemed to belong to the martial world. He had been so focused on the fight that he had not even noticed their arrival.

He then moved slowly, approaching the servants of the young aristocrat who were standing in a group. Watching them out of the corner of his eye, he saw, among them, three characters with a martial look. The first wore a scarlet Buddhist monk's dress and a golden cap; it was a very tall Tibetan lama. The second, medium-sized, had silvery white hair and a ruddy, beaming face with smooth skin like a baby, without one wrinkle. He was clothed in a long robe, but one couldn't tell if it was Taoist or Buddhist. The third was very small, but his blood-shot eyes had a piercing look, and he wore a proud small mustache.

The presence of these unusual faces astonished Mu Yi. He then heard one of the servants say, "Supreme Virtue, have the goodness to rid us of this stupid fool, please! If this continues and something serious happens to the young Prince, we servants could face death!"

Hearing this, Mu Yi was shaken. "So," he thought, "this young scoundrel is a prince! If the fight continues, misfortune might happen to him. Apparently all these experts are part of the royal house and the servants have summoned them here to lend assistance to the prince."

The Tibetan llama smiled without saying a word. The old man shouted while laughing, "The 'Supreme Virtue' Lingzhi is an eminent member of a secret school in Tibet, he cannot stoop so low as to exchange stances with a lowly skilled fighter of this kind, it would be too demeaning... If something should happen, the Prince would at most break your legs; he wouldn't go so far as to kill you, would he?"

"Anyway," intervened the small man with the blood-shot eyes, "the young Prince is stronger than this kid, what do you have to fear?" He was small, but also had a piercing voice. The spectators around them jumped when they heard it and turned around to look at him. Made nervous by his menacing look, they lowered their eyes immediately.

"Our young Prince did put in a lot of hard work to learn this kung fu," the silvery haired old man said, "if he can't give a public demonstration of it, he would really be frustrated if all these years of effort remains unseen! If someone actually helps him, he will surely be vexed..."

"Venerable Liang," the small man said, "to what school does the palm technique of the young Prince belong?"

"Brother Peng," the old man answered, laughing, "Do you want to put me to the test? The young Prince has a palm technique combining agility with complexity that is indeed difficult to acquire. If I am not mistaken, he has learned his kung fu from a Taoist of the Quanzhen Sect!"

Mu Yi was again startled. "Could this inconsiderate youngster be a disciple of the Quanzhen Sect?"

"The Venerable Liang has a remarkable eye," the small man said. "You've spent your life at the foot of the Mountain of Eternal Whiteness and you've dedicated yourself to meditation and to alchemical practices. People say that you rarely come into the Central Plains, and yet you seem to know by heart the styles of the Chinese schools. I admire you greatly."

"Brother Peng is too generous with his praise," the old man said, while smiling.

"But," the small man pursued, "the Taoists of the Quanzhen Sect are of bizarre and surprising character. How could they accept the young Prince as a disciple? That would be rather astonishing."

"If the Sixth Prince wants to, who can he not entice to join him? Just like you Brother Peng, you are a great hero who dominates Shandong and Shanxi, yet you are now part of the Prince's household."

The small man acknowledged this. Their attention was again focused on the fight. They noticed that Guo Jing had changed styles again; the rhythm of his palm technique slowed, and his defense was extremely tight. The young Prince had repeatedly searched for ways to attack but had been repulsed by very heavy strokes.

"In your opinion," the old man asked the small man, "where does this young boy's kung fu come from?"

"His kung fu is very mixed," he answered after a moment of hesitation. "One would say that he had several Shifus..."

"Chief Peng is right," interrupted someone nearby. "This kid is the disciple of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'."

Mu Yi examined the person who had just spoken. It was a skinny man with a dark face and three lumps on his forehead. "He called him Chief Peng; would this small man be the bandit Peng Lianhu, the 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands', who slaughters without frowning! As for the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan', it has been a long time since I heard their name mentioned, could they still be part of this world?"

At this time, the skinny man with the dark face suddenly roared, "Little brat, I finally found you." He drew a steel trident, rolled up his sleeves and bounded into the arena. Hearing the noise behind him, Guo Jing turned around and was nose to nose with the man with the three lumps on his forehead; it was the Three-Headed Dragon, Hou Tonghai, the martial uncle of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. Surprised and worried, he hesitated, not knowing what to do. The young Prince took advantage of this hesitation to hit him on the shoulder bringing Guo Jing back to the fight.

Seeing Hou Tonghai bound into the arena, weapon in hand, the spectators believed that he was going to help one of the fighters and, finding this unworthy, began to hoot. Mu Yi, who now knew that he was also part of the royal household, moved forward, ready to fight him if he tried something against Guo Jing. He remained conscious of the fact that the enemy was superior in numbers. However, Hou Tonghai was not angry at Guo Jing. He sped along to the other side and into the crowd where a puny young boy in rags jumped up after seeing him and turned tail. The 'Three-Headed Dragon' rushed after him, followed by four men.

Out of the corner of his eye, Guo Jing realized that it was Huang Rong, the new friend that he had gotten acquainted with in Kalgan. Hou Tonghai pursued him with his weapon in hand, followed by the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. Very worried, he threw a kick and jumped backward. "A

moment please!" he exclaimed. "I need to stop for one moment; we will continue our fight later."

The Young Prince, tired of this fight, had lost all desire to continue. This request could not have come at a better time. "If you admit your defeat," he sneered, "you can go..."

Preoccupied with his friend's safety, Guo Jing got ready to lend him assistance when he heard the sound of footsteps; it was Huang Rong who had come back dragging a worn-out old shoe and laughing. Hou Tonghai pursued and called him names and tried to hit him on the back with his trident. But Huang Rong was extraordinarily agile and the trident always missed its target by a small margin. The young boy adroitly slipped through the crowd and had already come out again on the other side. When Hou Tonghai came nearer, one could see the black marks of two palms on his cheeks; obviously, the fragile boy had managed to slap him twice. Hou Tonghai pushed aside everyone in his way and managed to find a path through the crowd, but Huang Rong was already far away. Hou Tonghai stopped and made gestures to show Huang Rong what he had in mind. "If I don't succeed in catching and slicing you up," Hou Tonghai howled, insane with rage, "I don't want to be called a man any longer!"

Huang Rong waited until Hou Tonghai came nearer before fleeing again. Everyone burst out laughing. In the meantime, three breathless men arrived, they were three of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'; the one missing was Qian Qingjian, known as 'Axe Buries Family'.

Seeing such a spectacle, Guo Jing was surprised and pleased at the same time. He thought, "This friend of mine must have excellent kung fu. The other day, in the Black Pine Woods, it must have been him who lured Hou Tonghai away and hung the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' from

the trees!" The surprise was not less in the opposition camp.

'Supreme Virtue Lingzhi' asked: "Ginseng Immortal, that little beggar has remarkable agility, to which school does he belong? Apparently, Brother Hou has lost this skirmish..."

The white-haired Master of the Mountain of Eternal Whiteness was called Liang Ziwing. Since his youth he had consumed natural ginseng and other herbs which had protected him from the advance of old age. He didn't recognize the kung fu style of the little beggar and shook his head. Then, after a moment, he said, "When I am outside the Pass (the border crossing between China proper and the lands to the north), I've often heard claims that the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' was a frightening expert; who would have thought that his martial brother was such a pitiful figure, even to the point of not being able to handle a mere child?"

The small man was Peng Lianhu. He frowned without answering. He was a great friend of the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', with whom he often collaborated and assisted in robbing raids. He knew the kung fu of Hou Tonghai, which was not bad, but couldn't explain how he could be toyed with that easily.

The diversion with Huang Rong and Hou Tonghai had stopped the duel between Guo Jing and the young Prince. The latter clearly had the edge on Guo Jing, since he'd succeeded in making his adversary fall several times; but he himself had received a multitude of blows and felt tired out. He wiped off the sweat which ran down his face with the scarf he wore as a belt.

Mu Yi, who had stowed the brocade banner, held Guo Jing's hand, thanking him warmly and urging him to leave this

place. Suddenly, the pitter-patter of feet was heard as Huang Rong and Hou Tonghai returned, one chasing the other. The former held two pieces of fabric, two pieces which matched pieces missing from the tunic of the latter; the torn tunic exposed a hairy chest. A little later, Wu Qinglie and Ma Qingxiong appeared, weapons in hand, faithfully and breathless following. Missing was Shen Qinggang, whom Huang Rong apparently managed to dispose of in some mysterious way. The commotion provoked more laughter and jibes from the audience.

Shouts came from the west as several tens of soldiers, wicker rods in their hands, shouted and struck the onlookers to open the way for a large red and golden sedan chair carried by six well muscled men. "It is the Princess," exclaimed the servants of the young Prince.

"Which idiot had the insolence to inform my mother?" the latter thundered, frowning. The servants, who did not dare to answer, hastened to approach the sedan chair which halted at an emptied spot.

"Why are you fighting?" a soft female voice was heard from inside. "It's snowing and you don't have your coat on, you will certainly catch a cold ..."

Hearing that voice from a distance, Mu Yi seemed as if struck by lightning. "How is this possible?" he thought, dumbfounded. "That voice resembles hers so much! But that's impossible, she is a Jin princess ... Perhaps I've thought too much about my wife and I've become crazy ..."

Despite everything, he could not stop himself from edging nearer to the sedan chair. He saw a dainty hand with a handkerchief appear from inside the sedan chair and tenderly wipe the sweat from the face of the young nobleman, who listened to the words pronounced in a low voice, undoubtedly of reproach and admonition ... "But

mom," the young Prince said, "I was just having fun, all is well ..."

"Put your coat on quickly," the Princess said, "and let us go home ..."

"How could two voices be that similar?" Mu Yi, still astonished, saw the white hand disappearing behind a silk curtain on which peonies were embroidered in gold wire. He tried to peer in but couldn't see through the bright curtain.

One of the servants collected the brocade coat of his Master and yelled at Guo Jing, "Animal! Look at the state this coat is in and you're the cause!" One of the soldiers that came with the Princess raised his wicker rod and violently slashed down at Guo Jing's head. Guo Jing dodged, seized the wrist of his attacker, took the rod away, and tripped him. The man fell on the ground and Guo Jing whipped him with the rod. "You dare to strike wrongly and viciously?" he shouted. The crowd, some of whom had received blows from the rod, applauded in appreciation. The other soldiers shouted and hastened to the rescue of their companion, but Guo Jing took them by pairs and tossed them away.

"Still showing off?" the young Prince shouted. He leapt at Guo Jing and both exchanged blows again. The Princess shouted for him to stop, but the son did not seem to fear his mother, "Look at me, mom," he exclaimed. "This bloody peasant is doing wicked things in the capital! If he is not taught a good lesson, he won't respect his old man!" He wanted to give his best performance and he doubled his efforts. Guo Jing, not being able to parry his nimble and fast palms, was struck by several blows and stumbled twice.

Mu Yi, for his part, was still hypnotized by the sedan chair. A corner of the curtain had been opened; he saw two caring

eyes, some hair strands and part of the face of a mother, full of tenderness and worry for her son. Mu Yi remained frozen.

Guo Jing's moves had changed for the better but he was confronted with an adversary with renewed vigour. The young Prince sought to deliver mortal blows, hoping to injure his adversary seriously, in order to put a definite end to the combat. But Guo Jing had a thick skin and a good neigong basis so he was able to endure many blows. Moreover, the techniques of the prince lacked sophistication; his power was limited because of his youth and lack of experience. He tried on several occasions to grab Guo Jing with ten fingers forming claws, using the technique which had enabled him to injure Mu Yi, but the disciple of the Six Freaks defended himself using the technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones'. As the brawl reached its climax, one could again see Huang Rong and Hou Tonghai running after each other. This time, the latter had a long straw in his hair. Usually this is a sign indicating an item is on sale. A bit of straw on his head thus meant that the head was to be sold. It was obviously Huang Rong's doing, of which Hou Tonghai was not yet aware because he was so occupied with the chase! The remaining two 'Demons of the Yellow River' had also disappeared, obviously disposed of in some way ...

Liang Ziwong and his companions racked their brains over the identity of Huang Rong. They watched Hou Tonghai running swiftly, but he never managed to catch up with the boy in rags. "Could this kid be a member of the Beggar Clan?" Peng Lianhu asked suddenly. The Beggar Clan was at this time the most powerful secret society in the realm of Jianghu (Rivers and Lakes region). Liang Ziwong twitched, but didn't answer.

The two young people attacked each other more swiftly and with increasing strength. Occasionally Guo Jing received a palm blow on his shoulder and sometimes the prince got a kick on his thigh. They fought body against body, raging and panting. Even an amateur could see that the fight was becoming increasingly dangerous; the least distraction could cause a fatal injury. Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziwong prepared their hidden projectiles covertly, in order to intervene when necessary. Although Guo Jing was a very obstinate person, his kung fu was not yet a match for the young prince. The two experts persuaded themselves that they would be able to take control of the situation in time to prevent a disaster.

Guo Jing's type of development was difficult to reproduce. Having grown up on the steppe, he had undergone all the rigors of life there and had experienced and was hardened by numerous battles. The Prince, on the other hand, had always lived in luxury; it was no wonder, that in this utterly brutal and merciless endurance battle, he began stumbling as he began to suffer from fatigue. Guo Jing suddenly uttered a great cry, seized his adversary by the collar, raised him high and violently threw him to the ground. It was neither the technique 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones' nor qinna [the art of seize and control], but a unique Mongolian wrestling technique that Jebe, his archery teacher, had taught him.

The Prince reacted promptly by jumping up as soon as he touched the ground and seized Guo Jing's legs so that they both fell. He got up quickly, tore a long lance from the hands of a soldier and thrust it towards Guo Jing's stomach. Guo Jing rolled to the side, while the other continued handling the long lance with dexterity. Guo Jing tried to grab the lance with the stance 'To Seize the Blade', but in vain!

“My son,” the Princess exclaimed, “do not injure him! Be satisfied with winning!” However, the Prince, who seemed really eager to pin Guo Jing down with the lance, turned a deaf ear.

Guo Jing, seeing the gleaming tip of the lance a few inches from his nose, parried with his arm, and something collapsed behind him. He seized Mu Yi’s brocade banner. Using the stance ‘Drawing Aside the Clouds to Peer at the Sun’, he used the pole like a long staff to counter the circling lance.

With both fighters armed now, Guo Jing employed the techniques of the ‘Exorcizing Staff’ taught by his First Shifu. In spite of the length of the pole, which obstructed him a little, he could deploy all subtleties of this art methodically developed by Ke Zhen’ E to counter Mei Chaofeng. Each movement used variants, often unexpected, but always effective. Surprised by the ability of that weapon, the Prince was forced to defend. But his dexterity with the lance was still impressive.

As Mu Yi watched the Prince handling that weapon, he was astonished; all his stances corresponded with the spear style of the Yang family. This technique, which was only handed down from father to son, was rarely seen even in the South. He was really dumbfounded seeing it now in the capital of the Jin. In spite of his nimble movements, this version of the lance style did not seem completely orthodox; it appeared devoid of its essence as if it had been copied without the knowledge of its rightful owner. The watchers saw the crossing and swaying of the lance and the banner pole, scattering the snowflakes in all directions.

The Princess, seeing her son almost sweating blood, could not contain her anxiety any longer, “Stop!” she exclaimed. “Stop fighting both of you!”

Hearing these words, Peng Lianhu advanced with large steps into the arena and he struck the banner pole brutally. Guo Jing felt a sharp pain in his hands and released the pole, which flew away. The brocade banner spread in the wind and one could read, through the falling snowflakes, the golden letters: 'Joust to Find a Spouse'. Very surprised, Guo Jing did not even have time to see the face or the silhouette of his adversary as he felt the coming blow. He leapt back, but was too slow; the palm of Peng Lianhu had already touched his arm and he lost balance and fell to the ground.

"Young Prince," Peng Lianhu said, laughing, "I will get rid of this thoughtless young man, so that he can not intrude any longer ..." He raised his palm, inhaled deeply, and sent a brutal blow at Guo Jing's head. Guo Jing, who was on the ground, knew that he did not stand a chance, but regardless, he raised his arms to parry the blow. 'Supreme Virtue' Lingzhi and the 'Ginseng Immortal' exchanged glances; the arms of the young man would be lost, the blow of the 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands' was violent and was obviously going to smash them.

At this critical moment, a shout came from the crowd, "Hold on!" A gray silhouette holding a strange weapon leapt forward and wrapped up the right wrist of Peng Lianhu. Peng Lianhu withdrew with force, cracking and breaking the weapon, then attacked with his left palm immediately. The man avoided the blow by lowering his head, while seizing Guo Jing by the waist and carrying him away. The spectators saw a middle-aged Taoist, dressed in gray, who had been holding a fly-whisk in his hand, of which only the handle remained. The torn-off strands of the fly-whisk were still around Peng Lianhu's wrist. They looked at each other; although they had exchanged only one stance, they'd been able to fathom each others kung fu.

"You are undoubtedly the famed Master Peng?" the Taoist said. "It is a great honor to meet you here today."

"You are overly courteous. May I ask the name of Master Taoist?"

The Taoist, on which all eyes were fixed, did not answer. He stepped forward with his left foot and then withdrew it. One could see on the ground, covered with a very fine layer of snow, a ten inch deep hole! The simple pressure of his foot had dug such a deep hole, revealing extraordinary kung fu.

Peng Lianhu was startled and said, "Are you the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot', Jade Sun Wang?"

"Now Master Peng is over praising," the Taoist answered. "I am indeed Wang Chuyi, but I am not worthy of the title 'Immortal'."

Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziwing and 'Supreme Virtue' Lingzhi knew very well that Wang Chuyi was an eminent member of the Quanzhen [Absolute Perfection] Sect; his fame was only slightly less than that of 'Eternal Spring', Qiu Chuji. They had only heard of, but never seen him. They examined him attentively. He was a man with fine features and a little goatee on his chin. He wore immaculate white socks, gray shoes, and seemed to take much care to his clothing. If he had not demonstrated his kung fu, nobody there would believe that he was indeed the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot', who, by keeping one foot on a cliff's edge and swaying like a "lotus leaf in the wind", had much impressed the brave men of Hebei and Shandong.

Wang Chuyi smiled and said, pointing at Guo Jing, "I don't know this young friend at all, but seeing him intervening with such bravery and courage, I was full of admiration. That is why I permit myself to beg Master Peng to let him live."

"The request was made with such courtesy," said Peng Lianhu, "and when an eminent Quanzhen master intervenes, who wouldn't grant him a request?"

"Very well," Wang Chuyi answered, cupping his hands, "thank you"

After thanking Peng, he asked Guo Jing his name. Then Wang Chuyi turned and his expression changed; his face darkened and he asked the young Prince sternly, "What is your name? Who is your Shifu?"

The young Prince, after having heard the name of Wang Chuyi, felt ill and would have liked to disappear unnoticed. However, the Taoist had kept an eye on him, "My name is Wanyan Kang," he answered, "I cannot reveal the name of my Shifu."

"Your Shifu has a red mole on his left cheek, hasn't he?" Wanyan Kang wanted to divert the question with a witty remark, but the terrible glance of the Taoist frightened him; he suppressed what he intended to say, and nodded. "I suspected it," Wang Chuyi said, "You are the disciple of Brother Qiu. What did your Shifu tell you before teaching you martial arts?"

Wanyan Kang understood the situation had become very untenable for him. He thought, "If Shifu hears of what has happened today, it will be a catastrophe!"

"If Master Taoist knows my Shifu," he said in a servile manner, "you deserve my complete respect. Why don't you come to my modest residence, so that I can benefit from your advice?" Before Wang Chuyi could answer, the prince turned to Guo Jing and said while bowing, "After exchanging blows, a friendship may grow," he said smiling. "I admire the kung fu of Brother Guo very much. I invite

you both to come to my house in order for us to get to know each other better."

"And what will happen about the marriage?" Guo Jing asked, pointing at Mu Yi and his daughter.

Wanyan Kang seemed embarrassed. "This matter deserves further pondering ..."

"My friend," Mu Yi said, after approaching and drawing Guo Jing by his sleeve, "let us go, we don't need to occupy him any longer."

Wanyan Kang bowed again to Wang Chuyi. "Master Taoist, I will await you at home; you only have to ask for the residence of Prince Zhao. The weather is very cold, all things are freezing. It is an ideal time to sit together by a fire and admire the snow. We shall drink to celebrate this meeting." He climbed on the horse, whose bridle his servant held, and galloped off into the crowd without any concern about trampling somebody. This contemptuous behavior triggered Wang Chuyi's anger, "My little friend," he said to Guo Jing, "come with me."

"I must wait for a very dear friend," Guo Jing said. As he said these words, he saw Huang Rong jumping up in the middle of the crowd and shouting to him, "Don't worry about me, I'll find you in no time at all!" Huang Rong turned and his diminutive figure soon disappeared into the crowd. Hou Tonghai, the 'Three Headed Dragon', gave chase. Guo Jing turned and kowtowed in the snow, to thank Wang Chuyi for saving his life. The Taoist raised him and took his arm. Both found a path through the crowd and ran in the direction of the outskirts of the city.

Chapter 8 - Each One Demonstrating His Skill

Translated by Patudo, Dugu Seeking a Win and SunnySnow



The water splashed and a flat boat floated out from among a cluster of trees. He saw on the stern of the boat a woman paddling. Her long hair was draped on her shoulder and she was dressed in white from head to toe, with a golden hair band on top of her head; the white snow reflected its resplendent brightness.

Wang Chuyi went extremely quickly. In little time, they'd left the city. Some li further, they arrived at the foot of a hill. Eager to test the abilities of Guo Jing, the Taoist did not slow and ran more and more quickly.

At the time Ma Yu taught Guo Jing how to control his breathing; he had climbed and descended a high mountain cliff many times. Today, even after a heated battle, this race did not intimidate him. Running against the wind as heavy snow fell, Wang Chuyi sprang up a small hill with its slope covered with slippery snow. Near the top, the slope became increasingly steep, but Guo Jing's progress made him wonder. He advanced without breathing hard, as if his pulse had not accelerated and as if the ground were flat. The Taoist, extremely surprised, released Guo Jing's arm, "Your kung fu foundation is rather well established! How is it possible that you were not able to beat him?" Guo Jing had no answer and could only remain silent. "Who is your Shifu?" Wang continued.

Guo Jing knew of the Taoist, since, at the top of cliff, he had received instructions to play the part of Yin Zhiping, to mislead Mei Chaofeng. He remembered that Wang Chuyi was one of the martial brothers of Ma Yu and he did not hesitate to tell the truth. He quickly told of how he had been taught by the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' and also by Ma Yu.

"My senior brother gave you lessons!" Wang exclaimed, delighted. "He is formidable, so I see no reason why I

should worry about you!" Guo Jing's eyes widened as he looked at him without understanding.

"This so-called Young Prince, Wanyan Kang," Wang explained, "is the disciple of my martial brother Qiu Chuji. Did you know?"

"Ah," Guo Jing was astonished. "I was unaware of it..." Indeed, Ma Yu had taught to him some basics for the control of internal energy, as well as the qinggong technique called 'Flight of the Golden Eagle', to enable him to climb the cliff. But he had not given him the least instruction in battle techniques or weapons skills. This is why Guo Jing did not know any Quanzhen kung fu. Hearing the remarks of Wang Chuyi, he remembered his battle with the young Taoist Yin Zhiping, whose movements seemed to come from the same style as those of Wanyan Kang. He believed that he had done wrong and bowed his head. "I did not know," he said humbly, "that this Young Prince was a disciple of Master Qiu. I behaved out of order with him; please do not hold it against him..."

Wang Chuyi burst out laughing. "Your righteousness and gentlemanly spirit appeal to me. How could I reproach you? The rules of our Sect are extremely strict. If a disciple is at fault, he will be punished accordingly and justice will be done. This young boy was impudent and arrogant; I will ask Brother Qiu to punish him severely."

"If he agrees to marry the young lady, Mu," Guo Jing pleaded, "please agree to forgive him..."

Wang Chuyi shook his head without answering. He could see that Guo Jing had a good heart and that he forgave readily; he looked on him with even more sympathy. "Brother Qiu has always hated evildoers, and especially the Jin," he thought. "How did it come about that he agreed to

take on a Jin prince as his disciple? Even more strange is that the knowledge he seems to have of our kung fu appears rather thorough. That would mean that Brother Qiu devoted much time and energy on him! However, in his kung fu, one senses the pernicious influences of unorthodox and perverse schools. I'm totally mystified!"

"Brother Qiu told me he was coming to Yanjing," he said to Guo Jing. "He should arrive in the next few days. We will ask him for an explanation when we see him. I intended to mention that he took a disciple by the name of Yang, who must contest himself against you in Jiaying. I do not know how powerful this boy is but don't be concerned, I will be there and I'm sure you will come out on top."

Guo Jing was obeying the order given by his six Masters, to go, at the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, to the prefecture of Jiaying. But they had not explained to him for what reason. "Master Taoist," he then asked, "why must I test myself against him?"

"If your teachers did not think it needful to explain it to you," Wang answered, "it would be wrong for me to do it in their place." He had learned, from Qiu Chuji, the origin and outcome of this business and he felt, for the generous sacrifice made by the Six Freaks, immense admiration. He'd had the same thoughts as Ma Yu and hoped for the victory of the Six. However, as his junior, he could not ask Qiu to back down. Today, encouraged by the personality of Guo Jing, he wondered how he could help him secretly, without damaging the reputation of his martial brother. Then he decided to go to Jiaying, and to think, on the spot, of some way to aid him. "Let's go back and visit Mu Yi," the Taoist proposed. "His daughter seems to be rather stubborn and I fear this will cause him problems..."

They went to the Prosperity Inn, in the western part of the city. When they arrived at the door of the Inn, ten servants richly clad in brocade were waiting there. They came to them and greeted, "Our master humbly requests of the Master Taoist and Lord Guo, if they will agree to attend a banquet held at his modest residence." The red invitation card carried the respectful inscription "Your disciple Wanyan Kang invites".

"Well then," Wang Chuyi said, shaking his head. "We will come presently."

"These cakes and fruits," declared the leader of the servants, "are modest gifts from the Young Prince. If the Master Taoist and Lord Guo indicate to me where to place them, I will put them there." The servants presented twelve large boxes filled with various fresh fruits and fine cakes, all looking very appetizing.

"Brother Huang Rong likes finely made pastries," Guo Jing thought, "I'll keep some for him." Because of his aversion to Wanyan Kang, Wang Chuyi intended to return the gifts. But, seeing that Guo Jing seemed to appreciate them, he ordered them to leave them at the counter. "Young people are covetous," he thought with a smile. "It's normal..." They then went to Mu Yi's room. He was stretched out on the bed, his face pale, his daughter in tears sitting by his bedside. Seeing Wang and Guo entering, they let out a gasp of surprise. The girl rose to her feet and the man tried to get up.

Wang Chuyi examined Mu Yi's wounds. On each hand, the five wounds dug by the fingers of Wanyan Kang were open to the bone; as if they had been inflicted by a weapon. The hands were extremely swollen so they had been coated with alleviating balsam but, because of the fear of infection, no bandages had been applied. Wang Chuyi could not

understand the nature of the wound, "Who taught Wanyan Kang such a cruel and brutal technique? Looking at the seriousness of those wounds, it seemed it would take a long time for someone to reach this level of power. How could Brother Qiu not realize this; or, if he had some idea about it, why didn't he do anything to stop him?" He turned to the girl, "Young lady, you are...?"

"I am called Mu Nianci (Nianci: 'to remember the mother')," she answered, casting a grateful glance towards Guo Jing before bowing her head. Guo Jing saw that the banner pole was at the foot of the bed, but the banner itself, with its inscription 'Joust to find a Spouse', had been torn to shreds.

"Don't you want to find a husband?" he wondered in surprise.

"Your father's injury is quite serious," continued Wang. "It should be looked after properly." Seeing the destitute manner in which they lived, he understood that the father and the girl had few means and would have probably found it very hard to find money for medicines. He took two silver yuan bao [small boat shaped silver ingots] from his pocket and placed them on the table. "I will return to see you tomorrow," he promised. Without awaiting the thanks of Mu Yi and his daughter, he took Guo Jing by the arm and they left. At the door of the inn, the four brocade clothed servants advanced towards them and bowed, "Our young Master awaits your honored visit, please follow us." Wang Chuyi agreed.

"Master," Guo Jing said, "wait for me one moment." He turned and ran to the counter of the inn, opened the boxes of delicacies given by Wanyan Kang, chose four cakes, carefully wrapped them in a handkerchief and put them in his pocket. Then he followed Wang Chuyi to the residence.

On the two sides of the large bright red door, flags were hung on high poles. Two jade lions, majestic and fierce, stood guard. A flight of white jade stairs led to the large hall. The effect was impressive. Above the large door, there was an inscription in gold letters: 'Residence of Prince Zhao'.

Guo Jing knew that 'Prince Zhao' is the title of the Sixth Prince of the Jin Empire, Wanyan Honglie. "So," he said nervously to himself, "this Young Prince is the son of Wanyan Honglie. He knows me; it'll be dangerous if I come across him!" As he hesitated, there came the sound of drums and trumpets.

The Young Prince, wearing a gold crown, a red tunic, and a gold belt tied around his waist, descended the stairs to meet them. However, he had a black eye, and a swollen face, marks from the keen combat of a few hours earlier. Guo Jing was not much better off, having a swollen eye, swollen lips and a bruised face. Both were amused, and could not prevent themselves from smiling. Seeing Wanyan Kang's luxurious garb, Wang's eyebrows came together and he followed him to a large room without saying a word. Wanyan Kang invited him to sit in the place of honor.

"It's a distinguished honor that Master Taoist and Brother Guo have agreed to come here!"

Since he did not kowtow to him and did not seem to recognize his membership in the Quanzhen Sect, Wang felt anger rise within him. "How many years were you taught martial arts by your Shifu?" he asked.

"I know nothing of martial arts," Wanyan Kang answered, laughing. "My Shifu gave me lessons for several years, but what he taught me would make you laugh, because it was no more than a three-legged cat's skills."

"The skills of the Quanzhen Sect are nothing exceptional," Wang said, containing his anger, "but it is nonetheless better than a three-legged cat's skill. Did you know your Shifu will arrive in a few days?"

"My Shifu is here," retorted Wanyan Kang, still smiling. "Do you wish to see him, Master?"

"Where is he?" exclaimed Wang Chuyi, amazed.

Without waiting for him to answer, Wanyan Kang struck his hands together, and ordered, "Serve the banquet!" Then he took his two guests towards the banquet hall. They crossed through several corridors and several decorated pavilions. Guo Jing, who had never seen such a luxurious residence, was overwhelmed. But he was especially worried about the coming confrontation with Wanyan Honglie because he didn't know what he should do. "The great Khan wants me to assassinate the prince," he thought, "but it turns out his son is the disciple of Taoist Elder Qiu! Should I kill the prince or not?" He could not decide, so uneasiness plagued him.

In the banquet hall, six or seven people already awaited them. One of them had three lumps on his face; it was Hou Tonghai, the 'Three-Headed Dragon'. He looked at them with hands on his hips and an angry face. Guo Jing made a movement of retreat, then, reassured, he thought that the presence of the Taoist Elder at his side would dissuade Hou from undertaking anything. However, not being able to suppress a feeling of apprehension, he averted his head and avoided the glance of his adversary. Then, recalling the foolish behavior of Hou during the chase with Huang Rong, he laughed inside.

"Taoist Elder," Wanyan Kang said with a charming expression on his face, "Here are several people who

admire you and have wished, for a long time, to get acquainted. You have already met Chief Peng. This is the honorable Liang Ziwing, also called the 'Ginseng Immortal', who is from the Mountain of Eternal Whiteness."

Liang Ziwing, an old man with a florid face and immaculate hair, greeted him by joining his hands. "What an honor to meet the Perfect Wang, the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot'! I will now be able to claim that my voyage beyond the Pass has not been in vain. This is Supreme Virtue Ling Zhi, also known as Distinguished Big-hand, from the 'Secret School' of Tibet. I myself come from the northeast, he from the southwest; it had required a voyage of tens of thousands of Li so one could say that ours is a predestined encounter."

Obviously, Liang Ziwing was a very glib talker. Wang Chuyi greeted Supreme Virtue Ling Zhi, and the lama [a Tibetan religious leader] answered by joining his hands. Suddenly, a raucous voice was heard. "Because they feel supported by the Absolute Perfection Sect [Quanzhen] maybe that is why the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan dare to be so conceited!"

Wang Chuyi turned his head and saw a completely bald man with a gleaming skull and bulging red eyes. That man reminded him of someone. "Is it possible that are you the venerable Sha, the Dragon King of the Demonic Group?"

"Precisely," the man retorted with an angry voice. "So, you still remember my name!"

"We have never met," Wang thought, "in what affair could I have offended him?"

"I've long heard of your great reputation," he answered in a conciliatory tone, "and I much admire you."

This Dragon King of the Demonic Group was Sha Tongtian, and he was much abler than his martial brother Hou

Tonghai. However, he possessed a quick temper and was constantly angry when teaching. That was why he had only been able to transmit a negligible part of his ability to his four disciples. It was also the reason why the “Four Demons of the Yellow River”, when they fought against Guo Jing in Mongolia, were not able to win and lost face in front of Wanyan Honglie. Since then, Prince Zhao did not grant the four men any credibility. When he heard about that, Sha Tongtian fell into a terrible rage; he punished his unworthy disciples viciously and the four demons nearly turned into four ghosts. He ordered his brother-in-arms to capture Guo Jing, but Hou Tonghai turned into a teasing object for Huang Rong and underwent an even greater humiliation.

More and more annoyed, Sha Tongtian, no longer concerned about courtesy in front of others, sprang towards Guo Jing, his hands forming claws. Guo Jing retreated two steps. Wang Chuyi, with a protective move, put himself in front of Guo Jing.

“Do you really want to protect this little rascal?” Sha exclaimed angrily. And he struck a palm in the direction of Wang. Wang, considering the brutality of the attack, was forced to defend himself. Their two palms clashed, and as they were about to channel their internal energy, a man suddenly appeared. With his hands, he pressed their wrists and separated them. Wang and Sha felt a shock sensation and withdrew their hands immediately. Being eminent personalities of the Jianghu realm both had anticipated the real abilities of their adversary and had already activated their internal energy. That someone was able to separate them so easily with such a move was unbelievable to them!

The man, dressed in white, wore a light fur coat and a broad belt. Aged about thirty-five or thirty-six years, he moved elegantly, had a distinguished appearance and an undeniable martial air. He seemed to be the scion of a noble

family. "This is," Wanyan Kang said laughing, "the Junior Chief of the White Camel Mountain from the Kunlun mountain range in the Western Territories. His name is Ouyang Ke. The Honorable Ouyang has never been in the Central Plains before. You all meet him for the first time."

The sudden appearance of this man surprised not only Wang Chuyi and Guo Jing, but Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziwong as well, who also didn't know him. After seeing a demonstration of his ability, everyone secretly felt respect; but nobody had ever heard of the White Camel Mountain in the Western Territories.

"Brothers, I should have arrived in the capital several days ago," Ouyang Ke said, greeting everyone. "But I ran into a small hitch along the way which caused a delay; that is why I have just arrived, please excuse me."

After learning that he was the Junior Chief of the White Camel Mountain, Guo Jing knew that he was connected to those young women wearing white clothes who had tried to steal his horse on the road. He felt his heart tighten. "Have my six Shifus clashed with him?" he wondered. "Have they been injured?"

Wang Chuyi knew that all the men were of frightening ability. He had experienced the pressure of Ouyang Ke's hand and had displayed internal energy by no means inferior to his own, though it contained a strange viciousness.

If dialogue turned out to be impossible and it became a fight, he was not even sure of being able to beat Ouyang Ke. Should they attack en masse, how could they defend themselves? "And your Shifu," he asked Wanyan Kang, "why don't you ask him to come in?"

"I will," the young man agreed, turning to his servants. "Request Shifu to come and meet the visitors."

Wang Chuyi felt reassured. "If Brother Qiu is here," he mused, "though the enemy are dominant in numbers, we will be able to at least remain unscathed."

Some time later, they heard the noise of boots. Through the large door a big old officer of forty years, with a thick beard and dressed in brocade entered with a martial air. Wanyan Kang advanced. "Shifu," he said respectfully. "This Taoist Elder wishes to see you, and has already asked about you on several occasions."

Wang felt an upwelling of anger. "Ah, wicked one," he thought, "you dare to make fun of me? The way this officer moves, he can't have any remarkable skills; he is certainly not the one who taught this rascal his strange techniques."

"Taoist," the officer said, "what do you want from me? Normally I hate seeing monks or priests."

Wang's anger was so strong that he burst out laughing. "I would like," he said, "to request alms from Your Excellency, a thousand silver taels."

The officer was called Tang Zude, captain of Prince Zhao's personal guard. When Wanyan Kang was small, Tang Zude had given him some martial arts lessons; that's why everybody in the household called him 'Shifu'. Hearing this outrageous request from Wang Chuyi, he was startled. "Rubbish!" he retorted.

"A thousand taels of silver," Wanyan Kang said, "is nothing, nothing at all. Let someone quickly prepare a thousand silver taels and present it to the venerable Taoist." Tang Zude remained baffled. He examined Wang Chuyi from tip to toe with his mouth agape, then upwards again, without

managing to understand why anyone should show such benevolence.

"Everyone please take a seat," Wanyan Kang invited. "Taoist Elder Wang, it's the first time you've come to us, the place of honor is reserved for you."

Wang Chuyi refused modestly, but ended up settling in the place of honor. Three rounds of wine were served. "You are all eminent personalities of the Jianghu realm," Wang declared then. "You all shall judge how we'll settle the affair of Mr. Mu and his daughter." All eyes were fixed on Wanyan Kang, waiting to see his reaction.

Wanyan Kang poured wine and raised the wine cup. Respectfully presenting the cup before Wang, he said, "Senior [qianbei], do me the honor and accept this cup first. As for the affair in question, it will be dealt with according to Senior's instructions, your Junior [wanbei] dare not disobey."

Wang was amazed to hear him giving in so easily. He took the cup and drank the wine in one go. "Very well," he said. "Let us bring Mr. Mu here and let him speak."

"Someone must bring him here," Wanyan Kang said. "Could I charge Brother Guo with the task of bringing Mr. Mu here?" Wang Chuyi nodded.

Guo Jing immediately left the banquet to go to the Prosperity Inn. But Mu Yi's room was empty; the father and the girl had left, taking all their belongings with them. When asked, the boy at the inn answered that someone had come seeking them, paid for the room and the meals, but he could not say who. Guo Jing hurriedly returned to the residence of Prince Zhao, where Wanyan Kang greeted him with a great smile. "Brother Guo, thank you for your efforts. Where is Mr. Mu?" Guo Jing told him that he had sought

him in vain. "Ah, it is my fault," Wanyan Kang sighed. Turning to one of his servants, he ordered, "Take several men with you and go quickly in all directions. We absolutely must find Mr. Mu!" The servant obeyed and left.

Without the main person of interest, it was impossible to continue. Wang Chuyi could say nothing, but his head was full of suspicions. "To go and seek Mr. Mu," he said to himself, "one or two servants are enough. This rascal insisted that Guo Jing should go, obviously he wanted Guo Jing himself to discover the departure of Mu, and give testimony of it."

"It doesn't matter that a mysterious thing happened," he sneered, "in the end the truth will always triumph."

"Taoist Elder, you have reason to believe that Mr. Mu did mysterious things?" Wanyan Kang answered laughing, "That is really odd!"

The officer Tang Zude, already furious to see how easily the Taoist had extorted a thousand silver taels, found it intolerable to see him also showing insolence to the Young Prince. He vented his anger, "Taoist, to which temple do you belong? What right do you have to swindle our Master?"

"Officer," Wang Chuyi retorted. "To which country do you belong? What right do you have to occupy an official position here?" He had noticed that Tang Zude was Chinese, but occupied an officer's rank in the Jin army. He was benefiting from the oppression of his compatriots, and it was for this reason he made fun of him. The thing that Tang Zude hated most was people mentioning that he is Chinese. He regarded himself to be highly skilled in martial arts, loyal and willing to risk his life for the Jin, yet they still do not allow him to lead an army. He had worked hard for twenty years but was kept in Prince Zhao's residence for

show. Wang Chuyi's comments had hit his sore point and his face changed as he roared in anger. He stood up, opposite Liang Ziwing and Ouyang Ke and released a fist towards Wang Chuyi's face.

The later glanced at the fist coming towards him, stretched out two fingers of his left hand to grab Tang Zude's wrist, laughing, "Even if you are not willing to answer, there is no need to resort to violence is there?"

Tang Zude's fist was stopped in mid-air and was unable to move. He was surprised but angry, and scolded, "Brilliant witchcraft, you used witchcraft!" He used his strength to release his fist but was unable to. He scowled, feeling very embarrassed.

Liang Ziwing, who was sitting beside him, laughed, "General, do not fret, come and sit down for a cup of wine." And with that, he stretched out his fingers towards Tang Zude's left shoulder.

Wang Chuyi was aware that although his two fingers could suppress Tang Zude's fist, he knew they would be unable to stop Liang Ziwing's move. He released Tang's wrist and aimed a finger at Tang Zude's right shoulder. With this quick change of moves, Liang Ziwing was unable to restrain himself and two fingers pressed both sides of Tang Zude's shoulder at the same time. It is really an honor for Tang Zude to have two highly skilled fighters ambushing him at the same time. Both his hands uncontrollably punched forward. With the sounds of two crashes, his left hand punched into a plate of left-over fish and his right hand entered a bowl of hot and sour soup. The two dishes broke into small pieces. The fish bones and broken fragments of the dishes pierced Tang Zude's hands, mixing flesh and blood with remains of the soup, causing him to yell in pain.

The crowd laughed loudly and quickly moved aside. Tang Zude, by this time very embarrassed and furious, dashed out of the hall. The servants, suppressing their laughter, moved forward to clean up the mess. Sha Tongtian marveled, "The Quanzhen Sect really lives up to its name! This Brother wants Taoist Wang to enlighten me on something."

Wang Chuyi replied, "It's nothing much, please ask, elder Sha."

Sha Tongtian replied, "The Yellow River Clan and Quanzhen Sect have long been at peace; why does Taoist Wang make things difficult for this brother by going out of his way to support the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'? The Quanzhen Sect may have many disciples, but this brother is not afraid."

Wang Chuyi replied, "I think there is some misunderstanding. I have heard of the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' but I don't know any of them. I have a martial brother who made a little bet with them. But I have never planned on helping the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' against Yellow River Clan."

Sha Tongtian exclaimed, "That's good. Then please hand over this rascal to me." As he spoke, he reached forward to grab Guo Jing's throat.

Wang Chuyi knew that Guo Jing would be unable to avoid that grab and would get injured. He stretched out his arm to push Guo Jing's shoulders gently. Guo Jing fell out of his chair uncontrollably and a "ke cha" sound was heard, as Sha Tongtian's five fingers changed direction towards the floor and the back of his chair was broken. This 'Claw Smashing Wood like Bean Curd' is indeed one of the least seen but powerful moves in the Wulin world.

Sha Tongtian, who failed to grab Guo Jing, furiously asked, "So you are going to protect this rascal?"

Wang Chuyi replied, "I brought this child in, so I will naturally bring him out safely. Why does brother Sha not let him off today and find him on another day?"

Ouyang Ke spoke up, "This young chap offended brother Sha, let's talk this out shall we?"

Sha Tongtian thought, "This Taoist priest's skills are definitely not below mine; my martial brother and I, together, may not be able to make that little rascal stay behind. This Ouyang Ke has good skills and I'm not sure of his background; if he joins up with that idiot, then there will be trouble." He then spoke, "I have four useless disciples who followed Prince Zhao to Mongolia on a big mission. They were about to succeed when this rascal, whose surname is Guo, appeared and spoiled everything, making Prince Zhao extremely furious. Gentlemen, please think, if we cannot even overcome a little rascal, how can we accept the invitation to eat and drink in the residence of Prince Zhao?"

Although Sha Tongtian was very bad-tempered and rash, he was not stupid; with this speech, Guo Jing immediately became the centre of suspicion. With the exception of Wang Chuji and Guo Jing, everyone else here was invited by Prince Zhao. Wanyan Kang is Prince Zhao's eldest son. After hearing what Sha Tongtian said, he too was a little displeased, so everyone present decided to capture Guo Jing and present him to Prince Zhao.

Wang Chuyi was anxious deep down and tried to think of a plan to escape, but there were so many strong opponents that it was quite impossible to do so. He'd actually thought that, since Wanyan Kang is his martial brother's disciple

and even though he is a Jin, he wouldn't dare attack his teacher's martial brother. However, he did not expect Wanyan Kang to be so arrogant and had even planned to trap them with the help of skilled experts. If he had known this would happen, he would not have come so rashly; but even had he known, he wouldn't have brought Guo Jing along. If he wanted to leave, no one had any reason to stop him; but escaping with Guo Jing would be very difficult. He thought, "In this situation, it's best to delay things." Then he said, "Every single one of you is highly skilled and well-known; I have the utmost respect for each of you. To be able to meet you all today is my honor." Pointing to Guo Jing, "This child is unaware of the serious trouble he has caused all of you by offending elder Sha. If you want him to stay, I am powerless to stop it, but even so, I cannot agree to it. Thus, I daringly request that each of you display your superior skills to Guo Jing so as to let him know that it is not that I don't want to fight, it's because I am unable to help him."

Hou Tonghai had been suppressing his boredom all the while and immediately jumped out of his chair and pulled up his sleeve, "Let me be the first to taste your skills."

Wang Chuyi replied, "My shallow skills are unworthy to exchange moves with those present. I hope that brother Hou's superior skills will impress and teach this little rascal a lesson, and allow him to become aware of the existence of many skilled experts so that he won't dare to be arrogant in the future." Hou Tonghai had the feeling that there was sarcasm hidden in his words, but didn't know what it was and was unsure how to answer.

Sha Tongtian thought, "It's very tough to compete with Taoists from the Quanzhen Sect. It's also good that I don't have to do so." Turning to Hou Tonghai, "Martial brother,

why not display the 'Burying One in the Snow' skill for elder Wang."

The snow outside had not stopped. Hou Tonghai rushed to the centre of the courtyard and swept both of his arms up, drawing the snow in until there was a huge pile in front of him. He used his legs to arrange the pile neatly, retreated three steps then flipped upside down and with a 'pa' sound, he thrust himself forward and landed in the middle of the snow pile. The snow was not up to his chest. Guo Jing rubbed his head in confusion when he saw this skill because Hou Tonghai's head was in the snow pile, motionless.

Sha Tongtian turned to Wanyan Kang and the others and said, "Everyone, please kick all the remaining snow onto the pile which my brother Hou's head is in." The audience was curious and laughingly kicked the snow, making the pile even deeper. Sha Tongtian and Hou Tonghai frequently practiced in the Yellow River, thus their water skills are excellent. Those who practice water skills focus on controlling their breathing while under water and Hou Tonghai was able to bury his head in the snow without breathing and then use kung fu to fly out after a long while. The audience raised their cups of wine and praised this display of skill; after along while, Hou Tonghai finally use both his palms to sweep his head out of the snow and flipped back to a normal standing position. Guo Jing, being an inexperienced youth, was the first to applaud loudly. However, Hou Tonghai merely returned to his seat and drank a cup of wine, before staring at Guo Jing fiercely.

Guo Jing saw that there were the remains of snow on Hou Tonghai's head and couldn't control himself, he said, "Third master Hou; there's snow on your head." Hou Tonghai angrily retorted, "I am known as the 'Three-Headed Dragon', but I am not third in position, why call me third master? Even if I am fourth master Hou, is it any of your

business? How would I not know if my head has snow on it? I wanted to wipe it away, but now that you mentioned it, I will purposely not do it!" The warm temperature in the room caused the snow on his head to melt and drops of water ran down Hou Tonghai's head. But he is a stubborn man who keeps to his word, so no matter what, he did not even try to wipe the water off his face.

Sha Tongtian said. "My martial brother's skills are rough and clumsy, please pardon him." With that, he stretched his hand into a plate, grabbed some melon seeds, and shot the seeds out in a straight line with a flick of his middle finger. The seeds stuck into the snow pile which Hou Tonghai had earlier made and formed a 'huang' [yellow] character. The snow pile was quite a distance from Sha Tongtian's seat and yet, he was still able to neatly form a word on it using the melon seeds. His eyesight and accuracy was indeed amazing.

Wang Chuyi thought, "No wonder the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' rules the Yellow River area, his skills are indeed spectacular." Turning his head, he saw that the snow pile had received another wave of seeds, forming the 'he' [river] character and the 'jiu' [nine] character; it seemed Sha Tongtian wanted to form four words, reading 'huang he jiu qu' [Nine Songs of the Yellow River].

Peng Lianhu laughed, "Brother Sha, I cannot help but admire your remarkable finger skills. Let us make a deal; since elder Wang wants to study our skills, I will borrow Brother Sha's finger skills to display some of my own." With that, he threw his body forward and landed near the doorway. By this time, Brother Sha had already shot out the rest of the seeds to form the remaining 'qu' [song] character. Peng Lianhu suddenly stretched out both hands to catch the seeds; it looked as if he were picking the seeds from midair. The seeds were very tiny and traveled at

amazing speed, but Peng Lianhu did not miss a single one and had them all in his hands.

The audience broke into praise and Peng Lianhu retuned to his seat with a smile. Only then did Sha Tongtian manage to finish forming the 'qu' [song] character with the seeds. Peng Lianhu's sudden display did steal away some of Sha Tongtian's limelight, but the two were very close and Sha Tongtian did not seem displeased and even smiled a little. He turned to Ouyang Ke and asked, "What does master Ouyang plan on displaying to enlighten us inexperienced people?"

Ouyang Ke heard the sarcasm in Sha Tongtian's words and knew that he was still sore at him for interrupting his hits earlier. He thought hard about what to display so as to make Sha Tongtian admire him. At that moment, the servants brought in four types of dessert and replaced the used chopsticks with clean ones. Ouyang Ke snatched up the used chopsticks and, with a wave of his hand, twenty chopsticks flew out at the same time, stuck into the snow and neatly formed four flower shapes. To throw a chopstick and stick it into the snow with a wave of the hand is child's play, but to neatly form the shape of a flower using twenty chopsticks was more difficult. This skill was deep and complex, so much so that Guo Jing and Wanyan Kang were not able to comprehend it fully; but people such as Wang Chuyi and Sha Tongtian secretly praised him.

Considering the high number of experts, Wang Chuyi thought, "One of them would be quite a handful, yet there are so many gathered together here. Why? Even people like the young Chief of White Camel Mountain, 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi and the 'Ginseng Immortal', who do not reside on the central plains are here. There must be a dangerous plan here!"

The 'Ginseng Immortal', Liang Ziwing laughed as he stood up and acknowledged the group. He reached the centre of the courtyard with light steps. He stretched out his right foot and lightly landed on the chopsticks, which Ouyang Ke had stuck into the snow. Then he started his display of skills , 'Hugging the Moon', 'Two Gentlemen up the Hills', 'Pulling the Arrow', 'Turning Without Shoes', and then displayed his 'Sparrow Light Fists'. His feet looked like he was jumping one moment and flying at the next moment; every step he took would end by landing on a chopstick. After his 'Giving Way to Step on a Tiger' and 'Retreating to Wrap it Up', Liang Ziwing finished his display with his 'Sparrow Light Fists'. The amazing thing was that the twenty chopsticks were still neatly in place. With a satisfied smile on his face, Liang Ziwing retreated back to his seat. The hall exploded into applause and even Guo Jing praised him. At this moment, the banquet ended and the servants brought golden bowls of warm water for the guests to wash up a little.

Wang Chuyi thought, "Now, Superior Virtue, Ling Zhi will display his skills before they all attack." Wang Chuyi glanced his way only to see him still dipping his hands in the water slowly, disregarding everything else. After everyone finished washing, his hands were still in the bowl of water, as if thinking of something. Everyone was feeling a bit curious and after a while, steam began rising from his bowl. The bowl made a noise just before bubbles rose from the bottom of the bowl as if water was boiling. Wang Chuyi was secretly anxious, "His internal energy is powerful! I have to take a chance and attack first."

Because all the attention was focused on Ling Zhi, Wang Chuyi thought, "I have to take them by surprise and make the first move to gain the upper hand." Suddenly, he flew forward, with supreme speed, caught and pulled Wanyan

Kang away with his right hand, before sealing his accupoints. Sha Tongtian and the rest were taken by surprise and did not know how to react.

Wang Chuyi picked up a bottle of wine with his left hand and said, "To be able to meet with so many heroes today is my honor, let me give a toast to everyone." From the bottle he took a large mouthful, spat out and drops of wine landed in everyone's cup. It didn't matter whether the person's cup was near or far away from him, or whether the cups were half-filled or empty, the wine kept landing accurately in the cups. Afterwards, every cup had the same proportion of wine, and there was not a single drop of wine spilled. From the way Wang Chuyi spat the wine, 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi knew that he had excellent internal energy. Also he was able to hold the wine bottle in one hand while holding Wanyan Kang with the other. Although they knew that it was possible to attack Wang Chuyi at this moment, no one dared to for fear of Wanyan Kang getting hurt. Wang Chuyi poured wine for himself and Guo Jing, and then, raising his cup, said calmly, "I have no animosity towards anyone and have no strong ties with little brother Guo; but seeing that he is compassionate, heroic and has backbone, I want to plead with all present to let him go on my behalf."

Everyone was silent. Wang Chuyi continued, "If everyone is magnanimous, I will free the little prince. A royal descendent in exchange for a commoner is a very good trade, right?"

Liang Ziwong laughed, "Since Taoist Wang is so forthright, it's a deal." Without a moment's hesitation, Wang Chuyi released Wanyan Kang. Wang Chuyi knew that although these people were well-known for their evil, cold-blooded, unorthodox and underhanded ways, they would not dare to break their promise and attack in front of their fellow Wulin experts for fear of tarnishing their reputation.

Wang Chuyi took Guo Jing's hand and said, "I bid you farewell and may we meet again". The crowd, unable to stop them, watched their prey escape from the trap, sighed and looked crushed.

Wanyan Kang recovered and laughed, "Taoist Wang is superior, please feel free to visit anytime so that I can learn from the great elder."

Wang Chuyi snorted, "I haven't solved our problem; we will definitely meet again."

As they walked towards the doorway, 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi suddenly said, "The Taoist elder has brilliant skills of which I am in awe." He joined his palms in the prayer position and bowed. Suddenly, he released both palms in the air and dashed forward with all his might.

Wang Chuyi also pushed out both his palms in defense, using internal energy to meet Ling Zhi's blow. Just as the palms were about to meet, Ling Zhi suddenly switched from internal to external energy and used his left hand to grab Wang Chuyi's wrist. Wang Chuyi reacted swiftly by grabbing his opponent's wrist; both sides used their utmost force and both wrists met briefly before separating.

Ling Zhi's face paled but he forced himself to say, "I really admire the Taoist skills."

Before retreating Wang Chuyi laughed, "The Abbot is famous throughout Wulin, but why do you not keep your word?"

'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi was furious and spat out, "I wanted to make you stay behind, not the Guo rascal...." He had received a blow from Wang Chuyi and was injured; had he quietly sat down to recuperate, it would not have become serious. But being mocked by Wang Chuyi had

made him furious and he had not finished speaking when he vomited a mouthful of blood. Wang Chuyi did not dare stay any longer and took Guo Jing's hand and quickly made his way out. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the rest did not want to break their promise and, seeing that 'Supreme Virtue' Ling Zhi had suffered, they did not move forward to stop them.

Wang Chuyi had left quickly and was quite a distance from Prince Zhao's residence before he turned back to check if there was anyone behind them. When he confirmed that there was no one, he quietly said to Guo Jing, "Carry me back to the inn."

Hearing his weak voice, Guo Jing was shocked; he studied Wang Chuyi's face and saw that it was pale and he looked very sick. It was a vast difference from the quick and swift Wang Chuyi of earlier on. Guo Jing quickly asked, "Taoist Wang, are you injured?"

Wang Chuyi nodded and could not balance himself properly. Guo Jing quickly lowered his back to carry Wang Chuyi and hurried to a large inn. He was about to enter when Wang Chuyi whispered, "Find...find the most isolated.... and smallest.... smallest inn."

Guo Jing thought for awhile and then understood that Wang Chuyi was afraid that enemies may be looking for them. If they met rivals, with Wang Chuyi injured and him lowly skilled, they would definitely lose. With that thought, Guo Jing lowered his head and started running to look for another inn. Guo Jing was unfamiliar with the city and headed for roads with very few people on them; the further he went, the more deserted the road became. He felt Wang Chuyi's breathing getting weaker and weaker before he found a very small inn. The inn was small and dirty, but

fearing for Wang Chuyi's safety, he immediately dashed in and laid Wang Chuyi down.

Wang Chuyi said, "Find me a big tub...of water.....fresh...clean water...hurry...hurry up."

Guo Jing asked, "Is there anything else?"

Wang Chuyi remained silent and just waved his hands to hurry Guo Jing. Guo Jing hurried out of the room and asked a waiter to help him prepare the water. He gave him some money for doing so and then rewarded the boy with some extra coins.

Since Guo Jing had come to the central plains, he'd learned the importance of bribing. The inn boy was overjoyed and quickly fetched a huge tub and filled it with clean water. Guo Jing went back to inform Wang Chuyi that the water was ready. Wang Chuyi responded, "Good...good child, now put me in the water...don't allow...anyone to come in here."

Guo Jing did not understand why Wang Chuyi wanted to do this but did as he was told. The clean water covered Wang Chuyi except for his head. Guo Jing instructed the inn boy to keep everyone out. Wang Chuyi sat quietly with his eyes closed and breathed deeply. After awhile, the water turned black and colour began to return to his cheeks. Wang Chuyi said to Guo Jing, "Help me out and change the water."

Guo Jing changed the water and helped Wang Chuyi in again. It was some time before Guo Jing realized that Wang Chuyi was using his internal energy to force out the poison in him and allowing it to float in the water. Guo Jing changed the water four times before no more poison came out of Wang Chuyi and the water stayed clear.

Wang Chuyi finally smiled and said, "It's okay now." He climbed out of the water and sighed, "That lama's skills are

deadly.” Guo Jing was relieved and asked whether there was poison on the lama’s palms. Wang Chuyi replied, “Yes, I have seen the ‘Poison Sand Palms’ many times, but this is the strongest one yet. It almost cost me my life.”

Guo Jing replied, “Luckily you are alright now. What do you want to eat? I’ll ask the inn boy to buy something.” Wang Chuyi asked Guo Jing to borrow some ink and a brush before writing down a list of medicines.

Wang Chuyi explained, “ Although my life is not in danger now, my internal organs are not fully cleansed of the poison; if I do not cleanse the poison in twenty-four hours time, I may be crippled for life.”

Guo Jing took the medicine list and rushed out; he saw that there was a medicine shop nearby and quickly asked the owner for the medicine on the list. The owner checked his shelves, but returned empty-handed and said, “So sorry, you came at the wrong time, the medical herbs that you need are out of stock.”

Guo Jing did not wait for him to finish and dashed off to find another medicine shop. To his surprise, the second medicine shop he went to also didn’t have the things he wanted; it was the same result even after he went to eight other shops. Guo Jing was anxious and angry by then and ran to all the medicine shops in the city, only to get the same answer. They’d had a huge stock of the herbs he wanted but they’d been bought by someone earlier. It was then that Guo Jing realized that the people at the Zhao residence must have guessed that Wang Chuyi needed the medicine for his injury and purposely bought up all the medical herbs.

Dejected, Guo Jing returned to the inn and told Wang Chuyi what had happened. The latter responded with a sigh and

also looked dejected. Guo Jing was so miserable that he leaned on top of a table and cried. Wang Chuyi laughed, "Everyone has to die sooner or later; when is up to heaven, and we have no say. Besides, I may not die, so why all this crying?" Then he started singing.

Guo Jing dried his tears and felt better. Wang Chuyi laughed and sat upright on the bed and began using inner strength to recuperate.

Guo Jing did not dare to make any noise and crept out of the room, he suddenly thought, "If I rush to another nearby city, they may not have finished buying up the medicine."

Happily, he was about to set off when he saw the inn boy running towards him with a letter, on the top of the envelope it said, ' Please read it yourself, big brother Guo.'

Guo Jing felt curious and wondered who would write to him. He hurriedly tore open the letter and shook open a white piece of paper on which was written, 'I have something urgent to tell you, will be waiting for you at the small lake by the river which is ten meters west of the city.' At the bottom of the letter was a vivid drawing of a little beggar who was laughing, it was Huang Rong.

Guo Jing thought to himself, "How does he know that I am here?" and turned to the inn boy, "Who sent this letter?"

The inn boy replied, "It was brought here by a wandering commoner."

Guo Jing returned to his room and saw Wang Chuyi stretching his limbs. He said, "Taoist Elder Wang, I'm going to the nearby cities to buy the medicine."

Wang Chuyi answered, "If we thought of this, they will too, there's no need to go."

Guo Jing would not give up and was determined to try, he thought, "Brother Huang is so intelligent, I will discuss this with him first." He told Wang Chuyi, "My good friend wants to meet me, I will return afterwards." With that, he showed the letter to Wang Chuyi; the latter thought awhile and asked Guo Jing how he knew this fellow.

Guo Jing related the story to Wang Chuyi and the latter thought, "I saw how that fellow tricked Hou Tonghai; his skills are very weird and unusual...." He turned to Guo Jing and said, "You must be careful, this kid's skills are much higher than yours and seem unorthodox. I have not been able to guess his origins."

Guo Jing replied, "He is my newest best friend; he will not harm me."

Wang Chuyi sighed, "You have not known him for long; how can you be sure if he is truly your best friend? He may be small in size, but if he wants to trick you, you won't be able to defend yourself."

Guo Jing was not the least suspicious of Huang Rong and thought to himself, "Taoist Wang says this because he doesn't know brother Huang's character." And with that, began singing the praises of Huang Rong non-stop.

Wang Chuyi laughed and said, "Alright, go then, young people must meet some danger in order to gain experience. This person....considering his build and voice....he is not a.....can't you tell?"

Wang Chuyi stopped here and just shook his head. Guo Jing placed the list of medicines in his pocket and ran out. When he reached the outer city, he could see snow, but it was in isolated patches. He walked ten meters west and saw some reflections of water; it was indeed a small lake by the river. The weather was not that cold, so the lake was not frozen;

flower petals covered with snow floated on the water and beside the lake were rows and rows of plum trees. The plum flowers looked magnificent with the snow.

Guo Jing could not see anyone and for an anxious moment, he thought, "What if he waited for me too long and then left?" and began to shout, "Brother Huang, brother Huang."

Guo Jing suddenly heard a sound and turned around sharply, only to realize that it was made by river birds. Guo Jing was very disappointed, and called out two more times, before thinking, "Maybe he hasn't reached here yet, I'll wait for him." Sitting down by the lake, Guo Jing thought about Huang Rong, and then he thought about Wang Chuyi's injuries and was in no mood to enjoy the scenery. Besides, since he grew up in Mongolia he was used to seeing snow and he did not bother to look out for the differences in landscape between Mongolia and the central plains. He waited for a long while and suddenly heard some noises among the trees.

Feeling curious, he walked in that direction and heard a rough voice say, "Why still act like a big brother when all of us, including you, wasted time just now?" Another voice answered, "Damn it! If it were not for you being such a coward we would have won had the four of us ganged up on that one." Another answered, "What's the big deal? Even you tripped while running away." It sounded like the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'.

Guo Jing summoned up his courage and stepped into the cluster of trees, only to see no one. He suddenly heard a voice, "If we had fought directly, how could we lose? But who would have thought that the little beggar had so many tricks up his sleeves..."

Guo Jing looked up and saw four men dangling in mid air from a tree, swinging to and fro, yet squabbling non-stop; it was indeed the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'. His heart jumped for joy, since he knew that Huang Rong was nearby, and let out a laugh before asking, "Hey, are you guys practicing your lightness skills again?"

Qian Qingjian retorted angrily, "Who says that we are practicing our lightness skills? Haven't you got the eyes to see that we were hung up here?"

Guo Jing laughed loudly and Qian Qingjian angrily tried to use his leg to kick Guo Jing; but how could he when the distance between them was so large?

Ma Qingxiong scolded, "Rascal, if you don't go away, I will pee on you!"

Guo Jing laughed until he could hardly stand up and said, "I'll just move aside, then your pee can't reach me." Suddenly came the sound of gentle laughter and Guo Jing turned around, only to hear the splashing of water and saw a leaf floating down from a tree. Then, he saw a girl at the back of a boat, rowing gently. She had long hair below her shoulders, was dressed in white from head to toe and had some golden pins in her hair which shone like fire. Guo Jing thought the girl's dress looked like a fairy's and was dumbstruck. The boat slowly came nearer and he saw that the girl was barely fifteen or sixteen years of age. She had very smooth skin that was as white as snow, with beautiful color on her cheeks and had a beauty which was incomparable. Guo Jing was dumbstruck by her beauty and retreated a few steps before turning away, not daring to look at her.

The young girl tied the boat to the bank and called out, "Brother Jing, come on board!" Guo Jing was astonished,

and turned around, only to see the girl smiling sweetly and her robe floating gently in the wind. Guo Jing felt like he was in a dream and used both hands to rub his eyes.

The young girl giggled and said, "You don't recognize me?"

Guo Jing thought that she sounded like Huang Rong, but how can a dirty and lowly male beggar suddenly transform into a beautiful fairy? He couldn't believe his eyes.

He heard the voices of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' behind him shouting, "Little miss, cut the ropes that are hanging us up and let us down! If you help us, I'll give you a hundred taels of gold! Each one of us will give you a hundred taels; you'll get four hundred taels all together. We can even give you eight hundred taels!"

The young girl ignored them and smiled at Guo Jing, "I am your brother Huang, don't you care about me anymore?"

Guo Jing studied her face and saw that her features were exactly the same as Huang Rong's and stuttered, "You.....you....." he only managed to say the word, 'you' before stopping.

Huang gave a little laugh and said, "That I am actually a girl, who asked you to call me brother Huang? Hurry, come onto the boat." Guo Jing felt like he was dreaming, moved forward a little, and stumbled onto the boat. On the other hand, the 'Four Demons' kept making much noise in the background as they raised the amount of their reward.

Huang Rong rowed the boat to the middle of the lake, brought out some food and wine and giggled, "And don't you call me sister Huang, call me Rong'er. My dad always calls me that."

Guo Jing suddenly remembered something and said, "I brought some cakes for you." He took out the cakes that Wanyan Kang had given him and Wang earlier on. But because he had carried Wang Chuyi, taken care of him and ran around trying to find medicines, the cakes were smashed into little pieces.

Huang Rong saw the mess and laughed softly. Guo Jing reddened and said, "They can't be eaten now" and was about to throw them into the water when Huang Rong stretched out her hand and took the cakes from him saying, "I'd like to eat them." Guo Jing was surprised but she had already placed a small piece into her mouth and started eating. After watching her eat a few mouthfuls, his eyes grew red and tears started slowly forming, he didn't understand her actions.

Huang Rong said, "My mother died after I was born and no one has ever remembered my likes and habits so well before....." Then a few tears flowed from her eyes. She took out a clean handkerchief and Guo Jing thought that she was going to dry her eyes; but instead, she used it to wrap the smashed cakes and placed it in her pocket, before turning back to him with a smile, "I'll eat them slowly."

Guo Jing did not know much about romantic relationships, but he felt that 'brother Huang's' actions were very special and unique. He asked her, "You said you had something important to tell me; what is it?"

Huang Rong giggled, "I wanted to tell you that I'm not brother Huang but Rong'er, isn't that important?"

Guo Jing smiled and said, "You are so pretty, why disguise yourself as a little beggar?"

Huang Rong turned her head slightly and said, "You say I'm pretty?"

Guo Jing replied, "Yes, very beautiful, like the fairy on top of our snow mountain."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "You've seen a fairy?"

Guo Jing said, "Of course not, if I'd seen one, how can I still live?"

Huang Rong asked, "Why?"

Guo Jing replied, "The elders in Mongolia always say that whoever sees a fairy will never want to return to the grasslands again; he will just stay in a daze and freeze to death after a few days."

Huang Rong laughed and asked, "And do you feel dazed after seeing me?"

Guo Jing reddened and quickly answered, "We are good friends, so it's different."

Huang Rong nodded and said seriously, "I know you sincerely care for me, regardless of whether I'm a girl or a boy, pretty or ugly. If I dress like this, it's not surprising that people are good to me; but you were nice to me even when I dressed like a little beggar, so you are truly good to me." At this point, Huang Rong was in high spirits and smiled, "I'll sing a tune for you, alright?"

Guo Jing replied, "Can you sing tomorrow instead, we have to get medicine for Taoist Wang first." With that, he related the story of how Wang Chuyi got injured and how all the medicines were bought up by Wanyan Kang.

Huang Rong replied, "Ah, no wonder you were running anxiously from one medicine shop to another."

Guo Jing thought, "She was following me and that's how she knew where I stayed."

He said, "Brother Huang, may I ride your little red horse to buy the medicines?"

Huang Rong said seriously, "Firstly, I am not your brother Huang. Secondly, the horse is yours; do you think that I would actually take it? I just wanted to test you. Thirdly, you may not be able to get the medicine even if you travel to the nearby cities."

Hearing what she said, Guo Jing felt anxious. Huang Rong smiled a little and said, "I am going to sing now, listen well." Huang Rong gently turned her head, leaned to the edge of the boat, and then started singing in a crystal clear voice:

*"The wild geese penetrated the cold frost curtain.
Tender ice covered the pale moon of the first month.
The creek flowed like a comb on the bride's hair.
Wishing to keep the fragrance of the face powder,
looking at the adornment makes one difficult to study.
The weak muscle delicate as jade, covered by layer upon
layer of dragon-lining silk.
With an easterly wind, one captivating smile,
tens of thousands flowers bashfully hope to be left behind."*

[Ignoring my own inadequacy, I tried to translate this part just for completeness sake – Frans Soetomo, after the chapter has been edited by the team of editors]

Guo Jing listened carefully to each and every word. Although he didn't know the meaning, Huang Rong's voice was gentle and sweet such that he felt like he was in a daze. The beautiful scenery gave him a feeling of warmth that he had never felt before.

Huang Rong finished singing and said in a low voice, "This is a song composed by the official Xing, which describes the plum flowers which bloom after winter; was it good?"

Guo Jing replied, "I don't know about these things, but the song sounded very nice. Who is official Xing?"

Huang Rong answered, "Official Xing is Xing Qiji. My father says that he is a good official who loves his people. When the Jin captured the north and villains harmed mister Yue, official Xing was the only one left struggling to restore our lost lands."

Although Guo Jing often listened to his mother talk about how violent the Jin were, and how they mercilessly killed many Chinese, he had grown up in Mongolia and did not feel that strongly about the Jin. Guo Jing replied, "I have never been in the central plains before, you'll have to tell me the stories slowly another time, the most important thing now is to save Taoist Wang."

Huang Rong said, "Listen to me, we'll play just a little while longer so don't worry."

Guo Jing replied, "Taoist Wang said that if he doesn't take the medicine in twenty-four hours time, he will be crippled!"

Huang Rong retorted, "So let him be crippled; anyway, it's not you or me who will be crippled."

Guo Jing let out an "Ah" sound and jumped up saying, "This.....this....." his face became furious.

Huang Rong giggled, "Don't worry; I'll make sure that you get the medicine."

Guo Jing heard the confidence in her voice and thought, "She is much smarter than me, and besides, I don't have any brilliant ideas so maybe I should listen to her." He had no choice but to follow her wishes for the time being. They both clapped with laughter when she told of how she

tricked the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' and how she teased Hou Tonghai. The combined colors of the white snow, the water in the lake and the plum flowers was beautiful; Huang Rong slowly stretched out her hand and put it into Guo Jing's and whispered, "I'm not afraid of anything now."

Guo Jing asked, "Why?"

Huang Rong replied, "Even if my father doesn't want me anymore, you will want me to follow you right?"

Guo Jing answered, "Of course. Rong'er, I...I...like...like being with you."

Huang Rong leaned gently on his chest and Guo Jing smelled a sweet scent surrounding his whole body, surrounding the lake, surrounding the whole world; he didn't know whether it was the plum flower scent or if it came from Huang Rong. The two just held hands silently. After a very, very long while, Huang Rong sighed and said, "It's so nice here, such a pity that we have to go."

Guo Jing asked, "Why?"

Huang Rong said, "Don't you want to get the medicine to save Taoist Wang?"

Guo Jing rejoiced, "Ah, where do we go then?"

Huang Rong asked, "Where have all the medicines in the shops gone to?"

Guo Jing answered, "The medicines have been bought up by people in Prince Zhao's residence."

Huang Rong said, "Yup, that's right, so we'll go to his residence and take it."

Guo Jing was shocked, "To Prince Zhao's residence?"

Huang Rong replied, "That's right!"

Guo Jing said, "We can't go there, we'll only lose our lives."

Huang Rong said, "Then you can bear to see Taoist Wang crippled? Or if his injuries take a turn for the worse, do you want to see him dead?"

Blood rushed up to his face and Guo Jing replied, "Alright, but you can't go."

Huang Rong asked, "Why?"

Guo Jing answered, "Just promise me that you won't go." But he couldn't find a reason.

Huang Rong lowered her voice and said, "I won't be able to stand it if you continue to worry for me. If you meet with any danger, how do you expect me to live alone?"

Guo Jing's heart gave a leap and gratitude, happiness, and love dashed into his mind; he suddenly felt a hundred times braver and wasn't the least afraid of people like Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu. It was as if nothing was impossible in the world. He said, "Alright, we will both go to get the medicine."

They rowed the boat to the bank and started towards the city. Halfway there, Guo Jing suddenly remembered that the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' were still stuck in midair and said, "Hey, do you want to release those four people?"

Huang Rong giggled, "Those four fellows call themselves 'Iron Strong Heroes' so they are very powerful; they won't freeze or starve. Even if they do starve to death, 'Four Demons of the Plum Forest' is superior to the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River'."

Chapter 9 - Iron Spear, Broken Plow

Translated by James Worsley and SunnySnow



Yang Tiexin took down the rusty iron spear hanging on the wall; he gently stroked the spear shaft and sighed, "This iron spear is rusty. It has

not been used for a long while." Consort Wang spoke softly, "Please don't touch the spear, it is the most precious possession I have." "Really?" Yang Tiexin asked, "This spear used to have a matching partner, however today only one remains."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong went to the back of Prince Zhao's palace and leaped over the wall into the courtyard. Huang Rong whispered to Guo Jing in a soft voice, "Your lightness kung fu is excellent!" Guo Jing, crouching by the foot of the wall watching out for any movement in the courtyard, felt ecstatic hearing such praise from her.

After a moment they heard footsteps approaching; two men were laughing and talking as they walked towards them. One man was saying "What do you think the young prince has in mind for the young lady?"

The other man laughed and said, "It's obvious isn't it? Although she is a pretty woman, after giving birth who would give her another glance?"

The first man retorted, "With your dirty mind, you had better be careful that the young prince doesn't cut your head off. Although this girl is pretty, she cannot compare with the princess."

The second man exclaimed, "She's peasant girl! How can you mention her and the princess in the same breath?"

The first man replied, "The princess, you said she..." He suddenly stopped, coughed twice and changed the subject saying, "The young prince really suffered a loss at the hands of that big fellow today, you'd better be careful not to

give him any cause for taking offence or you'll surely get a beating!"

The second man said, "If the young prince tries to beat me, I'll simply dodge - and return with a kick..."

The first man laughed, "Stop talking bull shit."

Guo Jing thought to himself "So Wanyan Kang already has a pretty sweetheart, no wonder he cannot marry the Mu girl. But if this is true, then he shouldn't have taken up the challenge in the first place let alone grab her shoe. Why would he concern himself with other people's affairs? Is it possible that a person, unwilling to agree to something, would use force to coerce them?"

At this point the two men had walked very close to Guo Jing and Huang Rong. One was carrying a lamp and the other a basket of food. They were servants wearing green clothes and caps. The man with the basket laughed and said "Speaking of other people, I fear that someone has become very hungry, we had better deliver these vegetables quickly!"

The other man replied "How can he win a young girl's heart if he doesn't gain her sympathy?" Both men laughed as they walked away into the night.

Huang Rong became very curious. She whispered to Guo Jing "Let's go and see what type of pretty girl they're talking about."

Guo Jing asked "What about getting the medicine, isn't that more urgent?"

"I want to see the girl first!" Huang Rong said stubbornly as she started off after the two servants.

Guo Jing thought "What's so interesting about seeing some girl? That's really strange." What he didn't know was that when a woman hears about another beautiful woman, she will never be satisfied until she has seen her with her own eyes. If the woman that hears about this other woman is herself especially beautiful, then the greater is the desire to see that other woman so she can compare herself with her! Guo Jing, however, did know enough about girls to know that they can be extremely difficult at times so he had no alternative but to follow.

The Zhao residence was huge. Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed the two servants for quite some time before arriving in front of a big building. At the entrance a few guards stood with weapons in hand. Guo Jing and Huang Rong hid behind a corner and heard the two servants whispering something to the guards before the guards opened the door and allowed them in. Huang Rong picked up a stone and threw it at the torches to put them out, before pulling Guo Jing along to follow the servants inside. Huang Rong was so swift that she and Guo Jing overtook the servants and were in front of them in a flash. The servants and guards didn't notice that they'd slipped in and cursed and joked while re-lighting the torches. The servants entered a large room, opened a small door in the corner, and walked in. Guo Jing and Huang Rong silently followed them and saw rows of iron bars forming a large prison cell. Behind the bars sat a woman and a man.

One of the servants lit a candle and placed it on a prison table. In the candlelight, Guo Jing saw the man's anxious and angry face; it was none other than Mu Yi. The young girl sitting beside him was his daughter, Mu Nianci. Guo Jing was suspicious and thought, "How did they end up here? Ah, Wanyan Kang captured them. What does he intend to do with them? Does he love this lady or not?" The

two servants took out some wine and dishes from their basket and pushed them into the cell.

Mu Yi picked up a plate of snacks and threw it out before yelling, "I have already fallen into your trap, so kill me if you want to. Why pretend to be nice?"

Amidst the commotion, the guard outside suddenly said, "Greetings, young Prince!"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong exchanged glances and hurriedly hid behind the door and saw Wanyan Kang rushing in and scolding, "Who made Hero Mu angry? Let's find out whether or not I will break your legs when I leave."

The two servants were frightened and dropped to their knees, "We dare not."

Wanyan Kang answered, "Hurry up and get out of here!"

The two servants replied, "Yes, yes." and turned to leave; but when they reached the door, they stuck their tongues out at each other and made funny faces as they left.

Wanyan Kang waited until they closed the door before saying gently, "I invited Hero Mu and Miss here for a different reason. Please don't be offended."

Mu Yi was furious, "You lock us up like prisoners and you dare use the word 'invite'?"

Wanyan Kang said, "I'm so sorry. Please bear with it for the time being. I really am sorry."

Mu Yi retorted angrily, "You can use this kind of talk to fool a three year old, but I've seen enough vicious officials to know better."

Wanyan Kang tried to speak several times but was shut up by the angry Mu Yi. Yet, he still remained good natured and laughed good humoredly without a hint of anger. Mu Nianci listened to the argument and whispered to her father, "Father, let's hear what he has to say." Mu Yi grunted before becoming silent.

Wanyan Kang said, "Your daughter has rare talents and beauty. I'm not blind so how can I possibly not like her?" Mu Nianci blushed deeply and lowered her head. Wanyan Kang continued, "However, I am the heir of Prince Zhao and my family rules are very strict. If people find out that I married a commoner, my father will be furious and face a lot of trouble."

Mu Yi replied, "Then what do you plan to do?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "I was thinking of letting Hero Mu and Miss stay here for a few days to recover from any injuries, before going back home. After a year and a half, when the situation is better, I will come to you and ask for your daughter's hand in marriage, or Hero Mu may send Miss to me so as to complete the marriage. Isn't that a perfect solution?"

Mu Yi remained silent, as though he was thinking about some other thing. Wanyan Kang continued, "My father has gotten into trouble because of me. The emperor even reprimanded him three months ago. If my father learns about this now, he will never agree to the marriage. I hope that Hero Mu keeps this a close secret."

Mu Yi became furious, "If I listen to what you say, then my daughter will suffer because everything has to be kept under wraps."

Wanyan Kang replied, "I have everything planned. I will get some grand officials to ask for her hand in marriage; it will

be a grand and joyous affair.”

Mu Yi’s faced suddenly paled and he said, “Please ask your mother to see me so that I can discuss the matter with her.”

Wanyan Kang smiled and said, “How can my mother meet you?”

Mu Yi yelled, “If I don’t get to meet your mother, I won’t give in to you no matter what you come up with.” With that, he picked up the jar of wine and threw it.

By the time Mu Nianci finished fighting with Wanyan Kang, she’d already fallen for him and was delighted when she heard his plan. But her father’s sudden outburst changed everything and she didn’t know whether she was surprised or dejected. Wanyan Kang moved quickly, caught the wine jar in time, and put it back on the table. He laughed and said, “I’m leaving.” before turning to go.

After hearing Wanyan Kang’s words, Guo Jing felt that the Prince was reasonable and had a very good plan; but who would expect Mu Yi to lose his temper. He thought, “I’ll try to convince him.” He was about to go to him when Huang Rong pulled his sleeve and took him out of the building.

They heard Wanyan Kang ask a servant, “Have you brought it?” The servant nodded and raised his hand to reveal a rabbit. Wanyan Kang took the rabbit from him and broke it’s hind legs, before placing it in his pocket and hurrying off. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were curious and followed behind him. After a while, they saw a small three-roomed hut. It was a normal looking hut like any commoner’s, but looked out of place amongst the grand surroundings of the Zhao residence. Now they were very curious. Wanyan Kang opened the door and entered the hut. They silently moved to the back of the house and peered through a window. They were sure that there was something secret about the

hut, which Wanyan Kang kept to himself. Then they heard something they did not expect when he called out, "Mother!"

A woman's voice answered him and Wanyan Kang walked into the room. Huang Rong and Guo Jing saw a middle-aged woman sitting beside a table, gazing blankly into space. The woman looked no more than forty, had very delicate features with little powder on her face and wore very common robes. Huang Rong thought, "This princess is indeed prettier than Miss Mu, but why does she dress so shabbily and live in a hut like this? Has she fallen out of Prince Zhao's favor?"

Guo Jing thought the same thing at first but later regarded it as nothing special. He mused, "She must be like Rong'er. She purposely dresses like a peasant just for fun."

Wanyan Kang walked to her side took her arm and said, "Mother, are you ill again?"

The woman sighed, "I was worrying about you."

Wanyan Kang leaned on her and giggled, "But your son is standing healthy in front of you."

The woman replied, "With swollen eyes and a broken nose? You call that healthy? You are getting more and more disobedient. It's alright if your father knows, but if your teacher learns about it, you'll be in hot soup."

Wanyan Kang giggled again, "Mother, do you know who the Taoist priest is that came today?"

The woman asked, "Who?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "He is my teacher's martial brother and is my elder. I purposely pretended to be ignorant of that fact and called him Taoist this, Taoist that. He scowled

and was furious but couldn't do anything." With that, he started laughing.

The woman was alarmed and said, "Oh no! I've seen your teacher flare up before and he can kill people. It's really a frightening thought."

Wanyan Kang was curious and asked, "You've seen teacher kill before? When? Why did he kill people?"

The woman lifted her head and gazed at the lamp, as if she was somewhere far away and said gently, "That was a long time ago. Ah, I cannot remember anymore!"

Wanyan Kang did not probe further; instead he grinned smugly and said, "That Taoist Wang came to ask me how was I going to deal with the marriage and I told him that if he brought Miss Mu to me, I would listen to whatever he said."

The woman asked, "Have you asked your father's permission? Has he agreed?"

Wanyan Kang smiled, "Mother, you are too honest. I asked my men to trick them into coming here and locked them up in the back cell earlier. How can Taoist Wang find them now?" Wanyan Kang was going through the events in an excited manner while Guo Jing fumed outside.

Guo Jing thought, "To think that I actually thought that he had good intentions! Luckily Hero Mu was wise enough not to fall into his trap."

The woman answered exasperatedly, "How can you make fun of this man and his daughter and lock them up? Hurry up and release them now. Remember to apologize and give them some money."

Guo Jing nodded his head and thought, "That's more like it."

Wanyan Kang said, "Mother, you don't understand! These people don't care about money. If I release them and they go round telling people what happened, father will hear about it."

The woman became anxious, "Do you plan to lock them up forever?"

Wanyan Kang smiled, "I tried to sweet talk them into going back to their village and stupidly wait for me forever." With that, he burst out laughing.

Guo Jing was shaking with fury by this time; he raised a palm towards the window frame and was about to yell when he felt a soft and smooth hand cover his mouth and grab his left wrist. A gentle voice whispered into his ear, "Calm down." Guo Jing recovered and turned towards Huang Rong with a faint smile before looking back into the room again.

Wanyan Kang continued, "That Mu fellow is really cunning; he didn't take the bait. Let's see how long he can last if I keep him locked up for a couple of days longer."

His mother replied, "I've seen Miss Mu and I find her beautiful and talented. She is quite likeable. Why don't I talk to your father and ask him to let you marry her; then everything will be solved."

Wanyan Kang laughed, "Mother, for the last time, we are royalty. How can I marry a commoner? Father always tells me that he will arrange a respectable match for me. But it's a pity that we are Wanyans."

The woman asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "If not, I could marry the princess and become the crown prince."

The woman sighed and said in a low voice, "How can you look down on poor commoners...do you really think that..."

Wanyan Kang laughed, "Mother, I have a joke for you. That Mu fellow says that he will only believe me if he meets with and discusses it with you."

The woman responded, "I won't help you to lie and do such despicable things."

Wanyan Kang giggled and walked around in circles. He said, "Even if you were willing to do so, I will not allow it. You don't know how to lie and will be exposed on the spot."

Huang Rong and Guo Jing studied the room, which was furnished with normal wooden furniture and normal farming tools. On the wall hung a moldy sphere, a broken plough and an old wooden cart was placed in the corner of the room. Both of them thought, "This woman is a princess. Why is her house so plainly furnished?"

Wanyan Kang pressed his chest and the rabbit in his pocket let out a squeal. The woman asked, "What's that?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "Ah, I almost forgot. I saw an injured rabbit just now and picked it up. Mother, please tend to it." He took out a little white rabbit and placed it on the table. The rabbit's hind legs were broken and it couldn't move.

The woman said, "Good child!" She hurriedly took out some implements and medicine and tended to the rabbit's injuries.

Guo Jing began to fume again and thought, "This man purposely injured the rabbit because he knows that his mother is kind-hearted and will tend to its injuries. Then

she'll forget about the bad stuff that he has done. How can he be so evil as to make use of his mother's kind nature to deceive her?"

Huang Rong was leaning on him and felt Guo Jing's whole body quiver. She knew that he must be burning with anger and was afraid that he wouldn't be able to control it and burst out at Wanyan Kang. She pulled his hand and said, "Let's ignore them; come, let's go and find the medicine."

Guo Jing asked, "You know where they've hidden the medicine?"

Huang Rong shook her head and said, "No. So we have to go and find out."

Guo Jing thought about how huge the Zhao residence was and wondered where to start the 'finding', "It will be disastrous if we alert Shao Tongtian and the rest..." he was about to discuss this with Huang Rong when there was a flash of light in front of them. A man came carrying a small lantern while humming a tune and he was walking closer and closer to them. Guo Jing was about to slip behind a tree when Huang Rong rushed forward, towards the man. The man was alarmed and before he could say anything, Huang Rong flipped her palm and shot out a shiny steel object which pierced his throat. She asked, "Who are you?"

The man, having had the fright of his life, only managed to answer after awhile, "I...I am the caretaker. What...what are you doing?"

Huang Rong answered, "What am I doing? I am going to kill you! You are the caretaker? That's good. Where do you keep the medicines that your young prince had people buy during the day?"

The caretaker replied, "I...I don't know. The young prince kept it himself!"

Huang Rong used her left hand to twist his wrist and used her right hand to push forward slightly, causing the steel object to pierce even deeper into his throat. The caretaker felt a sharp pain shoot through his wrist but didn't dare scream out loud. Huang Rong said in a low voice, "Are you going to tell me or not?"

The caretaker responded, "I really don't know."

Huang Rong used her right hand to remove his cap and stuff it into his mouth. Following that, her left hand pulled and twisted his arm. A 'crack' was heard as she broke the bone in his right shoulder. The caretaker tried to yell before fainting but the cap in his mouth had muffled his yell. Guo Jing was stunned. He didn't expect this petite young lady to be so vicious and cruel in her actions. Huang Rong shook the caretaker and he came around. She swiftly removed the cap from his mouth and placed it back on his head before saying, "Do you want me to break your left shoulder as well?"

The caretaker wept in pain and answered weakly, "I really don't know. Even if Miss kills me, I still won't know."

Now Huang Rong believed him; she lowered her voice and said, "Go and find young prince now and tell him that you fell and broke your shoulder. Also tell him that you suffered serious internal injuries and the physician says that you must take the medicine that he bought up earlier. Beg him to give you some of the medicine." The caretaker listened attentively to Huang Rong's instructions and dared not question anything.

Huang Rong continued, "Hurry up, young prince is with the princess. I am going to follow you and if I see that you do

not act properly, I will break your neck and dig out your eyes." With that, she stretched out her fingers and made a clawing move at his eyes. The caretaker shivered and stood up; he clenched his teeth, ignored the dreadful pain and dashed towards the princess's house.

Wanyan Kang was still talking with his mother when the caretaker suddenly dashed in, sweating and crying. He repeated what Huang Rong instructed him to say. The princess saw that his face was as white as a sheet and knew he was in great pain; she didn't wait for Wanyan Kang's answer and immediately ordered him to give the caretaker the medicine. Wanyan Kang frowned and said, "The medicine is with Master Liang, go and find him yourself."

The caretaker wept and said, "Young prince, please write a note for me." The princess immediately took out some paper, ink and a brush and Wanyan Kang wrote the note. The caretaker bowed and thanked them while the princess said gently, "Hurry and take the medicine to cure your injuries."

The caretaker came out of the house and walked a few steps when he felt the cold blade of a knife on the skin of his neck. He heard Huang Rong say, "Go to Master Liang now." The caretaker walked a little ways but he could stand the pain no longer and fell to the ground.

Huang Rong said, "If you don't get the medicine, your neck will be broken." With that, she grabbed his head and turned it forcefully. The caretaker was shocked and had a sudden wave of determination. Sweating continuously, he hurried on. They passed by seven or eight servants but no one asked anything when they saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

When they reached Liang Ziwong's quarters, they found the door locked. A servant told them that he had gone to

the Fragrant Snow guest hall. Guo Jing saw that the caretaker was having difficulty walking and helped him along. Just as they reached the guest hall, two guards carrying lanterns in one hand and sabers in the other called, "Stop, who's there?"

The caretaker took out the note written by Wanyan Kang and gave it to the guards. They glanced at it and let him through before going up to question Guo Jing and Huang Rong. The caretaker said, "They're our own people."

One of the guards said, "The prince is having a banquet with important guests, no one is allowed to disturb them. If you have anything to say, you can come back tomorrow to..." he didn't finish his sentence before the two guards felt their strength disappear. They were unable to move because Huang Rong had sealed their accupoints. She hid them in some bushes before grabbing Guo Jing's hand and they made their way towards the entrance of the hall. She gently pushed the caretaker forward. She and Guo Jing swung up and caught a wooden window frame and peered inside the hall.

The hall was brightly lit with a huge banquet table in the middle. Guo Jing looked at the people sitting around the table and his heart beat furiously. He has seen the same people in the same room earlier. There was the Junior Chief of White Camel Mountain, Ouyang Ke, the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group', Sha Tongtian, his martial brother the 'Three-Headed Dragon', Hou Tonghai, the 'Ginseng Immortal', Liang Ziwong and the 'Butcher of One Thousand Hands', Peng Lianhu. At the head of the banquet table was the Jin sixth prince, Wanyan Honglie. At one corner of the table was a thickly padded grand chair in which sat 'Superior Virtue' Lingzhi, who had a golden complexion and looked seriously injured. Guo Jing laughed gleefully, "You

ambushed Taoist Wang, so it serves you right to have a taste of your own medicine.”

The caretaker entered the room and bowed in front of Liang Ziwong before handing him the note written by Wanyan Kang. Liang Ziwong read the note, glanced at the caretaker and handed the note to Wanyan Honglie, “Esteemed Prince, was this written by the young prince?”

Wanyan Honglie read through the note and said, “Yes, please do what it says Master Liang.”

Liang Ziwong turned and instructed a dwarf dressed in green, “Go and take out five grams each of the medicines that the young prince delivered today and give it to the caretaker.” The dwarf nodded and followed the caretaker out.

Guo Jing whispered to Huang Rong, “Let’s go, these people here are too formidable.”

Huang Rong smiled and shook her head. A strand of Huang Rong’s soft hair brushed past Guo Jing’s face and he felt a tickling sensation not only on his face but also in his heart. He didn’t argue with her and dropped down. Huang Rong hurriedly grabbed his wrist, flung her body forward, locked her legs around a high wooden pole and gently lowered Guo Jing to the ground.

Guo Jing was relieved, “That was close! Had I just jumped down, wouldn’t it have alerted the high level fighters inside?” Guo Jing was not a veteran Jianghu traveler and tended to be careless at times.

The caretaker and the dwarf came out and Guo Jing followed behind them. He walked ten steps before turning around and saw that Huang Rong had flipped up and was peering into the hall with her legs hooked on the roof’s

edge and her head hanging below. There was a light breeze, causing her white robe to float gently; the image looked like a blooming white lily in the darkness. Huang Rong glanced into the hall and saw that no one had noticed her presence; she turned her head and watched until Guo Jing's figure disappeared into the darkness before turning her attention back to what was going on in the hall.

Peng Lianhu suddenly turned around, and with eyes quick as lightning, he did a check of the windows. Huang Rong didn't dare look any longer, and crouched near the window to hear what was going on. She heard a rasping voice say, "Do you people think that Wang Chuyi turned up coincidentally or was it for a reason?"

A high pitched voice replied, "No matter whether he had ill intentions or not, being injured by 'Superior Virtue' Lingzhi will leave him dead, or at least crippled."

Huang Rong glanced into the hall and saw that the person talking was Peng Lianhu, who was small and had eyes that flashed like lightning. She heard a clear voice laugh, "We have even heard of the 'Seven Masters of Quanzhen' in Tibet. They really live up to their name; if it were not for 'Superior Virtue' Lingzhi's attack, we would have been defeated by him."

A deep and rough voice answered, "Master Ouyang, you don't have to flatter me, both that Taoist priest and I are injured, there is no winner."

Ouyang Ke said, "Yes, but you just have to recuperate quietly for some time whereas even if he doesn't die, he will end up handicapped!"

After this comment no one spoke. The host could then be heard toasting all the assembled guests. Guest by guest he said "Sir, you have come from a great distance to visit me, I

am deeply honored! It reflects greatly on the Jin nation to have such honored guests as you!" Huang Rong thought that the person speaking must be the Prince Zhao, Wanyan Honglie. The assembled guests then all answered with the modest protestations as decorum required.

Wanyan Honglie then continued, "Lingzhi is Tibet's foremost monk, Liang is a master of great learning and integrity, Chief Ouyang is a legendary leader of military virtue, Master Peng's prestige is widely feared on the central plains, and Formidable Sha rules over Yellow River! If any one among the five heroes lends a hand, the Jin Nation's challenges could be overcome; but imagine what could be achieved with all five of you united together! Ha... Ha! That would be akin to having a lion using all its strength to catch a rabbit!" This speech made him sound very arrogant indeed.

Liang Ziwing smiled and said, "If Your Lordship has a task for us to carry out, you need only say it and we will gladly do it. Unfortunately this old man's (referring to himself) kung fu is very shabby and weak. I fear that if I was to be entrusted with such a task by your Lordship I would fail and not be able to show my worthless face again, ha...ha!" Peng Lianhu also added a few self depreciating remarks in the same vein. These men have always been the center of attention and power in their own regions. Their speech and manner showed that they did not consider themselves inferior to Wanyan Honglie.

Wanyan Honglie again toasted each guest in turn with a cup of wine "This humble prince is deeply moved by your presence here tonight. I will now speak of a great matter. This matter cannot be mentioned to any other person outside of this room. If word got out, it would cause great trouble for my Jin nation. This humble prince has great confidence in your ability to keep this secret."

These words, although humbly spoken, implied great importance and caused everyone present to take note that this must be a very serious matter that required the utmost secrecy. Everyone therefore replied, "Your Lordship need not fear, no words spoken here tonight will be heard outside this room!" The five invited guests knew that the reason for their invitation must be a matter of great importance; something that would require no small measures to carry out. Having spared no expense at sending them presents of gold, silver and other valuables, Wanyan Honglie still had not made any mention of the task he would ask of them. Now that he was about to reveal this deeply held secret, there was not a person present who didn't feel extremely interested and excited.

Wanyan Honglie continued: "During the reign of the Great Jin Emperor Taizong, in the third year of the Tianhui era [the seventh year of the Song Emperor Huizong's Xuanhe era], our Jin soldiers, led by the generals Youzhanmeihe and Wolibu, captured the two Song Emperors, Huizong and Qinzong. From ancient times there has never been such a great victory." All the guests cheered his speech.

Huang Rong thought to herself angrily, "How shameless! Everyone, aside from that Tibetan Monk, is Chinese. The Jin Prince is boasting about how his country invaded our country and held our two emperors captive and you actually cheer him on!"

She heard Wanyan Honglie speak again, "At that time, our Great Jin soldiers were vigorous and their numbers vast, but now, after almost a hundred years, the Zhao officials serve our emperor from Huangzhou. Esteemed guests, can you guess why they serve from there?"

Liang Ziwing said "Please enlighten us Honored Prince."

Wanyan Honglie sighed “The year Yue Fei defeated us and had us in his grasp, there was no one who did not know it, but who would dare say it out loud? Our Jin Generals knew how to lead soldiers, but when they encountered Yue Fei they were always defeated. Even after Qin Gui ordered Yue Fei's execution, our soldiers were still demoralized by their earlier defeats so that they lacked the willpower to act further against the Southern Song. Although this humble prince has the ambition to act, he lacks the abilities to succeed. If my guests, with their god-like skills, were to help with this enterprise, then there is no way that we cannot succeed and earn great merit.”

The guests looked at each other without fully understanding exactly what he meant. Each thought: “Charging enemies and fighting valiantly, taking cities and seizing territory... these are not my strengths. Could it be that he wants us to assassinate some Southern Song generals?

Wanyan Honglie's face showed self importance [de yi]. His voice trembled slightly, “A couple of months ago, this humble prince was looking through some old files in the palace when I stumbled across a letter left behind by the former emperor. It was actually a few lines written by Yue Fei, the phrasing of which was most peculiar. I puzzled over this for a few months until at long last I figured out its hidden meaning. It turns out that when Yue Fei was languishing in prison he realized that he had no hope of leaving with his life. His loyalty towards his country was so great that he wrote down his entire life's learning regarding battle tactics and other secret military arts in this letter in the hope that it could be passed on to other loyal countrymen who could use them in defending China against the Jin invaders. Luckily Qin Gui was very clever and feared that Yue Fei would try to communicate with

people outside of the prison, so he was very careful to prepare against such an event. Every guard assigned to watch over Yue Fei was personally selected by Qin Gui and was known to be completely trustworthy and loyal to him (Qin Gui). If the soldiers formerly under Yue Fei were to get word from Yue Fei and rise up in rebellion against the court, who could stop them? At that time, the only reason that there was not such a rebellion was entirely due to Yue Fei not being willing to rebel against his emperor. Had he changed his mind and decided to do so he would have certainly succeeded. What Qin Gui did not know though was that Yue Fei didn't have any desire to save his own life, only to save the 'rivers and mountains' [jiang shan...literally the country] of the Song Empire. Fortunately this letter never left the palace even after his execution." Everyone was listening intently to this story, so intently that they forgot to drink their wine. Huang Rong, hanging outside the window, was also listening mesmerized.

Wanyan Honglie continued: "Yue Fei had no alternative but to secrete his military manual in his clothing. Then he wrote four poems entitled 'Buddhist Barbarian' [Pu Sa Man], 'Shameful Slave' [chou nu er], 'Congratulating the Imperial Court Sage' [He Sheng Zhao], and 'Level Heaven Music' [Qi Tian Yue]. Each piece of writing appeared to be nonsense. The style did not follow the proper rules and the tonal sequences were all wrong. The sentences were jumbled to the point of incoherence. Qin Gui, who was said to have wisdom and talent the size of the oceans, was not able to figure out what hidden meanings lay in these pieces, so he dispatched some men with these letters to the Jin. Many years later these four pieces of nonsense writing found their way into the secret files of the Jin palace. No one was able to comprehend the meaning of these letters. Everyone thought that Yue Fei, who was near execution at the time he wrote these letters, was venting to his anger and

frustrations by writing such disjointed and senseless verse. Nobody guessed that the apparent nonsense verse was in fact a riddle hiding a very great secret!"

"This humble prince though continued to work on these letters until I finally discovered their secret. It turned out, that if you took every third word in a piece and put them together, and then reversed the order, a hidden message was revealed. In these four letters Yue Fei instructed his successors in the arts of military strategy and to continuously attack along the Yellow River and wipe out our Jin armies. In spite of his diligent work for his emperor, it turned out to be in vain. Ha...ha!" The guests gasped in surprise, then, one after another, began praising Wanyan Honglie's intelligence for cracking such a difficult code.

Wanyan Honglie said "Yue Fei's military abilities were unparalleled; when he attacked there was no one more formidable or successful. Imagine if we were to have his book of secret military strategies, then the whole empire would be ours for the taking!"

Wanyan Honglie went on "This humble prince thinks that this great book must be with Yue Fei in his tomb." At this point he paused. Everyone suddenly realized what was being asked: "Prince Zhao invited us here to do a bit of grave robbing!"

He continued, "Honored Guests, you are all brave heroes and by now you must be wondering how I could be asking you to rob a tomb? Although Yue Fei was the Jin's sworn enemy, his spirit and loyalty is something that is world renowned; we can't possibly disturb his resting place. This humble prince searched through the historical reports by spies of the Southern Song to look for further clues. It turned out that the day Yue Fei died he was buried beside the Zhongan Bridge. Later, Emperor Xiao Zong moved his

body to Lin'an's West Lake [Xi Hu] to a temple he had built for him. His clothing and other personal belongings were placed somewhere else and this must be where his book is. This other place is also in Lin'an." As he spoke this last sentence he watched his guests intently. Everyone was waiting for him to reveal the exact location of the book.

However, Wanyan Honglie suddenly changed the topic: "This humble prince had another thought; since someone moved Yue Fei's belongings, I feared that the book must have been taken by them as well. After some very detailed research I now know that this could not be possible. The people of Song venerate Yue Fei so much that they would not have dared interfere with his belongings. We are certain to find the book at this place. However, in the south there are many martial people of high abilities. If we are to succeed we cannot allow the slightest word of this to get out or else some of them may try to search for the book themselves. That would cause no end of trouble! This task concerns the fate of two nations and it is not something I would lightly undertake unless I had the help of the greatest heroes of the Wulin world." Everyone nodded their heads.

Wanyan Honglie then said, "The location of this book is no small matter and is indeed difficult to speak of; but in the presence of people of such great ability it is easier to speak. The location of the book is..." At this point the door to the hall was suddenly pushed open and a man rushed in, his face swollen and pale. He rushed forward to Liang Ziwing and called out, "Master..." everyone recognized him as the dwarf dressed in green that Liang Ziwing had sent to fetch the medicines.

When Guo Jing went with the caretaker and dwarf to fetch the medicine, he used his left hand to support the caretaker and help him walk, but also to ensure the caretaker would not try to warn the dwarf in any way about Guo Jing. The three of them went through a long corridor and past some rooms before arriving at Liang Ziwong's storeroom. The dwarf lit a candle, opened the door and entered.

Guo Jing stood close to the room where he smelled the pungent scent of various medicinal herbs. He also saw that a table, couch, floor and everywhere else was covered with all types of dried herbs. There were bottles, big and small, jars, bowls, vats and so forth. It seems that even though Liang Ziwong was a guest here, he still couldn't help but play around with different medicinal herbs trying to concoct different drugs. The dwarf seemed to be well versed in the nature of herbs as well and he quickly selected portions of four different herbs and wrapped them up in separate packets of white paper which he gave to the caretaker.

Guo Jing reached out and took the packets before turning and leaving the room. Now that he had the medicine in his hands, he didn't pay any more attention to the caretaker. Unfortunately for him, the caretaker was a slippery fellow. When Guo Jing and the dwarf left, he deliberately hung back, waiting until they were past the door. Then he suddenly slammed the door shut, grabbed the door bolt and locked the door, shouting "Robber, Thief!" Shocked, Guo Jing immediately turned to try and push open the door only to find that it wouldn't budge, the door stood firm. The dwarf, although he was small, was by no means slow witted. He immediately sized up the situation and took advantage of Guo Jing's distraction. He quickly snatched the four medicine packets out of his hand and threw them into the pond beside the room. Guo Jing tried to hit the dwarf with

his fists, but the dwarf was too quick and managed to slip away.

Guo Jing, even more frantic and angry, placed both his palms against the door and used his internal energy to break it open. There was a loud crack as the door bolt snapped and the door flew open. Guo Jing rushed in and silenced the caretaker immediately by smashing the caretaker's jaw with one swing of his fist. Luckily for Guo Jing, Liang Ziwing did not like to be disturbed, so his room was located in an out of the way place in the palace compound. Being far from other buildings, the caretaker's screams had not alerted anyone. He rushed back out of the room and saw that the dwarf was already a long way off. Guo Jing sprinted after him and in no time at all caught up with the dwarf and grabbed him by the neck. The dwarf, when he heard Guo Jing behind him, tried to use his leg to sweep Guo Jing off his feet. The dwarf was no stranger to fighting, having encountered many rough types in his travels with Liang Ziwing, so his skills were not weak. Guo Jing knew that he was in danger of not only failing to get the medicine for Wang Chuyi, but also, if the alarm was raised, Huang Rong would be in mortal danger if she was caught. Since there was no time to lose he made use of his most vicious moves such as the 'Disconnect the Muscles and Separate the Bones' move taught him by one of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan.

Guo Jing soon had the dwarf unconscious and he hastily hid him in some bushes beside the path. He then hurried back to the medicine store room and lit a candle which revealed the caretaker still lying unconscious on the floor.

Guo Jing cursed himself silently for being so careless. "Which four jars did the dwarf select the medicine from? I wasn't paying attention and now I have no idea of which herbs he used." All the jars were marked with strange signs

but no words. He thought hard: "I remember he was standing here so maybe I should just grab a little from each jar around here and bring them all back to Wang Chuyi to select from." He hurriedly snatched a pile of paper and began grabbing a handful of each type of herb/medicines which he then wrapped up into several packets all the while worried that someone had heard the caretaker's shouts earlier.

As soon as he had packed up all the medicines he felt much relieved. As he turned to leave, his elbow accidentally knocked over a large bamboo basket which fell onto its side. As soon as the lid came off there was a sudden hiss and a huge blood red snake shot out of the basket straight towards his face.

Guo Jing was startled and jumped back. He saw the snake was still partly coiled in the basket so he wasn't sure how long it was. Its head waved back and forth as its forked tongue flickered at him. Mongolia has a cold climate and all the snakes that he had seen there were small. This blood red snake certainly didn't look like any snake he'd seen before. He felt terrified as he slowly stepped back until he bumped into the table knocking the candle over. In an instant the candle went out and the room was plunged into total darkness.

With the medicine in hand he quickly rushed towards the door. Just as he reached it he felt something loop around his leg as if someone was wrapping a thick rope around it very tightly. Without time to think he tried to jump up. However the thing wouldn't let go and then he felt a cold sensation on his right arm and found that he could no longer move it.

Guo Jing knew that the snake had wrapped around him so he used his left arm to feel around his waste for the knife that Temujin had given him long ago. The sudden stench of

a pungent medicine like smell assailed his nostrils and he felt something cold on his face. It was the snake's tongue flicking on his cheek. By then there was no time to find his knife so he grabbed the snake firmly by its neck. The snake was incredibly powerful and began to squeeze tighter and its head moved closer to his face...

Guo Jing tried to hold the snake back but his arm was becoming numb and it became difficult to breathe as the snake tightened its grip around his chest. When he tried to use his internal energy to loosen the snake's grip it did give him slight relief, before the snake resumed its crushing grip. Guo Jing's left arm was beginning to lose strength. The stench of the snake's breath was unbearable and made him feel nauseous. He knew that he would not be able to hold off the snake for much longer. Eventually he might lose consciousness, loosen his grip, and then the snake would finish him.

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When the dwarf, knocked unconscious by Guo Jing, eventually came around his first thought was, "Where is that guy?" He looked over to his masters store room but saw it was dark and silent. He assumed Guo Jing had already fled. He rushed back towards the 'Fragrant Snow Hall' to report to his master Liang Ziwing.

Huang Rong was shocked when she heard the dwarf's report. She executed the move 'Goose Lands on Flat Sand' to quietly drop to the ground. When the guests in the hall were listening to Wanyan Honglie's story no one paid any attention to what was going outside. However, as soon as they were interrupted by the dwarf's news this was no longer the case. In a room full of people with high martial arts abilities who were no longer distracted, would any of them fail to notice Huang Rong's almost silent move

outside? Liang Ziwing was the first to move. In a flash he was outside and standing in front of Huang Rong, blocking her path. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Huang Rong could see by the way Liang Ziwing moved that his ability exceeded hers. Considering that there was a room full of highly skilled martial artists this was no time to start a fight, so she simply smiled and said sweetly, "This plum tree has such beautiful blossoms, could you please break a twig off for me?"

Liang Ziwing didn't expect to see such a beautiful young woman standing outside dressed in splendid clothing. When he heard her delicate laugh, 'like pearls tinkling on jade', he couldn't help being surprised. He thought that she must be a palace lady, possibly the lady Qian Jin, so he immediately broke off a twig of plum blossoms to give to her.

Huang Rong smiled and received the blossoms saying "Thank you kind sir."

By this time, the rest of the guests were standing by the door watching the proceedings. Peng Lianhu turned to Wanyan Honglie and asked, "Sire, is this lady from the palace?" Wanyan Honglie shook his head and said, "No."

Peng Lianhu went over and stood in front of Huang Rong blocking her way, saying, "Please wait for a moment lady. Let me also break off some blossoms for you." His right hand moved to execute a holding lock, grabbing her wrist, extending his five fingers towards her side, then suddenly flipping his hand into a claw and striking at her throat!

Huang Rong initially intended to pretend to be a simple lady with no martial abilities and not that bright so as to play for time and find a way to escape. She didn't expect that Peng Lianhu not only had great martial abilities but that he was very sharp and saw right through her

deception. His blow was so strong that she had no alternative but to dodge, raise her right hand in a sweep, thumb touching index finger, the remaining fingers outstretched, like an orchid shooting out. Her execution of this move was not only of the highest skill but also exquisitely beautiful.

Peng Lianhu knew that if she landed her strike on his 'Corner Pool' accupoint then his whole arm would become numb and useless, so he was suddenly forced to change his strike to avoid her counter strike. He was shocked that not only did this very young lady have outstanding skills and speed, but she also knew accupoint kung fu. Although he had seen many types of kung fu in his time, he had never seen this 'Orchid Touch' accupoint style before.

The 'Orchid' style relies upon speed, accuracy, surprise and purity. Of these, purity was the most important. It requires graceful execution and an easy, relaxed manner to execute properly, as if the person using it had not a care in the world. If it was executed with too much urgency or viciousness then it would lose its advantage in a fight.

As Huang Rong executed the 'Orchid' style everyone else watched in astonishment. Peng Lianhu laughed, "Little girl, what is your good name please? Who is your honorable master?"

Huang Rong smiled and replied, "This sprig of plum blossoms is quite pretty is it not? I must go and put it into a vase!" She didn't answer Peng Lianhu at all. Everyone else looked at her suspiciously wondering where on earth she came from.

Hou Tonghai said sternly, "Elder Peng asked your name. What's the matter, didn't you hear?"

Huang Rong asked innocently, "He asked something?"

Peng Lianhu had actually seen Huang Rong earlier in the day, in disguise, making fun of Hou Tonghai; seeing her here now, acting so impertinently, he suddenly thought, "That filthy beggar boy was actually you in disguise!" Suppressing a laugh he said, "Old Hou, don't you recognize who that girl is?"

Hou Tonghai was shocked. He looked Huang Rong over a couple of times while Peng Lianhu said, "You were chasing someone around in circles all day today, how could you forget?"

Hou Tonghai looked blankly at Huang Rong until at last he recognized her, "Yeah, that filthy boy!" When he was chasing Huang Rong, he never stopped cursing her as 'Filthy boy'. Even though 'he' had now become a 'she' he couldn't help but curse her as before. He raised both fists and charged at her only to grab air as Huang Rong deftly dodged aside.

The 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' Sha Tongtian's body became a blur as he moved forward and clasped Huang Rong's right wrist calling out "Where are you running to?"

Huang Rong's left hand shot up and struck at his eyes with two fingers, but Sha Tongtian was too fast and grabbed her left wrist as well. Huang Rong struggled to free herself, but try as she might she was not able to. Instead she shouted, "Shameless!"

Sha Tongtian asked, "What's shameless?"

"Big men bullying a girl and trying to take advantage of her!" she replied indignantly.

Sha Tongtian was surprised at this comment. He was after all a famous elder martial artist and this did appear to be a

case of the strong bullying the weak. He relaxed his grip and said, "Go into the hall and we will talk." Huang Rong saw she had no alternative but to enter the Hall.

"Before we do any talking let me cut this filthy tyke down to size first!" Hou Tonghai angrily demanded as he raised his fists to strike.

Peng Lianhu stopped him, cautioning, "First we need to find out who her Shifu is and what school she belongs to." He could tell from her fighting style and appearance that she must be from a great school. It would be better to find out who she was before doing anything too hasty. Hou Tonghai didn't pay any attention to him and launched an attack at Huang Rong.

She stepped aside and responded, "So you really want to fight eh?"

"You're not going to get away", Hou Tonghai retorted. He was afraid that if she did get away he would never be able to catch her again.

"If you want to have a little competition with me, that's not a problem." she said as she took up a full wine bowl from the table and placed it on her head. She then grabbed another full wine bowl in each hand and continued, "Do you dare to take up this challenge?"

Hou Tonghai was suspicious, "What kind of mischief is this?"

Huang Rong looked around at the assembled guests and smiled as she said, "This big-horned uncle and I have no deep grievance. If I am able to defeat him, what happens then?"

Hou Tonghai angrily stepped forward and yelled, "You defeat me? Listen you smelly little brat, this is a carbuncle not a horn. Take a good look and stop spouting crap!"

Huang Rong didn't pay any attention to him and continued addressing the others. "Let him and I compete with three full bowls of wine each. Who ever is the first to spill a drop will be considered the loser, is that fair enough?" She had seen Liang Ziwing, Peng Lianhu and Sha Tongtian in action and knew that she would be no match for any of them in a fight. However if this three horned dragon, with more teasing, can be enticed to fight using lightness skills and quick wits she will have the advantage. If you were to compare true martial ability she may not be his equal but she thought, "Right now my only chance is to play the fool and hope they don't find me a threat and let me go."

Hou Tonghai yelled, "Who wants to play monkey tricks with you!" and with that he launched another fierce attack.

Huang Rong again dodged still holding the wine and laughed, "Ok! I'll hold the three bowls of wine and you can attack without any bowls. Let's compete!"

Hou Tonghai was more than twice as old as she. Although his name was not as famous as that of his martial brother Sha Tongtian, he was still a fairly respected member of the martial arts world. To receive such a taunt in front of his peers was enough to make him even angrier. Without further thought he grabbed three bowls of wine, placing one on his head and the others in his hands. He bent his left leg and sent a vicious kick towards Huang Rong with his right.

Huang Rong laughed, "Well done! This shows the talents of a true hero." She then began to display her 'Lightness' qing gong by moving all around the room. Hou Tonghai launched

a series of kicks at her but she was able to avoid them all. Everyone began to roar with laughter seeing such a ridiculous fight.

Huang Rong kept her upper body completely steady as she glided about the room. Lumbering behind her, taking large steps was Hou Tonghai. She began spinning as she moved, her skirt forming a circle, as she alternated between dodging and attacking. She tried to use her elbows to knock over one of Hou Tonghai's wine bowls; however he was always able to avoid her attacks.

Liang Ziwing thought to himself, "This girl's kung fu is certainly considerable; but all things considered, she is still no match for brother Hou. However who wins and who loses is of no concern to me." His main concern was for the treasured medicinal herbs in his storeroom, so he turned and headed out the door to find the thief.

He thought, "The four medicines listed on the prescription, 'Dragon's Blood', 'Pseudo Ginseng', 'Bear Gallbladder' and 'Myrrh' are the same as those the Prince ordered to be bought up. Those herbs are nothing special and not very expensive, so their loss is minimal; but what does concern me is what else he may have taken while he was in there.

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Guo Jing was beginning to lose consciousness as the snake squeezed tighter and tighter. From the smell and the feel of the snake's breath on his face he knew its head must be getting closer. If the snake was able to bite him he would surely die. The snake's body was already brushing against his mouth. His body was immobile, held fast in the snake's deadly vice-like grip. His left hand, which was desperately trying to hold back the snake, was growing weaker. The

only thing that he could move was his head and mouth; so he opened his mouth and bit hard into the snake's neck.

The snake began to writhe and squeeze even tighter as it felt pain from Guo Jing's teeth. Guo Jing felt a gush of snake blood flow into his mouth. It tasted extremely bitter and was hard to bear. He didn't know if it was poisonous or not but he was too afraid to let go and spit it out. He feared that he might not get a second chance to bite the snake again so he had no option but to swallow. He also thought that the more blood the snake lost the more strength it would also lose and would eventually loosen its grip. He redoubled his efforts to suck out the snake's blood and continued to swallow. After continuing this for a while his stomach became full and the snake did gradually begin to loosen its grip. Finally, after a few spasms, the snake loosened its grip entirely and moved no more.

Guo Jing was by now exhausted and had to lean heavily against the table to remain upright. His first thought was to flee; however both his legs were still numb from the lack of blood flow so he was forced to wait for the circulation to reach all of his limbs again. After a few minutes he felt his body getting hotter as if he was burning up. He was very worried but after a short while he found that he could move again. However the feeling of extreme heat still coursed through his body. When he pressed the back of his hand against his cheek it felt burning hot.

The packets of medicine were still safely in his coat. "Now that I have the medicine I can help Wang Chuyi. Mu Yi and his daughter, though innocent of any wrong doing, were locked up by Wanyan Kang and are likely to be killed. I must help them escape before I leave." With this thought he left the storeroom and, after looking for the right direction, headed off to the prison where Mu Yi and his daughter were being held.

When he arrived at the prison he saw a group of guards patrolling and keeping a close watch. Guo Jing waited a time but found no way to get in as they had the first time. He went around to the back of the building and waited for a guard patrol to go past. Then he leaped lightly onto the roof of the building wall, then quietly into the courtyard within. Leaning against a wall he listened for the presence of soldiers. When he was sure that the coast was clear he whispered quietly "Elder Mu, I've come to help you get out of here."

Mu Yi was shocked. "Kind Sir, who are you?" he asked.

Guo Jing replied, "Junior's name is Guo Jing."

Mu Yi vaguely heard the name Guo Jing, but after the events of the past day and being weak from injuries, it didn't register at first. Then the two words 'Guo Jing' hit his brain like a thunderclap. With a trembling voice he asked, "What? Guo Jing? Your...your...surname is Guo?"

Guo Jing replied, "Yes, junior is the one who fought with the young prince earlier today in front of the arena."

Mu Yi asked, "What is your father's name?"

"My late father's name was Xiaotian." When Guo Jing was young he didn't know his father's name. It was only later after Zhu Cong taught him to read that he was able to learn his father's name.

Mu Yi's eyes filled with tears. He raised his head and said softly, "Heaven, oh Heaven!" He reached his hands through the bars and tightly held Guo Jing's hand.

Guo Jing could feel Mu Yi's hands trembling and at the same time felt tears dropping onto his hand. He thought to

himself, "Elder Mu is very grateful that I've come to rescue them."

He quietly whispered, "I have a sharp knife which I am going to use to cut away the lock and then both of you can come out. Earlier I heard the young prince talking. I know he is trying to deceive you, please don't trust him!"

Mu Yi however asked, "Your mother...is her surname Li? Has she passed away or is she still alive?"

"Oh!" Guo Jing asked surprised, "How do you know my mother's surname? My mother is in Mongolia."

Mu Yi became even more excited when he heard this. He continued holding Guo Jing's hand.

Guo Jing said, "Let my hand go so that I can cut off the lock."

Mu Yi held Guo Jing's hand as if it were the most precious treasure in the world. He was afraid if he let it go he would lose Guo Jing so he continued to hold fast, sighing, "You...you have grown up into such a big man. Ai! I only have to close my eyes and I can see your father, now long departed from this world."

"You knew my father?"

"Your father was my sworn brother. We swore to help our fellow countrymen." At this point his throat became choked with emotion and he was unable to continue. When Guo Jing heard this, he found his eyes becoming moist with tears as well.

Mu Yi was in fact Yang Tiexin. During the battle with the government soldiers he suffered a deep spear wound in his back. He managed to cling to a horse and was carried for several li before he finally lost consciousness and fell off into

a clump of bushes. The next morning, when he awoke, he crawled to a nearby farmer's hut where he remained for over a month recovering. By then he could struggle out of bed with the aid of a walking stick. The village nearby was called Lotus Pond village and was only about fourteen to sixteen li [7-8 kilometers /4-5 miles] from his own Ox Village. Luckily the farmer's family was very kind and took care of him as he slowly recovered. However he was worried about his wife and wanted to go back and look for her in Ox Village. Since he was afraid that government soldiers might still be there searching for him, he waited until midnight before returning to his old house to look around.

When he arrived there he saw the door ajar which made him fear that the worst had happened. He pushed it open and walked in. He looked around and saw things were very much as they were the night that they had to flee. There were some half finished clothes that his wife, Bao Xiruo, had left lying on the bed. On the wall, where his two family spears usually hung, one was missing, probably taken by one of the soldiers that night. That left one, looking as if, like himself, it too had had lost its partner/wife. Apart from that, nothing else was disturbed and everything was covered by a thick layer of dust...

When he went over to his sworn brother's house, it too was much the same as the night they left. He thought about the old wine seller Qu San with his incredible martial arts skills and wondered if he might be able to help him find his sworn brother's family and his wife. However, when he went to the wine shop he found it was locked up and no one was there. Yang Tiexin (now disguised as Mu Yi) made inquiries amongst his acquaintances in Ox Village but they all said that after the soldiers had left there had been no news of Guo or Yang.

He went to Red Plum village to ask about his wife at his father-in-law's house only to find that his father-in-law had died of shock shortly after hearing the news of the soldiers attack. Yang Tiexin wanted to cry, but had no tears left to shed. Dejected, he returned to Lotus Pond village and the farmer's family who had cared for him.

However, as the saying goes, 'Troubles never visit in isolation'. An epidemic of plague had broken out and one by one the farmer's family was stricken. After only a few days six of them died leaving only a newborn baby girl alive. Yang Tiexin was duty bound to care for her so he made her his adopted daughter and took her with him on his quest to find Li Ping and Bao Xiruo. Since one was halfway to the northern steppe and the other already in the north what chance did he have of finding them?

Yang Tiexin didn't dare use his real name since he was a wanted man hunted by government soldiers. So he 'split' the character of his surname, 'Yang' in half and used the left side to form the new character 'Mu' for his assumed surname and the right half to form the character 'Yi' for his personal name.

[Translators Note: The character "Yang" is made up of the character "Mu" or wood and "Yang" for the sound. The whole character actually means Poplar Tree as well as being a surname. The "Mu" of his assumed name actually means solemn and has another part of a character on the right side. The "Yang" character is pronounced as "Yi" by itself and means "Change" as well as other meanings. This is coincidentally the same "Yi" as the "Yi Jing" or "I Ching" - classic of changes. I'm sure there are quite a few allusions in this simple name change from which those who know Chinese history and culture well could have hours of fun analyzing. Also it is a common fact that when a man is forced to alter his name he is reluctant to lose touch with

the original name, so the name Yang Tiexin choose is not in keeping with custom. Anyway - on with the story!]

After ten years of fruitless searching the 'Rivers and Lakes' region [Jianghu] his adopted daughter Mu Nianci had grown like a flower into a lovely young woman. Yang Tiexin thought that his wife had likely died at the hands of marauding soldiers by now. But he still held out the hope that heaven was not blind to the sufferings of man, and that Guo Xiaotian's wife had given birth to a son (Guo Jing) who was alive. As soon as Mu Nianci was of marriageable age he stuck his spear into the ground, erected a banner proclaiming a competition to win the hand of his daughter and waited with the hope that Guo Jing would one day come and win her hand in marriage, thus fulfilling his hope and pledge to become the father-in-law of his sworn brother's son.

Although many tried, no Guo Jing was among them; after the better part of a year, his hope of finding Guo Jing began to fade. Now he would have to be content to find any man of good character and martial ability to marry his adopted daughter. Then, suddenly, on this one day, they encountered embarrassment at the hands of Wanyan Kang, help from a heroic stranger and by nightfall to find out that the heroic stranger is none other than Guo Jing. How could he help but be overwhelmed with emotion?

Meanwhile, Mu Nianci began to grow impatient listening to them talk about the past. She wanted Guo Jing to help them escape first and then, when they were safe, talk over old times at leisure. Then she had a sudden thought, "If we leave now, I will never see 'him' again!" As soon as the thought came to her, she hurriedly pushed it aside. Guo Jing was also thinking that getting everybody out was the most important thing so he slowly raised his golden knife ready to strike the lock and cut it open.

Suddenly a glint of light appeared under the door and the sound of many footsteps could be heard approaching. Guo Jing quickly slipped behind a door just as the prison doors were pushed open and in marched several people. Through the crack in the door Guo Jing could see the person in front was a bodyguard carrying a lantern. Behind him was the Prince's Consort, Wanyan Kang's mother.

She asked the bodyguard, "Are these two the people whom the young prince imprisoned?"

The bodyguard replied, "Yes." confirming it was them.

She then ordered the guard on duty, "Release them immediately."

The bodyguard hesitated, reluctant to obey the order so she said, "If the young prince asks why you released them, tell him I ordered it; now quickly open the lock and free them!"

The guard dare not refuse the order any longer and opened the lock freeing them. The consort then produced two ingots of silver from her cloak and passed them to Yang Tiexin saying softly, "Please go safely!"

Yang Tiexin didn't take the silver but just stared at her without so much as a blink. The consort assumed from his stare that he was angry with her and felt remorse for what they had suffered. In a gentle voice she apologized, "Please forgive us, my son, by his disgraceful behavior, has wronged both of you most gravely today."

Yang Tiexin stared at her a while longer before slowly taking the silver and putting it in his robe without a word. He then took his daughter's hand and walked out of the prison.

The bodyguard called after him. "Hey you scum, don't you

have any manners? When our lady saves your life you should get down on your knees and kowtow to show your thanks!" But Yang Tiexin kept on walking as if he had not heard.

Guo Jing waited until they had closed the door. Only when he heard the consort was far enough away did he emerge from hiding and look around. By then there was no sign of Yang Tiexin or his daughter. He thought that they must have left the palace by now so he had better return to the 'Fragrant Snow Hall' and pull Huang Rong away from her listening so they could hurry back with the medicine for Wang Chuyi. As he rushed off following the winding path he saw two figures carrying red lanterns coming directly towards him in what seemed a great hurry. Guo Jing tried to hide behind some decorative rockery but he was too late, he had already been spotted.

"Who's there!" shouted one man as he dashed forward with his hands raised in a claw stance.

Guo Jing could only raise his arms to block the strike. In the light of the two lanterns he was able to clearly see that his attacker was none other than Wanyan Kang!

As it turned out, the bodyguard, after releasing the prisoners, had hurriedly reported the consort's actions to the young prince. Wanyan Kang was shocked when he heard this.

He thought to himself, "Mother's heart has always been too soft and she does not know the consequences of the old man and his daughter getting away! If my Shifu were to hear about this, and were to bring them to face me, how could I deny what's been going on! I would really be in much trouble!" He immediately rushed off to search for them and see if he could stop them in time before they

actually escaped from the palace compound. Running into Guo Jing was the last thing he expected.

They had already fought viciously that day and now they meet again in the middle of the night. One was in a hurry to rush back with medicine, the other in a hurry to kill two people to seal their lips. Now they fought even more viciously than before. Guo Jing tried to escape a couple of times but was blocked by Wanyan Kang. When Guo Jing saw the bodyguard coming forward drawing his sword ready to assist his master he thought things were going badly indeed!

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Liang Ziwong thought that Huang Rong was about to be defeated and turned to leave, but to his surprise he heard a call from the crowd that indicated a change in the situation. Huang Rong suddenly raised both her arms and tossed her head sending the three bowls of wine soaring straight up in the air. She then swung both fists towards Hou Tonghai and struck using a move called 'Eight Steps to Overtake the Moon'. Because Hou Tonghai was holding the wine bowls he couldn't block the strike and instead dodged quickly to the left. Huang Rong followed through with a flash of her right hand leaving Hou Tonghai no option this time but to block with his arm. Not only was he unable to stop the wine in his hands from spilling, but the bowl perched atop his head also tipped over and fell to the floor with a crash.

Huang Rong instantly stepped back and caught two of her bowls in mid air while the remaining one fell neatly onto the soft cloud of her hair, all without spilling so much as a drop of wine. Those present could not help murmuring 'Excellent' after seeing this brilliant performance of skill. Ouyang Ke however didn't murmur his praise but said it rather loudly. Sha Tongtian shot him an angry glare; but

Ouyang Ke did not notice and again called out, "Brilliant indeed!"

Hou Tonghai's cheeks flushed red, "Try that again!"

Huang Rong laughed and touched her cheek with a finger and said, "Now, now, aren't you ashamed?"

Sha Tongtian, seeing his younger martial brother's loss of face, let out a grunt, "Young girl, you are certainly full of devious tricks. Tell us, who is your master?"

Huang Rong smiled sweetly saying, "I'll tell you tomorrow. Right now I must be on my way."

Without appearing to bend a leg or take a step Sha Tongtian suddenly appeared in the doorway blocking Huang Rong's exit. Just a few minutes earlier Huang Rong had already learned just how powerful Sha Tongtian's kung fu was when he had grabbed and locked both of her hands. Now his 'Change Form Exchange Place' maneuver only served to highlight just how powerful an opponent he would be. Although she felt a slight rush of worry, her face didn't betray her feelings. Instead she showed a slight frown and asked in a slightly annoyed tone, "Why are you blocking my way?"

Sha Tongtian replied, "I want you to tell me which school you belong to and why you came barging into the palace."

Huang Rong arched her pretty eyebrows and asked, "And what if I don't tell you?"

Sha Tongtian snapped, "When the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' asks a question, there is no choice but to answer!"

Huang Rong saw that she was surrounded and there wasn't much chance of her making a run for it. She had seen Liang

Ziwong about to leave and called out to him pleading sweetly, "Uncle! This bad man is blocking my way and won't let me go home."

Liang Ziwong laughed when he heard her pleading in such a cute manner. "The 'Dragon King' has only asked you a question, why don't you be a nice girl and answer him? I'm sure he will let you go then."

Huang Rong laughed in her most charming way and replied, "But I just don't feel like answering." And then to Sha Tongtian she said, "OK - If you won't make way, I'll just have to dash through."

Sha Tongtian laughed coldly, "Only if you have the ability to get past."

Huang Rong demanded, "You must not lay a finger on me!"

Sha Tongtian replied, "What need is there for me, the 'Dragon King', to move a finger in order to stop a little girl like you."

Huang Rong exclaimed, "Good, it's settled then. A gentleman cannot go back on his word. Dragon King Sha, do you see that?" She pointed with her left hand off to one side of the room. Sha Tongtian looked over to where she was pointing and at this point Huang Rong made a dash to get past him while he was distracted.

She moved with blinding speed, but Sha Tongtian's reaction was even faster. He shot his right two fingers up and aimed towards her eyes as she moved forward. If she didn't stop she would be blinded. Luckily she was agile enough to stop in time and leap back away from the danger. She tried again and again from many different angles but each time she found her way blocked no matter how quickly she moved. Finally, when she found her nose almost smashing

into Sha Tongtian's shiny bald head threatening to stain it with blood from her broken nose, she gave up with a little shriek of frustration.

Liang Ziwong laughed heartily, "Dragon King Sha is a master at this, there is no point in continuing. Why not just admit defeat?" He then turned away and set off at a rapid pace back to his medicine store room.

As soon as he stepped into the room he smelled fresh blood and knew that all was not well. He looked down and saw, by the glow of his torch, the shriveled body of his prized red snake. All its blood had been drained and his stores of medicines were strewn about the place. Liang Ziwong's blood ran cold. Twenty years of work had been destroyed in one night! He clutched the body of his dead snake and couldn't control his tears.

The Ginseng Immortal was originally a ginseng picker on Changbai Mountain. Later he killed a seriously wounded senior master and from inside his sack he took a manual of martial arts secrets along with ten or so prescriptions for the preparation of different types of medicines, drugs and potions. The study of this book combined with use of these drugs would lead to martial arts of incredible power. Part of the preparation of the drugs required the raising of a special type of venomous snake. He searched deep in the forests and mountains to find this type of snake and fed it the most precious of herbs and other medicines. The snake's body was originally black, but over the years as he fed it cinnabar it gradually began to turn a bright red. After twenty years of feeding the snake it had only a few more days before it completed its transformation. Then he was called to Yanjing to meet with the Prince. When the snake was ready he need only drink the blood of the snake and meditate to gain the full benefit of the martial arts power. This would make his kung fu more powerful than ever.

Seeing his life's work not only lost to him, and possibly someone else having benefited instead, was more than he could bear.

After a few moments he managed to compose himself and saw that the traces of blood on the snake had not yet congealed. He realized then that it couldn't have been very long since the snake died, so the culprit must still be near by. He immediately leapt up into a tall tree and looked all around for any signs of the thief. From there he saw the vicious fight between Guo Jing and Wanyan Kang going on in the garden. Burning with fury and anger, he leaped down and sped off towards the fight. As soon as he arrived he could already smell the pungent smell of the snake's blood coming from Guo Jing.

Guo Jing was not yet Wanyan Kang's equal when it came to fighting, so from the start he was already at a disadvantage. To make matters worse, he felt his stomach burning with an unbearable heat as if it were full of boiling water. He was terribly thirsty and itched excruciatingly all over his body. "This time I'm certain to die," he thought. "The snake's poison is beginning to take hold."

In the midst of these fearful thoughts he was being struck repeatedly by Wanyan Kang's fists which were made even more painful by the effects of the poison.

"You filthy bastard!" Liang Ziwong yelled, "Who sent you to steal my precious snake?" He couldn't imagine that some stupid kid would know the secret of the snake. He thought it must be someone else who put him up to the task. In fact he was almost certain that it was Wang Chuyi who had sent Guo Jing.

When Guo Jing heard this he was furious. "That precious snake of yours attacked and poisoned me! I've got a bone of

contention to pick with you!" and he leaped towards Liang Ziwing with his fists raised ready to attack.

Liang Ziwing however smelled the scent of medicines mingled with the snake blood and had an evil thought. "He has drunk the snake's blood. If I kill him now and drink his blood then I may still gain the beneficial effects. Who knows, maybe the drug's effects will be enhanced..." As soon as he thought of this his anger vanished and he leaped towards Guo Jing to meet his attack. With his superior kung fu he was able to easily lock Guo Jing's arms and legs and hold him down. He then prepared to bite into Guo Jing's neck to extract his precious medicine...

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Meanwhile Huang Rong, no matter how quickly she moved, had not been able to get past Sha Tongtian. She was getting anxious about what would happen if he decided to catch her. She decided that a change of tactics may be appropriate. "If I can get through the door then you promise to let me be, okay?" She asked.

"If you can get through the door I will admit defeat." Sha Tongtian replied.

"Ai yo! What a pity my father only taught me the skill of entering, not the skill of leaving." she sighed.

"What is this 'entering' and 'leaving' skill?" Sha Tongtian asked half doubting, half curious.

"Your 'Change Form Exchange Place' skill, although not bad, is still far below those of my father's skills. Way below in fact." she boasted.

"Don't talk nonsense you stupid girl." Sha Tongtian retorted angrily. "Anyway, who is your father?"

"If I told you my father's name, I'm afraid I would scare you out of your wits, so it's best if I don't say." Huang Rong replied mischievously. "When he taught me the skill of entering he hid by the door way and I tried to rush in from outside. I tried many times but was never able to get past him. However, even though I cannot get out against you with your piddling skills, there is no way that you could stop me from getting back in. I wouldn't even have to raise a sweat!"

Sha Tongtian laughed coldly and said, "From outside going in or from inside going out, what's the difference? OK you come here and show me!" With that he moved aside to let her demonstrate the great 'entering' kung fu of which she boasted.

Huang Rong immediately shot outside and laughed, "Ha, you fell for my trick. You said a minute ago that if I could get through the door that you would admit defeat and would let me go. Well am I outside now? Did I not go through the door? Come now Dragon King Sha, you are an honorable man; your word is your bond. You cannot think of going back on what you promised in front of all these gentlemen."

Although Sha Tongtian knew that she had tricked him, she was correct, his word was his bond and he could hardly go back on what he promised. He scratched his bald head and flushed red but could see no way to get out of it.

Peng Lianhu, however, was not about to let Huang Rong get away. He suddenly shot out a stream of darts [fei biao] towards her. The darts were extremely fast but they were aimed near to the back of her head rather than right at her. When they hit the stone pillar by the door however, they ricocheted towards her. They were too fast for her to catch and she had no choice but to leap forward a pace to avoid them. The darts continued in a stream and each one forced

her to move forward a few inches. Before she knew it she had moved back inside the hall again!

Peng Lianhu's objective all along had been to force her back into the room and everyone watching proclaimed their praise at his skill. He just laughed and said, "What's this? You've gone back inside again!"

Huang Rong scowled, "Huh! You used your concealed weapons to bully a girl and force her to move, what's so fantastic about that!"

"Who was bullying you?" he asked incredulously. "I never laid a finger on you or harmed you!"

"Then let me go!" she said angrily.

"First tell us who taught you your kung fu." he demanded.

Huang Rong smiled and said, "I taught myself whilst in my mother's womb!"

Peng Lianhu said, "If you're not willing to tell us then perhaps I can find out another way!" With this he shot his fist straight towards her shoulder. Huang Rong didn't move or try to block the blow. She figured that he wouldn't dare to act so shamelessly as to hit a girl who refused to fight back.

When Peng Lianhu saw she wasn't going to fight he pulled his punch and withdrew his arm shouting, "Come on, show me what you've got. Stupid girl! I bet I can find out who your master by your style of fighting within ten moves." He had seen many styles during his life and although he had seen that Huang Rong was a very crafty girl, he was confident that she would not be able to hide her real martial arts style from him in a true fight. In fact he thought he needed no more than ten moves to do so.

Huang Rong asked, "And if you have not found out within ten moves?"

"Then I will let you walk free." he replied. Without further ado he launched an attack using 'Triple Linked Penetration' so called because it incorporated three movements.

Huang Rong turned her body and dodged while forming a ring with her thumb and little finger and stretching the remaining fingers to form a three-pronged fork. Using this she counter attacked using the 'Night Trident Searches the Sea'.

Hou Tonghai cried out, "'Night Trident Searches the Sea'! Senior Brother, this brat must be from the ... our school of martial arts!"

"Rubbish!" Sha Tongtian scolded. He knew the Huang Rong had already been teasing and making fun of Hou Tonghai for some time before tonight. He figured that she must have picked up the 'Night Trident Searches the Sea' from her earlier encounters fighting with Hou Tonghai.

Peng Lianhu couldn't suppress a laugh as he whirled around to attack again. Huang Rong turned obliquely to the left and without bending a knee or taking a step suddenly 'moved' to the side.

Hou Tonghai again exclaimed, "'Change Form Exchange Place' ! Senior Brother, did you teach her that?"

Sha Tonghai again scolded him saying, "Can you shut up - okay? You're always saying stupid things!" However, inside he couldn't help but admire Huang Rong's intelligence and skill in learning the basics of such a move after only having seen it once. Even if the execution of the move wasn't entirely correct, she had been able to dodge Peng Lianhu's strike. An amazing achievement!

As the fight continued Huang Rong attacked using the 'Soul Smashing Knife' followed by the 'Soul Snatching Whip' strikes. When Hou Tonghai saw these attacks and heard her call out "Yi Yi Yi" with each strike he couldn't help but call out, "Senior Brother! This brat must be from our school..." If he hadn't seen Sha Tonghai's face growing angrier by the minute he would have again called out the name of the sects moves.

Peng Lianhu was also getting angrier. He thought to himself, "So far I've been kind and have shown mercy with my attacks, but this girl is craftier than a witch. If I don't start using more vicious attacks I take the chance of not forcing her to reveal her true style."

Martial Artists, after training in their chosen style, may pick up moves from other styles and over time can even become quite proficient at them. However, in a life and death struggle, they will always return to their roots and use the style that they first learned and are most familiar with.

Peng Lianhu's first four strikes had been mild and contained no desire to injure. However from his fifth strike on his moves became like a whirlwind. When the spectators saw his moves take on a vicious turn they couldn't help but become worried for Huang Rong. No one had any idea of her background and although she had been stubborn, no one actually had any real grievance with her or wanted to see such a young, pretty and charming girl come to harm.

No one except for Hou Tonghai that is, who actually thought, "The sooner the bitch is dead the better!"

Huang Rong continued to hide her style by using strikes from Wanyan Kang's 'Absolute Perfection School' [Quanzhen] and Guo Jing's 'Southern Mountain Fists' style. She had only just learned these moves by seeing them

earlier the same day when Guo Jing and Wanyan Kang fought using them in the arena. For the seventh move she even used Peng Lianhu's 'Triple Linked Penetration' that she first saw only six moves ago! However now it was getting more and more dangerous. Even in a straight fight with Huang Rong using all her strength and true skills against Peng Lianhu she would not be able to prevail, how could she expect to survive using tricks picked up by observing others? She was gambling against the fact that, even though he was using vicious strokes, he wouldn't actually go so far as to kill her.

Ouyang Ke thought, "This little girl is remarkably smart. She can hold herself against that Peng guy's fists." Aloud he said, "Ai yo. Watch out, watch out. Why haven't you dodged left?"

Peng Lianhu's style used a brilliant mixture of false and real strikes, which he was able to switch between at will. On the eighth move he made a feint with his left and a real lunge with his right. Huang Rong expected him to do the opposite on the next move and feint with his right whilst attacking with his left. This meant that she ought to dodge to her right, but when she heard Ouyang Ke call out she immediately changed her mind and leapt elegantly to the left. This sudden posture was exquisite, and it turned out that nobody in the crowd recognized it.

When Peng Lianhu heard Ouyang Ke's crucial words of help he became furious. He thought, "Do you think that I won't kill you if I have to you stupid girl!" His nickname wasn't 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands' for nothing. He had an extremely cruel nature when angry. When he first saw Huang Rong he thought, that she being so young, and a girl, it would be shameful to kill her; but now, having reached the second last move of the contest and still unable to find her real school, he was so angry that he no longer

cared. He struck with 'Push Open the Window and Watch the Moon' using all his force, left hand "Yin", right hand "Yang", one soft, one hard, both pushing out simultaneously.

Huang Rong knew that things were desperate. She stepped back as she saw his fists coming towards her face. All that she could do was to duck her head, bend both her arms, point both elbows forward and strike at his chest.

Peng Lianhu expected her to try and block this strike and intended to follow up with the tenth stroke. However he was taken aback that she should actually try a counter attack against such a vicious strike. He had already half executed the tenth strike 'Falling Star Great Void', but immediately had to concentrate his internal energy to stop it, which was like trying to reign in a horse to keep it from running over a cliff. "You are a disciple of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'!" he called out with a shiver in his voice.

Huang Rong leapt back several feet. When Peng Lianhu called out these words a wave of fear went through the room. Everyone present, with the exception of Prince Zhao, knew of the dreaded 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Even the feared 'Butcher of a Thousand Hands' Peng was afraid to touch her now.

Before Huang Rong could say anything a cry sounded in the still night air. It was Guo Jing, and he sounded as if he was in real danger. Huang Rong was suddenly concerned about his safety and her face went white with fear.

Guo Jing's arms and legs were held down by Liang Ziwong. He wasn't able to move an inch, but as he saw Liang Ziwong coming closer ready to bite his throat he felt a sudden surge of strength born of desperation. Executing the 'Carp Arching Backwards' he was able to free himself and leap upright. Liang Ziwong quickly struck again. Guo Jing tried

to leap away but Liang Ziwing's speed was like the wind and there was no way Guo Jing could escape him.

"Smack!" a punch hit him square on his back and it was not at all like the earlier punches from Wanyan Kang. This one felt like it penetrated to the bone. Guo Jing was frightened out of his wits and didn't wait for another hit. He continued running straight ahead, away from everyone. His 'Qing Gong' (lightness skill) ability was very good and he used it to his maximum ability to speed through the trees and rockeries of the garden. Liang Ziwing was not able to keep pace.

Initially Guo Jing ran very fast but after a short while felt himself becoming slower and he began to pant heavily. There was a big hole torn in the back of his gown and he felt pain from where he had been hit. He thought that the Liang Ziwing's last punch must have actually been a claw and had taken some of his flesh away along with the back of his gown. He was very worried now and looked frantically for some place to hide. Straight ahead was the Prince's Consort's shabby compound. He rushed in with the hope that they wouldn't search there and he might be able to make his escape later. He lay down behind the wall at the back and didn't dare to move a muscle. Soon he heard Liang Ziwing and Wanyan Kang, one calling and the other answering, coming closer. Liang Ziwing was so angry he couldn't control his voice as he called out.

Guo Jing anxiously thought, "If I wait here by the wall it's only a matter of time before they find me. The Prince's Consort seems to have a kind nature, perhaps she will save me." Given the critical situation he didn't have any time to think further and he quickly slipped inside the house. There he found a lighted candle on the table in the middle of the room. The consort must be in another room. He quickly looked around the room and saw a wooden wardrobe in the

east corner which he opened and slipped in before partly closing it, leaving only a crack to see through. He then pulled out his golden knife and allowed himself to relax a little.

He heard footsteps and saw the Prince's Consort slowly walk in. She sat down at the table and looked at the candle as if in a daze. Before long Wanyan Kang entered and asked "Mother, did some bad man come in and give you a fright?"

The consort shook her head, so Wanyan Kang went outside again and continued searching elsewhere with Liang Ziwing.

Wanyan Kang's mother then closed the door and seemed as if she was going to bed. Guo Jing thought, "As soon as she blows out the candle I'll slip out through the window and escape. No - I had better wait a while first, in case I run into the young prince and that white haired fellow again. That crazy guy tried to bite my throat. That sure is some weird kind of kung fu! My Shifu's never taught me anything like that. I really must ask them about it next time I see them. Going around and biting people's throats! What's with that?" He then thought some more, "After fighting so much and being away for so long, Huang Rong must have gone by now. I had better get out as well otherwise she might be wondering what's been keeping me."

Suddenly the window creaked open and someone leaped in. Both Guo Jing and the consort were shocked. She let out a gasp but Guo Jing noticed that the person who had just entered was none other than Mu Yi or now Yang Tiexin. Guo Jing couldn't have been more surprised. He had assumed that he and his daughter had fled the palace long ago.

When the consort recognized him she quickly said, "Please hurry and leave, before they find you."

Yang Tiexin replied, "Many thanks for the consort's kind concern. If I didn't come here to thank you in person I would regret it to my dying day." His words contained the element of sarcasm as if full of bitterness.

The Prince's Consort sighed and said, "Please forget it. It is my son who has wronged you and your daughter." Yang Tiexin looked around and saw that besides a table, lamp, bed and wardrobe there was not much else. Everything seemed to be old, worn and familiar. He suddenly felt a wave of sadness and he could not suppress a tear as it trickled down his cheek. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and walked over to the wall where a lone spear was hanging. He took it down and saw that it was covered with rust. He could still make out the four characters 'Tiexin Yang Clan' written on the spear's blade.

He gently stroked the spear's shaft and sighed, "This iron spear is rusty. It has not been used for a long while."

The Prince's Consort spoke softly, "Please don't touch the spear."

"Why?" Yang Tiexin asked.

"Because this is the most precious possession I have." she murmured.

Yang Tiexin was suddenly angry. "Really?" he asked bitterly. He paused before going on, "This spear used to have a matching partner, today however only one remains."

"What?" The Prince's Consort asked surprised, but he didn't reply. He hung the spear back on the wall and gazed at the broken plough tip while saying absentmindedly, "This plough tip is worn. Tomorrow you should call on Zhang Mu'Er in the east village to take a catty of iron and see if he can repair it."

When the consort heard this she felt as if she had been struck by a bolt of lightning. For a moment she was speechless as she stared at him. Finally she stammered, "Who...who are you?"

Yang Tiexin replied slowly but evenly, "I said the plough tip is worn. Tomorrow you should call on Zhang Mu'Er in the east village to take a catty of iron and see if he can repair it."

The woman felt her knees going weak. She again stammered, "Who...who are you? How...how could you know what my late husband said...said the night he died?"

The woman was none other than Yang Tiexin's wife, Bao Xiruo. When Wanyan Honglie was wounded by an arrow that day near Ox village, Bao Xiruo had saved his life. When he saw such a beautiful woman saving his life he couldn't stop thinking about her after he escaped that night. He bribed Duan Tiande to have his soldiers raid Ox village that night so that he could arrange to "save" Bao Xiruo and appear to be a hero. Once her husband and friends were dead she would be alone in the world and would naturally look to her "rescuer" to protect her. If he took her north and was patient enough she would sooner or later give up hope of return and agree to marry to him and start a new life together.

During the eighteen years at the palace, her face had not changed much at all. Yang Tiexin's face though had undergone changes from the hardships he'd encountered on the road searching for her. Now, when they'd met again, she could not at first recognize her former husband. After all these years of mutual longing to be together again, this night with so much danger made it seem as if they were in a dream.

Yang Tiexin didn't reply, he just walked over to the table and pulled open a drawer. Inside, he saw a couple of sets of a man's blue coats exactly the same as the ones he used to wear. He picked one up saying, "I have enough coats to wear. You are tired and should rest now that you are pregnant. No need to make more clothes for me." These words were the same ones spoken by him to her eighteen years earlier when she was pregnant.

Bao Xiruo rushed over to his side and grabbed his sleeve. When she pulled it up she saw an old scar. A mix of surprise and joy suddenly enveloped her. For the past eighteen years she had thought her husband dead and now to recognize him standing before her was like seeing a ghost coming back to life. She immediately hugged him, holding him tightly and crying, "Quickly! Quickly take me with you. Let us leave here now. I will show you a secret gateway where we can slip away unseen. I am not afraid of ghosts. I would rather become a ghost and be together with you than part with you again."

Yang Tiexin held his wife as warm tears rolled down his cheeks. After a long while he asked gently, "Do you think that I am a ghost?"

"I don't care if you are a man or a ghost, I won't let go of you again." she sobbed. "How is it that you are still alive? After all these years I can't believe that you are still alive. Where...what.."

Yang Tiexin was about to reply when Wanyan Kang's voice suddenly called from just outside the window, "Mother, why are you crying? Who are you talking to?"

Bao Xiruo had a fright. "It's nothing," she called out, "I was just dreaming."

Wanyan Kang had clearly heard the sound of a man's voice talking inside the room. He immediately became suspicious and walked around to the door, knocking gently saying, "Mother, I would like to have a word with you."

"Tomorrow," She replied, "Let's talk tomorrow. I'm very tired now and want to sleep."

When Wanyan Kang heard that his mother was not willing to open the door, his suspicions only increased. "I just want to have a few words then I'll go."

Yang Tiexin knew that Wanyan Kang was intent on coming in, so he went over to the window with the intention of making a quick get away. He tried to push open the shutter, but to his surprise he found that it wouldn't budge. Someone had locked it from the outside! Bao Xiruo was in a panic. She thought she would play for time and keep talking while Yang Tiexin found a place to hide. She hurriedly pointed to the wardrobe and motioned for her husband to hide inside. Imagine their surprise when they opened the door and found Guo Jing there! Bao Xiruo couldn't help but let out a little scream.

When Wanyan Kang heard this he became extremely worried. He thought someone was trying to harm his mother so he began trying to break open the door with his shoulder. There was no time to lose; Guo Jing grabbed Yang Tiexin and pulled him into the wardrobe and closed the door just as the wooden bar on the bedroom door gave a loud crack and flew open. Wanyan Kang rushed in. He saw his mother's face was pale with fear and her cheeks were wet with tears; but apart from her, there was no one else in the room.

"Mother, what's wrong? What's been going on?" he asked anxiously.

Bao Xiruo made an effort to compose herself before saying, "Nothing. I'm just not feeling well."

Wanyan Kang rushed over to her and said, "Mother, I promise I won't be doing anything stupid again. Please don't be worried. I've been a bad son to make you so worried."

"OK." She said in a comforting way, "I'm feeling so tired. Please let me go to bed. I'm very tired and want to sleep."

But Wanyan Kang heard a wavering in her voice and asked, "Mother, are you sure that no one has been here recently?"

"Who?" she asked.

"Recently a couple of bandits entered the palace."

"Really?" She replied. "You really should be going off to bed too. Don't let these things concern you."

Wanyan Kang said, "Yeah, I'm sure the guards, even though they're a useless bunch, will be able to take care of them. You need not worry. Please have some rest."

He was just on the point of leaving when he noticed the corner of a man's robe sticking out from a crack in the wardrobe door. Now he knew that something strange really was going on. He didn't say anything but instead sat down at the table and poured himself a cup of tea which he began to drink slowly while he mulled over what to do. "A man is hiding in the wardrobe, but I don't know if my mother knows this or not." He took a few more sips of tea before standing up and slowly walking over to the wall where the spear was hanging. "Mother, what did you think of your son's spear skills that you saw earlier today?"

"I have already told you that I don't like you using your skills to bully other people." Bao Xiruo said in a

disapproving tone.

Wanyan Kang replied in a hurt tone, "Bully people? I was merely competing one to one in a fair competition with that stupid boy." He then grabbed the spear off the wall and playfully tried a few strokes. The red tassel on the spear danced about as he executed the 'Rising Phoenix Soaring Dragon' strike aiming straight at the wardrobe. If this stroke went through the wardrobe, Yang Tiexin and Guo Jing, who could not see what was happening, would have no hope of fending off the attack. They would be dead for certain. Seeing this Bao Xiruo immediately fainted!

Wanyan Kang stopped short with his strike. Seeing his mother's reaction he immediately knew that she knew about the man hiding in the wardrobe. Propping the spear beside him, he lifted his mother up, but watched the wardrobe for any signs of movement all the while.

Slowly Bao Xiruo regained consciousness and when she saw the wardrobe still intact with no spear hole she immediately felt immense relief. Having undergone so many extreme highs and lows of emotions over the past hour she felt very weak all over.

Wanyan Kang was very angry, "Mother, am I your son or not?" he demanded.

"Of course you are my son. Why do you ask?"

"Well then, why do you keep so many things secret from me?"

Bao Xiruo thought to herself, "I must tell him about today's events and let him be reunited with his true father. After that I will take my life since I have lost my virtue and thus deeply wronged my husband. In this life I can never be

reunited with my husband Tiexin..." At this thought she again burst into tears which now flowed freely.

When Wanyan Kang saw his mother acting so strangely today he didn't know what to think. Finally Bao Xiruo said, "Please take a seat and listen to what I have to say very carefully." Wanyan Kang sat down as told but he stayed near the spear and continued to watch the wardrobe.

Bao Xiruo asked, "Do you see the four characters written on the spear?"

"When I was a small boy I asked you about those characters, but you refused to tell me what 'Yang Tiexin' meant."

"Well now I am going to tell you what they mean."

Yang Tiexin hiding in the wardrobe could clearly hear every word that was being said between the mother and son. Having an impulsive nature he thought to himself, "She is a Prince's Consort now. How could she possibly want to live with me again in a shabby hut in the wilds as a villager's wife? She is about to reveal my identity; could she actually be planning to have her son kill me?"

He heard her continue, "This spear is originally from a place call Ox Village in Jiangnan near the Song city of Lin'an. I sent men on a journey far away to fetch this for me. That plough, this table, lamp, bed, wardrobe, everything in this room was brought here from Ox Village."

Wanyan Kang interrupted, "I really don't understand why you insist on living in the shabby old shack. I can get you the most beautiful furnishings but you always refuse!"

"You say that this place is shabby. But to me it is better than the most intricately decorated palace! Child, you are not

fortunate. You have never lived with your true mother and father in such a shabby place.”

When Yang Tiexin heard this he felt a sudden wave of emotion and could not keep himself from shedding tears.

Wanyan Kang laughed, “Mother, the more you talk the stranger you become. How can father possibly live in this place?”

Bao Xiruo sighed: “Your poor father wandered all over the country for eighteen years living among the Jianghu [rivers and lakes]. He never had the opportunity to live peacefully in this house for even a day.

When Wanyan Kang heard this, his eyes opened wide and asked in a trembling voice, “Mother, what are you saying?”

Bao Xiruo asked in a sharp voice, “Who do you think your real father is?”

Wanyan Kang, mystified, said, “My father is the great Jin Prince Zhao. Mother...why are you asking me this?”

Bao Xiruo stood up and took the spear, cradled it in her arms, and with tears flowing again, said. “Child, you don't know, so I can't blame you. This...this is your real father's spear that he used many years ago...” Pointing to the characters on the spear she continued, “This is your real father's name!”

Wanyan Kang felt his body shake. “Mother!” he cried out, “You are talking rubbish. You must be going crazy. I'm going to call for the doctor.”

“Am I talking rubbish? You say that you are a Jin? You are Chinese! Your name is not really Wanyan Kang, it's Yang... Yang Kang!”

Wanyan Kang was shocked and very angry. He turned to go, shouting, "I'm going to ask father."

Bao Xiruo called out, "Your father is in there!" With this she took a bold step towards the wardrobe, pulled open the door and taking Yang Tiexin's hand led him out into the room.

Chapter 10 - Enemies Meet

Translated by Rayon



Following her instructions Guo Jing placed Mei Chaofeng on his shoulders, made an evading move, then hastened forward and they engaged

the enemy. His lightness kungfu was not weak and Mei Chaofeng's body was not heavy; with her on his shoulder Guo Jing's agility was not reduced.

Wanyan Kang was shocked to find Yang Tiexin there and then recognized him. He shouted, "It's you!" Brandishing the iron spear, he quickly adopted the 'Step of the Marching Tiger' [Hang Bu Deng Hu], followed by the 'Facing Upwards to Burn a Joss Stick' [Chao Tian Yi Zhu Xiang]. The tip of the spear gleamed, going straight towards Yang Tiexin's throat.

Bao Xiruo called out, "He's your father, you... Don't you see?" As she raised her head, her son flung her against the wall, causing her to cry out. Wanyan Kang was shocked and quickly took a step back, still holding the spear. He glanced down to see his mother on the floor, her body covered with blood and her breathing shallow, so it was difficult for him to tell for sure if she was going to live or die. Remorse filled him and he was helpless for a moment. Yang Tiexin then bent down and took his wife into his arms and carried her towards the door and outside. Wanyan Kang called out, "Put her down!" He then used the stance 'The Lone Wild Goose Excels' [Gu Yan Chu Qun] and the spear, moving like the wind, headed towards his chest.

Yang Tiexin heard the rushing sound behind him and quickly sent out his left hand to counter. He was able to stop the iron spearhead about five inches from its target. On the battlefield, the 'Yang Family Spear' was invincible and one move, 'Turning the Spear on Horseback' [Hui Ma Qiang] was a unique skill passed from generation to generation. When Yang Tiexin used his left hand to grasp the spearhead, he was actually using some elements of this move but had to improvise a little. Originally, when he

grasped the enemy's weapon, he only needed to send out his right hand as the iron spear drew closer, but because he was holding Bao Xiruo, he could only turn around and shout angrily, "The 'Yang Family Spear' is passed on only to sons. A pity your Shifu did not teach you this."

Although Qiu Chuji's kung fu was very high, he actually did not research this spear art very deeply. The 'Yang Family Spear' was native to the Song Dynasty and was famous throughout Jianghu, but only nineteen schools were direct descendants of the orthodox school. He knew the principles of the orthodox 'Yang Family Spear' and that year when they fought in Ox Village, Yang Tiexin saw evidence of that. As for the unique skills that were passed on only from generation to generation, that, obviously, he did not understand. That was why Wanyan Kang also did not completely absorb the moves of the spear.

The forces applied by the two people caused the iron spear, which was already old and its handle already starting to decay, to break into pieces with a "ka" sound. Guo Jing jumped forward and shouted angrily, "You heard that he's your father, why do you not kowtow?"

Wanyan Kang hesitated, unable to decide. Yang Tiexin then cradled his wife in his arms and ran out of the room. Mu Nianci was waiting for him outside to help him and then both father and daughter leapt over the wall.

Guo Jing did not dare wait and also rushed out of the room. He was just about to head towards the wall to flee when he suddenly sensed a rustle in the darkness and something rushing towards his neck. He felt the force of a palm brush the tip of his nose and he felt a severe pain on his face like it was scraped by a knife. This person's internal energy was fierce and moreover, there was barely a sound, nearly taking him completely unaware. He was shocked as he

heard the person angrily shout, "Peasant boy, this old man has waited long enough! Extend your neck and let this old man drink your blood!" It was the 'Ginseng Immortal' Liang Ziwing.

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Huang Rong heard Peng Lianhu proclaim that she was a disciple of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. She laughed and said, "You lose!" Then, she turned around and sprinted towards the hall's entrance.

Peng Lianhu quickly moved his body so that he was blocking the entrance and shouted, "Since you are a disciple of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', I won't embarrass you. But you must tell me, why did your Shifu send you here?"

Huang Rong, laughing, said, "You said that if in ten moves you can't recognize my sect, then you will let me leave. Old Senior, why are you being such a rascal?"

Peng Lianhu got angry, "That final move, the 'Spirit Sea Turtle Step' [Ling Ao Bu], didn't the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' teach you that?"

Huang Rong laughed, "I only saw the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' a few times and the level of their kung fu is low; how can they match my Shifu?"

Peng Lianhu said, "Your lying is useless."

Huang Rong answered, "I have actually heard of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. I know that those two people are dishonorable; they will stop at no evil and cheat their elders. Their shamelessness is known throughout Wulin. How can Peng Zhaizhu [Chief] compare me to those two obscene people?"

The crowd at first thought that she was just unwilling to tell the truth; but when they heard her slander the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' this way, they could not help but look at each other with blank dismay. Only then did they believe that she was in no way related to the two Corpses' sect. Although some people still wanted to find out if she was lying, they all decided that no one would dare to insult their Shifu in the presence of so many people.

Peng Lianhu stepped aside and said, "Young Miss, you win. Lao Peng admires you very much and wishes to know your name."

Huang Rong smiled, "I don't mind. I am called Rong'er."

Peng Lianhu asked, "Your surname?"

Huang Rong answered, "I'll be honest. I am surnamed neither Peng nor Sha." By this point, everyone in the hall, except the Tibetan Monk Ling Zhi and Ouyang Ke had lost to her. Ling Zhi was suffering from an internal injury and could not fight at the moment. That only left Ouyang Ke as the one who could temporarily stop her. The people all turned their gaze on him.

Ouyang Ke stepped forward, smiling pleasantly as he said, "This lowly one wants to go next and exchange moves with the young miss."

Huang Rong glanced at the white clothes he was wearing and asked, "You are with those pretty girls of the 'White Camel Group' [Bai Tuoshan]?"

Ouyang Ke smiled and said, "You have seen them? If you put all those girls together, they could not match even half your beauty."

Huang Rong's face turned red when she heard his flattery though she was also pleased. She said, "Then you'll help me with these old men who insist on being unreasonable."

Ouyang Ke's kung fu was high and with the support of his Shifu's younger brother, he was able to run amuck in the western region for many years. His lascivious nature caused him to spend all those years collecting beautiful women from different places and turning them into his concubines. To occupy their time, these concubines also studied kung fu and therefore, they were also his female disciples. When Prince Zhao summoned him to Yanjing, he brought twenty-four of them with him, dressing them up in white robes and mounting them on white camels. Because the concubines were many, they took turns riding while the others walked. Eight of them encountered the Six Freaks of Jiangnan on the road talking with Guo Jing. They heard Zhu Cong speak of the precious Han Xie [Blood-Sweating] horse's origin and intended to steal it and give it to Ouyang Ke as a gift; but they failed in their attempt.

Ouyang Ke was very proud of his collection of concubines and knew that they were the most beautiful women in the world. Not even the ladies of the imperial palaces of the Jin and Song Dynasties could compare with them. How could he have thought that he would meet a beauty like Huang Rong in the Zhao Palace? He saw that her eyes were bright, her cheeks tender and though still very young, her body was graceful. Her beauty was unsurpassed and none of his numerous mistresses could compare to her. When she displayed her exquisite martial arts skills, his heart fluttered. Now, as he listened to her friendly voice and the soft and gentle words, he felt his heart burn and his bones going soft. He could not say a word.

Huang Rong, "I have to go. If they try to stop me, you will help me, won't you?"

Ouyang Ke smiled, "If you want me to help you, then you must obey me as your teacher and stay with me forever."

Huang Rong answered, "Obeisance to the Shifu does not mean staying with him forever!"

Ouyang Ke said, "My disciples are different. They're all women so they follow me wherever I go. I only need to call and they will come."

Huang Rong tossed her head and laughed as she said, "I do not believe it."

Ouyang Ke whistled and at once about twenty white-clad women appeared at the entrance. Whether they were fair or dark, amply built or thin, all of them wore the same style of clothes. Their carriage was proud and their smiles seductive as they focused their eyes on Ouyang Ke. During the banquet earlier in the Fragrant Snow Hall, these mistresses remained outside the wall. This was the first time Peng Lianhu and the others saw them and in their hearts, they were envious of his good fortune.

When Huang Rong challenged him into calling his mistresses, her intention was to cause a disruption in the hall, and take the opportunity to escape; but who would have thought that Ouyang Ke anticipated her thoughts? He looked at the group of women and signaled them with his folded fan to stay in the entrance. Then, casting a sidelong glance at Huang Rong, he appeared casual and self-satisfied. The mistresses looked at Huang Rong fixedly; some of them feeling inferior while others felt jealousy in their hearts. They knew that the pretty girl had somehow caught the eye of Master Shifu's son. They could not allow her to become another one of his 'female disciples' because he might, thereafter, stop doting on them. These mistresses

gathered around him tightly, making it difficult for Huang Rong to rush out through the door.

Seeing that the situation was not favorable, Huang Rong said, "You prefer a real fight? You want me to obey you as my teacher, which is something I've never done before, and I don't want to cause any embarrassment."

Ouyang Ke asked, "Is it possible that you don't want to try?"

"OK, I will." Huang Rong answered.

Ouyang Ke said, "Good, then come. Don't be afraid. I won't hit you back."

Huang Rong said, "Why? If you don't hit back, I'll win, won't I?"

Ouyang Ke said smiling, "Even if you hit me, I'll still like you. How can I hit you back?" The crowd snickered at his frivolous manner but they were also wondering, "This young girl's kung fu is not weak. Even if you are ten times stronger, how do you expect to defeat her? What magic are you going to use?"

Huang Rong said, "I don't believe you're really not going to hit back. I must tie up both your hands."

Ouyang Ke then loosened the sash around his waist to give it to her. He folded his hands behind his back and walked towards her. Huang Rong saw that he seemed harmless but her mind continued to work. Although her face remained smiling, in her heart she was actually feeling more and more anxious as she paced back and forth for a while, thinking, "I have to be careful with my steps." Thereupon, she took the sash, spread both her hands, pulled on opposite sides, but the cloth was strong as though it was made of silk so that even though she used internal energy,

she still could not tear it. She immediately tied up his hands and smiled as she said, "How will we know who loses or who wins?"

Ouyang Ke stretched out his right foot, while keeping his left foot anchored, which left about three feet of distance in between. He proceeded to move his right foot against the brick floor, creating a sound like flowing water, until he made a complete circle six feet in diameter. Creating such a circle was no easy task and thus displayed his great internal energy. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the others all looked on with admiration. Ouyang Ke stepped into the circle and said, "Whoever steps out of the circle loses."

Huang Rong said, "And if we both leave the circle?"

Ouyang Ke said, "Then, I lose."

Huang Rong answered, "If you lose, you won't try to chase or stop me?"

Ouyang Ke replied, "Naturally. But if you leave the circle, that will result in you becoming my little darling. Everyone here is witness to that."

Huang Rong replied, "Alright!"

She stepped into the circle, her left palm performing the 'Encircling the Wind to Stroke the Willow' [Hui Feng Fu Liu] and her right palm the 'River of Stars in the Sky' [Xing He Zai Tian]. The left was light and the right was heavy, both hands exerting hard and soft forces. Ouyang Ke dodged slightly and both his shoulders were struck at the same time. Huang Rong encountered the force coming out of his body, startled to find that this Ouyang Ke's internal energy was truly profound. Though he remained true to his word of not hitting back, he actually borrowed the force she used and used it as his own so that no matter how many

times she hit him, he was always able to retaliate immediately. His hands remained motionless but Huang Rong was unsteady, almost falling out of the circle. This was why she did not dare to attack for the moment as she paced inside the circle. Then she said, "If I leave, that doesn't mean you've won. You said before that if both of us leave the circle, you lose."

Ouyang Ke looked shocked as he watched Huang Rong jog out of the circle. She was afraid that a long delay might cause more complications so she quickened her footsteps. With her golden bangles sparkling and her flowing robes fluttering in the wind, she rushed towards the entrance. Ouyang Ke shouted loudly, "I've been tricked!" He could only shout a warning but could not pursue. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the others saw how Huang Rong cleverly tricked Ouyang Ke and could not stop themselves from laughing loudly.

Huang Rong was just about to reach the entrance when a fierce sound could be heard coming from above and a large body suddenly dropped from nowhere. She moved sideways to avoid it, suppressing her fear at this unknown thing. She saw a person sitting down in a large round-backed wooden armchair; it was that tall Tibetan monk. He was wearing a red gown and even though he was seated, he was still able to tower over her. The skill with which he was able to leap high with the chair still stuck to his body was no ordinary feat. Huang Rong was just about to speak when she suddenly saw the Tibetan monk whip out a pair of cymbals from beneath his robes. He struck them together, releasing a shocking, deafening sound, before opening them like a flower and sending both, one on top of the other, flying fiercely towards her. The cymbals turned into a blur of shining metal, moving so fast it seemed there were a dozen of them. She tried to fend them off but the cymbals

suddenly became three. Startled, she turned only to find the cymbals still drawing nearer. She dashed forward, dodging, before immediately darting away; then reversed directions while sending out a right palm towards the top cymbal and her left foot flicked towards the two cymbals at the bottom. The two cymbals separated so that they were able to fly past. Her fierce stance was unusual but the cymbals were able to avoid it and Ling Zhi then leapt forward. He executed his 'Big Hand Imprint' [Da Shou Yin] towards her. Huang Rong was hit, the blow sending her violently towards the center of the crowd.

Everyone shouted in alarm at seeing the young girl hit by Ling Zhi's great palm, which had probably broken several bones and caused severe internal injuries. Ouyang Ke shouted, "Show mercy!" But was there enough time? He saw Ling Zhi's great palm strike her on the back, but also saw that the hand was withdrawn immediately, its owner cursing loudly. Huang Rong used the force of his palm to run out of the hall. He heard her clear laughter as though she was not injured at all. He expected that Ling Zhi's palm was strong but what he did not know was that before the palm could hit her fully, it was rapidly withdrawn so that the force behind the blow was greatly diminished.

The crowd watched with rapt attention when they heard Ling Zhi roar again and again, his right palm dripping with blood. He lifted it and saw ten small punctures. His features changed as he remembered, shouting, "Soft Hedgehog Armor...Soft Hedgehog Armor!" His voice revealed his great surprise, his anger, and his pain.

Startled, Peng Lianhu asked, "This girl was wearing 'Soft Hedgehog Armor'? That is the treasure of Peach Blossom Island [Taohua Island]!"

Sha Tongtian wondered, "How could someone her age get a hold of the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor'?"

Missing Huang Rong, Ouyang Ke ran out the entrance but he could barely see anything in the darkness. Not knowing where she was, he whistled for his concubines and ordered them to track her down. In his heart, he was secretly relieved, "It's good that she was able to escape and did not get injured. Good or bad, I must have her hand."

Hou Tonghai asked, "Shi Ge (Elder Martial Brother), what is this soft hedgehog armor?"

Peng Lianhu snapped, "Have you seen a hedgehog?"

Hou Tonghai nodded, "Of course."

Peng Lianhu replied, "Under her clothes next to the skin, she wears a sort of soft armor. Though soft, this armor can withstand the thrust of a sword or a spear. Moreover, it is covered with spines like those of a hedgehog. A single kick or punch will be enough to get you pricked!"

Hou Tonghai bit his tongue, thinking, "It's good that I wasn't able to hit that 'smelly boy'!"

Sha Tongtian said, "I'll get her back!"

Hou Tonghai looked at him and said, "Shi Ge, she... You can't touch her body."

Sha Tongtian, "Who asked for your opinion? I can still grab her hair."

Hou Tonghai replied, "Right, right, why didn't I think of that? Shi Ge, you are truly intelligent." Then both apprentice brothers and Peng Lianhu gave chase.

By now, Prince Zhao Wanyan Honglie heard the worried report from his son and learned that the princess had been taken prisoner. Angered, both father and son, together with their personal guards left the palace to chase after the culprits. At the same time, Tang Zude led another group of armed guards to search for and arrest the intruder. The palace was on full alert.

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Guo Jing had run into Liang Ziwong near the wall, but how could he just extend his neck and let him drink his blood? Shocked, he turned around and fled. He did not know which way was north or south so he decided to hide someplace. Liang Ziwong really wanted to drink his blood and did not slow down in the slightest. It was a good thing that Guo Jing's lightness kung fu was good; otherwise, even though the night was dark, he would have been captured a long time ago. The light from the torch died and he could no longer see where he was going; only sensing that he had somehow stepped into a thorny area where the ground was rugged and rocky. More people were coming out of the palace, so there was no time for Guo Jing to deliberate. The bristling thorns cut his legs, but when he thought about Liang Ziwong biting his throat, he could not let the tiny thorns bother him. Not even a mountain or forest of swords could stop him.

Suddenly, he felt the ground beneath him disappear, causing him to call out as he started to drop, falling some 45 feet into an extremely deep pit. While his body was in midair, he circulated his internal energy so that he would not lose his balance when he landed and to prevent himself from getting injured. But who would have thought that his feet would land on round stones? He lost his balance and fell down on his rear. His hands, which supported him, clutched one of these round stones. Fear shot through him

as he felt these round stones with his fingers; he realized that these stones were actually the skulls of dead people. It seemed that this deep hole was where the corpses of people executed at the Zhao Palace were dumped. He heard Liang Ziwong call out from above, "Boy, come up here!"

Guo Jing thought, "I'm not stupid enough to come up only to die!" With that, he raised his hand trying to touch the back of the pit, but he felt nothing. He moved forward, ready to defend himself against Liang Ziwong, who might follow him and try to kill him.

After shouting several curses, Liang Ziwong thought that perhaps Guo Jing could not get back up and shouted angrily, "Even if you run all the way to hell, this old man will still come after you!" Taking a deep breath, he jumped down.

Greatly surprised, Guo Jing took several steps back only to find empty space behind him. He turned around and stretched both his arms out trying to feel his way. As he continued on, he discovered that it was actually a tunnel.

Liang Ziwong also noticed the tunnel. His boldness was brought on by his high skill so that even though it was so dark that he could not see his five fingers, he was not afraid that Guo Jing would be laying an ambush for him. He followed, liking the situation even more, thinking, "This is just like seizing a turtle in a jar. This boy can't get away again. How can I not drink his blood now?"

Guo Jing was quite worried. Tunnels always have a dead end! Liang Ziwong was laughing loudly, both arms spread as he traced the tunnel walls. He was not impatient and took his steps slowly, one at a time.

Guo Jing ran several feet forward when he realized that the tunnel had ended, revealing an earthen cavern. Liang

Ziwong also followed, laughing, "The peasant boy wants to run away but to where?"

Suddenly, from the left corner came an eerie, raspy voice which said, "Who is it that acts unruly in here?"

Neither of them expected that someone lived in this black pit; but they could not deny this sound. The voice, though raspy, actually rumbled like thunder in their ears. Guo Jing was frightened and his heart was pumping madly. Liang Ziwong also could not restrain himself from feeling absolutely terrified. They heard the gloomy voice say, "Those who enter my cave are already rotting. Are you that impatient to die?" The voice now began to resemble that of a woman, anxious and breathing heavily as though she had contracted a serious illness.

When the two people realized that the voice did not belong to any ghost, their fears subsided. Guo Jing listened to her words and hurried to explain, "I did not mean to come here; some people are after me..."

Before he could finish his words, Liang Ziwong was able to discern where he was. He dashed forward, stretching his hands out to take him. Guo Jing heard the rustle caused by his palm and hastily dodged. Liang Ziwong changed directions at once, forcing Guo Jing to dodge once more to the right. It was pitch dark, so one could only grab aimlessly, while the other could only dodge blindly. Suddenly, there was a ripping sound. Liang Ziwong had taken hold of Guo Jing's left sleeve. The woman angrily said, "Who dares to capture a person here?"

Liang Ziwong scolded, "You disguise yourself like a crafty ghost. Are you trying to frighten me?"

Sounding asthmatic, the woman began to breathe heavily as she said, "Hmph, the young fellow can come here and

hide."

Guo Jing had thought that the situation he was in was hopeless and extremely critical, but when he heard her say that, without hesitation, he jumped to her just as he felt Liang's five icy cold fingers touch his wrist. They were much stronger than him so that when he was pulled by her, his body was not able to resist being thrown forward and felt himself growing numb. Gasping for breath, the woman said to Liang Ziwong, "You were able to grasp him adeptly which means your strength is not trifling. You are from beyond the mountain pass?"

Liang Ziwong was shocked as he thought, "I cannot see even half of her, how is it possible she was able to recognize my martial arts? Is she capable of seeing things in the dark? This woman must be an old eccentric who's proud and strict!" He did not dare to say anything careless or indiscreet and instead said pleasantly, "This lowly one, who is an invited guest here from Guandong, is surnamed Liang. This boy stole something from me and I'm trying to get it back. I ask your Excellency not to interfere."

The woman said, "Ah, is the 'Ginseng Immortal' Liang Ziwong trying to right a wrong? The other person seems unaware of it. I have no desire to interfere but after he came into my cave, the crime cannot be pursued. Lao Liang, you are an expert martial artist, don't you understand the rules of Wulin?"

Liang Ziwong was even more surprised and asked, "May I ask the name of your Excellency?"

The woman said, "I... I..." Guo Jing felt the hand grasping his wrist shiver violently, the fingers slowly beginning to loosen and he also heard her trying to keep down a groan

as though she was in extreme pain. He asked, "You are sick?"

Liang Ziwong's high kung fu allowed him to hear her groan and surmised that this person had lost her skills, not from a sickness, but from an injury which greatly weakened her. He immediately applied strength to his arms, sending both hands together to grasp Guo Jing's chest. He managed to brush against his clothing, waiting for his fingers to grab hold, when he suddenly felt a strong force meeting his wrists. Shocked, Liang Ziwong discovered that when he sent out his left hand, he'd managed to grab the woman's arm. The woman shouted angrily, "Prepare yourself!" A palm hit Liang Ziwong's back which forced him to take several steps back. Fortunately for him, his internal energy was good enough so that he was not injured.

Liang Ziwong said, "Mother-in-law of a thief [Hao zei po]! (The thief in question is Guo Jing.) Come here." When the woman continued gasping for breath and remained motionless, Liang Ziwong realized that she could not move the lower part of her body. His fear was immediately reduced and he began to slowly approach. He was just about to jump forward to attack when he suddenly felt something curl around his ankles. This thing was like a soft whip; silent and un-noticed. Greatly alarmed, he quickly tried to resist it, but the whip was able to lift his body in a flash. He tried to aim a kick at the woman just as the top of his head hit the earthen wall.

His leg kung fu was of a high level, unmatched in Wulin, which gave him more than twenty years of great prestige outside the mountain pass. This leg move, when executed, was incomparably fierce. Who would have thought that before the tip of his toe met its target, he would suddenly feel his 'Flushing Out the Sun' accupoint [Chong Yang Xue] growing numb. He immediately dodged, greatly alarmed.

This 'Flushing Out the Sun' point is located five inches from the instep of the foot. If this vital point was sealed by an opponent, his whole leg would grow numb. Luckily, he was able to withdraw his foot quickly; but the action of kicking and suddenly withdrawing caused his knee to ache.

As he dodged, Liang Ziwing thought, "This person lives in this dark cave but acts as though she is dwelling in a bright and sunny place. She was able to accurately find my vital point, how can she not be a witch or a demon?"

Realizing the critical situation he was in, he executed a half somersault to avoid the attack, and sent out a backward palm in an effort to shake her off. His palm was ten times stronger than before, and he thought that this asthmatic sounding person definitely would not have the internal energy to resist. Then he suddenly heard a loud cry as he felt the enemy's arm heading violently towards him, the fingertips already making contact with his shoulder. Liang Ziwing's left hand felt the opponent's ice-cold wrist, her body, appearing as though it was not made of flesh and bone, once more tried to attack. He immediately rolled away and rushed out using his hands and feet to crawl out of the tunnel. Panting heavily he thought, "I have lived for dozens of years but I have never encountered such a strange event! I don't even know if she is a woman or a ghost! I must inform the prince of this matter." He hastily ran back to the Fragrant Snow Hall. On the way, he thought: "I don't know if that creature is a woman ghost or female demon, but now that the boy has fallen into her hands, she will naturally suck all that precious blood from his body." He sighed and thought, "Due to a strange combination of circumstances I met that thieving boy. Then, after raising the snake and refining its blood, I had to run into that female ghost. I nearly lost my life in both encounters. Could the fabrication of the pill of longevity

really be against the will of Heaven and envied by ghosts and deities, so that I would fail on the verge of success?"

When Guo Jing heard him moving farther and farther away, he felt greatly relieved and fell on his knees, kowtowing to the woman as he said, "Junior politely thanks old senior for saving his life."

The woman had been able to match Liang Ziwing's moves earlier, but now she was exhausted, causing her injury to act up. She coughed and wheezed as she said, "Why did the old Monster want to kill you?"

Guo Jing, "Taoist Elder Wang was injured and needed medicine to treat his injuries. The disciple then came to the palace to..." Suddenly, he thought, "This person lives in the Zhao Palace compound, how do I know she's not in league with Wanyan Honglie?" He stopped talking immediately.

The woman said, "Mmm, so you have stolen the old Monster's medicine. I have heard that he is very knowledgeable in the research of medicines and their properties, so you must have stolen a miraculous pill or a marvelous drug."

Guo Jing, "I took some of his medicine to treat an internal injury, but he was so angry he wanted to kill me. Is the old senior injured? Disciple has several medicines, four samples of 'pseudo ginseng', 'dragons blood', 'bear's gall', and 'myrrh'. Taoist Elder Wang does not have to use all of it, if old senior..."

The woman angrily said, "Whether I'm injured or not, what concern is it of yours?"

At this juncture, Guo Jing could only say hastily, "Yes, yes." But after only a moment, he heard her gasping for breath

and could not restrain himself from saying again, "If old senior cannot walk, junior offers to carry you out of here."

The woman scolded, "Who is old? Who are you to say that someone is old?"

Guo Jing no longer dared to utter a sound, thinking that she did not want to leave. However, he had always been unable to stay content with half answers, so even though he knew that he ought to keep his silence he once again asked, "Whatever you want, I can go get it for you."

The woman laughed coldly and said, "You are as nosy as a woman but your heart is good." She stretched out her left hand to pull on his shoulders. Guo Jing felt his shoulder snap and the sharp pain that followed, but he was able to keep himself from falling on top of her. He suddenly felt an icy coldness as the woman's arm wound around his neck. Then he heard her bark the order, "Carry me to the exit."

Guo Jing thought, "That's what I offered in the first place!" Thereupon, he bent at the waist and slowly made his way out of the tunnel.

The woman said, "I am compelling you to carry me on your back. I won't owe anyone any favors." It was then that Guo Jing understood that this woman was very arrogant and was unwilling to receive any kindness from her juniors. As he walked out, he raised his head and saw the stars in the sky. He could not help letting out a sigh as he thought; "Only a moment ago, I was saved from death when I fell into this black hole and there was someone waiting to help me. If I told Rong'er about this, even she would not believe it. He was used to climbing cliffs with Ma Yu and even though that hole was like a deep well, he was actually able to climb up effortlessly.

As soon as they exited the hole, the woman asked, "Who taught you your lightness kung fu? Tell me quickly!" Her arm suddenly tightened, compressing Guo Jing's throat so he was gasping for breath. Alarmed, he hastily circulated his internal energy to resist. The woman was intentionally trying to test his skill by tightening her grip, but she paused before gradually relaxing.

She loudly exclaimed, "Surprise, the peasant boy knows the internal energy skills of the Taoist orthodox school. You said that Taoist Elder Wang was injured, by what name is this Taoist priest called?"

Guo Jing thought, "You have rescued me, so whatever you ask, I will answer you truthfully. To do otherwise would be barbaric!" He immediately replied, "Taoist Elder Wang is Wang Chuyi, but others call him the 'Jade Sun'."

Suddenly, he felt the woman on his back begin to shake and heard her breathe out heavily, "You are a Quanzhen Sect disciple? That...that is very good." As soon as she said this, she could not contain her delight and she went on to ask, "Who is Wang Chuyi to you? Why do you call him 'Taoist Elder'? Why not Shifu [master], Shi Zi (martial uncle younger than a person's Shifu), or Shi Bo (martial uncle older than a person's Shifu)?"

Guo Jing, "I am not a Quanzhen Sect disciple, but 'Scarlet Sun' Ma Yu taught me his breathing techniques."

The woman said, "Mmm, so you studied the internal energy methods of the Quanzhen. That is good." After a moment, she asked, "Who then is your Shifu?"

Guo Jing replied, "Disciple has seven teachers, the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan. First Shifu is called 'Soaring Through the Heavens Bat' and is surnamed Ke."

The woman began coughing violently, the sound bitter and sour as she said, "That is Ke Zhen'E!"

Guo Jing, "Yes."

The woman said, "You come from Mongolia?"

Guo Jing said, "Yes." But in his heart, he wondered, "How did she know I come from Mongolia?"

The woman said slowly, "Your name is Yang Kang, is it not?" Her tone of voice changed from gloomy to angry.

Guo Jing said, "No. Disciple is surnamed Guo."

The woman hesitated for a moment before saying, "You sit on the ground."

Guo Jing did what he was told and sat down. The woman then reached inside her bosom to fish out an object which she placed on the ground. This object was wrapped in a piece of cloth. When she revealed the thing, the star light shone on it, showing a dazzling and impressive looking dagger handle. Guo Jing thought it looked familiar and so he took a closer look; the dagger continued to shine brightly and on its handle were engraved the two characters 'Yang Kang'. It was indeed the knife he'd used to kill 'Copper Corpse' Chen Xuanfeng. The year that Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin met 'Eternal Spring' Qiu Chuji, he gave them daggers as presents. Both made the promise that if their wives gave birth to sons, the sons would become sworn brothers and if two daughters, they would become sworn sisters. However, if they are of different genders, then they would become husband and wife. The two fathers then exchanged their daggers as a token of their faith. This was the reason why the dagger with the inscription 'Yang Kang' ended up in Guo Jing's hands. When he was younger, he did not know what the two characters

'Yang Kang' meant but the shape of the dagger was enough for him to recognize it. He thought, "Yang Kang...Yang Kang?" But he did not remember that this name had been spoken by the princess only minutes ago.

While he was hesitating, the woman clamped his hand to prevent him grabbing the dagger as she shouted, "You recognize this dagger, do you not?" If Guo Jing was more quick-witted and heard how sad and shrill her voice sounded, he would have felt compelled to turn his head and look at her. Instead, he thought only of the other's kindness in saving his life, "This person saved my life. Certainly, that means she is a good person." Therefore, he was not the least bit suspicious as he immediately replied, "Ah, yes! When I was young, I once used this dagger to kill an evil man. That evil man suddenly disappeared, along with the precious dagger ..."

As he spoke, he felt the arm around his neck tighten suddenly, strangling him. In the midst of danger, he bent his arm and pushed it backwards but his wrist was held by that woman's outstretched left hand. The woman later relaxed her right arm, allowing her body to drop so that she was sitting on the ground as she shouted, "Who do you think I am?"

Guo Jing had been throttled by her earlier, making him see stars, so it took him a moment to recover. Afterwards, he looked at her only glimpsing, through her shawl of long hair, a face like white paper; it was the face of 'Iron Corpse' of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', Mei Chaofeng. Frightened out of his wits, he lifted his left hand to struggle but with her fingers digging into his flesh, how could he escape? In his mind was confusion, "How come? Why did she save my life? It can't be! But she really is Mei Chaofeng!"

Mei Chaofeng sat on the ground, her right hand clutching Guo Jing's neck, her left holding his wrist. For more than ten years, she had been searching for the man who killed her husband and now, suddenly, he was here. "Is it the work of my 'Bastard' husband from below, to have that person die in my hands?" In her heart she was delighted beyond measure; but this was quickly overcome by grief as past events from her life, no matter how much she fought it, came to her in brief flashes.

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She thought, "I was once an innocent young girl who played around and joked all day. My parents treated me as their most precious treasure to which they were much attached. At that time, I was called Mei Ruohua. However, my unfortunate parents died one after another, forcing me to suffer under an evil person. Shifu Huang Yaoshi rescued me and brought me to Taohua Island (Peach Blossom Island) where he accepted me into his school. My name was changed to Mei Chaofeng, for each of his disciples bore the character for "wind" [feng] in their names. Under the peach trees, I saw rugged looking youths standing in front of me. One of them picked a bright red peach and gave it to me to eat. That was apprentice brother Chen Xuanfeng. Among Shifu's disciples, he was the second; I was the third. We practiced kung fu together. He often taught me and treated me very well. Even though he sometimes scolded me for not studying hard, I knew he was only doing what was good for me. Slowly, as everyone grew up, I had him in my heart and he had me in his heart. One spring evening, when the peach blossoms were turning a brilliant red, he suddenly embraced me under a peach tree." A blush colored Mei Chaofeng's face and Guo Jing heard her laborious breathing intensify. Then, she let out a soft, gentle sigh.

Mei Chaofeng recalled how she and Chen Xuanfeng secretly married each other and how they feared their Shifu's punishment. When they ran away from the Island, her husband told her to steal the second book of the 'Nine Yin Manual' [Jiu Yin Zhen Jing]. Later, they settled on a remote mountain where they trained hard; but after practicing for half a year, her husband said that he could not understand the true meaning of the text. He wanted to smash his head out of frustration. That same year, my husband said, "My 'Shrew', we only stole one half of the 'Nine Yin Manual'. The first half contains the foundation principles needed to practice these secret kung fu techniques. The kung fu scripture belongs to the Taoists and what our Shifu taught us is completely different. We can't master this, what do you suggest we do?" I said, "What choice do we have?" He said, "Return to Taohua Island." How would I dare to go back? Both our skills had become ten times stronger but our Shifu would only have to use two fingers to defeat us. My husband was also afraid but knowing how many wonderful techniques he could not practice, he was willing to die for them. He had made up his mind to steal the first part and said, "If we are going to be the unmatched couple under the heavens, then 'My Shrew' must be prepared to be a widow." I did not wish to be a widow! If one must die, then the other must also die in the same place. Both of us decided to risk our lives by going back. We found out later that after we ran away, Shifu, in a great fit of anger, broke the legs of all his disciples and expelled them from his island. That was why there was only him, his wife, the two of us, and his servants. When we arrived at Taohua Island, we discovered two people engaged in a fight. Shifu's opponent looked like an expert. The two of them were arguing about the 'Nine Yin Manual' and as they quarreled, one of them opened with a recognizable move. This person was Quanzhen Sect and although he spoke foolish words, his kung fu was very high and had reached a level which I

could not even imagine. But Shifu, when compared to him, had a better chance of winning. Witnessing this martial arts duel only served to frighten us out of our wits. I said quietly, "My Bastard, we are inferior. Let's get away!" But he was not willing. We watched as Shifu grabbed his opponent and forced him to take an oath of never voluntarily leaving the Island. Remembering that Shifu's wife used to treat me with kindness, I decided to look for her through the window of their home. Who would have thought that all I would see was a mourning hall? Shifu's wife had passed away. In my heart, I felt very sad. Shifu's wife always treated me well but now that she's dead, Shifu was alone. I really felt sorry for him and I couldn't stand it. While I was crying, I suddenly saw, near the mourning hall, a one-year old girl, sitting straight up in a chair and smiling at me. This girl really looked like my Shifu's wife so I supposed she was their daughter. Was it because of childbirth that she died? I was thinking about this when Shifu noticed me. He flew from the mourning hall and stepped outside. I was so frightened, my feet grew weak and I couldn't move. I heard the girl laughing and calling, "Daddy, hugs!" Her smile was like a flower as she opened her arms towards Shifu. That girl saved my life. Shifu feared that she would fall down and so stretched out a hand to grab her. My husband then pulled me away and we both dashed out and stole a boat with sea water splashing inside. My heart was thumping so hard, it seemed like it was going to jump out of my throat.

'My Bastard' saw Shifu fighting and had immediately lost heart. He said, "Not only have we not learned a tenth of Shifu's kung fu, but we now see this Quanzhen master, how can we compare to them?" I said, "You regret coming here? If the Shifu can do it, then one day we can also learn his kung fu." He said, "If you don't regret it, then I do not regret it." Thereafter, he used the fiercest martial arts methods he could find and taught me everything. He said

that although this method was heretical, it allowed us to increase our skills.

In the beginning, our abilities became astounding and as we ran amok in Jianghu, we earned the nickname of 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Shen Long who flew through the sky with his axe exorcising evil spirits, was it my husband who killed him or was it me? My memory is not too clear as to who killed who but it is all the same in any case. One day, when we were practicing the 'Destroying Heart Palm' [Cui Xin Zhang] in the temple ruins, suddenly, from all directions, appeared dozens of skilled people. They were led by our fellow apprentice, Lu Chengfeng. He hated us after Shifu broke his legs and gathered a large group of people to help him capture us to give to Shifu. This man really thought that he could defeat us. Humph, the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' are not that easy to defeat. Though we were able to kill seventy-eight men and run away, we were also heavily injured. After several months, we found out that the Quanzhen Seven Masters were also secretly following us. We did not want to fight these opponents all at once because they were too many, so we left the Central Plains and traveled until we reached the Mongolian steppe. 'My Bastard' was worried that people would steal the Taoist scripture so he told me not to look for it. I did not know where he hid it. I said, "Good, my 'Bastard', I don't know where to find it." He said, "My 'Shrew', I will be good to you. I'll take care of you and teach you everything except the Taoist nei gong. If we force it, we could harm our bodies." I said, "Alright! What are you waiting for?" Thereupon, we continued to practice the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' [Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua] and the 'Destroying Heart Palm' [Cui Xin Zhang]. He said these two techniques were heretical and fierce but did not require one to learn nei gong. Suddenly, one evening on that stark mountainside, the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan attacked me.

"My eyes...my eyes!" The pain was burning from the poison. I crawled on the ground, clawing my eyes. I did not die but my eyes were blinded and my husband dead. That was retribution for that time when we killed that blind Ke Zhen'E's elder brother and blinded his (Ke Zhen'E) eyes.

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As Mei Chaofeng thought about this painful matter, both hands tightened instinctively and she created a noise as she ground her teeth. Guo Jing felt as if the bones in his left hand were going to break and secretly thought, "This is not good. What kind of vicious method is she going to use to kill me?" Then, he said, "Hey, I don't know what you plan to do but I want to ask you something, please agree."

Mei Chaofeng said coldly, "You want to ask me something?"

Guo Jing said, "Yes. I have medicines and I ask you to be generous. Please take these and give them to Taoist Elder Wang in the Prosperity Inn outside the city."

When Mei Chaofeng did not answer and continued to look blankly at him, Guo Jing said, "Do you agree? If so, many thanks to you!"

Mei Chaofeng said, "Many thanks for what? In all my life, I've never done any good deeds!"

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She could not call to mind how much pain she suffered in her life, nor could she recall how many people she had killed, but that night on the barren mountain, she remembered clearly. My surroundings suddenly went black and I could not even see the stars. 'My Bastard' said, "I have failed! The Taoist scripture is hidden on my chest..." These were his last words. Suddenly, a heavy rain began

and the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan began fiercely attacking me. I was hit in the back by a palm. This person's internal energy was profound; the pain from his hit reached my bones. I carried husband's corpse and escaped, descending the mountain even though I could not see. They did not pursue me which was really strange. The rain became heavier and the night had grown pitch-dark so they could not see me. I dashed about wildly in the rain. "My 'Bastard' husband's body was at first hot but afterwards, it gradually turned cold. My heart also turned cold with each minute that passed. I was shaking all over; I was very cold. "My 'Bastard' husband, are you really dead? Even with your fierce kung fu, how could you die so inexplicably? Who killed you?" I drew out a dagger from his stomach, causing the blood to spurt out. What caused this? Murdered people certainly bleed, but I did not know how many people I murdered. "I must die with my 'Bastard' husband! If no one else will call him 'My Bastard' in the netherworld, he will be lonely!" I placed the dagger to my throat and prepared to slice when suddenly, I traced two characters on the dagger handle, the characters 'Yang Kang'. "Mmm, the killer must be this person named Yang Kang. How can I not exact revenge? If I don't kill this Yang Kang first, how can I die?" Thereupon, I went through my husband's pockets, searching for the secret Taoist scripture, but even though I searched his whole body, I was not able to find a trace of it. "I must find it!" I started from his hair, not missing an inch until suddenly, while I was feeling the skin on his chest, I felt something strange.

As she had this thought, she was unable to restrain her bitter laughter. She said, "After careful investigation, I found that the 'Jiu Yin Zhen Jing' was tattooed on his chest. You were afraid that someone would steal it from you so you tattooed it on your body so it couldn't be taken away! Yes, just like Shifu's martial arts teachings, someone could also

steal the Taoist scripture from us so you came up with a way it couldn't be stolen. Your idea 'a person comes, but after he is gone, everything goes with him'. I used the dagger to cut your chest, mmm, I must tan this skin so it won't rot. I will keep it with me all the time so it will be like you are accompanying me forever." I was not sad anymore. "When I laugh, people are usually frightened even though I was smiling. I used both hands to dig a pit in the ground to bury you inside. You taught me the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua' before; I used this technique to dig your grave. I hid in a cave, afraid that the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan would find me. At that time, I was not their match but after some practice, humph, I could grab each of their hearts. Was it really dangerous to practice the Taoist nei gong? It would cause serious injuries but I was not afraid to die, but of what sort of injury? I must perfect my kung fu in the shortest time. It must have been some sort of divine intervention that 'My Bastard' tattooed the Taoist scripture on his body or with my blind eyes, what purpose would the written words have? After all these years, even when he was playing with me, he never removed the clothing on his upper body; now I know why..." When she thought about this, her face burned and she released a long sigh. What is it 'My Bastard', can you see me from the netherworld? If you married a female ghost and made it your wife, then we do not have forever...

Two days passed and I was very hungry; then suddenly I heard a large army on horseback pass by the cave. From their dialect, I knew that they were from the Jin Empire. I came out and asked them for something to eat. The leader of the army saw my pitiful state, decided to give me shelter and brought me all the way to the palace. Afterwards, I discovered that he was actually the sixth son of the Jin emperor, Prince Zhao. I swept the ground in the back gardens for them but in the evening, I secretly trained. In this manner I was able to practice for several years and no

one noticed anything. They only thought of me as a pitiful blind married woman.

One evening, that mischievous young prince went looking for bird's eggs in the garden at midnight without telling anyone. I did not see him but he saw me practicing with my silver whip and thereupon coerced me into teaching him. I taught him three moves and he learned them; he was really intelligent. Pleased with his progress, I also passed on to him the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw', and the 'Push the Heart Palm'. I wanted him to take the oath of not telling anyone, not even the prince or the princess. If he divulged it to anyone, I told him that I would capture him, break his bones, and send his soul to heaven. The young prince practiced kung fu and his foundation was not low. He said, "Shifu, I also have another male Shifu. This person is not good and I do not like him. I only like you as my Shifu. I will never reveal to him that you are teaching me. He can't compare to you. His kung fu teachings are not effective." Humph, the young prince knew how to flatter. His male Shifu was definitely not incompetent. But I only asked that he not tell him that he was studying kung fu with me and I in turn would not question him about his Shifu. Several years passed and the young prince said that Prince Zhao wanted to go to Mongolia. I asked the prince to allow me to go there with him to offer a sacrifice at my husband's grave. The young prince said to me that the prince agreed. The prince doted on him very much and whatever he asked, he agreed to.

Even if I couldn't find my husband's bones, I kept the skin from his flesh next to my own skin all day and all night. Besides, why would I offer a sacrifice at his grave? I wanted to find the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan for revenge. But my luck was not good because, unexpectedly, the Seven Elders of Quanzhen were all in Mongolia. My eyes could not see,

how could I match those seven people? 'Red Sun' Ma Yu's internal energy was profound. Even though he spoke without effort, his voice was able to travel far. But my going to Mongolia was not in vain because when I asked Ma Yu a question he answered, and passed on to me some nei gong (internal energy) secrets. After I came back to the palace, I went to the tunnel to practice diligently. But this internal energy could not be completed without guidance. Two days ago I was practicing and as I was vigorously moving around, my qi suddenly arrived in my hip area and I could not move it back up. Because of this, the lower part of my body suffered seriously. If the young prince did not look for me, how would anyone know that I had an accident while practicing? Had this Guo boy not rushed in here, I would have starved to death in that tunnel. Humph, it's my husband's ghost that sent him there to rescue me so I could I kill him to avenge his death. Mei Chaofeng laughed madly; her whole body shook and her right hand suddenly made an effort to grab Guo Jing's neck. Guo Jing sensed the danger to his life at this critical moment and tried to turn her hand wrong side up by grasping her wrist, using his external strength. Because of Ma Yu's orthodox school teachings his internal energy was not weak. Mei Chaofeng could not gain a grip as she felt her hand being turned wrong side up by him, forcing it to open. Startled, she thought that this boy's kung fu was not bad!

Even after being hit three times, Guo Jing applied all his strength in that hand. Mei Chaofeng called loud and long while lifting her palm to hit him. She was using her 'Destroying Heart Palm' unique skill. Guo Jing's level of skill and hers differed too much to begin with and his left was held firmly by her, how could he move to gain an opening? But he had to exert himself to overcome her strength and lifting his right hand to block. Mei Chaofeng raised her hand to meet his only to feel her arm shake. She changed

her mind at that moment as she considered, "I practiced nei gong without anyone to guide me and it resulted in a serious injury so that my lower body can't move. I heard him say a moment ago that Ma Yu taught him the Quanzhen Sect nei gong. It would be convenient if I forced him to tell me those nei gong secrets. How can I kill him to avenge 'My Bastard' and pick his brain later? Fortunately, this boy is not dead yet." At that moment, she returned her hand again to grasp Gou Jing's neck and said, "You killed my husband, how can you still expect to live? But if you listen to what I have to say, then I'll let you die quickly, but if you're stubborn, I will let you experience suffering and misery. I'll start with your finger, biting and chewing it until everything is eaten."

She had an accident, resulting in lower body paralysis. Afterwards, she starved for days so when she said that she wanted to eat Guo Jing's finger, it was not just idle talk to intimidate him. Guo Jing felt a shiver as he saw her open mouth, showing several white teeth. He did not dare say a word.

Mei Chaofeng asked, "Ma Yu taught you how to sit properly while meditating, how is it done?"

Guo Jing then understood, "She thinks I will teach her nei gong. Then later, she will go after my six Shifus to harm them. Even if I die now, how can I let this jealous woman increase her skill and harm my six Shifus?" He shut his mouth and did not answer immediately.

Mei Chaofeng's left hand tightened and Guo Jing felt pain and biting cold, but he had made up his mind. He said, "You want to obtain the orthodox nei gong. Give up that idea."

Mei Chaofeng saw that he was tough and unyielding so she loosened her hands to let him go as she said softly, "I

promise you that I will take the medicine to Wang Chuyi and save his life.”

Guo Jing felt a shiver of cold as he thought, “Ah, this is an important change. It's good that the lower part of her body cannot move. My six Shifu have no need to fear her.” Thereupon he said, “Alright, you make an oath and I in return will pass on to you the training methods.”

Mei Chaofeng was extremely happy and said, “Surname of Guo... This boy with the surname of Guo said that he will teach me the Quanzhen Sect nei gong methods. If I, Mei Chaofeng, do not deliver the medicine to Wang Chuyi, may my entire body lose its movement and forever endure misery.”

As soon as she said this, to their left some ten zhang in front of the palace, a person scolded, “Stinky boy, come out here and die!”

When Guo Jing heard the voice, he recognized it as the Three-Headed Dragon Hou Tonghai. Another one said, “Surely, the small girl is nearby. I'm relieved. She can't run away.” The same time that the two people were talking, they were also walking away.

Guo Jing was startled; Rong'er had not left yet and allowed them to follow her trail. Changing his intent, he turned to Mei Chaofeng and said, “You still need to do one more thing, otherwise, no matter what you force me to endure, I won't tell you the secrets.”

Mei Chaofeng got angry, “What is this other thing? I don't agree.”

Guo Jing said, “I have a good friend, a young girl. The experts from the palace are chasing her. You must rescue her and get her out of danger.”

Mei Chaofeng grunted and said, "How would I know where she is? If you want me to do it then quickly, tell me the nei gong secret!" Her arm immediately tightened.

Guo Jing felt his throat constrict, causing him great alarm. However, he was still unyielding and said, "Rescue... You said... Did not say..."

Having no other alternative, Mei Chaofeng said, "Alright, I'm depending on you but don't think that Mei Chaofeng does things to please others. Today is the exception, you stinky boy. This young girl is your sweetheart? You're full of affection but dumb. We made a deal and I'm only doing my part. I have agreed to rescue your sweetheart but I haven't consented to spare your life."

Guo Jing heard her agree and was glad. Then he raised his voice and called out, 'Rong'er, come here! Rong'er...'

Just after calling twice, Huang Rong's figure suddenly appeared from behind some rose shrubs nearby. She said, "I'm already here!"

Guo Jing was delighted, "Rong'er, come quickly. She agreed to help you. The others can't harm you now."

Huang Rong had been listening to Guo Jing and Mei Chaofeng for some time from behind the rose shrubs. She heard how he gave no thought to his own life and never forgot about her safety. In gratitude, two tear drops rolled down her cheeks as she shouted at Mei Chaofeng, "Mei Ruohua, let him go!"

'Mei Ruohua' was Mei Chaofeng's name before her master changed it. No one in Jianghu knew and for dozens of years, she had not heard these three characters uttered by anyone. However, today it was being shouted by this person. Greatly surprised, she asked, "Who are you?"

Huang Rong said clearly, “The peach blossom shade leaves behind the divine sword, the jade ocean current gives life to the jade flute!’ I am surnamed Huang.”

Mei Chaofeng was even more startled and could only stammer, “You... You... You...”

Huang Rong called out, “You what? The east China sea Taohua Island snapping finger, the pure sound of the cave, the green bamboo forest, the Trial Sword Pavilion, you also remember?”

Mei Chaofeng knew these places from her discipleship and when she heard them mentioned now, a sudden thought came to her and she asked, “Taohua Island’s Huang... Shifu Huang, is...is...What is he to you?”

Huang Rong said, “Since you have not forgotten my father, he has not forgotten you, either. He is coming to look for you!”

Mei Chaofeng wanted to turn around and flee but how could she move a foot even one step? Frightened out of her wits and shocked, she could only clench her teeth, making a grating sound. She did not know what to do.

Huang Rong called out, “Quickly release him.”

Mei Chaofeng suddenly remembered, “Shifu swore that he would never leave Taohua Island, how could he be here? It was only because of this that I and ‘My Bastard’ stole the Nine Yin Manual. He made an oath and could not leave the island to pursue us. This person is trying to deceive me. I won't let myself get confused.”

When Huang Rong saw her hesitate, her left foot pointed downwards as she leapt up ten feet and successively executed two half-circles before soaring into the air and

wielding a palm towards Mei Chaofeng's head, intending to hit her. It was the 'Fallen Hero Divine Sword Palm' [Luo Ying Shen Jian Zhang], a pillar move of the 'River Town Flying Blossom' [Jiang Cheng Fei Hua]. She called out, "My father taught you this move. Have you forgotten it?"

Mei Chaofeng heard the noise of the air rustling around her but she kept still, her suspicions still in place, though she raised her hand and softly called out, "Shi Mei [Apprentice Sister], you have spoken with Shifu?" Huang Rong let her body drop, using one hand to pull and then drag Guo Jing to her side.

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Huang Rong was the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang Yaoshi's only daughter. Before giving birth to her, her mother became ill which caused her to be physically and mentally exhausted and this led to her death after a difficult labor. Huang Yaoshi, in a fit of extreme grief, expelled all his disciples from the island, leaving the father and daughter alone there.

Huang Yaoshi was called 'Eastern Heretic' [Dong Xie] because of his peculiar conduct. He often said that the etiquette and customs of the world were nonsense. His love for his daughter was excessive and he naturally did nothing to control her and allowed her to become arrogant and willful. Although she was highly intelligent, she was not willing to focus her mind on learning martial arts. Her father had proficient knowledge of yin and yang and the five elements, and the methods from of calculating them. She was able to learn while still very young but even though her father had already reached a divine level, she was nevertheless unable to get beyond the basic Taohua Island martial arts. One day, she was playing on the island when she came upon her father's enemy imprisoned in a cave.

Feeling lonely, she talked with that person for almost half a day. That person's words were interesting to her so she returned often, seeking him out to speak with him and find relief from loneliness. Later, Huang Yaoshi found out and reproached her severely. Huang Rong had never been beaten or scolded by her father so she reacted with anger and self-pity. Her cunning and unreasonable temperament manifested itself suddenly and she took a boat to escape Taohua Island, thinking that no one cared for her there. Thus, she cut her ties to it and disguised herself as a poor, disorderly, miserable youth, wandering in all directions, though her heart was still with her father. She thought angrily, "Since you don't love me, then I will make the world feel pity for a young beggar." However, she did not count on meeting Guo Jing in Zhangjiakou [Kalgan]. At first, she went to the restaurant with him to spend his money and cause a disturbance, intending to displace her resentment towards her father on him. Who would have thought that he would be so dumb as to have no suspicions at all and talked with her as though they were old friends and showed his concern by giving her his horse. She was bitter and lonely and thought about how she had deceived him, while he continued to treat her honestly. She was touched. Since then, the two became good friends.

o0o

Huang Rong once listened to her father speak about Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng's affair in great detail and because of this, she learned Mei Chaofeng's maiden name and the lines: 'The peach blossom leaves behind the divine sword, the jade green sea gives life to the jade flute', which was the heretical couplet that hung inside the Sword Trial Pavilion and embodied the principles of Huang Yaoshi's wugong. Every Peach Blossom Island disciple knew this. Since she knew that her kung fu could not rival Mei

Chaofeng's, she lied and told her that her father was coming. As a result, Mei Chaofeng was frightened into releasing Guo Jing.

Mei thought, "If Shifu is indeed coming, how do I know that he won't kill me?" She remembered that Huang Yaoshi had a ruthless nature and his methods were cruel. She could not stop her face from growing ashen and her whole body shook as though Huang Yaoshi, his face grim, was already standing in front of her. Her body became limp. It was as though she had lost her kung fu skills as she bent towards the ground and shakily said, "Disciple's many sins make her deserving of death. But I beseech Shifu to take pity because my two eyes are blind and my lower body is handicapped. Please grant disciple leniency even though disciple is no better than a swine or a dog." Then she remembered how Huang Yaoshi used to treat her with favor. Fearing that his heart had changed, her bosom was filled with shame as she said, "No, Shifu does not need to be lenient. Punish me severely."

The whole time Guo Jing was with her, she appeared to be fierce and her manner evil. Even when faced with a great enemy or when climbing up that steep precipice, she remained unfazed as though nothing mattered. However, when Huang Rong mentioned her father, her attitude changed unexpectedly which he found very strange. Huang Rong was laughing inside as she pulled Guo Jing by the hand and led him towards the outside wall. But before they could leap over it to escape, they were stopped by a clear voice. Chuckling softly, a person came holding a fan. He laughed, "Girl, I'm not certain you can manage to climb that."

Huang Rong saw that it was Ouyang Ke. She knew his kung fu skills and knew that it would be difficult to get past him. So, she immediately turned to Mei Chaofeng and said, "Mei

Shizi [Elder Martial Sister Mei], father is always willing to listen to me. I can ask favor for you. But first, you have to do something meritorious so father can forgive you."

Mei Chaofeng asked, "What is it?"

Huang Rong said, "There's a bad person who wants to bully me. I will pretend to go along but you mustn't allow the enemy to strike or beat me. Once father comes and sees you helping me, he'll be pleased."

Mei Chaofeng, hearing that her younger apprentice sister was willing to ask her father for a favor, felt her spirits revive. As they spoke, four of Ouyang Ke's concubines arrived. Huang Rong dragged Guo Jing behind Mei Chaofeng to avoid getting in the way, waiting for Mei Chaofeng or Ouyang Ke to make opening moves and then take the opportunity to sneak off. Ouyang Ke saw Mei Chaofeng sitting on the ground, her hair disheveled and her skin covered with dirt. She tightly clutched the upper part of her bosom. Opening his fan lightly and moving forward to catch Huang Rong, he suddenly felt a force heading towards his chest. He looked down to find the woman on the ground stretching out her hand to grab him. He had never encountered such level of strength in one stance before. Shocked, he hastily struck towards her wrist with his fan and at the same time, leapt aside. He heard a mocking sound, a noise, and loud successive cries. The front piece of Ouyang Ke's jacket was torn, his fan broken in two, and his four concubines were collapsing to the ground. He took a quick look around and saw that all four women had been killed violently. Their spirits left their bodies as soon as they were hit. The tops of their heads were covered with blood and brain matter oozed out of five holes. The swiftness and viciousness of the move was extremely rare. Ouyang Ke was surprised and angry at the same time when he saw the woman still sitting motionless as though

paralyzed. His fear lessened and he quickly launched a stance passed on by his family, the 'Divine Camel Snowy Mountain Palm' [Shen Tuo Xue Shan Zhang]. His body floated as his palm prepared to attack. Mei Chaofeng's ten finger nails were sharp, each poised to grab and squeeze the air out of him as she sneered at him. How could Ouyang Ke dare get close?

Just as Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing so they could walk away, they suddenly heard a mad roar coming from behind them. Hou Tonghai's two fists were headed towards them. Huang Rong leaned slightly to one side. When Hou Tonghai saw this, he aimed for her shoulders, feeling pleased with himself. His blunt brain did not function fast enough and he belatedly remembered that she was wearing the soft hedgehog armor. He let out a loud shout, hastily withdrew his two fists, and hit his own forehead above the three bumps, yelling out in pain. Where else could he grab her besides her hair? At that moment, Sha Tongtian, Liang Ziwong, and Peng Lianhu arrived. Liang Ziwong saw Ouyang Ke engaged in a vicious fight, his long gown torn and ragged, and realized that the woman was the same one who pretended to be a ghost in the cave. Roaring angrily, he went forward to attack. Sha Tongtian and the others noted that Mei Chaofeng's stances were fierce. They were astonished and so decided to keep close watch, waiting for the first opportunity to attack. They thought, "Where does this woman's high kung fu come from?" Peng Lianhu watched and figured it out, he shouted, "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'!"

Huang Rong's body moved swiftly, first darting to the east before flashing to the west. How could Hou Tonghai grab her hair? Huang Rong noticed that his hands were always aimed at the top of her head and was able to surmise his intentions. She darted towards the rose bushes and hid

behind them. She removed her long two-pronged hairpin and inserted it up from the base of the bun in her hair. Then she poked her head out and called, "I'm over here!"

Hou Tonghai was greatly pleased, and sent out a hand to grab the top of her head as he said, "This time, you can't get away, smelly boy...Ai yo, ai yo! Shi Ge (Martial Brother), the smelly boy's head also has thorns...thorns!" His palm had been punctured by the metal tips of the hairpin and caused him to jump back in pain.

Huang Rong laughingly said, "Your head has three horns. It's not fair. I only have two horns. Let's do this again!"

Hou Tonghai replied, "No, not again!"

Sha Tongtian scolded, "Do not shout!" Then he hurried over to his side to help.

By this time, Mei Chaofeng was engaging two masters who were attacking together. Suddenly, she sent her arm back to grab Guo Jing's chest, calling out, "Hold my legs." Guo Jing did not understand what she meant but he wanted to help her fight the two powerful enemies. At her words, he immediately bent down and grabbed her legs.

Mei Chaofeng used her left hand to resist Ouyang Ke's palm while her right hand thrust towards Liang Ziwong. She said to Guo Jing, "Carry me to that old man Liang!"

Guo Jing suddenly understood, "Her lower body cannot move. She wants me to help her." Thereupon he placed Mei Chaofeng on his shoulders and hurried after the fleeing enemy. His body had a strong kung fu basis and Mei Chaofeng's body was not heavy so even though she was on his shoulders, it did nothing to diminish his speed. He quickly leapt forward and Mei Chaofeng soared along with him.

Mei Chaofeng did not forget about the nei gong secret so even though she was facing the enemy, she also asked, "When you practice nei gong, how is it done?"

Guo Jing replied, "Sit cross-legged with five hearts facing heaven."

Mei Chaofeng asked, "What does five hearts facing heaven mean?"

Guo Jing said, "The center of two palms, the center of two soles of the feet, and the center of the crown of the head – these are the five hearts." Mei Chaofeng was delighted and her spirits rose. She reached out to brush the shoulders of Liang Ziwong, whose heart jumped as he started and ran away.

Guo Jing was about to chase after him when suddenly the Dragon King Sha Tongtian ran in front of him to help his apprentice brother capture Huang Rong. Startled, he hastily carried Mei Chaofeng towards them, shouting, "First, let's take care of these two!" Mei Chaofeng stretched out her left arm, heading towards Hou Tonghai. Hou Tonghai anxiously withdrew, trying to dodge. Who would think that Mei Chaofeng's arm would be so violent as though it had the strength of an ape? Although Hou Tonghai's dodging was quick, her arm was still able to follow his body. Grabbing him, the fingers of her right hand were already digging into him. Hou Tonghai's entire body went numb. He could no longer move.

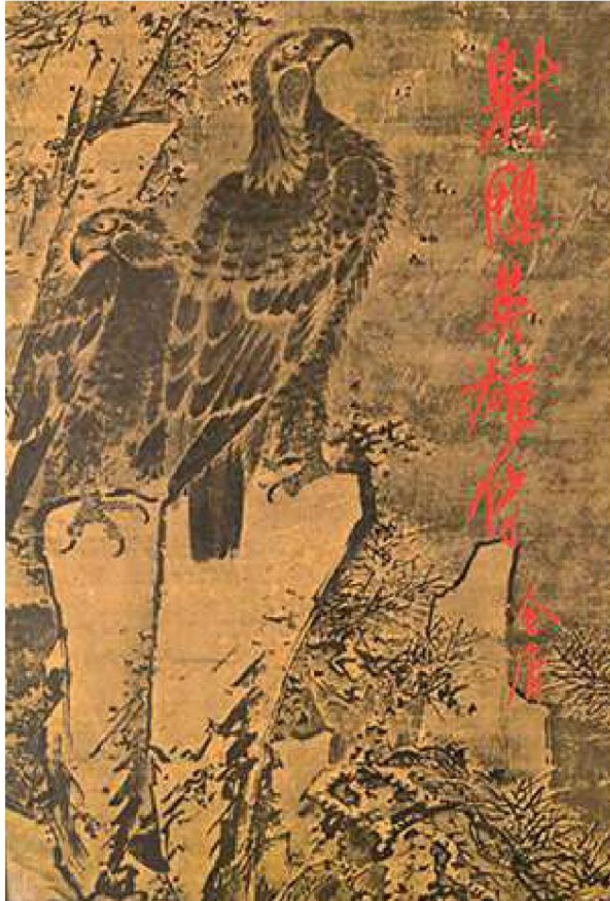
He shouted, "Spare my life, spare my life, I have surrendered!"

End of Book 1

She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan Eagle Shooting Hero Book 02

by

Jin Yong



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Minglei Huang,
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Patudo,
Taihan,
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Unfortunately there does not appear to a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to fan translators for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience.

Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 11 - Changchun Admits Defeat](#)

[Chapter 12 -The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse](#)

[Chapter 13 - The Crippled Person of Five Lake](#)

[Chapter 14 - The Master of Peach Blossom Island](#)

[Chapter 15 - The Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail](#)

[Chapter 16 - The Nine Yin Manual](#)

[Chapter 17 - Mutual Hands Combat](#)

[Chapter 18 - The Three Tests](#)

[Chapter 19 - Great Waves, School of Sharks](#)

[Chapter 20 - The Altered Manual](#)

Chapter 11 - Changchun Admits Defeat

Translated by James Worsley



On the eighth day, Guo Jing finally managed to reach the peak. Stretching out his hand, he

hauled Huang Rong up and they jumped up and down in jubilation, delirious in their triumph. Then, hand-in-hand, they slid down the waterfall once more.

Seeing his martial brother in critical danger, Sha Tongtian leapt over to quickly try and break Mei Chaofeng's grip. As soon as their hands met they both felt their arms struck by a sudden ache. Meanwhile over to their left came the sound of darts whizzing through the air. Peng Lianhu was throwing his darts directly at Mei Chaofeng. She deftly shifted her arm and threw Hou Tonghai straight towards the stream of darts. "Aiyo!" yelled Hou Tonghai as the darts smacked into his body.

Huang Rong called out "Congratulations Three-Horned Dragon! You managed to catch so many darts!"

Sha Tongtian, seeing the amazing power of Mei Chaofeng's throw and his martial brother down on the ground seriously injured, leaped towards Hou Tonghai and with a stretch of his hand pulled him upright. Hou Tonghai flew up like a paper sparrow but looked as if he would collapse again. There was no strength left in his body. Sha Tongtian had accidentally hit his three carbuncles.

All these events happened within a blink of an eye. While this was going on Ouyang Ke and Liang Ziwing were attacking Mei Chaofeng from the front and rear in concert with Sha Tongtian who was attacking from the right.

Mei Chaofeng was able to judge from the sound of the darts in the air where they were. She sent them flying back in four directions towards Ouyang, Liang, Sha and Peng. She asked Guo Jing "What does 'Gather the Five Elements' mean?"

Guo Jing replied "The eastern ghost is wood, the western soul is metal, the southern spirit is fire, the northern essence is water and the central will is earth."

Mei Chaofeng called out "Aiyo! I might have guessed that earlier! What does the 'Perform the Four Harmonious Signs' mean?"

Guo Jing replied, "Hide the eyes, concentrate the hearing, regulate the breath and seal the tongue Qi."

Mei Chaofeng sighed, "Ah, so that is the original meaning. What about the 'Five Primary Chambers'?"

Again Guo Jing replied, "Don't use your eyes to see, rather locate your soul in the liver; don't use your ears to listen, rather locate your essence in the kidneys; don't use your mouth to chant, rather locate your spirit in the heart; don't use your nose to smell, rather locate your soul in your lungs; don't move with your four limbs, rather locate your mind/concentration in your spleen. These are the 'Five Primary Chambers'."

The 'Four Harmonious Signs' and 'Five Primary Chambers' were key techniques contained in the 'Nine Yin Manual' practiced by Taoist priests. Not having anyone to explain the meanings of these key phrases to her, Mei Chaofeng had struggled without success for over ten years to understand them. Now with Guo Jing's explanations she suddenly understood everything and was delighted. Again she pressed for more information "Now, how do I perform the 'Gathering Three Flower Tops'. This technique was the crucial key to putting everything together. She had strived all those years for just this key point so she listened intently for Guo Jing's answer.

Guo Jing replied, "Essence is transformed into Qi, Qi is transformed into Spirit....."

Mei Chaofeng, by concentrating on Guo Jing's words, became less attentive to the fight and her four opponents. Just as Guo Jing was saying the two sentences she was struck on her left shoulder and right side by Ouyang Ke and Sha Tongtian's fists. She felt a severe pain that was hard to bear.

Huang Rong had planned to have Mei Chaofeng obstruct their enemies in a fight while she and Guo Jing took the opportunity to slip away. She never expected that Guo Jing would be dragged into the fight as well by becoming a conveyance to carry Mei into the battle. This made it impossible for them to get away. Now she became both worried and angry.

Meanwhile Mei Chaofeng was becoming alarmed at being suddenly put on the defensive and called out, "Hey! What did you do to annoy so many fierce opponents? Where is Shifu?" At this time Mei Chaofeng's thoughts were conflicting. On the one hand she was hoping her old Shifu would appear and see with his own eyes how she was helping to save his daughter from the savage onslaught of these four highly skilled martial artists and would leap in to help her dispatch them. On the other hand, when she thought about how wild and strange his nature was, she was struck with terror at the thought of meeting him again.

Huang Rong called out, "He's coming soon, but why worry...these guys are no match for you. Even if you just sit on the ground none of them would be able to harm a hair on your head." She was hoping that with a bit of flattery Mei Chaofeng would feel emboldened enough to let Guo Jing go and fight it out alone. However Mei Chaofeng had already begun to feel that she would not be able to manage

the four opponents by herself. She was already showing signs of despair and no amount of flattery was going to make her change her mind. Further more, she still had a few more questions to ask Guo Jing about the secrets of the manual and was not about to let him go even if she could win the fight sitting alone on the ground.

After a few more strikes were exchanged, Liang Ziwong leaped into the air with a sudden cry. Mei Chaofeng knew someone was executing a sneak attack and extended both arms to block and sweep in defense. She felt her hair being pulled upwards by Liang Ziwong. Huang Rong saw the situation was critical and struck outwards with her fist towards Liang Ziwong's back. Liang Ziwong hooked his right hand backwards and grabbed Huang Rong's wrist while maintaining his grip on Mei Chaofeng's hair. Mei Chaofeng struck upwards and forced Liang Ziwong to release his grip in order to avoid being hit by her powerful attack.

Peng Lianhu had been fighting with Mei Chaofeng for a while before he became aware that she was actually one of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'. Seeing Huang Rong aiding her he called out, "You lying brat! You denied that you are a disciple of the evil 'Dark Winds' sect but it's obvious that you are!"

Huang Rong laughed, "She...my Shifu? Even if she trained for another hundred years she still wouldn't be good enough to become my Shifu!"

Peng Lianhu saw clearly that Huang Rong's kung fu attacks were very similar to those of the 'Dark Wind's' school yet she not only continued to deny she was a disciple, but actually went so far as to insult Mei Chaofeng. He couldn't think of why she would be doing this and it astonished him.

Sha Tongtian yelled, "To kill the man, first shoot his horse!" and shot a kick towards Guo Jing with his right foot. This change of tactics took Mei Chaofeng off guard. She thought, "This kid's martial arts skills are very low. He can't possibly defend himself against their attacks. If I don't act fast I'll be dispatched by them." There was the sound of a low whistle as she bent low and shot out her hand as if to grab Sha Tongtian's foot. Ouyang Ke took advantage of this moment to launch an attack against her back. However Mei Chaofeng just let out a 'humph' and shook her right hand causing something to flash in the moonlight. All of a sudden a silver whip appeared, dancing and weaving all around her and Guo Jing, forming an impenetrable barrier.

Peng Lianhu thought to himself, "If we don't kill her now, when her husband, 'Copper Corpse' arrives, we will be in deep trouble!" The events of that night when Chen Xuanfeng died had not become known in the martial world. However the infamy of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' was widely known and their reputation was such that even highly respected martial artists such as himself were filled with dread at the thought of facing both of them together.

Mei Chaofeng's 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' was powerful in the extreme. If anyone approached from any direction they would die instantly. But Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziwing and Ouyang Ke were not about to give up so easily. Suddenly there was the sound of a whistle and Peng Lianhu began tunneling in the ground! Mei Chaofeng was prepared to defend against the sky and all four directions but not from below! At the sound of digging she became greatly alarmed and struck a palm down on the ground.

Seeing Guo Jing in danger, Huang Rong was about to rush to his aid but Mei Chaofeng was one step quicker. Using her long Silver Whip, she had already woven a defensive barrier around herself and Guo Jing, making it impossible

for Huang Rong or anyone to penetrate it. However, Huang Rong knew that with Mei Chaofeng's individual might alone, she would not be able to successfully defend against Peng Lianhu's attack for much longer. Sensing that the situation was dire, Huang Rong yelled, "Everyone hold it, I have something to say." But Peng Lianhu of course paid no heed to her. Why should he?

Huang Rong was preparing to raise her voice again when a voice from atop the wall said, "Everyone hold it, I have something to say." Huang Rong turned her head and saw six figures on top of the wall, some tall, some short and in the darkness, she could not make out their faces clearly. Peng Lianhu and the others knew that some people had arrived, but did not know if they were friend or foe. At present, the battle was growing ever more intense and nobody could bring themselves to stop. Two people leapt down from the wall and headed straight for Ouyang Ke; one waving a whip and the other raising a staff.

The short plump man that held the whip exclaimed, "You lecher, let's see you escape this time!" Upon hearing this voice, Guo Jing yelled gladly, "Shifu! Save me!" The six people that just arrived were the "Six Freaks' of Jiangnan'.

After parting from Guo Jing at the inn, the 'Freaks' had followed the eight girls from the 'White Camel Mountain'. When they discovered that Ouyang Ke was leading his concubines to abduct innocent girls at night, they fought him. After all, how could the "Six Freaks' of Jiangnan' sit by and do nothing while such atrocities were being committed? Although Ouyang Ke was highly-skilled, the "Six Freaks" had spent more than a decade on the steppe working hard and had improved significantly since they left the Central Plains. Surrounded by six fighters, Ouyang Ke was hit by Ke Zhen'E's staff and subsequently had his left little finger dislocated, courtesy of Zhu Cong's Bone

Dislocation technique. Left with no choice, Ouyang Ke was forced to leave the abducted girls behind and flee. The two concubines that had accompanied Ouyang Ke on the mission, however, were killed by Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa.

After escorting the teenage girls back to their homes, the “Six Freaks” went in pursuit of Ouyang Ke. But Ouyang Ke was extremely sly; he took another route and therefore, the “Six Freaks” were unable to locate him. They knew that, individually, none of them were his match, so they did not dare to split up to search. Fortunately, the girls who rode on white camels had a strange and distinct dress, so it was not difficult to ask around for their whereabouts. This being so, the “Six Freaks” pursued them all the way to the Zhao Palace.

Ouyang Ke’s white robes stood out in the darkness and Han Baoju together with Nan Xiren attacked immediately. Hearing Guo Jing’s call, the “Six Freaks” were both surprised and glad. Zhu Cong and the rest looked more closely and saw that the person weaving the barrier with a long silver whip was none other than ‘Iron Corpse’, Mei Chaofeng! Mei was sitting on Guo Jing’s shoulder and it certainly looked like Guo Jing had fallen into her clutches. With their faces pale with shock, Han Xiaoying immediately brandished her sword and rushed forward as Quan Jinfa tumbled into the silver whip’s defensive radius, both hoping to rescue Guo Jing. Peng Lianhu and the others thought it strange that six people should suddenly arrive. Now these six people were attacking both Ouyang Ke and Iron Corpse, making it even more impossible to tell whose side they were on.

Peng Lianhu halted his attack and, still using his ‘Earthen Palm’, got out of the whip’s radius. “Everyone stop fighting, I have something to say,” he shouted. Like a large booming

bell, his shout rang loudly in everyone's ears. Liang Ziwing and Sha Tongtian were the first to stop fighting.

Ke Zhen'E could tell from his shout that this person was a force to be reckoned with and called out, "Third brother, seventh sister, don't be rash!"

Hearing their Eldest brother's orders, Han Baoju and the rest backed off. Mei Chaofeng had also withdrawn her silver whip and was breathing hard. Huang Rong stepped forward and told her, "You have reaped much credit for yourself this time. My father will be pleased." Using both arms, she motioned to Guo Jing, telling him to toss Mei Chaofeng away.

Guo Jing understood Huang Rong, and knew that she had spoken to Mei Chaofeng to distract her. He said to her, "The 'Three Flowers Gathered Atop' is Essence transformed into Qi, Qi transformed into Spirit, Spirit transformed into Nothingness. Remember that!"

Mei Chaofeng pondered, then asked: "How does one transform?" Suddenly, she felt her body soaring through the air. While she had been dwelling on the deeper meanings of this nei gong (internal energy) mantra, Guo Jing had used the opportunity to toss her more than ten feet away. At the same time, he summoned his internal energy and leapt backwards; even before he landed, Mei's 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' was already flying towards him, its hooks sparkling brightly.

Han Baoju exclaimed, "Not good!" He unleashed his own whip and the two whips met. Suffering waves of shock from the extremely close encounter, Han Baoju's whip was snatched by her Poison Silver Dragon Whip. Just as Mei Chaofeng was about to land hard on the ground, her outstretched palm met it first and she lightly seated herself.

Having heard Ke Zhen'E's voice and fighting briefly with Han Xiaoying, she knew the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' must have arrived. Her heart was filled with loathing and, at the same time, a little fear. She thought to herself, "I have searched in vain for them everywhere and now they have delivered themselves to me. If it were any other day, I would've thanked the heavens, but on this night I am surrounded by other strong enemies and found them hard to handle. With the addition of these seven scoundrels, I cannot possibly hope to live past tonight." She gritted her teeth and decided: "I have no grudge with Liang Ziwing and the others. As for the 'Seven Freaks', I will fight them to the death and make sure that if I perish, they perish with me. One dead 'Freak' makes one less and I'll take as many as I can with me." Gripping her Poison Silver Dragon Whip, she listened carefully to the 'Seven Freaks' movements and wondered, "Out of seven only six came, I wonder where the other is hiding?" She did not know that the Smiling Buddha, Zhang Ahsheng, had been killed by her husband on that fateful night on the steppes.

The 'Six Freaks', Sha Tongtian and the others knew the power of her silver whip and stood far away from her, being careful not to stray within forty to fifty feet of her. For a moment, all was silent. Zhu Cong whispered to Guo Jing: "Why are they fighting? Why were you helping that wretch?"

Guo Jing replied: "They wanted to kill me, but she saved me." But Zhu Cong and the other Freaks remained puzzled.

Peng Lianhu called out: "What business do you have, sneaking into the Palace in the middle of the night? Provide your names."

Ke Zhen'E replied coldly: "My surname is Ke. We are seven brothers, and people call us the 'Seven Freaks of

Jiangnan’.”

Peng Lianhu said, “Ah, so it is the Seven Heroes from Jiangnan. I have long admired you.”

Sha Tongtian said in a strange voice: “Wonderful, the ‘Seven Freaks’ have come knocking on my door! I have long wanted to spar with you and see just how good you are.”

After hearing the name ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’, he immediately remembered the shame his four disciples had suffered. In one swift movement, he moved forward. Appraising the ‘Seven Freaks’, he saw that Ke Zhen’E was blind, Han Xiaoying was a woman, Quan Jinfa was skin and bones, Han Baoju was short and fat and Zhu Cong had the air of someone cultured but not of a pugilist. Only Nan Xiren had the bold, proud qualities of a fighter. Not wanting to waste his time on the rest, he struck straight at Nan Xiren’s head. Nan Xiren stuck his pole in the ground and met Sha Tongtian’s palm with his own. After a few moves, it was clear that Nan Xiren was not his match. Han Xiaoying and Quan Jinfa readied their weapons, sword and scale respectively, and rushed forward to help.

With a roar, Peng Lianhu leapt towards Quan Jinfa and attempted to grab his weapon. Sensing Peng Lianhu’s intentions, Quan Jinfa quickly drew back his weapon and sent both ends of it – a scale mace and scale hook, flying towards Peng. For all of Peng Lianhu’s experience in the martial world, he had never seen anything like Quan Jinfa’s weapon before. With a ‘Weird Python Flip’, he dodged Quan’s attack and exclaimed: “What is this? You’re using a scale from the market as a weapon!”

Quan Jinfa retorted, “This hand scale of mine is for weighing you bunch of skinny pigs!”

In a fit of anger, Peng Lianhu rushed forward striking with both palms furiously. Quan Jinfa was, of course, unable to defeat his attack. Seeing his Sixth brother in danger, Han Baoju quickly went to his aid. Even though he no longer had his whip, his basic hand-to-hand ability was still quite powerful. However, even at two against one, Peng Lianhu still seemed almost impossible to handle. Ke Zhen'E maneuvered his staff, Zhu Cong brandished his fan, and both joined in the battle. Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong were much more powerful than the rest of their group, so naturally with their addition, the battle tipped in the Freaks' favor. Over on the other side, the battle between Hou Tonghai and Huang Rong had grown extremely intense. Hou Tonghai's kung fu was by rights better than hers, but when he thought of this rascal's Soft Hedgehog Armor and the thorns that resided in her hair, his fist and palm strikes did not dare come into contact with her body, much less grab her by her hair. Sensing his fear and hesitation, Huang Rong took full advantage and charged about brashly, forcing him to back away repeatedly.

Hou Tonghai shouted: "This is unfair. Take off your Soft Hedgehog Armor before we continue fighting."

Huang Rong replied: "Sure, but you must first slice off those three lumps on your forehead, if not then it's still unfair."

Hou Tonghai retorted: "My three lumps do not hurt anyone!"

Huang Rong replied, "I feel disgusted when I see them, isn't that giving you have a huge advantage? On the count of three, you slice off your lumps and I'll take off my armor."

Hou Tonghai replied angrily: "I will not!"

Huang Rong said, "It's a very good trade-off, I think you should."

Hou Tonghai exclaimed, "I will not fall for your tricks. I won't slice them off no matter what you say!"

Ouyang Ke saw that the battle was not going well and thought, "I'll kill these six scoundrels first. That wretch is unable to escape so we can finish her off later." Wanting to show off his skills, he pointed both feet and displayed his family's 'Thousand Miles in a Flash', a superior qing gong technique, and promptly appeared beside Ke Zhen'E.

He shouted, "Blind scoundrel, I'll let you have a taste of your master's prowess for being such a busybody."

Moving forward, Ouyang Ke struck out with his right palm. Ke Zhen'E raised the end of his staff to meet the strike but caught nothing, only the sound of wind brushing past his right ear. Instead, the real attack came from the left with Ouyang Ke's reverse left palm flying towards him. Ke Zhen'E dipped his head to avoid being struck and then used the 'Diamond Guard' staff technique to fiercely attack, but by this time, Ouyang Ke was embroiled with Nan Xiren. Skillfully weaving his way through them, Ouyang Ke had attempted fatal blows on all six Freaks within a short period of time.

From the beginning, Liang Ziwong's eyes never shifted from Guo Jing. Seeing that the 'Six Freaks' defeat was imminent, he immediately tried to grab Guo Jing with both arms. Guo Jing quickly resisted, but of course he was not Liang Ziwong's match. After exchanging a few moves, Liang Ziwong had successfully grabbed him by the chest and his right hand gripped Guo Jing's stomach. Guo Jing shrunk his stomach in anxiety and his clothes tore with a ripping sound and the bags of medicine had been snatched away. Liang

Ziwong knew the bags contained medicine, he'd sniffed it out long ago and conveniently pocketed them. He followed with a second strike on Guo Jing. Guo Jing successfully struggled out of the grip on his chest and sprinted towards Mei Chaofeng, yelling, "Hey! Save me, quickly!"

Mei Chaofeng thought to herself, "There are still many things I don't understand about that mysterious school of nei gong." Still breathing hard, she said aloud: "Come, take hold my legs; don't be afraid of that old bat."

Guo Jing knew that holding her legs was easy, but to escape afterwards would be hard. So he did not dare to go close to her and instead sprinted wildly around her in circles. Although Guo Jing had already entered the perimeter of her 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip', Liang Ziwong still followed him relentlessly, nevertheless wary of a sneak attack. Mei Chaofeng pinpointed Guo Jing's position with her hearing and unleashed her silver whip across the ground towards his legs.

Although Huang Rong was engaged in a duel with Hou Tonghai, she held the upper hand with her Soft Hedgehog Armor and had always been looking out for Guo Jing. First he was captured by Liang Ziwong but she was too far away to help and was anxious to the extreme. Then Guo Jing sprinted into Mei Chaofeng's perimeter. Her whip flew towards him and he was unable to dodge. Out of anxiety, Huang Rong flew in their direction and threw herself in front of the whip. Mei Chaofeng's silver whip withdrew after hitting a target and circled back, wrapping itself around Huang Rong's waist. Huang Rong was thrown up into the air and shouted: "You dare hurt me, Mei Ruohua?"

Hearing Huang Rong's voice gave her a huge shock. She thought, "My whip is tipped with reversed hooks. Now that I've injured her, Shifu has even more reason not to spare

me. But I have already come this far, and either way I have betrayed my school. I'll kill her first." Raising her silver whip, she pulled Huang Rong closer to her and laid her on the ground, thinking that all the hooks must have torn deep into her flesh by now. She never expected the hooks to only tear Huang Rong's clothing, leaving her body completely unharmed. Huang Rong said laughingly, "You tore my clothes, I want compensation!"

Mei Chaofeng was surprised to hear no hint of pain in her voice then thought, "Ah, Shifu has given his Soft Hedgehog Armor to her." Feeling lenient, she said aloud, "That was my fault. I will replace them with a nice new set of clothing."

Huang Rong signaled Guo Jing to come over and he did so. The two of them now stood ten feet or so from Mei Chaofeng, where Liang Ziwong did not dare to venture.

Over at the other battle, the "Six Freaks" of Jiangnan had formed a tight circle with their backs towards each other and were trying their best to resist Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Ouyang Ke and Hou Tonghai. This was a formation they had mastered on the steppes of Mongolia. When faced with tough opponents, this formation made it unnecessary for them to defend their backs and instantly increased their power by half. But Sha, Peng and Ouyang were simply too strong and danger came from all directions; the "Six Freaks" were far from being their match. Not long after, Han Baoju's arm was injured. Han Baoju knew that if he left the formation there would be an opening for their opponents to exploit and their lives and Guo Jing's would be in grave danger. He could only grit his teeth and hold on with great effort.

Of their opponents, Peng Lianhu was the most vicious in his attacks and repeatedly targeted Han Baoju. Guo Jing saw that the situation was urgent and rushed towards them

with flying feet. With the double palm technique 'Separating Cloud and Moon', he aimed for Peng Lianhu's back. Peng Lianhu let out a chilling laugh and with a wave of his hand deflected Guo Jing's attack. In just three moves, Guo Jing found himself in a dangerous position.

Huang Rong saw that he was unable to escape and in her anxiety suddenly remembered the saying: 'A simple man is sinless, but a man wearing a piece of jade will be sinned against.' So, she yelled: "Mei Chaofeng, you stole my father's 'Nine Yin Manual', hand it to me now so I can return it to him!"

Mei Chaofeng went cold and did not respond. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Ouyang Ke and Liang Ziwong immediately shifted their attention to Mei Chaofeng and attacked her. All four harbored the same thought, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' is the world's top martial arts manual and it's been with the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' all along..." Now the four couldn't care less about anything else and their focus was to kill Mei Chaofeng and obtain the manual.

Mei Chaofeng began brandishing her silver whip and for the moment, none of them dared to venture within its perimeter. Seeing them lured away by the 'Nine Yin Manual', Huang Rong whispered to Guo Jing urgently, "Let's go!"

At this moment, a figure emerged from a thicket and hurried towards them. It shouted, "Gentlemen! Father requires your help with something urgent." The person wore a gold cap crookedly on his head and his voice was filled with worry. It was none other than the young prince, Wanyan Kang. Peng Lianhu and the others thought, "Prince Zhao has been generous in exchange for our services. Now that there is something urgent, how can we not go to his aid?" With this thought they backed off reluctantly, not

wanting to give up the 'Nine Yin Manual'. Their gaze still lingered on Mei Chaofeng.

Wanyan Kang said softly: "My mother... my mother has been abducted by villains. Father has requested that you help to rescue her, please start at once."

Originally, Wanyan Honglie had led his troops out of the Palace to chase Bao Xiruo, but they lost sight of her. Remembering the resourceful martial artists in his residence, he hurriedly sent his son to summon them. Wanyan Kang was caught up in anxiety and the night was dark, so he did not notice Mei Chaofeng seated on the ground.

Peng Lianhu and the others thought, "Oh my, the Consort has been abducted? If we don't go to her rescue, what are we here for?" They further thought, "It must have been the 'Seven Freaks'. Six of them kept us here to distract us, allowing the other to abduct the Consort. The manual will have to wait. Anyway, with so many accomplished fighters around, I can't hope to claim it for myself. I'll need to come up with a plan some other time." With that, they hurriedly followed Wanyan Kang. Liang Ziwong trailed behind, still longing for the blood in Guo Jing's body. He actually didn't care about rescuing the Consort but was alone in wanting to stay behind and had no choice but to follow miserably.

Guo Jing called, "Hey, return my medicine!" Fuming, Liang Ziwong turned and shot a bone-penetrating projectile straight at his head. The projectile cut through the night air with incredible strength.

Zhu Cong dashed forward and deflected the projectile with the handle of his fan. As the projectile fell, he caught it with his left hand and held it to his nose to have a sniff. "Ah," he

said, "seals throats when it touches blood; this is a 'Bone-Penetrating Meridian Nail'.

Hearing the name of his secret weapon startled Liang Ziwong; he spun around and yelled, "What?"

Zhu Cong went up to him and held out his palm; the Meridian Nail was resting on it. He said lightly: "I'll give it back to you, old master!"

Liang Ziwong retrieved it calmly. He knew that with Zhu Cong's level of kung fu, he could not harm him. Zhu Cong saw that Liang Ziwong's left sleeve was covered with mud and grass and used his own sleeve to swipe the dirt away. Liang Ziwong said angrily, "I don't need your bootlicking!" With that, he turned around and left.

Guo Jing was in a miserable position. If he went back without the medicine, all the night's misadventures would have been for naught; but if he tried to regain it forcefully, he would undoubtedly be defeated by Liang Ziwong. He was still hesitating when Ke Zhen'E said, "Let's go." Ke Zhen'E leapt to the top of the Palace wall and the other five 'Freaks' followed suit.

Pointing at Mei Chaofeng, Han Xiaoying said: "Elder brother, what about her?"

Ke Zhen'E replied: "We promised Priest Ma to spare her life."

Huang Rong did not acknowledge the "Six Freaks" and leapt on to the other end of the wall, grinning.

Mei Chaofeng hollered: "Little martial sister, where is Shifu?"

Huang Rong giggled and said, "My father is, of course, on Peach Blossom Island, why do you ask? Are you going to pay

him a visit?"

Mei Chaofeng seethed, her breath growing heavier and quicker. After a moment she said, "Didn't you just say that Shifu was on his way here?"

Still laughing, Huang Rong replied, "He doesn't know you're here, but rest assured I'll tell him for you. I'm sure he'll come straight away. Don't worry, I'm not bluffing." Enraged, Mei Chaofeng braced herself with both hands and sprung up suddenly. With staggering steps, she charged towards Huang Rong.

Mei Chaofeng had lost the use of her legs as a result of intensely practicing a nei gong she didn't understand. A stream of Qi had flowed down to her 'dan tian' (energy field) and was unable to work its way back up, paralyzing her lower body. She had stubbornly attempted to work the Qi back upwards but the harder she tried, the stronger the resistance she met.

At this moment, her senses were consumed with fury, so much so that she forgot about her paralysis. She was in a state where she had disengaged from her body and was only aware of a violent surge of anger rushing up to her heart. Suddenly her legs had become part of her body again and she charged towards Huang Rong. Shocked that Mei Chaofeng had regained the use of her legs, Huang Rong leapt down to the other side and fled into the night.

Suddenly regaining the use of her legs, Mei Chaofeng thought, "Eh, how come I can walk now?" With this thought, a sudden wave of numbness washed over her legs and she fell, losing consciousness.

For the 'Six Freaks' to kill her now would be an easy task; but they had promised Ma Yu to spare her life. So they leapt over the wall and left the palace with Guo Jing.

Han Xiaoying was the most anxious and hurriedly asked, "Jing'er, how did you end up here?"

Guo Jing roughly sketched the events leading up to this point...Wang Chuyi coming to his rescue, getting poisoned at Wanyan Kang's banquet, stealing the medicine, bumping into Mei Chaofeng in the tunnel, et cetera. For the moment, however, he did not mention the Yang family saga.

Zhu Cong said, "Let's hurry and see how Priest Wang is coping."

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Having just been reunited with his wife, Yang Tiexin felt an inexpressible mixture of joy and sadness. Carrying her in his arms, he leapt out of the palace. His foster daughter Mu Nianci was anxiously waiting outside the palace walls when she saw him carrying a woman in his arms. Surprised and curious, she asked, "Father, who is she?"

Yang Tiexin replied, "She's your mother. Let's go."

Mu Nianci said, bewildered, "My mother?"

Yang Tiexin said, "Hush, we'll talk afterwards," and sprinted off urgently.

After a time, Bao Xiruo slowly regained consciousness. It was near daybreak and in the dim light, she saw that the person bearing her was the husband she had been thinking of day and night for eighteen years. She didn't know if it was real or just an illusion. She felt like she was in a dream and reached out to caress his face. Her voice quivered as she spoke, "Tie-ge, am I dead too?"

Crying joyfully, he replied in a gentle voice, "Both of us are alive and well..." His sentence was interrupted by shouts from behind. Light from torches lit the area as soldiers

quickly streamed forward. Raising their swords and spears, they yelled, "Don't let the Consort's kidnapper escape!"

Yang Tiexin quickly surveyed their surroundings but there was no place they could hide. He thought, "The heavens have pitied us husband and wife and allowed us to reunite against the odds. Even if I were to die now, I would have nothing left to wish for." He called to Mu Nianci, "Here, hold your mother."

The scene at Lin'an's Ox Village eighteen years ago suddenly sprang into Bao Xiruo's mind: her husband fleeing with her in his arms, the cries of soldiers in the night and the eighteen years of separation and grief that followed. Sensing that the tragedy was to repeat itself, she held on stubbornly to her husband, refusing to let go. The soldiers were getting near and Yang Tiexin thought it better to die fighting than be captured and humiliated. With that, he pried his wife's fingers away and entrusted her to Mu Nianci. Turning around, he charged towards the soldiers and with a fist, knocked out a foot soldier and seized his spear. With a spear in hand, Yang Tiexin was even more lethal. The troops' commander, Tang Zude, was speared in the leg and promptly fell off his horse. With their leader down, the rest of the soldiers scampered away in all directions. Seeing there were no skilled pugilists amongst them, Yang Tiexin felt slightly relieved even though it was a pity not to have been able to grab a horse. The three of them continued their escape.

By this time it was morning. Bao Xiruo noticed the bloodstains on her husband's clothes and said, frightened, "Are you hurt?"

Hearing this, Yang Tiexin was suddenly aware of a sharp pain in his arm. Because he had exerted too much strength during the fight, the wound from Wanyan Kang's claws had

re-opened and was now bleeding profusely again. Earlier he had been fixated with escaping and was not aware of the pain; but now both arms felt stiff and weak and he was unable to lift them. Bao Xiruo was about to bandage his wounds when loud calls came from behind and the dust from countless pursuing soldiers appeared. With a bitter smile, Yang Tiexin said, "No need to bandage." He turned and said to Mu Nianci, "Child, run for your life! Your mother and I will stay here..."

Mu Nianci successfully fought back tears and raised her head proudly, saying, "The three of us will die together."

Confused, Bao Xiruo asked, "How... how is she our daughter?"

Yang Tiexin was just about to answer when he heard the soldiers nearing. Looking up, he saw two Taoist priests coming towards them, one had a white beard and eyebrows and looked kindly; the other had a long black beard, a long sword slung on his back and looked grand and dignified. Great delight replaced his initial astonishment and Yang Tiexin called out, "Priest Qiu, we meet again!"

Of the two priests, one was 'Scarlet Sun' Ma Yu and the other was 'Eternal Spring' Qiu Chuji. The two of them, along with 'Jade Sun' Wang Chuyi, had arranged to meet in Zhongdu to discuss the upcoming duel with the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'. Both had hurried here and chanced upon the Yangs. Qiu Chuji had an accomplished level of nei gong and thus his appearance had not changed much over the eighteen years. Only the hair on his temples was speckled with white. Hearing this greeting, he looked more closely, but it was someone he did not recognize.

Yang Tiexin said, "Eighteen years ago at Ox Village in Lin'an, we once drank and killed enemies together, do you

still remember?”

Qiu Chuji said, “You are...”

Yang Tiexin declared, “I’m Yang Tiexin, have you been well?” Yang approached him and bowed.

Qiu Chuji hurriedly returned the formality but still harbored some doubts. Eighteen years of hardship and grief had eroded his youthful appearance and Yang Tiexin looked vastly different than before. Yang Tiexin sensed his doubts but the soldiers were getting near and it was not a good time to clarify things in detail. Raising his spear, he displayed the ‘Phoenix Striking Head’. The red tassel trembled as the spear headed for Qiu Chuji’s chest and he said, “Priest Qiu, you may have forgotten me, but you can’t have forgotten the ‘Yang Family Spear’!”

The spear froze inches away from Qiu Chuji. Qiu Chuji saw that this was indeed the authentic Yang Family Spear and immediately recalled that night’s fight in the snow; it was indeed Yang Tiexin from eighteen years ago and a bittersweet feeling washed over him. He said loudly, “Aha, brother Yang, you’re still alive? Thank Heaven!”

Yang Tiexin withdrew his spear and said, “Priest Qiu, save me!” Qiu Chuji glanced at the approaching soldiers and said jovially, “Elder martial brother, I’m going to start killing again today, don’t get angry!”

Ma Yu replied, “Kill less; maybe just scare them off.”

Qiu Chuji laughed loudly and took a huge step forward. With a stretch of both arms, he plucked two soldiers off their horses and flung them towards another two soldiers behind. The four soldiers crashed against each other and fell in a heap. Qiu Chuji’s arms moved at the speed of

lightning and, like a canon, fired eight more soldiers towards another eight.

Terrified, the other soldiers turned their horses and fled. Suddenly, a chiefly looking figure with a bald, shiny head emerged from behind the fleeing soldiers. He bellowed: "Where did this scoundrel come from?" With a slight sway of his body, he was already close to Qiu Chuji and attacked with his palms. Qiu Chuji noticed that this person was highly agile. Raising his palms to obstruct the attack, their palms met with a clap and subsequently both withdrew three paces. Surprised, Qiu Chuji thought to himself, "Who is this person with such good kung fu?"

Little did he know that the Dragon King of the Demonic Group Sha Tongtian was concealing the pain in his arms from their exchange and was even more surprised than he. With an angry roar, Sha Tongtian swung his fists forward. Qiu Chuji did not dare to be slow and with full strength and concentration sent both palms darting straight at Sha Tongtian. After exchanging ten moves or so, Qiu Chuji successfully brushed his palm against Sha Tongtian, leaving five streaks of red on his bald head. Though Sha Tongtian could not see the marks, he could feel a stinging pain from the top of his head. Knowing that he would not be able to beat this Taoist empty-handed, he immediately pulled an iron stick from behind him. Although this weapon was heavy, its power was great and with a "Reviving Qin Behind the Sword", the stick struck in the direction of Qiu Chuji's shoulder. Qiu Chuji greeted the attack with his technique of seizing weapons with bare hands. But Sha Tongtian had been using this weapon for more than ten years and had extraordinary skill with it, so Qiu Chuji failed in his attempt.

Deep inside, Qiu Chuji marveled at this and was just about to ask for his name when someone from the left shouted, "Who is this priest from the Quanzhen Sect?" His voice

carried immense power. Qiu Chuji leapt to his right and saw four people; Peng Lianhu, Ouyang Ke, Liang Ziwing and Hou Tonghai.

Qiu Chuji cupped his fists and said, "My surname is Qiu, may I know your names?" Qiu Chuji's mighty name was well-known and feared in the Northern and Southern parts.

Sha Tongtian and the others thought, "It's no wonder he is so famous. He is indeed powerful."

Peng Lianhu thought, "We've already injured Wang Chuyi and forged animosity with Quanzhen Sect. If we combine forces and kill Qiu Chuji today, our names will travel far and wide!" He shouted, "Everyone, attack together." Before he even finished pronouncing the last word, Peng Lianhu had already retrieved his 'Judgmental Twin Brush' and advanced towards Qiu Chuji. He knew this opponent was powerful and was vicious with his onslaught, targeting his 'Yun Men' accupoint at the top and his 'Tai He' accupoint below. These two hits came in full force and left no room for mercy.

Qiu Chuji thought to himself, "This shorty is impudent! To be fair, his skills are also above average." With a swishing sound he drew out his sword and pierced Peng Lianhu's right arm, scraped Sha Tongtian's waist and, drawing back the sword, sent its hilt ramming into the critical Zhang Men accupoint in the side of Hou Tonghai's ribs. With one move he had struck three people, displaying amazing skill with the sword. Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu propped themselves up with their weapons. Hou Tonghai had narrowly missed having his accupoint blocked and managed to withdraw quickly, but alas a heavy kick to the buttocks sent him flying to the ground. Call it a coincidence but he landed straight on the three lumps on his head. Inwardly

shaken, Liang Ziwing propelled himself forward like a monkey and attacked.

Ouyang Ke saw that Qiu Chuji was occupied with Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu and now Liang Ziwing had also joined in. It was an advantage that just begged to be taken, and if not now – when? Feinting with his left hand, his right hand moved to block Qiu Chuji's 'Tao Dao', 'Hun Men' and 'Zhong Shu' accupoints with his iron fan. It seemed as though Qiu Chuji had no way out when a figure moved beside him and in a flash, a single hand reached out and halted the movement of the fan. So it was that Ma Yu, who had been observing in silence from the side, was flabbergasted to see a group of highly-skilled pugilists ganging up on his younger Martial Brother. With just three fingers he had trapped the fan; Ouyang Ke immediately felt a surge of formidable inner power coming from the handle of his fan and quickly leapt backwards in astonishment.

Ma Yu did not pursue him, but said, "Gentlemen, may I know who you are? We have never met. If there has been some misunderstanding we can talk it over, why resort to violence?" Though his tone was gentle, his voice carried abundant Qi. The projection for each word was crystal clear and bore straight into their eardrums. Sha Tongtian and the others were totally involved in their fighting when Ma Yu's sentences made them stop cold. They ceased fighting and withdrew while appraising Ma Yu.

Ouyang Ke said: "Priest, what is your revered name?"

Ma Yu replied: "My surname is Ma."

Peng Lianhu said, "Ah, so it is the 'Scarlet Sun', Revered Priest Ma. We have been rude."

Ma Yu replied, "With my shallow cultivation, how dare I claim the title of Revered?"

Though Peng Lianhu coated his words with politeness, inwardly he was thinking, "Since we have already created a grudge with the Quanzhen Sect, it is unlikely that there will be enough goodwill to forgive and forget. These two characters are the main pillars of the Quanzhen Sect and fortunately we have caught them alone. If we join forces and finish them off today, we will have less to worry about in the future. But I wonder if there are any other skilled pugilists from Quanzhen in the vicinity." A quick look around revealed only the three members of the Yang family – there were no other priests around.

Peng Lianhu said, "I have long admired the great names of the Quanzhen Seven. Where are the other five? How about inviting them here so we can meet them?"

Ma Yu replied, "Instead of concentrating on cultivation, my Martial Brothers have often meddled in worldly affairs and earned themselves empty reputations. I'm afraid they have made fools of themselves. The seven of us live in different Taoist temples and rarely gather together. I have made this trip to Zhongdu with my Martial Brother Qiu to look for our Martial Brother Wang, and by chance met all of you. All the world's martial arts branch from the same stem. Red lotus or white root, we all come from the same family. Since we have an affinity, how about becoming friends?" Being honest by nature, Ma Yu never expected that Peng Lianhu was merely sounding him out.

Hearing that there were indeed no other Quanzhen pugilists nearby, Peng Lianhu thought they could win with numbers. Not only that, the two priests had yet to meet with Wang Chuyi, and Ma Yu was trusting and off guard. All Peng Lianhu had to do was keep up this friendly pretence and they would be able to pull a sneak attack. Beaming, he said, "We are honored that Priest Qiu and Ma do not look down on us, and to be friends would be fantastic. My

surname is San; my full name is San Heimao [three black cats].”

At this, Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji were both startled, thinking, “This person’s kung fu is impressive, so that his name must be famous. But this name, San Heimao, is so strange yet I’ve never heard of it.”

Peng Lianhu tucked his ‘Judgmental Twin Brushes’ back into his waist and approached Ma Yu. He said, smiling, “Nice to meet you, Priest Ma.”

He stretched out his hand for a handshake. Unsuspectingly, Ma Yu reached out to shake his hand but the moment their hands touched, he suddenly felt Peng Lianhu’s grip tighten.

Ma Yu thought, “Hmph, trying to test my kung fu.” He merely smiled and applied his internal energy in response, squeezing Peng Lianhu’s hand. Suddenly, an intense pain penetrated into his five fingertips and it felt as if he had been pierced by many steel needles. He quickly withdrew his hand in astonishment. Peng Lianhu burst out laughing and retreated a few feet. Ma Yu raised his palm and saw that all five fingertips had been punctured deep into his flesh, and the holes were lined with black.

So it was that when Peng Lianhu was stowing his ‘Judgmental Twin Brushes’, he had secretly slipped on his special ‘Poison Needle Bangle’ on his right hand. Made from refined steel, the bangle was as slender as a thread and on it was five thin needles armed with a lethal poison. If the needles penetrated the flesh and drew blood, the victim would undoubtedly die within ten hours. Peng Lianhu usually wore this bangle to increase the potency of his palm attacks when exchanging blows, thus ensuring that his opponent would not live beyond half a day. He had also deliberately introduced himself as “San Heimao” (Three

Black Cats”) so that while Qiu Chuji and Ma Yu were busy being astounded, he could seize the chance and deliver his sneak attack.

Characters of the martial realm often harbor no admiration for one another at the first meeting, but tact and face made public aggression improper. They would often reach out for a handshake in the guise of friendliness, but in actuality it was a duel of sorts. It was not unusual for the inferior fighter to have his bones broken and his hand swollen, or to beg for mercy when the pain became too much. Ma Yu only thought that Peng Lianhu was practicing the old pugilistic habit of being friendly on the surface but secretly appraising the other’s strength. He never thought that Peng Lianhu would have another vicious trick up his sleeve. Thus, when both of them exerted strength, the five poisonous needles not only pierced his fingertips but sunk straight down to the bones of his fingers. By the time Ma Yu realized what had happened and struck with his right palm, Peng Lianhu had already leapt away.

All Qiu Chuji knew was that his Elder Martial Brother had been shaking hands with someone when his facial expression suddenly changed and he attacked. Qiu Chuji hurriedly asked, “What happened?”

Ma Yu replied angrily, “Crafty scoundrel, he poisoned me.” With that, he advanced towards Peng Lianhu.

Qiu Chuji had always known his Elder Martial Brother to be tolerant and had never seen him attack anyone in over ten years, yet at this moment, he opened his attack with the most formidable of Quanzhen’s skills – the ‘Three Flowers Atop’ palm technique. Qiu Chuji knew it must have taken a great deception for him to be so furious, so with a flick of his sword, he weaved left and right to reach Peng Lianhu. With a quick “swish, swish, swish”, he had dealt him three

strokes. By this time Peng Lianhu had already retrieved his Twin Brushes and successfully deflected two of Qiu Chuji's strokes while managing to deal a strike with one brush. But Peng Lianhu never expected Qiu Chuji's palm technique to be as ferocious as his sword. In that very instant when he was about to withdraw his brush – but not quite – Qiu Chuji reached out and grabbed it by the tip. He shouted: "Withdraw!" Combining internal power and external force, Qiu Chuji tried to break the brush; despite his using full energy, Peng Lianhu, being a formidable opponent, did not allow the brush to shatter. Qiu Chuji followed by guiding his sword straight forward and Peng Lianhu had no choice but to let go of his brush and evade. With the sword in his right hand and palm technique in his left, Qiu Chuji kept up the attack ceaselessly. Peng Lianhu had lost one brush and his right arm was also feeling stiff and weak. Having lost his edge, he repeatedly retreated.

At this point, Sha Tongtian and Liang Ziwong were embroiled with Ma Yu. Ouyang Ke and Hou Tonghai came forward to aid Peng Lianhu, one to the left and the other to the right. Faced with strong opponents, Qiu Chuji felt even more energized. With gliding palms and flashing sword, the more he fought the swifter his attacks became. Qiu Chuji was fighting three people by himself and had not lost the advantage. Over on the other side, Ma Yu was having trouble maintaining the situation. His right palm was already swollen and afflicted with numbness and itching as the poison gradually took effect. Although he knew that the needles were poisoned, he never expected such drastic reaction. He understood that the more he exerted himself, the faster his blood would circulate and the quicker the poison would attack his heart. Immediately he sat down and engaged his internal energy to halt the poison's progress, while still wielding a sword in his left hand for self-protection. Liang Ziwong's weapon was a shovel, similar to

the ones used for grave digging. Between slashing vertically, scooping horizontally, and at times sweeping across or striking directly, the variations in his attack were plentiful. Sha Tongtian's iron stick was heavy and even more dangerous. After ten moves or so, Ma Yu's breathing increased and his defensive circle shrank. Inwardly resisting the poison and outwardly defending against two enemies, he soon felt lethargic in spite having an accomplished level of internal energy.

Qiu Chuji was shocked at the sight of his Elder Martial Brother seated on the ground, with hot vapor rising slowly from his head as if he were being steamed. He wanted to finish off his three opponents quickly and rush to aid him, but these opponents were sticky and he could not spare a moment to pause in his attack and escape. Admittedly Peng Lianhu was a weaker fighter, but Ouyang Ke was proficient in both internal energy and external moves. His attacks were both fierce and unusual. In terms of ability, he was way above Peng Lianhu. From what Qiu Chuji could tell, Ouyang Ke's kung fu looked similar to that of the 'Western Poison', someone the Quanzhen Sect had always feared. This startled him and he thought, "Who is this person? Could he be a disciple of the 'Western Poison'? Has 'Western Poison' arrived on the Central Plains? I wonder if he's actually here in Zhongdu." While following this train of thought he momentarily lost concentration and repeatedly encountered close shaves.

Yang Tiexin knew in his heart that the skills of these two priests were way above his, but seeing both of them in danger he immediately lifted his spear and thrust towards Ouyang Ke's back. Qiu Chuji yelled, "Brother Yang, don't throw your life away in vain!" By the time he finished his sentence; Ouyang Ke had already broken the spear with his left foot and kicked Yang Tiexin to the ground with his right.

At this very moment they heard the sound of hooves as a great number of horses galloped swiftly towards them. Leading the way were none other than the father and son, Wanyan Honglie and Wanyan Kang.

Wanyan Honglie caught sight of his wife seated on the ground from the distance. Delighted, he hurried to her but a blade suddenly sliced through the air and came right at him. Slanting his body to avoid the slash, he saw that the wielder of the blade was a young girl dressed in red. At this point, his soldiers came forward and started fighting Mu Nianci.

Over on the other end, Wanyan Kang was startled at seeing his Shifu and shouted, "We're all on the same side, everyone stop fighting!"

Only after repeating this a few times did Peng Lianhu and the others finally retreat; the soldiers and Mu Nianci also halted. Wanyan Kang approached Qiu Chuji and bowed. "Shifu, let your disciple do the introductions," he said. "These are all senior pugilists engaged by my father."

Qiu Chuji nodded and went to check on his Elder Martial Brother. Ma Yu's right palm was black all over and, lifting up his sleeve, he saw that the blackness had spread all the way to the upper part of his arm. Astonished, he said, "How could the poison be like that?" Turning around, he said to Peng Lianhu, "Hand over the antidote!"

Peng Lianhu hesitated while thinking, "Just a little while more time and this person will die, but it wouldn't be appropriate to offend the little prince. Should I save him or not?"

Now that Ma Yu had no more enemies attacking him, he concentrated all his internal energy on resisting the poison and sure enough, the poison halted in his arm and could not

travel further upwards. Instead, the blackness gradually started moving downwards.

Wanyan Kang rushed over to his mother and exclaimed, "Mother, I've finally found you!"

Bao Xiruo was frightened and replied, "Do not ask me to return to the palace. I never will!"

Shocked, Wanyan Honglie and Wanyan Kang said in unison, "What?"

Bao Xiruo pointed at Yang Tiexin. "My husband is still alive and I will follow him to the ends of the earth," she said.

This came as no ordinary blow to Wanyan Honglie and he silently mouthed something to Liang Ziwong. Liang Ziwong understood the prince's intentions and flicked his right hand, sending three of his 'Bone-Penetrating Meridian Nails' flying towards Yang Tiexin's essential junctions. Qiu Chuji saw the flight of the nails but it was too late for him to do anything and Yang Tiexin would surely not be able to evade them. Having no projectiles with him, he grabbed a Jin soldier out of desperation and hurled him towards the space between Liang Ziwong and Yang Tiexin. With a loud "ah", the three 'Meridian Nails' struck the soldier.

Liang Ziwong regarded his 'Bone-Penetrating Meridian Nails' as his greatest skill. Having sent three nails simultaneously, it was absurd to think he would miss the target. Seeing Qiu Chuji foil his move in such a peculiar way, he roared angrily and attacked. Peng Lianhu saw this and decided against providing the antidote, knowing that the little prince's priority was rescuing his mother. He leapt forward abruptly and grabbed hold of Bao Xiruo's arm. With two swishing sounds, Qiu Chuji sent his sword thrusting towards both Liang Ziwong and Peng Lianhu. Both saw the fierceness of the strokes and were forced

backwards. Qiu Chuji thundered at Wanyan Kang, "Ignorant boy, you have called your enemy 'father' and led eighteen years of your life in folly. Now that your real father is here, aren't you going to acknowledge him?"

Having heard it from his mother, Wanyan Kang was already eighty percent convinced. Hearing it from his Shifu now further reinforced his belief and he glanced at Yang Tiexin. Wanyan Kang saw that his clothes were old and tattered and his face was smeared with dirt; turning around, he saw his 'father' wearing fine, embroidered robes and expensive jewels, looking handsome and refined. There was a world of difference between these two men. Wanyan Kang contemplated in his heart, "Am I actually going to give up this life of luxury and riches and roam the streets with this poor man? No...never!" His mind was made up.

"Shifu, don't listen to this person's nonsense," Wanyan Kang said. "Please help rescue my mother!"

"You stubbornly refuse to listen still, you're worse than a beast!" Qiu Chuji replied angrily.

Seeing that Shifu and pupil had fallen out, Peng Lianhu and the others started to attack even more fiercely. Wanyan Kang knew Qiu Chuji was in danger, but did not attempt to again stop the fight. Qiu Chuji was enraged and shouted, "Little bastard, you really have no conscience."

Wanyan Kang had always been very afraid of his Shifu and secretly hoped that Peng Lianhu and the rest would kill him to avoid any trouble in the future. Shortly into the battle, Qiu Chuji was struck by Liang Ziwong's spade and though it wasn't serious, blood seeped through his robes. From the corner of his eye he caught a hint of delight on Wanyan Kang's face and he was further incensed and swore continuously. Ma Yu retrieved a sparkler from his robes and

tossed it in the air, sending a blue blaze soaring through the sky. Peng Lianhu thought it must be a communicative signal for the Quanzhen Sect's members and alerted the others, "The old priest is sending for help."

After exchanging a few more moves, another blue blaze appeared from the northwest not far from here. "Younger Martial Brother Wang is nearby," Qiu Chuji said with delight. Switching his sword over to his left hand, he attacked from the top with his sword and from the bottom with his right palm, executing seven or eight fatal moves one after another forcing his enemies steadily backwards.

Ma Yu pointed to the blue glow in the northwest and said, "Go in that direction."

Weapons in hand, Yang Tiexin and Mu Nianci rushed in that direction while guarding Bao Xiruo. Ma Yu followed closely behind. Qiu Chuji interrupted his sword mid-move and in the next instant he had also turned to leave. Sha Tongtian repeatedly employed his 'Change Form Exchange Place' technique, hoping to bypass Qiu Chuji and snatch Bao Xiruo, but Qiu Chuji's sword was too swift and he did not succeed. It was not long before they arrived at the small inn where Wang Chuyi was staying. Qiu Chuji wondered to himself, "Why hasn't Younger Martial Brother Wang come out to greet us?"

Just after this thought, Wang Chuyi came walking unsteadily towards them, supported by a wooden stick. At the sight of each other, the Martial Brothers were shocked to see that Quanzhen Sect's top three pugilists were all injured.

Qiu Chuji called out, "Retreat back into the inn."

"Hand the Consort over in one piece and I'll spare your lives," Wanyan Honglie hollered.

“Who needs your mercy, you treacherous Jin dog?” Qiu Chuji shot back. He raised his sword and started fighting.

Despite being exhausted, Qiu Chuji still refused to yield and his swordplay remained as enthralling as ever. Seeing this, Peng Lianhu and the others were inwardly impressed. Yang Tiexin contemplated, “Since things have already come to this, it will not be easy to escape our end. We mustn’t risk Priest Qiu’s life for us.” Grasping Bao Xiruo’s hand, he stepped forward.

“Everyone, stop fighting,” he yelled. “My wife and I will end our lives here and let that be the end of it.” Raising his spear, he thrust towards his heart. With a “pu” sound, blood splattered in all directions and he fell backwards.

Bao Xiruo felt no sadness. With a bitter smile, she pulled the spear out of her husband’s body and braced it on the ground while saying to Wanyan Kang, “Child, you still don’t believe he’s your real father?” She leaned forward and sank onto the tip of the spear.

In horror, the color drained from Wanyan Kang’s face. “Mama!” he cried, rushing forward wanting to save her. Seeing this astonishing development, Qiu Chuji and the others stopped fighting. Reaching her side, Wanyan Kang saw her body was pierced through her chest by the spear and he began sobbing uncontrollably. Qiu Chuji went forward to inspect the couple’s wounds and saw that the spear had pierced fatal points on their bodies. There was no room for hope. Wanyan Kang held his mother and Mu Nianci held Yang Tiexin as the two wept with grief.

Qiu Chuji said to Yang Tiexin, “Brother Yang, tell me if you have a request and I will see that it gets done. I... I didn’t manage to save you in the end, I... I...” He felt a dull ache in his heart and choked up with sorrow.

At this very moment the sound of footsteps came. Everyone turned and saw the 'Six Freaks of Jiangnan' hurrying over with Guo Jing. Upon seeing Sha Tongtian and the others, the 'Six Freaks' immediately pulled out their weapons. Getting closer, they saw a man and a woman on the ground and looks of surprise appeared on their faces. They turned around and saw Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji and were further surprised.

Guo Jing saw Yang Tiexin lying on the ground covered with blood and hurriedly went to his side. "Uncle Yang, how are you feeling?" He asked.

Yang Tiexin was barely alive but broke into a smile when he saw Guo Jing. "Your late father and I had a pact: if we had a son and daughter then they would be married," he said. "I don't have a daughter, but this foster daughter is like my own..." He turned his gaze to Qiu Chuji. "Priest Qiu, see to this marriage and I... I will go in peace..."

"That's easy. Don't worry," Qiu Chuji assured him.

Bao Xiruo was lying beside her husband and clutched his arm with her left hand, afraid that he would leave her again. In a haze, she heard him mention the betrothal agreement from years ago. She sought to retrieve a dagger from her robes and said: "This... this is the token from that time..." Then she said, "Brother Tie, we finally to die together, I'm... I'm so happy..." With that, she showed a small smile and passed away peacefully, looking as warm and enchanting as always. Qiu Chuji retrieved the dagger and saw that it was none other than his gift to them at Ox Village in Lin'an; the words 'Guo Jing' were carved on its handle.

Yang Tiexin said to Guo Jing: "In...in honor of your late father, I hope you treat my daughter well..."

"I... I can't..." stuttered Guo Jing.

Qiu Chuji said, "I will see to everything, go... go in peace!"

Yang Tiexin had all but given up hope of finding Guo Xiaotian's descendent, and so arranged the 'Joust for a Spouse' for Mu Nianci. Today, he was not only reunited with his beloved wife but had also found his sworn brother's son; his daughter would have a husband to rely on. With that, having no further regrets, he closed his eyes for the last time.

Guo Jing was both sad and confused, thinking, "Rong'er has deep feelings for me, how can I marry someone else?" With this thought, his mind suddenly turned to something else and he was further taken aback. "How could I have forgotten Hua Zheng? The Khan has betrothed her to me, this... this... how could this be?"

All this time he had kept his good friend Tolui in his thoughts, but seldom did he think of Hua Zheng. Although the 'Six Freaks' regarded this wish difficult to fulfill, they couldn't bear to say so in front of Yang Tiexin, a dying man.

Wanyan Honglie had gone to great lengths scheming to marry Bao Xiruo, but to the end she had been unable to forget her husband. For over ten years he had loved and labored for her, but at the end of it all, things still unfolded this way. Though she was dead, Wanyan Honglie saw true happiness and contentment in her face. In all their eighteen years together, when had she ever looked at him this way? He might be a prince, but in her heart he was much, much inferior this village peasant. Despondent and heart-broken, he turned to leave.

Although the three Quanzhen priests were injured, the arrival of the 'Six Freaks' meant that Sha Tongtian and the

others wouldn't necessarily win. Since the Prince had already turned to leave, they followed.

"San Heima," shouted Qiu Chuji, "leave the antidote behind!"

Peng Lianhu laughed. "Your Stockade-Chief goes by the surname Peng; people in the pugilistic world call me the 'Butcher With A Thousand Hands'. Priest Qiu, have you lost your eyes?"

Qiu Chuji went cold, thinking, "It's no wonder this person is so powerful; so it is him." The poison had penetrated deep into his Elder Martial Brother's body and only the unique antidote from Peng Lianhu could save him. He loudly said, "Who cares if you've got a thousand hands or ten thousand? If you don't leave the antidote behind, don't hope to leave this place." Maneuvering his sword exquisitely, a flash of brilliant light advanced towards Peng Lianhu. Though only left with one brush, Peng Lianhu was not afraid. Brandishing it, they clashed head-on.

Zhu Cong saw Ma Yu was seated on the ground, working his internal energy. One of his palms was all black. "Priest Ma ... how did you get hurt?"

Ma Yu sighed. "I shook hands with that fellow Peng and he hid poison needles in his palm."

"Ah. He's not that great." Turning to Ke Zhen'E, he said, "Elder Brother, pass me a caltrop." Not understanding his intentions, Ke Zhen'E retrieved a poisonous caltrop [water chestnut] from his bag and handed it to him. Zhu Cong turned to look at the fight between Qiu Chuji and Peng Lianhu. The fight was intense, and it would be impossible to break it up with his level of kung fu alone.

"Elder Brother, let's go and break them apart. I have a plan that can save Priest Ma," he said. Ke Zhen'E nodded.

"So it is the 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands', Chief Peng!" shouted Zhu Cong. "We're all on the same side, stop fighting. I have something to say." Pulling Ke Zhen'E along, the two went forward and broke them apart - Zhu Cong with his fan and Ke Zhen'E with his staff.

Both Qiu Chuji and Peng Lianhu felt surprise hearing Zhu Cong's remark and thought, "How come we're 'on the same side' now?" Seeing the two Freaks come forward, they broke apart and waited to hear exactly how they were 'on the same side'.

Laughing cheerfully, Zhu Cong said to Peng Lianhu: "Eighteen years ago, the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' and Priest Qiu had a small dispute that ended with five of our brothers injured. On the other hand, the famed Priest Qiu also sustained heavy injuries that nearly left him dead. This dispute has yet to be resolved..." Zhu Cong turned to Qiu Chuji. "Am I right, Priest Qiu?"

Qiu Chuji was enraged, thinking: "Fantastic, you're going to take advantage of my precarious situation." Aloud, he retorted: "That's right, now what?"

Zhu Cong continued, "But we also have a small feud with 'Dragon King' Sha. One inept disciple of ours once single-handedly defeated 'Dragon King' Sha's top four disciples. We've also heard that 'Dragon King' Sha and Chief Peng are the closest of friends. Since we've offended 'Dragon King' Sha, then we've also offended Chief Peng."

"Heh..heh, how dare I?" said Peng Lianhu.

Zhu Cong laughed. "Since Chief Peng and Priest Qiu both have feuds with the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan', wouldn't

you then be on the same side against a common enemy? Ha ha, what are you still fighting for? Wouldn't Chief Peng and I also be on the same side? Come; let's get to know each other." Zhu Cong stretched out his hand for a handshake.

Having listened to this warped nonsense, Peng Lianhu thought, "The Quanzhen Sect saved the 'Seven Freaks' disciple, so they're obviously in it together. I won't fall for your trickery. Want to trick the antidote from me? It's not so easy." Seeing Zhu Cong's outstretched hand, Peng Lianhu laughed and said, "Splendid!" He tucked his Brush back into his waist and slipped on his 'Poison Needle Ring'.

Startled, Qiu Chuji said: "Brother Zhu, be careful." Zhu Cong ignored this and stretched out his hand. With a slight crook of his little finger, he had hooked the 'Poison Needle Ring' from Peng Lianhu's finger. Peng Lianhu did not realize this and went ahead with the handshake, both parties exerting strength.

Suddenly, a small pain penetrated Peng Lianhu's palm and he struggled to let go. Raising his hand, he saw three holes in his palm that were much bigger than those of his Poison Needles, with black blood oozing from them. Instead of pain, the wound felt both numb and itchy and the sensation was rather nice. He knew that the more potent the poison, the less painful the wound would be because the numbness would be overpowering. Both angry and frightened, he had no idea how he had fallen into this trap.

Looking up, he saw Zhu Cong hiding behind Qiu Chuji, holding up an object in each hand. In between two fingers of his left hand was Peng Lianhu's 'Poison Needle Ring'. In between two fingers of his right, however, was a black object shaped like a water chestnut with a sharp tail, and it was stained with blood.

Nicknamed the 'Magical Hands Scholar', Zhu Cong's skill with his hands was near magical and impossible for any human to detect. To first take Peng Lianhu's ring then pierce his palm with the poison caltrop was child's play to him. Fuming, Peng Lianhu attacked.

Qiu Chuji raised his sword and warded off the blow, shouting: "What are you going to do?"

Zhu Cong grinned. "Chief Peng, the poisonous caltrops are my Elder Brother's specialty projectiles. Once you're hit, it doesn't matter if your name is tiger [Peng Lianhu- 'hu' means tiger], lion, leopard, pig, dog or any other beast on this earth. You still will not live beyond four hours."

"Big Brother Peng, he's insulting you," said Hou Tonghai.

"You talk too much," Sha Tongtian reproached. "Do you think Big Brother Peng hasn't realized that?"

Zhu Cong chuckled and quipped, "Good thing Chief Peng has a 'Thousand Hands'. Allow me to give you a piece of friendly advice - why not chop off the hand that's been poisoned? You'll still be left with nine hundred and ninety-nine. However you'll have to alter your nickname a bit to become the 'Butcher with Nine hundred and ninety-nine Hands'."

By this time, the numbness had already spread to Peng Lianhu's wrist. Panic-stricken, he couldn't be bothered with Zhu Cong's taunts. Beads of cold sweat dripped from his forehead.

"You have your poison needles, I have my poison caltrops; these are two completely different poisons that require completely different antidotes. If you can't bear to give up the nickname of the 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands', how

about we exchange antidotes?" suggested Zhu Cong. "We're on the same side, after all."

Before Peng Lianhu could reply, Sha Tongtian said quickly, "That will do. Hand the antidote over."

Zhu Cong said, "Elder Brother, pass him the antidote." Ke Zhen'E retrieved two small medicine packets from his robes and handed them to Zhu Cong.

"Brother Zhu, don't fall for his trap," warned Qiu Chuji. "Let him hand over the antidote first."

Zhu Cong said cheerily, "We are all men of honor, I'm not afraid."

Peng Lianhu reached into his robes and felt for the antidote and his expression changed at once. He said in a low voice, "Oh no, the antidote is gone."

Qiu Chuji flew into a rage. "Hmph... up to your tricks again! Brother Zhu, don't give it to him."

Zhu Cong laughed. "Take it!" He said. "We said we'd give it to you. The 'Quanzhen Seven' and the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' are men of our word."

Sha Tongtian knew that Zhu Cong was skilful with his hands. Not wanting to be taken advantage of, he extended his iron stick horizontally. Zhu Cong placed the antidote on the stick and Sha Tongtian retrieved it. The bystanders were perplexed, not understanding why Zhu Cong gave him the antidote so casually without forcing Peng to handover his. Suspecting that the antidote was not genuine, Sha Tongtian said, "The 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' are renowned figures in the martial arts world. Surely you wouldn't use bogus medicine to harm others?"

Zhu Cong laughed, saying, "Of course, of course." He then returned the poison caltrops to Ke Zhen'E and started leisurely fishing out item after item from his robes. There was a handkerchief, some notes, a few pieces of loose silver and a white snuff bottle.

Peng Lianhu was dumbfounded. "Those items are mine! How did they end up with him?" he thought.

What happened was that Zhu Cong, while using his right hand to shake hands, employed his 'Empty Magical Hands' with his left. As a result, all the items in Peng Lianhu's robes had been lifted.

Zhu Cong uncorked the snuff bottle. It was divided into two compartments; one side contained red powder, the other side contained grey powder. "How is this applied?" he asked.

Though sly and aggressive by nature, Peng Lianhu's life now hung by a thread and he dared not be crafty. "The red is for consumption, and the grey for topical application."

Zhu Cong said to Guo Jing, "Hurry and fetch some water and two bowls."

Guo Jing bolted into the inn and fetched two bowls of clean water. He gave one bowl to Ma Yu and helped him drink the antidote. He then applied the grey powder to Ma Yu's palm. Just as he was about to give the other bowl of water to Peng Lianhu, Zhu Cong said, "Hold it. Give the other bowl to Priest Wang."

Though confused, Guo Jing followed Zhu Cong's instructions and gave the water to Wang Chuyi. Wang Chuyi also did not understand but accepted the bowl of water.

Sha Tongtian said, "Hey, how is your antidote applied?"

Zhu Cong replied, "Don't be anxious, nobody will die in such a short while." He reached into his robes and took out ten packets of herbs.

Guo Jing was delighted. "Yes, yes, that's the medicine for Priest Wang!" He opened all the herb packets and laid them in front of Wang Chuyi. "Priest Wang, you pick the ones that you need."

Wang Chuyi recognized the herbs and picked out "Tian Qi", "Xue Xie" and two other herbs. He chewed and swallowed them with water.

Liang Ziwong was both furious and impressed, thinking, "This dirty scholar has truly remarkable skill with his hands. All he did was brush my sleeve and actually managed to steal the packets of herbs from my robes." Turning around and brandishing his spade, he shouted: "Come, come, and let's see who the real winner is in a weapons fight!"

Zhu Cong laughed. "At that, I am definitely not your match."

Qiu Chuji said, "So this is Chief Peng Lianhu, what about the others? I do not know your names yet." Sha Tongtian declared himself in a hoarse voice. Qiu Chuji said, "Great, all of you have renowned reputations! There has been no clear winner between us today and it's a pity both sides now have injured parties. It looks like we'll have to arrange a gathering another day."

"That couldn't be better," said Peng Lianhu. "If we don't meet the 'Quanzhen Seven', it will be the biggest regret of our lives. Priest Qiu, please set the date and venue."

Qiu Chuji considered, "Elder Martial Brother Ma and Younger Martial Brother Wang have both been severely poisoned and will need at least a few months to recuperate. Younger Martial Brothers Tan, Liu and the rest are

scattered about and we will need some time to notify them.” So he said aloud, “Six months from now in August on Mid-Autumn Festival, we’ll admire the moon while discussing wugong. Chief Peng, what do you think?”

Peng Lianhu thought, “With all of the ‘Quanzhen Seven’, plus the ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’, we will be heavily outnumbered. We must gather more allies. Six months should be sufficient. Prince Zhao wants us to head to Jiangnan to steal Yue Fei’s manual, so we can take the chance and meet there.” So he said, “How thoughtful of Priest Qiu to arrange a martial gathering of friends on Mid-Autumn Festival. But we must also find a tasteful venue – let’s make it the hometown of the ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’.”

Qiu Chuji replied, “Excellent. We’ll meet in the Jiaxing Prefecture by the South Lake at the ‘Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal’. Everyone is welcome to invite a few more friends.”

“It’s a deal.”

Zhu Cong said, “Looks like we ‘Seven Freaks of Jiangnan’ will have no choice but to play host and foot the bills! Of all the places you had to choose from you had to pick Jiaxing so you can feast at our expense, how sly. But since it’s so rare that all of you grace Jiaxing with your presence, we will be able to afford it. Chief Peng – about the medicine – the white is for consumption and the yellow is for topical application.”

By this time, half of Peng Lianhu’s arm had already gone numb. It took him great effort to bear with it and still converse with Qiu Chuji. And then he had to put up with Zhu Cong’s incessant and useless chatter. Anger boiled in his chest but he dare not be impolite while his life was still

in their hands. When he heard Zhu Cong's last sentence, he hurriedly swallowed the white antidote.

"Chief Peng, for forty-nine days you will not go near wine or women," Ke Zhen'E said coldly. "It will be a shame if we do not see you at the gathering in Jiaxing."

Peng Lianhu replied angrily, "Thanks for your concern." Sha Tongtian applied the yellow antidote to his palm and, supporting him, turned to leave.

Wanyan Kang knelt on the ground and kowtowed four times to his mother's body. Then he turned and kowtowed a few times to Qiu Chuji. Raising his head and not uttering a single word, he walked away.

Qiu Chuji said sternly, "Kang'er, what is the meaning of this?"

But Wanyan Kang did not answer. He did not join Peng Lianhu and the others, but took another turn and went on a separate path alone. Qiu Chuji was stunned for a moment, then turned and bowed to Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong.

"If not for the help of the Six Heroes, my Martial Brothers and I might have lost our lives. Besides that, my disgraceful pupil has turned out to possess a wicked character. He cannot hold a candle to your virtuous pupil. For us martial arts practitioners, character and integrity are of the foremost importance; kung fu is secondary. I'm ashamed to have a disciple like him. The duel at Jiaxing's "Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal" has reached a conclusion - I admit defeat. Word will henceforth spread throughout Jianghu that Qiu Chuji has been trounced by the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan', and I have sincerely and gladly admitted my loss."

The “Six Freaks” swelled with pride as he spoke – their eighteen years of effort on the steppes of Mongolia had finally paid off. Ke Zhen’E uttered a few words of humility. But the “Six Freaks” then thought of their Fifth Brother, Zhang Ahsheng, who died on the steppe and sadness descended on their hearts. It was regretful that their Fifth Brother did not live to hear Qiu Chuji admitting defeat.

After they had helped Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi back into the inn, Quan Jinfa went and bought coffins to prepare for the Yang couple’s funeral. Qiu Chuji saw Mu Nianci grieving sorrowfully and felt awful himself. He said, “Miss Mu, how did your father spend the last few years?”

Wiping her tears, Mu Nianci replied, “My father and I have been wandering for over ten years, never settling in one place for more than a month. Father said he wanted to look for a... a Brother by the surname Guo...” Her voice trailed off and she slowly lowered her head.

Qiu Chuji glanced at Guo Jing, and then said to Mu Nianci, “How did your father end up adopting you?”

“I come from Lotus Pond village in the Lin’an Prefecture,” she replied. “About ten years ago, father took refuge at my home to recover from his injuries. Soon after, an epidemic broke out, killing my parents and brothers. Father then took me as his daughter and taught me martial arts. To find this Brother Guo, we roamed all over and started... started the ‘Joust for a Spouse’.”

“Ah. Your father’s surname is actually Yang, not Mu, so you should change your name accordingly.”

“No, I won’t take the surname Yang. I will still use Mu.”

Qiu Chuji said, “Why? You don’t believe me?”

Mu Nianci replied softly, "How would I dare to doubt you, Priest? But I'd rather my surname be Mu."

Qiu Chuji saw that she was stubborn and dropped the matter, thinking that she must be too traumatized by the sudden loss of her father to understand. Little did he know that he was the one who did not understand. Mu Nianci was actually thinking of something else - she had already committed her heart to Wanyan Kang. Since he was her father's real son, he must of course take the surname Yang. If she had the same surname, how could they marry?

Wang Chuyi was gradually recovering his energy after taking the antidote and lay on the bed, listening to their conversation. There was one thing he failed to understand so he asked, "How come your kung fu is so much better than your father's?"

Mu Nianci replied, "When I was thirteen, I met a strange person and he taught me kung fu for three days. It's a pity I was born unintelligent so didn't manage to learn much."

Wang Chuyi said, "He taught you just three days of kung fu and you managed to defeat your father? Who is this expert?"

"Priest, I wouldn't dare to hide anything but he made me vow that I would never reveal his name."

Wang Chuyi nodded and did not question further. Instead, he recalled her stances and moves during her fight with Wanyan Kang and conjectured, but still failed to discover which school her kung fu came from. The more he thought about her moves, the more he felt it was peculiar. He asked, "Elder Martial Brother Qiu, you taught Wanyan Kang for about eight or nine years, right?"

“Exactly nine and a half years,” Qiu Chuji replied, sighing. “I never thought he would turn out so rotten.”

Wang Chuyi said, “That’s strange!”

“Why?”

But Wang Chuyi did not reply. Ke Zhen’E asked, “Priest Qiu, how did you manage to find Brother Yang’s descendent?”

Qiu Chuji replied, “It was such a coincidence. After we made the bet, I traveled widely seeking news of the Guo and Yang families. Years passed and still there was nothing, but I did not give up. The year I went again to Ox Village looking for some clues to their whereabouts, I saw a few government officials removing objects from Brother Yang’s old home. I followed them and eavesdropped on their conversations. These officials were actually Prince Zhao’s guards from the Jin Empire. They were under orders to remove each and every item from the house, be it broken chairs or iron spears; nothing was to be left behind. I suspected that there was something much more to it, so I followed them all the way to Zhongdu.”

Guo Jing had seen Bao Xiruo’s living quarters in the Palace, and now he fully understood.

Qiu Chuji continued, “To find out why Prince Zhao had moved all these old and broken things from Ox Village, I sneaked into the Palace at night to investigate. What I saw made me both furious and upset – Brother Yang’s wife had become a Consort! In my great anger I initially thought of killing her; but then I saw her living in the old house, caressing Brother Yang’s spear and sobbing all night. I felt she wasn’t totally heartless after all and hadn’t forgotten her dead husband, so I spared her life. Later, I found out that the little Prince was actually Brother Yang’s flesh and

blood. When he was a few years older, I started teaching him martial arts.”

Ke Zhen'E said, “So all along he was none the wiser about his roots?”

“I did sound him out a few times, but found that he enjoyed riches,” he replied. “He was not a person of integrity, so I never revealed the truth to him. Every time I tried to teach him important moral principles, he would always behave apathetically and respond with his slippery tongue. If it wasn't for our wager, why would I even waste my time on him? Originally I had hoped for both sides to reconcile no matter who won the duel and then I would tell him the truth about his birth. We would then rescue his mother from the Palace and settle down in a quiet area. How was I to know that Brother Yang was still alive? Both Elder Martial Brother Ma and I were injured by those scoundrels and failed to save him and his wife... hai!” Hearing this, Mu Nianci hid her face and started weeping softly again.

Guo Jing then explained how he met Yang Tiexin and how he had seen Bao Xiruo in the night. Everyone agreed that although Bao Xiruo had lost her virtue in the Zhao Palace, she was, after all, under the impression that her husband was dead. In the end she followed her husband in death and there was no one present that did not admire her loyalty or sigh at the tragedy.

The conversation then shifted to the Mid-Autumn Festival duel. Zhu Cong said, “The ‘Quanzhen Seven’ will be assembled there. What have we to worry about?”

“It's just that those scoundrels might bring along enough good fighters to outnumber us,” Ma Yu said.

Qiu Chuji said, “Which other good fighters can they bring along? Are there so many good fighters in the world?”

Ma Yu sighed. "Younger Martial Brother Qiu, your skills have improved greatly in the past few years and brought glory to our Sect. Yet, you still haven't been able to curb the arrogance of youth. You..."

Qiu Chuji laughed and completed, "I must know that there will always be a higher person, like there will always be a higher heaven."

Ma Yu smiled. "Isn't it so? The people we met just now really possess skills that are no lower than ours. If they invite more fighters of their caliber to the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal', then it's hard to tell who will win."

Qiu Chuji cocked his head proudly and said, "Elder Martial Brother, you worry too much. Is it even possible that Quanzhen Sect would lose to that bunch of thugs?"

Ma Yu replied, "Nothing is certain in this world. If not for Brother Ke and Brother Zhu, the decades-old reputation of Quanzhen Sect would have been ruined by us three Martial Brothers."

Ke Zhen'E and Zhu Cong declined modestly. "It was just because the opposition employed dirty tricks. How can it be taken into account?"

Ma Yu sighed again. "Martial Uncle Zhou was taught personally by our sect's founder and his skills are ten times better than ours. Alas, because of his stubborn and competitive nature, he has been missing for over ten years. We must take this as a lesson and always remain cautious."

Now that Ma Yu phrased it this way, Qiu Chuji did not dare to rebut. The 'Six Freaks' never knew the 'Quanzhen Seven' had a Martial Uncle. From Ma Yu's words, they deduced that this matter was not something that the Quanzhen Sect was proud of. It would not be tactful to make any comments

and so they refrained; but nevertheless they were curious. Wang Chuyi listened to their dialogue but remained silent, mulling over something.

Qiu Chuji glanced at Guo Jing and Mu Nianci. "Brother Ke, you have nurtured a fine and gallant disciple. With such a son-in-law, my Brother Yang will be able to rest in peace."

Mu Nianci's face reddened and she stood up. Lowering her head, she walked out of the room. Watching her stand up and walk out, a notion flashed through Wang Chuyi's mind and he got out of bed, sending his palm straight at her shoulder. This move was swift and by the time Mu Nianci sensed it, his palm had already reached her right shoulder. He paused there for a moment, waiting for her to exercise internal energy to resist. At the very moment when the energy was just about to respond, Wang Chuyi yanked her shoulder. So distinguished a character was the 'Immortal with the Iron Foot', 'Jade Sun' Wang Chuyi that even though he had not recovered from his heavy injuries and his arms were devoid of internal energy, he was still able to pinpoint the void in her qi. With this push and pull, Mu Nianci swayed and instantly fell forward. Wang Chuyi extended his right hand to support her right shoulder and she was upright again. It was all beyond her control and her lovely eyes widened with a mixture of surprise and bewilderment.

Wang Chuyi laughed and said, "Don't be frightened Miss Mu, I was just testing your kung fu. The senior expert who taught you for three days - did he dress like a beggar and have just nine fingers?"

Mu Nianci said in surprise, "Uh? Yes, that's right. Priest Wang, how did you know?"

Wang Chuyi smiled. "This 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar', Elder Hong, goes about things in a truly mysterious

manner. It's just like seeing the heavenly dragon's head but catching no hint of the tail. To have been taught personally by him is to your great fortune and a cause for celebration."

"It was a pity he was so busy and only taught me for three days."

Wang Chuyi let out a sigh. "You should be content. You have gained more in those three days than what others can teach you in ten or twenty years."

Mu Nianci said, "Priest is right." After a brief pause, she continued, "Priest Wang, do you happen to know where Elder Hong is?"

Laughing, he replied, "Now you've got me stumped. I last saw him at Mount Hua over twenty years ago and have not heard from him since." Disappointed, Mu Nianci walked slowly out of the room.

Han Xiaoying asked, "Priest Wang, who is this Elder Hong?"

Wang Chuyi smiled and seated himself on the bed. Qiu Chuji said, "Heroine Han, have you heard of the 'Eastern Heretic', 'Western Poison', 'Southern Emperor', 'Northern Beggar' and 'Central Divinity'?"

Han Xiaoying replied, "I've heard people say they are the five strongest martial artists in the world, but I don't know if it's true."

Qiu Chuji said, "It is."

Ke Zhen'E said, "So this Elder Hong is the 'Northern Beggar'?"

Wang Chuyi replied, "That's right. The 'Central Divinity' refers to our late founder, the Reverend Wang."

Upon hearing that Elder Hong was mentioned alongside the 'Quanzhen Seven's' Shifu, they were immediately filled with awe. Qiu Chuji turned and smiled at Guo Jing. "This future wife of yours is the disciple of the great 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar'. Who would dare bully you in the future?" Guo Jing felt his cheeks burn and wanted to dispute this, but he just stammered and did not manage to say anything.

Han Xiaoying asked, "Priest Wang, how could you tell that she was taught by the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar' by just pushing her shoulder?"

Qiu Chuji motioned for Guo Jing to come over and Guo Jing went to his side as instructed. Qiu Chuji pushed Guo Jing's shoulder with his palm, exerting pressure with internal energy. But Guo Jing had cultivated profound internal energy under Ma Yu's guidance and also endured over ten years of hard physical training from the "Six Freaks". As a result, he had considerable internal and external strength. With this push, Qiu Chuji could not bring him down. Laughing, he said, "Good lad!" and the pressure loosened.

Guo Jing had exercised his internal energy to resist the push and now he relaxed both outwards and inwards. Quick as lightning, Qiu Chuji seized this instant; Guo Jing's earlier energy had dissipated and his new wave of energy had yet to expand, leaving a gap. With a light pull, Guo Jing fell backwards. He extended his hands and, using his fingers, propelled himself upright again.

Everyone burst out laughing. Zhu Cong said, "Jing'er, remember this expert move that Priest Qiu just taught you." Guo Jing nodded in obedience.

Qiu Chuji said, "Heroine Han, when pulled by the shoulder, all martial artists in the world will fall backward if they are

unable to resist. But with the unique kung fu of the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar', one will fall forward instead. This is because his kung fu is rooted in extreme, rigid toughness. When faced with strength, it responds with greater strength. Though Miss Mu only spent three days in his tutelage, she has evidently grasped his martial arts philosophy. Though she was unable to withstand Younger Martial Brother Wang's pull, she refused to succumb to the situation. Even if she had to fall, she would fall in the opposite direction to the enemy's strength."

The 'Six Freaks' thought what he said made sense, and admired the Quanzhen Sect's extensive knowledge. Zhu Cong said, "Priest Wang has seen the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar' display his kung fu?"

Wang Chuyi said, "Over twenty years ago, my late Shifu competed in the Mount Hua Tournament with the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar', Huang Yaoshi and the other Greats. Elder Hong's kung fu was truly outstanding but he is also very gluttonous and Mount Hua was short of delicacies. Feeling extremely bored, he took sword as wine and fist as dishes and began chatting about the theories of sword and fist with my late Shifu and Elder Huang Yaoshi. At that time I was serving my Shifu and was very lucky indeed to have heard these brilliant theories. In fact, I learned a lot."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Oh, so of the group, 'Eastern Heretic', 'Western Poison', Huang Yaoshi must be the so-called 'Eastern Heretic'?"

Qiu Chuji replied, "Correct." He then turned to Guo Jing and said jovially, "Although Elder Martial Brother Ma taught you some internal energy, luckily you are not officially his disciple. If you start comparing seniority, you'll be one level

lower than your future wife! You'll never be able to raise your head in this life."

Guo Jing went red. "I'm not marrying her."

Startled, Qiu Chuji said, "What?"

"I'm not marrying her!" Guo Jing repeated.

Qiu Chuji's face sank and he stood up. "But why?"

Ever doting on her disciple, Han Xiaoying saw that Guo Jing was in a tight spot and hurriedly explained on his behalf: "We received word that Master Yang's child was a male. Thinking that the betrothal agreement was nullified, Jing'er has already become engaged in Mongolia. The Khan of Mongolia, Genghis Khan, has appointed him as his imperial son-in-law."

Qiu Chuji's face hardened and he glared at Guo Jing. Laughing icily, he said, "Brilliant, that girl is a Princess and a precious imperial descendent so commoners can't hold a candle to her. Are you just going to conveniently ignore the wishes of the dead? You lust for riches and betray your roots, so how are you different than that scoundrel Wanyan Kang? And what of your late father's wishes?"

Panicking, Guo Jing kowtowed. "I never met my father and my mother has never mentioned anything about his wishes. Priest, please enlighten me."

At this, Qiu Chuji lost his cold smile and his expression softened at once. "So you are really not to blame. I was too quick to jump to conclusions." He then explained everything from beginning to the end - his meeting with the Guo and Yang sworn brothers eighteen years ago at Ox Village, the slaughtering of soldiers that night, his search for the Guo and Yang family wives, his misunderstanding with the

'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan' and the wager that followed, et cetera.

Now knowing the circumstances of his birth and how everything had begun, he broke down in sobs. His father died a horrible death and had yet to be avenged; he then thought of the great kindness of his seven Shifus -- how could he even hope to repay them in this lifetime?

Han Xiaoying said kindly, "It's very common for a man to have more than one wife. Just let the Khan know about this and marry both women. That way, all your problems will be solved. I reckon the Khan himself has more than a hundred wives."

Wiping away his tears, he replied, "I can't marry Princess Hua Zheng either."

Surprised, Han Xiaoying asked, "Why?"

"I wouldn't like her as my wife."

"But haven't you always been on very good terms with her?"

"I regard her as a younger sister and a good friend; but I certainly don't want her as my wife."

Qiu Chuji said happily, "Good child, you've got backbone! Khan or not, Princess or not, who cares? Just obey your father and Uncle Yang and get married to Miss Mu." Unexpectedly, Guo Jing shook his head again.

"I won't marry Miss Mu either."

Everyone present was bewildered, not knowing what was running through his head. But Han Xiaoying was a woman and she paid heed to details. "You like someone else?" she

asked gently. Guo Jing blushed and, after a moment or two, nodded his head.

Han Baoju and Qiu Chuji asked sternly in unison, "Who is it?"

Guo Jing opened his mouth to answer but faltered. During the fight with Mei Chaofeng and the others at the Jin Palace the previous night, Huang Rong had caught the attention of Han Xiaoying. She had secretly marveled at this girl with her graceful movements and a face as delicate as those you only see in paintings. Thinking back, Huang Rong did seem very affectionate towards Guo Jing and had been especially looking out for him. Han Xiaoying asked, "It's the young girl who dressed in white, isn't it?" Guo Jing went red as he nodded.

Qiu Chuji said impatiently, "What young or old girl in white or black?"

Han Xiaoying muttered to herself, "I heard Mei Chaofeng call her Little Martial-Sister and addressed her father as Shifu..."

Qiu Chuji and Ke Zhen'E stood up at once and said together, flabbergasted: "She's Huang Yaoshi's daughter?"

Holding Guo Jing's hand, Han Xiaoying asked, "Jing'er is her surname Huang?"

Guo Jing answered, "Yes."

This response left Han Xiaoying speechless.

Ke Zhen'E muttered, "You want to marry Mei Chaofeng's Younger Martial-Sister?"

Zhu Cong asked, "Her father has betrothed her to you?"

Guo Jing replied, "I've never met her father, nor do I know who her father is."

Zhu Cong asked again, "So you have an illicit engagement?"

Not knowing what an 'illicit engagement' meant, Guo Jing widened his eyes and did not reply. Zhu Cong continued, "You've told her that you will definitely marry her, and she's also said that she'll definitely marry you, is that right?"

Guo Jing replied, "I never said that." After a brief pause, he continued, "We don't have to say it. I can't do without her and she can't do without me. We know this in our hearts."

Having never experienced the feeling of love, Han Baoju was displeased hearing this and said impatiently, "What nonsense is this?"

However, Han Xiaoying's mind flitted to Zhang Ahsheng as she thought, "Amongst us 'Seven Freaks', Fifth Brother's character was the most similar to Jing'er's. He loved me in secret - he always thought he wasn't good enough for me - and so he never expressed his feelings. Was it like Jing'er and that girl, what with the 'we both know it in our hearts; I can't do without her and she can't do without me'? If I had let him know, just a few months before he died, that I actually couldn't do without him, he would have at least had a few months of true happiness in his lifetime."

Zhu Cong said calmly, "Her father is a ruthless monster who kills without blinking, did you know that? If he found out that you got close to his daughter in secret, how could you even hope to live? Mei Chaofeng hasn't even learned one-tenth of his kung fu and she is already so formidable. If the Master of Peach Blossom Island decides to kill you...who will be able to save you?"

Guo Jing said softly, "Rong'er is so nice, I doubt... I doubt her father will be a bad person."

"Bullshit!" Han Baoju berated. "Huang Yaoshi is utterly evil, how could he not be a bad person? Quickly vow that you'll never see that little demoness again."

Because the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had killed the 'Smiling Dhuda' Zhang Ahsheng, the 'Six Freaks' bore a grudge as deep as the ocean towards them and they hated their Shifu to the core. They all thought that the kung fu the Twin Killers used to kill Zhang Ahsheng had been taught by Huang Yaoshi; had there been no Huang Yaoshi in this world, Zhang Ahsheng wouldn't have died.

Guo Jing was in an extremely difficult position. On the one hand was his deep gratitude towards his Shifus and on the other was a love both sincere and true. If he could never see Rong'er again, how could he live? His Shifus' eyes were fixed sternly on him and with an aching heart he dropped down to his knees with tears streaming down his cheeks. Han Baoju stepped forward and said harshly, "Say it! Say that you'll never see that little demoness again."

Suddenly, a clear female voice shouted from outside the window: "Why are you bullying him like that? How shameless!" Everyone was startled. The girl called, "Jing ge ge, hurry outside."

Surprised and delighted to hear Huang Rong's voice, Guo Jing dashed outside and saw her standing in the courtyard with his 'Blood-Sweating Horse'. The little red horse saw Guo Jing and let out a long neigh, raising its front hoofs.

Han Baoju, Quan Jinfu, Zhu Cong and Qiu Chuji followed him out of the room. Guo Jing said to Han Baoju, "Third Teacher, that's her, she's Rong'er. Rong'er isn't a demoness!"

"You ugly and short fatty, why did you call me a little demoness?" Huang Rong scolded. She then pointed to Zhu Cong and said, "And you, sly and sloppy scholar! Why did you say my father is a monster who kills without blinking?"

Not taking a little girl's words to heart, Zhu Cong merely smiled. Looking at Huang Rong, he thought that her beauty was indeed peerless and none he had seen in his life could match hers - no wonder Jing'er was so crazy about her. Han Baoju, however, was absolutely furious; so much so that the moustache at the edge of his lips had curled. He yelled, "Get out, get out!"

Huang Rong started clapping and sang: "Shorty-gourd, tumbling ball, with one kick, rolls three times; with two kicks..."

Guo Jing exclaimed, "Rong'er, stop being discourteous! These are my Shifus."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and made a face. Moving forward, Han Baoju struck out his arm to hit her. Huang Rong sang again: "Shorty-gourd, tumbling ball..." Sudden, she reached out and grabbed the cloth at Guo Jing's waist. With a hard tug, both of them mounted the horse. With a lift of the reins, the little red horse bolted forward and away like an arrow leaving the bow. No matter how fast Han Baoju was, how could he possibly catch up with the lightning speed of a 'Blood-Sweating Horse'? By the time Guo Jing had settled himself, he turned his head to see that the faces of Han Baoju and the others were already blurs; in the next instant they were reduced to little black dots. His own face was wrapped in the rushing wind and his ears enveloped in the sound of it. The little red horse continued to surge forward at an amazing pace.

Huang Rong held the reins in her right hand and held Guo Jing's hand with her left. Though they had parted for less than half a day, they had just gone through an agonizing experience. Though one was inside the room and the other outside the window, both had similar feelings of anxiety. Now it felt like they had re-united after a calamity. Guo Jing's heart was clouded with indecision – running from his Shifus like this was hugely wrong. Yet when he thought of giving up this girl in his arms, who was dearer than his own life, and never seeing her again, he would rather slice his neck and bleed to death.

Only after the little red horse had galloped more than ten li beyond the Jin Capital did Huang Rong pull back the reins and halt, leaping off the horse. Guo Jing followed. The little red horse kept rubbing its head against Guo Jing's waist, displaying great affection. Guo Jing and Huang Rong held hands and gazed at each other in silence; each having a multitude of words to say but not knowing where to begin. But even in the absence of words, their hearts were linked and they were aware of each other's thoughts. After a long while, Huang Rong lightly released her hand and retrieved a towel from the leather sack on the horse's side. She wet the towel in a small stream and gave it to Guo Jing to wipe his face. Guo Jing was currently in a dazed state and did not take the towel but suddenly said, "Rong'er, we have to do it!"

Jumping in surprise, Huang Rong said, "What is it?"

"We'll head back and see my Shifus."

"Go back? Go back together?" She said, stunned.

"Yes. I want to hold your hand and tell my six Shifus, Priest Ma and the rest, 'Rong'er is not a demoness'..." Holding Huang Rong's little hand and lifting his head, he said firmly,

as if Ke Zhen'E, Ma Yu and the rest were in front of him, "Shifus, you have shown me great kindness that I will never be able to repay even with my life. But, but, Rong'er is really not a demoness, she's a very, very good girl, very, very good..." In his heart he had innumerable words and phrases in defense of Huang Rong, but when the words were in his mouth, he could say nothing but 'very, very good'.

Huang Rong found it funny at first but as Guo Jing went on she felt greatly moved. Gently, she said, "Jing ge ge, your Shifus hate me to the core. Nothing you say will make a difference. Let's not go back! I'll follow you to the secluded mountains, to an island in the sea, to someplace where they'll never find us and live there forever."

Guo Jing's heart gave a start, but he said seriously, "Rong'er, we must go back."

"But they'll surely separate us," she wailed. "Then we'll never be able to see each other, ever again."

"Then we'll just not separate, until death parts us."

Huang Rong's initial misery abated with these words; words that weighed more than a thousand vows and a million promises. Suddenly she was filled with such confidence, a feeling that their two hearts had long been stubbornly knotted together, so stubbornly that no person or force in this world could separate them. She thought to herself: 'Yes, that's it. In the worst case we can only die; surely there can't be anything worse than death?'

She said aloud, "Jing ge ge, I will abide by you forever. We'll just won't separate until death parts us."

Guo Jing said with delight, "I've always said you were a very, very good girl."

Smiling gaily, Huang Rong retrieved a large piece of raw beef from the sack and coated it with moist earth. Gathering some dry twigs and branches, they started a fire. She said, "Let the little red horse rest for a bit. We'll set off after we eat."

After they had finished the beef and the little red horse had had its fill of grass, the two of them mounted the horse and went back the way they came. Not long after passing a sign they arrived at the inn. Guo Jing held Huang Rong's hand and together, they stepped inside. The shopkeeper had once been recipient of Guo Jing's silver and looked joyous at seeing his return. Hurrying forward, he welcomed Guo Jing, saying, "Good day to you, sir! All the other guests have left the city. What would you like to eat?"

Guo Jing said, surprised, "They've all left? Did they leave any messages?"

"No, they didn't. They headed south and haven't been gone for more than four hours."

Turning to Huang Rong, Guo Jing said, "We'll catch up with them." They left the inn, mounted the horse and headed south in pursuit, but failed to catch sight of the three priests or the 'Six Freaks'. So they turned back once again. The little red horse, spirited as ever after having done two trips, still showed no signs of weariness and continued galloping relentlessly. Along the way they made inquiries about the three priests and 'Six Freaks' but no one had seen anyone like them and Guo Jing was thoroughly disappointed.

Huang Rong said, "All of them will be gathering at the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal' during the Mid-Autumn Festival, so you'll definitely be able to see your Shifus then."

It still wouldn't be too late to tell them that I'm 'very, very good'."

"Mid-Autumn Festival is a whole six months away," he replied.

Smiling cheerfully, Huang Rong said, "Then for these six months we'll have fun and be merry, wouldn't that be great?"

Besides being adventurous by nature, Guo Jing, like all young people, was also playful. Furthermore, he would be accompanied by the girl he loved and couldn't ask for more. Applauding the idea, the pair hurried to the nearest town to spend the evening. The next day they bought a white horse; Guo Jing insisted on riding it, letting Huang Rong ride the little red horse. With reins in hand, they traveled leisurely and enjoyed themselves along the way. Sometimes they slept beside each other in the wilderness, other times they shared a room at an inn. Despite their deep love for each other, they were young and innocent and did nothing licentious. Huang Rong did not think this situation was unusual; Guo Jing, however, felt that this was how things were meant to be.

One day they arrived in Xiqing Prefecture, which was east of Jingdong Road and was controlled by the Taining military. As it grew closer to noon, the weather became increasingly humid. Having ridden with haste for nearly half a day, trickles of perspiration formed on their foreheads and backs as the bright, orange sun shone directly on them. Sand and dust from the trail scattered all around them as they rode, the particles sticking to their sweating faces. The discomfort was unbearable.

"Let's not hurry anymore. We'll find a cool and breezy place to rest," Huang Rong suggested.

Guo Jing replied, "Sure. Let's have a pot of tea in the next town before doing anything else."

As they spoke, their horses caught up with a sedan chair with a scrawny donkey leading. Riding the donkey was a big fat man clothed in yam-colored gauze robes, continuously fanning himself with a big white fan. The donkey staggered under the weight of his 227 jin [113kg / 250lb] body, with every step proving to be a hurdle. As for the sedan chair, its screens were lifted for cooling purposes and within it sat a fat middle-aged woman in pink robes. Coincidentally, the two sedan-bearers were also thin and frail and both were panting heavily. Beside the sedan was a servant girl with a sunflower-fan, relentlessly fanning the fat woman. Huang Rong urged her horse forward and overtook this group of people and passed them by seventy or eighty feet. She then reined in and turned around to face them.

Curious, Guo Jing asked, "What are you doing?"

"I want to see what this madam looks like," came her reply. Peering into the sedan, she saw that the fat woman was forty-odd years of age. She had a gold hairpin in her hair, and at the edge of her temple was a large, red velvet flower. She had a broad mouth, beady eyes, two flapping ears and a nose so flat it looked like it wasn't there. Her plump face was as round as a plate with a thick layer of powder slapped on. However, streams of perspiration from her forehead had already washed streaks of powder to create several ridges on her face. Hearing Huang Rong's words, she raised a pair of bushy eyebrows and glowered fiercely at her.

"What's there to see?" The fat woman rudely said.

Huang Rong already had intentions of creating trouble and she couldn't have been happier now that the fat woman

took the initiative to stir it up. Halting the little red horse and blocking the way, she grinned and said, "I'm admiring your slim figure, it's really nice!" All of a sudden, she lifted the reins with a cry and the little red horse charged straight at the sedan chair. Shocked, the two sedan-bearers dropped it immediately and escaped to the sides. The sedan chair toppled over and the fat woman came tumbling noisily out, landing right smack in the middle of the path. Her arms and legs flailed helplessly about and she was unable to pick herself up. But Huang Rong had halted the little red horse and was now clapping her hands and howling with laughter. She had intended to ride away after this prank, but the fatty on the donkey brandished his mule whip and lashed it ferociously towards her.

He bellowed: "Where did this little witch pop up from?"

Lying horizontally across the path, an even worse string of obscenities escaped the fat woman's mouth.

Huang Rong caught the whip with her left hand and gave it a small tug, causing the fat man to tumble off his donkey. Raising the whip, she swung it towards him. The fat woman screamed loudly, "Female robber! Murderer! She's blocked our way and robbed us!" Unrelenting, Huang Rong pulled out her E'Mei Dagger and bent down. A "chit" sound and blood splattered across the fat woman's face and she squealed like a dying pig. Her left ear had been sliced off.

This scared the living daylight out of the fat man and he immediately knelt, whimpering: "Mercy, big Lady King! I... I have silver!"

Huang Rong made a face. "Who wants your silver? Who is this woman?"

"She... She's my wife! We... we... she went to her mother's house for a visit."

“Both of you are fat and robust; why can’t you walk? I can show mercy, but you have to follow my orders.”

“Yes, yes,” he sputtered. “We’ll obey Lady King’s orders.”

Huang Rong burst out laughing when she heard him address her as ‘Lady King’, thinking it was a pretty interesting title. She said, “Where are the two sedan chair bearers? Get inside the sedan chair – all of you, together with that servant girl.”

Not daring to defy her, the three servants tipped the fallen sedan chair upright and climbed inside. Thankfully, the three of them were thin and small so it wasn’t much of a squeeze. In fact, their combined mass might’ve even been smaller than that of the fat woman. Six pairs of eyes, the three servants’, Guo Jing’s and the fat couples’ were fixed nervously on Huang Rong, not knowing what strange ideas she might have.

Huang Rong said, “You, husband and wife, have led a life of power and luxury, bullying the poor just because you have a little stinking money. Now that you’ve met the big ‘Lady King’, would you like to live or die?”

By this time, the fat woman had stopped her wailing. With her left hand pressed firmly on the wound on the side of her head, she said together with her fat husband, “We want to live, we want to live! Please have mercy, Lady King!”

“All right,” Huang Rong said. “Today, it’s your turn to be the sedan chair bearers. Lift it up!”

The fat woman cried, “I... I only know how to sit in them; I don’t know how to carry them!”

A dagger flew past her, grazing the tip of her nose. Huang Rong shouted, “If you don’t carry the sedan chair, I’m going

to slice off your nose."

Thinking that her nose had already been sliced off, the fat woman shrieked, "Aiya, the pain is killing me!" Huang Rong shouted again, "Are you going to carry the sedan chair, or not?"

The fat man quickly lifted one end of the sedan chair and said, "We'll carry it, we'll carry it!"

Left with no choice, the fat woman lowered her body and placed the other end of the sedan chair pole on her shoulder, then stood upright again. Both husband and wife were truly sturdy and robust, having eaten plenty of tonics. They strode away with the poles on their shoulders, looking like experienced sedan chair bearers.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing cheered in unison, "Well carried!" They trailed behind the sedan chair on their horses for about a hundred feet before Huang Rong urged her horse to a gallop.

"Jing ge ge, let's go!"

Together, they galloped swiftly and after a short distance, turned back for a look. They couldn't help but burst out in peels of laughter at the sight. The fat couple was still walking with the sedan chair pole on their shoulders, not daring to put it down.

"That fat woman is both cruel and hideous and is actually quite a suitable choice. I originally wanted to capture her and give her to Qiu Chuji as a wife; it's too bad I can't beat that Ox-nose in a fight."

"Why would you give her to Priest Qiu?" Guo Jing asked, baffled. "He wouldn't want a wife."

“Of course he wouldn’t. But at the same time, why doesn’t he understand you? You said you didn’t want to marry Miss Mu but he still tried to force you to. Hmph, one day when I can defeat that Ox-nose priest, I’ll force him to take a wicked and ugly woman as his wife and let him have a taste of being forced to marry!”

Hearing this, Guo Jing’s smile faded and he was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Rong’er, Miss Mu is neither wicked nor ugly. But I’ll only take you as my wife.”

With a lovely smile, Huang Rong said, “Even if you didn’t say it, I know.”

They continued their journey until the sound of rushing water emerged from behind a row of trees. Huang Rong wove her way past a big tree and gave a cry of delight. Guo Jing followed and soon saw a clear stream; so clear in fact that you could see the stream bed made up of green, white, red and purple pebbles. Hanging willows graced both banks and their branches lightly brushed the water’s surface, beneath which many fish swam freely. Huang Rong removed her outer robe and jumped into the water with a splash. Alarmed, Guo Jing went near the edge of the stream only to see both her hands raised high, grasping a green fish that was about one chi long [33.3cm / 13in.]. The fish wriggled desperately, struggling to escape. Huang Rong called out, “Catch!”

She threw the fish towards him. Displaying his seize and control method, Guo Jing caught the fish. But the fish was extremely slippery and slid out of his hands immediately and flipped wildly on the ground.

Clapping and laughing, Huang Rong called, “Jing ge ge, come in and swim.” Having grown up on the steppes, Guo

Jing did not know how to swim and shook his head with a smile.

“Come in, I’ll teach you,” she urged.

Huang Rong looked like she was having a lot of fun in the water, so he removed his outer clothes and slowly waded in. Huang Rong gave his leg a tug and he lost balance, falling in and gulping down a few mouthfuls of water in panic. Huang Rong laughed as she helped him up, and began teaching him the technique of swimming. The essentials of the skill lay in regulating one’s breathing. Since Guo Jing was acquainted with internal energy practice techniques and proficient with breath regulation, it took him only half a day’s practice to get the hang of swimming. That night they slept near the bank of the stream; early the next morning it was back to one teaching, one learning. Growing up on an island in the sea, Huang Rong had been proficient in aquatic skills since she was young. Be it literature or martial arts, there was nothing Huang Yaoshi did not excel at, yet his aquatic skills were far behind those of his daughter. Under the guidance of this brilliant instructor, Guo Jing spent eight to ten hours underwater every day. After seven or eight days had passed, he could swim up and down as he pleased; float and sink as he chose.

On this particular day, they had been swimming for hours and their enthusiasm still seemed boundless. They defied the current and had just swum a few li upstream when they heard the sound of falling water. Rounding a bend, their eyes were greeted with what looked like flying pearls and sprinkling jade – it was actually a waterfall of a few hundred feet in height, with large amounts of water spilling down ceaselessly from the cliff peak.

“Jing ge ge, let’s try and make it up to the cliff from the waterfall,” Huang Rong said.

“Okay, let’s give it a try. You’d better wear your ‘Soft Hedgehog Armor’.”

“No need!”

With a determined shout, the pair plunged their way into the waterfall. The current was extremely swift – forget climbing, they couldn’t even stand properly, and with a slight shift of their feet their bodies were pushed far downstream by the current. After a few unsuccessful attempts, they finally gave up in exhaustion. Feeling extremely discontented, Guo Jing said with rising anger, “Rong’er, we’ll have a good rest tonight and come again tomorrow.”

Huang Rong said, laughing, “Okay! You needn’t get angry at the waterfall, though.”

Realizing he was being silly, Guo Jing laughed along with her. The next day they tried again, and this time managed to climb over ten feet. Fortunately, both were proficient in their lightness skills (qing gong) and every time they were pushed down by the water, they only fell into the deep waterfall plunge pool and did not hurt themselves. On the eighth day, Guo Jing finally managed to reach the top. Stretching out his hand, he hauled Huang Rong up and they jumped up and down in jubilation, delirious with their triumph. Then, hand-in-hand, they slid down the waterfall.

And so, after spending nearly ten days in this fashion, Guo Jing’s aquatic skills were no longer weak, thanks to his deep internal energy. Though he was still far behind Huang Rong, she told him that he had already surpassed her father. Only when the waterfall ceased to interest them did they finally get back onto their horses and journey southwards.

On this day, the sun had already set and the vast, cloudy sky was a dark blanket of blue when the pair arrived at the banks of Changjiang River. Guo Jing gazed east where the great river's waves broke steadily and unfaltering. All around him was an abundant excess of nature, seemingly infinite. Water flowed unceasingly into the river from upstream; it was steadfast, and it would run without rest for eternity. With such awe-inspiring scenery before his eyes, feelings of heroism and valor stirred in his chest and he felt like his body had merged into one with the river. Guo Jing continued admiring the scenery for a fairly long while before Huang Rong suddenly spoke: "If you want to go, let's go."

Guo Jing replied, "Okay!"

Having spent all these days together, there was no longer a need for many words between them before they knew what the other was thinking. Huang Rong could see from the expression in his eyes that he wanted to swim across the river. Guo Jing released the white horse's reins and said, "You're of no use now, so go your own way."

With a pat on the back of the little red horse, they leapt into the river together. The little red horse let out a long neigh and swam out in front, while Guo Jing and Huang Rong swam side-by-side behind it. By the time they reached the middle of the river, the little red horse was already way ahead of them. Above them, myriads of stars sparkled in the sky and aside from the sound of the waves, all else was quiet. It was as if they were the only two people in heaven and earth.

After swimming for a while longer, dark clouds suddenly started gathering in the sky and on the river, all was pitch black. Lightning and thunder followed and each roar of thunder seemed like it had struck their heads.

"Rong'er," Guo Jing called. "Are you afraid?"

Smiling, she said, "I'm with you, I'm not afraid."

The rain then started falling mercilessly and eventually ended as abruptly as it began. When they finally reached the other side of the river, the storm had ended and the moon had begun to give way to the sun. Guo Jing gathered some dry twigs and started a fire. From her bag, Huang Rong retrieved a dry set of clothing for both of them and they hung their wet clothes above the fire to dry.

After a short nap, brightness crept slowly over the horizon. In a small peasant hut by the river, a single rooster cleared its throat and started its long crow. Huang Rong yawned and exclaimed, "I'm hungry!" She sprinted towards the hut and returned within a quarter of an hour with a big fat chicken in hand. Chuckling, she said, "Let's go farther away so the owner won't see."

The two of them journeyed eastward a few li and the little red horse trailed behind them obediently. Huang Rong used her E'Mei dagger to cut open the chicken's stomach and proceeded to remove its organs, but she did not pluck its feathers. Wetting some earth with water, she coated the chicken with mud and roasted it over fire. Some moments later, a sweet fragrance seeped through the mud. When the mud had become completely dry, it was removed and the chicken skin and feathers came off with it, exposing tender white meat and releasing a rich, savory aroma that filled their nostrils.

Chapter 12 -The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse

Translated by Patudo, Xfiberloss and Sunnysnow, with notes by Qiu Shuyi



Suddenly, Wanyan Kang understood, "She is telling me that we are not related by blood at all!" He took her right hand in his and smiled. Mu Nianci's face reddened, she struggled lightly but did not loose his grasp, letting him to hold her hand; her head hung even lower.

Huang Rong was on the point of cutting up the chicken when they heard a voice behind them: "A third portion please; I will take the back-end portion!"

The two youngsters jumped; how had somebody been able to approach them without them realizing it? They turned and beheld a beggar, older but forceful. The man had a rectangular face, a goatee and vigorous but rather massive limbs. His clothes, frayed everywhere, were, however, very clean. He held with one hand a green stick, made from translucent bamboo like jade, and carried on his back a large red gourd. He looked so eager and impatient that one had the impression that if his portion was not offered, he was going to seize some by force! Before the two young people had time to answer, without much ado, he was already sitting down in front of them. He took his gourd, opened it, and a heady alcoholic perfume spread itself in the air. He thirstily swallowed several mouthfuls before capping it again. To Guo Jing he said, "A drink for you, little urchin!"

Guo Jing found the man rather impolite, but sensed distinctly that he was no ordinary individual, so he did not dare to show disrespect. "No, thank you," he said courteously, "I do not wish a drink at the moment, but you having one won't bother me."

"And you, little girl," the beggar asked Huang Rong, "Do you drink?"

Huang Rong shook her head. Suddenly, she saw that the hand which held the gourd had only four fingers; the index had been severed at the first knuckle. She started and thought of the conversation between the Taoists and the Freaks, which she had overheard outside the window of the inn the other day, concerning the 'Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar'. "Could this be a stroke of luck," she wondered, "that we meet by chance, that Elder? Let's try to probe him a little..." The eyes of the beggar were fixed on the chicken held in her hand and he salivated in anticipation. She could not stop secretly laughing. She then cut out the bird into two and the end portion was handed to him. Captivated, the beggar seized it and took a full bite. While devouring it, he did not cease praising, "Delicious! Delicious! Even I, who am the leader of all the beggars, could not improvise such a delicious 'Beggar's Chicken'!" Huang Rong smiled and offered the other piece to him.

"But no," protested the beggar, "neither of you have eaten yet!" This attempt at manners was in vain and purely a formality, since it did not prevent him from seizing what was offered to him. In a flash, there remained nothing but bones!

He tapped his belly then and exclaimed, "Ah, my belly, my belly! Hasn't it been a long time that you have been starved of such good chicken?"

Huang Rong burst out laughing, "By the greatest good chance, I prepared 'Beggar's Chicken' and here it has entered the majestic belly of the leader of the beggars! It's a true honor!"

The beggar burst out laughing, "Little girl, you are quite brave!" He withdrew from his pocket several gilded projectiles. "Yesterday," he explained, "I saw several individuals brawling about something unknown to me The

missiles which one of them launched shone like gold. I was the one who benefited from it and I took some of them. In fact, the inside is cheap metal, but outside, to look good, it is genuine gold. Little urchin, take them and have fun. When necessary, you can get some money for them."

Guo Jing shook his head, "We regard you as a friend, and when one invites a friend to eat, one does not accept payment!" By saying this he honored the Mongol's rules of hospitality.

The beggar, feeling thwarted, scratched his head. "Then, I am also embarrassed! I have no trouble begging for scraps from people, but today, you provided me such good chicken! Such a benefit, that I cannot return it, that..."

"Why speak about benefit and repayment, for such a small chicken?" Guo Jing said. "To be honest, we stole this chicken..."

"We took this chicken in passing," confirmed Huang Rong, "and you ate it as you passed here, very well done..."

The beggar burst of laughing. "You two," he said, "funny enough, I like you well. Good, if you have any wishes, just ask." Guo Jing, understanding that he proposed to help them, which again infringed the rules of hospitality, shook his head again.

But Huang Rong intervened. "In fact, this 'Beggar's Chicken' is really not a great thing; I have other small dishes that I would readily make for you to taste. Why won't you come with us?"

"Splendid!" exclaimed the beggar, enchanted. "Splendid!"

"What is your honorable name?" asked Guo Jing.

"My surname is Hong, and as I am the seventh in my family. You kids can call me Qigong."

"It is indeed him," Huang Rong thought, "The 'Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar! But he seems to be younger than the Taoist Master Qiu, so how could he be a contemporary of a master of the Quanzhen Seven? Hmm...Actually, my dad isn't old, yet he is a peer of Qigong! That must be explained by the incompetence of those seven old Taoists, who wasted their time!" She'd always held some resentment against Qiu Chuji for his wanting to force Guo Jing to marry Mu Nianci.

They headed south and arrived in a small town, where they took a room in an inn. "I'll go to the market," Huang Rong said. "It's better for you men to rest a little."

"She...isn't she your little wife?" Qigong asked Guo Jing with a smile while watching her leave. The young man reddened, not daring to agree nor to disagree. Qigong burst out laughing, and then began to drowse in a chair. More than one and a half hours later, Huang Rong finally returned and settled in the kitchen. Guo Jing wanted to help her but the girl laughingly closed the door. Another half an hour passed.

Qigong yawned, stretched, and inhaled deeply. "That smells very good," he said. "But what could that be? It's odd..." He stretched his neck, trying to look through the door of the kitchen. Looking at him, both impatient and longing, Guo Jing could not stop himself from secretly laughing. Delicate aromas emerged from the kitchen, but Huang Rong remained invisible.

Qigong could not hold still any longer; he scratched his head, rubbed his cheeks, rose, and sat down, again and again as if he were on burning coals. "I am like that," he confided to Guo Jing, "I have this unpleasant vice of

gluttony; when I think of eating, I forget everything else!" He opened his right hand and showed its four fingers. The man said, "The ancients said: 'index finger moves'.* That's completely true! Each time I see or smell a dish that is original or exquisite, the index finger of my right hand cannot prevent itself from quivering. Once, because of it, I messed up an extremely important matter. Then, I got so angry with myself that, with a stroke of a knife, I sliced off my index finger!" [*The Chinese word for the index finger, 'shi zhi', literally translates as 'food finger'.] Guo Jing started as Qigong sighed, "But I cut off my finger in vain, because my gluttony remained."

At this moment Huang Rong entered, smiling, carrying a large wooden tray which she placed on the table. On the tray, were three bowls of white rice, a wine cup and two large bowls containing the main dishes. Guo Jing smelled a delicious, extremely appetizing aroma. In one of the large bowls were laid out roasted beef sticks which, apart from their scent, did not seem exceptional. The other contained a clear soup the colour of jade, in which floated many red cherries and ten pink petals. At the bottom lay young fresh bamboo shoots. The association of the three colors - red, white and green, formed a multi-coloured whole that was extremely pleasant to the eye. The sense of smell was also engaged because the soup emitted the delicate scent of lotus. Huang Rong poured wine in a cup which she placed in front of Qigong while smiling. "Qigong, taste my dishes and tell me what you think of them!"

Hong didn't need to be told twice! Without even drinking the wine, he brandished his chopsticks and seized two meat sticks that he consumed voraciously. An exquisite taste filled his mouth; this was not mere beef! As he chewed, different flavor sensations struck him; sometimes oily and juicy, sometimes a succulent freshness. Flavors succeeded

themselves in complex and unpredictable variations, like the blows of a martial arts expert. Startled and delighted, Qigong examined the sticks more closely and saw that each of them was formed by four small intertwined sticks. He shut his eyes to savor the taste better. "Hmm," he said, "there is mutton thigh on one stick, another of pig ears in milk, a third one of calf kidney, and the last one...the last one..."

"If you guess," Huang Rong said with a grin, "you're really fantastic..."

She had barely finished her sentence before Qigong cried, "Deer thigh mixed with rabbit!"

"Bravo!" applauded the girl. "Well guessed!"

Guo Jing was completely stunned. "These meat sticks needed so much work!" he said to himself. "Qigong is truly astonishing to have been able to distinguish the five different meats!"

"There are only five meat types," Qigong went on, "but the blend of pork and mutton gives a certain taste, the deer with beef another... how many variations there are, that, I can't say?"

"If one does not count the order of the variations," Huang Rong said with a smile, "there are twenty-five, corresponding to the five times five petals of the plum flower. Just as the meat stick resembles a flute, this dish has a name ...it is called 'Plum Flowers Fall to the Jade Flute's Song' The 'variations' mentioned in your question means that there is a placement sort to the test. Qigong, you passed the test, you are the master of all gourmets!"

"Bravo!" the beggar said to himself. No one knew whether he applauded the name of the dish or his own skillfulness in

discerning the tastes. Then he placed two cherries in a spoon and said, laughing, "This bowl of lotus-leaf soup, with those bamboo shoots and cherries, is so pretty to look at, one almost regrets to have to eat it!" He swallowed and cried, "Ah!" Then he said to himself, astonished, "Eh?". He took two more and exclaimed again, "Ah! The freshness of the lotus leaf, the taste of the bamboo sprouts, the sweetness of the cherries, all that leaps to the taste buds; but what's more, the cherries, after having been pitted, have been filled something..."

"In the cherries," Qigong said while hesitating, "what's there?" He closed his eyes again, trying to recognize the taste. "This is lark's meat!" he mumbled to himself. "No...if this is not partridge, then it's turtledove! Yes, that's it, it's turtledove!"

He opened his eyes, saw that Huang Rong raised her thumb and couldn't help feeling very pleased with himself. "So what's the complex name of this soup with lotus leaves, bamboo sprouts, cherries and turtledove?" he asked.

"Elder Hong," Huang Rong said, "you haven't mentioned one more ingredient."

"Ah yes?" Hong said, astonished. He regarded the soup again. "Yes," he agreed, "there are these flower petals..."

"Exactly!" confirmed Huang Rong. "Can you figure out the name of this soup from these five ingredients?"

"If this is a riddle, I declare I've lost. Tell me quickly..."

"I'll give you a clue," Huang Rong said, "You just need to think about the 'Book of the Odes'!"

Note: The Book of Odes is also known as the Book of Songs (Shi Jing in Chinese), one of the Five Classics. The Four

Books and Five Classics were the standard texts that all scholars studied back in the day. The other four Classics are the Book of Changes (Yi Jing) - this one features a lot in the wuxia genre, Book of History (Shu Jing), Book of Rites (Li Ji) and the Spring and Autumn Annals (Chun Qiu). The Four Books are the Great Learning (Da Xue), the Doctrine of Mean (Zhong Yong), the Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu) and Minces (Meng Zi).

"Ah no!" Qigong protested, "I know nothing in the books!"

"The flower hints at a beauty's complexion," explained Huang Rong, "the cherries to her small mouth, isn't that right?"

"Ah, this is therefore the 'Beauty's Soup'?"

"No," Huang Rong said, shaking her head, "The bamboo is a symbol of modesty so it characterizes a gentleman, just as the lotus is the most eminent of the flowers. Thus, bamboo and lotus relate to a gentleman."

"Oh," Qigong said, "this is therefore the 'Gentleman and Beauty's Soup'?"

"What about the turtledove?" Huang Rong said. "Indeed, all these elements meet again in the first poem in the 'Book of the Odes' that finishes thus, 'The gentleman is in good company'. Thus, this soup is called the 'Soup of Good Company'!"

Qigong burst out laughing. "Since there is such a complex and strange soup, it's good that it has such a complex and strange name. Very well! Very well! You're a complex and strange little one yourself and I would like to know which complex and strange father sired you...In any case, this soup is truly exquisite and much better tasting than the

soup with cherries that I ate, approximately ten years ago, in the kitchen of the Imperial Palace."

"You have a pass to the imperial kitchen?" asked Huang Rong. "Tell me of a dish and I'll try to prepare something that will please you just as well."

Qigong devoured the soup and didn't have time to reply. He stopped when he had reached the bottom of the bowls. "In the Imperial Kitchen," he explained, "there are lots of good things of course, but nothing compares to the two dishes here... Ah, if there was it would be the 'Five-flavored slices of Mandarin Duck'. That was delicious, but I don't know how it was prepared."

"And it was the Emperor that invited you?" asked Guo Jing.

"Absolutely," Qigong said while laughing, "the Emperor treated me, but he didn't know it! I lived hidden on a big beam of the Imperial Kitchen for three months and tasted each of the dishes intended for the Emperor. If I found it to my taste, I kept it for myself; otherwise, I left it to him! The cooks believed that there were ghosts about!"

"This person really is excessively gluttonous," thought Guo Jing and Huang Rong to themselves, "but he is also insanely audacious!"

"Young lad," Qigong said, laughing, "your little girlfriend is the best cook in the world; your happiness is assured! Goodness! Why didn't I meet such a woman when I was young?" He seemed sincerely sorry. Huang Rong, with a hint of a smile, prepared the remainder for Guo Jing and herself. One bowl of rice was more than enough for her, while the young man put away four big bowls. As for the exquisite arrangement, it did not seem to make a difference to him.

Qigong shook his head while sighing. "Like a bull chewing on peonies! What a shame! What a shame!" Huang Rong put a hand in front of her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

"Bulls... do they like peonies?" Guo Jing asked himself. "There are many bulls in Mongolia but no peonies; indeed I have never seen bulls eating peonies. But why does he keep saying 'What a shame'?"

Qigong patted his stomach and said, "Good. You are both practitioners of martial arts; I saw that right away. The little one that went to so much trouble to prepare such exquisite dishes for me certainly has a devious motive, such as, persuading me to give you some instruction. Is that not correct? Good, I recognize that after having eaten so well, it would be inconsiderate of me to leave without giving something in return. Come, come with me!" He took up his gourd and bamboo cane, and went out.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed until they were outside of town. "What do you want to learn?" Qigong demanded of Guo Jing.

"Martial arts are so varied," said the young man to himself, "if I want to learn something, how is he so sure that he'll be able to teach it to me?"

While he reflected, Huang Rong had begun to speak. "Qigong, his kung fu is inferior to mine so he gets angry often because he's always trying to best me."

"When did I get angry?" Guo Jing protested. Huang Rong glanced at him, telling him to be quiet.

"For my part," Hong Qigong said while laughing, "I have the impression that all his movements are firm and assured; that means that he has a good basis of neigong. How would

he be inferior to you? Why don't you two match skills a little?"

Huang Rong moved aside some steps and called, "Jing'Ge ge, come on!" Guo Jing hesitated.

"If you don't show what you're capable of," Huang Rong said, "how do you expect this Elder to correct you? Get ready!" She jumped at him and attacked with a palm stroke; Guo Jing blocked the blow, but she already had changed tactics, and attacked with a kick.

"Well done, little one!" Qigong said. "Pretty move!"

"Fight seriously," Huang Rong advised in a low voice.

Guo Jing concentrated and executed conscientiously the powerful 'Southern Mountain Palm' taught by Nan Xiren. Huang Rong defended herself nimbly, jumping upwards and back. Then suddenly, she modified her technique and executed the 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palm' technique, created by her father. This palm technique resembled its name, 'Divine Sword', for it was adapted from a sword technique. She moved her arms in all directions; her opponent was encircled by the palm shadows, unable to determine if they were feigned or real. It was as though the wind had arisen in the woods dropping a thousand flowers. The beauty of the gestures resided in their lightness and their aerial grace; so well that Huang Rong resembled a butterfly taking flight. Since her neigong lacked power, her blows were not as violent and as terrifying as they should have been. It mattered little, for Guo Jing, stunned by the multiplicity of the shadows in front of his eyes, had lost all means to resist. In some seconds, he received four palm blows, on the shoulders, on the chest and on the back. He was not injured, since Huang Rong had not struck with force. She stepped back with a smile.

"Well done, Rong'er!" Guo Jing exclaimed with genuine admiration. "What a beautiful palm demonstration!"

"Your father is so powerful," Hong said in an icy voice. "Why do you want me to give lessons to this simple-minded one?"

Huang Rong was startled. "According to Father," she said to herself, "since he created this 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palm', he has not ever used it himself; how did this Elder recognize it?" "Qigong," she demanded, "you know my father?"

"Indeed, he is the 'Eastern Heretic' and I, the 'Northern Beggar'; don't you think that we had occasion to match skills?"

"He matched blows with Father," Huang Rong said to herself, "and managed to survive; that's really astonishing. Now I understand how the 'Northern Beggar' can be ranked alongside the 'Eastern Heretic'!"

"And how did you recognize me?" she demanded again.

"Just look at yourself in a mirror!" Hong replied. "Your nose and your eyes, are they not as those of your father? At first, I did not think about that; I only felt that your face appeared familiar to me, but your demonstration revealed everything! Do you believe that this old beggar does not recognize the kung fu of Peach Blossom Island? Even if I never had seen this palm, I would not doubt that a crafty fellow such as your dad would have been able to invent it. Heh...heh...and the names of your two dishes, what were they? 'Plum Flowers Fall at the Jade Flute's Song', and the 'Soup of Good Company'; it was doubtless your dad that invented them."

"You really can read minds," Huang Rong said, laughing. "Then, according to you, my dad is very strong, isn't that

right?"

"Of course he is powerful," Qigong said coldly, "but he is not the most powerful in the entire world!"

"Then, surely you're the most powerful in this world?" Huang Rong exclaimed while applauding.

"Not necessarily," Qigong said. "Twenty years ago, all five of us, 'Eastern Heretic', 'Western Venom', 'Southern Emperor', 'Northern Beggar' and 'Central Divinity', met at the summit of Huashan (Mount Hua), to match ourselves. The confrontation lasted seven days and seven nights. Finally, 'Central Divinity' revealed himself to be the most powerful, and we all gladly recognized it."

"Who then is this 'Central Divinity'?" asked Huang Rong.

"Your father never told you?"

"No. Father said that, in the martial arts world, there are more bad things than good and that there was no point for girls from good families to hear about it. He scolded me very fiercely; he didn't love me anymore so I ran away. He doesn't want anything to do with me..." With a sad face, she lowered her head.

"That old monster!" Qigong swore. "What ...!"

"I won't allow you to insult my father!" Huang Rong exclaimed.

"What a pity that I was always too poor!" Qigong exclaimed, laughing. "No one ever wanted to marry me! Otherwise, I would have had a kind girl like you, and never would I have left you..."

"Indeed!" Huang Rong said, laughing. "If I leave, what will you do for food?"

"Fair enough!" Qigong agreed with a sigh. "Well, to answer your question, the 'Central Divinity' is Wang Chongyang, founder of the Quanzhen Sect. But, since his death, it's difficult to say who's the world's most powerful."

"The Quanzhen Sect?" Huang Rong said. "There is a fellow called Qiu, another called Wang, and yet another named Ma. They are all cow-nosed Taoist priests. I found their kung fu rather pathetic! When they fought, they were either poisoned or injured in two or three stances."

"Ah yes? They were doubtless disciples of Wang Chongyang. It seems that, among his seven disciples, Qiu Chuji is the most powerful... But, it is certain that they are not even close to their martial uncle, Zhou Botong." Upon hearing this name, Huang Rong was startled; she was about to say something, then stopped herself.

Guo Jing, who had been content to listen to their conversation, interrupted, "It's true, Master Ma said that they had a martial uncle, but he did not mention the name of this Taoist master."

"Zhou Botong is not a Taoist," Hong Qigong replied. "He is a secular person, who was personally taught by his martial brother, Wang Chongyang... Eh, I say, my simple-minded one, you seem rather clumsy to me! Does your father-in-law, so fine and so crafty, really appreciate you?" Guo Jing, who didn't think he had a 'father-in-law', spluttered, not knowing how to reply.

"My father has yet to see him," Huang Rong said, smiling. "If you would be kind enough to give him some pointers, then, thanks to you, my dad will have some appreciation for him!"

"Little rogue," Qigong grumbled, "who has learned not even a tenth of her father's kung fu, but who has inherited

all his trickery and cleverness! I don't like your flattery or your toadying! And also, I never take disciples! Who wants a stupid one like that? You planned to get me to teach your dumb little husband! Huh, this old beggar will not fall into such a trap!"

Huang Rong bowed her head, red faced. She never had applied herself to learn martial arts. Her father himself was so powerful, yet she had not learned seriously from him; why would she want to learn from Qigong? But Guo Jing's kung fu was not up to the mark and his six Shifus considered her to be a 'little witch', so she rejoiced at having met a master such as Qigong. She hoped that he would pass on a little of his knowledge to her loved one so that, in front of his masters and in front of Qiu Chuji's Taoists, Guo Jing would not have to be afraid, like a mouse in front of the cats. Qigong was very gluttonous and always grinning but he was not stupid; he had seen through her act all along!

The old beggar, muttering to himself, left without a backward glance. The two young people stood silently for a long moment.

"Rong'er," Guo Jing finally said, "this Elder has a rather unique character!" Huang Rong heard a light rustle in the foliage above their heads and realized that Qigong had made a loop before returning, discreetly, to the top of the tree.

"He's a really kind person," she then said. "And his kung fu is much stronger than my father's."

"He hasn't shown his skills," Guo Jing wondered aloud, "how do you know that?"

"My dad told me so."

“What exactly did he say?”

“He said that, in today's world, there was only one person who could beat him, and that was the Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar, Hong Qigong. Unfortunately, since this Elder is always wandering, he has seldom had the occasion to see him and exchange pointers.”

In fact, after he had moved away, Qigong had used his incomparable qinggong and had returned to the top of the tree, high above the heads of the young people. He wanted to hear their conversation and to assure himself that they had not been sent by Huang Yaoshi to steal his skills. The words of Huang Rong filled him with pride. “So,” he said to himself, “Huang Yaoshi never wanted to accept my superiority; but deep within himself, he admires me nonetheless!” How could he have guessed that it was all pure and simple invention by the girl?

“I didn't learn great things from my father,” Huang Rong went on, “but that's my fault. I enjoyed having fun too much and never wanted to apply myself! Having had the good fortune to meet Elder Hong and had he wanted to give me some lessons, it would have been much better than learning from my father! What a shame I offended him without intending to!” Then she started to sob. At first she pretended and Guo Jing tenderly tried to console her. Then she thought about the death of her mother, the intransigence of her father and started to truly weep. Qigong, atop his tree, was nearly convinced.

“I heard father say,” Huang Rong continued while sobbing, “that Elder Hong had an exceptional skill of incomparable power that even Wang Chongyang feared. It's called... It's called... What is it called? I can't remember... Anyway, I had it on the tip of my tongue all this time and I wanted to beg

him to teach it...to you- it's called...it's called..." Indeed, she did not know of any such skill and talked in a rambling way.

Hearing her hesitate, seemingly searching for the name without finding it, Qigong could not hold back and cried as he jumped to the foot of the tree, "It is called the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'!" Guo Jing and Huang Rong bounded up in surprise, one's surprise was real, the other's was feigned...

"Ah, Elder Hong," Huang Rong cried, "how did you get up in the tree? By flying? Yes, that's it, the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'! Exactly! How could I have forgotten it? Father often told me that the kung fu that he admired most in the world was the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'!"

Qigong was delighted. "Then your dad knows what the truth is! I believed that, after the death of Wang Chongyang, he considered himself to be the most powerful in the world!" He turned towards Guo Jing. "Indeed, your kung fu isn't inferior to that of your little friend. The problem is that your palm technique is not at all up to the mark. Little girl, you return to the inn!"

Huang Rong realized that he was going to give a lesson to Guo Jing and she went away, well satisfied. Qigong addressed Guo Jing solemnly, "You will kneel down and promise me that, without my permission, you will not transmit my kung fu to anyone else, not even to your crafty little woman!"

Guo Jing was greatly embarrassed. "If Rong'er insists that I teach her," he said to himself, "how can I refuse?" "Sir," he said, "I do not want to learn from you. What does it matter if she is more skilled than me?"

"And why not?" Hong asked.

"If she wants me to teach her, I cannot refuse without offending her and I cannot accept without offending you..."

"Simple-minded though you are," Hong Qigong said, laughing, "you have a good heart and you speak directly. That is good. Very well, I will teach you a stroke called 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. I would imagine that Huang Yaoshi has enough pride that he won't, although he would desire to, copy my superior skills. In any case, our schools are completely different; I cannot learn his kung fu and he cannot learn mine..." At that, he bent his left knee, pivoted and straightened his arm, made a circle with the upright hand and pushed outwards with the other. His palm touched a great pine and 'craack', its trunk snapped! Guo Jing stood petrified, shocked by the power contained in this blow.

"This tree could not move," Qigong said, "if it were human, it would obviously try to avoid the blow. The difficulty of this technique is to strike precisely so that your opponent cannot, no matter what, avoid it and so well that once you land your blow, 'craack', the enemy will collapse like this pine!" He repeated the demonstration twice, explaining in detail how to concentrate and project the internal energy. It was only one stroke, but the lesson took more than an hour.

Guo Jing was not clever but he had a good basis in neigong. To learn a move such as this, made with simple movements but having unequaled power, suited him perfectly. He trained conscientiously and, at the end of two hours, had grasped the majority of this technique...

"In that little imp's technique," Hong said, "there are many more feints than real attacks. If you try to follow her, she will run around you as if you were a donkey and you will always fall. You will never be as quick as her. You will think that, after all these feints, the next blow will be real, but no,

it will be a feint! And the blow following you will believe to be a feint, but she will strike a real blow and you will be in trouble!" Guo Jing nodded his head in agreement.

"Therefore, to fight her, the clever way is to completely put the thought of whether it is a feint or not out of your mind. When she attacks you with a palm blow, whether it is a feint or not, return it with a blow of 'The Proud Dragon Regrets'. Against the power of your attack, she will be forced to withdraw and defend herself; so much so that all her tricks fall into water!"

"And after that?" Guo Jing asked.

"What do you mean, 'and after that'?" Hong replied, his face suddenly darkening. "You great idiot, do you think she is able to withstand this blow that I taught you?"

"But if she can't withstand it," Guo Jing said, very worried, "won't she be injured?"

Qigong shook his head and sighed. "If, in such a blow one seeks only to send out the force and not to keep it, if one cannot somehow control its lightness or its power, firmness or softness, how can one consider himself a master of these unique 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'?"

Guo Jing was eager to agree, but he had made a mental decision. "Since I haven't learned to control my force perfectly, I won't fight with Rong'er!"

"You don't believe me?" Hong Qigong said. "In that case, try it!" Guo Jing took up the position, imitating his senior's posture, picked a pine with a particularly slender trunk and struck it with a violent blow. The pine shook but was not at all broken.

"You big fool," Qigong said, "Why are you shaking this tree; to catch squirrels or to drop pinecones?" Guo Jing, red with shame, laughed with an air of denial, not knowing how to reply.

"I already demonstrated it for you." Hong Qigong said. "It is necessary to put the opponent in a position such that it cannot back up or get away. Your blow just now had enough force, but all the pine needed to do is shake itself a little for it to escape the full force. It is necessary that you learn to approach and strike in such a way that the tree cannot budge, in order to be able to break it in one go."

This was, for Guo Jing, enlightening. "Then," he cried joyously, "It's necessary for the force to be particularly swift, delivered in such a way that the opponent has no time to defend himself!"

Qigong shot him a bleak look. "Absolutely! That goes without saying! You've sweated blood for such a long time and you only now understand this truth? One really can say that you aren't clever! For this stroke, known as 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'- its essence is not found in the word 'Proud' but rather in the word 'Remorse'. If one concentrated only on pure violence, brute power, a little force in the muscles would suffice. If that were true, how could this technique be admired by Huang Yaoshi? As the old saying goes: 'The Proud Dragon itself regrets, the surplus will not last a long time'. This is the reason that if there is transmission, there must be retention. When you send out a force of ten, it is necessary to preserve within yourself a force of twenty. The day when you know to appreciate the full meaning of the concept 'Remorse', then you will be able to say that you have understood thirty percent of this stroke. Just as a fine old wine that has had time to age at first tastes not very strong, but afterwards it

releases its full heady flavor, that explains the concept 'Regrets'."

Guo Jing didn't understand anything about these matters, but he tried to memorize them in order to reflect upon them later. To learn martial arts, he always had adopted the same method: 'To that which others may assimilate in a morning, I will devote ten days!' Then he concentrated on the study of the palm technique. At first, the pine absorbed each of the blows that it received. Towards the end, these blows became more and more powerful, but the tree shook less and less. He realized that he had progressed and rejoiced somewhat. His palm had become red and swollen, but he did not treat it and continued to train with determination, never relaxing.

Hong Qigong, who had initially laughed at his persistence, had stretched himself on the ground and snored contentedly. Little by little, Guo Jing felt more comfortable as he attained a mastery of his energy...to carry the blow and to keep it. He brought his breath into his dan tian, advanced his palm violently, and withdrew his force immediately; so well that the tree did not move at all. Delighted, the young man repeated it in the same way while concentrating his force on the edge of his palm. He heard a 'craack', and the small pine broke apart.

"Bravo!" Huang Rong, who had seen the scene from a distance, cried. She approached slowly, carrying a heavy shopping basket.

Before even opening his eyes, Hong Qigong had smelled the delicious aroma of the food that she brought. "That smells good! That smells very good!" he shouted, jumping to his feet. He seized the basket from the girl's hands and opened the lid. He beheld a dish of roasted frogs thighs, a very fat duck suited to the 'Eight Treasures', and a big bowl of white

and immaculate money noodles. With joyful sounds, he pounced on the food, continuously praising as he devoured it. But, since his mouth was full, one couldn't understand anything he said. In an instant, the bowls containing the frog thighs and the duck were emptied. Realizing that Guo Jing again had not eaten, the old beggar felt a little ashamed of his gluttony. "Go on, eat up," he said, "these noodles aren't bad..." And as he felt really bothered, he added, "They are even better than the duck!"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Elder Hong, you haven't yet tasted my best dishes!"

Surprised and delighted, the old beggar eagerly asked, "What dishes? What dishes?"

"You can't name them all," Huang Rong replied. "For example, stir-fried Chinese cabbage, steamed tofu, stewed eggs, sliced meat..."

As a well-informed gourmet, Qigong knew well that it was in the simplest dishes that the true masters really showed their talents. The same applied to martial arts...wondrous execution of the simplest techniques...that was the hallmark of the great masters! These words of Huang Rong's delighted him so much that his expression was almost imploring. "Good, good!" he said. "I always said that you were a brave little girl. Do you want me to buy you cabbage and tofu? Please?"

"It's not worth your while," Huang Rong said, laughing. "What you buy may not necessarily suit me."

"Fair enough," Qigong said. "No other but you can choose your ingredients."

"Just now," Huang Rong said, "I saw him break the trunk of a pine; he's already more powerful than me!"

"Not at all," Hong Qigong protested, shaking his head. "He isn't up to standard at all! It's necessary that the point where the trunk breaks be perfectly neat. Look, it's all twisted like a saw's teeth...what pathetic kung fu! Besides, this pine is as slender as a stick, no, as slender as a toothpick! This kid isn't up to the mark at all!"

"But if he attacks me with this palm," objected Huang Rong, "I will not be able to defend myself. This is all your fault! If he bullies me later, how will I resist?"

Qigong, who wanted to get back into her good books and did not want to keep annoying her, clearly saw that she was being devious. "So what, according to you, must I do?"

"Teach me a skill with which I can beat him. After that, I'll cook for you."

"Very well, we're agreed," Qigong said. "He only learned a single blow; it's easy to beat him. I will teach you a fist technique called 'Wandering Strides'." No sooner had he finished speaking, he rose to his feet to demonstrate. He jumped to the right and to the left, with grace and nimbleness, while his big sleeves flew...

Huang Rong, quick to learn, silently memorized every movement. When the old man had finished the complete chain, she had already half-learned it. After he had given all the supplementary instructions, it didn't take more than two hours for the girl to execute perfectly the thirty-six movements of the 'Wandering Strides'. In the end, she executed the skill at the same time as Qigong. They moved together and leaped in concert, the one to right, the other to the left, twirling like a jade swallow and gliding like a great eagle in the skies. At the end of the thirty-six movements, they landed on their feet at the same time.

While looking at each other they burst into laughter and Guo Jing applauded vigorously.

"This little one is a hundred more intelligent times than you," Hong Qigong said to Guo Jing.

"So many movements and variations," marveled the latter while scratching his head, "how did she learn so quickly? And how does she manage not to forget? Me, when I learn the second movement, I've already forgotten the first one!"

Qigong burst out laughing, "Indeed you absolutely cannot learn this 'Wandering Strides'! Even if you memorized the steps, you are incapable, in practice, of producing the spirit of striding! Executed by you so painstakingly and clumsily, this fist technique would become a real chore!"

"You've got a point!" Guo Jing laughingly conceded.

"The 'Wandering Strides'," Hong said, "is a kung fu that I practiced in my youth. I taught it to the little girl because it compliments her style of kung fu. It actually doesn't match my current kung fu style.. Thus, I haven't used it myself once during the past ten years." What he implied was that the 'Wandering Strides' was a lot less powerful than the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

Huang Rong was delighted. "Elder Hong, if I beat him again he'll surely be unhappy; please teach him some other blows." She herself had no real intention to learn and it was only a pretext to push the old beggar to give more lessons to her love. If she really had wanted to learn martial arts, she had at her disposal a great master in the person of her father, all of whose skills she never could have learned.

"This dumb kid," Hong said, "He hasn't even fully digested the single blow that I taught him. He's bitten off more than

he can chew! As long as you prepare me lots of dishes and I will grant all your wishes!"

"Very well then," Huang Rong said, smiling. "I'll leave for the market." Hong Qigong laughed heartily and returned to the inn leaving Guo Jing alone in the pine forest where he resumed training with determination, late into the night.

That night, Huang Rong indeed prepared a cabbage dish and a plateful of tofu for Qigong. She had carefully selected the most tender cabbage heart, then she stir-fried with chicken oil and duck leg filaments. But the plateful of tofu was really extraordinary - she had cut a ham in two and then dug twenty-four small spherical cavities in which she placed balls of tofu, before closing the ham and beginning to steam it. At the end of cooking, the flavor of the ham had passed into the tofu, while the ham itself was left out. After tasting this dish, Hong was naturally overwhelmed. This steamed tofu had a name inspired by Tang poetry and was called 'Full Moon Night on the Twenty-four Bridges'. [Note: This refers to poetry composed during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). The most famous poets of the era were Li Bai (sometimes known as Li Po) and Du Fu.] If the girl had not had at her disposal the family technique called 'The Orchid Skims the Point', her ten nimble and delicate fingers would not have been able to cut twenty-four small balls in the fragile mass of the tofu. To do it demanded as much delicacy as engraving characters on a grain of rice or sculpting a boat in a nutshell. It would have been easy to cut pieces of tofu in cubes, but where has one seen square full moons?

After dinner, each retired to bed. Hong Qigong was astonished to see Guo Jing and Huang Rong going to separate rooms. "Huh? Aren't you husband and wife? Why don't you sleep in the same room?"

Huang Rong, who had joked with him without reserve, felt embarrassed. Her cheeks blushing and looking upset she said, "Elder, if you continue to talk nonsense, I won't cook for you tomorrow!"

"What's this?" Hong was astonished. "When did I talk nonsense?" After a moment's reflection, he realized, "I'm old and senile, indeed," he said, laughing. "You're clearly dressed like a girl and not a wife. You are therefore promised to each other secretly, without the consent of parents or a matchmaker or a wedding ceremony. Don't worry; I will be your go-between. If your father does not accept, I'll challenge him to a duel and we'll fight, my goodness, for seven days and seven nights if we have to, until he yields!"

Huang Rong was worried about this matter and she feared that her father would not like Guo Jing. The words of the old beggar filled her with joy and she returned to her room, her face radiant.

The next day, Guo Jing went back to the pine forest at dawn. He practiced about twenty rounds with much sweat and rejoiced at the progress he accomplished. Suddenly he heard a voice speaking amongst the trees.

"Shifu," a voice said, "we must have traveled more than thirty li this time, isn't that right?"

"Indeed," replied another voice, "you've achieved some progress in endurance..."

This voice seemed very familiar to Guo Jing, who then saw four individuals appear, the first of which had white hair and ruddy complexion. It was none other than his number one enemy, Liang Ziwing, the 'Ginseng Immortal'! He shivered internally and took to his heels. But Liang Ziwing had already recognized him: "Where do you think you're

going?" he called out while leaping forward in pursuit. The other three men were his disciples and seeing their Shifu running after an enemy, they split up in order to surround the young man.

"I need to get out of the pine forest and back to the inn in order to be safe," Guo Jing said to himself, while running even faster. But the first disciple of Liang Ziwong barred his way and shouted, while crossing two palms, "Little bastard, kneel!"

He attacked with a technique of qinna [capture and control] taught by his master and sought to seize Guo Jing by the chest. The young man bent his left leg slightly; with his extended arm turned in, he made a circle with his right palm and struck out powerfully. It was precisely the blow that he had just learned, 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. His opponent felt the sudden power and attempted to evade it, but it was so powerful that it broke his arm and threw him a distance of a zhang [3.3m /11+ ft] or so, making him lose consciousness. Guo Jing never would have believed that his blow was going to be so strong but could not delay a moment and resumed his flight.

Surprised and irritated, Liang Ziwong jumped in front of him. Guo Jing had just left the pines when he found the 'Ginseng Immortal' in front of him. Very frightened, he got in position and launched once again his newly learned 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. Liang Ziwong did not know this blow but, sensing its power, knew that he could not handle it. He had to roll to the earth to avoid it. Guo Jing took the opportunity to flee again.

When Liang Ziwong recovered, the young man had reached the front of the inn. Guo Jing hollered, "Rong'er, disaster! It's the evil one that wants to drink my blood!"

Huang Rong poked her head out the window. "How did that old monster get here?" she asked herself. "That's fine; I'll try out this new 'Wandering Strides', which I have just learned, on him. Jing ge ge," she cried. "Don't be afraid of that old crust. Begin the fight; I'll come to help you and we'll teach him a good lesson!"

"Rong'er doesn't know the power of this old monster," Guo Jing said to himself, "that's why she speaks so recklessly." But Liang Ziwong had already jumped on him. In the face of the violence of the attack, the young man had no other option but to launch once more his 'The Proud Dragon Regrets'. Liang Ziwong twisted and dodged several feet to the side, but his extended arm was almost touched by the force of the palm and it left a burning and painful feeling. The 'Ginseng Immortal', frightened inside, was amazed that this kid, in the space of some few months, had progressed so much. "This must be," he thought, "due to the absorption of the precious blood of the snake." This thought absorbed him and he jumped again to the attack. Guo Jing defended himself again with the same blow. Conscious that he could not oppose it, Liang Ziwong retreated. Noting that the young man seemed not have at his disposal other such fearful blows to press his advantage, Liang's fear lessened. "Little idiot," he shouted, "Do you know only that one blow?"

Guo Jing tumbled right into his trap, "With even this one blow," he replied, "you still won't be able to avoid it!" He advanced, launching once again his 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. Liang Ziwong dodged and jumped behind Guo Jing to attack him. He turned and attempted to attack again in the same manner, but his opponent once more slipped behind him. The young man, who only knew how to make frontal attacks, was completely disturbed and could not manage to face him.

Seeing him on the verge of losing, Huang Rong called out, "Jing ge ge, let me take care of him!" She sprang forward and interposed herself between the two fighters, attacking Liang Ziwing with palms and kicks, who returned the attack. Guo Jing retreated two steps to watch them. Huang Rong had learned well this wonderful 'Wandering Strides' technique, but, aside the fact that she had learned it too recently to truly master it, Liang Ziwing was in fact a lot stronger one than she. Therefore, without the protection given by her soft armour, she already would have received several blows and certainly would have been injured long ago. Before even deploying the full thirty-six movements of the 'Strides', she was losing form badly. The disciples of Liang Ziwing, supporting their injured elder brother, observed the fight and, seeing their Shifu winning, shouted encouragement to him.

Guo Jing prepared to assist Huang Rong when all of a sudden Hong Qigong was heard to shout from behind the window, "His next blow is called 'The Evil Dog Blocks the Road'!"

Very surprised, Huang Rong observed that Liang Ziwing, legs firmly spread in the 'Horse Stance' and the fists stretched horizontally, was indeed taking the stance of the 'Evil Tiger Blocks the Road'. She couldn't prevent herself from laughing inside. "Hong changed the name of this blow, but how was he able to guess that it would be that one?"

Then she heard the old beggar shout again, "And his next blow is 'The Stinking Snake Inhales Water'!"

She realized that this was the 'Green Dragon Inhales Water', in which one lengthened the fist forward, thus unveiling a weakness to the back. The Beggar Clan leader had no sooner finished speaking than she had already slipped behind Liang Ziwing. He attacked effectively with

the 'Green Dragon Inhales Water', but the girl, warned in advance, had the advantage and attacked from behind. He avoided the danger only because of his exceptional technical mastery, which allowed him to change position right in the middle of a movement and to fly further away. He landed on the tips of his toes, surprised and furious at the same time. "Who is the powerful master that hides in the shack?" he shouted towards the window. "Why don't you show yourself?" But there was only silence behind the window. Liang Ziwing was lost in bewilderment. "How could this person succeed in predicting my blows?"

Fortified by the support of a great master, Huang Rong now feared nothing. She had regained the initiative and launched herself to the attack. Liang Ziwing resorted to killer blows so that the girl was forced to yield the upper hand. "Don't fear anything!" Hong Qigong shouted. "He will do a 'Monkey with a Rotten Bottom Climbs the Tree'!"

Huang Rong burst out laughing, raised her fists and attacked downwards. Liang Ziwing had chosen the 'Phenomenal Gorilla Climbs the Tree' and had, after jumping into the air, prepared to attack downwards. But Huang Rong had preceded him and if he continued the jump he would simply offer his head to her falling fists. He had to change his technique immediately! In a fight, if the opponent knew in advance all your blows, it would not take long for him to overcome you! The 'Ginseng Immortal', fortunately for him, was a lot stronger than Huang Rong and this allowed himself to extricate himself from a bad situation at the last moment.

He suddenly jumped back and shouted at Guo Jing, "If you persist in not fighting yourself, I won't hesitate to be ruthless towards this girl!" Changing his tactics and rained down blows like hail in a storm; so much so that Huang Rong absolutely could not adjust and Hong Qigong had not

the time to call out his blows in advance. Seeing his dearest friend in danger and reduced to dodging right and left, Guo Jing leapt forward and sent out once more his 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. Liang Ziwong jumped back.

"Jing ge ge", Huang Rong said, "give him three blows!" She turned and went back into the inn.

Guo Jing prepared, awaiting the approach of Liang Ziwong. No matter what technique the 'Ginseng Immortal' employed he replied with 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. His opponent, surprised and furious, wondered, "Where on earth did this dumb little fellow learn this strange blow and why only that one!" But even if he knew only this one blow the dumb little fellow had to be respected and Liang Ziwong could do nothing. Having reached a stalemate, the two held their positions.

"Silly boy," Liang Ziwong then shouted. "You'd better watch out!" He jumped at his young opponent, who continued using his time-tested defense. Liang changed direction in mid-flight and suddenly struck with three 'Accupoint Piercing Bones' that sped towards the young man from three different directions. As Guo Jing hurriedly dodged, Liang Ziwong thrust himself forward with lightning speed and seized him by the nape of his neck. Very frightened, the young man struck an elbow blow at the chest of his opponent. To his great astonishment, he had the impression that his elbow had sunk itself in a soft mass, like cotton.

Just as Liang Ziwong prepared himself to deal a fatal blow he heard Huang Rong scream, "Old monster! Look here!" Knowing that she was very crafty, he decided not to take any risks. He struck Guo Jing upon the 'Jianjing' accupoint so that he was unable to move, before turning his head. He saw the girl advancing slowly and saw that in her hand was a bamboo stick, its green as clear as jade. This froze him in

terror. "Hong..." he stammered, stunned, "Clan Master Qigong!"

"Why haven't you released him!" threatened Huang Rong.

At the time he heard someone calling out his blows before he even carried them out, Liang Ziwong was very surprised, but he had not thought that it could be Hong Qigong. Now, with the appearance of the green bamboo stick, he realized that the voice behind the window was indeed the person that he dreaded most in the world. Terrified, he quickly unsealed Guo Jing.

Brandishing the stick, Huang Rong approached him and said severely, "Senior Qigong wants to ask you how you dare to do evil here again? What impudence!"

Liang Ziwong dropped to his knees: "Your servant did not know that Clan Master Qigong was here," he stuttered. "Even if I had courage, I would never have dared to offend Clan Master Qigong."

"Nonetheless, this fellow is very powerful," Huang Rong said to herself, astonished, "How is it that he is so terrified at just the mention of Hong's name? And why does he call him Clan Master Qigong?" But she didn't allow any of her thoughts to show and assumed a threatening air. "And which punishment do you deserve?"

"I beg you to please say some words in my favor to Grand Master Qigong! Say to him that Liang Ziwong recognizes his great sins and that he implores Clan Master Qigong to spare his life!"

"Say a word in your favor? Why not? But several words, this would be really too much to ask. In the future, you mustn't cause trouble for either of us."

"Your servant offended you in his ignorance," Liang Ziwing said. "If you do not think harshly of me, then in the future, I will not dare to do..."

Huang Rong, very proud of herself, smiled and re-entered the inn hand-in-hand with Guo Jing. They found Hong Qigong sitting at a well-laid table with a knife in his left hand and chopsticks in his right, in the process of treating himself. "Master Qigong," Huang Rong said, laughing. "He's on his knees and doesn't dare to move even a hair."

Hong Qigong replied, "Give him a hiding to vent your anger; he certainly won't dare to defend himself."

By the window, Guo Jing saw Liang Ziwing kneeling petrified, with his three disciples behind him, also kneeling, all four looking miserable. He felt pity for them and said, "Senior Qigong, why not forgive him?"

"Little good-for-nothing," Hong reprimanded. "Someone comes here to trouble you and you aren't capable of defending yourself. Yet you accept the situation and you want to forgive your enemy! How can you be so foolish, I ask you?" Guo Jing wasn't sure how to reply.

"I'll take care of him," Huang Rong said, laughing. She took up the bamboo stick and went out of the inn. Liang Ziwing remained kneeling respectfully, his face full of fear.

"Hong Qigong said that if you persist in doing evil," Huang Rong thundered, "then it is absolutely necessary to cut your throat today! Fortunately for you my Jing ge ge has a good heart and he did not stop pleading your cause, so much so that Qigong finally agreed to spare you." She wielded the stick and struck him a blow on the buttocks while screaming, "You go in!"

Liang Ziwing spoke to the window, "Clan Master Qigong, I want to see you, to thank you for sparing my life!" Only silence greeted his plea. Liang Ziwing did not dare to rise and continued to kneel humbly. After a short while, Guo Jing came out and waved his hand, "Senior Hong is asleep," he said in a low voice. "Do not disturb him..." At that, Liang Ziwing got up, shot a hate-filled look at the two young people, and left along with his disciples.

Huang Rong, heart full of joy, re-entered the inn. She saw Hong Qigong lying on the table snoring. She touched him on the shoulder to awaken him, "Qigong!" she called. "Your precious magic stick has wonderful power. Since you're not using it, why not give it to me?"

Hong raised his head, yawned and said, "You speak so lightly about it" he said, laughing, "That is the work instrument of your teacher! A beggar without a dog-beating stick, how would that look?"

Huang Rong continued to tap it while simpering, "You have such powerful kung fu! People even fear the sound of your voice. Why would you need this stick?"

"You conniving imp!" Hong said, laughing. "Quickly, prepare some dishes for me and I'll explain it for you presently..." Huang Rong obeyed and quickly went into the kitchen to prepare three small dishes.

With his right hand holding a wine cup and his left squeezing the bone of a ham that he slowly gnawed, Qigong began: "The proverb says 'That which resembles itself assembles itself'. The lowly have to form a clan; the outlaws of the highway who rob the passersby form a clan, we others that freely pass our lives begging food leftovers also form a clan..."

"I understand," Huang Rong exclaimed while clapping her hands. "That old man Liang called you 'Clan Master Qigong', are you the chief of the beggars!"

"Precisely. As we wander, and someone sets the dogs on us, if we did not group together in a band, how could we survive? The ordinary citizens, in the north of the country, are for the moment under the authority of the Jin; in the south, they are under the authority of the Song emperor; but every beggar in the country..."

"Whether they be in the south or the north," interrupted Huang Rong, "are under your authority!"

"Eh, yes!" Qigong agreed with a smile. "This bamboo stick and this gourd have been passed on from generation to generation, since the end of the Tang dynasty. In other words, it has passed on from one leader of the Beggar Clan to the next. For we beggars, this is like the jade seal of the little emperor."

"Just as well you didn't give it to me," Huang Rong said, sticking out her tongue.

"Why not?" he replied.

"If every beggar in the country came to find me to sort out their affairs, that would be a catastrophe!"

"You are right," Qigong sighed. "Since I am lax and of a lazy nature, the weight of being Clan Master of the Beggar Clan is too heavy for my shoulders. Since I can't find a person to whom I can entrust it, I'll have to bear with..."

"So that's why old Liang fears you so much. If all the beggars in the country came after him, he would be in big trouble. If each one dropped a louse in his collar, that would

trouble him until the end of his days!" Hong Qigong and Guo Jing burst out laughing.

"No," the old beggar said at last, "it's not just for that; he's also afraid of me."

"Why is that?" she said.

"Nearly twenty years ago, he was committing an evil deed when I fell upon him..."

"What evil deed?"

"That old monster," Qigong hesitantly said, "believed a section of the adage: 'Gather the yin to nourish the yang...' He had obtained for himself several virgins and he violated their bodies, supposedly to obtain immortality."

"What's that, 'to violate the body'?" Huang Rong asked. The girl, whose mother had died in childbirth, had been raised and taught by her father. After the treachery and escape of Chen Xuanfeng and of Mei Chaofeng, Huang Yaoshi, furious, had crippled his other disciples and they had all fled. No others remained on Peach Blossom Island other than some mute servants. Because of this, no one had spoken to the girl of the things that happened between men and women. Since then, she had met Guo Jing and she felt a joy and an incredible softness in his company. When she was separated from him even for a moment, a feeling of melancholy and an unbearable solitude overcame her. She believed that being husband and wife meant nothing more than never parting from each other; that was why for so long now she had considered Guo Jing as her husband, without knowing the nature of conjugal relations. Her question therefore put Qigong in great difficulty.

"To violate the body of the virgins," the girl insisted, "is to kill them?"

"No," Hong responded, "when a woman undergoes such an outrage, this is sometimes more painful than death itself. The proverb says: 'To be dishonored is grave, to die of hunger is nothing'. That says well what I want to say..."

Huang Rong did not understand. "Does that mean to cut the ears or the nose with a knife?"

"Pah!" Qigong said, bothered, "not at all! Little imp, you better ask your mother when you get back home..."

"My mother is dead..."

"Ah!" said the beggar. "Then you will understand after your wedding night with our silly young fellow!"

Huang Rong reddened, understanding at last that it was a matter of shameful things. She said softly, "If you do not want to explain... Therefore, you fell on the old monster in the process of committing this evil deed...this was in past then?"

Qigong, relieved to see that she did not put up anymore embarrassing questions, continued, "Well, I intervened, that's right. I caught this rascal, gave him a good thrashing and pulled out all his hair! Afterwards, I obliged him to take those girls back to their homes and to promise solemnly that he would not try it ever again. If he resumed doing it, he would regret ever having been born! It would seem that, for all these years, he never broke his promise and that's the reason why I spared him today." He said then, "Goodness, did his hair grow back?"

"Oh yes!" Huang Rong said while bursting out laughing. "Pulling out all the hair...that would have been really funny!" The three finished the meal.

“Master Qigong,” Huang Rong then said, “now, even if you wanted to give me this bamboo stick, I wouldn't want it. But we cannot remain close to you all our lives! What if we come across this Liang fellow, and he says to us: ‘Well little brat, last time you sheltered yourself under the name of Clan Master Qigong and you hit me with his bamboo stick, today I'm going to avenge myself. I will pull out all of your hair!’ What will we do then? When my Jing ge ge fought with him, his one and only blow, ‘The Proud Dragon Regrets’, is of course powerful, but that means little all the same, true? I am sure that Liang will say in his heart: ‘Clan Master Qigong has kung fu of infinite power, but when it comes to teaching a disciple; this is really not that troublesome!’”

“I well know,” Qigong said, “that you utter all these stupidities, so provoking and threatening, so that I'll teach all my skills to you two! Well, so long as you prepare some good dishes for me, I won't disappoint you.”

Huang Rong, delighted, took Hong Qigong by the hand to go into the pine forest.

Hong imparted to Guo Jing the second blow of the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', called 'Flying Dragon in the Heavens'. In this stance it was necessary to jump into the air and strike from the top down; an extremely powerful attack. Guo Jing took three days to assimilate it. During these three days, Qigong took the opportunity to experience ten more delicious dishes even better than the others. Huang Rong, for her part, asked nothing from him for herself; provided that he continued to teach her loved one. This was more than enough to satisfy her.

In the space of a month, Qigong taught Guo Jing fifteen of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', from 'The Proud Dragon Regrets' to 'Sighting the Dragon in the Field'.

These 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' were Qigong's ultimate skills. He had originally learned them from his Shifu and they were instrumental to his reputation. The number of blows was of course, limited, but each of them was full of exceptional power. At the time of the first Huashan tournament, when the Five Supreme Masters measured themselves, these Eighteen Palms were not completely up to the mark, but they did give rise to respect and general admiration. Thereafter, Qigong often expressed his regret that if he had concentrated all his efforts to perfect this technique some years earlier, the title of "First in the Martial World" might not have fallen to the Grand Master of the Quanzhen Sect, Wang Chongyang, but to himself!

At first, Hong had no intention of passing on to Guo Jing more than two or three of these Eighteen Palms, which would have been more than enough for him to defend himself. But Huang Rong was really an unparalleled cook; every day she prepared new dishes of exceptional taste, never repeating herself. The old beggar could not resolve himself to leave. So, day after day, he ended up teaching the fifteen blows. Guo Jing did not understand the stances quickly, but the little that he learned, he retained and repeated day and night. Working with such determination he achieved a good mastery of the fifteen blows and what he lacked in power, time and practice alone could give to him. Thus, in a little more than a month, his kung fu had achieved such progress that he was no longer the same person!

That morning, after breakfast, Qigong said, while sighing, "My children, we've been together for more than a month, it's time we took leave of each other."

"Ah no," Huang Rong protested. "I have many more simple dishes for you to taste..."

"There are not endless banquets, but there is an infinity of dishes... I never have, in all my life, taught anybody for more than three days. This time, I've done that for more than thirty days! If this continues it'll be a catastrophe!"

"Why's that?"

"Well, you will strip me of all that I know!"

"You've started a good work; why not take it to the end! Teaching him the Eighteen Palms would be a real accomplishment!"

"Pah, that would be an accomplishment for you two, but not for me..." Huang Rong, worried, wondered what stratagems she could invent to get Hong to teach the three remaining blows to Guo Jing, but the old beggar did not give her the time. Flipping his gourd over his back, he left without speaking another word.

Guo Jing chased after him, but Qigong went so quickly that he disappeared in a wink. The young man raced into the pines and called, "Qigong, Qigong!" Huang Rong had followed him and added her calls to his. Suddenly, a shadow arose from the pines; it was Hong, who addressed them angrily, "Dirty kids, what are you still bothering me for? If you want me to teach you more, that is absolutely impossible!"

"You have already taught us too much," Guo Jing said. "I am more than satisfied, how could I want more? It's only that I did not thank you again for your kindness!" He knelt then and kowtowed, striking the ground with his forehead, several times.

Qigong's expression changed: "Stop," he shouted, "That which I taught you is nothing other than a suitable payment for the small dishes that she prepared for me. There has

never been a relationship of master and disciple between us!" At that, he also knelt and kowtowed in front of Guo Jing.

Stunned, he attempted to kowtow again, but Qigong extended a hand and touched a pressure point, freezing him with his legs half bent. The beggar released him only after having prostrated himself four times in front of him: "Remember," he cautioned, "Never mention that you kowtowed to me and that you are my disciple!" Understanding that he had a stubborn character, Guo Jing didn't attempt to contradict him.

"Grand Master Qigong" Huang Rong sighed, "you were so good to us and now we must part. I had the intention of preparing some simple dishes for you, but... unfortunately... I fear that this is not possible anymore..."

"And why not?" Qigong asked.

"Many people want to do evil to us... aside from that old monster the 'Ginseng Immortal', there are many more evildoers! One day, we will end up dying at their hands!"

"What is death?" Hong said with a smile. "Everyone must die one day."

"Of course"" replied Huang Rong while shaking her head, "it's not a big deal to die, but I'm afraid that they will capture me and, learning that I received your teaching and that I cooked for you, they will force me to cook for them all those dishes that I prepared you. This would be a stain on your reputation!"

Qigong knew well that the girl was trying to trick more skills out of him, but, the thought that someone might force her to cook, while he himself could not taste those succulent

dishes, caused a feeling of great anger. "Who are these villains that scare you?" he demanded.

"There is," Huang Rong replied, "a certain old monster of the Yellow River, Sha Tongtian. He eats in such a disgusting way! What a shame it would be for him to have my delicious dishes!"

"There's no need to fear Sha Tongtian!" Qigong said while shaking his head. "In one or two years, this dummy Guo Jing will be stronger than him. There's nothing to fear..."

Huang Rong mentioned the Tibetan monk Ling Zhi and Peng Lianhu. To which Qigong replied again, "Nothing to fear!"

But when Huang Rong mentioned the young master of White Camel Mountain, Ouyang Ke, Hong Qigong seemed taken aback. He questioned her about the techniques and moves of this new opponent, before nodding his head. "That's indeed him!"

Seeing the seriousness of his face, the girl became serious herself, "He's very powerful, isn't that right?"

"There's nothing to fear from Ouyang Ke!" Qigong said. "It's his uncle, the old West Venom, who is fearsome."

"The old West Venom? No matter how fearsome, he cannot be stronger than you, isn't that right?"

Qigong didn't reply. He thought for a while, before he stated, "At one time, we were equals. But that was twenty years ago... In those twenty years, he's surely trained harder than lazy and gluttonous me. Huh, but to beat this old beggar, nonetheless, won't be easy..."

"Then he certainly can't beat you!"

“We will see,” Qigong said, shaking his head. “Since the nephew of the old West Venom, Ouyang Feng, is after your head, we must be careful. I will eat your cooking for fifteen days. But let's make one thing clear...if, during these fifteen days, you present the same dish to me twice, I'll get up and say good-bye...”

Huang Rong was delighted. She decided to give the full measure of her talents. Not only did she not repeat the same dish, but she prepared infinite variations in the accompaniment of noodles and rice for every meal. Fried dumplings, steamed dumplings, boiled dumplings, fried rice, rice porridge, sticky rice, flower-shaped buns, rice flour noodles and a type of bean soup. Qigong, for his part, took pains to teach the two young people the art of adapting oneself to all the fighting positions, to react and to better defend themselves. But he never taught the three blows lacking from the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’. Guo Jing, of course, deepened his mastery of the fifteen stances, and he equally increased the power of all the martial arts he had learned with the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. Hong Qigong had, before the age of thirty-five, practiced much diversified kung fu and learned innumerable fist and palm techniques. From among them he deliberately chose bizarre types for Huang Rong, but it was just as a joke. These techniques were beautiful to look at, simple and direct, but their real effectiveness in battle was far inferior to the Fifteen Palms Guo Jing had learned. Huang Rong desired only to have fun, so without really applying herself in this apprenticeship she had learned them to amuse herself.

Guo Jing was practicing his palms one evening, when Huang Rong climbed a tree to gather bamboo shoots and plums for an unconventional dish called ‘The Three Friends of Winter’, which has three distinct flavors.

Hong Qigong couldn't stop himself from drooling. Then he suddenly bent over into a thicket of grass and fished out a two-foot-long blue snake.

"Snake!" Huang Rong shouted.

With his left hand, Hong Qigong lightly pushed Huang Rong on her shoulder, forcing her back a few feet. The thick patch of grass rustled again, revealing more snakes. Hong Qigong struck each snake with the dog-beating stick on the center of its head. The blow immediately killed them. Huang Rong cheered. Suddenly, two snakes silently slithered behind her and bit her.

Hong Qigong knew the blue snakes, although small, possessed a highly venomous poison without comparison. Alarmed, he tried to think of a way to neutralize the poison. The sound of continuous hissing was heard, as a hoard of snakes materialized about ten zhang away. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Huang Rong laughed. Fear struck Guo Jing when he saw the two snakes still hanging onto Huang Rong.

Hong Qigong told Guo Jing to be careful. In his anxiety Guo Jing had already removed a snake. He noticed blood dripping from its head. They were already dead. Hong Qigong understood. "Your father gave you his soft hedgehog armor." When the snakes bit Huang Rong, they were immediately killed by the spikes on her armor, which pierced their heads. Just as Guo Jing went to pull the other snake off Huang Rong more snakes emerged from the forest. Hong Qigong placed a yellow herb in his mouth and chewed. By this time, over a thousand snakes had emerged from the forest. Many more were out of the sight.

"Master Qigong, let's get out of here," Guo Jing said.

Hong Qigong didn't answer. Instead, he unstopped his gourd and took a large swig from it. He mixed the yellow herb with the wine, which he spit from left to right, creating an arc in front of the three.

When one blue snake attempted to cross the medicated wine, it immediately died. None of the other blue snakes dared to cross the wine after that. Indeed, the ones in the front attempted to retreat, but more snakes were emerging from the forest. Both groups crashed into one another causing a writhing chaotic mass. Huang Rong clapped her hands and shouted with pleasure. The forest suddenly emitted a strange noise just before three men dressed in white emerged from it. They used a pole to herd the snakes as if they were oxen. Huang Rong found this all amusing. But then she suddenly felt like vomiting. Hong Qigong struck at a snake with his dog-beating stick. He then took the snake and used two fingers to extract its gallbladder.

"Quickly swallow this," he said to Huang Rong. "Don't bite or chew it or you will feel pain." After swallowing the gallbladder, Huang Rong's chest immediately felt at ease.

"Jing ge ge, do you feel dizzy?" Huang Rong said. Guo Jing shook his head.

Because he had drunk the blood of the giant snake, Guo Jing had become impervious to over a hundred poisons. The snakes also felt fear whenever they smelled the scent of the blood on Guo Jing. When they emerged from the forest, they were really after just Hong Qigong and Huang Rong.

"Master Qigong, these snakes were raised by people," Huang Rong said. Hong Qigong nodded and angrily glared at the three men in white. The three men were also angry after they saw Hong Qigong feed the gallbladder to Huang Rong. They reorganized the snake line.

"You three bastards!" one of them shouted. "Are you tired of living?"

"No, you must be the three bastards who are tired of living!" Huang Rong shouted back.

Hong Qigong clapped Huang Rong on the shoulders in approval. The three men became even angrier. The sallow-cheeked, middle-aged man standing in the middle thrust the long pole at Huang Rong with a surprising amount of force. Hong Qigong pressed the dog-beating stick against the pole, which immediately stopped. Startled, the man pulled on the pole with both of his hands. Hong Qigong shook the dog-beating stick and shouted, "Be gone!"

The man stumbled and flipped over, landing right in the middle of all the deadly snakes. He had luckily eaten a herb earlier, so the snakes were unwilling to bite him. Shocked, the other two men took a step back. "How was it done?" they said. Indeed, the other man had fallen so hard that he crushed ten snakes and felt sore all over.

One of his companions, a fair-skinned man, held out the pole to the sallow-cheeked man to support him. They were reluctant to fight again.

"Who dares to stop our snakes with that herb?" the sallow-cheeked man said. Laughing, Hong Qigong paid no attention to them.

"Who are you to send out so many poisonous snakes to injure people?" Huang Rong replied.

The three men looked at one another, trying to figure out how to respond when another man dressed in white appeared at the edge of the forest. He walked through a narrow path between the snakes while fanning himself. Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong recognized him as Ouyang

Ke, the master of White Camel Mountain, whose presence amongst their ranks caused the snakes to disperse.

The three men welcomed their master and told him of Hong Qigong's amazing ability and the situation that had just transpired. Ouyang Ke was surprised. Then he nodded.

"In their ignorance these three servants offended the old senior," he said. "I apologize." Then he turned to Huang Rong and smiled. "Ah, the lady is here," he said. "I am at your service."

Huang Rong turned her attention to Hong Qigong. "Master Qigong, you should take care of this bad egg," she said.

Hong Qigong nodded and said to Ouyang Ke, "How can you lawlessly herd these snakes through the country in broad daylight? You obviously intend to use these snakes for reckless acts. Who do you intend to use them on?"

"These snakes have traveled a long distance," Ouyang Ke said. "They can't feed themselves in the conventional manner."

"How many people have you hurt?" Hong Qigong said.

"We've herded the snakes through the country," Ouyang Ke said. "Not many people were hurt."

Hong Qigong glared at the other man. "Not hurt many people!" he said. "Your family name is Ouyang is it not?"

"That's correct," Ouyang Ke said. "The lady must have told you. And what is the venerable one's name?"

"This man's rank is a generation above yours," Huang Rong said. "If he told you, he'd scare you to death!" But Ouyang Ke didn't get angry. He laughed instead and cast a sidelong glance at her.

"You are the nephew of Ouyang Feng, aren't you?" Hong Qigong said.

Ouyang Ke didn't respond, but the three snake herders shouted in anger, "Old man, how dare you use the given name of our master!"

"I say what others do not," Hong Qigong said with a smile.

The three snake herders continued to yell at Hong Qigong, when the beggar, who was on the ground with the dog-beating stick, suddenly appeared in sky like a large bird. He struck down three times so quickly that the three men had no time to react. Before their bodies hit the ground, Hong Qigong had already jumped into the air again.*

"Good move!" Huang Rong said. "Why haven't you taught it to me yet, Master Qigong?"

When the three men arose they could not make a sound because Hong Qigong had hit them on the tiny muscle near the chin that connects to the jaw.

Startled, Ouyang Ke said to Hong Qigong, "Senior knows my uncle?"

"Ah, so you are Ouyang Feng's nephew," Hong Qigong said. "It's been over twenty years since I've seen the 'Old Poison'. Is he still not dead?"

Ouyang Ke grew angry, but he knew the level of Hong Qigong's kung fu was very high. And because he knew his uncle, he must also be a senior of enormous ability. "Uncle has often said that he would never die before any of his friends," Ouyang Ke said. "So he dares not go to heaven before you."

Hong Qigong looked skyward and laughed. "Good! You turn my words around and insult me!" he said. "Now, why did

you bring all these treasures?" he said, indicating the snakes.

"I have spent all my life in the West," Ouyang Ke said. "This is the first time I have ventured to the Central Plains [zhong yuan]. The journey is lonely and solitary, so I thought I'd bring these snakes along for some fun."

"That's a lie," Huang Rong said. "How can your journey be lonely and solitary with so many of your wives and concubines to accompany you?"

Ouyang Ke snapped open his fan and looked over it at Huang Rong. Laughing, he recited, "My distant heart held no one within, but today I have met its princess."

Huang Rong made a funny face at Ouyang Ke and laughed. "I don't need your compliments, just as much as I don't need you to miss me," she said.

Ouyang Ke was speechless: He was enthralled by the goddess-like Huang Rong and her pleasant expression.

"Your uncle rules the western region tyrannically, so obviously no one has disciplined you," Hong Qigong shouted. "So you've come into the Central Plains with the idea of doing as you please. Well, today, I will give your uncle face and leave you alone. Get out of my sight right now."

Ouyang Ke stopped himself from spitting out hateful words. Knowing himself to be no match for Hong Qigong, he began to retreat obediently, though his heart was full of distaste. "Junior bids you farewell. If senior makes it through the next few years without suffering any serious illness, please come to the White Camel Mountain for a visit."

Hong Qigong laughed. "Little punk, you dare challenge me to a duel? If I do come, it will have nothing to do with an agreement. Your uncle isn't afraid of me and I'm not afraid of your uncle. Twenty years before yesterday, in the early morning, a group of us fought one another and found ourselves to be evenly matched. We need not ever fight again."

His face abruptly changed. "You are still here in front of me instead of being far away!" Hong Qigong shouted.

Ouyang Ke was startled again. "I've only learned thirty percent of uncle's kung fu," he thought. "This man doesn't seem to be lying. I'll accept this loss of face for now and get back at him later." Ouyang Ke didn't respond, and the three men, with their chins still aching, made no sound. Casting a glance at Huang Rong, Ouyang Ke turned and walked back into the forest.

The three men then made strange noises to direct the snakes, but because of the injury to their jaws, their voices at their loudest only came out as a weak rasp. Like a wave, the snakes moved back into the forest, leaving a trail of gleaming slime across the ground.

"Master Qigong, do you know where these snakes come from?" Huang Rong said. "Were they raised?"

Hong Qigong gave no response. He took a swig from his gourd, used his sleeve to wipe off the sweat from his brow and let out a sigh of relief. "So dangerous; so very dangerous!" he said.

"How so?" both Guo Jing and Huang Rong asked.

"Those poisonous snakes were only temporarily blocked by my efforts," Hong Qigong said. "They would have soon been able to cross over. With so many snakes, they would have

been like a flood. How would we be able to stop them? Luckily, those people were inexperienced and didn't realize my ruse since I frightened them so much. If the 'Old Poison' had come, you two kids would have been in a terrible position," he added.

"We wouldn't stay — we'd run away," Huang Rong said.

"This senior wouldn't be afraid, but you two kids would run away," Hong Qigong laughed. "But how would you flee if the 'Old Poison' sent out one of his palms?"

"Is that man's uncle really that powerful?" Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong laughed. "Powerful? 'Eastern Heretic,' 'Western Poison,' 'Northern Beggar,' 'Southern Emperor' and 'Central Divinity': Your father is the Eastern Heretic, and Ouyang Feng is the Western Poison. The number one martial artist, Wang Zhenren [Wang Chongyang], passed away. The remaining four of us, who fought against one another in eight pairs, were found to be equal. Is your father not fierce?" he added. "Is my own ability negligible?" [Note: Zhenren is a title for respected Taoist priests.]

Huang Rong had secretly pondered these points before and was not able to put the pieces together. "My father is a good person, so why is he called 'heretical' and 'evil?' I don't like his nickname."

"Privately, your father probably likes his nickname," Hong Qigong said with a laugh. "That man possesses a strange spirit. He follows his own unorthodox way — is that not perverse? I am convinced that the proper ancestry of all orthodox kung fu is through Quanzhen's teachings."

"You've learned Quanzhen's neigong haven't you?" he said to Guo Jing.

“Ma Yu taught me at length for over two years,” Guo Jing said.

“Indeed, indeed — you didn’t learn that in any short span of time,” Hong Qigong said. “Had you not, how would you be able to learn my ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ if you didn’t possess a good neigong basis?”

“Who is Southern Emperor?” Huang Rong said.

“Southern Emperor is indeed an emperor [huang di],” Hong Qigong said. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were surprised.

“Do you mean the emperor of the Song?” Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong erupted in laughter. “That kid emperor is only strong enough to eat from a golden rice bowl. If there are two, he wouldn’t be able to pick it up! Southern Emperor is not the Song emperor. No, this Southern Emperor possesses very powerful kung fu. Between the three of us, your father and I were slightly inferior. But the ‘southern fire overcoming the western gold’? Indeed, the ‘Old Poison’, Ouyang Feng, was unable to overcome his star.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong wanted Hong Qigong to finish his story but the beggar was lost in thought and fell into silence. They didn’t press him. Hong Qigong looked skyward. His eyebrows creased as if he were pondering some sort of difficult problem. He walked back into the inn alone.

Suddenly, Huang Rong and Guo Jing heard the sound of tearing. As Hong Qigong passed through the gate into the inn, a nail got caught on his sleeve and tore a large hole into it. Huang Rong gasped in surprise. But Hong Qigong didn’t notice. He kept walking as if he were in a daze.

"I'll mend it for you," Huang Rong said. Huang Rong went to the proprietress of the inn and borrowed a needle and thread. Then she fixed the hole in Hong Qigong's sleeve.

Hong Qigong shook himself from his reverie when he saw Huang Rong with the needle in her hand. He abruptly snatched the needle and ran outside the inn's gate. Curious, Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed, only to see Hong Qigong throw the gleaming needle out. Huang Rong watched the needle arch and pierce a grasshopper. She shouted in delight.

"This will do," Hong Qigong said, looking satisfied. "This style will do nicely."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited for Hong Qigong to continue.

"Ouyang Feng, the 'Old Poison', loves to raise poisonous snakes and poisonous insects," Hong Qigong said. "Coming up with a way to deal with all those blue snakes is not an easy thing." He paused before continuing. "When I saw that young Ouyang and found him to be no good, and knowing his uncle who opposes everyone, I realized that you two needed some way to disperse the snakes since I might not always be around to save you."

Huang Rong clapped her hands. "You would use the needles to pin the snakes to the ground."

Hong Qigong smiled at Huang Rong. "This girl is so clever," he said. "You say one sentence, and she already knows the next one."

"You don't want to use the yellow herb anymore?" Huang Rong said. "You just spit it out with the wine and the poisonous snakes will refuse to cross it."

"That will only work for so long," Hong Qigong said. "I have to practice this stance 'Blossoms Rain from the Sky', which uses needles. The snakes will approach in the future, and I will throw out these needles, hitting each snake, one by one. After I get enough needles, I will go and kill all those snakes in about a fortnight." Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong laughed.

"I'll go get you your needles," Huang Rong said, before immediately heading off in the direction of the town market.

Hong Qigong sighed in admiration. "Jing'er, why don't you have her split her intelligence and cleverness in half and give one half to you?"

"Split in half her intelligence and cleverness?" Guo Jing said. "You can't split those apart."

Huang Rong returned from the market around the next meal time. She removed from a food basket two packages of sewing needles, and, smiling, said, "I bought every single needle in town. Tomorrow, all the men are going to get an earful from their women."

"Why?" Guo Jing said.

"Yelling at them would be useless!" Huang Rong said. "There's not a single needle left to buy in the town."

Hong Qigong burst into laughter. "Didn't you two kids want me to teach you projectile kung fu? Let's see how hard you can work. You two kids won't get another opportunity to learn from this old man. It turns out this old beggar was smart after all! By not marrying, I'm spared the torment of dealing with women." Laughing, Huang Rong followed him out.

"I don't want to learn Master Qigong," Guo Jing said.

“Why?” Hong Qigong said.

“Senior has already taught me so much kung fu that I haven’t practiced enough,” Guo Jing said.

Hong Qigong understood: Guo Jing refused to be greedy. The beggar had said he would no longer teach anymore kung fu to Guo Jing, but the recent emergency situation made teaching more techniques imperative. Nevertheless, if Guo Jing allowed Hong Qigong to teach him again, it would appear to be opportunistic. Nodding, Hong Qigong pulled Huang Rong by the hand and said, “We practice.”

Once alone, Guo Jing went out and practiced the first fifteen palms of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ and thereby increased his understanding.

Huang Rong studied ‘Blossoms Rain from the Sky’ for ten days. She learned how to throw ten needles and simultaneously hit a person’s vital areas, but could not master hitting the vital points of multiple targets at once.

One day, Hong Qigong and Huang Rong were out practicing with the needles. The beggar threw them all at once. The needles fell to the ground in two groups — each ten feet across. Satisfied, he looked skyward and fell into contemplation. But his thinking was muddled, so he said aloud, “Old Poison, why did you train all those snakes?”

“With his kung fu already at such a powerful state, he can handle almost anyone near him,” Huang Rong said. “So what would the snakes be for?”

Hong Qigong slapped his head. “Of course!” he said. “It’s to deal with the Eastern Heretic and the Southern Emperor. Both the beggars and Quanzhen are numerous in manpower and the Southern Emperor is an actual emperor with many bodyguards and soldiers protecting him. Your

father is a cultivated intellectual possessing many strange and powerful skills, which can help him face multiple enemies alone. When the 'Old Poison' fights alone, no one in his generation can completely face him. But if his enemy brings a companion and so on, then the 'Old Poison' facing them alone is in a terrible position."

"Therefore, the 'Old Poison' raised the snakes to help him," Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong sighed. "Us beggars often catch snakes and raise them for food," he said. "We've been able to do this with about seventeen or eighteen snakes. We sometimes even release them into fields at night to catch frogs. But the process isn't easy at all. Now, the 'Old Poison' has actually had the time to catch innumerable numbers of snakes. Rong'er, the 'Old Poison' has spent a great deal of time on this, which means he must be planning something."

"He is certainly planning something," Huang Rong said. "But luckily for us, his nephew revealed the snakes."

Hong Qigong slapped his head. "Of course, the Ouyang kid revealed the secret through his frivolousness," he said. "But what does the 'Old Poison' know about what others have? These thousands of snakes could not have come from the western region. They must have been collected from the mountains in the East. Although that Ouyang kid betrayed a part of the plan, he might not have completely revealed the whole scheme in which he plays a part."

"That's not a good thing," Huang Rong said. "Luckily, this 'Blossoms Rain from the Sky' style prepares us in advance to take care of those snakes when we meet them, as opposed to having to deal with them while fighting with the 'Old Poison' himself."

Hong Qigong hesitated. "But suppose he wraps me up and prevents me from throwing the needles," he said. "How would I deal with those thousands of snakes?"

Huang Rong thought for a while, "Just run away," she said.

"Bah!" Hong Qigong said with a smile. "What kind of method is turning around and running away?"

Suddenly, Huang Rong exclaimed, "I've got it! I just thought of a good plan."

Joyful, Hong Qigong said, "What kind of plan is it?"

"Just keep the two of us by your side," she said. "Should we meet the 'Old Poison', you will fight him and Jing ge ge will deal with his nephew. I will simply use the sewing needles to kill all the snakes. The problem is Jing ge ge doesn't know three of the strikes from the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' and might not be able to deal with those devious ones." Hong Qigong stared.

"You are the devious one," he said. "You just want to trick me into teaching your 'Jing ge ge' the last three palms. With regard to Guo Jing's moral conduct, I would teach him all eighteen palms without any hesitation. But when did this boy become my disciple? He is so dull that if I took him as a disciple, I would be giving people the right to laugh at me!" Huang Rong laughed.

"I'm going to buy some groceries," she said, knowing that food would make it harder for Hong Qigong to leave.

She went to the market and purchased many different kinds of vegetables and meats while making sure she bought ingredients with sufficiently unique tastes. With the groceries held in her left hand and her right practicing the "Blossoms Rain from the Sky" technique, she leisurely

strolled back to the inn. Suddenly, she heard the sound of a bell approaching. In the distance, she saw a lone, female rider dressed in white nearing the inn very quickly. Huang Rong saw it was Yang Tiexin's daughter, Mu Nianci, whom Guo Jing's teachers wanted him to marry. Huang Rong's heart turned sour and, as Mu Nianci got closer, she refused to make a sound. "What's so good about this girl?" she thought. "Jing ge ge's six masters and that ox-nosed priest of the Quanzhen Sect all want him to marry her." After more thinking, Huang Rong grew angry. "Let me go fight her and relieve some of my frustration," she thought. But when Huang Rong went to place the groceries in the inn, she found Mu Nianci already sitting at a table.

An anxious-looking innkeeper asked Mu Nianci what she wanted to eat and drink. "Bring me a bowl of noodles and some beef," Mu Nianci said. The innkeeper quickly left to fill the order.

"How is simple beef any good to eat?" Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci looked at Huang Rong. At first she couldn't recognize her, but then she remembered it was the girl who had so suddenly left with Guo Jing. She exhaled. "Little sister is here too?" she said. "Please sit with me."

"Did that smelly scholar, the fat dwarf, or the other ones come too?" Huang Rong said.

"No," Mu Nianci said. "I came alone. They are all off somewhere together."

At first Huang Rong feared running into Qiu Chuji, but she felt joy after learning Mu Nianci was there by herself. Blinded at first by the possibility of the Taoist's presence, Huang Rong now examined Mu Nianci closely and noticed her small boots, dress and her hair entwined with a white flower, signifying that she was in mourning. And though she

had lost weight and wore a sad expression, Mu Nianci remained elegantly beautiful as opposed to pitiable. Huang Rong then noticed a dagger worn at Mu Nianci's waist.

"That is the dagger exchanged by Jing ge ge's parents with her parents to mark their marriage," Huang Rong thought. Unable to bear the thought, Huang Rong shouted, "Little sister, may I take a look at that dagger?"

The dagger was indeed the one Bao Xiruo gave away just before dying. It had been recovered after she and Yang Tiexin killed themselves and now served as a keepsake of the two adoptive parents.

Mu Nianci looked at Huang Rong and noticed her strange expression, but before she could do anything, Huang Rong had already reached out, taken hold of the dagger and casually removed it.

She looked at the weapon and noticed the two characters "Guo Jing" carved into its hilt. "This belongs to Jing ge ge," she thought bitterly. "Why does she get to have it?" She removed the weapon from its sheath. A cold air immediately emanated from the weapon. "Good dagger!" Huang Rong said. She put the dagger back into the sheath and placed it within her shirt. "I'm going to go give this to Jing Ge ge," she said.

Stricken, Mu Nianci said, "What?"

"The two characters engraved on the hilt proves who the rightful owner of this dagger is," Huang Rong said. "I'm going to give it to him."

Mu Nianci cried out angrily, "That is the only possession I have from my adoptive parents. How can you take it? Quickly give it back to me." She stood up and walked towards Huang Rong.

"If you have a problem, come and get it!" Huang Rong shouted as she ran out of the inn. Huang Rong knew Hong Qigong was asleep in the forest and Guo Jing was up on the mountains practicing his palms. She ran to the left.

Mu Nianci pursued anxiously, fearing Huang Rong would ride the red horse. She continued to chase until she heard a loud noise, which she followed.

Huang Rong had taken a bend into a clearing surrounded by tall, locust trees. She stopped there and laughed.

"You've won," she said. "You're the better horse. Now let us match against one another to see who gets the bride's dagger."

Mu Nianci's cheeks reddened. "Don't joke little sister," she said. "When I see this dagger, I see my adoptive father. Why did you take it away?"

Huang Rong's brow dropped. "Who is your sister?" she shouted. She immediately jumped at Mu Nianci with her palm extended.

Mu Nianci tried to dodge, but Huang Rong used the 'Palm of the Divine Sword Felling the Hero'. Employing the many and mysterious variations in the style, Huang Rong hit Mu Nianci twice in the ribs, causing a lot of pain. Angry, Mu Nianci turned to the left before also returning her own palm stroke, which was a violent strike.

"That is the 'Wandering Strides' fist!" Huang Rong shouted. "How is this possible?"

Mu Nianci was surprised upon hearing Huang Rong's shout. "This was the style Hong Qigong passed on to me alone," she thought. "How could she know about it?" Mu Nianci watched as Huang Rong retracted her left palm and

attacked with her right as a fist. After three moves, Mu Nianci recognized the style to be none other than the 'Wandering Strides'. Surprised, she jumped back. "Stop!" she shouted. "Who taught you this style?"

"I just figured it out myself," Huang Rong said with a smile. "What's so special about this rough and crude kung fu?" So saying, she attacked again with the 'Wandering Strides', employing its two central moves, 'Alms Bowl at the Door' and 'Seeing a Benefactor', in a continuous attack.

Mu Nianci became even more bewildered after avoiding another move, 'Traveling the Seas Without Worry'. "You know Senior Hong Qigong?" she said.

"He and I are old friends," Huang Rong said with a smile. "You can use this style. I'll use the kung fu I know and then we'll see who wins."

With a menacing chortle, Huang Rong immediately attacked. She did not use the 'Wandering Strides' style. Instead, she employed the martial arts taught to her by her father to get the better of Mu Nianci, whose skills were taught to her by Hong Qigong. How could Mu Nianci block?

Mu Nianci tried to flee but she couldn't. She watched a palm rise like a sword slashing across with a roaring wind. Feeling the spear-like force, Mu Nianci twisted her body to the side to dodge, but then felt pain in her neck as Huang Rong successfully hit her with 'Brushing the Orchid Blossoms from the Road'. The palm had struck the neck vertebrae precisely where the blood vessels regulate the body, hands and feet. After being hit, Mu Nianci's hands and feet immediately became numb and weak.

Huang Rong then stepped forward and pressed an acupoint on Mu Nianci's waist. Mu Nianci immediately fell over. Huang Rong took out the dagger and laughed, before

slashing at Mu Nianci's cheeks with ten different strikes. None of them hit — but they were only one inch away from striking flesh.

Mu Nianci closed her eyes, expecting death, but to her surprise she felt a cool air near her cheeks that didn't hurt. When she opened her eyes, she saw the dagger coming towards her eyes, only to see it stop next to her face. "If you're going to kill me, kill me," she yelled in anger. "Why all the threats and theatrics?"

"You are not my enemy, nor do I hate you," Huang Rong said. "Why would I kill you? You just have to swear one oath, and I'll release you."

Although they were indeed not enemies, Mu Nianci refused to even consider giving an oath. "Lady, you threaten to kill me because you want me to swear an oath," she shouted. "You must be dreaming."

Huang Rong sighed with admiration. "It would be a real pity to kill a beautiful lady of marriageable age," she said.

Mu Nianci closed her eyes and waited for death, but she heard not a sound.

After a moment, Huang Rong gently said, "Jin Ge ge and I have already shared our hearts. If you were to marry him, there is no way he would give you the same."

Mu Nianci opened her eyes. "What did you say?" she asked.

"I know you won't promise not to marry him," Huang Rong said.

"Who is it that you like?" Mu Nianci said in confusion. "Who is it you think I want to marry?"

"Jin Ge ge, Guo Jing," Huang Rong said.

“Oh him,” Mu Nianci said. “What do you want me to swear?”

“I want you to swear a heavy oath that you will not marry him,” Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci giggled. “You put a dagger to my throat when I already cannot marry him,” she said.

“Is it true?” Huang Rong asked joyfully. “How can this be?”

“Although my adoptive father betrothed me to brother Guo Jing, honestly...” she said before lowering her voice. “Honestly, my adoptive father, despite all his wisdom, neglected to prevent me from giving my heart to someone else.”

“I’ve made such a bad mistake about you,” Huang Rong said ecstatically before immediately un-sealing Mu Nianci’s accupoints and massaging her numb hands and feet. “Elder sister, who have you matched yourself with?”

Mu Nianci blushed before cooing, “You’ve seen this person before.”

Huang Rong tilted her head and thought for a moment. “I’ve seen him before?” she said. “What kind of person around this town is worthy of ascending to elder sister’s level?”

Mu Nianci laughed. “In this world, this man is unrivaled by anyone except for your Jing ge ge,” she said. “Elder sister, is he so crazy that he hasn’t married you?” Huang Rong said with a smile.

“Is brother Jing crazy?” Mu Nianci said. “His character is honest, and his heart is chivalrous. I admire him very much. He treated my father and me very well that day when he

helped us at the risk of his own life. I am very grateful for that. This quality of man is very rare in the world."

Worried, Huang Rong pressed, "Did you say that you couldn't marry him just so I wouldn't put this dagger against your throat?"

Mu Nianci noticed how Huang Rong pressed the issue and concluded the imprudence she exhibited before wasn't far off. She grasped Huang Rong's hands and slowly spoke, "Little sister, your heart is already set on brother Jing. Finding another man his equal will be difficult even with all the thousands of men in the world, right?"

"Yes, I do believe it's very unlikely to find another his equal," Huang Rong said.

"If brother Jing heard your praises of him, his heart would be filled with joy," Mu Nianci said. "During the contest my father set up in Yanjing, a man defeated me."

Huang Rong understood. "I know now," she said. "The person in your heart is the Little Prince, Wanyan Kang."

"Yes, it is the young prince," Mu Nianci said. "He is the one my heart wants. He's a good person underneath. I can make him stop being rotten. "

Though she spoke softly, Mu Nianci's expression was very firm. Huang Rong nodded her head when she suddenly realized she felt the same way about Guo Jing as what Mu Nianci said in such simple words. They grasped each other's hands and sat side-by-side below the locust trees with the sensation of shared feelings. Huang Rong thought for a moment. Then she gave the dagger back to Mu Nianci.

"Elder sister, let me return this to you," Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci did not take it. "Keep it — this is your Jin Ge ge's possession," she said. "His name is carved there on the hilt. With it everyday, I ..." She paused. "If I should carry it everyday, it wouldn't be very good."

Huang Rong lovingly took the dagger and stowed it near her bosom. "Elder sister, you are truly good," she said. After receiving the valuable dagger, Huang Rong was momentarily distracted from her thoughts. "Elder sister, what business has drawn you to the South alone?" Huang Rong asked. "Maybe little sister can help you?"

Mu Nianci blushed and lowered her head. "I don't have any pressing matters at hand," she said.

"In that case, I will take you to see Master Qigong," Huang Rong said.

Mu Nianci felt joy. "Master Qigong is here?" she said.

Huang Rong nodded before grasping Mu Nianci's hand and pulling her up. Suddenly, she heard a sound among the branches above. A piece of bark fell to the ground. In the distance, they could see one person's shadow jumping happily from locust tree to locust tree. After a while, they could tell it was Hong Qigong.

Huang Rong picked up the bark and saw characters carved onto its surface with a needle. "Two dolls like this are very good," she read. "But if Rong'er deliberately causes trouble again, then Qigong will hit your eldest child on the ear." The bark was not signed at the bottom. Instead, a gourd was carved in its place. Huang Rong knew Qigong carved the bark and couldn't help blushing. She knew Qigong had observed the whole fight and knew all about the particulars of the oath she wanted Mu Nianci to swear. Both people had entered the locust grove and did not even notice Hong Qigong. The pair walked hand-in-hand back to the inn.

Guo Jing, who was sitting inside after he finished practicing, was shocked to see Mu Nianci. He quickly said, "Sister Mu, did you see my masters?"

"Your respected masters and I left the capital together and went south to Shandong," she said. "We split up there, and I have not seen them since."

"Are my masters well?" Guo Jing said.

"Be at ease, brother Guo," Mu Nianci said with a smile. "They are not angry with you."

Guo Jing was indeed very worried, fearing his masters were very angry with him. He rose and fiddled with some tea and food as his simple mind was lost in thought. Mu Nianci turned to Huang Rong and asked how they met Hong Qigong. Huang Rong told the tale.

"Little sister, you are so blessed," Mu Nianci said with a sigh. "You spent so much time with Master Qigong that you lived like a little family. But I only wanted to see him and he is not here."

"He was looking after you," Huang Rong said comfortingly. "He would have revealed himself if I tried to injure you. If I had hurt you, how could he not have acted?" Mu Nianci nodded in acceptance.

Guo Jing thought this was strange. "Rong'er, why would you want to injure sister Mu?" he asked.

"I cannot say," Huang Rong said quickly.

Mu Nianci smiled. "She feared ... feared I would," she said without finishing. Although she started to speak of the matter, she felt shy about the subject.

Huang Rong reached out and tickled Mu Nianci's armpit. "You dare to speak of it?" Huang Rong said with a smile.

Mu Nianci stuck her tongue out and then shook her head. "How would I dare?" she said. "Don't you want me to swear an oath?" Huang Rong spluttered as she recalled trying to force Mu Nianci into swearing to not marry Guo Jing. Both her cheeks turned a bright red. Seeing their shared emotions, Guo Jing felt great happiness.

After eating, the three went into the middle of the forest and strolled about as they idled away their day. Huang Rong asked Mu Nianci how she had received instruction from Hong Qigong.

"It happened when I was very young," Mu Nianci said. "I followed father to a river in Henan province. We stopped at an inn, and while I played at the entrance, I saw two beggars lying on the ground, bleeding profusely. No one was willing to help them for fear of getting themselves dirty."

Huang Rong made the connection. "Oh, so you showed compassion!" she said. "You tended their injuries."

"I could not do much for their injuries," Mu Nianci said. "But I pitied them and took them to father's room where I cleaned their wounds and bandaged them. When my father returned, he said I did the right thing, and then sighed and said how his former wife was kind hearted as well. Then my father gave the two beggars some money to help them with their injuries. They thanked him and left. After several months, we went to Xinyang, where we ran into those two beggars again, who had recovered from their wounds. They took me to a temple where I first met Hong Qigong. After praising me, he taught me the 'Wandering Strides' form,

which took three days. On the fourth day, when I returned to the temple, the master had gone.”

Huang Rong said, “Master Qigong won’t allow us to teach his skills to others. But if you, my sister, would like to learn my father’s skills, I could spend the next few days teaching you some of them.” When she found out that Mu Nianci did not want to marry Guo Jing, a burden was lifted from her heart. Now she felt that she was a really nice person, so she wanted to make her a gift.

Mu Nianci said, “Many thanks, but at present I have some urgent matters to attend to. In future I would ask you even without you suggesting it.”

Huang Rong wanted to ask her what was it but one look at her face and Huang Rong knew she did not want to talk about it and thought, “From her shyness, it seems like she’s made up her mind. If she doesn’t want to mention it, it’s alright.”

Mu Nianci left the inn around noon in a hurry and only returned after dusk. Huang Rong noticed the joyful expression on her face but pretended that she did not notice. After their meal, the two ladies retired. Huang Rong saw her cheek resting on her palm and her heart seemed full of emotions, so she pretended to sleep. After a while, she saw her reach into her bundle and take something out, kiss it lightly and look at it fondly. Huang Rong looked over her back and saw that it was a piece of finely-embroidered handkerchief.

Suddenly Mu Nianci jerked around and the handkerchief fluttered. Huang Rong was shocked and immediately shut her eyes while her heart pounded. She only heard the slight breeze in the room and carefully lifted her eyelid. She saw Mu Nianci pacing around the room executing moves

randomly. She said to herself, "Hey, that's the handkerchief she snatched from that young prince during their sparring match." She saw Mu Nianci smiling to herself, and felt that she was reminiscing of that day's events as she was imitating Wanyan Kang's movements and actions. She did that for some time before walking near her bedside.

Huang Rong closed her eyes tightly as she knew Mu Nianci must have been looking in her direction. After a brief moment, she sighed, "You're really beautiful!" She suddenly turned around and opened the door and walked out. Huang Rong became curious and gave pursuit, utilizing her lightness kung fu [Qinggong] to follow her. Her Qinggong was better than Mu Nianci's, but she kept her distance to evade detection. She saw her jump onto a roof and glance around. Mu Nianci then jumped to a larger building to the south. Huang Rong had been visiting the place daily to buy groceries, and knew that this was a rich man's house, so she thought, "Most likely she'd run out of money, so she came here to 'get' some."

Huang Rong saw that the door was brightly painted and there were two large lanterns suspended at the door inscribed with the words, "The Great Jin Kingdom's Envoy" and there were four Jin soldiers guarding the door. She had passed this door numerous times but had never seen this before, so she thought, "She wants to rob the Great Jin's bounty; that's great, after she's done I can also help myself." She then followed Mu Nianci to the back courtyard and saw her hide at every other corner, so she followed suit.

They saw the candlelight coming from the kitchen and there was a man's shadow there pacing about the room. Mu Nianci cautiously walked over and gazed at this shadow. After some time, the shadow was still pacing around while Mu Nianci was starrng at him motionlessly. Huang Rong became impatient and thought, "Sister Mu is hesitating;

why doesn't she just barge in and immobilize him?" She went around the other side and thought, "I'll help her by immobilizing him and hiding in one corner to surprise him." Just as she was about to enter through a window, she suddenly heard the door open and a man went in, saying, "Reporting, sir, the Southern Imperial Court will send a special envoy here the day after tomorrow." The man nodded and the messenger left.

Huang Rong thought, "So the guy inside is a Jin nobleman, Sister Mu must have some good reason for coming here and not for burglary; I shouldn't interfere." She dipped her finger in her mouth and poked a hole in the window panel and peeped in. She was surprised; it was none other than the young prince Wanyan Kang. In his hand was a black object, and when illuminated by the candlelight, Huang Rong saw that it was a head of a rusty spear. [Note: Window in those days were made of oiled paper.]

Huang Rong did not know that this spear was his father Yang Tiexin's property and only felt that it had something to do with Mu Nianci, so she laughed to herself, "The two of you are really acting in concert; don't tell me you're inseparable." She let out an uncontrollable laugh. Wanyan Kang was startled and quickly extinguished the candle, exclaiming, "Who's that?" Huang Rong took this chance to sneak behind Mu Nianci and swiftly sealed her accupoints, rendering her immobile. Huang Rong laughed, "Don't be afraid, I'm just letting you meet your sweetheart."

Wanyan Kang opened the door and was about to run out when he heard a girl giggling, "Your sweetheart is here, catch!" Wanyan Kang exclaimed, "What?" A soft, warm and fragrant body landed in his arms, and the girl who spoke was swiftly over the wall laughing, "Sister, how can you ever thank me?" As the laughing faded, the girl in his arms struggled to get down. Wanyan Kang was shocked beyond

words and immediately stepped backed, asking, "Who's this?" Mu Nianci said softly, "Do you still remember me?" He felt her voice was familiar and stammered, "You... you're Miss Mu?" She replied, "Yes." He asked, "Who came with you?" She said, "It was a mischievous friend; I didn't know she followed me."

He stepped in and relit the candle, saying, "Come in." Mu Nianci bowed her head and entered, sitting on a chair silently but with a thudding heartbeat. Wanyan Kang saw that she was blushing profusely and said soothingly, "Why are you here to find me at this time?" She did not reply. He thought of his parents' deaths and said softly, "Since your father is dead, you can stay with me and I will regard you as my sister."

Mu Nianci replied, "He was my foster father..." Wanyan Kang was surprised and thought, "She's telling me we're not related by blood." He took her hand in his and smiled. Mu Nianci's face reddened even more and her head bowed lower. Wanyan Kang's heart was on fire and he hugged her, whispering into her ear, "This is the third time I've hugged you. The first was during our sparring match, the second was just outside and now there's no one else around."

Mu Nianci said "Mmm" and felt an extremely sweet flush inside, which was happening for the first time in her life. Wanyan Kang smelled her fragrance, felt her slender body and decided that it was so surreal. After a while he asked, "How did you find me?" Mu Nianci said, "I've been following you. Every night I stare at your shadow but I didn't dare..." Wanyan Kang realized that her feelings were deep and was very touched, so he kissed her forehead. In the heat of passion he hugged her tightly and kissed her for a long time.

Mu Nianci whispered, "I'm an orphan... Don't abandon me." Wanyan Kang embraced her and stroked her hair, saying, "Don't worry! You'll always be mine and I'll always be yours, OK?" Mu Nianci felt great joy in her heart and looked into Wanyan Kang's eyes, and nodded. Wanyan Kang saw that she was blushing profusely and did not care anymore; he blew out the candle flame and carried her to the bed and tried to undress her.

Mu Nianci was somewhat intoxicated by his affection, but when he touched her, she hastily pushed him away and said, "No, we can't do this." Wanyan Kang hugged her and said, "I will definitely marry you. If my heart changes I shall die a horrible death." She placed her hand over his mouth and said, "I believe you." He then said, "Then allow me." She pleaded, "No... no..." Wanyan Kang was really aroused and tried to undo her clothes. She struck out with half her maximum force. Wanyan Kang did not expect her to use her martial arts at this moment and he was shoved away. Mu Nianci jumped from the bed, snatched the spearhead and pointed it towards herself, saying, "If you force me I shall die in front of you."

Wanyan Kang's passion immediately turned to ice and he said, "Alright, let's talk about this, don't do that." Mu Nianci said, "Though I'm a poor girl who wanders through Jianghu, I have my dignity and self-respect. If you truly love me, please respect me. I have no other wish in life but to be with you. In future... in future if I marry you I'd of course... obey you. But today if you try to violate me, I'd rather die." Though she said this softly, she never hesitated. He silently admired and respected her, saying, "Don't be angry, it's my fault."

He got off the bed and relit the candle. Mu Nianci heard that he knew his mistake and said, "I'll wait for you at my foster father's home in Ox Village. You can send... the

matchmaker anytime.” She paused and said, “If you never show up, I’ll just wait for my whole life.” Wanyan Kang was really touched and quickly said, “Don’t worry, when my official business is complete, I’ll come immediately. In this life I shall never change my mind.”

Mu Nianci smiled shyly and turned to leave. Wanyan Kang shouted, “Don’t leave...let’s chat for a while more.” Mu Nianci waved and left. Wanyan Kang stood there and stared at her departing shadow and felt like it was but a dream. She did leave a few strands of hair behind from their struggle and those he placed in his pouch. When he first sparred with her, he did not think much about it, but he did not expect her to follow him here and stare at his shadow every night. Yet she strongly cherished her chastity, deeply earning his respect. He smiled and sighed.

Chapter 13 - The Crippled Person of Five Lake

Translated by SunnySnow



As the Lake Tai pirates and the Jin officials' boats came closer, there were sounds of yelling, scolding, clashing of weapons and the sounds of splashing as bodies dropped into the water. After a while, the Jin officials' boats were on fire which lit up the dark sky and cast a fiery red glow over the lake.

When Huang Rong returned to the inn for the night, she thought in her heart how she had done a good deed and was extremely delighted. Following that, she fell into a sweet sleep, and told Guo Jing all about it when she awoke the next morning. Guo Jing had actually spent a lot of effort on this matter. The last time, he got into a messy situation and had to fight for his life with Wanyan Kang and he was also nearly forced to marry Mu Nianci. When he heard that Mu Nianci and Yang Kang were in love, he secretly felt relieved and happy, especially since Qiu Chuji and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan would not be able to force him to marry Mu Nianci anymore. He ate and chatted with Huang Rong and after some time, Mu Nianci still had not come back.

Huang Rong smiled and said, "We don't have to wait for her, let's just go." Following that, she went back into her room and put on a male disguise. Both of them went to the market and bought a donkey and rode to the Jiang residence. When they saw the lantern, which read 'The Jin Ambassador' at the door smashed, they thought that Wanyan Kang must have left and Mu Nianci must have followed him.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong decided to tour the countryside and rowed a boat to the south along the Grand Canal [Dà Yùnhé]. That day they visited the famous Yixing city, which specialized in pottery making and was renowned as the

pottery capital [tao du]. The rows of ceramic creations [zisha pottery] made with purple sand and clay lay amongst the green hills and blue waters which created a beautiful sight. They traveled towards the east and not long after, came upon a huge lake [Lake Tai]. Since the lake was situated between three cities and it took about five hundred li [1li=500m / 1/3mile] to reach the east or south side, the lake was named Five Lake. Guo Jing had never seen such a huge body of water before and pulled Huang Rong to the lakeside. They saw the sky far away from them, a huge, never-ending space in front, with the lake in the middle and couldn't help but yell happily.

Huang Rong said, "Let's go and play on the lake." They found a fishing village near the lake, borrowed a small boat and left the donkey with the owner before rowing out into the waters. After rowing some distance away from the shore, the space between all four corners of the lake seemed so empty and huge that it seemed like heaven to them.

Huang Rong's robes and hair floated gently in the wind and she smiled, "Long ago, Advisor Fan escorted Xi Shi across the Five Lake...what a clever man. His court position is nothing compared to the peaceful life here."

Guo Jing didn't know anything about Advisor Fan's story and asked, "Rong'er, how about you tell me the story."

Huang Rong began to tell of how Fan Li helped the King of Yue avenge the Yue kingdom and how he successfully retreated with Xi Shi to a peaceful life on Lake Tai. She continued on about how Wu Zixu and Wen Zhong were killed by the King of Wu and the King of Yue respectively.

[Historical background: Xi Shi is one of the legendary Four Beauties of China. The others are Wang Zhaojun, Diao Chan

and Yang Guifei (Note that Guifei is a title for the emperor's consort).

** This occurred during the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BC), before China was united as one empire. At that time, many small states existed. It is against this backdrop that this story took place.]

As the story goes, the King of Yue had once been a prisoner of the King of Wu. He was obsessed about revenge for his humiliation. Fan Li, a minister of the Yue kingdom, came up with a scheme whereby Xi Shi was sent as a gift to the King of Wu. The King of Wu was so enamored by her beauty that he neglected his state, spending all his time with her. Wu Zixu was his best general, but was killed by him.. Eventually, the weakened Wu state was defeated by Yue.

Wen Zhong was a minister of Yue. It was he who ruled Yue while its king was a prisoner. After the defeat of Wu, he was killed by the King of Yue. As for Xi Shi, some legends hold that she disappeared with Fan Li (like what Huang Rong said). Others say she was killed by the King of Yue because he was afraid of succumbing to her beauty like the King of Wu.]

Guo Jing was in a daze after listening to the story and after a while, he recovered and said, "Fan Li was clever, but Wu Zixu and Wen Zhong are admirable too, for dying for their country."

Huang Rong gave a little laugh, "Absolutely. As the saying goes, if a country is virtuous and one does not change, he is the strongest. If a country is corrupted, and one still does not change, he remains the strongest."

Guo Jing asked, "What does this mean?"

Huang Rong replied, "If a country is virtuous, even though one rises to be a powerful official, one would still be as alert

and cautious as before. When the country becomes weak one day and you are still willing to die for your country, then you are the real hero."

Guo Jing nodded his head and said, "Rong'er, how clever of you to think of this!"

Huang Rong laughed, "Ai ya! If I could think of this, I would be a sage. These are Confucius sayings which my father taught me when I was young."

Guo Jing sighed, "There are so many matters I can never understand. If I had read more books and learned more sayings, I would have understood more."

Huang Rong said, "That may not always be the case. My father always tells me that a lot of sayings by sages and scholars are nothing but rubbish. I often see my father reading and saying out loud 'No, No what nonsense, this is atrocious!' Sometimes, he would also say 'What sage! It's a pack of rubbish!'" Guo Jing laughed out loud hearing how Huang Rong described her father.

Huang Rong continued, "I somehow regret spending so much time studying and practicing art and calligraphy. If I hadn't pestered my father to teach me such stuff as well as all sorts of other things such as the interesting ways of calculations, I would have devoted more time to practicing my martial skills and we wouldn't have to be afraid of people like Mei Chaofeng and the old Liang creature! But don't worry Jing ge ge, you've learned Qigong's 'Eighteen, but short three, Dragon-Subduing Palms' and thus you don't have to fear that old Liang creature anymore."

Guo Jing shook his head and said, "I don't think that's possible."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "It's a pity Qigong left. If he hadn't, I would have confiscated and hidden his dog beating stick and forced him to teach you the remaining three stances before returning it to him."

Guo Jing hurriedly said, "No, no. I'm more than satisfied to be able to learn the fifteen stances. How can we make trouble for Senior Qigong?"

Both started chatting and stopped rowing, allowing the wind to move the boat freely. Without realizing it, they were already miles away from the shore. They saw a fisherman fishing lazily from a boat not far away and there was a servant at the bow of the boat.

Huang Rong pointed and said, "As the mist clears, one can see the shape of a straight bamboo rod. It's just like a painting of water inked scenery."

Guo Jing asked, "What's water inked scenery?"

Huang Rong answered, "That's paintings which use only black ink and no other colors."

Guo Jing saw the green hills, blue waters, white clouds and orange sun but could not find anything black in color. He shook his head, not understanding Huang Rong's words. Huang Rong chatted more with Guo Jing. Later she turned around and saw that the fisherman was still sitting straight in the boat and his rod had not moved an inch. Huang Rong laughed, "This person does have a lot of patience."

A gust of wind blew over them and little waves of water sloshed gently against the boat. Huang Rong swung her arms about and started singing a song entitled 'The Water Dragon's Hum' which tells about life on the lake. She finished singing the first part of the song before resting a little. Guo Jing noticed tears in her eyes and was just about

to ask her the meaning of the song when suddenly, they heard a melancholy voice singing the exact same song Huang Rong was singing earlier, except that it was the second part. When they looked around, it seemed as though the fisherman was the one singing the song. His voice sounded somewhat forceful yet gentle. Guo Jing did not understand what both of them were singing about but thought that it sounded very nice. However, when Huang Rong heard the song, she looked stunned.

Guo Jing asked, "What's the matter?"

Huang Rong answered, "My father often sings this song, I didn't expect a common fisherman to know it too. Let's check it out." Both of them rowed the boat over only to see the fisherman holding his fishing rod and rowing his boat forward. When both boats neared each other, the fisherman asked, "To think I was fortunate enough to meet such special guests, can I invite you in for a drink?"

Huang Rong thought his speech sounded composed and refined. She was secretly curious, and answered, "We do not wish to bother the senior."

The fisherman laughed, "It's not easy to meet such special guests, but since we meet by chance on the lake, we should treasure it. Please come over."

The two boats moved even closer. Huang Rong and Guo Jing rowed the boat along side the other boat and climbed in to greet the fisherman. The fisherman greeted them while staying seated and said, "Please be seated. I am crippled so can't stand up, I apologize for any inconvenience."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong said, "It's alright."

Both of them sat down and observed the fisherman. He looked about forty years of age, had a rather thin face and

looked as if he were ill. He was very tall and even though seated, he was still half a head taller than Guo Jing. The servant at the back of the boat began warming up some wine.

Huang Rong said, "My older brother's surname is Guo, whereas junior is surnamed Huang. I was excited for a moment and started singing in the middle of the lake. I haven't offended the senior have I?"

The fisherman laughed, "I am fortunate to be able to listen to such a clear voice. My surname is Lu. Little brother, is it your first time touring this lake?"

Guo Jing answered, "Yes."

The fisherman ordered the servant to bring out some dishes and wine for the guests. Although the four dishes were nothing compared to Huang Rong's cooking, they tasted good too and the wine cups and dish plates looked quite unique, and no doubt belonged to some precious collection.

The three of them started drinking. The fisherman said, "Just now I heard little brother singing the song 'The Water Dragon's Hum' which has such perfect lyrics. It is such a surprise that little brother, though so young in age, is still able to comprehend the deep meanings of the words."

When Huang Rong heard his admiring words, she gave a little smile and said, "Ever since the Song moved south, song writers often write sad songs for the country."

The fisherman nodded in agreement. Huang Rong continued, "The song 'The Six Cities' by Zhang Yuhu has the same meaning."

The fisherman started singing the lyrics, "When people pass by, one would cry tears of loyalty and anger..." He drank up

three cups of wine and engaged in conversation with Huang Rong. Actually Huang Rong is just a young girl and had not experienced any real sorrows caused by 'one's country'. She did not really identify with the deep meaning of the lyrics. It was just that she'd listened to her father explain the meanings before and thus used her father's explanation which was a very refined and sophisticated one. This awed the fisherman, who could not help but praise Huang Rong. Guo Jing listened from one corner and did not understand a single word, but he was delighted hearing the fisherman praise Huang Rong. After chatting awhile, he saw that the landscape had paled and the mist surrounding the lake had thickened.

The fisherman said, "My residence is close by the lake, if you don't mind, I would like to invite both of you there for more discussions."

Huang Rong asked, "How about it, Jing ge ge?"

Guo Jing hadn't had a chance to answer before the fisherman said, "My house is built against the backdrop of beautiful hills. Since both of you are touring the countryside, why not stop by for a visit?"

Guo Jing felt that he seemed honest and earnest and thus answered, "Rong'er, we'll have to impose on Mr. Lu." The fisherman was delighted and implored the servant to row the boat back home.

When they reached the lakeshore, Guo Jing said, "We will have to return the boat first and collect the donkey and my horse."

The fisherman smiled and said, "I'm acquainted with everyone in the area. You can let him handle the matter." With that, he gestured to the servant.

Guo Jing said, "My horse is bad tempered; I'd better handle it."

The fisherman said, "If you insist; I'll wait for your arrival at my residence then." With that, the boat rowed off and disappeared into the distance.

The servant followed Guo Jing and Huang Rong to get the things done. He got a larger boat from one of the villagers, which had enough space to hold the donkey and horse. Six hardy boatmen rowed the boat for some distance before the front of an island came into view. They stopped the boat at the jetty, which was made of green stone. When they arrived on shore, they saw a cluster of small houses, which formed a huge manor. They crossed a large stone bridge and arrived in front of the manor. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other, since they didn't expect a fisherman to live in such a luxurious place. Before they could reach the main entrance, they saw a man who looked about twenty years of age coming up to them. About six servants followed behind him. The youth said, "My father sent me to receive his guests."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong made grateful gestures. They noticed that he wore a long robe and had similar facial features to the fisherman, except that he looked stronger and well built. Guo Jing said, "May we know brother Lu's name?"

The youth said, "This humble one is named Guanying; please just call me by my name."

Huang Rong answered politely, "No, how can we?"

The three began chatting while proceeding towards the main hall. Guo Jing and Huang Rong noticed that the interior of the hall was designed and decorated beautifully.

As Huang Rong walked, she concentrated on the layout of the place and its pathways. She looked a little puzzled.

As the three of them crossed the front yard and entered the guest hall, they heard the fisherman call out from behind a screen, "Please come in."

Lu Guanying said, "My father is unable to walk and thus has to receive you in his east study."

The three of them went past the screen and saw that the door of the study was open; the fisherman was sitting on a couch, inside. However, he was no longer dressed as a fisherman but as an elderly scholar. He held a white goose feather fan in his hand and was fanning himself cheerfully. Guo Jing and Huang Rong entered and sat, but Lu Guanying didn't dare sit and stood to one side. Huang Rong saw that the study was filled with shelves of literary classics and poetry collections. The tables were decorated with precious ornaments, such as jade antiques and a black ink painting hung on the wall. The painting depicted a middle-aged scholar who was posing with a sword stance in the backyard in the moonlight. But the scholar had a lonely expression on his face. On the upper left corner of the painting was a poem.

"The night is silent without any chirping from the birds. It is already late in the night when I fall into deep sleep. I awake only to carry on alone, there is no one but the bright moon there. A hundred pieces gain recognition and success. The aging hills and withering branches block my path.

There are so many things buried within me but no one is willing to listen, to whom can I confide in my problems?"

Huang Rong recognized this poem as one written by Yue Fei entitled 'Little Strong Hill'. It had been taught to her by her father. She saw the signature at the bottom which read

'The Crippled Person of Five Lake is seriously ill' and realized that the 'Crippled Person of Five Lake' must be the pen name for the owner of this manor. The strokes of the words were written in a harsh and forceful manner and seemed like they were tearing through the paper.

Master Lu saw that Huang Rong was concentrating on the painting and asked, "Brother, how do you find my painting? Would you care to give me some pointers?" [Reminder: Huang Rong is dressed as a boy.]

Huang Rong answered, "I will express my thoughts then, but I hope Master Lu does not get offended."

Master Lu said, "Please go on."

Huang Rong said, "The poem in the painting is Yue Fei's 'Little Strong Hill', which he wrote in his Wu Mu collections. The words depict a distressed and depressed mood. However there are specific meanings to them. General Yue was a courageous soul and fought hard for his country and people. The phrase, 'A hundred pieces for recognition and success' in the poem is probably to show his humble being. At that time, many court officials were corrupt and were on the side of the Jin. Yue Fei was a strong official but it was a pity no one was willing to listen to him. This was probably why he wrote the phrase, 'There are so many things buried within me but no one is willing to listen, to whom can I confide my problems?' The phrase depicts a despondent Yue Fei, but it doesn't necessarily mean that he wanted to oppose the court. However when master wrote this poem, you were in an agitated and aggressive mood and thus asserted much force in your brush strokes; it seems as if you wanted to fight it out with your sworn enemy and thus, your intentions and mood do not tie in at all with Yue Fei's at the time when he worked on his Wu Mu collections. Forgive me for my ignorance but from what I know, if one

strives to over achieve or over express in literary and art works, the true and pure intentions will be lost and the work will be unable to achieve its brilliance.”

When Master Lu heard what Huang Rong said, he gave a long sigh. He wore a miserable expression and was silent. Huang Rong saw his unusual response and thought, “I’m afraid I have been too direct in my words and offended him. But it’s exactly what father taught me when he explained this poem.”

She said, “This humble one has been too ignorant and spouted nonsense. Please forgive me Master Lu.”

Master Lu recovered a little and then wore a delighted expression on his face. He asked happily, “Brother Huang, please don’t say that. You are the first person who can actually read my feelings, what a great confidant you are. As for the over use of expression, it is one of my worst habits. I thank brother for your pointers.” He turned to his son and said, “Hurry and ask the servants to prepare the banquet.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong hurriedly conveyed their thanks and said, “Please don’t bother.” But Lu Guanying had already disappeared from the room.

Master Lu said, “Brother is wise and knowledgeable, you must have mastered a high level of literary classics and your father must be a brilliant teacher. I wonder what his honorable name is?”

Huang Rong answered, “This humble one knows nothing much and thus does not deserve all this praise. My father lives in isolation and does not have any students; thus his name is not well known.”

Master Lu sighed, "What a pity it is, not being able to meet such talent."

After the banquet, they returned to the study for a chat. Master Lu said, "The scenery outside is some of the best, why don't the two of you reside in one of the houses in the manor and enjoy the view? Furthermore, it's getting late and it is time for you to rest."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong stood up and bid their farewell. Huang Rong was about to leave the room when she suddenly looked up and saw that eight pieces of iron strips were fixed above the study's lintel. The iron strips were arranged to form the 'Eight trigrams', but it was not as neat as the usual arrangement. The iron strips were arranged in a rather sloppy and messy way. Huang Rong's heart skipped a beat but she remained silent and expressionless and followed Guo Jing to a guest room. The guest room was decorated in an elegant way; the two beds faced each other and the pillows and sheets were clean.

A servant served them some fragrant tea and said, "If sirs need anything, just ring the bell beside the bed and I will come. Please be reminded never to leave the room." With that, he left the room and gently closed the door behind him.

Huang Rong asked in a low voice, "What do you find peculiar about this place? Why do they ask us not to leave the room?"

Guo Jing said, "The manor is huge and the pathways lead out in all directions. Maybe they're afraid that we will get lost?"

Huang Rong gave a little laugh, "The manor has an unusual design. What kind of person do you think Master Lu is?"

Guo Jing said, "Maybe a retired official?"

Huang Rong shook her head, "This person is no doubt highly skilled in martial arts. Did you see the iron 'Eight Trigrams' just now?"

Guo Jing asked, "Iron 'Eight Trigrams'? What's that?"

Huang Rong answered, "That's used to practice the 'Thrusting Air Palms'. Father taught me this set of palm techniques but I was bored and stopped learning it after a month. I would never have expected to see it here."

Guo Jing said, "Master Lu means us no harm. Since he did not mention anything about it, let's just pretend that we are unaware of it."

Huang Rong nodded and smiled. She gently thrust out her palm towards the candle and a 'chi' sound was heard just before the candle went out.

Guo Jing praised in a low voice, "Great palm technique!" He asked, "Is that the 'Thrusting Air Palm'?"

Huang Rong smiled, "I only learned it to this level. It can be used for fun but it is totally useless when used in a real duel."

There was a sudden distant humming in the middle of the night, which startled Guo Jing and Huang Rong, who had been sleeping before that. They strained to hear more and heard the sound again, which sounded like someone was blowing a tune on a seashell. After a while, the humming started again. There was definitely more than one person creating the noise as both hums were created at the same time. It seemed like there were two people standing apart and blowing the shells to communicate. Huang Rong whispered, "Let's go and see what's up."

Guo Jing answered, "Let's not go and find trouble."

Huang Rong argued, "Who says we're finding trouble? I only suggested that we check out what's happening."

They pushed open the window quietly and looked out. They saw many people running about with lanterns in their hands, but there was no clue as to why they were rushing about. Huang Rong looked up and saw three or four blurred figures crouching on a nearby rooftop. The light from the lanterns shone briefly onto the figures and Huang Rong saw the moving light reflecting from the weapons which those people carried. After a while, the crowd of servants ran out of the manor. Huang Rong was curious and pulled Guo Jing towards the side of the window. She made sure no one was about and gently leaped out such that the people on the roof weren't aware of her movements.

Huang Rong signaled to Guo Jing to walk backwards. The pathways in the manor turned and twisted such that the directions were very complicated. The most unusual thing was that the railings and pillars at every turn looked exactly the same. After a few whirls, one would not be able to distinguish between the different directions. Huang Rong, however, was not the least bothered about this obstacle and walked around without any hint of worry or suspicion. Several times, it looked as if it was no pathway but she always managed to identify a fake rock and spin past it; or she would just twirl round the flowers and they would be back on the main path. At times, it looked as if there was a dead end in front of them, but somehow or other, there would always be a way past a screen of a huge trees. At times, there would be a path through the opening of a grotto but Huang Rong would never walk through. Instead, she would miraculously be able to identify a hidden and unnoticeable entrance in the walls and push through. The more Guo Jing proceeded the more curious he became. He

whispered, "Rong'er, the pathways of this manor are really bizarre, how is it that you are always able to identify the right way?"

Huang Rong signaled for him to be quiet and after seven or eight more turns, they arrived by the wall of the backyard. Huang Rong examined the wall and used her fingers to count before walking and counting her footsteps. Guo Jing heard her mumble, "Form a trigram first, thirdly prepare, fifthly supplement, repeat the seventh..."and he did not understand a single word.

Huang Rong counted as she walked, and after a particular count, she stopped in her tracks and said, "We can only leave from here; the rest of the place is filled with traps."

She leapt onto the top of the wall and Guo Jing followed suit. Huang Rong continued, "This manor is built according to sixty-four bearings (positions) which are concealed. My father is a master in this particular type of pattern, which requires one to design eight different types of routes. Master Lu can obstruct others, but he can't trap me." Her tone was filled with pride.

The two climbed up a small mound situated behind the manor and looked out towards the east. They saw a person walking towards the lake with a lantern raised high. Huang Rong tugged at Guo Jing's sleeve and both of them flew forward using their lightness skill. Arriving closer, they hid behind a huge rock and noticed a row of fishing boats near the shore of the lake. A crowd of people slowly boarded the boats and after they did so, each put out their lanterns. Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited till the last batch of people boarded and it was pitch dark before leaping out and landing on the tail of a large boat. After they heard the fishing boats begin to move, they leaped on top of the sail of the boat and looked down. It was then they saw someone

sitting inside the cabin of the boat and the person was none other than the junior of the manor, Lu Guanying.

As the row of boats started moving, the tune from the seashell could be heard again. A person on the boat walked to the front and also started blowing into a shell. After the boat moved some distance, one could see many little boats drifting on the lake. The myriad of little boats looked like tiny ants in the distance as though one had painted hundreds of black dots on a large sheet of paper. The person on the boat blew his shell three times and the large boat dropped its small boat into the middle of the lake. About ten little boats started moving in from all directions. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were mystified and they were not sure whether or not a battle was going to take place. They lowered their heads and peeped at Lu Guanying, who looked calm and normal; he did not show any hint of anxiousness as one would show in times of war.

Not long after, the boats sailed nearer. Every boat had either two or three people who boarded the boat. Every person, after boarding the huge boat, would bow to Lu Guanying and were respectful in their behavior. It seemed that seats had been arranged for the visitors from the little boats according to their status. Some people had arrived earlier but sat at the back, whereas some who arrived later got to sit in the front. A tea server ushered the visitors to their seats. The visitors had stern and rough expressions and their actions were swift and fierce. Although they dressed like fishermen, it seemed as if all of them were well versed in martial arts and were definitely not the usual type of fisherman.

Lu Guanying raised his arm and said, "Brother Zhang, what have you found out?" A skinny man sitting in the middle stood up and said, "To answer Junior Master, the Jin Ambassador has decided to sail across the lake tonight.

Commander Duan should arrive in about one shichens. [one shichen = 2 hours] He is using the pretext of greeting the ambassador to engage in some plunder along the way. That is why he is late. ”

Lu Guanying asked, “How much has he ransacked?”

The man answered, “There have been harvests from every village and his soldiers are still robbing the villagers now. When I saw him board the boat, his soldiers were struggling with more than twenty heavy chests of treasure.”

Lu Guanying asked, “How many soldiers and horses does he have with him?”

The man answered, “About two thousand. Those who cross the lake do not have horses with them. Since there are not enough boats, there are about a thousand of them who stayed back on shore.”

Lu Guanying turned towards the audience and asked, “Bothers, what do you think?”

Everyone answered, “We will follow Junior Master’s orders.”

Lu Guanying placed both hands into his sleeves and said, “These corrupt officials go around confiscating money through immoral means. We, the people of the lake, would not be delivering justice if we do not get that money back. We will do our best to take as much as we can. Half of it will go to the poor villagers by the lake and the other half will be split between us.”

The audience all roared in agreement. It was then that Guo Jing and Huang Rong realize that these people were the pirates of the lake and Lu Guanying was probably their leader.

Lu Guanying said, "Without further delay, let's get going. Brother Zhang, take five small boats and continue to keep watch."

The skinny man took the order and immediately sailed away. Lu Guanying went on to assign everyone their tasks, such as who would lead, who would be the back ups, who would lead the 'water ghosts' to swim and create damage to the enemy's boat, who would grab the treasure, who would capture the official and so on. He carefully assigned the various tasks in a very organized way.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were puzzled. They had just dined and chatted with Lu Guanying earlier in the day and found him to be a polite, proper and decent chap, not forgetting that he was from a wealthy and cultivated family. Who would have guessed that he was a pirate leader? Just as Lu Guanying finished assigning the various tasks and everyone was setting out, someone from the middle of the group stood up and said coldly, "We people have no assets and it is alright to rob some wealthy businessmen. But if we attack such an official, won't we have trouble living on the lake in the future? We should not offend the Jin Ambassador."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong thought the voice sounded familiar. When they squinted to have a better look, they realized that it was Sha Tongtian's disciple, one of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River', 'Spirit Capturing Whip' Ma Qingxiong; they had no idea how he ended up in this group. Lu Guanying's expression changed; he had yet to answer when a few pirates in the crowd starting hooting.

Lu Guanying said, "Brother Ma is a first timer and doesn't know the rules here. Since everyone is determined to carry out the task, we'll give our all and make sure the soldiers

have no chance to retaliate, only then can we die without regrets.”

Ma Qingxiong answered, “Alright, you people go ahead; I would rather not get involved and get myself into trouble.” With that, he turned and started to walk off the boat. Two men blocked him and called out, “Brother Ma, you swore that you will go through thick and thin with us!”

Ma Qingxiong pushed out with both palms and retorted, “Move away!” The two men were hit and fell to the side. As Ma Qingxiong was about to leave the boat he suddenly felt a gust of wind fly towards his back, when the wind passed him he used his left hand to take a dagger from his boot, twist his arm and thrust the dagger behind him. Lu Guanying stretched out his left arm and positioned it on the entrance door; at the same time, he leaped and thrust his palm forward. Ma Qingxiong used his right arm to block the attack while using his left arm to thrust the dagger forward. The two men exchanged attacks in the narrow passage-way of the boat. Guo Jing once fought with Ma Qingxiong back in Mongolia. When he first saw Lu Guanying’s moves, he thought that it would not be easy for him to win. But after more moves, Lu Guanying gained the upper hand and was clearly going to win. Guo Jing was suspicious and thought, “Why is Ma suddenly not strong anymore? Ah, yes, that day when he fought with me he had the support of his martial brothers; but now, he’s alone surrounded by many enemies, of course he’ll be afraid.” But Guo Jing did not know that the real reason lay in Hong Qigong’s training of the past two months. Guo Jing had mastered fifteen stances of the world renowned ‘Eighteen Dragon- Subduing Palms’, accompanied by pointers and advice provided by Hong Qigong himself. Because of this, although he did not understand the full essence of the skill, his martial arts had improved tremendously and were at a very much higher

level than the skills he learned from the 'Seven Freaks of Jiangnan'. At this point in time, Guo Jing was still unaware that his skills had already exceeded his six teachers, and thus, he still thought that he was inferior to Ma Qingxiong. He saw the two men exchange further stances when Lu Guanying shot out his left fist and a 'pa' sound was heard; the blow hit Ma Qingxiong on the chest and he stumbled and fell back. Two pirates behind him pierced him with their daggers and Ma Qingxiong lay dead. The two pirates then lifted the corpse and threw it into the lake.

Lu Guanying continued, "Brothers, let's embrace our mission bravely." The crowd began to cheer loudly and each group separated, went back to their respective boats and began to head east. Lu Guanying's huge boat sailed at the rear of the others. After awhile, they spotted around ten huge and brightly lit boats from afar, heading west towards them.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong thought to themselves, "Those big boats must belong to the officials."

The two quietly climbed up the mast of the boat and sat on top at a cross arm hiding themselves behind the sail. They heard the seashell tunes from the little boats as the opposing sides got closer. There were sounds of yelling, scolding, clashing weapons and the sounds of splashing as bodies dropped into the water. After awhile, the officials' boats were on fire which lit up the dark sky and cast a fiery red glow over the lake. Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew that the pirates had succeeded in their mission and saw a few little boats sailing forward furiously with shouts of, "The soldiers have been defeated and the commander has been captured."

Lu Guanying was delighted as he walked to the bow of the boat and shouted, "Inform the various chiefs on each boat

to put in a little more effort so that we can capture the Jin Ambassador!" The pirate who delivered the news obeyed and flew off to pass on the message.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong nudged each other at the same time and had the same thought, "That Jin Ambassador must be Wanyan Kang; I wonder how he will deal with this."

They heard the seashell tune coming from various boats again and saw that the group of boats had turned back in their direction and the pirates were tugging at their sails. The west wind suddenly blew furiously, causing the boats to sail like arrows shooting towards the east. Lu Guanying's boat had been at the rear of the fleet, but now his boat had become the lead. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were now sitting on the cabin's roof with the wind blowing on their backs. They were sailing fast across the misty lake and the myriads of stars in the sky came into view and they had the urge to sing out loud. Suddenly, the little boats sailed past one by one and ended up in front of the boat Guo Jing and Huang Rong were on.

The boats sailed for about an hour and the sky turned brighter before two boats sailed quickly towards the boat. One of the men in the boat raised a green flag and waved it, shouting, "We have spotted the Jin boat! The commander's boat has already taken the lead to capture it."

Lu Guanying, standing in the bow of his boat, called out, "Good!"

After a short while, another small boat sailed back and reported, "That bastard Jin Ambassador has deadly claws; our commander is injured but leader Peng and Dong are currently trying to subdue him."

In a while, two pirates carried the injured and unconscious commander onto Lu Guanying's boat. As Lu Guanying was

inspecting the wounds, two small boats rowed up and the pirates helped their two injured leaders up onto the boat. The pirates also reported that Piao Miao Peak's Leader Guo suffered a deadly blow from the Jin Ambassador and fell into the lake. Lu Guanying was furious and shouted, "I am going to personally kill that vicious Jin dog."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were strongly against Wanyan Kang's actions but could not bear to let him fend off the group of pirates alone. This would make Mu Nianci hate them forever. Huang Rong whispered into Guo Jing's ear, "Are we going to help him?"

Guo Jing replied with a slight sigh, "Save him but make him repent." Huang Rong nodded.

At the same time, Lu Guanying leaped onto a small boat and yelled, "Let's go!"

Huang Rong said to Guo Jing, "Let's go and stop the small boat." Both of them leaped onto the side of the small boat and heard some shouting from the group of pirates in front. They looked out and saw the Jin Ambassador's boats slowly sinking one by one. They thought that it must have been the doings of the 'Water Ghosts' who were in charge of wrecking the bottom of the boats from below.

As the pirates waved the green flag, two small boats hurriedly rowed over and reported, "The Jin dog fell into the water and has been captured by us!"

Lu Guanying was delighted and leaped back onto his boat. After awhile, the seashell tune was blown again and the various little boats assembled, one by one bringing along with them the Jin Ambassador and his guards onto the boat. Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw that Wanyan Kang had his hands and feet bound with ropes and his eyes were tightly shut. They thought that he must have swallowed too much

water but his chest had not congested and he was still breathing. By this time, the sky was already light as sunlight shone brightly from the east revealing a line of boats floating gracefully on the lake.

Lu Guanying commanded, "The various leaders may return to the manor and hold a banquet to celebrate. Please lead your teams and await your rewards."

The pirates cheered loudly and the boats parted ways and slowly disappeared into the cloud of mist. The lake became peaceful and quiet once more. Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited for the boat to sail back to the Lu Manor and after Lu Guanying and his group of pirates left, they flew back to the shore. The pirates were overjoyed with their rewards and did not notice that there had been people secretly hiding on their boat. Huang Rong sought out the directions and led Guo Jing into the manor via the backyard and back into their room.

By this time, the servant who took care of them had checked a few times to see if they had awakened, but since the room door was still locked, he thought that the two young men must have had a long day yesterday and thus slept longer. After they got back into their room, Guo Jing opened the door and two servants who waited outside came forward to greet him before bringing some breakfast. One said, "Master Lu is waiting in his study. Please go and join him after your breakfast." The two ate some dishes and buns before following the servant to the study.

Master Lu smiled and said, "The winds from the lake are strong and when they blow against the shore, the noise might be disturbing. Did you two sleep well?"

Guo Jing wasn't used to lying so when he heard the question, he froze for a moment. Huang Rong answered,

"We only heard sounds of seashells blowing during the night, I think it must have been the monks and Taoist priests chanting and practicing their rituals."

Master Lu laughed and did not ask more. Instead, he said, "I have collected some artistic works and would like you two brothers to have a look."

Huang Rong answered, "Of course. Anything that Master Lu collects must be priceless."

Master Lu ordered the keeper of the study to bring out some artistic pieces and Huang Rong observed each of the pieces curiously. Suddenly, noises came from outside. They could hear footsteps and it sounded like a group of people chasing someone. A voice said, "Once you've stepped into the manor grounds, it will be impossible for you to escape!"

Master Lu acted as if nothing had happened and as if he hadn't heard anything. He asked, "The art of calligraphy in our dynasty is dominated by the four families, Su, Huang, Mi and Cai. I wonder which family brother Huang likes best?"

Huang Rong was about to answer when the door of the study suddenly burst open and a person, who was wet from head to toe, rushed in. It was Wanyan Kang. Huang Rong tugged on Guo Jing's sleeve and whispered, "Look at the pieces of art, don't look at him." The two turned around and lowered their heads to the calligraphy works.

Wanyan Kang didn't know how to swim; when his boat sank earlier, though he was well versed in martial arts, he could not save himself. He passed out and when he regained consciousness he had been captured and brought to the manor for questioning by Lu Guanying. Wanyan Kang noticed that the pirate guarding him did not carry his usual dagger and came up with a plan. He summoned his internal

strength and used his fingers to grab onto the ropes which bound him and used the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' to free himself. The guards were stunned and rushed forward to re-capture him but were attacked by his claws and fell to the ground. Wanyan Kang ran off but couldn't have guessed that the manor was structured with bizarre mazes. If a stranger did not know the secret to the formations and did not have a guide from the manor, he or she would get trapped on the manor grounds. Wanyan Kang, anxious when he could not find his way out, barged into Master Lu's study. Although Lu Guanying knew that he had freed himself from the ropes, he also knew that Wanyan Kang would not be able to find his way out of the manor grounds and was not worried. He chased after Wanyan Kang and saw him dash into Master Lu's study. Afraid that his father would get hurt, he dashed forward and stood in front of his father. The section leaders of Lake Tai blocked the doorway.

Wanyan Kang was furious at being trapped; he pointed a finger at Lu Guanying and yelled, "Despicable pirates! You people used dirty tricks to sink my boat. Have you no sense of shame; aren't you afraid you'll be mocked by the other Jianghu swordsmen?"

Lu Guanying laughed heartily and said, "You are a Jin Prince, what business do you have with us Han swordsmen? What have the people of Jianghu got to do with you?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "When I was in Yanjing, I heard of many stories regarding the heroes of Jiangnan and thought that the men of Jiangnan were all upright and courageous. Hah! Who would have thought that you people...hai, you people do not live up to your reputations at all!"

Lu Guanying was furious and shouted, "So?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "You people are no more than despicable cowards who use vast strength to defeat one person!"

Lu Guanying laughed coldly, "So if anyone takes you on alone and wins, then you will die without regrets?"

Wanyan Kang was using words to infuriate Lu Guanying and trick him into saying exactly this. He immediately replied, "If the manor has just one person who can exceed me in terms of fighting, I would willingly give in and will die without regrets. But I wonder who would I spar with?" As he said this, he arrogantly looked around the crowd with hands behind him laughing coldly.

These words angered Lake Tai's Mo Li Peak's chief, the section leader, 'Golden Rock' who shouted, "Bastard, I am going to beat you!" With that, he rushed into the study, stretched out both fists and using the stance 'Sounds of the Striking Bells' aimed towards Wanyan Kang's Taiyang accupoint. Wanyan Kang gently shifted his body and flipped his left palm to grab hold of the back of his opponent's robe before swinging him out of the door.

Lu Guanying, having seen Wanyan Kang's vicious strokes, was secretly alarmed. He knew that none of the section heads were his match and yelled, "Excellent skills, let me exchange a few stances with you. Let's go out into the yard." Lu Guanying knew that his opponent was strong and was afraid that if they fought in the study, one of them would accidentally harm his father and his guests, since none of them knew how to fight.

Wanyan Kang answered, "It's the same wherever we fight, why not just stay here? Please display your stance section leader!" Actually, his words were hinting at another meaning. What Wanyan Kang was actually thinking in his

heart was, "I only have to use a few stances to defeat you, why bother changing the place of the fight?"

Lu Guanying, seething, said, "Alright, since you are the guest, please start first."

Wanyan Kang relaxed his right palm and used his left palm to attack Lu Guanying's chest. His first stance already used the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw', and was intended to injure his opponent immediately.

Lu Guanying mentally scolded, "Arrogant fellow, let me show you what I am capable of." He sucked in his chest subtly but did not retreat. Instead, he used his right fist to attack his opponent's moving elbow, while two of his left fingers pointed towards Wanyan Kang's face, with the intention of piercing his eyes. Wanyan Kang saw that his stances were swift and was a little nervous. He secretly thought to himself, "Who would have thought there would be such a skilled fighter in this out of the way place?" With that, he hurriedly retreated half a step, flipped his wrist and aimed at Lu's arms. Lu Guanying twisted to his left and put both hands together in the form of a pouch with the thumb and index finger of one hand facing those of his other hand. The move was none other than 'Holding the Moon Against One's Chest'. Wanyan Kang knew that his opponent was strong and did not dare underestimate him any longer. He became serious and displayed the Quanzhen fist techniques which Qiu Chuji had taught him. Lu Guanying was the favorite pupil of Honorable Kumo of the Yun Qi monastery. He learned the fist techniques of the Xian Xia School, which was affiliated with the Shaolin monastery in the hills of Henan. Therefore, the skills Lu Guanying learned were orthodox; he was cautious of his opponent and used different skills to counter whatever his opponent used. He knew that Wanyan Kang's claw techniques were superior and thus made sure that he didn't let Wanyan Kang's

fingers touch his body. When he saw the chance to attack Wanyan Kang, he used his legs. His teacher had taught him, "Use your fists thirty percent and your legs seventy percent. Your hands are just like fans; concentrate on using your kicks."

Lu Guanying learned skills that did not belong to his family and his kicking techniques were excellent. The longer the two fought, the faster their stances became and they looked like two dancing shadows sparring with each other in the study. Guo Jing and Huang Rong did not want Wanyan Kang to recognize them and retreated to the side of a bookshelf and secretly observed the fight. Wanyan Kang was getting agitated the longer he fought and secretly thought to himself, "If this goes on, even if I can defeat him this round, there will still be others wanting to spar with me. By that time, how will I have any energy left for fighting?"

His skills were actually much superior to Lu Guanying's; but because he had nearly drowned and swallowed so much water he'd lost quite a bit of energy and his body was exhausted. Furthermore, it was the first time he'd been trapped in this sort of situation and was somewhat nervous and therefore allowed Lu Guanying to gain the upper hand for more than ten stances. He forced himself to concentrate and put more force into his attacks. A cracking sound was heard as Lu Guanying's shoulder was injured by Wanyan Kang's fist. Lu Guanying stumbled and retreated backwards. He saw that his opponent was using this chance to attack further and leaped up, kicking his right leg forward towards Wanyan Kang's chest. The stance, called 'Bosom Kick' is a very swift and powerful one which Lu Guanying had practiced since young. He had tied himself to a rope so as to develop his speed since the stance emphasizes the swiftness of the kick such that the opponent is caught by surprise and cannot defend himself in time.

Wanyan Kang felt a pain in his chest and he twirled his right hand jabbing his fingers into Lu Guanying's calf. He used his left palm and thrust towards Lu Guanying's calf while yelling, "Down!"

Lu Guanying was actually standing on one foot but after that strong push by Wanyan Kang, he lost his balance and fell backwards towards his father. Master Lu stretched out his left arm and caught Lu Guanying before gently placing him on the floor. When he saw the blood that flowed from his son's leg he was shocked and furious. Master Lu shouted, "How are you connected to the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?"

Everyone was surprised when Master Lu intervened. Wanyan Kang and the various section leaders were unaware that Master Lu knew martial arts; even his son, Lu Guanying did not know it. Everyone thought that because Master Lu was crippled, it was natural that he would not know martial arts and could not fight. Even since he was young, Lu Guanying never asked about or probed into his father's affairs. Who would have expected that that move which Master Lu displayed to save his son would be steady and strong? Huang Rong had seen the iron 'Eight Trigrams' on the study's lintel last night and had pointed it out to Guo Jing. They were the only ones who did not seem that surprised.

When Wanyan Kang heard Master Lu ask about the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', he froze for a moment before answering. "What are the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?" Although Mei Chaofeng had taught him martial arts, she never told him about her past and Wanyan Kang did not even know her name. It was therefore understandable that he did not know anything about the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'.

Master Lu was furious and shouted, "Who are you bluffing? Who taught you the deadly 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "I have no time to listen to more of your nonsense, good bye!" With that, he turned and headed towards the door.

The various section leaders were furious and took up their weapons, ready to guard the doorway. Wanyan Kang turned towards Lu Guanying and laughed coldly, "Didn't you give your word just now?"

Lu Guanying was pale and waved his arm saying, "Heroes of the lake keep to their promises; brothers, let him go. Brother Zhang, please lead him out."

The section leaders were all unwilling to do so but since the Junior Master had given orders, they could not oppose him. Leader Zhang said, "Follow me then. I bet a rascal like you would not be able to find the way out yourself."

Wanyan Kang said, "Where are my men?"

Lu Guanying replied, "We let them all go."

Wanyan Kang pointed to him and said, "Good, you are a man of your word. As for the rest of you leaders...until we meet again." He said rudely and arrogantly.

Just as he was about to leave the room, Master Lu suddenly called out, "Hold it! This Elder here is untalented but would like to have a taste of your 'Nine Yin White Bone Claws'."

Wanyan Kang stopped in his tracks and laughed, "Alright!"

Lu Guanying hurriedly said, "Father, you should not deal with this rascal at your age."

Master Lu replied, "Don't worry, his 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' is not up to standard yet." He stared at Wanyan Kang and said weakly, "I am crippled and am unable to move, come here."

Wanyan Kang laughed but did not move. Lu Guanying's leg wounds were hurting but he did not want his father to fight with Wanyan Kang and leaped out of the door shouting, "I will represent my father to exchange a few blows with you." Wanyan Kang laughed and said, "Good! Let's practice again."

Master Lu shouted, "Ying'er move away!" With that, he leaped up, his left arm gripped the couch he was sitting on and he used his left arm's strength to support the weight of his body. His right palm lashed out towards Wanyan Kang's head. At the sound of the crowd's anxious gasps, Wanyan Kang raised his hands to counter the blow but felt his left wrist trapped. He'd seen the swift shadow of his opponent's palm which was heading towards his shoulder, but Wanyan Kang did not expect his opponent's seizing stance to be so fast and unique. He hurriedly used his right hand to strike back while struggling to free his left hand from his opponent's grasp. Master Lu shifted his weight onto Wanyan Kang's wrist and was able to float in midair. His left palm unleashed several killer strikes while Wanyan Kang used all his strength to escape his grip; but to no avail. He tried to unleash a flying kick towards Master Lu but missed. The crowd was delighted as they watched the ongoing fight. Master Lu raised his palm, ready to unleash a strike onto Wanyan Kang when the latter stuck out his fingers and aimed towards Master Lu's palm. Master Lu suddenly lowered his palm and struck Wanyan Kang's shoulder accupoint. Wanyan Kang felt his upper body going numb and following that, his right wrist was also seized by Master Lu. Two sounds were heard before Wanyan Kang's wrists

were released. Master Lu's stance was very quick as he used his right hand to push against Wanyan Kang's waist while his left hand pushed against Wanyan Kang's shoulder, thus borrowing Wanyan Kang's strength to leap back steadily onto his couch. Wanyan Kang felt both legs giving way and he collapsed. The section leaders were stunned and it was only after a moment's silence that they started to cheer.

Lu Guanying hurriedly ran towards the couch and asked, "Father, are you alright?"

Master Lu smiled and shook his head but his expression turned suspicious and he said, "When the teacher of this Jin dog comes for him, I will have to have a serious talk with him."

Two section leaders took some rope and tied Wanyan Kang up. Leader Zhang said, "Amongst the belongings of Commander Duan, we found iron locks and chains, let's use them for this rascal and see whether he can break them!" The crowd cheered in agreement and someone ran out to retrieve the chains and locks before returning to bind Wanyan Kang with them. The pain in his wrists was torturing him and Wanyan Kang sweated profusely; but he bore with it and refused to make a sound.

Master Lu said, "Bring him here." Two men grabbed Wanyan Kang by the shoulders and brought him in front of the couch. Master Lu tapped the accupoints of Wanyan Kang's lower spine and left chest. Wanyan Kang suddenly felt the pain subsiding and though he was still fuming inside, he was secretly surprised. Before he could say anything, he was taken away while the other section leaders slowly left the room.

Master Lu then turned towards Huang Rong and Guo Jing and smiled, "I was concentrating so hard on fighting with that young man that I forgot my manners, I hope you won't laugh."

Huang Rong saw that his palm and accupoint techniques were those of her family and was even more puzzled. She smiled and asked, "Who was that? Did he steal from the manor and thus made Master angry?"

Master Lu laughed heartily and said, "Yes, he did steal a lot from us. Come, let us not get distracted by that evil rascal; let's continue to appreciate the pieces of art."

Lu Guanying left the room to the three of them. Master Lu chatted about the scenic backdrops, human expression and more with Huang Rong while Guo Jing just listened without understanding a single thing as usual. After lunch, Master Lu ordered two servants to accompany them on a tour of the countryside and they enjoyed themselves until nightfall before returning to the manor. Before sleeping, Guo Jing asked, "Rong'er. How are we going to save him?"

Huang Rong answered, "Let's stay here for a few more days because I still can't guess Master Lu's true identity."

Guo Jing answered, "His skills are very similar to yours."

Huang Rong sighed deeply, "That's the unusual part, and, hmmm, does he know Mei Chaofeng?"

The two could not guess and were afraid that someone might eavesdrop and so did not discuss it further. In the middle of the night, they suddenly heard a slight sound on the rooftop followed by a sound on the ground. They immediately got out of their beds, quietly pushed open the window and peered out. They saw a black shadow amongst the roses. That person looked around before heading

towards the east. The person did not seem to be a resident of the manor since he or she was alert and on guard. Huang Rong had actually thought that this manor only housed heroic pirates of the lake, but after seeing Master Lu's display of skills earlier, she felt curious and decided to find out more. She waved to Guo Jing and they leaped out of the window, secretly trailing that intruder. After following that person for a while, the moonlight showed that it was a lady with average skills. Huang Rong quickened her pace and moved nearer to her. She turned her head slightly, revealing that it was Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong laughed inwardly and thought, "Good, his rescuer has come; let's see what tricks you use."

Mu Nianci circled the garden and lost sense of direction after a while. Huang Rong understood the layout of this garden since her father, Huang Yaoshi, was a master of these formations and would discuss it with her once in a while. She thought the formations in this garden unusual but it was nothing compared to those on Peach Blossom Island, which were weird and confusing, just like its owner.

Huang Rong thought to herself, "If you carry on walking like that, you won't be able to find him in a hundred years." With that, she picked up some soil from the ground and when she saw Mu Nianci hesitating in her tracks, she threw a lump of soil to the left side of the track and said in a low voice, "Go that way." before hiding behind some flowers.

Mu Nianci was alarmed; she turned around but saw no one. She grabbed her dagger and walked to the left. Huang Rong and Guo Jing's lightness skills were much better than hers and they hid themselves, not allowing her to spot them.

Mu Nianci was worried and she thought to herself, "I wonder whether this person is helping or hindering me. But since I can't find my way, I might just as well follow the directions given." With that, she followed the directions given and walked towards the left. Every time she came to a junction, she heard the sound of a lump of soil thrown to show her the way. Another lump hit the window of a small hut. Mu Nianci saw a blurred vision as two black figures quickly flew by and disappeared. Mu Nianci thought for a while and then ran towards the small hut. She saw two guards lying on the ground. Though their eyes were wide open and looking at her, they were motionless and did not make a move for their weapons. Mu Nianci guessed that they must have had their accupoints sealed by someone. Mu Nianci knew that someone was secretly helping her. She pushed open the door quietly and listened; there seemed to be someone breathing inside. She called out in a low voice, "Brother Kang, is that you?"

Wanyan Kang was surprised when he saw the guards at the door collapse; but when he heard Mu Nianci's voice, he was even more surprised and delighted. He called out softly, "It's me!"

Mu Nianci was overjoyed and walked towards the voice in the darkness and said, "Thank heaven I found you, that's good, let's go."

Wanyan Kang replied, "Did you bring any weapons?"

Mu Nianci asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang gently shook himself and the sounds of chains could be heard. Mu Nianci stretched out her hand and touched the chains. She was filled with regret and said furiously, "I shouldn't have given that dagger to Sister Huang!"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing were listening outside and the former silently laughed and thought to herself, "I'll let you worry for awhile before I return the dagger."

Mu Nianci was anxious and said, "I'll go and steal the keys."

Wanyan Kang replied, "Don't go. The people in this manor are highly skilled and there's no point risking yourself and getting caught."

Mu Nianci replied, "Then, I'll carry you out."

Wanyan Kang laughed, "You should give me a kiss."

Mu Nianci moved away and said, "I'm so worried and you can still joke."

Wanyan Kang laughed cheekily, "Who's joking? I'm serious."

Mu Nianci ignored him and tried to think of a plan. Wanyan Kang asked, "How did you know I'm here?"

Mu Nianci answered, "I followed you."

Wanyan Kang was touched and said, "You lean on me, I'll tell you something." Mu Nianci sat on the ground and leaned into his arms.

Wanyan Kang said, "I am the Jin Ambassador so I don't think they will dare do anything to me. But if I stay here any longer, it will affect father's plans. What shall we do? Sister, help me with something."

Mu Nianci asked, "What is it?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "Take off the golden seal hanging from my neck." Mu Nianci stretched out her hand and took off the golden seal.

Wanyan Kang continued, "This is the seal of the Jin Ambassador. Take it to Lin'an and seek assistance from Prime Minister Shi Miyuan of the Song Dynasty."

Mu Nianci asked, "Prime Minister Shi? Would he see a commoner like me?"

Wanyan Kang laughed, "When he sees this golden seal, he'll welcome you. Tell him that I've been captured by the pirates of Lake Tai and cannot see him personally. But you must remember one thing, if the Mongolian ambassador is there, make sure that you avoid letting him and the prime minister meet at all costs. This is a secret mission ordered by the Jin Emperor, you must fulfill it."

Mu Nianci asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "These are army matters; you won't understand. You will be doing me a great favor by telling Prime Minister Shi what I just asked you to. If the Mongolian ambassador reaches Lin'an first and meets with the Song Officials, it will put us Jin in a very unfavorable position."

Mu Nianci replied indignantly, "What 'us Jin'? I am a citizen of the Song Dynasty. If you don't explain clearly to me, I'm not going to help you with this mission."

Wanyan Kang smiled faintly, "Aren't you going to be the concubine of a Jin in the future?"

Mu Nianci stood up angrily and said, "My adoptive father was your real father; you are in fact a Han. So you still want to be a Jin Prince? I know...know you..."

Wanyan Kang answered, "What?"

Mu Nianci answered, "I always thought that you were a strong, smart and upright man. I thought you were

pretending to be the Jin Prince for a while so as to help Great Song. But you...you really want to acknowledge the enemy as your father?" Wanyan Kang heard her tone change to a furious one; she was choking with anger and could not speak for a moment.

Mu Nianci continued, "Great Song has lost half of our empire to the Jin and so many Han have been tortured and slaughtered by them. Doesn't that bother you at all? You...you..." She stopped here and could not go on. Following that, she threw the golden seal on the floor and was about to leave when Wanyan Kang called out, "Sister, I'm wrong, come back."

Mu Nianci stopped and turned, "What?"

Wanyan Kang said, "When I am freed from the burdens as Jin Ambassador, I won't go back to the Jin, alright? I will live a carefree and simple life with you, which is much better than having to suffer in silence like now."

Mu Nianci sighed and was silent. Ever since she sparred with Wanyan Kang and fell for him deeply, she had viewed him as an upright and just hero. She thought that there must be some reason that Wanyan Kang did not want to acknowledge his real father. When he became the Jin Ambassador, she thought of an excuse for him...that he was secretly spying for the Song and would help crush the enemy for the Song. Who would have guessed that it was all wishful thinking on her part; Wanyan Kang was nothing more than a greedy and shameful traitor. She was heartbroken and felt dejected.

Wanyan Kang asked in a low voice, "Sister...what's wrong?" Mu Nianci did not reply.

Wanyan Kang asked, "My mother told me that your adoptive father is my real father. I did not have a chance to

clarify it before they both died. I have been really confused all along. My birthright and origins cannot be so simply or haphazardly defined right?"

Mu Nianci was secretly comforted and thought to herself, "So he is not clear about his birthright. He cannot really be blamed then." Out loud she said, "Don't mention anything about taking the golden seal to Prime Minister Shi anymore. I will find Sister Huang and ask her for the dagger to save you."

Huang Rong had actually thought of returning the dagger to Mu Nianci but when she heard what Wanyan Kang said about aiding the Jin, she was fuming and thought, "Father hates the Jin, let him stay here for a couple more days then."

Wanyan Kang continued, "The pathways in this manor are bizarre, how did you find your way through?"

Mu Nianci replied, "Luckily there were two masters secretly directing me, though I don't know who they are and they do not want to reveal themselves."

Wanyan Kang sighed deeply, "Sister, I'm afraid that you'll be discovered the next time you come here. If you want to save me, then help me find a certain person."

Mu Nianci replied angrily, "I'm not going to find any Prime Minister for you."

Wanyan Kang replied, "Not the Prime Minister, but help me look for my teacher."

Mu Nianci replied, "Ah!"

Wanyan Kang continued, "Take my belt with you and use a knife to carve 'Wanyan Kang is in danger at Guiyun Manor [Cloud Manor] located on the west bank of Lake Tai' on the

gold buckle. After that, go to Suzhou and travel thirty li north to a deserted hill. Find nine human skulls there and stack them together into a pyramid, with five skulls at the base, followed by three in the middle and one on top. Lastly, place the belt under the top skull."

Mu Nianci was puzzled and asked, "Why?"

Wanyan Kang replied, "My teacher is blind, but when she finds the belt and feels the carvings, she will come and save me. Therefore, you must carve the words deeply."

Mu Nianci asked, "Isn't your teacher 'Eternal Spring', Taoist Qiu? How can he be blind?"

Wanyan Kang answered, "No, it's not Taoist Qiu, it's my other teacher. After you place the belt, you must leave immediately. My teacher has a weird temperament; if she finds you near the skulls, she might harm you. She is highly skilled and can save me. You just have to wait for me in front of the Xuan Miao Monastery in Suzhou. "

Mu Nianci said, "You have to swear that you will not acknowledge the enemy as your father and betray your people."

Wanyan Kang refused and replied, "After I find out the truth about everything, I will then act according to my morals. What use is it to force me to swear now? If you are not willing to save me, then so be it."

Mu Nianci replied, "Alright! I'll help you seek help." With that, she removed Wanyan Kang's belt.

Wanyan Kang asked, "Sister, are you leaving? Come over and let me kiss you."

Mu Nianci replied, "No!" With that, she stood up and headed for the door.

Wanyan Kang said, "I'm afraid that they might kill me before my teacher arrives and then I'll never get to see you again."

Mu Nianci's heart softened; she gave a long sigh and walked back into his arms, allowing him to kiss her on the cheek a few times. Then suddenly she beat on his chains and said, "If you do not walk the right path in the future, I cannot do anything but blame myself for my ill fate and will die in front of you."

Wanyan Kang wanted to cuddle and sweet-talk her a while, half hoping that she would change her mind and agree to take the golden seal to Prime Minister Shi. Then he felt her body shaking and her breathing was harsh, signaling that she was upset. He had not expected her to say anything like that and was shocked for a moment. Mu Nianci stood up and walked out of the door.

When she came out, Huang Rong again guided her and Mu Nianci ran till she saw a wall leading to the outside of the manor. Before she left, she called out softly, "Since senior does not want to show him or herself, this junior will just have to look to the sky and express my gratitude." With that, she kneeled on the ground and kowtowed three times. She heard a gentle giggle and a clear voice spoke out, "Ah, I cannot accept this!"

When she raised her head, she only saw stars in the sky and the empty surroundings. Mu Nianci was puzzled and thought that the voice sounded like Huang Rong's, but how could she be here and how would she know the way around this confusing place? She pondered this matter as she walked along but was not able to come up with an explanation. After walking about ten li [5km / 3+ miles] from the manor, she decided to rest under a large tree and wait for the boat that would take her to Suzhou the next day.

Suzhou is a busy city in the Southeast and although it isn't comparable to the capital of Hangzhou, it is still a prosperous and booming place. The Song officials in the South also ruled the territory of Jiangnan and had almost forgotten about the suffering of the people under the Jin in the North. Since the cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou were rich and prosperous it gave rise to a saying 'Heaven above, Su Hang below' indicating the importance and grandeur of these two cities. Actually, the River Huai was the source of wealth and also a symbol of beauty for these two cities in the south.

Mu Nianci admired the colorful scenery in the city before settling down at an inn. Then she carefully started to carve the words Wanyan Kang had told her onto his belt. She thought about how recently the belt had left its owner and prayed for Wanyan Kang's safety, hoping that the belt would return to its owner once more. She secretly wished that Wanyan Kang would come to his senses and marry her and that she would personally help him put the belt on. After daydreaming awhile, she placed the belt beneath her robe and couldn't help thinking, "This belt is like his arm, wrapping around my waist." She immediately blushed and didn't dare think more. After eating a quick bowl of noodles, she saw the sun moving to the west and she hurriedly traveled towards the north, following Wanyan Kang's instructions to find his teacher.

The road on the hill was deserted and Mu Nianci felt uneasy when she heard weird sounds made by the birds and the sun had begun to set as well. She left the main path and went to the valley on the other side of the hill to search for the skulls which Wanyan Kang had asked her to search for. As it slowly turned to night she was still unable to find them. She mulled over the matter and decided to continue the search the next day. With that, she went to see if there was

any place nearby in which she could seek shelter for the night. She ran up a mound, looked out into the distance and spotted a manor to the west. She was relieved and immediately rushed there.

As she approached the place, she realized that the manor was actually a rundown temple and there was a signboard above the door, which read 'Temple Earth'. She pushed open the door gently and the door gave a creak before falling down, blowing up a pile of dust. It was then that Mu Nianci realized that it was an abandoned temple and no one lived there. She walked into the hall and saw cobwebs on the statues of mother [tu di po] and father [tu di gong] earth. She pressed on a table and gave it a blow but found that the table was still sturdy and did not break. She found some hay to clean the table with and went on to place the broken door back into position. She ate some dried food before lying on the table and slept with her travel-bag as her pillow. She could not help but feel heartbroken and ashamed when she thought about Wanyan Kang's personality and tears rolled down her cheeks. But when she thought about his gentleness and honeyed words, she felt a hint of warmth in her heart. She thought about many things and tossed what seemed a million times before she was finally able to fall asleep.

In the middle of the night, Mu Nianci heard a funny noise. Alarmed, she sat upright as the noise grew louder. She hurried to the door and peered out. It was then that she got the shock of her life as the moonlight shone onto the ground, revealing thousands of snakes gliding along. The stench came in through the door. After what seemed a long while, the number of snakes began to lessen and she then heard footsteps as three men in white appeared with long poles in their hands, controlling the snakes. Mu Nianci was afraid that she would be discovered and hid behind the hall

door, not daring to look any longer. She heard a few footsteps and peered out again. The snakes were gone and the surroundings were quiet and deserted. She thought she must be dreaming and she couldn't believe what she had just seen.

She opened the main door quietly and peered out. She walked a little in the direction that the snakes had gone but could not find those men in white. She was somewhat relieved and was about to return to the temple when she saw the moonlight shining on a strange pile of white objects in the distance. She went for a closer look and let out a low gasp; it was a pile of skulls neatly arranged in the form of a pyramid, with five on the bottom, three in the middle and one on top. She'd searched for them during the day but found nothing. Now suddenly, they had appeared in front of her in the middle of the night. She found the skull formation scary but her heart beat fast since she was happy to have found them. She approached the skulls slowly and took out Wanyan Kang's belt. With hands shaking, she reached out to lift the skull stacked on top. She touched the skull and felt five holes in it which fitted her five fingers; it was as if the skull had formed mouths, which swallowed her fingers. Mu Nianci was astonished and screamed before turning about to run. She had run awhile when she stopped again and realized that she was just scaring herself. She giggled nervously and went back to put the belt on top of the three skulls before placing the skull in her hands back onto the top of the formation.

She thought to herself, "His teacher is really weird; I wonder whether she looks frightening as well." After placing the skull back into place, she secretly wished, "I hope that teacher will get the belt and immediately go and save him. I hope that you will teach him properly so that he ends his bad habits and changes his ways."

She was thinking about the chained up handsome sweet-talker Wanyan Kang when she felt someone gently patting her shoulder. She was shocked and did not dare turn around. Due to her nervousness, she accidentally fell onto the pile of skulls. Mu Nianci clutched her chest and turned around. As she turned someone gently patted her shoulder again. She turned around about six more times but still could not spot the person behind her; she didn't know whether it was ghost or a demon. Mu Nianci broke out in cold sweat and did not dare move. Quivering, she asked, "Who are you?"

The person placed his head near her neck and sniffed before laughing, "What a nice scent! Guess who I am."

Mu Nianci hurriedly turned around and saw a scholarly dressed man with a fan in his hand and a charming expression: It was one of the culprits who had forced her godfather to commit suicide back in Yanjing, Ouyang Ke. She was both surprised and angry; but since she knew that she was not his match, she turned to run. Ouyang Ke was, however, already in front of her laughing with arms out stretched ready to hug her if she took a few more steps. Mu Nianci retreated hurriedly then ran to her right. She had only run a few steps when Ouyang Ke was in front of her again. She ran in all directions but still could not escape him.

Ouyang Ke saw the pale colour of her beautiful face and was delighted. He knew that he could capture her in one move but he wanted to play the cat and mouse game with her, trapping her and letting her run again. Mu Nianci knew that she was in danger and pulled out a green dagger, aiming for his eyes.

Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "Aiya, don't be rough." He twisted his body, grabbed her arms with his left hand while

holding her waist with his right arm. Mu Nianci struggled but felt numbness in her throat and her dagger had already been snatched away by Ouyang Ke. She managed to free herself after awhile only to be captured in his arms again. The way he held her was similar to the way he'd seized Huang Rong at Wanyan Kang's residence causing her own hands to seal her accupoints and immobilizing herself.

Ouyang Ke laughed lightly and said, "Accept me as your teacher and I'll immediately release you and teach you this stance; but I'm afraid that by that time, you won't want me to let go of you."

Mu Nianci was trapped by his arm and Ouyang Ke used his right hand to gently brush against her cheeks. She knew that he was up to no good and was so frightened that she passed out. After awhile, Mu Nianci woke up but she felt numb and weak all over. Someone was hugging her tightly and in the confusion, she thought it was Wanyan Kang and was delighted. Then she opened her eyes and realized that the person hugging her was Ouyang Ke. She was embarrassed and nervous and struggled to stand up only to realize that she could not move. She opened her mouth to call out but realized that Ouyang Ke had stuffed a handkerchief in her mouth. He was sitting on the ground but he wore an anxious expression. On both sides of Ouyang Ke were eight women in white each with a weapon in their hands and all of them staring suspiciously but silently at the pile of skulls.

Mu Nianci was curious and tried to think what they were up to. When she turned her head, she was frightened out of her wits as she saw thousands of green snakes behind Ouyang Ke. The snakes were motionless but were hissing as their tongues flicked out. The moonlight shone on what looked like a sea of red tongues; it was a frightening sight. Amongst the snakes stood three men in white with long

poles in their hands; they were the same men Mu Nianci had seen earlier. She didn't dare look anymore and turned away. It was then that she saw the shiny gold belt amongst the nine skulls and thought anxiously, "Ah, they must be waiting for his teacher. From their expressions, they must be prepared to deal with his teacher. If his teacher comes alone, how could so many people be defeated? And there are so many poisonous snakes around as well."

She was extremely anxious and hoped that Wanyan Kang's teacher wouldn't come. But she also hoped that his teacher would know what to expect and come prepared, defeat these evil people and save her. After waiting for more than half an hour, the moon rose ever higher and she saw Ouyang Ke constantly looking up at the moon. She thought to herself, "Will his teacher only appear when the moon reaches the middle of the sky?"

She saw the moon rise above the top of a tree. The surroundings were empty, the worms were making sounds in the earth and there were the calls of birds in the distance. Ouyang Ke glanced at the moon once more before placing Mu Nianci into the arms of a woman beside him. He took out his fan with his right hand and stared at the edge of the hill. Mu Nianci knew that the person they were waiting for was coming soon. The silence was soon broken by a strong and piercing flute tune, which grew nearer after awhile. A figure flashed by as a woman with long hair suddenly appeared from the cliff. As she passed by she slowed down; it seemed like she had noticed that there were people nearby. It was 'Iron Corpse', Mei Chaofeng.

After Mei Chaofeng had gotten a few verses of the secret formulae for the cultivation of her internal energy from Guo Jing, she studied them carefully and it was not more than a month before her legs recovered and she could move normally. Furthermore, her internal energy had improved

tremendously. Ever since she found out that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had returned from Mongolia, she had started to plot revenge while following the 'Little Prince' as he set out on his mission. She practiced her skills every night. Mei Chaofeng found riding boats with many people inconvenient and thus decided to travel by herself at night. She had arranged to meet Wanyan Kang in Suzhou. She did not know that Wanyan Kang was in the hands of the Heroes of Lake Tai, nor was she aware that Ouyang Ke, who wanted to take revenge on her for killing his men and humiliating him earlier, wanted to lay hands on her 'Nine Yin Manual'. He had earlier searched for and found out her whereabouts, gathered together thousands of snakes and was now secretly waiting for her at the spot she practiced her skills every night. She had just passed by when she heard the breathing of several people and immediately stopped in her tracks to listen. She heard many weird noises behind the group of people.

Ouyang Ke saw her alarmed expression and cursed inwardly, "What a brilliant blind Bitch!" Fanning himself gently, he stood up and summoned his internal energy. He was about to strike out at Mei Chaofeng when he saw another person coming from the cliff. He hurriedly took back his strike and studied that person. He saw that the man was slim and tall; he was wearing a green robe and part of his hair was bound with a squared cloth. He looked like any cultured person but Ouyang Ke was unable to see his face clearly.

The amazing thing, however, was that Ouyang Ke was unable to hear any footsteps or breathing coming from that man. Even a highly skilled person like Mei Chaofeng would inevitably make some light noises when she walked; but this person was walking casually, as if his body were floating, forming a somewhat ghostly image. It seemed as if nothing

would cause him to make any noises while moving. That person glanced at Ouyang Ke before standing behind Mei Chaofeng. Ouyang Ke studied his face in detail and gasped. That person had a very strange face and aside from a pair of eyes glancing around, the rest of his face was like a dead person's. Although the skin was stiff, it was not ugly but neither was it appealing. The man looked extremely cold and emotionless and it gave one chills. Ouyang Ke regained his senses and saw that Mei Chaofeng was approaching him. He knew that her strikes were going to be vicious and deadly and knew he had to gain the upper hand first. He made a signal with his left hand and the three men controlling the snakes started blowing their flutes, causing the snakes to glide forward. The eight women in white sat still since they had applied some substance which caused the snakes to ignore them and slither past.

Mei Chaofeng heard the sounds of snakes approaching and knew there were countless numbers of them. She was alarmed and jumped back some distance. The snake men used their poles to urge the thousands of snakes to disperse in all directions. Mu Nianci saw that Mei Chaofeng's expression had paled with fear and could not help but worry for her. She thought, "Is this strange woman his teacher?" She saw Mei Chaofeng suddenly turn around and uncoil a long silver whip from her waist to protect herself. She was however surrounded by the poisonous snakes and several snakes, which were excited by the flute tune began to attack her, only to be slashed by her whip.

Ouyang Ke yelled, "Demoness Mei, I don't want your life. You just have to hand me the 'Nine Yin Manual' and I'll let you go."

When he was at Prince Zhao's residence, he heard that the 'Nine Yin Manual' was in Mei Chaofeng's hands and, being greedy as he was, he was very much tempted to get it at

any cost. It would definitely make his uncle, who had tried every means to get the manual, very happy. Mei Chaofeng ignored Ouyang Ke and used her whip to strike out even more furiously.

Ouyang Ke called out, "Since you're so stubborn, I'll see how long you can dance. I'll wait until tomorrow and we'll see whether or not you will hand the manual over to me."

Mei Chaofeng was very anxious and tried thinking of a plan to escape. She listened carefully and realized that there were snakes everywhere. She didn't dare move much and she was afraid that the poisonous snakes would bite her if she stepped on them.

Ouyang Ke sat down and after awhile, called out arrogantly, "Sister Mei, you stole the manual and have been familiarizing yourself with the contents for the past twenty years. What use is it to die trying to keep it? Why not lend it to me for a look and let's be friends, isn't it better that way?"

Mei Chaofeng replied, "Take the snakes away first."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Hand me the manual first."

The contents of the 'Nine Yin Manual' were tattooed on her late husband's skin and Mei Chaofeng valued it more than her life. She was, of course, unwilling to hand it over. She decided that if she was bitten by the snakes, she would immediately tear the manual to pieces.

Mu Nianci wanted to shout and tell her to jump onto a tree so that the snakes would not be able to bite her but she could not do so since a cloth bound her mouth. Mei Chaofeng was not aware of the few tall trees near her. She realized that if she continued fighting, her internal energy

would deplete and thus pulled out something from her pocket and shouted, "Alright, I give in, take it."

Ouyang Ke called out, "Throw it over here."

Mei Chaofeng called out, "Catch", and flung something with her right hand.

Mu Nianci heard a few faint cries and saw two women in white collapse. Ouyang Ke had fallen onto the ground and managed to avoid her deadly concealed weapons. He broke out in cold sweat and was both shocked and angry. He retreated a few steps and yelled, "Alright Bitch, I'll let you suffer horribly!"

Mei Chaofeng had shot out three 'Shapeless Needles' which traveled as fast as lightning. She was secretly impressed with Ouyang Ke's ability to escape her attack and was all the more anxious. Ouyang Ke studied her arms and plotted to set the snakes on her once she relaxed a little. By this time, Mei Chaofeng had already killed hundreds of snakes but there were thousands more surrounding her. How would she be able to kill all of them? Ouyang Ke saw that her whip skills were excellent and knew that she had hidden weapons and thus did not dare to go near her.

After half an hour, the moon moved towards the west and Mei Chaofeng was beginning to feel more and more anxious and her breathing became harder. Her whipping dance was not as smooth as earlier and she therefore struck out at shorter distances so as to preserve her energy. Ouyang Ke was delighted and commanded the snakes to move nearer and nearer to her. But he was also afraid that if she was still unwilling to surrender and destroyed the book, it would ruin his plans. This point in time was crucial to him. Mei Chaofeng heard the snakes moving closer and closer to her and could not help but touch the manual in her pocket. She

looked very pale and cursed silently, "I haven't obtained my revenge yet and who would have thought that I would die at the hands of this bloody rascal."

Suddenly, there came a noise which sounded like the tune from a qin [zither], but it also sounded like the sounds made by jade. Following that, there was the sound of a clear and smooth flute tune. Everyone was taken by surprise. Ouyang Ke looked up and saw the odd man in green sitting on top of a tall tree, playing his flute. Ouyang Ke was puzzled. He knew that he had very sharp eyesight and yet, even under such bright moonlight, he did not notice that that man had gone up the tree. The wind was blowing and the trees were swaying but that man was still able to sit steady and motionless on top. Ouyang Ke had been taught by his uncle since he was young and he knew that even if he trained for another twenty years, he would be unable to achieve the standards of this man. Is that man a ghost then?

By this time, the tune from the flute was flowing continuously and Ouyang Ke lost control of his emotions and was smiling unnaturally. He felt his blood pounding and rushing inside him and had to dance crazily in order to feel better. He had just stretched out his arm to dance and was shocked. He summoned all his concentration and noticed that all of the snakes were rushing to the bottom of a tree and writhing about following the flute's tune. The three men and six women in white moved under the tree as well dancing around crazily. They tore their clothing and scratched their faces furiously leaving bloody streaks on them while laughing stupidly at nothing. It seemed like they had all gone mad and unaware of any pain.

Ouyang Ke was extremely shocked and knew that he had encountered a strong opponent tonight. He took out six poisoned projectiles and flung them towards the man's head, chest and limbs. The projectiles were about to strike

the man when he gently waved the end of his flute and blocked the projectiles. When he used his flute to block the projectiles, his lips continued to blow and did not leave the flute hole for a single moment. The tune coming out from the flute was not interrupted for a single second. Ouyang Ke could not stand it any longer and opened his fan, again wanting to dance.

Luckily Ouyang Ke had a rather good grasp of his internal energy and knew that if he started dancing, unless his opponent stopped blowing the flute, he would not stop dancing until he died of exhaustion. Ouyang Ke was a clear-minded and sharp man and forced himself to take back his arm with the fan in it. He suddenly thought of a plan, "I'll tear some cloth off my robe and stuff the cloth in my ears so as to block the sound." But the flute sound was marvelous and, although Ouyang Ke had torn off some cloth, the flute tune made him lose control of his actions; he struggled but could not put the cloth into his ears. He was alarmed and frightened and broke out in a cold sweat. He saw Mei Chaofeng sitting on the ground with her head lowered, circulating her internal energy. He guessed that she was summoning her internal energy to combat the flute's sound.

At this moment, three of Ouyang Ke's least skilled apprentices had fallen onto the ground, ripping and tearing their clothing while twisting and turning uncontrollably. Mu Nianci had her accupoints sealed and could not move. Even though her emotions and concentration was deeply disturbed and provoked by the flute's tune, she did not kick or dance madly because she could not move and just lay silently on the ground.

Ouyang Ke's cheeks had turned bright red, his head was burning and his throat was dry and uncomfortable. He knew that if he did not stop this now and escape, he would die. He summoned up all his determination and bit on his

tongue. The pain diverted his attention from the flute tune and the sound had less impact on him for a moment. He grabbed this opportunity to escape and ran for his life. It was not until he was several li away from the place and he could not hear the flute sound anymore that he felt relieved. Ouyang Ke was thoroughly exhausted and felt extremely weak, as if he had fallen very ill. He thought to himself, "Who is that strange man? Who is that strange man?"

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Meanwhile, Huang Rong and Guo Jing returned to their rooms to sleep after they sent Mu Nianci off. They were pleased with their relaxing trip on the lake so far. Guo Jing knew that once Mu Nianci was off, Mei Chaofeng would soon appear. She was vicious and deadly in her attacks. He worried that there will be no one to match her and many people would get hurt. Guo Jing decided to consult Huang Rong and asked her, "I think we better tell Master Lu about Mei Chaofeng and plead with him to let Wanyan Kang go and save the people in the manor from any injury."

Huang Rong waved her hand and replied, "That's not a good idea. Wanyan Kang is an evil brat; let him suffer a few more days. If he is let off so easily, then he will not learn his lesson." Actually Huang Rong couldn't care less about whether Wanyan Kang repented or not. She thought that since he was the disciple of 'two bad eggs' Qiu Chuji and Mei Chaofeng, then he might as well stay a baddie. She thought it fun making life difficult for Wanyan Kang. But Huang Rong was also afraid that if Wanyan Kang did not repent Mu Nianci would not marry him and if Mu Nianci does not have a husband, the busybodies would once again try to force Guo Jing to marry her. This would be disastrous. Therefore, she decided that it would be better for Wanyan Kang to repent.

Guo Jing asked, "What shall we do if Mei Chaofeng arrives?"

Huang Rong smiled, "Then we'll try out what Qigong taught us on her!"

Guo Jing knew that it was pointless to argue with Huang Rong and so returned her smile. But he thought that since Master Lu had taken such good care of them, he would risk his life to protect everyone in the manor no matter what.

Two days later they told Master Lu that they would not leave just yet. Master Lu was even nicer to them since he had hoped that they would stay longer. On the third morning, Master Lu was chatting with Huang Rong and Guo Jing in his study when Lu Guanying rushed in with a pale face. Behind him was one of the housekeepers who carried a wooden tray. There was something on the tray wrapped up with a green cloth.

Lu Guanying said, "Father, someone sent this just now." With that, he removed the green cloth to reveal a white skull with five finger holes in it; it was indeed Mei Chaofeng's work.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were not surprised, since they knew that Mei Chaofeng would appear sooner or later. Master Lu was however shocked and he paled. Quivering, he asked, "Who...who brought this here?" He straightened his body as he asked.

Lu Guanying knew that skull appeared strange but he was a daring and skilled fighter and furthermore, he was the leader of the pirates of the lake. Therefore he did not really take this matter too seriously. But when he saw how upset his father was, he was surprised and even more frightened. He answered hurriedly, "Someone put this in a box and sent it here. The housekeeper thought it was a normal gift and

tipped the person without asking its origins. When he brought it to the accounts room and opened the box, he found the skull and when he went to ask the person who sent the gift that person was already gone. "Father, what do you think is going on here?"

Master Lu did not answer but inserted his fingers into the holes in the skull, which fitted his fingers perfectly. Lu Guanying asked in shock, "The holes in the skull are made by fingers? Are fingers that powerful?"

Master Lu nodded and sighed deeply before saying, "Ask the servants to pack up and send your mother to the north manor in the city to stay for the time being. Order the section leaders to gather and stay with their sections for three days. No matter what happens to Cloud Manor, tell them not to interfere."

Lu Guanying was astonished and asked, "Why, father?"

Master Lu smiled weakly and turned towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong saying, "It is a blessing to be able to make friends with both of you. I had hoped that you could stay longer but I made two enemies when I was younger and they are coming to seek revenge. It's not that I want to chase you away but Cloud Manor is...is in danger. If I am fortunate enough to survive, we will meet again; but ... but there is only a slight chance of that." He laughed bitterly and shook his head before turning to the study keeper and said, "Bring forty gold taels to me." The keeper left to do so. Lu Guanying did not dare ask any more questions and left the study to carry out his father's instructions.

After a while, the keeper came back with the money and Master Lu offered it to Guo Jing saying, "The lady is beautiful and talented and is a perfect match for you. This

small amount of money is for your upcoming marriage ceremony; please accept this humble gift."

Huang Rong blushed and thought, "This person is very sharp, he knew all along that I was a girl. But how did he know that I am not married to Jing ge ge?"

Guo Jing did not know the art of politeness and just thanked Master Lu before accepting the gift. Master Lu then retrieved a glass bottle from the study table and poured out more than ten red pills before wrapping them up in some paper. He continued, "I am not talented but my teacher taught me some medical formulas and I used them to make these pills which can prolong lives when taken. Take them as a form of my respect."

When Master Lu poured out the pills there was a sweet scent in the air. When Huang Rong smelled it, she knew immediately that those were the 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills'. She had helped her father make those pills before and had to collect the dewdrops from nine different types of flowers. To make the pills, one had to know how to brew the substance on the correct days and season of the year. It was a very painstaking process and the pills consisted of many different types of scarce and precious herbs.

Huang Rong knew that Master Lu was being too generous giving them so many and spoke out, "It is not easy to create the 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills'. We would be more than grateful to accept two pills each."

Master Lu was slightly surprised and asked, "How did Miss know the name of the pills?"

Huang Rong answered, "I know because I was weak when I was young and an honorable master gave me three pills which had positive effects when I took them."

Master Lu showed a smile and said, "You don't have to resist my offer. It would be a waste to keep them anyway." Huang Rong knew that he was prepared to die and so did not argue and kept the pills.

Master Lu continued in a serious tone, "I have already prepared a boat so please cross the lake quickly. Even if you notice something strange, do not bother to stop. Remember this!"

Guo Jing wanted to stay and help but he caught Huang Rong's eye signal and had no choice but to agree with Master Lu.

Huang Rong said, "Forgive little sister for her ignorance, but I have something to ask."

Master Lu answered, "Please speak, Miss."

Huang Rong replied, "Since Master Lu knows that there are formidable enemies coming to seek revenge, why not hide from them? As the saying goes, a hero avoids obvious dangers."

Master Lu let out a huge sigh and answered, "Those two people have made me suffer so much! They are the ones who caused me to be crippled. For the past twenty years I have not sought revenge because I am unable to walk. Since they are coming now, no matter what, I will risk my life to fight them. Anyway, they offended my teacher. Even if I am unable to seek revenge for myself, I will definitely have to seek revenge for my teacher at all costs. I don't hope to defeat them. I am more than happy as long as I can die together with them and thus, repay my teacher's kindness."

Huang Rong thought, "How come he keeps saying there are two people? Ah, I know, he still thinks that 'Copper Corpse', Chen Xuanfeng, is alive. I wonder what animosity he bears

towards them? It is unfortunate for him but I won't probe further, although I am still curious about something."

Huang Rong asked out loud, "Master Lu, it's not surprising that you were able to see through my male disguise but how did you know that we are not married since we stayed in the same room?"

Master Lu was dumbfounded by her question and thought to himself, "It's obvious that she is still a virgin but how do I explain it to her? This little Miss is intelligent and talented in all areas but how come she's so blind when it comes to matters like these?" He was thinking of a way to answer her when Lu Guanying entered the study and said in a low voice, "I have given the command but leaders Zhang, Gu, Wang and Tan refuse to leave. They say that they will remain in Cloud Manor even if it means risking their lives."

Master Lu sighed and said, "It is not often that you find such loyal and courageous people! Hurry and send these two guests off."

Huang Rong and Guo Jing bid Master Lu farewell before following Lu Guanying out. The housekeeper had already prepared Guo Jing's little red horse and their donkey on the boat. Guo Jing whispered to Huang Rong, "Are we going to get on the boat?"

Huang Rong whispered back, "We'll leave and come back."

Lu Guanying wasn't bothered by their whispering since he was in a state of confusion and wanted to hurriedly send off the guests so as to be able to help out with the preparations against his father's enemies. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were about to board the boat when Huang Rong spied someone on the bank, walking fast towards them. The person looked strange since he was supporting a huge jar on his head as he walked towards them without a pause.

When he came nearer, Guo Jing, Huang Rong and Lu Guanying saw that the man's hair was white; he wore a short yellow robe and carried a huge feather fan in his right hand, fanning himself gently as he quickened his pace. The jar looked as if it was made from iron and seemed like it weighed a hundred jin [110lbs / 50kg].

The man walked past Lu Guanying, glanced nonchalantly at them and continued walking. He had not taken but a few steps more when his body hunched a little and some water spilled out from the jar. The three then realized that the jar was filled with water, which would now weigh about a hundred jin more. The old man must be highly skilled to be able to balance such a heavy weight on his head.

Lu Guanying thought nervously, "Is this man father's enemy?" He ignored the danger and went up to the man, while Guo Jing and Huang Rong stole a glance at each other before following him. Guo Jing heard his six teachers mention their fight with Qiu Chuji at the 'Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal' before and knew that Qiu Chuji was skilled enough to lift up a huge jar. But the size of the jar Qiu Chuji lifted as described by his teachers did not seem as big as this jar the man was lifting now. Guo Jing suspected that this old man's skills were above those of 'Eternal Spring' Master Qiu Chuji. The old man walked on before reaching the bank of a small river with graves all over the place.

Lu Guanying thought to himself, "There is no bridge here so let's see whether he crosses the river to the north or goes towards the west."

Lu Guanying was stunned by what he saw next: The old man walked without a pause over the river; his body was steady and only his lower legs were submerged in the water. When he reached the opposite side of the river he

placed the huge jar on the grasses next to a hill before returning to the river and walking on the water back to the other side again.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing had heard their seniors talk about all sorts of skills from various sects and schools but they never heard of the skills which the old man just displayed: Carrying a huge jar on his head and walking on water. They'd thought that such skills only existed in myths and legends; who would have thought that such skills do actually exist on earth? If they had not seen for themselves, they would never have believed such stuff and were secretly in awe of this old master.

The old man's hair was white and he laughed heartily before turning to Lu Guanying, "You must be the leader of the pirates, Junior Master Lu right?"

Lu Guanying bowed and answered, "I dare not accept such praise, I wonder what is elder's name?"

The old man pointed towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong and said, "You two boys come here as well."

Lu Guanying turned around and got a surprise when he saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong behind him. It was then that he realized that the two had been following him. Their lightness skills were so good that they made no noise and he was not even aware of them following him. Guo Jing and Huang Rong bowed and said, "Greetings to elder."

The old man laughed, "No need for such greetings." He turned towards Lu Guanying and said, "Here is not a place to talk, let's find somewhere to sit."

Lu Guanying was suspicious and thought, "Is he father's enemy?" He decided to be direct and asked, "Does elder know my father?"

The old man replied, "Master Lu? I have never met him before."

Lu Guanying thought that the man didn't seem like he was lying and asked some more, "My father received a strange gift earlier in the day, does elder know of this matter?"

The old man asked, "What strange gift?"

Lu Guanying replied, "It's a dead person's skull on the top of which is five finger holes."

The old man said, "That's funny; could it be someone playing with your father?"

Lu Guanying thought silently, "This man's skills are exceptional. Even if he wants to fight father, he would do so openly and does not need to lie about it. It seems like he really doesn't know anything. Why not invite him to the manor to help us instead? If he agrees to help us, it will be alright no matter how great father's enemy is." The more he thought about it, the more delighted he was and answered, "If elder does not mind, why not come to my residence for some tea?"

The old man hummed slightly and replied, "That will be good." Lu Guanying was overjoyed and waved for the old man to go first.

The old man pointed towards Guo Jing and said, "These two young men are guests of the manor right?"

Lu Guanying answered, "They are father's friends." The old man did not probe further and walked in front with Guo Jing and Huang Rong following behind Lu Guanying. When they reached the manor, Lu Guanying ushered the old man to a seat in the main hall and sped off to find his father.

Not long after, two servants carried in a bamboo couch with Master Lu on it. Master Lu greeted the old man politely and said, "I hope my ignorant son has not offended elder in any way."

The old man shifted his body slightly but did not greet him back. He replied blandly, "Master Lu may dispense with the formalities."

Master Lu asked, "I wonder what elder's name is?"

The old man replied, "My surname is Qiu and my name is Qianren."

Master Lu was shocked and asked, "Could it be that elder is the renowned 'Iron Palm Who Floats on Water', elder Qiu?"

Qiu Qianren smiled slightly and answered, "To think that you can remember my nickname, you really have a good memory. I have not been active in Jianghu for the past twenty years and thought that people had long forgotten me!"

The name 'Iron Palm Who Floats on Water' was indeed a formidable name twenty years ago. Master Lu knew that the old man was the chief of the Iron Palm Sect in Hunan. He had been famous and active in Jianghu but had disappeared suddenly for a very long time so it was not surprising that many juniors born later would not know of him.

Master Lu was surprised and curious by his visit and asked, "I wonder what has caused Senior Qiu to come here? If you need junior's help, I would be more than happy to offer it."

Qiu Qianren stroked his beard and laughed, "It's nothing big actually, just that I have been too softhearted and fate has it that it will not end...um, I would like to seek a

secluded place to practice my skills; we'll talk again in the night."

Master Lu saw that he wore no evil expression but was still unsettled and asked, "I wonder, did Senior happen to meet the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'?"

Qiu Qianren replied, "The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'? That evil pair are not dead yet?"

Master Lu was greatly comforted by what he heard and spoke out, "Ying'er, please bring Senior Qiu to my study to rest." Qiu Qianren gave everyone a nod and left with Lu Guanying.

Although Master Lu had never seen Qiu Qianren's skills before, he had heard his formidable name. He knew that when the five greats, Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity met for the Hua Shan tournament, they had invited him but he had something to attend to and thus turned down the invitation. His skills must have been exceptional to get the invitation; even if he was not up to the level of the greats, he should not be far from their standards. Should the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' come, they would not be able to mess around with him.

He turned to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, "You haven't gone? That's very good. The Elder Qiu's skills are formidable, how lucky that he should appear at this moment. I do not have to fear my opponents any longer! Later on you can rest in your rooms but please do not leave them and you'll be fine."

Huang Rong gave a little laugh, "Can I watch the fun?"

Master Lu let out a deep sigh and replied, "I'm afraid that my enemy will bring lots of people so I'm afraid that I won't be able to protect myself and will allow you two to be hurt."

Alright then, but you two must stick with me. With Senior Qiu around, it will be useless no matter how many people they bring!"

Huang Rong clapped her hands in delight and laughed, "I love seeing people fight. It was so interesting that day you defeated that Little Jin Prince."

Master Lu replied, "This time it will be the Little Prince's teacher who is much more skilful than him; that's why I'm worried."

Huang Rong answered, "Ah! How do you know?"

Master Lu replied, "Miss Huang, you won't understand these fighting matters. That claw technique which the Little Jin Prince used to attack my Ying'er's thigh is the same as the skill used to create those finger holes in the top of the skull."

Huang Rong answered, "Oh, I understand now. Wang Xianzhi's calligraphy was taught by Wang Yizhi and Wang Yizhi was taught by Lady Wei whose teacher was Zhong You. Thus, any professional would be able to guess the family or sect the calligrapher belongs to merely by looking at his works."

Master Lu laughed, "Miss is highly intelligent. I just have to give you a hint and you are able to understand everything. My two opponents are evil and vicious. Compared to Zhong Wang, they have smeared the reputation of their teacher and ancestors."

Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's hand and said, "Let's see what great skill the white bearded Grandpa is practicing."

Master Lu was alarmed and said, "Ah, don't...don't disturb him."

Huang Rong laughed, "It's alright," and stood up to leave.

Master Lu was sitting on the couch and could not move. He thought nervously, "This young lady is too mischievous. How can she spy on him?"

He hurriedly ordered the servants to lift up the bamboo couch and hurry to the study to stop them. When he reached it he saw them bending down and looking into the room through a hole made in the paper covering the window frame. When Huang Rong heard the servants' footsteps she hurriedly turned and signaled to them not to make a single sound; at the same time she waved to Master Lu asking him to come over and see.

Master Lu was afraid that if he did not go over, the little miss would throw a tantrum and alert Qiu Qianren. He immediately ordered the servants to walk silently and help him over to the window. When he looked through the hole Huang Rong made, he was baffled to see Qiu Qianren sitting cross-legged with eyes shut and smoke continuously coming out of his mouth.

Master Lu's teacher was highly skilled and knowledgeable. When he trained under him in his younger days, he often heard his teacher talk about the various skills of different sects and schools but had never heard of a skill involving breathing out smoke. He did not dare look longer and pulled Guo Jing's sleeve, signaling him not to look anymore. Guo Jing respected him and besides, he never thought it proper to spy on others. Guo Jing immediately stood up and took Huang Rong by the hand, following Master Lu back to the hall.

Huang Rong giggled, "That old fellow's skills are fun. There's a fire burning inside his stomach!"

Master Lu answered, "You do not understand. This is an amazing type of internal energy."

Huang Rong asked, "Could he breathe out fire to burn someone?" Huang Rong was not joking as she said this; she was indeed curious about Qiu Qianren's mysterious skills.

Master Lu replied, "No one can breathe out fire, but to be able to attain such profound internal skills would mean that he can probably injure someone using mere flowers and leaves."

Huang Rong laughed, "Ah, tear a flower to hurt someone!"

Master Lu smiled slightly and answered, "Miss is very smart."

There was a poem entitled 'Barbaric Buddhist' which was written by an anonymous poet during the Tang dynasty, which read: "When the peonies reveal real pearls, a beauty walks by the hall.

With a gentle laugh, she asks the gentleman, 'Which is prettier, the flower or the lady?' The gentleman mulls it over and answers, 'The flower is beautiful.' The lady throws a mild tantrum and flings the smashed flower at him." [The underlying meaning is actually used to refer to an insolent woman, who is not respected. In the past, the ideal woman is supposed to be gentle and docile.]

The poem thus spread far and wide. Once, there was a court case in which an evil wife broke her husband's legs. When the Tang Emperor, Xuanzhong learned about it, he laughed and said to his Prime Minister "Isn't this tearing a flower to hurt someone?"

Master Lu was relieved when he saw how powerful Qiu Qianren was. He ordered Lu Guanying to send people to inspect the lake and politely invite any suspicious-looking

person back to the manor. He also ordered the servants to open the main entrance to the manor so as to welcome any guests. Evening came and the servants lit many candles in the main hall of Cloud Manor. The bright lights surrounded the whole hall, as if waiting for a banquet to begin. Lu Guanying personally went to invite Qiu Qianren to the hall in which he was offered the middle host seat. Guo Jing and Huang Rong sat beside him while Master Lu and his son sat on seats beneath their tables. Master Lu made his toasts but did not dare ask Qiu Qianren the purpose of his visit and only engaged in casual talk with his guests.

After drinks, Qiu Qianren spoke out, "Brother Lu, Cloud Manor is the leader among all heroes of the lake and therefore your skills must be good. I wonder whether you would be willing to display a stance or two for me?"

Master Lu answered hurriedly, "Junior's skills are nothing compared to senior's, I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself. Furthermore, I have been crippled for a long time now and have given up the skills my teacher taught me long ago."

Qiu Qianren replied, "Who is your teacher? I may know him."

Master Lu let out a long sigh and his face paled. After a long while, he answered, "Junior is dumb and rough and is unable to serve my teacher. Due to the doings of others, my teacher disowned me. This is such a shameful story and I do not want my teacher's name to be smeared. I hope Senior understands."

Lu Guanying thought silently, "So father was disowned by his teacher and thus never displayed his skills. I didn't even know what a skilled fighter he is. If it weren't for that Jin dog that hurt me, father would never have displayed his skills. He must have experienced a very devastating and

hateful event in his life." Lu Guanying was deeply saddened and disturbed by this thought.

Qiu Qianren answered, "Brother is at the peak of his life and is the leader of a group of heroes. Why not take this opportunity to make your name known? It will help extinguish the wrongs done to you and make the seniors in your school regret them."

Master Lu replied, "Junior is crippled and is hopeless. Senior's advice is insightful but I cannot accept it."

Qiu Qianren answered, "Brother is too courteous. There is a pathway but I'm not sure whether brother will agree to take it."

Master Lu answered, "Then I shall bother Senior to help me out."

Qiu Qianren laughed softly but continued eating and did not answer. Master Lu knew that this man had hidden himself for twenty years and thought, "There must be some reason why he has resurfaced in Jianghu. Since he is a senior master, it is not proper for me to probe further and I can only wait for him to tell me."

Qiu Qianren spoke, "If brother does not want to display your skills, it's fine with me. Cloud Manor is a famous name and the leader must be from a famous school."

Master Lu gave a small laugh, "The matters of Cloud Manor have long been handled by my son Guanying. His teacher is the monk Kumo of Yun Qi Monastery."

Qiu Qianren answered, "Ah, Kumo is a skilled fighter of the Xian Xia sect which is affiliated to Shaolin. His skills are also commendable. How about the Junior Master displays some stances for me?"

Master Lu said, "It is the child's fortune to receive some pointers from Senior Qiu."

Lu Guanying thought it was rare to be able to meet such a highly skilled master and his advice would be insightful and precious. Therefore, he hoped to receive a few pointers. He immediately walked to the centre of the hall and said, "Elder, please give some pointers."

With that, he positioned himself and displayed his best stance, the 'Luo Han Subduing the Tiger' fists which created some wind when he punched with his fists. He was indeed the disciple of a skilled martial artist. His skills were unique and he displayed them for a while longer before releasing a loud roar which sounded like a tiger's roar; the candle lights wavered and a gust of wind blew to the four corners of the room. The servants felt a chilling sensation and were startled by his performance. Lu Guanying continued with a palm technique while shouting loudly, looking very impressive. He did a flip and crouched on the floor; then suddenly stretching his left palm out straight, displayed a stance of the 'Ru Lai Buddha Palm'. After a while longer, his roar grew softer but the pace of his 'Luo Han Fists' quickened and with his last stance, he attacked the floor and the force broke some bricks nearby. Lu Guanying flipped upright into position and with his left arm in the air and his right leg kicking out, he steadily and motionlessly formed the image of a Luo Han Buddha.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong cheered out loud and shouted, "Excellent palm technique!"

Lu Guanying relaxed, stood in normal position again, then turned to face Qiu Qianren who gave a slight smile.

Master Lu asked, "How are this child's set of palm techniques?"

Qiu Qianren answered, "Passable."

Master Lu said, "If it's far from perfect, I hope Senior gives some pointers."

Qiu Qianren replied, "Your son's palm techniques can be used to build up his body but is useless when fighting an opponent."

Master Lu answered, "I would like to hear Senior's comments so that he can improve them."

Guo Jing could not understand either and thought silently, "Junior Master's skills are not formidable, but how can the Elder say that they're useless?"

Qiu Qianren stood up and walked to the middle of the hall and returned to his seat with a two pieces of the bricks which Lu Guanying had broken earlier. He did something with his hand and a cracking sound was heard as the pieces broke into smaller pieces. He kneaded the pieces and they turned to powder, which floated off the table. Everyone was astonished by what they saw.

Qiu Qianren swept the dust and powder on the table onto his clothes and walked to the middle of the hall before shaking off the powder onto the floor. He laughed softly as he went back to his seat and said, "It is commendable for Junior Master to be able to break the bricks with a palm but think about this: The opponent is not a brick and will not stand there quietly, waiting for you to attack him or her. Furthermore, if the opponent's internal energy is stronger than yours and your palm strikes him or her and they repel the strike, you will be heavily injured yourself." Lu Guanying nodded silently.

Qiu Qianren sighed and continued, "There are many martial artists these days but only a few can be considered skilled

fighters.”

Huang Rong asked, “Which few?”

Qiu Qianren replied, “Wulin’s well-known five greats: Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity. However, Central Divinity Wang Chongyang has the most profound skills. As for the other four, they are skilled in their own way. But a person has strengths as well as weaknesses. If one knows their weakness, it is not difficult to defeat them.”

With those words, Qiu Qianren shocked Master Lu, Huang Rong and Guo Jing. Lu Guanying did not know of the five greats and did not know why the rest were surprised. Huang Rong was actually in awe of Qiu Qianren when she saw his display of skills, but when she heard his disrespect towards her father, she was furious and gave a polite laugh before asking, “So if Elder can defeat the five greats, wouldn’t that be incredible for you?”

Qiu Qianren answered, “Wang Chongyang has already passed away. I was caught up with some affairs at home during the Hua Shan tournament and could not attend it. That allowed that old Taoist to steal the title ‘number one’. At that time, the five were competing for the ‘Nine Yin Manual’, deciding that the most skilful fighter and winner would get the manual. They dueled for seven days and seven nights and Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Northern Beggar and Southern Emperor lost. Later, when Wang Chongyang passed away, there was chaos again. I heard that the old Taoist passed the manual to his martial brother, Zhou Botong. Eastern Heretic, Huang Yaoshi rushed there and Zhou Botong was not his match, thereby allowing the former to steal half of the manual. No one knows what happened later.”

Huang Rong and Guo Jing thought silently, "So there were things which happened in between. Half of the manual was stolen by the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds'."

Huang Rong said, "Since Elder is the higher skilled, then the manual should belong to you!"

Qiu Qianren replied, "I cannot be bothered to fight for it. The four greats are mediocre and have been practicing all these years so as to compete for the number one title. It would be fun to see the second Hua Shan Tournament though."

Huang Rong asked, "There is a second Hua Shan Tournament?"

Qiu Qianren replied, "Once in every twenty-five years. If the old ones die, the young ones will take over. The next Hua Shan Tournament will take place in a year's time. But all these years have passed without any outstanding talents. I think it will be us old fellows once again. Ah, there are no outstanding descendants; the skills of the future generations will not be as great as the earlier ones." He shook his head as he spoke as though filled with deep regret.

Huang Rong asked, "Is Elder going to participate in the next Hua Shan Tournament? If yes, please take us alright? I love seeing people spar with each other."

Qiu Qianren grunted, "Ah, such childish talk! How can you call that sparring? Initially I didn't want to go. I am so old already, why bother about fighting for all these useless titles? However, I have a very important matter at hand, which involves the lives of everyone. I would be a selfish and greedy person if I do not step forward to help or the matter will turn into a catastrophe."

The four of them were astonished by his agitated tone and hurriedly asked him what was it.

Qiu Qianren answered, "This is a highly secretive matter. Since Brothers Guo and Huang are not Jianghu people, it's better that you don't hear about it."

Huang Rong laughed, "Master Lu is my good friend; if you tell it to him then he will tell it to me." Master Lu secretly scolded Huang Rong for being so cheeky but did not deny her words.

Qiu Qianren replied, "Since this is so, I will tell all of you then. But before the matter is resolved, I would like all of you to keep it a secret."

Guo Jing thought, "We are not related to him in anyway and since it's a secretive issue, it's better not to hear it." With that, he stood up and announced, "Both us juniors bid our farewell."

He pulled Huang Rong's hand and was about to leave when Qiu Qianren replied, "Since both of you are Master Lu's good friends, you are not outsiders. Please sit," With that, he tapped Guo Jing on the shoulder. Guo Jing did not find his energy spectacular but obeyed and returned to his seat.

Qiu Qianren stood up and toasted the wine to the four people before saying, "Not more than half a year from now, Great Song will be in trouble. Does anyone know why?" The others were stunned by his serious expression. Lu Guanying waved to signal to the servants to leave the room and ordered them not to bring in any more food.

Qiu Qianren continued, "I have gotten news that in six months time, the Jin will attack the south with a formidable army and our Song Empire will be lost. Hai, this is so sudden that we cannot do much about it."

Guo Jing was alarmed and asked, "Then Elder Qiu had better go and inform the Imperial Court and ask them to prepare and make plans to counter the enemy."

Qiu Qianren stared at him and scolded, "What does a young man like you know? If Great Song is prepared, they will lose out even more." No one understood what he was saying and looked at him with alarm.

He continued, "I have wracked my brain for a plan to protect the safety and happiness of the people and there is only one way to protect the country. I have traveled all the way to Jiangnan for this. I heard that the Little Jin Prince and Commander Duan are held in this manor. Why not invite them in for a discussion?"

Master Lu did not know how Qiu Qianren knew of this but hurriedly ordered two servants to bring them in. He ordered their chains removed but asked the servants to place them on the floor and denied them any utensils for dinning. Guo Jing and Huang Rong noticed that Wanyan Kang looked weak and exhausted. Commander Duan looked like he was in his early fifties, had a thick beard and wore a frightened expression.

Qiu Qianren looked at Wanyan Kang and said, "Little Prince has suffered?"

Wanyan Kang nodded and thought, "I wonder why Guo Jing and Huang Rong are here?" The day he fought in Master Lu's study, he didn't notice them hiding in one corner. The three looked at, but did not greet each other.

Qiu Qianren faced Master Lu and said, "There is much wealth in front of your manor but why hasn't brother retrieved it?"

Master Lu was curious and asked, "I live a simple, rural life. What wealth is Elder talking about?"

Qiu Qianren answered, "When the Jin Army attacks the South, a great war will start and many lives will be lost. If brother gathers the heroes of Jiangnan and you fight together, you will banish the Jin and attain peace."

Master Lu thought silently, "This is a serious matter indeed." He answered hurriedly, "It is my honor to help fight for my country and it is something that I am responsible for. I am loyal to my country but the Imperial Court does not appreciate it. If a person is evil, even if he becomes a priest, it is useless if he does not have the right morals. I hope Senior creates a pathway for me and Junior to follow and we will be more than grateful. I do not crave any wealth or rewards."

Qiu Qianren stroked his beard and laughed. He was about to answer when the housekeeper rushed forward and said, "Leader Zhang has spotted six suspicious-looking people on the lake. They have already reached the Manor."

Master Lu paled and called out, "Invite them in quickly."

He thought silently, "Why are there six people? Could it be that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' have found allies?"

Chapter 14 - The Master of Peach Blossom Island

Translated by Frans Soetomo



The power of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' was not light. However, Mei Chaofeng always knew in advance where his attack would go and was able to evade quickly. Several moves later the strange man flicked three pebbles in succession. Mei Chaofeng followed the sound and launched three deadly attacks one after another.

What he saw was six people, five men and one woman, entering the hall. They were the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. They had been wandering around the north and south and on this particular day had arrived at Lake Tai, where they met some Jianghu people on a boat who received them attentively.

They had been away from their hometown for such a long time that they did not know the current affairs of the martial arts world. They weren't sure who these people were, so Zhu Cong exchanged some pleasantries with them. It turned out these people were Manager Zhang [zhai zhu] and his men from 'Cloud Manor' [gui yun zhuang].

They had received orders from Lu Guanying to guard the lake and to report any unusual activities. They did not know who these six people were, and since these six wielded weapons, they were inclined to regard the six as the enemies of the Old Manor Master. Therefore, Manager Zhang acted with utmost prudence and received the six cordially then invited them to enter the manor while at the same time sending a report to the Manor Master.

Guo Jing, however, was ecstatic to see his six masters. Quickly he knelt and greeted them one by one, "First Master, Second Master, Third Master, Fourth Master, Sixth Master, and Seventh Master! You are all here! This truly is wonderful!" He was overly exuberant, but because of his

spontaneity everyone could see his sincerity and genuine delight.

Although the Six Freaks were angry with him over the Huang Rong affair, in all honesty they loved him dearly. They were pleasantly surprised to see him and all anger simply vanished into thin air.

“Child, where is that female demon of yours?” Han Baoju could not help scolding him.

Han Xiaoying, however, had a pair of sharp eyes. She saw Huang Rong wearing men’s clothing sitting amongst the group. She tugged Han Baoju’s sleeve and whispered, “Calm down. We will talk this over later.”

Initially Master Lu also suspected that his enemies had arrived, but then he saw that these six were total strangers to him. Moreover, Guo Jing had addressed them as his masters. He was relieved. Cupping his fists in respect he apologized, “I have crippled legs; please forgive me for not standing up to welcome you,” and immediately gave the order to prepare another banquet table for the guests.

Without wasting another second Guo Jing introduced his Masters. Master Lu was delighted and said, “I have heard of your illustrious names and admired you for a long time. It is very fortunate to finally meet you in person today.” His manner was very cordial.

Qiu Qianren, on the other hand, did not show any interest in the six guests. He simply smiled faintly and kept eating and drinking.

Han Baoju was irritated and could not hold his temper. “And who is this gentleman?” he asked.

"I am pleased to introduce him to you, Six Masters," Master Lu proudly said. "He is the highly respected Senior of Wulin, the Taishan (Mount Tai) and the Big Dipper Constellation [meaning – the ultimate] of this present age."

The Six Freaks were startled. "Is he the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang Yaoshi?" asked Han Xiaoying. "Could he be the 'Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar' [jiu zhi shen gai] Hong Qigong?" asked Han Baoju.

Master Lu smiled and explained, "No, he is neither. He is the 'Iron Palm Floating on the Water' [tie zhang shui shang piao], Senior Qiu."

"He is Senior Qiu Qianren?" Ke Zhen'E asked, surprised by the revelation.

Qiu Qianren laughed heartily with a smug face

By that time the manor staff had finished preparing a new banquet table and the Six Freaks took their seats. Guo Jing wanted to sit with his masters. He tugged Huang Rong's hand for them to go together, but Huang Rong simply smiled and shook her head. She was not willing to sit with the Six Freaks.

Master Lu laughed and said, "I thought Brother Guo did not know martial arts. Who would have known that you are the disciple of these well-known Masters? Truly my eyes are blind and could not see the hidden treasure right in front of me ..."

Guo Jing stood up. "My skill is mediocre," he said, "I was indeed taught by these Masters. I do not dare to show off in front of the Manor Master. I beg your forgiveness."

Ke Zhen'E was delighted listening to their conversation. He was proud that Guo Jing was well-behaved.

Qiu Qianren suddenly said, "The Six Freaks of the South [Jiangnan] are prominent characters in the Jianghu world. This old man has a very important matter to deal with. It would be wonderful if I could acquire your valuable assistance."

"Senior Qiu was just about to explain the matter when the six guests arrived," explained the Manor Master. "Now would Senior please enlighten us?"

Qiu Qianren complied and said, "For we who live in the Jianghu world, the ultimate purpose of our existence is chivalry and helping the suffering people. Right now we see with our own eyes the Jin army moving south. If our Song Dynasty cannot discern good from bad and is not willing to surrender, when the war breaks out, I wonder how many lives will perish? As the saying goes, 'shun tian zhe chang, ni tian zhe wang' [following Heaven's will means prosperity, opposing Heaven's will means death]. Therefore, this old man is going to make contact with the valiant people of the south and to take up arms alongside the Jin army and attack the Song Dynasty from both sides. This will render it helpless and thus it will not have any choice but surrender. If we succeed, not only will we gain riches and honor, but the gratitude of the common people as well. That way our martial arts skills are not useless and we do not taint the two characters 'xia yi' (chivalry) with dishonor."

Hearing this, the Six Freaks' countenances flushed and the Han siblings were ready to open their mouths. Luckily Quan Jinfa - who sat between them, quickly pulled their sleeves and signaled with his eyes towards the Manor Master, hinting that they should wait to see how he responded.

So far Master Lu had showed great admiration for Qiu Qianren; but listening to his speech he was unable to restrain his great surprise. He forced a smile and said,

“Even though Junior is unworthy and my body is as worthless as grass, I have never dared to forget ‘zhong yi’ [loyalty and brotherhood]. The Jin army is going south to attack my country and they mean harm to the people. Junior will certainly join other Jiangnan heroes to fight the invaders to my death. Senior, what you just said, was that to test me?”

“Brother Lu, how can you be so short sighted?” Qiu Qianren asked. “What good is it to help the Song fight the Jin? Most likely you will end up like Yue Wu Mu [General Yue Fei], who suffered a tragic death at the ‘Crisis Pavilion’ [Feng Bo Ting].”

Hearing this, Master Lu was shocked and angered at the same time. Initially he thought he could count on Qiu to help him deal with the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ [hei feng shuang sha]. Who would have thought that he had decided to betray his own country? It was useless to possess a high martial arts skill if the person had such a low character and was this shameless. He flicked his sleeve and said, “Junior is facing a formidable enemy tonight. I was going to ask Senior to help me uphold justice; but since we do not hold to the same values, I do not dare to entertain your honorable presence even if blood should splash from my neck. Please!” He cupped his fists. His intention was clear; he did not want the guest to stay any longer.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan – along with Guo Jing and Huang Rong, were delighted and secretly admired their host.

Qiu Qianren smiled but did not say anything. As his left hand gripped the wine cup, his right hand moved towards the cup’s mouth, revolving the cup around in his hand. Suddenly he flipped his right hand and flicked the cup away. To everyone’s amazement the cup was cut smoothly into

two parts: the cup bottom and about half an inch of porcelain ring. To crush a cup is not difficult, but to cut the cup smoothly was a demonstration of profound energy worthy of respect.

Master Lu realized he was being threatened. While he was still hesitating, the 'Horse God' [ma wang shen] Han Baoju had already leaped out of his seat. Angrily he called out, "Shameless scoundrel, let us see who is superior, you or I!"

Qiu Qianren did not falter. "I have heard for a long time of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan's stellar reputation. Today I want to see whether what I heard is true or not. All six of you, come!"

Master Lu knew Han Baoju was no match for the old man. He was delighted to hear the old man challenge all six of them. He quickly said, "The Six Freaks of Jiangnan always move forward and backward together. Facing a single enemy or fighting an army, the six go together, not a single one of them willing to be left behind."

Zhu Cong understood very well the Manor Master's intention. "Very well," he said, "let us five brothers and our sister fight this famous Wulin character!" He waved his hand and his five brothers and sister immediately left their seats.

Qiu Qianren also stood up, picked his chair up, strolled to the center of the hall, set the chair down, and sat with his right foot above his left. He calmly said, "This old man will fight you sitting down."

Ke Zhen'E and the others were startled. He knew that the old man would not dare to act so arrogantly if he did not have a very high level of martial arts.

While his six masters had not made any moves yet, Guo Jing quickly moved forward. He had heard amazing stories

about this old man's kungfu and knew his masters were not this old man's match. He had received his masters' kindness and even though he knew the risk, he stepped in front of his masters and boldly said, "Junior is asking for some lessons from the Senior."

Qiu Qianren was surprised; then exploded in laughter. "It wasn't easy for your parents to raise you. Why would you waste your unworthy life for nothing in this place?"

Almost in unison Ke Zhen'E and the others called out, "Jing'er, move back!"

But Guo Jing was determined. He was afraid his masters would hold him back, so without saying anything he bent his left leg a little bit, moved his right palm in a circular motion, then thrust it forward, hard. It was the 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' [kang long you hui] from the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', which he had unceasingly trained hard up to this day. It could not be compared to what it was when Hong Qigong first taught it to him.

Qiu Qianren had judged Han Baoju's skill when he leaped out of his seat. It wasn't extraordinary so it was natural that he thought Han's disciple would not be good either. It was beyond his comprehension that Guo Jing's attack would be so fierce. He was shocked and hastily leaped up from his chair, only to hear a loud cracking sound. His chair had been destroyed by Guo Jing's palm.

"Confounded kid!" he shouted angrily when he landed back on the floor.

Guo Jing was a bit wary; he did not dare to advance. "Senior, please give me some pointers," he said politely.

Huang Rong wanted to disturb Qiu Qianren's mind so she called out, "Jing ge ge, don't be so polite to this old

scoundrel!”

The old man was livid! As long as he had roamed Jianghu, who would dare call him ‘old scoundrel’ to his face? He was about to thrust his palm to attack her, but suddenly remembered his own reputation. He sneered and lifted his right hand and positioned his left hand on his eyebrows. Then, just when Guo Jing darted sideways to fend, redirected his hand to make a claw then retracted it. The hand on his eyebrows moved forward in circular motion. His right hand followed, changing from a fist to a palm.

Huang Rong called out, “What’s so special about that move? That is the ‘Lone Goose Leaves the Flock’ [gu yan chu qun] from the ‘Open Arm Six Palms Technique’ [tong bi liu he zhang]!”

Qiu Qianren was surprised that she recognized his move. It was indeed the ‘Open Arm Six Palms Technique’, which was created based on the ‘Open Arm Five Elements Technique’ [tong bi wu xing zhang]. It was not an extraordinary move, but he had perfected this move for decades. The word ‘open’ here actually meant that his right and left arms were interchangeable. Guo Jing saw his right hand coming fast, while his left hand moving to the right, then the right hand went back and supported the left hand. Both hands were supporting each other, increasing the strength of both hands and was very fierce.

Guo Jing had seen his amazing strength and he lacked experience in combat. He was a little bit nervous and did not dare to counterattack. He kept stepping back.

Qiu Qianren thought, “This kid could destroy a chair because of his strength, but actually his martial arts are only average.” He immediately launched several stances: ‘Penetrating Palm Hacking Down in a Flash’ [chuan zhang

shan pi], 'Lifting the Cloud Palm Technique' [liao yin zhang], 'Step Across the Tiger to Climb a Mountain' [kua hu deng shan], getting stronger with each stance.

Huang Rong was anxious seeing that Guo Jing was losing. She approached the two with the intention of stepping in if Guo Jing was in danger.

When Guo Jing saw her coming, he turned his head to see her anxious face and could not help but feel nervous. Qiu Qianren saw this and, wasting no time, he attacked with the 'White Snake Spitting Sign' [bai she tu zhi]; his palm hit Guo Jing squarely on the chest.

Huang Rong and the Six Freaks – as well as Master Lu and his son, all called out in alarm. They thought that with Qiu's strength hitting such a vital part, Guo Jing must be dead or at least severely injured.

Guo Jing was also shocked, so he immediately circulated his chi and lifted both arms. Strangely he did not feel too much pain, which puzzled him no end. Huang Rong saw him staring blankly and thought that he was internally injured and was about to pass out. She immediately jumped forward to support him and asked anxiously, "Jing ge ge, are you all right?" Her heart was so shaken that tears flowed involuntarily from her eyes.

Guo Jing's response was unexpected, "I am all right! Let me try again." He stuck his chest out, walked toward Qiu Qianren and boldly said, "You are the senior 'Iron Palm Who Floats on Water', hit me again!"

Qiu Qianren was furious; he immediately struck another palm at Guo Jing's chest with all his strength. But instead of collapsing, Guo Jing laughed loudly and shouted, "Masters! Rong'er! This old scoundrel's skill is only ordinary. As long as he did not hit me, his secret was safe; but as soon as he

hit me, his secret is revealed!" His words were followed by a sweep of his left arm, forcing Qiu Qianren to step back. "Now you can feel my palm!" he shouted.

Qiu Qianren saw his movement and thought, "You said 'palm' but your hand forms a fist, do you think I am blind?" He underestimated Guo Jing's attack and simply blocked the fist with both hands in front of his chest. Who would have known that Guo Jing was using the 'Dragon Battling in the Wilderness' [long zhan yu ye] which was the most mysterious stance of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. Both left and right arms could be either solid or void without any specific rules.

Qiu Qianren saw Guo Jing's left arm move while his right arm hung loose; suddenly the right arm thrust forward and hit Qiu Qianren on the right shoulder, followed by a punch to his chest. Qiu Qianren's body flew out of the hall through the main entrance like a kite with broken string!

Just as everyone uttered a startled cry, somebody suddenly appeared in the entrance. She held Qiu Qianren by his collar while entering the main hall with big strides. She put Qiu Qianren down on the floor and stood coolly at the center of the hall. Her face was cold and expressionless and her long hair lay scattered about her shoulders. She looked up. It was none other than 'Iron Corpse', Mei Chaofeng. Every heart skipped a beat.

Behind her was another person no less peculiar than 'Iron Corpse'. That person was tall and rather thin and wearing a dark green robe. His countenance was pale and expressionless. Other than his eyes, the rest of his face seemed frozen like a wooden statue. He stood still and stiff like a standing corpse. As soon as everyone saw this person, a chill crept down their spines. They immediately turned

their gaze away from this person, not daring to look at his face any longer with their hearts thumping.

Master Lu was perplexed. He would never have thought that the world famous Qiu Qianren would collapse unexpectedly from the first blow of his opponent. He was about to smile but, seeing Mei Chaofeng's arrival, his smile froze.

Wanyan Kang saw his master and was very excited. He immediately stepped forward to pay his respects. Everybody could see that these two, master and disciple, were actually similar in appearance and could not help but be astonished.

Master Lu raised his cupped fists and said, "Martial Sister Mei, it's been twenty long years and we finally meet here. How is Martial Brother Chen?"

The Six Freaks exchanged glances with Guo Jing. They clearly heard Master Lu calling her 'Martial Sister' and could not help but feel dismayed. Ke Zhen'E was upset. "We fall into a trap today," he said. "Mei Chaofeng alone is not easy to deal with, now she has her martial brother at hand."

Huang Rong on the other hand secretly nodded her head. "This Master's martial arts and literary knowledge, as well as his general conduct and manner of speaking, resemble those of my father. I suspected he must have a martial relationship with us. But who would have thought he's my father's disciple."

Mei Chaofeng replied coldly, "Is the speaker my martial brother Lu Chengfeng?"

"Yes," Master Lu answered. "Has Martial Sister been well since our last meeting?"

“Why do you ask?” Mei Chaofeng answered. “Both of my eyes are blind. Can’t you see it? Your Martial Brother Xuanfeng was murdered a long time ago. That was your expectation, was it not?”

Master Lu was both pleasantly surprised and shocked. The ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ had roamed Jianghu and turned it upside-down...how could ‘Copper Corpse’ have been murdered? But he was also relieved because he had one less formidable enemy and moreover, the one left behind was blind. However, he recalled their apprenticeship together on Peach Blossom Island and could not help but feel sad. “Who killed Martial Brother Chen?” he sighed and asked. “Has Martial Sister sought revenge?”

“I have wandered everywhere looking for them,” Mei Chaofeng answered.

“Let Little Brother help you,” Master Lu said. “Afterward we can sort out our own business.”

“Humph!” Mei Chaofeng sneered.

“Mei Chaofeng!” Han Baoju could not hold himself. He slapped the table and shouted, “Your sworn enemies are here!”

He was going to pounce on her, but Quan Jinfa quickly pulled him back. Mei Chaofeng, on the other hand, was taken aback. “You ... you ...” she stammered.

At that time Qiu Qianren, who had been silent because of the chest pain from Guo Jing’s punch, felt the pain subsiding. He opened his mouth to say, “What is it you were talking about...revenge? Why, your own master was killed and you don’t know it? What kind of hero are you?”

“What did you say?” Mei Chaofeng almost screamed. She tightly crushed Qiu Qianren’s hand so that he cried out in pain, “Let go...let go!”

Mei Chaofeng ignored him, “What did you say?” she repeated.

“The Master of Peach Blossom Island has been killed!” Qiu Qianren answered.

Lu Chengfeng was stunned. “Is that true?” he asked anxiously.

“Why would it not be true?” Qiu Qianren answered. “He was surrounded and killed by the Quanzhen Seven Masters, Wang Chongyang’s disciples.”

Before he finished speaking Mei Chaofeng and Lu Chengfeng had called out loudly. With a loud thud Huang Rong fell backwards from her chair...unconscious. The others initially did not believe that with his expertise, Huang Yaoshi would easily be killed by anyone; but since it was the Quanzhen Seven Masters, they had to believe it. They knew very well the combined power of Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others would be difficult for Huang Yaoshi to defeat.

Guo Jing, frantic, hugged Huang Rong and called out, “Rong’er, wake up!” He saw Huang Rong’s face was deathly pale and her breathing uneven; he was even more anxious and called his masters, “Master...Master...help!”

Zhu Cong immediately came over and held his hand beneath her nose. “Don’t worry,” he said. “She was only shocked...she is not going to die.” Then he rubbed her ‘Fatigue Palace acupoint’ [lao gong xue] while slowly transferring internal energy.

Huang Rong slowly recovered. "Father...Father! I want my Father!" she cried.

Lu Chengfeng was surprised, but immediately realized, "She is Master's daughter. No wonder she knew about the 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pill'." He shed some tears and loudly called out, "Little Martial Sister, let us go after those scoundrel Quanzhen priests to seek revenge. Mei Chaofeng...are you coming or not? If you don't come, let me fight you to the death right now! It ... it was because of you that Master met his fate."

Lu Guanying knew his father was too deep in sorrow to speak coherently. He quickly supported him and urged, "Father, please don't be so sad. We need to consider it further."

Lu Chengfeng ignored his son and cried louder. "Mei Chaofeng! You bitch! You have caused me much harm! You are shameless! You ran away with your man, which was all right with me, but why did you have to steal Master's 'Nine Yin Manual' as well? In his anger he smashed the ligaments in the legs of us four martial brothers. Not only that, he expelled us from Peach Blossom Island. I was hoping Master would change his mind and have compassion on us who hadn't done anything to deserve such punishment. Now that he's passed away, my hope is shattered ..."

"I always thought you were spineless," Mei Chaofeng scolded, "and you are still spineless. Three...four times you lead other people to deal with us, forcing us - husband and wife to be without shelter; we had to run for our lives and ended up suffering on the Mongolian Steppe. Now you don't have guts enough to seek revenge for our Master, but keep nagging about settling your own old debts with me. I say we go and find those seven scoundrels and deal with them. If you can't walk, I'll carry you!"

All this time Huang Rong was still weeping, "Father! I want my Father!"

Zhu Cong intervened, "Let us ask about this more directly," he said, walking towards Qiu Qianren. He brushed some dust from Qiu Qianren's clothes and apologetically said, "My young disciple was ignorant and has offended you; he has no regard for seniority."

Qiu Qianren was angry, "I am old, my eyes are not clear, I let it slip by. Come, let us fight again!"

Zhu Cong patted his shoulder and pulled his left hand gently, then persuasively smiled, "Senior is an expert; there is no need to fight with him." As soon as they got to the table, Zhu Cong picked a wine cup up with his left hand, while his right hand covered the cup's mouth. Then he revolved it around, just like Qiu had done, and flicked the cup to the table. With a clanking sound the wine cup landed on the table, broken into two parts: the cup bottom and about half an inch of porcelain ring. Exactly like Qiu Qianren demonstrated earlier. Everyone was amazed!

Zhu Cong smiled and said, "Senior's skill is extraordinary. Junior has stolen it from you. Please forgive my offense and many thanks to you."

Qiu Qianren's face changed color immediately. Now everybody knew there must be some kind of trick, but nobody really knew what was going on.

"Jing'er, come here!" Zhu Cong called, "Let me teach you a trick and later on you can use it to deceive other people."

Guo Jing came near and Zhu Cong showed him a ring on his left middle finger. "This is Senior Qiu's; I borrowed it from him a moment ago. Go ahead and put it on," he said while taking the ring off his own finger.

Qiu Qianren was startled, then fuming mad. He did not understand how the ring on his finger had moved to Zhu's finger. In the meantime Guo Jing had already taken the ring. Zhu Cong explained, "This ring has a diamond chip on it, the hardest material on earth. Put the diamond's tip on the wine cup and rotate the cup with your right hand."

Guo Jing did so. Now Lu Guanying and the others began to understand. They were unable to restrain a smile and softly murmured amongst themselves. Guo Jing turned the cup in his right hand and sure enough, the cup was smoothly broken into two parts. If one looked carefully, the diamond had left a deep mark on the porcelain pieces; it wasn't profound internal energy at all.

Huang Rong was amused and she was smiling through her tears; then the memory of her father came flooding back and she cried again.

"Don't cry, Miss," Zhu Cong comforted her, "This Senior Qiu loves to deceive people and his words may not be necessarily true." Huang Rong was puzzled and she looked at him with a questioning look.

"Your father's martial arts are so profound; how could he be killed by other people easily?" Zhu Cong said with a smile. "Also, the Quanzhen Seven Masters are respectable people and they have no enmity towards your father. Why would they kill him without a reason?"

"Perhaps it was because of Qiu Chuji and the other ox-noses [derogatory term for Taoist priests] Martial Uncle Zhou Botong," Huang Rong said, expressing a guess.

"What about him?" Zhu Cong asked.

"You wouldn't know about it," Huang Rong said, crying again. Even with her intelligence, she was not really sure

what really happened. First of all, it had something to do with her mother and Huang Yaoshi did not want to talk too much about it. Second, the business between her father and Zhou Botong was more complicated than her young mind could grasp. She did not want to believe the Quanzhen Seven Masters would attack her father, but the fact was....she was not sure.

"Whatever it was, I'd say this old man's word is a little bit smelly," Zhu Cong said.

"You mean he was only ... only ...," Huang Rong stuttered.

"Yes, he was just farting!" Zhu Cong laughed. "He has so many tricks stored in his pocket and guess what he would do with them." Then he groped into his pocket and produced some things which he placed on the table. Among those things were two bricks, some dry grass, a piece of cloth to light a fire, a knife for the same purpose and a piece of flint.

Huang Rong took a brick and as soon as she tightened her grip she could feel the brick was soft. She gripped it harder and, without too much effort, the brick crumbled into powder. After listening to Zhu Cong's words her sadness was greatly reduced. Her face broke into a smile, showing her two dimples. "This brick is made from bread flour. He used it to demonstrate his profound internal energy earlier."

Qiu Qianren's face turned from pale to red and back to pale. He was greatly ashamed. He thought that with the news of Huang Yaoshi's death, everyone's attention could be diverted and he would find an opportunity to escape. Who would have thought that his scheme would be revealed by Zhu Cong? He flicked his sleeve and turned around to

walk out. But Mei Chaofeng reached backwards, snatched him, and then threw him on the floor.

“You said my Master passed away, did you tell the truth?” she asked menacingly. Qiu Qianren was in too much pain to say anything, he only whimpered.

Huang Rong noticed that the grass was half burnt and immediately realized what had happened earlier. “Second Master, light the grass, put it inside your sleeve, then inhale and exhale.”

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan initially had some problems with Huang Rong, but Qiu Qianren’s trickery had united them in facing a common enemy. Zhu Cong happily complied. Actually he liked Huang Rong’s cunning mind and her eccentricity. Now that Huang Rong called him ‘Second Master’ he liked her even more. He did what was asked and while doing that, he even closed his eyes and swayed his head solemnly.

Huang Rong clapped her hands in delight. “Jing ge ge,” she said laughing happily, “Didn’t we see this old man practicing his internal strength a while ago exactly like this?” She walked to Qiu Qianren’s side and said, “Stand up!” As she pulled him up, she suddenly struck his ‘Holy Way’ [shen dao] acupoint under the fifth rib on his back with her left hand, using the ‘Orchid’ acupoint sealing technique [lan hua fu xue shou]. She shouted loudly, “Tell me, did my father die? If you say he did, I will take your life away!” With a flip of her hand she placed a shiny butterfly shaped steel piece on his chest.

Everybody was amused hearing her threat. She asked him for the truth but she didn’t want him to say Huang Yaoshi was dead.

Qiu Qianren was writhing in pain and also suffering from an itch. "I am afraid he is not dead yet. I don't know ..." he said, trembling.

Huang Rong beamed from ear to ear. "Very good!" she said, "I will spare you." She struck his 'Open Basin' [que pen] acupoint to ease his suffering.

Lu Chengfeng thought, "Little Martial Sister's question was one-sided and really missed the point." So he asked, "You said my Master had been killed by the Quanzhen Seven Masters, did you see it with your own eyes, or did you just hear it from somebody else?"

"I heard it from somebody else," Qiu Qianren replied.

"Who was it?" Lu Chengfeng pursued.

Qiu Qianren hesitated, but finally said, "It was Hong Qigong."

"When did he tell you that?" asked Huang Rong.

"About a month ago," Qiu Qianren answered.

"Where did you two meet?" Huang Rong asked again.

"At the summit of Mount Tai [Taishan]," Qiu Qianren answered. "We were having a match and he lost to me. He unintentionally mentioned it."

Huang Rong was ecstatic. She hopped around like a little kid. Her left hand grabbed his chest, her right hand pulled away some of his beard. Giggling she said, "Hong Qigong lost to this old scoundrel? Martial Sister Mei, Martial Brother Lu, don't listen to him, he was just ... just ..." Being a girl, she didn't have the heart to use vulgar language.

Zhu Cong continued for her, "He was just farting!" then he covered his mouth, laughing.

Huang Rong continued, "A month ago Hong Qigong was with Jing ge ge and I. Jing ge ge, give him another blow!"

"Right!" Guo Jing said, moving towards Qiu Qianren.

Qiu Qianren was frightened and he turned around to escape, but Mei Chaofeng was standing in the middle of the doorway. He turned around again, but this time Lu Guanying blocked his way. He quickly pushed until Guanying staggered and fell. Even though he had gained his fame by deceiving people, Qiu Qianren still possessed some real martial arts skill. If he did not, he would not recklessly dare to challenge the Six Freaks and Guo Jing. Lu Guanying was certainly not his match.

Huang Rong jumped to block him. "You carried an iron cauldron over your head and walked on water, how did you do it?" she asked.

"That was my special skill," Qiu Qianren answered. "My title is 'Iron Palm Floating on Water'; that was the 'Floating on Water'."

"You are still boasting," Huang Rong said with a smile. "Aren't you going to tell me the truth?"

"I am old, my martial arts are not as they used to be," Qiu Qianren answered. "But my lightness kungfu has been trained to perfection."

"Very well," Huang Rong said, "There is a large cistern containing gold fish outside in the courtyard. Why don't you demonstrate your 'Floating on Water' so that everybody can see your skill? Just go out of the hall, turn left beneath the

sweet-smelling 'osmanthus' [gui hua] tree." [Note: A fragrant evergreen tree/shrub native to China.]

"How can someone train in a cistern ...?" Qiu Qianren had not finished speaking when something flashed brightly in front of his eyes and, without him realizing it, his foot had been grabbed and he was hanging upside down.

"Your death is imminent, yet you still open your big mouth!" Mei Chaofeng shouted. Her 'Poisonous Silver Dragon Whip' [du long yin bian] curled in midair and hurled him toward the cistern, following Huang Rong's directions.

Huang Rong quickly moved to the cistern, waving her butterfly shaped steel piece menacingly. "I won't let you out of the cistern unless you explain to me your 'Floating on Water'!"

Qiu Qianren kicked the cistern's bottom, trying to leap up, but Huang Rong's steel punctured his shoulder. He fell back into the cistern, soaking wet. With face showing much pain he said, "In that cauldron was laid a thin sheet of iron which was sealed; above it I put three inches of water. In that creek I hid some wooden poles about five to six inches below the surface to make them invisible."

Huang Rong laughed, then re-entered the hall, not paying Qiu Qianren any more attention. He quickly leaped up from the cistern and hastily ran out of the manor without looking back.

Mei Chaofeng and Lu Chengfeng smiled in embarrassment. They had fought and cried over nothing. Their master had not been killed. Now that this matter was made clear, they felt uneasy towards each other. Mei Chaofeng hesitated for a moment, then clearing her throat she said, "Lu Chengfeng, let my disciple go. For the sake of our Master I won't remember our past differences any longer. As for the

fact that both husband and wife had to flee to Mongolia ... oh well, that was our fate."

Lu Chengfeng heaved a deep sigh. He said in his heart, "Her husband has died, her eyes blinded and she is alone and forsaken in this world. Both my legs are crippled, but I have a wife and a son. I have a family and I have a business. Actually my condition is a hundred times better than hers. Both of us are decades older than we were then, why would I keep holding resentment towards her?" Therefore, he answered, "You can take your disciple away. Mei Shijie [older martial sister], your younger brother will leave for Peach Blossom Island to visit our benevolent master tomorrow. Will you come with me?"

"Do you dare?" Mei Chaofeng asked with a trembling voice.

"To visit Peach Blossom Island without Master's permission is a big violation of our banishment, but after listening to that old man Qiu talking nonsense, my heart was troubled. I want to make sure he is all right. If I don't go, I will be haunted with uncertainty for the rest of my life."

Before Mei Chaofeng could answer Huang Rong had already said, "Let us all go together. I will ask his forgiveness on your behalf."

Mei Chaofeng was silent for a moment. Two lines of tears flowed down her cheeks. "I don't have face to see him," she sadly said. "Our benevolent master had compassion on a wretched child like me. He took me as his disciple and raised me. But because of wild ambition I have betrayed him..." Suddenly she lifted her head and shouted, "I only want to seek revenge for my husband. Afterwards, I know what to do. Seven Freaks of Jiangnan...let us sort out our business now. Martial Brother Lu, Little Martial Sister, you stand aside; don't even think of interfering. No matter who

lives or who dies, I don't want you to help either side. Do you hear?"

Ke Zhen'E walked in big strides to the main hall, his iron staff striking the brick floor. Then he said clearly with his hoarse voice, "Mei Chaofeng, you can't see me, neither can I see you. That night when we fought on that barren hill, your husband died a violent death, but our fifth brother also died at your hands. Did you know that?"

"Oh...there's only six of you left?" Mei Chaofeng asked.

"We promised Taoist Priest Ma Yu to no longer seek vengeance towards you, but it is actually you that looked for us. Good! Even though the world is wide, we always meet each other. It seems like the heavens won't allow the six of us to co-exist with you in this world. Come!" Ke Zhen'E coldly said.

Mei Chaofeng snorted. "The six of you can attack together," she said icily.

Zhu Cong and the other Freaks quickly arranged themselves near their elder brother, guarding against Mei Chaofeng's sudden attack. Everybody unsheathed their weapons.

Suddenly Guo Jing moved forward. "Let your disciple fight her first," he said.

Lu Chengfeng was in an awkward situation. He heard Mei Chaofeng's challenge and the six accepted. He did not know how to be the mediator and he hated himself for not having authority or influence over these people. But hearing Guo Jing's words an idea suddenly came to his mind. He quickly said, "Both sides please stay your hands for a moment. Please listen to Little Brother's words. Although Mei Shijie and the Jiangnan Six have deep enmity between you, each

side has suffered an unfortunate loss. In Little Brother's opinion, no more blood needs to be shed. Let today's match only decide victory or defeat, please don't deepen the enmity. The Six Freaks, although they always face the enemy together, it is still six against one; that, in my opinion, is not fair. Why doesn't Mei Shijie teach several moves to young Brother Guo?"

Mei Chaofeng snorted and coldly said, "How could I fight an unknown junior?"

"Your husband died at my hands. What does it have to do with my Masters?" Guo Jing called out.

Mei Chaofeng was furious. She jumped up and shouted, "Precisely! I will kill you first, little scoundrel!" By listening to voices she knew her enemy's position. Her five fingers stretched towards Guo Jing's skull.

Guo Jing leaped to avoid the attack. "Senior Mei!" he called out. "I was very young and ignorant and I accidentally killed your husband. But one has to be responsible for one's actions. Today you want to kill me and I won't run away. But will you still look for my Masters in the future?" He realized he was no match for Mei Chaofeng and was ready to die under her fingers; but he was determined to protect his Masters in any way he could.

"You really aren't going to run away?" Mei Chaofeng asked.

"No!" Guo Jing asserted.

"Good!" Mei Chaofeng shouted. "I am willing to write off the Six Freaks' debt. Good boy, come, follow me!"

"Mei Shijie, he is a real man. You on the other hand, will be the laughingstock of the heroes of Jianghu!" Huang Rong suddenly called out.

“How?” Mei Chaofeng was angry.

“He is the only heir to the Jiangnan’s Six Freaks’ skills,” Huang Rong explained. “The Six Freaks martial arts of today cannot be compared to theirs of the past. It would be quite easy if they really wanted to take your life. But they have actually forgiven you. Not only that, they also gave you face. It was you who didn’t know the good from the bad... yet you are still boasting.”

“Did I want them to forgive me? Bah! ” Mei Chaofeng was furious. “Six Freaks, have your martial arts improved greatly? Want to try me?”

“Why would they want to fight you personally? Even their disciple won’t necessarily lose to you,” Huang Rong said.

Mei Chaofeng was so angry she almost screamed, “If I can’t kill him in three stances, I will kill myself right here right now.” She had fought Guo Jing in the Zhao palace and thought she knew his level of martial arts. What she didn’t know was that in the past few months Guo Jing had received the tutelage of the ‘Nine-Fingered Divine Beggar’. His skill now couldn’t be compared to his skill then.

“Good!” Huang Rong said, “Let all the people here bear witness. Three stances are too few, let’s give you ten.”

“I will match Senior Mei for fifteen stances,” Guo Jing said. He’d only learned fifteen out of the eighteen moves of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’, hence he thought he could at least survive fifteen stances.

“Ask Martial Brother Lu and the guest who accompanied you to be the witnesses,” Huang Rong added.

“Who accompanies me?” Mei Chaofeng was taken aback. “I rushed to this manor alone...who came with me?”

“Who is that behind you then?” Huang Rong asked.

Mei Chaofeng threw a sudden backward punch, quick as lightning. Nobody saw the man move, but her attack hit empty space. That person moved like he was a ghost or spirit; the amazing part was that he moved without making a sound.

After she arrived in the Jiangnan region Mei Chaofeng always had the feeling that somebody was following her, but no matter how she spoke or attacked, she could never hear anything. She thought she was losing her mind, or it was a ghost haunting her. And then she heard the flute driving away the snakes and she was certain someone with a very high level of martial arts was shadowing her. She had tried to express her gratitude to the air, but nobody answered. She waited among the trees, but was not sure if that person had left or not. Now she heard Huang Rong speak and she was unable to hide her feeling.

“Who are you?” she asked, trembling, “What do you want from me?”

That person did not answer. Nobody knew if he even heard the question. Mei Chaofeng thrust herself forward. That person did not seem to move but again she did not touch anything. Everybody was stunned. They had never seen someone with this person’s immeasurable skill.

Lu Chengfeng boldly asked, “The Honorable Guest has come from a long way and I have not had the opportunity to welcome you. Would you please sit down and have a drink with me?”

That person turned around, seemingly floating on air as he went outside.

Mei Chaofeng gathered her courage and asked, "Is Honorable Senior the one who played the flute to help me? Mei Chaofeng is deeply grateful."

Nobody was able to restrain their amazement. Being a blind woman, Mei Chaofeng had very sharp ears, but she could not hear that person leaving the hall.

"Mei Shijie, that person has already left," Huang Rong said.

Mei Chaofeng was startled. "He did? I ... How could I not hear him?"

"Go after him quickly; don't boast about yourself in here," Huang Rong said.

Mei Chaofeng was dumbfounded. Her face showed sadness, yet there was a tinge of anger. Suddenly she shouted, "Guo Kid, take this!" She lifted both hands with all ten fingers out-stretched, emanating a spooky bluish green aura in the candlelight; but she did not attack.

"I am here," Guo Jing said.

As soon as Mei Chaofeng heard the word 'I' her right hand moved, followed by her left hand's five fingers, towards Guo Jing's face.

Guo Jing saw her fast movement; he slightly leaned his body sideways and sent his left palm toward her. Mei Chaofeng heard the sound of the palm and was about to evade, but she was not fast enough for the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' exquisite move and her shoulder was struck. She was shaken and forced to retreat three steps. But her martial arts were not weak. While stepping backwards she sent her fingernails to counterattack. Guo Jing was taken by surprise and his right wrist was caught by Mei Chaofeng on three acupoints: 'Inner Gate' [nei guan], 'Outer Gate' [wai

guan], and 'Ancestor Meeting' [hui zong]. Guo Jing had carefully heeded his masters warning, that Mei Chaofeng's 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' [jiu yin bai gu zhua] was very lethal; hence he guarded himself carefully. But now he could not avoid being grasped by those deadly fingers. "Not good!" he screamed. His whole body felt weak. In that critical moment he managed to bend two fingers, and with his hand forming a half-palm-half-fist he hit her chest. That was the 'Hidden Dragon is Forbidden' [qian long wu yong]. It was supposed to be followed by his left hook – a brilliant stance difficult to fend; but since his left wrist was in the enemy's hand, he could only launch a half stance. But the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' was amazing and even a half stance was no small matter.

Mei Chaofeng heard the incredible wind generated by this half-palm-half-fist move; she did not dare to parry but tried to elude it. Still her shoulder was hit very hard and she was forced to let Guo Jing go.

As Guo Jing was struggling to free himself, he pulled hard, so when his hand was suddenly free both people were thrown backwards and each hit a pillar. The roof shook and bricks, stones and dust fell down into the hall. Many manor people cried out and ran to escape.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan looked at each other with amazement but were also pleasantly surprised. "Where did Jing'er learn this kungfu?" they asked in their hearts. Han Baoju looked at Huang Rong suspiciously; he thought she was the one who taught Guo Jing and secretly felt admiration, "Peach Blossom Island's martial arts are amazing."

By now Guo Jing and Mei Chaofeng were engaged in a fierce battle. Palms, fists, and claws were exchanged. Mei Chaofeng was furious and she fought with gusto. Guo Jing

was calm but agile. Both had exerted their full strength and the hall was filled with the sound of their blows.

Suddenly Mei Chaofeng jumped vertically; her attacks seemed to come from every direction, one after another, ever changing. Guo Jing knew this attack was fierce and he would suffer defeat if he left any openings in his defense. He recalled Hong Qigong's lesson on how to deal with Huang Rong's 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm [tao hua shen jian zhang]; no matter how many changes his opponent executed he steadily used fifteen moves out of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

By repeating these fifteen moves he was able to defend himself for forty to fifty moves; without giving Mei Chaofeng even half a step advantage.

Huang Rong was keeping her eyes on her 'Jing ge ge' with a smile on her pretty face. The Six Freaks stood still in amazement, sometimes clucking their tongues in praise. Lu Chengfeng and his son could only look on in dismay.

"Mei Shijie has improved so much," Lu Chengfeng thought. "If I had to fight her, I would certainly lose my life in only ten moves ... This young Brother Guo, how could he master such a profound kungfu at his young age? I was really blind ... Luckily I was not careless or indiscreet, but treated him with politeness and respect."

Wanyan Kang was also upset, "I was supposed to compete with this boy; with his kungfu, how could I win?"

"Mei Shijie, you have been fighting for more than eighty moves. Why don't you admit defeat?" Huang Rong loudly called out. Actually they had only fought for about sixty moves, but she exaggerated by adding twenty more.

Mei Chaofeng was fuming. "I have trained hard for dozens of years but cannot cope with this kid?" she thought. She ignored Huang Rong's remark and increased the speed of her attacks. Her kungfu was actually many times better than Guo Jing's; but first, she was at a disadvantage because of her blindness, and second, she could not think straight because her heart was filled with rage in her efforts to seek revenge for her husband. Anger is a big taboo in a battle between two martial arts experts. Thirdly, Guo Jing had the advantage of a youth's strength, plus he had mastered most of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. Therefore, the battle between these two was extremely fierce.

After about a hundred moves, Mei Chaofeng started to recognize and become more familiar with Guo Jing's fifteen moves. She knew Guo Jing's line of defense was formidable; she could feel the wind from more than ten feet away. But she also knew that performing the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' took a lot of energy, and her internal energy was stronger than Guo Jing's. Therefore, Mei Chaofeng changed her tactics and was trying to tire him. She used the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and 'Heart Destroying Palm Technique' [cui xin zhang] interchangeably.

Huang Rong knew if this fight was further prolonged, Guo Jing would suffer defeat. "Mei Shijie, it's more than a hundred moves and quickly will reach the two-hundredth move. You still don't want to admit defeat?" she called. But Mei Chaofeng turned a deaf ear and increased the intensity of her attacks.

Suddenly Huang Rong had an idea; she leaped to a nearby pillar and called out, "Jing ge ge, look at me!" Guo Jing launched two moves in succession: 'Wading a Wide Creek' [li she da chuan] and the 'Phoenix Slowly Arises from the

Land' [hong jian yu lu], and managed to push Mei Chaofeng back far enough so that he could turn his eyes to Huang Rong. He saw her running around the pillar and making some hand signals, but did not understand what she wanted. So she called out again, "Fight here!"

Guo Jing finally understood; he turned around and leaped toward a nearby pillar. Mei Chaofeng followed with her five fingers to grab him, but her claw ended up penetrating the pillar. As a blind woman, she used sounds to know the whereabouts of her opponent; but the pillar was fixed in place and did not make any sounds at all. When Guo Jing hid behind one, how would she know?

As soon as Guo Jing overcame his surprise he immediately launched a palm which Mei Chaofeng parried. Two forces collided and both were pushed back several steps while Mei Chaofeng's fingers were freed from the pillar. Mei Chaofeng was very angry and she did not waste another second. Before Guo Jing could steady himself she sent another attack his way.

Guo Jing was able to elude it, but his clothes were ripped and his arm was scratched by her fingernails. Luckily he was not injured, but Mei Chaofeng had scared the hell out of him. Guo Jing quickly counterattacked by launching three successive moves combined with hiding behind the pillar. Mei Chaofeng shouted angrily as once again her fingers pierced the pillar.

Actually Guo Jing did not want to take advantage of her blindness, so he loudly called out, "Senior Mei, my kungfu is far inferior to yours; please show me mercy!"

Everybody could see that Guo Jing had gained the upper hand albeit with the help of the pillar. They knew he was giving Mei Chaofeng face by asking her to stop. Lu

Chengfeng also thought that this was a good time to stop the fight.

But Mei Chaofeng coldly said, "If we were competing in martial arts and when I could not defeat you in three moves I should have admitted defeat. But today's fight is not a martial arts competition; I am seeking revenge for my husband. I have already lost to you, but I still want to kill you!" As soon as she finished speaking both arms launched successive attacks: three times with her right hand and another three with her left. Each attack hit the pillar squarely on. Finally both her hands hit the pillar at the same time. With a loud crack the pillar broke and the roof collapsed.

The people in the hall were martial artists; even though they were shocked they could still jump out to escape. Lu Guanying grabbed his father and rushed outside just in time before half the hall was filled with debris. Unfortunately the Jin officer was not able to escape and his legs were pinned beneath a beam. He was screaming for help. Wanyan Kang rushed to his rescue. He lifted the beam up, pulled him up, grabbed his hands and took him out of the hall. As soon as they turned their backs they suddenly felt numbness; without knowing who, someone had sealed their acupoints.

Mei Chaofeng had always concentrated her attention on Guo Jing. As soon as she heard Guo Jing move she followed. By now, under heavy cloud, the outside was dark. As soon as everybody was able to calm him or herself, they could see Guo Jing's and Mei Chaofeng's fight had become fiercer than ever. They fought in the dim light; both parties exchanged swift blows one after another, creating gusts of wind everywhere. Compared to the fight inside the hall this fight was more intense.

The darkness was a disadvantage for Guo Jing and he started to fall under Mei Chaofeng's attacks. Mei Chaofeng's left leg made a sweeping move, followed by her right leg kicking toward his legs. If he was hit, his leg would break for sure. But this kick was a trick move. Mei Chaofeng unexpectedly held her leg half way and her left arm grabbed Guo Jing's leg. Lu Guanying was looking from the sidelines. "Watch out!" he cried. He had experienced defeat from Wanyan Kang with this exact same move.

In this dangerous situation Guo Jing tried hard to overcome his fear and used his left hand to parry Mei Chaofeng's hand. He was fast enough, but his strength was waning. As soon as their hands collided, Mei Chaofeng understood his situation. She immediately turned her hand over and used three fingers: middle, ring, and little finger to scratch the back of Guo Jing's hand. Guo Jing also realized the danger he was in as his right palm thrust toward her. It was a fierce attack; if Mei Chaofeng did not back off, both of them would be injured. Mei Chaofeng avoided the attack by leaping sideways and then uttered a sinister laugh.

Guo Jing felt his left hand become numb and itchy, then felt a burning sensation. Lowering his head he saw three scratch marks on the back of his left hand. The scratches were bleeding only a little but the blood slowly turned black. He suddenly remembered the time he climbed that hill on the Mongolian Steppe and saw nine skulls Mei Chaofeng left behind. Priest Ma Yu had told him that Mei's fingernails contained lethal poison and he knew immediately that his life was in grave danger.

"Rong'er, I have been poisoned!" he called out. Without waiting for Huang Rong's response he immediately jumped forward and threw both palms at Mei Chaofeng. His intention was to seize her and force her to hand over the antidote. It was his only chance of survival.

Mei Chaofeng recognized the fierceness of his attack and jumped back to elude. Huang Rong and the others were greatly shocked by Guo Jing's revelation. Almost together Ke Zhen'E with his iron staff followed by Huang Rong and the rest of the Six Freaks jumped forward and surrounded Mei Chaofeng.

"Mei Shijie!" Huang Rong shouted, "You have already lost! How could you keep fighting? Quickly, bring out the antidote and save him!"

Mei Chaofeng felt Guo Jing's attack was both swift and fierce; she did not dare to lose her concentration by replying to Huang Rong's remark. In her heart she was delighted, "The more you exert your energy, the quicker the poison will attack your system. Should I die here and now, I still have succeeded in gaining revenge for my husband."

Guo Jing noticed his vision blurring, his head felt dizzy and his whole body felt weak. As he gradually lost control of his left arm, he decided to stop fighting. The poison had begun to enter his system. Had he not drunk the snake's blood he would have died by now.

Huang Rong saw his dazed condition and loudly called, "Jing ge ge, get back!" Taking out a butterfly steel needle she jumped toward Mei Chaofeng.

Guo Jing heard her call and it raised his spirits. He thrust his left palm using the eleventh stance of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', 'Sudden Advent' [tu ru qi lai] only his arm moved slower than it was supposed to.

Huang Rong, Han Baoju, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa moved together to attack Mei Chaofeng but saw Guo Jing's palm squarely hit Mei Chaofeng's shoulder. She fell down without even having tried to fend against the attack. Mei Chaofeng relied on her ears to locate her opponent's movement and

Guo Jing's attack was so slow it did not make any noise. That was the reason she was easily hit.

Huang Rong was startled, but Han, Nan and Quan had simultaneously thrown themselves on Mei Chaofeng's body to seize her. But she struggled and was able to send Han Baoju and Quan Jinfa flying backward, while at the same time striking backward to grasp Nan Xiren's arm. Nan Xiren saw this attack coming and rolled out of the way.

Mei Chaofeng took advantage of this chaotic situation to leap up, but Guo Jing's palm unexpectedly arrived on her back and she tumbled down one more time. Guo Jing's palm was swift and silent, but it was weak. Even though she was hit on a vital place, she was not injured.

After attacking twice Guo Jing's energy was depleted; he staggered and fell down right next to Mei Chaofeng. Huang Rong immediately threw herself toward him to protect him.

Mei Chaofeng heard someone falling at her side and without wasting a single moment she sent five fingers to grab, but to her surprise she felt pricking pain. She realized she had hit the thorns on Huang Rong's 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' [ruan wei jia]. Hastily she used 'To Leap Like a Carp' [li yu da ting] to get away.

Suddenly somebody shouted, "Take this!" and something was thrown her way. Mei Chaofeng did not know what was being thrown so she just lifted her right arm to parry. That thing fell down broken to pieces. It turned out it was a chair.

That chair was followed by another thing, bigger than the first. This time 'Iron Corpse' stretched her left hand to grab it. It was a tabletop; wide and slippery, so she could not get a good grasp. Who threw all these things at her? It was Zhu Cong. He immediately threw a couple of table legs her way.

Mei Chaofeng lifted her leg and kicked them away. Zhu Cong eluded them but at the same time stretched out his right hand and suddenly Mei Chaofeng felt three things slip down her collar. They were cold and slippery, and kept wiggling inside her clothes. She was frightened, "What are these things? Is it some witchcraft or secret weapons?" Hastily she groped around inside her clothes and caught three goldfish.

She was relieved, but suddenly she froze! Her porcelain antidote bottle had disappeared, along with her dagger and the scroll of the 'Nine Yin Manual' which was wrapped around the dagger.

The three goldfish were from the cistern that was crushed when the roof collapsed. Zhu Cong knew Mei Chaofeng was careful and could not be easily deceived, unlike Peng Lianhu or Qiu Qianren; so he used the goldfish to divert her attention while at the same time executed his quick hand to take Mei Chaofeng's pocket's contents. He took the porcelain bottle out, pulled its stopper and took it to Ke Zhen'E to smell while whispering softly, "Well?"

Ke Zhen'E was an expert at using poison. As soon as he smelled the antidote he said, "To be taken orally and also applied to the wound. This is the antidote."

Mei Chaofeng heard their conversation and immediately realized what happened. Furiously she leaped toward them. Ke Zhen'E swung his iron staff to block her, assisted by Han Baoju's 'Golden Dragon Whip' [jin long bian], Quan Jinfa's 'Weighing Scale' [cheng gan], and Nan Xiren's 'Steel Carrying Pole' [chun gang bian dan]. Mei Chaofeng quickly put her hand to her waist to retrieve her own 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' but suddenly heard a gust of wind from a sword coming her way. It was Han Xiaoying. She was forced to parry this attack first.

Meanwhile Zhu Cong gave the antidote to Huang Rong. "Have him swallow some, then spread some on his wound," he said. Then he put the dagger he took from Mei Chaofeng into Guo Jing's pocket. "This dagger was yours," he said. Joining his brothers and sister he raised his iron fan to attack Mei Chaofeng. The six had trained hard these past ten years and had improved their martial arts considerably. Therefore, this battle was many times fiercer than the one on that barren Mongolian hill.

Lu Chengfeng and his son were amazed witnessing this fierce battle. "Mei Chaofeng's martial arts are no doubt swift, fierce and ruthless, but these Six Freaks of Jiangnan certainly live up to their names," they thought. "Ladies and gentlemen, please stop! Please listen to what I have to say!" Lu Chengfeng shouted loudly. But both parties were fighting fiercely, who would actually have time to listen to him?

Not long after he took the antidote, Guo Jing was slowly regaining his sense. The poison had attacked his system quickly, but the antidote also neutralized it fast. His wound was still hurting, but he was able to move his left arm. After putting the dagger away he immediately jumped up and rejoined the battle. Learning from before, he started slowly and when his palm was almost touching Mei Chaofeng's body, he added more strength. It was the stance 'A Hundred Li Shock' [zhen jing bai li]. Mei Chaofeng was busy fending off her attackers and could not hear Guo Jing's palm. She was hit suddenly and fell down immediately right at the moment when Han Baoju's whip and Nan Xiren's pole were coming down on her.

Guo Jing leaned and parried those two weapons. "Masters! Please show mercy!" he shouted. The Six Freaks complied. They withdrew their weapons and leaped back.

Mei Chaofeng stood up and got ready to fight again. Knowing that Guo Jing was fierce and she could not see, she took her 'Poison Silver Dragon Whip' [du long yin bian] and readied it in front of her. Guo Jing did not move, "We are not going to fight you anymore. You are free to go!" he shouted.

Mei Chaofeng put her whip back and said, "Please return my manual." Zhu Cong was puzzled. "I did not take your manual," he said. "You know the Seven Freaks have never lied." He did not realize that the skin wrapped around the dagger was the 'Nine Yin Manual'.

Mei Chaofeng knew that even though the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan had deep enmity toward her, they always meant what they said and never deceived anybody. She thought the manual must have fallen when she was fighting Guo Jing a moment ago. So she bent down and groped around on the ground looking for the manual. Where could that manual be?

A blind lady groping around the ground made a pitiful scene. Lu Chengfeng told his son, "Guanying, help your Martial Uncle Mei to look." But in his heart he was thinking that the manual belonged to his Master, therefore, it must be returned to the Master. He faked a cough to signal his son and Lu Guanying understood. He nodded. Guo Jing was also looking around, but where did that manual go?

"Mei Shijie," Lu Chengfeng said, "Your manual is not here; perhaps you dropped it on your way here."

Mei Chaofeng did not answer; she kept groping around. Suddenly everybody's eyes were blurred as that green-robed man reappeared beside her. His movement was so swift that nobody saw anything as Mei Chaofeng's body was lifted off the ground and an instant later they were gone,

vanishing among the trees outside the hall. Mei Chaofeng was very skilled, yet that man had captured her without any struggle. They looked at each other in blank dismay. This person's skill was unbelievable.

The hall was quiet; only the distant sound of the waves of the lake lapping the shore could be heard. A long while later Ke Zhen'E broke the silence. "My young disciple fought that wicked woman and damaged your mansion. I feel deep regret."

"I do not dare complain," Lu Chengfeng answered. "The Six Freaks and Hero Guo visiting our place today was an honor to us all. No need to mention that you have helped my family escape a disaster. What Hero Ke just said, wouldn't that make us seem like strangers?"

"I invite the honorable guests to take a rest inside the hall," Lu Guanying added. "Brother Guo, are you still in pain?"

"I am all right," answered Guo Jing. At that moment the green-robed man came back along with Mei Chaofeng. They stood in front of the hall. Mei Chaofeng put her hands on her waist and shouted, "Guo Kid! You used Hong Qigong's 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' to fight me. I am blind and could not see your moves. Mei Chaofeng does not care about life or death, victory or defeat; but if this matter were spread in the Jianghu world, wouldn't the reputation of my Benevolent Master of Peach Blossom Island be ruined? Come! Let us fight again!"

"I am not your match," Guo Jing answered honestly. "I took advantage of your blindness to protect my own life. I admitted defeat a while ago."

"The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' have eighteen moves," Mei Chaofeng asked, "Why did you only use part of it?"

"Because I am not smart ..." Guo Jing answered; Huang Rong signaled him not to reveal his secret, but Guo Jing continued, "... Senior Hong only taught me fifteen moves."

"Very good!" Mei Chaofeng said. "You only know fifteen moves yet you defeated Mei Chaofeng. Is that old man Hong Qigong really that good? No! I can't accept it. We must fight again!"

Everybody felt this was strange; apparently Mei Chaofeng had not come back to avenge her husband, but to dispute Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong's reputations.

Guo Jing was still calm. "Miss Huang is younger than I am, yet I'm still not her match; how could I be your match?" he said. "I have always admired Peach Blossom Island's martial arts."

"Mei Shijie," Huang Rong interrupted. "What are you talking about? Who in the world can surpass Father's martial arts skill?"

"Still, I must fight him again!" Mei Chaofeng insisted. Without waiting for Guo Jing to answer she stretched her claw towards him. Guo Jing could not hold himself back much longer and so eluded the attack. He said, "If that's the case, I will ask Senior Mei to give me some lessons." Then he launched a strong counterattack.

Mei Chaofeng parried it by turning her hand. "Use your silent moves!" she said, "You are not my match if you are using loud moves."

Guo Jing leaped back several steps and said, "My First Master Ke's eyes are not perfect. I hate when others bully him with silent moves. How could I use silent moves to bully you? I was injured by your poison and at that critical

moment I inadvertently use a silent move. If we fight fair and square, frankly I am not your match."

Mei Chaofeng could hear the sincerity in his voice, her heart was stirred. "This kid is kind hearted," she thought. But she shouted, "I told you to use your silent moves. I have a way to counter it, why do you keep nattering like an old woman?"

Guo Jing looked at that strange green-robed man. "Could it be that he taught her how to cope with silent moves just now?" he thought. But because Mei Chaofeng insisted, he did not have any choice but to comply. "Very well," he finally said. "I will fight you another fifteen moves." He thought that by using the fifteen out of 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' he might not win, but at least he could defend himself.

Guo Jing jumped to get closer to her, then continued by tiptoeing forward, slowly sending his palm to strike. But before his palm hit its target he heard a light sound and Mei Chaofeng turned her wrist to grab his hand. It was like her eyes were not blind at all. Guo Jing was surprised; he immediately pulled his left palm and slid his body to the left to launch the 'Skillfully Crossing a Vast River' slowly.

His palm had only moved several inches when again he heard a light sound and Mei Chaofeng blocked his attack. Guo Jing retracted his palm a little bit too slow and Mei Chaofeng's fingernails swept very close to his face. He hastily leaped back and thought, "How could she know where my next attack would be?"

His third attack was his fiercest stance, the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' [kang long you hui] but again, following a light sound, Mei Chaofeng's steel-like fingernails moved to grab his wrist. Guo Jing knew the secret must be in that

light sound, so with his fourth move he stole a glance at that strange man. This time he was able to see that man flick something into the air and that thing created a light sound.

“Ah, it really is him!” Guo Jing understood. “But how could he know where my next move will be? Hmmm ... it was like the time when Huang Rong fought that old man Liang Ziwing; Hong Qigong had deduced his attacks in advance. Now this man is using the same method to defeat me. All right, I’ll fight for the full fifteen moves, and then I will admit defeat.”

Even though the stances of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ did not change and Guo Jing had not learned the whole set, his attacks were not light. However, Mei Chaofeng always knew in advance where his attack would go and sometimes she would move ahead of Guo Jing so that instead of being defensive, she was actually on the offensive.

Several moves later that strange man flicked three pebbles in succession. Mei Chaofeng was following the sound and launched three attacks one after another. Guo Jing was forced to elude one and barely managed to parry the other two.

The fight was getting fiercer and the winds generated by their hands were getting stronger. Periodically the light sound of a pebble was heard. Huang Rong understood the situation was not favorable. She silently picked some debris from the floor and flicked them away. Some were just aimed at nothing in particular, trying to confuse Mei Chaofeng, while some were aimed to knock the strange man’s pebbles down. But, unexpectedly, the man’s pebbles were not knocked down by Huang Rong’s debris; on the contrary, Huang Rong’s debris was knocked down while his pebbles kept flying. His clues to Mei Chaofeng were not hindered.

Lu Chengfeng, his son, along with the Six Freaks, were greatly amazed. "The strength of this man's fingers is amazing; how is he capable of giving the pebble this kind of force? Even an arrow would not create such a strong noise. If this pebble hit someone, wouldn't that someone's bones be shattered by it?" they thought.

By now Huang Rong had stopped her intervention. She stood and stared blankly at that strange man. In the meantime Guo Jing was starting to lose; Mei Chaofeng's attacks became swifter and fiercer.

Suddenly two loud hums were heard as two pebbles flew from the strange man's hand. The first one was slower than the latter one. The latter hit the first and two pebbles broke into pieces and flew in all directions. Mei Chaofeng took that opportunity to pounce on Guo Jing. He stumbled trying to avoid the attack. Remembering Nan Xiren's advice, 'If you can't win, run!' [da bu guo, tao!] He turned around and ran away.

Out of the blue Huang Rong called out, "Father!" And she rushed toward the strange man, threw herself into his arms and loudly cried, "Father! Your face ... what happened to your face ...?" Nobody expected this and the strange man stood still without saying anything.

Guo Jing turned around and saw Mei Chaofeng standing very close to him. She was trying to listen to the sound of the pebble. Guo Jing saw a very good opportunity and sent his right palm slowly toward her shoulder using only about ten percent of his strength. But as soon as his palm hit, his left palm followed at full strength. Mei Chaofeng was squarely hit by both palms and fell down; she was not able to stand back up.

Lu Chengfeng heard Huang Rong call that strange man her father; he was overwhelmed with joy and sorrow at the same time. He forgot his legs were lame and jumped toward the man, but fell face down on the floor.

The strange man's left arm was in Huang Rong's embrace and lifted his right hand to slowly take off a thin mask from his face. He was wearing a genuine skin mask; no wonder his face was emotionless like that of a corpse. His true appearance was clear and good-looking, with a hint of sadness. Yet an aura of dignity surrounded him; resembling the image of deity.

Huang Rong's tears had not dried yet she shouted with joy. She snatched the mask from her father's hand and placed it on her own face while bouncing up and down and hugging the man's neck, giggling continuously. The man was indeed the Master of Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi.

"Father, why did you come here?" she asked, grinning from ear to ear. "That old man Qiu said bad things about you. Why didn't you teach him a lesson?"

"Why did I come?" Huang Yaoshi sternly asked. "I came looking for you!" Huang Rong was ecstatic; she clapped her hands and shouted, "Father! You were looking for me? Wonderful...that's just wonderful!"

"What do you mean 'wonderful'?" Huang Yaoshi asked. "Do you think it was wonderful finding a useless girl like you?"

Huang Rong felt bad. She knew after losing the second half of the 'Nine Yin Manual' to his own disciples, Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng, her father was determined to master the skill with his own intelligence. He once said that the 'Nine Yin Manual' was created by a human being. If a man could create it, why wouldn't he be able to re-create it? He then made a vow not to leave Peach Blossom Island

until he had mastered the skill. Unexpectedly his prodigal daughter had run away so that he was forced to break his own vow and come looking for her.

“Father, I promise to be a good daughter and will listen to you from now on until the day I die,” Huang Rong solemnly promised.

Huang Yaoshi was very happy to find his daughter well and listening to her promise put him in an excellent mood. “Help your Shijie get up,” he said.

Huang Rong immediately complied. Lu Guanying helped his father to kneel down in front of his Master. Huang Yaoshi sighed and said, “Chengfeng, you are a good disciple. I was wrong to lose my temper and act so rashly as to falsely accuse you.”

Lu Chengfeng was sobbing. “Master, are you well?” To which Huang Yaoshi replied, “Luckily I’ve not been irritated to death.” Huang Rong looked at her father with a mischievous look, “Father, you’re not talking about me are you?” Huang Yaoshi snorted and said, “You are part of it.”

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and diverted his attention. “Father, let me introduce you to my friends. These are the well-known heroes of Jianghu, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan; Jing ge ge’s Masters.”

Huang Yaoshi did not even look at them. “I don’t want to meet outsiders,” he said coldly. The Six Freaks were irritated by his arrogance, but since the man practiced god-like martial arts, they kept their peace.

“Do you have anything you’d like to take home with you?” Huang Yaoshi asked his daughter. “Get them and we’ll go home together.”

“Nothing,” Huang Rong answered with a smile. “But I do have something I need to give back to Martial Brother Lu.” She took out the ‘Nine Flower Jade Dew’ pills from her pocket and gave them back to Lu Chengfeng. “Lu Shige (Elder Martial Brother Lu), these pills are not easy to make. We have two pills from you and that’s enough.”

Lu Chengfeng waved his hand and said to Huang Yaoshi, “The disciple has seen the Benevolent Master today. I am extremely joyful. I want to present those pills to you. I wonder if you could stay for a while in my humble abode. I will be ...”

“Is he your son?” Huang Yaoshi interrupted him, pointing toward Lu Guanying. “He is,” answered the disciple.

Lu Guanying did not wait for his father’s prompting. He immediately kneeled and kowtowed several times and said, “Disciple pays his respects to Grand Martial Master.”

“It’s all right!” Huang Yaoshi said. Without bending his body he extended his left hand as if he was going to help Guanying to stand up; but unexpectedly his right hand struck Guanying’s shoulder.

Lu Chengfeng was shocked! “Master, he is my only son ...” Huang Yaoshi’s palm was not light. Lu Guanying was thrown back seven or eight steps then fell face down on the floor.

“You are a very good disciple,” Huang Yaoshi told Lu Chengfeng. “You have not passed your skills to him. Is he a disciple of the ‘Immortal Red Cloud Sect’ [xian xia pai]?”

Lu Chengfeng was relieved to know his master was only testing his son’s martial arts. “Your disciple did not dare to disobey our school’s rule. I did not dare to teach my skills to others without Benevolent Master’s permission. This child is

indeed the disciple of 'Great Teacher Kumu' [ku mu da shi] of the 'Immortal Red Cloud Sect'."

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "Kumu dares to call himself 'Great Teacher' [da shi can also mean 'great master'] with his skills? Your skills exceed his a hundred fold. Starting tomorrow you will teach your son. The 'Immortal Red Cloud Sect's' martial arts do not hold a candle to ours."

Lu Chengfeng was ecstatic and hastily told his son, "Quick! Express your gratitude to the Grand Martial Master!" Lu Guanying immediately kowtowed again to Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi lifted his head, completely ignoring Guanying.

Lu Chengfeng had learned martial arts on Peach Blossom Island; even though both his legs were lame he did not lose any skills pertaining to his upper body. He realized very well the superiority of his own school. He had seen with his own eyes how hard Lu Guanying trained, yet his achievements were limited. This upset him, but since he did not dare to violate his school's rule, he had to restrain himself. In order not to disappoint his son, he pretended he did not know martial arts at all. Now that his master had given him permission he knew his son's martial arts skills would improve by leaps and bounds; how could he be not happy? He wanted to say some grateful words, but he was choked up.

Huang Yaoshi saw this and he simply said, "Take this!" He waved his right hand and two sheets of paper gently flew toward Chengfeng. The distance between them was actually more than ten feet, but the papers flew gently like they were hand delivered to Lu Chengfeng. This demonstration of internal energy was even more impressive than flicking pebbles, since the paper was flimsy and more difficult to throw. No one could help but feel very impressed.

Huang Rong was very happy, she quietly approached Guo Jing and asked, "Jing ge ge, what do you think of my Father's martial arts?"

"Your Father's martial arts are superb," Guo Jing answered. "Rong'er, as soon as you are home, you have to train diligently, don't waste your time playing."

"You are coming with us, aren't you?" Huang Rong asked.

"I have to follow my Masters," Guo Jing said. "I will look for you later."

Huang Rong was anxious. "No! I don't want to leave you." Guo Jing grinned; he did not want to be separated from her either, but he knew they did not have much choice and was sad too.

Lu Chengfeng took the papers and examined them. He saw the papers were full of characters. Lu Guanying took a torch from a manorr; he came close to his father and held the light for his father to read. Lu Chengfeng could see the papers were full of characters and symbols. They were instructions for training martial arts in Huang Yaoshi's own handwriting. He had not seen his master's handwriting for twenty years, yet he recognized it. The Master's handwriting was tall and straight, as elegant as he remembered it. On the right hand was the title, 'Sweeping Leaves Whirlwind Leg' technique [xuan feng sao ye tui fa], six characters. Lu Chengfeng knew that the 'Sweeping Leaves Whirlwind Leg' and the 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palms' [luo ying shen jian zhang] were his Master's own ingenious martial arts creations. None of his master's six disciples had ever learned this leg technique. He imagined how delighted he would have been if he'd learned this technique. But still, due to his master's mercy, he could still teach this technique to his son. He was

grateful. He put the papers into his pocket and bent down to express his gratitude.

“This set of leg techniques is entirely different from the ones you knew,” Huang Yaoshi said. “The external techniques remain, but the energy to drive the technique must be developed internally. If you practice and meditate daily, and if your progress is good, you will be able to walk without a cane within five or six years.”

Lu Chengfeng was emotional with all kinds of feelings flowing in his heart.

“Your disability is permanent,” Huang Yaoshi added. “You won’t be able to fight relying on your leg techniques; but if you diligently train, you won’t have any problem walking like normal people. Oh ...” He regretted that consumed with anger he had punished his four innocent disciples severely. In recent years he’d racked his brain to create the new ‘Sweeping Leaves Whirlwind Leg’ technique with improved internal energy training methods. His plan was to find his four disciples and bestow this new technique so that they would be able to walk again. He was too arrogant, so even when his heart was full of regret, his mouth was not willing to admit it. Therefore, although this leg technique was entirely a new creation of his, he still used the irrelevant old name; pretending he had not done anything wrong. After a while he continued, “Look for your three other brothers and teach them this new technique.”

“Yes,” Lu Chengfeng answered. Then he added, “Qu shige (older martial brother) and Feng shidi’s whereabouts are unknown to me, but Wu shidi passed away many years ago.”

Huang Yaoshi felt a stab of pain in his heart and his eyes glistened. Then his penetrating gaze turned toward Mei Chaofeng. Luckily she was blind and could not see it, but

the other people around her shuddered just looking at his gaze.

“Chaofeng,” he said icily. “You have been extremely wicked, but you also have suffered greatly. When that old man Qiu said I was dead, you shed tears and even wanted to seek revenge for me. Because of those tears I am willing to let you live a few more years.”

Not in a million years did Mei Chaofeng expect her master to forgive her that easily. She was delighted and quickly kowtowed. “All right, all right!” Huang Yaoshi said. Then he stretched his hand toward her back and tapped gently three times.

Mei Chaofeng suddenly felt a stabbing pain, which gradually became more intense and she almost passed out. With a trembling voice she begged, “Benevolent Master, your disciple deserves to die ten thousand times. I ask for your mercy to kill me quickly, but please spare me from the ‘Bone-Penetrating Needle’ [fu gu zhen].” She had heard for a long time from her husband that once their master’s ‘fu gu zhen’ entered their bodies, it would attach itself to the bone and slowly dispense poison. Six times a day, following the circulation of the blood, the poison would cause excruciating pain, but it would not kill immediately. It could take as long as a year or two for that person to die slowly from the pain. A highly skilled martial artist would channel his internal energy to counter the pain, but the more he does so the greater the pain. A normal person would only grit their teeth when in pain. Using internal energy to suppress the pain would be like drinking poison to satisfy a thirst, because the next attack would be more intense than the previous one. As far as they knew, there was no antidote for this poison.

Mei Chaofeng was desperate; she had entered a living hell, why would she want to live much longer? She frantically thrashed her whip fiercely trying to take her own life. Huang Yaoshi quickly stretched his hand and snatched the whip away. "Why are you so anxious to die? It's not that easy!" he said coldly.

Mei Chaofeng did not give up easily. "Master must want to torture me, that's why he won't allow me to die," she thought. Unable to restrain her grief she turned toward Guo Jing and smiled sadly, "I have to thank you for killing my husband; at least that way my bastard husband died an easy death."

Huang Yaoshi ignored her remark and said, "The 'Bone-Penetrating Needle' will work after a year. I'll give you three assignments to do within this one-year period. Once you complete your assignments, come and see me at Peach Blossom Island. I have a way to neutralize the poison."

Mei Chaofeng's hope was rekindled. "Your disciple will go through fire or water to accomplish whatever Master cares to assign to me." But Huang Yaoshi coldly answered, "You haven't heard what I have to say, yet you comply that quickly?" Mei Chaofeng did not dare to answer, she only kowtowed.

"First, you have lost the 'Nine Yin Manual'," Huang Yaoshi continued. "You have to find it and give it back to me. If somebody else laid their eyes on it, you must kill that person. If there are a hundred people who have seen it, kill the hundred people. If you only kill ninety-nine, don't even think of coming to see me."

All who listened shuddered involuntarily. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan thought, "Huang Yaoshi is known as the Eastern Heretic; his character is very evil."

They heard him continue, "Qu, Lu, Wu and Feng, your four martial brothers have endured suffering and hardships because of you. You are to find your brothers Lingfeng and Mofeng, and find out if Mianfeng left behind any family. You are to bring them all to 'Returning Cloud Manor' [gui yun zhuang] and let your martial brother Chengfeng take care of them. This is your second assignment."

Mei Chaofeng nodded her head repeatedly. Lu Chengfeng thought, "I could manage this." But knowing his master's temperament he did not dare to say anything.

Huang Yaoshi raised his head, looking at the starry sky above and slowly said, "You stole the 'Nine Yin Manual'. I did not teach you nor did I tell you to practice it. You know what to do." He paused for a moment then said, "This is the third."

Mei Chaofeng was silent for a moment; she did not fully grasp her master's intention. After pondering in her heart she suddenly understood. With a trembling voice she said, "After I have completed the first two assignments, your disciple knows how to get rid of the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and 'Heart Destroying Palm' I have learned."

Guo Jing did not understand; he pulled Huang Rong's sleeve and, signaling her with his eyes, asked for an explanation. Huang Rong's countenance was sad; she lifted her right hand and made a chopping action toward her left arm. Guo Jing finally understood, "Oh, she is going to chop off her own arms." His mind kept wandering, "This Mei Chaofeng is really wicked, but she repented. Why is the punishment so harsh? I need to talk to Rong'er; perhaps we can ask her father to show mercy."

While he was still thinking, Huang Yaoshi beckoned him to come over and asked, "Your name is Guo Jing?" Guo Jing

stepped forward and made an obeisance. "Disciple Guo Jing is at Senior Huang's service."

"You are the one who killed my disciple Chen Xuanfeng, aren't you? Your skill must be extraordinary, eh?" Huang Yaoshi said.

Guo Jing understood his sarcasm; his heart turned cold. "I was very young and ignorant. Senior Chen seized me; I was scared and panicked. I injured him inadvertently."

Huang Yaoshi snorted and coldly said, "Chen Xuanfeng was indeed my rebellious disciple; but it was our right to punish him. How could a disciple of Peach Blossom Island be punished by an outsider?" Guo Jing was dumbstruck.

Huang Rong quickly came to his rescue. "Father, he was only six, what did he know?" Huang Yaoshi did not like what he heard; he continued, "The old man Hong usually does not take disciples and he is very proud of his 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'; but he taught you fifteen moves, so you must have something good in you. If not, you must have sweet-talked him into teaching you. You have defeated my disciple with his skill; next time he sees me, I bet he will boast to no end."

"Father, the sweet talk part was indeed true," Huang Rong said with a smile. "But it was not him, it was I. He is just a simple honest kid. Your words were too harsh, you have frightened him."

After he lost his wife, Huang Yaoshi was very fond of his daughter. In fact, he was too lenient with her so that she became spoilt. That day he scolded her she immediately ran away from home. He thought that being a spoilt kid and after wandering Jianghu for a while Huang Rong would be destitute and in bad condition. Who would have thought that she was not thin and pale, but as tender and beautiful

as ever? Then he saw her affection towards Guo Jing and how she was always trying to protect him. Secretly he was jealous because she had never shown the same affection to him. His jealousy turned to anger. He ignored his daughter and said to Guo Jing, "By teaching you the old Beggar obviously does not hold me in high regard. He let you defeat Mei Chaofeng; he thinks my disciples are a bunch of nobodies ..."

Huang Rong understood that her father was upset because Mei Chaofeng was defeated by the 'Eighteen-Dragon Subduing Palms'. She hurriedly said, "Who says Peach Blossom Island disciples are nobodies? He was lucky because Mei Shijie's eyes are blind, what's so special about that? If they were fighting fair and square, he would have been defeated a long time ago. Let your daughter prove it to you." She jumped out and called to Guo Jing, "Come! Let me use the skills my Father taught me to fight Hong Qigong's special skill."

She knew that by this time both Guo Jing and she had improved tremendously. They were more or less equally matched. She thought that as long as they could fight fairly for about a hundred moves her father would be satisfied. Guo Jing understood her intention; besides, Huang Yaoshi did not say anything, so he agreed and said, "You are always superior to me. All right, I will let you beat me a couple more times." And he immediately walked to Huang Rong.

"Watch out!" Huang Rong called out. Her hand swept horizontally with a gust of wind, it was the 'Heavy Rain Fierce Wind' stance [yu ji feng kuang] from the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm [tao hua shen jian zhang]. Guo Jing immediately countered using the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. However, he was very fond of Huang Rong so did not use his full strength. Unfortunately, the

'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' relied heavily on strong internal energy; in terms of palm techniques, it could not be compared to the exquisite moves of 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm'. After several moves he was hit several times by Huang Rong's fist. Huang Rong, on the other hand, knew that Guo Jing was strong and resilient, so to appease her father she used her full strength. "Aren't you going to admit defeat?" she called out loudly. Her mouth said those words, but her hands did not stop hitting him.

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "What kind of acrobatic show are you demonstrating?" Nobody saw him move, but suddenly he was near the two, stretching both hands to grab and throw them away. Although the movements were similar, he only flung his daughter to the side, while his right arm threw Guo Jing at full strength. His intention was obvious; he wanted Guo Jing to hit the ground hard. However, although Guo Jing was not able to resist the throw, but he was able to turn his body in midair; when he landed, he did not fall down, but stood firmly on the ground. His face was pale and he looked about ready to throw up.

Instead of praising his skill, Huang Yaoshi's anger flared. "I don't have any disciples to fight you. Come! Let me test your few stances."

Guo Jing hastily bowed and said, "Even if I had courage as high as the sky I still would not dare to fight Senior."

Huang Yaoshi sneered. "Humph, fight me?" He coldly said. "You are not my match, boy! Tell you what, I will stand here while you attack me with your 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'; if I even move or raise my hand to parry, you win."

"Junior still does not dare," Guo Jing said.

"I don't care! Dare or not, you have to fight me!" Huang Yaoshi said.

Guo Jing did not know what to do. "I don't have any choice; I'd better hit him several times, but I think he is going to borrow my own strength to shake me up. So what if I have to fall a few more times?" he thought.

Huang Yaoshi saw him hesitating, but his face showed his willingness to try. So he urged him, "Quickly hit me! If not, I am going to hit you!"

"Since Senior commanded it, I would not dare to disobey," Guo Jing said. He bent his body and moved his hand in a circling motion, launching the 'The Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'. He was afraid he might injure Huang Yaoshi; also, he worried that if he used his full strength the counterattack would be fierce. Therefore, he used only sixty percent of his strength. His palm struck Huang Yaoshi's chest; but to his surprise his palm slid like the chest was slick with oil. "Why, you didn't even want to hit me," Huang Yaoshi mocked. "Do you think I cannot take the overwhelming power of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'? Is that it?"

"Junior does not dare," Guo Jing answered. Then he launched his second move, the 'Leaping the Abyss' [huo yue zai yuan]. This time he did not hold back. Exhaling, his left palm lunged toward Huang Yaoshi's throat, his right palm swiftly moved in front of the left, going straight to Huang Yaoshi's lower abdomen.

"Now you are fighting," Huang Yaoshi said. Hong Qigong had Guo Jing train this stance against a pine tree. The tree needed to be still, then Guo Jing was supposed to hit it with a sudden movement. Only then did he manage to break the tree. He had practiced this stance thousands of times. But as soon as his palm touched Huang Yaoshi's clothes he felt Huang Yaoshi's abdomen shrink and his palm was sucked

in; he felt pain because his wrist joint was dislocated. He immediately leaped back several feet. His hand hung limp.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan saw that Huang Yaoshi's body did not move, nor did he lift a hand to parry; yet he was capable of dislocating Guo Jing's wrist. They were amazed but also worried.

"You have to receive my palm also!" Huang Yaoshi suddenly shouted, "I want to let you know which one is superior, the Old Beggar's 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' or my Peach Blossom Island's martial arts." Before he finished speaking a gust of wind had already blown toward Guo Jing. He endured his pain and jumped to avoid the attack. Unexpectedly Huang Yaoshi did not continue his palm but swept his legs instead. Guo Jing went tumbling down.

Huang Rong was alarmed. "Father, no!" she cried, and quickly jumped forward and bent down to protect him.

Huang Yaoshi did not stop; he simply changed his fist to an open palm. He grabbed his daughter's vest and lifted her up, while his left fist went straight toward Guo Jing.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan realized that if Guo Jing got hit, he would certainly die or at least suffer a very heavy injury. They moved at once. Quan Jinfa was the first. He struck Huang Yaoshi's left arm with his steel balance arm. Huang Yaoshi calmly put his daughter aside; waved both hands casually and that steel balance arm changed direction; striking the long sword in the hands of Han Xiaoying. Both the balance arm and the sword broke into four pieces.

"Master ... !" Lu Chengfeng called out. He wanted to ask his master to stop, but knowing his master's temperament well, he did not dare to continue.

Huang Rong cried. "Father, if you kill him," she shouted. "You will never see me again!" Without further ado she ran out towards Lake Tai and leaped into the water.

Huang Yaoshi was surprised, then angry. He knew his daughter was very good in water. She used to swim and dive in the East China Sea [dong hai]; playing with fish and turtles. Sometimes she went swimming for a whole day. But this time he was not sure when he would be able to see her again. So he ran toward the lake to try to grab her, but he was too late. Huang Rong had already vanished in the dark water. Huang Yaoshi stared blankly from the lakeshore.

After a long while he turned his head and saw Zhu Cong mending Guo Jing's wrist. His anger flared and he wanted to vent his frustration towards these people. "You six people! Quickly kill yourselves and save me the trouble," he said coldly.

Ke Zhen'E wielded his iron staff in front of his chest and proudly said, "Real men do not fear death. Do you think we are afraid of suffering?" Zhu Cong also said, "The Six Freaks of Jiangnan have returned to our hometown. If our bones can be buried here by Lake Tai, what more could we want?" The six unsheathed weapons or readied their bare hands and assumed a battle formation.

Guo Jing thought hard. "My six masters do not have enmity with this man. They will give up their lives in vain. How can I let them go in harm's way?" he said in his heart. He quickly jumped forward. "Chen Xuanfeng died at my hand! It has nothing to do with my masters! I will pay for his life with mine!" But then he had another thought, "The First Master, Third Master and Seventh Master are hot-tempered. If they see me losing my life, they will surely fight to their deaths. I have to stall. I must deal with him later,

alone." He boldly positioned himself between Huang Yaoshi and the Six.

"My only regret is that my father's death has not yet been avenged. I beseech Senior to give me a month's grace. After thirty days I will personally come to Peach Blossom Island to give up my life," he said fearlessly.

Huang Yaoshi's anger had subsided by now; plus, he was worried about his daughter. He'd lost his appetite for fighting. So he waved his hand casually and walked away.

Everybody was surprised; how did Guo Jing's simple speech send him off just like that? They were suspicious that he was playing a trick; so they kept their eyes open at full alert. But after waiting a time, Huang Yaoshi still did not come back.

After a while Lu Chengfeng regained his composure and invited everybody to go back to the hall for some rest.

Mei Chaofeng laughed suddenly, waved her sleeves, then turned around and leaped outside. Before long she had vanished in the dark.

"Mei Shijie!" Lu Chengfeng called out, "Take your disciple with you!"

But the darkness swallowed his voice. Mei Chaofeng had already gone far.

Chapter 15 - The Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail

Translated by Frans Soetomo with special thanks to Sunnysnow



He saw in front of her two clay figurines, one resembling a man, the other a woman. These figurines were made in the famous Wuxi city; they were round, fat and really cute. In front of the figurines sat tiny clay bowls filled with flower petals, leaves, and so on.

A moment later Lu Guanying remembered their other guests; he helped Wanyan Kang stand up but he could not move because his acupoints were still sealed; only his eyes were moving.

"I accepted your Master's request, you may go," Lu Chengfeng said. He did not want to unseal the acupoints, since it was someone outside his school who did that. If he did, he would be showing disrespect towards other people. He therefore cast his glance toward his guests. Before he even said anything Zhu Cong had come up to Wanyan Kang and hit several times on his waist, and tapped some more on his back; unsealing the acupoints.

Lu Chengfeng was impressed. "This Wanyan Kang's martial arts are not weak, yet this man was able to seal his acupoints without any resistance. His martial arts must be good," he thought. What he did not know was that Zhu Cong took advantage of the commotion caused by the collapsing roof so that Wanyan Kang did not even realize what was happening.

Wanyan Kang was ashamed; he turned his back and walked away without saying anything. Zhu Cong saw the Jin officer still lying around; he unsealed his acupoints and called out, "Who is this officer? Take him away."

That officer had thought that he was going to die, but he was unexpectedly released. He was delighted and hurriedly kowtowed, "Valiant Hero ... thank you so much for saving my lowly life. Duan Tiande will not forget it as long as I live.

Next time when you visit the capital, please make sure you stop by my residence, I will be at your service with all my heart ...”

Guo Jing heard that name ‘Duan Tiande’; his ears were buzzing. With a trembling voice he asked, “You ... your name is Duan Tiande?”

“That’s right,” answered Duan Tiande. “Duan Tiande at your service, Young Hero.”

“Eighteen years ago, were you serving as a military officer in Lin’an?” Guo Jing asked.

“How did the Young Hero know that?” Duan Tiande asked; and then he remembered that Lu Chengfeng had mentioned that Lu Guanying was a disciple of the monk Kumu; he turned his head to Lu Guanying and said, “I am Monk Kumu’s nephew, only I did not attend the monastery. I say we belong to the same family. Ha ... ha ...!” He laughed merrily.

Guo Jing looked at him strangely but did not say anything. Meanwhile Duan Tiande was still smiling happily. After a while Guo Jing regained his composure and turned his head to Lu Chengfeng. “Manor Master Lu, may I please borrow your courtyard for a moment?” he asked.

“Sure, use it as you wish,” Lu Chengfeng answered.

Guo Jing took Duan Tiande’s arm and led him to the courtyard in big strides. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan were having mixed feelings; they thought the heavens did indeed have eyes. Had he not said his own name, they would not have known he was the person they’d been looking for these past seven years and tens of thousands li.

Lu Chengfeng and his son, along with Wanyan Kang followed behind. They had no idea what Guo Jing was about to do.

The courtyard was bright with the torches held in the manor servants' hands. Guo Jing requested the use of some writing instruments, which the servants also quickly provided. Guo Jing then turned to Zhu Cong.

"Second Master," he requested, "Would you please write down my father's name?" To which Zhu Cong complied. He wrote in large characters, 'Guo yi shi Xiaotian zhi ling wei' [memorial tablet for the righteous warrior Guo Xiaotian] and placed it on the center table.

When he was taken out of the hall, Duan Tiande thought they were going to enjoy some refreshments; but as soon as he saw the name 'Guo Xiaotian' the blood drained from his face. He looked around and found the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had taken positions surrounding him. He was especially wary of Han Baoju with his short and stout stature; involuntarily he wet his pants. That day when he took Guo Jing's mother to the north with the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan hot on his trail, he stopped at an inn for the night. He heard a commotion and took a peek through a crack in the door and had seen Han Baoju. Han's short and stout stature was not easily forgettable. Earlier that day they met in the hall, but since he was a prisoner, he was more worried about his own fate so that he did not pay too much attention to anyone else. But now under the bright torch light it was impossible to mistake Han Baoju for someone else.

Guo Jing smashed a table and loudly shouted, "Now tell me, do you want a quick and easy death, or do you want me to slice your body with a thousand cuts before killing you?"

Duan Tiande knew he was not going to see another day. He scrambled to find something; anything to save his life. "Your father the chivalrous hero Guo's death was unfortunate and I did have a small role in his death, but ... what could I do as a lowly officer against higher authority?" he stammered.

"Who was that? Who sent you to harm my father? Quick, say it!" Guo Jing shouted.

"It was the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Prince Wanyan Honglie," Duan Tiande said.

"What did you say?" Wanyan Kang was startled.

At this point all Duan Tiande could think of was, if he was going down, other people were going down with him. Who knows? He might get away with his crime. Therefore, without concealing anything he narrated how Wanyan Honglie was infatuated with Yang Tiexin's wife, Bao Xiruo; how he conspired with Song authorities to kill Yang Tiexin while Wanyan Honglie would pretend to be the good guy who rescued Bao Xiruo. He told how they ransacked Ox Village and ended up killing Guo Xiaotian; how Duan Tiande then took Guo Jing's mother to Beijing and then joined the Jin envoy to Mongolia. He explained how, during the chaotic times in Mongolia, he got separated from Guo Jing's mother; how he decided to go back to Lin'an and worked diligently as a career soldier, finally to get promoted to his current position. He ended his story by kneeling in front of Guo Jing.

"Young Hero Guo, Guo Da Ren ['honorable' – someone in high position]," he said. "Please do not blame your lowly servant. I saw how chivalrous your father was, how solemn his expression was; I wanted to befriend him, only ... only ... your lowly servant was a very low ranking officer and I must obey orders. It was useless for me to have good intentions.

Heaven is my witness, how I, Duan Tiande, did not have any enmity towards anybody ...” He saw Guo Jing’s expression had not changed a bit and he did not say anything either. He quickly scooted over to the table and kneeled in front of Guo Xiaotian’s memorial. “Master Guo,” he continued. “I am sure your spirit in heaven is very clear that it was the Sixth Prince Wanyan Honglie who killed you, and not this lowly creature in front of you. Today I witnessed that your son is an extraordinary young man, your spirit must be very proud of him. I pray, with your blessing, he will forgive a lowly dog like me ...”

While he was still babbling, Wanyan Kang swiftly leaped, struck with both hands and shattered his skull. He collapsed and died instantly.

Guo Jing kneeled in front of the table, sobbing uncontrollably. Only now did Lu Chengfeng understand the real story, so along with his son and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan they bowed to pay their respects in front of Guo Xiaotian’s memorial. Wanyan Kang also kneeled and kowtowed several times. Then he stood up and said, “Brother Guo, today I know that ... that Wanyan Honglie is our archenemy. Little Brother did not realize it and has committed many-many despicable actions, more like heinous crimes.” And then he remembered his mother’s suffering and wept bitterly.

“What are you going to do then?” Guo Jing lifted his head and asked.

“Little Brother found out today, that my surname is actually ‘Yang’, the name ‘Wanyan’ does not have anything to do with me. From now on, I will be called ‘Yang Kang’,” Wanyan Kang answered.

“Good!” Guo Jing exclaimed. “Finally you are a real man who does not forget your origins. I am going to Beijing tomorrow to kill Wanyan Honglie. Are you coming with me or not?”

Yang Kang still remembered Wanyan Honglie’s kindness in raising him from childhood; he hesitated for a moment. But seeing Guo Jing’s stern expression he hastily answered, “Little Brother will accompany Big Brother to seek revenge.”

Guo Jing was delighted. “Good! You know that our late fathers were sworn brothers and my mother told me that they made a pact to make us sworn brothers too. What do you say?”

“That is precisely my wish,” answered Yang Kang. So they asked each other their respective ages, it turned out that Guo Jing was born two months before Yang Kang. They kneeled in front of Guo Xiaotian’s memorial, bowed eight times toward each other and became sworn brothers.

With everything under control, they turned in to take some rest in Returning Cloud Manor. Early the next morning the Six Freaks, Guo Jing and Yang Kang bade farewell to Manor Master Lu and his son. The Manor Master presented each guest with a generous amount of money as a farewell gift to cover their traveling expenses.

Leaving the village Guo Jing said to his six Masters, “Disciple and Brother Yang are going north to kill Wanyan Honglie. I am asking Masters to give me some advice.”

“The mid-autumn festival is still weeks away, while we do not have anything pressing to do. I think we’d better accompany you to take care of this important business,” Ke Zhen’E said. Zhu Cong and the rest voiced their approval.

“Your kindness towards your disciple is as heavy as a mountain. Wanyan Honglie’s martial arts are mediocre. With Brother Yang’s help, I am sure killing him will not be a difficult task. For your disciple’s sake my Masters have been away from Jiangnan for more than ten years. Now that you are back in your hometown, your disciple does not dare to trouble Masters with my personal business.”

The Six Freaks thought Guo Jing was being very reasonable; also, they had seen with their own eyes that Guo Jing’s martial arts had improved tremendously. Hence they did not press him and one by one they gave their blessings to him.

Finally Han Xiaoying said, “On the matter of Peach Blossom Island, I don’t think you should go.” She knew Guo Jing was uprightly honest and that Huang Yaoshi was hot-tempered and strangely cruel. If Guo Jing went to Peach Blossom Island chances were he would meet some unfortunate events.

“If disciple does not go, wouldn’t that mean I broke my promise to him?” Guo Jing asked.

“When dealing with a monster we don’t have to have good faith,” Yang Kang countered. “Big Brother, I think you adhere too rigidly to old-fashioned values and traditions.”

Ke Zhen’E snorted and said, “Jing’er, as chivalrous heroes we have to do what we say. Today is the fifth day of the sixth month; we will meet again on the first day of the seventh month at the ‘Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal’ in Jiaxing [in modern day Zhejiang]. Then we will go to Peach Blossom Island together. Now you’d better rush to Beijing on your red horse to seek revenge. You don’t always have to be with your younger brother. If you can achieve your goal, that would be great. If not, we can always look for the Quanzhen

Sect's priests to help us kill the traitor. Their righteousness is as heavy as a mountain; they certainly will not turn down our request."

Guo Jing understood his First Master's love toward him as shown by his willingness to go with him into a dangerous situation. His heart was overwhelmed and he kneeled and kowtowed respectfully.

"Your younger brother comes from a rich and honorable family, you must be careful," Nan Xiren reminded him. Guo Jing did not understand, he only looked at his master. Han Xiaoying smiled, "You don't understand your Fourth Master's words. It's all right. You will understand later. Just be careful at all times," she said. "Yes," Guo Jing said.

Zhu Cong smiled, "Huang Yaoshi's daughter is actually very different from her father," he said. "We shouldn't provoke her anymore, should we, Third Brother?"

Han Baoju twitched his moustache. "That little brat scolded me even though she is as short as a winter melon; she even thinks herself pretty." Speaking thus he could not restrain a smile.

Guo Jing knew his masters no longer bore any grudges toward Huang Rong; he was delighted. But then he remembered her whereabouts was unknown, he couldn't help feeling depressed.

"Jing'er," Quan Jinfa said, "The sooner you leave, the sooner you will be back. We will wait patiently in Jiaying." With that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan headed south.

Guo Jing held his red horse's reins and followed his masters with his eyes until he no longer could see them. Then he turned his head toward Yang Kang. "My worthy younger brother [xiandi], this red horse of mine is extremely fast; we

can go to Beijing and back within ten days. What do you say I accompany you and spend several days looking around?" Yang Kang agreed. Two young men mounted the horse and headed slowly to the north.

Yang Kang sighed with heavy feelings. Only a month ago he lived a luxurious life. He came to Jiangnan with a great company as a special emissary of the Great Jin, with all the power and prestige that came with it. Now he was traveling back to the capital quietly, with nobody pampering him along the way. It was like he was having a pleasant dream and suddenly woke up to the harsh reality of life. Guo Jing might not necessarily take him along to kill Wanyan Honglie; which made him more distressed. He contemplated warning Wanyan Honglie, but could not make up his mind about it.

Guo Jing, noticing his grim expression, thought that he was mourning the death of his parents and so tried to console him.

Around noon they arrived in Liyang and straightaway tried to find a restaurant for some refreshments. Out of the blue, someone who looked like a restaurant worker, approached. "Are you gentlemen Mr. Guo and Mr. Yang?" he bowed as he asked, smiling broadly. "The table is ready, please come with me and eat."

Guo Jing and Yang Kang were baffled. "How did you know us?" Yang Kang asked.

"A guest arrived earlier and asked us to prepare a meal for you. I was even given a detailed description of how Mr. Guo and Mr. Yang look," he said, still with a smile on his face. He then took the horses' reins and led them to the stable.

Yang Kang snorted and cynically said, "The Returning Cloud Manor Master Lu is so kind." They entered the restaurant

and sat down. As it turned out, the food was exquisite and the wine was superb. Guo Jing even found some chicken that he liked very much. They ate to their hearts' content and were about to pay the bill, but the restaurant worker simply smiled and said, "No need to pay gentlemen, everything has been taken care of." Yang Kang laughed and tipped him generously. He thanked them profusely and led them out of the restaurant, bowing and smiling the whole time.

Guo Jing praised Manor Master Lu's generosity. Yang Kang, however, still bore a grudge because he had been captured and held prisoner. "I assume he uses this trick to befriend the people of Jianghu; no wonder he's the leader of the Lake Tai area," he said.

"Isn't Manor Master Lu your martial uncle?" Guo Jing wondered.

"It's true that Mei Chaofeng taught me some martial arts," Yang Kang answered. "But that doesn't necessarily make her my master. If I had known they came from a heretical sect, I would not have wanted to learn any of it and I wouldn't have fallen into this situation."

"How so?" Guo Jing was confused.

Yang Kang realized he had made an indiscreet remark. He blushed and said with a smile, "Little Brother feels the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and her other martial arts are unorthodox."

Guo Jing concurred. "What my worthy younger brother said is correct. Your master, Priest Changchun's [Eternal Spring] martial arts are exquisite and he comes from an orthodox Taoist school. If you tell him the truth and repent, I am sure he will be willing to forget past matters." Yang Kang silently agreed.

That evening they arrived at Jintan. Again, another restaurant worker welcomed them and led them to a table full of choice foods and wine. This happened for the next three days. The next day the two crossed a river and arrived at Gaoyou and received the same welcome. Yang Kang sneered and said, "I want to see just how far Returning Cloud Manor extends their hospitality." However, Guo Jing was starting to get suspicious; every time they ate, he would find one or two bowls of his favorite food. If it was Lu Guanying, how would he know what he liked?

After they finished eating Guo Jing proposed, "My worthy younger brother, let me go ahead and investigate." Mounting his red horse he quickly rode ahead, passing three scheduled stops and soon arrived at Baoying. Sure enough, nobody welcomed him there. Guo Jing found the biggest inn in town and checked into the best room. That evening he heard a horse with loud ringing bells galloping and stopping right in front of the inn. Someone entered and ordered some food scheduled for tomorrow, for Mr. Guo and Mr. Yang.

Guo Jing had guessed earlier it must be Huang Rong; but on hearing her voice he was overjoyed nonetheless. He restrained himself from coming out to see her. He thought that since Huang Rong liked to play around, he would surprise her later that evening. He slept soundly until about the second hour, quietly got up and went tiptoeing to scare Huang Rong in her room. Then he saw a shadow flashing on the roof; it was Huang Rong. "Where is she going in the middle of the night?" Guo Jing wondered.

Quickly using his lightness kungfu he followed behind. Huang Rong ran without looking around to the outskirts of town; oblivious that somebody was following her. She stopped at the bank of a small creek and sat beneath a

willow tree. She took something out of her pocket and bent down to play with it.

The moonlight shone on her beautiful face as a cool breeze swayed the willow branches and her clothes gently fluttered. The creek whispered softly and the insects chirped quietly. It was a beautiful scene to behold. Guo Jing was about to come near when suddenly he heard Huang Rong quietly say, "This is Jing ge ge, this one is Rong'er. You two sit down nicely face-to-face. Yes, like this ..."

Guo Jing tiptoed behind her. He could not see clearly in the dim moonlight, but he saw in front of her two clay figurines, one resembled a man, the other a woman. These figurines were made in the famous Wuxi city; they were round, fat and really cute. During their stay at Returning Cloud Manor Guo Jing had learned from Huang Rong that although mere toys, Wuxi's products were the result of very high quality craftsmanship. The locals called them 'da a fu' [big lucky]. Huang Rong owned several such figurines on Peach Blossom Island.

Guo Jing came nearer and saw in front of the figurines tiny clay bowls filled with flower petals, leaves, and so on. He heard her saying softly, "Jing ge ge can eat this bowl, Rong'er will have this one. Rong'er cooked them herself. Aren't they delicious?"

"Delicious, very delicious!" Guo Jing said as he stepped out.

Huang Rong was startled. She turned her head and smiled sweetly; rushed into Guo Jing's arms and hugged him tightly. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder beneath the willow tree busily talking about what had happened during their few days of separation [which felt like years to them]. Actually it was Huang Rong who busily talked; Guo Jing was

content with simply looking at her face and listening to her chatter.

Huang Rong told him how that night after her father threatened Guo Jing's life she had jumped into the lake. After hiding for some time she figured out her father must have left, so she came back to the village. She saw Guo Jing was safe and sound and was greatly comforted; but recalling how she had been so harsh with her father she felt really bad. The next morning she saw Guo Jing and Yang Kang heading north to Beijing; thereupon she preceded them and arranged for meals along the way.

They talked all through the night in the warm sixth month's weather. The weather was pleasant and Huang Rong's heart was happy; after a while she became sleepy, her speech became fuzzy and not too long afterward fell asleep against Guo Jing's chest; her jade-white skin felt cool and her breath blew softly. Guo Jing was afraid he might awaken her, so he sat motionless against the willow tree and after a while he too dozed off.

Guo Jing did not know how long he slept, but by the time he opened his eyes he could hear the birds chirping merrily and he smelled the sweet fragrance of the wild flowers. The sun was rising; but Huang Rong was still asleep. With her eyebrows creased, her ruddy complexion, her graceful smile, she looked like she was having a sweet dream.

"Let her sleep a bit longer; I must not make any noise," Guo Jing thought. He looked like he was counting her long eyelashes when suddenly a voice was heard, coming from about twenty feet to his left.

"I found the Eldest Miss Cheng's room; it is on the second floor of the building surrounded by a flower garden behind the Tong Ren pawnshop," the voice said.

“Good! We will work tonight,” another voice replied, it sounded like an older man. Both men spoke in low voices, but in the quietness of the morning Guo Jing could hear every single word clearly. He was startled; they sounded like some ‘flower picking thieves – rapists’ [cai hua yin zei], naturally he could not let them do all kinds of evil things.

Suddenly Huang Rong opened her eyes; she leaped out of Guo Jing’s arms and called out, “Jing ge ge, catch me!” She ran toward a big tree. Initially Guo Jing was perplexed, but Huang Rong kept beckoning him to come. Finally he understood. They were pretending to be a young couple playing hide-and-seek in the morning. He pursued her while laughing and joking loudly, intentionally made his footsteps heavy to conceal his lightness kungfu.

The two men were not expecting anybody else to be around that early in the morning. They were startled, but upon seeing a young man and a young woman noisily playing, their suspicions vanished. However, they did not continue talking and left immediately.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing could see their backs. They were dressed in rags and looked like they were beggars.

“Jing ge ge, what do you think they are going to do to that Eldest Miss Cheng?” Huang Rong asked after they had walked far enough.

“Most likely not a good thing,” Guo Jing answered. “Do you think we should help her?”

“For sure,” Huang Rong answered with a smile. “Only I don’t know if they belong to Hong Qigong’s clan or not?”

“I don’t think so,” Guo Jing said. “But then Qigong said that all beggars under the heaven are in his care ... Hmm ... perhaps those two are impostors.”

"There are tens of thousands beggars in the world; certainly some of them have turned bad. I don't care how good Qigong is, he will not be able to manage each and every one of them. Looks like these two are the bad ones. Hong Qigong has been so kind to us that it is impossible to ever repay him. I think he will like it if we take care of these bad ones."

"You are right," Guo Jing agreed. Even though he was a little bit tired, the thought of repaying Qigong's kindness lifted his spirits.

"Those two men's bare legs were covered with boils. I am sure they are not false, so those two were real beggars. Other people would not disguise themselves like that," Huang Rong said.

"You really are very observant," Guo Jing said admiringly.

The young couple went back to town for some breakfast; then they walked idly down the street toward the west end of town. There they saw a very big pawnshop with four characters painted on the white wall, 'Tong Ren Pawnshop', with each character taller than an average man. Behind the shop was a garden and in the middle was a two-story building. There was a dark green bamboo curtain covering a big window on the second floor. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other and smiled. Hand-in-hand they walked away to play elsewhere.

After dinner that evening they retreated to their respective rooms for some rest and meditation. About one o'clock that night they ran toward the western part of the town; leaped up on the garden wall and saw the dark shadow of the big building. Silently they climbed to the roof and swung their bodies down from the eaves. It was a summer night, so the window was open. They looked around the big room and to

their surprise there were seven young girls, all about eighteen or nineteen years of age. One beautiful girl was sitting next to a lamp, reading. They thought she must be Miss Cheng. The other six were dressed as servant girls, all holding unsheathed weapons in their hands; they looked stern yet graceful, obviously they knew martial arts.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong initially intended to help this young woman, but, seeing she was well prepared, they thought they would wait and see. So they quietly climbed back to the roof and waited.

Not too long after they heard a faint call from outside the wall. Huang Rong immediately pulled Guo Jing and they looked down to see two shadows leaping the wall and walking toward the building. The shadows looked like the two beggars they'd seen earlier. One of the beggars whistled softly. A servant girl drew back the curtain and asked, "Have the hero brothers from the Beggar Clan arrived? Please come up." The two beggars leaped up and entered the room.

In the darkness outside Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other in surprise. Earlier they thought that as soon as the beggars arrived there would be some fighting or something interesting; who would have thought that they knew each other?

Miss Cheng immediately stood up, paid her respects, and uttered some pleasantries. "Would you tell me your honorable names, please?" she asked.

"My surname is Li," the older beggar answered, "And this is my martial nephew Yu Zhao."

"So you are Senior Li and Elder Brother Yu," Miss Cheng said. "The valiant heroes of the Beggar Clan always uphold justice and are admired by the people of the martial arts

world. It really is an honor for me, young disciple, to finally meet two revered role models. Please, sit down.” Although what she said was common Jianghu pleasantries, her facial expression was shy. She paused a lot in between sentences; which showed she was not used to this kind of talk. She said ‘admired by the people of the martial arts world’ with sincerity, but sounded like she was not sure what she was talking about. When she finished speaking her head hung low and her face blushed.

Shyly she looked up toward the old beggar’s one eye and timidly asked, “Senior Hero, aren’t you the venerable ‘Serpent King of the East River’ [jiang dong she wang] Li Sheng?”

The old beggar laughed. “You have keen eyes, Miss! I have had the honor of meeting your master, the ‘Sage of Tranquility’ [qing jing san ren]. Even though we are not the best of friends, we’ve always had great respect for each other.”

Guo Jing had also heard the name ‘Sage of Tranquility’ mentioned and was delighted, “The Sage of Tranquility, Sun Bu’Er, is one of the Quanzhen Seven Masters; therefore, this Miss Cheng and those two beggars are not strangers.” He heard Miss Cheng continue, “I am very grateful to receive the Senior Hero’s aid in upholding justice. I will listen to Senior Hero’s instructions.”

“Miss, you are worth a thousand gold taels,” Li Sheng said. “But for this licentious man to look at you, even with one eye, is still too much.” Hearing this Miss Cheng’s face blushed profusely. Li Sheng continued, “Now I suggest you stay overnight in the main house, along with these honorable servants of yours. I will deal with that conceited man alone.”

"Young disciple is not skilled in martial arts, but I am not afraid of that villain," Miss Cheng said. "How can I let Senior deal with him alone?"

"Please don't say such things Miss," Li Sheng said. "Our Clan Leader Hong and your honorable founder Senior Wang were good friends; that means we belong to the same family. Why do you want to consider it otherwise?"

Actually Miss Cheng wanted to try out her own martial arts, but she listened to Li Sheng since she dare not defy him. So she bowed and said, "Then I will leave everything in Senior Li and Elder Brother Yu's capable hands." After saying that, she gracefully led her maidservants downstairs.

Li Sheng walked towards the young lady's bed, pulled back the embroidered quilt, and without taking off his shoes laid his dirty body on the sweet smelling bedding. "Go downstairs," he told Yu Zhao, "Be on guard with everyone else. Do not make any moves without my command." Yu Zhao complied. Li Sheng then hid his entire body under the blankets after extinguishing the candle beside the bed.

"Miss Cheng might not want to sleep under that blanket anymore," Huang Rong laughed inside. "The members of the Beggar Clan are just like their leader, they like to deliberately create trouble in a funny way. This matter is actually much more amusing than I originally thought."

Because there were other people standing guard, Huang Rong and Guo Jing quietly hid themselves under the eaves. About an hour later she heard the night watch sounding the signal 'knock, knock, bang, bang, bang ...' at the front of the building. It was the third hour. Then she heard a pebble fall in the flower garden.

A moment later eight people came leaping over the wall and headed straight to the second floor. They lit a lantern

briefly, enough to see the bed, then quickly extinguished it. In that very short time Guo Jing and Huang Rong could see their appearance. It turned out they were the female disciples of Ouyang Ke who dressed like men and all wore white clothing. Four of them pulled open the bed's curtain and covered Li Sheng's head with a silk hood; firmly held, they lifted him up. Two of them opened a big sack and in went the blanket with Li Sheng inside it. They quickly tightened the sack mouth and lifted up the sack. They worked swiftly and quietly in the dark, without making any noise. It seemed they were very skilled in what they were doing.

They leaped back downstairs. Guo Jing was about to make a move when Huang Rong whispered in his ear, "Let the Beggar Clan go first." Guo Jing complied. He stretched his neck and saw four female disciples carrying the sack with Li Sheng in it, while the other four were guarding the rear. Further back, about ten yards behind them, were the Beggar Clan members, each wielding a wooden staff.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong waited a moment to put some distance between them before they quietly leaped out of the garden and followed from afar. A little while later they arrived at the edge of the town. The eight women took the sack to a big house, while the four Beggar Clan members spread out to surround the building.

Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's arm and they walked toward the back of the building; jumped over the back wall and saw that the building was actually an ancestral temple. The main hall was full of memorial tablets. On the main beam hung big banners with the deceased people's merits and honorable titles written on them. The hall was lit by four or five big red candles; and in the center sat a man waving a folding fan.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong had guessed earlier it must be Ouyang Ke's doing and they were right. They hid themselves under a window, not daring to move at all, while wondering in their hearts, "Would that Li Sheng fellow be able to fight him?"

They saw the eight women entering the hall and one said, "Young Master, Miss Cheng is here." Ouyang Ke sneered coldly. He looked outside and said, "Friends, you have been so kind to visit, why not come in and introduce yourselves?"

Hiding on top of the wall, the Beggar Clan members knew they had been found out, but without Li Sheng's command they did not dare to make any noises.

Ouyang Ke turned his head and looked at the sack. "I did not expect such a beautiful lady as you would be so easily invited to come here." He walked slowly forward, waving his folding fan slowly. When he folded the fan, it resembled an iron pen.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing saw his hand movements and his expression; they were shocked. It seemed Ouyang Ke had already discovered that an enemy was hiding inside that sack and was going to strike.

Huang Rong instantly put three steel needles into her hand, aimed toward the fan; ready to strike if Li Sheng was in danger. Suddenly there were swishing sounds and a couple of sleeve-arrows flew toward Ouyang Ke's chest. They were released by a beggar who appeared on the windowsill. They also had seen the danger threatening Li Sheng and launched a pre-emptive strike.

Ouyang Ke moved his left hand sideways, his index and middle fingers pinched one arrow, his ring and little fingers pinched the other, with a 'crack' sound the two arrows became four pieces.

The Beggars saw this and were amazed. "Martial Uncle Li, come out!" Yu Zhao called. He had not even finished shouting when the sack was ripped open; out came two blades followed by Li Zheng rolling on the floor. He used the sack as a shield and quickly stood up.

Li Sheng knew Ouyang Ke was a fierce opponent and he was not sure he could defeat him; that was the reason he wanted to attack him by surprise by hiding inside the sack. Who would have thought that Ouyang Ke would foil his plan?

"A beautiful lady turned into a beggar. That was a good sack trick!" Ouyang Ke laughed.

Li Sheng ignored his remark. "This city has lost four girls in three days. All were your doing, I presume?" he countered.

"This Baoying County is certainly not a poor area, how did a law enforcement officer turn into a beggar?" Ouyang Ke smirked.

Li Sheng remained calm. "I am not begging for food here," he answered. "But I heard yesterday that four adolescent girls suddenly vanished without a trace. My curiosity was piqued, so I took a look."

Ouyang Ke reluctantly said, "Actually those girls are not exceptional; since you want them and considering we are the people of the martial arts world, I'd like to give them to you. Beggars usually eat dead crabs; so I am sure you will treat these four girls as your treasures." He waved his right hand, and several female disciples of his went inside to get the four girls. The girls' clothes were unkempt, their faces thin and pale and their eyes red from crying.

Li Sheng was outraged to see this. He loudly shouted, "What is your honorable name? Whose disciple are you?"

Ouyang Ke still maintained his carefree attitude. "My surname is Ouyang. What is it that you want, my friend?" he nonchalantly answered.

"I want to fight you!" Li Sheng roared.

"Nothing could be better!" Ouyang Ke replied. "Please start!"

"Good!" Li Sheng shouted and moved his right hand. Just before he struck a white shadow flashed with a gust of wind. He was very shocked and leaped up immediately, but his neck was scratched nonetheless. Luckily he was swift, if not; his neck would have a hole in it.

Li Sheng was an eight-bag disciple of his clan; a highly respected position. His martial arts were strong and the beggars in Liangzhe area came to him for advice. In short, he was one of the Beggar Clan's elite fighters; who would have thought that he was nearly injured in just one stance. His face flushed with anger and embarrassment. Without turning his body he launched his hand backward.

"He knows the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'," whispered Huang Rong. Guo Jing nodded.

Ouyang Ke could see this move was fierce and did not dare to meet it head-on; he jumped sideways. By this time Li Sheng had turned his body around and stepped forward. He lifted both hands in front of his chest and with a loud cry pushed them forward.

This time it was Guo Jing who whispered into Huang Rong's ear, "Is that move from the 'Wandering Strides' fists technique [xiao yao you quan fa]?" Huang Rong nodded; but she noticed that Li Sheng's movements were heavy and not elegant like the 'Wandering Strides' should be executed.

Ouyang Ke saw Li Sheng's step was steady and his hands were proficient at launching wonderful moves; he did not dare to act casual and underestimate his opponent any longer. He slipped his folding fan into his waist and quick as a flash launched a counterattack toward Li Sheng's shoulder.

Li Sheng parried with the 'Begging for Rice' move [fan lai shen shou], still from the 'Wandering Strides' fists technique. Ouyang Ke parried with his left hand, which forced Li Sheng to lift his right arm; Ouyang Ke swiftly moved toward Li Sheng's back and stretched both hands with all fingers forming two claws attacking Li Sheng's vital 'Sleeveless Garment' [bei xin] acupoints.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing were startled, "That move is difficult to defend against."

By that time the rest of the Beggar Clan members had entered the hall. They saw Li Sheng was in grave danger and were rushing to help.

Li Sheng could hear the wind behind his back and felt the claws almost touching his clothes. Again he launched his hand backward using the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail' [shen long bai wei] from the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. The stance came from the trigram, 'to tread on' which is part of the Yi Jing [Book of Changes]. The master who created the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' actually named the stance 'Treading on the Tiger's Tail' [lu hu wei]. It was a more powerful description compared to 'Attacking the Tiger from Behind' because if one steps on the tiger's tail, it will no doubt turn around and attack furiously. However, the later generation felt that this description in the Yi Jing was too soft and not pleasing to the tongue. Thus, they changed it to the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail'.

Ouyang Ke did not dare to meet this attack head-on, so he flexed his body and jumped back.

“A very close call!” Li Sheng said in his heart. He turned his body around to face his opponent again. His martial arts were inferior to Ouyang Ke’s exquisite moves. They had fought thirty or forty moves and already his life was threatened five or six times. Fortunately he could always use the ‘Divine Dragon Swings its Tail’ to get out of trouble.

“Looks like Hong Qigong only passed on this single move to him,” Huang Rong whispered. Guo Jing nodded. He recalled the time when Hong Qigong passed on to him the ‘Proud Dragon Show Remorse’ and he fought Liang Ziwen using this single move over and over. Later on Hong Qigong taught him a total of fifteen moves, while this important figure in the Beggar Clan only knew one move. His heart swelled with gratitude toward Hong Qigong.

In the meantime Ouyang Ke had increased the intensity of his attacks and step-by-step he forced Li Sheng into a corner. Earlier Ouyang Ke sent his fierce attacks without any particular target, but now his moves were intended to prevent Li Sheng from turning around and launching his backward palm. Li Sheng understood his intentions very well, so he worked hard to step back into the middle of the room.

Suddenly Ouyang Ke let out a long laugh; he whirled the fist straight up from below hitting Li Sheng’s chin. Li Sheng stuttered in pain and cried out in alarm. He tried to stretch his hand to counterattack but he was a split second too late. Ouyang Ke’s fist had struck its target. Li Sheng was hit five or six times on the head and chest. He felt dizzy and his body weak as he wobbled and fell to the floor.

The Beggar Clan people rushed to help but Ouyang Ke turned around, grabbed two of the front most attackers and threw them to the wall. They fainted immediately. The rest of the beggars did not dare continue.

“What, did you think that a bunch of stinky beggars would deceive me so easily?” Ouyang Ke sneered. He clapped his hands and two female disciples came out dragging a young woman along. Her hands were tied behind her back, her face forlorn and tears flowed down her cheeks; it was none other than Miss Cheng.

Everybody, including Huang Rong and Guo Jing, was shocked and baffled.

Ouyang Ke waved his hand and his disciples took Miss Cheng back inside. With a smug expression he said, “While the old beggar went into the sack, I worked downstairs capturing Miss Cheng and came back here immediately to wait for the rest of you.”

The beggars looked at each other in blank dismay; they’d lost this bout big time.

Ouyang Ke casually waved his fan and mocked, “The Beggar Clan’s name is well-known throughout the world. Today I have seen it with my own eyes; it’s a fame that will make people laugh until their teeth fall out of their mouths! Your special skills of stealing chickens, stroking dogs, begging for food, catching snakes, I have seen them all. Now, do you still dare to meddle in your Young Master’s business? I am willing to spare this old beggar’s life, but I must take his two lights as a souvenir.” After saying that, he stretched out two fingers toward Li Sheng’s eyes.

“Hold it!” a voice suddenly called out. A man leaped into the hall and immediately sent an attack toward Ouyang Ke.

Ouyang Ke sensed the swiftness and fierceness of the attack; he moved sideways to evade, but could not get out of the wind. His body shook and he was forced to draw back two steps. He could not help but be inwardly startled. "Since I left the Western Regions I have fought many skilled masters; who is this man who has an unexpectedly high martial arts skill?" He turned his eyes toward the newcomer and once again he was startled. He had fought Guo Jing before at the Zhao Palace and his martial arts were only average; how did his palm carry such profound strength just now?

"You have committed all kinds of evil, but instead of repenting you wanted to injure this good man. Do you really not have any consideration for the heroes of Jianghu?" Guo Jing scolded.

Ouyang Ke thought that Guo Jing's last attack was just a fluke. He looked down on Guo Jing, "Are you one of those 'heroes'?" he mockingly asked.

"I do not dare to call myself a hero," Guo Jing answered. "With all due respect, I am asking you to release Miss Cheng and return to the west immediately."

"And what if I don't want to listen to your childish request?" Ouyang Ke smirked.

Before Guo Jing had a chance to reply, Huang Rong called from outside the window, "Jing ge ge, just punch that bastard!"

When Ouyang Ke heard Huang Rong's voice, his spirits were shaken. "Miss Huang, you want me to release Miss Cheng, that is easy, just as long as you follow me wherever I go. Not only Miss Cheng, but I will also release all my female disciples; moreover, I will promise you not to take another female disciple. Wouldn't that be good?"

Huang Rong leaped inside the hall, smiling as she said, "That is very good! We are going to tour the Western Regions. Jing ge ge, are you coming?"

Ouyang Ke shook his head, "No, I want you to come with me. I don't want this stinky kid to come along," he said, still smiling.

Huang Rong was angry, her palm slapped backward. "You dare to slur him? You are the stinky one!" she shouted loudly.

Ouyang Ke was mesmerized with Huang Rong's gracefulness and her sweet smile while talking to him. She looked so innocent yet free. His spirit was enthralled. Who would have thought that she would abruptly turn hostile? He was not on guard against her and Huang Rong used the exquisite move from the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm', the ultimate in Peach Blossom Island palm techniques. His left cheek was slapped. Fortunately Huang Rong did not use her full strength, but his face burned with pain nonetheless.

"Bah!" Ouyang Ke spat. His left hand suddenly stretched out toward Huang Rong's breast. Huang Rong did not elude him but threw both hands toward the top of his head. Ouyang Ke was lascivious and seeing that Huang Rong did not move, he was delighted. Ignoring the blow on his head his hand caressed her breast. Who would have thought that as soon as his fingers touched her clothing he felt a stabbing pain. It suddenly dawned on him, "She is wearing the soft hedgehog armor." Luckily he was being frivolous and had not used much strength. Quickly he lifted his arm to parry her blow.

"It's not easy for you to hit me," Huang Rong smiled. "I can hit you, but you can't hit me."

Ouyang Ke was exasperated; he could not get angry with Huang Rong, so he directed his anger toward Guo Jing. "Let me kill this kid first; I hope then her feelings toward him will die," he thought. While his eyes were fixed on Huang Rong, his leg flew backward towards Guo Jing's chest. This leg movement was swift and ruthless. It was the 'Western Poison' Ouyang Feng's unique family skill. It was difficult to fend against. Once the leg hit its target, the ribs would fracture in towards the lung.

Guo Jing did not have enough time to jump back, so he turned his body around and launched a backward palm. With a loud crash Guo Jing's palm hit Ouyang Ke's leg just as Ouyang Ke's leg almost simultaneously hit Guo Jing's chest. Both men felt pain that seared to the bone. They turned their bodies around facing each other and stared at each other angrily; then they immediately attacked each other again.

The Beggar Clan people were surprised and thought, "This move obviously is Li Sheng's unique skill, the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail', how come this young man can use it? Moreover, his movement was superior to that of Li Sheng." By now they had already pulled Li Sheng, who had come to his senses, to the side. He also recognized not only the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail', but other stances as well. He saw Guo Jing's moves were exquisite and powerful; he was amazed. "The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' is Clan Leader Hong's special skill. Because I had no regard for my own life and rendered a great service, the leader generously rewarded me with one stance. Where did this youth learn the full set of eighteen stances?" Obviously he did not realize Guo Jing only knew fifteen stances.

Ouyang Ke was also amazed. He secretly admired Guo Jing's progress. "How could this kid's martial arts improve so much in just two months?"

In a short time they already exchanged about forty moves. Guo Jing had repeatedly used his fifteen stances several times. It was enough for him to defend himself; but in all honesty he had to admit that Ouyang Ke's martial arts were several levels above his. He realized he would not win.

Another ten or so moves later Ouyang Ke changed his tactics. He swiftly moved in all directions to divert Guo Jing's attention then he launched an attack from an unexpected direction. Guo Jing tried hard to fend it off but his left hip was kicked. He stepped backward limping. Luckily his stances were concentrated in his palms, so he could still launch his fifteen moves in succession.

Ouyang Ke did not dare to press the situation for a while. He tried to force an opening in Guo Jing's defense line. About a dozen or so moves later, he did see an opening and immediately launched an attack. Guo Jing had finished all fifteen moves and was about to repeat the whole set. After the fifteenth stance, the 'Seeing the Dragon in the Fields' [jian long zai tian], he could have launched the first stance, the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' [kang long you hui]; but he could also repeat the last stance, the 'Seeing the Dragon in the Fields '. His mind was not quick enough as he pondered, "Shall I repeat from the beginning, or shall I reverse the order?" This slight hesitation was enough for Ouyang Ke. He immediately took advantage of this small flaw and attacked Guo Jing's shoulder.

Guo Jing was taken aback; he did not have any chance to think which one of the fifteen stances he could use to parry that attack, so in reflex he stepped backward and slapped his opponent's hand. It was a move that followed no martial arts principles; it was a move without a move. It took Ouyang Ke by surprise and his arm was squarely hit. Ouyang Ke was shocked; he leaped back and immediately

examined his arm. Luckily, even though it hurt, it was not broken.

Guo Jing was delighted with this unexpected result. He thought, "I realized there are three areas on my body that are not protected well: my shoulder, left hip and right waist. If only I could develop more stances using both hands ..." His mind was still reeling as Ouyang Ke launched another attack.

Guo Jing was not the smartest kid in the country. Even if he painstakingly racked his brain for ten days or two weeks, he would not necessarily come up with even half of a new move. Right now he was engaged in fierce combat, how would he have a chance to think? All he could do was clumsily modify whatever principles he had learned from the 'Dragon Palms' just to protect these three areas, his shoulder, left hip and right waist.

Ouyang Ke was anxious. "His stances are limited, and given enough time, I am sure I can gain the upper hand. Where did the three additional stances come from?" he thought. He did not know that Guo Jing's three additional moves were actually useless; but he was a little bit wary since he was hit before. He slowed his pace and concentrating his strength on defense, carefully studied Guo Jing's new moves. After a while he could see the flaw. "Right! He has not mastered these moves yet, that was the reason he did not use them at the beginning," he thought. While still moving his body around he thrust his left hand to divert Guo Jing's attention and at the same time swung his right leg straight toward Guo Jing's left hip.

Guo Jing was not able to use his three self-developed stances to their full extent yet. Suddenly seeing his opponent attack his weak point, he was nervous. As he was

launching a palm, he suddenly retracted it halfway and diverted his palm to parry his opponent's kick.

Huang Rong was secretly disappointed. "To hesitate in a match like this is truly martial arts biggest taboo. In this one single move Jing ge ge has wasted seven or eight opportunities. Not only that, even if he won't be able to injure the enemy, he should be able to defend himself. By turning his palm around like that, he actually made the flaw bigger," she reasoned. She knew for sure that Ouyang Ke had put all his strength into that kick and Guo Jing might not be able to parry it. Immediately seven or eight steel needles flew swiftly from her hand.

Ouyang Ke quickly drew the folding fan from his waist and in one fluid motion opened it and waved it gently to block the needles. He was sure all needles were knocked down so he did not slow down his kick toward Guo Jing. He was confident Guo Jing would get hit hard and fall to the floor; but then he felt a slight numbness as though the acupoint above his ankle was sealed. His kick did not stop, but it had lost all its strength. Ouyang Ke leaped back in great surprise. "Which meddler was brave enough to backstab your Young Master?" he fumed, "Come out if you have guts ..."

But before he finished he heard a noise from above and something flew his way. He lifted his hand to block that thing, but it came too fast. Before he knew it something had entered his mouth. It was a little bit salty and hard. He was startled and frightened. Quickly he spat that thing out. As it turned out it was a chicken bone.

Nervously he looked above him, but at that precise moment more debris came down on him. He quickly leaped sideways while spitting the dust from his mouth. Just as he opened his mouth several chicken bones came hitting his teeth.

They were not knocked out but it was painful! Ouyang Ke was wild with rage. Suddenly he saw something fly down from a shadow on the roof beam above; he immediately launched a palm to strike that something. He managed to knock it down to the floor only to see that something was a half-eaten chicken foot. Then he heard the shadow on the beam explode in laughter. "How is the beggar's stealing chickens skill?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing leapt with joy as soon as they heard his voice. "Qigong!" they shouted together.

Everybody looked up and saw Hong Qigong sitting on the roof beam, his legs spread and with half of a chicken in his hand, which he ate enthusiastically. The Beggar Clan people bowed and open their mouths together, "Clan Leader! We wish you well Senior."

Ouyang Ke saw it was indeed Hong Qigong and his heart sank. "If what he threw at me was not chicken bones but projectiles, I would be dead by now. Real men are not afraid of defeat; the most important thing now is escaping." He bowed and said, "Uncle Hong, your nephew kowtows to you." His mouth said 'kowtow' but he did not kneel.

Hong Qigong was still chewing the chicken. "Are you not returning to the west? You have committed evil acts here, do you want to end your little life in the 'Central Plain' [zhong yuan]?" he asked indistinctly.

"In the Central Plain Uncle Hero is invincible," Ouyang Ke replied. "As long as Uncle Hero shows mercy and did not come here to bully the young and the weak, your young nephew has nothing to fear. My uncle has instructed me that if I ever see Uncle Hong I should be respectful to you. He warned me about the difference between our skill levels and that Junior simply could not even touch you. Should I

insist on trying I would be the laughingstock of all the heroes of the world."

Hong Qigong laughed heartily and said, "You flatter me and try to prevent me from fighting you. But there are actually a lot of people on the Central Plain who want to kill you. I don't have to move my finger if I really want you dead. Earlier you said that you have seen my skills of stealing chickens, stroking dogs, begging for food and catching snakes and you belittled those skills, did you not?"

Ouyang Ke hastily answered, "Your young nephew was not aware this old hero is Uncle Hong's disciple. It was very disrespectful of me. I beg Uncle and this old hero's forgiveness."

Hong Qigong leaped down from the beam. "You called him 'the old hero' but he was defeated by you. Aren't you the hero then? Ha ... ha ... aren't you ashamed?"

Ouyang Ke was angry, but knew his martial arts were too far below Hong Qigong's so he did not dare to say anything wrong. He suppressed his anger and did not make a sound.

"Your skills were imparted by that old Western Poison and you are thinking of running amuck in the Central Plain. Humph ... did you really think I am already dead?" Hong Qigong said.

"Uncle holds the same rank of honor as my uncle; Junior will have to listen to Uncle's instructions," Ouyang Ke said.

"Is that so?" Hong Qigong said. "You are saying that I've put you on the spot; that the older bully the younger?" Ouyang Ke did not say anything, which was the same as agreeing to what Hong Qigong was saying.

“Even though the Old Beggar is the leader of all beggars, old and young alike, not all beggars are my disciples,” Hong Qigong continued. “This man surnamed Li has learned a superficial amount of my martial arts; how could he be regarded as my successor? His ‘Wandering Strides’ fist technique has not yet reached perfection. You belittled my stealing chickens and stroking dogs skill, humph ... if the old beggar really takes a disciple, he wouldn’t be inferior to you.”

“Naturally,” Ouyang Ke agreed. “Uncle Hong’s disciple would be much stronger than your nephew. But your martial arts skill is too high; it wouldn’t be easy for anybody to learn.”

“Your mouth is sweet,” Hong Qigong said, “But I am sure you are scolding me in your heart.”

“Your nephew does not dare,” Ouyang Ke answered.

“Qigong, don’t believe his lies,” Huang Rong quipped. “He scolds you in his heart all right and he scolds you really bad. He said that although your martial arts are not bad, it only benefits you; you don’t have the ability to teach. Even if you teach your stealing chickens and stroking dogs’ skills to the end of your life, nobody would be able to learn it to perfection.”

Hong Qigong just stared at her. He snorted and mumbled, “This little girl knows how to provoke me.” He turned his head and said, “So? This kid dares to scold me?” Suddenly he stretched out one hand and, quick as lighting, he snatched the folding fan from Ouyang Ke’s hand. He unfolded the fan and saw some painted peonies and two characters ‘Xu Xi’. He did not know that Xu Xi was a poet from the Northern Song Dynasty. Although the peonies were beautifully painted, he still said, “Not good!” There

were several lines of characters written on the fan and at the end was a signature, 'Young Master of the White Camel Mountain' [bai tuo shan shao zhu]. It was Ouyang Ke's handwriting.

"What do you think of these characters?" Hong Qigong asked Huang Rong.

Huang Rong raised her eyebrows and said, "Very crude. But what do you expect? A spoiled rich kid like him wouldn't know how to write. I bet he hired a pawnshop clerk to write those characters."

Ouyang Ke prided himself on being both a martial arts and literature expert, which was actually not too far from the truth. Upon hearing Huang Rong's words he was really angry. He shot a glare towards her, only to see in the candlelight the corners of her eyes showed a very faint smile. She looked so sweet and innocent that his anger vanished into thin air.

Hong Qigong spread the fan in his hand, raised it, and wiped his mouth with it. He had just eaten a chicken, so his mouth was greasy. As soon as he did that, the painting and calligraphy were completely destroyed. Then he casually crumpled the fan, made a paper ball and tossed it to the floor.

Other people would think nothing of it, but not Ouyang Ke; his fan's spines were made of steel. The fan was his weapon. It was a demonstration of profound internal energy. He was terrified.

"If I personally fight you, you will die unsatisfied. So I am going to take a disciple and let him fight with you," Hong Qigong said.

Ouyang Ke pointed to Guo Jing. "This fellow has fought with me for dozens of stances. If Uncle Hong had not appeared, I would have gained the upper hand. Brother Guo, don't you agree?" he said.

Guo Jing nodded his head, "I might lose." Ouyang Ke smiled with satisfaction.

Hong Qigong looked up and laughed. "Jing'er, are you my disciple?" he asked.

Guo Jing recalled he kowtowed to Hong Qigong, but Hong Qigong returned those kowtows. "Junior is not fortunate enough to be your disciple," he quickly replied.

"Did you hear?" Hong Qigong asked Ouyang Ke.

Ouyang Ke was dissatisfied. "You can't fool me; where did this kid's exquisite palms come from?" he asked.

Hong Qigong turned toward Guo Jing. "If I don't make you my disciple, that little girl brat will not let me die peacefully. She will pester me with hundreds of evil schemes forever. I guess the old beggar has to admit defeat. All right, bow to me; I'll take you as my disciple," he said.

Guo Jing was ecstatic. Quickly he dropped to his knees and quickly kowtowed several times while calling out, "Master!" That day at 'Returning Cloud Manor' he had recounted to his six masters how Hong Qigong had taught him most of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan were very happy and all said it was a pity this highly skilled extraordinary character of the Wulin world was not willing to take Guo Jing as his disciple. They told him that if Hong Qigong happened to reveal his willingness to take him, Guo Jing should accept without reservation.

Huang Rong was even happier. She smiled broadly and said, "Qigong, I have helped you find a very fine disciple. My contribution is not small. Starting today you will have somebody you can call your successor. How will you thank me?"

Hong Qigong made a face at her, "Kiss my ass!" Then he turned to Guo Jing and said, "Stupid kid [sha xiao zi - it's a vulgar term, lit. foolish/dumb etc.], let me first teach you three stances." He immediately taught Guo Jing the last three stances of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' right in front of everyone. Of course, compared to Guo Jing's own three desperately-brewed stances, these moves were a world apart.

Ouyang Ke said to himself, "This old beggar's martial arts are outstanding, but he is not too smart. He is concentrating on teaching his disciple, totally forgetting that I am standing here, watching." With rapt attention he watched Guo Jing's every move. But he did not see anything extraordinary. Sometimes Hong Qigong whispered something into Guo Jing's ear. He guessed it must be the theory behind these three moves. Sometimes Guo Jing would nod his head, but most other times he just stood there, staring blankly or shook his head. Hong Qigong would repeat what he just said until Guo Jing reluctantly nodded his head; obviously he did not fully comprehend the theory. "This guy is really stupid," he thought, "This short period of time is not enough for him to learn the three stances. I might as well take the opportunity to study them."

In the meantime Hong Qigong had Guo Jing practice them six or seven times. "Good, smart disciple," he said. "You have mastered about fifty percent of these three stances. Now go and beat this lecherous thief for me."

“Yes,” Guo Jing answered and moved forward two steps and launched a palm toward Ouyang Ke. Ouyang Ke slanted his body and counterattacked with a fist. Thus the two engaged in a fight again.

The secret of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ lies in the exact timing of energy exertion. The moves themselves were quite simple. That was the reason that although Liang Ziwen, Mei Chaofeng and Ouyang Ke’s martial arts were higher than Guo Jing’s, he was able to fight them without losing ground. Just a moment ago Ouyang Ke was watching Hong Qigong pass on the three stances to Guo Jing and he knew Guo Jing had not fully comprehended the moves while he himself had memorized the stances. Yet, now that he was fighting Guo Jing, he found it difficult to overcome those three stances.

Guo Jing, on the other hand, had now mastered the complete set of the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’. He was able to use it from head to tail and back to head again. The fierceness of the original fifteen moves he had already mastered was greatly increased.

Ouyang Ke had used four different kinds of martial arts, yet he could only match Guo Jing without being able to gain the upper hand. Dozens of moves later he started to get anxious. “If I don’t use my family’s unique skills I may lose,” he thought. “I was trained by my uncle since childhood. How come I cannot defeat the old beggar’s disciple who received instructions just a moment ago? I am afraid the old beggar will look down on my uncle.”

A dozen or so moves later Guo Jing raised his hand to parry Ouyang Ke’s fist which suddenly turned around and hit Guo Jing’s skull from behind. Guo Jing was stunned. He ducked to avoid a blow while simultaneously throwing a fist slanting upward. Ouyang Ke stepped sideways and sent another fist.

Guo Jing did not dare to parry that fist; he dodged to the right. Who would have thought that Ouyang Ke's arm would suddenly move like a whip! Guo Jing clearly saw it was aiming at his left side but suddenly twisted to the right and struck Guo Jing's shoulder.

Guo Jing was hit three times in a short period of time. These three hits were heavy; he was anxious for he had no idea how to deal with them. "Jing'er, stop!" Hong Qigong called out, "Let's just admit defeat this time."

Guo Jing leaped back about ten feet; he felt pain in the parts hit. To Ouyang Ke he said, "Your martial arts are really brilliant; turning your arm around like that was really odd." Ouyang Ke was proud of himself; he cast a boastful look toward Huang Rong.

Hong Qigong said, "The Old Poison raises snakes for a living; this set of the 'Snake's Flexible Skin' [ruan pi she] fists technique must be developed from the movements of venomous snakes'. It was brilliant. The old beggar has not been able to devise a method to overcome it. Just consider yourself lucky. Now, get out of my way!"

Ouyang Ke's heart turned cold. "Uncle warned me a thousand times not to use this 'Spirit Snake Fist' [ling she quan] unless in an extremely dangerous situation. Today I have let the old beggar see it. If my uncle finds out, I will be in big trouble." His self-satisfaction disappeared almost immediately. He bowed toward Hong Qigong and walked out the temple.

"Hold on a second! I have something to say," Huang Rong called out. Ouyang Ke halted his steps; his heart beat faster. But Huang Rong did not pay any attention to him. She turned toward Hong Qigong and bowed respectfully. "Qigong," she said. "You have to accept two disciples today.

Good things come in pairs; you have accepted a male disciple, now you must accept a female one. Otherwise I won't let you off easily."

Hong Qigong shook his head. "I have already made an exception by accepting one disciple," he smiled. "The old beggar doesn't want to talk about it. Moreover, your father is also highly skilled in martial arts, how could he let you take the old beggar as your master?"

Huang Rong pretended to be suddenly enlightened. "So, you are afraid of my father!" she exclaimed. Hong Qigong was provoked, but he was actually very fond of her. "Me? Afraid of your father?" he said with a straight face. "All right, I'll take you as my disciple. I want to see if Old Heretic Huang will eat me alive."

Huang Rong smiled. "You've said it, you can't take it back," she said. "You know, my father oftentimes remarked that after Wang Chongyang died, amongst the martial experts in this world, only you and he were the two people that counted. The Southern Emperor and the rest of them are not even in his books. I am sure father will love that I take you as my master. Master, how does a beggar catch a snake? Please teach me this skill first."

Hong Qigong was not sure he knew her intentions, but he did know the young girl was smart. She must have had some clever trick up her sleeve. So he explained simply, "Grab the snake seven inches from its head. Use your two fingers like a pair of tongs. As long as you pinch the snake at seven inches, no matter how venomous the snake is, it won't be able to move."

"What if the snake is very big?" Huang Rong asked.

"Lure it to bite your left hand, then, use your right hand to hit it at seven inches," Hong Qigong answered.

“Do you have to be extremely quick?” Huang Rong asked again.

“Of course,” Hong Qigong replied. “You have to put some ointment on your left hand, so even if it gets bitten by the snake you won’t get hurt.”

Huang Rong nodded. She winked at Hong Qigong and asked, “Master, please apply the ointment to my hand.”

Catching snakes was the Beggar Clan’s specialty. Hong Qigong had never used any ointment or antidote; he would simply beat the snake with his stick. But, seeing Huang Rong’s meaningful glance, he took the scarlet gourd from his back, which actually contained some wine, and applied the wine to both of Huang Rong’s palms.

Huang Rong sniffed her palms, made a face, and said to Ouyang Ke, “Hey, I am now a world famous beggar, the Old Hero Hong’s disciple. I am asking for a lesson on the ‘Snake’s Flexible Skin’ from you. But I must warn you that my hands are full of the antidote to your poison, so you must be careful.”

“Having a match with you is exactly what I hoped for,” Ouyang Ke thought. “I don’t care what witchcraft is on your hands, as long as I don’t touch them.” So he smiled brightly and said, “I am willing to die by your hands.”

Huang Rong said, “Your other martial arts are so sloppy and ordinary, I only want to fight your stinky snake moves. If you use any other martial arts, you lose.”

“Whatever Miss says, I wouldn’t dare to disobey,” Ouyang Ke said.

Huang Rong laughed. “I can’t believe a bastard like you would have a very sweet mouth,” she said. “Watch out!” As

soon as she finished speaking her fist came flying with Hong Qigong's 'Wandering Strides' technique.

Ouyang Ke let the fist pass to his side. Huang Rong followed with her left leg kicking horizontally, while her right hand formed a hook. It was a stance from the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm', her own family heritage. Unfortunately Huang Rong was still too young and the time she spent on training was limited; however, this time her purpose was a victory, so she used whatever kungfu she knew, regardless of who passed it on to her.

Ouyang Ke saw the exquisiteness of her moves; he did not dare to be careless. His right arm extended and suddenly curved back to hit her shoulder. This move from the 'Spirit Snake Fist' was swift. His hand almost touched Huang Rong's body when he suddenly remembered that she was wearing the soft hedgehog armor. Had he proceeded, wouldn't his fist be dripping with blood?

Huang Rong quickly dodged and sent both her palms whishing toward an opening on his face. Ouyang Ke brushed his sleeve and parried her palms.

Huang Rong's body was protected by the soft hedgehog armor, her hands were covered with ointment; the only part unprotected was her face. Ouyang Ke was in a predicament; he was getting attacked without any chance to hit back. Even though the 'Spirit Snake Fist' was wonderful; he was forced to fly east and dodge west trying to elude Huang Rong's attack, while keeping himself from touching her palms. "If I hit her face to gain victory, that would be offensive to her, and if I pull her hair, I treat her rudely; other than that I can't think of anything else," he thought. But he suddenly had an idea. He stepped aside and quickly tore the corner of his sleeve; ripped it into two

parts and wrapped them around his hands. With protected hands he tried to grab Huang Rong's palms.

"You lost!" Huang Rong jumped out of the arena and called out. "That's not the 'Stinky Snake Fist'."

"Oh, I forgot," Ouyang Ke said.

"Your 'Stinky Snake Fist' is not that special, it cannot defeat Hong Qigong's disciple," Huang Rong continued. "At the Zhao Palace you defeated me, but that was because you had Liang Ziwen, Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Reverend Ling Zhi, and also that wart-headed Hou Tonghai at your side. I was overwhelmed by sheer numbers; also I did not want to get into trouble, so I admitted defeat. All right, now that we have defeated each other, let's just have a match to decide victory or defeat."

Li Sheng and the others were taken aback, they thought, "Even though this young girl's martial arts are good, she is definitely not this man's match. She won by using a trick. Why would she add something superfluous and ruin the victory? What else does she want to prove?"

Hong Qigong on the other hand fully realized that this girl was full of clever tricks; she must have something in mind to trick the enemy. So he simply smiled but did not say anything. He continued gnawing the chicken leftovers and ate noisily; like that chicken was the best food in the world.

"Why are you so serious?" Ouyang Ke laughed. "You'll win or I'll win, it doesn't make a difference. But if you really want to play, I will accompany you."

"At the Zhao Palace we were surrounded by your friends. Had I won, they would surely attack me; thus I was not willing to fight you seriously," Huang Rong said. "But now you have your friends," she pointed to the female

disciples/concubines in white, “and I also have my friends. Although you have more friends than I do, I am not afraid. Let us fight just like we did before: you may draw a circle on the ground; we will follow the same rule; whoever steps out of the circle first, loses. I have kowtowed and taken Senior Hong as my master; I also have highly skilled martial siblings, including this young man. You do not have to tie your hands behind your back as before.”

Ouyang Ke was amused. What she said was partly funny, but also, if you thought about it, it did make sense. So he planted his left foot on the floor, and used it as the axis; while his right foot was stretched three feet away. He turned around and made a circle about six feet in diameter.

The Beggar Clan people did not like him, but seeing this they could not help but secretly praise him.

Huang Rong entered the circle and said, “Are we going to fight the ‘soft’ way [‘wen’ – literary] or ‘hard’ way [‘wu’ – military, or martial arts]?”

Ouyang Ke was baffled, “You are eccentric,” he said in his heart, but his mouth asked, “How do fight the ‘soft’ way? And how do you fight the ‘hard’ way?”

“If we fight the soft way, I attack you three times, you don’t counterattack; then you attack me three times, I won’t counterattack,” Huang Rong explained. “If we fight the hard way, we can fight each other at will. You can use your ‘Dead Snake Fist’ or ‘Live Mouse Stance’, I don’t care. Whoever steps out of the circle first, loses.”

Ouyang Ke thought for a moment. “I think we’d better fight the ‘soft’ way,” he said. “That way, we can avoid injury and won’t spoil our friendship.”

"If you chose the 'hard' way, you will certainly lose," Huang Rong said. "But if we fight the 'soft' way, you still have a chance. Good! Let us fight as you wish, the 'soft' way. Do you go first, or I go first?"

How could Ouyang Ke hit her first? "Certainly ladies first," he said.

Huang Rong smiled. "You are sly! You know you will suffer a loss if you hit me first. All right, I am being generous to you; let me hit you first."

Ouyang Ke was going to say, "In that case I will hit you first." But before he could open his mouth Huang Rong had already shouted, "Watch out!" She immediately sent her palm to attack. Something flashed in her hand; as it turned out she was throwing some hidden projectiles.

Ouyang Ke saw the multitude of projectiles; normally he would use his folding fan to parry an attack like this, but his fan was crushed by Hong Qigong's hand. He could also use his long sleeve to trap the projectiles, but he'd torn his sleeves earlier. The steel needles encompassed an area about six or seven feet wide; if he leaped sideways, he would be out of the circle. He had no time to consider any other alternatives, so he leaped about ten feet vertically. The steel needles flew below him.

Huang Rong waited until he was at the peak and was falling back down before she called out, "Here comes the second attack!" Her hands launched about a hundred steel needles. It was the 'Blossoms Rain from the Sky' needle tossing technique [man tian hua yu zhi jin zhen] from Hong Qigong. She did not even try to aim and just shot the needles toward Ouyang Ke.

Even if Ouyang Ke's skills were much higher, his body was midair and there was simply no way he could avoid them. "I

am finished!" he sighed in his heart, "This girl is so vicious." Right at that moment he felt someone pulling his collar and his body moved back upward; with swishing noise the needles fell to the ground.

Ouyang Ke knew somebody must have saved him. He was thrown back to the ground. It was not too hard, but the energy behind that throw was peculiar – a sign of a highly skilled martial artist; he fell left shoulder first. Naturally he tried to stand back up, but he was unable to do so. He rolled around on the floor a bit before he finally managed to stand. He knew it must be Hong Qigong, because nobody in that vicinity had that kind of skill. He was terrified yet upset and immediately walked out the temple without saying anything. His female disciples followed.

"Master, why did you save that scoundrel?" Huang Rong asked.

Hong Qigong smiled. "His uncle is an old friend of mine. That kid has committed many disgraceful acts; he deserves to be damned. But it wouldn't be good for his uncle's face if he were injured by my hand." He patted Huang Rong on the shoulder and said, "Smart girl, you have given me much good face today. How should I reward you?"

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue. "I don't want your bamboo stick," she said.

"Even if you want it, I cannot give it to you," Hong Qigong said. "I have a mind to teach you one or two kinds of kungfu, but I am too lazy these past few days. I don't have any interest in doing anything."

"I'll prepare some good food for you to boost your interest," Huang Rong offered.

Hog Qigong's eyes lit up; but then he heaved a big sigh. "I don't have time to eat right now. What a pity, what a pity ...!" He turned to Li Sheng and the others and said, "The Beggar Clan has several matters we need to discuss internally."

Li Sheng and the others came to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, expressing their gratefulness for saving their lives. Huang Rong had cut the rope that bound Miss Cheng's hands and feet. Miss Cheng was extremely shy; she held Huang Rong's hand and quietly said her thanks. Huang Rong pointed to Guo Jing and said, "Your Eldest Martial Uncle, Priest Ma taught him kungfu, your Martial Uncles Qiu and Wang are also very fond of him, so I can say that we belong to the same family."

Miss Cheng turned her head toward Guo Jing and suddenly blushed. She lowered her head and after a while quietly stole a glance toward Guo Jing again.

Li Sheng and the others also congratulated Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong. They knew Qigong did not usually accept disciples; even amongst the Beggar Clan members did he rarely teach more than one or two stances. They wondered how Guo Jing and Huang Rong persuaded him so that he was willing to take them. In their hearts they envied these two.

"We are going to prepare a banquet tomorrow evening to congratulate Clan Leader on having accepted two very fine disciples," Li Sheng said.

Hong Qigong smiled, "I am afraid they won't like filthy foods, the kind we beggars eat."

"We will certainly come," Guo Jing hastily said, "Big Brother Li is a Senior Hero, Junior would very much like to know you." Li Sheng had been saved by Guo Jing; thus he kept his

eyes on this young man and listening to his humble speech he was even more delighted. He decided right then and there to befriend Guo Jing.

Hong Qigong said, "I am glad you two feel like old friends at your first meeting; but I warn you not to persuade my first disciple to be a beggar like you! You, my younger disciple, go and take Miss Cheng back home. We, the beggars are going to steal some chickens and beg for some rice." After saying these words, he left the temple followed by all the beggars. Just before leaving Li Sheng told Guo Jing that the banquet tomorrow would be held in that very same temple.

Guo Jing accompanied Huang Rong escorting Miss Cheng back home.

Miss Cheng quietly told Huang Rong her full name was Cheng Yaojia. Even though she had learned martial arts from the 'Sage of Tranquility' Sun Bu'Er, she was born to a rich family and had been pampered since her childhood. Thus, by nature, she was very shy and did not know too many people. She was very different from Huang Rong who was carefree and brave. She did not dare to say even a half word to Guo Jing. Occasionally she would steal a glance and immediately lower her head; her cheeks blushed profusely.

Chapter 16 - The Nine Yin Manual

Translated by Frans Soetomo



The coffin's lid opened; it turned out it had not been nailed down. There was no zombie inside; only a good-looking young girl with a pair of big

eyes. It was none other than Mu Nianci. Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised and quickly he held out his hand to help her out.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong left the Cheng's residence and were very tired since they have not had any sleep that night. They had wanted to go back to the inn to rest, but suddenly heard the sound of hoof beats galloping fast from the south heading north. The sound was coming nearer but suddenly it stopped. Huang Rong's curiosity was piqued, "There must be something unusual happening. It sounds interesting." Utilizing her lightness kungfu she immediately went to take a look. Guo Jing followed closely.

To their surprise, what they saw was Yang Kang standing at the roadside, holding a horse's reins and talking to Ouyang Ke. Guo and Huang did not want to come any closer because they did not want to be detected. They hid themselves quite a distance away. Those two spoke in low voices so all Huang Rong could hear was bits and pieces. Ouyang Ke mentioned 'Yue Fei' and 'Lin'an government office', while Yang Kang did say 'my father'. Huang Rong was curious, she wanted to go nearer, but at that moment Ouyang Ke cupped his fists and headed east along with all of his female disciples/concubines.

Yang Kang stayed behind. He stared blankly for a while; then let out a long sigh and mounted his horse. "Xian Di [Worthy Brother], I am here," Guo Jing called. Yang Kang heard his voice and was startled but stopped his horse anyway. "Elder Brother, you are here as well?" he replied.

"I ran into Miss Huang and we fought Ouyang Ke, that's why we were delayed," Guo Jing explained. Yang Kang's face turned red; he felt uneasy since he wasn't sure if Guo Jing heard his conversation with Ouyang Ke. Guo Jing's face

remained calm; so Yang Kang felt better. "This man does not know how to deceive," he thought, "He wouldn't be this calm if he had heard me."

"Elder Brother," he said, "shall we hurry up and continue our trip tonight, or shall we spend the night here? Will Miss Huang go to Beijing with us?"

"It's not I who goes with you, it is you who follows us," Huang Rong said.

"What's the difference?" Guo Jing smiled. "Let us go back to the ancestral temple and have some rest. Tomorrow evening we will enjoy the Beggar Clan's banquet and then we can continue our trip."

Then the three walked back to the temple. Huang Rong lit a candle. As she carried the candle she picked up the needles she shot out minutes ago. At this time of the year the weather was got hotter, so they took down the doors and took them outside. They intended to sleep in the courtyard.

Just before they fell asleep, the sound of horses' hoof beats could be faintly heard from the distance. They tilted their heads to listen. The sound was coming fast and sounded like it was more than one horse.

"Three horses in front, pursued by more than ten people," Huang Rong guessed. Guo Jing literally grew up on horseback; he knew exactly the number of the horses.

"There are sixteen pursuers altogether," he said. "Well, well, well ... what do you know?"

"What?" Huang Rong asked.

"The three at the front are on Mongolian horses, but the pursuers are not," Guo Jing answered. "What in the world are Mongolian horses doing in this area?" he wondered.

Huang Rong tugged Guo Jing's hand and they walked outside the temple gate. Suddenly a swishing sound was heard as an arrow flew above their heads. The three riders rushed towards the temple. An arrow flew from the pursuers and hit the last horse's thigh. The horse uttered a sad neigh as its leg buckled. The rider's equestrian skill was superb; he managed to leap clear just before the horse hit the ground. It seemed the rider did not know any lightness kungfu and his steps were heavy. The other two riders stopped their horses and turned back.

"I am all right," shouted the one now on foot. "Quickly, go! I'll try to slow the enemy!"

"I will help you with the enemy. Fourth Prince, you go ahead," shouted one of the other two.

"How can you do that?" asked the Fourth Prince.

Those three were speaking Mongolian. Guo Jing, as he listened, thought he knew those voices. They sounded like Tolui, Jebek, and Borchu. He was really surprised. "What are they doing here?" he thought. He wanted to go nearer, but the pursuers had already surrounded the three riders. The three Mongolians were experts at shooting arrows, so the pursuers did not dare to come too close and shot their own arrows from a distance.

"Let's go up!" one of the Mongolians shouted, his hand pointing to a flagpole. The three scurried to the flagpole and climbed up. They were trying to gain a better position.

The pursuers dismounted and surrounded the flagpole on all sides. Somebody shouted an order and four soldiers lifted high their shields, came near the flagpole and tried to chop it down with their swords.

"You are wrong," Huang Rong whispered, "There are only fifteen pursuers."

"No, I can't be wrong," Guo Jing countered. "Maybe one of them was killed." He'd just closed his mouth when a horse came wandering in. There was a rider with it but he was dead with an arrow sticking out from his chest; his foot was stuck in the stirrup so the horse was dragging him along.

Guo Jing crawled towards the corpse and pulled the arrow out. As soon as he felt the arrow with his fingers he could feel that it was made of wrought iron and had the engraving of a leopard's head. It was an arrow used by the Master Archer Jebek and was heavier than average arrows. His suspicion was gone; he called out, "You on the flagpole, are you Master Jebek, Brother Tolui and Master Borchu? This is Guo Jing!"

The three were delighted. "How can you be here?" they asked.

"Who pursues you?" Guo Jing asked.

"Jin soldiers!" Tolui answered.

Guo Jing grabbed the dead Jin soldier's body, lifted it up, and rushed forward. He threw the corpse toward the soldiers at the foot of the flagpole. The corpse did knock down two soldiers and the other two were frightened and ran away.

Out of the blue two white shadows swooped down to Guo Jing. He recognized his two eagles, which he and Hua Zheng raised back in Mongolia. The two birds recognized their master even in the dark night; they uttered a loud cry and came down on Guo Jing's shoulders.

Huang Rong had heard Guo Jing's story of how he had shot two eagles and how he raised a pair of eagles as his playmates. Now, suddenly seeing the white eagles, she ignored the surrounding soldiers. She came running towards Guo Jing and called out, "Let me play with them!" She held out her hand to stroke one eagle's feathers. But the eagle did not know Huang Rong, so it moved its head to hit Huang Rong's hand with its beak. Luckily Huang Rong was quick; if not, the back of her hand would've been injured.

Guo Jing hurriedly pulled the birds away. Huang Rong sulked, "Your pet birds are bad!" But actually she was happy, she bent her head to take a closer look at them.

"Rong'er, watch out!" Guo Jing shouted suddenly. Two fast arrows flew toward Huang Rong's chest. She ignored the arrows and nonchalantly reached towards the dead soldier's pocket. The arrows were right on target, but they hit the soft hedgehog armor and simply fell down near her foot. Huang Rong continued groping in the pocket until she found some dried meat and fed it to the birds.

"Rong'er, play with the eagles, I am going to kill some Jin soldiers!" Guo Jing said. He jumped to strike an arrow flying towards him, stretched his left palm and with a cracking sound broke a nearby Jin soldier's arm.

"Where did the dog that creates trouble come from?" a voice called out suddenly in the dark. Surprisingly, he was speaking Chinese. Guo Jing was startled, "That voice sounds familiar," he thought. At that time a couple of metal weapons came flashing his way as two short hatchets came chopping down at him, one slashing at his chest, the other slashing towards his lower abdomen.

Guo Jing saw the incoming force was fierce and he knew the attacker was not an ordinary officer. He immediately shot out his palm using the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail'. His palm hit the man on the shoulder shattering the shoulder blade into pieces and sent the man flying backwards a few feet. The man cried out pitifully. Suddenly Guo Jing remembered, "This is one of the 'Four Demons of the Yellow River' [Huang He si gui], the 'Axe Buries Family' [sang men fu] Qian Qingjian."

Guo Jing knew that his martial arts skill had improved tremendously these past several months and of course he was in an entirely different league compared to when he fought the Four Demons of the Yellow River in Mongolia a while back. But to be able to knock the enemy back more than ten feet with only one palm? He was amazed. While he was still thinking about it, more metal objects came flashing toward him. This time it was a saber and a spear.

Guo Jing guessed they must be 'Saber Breaks Down the Soul' [duan hu dao] Shen Qinggang and 'Lance Seizes Life' [zhui ming qiang] Wu Qinglie. With his right hand forming a hook he caught the spear near its head and pulled it hard. Wu Qinglie tried to resist, but he was pulled along and fell face down in front of Guo Jing. Right at that moment as Guo Jing was stepping back to elude the chopping saber, Shen Qinggang's blade was hacking toward his martial brother's skull. Guo Jing's leg flew up and kicked Shen Qinggang's right wrist. A streak of blue light flashed in the dark night as his saber flew from his hand; Wu Qinglie's life was saved. Guo Jing then picked up Wu Qinglie and whirled him at his martial brother. With a 'bang', two brothers collided and both passed out immediately.

Of the Four Demons of the Yellow River, only three were left, since 'Whip Capture Spirit' [duo po bian] Ma Qingxiong was killed by Lu Guanying when he was trying to infiltrate

the pirate gang of Lake Tai. These three people were the elite fighters of the Jin soldiers who pursued Tolui and his companions. The rest of the Jin soldiers were not aware that their leaders had fallen due to the darkness. They were still engaging Tolui, Jebek and Borjigin in a shooting battle.

"You are not running away, do all of you want to die here?" Guo Jing roared. He rushed towards the enemy soldiers, hitting here and grabbing there, throwing bodies everywhere. Very soon the soldiers panicked and scattered in all directions. Shen Qinggang and Wu Qinglie slowly came to their senses, each with a splitting headache. Their vision was still fuzzy, but they realized that their company had scattered so they also ran away without hesitation. They accidentally stumbled upon Qian Qingjian and woke him up. He mumbled indistinctly, but seeing the rest of the soldiers had run away, he ignored his pain and they ran in different directions.

Jebek and Borjigin were skilled archers; they kept shooting arrows and managed to kill three more Jin soldiers. Tolui looked down and saw that his sworn brother had scattered the enemy. He was delighted and called out, "Anda [Mongolian term for sworn brother]! How are you?" He slid down the flagpole to the ground.

Guo Jing and Tolui held each other's hands; they were so happy that they were speechless for a while. A moment later Jebek and Borjigin joined them. "Those three Han holding shields blocked our arrows, preventing us from shooting them," Jebek said. "If Jing'er had not come to rescue us, we wouldn't be able to drink the Onon River's clear water anymore."

Guo Jing pulled Huang Rong's hand to let her meet Tolui and company. "This is my sworn sister," he introduced her.

“Will you give me these two white eagles?” Huang Rong asked, smiling. Tolui did not understand Chinese and his translator had run away when they were being attacked by the Jin soldiers. He’d noticed that Huang Rong’s voice was clear and sounded pleasant to his ears, but he actually had no idea what she was saying.

Guo Jing ignored Huang Rong’s request. “Anda, why did you bring the eagles here?” he asked.

“Father sent me to see the Song Emperor; we want to make an agreement between the north and south, so that we can dispatch troops together and attack the Jin from both directions,” Tolui explained. “My sister thought I might meet you here, so she sent these eagles to you. She guessed right, I did meet you here.”

When Guo Jing heard him mentioning Hua Zheng, he was speechless. He knew he was in love with Huang Rong; when he sometimes thought of Hua Zheng he felt it wasn’t right. However, he did not know how to resolve the matter, and tried not to think too much about it. But now, hearing what Tolui said, he was at a loss. His only thought was, “Within a month I am going to Peach Blossom Island where Rong’er’s father might kill me. There’s no point thinking about it now.” Therefore, he turned toward Huang Rong and told her, “These two birds are mine. You can have them to play with.”

Huang Rong was delighted; she found more dried meat to feed the eagles.

Tolui proceeded by telling how his father, Genghis Khan, had gained victory over the Jin on several fronts; but the Jin army was strong in numbers. They’d consolidated themselves and for many years strengthened their forts so that, for a while, they’ve managed to defend their borders.

Therefore Genghis Khan had sent Tolui to make contact with the south to form an alliance with the Song to attack the Jin. Unfortunately they ran into a brigade of the Jin army and could not avoid a battle. Their company perished and only the three of them managed to escape and run here.

Guo Jing remembered that day at Cloud Manor he heard Yang Kang asking Mu Nianci to go to Lin'an and see the Prime Minister Shi Miyuan, to ask him to kill the Mongolian messengers. At that time he did not know anything specific, but now he knew that the Jin had discovered the conspiracy and had sent Yang Kang to prevent the Song and Mongols from forming an alliance.

Tolui continued, "Looks like the Jin have determined to kill me to avoid Mongolia and the Song Dynasty from successfully forming an alliance; the Sixth Prince himself personally led the troops to capture me."

"Wanyan Honglie?" Guo Jing asked in surprise.

"That's right!" Tolui answered. "He was wearing a golden helmet; I saw him clearly and even shot three arrows at him. Too bad they were blocked by his bodyguards' shields."

Guo Jing was ecstatic, "Rong'er, Brother Kang! Wanyan Honglie is here. Let us quickly find him." Huang Rong quickly agreed, but Yang Kang was nowhere to be seen. Guo Jing was impatient, he shouted, "Rong'er, you go to the east, I will search to the west." The two people used their lightness kungfu and ran very fast in opposite directions.

After several li Guo Jing managed to catch up with several runaway Jin soldiers. He captured one of them and found out that it was indeed the Sixth Prince Wanyan Honglie who personally led the pursuers; but the soldier did not know his whereabouts.

"We have deserted the Prince without any regard for his safety; if we go back, we will be executed. Therefore we are throwing away our uniforms and trying to hide among the common people," the soldier said.

Guo Jing turned and resumed his chase. It was almost dawn, but where was Wanyan Honglie? He knew the enemy who killed his father was near but seemed to be unreachable. He was anxious.

He rushed forward a little bit further and arrived at a small wooded area where he saw a white shadow flashing by. It was Huang Rong. The two met, looked at each other and knew they had not found him. Dejectedly they decided to go back to the temple.

"Wanyan Honglie led quite a number of troops pursuing us; he was riding a fast horse. I think by now he must be going back to fetch reinforcements to capture us," Tolui reasoned. "Anda, I am bearing my father's decree; I can't stay for long. Let us part here. My little sister asked me to deliver this message to you: Please come back home to Mongolia as soon as possible."

Guo Jing agreed to what he said, but feared that it would be difficult for them to meet again in the future. His heart was heavy. He hugged Tolui, Jebek and Borchu and bade them farewell, saying very little. They mounted their horses and galloped away. The sound of hoof beats gradually vanished; men and horses hidden behind a cloud of yellow dust.

"Let us hide and wait for Wanyan Honglie to come back," Huang Rong proposed. "If the troops are numerous, we will simply follow them and try to assassinate him in the evening. Don't you think it's a good idea?"

Guo Jing was delighted. He praised Huang Rong endlessly. Huang Rong was very happy too, she smiled and said, "It

was nothing, I was just using the common tactic of 'leaving the shore to move to a ship' [yi an jiu chuan]."

"I'll go to the woods to hide our horses," Guo Jing said. He walked towards the backyard of the temple and suddenly saw something gleaming in the grass in the morning sun. He bent down to take a closer look and found that thing was a golden helmet, inlaid with three big jewels. Guo Jing picked it up and walked back to Huang Rong. "What do you think this is?" he quietly asked.

"Wanyan Honglie's golden helmet?" Huang Rong guessed.

"Exactly!" whispered Guo Jing. "I believe he is still hiding somewhere close to this temple. Let's spread out and find him."

Huang Rong turned, her hands pressed down on the wall and she floated atop the wall in no time. "I'll search from above, you from below," she called out. Guo Jing entered the temple.

"Was my lightness kungfu good?" Huang Rong called.

Guo Jing was taken aback, he stopped in his tracks. "It was very good! Why?" he asked.

"Then why didn't you praise me?" Huang Rong said with a laugh.

Guo Jing stomped his feet. "You're a mischievous kid! You still want to joke at a time like this," he said.

Huang Rong simply laughed; raising her hands, she flew to the rear courtyard.

When Guo Jing was fighting the Jin soldiers, Yang Kang had observed from one side. Despite the darkness he could recognize the Sixth Prince Wanyan Honglie. Although Yang

Kang knew by now he was not his father, he nonetheless had raised Yang Kang for more than eighteen years. He had been a father figure to Yang Kang all this time. Yang Kang saw how Guo Jing dispersed the Jin soldiers; if Wanyan Honglie was seen by Guo Jing, he would surely lose his life. It was a critical moment and Yang Kang did not have too much time to think; so he jumped onto the battleground. At that time Guo Jing was hurling a Jin soldier's body into the air. Wanyan Honglie's horse got frightened, so he was busy holding the reins. Yang Kang grabbed him from behind and pulled him to safety.

"Fu Wang [Father King], it's me, Kang'er. Don't make a sound!" Yang Kang whispered urgently. Guo Jing was still fighting and Huang Rong's attention was occupied by the eagles. The night was dark, so nobody saw him with Wanyan Honglie moving towards the rear courtyard of the temple.

Yang Kang quietly pushed open the door to the west wing and, equally quietly, the two hid themselves there. Their ears could still hear the battle cries outside, followed by the sounds of Jin soldiers scampering away; finally they heard the mumbled sounds of the three Mongolians talking to Guo Jing.

Wanyan Honglie thought he was dreaming, "Kang'er," he whispered, "What brought you here?"

"It was a fortunate coincidence," Yang Kang replied. "Ah ... but that man surnamed Guo means you harm."

By then Wanyan Honglie heard Guo Jing and Huang Rong were going to go separate ways to look for him. He also saw how Guo Jing had defeated the 'Three Ghosts of the Yellow River' and how fiercely and swiftly he had beaten and killed

numerous Jin soldiers. If he were discovered by those two, what would happen? He shuddered involuntarily.

"Fu Wang, if we go now, I am afraid we'll run into them. Let's just hide here; they will leave eventually. We'll wait until they are far away, then we can carefully leave," Yang Kang said.

"That's not a bad idea," Wanyan Honglie said. He paused, then said, "Kang'er, why did you call me Fu Wang and not dad [die]?"

Yang Kang was silent. He remembered his late mother's fate and his heart was filled with turbulent emotions.

Wanyan Honglie said slowly, "You were thinking of your mother, were you not?" He stretched his arm to hold Yang Kang's hand and that hand was icy cold with Yang Kang's sweat.

Yang Kang gently pulled his hand away. He changed the subject, "Guo Jing's martial arts are high. He is seeking vengeance for his father; he is determined to find and kill you. He also has befriended many, many experts in martial arts; it will be impossible for you to guard against him. I think it will be to your benefit if you do not go back to Beijing for the next six months or so."

Wanyan Honglie recalled what happened at Ox Village near Lin'an nineteen years ago; he was saddened. Yet there was a tinge of guilty feelings in him, so he was silent for quite a while. "Very well," he finally said, "I'll avoid Beijing for a while. Have you gone to Lin'an yet? What did Prime Minister Shi say?"

"I haven't been there," Yang Kang coldly replied.

Wanyan Honglie heard the tone of his voice and guessed that Yang Kang had probably found out about his own life story; but why did Yang Kang save him? Could he have another plan in mind?

Those two men had lived together for eighteen years as father and son; they loved each other dearly. But now that they were together in that small room, Yang Kang suddenly thought there was a deep hatred between them. There was a raging battle inside his heart: "With just a whack of my palm I will avenge my father and mother; but how can I do that? Yang Tiexin was my biological father, but what did he give me? Mama normally treated Fu Wang well and if I kill him now, would Mama like it? Besides, if I really forsake being a prince, will I end up wandering around in the wilderness, destitute like Guo Jing?"

He was still having these disquieting thoughts when Wanyan Honglie said, "Kang'er, we have had a father-son relationship. No matter what, you are my son and I love you. Within ten years our great Jin will conquer the Song. At that time I will have enormous power and authority in my hands, with unlimited riches and honor. This beautiful country, this mortal world, will eventually fall into your hands."

Yang Kang understood the implications of his speech; Wanyan Honglie aimed to be the emperor. Thinking about 'unlimited riches and honor', his heart was thumping loudly and he secretly thought, "With the power of the Great Jin, it will not be difficult to crush the Song. Mongolia will pose another problem, but it will be temporary. They are just a bunch of barbarians with excellent riding and archery skills; nothing refined. Fu Wang's management skill is superb. Which other Great Jin prince can be compared to him? When all's said and done, I will definitely become the crown prince of this world." Thinking thus, his blood boiled.

He stretched his hand to grab Wanyan Honglie's. "Dad, your child will certainly help you in this great undertaking."

Wanyan Honglie noticed Yang Kang's hand had become warm; he was delighted. "I am Li Yuan, you are Li Shi Min." [Translator note: Li Yuan and Li Shi Min were the father and son founders of the Tang Dynasty]

Yang Kang was about to reply when they suddenly heard a noise behind them. The two men froze. Quickly they turned their heads. It was already morning and bright sunlight came through the window. They saw seven or eight coffins scattered throughout the room. It turns out that this west wing was the temporary place for the dead before burial. They listened carefully; the noise sounded like it came from one of the coffins.

"What was that?" Wanyan Honglie asked.

"Probably a mouse," Yang Kang replied. At that moment they heard Guo Jing and Huang Rong talking outside about the golden helmet; then joking around as they looked for them.

"Confound it!" Yang Kang thought, "Father's golden helmet was left outside! This could be bad." With a low voice he said, "I am going to lead them away." Quietly he opened the door and jumped outside, towards the roof.

Huang Rong was on the roof when she suddenly saw a shadow flash by on the roof's peak. "Good! He is here!" She dashed toward that shadow, but the shadow quickly jumped down and disappeared around a corner.

Guo Jing heard her voice and came. "He can't run far and must be hiding in the woods," Huang Rong said.

The two were about to run into the woods when suddenly there was a noise from the bush and out came Yang Kang. Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised. "Xian di, where did you come from?" he asked. "Did you see Wanyan Honglie?"

"Wanyan Honglie is here?" Yang Kang feigned surprise.

"He was the commander of those troops. Look, his golden helmet is here," Guo Jing said.

"So that's how it is," Yang Kang said.

Huang Rong noticed his expression was unusual; she also remembered he was speaking with Ouyang Ke earlier so she was suspicious. "We were looking for you everywhere just a moment ago. Where were you?" she asked.

"I ate too many strange foods yesterday, I think I suffered food poisoning, so I relieved myself over there," Yang Kang said, pointing to a small wooded area.

Huang Rong did not believe him, but she was too uncomfortable to challenge him. "Xian di," Guo Jing said, "Let's look together."

Yang Kang was worried; he was not sure if Wanyan Honglie had run away or was still here; but his face did not show anything. "He came here to die! We could not have asked for anything better," he said, "Why don't you two search to the east, I'll go to the west."

"Very well." Guo Jing said, immediately walking to the east and pushing open the door to the 'Clemency and Filial Hall' [jie xiao tang].

"Brother Yang," Huang Rong said, "I think that man is hiding in the west wing; let me come with you."

Yang Kang groaned inwardly, but his face feigned happiness. "Let us go, quickly!" he said, "Don't let him run away." Immediately the two searched from room to room.

The Liu family of Baoying was originally an important family during the Song Dynasty; naturally their ancestral temple was huge. Because of the war with the Jin, this temple was partially burned and some of the Liu family killed. Therefore parts of temple were left in ruins without any effort to rebuild it.

With a cold look Huang Rong watched Yang Kang open dust-laden and spider-webbed doors one by one. He searched each and every room. Finally they arrived at the west wing. Huang Rong saw thick dust on the floor and in that dust there were several footprints, which – from the look of them, were recently made. There were a couple of handprints on the closed door too. "In here!" she shouted excitedly.

Guo Jing and Yang Kang both heard her shout; Guo Jing was delighted, while Yang Kang was anxious; both rushed towards her.

Huang Rong kicked the door open, but to her surprise, all she saw were several coffins with no sign of Wanyan Honglie.

Yang Kang was greatly relieved, he knew Wanyan Honglie must have escaped; but he entered the room and loudly shouted, "Wanyan Honglie, traitor! Where do you hide? Come out!"

"Brother Yang, he must have heard us a long time ago. You don't have to be so kind as to let him know we are here," Huang Rong snickered.

Yang Kang was embarrassed, his face flushed, "Miss Huang, why do you joke with me?" His embarrassment turned to anger.

"Never mind her, Xian di; Rong'er likes to joke," Guo Jing smiled. He lowered his head and said, "Look here, someone must have left all these footprints. Indeed he was here."

"Quick, we must pursue him!" Huang Rong urged. Just as she turned her head, there came a noise from behind her. All three were frightened. They saw a coffin move slightly.

Huang Rong had always been afraid of coffins and ever since she entered this room, she had been feeling queasy; now a coffin suddenly moved by itself, she uttered a cry and tightly held Guo Jing's arm. But even though her heart was scared, her brain was still working. "That traitor ... that traitor hides in the coffin," she said with a trembling voice.

Yang Kang suddenly pointed his finger outside, "Hey! He is over there!" Without waiting for a reply he readied to run outside. But Huang Rong was quick, she reached backward and grabbed Yang Kang's main artery. "You have seen a ghost?" she sneered.

Half of Yang Kang's body was numb; he could not move. "You ... what are you doing?" he asked anxiously.

Guo Jing was delighted. "Right...that traitor must be hiding in the coffin." With big strides he walked towards the coffin and lifted his hands, ready should Wanyan Honglie came out.

"Elder Brother, be careful!" Yang Kang called out. "There could be a zombie inside."

Huang Rong twisted Yang Kang's hand so that he fell to the floor. "You still want to scare me?" she asked angrily. She

was certain that it was Wanyan Honglie hiding inside the coffin, but still, she was scared. What if it really was a zombie inside? You never know, do you?

“Jing ge ge, not so fast!” she tremblingly said.

Guo Jing halted and turned his head, “What is it?”

“Just hold the lid down,” Huang Rong said. “Don’t let ... don’t let that thing come out.”

Guo Jing smiled, “How can it be a zombie?” But he saw that Huang Rong was really afraid, so he jumped toward the coffin and comforted her, “He won’t be able to crawl out!”

Huang Rong was still anxious, she hesitated a little bit, and then said, “Jing ge ge, let me hit the coffin using the ‘Empty Splitting Palm’ [pi kong zhang] while you keep your eyes open. Whether it is a zombie or Wanyan Honglie, I will split the coffin. Then we’ll see whether it is a person crying or a zombie wailing!”

As soon as she finished speaking she exerted energy to her palms, took two steps and sent the palms at the coffin. Her ‘Empty Splitting Palm’ was not as strong as Lu Chengfeng’s; therefore, she needed to hit the coffin directly. Actually it could be launched from a distance with empty air between her and the target.

“That’s not right!” Yang Kang said anxiously, “You hit the coffin’s lid and a zombie might poke his head out and bite your hand, that won’t be good!”

He was successful in making Huang Rong more frightened than ever. She was shivering and halted her movement. Suddenly a cry came out from the coffin; it was a woman’s voice. Huang Rong jumped. She was extremely terrified. “A

female ghost!" she cried. Flailing her hands she ran outside and cried, "Quick! Get out of here!"

Guo Jing was brave, "Brother Yang, let us lift the coffin lid and take a look," he said.

Yang Kang was drenched in a cold sweat, but how could he refuse Guo Jing's request? Surely he could not make himself an enemy of this Guo-Huang couple. But then he heard that woman's voice again, so he rushed ahead to raise the coffin lid. They used a knife to jack the lid up and together they opened the lid, which actually had not been nailed to the coffin.

Guo Jing had directed his strength to his arms, ready to strike the zombie's head; but when he looked down, he was stunned. There was no zombie; it was a good-looking young girl, with a pair of big eyes looking up at them. It was none other than Mu Nianci.

Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised and quickly he held out his hand to help her out.

"Rong'er, come here, quick!" Guo Jing called out. "Look who's here?"

Huang Rong turned her head with her eyes closed. "I don't want to see!" she shouted back.

"But it's Elder Sister Mu!" Guo Jing urged.

With her left eye still closed, Huang Rong took a peek with her right eye. She saw Yang Kang embracing a woman who looked like Mu Nianci. She felt relieved and timidly entered the room again. Who was that woman if not Mu Nianci?

Huang Rong saw Mu Nianci's face looked haggard and two streams of tears flowed down her cheeks. She was unable

to move. Huang Rong unsealed her acupoint and asked, "Elder Sister, why are you here?"

Mu Nianci's acupoint had been sealed for quite a while; her whole body was stiff and her breathing was uneven. Huang Rong helped by rubbing her back. After a while [about the time needed to drink a cup of tea] Mu Nianci told her, "I was captured and held prisoner."

Huang Rong noticed that the sealed acupoint was located at the center of the sole of the foot; the 'Bursting Fountain' [yong quan] acupoint. This was rarely used by the wulin characters of the Central Plains. So with eighty to ninety percent certainty she guessed, "Was it that bastard Ouyang Ke?" Mu Nianci did not answer, but she nodded.

That day when she was trying to contact Mei Chaofeng for Yang Kang's sake she was captured by Ouyang Ke near the pile of skulls and her acupoint was sealed. After Huang Yaoshi played his jade flute to disperse the snakes and help Mei Chaofeng; Ouyang Ke's concubines and his three snake herders were left unconscious by the flute's sound and Ouyang Ke ran away in distress. At daybreak the concubines and the snake herders woke up and found Mu Nianci lying on her side, unable to move. They took her to their master. Ouyang Ke tried to rape her, but she was determined to fight to her death. Although Ouyang Ke was conceited and lecherous, he always prided himself as being an elegant and cultured man; his martial arts skill was high, so he could easily melt women's hearts. If he resorted to violence and brute force, he would certainly succeed in raping her; but then he would mar the name of the White Camel Mountain. Because of this pride, Mu Nianci was fortunate and able to keep her purity.

Afterwards they arrived at Baoying and Ouyang Ke hid her inside one of the Liu ancestral temple's coffins. He then

sent his concubines to 'invite' several beautiful young women from rich families, including Miss Cheng. It was then that the Beggar Clan intervened which resulted in a battle. Ouyang Ke left in a hurry. He'd had several women these past few days, so he did not remember Mu Nianci was still inside one of the coffins. If Guo Jing and the others had not been looking for Wanyan Honglie, she would have starved to death inside the coffin.

Yang Kang was unexpectedly happy to see his beloved here. With a compassionate face he said, "Little sister, just rest here, I am going to boil some water for you to drink."

"How can you boil some water?" Huang Rong smiled, "I'll go. Jing ge ge, come with me." She had thought to leave those two alone to alleviate their lovesickness, but Mu Nianci sat straight up, "Hold a moment!" she said without a smile, "Mister Yang, I congratulate you on your unlimited riches and honor in the future."

Yang Kang felt a flush creeping onto his whole face, but his heart turned cold. "She must have heard my conversation with Fu Wang in here." He stood still not knowing what to do.

Mu Nianci saw he was distressed and her heart melted; she did not have the heart to reveal the secret that he was the one who let Wanyan Honglie go, for fear that Guo Jing and Huang Rong would kill him out of anger.

"You called him 'Dad', wasn't that better? It is much more intimate than if you call him 'Fu Wang', isn't it?" she coldly said. Yang Kang felt so ashamed; he hung his head and did not say anything.

Huang Rong did not know what was going on; she thought this young woman was upset and blamed Yang Kang for not coming earlier to rescue her. She pulled Guo Jing's sleeve

and whispered, "Let's go out, I am sure those two will make up immediately." Guo Jing smiled and went along with her.

"Let's eavesdrop on what they're saying," Huang Rong said as soon as they reached the courtyard.

Guo Jing smiled, "Don't intentionally create trouble. I don't want to listen."

"Very well!" Huang Rong sulked. "Just don't be disappointed if I hear something interesting and I don't tell you about it." She leaped to the roof and walked quietly back to the west wing only to hear Mu Nianci speaking harshly.

"You called an enemy your father. I can understand that considering your past relationship; you will get over it. But who would have thought you also have delusional thoughts; you want to destroy the country of your own parents, this ... this ..." Reaching this point she was so furious that she could not continue.

Yang Kang smiled nervously. "Little sister, I ..." he said softly, but Mu Nianci cut him short. "Who's your little sister? Don't touch me!" she screamed. 'Slap!' her hand left a red imprint on Yang Kang's face.

Huang Rong was surprised. "They're fighting, I must stop them," she thought. Entering through a window she laughed and said, "Aiyo! Even if you don't agree with each other, please don't resort to violence." But she stopped dead in her track at seeing Mu Nianci's fiery red cheeks while Yang Kang was very pale. She was about to open her mouth again when Yang Kang suddenly shouted, "Good! You have met the new one and abandoned the old. Your heart is already occupied by another and so you treat me like this."

"You ... what did you say?" Mu Nianci stammered. Yang Kang snickered, "You and that fellow named Ouyang. His martial arts are ten times better than mine; of course you would immediately brush me from your heart."

Mu Nianci was so angry that her hands and feet went icy-cold; she nearly passed out.

Huang Rong interrupted, "Brother Yang, you must not speak nonsense; if Sister Mu liked him, why would that bastard seal her acupoint and leave her starving inside the coffin?"

Out of shame Yang Kang became indignant. "The truth is good, yet hypocrisy is also good. She was held by that bastard for quite some time and she has lost her innocence. How could she and I be together again?"

Mu Nianci was outraged, "I ... I ... What innocence have I lost?"

"You were in that man's possession for many days; he must have cuddled you, you must have embraced him. How could you keep your crystal clear purity?" Yang Kang mocked.

Mu Nianci really could not hold herself back any longer. She was tired and angry. This last attack was too vicious for her to bear. With a 'wah' sound she spit some blood and fell backwards.

Yang Kang realized his words were too vicious; seeing her like that he felt remorse and wanted to embrace and comfort her. Then he remembered she knew his secret. Huang Rong had voiced her suspicions earlier; if Mu Nianci should open her mouth, his life would be in danger. Moreover, he was worried about his father; so without saying anything he turned around, rushed outside and leaped over the wall.

Huang Rong had to massage Mu Nianci's chest for quite a while before she finally came to. She was unusually composed and did not even cry. "Little Sister," she calmly said, "Let me borrow the dagger I gave you earlier."

"Jing ge ge!" Huang Rong called out loudly, "Can you come here, please?" Guo Jing quickly came. "Please give the dagger that belongs to Brother Yang to Elder Sister Mu," Huang Rong said.

"Certainly," Guo Jing complied. He pulled the dagger out of his pocket; it was the dagger taken by Zhu Cong from Mei Chaofeng. It was wrapped in, what would appear to the casual observer, a thin sheet of leather. The leather was full of characters tattooed with a needle. Guo Jing was not aware that the characters were actually the second part of the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He casually unrolled the leather sheet and gave the dagger to Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong also took a dagger out from her pocket; she softly said, "Jing ge ge's dagger is in my possession; Brother Yang's dagger is now in yours. Elder Sister, this is a destiny that will bring you two together. You have had a disagreement, but for the moment, please don't be sad. My father and I are also having some disagreements. Jing ge ge and I are going to Beijing to look for Wanyan Honglie. Elder Sister, please don't let your heart be troubled. Why don't you come with us? We can walk leisurely together. I am sure Brother Yang will come back to you."

Guo Jing was puzzled, "Brother Yang?" Huang Rong stuck out her tongue. "He provoked Elder Sister; Elder Sister slapped him hard. Elder Sister Mu, if Brother Yang did not like you, how come he did not retaliate when you slapped him? His martial arts are stronger than yours. The fight between you ..." She wanted to say 'the fight between you two must be a habit' (she was referring to the 'Joust to Find

a Spouse), but she saw Mu Nianci was grieving and she did not have the heart to make a joke.

"I am not going to Beijing," Mu Nianci said, "You also don't have to go. For the next half a year that traitor Wanyan Honglie won't be in Beijing. He is afraid of you. Brother Guo, Little Sister, you are good people, your life must also be good ..." She choked up; covered her face and rushed towards the door. With a leap she was gone.

Huang Rong looked down and saw the blood Mu Nianci spit up earlier. She hesitated for a moment, and in the end did not feel comfortable doing nothing, so she also leaped over the wall and chased after her, only to see Mu Nianci under a big willow tree in the distance. The sunlight reflected on the dagger's naked blade. Mu Nianci lifted the dagger high above her head. Huang Rong was anxious; she thought Mu Nianci was going to kill herself. She shouted loudly, "Elder Sister! Please don't ..." But the distance between them was too great; she would not be able to stop her. Luckily Mu Nianci only raised her left hand holding up her hair. With a slash of the dagger in her right hand she sheared off a big clump of hair, threw it to the ground and ran away.

"Elder Sister! Elder Sister ... !" Huang Rong called out. Mu Nianci turned a deaf ear and kept going.

Huang Rong stared blankly in the distance, she was lost in thought. She saw the clump of soft hair dancing in the morning breeze. A short time later some of the hair was scattered to a rice field, some went into a creek, some flew up into the trees lining the pathway and some followed the blowing dust, going who knows where. Huang Rong had always been tender, carefree and mischievous since her childhood. She laughed when happy, cried or sulked when not; the word 'anxiety' was never in her vocabulary. But now that she saw what had just happened, she could not

keep sadness from creeping into her heart. Now, she found out about the world of anxiety.

She slowly walked back to the temple and told Guo Jing what had happened to Mu Nianci. Guo Jing did not know why those two people were having a disagreement; he simply said, "I don't understand why Elder Sister Mu made such a big deal out of it. I think her character is just too rigid."

"How could a woman hugged by a stranger lose her innocence? Even her loved one did not respect her anymore or care about her any longer." Huang Rong thought. She did not have a clue as to the reasoning behind all it, so she brushed it off as 'that was the way it was' and left it at that. She slowly walked to the rear courtyard and sat against a pillar. Her mind was heavy with thoughts. She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

That very evening Li Sheng and other Beggar Clan members threw a banquet in honor of their leader, Hong Qigong, and also to congratulate Guo Jing and Huang Rong. They waited until around midnight but Hong Qigong still had not shown up. Li Sheng knew his Leader's unusual habits so he did not give it any thought; he kept serving wine to Guo Jing and Huang Rong and they drank to their hearts' content. The people of the Beggar Clan had high respect for these two people, so their conversations were congenial. Miss Cheng had personally prepared some food, provided four big pots of good quality wine, and delivered everything via her servants.

After the banquet was over Guo Jing and Huang Rong discussed what to do next. Wanyan Honglie would not be in Beijing, so it would be difficult to find him in a short period of time. The Peach Blossom Island appointment was drawing near. Guo Jing needed to go back to Jiaying

immediately and consult with his six masters on what action they would take.

Huang Rong nodded her head in agreement. "I think it is best for your six masters not to go to Peach Blossom Island," she added. "You fought with father and received quite a beating; for him to hit a few more heads is no big deal, is it? If you don't agree with me, let me hit you a few more times on the head. If your six masters meet my father again, what good will it bring?"

"You're right," Guo Jing said. "But you don't need to hit my head."

Early the next morning the two rode south. It was the beginning of the sixth month and the weather was burning hot. Natives of Jiangnan had a saying, 'the sixth day of the sixth month, a duck egg was cooked by the sun.' Traveling under the hot sun they were very miserable. So they would hurry along early in the mornings and later in the evenings and rested at noon.

A few days later they arrived at Jiaxing. Since it was earlier than the appointed time, the Six Freaks were not there yet. Guo Jing wrote a letter and left it with the innkeeper of the Pavilion of the Drunken Immortal, asking him to deliver the letter in person to the Six Freaks of Jiangnan when they arrived at the beginning of the seventh month.

In the letter he explained that he had met Huang Rong and was going to Peach Blossom Island to fulfill his promise and that with Huang Yaoshi's beloved daughter's company, he should not come across any problems. He asked his six masters to not be anxious and that they need not accompany him, and so on.

Even though he said that, he was actually afraid since Huang Yaoshi was very peculiar. He thought he would more

likely meet misfortune than good fortune. He was afraid Huang Rong would feel anxious for him, so he did not tell her anything. Knowing that his six masters did not have to go into harm's way was his only consolation.

The couple headed east. After Zhoushan, they hired a boat and continued by sea. Huang Rong knew that local sailors were afraid of Peach Blossom Island, like some people are afraid of vipers or scorpions. Nobody dared to sail within forty li of the island. If she mentioned the name of Peach Blossom Island, no matter how much money she offered, nobody would be willing to take them. So she said they were going shrimp fishing at a nearby island. It was only after they were quite a distance from shore did she tell the boatman to change course to the north. The boatman was terrified, but Huang Rong wielded a dagger in front of his chest; a cold and bright sparkle emanated from the blade so he had no choice but to comply with their request.

As the boat was nearing the island, Guo Jing smelled a flowery fragrance amidst the salty smell of the sea. He turned his gaze towards the island. It was green and lush with colorful trees and shrubs. Some were green, some red, some yellow, and some purple. The island looked like a massive flower garden.

Huang Rong smiled. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked.

Guo Jing sighed, "I have never seen so many beautiful flowers in my whole life," he answered.

Huang Rong was very pleased; she smiled and explained, "Come the third month, the peach blossoms are in full bloom. That is really beautiful. Shifu did not want to admit that my father's martial arts are number one in the world, but he cannot deny the fact that my father's gardening skill is unrivaled. Too bad he is only interested in food and drink;

he doesn't even know what a good flower or plant is. He's such an uncouth person."

"You are talking about Shifu behind his back," Guo Jing scolded, "Not a good habit." Huang Rong stuck her tongue out and made a face.

They waited until the boat was closer before they leaped ashore. Guo Jing's red horse also jumped to the shore. The boatman had heard many horror stories about the island; it was said that the Master of Peach Blossom Island would kill without batting an eye, that he liked to dig out people's hearts, lungs, livers and intestines. As soon as his passengers disembarked, he turned the rudder, wanting to leave the island as soon as possible.

Huang Rong took out a silver ingot of ten 'liang' [ounces] and tossed it to the boat. With a clanking noise it landed on the bow. The boatman did not expect such a generous recompense; he looked ashore delighted, but still did not dare to stay near that island much longer.

Being home again, Huang Rong's was ecstatic. "Father! Father! Rong'er is back!" she shouted loudly. Beckoning Guo Jing to come, she then dashed forward.

Guo Jing saw her turning east and dodging west amongst the flowers and very soon disappeared from his sight. He hastily chased her, but after several 'zhang' he had already lost track of her. He saw there were trails heading east, south, west and north; but did not know which one he should take.

When he arbitrarily took a path and walked for while and he seemed to be returning to where he'd started. He recalled the pathways of Cloud Manor Manor; Huang Rong had said that although that manor's layout was wonderfully arranged it still paled in comparison with Peach Blossom

Island, whose design was based on yin-yang and open-closed elements. If he forced himself to walk in this wonderful, almost magical place he would end up wasting his strength in vain. So he decided to just sit underneath a peach tree and wait for Huang Rong to fetch him. Who would have thought that after waiting for half a day Huang Rong still had not come. He looked around in all directions but did not see even the shadow of a human being; not even a single sound was heard. He was lost!

Anxiously he stood up and climbed atop a nearby tree. Again he looked everywhere; to the south of him was the sea, to the west was a barren rock hill, to the north and east were forests of flowers of all kinds and colors; he could not even see the end of it. His head became dizzy. He did not see anything that resembled a wall or a chimney; he did not even hear a dog's bark. It was so extremely quiet and lonely that it scared him.

Quickly he slid down the tree and ran in panic towards the dark forest. He suddenly stopped in his tracks and anxiously cried, "Not good! I am running around aimlessly! If Rong'er comes looking for me, she won't find me!" Having had this thought he turned around and ran back; but he was lost again! He couldn't even find the place where he started.

The little red horse was following him closely, but when he ran among the bushes and climbed trees and soon the horse was also lost. The sky was growing dark and Guo Jing did not know what to do; so he simply sat on the ground and waited for Huang Rong. It was a good thing that that place was covered with thick green grass, so he was quite comfortable sitting down.

He started to get hungry and thirsty too. His mind wandered to the delicious food Huang Rong used to prepare for Hong Qigong and he was getting hungrier.

Suddenly a thought came into his mind. "What if Rong'er's father locked her up? She won't be able to rescue me. How can I let myself starve to death in this forest?"

He recalled he still had to sort out the enmity with Huang Rong's father; he also remembered he had not paid back his masters' kindness. Then his mind wandered to his mother in far away Mongolia; if he died here, who would take care of her? With these heavy thoughts he became tired and fell asleep.

It was deep into the night when he dreamt he was on a trip with Huang Rong. They visited a lake near Beijing. They got to a beautiful spot and Huang Rong was singing a tune in a soft voice. Out of the blue there came another sound singing along; it was a bamboo flute. He woke up, startled. The flute sound still lingered in the air. Guo Jing got up and looked around. The moon shone brightly in the sky, and the sweet fragrance of the flowers was thickened by the dark night. The flute sound came from a distance; he was not dreaming!

Guo Jing was delighted. He walked towards the flute sound following the path in front of him. It was a winding path, and sometimes there was no path in front of him, but the flute sound was still coming from the front. He remembered the pathways of the Cloud Manor; so he ignored the winding path and just went straight to the sound. If a tree or shrubs were in front of him, he simply climbed or jumped over them.

The flute sound was getting clearer. Guo Jing walked faster. Rounding a bend, he arrived at an area of white flowering shrubs. Layer upon layer of flowers glistened in the bright moonlight; so many they looked like a small white lake. In the middle of these white flowers he saw something big and tall, looking massive. Here the sound of the flute suddenly

changed. Sometimes high, sometimes low; sometimes the sound came from his front, sometimes it moved to his back. He thought the sound was coming from the east, but when he rushed to the east, the sound moved to the west; when he chased to the north, the sound swiftly moved to the south. It sounded like more than ten people were playing flutes all around him. This flute sound really drove him crazy.

After running around like that for a while Guo Jing's head was spinning, so he decided to quit running and walked directly towards that massive thing in the middle of white flower lake. It turned out it was a grave site. There was a stone in front of the tomb with this inscription: 'The Fragrant Burial Ground of Mistress Feng of Peach Blossom Island' [tao hua dao nu zhu feng shi mai xiang zhi zhong], in eleven large characters.

"This must be Rong'er's mother's tomb," Guo Jing thought. "Rong'er lost her when she was very small, it was really sad." He knelt down in front of the tomb and kowtowed four times to pay his respects.

The flute sound suddenly stopped when Guo Jing was kneeling. Everything around him was very quiet; but as soon as he stood up, the flute sound resumed in front of him. "I don't care if it brings luck or misfortune, I will follow the sound," Guo Jing thought.

Again he walked amongst the vegetation following the flute. And again sound of the flute changed its personality. First it sounded like laughter, but suddenly changed into anger; it affected his feelings no end. Guo Jing's pulse quickened, "How come this tune is so pleasant to my ears?" he was fascinated.

The tune increased its tempo, urging him to get up and dance. Guo Jing felt the urge, his face flushed and he felt his blood flowing ever faster through his hundreds of arteries. He immediately sat on the ground and meditated as Ma Yu had taught him: circulating his internal energy.

At first his heart was shaken, several times he felt the urge to stand up and dance to the tune. After breathing in and out several times, his heart calmed down, his mind became clear. No matter how the flute song changed, he heard it like the sound of the waves of the sea, or like a breeze in the tree tops. He felt his 'dan tian' bursting with energy; his whole body felt comfortable. No longer did he feel hunger or thirst. He knew that as he reached this state, external elements would not be able to affect him any longer; he slowly opened his eyes only to see in the darkness, about two 'zhang's away, a pair of bright eyes looking straight at him.

He was startled, "What kind of beast is that?" he thought while leaping back several steps. But suddenly those eyes disappeared. "This Peach Blossom Island is really strange," he thought, "even a fast leopard or a swift fox won't be able to move that fast." He hesitated for a moment and then heard fast breathing; it was a human's breathing. Then he realized, "It was a human being! Those sparkling eyes were his. I didn't see them anymore because he shut his eyes, but he is actually still here." Having this thought he laughed at his own foolishness; but it was unclear to him whether that person was a friend or a foe, so he did not dare to make a sound and just opened his eyes wide to observe quietly.

At this time the floating flute song carried a passionate, seducing feeling resembling a woman sighing and groaning, then murmuring softly; then at other times it raged wildly with desire.

Guo Jing was still young and although he had trained in martial arts since his childhood he did not know much about sexual relationships. He felt the flute affecting his emotions and the melody was enchanting to the soul, but he did not let it give too much thought. But it was not so with the other man; he was gasping for breath and groaning softly. It sounded like he was struggling with all his strength just to resist the enticement coming from the flute.

Guo Jing's heart was moved with compassion towards this man and slowly he went to him. The trees in this place were dense and the moon was bright, but the moonlight could not penetrate the thick branches and leaves. Guo Jing walked closer and only then he could vaguely see the man's appearance. He was sitting cross-legged. His hair was long, almost touching the ground and his eyebrows, moustache and beard were long also, covering his mouth and nose. His left hand was on his chest, his right hand on his back.

Guo Jing knew that it was one of the positions for cultivating internal energy that 'Scarlet Sun [dan yang zi], Ma Yu had taught him atop that barren hill on the Mongolian steppes. It was the technique for closing one's heart and mind. Whenever someone masters it to perfection, even if thunder rumbles and lighting flashes, or water gushes and creates landslides, it would not bother him at all. This man looked like he knew this advanced skill of internal energy cultivation; but why couldn't he control himself and feared the sound of the flute?

The flute music quickened and that man's body was swaying and twitching. Several times he jumped a few feet off the ground and after struggling with all his might he was finally able to sit down again. Guo Jing saw this cycle happen several times: he would be calm for a moment, then agitated, before calming down again, but the cycle was

getting shorter and shorter. Guo Jing knew that man was fighting a losing battle, so he started to worry for him.

The flute played two more intricate melodies softly. Suddenly the man shouted, "All right! All right!" and was about to jump up. Guo Jing realized the time was critical; without thinking he rushed forward and stretched out his hands pushing down on that man's shoulder. His right hand tapped the 'Big Spine' [da zhui xue] acupoint on his neck. He remembered when he was training on that Mongolian cliff; whenever his mind was troubled and could not achieve tranquility, Ma Yu would gently stroke him on his 'Big Spine' acupoint and that helped calm him. His internal strength was not as strong as Ma Yu's so he could not help this man to overcome the flute's sound; but because he struck the right spot the long-haired old man was able to calm himself. He closed his eyes and seemed like he was in control.

Guo Jing was happy inside; then someone scolded him. "Little beast! You ruined my great effort!" The flute had suddenly stopped. Guo Jing turned his head and did not see anyone, but that voice sounded like Huang Yaoshi. He became anxious and regretted his actions. "I don't know if this long-haired old man is good or bad and I thoughtlessly helped him. I've surely increased Rong'er's father's anger. If this old man is a monster or evil witch, then I just committed a big mistake?"

He heard the old man's breathing slowing down to steady breathing. Guo Jing refrained himself from asking the old man questions. He simply sat quietly opposite him, closed his eyes and used that time to meditate. Soon he was able to calm himself and achieve a state of emptiness. He lost track of time and opened his eyes when the morning stars began to dim in the dawn light.

The morning sun shone through the trees and flowers, illuminating the old man's face. Guo Jing could see him clearly now; his hair and beard were not entirely white and God only knows how many years a shaving knife had not touched his head. He looked like a cave man.

Suddenly the old man's eyes opened. His eyes were bright and twinkling. He smiled faintly and asked, "Which one of the Quanzhen Seven Masters is your master?"

Guo Jing saw his kindly countenance and was put at ease. He stood up and bowed respectfully, "Disciple Guo Jing pays his respect to Senior. I am the disciple of the Seven Heroes of Jiangnan."

The old man seemed surprised. "The Seven Heroes of Jiangnan; is that Ke Zhen'E and the others? How could they teach you the internal energy cultivation of the Quanzhen Sect?" he asked.

"Actually, Ma Dao Zhang [Taoist Priest Ma] spent two years teaching this disciple, but he did not permit me inside the Quanzhen Sect's gate and wall," Guo Jing answered. [Guo Jing meant that he was not taken as Ma Yu's official disciple.]

That old man laughed heartily and then made faces. He looked so funny, like a child playing jokes. "So that's how it is" he said, "How did you come to Peach Blossom Island?"

"Master Huang told me to come," replied Guo Jing.

The old man's face suddenly changed, "What for?" he asked.

"This disciple offended Master Huang," Guo Jing answered. "I come here to accept my fate."

"Are you telling the truth?" the old man asked.

“Disciple does not dare to lie,” answered Guo Jing.

The old man nodded, “Very good! Sit down!” he commanded.

Guo Jing sat on a big rock and he could see clearly that the old man was sitting inside a cave in a rock wall.

“Other than your Masters who else taught you martial arts?” the old man asked again.

“The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar, Benevolent Master Hong ...” Guo Jing said.

The old man’s face changed again, it was strange, like he was going to smile but restrained himself. “Hong Qigong also taught you martial arts?” he interrupted.

“Yes,” replied Guo Jing. “Benevolent Master Hong taught me the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’.”

The old man’s face showed happiness and envy at the same time, “You know the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’? That martial art is so amazing. How about teaching it to me? I will take you as my master.” But then he shook his head and said, “Won’t do! Won’t do! As the Old Hong’s disciple your energy must not be that strong. Did Old Beggar Hong teach you internal energy?”

“He did not,” Guo Jing answered truthfully.

The old man looked up and thought aloud, “He looks so young. Even if he cultivated his internal energy inside his mother’s womb, it would be at most eighteen or nineteen year’s worth of internal energy. How could he resist the flute sound, while I could not?” He was deep in thought for a moment; then he looked at Guo Jing from top to bottom and again from bottom to top. He stretched out his right

palm and said, "Push my palm; I want to test your martial arts."

Guo Jing complied; he extended his right palm and pushed. The old man said, "Qi' [internal energy] in your 'dan tian' [lower stomach region] and push hard!" Guo Jing exerted his strength. The old man pulled back his palm slightly then pushed hard while calling out, "Be careful!"

Guo Jing sensed a powerful force pushing him. He could not resist it, so he used his left hand to reinforce his right palm. Surprisingly, old man flipped his palm and pushed Guo Jing's wrist with four fingers. The power of these fingers was enough to send Guo Jing flying backwards seven or eight steps until his back hit a tree. Only then did Guo Jing manage to stand steady.

"His martial arts are not bad, but nothing extraordinary either," the old man muttered, "But how could he resist the Old Heretic Huang's 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave song' [bi hai chao sheng qu]?"

Guo Jing felt his chest tighten; he was astonished, "This man's martial arts are about the same level as Shifu's and Master Huang's. How could there be an expert of his caliber on Peach Blossom Island? Could it be he is the Western Poison or the Southern Emperor?" As soon as he remembered 'Western Poison' his heart turned cold, "Did I fall for his trickery?" Quickly he lifted his palm in the sunlight and checked it. He did not see any inflammation or black marks and was relieved; at least he wasn't being poisoned.

"Can you guess who I am?" the old man laughed.

"Disciple heard people say that in the martial arts realm there are five experts. The Quanzhen's founder Venerable Wang has passed away; the disciples have met the 'Nine-

fingered Divine Beggar' Benevolent Master Hong and the Master of Peach Blossom Island. Could you be the Senior Ouyang or the Emperor Duan?"

"You thought my martial arts are comparable to the Eastern Heretic and Northern Beggar didn't you?" the old man smiled.

"This disciple's martial arts are mediocre and my experience modest, I do not dare to speak nonsense. But when Senior pushed me a moment ago, I can say with confidence that other than Benevolent Master Hong and Master Huang, I have never experienced such force," Guo Jing said.

The old man was delighted with Guo Jing's praise; his face looked like a child's happy face. "I am neither the Western Poison Ouyang Feng, nor the Emperor Duan," he smiled broadly. "Guess again."

Guo Jing hesitated. "This disciple has met somebody whose name was as well known as Benevolent Master Hong, Qiu Qianren. But that person's martial arts are just ordinary. Disciple is really not smart, I cannot guess Senior's honored name," he said.

That old man laughed heartily, "My surname is Zhou; can you guess now?" he asked.

"Ah, you are Zhou Botong?" Guo Jing blurted. As the words came out of his mouth Guo Jing froze. Mentioning someone's name, especially a Senior, could be considered disrespectful. He quickly bowed and apologized, "Disciple has shown disrespect, will Senior Zhou please forgive me."

he old man laughed, "You are right! I am Zhou Botong. My name is Zhou Botong, and you called me Zhou Botong; when did you show me disrespect? The Quanzhen Sect's

founder, Wang Chongyang, was my martial brother; Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others are my martial nephews. You are not a Quanzhen disciple, you don't have to call me Senior this or Senior that; just call me Zhou Botong."

"How would disciple dare?" Guo Jing asked.

Zhou Botong had lived on Peach Blossom Island for a long time; he was bored and now Guo Jing suddenly came along. Talking with him he found relief; he was thrilled. Suddenly a strange thought came into his mind. "Little friend, what do you say you and I become sworn brothers?" he asked.

No matter how strange his words were, this was the strangest of all. Guo Jing's jaw dropped and he looked at Zhou Botong in disbelief; he thought Zhou was joking. After a while he opened his mouth, "This disciple is Priest Ma and Priest Qiu's junior; I should address you as my grand martial master."

Zhou Botong waved his hands. "My martial arts skill came from my martial brother. Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others do not consider me their senior; they also did not respect me as a senior. You are not my son, I am not yours; we do not have older-younger generation difference." As he spoke he heard footsteps approaching; an old servant appeared carrying a food basket. Zhou Botong beamed, "Our food is here!"

The servant opened the basket and took out four dishes of food, two pots of wine and a woven basket full of rice. He placed the food in front of Zhou Botong on top of a big rock, poured out two cups of wine and stood silently to one side.

"Where is Miss Huang? Why doesn't she come looking for me?" Guo Jing asked. That servant shook his head, pointing to his ear and his mouth, signaling that he was deaf and mute.

“Huang Yaoshi punctured his ear drums. You can ask him to open his mouth wide and take a look,” Zhou Botong chuckled.

Guo Jing made a signal, asking that servant to open his mouth. Guo Jing was startled and frightened; that servant’s tongue had been cut in half.

“The servants of Peach Blossom Island are all like that,” Zhou Botong said. “You have come here and if you don’t die, you will end up like them.”

Guo Jing heard what he said and he was silent for a long time. “How could Rong’er’s father be so cruel?” he thought.

“That Old Heretic Huang tortures me every night,” Zhou Botong continued, “I don’t want to admit defeat to him. Last night I almost fell into his hands; if not for you, little brother, my more than ten plus years of effort resisting him might have crumbled in one evening. Come little brother, we have wine and food. Today we will take an oath to be sworn brothers; in the future we will share fortune and bear difficult times together. The year when Wang Chongyang and I became sworn brothers he also resisted in every way ... Why? Do you really not know? My sworn brother Wang Chongyang’s martial arts were much higher than mine; that was why he was not willing to swear brotherhood with me. Are your martial arts also much higher than mine? I don’t think so.”

“Junior’s martial arts are way below yours,” Guo Jing answered. “I don’t deserve to swear brotherhood with you.”

“If you say to swear brotherhood you have to have the same level of martial arts, then I have to swear brotherhood with Old Heretic Huang, or Old Poison,” Zhou Botong said. “That’s ridiculous! I only like to fight with them! Do you want me to swear brotherhood with this deaf and mute

fellow?" He pointed to that old servant and jumped up and down in a fit of rage.

Guo Jing saw his red face and he quickly said, "Disciple and Senior are two generations apart. If I follow Senior's directions, people will laugh at us and ridicule me. When I meet Priest Ma and Priest Qiu, how can I not be ashamed?"

"You have these many considerations. You certainly don't want to swear brotherhood with me because I am too old", he sputtered. Zhou Botong covered his face and cried while unconsciously pulling his beard.

Guo Jing nervously waved his hands, "Disciple will do whatever Senior instructs."

Zhou Botong cried even harder. "You said that because of my coercion, you reluctantly agreed; that doesn't count. When someone asks in the future, you will say that it was entirely my fault. I know you are not willing to call me your sworn brother."

Guo Jing was secretly amused. How could such an old man not act his age? He saw him pick up a dish and toss it outside; he did not want to eat any longer. The old servant promptly picked it up; he didn't know what was going on and he was terrified.

Guo Jing had no choice; suppressing a laugh he said, "Since Elder Brother had shown kindness, how could Little Brother not accept? Let us use earth in place of incense and become sworn brothers."

Zhou Botong smiled through his tears. "I have sworn to Old Heretic Huang that as long as I cannot defeat him, I will never leave this hole except for bowel movements or urinating. I will kowtow inside, you kowtow outside," he said.

"If you can't defeat Master Huang, then you will live in this hole all your life?" Guo Jing thought; but he did not say anything and simply knelt down on the ground.

Zhou Botong knelt alongside; with a clear voice he said, "Today the Old Urchin Zhou Botong and Guo Jing are swearing a brotherhood [lit. 'jin lan' - golden orchid]. We will share good fortune together and will face difficulty together. If I break this oath, may my martial arts perish so that I can't even fight a puppy or a kitten."

Guo Jing heard him call himself 'Old Urchin', and his oath was sort of peculiar; he could not restrain a smile. Zhou Botong stared at him. "What are you smiling at? Quickly say your oath." Guo Jing quickly recited his oath; then two people poured wine on the ground. Guo Jing then paid his respects to his elder brother.

Zhou Botong laughed heartily and loudly shouted, "That's enough! That's enough!" He poured some more wine and drank. "The Old Heretic Huang is very stingy; he serves me insipid wine only. One day a little miss came and brought me some good wine; it's a pity she never came back."

Guo Jing remembered Huang Rong had told him how she stole some wine and brought it to Zhou Botong; because of that she was scolded by her father. This caused her to leave the island in anger. It seemed like Zhou Botong was not aware of it. Guo Jing had been hungry for the whole day; he did not want to drink any wine but he ate five big bowls of rice. Now at least he was full. As soon as the two finished eating, the old servant cleaned up and took the leftovers back.

"Brother," Zhou Botong asked, "How did you offend the Old Heretic Huang? Tell your big brother."

Guo Jing then narrated how he accidentally killed Chen Xuanfeng in his childhood; how at the Cloud Manor he had fought and defeated Mei Chaofeng; how Huang Yaoshi made things difficult for the Six Freaks of Jiangnan; how because of that he had made a promise to come to Peach Blossom Island within a month to die; he told Zhou everything.

Zhou Botong loved to listen to stories; he bent his head, squinted, and listened with enthusiasm. When Guo Jing only recounted something briefly he would ask for every detail of it. Every time Guo Jing paused even for the slightest time he urged him, "Then what happened?"

"Then I arrived here," Guo Jing finally said.

Zhou Botong hesitated a moment. "Hmm...so turns out that pretty little girl is the Old Heretic Huang's daughter. She is good to you. Why did she disappear soon after arriving on the island? There must be a reason, maybe Old Heretic Huang locked her up."

Guo Jing's anxiety showed on his face, "This disciple also had this thought ..."

"What did you say?" Zhou Botong snapped as his face changed color.

Guo Jing knew he made a mistake and quickly said, "Little brother made an indiscreet remark, please don't mind me, Big Brother."

Zhou Botong smiled. "The way you address me cannot be wrong. If you call me any name, then you'd better call me 'wifey', or 'mommy', or 'daughter'. No, don't make a mistake," he said. Guo Jing agreed.

Zhou Botong leaned his head and asked, "Can you guess how I ended up here?"

"Brother is just about to ask," Guo Jing said.

"It's a long story, I will tell to you completely," Zhou Botong said. "Do you know when the five experts, the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity, were having a sword meet on Mount Hua?"

Guo Jing nodded, "I've heard people talk of it."

"It was in the dead of winter at Mount Hua," Zhou Botong continued. "The peak was covered with a heavy snow. Five people were having a meet there; their hands contended in martial arts for seven straight days and nights. In the end the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, and the Northern Beggar admitted that my martial brother, Wang Chongyang's martial arts was number one in the world. Do you know why those five people were having that sword meet at Mount Hua?"

"This, brother has not heard," Guo Jing replied.

"It was because of a scripture ..." Zhou Botong said.

"The 'Nine Yin Manual'!" Guo Jing exclaimed.

"That's right!" Zhou Botong said. "Brother, you are young, but your knowledge of Wulin matters is not shallow. Do you know the origin of the 'Nine Yin Manual', then?"

"That I actually do not know," Guo Jing replied.

Zhou Botong playfully pulled his ears and long hair and his face showed that he was very pleased with himself. "A moment ago you told me a very interesting story, now ..."

“What I told you was not a story; that really happened to me,” Guo Jing interrupted.

“What is the difference? As long as it is good to listen to,” Zhou Botong said. “Some people spend their lives eating, sleeping, urinating and defecating. If those people tell me every single detail of their life, the Old Urchin will die of suffocation.”

Guo Jing nodded his head. “That’s true,” he said. “Then why doesn’t Big Brother tell the story of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ for little brother to hear.”

“The Emperor Hui Zong in the year of Zheng He wanted to compile Taoist books and scriptures from all over the world. He wanted to publish the work, which consisted of 5481 Chapters altogether. They were called the ‘Taoist Canon of Everlasting Life’ [wan shou dao zang]. The Emperor commissioned someone to do the work; he was called Huang Shang ...”

“He was also surnamed Huang?” Guo Jing asked.

“Bah! What’s so special about the family name Huang?” Zhou Botong spat. “This person had nothing to do with the Old Heretic Huang Yaoshi; don’t get any wrong ideas. There are numerous people surnamed Huang in this world; the ‘yellow’ [huang] dog or yellow cat are also surnamed Huang.”

Guo Jing thought that a yellow dog and a yellow cat did not necessarily have ‘huang’ as their surnames, but he did not want to debate him; so he let him continue with his story.

“This Old Heretic Huang is not as smart as that Huang Shang. He was extremely intelligent ...” Zhou Botong continued. Guo Jing wanted to say, “It turns out he was also

an extremely intelligent person,” but that thought stopped at his mouth.

“This Huang Shang was very afraid he might make a mistake in the writing of the canon; because if the Emperor found out later, he would surely lose his head. Therefore, he read and re-read each volume to make sure his work was error-free. Unexpectedly, after several years of studying the scriptures, he became very proficient in the Taoist doctrines; he had found the profound truths of martial arts. He did not have a master, so he trained himself in internal and external energy cultivation and became a grand master of martial arts. Brother, this Huang Shang was many times smarter than you are. I don’t have his kind of intelligence and I don’t think you do either.”

“Naturally,” Guo Jing said. “If I were to study more than five thousand chapters of scripture, it will take me a life time just to read them from beginning to the end. How would I comprehend the martial arts inside them as well?”

Zhou Botong sighed. “These kinds of intelligent people still exist in the world today,” he said, “But if you meet this kind of people, chances are, you will face unfortunate events.”

Guo Jing did not agree with his view and secretly thought, “Rong’er is very intelligent; but since I met her I have always found good luck. How can he say ‘unfortunate’?” But he was not the kind who liked to argue, so he kept his thoughts to himself.

“Huang Shang had mastered the martial arts, yet he still held an office in the government,” Zhou Botong continued. “There came a time when there suddenly arose a religious movement in the kingdom; they called themselves the ‘Ming Cult’ [ming jiao]. It was said that this movement originated in central Asia; a place called Persia. The followers of this

Ming Cult: first – did not worship the ‘Supreme Master Lao’ [tai shang lao jun translator note: I think he was a Taoist Deity]; second – did not worship ancestor spirits; third – did not worship Buddha. They only worshipped an old foreign devil. They did not eat meat or drink wine; they were vegetarians. The Emperor Hui Zong only believed in Taoism; so as soon as he found out about this devil cult he issued an imperial decree assigning Huang Shang to eradicate it. Unexpectedly, there were many martial arts masters among the members of the cult. They were fearless of death and fought Huang Shang and his troops, rendering them useless. After several battles Huang Shang and his troops suffered heavy losses. Huang Shang was indignant. He went out and challenged the Devil Cult’s martial arts masters to a one-to-one combat. He personally killed several ‘imperial priests’ [fa wang] and some envoys. How could he know that the people he killed were disciples of well-known Wulin characters; some were their martial uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters or their immediate families. Of course those people were enraged and they came together to face him. They scolded him for not handling the affairs according to Wulin customs, to which Huang Shang replied, ‘I am a government officer and not part of the Wulin world. What do I know about your Wulin customs?’ Those whose family or relatives were killed argued, ‘If you are not part of the Wulin world, then how do you know martial arts? Are you saying that your master only taught you martial arts but did not tell you anything about the Wulin customs?’ Huang Shang replied, ‘I didn’t have a master.’ Of course they did not believe him; so they became involved in a heated argument. What do you think happened?”

“They began to fight each other,” Guo Jing said.

“Obvious, wasn’t it?” Zhou Botong said. “Huang Shang’s martial arts were strange and none of his enemies had seen it before. Because of this he could kill some of them quite easily. However, his enemies were numerous and he was also injured in the fight, so in desperation he ran away. Those enemies then wiped out his parents, wife and children completely.”

Listening to this part Guo Jing heaved a sigh. He thought that people who practiced martial arts would inevitably kill others. This Huang Shang was no different; had he not practiced martial arts, he would not have experienced such tragedy.

“That Huang Shang fellow ran away to a deserted place and hid himself there,” Zhou Botong continued. “There he tried to recall his enemies’ martial arts one by one. He painstakingly pondered as to how to defeat each and every one of them. He decided that as soon as he succeeded in developing the countering martial arts, he would go back and seek his revenge. A long time passed before he finally was able to master the new martial arts. He was very happy and expected that very soon he would be able to avenge his family. Thereupon he left the mountain to seek his enemies. Unexpectedly, the people he was looking for had disappeared. Can you guess what happened to them?”

“Perhaps his enemies found out his intentions and they knew his martial arts were very good, so they were frightened and hid from him,” Guo Jing guessed.

Zhou Botong shook his head, “No, no. When my martial brother told me this story he also asked me to guess what happened and I also said the same thing. I even made seven or eight other guesses but none of them was right.”

“Well, if Big Brother guessed seven or eight times yet did not hit the target then I don’t have to make any other guesses at all. Even if I guess seventy or eighty times I will certainly guess incorrectly,” Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong roared with laughter, “No chance, you have no chance at all! All right, since you admit defeat I won’t ask you to guess anymore. Actually several dozens of his enemies had died.”

Guo Jing uttered a cry of disbelief. “That’s strange! Could it be that his friends or maybe his disciples avenged him and killed all his enemies?” he asked.

Again Zhou Botong shook his head, “No, no. You missed by a hundred and eight thousand li. He did not have any disciples. He was a government official and his friends were scholars, not martial artists; how could they avenge him?”

Guo Jing scratched his head. “Could it be that they were plagued by some disease and died in some kind of epidemic?”

“Also incorrect. His enemies were scattered; some lived in Shandong, some came from Huguang, several were from Hebei and Liangzhe. How could they die in the same epidemic?” Zhou Botong asked; but then he exclaimed. “Ah! Yes, yes! That’s right! Some epidemics could kill you no matter where you are, even if you ran to the ends of the earth. Can you guess what kind of epidemic was it?”

Guo Jing mentioned typhus, smallpox, dysentery and six or seven other types of diseases; but Zhou Botong shook his head every time. Finally Guo Jing exclaimed, “Foot-and-mouth disease!” Then he faked surprise, covered his mouth, stood up and tapped his head with his left hand and burst into laughter. “I was kidding! Foot-and-mouth disease is the

plague of cattle on the Mongolian steppe; it won't attack humans."

Zhou Botong also burst out in laughter. "The more you guess the weirder you become. Huang Shang looked everywhere before he finally found one of his enemies. It was a woman. When they fought originally, she was only a sixteen or seventeen year old girl, but when Huang Shang found her, she was a sixty-year old granny ..."

Guo Jing's jaw dropped. "This is really weird! Ah, right, she must have disguised herself as an old lady so Huang Shang wouldn't recognize her."

"She did not disguise herself," Zhou Botong answered. "Just think: Huang Shang had several dozen enemies and each one of them was a martial arts expert; each came from a respectable martial arts school or family. Can you imagine how profound and complicated each of their skills were? He wanted to defeat each person's unique skill; just how much time did he painstakingly spend to achieve such a result? He was hiding in a remote mountain area and diligently trained. Day and night only martial arts occupied his mind, he did not care about anything else; without him realizing it, it had taken more than forty years altogether."

"More than forty years?" Guo Jing was astonished.

"That's right," Zhou Botong asserted. "When you are totally absorbed in learning martial arts, forty years will pass quite quickly. I have been here for fifteen years yet it did not feel like it was that long. When Huang Shang saw that young girl had turned into an old granny, his heart was heavy with emotions. That old lady was sick, bedridden and was dying. Without him raising a hand she would die in a few days. The heartache and hatred of dozens of years just vanished without a trace. Brother, everybody has to die. The

epidemic I was asking you about earlier was death. When your time comes, you cannot run away.”

Guo Jing silently nodded. Zhou Botong continued, “My martial brother and his seven disciples’, day in and day out, dedicate themselves to achieving the perfection of life. But tell me: is it really possible to cultivate a divine body that won’t see death? That was the reason I did not want to follow the ox-nosed way of living.”

Guo Jing was lost in thought. Zhou Botong continued, “Some of Huang Shang’s enemies had been about forty or fifty years of age; add another forty years plus, how could they not die? Ha ... ha ... ha ... Actually he did not have to trouble himself by training his martial arts and developing new techniques; all he had to do was outlive his enemies. Forty plus years and Heaven would take care of his personal enemies for him.”

Guo Jing nodded. “Well then, should I look for Wanyan Honglie to avenge my father or not?” he wondered in his heart.

Zhou Botong again said, “However, learning martial arts diligently could bring endless pleasure to one’s life. If one did not practice martial arts, what other interesting thing is worth doing? There are endless toys and gadgets in the world, but after playing with them for a while you will get bored eventually. With martial arts, the more you play, the more interesting it becomes. Brother, don’t you agree?”

Guo Jing only made an ‘hmm’ sound noncommittally, showing neither his approval nor disapproval. He admitted that knowing martial arts could be fun; but it was also hard work. He had trained in martial arts since he was very young and he could not say the training was ‘fun’. He had to work hard and suffer, without a single day of leisure.

Zhou Botong saw he was not showing much enthusiasm, "Why didn't you ask me what happened next?" he asked.

Guo Jing hastily said, "Right! What happened next?"

Zhou Botong was sulking, "If you don't prompt me every now and then I will lose my eagerness for telling you the story."

"Yes, yes, Big Brother, what happened next?" Guo Jing prompted.

"Huang Shang thought, 'I realize I am old now and do not have too many years for good works.' He had taken those several dozens of years of pain to master the martial arts techniques of almost every martial arts school in the world. But after all those years, who would enjoy his work? How could he let his life-long work be wasted just like that? Therefore, he decided to compile the techniques he had mastered into a two-volume book. What would that be?"

"What is it?" Guo Jing asked.

"Ay! Don't tell me you cannot guess this one," Zhou Botong said.

Guo Jing thought for a moment, then asked, "Is it the 'Nine Yin Manual'?"

"We have talked for half a day about the origin of the 'Nine Yin Manual'; why do you still ask?" Zhou Botong scolded.

Guo Jing smiled, "Well, Little Brother was afraid to make another incorrect guess."

Zhou Botong continued, "After compiling the 'Nine Yin Manual', Huang Shang wrote it as a disguised literary book; my martial brother later found out about it. Huang Shang had hidden the book in a very secret place so that for

dozens of years nobody knew of its existence. For some reason this book appeared later and the Wulin world was troubled. Everybody wanted to get hold of it. It was a dog-eat-dog situation. My martial brother said that the heroes who fought over this book and lost their lives came from all parts of the Wulin world; the number was over a hundred people. Every time someone got hold of it and practiced for half-a-year or a year, somebody else would find that person and snatch the book. Who knows how many times the cycle repeated or how many lives it cost. The one who got it would try to avoid others, but the pursuers were so numerous and in the end they would always find that person. Sometimes they used force, sometimes trickery and I don't know how many times the book changed hands."

"If that's the case, then this book is actually the most damned thing for mankind," Guo Jing said. "If Chen Xuanfeng did not have this book he would have been able to live peacefully with Mei Chaofeng in some remote village and Island Master Huang would not have looked for him. If Mei Chaofeng did not have this book, she would not be in her wretched condition today."

"Brother, why do you have such a negative feeling towards the book?" Zhou Botong asked. "The martial arts contained inside the 'Nine Yin Manual' are very profound and divinely wonderful. If someone is able to learn even a little bit of it, how could that someone's life not be changed? Even though it has created disasters, what does that have to do with it? Didn't I say that not everybody was dead because of it?"

"Big Brother," Guo Jing said, "That is because you are so fascinated with martial arts."

"That goes without saying," Zhou Botong smiled. "Those who practice martial arts have endless pleasure. Common people are so foolish; some love to study to become

government officials; some love gold or exquisite jewels; some love beautiful women; but those who find pleasure in martial arts, won't those people be able to do much more in times of emergency?"

"Little Brother has practiced a little bit of shallow martial arts, but I have not yet learned to have any endless pleasure from it," Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong sighed. "Silly kid, silly kid; then why did you practice martial arts?" he asked.

"Masters wanted me to practice, I practiced," Guo Jing replied.

Zhou Botong shook his head. "You are really dumb," he said. "I am telling you: a man may not like the food he eats; he may not love his own life, but he cannot not practice martial arts."

Guo Jing replied while thinking, "This Brother of mine is really addicted to martial arts and that's why he acts so crazy." He said, "I noticed that the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' practiced the martial arts of the 'Nine Yin Manual'; it was completely evil. Those absolutely cannot be practiced."

Zhou Botong shook his head. "Those 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' did not train correctly. The 'Nine Yin Manual' is upright and honest, how could it be evil?"

Guo Jing had seen Mei Chaofeng's martial arts with his own eyes, so he did not believe what he heard.

Zhou Botong asked, "Where were we in the story?"

"You talked about the heroes of the world fighting over the 'Nine Yin Manual'," replied Guo Jing.

“That’s right!” Zhou Botong said. “Afterwards, the troubles kept getting bigger and more complicated so that the likes of the Quanzhen Sect’s Leader, Peach Blossom Island Master Old Heretic Huang and Beggar Clan Leader Hong had to intervene. Those five people agreed to meet at Mount Hua and have a contest. Whoever possessed the highest martial arts skill would get the book.”

“And the book fell into your martial brother’s hand,” Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong’s eyes lit up. “That’s right! My martial brother Wang and I were good friends; he had not yet become a priest when we became good friends. Later on he taught me martial arts. He said I practiced martial arts like crazy and was too determined; it did not fit well with the Taoist way of seeking peace and perfection. That is the reason why, though my martial arts are from Quanzhen, my martial brother did not let me become a Taoist priest. That, precisely, was what I expected. Amongst my martial brother’s disciples, Qiu Chuji was the one with the highest martial arts skill. My martial brother did not like it and said Qiu devoted too much time practicing martial arts and neglected to cultivate his Taoist faith. He said that whoever wanted to practice martial arts must do so diligently; while those who entered the Taoist way must do so with a simple heart. Those two did not go together very well. Ma Yu inherited my martial brother’s Taoist faith, but his martial arts are actually inferior to Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi.”

“The Quanzhen Sect Master Wang, how did he become both a Taoist saint and a martial arts master?” Guo Jing asked.

“His natural talent was that incredible. He was able to master martial arts quite easily, while I had to practice hard and diligently.” Zhou Botong answered. “Where were we in

the story? Why did you divert my attention with your question?"

Guo Jing smiled. "You were talking about your martial brother obtaining the 'Nine Yin Manual'."

"That's right," Zhou Botong said. "After he had the book in his possession, he did not learn anything from it. He put the book inside a stone box and buried it underneath the flagstone where he sat meditating daily. It seemed strange and I asked him what was going on. He smiled but did not say anything. I became anxious, but he simply told me to go and think about it. Go ahead and try to guess... why did he do that?"

"Was he afraid somebody might come and steal it from him?" Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong repeatedly shook his head, "No, no! Who would dare to steal a Quanzhen Sect Master's belongings unless that person was bored of his own life?"

Guo Jing pondered for a long time. Suddenly he jumped up and exclaimed, "That's right! That book should be hidden away really well; better yet, it should have been burned."

Zhou Botong was astonished; he stared hard at Guo Jing. "My martial brother at that time said the same thing; but every time he was going to do it, he hesitated at the last moment. Brother, you are not that smart, how did you guess correctly?" he asked.

Guo Jing blushed. "I thought that Venerable Wang's martial arts were already number one in the world; even if he trained from the manual himself, he would still be number one. I also thought that his intentions at the sword meet on Mount Hua were not to be the number one but to obtain this 'Nine Yin Manual'. He wanted it, not to benefit from it,

but rather to avoid further bloodshed amongst the heroes of Wulin."

Zhou Botong raised his head and looked up to the sky; he looked like one whose spirit had left him. He was silent for a long time. Guo Jing became anxious, he was afraid he had said something wrong and had offended this new brother of his with the strange temperament. Finally Zhou Botong sighed and asked, "How could you think of this truth?"

"I don't know," said Guo Jing, scratching his head. "I just thought that because this book had caused numerous deaths; even if it was a precious book, it would still be better if it were destroyed."

"I know his reasoning, but I have never understood it," Zhou Botong said. "My martial brother often times said that I am smart and have a natural talent for learning martial arts; also I have the determination to achieve success; but, he said, first of all I am too fascinated with it, and second, I do not have a caring heart towards other people. Even if I had a lifetime to train myself hard; I will never achieve perfection. At that time I listened to him, but did not believe him and thought, 'What does training myself to move my fist or kick or use a blade have to do with the state of my heart?' These past ten years or so I have been pondering over it and I can no longer believe it. Brother, your heart is upright, your mind is broad. It's a pity that my martial brother is dead, otherwise I am sure he would have liked what he saw in you and I am sure he would have bestowed his unparalleled martial arts on you. If only he hadn't died ..." Remembering his late brother, he suddenly bent over a rock and wept bitterly.

Guo Jing did not really understand what he was saying, but seeing his brother crying miserably could not help but feel grief in his own heart. After a while, Zhou Botong suddenly

raised his head and said, "Ah! Our story is not finished yet; let us finish it, then we can cry some more. Where were we? Why didn't you persuade me not to cry?"

Guo Jing smiled and said; "You were telling me about how Venerable Wang hid the 'Nine Yin Manual' underneath a flagstone."

Zhou Botong slapped his thigh and said, "That's right! He had hidden the book underneath a flagstone. I asked him if I could take look at it, but he scolded me; afterwards I did not dare to ask him again. The Wulin world again enjoyed peace and quiet for some time. Then martial brother died; and at the time of his death there was quite a disturbance in the martial arts world."

When Guo Jing heard the tone of his voice he became anxious, knowing that the disturbance must not be small. He opened his ears and listened attentively. Zhou Botong continued, "Martial Brother was aware that he could not avoid his imminent death; therefore, he arranged for us to take care of his unfinished business. He even asked me to take the 'Nine Yin Manual' out and bring it to him. He prepared a fire and was about to burn the book. But after stroking the book for a long time he heaved a deep sigh and said, 'This book is a Senior's lifelong effort; how can it be destroyed by my hand? Water can float a boat, yet it can also sink a boat; we'll have to see if the future generations make good use of it. However, I forbid our Sect's disciples from practicing what is in this book, so that people cannot accuse me of having wanted to own this book for personal gain.' After saying those words he closed his eyes and died. That very evening, it was not even the third hour yet, something happened in the temple."

"Ah!" Guo Jing uttered a cry; Zhou Botong continued, "That night I stayed up with the Quanzhen's seven first

generation disciples and kept a vigil at the side of the coffin. Around midnight enemies came. They were all skilled pugilists. The Quanzhen Seven Masters immediately went out and engaged the enemies in battle. They were afraid the enemies would desecrate their master's remains. I was the only one left guarding the coffin. I heard someone outside shouting, 'Hand over the 'Nine Yin Manual' quickly, otherwise your temple will be burned to the ground.' I looked outside and could not help feeling cold fear in my stomach. I saw a man standing on a tree branch and his body was swaying following the branch movements. It was an extraordinary demonstration of lightness kungfu. At that time I thought, 'This lightness kungfu is superior to mine; if he is willing, I'd like to take him as my master.' But then I changed my mind, 'It's wrong! It's wrong! This man must have come here to steal the 'Nine Yin Manual'; not only can I not bow to him to become his disciple, but I must fight him.' I did not know him, but whether I wanted it or not, I had to fight him. So I jumped outside and fought with him on the tree. I fought him for thirty or forty moves and I was getting frightened; the enemy was a few years younger than I was, but his martial arts were so fierce that I had a hard time keeping up with him. Finally I got hit on my shoulder by his palm and fell down from the tree."

"You have such high martial arts skills, yet you lost to him. Who was that?" Guo Jing wondered.

Zhou Botong answered his question with another question, "Can you guess?"

Guo Jing thought for a while then exclaimed, "Western Poison!"

"Ah!" Zhou Botong was amazed. "How did you guess?"

Guo Jing replied, "Little Brother thought that the people whose martial arts were higher than yours must be the people who were involved in the sword meet at Mount Hua. Benevolent Master Hong is straightforward and honest. The Emperor Duan is an Emperor, he would not stoop so low to steal someone else's possession. Little Brother does not know Island Master Huang's real character very well, but he is a proud man and not the kind of person who would take advantage of someone else's precarious condition and make a thief of himself!"

From the flower shrubs outside a shout suddenly came, clear and loud, "The little animal has good judgment!"

Guo Jing leaped towards that voice, but that person's movements were too swift. Guo Jing could not even see his shadow; only the trees were still swaying and flower petals fell down to the ground in abundance.

"Brother, come back!" Zhou Botong called out. "That was the Old Heretic Huang. He's already far away."

Guo Jing returned to the front of the cave, while Zhou Botong commented, "Old Heretic Huang is proficient in the amazing and weird five-element techniques; he arranged this vegetation according to Zhuge Liang's maze-laying arts of the past." [For those interested in more background on the eight trigrams (ba gua) one source on the net is the Feng Shui Institute.]

"Zhuge Liang's laws?" Guo Jing was amazed.

Zhou Botong sighed, "That's right. Old Heretic Huang is well versed in music, chess, calligraphy and painting, medicine, divination and astronomy; as well as farming and irrigation; economics and military strategy. Nothing is hidden from him, nothing that he is not proficient at. It's too bad he likes to give the Old Urchin a hard time and when

we fight, I will not necessarily win. Once he flies east and west amongst this vegetation nobody will be able to catch him.”

Guo Jing was silent for a long time. He was thinking about how amazing Huang Yaoshi was and was unable to restrain feeling captivated. After a while he remembered the story and asked, “Big Brother, you were hit by the Western Poison and fell down from the tree. What happened next?”

Zhou Botong slapped his thigh. “Right! This time you did not forget to remind me about the story,” he exclaimed. “I was hit by Ouyang Feng’s palm; the pain entered my heart and lungs and I wasn’t able to move for half a day. I saw him rushing into the mourning hall, but I couldn’t do anything; I was badly injured. Then I gritted my teeth and, risking my own life, I chased him. I saw him standing in front of my martial brother’s coffin. He stretched his hand to take the book from the table in front of the coffin. I was groaning inwardly; I was not his match and my martial nephews had not come back from fighting the other enemies outside. At this critical moment there was a loud cracking sound; the coffin’s wooden lid burst open and flew away, leaving a gaping hole in the coffin.”

“Did Ouyang Feng use his palm to destroy Venerable Wang’s coffin?” Guo Jing asked.

“No, no!” Zhou Botong replied. “It was my own martial brother who used his palm strength to break open the lid.”

After listening to this strange and absurd tale Guo Jing’s eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. He was speechless.

Chapter 17 - Mutual Hands Combat

Translated by Frans Soetomo



The Old Urchin Zhou Botong and the Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi had a marbles competition, with the 'Nine Yin Manual' and the Peach Blossom Island's Soft Hedgehog Armor as bets. Huang

Yaoshi's newly-wedded wife watched the proceedings from the sidelines. Though a marbles competition was child's play, this particular game had its own intricacies.

“Did you think my martial brother became a ghost?” asked Zhou Botong, “Or did you think he came back to life again? No not at all. He was faking death.”

“Ah!” Guo Jing gasped. “Faking death!”

“Yes,” Zhou Botong answered. “A few days before he died, my martial brother found out that the Western Poison had been lurking around the temple and waiting for him to die so he could steal the book. Therefore, my martial brother stopped his breathing by using his excellent internal energy and feigned death. He knew that if he told his disciples they would not grieve convincingly. Then, since Western Poison is so crafty, he would see through the ruse straight away; that was the reason nobody knew martial brother’s plan. Anyway, my martial brother flew out from the coffin and struck Western Poison with the ‘Solitary Yang Finger’ [yi yang zhi]. Ouyang Feng clearly saw me from outside the window as I was beside my martial brother’s death bed. He obviously saw us placing the body inside the coffin. Now, suddenly, my martial brother jumped out of the coffin; he was so shocked that the blood drained from his body. He was so frightened by my martial brother that he did not move. My martial brother’s ‘Solitary Yang Finger’ hit him on the eyebrow and broke his many years of training the ‘Toad Stance’ [ha ma gong]. Ouyang Feng then escaped back to the west and I’ve never heard of his returning to the Central Plains. My martial brother laughed long and hard as he sat cross-legged on a table. I knew launching the “Solitary Yang Finger’ consumed a lot of his energy, so he needed to meditate and restore his strength and I did not bother him. I ran outside and helped my martial nephews

get rid of the other attacking enemies. When my nephews heard that their master was not dead, their happiness was beyond belief. We rushed back into the temple but then stopped dead in our tracks ...”

“What happened?” Guo Jing asked nervously.

“I saw my martial brother’s body skewed to one side and his face looked strange,” Zhou Botong said. “I rushed to him and checked his pulse; his body was cold as ice. He was really dead this time. Martial brother’s last words were for us to divide the “Nine Yin Manual” into two parts, so that if somebody should steal one, the whole book would not be lost. I took the first part with the intention of hiding it later on, and brought the second part to the south to hide it on a mountain peak somewhere. On my way south I came across the Old Heretic Huang.”

“Ah!” Guo Jing exclaimed.

“Even though Old Heretic Huang’s behavior is queer and he is very arrogant, he is unlike the Western Poison who knows no shame and dared to come to steal the book,” Zhou Botong said. “Old Huang happened to be with a lady who turned out to be his wife.”

“That must be Rong’er’s mother,” Guo Jing thought, “I wonder if she knows that her mother was involved in this matter?”

“I saw them so happy together,” he heard Zhou Botong continue. “He said they were just married. I thought Old Heretic Huang was smart, what good would a wife do for him? So I teased him about the marriage. Old Heretic Huang did not get angry; he even invited me to have a drink. I told him about my martial brother playing dead and wounding Ouyang Feng. Old Heretic Huang’s wife was listening to my story; she asked me if she could take a look

at the book. She told me she did not understand any martial arts, she was merely curious as to what kind of book had caused the deaths of numerous masters of the Wulin world. Naturally I did not let her. Now the Old Heretic Huang loved his young wife very much and he wanted to make her happy, so he said to me, 'Botong, this woman does not know any martial arts at all. She is still young and loves to see amusing things. What's the problem with letting her take a look? If I, Huang Yaoshi, cast a single glance toward your book, I will immediately gouge out my eyeballs and give it to you.' Old Heretic Huang is a man who can be ranked among the best of this present age; his words, without doubt, carry a lot of weight. But to let somebody see the book is a grave matter, so I shook my head. Old Heretic Huang was not happy. He said, 'How can it be that I don't understand your difficulty with the book? If you agree to let my wife take a look, there will be time when this old Huang repays the Quanzhen Sect's kindness. But if you don't agree, that is entirely up to you. Who said that I have to have your friendship? I don't even know any of your Quanzhen disciples.' I understood very well his meaning. This man will do what he says. He felt uncomfortable giving me a hard time, but he could make things difficult for Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others. His martial arts skill is too high; it was not a good idea to provoke his anger."

"That's true," said Guo Jing. "Priest Ma, Priest Qiu and the others are not his match."

Zhou Botong continued, "At that time I said to him, 'Old Heretic Huang, if you are angry come and find me, the Old Urchin. Why do you have to look for my martial nephews? Won't that make you 'the big bully the little'?' When his wife heard me mentioning my nickname, 'the Old Urchin', she burst into laughter and said, 'Big Brother Zhou, you love to play around; let us forget this whole thing and let us play

around together. I don't want to see your precious book anymore.' She turned her head to Old Heretic Huang and said, 'I think the "Nine Yin Manual" was stolen by that Ouyang fellow, that's why Big Brother Zhou could not show it to me. If you keep pestering him I am afraid you will only make him lose face.' Old Heretic Huang smiled and said, 'That's right. Botong, let me help you find that Old Poison and deal with him. His martial arts are above yours.'"

"Looks like Rong'er inherits her mother's odd intelligence," Guo Jing thought. To Botong he said, "They were just provoking you!"

"I know that!" said Zhou Botong, "But I didn't want to lose to them. So I said, 'The book is in my possession and I have no problem with letting sister-in-law taking a look. But you inferred the Old Urchin cannot defend the book; you have to prove it to me.' The Old Heretic Huang smiled, 'If we fight, we might injure our friendship. You are the Old Urchin; let us play like little kids.' His wife clapped her hands and called out, 'Goody, goody! Why don't you two compete by playing with marbles?' before I could answer him."

Guo Jing showed a faint smile. Zhou Botong continued, "I am an expert in playing marbles; so I shouted, 'Let's play marbles then, do you think I am afraid of him?' Madame Huang smiled and said, 'Big Brother Zhou, if you lose, you will let me take a look at your book. But if you win, what do you want in return?' The Old Heretic Huang immediately said, 'The Quanzhen Sect has its treasure, don't you think Peach Blossom Island also has one?' He took out a shiny black cloth completely covered with thorns. Can you guess what it is?"

"Soft Hedgehog Armor [ruan wei jia]," Guo Jing said.

“That’s right, so you know of it,” Zhou Botong said. “The Old Heretic Huang said, ‘Botong, your martial arts are outstanding so naturally you don’t need any protection; but someday you will meet a girl urchin and soon have little urchins. This ‘Soft Hedgehog Armor’ will be invaluable for protecting the child; nobody will bully him. If you can beat me at marbles, this Peach Blossom Island treasure will be yours to keep.’ I said, ‘I won’t meet any girl urchin so naturally a little urchin will not be born; but your ‘Soft Hedgehog Armor’ is famous in the Wulin world. If I win it, I will wear it outside my clothing and then I will wander around Jianghu and let the people know that the Peach Blossom Island Master lost to the Old Urchin.’ Madame Huang interrupted, ‘Stop talking, after both brothers’ play then we can talk again.’ So we reached an agreement. Each man had to put nine marbles into nine holes, so I made eighteen holes altogether. Whoever put in nine marbles first will win the game.”

Listening to this part Guo Jing recalled his own childhood playing marbles with his sworn brother Tolui on the steppe, a smile broke out on his face. Meanwhile Zhou Botong continued, “I always carry plenty of marbles in my pocket, so we went outside to play our game. I paid close attention to Madame Huang’s movements and I found out she really did not know any martial arts. I went down and made some holes in the ground. I let Old Heretic Huang choose his marbles first, and he did. Then we started our game. His special hidden projectile skill, the ‘Divine Flicking Finger’ [tan zhi shen tong] is well known throughout the world. He knew his skill with small objects was superior to mine. But he did not know that this game had a secret; there was a slight difference in the way I made the holes. I made them in such a way that when a marble went in, it would jump right back out. You have to shoot the marble with the perfect amount of strength; it had to be just right with a

little bit of pulling force behind it, so the marble will stay in the hole."

Guo Jing never thought that playing marbles on the Central Plains would be so complicated; Mongolian kids would never be able to compete. He heard Zhou Botong proudly continue, "The Old Heretic Huang launched three marbles and all were right on target. But as soon as they entered the holes they would jump back out. He did not know my secret. In the meantime I flicked five marbles and all went into the holes and stayed. His secret projectile skill was very good; he tried hard to catch up to me by flicking three more marbles, while I put another marble in a hole. I was already in the lead, how could I let him catch up? He was having a hard time with the marbles. Secretly I was smug, thinking that his defeat was imminent; even the Heavens wouldn't be able to help him. Ay! Who knew that the Old Heretic Huang would use a dirty trick to gain victory? Can you guess what he did?"

"He hurt your hand using his superior martial arts?" Guo Jing guessed.

"No, no," Zhou Botong said. "The Old Heretic Huang is bad, but he is not stupid; he wouldn't use such a foolish method. He knew he was going to lose, so he sent his energy into the marbles; he flicked three marbles and hit my last three. Mine were smashed while his marbles stayed intact."

"Ah! Then you didn't have any marbles left!" Guo Jing exclaimed.

"I had to helplessly watch him put his marbles into the holes one by one. Thus, I lost!" Zhou Botong said.

"But that doesn't count!" Guo Jing said.

“That was what I said,” Zhou Botong answered. “But Old Heretic Huang said, ‘Botong, we have agreed that whoever got all nine marbles inside the holes, he wins. Blame your own inadequacy! It was your own fault that you don’t have enough marbles to put into the holes. Therefore, you lost!’ I still think he was being deceitful, but I had to admit I didn’t expect his move. Also, even if I wanted to destroy his marbles I couldn’t do what he did; I can’t hit a marble without smashing my own. So I secretly admired his ability. I said, ‘Sister-in-law Huang, I will let you see the book but I want it back by sundown.’ I said that because I was afraid they would say, ‘We didn’t say how long we might borrow the book; we haven’t finished looking at it so why are you taking it back?’ If that happened, the book would be in their hands for ten or even a hundred years.”

Guo Jing nodded his approval. “Right! Luckily Big Brother is smart and could foresee this. If it was me, I would fall for their scheme.”

Zhou Botong shook his head, “Speaking of intelligence, who on earth can be compared to the Old Heretic Huang? I don’t know how he did it, but he managed to find a wife who was as smart as he is. At that time Sister-in-law Huang only showed a faint smile, she said, ‘Big Brother Zhou, you are known as the Old Urchin, but you are smart. You are afraid it will be the same as Liu Bei borrowing the city of Jingzhou forever, aren’t you? Don’t you worry; I will sit right here in front of your eyes and I won’t hide in a secret place. If you are feeling uneasy, you can stay by my side and stand guard.’ I listened to her say this and I took the book from my pocket and handed it over to her. Sister-in-law Huang took it and walked to a tree and sat on an upturned rock.

The Old Heretic Huang saw I still showed some trepidation on my face and said, ‘Old Urchin, in this present age, how many people can defeat us two in martial arts?’ I replied,

'Nobody can necessarily defeat you; but to defeat me, including you there are four or five people!' Old Heretic Huang smiled, 'You flatter me. Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar are four people and each one has his own strengths; none could defeat any of the others. Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance' has already been broken by your martial brother, so for ten years he won't be able to compete with us. There is 'Iron Palm Floating on Water', Qiu Qianren and I've heard his martial arts are good, but because he did not attend the 'Sword Meet on Mount Hua' [hua shan lun jian], I am not sure that his martial arts are superb. Old Urchin, I believe that other than these people, you are number one in terms of martial arts. If we combine our strength, nobody can beat us.' I said, 'Naturally!' Old Heretic Huang then asked, 'Why then, are you so anxious? With both of us standing right here; who in the world could come and steal your precious book?' He was very reasonable, so I felt better.

I saw Madame Huang flipping one page after another and she read attentively from the beginning; her lips moved slightly which I found a little funny. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contains high-level secrets of martial arts; even if she was well versed in literature, I am afraid she wouldn't comprehend even half a word. She read slowly from the beginning to the end, taking her time. I waited impatiently until she finally flipped the last page. I thought she was done, but she unexpectedly turned to the first page and read again. But this time she read quickly and finished in the time needed to drink a cup of tea. She gave the book back to me and smiled, 'Big Brother Zhou, you have been deceived by the Western Poison; this is not the 'Nine Yin Manual'!' I was shocked. I asked, 'What do you mean it isn't? Obviously this was left behind by my martial brother and it looks good to me!' Madame Huang replied, 'What use is this book? Ouyang Feng obviously swapped your book for

this cheap copy on how to do fortune telling and divination’.”

“Could it be that Ouyang Feng swapped the books before the Venerable Wang came out of the coffin?” Guo Jing asked.

“That was what I thought at first,” Zhou Botong replied. “But I’ve known for some time that Old Heretic Huang is very shrewd; I could not really believe what his wife said either. Madame Huang saw me standing silently; she knew I doubted her words, so she asked, ‘Big Brother Zhou, how do you know this is the real ‘Nine Yin Manual’?’ I told her, ‘Ever since my martial brother took possession of the book, nobody has ever seen its contents. Martial Brother had said that he fought for seven days and seven nights to avoid further bloodshed in the Wulin world, not for his personal gain. Therefore, he forbade the Quanzhen disciples from learning any martial arts from the books. Madame Huang then said, ‘Venerable Wang had a just and upright heart, truly deserving of endless admiration. Even so, there are other people who would not hesitate to deceive him. Big Brother Zhou, you go ahead and take a look at the book.’ I hesitated, remembering my deceased martial brother’s last words that I did not dare to defy. Madame Huang continued, ‘This is a book of divination that is available anywhere in Jiangnan and not worth half a ‘wen’ [Chinese coin]. Besides, even if this book is the real ‘Nine Yin Manual’, it is all right to look as long as you do not learn anything from it, isn’t it?’

So I opened the book and looked at the first page. To me the book seemed to be describing methods and techniques for practicing martial arts; where was fortune telling and divination stuff? Madame Huang said, ‘I have played with this kind of book since I was five; I know the contents from the beginning to the end. Of we Jiangnan kids, nine out of

ten are familiar with it. If you don't believe me, just listen to this.' Having said that, words started flowing like water from her mouth; she recited the book from the beginning to the end. I looked at the book to see if she really was reciting it from memory. Indeed, not a single word was wrong. My body turned cold, as though I'd been plunged into a hole full of ice. Madame Huang also said, 'No matter which page you want me to recite, as long as you read the beginning, I can recite the rest for you. I have read this kind of book since I was little, so I won't forget its contents.' I chose several sections just as she said and she did recite them without hesitation.

The Old Heretic Huang burst out in laughter. I was really angry; I tore the book to pieces and then burned it. Old Heretic Huang said, 'Old Urchin, you don't need to lose your urchin's temper. Let me give you the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor'.' I wasn't aware I'd fallen for his scheme; I thought I looked so upset to him that he wanted to ease my feelings. I was upset, but how could I take the treasure of Peach Blossom Island? So I thanked him without taking his gift. I went back to my hometown and closed the door on the world. I wanted to practice my martial arts. I knew at that time that I was not Ouyang Feng's match, so I was determined to train hard for five years. I thought I would go to the west to take the book back from the Western Poison. My martial brother entrusted me with the book and the Old Urchin could not keep it safe. How could I face martial brother in the underworld?"

"The Western Poison is so crafty. I know you must deal with him; but wouldn't it be a lot better if you take Priest Ma, Priest Qiu and the others with you?" Guo Jing asked.

"Ay! I can only blame my own arrogance," Zhou Botong said, "After suffering from that humiliation I did not want to talk to Ma Yu and the others. If I did they would certainly

see something was amiss. Several years later there arose a rumor amongst the Jianghu people that the Peach Blossom Island disciples, the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' had gotten hold of the 'Nine Yin Manual'. They had mastered several kinds of exquisite martial arts from the book and created havoc everywhere. At first I did not believe it, but the rumor got stronger. A year later, Qiu Chuji came to my home. His visit was in connection with the 'Nine Yin Manual' affair. He said that the book really had fallen into the Peach Blossom Island disciples' hands. I was fuming mad and said, 'Old Heretic Huang is not worthy to be my friend!' Qiu Chuji was taken aback, 'Martial Uncle, why did you say Huang Yaoshi was not worthy to be your friend?' I told him, 'He went to get the book back from Western Poison without consulting me and did not give it back to me.'"

"I think he intended to do it, but right after he got the book back it was stolen by his renegade disciples," Guo Jing reasoned. "I know he was quite angry because of this, so he cut the ligaments in the legs of his other innocent disciples and expelled them from his school."

Zhou Botong shook his head. "You are as naive as I was; if this affair happened to you, you would surely be bullied without knowing it," he said. "That day Qiu Chuji discussed martial arts with me and we talked at length before he finally left. Two months later he suddenly reappeared. He had visited Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng, the couple that had stolen the Old Heretic Huang's book. They were practicing the 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' and 'Heart Destroying Palm', two evil martial arts. He took a big risk to eavesdrop on the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' conversation and found out that Old Heretic Huang did not get the book from Ouyang Feng. Not at all ... he'd stolen it from my hands."

"You burned the book. Did Madame Huang swap the book and gave you a fake one?" Guo Jing asked.

"I guarded against that possibility from the beginning," Zhou Botong said. "When Madame Huang looked at the book, I did not dare to move even half a step from her side. She did not know martial arts. Even if her hands and feet were swift she could not get away from we who practice hidden projectiles. No, she did not make a swap; she merely recorded it in her mind!"

Guo Jing did not understand. "How did she record it?" he asked.

Zhou Botong answered his question with another, "Brother, when you are reading a book, how many times do you have to read it until you commit what you read into your memory?"

"If it is easy ... maybe thirty or forty times. If it is difficult or long, probably seventy or eighty times, or even a hundred times. Even after I read it a hundred times, I still cannot guarantee its accuracy," Guo Jing replied.

"Speaking of brain power, I am afraid you cannot be considered smart," Zhou Botong said.

"Your Brother is dumb by nature," Guo Jing admitted. "It doesn't matter whether I am studying literature or martial arts, I am always very slow."

Zhou Botong sighed. "Let's not talk about studying literature," he said. "Just talk about practicing martial arts. When you learned a fist or palm technique, didn't your masters have to teach you dozens of times before you could understand it?"

Guo Jing's face was red with shame. "That's true," he said. "Sometimes I knew it but couldn't recall it, and sometimes I remembered it but could not apply it."

"But there are people in the world who, simply by watching other people do a stance, will be able to remember it forever," Zhou Botong said.

"Totally correct!" Guo Jing exclaimed. "Island Master Huang's daughter is just like that. When Benevolent Master [Enshi] Hong taught her martial arts, at most he would teach her twice; it was very seldom that he had to repeat the lesson three times."

"That girl is so smart," Zhou Botong slowly said, "Let's just hope she won't share her mother's short life! That day when Madame Huang borrowed my book she only read it twice, yet she did not miss a single word. After we bade farewell she wrote down everything for her husband to see."

Guo Jing could not restrain his amazement. He was silent for a while only to say, "Madame Huang did not understand what she was reading; yet she was able to memorize the whole thing. How can there be such an intelligent person on the earth?"

"I am afraid your little friend, that Huang girl, is also capable of doing that," Zhou Botong said. "Anyway, after listening to Qiu Chuji I was ashamed. I immediately summoned the Quanzhen Sect's seven first generation disciples to discuss this matter. Everybody agreed we should deal with the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' and get the book back from them. Qiu Chuji said, 'The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' martial arts skills may be high, We are your juniors so Martial Uncle does not need to go into action personally; otherwise the heroes of Jianghu

would say that the older generation bullied the younger one.' I thought he was right, so I assigned one or two of them to find the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' while the rest shadowed from out of sight to guard against the 'Twin Killers' escaping."

Guo Jing nodded his head in agreement, "If all the Quanzhen Seven Masters went into action the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' wouldn't have a chance." His mind wandered to the time when Priest Ma Yu along with his six masters masqueraded as the Quanzhen Seven Masters atop the barren Mongolian hill.

"They pursued the 'Twin Killers' as far as Henan, when the two unexpectedly disappeared," Zhou Botong continued. "The Quanzhen Seven tried to get information and as it turned out another disciple of Old Heretic Huang, Lu Chengfeng had gathered dozens of heroes and valiant people of the Central Plains to fight those two with the intention of capturing them, sending them back to Peach Blossom Island and handing them over to the Old Heretic Huang. Nevertheless, they were still able to escape and vanished without a trace."

"No wonder Village Master Lu hated his martial brother and martial sister so much; he was unjustly expelled from his school," Guo Jing said.

"Since I couldn't find the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', naturally I looked for Old Heretic Huang. I carried the first volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' because I was afraid I might lose this one as well. Upon arrival at Peach Blossom Island I scolded the Old Heretic Huang, but he said, 'Botong, Huang Yaoshi always means what he says. I said I wouldn't cast a glance at 'your' book and when did I look at it? The 'Nine Yin Manual' that I saw was the one recorded by my wife, certainly not your book.' His words sounded

reasonable, but I was furious so I spoke harsh words to him and asked to talk to his wife. He smiled bitterly and led me to the main hall. As soon as we were there I was shocked. It turned out Madame Huang had passed away. There in the main hall was her memorial tablet.

I was going to pay my respects to her spirit but Old Heretic Huang sneered and said, 'Old Urchin! You don't have to be pretentious on my behalf. If not for your damned 'dog fart manual' [gou pi zhen jing] my wife wouldn't have left me.' I was startled, 'What?' I asked. He didn't answer and only looked at me with angry eyes; then tears started rolling down his cheeks. After a long while, he began to tell me what really happened.

Madame Huang wrote down the book the first time for her husband's sake. Huang Yaoshi then found out that the book in his hands was the second volume which was harmful if used without knowing the first volume. So he decided to set the book aside while he was trying to get hold of the first volume. Who would have thought that the book would be stolen by Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng? Madame Huang wanted to comfort her husband and she was quietly determined to rewrite the whole book.

First of all, she did not understand the meaning of what she wrote; she merely memorized the words. Secondly, it had been several years since she wrote it the first time; how could she remember everything? At that time she was entering the eighth month of her pregnancy. After much painstakingly hard thought she was able to re-write about seven or eight thousand words, but not every word was accurate. Her heart and mind were exhausted and because of that she gave birth to a baby girl prematurely. The baby was healthy, but her own condition was like a lantern that had run out of oil. Even though Huang Yaoshi's medical skill

is peerless, in the end, he was not able to save his beloved wife's life.

Old Heretic Huang always loved to vent his anger and blame others; during this time after his wife passed away, he was like a madman and talked incoherently to me. I knew he was grieving so I did not want to argue with him. I simply smiled and said to him, 'You are a pugilist, yet you invest so much feeling towards the husband and wife relationship. Aren't you afraid you are becoming the laughing stock of other people?' 'My wife was different,' he said. I told him, 'Your wife died and now is the best time to train your martial arts. If it were me, that is exactly what I would expect of myself. The earlier your wife died the better. Congratulations! Congratulations!'"

"Ah!" Guo Jing gasped. "How could you say such thing?"

Zhou Botong eyes rolled, "I said what I was thinking; what's wrong with that?" he snapped. "But that Old Heretic Huang got angry and without saying anything he struck me with his palm and we fought. In the end I had to stay in this stupid place for fifteen years."

"Did you lose to him?" Guo Jing asked.

Zhou Botong smiled, "If I'd won, I wouldn't be here. He hit me until I was spitting up blood. I ran away until I found this cave. He pursued me, wanting to break my legs. He also wanted to snatch the first volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' and burn it in front of his wife's memorial tablet. I hid the book in a hole and sat at the cave entrance guarding it. I said that if he resorted to force I would destroy the book immediately. He said, 'I will find a way to force you out of there.' I said, 'We'll see!'"

Just like that and I have been here for fifteen years. That man is arrogant, but he is not desperate yet, so I am sure

he won't put poison in my food. But he has used every means possible to force me out of here. I leave the cave only to urinate and defecate so he won't have any opportunity to sneak in. Only I have to live with this stench. Sometimes I pretend to have a bowel movement. His heart itches to lay his fingers on it, but he ended up enjoying the smelly thing." He ended his narration by laughing heartily.

Listening to his story Guo Jing was fascinated. He found this big brother of his to be smart and witty. Zhou Botong continued, "After fifteen years he started to attack my heart and mind, but so far I've been able to defend myself. Last night I was almost broke; fortunately a ghost or angel brought you here and you helped me. If not, this book would certainly have fallen into Old Heretic Huang's hands. Ay! Old Heretic Huang's 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave Song' contains strong internal energy, very profound."

Guo Jing listened to him recounting this tale of gratitude and grudges; his heart was troubled. "Big Brother, what will you do now?" he asked.

Zhou Botong smiled, "I will continue our competition. We'll see if Old Heretic Huang outlives me, or I'll live a few years longer than him. I told you the life story of Huang Shang a while ago; he outlived all his enemies."

Guo Jing felt this was not a good idea, but he didn't have anything better, so he asked, "How come Priest Ma Yu and the others did not come to rescue you?"

"Most probably they don't even know I am here," Zhou Botong said. "Even if they do, the vegetation on this island is so strange that unless Old Heretic Huang himself gives consent, other people won't be able to enter Peach Blossom Island. Also, even if they come to rescue me, I won't go. I

haven't finished the competition with Old Heretic Huang yet."

After talking with Zhou Botong for half a day, Guo Jing decided that even though this man was old, he was filled with childlike innocence and always spoke straightforwardly and without any pretensions.

In the meantime the sun had climbed high in the sky. The old servant came to deliver their meal. After finishing eating Zhou Botong continued, "I have stayed on Peach Blossom Island for fifteen years, yet my time was not totally wasted. Here my heart and mind are clear, without any distractions. Here I have achieved what would take twenty-five years to achieve elsewhere. Although I know I have advanced greatly, it's too bad I didn't have a sparring partner. I had to use my left hand to fight my right hand."

Guo Jing was astonished. "How can the left hand fight with the right hand?" he asked.

"I pretend my right hand is the Old Heretic Huang and the left hand is the Old Urchin. The right hand attacks, the left hand neutralizes that attack and launches a counterattack, like this," Zhou Botong said, then moved his hands to battle each other.

At first Guo Jing thought it was very funny; but after several moves he realized that the stances were wonderfully mysterious. He couldn't help but feel great admiration. People who practice martial arts, regardless as to whether they are barehanded or wield a saber or thrust a spear, will always use both hands either to attack or to defend. But Zhou Botong was different. He used one hand to attack and the other to defend; each attack was fierce and always aimed at vital points, while the defending hand would parry and counterattack with no less fierceness. It truly was like

two people fighting each other. Guo Jing had never seen nor heard of anything like this before.

After watching Zhou Botong fight himself for a moment Guo Jing commented, "Big Brother, why don't you use your feet too?"

Zhou Botong halted and smiled, "Not a bad observation! You could see through my moves. Come, come! You try!" While speaking thus he stretched his palm to attack. Guo Jing also stretched his to parry.

"Careful! I am going to push you to the left," Zhou Botong said. As soon as he finished speaking he exerted his energy. Guo Jing was ready, even before Zhou Botong warned him he had prepared himself to use the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. Two great forces collided and Guo Jing staggered back seven or eight steps. He felt his arm become sore and numb.

"This time I borrowed strength from my feet and you were pushed back," Zhou Botong said, "Now I am not going to use my feet. You try again."

Guo Jing followed his bidding to attack again, but suddenly he felt a pushing and pulling force. He was unable to keep steady, so he fell forward and his forehead hit the ground. He crawled as he tried to stand up; he was in a daze.

Zhou Botong smiled, "Do you understand?"

"No, I don't," Guo Jing replied.

"I developed this technique through training and meditation after toiling for more than ten years inside this hole," Zhou Botong said. "My martial brother once told me about the technique of using emptiness to gain victory. At that time my understanding of Taoist principles was still

shallow. I heard him but I didn't understand. About five years ago I was moving my hands when it suddenly dawned on me that I could develop a palm technique using that principle. I was unsure about it since it was only a theory and I have never tried it in real combat. Brother, come and fight me again. Please don't fear the pain. I am going to make you fall a few more times."

He saw Guo Jing hesitate, so he tried to persuade him again, "Good Brother, I have been here for fifteen years and always longed for someone to come and train with me. Several months ago Old Heretic Huang's daughter came and talked with me to ease my boredom. I was thinking of training with her, but she did not return the next day. Good Brother, I'm certainly not going to hit you too hard."

Guo Jing saw both of his hands were itching to move and his face showed eagerness that was hard to resist, so he agreed and said, "So what if I fall a few more times?" He launched his palm and fought a few stances; but it seemed that Zhou Botong's palm was sometimes void of strength. He was about to fall again when Zhou Botong's left hand suddenly hit his shoulder from below. His body was sent somersaulting in the air and he fell to the ground hard. His shoulder was hurting badly.

Zhou Botong's face showed regret and he said, "Good Brother, I can't let you fall for nothing. Hear me out and I'll teach you this technique." Guo Jing endured the pain and crawled near to him.

Zhou Botong said, "In Lao Tse's [the founder of Taoism] 'The Book of the Way' [dao de jing] there is a saying: 'a clay utensil is useful because it is empty, a room is useful because it is empty.' Do you understand this saying?" [There are several spellings Lao Tse's name and several translations of the name of his book. I chose these.- ed]

Guo Jing's literary knowledge was limited so naturally he did not understand the saying. He smiled sheepishly and shook his head.

Zhou Botong took a rice bowl they'd used earlier. "This bowl is empty inside, that's why we can fill it with rice. If it was a solid clump of clay, how could we put food inside it?" he asked.

Guo Jing nodded and thought, "It is a very simple truth, but I've never thought about it."

"Likewise a house can be occupied by people because it has four walls and windows and doors in those walls," Zhou Botong added. "What good is it if the building is made of solid brick without windows and doors?"

Guo Jing nodded again; his heart was more open to this truth.

Zhou Botong continued, "Our Quanzhen Sect's highest martial art is based on these two characters 'empty' [gong] and 'soft' [ruo]. It was called so because 'lacking accomplishment does not necessarily mean weak, lacking fullness does not necessarily mean empty.'"

Following these deep and profound thoughts Guo Jing listened attentively and pondered deeply.

Zhou Botong added, "In terms of energy exertion, your master Hong Qigong's martial arts are on the external side of the spectrum. Even though I know Quanzhen Sect's martial arts, I am not his match. But I am afraid that once you reach certain level of external type martial arts you cannot go much higher. Not so with the internal type of martial arts, the type that my martial brother practiced. The time when my martial brother won the title 'Number One in the Martial Arts World' he was not just lucky. If he

was still alive today and with the additional ten years of training, if he again fought Eastern Heretic, Western Poison and the others, I believe he would probably only need half a day, not seven whole days and nights, to subdue them.”

“Founder Wang’s martial arts were truly amazing; Brother is unfortunate not to have made his acquaintance,” Guo Jing said. “Benevolent Master Hong’s ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ are the pinnacle of the ‘hard’ type of martial arts; but a moment ago Big Brother made me fall to the ground using the worlds ‘softest’ type of martial arts, isn’t that so?”

Zhou Botong laughed. “That’s true, that’s true,” he said. “Although the soft can subdue the hard, I wouldn’t be able to push you that easily if your ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’ was as fierce as Hong Qigong’s. It all depends on the depth of your comprehension. Do you remember the move I used to push you down just a moment ago? Try to remember it well.” And then he carefully explained how to move the hand and how to exert the energy. He knew Guo Jing’s comprehension was slow, so he took his time explaining everything.

Guo Jing tried the move dozens of times; fortunately he had a good foundation in profound internal energy techniques from the Quanzhen Sect, so he was able to grasp it, albeit slowly.

Zhou Botong was elated and said, “Brother, if your pain has lessened, let me make you fall one more time.”

Guo Jing laughed. “Pain is nothing,” he said, “But I am afraid I won’t be able to remember your lesson.” While speaking he was still trying hard to memorize everything.

Zhou Botong had childlike enthusiasm so he kept urging, “Is it enough? Have you memorized it? Come on, quickly!”

But his nagging was actually disturbing Guo Jing's mind. After some time was he finally able to memorize the move. So again he charged towards Zhou Botong and again he fell down.

Day and night those two trained together. Guo Jing was a young man, so he did not need too much sleep; but even when he did, Zhou Botong wouldn't let him. He kept urging him to train. Guo Jing fell down seven or eight hundred times. His body was swollen, hurt all over and covered with purple bruises. Fortunately he was strong, so he just gritted his teeth and doggedly learned and finally mastered Zhou Botong's special skill which he'd created during his fifteen years inside the cave, the seventy-two move 'Vacant Fist' [kong ming quan].

The two were so engrossed in training their martial arts that they did not know how many days passed. Guo Jing thought about Huang Rong all day, but since he was unable to seek her, he had to be content with waiting patiently. Several times he wanted to go with the mute servant who delivered their meals to find her; but every time, Zhou Botong called him back.

One day right after lunch Zhou Botong said, "You have mastered the entire 'Vacant Fist'. After this I won't be able to make you fall so easily; so we have to change the way we play."

"Very well. How should we play?" Guo Jing asked, laughing.

"We will play as though four people were fighting each other," Zhou Botong replied.

"Four people?" Guo Jing was perplexed.

"Absolutely," Zhou Botong said. "Four people! My left hand is one person, my right the other and your pair of hands are

the two other people. Four separate individuals and nobody help anybody. Four people in a tangled battle! That should be more interesting."

Guo Jing's interest was piqued. "It certainly is interesting; too bad I cannot separate my left and right hands," he smiled as he said it.

"I mean to teach you that later," Zhou Botong said. "For now, let us just have a three-way fight." His hands made two people and attacked Guo Jing immediately. He separated himself into two different entities and each hand launched a different stance. They did not complement each other and it was completely different to one person using two hands. When his left hand was giving Guo Jing a hard time, his right hand would come to Guo Jing's rescue. Likewise when his right was gaining the upper hand, his left fought his right. When Guo Jing gained the upper hand, Botong's hands would fight together like two people facing one opponent. In short, it was like three separate individuals fighting with each other. After fighting for a while they stopped for a rest.

Guo Jing thought this way of playing was very amusing; but he could not help but remember Huang Rong. He thought that if she was here, the three people would be able to fight as six individuals. He was sure Huang Rong would be very interested.

Zhou Botong was full of enthusiasm. As soon as Guo Jing caught his breath he taught him how to divide his hands into the 'Mutual Hands Combat'. This technique was actually more difficult than the 'Vacant Fist'.

There is a saying, 'The mind cannot be divided,' and something along the same line, 'The left hand drawing a square, the right hand drawing a circle, is not a good habit.'

But this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique was exactly that: dividing one's mind into two. And the way to train it was by drawing a square with the left hand and a circle with the right hand. Guo Jing practiced doing the drawings. Initially his square resembled a circle and his circle looked like a square. He painstakingly practiced for a long time before he finally got the hang of it and both hands could simultaneously draw a perfect square and circle at will.

Zhou Botong was very excited. "If you hadn't practiced our Quanzhen's internal energy cultivation, which enables you to combine inner and outer strength, how could you master this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique so quickly?" he said. "Now, use your left hand to launch the 'South Mountain Fist' technique [nan shan quan] and your right hand the 'Yue Maiden Sword' technique [yue nu jian]." These were the martial arts Guo Jing learned from Nan Xiren and Han Xiaoying. Guo Jing knew these techniques by heart, but launching them at the same time, one with each hand, was actually very difficult.

Zhou Botong was dying to play the 'four persons mutual combat', so he urged Guo Jing to train and he did not stop giving instructions and pointers. A few days later Guo Jing had mastered the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique. Zhou Botong's delight was boundless. "Come, come!" he urged, "Your left hand and my left one form an alliance against your right hand and mine. Let us have a martial arts contest."

Guo Jing was still young, how could this kind of game not interest him? Immediately his right hand fought Zhou Botong's left while his left hand fiercely fought Zhou Botong's right. No one had ever seen or heard of this kind of battle.

While they were fighting each other and themselves, Zhou Botong gave Guo Jing pointers unceasingly on how to attack swiftly and fiercely and how to form a stable defense. Guo Jing listened and committed each and every one of them to memory.

Zhou Botong only wanted to have an interesting playtime, but Guo Jing's mind came up with other thoughts. One day when they were playing, he thought, "If our legs can also be divided, wouldn't two people be able to fight as eight individuals?" But he knew if he brought this up, Zhou Botong would go on indefinitely, so he refrained from saying anything.

Several more days passed. Guo Jing and Zhou Botong fought as four separate individuals. Zhou Botong was having fun; he fought and laughed heartily. Guo Jing's skill was still shallow, so when one of his hands was unable to defend, the other involuntarily would come to its rescue. Zhou Botong's fists moved rapidly and Guo Jing was not able to keep fighting as separate individuals, so he often became one individual fighting two people, as in the 'three person mutual combat'. But his two hands launched different moves, so it was like two Guo Jings fighting together hand-to-hand against two opponents.

Zhou Botong laughed heartily, "You are fighting without regard to the rules," he said.

Guo Jing jumped back. He was silent for a while then opened his mouth, "Big Brother, I have been thinking of something."

"What is it?" Zhou Botong asked.

"Well, your hands can launch completely different moves. Why can't they work together like two people facing a common enemy? This technique can be very useful; if your

enemy is strong, you can divide your mind and help yourself. Although the force won't be doubled, the stances would enjoy a great advantage."

Zhou Botong had created the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique out of boredom while living in the cave alone. It never occurred to him that he could actually use the technique in real combat. Now that Guo Jing reminded him of it a thought suddenly flashed back and forth in his mind. He suddenly leaped out of the cave and walked back and forth at the cave entrance, laughing incessantly.

Guo Jing saw the sudden change in his actions, like an evil spirit possessed him; he became anxious and called out, "Big Brother, what happened to you? What is it?"

Zhou Botong did not answer but kept laughing. After a while he said, "Brother, I am coming out of this hole! I am not going to urinate, I don't need to have a bowel movement, but I am coming out."

"You are!" Guo Jing exclaimed.

Zhou Botong smiled, "Right now my martial arts are number one in the world, why should I fear Huang Yaoshi? I only hope he will show up so I can beat him really good."

"Are you sure you can defeat him?" Guo Jing asked.

"Actually my martial arts are still a notch below his, but by dividing my mind I can be two people against one; nobody can defeat me. Huang Yaoshi, Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng, their martial arts are superb; but how can they defeat two Zhou Botongs?" Guo Jing was delighted; what Zhou Botong said seemed very reasonable.

"Brother," Zhou Botong continued, "You understand this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique; all you need is just a few

more years of practice and then your martial arts skills will be doubled." As they chatted, the two became more and more excited.

Before this time, Zhou Botong was afraid Huang Yaoshi would come and make things difficult for him; but now he hoped Huang Yaoshi would show up. He would beat him up and leave this awfully smelly cave forever. He impatiently looked outside hoping to catch a glimpse of Huang Yaoshi's shadow. He would've dashed out to seek him if he hadn't known the pathways on the island were arranged mysteriously.

That night the mute servant came to deliver their dinner. Zhou Botong grabbed his neck and said, "Quickly tell Huang Yaoshi to come, tell him to test my new technique!" But the old servant only shook his head.

Zhou Botong swore and uttered some indistinct remark before he suddenly realized, "Bah! I forgot you are deaf and mute!" Turned his head to Guo Jing he said, "Tonight we must eat really well." Then he reached out to grab the food basket.

Guo Jing's nostrils caught a delicious smell coming from the basket, unlike the meals they usually got. He hastily opened the basket and saw two small dishes of vegetables with a big bowl of chicken cooked with winter-picked mushrooms...one of his favorites. With a thumping heart he took a porcelain spoon to scoop a spoonful of the soup. It tasted exactly like the one Huang Rong prepared for him, so he was certain it was from Huang Rong. His heart thumped even harder. Quickly he looked at the basket to see if there was anything unusual. He found a box with ten steamed buns inside. One of them had the image of a gourd, carved with a nail. The marking was so subtle that if he had not paid attention he would surely have missed it. Guo Jing

knew this bun was unusual. With a trembling hand he picked up the bun, broke it into halves, and found a wax pill inside. Guo Jing observed that Zhou Botong and the old servant were not looking his way, so he quickly slipped the pill inside his pocket.

This time the two men ate their dinner without caring about its taste: one was eating while thinking of how to have the peerless martial art in the world. While the right hand grabbed a steamed bun the left hand threw some fists, so both hands were very busy. Sometimes they fought each other while the mouth was chewing. The other person wanted to eat as fast as he could so that he could see what Huang Rong had hidden inside the wax pill.

Zhou Botong ate the last steamed bun with some effort and with a noisy slurp he finished the soup too. The old servant cleaned up and took the basket away. Guo Jing hurriedly pulled out the wax pill, crushed it, and took out the paper hidden inside. It was indeed Huang Rong's handwriting. It said, 'Jing ge ge, please do not worry. Father and I are reconciled. I will carefully arrange to ask him to release you.' The letter was closed with two characters, 'Rong'er'. Guo Jing was ecstatic; he showed the letter to Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong laughed. "Leave it to me," he said. "He can't refuse to release you; we will compel him to, so there's no need to ask him nicely. If he refuses, I will imprison him in this hole for fifteen years. Aiyo! That's not right! What if, in fifteen years, he finds the secret of the 'Mutual Hands Combat'?"

The sky was gradually becoming dark. Guo Jing sat cross-legged and was going to practice internal energy. But his mind kept wandering back to Huang Rong. For a long time he could not concentrate. Finally he was able to calm himself and his chest relaxed; he started to breath evenly. A

sudden thought came to his mind: if he could divide his mind to control two hands and use two different martial arts, why not try dividing his breathing into two? So he closed one of his nostrils and practice breathing using only one nostril.

He had practiced for about an hour and felt that he had made some progress when he heard some rustling sounds. He opened his eyes and could see in the dark somebody with long hair and a long beard moving around; Zhou Botong was practicing martial arts. He opened his eyes wide and looked closely. He saw Zhou Botong's left hand was doing the seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fist', while his right hand was doing some other Quanzhen Sect fist technique. The fists moved slowly, but they created gusts of wind that had created the rustling sound he heard earlier. Guo Jing admired his amazing skills.

While he was half watching and half lost in thought, he suddenly heard Zhou Botong call out anxiously, "Aiyo!" then hastily brush something from his body. A long black and shiny thing flew from his body and hit a distant tree like he was throwing a hidden projectile of some sort. Guo Jing noticed Zhou Botong shaking and he was startled. Hurriedly going to him he called out, "Big Brother, what happened?"

"I was bitten by a viper! I am dying!" Zhou Botong shouted.

Guo Jing was shocked as he held Zhou Botong's body. His expression had changed; he leaned on Guo Jing's shoulder and slowly walked back to the cave. Guo Jing quickly tore a piece of his clothing and tightly wrapped it around Zhou Botong's thigh to prevent the venom from reaching the heart.

Guo Jing took a piece of flint from his pocket and lit a fire. In the bright firelight he could see more clearly. His heart jumped to his throat. Zhou Botong's calf was swollen very badly.

"This island does not have this kind of venomous green viper. I wonder where it came from?" Zhou Botong said weakly. "The snake wouldn't be able to bite me when I practice normally. But this time I was practicing two sets of fist techniques; I had all my attention on my movements ... Ay!"

Guo Jing heard his trembling voice and knew the poison was severe. If Zhou Botong had not possessed a profound internal energy he would have died earlier. Nervously he bent over and sucked on the wound.

"You can't do that!" Zhou Botong cried out. "The snake's venom is extraordinary. It will kill you."

But Guo Jing was only thinking of saving Zhou Botong's life; he did not even think of his own safety. His right arm held Zhou Botong's body firmly, while his mouth continued sucking. Zhou Botong tried to struggle, but his body was weak and he could not move. A little while later he passed out.

Guo Jing kept sucking the venom out and spat it on the ground. With the poison drained out of his body, plus his profound internal energy Zhou Botong slowly regained consciousness. His eyes were still heavy lidded. Half awake he said, "Brother, your Big Brother is going to return to heaven today. But before leaving this world I gained your friendship, my heart is extremely happy."

Even though Guo Jing had only crossed Zhou Botong's path a short while ago, because they were of the same straightforward and honest nature, they hit it off

immediately. He felt like they had known each other for dozens of years. Right now, as he looked at his dying face, he couldn't prevent tears from flowing down his cheeks.

Zhou Botong smiled sadly and said, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' is hidden inside a box beneath the stone where I usually sit. I was going to give it to you; but since you sucked the deadly snake venom, you will not live long. We two will walk hand in hand to the underworld. No need to fear that we won't have someone to play with. We will play as four people in the clouds ... No, as four ghosts ... that would be interesting. The bigheaded ghost and the grim reaper will be baffled watching us. The ghost world won't be the same." Speaking like this made him quite happy.

Guo Jing heard Zhou Botong say that he too was going to die, but he did not feel anything unusual. He used the fire to examine himself. The fire was about to burn out, so he took Huang Rong's letter and burned it. He then looked around the cave entrance to find a dried branch or grass, but in the hot summer weather the vegetation around him was green and lush.

He was getting more and more anxious. He groped in his pocket to find something that could be used as a torch. But he found nothing, except that leather-like thing wrapped around his dagger that came from Mei Chaofeng. Without giving it a second thought he lit that thing and extended it to examine Zhou Botong's face. He saw his face turning gray, no longer ruddy like a child's.

Zhou Botong saw the flickering fire and showed a faint smile. He saw Guo Jing's countenance had not changed; there was no sign of poison at all. He was confused. He blinked his eyes and looked at the fire. He saw the thing that Guo Jing used as a torch had characters written all over it. He squinted, trying to read what was written; after

reading about ten characters or so he was startled. He recognized that the words were taken from the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He didn't have time to ask any questions so he just raised his hand and struck out the fire, asking, "Brother, what kind of medicine did you take? How come the deadly poison did not affect you?"

Guo Jing guessed it was because he'd drunk the blood of Liang Ziwong's big ginseng-fed snake. So he said, "I once drank a big snake's blood; perhaps that is why I can resist the snake's venom."

Zhou Botong pointed to the leather on the ground, "That is a very precious thing; it absolutely cannot be destroyed ..." he passed out before he could finish his sentence.

At this time Guo Jing did not care about any precious objects; he was busy sealing Zhou Botong's 'Palace Crossing' [gong guo] acupoint, but it did not help. He felt Zhou Botong's calf; it was hot and very swollen.

"Four weaving machines, mandarin ducks fly in pairs ..." he heard Zhou Botong mutter indistinctly.

"What did you say?" Guo Jing asked.

"Too bad that old fellow's head has turned white, too bad ..." Zhou Botong sighed.

Guo Jing knew he was delirious from the poison and he was very anxious. He dashed out of the cave and climbed a tree outside, shouting loudly, "Rong'er! Rong'er! Island Master Huang! Island Master Huang! Help...help!" But Peach Blossom Island encompassed an area of more than ten li across; it was a big island. Huang Yaoshi's residence was located on the other side of the island. Guo Jing's shout was in vain. The only response he heard was his own voice

echoing from the mountain and valley ahead, “ ... Island Master Huang! Help! Help ...!”

Guo Jing jumped down from the tree, at a loss. In that critical moment an idea flashed into his mind, “Snake’s venom cannot harm me; perhaps my blood contains an antidote to the snake’s poison.” Without wasting another second he fumbled about on the ground, looking for the big green bowl that Zhou Botong used to drink tea from everyday. He took his dagger and without hesitation sliced his left arm and let his blood drip into the bowl until the dripping stopped by itself. He made another cut until blood filled the bowl. Then he propped Zhou Botong up on his knee and with his left hand he forced Zhou Botong’s mouth open and with his right hand fed him the blood.

Although he was young and his body strong, losing that much blood had drained his energy. After feeding it all to Zhou Botong he leaned against the cave wall and closed his eyes; he fell asleep not long afterward.

He didn’t know how long he slept, but he felt someone tending his wounds. He opened his eyes and saw Zhou Botong’s white hair and beard. Guo Jing was delighted. “You ... you ... are you well?” he called out.

“I am well, Brother. You have sacrificed yourself to save my life,” Zhou Botong said. “I am sure the grim reaper is greatly disappointed; I am not that easy to kill.”

Guo Jing looked at Zhou Botong’s calf and saw that the dark swelling was no longer there, only a red inflammation that was not life threatening.

That morning the two sat together to meditate, cultivate their inner strength and revitalize their bodies. After lunch Zhou Botong asked Guo Jing the origins of the leather wrap. Guo Jing gathered his thoughts for a moment then

started narrating how his Second Shifu at Cloud Manor had taken some things from Mei Chaofeng; the dagger was amongst those things and the leather was wrapped around it. Later he also noticed the characters, but he did not know what they were so he simply kept it in his pocket without giving it another thought.

Zhou Botong mumbled and was lost in thought for a long time. "Big Brother, you said it was a very precious object, what is it?" Guo Jing asked.

"I have to examine it before I can answer your question. I don't know if it is the real thing; but since it came from Mei Chaofeng, I have strong reasons to believe it is," Zhou Botong replied. Taking the leather he looked at it from top to bottom.

Wang Chongyang won the book, not for his personal gain, but to avoid bloodshed amongst the people of Wulin; therefore, he had strictly forbidden his disciples from ever learning any martial arts from the book. Zhou Botong naturally did not dare to disobey his martial brother's last words. But he recalled what Madame Huang said, 'Simply taking a look without training it can not be considered disobeying.' He'd spent fifteen years in the cave without anything to do, so out of boredom he had read the first volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' that was in his possession. However, the first volume only contained the methods of cultivating internal energy as well as the basics of swordsmanship; there were no real profound martial arts to defeat an opponent. It was useless if one did not learn the second volume.

Over these past ten years or so, Zhou Botong read the first volume over and over again; he even made some guesses as to what the second volume contained. As soon as he read

the leather wrap, he immediately knew it was related to what he had already memorized.

Zhou Botong raised his eyes to the distant hills and was deep in thought. He loved martial arts; in fact he was obsessed with them. Now he had in his hand the world's greatest and most profound martial arts manual. In all honesty he wanted very much to learn what was in the book; not to build up his own reputation, not to seek vengeance, also not to show off his prowess or to rule the world; he was simply and purely curious to see how profound the martial arts in the book actually were.

He recalled his martial brother's story of Huang Shang compiling the 5481 chapters of the Everlasting Life Taoist Canon [aka The Book of Salvation]; then later on he spent forty years painstakingly studying various exquisite martial arts from various schools. This was no small matter. The 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds' only got hold of the second volume and they only managed to learn two techniques among the many; yet they were able to wreak havoc in Jianghu. What if they had been able to learn the entire second volume? The result would be inconceivable. But martial brother's last words could not be disobeyed. Zhou Botong pondered these things in his heart; he heaved a heavy sigh, put the leather inside his pocket, closed his eyes and fell asleep.

After having a good rest, he took a tree branch to dig a hole in which he intended to bury both volumes. He was digging and sighing at the same time. Suddenly an idea came to him and he exploded in laughter and cheers, "That's right! That's right! I can have it both ways!" He was so ecstatic that he startled Guo Jing, "Big Brother, what both ways?" But Zhou Botong merely laughed without saying anything. It looked like he'd come up with a really great idea.

“Brother Guo is not my Quanzhen Sect’s disciple. I will teach him and let him train; then I will see the results,” he thought. “That way I can satisfy my curiosity and follow martial brother’s dying wish at the same time.” He was going to tell this idea to Guo Jing when he suddenly had another thought, “From the way he speaks I gather he detests the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. He thinks it is an evil martial art; but that is because the ‘Twin Killers of the Dark Winds’ who only looked at the second volume. They did not learn the first volume. It would have told them how to cultivate their inner energy and build a foundation for the subsequent techniques. They only took the fiercest martial arts they could find and that resulted in the monstrosity of their martial arts. I’d better not tell him anything; I’ll let him practice and let him know afterwards. By that time he will have mastered the books’ martial arts and even if he wanted to get rid of them he won’t be able to do anything about it. Won’t that be interesting?”

By nature he was mischievous; other people would scold him or get mad at him, he did not care. Other people loved him or showed him favor, but he did not give it a thought. As long as he could play or make practical jokes and have fun, he would be happy. Now that he had thought of this idea he maintained his composure and with a straight face he told Guo Jing, “Younger Brother [Xian Di], during my fifteen years inside this cave I have created not only the ‘Vacant Fist’ and the ‘Mutual Hands Combat’ techniques, but also some other ones. Now that we don’t have anything to do, what do you say to me teaching you some more to pass the time away?”

“Nothing could be better,” Guo Jing said, “But Rong’er said she is thinking of a way to get us out of here ...”

“Has she found a way out for us?” Zhou Botong asked.

“Not yet,” Guo Jing replied.

“Then what’s wrong with learning new things while waiting for her?” Zhou Botong suggested.

Guo Jing happily complied, “That will work. Big Brother’s other martial arts must be marvelous.”

Zhou Botong laughed inside, “Don’t you be happy yet,” he thought, “You have fallen for my scheme!” So he immediately passed on the essence of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ a little at a time from his memory. Naturally Guo Jing did not immediately understand it, but Zhou Botong was very patient. He would repeat the lesson as many times as needed. As for the lessons from the second volume on the leather wrap, he would memorize it first when Guo Jing was not looking, and then he would pass it on as he had memorized it.

The ‘Nine Yin Manual’ contained various martial arts techniques which were different from each other. Zhou Botong taught the theory but did not give any examples on how to do it. He let Guo Jing ponder them and find out on his own. Afterward he would test the newly learned technique against his Quanzhen Sect’s martial arts.

After several days he started to see the marvelous martial arts of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ which Guo Jing was gradually mastering; however, Guo Jing was still completely unaware that he was learning the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. Zhou Botong was very happy; he would often smile in his sleep.

In the meantime Huang Rong kept preparing food for Guo Jing, although she did not show up personally. Guo Jing’s heart became contented and his skills advanced more quickly.

One day Zhou Botong was teaching the 'Nine Yin Divine Claw' [jiu yin shen zhua]; he instructed Guo Jing to use all of his fingers to practice against the cave's wall. Guo Jing had practiced this several times when he suddenly realized something. "Big Brother," he said, "I think Mei Chaofeng also learned this kind of martial arts, only she practiced against humans. She could insert her five fingers inside someone's skull. It was very cruel."

Zhou Botong was startled, "That's true," he thought, "Mei Chaofeng did not know the first volume's contents so she followed the instructions literally. The second volume only stated 'concentrate the energy in the five fingers and firmly attack the enemy's head.' She did not know that 'the enemy's head' means the enemy's vital points and not literally to insert five fingers into the enemy's skull. It's no wonder she thought she had to train using real skulls. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contains lessons for spiritual purity to chase evil spirits away; how could it teach anyone to practice her type of cruel and ferocious martial arts? That old hag strayed too far from the truth. Brother Guo is already suspicious so I'd better not teach him that kind of martial arts." Thereupon he smiled and said, "Mei Chaofeng practices a demonic type of martial arts; how can she be compared with our true orthodox school of martial arts? All right, we won't train this 'Divine Claw' martial art for the time being; instead, I will teach you more of our Quanzhen heritage martial arts."

While speaking he hatched another good idea, "I will teach him the first volume until he really comprehends everything. Then I will continue with the second volume. He will see the logical connection between the first and the second and he won't be suspicious any longer." So he started to recite the theory from the first volume and told Guo Jing to memorize it.

The lessons in the manual were very deep and profound; how could Guo Jing comprehend everything? Zhou Botong realized Guo Jing was slow, so he told him to recite it aloud. After repeating them dozens of times Guo Jing was able to memorize almost everything. He did not understand the meaning of some of it, but he memorized it anyway. Several days passed and Zhou Botong had passed on most of the book, so he told Guo Jing to start practicing his internal energy cultivation.

Guo Jing felt that the internal energy cultivation method was similar to the one he'd learned from Ma Yu, only this one was deeper and more difficult. He credited that to the fact that Zhou Botong was Ma Yu's martial uncle, so naturally his way of cultivating internal energy would be profounder than Ma Yu's. He also recalled that when Mei Chaofeng sat on his shoulder battling enemies in the Zhao palace she'd asked him some questions about internal energy cultivation which he was able to answer. He did not suspect anything at all. Although he frequently noticed Zhou Botong's funny expression, as though he was amused by something, he thought it was Zhou Botong's natural disposition to play jokes. Maybe he was thinking of other amusing things.

The manual contained more than one thousand gibberish characters without any clear meaning. For the past several years Zhou Botong had repeatedly pondered over those words in the cave, but he still did not have a clue as to what they meant. Nevertheless he passed them on to Guo Jing anyway. When Guo Jing asked what they meant, Zhou Botong simply said, "This secret can't be divulged right now, you will understand it when the time comes."

Memorizing those thousand or so words without understanding what they meant was a hundred times more difficult than memorizing a regular book. It might not be

too difficult for a sharp minded person; but even though Guo Jing was slow, he had strong determination. After more than a thousand times of reciting those words he eventually was able to memorize everything.

Guo Jing woke up early one morning and immediately started practicing his martial arts. When breakfast came he noticed another unusual steamed bun. Without waiting to finish his meal he took the bun into the forest and immediately crushed the wax pill inside to get the letter. Once he had taken a glance he could not help but feel very anxious. The letter said, 'Jing ge ge, Western Poison has proposed to Father to give my hand in marriage to his nephew, and Father answered ...' The letter was not finished, indicating that she was writing it in a hurry. It looked like the word after 'answered' was 'yes'.

Guo Jing's mind was frantic; he waited impatiently for the old servant to clean up then he hastily showed the letter to Zhou Botong.

"Her father gave his consent, that's good. It's none of our business," Zhou Botong said.

"I can't go along with that," Guo Jing said, "Rong'er has promised to be with me. She must be frantic right now."

"If you take a wife, there are some martial arts you cannot practice. That will be too bad," Zhou Botong said. "I ... I feel deep remorse that I didn't listen to good advice. Good Brother, listen to my advice: you'd better not to take a wife."

Guo Jing felt the more Zhou Botong spoke, the more unreasonable he became; that made Guo Jing more concerned than ever. Zhou Botong continued, "If I hadn't lost my virginity and therefore could not practice my martial brother's fiercest martial arts, how could Old

Heretic Huang have imprisoned me in this confounded hole? You see, if your thoughts are focused on your wife, your heart is divided. I am sure today's martial arts practice will not get you anywhere. If you really marry Old Heretic Huang's girl... ay! That will be too bad! If only I ... ay! Never mind that. In short, if you let yourself get entangled in an affair with a woman, you won't reach the pinnacle of perfection. Moreover, you will offend your friend and disobey your martial brother. It is very difficult for you to forget her. I wonder how she is ... Anyway, don't ever look at her pretty face, don't ever caress her beautiful body and don't teach her acupoints sealing techniques, because she will feel your body to find those acupoints. Those are great taboos ... worse yet, don't ever ask her to marry you ... "

To Guo Jing Zhou Botong was just mumbling illogically, but it was troublesome. "Whether I marry her or not, we'll sort that out later," he said, "Big Brother, we have to help her now."

Zhou Botong laughed, "Western Poison is very evil; his nephew cannot be different. Old Heretic Huang's daughter is pretty, but she must have the same character as Old Heretic Huang: a perverted mind. Let Western Poison's nephew take her as his wife; let them both suffer and let their martial arts not go anywhere. That way we kill two birds with one stone. No, more precisely...lose two birds with one stone. There's nothing good in either one of them. Don't you think this is a good idea?"

Guo Jing sighed, walked into the woods, and sat on the ground. His mind was jumbled, "Even if I have to die on Peach Blossom Island's pathways, I must find her," he thought. Once his mind was set he leaped up and started moving. At that moment he heard two loud calls from the sky and two white forms swooped down towards him. They were the white eagles Tolui brought him from the steppes.

Guo Jing was delighted and extended his arm to let the eagles perch. Only then did he see a bamboo tube tied to the male eagle's leg. Hastily he loosened it and found a letter inside. It was from Huang Rong. She told him the latest developments - how Western Poison would arrive in a few days to arrange the betrothal; how her father was closely guarding her and not letting her out of her quarter's even half a step. That included preparing food for Guo Jing. In the end she said that if she could not get away from all of this, she would commit suicide to show her love for him. She also told Guo Jing that the pathways on the island were dangerous and mysterious and full of booby traps, so she warned Guo Jing not to try to find her.

Guo Jing was dumbstruck. He pulled out his dagger and carved these six characters on the bamboo tube, 'live together, die together' [yi qi huo, yi qi si]; then he tied the tube back on the eagle's leg and raised his arm and pointed north. The eagles circled him several times, and then they flew north. Once he'd made this decision his heart was calm. He walked back to Zhou Botong, sat on the ground in front of him and listened to him imparted more lessons on martial arts.

The next ten days passed without any word from Huang Rong. Guo Jing had managed to memorize the first volume in its entirety. Zhou Botong was inwardly delighted; he proceeded to recite the second volume for Guo Jing to memorize. Again, he did not give any examples or instruction on how to practice them for fear that Guo Jing would see through his scheme. Guo Jing diligently studied and committed each and every word to his memory. Several hundred times worth of reciting later he had both the first and second volumes down pat in his mind, including all the gibberish words such as 'ang li na de' and 'ha hu wen bo ying' [translator's note: these characters don't make logical

sentences, so I leave them as they are]. He did not miss a single word.

Listening to Guo Jing Zhou Botong's heart was filled with admiration. "This dumb kid can actually memorize the entire dumb martial arts manual. Old Urchin salutes him."

That night the sky was clear and the sea was calm reflecting the bright silver moon shining over the island. Zhou Botong just finished checking Guo Jing's progress. He discovered that Guo Jing had made tremendous advancements in his martial arts without even realizing it. He was very happy and believed that the manual really did contain profound martial arts techniques. He thought that if he were to learn the techniques from books, he would eventually surpass Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong.

The two were sitting on the ground, idly chatting when they suddenly heard rustling noises coming from the distance. Zhou Botong jumped up in alarm, "Snakes!" he cried. He'd just closed his mouth when hissing sounds reached their ears. It sounded like there was a swarm of snakes coming their way. Zhou Botong's face turned pale and he dashed into the cave. He was a courageous man and his martial arts might be superb, but not when facing snakes. Guo Jing immediately moved some big rocks and covered the cave entrance.

"Big Brother," he said, "I'll go take a look. Don't come out."

"Be careful and return quickly," Zhou Botong answered. "But I'd say you don't need to take a look. What's so interesting about vipers? How ... how can there be so many snakes on this island? I have lived here for fifteen years and haven't seen a single snake. Look how bad this island has become! Old Heretic Huang always boasts of his vast knowledge and resourcefulness but look how dirty this

Peach Blossom Island has become. Sea turtles, vipers, centipedes and all kinds of creepy-crawlies are coming here.”

Chapter 18 - The Three Tests

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Huang Yaoshi kept blowing the flute; Guo Jing raised his hand and struck the bamboo stick

between two beats of the music. He struck again, still between the two music beats. He had struck his bamboo stick four times, all in the wrong places.

Guo Jing went towards where the snake noises were coming from. After dozens of steps in the bright moonlight he saw millions of green snakes slithering together as a mass. With them were more than ten men wearing white clothing and carrying long poles herding the snakes.

Guo Jing gulped; he was greatly surprised, "What are those people with so many snakes doing here? Could it be that Western Poison has arrived?" Without regard to his own safety he came closer, snuck behind trees and followed them north. Luckily the men who herded the snakes did not have a high level of martial arts, otherwise he would be detected.

A deaf and mute servant of Huang Yaoshi could be seen in front of the mass, showing the way. They walked on the winding path for several li through the forest and crossed a small hill before finally arriving at a large stretch of grass meadow. To the north of the meadow was a bamboo forest. As soon as they were all on the meadow, the men in white blew their whistles and the snakes stopped with their heads raised high in the air.

Guo Jing knew there must be something in the bamboo grove and he wanted to take a look, but he did not dare to reveal his presence by walking across the meadow. So he stealthily walked to the east and then circled back north, keeping his ears open at all times; but the forest was quiet. He finally arrived and immediately entered the thick green bamboo grove.

Inside the grove there was a small pavilion built from bamboo. Under the bright moonlight Guo Jing could see,

written across the pavilion opening, these three characters, 'Old Jade-Green Pavilion' [ji cui ting]. On either side hung two couplets: 'under the shadow of peach blossom the divine sword flew' [tao hua ying li fei shen jian] and 'with the jade-colored ocean tide the jade flute arose' [bi hai chao sheng an yu xiao].

Several bamboo chairs were placed inside the pavilion; the chairs looked rustic and old. In the bright moonlight the bamboo looked no longer green but smooth and shiny yellow. The pavilion was built between two big pine trees. Their trunks and branches spread out looking like dragons lurking in the dark. The trees were several hundred years old. The dark green bamboo surrounding the bamboo pavilion and the trees gave a feeling of serenity and beauty.

Guo Jing looked back and saw that the snakes had arranged themselves in row after row, on the meadow. Only now did he realize that the snakes were not only green but other types of snakes as well: there were rattlesnakes, golden-scaled snakes, black snakes and other kinds of venomous snakes. The snakes kept moving their heads, which made the meadow appear to ripple like ocean waves. The snakes' tongues flicked in and out of their mouths, looking like tiny dancing chaotic flames.

The snakes' herders divided the mass to open up a pathway through the middle. Dozens of females dressed in white walked through carrying red lanterns. Several zhang [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet/3 meters] behind them two men walked slowly. The first was wearing a long white satin gown, embroidered with gold thread and held a folding fan in his hand. It was none other than Ouyang Ke.

Arriving at the bamboo grove he said in a loud and clear voice, "Mr. Ouyang from the Western Region pays a visit to the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang."

"It really is Western Poison," Guo Jing thought, "No wonder all this pomp and fanfare." He turned his eyes to the man beside Ouyang Ke. He was big and tall and also wore white clothing, but because the light was coming from behind him, Guo Jing could not see his face clearly.

Those two people stood there waiting. Out from the bamboo grove came two people. Guo Jing's heart leaped to his throat and he almost called out in alarm; it was none other than Huang Yaoshi holding Huang Rong's hand coming to welcome the guests.

Ouyang Feng rushed forward and raised his hands in salute. Huang Yaoshi reciprocated by cupping his fists. Ouyang Ke actually knelt down where he was, kowtowed four times and said, "Son-in-law kowtows to the Honorable Father-in-law and wishes Honorable Father-in-law peace and prosperity."

"Enough!" Huang Yaoshi said, extending his hand to raise him up. Guo Jing could hear clearly what these two people were saying; his heart was in a tumult and he didn't know what to do.

Ouyang Ke anticipated that Huang Yaoshi would certainly test his martial arts, so he was prepared; even when kowtowing he was fully alert. Suddenly he felt his own right hand moving toward his left hand and pushing it upward. He stumbled and almost fell face down on the ground; only by exerting his internal energy was he finally able to stay standing, but he still staggered. "Aiyo!" he called out. Ouyang Feng immediately stretched the staff in his hand and tapped gently on his nephew's back. Ouyang Ke took advantage of this force and steadied himself.

Ouyang Feng smiled. "Good!" he said, "Brother Yao [Yao Xiong] (translator's note: different character, more

respectful than Huang Rong's 'Jing ge ge' 'Brother Jing'), was that your way of greeting your son-in-law at your first meetingby making him do a somersault?"

Huang Yaoshi sneered. "Once he helped others bully my blind disciple; another time he frightened her with his snakes. I wanted to see what abilities he possesses."

Ouyang Feng laughed. "That was a small childish misunderstanding, Brother Yao, please don't mind him. This child of mine, is he worthy enough to be your precious daughter's match?" He turned toward Huang Rong to check her out; clucking his tongue in admiration, he continued, "Elder Brother Huang [lao ge], with this beautiful young lady, your life lacks nothing."

He groped in his pocket and produced a small embroidered box. He opened the box revealing a pigeon-egg sized sphere. The sphere shone brightly in the dark and was dazzling to the eyes. He turned to Huang Rong and smiled, "This is the 'Rhinoceros Dragon Pill, made from the Western Region's rarest animal. I further refined it with some other medicinal substances. When you wear it, you won't be affected by hundreds of types of poison. It is one-of-a-kind in the whole wide world. Later on when you become my nephew's wife, you need not fear your uncle's venomous snakes and insects. This 'Dragon' pill's usefulness is not negligible, but it cannot be regarded as the most precious treasure in the world. Your father has traversed the world; what kind of treasures he has not seen? This is only a countryman-from-a-remote-area's gift of first meeting. I am afraid he would laugh at it." Then he presented the box to Huang Rong.

Ouyang Feng was an expert at using poison; by giving this precious poison repellent as a dowry he showed his sincerity and was hoping to win Huang Yaoshi's heart.

Guo Jing saw everything. "Rong'er has always been good to me; she won't change her mind. Surely she doesn't want that first meeting gift of yours," he thought. But unexpectedly he heard Huang Rong say with a smile, "Many thanks to you!" and extended her hand to receive it.

As soon as Ouyang Ke saw Huang Rong's snow-white skin and face as pretty as a flower his soul had already been bought; now that she was smiling at him, his whole body melted as he thought, "Since her father has given her hand in marriage to me, her attitude towards me is naturally not the same as it was before." He felt smug. But suddenly something metal flashed towards him. "Not good!" he cried, and immediately bent his body backwards using the 'Iron Bridge' [tie ban chiao] stance.

"What are you doing?" Huang Yaoshi scolded. His left sleeve flicked and struck down most of the steel needles shot from Huang Rong's hand, while with the back of his right hand he pushed her shoulder back.

"Wah!" Huang Rong bawled. "Father, you'd better kill me," she cried. "I'd rather die than marry this bad thing."

Ouyang Feng thrust the 'Dragon' pill into Huang Rong's hand while his other hand gently fended off Huang Yaoshi's palm. "Your daughter is just testing my nephew's martial arts, why are you so serious?" Because he was striking his own daughter, Huang Yaoshi's palm naturally did not carry a lot of strength. Ouyang Feng's hand also did not carry a lot of force.

As Ouyang Ke straightened his body, he felt pain in his left chest; he knew he'd been hit by one or two needles. However, he was proud and did not want anyone else to know, so he kept a straight face. But he was embarrassed. "She does not want to marry me after all," he thought.

Ouyang Feng smiled, "Brother Yao, since our last meeting at Mount Hua, we haven't seen each other for more than twenty years. Now that you have accepted my nephew's proposal, should you have some business to complete, your brother will not dare to refuse his assistance."

"Who dares to provoke you, Old Poison?" Huang Yaoshi replied. "You have stayed in the Western Region for twenty years, what fierce new martial arts have you mastered? Come, let me see."

As soon as Huang Rong heard her father mention 'new martial arts' her interest was piqued. She wiped her tears away and leaned on her father. Her eyes looked closely at Ouyang Feng. She saw a curved black staff in his hand and looked like it was made of steel. The head of the staff resembled a man's face with its mouth open showing two rows of sharp teeth. The face looked ugly and fearsome. What was more amazing was that there were a couple of silver-scaled snakes slithering up and down the staff.

Ouyang Feng smiled. "I was inferior to you then, and now that I have wasted more than twenty years, I certainly still won't be your match," he said. "We've become in-laws now. I am thinking of staying on Peach Blossom Island for a few days and asking your advice."

When Ouyang Feng sent an envoy to propose marriage for his nephew, Huang Yaoshi thought that Ouyang Feng was one of only a handful of people whose martial arts could be compared to his own. Since Ouyang Feng was an educated man, so his nephew must be as well. He knew his daughter was stubborn and strong-willed. If she married just anybody, he was afraid she would bully her husband. Besides, he loathed that Guo kid whom his daughter liked. Ouyang Ke was not only highly educated, but was highly skilled in martial arts as well; not too many young men

would hold a candle to him. That was the reason he accepted their proposal. But now as he listened to Ouyang Feng's sweet mouth, he could not help but feel suspicious. He knew Ouyang Feng was crafty and sly and Ouyang Feng would not easily admit defeat to others in term of martial arts. His Toad Stance had been neutralized by Wang Chongyang's Solitary Yang Finger; could it be that he had recovered it completely? Huang Yaoshi took out his jade flute and said, "Honored guests who come from afar, Little Brother is going to play a tune to entertain you. Please sit down and listen to this song."

Ouyang Feng knew Huang Yaoshi was going to play the 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave song' to test his internal strength, so he showed a faint smile and waved his left hand. The thirty-two white-dressed lantern-carrier maidens immediately stepped forward and kneeled before them. Ouyang Feng smiled and said, "Your brother has acquired these thirty-two maidens from various regions in the west. Please accept them as my gift to an old friend. They are trained in singing and dancing even though they come from uncultured places; of course they can't be compared to Jiangnan's beautiful maidens."

"Your Brother does not enjoy this kind of gift very much," Huang Yaoshi replied, "Since my wife passed away, I regard the world's beautiful women as dung. I do not dare to accept Brother Feng's generous gift."

"What's the harm in some entertainment to pass the time?" Ouyang Feng laughed.

Huang Rong noticed that these women's skin was fair and light in color. They were tall in stature and some had blond hair and blue eyes; their noses were high and their eyes deep so they were totally different from the women of the

Central Plains. But they were beautiful and had a seductive look that would attract casual onlookers.

Ouyang Feng clapped his hands three times and eight women brought out various musical instruments. They started playing while the other twenty-four women started dancing to the tune. The musical instruments as well as the tune were different from the ones commonly played in the Central Plains and they sounded weird to Huang Rong's ears. She watched the front row women bend down, turn to the left and then back to the right; their bodies were very supple. The next row did the same as row after row danced in succession, resembling a large snake. After a while each woman spread both hands apart; from the tip of their left hand to the tip of their right hand, their bodies swayed following the tune reminding her of snakes slithering on the ground.

Huang Rong remembered Ouyang Ke's 'Spirit Snake Fist', so she cast a glance towards him only to see that Ouyang Ke was staring intently at her. She hated him deeply and wished that her father had not intercepted her needles. She would find another way of taking his life and even if her father should force her to marry, that person was already dead. It was called the 'Remove the Firewood from Under the Pot' tactic. Having had this thought she was happy and a smile broke out on her face. Ouyang Ke saw her sudden smile and thought that she was smiling at him. He was so elated that he momentarily forgot the pain in his chest.

By now the dance movements of the women were getting more intense. Their bodies moved erotically as their hands caressed their own buttocks, then moved upwards to their breasts; then they unfastened their dresses so they showed their upper bodies and posed in various postures.

The men who herded the snakes had closed their eyes tightly; they did not dare to look. Even then their minds were disturbed.

Huang Yaoshi simply smiled, put the flute to his lips, and he started playing a tune. The women's bodies suddenly shook and their dance movements became chaotic. A few bars later both their music and their dance were following the flute's sound.

Ouyang Feng knew something was amiss; he clapped his hands and a maiden stepped forward carrying an iron zither [zheng]. Ouyang Ke began to feel his heart beating faster. The eight women playing the musical instruments had lost their self-control and followed the flute's tune. The men in charge of the snakes jumped up and down like crazy men amongst the snakes.

Ouyang Feng played a few notes on his zither producing metallic sounds like an iron horse charging toward the enemy; the complete opposite to the soft murmuring sound of the flute. Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "Come, come! Let us play a duet." As soon as the flute left his lips, everyone was released from their hysterical condition.

"Everybody block your ears! Island Master Huang and I will play some music," Ouyang Feng shouted. The people who came with him knew the song would not be an ordinary one; they immediately grabbed anything, including pieces of their own clothing that could be used to cover their ears. They put layer after layer of cotton and pieces of clothing over their ears; yet they still feared the sound would penetrate that barrier. Ouyang Ke also took out some cotton balls to plug his ears.

"My father plays his flute for your listening enjoyment; this is a big honor for you, yet all of you cover your ears. That is

so rude! You come to Peach Blossom Island as guests, yet you dare to insult the host!" Huang Rong mocked.

"Don't be rude!" Huang Yaoshi scolded her. "The ones who do not dare to listen to my flute actually have more sense. They have learned their lesson ... ha ... ha ... Your uncle's iron zither skill is considered the best in the world, yet you dare to listen to him? Do you want to test yourself?" Then he took a silk handkerchief from his pocket, tore it in halves and told Huang Rong to cover up her ears with them.

Guo Jing was curious about the world's best iron zither; he wanted to hear Ouyang Feng's fierce method, so he came a few steps closer.

Huang Yaoshi turned to Ouyang Feng, "Your snakes cannot cover their ears." Then he turned his head towards his deaf and mute servant. He made some gestures and the servant nodded his head. The servant then signaled the snakes' herders to leave by waving his hand. These men had been waiting for an opportunity to get away from that place; as soon as Ouyang Feng nodded his head in approval, they hurriedly drove the snakes away with the deaf and mute servant leading the way.

Ouyang Feng said, "Your Brother's martial arts are not good enough. I must ask Brother Yao to reduce your strength by thirty percent." He sat cross-legged on a big rock with the zither on his lap and immediately used his right fingers to pluck some strings.

The original 'qin zheng' [a zither from the short-lived Qin dynasty 221-207 BC] produced a sad and shrill tone. This Western Region iron zither produced an even more intensely sorrowful sound. Guo Jing did not understand music, but the zither's tune affected his feelings. The louder the zither's sound, the harder his heart beat. The quicker

the zither's tune, the faster his breathing became. His heart was thumping very hard, almost jumping out of his throat. It was an intensely uneasy feeling. After listening a while longer he felt his heart beat intensify and he had to struggle hard to stay conscious. "If this zither keeps getting stronger and stronger, how can I not be killed by its music?" he thought. He immediately retreated a few steps and circulated his 'chi' according to the Quanzhen method. After a while he managed to calm his heart and the zither's music no longer adversely affected him very much.

The zither's music was getting more intense and in Guo Jing's mind it resembled the metallic clamor of armored cavalry charging at full speed. The thin tune of the jade flute seemed to ride smoothly in the midst of the clamoring zither's tune. Guo Jing was trembling; his face was red from heat and he was sweating profusely. Again he quickly circulated his internal energy trying to further calm himself.

Although the zither was loud, it was not able to drown out the flute. Two distinct tunes intermingled, creating an eerie melody. The iron zither screamed like an ape from the Wuxia Gorge [one of the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River] or a ghost's cry in the dead of the night, while the flute sang like a Phoenix from the Kunlun Mountains or the soft murmur of a woman inside her chamber. One resembled the heartrending cry of a mournful soul, while the other carried the feeling of someone leisurely wandering through the wilderness. One high, the other low; one rushing forward, the other leisurely retreating; neither overpowered the other.

Initially Huang Rong watched as these two played music with smile on her face; but later she saw their expressions were getting serious. Her father stood up and started to walk around while playing his flute. His steps were actually following the 'Eight Trigrams' [ba gua]. She knew this was

the footwork her father followed when he was cultivating his internal energy; it showed her how fierce the battle was for her father as he was forced to use all his strength. Turning toward Ouyang Feng she did not see anything better. Thick steam was coming from the top of his head as his sleeves fluttered following movements of his hands as he plucked the strings. Gusts of wind blew everywhere. His face looked totally focused on his zither playing; obviously he did not dare to be careless.

In the bamboo groove Guo Jing listened to the music attentively. He was pondering in his heart what these two instruments – the iron zither and the jade flute – had to do with martial arts? They sounded so evil to him; how could the sounds affect other people's hearts and minds? At first he was too busy circulating his 'chi' and calming his heart and mind, but gradually he was able to control himself and follow the flow of flute and zither sounds. A little while later he began to realize that those two sounds were actually battling each other. When one sound was on the offensive, the other took a defensive position. Sometimes one attacked the other furiously, while the other blocked the attack while waiting for a good opportunity to counterattack. It really was no different than a battle between two martial arts masters. After pondering some more it suddenly dawned on him, "That's right! Island Master Huang is having an internal energy match with Ouyang Feng." Because he wanted to understand better, he closed his eyes and gave his ears full attention.

He began to hear the two sounds were alternately gaining victory or suffering defeat. Being musically illiterate the sound of the music could not affect his spirits; but he did feel openness in his heart as though he was looking at something bright. His mind wandered back to when Zhou Botong taught him the seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fist'

whose origins stemmed from the words 'empty/vacant/open' and 'clear/bright'. With his mind fully receptive and uncluttered, he could clearly 'see' every detail of the internal energy fight between Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng. True, his internal energy was still inferior to those two experts, but he had improved greatly without even realizing it. Besides, as a spectator, he could see better than those two who were involved in the battle. He'd often wondered why Zhou Botong could not resist the flute's sound while with inferior internal strength he could. He did not know that Zhou Botong carried heavy guilt in his heart because of what he had done in the past. Therefore it was not purely due to one's internal energy strength that one could withstand the flute's sound.

Now Guo Jing heard Ouyang Feng's zither crushing Huang Yaoshi's flute with a force as powerful as a thunderbolt. The flute evaded to the east and dodged to the west and as soon as there was a gap in the zither's tune the flute would counterattack immediately. After a while the zither gradually slowed down, while the flute got more intense. Suddenly Guo Jing remembered the theory behind the 'Vacant Fist' which he'd memorized. It said, 'hard must not last long and soft must not defend long'. He thought, "In not too long the zither will launch a counterattack." Sure enough, when the flute slowed a little bit, an abrupt clank was heard as the iron zither again assumed the offensive.

Guo Jing had memorized the theory well, but his perception of it was still low. Zhou Botong did not explain the meaning of the words he passed on to Guo Jing so his overall comprehension was perhaps only about ten percent. Now, as he listened to the music battle between Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng, he began to understand who was doing what. It followed the theory he had memorized so well. Inwardly he was delighted. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contained

some very advanced martial arts theories. If it were left to him to dissect the theory, even with someone's assistance, he would probably spend more than a year trying to understand what it said. But as he listened to the two tunes colliding he kept comparing the battle to the theory. However, he saw some discrepancies between the theory and a real battle situation and he attributed those discrepancies to his own shallow comprehension. For example, there were several occasions where Huang Yaoshi was obviously gaining the upper hand as long as he kept the flute's tune constant. Then, Ouyang Feng was not able to withstand it. But Ouyang Feng also missed several opportunities to exploit to his advantage. Guo Jing had initially thought they were being modest and had backed off; but as he listened more, that didn't appear to be the case.

His intelligence might not be high, but after those two people repeatedly made similar mistakes he began to realize that the flute and zither had a lot of holes in their defenses. After listening for a little bit more a thought came into his mind, "Compared to the theory of the 'Vacant Fist', their offense and defense have flaws and deficiencies; could it be that the theory passed on by Brother Zhou is better than both Island Master Huang's and Western Poison's martial arts?" But then he changed his mind, "Nah! It couldn't be! If Brother Zhou's martial arts are really better than Island Master Huang's, how could those two fight countless battles over fifteen years and he still be stranded inside that cave?"

He racked his brain for a long time without coming to any conclusions; then he heard the flute tune climbing higher and higher until, if it went still higher, Ouyang Feng's defeat would be decided. But the flute was not able to climb any higher; it had reached its peak. Guo Jing stifled a laugh, "I

was really dumb! There is a limit to what one can achieve. Among the desires of the heart, nine out of ten cannot be achieved. I know that if my fist could generate a ten thousand catty force [5000kg / 11,000+lb], I will be able to crush my opponent to dust; but how can my fist develop that ten thousand catty force? Seventh Master often said, 'Looking at others easily carrying a burden on a pole does not mean we can do the same without breaking our back.' If merely carrying a burden follows this principle, how much more so do martial arts?"

The sounds of music became increasingly fierce and it sounded like those two were engaged in hand-to-hand combat, or fighting at very close quarters with naked blades. Victory or defeat would be decided very soon. Guo Jing was worried for Huang Yaoshi when he suddenly heard a long and loud whistle coming from the direction of the sea.

Both Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng were startled and the flute and the zither slowed down. The whistle came nearer and nearer. It sounded like someone was on a boat coming towards the island. Ouyang Feng moved his hand and stroked two metallic notes, 'clank, clank.' The distant whistle went higher to overpower the zither. Not too long afterwards Huang Yaoshi's flute joined in. Sometimes the flute was fighting the long whistle and sometimes it tangled with the zither in a close fight. The three distinct sounds were fighting each other.

Guo Jing had played 'four-people combat' with Zhou Botong, so he did not have any problems dividing his mind to distinguish between the different sounds. He knew a senior with a very high level of martial arts had arrived.

Soon the person uttering the long whistle had arrived at the forest. The whistle rose high then low. It sometimes

sounded like a dragon's cry or a lion's roar and sometimes resembled a wolf's howl or an owl's cry. Then it sounded like a strong wind blowing through the forest which suddenly turned into a gentle rain showering the flowers. It was constantly changing.

The flute sound was clear and bright, the zither sound was intensely mournful, yet the combination of the three made a mysteriously wonderful sound which did not sound too bad at all. The three different sounds engaged each other in a close fight.

Guo Jing was amazed and could not help exclaiming, "Wonderful!" But once he closed his mouth he realized he had made a big mistake. He scurried away, but it was too late! A green shadow flashed by and Huang Yaoshi was standing in front of him. The three sounds were no longer heard. Huang Yaoshi lowered his head and said, "Good Boy, come with me."

Guo Jing did not have a choice and meekly greeted, "Island Master Huang." With the hair on the back of his neck raised he followed Huang Yaoshi back towards the bamboo pavilion.

Huang Rong still had her ears covered with silk, so she did not hear Guo Jing's exclamation. Now Guo Jing suddenly appeared and she was pleasantly surprised. "Jing ge ge! You have finally come ..." she called out. She was joyful, yet sad at the same time; before she could finish speaking tears were already rolling down her cheeks. She rushed forward and threw herself onto Guo Jing's chest. Guo Jing opened his arms and embraced her tightly.

Now that Guo Jing had appeared, Ouyang Ke was annoyed; then as he saw how intimate Huang Rong was with Guo Jing and his heart burned hot with hatred. With a gust of wind

his fist flew toward Guo Jing's face. "Stinky kid ... you are here too!" he shouted.

He thought his martial arts skill was higher than Guo Jing's and furthermore, his attack could be considered a sneak attack and Guo Jing was unprepared. Lashing out in hatred, he thought he might break Guo Jing's nose. Not in his wildest imagination could he know that the Guo Jing now was not the same Guo Jing as when they fought each other at the Baoying Ancestral Hall. Guo Jing saw a fist coming and he leaned to the side to evade; then his left hand launched the 'Swan Gradually Lands' [hong jian yu liu] while his right hand launched the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'; both from the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' were unparalleled in the world; one move was very difficult to withstand, much less two stances at the same time. How could Ouyang Ke face them? Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng were actually standing close-by, but they did not anticipate Guo Jing's counterattack. Both were startled and were unable to do anything.

Ouyang Ke saw his opponent's left hand threatening his right side. He knew the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' were very fierce and he could evade but could not parry. Quickly he leaned his body to the left at exactly the same time as Guo Jing's right hand's 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' came in. 'Crack!' his upper torso was squarely hit and one of his ribs was broken.

He was aware of the fierceness of his opponent's attack, so when Guo Jing's hand arrived he had already focused his internal energy into his chest to protect his heart and lungs against the incoming force. Furthermore, as soon as he was hit he tried to lessen the injury by trying to jump up. The

incredible force from Guo Jing's hand had added to his own energy and sent him flying towards the bamboo pavilion's roof. He managed to land standing, albeit staggering badly; then slowly slid down. He was terribly embarrassed and his chest hurt badly. He walked back slowly.

Guo Jing's counterattack had surprised both the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison and taught Ouyang Ke a lesson he wouldn't easily forget. It also received Huang Rong's accolades. She clapped her hands and bounced up and down with great happiness. Guo Jing himself did not realize that his martial arts had improved tremendously. He simply thought that Ouyang Ke was being careless and was caught off guard. He was afraid Ouyang Ke would launch a counterattack, so he withdrew two steps and waited for his opponent with rapt attention.

Ouyang Feng glared angrily at Guo Jing as he called out loudly, "Old Beggar Hong ... congratulations on your fine disciple!"

Huang Rong had removed the silk handkerchief from her ears and upon hearing Ouyang Feng's loud call she knew Hong Qigong had arrived. Truly a savior sent from heaven. She rushed outside the bamboo grove and loudly called, "Shifu! Shifu! [Master]"

Huang Yaoshi was astounded, "Why did Rong'er call the Old Beggar Hong 'Shifu'?" Right at that moment Hong Qigong appeared with a scarlet wine gourd on his back, a bamboo staff in his right hand, Huang Rong's hand in his left and smiling broadly as he entered the bamboo grove.

Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong greeted each other and exchanged some pleasantries. Then Huang Yaoshi turned to his daughter and asked, "Rong'er, what did you call Qigong?"

"Senior Qigong has taken me as his disciple," Huang Rong replied.

Huang Yaoshi was delighted. He turned to Hong Qigong saying, "So Brother Qi [Qi Xiong] has accepted my daughter; your brother appreciates that very much. But my daughter is mischievous; I do hope Brother Qi will teach her some lessons." Speaking thus he raised his hands in respect.

Hong Qigong smiled. "Brother Yao's martial arts are both broad and profound. This girl won't be able to learn them all in her lifetime; why would I need to meddle? But since you asked, the reason I took her as my disciple was so that I can eat for free. She prepared a lot of good food for me, so you don't need to thank me," he said. Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong both laughed heartily.

Huang Rong pointed her finger at Ouyang Ke and said, "Father, this bad man bullied me. If not for Senior Qigong looking after me on your behalf, you wouldn't have seen Rong'er so soon."

"Nonsense!" Huang Yaoshi reprimanded her, "How could he bully you for no reason?"

"If you don't believe me, ask him!" Huang Rong replied. Turning her head towards Ouyang Ke she said, "You have to swear an oath that if you answer my father's question with even half-a-lie there will come a day when the vipers on your uncle's staff will bite you."

Listening to her words Ouyang Feng and Ouyang Ke's faces changed. Ouyang Feng had spent more than ten years raising the vipers on his staff. They were a mixed-breed of various venomous snakes so their poison was extremely lethal. Ouyang Feng used to punish his rebellious disciples or his enemies with a bite from these snakes. Once the

poison entered somebody's system, the victim would suffer a terrible itch all over, followed by a violent painful death. Ouyang Feng did have the antidote; but after the poison entered one's body, even if the antidote saved one's life, one would lose all his martial arts and would live forever as a cripple. Huang Rong of course did not know this; she simply felt that the snakes entwined on Ouyang Feng's staff were peculiar so she capriciously mentioned them. Who would have thought that she had touched exactly on the main taboo subject of the Western Poison family?

"I dare not answer Honorable Father-in-law's questions untruthfully," Ouyang Ke promised.

"You are speaking nonsense again!" Huang Rong spat. "You make me want to slap your ears really hard. Let me ask you this: Did you or did you not see me in Beijing at the Zhao Palace?"

Ouyang Ke had a broken rib and his chest had been hit by her steel needle, so the pain was nearly unbearable; but he was too proud to show his weakness in front of others. He gritted his teeth and was able to speak, but the pain was getting worse and resulted in a cold sweat showing on his forehead. Even though he wanted to answer Huang Rong, he did not dare to open his mouth. All he could do was nod in the affirmative.

"At that time you, along with Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziweng, and Monk Lingzhi, surrounded and bullied me, did you not?" Huang Rong asked again.

Ouyang Ke wanted to defend himself by explaining that he was not a collaborator with those people to bully her; but all he could say was, "I ... I did not collaborate with them ...". His chest was in so much pain that he could not say another word.

“Very well,” Huang Rong said, “I don’t need your answer; all you need to do is nod or shake your head in reply to my questions. Let me ask you this: Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Liang Ziwen, and Monk Lingzhi meant to harm me, did they not?” Ouyang Ke nodded.

“They wanted to capture me, but failed miserably. Then you showed up and went into action, did you not?” Huang Rong asked again. Ouyang Ke had no choice but to nod his head again.

“At that time I was alone inside the Zhao Palace; I had nobody to help me and my situation was precarious. My father did not know my whereabouts, so even had he wanted to rescue me, he would not have been able to. Isn’t that right?” Huang Rong continued. Ouyang Ke knew she was trying to win sympathy from her father and incite her father’s hatred toward him, but what she said was a fact, so he had no choice but to nod his head again.

Huang Rong reached out for her father’s hand and said, “Father, you don’t love Rong’er anymore. If Mother was still alive you wouldn’t treat me like this ...” Huang Yaoshi heard her mention his beloved wife and he felt a stab of pain in his heart. He reached out his left arm and hugged her.

Ouyang Feng was smart and he felt something was not right; before Huang Rong could ask another question he interrupted her. “Miss Huang,” he asked, “Those well-known martial arts characters wanted to capture you; but since you have mastered your family’s peerless skills in wushu [kung fu] they could not overcome you, could they?” Huang Rong nodded her head and smiled sweetly. Huang Yaoshi listened to Ouyang Feng praising his family’s martial arts and showed a faint smile.

Turning to Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng said, "Brother Yao, ever since my nephew first saw your daughter his heart was captivated by her beauty and excellent skills. He sent a pigeon to summon me and I came from the White Camel Mountain, thousands of li away, crossed the Central Plains and the sea to Peach Blossom Island to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage. You have considered my haste and, although unworthy, have received me well. Other than Brother Yao, there is no one in this present age that would do such thing."

"I do not dare to accept such compliments," Huang Yaoshi smiled. He thought that even with his high position, Ouyang Feng was still willing to travel a long way to see him and he felt honored.

Ouyang Feng then turned to Hong Qigong and said, "Brother Qi, we uncle and nephew admire Peach Blossom Island's martial arts; but you...how could you belittle us by bullying the juniors? If my nephew had been unfortunate, he could have died from your unique skill of the 'Steel Needle Rain'."

Actually, it was Hong Qigong who saved Ouyang Ke from the 'Steel Needle Rain' launched by Huang Rong, but now Ouyang Feng had placed the blame on him. He knew Ouyang Ke must have lied to his uncle and his uncle was using that to discredit him. Hong Qigong was an honest, straightforward man and he did not want to argue; he simply laughed a big laugh, unplugged his wine gourd and took a big gulp.

Guo Jing could not keep his patience any longer, "It was Senior Qigong who saved your nephew's life; how could you say such thing to blame him?"

"Kid, we are still talking, how dare you interrupt?" Huang Yaoshi barked.

"Rong'er, tell him ... tell your Father what happened to Miss Cheng," Guo Jing hastily said.

Huang Rong knew her father's temperament very well; he was not one who followed customs and traditions. He often said, "What do those customs have to do with us?" His way of thinking was different from the common people of his time. What other people thought to be right, he would consider it wrong; what other people thought to be wrong, he might think it to be right. That was how he earned his title 'Eastern Heretic.' Huang Rong thought, "Ouyang Ke's behavior is really disgusting, but Father might think that he did what any normal romantic young man would do." She noticed that her father was looking at Guo Jing with fiery eyes so she hastily came up with an idea.

"I am not done with you," she said turning to Ouyang Ke, "That day when we were having a martial arts contest at the Zhao Palace you tied both your hands behind your back and said that you didn't need any hands to subdue me, did you not?" Ouyang Ke admitted with a nod of his head.

"Later on after I took Senior Qigong as my master we met again in Baoying," Huang Rong continued. "You said that no matter what kind of martial arts I used, whether it be from my father or the ones taught by Hong Qigong; you would only use your Uncle's martial arts to defeat me, didn't you?"

Ouyang Ke thought, "It was your own idea; I did not say such thing."

Seeing his hesitation Huang Rong quickly continued, "You drew a circle on the ground with your feet and said that if I could get you out of the circle using the martial arts I

learned from my father you would admit defeat, didn't you?" Ouyang Ke nodded again.

Turning to her father Huang Rong said, "Father, did you hear that? He did not have any respect for Hong Qigong and he did not have any respect for you. He said that the martial arts of the two of you are inferior to his uncle's and even if you two came together you still cannot defeat his uncle. I don't believe it."

"The little girl has a long tongue [she's stretching the truth]," Huang Yaoshi said. "Who among the people under the heavens do not know that Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar's martial arts are like a pound to sixteen ounces? No one is superior to the others." Although his mouth said those words, he resented Ouyang Ke's arrogance, but he did not want to discuss this matter anymore. He turned his head to Hong Qigong and asked, "Brother Qi, your presence has brought honor to Peach Blossom Island. I wonder if there is anything I can do for you?"

"I've come here to ask you for a favor," Hong Qigong replied.

Although Hong Qigong loved to joke around, he was an honest and straightforward man, always upholding justice. His martial arts skill was very high, so Huang Yaoshi had always respected him. Huang Yaoshi knew that whatever business Hong Qigong was dealing with, it was always taken care of, if not personally, then with the help of his numerous Beggar Clan members. This time Hong Qigong was asking him for a favor. He was extremely delighted and said, "We have been friends for dozens of years; if Brother Qi has anything to ask, how can your younger brother not oblige?"

“Don’t comply too quickly,” Hong Qigong said, “I am afraid this matter is not easy to manage.”

Huang Yaoshi smiled, “If the matter was easy, Brother Qi wouldn’t think of asking your younger brother.”

Hong Qigong clapped his hands. “That’s right!” he laughed, “That is the sign of a real friendship! You have decided to comply to my request then?”

“Speak up!” Huang Yaoshi said. “Even if it means going through fire or water, I’ll do it.”

Ouyang Feng swung his snake staff and opened his mouth, “Slow down Brother Yao, first we must ask Brother Qi what it is that he wants.”

Hong Qigong laughed. “Old Poison, this matter does not concern you. You are being nosy. You’d better prepare your belly to drink ‘celebratory wine’.” [xi jiu - the term used for wine served at a wedding banquet.]

“Drink ‘celebratory wine’?” Ouyang Feng wondered.

“That’s correct,” Hong Qigong replied, “‘Celebratory wine’.” Pointing to Guo Jing and Huang Rong he continued, “These two are my disciples; I have agreed to ask Brother Yao on their behalf to let them marry each other. Brother Yao has agreed to it.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were both frightened and happy at the same time. They exchanged glances with each other. Ouyang Feng and his nephew, as well as Huang Yaoshi, were startled.

“Brother Qi!” Ouyang Feng said, “You are wrong! Brother Yao’s ‘precious one’ [qian jin - thousand gold] was betrothed to my nephew earlier. We came to Peach Blossom

Island today to deliver the dowry and arrange for the ceremony.”

“Brother Yao,” Hong Qigong asked, “Is that so?”

“I am afraid so,” Huang Yaoshi replied, “Brother Qi, please don’t play jokes on your younger brother.”

Hong Qigong put on a sour face. “Who plays jokes on you?” he said. “You have betrothed your daughter to two families; your family’s reputation is at stake here.” Turning his head to Ouyang Feng he asked, “I am the Guo family’s primary matchmaker, where is yours?”

Ouyang Feng was dumbfounded; he did not expect Hong Qigong to ask him that question. Stammering he tried to answer, “Brother Yao has consented to this marriage, I have also consented; why would we need a matchmaker?”

“Are you aware that there is somebody who has not consented to this arrangement?” Hong Qigong cut him off.

“Who?” Ouyang Feng asked.

“Ha ... ha ... it’s yours truly, the Old Beggar Hong!” Hong Qigong laughed.

As soon as Ouyang Feng heard this and knowing Hong Qigong’s character to be strong-willed and his conduct to be firm and resolute, he knew a fight was unavoidable; his face did not show even a slight change but he delayed saying anything.

Hong Qigong smiled, “Your nephew’s behavior was improper. How could he be compared to Brother Yao’s beautiful-as-a-flower daughter? If you force them to get married, they will fight over all kinds of things everyday and they might end up killing each other. What good would it do?”

Huang Yaoshi listened attentively and his heart was stirred. He looked at Huang Rong, who was gazing lovingly at Guo Jing. Then he looked at Guo Jing. He hated this dumb kid to the core...Guo Jing's intelligence was questionable; he knew nothing of literature or martial arts or music, chess, calligraphy and painting. He would not be a talented scholar or a gallant knight. Both he and his wife were intelligent people and he knew their only daughter's brainpower was not far below theirs. If he let this scatterbrain marry his daughter, it would be like throwing a fresh flower into cow dung.

Right now he saw Guo Jing standing alongside Ouyang Ke; he could not help but compare those two. Ouyang Ke's intelligence and smart appearance was a hundred times better than Guo Jing's. His mind was set to take this young man as his son-in-law. But Hong Qigong's face showed he would not easily give up; so he cooked up a scheme and said, "Brother Feng [Feng Xiong], your nephew is injured. You'd better take care of that first; we will discuss this matter further later."

Ouyang Feng had been worried about his nephew's condition for a while and was hoping Huang Yaoshi would give them a chance to take care of his injuries. He immediately beckoned his nephew and the two walked back into the bamboo grove. Huang Yaoshi then engaged Hong Qigong in some pleasantries.

In about the time needed to cook some rice later, the uncle and nephew returned to the pavilion. Ouyang Feng had extracted the steel needles from his nephew's body and mended the broken rib as well.

"My daughter's posture is as weak as a willow tree; she is stubborn, disobedient and hardly worthy to be a gentleman's wife. But Brother Qi and Brother Feng have

both unexpectedly given me the highest honor by asking her hand in marriage. My daughter was already betrothed to Mr. Ouyang, but Brother Qi's request is also difficult not to accept. I have an idea and I wonder if you two brothers would tell me if this idea will work or not?" Huang Yaoshi said.

"Say it quickly ... say it quickly!" Hong Qigong interrupted. "The Old Beggar doesn't like listening to your twisting and flowery words."

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly. "Brothers, even though this daughter of mine is unworthy, I still hope she will find a good husband," he continued. "Mr. Ouyang is Brother Feng's honorable nephew, while Mr. Guo is Brother Qi's outstanding disciple. Both are very fine gentlemen and it is very difficult to choose one of them. I have no alternative but to come up with a three-subject test and I will betroth my daughter to whoever passes this test. I will not favor either one of them. Will both old friends tell me if this idea is good?"

Ouyang Feng clapped his hands. "Clever! Wonderful!" he called out. "The only thing is, my nephew is injured; if the test involves martial arts then we have to wait until he is fully recovered." He had seen the fierceness of Guo Jing's attack that injured his nephew; he knew that if they contended in martial arts his nephew would no doubt lose. So he used his nephew's injury to their best advantage.

"Certainly," Huang Yaoshi said. "A martial arts contest would harm the good relationships between two families anyway."

Hong Qigong thought in his heart, "This is so typical of Old Heretic Huang. We all are Wulin people; if the test involves literary and not martial arts skill, do you expect an

‘academic scholar’ [zhuang yuan] to become your son-in-law? If you come up with music or poetry, even if he was reincarnated, my stupid disciple will not be able to take the test. Your mouth says no favorites, but obviously you totally favor the other side. My stupid disciple will lose for sure. This is confounding! I will fight Old Poison first and talk later.” He looked upwards and laughed hard; then, staring at Ouyang Feng he said, “We are all martial arts practitioners; instead of a contest of martial arts, would you prefer to have an eating contest or defecating race? Your nephew is injured, but you are not. Come ... come ... come! We will fight in their stead.”

Without waiting for an answer he sent his palm towards Ouyang Feng’s shoulder. Ouyang Feng stepped back several feet. Hong Qigong put his bamboo staff down on a small bamboo table. “Watch out for this!” he shouted. While his words were still hanging in the air both his palms had already moved seven times in rapid succession.

Ouyang Feng dodged to the left and evaded to the right and all seven attacks flew past. His right hand shoved the snake staff into the bricks in front of the pavilion, and in a flash his left hand had also sent seven counterattacks.

Huang Yaoshi cheered, but did not prevent them from fighting. He wanted to watch these two world-class martial arts masters, who were his peers, and see what kind of improvements had they made twenty years after their last meeting.

Both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were the experts of their respective martial arts schools. They had reached the pinnacle of their martial arts twenty years ago. After the Sword Meet of Mount Hua both had trained hard and improved their skills tremendously. Their skills were incomparable to when they had their meet on Mount Hua

and now they meet again on Peach Blossom Island. Each launched swift attacks and counterattacks, but they were actually still probing their opponent's skills. Both combatants exchanged fast and forceful palms and fists so that the gusts of wind created swayed the bamboo leaves around them. Although they were only testing each other, their moves carried profound martial arts techniques.

On the sideline Guo Jing was watching with full attention; whether it was an attack or a defense, every single move was a wonderful one and beyond his wildest imagination. The 'Nine Yin Manual' contained the deepest martial arts theory in the world whether it be internal or external energy cultivation, bare hands or swordplay, and other kinds of the most profound martial arts imaginable. After Guo Jing memorized the content by heart and even though he did not understand every single one of them, those theories were actually ingrained in his brain. Now as he watched those two combatants exchanging exquisite moves, those theories came flooding back into his mind, forming a fuzzy shadow in his brain.

Earlier he'd listened to Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng's flute versus zither battle. That was an invisible internal energy battle and it was extremely difficult to clearly see their relationship to the theory in the manual. This time the battle was fists and kicks and much easier to perceive. In his delight, his heart was itching to try what he had seen.

Very quickly Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng had exchanged more than three hundred stances. Both were surprised at their opponent's skill and could not help but praise each other in their hearts. On the side-lines Huang Yaoshi looked on with a sigh and thought, "I have trained myself painstakingly on Peach Blossom Island and I thought, after Wang Chongyang passed away, my martial arts would be number one in the world. Who would have thought that the

Old Beggar and Old Poison have both taken their own paths and reached these frightfully respectable levels of martial arts?"

Both Ouyang Ke and Huang Rong were deep in their own thoughts and each hoped that their side would gain a quick victory. But they actually could not comprehend the exquisiteness of the martial arts being displayed in front of their eyes. From the corner of her eye Huang Rong saw a black shadow dancing erratically with flailing hands and feet moving constantly. She turned her head and discovered that the shadow was Guo Jing. Guo Jing's expression was strange and it looked like he was in ecstasy. Her heart skipped a beat. "Jing ge ge!" she called with a low voice.

Guo Jing did not hear her; he was too busy moving his hands and feet. Huang Rong felt anxious, so she watched attentively and discovered that Guo Jing was actually imitating Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng's movements.

By now those two had changed the way they were fighting; every fist and every kick was sent out slowly. Sometimes they would stand still for a moment, and then send out a fist. After they exchanged one stance, they would sit down on the ground to take a rest; then stand up and exchange another move. In fact, the way they were fighting was slower than two disciples practicing martial arts. But looking at their faces, one could see the seriousness of their expressions, almost to the point of being very tense.

Huang Rong glanced towards her father and saw him looking intently at those two and his face was also unusually tense. Ouyang Ke was the only person around who'd maintained his calmness. He looked at her flirtatiously while lightly waving his folding fan.

Guo Jing saw an unconventional move and he could not restrain from cheering loudly. Ouyang Ke was irritated, "Your dirty kid does not understand anything, what is he shouting about?"

"Just because you don't understand, how would you know whether or not other people understand?" Huang Rong shot back.

Ouyang Ke laughed, "He's just flailing his hands and feet foolishly. Given his young age, how would he know the wonder of my uncle's divine martial arts?"

"You are not him; how would you know what he knows?" Huang Rong replied.

While the two were bickering on the side, Huang Yaoshi and Guo Jing turned a deaf ear on them; they were watching the fight with rapt attention.

By that time both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were squatting on the ground; one with his left middle finger pointed to his forehead and the other used both hands to cover his ears. Both were thinking very hard with their eyes closed. Suddenly they shouted and simultaneously leapt towards each other; one sent his fist and the other used his leg; then they separated again.

Those two people had reached the level where each and every single one of the martial arts belonging to their own family or school had no flaws whatsoever. However, they both knew that no matter how fierce their stance was, the opponent would easily break it. Therefore, they had to create a new and unknown move in order to gain the upper hand.

After their sword meet twenty years ago, both men, one residing on the Central Plains, the other from the Western

Regions, had not met or even heard of the other's present state, so they did not know how much the other man had improved his martial arts. Now that they were fighting each other, the situation was not much different. Each had his own strengths; each had his own weaknesses and neither could tell who would overcome who. In the meantime the moonlight had faded and one could see a streak of sunlight glowing in the east. Both had racked their brains and had created innumerable new and wonderful moves; fist or palm techniques along with tens of thousands variations thereof, but still, no one could tell which one was better.

Guo Jing witnessed the fight between two top experts of the present age's martial arts world; wonderful moves and exquisite techniques came one after another. Sometimes he understood, but more often he did not. Sometimes he saw something that was related to the theory taught him by Zhou Botong which made him excited and he wanted to try. But before he could finish half a stance, Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng had already launched new moves and Guo Jing had already forgotten the previous move he was trying to master.

When Huang Rong saw Guo Jing like that, she was alarmed. "I have not seen him for dozens of days; could it be that he's had some profound martial arts lessons from a divine being?" she thought, "I'm watching the fight and I got confused; how could he exclaim in admiration?" But then another thought came to her mind, "Could it be that this silly brother of mine missed me so much that he went insane?"

She had not seen Guo Jing for quite some time and now that they've seen each other again, the situation was not conducive for them to be affectionate. She moved forward, wanting to hold Guo Jing's hand. Right at that moment Guo Jing was imitating Ouyang Feng's palm technique; he was

turning his body around and launched a palm attack. It looked ordinary, but in actuality it carried enormous hidden energy. Her hand barely touched Guo Jing's palm when she suddenly felt a surge of incredible energy pushing her. She was sent flying upward.

After touching Huang Rong's hand, Guo Jing came back to reality. "Aiyo!" he shouted and jumped up to grab Huang Rong's waist. While falling back down to the ground, Guo Jing's left hand grabbed the bamboo pavilion's eave. He swung their bodies and they landed on the roof. The two sat shoulder to shoulder on top of the bamboo pavilion watching the fight on the ground.

By that time the battle situation on the ground had changed again. Ouyang Feng was squatting on the ground with both arms bent at the shoulder, resembling a big frog about to strike at its enemy. His mouth created some deep rumbling noises like a cow mooing; sometimes it was audible and sometimes it wasn't.

Huang Rong was amused; she smiled and with a low voice asked, "Jing ge ge, what is he doing?"

"I don't know," Guo Jing replied. But suddenly he remembered Zhou Botong's story about Wang Chongyang's 'Solitary Yang Finger' breaking Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance'. "That must be it!" he exclaimed, "This is his fiercest martial art; it is called the 'Toad Stance'."

Huang Rong clapped her hands and laughed, "He does look like a toad!"

Ouyang Ke had observed the two sitting close and leaning toward each other, talking and laughing; his heart was burning with jealousy. He wanted to leap up and fight Guo Jing, but his chest was still hurting and he could not exert any strength. Besides, he did not have any confidence that

his martial arts were superior to Guo Jing's. But hearing Huang Rong say 'he looks like a toad' he thought they were ridiculing him and saying that he looked like a dirty toad desiring to eat swan's meat [a lascivious man lusting after an innocent maiden?]; he was furious. With his right hand holding three hidden projectiles he quietly walked around toward the back of the bamboo pavilion. Gritting his teeth he moved his hand and three silvery streaks flew towards Guo Jing's chest.

In the meantime Hong Qigong was launching his palms to the front and to the back, busily fighting Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance' with his Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms. These two martial arts were the highest skills of each combatant, so the fight was no longer slow and sluggish like it was before. Now it became fierce as the two used their dozens of years of martial arts training trying to gain victory; life or death could be decided in the twinkling of an eye. Guo Jing had learned the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms, but he had not seen his master using this technique before. It sent shivers along his spine to see how wonderful the palm techniques were, with infinite variations in them. It was truly incomparable to the ones he had already mastered. He was completely captivated with what was happening on the ground; why would he expect that someone would sneak in from behind and stealthily attack him?

Huang Rong was not aware that the two fighting on the ground were using their highest martial arts skills; she was still laughing and joking around when she suddenly realized one person was missing from the bamboo pavilion. Her mind immediately went to Ouyang Ke since she was afraid of his craftiness. Her eyes scanned the area, but it was her ears that heard the wind generated by the hidden projectiles coming towards Guo Jing's back. From the

corner of her eye she could see three silvery streaks coming fast. She did not have time to think and immediately threw herself behind Guo Jing's back. "Puff...puff...puff!" three hidden projectiles landed squarely in her back. She was wearing the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' [ruan wei jia] so she was not injured, but she felt some pain nonetheless.

Her hand reached back and grabbed the hidden projectiles. She turned around and smiled sweetly, "You are scratching the itch on my back, aren't you? Thank you, but I need to give these back to you."

Ouyang Ke saw how she intercepted the projectiles with her own body to protect Guo Jing and he was more jealous than ever. Hearing what she said he thought she was going to throw the projectiles back his way, so he readied himself. But after a moment he saw Huang Rong holding the projectiles in her hand palm up, as though she was expecting him to take them back from her hand.

Ouyang Ke kicked his left foot and leaped to the bamboo pavilion's roof. He intended to show off his lightness kungfu and, lightly perched on the edge of the roof, he looked like a white shadow swaying gently in the wind. It was indeed an excellent skill; as elegant as that of a deity.

"Your lightness kungfu is truly wonderful!" Huang Rong exclaimed. She stood up and walked towards him, arm extended with the projectiles in her hand.

Ouyang Ke saw her white complexion and he was mesmerized. Absentmindedly he stretched out his hand to take the projectiles, with the ill intention of rubbing her hand. Suddenly some metallic streaks came his way. He had twice fallen for Huang Rong's tricks and did not want to repeat it. He somersaulted down from the roof waving his

sleeve and parrying an abundance of Huang Rong's steel needles.

Huang Rong giggled and threw the three silver projectiles to the ground, right in front of the squatting Ouyang Feng.

"NO! Don't!" Guo Jing shouted in alarm. He grabbed Huang Rong's waist and jumped down from the roof. Before his feet even touched the ground he heard Huang Yaoshi's anxious shout, "Brother Feng have mercy!"

Guo Jing felt an earth-shattering force coming his way. Quickly he pushed Huang Rong aside and exerted all his strength to his hands with one of the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms, the 'Sighting a Dragon in the Fields' [jian long zai tian].

A loud 'bang' was heard as his force collided with Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance'. As a result he staggered back seven or eight steps. Guo Jing felt blood rising from his chest to his throat. He was alarmed and also afraid Ouyang Feng would send another attack, so he forced himself to move and stood in front of Huang Rong, ready to take another blow. Then he saw Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi had already stepped in between them.

"I'm so sorry! I am so ashamed!" Ouyang Feng said as he stood up. "I was not able to retract my force. I hope I did not hurt the young lady, did I?" he called out.

Actually Huang Rong was frightened and her beautiful face was pale; but hearing him say such a thing, she put on a bold face and laughed, "With my Father around, how could you hurt me?"

Huang Yaoshi was very anxious; he took her hands and quietly asked, "Do you feel anything different in your body? Quickly breathe in and out a few times." Huang Rong

listened to her father and quietly circulate her 'chi' but did not feel anything unusual, so she laughed and shook her head.

Huang Yaoshi was relieved. "Your two uncles are practicing their martial arts just now, what was a little girl like you doing carelessly intervening?" he reprimanded. "Uncle Ouyang's 'Toad Stance' is not a small matter; if he had not shown you mercy, do you think your little life would be spared?"

In order to launch the powerful 'Toad Stance', Ouyang Feng had to concentrate all of his strength in the whole of his body. As soon as the opponent attacked, he would be able to counterattack by launching the full power already stored. That was exactly what happened when he was waiting for Hong Qigong to attack; his strength was concentrated, ready to be launched like an arrow on a completely drawn bow. Unexpectedly Huang Rong tossed something at him that he instinctively counterattacked towards her.

When he realized it was Huang Rong he was extremely shocked; but his force had already being released so there was no way he could pull it back. He sighed inwardly, thinking he had created a terrible disaster and that this beautiful flower-of-a-girl would die a violent death at his hands. Moreover he'd heard Huang Yaoshi call out, 'Brother Feng, have mercy!' He frantically tried to divert his force, but there simply was not enough time. Then he suddenly felt another force colliding with his. He took this opportunity to retract his force. When he looked carefully, he discovered that the person who rescued Huang Rong was Guo Jing! He secretly admired Hong Qigong, "The Old Beggar is very good; he has succeeded in teaching this young disciple to such a high level of martial arts!"

Huang Yaoshi had seen Guo Jing's martial arts at Cloud Manor; he thought, "This youngster did not know the height of the sky or the depth of the earth, yet he dared to parry Ouyang Feng's fierce 'Toad Stance'. If Ouyang Feng had not seen my face and showed him mercy, his bones would have been shattered." He did not know that the Guo Jing he met at Cloud Manor was not the same Guo Jing as now. However, he acknowledged that Guo Jing had selflessly saved Huang Rong's life without any regard for his own safety. His hatred towards him was, for the most part, gone. He thought, "This kid really has a good heart and he really loves Rong'er. I can't give Rong'er to him, but I can certainly reward him by teaching him something." The rascal in front of him looked rather stupid and the word 'foolish' had stirred up anger in him.

"Old Poison...you are really good!" Hong Qigong called out, "But victory or defeat has not been decided yet; let us fight again!"

"Very well!" Ouyang Feng replied, "I will risk my life to accompany a gentleman's play!"

"I am not a gentleman," Hong Qigong laughed. "You are risking your life to play with a beggar!" With a jump he was standing in the courtyard again.

Ouyang Feng was about to join him when Huang Yaoshi suddenly lifted his left hand, "Hold it!" he called out, "Brother Qi, Brother Feng, you have fought for more than one thousand moves and you two are equally strong. Today the two of you are Peach Blossom Island's honored guests; you are entitled to drink several cups of your brother's own wine. The sword meet at Mount Hua is at hand. At that time not only will you two see who will gain a victory, but your brother, along with the Southern Emperor will be there to

practice our martial arts. Why don't we end today's contest right now?"

"That's fine with me!" Ouyang Feng laughed, "If this fight continues, I will be forced to admit defeat very soon anyway."

Hong Qigong turned back and laughed, "Old Western Poison is crafty; when he said he will admit defeat, he actually means he's going to win. I don't believe what he said one bit."

"Well, then," Ouyang Feng replied, "Let me ask Brother Qi's expert opinion again."

Hong Qigong flicked his sleeve and said, "Nothing would be better!"

"I see," Huang Yaoshi interrupted, "So your arrival on Peach Blossom Island today is actually to show off your martial arts," he said with a smile.

Hong Qigong roared in laughter. "Brother Yao is right! We came here to ask your daughter's hand in marriage, not to fight each other."

"I said earlier that I am going to provide three subjects to test both gentlemen," Huang Yaoshi continued, "The one that passes the test will be my son-in-law; but the one fails won't be going home empty handed either."

"What? Do you have another daughter?" Hong Qigong asked.

Huang Yaoshi smiled, "No, I don't. Even if I found another wife, I don't think we want to wait that long do we? Your brother has many other skills: medical, astrology and a lot of other stuff. To the gentleman who fails the test, so long as he does not belittle my shallow knowledge and is willing to

learn one particular subject, I will devote my time and teach him with all of my heart so that he won't leave Peach Blossom Island empty handed."

Hong Qigong was fully aware of Huang Yaoshi's abilities; he thought that if Guo Jing could not be his son-in-law but managed to learn just one skill from him, he would gain a lifelong benefit nonetheless. He thought that whatever subjects the tests would be, Guo Jing would undoubtedly suffer a loss and he felt badly for him.

Ouyang Feng, noticing Hong Qigong's reluctance, took the opportunity to say, "Good...let it be that way! Brother Yao has actually accepted my nephew's proposal, but he honored Brother Qi's face. So let these two kids be tested. That way it won't damage our friendship." Turning towards Ouyang Ke he said, "Later, should you lose, you will only have your own lack of ability to blame and you cannot blame anyone else. We will happily drink Brother Yao's vintage wine [xi jiu]. If you later have a mind to create other problems, not only will these two seniors not let you off easily, but I myself will not spare you."

Hong Qigong looked up and burst out in laughter, "Old Poison, you are ninety percent sure that you are going to win. Your speech was actually directed at me and my disciple; what you are saying is 'be a dear and just admit defeat'."

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, "Who wins and who loses, how would you know in advance? Even for people of our level, do you think it is easy to claim victory so shamelessly? Brother Yao, please present the subjects of your test."

Huang Yaoshi had determined to give his daughter to Ouyang Ke, therefore, he had to come up with three subjects that would guarantee victory for Ouyang Ke. But

first of all, a man of his stature could not be blatantly one-sided; secondly, he did not want to offend Hong Qigong. But while he was still carefully considering what he was about to say, Hong Qigong opened his mouth, "We all live by our fists and kicks, the test Brother Yao will administer must be related to martial arts. If your subjects are poetry, music, reciting scriptures or painting, then we - master and disciple, will simply admit defeat and take our butts out of here; there's no need to lose face."

"Naturally," Huang Yaoshi assured him, "The first subject is a martial arts competition."

"That won't do," Ouyang Feng said, "My nephew is injured at present."

Huang Yaoshi smiled. "I know that," he said, "I cannot let two brothers have a martial arts contest on Peach Blossom Island and damage their friendship."

"They are not going to fight?" Ouyang Feng was baffled.

"That's correct," Huang Yaoshi answered.

"Ah!" Ouyang Feng smiled, "Then the test giver will try each person's martial arts?"

Huang Yaoshi shook his head, "No, if I do that, no one can guarantee that I will be fair since I can make my moves heavy or light at will. Brother Feng, you and Brother Qi have reached the pinnacle of your respective martial arts skills and the fight just now was the proof. You have fought for more than a thousand moves, yet nobody knows who gained victory or suffered defeat. Brother Feng, you test Brother Guo, and Brother Qi, you try Brother Ouyang."

Hong Qigong thought to himself, "This is very fair indeed. Old Heretic Huang is really smart to have thought of this

method. Old Beggar would never come up with something like that." He laughed and said, "This method is not bad! Come...come...come! Let us play!" He beckoned Ouyang Ke.

"Wait!" Huang Yaoshi said, "There are some rules for the game we need to address. Rule number one: Brother Ouyang is injured and he cannot exert any energy; both of them, therefore, will be tested in terms of martial arts, not in terms of strength. Rule number two: The four of you will fight on top of these pine trees," he pointed to two big pine trees outside the bamboo pavilion, "The junior who falls to the ground first will lose. Rule number three: Brother Feng and Brother Qi, if one of you puts too heavy a pressure on the junior and accidentally injures him, he will lose."

"Injuring a junior is considered losing?" Hong Qigong mused.

"Certainly," Huang Yaoshi explained, "The two of you have such high skills, so if I didn't have this rule, should you put forth a heavy hand, do you think the junior will live? Brother Qi, if you even scratch Brother Ouyang's skin, you lose. The same goes for Brother Feng. Of these two juniors, one will be my son-in-law; how can they be injured by your hands?"

Hong Qigong scratched his head and laughed, "Old Heretic Huang is quite strange and really lives up to his reputation. Injuring an opponent will be considered a loss; this strange rule has never been heard of in thousands of years. Fine! As long as it is fair, the Old Beggar will comply."

Huang Yaoshi gave a hand signal and the four of them jumped up into the pine trees, forming two parties. Hong Qigong and Ouyang Ke were in the right tree and Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing in the left. Hong Qigong still had an

amused look on his face, while the other three looked serious, almost tense.

Huang Rong knew Ouyang Ke's martial arts were actually higher than Guo Jing's, but luckily he was injured. However, the competition on top of the pine trees relies heavily on lightness kungfu, in which Ouyang Ke obviously had some advantages over Guo Jing. She was unable to avoid feeling anxious. In the meantime she heard her father's loud and clear voice, "I will count to three, then you can start. Brother Ouyang, Brother Guo, whoever falls to the ground first will lose!"

Huang Rong thought of helping Guo Jing somehow, but Ouyang Feng's martial arts were very high; how could she fight him with her present abilities?

Huang Yaoshi had started counting, "One...two...three!" Four shadows danced on top of the pine trees; they had begun.

Huang Rong's gaze never left Guo Jing and saw him fight more than ten stances against Ouyang Feng in the blink of an eye. Both Huang Rong and Huang Yaoshi were secretly surprised, "How did his martial arts suddenly improve by leaps and bounds? He's managed to fight this many moves without showing any signs of losing."

Ouyang Feng was anxious, so he gradually increased his strength bit by bit. But he was afraid to injure Guo Jing. Suddenly an idea came into his mind and his legs rotated like a wheel, trying to sweep Guo Jing from the pine tree. Guo Jing used the 'Flying Dragon Soaring Through the Heavens' [fei long zai tian] from his Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms; he repeatedly leaped high with both palms hacking down like knives trying to hit his opponent's legs.

Huang Rong's heart was thumping madly. She turned her gaze toward Hong Qigong only to see his fight taking a different path. Ouyang Ke was using his lightness kungfu and leaped to the east and dodged to the west; he did not want to engage with even half of Hong Qigong's moves. Hong Qigong was compelled to chase him, but Ouyang Ke kept running around. Hong Qigong thought, "This stinky creature is cunning and he is trying to buy time. Guo Jing is a dumb kid; he actually fights the Old Poison. If he keeps it up, he will certainly fall to the ground first. Humph! Little rapist! Do you think the Old Beggar cannot fold you under my arm?" Suddenly he leaped high into the air and with fingers like two steel claws he struck towards Ouyang Ke's head.

Ouyang Ke saw that this incoming force was swift and fierce; it was certainly not a contest type attack but was intended to take his life. He was shocked and hastily tried to flee to the right. Unbeknownst to him, Hong Qigong's attack was a feint. Hong Qigong had anticipated this movement and as soon as Ouyang Ke turned right, Hong Qigong bent over mid-air and flew to the right. His hands came fast towards Ouyang Ke and he shouted clearly, "I don't care if I lose; today I am going to kill you stinky kid."

Ouyang Ke was startled because Hong Qigong was able to turn his body in mid-air; he was frightened and froze for a moment after hearing Hong Qigong's shout. He did not dare to parry this attack, so he frantically stepped back onto empty air. He fell down from the tree with this thought in his mind, "I've lost the first test!" Suddenly he heard a rustling noise beside him as Guo Jing also fell down from the tree next to him.

After fighting Guo Jing for quite a while, Ouyang Feng lost patience, "If I let this kid fight me for another fifty moves, how can I maintain the Western Poison's pride?" he

thought. Suddenly a wicked thought came into his mind. His left hand moved lightning fast towards Guo Jing's neck while shouting loudly, "Down you go!"

Guo Jing ducked this attack and lifted his left hand and tried to parry with the back of his hand. But Ouyang Feng suddenly put more force into his hand. "You ... you ..." Guo Jing stammered. He was going to say, "You don't follow Huang Yaoshi's rules?" but was not able to say it because he was forced to use all his energy to withstand this attack. Ouyang Feng smiled and coldly said, "I what?" and put even more force into his hand.

Guo Jing tried to get a strong foothold for fear that he might be internally injured by this 'Toad Stance' force. Who could have imagined that the tremendous force pushing him down would suddenly disappear? It was fortunate for him that his skills had improved; if not, he wouldn't have been able to withstand Ouyang Feng's force which suddenly got stronger, then suddenly disappeared. Luckily it was similar to the seventy-two moves of the 'Vacant Fist' he learned from Zhou Botong, in which a hard force contained softness in it. If not for this knowledge he would've been injured just like when he fought Huang Yaoshi at Cloud Manor and his hand was caught and broken. Nevertheless, he lost his balance and was thrown down from the tree head first.

Ouyang Ke fell down right side up, while Guo Jing fell upside down and both men saw the ground approaching fast. Seeing Guo Jing falling beside him Ouyang Ke had an idea; he stretched his hands toward Guo Jing's legs. He wanted to use Guo Jing as a stepping stone, so he would be able to jump back up while Guo Jing would certainly fall faster to the ground. Or so he thought.

Huang Rong noticed Guo Jing's precarious situation and called out, "Aiyo!" But incredibly it was Guo Jing who she saw jumping back up into the tree while, with a loud crash, Ouyang Ke was hitting the ground. Guo Jing landed on a tree branch out of breath and panting hard.

Huang Rong was extremely delighted. She did not see clearly how it happened or how, at the critical moment, Guo Jing was able to turn defeat into victory, but she was delighted nonetheless and was unable to restrain herself from crying out, "Aiyo!" But those two 'aiyos' carried entirely different emotions.

By that time Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong had already come down from the trees. Hong Qigong was laughing hard and repeatedly uttered, "Wonderful! Wonderful!" Ouyang Feng's face was green with anger. "Brother Qi," he said gloomily, "Your smart disciple's martial arts are so diverse as to even include Mongolian wrestling skills."

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "I don't know how to wrestle, so it wasn't me who taught him. You can't blame me."

What really happened was: as Guo Jing was pushed down by Ouyang Ke, he fell faster. He saw Ouyang Ke's legs flying up right in front of him. He did not have time to think. In that critical moment he instinctively stretched out both arms to grab Ouyang Ke's calves and pulled himself up by twisting his body from the upside-down position to the upright one. It was precisely a wrestling technique the Mongolians used.

The Mongolians had trained and perfected their wrestling techniques for generations; they were considered one of the best. Guo Jing grew up on the Mongolian steppes and before he even learned martial arts from the Six Freaks of

Jiangnan he had played and wrestled everyday with Tolui and his friends. Mongolian wrestling was to him as natural as eating rice. He was slow by nature and he was falling down fast; even though he knew Mongolian wrestling techniques he would not have had enough time to think. He didn't consciously think: "Oh, a pair of legs, nice! Hey, why don't I use those legs to jump back up into the tree?" It happened so fast so that even after he managed to land on his feet on a tree branch he did not know what had happened! And so he won against all odds.

Huang Yaoshi shook his head slightly and thought, "This Guo Jing is a slow-witted kid. This victory is obviously due to sheer luck." He gave his decision, "The first test was won by Worthy Nephew Guo [Guo Xianzhi]. Please do not to worry Brother Feng, you have taught your honorable nephew well. Who knows, maybe he will score victories in the second and third tests."

"Brother Yao, please present the second test," Ouyang Feng replied.

"The second test will be ..." Huang Yaoshi started, but before he could finish Huang Rong cut him off, "Father, you are obviously being one-sided. Just a moment ago you said you would only test their martial arts skill, how come you want to test with other subjects? Jing ge ge, you might as well admit defeat and leave."

"What do you know?" Huang Yaoshi said, "After reaching a certain level of martial arts skills, do you still want to fight everyday? Yes, we are martial arts people; but unlike ordinary military people, we don't live day after day for martial arts alone. Also, we don't amuse ourselves by jousting to find a spouse ..." After listening to this part, Huang Rong stole a glance at Guo Jing. Guo Jing was also looking at her. They were thinking of the same thing: Mu

Nianci and Yang Kang, who met each other in the capital by 'jousting to find a spouse'. In the meantime Huang Yaoshi continued his speech, "... My second test subject therefore is to ask these two nephews to listen to this old man playing a tune on my flute."

Ouyang Ke was ecstatic; he thought, "What does this stupid kid know about wind or string instruments? The victory is mine for sure."

Ouyang Feng on the other hand was not so sure. He suspected that Huang Yaoshi was going to test these two peoples' internal energy strength with the flute's sound. He knew Guo Jing's level of internal energy to be quite strong and his nephew would not necessarily exceed him. Also, he was afraid his nephew would be internally injured by Huang Yaoshi's flute sound. He said, "The Juniors' internal energy cultivation is shallow and I am afraid they won't be able to listen to Brother Yao's elegant melody. I wonder if Brother Yao would consider ..."

Huang Yaoshi did not give him a chance to finish, "My song is an ordinary one without any high level of internal energy. Brother Feng, set your heart at ease." Towards Ouyang Ke and Guo Jing he said, "Nephews, please take a bamboo stick and follow my music by tapping it to the rhythm. The one who can follow best will win the second test."

Guo Jing stepped forward and cupped his hands, "Island Master Huang, disciple is very slow and stupid. I know nothing about music, so let me admit defeat in the second test."

"Don't be hasty...don't be hasty," Hong Qigong intervened, "At worst you will lose, so why don't you try? Are you afraid that others will laugh in your face?"

Guo Jing thought his master made some sense; seeing Ouyang Ke take a bamboo stick he did the same.

“Brother Qi, Brother Feng,” Huang Yaoshi smiled, “Younger brother will show off his lack of ability.” Lifting the jade flute to his lips he started to blow. This part of his song did not carry any internal energy and it wasn’t any different than what an ordinary person would play.

Ouyang Ke listened attentively, trying to follow the rhythm; then he started tapping his bamboo stick correctly. Guo Jing did not have a clue, so he held his bamboo stick high in the air but did not dare tap it. It was only after Huang Yaoshi had played for about the time needed to drink a cup of tea, he began to move his stick.

The Ouyangs, uncle and nephew, were very smug. They thought that this time victory was guaranteed. Since the third subject would be literary, they were ninety percent sure they would win.

Huang Rong was feeling anxious so she lightly tapped her right hand finger on her left knuckles with the hope Guo Jing would follow. Who would have thought that Guo Jing would sit staring blankly at the sky, lost in thought; obviously he did not see her signal.

Huang Yaoshi kept blowing the flute. Guo Jing raised his hand and struck the bamboo stick in between two beats of the music. Ouyang Ke stifled a laugh, thinking that this stupid kid strikes on the wrong beat. Guo Jing struck again, still in between two music beats. He had struck four times with his bamboo stick, all in the wrong places.

Huang Rong shook her head in dismay, “My stupid brother does not understand anything about music,” she thought, “Father shouldn’t have tested him.” Having had this thought, she racked her brain, trying to find a way to

disrupt the test. But when she turned her gaze toward her father she was surprised; her father was showing astonishment in his face. She heard Guo Jing tap several more times and the flute sound suddenly became a little bit slow, but then it immediately resumed its original tempo.

Guo Jing kept tapping his bamboo stick, always on the off-beat: sometimes tapping faster, sometimes slower. He drove the tempo faster, and sometimes slower. On several occasions the music from the flute almost could not maintain its steady rhythm and was nearly forced to follow the bamboo stick's erratic tempo. Huang Yaoshi was not the only one who was astounded; Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng also felt something strange was happening.

Actually Guo Jing remembered listening to the battle between the three people earlier: the flute, the zither and the whistle. He noticed that the sounds fought each other systematically, like a battle strategy in war. He did not have the slightest degree of comprehension about music theory, but listening to Huang Yaoshi's flute he wanted to try to battle that sound and thus he struck the bamboo stick erratically to disrupt the melody. He tapped the bamboo stick against an old bamboo tree, creating a loud 'bonk, bonk' sound. The sound made Huang Yaoshi feel like he was inside a hot furnace and the fire was glowing white hot, forcing the flute to surrender and follow the erratic tempo of the bamboo stick.

Huang Yaoshi's spirits were roused as he thought about this kid unexpectedly possessing this kind of ability. The flute sound changed again; this time it flowed faster and slower seemingly having infinite variations. Ouyang Ke only stopped to listen for a moment, then he could not resist lifting his bamboo stick and brandishing it erratically in the air. Ouyang Feng heaved a sigh, quickly took his nephew's hand, and pressed the main artery on his wrist. Then he

took out a silk handkerchief, tore it into two pieces and plugged Ouyang Ke's ears. After a while Ouyang Ke started to calm down and Ouyang Feng let his hand go.

Since her childhood Huang Rong had listened to her father's 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave Song'; one time Huang Yaoshi even explained, in detail, every variation there was. The father and daughter's minds were like one so this song did not affect her at all, but she was fully aware that her father's flute carried enormous power. Therefore, she was worried that Guo Jing would not be able to defend himself.

This song simulated the vastness of the ocean with its thousands of waves, coming slowly from afar, and then crashing on the shores. The wave was foamy white and high as a mountain; but in the tide the fish leaped and the whale floated, while above the water seagulls flew. In a moment the water turned wild, like a group of devils was stirring it; the weather turned cold and icebergs came floating by. In another moment it turned hot, extremely hot, so that the sea was rippling and bubbling like boiling water. The next moment, just as quickly, the sea became calm and the surface was as smooth as a mirror. The water flowed strongly, yet quietly; but beneath the surface there was a very strong current threatening those who were unwittingly brave enough to enter and challenge its power. Such were the complexities of the song.

Guo Jing sat cross-legged on the ground as he exerted the Quanzhen Sect's internal energy to suppress the turmoil in his heart and refresh his spirit, all the while resisting the temptation of the flute's sound. At the same time he kept tapping the bamboo stick disrupting the flute's song.

When Huang Yaoshi, Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were battling each other with sounds earlier, they were on the offensive and defensive alternately. They had to guard their

own hearts and minds while looking for an opportunity to launch a counterattack; each trying to subdue the other's hearts and minds. Guo Jing's internal energy was much inferior to those three; he was only able to put up a strong defense, without being able to launch a counterattack. But Huang Yaoshi was not able to penetrate his defense either.

After a long while, the volume of the flute gradually decreased, making it difficult to hear. Guo Jing stopped tapping to listen. This was the moment Huang Yaoshi was waiting for; unexpectedly, as the sound became softer, the stronger the energy it carried. Because Guo Jing was listening attentively, his heart began to follow the rhythm of the flute. Had this happened to someone else, they would fall into the trap and would not be able to escape; but Guo Jing was different. He had learned the 'Left/Right Mutual Hands Combat' and he was capable of dividing his mind. He used his left hand to take the shoe from his left foot to knock on the bamboo pole. "Knock! Knock! Knock!" again, disrupting the flute's sound.

Huang Yaoshi was startled, "This kid possesses some extraordinary skills; he truly cannot be underestimated." He started to walk around according to the 'Eight Trigrams' while he continued playing.

Both of Guo Jing's hands were striking the bamboo pole with an erratic tempo opposing the flute's rhythm. His hands were like two people joining forces to defend against Huang Yaoshi's attack. "Bonk...bonk...bonk! Knock...knock...knock!" His defensive power was doubled.

Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were quietly focusing their attention and energy guarding themselves against the internal energy battle between these two people. Even though one party was only on the defensive, they did not

dare to carelessly ignore the offensive energy from the flute.

The flute sound suddenly ran from high to low; ever changing, strange yet wonderful. Guo Jing suddenly felt a burst of cold air carried by the flute's sound. He felt like his body was wrapped in a thick layer of ice, which had him shivering violently.

The flute sound gently climbed up the hill, getting more and more intense. Guo Jing felt cold to his bones. He struggled hard to divert his mind and to think about a burning sun in the sky, or of touching iron exposed to the heat of the day, or of holding a burning coal in his hand, or that he was entering a very hot stove; in short, any kind of heat inducing thoughts. He succeeded. Huang Yaoshi saw Guo Jing's left side was blue and shivering from the cold, while his right side was red, sweltering from the heat.

Huang Yaoshi was inwardly amazed. Once again he changed the flute's sound: now winter had passed and summer came around. Guo Jing struggled hard to resist, but his clapping tempo began to follow the flute's rhythm. Huang Yaoshi said in his heart, "If this kid keeps on resisting like this - even though he is still young, he won't be able to withstand hot and cold successively and he will suffer a severe illness in the future." The flute sound became graceful, dispersing into the forest then stopped.

Guo Jing exhaled a long breath, stood up, staggered and nearly fell again to the ground. Only after taking several deep breaths did he manage to steady himself. He knew Huang Yaoshi was showing mercy; so he stepped forward, bowed and thanked him. "Thank you very much for showing mercy, Island Master Huang," he said, "Disciple is very grateful."

Huang Rong noticed Guo Jing's left hand was still holding his shoe and could not stifle a laugh, "Jing ge ge, put your shoe back on," she said.

"Yes," Guo Jing replied, and put the shoe back on his left foot.

A thought suddenly came into Huang Yaoshi's mind, "This kid is so young, yet his martial arts are actually quite profound. Could it be that he is just pretending to be a fool, but is in reality a very intelligent person? If that's the case, what would hinder me if I wanted to give my daughter to him?" A faint smile appeared on his face and he said, "You are very good, why do you still call me Island Master Huang?" What he was saying was, that since Guo Jing had won two out of three tests then Guo Jing should call him 'Father-in-law'.

Who would have thought that Guo Jing really did not have a clue as to what he was talking about, so he only stammered, "I ... I ..." his eyes looked at Huang Rong; asking for help. Huang Rong was in seventh heaven; she bent her right thumb, signaling Guo Jing he should kowtow. Guo Jing understood this signal, so he bent his knees and kowtowed four times to Huang Yaoshi, but he still did not open his mouth to speak.

Huang Yaoshi smiled and asked, "What do you kowtow to me for?"

"Rong'er told me to," Guo Jing answered honestly.

Huang Yaoshi sighed silently, "A dumb kid is a dumb kid," he thought. Extending his hand he took the silk handkerchiefs from Ouyang Ke's ears, and gave his decision. "Regarding internal energy, Nephew Guo is stronger; but my test subject was music knowledge, in which Nephew Ouyang is much better ... Let's just say that the second test was a

draw. I am going to present the third subject and let the two Nephews decide victory or defeat."

Ouyang Feng knew his nephew had lost, but he did not expect Huang Yaoshi would do him a favor, so he quickly replied, "True, true! Let them compete one more time."

Hong Qigong was upset but didn't say anything, he thought, "The girl is your daughter and others can't meddle. You want to give her to that rotten playboy. I've always wanted to fight you, but right now it is difficult for my two fists to fight your four hands. Wait until I ask Emperor Duan to help me. Then we'll see ..."

Huang Yaoshi produced a thin book with a red silk cover from his bosom and said, "My wife and I only had this one daughter. Unfortunately she died prematurely. Today Brother Feng and Brother Qi are both here to ask her hand in marriage. If my wife were here, I am sure she would be very delighted ..." Listening to her father speak, Huang Rong's eyes turned red. Huang Yaoshi continued, "This book was written by my wife the same year she passed away. It was the fruit of her hard work. I am going to let both Nephews read it and then recite it from memory. Whoever manages to recite the most will be betrothed to my daughter." He caught sight of Hong Qigong with a slight cold smile on his face, but he continued on, "Actually, Nephew Guo has won by one subject, but this book has impacted my life tremendously since my wife died because of it. Now I silently wish her soul in heaven will personally choose our son-in-law and that she will bless the Nephew that wins."

Hong Qigong could no longer maintain his patience. He shouted loudly and clearly, "Old Heretic Huang! Who wants to listen to your sentimental ghost story? You know perfectly well that my disciple is a dummy and does not

know books or poetry, yet you insist on testing him on that very subject. Then you frighten him with talk of your dead young wife. You are shameless!" He brushed his long sleeve and turned his body to walk away.

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "Brother Qi, if you came to Peach Blossom Island to flaunt your power, you still need to practice for several more years," he said coldly.

Hong Qigong stopped dead in his tracks, "What?" he raised his eyebrows, "You want to fight me?" he asked.

"You don't understand the 'Five Elements Strange Gates' [wu xing chi men...*referring to the maze-like pathways on the island*] techniques," Huang Yaoshi replied, "Don't even think of leaving this island alive without my permission."

Hong Qigong was angry, "I am going to burn down your smelly trees and flower bushes!"

"If you have the ability, go ahead and try!" Huang Yaoshi coldly challenged.

Guo Jing knew those two were about to fight and he also knew that Peach Blossom Island was not to be trifled with; he was afraid his master would fall into a trap on the island. He quickly stepped forward and said, "Island Master Huang, Shifu, let this disciple and big brother Ouyang compete in this book memorization contest. Disciple is really stupid; if I lose, I lose." But in his heart he was thinking, "I'll wait until Shifu is safe, then Rong'er and I will jump into the sea and swim as far as our strength will take us. Then we will die together in the sea."

"Great!" Hong Qigong said mockingly, "You just can't wait to lose face, can you? Be my guest, then! Be my guest." His thought was, 'if you are going to lose anyway, why compete?' He intended to take his disciples along and walk

away to the seashore, snatch a boat and sail away from the island. Who would have thought that this stupid disciple of his would not act according to the circumstance? He had no alternatives but to concede.

“Be a good girl and sit quietly. Don’t get any weird ideas,” Huang Yaoshi told his daughter.

Huang Rong did not say anything, but she expected Guo Jing would fail this next test. Her father said that he would let her deceased mother pick their son-in-law; that meant the previous two tests Guo Jing had won did not count at all. Of the three tests, Guo Jing had obviously won the second one, so the decision that it was a draw was hard to accept. In short, she believed that the reason her father insisted on administering the third test was so that Ouyang Ke would win. She started to cook up an escape plan as to how she would get Guo Jing off the island.

Huang Yaoshi told Ouyang Ke and Guo Jing to sit side by side on a big rock; then he presented the book in front of them. Ouyang Ke saw the cover was written in seal characters [the ones found on official documents] with the six characters, ‘Nine Yin Manual’ [jiu yin zhen jing]; he was ecstatic. “The ‘Nine Yin Manual’ is the world’s most profound martial arts manual; Father-in-law must be very fond of me to let me read this wonderful book.” Guo Jing, on the other hand, also saw the six characters but had no idea what they were; he thought, “He intentionally wants to make things difficult for me. How would I know those kinds of curving-tadpole characters? In any case I am going to admit defeat.”

Huang Yaoshi opened the cover and the book was actually written in normal characters. The handwriting was graceful and obviously written by a female hand. Guo Jing started to read and his heart skipped a beat. The first line read, “The

way of Heaven: A simple fix is not enough to repair damage; it truly is an empty victory, insufficient for a real one.” It was exactly like a sentence Zhou Botong told him to memorize. He looked further down and to his surprise, the sentences were the ones he already knew by heart.

Huang Yaoshi waited a moment, and when he thought the two had finished, he flipped the page. On the second page the words and phrases were slightly out of order, and further into the book, the sentences were becoming more confusing and the characters looked soft and weak.

Guo Jing’s heart was shaken again as he recalled Zhou Botong’s story of how Madame Huang had re-written the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ from memory and how it drained her emotionally and physically so that she died while giving birth to her child. This book was obviously the one she wrote before she died. “Could it be that what Big Brother Zhou taught me was the ‘Nine Yin Manual’?” he wondered in his heart. “No. It can’t be. The second volume of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ was lost by Mei Chaofeng; where did he get it from?”

Huang Yaoshi saw him staring blankly, lost in thought and even looking dazed. He did not pay any further attention and slowly turned the pages one by one. At first Ouyang Ke was able to memorize what was written, but later on when it got to the training methods the sentences were garbled and there was no clear relationship between the previous and the next ones. Further into the book, even the characters were unclear. His heart sank and he could not help sighing inwardly, “It seems he is still unwilling to show me the real full-text Manual.” But then he had another thought, “Even though I can’t see the full Manual, compared to this dumb kid I am sure I have memorized more of the text. With this test my victory has been

decided.” Having had this thought he felt smug and could not help but cast a glance towards Huang Rong.

Huang Rong caught his glance and she stuck her tongue out while making an ugly face. “Brother Ouyang,” she said, “You captured Sister Mu and put her inside the coffin at the ancestral temple. You suffocated her to death. She came into my dreams last night; her hair was disheveled, her face covered with blood and she told me she is looking for you; she wants to take your life.”

Ouyang Ke had forgotten about her long ago and now, out of the blue, Huang Rong mentioned her name; he was startled, “Aiyo! I forgot to get her out of there!” He thought in his heart, “It’s a pity a young girl like her died of suffocation.” But then he noticed Huang Rong was smiling; apparently she was joking. “How did you know she was in the coffin? Did you rescue her?” he asked.

Ouyang Feng knew Huang Rong was trying to muddle his nephew’s mind, so that he would not be able to remember the text. “Ke’er,” he said, “Don’t bother with other matters; just concentrate on the book.” Ouyang Ke shivered. “Yes,” he said; and quickly turned his eyes back to the book.

Guo Jing noticed that the sentences in the book were nearly the same as the ones Zhou Botong taught him. The ones in his memory had even more integrity than the ones in this book. This book contained many holes, incomplete sentences and missing words, in it. He raised his head and looked up at the tree branches, trying to make some sense out of it all.

A little while later Huang Yaoshi turned the last page. “Who will recite first?” he asked.

Ouyang Ke thought, “This book is confusing and very difficult to memorize. I’d better recite it while it is still fresh

in my memory.” Snatching the opportunity he said, “I will.”

Huang Yaoshi nodded his head, then to Guo Jing he said, “Please go to the bamboo grove over there. You cannot listen to him reciting.”

Guo Jing obeyed him and walked a few dozen steps towards the bamboo grove. Huang Rong saw this as a good opportunity for them to escape together, so she quietly walked towards him. Huang Yaoshi suddenly called out, “Rong’er, come here! You have to listen to them recite, otherwise you’ll say I am one-sided.”

“You are one-sided,” Huang Rong replied, “You don’t need other people to say that.”

“That’s nonsense!” Huang Yaoshi laughed, “Come here!”

With her mouth Huang Rong silently said, “I don’t want to come,” but she knew her father’s temperament very well; once he’d decided to keep her under his watchful eyes, it would be even more difficult for her to escape. Slowly she walked back towards them, giving Ouyang Ke her sweetest smile and said, “Brother Ouyang, what’s so good about me that you like me so much?”

Ouyang Ke’s heart melted and his vision blurred. Grinning widely he replied, “Little sister, you ... you ...” he could say no more than that.

“Don’t go back to the West too soon,” Huang Rong added, “Stay on Peach Blossom Island for several days. The west is very cold, isn’t it?”

“The west is much bigger than you think. There are some cold regions, no doubt, but other parts are warm and sunny, much like the south (Jiangnan),” Ouyang Ke replied.

"I don't believe you," Huang Rong smiled, "You love to deceive people."

Ouyang Ke was about to debate with her, but Ouyang Feng coldly said, "Child, you can chat again later; right now you need to recite the book."

Ouyang Ke was startled; he realized that Huang Rong's conversation was intended to confuse him, and indeed he had now forgotten many characters from the confusing parts. He therefore refocused his attention and slowly recited the book. "The way of Heaven: A simple fix is not enough to repair damage; it truly is an empty victory, insufficient for a real one ..."

His memory was quite good; he managed to remember most of the theory in the front part, but towards the latter part of the book - where the training methods were explained, he missed a lot. It was not surprising actually, since Madame Huang did not know martial arts and it was some time later that she re-wrote the book from memory, so the words were unknowingly jumbled. Ouyang Ke only managed to recall about ten percent of this latter part. All the while Huang Rong kept trying to divert his attention by saying, "Not right! You remembered wrong!" He could not even remember ten percent towards the end of the book.

Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "You remembered that much and that was very good!" Raising his voice he called out, "Nephew Guo, it's your turn to recite."

Guo Jing walked back and, seeing the smug expression on Ouyang Ke's face, he thought, "This man is really smart, he only read it once, yet he can still recite this mumbo-jumbo text. I don't have that capability, so I'd better recite the ones Big Brother Zhou taught me. If it is incorrect, oh well ... I don't have any choice."

Hong Qigong said, "Stupid kid, they intentionally want to make fools out of us; they planned it all."

Huang Rong suddenly kicked the ground and leaped to the top of the bamboo pavilion. With a flick of her hand she pointed a dagger at her own chest and said, "Father, if you insist on my going to the West with that stinky boy, I will die right here right now in your presence."

Huang Yaoshi knew his precious daughter would do what she said so he called out, "Put that dagger down! We can talk it over."

Ouyang Feng thrust his staff onto the ground and with a humming sound something flew from the staff straight towards Huang Rong. The hidden projectile was very fast; before Huang Rong could see what it was, she'd already heard a clanking sound and the dagger flew from her hand, falling to the ground. At the same time Huang Yaoshi leaped to the roof, stretched his hand, grabbed his daughter's shoulder and softly said, "It's all right if you don't want to get married. You can stay on Peach Blossom Island and accompany your father for the rest of your life."

Huang Rong flailed her arms and legs, crying, "Father, you don't love Rong'er! You don't love Rong'er!"

Hong Qigong was amused to see Huang Yaoshi, who roamed the lakes and the sea fearlessly, who killed people without batting an eye, was actually having trouble controlling his own daughter. He could not help laughing very hard.

Ouyang Feng thought, "I will wait for the final decision and then I'll take care of this Old Beggar and that boy surnamed Guo. We'll sort out the other things later. If this girl acts like a spoiled brat, what do I care?" Therefore he said, "Nephew Guo's martial arts skill is excellent; he is a real young hero.

His intelligence must be excellent as well. Brother Yao, you'd better ask him to recite."

"Exactly!" Huang Yaoshi said, "Rong'er, if you keep babbling you will disturb Nephew Guo's concentration." Huang Rong closed her mouth immediately.

Ouyang Feng wanted to humiliate Guo Jing very much. "Nephew Guo, please start reciting. We are going to listen respectfully," he urged.

Guo Jing's face reddened as he thought, "I can't do it; I'd better recite what Big Brother Zhou taught me." Thereupon he started reciting, "The way of Heaven: A simple fix is not enough to repair damage; it truly is an empty victory, insufficient for a real one ..." He had recited the 'Nine Yin Manual' from beginning to end hundreds of times before; by now it was deeply imbedded in his brain. He recited slowly but steadily with no hesitation at all.

About half a page later everybody was stunned and they thought, "This kid seems slow and dim-witted, who would have known that he is actually very smart."

Very soon Guo Jing had reached the fourth page. Hong Qigong and Huang Rong knew very well that Guo Jing did not have that kind of intelligence and they did not know what had possessed him, but they were extremely and pleasantly surprised.

Huang Yaoshi listened attentively and compared every word with the ones in the book. He discovered that Guo Jing's sentences were ten times more logical; firmly resembling the original text that he remembered. His heart turned cold and he unknowingly broke into a cold sweat. "Could it be that my deceased wife's spirit in the underworld is so smart that she managed to recall the full text and passed it on to this boy?" The words kept coming out of Guo Jing's mouth

like trickling water. Huang Yaoshi was beginning to be convinced that his wife's spirit was helping this youngster; he looked up to the sky and softly muttered, "A Heng, A Heng, you loved me so much that you have used this boy's mouth to impart the manual to me. But why don't you let me have a glimpse of you? I've played my flute every night for you; did you hear it?"

'A Heng' was Madame Huang's nickname and nobody else but him knew this; naturally no one else knew what he was talking about. They saw that his face looked different; his eyes were glazed with tears, his mouth quivered but nothing came out of it; they were puzzled.

After being in that dazed condition for a while Huang Yaoshi suddenly had another thought. He waved his hand to stop Guo Jing. His face was as cold as if there was a layer of frost on it; fiercely he asked, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' that Mei Chaofeng lost, where did you find it?"

Guo Jing saw his eyes had a murderous look and he was really frightened. "Disciple really does not know Mei ... Senior Mei's Manual's whereabouts. If I did, I will gladly help retrieve it and return it to the Island Master."

Huang Yaoshi looked at him with his penetrating gaze yet did not see even the slightest bit of deceitfulness on Guo Jing's face. He was compelled to believe it was his late wife from the underworld who'd taught Guo Jing; he felt joy and grief at the same time. With a loud and clear voice he gave his verdict, "Very well. Brother Qi, Brother Feng, it was my deceased wife who chose our son-in-law; your brother does not have anything else to say. Child, I betroth Rong'er to you. Treat her well. I have spoiled Rong'er badly, so you need to yield thirty percent of the time."

Huang Rong was ecstatic and she grinned from ear to ear, "I am a completely well-behaved girl; who said I am spoiled badly?"

Guo Jing might be stupid, he might be slow, but this time he did not need Huang Rong to prompt him; he immediately kneeled down and kowtowed, "Father-in-law!"

He had not yet stood back up when Ouyang Ke suddenly called out, "Hold on!"

Chapter 19 - Great Waves, School of Sharks

Translated by Frans Soetomo



*Alone in that small underground room and seeing
the painting of her deceased mother made by her*

father's own hand; with a roller coaster of emotions Huang Rong thought, "I have never seen Mother. I wonder after I die, will I meet her? Was she really as beautiful as in the picture? Where is she right now? Is she in the sky above, in the earth below, or still in this room?"

Not in his wildest dreams did Hong Qigong think the memorization contest would end up this way. Guo Jing beating Ouyang Ke and making him roll around on the ground seventeen or eighteen times would be ten times more believable to him. He was so happy that he could not wipe the smile off his face. Hearing Ouyang Ke protesting he snapped, "What? You are not convinced?"

"What Brother Guo recited was a lot more than what was written in the book," Ouyang Ke said, "He must have the 'Nine Yin Manual' in his possession. Junior has the courage to ask to search him."

"Island Master Huang had accepted his proposal," Hong Qigong said, "What other business is there to discuss? Didn't you hear what your uncle said before the tests?"

Ouyang Feng glared. "Do you think a man surnamed Ouyang would be easily deceived?" he said. He heard what his nephew just said and was convinced that Guo Jing knew the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He wanted very much to get the book for himself. Whether Huang Yaoshi accepted his marriage proposal or not became secondary to him.

Guo Jing took off his belt and opened up his clothing, saying, "Senior Ouyang, you can search me if you want to." He immediately took everything out of his pockets and placed them on top of a big rock nearby: silver coins, a handkerchief, a flint and the like.

“Humph!” Ouyang Feng snorted and began searching Guo Jing’s body. Huang Yaoshi had known Ouyang Feng as a ruthless man for a long time and he would do unpredictable things when angry. His strength was profound and if he put forth a violent hand, nobody would be able to rescue Guo Jing. Huang Yaoshi coughed, stretched out his left hand and placed it on Ouyang Ke’s neck close to his spine; it was a vital point. Should Huang Yaoshi put some force into it, Ouyang Ke’s spine would break and Ouyang Feng could give up any ideas of saving him.

Hong Qigong knew his intentions very well and he was fascinated, “Old Heretic Huang is really one-sided. Now that he gives favor to his daughter and future son-in-law he wants to protect this dumb disciple of mine. Ay! He was capable of reciting the whole book, so I can’t call him dumb anymore.”

Originally Ouyang Feng was going to strike Guo Jing’s lower abdomen with his ‘Toad Stance’ energy and let him suffer for three years before he finally died. Seeing that Huang Yaoshi had guarded against his scheme he did not dare to strike. He searched Guo Jing’s body without any results. All he could do was stay silent for a long time, thinking really hard. He did not believe all this nonsense about Madame Huang’s spirit choosing her son-in-law. He recalled that this kid was dumb, slow and apparently he could not lie. Perhaps he could coerce the whereabouts of the Manual from him. He shook the staff in his hand and with a scratching sound the two weird looking snakes slithered up the length of the staff.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing had seen these strange animals; they were frightened and moved back one step. Pointing at Guo Jing’s throat, he asked, “Nephew Guo, where did you learn the ‘Nine Yin Manual’?” His eyes were blazing red as he looked at Guo Jing with a penetrating glare.

"I know about the 'Nine Yin Manual', but I have never seen it," Guo Jing said. "The first volume is in the hands of Zhou Botong, Big Brother Zhou ..."

"Why did you call Zhou Botong 'Big Brother Zhou'?" Hong Qigong asked, "Have you met the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

"Yes," Guo Jing replied, "Big Brother Zhou and your disciple have become sworn brothers."

"One is old and the other young," Hong Qigong mocked, "That's really preposterous!"

"What about the second volume?" Ouyang Feng asked.

"The second volume was in Mei Chaofeng ... Mei ... Mei Shijie's hands, but it was lost at Lake Tai," Guo Jing explained. "Right now she is under Father-in-law's orders to search for it everywhere. Disciple was thinking that after everything is done here, I will go and lend her a helping hand."

Ouyang Feng asked fiercely, "If you have not seen the 'Nine Yin Manual', how can you recite it so well?"

Guo Jing was puzzled. "Did I recite the 'Nine Yin Manual'?" he asked, "That can't be. I recited a text Big Brother Zhou taught me; he said it was his own secret martial arts creation."

Huang Yaoshi inwardly sighed. He was dismayed and thought, "Zhou Botong received his late martial brother's order to guard the 'Nine Yin Manual'. We played with marbles and he lost to me; I tricked him and in the end he burned the book. Up to that time he had not looked at the contents of the book at all, which was not at all strange. But now there seems to be some divine intervention; everything

has happened so coincidentally that my daughter ended up betrothed to him. Isn't he very lucky?"

Huang Yaoshi was still deep in thought as Ouyang Feng pressed on, "Where is Zhou Botong now?" he asked.

Guo Jing was about to answer when Huang Yaoshi cut him off, "Jing'er, there's no need to say more." Turning his head to Ouyang Feng he said, "It is such a trivial matter, why do you care so much? Brother Feng, Brother Qi, we have not seen each other for twenty years. Let us spend three days together on Peach Blossom Island, drinking to our hearts' content."

"Shifu, I am going to prepare some food for you," Huang Rong said, "The lotuses on this island are superb; so how about some chicken steamed in lotus petals, or some fresh water chestnut and lotus leaf soup? I am sure you'll like it."

Hong Qigong smiled widely, "Now that you've gotten your heart's desire, look how happy you are!"

Huang Rong just gave him a faint smile. "Shifu, Uncle Ouyang, Brother Ouyang, please," she said. She was extremely happy to be betrothed to Guo Jing so that her animosity toward Ouyang Ke had vanished into thin air. At this very moment everybody in the whole wide world was, to her, a good person.

Ouyang Feng raised his hands in respect to Huang Yaoshi, "Brother Yao, I must decline your great hospitality. Many thanks. Let us part today."

"Brother Feng has come a long way," Huang Yaoshi replied, "Brother has not fulfilled my responsibility as a good host; how can I let you leave?"

Ouyang Feng had come from thousands of li away, not only for his nephew's sake, but for another grand scheme as well. He'd received his nephew's carrier pigeon message which said that the 'Nine Yin Manual' had reappeared and was in the hands of Huang Yaoshi's renegade blind female disciple. After the wedding he planned to join forces with Huang Yaoshi and obtain the 'Nine Yin Manual'. But now the marriage proposal failed; his nephew lost the competition and he felt really dejected, so he insisted on leaving.

"Uncle!" Ouyang Ke suddenly said, "Your nephew is useless and I have made you lose face. But Uncle Huang has promised that he will teach Nephew some skills."

"Humph!" Ouyang Feng muttered. He was aware his nephew had not given up hope on the Huang family's girl, so he'd found some excuse to stay longer to be close to Huang Rong and try to win her heart. Who knows, she might eventually fall into his hands?

Huang Yaoshi was upset. He erroneously thought that Ouyang Ke would win the three tests and that was why he made that promise to reward Guo Jing. But it was Ouyang Ke who unexpectedly failed the tests. Apologetically he said, "Nephew Ouyang, your uncle's martial arts are unparalleled in the world; others cannot hold a candle to him. You have mastered your own family heritage skills, what need do you have to learn somebody else's? This old dog was lucky to master some 'back door second rate' [zuo dao pang men] techniques. If Nephew does not think it too superficial, then whichever skill you'd like to learn, this old dog will be happy to teach it to you."

Ouyang Ke thought, "I must choose the one that needs the longest time to master. I have long heard about Peach Blossom Island's 'Five Elements Open Gateway' [wu xing qi

men] as being number one in the world. I am sure he won't be finished in a day." Thereupon he bowed and said, "Young Nephew admires your 'wu xing qi men' techniques so much. I am asking Uncle to kindly bestow that on me."

Huang Yaoshi did not answer immediately; he hesitated with an awkward feeling in his heart. The technique requested was the one he was most proud of. Apart from it being complicated to begin with, he had expanded and developed new interpretations and variations of the original technique he learned from his ancestors. His own daughter, because of her young age, had not learned this technique so how could he pass this knowledge to a total stranger? But he had given his promise and it was impossible to take back, so reluctantly he asked, "The 'wu xing qi men' technique is very broad and deep. Which one do you want to learn?"

Ouyang Ke wanted to stay on Peach Blossom Island as long as possible, so he requested, "Young Nephew saw the winding pathways of Peach Blossom Island; the vegetation arrangement is very complicated. My heart admires this arrangement to no end. I am asking Uncle to allow young nephew to stay on the island for several months and thoroughly study the mystery of these complicated pathways and their variations."

Huang Yaoshi's face changed slightly and he cast a glance towards Ouyang Feng. He thought, "So you want to investigate and find out about Peach Blossom Island's ingenious arrangements. What is your real intention?"

Ouyang Feng saw his expression and could guess what was in his heart, so he chided his nephew, "You don't know how high the heavens are or how deep the earth is! Uncle Huang has spent half of his life painstakingly arranging the

island. It is his defense against intruders; how could he divulge this mystery to you?"

Huang Yaoshi laughed coldly, "Peach Blossom Island is only a barren and rocky hill; I doubt if anybody would come and harm me."

Ouyang Feng smiled apologetically, "Little Brother rudely made an indiscreet remark, Brother Yao, please don't be offended."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Old Poison! You are very sly; this is what you planned from the start. Quite brilliant!" he mocked.

Huang Yaoshi slipped the jade flute into his belt and said, "Everyone, please follow me."

Ouyang Ke saw the indignation on his face, so he looked to his uncle for guidance. Ouyang Feng nodded his head and started to walk behind Huang Yaoshi. Everybody followed not too far behind.

Winding through the bamboo grove they arrived at a big lotus pond. The lotuses were white, emitting a fragrant scent. The pond's surface was covered with lotus leaves and there was a strip of causeway made of small stones winding through the center of it. Huang Yaoshi walked along the causeway leading everyone to a building on the other side of the pond. The building was made from pine logs and a rattan tree climbed the outside wall. It was midsummer and the weather was hot, but as soon as they saw that building everyone felt a burst of cool air. Huang Yaoshi led the four people into his study. A deaf and mute servant immediately came and served tea. The tea was dark green and as cold as snow. As soon as it entered their mouths the cold seeped into their bones.

Hong Qigong laughed and made a comment, "People say: 'after being a beggar for three years one would not be willing to be a government official'. Brother Yao, if I stayed in your cool place for three years, I wouldn't be willing to be a beggar any longer!"

"If Brother Qi is willing to stay to drink and talk to our hearts' content, that would truly be my wish come true," Huang Yaoshi said.

Hong Qigong could hear the sincerity in his voice and his heart was touched. "Many thanks," he said, "It's a pity the Old Beggar leads a busy and laborious life; I don't have the luxury of enjoying a peaceful life like Brother Yao."

Ouyang Feng said, "With the two of you living in the same place, as long as you don't fight each other, I'll bet within two months you will have created several sets of fist techniques or sword stances."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Are you jealous?"

"This room is a big hall for studying martial arts," Ouyang Feng explained, "It's natural that I would come to that conclusion."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Ha ... ha ...! It's another one of those, 'what-you-say-is-not-what-you-were-thinking' sort of speech."

Although these two men did not hold deep animosity towards each other, their minds were worlds apart and that was why they did not like each other. Ouyang Feng's feelings were hidden behind a thick wall, unlike Hong Qigong who was open and outspoken. When Ouyang Feng heard Hong Qigong's comment he wanted to send Hong Qigong to the grave with one strike...but his face did not show it. He laughed but did not say anything.

Huang Yaoshi pressed something on the side of the table and a landscape painting on the west wall slowly rose, revealing a secret compartment behind it. He walked towards the wall, opened up the door to the compartment and took out a roll of paper. He gently ran his fingers on the scroll several times before he faced Ouyang Ke and said, "This is the map of Peach Blossom Island, complete with all the five elements variations, the yin and yang elements and the eight-trigram changes; everything is there. Take this and study it thoroughly."

Ouyang Ke was disappointed; he was hoping he could stay on Peach Blossom Island for a while. He did not expect that Huang Yaoshi would only give him a map to look at. He knew it would be a difficult topic to learn; since he did not have a choice, he bowed respectfully and stepped forward to take the scroll from his hand.

"Hold on!" Huang Yaoshi suddenly said. Ouyang Ke was startled, he pulled his hand back. "When you take this drawing, I want you to go to Lin'an and find an inn or a temple to stay in. After three months I will send someone to retrieve it. You can memorize everything on the map; but I forbid you to make any copies," Huang Yaoshi continued.

Ouyang Ke thought, "You won't allow me to stay on Peach Blossom Island; it's just as well since I don't care much about your weird skills anyway. For the next three months I will be responsible for this chart. If I'm not careful I might lose or damage it; then what would I do? No, I'd better not take it!" He was going to say some nice words to decline the offer when suddenly another thought came into his mind, "He said he is going to send someone to retrieve it; that someone must be his daughter. That will be a great opportunity to get intimate with her." He was delighted with this thought and immediately held out his hand to receive the scroll while uttering some grateful words.

Huang Rong took the small box with the dragon pill and gave it back to Ouyang Feng. "Uncle Ouyang," she said, "This is your poison antidote pill; your niece does not dare to accept it."

Ouyang Feng thought, "If this thing fell into the Old Heretic Huang's hands, he will be impervious to my poisons. Although taking it back again seems so petty, I can't afford to let him have it." Therefore, he held out his hand to take the pill and immediately raised his hands to say goodbye to Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Yaoshi did not hold him back and sent them on their way. Walking to the door Hong Qigong said, "Poison Brother [Du Xiong], our Sword Meet on Mount Hua is at the end of next. You have to conserve your energy well since we are going to have a very tight competition."

Ouyang Feng simply smiled casually, "The way I see it, we needn't waste our energy fighting. The title 'the world's number one martial artist' has already been decided."

Hong Qigong was taken aback, "Already been decided? Could it be that Du Xiong has mastered a matchless and unique skill?"

Ouyang Feng showed a faint smile, "With such mediocre skills, how would Ouyang Feng dare to covet the title 'the world's number one martial artist'? I am talking about the person who taught our Nephew Guo."

Hong Qigong laughed, "Are you talking about the Old Beggar?" he said, "I'd like that, but Brother Yao's martial arts improve daily. For you, Poison Brother, advancing years also mean advancing skills. I am afraid Emperor Duan's martial arts skill is not getting weaker either. I don't think the Old Beggar will have any advantage."

Ouyang Feng coldly said, "Of the people who taught Nephew Guo, it's not necessarily Brother Qi's martial arts that were the finest."

"What?" Hong Qigong had barely closed his mouth when Huang Yaoshi interrupted, "Uh, are you talking about the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

"That's right!" Ouyang Feng replied, "Since the Old Urchin has mastered the 'Nine Yin Manual', then all of us: the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar, are no longer his match."

"That is not necessarily true," Huang Yaoshi said, "A manual is dead, but martial arts are alive."

Ouyang Feng noticed earlier that Huang Yaoshi had diverted his question and he did not let Guo Jing tell them Zhou Botong's whereabouts. He knew something was amiss; so he decided to mention it again just before he left. Hearing what Huang Yaoshi said, he knew his suspicions were not unsubstantiated; but he was crafty, so his face did not show any change. Nonchalantly he said, "We all know the quality of the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts; we even need to ask for their advice. Now that the Old Urchin has added the skills of the 'Nine Yin Manual' to that, even if Wang Chongyang were alive, I doubt even he would be his match, no need to mention us. Ay! The Quanzhen are very good; even if the three of us worked hard for a lifetime, we are still a notch below them."

"The Old Urchin's martial arts are a lot better than mine," Huang Yaoshi said, "But it has not reached Brother Feng or Brother Qi's level. I know this for a fact."

"Brother Yao does not need to be modest," Ouyang Feng said, "You and I are 'ban jin ba liang' [lit. half a 'jin' to eight 'liang' = comparable or equal]. You have said yourself that

Zhou Botong's martial arts are not as good as yours. However, I am afraid ..." He shook his head.

"Brother Feng will find out next year at the Sword Meet on Mount Hua," Huang Yaoshi smiled.

Ouyang Feng was serious, "Brother Yao, I usually respect your martial arts, but I doubted it when you said you can defeat the Old Urchin. When it comes to him, you'd better watch out."

It was not that Huang Yaoshi did not know that he was being provoked, but he was a proud man, so of course he did not want anyone to belittle him. Seething with indignation he said, "The Old Urchin is actually on Peach Blossom Island. Brother has imprisoned him here for fifteen years."

Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong were dumbstruck. Hong Qigong simply raised his eyebrows, but Ouyang Feng actually broke out laughing, "Brother Yao...that is a very good joke!"

Huang Yaoshi did not say anything but pointed his finger as if showing the way; then he exerted strength to his feet and flew back to the bamboo grove. Hong Qigong followed with his left hand holding Guo Jing's arm, his right hand Huang Rong's. Ouyang Feng took Ouyang Ke's arm and together they used their lightness kungfu. Not too long afterwards they arrived in front of Zhou Botong's cave.

When they were still quite a distance away Huang Yaoshi noticed that the cave was empty. "Ah!" he uttered in surprise. With his body as light as a feather, he leaped up into the sky and after several jumps he arrived at the cave's mouth. His left foot landed first, only to feel as if he'd stepped on an empty space. Even encountering this situation suddenly, he did not panic; he kicked his right foot

into the air and jumped vertically. Again he landed gently with his left foot, but again felt he was stepping onto empty air. This time he was not able to use anything as a stepping stone, so with the backward flick of his hand he pulled the jade flute from his belt and in one fluid motion struck the cave wall with the flute. With one push his body flew out of the cave like an arrow.

That vertical leap, pulling out the jade flute and flying backwards outside of the cave was done in a flash. Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng, seeing his wonderful skill, cheered...only to hear a “Splotch!” sound. Huang Yaoshi’s feet had landed in a hole in the ground outside the cave.

Huang Yaoshi felt his feet stepping on something wet and soft. With a light kick once again his body flew up. While he was still in the air he saw Hong Qigong and the rest had arrived and they did not fall into any traps. He landed gently at his daughter’s side. Suddenly a foul stench attacked his nostrils; he looked down and, to his dismay, he saw his feet were covered with faeces.

Everyone was puzzled. With his high level of martial arts skill, plus his intelligence, how could Huang Yaoshi fall into someone’s trap?

Huang Yaoshi was furious; he took a tree branch to test the ground, poking to the east and striking to the west. To his surprise, only those three holes were there, the rest was solid ground.

Obviously Zhou Botong had expected him to come rushing into the cave, so he’d prepared the first hole. He had carefully calculated that with his level of lightness kungfu Huang Yaoshi would leap up vertically to avoid falling into that hole; therefore, he prepared the second hole. Again, he knew that this second hole would not trap Huang Yaoshi. So

he cleverly placed the third hole, knowing Huang Yaoshi would leap backwards out of the cave, and filled this hole with faeces.

Huang Yaoshi carefully entered the cave, looked in all directions, and saw nothing except some clay jars and clay bowls. He vaguely noticed several lines of characters written on the cave wall.

Watching Huang Yaoshi fall into a trap, Ouyang Feng laughed inside. But now he saw Huang Yaoshi walking towards the cave wall to take a look; he thought there was a slight possibility that the 'Nine Yin Manual' was written on that wall, so he threw caution to the wind and hurriedly went forward to take a closer look. What he saw was several characters carved with a needle which read, "Old Heretic Huang, you have broken both of my legs and imprisoned me inside this cave for fifteen years. I should have broken both of your legs to vent my anger. But after some thought I decided to let it pass. I give you this pile of faeces and a pot of stinky urine instead. Please, please ..." The characters below the 'please' were covered by a leaf.

Huang Yaoshi casually stretched his hand to lift the leaf up, but the leaf was tied to a string. Without thinking he pulled the string only to hear a knocking noise above him. Realizing what was happening Huang Yaoshi quickly jumped to the left. Right next to him Ouyang Feng was also quick; seeing Huang Yaoshi move, he jumped to the right. Who would have thought that following a series of clanking sounds, a bunch of clay jars fell from both sides? Both men were drenched in smelly urine!

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "How sweet! How sweet!" he shouted. Huang Yaoshi was fuming mad and shouted some curse words. Ouyang Feng was very good at concealing his feelings, so he merely smiled.

Huang Rong dashed back to the house and brought a change of clothes for her father. She also brought one of her father's robes for Ouyang Feng.

Huang Yaoshi decided to look inside the cave one more time, being very careful not to trip on any more booby-traps. He took down the leaf and saw two lines of very fine characters, "... don't pull the leaf. There is smelly urine above to drench you. This is the absolute, one hundred percent, truth! Don't ever say that I didn't warn you."

Huang Yaoshi was angry, but also amused. Suddenly he remembered that the urine was still a little bit warm; he turned and walked out the cave. "The Old Urchin did not leave too long ago; we can still catch up with him."

Guo Jing was wary, "As soon as those two see each other they will certainly engage in a fierce battle," he thought. But before he had a chance to voice his opinion Huang Yaoshi had already flown to the east.

Everybody knew the pathways of the island were mysterious and nobody dared to be left behind; so they followed closely. Not too far ahead they could see Zhou Botong leisurely strolling along. Huang Yaoshi exerted his strength to his feet and flew like an arrow leaving its bow and in a flash he approached Zhou Botong. He stretched out his hand to grab Zhou Botong's neck.

Zhou Botong evaded to the left. Turning his body around, he called out, "Wow! It's the sweet smelling Old Heretic Huang!"

In this one grab Huang Yaoshi had used the skill he'd painstakingly trained for decades; it was swift and fierce. He was angry because of the urine and dung, so he'd used one hundred percent of his strength in that one attack. Who would have thought that Zhou Botong was able to evade his

attack casually, as though it took not too much effort at all. Huang Yaoshi's heart turned cold and he stopped his attack. He calmed himself and looked at Zhou Botong. To his surprise Zhou Botong's hands were tied in front of his chest; but he was smiling happily and his face showed contentment.

Guo Jing rushed forward and said, "Big Brother, Island Master Huang has become my father-in-law; now we belong to the same family."

Zhou Botong sighed, "What Father-in-law? Why didn't you listen to me? Old Heretic Huang is wicked and weird; how can his daughter be any better? You will suffer the consequences for the rest of your life. Good Brother, let me tell you this: No matter what happens, you cannot take as your wife the daughter of someone who loves to drench himself in urine everyday. It's a good thing you haven't yet bowed to heaven and the earth to marry her; you can still slip away. Quickly, run away as far as you can, otherwise she'll come looking for you ..."

He was still babbling when Huang Rong stepped forward and smiled, "Big Brother Zhou, look who's coming behind you?"

Zhou Botong turned his head, but of course he did not see anyone. Huang Rong raised her father's smelly clothes and threw them towards his back. Zhou Botong heard the swishing sound and stepped sideways. "Splat!" the bundle of clothes fell to the ground dispersing its foul odor everywhere.

Zhou Botong doubled up with laughter. "Old Heretic Huang," he said, "Even though you imprisoned me for fifteen years and broke both of my legs, I only let you to

step in my faeces and drenched you with my urine. Don't you think that is a fair trade?"

Huang Yaoshi pondered for a moment and felt Zhou Botong was right. He did not give it another thought and asked, "Why did you tie up your hands like that?"

"I have my reasons, which I can't tell you," Zhou Botong said, repeatedly shaking his head and looking solemn.

Actually when Zhou Botong was forced to endure suffering in that hole, he thought several times of coming out and fighting Huang Yaoshi. However, he realized that he was still not Huang Yaoshi's match. Besides, if he got killed or heavily injured, who would defend the 'Nine Yin Manual' entrusted to him by his martial brother? Therefore, he had to swallow his pride and endure everything patiently. Then Guo Jing came onto the scene. Together they played four-hand mutual combat until one day he had the idea of fighting as two Zhou Botongs against one Huang Yaoshi. He was confident that no matter how high Huang Yaoshi's skills were, he would be able to exact revenge for his fifteen years of suffering.

After Guo Jing left, he sat on the ground and all kinds of memories came flooding back to his mind: dozens of years of gratitude, grudges, love and hate came until he felt like a thick curtain was covering his mind. Suddenly he heard from the distance the flute, zither and whistle sounds battling each other. His spirits were stirred; he became agitated, wanted to dash out, and had difficulty controlling his emotions. He had been pondering his own set of questions for a while, "My little brother's martial arts are still far below mine, but why is it that Old Heretic Huang's flute sound did not affect him at all?" After he'd befriended Guo Jing for many days he started to understand Guo Jing's personality. That day, after thinking deeply for a while, it

suddenly dawned on him; "That's right! That's right!" he exclaimed, "He is young, does not understand the relationship between a man and a woman and does not know its pleasures and heartaches. Moreover, he is simple-minded, not ambitious, has a naïve personality and a pure heart. I, on the other hand, am old; but why do I still think about revenge? I am so narrow-minded. It really is ridiculous!"

Although he belonged to the Quanzhen Sect, he had never become a Taoist Priest; still, the Taoist principles were deeply ingrained in his heart: 'peace and tranquility' [qing jing wu wei], lead a simple life and suppress ambition, all those Taoist teachings. It was like a light bulb suddenly turned on in his head. He let out a long breath, stood up and walked outside of the cave. For the first time in many years he realized that the sky was so blue and the clouds so white. His heart became clear and bright. The suffering he experienced from Huang Yaoshi for the past fifteen years simply became a small matter in his mind.

Once outside he thought aloud, "Once I leave Peach Blossom Island I am not coming back. But if I don't leave some souvenirs for the Old Heretic Huang, how will he remember me in the days to come?" Therefore, with much eagerness, he dug some holes and filled them with his faeces and found some jars and filled them with his urine. After working hard for half a day he finally left the cave.

He'd only walked several steps when he suddenly remembered something, "The pathways of Peach Blossom Island are strange, so how will I know the right path to take? If I leave Brother Guo on this island, chances are that more harm will come his way; I must take him with me. If the Old Heretic Huang tries to stop, ha ... ha ..., should the Old Heretic Huang want to fight, one Old Heretic Huang won't be a match for two Old Urchins!" After thinking about

that he casually swung his hand and ‘Crack!’ a small tree by the pathway broke in two. He was stunned! “How come I am so strong? This has nothing to do with the ‘Mutual Hands Combat’ technique.”

He swung his hand several more times and ‘Crack! Crack! Crack!’ without too much effort he broke seven or eight small trees along the way. He was horrified. “This ... this is the energy cultivation from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. I ... when...when did I learn it?” All of a sudden his body was drenched in a cold sweat. “Strange, really strange!” he muttered.

He clearly remembered his late martial brother’s death wish; that no one from Quanzhen was allowed to learn anything from the manual. He hadn’t thought that in order to teach Guo Jing he had to recite the text to him everyday and used his hands to provide a clearer explanation; unexpectedly, the manual had become ingrained in his mind. Even in his sleep he would dream about the manual, so he subconsciously cultivated his energy based on the text. Since his martial arts were already high, his understanding of martial arts theory was also profound. Because the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ was based on Taoist principles which he had already learned, the manual became intertwined with his own basic knowledge. He did not wish to learn these martial arts, but it came to him anyway.

He vented his frustration by shouting loudly, “Bad! It’s really bad! This is called ‘once the ghost inhabits your body, you cannot drive it out’. I wanted to play a big joke on Brother Guo, but who knew that by smashing a big rock, the debris would hurt your own foot.”

He was depressed for a long while and kept knocking his head. Afterwards an idea came into his mind; he peeled off

some tree bark, made a rope, then with his teeth he tied his own hands while muttering loudly, "From now on, since I cannot forget the manual completely, I must not resort to violence towards anyone. Even if the Old Heretic Huang chases me, I cannot fight him and therefore disobey my martial brother's death wish. Ay, Old Urchin, Old Urchin, you reap what you sow!"

Of course Huang Yaoshi could not guess the reason. He only knew the Old Urchin was naughty and strange, so he simply said, "Old Urchin, this is Brother Ouyang, who I believe you have met, this is ..." Before he could finish, Zhou Botong had walked around them all, sniffing here and there, and then he laughed, "This must be the Old Beggar Hong Qigong. I know he is a good man. 'Heaven's nets do not miss'! My stinky urine only drenched two people, the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison. Ouyang Feng, you fought with me once and now I've soaked you with my urine; we are even now and nobody suffers a loss."

Ouyang Feng merely smiled but did not say anything. He came close to Huang Yaoshi and whispered in his ear, "Brother Yao, this man's martial arts are amazing; he's already surpassed both you and me. I think it best not to provoke him."

Huang Yaoshi thought, "We haven't seen each other for twenty years, how would you know my martial arts are inferior to his?" To Zhou Botong he said, "Botong, I have asked you over and over to let me burn the 'Nine Yin Manual' as a sacrifice in front of my late wife's memorial. As soon as you hand it to me, I am going to let you go. Where did you think you were going just now?"

"I am tired of living on this island," Zhou Botong said, "I am going outside to take a stroll."

“And where is the manual?” Huang Yaoshi said holding out his hand.

“I gave that to you earlier,” Zhou Botong said.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” Huang Yaoshi said, “When did you give it to me?”

Zhou Botong smiled, “Guo Jing is your son-in-law, is he not? Then he belongs to you, does he not? I have passed on the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ from beginning to end to him; isn’t that the same as giving the manual to you?”

Guo Jing was surprised. Panic stricken he called out, “Big Brother, this ... this ... you taught me the ‘Nine Yin Manual’?”

Zhou Botong burst out laughing, “Do you think it was a fake?”

Guo Jing was dumbstruck and he felt like a fool. Zhou Botong was so happy. It was exactly for this moment that he was willing to expend immense efforts to get Guo Jing to memorize the ‘Nine Yin Manual’; he wanted to see Guo Jing’s expression when he found out that he’d learned the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ in spite of his earlier refusal. Now that this goal was achieved, how could Zhou Botong be not as happy as he was crazy?

“The first volume was always in your hands, but where did you get the second volume?” Huang Yaoshi asked.

“Didn’t your good son-in-law deliver it to me personally?” Zhou Botong smiled mischievously.

“I ... I did not!” Guo Jing was taken aback.

Huang Yaoshi was very indignant and thought, “This kid Guo Jing dares to deceive me and poor blind Mei Chaofeng

is still desperately looking for that book.” He shot an angry glare towards Guo Jing, then turned his head towards Zhou Botong, “I want the original manual.”

“Brother,” Zhou Botong called Guo Jing, “Help me take the book from my pocket.” Guo Jing stepped forward and groping inside Zhou Botong’s pocket he took out a book about half an inch thick. Zhou Botong held out his hand to receive the book and said to Huang Yaoshi, “This is the first volume of the manual; the second volume is folded inside it. If you have the skill, come and take it.”

“What kind of skill are you talking about?” Huang Yaoshi asked.

Zhou Botong held the book tightly in his hands, bent his head and said “Wait, let me think ...” Quite a while later he smiled and said, “Pasting skill!”

“What?” Huang Yaoshi was puzzled.

Zhou Botong lifted his hands high in the air, and soon the book became a million pieces. A flurry of paper pieces flew from his hands like a flock of butterflies flying in all directions, carried by the sea breeze, floating to the east and scattering to the west. It would be impossible to track them down.

Huang Yaoshi was startled, angry and at the same time, surprised that Zhou’s internal energy was so profound. In that short period of time the book was completely gone. Remembering his late wife, Huang Yaoshi felt a stab of pain in his heart. “Old Urchin, you played a trick on me! Don’t ever think of leaving this island alive!” he shouted angrily. Flying forward his palm got very close to Zhou Botong’s face.

Zhou Botong moved his body just a little bit and like a pendulum he swung to the left and to the right. With a swish, swish sound Huang Yaoshi's palms danced in the air, very close to Zhou Botong's body, but were not able to touch him. It was Huang Yaoshi's specialty, the 'Peach Blossom Divine Sword Palm' [tao hua shen jian zhang]; who would have guessed that after about twenty stances, it seemed the palm technique was useless against Zhou Botong.

Huang Yaoshi was puzzled because Zhou Botong did not launch any counterattacks, while he had used all of his strength compelling Zhou Botong to withstand his attack. He was suddenly alarmed, "How could I, Huang Yaoshi, fight someone who has both his hands tied?"

Leaping back three steps he called out, "Old Urchin, I have done something inappropriate to you, but your legs have healed. Quickly break the rope binding your hands and let me fight your 'Nine Yin Manual' martial arts."

Zhou Botong looked dismayed and repeatedly he shook his head, "I don't want to lie to you, but I have my own difficulties. No matter what happens, I can't take off the ropes."

"Then let me take it off for you," Huang Yaoshi said, immediately moving forward to touch his hands.

"Aiyo! Help! Somebody help me!" Zhou Botong cried out and rolled around on the ground.

Guo Jing was shocked. "Father-in-law!" he called out. He was about to dash forward to block Huang Yaoshi when Hong Qigong held him back. "Don't act foolishly!" he hissed. Guo Jing halted and watched. Even though Zhou Botong was rolling around on the ground, he was very agile. Huang

Yaoshi grabbed and kicked but was unable to even touch his body.

“Look closely at how his body moves,” Hong Qigong whispered.

Only then did Guo Jing realize that Zhou Botong was moving according to the ‘Snake Slithers, the Wild Cat Flips’ [she xing li fan] from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’. He watched with a rapt attention. Every time he saw an exquisite move he would cheer, “Good!”

Huang Yaoshi was getting angrier; his hands flew everywhere, resembling a hatchet or a knife hacking in every direction. Zhou Botong’s long sleeve and part of his robe had been slashed by the strength of Huang Yaoshi’s hand. A moment later his long beard and long hair were also cut. Although he was not injured, Zhou Botong knew that if the fight was prolonged he might not stay so lucky. In perhaps half a move later he would be dead or at least heavily injured.

At that moment Huang Yaoshi’s left hand swept horizontally, while his right hand slashed down diagonally and each palm contained three deadly variations within. Zhou Botong knew that no matter how quickly he could move, it would be difficult to avoid this attack. He had no other choice but to exert his strength in both hands and break the rope. As soon as his hands were free, his left hand parried the attack, while his right hand went to his own back and scratched, “Aiyo! The itch is unbearable,” he said.

Huang Yaoshi was inwardly alarmed when he saw Zhou Botong acting so casually, even to the point of playfulness, while they were fighting ferociously. Huang Yaoshi sent out three more fierce stances and all three were his best ones.

"I can't fight you with one hand," Zhou Botong said, "Ay! I can't help it. No matter what, I can't let my martial brother down." He put all his strength into his right hand and parried the attack; while his left hand hung loosely at his side. His strength was still inferior to Huang Yaoshi's pure internal energy, so as soon as the two hands collided, Zhou Botong was shaken and he staggered back a few steps.

Huang Yaoshi flew forward with both palms surrounding Zhou Botong's body. "Use both hands! With one hand you are not my match," he called out.

"I can't," Zhou Botong said, "I have to use only one hand."

Huang Yaoshi was indignant, "All right then, try this!" Both of his palms struck forward with full strength. A loud bang was heard and Zhou Botong fell down to the ground. He sat still with both eyes closed. Huang Yaoshi withheld his hands and saw Zhou Botong coughing and spurting blood from his mouth; his face was paper-white.

Everyone thought it was strange; had he really fought with Huang Yaoshi, even if he couldn't win, he certainly wouldn't have suffered so badly. Why did he insist on using only one hand?

Zhou Botong stood up slowly and said, "The Old Urchin has suffered the consequences of his own actions. Even though I had no intention to, I unexpectedly learned the martial arts from the 'Nine Yin Manual' and I violated my martial brother's death wish. If I used both of my hands, Old Heretic Huang, you are not my match."

Huang Yaoshi was aware that what he said was the truth; he was silent. He realized he had no reason to imprison Zhou Botong on the island for fifteen years and he also had no reason to injure him just now. He took a jade box from his pocket, opened it and produced three blood-red pills; he

gave the pills to Zhou Botong and said, "Botong, there is no medicine under the heavens that can surpass these Peach Blossom Island red pills. Take one right now and then take the next two seven days apart and your internal injury won't be a problem any longer. Let me take you away from this island."

Zhou Botong nodded, took the pills and swallowed one; after circulating his breath for a while he vomited some congealed blood. He said, "Old Heretic Huang, your red pill is very effective; no wonder you are called 'Yaoshi' [master pharmacist]. Eek! Strange! Very strange! My name is 'Botong', I wonder what that means?" After pondering that question for a while he shook his head and said, "Old Heretic Huang, I must go now. Are you or aren't you going to let me go?"

"I do not dare stop you," Huang Yaoshi replied, "It's up to you if you stay or go. Brother Botong, from today, if you ever have the desire to come here, I will welcome you wholeheartedly. Now let me walk you to the boat which will take you back to the mainland."

Guo Jing squatted to pick up Zhou Botong and carried him on his back as he followed Huang Yaoshi and walked to the seashore. Arriving at the dock he saw six or seven boats, both large and small.

"Brother Yao," Ouyang Feng said, "You needn't send a boat to take Big Brother Zhou home. He can ride on Little Brother's boat."

"In that case do as Brother Feng desires," Huang Yaoshi said. He made a hand signal to a deaf and mute servant and that servant went onto a big boat nearby. When he reappeared he had a tray full of gold coins.

“Botong,” Huang Yaoshi said, “Take this money and use it to play around. Your martial arts are better than Old Heretic Huang’s. I admire you very much.”

Zhou Botong’s eyes shone with a mischievous twinkle. He looked towards Ouyang Feng’s big boat and saw a white flag on the bow. On the flag was embroidered a strange looking snake with two heads and both mouths were open showing forked tongues. He was not happy at all.

Ouyang Feng took a wooden whistle from his pocket and blew some notes; before long there came strange noises from the forest ahead. Two Peach Blossom Island servants came leading some White Camel Mountain snake herders out from the forest, followed by row after row of snakes which slithered onto the gangplank and went into the boat’s hold.

“I am not riding on Western Poison’s boat!” Zhou Botong cried out, “I’m scared of snakes!”

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly, “That is all right too; you can ride on that boat.” He pointed to a boat nearby.

Zhou Botong shook his head no, “I don’t want that boat, I want that BIG boat.”

Huang Yaoshi’s face changed a little. “Botong, that ship is damaged, it is not fixed yet. You can’t have it.”

Everybody could see that the boat’s stern was tall and the hull was painted blue and gold; it was very beautiful. It looked new and strong, why did he say it was damaged?

“Why can’t I ride on that boat?” Zhou Botong asked, “Old Heretic Huang, how come you are so stingy?”

“That is a most ill-fated boat, that’s why it is always anchored here,” Huang Yaoshi explained. “Since when have

I been stingy? If you don't believe me, I'll have the boat burned for you to see." After making some hand signals, four deaf and mute servants lighted some torches and rushed to the boat to burn it.

Zhou Botong suddenly sat on the ground, flailing his hands and feet, pulling his hair and beard and bawling loudly. Seeing him acting like that startled every one. Guo Jing was the only one who really knew his temperament so he was just fascinated. Zhou Botong pulled his beard and rolled around on the ground, "I want to ride on the new boat; I want to ride the new boat." Huang Rong quickly moved forward to stop the four servants.

Hong Qigong smiled, "Brother Yao," he said, "For all of my life the Old Beggar has been ill-fated. Let me accompany the Old Urchin on this ill-fated boat. We can use poison to combat poison. Let us see whether the Old Beggar's unlucky aura wins, or if your ill-fated boat prevails."

"Brother Qi, I thought you were going to stay on the island for several days," Huang Yaoshi said, "Why such a hurry to leave?"

"Within a few days the world's big beggars, medium-sized beggars, and little beggars will gather at Yueyang in Hunan province. They will look to the Old Beggar to appoint a new leader. Should the Old Beggar meet a calamity and return to heaven before appointing a successor, who will lead the world's beggars? That's why the Old Beggar has to go, whether he wants it or not. Your brother truly appreciates Brother Yao's generosity. When your daughter and son-in-law get married, I will come back to disturb the wedding."

Huang Yaoshi sighed, "Brother Qi, you are truly an ardent man; you dedicate your life toiling for others, like a horse that never stops galloping."

Hong Qigong laughed, "The Old Beggar never rides a horse and my feet can't be compared to a horse's hoofs. Aiyo! Something's wrong! You are indirectly scolding me by saying that my feet are hoofs; wouldn't that mean you are saying I am a horse?"

Huang Rong laughed, "Shifu, you said it yourself, my father didn't scold you."

"Of course, a Shifu will always be inferior to a father," Hong Qigong said, "Just for that I am going to take a Mistress Old Beggar and we'll have a baby girl beggar for you to look after."

Huang Rong clapped her hands, "That's great! I will have a little beggar martial sister to play with. Won't that be fun?"

Ouyang Ke stole a glance at her; in the bright sunlight she looked so beautiful with her pink cheeks like a spring flower and as colorful as the rosy-colored clouds at dawn. He couldn't help but feel crazy about her. However, from her, his thoughts went to Guo Jing and his pulse quickened. Knowing she only had eyes for Guo Jing, his anger rose and he swore in his heart, "There will come a day when I will kill this stinky kid."

Hong Qigong held out his hand to help Zhou Botong onto the boat as he said, "Botong, I will accompany you on this new boat. Old Heretic Huang is so weird and we shouldn't pay any attention to him."

Zhou Botong was delighted, "Old Beggar, you are a very kind man, what do you say we become sworn brothers?"

Hong Qigong had not yet answered before Guo Jing interrupted, "Big Brother Zhou, you and I have become sworn brothers so how could you take my master as your sworn brother as well?"

Zhou Botong laughed, "What's the problem? If your father-in-law is kind enough and lets me ride on this new boat, I might be so happy as to take him as my sworn brother too."

"What about me?" Huang Rong laughed.

Zhou Botong squinted his eyes, "I am not too keen to take on a baby girl; if I look at pretty women too much, they turn into trash." Taking Hong Qigong's arm he walked to the boat.

Huang Yaoshi quickly blocked their way, stretching both arms and saying, "Old Huang does not dare to take advantage of others. Riding on this boat will bring more harm than good. Gentlemen, you don't need to prove your courage, it is well known on the Central Plains."

Hong Qigong laughed heartily, "You have repeatedly warned us; even if the Old Beggar returns to heaven due to seasickness I will still appreciate Brother Yao's friendship." Although he said those things jokingly, in his heart he was quite wary since Huang Yaoshi had twice tried to stop them from boarding the boat. He knew something was wrong with that boat, but Zhou Botong was insistent on going aboard. He'd seen with his own eyes how stubborn Zhou Botong was. If something really went wrong, Zhou Botong could not possibly face the danger alone with his internal injury and all. That was the reason he made up his mind to go with Zhou Botong.

Huang Yaoshi made a 'humph' sound and said, "You two gentlemen are experts in martial arts; I am sure you would be able to turn bad luck into good. Old Huang worries too much. You, the boy named Guo, you are going with them."

Guo Jing was startled. When he became Huang Yaoshi's son-in-law he was called 'Jing'er' but now Huang Yaoshi suddenly changed the way he called him; moreover, his

expression was so stern. Looking at Huang Yaoshi he said, "Father-in-law ..."

"Who's your Father-in-law?" Huang Yaoshi cut him off with a harsh voice, "You are a greedy lying boy! If you ever set foot on Peach Blossom Island again, even half a step, don't blame Old Huang for being ruthless." Reaching backwards he grabbed a servant's collar and shouted, "This is your example!" The deaf and mute servant's tongue had been cut out, so only a low deep gurgling was heard from his throat as his body flew into the sea. His internal organs had been crushed by Huang Yaoshi's palm. He dropped to the sea and in an instant disappeared without a trace among the waves.

The other deaf and mute servants were extremely terrified and they all knelt down at once. All were originally criminals and Huang Yaoshi had investigated their backgrounds carefully before capturing them one by one and taking them to the island. He cut out their tongues and pierced their ear drums, making them his slaves. He once said, "Old Huang is not a gentleman, so Jianghu people call me the Eastern Heretic. Naturally I don't like gentlemen as my companions and I prefer wicked people to be my servants. The more wicked they are, the more I like them." Seeing that servant, even though he deserved to be condemned, struck by his palm and thrown out into the sea without any reason, had shaken everyone. They could not help but sigh inwardly, "The Old Heretic Huang is really wicked."

Guo Jing was frightened; he also knelt down on the ground.

"What did he do to offend you?" Hong Qigong asked.

Huang Yaoshi did not answer his question, instead, he sternly asked Guo Jing, "Did you or did you not give the

second volume of the 'Nine Yin Manual' to Zhou Botong?"

"I did give something to Big Brother Zhou, but I really did not know it was the manual," Guo Jing said, "If I'd known ..."

"What do you mean you didn't know?" Zhou Botong interrupted. He was always ignorant as to what was serious and what was not. The more other people were upset, the more he wanted to play practical jokes on them. Without waiting for Guo Jing to explain he said, "You said it yourself, that you took that manual from Mei Chaofeng and said you were lucky that old man Huang Yaoshi didn't know. You also said that after you mastered the manual, you will become the number one martial arts expert in the world."

Guo Jing was stupefied. "Big Brother, I ... when did I say that?" he said with a trembling voice.

Zhou Botong's eyes glittered and with a stern voice he said, "You certainly did say that."

The fact that Guo Jing was able to recite the book was well-known to those present; whether he knew it was the 'Nine Yin Manual' or not, nobody cared. Now that Zhou Botong had confirmed it, Huang Yaoshi was very, very angry. Why would he think Zhou Botong was only joking? He forgot that Zhou Botong was childish and always liked to make jokes, while Guo Jing was naïve and unable to tell lies. He was so wild with rage that he was afraid he would rip Guo Jing apart and thus smear his own reputation; so instead he raised his hands in respect towards Zhou Botong, Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng, saying, "Please forgive me!" Pulling Huang Rong's hand he turned around and walked away.

Huang Rong still wanted to have a few words with Guo Jing. "Jing ge ge ..." she called; but she was pulled by her father

and in a blink of an eye they had traveled dozens of feet, disappearing into the forest.

Zhou Botong burst out in laughter, but stopped abruptly because his chest hurt. Finally he chuckled and said, "The Old Heretic Huang has fallen into my trap. I spoke nonsense to deceive him and he took it seriously. Amusing...very amusing!"

Hong Qigong was taken aback. "Then Jing'er really didn't know beforehand?" he asked.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Of course he didn't know! He thought the 'Nine Yin' martial arts were evil; had he known, he wouldn't have wanted to learn it with me. Brother, you memorized the manual really well didn't you? Even if you want to forget it, you can't, can you?" He held his stomach and burst out into laughter again and didn't care if it hurt his chest, so his expression was really distorted.

Hong Qigong stomped his foot. "Ay! Old Urchin! Don't you think this joke is too much? I am going to talk to Brother Yao." Moving his feet he dashed into the forest, but the pathways were confusing and he did not know which way Huang Yaoshi had gone. As for the deaf and mute servants, as soon as their master left, they scampered away following him. Hong Qigong had no one to lead him, so he was compelled to come back. Then he suddenly remembered that Ouyang Ke had the detailed map of Peach Blossom Island. "Nephew Ouyang, can I borrow the Peach Blossom Island map, please?" he asked urgently.

Ouyang Ke shook his head, "Without Uncle Huang's permission little nephew does not dare to let other people see it; Uncle Hong please don't blame me."

"Humph!" Hong Qigong snorted. In his heart he said, "I am really stupid; how can I borrow the map from this kid? He

earnestly wishes for Old Heretic Huang to hate my dumb disciple." While he was still staring at the forest he suddenly saw some white shadows coming. It turned out they were Ouyang Feng's thirty-two white clothed dancing girls.

As they came close to Ouyang Feng, they bent their knees and one of them said, "Master Huang told us to go back with Master."

Ouyang Feng did not even look their way; he simply waved his hand telling them to board his boat. To Hong Qigong and Zhou Botong he said, "I am afraid Brother Yao might have put some booby-traps on board. Don't you two gentlemen worry, Little Brother will follow closely in my boat. In case of an emergency we can lend you a hand."

Zhou Botong angrily said, "Who wants your charity? I want to see what kind of gadgets Old Heretic Huang put on his boat. If you follow us the danger won't be there; where is the fun part then? If you mess with me, the Old Urchin will drench you with urine one more time!"

Ouyang Feng laughed, "Very well! In that case, until we meet again." He cupped his fists and took his nephew aboard his boat.

Guo Jing was still staring blankly at where Huang Rong had disappeared, lost in thought. Zhou Botong laughed, "Brother, let us board the boat. I wonder if this ill-fated boat will swallow the three of us alive" His left hand took Hong Qigong's arm and his right hand pulled Guo Jing along and together they boarded the new boat.

The boat came with seven or eight sailors who waited to serve them; they were all mute. Zhou Botong laughed, "One day Old Heretic Huang will be so angry that he cuts out his precious daughter's tongue. Only then will I admire him for

having guts.” Listening to this Guo Jing could not help but shiver. Zhou Botong saw him and laughed heartily, “Are you afraid?” he asked, and then made a hand signal to the sailors to start sailing. The sailors hoisted the anchor and raised the sail; under a southern wind they headed north.

“Come,” Hong Qigong said, “Let us take a look at this boat and see what is so strange about it.” Three men walked the boat from stem to stern; from the deck to the bottom of the hold. The boat was painted in bright and clear paint and the hold contained a supply of food and drinks...water, white rice, wine, meat and vegetables in abundance. But nothing was out of the ordinary.

“Old Heretic Huang deceived us!” Zhou Botong said hatefully, “Where is the strange thing on this boat he was talking about? He is such a liar!”

Hong Qigong, however, still had doubts. He leaped to the mast and with his strength tried to rock the masts and the sails, but again, he found nothing out of the ordinary. He lifted his eyes and looked in the distance; he saw seagulls flying, the waves rolling and the horizon where the sea met the sky. The boat’s three sails were fully raised as they headed north. He opened his collar and enjoyed the invigorating wind. Turning his head he saw Ouyang Feng’s boat following approximately two li [about 1 km] behind.

Hong Qigong leaped down from the mast and made a hand signal to the sailor at the rudder telling him to change course to the northwest. A moment later he looked again and saw that Ouyang Feng’s boat had also changed direction to the northwest.

“What is he following us for?” Hong Qigong muttered under his breath, “Can he really have good intentions? The day Old Venom shows kindness of heart, the sun may have to

rise in the west.” He was afraid if Zhou Botong knew he would throw a fit of temper. He didn’t say anything, but signaled the sailor to change course to the east.

The boat made such an abrupt turn that the sails were almost touching the water and they slowed down. In approximately the time needed to drink a cup of tea Ouyang Feng’s boat also changed direction to the east. “If you want to settle our score on the sea, that’s all right with me,” Hong Qigong thought.

He left the deck to enter the cabin and saw Guo Jing looking depressed; he was quiet and lost in thought. Hong Qigong said, “Tu’er [disciple], let me teach you how a beggar begs for rice: if the master of the house does not give you anything, you hang around his door for three days and three nights and see if he still refuses to give you anything.”

Zhou Botong laughed, “What if the master of the house owns a vicious dog? What if he told the dog to bite you because you don’t want to go? What would you do?” he asked.

Hong Qigong laughed, “In that case he is a heartless rich man. If you come again at night and steal his belongings, you are not violating heaven’s law.”

Zhou Botong turned to Guo Jing. “Brother, do you understand your Master’s speech? He taught you to be persistent in front of your father-in-law. If he still won’t give his daughter to you and beats you for no reason, then you can steal her at night,” he said, “But if you really want to steal that treasure, you don’t have to do it yourself; all you need to do is call out, ‘bao bei er [Treasure, precious], come!’ And she will come out and follow you.”

Listening to him Guo Jing was unable to restrain a smile. He watched Zhou Botong pacing up and down the cabin; he

could not stay still even for a moment. Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "Big Brother, do you have a destination in mind?" he asked.

"I don't have one," replied Zhou Botong, "I will go where my heart tells me to. I stayed on Peach Blossom Island for too long and I felt cooped up."

"I have a favor I'd like to ask Big Brother," Guo Jing said.

Zhou Botong shook his head. "No, I am not going to Peach Blossom Island to help you steal a wife, I don't want to."

Guo Jing blushed, "No, not that," he said, "I want to bother Big Brother to visit Cloud Manor in Yixing, by Lake Tai."

"What for?" Zhou Botong asked.

"The Cloud Manor Master, Lu Chengfeng is a brave hero," Guo Jing explained, "He was Father-in-law's disciple. Because of the 'Twin Killers of the Dark Winds', Father-in-law broke his legs and he became a cripple. Big Brother's legs recovered, so I want to ask Big Brother to teach him the technique of healing his legs."

"That's easy," Zhou Botong said, "Even if Old Heretic Huang broke my legs again, I know how to heal myself. If you don't believe me, go ahead, break my legs." After saying that, he sat on a chair and stretched out his legs with a challenging look on his face.

Guo Jing smiled, "I don't need to try, I know Big Brother has this ability," he said.

While they were still talking a loud crashing noise was suddenly heard. The door burst open and a sailor came rushing in with a terror-stricken expression. He could not speak, so he just gesticulated in panic. Three of them knew

something was terribly wrong, so they dashed out of the cabin.

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Huang Rong wanted to have a word with Guo Jing but was pulled away by her father. She was very upset. As soon as they arrived at their home she went straight to her room and locked the door, crying uncontrollably. In anger Huang Yaoshi had expelled Guo Jing from the island; now that his anger had subsided he regretted his rash decision. He realized he had sent Guo Jing to his death. He wanted to comfort his daughter, but no matter how hard or how long he knocked on her door, she just turned a deaf ear to him. During supper he called for her, but she did not appear; he sent a servant with Huang Rong's dinner but she threw it to the floor and even hit the servant a couple of times.

"Father said that if Jing ge ge ever sets his foot on this island again he will kill him. I want to go and find him, but how can I leave Father alone here? He will definitely be grieved," Huang Rong pondered it back and forth, but could not come up with any ideas until her stomach hurt.

Several months ago Huang Yaoshi scolded her and she ran away from the island; with childish thoughts she did not want to go back. Afterwards, when she met her father again, she saw that the number of white hairs on his temple had suddenly increased. It had only been several months, but he looked ten years older than she remembered him. She felt really sorry, and promised in her heart never to leave him again. Who would have thought that she would now face this difficult situation? She stayed on her bed all day, crying. She thought, "If Mother were still alive, she would take care of me; would she allow me to suffer like this?"

While thinking about her mother she decided to get out of the room and walked through the hall to the front door. Her house on Peach Blossom Island had a front door that was always open, night and day, unless there was storm coming. Huang Rong went out into the yard. There was a starry sky and the air was heavy with the scent flowers. "Jing ge ge must be many li away by now; I wonder when we are going to see each other again," she wondered in her heart. She heaved a deep sigh, wiped the tears from her eyes with the end of her long sleeve, and walked toward the flower bushes at the end of their yard. Entering the bushes and brushing away the leaves she arrived at her mother's tomb.

The exquisiteness of the coffin's wood, the various plants and rare orchids and the different flowers that bloomed at different seasons, were all Huang Yaoshi's personal choices. They glowed in the moonlight with each radiating its own unique scent. Huang Rong pushed the entrance stone three times to the left and three times to the right; then exerting her strength she pushed it. The entrance stone slowly moved to the side, revealing a long and narrow stonewalled tunnel. She went in, and after making three turns, she arrived at another secret door. Beyond this door was where the coffin was placed. The room was lit by an oil lamp inside a precious stone container, illuminating Huang Rong's mother's memorial tablet.

Alone in that small underground room and seeing the painting of her deceased mother made by her father's own hand, Huang Rong's heart was filled with a roller coaster of emotions. She thought, "I have never seen Mother. I wonder if, after I die, will I meet her? Was she really that young and beautiful as in the picture? Where is she right now? Is she in the heaven above, in the earth below, or still in this room? I am going to stay here forever to accompany her."

Along the walls of this tomb there were precious jewels, antique collections, paintings and calligraphy from famous artists; each worth a fortune. After his wife died, Huang Yaoshi roamed the sea and lakes to collect these precious articles. Whether it was inside the imperial palace, inside the house of some rich government official, or in a robbers' den high up in the mountains, as long as he knew there was a treasure, he would come and steal it or take it by force. His martial arts were high and he had keen eyes and sophisticated tastes, so he managed to collect quite a few treasures which he piled up inside his wife's tomb.

Huang Rong could see bright pearls, beautiful jade, emeralds and amethysts glimmering in the firelight; she thought, "These precious jewels don't have any feelings, yet they will last for millions of years. Today I am looking at them in here, but in the future my body will turn into dust and they will still be here. Is it true that among living things, the smart and intelligent won't have a long life? Was it because she was so smart that my mother died when she was only twenty?"

Huang Rong stared at her mother's picture for a moment, heaved a sigh, then blew out the light and walked to her mother's coffin. She stroked the coffin lovingly and sat on the floor. Her heart was heavy with self-pity. She was leaning on the coffin, pretending she was being cuddled at her mother's side, relying on her for consolation. Earlier that day she experienced great joy and great anxiety; that night she was completely exhausted and after a while she drifted off to sleep.

She dreamt she was inside the Zhao Palace in Beijing, all alone and fighting a group of martial artists; then the scenery changed, she was in the northern area and unexpectedly met Guo Jing there. She'd barely said a few words to him when her mother suddenly showed up. She

just knew it was her mother even though, try as she might, she could not see her face clearly. Then her mother started to fly into the sky while she called and pursued on the ground. Her mother was flying higher and higher and she was so scared. Then out of the blue she heard her father's voice calling her mother. At first it was a distant sound, and then the voice got nearer and clearer. Huang Rong awoke with a start but her father's voice could still be heard, mumbling indistinctly in front of the curtain. Then she calmed herself and realized that it was not a dream; her father was indeed inside the tomb, talking to her mother's spirit.

When she was little her father often brought her here; he would tell her mother anything that happened outside, regardless of how trivial those matters were. For the past several years she did not go with her father as often, yet it did not surprise her to hear her father talking in front of the coffin. She was still upset with him and did not want to see him. She wanted to wait quietly until he left, but what she heard next surprised her.

"I have found your heart's desire," he said, "I know you suffered a lot that year you rewrote the 'Nine Yin Manual'. I wanted to find it and burn it in your presence, so your spirit in heaven will be consoled. I have searched in vain for fifteen years, but today I found it."

Huang Rong was surprised, "Where did Father get the 'Nine Yin Manual'?" she wondered.

"I did not intentionally want to kill your son-in-law," she heard her father continue. "But it was they who insisted on riding on that boat."

Huang Rong was puzzled, "Mother's son-in-law? Is he talking about Jing ge ge? He's on that boat, then what?"

She opened her ears and listened attentively.

Huang Yaoshi recounted how miserable and lonely his life had become since his wife passed away and how badly he missed her. Huang Rong listened to him pouring out his heart and her own heart was filled with sorrow. "Jing ge ge and I are mere youngsters and we love each other. I don't think it will be impossible to see each other in the future; but I cannot leave my father," she thought.

Once her mind was set, she continued listening to her father. "The Old Urchin destroyed the entire 'Nine Yin Manual' with the strength of his hands. I thought my hopes of sacrificing the manual to you were shattered. Who would have thought that, perhaps by divine intervention, he would insist on riding the boat I made for our future meeting?" he said.

"Every time I wanted to play aboard that boat Father always sternly prohibited me; how would he use the boat to meet Mother?" Huang Rong wondered.

Huang Yaoshi loved his wife very much. Moreover, his wife died because she wanted to make him happy. Therefore, he wanted to commit suicide as a sacrifice to her. But he knew his martial arts were profound, so he could not die easily by hanging himself or simply drinking a poison. Besides, if he died on the island, he was sure his deaf and mute servants would mutilate his body. Therefore he went to the mainland and kidnapped a highly skilled boat builder to build him this fancy boat.

This boat's keel was no different than a regular boat's, except that the bottom of the boat was not nailed together with metal nails, but put together with ropes and glue. Moored at the marina it looked like an extremely magnificent and beautiful yacht; but as soon as it sailed

onto the sea, the waves would destroy the ropes and glue, and the boat would certainly sink.

Originally he intended to put his wife's coffin on the boat, take the boat onto the sea and while the waves rocked the boat, he would play on his jade flute the 'Jade-Colored Tidal Wave' song. Together with his wife they would be buried thousands of feet beneath the sea. That way he would make a clean end to his life without disgracing his reputation as the martial arts master of his age. However, every time he wanted to go, he could not bear the idea of taking their daughter along, but who would raise her if he died? Finally he decided to build a tomb and placed his wife in it. He repainted the boat every year, so it always looked new. He was going to wait for their daughter to grow up before taking his last voyage.

Of course Huang Rong did not know of her father's plan. But she kept listening anyway. "The Old Urchin was able to recite the 'Nine Yin Manual' completely and that Guo kid could also recite it from memory. If I sink those two into the sea, it would be the same as though I was burning the two manuals for you. If your spirit in heaven knows this, you can then rest in peace. My only regret was that the Old Beggar Hong will lose his life in vain; it is rather unfair to him. Within one day I have killed three martial arts masters for your sake. When we meet again, you can certainly say that your husband has fulfilled his promise to you. Ha ... ha ... !"

After listening to this last part, the hair on Huang Rong's neck stood up and her heart turned very cold. She did not completely understand what was going on, but knowing her father's abilities very well, she was sure that there must be something terribly wrong with that boat. She was anxious for the safety of Guo Jing and the other people on board. Her heart was filled with shock and sorrow at the same time. She wanted to stand up and beg her father to save

them, but she was neither able to stand nor speak; her legs were weak and her throat dry from fear. She only heard her father's long and mournful laughter – sounding like a song or a cry, as he walked out of the tomb.

Huang Rong tried to calm herself down and thought out loud, "I must go to rescue Jing ge ge. If I can't make it, I will still die with him." She knew her father's strange temper well; he'd become crazy because of his excessive love for his deceased wife and it would be useless to ask him for help. She dashed out of the tomb towards the seashore where she jumped on a boat, woke up the deaf mute servants in charge of the boat and immediately set sail.

Suddenly she heard hoof beats coming her way and at the same time she could hear her father's jade flute in the distance. Huang Rong looked back; it was Guo Jing's little red horse, galloping in the moonlight. It had been wandering aimlessly on the island and that particular night it ran towards the seashore. Huang Rong thought, "Where can I find Jing ge ge on this boundless sea? The little red horse has divine abilities on dry land, but on the water it is completely useless."

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Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong and Guo Jing dashed out of the cabin only to find their feet submerged in water almost to their knees. They were extremely shocked. Immediately they jumped up onto the mast; Hong Qigong even remembered to snatch a couple of deaf and mute sailors. They looked down and saw the turbulent water rising fast. It all happened so fast that they were at loss as to what to do.

"Old Beggar," Zhou Botong called, "Old Heretic Huang is so amazing! I just wonder how he built this boat?"

"I don't know!" replied Hong Qigong, "Jing'er, hold the mast tightly, don't let go ..."

Guo Jing was about to answer when a loud crack was suddenly heard; the boat broke in two and both halves slowly sank into the water. The two sailors were so shocked that they lost their hold on the mast and fell down into the raging water below. Zhou Botong flexed his muscles and jumped into the water.

"Old Urchin!" Hong Qigong called, "Do you know how to swim?"

Zhou Botong's head came out of the water, "I guess I'll just have to try ..." he laughed. These exchanges happened in the midst of howling winds and they could not hear each other clearly.

By this time the mast was leaning far enough that it would hit the water very soon. Hong Qigong called out, "Jing'er, the mast is joined to the hull; let's break it free. Come on!" The two gathered their strength and struck the mast near its center. Although the mast was made from solid wood, how could it withstand the combined forces of Hong Qigong and Guo Jing? After several strikes, with a 'Crack', the mast gave way. The two held on to it and together they fell into the sea below.

They were already many li away from Peach Blossom Island and looking in all directions there were towering waves as high as a mountain; there was no land in sight. Hong Qigong was secretly very anxious. Drifting on the sea like this, without food or fresh water, should nobody rescue them, they would certainly die in less than ten days no matter how high their martial arts skills were. Hong Qigong tried looking for Ouyang Feng's boat but it was nowhere to

be seen. He heard someone laughing hard to the south of them, it was Zhou Botong.

“Jing’er,” Hong Qigong said, “Let’s try going to him.” With one hand holding the mast, the other hand paddled towards Zhou Botong. The waves were quite strong, so as they moved dozens of zhang they were pushed back dozens of zhang.

“Old Urchin, we are coming!” Hong Qigong laughed. Due to his strong internal energy, his voice could be heard amidst the sound of the roaring waves around them. They heard Zhou Botong calling out, “The Old Urchin has become a dog in the water; sort of like an old dog in salty soup!”

Guo Jing was amused that in a situation as dangerous as this, he still had the urge to goof around; truly he did not bear the title ‘the Old Urchin’ in vain.

The sea was raging wildly around them and no matter how hard they tried, they were still dozens of zhang apart from each other. Only after working hard for a long time did they finally manage to get together on the broken mast. As soon as Hong Qigong and Guo Jing saw Zhou Botong, they were unable to stifle their laughter; Zhou Botong had used sail rope to tie a piece of board to his feet and used his excellent lightness kungfu to tread on the waves. Unfortunately the waves were too strong. Even though his body was going up and down with the waves, free and unrestrained, it was actually very difficult to move forward. Zhou Botong played on the water enthusiastically, seemingly oblivious of the danger they were facing.

Guo Jing looked around to see their boat was gone along with all the crew; they were buried under the sea. Suddenly he heard Zhou Botong call out in alarm, “Aiyo! This is serious! The Old Urchin might meet a cruel death.”

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing heard his frightened voice and asked, "What is it?"

Zhou Botong pointed his finger and said, "Sharks...a school of sharks!"

Guo Jing grew up on the steppes so he did not know how fierce a shark was. He turned around to see Hong Qigong's face looking strange. He wondered what kind of monster a shark was that would make his master and big brother Zhou, who were used to facing danger with smiles on their faces, look so nervous.

Hong Qigong sent his strength to his palm and broke the end of the mast; then he divided the broken pieces further into two halves. Suddenly he saw a shark's head appear amongst the white foam of the waves; its two rows of sharp white teeth glistening in the sunlight. It was only for a moment, and then it disappeared under the water. Hong Qigong threw a wooden stick to Guo Jing. "Aim for their heads!" he called out.

Guo Jing groped in his pocket and produced a dagger. "Disciple has a dagger!" he called back and threw the wooden stick toward Zhou Botong.

By now there were four or five sharks circling around Zhou Botong; it looked like they were assessing the situation, but no shark had attacked yet. Zhou Botong leaned over and struck; a shark's head split open. As soon as the other sharks smelled blood they all attacked their dead comrade.

Guo Jing saw the water's surface bubbling like boiling water; he wondered how many thousands of sharks were there. He saw white teeth flashing and in a very short moment, nothing was left of that dead shark. He was horrified. Suddenly he felt something bump his feet. Nervously he kicked around and a big shark shot up from

the water towards him. With his left hand holding the mast he sent all his might to his right hand and with unmatched accuracy his extremely sharp dagger made a hole in the shark's head. Again the water boiled as a group of sharks feasted on their dead companion. Thousands of sharks were moving and biting randomly in the water.

The three men's martial arts were superb; surrounded by thousands of sharks they moved to the west and dodged to the east. Every time their hands struck, a shark was either dead or heavily injured while their own bodies were not even scratched. As soon as a shark bled, it became the other sharks' food and in a flash it became a pile of cartilage sinking in the sea. Although the three's martial arts were profound and they had great courage, when they saw this sight, they could not help feeling frightened. The sharks were uncountable and seemed like they were killing them endlessly. They did not have time to think of anything else; they needed all their energy and concentration to fight and fight and fight ...

After hours of fighting they'd killed more than two hundred sharks, then fog began rising from the water as the sun slowly fell to the western horizon. Zhou Botong called out, "Old Beggar, Brother Guo, once the sky is dark all three of us will go into the sharks' tummies. Shall we make a bet? Who will be first to be eaten?"

"Is the first to be eaten the winner or the loser?" Hong Qigong asked.

"The winner, certainly," Zhou Botong replied.

"Aiyo, in that case I'd rather be the loser," Hong Qigong said. With the back of his hand he launched the 'Divine Dragon Swings its Tail' and hit a big shark on its side. That big shark weighed approximately 200 jins [100kg / 220 lbs], but

because of Hong Qigong's strength, it flew into the air, rolled twice, before it fell back into the water, creating a big splash. That shark turned belly up; it had been killed instantly.

"Excellent palm technique!" Zhou Botong praised, "I'll bow to you and take you as my master so you can teach me the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. It's too bad I won't have time to learn it. Old Beggar, do you want to compete with me?"

"I am sorry I can't accommodate you right now," Hong Qigong said.

Zhou Botong laughed heartily, "Brother, are you scared?" he asked Guo Jing.

In his heart Guo Jing was really scared; but seeing these two people were still able to chat and make jokes in a life and death situation his spirits were lifted. "I was scared, but not anymore," he replied. Suddenly he saw a monstrous shark charging his way. He leaned sideways then lifted his left hand high in the air as bait. That big shark turned around and leaped out of the water to bite his hand. The dagger in Guo Jing's right hand moved upward and stabbed beneath the shark's mouth. Because the shark was moving forward, the dagger made a long cut along the shark's body. Blood gushed and the contents of its stomach spilled out.

By that time Zhou Botong and Hong Qigong had each killed another shark. Zhou Botong had not yet recovered from Huang Yaoshi's blow earlier; after fighting for such a long time he began to feel a severe pain in his chest. He laughed loudly and said, "Old Beggar, Brother Guo, I am so sorry I can't continue much longer, I'll have to be the first one

going into a shark's belly. Ay! Too bad you two didn't want to bet. I would've won!"

Even though he was laughing, Guo Jing could hear the desperation in his voice. "All right!" he shouted, "I'll bet with you!"

"At least now I can die an interesting death!" Zhou Botong laughed. As he turned around to avoid the converging attacks of two sharks charging in together he suddenly saw a high white sail far away. In the dim light of dusk a big private boat was cutting through the waves and coming their way.

Hong Qigong also saw the boat; it was Ouyang Feng's. They were exuberant knowing that help was on the way. Guo Jing immediately came near Zhou Botong to help him fight the sharks. A moment later the boat arrived and lowered two small boats to rescue the three people. Zhou Botong vomited some more blood, but he would not stop talking and laughing. He was waving his finger at the sharks and cursing them incessantly.

Ouyang Feng and Ouyang Ke stood on the bow of the big boat to welcome them. As far as their eyes could see, the water was full of shark fins; they were inwardly alarmed.

Zhou Botong was unwilling to admit indebtedness, he said, "Old Poison, it was you who came and rescued us; I did not call you for help so I don't owe you anything."

"Naturally you don't owe me anything," Ouyang Feng replied, "Today I come across the three of you engaged in a shark killing spree; Little Brother was fascinated."

Zhou Botong laughed, "You came across us and prevented us from playing inside the sharks' bellies, so I will still call it even; we don't owe anybody anything."

Ouyang Ke and a snake herder put some big chunks of beef on an iron hook as bait and in a short period of time had hooked seven or eight big sharks.

Hong Qigong pointed at the sharks and laughed, "Good, you didn't eat us, but it looks like we are going to eat you."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Little Nephew has a way to avenge Uncle Hong." He quickly cut some short sticks, sharpened both ends, then pried open a shark's mouth with a spear and stuck the wooden stick in the shark's mouth. Then he kicked the shark back into the water.

Zhou Botong laughed, "That way the shark won't be able to eat anything ever; I bet it will die within eight to ten days."

Guo Jing thought, "Only he would think of such an evil plan. This gluttonous shark will starve to death in the sea. That is so cruel."

Zhou Botong saw Guo Jing's face showing a disgusted look, he laughed, "Brother, such a malicious trick is not pleasing to the eye, is it? Well, this is called 'a poisonous uncle results in a poisonous nephew'."

Hearing others cursing him as evil did not bother Western Poison Ouyang Feng at all; on the contrary, he was pleased. Listening to Zhou Botong he showed a faint smile and said, "Old Urchin, this small trick is nothing compared to what the Western Poison can do. You three are out of breath from fighting this bunch of baby sharks. Even though they are many, to me they are nothing." After saying that he faced the sea, stretched out his right hand, moved it in a sweeping motion from left to right and said, "Even if there were ten times more sharks than these, I can annihilate them all without breaking a sweat."

"Ah!" Zhou Botong exclaimed, "The Western Poison blows his horn really loud! If you can prove your great prowess and really kill the sharks, the Old Urchin will kowtow to you and will call you 'Grandfather' three hundred times."

"I do not dare to accept that," Ouyang Feng said, "If you don't believe me, why don't we make a bet?"

"All right," Zhou Botong almost shouted, "I'll bet you my head!"

Hong Qigong, on the other hand, was suspicious, "Even if his skills are as high as the sky, it is impossible to kill millions of sharks at once," he thought, "I am afraid he has another evil scheme up in his sleeve."

"I don't need your head," Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "If I win, I want you to do something for me and you must comply with it. If I lose, I won't decline whatever difficult matter you want me to do. What do you think?"

"I don't care, whatever you say!" Zhou Botong shouted.

Ouyang Feng turned to Hong Qigong, "I am asking Brother Qi to be our witness," he said.

Hong Qigong nodded, "Very well," he said, "But what if the winner assigns the loser something and he is not able to do it?"

"Then the loser must jump into the sea to be eaten by the sharks," Zhou Botong said.

Again Ouyang Feng showed a faint smile but he did not say anything. He signaled a servant to bring a small wine cup. Two of his right fingers pinched the neck of the strange looking snake on his staff, forced it to open its mouth and venom gushed from its teeth. Ouyang Feng held out the wine cup and caught the venom in it, black and thick like

China ink, almost filling half the cup. As soon as this snake ran out of venom, he pinched the other one and did the same, filling the whole cup with snake's venom. When he was finished the two snakes wrapped around the staff quietly, no longer slithering up and down, like they were very tired.

Ouyang Feng's servant hooked another big shark and placed it on the deck. With his left hand Ouyang Feng gripped the shark's upper jaw, while his right foot stepped on the lower jaw, prying the jaws open. That shark was about two zhang's long [approximately 20 feet or 7 meters], but it could not prevent its mouth being opened revealing two rows of dagger-sharp teeth. Then he poured the cup of venom into the shark's mouth, right where the gaping wound caused by the iron hook was. With an abrupt movement his left hand lifted the shark by its belly and without much trouble swung it up. The 200 catty [about 100 kg / 220lbs] shark flew into the air and with a loud splash fell into the sea.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Aha! I understand now," he said, "This is the old monk's method of killing bedbugs."

"Big Brother," Guo Jing asked, "How did the old monk kill the bugs?"

"There was once an old monk who hawked concoctions for getting rid of bedbugs in a Bianliang [a city in Henan province] street market," Zhou Botong told him, "He claimed his concoction to be very effective; once the bugs ate his product they would surely die. If not, he was willing to reimburse the customer's money tenfold. Of course with this kind of guarantee his business was brisk. One of his customers went back home and scattered the concoction on his bed. Heh, heh ... that night the bedbugs still came by the thousands, biting him half to death. That customer was

upset and early the next morning he went back to the market to find that old monk, wanting him to refund his money. That old monk said, 'My concoction is very effective; if it did not kill your bugs, perhaps you did not use it correctly.' The customer asked, 'How do you use it?'" Reaching this point Zhou shook his head with a mischievous smile on his face, but did not continue.

"Then how do you use it?" Guo Jing asked.

With a straight face Zhou Botong said, "That old monk said, 'You catch the bug, pry open its mouth and feed just a little bit of this concoction to it. If it doesn't die, then you can come to the old monk again.' The customer was mad, he said, 'If I can catch the bug, I can crush it to death with my fingers, why would I need your effective concoction?' To which the old monk replied, 'Of course, I never said you can't crush it to death, did I?'"

Guo Jing, Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng and his nephew, along with everyone who listened to Zhou Botong, burst into laughter. "My concoction is somewhat different than that of the old monk," Ouyang Feng said with a smile.

"I don't see much difference," Zhou Botong said.

Ouyang Feng pointed his finger to the sea and said, "Well, just take a look."

The shark fed the venom went belly up, and of course seven or eight other sharks were having a feeding frenzy over it. The strange thing was that the seven or eight sharks which ate their comrade's flesh were also belly up not too long afterwards. Each dead shark was immediately eaten by another group of sharks, which, in turn, also went belly up in the water. One shark killed ten others, ten sharks killed a hundred, a hundred killed a thousand; in not too long the sea was full of floating dead sharks. The remaining sharks

were not too many, but they were still feeding on their dead comrades. A while later the sea became calm, there were no more sharks left alive. When Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong and Guo Jing saw this chilling scene their faces paled. Hong Qigong sighed and said, "Old Poison, Old Poison...your evil plan was truly evil; only a small amount of poison from your two snakes is extremely deadly."

Ouyang Feng chuckled and looked at Zhou Botong with a smug expression. Zhou Botong wrung his hands, stomped his foot, and pulled his beard and hair erratically. As far as anyone could see, the sea's surface was full of dead sharks with their white bellies upward, floating and bobbing on the waves.

"Looking at so many white bellies makes my tummy sick; thinking about that many sharks being killed by the Old Poison's venom, also makes my tummy sick," Zhou Botong said, "Old Poison, you need to watch out; once the 'Dragon King of the Sea' [hai long wang] finds out, he is going to send his shrimp army and crab generals to deal with you." Ouyang Feng simply smiled without saying anything.

"Brother Feng, little brother is unclear about something and I beg you to explain it to me," Hong Qigong said.

"I don't dare," Ouyang Feng replied.

"It was only a small cup of venom; even if the poison was extremely deadly, how could it kill thousands of sharks?" Hong Qigong asked.

Ouyang Feng laughed, "This type of venom is very special," he explained, "As soon as it enters the blood the blood became poisonous. If this blood enters another shark's system, that second shark's blood will also be poisonous. Just imagine the amount of venom increasing a hundredfold. Each dead shark would multiply that amount

another hundredfold; very soon you'll have an infinite amount of venom able to kill forever."

"That is called perpetual killing," Hong Qigong commented.

"Exactly," Ouyang Feng replied. "Little brother's title is 'Western Poison'; if my skill in using poison is somewhat lacking, then I'm afraid I'm not worthy to hold that title."

While they were still talking the remaining sharks had already died. The other smaller fish were also gone; though not being eaten by the sharks, they still had disappeared so the sea was eerily calm.

"Sail away quickly...sail away quickly! The air here is too thick with poison," Hong Qigong urged.

Ouyang Feng gave a signal and the boat moved away at full speed; all the triangle shaped sails were raised. With the wind coming from the south they headed northwest.

"The Old Poison really sells effective concoctions to get rid of bedbugs," Zhou Botong said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'd like to welcome the three of you into my cabin first," Ouyang Feng said, "You need to change into dry clothes, eat something, and then take a rest. About the bet, it won't be too late to talk about later."

Zhou Botong was really impatient, "That won't do, that won't do!" he called out, "Just say it! You won't gain anything by waiting. If the Old Urchin dies of suffocation, then it will be your loss for not telling me what you want."

Ouyang Feng smiled, "In that case, Brother Botong, please come with me."

Chapter 20 - The Altered Manual

Translated by Frans Soetomo



The burning mast separated two people. Ouyang Feng fetched his snake staff and jumped over the flaming mast. Hong Qigong immediately drew the

bamboo stick from his waist and fended off the attack. They had been ferociously fighting barehanded before, so imagine how fierce the battle had become now that both were wielding weapons.

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing watched Ouyang Feng and his nephew lead Zhou Botong to a cabin in the back, while they were taken to a different cabin to change their clothes. Four white-dressed maidens served them. Hong Qigong laughed, "The Old Beggar has not had the luck to enjoy this kind of treatment," he said. After taking off all his clothes a maiden dried him with a clean towel.

Guo Jing felt blood flowing up his neck and face and he did not dare to take his clothes off. Hong Qigong laughed, "What are you afraid of? They won't eat you alive!" he said. Two maidens approached him to take his boots off and loosen his belt. Guo Jing quickly took back his boots and upper garment, jumped onto the bed and while hiding underneath a blanket, changed his clothes. Hong Qigong burst out laughing and the four maidens also giggled.

Once they were finished, two other maidens entered the cabin carrying trays full of wine, meat dishes, vegetables, and some white rice, saying, "Please gentlemen, quickly eat what we prepared."

Hong Qigong waved his hand, "All of you get out of here, please. When the Old Beggar sees good-looking ladies I can't get food into my tummy." The maidens smiled and complied, closing the door on their way out.

Hong Qigong lifted the wine and the dishes to his nose and sniffed them, "Don't eat or drink this," he whispered, "The Old Poison is so crafty. Just eat the plain white rice." He took the gourd from his back, pulled the plug and took two mouthfuls of wine. Then he quickly ate three big bowls of

rice. Guo Jing followed his lead and dumped the other dishes under the deck-boards.

"I wonder what they want Big Brother Zhou to do?" Guo Jing asked in a low voice.

"Can't be anything good," Hong Qigong replied, "This time the Old Urchin really got himself in trouble."

The cabin door was suddenly pushed open and a maiden said, "Master Zhou asks Young Master Guo to come to the rear cabin. He has something to discuss with you." Guo Jing looked at his master and walked out of the cabin following the maiden. They walked along the port side of the boat towards the back. The maiden lightly knocked on the cabin door and after waiting a moment, shoved the door open, announcing, "Young Master Guo has arrived."

Guo Jing entered the cabin and the door was closed behind him. There was no one inside the cabin. Guo Jing felt uneasy, but then a small door to his left opened and Ouyang Feng and his nephew walked in.

"Where is Big Brother Zhou?" Guo Jing asked.

Ouyang Feng closed the door with the back of his hand then took two steps forward and grabbed Guo Jing's wrist. His movement was very swift; not in a million years would Guo Jing have guessed that Ouyang Feng would do that. He felt like his wrist was grasped by a pair of tongs; he could not move. Ouyang Ke pulled a steel-spined folding fan from his sleeve and placed it on a vital acupoint on Guo Jing's back. Guo Jing was dumbstruck; he could not guess what the uncle and nephew wanted from him.

"The Old Urchin lost a bet with me, but when I asked him to do something for me he refused," Ouyang Feng coldly said.

“Hmm?” Guo Jing was confused.

“I told him to rewrite the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ from memory for me to read, but he unexpectedly did not keep his word,” Ouyang Feng explained.

“How could Big Brother Zhou give the manual to you?” Guo Jing thought; and again he asked, “Where is Big Brother Zhou?”

“It was he who said that whoever did not keep his word must jump into the sea to be eaten by the sharks. Humph! He finally made up his mind and did what he said he would,” Ouyang Feng said coldly.

Guo Jing was shocked. “He ... he ...” he stammered. He tried to pull his hand free and dash to the door, but Ouyang Feng’s grip was very tight, forcing Guo Jing to stop. Ouyang Ke pushed his fan slightly harder against Guo Jing’s ‘Most Positive’ [zhi yang] acupoint.

Ouyang Feng pointed to a table with a stack of paper, a brush and some ink on it and said, “In the whole wide world you are the only one who knows the manual’s full text. Write it down for me quickly.”

Guo Jing shook his head. Ouyang Ke smiled and said, “The food and wine you and the Old Beggar ate just now was poisoned. If you don’t take my Uncle’s antidote you will die within twelve hours, just like the sharks you saw earlier. If you comply, we will spare both you and your master’s lives.”

Guo Jing was quite shocked, “Had Master not been so alert we would certainly have fallen into their trap.” He stared at Ouyang Feng and thought, “You are a great master of martial arts, yet you commit a despicable act like this.”

Watching Guo Jing starring at him without saying anything Ouyang Feng said, "You have memorized the manual anyway. You won't lose anything by writing it down. What are you waiting for?"

Guo Jing shivered with rage, "You have harmed my sworn brother; now there is hatred as deep as the ocean between you and I. If you want to kill me then go ahead. But if you think you can force me, keep on dreaming!"

"Humph!" Ouyang Feng said, "Good, you have guts kid! You are not afraid of death, but does your master's life mean nothing to you?"

Before Guo Jing could reply a sudden loud bang was heard as the cabin door was shattered and wood fragments flew everywhere. Ouyang Feng turned his head to see Hong Qigong with a couple of wooden water barrels in his hands. Hong Qigong threw the water out from the barrels and two deep green transparent columns flew toward Ouyang Feng and his nephew. Ouyang Feng knew the fierceness of this water attack; he leaped to the left to elude it while his left hand still tightly held Guo Jing's wrist. The water hit the cabin's wall and splashed in all directions. Ouyang Ke loudly called out in alarm because Hong Qigong had grabbed the back of his head.

Hong Qigong laughed loudly, "Old Poison, you've always wanted to kill me by any means possible, fortunately the Heavens won't allow that to happen!"

Ouyang Feng saw his nephew had fallen into Hong Qigong's hands so he smiled and said, "Brother Qi, are you going to challenge me again? It won't be too late if we wait until we are ashore."

"I see you like my disciple so much that you won't let his hand go," Hong Qigong laughed.

"I made a bet with the Old Urchin and I won, didn't I?" Ouyang Feng asked, "You are our witness, are you not? Let me ask you this: The Old Urchin did not keep his word, did he?"

Hong Qigong repeatedly nodded his head in answer to his questions, "That's correct. Where is the Old Urchin?"

Guo Jing was grieved, he shouted, "Big Brother Zhou was ... he was forced to jump into the sea and die!"

Hong Qigong was startled; with Ouyang Ke still in his grip he jumped out of the cabin. He looked in all directions but all he could see were the billowing waves and not a glimpse of Zhou Botong.

Ouyang Feng, still gripping Guo Jing, also walked out onto the deck. Loosening his grip he said, "Nephew Guo, your skills are still quite far from being adequate. You let someone grab your hand without being able to do anything about it. Go and learn from your master for ten more years, then you can roam Jianghu again."

Guo Jing was worried about Zhou Botong's safety; he ignored his derogatory remarks and climbed the mast, looking at all directions.

Hong Qigong lifted Ouyang Ke and tossed him towards Ouyang Feng. He shouted, "Old Poison, you forced the Old Urchin to his death; the people of Quanzhen will deal with you. Your martial arts may be profound, but I don't believe you'll survive the Quanzhen Seven's combined force."

Ouyang Ke did not let his body touch the deck; his right hand pushed the deck and he somersaulted into an upright position while inwardly cursing, "Stinky beggar! By this time tomorrow you will crawl in front of me, begging me to save your life."

Listening to Hong Qigong's remark Ouyang Feng simply smiled faintly, "I am afraid you won't be able to witness it when it happens."

"Very well!," Hong Qigong said, "Until that time comes, I am going to use my dog beating stick to beat some wet dogs." Ouyang Feng raised his hands in salute then entered the cabin.

After looking around for a while without seeing anything Guo Jing climbed back down to the deck and told his master how Ouyang Feng had tried to force him to write out the manual. Hong Qigong nodded without saying anything as he quietly pondered, "Once the Old Poison sets his mind to something, he won't easily let go. Until he gets hold of the manual he will harass my disciple continually."

Guo Jing, thinking of Zhou Botong's death, cried mournfully. Hong Qigong also grieved. He knew the boat was sailing fast to the west and within two days they were going to reach land. He was afraid Ouyang Feng would poison their food again, so he went to the kitchen and plundered some dishes and plenty of rice. After eating it with Guo Jing, his head nodded and then he snored.

Ouyang Feng and his nephew waited until the afternoon of the next day; after nearly sixteen or so hours passed, they had not heard Hong Qigong or his disciple made any sounds. Ouyang Feng was afraid his poison was too strong and had killed them. Killing Hong Qigong was not a big deal, but killing Guo Jing meant the 'Nine Yin Manual' would be lost forever. He secretly took a peek through a crack in the door, only to see two people sitting comfortably and chatting amiably. Hong Qigong's voice was loud and clear. Ouyang Feng was enraged, "It seems the Old Beggar was alert. They weren't poisoned after all." His poison

collection was vast, but in order to poison Hong Qigong without harming Guo Jing, he had to think of a better plan.

Hong Qigong was telling Guo Jing the ins and outs of the Beggar Clan. He said that although they begged for a living, every member actually had the responsibility to uphold justice, to help those in distress, and to follow their predecessors' good deeds and not the bad ones. These facts were mostly hidden from the public eye. He talked further about the election procedure of the Beggar Clan Leader when the time came to find a successor. "It's a pity you don't like being a beggar," he said, "Otherwise you have the perfect character to be a leader; there is no one inside the clan superior to you. I'd really like to bestow the 'Dog Beating Stick' [da gou bang] on you." While they were still chatting there came a sudden banging noise from outside, it sounded like a hatchet or a chisel hitting the wall.

Hong Qigong jumped up in alarm, "Not good! That stinky snake is going to sink the boat," he shouted. Rushing towards the door he yelled to Guo Jing, "Quickly go to the small life boat at the back!" He had just finished shouting when, with a loud crash, a big hole appeared in a wooden partition, followed by loud hissing noises; it was not seawater that came rushing in, but dozens of venomous snakes.

"So it's the Old Poison's snake attack!" Hong Qigong mocked. His right hand swept, scattering dozens of steel needles and dozens of snakes were pinned to the wooden deck; with loud hissing noises their bodies coiled but they were not able to move forward any longer.

"Rong'er is very good at this needles scattering technique, but compared to Master she still falls far short," Guo Jing thought.

By that time dozens more snakes came through the hole in the wall. Hong Qigong kept shooting steel needles and more and more snakes were nailed to the floor. The sound of a wooden whistle was heard outside as more and more snakes were herded into the cabin.

Hong Qigong shot more and more needles, "The Old Poison kindly sends all these targets for me to practice my martial arts skill on; it is truly a rare opportunity," he said. But when he put his hand into his pocket to grab more needles he was startled to find only a few left. Inwardly he was alarmed considering that the snakes kept coming. He was thinking hard as to what to do next when a loud crash was suddenly heard as the wall behind him fell down and a palm swiftly moved towards his back.

Guo Jing was standing beside his master when he heard the swift and fierce wind; he turned around and using both hands he blocked the sneak attack. The incoming attack was so strong that he felt his stomach turning upside down and he almost passed out.

Having his attack unexpectedly blocked Ouyang Feng uttered a cry of surprise. He stepped back a little bit and then hacked horizontally with the back of his hand.

Guo Jing knew this attack would be hard to defend against, so with his left palm he parried the attack, while his right hand launched a counterattack towards Ouyang Feng's side, forcing him to withdraw. Ouyang Feng did not dare to take Guo Jing's palm hit on his side, so he ducked while sending out a hand in a chopping motion toward Guo Jing's lower body.

Guo Jing was aware that the situation was extremely critical. The snakes would keep coming in as long as Ouyang Feng could control the entrance; he and his master

would be in grave danger. He gritted his teeth and to the utmost of his ability used one hand to fend off the incoming attacks while the other hand tried to deliver counterattacks. When his left hand defended his right hand attacked; when his right hand was void his left hand was solid, following Zhou Botong's 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique.

Ouyang Feng had never seen this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique before, so he was confused for the moment, giving Guo Jing a chance to use several stances. When comparing true martial arts skill, Ouyang Feng was two times superior to Guo Jing, but this 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique was so strange to him and it took him by surprise. Guo Jing was able to gain the upper hand for a while. But the Western Poison Ouyang Feng had enjoyed his title as a 'Great' for dozens of years; he was a great martial arts master, so he was confused only for a short time and soon thought of a method to deal with this strange technique. "Ugh!" with a loud grunt both his palms shot forward.

Guo Jing would not be able to block this attack single handedly; he was forced to step back, but behind him a mass of snakes could be heard hissing loudly.

"Wonderful...wonderful!" Hong Qigong shouted loudly, "Old poison, you can't even defeat my disciple; how can you boast about yourself as a great hero?" With the 'Flying Dragon Soaring Through the Heavens' [fei long zai tian] he leaped over both Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing's heads, towards Ouyang Ke. With one kick he knocked Ouyang Ke down. Hong Qigong then used his elbow and sent Ouyang Ke somersaulting towards Ouyang Feng's back. Ouyang Feng leaned sideways to avoid his nephew and because of that, Guo Jing escaped his vicious attack.

“Master’s martial arts skill is at par with his, while his nephew’s is below mine and he is injured. With two against two, we should certainly win,” Guo Jing thought. His spirits rose and with renewed vigor his hands and feet attacked Ouyang Feng like a violent storm.

While fighting violently with the enemy Hong Qigong kept his eyes open in all directions. He saw dozens of snakes approaching Guo Jing’s back, ready to strike. Once Guo Jing got bitten he would certainly die. Hong Qigong called out anxiously, “Jing’er, get out of here, quickly!” He increased the intensity of his attack against Ouyang Feng, forcing him to move away from Guo Jing.

Ouyang Feng was facing attacks from both his front and rear; he was feeling the strain. Hong Qigong’s attack had forced him to lean sideways, thus giving Guo Jing an opportunity to dash out of the cabin while Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong remained in a fierce battle. Meanwhile hundreds of snakes slithered around the deck surrounding the two. “Fighting with pets as your helpers? You are shameless!” Hong Qigong mocked, but in his heart he was nervous. The snakes were countless and they were everywhere. With the dog beating stick in his right hand he crushed dozens of snake’s heads. Pulling Guo Jing’s hand they headed for the mast.

Ouyang Feng was inwardly alarmed, “This is not good! If those two leap onto the mast they will be unreachable for a while.” He flew out to block them.

Both of Hong Qigong’s palms made a ferocious chopping motion creating a roaring gust of wind. Ouyang Feng’s fist swept horizontally to parry. Guo Jing stepped forward to help his master, but Hong Qigong called out, “Just go to the mast, quickly!”

"I want to kill his nephew to avenge Big Brother Zhou," Guo Jing replied.

"The snakes...the snakes!" Hong Qigong urgently warned him.

Guo Jing saw vipers slithering all around him, so he did not dare to linger much longer. With the back of his hand he grabbed Ouyang Ke's 'Flying Swallow Silver Shuttle' [fei yan yin suo], then, leaping dozens of feet upwards, his left hand grasped the mast. At that very moment he heard the sound of an incoming projectile, so he shot the 'yin suo' from his hand and, with a loud clang, the two projectiles met midair; both changed directions towards the sides of the boat and fell into the sea. Guo Jing moved his hands and feet and in a short time he had reached the middle of the mast.

Ouyang Feng knew Hong Qigong also wanted to go up the mast so he intensified his attacks. Even though Hong Qigong was able to hold his ground he could not move towards the mast.

When Guo Jing saw the snakes crowding around his master's feet he was very anxious; with a loud shout he wrapped his legs around the mast and hung his body down. Hong Qigong understood his intentions; his left foot kicked the deck, his right foot flew toward Ouyang Feng's face while extending his dog beating stick towards Guo Jing. Guo Jing grabbed the end of his stick, pulled it upwards, and Hong Qigong's body flew into the air. With a loud laugh Hong Qigong's left hand caught the mast above Guo Jing. Now the two were high in the air looking down on their opponents and occupying a superior position.

Ouyang Feng knew that if he tried to climb the mast he would certainly be at a disadvantage, so he called out

loudly, "Very well! We lost this time. Turn the rudder to the east!" With an abrupt turn the boat sailed to the east.

From high above the deck Hong Qigong and Guo Jing could see that the snakes were very dense on the deck. Hong Qigong sat comfortably on the sail yardarm while he loudly sang the 'Falling Lotus Flower' [lian hua luo], a song beggars sang when begging for food. His face showed calmness, but he was actually very anxious. "How long can we stay on this mast?" he wondered, "Even if the Old Poison doesn't chop it down we still can't climb down if he does not call off the snakes. Those two can drink wine and sleep, but all the two of us can do up here is eat wind and urinate. That's it!" As soon as he remembered urinating, he stood up, pulled his pants down and sprayed his urine onto the snakes. "Jing'er," he shouted, "Let those scoundrels drink your urine and quench their thirst."

Guo Jing still enjoyed his childish side; he followed his master's instructions while shouting happily, "Please! Be my guests!" Both master and disciple sprayed their urine about.

"Get the snakes out of here...quickly!" Ouyang Feng barked while at the same time leaping back several steps. He moved so fast that Hong and Guo Jing's urine did not touch his body. Ouyang Ke, on the other hand, was startled upon hearing his uncle's anxious call and some drops of urine splashed on his face and neck. He was a neat and fastidious person, so naturally he was indignant; then he suddenly remembered, "Our snakes fear urine!"

Amidst the sounds of the wooden whistle the snakes slowly slithered away, but dozens of them closest to the mast were drenched in urine. These vipers were all hybridized in the snake valley of the Western Region where the White Camel Mountain was; their toxicity was extreme. Ouyang Feng had

used big bamboo baskets hung between several hundred pairs of camels to transport these vipers thousands of li to the Central Plains. He intended to use them as weapons to dominate the Wulin world, but the snakes were affected by human excretions. As soon as they were wet they started to squirm around, coiling in confusion and biting each other; the snake herders were unable to control them.

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing laughed long and hard at seeing the chaotic situation they'd caused. Guo Jing thought, "If Big Brother Zhou saw this I am sure he would be very happy. Ay! A major martial arts expert of this age had to die in the sea. Even with their level of martial arts skills, Island Master Huang and the Old Poison were still drenched by his urine; but my master's and my urine did not even touch the Old Poison."

About four hours later the sky gradually turned dark. The boat crew prepared banquet tables on the deck; meat and wine flowed freely and the sweet smelling aroma drifted upward assailing Hong Qigong and Guo Jing's nostrils. Ouyang Feng was very shrewd; how long could a glutton like Hong Qigong endure this kind of torture? The gourd on Hong Qigong's back was emptied only a short while later.

That night Hong Qigong and Guo Jing took turns on night watch duty. On the deck below them the crew lit dozens of lanterns, while a mass of snakes stayed on guard around the mast. They really did not have a chance of breaking this formidable defense, and they certainly could not urinate continuously.

Hong Qigong cursed Ouyang Feng's ancestors back eighteen generations, creating every fabricated scandal he could think of while adding some spice to make the scandals even more dramatic; but Ouyang Feng did not even come

out of his cabin. Hong Qigong cursed until his jaws were tired and he finally fell asleep.

Early the next morning Ouyang Feng sent a servant to shout loudly under the mast, "Hong Bangzhu, Guo Xiaoye [Clan Leader Hong, Young Master Guo], Master Ouyang has prepared a superb wine and food banquet for you to enjoy; please come down and enjoy it."

"You go and invite Ouyang Feng to come out and we will serve him our urine!" Hong Qigong shot back.

Not long afterwards the banquet table was readied below the mast. The foods were steaming hot and looked like they were fresh from the kitchen. They placed two chairs on each side of the table; it seemed they were waiting for Hong Qigong and Guo Jing to come down and enjoy their banquet.

Several times Hong Qigong wanted to slide down the mast and gobble down the food, but he knew it must be poisoned; he had no choice but restrain himself. He was so upset and started his 'your mother is a bitch' and 'you are a male dog with a bird's brain' series of curses.

By the third day the two were so hungry and thirsty that their heads began to spin. "If only my female disciple was here," Hong Qigong sighed, "She is so smart that I am sure she would come up with something to counter the Old Poison's tactics. All we can do is just stare and swallow our own saliva." Guo Jing also sighed.

About noon that day as the sun shone brightly, Guo Jing suddenly saw two white dots on the horizon. He thought they were a couple of white clouds, but the dots moved much too fast for clouds. They grew closer and got bigger and bigger and uttered loud cries. It was two white eagles.

Guo Jing was ecstatic; he curled his left fingers, put them in his mouth, and whistled repeatedly.

The eagles circled above the boat several times before diving down and perched on Guo Jing's shoulders. They were indeed the pair of eagles Guo Jing had raised on the Mongolian Steppe. "Master, could it be Rong'er is sailing this way?" he asked happily.

"That would be wonderful!" Hong Qigong replied, "Too bad these eagles are too small and can't carry us away from here. We are stuck here, at loss as to what to do. Quickly tell her to come here and think of something."

Guo Jing took out his dagger and cut two five inch square pieces from the sail and cut out two characters 'you nan' [lit. having trouble] on one and the outline of a gourd on the other piece. Then he strapped those pieces, one on each white eagle's leg, and said, "Fly back quickly and get Miss Huang to come here." The white eagles made some chirping sounds, stretched their wings, and flew from Guo Jing's shoulders. They circled the boat once then flew towards the west.

About an hour after the white eagles left, Ouyang Feng again tried to entice Hong Qigong and Guo Jing into coming down from the mast by preparing another banquet table, loaded with food and wine. Hong Qigong was indignant, "The Old Beggar is a glutton and the Old Poison is using this dirty trick to torture me. I've practiced martial arts my whole life, but I have to admit my spiritual strength is rather lacking. Jing'er, what do you say we go down and beat them up real good?"

"The white eagles will have already delivered our message; I believe the situation will change very soon. Please be patient and wait a little bit longer," Guo Jing replied.

Hong Qigong smiled. A while later he asked, "Among the world's disgusting aromas, what do you say is the worst?"

"I don't know. What is it?" Guo Jing replied.

"There was one time I wandered way up north. I was caught in a heavy snowstorm for eight days without any food; not even a squirrel could be found. I wanted to eat tree bark, but I couldn't find any of that either. I randomly dug around in the snow-covered ground and was lucky enough to find five living things, so I could extend my life another day. The next day I found a yellow wolf and that was able to satisfy my hunger."

"What were those five living things?" Guo Jing asked.

"They were earthworms, fat juicy earthworms. I just swallowed them alive, and did not dare to chew them," Hong Qigong replied.

When Guo Jing recalled how the slimy earthworms wiggled, he almost threw-up. Hong Qigong laughed heartily. He intentionally talked about the world's dirtiest and smelliest things to battle the aroma coming from the food and wine below them. He talked some more and cursed some more, before finally saying, "Jing'er, the Old Beggar has eaten earthworms, but there is something even more disgusting than them and the Old Beggar would rather eat my own toes than eat that thing. Do you know what it is?"

Guo Jing smiled, "I know...it's dung!" he exclaimed.

Hong Qigong shook his head, "No, it is dirtier than that." He let Guo Jing make some more guesses before bursting out in laughter, "I'll tell you what it is; the world's dirtiest and most disgusting thing is the Western Poison Ouyang Feng!"

"Right...that's right!" Guo Jing also burst out laughing.

After they'd suffered the whole afternoon, that evening Ouyang Ke came out and stood amidst his mass of vipers. He smiled and said, "Uncle Hong, Brother Guo, my uncle wants to borrow the 'Nine Yin Manual' just to take a look, nothing else."

Hong Qigong cursed under his breath, "That son-of-a-bitch....he has such good intentions!" In the midst of his anger an idea suddenly came into his head; but he kept a straight face and shouted loud and clear, "Little Rascal, the old man admits defeat to your dog-like uncle's evil scheme. Quickly prepare some food and wine and we'll talk again tomorrow."

Ouyang Ke was delighted; he knew Hong Qigong's word was as firm as a mountain and he certainly would live up to his promise. He gave the command to withdraw the snakes immediately. Hong Qigong and Guo Jing slid down the mast and went into the cabin; where Ouyang Ke's servants delivered all kinds of food and wine. As soon as the door was closed Hong Qigong immediately drank half a pot of wine, ripped apart half a chicken and started to chew.

"Is this food and wine free of poison?" Guo Jing asked with a low voice.

"Stupid kid," Hong Qigong said, "That bird brain wants you to write out the manual, he won't harm you just yet. Quickly eat as much as you can; we have things to discuss afterwards." Guo Jing silently agreed and in one breath he ate four big bowls of rice.

After eating and drinking to his heart's content Hong Qigong used the end of his sleeve to wipe his greasy mouth, then whispered in Guo Jing's ear, "The Old Poison wants the 'Nine Yin Manual' [jiu yin zhen jing] from you, so you will

write a 'Nine Yin Altered Manual' [jiu yin jia jing] for him." [Note: 'zhen' means real and 'jia' means fake.]

Guo Jing was puzzled, "Nine Yin Altered Manual?" he asked in a low voice.

Hong Qigong smiled, "That's right!" he said. "In this whole wide world, you are the only one who knows the 'Nine Yin Manual'. Whatever you want to write, just write. Who is going to say that what you write is not the real manual? You will intentionally alter and mix up the sentences and let him use that to train himself in that martial art. I am sure that if he practices for a hundred years he won't master even one part of it!"

Guo Jing was delighted and thought, "This is really a clever trick; the Old Poison will surely fall for it." But then he remembered something, "Ouyang Feng's martial arts are profound and he is also crafty and vigilant; if disciple just scribbles some nonsense, he will find out eventually, then what?" he asked.

"You have to write something that appears right but is actually wrong," Hong Qigong explained, "Write three correct sentences then alter the fourth one. Add or subtract some numbers, for example, if the manual says you need to do it eight times, change it to six or perhaps ten. As smart as he is, he will never find out. I am willing to spend seven days and seven nights without food or wine just to watch him train from the fake manual." Speaking to this point he could not restrain a smile.

Guo Jing laughed, "If he really practices according to the altered manual, not only will he waste his time and energy, but he could suffer some internal injuries as well," he said.

"Now quickly think carefully about how you are going to alter the manual; if he once gets suspicious, our plan will be

foiled,” Hong Qigong said with a smile; then he added, “The contents of the second volume was read and rewritten by Huang Yaoshi’s wife; moreover, that little rascal read it on Peach Blossom Island and therefore you can’t change that part too much, just add some incorrect words here and there. I am sure the little rascal won’t know the difference.”

Guo Jing silently recited the manual in his head, trying to think which sentences he could alter and where he could insert some misleading sentences. He replaced hold with move, above with below, and other simple alterations that did not require him to recompose a whole sentence; in short, he was following his master’s instructions to make subtle changes everywhere in the manual. For example, he changed the sentence ‘hand and mind toward the sky’ to ‘foot and buttock toward the sky’; or ‘feet firmly on the ground’ into ‘hands lightly moving on the ground’. On the internal energy cultivation he changed ‘concentrate ‘qi’ in the pubic region (dan tian)’ into ‘concentrate ‘qi’ in the chest and throat’.

While thinking about all these changes he could not restrain from heaving a heavy sigh and saying in his heart, “Playing practical jokes like this is Rong’er and Big Brother Zhou’s greatest delight. It’s a pity that one is nowhere near and the other is already dead. Someday I will see Rong’er again, but I will never be able to tell this story to Big Brother Zhou.”

Early the morning on the next day Hong Qigong called Ouyang Ke and proudly told him, “The Old Beggar’s martial arts are already unique; I don’t need to know the kinds of ‘Nine Yin Manual’ arts. As a matter of fact, even if you hold the manual in front of my face I won’t even cast a glance at it. Only some bird brain whose martial arts are useless would be dying to steal all sorts of gold and silver [play of words here: shen jing – divine scripture, shen jin – pure

gold, shen yin – pure silver]. Tell your dog-of-an-uncle that the manual will be written just for him. Tell him to shut himself up and train hard; when he's done, to come to the Old Beggar to test his newfound skills. The Manual is naturally a good thing, but I don't even want to give it a single glance. I want to see, if with the Manual's help, he will be able to defeat the Old Beggar. I want to see, if after he has painstakingly practiced the martial arts from the manual, whether he'll even be equal to [ban jin ba liang] the Old Beggar? I'd say he's just taking off his pants to fart; it's totally useless!"

Ouyang Feng was actually standing behind his cabin door, so he heard everything, but he was delighted instead of getting angry. "It's a very good thing the Old Beggar is so proud that he doesn't mind letting me have the manual," he thought, "Otherwise, even if I fought him, threatened him with snakes or poison, or starved him to death, it would still be difficult to force him."

"Uncle Hong, you are wrong!" Ouyang Ke said, "My Uncle's martial arts have reached perfection. With Uncle Hong's ability, you could not gain even half a move advantage; so why would Uncle want to learn the 'Nine Yin Manual'? My Uncle once told little nephew that he is convinced the 'Nine Yin Manual' has enjoyed an undeserved reputation. Otherwise, when Wang Chongyang won the book, why didn't he learn anything from it and demonstrate it in front of everybody? My Uncle wants to take a look at it to point out the errors and prove that the manual is actually a hoax. Wouldn't you say that it will benefit the Wulin world tremendously?"

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "You are foolishly blowing your horn too hard!" he mocked. "Jing'er, go ahead and write the manual from your memory. If the Old Poison

can point out any errors in the 'Nine Yin Manual', the Old Beggar will kowtow to him."

Guo Jing agreed and went out. Ouyang Ke led him to the big cabin where there was a stack of paper, some ink sticks and a brush; he'd even prepared the ink himself and respectfully waited at one side.

Guo Jing's had not had much schooling and his handwriting was shoddy; he often had to think about the characters he had to write so he worked very slowly. More than once he did not know how to write a certain character, so he had to ask Ouyang Ke to write it for him. Working until noon that day he'd barely finished the first half of the first volume.

Ouyang Feng did not show himself at all, but every time Guo Jing finished writing a page Ouyang Ke would take that page and give it to his uncle. Ouyang Feng looked at them carefully. Some sentences did not make any sense to him, but even though sloppy, the characters were clear. He thought those sentences must have very deep meanings behind them; when he returns to the west he will then slowly digest the manual. He believed that with his intelligence and ability he would eventually understand the manual thoroughly. After a dozen years or so he would master all of the martial arts in the manual. He could not help but feel elated. He knew Guo Jing was dumb, he also noticed Guo Jing's handwriting was plain and simple, almost child-like. He believed that a person like him would not be able to fabricate a complex manual such as this one. Besides, his nephew had told him that for many characters Guo Jing knew the sounds, but did not know how to write them, so his nephew had to teach him or write the characters himself. This was the real manual without a doubt. How could he know that this dumb kid had conspired with his master to deliberately alter the manual to deceive

him? As for the confusing sentences, he blamed that on Guo Jing's inability to remember the text correctly.

Guo Jing did not stop writing even though the sky had turned dark and he'd finished more than half of the second volume. Ouyang Feng did not allow him to return to his cabin for fear that Hong Qigong would convince him to change his mind and make things difficult for him. Even though he already had most of the manual in his hands, he wanted the complete manual. Therefore he arranged for a sumptuous meal and wine to be brought to Guo Jing and let Guo Jing continue to write without interruption.

Hong Qigong waited until about the end of the eleventh hour or early twelfth hour [about 9 pm] but Guo Jing did not come back. He felt queasy and afraid that Ouyang Feng had discovered their scheme and his dumb disciple might suffer the worst. He snuck out of his cabin and quietly walked towards the main cabin. There were two snake herders standing guard in front of the main cabin. Hong Qigong sent his left palm forward creating a gust of wind making the sail ropes move. The two snake herders heard the noise and looked around while Hong Qigong moved to the right. His movement was so quick that the two did not see a thing; they thought it was a ghost or something. Very soon Hong Qigong was at the starboard side of the main cabin.

Hong Qigong could see a faint glow coming out of the main cabin's window. He took a peek inside and saw Guo Jing still crouched at the desk, writing. Two white-clothed maidens stood beside him, keeping busy serving tea or lighting incense or replenishing the paper or preparing more ink. Guo Jing was well taken care of. Hong Qigong was relieved. Then his nostrils caught the scent of the wine. He fixed his gaze on it and saw in front of Guo Jing a cup of amber

brown aged wine, almost rouge in color; the sweet fragrance assailed his nose mercilessly.

Hong Qigong cursed inside, "The Old Poison is very stingy; because my disciple writes for him he serves him the best wine, but to the Old Beggar he only serves a very average cheap wine." He was the world's number one glutton and wine connoisseur; seeing his disciple with this excellent wine, how could he restrain himself from wanting some of it? "The Old Poison must store the good wine in the boat's hold; I am going to drink to his happiness, then replace the wine with my urine. Let him taste the Old Beggar's own vintage urine wine. Compared to what the Old Beggar and his disciple went through with the sharks, the Old Poison drinking some urine in his wine won't be too bad. At least he won't die because of it."

Having had this thought he could not help but smile; stealing wine and food was the skill he's most proud of. He once spent three whole months inside the Imperial Palace in Lin'an; he hid on a beam in the Imperial kitchen and tasted practically every single dish or wine that was to be served to the emperor. The Imperial Palace was heavily guarded, yet he was able to come and go like there were no other people there. Stealing food and wine from a boat's kitchen certainly would not give him any trouble.

He looked for the stairs that would lead him below and, after making sure nobody was watching, he carefully went down, relying on his nose to find where the food supply was. Even though the hold was pitch black, Hong Qigong's nose was able to smell food from a mile away. He slowly walked along the wall, lit a torch and saw six or seven wooden barrels piled up in the corner. Hong Qigong was delighted; he extinguished the torch after picking up a broken bowl he found laying around and put it in his pocket. He groped

around towards the barrels and tried to lift one. The barrel was very heavy; it could contain anything.

With his left hand he found the plug, while his right hand placed the bowl under it. He was about to pull the plug when his sensitive ears suddenly heard footsteps. It seemed like there were two people walking towards the hold. Their steps were very light, so Hong Qigong knew it was Ouyang Feng and his nephew since nobody else on board had that kind of ability. He thought if those two came to the hold late at night, they must have some evil intentions, like poisoning the food to harm others. He shrank his body and hid curled up among the barrels. He heard the door open quietly, a flame flared, and two people walked in; they stopped right in front of the barrels. Hong Qigong's heart skipped a beat, "Are they going to poison the wine?" he wondered inside; but what he heard next turned his heart cold.

"Have you placed oil, firewood and sulfur in each cabin?" he heard Ouyang Feng ask.

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Everything is ready; as soon as we start the fire this boat will turn into ashes and the stinky Beggar will be scorched to death instantly."

"They are going to burn the boat?" Hong Qigong was shocked.

"We must wait a little bit longer," Ouyang Feng said, "As soon as that kid named Guo falls asleep you go to the life boat; just be really careful not to wake the Old Beggar up. I'll come here and light the fire."

"What are we going to do with the maidservants and the snake herders?" Ouyang Ke asked.

"The stinky Beggar is a great master of this age; it's worthy of his reputation to sacrifice some people to accompany him

in death," Ouyang Feng said coldly.

While they talked their hands were not idle; they unplugged a barrel and the smell of oil reached Hong Qigong's nose. It turned out the barrels were full of vegetable oil. Ouyang Feng and his nephew also took some sulfur from a stack of wooden boxes, some firewood and sacks of wood shavings from the shelves, then scattered them on the floor.

Not too long afterwards they'd finished their job and turned around to go when Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "Uncle, in less than twelve hours that Guo kid will be buried at sea and the only person who knows the 'Nine Yin Manual' will be you."

"No, there will be two. Won't I pass it on to you?" Ouyang Feng replied. Ouyang Ke was delighted; he closed the door with the back of his hand.

Hong Qigong was furious and shocked at the same time, he thought, "If there was no ghost or spirit urging me to steal some wine how would I have found out about the two's treacherous plan? When the boat suddenly caught fire, how would I've escaped the disaster?" When he could not hear the footsteps of those two anymore, he carefully snuck out and went back to his own cabin. Guo Jing had already come back and was sleeping soundly on the bed. He was about to wake him and discuss what they were going to do when there was a slight rustling noise outside the door. He knew it must be Ouyang Feng checking to see if they were sound asleep, so he pretended to talk in his sleep, "Good wine! Good wine! I want ten more pots!"

Ouyang Feng was startled, at first thinking the Old Beggar was still awake, drinking wine; but then Hong Qigong called out loudly again, "Old Poison, let us fight for another thousand stances ... (giggling) ... Good boy! That was

awesome!" Standing outside the door Ouyang Feng listened to him speaking nonsense. He was confused for a while, then realized that Hong Qigong was talking in his sleep. "The stinky Beggar's death is imminent, yet he still drinks and fights in his dreams," he thought.

As Hong Qigong's mouth talked nonsense, his ears listened attentively. Ouyang Feng's lightness kungfu was superb, but Hong Qigong was still able to hear him walking towards the port side of the boat. Hong Qigong put his mouth on Guo Jing's ear and lightly shook his shoulder, "Jing'er!" he whispered.

"Mmm!" Guo Jing mumbled as he awoke.

"Just follow my lead and don't ask any questions," Hong Qigong said urgently, "Get out quietly and make sure nobody's watching you."

Guo Jing rolled over and crawled quietly towards the door. Hong Qigong silently opened the door and, tugging Guo Jing's sleeve, they moved towards the starboard side. He was afraid they would be detected by Ouyang Feng, so instead of jumping he climbed over the rail. With his left hand holding onto the rail his right hand pulled Guo Jing along; both of them hung outside the boat. Guo Jing thought it was strange, but did not dare to make any sounds. Hong Qigong slowly released his hands from the rail and quietly crawled downwards keeping his eyes on Guo Jing fearing that the boat was too slippery for him. Should he fall, he would surely make noise.

The boat was smoothly painted, plus, it was wet and they were going downwards to where the boat sloped towards the water. The boat was moving in waves making the boat rock, so climbing down was not an easy matter. Luckily Guo Jing had been trained by Ma Yu to go up and down the cliff

everyday on the Steppe; plus, his skills had been improved tremendously this past year or so. He would stick his fingers in between the wooden planks or grab the head of a nail or find a crack somewhere and slowly but steadily moved down.

Half of Hong Qigong's body was already in the water. He moved towards the stern with Guo Jing following close behind. His target was the small life boat tied on a rope behind the boat. "Get on that boat!" he told Guo Jing. He loosened his grip and released his body from the big boat.

The big boat was traveling quite fast, so only a second later Hong Qigong grabbed the edge of the small boat. Swinging with his hands his body somersaulted and landed in the small boat without making a sound. After Guo Jing followed his example he quietly said, "Cut the rope." Guo Jing took out his dagger and a moment later the small boat was floating free on the ocean waves. Hong Qigong pulled the oars to get them some distance from the big boat. A moment later the big boat disappeared into the darkness.

Suddenly flames were seen on the big boat's stern coming from the torch in Ouyang Feng's hand. Ouyang Feng could be heard shouting in alarm because the small life boat was nowhere to be seen. He sounded shocked, angry and afraid at the same time. Hong Qigong concentrated his 'qi' in the 'dan tian' region and let out a long laugh.

Out of nowhere another boat appeared, heading rapidly towards the starboard side of the big boat. Hong Qigong wondered, "Uh, whose boat is that?" Before he finished speaking a pair of white eagles came down from the sky, circling the big boat's main sail. Someone dressed in white could be seen leaving the incoming boat and leaping towards the big boat. In the bright starlight one could see

the glimmer of a golden hair band on her head. "Rong'er!" Guo Jing gasped.

The person leaping onto the big boat was indeed Huang Rong. Just before leaving Peach Blossom Island she saw the little red horse galloping from the forest, she thought, "This little red horse is useless on the sea, but those two eagles would actually be able to help me find Jing ge ge." So she whistled loudly to call the white eagles to her.

Eagles' eyes are sharp and they can fly extremely fast. On this boundless sea they unexpectedly found Guo Jing on the big boat. Huang Rong was alarmed, but also pleasantly surprised to find the 'in danger' message Guo Jing had tied on the eagles' leg; she immediately let the eagles soar in the sky and steered the boat to follow them. Eventually her boat caught up with the big boat, but she was a little bit too late, Hong Qigong and Guo Jing had already left the big boat.

Huang Rong had not forgotten the 'in danger' message she got earlier and she was afraid she might be too late; as soon as the eagles circled above this boat, she ordered her crew to sail alongside. As soon as the distance was manageable she leaped onto the big boat with a butterfly steel projectile in her hand, only to see Ouyang Ke pacing around nervously, like an ant on a hot pot.

"Where is Guo Jing?" Huang Rong shouted, "What did you do to him?"

Ouyang Feng had lit the fire in the hold and was planning to escape using the small life boat when he suddenly saw the boat was gone. Perspiration ran down his forehead like beads or pearls when he heard Hong Qigong's loud and long laugh. He silently cursed his own stupidity because instead of harming others he was harming himself; of

course he was very anxious. Then Huang Rong suddenly arrived on a boat and he rushed to grab this opportunity, "Quickly seize that boat!" he shouted.

The crew of Huang Rong's boat was deaf mute servants from the island. As long as Huang Rong was on board, they followed her commands out of fear; as soon as Huang Rong left the boat, they immediately turned the boat around, hoisted the sail and escaped as fast as they could.

Not long after Hong Qigong and Guo Jing saw Huang Rong jump onto the big boat, the fire in the hold was starting to reach the deck. Guo Jing, unaware of what had happened, called out in alarm, "Fire...fire!"

"That's right," Hong Qigong said, "The Old Poison set the boat on fire to burn the two of us to death."

Guo Jing had a blank expression on his face as he excitedly said, "We must save Rong'er!"

"Let's go back to the boat!" Hong Qigong said. With all his might Guo Jing pulled the oars. The big boat had also changed its direction to approach the small life boat. The deck was full of male snake herders and female maidservants running around frantically, shouting for help. Hong Qigong had to raise his voice to be heard, "Rong'er! Jing'er and I are here! Swim over quickly!"

On the sea the mighty waves rolled, the night was dark, so it was a very dangerous time to swim. But Hong Qigong knew Huang Rong's water skills were excellent and it was also a critical moment, so he was compelled to take this risk.

When Huang Rong heard her master's voice, she was delighted. No longer paying attention to Ouyang Feng and his nephew she rushed to the boat's side and jumped into

the water below. Suddenly she felt something was holding her back. Huang Rong turned her head in great surprise to see her right wrist in Ouyang Feng's hand. "Let me go!" she shouted, sending her left fist toward Ouyang Feng's face; the result was, both of her wrists were in Ouyang Feng's hands.

Ouyang Feng saw the boat that brought Huang Rong had already far away, too far for them to pursue and the big boat they were on was already ablaze. The main mast was burning and about to fall and things on deck were extremely chaotic; the boat would sink at any minute. His only hope now was the small life boat in Hong Qigong's control; so he shouted loudly, "Stinky Beggar! Miss Huang is in my hands; do you see her?" He lifted Huang Rong high in the air.

By that time the sea was lit bright red from the fire on the boat. Hong Qigong and Guo Jing could see her clearly. Hong Qigong was very indignant, "Again he uses a dirty trick to get this boat. Humph! I am going to get Rong'er back."

Guo Jing saw the boat was nearly burnt to the rails, "I am coming too!" he said.

"No! You stay and guard this boat; don't let the Old Poison take it away," Hong Qigong said.

"All right!" Guo Jing said and exerted his strength pulling the oars. By that time the big boat was motionless on the sea's surface, so with several pulls they had come close to the big boat.

Hong Qigong kicked the small boat and his body flew toward the big boat. Stretching his left hand he grabbed the boat's rail with his strong fingers and then catapulted his body upward and somersaulted to the deck.

Ouyang Feng was still holding Huang Rong's wrists; "Stinky Beggar, what do you want?" he said, smiling ferociously.

Hong Qigong cursed him silently, "Come...let us fight another one thousand stances." 'Swish...swish...swish!' He sent three palm attacks towards Ouyang Feng's face. Ouyang Feng was shrewd; he pushed Huang Rong's body forward as a shield, forcing Hong Qigong to retract his attack. Ouyang Feng had sealed Huang Rong's acupoints, so she was paralyzed.

Hong Qigong shouted loudly, "Old Poison, you are shameless! Quickly unseal her and let her go; you and I will fight here to decide victory or defeat."

How could Ouyang Feng release his prisoner so easily? Then he noticed his nephew was continuously being pushed backwards by the fire; he threw Huang Rong towards him and called out, "Go to the small boat!"

Ouyang Ke caught Huang Rong and looked downward to see Guo Jing waiting in the small boat below. He thought the small boat was too small. If he jumped down carrying someone, he might cause the boat to turn over, so he found a thick rope. After tying it to a mast he used his right hand to slide down onto the small boat while holding Huang Rong with his left.

Guo Jing was relieved to see Huang Rong on the small boat but he did not know that Huang Rong's acupoints were sealed. His attention was focused on his master and Ouyang Feng fighting a fierce battle on the blazing deck. He was so worried about his master's safety that his gaze was fixed on the fight and he forgot to speak to Huang Rong.

Both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng demonstrated their excellence in martial arts while leaping around to avoid falling wood and ropes. They attacked and counterattacked

each other. Hong Qigong had a slight advantage in that his body was still wet from swimming to the small boat earlier, while Ouyang Feng's clothes and hair had caught fire here and there.

The two's martial arts were at par to begin with and a slight advantage was enough for Hong Qigong to gain the upper hand. Ouyang Feng was forced to step back bit by bit until his back was very close to the cabin and his clothes and beard started to catch fire. He wanted to jump into the sea, but Hong Qigong did not give him any slack. If he tried to jump and thus diverted his attention from the fight, he might be seriously injured or even worse, killed. Ouyang Feng became very anxious and it seemed like defeat was imminent.

Hong Qigong also realized that he would certainly win this time and that boosted his confidence. But then another thought came into his mind, "If I forced him to enter the fire and die, that won't do my plan any good. He has obtained the 'Nine Yin Altered Manual' from Jing'er and he won't die satisfied until he practices that manual. Why don't I let him off this time?" Thereupon he laughed and said, "Old Poison, I let you off this time, quickly jump into the boat."

Ouyang Feng looked at him strangely, then turning his body he jumped into the sea. Hong Qigong was about to follow when Ouyang Feng suddenly flew back up. "Hold on! Now that my body is also wet, we are on level ground. Let us fight again to decide victory or defeat." Holding onto the boat's rail he swung his body up and landed on the deck.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Hong Qigong said, "I'm having a very satisfying fight today!" He sent his fist forward, and the two engaged in a fierce battle one more time.

“Rong’er, do you see how fierce the Old Poison is?” Guo Jing asked. Huang Rong’s acupoint was still sealed, so of course she was not able to answer. “Do you think I should go up there and help Master? The boat is about to sink,” Guo Jing said. There still was no answer from Huang Rong. Guo Jing turned his head to see Ouyang Ke hugging Huang Rong; he became angry and shouted, “Take your hands off her!”

After great difficulty Ouyang Ke was finally able to touch Huang Rong’s hands; how could he let go that easily? Smiling he said, “If you move, I am going to bash her brains out with my palm.”

Guo Jing did not even think; he swept the oar in his hand horizontally. Ouyang Ke ducked to avoid this attack, but Guo Jing sent his palm with a whistling sound toward his head. Ouyang Ke was forced to let Huang Rong go and swung his head backwards to avoid this attack. Guo Jing’s fists moved simultaneously, one downward, the other upward, both aimed at Ouyang Ke’s head.

Ouyang Ke realized this small boat was not the best place to fight while his enemy attacked fiercely. He stood up and sent a stance from his ‘Spirit Snake Fist technique’ [ling she quan], his hand swept horizontally. Guo Jing extended his left arm to parry, but suddenly Ouyang Ke’s fist curved upward turning into a palm that slapped Guo Jing hard on his cheek.

This blow was very hard and Guo Jing’s head was spinning because of it; but he realized the danger and he opened his eyes to see the second attack coming. Ouyang Ke’s movement resembled a wine gourd with two bends. Guo Jing avoided this attack by throwing his head backwards while sending his right arm forward to counterattack. Because his head was moving backwards, his attack was not effective. Luckily he had learned the ‘Mutual Hands

Combat technique' from Zhou Botong, so both his left and right hands could move independently of each other. This time his left hand followed his right with a different stance heading at his opponent. Because Ouyang Ke's hand was still coming towards Guo Jing, Guo Jing's arms surrounded his hand. Ouyang Ke's right arm happened to get caught in between Guo Jing's hands and as the left hand was pulling inwards and the right was pushing outwards. With a crack one of Ouyang Ke's arm bones was broken.

Actually Ouyang Ke's martial arts skill was not much below those of Ma Yu, Wang Chuyi or Sha Tongtian. No matter which technique he used, he should be able to defeat Guo Jing in a fair battle. Because Guo Jing's techniques were more bizarre than any other techniques he had seen before, he suffered under Guo Jing's hands twice. Ouyang Ke fell onto the small boat's deck.

Guo Jing did not pursue his attack on his opponent; instead he quickly took Huang Rong's yielding body and unsealed her acupoint. Luckily for him that when Ouyang Feng sealed her acupoint, he did not use too much energy; he was trying to conserve his energy because he'd anticipated Hong Qigong's attack. Guo Jing would not have been able to unseal the Western Poison's acupoint sealing otherwise.

Huang Rong came to her senses, "Quickly help Shifu!" she called out.

Guo Jing lifted his head to see his master and Ouyang Feng engaged in close hand-to-hand combat and looked like they were dancing in the midst of the blazing fire. The sound of the winds generated by their movements was intermingled with the sounds of cracking and debris falling over them. Suddenly a loud crack was heard as the boat's back broke; the stern slowly sank into the sea and vanished in the dark water. The bow was lighter, but slowly sank as well. Guo

Jing took his oar and started paddling to get the small boat closer with the intention of helping his master.

Hong Qigong's feet hit the water first. His clothes had been dried out by the fire, while Ouyang Feng's were still wet from jumping into the sea earlier. This time the Western Poison had gained the upper hand over the Northern Beggar. Hong Qigong did not want to surrender so easily, so he fought with all his might. At that moment the main mast broke and fell. The two hurriedly jumped backwards so they were separated by the burning mast.

Ouyang Feng fetched his snake staff and jumped over the burning mast. Hong Qigong immediately drew the bamboo stick from his waist and fended off the attack. They had been fighting ferociously barehanded before, so imagine how fierce the battle had become now that both were wielding weapons.

Guo Jing held the oar in his hands, ready to jump on board. He was very concerned about his master's safety, yet watching the two's wonderful weapon techniques he was carried away, clucking his tongue and praising them unceasingly.

There is a saying among martial arts practitioners, "A hundred days to master a saber, a thousand days to master a spear, ten thousand days to master a sword," indicating that sword techniques were the most difficult to learn. However, when martial artists reached perfection, each would develop his/her own unique skill and the difference between various weapons would become minuscule. Twenty years ago during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng already admired each other's martial arts very much. Even using swords it was very difficult for one to defeat the other. Now neither used the sword any longer.

Hong Qigong wielded a bamboo stick which he carried anywhere he went as the symbol of authority of his position as the Beggar Clan Leader. The bamboo was pliable but hard to break. Compared to a sword it was about one foot longer. His skill in external martial arts was superb; he was able to impart an incredible amount of strength to the flexible weapon in his hands, increasing its might tremendously.

Ouyang Feng's snake staff was also unique in that he'd combined the cudgel, stick, and spear techniques; the movements were complicated. The staff's head was carved in the form of a human head; its mouth grinned ferociously, looking very scary. The two rows of sharp teeth inside its mouth were covered with poison. The head danced around like a ghost ready to strike its victim. On top of that, there was a hidden button on the staff that, when pressed, would shoot some poison towards the enemy. If that wasn't enough, fiercer still were the two snakes wrapped around the staff. They were alive and able to make unpredictable moves and were very difficult to guard against.

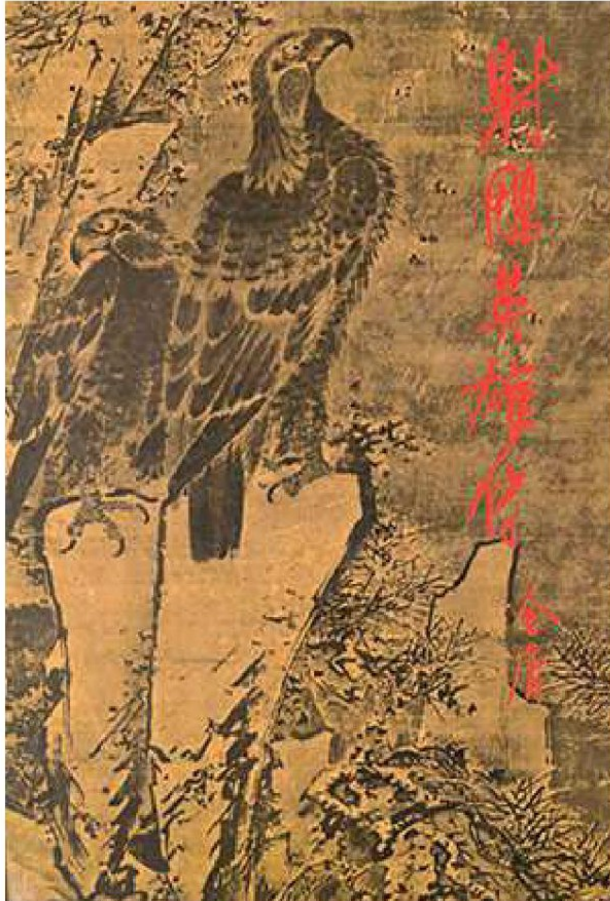
The two exchanged palms and weapons, displaying their respective unique skills. Ouyang Feng had a slight advantage in terms of weaponry, but Hong Qigong was the leader of beggars everywhere and beggars were experts in catching snakes. His bamboo stick danced amidst the snake staff movements and parried every move that came his way. He also took advantage of any opening in his opponent's offense and struck at the snake staff's vital point. Ouyang Feng moved his staff very quickly, making it difficult for his opponent to take accurate aim; he knew Hong Qigong meant to kill the snakes on his staff. He did not activate the secret button on his staff for fear that his reputation would be ruined.

Hong Qigong still had a unique skill set belonging to the Beggar Clan, namely the 'Dog Beating Stick technique' [da gou bang], its changes were subtle yet marvelous. It was a very sophisticated stick technique. However, Hong Qigong did not want to use this special skill unless except in an emergency situation. He was planning on using it at the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua the following year and he did not want to let this would-be-contender to have the advantage of watching his moves beforehand.

Guo Jing stood on the bow of the small boat and several times wanted to jump on board to help his master; but the two combatants were fighting closely. He realized his own skill was too far below theirs and it would be very difficult to even get close to them. All he could do was stare blankly, unable to do anything.

End of Book 2

She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan
Eagle Shooting Hero Book 03
by
Jin Yong



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She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan Eagle Shooting Hero Book 03

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Unfortunately there does not appear to a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to fan translators for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience.

Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 21 - The Thousand-catty Rock](#)

[Chapter 22 - Wandering on a Shark's Back](#)

[Chapter 23 - Big Trouble in the Imperial Palace](#)

[Chapter 24 - Healing in the Secret Room](#)

[Chapter 25 - Desolated Inn in the Village](#)

[Chapter 26 - New Allies, Old Arrangements](#)

[Chapter 27 - In front of the Xuanyuan Platform](#)

[Chapter 28 - Peak of the Iron Palm Mountain](#)

[Chapter 29 - The Lady of the Black Marsh](#)

[Chapter 30 - Reverend Yideng](#)

Chapter 21 - The Thousand-catty Rock

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox)



They acted together and used the oak tree as the pivot to pull the crisscross shaped rope formation. The rope became taut and the rock was lifted

slowly. The Sun was about to set and the sky was red, illuminating the surface of the water. The tide had already gone out and Ouyang Ke's body was in the mud with his eyes fixed onto the rock. It moved slowly and steadily with a creaking sound, causing him to be anxious yet happy.

Ouyang Feng felt his surroundings becoming hotter and the deck of the boat was shaking violently; he knew the boat would sink any moment. But Hong Qigong was attacking more furiously and did not slacken his pace; if he did not use his special skills now, he might not get out of this contest alive. He pulled back his Snake Rod with his right hand and kicked out viciously with his right leg.

Hong Qigong used his bamboo rod to chase the Snake Rod while using his left hand to block the incoming kick. Ouyang Feng suddenly twisted his arms and punched towards Hong Qigong's 'Right Sun' Acupoint. This 'Spirit Snake Fist' was developed by Ouyang Feng's own harsh training and was meant for use during the second Mount Hua Tournament. He had not yet used this snake-like boxing skill even after exchanging a thousand strokes with Hong Qigong on Peach Blossom Island.

A snake seems to be boneless and can turn in all directions at will, so the main point of this boxing skill is to be able to twist the arms unpredictably, so that when the opponent blocks the fists, the attacker would be able to throw a punch from an unexpected angle at close proximity. Of course to expect the arms to move exactly like a snake would be unreasonable but to the eyes of the opponent, the movements of the arms greatly resemble the movements of snakes.

With Ouyang Feng executing such a strange move at this critical moment, Hong Qigong should have found it hard to

counter, and even if he wasn't injured, he would still be in danger. However Ouyang Ke had already used the move against Guo Jing, and although he won, he actually gave Hong Qigong a chance to spot a flaw in the move.

That day he did not attend the feast with Li Sheng and the group of beggars but instead thought deeply on how to counter the move. Now that Ouyang Feng finally used this move, he inwardly rejoiced; he extended his fingers to form a claw and caught hold of his fist. His response was perfect and he managed to swiftly and accurately counter this special move of the 'Spirit Snake Fist'.

It looked like it happened by chance, but in reality Hong Qigong had pondered over it for many days and nights and followed it with long hours of practice which finally allowed him to deal with the entire 'Spirit Snake Fist' move. Although it had not been perfected yet, it had the element of surprise and managed to catch Ouyang Feng off guard.

Ouyang Feng had expected Hong Qigong to be greatly surprised and be rendered helpless, allowing him to seize the opportunity and move in for the kill. Unexpectedly it was he who ended up surprised and forced to retreat several steps. Suddenly a mass of fire descended upon him, immediately covering his body. Hong Qigong was also startled; he leapt back and saw that it was actually a large sail which had caught fire and fallen.

Normally with Ouyang Feng's level of martial arts, even had that sail fallen several times faster, it would not have hit him. But he had just seen the 'Spirit Snake Fist', which he painstakingly created over many years, unexpectedly and casually neutralized; he was stunned and he did not even attempt to evade the burning sail. The sail, along with the mast, weighed several hundred jin and Ouyang Feng was not able to lift the sail even after jumping twice. Although

he was in great danger, he was still calm; he tried to raise the Snake Rod to lift the sail, but the Snake Rod was pinned under the mast and could not be lifted. In his heart he sighed, "Forget it! I'll return to heaven today!" Suddenly he felt the weight lifting and his head was no longer covered by the sail. He saw that Hong Qigong had raised the anchor, hooked it onto the sail and pulled the sail away. Hong Qigong did not want to see him being burned alive so he went to save him.

By now Ouyang Feng's clothes and brows were on fire and he immediately rolled on the deck of the boat frantically attempting to put out the fire. Unfortunately bad things do not come singly and the boat suddenly lurched to one side, causing a huge chain to sweep right into him.

Hong Qigong shouted, "Ah!" and dashed forward to grab the chain. The chain had been heated by the fire and caused a sizzling sound when it came into contact with his hand, burning his palm. He quickly let it go as he threw it into the sea. He was just about to jump from the boat when he felt a slight numbness in his back. He stopped for a second and a thought flashed through his mind, "I saved West Poison's life, can it be possible that he's using his snake to poison me?" He turned around and saw that it was indeed a snake and it had fresh blood in its mouth. Enraged, he threw two palms towards Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng casually stepped aside and Hong Qigong's palms hit a mast, splitting it in two.

Ouyang Feng was happy that his sneak attack worked but when he saw Hong Qigong lashing out crazily he became more serious and did not dare take the blows head-on, avoiding them instead. Guo Jing shouted, "Master! Climb aboard the small boat." Hong Qigong suddenly felt dizzy and staggered.

Ouyang Feng charged forward and struck out with his palms which landed on Hong Qigong's back. Ouyang Feng's lethal snake poison was unmatched, but fortunately he already used up most of the poison when he made the bet with Zhou Botong days ago, so today the poison was not as lethal. When Hong Qigong was bitten, he was not severely poisoned and because of his high internal energy, the poison took some time to take effect. When he was hit by Ouyang Feng he was in a daze and he did not circulate his qi to protect himself. The blow caused him to throw up blood and collapse.

Since Hong Qigong was very highly-skilled, Ouyang Feng knew that this blow would not kill him; when he recovered some time later, Ouyang Feng would be in trouble. He jumped over and raised his foot to strike his chest. Guo Jing had just climbed aboard from the small boat and saw that the situation was very urgent and he might not be able to save Hong Qigong in time. So he struck out with both palms using the 'Twin Dragons Fetch Water' stance to attack Ouyang Feng's waist.

Although Ouyang Feng knew his martial arts were not weak, he did not think very highly of him and used his left hand to block the strike while his right foot slammed down. Guo Jing was shocked and did not care about his own safety; he jumped forward to clutch Ouyang Feng's head. By doing this he left his acupoints exposed and his side was swept at by Ouyang Feng.

Although this counterattack was not very forceful, every one of his strikes was enough to kill his opponent. If not for Guo Jing's good internal strength, he would have suffered serious injuries. He felt a sharp pain followed by numbness in half his body, but he continued to cling tenaciously to Ouyang Feng's head.

Ouyang Feng assumed that with his vicious strike, his opponent would retreat, but he did not expect the dumb kid to use a move that could get both of them injured. He had to retract the foot which was halfway to Hong Qigong in order to twist his body around to attack Guo Jing. In such close proximity, he could not execute any of his refined 'Snake' moves.

Whenever highly-skilled martial artists fight, they will not allow their opponent to get close to them even if they were targeting acupoints. There was hardly any close-contact grappling involved. When it came to advanced martial arts, there were no moves for scuffling.

Ouyang Feng felt his throat being gripped forcefully by Guo Jing and he struck out backwards, but Guo Jing managed to avoid the blows. It was becoming harder for him to breathe and he felt the grip was becoming tighter, so he jabbed his elbow backwards. Guo Jing evaded to the right and had to let go with his left hand, but at the same time used his legs to execute a Mongolian wrestling technique while his left hand slipped past Ouyang Feng's shoulder.

He slammed down forcefully on Ouyang Feng's back, causing Ouyang Feng to suffer intense pain even with his high level martial arts. This technique was called the 'Camel's Pull', and it was so effective that only a wrestling expert could deal with it. Ouyang Feng did not know wrestling, so he suffered the full extent of the strike.

Guo Jing was happy and his right hand released its grip and slipped upwards behind Ouyang Feng's back. With a loud yell he pressed both palms down. In Mongolian wrestling this move was called the 'Mountain Breaking Move' and was used when the opponent had fallen, so that no matter how strong his shoulders were or how good his wrestling

techniques were, there would be nothing much he could do as his shoulder would break if he tried to move.

However Ouyang Feng's martial arts were much better than the Mongolian wrestlers, so even with such a disadvantage he still managed to think of a way to turn defeat into victory. When Guo Jing's hands came down, he used his qinggong [lightness kungfu] to duck aside and rolled away under Guo Jing's waist.

With his status as a highly skilled martial arts master, rolling under a junior's waist was a great disgrace, but that did not bother him. He broke free from the 'Mountain Breaking Move' and immediately threw his fists at Guo Jing's back to counterattack. He did not expect that before his fists reached Guo Jing, his left leg was immobilized. Guo Jing knew he was no match for his opponent, but in a close-combat situation and with his wrestling background, coupled with the fact that he had no regard for his own safety, Ouyang Feng could not get closer to his master to injure him further. At this point the fire became fiercer and the planks twisted, causing them to lose their balance, fall and their clothes to catch fire.

Huang Rong was worried sick and anxious as she saw Hong Qigong's motionless body slumped at the side of the boat; she could not tell if he was dead or alive. Meanwhile Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were still rolling and struggling without showing any signs of stopping. Their clothes were on fire and the situation was getting dangerous, so she lifted the oar and swung it at Ouyang Ke's head. Although his right arm was broken, his martial arts were still good enough for him to evade the oar and stretch out his left hand to grab Huang Rong's bracelet. Huang Rong stomped her feet fiercely and the small boat almost capsized. Ouyang Ke could not swim and he was about to fall overboard, so he had to let go of Huang Rong. When the

boat stabilized, Huang Rong took the opportunity to jump into the sea.

She swam quickly towards the big boat. The boat was already half submerged and the deck was almost touching the water's surface. Huang Rong climbed aboard to help Guo Jing and took out the 'Emei Sting' from her waist. [The Emei Sting is a spike-like weapon which is pointed on each end and has a finger-ring in the middle] Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were locked in a bundle and rolling about. Ouyang Feng's martial arts were better and he managed to pin Guo Jing beneath him, but Guo Jing tenaciously held on to his shoulders, preventing him from counterattacking. Huang Rong fought through the smoke, went up to Ouyang Feng, and pierced his back with the spike.

Ouyang Feng was struggling madly with Guo Jing, but when he felt the prick, he was surprised and twisted around forcefully, causing Guo Jing to land on top. Huang Rong now wanted to poke Ouyang Feng's head with the spike, but Ouyang Feng's agility allowed him to evade her attacks and she ended up jabbing the spike into the deck.

A gust of wind blew some thick black smoke her way causing her eyes to burn. Just as she was about to rub her eyes she suddenly felt a pain in her leg and fell. Ouyang Feng had kicked her. Huang Rong rolled over and jumped up, but her hair caught fire. She was about to attack him again when Guo Jing shouted, "Save Master first!" Huang Rong silently agreed and ran towards Hong Qigong, grabbed him and jumped into the sea, extinguishing the flames on her body.

Huang Rong placed Hong Qigong on her back, kicked her legs in the water, and swam to the small boat. Ouyang Ke stood at the side of the boat and raised the oar high, shouting, "Put the old beggar down; I'll only let you alone

board!" Huang Rong said, "Fine! Let's meet in the water!" She shook the boat violently. The boat rocked and seemed about to capsize. Ouyang Ke became frantic and gripped the side of the boat tightly, saying, "Don't... don't shake it, the boat is going to overturn!"

Huang Rong laughed as she said, "Pull my master up quickly. And watch out...if you try any tricks, I'll dump you in the water for six hours." Ouyang Ke had no choice but to comply and took hold of Hong Qigong, pulling him onboard.

Huang Rong smiled and praised him, "Since I first met you, this is the first good deed you've done." Ouyang Ke's heart stirred and he wanted to speak, but could not open his mouth. Huang Rong was about to swim back to the large boat to help out in the fight when she suddenly heard a thunderous rumble - a huge wall of water loomed over her head.

She was shocked and quickly held her breath, waiting for the water to hit the boat, but when she looked again her jaw dropped. A whirlpool had formed on the surface of the sea and the burning boat had disappeared together with Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng.

At this moment, her mind went completely blank and she could not feel or think of anything. She'd become completely lost, not knowing where she was. Suddenly, salty water filled her mouth and she found herself sinking. She jerked and her senses awoke as she swam upwards. When she broke the surface, all she could see in any direction was the small boat; everything else had disappeared under the waves. Huang Rong dived under the water again and struggled to go deeper. Her swimming skills were fantastic and her strokes were powerful, but she could only swim along with the current. She covered the entire area searching for Guo Jing but he had disappeared without a

trace. Even Ouyang Feng could not be found – it seemed they had gone down with the boat.

After some time, she was completely exhausted, but she refused to give up, and swam about wildly. She could only hope Heaven would be merciful and let her bump into Guo Jing, but she was surrounded by mountainous waves and there was no trace of him. She had been swimming for over an hour now and could not continue any longer, so she headed towards the small boat, intending to rest for a while before resuming the search.

Ouyang Ke pulled her up. He knew that his uncle was missing and was equally anxious, asking, “Have you seen my uncle?” Huang Rong was too exhausted and she suddenly saw everything go black as she fainted. After some time she slowly regained consciousness but felt like her body was afloat, as though she was floating among the clouds while the sounds of the winds and waves beat against her ears. She sat upright and realized that the boat was just following the currents.

By now they did not know how far they were from the sunken boat and Guo Jing could not be found. Huang Rong felt great sadness and fainted again. Ouyang Ke could only grip the sides of the small boat tightly as he feared that the next wave would send him tumbling out of the boat into the water.

After another hour, Huang Rong awoke again and thought that since her Jing ge ge was at the bottom of the sea, it was meaningless for her to live on. When she saw Ouyang Ke’s twitching eyes and his pale lips, she felt disgusted and thought, “How can I possibly die together with this beast?” She stood up and snapped, “Jump overboard!” Ouyang Ke was shocked and exclaimed, “What?” Huang Rong said,

“You’re not jumping? Let me capsize the boat then we shall speak again.”

She jumped towards the right, causing a reaction which resulted in the boat springing to the left. She then jumped towards the left, and the boat rocked even more violently. When she heard Ouyang Ke’s frantic shouting, her sadness became joy and she jumped again.

Ouyang Ke knew that if she jumped a few more times, the boat would definitely capsize. When he saw her jump again, he quickly jumped to the other side. They landed exactly at the same time and their forces cancelled out, causing the boat to momentarily dip deeper into the water.

Huang Rong repeated this trick twice, but he managed to stop her. Huang Rong said, “Good! I’ll make a hole in the boat and see what you can do then.” She took out the steel spike and jumped to the middle of the boat, but then she saw Hong Qigong lying motionless in the bottom of the boat. She realized that she had completely forgotten about her master as she yearned for Guo Jing. She hurriedly bent down to place a finger by his nose and she felt his faint breathing. She was relieved and supported Hong Qigong in her arms. His eyes were tightly closed, his face was white as sheet, and his pulse was weak. Huang Rong became worried about her master and no longer worried about Ouyang Ke, so she loosened his shirt to check his injury.

Suddenly the boat trembled violently and Ouyang Ke shouted excitedly, “Land ahead...land ahead!” Huang Rong lifted her head and saw a dense cluster of trees in the distance. The boat had now stopped moving since it was grounded on a reef.

They were still some distance from shore but they could see the sea bed; the depth was only waist-high. Ouyang Ke

jumped into the water and ran a few steps forward before turning back to look at Huang Rong, then he headed back. Huang Rong saw that Hong Qigong's shoulder had a black handprint which seemed to be quite deep and she could not help but think, "How could Western Poison's palm strike be so powerful?"

Then she noticed two fine teeth marks on his shoulder. If she had not looked carefully, she would have missed them. She pressed them lightly with her fingers and suddenly felt a sharp pain in her hand, so she hastily withdrew them and asked, "Master! How are you now?" Hong Qigong moaned but did not answer her. Huang Rong said to Ouyang Ke, "Give me the medicine."

Ouyang Ke threw up his hands impatiently and said, "The antidote is with my uncle." Huang Rong said, "I don't believe it." Ouyang Ke said, "Search me." He undid his outer gown and emptied his stuff onto his hand. Huang Rong saw that there was indeed no medicine and said, "Help me get Master ashore!"

Each took one of Hong Qigong's arms and placed it over their shoulders. Huang Rong held Ouyang Ke's hand, allowing Hong Qigong to sit on their forearms. Then they proceeded to the shore. Huang Rong felt her master shivering continuously and was extremely worried. Ouyang Ke, on the other hand, was rather pleased since he was only aware of the warm and smooth hand holding his, something he could only dream of before. Unfortunately for him, it was not long before they reached the shore.

Huang Rong crouched and lowered Hong Qigong to the ground and said, "Quick, get the boat ashore, don't let the tide sweep it out to sea." Ouyang Ke released her hand and stared blankly, only vaguely hearing Huang Rong's voice but not paying attention to what she was saying. Luckily

Huang Rong did not know what he was thinking and stared at him while repeating what she'd said. Ouyang Ke then dragged the boat ashore and saw that Huang Rong had rolled Hong Qigong over, letting him lie on the grass so that she could give him first aid. Then he thought, "Where on Earth are we?"

He ran up a small hill, looked around, and could not help but be surprised and extremely pleased. In every direction was the vast sea; they were on a remote island. The island was filled with lush greenery but there were no signs of human life. He was surprised that there were no signs of food or accommodation; how would they survive? On the other hand, he was pleased because it seemed as though he was fated to be on this deserted island with that angel-like beauty. With the old beggar seriously injured, he would not bother them. He thought, "With her here, this god-forsaken island is like a paradise; even if I die, I will die happy."

When he thought of this he unconsciously spread his arms, but suddenly felt a sharp pain in his right arm which reminded him that it was broken. He broke off two branches, tore a strip of cloth and tied his arm to the makeshift splint. Huang Rong was at that time trying to suck out the poison from her master's back. She did not know how else she could help him so she let him lie down on a rock in a cave and shouted to Ouyang Ke, "Go look around and see if there's an inn around here."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "This is an island and there's absolutely no inn here. Let's see if we're lucky enough to find anyone else here." Huang Rong was slightly shocked and said, "You do that." When Ouyang Ke heard her instructions he was very excited and utilized his qinggong running to the east; but all he saw were more trees and no traces of human beings. Along the way he killed two wild

hares and then headed north before making his way back in a loop. He told Huang Rong, "It's a deserted island."

That night Huang Rong did not dare sleep for fear of Ouyang Ke attacking them and also because of her anxiety for Hong Qigong. It was only at dawn the following morning that she caught a few hours of sleep. In her sleep she dreamed that Hong Qigong called her several times and she was jolted awake and asked, "Master, how are you?" Hong Qigong pointed at his mouth and moved his jaws. Huang Rong laughed and took some of the unfinished rabbit meat from the previous night and fed him.

Once he'd consumed the meat, he felt the Qi stirring within him and he sat upright in order to breathe properly. Huang Rong did not dare utter a word and only scrutinized his expression. But she watched the reddish tint of his face turn pale, then red again. This cycle repeated several times and soon his head was emitting a steamy mist and sweat fell like rain as his body shivered violently. Suddenly there was the flicker of a shadow... Ouyang Ke was trying to come into the cave.

Huang Rong knew that her master was attempting to treat his own injuries, which was a life-and-death situation; if he forced his way in and distracted her master, nothing would save him. She softly snapped, "Get out now!" Ouyang Ke laughed, "Let's discuss how we can survive on this deserted island. The days will get longer from now on, you know!" Hong Qigong blinked and asked, "Is this really a deserted island?" Huang Rong said, "Master, please concentrate, ignore him." She turned to Ouyang Ke and said, "Come, let's talk outside." Ouyang Ke was elated and followed her out of the cave.

The weather was good this day, but Huang Rong only saw the edge of the vast sea meeting the sky; apart from a few

clouds, there was nothing else. She walked to their landing site and was shocked, and asked, "Where's the boat?" Ouyang Ke said, "Huh, where is it? It must have been swept away by the currents! Ah, damn it!"

Huang Rong saw his expression and deduced that it was he who pushed the boat out to sea so that she could not get away from here. She felt that this was absolutely despicable. Since Guo Jing's apparent death, she had no intention of living. Besides, the small boat would not be able to make it through the fierce waves which made the situation bleak. In any case she would not be able to get her master to safety. She stared at Ouyang Ke without showing any change in expression. In her heart she was actually thinking of how she could kill him and save her master at the same time. Huang Rong jumped onto a large rock and looked into the distance. Ouyang Ke thought, "If I don't use this chance to get close to her, then when can I?" He also leapt up on the rock and waited for her to sit down. After some time, when she did not appear angry and did not shift her position, he moved closer and said, "Little sister, the two of us can live here until we're old and live like the deities. I must have done something wonderful in my past life to deserve this!"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "This island only has the three of us, including Master, wouldn't we be lonely?" Ouyang Ke thought her tone sounded harmless and was ecstatic, saying, "With me by your side, why would it be lonely? Moreover, when we have children in the future, it will be even less so." Huang Rong laughed, "Who will have the children? I won't." Ouyang Ke laughed, "I'll help you." After saying that, he reached out his hand to take hold of hers. Then he felt warmth in his palm and realized that Huang Rong already held his hand. Ouyang Ke's heart beat madly.

Huang Rong slowly moved her hand up his arm, then said in a low voice, "Sister Mu Nianci's chastity was destroyed by you, was it not?" Ouyang Ke laughed as he said, "That girl did not want to submit to me. What kind of man would I be to force her?" Huang Rong said, "So, it must be others who slander her. Her lover had a big quarrel with her because of it." Ouyang Ke said, "Her reputation suffered because of that, what a pity!"

Huang Rong suddenly pointed to the sea and shouted, "Ah, what is that!" Ouyang Ke looked in that direction and was about to ask where when he suddenly felt his wrist stiffen in her firm grip and his body went numb and he could not move. Huang Rong drew her spike and thrust it towards his abdomen. The distance between them was extremely small and Ouyang Ke was in a state of confusion, coupled with the fact that his arm was immobilized, how could he block it? But all of his training under expert guidance at White Camel Mountain had not been wasted; he suddenly twisted his body and in a split second used his chest to thrust towards Huang Rong's back. Huang Rong evaded him and jumped off the rock, causing the spike to gash his leg and resulting in a deep wound that was almost a foot long.

Ouyang Ke jumped off too and saw her spike. He stood there and grinned, but then he felt terrible pain. He bent over and saw his gown stained with blood and realized that although he barely escaped with his life, he was severely injured. Huang Rong said, "We were talking nicely, so why did you try to bump into me for no reason? I can't be bothered with you now." Then she turned and left. Ouyang Ke was filled with love and hatred, shock and joy, as he stood there in silence.

As Huang Rong walked back to the cave she blamed her poor skills for wasting such a good opportunity and letting him escape. When she went inside she saw Hong Qigong

asleep and a pool of black blood on the cave floor. Startled, she asked, "Master, how are you? Are you better?" Hong Qigong said, "I want wine." Huang Rong was distressed because she did not know where to find wine on this deserted island. Yet she agreed and said, "I'll try to get some. Master, your injury isn't serious, right?" Tears fell as she said that.

Despite having gone through so much, she had not cried. Now that the tears had started she could not control herself, so she buried her head on Hong Qigong's chest and cried her heart out. Hong Qigong stroked her hair and patted her back, trying to console her. The old beggar had roamed Jianghu for many decades but had never had to deal with a crying girl before; he did not know what to do. He could only say, "Good girl, don't cry, Master's here for you. Please don't cry. I don't want the wine anymore."

Huang Rong stopped crying after a while and lifted her head. When she saw that Hong Qigong's clothes were wet with her tears, she smiled and said, "I didn't manage to kill that evil jerk, what a pity!" She then told the whole story to him. Hong Qigong was silent for a moment before saying, "Master is useless now and that 'jerk' is better than you in martial arts. For now you can only pit your wits against him." Huang Rong said, "Master, after resting a few days, you'll recover and take his useless life with one palm, won't that settle it?"

Hong Qigong regretfully said, "I've been poisoned by the poisonous snake as well as Western Poison's deadly palm. I've already used all of my martial abilities to purge the poison but there is some left within me. Even if I survive, my martial arts will be affected. Your master is just another old man without any powerful skills." Huang Rong quickly said, "No, no, Master, you aren't, you aren't!" Hong Qigong said,

"I, the old beggar, have never taken things seriously, but now it has come to this and I can't deny it."

He paused, and then gravely said, "Child, Master has no choice but to request a huge favour from you... it's extremely difficult to accomplish... will you accept?" Huang Rong quickly said, "Yes, yes! Master, tell me." He sighed, and then said, "Our time together as master and disciple has not been long and I didn't get to teach you very much martial arts. Now that you're facing a strong opponent, I have no choice but to thrust a great burden on you, or I will not be at ease."

Huang Rong knew that he was usually carefree and easygoing; but now he was so hesitant that she knew it must be some extremely important responsibility. She said, "Master, please tell me. Your injuries were caused by you trying to help your disciple escape from Peach Blossom Island. Even if I die a horrible death, I can hardly repay you. I'm just afraid I'm too young to carry out your instructions." Hong Qigong happily said, "So you agree to it?" Huang Rong said, "Yes. Please say it."

Hong Qigong stood up unsteadily, cupped his hands, and bowing to the north said, "Ancestors, the Beggar Clan you founded passed to my hands. I am now unfortunately incapable of bringing virtue to our clan. Today the matter is urgent and I have to pass on my responsibilities. May the Ancestors in Heaven bless us, help this child avoid trouble and bring our clan to greater heights." When he finished, he bowed to the north once more. Huang Rong was both shocked and curious when he said that.

Hong Qigong said, "Child, kneel down." Huang Rong knelt down and Hong Qigong took his green bamboo stick and raised it over his head. He saluted it and placed it in her hands. Huang Rong was extremely shocked and said,

“Master, you want me to be the Beggar Clan... the Beggar Clans’...” Hong Qigong said, “Exactly. I am the eighteenth generation Leader of the Beggar Clan, and now you are the nineteenth Leader. Now let’s thank our ancestors.”

At this stage Huang Rong did not dare to disobey and could only imitate Hong Qigong’s actions and bowed with both hands cupped. Hong Qigong suddenly coughed and spat out some phlegm which landed on Huang Rong’s clothing. Huang Rong was secretly sad and thought, “Master’s injuries are indeed serious... he doesn’t even have the strength to spit properly.” However she pretended that nothing was amiss. He sighed, “When the Beggars pay their respects to you in future, there will be a disgusting ritual. Ah, this will be hard on you.”

Huang Rong smiled, thinking, “The beggars are filthy and rough, how could any of that be unexpected?” Hong Qigong drew a deep breath. His face was pale but in his heart it felt as though he had just put down a large rock and he was very pleased. Huang Rong helped him lie down. He said, “Now that you’re the Leader, I am an Elder in the Clan. Although the Elders are respected by the Leader, when there’s something to be done the Leader has to give the order. This rule was laid down by our founders, so you must follow it to the letter. When the Leader issues an order, all the beggars must obey it.”

Huang Rong became depressed and worried, thinking, “We’re on this deserted island and I don’t know how we can return to the Central Plains. Moreover Jing ge ge is dead and I have no desire to live. Now Master suddenly wants me to be some so-called Clan Leader and command all the beggars under the sky; how on Earth am I going to do that?” But when she saw her master’s condition, she did not want to worry him further and could only agree to anything he proposed.

Hong Qigong said, "On the fifteenth day of the seventh month of this year, the four Elders of our Clan will hold a gathering at the lakeside Cave-Courtyard in Yueyang City and hear my announcement of the new Leader. You only need to take the bamboo rod there and they will understand my intentions. Every matter within the Clan will be dealt with by the four Elders, so I can leave it to them. But I have to send you, such an adorable child, into the midst of the filthy beggars; this will be really hard on you."

Then he laughed heartily, but because of his injury he began to cough before he finished laughing. Huang Rong massaged his back for a while until he stopped coughing. Hong Qigong sighed, "This old beggar is really useless now, ah, I don't know when I'll recover. I have to rush into teaching you the 'Dog Beating Skill'." Huang Rong was wondering why this stick skill had such a horrible name. She thought that no matter how fierce a dog might be, she could kill it with one punch. She saw no need to learn this skill, but her master was deadly serious, so she could only agree.

Hong Qigong said, "Although you are now the Clan Leader, you don't have to change your personality; if you want to be playful and mischievous, go ahead and be so. We beggars have no restrictions and we do as we please. If we worried that 'this won't do and that won't do', we might as well be judges or ministers. If you do not think highly of the 'Dog Beating Skill', simply say so!"

Huang Rong laughed, "Disciple is wondering what kind of dog could be so tenacious that it requires a specialized skill to handle it." Hong Qigong said, "Now that you're the head of all the beggars, you'll have to act like one. With your rich dress and your rich girl's attitude, the dog would be only too pleased to listen to you; why would you need to hit it? But if we beggars run into such dogs it's a different story.

The old saying goes: 'the poor not armed with sticks get bullied by dogs'. You have never been poor so you don't know what it's like to be one of them."

Huang Rong clapped and laughed, "Master, you're wrong there!" Hong Qigong was perplexed and asked, "Why?" Huang Rong said, "On the third month of this year, I escaped from Peach Blossom Island to play around, and I disguised myself as a beggar. Whenever there were fierce dogs bothering me, all I had to do is give them a kick and they would scramble away." Hong Qigong said, "Yup, but if the dog is too fierce then you'd have to use a stick to hit it."

Huang Rong thought, "What dog could be so fierce?" Then she realized what he meant and shouted, "Oh yeah, bad guys are dogs too!" Hong Qigong smiled and said, "You're really clever. If..." He wanted to say that Guo Jing would not have known it, but his heart turned sour and he stopped.

When Huang Rong heard him stop in mid-sentence, she understood what he was thinking, felt bitterness in her heart and wanted to cry; but now that Hong Qigong needed her help she seemed all grown-up while Hong Qigong seemed like a youth, so she controlled herself and only turned her head away. The tears, however, fell like pearls.

Hong Qigong was as sad as her and he knew that consoling her was useless, so he talked about serious matters, saying, "The thirty-six moves of the 'Dog Beating Skill' was created by our Ancestors and can only be passed down from one Clan Leader to the next without letting anyone else know about the skill. Our Clan's third Leader far surpassed previous Leaders and he greatly improved this skill. After hundreds of years, when our Clan faces any strong opposition, our Leader would personally come forward and use this skill to defeat our enemies."

Huang Rong began to pay attention and then sighed softly, asking, "Master, when you were fighting with Western Poison on the boat, why didn't you use it?" Hong Qigong said, "This skill is very important to our clan, so even though I didn't use it, he may not have won. Who'd know he could be so despicable as to poison me after I saved his life?" Huang Rong saw that he was becoming depressed, so she tried to distract him and said, "Master, please teach me so that I can kill him to avenge you."

With a stony-faced laugh Hong Qigong picked up a piece of firewood and leaned against the cave wall. He recited the formula and executed the steps, thus passing on all thirty-six moves to her. He knew Huang Rong was extremely intelligent but was afraid that he would not live long, so he passed everything on to her in one shot. Although the name 'Dog Beating Skill' was crude, the changes within were subtle and the techniques profound; it was one of the best martial arts skills ever created. It was therefore the reason that this skill was passed down like a precious heirloom.

Although Huang Rong was very clever, she could only remember the general skills and forgot some of the finer details. How could she understand it in such a short time? After he was done, a sweating Hong Qigong took a deep breath and said, "I didn't teach it well, but... that's all I can do for now." With a groan he collapsed and fainted. Huang Rong was shocked and shouted, "Master...master!" She hurriedly supported him but noticed his limbs were cold and his breathing was weak; he seemed almost beyond hope.

Huang Rong had been severely tried for the past few days but now she could not cry. She listened to his heart beat and found it barely audible so she quickly massaged his chest to aid his breathing. Just at this critical moment she heard noises behind her and a hand reached out to take her

wrist. She was concentrating fully on saving her master and did not even notice when Ouyang Ke entered the cave. Now she ignored the fact that the person behind her was a vicious wolf and quietly said, "Master may not make it; think of something to save him."

When Ouyang Ke heard her plead so sincerely, saw the tears welling up in her eyes and her face looking pitiful, his heart quivered. When he bent down to look at Hong Qigong, he saw that his face was white as sheet and his eyes were rolled up; he felt happier. The distance between Huang Rong and himself was less than half a zhang and he could even feel her breathing and smell her fragrance. A few strands of hair caressed her face and his heart thumped madly until he could no longer restrain himself and he grabbed her by her waist.

Huang Rong was taken aback, struck out with force and took the chance to jump away when he evaded her blow. Ouyang Ke had been afraid of Hong Qigong so he did not dare be disrespectful to Huang Rong; now he saw that Hong Qigong was half dead, so he did not worry any longer and laughed, "Good girl, I normally don't bother about other girls, but for a beauty such as yourself, I'll make an exception; come kiss me."

Then he moved menacingly towards her. Huang Rong was frightened out of her wits and thought, "This is a terrible situation. Looks like I'll be killed here, with some indignities." She took out her needles. Ouyang Ke smiled, used his outer gown as a weapon and even advanced another two steps. Huang Rong waited for him to advance another step before crouching low and dodging to the left.

Ouyang Ke followed her and Huang Rong waved her hand. He waved his long sleeve and blocked the spike. Huang Rong knew that she was like an arrow away from the bow

and anxiously tried to run out of the cave. Ouyang Ke was faster. Huang Rong heard the wind behind her back and knew he was attacking her. She was wearing the soft armour so she was not afraid of that and furthermore she was prepared to die, but she wanted to injure him first, so she did not defend herself and even sent a strike towards his chest.

Ouyang Ke did not intend to injure her and his strike was only meant to tire her out, so he quickly struck towards her wrist, neutralizing her move. At the same time, he jumped to the cave entrance, effectively trapping her inside. But the entrance was narrow and he could barely turn around, so with Huang Rong's fierce onslaught coupled with her indifference to defense, her power seemed to have increased tremendously. Although Ouyang Ke was better than her, he did not want to injure her, so he was at a disadvantage.

In a brief moment they had exchanged fifty or sixty moves and Huang Rong was in danger. Her martial arts had been taught to her by her father while Ouyang Ke's were taught by his uncle. Huang Yaoshi's and Ouyang Feng's martial arts were about the same level, but Huang Rong was only around fifteen while Ouyang Ke was almost thirty, so the difference in their martial arts was almost twenty years' worth of training. Moreover Huang Rong was not as hard working as Ouyang Ke and although she learned some skills from Hong Qigong, she'd hardly practiced them. At this time, even with Ouyang Ke's injuries, she was still unable to gain an advantage.

Suddenly Huang Rong launched herself forward and sent her spike towards him with a backstroke. Ouyang Ke blocked it and Huang Rong followed up closely with a fierce stab towards his right shoulder. His right arm was broken and in a splint so he could not exert any strength there. He

tried to use his left hand to intercept that move, but the spike made a semi-circle, changed directions midway, and stabbed into his right shoulder. Huang Rong was elated, only to feel her hand suddenly go numb and had to drop the spike because her wrist's acupoint had been hit.

Ouyang Ke was swift and agile; seeing that she was about to escape, he hit her 'Xuan Zhong' and 'Zhong Tou' acupoints consecutively with his legs. Huang Rong was in midair when she was struck and she fell towards the ground. Ouyang Ke moved forward and threw his outer gown on the ground, laughing, "Ah, don't hurt yourself." Huang Rong spun the spike around and tried to jump up but her legs were numb and she only managed to get a foot off the ground before falling again.

Ouyang Ke came to help her up. Huang Rong used her only non-immobilized arm and punched him. But in the confusion, her punch lacked strength and Ouyang Ke laughed as he sealed her last acupoint. This time Huang Rong was totally immobilized and she inwardly regretted, "Why did I did not stab myself just now? Now I can't even beg for death." She was on fire inside and everything went dark as she fainted. Ouyang Ke smoothly consoled her, saying, "Don't be afraid!" He stretched his arm out to hug her. Suddenly he heard a cold voice above his head, saying, "Do you wish to live or die?"

Ouyang Ke was shocked, twisted his head around and saw Hong Qigong standing at the entrance looking at him with a side ways glance from his eyes. He once heard his uncle mention the incident where Wang Chongyang jumped out of his coffin and nearly killed him, so he immediately thought, "The old beggar pretended to be dead and now I'm dead!" He'd tasted Hong Qigong's skills before and knew he did not even come close, so in shock he knelt down and said, "I

was just playing with Miss Huang. Uncle Hong, please don't be angry."

Hong Qigong spat and shouted, "Scoundrel, aren't you going to unseal her acupoints or do you need me to do it?" Ouyang Ke agreed repeatedly and hurriedly unblocked her acupoints. Hong Qigong said coldly, "Enter the cave again and I'll show no mercy. Scram!" Ouyang Ke darted out like a rabbit.

Huang Rong awoke as though from a dream. Hong Qigong could not hold on any longer and collapsed. Huang Rong was shocked and agitated and quickly held him up. She noticed his mouth filled with blood and three teeth fell out. Huang Rong was very sad as she thought, "Even with Master's wonderful abilities, such a fall actually broke his teeth."

Hong Qigong took his teeth and laughed, "Teeth ah teeth, you don't want to savor exquisite food with me anymore. I never expected you to leave before I did!" He was actually in very bad shape from the snake poison in his body and a palm strike by Ouyang Feng which almost shattered his spine. Because of his high skills, he was fortunately spared from death, but he was as weak as someone without martial arts.

When Huang Rong's acupoints were blocked, Hong Qigong actually did not have the strength to unblock them for her and had to use his reputation to frighten Ouyang Ke into doing it for him. He saw Huang Rong's grave expression and said, "Don't worry. With this old beggar around, he wouldn't dare to disturb you." Huang Rong asked, "When I'm inside the cave that creep won't show up, but what about food?" Though resourceful, she was flustered now and could not think straight.

Hong Qigong asked, "You're thinking of ways to obtain food right?" Huang Rong nodded. Hong Qigong said, "Help me down to the beach to view the sun." Huang Rong complied immediately and said, "OK! Let's go fishing." She let him lean on her shoulder and they walked slowly to the beach.

The weather was good on this day and the sea seemed endless, moving gently in the sea breeze. As the sun shone on her, their spirits were lifted. Ouyang Ke was also standing on the beach, but when he saw them coming, he immediately retreated several zhang, then stopped to watch them because they did not chase him.

They both worried, "This slimy creature is really hard to shake off; he may discover our weakness sooner or later." But right now they could not care too much. Hong Qigong sat on a rock while Huang Rong broke off a tree branch to use as a fishing rod. The fish population thrived around this island because no one molested them, so within a short time she caught three big fish.

Huang Rong used the same method she used to cook chicken to cook the fish and they ate their fill. After resting for a while, Hong Qigong asked Huang Rong to display the moves of the 'Dog Beating Skill' and gave some pointers along the way. Huang Rong then understood more of the finer profound changes of the skill. By the time evening came, she had practiced until she was very hot, so she removed her outer coat and jumped into the sea to bathe. Suddenly she had a thought, "I've heard that the Dragon Palace at the bottom of the sea has a very beautiful Dragon Princess; I wonder if Jing ge ge has gone to the Dragon Palace?"

As she dreamily kicked in the water she felt a sharp pain in her foot and quickly retracted it; but felt as though it was being grabbed by something and she could not get free.

She'd played in the sea since young and was not afraid of large clams; she was about to reach out her hand to catch it and got a shock instead. The clam was almost as big as a table; it was larger than any clam she had seen at Peach Blossom Island. She stretched out both hands to pry it open.

The clam was incredibly strong and even with both hands she could not force it open. The clam gripped her even tighter and her leg felt even more painful. Huang Rong smacked through the water, hoping to yank it out of the bottom but she had not expected it to feel like it weighed around two or three hundred jin. The clam had been living on the seabed for many years and had become part of the reef, how could it be easy to move it?

Huang Rong struggled a while more but felt her foot become even more painful; she was worried and gulped down two mouthfuls of water and thought, "Although I have no wish to live, I cannot leave Master alone here to be bullied by that scoundrel, I wouldn't die in peace." She quickly grabbed a large stone and smashed it on the clam, but because its shell was tough and she could not exert much strength through the water, even though she hit it repeatedly, it did not budge.

As the clam was attacked it tightened its grip further and Huang Rong swallowed water again; then she suddenly thought of something and quickly put the stone down, grabbed a handful of sand, and threw it into the open clam. The clam was indeed irritated by the sand and hurriedly opened up, wanting to expel the sand. As soon as her leg was free, she wasted no time swimming to the surface and sucked in some fresh air.

Hong Qigong noticed that she was submerged for such a long time and became worried since he knew she must have

met some trouble in the water. Wanting to help her, he anxiously splashed around in the water for a brief moment before he saw Huang Rong surface and hailed her in his excitement. Huang Rong waved to her master and decided to dive again. This time she was prepared and dived some distance away from the giant clam and shook it, then used the reef as a pivot to lift it up. She dragged the clam back to the shore. When the clam left the water, it lost its buoyancy and became as heavy as a large rock. Huang Rong could not move it further. Then she grabbed a large stone and struck the clam to vent her anger. When she saw the deep wound the clam had inflicted on her, she thought of her close brush with death and stopped hitting it.

On this night the two of them made the clam into a good meal and they thought that it tasted really good. The next day when Hong Qigong awoke, he felt that the great pain in his body was less intense. His stomach felt really comfortable and he contentedly sighed.

Hong Qigong said, "After sleeping for a night, my injury seemed to have improved by quite a bit." Huang Rong was elated and exclaimed, "It must be the clam meat which helped you." Hong Qigong laughed, "The clam meat didn't help much, but because the food was delicious, it satisfied my mouth. After that my recovery follows automatically by a small amount."

Huang Rong giggled and rushed out to the beach to find the remains of the clam meat. In her eagerness, she forgot about Ouyang Ke. Just as she cut off two slices of meat, she suddenly saw a figure that was moving closer to her. Huang Rong bent over and grabbed part of the clam's shell, threw it and jumped away at the same time, reaching the shoreline.

After observing Hong Qigong from a distance for a day, Ouyang Ke was becoming more suspicious since he could hardly walk, but he did not dare go into the cave. Now he forced himself forward and said, "Sister, don't go, I want to talk to you." Huang Rong said, "I'm ignoring you, yet you disregard that...you're really shameless." She then made a face at him.

Ouyang Ke watched her childish behavior which caused his face to lose color and his heart to itch; he advanced two steps and laughed, "It's your fault; it's because you're so beautiful that people can't ignore you." Huang Rong laughed, "I said I'm ignoring you and I mean it. It's useless to sweet-talk me." Ouyang Ke advanced yet another step and said, "I don't believe you."

Huang Rong's face became a shade darker and she said, "Move another step forward and I'll ask Master to club you." Ouyang Ke said, "Forget it...can he even walk? I'll go in and carry him out, OK?" Huang Rong felt a jolt inside and retreated two steps. Ouyang Ke grinned, "If you'd like to jump into the sea then go ahead. I'll wait here for you and we'll see who can last the longest."

Huang Rong said, "Fine, you're bullying me, so I'll ignore you forever." She turned and ran, but tripped on a stone and fell down. Ouyang Ke sort of expected this so he laughed, "You're really mischievous and naughty, but I love it." He held his gown in his hand to catch any hidden needles she might throw and walked towards her. Huang Rong shouted, "Don't come near!" She struggled to her feet but fell again after three steps.

This time her fall was more serious and half her body was in the sea; she seemed to have fainted. Ouyang Ke thought, "This girl is very crafty, I won't fall for her tricks. With your skills, why did you fall for no apparent reason?" He stood

there and observed her. After some time, he saw that she was still motionless and the tide was about to engulf her whole body.

Ouyang Ke became worried and thought, "This time she really has fainted; if I don't save her she might drown." He ran forward and tried to pull her legs. When he tugged her legs, he got a shock because her body was stiff, so he quickly lifted her up. Huang Rong suddenly hugged his legs and called out, "Go down!" Ouyang Ke could not stand and the two went into the water together.

In the water, despite his high skills, he could not use them and thought, "Even with precautions, I fell for her trick; this time my life is lost!" Huang Rong originally wanted to dunk his head in the water to appease her anger. However as Ouyang Ke felt the water fill his mouth, he could not feel where his body was and struggled wildly, wanting to grab onto Huang Rong.

However she had expected that and swam around him; how could he catch her? In the struggle, Ouyang Ke swallowed a few mouthfuls of water and his body sank deeper until his feet touched the seabed. Even though his martial arts were good and he was quick-thinking, he was at a great disadvantage in the water and could feel his body floating aimlessly. He hurriedly grabbed a rock on the seabed and used his internal energy to hold his breath while he looked around trying to find the direction to the shore. But the water was murky and he could not tell east from west, so he walked around for a few steps and decided that walking upwards was a good idea. He hit rock and took large steps towards the shallower area. With the reef on the seabed, movements were very difficult, so he used his internal energy to dash across in one go. When Huang Rong saw that he did not surface for some time, she quickly looked around and was surprised to see him walking in the water.

She swam behind him and used her spike to thrust towards him.

Ouyang Ke felt the water flowing faster, so he quickly evaded and moved even faster. Now he really felt the lack of air in his lungs and let go of the large stone he was carrying trying to surface to breathe. When he stuck his head out, he saw that he was already close to shore. Huang Rong knew she could not stop him now so she sighed and dived again. Ouyang Ke did not die but crawled onto the beach completely drenched and his senses were dull. He threw up all the water he swallowed and felt his body go weak as if he suffered from some great illness. He was very angry and thought, "I'll go kill that old beggar and see if that girl listens to me then!"

Although he had these thoughts, he was still wary of Hong Qigong and breathed deeply for a few moments to get rid of his fatigue. Then he broke off a tree branch as a makeshift weapon and ran towards the cave.

He avoided going in directly and tried to slip in from the side. He listened for a moment and did not pick up any movements in the room. He looked in and saw Hong Qigong sitting on the ground, meditating. His face showed no signs of any injury.

Ouyang Ke thought, "I'll test him to see if he can move." He said in a loud voice, "Uncle Hong, this is bad...this is bad!" Hong Qigong opened his eyes and asked, "What?" Ouyang Ke pretended to be in a state of panic and said, "Sister Huang tried to catch a rabbit but fell into a deep valley and is injured. She can't climb out!"

Hong Qigong was shocked and said, "Then quickly save her!" Ouyang Ke was excited and thought, "If he can walk, why doesn't he come out and save her?" He walked in and

laughed, "She tried several ways and means to take my life, why should I help her? You go save her."

Hong Qigong observed his expression, knew that he was lying, and thought, "This scum has discovered that I've lost my martial arts...I'm in danger!" In this situation, he could only try to bring him down as well; he secretly channeled all his strength to his arm, and waited for him to come closer before he struck. However when he did that, he felt a sharp pain near his heart and his body felt like it was about to come apart. When he saw Ouyang Ke's twisted smile, he let out a long sigh and waited for death.

Huang Rong saw Ouyang Ke get to shore and got worried, thinking, "At this point the scoundrel will be prepared for me; it will be harder to scheme against him now." She swam out a ways and headed left. After a while she saw lush foliage and noticed that this beach was different. She thought of Peach Blossom Island and became sad. Then she thought, "If I can find a safe place here for us to hide for a while, that scoundrel might not find us." It was not a fantastic plan, but it was better than their situation now and he might not actually find them, giving her master time to recover. So she went ashore but she did not dare explore too far inland since she was afraid of bumping into Ouyang Ke. She stuck close to the seashore, thinking, "If I hadn't been so carefree in the past and had mastered Father's Five-Element skills, I'd have been able to handle that scoundrel. Aiyo, Father gave him the map to Peach Blossom Island and he'll surely be able to understand it."

She was so absorbed in thought that she tripped on a tree vine and stumbled; above her she heard some rustling noises followed by mud and small pebbles raining down on her. She dashed aside but bumped into a tree behind her and a few of the pebbles hit her body. Fortunately she was wearing the Soft Hedgehog Armour, so she was not really

hurt. She looked up and was so stunned that her heart beat rapidly. She saw a sheer cliff face with a gigantic rock at its edge. Half the rock was hanging over the edge and even slight disturbance could bring the rock crashing down. The top of the cliff had many thick vines winding around and the very vine she tripped on just now was attached to the rock. If she snapped a vine connected directly to the thousand-pound rock [the catty in the chapter title is 500 grams or 1.1 lb], the rock could have smacked into her, turning her into mincemeat.

The rock had moved but was not dislodged. Huang Rong became extremely careful and watched where she was going while jumping here and stopping there. She moved back several dozen meters and became curious. She knew that she could pull the rock down with just one arm but no one ever came here; there was not even a bird in sight and the rock had been here for hundreds of years.

Cliffs surrounded this place so even the sea breeze could not get through, and it seemed likely this rock had rocked in the wind for the hundreds of years. As Huang Rong headed back to find her master she suddenly had an idea, "Heaven wants that scoundrel dead and has presented this wonderful opportunity; how can I be so dense?" She became excited and somersaulted twice.

She hurriedly returned to the cliff and carefully examined the place. She saw trees reaching up to the sky and if one wanted to avoid the falling rock, one could only move four or five feet in any direction at most. If that rock came crashing down, even birds or squirrels might not evade it. She took her spike out and cautiously walked to the base of the cliff and noted the seven or eight vines directly attached to the rock so that she would not touch them, then she cut the remaining vines. When she cut a vine she held her

breath because she was afraid that one small mistake and it would be she who would be flattened.

When she finished, she was drenched with sweat and felt that it had been more tiring than a fierce battle. She then tied the cut vines together and placed a few heaps of dry grass as markers, then memorized the route she took before heading back. As she went she hummed a few tunes along the way, feeling quite proud of herself.

When she got near the cave she still had not seen Ouyang Ke. Then she suddenly heard a perverted laugh coming from inside followed by someone saying, "You claim to be among the best martial artists, yet today you are in Grandfather's power, how do you feel? All right...because you're an elder, I'll let you have a three-move advantage, how's that? You can display each and every one of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'!" Huang Rong softly exclaimed, "Ah!" She knew that the situation was dire and shouted, "Father, you're here? Ah, Uncle Ouyang, you're here too!"

Ouyang Ke had already assessed Hong Qigong's abilities and was about to strike when he heard Huang Rong's shout. He was happy and thought, "How is it possible that Uncle and Old Heretic Huang are here?" Then he thought further, "It must be that girl shouting rubbish to save the old beggar. Fine, since the old beggar is in my control anyway I might as well take a look." He then exited the cave.

He saw Huang Rong waving towards the beach and shouting, "Father...Father!" Ouyang Ke looked that way but of course he did not see Huang Yaoshi. He laughed, "Sister, you wanted to trick me into coming out to play...how could I refuse?" Huang Rong laughed and said, "Who's lying?" She then ran to the beach. Ouyang Ke laughed, "This time I'm

prepared; you want to drag me into the sea again, so let's try it." Then he chased her. His Qinggong [lightness kung fu] was good and he was catching up fast. Huang Rong inwardly exclaimed, "This is bad! I might even get caught before I reach that cliff." She ran another few dozen meters and Ouyang Ke was almost catching her. Huang Rong broke left and off the beach. Ouyang Ke had learned his lesson and did not dare go near, so he laughed, "OK, let's play hide-and-seek."

Though he did not stop, he was prepared for any trick she might try. Huang Rong stopped and laughed, "There's a large worm in front of you, and if you chase me again it'll eat you in one gulp." Ouyang Ke laughed, "I'm a worm too and I'm going to eat you!" He leaped forward but Huang Rong just laughed and ran ahead.

The two came close to the cliff wall soon enough. Huang Rong ran even faster and shouted, "Come on!" Just as she was about to reach the wall, she saw two figures on the beach. She was really curious but did not have the luxury of stopping; she carefully looked for the piles of grass then ran all the way to the cliff's base.

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Where's the worm?" He also ran faster and reached the cliff wall quick as an arrow. The spot where Huang Rong stopped was already cleared of vines, but Ouyang Ke, not suspecting a trap, stepped right into it, wrenching the rock out of its place. The vines snapped and Ouyang Ke felt a great pressure descending on him. He looked up and what he saw scared the living daylights out of him; a mountain of a rock rolling down towards him.

Although the rock was very high up, the gust of wind it created was so strong that he could hardly breathe; he hastily jumped backwards, but smacked right into a tree with such a great force that the tree cracked and the

splinters pierced him. At this point he was fleeing for his life and ignored the pain. He jumped again, but only managed to move three feet. Now he was in a daze, then suddenly felt as though someone had jolted him awake, dragging him several feet away....but it was too late. Amidst the thunderous rumble and flying dust, he fainted.

Huang Rong saw that her plan had worked and she was very happy. She had not expected the deafening rumble which seemed to shove her aside and her head was hit by the countless grains of dirt and dust. She bent over and held her head for a moment before opening her eyes and saw two shadows through the dust.

As the dust settled, she rubbed her eyes and saw that it was actually West Poison Ouyang Feng and the other was the one she so deeply missed...Guo Jing. Huang Rong shouted and jumped for joy. Guo Jing had never expected to meet her here and he rushed forward and hugged her. In their excitement, they had forgotten that their enemy was close by.

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When Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were fighting on the boat, neither could gain the advantage, while at the same time the boat was sinking. It took them down with it. Deep in the sea the water pressure was very high and they felt water forcing its way into their ears and noses, causing great pain. They had to stop their struggle and cover their ears and noses.

The bottom of the sea had a swift undercurrent moving in a different direction than the surface current and before they knew it they were swept some distance away. When Guo Jing managed to get up to the surface to breathe it was already dark and the boat seemed very far away. While Guo

Jing shouted, at that very moment Huang Rong was looking for him; but they were so far apart, how could they find each other?

Guo Jing shouted again and felt a tug on his leg, followed by another head reaching the surface...it was Ouyang Feng. He was at a disadvantage in the water, so although he was a martial arts master, he struggled wildly and refused to release Guo Jing's leg.

Guo Jing struggled harder but his other leg was also grabbed. They wrestled for a brief moment before submerging again. When they hit the surface, Guo Jing shouted, "Let my legs go...I won't desert you." Ouyang Feng also realized that this would kill them both, so he released his legs and grabbed his shoulder.

Guo Jing supported him, allowing them to float. At this time they saw a large wooden board floating by and it bumped Guo Jing. Ouyang Feng shouted, "Careful!" Guo Jing grabbed it, shouting, "Grab it and don't let go!"

They looked around but could not see any boats. Ouyang Feng's Snake Staff was lost and he worried, "If we meet any sharks, we can only hit them wildly like Zhou Botong did. I saved him that time, but who'll save me now?" They floated for some time and saw many fish swimming by so they had to depend on the fish for survival.

As the ancient saying goes, "Helping each other in the same boat (同舟共济)", so these two men who fought a bitter battle just a while ago could share the same raft. During this time they were fortunate not to meet any danger. In time the current brought them to the island where Hong Qigong and Huang Rong were only two days after their arrival.

When they hit shore they lay down for some time before they suddenly heard someone laughing. Ouyang Feng

jumped up and followed the laughter and coincidentally met Ouyang Ke who had just fallen into the trap. Ouyang Feng tried to rush forward to save him. He managed to pull him back several feet but Ouyang Ke's legs were crushed by the rock and he fainted from the pain.

Ouyang Feng was suspicious and looked around but did not find any more danger. He went back to check on his nephew. He noticed that he was still breathing so he tried to push the rock off him, but it did not budge even an inch. He then knelt down and grunting, tried again with both hands. Even though his strength was tremendous, how could even he move a thousand-pound rock?

He bent down just as Ouyang Ke opened his eyes and called, "Uncle!" Ouyang Feng said, "You'll have to bear with it for a while." He hugged him and pulled him, but Ouyang Ke screamed and fainted again. The rock had pinned his legs beneath it, so this pulling only worsened his pain but did not free him. Ouyang Feng was perturbed.

Guo Jing held Huang Rong's hand and asked, "Where's master?" Huang Rong pointed, saying, "Over there." Guo Jing hearing that his master was alright was elated and wanted her to lead him there. Then he heard Ouyang Ke's scream and could not bear it; he said to Ouyang Feng, "I'll help you." Huang Rong tugged his sleeve, saying, "Let's go see master, ignore this bad guy!"

Ouyang Feng did not know that this was a trap set up by her since he saw the rock tumble down and it was impossible for anyone to lift it up the cliff. But when he heard Huang Rong stop Guo Jing, his anger flared. Then he heard that Hong Qigong was here and he was startled, thinking, "That beggar took one of my palms and was also poisoned by my snake, yet he's not dead; even at that he should be ninety percent dead, so why should I fear him?"

He saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong about to leave so he knelt down again and pretended to push the rock as he waited for them to turn away before saying, "Don't worry, I'll save you. For now just concentrate on circulating your Qi to protect your heart and pretend that those legs are not yours." He followed them and saw them with an arm around each other and talking romantically; he was flabbergasted and thought, "If I don't torture you until you're worse than dead, I'm not the Western Poison."

Huang Rong took Guo Jing to the cave entrance. Guo Jing rushed in and shouted, "Master!" Then he saw that Hong Qigong's eyes were closed and there was no color in his face. He had been insulted by Ouyang Ke and his injury had relapsed. Huang Rong quickly undid his outer gown while Guo Jing massaged his limbs.

Hong Qigong opened his eyes and saw Guo Jing; he was naturally very happy to see him and smiled, saying in a low voice, "Jing'er, you're here too!" Guo Jing was about to reply when a rough voice cut in from behind, which said, "Old beggar, so am I." Guo Jing turned around to block the entrance. Huang Rong snatched her master's bamboo stick and stood beside Guo Jing.

Ouyang Feng laughed, "Old beggar, come out...if you don't, I'm coming in." Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other while thinking, "Even if it costs us our lives, we must not let him molest Master." Ouyang Feng laughed and stepped in. Guo Jing stepped forward to block him.

Ouyang Feng twisted aside to evade his palm strike and moved to his right. Then a bamboo stick flew over and made a circle that seemed aimed at three separate spots at the same time, making it difficult to deal with. He waved his left hand and swept his leg to force his opponents back. He did

not expect Huang Rong's stick to hit the centre of the circle his leg made.

Ouyang Feng was surprised and jumped back, watching carefully. Huang Rong was using the 'Dog Beating Skill' and had managed to force her much stronger opponent backwards. She was feeling very proud of herself. Ouyang Feng had not expected that this girl would learn the old beggar's wonderful rod skill. He snorted and advanced again to hit her bamboo stick. Huang Rong executed the stick skill she'd just learned as she poked, hit, circled and flew around; although she could not injure him, she managed to evade seven or eight successive moves.

Guo Jing, who was surprised and happy, kept cheering, "Very good Rong'er, great rod skill!" Then he attacked with a fist and palm from the side. Ouyang Feng shouted in anger, then knelt down while launching both palms. Even before the palms arrived the wind from the palms caused dust to fly. Guo Jing saw that the palms were very powerful and was afraid that Huang Rong might get injured if she was hit; he hurriedly pushed her aside and they managed to evade the strike together.

Ouyang Feng stepped forward two steps and struck out again with both palms. His attack was terribly strong and he had fought to a draw with Hong Qigong on Peach Blossom Island a few days ago. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were far from his match and were forced to retreat step by step. Ouyang Feng rushed into the cave and flipped his palm, hitting the stone wall and causing bits of stone to flake off. He brought the other palm up above Hong Qigong's head and held it there to sense his condition.

Huang Rong said, "My master saved your life, yet you want to hurt him... aren't you ashamed?" Ouyang Feng pushed Hong Qigong's chest lightly and felt his chest muscles

contract, indicating that his martial abilities were really gone. He was happy inside and lifted him, saying, "If you help me rescue my nephew, I'll spare the beggar's life."

Huang Rong said, "Heaven released the rock that pins him, you saw that yourself, so who can save him? Try any more tricks and Heaven will crush you with a rock too." Guo Jing noticed that Ouyang Feng had lifted Hong Qigong higher and was prepared to throw him down...but he doubted that he would really do it. Still he was worried and quickly said, "Put him down and we'll go save your nephew."

Ouyang Feng missed his nephew and was very eager to hurry to him, but he kept his face impassive and put Hong Qigong down very slowly.

Huang Rong said, "Helping him is not difficult, but let's make an agreement." Ouyang Feng said, "What do you want?" Huang Rong said, "After we save your nephew, you must not harm the three of us while we're here on this island." Ouyang Feng thought, "My nephew and I are afraid of water; if we want to get back I may need to depend on these three people." He nodded his head, saying, "OK, I'll not kill any of you now, but I can't promise anything after we leave this island."

Huang Rong said, "When the time comes, even if you leave us alone, we'll come after you. Another thing, my father has betrothed me to him and you saw that for yourself. If your nephew bothers me again, you're worse than a pig or a dog." Ouyang Feng spat, saying, "OK, but that only applies on this island, once we leave, then we'll see."

Huang Rong smiled, saying, "Finally, although we'll try our best to help you, we're not gods; if fate has decreed that your nephew must die, you can't blame us." Ouyang Feng said, "If my nephew dies, you two can forget about living."

Little girl, shut up and come save my nephew." He then ran to where the rock was.

Guo Jing was about to follow when Huang Rong said, "Jing ge ge, when he uses his strength to push the rock, you can strike his back when he least expects it." Guo Jing answered, "We must honour our word; let's save his nephew first, then try to avenge Master." Huang Rong sighed and knew that it was useless to try to get him to backstab someone.

For the past two days she had thought that he'd died in the sea; now that she was with him again her heart exploded with happiness. Even if Guo Jing made any unreasonable demands, she would listen to him; moreover his actions were those of an honorable gentleman, so she smiled sweetly and said, "OK, you're a saint and I'll listen to you."

They ran to the base of the cliff and heard Ouyang Ke groaning in the distance. Ouyang Feng shouted, "Hurry up!" They went over and stood beside him and three pairs of hands pushed the rock together. Ouyang Feng said, "Up!" and they pushed at the same time. The rock moved an inch before slamming down again. Ouyang Ke screamed and his eyes rolled up.

Ouyang Feng was shocked and immediately supported him and felt his breathing was weak. To bear the pain he'd bitten through his tongue, filling his mouth with blood. Even with Ouyang Feng's outstanding martial arts, he was powerless to move the rock. Now he had made it worse for his nephew and also lost a shoe in the sand. Ouyang Feng bent down to pick up his shoe and got another shock...the tide was slowly rising and was already reaching the rock. Ouyang Feng menacingly said, "Little girl, if you want your master to live, you'd better save my nephew quickly."

Huang Rong was already thinking about it. The rock was enormous and there was no one else who could help them... how could they move it? She had come up with more than ten ideas in a flash, but none seemed workable; when she heard Ouyang Feng, she said, "If Master wasn't injured, we could easily move this rock with his tremendous strength. Now..." She threw up her hands to indicate that it was useless.

Though his sentence was said in anger, Ouyang Feng thought, "Maybe it really is fate; if the old beggar wasn't injured and with his chivalrous nature, he'd definitely help. Who knew that when I injured him, it was as good as killing my own nephew?" Although Ouyang Ke was officially his nephew, he'd had an affair with his sister-in-law and he was in fact his son.

Ouyang Feng was usually cold-hearted, but now he felt regret. He turned his head and saw the water had risen a few more feet. Ouyang Ke yelled, "Uncle, kill me with one blow! I... I can't take it anymore!" Ouyang Feng took out a sharp knife and gritted his teeth, saying, "You bear with it for a while; even without your legs you can still live." He moved forward with the intention of severing his nephew's legs.

Ouyang Ke exclaimed, "No, no, Uncle, just stab me to death!" Ouyang Feng said angrily, "With so many years of my guidance, how can you be so useless?" Ouyang Ke hugged his chest and tried to bear the pain, not daring to say another word. Ouyang Feng saw that the rock had pinned him nearly to the hips; even if he amputated his legs, he might not live...so he hesitated.

Huang Rong saw that the uncle and nephew had nothing left to say and both looked dejected; her heart softened and she remembered how her father moved rocks on Reach

Blossom Island. She exclaimed, "Wait! I've got a way, but I'm not sure if it will work." Ouyang Feng was elated and said, "Good lady, just say it!"

Huang Rong was thinking, "Now that you want to save your nephew, you're not calling me names anymore...but 'Good Lady', huh!" She smiled and said, "OK, you must listen to me now. Let's cut some tree bark and make a rope strong enough to lift this rock." Ouyang Feng said, "Who's going to pull the rope?" Huang Rong said, "We'll pull like raising a sail..." Ouyang Feng immediately understood and said, "Yes, yes, just like that!"

Guo Jing heard Huang Rong mention using tree bark and did not question her; instead he pulled out his dagger and began cutting some tree bark. Ouyang Feng and Huang Rong followed his lead and within a short time, they had cut many strips of tree bark. As Ouyang Feng was cutting the bark he looked at his nephew and suddenly exclaimed, "Don't cut anymore!" Huang Rong curiously asked, "What... why not?"

Ouyang Feng pointed at his nephew and Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at him. They saw that the tide was rising faster and had already submerged half his body. He would be drowned before they had gathered enough material. Ouyang Ke was motionless in the water. Huang Rong said, "Don't fret. Just cut!"

Although Ouyang Feng was a monster, he meekly obeyed her. Huang Rong jumped down from the tree and ran to Ouyang Ke and used several big stones to support his upper body. That way his nose was still above water.

In a low voice Ouyang Ke said, "Miss Huang, thank you. Even if I don't live, I'll die contented knowing that you tried to save me." Huang Rong felt apologetic and said, "Don't

thank me. Do you know that I was the one who laid this trap?" Ouyang Ke said, "Don't speak so loudly; if my uncle hears it, he won't let you off. I guessed it long ago; to die at your hands would leave me with no regrets."

Huang Rong sighed and thought, "Although this person is annoying, he treats me nicely." She returned to the tree and began braiding the bark. She joined three together to form a thin rope and then six ropes together to form a thick rope, and then she joined several thick ropes together to form a massive rope. Ouyang Feng continuously cut tree bark while Huang Rong unceasingly wove the ropes.

Although they were fast, the tide was faster and even before the massive rope was half-complete, the water had risen up to Ouyang Ke's mouth. Soon only his nose was left sticking out. Ouyang Feng jumped down and said, "You can go. I want to speak with my nephew. You have tried your best and I appreciate it." His voice was heavy with emotion and he was seemingly resigned to the situation.

Guo Jing saw that it was hopeless and went off together with Huang Rong. They'd walked several zhang when Huang Rong whispered, "Let's go behind the rock and listen to what he says." Guo Jing said, "That doesn't concern us. Besides, he'll discover us." Huang Rong said, "Once his nephew dies, he'll try to harm Master, so we must keep ourselves informed to be prepared. If we're found out we'll just say that we've come back to send his nephew off."

Guo Jing nodded. They went around a bend, behind some trees, and then stealthily crept back behind the rock. They heard Ouyang Feng say, "Go in peace. I know what you're thinking...you wanted Old Heretic Huang to marry his daughter to you, but I fear I can't grant your wish."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled and thought, "He's about to die; why would Ouyang Feng say that?" As they heard more, they became angrier. Ouyang Feng was actually saying, "I'll go kill that girl and bury her with you. Everyone dies; if you can't live with her then you can die with her and have no regrets."

Ouyang Ke's mouth was beneath the water and he could not speak. Huang Rong took Guo Jing's hand and they stealthily left. Around the corner, Guo Jing angrily said, "Let's confront that old poisonous thing." Huang Rong said, "With him we must compare wits, not strength." Guo Jing asked, "How?" Huang Rong said, "I'm thinking."

As they walked near a ravine, she saw some reeds. Huang Rong thought of something and said, "If he weren't so evil, I could save his nephew." Guo Jing quickly asked, "How?" Huang Rong took out her knife and cut a hollow reed and put it to her mouth and breathed through it for a while. Guo Jing laughed, "Ah...that is really a good idea. How did you think of it? Should we save him?"

Huang Rong pouted, "Of course not. That old poisonous thing wants to kill me...let him do it, hmm, I'm not afraid." But when she thought of Ouyang Feng's cruel methods, she could not help but gasp. His martial arts were much stronger than his nephew's and he was much more cunning. If they fell into his trap, it would not be good. Guo Jing remained silent.

Huang Rong took his hand, saying gently, "Don't tell me you want me to save that scoundrel? You're worried about me, right? Those two may not treat us well." Guo Jing said, "You're right, but I am worried about you and Master. Since that old poisonous thing is the head of a sect, what he says has some credibility." Huang Rong said, "OK, let's save him and then talk; we'll plan as we go along."

They turned back and saw Ouyang Feng standing in the water, supporting his nephew. When he saw the duo coming, his eyes glinted and it was obvious he wanted to kill them. He said roughly, "I told you to leave; why did you return?" Huang Rong sat down on a stone and laughed, "I came to see if he's dead yet." Ouyang Feng snapped, "So what if he's dead, so what if he's alive?"

Huang Rong said, "If he's dead then it's no use now!" Ouyang Feng jumped out of the water, hastily saying, "Good... good lady, he's not dead yet, you must have found a way. Say it...say it quickly." Huang Rong threw the hollow reed over and said, "Put it in his mouth and he won't die." Ouyang Feng was happy and jumped into the water and stuffed the reed into his nephew's mouth.

The water had already covered his nose and he was exhaling his last bit of air, but his ears could still hear their conversation. When the reed reached his mouth, he breathed hard, felt comfortable and momentarily forgot about the pain in his legs. Ouyang Feng said, "Quick...hurry, let's connect the ropes."

Huang Rong laughed, "Uncle Ouyang, you want me dead to accompany your nephew, isn't that right?" Ouyang Feng jerked and thought, "How did she hear what I said?" Huang Rong laughed, "If you kill me and you meet some trouble later, who's going to help you?" Now that Ouyang Feng was depending on her, he could only pretend not to hear her and went back to work on the tree bark.

They worked for more than two hours and made an enormously thick rope nearly thirty zhang long [99 meters or 325 ft]. By now the water level was nearly half-way up the rock. Ouyang Ke's head was a few feet under water and only the tip of the hollow reed was exposed. Ouyang Feng

was still worried and occasionally reached his hand under the water to check on him.

After another hour the water began to recede and Ouyang Ke's head was slowly emerging. Huang Rong measured the rope's length and shouted, "Enough! Now I need four massive poles for the 'masts'." Ouyang Feng was doubtful; he knew that on this deserted island, even a knife was hard to find, much less an axe sturdy enough for their task. He asked, "How do we get that?" Huang Rong said, "Don't worry, just find the wood first."

Ouyang Feng was afraid she would throw a tantrum and refuse to help him, so he did not ask again and ran around looking for trees with thick enough trunks. He crouched down, gathered his strength and launched his palms at each of the trees. The trees fell after a few strikes. Guo Jing and Huang Rong witnessed this powerful display of internal strength and shuddered. Ouyang Feng found a long and flat rock and used that to cut away the tree branches.

Now Guo Jing and Huang Rong tied the rope round three of the thick tree trunks and looped the rope around the large rock before tying the end to the final tree trunk. That trunk was a centuries-old oak tree and even the arms of three or four people were not enough to circle the tree. Huang Rong said, "I guess this tree can handle the rock, right?" Ouyang Feng nodded.

Huang Rong told them to connect one more thick rope and they arranged the four tree trunks around the tree, forming a crisscross shape and looped the rope round the top. Ouyang Feng praised her, "Good lady, you're really smart, just like your father." Huang Rong laughed, "But how can I be compared to your nephew? Let's start!"

They acted together and used the oak tree as the pivot to pull the crisscross shaped formation. The rope became taut and the rock lifted slowly. The sun was about to set and the sky was red, illuminating the surface of the water.

The tide had already gone out and Ouyang Ke's body lay in the mud and his eyes were fixed on the rock. It moved slowly and steadily with a creaking sound, causing him to be anxiously happy. Though the rope had made one complete turn around its loop, the rock had only moved an inch and it was already causing great strain on the pivot point.

Although Ouyang Feng did not believe in divine intervention, he silently prayed throughout the process. Suddenly the rope snapped and the rock slammed down onto Ouyang Ke again; he tried to scream but no sound came out. The rope flew back and hit Huang Rong, knocking her off her feet. Guo Jing quickly helped her up.

At this stage Ouyang Feng lost all hope and Huang Rong could hardly smile. Guo Jing said, "We can join them back together, add another rope and try again." Ouyang Feng shook his head, "That'll be harder; the three of us aren't enough." Guo Jing mumbled to himself, "If only someone else would help us." Ouyang Feng got angry and snapped, "Obviously!" He knew Guo Jing had good intentions, but in his depression he vented his frustrations on him.

Huang Rong thought for a while then jumped up, laughing and clapping, "Yes, yes, there's someone who can help us." Guo Jing asked, "Who might that be?" Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, Brother Ouyang will have to bear more discomfort and wait for the tide to come in again before he can be set free." Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing both looked at her thinking, "Are you thinking that when the tide comes in, someone will come to our aid?"

Huang Rong laughed, "We're all tired and hungry; let's find some food." Ouyang Feng said, "Miss, you said someone will help us, please explain." Huang Rong said, "At this time tomorrow, Brother Ouyang will be free. For now I can't reveal the secret." Ouyang Feng saw that she had great confidence in herself and his doubts lessened. But he was still skeptical so he stayed with his nephew.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong caught a few wild hares and cooked one for the uncle and his nephew; then they shared the rest with Hong Qigong. When Guo Jing learned that the trap had been set by her, he was surprised and happy. They knew that Ouyang Feng was with his nephew and would not bother them, so they lit a fire at the cave entrance to prevent any wild animals from coming in and they slept very well. The next morning, Guo Jing saw a shadow at the entrance and he quickly jumped up. He saw Ouyang Feng standing there saying, "Is Miss Huang awake?"

Huang Rong was already awake but she pretended to be soundly asleep. Guo Jing whispered, "Not yet. What is it?" Ouyang Feng said, "When she wakes up, ask her to save him." Guo Jing said, "OK." Hong Qigong said, "I had her drink the 'Hundred-Day-Drunken-Stupor' Wine as well as hit her Sleeping Acupoint. It'll hard to wake her for three months."

Ouyang Feng was startled and Hong Qigong laughed heartily. Ouyang Feng realized that he was joking and became angry. Huang Rong sat up and laughed, "If we don't tease the Old Poison now, when will we get another chance?" She then combed her hair, washed her face extremely slowly and then went out to fish and catch rabbits for breakfast. Meanwhile Ouyang Feng paced up and down like he had ants in his pants. Guo Jing said, "Rong'er, when the water rises, will there really be someone to save him?"

Huang Rong said, "What do you think?" Guo Jing shook his head and said, "I really don't think so." Huang Rong laughed, "Me neither." Guo Jing was startled, "So you lied to him?" Huang Rong said, "Not really; when the tide rises, I have a way to save him." Guo Jing knew that she was very intelligent and resourceful so he did not question her further. Then they went to play around in the flowers.

Huang Rong had no companions when she was young and always played on the beach on Peach Blossom Island by herself. Now that she had Guo Jing with her, she was extremely happy. They played and laughed endlessly on the beach. Huang Rong said, "Jing ge ge, your hair is terribly messy, let me comb it."

They sat together on a rock. Huang Rong took out a small golden-jade comb and combed his hair carefully, then sighed, "Why don't we think of a way to get rid of those two poisonous creatures and then we can live here together with Master and never leave this place...what do you think?" Guo Jing said, "I was thinking of my six masters." Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, and my Father too."

After a while she said, "I wonder how Sister Mu is doing? Master asked me to be the Leader of the Beggar Clan and I'm starting to miss those beggars too." Guo Jing laughed, "Looks like we'll have to think of a way to get back." Huang Rong finished with his hair and tied it up. Guo Jing said, "The way you comb my hair reminds me of my mother."

Huang Rong laughed, "You can call me Mother then." Guo Jing smiled without replying. Huang Rong tickled him and asked, "Aren't you going to say it?" Guo Jing laughed and jumped up, messing his hair again. Huang Rong laughed too, "It's ok if you won't say it. Do you think anyone will call me 'Mother' in the future? Sit down."

Guo Jing sat down and Huang Rong wiped the sweat away, then kissed his forehead lightly. She thought of the previous day's fight with Ouyang Feng and remembered that Guo Jing had praised her 'Dog Beating Skills', so she wanted to teach it to him. Huang Rong knew that his martial arts had improved a lot and was more excited about that than her own skills.

Since she was Huang Yaoshi's daughter, she had access to wonderful martial arts skills since she was young, but she really did not pay attention to wonderful skills, just like a rich man's son would not bother about gold or silver. Then she thought, "This skill is meant exclusively for the Beggar Clan Leader, so I can't teach him" She asked, "Jing ge ge, do you want to be the Beggar Clan's Leader?"

Guo Jing said, "Master wants you to be the Clan Leader, why do you ask me?" Huang Rong said, "I'm a young girl and I don't look like a Beggar Clan Leader. Why don't I give up this appointment to you? With your commanding appearance the beggars will listen to you. Besides, if you become the Leader, this marvelous skill will be yours." Guo Jing said, "No, no. I can't be the Leader. I'm not intelligent enough to handle even small matters, much less important matters."

Huang Rong knew he was right. Even though Hong Qigong had no choice but to have her succeed him during this crisis, he must have known that despite her youth, she was very intelligent and probably no less capable than the four Elders. Also, he did not give her permission to give this responsibility to someone else and not even a silly boy who knew the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' and the 'Dog Beating Skill' could become the Leader. So she laughed, "OK. But I'm afraid that you can't learn this skill, then."

Guo Jing said, "There's no difference between you and me knowing it." Huang Rong knew that this sentence came from his heart and she was touched. She said, "When Master recovers I'll return the position to him. Then... then..." She wanted to say "Then we can get married" but somehow the words would not come out of her mouth. She asked, "Jing ge ge, do you know where babies come from?"

Guo Jing said, "I know." Huang Rong said, "Where?" Guo Jing said, "When people get married, they have babies." Huang Rong said, "Yes I know that too. But why do married people have babies?" Guo Jing said, "That I don't know." Huang Rong said, "Me neither. I asked Father, but he said they crawl out of nests."

Guo Jing was about to ask more when they suddenly heard a sharp voice saying, "Making babies? You'll know that when you grow up. The tide is already rising!" Huang Rong gasped and jumped up; she had not expected Ouyang Feng to be listening to them. Although she did not understand male-female relationships, she knew that talking about such stuff was embarrassing, so her face turned red and they quickly ran to the cliff.

Ouyang Ke had been under the rock for twenty-four hours and had been through much suffering. Ouyang Feng kept a straight face and said, "Miss Huang, you said that someone would come to help when the tide rises, this is not a joke." Huang Rong said, "My father knows the changes of the Five Elements, so of course his daughter would know a bit, although I can't be compared with him. Still, I can predict a bit of the future."

Ouyang Feng knew about her father's abilities, so he said, "Your father is coming? Splendid." Huang Rong paused, and then said, "Such a small matter wouldn't need my father's presence. Moreover, if my father knew that you

hurt my master, he wouldn't let you off. With us two included, how can you win? So what are you happy about?" Ouyang Feng could not argue this point and remained sullenly silent.

Huang Rong said to Guo Jing, "Jing ge ge, go get some tree branches...the more the better." Guo Jing agreed and went. Huang Rong mended the rope which had snapped the previous day with more bark. Ouyang Feng kept asking who was coming but she just hummed songs without replying.

Ouyang Feng was dissatisfied. But when he saw Huang Rong's relaxed expression, it kept his hopes up, so he went to help Guo Jing. He watched Guo Jing execute the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' and he only needed a few hits to bring down a sturdy tree. He thought, "His martial arts are good. Coupled with the 'Nine Yin Manual', he spells future disaster for me."

He decided that he had to extract his nephew dead or alive. He crouched down between two trees, sent out his palms simultaneously and each palm hit a tree, causing it to break. Guo Jing was awed and said, "Uncle Ouyang, I wonder when I can match your standard." Ouyang Feng did not reply but thought, "In your next life."

They carried all the wood back to the base of the cliff. Ouyang Feng looked out into the sea but could not even see the smallest speck of a boat. Huang Rong asked, "What are you looking for? No one's coming." Ouyang Feng was surprised and angry. He raised his voice, "No one?" Huang Rong said, "This is a deserted island and no one will come here." Ouyang Feng was flabbergasted, unable to speak and waiting to kill someone.

Huang Rong did not look at him directly but turned to Guo Jing and said, "Jing ge ge, what's the most you can lift?"

Guo Jing said, "Around 400 jin [200kg / 440lbs]." Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, how about a 1200 jin rock?" Guo Jing said, "I think not." Huang Rong said, "How about a 1200 jin rock in the water?"

Ouyang Feng realized what she meant and yelled happily, "Yes, yes, that's correct!" Guo Jing however had yet to understand it. Ouyang Feng said, "When the tide rises, it half-submerges this rock, causing it to be lighter; we'll try it again and it'll definitely work."

Huang Rong said coldly, "Yeah, but the trees will be half-submerged too; how are you going to work underwater?" Ouyang Feng bit his teeth and said, "Leave that to fate." Huang Rong said, "Hmmm, it doesn't have to be so difficult. Go tie and the branches to the rock."

When she said that, Guo Jing understood too and cheered; working together with Ouyang Feng they began tying several large branches around the rock. Ouyang Feng was afraid that the buoyancy would not be enough, so he tied seven or eight large pieces of wood together and then helped Guo Jing connect the rope that had snapped the previous day. Huang Rong stood aside and smiled, watching them work. Within two hours it was ready and the only thing lacking was the tide.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong went to visit their master. In the afternoon, the tide began to rise and Ouyang Feng ran up to inform them. The three of them went back together. After some time, the tide reached its highest level and they stood in the water and looped the rope around the oak tree. Then they operated the crisscrossed-shaped mechanism again. This time, with the pieces of wood tied to the rock, the buoyancy was quite high and it seemed like there were many strong men helping to lift the rock. The three did not use much effort to move the rock. After turning a few

rounds of rope round the tree, Ouyang Feng held his breath and pulled his nephew to the surface.

Guo Jing, knowing that they had been successful, could not help but cheer. Huang Rong clapped continuously and actually forgot that it was she who set the trap.

End of Chapter 21.

Chapter 22 - Wandering on a Shark's Back

Translated by William Lee Chong Beng & Frans Soetomo



Huang Rong sat steadily on the branch and called out, "Fire away!" Aiming toward the raft, Guo Jing released his grip and Huang Rong's body flew into the sky. She somersaulted twice in the air and plunged into the water.

Huang Rong saw Ouyang Feng carry his mud-drenched nephew to the shore. He was beaming happily from ear to ear but he never uttered any words of gratitude to Guo Jing and her. She pulled Guo Jing's sleeve and they returned to the cave together.

Guo Jing noticed that Huang Rong had a worried expression on her face and asked her, "What are you thinking about?" Huang Rong replied, "I am thinking about three very difficult things." Guo Jing replied, "You are an intelligent person who always has a way to solve problems." Huang Rong gave a very slight laugh, but a moment later her eyebrows showed a frown again.

Hong Qigong opened his mouth to speak, "The first thing really does not matter much. The second and third things cause people to be at a loss as to what to do."

Then Guo Jing said, "Wow! You really are amazing! How would you know about the three things she's thinking about?"

Hong Qigong replied, "I simply guessed her thoughts. The first is how to cure my injury...but there is no doctor, medicine or a person with good internal energy here to help me. The Old Beggar can accept his fate with resignation and whether I live or die is not the most important matter now. The second thing is how to defend ourselves from the poisonous hands of Ouyang Feng. That person's martial arts are very solid and the two of you are definitely not his match. The third thing is...how we can return to the mainland? Rong'er, am I right or wrong?"

Huang Rong replied, "Yes, you are right. At present the most pressing matter is to think of a way to discourage the Old Poison from acting ruthlessly."

Hong Qigong said, "In short, we must have a battle of wits with him. The Old Poison may be cunning but he is hugely conceited. In fact, he is so conceited that it won't be difficult to fool him. However, after he has been tricked, he will immediately adapt and follow up with a severe counterattack."

The two gave it deep thought. Huang Rong began to think that the enemy's skill level was difficult to differentiate from her father's or teacher's. Even if her father was there, he would not necessarily defeat him. How could she fight him? It seemed that if they did not take his life in one stroke, it would only make him commit even more evil deeds.

Hong Qigong suddenly felt pain in his chest and coughed loudly. Huang Rong immediately helped him to lie down. A shadow suddenly blocked the sunlight at the mouth of the cave. She raised her head to see Ouyang Feng carrying his nephew in and making a hissing sound while saying, "All of you get out! Let me have this cave for healing my nephew's injury!"

Guo Jing was very angry as he jumped up and said, "This place belongs to my master!"

Ouyang Feng replied coldly, "Even if the Jade Emperor lived here, he too would have to leave!"

Guo Jing, furious, tried to answer him, but Huang Rong pulled his sleeve. She stooped down to help Hong Qigong up and they left the cave.

While passing Ouyang Feng's side, Hong Qigong opened his eyes and said with a mocking smile, "Impressive power... very deadly!"

Ouyang Feng's face turned red. He could have killed Hong Qigong violently with just a stroke of his palm, but for some

reason he was overwhelmed by Hong Qigong's righteous air. He shivered and did not answer this insult. He turned his head to avoid Hong Qigong's penetrating gaze and said, "Come back and bring us something to eat! If you two small creatures mess with the food, then watch out for your three lives."

The three went down the hill. Guo Jing cursed incessantly, while Huang Rong was deep in thought and did not say anything. Guo Jing said, "Master, please rest here while I go and look for a suitable place to stay."

Huang Rong had just helped Hong Qigong sit down by a big pine tree when she spotted two squirrels climbing quickly up the tree trunk then immediately climb back down again. They were only a few feet from her and watched the two people with their small round eyes. Huang Rong was fascinated; she picked a pine cone and held it out. One of the squirrels came near to sniff at the cone; then used its front paws to slowly pull the cone away. The other squirrel boldly climbed Hong Qigong's sleeve. Huang Rong sighed and said, "Nobody has been here before. Look at these two squirrels...they're not afraid of humans at all."

When the squirrels heard Huang Rong's voice they scurried up the tree. Huang Rong looked up the tree and saw dense needles growing from the branches of the pine tree. The leaves formed a canopy and the top of the tree was full of green cane. Huang Rong suddenly had an idea and called out, "Jing ge ge, there's no need to look anymore. Let's go to the top of the tree."

Guo Jing stopped and looked up the pine tree. The tree was indeed a wonderful place for a shelter. The two bent some branches and made a platform. Then, with one on either side, they sat Hong Qigong on their hands and shouted,

“Heave!”. They flew up and put Hong Qigong safely on the platform they just made.

Huang Rong laughed and said, “We are living on branches like birds. Let them live in the cave like beasts.”

Then Guo Jing said, “Rong’er, do you want to send them food or not?”

Huang Rong said, “Since I cannot think of any wonderful plan to defeat the Old Poison at the moment, I think we’d better comply with his request.” Guo Jing continued to grumble.

The two wandered around a mountain and managed to catch a wild goat. Then they made a fire at the base of the tree to roast the goat. The roasted goat was then torn in two. Huang Rong took one piece of the meat and threw it on the ground and said, “Urinate on the meat!”

Guo Jiang laughed, “They’ll find out.”

Huang Rong said, “Don’t worry about that...just do it.”

Guo Jing blushed and said, “I can’t do it!”

Huang Rong asked, “Why?”

Guo Jing mumbled, “I can’t urinate with you beside me.” Huang Rong burst out in laughter.

From the top of the tree Hong Qigong called out, “Throw the meat up here! I will urinate on it myself!” Guo Jing laughed, took the meat and leaped up to the platform so that Hong Qigong could urinate on it. Hong Qigong urinated a lot on the goat meat. Guo Jing laughed loudly then carried the meat towards the cave.

Huang Rong called, “No! Take this one.”

Guo Jing scratched his head and said, "That's the clean one."

Huang Rong said, "That's right. We are going to offer them the clean meat."

Guo Jing was confused, but he usually listened to whatever Huang Rong said. He came back and took the clean goat meat. Huang Rong took the urine-soaked meat and put it back on the fire while she went out to pick edible wild fruits. Hong Qigong did not understand Huang Rong's plan and was upset. He'd drooled over the meat, but all that was left was the one soaked with his own urine. He had no choice but to be patient.

The roasted goat released a very good aroma. Inside the cave Ouyang Feng had smelled that wonderful aroma. Without waiting for Guo Jing to arrive he went out of the cave and snatched the meat as his face showed how pleased he was at the moment. Then a thought came into his mind. "Where is the other half?" he asked. Guo Jing pointed his finger.

Ouyang Feng walked in big strides towards the pine tree. He snatched the urine soaked meat and threw the clean meat on the ground. He laughed coldly before turning around to leave.

Guo Jing knew that he must not show anything suspicious on his face. However, it was not in his nature to pretend, so he was forced to turn around and dared not look at Ouyang Feng. He waited for Ouyang Feng to get far away before rushing to Huang Rong. He laughed and said, "How did you know that he would come and exchange the meat?"

Huang Rong smiled and said, "According to military tactics, void is actually solid, while solid is actually void. The Old Poison knew that we would try something with the food and

did not want to be tricked. So I just let him trick himself.” Guo Jing listened to all of this in awe while tearing the clean goat meat into smaller pieces before taking it up to the shelter they’d made. The three ate the meat.

While they were happily eating, Guo Jing suddenly said, “Rong’er, you really came up with a wonderful ruse just now. Nevertheless, it was a dangerous one.”

Huang Rong immediately asked, “Why?”

Guo Jing replied, “If the Old Poison had not come and exchanged the meat, wouldn’t we be eating the meat soaked in master’s urine?”

Huang Rong, who sat on a branch while listening to Guo Jing’s words, bent over laughing loudly and tumbled down from the tree. Then she leaped back up into the tree unharmed and said, “Very, very dangerous indeed.”

Hong Qigong sighed and said, “Dumb child, if he didn’t come to exchange the meat, then you just don’t eat the tainted meat.”

Guo Jing was startled at the truth of the statement and let out a loud laugh before falling down from the tree as well.

As Ouyang Feng and nephew ate the meat, they thought the wild goat meat had a urine-like smell to it, but they did not suspect anything. In fact, they praised Huang Rong’s wonderful skill in roasting the meat and giving the meat a salty taste. Not long after, the sky began to turn dark. It was at this moment that Ouyang Ke’s wounds started to ache, causing him to groan loudly.

Ouyang Feng walked out towards the pine tree and called out, “Come down little girl!”

Huang Rong was startled because she did not expect Ouyang Feng to come that soon. She asked, "What is it?"

Ouyang Feng answered, "My nephew needs tea and water. Quickly go and serve him now." The people in the tree listened to everything and could not help but feel very angry. Ouyang Feng shouted angrily, "Hurry up! What are you waiting for?"

Guo Jing whispered, "Let's fight him."

Hong Qigong added, "The two of you run quickly towards the back of the mountain. Don't worry about me."

Huang Rong had already calculated carefully the two choices that they had now. Whether they should flee and allow their master's life to be lost...or duel with Ouyang Feng. The only thing that could be done now was to compromise for their master's safety. She leaped down from the tree and said, "Alright, let me go and have a look at his wounds."

Ouyang Feng sneered and said, "The boy surnamed Guo... come down and follow me. Are you still soundly asleep? I have a good idea you're not." Guo Jing, swallowing his anger, leaped down from the tree.

Ouyang Feng said, "Go get a hundred logs for me before the night ends. If you are short by one log, I will break one of your legs. If you are short two logs, I will break both of your legs."

Huang Rong asked, "What do you want with the logs? Besides, how are we going to see where we're going in the dark?"

Ouyang Feng cursed her, "You talk too much girl! What does this have to do with you? Go quickly and attend to my

nephew. If there is something amiss or wrong, all of you will suffer the consequences!"

Huang Rong gave Guo Jing a hand signal telling him not to make things worse. Guo Jing watched Ouyang Feng and Huang Rong's shadows disappear in the darkness. He was so angry that tears flowed from his eyes.

Hong Qigong suddenly said, "When I was young, my grandpa, my father and I were slaves of the Jin. What is this hardship compared to what we went through?"

Guo Jing was startled and he came to his senses, "It turns out that my benevolent master was once a slave, but later he mastered a matchless martial art. Although I feel wronged today, can't I just endure it patiently?" Guo Jing then leaped down from the tree and lit a tree branch before heading towards the back-side of the mountain. He used the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', hacking down trees as big as a rice bowl in diameter. He was fully aware that Huang Rong would be able to escape from harm, just like the day she was surrounded by a bunch of criminals at the Zhao palace. No matter how difficult the situation, she somehow managed to escape unharmed. Therefore, he concentrated his attention and energy on cutting down trees.

Using the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' took a lot of his energy. After a while he started to feel strained and numb. In less than an hour Guo Jing managed to knock down twenty one pine trees. By the time he knocked down the twenty-second tree, Guo Jing's arm was sore and tired. When he launched the 'Seeing the Dragon in the Field', his palm strokes were uneven and though branches and leaves shook, the trunk swayed but did not break. He felt his chest tightening. The energy did not flow to his palm, but went in reverse to his chest. His master had repeatedly warned him

about this condition. The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' carried tremendous force, but if his own strength was not sufficient, he would suffer a tremendous self-inflicted injury. He was shocked, immediately sat down, and focused his mind on controlling his breathing. After about an hour he struck that tree again, but his body was worn out and his arms and legs were weak.

Guo Jing knew that if he forced himself to exert more strength, not only would it still be difficult to accomplish his task, but he would suffer internal injuries as well. On this desolate island there was no saber or hatchet...how would he be able to chop down more trees? He noticed that out of the hundred logs needed he was still about eighty logs short and his legs were about ready to give out. He thought aloud, "His nephews legs are crushed... he must hate me to my guts. Even if I manage to give him a hundred logs tonight, tomorrow night he will require a thousand. When will it end? We can't fight him and on this desolate island there's nobody to help us." Having thought about this he heaved a long sigh, "Here we are stuck on this island...who in the world would come to rescue us? Benevolent master Hong has lost his martial arts and whether he will live or die is difficult to tell. Rong'er's father despises me. All of the Quanzhen Seven Masters and my six benevolent masters are not the Western Poison's match. If only ... if only my sworn brother Zhou Botong was here ... but he killed himself by jumping into the sea earlier." As soon as Zhou Botong came into his mind, he hated Ouyang Feng even more. He thought of that old sworn brother of his, who was skilled in the 'Nine Yin Manual', who had created the 'Mutual Hands Combat technique', and was forced to his death by Ouyang Feng.

"Ah...the 'Nine Yin Manual'...the 'Mutual Hands Combat technique'!" These words flashed through his mind like

seeing a bright star on the horizon on a dark and endless night. "My martial arts may not be enough to fight the Western Poison, but the 'Nine Yin Manual' contains the most wonderful secrets of the martial arts world and the 'Mutual Hands Combat technique' will double my skills. If Rong'er and I train hard day and night, then we can fight the Old Poison with everything we have. Regardless of which martial arts we use, we will still need to fight him for a whole day and night; how can that be good?"

He stood in the forest thinking deeply and suddenly thought, "Why don't I ask Master? His martial arts might be gone, but his knowledge is not; he should be able to give me clear directions." He went back to the tree right away and explained to Hong Qigong every single one of his thoughts.

"Recite the 'Nine Yin Manual' slowly for me to hear," Hong Qigong suggested, "Let's see if there is a marvelous martial art you can learn in a short period of time. Guo Jing immediately recited the manual sentence by sentence. When Hong Qigong heard Guo Jing reciting, 'One knows that by sitting down and pondering deeply one can accomplish virtue; but to unknowingly attain excellence one requires flexibility, as well as clear and bright understanding. The body is cultivated two-fold; namely movement and stillness. When being attacked, stay still.' He suddenly stood up, "Ah!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Guo Jing worriedly asked. Hong Qigong did not answer. He thought those sentences over for a while and then said, "Repeat the last part you were reciting a moment ago."

Guo Jing was delighted and thought, "Master must have found some method to fight the Old Poison in the last part." Right away he slowly recited those sentences.

Hong Qigong nodded his head and said, "That's true. Carry on." Guo Jing continued reciting the manual from memory. Towards the end he recited, "Mo han si ge er, pin te huo ji en, jin qie hu si, ge shan ni ke ..."

Hong Qigong was baffled, "What are you saying?"

Guo Jing answered, "Big Brother Zhou told me to memorize those sentences."

Hong Qigong frowned, "What do they mean?" he asked.

"I don't know," Guo Jing replied, "Big Brother Zhou himself did not understand them."

"Carry on, then," Hong Qigong said.

Guo Jing continued, "Bie er fa si, ge luo wu li ..." until he came to the end, reciting all kinds of these tongue-twisting sentences.

"Hmm," Hong Qigong said, "It seems the manual also contains some incantations to catch ghosts." He wanted to add, "Crafty priest, fooling people with cheap tricks," but remembered that the manual contained an extensive profound mystery. This mumbo-jumbo must have a deep meaning and for the time being, he simply did not understand it. As the words were about to leave his lips, he swallowed them back. After a long while Hong Qigong shook his head, "Jing'er," he said, "There are many marvelous martial arts in the manual, but none of them can be mastered in one day and night."

Guo Jing was disappointed. Hong Qigong continued, "Quickly, go and build a raft with those twenty logs, then go away as far as you can. Rong'er and I will stay here and devise a plan to deal with the Old Poison."

"No," Guo Jing quickly said, "How can I leave you, Senior?"

Hong Qigong sighed, "The Western Poison is afraid of the Old Heretic Huang, he won't harm Rong'er. In any case the Old Beggar is an invalid. Go quickly!"

Guo Jing was struck with grief and indignation; he raised his hand and struck the tree trunk with his palm.

This strike was extremely heavy and the sound echoed from the mountain and valley. Hong Qigong was startled and quickly asked, "Jing'er, the palm you launched...what technique did you use?"

"Why?" Guo Jing was perplexed.

"You hit very hard, but the trunk did not even shake," Hong Qigong said.

Guo Jing was very embarrassed, "I used up all my strength striking down trees and my hands are very sore; I don't have any more strength left," he said.

"No, no," Hong Qigong shook his head, "Your palm technique was a little strange. Strike again!"

Raising his hand he struck the tree with his palm. The sound shook the forest, but the tree did not budge. Suddenly it dawned on him. "That was from the seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fist' Big Brother Zhou taught your disciple."

"'Vacant Fist'...I have never heard of it," Hong Qigong mused.

"That's right," Guo Jing said, "Big Brother Zhou was held prisoner on Peach Blossom Island. He had nothing to do, so he invented this technique. He taught me the sixteen-character secret of the technique: 'empty and hazy like a loose cave, the wind blows carrying a dream, playing around with power or exhaustion, a child can use a worm as

a weapon' [kong meng dong song, feng tong rong meng, chong qiong zhong nong, tong yong gong chong]"

Hong Qigong laughed, "What kind of empty hole?" he asked. [Play on words here, Hong Qigong said 'tong nong ku long' which rhymes with whatever Guo Jing was saying. I can't translate it properly.]

Guo Jing explained, "Each one of those sixteen characters has its own meaning. The word 'song' [loose] means the fist must be devoid of strength; 'chong' [worm] means the body must be flexible like a worm; 'meng' [hazy] means the fist movement must be obscure, must not be too clear. Disciple will play it out for you to watch, tell me what you think?"

"The night is so dark and I can't see anything," Hong Qigong said, "Why don't you explain it to me? This is an excellent martial art; I don't have to see it in order to understand it."

Guo Jing explained from the first stance, 'Empty Bowl Filled with Rice' [kong wan cheng fan], to the second stance, 'Empty House Occupied with People' [kong wu zhu ren], and all variations therein, including how to send out the force, to Hong Qigong.

By nature Zhou Botong was mischievous, so he gave each and every stance a funny name. Hong Qigong had only heard up to the eighteenth stance and his heart was already filled with admiration. He cut Guo Jing off, "You don't need to continue, I have found a way to fight the Western Poison."

"With the 'Vacant Fist'?" Guo Jing asked, "I am afraid the disciple's skill is insufficient."

"I know that," Hong Qigong said, "But we are in a desperate situation; we have to take a risk. Do you still have

the dagger Qiu Chuji gave to you?" A cold light flashed in the dark night as Guo Jing took out his dagger. Hong Qigong said, "With the 'Vacant Fist technique', use this dagger to cut down some trees." Guo Jing held his dagger by the hilt, the thin blade was only about one foot long. He was doubtful but did not say anything.

Hong Qigong said, "The 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' I passed on to you is the pinnacle of the external types of martial arts; that 'Vacant Fist' is a very profound inner type of martial arts. Your dagger can cut through metal and carve jade; what would the problem be of cutting a tree trunk? The important thing is, your hand strength must follow the 'Empty' [kong] and 'Loose' [song] principles."

Guo Jing pondered it for a long time. Hong Qigong also gave him some more directions. Finally he understood. He jumped down from the tree and went to find a medium size pine tree. With the 'Vacant Fist' method of exerting energy, using force without force, he lightly struck the trunk and, sure enough, the dagger went through the tree trunk. He exerted his strength and cut around the trunk and that tree fell down immediately. Guo Jing was ecstatic; using the same method he cut down dozens of trees one after another. It seemed before daybreak he would be able to cut down a hundred logs.

While he was still cutting down trees, he heard Hong Qigong suddenly call out, "Jing'er, come up here."

Guo Jing leaped up to the platform. "It really worked," he said, "I did not even use very much energy."

"Certainly we can't waste our energy, can we?" Hong Qigong said.

"That's right! That's right!" Guo Jing exclaimed, "Now I understand the 'kong meng dong song' principle. Big

Brother Zhou explained it to me, but I did not understand it."

"This martial art is more than enough to cut down trees," Hong Qigong said, "But it is still far from adequate for fighting the Western Poison. You must train with the 'Nine Yin Manual' again, only then will you have a chance to defeat him. Let us think of some way to buy time." Speaking about plans and strategies, Guo Jing could only stay silent, letting his master do the thinking.

After a long time, Hong Qigong shook his head and said, "I can't think of anything good. Let's wait until tomorrow, perhaps Rong'er can come up with some clever ideas. Jing'er, listening to you reciting the 'Nine Yin Manual' I had a thought and I believe I am not wrong. Help me get down from this tree...I am going to practice my martial arts."

Guo Jing was shocked. "Your injury has not healed yet, how can you train?" he asked.

Hong Qigong answered, "The manual said, 'The body is cultivated two-fold; namely movement and stillness. When attacked, stay still.' Those sentences have opened my eyes. Let's go down."

Guo Jing did not understand the meaning of those sentences, but he did not dare to defy his master. Therefore he lifted his master and gently jumped down from the tree.

Hong Qigong calmed himself...then opened his arms and launched a palm strike. In the darkness Guo Jing saw his master's body stagger forward like he was falling down. Guo Jing rushed forward to help, but Hong Qigong had already steadied himself. His breathing was heavy, but he said, "I am alright."

A moment later he launched a left palm strike. Guo Jing saw him stagger, his feet stumbled and he appeared to be extremely exhausted. Guo Jing fought the urge to rush forward and help his master. Who would have thought that the more Hong Qigong practiced, the stronger he became. Initially he had to catch his breath after every single stance he launched, but later he was able to launch several stances in succession. His steps were getting steadier as well. It was a tremendous improvement. Hong Qigong launched the whole set of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', followed by a set of the 'Crouching Tiger Fist' [fu hu quan].

Guo Jing waited until he finished, then he shouted happily, "You are healed!"

"Help me back up," Hong Qigong said.

Guo Jing wrapped his arm around his master's waist and jumped up to the platform. His delight was unspeakable, he mumbled repeatedly, "Very good...very good!"

Hong Qigong sighed and said, "Not so good, these martial arts are only good to watch, but they're actually useless." Guo Jing did not understand and Hong Qigong explained, "After suffering an injury, all I did was rest, trying to recuperate. It never occurred to me that my martial arts are of the external type; the more I move the better. It's too bad I realized it way too late; now my life will be spared, but my martial arts will be very difficult to restore."

Guo Jing wanted to offer some words of comfort, but he did not know what to say. After a while he simply said, "I'll go down and chop some more trees."

"Jing'er," Hong Qigong suddenly said, "I think I have an idea to intimidate the Old Poison. Let's see if you agree with me." Then he explained his idea. Guo Jing was delighted,

“Splendid! Splendid!” he exclaimed; and immediately jumped down from the tree to make preparations.

Early in the morning of next day, Ouyang Feng came to the tree. He counted the logs Guo Jing chopped down and found only ninety of them. He coldly laughed and shouted, “Little bastard [za zhong]! Get down here quickly! Where are the other ten?”

Huang Rong had spent the entire night by Ouyang Ke’s side, tending his injuries. Listening to his pitiful groaning she felt sorry for him. That morning as Ouyang Feng left the cave, she followed behind. Hearing his loud shouts, she worried for Guo Jing.

Ouyang Feng waited for a moment, but nothing was heard from the tree above, except some gust of winds coming from a distant hill. It sounded like somebody was practicing martial arts. He hastily followed the source of the sounds. When he rounded the hillside, what he saw surprised him. Hong Qigong was sparring with Guo Jing; palms and kicks flew towards each other...they were engaged in a close fight.

Huang Rong saw that her master was not only able to walk unaided, but it seemed his skills were restored as well...she was pleasantly surprised. She heard him shout, “Jing’er, be careful of this next stance!” and he launched a palm.

Guo Jing raised his palm to parry, but before their palms met his body flew backwards and ‘bang!’ he hit a pine tree. That tree was not too big, about a rice bowl in diameter; ‘crack!’ and it was snapped by the strength of Hong Qigong’s push and fell to the ground.

This strike seemed ordinary, but it was enough to stun Ouyang Feng. Huang Rong praised, “Master, that was a great ‘Hacking Empty Air Palm technique’ [pi kong zhang]!”

“Jing’er, protect your body well; don’t let my palm strength injure you!” Hong Qigong called out.

“Disciple understands,” Guo Jing replied. He was just closing his mouth as Hong Qigong’s palm arrived. ‘Crack!’ again Guo Jing was sent flying, again bumping into a tree. Palm after palm came one after another; in a short period of time Hong Qigong had used the ‘Hacking Empty Air Palm’ to send Guo Jing flying and knocking down ten big trees.

“We have ten trees already!” Huang Rong called out.

Guo Jing gasped for breath. “Disciple is exhausted,” he said.

Hong Qigong held his palm and laughed, “This ‘Nine Yin Manual’ is really wonderful. My injury was heavy and I couldn’t even exert any strength, yet I achieved success with just one morning’s exercise.”

Ouyang Feng was suspicious; he stooped down to examine the broken tree trunks and what he saw stunned him. Apart from the heart of the trunk, the outer rings were exceptionally smooth, even smoother than if the trunk was sawn. He thought, “Could it be that the martial arts in the manual is this marvelous? It looks like the Old Beggar’s martial arts have been completely restored. How can I fight them if the three gang up on me? I’ve been lucky so far, I’d better start training myself in the martial arts from that manual.” He cast a glance towards the three and then flew back to the cave in a hurry. He immediately fetched the book Guo Jing wrote, unwrapped layer upon layer of oil papers from the bundle and straightaway buried his head in the book, diligently studying the manual.

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing waited until they could not see Ouyang Feng anymore before both of them burst out laughing. Huang Rong was delighted, “Master, this manual is truly wonderful,” she said.

Hong Qigong laughed without giving her a response. Guo Jing rushed to her and said, "Rong'er, we were only pretending." Then he told her everything they had thought of and done. It turned out that Guo Jing had used his knife to cut around the trunks, leaving the center intact. Hong Qigong's palm actually did not carry any strength at all and every time Guo Jing got hit, he used his own strength to fly backwards and bump into a tree, breaking it. Ouyang Feng did not know that with the 'Vacant Fist' energy, the dagger was capable of cutting deep into the tree trunk; naturally he did not suspect that the cut was made by the knife.

Huang Rong was laughing hard, but after hearing Guo Jing's story, she was silent for quite a while with a deep frown on her face. Hong Qigong smiled and said, "The Old Beggar is once again capable of walking on my own feet; it is truly a blessing from Heaven. I don't care if it was true martial arts or fake. Rong'er, you are afraid the Western Poison will see through this deception, aren't you?" Huang Rong nodded. "The Old Poison has good eyesight," Hong Qigong continued, "How could we fool him that easily? But life is full of uncertainties, right now it is useless to worry over nothing. Hear me out: Jing'er recited the contents of the manual to me. There is a section which was called 'Changing Muscle Forging Bones' [yi jin duan gu pian] or something; I thought it was very interesting. Since we don't have anything else to do, why don't we practice it?"

These words were said with offhanded gentleness, but Huang Rong was aware of the urgency of the situation. What their master had said was very reasonable, therefore she said, "Very well, Master, please teach us."

Hong Qigong asked Guo Jing to recite the 'Changing Muscle Forging Bones' twice, then, based on that, he taught the two how to practice it. He went out hunting and fishing himself as well as lighting the fire and cooking their meals.

Several times Guo Jing and Huang Rong offered to help, but he shoos them away every time.

Seven days quickly passed and Guo Jing and Huang Rong made some progress in terms of their energy cultivation. Inside his cave Ouyang Feng was also painstakingly studying his manual and putting all his efforts into doing so. Towards the evening of the eighth day Hong Qigong smiled and said, "Rong'er...how was your Master's roasted wild goat?"

Huang Rong smiled but did not say anything, she simply shook her head. Hong Qigong laughed, "I can't eat it myself either. You two have finished the first part of your lesson; today you must rest your muscles and bones, otherwise your 'qi' will be obstructed and you will suffer an injury. Ok Rong'er, you prepare our meal tonight; Jing'er and I will go and build a raft."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were astonished, "Build a raft?"

"That's right," Hong Qigong said, "Do you want to stay with the Old Poison on this deserted island forever?"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were delighted; they both voiced their agreement and started to work immediately.

The hundred logs Guo Jing cut down were piled neatly at one side. They cut the tree's bark, wove it into ropes and tied the logs together to make the raft. When Guo Jing used his strength to pull the rope, it broke. He thought the rope was not made strong enough. He tried pulling another rope, but as soon as he exerted a little strength, it also broke easily. Guo Jing was baffled; he stared blankly at the rope and did not know what to do.

From the other side of the hill Huang Rong ran shouting with a wild goat in her hands. When going out to hunt for

the goat she carried some pebbles to herd the goat with; who would have thought that with only several jumps she had already overtaken the goat. She twisted around and grabbed the wild goat. Her body movements were so swift that she even surprised herself.

Hong Qigong smiled, "So the 'Nine Yin Manual' is truly a wonderful manual; no wonder countless heroes and warriors were willing to risk their lives for it."

Huang Rong was delighted, "Master, do you think we can beat the Old Poison now?" she asked.

Hong Qigong shook his head, "Not yet, you are still far from that," he replied, "You'll have to train for another eight to ten years. His Toad Stance is not a small matter; no martial art can break it except Wang Chongyang's Solitary Yang Finger.

Huang Rong pouted and said, "Then even if we train for another eight to ten years we might still not be able to defeat him."

"That's hard to say," Hong Qigong said, "Perhaps the martial arts in that book are fiercer than I think."

"Rong'er, please be patient," Guo Jing said, "There is nothing wrong with learning a new skill."

A few more days passed and Guo Jing and Huang Rong finished the second part of the 'Changing Muscles Forging Bones'. The raft was also ready. The three of them wove a sail from tree bark and they also prepared some fresh water and food on the raft. All along Ouyang Feng acted indifferent to what they were doing; he simply watched their activities with a cold look.

One evening everything was ready so they planned on sailing the next day. Just before bed that night Huang Rong asked, "Do we have to say goodbye to them?"

"Not only that, we must make a ten year agreement with them," Guo Jing answered, "They have bullied us badly; how can we just forget it?"

Huang Rong clapped her hands and said, "Absolutely! I pray to Heaven to bless those two thieves so that they can go back to the mainland, and also to give the Old Poison ten more years of life; or perhaps to restore Master's martial arts quickly, so that in one or two years we can hunt for him. That would be even better."

The next day before the crack of dawn Hong Qigong awoke; he indistinctly heard some noises from the shore. He quickly called, "Jing'er, did you hear that noise from the beach?"

Guo Jing got up immediately and jumped down from the tree. Once he saw what was happening on the beach he could not stop cursing; he immediately rushed forward in pursuit. By this time Huang Rong also awoke and ran after him, calling out, "Jing ge ge, what's the matter?"

Guo Jing shouted from the distance, "Those wicked thieves stole our raft." Hearing this, Huang Rong was shocked.

By the time they got to the beach Ouyang Feng had already carried his nephew out to the raft, raised the sail and was already several zhang [1 zhang = 3.3m or 11ft] away from land. Guo Jing was furious and was about to jump into the ocean to pursue, but Huang Rong pulled his sleeve and said, "They are already too far."

Ouyang Feng roared with laughter, "Many thanks for the raft!" he shouted.

Stomping his feet with rage, Guo Jing furiously kicked a red sandalwood tree nearby. Huang Rong suddenly had an idea, "I've got it!" she called out. She took a big rock and placed it in the tree branches. She wanted to use the tree as a slingshot. "Pull on this tree," she said, "and we'll hurl the rock."

Guo Jing was delighted. He braced his legs on the tree's base and pulled the trunk backward with all his might. Sandalwood trees are strong but supple; it bent almost completely down to the ground but did not break. Guo Jing let go and with a whooshing sound the big rock flew out to sea and fell near the raft's side, creating a zhang high big splash.

"What a pity!" Huang Rong called out. She took another rock, aimed carefully and let go. This time the rock hit the raft dead on, but the raft's construction was too good and it did not break. The two launched three more rocks, but all of them fell into the water.

Watching all their rocks miss the target, Huang Rong had a crazy idea. "Quick, use me as the rock!" she shouted. Guo Jing was startled, unclear of what she meant. Huang Rong explained, "Hurl me out to sea; I'll deal with them."

Guo Jing knew her water skills were excellent, her lightness kungfu was excellent as well; he saw no danger in complying with her request. He drew his knife and put it in her hand. "Be careful," he said. He pulled the tree one more time. Huang Rong sat steadily on a branch and called out, "Fire away!"

Guo Jing released his grip and Huang Rong's body flew into the sky. She somersaulted twice in the air and plunged into the water several zhang away from the raft. It was a beautiful sight to behold. Ouyang Feng and his nephew

were dazzled and they didn't know what she was going to do.

Huang Rong went deep into the water. She did not emerge, but swam underwater towards the raft instead. Once she saw a black shadow overhead she knew she had arrived at the bottom of the raft. Ouyang Feng randomly hit the water with the oar, but he could not hit her.

Huang Rong held up the dagger, ready to sever the ropes tying the wooden raft together; then she suddenly came up with a bright idea. She reduced the strength of her hand only partly cutting the ropes, leaving a third intact; that way the raft would not break apart until the rough waves of the open sea hit it. She turned around and swam away, emerging on the surface about a dozen zhang away; she gasped for breath, pretending she could not catch the raft. Ouyang Feng laughed wildly and hoisted the sail. Not too long afterwards the raft was far away.

While waiting for her to arrive back at the beach, Hong Qigong and Guo Jing cursed continuously; but then they saw Huang Rong's smug expression and were puzzled. After hearing what had happened, they were delighted to no end. "Even though we are sending those two wicked men to the bottom of the sea, we will have to start the work over again," Huang Rong said.

The three ate their meal in high spirits; then they cut logs again and built another raft. Several days later they were ready, and when the southeast wind blew, they hoisted the tree bark sail and left the island heading to the west. Huang Rong gazed towards the island, which was getting smaller and smaller, she sighed and said, "Our lives were almost lost on that island; but leaving it today, my heart is filled with sadness."

"We can always revisit the island in the future," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong clapped her hands and said, "Good! We must come back. When that time comes, you can't go back on your word. But first, let's give this small island a good name. Master, what do you think?"

"You crushed that little bastard's legs with a big rock on that island," Hong Qigong said, "Let us call it 'Crushing Ghost Island' [ya gui dao]. What do you say?"

Huang Rong shook her head. "That is not very elegant."

"If you want elegance, why ask the Old Beggar in the first place?" Hong Qigong said, "If you ask me, since the Old Poison ate my urine on the island, I say we call it 'Eat Urine Island' [chi sui dao]."

Huang Rong smiled with a negative wave of her hand; she leaned her head to one side to think. She saw a group of red clouds on the horizon, like a cluster of gems hovering gloriously over the island. "Let's call it 'Bright Red Cloud Island' [ming xia dao]!" she called out.

"Not good, not good!" Hong Qigong countered, "That was too elegant."

Guo Jing listened to the master and disciple arguing; he smiled and did not say anything. He did not care whether the island had an elegant name or a vulgar name; but deep down in his heart he thought 'ya gui' or 'chi sui' were more interesting than 'ming xia'.

Carried by the blowing wind they sailed for two days and the wind did not change its course. Towards the evening of the third day Hong Qigong and Huang Rong were asleep while Guo Jing kept charge of the rudder for the night.

Amid the ocean breeze and rolling waves he suddenly heard somebody shout, "Help! Help!" twice. The voice sounded like clashing cymbals and it could be heard clearly amidst the blowing wind and waves.

Hong Qigong sat up and said in a low voice, "That's the Old Poison." They heard the shout one more time and Huang Rong grabbed Hong Qigong's arm, "It's a ghost...it's a ghost!" she said with a trembling voice. It was the end of the sixth month and the night was dark and moonless; there were only a few stars scattered sparsely in the dark night. The sea was pitch-black and a scream in the middle of the night would make anybody terrified.

"Is that the Old Poison?" Hong Qigong called out. His internal energy was lost, so his voice did not travel too far. Guo Jing gathered the 'qi' on his 'dan tian' and called out, "Is that Uncle Ouyang?"

From the distance they heard Ouyang Feng answer, "It is me, Ouyang Feng. Help!"

Huang Rong was still terrified, "It doesn't matter whether it's a man or a ghost, let's just leave, quickly!"

"Help him," Hong Qigong suddenly said.

"No, no!" Huang Rong quickly answered, "I am afraid."

"It's not a ghost," Hong Qigong said.

"Even if it is a man we still don't have to help," Huang Rong said.

"Helping others in distress is one of our Beggar Clan rules," Hong Qigong said, "You and I are two generations of Clan Leaders; we can't abandon the honorable customs handed down from previous generations' leaders."

"The Beggar Clan's custom is not right," Huang Rong countered, "Ouyang Feng is clearly a scoundrel; when he becomes a ghost, he will be a scoundrel ghost. It doesn't matter if it is a man or a ghost, we should not help."

"It is the Clan's regulation; we can't change it," Hong Qigong said.

In her heart Huang Rong was very angry. They heard Ouyang Feng's voice in the distance again, "Brother Qi [Qi Xiong], are you really 'seeing death, but do not help' [jian si bu jiu]?"

Huang Rong said, "I've got it! Jing ge ge, wait until you can see Ouyang Feng clearly, then strike him dead with your stick. You are not a Beggar Clan member; you don't have to observe this unreasonable rule."

Hong Qigong was angry, "Is taking advantage of somebody else's precarious condition the way of the righteous warrior?"

Huang Rong did not have a choice. She watched helplessly as Guo Jing steered the raft towards the voice. In the deep darkness of the night they vaguely saw two men in the water rocked by the waves; next to their heads were logs. It seemed that after their raft broke up, Ouyang Feng and his nephew had clung onto the logs until now.

"Let him swear an oath never to harm anybody else, then we will rescue him," Huang Rong said.

Hong Qigong sighed, "You don't know the Old Poison's character; he would rather die than surrender. He won't make that kind of promise. Jing'er, rescue them."

Guo Jing bent down and grabbed Ouyang Ke's collar and lifted him up onto the raft. Hong Qigong was eager to help

and he forgot his martial arts were gone. He held out his hand and Ouyang Feng took it. He wanted to borrow strength and leap to the raft; but because of his pull Hong Qigong fell unexpectedly into the sea with a splash. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were shocked; they immediately jumped into the sea and saved Hong Qigong. Huang Rong angrily scolded Ouyang Feng, "My Master has a good heart and wanted to rescue you; how could you drag him into the sea like that?"

Ouyang Feng now knew Hong Qigong had lost his martial arts; otherwise, how could his simple pull make a martial arts expert fall into the sea? But he had been immersed in the water for several days and he was extremely weary. He did not dare to look at them; he lowered his head and said, "I ... I did not mean to. Brother Qi [Qi Xiong], please don't blame your brother."

Hong Qigong laughed heartily, "Well said, well said. But now the Old Beggar's real skills are known to you," he said.

"Good Miss," Ouyang Feng said, "Could you spare something for us to eat? We haven't eaten for several days."

Huang Rong replied, "We only have food and water enough for three people on this raft. I can give you some, but what do we eat?"

"Very well," Ouyang Feng said, "Please give a little bit of food to my nephew then; his legs are severely injured and he won't survive without food."

"In that case let's make a deal," Huang Rong said, "Your viper injured my Master; he has not recovered. Give him the antidote."

Ouyang Feng groped in his pocket and produced two vials; handing them over to her and said, "Miss, please take a

look; the vials were submerged in the water and the antidote has been washed out!”

Huang Rong took the vials, shook them, and sniffed them; the vials really were filled with seawater. “In that case, tell us ingredients for the antidote; as soon as we are ashore we can prepare some.”

“If I wanted to swindle you, I could just tell you some ingredients and you wouldn’t know if it is genuine or fake; but how can Ouyang Feng be that kind of person?” Then he said, “Let me tell you the truth: my vipers are the most poisonous in the world; nothing can match their lethality. If one is bitten, although you won’t die immediately due to one’s excellence in martial arts, within sixty-four days half of your body will be paralyzed and you will be an invalid for the rest of your life. I have no problem about giving you the antidote ingredients, but not only are the ingredients hard to find, it also requires processing for three successive winters and summers. By the time the antidote is ready, I am afraid it will be much too late. I have told you the truth; if you still want to take my life that is entirely up to you.”

Huang Rong and Guo Jing listened to him and secretly admired him; they thought, “Although this man is evil and cruel, in a matter of life and death he did not lose his honor as the grand master of his martial arts school.”

“Rong’er,” Hong Qigong said, “He is telling the truth. A man’s life has been decided by fate; the Old Beggar has nothing to be worried about. You give them something to eat.”

Inwardly Huang Rong’s heart was crushed and she knew her master would not recover from his injury. Silently she took a roasted wild goat leg and tossed it towards Ouyang

Feng. Ouyang Feng first tore some meat off for his nephew before he took a big bite and chewed the meat.

Huang Rong said coldly, "Uncle Ouyang, you have injured my master; at the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua you will be the winner amongst the heroes. Let me be the first to congratulate you."

"That is not necessarily true," Ouyang Feng replied, "There is at least one other person in this whole wide world who can heal Brother Qi's injury."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong jumped up in shock so that the raft leaned to one side. They both asked in unison, "Is that true?"

While biting the goat leg Ouyang Feng said, "But it is very difficult to ask this person to help. Your Master also knows about it."

The two's eyes turned to their master. Hong Qigong smiled, "You know it is difficult...why did you mention it?"

Huang Rong tugged her master's sleeve, asking for an explanation, "Master, tell us. Even if it is difficult, we still have to try. I will ask my father to help; surely he'll find a way." Ouyang Feng snorted softly. "What are you snorting about?" Huang Rong said. Ouyang Feng did not answer.

Hong Qigong said, "He was laughing at you for thinking your father is all powerful. Finding that person is not a small matter, so how could your father convince that person to help?"

Huang Rong was astonished, "That person! Who is that person?"

Hong Qigong continued, "Let's not talk about that person's high level of martial arts skills. Even if he was so weak that

he couldn't even kill a chicken, the Old Beggar will never harm someone to benefit myself."

Huang Rong hesitantly said, "High level of martial arts skills? Ah! I know. He is the Southern Emperor, Emperor Duan. Master, let's ask him to heal your injury, how does that harm others to benefit yourself?"

"Go to sleep and don't ask any more questions! I forbid you to bring up this matter again. Understand?" Hong Qigong said. Huang Rong did not dare to say more. She was afraid Ouyang Feng might steal their food, so she leaned against the food basket and slept.

Waking early the next morning Huang Rong looked at Ouyang Feng and his nephew; she jumped in fright because their complexions were very pale and their bodies swollen from being in seawater these past several days.

The raft sailed until about the ninth hour [3-5pm] when they saw a dark line in the distance. It appeared to be land. Guo Jing was the first to jump up and shout in delight. In the time needed to eat a bowl of rice they could see more clearly; it was indeed land. The sea was calm and the sun shone brightly, scorching these people and making them miserable. Ouyang Feng suddenly stood up; he swayed a little bit and stretched out his hands and grabbed both Guo Jing and Huang Rong. With the tip of his foot he also kicked and sealed Hong Qigong's acupoint.

The two were taken by surprise and their vital acupoints sealed; half of their bodies numbed immediately. Startled they asked, "What are you doing?" Ouyang Feng grinned evilly, but did not say anything.

Hong Qigong sighed, "The Old Poison is very conceited; he is not willing to accept another's mercy. We have saved his life; if he does not kill his saviors, how can his heart be at

peace? Ay, I can only blame my own benevolent heart for rescuing these people in the middle of the night and forgetting this fact. Now I've endangered the lives of these two weary kids."

"You knew it very well," Ouyang Feng said, "Also the 'Nine Yin Manual' is in my hands; if I leave a copy in this boy named Guo's mind, I will only invite inevitable misfortune on myself."

Hearing him mentioning the 'Nine Yin Manual' Hong Qigong's heart was stirred; with a loud voice he recited, "Nu er qi liu, ha gua er, ning xie qi qia, ping dao er ..."

Ouyang Feng was startled; he recognized the sentence to be one among hundreds of difficult sentences he did not know the meaning of. Listening to Hong Qigong reciting it, he believed Hong Qigong understood the meaning and he thought, "There are many strange sentences in the manual, there must be a key to unlock their secrets. If I kill these three, I am afraid there is nobody else in this world who understands it and my taking possession of the manual will have been in vain." Therefore, he asked, "What does it mean?"

Hong Qigong replied, "Hun hua cha cha, xue gen xu bat u, mi er mi er ..." Even though he had listened to Guo Jing reciting the strange sentences from the manual, how could he have memorized everything? He was just talking nonsense, but his face showed deep veneration.

Ouyang Feng actually thought the sentences carried a very profound meaning; he focused his attention and thought deeply. Hong Qigong shouted, "Jing'er, now!"

Guo Jing pulled back his left hand and sent out his right palm while his left leg flew forward simultaneously. Actually when Ouyang Feng sent out his kick and launched a

surprise attack, his vital acupoint was grabbed and he was unable to move. When Hong Qigong talked nonsense and confused Ouyang Feng, it caused him to lose his concentration and slightly loosen his grip. Guo Jing took this opportunity to free himself and launch a counterattack. Guo Jing had trained the 'Changing Muscle Forging Bones' to the second stage; although he did not learn any new fist or kick techniques, his original strength was actually increased by at least twenty percent. This one pull, one palm and one kick were executed without any extraordinary moves, but the force within his attack was unexpectedly strong.

Ouyang Feng was taken by surprise and because the raft was narrow, there was no space to withdraw; he was forced to raise his hand to fend off the attack, but his grip on Huang Rong did not loosen.

Guo Jing's fist and palms went out one after another, attacking his enemy like a violent storm. He was well aware that, on this narrow raft, should he ever let Ouyang Feng attack with his Toad Stance, then the three of them would be dead with no burial ground. This flurry of attacks forced Ouyang Feng to withdraw half a step.

Huang Rong leaned sideways slightly, positioning her shoulder to bump Ouyang Feng's body. Ouyang Feng was amused and thought, "This little girl wants to bump me, just how much skill does she think she has? Don't blame me if I bump you clear to the ocean." He had just finished this thought when Huang Rong's shoulder arrived. Ouyang Feng did not evade nor try to parry, appearing not to pay attention; then he suddenly felt a pricking pain on his chest. The pain caused him to realize immediately that she was wearing Peach Blossom Island's treasure, the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' [ruan wei jia]. By now he was already at the edge of the raft, so he could not move back even half a

step. Her armor was full of sharp spines which he could not deal with. He hastily let go of her vital acupoint and flung her to one side.

Huang Rong did not have any room to set foot on and she was going to fall into the water. Guo Jing reached behind his back and grabbed her, while his left hand was still attacking his enemy. Huang Rong drew out her dagger and rushed forward to attack.

Ouyang Feng stood on the edge of the raft with water splashing his legs; no matter how hard Guo Jing and Huang Rong attacked, they were not able to force him into the water.

Hong Qigong and Ouyang Ke were unable to move, so both of them helplessly watched the ferocious fight. Their hearts were thumping madly as they watched this evenly matched fight where the margin between life and death was as narrow as a strand of hair. They both bitterly wished they could help their side.

Ouyang Feng's martial arts were considerably above Guo Jing and Huang Rong's combined power, but because he had been immersed in the water for several days, almost half of his strength was gone. Although Huang Rong's martial arts were not too high, she was wearing the 'Soft Hedgehog Armor' and her hand was holding a sharp dagger. These offensive and defensive weapons were enough to give Ouyang Feng some headaches. Not only that, Guo Jing's 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms', his seventy-two stances of the 'Vacant Fist', the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique, as well as the recently learned 'Changing Muscles Forging Bones' from the 'Nine Yin Manual' combined to make him a formidable opponent. Besides that, the three were engaged in a close fight on a raft!

After a while Ouyang Feng's palms started getting stronger; Guo Jing and Huang Rong started to fall under his attack. Hong Qigong was very anxious watching this fierce battle. Amidst Ouyang Feng's dancing palm shadows his left leg kicked out with a strong gust of wind. Huang Rong did not dare to block it and was forced to somersault back and fell into the water.

Suddenly facing a strong enemy alone, Guo Jing was feeling the strain. Luckily, after falling into the water on the left side of the raft, Huang Rong swam under the bottom of the raft, boarded on the right side, and swept her dagger towards Ouyang Feng's chest. Now Ouyang Feng had to face enemies on two sides.

While fighting courageously, Huang Rong thought of plans to overcome this situation, "If this fight continues, and with our inferior martial arts, in the end we will fall under his hands. The only way to defeat him is under water." As soon as this thought entered her mind, she swept her dagger and cut the sail rope and the sail immediately fell down; the raft now carried by the waves and no longer moved forward. Huang Rong drew back two steps, wrapped the rope several times around Hong Qigong's body, then several turns on logs from the raft and made two tight knots.

With Huang Rong out of the battle, Guo Jing would not be able to withstand the enemy much longer. He managed to block three successive stances, but the fourth stance forced him to step backwards. Ouyang Feng did not want to let him go and his palms continuously attacked. Guo Jing was forced to step backwards again and using the 'Fish Jumping out of the Deep' [yu yue yu yuan] he managed to block another stance. For the next stance he was forced to move backwards again and his left foot stepped on empty air. In this critical moment he did not get nervous; his right foot

immediately flew forward to block his enemy from attacking further. With no feet on the raft, with a 'splash!' he also fell into the water.

The raft was rocking hard and Huang Rong also took this opportunity to leap into the sea. The two pushed and pulled the raft, trying to overturn it. They knew Ouyang Ke would drown, and besides, in the water Ouyang Feng was not their match. Hong Qigong's was tied to the raft and the two took the risk of dealing with the Western Poison first before trying to save their master.

Ouyang Feng understood their intentions very well and he raised his foot over Hong Qigong's head and loudly shouted, "You two kids listen to me! If you rock the raft one more time, I will kick instantly!"

Huang Rong understood her first plan had been foiled so she proceeded with her second plan: she took a deep breath, dove underneath the raft and began cutting ropes with her dagger. She knew they were not too far from land; after drowning Ouyang Feng and his nephew, she thought they could ride on logs and get to shore without too much trouble.

'Snap...snap!' the wooden raft broke into two halves. Ouyang Ke was on the left half, while Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong were on the right half. Inwardly Ouyang Feng felt anxious and he quickly stretched his hand to grab his nephew; then he bent over looking into the water, ready to strike Huang Rong if she cut another rope.

From under the water Huang Rong could see Ouyang Feng's shadow clearly. Knowing his next attack would be very fierce, she did not dare to cut another rope. Both sides were in deadlock for a long time. Huang Rong swam several

zhang away, took another deep breath, then dove right back under, waiting for an opportunity to launch her attack.

With concentrated attention, both sides waited for an opportunity. For the moment their part of the sea became very calm and the sun shone brightly over their heads. The ocean seemed so peaceful, but on this half raft, with one above and one below, there were very murderous intentions.

Huang Rong thought, "If this half raft is cut in two, the waves will certainly turn it over." While Ouyang Feng thought, "As soon as she pokes her head up, I am going to slap the water. The vibration should be enough to scatter her brains. Once this little girl is gone, the little thief named Guo should not prove a problem to me." Two people waited without blinking, both itching to strike.

Suddenly Ouyang Ke pointed to the left and called out, "A boat...a boat!"

Hong Qigong and Guo Jing turned their heads and saw a big boat with a dragon figurehead and its sail fully raised; it approached riding the wind and breaking waves. A moment later Ouyang Ke saw someone standing on the bow; he was large in stature and was wearing a scarlet kasaya [a garment worn by Buddhist monks] and looked like the Monk Lingzi. As the boat got closer, he could see more clearly, it was indeed the Monk Lingzi. He quickly told his uncle.

Ouyang Feng concentrates his 'qi' in his 'dan tian' [lower abdomen] and loudly called out, "Friends, here, come quickly!"

Under water, Huang Rong did not know what was happening, but Guo Jing knew they were in more trouble. He swam underwater and pulled Huang Rong's arm,

signaling her that more enemies were coming. Huang Rong was not very clear on his intentions, but she was aware something was not right. She signaled back to Guo Jing to block Ouyang Feng's palm while she severed the rope.

Guo Jing knew his own skill was inferior to his enemy by a long shot; but now that he was underwater and the enemy above, the difference was lessened. He knew blocking Ouyang Feng's palm meant endangering his own life, but it was a critical time and he had no other alternative. Therefore he exerted all his strength into his palms and suddenly swept upwards.

"Ugh!" Ouyang Feng grunted as his palms struck the water; meanwhile Guo Jing's palms were coming up from below. Two forces collided on the surface of the sea, creating a big splash. The raft was lifted several feet upwards and, 'snap... snap', the half raft broke into two parts; it seemed Huang Rong managed to cut the rope just in time.

In the meantime the big boat was only a few dozen zhangs away from the raft. After cutting the rope, Huang Rong immediately dove deeper underwater. She was about to come up and stab Ouyang Feng when she noticed Guo Jing was motionless and slowly sinking. She was alarmed, quickly swam near, and grabbed his arm. She swam several zhangs away before coming up to the surface. Guo Jing's eyes were tightly shut, his face blue and his lips colorless; he was unconscious.

The large boat lowered a small boat with several sailors pulling the oars; they took Ouyang Feng, his nephew, as well as Hong Qigong aboard. Huang Rong called three times, "Jing ge ge!" but Guo Jing did not wake. She thought that although the boat was full of the enemies, she had no alternative; she held on to Guo Jing's head and swam towards the small boat.

The sailors pulled Guo Jing aboard and held out their hands to pull her in. Huang Rong's left hand pressed on the boat's edge and she leaped up from the water like a flying fish, into the boat, scaring the sailors.

When his palms collided with Ouyang Feng's, Guo Jing felt a tremendous force surging through his body and he passed out immediately. He awakened and knew he was leaning on Huang Rong's chest and aware that they were on a small boat. He concentrated his breathing and found out that he was not internally injured; he raised his eyebrows and smiled at Huang Rong.

Huang Rong smiled back at him and her anxiety and fears were gone in an instant. She at last had an opportunity to see what kind of boat was coming to rescue them. Once she looked up, she groaned inwardly; she saw, standing at the bow of the big boat, seven or eight men, both tall and short. They were the same Wulin characters she'd met several months earlier at the Zhao Palace in Yanjing. The short, stout one with bright eyes was the 'Butcher with a Thousand Hands' [qian shou ren tu] Peng Lianhu, the one with a bald, shiny head was the 'Dragon King of Guimen' [gui men long wang] (lit. Ghost Gate) Note to final editor: the earlier chapter has 'Dragon King of Demonic Group'] Sha Tongtian, the one with three carbuncles on his head sticking out like horns was the 'Three-Headed Dragon' [san tou jiao] Hou Tonghai, the one with ruddy face and white hair was the 'Ginseng Immortal' [shen xian lao guai] Liang Ziweng, the one wearing scarlet kasaya was the Tibetan monk the 'Big Handprint' [da shou yin] Venerable Lingzhi. There were several others that she did not know. She thought, "Jing ge ge's martial arts and mine have recently enjoyed tremendous improvements. If we have to fight with Peng Lianhu and the others one-on-one, I might not win, but Jing ge ge will definitely score a victory. But the Old

Poison is standing nearby, plus these other people. It will be very difficult for us to escape danger today.”

The people on the big boat were surprised to hear Ouyang Feng’s shouts from the raft. Now that they saw Guo Jing and the others, they were even more surprised. Ouyang Feng was holding his nephew; Guo Jing and Huang Rong carried Hong Qigong; the five people in two groups jumped up one after another from the small boat to the big boat.

Soon a man came out of the cabin to welcome them; he wore an embroidered colored robe. As soon as he saw Guo Jing, both men were stunned. The man wore a neat beard on his chin, had a handsome face; it was none other than the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Wanyan Honglie.

After escaping from the Liu family ancestral hall in Baoying, Wanyan Honglie was afraid that Guo Jing might pursue him to the north; he did not dare go home. He came across Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others and decided to head down south to steal the book left behind by Yue Wumu (the Wumu Legacy). By this time the Mongolian army had dispatched a large scale military expedition against the Jin; the capital, Yanjing, had been besieged for several months and the sixteen prefectures surrounding it had fallen to the Mongolian invasion. As the days passed the situation for the Jin got more and more critical. Wanyan Honglie was very worried about the fate of his country; he’d seen with his own eyes that the Mongolians were very swift and fierce. Although the Jin army was ten times superior in numbers, each time they met, the Jin were routed. Wanyan Honglie painstakingly pondered all ideas to rebuild his country’s lofty aspirations, and came to the conclusion that what he needed right at that time was the Wumu Legacy. He thought that if this book on military strategy was in his possession, he would be able to build a divine and invincible army just like Yue Fei’s own army. Even though the

Mongolian army was strong, they would flee at the sight of his army.

He presently led this expedition south, trying to track down the whereabouts of the Legacy; but he feared the Southern Song would uncover his intentions and be on guard against intruders. He decided to go by sea, hoping nobody would know his itinerary and he could land on the Zhejiang coast undetected and quietly enter Lin'an to steal the book.

Before departing he looked for Ouyang Ke knowing he was a martial arts expert and would be a highly useful companion. After a long time of not hearing any news of him, he decided to leave without waiting for this man. Now they suddenly meet quite by accident on the sea; not only Ouyang Ke, but Guo Jing as well. He could not help but feel anxious; he was afraid his secret mission had been compromised.

Seeing the enemy who'd killed his father, Guo Jing seethed with anger; he did not care if he was surrounded by powerful enemies and he looked at Wanyan Honglie with blazing gaze.

Just then someone else came out of the cabin, but when only half step through the door he immediately drew back in. Huang Rong's sharp eyes saw that the man looked like Yang Kang.

In the meantime Ouyang Ke introduced his uncle to the prince, "Uncle, this is the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin who loves people with high skills." Ouyang Feng cupped his fists in front of his chest.

Wanyan Honglie did not know that Ouyang Feng was a very big name in the martial arts realm. He noticed Ouyang Feng had an arrogant expression, but for Ouyang Ke's sake he returned the cupped fists gesture.

When Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others heard his name, they bowed and spoke their praise, "For a long time Mr. Ouyang has been the Mount Tai and the Big Dipper [meaning 'ultimate'] of the Wulin world; today we are fortunate to finally meet you." Ouyang Feng slightly bowed, returning their respect half-heartedly.

'Big Handprint' the Venerable Lingzhi came from Tibet and did not know of the Western Poison's reputation; he merely put his palms together without saying anything.

Wanyan Honglie knew that Sha Tongtian and the others were conceited men and they always looked down on others; but he noticed they were very respectful towards Ouyang Feng, almost to the point of fear and heaped flattering words on him. Their expressions looked very unusual. Wanyan Honglie realized that this water-swollen man with disheveled hair and bare feet was not an ordinary person; he immediately treated Ouyang Feng with respect and uttered some polite words.

Among these people, only Liang Ziweng had different feelings. Because Guo Jing had drunk the precious blood of his valuable viper, and now that they saw each other again, how could he not feel angry? But he also noticed that the person he was most afraid of, Hong Qigong, was with Guo Jing. Even though he was very angry, he managed to keep a smiling face. He went forward and bowed respectfully, "The little Liang Ziweng greets Clan Leader Hong and wishes Senior well."

His speech startled everyone. Although they all had heard for a long time of the stellar reputations of the Western Poison and the Northern Beggar, they had never met them in person. Who would have expected that two of the biggest names in the martial arts world would actually make their appearance at the same time? They were about to rush

forward and pay their respects when Hong Qigong laughed loudly and said, "The Old Beggar is having very bad luck; a vicious dog has bitten me leaving me half dead and half alive, what are you paying respects for? It would be better if you bring me something to eat."

Everyone was startled and they thought, "This Hong Qigong is lying motionless because he is severely injured... we don't have anything to fear from him." They looked at Ouyang Feng, waiting to see what he was going to do.

Earlier, Ouyang Feng had cooked up a plan as to how to get rid of these three people: Hong Qigong must be eliminated first to avoid his own dishonorable behavior from becoming public; next, he would force Guo Jing to explain the difficult sentences from the manual and then he would kill him. As for Huang Rong, even though his nephew loved her, if he let her live, she would cause an enormous disaster in the future. However, if he personally killed her, Huang Yaoshi would not let him have a single moment's peace. Therefore he decided to use someone else's hand to kill her and thus shift the blame from his shoulders. Since the three were aboard the boat, he was not afraid they would fly away and escape. He stepped forward and said to Wanyan Honglie, "These three people are very crafty and they are also highly skilled in martial arts. I beseech the Prince to assign some people to guard them well."

Liang Ziweng was very pleased; he leaned to the left and squeezed past Sha Tongtian to grab Guo Jing's hand. Guo Jing turned his wrist over and slapped Liang Ziweng's shoulder. He'd used the 'Sighting the Dragon in the Field', a swift and heavy stance; even though Liang Ziweng's martial arts skill was high, he was unexpectedly forced to stagger back two steps.

Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng continually competed to win the favor of Wanyan Honglie. They always tried to outdo the other and what their faces showed was different from what they felt in their hearts. Seeing Liang Ziweng stumble, Peng Lianhu was inwardly very pleased. He stepped closer to Hong Qigong and the others; but he was waiting for Liang Ziweng to fall before taking any action.

When Liang Ziweng slipped past Sha Tongtian to pull Guo Jing away, he was prepared for Guo Jing's single stance, the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse'; he knew he would not be able to face it head on, hence the attack from the side. Who would have thought that in less than a month the 'Proud Dragon Shows Remorse' was not the only move Guo Jing knew? Because Guo Jing did not pursue, he jumped up and attacked with his fists, launching his life's worth of training in martial arts, the 'Wild Fox from Liaodong Fist' technique [liao dong ye hu quan fa], determined to take Guo Jing's life, both for embarrassing him just now and also for killing his precious snake.

One time Liang Ziweng went to gather ginseng on Mount Changbai [located in Jilin province]; he saw a hound fighting with a wild fox in the snow. The fox was very cunning; it leaped to the east and hopped to the west, very quick and agile. Although the hound's claws and teeth were sharp, after battling for a long time it had yet not scored victory. Liang Ziweng noticed the ability of the fox to jump very high and he had a sudden inspiration. He abandoned his intention to gather ginseng and decided to stay in a thatched hut on the snowy mountain, painstakingly pondering martial arts moves for several months. As a result, the 'Wild Fox Fist technique' was born.

The technique incorporates four fundamental principles, namely 'ling' [alert/quick], 'shan' [dodge], 'pu' [pounce], and 'die' [tumble]. This technique had come in handy in

dealing with powerful enemies. First of all, he did not give the enemy an opportunity to catch him since he was very quick to retreat and he was able to hasten to the left and escape to the right; then he struck back as the opportunity arose.

Now he did not dare to underestimate his opponent any longer and launched this fist technique right away. His attacks were lightning fast as he threw everything he had at Guo Jing. The fist technique was weird; Guo Jing had never seen anything like it before. He thought, "In Rong'er's 'Peach Blossom Island Divine Sword Palm' technique there are many trick moves; out of five attacks only one is real, or sometimes one out of eight. But it seems this old man's fists are all empty strikes. I wonder what kind of strange technique this is?" However, he remembered Hong Qigong's advice, that regardless the technique his opponent is using all he needed to do was to keep using the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'.

After watching the two men fighting for a while, everybody began to silently shake their heads, thinking, "The Old Freak Liang can be considered a grand master of martial arts; why is it that when fighting this new born kid [very inexperienced] he keeps moving around and does not dare to attack head on?"

Several moves later Guo Jing's palm strength began to force him back step by step; it seemed that very soon he would fall into the ocean. Realizing his 'Wild Fox Fist' would not help him score a victory, Liang Ziweng thought of using a different set of fist techniques; but it was too late. Guo Jing's palms enveloped him completely, not giving him any chance to counterattack. Amidst the strong gusts of wind Hong Qigong's voice was heard, "Attack the lower part!"

Guo Jing immediately launched the stance 'The Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail' [shen long bai wei] and his left arm swept him away. Liang Ziweng called out in alarm and tumbled over the rail of the boat.

Everybody was stunned and rushed to the edge to look, only to hear somebody on the sea laughing a long laugh. Liang Ziweng's body suddenly flew back up and with a loud grunt landed back on deck, unconscious.

What had just happened confounded everyone on board. Could it be that the waves bounced his body back up? Everybody crowded to the rail of the boat, looked down to the sea below and saw an old man with a white beard and white hair rushing to the east and dashing to the west on the surface of the sea at unusual speed. They strained their eyes to see more clearly; as it turned out, that man was riding on the back of a huge shark at a speed not inferior to someone galloping on horseback on dry land.

Guo Jing was delightedly surprised and with a loud voice he shouted, "Big Brother Zhou, I am here!" That shark rider was indeed the Old Urchin Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong heard Guo Jing's shout and he cheered with delight; then he hit the shark's head near its right eye with his fist and the shark turned left immediately, coming near the boat's side.

"Is that Brother Guo?" Zhou Botong called out, "How are you? There is a whale ahead and I have been chasing it for a whole day and night. I want to continue chasing it. See you later!"

"Big Brother! Come here quickly!" Guo Jing anxiously called, "There are many bad people here who want to bully your little brother!"

Zhou Botong was angry, "Is that so?" His right hand held onto something inside of the shark's mouth, while his left hand grabbed onto the rail of the big boat. He pulled hard and both man and shark suddenly flew up above everybody's heads and landed on the deck. He roared, "Who dares to bully my little brother?"

Almost every single one of the people aboard had extensive knowledge of Jianghu matters; but this white bearded old man who suddenly appeared in a most bizarre way stupefied everyone. Even Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were dumbstruck.

Zhou Botong saw Huang Rong and he felt strange. "How come you are also here?" he asked.

Huang Rong smiled, "Why not?" she replied, "I figured you'd come back today, that's why I am here waiting for you. Quickly teach me how to ride a shark."

Zhou Botong laughed, "Very well, I'll teach you."

Huang Rong replied, "First you have to help us get rid of these bad people, and then you can teach me."

Zhou Botong swept his gaze across the people on the deck and he said to Ouyang Feng, "I knew other people wouldn't dare to act so savagely, so it turns out to be you."

Ouyang Feng replied coldly, "A man who does not keep his word, while he is alive in this world, will be the laughing stock of all the warriors of the world."

"Totally correct," Zhou Botong said, "A man of integrity certainly won't cause trouble. But those who speak truly and those who fart [lies] has to be distinguished clearly, otherwise people who hear it might not know if the sound comes from above or from below. I am indeed looking for

you to settle an old score and nothing could better than seeing you here. Old Beggar, you are our witness; stand up and give us your judgment.”

Hong Qigong lay on deck and he smiled slightly. Huang Rong said, “The Old Poison was almost dead nine times and my Master was kind enough to rescue him every single time. Who would have thought that he has the heart of a wolf and the lungs of a dog and repays kindness with evil; he injured my Master and sealed his acupoints.”

Actually, Hong Qigong only saved Ouyang Feng’s life three times, but Huang Rong intentionally exaggerated by a factor of three. Ouyang Feng knew this but did not want to argue; he only looked at her with blazing eyes.

Zhou Botong stooped down trying to unseal Hong Qigong’s ‘Song Reservoir’ [qu xhi] and ‘Bubbling Spring’ [yong quan] acupoints by rubbing them. “Old Urchin, it’s useless,” Hong Qigong said.

It turned out that the acupoint sealing method Ouyang Feng used was somewhat unusual; other than Huang Yaoshi and himself, there was no one else in this whole wide world who could unseal them. Ouyang Feng was very smug, “Old Urchin, unseal his acupoints if you have the ability,” he challenged.

Even though Huang Rong could not unseal them, she was familiar with the sealing method; she pressed her lips together and said, “What’s so strange about that? My father can unseal this ‘Penetrating Bone’ [tou gu da xue fa] acupoint sealing technique without very much effort.”

Hearing her mentioning the correct name for his acupoint sealing technique, Ouyang Feng was amazed that this little girl’s knowledge was as deep as a bottomless abyss, even encompassing acupoint sealing techniques. However, he did

not pay any attention to her; turning to Zhou Botong he asked, "You lost our bet; why are you talking like breaking smelly wind?"

Zhou Botong covered up his nose and called out, "Break wind? Bad smell, bad smell! But let me ask you this: what did we bet on?"

"Everyone here, except this Guo kid and this little girl, is a well-known warrior. I'll tell what happened and ask these gentlemen to be our judges," Ouyang Feng replied.

"Well said, well said," Peng Lianhu said, "Mr. Ouyang, please tell us."

"This gentleman is the Quanzhen Sect's Zhou Botong, Master Zhou, known in the Jianghu world as the Old Urchin. In terms of seniority, he holds a very high position; Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the other Quanzhen Seven Masters are his martial nephews."

For the past dozen years or so, Zhou Botong had been detained on Peach Blossom Island; before that time his martial arts skills were obscure. Aside from some mischievous troubles, he never accomplished anything worth mentioning, so his reputation did not spread far and wide in the Jianghu world. However, everybody had seen him riding a shark, a feat not easily accomplished by any of them. Since he is the martial uncle of the Quanzhen Seven Masters, it's no wonder he is this good. As a result everybody talked amongst themselves in low voices. Peng Lianhu remembered their appointment on the eighth month's mid-autumn festival in Jiaying; if the Quanzhen Seven Masters had this strange man as their ally, they would not be easy to deal with. He could not help but feel anxious.

Ouyang Feng continued, "Brother Zhou was stranded in the sea amongst a mass of sharks and I rescued him. I said this mass of sharks was nothing much and without too much effort I could kill every single one of them. Brother Zhou did not believe me, so the two of us made a bet. Brother Zhou, isn't what I said true?"

Zhou Botong nodded his head repeatedly, "It was absolutely true. But you need to explain to everyone what we were betting on exactly," he said.

"Correct!" Ouyang Feng said, "I said that if I lost, I would do whatever you wanted me to do. If I am not willing to do it, then I must jump into the sea and become fish food. You said the same thing, is that correct?"

Zhou Botong nodded his head again, "Right, right, that was absolutely correct, and then what happened?" he asked.

"What do you mean 'what happened'? You lost!" Ouyang Feng said.

This time Zhou Botong shook his head repeatedly, "Not true, not true!" he said, "It was you who lost, not me."

Ouyang Feng was angry, "A real man can distinguish between right and wrong; how can you deny your own words? If I lost, how come you were willing to plunge into the sea to kill yourself?"

Zhou Botong sighed, "That's true. I originally said that the Old Urchin's fortune was bad so I lost to you; who would have thought that as I went into the water the Heavens sent something we could regard as a coincidence. Only then did I know that the Old Poison had lost and the Old Urchin had really won."

Ouyang Feng, Hong Qigong and Huang Rong asked together, "What coincidence?"

Zhou Botong stooped down with his left hand, grabbed a piece of stick stuck inside the shark's mouth, lifted the shark and said, "I met my riding animal. Old Poison, take a look; it was your precious nephew who stuck this stick inside its mouth, wasn't it?"

It was indeed Ouyang Ke who concocted this wicked plan to insert a stick inside the shark's mouth, so that it would not be able to eat and eventually die of starvation. Ouyang Feng had seen this with his own eyes. He saw a huge shark with a wooden stick in its mouth and he also saw the wound caused by the hook in the shark's mouth. Without any doubt this was the very same shark they'd returned to the sea that day. "So what?" he said.

Zhou Botong clapped his hands and laughed, "That means you lost! Our bet was that you would kill every single one of the sharks, but this good fellow was bestowed with good fortune by your nephew. It could not eat the dead sharks, hence could not eat the poison. It was the only shark left alive. How can you say that the Old Urchin didn't win?" He burst out laughing. Ouyang Feng's countenance changed and he could not say anything.

Guo Jing delightedly asked, "Big Brother, where were you these past few days? I was so miserable thinking about you."

Zhou Botong laughed, "I was playing and having fun. Not long after I jumped into the sea, I saw this fellow gasping for breath on the surface and it seemed to be in agony. I said, 'Old Shark, oh Old Shark, seems like today you and I share the same fate!' Then I suddenly jumped on the shark's back. It furiously went under the water and I had to

hold my breath with both hands holding tightly to its neck and my feet periodically kicked its belly. In great difficulty it went back up to the surface. Without giving me a chance to take two mouthfuls of air this fellow dove back under. The two of us fought for half a day and he finally became obedient and was willing to listen to what I said. I wanted it go to the east and it went to the east, I wanted it to head north and he wouldn't dare think of going south." As he spoke he gently patted the shark's head, looking extremely pleased.

Of those who were present, only Huang Rong admired and envied him. Her eyes shone and she asked, "I played in the sea for many years, why didn't I think of this trick? I was so stupid!"

"Look at its mouth full of teeth; they are as sharp as knives," Zhou Botong said, "If there was no stick in its mouth, would you dare to ride it?"

"You spent the last few days riding on the back of this fish?" Huang Rong asked.

"Certainly," Zhou Botong replied, "The two of us have pretty good skills at catching fish. As soon as we saw a fish, we chased it and I sent a fist or a palm to kill it. Out of ten fish, I only ate one and this fellow ate the other nine."

Huang Rong felt the shark's belly and asked, "You dumped dead fish into its belly? It did not need its teeth to eat?"

"He's a good eater," Zhou Botong answered, "There was a time the two of us chased an extremely big cuttlefish ..."

Two people, one old, the other young, were having an animated discussion, totally ignoring everybody else on board the ship. Ouyang Feng groaned inwardly and silently thought of some methods to deal with this situation. Zhou

Botong suddenly turned to him and said, "Hey, Old Poison, do you admit defeat?"

Ouyang Feng had been the one making the speech earlier; how could he swallow his own words in front of this many people? He was obliged to say, "So what if I lost? Do you think there is anything I can't do?"

"Hmm," Zhou Botong said, "I must think of a difficult thing for you to do. Very well, you scolded me just now saying that I was farting; I want you to fart immediately and let everybody smell it."

Hearing Zhou Botong ask Ouyang Feng to break wind for no reason at all, Huang Rong was annoyed. Breaking wind at will was naturally not easy for the average person, but with strong internal energy, it was not difficult to circulate the breathing to all parts of the body, hence it was an extremely trivial thing to do. She was afraid of Ouyang Feng's craftiness, of his venomous snake staff and was afraid he would grab this opportunity to gently break wind and put everything behind him without too much trouble. So she hastily said, "Not good, not good! First you want to tell him to unseal my Master's acupoints, then we can talk some more."

"See!" Zhou Botong said, "Even a young miss is afraid of your smelly fart. Alright, I'll let you go this time. I was not going to ask you to do a difficult thing anyway; quickly tend to the Old Beggar's injury. The Old Beggar's skill is not less than yours; if not of your sneakiness, there's no way you would be able to injure him. After he is healed, the two of you can fight again. At that time let the Old Urchin be the judge."

Ouyang Feng knew Hong Qigong's injury was incurable, so he was not afraid of future retaliation. But he was afraid

that Zhou Botong would come up with a more difficult and strange request. Under the scrutiny of numerous people he felt really awkward; he did not want to comply, yet he was too proud not to. Without saying anything he bent down, exerted strength to his palm and unsealed Hong Qigong's acupoints. Huang Rong and Guo Jing rushed forward to help their master stand.

Zhou Botong swept his gaze to the other people on the deck, he said, "The Old Urchin is most afraid to smell the urine scent of the sheep eaten by you barbarians. Quickly let down a small boat and send us four people ashore."

Ever since he'd seen the fight between Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng knew that this man's martial arts were very strange. If for any reason they had to fight, he was certain he would not be defeated, but scoring a victory was not guaranteed either. He decided to endure things patiently for the time being. He wanted to wait until he had mastered the 'Nine Yin Manual', then he would come and settle the account with Zhou Botong. Besides, he had the excuse of losing the bet earlier. When all was said and done, it would be better off to send this annoying plague away, so he made up his mind and said, "Very well, your luck was very good! Since you won the bet, let it be as you said." Turning his head to Wanyan Honglie he said, "Prince, please let down a boat to take these four people ashore."

Wanyan Honglie hesitated as he thought, "I am afraid that as soon as they are ashore, these four will leak my secret mission to the south."

All this time the Venerable Lingzhi was watching with his cold eyes. Earlier he had seen Ouyang Feng's unkempt appearance and his heart was filled with contempt. He thought that this 'chicken half-drowned in soup' did not

dare to defy even half a word of whatever Zhou Botong told him to do; it seemed likely he enjoyed an unearned reputation. Even if his martial arts were excellent, he would not necessarily be more skillful than the rest of the people on board. Noticing Wanyan Honglie's slight hesitation, he moved forward two steps and said, "If we were on the raft we would have to comply with Mr. Ouyang wishes; how could other people dare to speak too much? But we are on this boat and we have to listen to the Prince's instructions."

Listening to this, everyone's heart was stirred and they turned their gaze on Ouyang Feng to see what he was going to do. Ouyang Feng coldly looked the Venerable Lingzhi up and down, sizing him up. He raised his face to the sky and wryly said, "Does this Great Monk deliberately want to make things difficult for this old man?"

Venerable Lingzhi replied, "I don't dare. The lowly monk has lived at the edge of Tibet, friendless and ignorant. Today is the very first time I heard Mr. Ouyang's honorable name. I don't need to have anything to do with you whatsoever ..."

Before he could finish, Ouyang Feng had moved forward one step; his left hand swiftly made a false move while his right hand deftly grabbed Venerable Lingzhi. With a little effort he turned the monk over and held him upside down. It had happened so fast that all the others saw was Venerable Lingzhi's red kasaya sway, and then flutter loosely in midair. Nobody saw clearly what technique Ouyang Feng used.

Venerable Lingzhi was a head taller than anyone else, but Ouyang Feng was able to grab his neck easily. Even if Ouyang Feng lifted his arm up over his head, he would not necessarily be able to lift Lingzhi's feet off the deck; but

when Ouyang Feng turned his body upside down, the top of Lingzhi's head was actually about four feet above the deck.

Venerable Lingzhi's legs were kicking wildly in the air and his mouth let out roaring curses. Everybody had seen Venerable Lingzhi fight Wang Chuyi at the Zhao Palace; they knew his skill was not a trivial matter. But how could he have been turned upside down by Ouyang Feng and held there with his arms flailing weakly beside his head as though the arms were broken and he did not have the strength to struggle free?

With his eyes still looking upward, Ouyang Feng said dryly, "Today was the first time you heard my name; therefore, you look down on the old man, don't you?"

Venerable Lingzhi was both frightened and angry. He tried to exert his internal energy several times, trying to struggle free, but no matter what he did, he was not able to escape. Peng Lianhu and the others had seen what happened and their faces showed amazement.

Ouyang Feng continued, "You look down on the old man, that's alright. But I don't want to stoop to your low level in front of the Honorable Prince. So you want to detain the Old Urchin, Master Zhou and the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar, Master Hong. Heh, heh ... do you think you can rely on your magical skills to match them? You are both friendless and unlearned; it's no wonder you don't know much and have not had enough lessons to teach you manners. Old Urchin, take this!"

Again, nobody saw Ouyang Feng's hand move; he merely exerted his strength to his palm and Venerable Lingzhi flew like a cloud from the port to the starboard side of the deck. As soon as he felt Ouyang Feng's palm strength leave his body and he was free, Lingzhi stretched his body like a carp

trying to turn his body right side up. Then he suddenly felt a sharp pain on his neck; he cried out and stretched out his left arm to attack. Again he felt his arm go numb and hang helplessly beside his head. Once again his body was suspended midair. As it turned out, Zhou Botong followed Ouyang Feng's example and grabbed him by the neck.

Although Wanyan Honglie understood Lingzhi's precarious situation, he knew nobody could accuse Ouyang Feng of not giving forewarning. None amongst his warriors had the ability to deal with Zhou Botong, just this one man; hence he hastily said, "Mister Zhou, you don't have to play any longer, Little Prince will send a boat out to take the four of you ashore."

"Very good," Zhou Botong said, "You can also try to take this!" Following Ouyang Feng's example, he exerted his strength to his palm and sent the Venerable Lingzhi flying towards the Prince.

Of course Wanyan Honglie knew martial arts, but his skill was limited to the saber, spear and bow and arrow from horseback. The flying monk from Zhou Botong's hand carried a swift and strong force; how could he take it? Even if he didn't die he would certainly suffer a heavy injury; so he hastily stepped aside to avoid him.

Sha Tongtian knew the Prince was in danger and straight away stepped forward in front of the Prince, trying to protect him. He saw the Venerable Lingzhi coming fast and if he struck with his palm, he might injure the monk. Following Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong's earlier example, he wanted to grab the monk's neck, turn him right side up, and then lay him down gently. However, he had forgotten one important detail; namely, his martial arts were way below that of those two people. He had seen Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong, seemingly without effort, grabbing and

throwing Venerable Lingzhi's heavy body. Therefore he leaped up to intercept Lingzhi, stretching his hand to grab his neck. As he touched Venerable Lingzhi's neck he unexpectedly felt a burning sensation followed by a strong force attacking his hand and wrist. He knew if he did not ward off this attack his wrist would be broken immediately. At this critical moment he quickly withdrew his right hand, while his left fist launched his 'Splitting Armor Awl' [po jia zhui].

What had happened was when Venerable Lingzhi was thrown back and forth between Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong, his blood was flowing adversely, his head was dizzy while his heart burned with anger. He heard Zhou Botong calling out for someone else to take his body; all he knew was that person must be an enemy, so while he was still airborne he had already exerted his strength in anger. As soon as Sha Tongtian's hand touched his neck, Venerable Lingzhi's 'Big Handprint' [da shou yin] slashed out.

In terms of strength these two were on par with each other; Sha Tongtian had the advantage of standing upright, but Venerable Lingzhi had prepared his attack beforehand, and thus caught him off guard. Two equal forces collided; Sha Tongtian was pushed back three steps, but Venerable Lingzhi, also shaken by the collision, fell flat on the deck. He immediately stood up and saw that the person he thought attacked him was Sha Tongtian; he thought, "Even you, a stinky thief, want to take advantage of me!" With a loud roar he pounced forward.

Peng Lianhu knew he misunderstood the situation and hastily stepped in between the two people, calling out, "Reverend, please don't get angry, Brother Sha only had good intentions."

In the meantime the small boat had been lowered. Zhou Botong grabbed the stick inside the shark's mouth; he lifted and hurled the huge shark into the sea while simultaneously exerting his strength and breaking the stick into two parts. As it splashed into the sea, the shark felt the stick in its mouth had been broken and was very happy. It dove deep into the water to hunt for some fish.

Huang Rong smiled, "Jing ge ge, later on the two of us and Big Brother Zhou can ride sharks together and we can have a race." Guo Jing did not answer but Zhou Botong clapped his hands and cheered. He said, "We can ask the Old Beggar to be our judge."

After watching Zhou Botong and the others leave on the small boat, Wanyan Honglie started to think. With his kind of martial arts, Ouyang Feng would provide valuable assistance in his plan to steal the book. He took Venerable Lingzhi's hand and walked towards Ouyang Feng. "Everyone here are good friends and I hope Sir was not offended; I am sure Reverend was not serious. I wish both gentlemen to give Little Prince face and consider everything as a joke," he said.

Ouyang Feng smiled and extended his hand. Venerable Lingzhi, on the other hand, was still upset. He mused, "You only used the seizing technique [qin na] and caught me off guard. I have trained painstakingly for dozens of years to develop my 'Big Handprint' power; do you think I am inferior to you?" Then he also stretched out his hand while sending energy to his palm with the intention of gripping Ouyang Feng's palm hard. Just as he was about to exert his strength he suddenly jumped away. He felt as though he was touching red-hot steel and his hand was in so much pain that he dropped it in a hurry. Ouyang Feng did not want to pursue the matter so he faintly smiled. Venerable Lingzhi looked at his hand and did not see anything unusual

and thought, "Damn it, this old thief surely knows some demonical tricks."

Ouyang Feng noticed Liang Ziwen was still lying on the deck, unmoving. He came to examine him. Ouyang Feng knew that Liang Ziwen was pushed into the sea by Guo Jing and intercepted by Zhou Botong, who sealed his acupoints and threw him back onto the boat. He unsealed Liang Ziwen's acupoints and, there and then, Ouyang Feng became the leader of this group of warriors.

Wanyan Honglie immediately ordered a banquet to welcome Ouyang Feng and his nephew. While drinking wine Wanyan Honglie explained to Ouyang Feng his plan to go to Lin'an and steal the 'Wumu Legacy' while at the same time asking his willingness to help. Ouyang Feng actually had heard about this matter from his nephew but this time his heart was stirred. Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "What kind of man do you think I, Ouyang Feng, am? How can I submit to you? But I heard that not only was Yue Fei's military skill divine, his martial arts skill was also superb. I also heard that the Yue Family's martial arts had been lost to the martial art world. Perhaps in his legacy there is a martial arts manual as well as the military strategies. I will agree to help him get the book and if I like what I see... can't the Old Poison get what he wants?"

It was a case of: You cheat and I am crafty...it's everyone for himself. Wanyan Honglie wholeheartedly wanted the book to help him defeat the Great Song. It is said that while the praying mantis was hunting for the cicada, the yellow canary caught it from behind. Ouyang Feng had a different idea to top his. Therefore, while one man heaped flattering words, the other's mouth was full of compliance. In addition, Liang Ziwen did his utmost to be a good host and the banquet table was overflowing with wine. The guests and the hosts were having a good time. Only Ouyang Ke,

who was still in pain from his injury, did not drink anything, but only ate some dishes. Then he asked the crew to help him to the rear cabin to rest.

While they were eating and drinking in a lively manner, Ouyang Feng's countenance suddenly changed. The cup stopped at his mouth and he did not drink. Everyone was startled; nobody knew what had offended him. Wanyan Honglie was about to ask when Ouyang Feng said, "Listen!"

Everybody inclined their heads to listen, but other than the wind and the waves of the sea, they did not hear anything. A moment later Ouyang Feng asked again, "Do you hear it this time? It's a flute's sound." Everybody listened attentively with rapt attention and now they could hear, amidst the sound of the waves, the faint sound of a bamboo flute, sometimes broken, sometimes continuous. Nobody would have heard it if Ouyang Feng had not pointed it out.

Ouyang Feng walked to the bow; there he let out a long whistle and the sound traveled far. By now everybody else had arrived at the bow. They saw in the distance a light boat with three green sails, cutting the waves and coming fast towards their boat. They were inwardly astonished, "Is the flute sound coming from that boat? It's very far away...how could the sound travel here?"

Ouyang Feng ordered the sailors to turn the rudder to intercept that fast boat. Two boats gradually came closer to each other. On the bow of that fast boat stood a man wearing a long dark green robe and in his hand was indeed a flute. He called out loudly, "Brother Feng, have you seen my daughter?"

"Your daughter has a very strong temperament, how would I dare to provoke her?" Ouyang Feng replied.

Two boats were several zhang apart and nobody saw that man move his body and jump, yet they saw a blurred shadow and that man was already standing on the big boat's deck.

As Wanyan Honglie saw his marvelous skill and his desire to recruit warriors arose; he stepped forward to welcome the guest, saying, "What is your surname, Sir? I am very fortunate to receive your visit." Considering his lofty position as a prince of the Great Jin, he was being unusually modest. Upon seeing he was wearing a Jin official's costume, that man only gave him a blank stare, apparently not paying any attention to him.

Seeing the prince not getting the attention he deserved Ouyang Feng said, "Brother Yao, let me present to you the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Prince Zhao." To Wanyan Honglie he said, "This is the Master of Peach Blossom Island, the number one martial artist in the world; his knowledge is unparalleled."

Peng Lianhu and the others were so shocked that they involuntarily withdrew several steps. They knew from the start that Huang Rong's father was a very fierce devil and the Twin Killers of the Dark Winds were his renegade disciples and were able to shake Jianghu with their might. The faces of the people of the Wulin world would change color whenever their names were mentioned. If the disciples were that fierce, how much more so would be their master? He has appeared here to create trouble for sure, they thought, and everyone remembered that they had offended his daughter. Therefore, everyone's heart was filled with fear and nobody dared to make a sound.

When his daughter ran away, Huang Yaoshi knew she must be looking for Guo Jing. Initially he was angry and ignored her. But a few days later he became worried; he was afraid

she would find Guo Jing on the special ship he built and they'd go down to the bottom of the sea together. He was worried to death for his daughter, so he decided to go out to sea and search for her.

Knowing they were returning to the mainland, he decided to head to the west. But looking for a boat on a boundless sea was truly easier said than done. Even though Huang Yaoshi possessed extraordinary intelligence, after searching back and forth he did find any trace of her. On this particular day backed by his strong internal energy he played his flute at the bow of his boat, with the hope that his daughter would hear and respond. Unexpectedly it was Ouyang Feng who responded.

Huang Yaoshi, Peng Lianhu and the others did not know each other. Hearing Ouyang Feng say that this person was a prince of the Jin, he did not want to stay any longer; he cupped his fists across his chest and said to Ouyang Feng, "Brother needs to continue my search for my daughter; I apologize for not accompanying you longer." Then he turned around to leave.

Venerable Lingzhi had been angered by Ouyang Feng and Zhou Botong, and now another extremely arrogant and impolite person had come on board. He heard what Ouyang Feng had said, but he thought, "Could it be that there are so many highly skilled people in this world? Most likely these people know some witchcraft and deceive others with their demonical abilities. Let me try and perhaps I can deceive him as well." Seeing Huang Yaoshi was about to leave he said with a loud voice, "Are you looking for a fifteen or sixteen years old young lady?"

Huang Yaoshi paused and turned around with a happy expression on his face, "Yes Reverend, did you see her?"

Venerable Lingzhi coldly replied, "I did see a young lady, but the one I saw was a dead one, not a live one."

Huang Yaoshi's heart turned cold, "What?" he asked quickly, his voice was trembling.

Venerable Lingzhi replied, "About three days ago I saw the body of a young girl floating on the surface of the sea. She was wearing white clothes and a gold ring in her hair; originally her face must have been very pretty. Ay! What a pity, what a pity! What a pity her body was swollen by the seawater." He had accurately described Huang Rong's clothing and adornments.

Huang Yaoshi's mind was greatly troubled; his body shook and his face turned pale. A moment later he asked, "Are you telling me the truth?"

Everyone clearly saw Huang Rong board the small boat just minutes ago; now they heard Venerable Lingzhi deceiving this man and taking pleasure from another's misfortune. Even as they watched Huang Yaoshi's grieving face, nobody made a sound.

Venerable Lingzhi coldly continued, "Beside that young lady's body I saw three other corpses; one was of a young man with thick eyebrows and big eyes, the other one was an old beggar with a scarlet wine gourd on his back, and the last one was a white haired old man." He was describing Guo Jing, Hong Qigong and Zhou Botong.

Reaching this point Huang Yaoshi's doubts were completely gone. He squinted at Ouyang Feng, thinking, "You knew about my daughter so why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Ouyang Feng noticed his look and realized his grief had reached its peak so he began to have murderous intent. Although he himself would not suffer a loss, the oncoming

force would not be easy to resist. He quickly said, "Brother has just come on board this boat today and it is the first time I met these people. When this Reverend saw some floating corpses, your daughter was not necessarily amongst them." Sighing, he continued, "Your beloved daughter is such a good girl; it is very regrettable if she really died at such a young age. If my nephew found out, he would die of heartbreak." This speech shifted the blame from his shoulders, but clearly did not offend either side.

After listening to Ouyang Feng, Huang Yaoshi was in total shock; his heart sank in an instant. He was the type who loved to vent his anger on others; if it were otherwise, then when the Twin Killers of the Dark Winds stole his manual, why did he break Lu Chengfeng and his other innocent disciples' legs and expel them from his school? His chest felt icy-cold, but his blood was boiling, just like when his beloved wife died some years ago. His hands were trembling and his face changed from snow white to crimson red alternately.

Everybody looked at him in silence and their hearts were filled with unspeakable fear. Even Ouyang Feng was anxious; he gathered his 'qi' in his 'dan tian', his whole body alert, ready to take any attack. The entire boat was unusually quiet. Suddenly Huang Yaoshi let out a long laugh, sounding like a never ending dragon's roar.

This latest development took everybody by surprise and they were startled. They saw him facing skyward, laughing wildly and getting louder and louder. His laughter caused a chill in the air; those who listened to it felt more and more miserable. Gradually the laughter turned into weeping, a very sad weeping. The people could not bear it any longer; they felt like they shared his grief and were about to shed tears as well.

Ouyang Feng was the only one who knew his temperament well and knew that he used to sing and cry for no specific reason, hence he was not affected. But listening to him weeping so miserably he thought, "If he keeps crying like this, the Old Heretic Huang will inevitably injure himself. In past days Ruan Ji mourned the death of his mother and in doing so vomited a lot of blood. The Old Heretic Huang could experience the same fate as that person from the past. It was a pity my iron zither was lost when my boat sank, otherwise I could have played it and made his crying more interesting. This man has an unusual character; once he unleashes his uncontrolled emotions he will most likely suffer a serious internal injury. When it's time for the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua I will surely miss a worthy and formidable opponent. Ay! What a great loss! What a pity, what a pity!"

After crying for a while Huang Yaoshi lifted his jade flute and struck the rail of the boat while singing, "Why did God make someone's life so short? Why did someone die when all the hair on his head turned white, while the other died because of disaster or child-birth. The previous calamity had not yet passed, when the new one has come along. Morning had just blossomed, but the evening has already come, the dew came with the dawn and evaporated immediately. The departed cannot be pursued, the emotion suddenly fails. The high heaven does not have stairs; to whom shall I pour out my complaints to?"

With a 'Crack!' the jade flute was broken in two. Without turning his head Huang Yaoshi walked to the bow. Venerable Lingzhi dashed forward to block him and coldly said, "You wept and you laughed like a madman, what do you think you are doing?"

"Reverend, don't ..." Wanyan Honglie called out, but before he finished, Huang Yaoshi's right hand stretched out and

grabbed Venerable Lingzhi's neck. Turning him midair until his feet were facing upward Huang Yaoshi threw him down and his fat bald head penetrated the deck up to his shoulders.

It seems that in the martial arts Venerable Lingzhi practiced, his neck was his weakest point. As soon as he made his move, a highly skilled martial artist like Ouyang Feng, Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi could immediately see this flaw and attack his weakest point.

Huang Yaoshi continued singing, "The sky's eternal, the earth unchanging, how long will a man live? The past, the future, everything passes unawares; there is a time for everything." A dark green shadow flashed and he had already moved to his own boat, turned the rudder and sailed away.

The people on board were about to rescue Venerable Lingzhi who remained motionless; they did not know if he was alive or dead. Then suddenly they heard a grunt and the deck hatch opened and out came a young man. He was handsome, with red lips and white teeth, and a face like crown jade; it was Wanyan Honglie's son, Yang Kang, who's former name was Wanyan Kang.

After having a disagreement with Mu Nianci he kept remembering Wanyan Honglie's words, 'unlimited riches and honor'; soon after he contacted a Jin government office in the north to get information about him. Not long after, he found his father and thus accompanied him to the south. When Guo Jing and Huang Rong came onboard, he caught a glimpse of them and immediately hid inside the cabin, not daring to come out. He only peeked through a crack in the cabin's door and from there he clearly saw everything that happened on the deck. When the people were eating and drinking he was afraid Ouyang Feng was Guo Jing's

accomplice. He hid in the boat's hold and eavesdropped on the conversations at the banquet table, trying to find out Ouyang Feng's real intentions. Only after Huang Yaoshi left did he finally decide that he had nothing to worry about, so he opened the hatch-cover and came out.

Venerable Lingzhi's fall was truly severe; fortunately, due to his hard training, his head was strong. He'd made a hole in the deck, but his head was not injured and he was only a little bit dizzy. He calmed himself and pushed with both hands on the deck to heave his body up and stood.

The people looked at the round hole in the deck and then looked at each other in amazement. They thought it was funny, but felt it was inappropriate to laugh, so they kept their faces straight, but looked very awkward.

Wanyan Honglie broke the silence by saying, "Son, meet Mr. Ouyang."

Yang Kang immediately knelt in front of Ouyang Feng and kowtowed to him four times. This was a very big honor, surprising everyone. At the Zhao Palace Yang Kang had felt great admiration towards Venerable Lingzhi; but today he had seen Ouyang Feng, Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi, one after another, grab his neck and toss him back and forth like he was a baby. Only then did he realize there was a sky above the sky and there was another man above a man. He recalled the disgrace of being held captive at Cloud Manor on Lake Tai, and of when he was afraid of and lost his nerve to fight Guo Jing and Huang Rong at the Liu ancestral hall in Baoying...all because his skill was inferior to others. Now there was a man with very high skills in front of him and he wanted to take him as his master. After paying Ouyang Feng such respect he turned to Wanyan Honglie and said, "Father, your son wants to take this gentleman as my master."

Wanyan Honglie was delighted, quickly he stepped forward and bowed in respect to Ouyang Feng, saying, "My young child likes to learn martial arts, only he has not yet met a suitable master. If Sir does not refuse this request and is willing to bestow instructions, Little Prince and son will be forever grateful."

The others thought that being the young prince's master was the wish of all of them; who would have thought that Ouyang Feng would simply return the greeting and say, "There has always been a rule in the Old Man's martial arts school that our knowledge will be bestowed on one disciple only and no one else. The Old Man has already taken my nephew as my disciple; I can't take another one. For this I beg the Prince's forgiveness."

Seeing that Ouyang Feng did not grant his request Wanyan Honglie did not press the issue. He ordered his men to prepare more food and wine. Yang Kang, on the other hand, was quite disappointed.

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, "I don't deserve to be the young prince's master, but it will not be difficult for the Old Man to give you some pointers on martial arts. We will talk about it later."

Yang Kang had seen Ouyang Ke's many concubines and they had received instructions in martial arts from him; but because they were not his disciples their skills were nothing extraordinary. Listening to the way Ouyang Feng said it, he was not in the least enthusiastic, but his mouth was obliged to utter some grateful words. He had not realized that Ouyang Feng's skill was not to be compared with his nephew's; receiving one or two instructions on martial arts from an expert of Ouyang Feng's caliber would give him sufficient skill to boost his power and prestige among the heroes of the Wulin world.

Ouyang Feng noticed his expression and realized his intention to give instructions was not very well received; he never raised this matter again.

During the banquet they talked about Huang Yaoshi's arrogance and rudeness; they praised Venerable Lingzhi for fooling him so well. Hou Tonghai said, "That man's martial art's skills are truly high and it turns out that stinky girl is his daughter; no wonder her ways are crafty." While saying that he turned his attention towards Venerable Lingzhi's bald head. After staring for a while he turned his gaze toward Lingzhi's fat neck, and then he used his right arm to grab his own neck. "Hey, hey," he mocked and asked, "Shige [Older Martial Brother], those three used a grabbing skill, what kind of technique was that?"

"Don't talk nonsense!" Sha Tongtian rebuked him.

Venerable Lingzhi could not hold his patience any longer and he stretched out his left hand to grab the three carbuncles on Hou Tonghai's forehead. Hou Tonghai quickly shrank his body and slid under the table. Everybody laughed and cheered.

Hou Tonghai reappeared in his chair and said to Ouyang Feng, "Master Ouyang, your martial arts skill is very high indeed! How about you teach me the skill of grabbing someone's fat neck?" Ouyang Feng smiled but did not answer. Venerable Lingzhi glared at Hou Tonghai.

Hou Tonghai turned his head and asked again, "Shige, that Huang Yaoshi was crying and singing; what was he saying?"

Sha Tongtian glowered at him, not knowing how to answer. "Who cares about the gibbering of a madman?" he said.

Yang Kang explained, "What he sang was a poem written by Cao Zijian of the Three Kingdoms period. Cao Zijian

composed two stanzas of lamentations because of his daughter's death. In the poem he said how some people live until the hair on their heads had turned completely white, while some children died prematurely. He questioned why God was so unfair? He hated the fact that Heaven was so high and without stairs so that he could not ascend to God's throne to cry out his complaints. He finally said that his grief was so deep that the day he would follow her to the grave would not be far away."

The warriors immediately heaped him with praise, and said, "The Young Prince is truly a scholar and highly educated. We are rough men; how would we know?"

Huang Yaoshi's heart was filled with grief and indignation. He pointed his finger to the sky and scolded the heaven, cursed ghosts and blamed divine beings for treating him unjustly, for all his sorrows and unfair fate. He commanded his boat towards the mainland. Once he was ashore his anger flamed again. He looked up to the sky and shouted, "Who killed my Rong'er? Who killed my Rong'er?"

Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "It's that boy surnamed Guo. That's right, it was him. If not for him, why would Rong'er go aboard that boat? But that boy died alongside Rong'er; who should I unleash my anger on?"

As soon as he had this thought, he remembered Guo Jing's masters, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. "Those six are the guiltiest of killing my Rong'er! If they hadn't taught that Guo kid, how would he have met Rong'er? I won't be appeased until I cut off their arms and legs one by one."

As his anger increased, his sorrow decreased somewhat. He arrived at a small town and stopped for some food, while still thinking deeply about how he would pursue the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. "The Six Freaks' martial arts skills are

not high, but their reputations are not low. Perhaps they have something that sets them above everybody else, or perhaps they only use deceit. If I pay a visit to their residence and inquire, chances are I am not going to find them. I must go in the middle of the night and break into their houses. Then I will wipe them and their families clean, young and old alike." Then he took big strides walking north towards Jiaying.

End of Chapter 22.

Chapter 23 - Big Trouble in the Imperial Palace

Translated by Daniel Shultz, Bluebook & Frans Soetomo



While they talked they arrived at the Broken Bridge by the West Lake. Because it was summer what they saw was lotus under the bridge. Huang Rong saw a neat little wine shop by the lakeside. "Let's drink a cup of wine and enjoy the lotus," she said. "Very good," Guo Jing agreed.

Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong, Huang Rong and Guo Jing took a small boat to the west. Guo Jing rowed at the stern, while Huang Rong continuously pestered Zhou Botong with questions about riding sharks on the sea. Zhou Botong devised ways of catching sharks to amuse Huang Rong.

Guo Jing, observing his master's pale complexion, asked "Master, what are you thinking about?" Hong Qigong did not reply as he hoarsely took small breaths again and again. The strike he received from Ouyang Feng had penetrated to the bone. Although the acupoint had already been unsealed, the internal injury had actually worsened. Huang Rong fed him nine 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills'. Although the pain lessened somewhat, his breathing was just as bad as before. The Old Urchin, with complete disregard for the suffering of others, continued to make a ruckus and shouted that they must catch a shark. Huang Rong knew his behavior was inappropriate and tried signaling him with her eyes to be quite and not disturb Hong Qigong.

Zhou Botong, not understanding in the least, simply continued to cause a disturbance. Huang Rong frowned and said, "You want to catch sharks, but you don't have any bait to attract them, so what are you going on about?"

The Old Urchin never acted like a respected senior. When juniors drink and swear in front of him, he's never offended in the least. He suddenly said, "Got it! Brother Guo, I'll hold your hands while you dip the lower half of your body into the sea."

Guo Jing respected his sworn brother and even though he did not know his intentions, he quickly agreed. Huang Rong, just as quickly, called out, "Jing ge ge! Don't listen to him! He wants to use you as bait to catch sharks."

Zhou Botong clapped his hands and shouted happily, "Exactly! When a shark comes, I'll immediately whack it and pull it up! Or you could hold my hands and I'll attract the sharks."

Huang Rong replied, "You two are causing so much trouble on this small boat and if it capsizes, we'll have you to blame!"

Zhou Botong replied, "If the boat capsizes, that will be great! Then we can all play in the sea!"

Huang Rong replied, "And what about our Master? Do you want him to live or not?"

Zhou Botong held his head, at a loss for words. After a short time, he said that it was strange that Hong Qigong should be injured by Ouyang Feng's attack. Huang Rong shouted, "If you talk nonsense again, the three of us will not speak to you for three days and three nights!" Zhou Botong stuck out his tongue but did not dare to say another word. He grabbed an oar to help Guo Jing with the rowing.

Although land appeared to be close by, it was already dusk by the time they finally disembarked. That night the four of them slept on the sandy beach. The next morning, Hong Qigong's illness had worsened considerably and Guo Jing began to cry.

Hong Qigong said with a smile, "Even if I were to live for another hundred years, I'd still have to die in the end. Good child, I only have one wish left. Using this old beggar's last

breath, I would ask that the three of you do something for me.”

Huang Rong replied tearfully, “Master, please tell us.”

Zhou Botong interrupted, “That ‘Old Poison’ is a disgrace. Because of him old Senior is at the point of death. Before he died, my martial brother had to fake his death because of Old Poison. One person had to die twice...isn’t he satisfied? Old Beggar, you go right ahead and die and don’t worry about a thing. I will go and kill him to get revenge for you.”

Hong Qigong replied with a smile, “Avenging a grievance cannot be considered a final wish. What I want is to eat a bowl of minced ‘Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck’ from the Imperial Palace kitchen.”

Which of the three would have thought that his final wish was for food? Huang Rong replied, “Master, that’s easy. Since we’re not far from Lin’an so I’ll go steal several large pots from the Imperial Palace so that you can eat to your heart’s content.”

Zhou Botong interrupted again, “I also want to eat.”

Huang Rong gave him a displeased look and replied, “Do you also understand how to differentiate between good and bad food?”

Hong Qigong said, “The minced ‘Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck’ is hard to come by. Back in the day I hid in the Imperial Palace for three months and only managed to try a tiny bit. Just recalling the flavor is enough to make one drool.”

Zhou Botong said, “I have an idea, We’ll grab the old emperor’s chef and make him prepare it.”

Huang Rong replied, "Old Urchin, that's not a bad idea." Hearing Huang Rong supporting him, Zhou Botong was very pleased with himself.

Hong Qigong, shaking his head in disapproval, replied, "Not a chance. To make flavorful minced 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck', the kitchen implements, charcoal fire, and dishes must form a complete set. If even one is missing, the taste will be off. We still need to go to the Imperial Palace." Seeing that the three still had some misgivings, he said "It will be quite superb and if we go, you will all gain valuable experience."

Guo Jing immediately placed Hong Qigong on his back and set off to the north. Upon reaching a small town, Huang Rong sold some of her jewelry for cash and purchased a small mule cart to allow Hong Qigong to relax and recover from his injury. Eventually they passed the Qiangtang River and arrived at the outskirts of Lin'an Prefecture where they watched a vast misty sunset and heard the intermittent cawing of a crow. By nightfall they still had not reached the city and were forced to seek lodgings for the night. Looking around, they saw only a small village of several households near the riverbank.

Huang Rong spoke out, "This village looks good. We can rest here."

Zhou Botong replied sullenly, "What's so good about it?"

Huang Rong replied, "Take a look...doesn't this scenery sort of look like a painting?"

Zhou Botong replied, "How does it resemble a painting then?" Huang Rong stared blankly, having difficulty coming up with a response. Zhou Botong said, "That painting must be very ugly. Unless it is similar to the 'Old Urchin's' paintings, I'm afraid it must be inferior."

Huang Rong said with a smile, "Heaven has the ability to create a landscape, just like the 'Old Urchin's' random scribbling of a painting."

Zhou Botong, extremely pleased with himself, replied, "Are you certain? If you don't believe it, then I'll make a painting right now and you can ask Heaven to look."

Huang Rong replied, "Of course I believe it, but you've already said that this place is not good enough so don't rest here...but us three will stay."

Zhou Botong replied, "If the three of you won't go on, why on earth would I want to?"

In the midst of this chatter, they arrived at the village. The village center looked very desolate and dilapidated, with only a wine shop banner hanging off a pole at the eastern corner of the village near what sort of looked like the village inn. They arrived in front of the inn and saw two tables under the eaves, on top of which lay an extremely thick layer of dust.

Zhou Botong yelled "Hey!" loudly several times and a young girl of indeterminate age with disheveled hair and clothing came out. She opened her eyes and gave the three a blank, lifeless stare. Huang Rong ordered wine and food, but the girl only shook her head continuously.

Zhou Botong said, "You have neither wine nor food here... what kind of shop are you running?"

The girl shook her head and replied, "I don't know."

Zhou Botong replied, "Ai, you really are a silly girl."

The girl grinned and laughed, saying, "That's right, I'm called Sha Gu [silly girl /aunt]."

The three of them laughed and understood. Huang Rong went to take a look at the interior and the kitchen. She found them dust and cobweb covered along with a few pots and other old things. On a bed was a torn mat. One couldn't help but feel sympathy and sadness. She went back outside and inquired, "Is it just you living here?"

Sha Gu smiled and nodded. Huang Rong asked again, "What about your mother?"

Sha Gu replied, "Dead!" and wiped her hands across her eyes in imitation of somebody grieving.

Huang Rong asked again, "What about your father?"

Sha Gu shook her head, indicating she didn't know. They noticed that her face and hands were filthy and her long fingernails filled with black crud. Who knew how long it had been since she'd washed her face and hands.

Huang Rong said sadly, "Even if she did cook, we wouldn't be able to eat it." She asked, "Do you have any rice?"

Sha Gu smiled and nodded, producing half a jar of unpolished rice. Huang Rong immediately washed the rice and began preparing the meal. Guo Jing went to the west side of the village and bought two fish and a chicken. By the time everything was prepared it was already dark. Huang Rong brought out the food, placed it on one of the tables, and searched for an oil lamp. Sha Gu again shook her head, indicating there was none.

Huang Rong took some firewood and lit a fire in the furnace. Then she tried to find some bowls and chopsticks in the cupboard. She opened the cupboard's door and a foul stench attacked her nose. She held a burning piece of wood and saw there were about seven or eight shabby bowls. Inside and around the bowls were dozens of dead insects of

all kinds. Guo Jing helped her fetch the bowls.

“Wash them thoroughly and then get some small branches to use as chopsticks,” Huang Rong said. Guo Jing mumbled his compliance and took the bowls outside.

Huang Rong reached out to pick up the last bowl and immediately felt a difference. This bowl was cold, colder than a regular porcelain bowl. She tried to pick it up, but the bowl would not budge, as though it was attached to the cupboard. Huang Rong was astonished. She was afraid she might break the bowl, so she did not dare use too much strength. She tried it one more time but the bowl still refused to move. “Could it be that it has been there so long that the dirt made the bowl stick to the cupboard?” she wondered. She took a closer look and saw that the bowl was covered with many layers of rust. It was an iron bowl.

Huang Rong let out a soft laugh and thought, “I have seen rice bowls made of gold, silver and jade, but I have never ever heard of a rice bowl made of iron.” She exerted her strength and tried to lift the bowl up, but still the bowl did not move. She was even more surprised. She thought that with her strength, even if the bowl was nailed to the shelf, the shelf could be cracked. Then she had another thought, “Could it be that the shelf is also made of iron?” She stretched out her middle finger to tap the shelf and heard a metallic sound. The shelf was indeed made of iron.

Her curiosity was piqued and she tried lifting the bowl again but the bowl remained motionless. She tried turning the bowl to the left and did not perceive any movement. She tried turning it to the right and felt movement. She tried turning it harder and the bowl moved. Suddenly she heard a cracking sound and the cupboard slid aside, revealing a dark hole behind it. An even fouler stench came out of the hole, almost making her throw-up.

Huang Rong let out an “Ah!” and quickly leaped to the side. Guo Jing and Zhou Botong heard her cry and immediately came and saw the dark hole.

Huang Rong thought out loud, “Is it possible that this is a illegal wine shop and that Sha Gu is just pretending to be insane?”

She handed her burning branch to Guo Jing and walked over to Sha Gu and tried to grab her hand. Sha Gu waved her hand trying to avoid the grab and counterattacked by sending her palm towards Huang Rong’s shoulder. Even though Huang Rong suspected she did not have good intentions, she never expected that this incoming palm would carry such a powerful technique. She could not help but feel slightly startled. Her left hand formed a hook and her right hand came forward as she launched two strikes in succession.

Ever since she mastered the ‘Changing the Muscle Forging the Bone’ technique [yi jin duan gu bian] from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’, her speed and strength had increased tremendously. With a loud slap Sha Gu cried out as her right arm was hit, but her attack did not slow down. She counterattacked with two stances one after another. After several more stances Huang Rong was really astonished. Sha Gu’s moves were actually the Peach Blossom Island’s basic skill of the ‘Jade-Green Waves Palm technique’ [bi bo zhang fa]. Although it was performed with shallow skills, it was actually the foundation of all Peach Blossom Island’s martial arts. Every disciple had to learn it. Huang Rong intensified her attacks in an attempt to identify Sha Gu’s martial arts school, but Sha Gu dodged and weaved and was able to resist her for six or seven stances.

The situation was similar to when Guo Jing fought Liang Ziweng with only one stance, namely the ‘Proud Dragon

Shows Remorse', but her strength was greatly inferior to Guo Jing's. Moreover, her palm technique was very straightforward and showed not even the simplest variation. It was beyond anyone's expectations that in this remote village there was a illegal wine shop with a poor filthy girl who could fight Huang Rong for more than ten stances.

Zhou Botong found all these things very amusing. He noted that the gust of wind from Huang Rong's palm was swift and fierce. Sha Gu repeatedly cried out, "Aiyo!" while resisting Huang Rong's attack. Zhou Botong shouted, "Hey! Rong'er, don't harm her. Let me fight her." Along the way he heard Hong Qigong and Guo Jing calling her 'Rong'er' and she did not seem to mind, so he thought he did not need to be polite by calling her 'Huang guniang' or 'Huang xiaojie' [both mean Miss Huang].

Guo Jing was afraid Sha Gu had other companions waiting in the dark ready to ambush them, so he stayed closed to Hong Qigong and did not dare to leave him.

Several moves later Sha Gu's left shoulder was hit, which made her left arm go limp and she was unable to move it. If Huang Rong really wanted to injure her, all she had to do was continue her attack, but she showed mercy and called out, "Quickly kneel down and I'll spare your life."

"You kneel down too!" replied Sha Gu as she sent out two palms of the 'Jade-Green Wave Palm' technique towards Huang Rong. However, only the first two stances were executed repeatedly and her technique was clumsy.

This incomplete 'Jade-Green Wave Palm' palm attack lacked internal power but was continuous like waves in water, truly the martial arts style of Peach Blossom Island. Huang Rong's suspicions about Sha Gu's martial arts roots became

stronger. She called out “How did you learn the ‘Jade-Green Wave Palm’? Who is your master?”

Sha Gu responded with a smile “You can’t hit me no more, ha ... ha ...”

Huang Rong raised her left hand, moved her right hand to the side, feigned an attack with her left elbow and leaned her right shoulder forward. These four moves were fake attacks. Huang Rong followed with the fifth move by sending both hands curving inward. This fifth attack was also false. The next move, a kick, was real. Sha Gu was unable to stay upright. She fell to the floor and called out as she was getting up, “You used a trick, that does not count, let’s fight again,”.

Huang Rong did not allow her to stand up. She pounced and pushed her down, tore her clothes and bound her hands behind her back. “My palm technique is clearly better than yours,” she said.

Sha Gu turned around and shouted in dissent, “You tricked me, unacceptable...you tricked me, unacceptable!”

Guo Jing, seeing that Huang Rong was able to control Sha Gu, walked out of the inn and jumped onto the roof. He looked around for any traces of other people but found none. He jumped back down, walked around the building and noticed that this desolate inn was a stand-alone building, a few ‘zhangs’ apart from other houses in the area. There were no other people hiding around it. Now at last he felt relieved.

When he walked inside the inn, he saw Huang Rong holding a dagger in front of Sha Gu’s eyes, threatening her, “Who taught you martial arts? Tell me quickly or else I will kill you”. While saying that she made two stabbing moves with the dagger.

In the light from a candle, Sha Gu's smile could be seen. Looking at her expression, it did not seem like she was brave or mad. It was more a stupid smile, completely oblivious to the danger. It seemed like she was thinking that she and Huang Rong were just playing around. Huang Rong asked her again and Sha Gu laughed and said, "You kill me, I will kill you too!"

Huang Rong's eyebrows rose as she said "This stupid girl is not telling us anything, so we should take a look inside the hidden room. Big Brother Zhou, please take care of Master and keep an eye on this girl. Jing ge ge, let's go in."

Zhou Botong waved his hands and said, "No, I am going in with you."

Huang Rong told him, "I don't want you to come in with me."

Although Zhou Botong was a Senior with a higher level of martial arts, for some reason he did not dare to defy Huang Rong. He could only beg, "Good Miss, next time I won't argue with you."

Huang Rong smiled slightly and nodded her head. Zhou Botong was very happy. He found two pine branches, lit them, and fumigated the dark hidden room for a long time. The fumigated room still emitted a very foul odor. Huang Rong picked up a pine torch and threw it into the room. There was a clatter as the torch hit the far wall and fell to the floor. The room was not very deep at all.

With the light from a torch she looked inside. The room was quiet and there was no trace of people. At that moment Zhou Botong became impatient and snuck past Huang Rong into the room. Huang Rong followed Zhou Botong cautiously. The room was not large. In fact, it was quite

small. Zhou Botong cried out “We were fooled...we were fooled, this is no good!”

Huang Rong then let out an “ah!” sound as she spotted the skeleton of a person lying on the floor. The skeleton faced upward and the clothes had decayed. Two rows of the skeleton’s ribs were broken. There was another skeleton in the east corner of the room. This skeleton lay on top of an iron chest. There was a long sword blade penetrating the skeleton’s ribs and piercing the iron chest’s lid.

Zhou Botong noted that the room was small and dirty and he found those two corpses not that interesting. While Huang Rong carefully examined the two skeletons, Zhou Botong got really impatient and wanted to interrupt her. But he feared that Huang Rong might get angry so he did not dare say anything and behaved quietly. Inside, his mind was going crazy. He asked her, “Rong’er, Good Miss, I can go out now, can't I?”

Huang Rong said “Fine, you can go. Get Jing ge ge for me.”

Zhou Botong ran out happily and said to Guo Jing, “Go in quickly, it’s very interesting in there,” He was afraid Huang Rong might call him back but he’d found a replacement. Guo Jing went in.

Huang Rong raised her torch to show Guo Jing the skeletons and asked, “How do you think these two people died?”

Guo Jing pointed to the skeleton on the iron chest; “Looks like this person died while trying to open the iron chest. He died from sneak attack with one thrust. The other person has two rows of shattered ribs, so he was probably attacked by a palm of great internal strength.”

Huang Rong said, "I think so too, but there are some things I don't quite understand."

Guo Jing replied, "What things?"

"Sha Gu obviously used Peach Blossoming Island's 'Jade-Green Wave Palm' technique. Although she only knew six or seven moves and was not very proficient, her technique was good and correct," Huang Rong said. "The two dead people...I wonder what their connection is to Sha Gu."

Guo Jing responded, "I will ask the girl." Because he was often called 'stupid kid' by others he was not willing to call that girl 'Sha Gu' [stupid / silly aunt].

"I truly think that girl is retarded, so it will be difficult to get any information from her. Perhaps we can investigate what little evidence we have here on our own," Huang Rong suggested. She lifted her torch and slowly examined the skeleton on the chest and noticed a shiny object beside it. She picked it up and looked carefully. It was a gold medallion. In the middle, there is a gate engraved into the gold. On the back of the medallion, there were several engraved characters that read 'By royal decree bestowed on the loyal martial arts master responsible for defending the state, special guard Shi Yanming'.

Huang Rong said, "If this medallion is his, this government officer's rank was not low."

Guo Jing replied, "A high-ranking official died in here...this is strange."

Huang Rong checked the skeleton on the floor again and she noticed something sticking out of the rib area. She used the torch to push on it. The object fell, raising a cloud of dust, revealing a sheet made of iron. She called out in a low shocked voice and picked up the object.

Guo Jing also saw the object in her hand, "Ah!" he exclaimed.

"Do you recognize this?" Huang Rong asked.

"Certainly," Guo Jing replied, "This is the iron 'Eight Trigram' [ba gua] of Village Master Lu of Cloud Manor."

"It is an iron 'ba gua' alright, but it doesn't necessarily belong to Martial Brother Lu," Huang Rong said.

"That's right!" Guo Jing said, "These two men's clothes and flesh have decomposed. They have been here for at least ten years."

Huang Rong was silent for a long time. Suddenly a thought came into her mind. She pulled out the blade stuck in the iron chest's lid, brought it close to the flame and she saw the character 'Qu' engraved on the blade. She could not help blurting, "The one lying on the floor was my older Martial Brother Qu [Qu Shige]."

"Ah!" Guo Jing exclaimed in surprise.

"Martial Brother Lu said that Martial Brother Qu was still alive. Who would have thought that he was already dead in this place ... Jing ge ge, look at his leg bones," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing stooped down and looked, "Both of his legs were broken. Ah, it was your father who broke them," he said.

Huang Rong nodded her head. "He is indeed Qu Lingfeng. My father once said that amongst his disciples, Martial Brother Qu had the strongest martial arts. He was also my father's favorite ..." At this point she suddenly dashed out the room. Guo Jing followed.

Huang Rong quickly went over to Sha Gu and asked, "Your surname is Qu, isn't it?" Sha Gu giggled but did not answer.

Guo Jing gently asked, "Miss, what is your surname?"

"Surname...surname!" Sha Gu said giggling.

The two wanted to ask further, but Zhou Botong called out, "I am starving! I am starving!"

"Alright," Huang Rong said, "We'll need to eat first." She untied Sha Gu and invited her to eat with them. Sha Gu was not bashful about it as she smiled, held out her hands to take a bowl, and ate.

Huang Rong told Hong Qigong everything she'd found in the secret room. Hong Qigong also thought it was peculiar. "It seems like that government officer named Shi killed your Martial Brother Qu. Who would have thought that your Martial Brother Qu, before he breathed his last, threw the blade and killed him."

"Most probably so," Huang Rong concurred. She took the blade and the iron 'ba gua' and showed them to Sha Gu. "Whose are these?" she asked.

Sha Gu's countenance suddenly changed. She leaned her head sideways to think, seemed as though she recalled something, but after a while her expression went blank. She shook her head and took the blade, unwilling to let it go.

"Apparently she has seen this blade before," Huang Rong said. "But it must have been a long time ago and she can't remember anymore."

After they finished eating she took care of Hong Qigong and let him sleep. Then she and Guo Jing went back to the room to take a further look. They thought the key to this mystery must be hidden inside the iron chest, so they removed the

skeleton lying on top of it and opened the lid. It turned out the lid was unlocked and could be opened easily. In the torch light their eyes were dazzled by a chest full of gleaming pearls, jade, and all sorts of treasures and antiques.

Guo Jing only felt surprise, but Huang Rong knew each article was a very rare and precious treasure. Her father's collection was not as extensive as the contents of this chest. She grabbed a handful of pearls and let them roll through her fingers. The pearls made nice clinking sounds as they fell back into the chest and hit other pearls and jades. She sighed, "There must be a history behind all these treasures. If father were here he would be able tell us the origins of each." She took them one by one and explained what they were to Guo Jing. This one was a jade bracelet, this one a rhino skin case, that one was a carnelian cup, that one was an emerald dish, and so on.

Guo Jing grew up on the steppes, and as a result, not only he had never seen these kinds of treasures, he had never even heard of them. He thought, "People spent so much effort to collect these objects. What were they going to do with them?"

While she spoke, Huang Rong continued to grope around in the chest. Her hand touched a piece of hard board and she knew there must be another layer underneath it. She moved the jewelry aside and saw rings attached to the board, so she inserted her little fingers inside the rings and lifted the board up. Beneath it were a bunch of greenish bronze colored antiques. Her father had shown her illustrations of some antique bronze ware. She recognized them to be an imperial culture tripod [long wen ding], an article from the Shang Dynasty (16th to 11th century BC) [shang yi], a plate from Zhou Dynasty (1027BC) [zhou pan], another article from Zhou Dynasty [zhou dun], tableware

from Zhou Dynasty [zhou ju lei] and so on. In the end she had to admit she did not know much detail about the articles. If the pearls and jades were considered treasures worth a fortune, then these bronze antiques were priceless.

The more Huang Rong looked at them, the more she marveled. She lifted another board beneath the antiques and discovered rolls and rolls of paintings. She asked for Guo Jing's help and together they unrolled the paintings one by one. She was shocked! The first painting was Wu Daozi's 'Send off a child heavenward' [song zi tian wang tu]. The next painting was Han Ganhua's 'Herding horses' [mu ma tu] and the other was the Southern Tang Dynasty's Li Houzhu's 'Crossing the forest spring' [lin quan du zhui ren wu]. Altogether there were more than twenty scrolls and every single one of them had originated from the brush of a famous artist. Several scrolls were calligraphy and paintings by Huizong, while several others were by contemporary artists. Each one of them was of the most exquisite and highest quality. Among them were examples of the imperial court's artist Liang Kai's unique two-rolls splashing ink characters, with very vivid images. Some of it reminded her of Zhou Botong.

Huang Rong had only looked at about half of them but did not feel like continuing, so she returned everything to the chest, closed the lid and sat on top of it, hugging her knees. She thought, "Father has amassed all kinds of treasures during his life, but the value of his collection might only be one tenth of the contents of this chest. How did Martial Brother Qu have the ability to obtain so many rare and priceless treasures?" No matter how hard she racked her brain she could not think of a good explanation.

When Huang Rong was thinking hard, Guo Jing never dared disturb her train of thought. He stayed quiet until he heard Zhou Botong calling from outside, "Hey! Get out of there

quickly! We need to visit the old emperor's house for some minced 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck'!"

"Tonight?" Guo Jing asked.

Hong Qigong replied, "The sooner the better. I am afraid I can't hold on much longer."

"Master, don't listen to the Old Urchin speaking a lot of nonsense," Huang Rong said, "We can't go tonight. We will enter the city gate tomorrow in the early morning. If the Old Urchin gets anymore weird ideas, we won't let him come to the palace with us."

"Humph!" Zhou Botong snorted, "Once again I am to blame." He sulked and refused to talk.

That night the four slept on the straw beds laid-out on the floor. Early the next morning Huang Rong and Guo Jing prepared some breakfast and the four, plus Sha Gu, ate together. Huang Rong turned the iron bowl, closed the cabinet wall and put all chipped bowls and broken utensils back inside the cabinet. Sha Gu was indifferent to what was going on around her as she held the handle of the sword in her hand and played with it.

Huang Rong took a small ingot of silver [yuan bao] from her pocket and gave it to her. Sha Gu took it and casually tossed in on the table. "If you are hungry you can use it to buy rice and meat," Huang Rong said. It was hard to say if Sha Gu understood, since she only giggled foolishly.

Huang Rong felt sadness creeping into her heart knowing that this girl must have some relationship with Qu Lingfeng. If she wasn't a member of his family, then she must be his disciple. Her six or seven stances of 'Jade-Green Waves Palm technique' [bi bo zhang fa] definitely came from Qu Lingfeng, even though she had only roughly learned it.

What Huang Rong did not know was whether she had been retarded since birth, or did she have a horrifying experience which shocked and damaged her mind. She wanted to find more information about her in the village, but Zhou Botong kept urging them to move onward. Therefore the four, with their cart, went straight through and entered the city of Lin'an.

Lin'an was, at this time, the world's most bustling city. When the Song government moved south, it was established as the new capital. All kinds of people converged on the city and it continued to flourish.

The four entered the city via the east gate and went straight to the 'Beautiful Portal Gate' [li cheng men] of the Imperial Palace. Hong Qigong remained inside the cart while Zhou Botong and the others looked around. They saw golden nails in the scarlet doors, painted beams, engraved railings and copper tiles covering the roof. There were sculptures of flying dragons and phoenixes, all magnificent in their splendor dazzling their eyes.

"Interesting!" Zhou Botong called out loudly as he took a step to enter.

The palace guards stationed in front of the gate had noticed these three people, one old and two young, with a mule cart making noises in front of the Imperial Palace gate. Four guards with axes in their hands had already stepped forward with menacing looks on their faces.

Zhou Botong loved creating a disturbance very much. Watching the guards with their distinctive armor, tall and powerfully built, he was itching to have an interesting fight.

"Go quickly!" Huang Rong called out.

Zhou Botong stared at her. "What are you afraid of? Do you think these babies can eat the Old Urchin?" he asked.

Huang Rong quickly said, "Jing ge ge, let's go and play someplace else. Since the Old Urchin is not listening, we'll just ignore him." She flicked her whip and the cart sped along to the west. Guo Jing followed behind. Zhou Botong was afraid he would get left behind while they went someplace more interesting, so he ignored the guards and ran to catch up. The guards thought they were simple villagers looking around the city, so they laughed loudly and did not pursue them. Huang Rong drove the cart to a deserted place. Seeing that nobody chased them, they stopped.

"Why didn't we break into the palace? Could those wine bags and rice sacks [the guards] stop us?" Zhou Botong asked.

"Certainly breaking in is not difficult, but let me ask you... are we here to fight or to go to the kitchen and steal some food?" Huang Rong said, "If you break in, the palace will be in chaos. Do you think the chef will quietly make some 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck' for Master to eat?"

"Fighting and capturing people is the guards' business and it has nothing to do with the chef," Zhou Botong reasoned. Actually, what he said did make some sense and Huang Rong was momentarily at a loss, but she was not willing to yield to him, so she argued, "The imperial chef can both prepare food and capture people."

Zhou Botong stared at her but did not know how to respond. A long while later he conceded, "Fine, let's just consider I was wrong."

"What do you mean 'consider'? You were wrong right from the start," Huang Rong said.

"Fine, fine," Zhou Botong said, "Don't consider anything... don't consider anything." Turning his head to Guo Jing he said, "Brother, all the women in the world are very ferocious. That's why the Old Urchin said don't take a wife."

Huang Rong laughed, "Jing ge ge is a good man, so other women won't be ferocious towards him."

"Are you saying I am not a good man?" Zhou Botong asked.

Huang Rong smiled, "Are you? You don't want to take a wife and other people don't like the way you handle things. You only create trouble and disturbances. Tell me, why don't you want to take a wife?"

Zhou Botong leaned his head to one side to think, unable to answer. His face turned red, and then pale and it seemed like his mind was full of anxiety. Huang Rong had very seldom seen him this serious, and was astonished.

"Let's find an inn to stay in. We'll come back to the palace tonight," Guo Jing said.

"That's a good idea!" Huang Rong agreed, "Master, as soon as we find an inn, I am going to prepare a couple of simple dishes as your appetizers and we will have a feast later on tonight." Hong Qigong was delighted and he cheered repeatedly.

The four stayed at the Jin Hua inn on the street west of the Imperial Palace. True to her word, Huang Rong prepared three dishes and a soup for Hong Qigong. The aroma spread around the inn causing the guests to ask the innkeeper which famous chef had cooked this fine cuisine.

Zhou Botong was still mad at Huang Rong's words hinting that he could not find a wife, so he sulked and refused to

eat. The three of them knew his childish behavior. They only laughed and did not pay any attention to him.

After eating, Hong Qigong lay down to rest. Guo Jing asked Zhou Botong to go out and play, but he was still angry and ignored Guo Jing. Huang Rong chuckled and said, "Then you'd better look after my Master nicely and when I return, I will buy some fun things for you to play with."

"You are not lying?" Zhou Botong asked, delighted.

Huang Rong smiled, "'When a word has already left the mouth, it is difficult for four horses to chase it' [yi yan ji chu, si ma nan zhui]."

During the spring when Huang Rong left home to go north, she visited Lin'an for one day, but that city was too close to Peach Blossom Island and she was afraid her father might find her. She did not dare to stay too long so her visit was a quick one. This time the days were long and nothing burdened her mind. Hand in hand with Guo Jing they went to the West Lake (xi hu).

She noticed Guo Jing's countenance showed anxiety and knew he worried about their master's injury. "Master said there is one person in this world who can heal his injury," Huang Rong said. "But he would not allow me to ask. From the way he talked, it must be that Emperor Duan, but we don't know where he is. We must find a way to ask him to heal Master."

"That'll be great," Guo Jing said happily. "Rong'er, do you think we can ask him?"

Huang Rong replied, "I am still thinking of how to ask. During our meal today I tried to fish some information from Master. He was just about to say something when he realized it and stopped talking immediately. I must get this

information from him eventually.” Guo Jing knew her abilities very well so he was greatly relieved.

They were still talking as they arrived at the Broken Bridge by the lakeside. That ‘duan qiao can xue’ [the broken bridge where people can see the remnants of the snow] was one of the West Lake’s more famous sights, but it was summer so all they saw were the lotus under the bridge. Huang Rong saw a neat little wine shop by the lakeside. “Let’s drink a cup of wine while we enjoy the lotus,” she said.

“Very good,” Guo Jing agreed. The two went in and sat down. The shopkeeper delivered some wine and dishes of meat which tasted very good. They drank wine while enjoying the scenery and were in a good mood.

Huang Rong saw a screen by the eastern window, covered with jade-green muslin. Obviously the shop owner regarded the screen as a very precious object. Her curiosity was piqued, so she went over to take a closer look. It turned out that beneath the muslin there was a poem inscribed on the screen. It was the ‘Wind Entering the Pine’ [feng ru song], which read,

‘Spring time is always spent wasting money, drinking daily by the lakeside. Riding a buckskin horse along the road toward the West Lake, proudly passing in front of a tavern. Singing and dancing amidst the sweet fragrance of red apricots, swinging in the shadow of green willows. Warm winds embraced ten ‘li’ of beautiful women and sky, crushed flowers adorned the sides of their temples. Picturesque boats carrying incense going back and forth are like smoke covering the water. Comeback tomorrow supporting the remnants of drunkenness, seeking the fancy golden inlay on the pathway.’

Huang Rong said, “This poem is a good one.”

Guo Jing asked her to explain the meaning of the poem. The more he listened, the more upset he became and he said, "This is the capital of the Great Song Dynasty and these government officials spend their days drinking wine and enjoying flowers. Don't they care or even pay attention to the affairs of the country?"

Huang Rong replied, "Exactly, these people talk shamelessly!"

Suddenly someone behind them said, "Humph! What do you two know enough about to talk such nonsense?"

They turned around and saw a man dressed as a scholar, roughly forty years of age, sneering at them. Guo Jing greeted the scholar by cupping his hands and said, "Junior does not understand and would like to ask Mister for advice."

The man replied, "This is the most splendid work of Yu Guobao in the year of Chun Xi. That year the retired Emperor Gaozong came to drink wine, saw the work and praised it greatly. That very same day the emperor granted Yu Guobao a government position. This is a scholar's lifelong dream, and the two of you ridicule absurdly it!"

"So it is because the Emperor saw this screen that the innkeeper covers it with jade-green muslin?" Huang Rong asked.

The man laughed coldly and said, "How can it be so? Look at the sentence 'Comeback tomorrow supporting the remnants of drunkenness' on the screen. Did you notice that this one sentence has two revised characters?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing examined it more closely and found the character 'fu' [carrying or supporting somebody]

was formerly 'xie' [bringing/carrying along], and the character 'zui' [drunkenness] was actually 'jiu' [wine].

The man then said, "Yu Guobao originally intended to write 'Comeback tomorrow bringing the remnants of the wine'." The retired Emperor smiled and said, 'Although this phrase is good, it is rather simple-minded.' Hence he took a brush to revise those two characters. That was truly heaven sent wisdom and farsightedness, like transforming iron into gold." He swayed his head and sighed as if he was enjoying it tremendously.

Guo Jing listened and became angry. He yelled loudly, "This emperor Gaozong put Qin Gui in an important position in order to harm and kill Master Yue [General Yue Fei]!" His leg flew out and kicked the screen, smashing it. He reached backwards to catch the scholar and pull him forward. With a splashing sound wine spilled everywhere as that man, head up feet down, sank into the wine vat.

Huang Rong loudly applauded and laughed, "I too will make correction to those two sentences. They are, 'Today standing upright spoiling the wine, the gentleman sank into the vat drunk.'"

As the scholar's head emerged from the wine jar with wine dripping from it, he said, "The oblique tone of 'drunk' does not rhyme well."

Huang Rong replied, "'Wind entering the pine' does not rhyme well. My poem 'Man entering the jar' rhymes better!" She extended her hand and firmly pressed his head down inside the wine jar, and then flipped the table over, causing an outburst. The customers and the wine shop keeper scrambled out of the shop. Guo Jing and Huang Rong stood up and pounded and smashed all the wine vats, pots and cauldrons. Finally, using the 'Eighteen-Dragon

Subduing Palms', Guo Jing exerted all his strength to strike the main support pillar of the inn, causing the roof to collapse. In a brief moment, a large restaurant was transformed into a pile of wood that hardly resembled anything.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong laughed loudly. Holding each other's hands, they walked north. Nobody knew where this mad young man and young woman came from but who dared pursue them?

Guo Jing laughed, "That was such a good trashing that all the bad air in my chest went away completely."

Huang Rong replied happily, "Whenever we see anything unsightly, we will smash it."

Guo Jing replied, "Good!"

Since leaving Peach Blossom Island, the two had gone through many unfavorable situations. Although they were reunited, their Master had suffered a serious and difficult to heal injury and this made their hearts heavy with worry. At this time they unexpectedly had the chance to break up a restaurant and it had helped to vent their frustrations. The couple leisurely walked along the lake-shore and saw poems everywhere...on rocks, on trees, on pavilions and on the walls. They were written either by travelers bidding their farewells, or young men expressing their love.

Guo Jing did not understand the poems, but when he saw the words 'wind', 'flower', 'snow' and 'moon' he sighed and said, "Even if we had a thousand pairs of fists, we can't break them all. Rong'er, you have learned literature and art...what are all these for?"

Huang Rong smiled. "There were some good ones among these poems," she said.

Guo Jing shook his head. "I still think fists and kicks are more useful," he said.

While walking and talking they reached the 'Flew in Peak' [fei lai feng]. There was a pavilion built on that peak. Above the gateway there were three characters 'Jade-Green Small Pavilion' [cui wei ting] in Han Shizong's handwriting. Guo Jing knew Han Shizong's reputation. Upon seeing the handwriting of the general who resisted the Jin army he was delighted. He quickly walked into the pavilion. There was a stone monument inside, with a poem inscribed on it reading:

'With the passing years dust has settled on the battle uniforms, especially seeking some fragrant jade-green wine, not enough to only see good mountains and good rivers, taking advantage of the bright moon light the return of horse hoofs.'

This seemed to be the handwriting of Han Shizhong as well.

"This is a good poem," Guo Jing praised. Actually, he did not know a good poem from a bad one, but he believed this poem was Han Shizhong's. It also contained words like 'battle uniforms' [zheng yi] and 'horse hoofs' [ma ti], so it must be good.

Huang Rong said, "That was Master Yue, Yue Fei's work."

Guo Jing was surprised and asked, "How do you know?"

Huang Rong replied, "I listened to father tell the story. In the winter of the eleventh year of Shaoxing, Master Yue died at the hands of Qin Gui. In the spring of the following year, in remembrance of him, Han Shizhong built this pavilion and engraved this poem as a memorial. Unfortunately, Qin Gui was very influential during that period, so he could not openly commemorate Master Yue."

Remembering the previous dynasty's General, Guo Jing reached out his hand and ran his finger along the inscriptions in the stone. While he was lost in thought Huang Rong suddenly pulled his sleeve and jumped towards the bushes behind the pavilion and pushed his head down. As they were crouching, they heard the footsteps of people entering the pavilion. A moment later they heard someone say, "Han Shizhong was a hero. His lady, Liang Hongyu, although a former prostitute, helped her husband achieve victory by beating drums during the battle. She could be considered a heroine."

Guo Jing thought this voice was somewhat familiar but could not remember who it was. Again another man said, "Yue Fei and Han Shizhong were heroes, but the emperor wanted them dead and stripped them of their military leadership. Both Han and Yue had to follow orders. Obviously the emperor held the power that even heroes like them could not defy."

Guo Jing listened to the accent and recognized that this person was Yang Kang. Guo Jing was startled and wondered, "What is Yang Kang doing here?" Still surprised, another broken cymbal-like voice confounded him even more. It was the Western Poison Ouyang Feng. He heard Ouyang Feng say, "That's correct. With muddle-headed ruler reigning, just like the previous dynasty, it doesn't matter how great a hero is...he is useless."

The first man then said, "But if a wise ruler is on the throne, a great hero like Mr. Ouyang could help him greatly to achieve his aspirations."

Listening to those two speak, Guo Jing suddenly recognized that the other one was the enemy who'd killed his father, the Sixth Prince of the Great Jin, Wanyan Honglie. Even though he had seen Wanyan Honglie's face before, he'd not

often heard his voice and was therefore unable to recognize it for a moment.

The three talked and laughed and then they left. Guo Jing waited until they had gone far enough and then asked no one in particular, "What are they doing in Lin'an? How come Brother Kang is with them?"

"Humph," Huang Rong snorted, "I realized earlier that this brother of yours is not a good person. You still say that he is the descendant of a hero. You have been deceived. Now you understand his real intentions. If he is really a good man, how could he accompany those two scoundrels?"

Guo Jing was very much bewildered, "I don't understand," he said. Thereupon Huang Rong told him everything she'd heard in the Fragrant Snow Hall of the Zhao Palace. She said, "Wanyan Honglie gathered Peng Lianhu and the other fellows to help with his plan to steal Master Yue's Wumu's Legacy. Now they suddenly arrive here. Perhaps this Legacy is in Lin'an. If they succeed, then our Great Song's common people will suffer great calamities."

Guo Jing shivered with fear, "We simply cannot let them succeed," he said.

Huang Rong said, "The problem is that the Western Poison is traveling with them."

"Are you afraid?" Guo Jing asked.

"Aren't you?" Huang Rong asked back.

Guo Jing replied, "Naturally I am frightened of the Western Poison, but this is not a small matter. We ... even if we are afraid, we cannot simply overlook it."

Huang Rong smiled, "If you must take care of it, then naturally I will follow you."

“Very well,” Guo Jing said, “Let’s go after them.”

Leaving the pavilion they could not see any trace of Wanyan Honglie’s group and were forced to look randomly around the city. Lin’an was a big city, so how could they find what they were looking for in a short period of time? After walking for a long time, the sky turned dark as the two arrived in front of the ‘Martial Arts Garden’ [wu lin yuan] at Zhong Wazi. Huang Rong saw a shop with a lot of masks with vividly drawn features hanging in its entrance. She was amused and remembered her promise to buy something fun for Zhou Botong. She spent five silver coins and bought ‘the king of ghosts’ [zhong kui], ‘the judge of hell’ [pan guan], ‘kitchen god’ [zao jun], ‘earth god’ [tu di], ‘soldier of heaven’ [shen bing] and other ghosts and supernatural beings, more than a dozen masks in all.

While the shopkeeper was wrapping the masks with paper, there came the sweet fragrance of food and wine from a restaurant next door. The two had been walking for a long time and were starving. “What restaurant is that?” Huang Rong asked.

The shopkeeper smiled and said, “So it turns out you two are new to the capital. No wonder you don’t know. The ‘Three-Primary Tavern’ [san yuan lou] is very well-known in our Lin’an. The wine, the food, and the utensils are number one under heaven. You two cannot not leave without trying it.”

Huang Rong’s heart was stirred by what he said. She took the masks and then pulled Guo Jing to the front of ‘Three-Primary Tavern’. They could see that the building was decorated with colorful paint and had a row of red and green fencing. Beneath the second floor roof hung flower-patterned lanterns. The interior was lined with luxurious

wood inlay and the pavilion looked elegant and unconventional. It was truly an exquisite tavern.

As the two walked in they were welcomed by a waiter with a smiling face and were led through a corridor to a chamber already set with bowls and chopsticks. Huang Rong immediately placed an order and the waiter left to prepare the food.

In the candlelight Guo Jing saw more than a dozen courtesans with heavy makeup sitting in a row on a nearby porch. He wondered who they were and was about to ask when, from the chamber next door, he suddenly heard Wanyan Honglie's voice call out, "That's fine! Send somebody to sing and join us drinking wine."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other and thought, "Just like the saying goes, 'wearing out iron shoes to look around, finding the result without any effort.'"

A summons was heard and a woman gracefully stood up and walked towards the chamber next door with a pair of ivory planks in her hands. A short moment later the woman started to sing. Huang Rong tilted her head to listen to her song:

"The southeast appears victorious, the rivers and lakes (Jianghu) convene, Qiantang River always flourishes from the ancient times. The bridge looks like a painting of smoking willow; the wind blows the wine shop sign and the jade-green curtain, amidst a hundred thousand people. Cloudy trees wind around the sandy dike, angry waves roll up like frosty snow, the sky and the moat around the city are boundless. Rows of pearls line up in the market, the homes compete with each other to show their extravagance. The clear water lake is surrounded by three autumn cassia buds and ten 'li of lotuses. Along the clear

alleys the water chestnut songs floating through the night, enticing old gentlemen to the lotus-like dolls. A thousand riders gather around the ivory tower, intoxicated by the sound of flute and drum, enjoying the rosy-cloud smoke. A particular day to paint fine scenery, as the phoenix returns to the pond of praise.”

Guo Jing did not understand the sing-song sound of her singing, but he did enjoy the gentle tapping of her ivory planks and the melodious sound of the flute.

As the song finished, both Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang proclaimed their praise. “You sing very well!”

The woman repeatedly expressed her gratitude and jubilantly went out with the musicians while wishing Wanyan Honglie much enjoyment.

Wanyan Honglie said, “Son, do you know that this Liu Yong [Eternal Willow] poem, ‘Gazing at the Ocean Tides’ [wang hai chao], has a close relationship with our Great Jin?”

“Your child does not know,” Yang Kang replied. “Would Papa [Die] please explain?”

Hearing him calling Wanyan Honglie ‘Papa’ in an affectionate tone, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other. Guo Jing was angry and broken hearted. He wished he could go over, grab him, and ask for an explanation.

He heard Wanyan Honglie reply, “During the prosperous years of our Great Jin, the Jin Lord Liang saw this poem by Liu Yong, which praises the beauty of the West Lake’s scenery. Thereupon he sent an emissary south and at the same time dispatched a famous painter to paint the scenery around the City of Lin’an. The painter inserted the Jin Lord’s image in the painting, sitting on horseback on the peak of Wu Shan [Wu Mountain]. The Jin Lord wrote this

poem on the painting: "Ten thousands of li riding on a chariot, how can there be another border to Jiangnan? Dispatching soldiers by the millions to the West Lake, on a horse's back to stand on Wu Shan's first peak!"

"What a grand and heroic spirit!" Yang Kang praised.

Guo Jing was so angry hearing him that he clenched his fist so hard, his knuckles made cracking sounds.

Wanyan Honglie sighed. "Jin Lord Liang's desire to dispatch soldiers to the south and to stand on Wu Shan on horseback did not come true, but his heroic spirit to cross the river was inherited by us, his descendants. Once he inscribed this poem on a folding fan: 'With a great fan in the hand, bringing a cool breeze over the entire world.' That's the kind of ambition he had!"

Yang Kang repeated that poem. "With a great fan in the hand, bringing a cool breeze over the entire world." He sounded like he was really impressed by it.

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "Someday the Prince's dream of having great authority and standing on Wu Shan will come true."

Wanyan Honglie quietly said, "I do hope Sir's words will come true. There are too many ears and eyes around here...let's just drink some wine." So the three people changed the topic of their conversation immediately and instead talked about the scenery, what they'd seen and heard about local conditions and social customs.

Huang Rong whispered into Guo Jing's ear, "They are having a good time drinking wine and I don't want them to have a good time." The two slipped away from their chamber and went to the backyard. Huang Rong took out her flint and ignited the firewood in a shed and spread the

fire around. In a short moment flames arose and people shouted in confusion, "Fire!" Then they heard copper gongs being struck noisily.

"Quick...we must go to the front or we'll lose track of them again," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing was filled with hatred. "Tonight I must kill that traitor Wanyan Honglie!" he said.

Huang Rong said, "First we must take Master to the palace to eat. Afterwards we will entreat the Old Urchin to face the Western Poison. Only then can we deal with the other two traitors."

"That's right," Guo Jing said.

Amidst the commotion, the two walked to the front of the restaurant just as Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang emerged from the building. Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed them at a distance through streets and alleys towards the west market. They entered the Guan Gai Inn. The two waited outside the inn for a long time without seeing Wanyan Honglie or the others coming back out. They concluded that they must be staying here. "Let's return to our inn, fetch the Old Urchin, and come back here to deal with them," Huang Rong said. They went back to the Jin Hua Inn immediately.

Approaching the inn they heard Zhou Botong shouting. Guo Jing was frightened because he thought his Master's injury was getting worse. He rushed forward anxiously only to see Zhou Botong squatting on the ground squabbling with six or seven boys. As it turned out, he was gambling with these kids in front of the inn's gate and he'd lost. He argued with the kids, and the kids argued back, hence the noise.

With Huang Rong's return he was afraid she would scold him, so he turned around and went back into the inn. Huang Rong smiled and brought out the masks. Zhou Botong was delighted and squealed again and again. He put on a mask and become the 'Judge of Hell', and then became a little demon.

Huang Rong expressed their desire to take him back to help them fight the Western Poison. Zhou Botong readily agreed. "Don't worry," he said, "My two hands can use two different fist techniques to fight him."

Huang Rong recalled the time on Peach Blossom Island when Zhou Botong was afraid he might involuntarily use the martial arts from the 'Nine Yin Manual'. He tied his own hands and as a result was injured by her father. "The Western Poison is very bad," she said, "You can't be considered disobeying your martial brother's death wish if you injure him with the martial arts from the manual."

Zhou Botong stared hard at her. "No, I can't do it" he said. "I have trained hard and I don't need to use the techniques from the manual."

By this time Hong Qigong's heart was already inside the Imperial Palace's kitchen. He had waited until the second hour of this night with great difficulty. Guo Jing carried Hong Qigong on his back and the four walked on the roofs towards the Imperial Palace. The palace was taller than the other buildings and its roof glittered with gold inlay. It was very easy to identify. Before long, very quietly and without making any noises, the four leaped over the palace's wall.

The security inside the palace was tight and guards patrolled everywhere. But with the level of lightness kungfu Zhou, Guo and Huang possessed, how could they be caught by the guards? Hong Qigong knew where the kitchen was

and in a low voice he explained the way to it. In a few moments they had arrived at the imperial kitchen, located behind the 'Six Ministry Hill' [liu bu shan]. The kitchen was to the east of 'Fine Bright Hall' [jia ming dian], where the imperial meals were being prepared. These places were adjacent to the imperial sleeping chamber and the imperial personal office. All were closely guarded with alarm gongs everywhere. By this time the emperor had already gone to bed and the imperial kitchen staff had been dismissed. The four people arrived at the well-lit kitchen where several young court eunuchs slumbered inside.

Guo Jing helped Hong Qigong sit on a beam while Huang Rong and Zhou Botong looked for already cooked meals in the kitchen cabinets. Very soon the four began to eat.

Zhou Botong shook his head, "Old Beggar, the food here can't be compared to Rong'er's culinary skills. I don't understand why you so earnestly desired to come here."

Hong Qigong replied, "I wanted to eat the minced 'Five-Treasures Mandarin Duck'. I don't know where the chef lives...but tomorrow we will catch him. Then we'll force him to prepare something more to your taste."

"I can't believe his culinary skill is superior to Rong'er's," Zhou Botong said.

Huang Rong smiled. She knew he wanted to thank her for the masks, which was why he praised her repeatedly.

"I want to stay here and wait for the chef," Hong Qigong said, "Since you are bored, why don't you and Jing'er go out of the palace and let Rong'er stay with me. Tomorrow night you can come back."

Zhou Botong put on the 'City God' mask and laughed. "No," he said, "I want to stay here with you. Tomorrow I am going

to wear this mask to scare the old emperor. Brother Guo, Rong'er, you keep your eyes on the Old Poison. Don't let him steal Yue Fei's legacy."

"What the Old Urchin said was very reasonable," Hong Qigong said. "Go quickly and be careful." The two gave their promise.

"Don't fight the Old Poison tonight. Wait for me tomorrow," Zhou Botong said.

"We can't beat him so naturally we won't fight," Huang Rong said. She, along with Guo Jing, slipped away from the imperial kitchen with the intention of going back to the Guan Gai Inn to observe Wanyan Honglie and the others' activities.

They tiptoed through two halls in the dark. Suddenly they felt a cool breeze and faintly heard the sound of water. In the stillness of the night they could also smell a faint delicate fragrance from deep in the palace courtyard. Unexpectedly they'd come across a wooded hill placed inside the palace.

Huang Rong sniffed and knew there must be a flower garden nearby. She thought there must be many wonderful flowers and unusual plants in the Imperial Palace garden. Since she was there, she certainly could not pass up this rare opportunity to take a look. So she tugged Guo Jing's hand and followed the flowery fragrance, looking for the garden.

Gradually the sound of water grew louder. The two walked on flower-lined paths and saw pine and bamboo trees blocking the deep blue sky above along with beautiful hills quietly standing in the background. Huang Rong was deeply impressed with this place. Even though the

landscaping was inferior to that of Peach Blossom Island, the flowers and trees were exquisitely beautiful.

They walked several zhangs further and saw a streak of water appearing like a silver waterfall coming out from the side of a hill. The water ran down to a pond, and in turn, a stream of water came out of the pond so that it would not overflow. There were countless red lotuses strewn across the surface of the pond. Directly in front of the pond was a hall entrance dense with flowers. Just above the entrance were written the three characters 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' [cui han tang].

Huang Rong walked to the front of the hall. Below the porch she saw some stairs leading upwards, surrounded by many kinds of flowers: 'jasmine' [mo li], 'fragrant vegetable' [su xin], 'musk deer fragrant rattan' [she xiang teng], 'vermillion hibiscus' [shu jin], 'jade cassia' [yu gui], and 'red banana' [hong jiao]. Each was the kind of fragrant plants that bloom in summer. Towards the back of the hall, orchids and other scented plants hung. Sweet smelling incense burned, filling the hall and assailing their nostrils.

On a table inside the hall were several bowls of lotus root, sweet melon, loquat, and many kinds of wild fruits from the forest. Several round fans were strewn about on the chairs. It seemed that this was the hall where the emperor enjoyed the cool evening breeze before going to bed.

Guo Jing sighed. "The emperor really knows how to enjoy life," he said.

Huang Rong laughed. "Now you can be one," she said, pulling Guo Jing along to sit on a couch. She offered him the bowl of fruits and knelt down. "Long live master. Please enjoy some fresh fruits," she said.

Guo Jing smiled and picked up a loquat. "Please rise," he said.

Huang Rong laughed, "Emperors never says 'please'. That is too polite," she said.

As they talked and laughed in low voices they suddenly heard someone shout in the distance, "Who's there?" They were startled. Leaping out of the hall they hid behind a fake hill. They heard heavy footsteps as two men came shouting loudly. Guo Jing and Huang Rong listened to these people and knew their martial arts skills were low. They was nothing to worry about. The guards brandished their sabers while rushing towards the front of the hall. They looked around but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"You saw a ghost," one guard said, laughing.

The other one was also laughing. "I am always seeing things these past few days," he said. They walked away, still talking and laughing.

Huang Rong was inwardly amused. She tugged Guo Jing's hand to leave, but suddenly heard those two guards grunt...'hey...hey'. Although the noise was deep and muffled, they knew it was the sound of exhaling because their acupoints were being sealed. Guo Jing and Huang Rong both thought, "Did Big Brother Zhou get bored and came out to play?"

They heard someone speak in a low voice, "According to the Imperial Palace map, the building next to the waterfall is the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall'. We are going there." The voice belonged to Wanyan Honglie.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very shocked. They grabbed each other's hands and hid even deeper behind the fake hill, not daring to make a sound. In the dim

glimmering starlight they saw shadows moving in front of the hall. They vaguely recognized that, besides Wanyan Honglie, there was Ouyang Feng, Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian, the Venerable Lingzhi, Liang Ziweng and Hou Tonghai.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were puzzled. "What are these people doing in the Imperial Palace?" they thought. "Could it be they also want to steal some food from the imperial kitchen?"

They heard Wanyan Honglie speak again, still in low voice. "The Little Prince has carefully examined the secret letter Yue Fei left behind and also the documents from the dynasties two emperors, Gaozong and Xiaozong. I concluded that the Wumu Legacy is hidden fifteen steps east of the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall'."

Everyone's eyes automatically followed the direction of his hand. Fifteen steps east of the hall was the waterfall and nothing else. Wanyan Honglie said, "How the book could be hidden in the waterfall? The Little Prince found hard to understand, but according to the documents, this is the correct place."

Sha Tongtian was known as the 'Dragon King of the Demonic Group' [gui men long wang] and his water skills were excellent. "I'll go and take a look at the waterfall," he said. Without waiting, he stepped forward and jumped into the water. Not long afterward he reemerged. Everybody rushed forward to meet him, only to hear him say, "The Prince reasoned correctly. Behind the waterfall there is a cave with a closed iron gate."

Wanyan Honglie was ecstatic. "The Wumu Legacy must be inside the cave," he said. "I am afraid I'll have to

inconvenience you gentlemen and have you to open the iron gate.”

Everybody unsheathed their prized sabers and sharp blades, ready to comply with his request and each wanting to render meritorious service. They raced to the waterfall. Ouyang Feng laughed coldly and stayed at Wanyan Honglie’s side. He felt his reputation was different, so he was not willing to fetch the book with the others.

Sha Tongtian was the first to duck under the flowing water. Suddenly a gust of wind assaulted his face. He’d just come in to take a look and saw nothing. How could he guess an enemy would suddenly attack him? He hurriedly avoided the attack, but his left wrist was suddenly grabbed by the enemy and he was pushed hard. Against his wish, his body flew out and hit Liang Ziweng hard. Luckily both men’s martial arts skills were quite high and they were not injured.

Everyone was taken by surprise. In the meantime, Sha Tongtian entered the waterfall again...but this time he was ready. He raised both palms in front of his face and, sure enough, from behind the waterfall a fist came flying out. He used his left hand to parry while launching a counterattack with his right. During all this, he had not seen clearly who the enemy was.

Liang Ziweng had also jumped into the waterfall. A stick suddenly came sweeping close to the ground. Liang Ziweng tried to evade it, but he was too late. The lower part of his leg was hit squarely and he could not maintain his balance and fell backwards. As his chest was being hit by the waterfall, his leg was again hit by the stick. Against his will, his body fell outside the waterfall.

By this time Sha Tongtian had also been pushed outside of the waterfall by a swift and fierce palm. The 'Three-Headed Dragon' Hou Tonghai did not think about the martial arts skills his martial brother had compared to his own skills. If his martial brother was so easily defeated, how could he hope to achieve success? Relying on his superb water skills and his ability to open his eyes and see underwater, he charged into the waterfall.

Looking at the adverse situation, Peng Lianhu rushed forward to join the battle. Suddenly a dark and rather shiny shadow flew above his head. With a 'Bang!' that shadow fell to the ground and then he heard Hou Tonghai cry loudly in pain. Peng Lianhu quickly went over and said in a low voice, "Brother Hou [Hou Xiong]...be quiet! What happened?"

"Damn his granny!" Hou Tonghai cursed. "My butt is broken into four pieces from the fall."

Peng Lianhu was confounded and amused at the same time. "Is there such a thing?" he whispered. He stretched his hand to check Hou Tonghai's buttocks, seemingly checking to see if they were still in one piece. He found nothing injured. He knew something was amiss, but he did not want to face the danger rashly. "Who's inside?" he asked.

Still in pain Hou Tonghai became angry. "How would I know?" he snapped. "As soon as I went in, I was thrown back out. That scoundrel of a bastard!"

In the starlight they saw the Venerable Lingzhi's red robe fluttering as he entered the waterfall in big strides. Amidst the sound of the water gurgling, they could hear his loud shouts in Tibetan. It seemed like he was fighting an intense battle with the man inside.

Everyone looked at each other in surprise. Sha Tongtian and Liang Ziweng had been thrown out. But in the darkness

they vaguely saw, behind the curtain of water, a man and a woman. The man was barehanded and the woman had a stick in her hand. At this time they heard the Venerable Lingzhi's loud roar. It seemed he had suffered hardships as well.

Wanyan Honglie frowned. "Why is this Venerable so reckless? He called out so earth shatteringly loud. If the palace guards heard it and come here, how will we get the book?" he said.

He had just finished speaking when they saw the Venerable Lingzhi's red kasaya [Tibetan Robe] fly out from the waterfall and land floating on the red lotus pond, followed by two clanking sounds as the two copper cymbals that he used as weapons also flew out. Peng Lianhu was afraid the cymbals would make a loud noise if they hit the ground and thus alert the palace guards. He stretched out his hands and caught the cymbals. They heard loud shouts of Tibetan curse words coming from the waterfall, which nobody could understand, followed by a huge body flying out.

Luckily the Venerable Lingzhi's martial arts were different from Hou Tonghai's. Although he fell backwards, he was able to land softly, so his buttocks were not injured at all. He cursed aloud, "It's the boy and the girl we met on the boat."

When Guo Jing and Huang Rong were hiding behind the fake hill, they heard Wanyan Honglie order the people to go into the cave and steal the book. They thought that if the Wumu Legacy was obtained by him, the Jin army could follow Yue Wumu's military strategies to invade the south, which would be disastrous. They realized that Ouyang Feng was around and that they were not his match, but if they did not step forward bravely, how would they bear it if, in the future, the common people of the world suffered such a disaster?

At first Huang Rong wanted to find a way to scare these people away, but Guo Jing knew that the situation was critical and they had no time to hesitate. He immediately grabbed Huang Rong's hand and slipped behind the waterfall. They were hoping to set up an ambush and attack Ouyang Feng by surprise. Luckily the waterfall's rumbling was so loud that nobody heard their movements.

The two did all they could to repel Sha Tongtian and the others. They were pleasantly surprised with the results and did not expect the Manual's 'Changing Muscles Forging Bones' to be that marvelous. Huang Rong's 'Dog-Beating Stick' had infinite variations. So amazing were they that even men of Sha Tongtian and the Venerable Lingzhi's caliber were thrown into confused helplessness. Guo Jing took advantage of the situation to send out his palms and as a result they managed to throw everyone out of the waterfall.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew that as Sha Tongtian and the others were defeated, Ouyang Feng would go into action and that they absolutely could not fight against him. "Let's get out of here quickly!" Huang Rong said, "We have to raise the alarm and let the palace guards come and prevent these people from acting further."

"That's right!" Guo Jing said, "You go out and raise the alarm. I am staying here on guard."

"You must not fight the Old Poison," Huang Rong said.

"Yes. Now go! Go!" Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was about to go out through the hole behind the waterfall when they suddenly heard a loud grunt and a great burst of energy came through the waterfall from the outside. The two did not dare to block it and leaped sideways to evade that energy. With a loud roar, Ouyang

Feng's 'Toad Stance' energy penetrated the waterfall and hit the iron gate. Water splashed everywhere and the force was astonishing.

Although Huang Rong managed to leap sideways, her back was still hit by the 'Toad Stance's' lateral force. She felt her blood rushing and her vision blurred. She tried to focus her mind and then dashed outside shouting at the top of her lungs, "Seize the assassin! Seize the assassin!" She ran away while continuing to shout.

As she shouted, the palace guards all around the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' were startled awake. Shouting began immediately from everywhere, raising the alarm. Huang Rong jumped up on the roof of the hall, picked up some roof tiles, and 'Bing...bing...bang...bang!' randomly threw them to the ground.

"Kill that little girl first, then we'll talk," Peng Lianhu cursed. Launching his lightness kungfu, he gave chase. Liang Ziwen jumped to the left, trying to block her.

Wanyan Honglie was still calm. He said to Yang Kang, "Kang'er, go with Mr. Ouyang and get the book."

By this time Ouyang Feng was already squatting on the ground in front of the waterfall. With another grunt he sent another burst of energy and the double iron gate at the cave's mouth flew in. He was about to enter the cave, when from one side, a shadow suddenly attacked. Before the person even arrived, his palm had already come, launching the dangerous stance of the 'Flying Dragon Soaring Through the Heavens' [fei long zai tian]. Although he could not clearly see that person's appearance in the dark cave, as soon as he saw the stance he knew it must be Guo Jing. He was delighted, "The 'Nine Yin Manual' is exceptionally difficult to comprehend and I only understand two out of

ten sentences. If I can capture this kid, I can force him to explain it.” He leaned sideways to evade the attack then swiftly stretched out his hand, trying to grab Guo Jing’s back.

Guo Jing was determined that no matter what he had to do to guard the entrance, he would not let the enemy enter. As long as he could hold it for a while, the palace guards would come. Although this group of traitors’ martial arts was high, they would have to run away eventually. He was slightly puzzled to see Ouyang Feng not trying to kill him but merely trying to capture him. His left hand swept the attacking hand away and his right hand counterattacked with the ‘Vacant Fist’ technique. Even though, in terms of strength, this technique was inferior to the ‘Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms’, by using the ‘Vacant Fist’, his palms floated with tricky movements.

“Good!” Ouyang Feng exclaimed. He dropped his shoulder and pulled back his hand while trying to catch Guo Jing’s right arm. His hand did not carry the gust of wind that came with his usual swift and ferocious force.

While he was on the deserted island, Ouyang Feng studied the Manual Guo Jing wrote out. The more he practiced it the more he felt something was wrong. It never crossed his mind that the Manual in his hands was altered to the point of being somewhat unintelligible. He thought that the Manual carried a very deep and profound meaning which could not be deciphered in a short period of time. Later on he heard Hong Qigong mumbling some gibberish on the raft which he thought was the key to understanding the Manual. Also, every time he met Guo Jing, he noticed that his martial arts were continuously progressing. He was startled yet delighted at the same time. Startled: because this kid’s skills were improving so rapidly. Therefore, the power contained in the Manual must be truly something to

be feared. Delighted: because the Manual was in his hands. By strengthening his own background, his advancement in the future would be limitless.

On the raft he fought a life and death battle against two enemies. This time he felt that he had gained the upper hand and wanted to fight at a leisurely pace. He thought he would be able to dissect the manual by watching Guo Jing's every single move. He did not care whether the Wumu Legacy would be stolen or not. In his heart the only important matter right was the martial arts in the Manual.

By now the light from the many lanterns carried all around the area had made the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' bright as daylight, as more and more palace guards arrived. Wanyan Honglie noted that Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang had been behind the water's curtain for a very long time without coming back out. Meanwhile the palace guards gathered around them. He was getting increasingly anxious. Fortunately the guards' attention was concentrated by Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng on the roof chasing after Huang Rong, oblivious that there was a bigger fight going on inside the waterfall. He realized, however, that sooner or later the guards' would detect their presence there. He stomped his feet and waved his hands continuously, while urgently calling out, "Quick...quick!"

"Don't worry Prince, little monk will go in again," the Venerable Lingzhi said. Shaking his left palm in front of his body he entered the waterfall. By now the light from outside had penetrated the water curtain. He was able to see Ouyang Feng exchanging stances with Guo Jing in front of the cave entrance, while Yang Kang, at one side, was trying to get into the cave. But how could he pass through the two people's ferocious gusts of wind created by their palms?

The Venerable Lingzhi watched for several stances until he could not endure it any longer. He knew the present situation was very urgent. But Ouyang Feng was sparring leisurely with this kid. Truly he was a bastard. "Mr. Ouyang, let me help you!" he shouted.

"Don't come near me!" Ouyang Feng replied.

The Venerable Lingzhi thought, "In a situation like this you still flaunt yourself as a hero and display your reputation as a grandmaster of a martial arts school?" He bent his knees and attacked Guo Jing's left side. His 'Big Hand Imprint' [da shou yin] slapped Guo Jing's 'Sun' [tai yang] acupoint.

Ouyang Feng was angry. His right hand stretched out to grab the back of Lingzhi's neck and fling him out. As soon as his neck was grabbed, the Venerable Lingzhi became very angry and he shouted a series of the most obscene cuss words he could think of. Unfortunately he was speaking Tibetan, so Ouyang Feng naturally did not understand a word he was saying. All he heard was "Ba ni mi hong"... half a sentence because water started to get into his mouth and his curses were drowned. As he fell backwards with his face facing the sky, he landed in the pond and water began filling his mouth.

Wanyan Honglie saw the Venerable Lingzhi come flying out and fall like he was mounting the clouds and riding the mist. Then he heard a loud clanking noise as the big flower pot in front of the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' was crushed. He groaned inwardly. He also saw many palace guards coming in succession, so he hastily tucked in his robe and went inside the waterfall.

Although he had learned some martial arts, his skill was only so-so. As soon as he was inside the waterfall he stepped on the slippery surface and fell down. Yang Kang rushed

forward to help him up. It took a while for Wanyan Honglie to scan the cave and see what was going on. "Mr. Ouyang, can you expel this youngster?" he called out. He knew that no matter how he begged or entreated, Ouyang Feng might not necessarily pay any attention to him. Therefore he resorted to subtlety by asking if Ouyang Feng was capable of expelling Guo Jing. This was called 'dispatching a general is not as good as inciting a general'.

Sure enough, as soon as Ouyang Feng heard that, he replied, "Why not?" He squatted and with a loud grunt, sent his 'Toad Stance' energy forward through his palms. This one push was backed by his lifelong cultivation of internal energy. Even if Hong Qigong or Huang Yaoshi were here, they would not be able to resist this attack head on, so how could Guo Jing block it?

Ouyang Feng had just exchanged several stances with Guo Jing, compelling him to use the 'Vacant Fist' technique. He noticed that Guo Jing's movements were subtle with marvelous variations. In his heart he was secretly pleased and thought this must be the 'Nine Yin Manual's' martial arts. He wanted to watch Guo Jing use enough of this technique so that he could steal as much as he could. Unfortunately, Wanyan Honglie barged in and questioned his ability. He still thought that Guo Jing would be useful, and he knew the ferociousness of his own strength, therefore, he voluntarily withdrew his push.

But unexpectedly, Guo Jing was determined to guard the Wumu Legacy with his life. He knew that if he stepped to the side, the cave entrance would be defenseless and the Wumu Legacy would fall into the enemy's hands. Although there were numerous palace guards outside, how could they defend against Ouyang Feng and the others? He knew the incoming force was ferocious. He could not block it, yet he must evade it. His feet kicked jump about four feet

upwards to escape the attack and landed back in front of the entrance. He heard a loud noise behind him as sand and rocks fell because Ouyang Feng's force had hit the cave wall.

"Good!" Ouyang Feng called out. With exceptional speed he sent out the second attack. The previous force had not yet dissipated before the next force arrived.

Guo Jing felt a sudden gust of wind blowing on his upper body. He groaned inwardly and immediately launched both palms forward using the 'Tremors Shake a Hundred li' [zhen jing bai li]. It was one of the most powerful moves of the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms'. This time he'd blocked hard with a 'hard' stance. For an instant both of them stayed motionless. Guo Jing realized his strength was not a match for his enemy's and he knew he would suffer defeat, but there was no alternative.

Wanyan Honglie watched these two men fighting, leaping and eluding. As one rose up the other dropped down. Suddenly they were as rigid as corpses. Not even a finger stirred and they did not even seem to breathe. He was greatly astonished. A short moment later sweat began to drip from Guo Jing's body. Ouyang Feng knew that if this fight continued his opponent would suffer a serious injury. He had a mind to yield for half a stance, but as soon as he lessened his power his chest tightened because his opponent's power was pressing in. If not for his profound strength he would certainly have been injured.

Ouyang Feng was startled. He had never expected that at such a young age, Guo Jing's strength would be so fierce. He took a deep breath and counterattacked immediately, pushing the incoming force back. If he just added a little bit more strength to his push, he would be able to overcome Guo Jing easily. But at this time, both parties palm strength

was equal. If he wanted to score a victory he would have to inflict heavy injuries on his opponent. It would not be difficult should he really want to kill Guo Jing, but this kid was the key to understanding the Manual, so how could he destroy his only resource? Therefore, he intended to wait for Guo Jing's strength to become depleted and then capture him.

Not too much later it became obvious that as one's strength declined, the other's increased. Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang, who watched from the sidelines, did not know how much longer this situation would last. They became very anxious. Actually, the two people had only been in this deadlock for a short time, but because the light from outside was getting brighter and the noise from outside was getting louder, it seemed in Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang's minds that they had been motionless for a very long time.

With a loud noise, two palace guards suddenly came barging into the waterfall. Yang Kang swiftly pounced. With a 'ta, ta' sound both of his hands penetrated the guards bodies. It was the deadly 'Nine Yin White Bone Claw' [jiu yin bai zhua gong]. The reeking smell of blood assailed everyone's nostrils as the guards died instantly. Yang Kang then drew a dagger from his boot and jumped forward to stab Guo Jing in the side.

Guo Jing was resisting Ouyang Feng's palm with all his strength. How could he avoid this incoming thrust? He knew if he moved even a little bit he would die violently from the Western Poison's 'Toad Stance'. Therefore, even though he knew the dagger would penetrate his body soon, he was forced to ignore it. He suddenly felt a severe pain in his side and his breathing stopped. He instinctively swung his fist and hit Yang Kang's hand.

By this time the difference in the levels of martial arts between these two was vast. Guo Jing's fist struck Yang Kang's hand like it was about to crack bones. Yang Kang hastily withdrew his hand so that the dagger's blade only penetrated halfway into Guo Jing's side. Right at that moment the 'Toad Stance's' force came surging into Guo Jing's chest. He let out a noiseless grunt, bent over, and fell down.

Realizing that in the end he had inflicted injury, Ouyang Feng waved his hand and shook his head. "What a pity! What a pity!" he called out. He was dejected and knew that this kid could not be revived. There was no reason why he should hang around since he still had to get the Wumu Legacy. He stared at Yang Kang angrily and thought, "This kid has spoiled my big chance." He turned around and entered the cave in big strides. Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang followed behind.

By that time there were a lot of palace guards there. Without turning, Ouyang Feng reached back and, one by one, flung the guards away. In the end, no guards were able to enter the cave.

Yang Kang lit a torch to see the cave's interior. He saw thick dust everywhere...a sign that nobody had entered it for a very long time. There was a stone table in the middle of the cave and a stone box on top of it, measuring about two feet square. The box was sealed. Other than that, no other objects could be seen inside the cave. Yang Kang brought his torch closer to take a look. The writing on the seal looked very old and the characters were not recognizable.

"The book must be inside this box," Wanyan Honglie called out.

Yang Kang was delighted. As he reached out his hand to take the box, Ouyang Feng's left arm gently pushed his shoulder away. Yang Kang staggered back several steps before falling down. He was startled and saw that Ouyang Feng had taken the box.

"The great work is accomplished...everyone withdraw!" Wanyan Honglie called out.

With Ouyang Feng in front leading the way, the three went out of the cave. Yang Kang saw Guo Jing, his body covered with blood, lying motionless among several guards at the cave entrance. He felt slight remorse and muttered under his breath, "You don't know good from bad and always meddle in other people's business. You can't blame me for this in spite of our sworn brotherhood." Remembering his dagger was still in Guo Jing's body, he stooped to retrieve it and suddenly saw a shadow appear outside. "Jing ge ge, where are you?" the shadow called out.

Yang Kang recognized Huang Rong's voice. He was startled and without taking his dagger he jumped over Guo Jing's body and ran outside of the water curtain to follow Ouyang Feng and the others.

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Earlier, Huang Rong had been rushing to the east and running to the west on the rooftops with Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng in pursuit. Not long afterwards, palace guards began to gather in the area. Peng and Liang were frightened and did not dare chase Huang Rong any longer, so they went back to join Sha Tongtian and the others waiting for Wanyan Honglie by the waterfall. They killed several guards outside the cave before Ouyang Feng came out.

Huang Rong was concerned about Guo Jing, so she went back inside the cave and called out several times without getting an answer. She was beginning to get nervous, so she struck her flint to her fire-starter bundle and saw Guo Jing, his body soaked in blood, lying next to her foot. Huang Rong was scared to death and her hands began to tremble, her fire-starter bundle fell and the fire went out.

Outside the cave, the guards were still shouting loudly, calling to each other to capture the assassin. More than a dozen guards were grabbed and tossed away by Ouyang Feng with broken necks. No one dared go near them any longer. The palace guards carried a heavy burden of responsibility and presently there was an assassin in the palace. If they did not shout loudly and appear bold by not running away, how else could they show their loyalty?

Huang Rong stooped down to hold Guo Jing, noticed that his hand was still warm and felt relieved. She called out several times without getting an answer from him, so she decided to carry him on her back and quietly slipped away from the waterfall towards the back of the false hill.

By now the area around the 'Jade-Green Cold Hall' was as bright as daylight from the guard's lanterns. Guards from other parts of the palace had heard the news and arrived in abundance. Even though Huang Rong's movements were quick, it was impossible to avoid being seen by several guards. They shouted loudly and began to chase her. Huang Rong silently cursed. "You are a bunch of scum. You don't pursue the bad people but chase after the good people."

She gritted her teeth and flew away. Several guards with higher martial arts skills managed to get close to her, forcing her to launch several steel needles. "Aiyo!" she heard several guards cry out and fall down. The rest of the guards did not dare pursue her and could only look

helplessly at her as she leaped over the palace wall and disappeared without a trace.

Those people were so noisy that the whole palace was frightened. In the dark of the night nobody knew if it was a coup with somebody trying to usurp the emperor's throne, or some government officers inciting a rebellion. The palace guards, the imperial army, and all the armed forces personnel were alarmed, but not a single high-ranking military officer knew what was going on for sure. They were confused for the rest of the night. Come daybreak the cavalry was dispatched and the city was turned upside down in search of 'the rebels' or 'the assassin'. Quite a number of people were arrested. Unfortunately, later investigations proved that these people were nothing but petty thieves and local ruffians. The officials were forced to fabricate oral confessions and randomly execute some people in order to appease the throne and to assure their own safety and position.

After leaving the palace that night, Huang Rong ran without looking where she was heading. She randomly chose her way and only slowed down after realizing that nobody was pursuing them. She entered a small alley and stretched her finger to feel for Guo Jing's breath. She was relieved to find Guo Jing was still breathing, but since her flint had been lost in the palace, in the darkness she could not examine him to determine where the injury was. She knew if she waited for dawn, it would be more difficult to find shelter inside the city walls, especially with her having a blood-covered person with her, so she decided to leave the city that very same night and headed towards Sha Gu's wine shop.

Huang Rong's martial arts skills were high, but after running fast for half the night and carrying Guo Jing on her back, it was with a nervous heart that she shoved open the

door of Sha Gu's shop. She was out of breath and her body felt weak. She sat down to calm herself. After catching her breath she found a piece of firewood and lit it so she could look at Guo Jing's face and examine his wound. She was even more shocked than when they were at the palace.

Guo Jing's eyes were tightly closed, his face was as white as a sheet, and he looked more dead than alive. Huang Rong had seen him injured several times before, but had never seen him in this kind of critical condition. She felt as though her own heart was about to jump out of her throat. As she stood lost in thought with the torch in her hand a hand suddenly reached out from the side and touched the torch. Huang Rong slowly turned her head and saw that it was Sha Gu. Huang Rong sucked in a deep breath. Now that there was someone beside her, she felt somewhat better. She remembered that she was going to examine Guo Jing's injury. Under the bright light of the torch she could see a blackish object protruding from Guo Jing's side. It looked like the ebony hilt of a dagger. She lowered her head for a closer look and saw that it was indeed a dagger with the blade stuck in Guo Jing's left side.

By this time Huang Rong's panic had reached its limits and her mind became calm. She gently tore the clothes from around his waist, exposing bare skin and muscle. She saw that the blood had coagulated around the blade, which had penetrated the muscle several 'cun' deep [1 cun is approximately 1 inch]. She was afraid if she pulled the dagger out, Guo Jing would die immediately, but if she waited too long it would be even more difficult to save his life. Biting her lips, she reached out to grab the dagger's hilt, but doubt suddenly came creeping into her heart and she withdrew her hand. This happened several times. She just could not make up her mind.

Sha Gu became impatient. The fourth time Huang Rong withdrew her hand, she suddenly stretched out hers, grabbed the hilt and abruptly pulled the dagger out. Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong shouted in shock, but Sha Gu thought it was fun and laughed happily.

Huang Rong saw blood gushing like a spring from Guo Jing's wound, while Sha Gu was still laughed foolishly. Huang Rong went from shock to anger. Her palm struck backwards sending Sha Gu rolling on the floor. Then she immediately stooped down to press the wound with a handkerchief.

When Sha Gu fell, she took the torch with her. The flame was extinguished and the room became pitch-black. Sha Gu was angry. She jumped up and kicked Huang Rong's leg. Huang Rong did not avoid the kick. Sha Gu was afraid Huang Rong would retaliate, so she jumped back immediately after kicking. After a while, she heard Huang Rong sobbing softly. She was surprised. Hastily she re-lit the torch and came asking, "Did I hurt you bad?"

When the dagger was pulled out, the pain was so severe it woke Guo Jing up. In the torch light he saw Huang Rong kneeling beside him. "Master Yue's book ... was it ... was it stolen?" he quickly asked.

Huang Rong was delighted to hear him speak. Knowing he was very concerned about this matter she felt it was not the right time to add to his anxiety. "Don't worry," she said, "Those traitors were not able to get their hands on the book ..." She wanted to ask how he was feeling but her hands were still warm from his blood.

"Why are you crying?" Guo Jing asked in a low voice.

Huang Rong forced a smile and said, "I am not crying."

Sha Gu suddenly opened her mouth, "She is too, isn't she? Look, there are still tears on her face."

"Rong'er, don't worry." Guo Jing said. "There is a section about treating injuries in the 'Nine Yin Manual'. I won't die."

Upon hearing this, Huang Rong was like someone in the dark suddenly seeing a beacon of light. Her eyes shone brightly and her delight was unspeakable as though nothing could dampen her spirits. She wanted to ask for the details but was afraid she would make him weary. She turned around to hold Sha Gu's hand. "Sister, did I hurt you just now?" she asked, with smile on her face.

Sha Gu's mind was still set on seeing her cry so she ignored her question and asked, "You were crying...won't you admit it?"

Huang Rong smiled, "Fine, I was crying but you weren't. You are a good girl." Sha Gu was delighted to hear her praise.

Guo Jing slowly circulated his 'qi' because the pain was unbearable. By this time Huang Rong had cleared her mind. She took out a steel needle and pierced the acupoints around his left side, both to slow down the flow of blood and to reduce the pain. Then she washed his wound, applied some medicine and re-wrapped the wound with clean cloth. She also gave him a 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pill' to help stop the pain.

Guo Jing said, "Although the dagger went in pretty deep, but ... luckily it did not hit any vital organs, so it ... it won't be life-threatening. I suffered more dangerous injuries from the Old Poison's 'Toad Stance'. Fortunately it seems like he did not use all of his strength, so it looks like I can be

healed. Only I will have to make you suffer for seven days and seven nights.”

Huang Rong sighed. “You know that even if I had to suffer seventy years for you, I would still be willing,” she said.

Guo Jing felt a sweetness creep into his heart and at the same time felt dizzy. After waiting for a moment his mind cleared up a little bit and he said, “It was a pity that when Master was injured I missed several days’ opportunity to treat him. Had it been otherwise, even though the snake venom was fierce, it wouldn’t have been too hard for him to fully recover. He wouldn’t be ... he wouldn’t be disabled like he is today.”

Huang Rong replied, “When we were on that island, even if we could have healed Master’s injury, would the Old Poison and his nephew let us? Please don’t think that way. Just tell me your method and set my mind at ease.”

“First we must find a peaceful and quiet place,” Guo Jing said. “Then, following the Manual’s instructions, we circulate our ‘qi’ together. Each will hold the other’s palm. By using your internal energy you are helping me heal my injury.” At this point he closed his eyes to catch his breath before continuing. “The only difficulty is that for seven whole days and nights our palms cannot be separated even for a second. Your breathing will be closely linked to mine. We can talk to each other, but we definitely can’t have a third person interrupting us by even a half sentence. Also, we must not walk even half a step. If someone else disturbs us, we may ...”

Huang Rong realized this kind of treatment was similar to the meditation for cultivating someone’s martial arts. Before reaching a satisfactory result, one cannot experience any external interruptions. Otherwise, the mind

would be disturbed with bad thoughts or would go out of control. Unavoidably the result would be a fire deviation and not only would the whole energy cultivation be wasted, but at the very least the person could suffer an injury or even die. That is the reason warriors who cultivate internal energy will find a secluded and uninhabited mountain or field, or at least close their doors and not leave, and have a skilled and powerful master or friend protecting them from the sidelines to prevent their training going astray.

She thought, "With this short notice it's difficult to find a peaceful and quiet place and I am the only one who can help him treat his injury. It's impossible to rely on Sha Gu to guard against external disturbances. She could even come and create endless disturbances herself. If only Big Brother Zhou would come back. But even then I don't think he will be able to focus his mind on guarding us for seven days and seven nights. Success won't be guaranteed and more than likely, things will go wrong. What should I do?" She mused over this matter for a long time. Then she glanced over at the iron bowl in the cabinet. An idea came into her mind, "I've got it. We can hide inside the secret room. In the past Mei Chaofeng practiced martial arts without anybody protecting her. Didn't she hide herself in a cave?"

It was now dawn. Sha Gu went to the kitchen and cooked some rice porridge for the two to eat. "Jing ge ge," Huang Rong said. "Wait here for a moment. I am going to buy some food and then we can start your treatment immediately."

She thought that with the weather being blisteringly hot, if she cooked some rice and dishes, they would definitely spoil if kept in the room for seven days and nights. She went to the village market to buy a picul [approximately 50 kg or 100 lbs] of watermelons.

The farmer who sold the watermelons brought everything back to Sha Gu's inn and stacked them on the floor. On the way out after being paid he said, "Our Ox Village's watermelons are sweet and crispy. Once Miss tastes them, you will agree with me."

On hearing the words 'Ox Village' [niu jia cun], Huang Rong's heart skipped a beat. "So it turns out this is Ox Village," she said to herself. "This is Jing ge ge's hometown." She was afraid that if Guo Jing found out his mind would be disturbed and therefore, she replied noncommittally.

She waited until the villager went out before going to the hidden chamber. Guo Jing was asleep and blood no longer seeped out through the cotton cloth wrapped around his waist. Huang Rong opened the cabinet, turned the iron bowl to open the secret chamber's door, and took the watermelons inside one by one. Then only one thing remained outside...Sha Gu. Huang Rong had repeatedly warned Sha Gu not to tell anybody that they would be staying inside the chamber. No matter what kind of earth shattering things happened, she was not supposed to call out from outside.

Sha Gu did not understand her intentions, but seeing Huang Rong's serious expression, she said she understood and repeatedly nodded her head. "You want to eat watermelons inside and you don't want anybody to know. After you finish eating watermelons, you will come back out again. Sha Gu will not tell."

Huang Rong was happy. "If Sha Gu doesn't tell, Sha Gu is a good girl," she said. "If Sha Gu tells, Sha Gu is a bad girl."

"Sha Gu won't tell...Sha Gu is a good girl," Sha Gu said repeatedly.

Huang Rong fed Guo Jing another big bowl of rice porridge and ate one herself. Then she helped him enter the secret chamber. As she was closing the door from the inside, she saw Sha Gu's simple face showing a smile. Sha Gu said, "Sha Gu won't tell."

Suddenly Huang Rong's heart fluttered. "This girl is so dumb and what if every time she meet someone she says, 'Those two eat watermelons inside the cabinet, but Sha Gu won't tell?' The only way to ensure our safety is to kill her."

She grew up under the influence of her father. Benevolence and justice, the differences between good and evil didn't matter to them. Although she knew that Sha Gu had a very close relationship with Qu Lingfeng, right at that moment she presented a danger to Guo Jing's life. Even if there were a dozen Sha Gus, she would kill them all.

She took the dagger from Guo Jing's waist and walked out of the room.

End of Chapter 23.

Chapter 24 - Healing in the Secret Room

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Sha Gu walked over to Liang Ziwen and said, "You hit my nose, I must hit your nose. You hit me once; I must pay you back three times." Her fist went straight to his nose.

Huang Rong had walked two steps before she turned her head and saw Guo Jing's suspicious expression, as if he could see the murderous look on her face. She thought, "I don't have a problem with killing Sha Gu, but Jing ge ge might ask me about it later. He might not ask me now, he might not even raise this matter...ever, but in his heart he might harbor hatred towards me and that won't be good. All right, we'll just have to take this huge risk." She closed the door immediately and then looked around the room carefully.

In the western corner, near the roof of that small room, there was a small ventilation window about one foot square where the sunlight entered the room through a sheet of clamshell curtain. It was by this light that they were able to see everything inside the room. The ventilation hole was dusty, so Huang Rong took out her dagger and cleaned it out. The bad smell in the room still lingered, but they did not seem to notice it. In light of the life and death experiences they'd faced earlier, the smelly, dusty room felt like a sanctuary to them.

Guo Jing leaned against the wall, smiled slightly and said, "There is no better place for us to treat my injury than in this room. Unfortunately we are accompanied by two dead people. Are you afraid?"

Inside, Huang Rong was actually frightened, but she was determined not to think about it. She said with a smile, "One was my older Martial Brother [shige], he certainly won't harm me, and the other was a rice bucket government official. Alive he wouldn't scare me and by becoming a ghost he would scare me even less." She immediately kicked the pair of skeletons towards the northern corner of the room. She took the straw mat covering the watermelons, spread it out on the floor, and

then she piled the watermelons around it within arm's reach. "What do you think?" she asked.

"Very good," Guo Jing replied. "Now we can start."

Huang Rong helped him sit down on the straw mat and she sat cross-legged to his left. When she raised her head she saw a small peep-hole the size of a coin in the wall right in front of her. She looked through it and to her delight she saw a mirror in which she could see the entire room outside. Apparently the people who built this secret room had planned it well. When they were hiding from enemies inside this room, they could still observe the activities outside in the mirror. It had been unused for a long time and the mirror was covered with a thick layer of dust. She took out a handkerchief, wrapped it around her index finger, and poked it through the hole to clean the mirror. She saw Sha Gu sitting on the floor throwing pebbles while humming a tune. Huang Rong could not hear clearly what she was humming, so she pressed her ear to the hole to listen. It seemed Sha Gu was humming a lullaby: "Swing, swing, swing; swing to the Grandmother's bridge. Grandmother calls me the precious baby ..."

It was strange, but the more she listened, the more she felt the touching emotions that song carried. Her heart overflowed with tender affection. She could not help but wonder: "Could this song be the one her mother sang to her when she was little ...? If my mother had not died, would she have sung to me like this?" Thinking of this, her eyes became moist.

Guo Jing saw her sad expression and said, "What are you thinking? My injury is not that bad...don't feel so sad."

Huang Rong moved her hand to wipe away tears and said, "Quickly teach me the internal energy cultivation

technique.” Thereupon Guo Jing started to slowly recite the ‘Treating Injuries’ chapter from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’.

There was a saying amongst martial arts practitioners: ‘Learn how to take a beating first before learning how to beat someone.’ Therefore, the most basic lesson in martial arts was how to take a beating without getting seriously injured. When the martial arts became more profound, the practitioner must learn how to protect their own body and their life by sealing acupoints to treat an injury, set broken bones, cure poison, treat wounds, and many other kinds of advanced techniques. Better techniques would result in better skills and it did not matter if one’s martial arts skills were unmatched, there would come a day when he would fall. The ‘Treating Injuries’ portion of the ‘Nine Yin Manual’ explained how a highly skilled martial artist could use his own internal energy to treat an injury and how to circulate his own and other’s internal energy for treating internal injuries. As for broken bones, weapon-inflicted wounds or other external injury treatments, it was assumed that the person who practiced the ‘Manual’ did not need further instructions.

Huang Rong needed to listen to something once and she would remember forever. There were several unclear passages in the ‘Manual’, which they needed to discuss in detail. One had a strong foundation in the Quanzhen Sect’s internal energy cultivation and the other had extraordinary intelligence. With some deliberation, they were able to grasp almost everything. Huang Rong held out her right hand, clasped Guo Jing’s left, and they started to train diligently according to the techniques in the ‘Manual’.

After training for four hours they took a short break. Taking her knife in her left hand, Huang Rong cut up a watermelon. She fed some to Guo Jing, while her right hand still clasped Guo Jing’s left. After training for several hours,

the tightness in Guo Jing's chest gradually decreased as the warm energy from Huang Rong's palm slowly dispersed into his bones. The pain in his side also gradually reduced. He thought the techniques contained in the manual were truly incomparable. He did not dare to be negligent and proceeded with care.

When the time came for them to take their third break, the light streaming through the ventilation window had gradually dimmed. It was near dusk. Not only did Guo Jing feel that his chest was a lot less constricted, but Huang Rong also felt invigorated. The two chatted a while before continuing their training. Suddenly they heard running footsteps that stopped in front of the inn. Then several people came in. An insolent voice shouted, "Quickly get some food. Your masters here are starving!"

They recognized that the voice belonged to the 'Three-Headed Dragon' Hou Tonghai. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other in surprise. Huang Rong quickly looked through the small hole and to her surprise, she saw in the mirror not only Hou Tonghai, but Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng, Yang Kang, Peng Lianhu and the others. Huang Rong had no idea where Sha Gu had gone to play.

Hou Tonghai slapped the table and made quite a racket but nobody came. Liang Ziweng went out and walked around the building. He frowned and said, "Nobody lives here." Hou Tonghai volunteered to go into the village and buy some wine and food. Ouyang Feng found a spot protected from the blowing wind and spread some straw. Then he carried his nephew and gently placed him on the straw to let him lie quietly to heal his broken legs.

Peng Lianhu said with a laugh, "Although those palace guards are useless, they are haunting us like ghosts. We didn't even have time to stop and eat for the whole day.

Prince, you are a northerner, yet you knew that there is a desolate village by the Qiantang River and led us here. Truly nothing is hidden from your knowledgeable mind."

Although he heard the flattering tone in Peng Lianhu's voice, Wanyan Honglie's face did not show the slightest satisfaction. He merely sighed softly and said, "I came to this place nineteen years ago." Everyone could see that his expression had changed. They felt a little strange. Of course, nobody knew he was thinking about how Bao Xirou had saved his life in this village. The desolate village still existed, but that gentle lady with a hairpin in her hair, wearing green robes, and who fed him warm chicken soup, was no longer in this world.

Meanwhile, Hou Tonghai had returned from the village with wine and food. Peng Lianhu poured wine for everybody and said to Wanyan Honglie, "Prince, today you succeeded in attaining the marvelous book of military strategy. It is a sign that the Great Jin's prestige will soon inspire the world, and your armies will dominate tens of thousands of lands. Let us all congratulate you!" He raised his cup and gulped his wine. His voice was loud and clear so Guo Jing could hear him clearly in spite of the wall between them. He was shocked. "Master Yue's Legacy [Yue Yeye] has fallen into his hands!" he thought bitterly. As soon as his mind became anxious, the flow of energy in his chest reversed. Huang Rong could feel his palm shaking and she knew he'd heard everything. It had affected his 'dan tian' [pubic region] energy. If it was not controlled quickly his life might be in danger. She quickly pressed her lips to his ear and whispered, "If he could steal the book, can't we do the same? When your Second Master [Er Shifu], the 'Magical Hands Scholar' makes his move, he can easily steal ten books."

Guo Jing thought she was right and immediately closed his eyes. His mind no longer listened to the conversation beyond the wall. Huang Rong looked into the hole again and saw Wanyan Honglie raise his cup and drink his wine. Then, with a delighted smile, he said, "In today's battle everyone worked hard to help and Mr. Ouyang rendered the greatest service. If he had not gotten rid of that kid named Guo, we would have had to expend a lot more effort."

Ouyang Feng let out a dry laugh which sounded like a broken cymbal. As Guo Jing heard his laughter, his heart was stirred yet again. Huang Rong inwardly thought, "Heaven bless us and not let the Old Poison pluck his devilish zither here, or Jing ge ge's life will be difficult to save."

She heard Ouyang Feng say, "This place is so remote, the Song army will not find us here. I wonder what kind of treasure this Yue Fei Yishu [Legacy] is. Let us all take a look."

He took the stone box from his clothing and placed it on the table. His thoughts were that should Wumu Legacy contain an exquisite martial arts method, then he would, without regard for anyone else, take it for himself. However, if the book only contained marching techniques and military strategies, it would be useless to him. In that case, he would gladly let the others enjoy it and allow Wanyan Honglie keep it.

In the meantime, everyone was gazing at the stone box. Huang Rong thought, "What can I do to destroy the book? Destroying it would be better than letting it fall into the hands of these traitors." She heard Wanyan Honglie say, "Xiao Wang [lit. little prince] has performed a comprehensive analysis of Yue Fei's riddle in the form of a

poem. I also carefully studied the official historical records of the previous dynasties on the construction of the Imperial Palace. I came to believe that this book was concealed fifteen steps east of the 'Green-Jade Cold Hall'. Today my deduction was proved correct. I believe no one in the Song Dynasty knew that such a treasure was hidden in their palace. The commotion we made last night....I don't think anybody knew what it was all about." He sounded very proud of himself. Everyone seized the opportunity to immediately heap praises on him.

Wanyan Honglie twisted his moustache and laughed. "Kang'er," he said, "Go ahead...open the box."

Yang Kang responded and stepped forward. First he removed the seal and then lifted the lid. Everyone's eyes were on the box. Their countenances suddenly changed and they were confounded. No one made a sound. The box was completely empty. There wasn't a military strategy book inside ...there wasn't even a blank sheet of paper. Although Huang Rong could not see the box, judging from everyone's expression, she could deduce that the box was empty. She was delighted and found it amusing.

Wanyan Honglie was very disappointed. He held onto the table as he sat down. His hand propped his cheek as he began thinking deeply. "My thousands of calculations, tens of thousands of iterations, all pointed to Yue Fei's Legacy being in this box. How can it be that there's not even a trace of it?" he thought. Suddenly he had an idea and his face lit up. He took the stone box outside towards the well and smashed it with all his might against the flagstones. 'Bang!' the box broke into pieces.

When Huang Rong heard that breaking stone she immediately thought, "Ah, there is a secret compartment in the box." She was anxious to see if the Legacy was inside a

secret compartment, but no matter what, she could not go out. After a moment, however, she saw Wanyan Honglie dejectedly return to the room and sit down.

"I knew there was a secret compartment in that box, but who could have known it was also empty," Wanyan Honglie said.

One after another the others tried to offer their opinions. Huang Rong was amused listening to their wild imaginings. Each was weirder than the next. She immediately told Guo Jing. When he learned that the Wumu Legacy had not been stolen, he was greatly comforted. Huang Rong deliberated further. "These traitors will not give up just like that...they must be thinking of going back to the palace tonight." She was thinking of her Master who was still inside the palace and she was afraid he might be implicated if found. Zhou Botong was there to protect him, but Huang Rong could not help but feel worried since the Old Urchin behaved like a madman. He could not take care of important matters properly.

Sure enough, she heard Ouyang Feng say, "It's not a big deal. We'll go back to the palace tonight and search some more."

"We can't go tonight," Wanyan Honglie objected. "We made quite a disturbance last night and I am sure they will guard the palace closely tonight."

"We can't avoid the guards," Ouyang Feng said, "But why worry over it? The Prince and Young Prince do not need to go. You and my nephew may stay here to have some rest."

Wanyan Honglie cupped his fists in front of his chest. "Then I will trouble Mister to do this work for me. The Prince will await your good news with a peaceful heart." Straightaway everyone spread out some straw in the room and lay down

to sleep. After they'd slept for more than two hours, Ouyang Feng woke the others and they went to the city once again.

Wanyan Honglie tossed and turned without being able to get any sleep. Around midnight he could hear the sounds of the rising tide in the river. He could also hear a dog barking at the other end of the village and the dog barked intermittently throughout the night, as if it was lamenting. In the quiet of the night it brought sorrow to the heart, adding to the anxiety he already felt inside.

After a long while footsteps were heard outside the door... someone was coming in. Wanyan Honglie quickly sat up and drew his sword. Yang Kang had quickly jumped behind the door to set an ambush. In the moonlight they saw a woman with disheveled hair, humming a children's song, open the door and come in. It was none other than Sha Gu. She had just got back from playing in the woods all day. She thought little of seeing people sleeping in her room, so she kept walking towards the pile of firewood, and lay down next to it. Not too long afterwards, she was snoring.

When Yang Kang saw it was only a dumb country girl, he smiled and went back to sleep. Wanyan Honglie's mind, however, was filled with thoughts of the past and present. He did not sleep for a long time. He got up, took a candle from his backpack and lit it. Then he took out a book and started flipping the pages.

Huang Rong saw the bright light through the small hole. She took a peek and saw a moth circle the candle, then fly suddenly into the flame. Its wings were immediately scorched and it fell onto the table. Wanyan Honglie picked the moth up. He could not help but feel distressed. He thought, "If my Madame Bao were here, she would certainly take care of you." From his bosom he took out a

small silver knife, a small medicine bottle and stroked them affectionately.

Huang Rong lightly tapped Guo Jing's shoulder and moved aside so Guo Jing could take a look through the small hole. What Guo Jing saw with his own eyes enraged him. He vaguely recognized the silver knife and medicine bottle as belonging to Yang Kang's mother, Bao Xiruo. He'd seen her using these items at the Zhao Palace when she was tending a little injured rabbit. He heard Wanyan Honglie softly murmur, "Nineteen years ago, in this very village, I met you for the first time ... Ay! I wonder what has happened to your former home?" After saying that he arose, took the candle, and went out of the door.

Guo Jing was startled. "Could it be that this is my parents' hometown, Ox Village?" he wondered. He pressed his mouth to Huang Rong's ear to inquire. Huang Rong nodded. Guo Jing's blood surged and his body shook.

Huang Rong's right palm was holding Guo Jing's left palm so she realized his breathing was uneven because of his agitation, which was very dangerous. She immediately reached out her left palm to grab Guo Jing's right and together they synchronized their energies while Guo Jing slowly controlled his breathing. After a long time they saw a moving light and heard Wanyan Honglie heave a long sigh as he came back to the room. By this time Guo Jing was able to control his emotions, but his left palm was still held in Huang Rong's right. He looked through the small hole again and saw Wanyan Honglie holding several small pieces of broken brick and tile, sitting in daze in the candle light.

Guo Jing thought, "This traitor is less than ten steps away from me. All I need to do is throw the dagger at him and I will be able to take his life."

His right hand drew the golden blade that Genghis Khan gave him and he whispered to Huang Rong, "Open the door."

"Don't!" Huang Rong hastily said. "Killing him will be easy, but our hiding place will be discovered."

With a trembling voice Guo Jing said, "In six more days, I won't know where he'll be."

Huang Rong knew it would not be easy to persuade him, so she whispered in his ear, "Your mother and Rong'er want you alive."

Guo Jing's felt a cold shiver in his heart. He nodded while putting the golden blade back into its sheath and again looked out through the small hole. He saw Wanyan Honglie sprawled on the table, asleep. Suddenly he saw somebody get up from the straw. This person's face was illuminated by the candle light, but in the mirror, it was not clear whose face it was. Guo Jing only saw him quietly stand up and walk over to Wanyan Honglie. He took the silver knife and the small medicine bottle from the table, looked at them for a while, then gently put them back down on the table. He then turned his head and Guo Jing saw that it was Yang Kang.

Guo Jing said in his heart, "That's right, you must avenge your parents. This is a very good opportunity. With a stab of the dagger, the enemy, with whom you cannot live under the same sky, will certainly lose his life. You won't get the same opportunity once the Old Poison and the others come back."

He was very anxious, hoping Yang Kang would make his move immediately. But after putting down the silver knife and the medicine bottle, Yang Kang blew out the candle. For a moment the room looked dark to him. Then he saw

Yang Kang take off his long robe and gently drape it over Wanyan Honglie's shoulders to protect him from the cold night.

Guo Jing was very angry and turned his head, not willing to look outside any longer. He did not understand how Yang Kang could treat the enemy who killed his parents with such tender and loving care. Huang Rong comforted him by saying, "Do not be impatient. After your injury is healed, even should the traitor run away over the horizon, we will catch him. He is not the Old Poison...don't you think killing him will be easy?" Guo Jing nodded and went back to circulating his internal energy.

Dawn soon arrived and from the village came the sounds of roosters crowing and all kinds of morning clatter. The 'qi' had circulated inside their bodies seven times and they felt relaxed and comfortable. Huang Rong raised her index finger and said with a smile, "One day has passed!"

"And it was very dangerous!" Guo Jing replied in low voice. "If not for you, I would not have been able to keep my mind peaceful and calm. I nearly made things worse."

"There are six more days and nights to go," Huang Rong said. "You promised to listen to what I say."

Guo Jing laughed. "When did I ever not listen to what you say?" he said.

Huang Rong leaned her head to one side and said, "Hmm, let me think."

At this moment a single ray of sunlight came slanting through the ventilation window. Her white skin and beautiful rosy cheeks looked like the red clouds at dawn. Guo Jing suddenly noticed her palm was exceptionally warm and soft. Something stirred in his chest and he hastily

chased that thought away, but his face was already blushing. For as long as they had been together, Guo Jing had never had this kind of feeling towards her before. He could not help feeling shocked and he silently rebuked himself.

Huang Rong saw him blushing and felt strange. "Jing ge," she asked, "What just happened?"

With a low voice Guo Jing replied, "I have been bad. I suddenly thought of ... thought of ..."

"What is it?" Huang Rong asked.

"I am not thinking about it anymore," Guo Jing answered.

"Then what did you think of?" Huang Rong pressed.

Unable to dodge the question Guo Jing confessed. "I was thinking of hugging you...kissing you."

Huang Rong felt warm and sweet all of a sudden and she also blushed. She looked shy and even lovelier.

Seeing her lower her head without saying anything Guo Jing asked, "Rong'er, are you angry? I was as bad as Ouyang Ke for having such a bad thought."

Huang Rong gave him one of her captivating smiles. "I am not angry," she said with a tender voice, "I was thinking that in the future you will hug and kiss me, for I will certainly be your wife." Guo Jing was very happy. He stammered but could not say anything.

"You wanted to hug and kiss me...is that bad?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing was about to reply when there suddenly came the sounds of rushing footsteps outside as two men burst into

the inn. He heard Hou Tonghai's voice say, "His granny [he's cussing], I told you earlier that there are ghosts in the world, but older Martial Brother did not believe me." He was so agitated that he could not say clearly what was in his raging mind. Then Sha Tongtian replied, "What ghost? I told you...we met a martial arts master."

Huang Rong looked out through the hole and saw that Hou Tonghai's face was covered in blood, while Sha Tongtian's clothes were torn to pieces. It seemed as though these two martial brothers had been through an extremely difficult situation.

Wanyan Honglie and Yang Kang were confounded to see their condition and they hastily asked about it. Hou Tonghai replied, "We were very unfortunate...we met a ghost at the Imperial Palace last night. Damn it! Old Hou's ears were cut off by that ghost."

Wanyan Honglie did indeed see that both sides of his face were covered with blood and looked somewhat unusual. As it turned out, his ears were missing. Wanyan Honglie was astonished.

Sha Tongtian scolded, "Still talking about a strange ghost story! Haven't you disgraced us enough?"

Hou Tonghai was afraid of his older Martial Brother, but he still tried to argue. "I saw it clearly. His eyes were blue...he was the red bearded 'Judge of Hell' pouncing at me with a scary 'Wah! Wah!' voice! All I did was turn my head, then he grabbed my neck and my ears were gone. This 'Judge of Hell' looked exactly like the one in the temple...how could it not be him?"

Sha Tongtian only fought the 'Judge' for three stances and his clothes were ripped to pieces. That 'Judge' was definitely a highly skilled martial artist, not some strange

ghost, but Sha Tongtian did not have a clue as to why he had the appearance of the 'Judge of Hell'.

The four people offered their guesses and they even asked Ouyang Ke who was lying down because of his injuries, but nobody came up with a plausible answer.

While they were still talking, Lingzhi Shangren [Shangren is a respectful term for addressing a Buddhist monk], Peng Lianhu and Liang Ziweng also arrived, one after another. Venerable Lingzhi's hands were bound behind his back with an iron chain, Peng Lianhu's cheeks were a swollen red and blue, and Liang Ziweng's condition was the funniest...the white hair on his head had been pulled out so cleanly that he looked like a Buddhist monk. As he stood near and talked to Sha Tongtian, they looked alike with their bald heads reflecting the light.

As it turned out those three had entered the Imperial Palace and spread out in order to find the Wumu Legacy. All of them had met ghosts, but each met a different ghost. One met with a 'wu chang gui' [the ghost supposed to take soul after death], the other 'huang ling guan' [yellow spirit officer], and the last was 'tu di pu sa' [earth god].

Liang Ziweng stroked his own bald head and opened his mouth to curse using all the dirty words he knew, including some like 'mother-in-law of the earth grew some fungi'. Peng Lianhu endured it all silently and did not say a single word as he worked hard trying to take the iron chain from Venerable Lingzhi's wrists. The chain, with hooks on either end, connected tightly to each other and cut deep into the flesh. Peng Lianhu had to exert a lot of strength and his hands were bruised and bloody before he could unhook the chain. Everyone looked at each other with blank dismay and nobody made a sound. They knew in their hearts that last night they had met a highly skilled martial artist and were

greatly insulted. They all felt ashamed. Hou Tonghai still believed it was a ghost and nobody bothered to argue with him.

After a long time Wanyan Honglie opened his mouth. "I wonder why Mr. Ouyang has not come back yet. Perhaps he also met a ghost."

"Mr. Ouyang's martial arts skill is unmatched," Yang Kang said. "Even if he met a ghost he wouldn't suffer a defeat." Peng Lianhu and the others were indifferent.

Huang Rong heard everything about how these people met extremely difficult situations and talked about ghosts. She was very pleased and thought, "The masks I bought for Zhou Dage [Big Brother] have unexpectedly boosted his power and prestige ...that is truly beyond my expectations. I wonder if he's met and fought the Old Poison yet." At that moment she felt Guo Jing's internal energy starting to flow into her palm, so she immediately turned back to join him.

Peng Lianhu and the others had been busy all night and were starving. Working together they chopped firewood, bought rice and vegetables, and prepared the food. When the food was ready, Hou Tonghai went to the cupboard to get some bowls. He noticed the iron bowl and tried to take it...naturally it would not budge. He was startled and shouted, "A ghost!" He pulled the bowl with all his strength, but of course the bowl did not move. Huang Rong heard his voice and was shocked, for she knew that their hiding place must not be found by them. Not only that, if a fight broke out they would not necessarily win and besides, if they moved ever so slightly, Guo Jing's life would be in danger. That must not happen. Inside the secret room she was frightened and did not know what to do. Outside of the room, Sha Tongtian heard his martial brother's shout and reprimanded him for making such a big fuss over nothing.

Hou Tonghai was not angry and said, "All right then, come and take this bowl." Sha Tongtian reached out his hand to pick up the bowl, but the bowl stayed put. "Ah!" he exclaimed.

Peng Lianhu heard him and came over. "Brother Sha [Sha Xiong]," he said, "There must be a secret mechanism connected to it. Try turning it to the left or right."

Huang Rong knew the situation was pressing and knew that they were being forced to risk it all. She handed the dagger to Guo Jing and reached out her hand to take the bamboo stick given to her by Hong Qigong. Inwardly she felt sad to think their lives would end this way. At the last moment she turned her head and noted the skeletons at the corner of the room. Suddenly an idea came to mind. She hurriedly grabbed the skulls, lifted a big watermelon, and placed the skulls on the watermelon.

With a creaking sound the iron door opened, revealing the hole behind it. Huang Rong placed the watermelon on top of her head and spread her long hair over her face. As Sha Tongtian opened the door, he saw a monster with two heads inside the cabinet, making scary 'Wah! Wah!' sounds. The monster's two heads were skulls, side by side on top of a blue and green striped sphere, with a clump of long black beard beneath it.

Everyone had suffered a lot the previous night and they were still shaken. Now they suddenly saw a ghost inside the cabinet and they were really frightened. Hou Tonghai screamed and ran away. Without thinking, everyone else followed. The only one left was Ouyang Ke. He was lying on a straw bed with broken legs, unable to run.

Huang Rong heaved a long sigh and quickly closed the cabinet door. She could not help but smile considering that,

for the moment, they had barely escaped serious trouble. She also knew those traitors were some of Jianghu's top veterans, so surely they would come back. They were running away because they had been frightened by the Old Urchin. If not for that, how could she have fooled them so easily? Once they calmed down they would come back and not be frightened away so easily. She was still undecided on the next course of action.

Huang Rong's grin had not disappeared before she heard a noise at the inn's door...someone was coming. Huang Rong grabbed a steel Emei Sting tightly in her hand and kept the bamboo stick close by her side. As soon as the cabinet door was opened, she would throw the projectile first and think about her actions later. After waiting for a moment she heard a beautiful voice calling out, "Innkeeper... Innkeeper!"

Huang Rong was really surprised to hear this call. She quickly looked out through the small hole and saw a lady wearing an embroidered gown sitting down. Her clothes and adornments were gorgeous, indicating that she came from a wealthy family. She sat with her back facing the mirror, so Huang Rong could not see her face.

The lady waited for quite a while and then she called out again, "Innkeeper...Innkeeper!"

Huang Rong thought, "That voice sounds familiar...tender yet strong. In fact she sounds like the Eldest Miss Cheng [Cheng Da Xiaojie] from Baoying." At that moment the lady turned around and it was Miss Cheng. Huang Rong was pleasantly surprised. "Why would she come this place?"

Sha Gu had not been awakened by the commotion made by Hou Tonghai and the others, but by now she'd had enough sleep, so she crawled up from her straw bed.

“Innkeeper,” Miss Cheng said. “Would you please prepare some food for me? I would be much obliged.”

Sha Gu shook her head, indicating she did not have any food. Suddenly she sniffed and smelled cooked rice. She rushed over to lift the pot’s lid and saw it was full of plain white rice that Peng Lianhu and the others had prepared. Sha Gu was delighted and, without wondering where the food came from, she filled two bowls, gave one to Miss Cheng while she gobbled the other. Miss Cheng noted there was no other food, only plain rice. She ate a few bites, and then put the bowl down. Sha Gu quickly ate three full bowls, then she patted her belly, looking very satisfied.

“Miss,” Miss Cheng said. “May I ask you a question? Do you know how far Ox Village is from this place?”

“Ox Village?” Sha Gu said. “This is Ox Village. How far it is from this place, I don’t know.”

Miss Cheng blushed. She lowered her head and played with the end of her belt. After some time she said, “So it turns out that this is Ox Village. Then I wonder if you know someone. I wonder if you know... know...someone ...”

Sha Gu did not wait for her to finish. She just shook her head impatiently and then rushed out of the door. Huang Rong wondered, “Who is she looking for in Ox Village? Ah, that’s right! She is the disciple of Sun Bu’Er. Most likely she received an order from her Master and Martial Uncles to find Qiu Chuji’s disciple, Yang Kang.”

Huang Rong saw Miss Cheng sitting up straight, her clothes properly arranged and she gently stroked the pearl head ornament at her temple. Her face was flushed and she had a slight smile at the corner of her lips. Huang Rong did not know what she was thinking and found this interesting. She suddenly heard footsteps as someone came in from outside.

This person was tall, handsome and his steps were brisk. As soon as he came in, he also called out for the innkeeper. Huang Rong thought, "By what coincidence would people I know gather together in this 'Cow' Village? The feng shui [harmonious balance - lit. wind and water] of Jing ge ge's Ox Village must be very good...if not for wealth, then for the individual." As it turned out, the incoming person was the Young Master of Cloud Manor, Lu Guanying. When he saw Miss Cheng he was startled. Then he called again, "Innkeeper!"

When Miss Cheng saw this young man, she felt shy and hurriedly turned away. Lu Guanying also felt awkward. "How come there's a beautiful young girl sitting alone in this place?" he thought. He walked around the kitchen and did not see anyone else. He was very hungry and saw there was rice in the pot. He turned to Miss Cheng and said, "Xiao Ren [lit. little/ - he's referring to himself] is very hungry, could Miss please give me a bowl to eat."

Miss Cheng hung her head lower, smiled slightly, and said, "The rice is not mine. Xiang Gong [honorable master], please help yourself."

Lu Guanying ate two full bowls, then cupped his fists to express his gratitude. He said, "This lowly person wishes to ask Miss about a certain place. I wonder how far Ox Village is from here?"

Miss Cheng and Huang Rong were both delighted. "Ha, it turns out he is also looking for Ox Village," they both thought. Miss Cheng stood up to return his respects and said, "This is Ox Village."

Lu Guanying was delighted. "That's wonderful!" he said, "This lowly person also wonders if Miss knows a certain man."

Miss Cheng was about to say that she was not a local when she suddenly changed her mind. "I wonder who he is looking for?" she thought.

Lu Guanying said, "I am looking for a gentleman surnamed Guo, Master Guo Jing. I was wondering where he lives... Is he home right now?"

Both Miss Cheng and Huang Rong were startled. "Why is he looking for him?"

Miss Cheng was dumbstruck. She hung her head and blushed to her ears. Looking at her expression, Huang Rong, with eighty percent certainty, guessed, "It seems this Miss secretly fell in love with Jing ge ge because he saved her in Baoying." Because Huang Rong was still very young, was an open-minded person, and believed in her heart that Guo Jing would not disagree with her reasoning, her heart, therefore, was free from jealousy. In fact, she was delighted to find that others liked Guo Jing as well.

Huang Rong's speculation was right on target. When Miss Cheng was held captive by Ouyang Ke, it was true that it was the Beggar Clan's Li Sheng and his men who tried to help her, but they were not Ouyang Ke's match. If Guo Jing and Huang Rong had not gone into action, she would have suffered a disgrace. She'd noticed Guo Jing was young, his skill superb, and his manner, sincere. Unexpectedly a strand of love thread floated from her to stick on Guo Jing.

She was the young lady of a very rich family and had never been away from home before. She had reached the age where she started to have an interest in the opposite sex, so when she met an attractive young man, Guo Jing, she unexpectedly fell in love. Even after Guo Jing left, he was always in Miss Cheng's mind. She thought it over from many sides and mustered up enough courage to leave home

in the middle of the night. Though she was a martial artist, she had never left home before and did not have the slightest idea about the ways of Jianghu people. She happened to hear that Guo Jing was from Ox Village in Lin'an prefecture, and thereupon found her way there.

Because her appearance was elegant and her bearing noble, bad people did not dare to bully her along the way. At the previous village she was told that Ox Village was near and when she suddenly heard Sha Gu say that this was Ox Village, she had no idea what to do next. She had come thousands of li to find Guo Jing...and now she was hoping Guo Jing would not be home. Her thoughts were, "I will secretly go to his home in the evening, take one look at him, and then go home. I can't let him know I came to find him... I would die of embarrassment if he found out."

Now, at this moment, Lu Guanying arrived and inquired about Guo Jing. Miss Cheng was afraid he had found out her heart's desire. She was at a loss for a moment, and then decided she would stand up and leave. Suddenly, outside the door, an ugly face appeared then vanished. Miss Cheng was startled and drew back two steps. That ugly face reappeared and called out, "Two-headed ghost! Come out in the sun if you have the ability. Three-Headed Dragon [San Tou Jiao] Master Hou challenges you to fight. I have one more head [referring to his Three-Headed Dragon nickname] than you do. In the bright sun, Master Hou does not fear you!" His meaning was clear: when it was dark, Master Hou would candidly admit defeat even though he had more heads. Lu and Cheng obviously did not understand.

"Humph!" Huang Rong snorted. "So they finally came back," she murmured. She believed Lu's and Cheng's martial arts skills were not too high and it would be difficult for them to fight Peng Lianhu and the others. If she and

Guo Jing wanted to help, all they would be doing is delivering two more lives. The best way would be to tell them to get out of the way quickly. But how could she let them know? She went over other possibilities, but after thinking it over, she still could not produce any really good ideas. All they had was each other and their courage.

When Peng Lianhu and the others saw the double-headed ghost, they all thought it was the same expert, dressed as a ghost, who had humiliated them the previous night. Therefore, they all ran from the village as far as possible. No one dared to come back, with the exception of Hou Tonghai. He was a simple man and actually believed it was a real ghost. He felt the blazing sun on his head, burning his scalp. While everybody else had disappeared, he cursed, "Ghosts will meet their doom under the sun. They know that, yet they dare to roam Jianghu. I, Lao Hou [Old Hou], am not afraid and I'm going back to face the ghost. Let them respect me." Thereupon he came back to the inn with big strides, albeit with some trepidation in his heart. When he stuck his head in the door he saw Miss Cheng and Lu Guanying sitting in the middle of the room. "Not good!" he said to himself, "The double-headed ghost has transformed itself into a man and a woman. Old Hou, oh, Old Hou, you have to be very careful."

Lu Guanying and Miss Cheng heard his challenge, but they did not understand the reason. They looked at each other and decided he was a mad man; hence they ignored him. Hou Tonghai kept cursing, but the ghost did not come out to fight. He believed that the ghost was afraid of the sun. As for barging in and capturing the ghost, Old Hou did not have the nerve. They were in a stalemate for quite a while. He was waiting for the two ghosts to transform themselves into other forms, but who would have thought that the ghosts did not show any signs of activity at all. Suddenly he

remembered an old saying that ghosts were afraid of filthy things, so he left at once to find some dung.

There were several outhouses in the village and there was one big one next to the inn. In his efforts to capture the ghost he was not afraid of filth, so he took off his outer garment, scooped up a large bundle of dung, and returned to the inn. He saw Lu and Cheng still sitting in the inn. The secret weapon in his hands boosted his courage considerably. He called out loudly, "All right, daring ghost! Master Hou wants you to return to your original form." With his three-pronged fork in his left hand and the bundle of dung in his right hand, he boldly entered the room.

As Lu and Cheng watched this lunatic coming back, they were slightly startled. Even before the man arrived they had already noticed the bad smell he was bringing. Hou Tonghai pondered, "I've heard people say that men are more vicious than women, but the female ghost is more dangerous than the male." Therefore, he lifted the bundle and threw it towards Miss Cheng.

Miss Cheng called out in alarm and moved sideways to evade it. Lu Guanying had already lifted a bench to strike the bundle aside. It fell to the floor and broke open. Dung flew everywhere and a terrible smell attacked their nostrils making them want to throw up.

Hou Tonghai shouted loudly, "Double-headed ghost, quickly go back to your original form." Lifting his fork he attacked Miss Cheng ferociously. He was simple-minded, but his martial arts skills were not bad. His fork attack was both swift and fierce.

Lu and Cheng were alarmed and both thought, "This man is obviously a Wulin expert and he is by no means a lunatic."

Lu Guanying saw Miss Cheng as a lady from a renowned family and she looked so frail and tender that a whiff of wind might blow her away. He was afraid this mad man might hurt her, so he lifted the long bench to parry the three-pronged steel fork. "Who are you, Sir?" he asked. Hou Tonghai ignored his question and jabbed at him with his fork three times. Lu Guanying kept using the bench as his weapon and repeatedly asked his name.

Hou Tonghai noticed that although the ghost's martial arts skill was not weak, it was entirely different from that of the mysterious appearing and disappearing ghost of last night. He concluded it was the result of his dung attack earlier. He was very smug and called out, "You, the enchanting ghost, want to know my name so that you can put a curse on me, don't you? Your master won't fall for your trick."

Initially he'd called himself 'Master Hou', but now that he had this sudden inspiration, he omitted the word 'Hou' and only used the word 'Master' to avoid the ghost's throwing a curse on him. The steel rings on his fork made a ding-dong sound as he intensified his attack.

Lu Guanying's martial arts were inferior to his opponent's to begin with and he was using a bench as a weapon. He wanted to draw the saber from his waist but did not have the chance to do so. He was forced to step back so that after a while his back was against the wall, covering the small hole through which Huang Rong was looking.

Hou Tonghai stabbed with his steel fork and Lu Guanying hastily moved sideways to evade it. 'Bang!' the fork punctured the wall less than a foot away from Huang Rong's peep-hole. Before he'd pulled his fork back, the bench in Lu Guanying's hand struck towards the top of his head. Hou Tonghai's foot flew out to kick Lu Guanying's hand, while his left fist attacked Lu Guanying's face. The

bench fell from Lu Guanying's hands as he was forced to duck to avoid the blow. Meanwhile Hou Tonghai had withdrawn his steel fork from the wall.

Miss Cheng saw this critical situation and she jumped forward, pulled the saber from Lu Guanying's waist, and handed it to him. "Many thanks!" Lu Guanying said. He had never imagined that, at this critical moment, this polite and charming girl would have the courage to enter such a fierce battle and draw his saber to help him. As he saw the bright flickering light from the steel fork coming towards him, his saber immediately went up horizontally in front of his chest and 'clang!' sparks flew everywhere. The steel fork was forced sideways, but he felt a pain in his chest. It seemed that this lunatic's strength was not insignificant, but with a saber in his hand, he was greatly encouraged.

After exchanging several stances, both men's feet had stepped into the dung and spread it everywhere they stepped. In the beginning, Hou Tonghai was fighting with some trepidation and he'd thought about darting out of the door to escape. He did not dare to use all of his strength, but the longer they fought, he began to see that the ghost was unable to defeat him. Obviously his enchantment powers were restrained by the dung. He became bolder and his attacks became fiercer. In the end Lu Guanying was having a hard time blocking his attacks.

At first Miss Cheng was repulsed by the dung on the floor and she stood in a corner watching the fight. Then she saw that this handsome young man would lose his life to the lunatic's steel fork. She hesitated for a moment, finally made up her mind, and drew a sword from her bundle. She called out to Lu Guanying, "Honorable elder brother [Xiong Gong], I ... I am going to help you. Please forgive me." Her manners were so ingrained that she was apologizing before

helping someone to fight. Her sword flashed towards Hou Tonghai's chest.

She was the Sage of Tranquility [Qingjing Sanren], Sun Bu'Er's disciple, so naturally she was well-versed in the Quanzhen Sect's sword techniques. Hou Tonghai had anticipated her move. He thought that the double-headed ghost had transformed itself into two and that the female ghost would attack him soon as an evil spirit, so he was not surprised. But Lu Guanying was pleasantly surprised. He saw that her movements were quick and her sword technique exquisite. His heart was full of admiration. His own saber was starting to become erratic and he was sweating profusely, but now someone suddenly came to help him and his spirits rose.

At first Hou Tonghai was quite worried by the female ghost's fierceness. But after a few stances he noticed that although her sword technique was proficient, her strength was ordinary. Moreover, she looked nervous. Probably she had not been a ghost for long and had not reached the 'old ghost' level yet. He gradually felt more relieved. His three-pronged fork created strong gusts of wind. One against two and he was still able to attack more than his opponents.

Watching from the other room, Huang Rong felt very anxious since she knew Lu and Cheng would eventually fall to their enemy. She wanted to lend them a hand, but she could not leave Guo Jing even half a step. Otherwise, with her intelligence and abundant experience, it would be very easy for her to play tricks on this 'Three-Headed Dragon'.

She heard Lu Guanying call out, "Miss, Go away! You don't have to endanger yourself with him."

Miss Cheng knew he was worried that she might be injured and wanted to fight this mad man alone. She was very

grateful, but she also knew that if he fought alone, he would not be able to resist this enemy. She shook her head, unwilling to withdraw.

As Lu Guanying fought furiously, he shouted to Hou Tonghai, "As a real man you are making things difficult for a young girl...what kind of hero are you? Just deal with me, a man surnamed Lu, and let this Miss go."

Although Hou Tonghai was muddle-headed, he knew by now that these two were not ghosts. But seeing how beautiful Miss Cheng was, and since he had gained the upper hand, how could he let her go? With a laugh he said, "I want to capture the male ghost and I also want to take the female ghost." His steel fork traveled horizontally with a violent thrust. He was being thirty percent lenient towards Miss Cheng, otherwise he would have stabbed her already.

"Miss, go quickly!" Lu Guanying said anxiously, "The man surnamed Lu is grateful for your kindness."

"Honorable master's honored surname is Lu, is it?" Miss Cheng asked in a low voice.

"Precisely," Lu Guanying replied. "Miss, what is your name? What school do you belong to?"

"My Master's surname is Sun. People call her the Sage of Tranquility," Miss Cheng said. "I ... I ..." She was going to say her name, but suddenly felt shy and closed her mouth.

"Miss, I'll block him and you run quickly," Lu Guanying said. "As long as the man surnamed Lu is still alive, I will look for you. I thank you for your help today."

Miss Cheng was blushing as she stammered, "I ... I don't ... honorable elder brother ..." Turning her head to Hou Tonghai she said, "Hey, mad man! Don't you dare injure this

man. My Master is the Sun Zhenren [lit. true person, a respectful term of address for a Taoist priest] from the Quanzhen Sect. She will arrive shortly.”

The names of the Quanzhen Seven Masters were well-known throughout the world. Hou Tonghai had seen it that day with his own eyes when the ‘Immortal with the Iron Foot’ [Tie Jiao Xian], Jade Sun [Yuyang Zi], Wang Chuyi, intimidated the group of experts at the Zhao Palace. Now, hearing Miss Cheng, he was somewhat afraid, but after that slight shock he cursed, “Even if the Quanzhen Seven Masters come together your master here will butcher them all, one by one!”

From outside the door, there suddenly came someone’s clear voice saying, “Who is it in there that’s speaking such nonsense and doesn’t want to live?”

The three were engaged in a fierce battle, but when they heard this voice they all leaped backwards. Lu Guanying was afraid Hou Tonghai would launch a sneak attack so he pulled Miss Cheng behind him and wielded his saber in front of her. Only then he did raise his head to take a look.

He saw a young Taoist priest standing at the doorstep, wearing a feather robe and a star crown. His face was handsome, his eyes bright, and he held a Taoist fly-whisk in his hand. “Who said he wants to butcher the Quanzhen Seven Masters?” he asked coldly.

With the fork in his right hand, his left hand on his hip, Hou Tonghai, with glaring eyes, loudly said, “It was me, your master. So what?”

“All right,” the young priest said, “You’re welcome to try.” Leaning his body forward he swept the whisk toward Hou Tonghai’s face.

Guo Jing had finished one round of exercise by now and hearing the clamor of the battle outside he looked out through the small hole. Huang Rong asked, "Is this young priest also one of the Quanzhen Seven Masters?"

Guo Jing recognized the young priest as Yin Zhiping, Qiu Chuji's disciple. Two years ago he received an order from his master to deliver a letter to the Jiangnan Six Freaks and had a martial arts contest with Guo Jing at night in which Guo Jing was defeated. Guo Jing quietly told Huang Rong everything.

As Huang Rong watched him exchange a few stances with Hou Tonghai, she shook her head and said, "He won't defeat the Three-Headed Dragon."

As Yin Zhiping slightly gave way to Hou Tonghai's attacks, Lu Guanying, saber in hand, immediately stepped forward to help him. Compared to the time he fought Guo Jing that night, he had made some progress, but even fighting side by side with Lu Guanying, they only managed to face Hou Tonghai evenly.

Miss Cheng's left hand had been grabbed by Lu Guanying for only a short moment, yet her heart was still pitter-pattering madly. As the three people fought furiously right next to her, she was actually daydreaming and gently stroking her hand. With a start she was suddenly awakened from her dazed condition by a clanking noise and Lu Guanying's urgent voice, "Miss, watch out!"

Hou Tonghai noticed her condition and thrust his fork at her. Lu Guanying hastily fended off the attack while shouting at her. Miss Cheng's face turned completely red as she gathered her thoughts and re-entered the battle. Miss Cheng's martial arts skill was not very high, but with one against three, Hou Tonghai had a hard time blocking these

enemies. He brandished his fork ferociously, trying to create an opportunity to escape and find some help, but Yin Zhiping's fly-whisk was dancing around in front of his face, blurring his vision. He was negligent for a split second and Lu Guanying's saber slashed his leg.

"Your eighteen ancestors be damned!" Hou Tonghai cursed. But because of this wound he gradually became slower. He thrust the steel fork forward and Yin Zhiping parried with his whisk and the whisk coiled around it. They both pulled their respective weapons back in a tug-of-war. Because Hou Tonghai was stronger, Yin Zhiping was forced to let his whisk go.

Miss Cheng thrust her sword using the 'Fighting and Shaking Star and River' [dou yao xing he] and stabbed his right shoulder. Hou Tonghai could no longer hold his steel fork and it fell. Yin Zhiping took this opportunity to sweep his leg and Hou Tonghai tumbled to the floor. Lu Guanying immediately pounced on him. Taking the leather belt from his waist he bound Hou Tonghai's hands behind his back.

Yin Zhiping laughed and said, "You can't even defeat a Quanzhen Seven Masters' disciple, so how would you butcher the Quanzhen Seven Masters?" Hou Tonghai opened his mouth and shouted curse words, saying that it was three against one and that it was not a real hero's deed. Yin Zhiping tore off a piece of his clothing and stuffed it into his mouth. Hou Tonghai's face looked very angry, but he could not say a thing.

Yin Zhiping bowed to Miss Cheng, "Elder Martial Sister [Shijie] is the disciple of Martial Uncle Sun [Sun Shishu]? Your little brother Yin Zhiping greets you."

Miss Cheng quickly returned his bow and said, "I don't deserve it. I wonder, who Martial Brother's [Shixiong]

Martial Uncle [Shibo] is? Little sister pays my respects to Elder Martial Brother Yin."

"Little brother is a disciple of Eternal Spring [Changchun]," Yin Zhiping replied.

Since becoming an apprentice to her master, Miss Cheng had never left her home. Of the Quanzhen Seven Masters, she had never met six of them. However, her master had told her all about her martial uncles and that Changchun Zi, Elder Martial Uncle Qiu [Qiu Shibo] was the most heroic and possessed the highest martial arts skills. Learning that Yin Zhiping was Qiu Chuji's disciple, she regarded him with respect. Lowering her head she said, "Elder brother is my older martial brother. I am surnamed Cheng. Just call me Younger Martial Sister Cheng."

Yin Zhiping had been under his master's tutelage for quite a long time and he also had inherited his master's broad-minded and heroic disposition. He regarded this martial sister as girlish and shy. She did not look like a heroic person at all, so he was secretly amused. He chatted with her about their school for a while then turned toward Lu Guanying to introduce himself. Lu Guanying introduced himself, but did not mention his father's name or title.

Yin Zhiping turned his attention to Hou Tonghai. "This lunatic's martial arts are actually very good. I wonder where he came from. We must not release him," he said.

Lu Guanying said, "Let little brother use my saber and finish him off." He was the leader of a band of pirates at Lake Tai and killing was not a serious matter for him. Miss Cheng, on the other hand, was tender-hearted. "Ah! Don't kill him!" she said.

Yin Zhiping smiled, "It's all right with me if we don't kill him," he said. "Younger Martial Sister Cheng [Cheng

Shimei], have you been here long?"

Miss Cheng blushed. "Little sister has just arrived," she said.

Yin Zhiping looked at the couple and thought, "Looks like these two are in love with one another...I must not interfere. I'll just visit for a while and then I'll go." He said, "I received an order from Master to go to Ox Village to find someone and convey a message to him. Little brother must take his leave. We'll meet again later." He cupped his hands and turned around to leave.

Miss Cheng's blush had not quite faded and from listening to him it seemed like a tinge of redness crept back onto her face. Hanging her head she asked timidly, "Elder Martial Brother Yin, who are you seeking?"

Yin Zhiping hesitated slightly as he thought, "Younger Martial Sister Cheng is a disciple of my school and this fellow surnamed Lu is her travel companion, so he is not an outsider. I think there is no harm in telling them." Thereupon he said, "I am looking for a friend surnamed Guo."

With these words, the people on both sides of the wall were stunned. Lu Guanying asked, "Could it be that this friend has the single character 'Jing' as his name?"

"That's right," Yin Zhiping said, "Brother Lu also knows this Guo friend?" he asked.

Lu Guanying replied, "The one little brother is looking for is exactly this Martial Uncle Guo [Guo Shishu]."

Yin Zhiping and Miss Cheng were both surprised, "You call him Martial Uncle?"

"My father is of the same generation as he," Lu Guanying said. "That's why Little Brother calls him Shishu." Lu Chengfeng and Huang Rong were of the same generation [meaning that they had the same teacher-Huang Yaoshi] and Guo Jing and Huang Rong were engaged to each other. It was for this reason that Lu Guanying referred to Guo Jing as Martial Uncle.

Miss Cheng did not say anything, but her heart was troubled. Yin Zhiping quickly asked, "Have you seen him? Where is he?"

"Little Brother has just arrived. I was about to inquire about him when this lunatic attacked without any reason," Lu Guanying replied.

"Good!" Yin Zhiping said. "Then let us look for him together." The three went out the door together.

Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other with bitter smiles on their faces. "They will come back," Guo Jing said. "Rong'er, open the door and call them."

Huang Rong sighed and said, "How can I do that? These people are looking for you and it must be about some important matters. You are still trying to heal your injury... how can your attention be diverted?"

"That's right," Guo Jing agreed. "It must be a very important matter. Can you think of something?"

Huang Rong said, "I will not open the door even if the sky is falling"

Sure enough, not too long afterwards, Yin Zhiping and the others came back to the inn. Lu Guanying said, "Even in his hometown no one can shed any light on his whereabouts. This is not good."

Yin Zhiping said, "May we know for what important matter does Brother Lu seek him?"

Initially Lu Guanying was unwilling to say, but seeing Miss Cheng's hopeful look, for some unknown reason he found it hard to refuse. He said, "It is a long story. Let little brother sweep the filth from the floor first, then I will relate the story to you two." There was no broom or dustpan in this inn, so Yin and Lu had to use tree branches to clean up the mess and only then did they sit down to talk.

Lu Guanying was about to speak when Miss Cheng suddenly said, "Wait a minute!" She went to Hou Tonghai and cut two small pieces from her clothing to stop his ears. "We can't let him listen," she said in a low voice.

Lu Guanying praised her, "Miss is very careful. We don't know where this lunatic came from, so we must not let him listen to what we are discussing."

On the other side of the wall Huang Rong silently laughed. "We are eavesdropping in here and it is impossible for you to know about it. Ouyang Ke is lying there inside and listening and nobody notices, yet you still talk about being careful?"

Miss Cheng had not roamed Jianghu before. Yin Zhiping had his master's impetuosity and he was young and inexperienced. Lu Guanying was the leader of Lake Tai's pirates and he was used to giving orders and not used to paying attention to the details. For that reason the three talked about important matters without carefully investigating their surroundings.

As Miss Cheng stooped down, she saw that Hou Tonghai's ears had been cut off. She was only startled for moment before stuffing the pieces of cloth into his ear holes. She smiled slightly and said to Lu Guanying, "Now you can talk."

Lu Guanying reluctantly said, "Ay! I don't know where to start. I am looking for Martial Uncle Guo and reasonably speaking, I should not be looking for him, but I have to."

"This is so strange," Yin Zhiping commented.

"That's true," Lu Guanying continued, "I am looking for Martial Uncle Guo not because of him, but because of his six masters."

Yin Zhiping slapped the table and shouted, "The Six Freaks of Jiangnan?"

"Exactly," Lu Guanying replied.

"Aha!" Yin Zhiping exclaimed. "I think Brother Lu came to this place for the same matter as little Brother. Why don't we write down a name and let Younger Martial Sister Cheng decide whether we are thinking of the same thing or not."

Before Lu Guanying could answer, Miss Cheng was already smiling and said, "That's a good idea. You two turn your backs and write."

Yin Zhiping and Lu Guanying both picked up a twig and wrote something on the floor. Yin Zhiping said with a smile, "Younger Martial Sister Cheng, see if what we wrote is the same or not."

Miss Cheng looked at their writing and in a low voice said, "Elder Martial Brother Yin, your guess was wrong. The two of you did not write the same thing."

"Ah!" Yin Zhiping exclaimed and stood up.

Miss Cheng smiled and said, "While you wrote 'Huang Yaoshi', he actually drew a peach blossom."

Huang Rong was shocked. "Both of them are looking for Jing ge ge in regards to my father?" she thought. She heard Lu Guanying say, "What Brother Yin wrote is the name of the Grandmaster of my school. Little brother does not dare to write down his name."

Yin Zhiping was startled. "Your Grandmaster? Hmm, it seems that what we wrote down is the same after all. Isn't Huang Yaoshi the Master of Peach Blossom Island?"

"Oh! So that's how it is," Miss Cheng said.

Yin Zhiping said, "Since Brother Lu is a Peach Blossom Island disciple, then the reason you are looking for the Six Freaks of Jiangnan is certainly not in their favor."

"That's not true," Lu Guanying said.

Yin Zhiping noticed Lu Guanying spoke with reluctance. He was unhappy as he said, "Since Brother Lu does not regard little brother as a friend, it's useless for us to talk any longer. I'll take my leave now." He stood up and turned around to leave.

Lu Guanying hastily said, "Elder Brother Yin, wait! Little brother has a difficulty and I wish for older brother's help."

Yin Zhiping was overjoyed when others came to him for help so he happily said, "All right, talk with me."

Lu Guanying said, "Elder Brother Yin, you are a disciple of the Quanzhen Sect. If you know someone is in danger, you will certainly warn that person to guard against the danger. That is part of your duty as a chivalrous person. But what if your own superior wanted to harm innocent people...would you still warn those innocent people to guard against your superior?"

Yin Zhiping slapped his thigh and exclaimed, "That's right! I know you are a Peach Blossom Island disciple, so you must have great difficulty with this matter. All right, let us see what I can do."

Lu Guanying said, "In this matter, if little brother does not do anything, I am not doing my duty upholding righteousness. But if I do something, I am betraying my own school. Even though little brother wishes to ask older Martial Brother's help, in all honesty, I cannot open my mouth."

Yin Zhiping had more or less guessed what he wanted, but since he was not willing to say it out loud, Yin Zhiping did not quite know what to do. He lifted his hand to scratch his head and looked bemused.

Miss Cheng remembered something: when a girl was too shy to say her heart's desires, the mother or her sisters would usually ask her questions, and determine what she really wanted by her nodding or shaking her head. Although it was not the best method, it would usually reveal the contents of the girl's heart in the end. For instance the mother would ask, "Child, are you in love with Zhang San'ge [Third Brother surnamed Zhang]?" The girl would shake her head. "Is it Li Silang [Fourth lad of Li family]?" The girl would shake her head again. "Then it must be the Wang family's cousin." The girl would hang her head without saying anything which meant the guess was correct. Thereupon Miss Cheng said to Yin Zhiping, "Elder Martial Brother Yin, you ask big brother Lu questions. If it is correct, he will nod, if wrong, he will shake his head. That way he won't say anything to betray his own school."

Yin Zhiping was delighted. "Little sister...that is a wonderful idea. Brother Lu, let me tell you first about my business. My Master, Changchun Zhenren, happened to hear that the

Master of Peach Blossom Island hates the Six Freaks of Jiangnan to his soul and that he is going to wipe out the entire six families from the face of the earth. My Master immediately set out to Jiaxing to deliver a warning, but the Six Freaks were not at home. They were traveling somewhere. Thereupon my Master visited the six families one by one and told them to escape. When Island Master Huang arrived, he did not find a single person. He was livid and lashed out his anger to the air...then he went north. I don't know what happened afterwards. Do you know of this matter?"

Lu Guanying nodded. Yin Zhiping continued, "I think Island Master Huang is pursuing the Six Freaks to the north. Originally there was some friction between my Master and the Six Freaks, but first, this friction has been taken care of, secondly, my Master greatly admires the Six Freaks' chivalrous deeds in helping others in distress, and finally, my Master thinks this matter is not the Six Freaks' fault at all. It so happened that the Quanzhen Seven Masters were having a meeting in Jiangnan and hence they spread out to find the Six Freaks, to warn them of this danger. It would be best if they could go into hiding in a faraway place so that your Grandmaster won't be able to find them. Don't you agree that we are doing the right thing?"

Lu Guanying repeatedly nodded his head.

Huang Rong was puzzled. "Jing ge ge has already fulfilled his promise to go to Peach Blossom Island. Why would Father still want to settle the debt with the Six Freaks?" She did not know that her father had heard Lingzhi Shangren's lie and believed that his daughter had died at sea. Therefore, grief-stricken, he wanted to vent his anger on the Six Freaks.

She listened as Yin Zhiping continued, "Since he could not find the Six Freaks, my Master then remembered the Six Freaks' disciple, Guo Jing. He is a native of Ox Village in Lin'an prefecture and has most likely returned to his hometown. For that reason my Master sent little brother to find him here. Chances are he would know his six masters' whereabouts. Did you also come to this place regarding this business?"

Lu Guanying again nodded his head. Yin Zhiping said, "Who would have thought that Brother Guo has not come home yet. My Master is very fond of the Six Freaks, but since he could not find them, he did not know what else he could do. But since this is the case, Island Master Huang might not be able to find them either. Brother Lu wanted to ask for my help...does it concern this matter also?"

Lu Guanying nodded. Yin Zhiping said, "Whatever orders Brother Lu might have, please tell me. Little brother will do his best to fulfill your wish."

Lu Guanying did not open his mouth and he looked quite bemused. Miss Cheng said with a smile, "Older Martial Brother Yin, you forget that Young Master Lu [Lu Xiang Gong] cannot open his mouth to speak frankly."

Yin Zhiping smiled, "That's right," he said. "Brother Lu...do you want me to wait for Brother Guo in this place?" Lu Guanying shook his head.

"Do you want little brother to find the Six Freaks and Brother Guo then?" Yin Zhiping asked. Again Lu Guanying shook his head.

"Ah, I get it," Yin Zhiping said. "Brother Lu wants little brother to spread the news in Jianghu. The Six Freaks are natives of Jiangnan. Once the word is out, sooner or later they will hear it."

Lu Guanying again shook his head. Yin Zhiping proposed seven or eight more guesses, but Lu Guanying kept shaking his head. Miss Cheng also asked him two questions, but none of her guesses were correct either. Not only was Yin Zhiping confounded, but Huang Rong in the adjacent room was equally so. The three were in a deadlocked situation for a long time. Finally Yin Zhiping laughed and said, "Little Sister Cheng, you can talk with him...I cannot play this riddle game any longer. I am going out for a walk. I will be back in a couple of hours." With that he went out the door.

Other than Hou Tonghai, Lu and Cheng were left alone. Miss Cheng hung her head and she noticed that Lu Guanying still had not made a move. She stole a glance at him just as Lu Guanying was also looking at her. Their eyes met and both hurriedly glanced away. Miss Cheng blushed even redder than before and hung her head even lower so that her chin touched her chest. Her hands played with the silk tassels at the end of her sword's hilt.

Lu Guanying slowly stood up and walked to the nearby stove above which was a Kitchen God idol. He stood in front of the Kitchen God idol and said, "Kitchen God, this lowly person has a burden in my heart, but I cannot reveal it to anyone else. I am going to bare it all to you, hoping that with your divine power you will bless this matter."

Miss Cheng silently praised him, "A smart man." She raised her head to listen carefully.

Lu Guanying said, "This lowly person is Lu Guanying, the son of Manor Master Lu of Cloud Manor by Lake Tai. My father's name is Chengfeng and he is a disciple of Island Master Huang of Peach Blossom Island. A few days ago my Grandmaster came to the manor and he said he wanted to kill the Six Freaks of Jiangnan and their entire families. He ordered my father and my Older Martial Uncle [Shibo] Mei

Chaofeng to help find the Six Freaks' whereabouts. Older Martial Uncle Mei has a deep enmity with the Six Freaks, so she accepted this order with gladness. Not so my father since he knew the Six Freaks of Jiangnan as patriots and chivalrous heroes. Killing them would not be righteous. Moreover, my father has become friends with the Six Freak's disciple, Younger Martial Uncle Guo and therefore, he could not simply ignore this matter. My father had received an order from my Grandmaster, so he was in a very difficult position. He had a mind to dispatch this lowly person to deliver a warning to the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, telling them to go into hiding and save their lives, but he could not betray his own master. That night my father looked up to the sky, heaved a deep sigh, and softly talked to himself, revealing his concerns. This lowly person was nearby and heard everything. Being a filial person I share my father's sorrow. Eventually my Grandmaster left and this lowly person departed that very same night to try to find the Six Freaks and deliver the warning."

Huang Rong and Miss Cheng both thought, "It turns out he is copying his father's method of telling someone without betraying his school."

They listened to Lu Guanying continue. "The Six Freaks were nowhere to be found, but I remembered their disciple, Younger Martial Uncle Guo, but he is also nowhere to be found. Younger Martial Uncle Guo is my Grandmaster's son-in-law ..."

"Ah!" Miss Cheng could not help but exclaim softly, then hastily covered her mouth with her hand. Originally she was attracted to Guo Jing and thought she was in love with him. She did not realize it was only a young girl's infatuation and not true love. Today she'd met Lu Guanying who looked distinguished, handsome and elegant. In all respects he seemed superior to Guo Jing. When she heard that Guo Jing

was Huang Yaoshi's son-in-law she was shocked, but not at all sad or heartbroken. On the contrary, she felt relieved. She also recalled at Baoying she'd noticed that Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very close to each other. All of a sudden it did not matter to her anymore. Unconsciously, the heart of this young woman had already been taken by somebody else.

Lu Guanying heard her soft exclamation. He wanted to turn around and look at her face, but he forced himself to bear with it. He thought, "If I acknowledge someone is listening from the side, I must stop talking altogether. That day when Father talked to the heavens, he never once looked in my direction. Right now I am talking to the Kitchen God. If she is listening, that means she is eavesdropping and I have nothing to do with it." Thereupon he continued, "I am hoping that when I find Younger Martial Uncle Guo, he and Martial Aunt Huang [Huang Shigu] will beseech the Grandmaster to show mercy. My Grandmaster is hot-tempered, but he loves his daughter and son-in-law, so it is possible that he will not kill his son-in-law's masters. However, from the way my father talked, it sounds as though Younger Martial Uncle Guo and Martial Aunt Huang have encountered some calamities. Whatever they were, it was not convenient for me to ask it of my father."

Listening to this point Huang Rong thought, "Does father know that Jing ge ge is suffering from a serious injury? No, he simply cannot know about it. Most probably he heard that we were stranded on that deserted island."

Meanwhile Lu Guanying continued, "Elder Martial Brother Yin is straightforward and just. Miss Cheng is intelligent and friendly ..."

Listening to him praising her to her face, Miss Cheng was happy and shy at the same time.

“... but what’s in my heart is like a fantasy and they cannot possibly guess it. I am thinking that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan are well-known heroes and real men. Although their martial arts skills are inferior to my Grandmaster, isn’t asking them to run away from danger the same as accusing them of being afraid of death? They certainly will not consider such a cowardly act. I am afraid that if they hear the news, instead of running away, they will go and find the Grandmaster! Therefore, instead of helping them, I would be sending them into a disaster.”

Huang Rong nodded unseen. She thought Lu Guanying was worthy of being the leader of the Lake Tai heroes and he had a profound understanding of the ways of Jianghu people. She heard him continue, “I also think that the Quanzhen Seven Masters are chivalrous people with resounding names and prestige. Their martial art skills are also high. If Elder Martial Brother Yin and Miss Cheng are willing to earnestly ask their masters to be mediators, Grandmaster would most likely give them face. I don’t think there is an irreconcilable deep animosity between Grandmaster and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. It’s more likely the Six Freaks said or did something that was offensive to the Grandmaster. What they need is a reputable character to act as the mediator, then forgiveness is surely not impossible. Kitchen God, Master, this lowly person’s difficulty is that my idea is in vain since I cannot reveal it to anyone. I am asking you to handle this business for me.” Having finished speaking, he repeatedly bowed to pay his respects to the Kitchen God.

As he finished speaking, Miss Cheng hastily turned around to look for Yin Zhiping, but as she walked to the door she heard Lu Guanying saying something more. “Kitchen God, if the Quanzhen Seven Masters are willing to mediate, they will be performing an enormously good deed. When the

Seven talk to my Grandmaster, I hope that they will be courteous and respectful and not offend my Grandmaster in any way. Otherwise, 'when one wave has not yet subsided, another wave arises'...all efforts will be wasted. This is all I have to say to you."

Miss Cheng smiled and said in her heart, "You have finished talking and now it's my turn to take care of your business." Then she left the inn to look for Yin Zhiping. After going around the village she saw neither his shadow nor his tracks.

She was about to turn around and go back when she suddenly heard Yin Zhiping calling her in a low voice, "Younger Martial Sister Cheng!" He beckoned to her from the corner of a wall.

"Ah! Here you are," Miss Cheng said happily.

Yin Zhiping made a hand signal, telling her to be quiet. He pointed to the west and walked towards her. In a low voice he told her, "There are some suspicious looking people snooping around over there and they all carry weapons."

Miss Cheng's mind was pre-occupied with what Lu Guanying had just said. She said, "I think they are just passers-by."

Yin Zhiping's face actually looked serious and again in a low voice he said, "Those people's movements are agile and their martial arts skills must be very high. We must be very careful." Actually what he saw was Peng Lianhu and the others. They'd waited for Hou Tonghai for a long time and he had not come back. They thought he must be in some danger, but all of them remembered the expert who pretended to be the ghost the previous night in the Imperial Palace. Who would dare to go and rescue him? Suddenly they spotted Yin Zhiping, so they withdrew and

hid themselves. Yin Zhiping waited for a while and after not seeing any activity ahead, he went over to take a look...but those people were already gone without a trace. Then Miss Cheng told him everything she'd heard from Lu Guanying.

Yin Zhiping smiled and said, "So that's what he was thinking about. How could anybody guess it? Younger Martial Sister Cheng, you go and ask Martial Uncle Sun's help and I'll go and tell Master. As long as the Quanzhen Seven Masters are willing to act, what matter under the sky can't they solve?"

"But we must be careful not to mess things up," Miss Cheng said. Then she relayed what Lu Guanying said just before she left the inn.

"Humph," Yin Zhiping sneered, "Who is Huang Yaoshi anyway? Is he stronger than the Quanzhen Seven Masters?"

Miss Cheng was about to remind him not to be too arrogant, but seeing his stern expression she swallowed back the words that were on her lips. The two went back to the inn together.

Lu Guanying said, "Little Brother will have to take his leave. Whenever you pass through the Lake Tai area, please pay me a visit at Cloud Manor for a few days." Miss Cheng was crushed to have him leave so soon, but how could she dare to reveal her deepest feelings?

Yin Zhiping turned around to face the Kitchen God idol and said, "Kitchen God, Master, the Quanzhen Sect is most willing to help other people in distress. Whenever there is any injustice in Jianghu and the Quanzhen disciples find out about it, there is no way we will not intercede."

Lu Guanying knew these words were directed at him and he also spoke, "Kitchen God, Master, I pray that you will give your blessing so that this matter will be resolved peacefully. Disciple is forever grateful towards all those gentlemen who expend their energy to help."

Yin Zhiping said, "Kitchen God, Master, please do not worry. The Quanzhen Seven Masters' power shakes the world. As long as they are willing to act, there is nothing in this world they cannot deal with."

Lu Guanying was startled and thought, "How will my Grandmaster be convinced if the Quanzhen Seven Masters rely on power?" He quickly said, "Kitchen God, Master, you know that my Grandmaster comes and goes as he wishes and never pays attention to other people. To others who speak to him as friends, he will certainly listen, but he loathes it if others try to reason with him."

"Ha, ha ..." Yin Zhiping laughed, then said, "Kitchen God, Master, how can the Quanzhen Seven Masters be afraid of others? Originally this matter had nothing to do with us and my Master only sent me to deliver a warning, but if anybody provokes us Quanzhen disciples, I don't care whether he is Huang Yaoshi or Hei Yaoshi [surname 'huang' lit. 'Yellow', hei lit. 'Black'], the Quanzhen Sect will definitely teach him a lesson."

Lu Guanying felt anger rising in his chest and said, "Kitchen God, Master, what disciple just said, please just consider it as talking in my sleep. If anyone belittles us, we will no longer want to accept anyone's favor." These two were talking to each other, but they were facing the Kitchen God idol. One spoke and the other responded and gradually this exchange of words became hotter and hotter.

Miss Cheng wanted to interfere, but those two men were young and hot-tempered and neither was willing to yield even half a word. Finally Yin Zhiping said, "Kitchen God, Master, the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts are the purest of the orthodox skills, while others' have heretical skills. Even if they are good, how can they be measured against the Quanzhen Sect?"

Lu Guanying responded, "Kitchen God, Master, I have long heard of the reputation of the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts. Certainly there are many martial arts experts within the Quanzhen Sect, but this doesn't mean that there are no arrogant blabbermouths amongst the disciples."

Yin Zhiping was angry. His palm struck and the corner of the kitchen stove collapsed. He stared hard and shouted loudly, "Kid, you demean people!"

'Bang!' Lu Guanying struck the other corner and it fell to the floor. He shouted, "How would I dare to demean you? I am demeaning only those disciples who are condescending and conceited."

Yin Zhiping had seen Lu Guanying's martial arts skill just now and he knew it was inferior to his own, so his confidence was boosted. With a cold laugh he said, "Fine! Let us spar and we'll see who is conceited."

Lu Guanying knew perfectly well he was not Yin Zhiping's match, but he hated it when others insulted his school. He was like someone riding on a tiger's back. He could not continue riding, but it was difficult to get off safely. He drew his saber, made a gesture of respect with his left hand and said, "Little Brother is ready to receive the Quanzhen Sect's excellent stances."

Miss Cheng was very anxious and tears streamed down from her eyes. She wanted to throw herself between these

two men, but each time she thought to do so, her courage failed her. She saw Yin Zhiping sweep his fly-whisk and step forward to launch his attack. Straightaway the two fought ferociously.

Lu Guanying did not expect victory...he merely hoped he would avoid an embarrassing defeat. He immediately launched the 'Buddhist Worthy One Saber technique' [luo han dao fa] he'd learned from Reverend Kumu [Dead Wood], creating a tight defense around himself.

Yin Zhiping assumed the offensive position immediately and to his surprise he found the opponent's saber power to be quite strong. He realized he had recklessly underestimated his opponent when his left arm was almost chopped off. His heart quivered and he hastily concentrated his attention on facing the attack and responding accordingly. Utilizing his school's special skill of calming his mind and spirit, he used slow steps with quick hand movements. Only by doing this did he gradually gain the upper hand.

For the past several months, Lu Guanying had received his father's instructions so he'd progressed by leaps and bounds. but the length of his training was too short for him to be compared to Yin Zhiping who was the main disciple of Qiu Chuji.

Huang Rong watched this fight through the small mirror. She saw Yin Zhiping gradually take the lead and she cursed in her heart. "This 'xiao za mao' [lit. small mixed-up hair - a derogatory term for Taoist priest] was disparaging my father. If Jing ge ge was not injured, I would certainly teach you some lessons about the heretical Peach Blossom Island martial arts. Aiyo! This is not good!" She saw Lu Guanying's saber strike with a familiar stance which Yin Zhiping intercepted and diverted with his whisk. Then he twisted his hand and his finger moved with exceptional speed

towards the crook of Lu Guanying's elbow. Lu Guanying felt his arm go numb and his saber fell to the floor. Without showing any mercy, Yin Zhiping swept his whisk towards Lu Guanying's face while loudly shouting, "This is the Quanzhen Sect's martial arts...remember it well!" His whisk was made of horse's tail mixed with strands of silver. Should Lu Guanying's face get hit, it would certainly be slashed with countless cuts.

Lu Guanying understood the danger and quickly ducked. The whisk followed by sweeping downward. Suddenly a tender voice shouted, "Older Martial Brother Yin!" Miss Cheng thrust her sword to block the whisk. Lu Guanying took that opportunity to leap back and pick up his saber from the floor.

Yin Zhiping laughed coldly, "Good! Younger Martial Sister Cheng...you are helping an outsider. Come! You two lovers can fight me together."

"You ... you ..." Miss Cheng stammered.

'Swish! Swish! Swish!' Yin Zhiping swept his fly-whisk three times, forcing her to move her hands and feet in an uncoordinated manner. Lu Guanying saw her precarious situation, so he raised his saber and joined the two against one fight. Miss Cheng did not want to fight her martial brother, so she jumped back.

"Come!" Yin Zhiping said, "He cannot fight me alone. In a while you will come and help again him anyway."

Huang Rong watched these three people fighting each other with amusement. Just as she was wondering how this matter could be resolved, she suddenly heard some noises from the door. She saw Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian, along with Wanyan Honglie, Yang Kang, and the others coming in together.

They had been waiting for Hou Tonghai for a long time and he had not come back. Sha Tongtian was concerned for his martial brother. Gathering his courage, he quietly came over to take a look. He saw two people fighting inside the inn and noticed their martial arts skills were only average. He waited for a long time but could not see anybody else. He was afraid to go in alone, so he went back, gathered the others, and brought them back to the inn.

Yin and Lu saw these people come in so they leaped back and stopped fighting. They asked these newcomers for their names, but Sha Tongtian only stepped forward with arms open and grabbed both men's wrists. Meanwhile, Peng Lianhu stooped down and untied Hou Tonghai's hands.

Hou Tonghai had been suffering for nearly half a day and was really angry. Without taking the cloth from his mouth, he roared and threw himself at Miss Cheng, attacking her with his palms. Miss Cheng evaded by moving backward in a circle. Hou Tonghai's face was purple from the bruising he'd received and his fists went straight, up and down, as he fiercely attacked Miss Cheng.

"Hold on!" Peng Lianhu repeatedly said. "Let's talk first." But since Hou Tonghai's mouth and ears were stopped with cloth, how could he have heard anything?

The acupoint on Lu Guanying's wrist was grabbed by Sha Tongtian. He felt half his body go numb and he could not move. Seeing Miss Cheng in danger and Hou Tonghai acting like a mad tiger, he struggled hard and without knowing where the strength came from, shook loose from Sha Tongtian's grip. Then he fiercely threw himself towards Hou Tonghai.

Before he reached his target, Peng Lianhu swept his leg and sent him tumbling down and immediately pounced on

him. He grabbed Lu Guanying by the back of his neck and lifted him up. "Who are you?" he asked. "Where is that fellow who played the ghost?"

Suddenly, the door creaked and opened slowly. Everyone turned their heads at once, but nobody came in. Peng Lianhu and the others could not help but feel shivers of fear in their hearts. Just as suddenly, a female head with disheveled hair was at the door. Liang Ziwen and Lingzhi Shangren jumped up in fright and even shouted, "This is not good...a female ghost!"

Peng Lianhu could see that she was just an ordinary country girl. "Come in!" he shouted.

Sha Gu walked in with a giggle and, while sticking out her tongue, she said, "Wah, so many people!"

Liang Ziwen was the one who shouted, "Female Ghost!" earlier and now he could see that she was just a poor peasant girl with tattered clothes and a silly demeanor. Filled with shame, he became angry. He jumped forward and shouted, "Who are you?" Stretching out his hand, he grabbed her arm. Who would have thought that Sha Gu would withdraw her arm, flip her hand, then her palm struck with the Peach Blossom Island's 'Jade-Green Wave Palm technique' [bi bo zhang fa]? Although her skill was unrefined, the stance was subtle and wonderful to see. Liang Ziwen did not defend against her counterattack at all. 'Slap!' Sha Gu's palm hit the back of his hand hard.

Liang Ziwen was stunned and angry at the same time. "Good!" he called out. "You are only playing dumb!" He rushed forward with both fists raised. Just as Sha Gu stepped back to evade, she suddenly pointed towards his shiny bald head and burst out laughing. This laughter caught everyone by surprise. Liang Ziwen was stunned

and stopped dead in his tracks for a few seconds...then he ferociously resumed his attack. Sha Gu raised her hands to block, but staggered back. She knew she was not his match, so she turned around and tried to run away, but Liang Ziweng would not let her escape. He stretched his left leg to block her, while his elbow struck backwards, followed by his fist. Sha Gu's nose was hit hard and she felt her head spinning. She cried out, "Sister who eats watermelons, come out quickly! Help me! Somebody is hitting me!"

Huang Rong was startled and thought, "My not killing this dumb girl was a big mistake. She is bound to bring us disaster." Suddenly she heard a soft 'humph' sound. It was so soft, almost inaudible, but Huang Rong's heart jumped with delight. "Father is here!" she thought. Quickly she looked through the small hole and saw Huang Yaoshi wearing a human-skin mask, standing on the doorstep. Nobody saw him come and it seemed as if he had just arrived...but it also seemed as if he had been there before anybody else came. He stood motionless like a piece of wood, without showing the least bit of emotion on his face. Anyone who saw him could not help but shudder. He did not have a green face nor did he have fierce teeth and he did not even look loathsome or ugly, but in all honesty, nobody could say that his face belonged to a living person.

Sha Gu had only exchanged three stances with Liang Ziweng but Huang Yaoshi could immediately tell that she was using the martial arts of his school. With a head full of questions he asked, "Miss, who is your master? Where is he?"

Sha Gu simply shook her head and stared at him blankly. She suddenly clapped her hands and laughed. Huang Yaoshi frowned and he knew she must have had some relations with his disciples. If not their disciple, then she must be of their family or a relative. He was very fond of

and tended to be over-protective towards his disciples. In no way would he allow anybody to bully them. Mei Chaofeng was a renegade disciple of his and she had committed a great crime against her master. Yet when she was defeated by Guo Jing, Huang Yaoshi would still help her, much less Sha Gu, who was a naïve and child-like young girl. Therefore he said, “Dumb kid...others hit you, why don’t you hit back?”

That day on the boat, when Huang Yaoshi was looking for his daughter, he did not wear a mask, so his appearance was not the same as today and nobody recognized him, but as soon as he opened his mouth, Wanyan Honglie, Yang Kang and Peng Lianhu, remembered his voice and tentatively guessed his identity. Peng Lianhu knew this evil man must not have good things in mind and also guessed that the ghost in the Imperial Palace last night might be this man. He knew there was no way he could fight him, so while there was the opportunity, he was thinking of launching his thirty-sixth stratagem, namely...running away.

Sha Gu said, “I can’t hit him!”

“Who says you cannot hit him?” Huang Yaoshi said. “He hit your nose, then you must hit his nose. He hit you once, so you must pay him back three times.”

Sha Gu laughed. “All right!” she said. Without thinking about Liang Ziweng’s skill being way above hers, she walked over to him and said, “You hit my nose...I must hit your nose. You hit me once...I must pay you back three times.” Her fist went straight for his nose.

Liang Ziweng raised his hand to block when suddenly the ‘Crooked Reservoir’ [qu chi] acupoint at the bend of his arm went numb. His hand was half way up but could go no further. ‘Bang!’ his nose was squarely hit by Sha Gu’s fist.

“Two!” Sha Gu called out and sent out another fist.

Liang Ziwen bent his knees while keeping his back straight and his left hand moved straight out using one of the highest ‘Seize and Control’ [qin na] techniques. He was sure he could turn Sha Gu’s arm and divert the attack. Who would have thought that as soon as his fingers touched Sha Gu’s arm, the ‘Scholar’s Arm’ [bi ru] acupoint on his arm went numb and he was unable to divert Sha Gu’s fist. ‘Bang!’ for the second time his nose was hit by Sha Gu. It was such a violent blow that his head was thrown backwards and he staggered, almost falling down. Liang Ziwen was really angry.

The others were astounded, but they did not see anything unusual. Peng Lianhu was an expert in hidden projectile usage and he was the only one who noticed something. Each time Liang Ziwen tried to block the attack, Peng Lianhu heard the very light swishing sound of secret projectiles. He knew Huang Yaoshi had launched some kind of tiny metal needles towards Liang Ziwen’s acupoints, but he did not see Huang Yaoshi’s arm move, so he did not know how Huang Yaoshi did it.

Actually Huang Yaoshi was flicking his finger inside his sleeve and sending the needles through the fabric towards the enemy. The needles arrived suddenly, invisible and were almost inaudible. How could an enemy evade this kind of attack?

“Three!” Sha Gu called out. Neither of Liang Ziwen’s arms would obey their master’s orders. His eyes saw the fist coming straight towards his face and he did not have any choice but to step backwards to evade it. Just as he was about to step back, the ‘White Ocean’ [bai hai] acupoint on the inside of his right leg suddenly went numb. His shock

had not yet subsided when a spark flashed in the air and he felt tears brimming in his eyes.

As it turned out, when his nose was hit the tear acupoint was also hit. He had always regarded defeat in martial arts contests as nothing important, but if tears streamed down his face, his lifelong reputation would be ruined. He hastily tried to lift his sleeve to wipe the tears away, but his arm did not obey. Two big teardrops finally rolled down his cheeks.

Sha Gu saw his tears and quickly said, "Please don't cry! Don't be afraid, I won't hit you anymore."

Compared to the three blows to his nose, those two comforting sentences were more difficult for Liang Ziwen to bear. In embarrassment, he vomited a mouthful of blood. He looked up at Huang Yaoshi and said, "Who are you Sire? You harm people secretly ...what kind of hero are you?"

With a cold laugh Huang Yaoshi replied, "Are you worthy enough to ask my name?" Suddenly he raised his voice, "Everybody...leave my presence!"

Everyone standing on the sidelines had felt their limbs and hundreds of bones weaken and none had the guts to fight. They just stood still in that inn without knowing what to do. When they heard his shout, it was as if they had just received a pardon for their lives. Peng Lianhu was the first one who wanted to leave, but after two steps he saw that Huang Yaoshi was standing in the doorway, not allowing anybody to pass, so he stopped dead in his tracks.

Huang Yaoshi sneered, "I told you to go, but you don't go. Do you want me to slaughter all of you one by one?"

Peng Lianhu had heard about Huang Yaoshi's strange temperament so he would do what he said. Therefore, Peng

Lianhu turned to the rest and said, "This Senior Master told us to leave. Let's just leave."

By this time Hou Tonghai had pulled the cloth from his mouth. He dashed towards Huang Yaoshi and glared at him menacingly. "Let me pass!" he shouted.

Huang Yaoshi did not pay him any attention to him. "You are not worthy to make me move aside," he said flatly. "If you want to live, crawl out between my legs."

Everyone looked at each other with blank dismay and it was clear from their expressions that they were angry. They thought that even though Huang Yaoshi might be highly skilled, there were many skilled pugilists gathered in that room. If they joined forces and risked it all, they might not necessarily lose.

Hou Tonghai roared and jumped at Huang Yaoshi. With a cold laugh, Huang Yaoshi moved his left hand and Hou Tonghai was lifted high in the air. Then his right hand pulled Hou Tonghai's left arm. 'Crack!' Hou Tonghai's arm, flesh and bones, was torn from his body. Huang Yaoshi cast the severed arm and the man to the floor. He raised his head to look at the sky, seemingly indifferent to his surroundings. Hou Tonghai passed out from the severe pain and blood gushed forth like a fountain from the wound from his missing arm.

Everyone's face changed color. Huang Yaoshi slowly turned his head and his eyes swept past everyone's face one by one. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu and the others were used to killing people without batting an eye, but seeing Huang Yaoshi's gaze on them, they involuntarily shuddered with fear. With their hair standing on end, goose bumps appeared on their skin.

Huang Yaoshi suddenly roared, "Are you going to crawl or not?" The mere sound of his voice was enough to scare the hell out of them. Nobody any longer thought about joining forces and attacking him together. Peng Lianhu hung his head and was the first to crawl out between his legs. Sha Tongtian released Yin and Lu and, holding his martial brother in his arms, he followed. Yang Kang helped Wanyan Honglie, followed by Liang Ziweng and Lingzhi Shangren, as one by one they crawled out between Huang Yaoshi's legs. Once they were out the door, they scurried away like frightened cats. None dared to turn around and look back.

End of Chapter 24.

Chapter 25 - Desolated Inn in the Village

Translated by Sunnysnow & Frans Soetomo



Huang Yaoshi was silent, thinking about his daughter but hiding his sadness. Lu Guanyin and Cheng Yaojia stole glances at Huang Yaoshi and looked at each other, feeling happy but awkward. Their faces and ears were red.

Huang Yaoshi laughed and said, "Guan Yin and this lady, stay." Lu Guanyin was aware that his grand-teacher had arrived earlier but when he saw Huang Yaoshi with his mask on, he was afraid that the former would not be willing to remove his identity and thus, didn't dare to address him properly. He decided to bow politely four times so as to greet Huang Yaoshi.

When Yin Zhiping saw how formidable Huang Yaoshi looked, he knew that he was of high status and bowed while saying, "Quanzhen Sect's Eternal Spring's disciple, Yin Zhiping greets senior."

Huang Yaoshi retorted, "Everyone has gotten lost and I did not ask you to stay on. Why are you still here? Are you tired of living?"

Yin Zhiping was taken aback, "Disciple is a student of Eternal Spring of Quanzhen Sect. I am not a criminal."

Huang Yaoshi answered, "So what if you're from Quanzhen Sect?" With that, he grabbed a corner of the table and removed a piece of wood before flinging it effortlessly at Yin Zhiping. Yin Zhiping quickly used his whisk to raise some dusts to block the attack but the small piece of wood seemed to be made out of metal and he felt a strong force charge towards him. He could not defend the force and the piece of wood and whisk slapped onto his cheek. Yin Zhiping felt a strong pain and there seemed to be some stuff in his mouth. He hurriedly spitted it out onto his palm

before realizing that it was a few of his teeth, which laid on his bloody palm. He was shocked and frightened and didn't dare to make any sound.

Huang Yaoshi continued coldly, "I am the one called Huang Yaoshi, Hei Yaoshi. What does Quanzhen Sect want so show me?" With these words, Yin Zhiping and Cheng Yaojia were taken aback.

Lu Guanyin was also shaken and thought to himself, "Grand-teacher must have heard me quarrel with that little Taoist quarrel just now. If he heard what I said to Prince Zao, then...then...I think father will also..." before breaking into cold sweat. Yin Zhiping rubbed his cheek and said, "You are a senior in the Wulin World but why do you behave so shrewdly? The 6 freaks of Jiangnan are heroic people, why must you force to them the corner? If not for my teacher spreading the news, won't the 6 of them be killed by you already?"

Huang Yaoshi was furious, "No wonder I couldn't find them. So it's a bunch of rascals poking their noses into this matter."

Yin Zhiping was agitated and shouted, "If you want to kill me, then do so. I'm not afraid of you."

Huang Yaoshi replied coldly, "Didn't you have fun scolding me behind my back?"

Yin Zhiping spared no thought for his life and shouted, "I'll scold in front of you as well. You demon, you weirdo!"

Ever since Huang Yaoshi became famous, no one, no matter good or bad, would dare to be offensive in front of him. He had never met someone as straightforward and disrespectful as Yin Zhiping. The latter had seen how cruelly he dealt with Hou Tonghai just now and yet, was still

not afraid to offend him. Huang Yaoshi was surprised and thought that the little Taoist had backbone and was bold, as bold he when he was young. Huang Yaoshi could not help but compare Yin Zhiping to his younger self while he stepped forward and said in a cold voice, "If you dare, scold some more."

Yin Zhiping said, "I'm not scared of you and yes I want to scold you demonic weirdo."

Lu Guanyin thought secretly, "Oh no, the little Taoist is not going to be able to escape death." He yelled out, "Bold Bastard! You dare offend my grand-teacher?" With that, he raised his saber and made an attack for his shoulder. Lu Guanyin was actually secretly trying to help Yin Zhiping. He was sure that his Huang Yaoshi would show him no mercy after all the insults. If Huang Yaoshi attacked, even ten Yin Zhipings would not be able to escape alive. Lu Guanyin hoped that if he injured Yin Zhiping, his grand-teacher's anger would subside somewhat and let that little Taoist off.

Yin Zhiping evaded the attack with two steps and frowned angrily before shouting, "I don't want to live after today so I'm going to scold until I'm happy." Lu Guanyin was bent on injuring him so as to save his life and thus, made another attack with his saber. At the same moment, Cheng Yaojia unsheathed her sword and called out, "I'm also a disciple of Quanzhen sect. If you want to kill, then kill both of us!"

Yin Zhiping did not expect this and shouted, "Good, Apprentice Sister Cheng!" Both of them stood shoulder-to-shoulder and stared at Huang Yaoshi. Lu Guanyin could not attack anymore.

Huang Yaoshi laughed out, "Good, you have guts, have backbone. I, Huang Yaoshi am in fact a heretic demon, you didn't scold wrongly. Your teacher is my junior, how can I

fight with a little Taoist then? Go then!" He suddenly stretched out his arm and grabbed Yin Zhiping's chest before flinging him outside. Yin Zhiping couldn't control himself and flew out of the door. He thought that he would fall badly but who would have thought that both his feet landed on the ground and he was still standing normally. He thought that Huang Yaoshi must have grabbed him and dropped him gently onto the ground. Yin Zhiping dazed for a second before thinking, "Close Shave!" No matter how brave he was, he did not dare go back into the inn to scold Huang Yaoshi. He stroked his swollen cheek and turned to leave.

Cheng Yaojia sheathed her sword and made to leave when Huang Yaoshi said, "Wait."

He stretched out his hand to remove his mask and asked, "Are you willing to be his wife?" while pointing at Lu Guanyin. Cheng Yaojia was shocked but her snow-white skin to turn red slowly.

Huang Yaoshi said, "Your apprentice brother scolded right. I am a heretic weirdo. Who doesn't know about Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi, the owner of Peach Blossom Island? The thing Old Heretic Huang hates most this life is rules and conventions, especially saints and whatnots. These are just things to cheat dumb people. It's such a joke that people have been blindly abiding to these rules and conventions for generations! I, Huang Yaoshi don't believe in these nonsensical teachings. Everyone say I'm heretic, humph! At least a heretic is better than those jerks who talk about morals and principals but caused the deaths of so many!" Cheng Yaojia was silent but her heart beat wildly. She did not know how he was going to deal with her.

But she only heard him say, "Tell me properly. Do you want to marry my grand-disciple? I like people who are

straightforward and have backbone. That little Taoist scolded me behind my back. If he didn't dare do that in front of me and kneeled down to beg me just now, do you think I would have killed him? Humph, you dared to help that little Taoist even though you knew it was dangerous, so it shows that your character is good and compatible with my Grand-disciple. Hurry up and answer me!"

Cheng Yaojia was willing with all her heart but she didn't even dare tell people like her parents, what more an outsider? Furthermore, Lu Guanyin was standing beside him. Huang Yaoshi saw that her pretty face was as red as a rose while Lu Guanyin also lowered his head and suddenly thought of his daughter. He let out a sigh and said, "If both of you love each other, I will give my blessings. Ah, even parents can't decide the marriage for their children."

He knew that if he had agreed to his daughter and Guo Jing's marriage, his beloved daughter would not have died in the deep sea and was vexed. He raised his voice, "Guanyin, stop beating around the bush, do you want her to be your wife or not?"

Lu Guanyin was stunned and answered hurriedly, "Grand-teacher, Grand-disciple's afraid that I am not good enough for..." Huang Yaoshi cut in, "Good enough! You are my grand-disciple, you are good enough even for a princess!"

Lu Guanyin saw Huang Yaoshi's eagerness and knew that if continued hesitating, the situation would turn worse. He answered hurriedly, "Grand-disciple is willing." Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "Good. What about you Miss?"

Cheng Yaojia felt a sweet sensation in her heart when she heard Lu Guanyin's words, when she heard Huang Yaoshi's question, she lowered her head and said softly, "I need father to help me decide."

Huang Yaoshi replied, "What parent's decision? All nonsensical rubbish, I want to be the one to make the decision! If your father is unwilling, ask him to come and duel with me."

Cheng Yaojia smiled, "Father only knows how to calculate accounts and do calligraphy, he doesn't know any martial arts." Huang Yaoshi thought for a while, "Then we'll compete using calculation! Humph, talking about calculations, who on earth can win me? Hurry up, are you willing or not?"

Cheng Yaojia kept quiet and Huang Yaoshi said, "Alright, so you aren't willing then, it's up to you. We keep to our words and Old Heretic Huang never allows anyone to regret their decisions." Cheng Yaojia stole a glance at Lu Guanyin and saw that his expression had turned anxious. She thought to herself, "Father dotes on me the most. If I ask Auntie to talk to father and you ask someone to seek my hand, father will agree. Why are you so anxious?"

Huang Yaoshi stood up and shouted, "Guanyin, follow me to look for the 6 freaks of Jiangnan! If you ever speak to this lady again, I'll cut off both of your tongues."

Lu Guanyin was shocked and knew that his grand-teacher was capable of such acts. He walked in front of Cheng Yaojia and cupped his palms into a greeting posture before saying, "Miss, Lu Guanyin is lowly skilled in martial arts and is untalented and uneducated. I live a wandering life and am not good enough for you. But I think it is fate that we should meet today..."

Cheng Yaojia answered softly, "Mister doesn't have to be humble. I...I...am not..." and she kept silent. Lu Guanyin's heart skipped a beat and he thought to make her answer by nodding or shaking her head, "Miss, if you do not find me

up to par with you, please shake your head." After he said this, his heart pumped frantically as he looked at her delicate face, worried that she would shake her head.

After a while, Cheng Yaojia still kept still and did not even move a finger. Lu Guanyin was delighted and said, "Since Miss is willing to marry me, please nod your head." But Cheng Yaojia still did not move. Lu Guanyin was anxious and Huang Yaoshi was exasperated and said, "You don't shake and you don't nod. What does that mean?"

Cheng Yaojia said softly, "If I don't shake my head, it...it... means that I nod my head..." These words were mumbled so softly such that only Huang Yaoshi, who had a high level of internal energy and sharp ears, could hear it. Had it been a few years earlier, he would not be able to hear anything but just see her lips moving slightly.

Huang Yaoshi laughed loudly, "Wang Chongyang has all along been a heroic and brave man. Who would have thought that his disciple would be so wishy-washy? That's just so funny. Alright, I will see through your marriage today." The couple was taken aback and stared at Huang Yaoshi speechlessly, who continued asking, "Where is that silly lady? I want to ask her who her teacher is." When the three of them were talking in the inn, Sha Gu had disappeared somewhere.

Huang Yaoshi continues, "Anyway, there's no rush to find her now. Guanyin, you will marry Miss Cheng here then." Lu Guanyin replied, "Grand-disciple is very grateful for grand-teacher's love but to marry here is somehow too plain..." Huang Yaoshi retorted, "You are a disciple of the Peach Blossom Island, do you want to abide to conventions as well? Come come, stand side by side both of you, and bow to the sky!" His tone was stern and serious and they did not dare disobey him. Cheng Yaojia had reached this stage and

knew that she could not do anything but carry on the rituals with Lu Guanyin. Huang Yaoshi continued, "Bow to the earth!...Bow to your grand-teacher ah...good, good, happiness, happiness! Bow to each other!"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing watched Huang Yaoshi orchestrate the show and were surprised but delighted as well. They found it very funny while Huang Yaoshi continued, "Excellent! Guanyin, go and get a candle for your nuptial night." Lu Guanyin was stunned and said, "Grand-teacher!" Huang Yaoshi replied, "Why? After completing the ceremony, isn't it time for your nuptial night? You and your wife are pugilists, so you don't need a glamorous room with beautiful blankets right? Can't you also have your nuptial night in this broken inn?" Lu Guanyin didn't dare answer back but he was excited and delighted at the same time. He followed his grand-teacher's instructions and went to the village to get a pair of red candles, some wine and chicken, and prepared a meal with Cheng Yaojia in the kitchen before serving it to their grand-teacher.

After that, Huang Yaoshi was silent and raised his head, thinking about his daughter but hiding his sadness. Huang Rong saw his expressions and knew that he was thinking about her. She felt terrible and wanted to shout out but was afraid that once her father discovered her, would bring her back to Peach Blossom Island. Even if he did not kill Guo Jing, Guo Jing would not be able to survive. When she thought about this, she took back her hand from the door. Lu Guanyin and Cheng Yaojia stole glances at Huang Yaoshi and looked at each other, while feeling happy but awkward. Their faces and ears were both red and they did not dare to make a sound. Ouyang Ke was lying amongst the straws and wood and listened attentively. Although he was starving, he did not dare to make any noise.

The sky gradually turned dark. Cheng Yaojia's heart was thumping louder and louder. She heard Huang Yaoshi talking to himself, "Why hasn't that Silly Girl come back? Humph, that bunch of traitors better not give her any trouble." Turning his head to Lu Guanying he said, "Tonight is your wedding night; why don't you light some candles?"

"Yes!" Lu Guanying replied. He took a flint and lighted the candles. Under the bright candlelight he saw that Cheng Da Xiaojie's [Eldest Miss Cheng] hair on her temples were like a cloud of mist, her cheeks were as white as snow, her face showed a bashful and surprised feeling; it was truly hard to describe with words. Outside the door the insects were buzzing, the evening breeze swayed the bamboo trees; he felt like it was a dream!

Huang Yaoshi took a wooden bench and placed it on the doorstep, then he laid down on it. Soon afterwards he was snoring lightly; looked like he was sound asleep. Lu and Cheng couple still did not dare to move. After a long time the red candle burned out, the flame died down and the room became dark.

Lu and Cheng couple spoke to each other in low voices. Huang Rong leaned her head sideways trying to listen, but she could not hear what they were talking about. Suddenly she felt Guo Jing's body tremble, his breathing has quickened. Apparently his internal energy flow had reached a branched passage, so she busily helped him to overcome this obstacle. After his breathing turned normal she turned her attention to the room one more time. She saw the moonlight slanted down from the broken window outside. Lu and Cheng couple was still sitting side by side on the bench. She heard Cheng Yaojia speak in low voice, "Do you know what day is today?"

"Today is our happiest day," Lu Guanying replied.

"That goes without saying," Cheng Yaojia said, "Today is the second day of the seventh month, my third [maternal] aunt's birthday."

Lu Guanying smiled, "Ah, you must have many relatives," he said, "It must be difficult to remember all those birthdays."

Huang Rong thought, "Your wife belongs to a big clan in Baoying; her maternal aunts', her paternal aunts', her nephews' and nieces' birthdays will come and go; but can they be compared to you, the Great Leader Lu of the Lake Tai's stronghold?" Suddenly she recalled something, "Today is the second day of the seventh month, Jing Gege will need until the seventh to recover. The Beggar Clan's general assembly is on the fifteenth at Yueyang City. We have a very tight schedule."

Suddenly there was a long whistle outside, followed by a loud laughter, shaking the roof tiles; it was precisely Zhou Botong's voice. He called out, "Old Poison, you have been chasing me from Lin'an to Jiaxing and from Jiaxing back to Lin'an, one day and one night, throughout you can't overtake the Old Urchin. Victory or defeat between us two has already been decided. What else do you want to compete in?"

Huang Rong was startled, "From Lin'an to Jiaxing and back is more than five hundred 'li's; these two men's feet are truly fast."

Ouyang Feng's voice was heard replying, "Even if you run to the end of the earth I will still chase you."

Zhou Botong laughed, "We won't eat, we won't sleep, we won't even urinate or defecate; let's see who can run the longest. Do you dare to compete with me?"

“Why not?” Ouyang Feng replied, “I want to see who will drop dead of exhaustion first!”

“Old Poison,” Zhou Botong said, “You won’t be able to compete with me in not urinating and not defecating.”

They both stopped talking and let out a long laugh instead, but the laughter seemed to come from more than a dozen of ‘zhang’s away already. Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia did not know what kind of people these men were, who swiftly came and went in the middle of the night. They looked at each other in astonishment; then hand in hand they walked to the door to take a look.

Huang Rong thought, “If these two are competing their feet power, then father will surely want to watch.” Sure enough, she heard Lu Guanying’s surprised voice, “Ah, where is Grandmaster?”

“Look over there,” Cheng Yaojia said, “There are three shadows; the last one looks like your Grandmaster.”

“That’s right,” Lu Guanying said, “Ah, they are that far already. I wonder what kind of experts those two are. Too bad we did not have any chance to meet them.”

Huang Rong thought, “The Old Urchin is all right, but you’d better not meet the Old Poison.”

As Huang Yaoshi left, Lu and Cheng two people thought that they were alone in that inn; their hearts started to get devious. Lu Guanying circled his arm around his newly-wed wife’s waist and asked in a low voice, “Meizi [Little sister – term of endearment], what is your given name?”

Cheng Yaojia said with a chuckle, “I won’t say it, you guess.”

Lu Guanying smiled, “If not Xiao Mao [kitten], then it must be Xiao Gou [puppy].”

Cheng Yaojia laughed, "Neither. It's Mu Da Zhong [mother big bug]."

"Ah," Lu Guanying laughed, "Then I must catch you."

Cheng Yaojia wriggled and leaped over the table. Lu Guanying laughed and chased her. One ran, the other chased, they were both laughing and giggling, running around the inn. The starlight was dim, Huang Rong was unable to see these two clearly, but she could hear their laughter clearly. Suddenly Guo Jing whispered in her ear, "Do you think he can catch Cheng Da Xiaojie?"

With a light chuckle Huang Rong replied, "Certainly."

Guo Jing asked again, "After he catches her, then what happen?"

Huang Rong's heart skipped a beat; she did not know the answer. She heard Lu Guanying had succeeded in catching Cheng Yaojia, the couple then sat on the bench, hugging each other and talking in low voices.

Huang Rong's right hand was holding Guo Jing's left. She felt his palm was getting hotter and hotter, while his body trembled faster and faster. She was frightened, busily asked, "Jing Gege, what happened?"

After Guo Jing suffered a heavy injury, his internal strength considerably decreased, practicing this Nine Yin energy cultivation method required a clean heart, free from any devilish thought. Right now he heard that Lu and Cheng couple was talking and laughing intimately; at the same time right next to him was his own beloved beautiful girl. Gradually he lost control, his blood warmed up to the point of boiling. He turned around and stretched out his right hand to embrace her shoulder. But as she heard his rushed breathing and felt his burning hot palm, Huang Rong was

frightened and busily said, "Jing Gege, be careful, quickly calm your heart."

Guo Jing's heart was shaken, anxiously he said, "I can't. Rong'er, I ... I ..." He wanted to stand up.

Huang Rong was very anxious, "You must not move!" she said.

Forcing himself Guo Jing sat down; he tried hard to control his breathing, but his chest felt like it will almost burst open. "Rong'er, help me," he begged. Once again he wanted to stand up.

"Sit down!" Huang Rong shouted, "If you don't, I'll seal your acupoint."

"Right," Guo Jing said, "Quick! I can't take it anymore."

Huang Rong realized that if his acupoint was sealed, his internal energy flow would be blocked, then their two days of effort would be wasted and they would have to start from the beginning again. But his condition was critical, as soon as he stood up, his life would be in danger. So gritting her teeth her left arm made a circle with the 'lan hua fu xue shou' [orchid brushing acupoint technique] and struck the 'zhang men' [sealing gate] acupoint on the eleventh rib on his left chest.

Her finger was right on target, but unexpectedly Guo Jing's internal strength was so profound that as soon as his body met an external force, the muscle automatically contracted and caused her finger to slip. Huang Rong struck twice in succession, both times missed. She was about to strike for the third time when suddenly he grabbed her left wrist.

It was almost dawn. Huang Rong saw his eyes were bloodshot like they were on fire, she was shocked; but she

felt that he was pulling her hand while his mouth was mumbling indistinctly, as if he was loosing his mind. In desperation Huang Rong moved her elbow and ferociously bumped her shoulder against his arm. As the thorns on the soft hedgehog armor pricked his arm, Guo Jing felt a shot of pain and was startled. Right at that moment they heard the rooster crow in the village. It was like a strike of lightning clearing out Guo Jing's mind. Slowly he put Huang Rong's wrist down; his face showed great embarrassment.

Huang Rong saw sweats dripping from his forehead; his face was pale and he looked so weary. But she knew the critical moment had passed. She said happily, "Jing Gege, we have passed two days and two nights."

'Slap!' Guo Jing slapped his own face and said, "Very dangerous!" He raised his hand to slap again. Huang Rong smiled and grabbed his hand. "That was nothing," she said, "You remember the Old Urchin? With that kind of skill he still could not bear to listen to my father's flute; much less you, who are seriously injured."

In their excitement as Guo Jing was battling his own mind, they forgot to lower their voices. All Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia cared for was each other, so naturally they were oblivious of everything else. But lying down in the room Ouyang Ke was fully awake, with his keen hearing he heard everything, he could even vaguely recognize Huang Rong's voice. He was surprised yet happy. He tried to listen carefully, but no more sound was to be heard. Both of his legs were broken, he was unable to walk, but by using hands as his feet he could stand upside down and he came out of his hiding.

Lu Guanying and his newly-wed wife were sitting side-by-side on the bench, with his left hand wrapped around her shoulder. Suddenly they heard rustling noise from the

firewood. Turning their heads around they saw a man standing on his hands come out from the inner room. They were startled and quickly drew their weapons out.

Ouyang Ke's injury was heavy, plus he had not had anything to eat for quite a long time, hence he was weak; suddenly seeing the bright flickering light of the blade he felt dizzy and fell down on the ground. Lu Guanying saw his sickly complexion; he rushed forward to help him sit on the bench with his back leaning against the table.

"Ah!" Cheng Yaojia called out in alarm, recognizing this man as the lecherous person who captured her at Baoying.

Lu Guanying saw her frightened expression, he said comfortingly, "Don't be afraid, his legs are broken."

"He is a bad man," Cheng Yaojia said, "I know him."

"Ah!" Lu Guanying exclaimed.

Ouyang Ke slowly woke up. "Give me a bowl of rice, please," he said, "I am starving."

Cheng Yaojia saw his deep cheeks, his eyes dull; he was not the same arrogant man who hurled insults to her. She was tenderhearted, plus she was a newly-wed, her heart was filled with happiness; thereupon she went to the kitchen and fetch a bowl of rice for Ouyang Ke.

Ouyang Ke ate one bowl, he asked for another bowl. After eating two big bowls of rice his strength returned. He looked at Cheng Da Xiaojie and his lewdness also returned. But he still remembered Huang Rong. "Where is Miss Huang?" he asked.

"Which Miss Huang?" Lu Guanying asked.

"The Peach Blossom Island's Huang Yaoshi's daughter," Ouyang Ke replied.

"You know my Huang Shigu [martial (paternal) aunt]?" Lu Guanying asked. "I heard she has passed away."

Ouyang Ke laughed. "Don't lie to me," he said, "Obviously I had just heard her voice." His left hand pushed the table, his body flipped and he walked around the room with his hands. He recalled that Huang Rong's voice came from the east side, but there was only a wall without any door on the east side. He considered carefully and came to the conclusion that there must be a secret in the cabinet. Immediately he pulled a table toward the cabinet, flipped his body over to sit on the table, and opened the cabinet door. Convinced that the secret passage must be inside, he was disappointed to see inside the cabinet was very dirty, unbearably filthy. He looked over carefully and saw some handprints on the dust covered iron bowl. His heart was stirred. Stretching out his arm he grabbed the bowl and tried to lift it up, but the bowl did not budge. He turned it around and with some creaking noise the secret door inside the cabinet slowly opened, revealing Huang Rong and Guo Jing two people sitting cross-legged inside the secret room.

He was delighted to see Huang Rong, but was scared and jealous to see Guo Jing by her side. After staring at them for half a day he finally asked, "Meizi, are you training martial art in here?"

Huang Rong had seen him through the small hole moving the table to the cabinet. She was sure they would be discovered soon, so she started thinking of ways to kill him. When the door started to move she whispered in Guo Jing's ear, "I'll lure him close, you finish him off with a Dragon Subduing Palm."

Guo Jing said, "I don't have any strength in my palm."

Huang Rong was about to say something else, but Ouyang Ke had already seen them. She thought, "How can I deceive him so that he will go far away and let us pass these five days and five nights in peace?"

Initially Ouyang Ke was rather afraid of Guo Jing, but seeing his thin and pale complexion he remembered his uncle said that in the imperial palace he had injured him severely with the Toad Stance; if Guo Jing did not die, then his injury must be extremely heavy. Looking at their expression he knew that his guess was 70, 80% correct. He wanted to try again, so he said, "Meizi, why don't you come out? It's too stuffy and tight to hide in there." He held out his hand to pull Huang Rong's sleeve.

Huang Rong raised her bamboo stick and with a 'bang da gou tou' [stick hits dog's head] she struck the top of his head. Her movement was very fierce; it was one of the deadliest stances of the Dog Beating Stick Technique. The stick carried a strong gust of wind, the oncoming force was swift and violent. Ouyang Ke hastily moved to the left to evade, but her stick suddenly swept horizontally. Ouyang Ke was startled, he somersaulted over the table and fell behind the table.

If Huang Rong could pursue, she would take advantage of this favorable situation and launch the 'fan jie gou tun' [flipping up and cutting the dog's butt]; certainly she would be able to harm his life. But she was sitting cross-legged and must not move, so she cried out inwardly, "What a pity!"

Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia were shocked to suddenly see there were people inside the cabinet. By the time they

saw clearly it was Guo Jing and Huang Rong, Ouyang Ke and Huang Rong had started fighting.

As Ouyang Ke fell down, his hands pushed the ground and he leaped back to the table and sat back down. He used the 'qin na' [grab and capture] technique trying to catch Huang Rong's hand across the secret room's door. Huang Rong's Dog Beating Stick Technique was marvelous, but she could not move; besides, she had to take Guo Jing's internal energy situation into consideration so that she could not use too much strength of her own. Ouyang Ke's martial art skill was actually several times better than hers, so after more than a dozen moves she fell into a desperately dangerous situation.

Lu Guanying husband and wife drew out their saber and sword and attacked from both sides. Ouyang Ke let out a long laugh and ferociously launched a palm strike hacking toward Guo Jing's face. At this moment Guo Jing was unable to exert any strength, so he simply closed his eyes waiting for death.

Huang Rong was shocked; she lifted up her stick to block. Ouyang Ke flipped his palm over and grabbed the end of the stick, pulling it out from Huang Rong's hand. Huang Rong could not match his strength; her body staggered forward. She was afraid her palm would be separated from Guo Jing's palm, so she let the stick go. Immediately she reached into her pocket and threw a steel needle out.

Those two were only several feet away from each other. By the time Ouyang Ke saw the flashing light, the steel needle was already in front of his face. Busily he bent his waist and threw his head backward, almost reclined on the table, thus evading the needle.

Lu Guanying saw his condition as if he was a sacrificial meat on the table, his saber chopped down toward Ouyang Ke's neck. Ouyang Ke rolled to the right and with a 'crack!' sound his saber hacked the tabletop. Right at that moment he heard swishing noise of a steel needle above him and suddenly felt his back numb; one side of his body was paralyzed. He wanted to move aside, but his right arm had already been grabbed by the enemy from behind.

Cheng Yaojia was shocked and rushed forward trying to help. Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "That's wonderful!" His hand moved so swiftly and grabbed the front upper part of Cheng Yaojia's gown. Cheng Yaojia hastily hacked her sword down to cut his hand, while trying to leap backward at the same time. 'Rip!' Her gown was torn by his hand. She was so scared that the sword almost fell from her hand; her face turned deathly pale and she did not dare to rush forward anymore.

Ouyang Ke sat at the corner of the table. He turned his head around and saw the door to the secret room was already closed. Recalling his dangerous encounter with steel needles earlier he shuddered in fear. "This little girl is really not easy to fight," he thought, "Aha! I got it! I am going to play around with this Cheng Da Xiaojie, let that kid surnamed Guo and the little girl hear it. Their concentration will be broken and thus their energy cultivation will be disrupted. I want to see if by that time she won't listen to me nicely." Thinking to this point he was very happy. He further considered, "This Huang family's little girl is like an angel, nevertheless I have to make her willing to follow me for the rest of her life. It won't be as much fun if I use force. I think it will be wonderful. Just marvelous beyond words!" So he turned to Cheng Yaojia and said, "Hey, Cheng Da Xiaojie, do you want him to live or to die?"

Cheng Yaojia saw her husband was in the hands of the enemy; she could not make any rash move. Hastily she said, "He has never wronged you, nor did he have any enmity with you. Please release him. You were very hungry a while ago. Didn't I give you some food to eat?"

Ouyang Ke laughed. "How can two bowls of rice pay the price of a life? Hey, hey, you've never imagined that one day you Quanzhen Sect people will ask someone else's help, have you?"

Cheng Yaojia said, "He ... he is the Peach Blossom Island's disciple; don't hurt him."

Ouyang Ke laughed, "Who told him to chop me with a saber? If I wasn't quick enough to evade, do you think my head will still be perched on my neck? Don't you use the Peach Blossom Island to scare me, Huang Yaoshi is my father-in-law."

Cheng Yaojia did not know whether he was lying or was telling the truth; she hastily said, "Then he is your junior. Just let him go, let him apologize to you later."

"Ha ... ha ..." Ouyang Ke laughed, "How can there be such an easy thing in this world? You want me to release him? That's easy, but you must do what I tell you to do."

Cheng Yaojia saw the lewdness in his face, she knew he must have malicious intentions; hence she lowered her head but did not say anything.

"Look at me!" Ouyang Ke roared. 'Crack!' his palm hacked down and cut the corner of the table; making a neat cut as if the table was cut by an axe or a saber. Cheng Yaojia was stunned, she thought, "Even my Shifu does not have this kind of ability." Ouyang Ke had been training martial art under his uncle's tutelage since he was little; no wonder his

skill surpassed Sun Bu'er who started to learn martial art in her adulthood.

Seeing the frightened look on her face Ouyang Ke was immensely puffed up. "You must do whatever I tell you to do," he said, "Otherwise I'll do this to his neck." Then he made a hacking move. Cheng Yaojia broke in cold sweats and called out in alarm.

"Will you do it?" Ouyang Ke asked. Cheng Yaojia reluctantly nodded her head. Ouyang Ke said with a smile, "Good! That's my good girl. Now go and close the door." Cheng Yaojia hesitated; she did not move.

"You are not listening!" Ouyang Ke was angry. Cheng Yaojia trembled in fear; she did not have any choice but stand up and close the door.

Ouyang Ke said with a smile, "You two got married last night, I heard it clearly from the other room. It was your wedding night, but you did not take your clothes off. There is no such thing in this world. You don't know how to be a bride, so I am going to teach you. Now take your clothes off. All of them. If you leave even half a strand of silk, I am going to send your husband returning to heaven, and then you will become a young widow!"

Lu Guanying could not move his body, but he could hear clearly. He was so angry that he felt his eyes were about to pop out of their sockets. He wanted to tell his wife to run away and forget about him, but his lips were unable to move.

When Ouyang Ke grabbed Lu Guanying, Huang Rong quickly closed the door to the secret room. She took her dagger out, waiting for his second attack. Suddenly she heard him ordering Cheng Yaojia to take her clothes off; she was angry, but at the same time found it amusing. She

was still childish so even though she hated Ouyang Ke's despicable behavior, she also wanted to know whether this girlish and bashful Cheng Da Xiaojie would follow his order or not.

"What's the big deal about taking off all your clothes?" Ouyang Ke said with a laugh, "Did you wear anything when you came out of your mother's belly? Do you want your pride or his life?"

Cheng Yaojia hesitated a moment, then with a sad voice said, "Just kill him!"

Ouyang Ke did not expect she would say such thing; he was slightly startled, but then he saw she lifted her sword horizontally across her own neck. Hastily he waved his hand, sending out a 'tou gu ding' [bone penetrating nail]. 'Clank!' her sword fell down to the ground.

Cheng Yaojia was about to stoop down to pick her sword up when suddenly she heard someone knocking the door, "Innkeeper, innkeeper!" someone called out. It was a woman's voice. Cheng Yaojia was delighted, "Someone's coming, things may change," she thought. She busily bent down to pick her sword and leaped to open the door.

There was a young woman wearing white standing outside the door, with a white cloth on her head and a dagger on her waist. Her face was thin and pallid, but it was obvious that she was a beautiful woman. Cheng Yaojia did not care what kind of person she was, she already considered her to be her liberator. "Please come in Miss," she quickly said.

That woman saw her exquisite clothes and adornment, her sweet and pretty face, also a sword in her hand; never in her wildest dream would she expect a desolate inn in this rural village like this would have this kind of innkeeper. She

was dumbstruck. "I have two coffins outside, may I bring them in?" she asked.

If it were an ordinary house, the coffins may never enter in; but an inn was different. Besides, Cheng Yaojia was hoping she would come in quickly. She would not care if it was a hundred or even a thousand coffins, let alone only two coffins. She busily said, "Wonderful, wonderful!"

That young woman was taken aback, she thought, "What's so wonderful about coffins going into an inn?" She beckoned outside and eight porters carrying two black coffins came into the inn.

That young woman turned her head and was surprised to see Ouyang Ke. With a 'qiang lang' sound she unsheathed the dagger on her waist.

Ouyang Ke laughed a big laugh and said, "The heaven has destined us to be together. You can run away, but you cannot escape your fate. It has delivered us good fortune, so we commit a great sin if we do not enjoy this blessing."

This young woman was precisely Mu Nianci who was once captured by Ouyang Ke. After she broke off with Yang Kang at Baoying she cut her hair in grief, completely discouraged. Then she remembered there was one thing on earth she had to take care, thereupon she rushed back to the capital to fetch Yang Tiexin's, husband and wife, bodies and brought them to the south. She wanted to bury her adopted father and mother at their hometown, the Ox Village of Lin'an; and then she was going to leave home and become a Buddhist nun.

At that time the Mongolian army was launching a large scale attack against the capital, they laid siege around the city. As a single woman traveling with two coffins in the turmoil and chaos of war, she experienced untold

hardships, until finally she arrived at her adopted parents' hometown. She had left home since she was five years old, and had never been to the Ox Village before. As she saw Shagu's inn she was thinking of stopping by for some food and directions; who would have thought that she came across Ouyang Ke here.

At this time she did not know whether this beautiful woman wearing exquisite gown was her captor's accomplice or not; when Cheng Yaojia was taken prisoner by Ouyang Ke, Mu Nianci was already hidden away inside the empty coffin. These two women had never met each other, so Mu Nianci thought Cheng Yaojia was one of Ouyang Ke's concubines. She chopped her dagger toward Cheng Yaojia, then darting toward the door trying to escape. She heard the rustling noise of a clothes, someone was leaping over her head. Mu Nianci lifted her dagger up, Ouyang Ke's body was still midair, his right hand's index finger and thumb pinched the back of her dagger and pulled it away, while his left hand grabbed her wrist. Mu Nianci was forced to let her dagger go; her body leaped up and two people fell together on the doorway, halfway above the coffin.

"Aiyo!" the four porters cried out in alarm. The coffin fell to the ground, pinching five, six of the porters' eight feet.

Ouyang Ke's left hand embraced Mu Nianci in his bosom, while his right hand stabbed the dagger randomly toward the back of those four porters. The porters screamed in terror and scrambled anxiously over the coffin to run away. The other four porters also dropped their coffin and ran outside the inn; without asking for their money.

Lu Guanying tumbled down as he was free from the enemy's hand. Cheng Yaojia rushed over to help him up. She was totally ignorant of what was going on around her; her mind was set on how to get away from the enemy. With

Mu Nianci in his left hand and Ouyang Ke pushed the coffin with his right hand, and leaped back to the table. He snatched Cheng Yaojia's belt and very soon she was also embraced at the crook of his right arm. Ouyang Ke sealed both women's acupoints and sat on a bench. He laughed and called out, "Huang Meizi, you have to come over here too!"

While he was feeling smug, a shadow flashed in from outside; a young gentleman came in. It was Yang Kang. After he went out from underneath Huang Yaoshi's legs along with Wanyan Honglie, Peng Lianhu and the others, they ran away out of the Ox Village. Everybody was angry at the humiliation they had just received; they hung their heads low and nobody said anything. Yang Kang thought if he wanted to seek revenge, he must find Ouyang Feng first, who had not returned from stealing the book in the imperial palace. Thereupon he asked for Wanyan Honglie's permission and went back alone, waiting in the forest just outside the village.

That night Zhou Botong, Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi three people came and go in a flash. With Yang Kang's current skill level, he could not even see them clearly. Early the next morning he saw Mu Nianci bringing the coffins into the village. His heart pounded from excitement and he followed behind her quietly. He saw her enter the inn, and then saw the porters running away, he felt strange, so he peeked through a crack on the door and did not see Huang Yaoshi inside; but he saw Mu Nianci was embraced by Ouyang Ke in a frivolous way.

Ouyang Ke saw him come in, he called out, "Xiao Wangye [Young Prince], you came back!" Yang Kang nodded. Ouyang Ke saw his face looked unusual, he tried to console him, "In the past Han Xin had also received humiliation by crawling underneath someone else's crotch. But a real great man can be bent and can be stretched. It was

nothing. Just wait for my uncle, then you can extract your revenge.”

Again Yang Kang nodded his head. His gaze was fixed on Mu Nianci.

Ouyang Ke smiled and said, “Young Prince, what do you think of my two beautiful women?” Yang Kang nodded again. Ouyang Ke was not present when Mu Nianci and Yang Kang were jousting to find a spouse on the street of the capital; therefore, he did not know that these two had a deep relationship between them.

At first Yang Kang did not think much of Mu Nianci, and then afterwards he saw how much she was passionately devoted to him; his heart could not help but be moved by her love, hence he promised to marry her. Right now he saw Ouyang Ke was hugging her, his heart swelled with hatred, but he maintained his composure.

“There was a wedding in here last night,” Ouyang Ke said with a smile, “There is some wine and chicken in the kitchen. Xiao Wangye, I’d like to bother you to fetch the food, I want to drink with you several cups. I am going to tell these two beautiful women to strip and dance to accompany your drinking.”

“Nothing better than that,” Yang Kang replied with a smile.

To suddenly seeing Yang Kang, Mu Nianci was pleasantly surprised. But when Yang Kang did not pay her any attention, she was mad. Now she saw his frivolous expression as he was going to join Ouyang Ke in humiliating her, her heart turned icy cold. She was determined that as soon as her hands and feet were free, she would cut her own throat in the presence of this heartless fellow; and then she would forever be free from the anxieties of the world.

She watched him turn and go into the kitchen. He fetched the food and drink, then sat alongside Ouyang Ke. Ouyang Ke poured two cups of wine and held them up in front of Mu and Cheng two women's mouths and said with a smile, "Drink this wine first, it will help to make your dancing more interesting." The two women were very angry, but since their acupoints were sealed, they were unable to turn their heads away from the wine cups on their lips. Ouyang Ke managed to pour half a cup into their mouths.

"Mr. Ouyang," Yang Kang said, "I admire your martial art skill very much. Let me toast you one cup before we enjoy the dancing."

Ouyang Ke took the cup Yang Kang handed over; he drank it in one gulp, then casually he released the two women's acupoints, but he placed his hands on the acupoints on their backs. He smiled and said, "If you listen nicely to what I say, not only you won't get hurt, but I will make you happy!" He turned to Yang Kang and said, "Xiao Wangye, which one of these young girls do you like? I'll let you choose first!"

Yang Kang slightly smiled and said, "Thank you very much!"

Mu Nianci pointed toward the two coffins on the doorsteps and imposingly said, "Yang Kang! Do you know whose coffins are those?"

Yang Kang turned his head and saw on the first coffin there was a red piece of paper with this line of characters on it: 'da song yi shi yang tie xin ling jiu' [the bier of Yang Tiexin, a chivalrous warrior of the Great Song Dynasty]. His heart turned cold, but his face did not show anything. He said, "Mr. Ouyang, can you hold them closely for me? I want to see which one has the smaller feet. I am going to choose her."

Ouyang Ke laughed and said, "Xiao Wangye is truly smart! I think this one's feet are smaller." While saying that he rubbed Cheng Yaojia's chin before continuing, "I have a special skill. I only need to look at a girl's face to know what her body looks like, from top to bottom."

Yang Kang laughed, "Amazing! I am impressed! What if I bow to you and take you as my master? Then you'll teach me this special trick." While saying that he bent down under the table.

Mu and Cheng both women had decided that as soon as he touched their feet, they would kick his 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint on his temple. Yang Kang smiled and said, "Mr. Ouyang, drink another cup of wine, then I'll tell you if your guess is correct."

"All right!" Ouyang Ke laughed, taking the cup with both hands. Yang Kang glanced upward from underneath the table, he saw Ouyang Ke was drinking the wine with his head thrown backward; suddenly he took a broken spearhead from his bosom. He sent all his strength to his arm, from his arm to his wrist, lunged it forward and 'Stab!' the spearhead went five, six inches deep into Ouyang Ke's abdomen. Immediately he somersaulted backward behind the table.

It was such a sudden change that Huang Rong, Mu Nianci, Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia were all startled. They only knew something changed, but nobody saw what happened under the table. Ouyang Ke raised his arms and pushed Mu and Cheng two women, they fell under the bench; and then he threw the wine cup in his hand out. Yang Kang ducked to evade and 'crash!' that cup hit the ground and turned into thousands of pieces; indicating the power behind that throw must be astonishing.

Yang Kang rolled on the ground, trying to escape to the door. Unfortunately the door was blocked by the coffins. He turned his head to see Ouyang Ke was standing on his hands on the bench, his body bent forward, his face looked like he was smiling yet he was not smiling, his eyes were staring at him with a weird expression. Yang Kang shuddered involuntarily. He wanted very bad to run away, but because of Ouyang Ke's stare, his body stiffened like a corpse, he could not move.

Ouyang Ke looked upward with a laughter and said, "I, the one surnamed Ouyang, have been roaming the world for half of my lifetime; unexpectedly I have to die under this kid's hands. One thing I don't understand, Xiao Wangye, why did you kill me?"

Yang Kang moved his legs and leaped up; he wanted to escape outside the door before answering his question. While his body was still midair, suddenly he felt a gust of wind behind his back; the back of his neck was grabbed by a steel-hook hand. He was unable to continue his leap and was forced to land on the coffin, along with Ouyang Ke next to him.

Ouyang Ke said, "You are not willing to talk, do you want me to die with my eyes open?"

The acupoint on the back of Yang Kang's neck was grabbed by Ouyang Ke; he could not move his limbs. He knew he would not escape alive, he laughed coldly and said, "All right, I'll tell you. Do you know who she is?" While saying that he pointed his finger toward Mu Nianci.

Ouyang Ke turned his head and saw Mu Nianci with a dagger in her hand, ready to pounce forward to help, but she was afraid she might hurt Yang Kang; her expression was full of concerns, exactly like what Cheng Yaojia showed

toward Lu Guanying. Suddenly it dawned on Ouyang Ke. He laughed and said, "She ... she ..." his words were cut short by coughing.

Yang Kang said, "She is my fiancée; twice you have bullied her. How can I let you go?"

Ouyang Ke said with a smile, "So that's how it is. We are going to hell together!" Raising his hand high his palm was ready to strike the top of Yang Kang's head.

Mu Nianci cried out in alarm, she rushed forward to save him, but it was too late. Yang Kang closed his eyes ready to die; he waited for Ouyang Ke's palm to strike down; who would have thought that after waiting for a while there was nothing moving above his head. He opened his eyes and saw Ouyang Ke was still smiling with his hand still high in the air, but his left hand, which grabbed Yang Kang's neck, was actually relaxed. Hastily Yang Kang struggled free and leaped away. Ouyang Ke tumbled down on top of the coffin, his breathing had ceased.

After staring blankly for half a day, Yang Kang and Mu Nianci rushed to each other and held each other's hands. They had countless words to say to each other, but neither one knew where to start. They both looked at Ouyang Ke's body and still felt fear in their hearts.

Cheng Yaojia helped Lu Guanying up and unsealed his acupoints. Lu Guanying knew that Yang Kang was a Jin's envoy. Even though he killed Ouyang Ke, thus Lu Guanying was indebted to him, he could not make an enemy his friend, so he simply cupped his fists in respect, then without saying anything he took Cheng Yaojia's hand and they both went away. These two people had just undergone a thrilling experience, escaping a life and death situation; they

completely forgot about seeing Guo Jing and Huang Rong earlier.

Huang Rong was very happy to see Yang Kang and Mu Nianci were back together; she also appreciated the fact that Yang Kang saved Mu Nianci from a possible disaster. Guo Jing also hoped that his sworn brother would change for the good. He exchanged a glance with Huang Rong, both of them broke into smiles.

They heard Mu Nianci say, "I have brought back your father and mother's bodies."

Yang Kang said, "Actually it was my responsibility. I have bothered Meizi so much."

Mu Nianci did not want to bring up past events; she simply discussed with him how to bury Yang Tiexin husband and wife. Yang Kang pulled the broken spearhead from Ouyang Ke's abdomen and said, "We have to bury him quickly. If his uncle finds out, even if the world is big, there will be no place for us to hide." Two people immediately buried Ouyang Ke's body in the backyard of the inn; and then went to the village to hire some people to help them carry the coffins and buried them in the backyard of Yang family's former home. Yang Tiexin had left his home for a long time that everybody who knew him had died. Nobody asked them anything.

By the time they finished burying their dead, the sky had already turned dark. That night Mu Nianci slept at a villager's house, while Yang Kang spent the night in the inn.

Early morning the following day Mu Nianci went back to the inn, she was going to ask him what he wanted to do next. She saw him pacing back and forth in the inn, stomping his feet and complaining bitterly. She asked him what happened and Yang Kang said, "I was so muddle-

headed to let those two people leave yesterday. I should have killed them to close their mouths. Now that they are gone, where can we find them?"

"Why?" Mu Nianci was surprised.

Yang Kang said, "If this fact that I killed Ouyang Ke ever leaks out, won't that be a disaster?"

Mu Nianci knitted her brows in displeasure. "A real man is not afraid to take responsibility of his actions," she said, "If you are afraid, you shouldn't have killed him yesterday."

Yang Kang did not say anything, he was busy thinking how to pursue and kill Lu and Cheng two people to close their mouths.

Mu Nianci said, "Even though his uncle is very fierce, we can run away to some far away place, he won't be able to find us."

Yang Kang said, "Meizi [sister/beloved], I have another thought: his uncle's martial art is unparalleled, I want to take him as my master."

"Ah!" Mu Nianci exclaimed.

"I have had this thought for a while," Yang Kang continued, "But they follow a very strict rule: they only take one disciple per generation. Now that this man is dead, his uncle might take me as his disciple!" He sounded very proud of himself.

Hearing his words and looking at his expression, Mu Nianci's heart turned cold. With a trembling voice she said, "It turns out the reason you killed him yesterday was not to rescue me at all, but you have another agenda in your mind."

Yang Kang laughed and said, "You are overly skeptical; for you, even if my body is crushed to dust and my bones smashed up to pieces, I am most willing."

"Let's talk about that later," Mu Nianci said, "Right now, what are you going to do? Are you willing to be a loyal patriot for the Great Song; or do you still want to seek unlimited riches and honor, acknowledging an enemy as your father?"

Looking at her beautiful face and smart appearance Yang Kang was silently full of admiration, but listening to her talk exposing the content of his heart he was not pleased at all. "Riches and honor? Humph," he said, "What riches and honor do I have? The Great Jin's capital has fallen to the Mongolian army. The Jins were defeated every time they went out to battle. The fall of Jin country is the present disaster we are facing."

The more Mu Nianci listened to him, the more displeased she became. "The defeat of the Jins is precisely what we are earnestly wished for," she said with a stern voice, "Yet you actually feel sorry for them. Humph, what if the fall of Jin country is the present disaster? Is the Jin country your country? This ... this ..."

"Why are we talking about other people's business?" Yang Kang cut her off, "I have been bitterly missing you since you left me." Slowly he went over to grab her right hand. Mu Nianci could hear the tenderness in his voice, her heart softened; she let him pull her hand gently, without struggling she followed him, her face was slightly blushing.

Yang Kang's left arm was about to embrace her shoulder when suddenly they heard bird cries high in the air; it was very loud and clear. They looked up and saw a pair of big white eagles spreading their wings flying across the sky.

Yang Kang had seen this pair of eagles that day when Wanyan Honglie led a team of soldiers to pursue and kill Tuolei, and he knew that later on Huang Rong took the eagles away. "How did the white eagles come to this place?" he thought. He pulled Mu Nianci's hand and hurriedly walked outside. He saw the pair of eagles fly in circles overhead, while a young girl was sitting on a steed's back by the big tree outside; she was looking at a distance. That young girl was wearing a pair of leather boots, with a horse whip in her hand. She was wearing Mongolian attire, with a long bow on her back and a quiver full of arrows hanging on her waist.

The eagles circled overhead for a while, then they flew along the road. A moment later they flew back. And then sound of hoof beats was heard coming from the road, a number of horse riders came speeding by.

Yang Kang thought, "Apparently this pair of eagles is to lead the way so that these people can meet with this Mongolian girl." He saw dust rose on the road and three riders were coming fast toward them. A swishing sound was heard, an arrow shot out to the air, coming this direction. The Mongolian girl extracted a long arrow from her quiver, drew her bow and shot the arrow to the air. As the three riders heard the arrow, they called out in delight, and rushed their horses even faster.

That young girl urged her steed forward to approach the riders. As they were about three 'zhang's apart from each other, the girl and one of the rider shouted and jumped from their saddles toward each other; their hands met in the air and together they landed on the ground.

Yang Kang was secretly startled, "The Mongolians are very proficient in riding and shooting techniques; even a young

girl has this kind of ability. Is it a wonder that the Jins are defeated?"

Inside the secret room Guo Jing and Huang Rong also heard the birds' cry and the hoof beats coming near. After a moment they also heard several people talking and walking toward the inn. Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised, "How did she come over here? This is wonderful!" he thought.

Turned out the Mongolian girl was his fiancée, Huazheng; and the other three were Tuolei, Jebek and Borchu. Huang Rong did not understand one word of Huazheng's babbling of talking and laughing in Mongolians; while Guo Jing's face turned green one moment and white another moment. His delight was replaced with anxiety. "My heart already belongs Rong'er, so I can't marry her. But she has looked for me here. How can I break my promise? What should I do?" he thought in his heart.

With a low voice Huang Rong asked, "Jing Gege, who is this girl? What are they saying? Aren't you feeling well?"

Several times Guo Jing had meant to tell Huang Rong everything once and for all, but always each time the words were already on his lips, each time he swallowed them back. Now that Huang Rong asked him, he could not hide anymore. "She is the Mongolian's Great Khan, Genghis Khan's daughter. She is my fiancée."

Huang Rong was shocked; tears started welling up her eyes. "You ... you have a fiancée?" she asked, "Why have you never told me?"

That day when Qiu Chuji and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan discussed Guo Jing's engagement in the inn at the capital, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan did mention that Genghis Khan had betrothed his beloved daughter to Guo Jing, but at that time Huang Rong had not arrived outside the window yet;

therefore, she had not heard about it and all this time she was not aware about this engagement.

Guo Jing said, "Now and then I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid you won't be happy. Sometimes I did not remember this matter."

"She is your fiancée, how can you not remember?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing was at a loss. "I don't know," he said, "In my heart I always regard her as my sister; we are like brother and sister. I don't even want to marry her."

Huang Rong raised her eyebrows in delight, "Why?" she asked.

Guo Jing replied, "The Great Khan decided this matter for me. At that time I was not unhappy, but I was not happy either. I only thought that the Great Khan's decision must be right. But now, Rong'er, how can I leave you to marry another?"

"What should we do then?" Huang Rong asked.

"I don't know," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong sighed and said, "As long as in your heart you are forever good to me, I don't care if you marry her." But a moment later she said, "However, if you marry her, I won't like another woman to be with you all day. Perhaps one day I won't be able to control my temper and make a hole in her chest with a sword, and then you will hate me. Enough talking about this, why don't you listen to them and tell me what they say."

Guo Jing pressed his ear to the small hole and heard Tuolei and Huazheng talk about what happened after they parted. It turned out that after Huang Rong and Guo Jing went

down to the sea, the white eagles flew around in the wind and the rain looking for their masters. There was no place on the ocean for them to set their feet on, so they had to fly back to the mainland. They remembered their old home in the north, hence they flew to find their other master.

Huazheng was astonished to see the white eagles came back. She saw a piece of cloth tied on the eagle's foot, with some Chinese characters carved on it. She took the cloth to some Han people in the army to translate. Turned out they were the 'in danger' two characters. Huazheng was concerned, so she went south immediately to investigate. By this time Genghis Khan was busy supervising the military expedition against the Jins; day after day the Mongolians engaged the Jins in fierce battles both inside and outside the Great Wall, so nobody stopped her when she expressed her intention to go to the south.

The eagles understood their master's intention, they flew ahead several hundred 'li's to look for Guo Jing, and went back every night. In so doing they arrived at Lin'an. Guo Jing had not been found, they came across Tuolei instead.

Tuolei was sent by his 'fu wang' [father king] on a diplomatic mission to Lin'an, to solicit cooperation from the Song Dynasty for a converging attack against the Jin country. But the Song ministers and officials were enjoying peace and prosperity in the southeast; they also were afraid of the Jin's army. They were thanking the heaven and the earth that the Jins did not attack them; how could they dare to pull a tiger's whisker? Therefore, they were very indifferent toward Tuolei; they placed him in the guest house and did not pay any attention to him anymore. Fortunately Wanyan Kang was captured by Lu, father and son, at Lake Tai; otherwise the Songs would have received the Jins' order and have Tuolei killed.

Later on came the news that the Mongolian army was moving fast and the Jin's capital of Yanjing fell. The ministers of the Song Dynasty changed their attitude immediately; now they treated Tuolei as the Fourth Prince this and the Fourth Prince that, flattered him to no end. They went as far as agreeing immediately to form an alliance to attack the Jins; they thought if they could seize the opportunity to defeat their enemy without too much effort, then why not?

Tuolei was not happy, but he still agreed to sign the bilateral agreement with the Southern Song Dynasty to attack the Jins. That day he returned to the north, the Song's ministers respectfully sent him off outside the city gate. Tuolei did not feel like performing perfunctory propriety, so he simply slapped his horse and left.

Just outside Lin'an he saw the white eagles; he thought Guo Jing must be around, who would have thought that it was his own sister. Huazheng asked, "Did you see Guo Jing Anda [Mongolian for 'sworn brother']?" Before Tuolei could answer they heard clamoring noise outside the door; the sound of armors and horses. It turned out it was the Song Dynasty's escort finally caught up with the Mongolian envoys.

Yang Kang was standing quietly at the door; he saw the Song troops were carrying a banner with these large characters written on it: 'Respectfully sending off the Mongolian Fourth Prince to return to the north.' He was unable to restrain having a disquieting thought, an extreme regret in his heart. Just dozens of days ago he was also a prince, an honorable envoy; today he was alone in the world and nobody paid him any attention. He had tasted riches and honor all his life, so it would be very difficult for him to throw away everything he held dear.

Mu Nianci watched him with a cold eye; she noticed his unusual expression. Although she did not know what he was thinking, but remembering that he had never forgotten the glory and splendor of being a part of the enemy, she was unable to restrain herself from feeling hurt.

The captain of the Song escort team went into the inn and respectfully appeared before Tuolei. He spoke with Tuolei for a moment before going back out and bark his order, "Go to every house and find out if there is someone surnamed Guo, Guo Jing, Guo Guanren [Master Guo - lit. government official] living in this village. If he doesn't, ask where did he move to?"

The soldiers complied with one voice and immediately spread out. Not too long afterwards from the village noises were heard of chicken scrambling and dogs running, men crying out and women screaming; for the soldiers did not find the information they were looking for, so they helped themselves to plunder sheep and other belongings. How else would they punish the villagers for not giving out the information they wanted?

Yang Kang's heart was stirred, "If the troops can seize this opportunity to plunder, why can't I seize this opportunity to befriend this Mongolians?" he thought, "I will accompany them returning to the north and kill him along the way; that won't be difficult. The Mongolian Great Khan will think it is the work of a Song man; hence the alliance between the Mongolia and the Song Dynasty will be broken. It will be a great advantage to the Jins." Once his mind was decided he told Mu Nianci, "Wait here for a moment." And in big strides he entered the inn.

The captain tried to stop him with a loud shout; holding up his hand in front of Yang Kang. Yang Kang lifted up his left

arm and tossed the captain away. The captain fell backward and for half a day did not crawl back up.

Tuolei and Huazheng were startled. By that time, Yang Kang had already arrived at the center of the room. He took the broken spearhead from his bosom and lifted it high above his head; respectfully placed that spearhead on the table, and then he knelt down in front of the table, wailing loudly, "Guo Jing, oh, Brother Guo, you died a miserable death. I surely must avenge your death, Guo Jing, oh, Brother Guo."

Tuolei brother and sister did not speak Chinese, but they heard him keep calling Guo Jing's name, they were astonished. By that time the captain was crawling up with great difficulty, hastily they told him to inquire.

Yang Kang was crying and talking, tears streaming down his cheeks, in between sobs he said, "I am Guo Jing's sworn brother, somebody killed Guo Dage [big brother] with this spearhead. That bastard is a Song Dynasty military officer; I think he received the Prime Minister Shi Miyuan's inciting."

As Tuolei and Huazheng, brother and sister, heard the captain translate what Yang Kang had said into Mongolian, it was as if they were struck by a thunder; they were speechless. Jebek and Borchu remembered their deep friendship with Guo Jing; the four of them wept and beat their chests. Yang Kang also brought up the fact that Guo Jing routed the Jin army at Baoying to save Tuolei and the others; hence Tuolei's suspicion was gone. They asked Yang Kang how Guo Jing died and who killed him. Yang Kang told them the killer was a Great Song's officer by the name of Duan Tiande, and that he knew this person's whereabouts, and that he was going to find him to seek revenge; it was a pity that Yang Kang was unable to do it without help, he was afraid this task would not be easy to accomplish. The

story just flowed out of Yang Kang's mouth like it was a true story.

In the other room Guo Jing heard everything clearly and he was frustrated. As Huazheng heard this story, she drew the dagger on her waist and was about to slash her own neck to commit suicide; but then she changed her mind and hacked the dagger into a table nearby. "I am not a human if I can't extract revenge for Guo Jing Anda!" she made a vow.

Yang Kang was very happy to see that his plan was halfway successful; he lowered his head and cried some more. Suddenly he saw the bamboo stick that Ouyang Ke snatched from Huang Rong's hand lying on the ground. It was deep green and clear like crystal, truly an unusual object; he knew it was an extraordinary stick, so he walked over and picked it up. Huang Rong was groaning inwardly, but she had no choice but to let him take it.

The troops came and delivered food and wine, but Tuolei and the others did not have any appetite. They urged Yang Kang to lead them to find Guo Jing's killer. Yang Kang nodded his head in compliance; he took the bamboo stick in his hand and walked to the door. He turned his head and called Mu Nianci to join them. Mu Nianci shook her head slightly. Yang Kang did not want to miss this good opportunity, their personal affair could wait, so he went out of the inn alone. Everybody else followed him.

Guo Jing said with a low voice, "Didn't he kill Duan Tiande at the Cloud Village a long time ago?"

Huang Rong shook her head, "I don't understand it myself. Wasn't it he who stab you with a dagger? This man is very sly, his thoughts are unpredictable."

Suddenly outside the door there was someone reciting loudly, "Roaming to and fro, free without limitation; heart is

free from greed, glorious body is free from disgrace! ... Ah! Miss Mu, why are you here?" It was the Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji.

Before Mu Nianci could reply, Yang Kang happened to be walking out of the inn. He saw his Shifu and his heart started thumping madly; this time they came face to face, there was no place he could hide, he had no choice but to kneel down and kowtow.

Next to Qiu Chuji stood several people; they were Danyang Zi [Scarlet Sun] Ma Yu, Yuyang Zi [Jade Sun] Wang Chuyi, Qing Jing San Ren [Sage of Tranquility] Sun Bu'er, as well as Qiu Chuji's disciple, Yin Zhiping. The previous day Yin Zhiping was beaten by Huang Yaoshi and he fell down and half the teeth in his mouth came off. Hastily he went to Lin'an to give report to his Shifu. Qiu Chuji was startled and angry; he wanted to go immediately to find Huang Yaoshi. Ma Yu strongly advised against his intention. Qiu Chuji said, "The Old Heretic Huang shared the same honor as our deceased master. Among us seven brothers and sister, only Wang Shi Di [younger martial brother] has seen his face at Mount Hua. Xiao Di [little younger brother] always admire him and wanted to see him long ago, I don't want to fight with him; why did Da Shige [first martial (older) brother] prevent me?"

Ma Yu said, "I heard Huang Yaoshi's temperament is strange, while your own temperament is brash and explosive; if you two meet, chances are that we won't have an amiable situation. He spared Zhiping's life, that means he is being lenient to us." However, Qiu Chuji was adamant in going, and Ma Yu did not have any way to persuade him not to. As it turned out, all Quanzhen Seven Masters happened to be in the vicinity of Lin'an; thereupon they were summoned and the next day they went to the Ox Village together.

All Quanzhen Seven Masters gathered together carried a strong power, but they fully realized Huang Yaoshi's ability, at the same time it was not clear whether he was a friend or a foe, therefore, they did not dare to be careless or indiscreet. Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi, Sun Bu'er and Yin Zhiping, five people went into the village; while Tan Chuduan, Liu Chuxuan and Hao Datong waited outside the village, ready to help. Who would have thought that they did not see Huang Yaoshi, but saw Mu Nianci and Yang Kang instead.

Qiu Chuji only snorted seeing Yang Kang kowtow, and did not pay him any attention. Yin Zhiping said, "Shifu, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island bullied disciple in this inn." Initially he referred to Huang Yaoshi as the Old Heretic Huang [Huang Laoxie], but after being scolded by Ma Yu and the others he changed the way he called him.

In a loud and clear voice Qiu Chuji called out, "Quanzhen disciples Ma Yu and the others pay their respect to the Peach Blossom Island's Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang]."

"There is no one inside," Yang Kang said.

Qiu Chuji stomped his foot and said, "What a pity, what a pity we can't see him!" Turning his head to Yang Kang he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Yang Kang was already scared to see his master and martial uncles, so he did not know what to say.

Huazheng had stared hard at Ma Yu for half a day, finally she rushed forward and called out, "Ah, you are the one who helped me capturing the eagles; you are the three-hair-bun Uncle. Look, those little eaglets have grown this big." She let out a loud whistle and the pair of eagles came down and perched on her left and right shoulders.

Ma Yu showed a faint smile, he nodded his head and said, "Are you going south to play?"

Huazheng cried and said, "Daozhang [Taoist Priest], somebody killed Guo Jing Anda. Please avenge his death."

Ma Yu jumped in fright; he translated what he just heard into Chinese. Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi were shocked; busily they asked further information. Huazheng pointed her finger toward Yang Kang and said, "He saw it with his own eyes; ask him what happened."

As Yang Kang found out that Huazheng knew his Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle], he was afraid that if they talked too much their suspicion would be aroused; and then his plan to swindle these Mongolians without any effort would be thwarted. However, he could not talk irresponsibly toward his master and martial uncles, so he told Tuolei and Huazheng, "You go ahead and wait for me for a moment, I need to talk to these priests and then I'll come along immediately." Tuolei listened to the captain's translation, he nodded his head, then led everybody to leave the village and going to the north.

"Who killed Guo Jing?" Qiu Chuji asked with a stern voice, "Tell us, quick!"

Yang Kang considered his answer carefully, he thought, "Guo Jing was clearly killed by me; whom should I accuse?" He was undecided for a moment before he remembered, "I'd better mention someone with a high level of martial art; let Shifu find him and thus delivering his own life, then I won't have any more problem in the future." Thereupon with hatred in his voice he said, "It was the Peach Blossom Island's Huang Daozhu."

The Quanzhen Seven Masters had known early on that Huang Yaoshi wanted to pursue and kill the Six Freaks of

Jiangnan, so it made perfect sense if Guo Jing died under his hands; they did not have the least bit of suspicion. Qiu Chuji cursed the Old Heretic Huang as the most evil person, and he vowed not to rest before dealing with him. Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi were very depressed, so they could not say anything.

Suddenly from a distant came the voice of laughter, followed by someone whose voice was like a broken cymbal, finally there was someone shouting in a soft voice; although the sound was low, it was heard clearly. Three different voices went around the outskirts of the village; and then suddenly it was as if they came from a faraway place.

Ma Yu was pleasantly surprised, "That laughter sounds like Zhou Shishu; he is still alive!" He heard three whistles from the east side of the village, going farther and farther away.

"Three Shige already give chase," Sun Bu'er said.

Wang Chuyi said, "Listen to that broken cymbal sound and that soft shout; it seems like they are chasing Zhou Shishu."

Ma Yu was worried, "Those two people's martial art skills are not below Zhou Shishu's; I wonder which experts are they? Zhou Shishu is facing two enemies, I am afraid ..." He shook his head.

All Quanzhen four masters leaned their heads to listen for half a day, until the sounds were gone. They knew those people had already several 'li's away, so it was useless to pursue them.

Sun Bu'er said, "If Tan Shige and the others manage to catch up and render their assistance, Zhou Shishu does not have to worry."

"I am afraid they cannot overtake them," Qiu Chuji said, "It would be best if Zhou Shishu knew we are here and run to this village."

Huang Rong found their reckless surmise ridiculous to hear, she thought, "My father and the Old Poison are competing leg strength with the Old Urchin; they are not fighting. If they were, and you – a bunch of stinky ox noses [derogatory term for Taoist priest] – want to help, do you think you are my father's and the Old Poison's match?" She had just heard how Qiu Chuji was cursing her father, she was not happy; while she did not mind too much that Yang Kang brought a false charge against her father as Guo Jing's killer, because Guo Jing was in good condition and was sitting right next to her.

Ma Yu waved his hand and everybody went into the inn to sit down. Qiu Chuji said, "Hey, are you now called Wanyan Kang, or is it Yang Kang?"

Yang Kang saw his master's eyes were glittering brightly, looking at him with a penetrating gaze, his face looked grim; he knew if he gave one bad answer, it would be difficult for him to keep his life. He busily said, "If not because of Shifu, Ma Shibo and Wang Shishu giving me directions, disciple still would have been in the dark today, regarding an enemy for a father; so naturally disciple's surname is Yang. Last night disciple and Sister Mu here have just buried my deceased father and mother."

Hearing him saying so, Qiu Chuji was delighted; he nodded and his face turned softer. At first Wang Chuyi reprimanded Yang Kang for jousting against Mu Nianci but not wanting to marry her; but now he saw these two people together he thought the two of them had sorted things out, his indignation toward Yang Kang vanished.

Yang Kang took out the broken spearhead with which he killed Ouyang Ke and said, "This is what's left of my deceased father's belongings; disciple always keep it with me."

Qiu Chuji took the spearhead and caressed it gently; his heart was filled with sorrow. He heaved a sigh and said, "Nineteen years ago, I came across your father and your Uncle Guo. Very quickly more than a dozen years have passed, two old friends have come back to the yellow earth. The two of them are dead, leaving me suffering on this earth. I was powerless to save your parents' lives; it has been my life-long regret."

In the other room Guo Jing heard Qiu Chuji fondly remember his own father, he was grieved. "Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest] still remembers his friendship with my father, but I have never seen my father's face. Brother Yang was able to meet with his father, he is luckier than I am."

Qiu Chuji then asked how Huang Yaoshi killed Guo Jing, and Yang Kang opened his mouth making up some stories. Qiu, Ma and Wang three people had known Guo Jing for a long time; they sighed incessantly. After talking for a while Yang Kang remembered he had to see Tuolei and Huazheng, his heart was restless.

Wang Chuyi looked at him, and then looked at Mu Nianci, "Have you two married?" he asked.

"Not yet," Yang Kang replied.

"You'd better get married soon," Wang Chuyi said, "Qiu Shige, why don't you make the decision for them? How do you think we should handle this matter?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other, they both thought, "Are we going to witness another wedding

tonight?" Huang Rong further thought, "Mu Jiejie [older sister] is hot-tempered, she is a lot different than that Cheng Da Xiaojie. Perhaps before she agrees to get married she would challenge that kid surnamed Yang for a martial art contest. Now that would be interesting to watch."

She heard Yang Kang delightfully reply, "I rely on Shifu to make the decision." But with a clear voice Mu Nianci said, "I have one condition you must fulfill; otherwise I won't comply."

Qiu Chuji showed a faint smile listening to her; he said, "All right, what is it? Miss, please say it."

Mu Nianci said, "My adoptive father was killed by that traitor Wanyan Honglie. Before we can get married, he has to avenge his father's death first."

Qiu Chuji clapped his hands and called out, "Hear, hear! Miss Mu has just said what's in this Old Priest's heart. Kang'er, don't you agree?"

Yang Kang was very hesitant; he pondered deeply how to answer. Suddenly from outside the door a rough throaty voice like a mute's hissing was heard, singing the 'lian hua luo' [fallen lotus flower], and then a high-pitched throaty voice called out, "Master, Lady, be merciful, spare this beggar some money."

Mu Nianci thought this voice was somewhat familiar, she turned her head and saw that two beggars stood at the doorstep; one fat, the other short and thin, so small that the fat one looked three times as big as he was. These two's postures were so unusual that even though it had been many years, Mu Nianci still remembered that when she was only thirteen she had tended their injuries. Hong Qigong was pleased that she had a good heart, for this reason he passed on some martial art to her for three days. She was

about to go out and greet them, but ever since those two beggars enter the room, their eyes had never left the bamboo stick in Yang Kang's hand. They looked at each other and nodded their heads, then they walked toward Yang Kang, cupped their hands in front of their chests and bowed respectfully.

Ma Yu and the others noticed the two beggars' steps and body movement, they knew these beggars were not weak; they also noticed that each beggar carried eight coarse sacks on their backs; therefore, these two were the Eight-Bag Disciple of the Beggars Clan. Their positions were very high, but they were this respectful toward Yang Kang; Ma Yu and the others did not understand.

The thin beggar said, "I heard the brethrens say that some people in Lin'an City saw the Clan Leader's Stick. We went everywhere to investigate, and are fortunate to see it here. I wonder where did the Clan Leader go begging?"

Although Yang Kang took the bamboo stick, actually he did not know the stick's origin. Listening to this beggar's words he did not know how to respond, so he simply uttered an 'Hmm.' There was a custom in the Beggars Clan that seeing the Dog Beating Stick was the same as seeing the Clan Leader himself; so even though Yang Kang did not pay any attention to them, they still looked respectful and cautious.

The fat beggar said, "The assembly at Yuezhou is getting closer; from the east Elders Lu and Jian have headed west seven days ago."

Yang Kang become more and more confused, he uttered another 'Hmm.' The thin beggar continued, "In order to look for the Clan Leader's Stick, disciples have been delayed for several days; so we must hurry along

immediately. If Your Excellency decides to leave today, let disciples accompany and take care of you along the way.”

Yang Kang was inwardly excited, he had been trying to find a way to leave his Shifu; without caring what the beggars said, he wanted to grab this opportunity. Thereupon he prostrated himself in front of Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others and said, “Disciple has some important matter to attend, I cannot accompany Shifu much longer. Please forgive me for taking my leave.”

Ma Yu and the others thought that Yang Kang must have some important connection with the Beggar Clan. The Beggar Clan was the largest organization in the world. The Clan Leader Hong Qigong was a martial art expert who shared the same reputation with their deceased master, Wang Zhenren; therefore, clearly they could not detain Yang Kang. Out of respect to the two beggars, they felt it was inappropriate to ask more questions, so they simply paid their respects according to the Jianghu custom.

The two beggars had always admired the Quanzhen Seven Masters; knowing they were Yang Kang’s masters, they were more modest, kept referring themselves as ‘wan bei’ [juniors]. Mu Nianci talked about past events, the two beggars became more affectionate. Since she already had some connection with the Beggar Clan, she was also invited to the Yuezhou assembly. Mu Nianci wanted very much to travel with Yang Kang, so she immediately nodded her head.

Qiu Chuji was originally very angry with Yang Kang and wanted to cripple him to take his martial art skill away, but remembering the deceased Yang Tiexin he did not have the heart to do so. Now, first, he saw that Yang Kang treated Mu Nianci in an intimate manner, that simple ‘joust to find a spouse’ affair turned out good after all; second, Yang Kang

seemed to learn good lesson from life experiences, he was willing to forfeit riches and honor, took the surname Yang as his own, so Qiu Chuji's loving care in teaching and giving him guidance was not in vain; third, these two high-level Beggar Clan disciple seemed to respect him very much, it certainly would bring glory and honor to the Quanzhen Sect. Therefore, the fury in his heart was replaced immediately into delight. He gently twirled the end of his long moustache and watched Yang and Mu two people's backs with a smile on his face.

That very evening Ma Yu and the others slept in the inn, waiting for Tan Chuduan three people to return. But all day the next day they did not hear anything about them; four people started to get anxious. Near midnight they heard a long whistle from outside the village. "Hao Shige came back!" Sun Bu'er said. Ma Yu returned the call with a low whistle. Not too long afterwards a shadow flashed by the door and Hao Datong flew in.

Huang Rong had never seen this person, she pressed her eye into the small hole to take a look. It was the fifth day of the seventh month, the crescent moon shone its light through the window opening. Under the moonlight she saw this man was big and tall, his appearance looked like that of a government official. His Taoist robe had short sleeves, stopped at the elbow; it looked different than the ones Ma Yu and the others wore. Turned out before he became a priest he was a head of Shandong's Ninghai sub-prefecture's rich family; highly educated, even managed to sell his divination skill. Later on he bowed to Wang Chongyang at the 'yan xia dong' [smoky red clouds cave] and took him as his master. Wang Chongyang took out his own robe, cut the sleeves and gave the robe to Hao Datong; saying, "Don't worry that it is without sleeves, you will complete it yourself."

The word 'xiu' [sleeve] was similar to the word 'shou' [to teach/to instruct/to award/to give]; the meaning was, no matter how much the master gives instructions, there will always be more to learn; whether the disciple enlightened or not, it depends on his own comprehension. He remembered his Master's kindness very well, so afterwards he always wore the half-sleeved Taoist robe.

Qiu Chuji was the most impatient, "How is Zhou Shishu?" he asked, "Is he playing around with others, or is he fighting them?"

Hao Datong shook his head. "I am ashamed," he said, "Xiao Di's [little brother] skill is superficial, I only managed to pursue them for seven, eight 'li's before Zhou Shishu's and the others' shadows disappeared. Tan Shige and Liu Shige were still ahead of Xiao Di. Xiao Di was powerless; I tried to look for them one whole day and one whole night but did not have the slightest clue on where they were."

Ma Yu nodded his head, "Hao Shidi [younger martial brother] is tired. Sit down and take some rest." Hao Datong sat cross-legged. He circulated his 'qi' around his body one time, then he said, "On my way back at the 'zhou wang miao' [Temple of King Zhou (dynasty)] Xiao Di saw six people. Their appearance matches Qiu Shige's description of the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. Thus Xiao Di came over to talk with them, and indeed it was them."

Qiu Chuji was delighted, "The Six Freaks are very bold," he said, "They unexpectedly went to the Peach Blossom Island. No wonder we could not find them."

Hao Datong said, "The head of the Six Freaks, Ke Zhen'e, Ke Daxia [great hero Ke] said that they had an agreement to see Huang Yaoshi, therefore, they went to the Peach Blossom Island to keep their promise; who would have

thought that Huang Yaoshi was not on the island. They heard Xiao Di mention Qiu Shixiong and the others are here, they said they are going to pay us a visit a little later.”

Guo Jing heard that his six masters were well, his heart was greatly comforted. By this time he had trained for five days and five nights, most of his injury has been healed.

Toward the ninth hour [3-5pm] of the sixth day, from the east of the village came a long whistle. “Liu Shidi came back,” Qiu Chuji said. A short moment later they saw Liu Chuxuan, accompanied by an old man with white hair and white beard, walking toward the inn. That old man was wearing a yellow short robe, a pair of shoes made of coarse cloth on his feet, and a huge rush-leaf fan in his hand. He was talking and smiling while entering the inn. When he saw the Quanzhen Five Masters he simply nodded his head slightly, as if he did not regard them too highly.

Liu Chuxuan said, “This is ‘tie zhang shui shang piao’ [iron palm floating above the water], Qiu Lao Qian Bei [Senior Qiu]. It is truly our good fortune to see him today.”

Huang Rong heard this and almost burst out in laughter, she lightly bumped Guo Jing with her elbow. Guo Jing also thought it was funny. Both were thinking, “I want to see how else this old scoundrel will swindle people.”

Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others had heard Qiu Qianren’s fame for a long time, they had a profound respect toward him, so they talked to him with utmost respect and caution. But Qiu Qianren kept bragging unguardedly. After talking for a while Qiu Chuji asked if he saw their Shishu Zhou Botong. Qiu Qianren replied, “The Old Urchin? He was killed by Huang Yaoshi.”

Everybody was shocked. Liu Chuxuan said, “How can it be? Just the day before yesterday Wan bei [junior] saw Zhou

Shishu; only he ran so very fast that I could not overtake him.” Qiu Qianren was confounded, he simply smiled without saying anything; his mind churning to find a good answer.

Qiu Chuji interrupted, “Liu Shidi, did you have a good look, the two people who chased Shishu are what kind of people?”

Liu Chuxuan said, “One was wearing a white robe, the other a dark green long gown. They ran really fast. Indistinctly I saw the one wearing green had a very queer facial appearance, almost like a corpse’s face.”

Qiu Qianren had seen Huang Yaoshi at the Cloud Village, he quickly opened his mouth, “That’s right! The one that killed the Old Urchin was this green-long-gown-wearing Huang Yaoshi. Other than him, who has the ability to do so? I was about to rush forward but I was one step too late. Ay! The Old Urchin died a miserable death.”

Tie Zhang Shui Shang Piao Qiu Qinren had a resounding reputation throughout the Wulin world; he was a senior with a high level of martial art skill. How would the Quanzhen Six Masters know that he was a blabbering mouth? Immediately they felt exceptional grief and indignation. Qiu Chuji slapped the tabletop so hard producing an earth-shattering noise; again he scolded Huang Yaoshi as a dog with head drenched in blood.

Huang Rong at the other room was very angry. She did not blame Qiu Qianren from spreading false rumor about her father, but she did blame Qiu Chuji for scolding her father repeatedly.

Liu Chuxuan said, “Tan Shige’s footwork is faster than mine, perhaps he saw how Shishu was killed.”

Sun Bu'er said, "Tan Shige has not come back till now, perhaps he also suffered harm under the old thief's hand ..." Speaking to this point her face turned miserable, she stopped talking immediately.

Qiu Chuji drew his sword and called out, "Let us go quickly to rescue and avenge people!"

Qiu Qianren was afraid they might meet Zhou Botong, he quickly said, "Huang Yaoshi is aware that you are all gathered here, he could look for you anytime. This Old Heretic Huang is so evil, the Old Man here cannot allow him to continue like this. I am going to find him; you wait for my good news in here."

Everybody revered him as the senior, it would be inappropriate to defy his word; also they were afraid they would miss Huang Yaoshi if they were out looking for him, it would certainly be better to wait here for the enemy to find them and conserve their energy at the same time. Thereupon they bowed to express their gratitude and sent Qiu Qianren off to the door.

Qiu Qianren stepped over the doorstep and turned around to wave his hand, "You don't have to send me off too far. Although that Old Heretic Huang is fierce, I have a way to deal with him. Watch this!" He drew the shining sharp sword from his waist and aimed it towards his own abdomen. "Hey!" with a grunt he thrust the sword in.

Everybody called out in alarm; they saw more than half of the three feet sword went into his stomach. Qiu Qianren smiled and said, "Any sharp weapon in the world won't injure me. Please don't panic. If I can't find the Old Heretic Huang and he comes to find you here, don't fight him, avoid getting injured. Just wait for me to deal with him."

Qiu Chuji said, "The enmity of Shishu, it is impossible for the disciples not to avenge it."

Qiu Qianren sighed and said, "That's fine too, this is fate. If you want to seek revenge, there is one thing you must remember."

Ma Yu said, "Please give us your direction, Senior."

Qiu Qianren's face turned serious, he said, "As soon as you see the Old Heretic Huang, kill him immediately. Don't bother talking to him; otherwise, this enmity will forever be difficult to avenge. Important! Very important!" As he finished speaking he turned around with the sword still stuck in his abdomen.

Everybody looked at each other in amazement. Ma Yu and the others had vast experience, yet they had never heard of a sharp sword entering the abdomen and nothing happening; they thought this man's skill must have reached a level beyond measure. They did not know that it was another trick of Qiu Qianren: that sword was actually consisted of three sections, as soon as a light force was applied to the tip of the blade the first and second sections would automatically retract into the third section, the sword edge went through a seam in the waistband, hence for the spectator at a distance it looked like the sharp edge was entering the body. He had been hired by Wanyan Honglie to incite enmities among the Jiangnan heroes and warriors, so that when the Jin army attacked to the south they would not be united to fight the invaders.

For the rest of the day the Quanzhen Six Masters were restless; they could not drink tea or eat their rice, they stayed awake until the midnight of the seventh day. They heard some faint whistles come from the north of the village, two people, one in front of the other, came swiftly to

the outside of the inn. Ma Yu, all six people were originally sitting cross-legged on the straw training their breathing exercises, because Yin Zhiping's skill was lower, he was sleeping. Hearing this noise they all jumped up immediately.

"The enemy is pursuing Tan Shidi," Ma Yu said, "All Shidis, be careful!"

Tonight was Guo Jing's last night to train and heal his injury. During these past seven days and nights not only his internal injury gradually healed, his external wound was also closing up, and both Huang Rong's and his own internal strength had enjoyed tremendous advancement. These last several hours would be very crucial to the entire healing process. Listening to Ma Yu, Huang Rong was very concerned. "If the incoming person is indeed Father, all Quanzhen Seven Masters will fight him immediately. I won't be able to come out and tell them the truth," she thought, "I am afraid the Quanzhen Seven Masters will be injured under Father's hand. I don't care much for Quanzhen Seven Masters, but Jing Gege has a close relationship with Ma Daozhang and the others. I know his character well; it would be difficult for him not to come out and help them. If he bravely steps forward, not only the entire exercise will be wasted, his life will also be in danger." Therefore, she quickly whispered in Guo Jing's ear, "Jing Gege, promise me that whatever happens, no matter what important incident, you must by all means not go out."

Guo Jing just barely nodded his head when the whistle had already arrived at the door.

"Tan Shige," Qiu Chuji called out, "Tian gang bei dou [lit. sky's stars north head - the Big Dipper constellation] formation!"

Hearing the 'tian gang bei dou' four characters Guo Jing's heart was stirred, he said to himself, "The 'bei dou da fa' [Big Dipper great method] is mentioned several times in the Nine Yin Manual as the foundation of learning the martial art. But the explanation of 'bei dou da fa' in the Manual is profoundly subtle, it was so difficult to understand. I wonder if Ma Daozhang and the others' 'tian gang bei dou' has anything to do with the 'bei dou da fa'. It's surely important to know." Busily he pressed his eye to the hole and looked out.

His eye was barely on the hole when he heard a loud 'bang!' the front door shook, and a Taoist priest flew in. But the priest's robe was lifted up, his left foot had already stepped over the threshold, suddenly he staggered back out of the door. It turned out the enemy had arrived behind him and had launched an attack.

Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi flew together towards the door, standing at the entrance their sleeves rose up and two palms struck together. 'Bang!' they collided with the enemy's palm. Qiu and Wang two people were forced two steps backward, the enemy also drew two steps back. Tan Chuduan took this opportunity to enter the room.

Under the moonlight his hair looked disheveled, with two traces of blood streaming down his face. The long sword in his right hand was only half of its original length, his overall appearance was a total wreck. As Tan Chuduan entered the room, without saying anything he sat down cross-legged. Ma Yu and the others also immediately sat in their respective positions.

From the darkness outside came a woman's gloomy voice calling out, "Tan Laodao [old Taoist], if I did not regard the face of your Shixiong Ma Yu, this old lady would have already delivered your life to the heaven early on. Why did

you lead the old lady to come over here? Who had just exchanged palm strength with me? Tell it to Mei Chaofeng.”

In the stillness of the night listening to her owl-cry like voice, although it was the middle of summer, involuntarily a chill crept on everybody’s back. As soon as she stopped talking the silence came back, outside the door the insects’ buzz was heard clearly. A moment later a series of cracking noises were heard. Guo Jing knew the noise came from Mei Chaofeng’s joints, in a moment she would start making her move.

Yet another moment someone was reciting softly, “Once one make a dwelling one can stay for several dozens years.” Guo Jing recognized it was Ma Yu’s voice, the intonation was really gentle and soothing. Tan Chuduan continued, “With disheveled hair walking all day long like crazy.” His voice was straightforward and heroic. Guo Jing peeked outside and took a good look on the Second Master of the Quanzhen Seven Masters. He saw a muscular face with thick eyebrows and big eyes, his body looked big and sturdy. Before he became a priest Tan Chuduan was a blacksmith in Shandong. After he entered Quanzhen Sect, his title was Changzhen [Eternal Truth] Zi.

The third Taoist priest was thin and small, his face looked like a monkey; he was Changsheng [Eternal Life] Zi, Liu Chuxuan. He continued the recitation, “Chongyang Zi [from ‘Wang Chongyang] underneath the ‘hay tang ting’ [ocean cherry-apple pavilion].” His stature might be small, but his voice was loud and clear.

Changchun [Eternal Spring (season, not water spring)] Zi Qiu Chuji opened his mouth, “Tai yi xian [I think he is a Taoist deity] in the lotus leaf boat.” Followed by Yuyang [Jade Sun] Zi Wang Chuyi, “Nothing can get out of an empty shell.” Guangning [Infinite Peace] Zi Hao Datong was next,

“There’s someone who can reach enlightenment before being born.” Lastly Qingjing Sanren [Sage of Tranquility] Sun Bu’er recited, “Leaving home with a smile without any obstruction.” Ma Yu concluded, “Cloud in the West Lake, moon in the sky!”

Mei Chaofeng listened to these seven recitations, each voice carried an abundant ‘qi’ in it, a sign of their deep internal energy. She was secretly shocked, “Are the Quanzhen Seven Masters really here this time? It can’t be. Other than Ma Yu, the others’ voices are not the same.”

On the peak of Mongolian desert cliff she had heard Ma Yu and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan pretending to be the Quanzhen Seven Masters talking to each other. Her eyes were blind, so she depended a lot on her extremely keen ears; her memory was also superb, once she heard anything, she would not forget it. She did not know that Ma Yu was deceiving her that day.

“Ma Daozhang, you must be well since our last meeting!” she said with a clear voice. She knew Ma Yu was showing her mercy the other day. Although she was vicious, she knew the good from evil. When Tan Chuduan could not overtake Zhou Botong he decided to return. On his way back he saw that Mei Chaofeng was using a living person to train her martial art. Being a man of chivalry and righteousness, he went forward to prevent evil; who would have thought that he was not her match. Fortunately Mei Chaofeng recognized him as a Quanzhen Sect priest. Out of her respect to Ma Yu she did not kill him, she only injured him and chased him away.

Ma Yu said, “I am very fortunate! Thank you! The Peach Blossom Island does not have any enmity with Quanzhen Sect. Is your honorable master coming soon?”

Mei Chaofeng was startled, "Are you expecting my Shifu?" she asked.

Qiu Chuji called out, "Witch! Quickly get your Shifu over here to experience Quanzhen Sect's real skill."

Mei Chaofeng was angry, "Who are you?" she called out.

"Qiu Chuji!" Qiu Chuji said, "Haven't you, the demon, heard my name?"

Mei Chaofeng cried out loudly, her body flew up to the direction of Qiu Chuji's voice. Her left palm was protecting herself, and her right claw striking downward.

Guo Jing knew that this pounce by Mei Chaofeng was swift and ruthlessly fierce, it was really difficult to block, although Qiu Chuji's martial art was good, he would not be able to take it head on. Who would have thought that he was still sitting cross-legged on the ground; he neither parried nor evaded.

"Not good!" Guo Jing shouted inwardly, "How can Qiu Daozhang be this bold?" He saw that Mei Chaofeng was about to grab the top of Qiu Chuji's head, suddenly two palm winds came from left and right; it was Liu Chuxuan and Wang Chuyi striking together. Mei Chaofeng's right claw continued to strike, while her left palm swept horizontally to block Liu and Wang two people's palm strikes. Who would have thought that these two palms were complementing each other, one 'yin' [negative], the other 'yang' [positive], the power, unexpectedly, was much stronger than the internal strengths of two people added together.

Mei Chaofeng felt this surge of power in midair; it was like a cannonball pushing her upward. Hastily she changed her right claw into a palm, striking downward then she flipped

her body backwards and landed on the threshold. She was unable to restrain her shock, thinking that these two people's skills were very profound, certainly above the Quanzhen Seven Masters. "Is Hong Qigong and Emperor Duan in here?" she called out.

Qiu Chuji said with a smile, "We are the Quanzhen Seven Masters. What Hong Qigong or Emperor Duan?"

Mei Chaofeng was puzzled, "Tan Laodao [old Taoist] was not my match; how come there is such an expert among his martial brothers? Could it be there is such a big difference in skill among them even though they came from the same school?"

Guo Jing in the other room was also puzzled; he thought that although Liu and Wang two people's martial art skill was higher, they were more or less in par with Mei Chaofeng or with her senior. Even if those two combined their forces, they would not be able to casually throw her out like that. Only Zhou Botong, Hong Qigong, Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng, and other people of their caliber would have this kind of ability; how did the Quanzhen Seven Masters manage to do that?

Mei Chaofeng's temper was very bold; other than her own Shifu, she did not fear anybody in the world. The more she suffered setbacks, the more she would act recklessly. That day on the peak of the Mongolian's cliff Ma Yu was speaking to her amiably, treating her in good manners and let her go without giving her too much difficulty. But today Qiu Chuji believed Qiu Qianren's lies that Zhou Botong had been killed by Huang Yaoshi; he also believed Huang Yaoshi killed Guo Jing. His hatred toward the Peach Blossom Island went deep to his bones and marrows; he kept calling Mei Chaofeng 'yao fu' [lit. goblin/witch/devil/monster woman]. Mei Chaofeng knew perfectly well that her enemies were

not her match, but she was not willing to give up. She only hesitated for a moment before she reached into her waist to pull her 'du long bian' [poisonous dragon whip] out. "Ma Daozhang!" she called out, "I must offend you today!"

Ma Yu replied, "You flatter me!"

Mei Chaofeng said, "I am going to use my weapon. Unsheathe your swords!"

Wang Chuyi said, "There are seven of us while you are alone, plus your eyes cannot see a thing. Even if the Quanzhen Seven Masters are unworthy, we cannot use weapons against you. We will sit and not move; you can start!"

Mei Chaofeng coldly said, "Do you want to face my silver whip sitting motionless?"

Qiu Chuji scolded, "Witch, tonight you will lose your life, what more do you want to say?"

"Humph," Mei Chaofeng snorted. Her right hand flicked, the long whip full of hooks in her hand moved slowly like a big python straight toward Sun Bu'er.

In the other room Huang Rong listened their conversation; she knew how fierce Mei Chaofeng's 'du long bian' was, the Quanzhen Seven Masters went as far as daring to take the whip sitting motionless and barehanded, she wanted to know how they were going to do that. She pulled Guo Jing away from the hole and told him that she wanted to watch.

She saw the Quanzhen Seven Masters sat in a formation inside the room; it suddenly dawned on her, "This is the Big Dipper constellation! Hmm, right! Didn't Qiu Daozhang mention the Big Dipper formation?" Huang Yaoshi was proficient in astronomy and the study of calendar

calculation (almanac). When Huang Rong was small she often sat on her father's knees in a clear night, looking at celestial constellation, hence she immediately recognized the positions of the seven Taoist priests.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters' Ma Yu took the 'tian shu' [sky pivot] position, Tan Chuduan took the 'tian xuan' [sky jade/gem] position, Liu Chuxuan 'tian ji' [sky pearl], Qiu Chuji 'tian quan' [sky power/authority]. These four people formed the head of the constellation. Wang Chuyi took the 'yu heng' [jade (measuring) weight], Hao Datong the 'kai yang' [open sun], and Sun Bu'er 'yao guang' [shaking ray (of light)]. These three were the handle of the Big Dipper.

Among the seven stars of the Big Dippers, the light of the 'tian quan' was the darkest, but it was the link connecting the head with the handle. It was the most important position; hence it was occupied by the strongest among the Quanzhen Seven Masters, Qiu Chuji. Among the handle, 'yu heng' was the most important; hence it was taken by the second strongest Wang Chuyi.

Mei Chaofeng's 'du long bian' was moving toward Sun Bu'er's chest. It seemed slow but it was very fierce; who would have thought that the Daogu [Taoist priestess] was still sitting motionless. Huang Rong followed the movement of the tip of the whip and saw that there was a skull embroidered on Sun Bu'er's Taoist robe; she was secretly amazed. "Quanzhen Sect enjoys the reputation as a Taoist orthodox school, how come her clothing resembles something from Mei Shijie's pathway?" She did not know that when Wang Chongyang took Sun Bu'er as his disciple he drew a skull and gave it to her. His meaning was that somebody's life was short, that very quick death will come, and the person would change into a skull; so she must cultivate the true and admired 'way' ['Dao' of the Taoist

means 'the way']. In memory of her deceased master, Sun Bu'er embroidered this skull on her robe.

The 'yin bian' [silver whip] seemed to move slowly, yet it carried a gust of wind. The tip of the whip was only about several inches apart from the embroidered skull on her robe, suddenly with an abrupt movement the silver whip flew back, just like a python when its head was chopped with a knife, or like an arrow it flew straight back towards Mei Chaofeng. It was so strange and swift; Mei Chaofeng only felt that her hand was slightly shaken and the wind had already caressed her face. Quickly she ducked and the silver whip brushed through her hair. "Dangerous!" she cried out inwardly as she pulled the whip back and re-attacked. This time the whip was aimed toward Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji, who were still sitting motionless. Tan Chuduan and Wang Chuyi raised their palms and parried the whip away.

After they exchanged several stances Huang Rong was able to see clearly that the Quanzhen Seven Masters always parry the incoming attack with one palm, while the other palm was holding the shoulder of the person sitting right next to them. Huang Rong pondered deeply and it dawned on her, "It turned out that they are using the same method I use to help healing Jing Gege's injury. They are combining seven people's strength into one; how can Mei Shijie resist?"

The Big Dipper Formation was Quanzhen Sect's highest and most mysterious martial art, developed by Wang Chongyang with countless meticulous care. The main principle was combining forces in combat with a wide range of variations; it might even be used in the battlefield. When the enemy attacked, the one directly bearing the brunt did not need to exert any energy to resist; it was the companions on his/her flanks who would launch the

counterattack. It was as if one person with several people's martial art; the power was truly irresistible.

Several moves later Mei Chaofeng became increasingly panicked, since she realized that the enemy no longer fend the whip off and shake it away, but she felt the whip was being pulled and redirected so that the circle of the whip movement was decreasing, getting smaller and smaller. A short moment later as the several 'zhang's long silver whip was moving halfway toward the enemy, she could not pull it back anymore. If at this time she has let the whip go and jumped back, she might escape unharmed; but she had spent innumerable painstaking efforts in training with this long whip, how could she just sit quietly when the enemy was trying to snatch the whip away from her hand?

She hesitated only for a moment but her opportunity to escape was gone. Once the Big Dipper Formation started to move, all seven people moved swiftly as if they were one person, unstoppable unless by the person occupying the 'tian quan' position. By the time Mei Chaofeng realized her precarious situation, it was already too late for her to back off. The only thing she could do was clench her teeth, let go of the whip handle and stake it all.

Liu Chuxuan's palm made a pulling action, with a loud 'bang!' the whip flew and hit the wall, shaking the whole building; the roof tiles rattled loudly and dust and debris from the roof fell down to the ground. Mei Chaofeng staggered; she could not resist this pulling force and was forced one step forward.

Although this one step was only about two feet, it was crucial in determining victory or defeat. If Mei Chaofeng had let her whip go sooner, she would not be pulled forward and she could turn around and escape out the door; the Quanzhen Seven Masters might not necessarily pursue her,

because even if they did they might not necessarily be able to overtake her. But now that she had moved forward one step, she knew the situation was unfavorable to her; she wielded her palms to the left and right, and they happened to meet with Sun Bu'er and Wang Chuyi's palms. As she slightly added her palm strength, Ma Yu and Hao Datong's palms came striking from behind. She knew perfectly well that if she moved another step, her situation would become more dangerous; but under the circumstances, she had no choice so her left foot treaded half a step forward. At the same time with a loud shout her right foot flew up and successively kicked Ma Yu and Hao Datong's hands.

"Good skill!" Qiu Chuji and Liu Chuxuan cheered together, while simultaneously their palms struck, one from the front, the other from the back, to prevent her from continuing her attack. Before her right foot even landed, Mei Chaofeng's left foot flew up and like a flash kicking Qiu's and Liu's palms; but as her right foot landed she moved one more step forward. This way she went even deeper into the Big Dipper Formation; she will not be able to escape unless she managed to overthrow one out of seven people.

As she was watching the battle, Huang Rong's heart was secretly anxious. Under the pale yellow moonlight she saw Mei Chaofeng's long hair flutter in the air as she was leaping around and her palms striking, her feet kicking. Each hand and each foot carried a light wind, like a tiger leaping or a leopard flitting about.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters were still sitting cross-legged; when the head is struck the tail responded, when the tail is attacked the head responded, when the middle is struck the head and tail responded, while all the time keeping her firmly inside the formation.

Mei Chaofeng had successively used the 'jiu yin bai gu zhua' [nine yin white bone claw] and 'cui xin zhang' [devastating heart palm] trying to dash out of the tight encirclement; but every time she was forced to go back by the Seven Masters' palm strength. In her anxiety she let out a strange 'wah, wah' cry.

By this time if the Seven Masters wanted to take her life they would be able to do so without too much effort, but all along they had never launched a deathly strike. Huang Rong watched for half a day before she realized what was happening, "Ah, right! They are borrowing Mei Shijie to train this formation. It is not easy to find an opponent with her high level of martial art. I think they are going to weary her to death before they'll stop." Actually her guess was only half true; they were borrowing Mei Chaofeng to train their formation all right, but Taoism did not tolerate killing easily, therefore, they never had any intention to kill her.

Huang Rong did not have a favorable impression toward Mei Chaofeng, but seeing the Seven Masters humiliate her like this Huang Rong was seething with anger; so after watching for a moment longer she didn't want to watch anymore and gave the hole back to Guo Jing. She still, however, heard the gusts of wind in the other room sometimes intensifying and sometimes slowing down, a sign that the battle was still raging.

At first Guo Jing was puzzled to see the fight; he did not understand why the Seven Masters was fighting Mei Chaofeng by sitting in an irregular formation on the ground. Huang Rong whispered in his ear, "They are sitting according to the Big Dipper Constellation; seven people's internal strengths are connected to each other. Do you see it?"

It was like a reminder to Guo Jing; he remembered the second part of the Nine Yin Manual mentioned the Big Dipper quite often. He had memorized this part by heart, yet he did not understand its meaning. Looking at the Seven Masters launching palm attacks while sitting in a formation suddenly he understood what the Manual was talking about. The more he watched, the happier he became, finally he was unable to restrain his excitement and stood up.

Huang Rong was shocked and quickly pulled him back. Guo Jing shivered in fear and immediately sat down. He pressed his eye against the hole and watched the fight again. This time he more or less understood the essence of the Big Dipper Formation. Although he did not know how to use it, each move and every style the Seven Masters used was like showing him the trick of the trade mentioned in the Nine Yin Manual.

The Nine Yin Manual was the result of a martial art expert Senior's comprehension over ancient Taoist canon. Wang Chongyang developed this formation before he saw the Manual; however, the martial art study within Taoism came from the same root. The basic essence originally did not differ much; therefore, the variations within the formation were not far from the Manual's basic content.

The other time on the Peach Blossom Island Guo Jing had watched Hong Qigong fight Ouyang Feng and he had gained tremendous advantage. However, he was slow, plus the Northern Beggar's and the Western Poison's martial arts were not based on the Manual; therefore, his comprehension was somewhat limited. This time the Seven Masters' martial art and the position they assumed were based on the same Taoism essence with the Manual; everything seemed to fit perfectly and this time he truly gained great benefit.

He saw Mei Chaofeng was in a difficult situation, but the Seven Masters' palm strength was also gradually weakened. Suddenly he heard someone on the doorstep speak, "Yao Xiong, are you going to act first, or do you want Brother to try first?"

Guo Jing was startled, it was Ouyang Feng's voice; he did not know when he came in. The Seven Masters were also surprised to hear his voice; they turned their heads toward the door and saw two men standing side by side on the threshold, one was wearing dark green long robe, the other was dressed in white. They were the two people who chased Zhou Botong the other night.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters made a low whistling noise, stopped fighting, and stood up. Huang Yaoshi said, "What a fine sight! Seven mixed-up hairs [derogatory term for Taoist priests] join forces against my lone disciple. Feng Xiong, if I teach them some lessons, will you say I am bullying some juniors?"

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "They were being rude to you first; if you do not show your skill, these juniors will not understand the Master of Peach Blossom Island's ability."

Wang Chuyi had seen the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison at Mount Hua; he was going to step forward to pay his respect to them when suddenly Huang Yaoshi's shadow flashed and struck with the back of his palm. Wang Chuyi stepped back to evade, but he was too slow. 'Slap!' his cheek was squarely hit; he staggered and tumbled down.

Qiu Chuji was shocked, "Quickly return to position!" he called out; but 'Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!' Tan, Liu, Hao and Sun four people were slapped by a palm. Qiu Chuji only saw a dark green shadow flashing by; a palm hacked down right in front of him, the palm shadow suddenly fluttered. Qiu

Chuji did not know where the attack would come from; desperately he raised his sleeve, striking toward Huang Yaoshi's chest.

Qiu Chuji's martial art was the chief among the Quanzhen Seven Masters; this strike was not a small matter. Huang Yaoshi had underestimated him a bit too much; unexpectedly he was struck by Qiu Chuji's sleeve and he felt pain on his chest. Hastily he retracted his hand to protect his chest; his left hand went up and grabbed the sleeve, his right hand moved fast toward Qiu Chuji's eyes. Qiu Chuji struggled with all his might and ripped his sleeve. At the same time Ma Yu's and Wang Chuyi's palms came to rescue him. Huang Yaoshi moved very fast; as soon as his strike to Qiu Chuji failed he leaped behind Hao Datong's back and raised his left leg. 'Bang!' he kicked Hao Datong, sending him rolling down on the ground.

This time Guo Jing let Huang Rong look through the small hole. She saw her father greatly demonstrate his invincible might, she was very happy. If she did not remember that Guo Jing still needed two to four hours to recover, she would have already jumped up and cheered.

Ouyang Feng loudly laughed and called out, "Wang Chongyang had accepted this group of rice buckets as his disciples!"

Ever since Qiu Chuji started learning martial art, he never suffered such a defeat. "Return to positions!" he repeatedly shouted. But Huang Yaoshi flashed to the east and swayed to the west, and in a short moment launched seven, eight deathly strikes. Everybody was having a hard time to parry, how could they return to their formation? A couple of 'crack! crack!' sounds was heard; Huang Yaoshi snapped Ma Yu's and Tan Chuduan's swords, he broke and tossed them to the ground.

Qiu Chuji's and Wang Chuyi's pair of swords continued to move upward with the Quanzhen Sect's subtle variations sword technique. As the pair of swords attacked together, their power increased exponentially. Huang Yaoshi did not dare to be negligent; with concentrated attention he launched several counterattacks. In the meantime Ma Yu took this opportunity to return into his 'tian shu' position while launching a palm attack at the same time, giving Tan, Liu and the others the opportunity to return to their respective positions.

As soon as this Big Dipper Formation was assembled, the battle situation changed. 'Tian quan' and 'yu heng' faced the enemy from the front; 'tian ji' and 'kai yang' sent out palm attacks from both sides, 'yao guang' and 'tian xuan' from the back circled to the front.

With four whooshing noise Huang Yaoshi sent out four palm attacks toward four people. "Feng Xiong," he laughed and said, "I did not know Wang Chongyang left behind this kind of skill!" His voice sounded effortless as his hands parried each opponent's palm attack, each one substantially different from the other. Each one of these seven people's attack carried an enormous power; it was incomparable to when they were fighting individually. Immediately Huang Yaoshi used his 'luo ying shen jian zhang fa' [falling (leaves) divine sword palm technique]; his body moved swiftly as if he was skating around randomly while his palms flew as if they were everywhere.

Huang Rong thought, "When Father taught me this 'luo ying shen jian zhang fa', I only know five voids one solid, or seven voids one solid; with the voids to distract the enemy. But I didn't know that these five voids and seven voids can be changed into solids." This amazing fight was certainly not the same as when the Seven Masters were fighting Mei Chaofeng earlier. Not only did Huang Rong watch the fight

with baited breath, Ouyang Feng with his level or martial art skill was also startled.

Mei Chaofeng was standing on the side, listening to the wind generated by the battle. She was both joyful and frightened on the inside. Suddenly she heard an 'Ah!' followed by a 'bang!'; turned out Yin Zhiping was watching eight people fight, he became dizzy as if the world was spinning around him; he saw many Huang Yaoshis moving around in front of him, his vision blurred and he fell backward, passed out.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters firmly held their positions, doing all they can to resist the enemy; they knew only one slight mistake was needed, and the seven of them would not live to see the day. Along with their demise, the Quanzhen Sect would see its fall. Huang Yaoshi was also groaning inwardly. If only he launched deathly attack a moment ago, he would be able to kill one or two enemies then the Big Dipper Formation would be broken. But because he had shown leniency he knew victory would not be achieved easily, while he simply must not lose. Both sides were like riding on a tiger's back; they could not back off easily. All they could do was fight with all their strengths.

Within less than two hours Huang Yaoshi had used thirteen different martial arts just to be even with the opponents. Eight people were inseparable until the dawn arrived, the roosters crowed and the sun started to cast its light into the room. By now Guo Jing had finished his seven days and seven nights training. Although the fight in the other room shook the sky and turned over the earth, his mind was very peaceful; his eyes closed, his internal energy was warming up his entire body, starting from his 'wei lu' [tail gate] going to his 'shen guan' [kidney pass], from his spine through both passes it ascended to 'tian zhu' [sky pillar] and 'yu zhen' [jade pillow]; finally to 'ni wan gong' [restrained pill

palace], at the top of his brain, paused for a moment and then pushed his tongue against his jaw. His inner breathing went down from his face, 'shen ting' [divine courtyard], to 'que qiao' [magpie bridge], and back again until it arrived at 'huang ting' [yellow courtyard], 'qi xue' [air pocket] and slowly down to his 'dan tian' [pubic region].

Huang Rong saw his face was ruddy and resplendent in divine brightness; her heart was overjoyed. She pressed her eyes against the small hole again to look outside and she was shocked. She saw her father's steps were sluggish; he moved according to the 'ba gua' [eight diagram]; while slowly launching palm attack by palm attack. She knew her father would not easily use this highest footwork technique. She knew that victory or defeat will soon be decided; it was a defining moment of life and death.

The Quanzhen Seven Masters were also fighting with all their might while shouting encouragement to each other. The top of their heads were emitting steaming mist, their robes were stuck to their sweating bodies. Their condition was totally different from when they were leisurely fighting Mei Chaofeng earlier.

Ouyang Feng was standing at the side with his sleeves down, looking intently at the Seven Masters' Big Dipper Formation. He was hoping that Huang Yaoshi would be exhausted and suffer a serious injury so that on the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua he would have one less powerful enemy. Who would have thought that Huang Yaoshi's martial art came out one after another; even though the Seven Masters were not defeated, it was obvious that they would not achieve victory easily either. "The Old Heretic Huang is really good!" he thought. He saw both sides moved slower and slower, a sign that the situation had become more critical than ever; in less than the time to drink a tea this battle would reach its conclusion.

Huang Yaoshi sent out two palm attacks toward Sun Bu'er and Tan Chuduan. They raised their hands to parry, while Liu Chuxuan and Ma Yu came to their rescue. Ouyang Feng let out a long whistle and called out, "Yao Xiong, let me help you." He squatted down and thrust both palms ferociously toward Tan Chuduan's back. Tan Chuduan was using all his power to fight Huang Yaoshi. Suddenly he felt an earth shattering force coming from behind with a lightning speed. Not only his martial brothers and sister did not have time to rescue, he also did not have time to evade. 'Bang!' his whole body was thrown forward.

"Who wants your help?" Huang Yaoshi roared angrily. Right at that moment Qiu Chuji's and Wang Chuyi's palms arrived together. He brushed his sleeve to neutralize those attacks, while his right palm blocked Ma Yu's and Hao Datong's palms.

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "All right, let me help them then!" Suddenly his palms struck toward Huang Yaoshi's back. When he attacked Tan Chuduan, he was only using 30% of his strength, but now he was using all of his lifelong cultivated energy; taking the opportunity while Huang Yaoshi was busy blocking the attack of Four Masters. He wanted to strike Huang Yaoshi down in one blow. He had planned it carefully: he would kill one of the Seven Masters and then kill Huang Yaoshi. As soon as the Big Dipper Formation was broken, he would not be afraid of their revenge. This evil scheme of his was perfect; even if Huang Yaoshi's skill were higher he would not be able to resist Four Masters and Western Poison on his back all at once.

"I am finished!" Huang Yaoshi secretly sighed; he had no choice but to concentrate his 'qi' on his back, staking his all to receive the brunt of Ouyang Feng's Toad Stance attack. Ouyang Feng's push carried an enormous force, but the speed was slower. He was sure his plan would prevail, he

was secretly delighted. All of a sudden a dark shadow flashed by. Someone from the side flew toward Huang Yaoshi's back, receiving the hit with a loud shout.

Huang Yaoshi, Ma Yu and the others stopped fighting immediately and leaped back. They saw that the person who risked her life to protect her master was Mei Chaofeng. Huang Yaoshi turned his head around and coldly laughed, "The Old Poison is really poisonous, you truly live up to your reputation!"

As his attack accidentally hit someone else, Ouyang Feng cried out in his heart, "What a pity!" He was aware that if Huang Yaoshi joined hands with the Quanzhen Seven Masters, his life would be difficult to protect. With a loud laugh he flew out the door and ran away.

Ma Yu stooped down to hold Tan Chuduan and he was shocked. Tan Chuduan's body was askew, his head was drooping to the side. It turned out this one strike of Ouyang Feng had broken the ribs on his back and his spine. Seeing his Shi Di's life was cut short Ma Yu's tears flowed down like rain.

Qiu Chuji pursued out with a sword in his hand, only to hear Ouyang Feng calling out from a far, "Old Heretic Huang, I helped you breaking the Wang Chongyang's formation, I also punished the Peach Blossom Island's renegade disciple on your behalf. You can take care of the remaining six mixed-up hairs by yourself. We'll see each other again later!"

"Humph!" Huang Yaoshi snorted; he knew Ouyang Feng was spreading his poison again, trying to incite tension between him and the Quanzhen Sect by placing the blame of the killing of Tan Chuduan on his shoulder, so that the Quanzhen Sect would seek their revenge on him. He

understood very well Ouyang Feng's ill intention, yet he was not willing to explain anything to the Quanzhen Seven Masters. Slowly he held Mei Chaofeng up; he saw the blood spurting out from her to the ground, he knew she would not live.

Qiu Chuji pursued for dozens of 'zhang's but he could not see which direction Ouyang Feng took. Ma Yu was afraid if he was chasing on his own he would also fall into Ouyang Feng's poisonous hand, so Ma Yu shouted, "Qiu Shi Di! Come Back!"

Qiu Chuji's eyes were on fire; he came back in big strides, pointed his finger to Huang Yaoshi and scolded him, "What enmity do you have with the Quanzhen Sect? You are a wicked ghost! First you killed our Zhou Shishu, now you harmed our Tan Shi Ge. Why did you come over here?"

Huang Yaoshi was startled. "Zhou Botong?" he asked, "I killed him?"

"You still don't want to admit it?" Qiu Chuji said.

Actually Huang Yaoshi was having a race with Zhou Botong and Ouyang Feng. They had run for several hundreds 'li's and were inseparable from each other; nobody was willing to give up. While they were running, Zhou Botong suddenly remembered he left Hong Qigong alone at the imperial palace. Hong Qigong had lost his martial art skill; if he was discovered by the palace guards, his life would be in danger. So he said, "The Old Urchin has a business to attend. I don't want to race anymore!" Once he said he did not want to race, he did not want to race. Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng could not make him do otherwise and were forced to let him go. Huang Yaoshi had wanted to ask Zhou Botong for news about his beloved daughter but all along he did not have the opportunity to do so.

Tan Chuduan and the others were pursuing behind, but very soon they lost track of the three's shadows. However, Huang Yaoshi and the other two could see them clearly. So as the Old Urchin left to tend his business, the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison two people decided to return to the Ox Village without expecting what was waiting for them over there.

By now Qiu Chuji was stomping his feet in fury, Sun Bu'er was crying while holding Tan Chuduan's body. Everybody wanted to stake it all to fight Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi knew there was a misunderstanding here, but being a man of his position he simply laughed coldly without saying anything.

Tan Chuduan opened his eyes slowly and in a low voice said, "I am leaving." Qiu Chuji and the others quickly gathered around him, sitting cross-legged on the ground. They heard Tan Chuduan softly recite, "Holding hands, the departed soul, like a string of pearls, forcing itself to leave. Hearts are open to the sound of nature, unlike the blowing flute." As he finished reciting, he closed his eyes and died.

The Quanzhen Six Masters lowered their heads to pray. Finished praying, Ma Yu held Tan Chuduan's lifeless body in his arms. Qiu Chuji, Yin Zhiping and the others followed behind without even looking back. At this moment Qiu Chuji, Sun Bu'er and the others realized that with the death of Tan Chuduan the Big Dipper Formation was broken. If they continued fighting Huang Yaoshi they would only deliver six more lives. Revenge had to wait some other day.

End of Chapter 25.

Chapter 26 - New Allies, Old Arrangements

Translated by Owbjhx



Huang Yaoshi noticed the sorrowful expression on his daughter's face; obviously her emotions were difficult to deny or to release. He knew her deep love toward Guo Jing was unchangeable and inseparable. He could not help but heave a long sigh. Huang Rong stood still, teardrops falling slowly.

Huang Yaoshi reflected on how he'd incomprehensibly come into conflict with the Quanzhen Seven, and – even more incomprehensibly – established a deep grievance with them. There'd really been no reason for it at all. Seeing Mei Chaofeng wheezing ever fainter, he thought of the grudge he'd held for over a decade, and he felt a great, unbearable anguish within him. Tears began to fall.

A hint of a smile appeared on the corners of Mei Chaofeng's lips. "Teacher," she said, "please...treat me like that way you used to – the kind way you treated me before. I've wronged you: wronged you too much, too far! Let me be by your side forever...forever to serve you. I'm dying fast. Time's almost up!" An imploring look covered her face.

Huang Yaoshi's eyes were brimming with tears. "Very well, very well! I'll treat you just like I did back when you were little," he said. "So from today, Ruohua better be a good girl, and pay attention to what teacher says."

Mei Chaofeng's betrayal of school and teacher was the greatest regret of her life. But now, facing death, she had somehow gained forgiveness from her teacher, who was once again calling her by her childhood name of former days. Beside herself with joy, she clasped Huang Yaoshi's right hand, gently trembling, in both of hers.

"Ruohua will pay attention forever," she said. "Teacher, I want to learn how to be 12-year-old Ruohua again. Teacher, tell me how, tell me how..." She rose up with all her

strength, determined to perform the rite of acknowledgement. After her third kowtow, she stiffened, never to move again.

From the other room, Huang Rong had witnessed these heart-moving, soul-stirring events unfold in succession, but hoped only that her father would stay a bit longer so she could come out and meet him the moment Guo Jing was respiring smoothly. She watched as Huang Yaoshi stooped, about to gather Mei Chaofeng's body in his arms.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a horse neighing outside – the sound, in fact, of Guo Jing's Little Red. Then Sha Gu's voice could be heard: "Well, this is Ox Village. How am I supposed to know if there's someone here called 'Guo'? Are you called 'Guo'?" Someone else, in a hugely impatient tone, answered: "With such few households in the village, how come you don't know everybody around here?" At this, the door burst in, and several people entered.

Behind the open door, the look on Huang Yaoshi's face suddenly changed: those entering were exactly who he'd been hunting as fruitlessly as if he'd been treading in broken iron shoes – the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. As it happened, they'd gone to Peach Blossom Island for the appointment; but whether they turned east or west, they ended up in circles, and found no way into Huang Yaoshi's residence. Later, they chanced upon one of the island's mute servants, and realised there that he'd already left. When the Freaks saw the Little Red dashing around in the forest, Han Baoju brought it under control, and the six then came to Ox Village looking for Guo Jing.

The Freaks had just stepped through the doorway when 'The Soaring Bat' Ke Zhen'e, whose hearing was acute, suddenly sensed the sound of breathing coming from behind the door. "Someone's here!" he shouted. The six

turned around instantly, and got a big shock: Huang Yaoshi, carrying the dead body of Mei Chaofeng across his arms, stood blocking the doorway, as if to stop them from escaping.

Zhu Cong gave a deep bow. "Master Huang," he said, his hands folded respectfully, "my best wishes to your good health! The six of us observed the summons to visit Peach Blossom Island and pay our respects, but it so happened that the Master was engaged with other business. How fortunate it is that today our paths should cross here!"

Huang Yaoshi had just intended to strike immediately and kill the Six Freaks, but with a glance at the pale face of Mei Chaofeng, he reconsidered: "The Freaks were her mortal enemies. Today, she might have died the sooner, but I'll enable her to kill off the Six with her own hands still. Should she learn of it in the netherworld, she'll definitely be pleased." His right hand holding the corpse and his left hand raising her wrist, in a sudden flash he was bearing down on Han Baoju, aiming Mei Chaofeng's palm at his right arm. In a panic, Han Baoju tried to dodge, but it was already too late: there was a loud crack as his arm took the hit. As if using Mei Chaofeng's palm as a weapon, Huang Yaoshi channelled his martial arts through the dead hand, transmitting a massive force of astonishing power. Although it didn't snap Han Baoju's arm, it left half his body tingling in paralysis.

For the Freaks, nothing could be more horrifying: Huang Yaoshi, without a single word, had immediately advanced and issued a vicious strike - and using the corpse of Mei Chaofeng as a weapon, too. There was a chorus of shouts as each drew their armaments, but Huang Yaoshi couldn't care less; raising high the body of Mei Chaofeng, he shot straight over, and Han Xiaoying was in the firing line. She saw the eyes of Mei Chaofeng, still round and staring after

death – the long hair draping the shoulders, the mouth edged with brimming blood twisted in a terrifying grimace – and the right hand held high, then violently pounding down towards the top of her own head. Scared, her hands and feet went numb, dodging and blocking forgotten.

With the wave of a shoulderpole and the flick of a counterpoise, Nan Xiren and Quan Jinfa launched simultaneous attacks at Mei Chaofeng's arm. Huang Yaoshi pulled back the right arm of the corpse and swung out with the left arm, hitting Han Xiaoying right in the waist. In pain, she squatted straight down. Han Baoju, tilting as he stepped up diagonally, unfurled his Golden Dragon Whip; but Huang Yaoshi strode forward with his left foot and stamped firmly on the whip's point. Han Baoju tried to free it with a mighty pull, but how could he move it one iota? In the space of a blink, Mei Chaofeng's claw was slashing at his face. Stunned, Han Baoju ditched the whip and recoiled, rolling away immediately. Feeling his face searing with agony, he touched it with his palm and saw it come away covered in fresh blood – five nail scars had already been gouged in him. It was fortunate that Mei Chaofeng was dead and therefore unable to unleash the 9 Yin White Bone Claw form, and that the fierce poison on her nails had dissipated with the exhaustion of her qi. Otherwise, this one claw would have been instantly fatal.

After just a few exchanges, it was as if the Freaks were fighting for their lives on every side. If it hadn't been for Huang Yaoshi intending Mei Chaofeng to kill with her own hands in posthumous vengeance, and deciding to use her limbs to destroy the enemy, the Six would have died long ago or been taken to the edge of death by injury. And even so, the Six were still living breath-by-breath against the Master of Peach Blossom Island, whose moves would come and go like a phantom's.

In the other room, Guo Jing had been overjoyed when he heard Zhu Cong hailing Huang Yaoshi. But then, he'd listened as the seven fought, his six beneficent teachers panting for breath and crying out as they held on with all their strength. The situation was desperately critical. The qi in his dantian had yet to stabilise; but with the gratitude he owed to his teachers for raising him being no different to that he owed his parents, how could he just keep his hands in his sleeves? Immediately restricting his qi and concentrating his breath, he launched out a palm. There was a loud bang as his strike shattered the secret door.

Huang Rong was shocked. She'd seen that he hadn't fully completed his progress - there was still a bit more effort left - and yet, at this point, he was using his strength to unleash a palm. Fearing he was endangering his life, she cried urgently: "Jing gege, don't do it!"

As soon as Guo Jing had sent out the palm, he felt the qi in his dantian surge upwards, a heat firing his insides. He hurried to restrain and close in the qi, forcing his inner breath hard back into his dantian.

Seeing the cupboard door suddenly shatter and reveal Guo Jing and Huang Rong, Huang Yaoshi and the Six Freaks leapt back from each other, startled and delighted at the same time.

Suddenly seeing his beloved daughter, Huang Yaoshi was unsure if he was dreaming. He rubbed his eyes. "Rong'er, Rong'er," he called out, "is it really you?"

Huang Rong, still holding one palm enjoined with Guo Jing's left, gave a slight smile and nodded her head, but said nothing. At this, Huang Yaoshi's joy exceeded all expectation; putting other thoughts behind him, he laid Mei Chaofeng's body down on a bench, went over to the

cupboard, and sat down cross-legged. One touch of his daughter's wrist, and he felt her pulse and breathing firm and steady. Then, reaching through the cupboard doorway, he pressed his left palm against Guo Jing's right.

The many currents of sizzling qi boiling and bubbling inside Guo Jing's body were already unbearable in the extreme; by this point, there'd been several times when he'd wanted to leap up screaming and shouting to relieve the pressure. When Huang Yaoshi's palm came to enjoin with his, a stream of inner power flowed through with tremendous force, and instantly he felt a gradual settlement. Using his right hand, Huang Yaoshi set about kneading and massaging all the critical acupoints on Guo Jing; so profound was his neigong that, in just the time it took to make a bowl of rice, he had saved Guo Jing's life.

Guo Jing, now regulating his qi with miraculous ease and circulating his inner breath freely, leapt through the cupboard doorway, bowed towards Huang Yaoshi, and immediately went to kowtow to his six teachers.

On the one side, Guo Jing was telling his teachers about the ins and outs of the situation; on the other side, Huang Yaoshi was leading his daughter by the hand and listening to her giggly chatter, her narrative punctuated with laughter. At first, the Freaks followed what Guo Jing was saying. But he was a dull talker, struggling to convey what he meant in words. Huang Rong, however, not only had a clear, crisp voice, but also a splendid turn of phrase; and when she got to the thrilling bits, her depictions scintillated with a hundred extra tones and colours. One by one, the Six involuntarily went over to listen; Guo Jing, too, finally shut up, turning from a speaker to a listener. Huang Rong did almost an hour's worth of talking. With her expressions taking full flight – now grave, now comic – everybody

listened enraptured to her pearls of wit, as if savouring a charming vintage wine.

Huang Yaoshi, upon hearing his beloved daughter had somehow become the Chief of the Beggar Gang, was utterly bewildered. "What a bizarre move from Brother Qi!" he remarked. "And how heretical of him! Perhaps he's thinking of stealing my nickname - no longer being the 'Northern Beggar', and instead being the 'Northern Heretic'? The 'Five Greats' would then be the 'Eastern Beggar', 'Western Venom', 'Southern Emperor', 'Northern Heretic', and 'Central Who-Knows-What?'"

Her tale having reached the fight between Huang Yaoshi and the Freaks, Huang Rong gave a laugh. "That's all," she said. "There's no use me saying what happened next!"

Huang Yaoshi announced: "I'm going to go and kill those four bastards Ouyang Feng, Lingzhi, Qiu Qianren and Yang Kang. Come with me and watch the fun, kid." He was talking about killing people, but because he was looking fondly upon his beloved daughter, his face was all smiles.

Taking a glance at the Freaks, he felt rather contrite. Yet although he knew himself to be clearly in the wrong, he was still unwilling to hang his head and admit a fault to anyone, only offering: "The movement of qi hasn't turned out too badly. It didn't make me harm someone good by accident."

As for Huang Rong, she'd originally resented the Freaks for prohibiting Guo Jing from getting married with her. But now that Mu Nianci and Yang Kang had gotten engaged, this issue had already been resolved. "Daddy," she giggled, "how about admitting to the teachers that you made a mistake?"

Huang Yaoshi gave a snort. "I'm going to go and find Western Venom," he said, changing the subject. He added:

“Jing’er, you come too.”

Fundamentally, he felt deeply displeased at this crude, block-headed Guo Jing. “I, Huang Yaoshi, am absolutely brilliant,” he had mused. “But with such a dumbass as a son-in-law, wouldn’t that make those in wulin laugh their lips off?” He had consented to the engagement with great difficulty. It then so happened that Zhou Botong, not telling apart the silly and the serious, had cracked a reckless joke claiming Guo Jing had borrowed Mei Chaofeng’s 9 Yin Scripture and made a copy. In the midst of his rage, he had believed this to be true, and was furious at Guo Jing’s dirty underhandedness. But after having sent off Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng, Zhou Botong and the others, he’d immediately realised that the text of the second-volume scripture that Guo Jing had learnt was far clearer than that in the second volume held by Mei Chaofeng. Moreover, this was without considering ‘let alone nowadays’, and so on. Guo Jing just couldn’t have copied from Mei Chaofeng’s handwritten text, and anyway, Huang Yaoshi had known long ago that Zhou Botong was telling lies. Later, he’d mistakenly believed Lingzhi’s made-up news of Huang Rong’s death.

Now, wild with joy at finally seeing his beloved daughter again, the grievance he held against the Freaks had momentarily vanished. It was just that he was unwilling to admit a fault or to make an apology; but he hoped in future to be able to help them with some serious matter, as a way of making amends.

Looking back on Mei Chaofeng who, in sacrificing herself to save him from great ruin, had not forgotten her gratitude to her teacher – not unto death – he pondered: “Ruohua and her martial brother Xuanfeng were in love. If they’d come and informed me about it, and petitioned to marry, I wouldn’t necessarily have forbidden them. There was no

need to be rash and take the big risk of running away from Peach Blossom Island. But I've been moody throughout my life, never settling on joy or rage. The two of them must have considered it from every angle, and – in the end – didn't dare to open their mouths. Now suppose Rong'er, because of this eccentric temper of mine, were to end up just like Ruohua..." The thought made him shudder. By calling out this word "Jing'er", he was actually acknowledging Guo Jing as son-in-law.

Huang Rong was delighted. From the corner of her eye, she glanced at Guo Jing, who looked totally unaware of the implications held by this one-word title of "Jing'er". "Dad," she said, "let's go to the palace first and bring teacher out."

At this point, Guo Jing confessed to his teachers about Huang Yaoshi assenting to the marriage on Peach Blossom Island, as well as the situation with Hong Qigong accepting him as a disciple. A pleased Ke Zhen'e said: "You've somehow set things up so that you can call The Divine Nine-Fingered Beggar your teacher, and you've duped the Master of Peach Blossom Island into letting you marry his beloved daughter. We're more than happy with it; where's the sense in refusing? It's just that the Mongolian Khan..." Recalling that Genghis Khan had granted Guo Jing the title 'Prince Consort of the Golden Blade', this was now something of an awkward matter which, if brought up, would surely provoke Huang Yaoshi into fury. For a moment, he wondered how he could mention it.

Suddenly, there was a creak as the main door was pushed open; in came Sha Gu laughing, holding a piece of yellow vellum twisted into the shape of a monkey.

"Sister," she said to Huang Rong, "are you done eating watermelons? Oldie asked me to give you this monkey to play with."

Huang Rong, assuming Sha Gu was just being silly and thinking nothing of it, reached out and took the paper monkey. Sha Gu added: "Hairy oldie says don't get angry; he'll definitely find teacher for you." When Huang Rong heard that she was obviously talking about Zhou Botong, she looked at the monkey and saw that there were words written on the paper. Hurrying to unravel it, the following was revealed in a crooked scrawl over the surface:

*Old Beggar was nowhere I looked,
Old Urchin was ever so good.*

Huang Rong gave a worried gasp. "How come he didn't see teacher?" she said.

Huang Yaoshi muttered to himself for a while. "Old Urchin might be deranged," he said, finally, "but his martial arts are terrific. As long as Qigong's still alive, he can surely rescue him. More immediately, the Beggar Gang are facing a big problem."

"What problem?" asked Huang Rong.

Huang Yaoshi replied: "The bamboo stick the old beggar gave you was taken away by Yang Kang. Although that brat's martial arts aren't great, he's still a nasty scoundrel; even such a person as Ouyang Ke died by his hand. Now he's got hold of the bamboo stick, he'll definitely go stirring up a storm, to make trouble for the Beggar Gang. We ought to catch up with him and retrieve it, or else the old beggar's brethren are going to suffer generations of serious hardship – and you, as chief, won't be reflected in glory."

Normally, the Beggar Gang being in trouble wouldn't prey on Huang Yaoshi's mind in the slightest; on the contrary, he'd rejoice in their disaster and take pleasure in their ruin, seeing it as a great spectacle of fun. But now that his

beloved daughter had become the Chief of the Beggar Gang, how could he still keep his hands in his sleeves?

One after the other, the Six Freaks nodded their heads. "But he's already been gone for days," said Guo Jing. "I'm worried catching up will be hard."

Han Baoju pointed out: "Your Little Red horse is here – just when you could use it!"

Delighted, Guo Jing rushed out the door and made a whistle to summon it. Seeing its owner, the red horse bounded and galloped over, brushing up close against him and neighing incessantly with excitement.

"Rong'er," said Huang Yaoshi, "you and Jing'er hurry and grab that bamboo stick. This red horse goes at a speedy pace; I expect you'll soon catch up."

Having said this, he noticed a smiling Sha Gu standing by the side, with an expression exactly like that of Qu Lingfeng, his own disciple. A thought occurred to him. "Are you called 'Qu'?" he asked her.

Sha Gu laughed and shook her head. "Don't know," she said. Huang Yaoshi had long been aware that his disciple Qu Lingfeng had a daughter, and calculated that her age also appeared to fit.

"Dad," said Huang Rong, "come and look!" Leading him by the hand, she went into the secret room.

Huang Yaoshi, seeing that the separated arrangement of the secret room was completely in a pattern he himself had originated, felt that it was surely the work of Qu Lingfeng.

"Dad," said Huang Rong, "take a look at the things in that iron chest. If you can figure out what they are, I guess that makes you an expert!"

But Huang Yaoshi ignored the iron chest. Going over to the southwest corner and lifting up the sideboard at the foot of the wall, he revealed a cavity. Reaching inside, he pinched out a scroll of paper and right away leaped out of the secret room. Huang Rong hastily followed him out. Coming up behind her father, she saw the scroll unfolded in his hands, the paper's surface covered in dust and its edges browned and broken. Written on it, in crooked handwriting, were a few rows of words:

Addressed most respectfully to venerable senior Master Huang of Peach Blossom Island:

Disciple has acquired, from within the palace, assorted calligraphy, paintings, and other artefacts, which he wishes to present for Master's appreciation.

Disciple respectfully refers to 'Master', not daring the presumption to utter 'beneficent teacher' – even if, in disciple's dreams, he still utters 'beneficent teacher' yet.

Misfortune has had it that disciple was encircled by palace guards, and is survived by a daughter...

The writing having reached the word “daughter”, there was nothing further – except for a few splattered marks which could faintly be discerned as bloodstains.

At the time of Huang Rong's birth, all the disciples had already suffered expulsion from Peach Blossom Island, and Qu Lingfeng had suffered it the earliest. Huang Rong, knowing that each person under the tutelage of her father had been a terrific individual, couldn't help feeling alarmed at seeing today this report left behind by Qu Lingfeng.

By now, Huang Yaoshi had already understood the heart of it. He knew that, after Qu Lingfeng had been expelled from his teaching, he had agonised hard over gaining readmittance to the school of Peach Blossom Island. Recalling that Huang Yaoshi was fond of treasures,

antiques, and samples from the work of famous painters, he had taken the risk of going to the imperial palace and committing robbery. This had gone favourably for a few times, but in the end, he had been discovered by the imperial guards. After a fierce fight, he had sustained a serious wound; returning home to write his final will, he must have struggled to finish it because of the seriousness of his injury. When, not long after, the master guardsman came in in pursuit, both sides ended up dying right here.

Huang Yaoshi was already remorseful after having seen Lu Chengfeng that last time. Now, with the recent death of Mei Chaofeng and the sight of such dedication from Qu Lingfeng, he felt even more guilt. Turning his head and spotting the grinning Sha Gu standing behind him, he had a thought. "Did your father teach you how to fight?" he asked, in a stern voice.

Sha Gu shook her head; running over to the door, she closed it and then furtively took peep after peep through the crack in the doorway, throwing a few punching moves. But as the punches came and went, they were all of the same six or seven unpolished moves from the 'Blue Wave Palm' form, and nothing else.

"Dad," Huang Rong commented, "she taught herself by spying when Martial Brother Qu was practicing martial arts."

Huang Yaoshi nodded his head, murmuring: "I expected Lingfeng wouldn't have such a nerve as to dare pass one's martial arts to others after having left my tutelage." He added: "Rong'er, try attacking her footwork. Trip her up."

Huang Rong stepped up, giggling. "Sha Gu," she said, "let's practice some martial arts. Look out!"

Throwing a feint with her left palm, she immediately followed with a 'Matching Ducks Joined by a Ring', launching two kicks with unrivalled speed. Sha Gu, dumbstruck, had already taken Huang Rong's left kick on her right hip before she hurriedly stepped back. But she didn't know that Huang Rong's right leg, placed in advance, was waiting behind her; she was still unsteady from her step back when her momentum made her trip and she toppled face-up.

Leaping up immediately, she shouted: "You cheated! Little sister, let's go again."

Huang Yaoshi's face darkened. "Who's the 'little sister'?" he said. "It's 'auntie'!"

Sha Gu, who didn't know the difference between "sister" and "auntie" anyway, laughed. "Auntie! Auntie!" she said, obediently.

Huang Rong had already understood. She thought: "Daddy basically wanted me to test her footwork. Both of Martial Brother Qu's legs were broken, so when he was practicing martial arts by himself, he obviously didn't practice using his legs and feet; therefore, Sha Gu wouldn't have been able to spy on any footwork. If he had trained her personally, then he'd have taught her skills for all areas: upper-body, mid-section, and footwork."

By calling out the word "auntie", Huang Yaoshi was finally accepting Sha Gu back under his tutelage. "Why the heck are you so silly?" he asked her.

She laughed: "I'm Sha Gu!"

Huang Yaoshi scowled. "Where's your mum?"

Sha Gu put on a crying face, answering: "Gone to granny's place."

Huang Yaoshi then asked seven or eight questions in a row, but he didn't get anything that mattered. He could only give a sigh and leave it at that. When Qu Lingfeng was still in his tutelage, he was aware that he had a silly daughter who wasn't very bright. That, for sure, was Sha Gu.

There and then, they buried Mei Chaofeng in the back garden. Guo Jing and Huang Rong carried out the skeleton of Qu Lingfeng and buried it next to Mei Chaofeng. Although the Six Freaks were mortal enemies with the 'Twin Spectres of the Black Winds', the death of a person was what was important; they too all kowtowed before the grave, offering wishes and dismissing their prior grievance.

Huang Yaoshi, gazing at the two new graves for a long while, felt a hundred feelings mixed together. "Rong'er," he said, sadly, "let's go and look at your Martial Brother Qu's treasures." At that, father and daughter walked back into the secret room.

Looking at the things Qu Lingfeng had left behind, Huang Yaoshi was silent for a long time. Shedding tears, he said: "Among the disciples under my tutelage, Lingfeng had the strongest martial arts and the brightest mind. If his legs hadn't been broken, even one hundred palace guards wouldn't have been able to hurt him."

"That's a matter of course," said Huang Rong. "Dad, are you going to teach Sha Gu martial arts personally?"

"I'll teach her martial arts," he murmured. "And I'll teach her verse-writing, qin-playing, the mysteries of the five elements...All the skills that back then your Martial Brother Qu wanted to learn but didn't learn - I'll teach her, comprehensively."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue, and thought: “Heretical thoughts from a heretical man! Daddy’s letting himself in for a lot of stress.”

Huang Yaoshi opened the iron chest, looking through it layer by layer. The more valuable the treasures, the more sorrow he felt. Seeing rolled-up paintings and calligraphy, he sighed, remarking: “No doubt it’s great to use this stuff as a pleasing diversion from frustration, but as for expending one’s will over playthings – that must never happen. How fine were the pictures of flowers, birds and figures painted by the Taoist ruler, Emperor Huizong! Yet having depicted the rivers and mountains in all their splendour, he rolled them up and gifted them to the Jins.” As he spoke, he furled and unfurled the scrolls. “Eh?” he said, suddenly.

Huang Rong asked: “Dad, what is it?”

Huang Yaoshi pointed out a landscape in splash-ink, saying: “Look here!”

In the painting was a towering mountain, with a total of five steep peaks. Among them, one peak was outstandingly tall – bolt upright and pointing to the heavens, it pierced the clouds with its colossal height and overlooked a deep chasm below. A row of pine trees grew by the mountainside. Twigs tipped with snow, each winding trunk curved to the south, suggesting the utter ferocity of the north wind. To the west of the summit was a lone pine: old, but stiff and upstanding, and rising with an elegant majesty. Beneath this pine, vermilion brushstrokes profiled a general, twirling his sword in the face of the wind. The figure’s features were hard to discern, but the sleeves of his clothes rose in a flutter, and his bearing escaped the ordinary. The entire picture was a monochromatic landscape, but this man alone

was a firey, blackish red – making him seem all the more outstanding and exceptional.

The painting was without a signature. It was annotated only with the following poem:

*My clothing covered with the marks of many years,
In special search of em'rald haven's fragrant heights,
I've never seen enough of hills and rivers fine,
As cavalry by moonlight hurries to retreat.*

A few days ago, Huang Rong had seen this poem as written down by Han Shizhong on the Emerald Haven Pavilion in Lin'an, and recognized the handwriting. "Dad," she said, "this was written by Han Shizhong. The verses are of the late, mighty Yue."

Huang Yaoshi nodded. "That's right, my clever Rong'er!" he said. "But this poem of the late Yue was actually describing the 'emerald haven' of the mountains in Chizhou. The mountains in the painting make a treacherous scene; they're no 'emerald haven' at all. Although this painting's style has a fine firmness, it's short on implication and tasteful accent; it's not by the hand of a master."

That day at the Emerald Haven Pavilion, Huang Rong had seen Guo Jing – reluctant to leave – tracing his fingers along the stone inscription and brushing over the remains of Han Shizhong's handwriting. Knowing that he'd be fond of it, she said: "Dad, let Guo Jing have this painting."

Huang Yaoshi laughed. "Girls, by birth, are extroverts," he said. "What else is there to say?"

Handing it over to her freely, he reached into the iron chest again and picked up a necklace, remarking: "This string of pearls is each and every one of the same size; that's truly hard to come by." After he gave it to Huang Rong to wear

around her neck, she threw herself into his arms, and he reached out and held her in a hug. Father and daughter smiled at each other, nestling cheek against cheek, both feeling a never-ending warmth.

Huang Rong had just rolled up the painting when suddenly, she heard several harsh, urgent cries of eagles overhead. Huang Rong, who was highly fond of that pair of white eagles, remembered that they'd already been taken back by Huazheng, and felt very unhappy. Wanting to play with them again for a bit, she emerged from the secret room in a hurry.

Outside the doorway, she saw Guo Jing standing under the big willow tree, one eagle pulling the shoulder of his clothes with its beak and leading him somewhere, the other eagle circling him and crying repeatedly. Sha Gu, watching in amusement, was wheeling round and round Guo Jing, clapping and giggling.

Guo Jing had an agitated look. "Rong'er," he said, "they're in trouble! Let's hurry and go save them!"

"Who?" asked Huang Rong.

Guo Jing replied: "My sworn brother and sister!"

Huang Rong threw a pout with her little lips. "Well, I'm not going!" she said.

Guo Jing, unaware of her feelings, was baffled. "Rong'er, don't be so childish!" he said, urgently. "Come on!" Harnessing the red horse, he slung himself into the saddle.

"Then...do you still want me or not?" said Huang Rong.

Guo Jing scratched his head in further bafflement. "How could I not want you?" he said. "I can go without my own

life, but I can't go without you." Holding the reins with his left, he stretched out his right hand to receive her.

Huang Rong gave a beautiful smile and called out: "Dad, we're going to the rescue. You and the six teachers come too." She leaped over, latched onto Guo Jing's right hand with her left, and pulled herself up to sit behind him on the horse's back. Guo Jing, on horseback, bowed ceremoniously to Huang Yaoshi and his six teachers, and prompted the horse forward; ahead, the pair of eagles led the way, giving a long cry in unison.

The Little Red horse had been separated from its master for very long; now that it was carrying him once again, it felt an inexpressible happiness. Invigorated in spirit, it galloped onwards as if hauled by lightning and sped by the wind; although the two white eagles were fast flyers, the Little Red somehow kept up with them.

Not long after, the eagles dived down into a dark, dense forest ahead. The Little Red, not waiting for its master's guidance, also raced straight towards the forest.

Arriving just outside the forest, they suddenly heard a voice like a cracked cymbal emanating from within the trees: "Brother Qianren, long have I known your mighty reputation as the venerable hero of Iron Palm! Younger brother has a great desire to admire, and marvel at, the virtuosity of your divine arts; it's a pity that senior brother couldn't participate at the Mount Hua Duels back then. Right now, let's 'throw brick to lure jade'. Firstly, younger brother will use his trivial skills to finish off one of these; then, how about senior brother letting loose in the awesome spirit of Iron Palm?" Following this, someone gave a loud cry of misery, the treetops swayed in the forest canopy, and a big tree came crashing down. Shocked, Guo Jing dismounted and rushed into the forest.

Huang Rong dismounted too. Patting the Little Red's head, she pointed back at the direction they'd come from, and said: "Quick, go bring my daddy here!" The Little Red turned around and zoomed off.

"I just hope daddy comes quick," thought Huang Rong, "or else, we're going to get it from Old Venom again."

Hiding herself behind the trees, she crept quietly into the forest. One glance later, she couldn't help feeling astounded: Tuolei, Huazheng, Zhebie and Bo'erhu had all been tied up separate from each other against four big trees, and in front of them stood Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren. Against another tree - which had collapsed - there was also someone tied; covered in brightly-coloured clothes and armour, this was actually the Song commander who'd been escorting Tuolei back north. He'd been given a push from the stone-splitting, tree-snapping force that was Ouyang Feng's palm. The front of his body was totally coated in blood, and the eyes in his drooping head were shut; he'd already been killed. The many soldiers had, to a man, disappeared without a trace; they'd presumably been routed by the two.

Qiu Qianren, who dared not compare palm power with Ouyang Feng, was just about to say a few things to bluff his way through when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. Turning around to see Guo Jing, he felt both alarm and glee - just in time to make use of Western Venom to eliminate him! All he had to do was induce the two of them to get fighting, and then there'd be no need to take action himself.

Ouyang Feng saw that Guo Jing had borne the powerful force of his own Toad Art, and yet hadn't died; this was highly unexpected.

“Guo Jing gege,” cried out Huazheng in delight, “you’re still alive! Super, super!”

Seeing the situation before her, Huang Rong had already concluded her calculations. “While waiting for daddy to come,” she planned, “I ought to delay things for a bit.”

“Bastards!” shouted Guo Jing. “What are you two oldies doing here? Planning murder again?”

Ouyang Feng, intending to get a clear look at Qiu Qianren’s martial arts, gave a slight smile and didn’t respond.

“Why aren’t you bowing down before Master Ouyang, boy?” shouted Qiu Qianren. “Bored being alive, are you?”

From within the secret room, Guo Jing had listened to Qiu Qianren saying all sorts of outrageous things to stir up controversy, and now he was trying to murder people. Hating him to the core, he strode forward two paces and let out a shout, throwing a ‘Repentance of the Haughty Dragon’ at Qiu Qianren’s chest. By now, his ability with the 18 Dragon-Subduing Palms was no small matter; this particular palm was four parts release and six parts restraint, its power unleashed and instantly withdrawn. Qiu Qianren tried to dodge the oncoming force by hurriedly tilting his body but still had to deal with the arriving palm wind, and helplessly, he dropped forward instead of moving backwards.

Guo Jing gave a yell and threw a left-handed reverse palm, aiming for a tongue-splitting, tooth-dropping hit, after which Qiu Qianren would never again profit from wagging his tongue and provoking a storm.

Although this palm was strong in force, it was thrown quite slowly, but in placement it was just right – making it impossible for Qiu Qianren to dodge. It looked like it was

about to hit him in the cheek when suddenly, Huang Rong called out: "Hold it!"

Guo Jing instantly converted his left hand into a grappling palm. Seizing Qiu Qianren by the back of the neck, Guo Jing lifted him up, then turned his head and asked: "What?"

Huang Rong was worried that, if Guo Jing wounded this oldie, Ouyang Feng would immediately go on the attack. "Quick, let go!" she said. "The 'facial martial arts' of this senior master are phenomenal. Once your palm hits his face, its force will be fired back at you; you won't avoid internal injury!"

Guo Jing, not knowing she was speaking in ridicule, was incredulous. "There's no such thing!" he protested.

Huang Rong added: "Senior master Qiu can strip the hide off an ox with just a gust of his breath! Why aren't you getting out of the way?"

Guo Jing was even more incredulous. But realizing that she surely had some intention, he duly put Qiu Qianren down and let go of his neck.

Qiu Qianren cackled loud with laughter. "Young miss sees the danger yet!" he said. "With you little kiddies, I've no grievance, no enmity. By the abundant goodness of heaven above, how could I - being the senior - do as the big bully the small, and injure you as I please?"

Huang Rong smiled. "That's well said," she replied. "I'm a great admirer of senior master's skill; today, I'd like to seek advice on expert moves. But don't you injure me!" At that, she put her guard up; her left hand raised, she rolled her right into a hollow fist, brought it to her mouth, and blew a few times.

"Here's a move called 'Tooting One's Own Conch'," she laughed. "En garde!"

"Young miss has some gall!" said Qiu Qianren. "The name of Master Ouyang is pervasive under heaven – your ridicule is unacceptable!"

There was a smack as Huang Rong threw a surprise right-handed slap, landing a crisp, clean hit on his face. Giggling, she said: "This move's called 'The Backlash of the Facetious Cheek'!"

Suddenly, from outside the woods came the sound of laughter, and someone said: "Excellent! And the same once again!"

Hearing the voice, Huang Rong realised that her father had now arrived. Immediately growing more daring, she gave a call of agreement and duly motioned to throw a right-hand slap. Qiu Qianren hastily ducked in avoidance, but didn't know that her move was actually a feint – the slap was instantly pulled and followed up with a left palm. Using the through-arm style of Six-Harmony Fist, he tried to swing out a block, but hadn't figured that his opponent's attack was still a feint; seeing her two tiny little palms fluttering up and down before his eyes like a couple of jade butterflies, his concentration slipped, and his right cheek took a slap yet again.

Qiu Qianren knew that, if the fight carried on, things could get positively out of hand. Shouting, he threw out two punches which forced Huang Rong to retreat a couple of steps, then straight away leapt aside with a cry of "Hold it!"

"What?" said Huang Rong, laughing. "Had enough?"

Qiu Qianren gave her a stern look. "Miss," he said, "you've already sustained an internal injury. Hurry off to a tranquil

room to convalesce for seven times seven days. And don't so much as peep outside, or else there's no guaranteeing your little life!"

Seeing him speak so seriously, Huang Rong couldn't help being startled for a moment – before bursting into giggles of uncontrollable laughter, her body trembling like the stem of a flower.

By now, Huang Yaoshi and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had already caught up, and were puzzled at the sight of Tuolei and the others tied against trees.

Ouyang Feng had naturally heard that the martial arts of Qiu Qianren were astonishing. In one former year, he'd beaten the master warriors of the Hengshan School – which had rocked the southern realms with its might – until they lay dead or dying, using only his pair of iron palms. There and then, Hengshan suffered irrecoverable collapse, never again able to hold its position in wulin. But today, how come he couldn't even beat a little girl like Huang Rong? And could it be true that he had facial neigong, able to injure opponents by firing their force back at them? Not only was this unheard of, it didn't look like it, given his situation.

Just as Ouyang Feng was hesitating, he raised his head and suddenly spotted a document pouch of Sichuan brocade hanging aslant from Huang Yaoshi's shoulder, with a camel embroidered in white silk on its surface – the property, as it happened, of his own nephew. Deep down, he couldn't help feeling dread. Having left after killing Tan Chuduan and Mei Chaofeng, he had come back again just to collect his nephew. "Could it be that Huang Yaoshi has actually killed the lad in vengeance for his disciple?" he thought.

In a trembling voice, he asked: "What's happened to my nephew?"

“What’s happened to my disciple Mei Chaofeng is also what’s happened to your nephew,” replied Huang Yaoshi icily.

Ouyang Feng felt half his body go cold. Ouyang Ke had been born because of an illicit liaison between him and his sister-in-law; nephew by name, he was actually his dear son, and he loved this illegitimate son like life itself. He had felt that, although Huang Yaoshi and the Quanzhen Taoists had established deep grievances with him, all of these people were renowned champions in jianghu; with Ouyang Ke unable to move either of his legs an inch, there was no way they’d cause him trouble. He just had to wait for them to disperse, before taking his son to a quiet place where he’d recuperate from his injuries. Little did he know that Ouyang Ke had already met with brutality.

Huang Yaoshi watched him standing there, eyes staring straight ahead, about to launch a sudden attack any moment now. He knew that this would be unleashed with a mountain-moving, ocean-churning violence, an unstoppable force; inwardly, he readied himself.

“Who’s the killer?” growled Ouyang Feng. “One of yours, or one of Quanzhen’s?” He knew that, with Huang Yaoshi’s exalted status, he’d never kill with his own hands someone who had two broken legs. He must have got somebody else to do it. By now, Ouyang Feng’s naturally harsh voice had become even more ear-piercingly jarring.

Huang Yaoshi answered coldly: “A brat who’s studied Quanzhen martial arts plus some skills from Peach Blossom Island, and who’s well acquainted with you. You go and look for him.”

Huang Yaoshi was actually talking of Yang Kang, but when Ouyang Feng thought about it, Guo Jing instantly came to

mind. Bursting with rage and anguish, for a moment he aimed a ferocious glare at Guo Jing, and then turned his head to Huang Yaoshi. "What the heck are you doing taking my nephew's document pouch?" he asked.

"If the master map of Peach Blossom Island was with him, I had to take it back," said Huang Yaoshi. "In digging down to search for the map, it was necessary for me to trouble your excellent nephew - after his burial - with the sight of daylight once again. Of that, I feel rather regretful. It's a shame that although he had the document pouch on him, within the pouch, that master map was nowhere to be seen; the search ended up being a waste of Heretic Huang's efforts. Still, we definitely gave the remains of your nephew a proper resting-place; we dared not have it the least bit deficient."

"Well said, well said," remarked Ouyang Feng.

He was aware that victory and defeat against Huang Yaoshi would be hard to tell apart until after one or two thousand moves had been exchanged, and that he'd not necessarily be the one standing in the ascendancy. Fortunately, he'd already gotten his hands on the 9 Yin Scripture, and anyway, there was no impatience for the day of revenge. But if Qiu Qianren could beat up the Jiangnan Six, Guo Jing and Huang Rong - and afterwards, come to his assistance - the two of them joining forces might take the life of Huang Yaoshi there and then. At this time of bereavement, from the sudden news that his dear son had been killed, he was still capable of coolly appraising the situation between himself and the enemy; and having calculated the chances of winning were higher, he wasn't willing to let the opportunity go. He turned his head to Qiu Qianren.

"Brother Qianren," he said, "you massacre these eight, while I deal with Heretic Huang."

Qiu Qianren laughed and gave a few gentle waves of his big cattail-leaf fan. "That's fine," he said. "I'll come and help you after I've massacred these eight."

"Precisely," said Ouyang Feng.

And with that one word, he fixed his glaring eyes on Huang Yaoshi, and slowly began crouching down. Huang Yaoshi, his legs in a 'half-nail, half-V' stance, stepped eastward into a 'Z-tree' position. In a moment, the two men were about to use world-class martial arts to distinguish the strong and the weak, the living and the dead.

"Massacre me first!" giggled Huang Rong.

Qiu Qianren shook his head. "Young miss is so cute and lively," he said, "I almost can't bear to do it...Oh shit! Oh shit!" He was suddenly clutching his belly with both hands and bending over at the waist. "At this time, of all the rotten coincidences..."

"What?" said Huang Rong, puzzled.

"You wait a moment," said Qiu Qianren, a strained look on his face. "I've suddenly got a stomach-ache. I must be excused!"

Huang Rong spluttered, for once not knowing what to say. Qiu Qianren, his brows knitted in an expression of discomfort, gave another moan; clutching his crotch with both hands, he ran off to one side, a limp in his step. From the look of things, he'd had a sudden stomach-ache and, unable to hold it in, had pooped into his pants. Huang Rong, aghast, had a feeling that he was eight-tenths faking it. But worried that he really did have diarrhoea, she looked on wide-eyed and let him run past, not daring to get in his way.

Zhu Cong took out a piece of straw tissue from his pocket. With flying steps, he caught up with Qiu Qianren and tapped him on the shoulder, saying pleasantly: "Have some toilet paper."

"Thanks a lot," said Qiu Qianren. Going into some bushes by a tree, he squatted down.

Huang Rong picked up a stone and threw it at the small of his back, calling out: "Go a bit further!"

The stone was just about to hit Qiu Qianren when he reached behind with his hand and caught hold of it. "Does the smell offend you, miss?" he laughed. "I'll just go a bit further away, then. And the eight of you better wait for me; don't be taking the opportunity to slip away!" As he talked, he pulled up his pants and walked further and further; behind a line of low groves over ten zhang away, he squatted down again.

"Second teacher," said Huang Rong, "that old bastard wants to escape."

Zhu Cong nodded his head, remarking: "That old bastard might be thick-faced, but he's slow-footed, too; he won't be able to escape, I'm afraid." He added: "Here's a couple of things for you to play with."

Huang Rong saw that he had a sharp sword and a cast-iron palm in his hands, and knew that he'd lifted them off Qiu Qianren's person when he'd patted the oldie on the shoulder just now. From the secret room, she'd already witnessed Qiu Qianren fooling the Quanzhen Seven with the sword-stabbed-through-the-belly stunt; she'd known immediately that it was clearly a sham, but hadn't been able to guess its mechanism. Now, seeing straight away that the sword had a retractable blade in three sections of interlocking sheaths, she laughed so hard she fell over.

Then, she got the idea of messing with Ouyang Feng's mind. Going over to stand in front of him, she smiled and said: "Uncle Ouyang, I just can't bear to live!" Raising her right hand, she stabbed the sword violently into her stomach.

Both Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng, who were just then accumulating power in preparation to attack, were shocked to see her do this. Huang Rong promptly held up the sword, showing off the three-section blade and pulling out the ensheathed tip, and laughing as she explained Qiu Qianren's trickery to her father.

"Could it be true," thought Ouyang Feng, "that this oldie has whipped up a phoney reputation, cheating his way to worldly renown with a lifetime of deception?"

Huang Yaoshi, noticing him slowly straightening to a stand, had already guessed what he was thinking. He took the cast-iron palm from his daughter's hands. The hollow of the palm, he noticed, was engraved with the word "Qiu", and the back of it had a carving in a wave pattern.

"This is the leadership token of Qiu Qianren, the Chief of Hunan's Iron Palm Gang," he said. "20 years ago, this token was really of the utmost significance in jianghu. No matter whose hands it was in, it brought an irresistible right of way, from as far east as Jiujiang to as far west as Chengdu; followers of both right and wrong would without exception offer awed obedience at the sight of it. In the past few years, the name of the Iron Palm Gang has long been unheard of, and it's unknown whether - or how - it's disbanded. Could this shameless, pathetic, big-talking oldie really be the owner of the token?" With doubts in his mind, he returned the iron palm to his daughter.

Seeing the iron palm, Ouyang Feng peered at it from the corners of his eyes, an expression of great surprise on his

face.

"This iron palm could turn out to be a lot of fun," giggled Huang Rong. "I want it! That deceitful guy has no further use for it." Lifting the three-section iron sword, she called out "Catch!" and raised her hand to throw it. But seeing the distance to Qiu Qianren was very far, she didn't have enough strength in her hands; her throw definitely wouldn't reach.

Smiling to her father, she handed him the sword. "Dad," she said, "you throw it to him!"

Huang Yaoshi, whose suspicions were aroused, had been intending a further test of whether or not Qiu Qianren had any real ability at all. Raising his left hand, he lay the iron sword flat atop his palm with the tip of the sword pointing away from him, and flicked its handle with the middle finger of his right hand. There was a light clang as the sword shot off sharply, faster and harder than if fired from a taut, powerful crossbow. Huang Rong and Guo Jing clapped their hands and cheered; Ouyang Feng, secretly shocked, thought: "What terrific Divine Flick skill!"

While they roared in acclaim, the sword flew straight at Qiu Qianren. When its tip appeared to be only metres from him, he remained squatting on the ground, unmoving; and in the blink of an eye, the point of the sword had already plunged into his back. Although the three-section sword wasn't sharp at all, this one flick from Huang Yaoshi had sent it in handle-deep. Even if it were a blade of wood or bamboo – let alone an iron sword – this oldie, if he wasn't dead, was surely heavily injured.

With flying steps, Guo Jing went over for a closer look. Suddenly, he gave a loud cry of astonishment. There was a yellow ko-hemp jacket on the ground; picking it up and

waving it in the air again and again, he shouted: "Oldie sneaked off long ago!"

As it happened, Qiu Qianren had taken off his jacket and hung it over the stem of a small tree – not only was he far apart from the others, the grass and woods were also blocking the view – and he'd somehow pulled off this 'moult of the golden cicada' trick. Just now, Huang Yaoshi and Ouyang Feng were concentrating on facing their opponent, their eyes on nothing else; and those two were in turn being watched by Zhu Cong and the rest. In the end, they'd all been deceived by Qiu Qianren. Eastern Heretic and Western Venom, giving each other a glance, couldn't help bursting simultaneously into loud laughter, both feeling secret cheer at having one less powerful enemy in the world.

Ouyang Feng knew that Huang Yaoshi was quick-witted in thought, and not straightforward like Hong Qigong; it wasn't easy to connive against him and succeed. But seeing him laughing in an easy-going manner, totally off-guard, how could he not take advantage of this opportunity to land a vicious strike? He gave three clanging laughs – a noise just like the din of gold clashing with iron – then stopped abruptly, as quick as lightning making a sudden bow low towards Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Yaoshi, still laughing with his head held high, raised his left palm sharply and clenched his right in a hook – and clasped his hands, returning the courtesy. Both men swayed slightly.

His surprise attack failing to connect, Ouyang Feng stood unmoving, before suddenly retreating three steps. "Heretic Huang," he shouted, "we'll meet again!" With a shake of his long sleeves, cloth swirled as he turned to go.

There was the faintest change of expression on Huang Yaoshi's face: he thrust out his left palm in front of his daughter, shielding her. Guo Jing had also recognised that Western Venom, in the midst of this turn, was stealthily unleashing his ruthless, sinister skills, and was about to use an Air-Splitting Palm-type technique to launch a sneak attack on Huang Rong. But both in reactions and making his move, he wasn't as quick as Huang Yaoshi; seeing the danger, it was already too late to help. So with a loud shout, he threw a double punch straight at Western Venom's stomach, hoping to force him to counterpunch in self-defence. The power applied in the sneak attack on Huang Rong would then not be enough.

The force unleashed by Ouyang Feng had just been repelled by Huang Yaoshi; exploiting the momentum, he immediately swung it around to attack Guo Jing instead. This move augmented the original force from himself with energy borrowed from Huang Yaoshi's block, amplifying its power. Guo Jing, in a critical position, ducked and rolled away. Leaping up afterwards, his face was already pale with shock.

"Good little boy!" swore Ouyang Feng. "I don't see you for a few days, and your skills improve yet again." Just now, his counterattacking move – borrowing an opponent's strength to injure another, an unfathomable variation delivered with unspeakable speed – had somehow been dodged by Guo Jing. That was completely beyond his expectations.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan, seeing both sides go on the attack, had clustered into a semicircular barrier behind Ouyang Feng. Paying no attention to them in the slightest, he dashed straight through, taking big strides. Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying, not daring to obstruct him, stepped aside to get out of his way and watched wide-eyed as he left the forest.

If Huang Yaoshi had wanted to avenge Mei Chaofeng right now, he could have got everyone to join forces, surround Western Venom, and overwhelm him. But being proud and arrogant by nature, he was unwilling to let anyone say a word about him 'using the many to persecute the few', and would rather seek him out again in the future, alone. Following the figure of Ouyang Feng with his gaze, he gave a cold laugh.

Guo Jing, Quan Jinfa and the others untied Huazheng, Tuolei, Zhebie and Bo'erhu. Already beside themselves with joy at the sight of Guo Jing still alive, they loudly cursed Yang Kang for his deceitful rumourmongering. "That Yang character said that he had to hurry to Yuezhou for something," fumed Tuolei. "I thought he was just a decent person, so I wasted three fine horses on him as a gift."

Earlier, they'd been told of Guo Jing's tragic loss; in the midst of their grief they heard Yang Kang talking on and on about wanting to avenge his sworn brother, and had fallen for his spiel. That evening, while they were staying together at an inn in a small town north of Lin'an, Yang Kang had wanted to go and stab Tuolei to death. But he hadn't expected that Fatty and Skinny – the two beggars who'd seen him holding the stick of the Chief's authority – were guarding him vigilantly, taking turns on night watch outside his window. Yang Kang had several times been just about to launch his attack, only to see if not Fatty then Skinny, patrolling to and fro in the courtyard with blade in hand. After waiting a whole night and from start to finish not getting an opportunity, he just gave up; the next day, he cheated Tuolei out of three fine horses, and rode off westward along with the two beggars.

Tuolei and the others, unaware that the previous night they'd nearly died a brutal death, were about to head north when they saw the pair of white eagles turn around and fly

south. Waiting for half a day, there was no sign of them coming back. Tuolei knew that the eagles were unusually intelligent and that there must have been a reason for them to go south; as there was fortunately no urgency at all to return north, they therefore waited in the inn for a couple of days. When the third day arrived, the eagles suddenly flew back, crying incessantly at Huazheng. Tuolei and the others followed in a group as the pair of eagles led the way, once again travelling south. Unfortunately, they then chanced upon Qiu Qianren and Ouyang Feng in the forest.

The Jin Empire had conferred a mission upon Qiu Qianren: incite the champions in Jiangnan to get fired up against each other, so that the Jin army could come south. While talking trash to Ouyang Feng in the forest, he'd spotted Tuolei – the Mongolian ambassador – and, together with Ouyang Feng, had instantly gone on the attack. Although Zhebie and the others were extraordinarily brave, how were they a match for Western Venom? The two eagles had actually flown south because they'd discovered the tracks made by the Little Red horse, but had ended up unwittingly leading their master into a catastrophe. And if they hadn't brought Guo Jing and Huang Rong over just in time, Tuolei's entire group would have inadvertently lost their lives there and then in the forest. Of these particulars, there were some Huazheng knew of, and there were some she was oblivious to. Tugging at Guo Jing's hand, she chattered away endlessly. Huang Rong, seeing the manner between Huazheng and Guo Jing so intimate, was already somewhat unhappy. Even more uncomfortably, Huazheng was speaking entirely in Mongolian, which Huang Rong couldn't understand a single word of. She had become an outsider.

Huang Yaoshi noticed the odd expression on his daughter's face. "Rong'er," he asked, "who's this barbarian girl?"

“Brother Jing’s wife-to-be,” answered Huang Rong, morose.

Hearing this, Huang Yaoshi almost couldn’t believe his own ears. “What?” he asked, insistently.

Huang Rong hung her head. “Dad,” she said, “go and ask him for yourself.”

Zhu Cong, nearby, had recognised in advance that things were getting inauspicious, and hastened forward. Delicately, he raised the circumstances of Guo Jing’s already having gotten engaged with Huazheng earlier in Mongolia.

Huang Yaoshi, unable to restrain his anger, cast an accusing glance at Guo Jing. Icily, he said: “So it turns out that, before coming to Peach Blossom Island as a suitor, he’d already set on an engagement in Mongolia?”

“We ought to think of a...think of a way to satisfy both parties,” stuttered Zhu Cong.

“Rong’er,” said Huang Yaoshi sharply, “dad’s going to do something, and you’d better not get in the way.”

“Dad, what is it?” asked Huang Rong, her voice trembling.

“That disgusting boy, that worthless girl – I’ll slaughter both of them together!” said Huang Yaoshi. “How could we allow anyone to disgrace the two of us, father and daughter?”

Huang Rong dashed forward a step and grabbed her father’s right hand. “Dad,” she said, “Brother Jing said wholeheartedly that he really, really loves me – that he’s never taken this barbarian girl to heart!”

“Well, fine,” snorted Huang Yaoshi. Raising his voice, he shouted: “Boy, hurry up and kill the barbarian girl, to display evidence of your own feelings!”

Guo Jing had never in his entire life met with such an awkward situation. Naturally hesitant in his thoughts, he heard what Huang Yaoshi just said and felt totally at a loss; standing there in a daze, dumbfounded, he didn't know what to do.

"You'd already set on a marriage beforehand," continued Huang Yaoshi frostily, "yet you still came to me in suit! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

Seeing Huang Yaoshi's ashen expression, the Jiangnan Freaks knew that Guo Jing was one sudden flick of a palm away from fatal misfortune; furtively, each of them went on guard. But with their ability so far inferior by comparison, they'd actually be helpless to assist should the fighting get serious.

Guo Jing had always been unable to tell lies. Having heard these questions, he answered with the plain truth: "All I hoped for was to be with Rong'er for the rest of my life. Without Rong'er, there's no way I can live."

Huang Yaoshi's expression softened slightly. "Very well," he said. "If you don't kill this girl, that's fine; but from now on, you cannot ever see her again."

Guo Jing, faltering, had yet to respond, when Huang Rong asked: "You definitely need to see her, don't you?"

"I've always treated her just like a dear sister," said Guo Jing. "If I can't see her, sometimes I'd worry about her."

Huang Rong gave a beautiful smile. "Just see who you'd like to see - I don't mind!" she said. "I have faith that you don't really love her. And how could it be that I don't compare to her?"

"Fine!" said Huang Yaoshi. "I am here. The barbarian girl's family are here. And your six teachers are here, too. Now you better say it loud and clear: the one you want to marry is my daughter, and not that barbarian girl!" It was already greatly against his nature to concede repeatedly like this; but out of respect for his beloved daughter, he restrained himself with all his might, and tolerated it. His heart had also softened briefly since Mei Chaofeng lost her life while shielding her teacher.

Lost in thought, Guo Jing hung his head. Stashed around his waist, he glimpsed both the golden blade granted to him by Genghis Khan, and the small dagger gifted to him by Qiu Chuji.

"Going by the will of father," he pondered, "Yang Kang and I should be good brothers, not changing through life and death. But how can I keep faith in this tie if he acts like he does? And going by the will of Uncle Yang Tiexin, I should take Sister Mu as a wife. But that obviously can't be right. It looks like I don't always have to follow the orders laid down for me by elders. The engagement between myself and Sister Huazheng was made by Genghis Khan. How can it be that, because some person said a few words, Rong'er and I have to spend our lives apart?" Having thought this far, he'd already made up his mind. He raised his head.

By now, Tuolei had clarified with Zhu Cong what had been spoken about in the exchange between Huang Yaoshi and Guo Jing. He saw Guo Jing dithering and ruminating, seemingly embarrassed; and he realised that he truly felt no sentiments towards his sister. Bursting with rage, he took a long, wolf-fanged-and-vulture-plumed arrow out from his quiver, and gripped it in both hands.

"Brother Guo Jing!" he called out. "Everywhere under heaven, 'One's word is one's bond' is the conduct of the

true man! Now that you've treated my sister heartlessly, how could the heroic sons and daughters of Genghis Khan seek sincerity from you? The brotherly tie between you and me...from now, I demand it severed! As for the bond of life and death the two of us had when we were children, and also your saving the lives of father and me - let's keep kindness and grievance clearly separated. Because your mother's in the north, I'll certainly provide for her, properly and respectfully. But if you want to see her come south, I'll be sure to send people in escort. There won't be the least bit of neglect - no way! A real man's words are set in stone. You put your mind at rest!" Done with talking, there was a loud crack as he snapped the arrow in two, flinging the shards before the horse. Tuolei had spoken with a steely finality and an iron will. Deep down, Guo Jing felt in awe, and he suddenly recalled all kinds of heroic deeds that him and Tuolei had got up to during their youth in the great desert.

"He said: 'A real man's words are set in stone,'" thought Guo Jing. "The agreement to marry Sister Huazheng was from my own mouth. To go back on one's word - how is that the way to behave? Even if Master Huang kills me today and Rong'er hates me for the rest of her life, I can't be seeing it like that."

Immediately, he raised his head high. "Master Huang, my six kind teachers, Brother Tuolei, and masters Zhebie and Bo'erhu," he announced, "Guo Jing really isn't the type who has no honour, no virtue. I have to marry Sister Huazheng."

He made this announcement in Chinese, and separately, in Mongolian. For everyone, it was far off what they'd expected. Tuolei, Huazheng, Zhebie and Bo'erhu were surprised but delighted; the Jiangnan Freaks privately praised their disciple for being a true man of hard

backbone; and Huang Yaoshi, casting him a sideways glance, gave a cold sneer.

Huang Rong was deeply heartbroken. After a moment's pause, she took a few steps towards Huazheng, and assessed her carefully. She noticed Huazheng's athletic figure, her large eyes and dashing eyebrows, her features everywhere noble; and she couldn't help giving a long sigh.

"Jing gege," she said, "I understand. You and her are the same. The two of you are a pair of white eagles rising over the great desert. But I'm just a little swallow, sitting under a willow branch in Jiangnan."

Guo Jing stepped over to her. "Rong'er," he said, grasping her hands, "I don't know if what you said is right or wrong. In my heart, there's only you – and you know it! Who cares what others say we should or shouldn't do? They can burn my body 'til the ashes blow away, but I'll only be thinking of you!"

"Then why did you say that you'll marry her?" said Huang Rong, tears welling in her eyes.

"I am a fool," said Guo Jing. "I don't know about any reasoning. I only know this: the promises that you make, you just can't take back. But I'm not lying when I say that, no matter what, you're the only one in my heart. There's no way I can be apart from you. I would rather die!"

Huang Rong felt confusion inside – feelings of love and of pain. After a moment, she gave a faint smile. "Jing gege," she said, "if I'd known things would be this way, we'd never have returned from the 'Island of Rubicund Clouds'. Wouldn't that have been great?"

Huang Yaoshi, raising an eyebrow, suddenly shouted: "That's easy!" With a flap of his robe sleeves, he swung out

a hand chopping at Huazheng.

To Huang Rong, her old dad's intentions had been plain to see. Spotting a cold glint in his eyes, and knowing an attempt to kill was imminent, she'd pre-emptively dashed to obstruct him before he'd thrown out his hand. Huang Yaoshi, afraid of harming his beloved daughter, at once stopped his hand's momentum. Huang Rong had already grabbed Huazheng by the arm and pulled her off her horse when Huang Yaoshi's hand struck the horse on the saddle, making a loud noise.

Initially, the horse didn't seem unduly affected at all. But gradually, its head drooped and its legs bowed as it curled, paralysed, into a ball on the ground – where, in the end, it died. This was a sturdy horse from a renowned Mongolian breed; although it wasn't as fabulous as the treasured blood-sweating horse, it was still a fine, muscular animal, strong-boned and with a high, bulky body. But with just one wave of Huang Yaoshi's palm, it had died under his hand. Martial arts this extreme were a rare sight indeed. The hearts of Tuolei, Zhu Cong and all the others were pounding wildly; if, they thought, this hand had struck Huazheng, how would she have survived?

Huang Yaoshi hadn't expected his daughter would actually take action and rescue Huazheng. He was stunned for a moment, before understanding why: if he killed the barbarian girl, Guo Jing would surely turn against his daughter, and they'd become enemies. He snorted, thinking: "To turn against is to turn against; how could I even be scared of this boy?" But with one glance at his daughter, he saw her expression was one of misery and pain, but obviously also of feeling intertwined with someone in a thousand ways – unable to part, unable to leave. Deep down, he couldn't help trembling: this was exactly the same look that his wife, on the verge of death, had on her face.

Huang Rong had always been very similar in looks to her departed mother. Back then, that emotional event had affected Huang Yaoshi like a dementia, like a madness; although it had been fifteen years, every day since it was as if it was still right before his very eyes. Now, to see it suddenly appear on his daughter's face, made him realise that her feelings of love for Guo Jing were already rooted bone-deep. Reflecting that this was precisely the natural character of her father and mother – self-willed and disposed towards irresolvable passion – he gave a long sigh, and intoned:

*“Earth and heaven
Are a stove,
Nature is the worker!
Yin and Yang are
As charcoal,
Thousand things are copper!”*

Huang Rong stood still, teardrops falling slowly.

Han Baoju gave Zhu Cong's lapels a tug. “What's he singing about?” he asked, in a whisper.

“It's from a composition written by someone called Jia, during the Han Dynasty,” answered Zhu Cong, also whispering. “It's saying that existence on this world – for mankind and the ten thousand creatures – is an anguish just like that of suffering incineration inside a huge furnace.”

“He's trained to such a high standard!” spluttered Han Baoju. “What anguish can he have?”

Zhu Cong, shaking his head, gave no response.

“Rong'er,” said Huang Yaoshi gently, “after we go back, you are never to see this boy again.”

"Dad, no!" said Huang Rong. "I still have to get to Yuezhou. Teacher told me to go and be the Chief of the Beggar Gang."

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly. "Being the head of the tramps," he said, "is a serious hassle, and it's not much fun."

"I promised teacher I'd do it," said Huang Rong.

"Well, try it out for a few days, then," sighed Huang Yaoshi. "When you're really sick of it, hand it over to another straight away. And afterwards...are you going to see this boy or not?"

Huang Rong took a glance at Guo Jing and saw him gazing back at her. The look in his eyes was one of overflowing tenderness, of a love infinite in depth. She turned her head back towards her father.

"Dad," she said, "he's going to marry someone else; so I'll marry someone else, too. I'm the only one in his heart, just as he's the only one in my heart."

Huang Yaoshi laughed. "The daughter of Peach Blossom Island cannot lose out, so that's not too bad. Now, suppose the man you marry doesn't let you be friends with him...?"

Huang Rong gave a snort. "Who'd dare to stop me?" she said. "I'm your daughter!"

"Silly girl!" said Huang Yaoshi. "It won't be a few more years before dad dies."

"Dad!" sobbed Huang Rong. "The way you treat me, would I really be able to live on for much longer?"

"So are you still going to be with this heartless, faithless boy?" enquired Huang Yaoshi.

"Each extra day I stay with him is an extra day of happiness," said Huang Rong. She said this gently, but with an expression of utter misery.

While father and daughter asked and answered each other like this, the Jiangnan Freaks – despite being eccentric in character – couldn't help but listen agape. In the Song era, the proscriptions advised by propriety were followed with the most particularity; but because Huang Yaoshi was a man who 'opposed Tang and Wu and despised Zhou and Kong' and who perversely went against the conventions of the age, it had led to everyone calling him by the given title of "Eastern Heretic". As for Huang Rong, she'd been moulded by her father since youth, and regarded marriage as marriage and love as love; when had thoughts of rectitude and chastity ever passed through her little head? This kind of conversation, shocking by the standards of the time, would set tongues wagging incessantly in disapproval among anyone overhearing it. But father and daughter were even talking as if it were only natural – just like common, idle, household chat. Despite the open-mindedness of Ke Zhen'e and the others, they couldn't help shaking their heads quietly.

Guo Jing, who was feeling very bad, wanted to say a few comforting words to Huang Rong, but he'd always been wooden in speech. Now, he knew even less what was the right thing to say. Huang Yaoshi glanced at his daughter, then glanced at Guo Jing. Lifting his head towards the heavens, he suddenly roared long and loud. The sound shook the treetops and echoed from the mountain valley, startling some magpies; they rose in a flock and flew around the forest.

"Magpies, magpies!" called out Huang Rong. "The cowherd meets the weaving-girl tonight. Why no hurry to build the bridge?"

Huang Yaoshi grabbed a handful of loose stones from the ground and hurled them up into the air. One by one, a dozen magpies dropped, most dying where they fell. "What bridge is there to build?" shouted Huang Yaoshi. "Deep passion, great love: all empty fantasy in the end. More fitting that it die an early death!" He spun around and floated off. In just the space of a blink, the others saw his blue-robed figure disappear beyond the back of the woods.

Tuolei hadn't understood what they'd been talking about; he knew only that Guo Jing was unwilling to turn his back on agreements from the past. "Brother," he said, happily, "here's hoping you soon succeed with your big objective. See you again when you're back north!"

Huazheng added: "Keep this pair of white eagles by your side, and come back someday soon!"

Guo Jing nodded his head. "Tell my mum," he said, "that I'm sure I'll put the enemy to the blade, and get revenge for father."

Zhebie and Bo'erhu also took their leave of Guo Jing, and the four rode out of the forest together.

"What are your plans?" Han Xiaoying asked Guo Jing.

Guo Jing said: "I...I plan firstly to go and find Teacher Hong."

Ke Zhen'e nodded his head. "That's right," he remarked. "Master Huang went to our households; our families must have been very worried. We ought therefore to return. When you see Chief Hong, you must invite His Eminence to come to Jiaxing and convalesce. We'll keep a firm guard over him, and assure you his safety." Guo Jing promised to do so, took leave of his six teachers, and then returned to Lin'an with Huang Rong.

That evening, the two of them went back into the palace for a careful look around the imperial kitchens, but there was no sign of Hong Qigong anywhere. They found and interrogated several eunuchs, all of whom said that there hadn't been any intruders or trespassers appearing in the palace these past few days. Guo Jing and Huang Rong felt they could put their minds at rest somewhat. Although Hong Qigong had lost his martial arts, he still had the resourcefulness and experience of a great master; they expected he'd surely had a plan of escape. And by now, it was already drawing near to the time of the Beggar Gang's big meeting - they couldn't delay any longer. Early next morning, they immediately rode westward together. At this time, half of China was already occupied by the Jins, the boundary a line from the River Huai in the East to Sanguan in the West. What remained for those of the Southern Song were seventeen provinces in all: Eastern and Western Liangzhe; Eastern and Western Huainan; Eastern and Western Jiangnan; Northern and Southern Jinghu; Southern Jingxi; the five regions of Bashu; Fujian; and Eastern and Western Guangnan. (*) The nation's influence was in faltering decline, its territory shrinking by the day.

On this particular day, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were coming to the border of Western Jiangnan province. (*) While going along a mountain ridge, there was a sudden blast of cold wind across it, and a big layer of jet-black clouds came floating over fast from the east. Right now, it happened to be the height of summer, but rain falls as it pleases; even before the dark, rumbling clouds had arrived overhead, there was a thunderclap, and it was already showering down with soyabean-sized raindrops.

Guo Jing opened an umbrella and went to shelter Huang Rong with it, but a violent, unexpected gust of wind burst over, ripped off the parasol, and carried it far away, leaving

only a naked umbrella-handle in Guo Jing's hands. Huang Rong, laughing loudly, said: "How come you've got a Dog-Beating Stick, too?"

Guo Jing laughed with her. Looking ahead along the ridge, there was nowhere in sight where they could escape from the rain. Guo Jing took off his jacket, wanting to use it to shield Huang Rong. "We can cover up for a bit longer," said Huang Rong, smiling, "but we'll still get wet!"

"Then let's walk quicker," said Guo Jing.

Huang Rong shook her head. "Jing gege," she said, "here's a story from a book. One day, it was raining down hard. Everybody travelling on the road was rushing to and fro. But there was one man who just walked at an unhurried pace. The other people were surprised, and asked him why the heck he wasn't running. The man said: 'It's raining down hard ahead of me, too. Won't running over there still get me soaked just the same?'"

"True!" laughed Guo Jing.

The issue of Huazheng suddenly arose in Huang Rong's mind. "The future ahead is already doomed with misery and heartbreak," she thought. "No matter how we run, in the end we can't escape, can't hide. It's just as if we'd encountered rain while along the ridge of a mountain."

There amidst the downpour, the two of them walked slowly until they'd left the ridge. Seeing a peasant household, they went in to shelter from the rain. As both were totally soaked from head to toe, they changed into clothing borrowed from the peasant family. Huang Rong put on the worn garments of an old farmer's wife, which she found amusing, when suddenly she heard a series of disappointed groans from Guo Jing in the neighbouring room. Rushing over, she asked: "What is it?"

Guo Jing, an upset look on his face, had in his hands the painting given to him by Huang Yaoshi. It had so happened that the painting had been damaged by rainwater during the downpour just now. "What a shame!" repeated Huang Rong.

Taking the canvas from him for a look, she saw that its paper was torn, its strokes of paint blurred. There was already no way it could be refitted and restored. She was just about to put it down when she suddenly noticed that a few extra lines of dim writing had appeared by the side of the poem annotated by Han Shizhong. A closer look revealed that these words had been written on paper interlying between the painting and the sheet it had been mounted on; if it hadn't been for the painting getting soaked, they definitely wouldn't be visible. The disintegration of the rain-soaked paper had made the writing fragmented and difficult to distinguish, but by looking at the form in which it was arranged, Huang Rong could make out there were four sentences in all.

With careful discernment, she read out slowly:

*"...posthumous writings of the late...,
iron palm...,
Middle...peak,
Second...joint."*

The remaining words were so damaged that there was absolutely no way they could be identified.

"It's about The Posthumous Writings of the Late General!" called out Guo Jing.

"Indeed!" said Huang Rong. "There's no doubt. That bastard Wanyan Honglie assumed the Writings were hidden by the side of the palace's Cuihan Hall. But although he got the stone box, the Writings were nowhere to be seen. It

looks like the location of the Writings hinges critically on these four lines of text."

After murmuring "...iron palm...middle...joint..." for a while, she added: "That day at The Villa of the Gathering Clouds, at one point I heard Martial Brother Lu and your six teachers discussing that deceitful guy, Qiu Qianren. They said he was the Chief of the Iron Palm Gang or something. Daddy said that the might of the Iron Palm Gang rocked Sichuan and Hunan; its prestige and reputation really were awesome. Could it be that the Writings actually have something to do with Qiu Qianren?"

Guo Jing shook his head. "As long as it's Qiu Qianren playing up," he said, "I'm not believing any of it!"

"I wouldn't believe it either!" said Huang Rong, with a little laugh.

On the fourteenth day of the seventh month, they arrived within the borders of Northern Jinghu province. (*) The next day, before the stroke of noon, they'd already reached Yuezhou. Leading their horses and loosing the eagles, they asked around for directions, and came by path to Yueyang Tower.

After going up into a nearby restaurant and ordering food and drink, they admired the scenery of Dongting Lake: a sweeping vastness of one blue-green hue spread across ten thousand qing. Towering mountains stood out in every direction, a ring of misty, lofty peaks arrayed in an arc of awe-inspiring majesty. Compared to the hazy waters of Tai Lake, this spectacle was something else entirely. While they enjoyed the view, the food arrived. The cuisine of Hunan was very heavily spiced, and Guo Jing and Huang Rong both felt that it wasn't to their taste; but with such big dishes and such long chopsticks, it nevertheless had a rather

generous spirit to it. The two of them ate some of the food and looked around at the verses inscribed on the four walls. Guo Jing perused Fan Zhongyan's Remarks on Yueyang Tower in silence, but he couldn't help reading out loud when he reached the sentence:

*"Be first under heaven to worry,
And last under heaven to rejoice."*

"What do you think about this couplet?" asked Huang Rong.

Guo Jing re-read it silently, pondering to himself and giving no immediate response.

"The writer of this essay was Fan, 'The Just Official'," said Huang Rong. "At that time, he rocked the Western Xia with his might; a literary talent and an astute tactician, you could say that he had absolutely no equal on earth."

Guo Jing asked her to describe some of Fan Zhongyan's achievements, and listened as she talked about his various childhood hardships – the poverty of his family, the early death of his father, the remarriage of his mother – and, after he'd attained wealth and honour, everything he did in consideration for the commonfolk. A grave feeling of reverence rising unstoppably within him, Guo Jing solemnly poured a ricebowlful of wine. "'Be first under heaven to worry, and last under heaven to rejoice.'" he said. "This is surely what's in the mind of great heroes and great champions!" With that, he lifted his head and drained the wine in a single shot.

Huang Rong laughed. "Although this sort of person is good for sure," she said, "there's so much worry under heaven – and so little joy – that wouldn't he never get to rejoice in his life? I couldn't be like that." Guo Jing gave a slight smile.

“Jing gege,” continued Huang Rong, her voice getting lower, “I don’t care whether there’s worry or joy under heaven. If you aren’t by my side, I’m never going to be joyful.” Her brows were knitted with despair.

“I won’t be joyful either,” remarked Guo Jing, hanging his head. He knew that she was thinking about how the two of them were going to end up, and he had no way of comforting her.

Huang Rong suddenly raised her head and laughed. “Never mind!” she said. “All this is childishness, anyway. Have you heard anyone sing Fan Zhongyan’s poem Spurn the Silver Lantern?”

“I haven’t heard it, of course!” said Guo Jing. “Could you tell it to me?”

Huang Rong said: “The concluding passage of the poem goes like this:

*‘The life of man is but
A hundred years in all;
Infatuated youth
Ends up with aged pall.
Only in between there’s time,
Briefly youthful in one’s prime.
Why grasp on fleeting fame, catch hold
Of first-class rank and thousand gold?
For how to flee white hairs of old?’”*

She followed this by explaining the general meaning of the poem.

Guo Jing commented: “He was telling people not to waste their best years by using them up in seeking fame, gaining office, getting rich, and so on. And that’s very well said.”

Huang Rong, in a whisper, recited:

*"Wine into the worried stomach
Changes into lovesick tears."*

Guo Jing gazed at her. "Is that a poem of Fan Zhongyan, too?" he asked.

"Yes," said Huang Rong. "Great heroes and great champions also aren't the heartless sort, you know."

The two of them drank a few cups to each other, and Huang Rong had a look at the guests in the restaurant. On the eastern side, she saw three middle-aged beggars sitting around a square table; although they wore many patches, their clothes were clean and fresh. By the look of them, they were important figures within the Beggar Gang who'd come to attend tonight's big meeting. Besides them, the other guests were all the usual officials and merchants. The incessant chirp of cicadas could be heard coming from a big willow tree outside the restaurant.

"All day long," said Huang Rong, "these cicadas call out 'zhi le, zhi le' endlessly, but whatever they know is unknown. Basically, even among insects there are guys who boast shamelessly. It makes me think of a particular person, and I rather miss him."

"Who?" demanded Guo Jing.

"That big talker of bull," said Huang Rong, smiling, "the Iron Palm's Qiu 'Floats-Over-Water' Qianren!"

Guo Jing laughed loudly. "That old trickster...!" he began.

He hadn't finished speaking when suddenly, from a corner of the restaurant, they heard somebody speaking in a mysterious voice: "Looking down even on 'Floats-Over-Water' Elder Qiu of Iron Palm? That's some big talk!" Guo

Jing and Huang Rong glanced at where the voice was coming from and saw a middle-aged beggar, with a swarthy complexion and clad in a tattered jacket, squatting by the corner and looking at them in snickering laughter.

Guo Jing, seeing that he was a Beggar Gang figure, immediately relaxed. Noticing that he had an agreeable expression, Guo Jing clasped his hands in respect and said: "Senior, how about joining us and drinking a cup or three?"

"Sure!" said the beggar, coming over at once.

Huang Rong ordered an extra cup and set of chopsticks from a waiter. Pouring the cup with wine, she said with a smile: "Please take a seat, and drink up!"

"Beggar here doesn't deserve a seat," he answered. Sitting right there on the floorboards, he took out a broken bowl and a pair of bamboo chopsticks from a pocket. Extending the bowl, he said: "The leftovers you're finished with - dump some over, and they'll do for me."

"That'd be a bit too disrespectful!" said Guo Jing. "Whatever dishes senior would like to eat, we'll order them up from the kitchen."

"A beggar does as a beggar looks," said the beggar. "If he's one in name only - just feigning the accent and affecting the appearance - might as well not be a beggar. If you agree to hand it out, then hand it out. If not, I'm going someplace else to beg for food!"

Huang Rong took a glance at Guo Jing. "Indeed!" she laughed. "You said it right!" They then tipped all their leftover food into the broken bowl. The beggar grabbed a few clumps of cold rice from inside a pocket and, along with the leftovers, began eating them up zestfully.

Secretly, Huang Rong counted the number of pockets on him: there were three pockets to a cluster, and three clusters in total – in sum, nine pockets. Having another look at the three beggars around the other table, each of them was wearing nine pockets as well, but on their table was a lavish spread of food and drink. Those three acted as if they hadn't seen this one beggar, and all along had never so much as glanced at him; but at times, their expressions carried a faint look of disgust.

As the beggar continued eating heartily, they suddenly heard the sound of footsteps on the staircase, and three people started coming up. Guo Jing turned his head and looked towards the stairs.

The first two people were Fatty and Skinny, the two beggars who'd attended Yang Kang at Lin'an's Ox Village. The third person was Yang Kang himself. Poking his head up, he got a big shock at the sudden sight of Guo Jing, still alive; after a moment of panic, he abruptly turned back and descended the stairs in terror, speaking about something as he left. Fatty followed him down, but Skinny went over to the table of the three beggars and said a few things to them in a low voice. The three immediately stood up and departed down the stairs. Meanwhile, the beggar sitting on the floor just carried on eating, taking no notice of them at all.

Huang Rong went over to the window and looked down from it, seeing Yang Kang – thronged by a dozen beggars – departing westward. He hadn't gone far when he turned his head and glanced up. Happening to make eye contact with Huang Rong, he looked away instantly and quickened his pace.

The beggar, having finished eating his meal, licked the bottom of the bowl clean and clear with his extended tongue, gave his chopsticks a few wipes on his clothing, and

put everything into a pocket. Huang Rong looked at him carefully. His face, covered with wrinkles, expressed anxiety and hardship; his hands were unusually big – almost double those of an ordinary person – and on their backs were raised blue veins, attesting to a lifetime of hard toil.

Guo Jing stood up and folded his hands in respect. “Senior,” he said, “please take a seat and we can have a talk.”

“I’m not used to sitting on stools!” laughed the beggar. “You two are the disciples of Chief Hong; although you’re young, we’re actually in the same generation. But as I’m older by several years, you can address me as ‘big brother’. My name’s ‘Lu’; I’m called ‘Lu Youjiao’.”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong cast a glance at each other, both thinking: “So he already knows our background!”

“Big Brother Lu,” said Huang Rong with a smile, “this name of yours really is interesting!”

Lu Youjiao answered: “It’s often said: ‘A pauper without a stick gets harassed by the dogs.’ I’m indeed without a stick, but what I do have is a pair of stinky feet. If a doggie comes to harass me, I take aim straight at the mongrel’s head, and that son-of-a-b***h gets a foot like so! Then, it’s off running to the wilds with its tail between its legs.”

Huang Rong laughed and clapped her hands. “Super, super!” she said. “If dogs knew the meaning of your name, they’d always be keeping their distance!”

“From what Brother Li Sheng’s been saying,” remarked Lu Youjiao, “I know the deeds the two of you did at Baoying. ‘Having ideals comes not from having advanced years; lacking ideals, one lives to a hundred in vain.’ How true! It really is a cause for admiration. No wonder Chief Hong has

favoured you like this!" Guo Jing rose and demurred modestly.

Lu Youjiao continued: "Just now, I heard you two chatting about Qiu Qianren and the Iron Palm Gang. It seems you're very much unaware of his circumstances."

"True," said Huang Rong. "I ought to ask for your advice."

"Qiu Qianren is the Chief of the Iron Palm Gang," said Lu Youjiao. "This Gang holds huge influence in the regions of Hunan, Hubei and Sichuan. The Gang's hordes commit murder and robbery; there's no evil they won't do. At first, they used to collaborate with local officials. Now, they're getting nastier and nastier – bringing out the cash to bribe ministers, they're starting to become officials themselves. Even more despicable is their secret liaison with the Jin nation, with whom they've struck a deal to work from within in accord with those outsiders."

"That oldie Qiu Qianren is only good at tricking people," said Huang Rong. "How'd he be able to handle such serious power?"

"Qiu Qianren is dangerous in the extreme!" insisted Lu Youjiao. "You ought not to look askance at him, miss."

Huang Rong smiled. "Have you met him?" she asked.

"As it turns out, no," admitted Lu Youjiao. "I hear he lives in seclusion among obscure mountains, practicing The Divine Art of the Iron Palm; he hasn't descended for at least a decade."

"You've been tricked!" said Huang Rong, laughing. "I've met him a few times. I've even fought him. And as for whatever 'Divine Art of the Iron Palm'..." Remembering

how Qiu Qianren had feigned diarrhoea and run away, all she could do was just gaze at Guo Jing and giggle.

Lu Youjiao gave her a stern look. He stated: "Although I'm not aware of what dirty tricks they've been playing, the Iron Palm Gang has rather flourished in recent years; you really ought not to belittle them lightly."

"Well said, Big Brother Lu!" offered Guo Jing hurriedly, worried he was getting angry. "Rong'er just loves to joke around."

"Since when was I joking around?" said Huang Rong with a laugh. Clutching her abdomen and imitating Qiu Qianren's voice, she added: "Ouch, ouch! I've got a stomach-ache!" Her antics made Guo Jing recall that particular spectacle, and he couldn't help letting out a laugh too.

Huang Rong saw he was laughing as well, but instantly restrained her mirth and changed the subject by asking: "Big Brother Lu, are you acquainted with those three who were dining here just now?"

Lu Youjiao gave a sigh. "The two of you aren't outsiders," he said, "so you may have already heard Chief Hong mention the internal division of our Gang into two groups: the 'Clean Clothes' and 'Dirty Clothes' factions."

"Haven't heard teacher talk of it," said Guo Jing and Huang Rong together.

"The division within the Gang is fundamentally not a good thing," said Lu Youjiao. "Chief Hong is extremely unhappy about it. His Eminence has expended an enormous amount of thought and effort, but all along hasn't been able to get these two factions to join together as one. Now, under Chief Hong, the Beggar Gang has four elders in all..."

"This I've heard teacher mention," interjected Huang Rong. Because Hong Qigong was still in this world, she didn't want to raise the issue of him having charged her with taking over the Chief's position.

Lu Youjiao nodded his head. "I'm the fourth-ranked elder," he continued. "All those three who were here just now are also elders."

"I get it!" said Huang Rong. "You're the head of the 'Dirty Clothes' faction, and they're of the 'Clean Clothes' faction!"

"Eh? How did you know?" asked Guo Jing.

"Look how dirty Big Brother Lu's clothes are!" said Huang Rong. "But the others' clothes were really clean. Big Brother Lu, I reckon the 'Dirty Clothes' faction are no good; dressing so stinkily, so sloppily – it isn't comfortable in the slightest! People in this faction of yours should wash their clothes more often. Wouldn't that just make both factions the same?"

Lu Youjiao was furious. "You're a little miss from a moneyed family," he fumed. "Of course you'd be annoyed by stinking beggars!" With a stamp of a foot, he stood up. Guo Jing moved to apologise for the offence, but the angry Lu Youjiao just stormed off down the stairs, without even turning his head.

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue. "Jing gege," she said, "I offended that Big Brother Lu. Don't tell me off."

Guo Jing just smiled.

Huang Rong added: "I was really worried just now."

"Worried about what?" said Guo Jing.

Huang Rong had a serious expression. “Just worried he’d lift up his foot and give you a kick. Wouldn’t that have been awful for you?”

“Why’d he kick me all of a sudden?” asked Guo Jing. “Even if you said something to offend him, there’s still no use kicking people.”

Huang Rong, pursing her lips with a slight smile, didn’t respond. Guo Jing just sat there in stupefaction, pondering uncomprehendingly.

Huang Rong sighed, and said: “Why don’t you think a little about what his name implies?”

Guo Jing had a sudden realisation. “So!” he shouted. “This is your roundabout way of calling me a dog!” He leaped up, motioning to tickle her as punishment. Huang Rong, giggling, dodged his outstretched hands.

End of Chapter 26.

Chapter 27 - In front of the Xuanyuan Platform

Translated by Gimel Gimeno & Frans Soetomo



Four young beggars, each with an unsheathed blade were guarding at their sides. Huang Rong turned her body around and was stunned. As it turned out, they were at the top of a small peak. In the moonlight she clearly saw lake water all around them. There was a tall platform a dozen zhang's away. The area around the platform was packed with row after row of hundreds of beggars.

While the two were joking around, there were footsteps coming from the staircase, the three old beggars who just went out with Yang Kang returned. They walk straight towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong's table then bowed in respect. The middle beggar had fair skin and plump, his face was full of white beard. If his clothes were not full of patches, he would look like a rich and noble gentleman. He smiled before he even spoke; his face was gay and friendly, he said, "That beggar surnamed Lu has just secretly carried out his poisonous hand against the two of you. We did not like what we saw; therefore, we come here to help."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled, they asked, "What poisonous hand?"

That beggar asked, "That old beggar was not willing to dine with you, was he?"

Huang Rong shivered with fear, she asked, "Did he put poison in our food?"

The beggar sighed and said, "It is our Beggar Clan's misfortune that we have such crafty traitor among us. This old beggar is highly skilled in using poison; as soon as his finger lightly flicked, the poison hidden in his finger nail would immediately mixed with the food and wine; even a

deity would not suspect. Your poisoning is already deep; in an hour time nobody would be able to save your lives."

Huang Rong did not believe what he said, she asked, "We do not have any enmity against him, why would he poison us?"

The beggar replied, "Most likely you two said something offensive to him. Please hurry and take this antidote, only then the two of you can be saved." After speaking he took out a package of powdered medicine from his pocket and put it into two wine cups and poured the wine in then he implored Jing, Rong two people to drink it immediately.

Just a moment ago Huang Rong saw them went to see Yang Kang, she was suspicious. How could they take some medicine just like that based on what he just said? So she asked, "That gentleman surnamed Yang is our acquaintance. Could the three of you invite him to come and see us?"

"Of course," that beggar replied, "But that traitorous disciple's poison is too severe. You should take this antidote quickly, or otherwise it will be too late."

Huang Rong said, "We are extremely grateful for your good intention. Would you please sit down and drink several cups with us? I often thought about the Beggar Clan's eleventh Clan Leader single handedly battled a group of warriors at Beigu Mountain; using only a stick and his pair of palms to strike down the five tyrants of Luoyang; what a hero he was."

During the time she and Guo Jing were together with Hong Qigong binding some woods to make a raft at MingXia [Bright Red Cloud] island, Hong Qigong would often tell her stories about some past major events within the Beggar Clan, so she would not be completely ignorant when she

became the Clan Leader in the future. That Beggar Clan's eleventh Clan Leader's achievement was one of the stories she heard from Hong Qigong. When the three old beggars heard her suddenly talk about former Clan Leader they look at each other in astonishment, they were wondering how a youngster like her would know about such matter.

Huang Rong again said, "The Hong Bangzhu's [Clan Leader] Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms have no equal under the heaven, I wonder how many stances have the three of you learned?"

Ashamed look appeared on the three beggars' faces; they had not learned even one stance from the Clan Leader's Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, they were inferior even from an eight-bag disciple Li Sheng who mastered one stance 'Divine Dragon Swings its tail'.

Huang Rong continued, "That Lu Zhanglao [Elder Lu] who poisoned us just a moment ago; I think his skill is just ordinary. Last month the Western Poison Ouyang Feng invited me to drink three poisoned wine, now that was somewhat better. Why don't you drink these two cups of poisoned wine yourselves?" She shoved the two cups with powdered medicine in front of the three beggars.

The three beggars' countenances slightly changed; they knew she was purposely talking nonsense and was not willing to drink the medicine. The Elder with the rich man appearance smiled and said, "Miss is suspicious, naturally we cannot force you. Only our good intention will be wasted. Let me just show one thing to convince Miss. Please take a look at my eyes; tell me if you see anything unusual."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at his eyes, only to see a pair of narrow eyes on the middle of a meaty fat face, like a pair of two slits on his face; but the eyeballs were

glistening, they looked very clear and bright. "What's so strange about his eyes?" Huang Rong wondered in her heart, "They look like a pair of sparkling pig eyes."

That beggar continued, "You two look into my eyes, surely you may not lose your concentration. Now you are feeling your eyelids are heavy, your minds are losing consciousness, your whole bodies are tired and weary; these are the signs of poisoning. Just close your eyes to sleep." His voice was soothing and pleasing to the ears while intoxicating at the same time, making Guo Jing and Huang Rong felt really tired and sleepy; as if their strength was drained from their bodies. Huang Rong slightly felt something was wrong; she tried to turn her head to avoid gazing at his eyes, but it seemed like she captivated by his eyes, she could not help looking back at him.

That beggar again said, "We are here by the lake side, the air is so cool and refreshing. You two should sleep soundly in this cool breeze. Sleep! Sleep! It is extremely comfortable. Sleep nicely!" As he spoke, his voice sounded increasingly gentle, sweet, and soothing. Guo Jing and Huang Rong unconsciously yawned repeatedly, put their heads down on the table and fell fast asleep.

Without knowing how many hours had passed, two people finally woke up dazed and confused; cool breeze caressed their bodies, made them feel the chill in the air. Their ears faintly heard a noise similar the sound of waves of the ocean. Slowly they opened their eyes and saw a clear bright moon that just rose up behind the eastern side of the mountain amidst a cloudy fog.

Two people were very shocked. The sun was still high up when they were drinking wine at the front of the tavern at Yueyang, how come in a blink of an eye the sky had turned dark? Dazed and confused they tried to stand up, they were

even more shocked to feel their hands and feet were bound by ropes. They tried to shout but their mouths were stuffed with cloths, pricking and hurting their tongues. Huang Rong knew it must be that white and fat beggar; but how he did it, she had no idea, for in that moment she could not think too much. She cast a sidelong glance and saw Guo Jing lying beside her, making an effort to struggle free; her anxiety was, for the most part, gone.

By this time Guo Jing had already possessed a powerful internal energy, he was able to break an even stronger rope. Who would have thought that as he exerted strength to his hands and feet, the rope on his body created 'zheng, zheng' noise, the rope was not damaged. Turned out it was made from braided cow rawhide mixed with steel wire.

Guo Jing wanted to add his strength and try again, unexpectedly he felt something cold on his face; a piece of ice-cold sword blade was softly patted twice on his cheek. He turned his head and saw four young beggars, each with an unsheathed weapon guarding them at their sides. He had no choice but stopped struggling. He turned his head to look at Huang Rong.

Huang Rong calmed herself down; she knew she needed to assess the overall situation first, and then try to find a way to escape. She turned her body around and was stunned. Turned out they were at the top of a small peak. Under the moonlight she clearly saw lake water all around them. A thin fog hung low on ten of thousands 'qing' [unit of area, 1 qing is approximately 6.67 Hectares or 16.47 acres] of bluish green waves. She thought, "It turns out that we are captured and brought to the Mount Jun's peak on Dongting Lake. How come I didn't feel anything along the way?"

She turned her head again and saw there was a tall platform a dozen of 'zhang's away. The area around the

platform was packed with rows after rows of hundreds of beggars. They sat quietly; the moonlight had not illuminated these people yet, which was the reason why Huang Rong did not notice them previously. She was inwardly happy, "Ah, right! Today is the fifteenth day of the seventh month; it's the Beggar Clan General Assembly. I must think of a way to speak, then I'll pass down Shifu's command, how can the beggars here refuse to accept?"

After a long time, the group of beggars still had not shown any activity. Huang Rong could not bear it any longer, but she could not move and had to endure patiently. About half an hour later, her limbs went numb. She saw the moon slowly rose to the middle of the sky, illuminating half of the tall platform. Huang Rong thought, "Li Tai wrote a poem, 'Pale moon swept through the lake, the surface was clear like a jade mirror, standing on Mount Jun painting a picture.' He went up the mountain to enjoy the moon that night, so free and unrestrained. Tonight the scenery is the same, but Jing Gege and I are bound in here. It really is irritating and funny at the same time!"

The moonlight slowly moved, shining on the three characters written on the side of the platform, 'xuan yuan [a name for the Yellow Emperor] tai' [platform]. Huang Rong recalled the story told by her father about great tales of the Jianghu world. Legend has it that the Huang Di [Yellow Emperor] cast [the word 'cast' here is as in 'casting metal from a mold'] a Ding [tripod, used for drinking utensil. From Wikipedia: a type of ancient Chinese vessel with three legs] on the bank of the Dongting lake. When the ding was finished, he rode a dragon and ascended to the heaven. She believed this platform was built to commemorate that event.

About the time it took to make tea later, the tall platform was completely engulfed by the bright moon. Suddenly she

heard 'bonk, bonk, bonk' three times then it stopped, then 'bonk, bonk, bonk' again. This pattern was repeated, sometimes slow sometimes fast, sometimes high, sometimes low, as if it followed certain rhythm. Turned out each one of the beggars held a small stick in their hands and they tapped the mountain rock in front of them. Huang Rong silently counted the tapping, she counted nine by nine, eighty one times when the noise stopped and four people stood up from the crowd of beggars. Under the bright moonlight she could see them clearly; they were Lu Youjiao and the three elders from the Clean Clothes Faction.

These four beggar elders walked towards the Xuanyuan Platform and stood on its four corners. The crowd of beggars also stood up and cupped their fists across their chests, bowing in respect. The white fat beggar waited until the crowd was seated and then with a clear voice said, "Brothers, the Beggar Clan met a disaster, an astronomical catastrophe, our Hong Lao Bangzhu [Old Clan Leader Hong] returned to heaven in Lin'an prefecture!"

At this word, the crowd of beggars fell into a complete silence. Suddenly someone cried out and threw himself to the ground. Everywhere the beggars beat their chests and stomped their feet, crying and wailing loudly. The noise of grieving shook the forest and echoed back from the surface of the lake down below.

Guo Jing was shocked, "We tried to find Shifu everywhere and could not find him, turned out he has passed away." He could not help shedding some tears, only his mouth was stuffed with some cloths, or else he would have wailed out too. Huang Rong meanwhile thought: "This fat guy is not a good person, he employed a nefarious way to capture us. I doubt it if we can believe what he said; he must be spreading up false rumors."

The crowd of beggars remembered Hong Qigong's kindness, everybody cried out louder and louder. Suddenly Lu Youjiao called out, "Peng Zhanglao, who personally saw Bangzhu returned to heaven?"

That white and plump Peng Zhanglao replied, "Lu Zhanglao, if Bangzhu was still alive; who has eaten leopard's gall and tiger's heart, dared to put a curse on him? The one who saw him returning to heaven is here. Yang Xianggong [honorable master], would you please tell the brothers here?"

Someone stood up from among the crowd of beggars; it was none other than Yang Kang. With the dark green bamboo stick in his hand he walked to the front of the platform. The crowd of beggars grew quiet, except for some continuing soft sobbing noise here and there.

Yang Kang slowly said, "About a month ago Hong Bangzhu was having a martial art contest with someone in Lin'an prefecture; unfortunately he lost and was killed."

As the crowd of beggars listened to him, their anger rose; one after another they shouted, "Who is the enemy? Tell us! Tell us!" "Bangzhu had divine power, how could he lose?" "Certainly the enemy ambushed him; our Bangzhu was overwhelmed by sheer numbers."

After Guo Jing listened to Yang Kang's speech, his grief turns to anger; immediately his heart was relieved and he thought, "A month ago, Shifu was obviously with us. Turned out he is just talking nonsense."

Meanwhile Huang Rong thought, "This kid must be a follower of the old swindler Qiu Qianren; he has completely mastered his stinky skill of spreading lies and deceiving people."

Yang Kang spread out both of his hands, waiting for the crowd of beggars to calm down, then he continued, "The ones who killed Bangzhu is the Peach Blossom Island's Master, the Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi, and the Quanzhen Sect's seven thieves."

Huang Yao Shi had not left his island for some time; therefore, nine out of ten beggars did not know much about his reputation. The Quanzhen Seven Masters' prestige, however, had shaken the world far and wide. The beggars who attended this general assembly on Mount Jun today were not rookies within the Beggar Clan; naturally they understood very well Quanzhen Seven Masters' capability. They did not care what kind of man Huang Yaoshi was, but if the Quanzhen Seven Masters joined hands, although Bangzhu's martial art was outstanding, he was but one person and certainly not their match. Everyone was very grieved and angered. Some opened up their mouths to curse, some others stood up and wanted to go to avenge their Clan Leader.

Actually Yang Kang heard Ouyang Feng said that he had severely injured Hong Qigong with his Toad Stance and that Hong Qigong's life was difficult to protect. He also thought that he had stabbed Guo Jing to death inside the imperial palace; who would have thought that they met again at the tavern in Yueyang city. He was shocked; thereupon he incited the three Beggar Clan's Elders to find a way to capture those two people with the intention of killing them later. He believed if today's matter would someday leak out to Huang Yaoshi, the Quanzhen Seven Masters and the Six Freaks of Jiangnan; they would certainly find him to seek revenge. The Six Freaks' martial art skills were not too high, so he was not afraid of them; but the Eastern Heretic and the Seven Masters were not a small matter. Thereupon he deliberately put the blame on Hong Qigong's murder on

their shoulders, so that the Beggar Clan would get out of their nest in full strength. With one swoop the Peach Blossom Island and the Quanzhen Sect would be destroyed and he would be saved from his trouble.

Amidst the clamoring noise of the beggars, Jian Zhanglao rose up from his corner on the east and said, "Brothers, listen to what I say." This man's beard and eyebrows were white, he was rather short; but as he opened his mouth the crowd grew silent, revealing his prominent position in the Beggar Clan. They heard him said, "Presently we have two important matters. First, we must follow Bangzhu's last order to elect the Nineteenth Clan Leader. Second, we must discuss how we are going to seek revenge for Bangzhu." The crowd of beggars shouted their approvals.

Lu Youjiao spoke loudly, "But first we must hold a memorial service for Lao Bangzhu's brave soul." He scooped some dirt from the ground and kneaded it into a clay figurine, treated it as Hong Qigong's image. He put the figurine on the side of Xuanyuan Platform and then he knelt down and cried. The crowd of beggars broke out into weeping and wailing again.

Huang Rong thought, "Shifu is alive and well; what do these stinky beggars cry for? Humph, without any reason you captured and bound Jing Gege and me, and now you are grieving for nothing. You get what you deserve."

After the crowd of beggars cried their hearts out, Jian Zhanglao clapped his hands three times; the beggars collected themselves and stopped crying. Jian Zhanglao said, "Brothers, in the Mount Jun General Assembly at Yuezhou today we were supposed to listen to Hong Bangzhu appoint his successor. It appeared Lao Bangzhu had met some unfortunate incidents and had returned to heaven; so we must make decision based on Lao Bangzhu's

last order. If he did not leave any order, then the Four Elders will convene and elect the new Bangzhu. This is in accordance with the custom the Beggar Clan observes from generation to generation. Brothers, isn't this so?" The crowd of beggars voiced their agreement.

Peng Zhanglao said, "Yang Xianggong, just before he returned to heaven, what is Lao Bangzhu's last order? Will you please tell us?"

Electing the new Clan Leader was the Beggar Clan's number one priority. The Beggar Clan's prosperity or decline, its success or failure, for the most part depended on the Clan Leader's virtue and capability. In the past the seventeenth Clan Leader, Qian Bangzhu, was dim and spiritless; his martial art skill was high, but he handled matters improperly. The Clean Clothes Faction and the Dirty Clothes Faction had endless fights; hence the Beggar Clan power suffered a large decline. When Hong Qigong assumed the Clan Leader position he forcefully suppressed the internal strife between these two factions. The Beggar Clan once again arose to become a strong organization within the Jianghu.

These past events were known to the group of beggars attending the assembly; as they heard that they were about to receive the order of their Clan Leader, they listened with complete attention, holding their breaths and not making any noise.

Yang Kang grabbed the green bamboo stick with both hands and lifted it high up above his head. With a clear and bright voice he said, "Hong Bangzhu was surrounded by traitors and suffered heavy injury; his life was in terrible danger. I hid him in the cellar of my humble home from the pursuing traitors. Immediately I called for a famous doctor

to treat the Hong Bangzhu's injury. Unfortunately his injury was too heavy and we were unable to save his life."

Listening to this point the beggars broke out in sobs. Yang Kang paused for moment before continuing, "Just before he died, Hong Bangzhu handed over this bamboo stick and ordered me to bear the heavy responsibility by becoming the Beggar Clan's nineteenth clan leader."

Listening to this, the beggars were surprised; they never had thought that the heavy responsibility of the Beggar Clan Leader could be entrusted to this youngster with playboy appearance.

At Qu Shagu's inn in the Ox Village of Lin'an Yang Kang had accidentally acquired this green bamboo stick. Then he noticed how the fat and skinny two beggars were exceptionally respectful toward him. He was astonished, but did not reveal anything to those two beggars. Along the way he fished for information on the origin of that bamboo stick. The two beggars saw him with the stick in his hand, they certainly answered everything without concealing anything. By the time they reached Yuezhou, Yang Kang had gathered about 60, 70% of the Beggar Clan's inside story. The only thing he did not know was classified information within the clan; since when he asked, the two beggars would not answer. He thought the Beggar Clan was a huge organization, and the Clan Leader held the greatest power and authority. In any case Hong Qigong's death was unverifiable, so he decided to seize the opportunity to become the Clan Leader, and then he would have authority over millions of brethrens. He had calculated it carefully and could not find any flaw in his plan, thereupon he arranged a set of lies and went as far as telling the great assembly the fake news about Hong Qigong's death and his self appointment as the next Clan Leader.

He was able to talk with a straight face in the midst of several hundreds of bold and outstanding warriors of the Beggar Clan; his face did not show the slightest bit of blushing, his words flowed freely. He knew perfectly well that if his lie was exposed, the group of beggar would turn him into mincemeat on the spot; but he thought if he wanted to achieve an important matter he surely would have to brave the risk. Much less Hong Qigong had died and the bamboo stick was in his hand, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were captured, so there was no immediate danger for him. Once he becomes the Clan Leader he will gain endless advantages; these millions of beggars would pave his way to reach the 'unlimited riches and honor' he so desired.

The Clean Clothes Faction's Jian, Peng and Liang, three Elders were pleased to hear Yang Kang's speech. Actually the Beggar Clan was divided into the Clean and Dirty Clothes Factions. Other than wearing clothes full of patches, the Clean Clothes members led an ordinary life just like common people. These people were originally Jianghu's warriors who either admired the Beggar Clan's chivalrous deeds that they joined the Clan, or was in good term with a Beggar Clan disciple; they were by no means beggars. The Dirty Clothes Faction members actually begged for a living; they observed a strict commandment: they could not use money to buy things, they must not eat on the same table with outsiders, they must not fight with people who did not know martial art. Each faction held their own principles and the dispute between two factions continued.

Hong Qigong was a fair leader; he would wear clean clothes the first year, and dirty clothes the next; year after year he treated the Clean and Dirty Clothes Factions equally. Begging was the Dirty Clothes Faction's true color; but Hong Qigong loved to eat and drink, begging for spoiled soup and cold rice to alleviate his hunger proved too much

for him, therefore, he could not strictly observe the discipline of the Dirty Clothes Faction.

Among the four elders, Lu Youjiao was the one earned his esteem most. If not for Lu Youjiao's hot temper, which spoiled several important business of the Clan, Hong Qigong would early on assign him to be his successor as the Clan Leader. In this general assembly in Yuezhou the Clean Clothes Faction was worried because speaking about morality, martial art and popularity, Lu Youjiao had eight, nine out of ten chance of being the candidate for the next Clan Leader. Moreover, although the Clean Clothes Faction had three out of four elders, the Dirty Clothes Faction disciples held the majority within the Beggar Clan.

The three elders of the Clean Clothes Faction had pondered deeply on various ways to handle this matter, but remembering Hong Qigong's prestige nobody dared to act rashly. Afterwards they saw Yang Kang arrive at Yuezhou with the bamboo stick in his hand, and they also heard that Hong Qigong was dead. Although they were genuinely grieved, they also saw this as a good opportunity to gain power over the Dirty Clothes Faction. That was the reason they agreed to support Yang Kang.

Actually fully respectful yet cautious they had attempted to scout Qigong's order earlier; but Yang Kang was sly, he was afraid they might have a change of heart, so he was not willing to divulge anything until he announced it at the general assembly. The three elders of the Clean Clothes Faction knew they did not have any chance of becoming a clan leader, yet they were not disappointed as long as Lu Youjiao was not elected either. They were willing to support this decision wholeheartedly; they thought Yang Kang was young, it would not be difficult to influence him later. Moreover, his clothes were magnificent, his choice of cuisine exquisite, he would in no way show favoritism

toward the Dirty Clothes Faction. Thereupon three people looked at each other and nodded their heads.

Jian Zhanglao said, "The stick in this Yang Xianggong's [honorable master] hand is our Clan's sacred article. If there is anybody among the brothers who has some doubts, please come forward and inspect it carefully."

Lu Youjiao cast a sidelong glance toward Yang Kang, he thought, "Can I rely on this kid to be the Clan Leader, to unite and command the Beggar Clan's members under the heaven?" He held out his hand to receive the bamboo stick. He saw that the stick was dark green crystal clear; it was obviously the stick that was passed on by the Clan Leader from one generation to the next. He thought, "Hong Bangzhu must be indebted to him that he passed on this stick to this boy. The former Bangzhu has issued an order, how can my generation dare not to obey? I must work with complete dedication to support him, I must not fail the good foundation Hong Bangzhu has built." Thereupon he lifted the stick with both hands and respectfully returned it back to Yang Kang. With a loud and clear voice he said, "We comply with the Lao Bangzhu's [Old Clan Leader] last wish; we herewith revere Yang Xianggong as the Nineteenth Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan." The crowd cheered.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong could not move their bodies, they could not open their mouths, all they could do was bitterly groaning in their hearts. Guo Jing thought, "The Huang Daozhu's [Island Master] prediction was accurate, Yang Kang dares to become the Clan Leader. He will certainly create big disaster in the future."

Huang Rong thought, "This fellow will surely not release us. I wonder how he will punish us. We'll have to act accordingly."

She heard Yang Kang modestly say, "I am young and my knowledge is shallow, I'm without virtue and powerless. I do not deserve this heavy responsibility."

Peng Zhanglao said, "Hong Bangzhu had ordered it this way, Yang Xianggong does not need to be modest. The brethrens will support you with one mind. Yang Xianggong, please feel at ease."

"Exactly!" Lu Youjiao said. He coughed and produced thick phlegm, then spat it to Yang Kang's face.

Yang Kang had never anticipated this; he was caught unguarded, the phlegm landed on his right cheek. He was startled and was about to ask when Jian, Peng and Liang three Elders also spat on his body. "I am finished!" Yang Kang cried out secretly. He thought his plot had been exposed by the four elders, so he wanted to turn around and run away, but he knew it would be very difficult to escape so he just resigned to wait for his violent death. Unexpectedly the Four Elders cupped their fists in front of their chests to salute him. Yang Kang was confounded and dumbstruck.

The beggars, starting with the most senior, came to him one by one and spat at him, then they saluted him. Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised and secretly expressed his admiration, "So they are being respectful to me by spitting at me?"

He did not know that the Beggar Clan always followed their custom and tradition; they saluted their new clan leader by spitting at him. It was because the beggars all over the world received insult and disgrace from countless other people, so the new leader must first receive insult and disgrace from his own members. This custom actually carried a very profound meaning.

Huang Rong suddenly remembered on the Mingxia [bright red clouds] Island, after Hong Qigong passed on the Clan Leader position to her he also spat phlegm at her clothes. She thought it was because of his heavy injury at that time that his saliva did not reach too far. So she did not understand that spitting saliva was the way to inaugurate the new Clan Leader. She also remembered Hong Qigong say, "When the Beggars pay obeisance to you in future, there will be a disgusting ritual. Ah, this will be hard on you." Now she knew that her Shifu was afraid she did not like to be dirty and refuse the Clan Leader position, hence he concealed the truth and did not state what she would be facing clearly.

For most of the day the beggars performed their inaugurating ritual; after they were finished they shouted together, "Yang Bangzhu, please go up the Xuanyuan Platform!"

Yang Kang saw that platform was not too high; he wanted to show off his skill so his legs kicked the ground and he flew up the platform with a graceful movement. Although the way he leaped was excellent, the Four Elders were proficient in martial art so that they could see his skill was flashy but lacking substance, the foundation was still shallow. However, they realized that he was still young; it was obvious that to possess this kind of ability he must have received tutelage from a prominent master, which was also considered quite special.

From the Xuanyuan Platform Yang Kang spoke in loud and clear voice, "Although the killers of the Old Clean Leader have not been punished, but I managed to capture their two accomplices."

His words created an uproar within the group of beggars. They shouted, "Where? Where?" "Bring them here and

we'll chop them into pieces," "Don't kill them with a saber, let the dogs eat them slowly."

Guo Jing thought, "Who is this accomplice he captured? I want to take a look."

"Take them to the front of the platform!" Yang Kang said with a stern voice.

Peng Zhanglao flew toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong. He grabbed both of them, one on each hand, and brought them to the front of the platform and threw them to the ground. Only now did Guo Jing realized, "Bastard! So he meant us," he silently cursed.

As Lu Youjiao saw Jing and Rong two people, he was stunned, busily he said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: these two are the Lao Bangzhu's disciples; how can they injure their own master?"

Yang Kang hatefully said, "Exactly because of this we are angrier than ever. These two deceitfully killed their own master, they are guilty of the most heinous crime."

Peng Zhanglao said, "Yang Bangzhu witnessed it with his own eyes; how can that be wrong?"

Among the group of beggars, Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing were at Baoying trying to save Cheng Yaojia. They nearly lost their lives under Ouyang Ke's hand, fortunately Guo Jing and Huang Rong came to their rescue. They both felt admiration toward this couple. Besides, they also knew Hong Qigong was very fond of these two disciples of his. Therefore, from among the beggars they rushed forward and Li Sheng called out, "Reporting to Bangzhu: these two are chivalrous heroes; subordinate is willing to vouch for them with my own life, Lao Bangzhu's death definitely has nothing to do with them."

Yu Zhaoxing called out, "These two are good people; they are very good friends of ours."

Liang Zhanglao stared at them and shouted, "If you have anything to say, let your Elder say it for you. Do you think this is the place where you can interrupt at will?"

Li and Yu two people belonged to the Dirty Clothes Faction, they were under Lu Youjiao's leadership. Since their rank was inferior, they did not dare to talk back to an elder. With anger in their hearts they stepped back into the crowd.

Lu Youjiao said, "It's not that subordinate did not believe Bangzhu, but the death and revenge of the Lao Bangzhu is a very important matter. I ask Bangzhu to examine this matter carefully so the truth will be revealed."

Yang Kang had anticipated this request and cooked up a plan, so he said, "All right, I will examine them carefully." Toward Jing and Rong two people he said, "You don't have to answer; if what I say is correct, just nod your head, if it is incorrect, shake your head. If you think you can lie to me, remember that the blade is ruthless." He waved his hand and Peng and Liang two Elders each unsheathed their weapons and place them on Guo Jing's and Huang Rong's backs. Peng Zhanglao's weapon was a sword and Liang Zhanglao's was a saber; both were very sharp.

Huang Rong was so angry that her face was deathly pale. She recalled how at the Ox Village Lu Guanying proposed to Cheng Yaojia by asking her to shake or nod her head. At that time she thought it was so silly; unexpectedly today she was humiliated by this traitor with similar method. She also remembered once she played this trick to Ouyang Ke, and now she was at the receiving end of this trick. In her anger she was still thinking about how to raise Lu Youjiao's suspicion by nodding or shaking her head; how to incite him

so that he wanted her to answer his question orally. Once she was able to talk, exposing Yang Kang's deceitful scheme would not be a difficult matter.

Yang Kang knew Guo Jing was naïve, it would be easier to manipulate him; he lifted him up and stood him aside, with a loud voice he asked, "This woman is Huang Yaoshi's daughter, isn't she?"

Guo Jing closed his eyes and did not respond. Liang Zhanglao nudged him on the back with his saber, he barked, "Yes or no? Nod or shake your head!"

Initially Guo Jing wanted to ignore Yang Kang, but then he thought, "Even if I can't say anything, right or wrong will be revealed in the end." Thereupon he nodded his head.

The crowd believed Huang Yaoshi was the ring-leader of the criminals who killed Hong Qigong; seeing him nod his head they loudly called, "What else to ask? Kill him! Kill him!" "Just kill the little bastard! We'll deal with the old bastard later!"

Yang Kang called out, "Brothers! Be quiet, please! Let me ask him again." Listening to their Clan Leader's order, the crowd quieted down immediately. Then Yang Kang asked Guo Jing again, "Huang Yaoshi has betrothed his daughter to you, has he not?" Guo Jing thought it was a fact, so he nodded again.

Yang Kang bent his waist to grope Guo Jing's body and took a dagger with beautiful crystal-like hilt; he asked, "This is a gift from the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Qiu Chuji. That Qiu Laodao [old Taoist Qiu] carved your name on the dagger, is that true?" Guo Jing nodded.

Yang Kang continued his interrogation, "The Quanzhen Seven Masters' Ma Yu had taught you martial art, Wang

Chuyi had saved your life, you can't deny that, can you?" Guo Jing thought, "Why would I deny that?" So he nodded again.

Yang Kang said, "Hong Qigong, Hong Bangzhu, thought that you two are good people, therefore, he had taught both of you his unique skills; had he not?" Guo Jing nodded.

Yang Kang asked again, "When Hong Lao Bangzhu fell into enemy's ambush and suffered a heavy injury, you two were nearby, weren't you?" Guo Jing nodded again.

Huang Rong was anxious, "Sha Gege [Dumb Big Brother], no matter what he asks you always nod your head; you must make him to allow you to speak."

The crowd of beggars listened to Yang Kang's increasingly stern voice, and saw Guo Jing repeatedly nod his head and they believed Guo Jing was admitting all the charges. They had never realized that all these questions about Hong Qigong fell into ambush had nothing to do with the matter at hand; it was all part of Yang Kang's sinister plot to frame Guo Jing and Huang Rong. Even Lu Youjiao hated Guo Jing and Huang Rong to his bones; he stepped forward and kicked Guo Jing several times.

Yang Kang called out, "Brothers! These two little thieves have readily admitted their crimes, let's just spare them further suffering. Peng, Liang, two Elders, please proceed!"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other mournfully. All of a sudden Huang Rong smiled, she thought, "In the end it is I who die with Jing Gege, not that Huazheng! It's better to die like this. There are heavy rains ahead anyway; it's no use to run away."

Guo Jing lifted up his eyes to the sky, he remembered his mother in the desert far away and looked toward the north.

He saw the Big Dipper constellation shining its brilliant light; suddenly his heart was moved. He recalled Quanzhen Seven Masters fight Mei Chaofeng and Huang Yaoshi using this battle formation. As someone who arrived at the point of death his thought was especially keen; he recalled the Big Dipper Formation's offense and defense, attack and retreat, take in and send out, open up and close in, he remembered everything very clear.

Peng and Liang two Elders were holding their saber and sword tight, and were about to act when Lu Youjiao suddenly rushed ahead toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong, and called out, "Hold on!" He took the cloth stuffing Guo Jing's mouth and asked, "How did Lao Bangzhu get killed? Tell me everything."

"You don't have to ask, I know everything," Yang Kang busily said. Yet Lu Youjiao said, "Bangzhu, the more we know the details the better. None of the thieves having any relation with this matter will get away!"

Yang Kang was secretly anxious; he thought as soon as the truth revealed his situation would change; but it was inconvenient for him to stop Lu Youjiao from investigating this matter himself, so beads of sweats appeared on Yang Kang's forehead. Who would have guessed that although the cloth from Guo Jing's mouth was removed, he still did not say anything; he was still staring at the northern sky, as if he was entranced.

Lu Youjiao asked him several times, but it seemed like Guo Jing did not hear anything. Actually Guo Jing's full attention was absorbed by studying the Big Dipper Formation that he was completely oblivious to everything else; how could he hear what Lu Youjiao had said?

Huang Rong and Yang Kang were both very astonished that Guo Jing unexpectedly did not want to take this good opportunity to clear up his name, only one was sad, the other joyful; their feeling was a world apart.

Yang Kang waved his hand and Peng and Liang lifted up their weapons. Suddenly they heard swishing noise, a violet spark swept through the lakefront. Peng and Liang two people were startled and turned their heads to look up and saw two blue flames streaked up to the sky. These flames were several 'li's away from Mount Jun, seemed like they were released from the middle of the lake.

Jian Zhanglao said, "Bangzhu, we have a guest."

Yang Kang was startled, "Who is it?" he asked.

"The Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan," Jian Zhanglao replied.

Yang Kang did not know the Iron Palm Clan's origin. "Iron Palm Clan?" he asked.

"The Iron Palm Clan is a big clan in the Sichuan and Hunan area," Jian Zhanglao explained, "Their clan leader is paying us a visit, we'd better receive them well. We can deal with these two thieves later."

"That's fine," Yang Kang said, "Jian Zhanglao, please welcome the guests."

Jian Zhanglao conveyed the order. 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' from the Mount Jun's island three red rockets were shot out. Not too long afterwards a boat came ashore. The beggars lit torches up and stood to welcome the guests. The Xuanyuan Platform was located at the peak of Mount Jun. It was quite a long way from the foot of the hill to the peak, so

that although the guests used their 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu], half a day had passed before they arrived.

Jing and Rong two people were taken into the crowd, guarded by Peng Zhanglao's disciples. Huang Rong tried to assess Guo Jing's condition; she saw he was expressionless, eyes looking at the sky, mumbling nonstop about who-knows-what. She was extremely shocked; she thought his mind must be confused because of the great injustice he received. She further thought that no matter who the guest was, there was always opportunity to be exploited.

While she was still thinking the guest had already arrived. Under the torch light she saw about a dozen men dressed in black escorting an old man walking toward the platform. This old man wore a short yellow robe, with a large leaf fan in his hand; who else but Qiu Qianren? Huang Rong was angry, but also amused and disappointed at the same time; this man certainly would not do her any good.

Jian Zhanglao stepped forward to welcome the guests, extending some Jianghu pleasantries. He was very respectful. Afterwards he introduced the guests to Yang Kang, he said, "This is 'tie zhang shui shang piao' [iron palm floating on the water] Qiu Lao Bangzhu [old clan leader Qiu]; his divine palm matchless, his prestige shakes the world. This is our newly elected Clan Leader, the young hero Yang Bangzhu. I am glad you two can be acquainted."

At the Cloud Village of Lake Tai Yang Kang had witnessed Qiu Qianren's trick being shamefully exposed; in his heart he looked at him condescendingly. He thought that it turned out that this swindler was a clan leader of some big organization. An idea came into his mind; he pretended he did not know the guest, and said with a smile, "Fortunate meeting, fortunate meeting!" Extending his hand he meant to shake Qiu Qianren's hand.

Both palms met, Yang Kang exerted all his strength into his palm, deliberately wanted to crush Qiu Qianren's palm, thinking, "Everybody believes you have an outstanding martial art skill, I want you to fall in my hand. This truly a heaven-sent opportunity that this old man is here today, so I can show my martial art prowess in front of this crowd of beggars." Who would have thought that as soon as he exerted his strength he felt scalding heat on his palm; as if he was grasping a red-burnt coal. Hastily he withdrew his hand, but the opponent just grabbed his hand firmly, so he felt like his hand was continuously burning. He could not restrain from crying out, "Aiyo!" His face was deathly pale, tears streaming from his eyes, his body doubled from pain, he almost fainted.

The Beggar Clan's four elders were startled; they rushed forward together to protect their clan leader. Jian Zhanglao was the chief among the Elders. He struck the steel staff in his hand to a rock. 'Clang!' sparks flew everywhere. "Qiu Lao Bangzhu!" he said angrily, "You've come from afar to be our guest. Our Yang Bangzhu is young; how can you test his skill like that?"

Qiu Qianren coldly said, "Nicely I shook his hand; it was your precious Bangzhu who tested the Old Man first. Yang Bangzhu deliberately wanted to crush my old bones." While his mouth was talking, his grip did not loosen up; while Yang Kang kept crying out, "Aiyo!" By the time he finished speaking, Yang Kang's voice weakened and he passed out.

Qiu Qianren loosened up his hand and waved it away; Yang Kang had already fainted, he tumbled down to the ground. Lu Youjiao hastily rushed forward to pick him up. Jian Zhanglao angrily said, "Qiu Lao Bangzhu, you ... you ... What's the purpose of this? Isn't this outrageous?"

"Humph," Qiu Qianren sneered; his left palm slapped Jian Zhanglao's face. Jian Zhanglao lifted up his steel staff to fend off. Very quickly Qiu Qianren changed his slap into slicing down to grab the head of the staff. As the edge of his palm touched the head of the staff, he pulled the staff inward before even grabbing it.

Jian Zhanglao's battle experience was vast; he was startled, but did not release the staff in his hand. Qiu Qianren indeed did not snatch his staff; quick like a wind his right palm swept away to the left. 'Clang!' it hit the middle of Jian Zhanglao's staff. Jian Zhanglao's palm was chaffed, blood flowed out and he could not hold his staff anymore; it was snatched by Qiu Qianren. Qiu Qianren swept the staff horizontally to parry Peng and Liang two Elders' saber and sword while his right elbow struck toward Lu Youjiao's face. Hence in a short period of time he compelled all four Elders of the Beggar Clan to step back.

The crowd of beggars watched with amazement. They unsheathed their weapons; they would fight the Iron Palm Clan as soon as their Clan Leader issued his command.

Qiu Qianren's left hand gripped the steel staff's head, his right hand held its tail; he let out a loud and long laugh and secretly sent his strength to both hands. With a shout he wanted to break the steel staff into two. He did not know that Jian Zhanglao's steel staff was made of a specially treated metal, it was very ductile; the staff did not break. It stubbornly resisted his arms' supernatural power. Qiu Qianren exerted more strength and the steel staff slowly curved into an arc.

The crowd of beggars was astonished and angry. Suddenly they saw Qiu Qianren swung his left arm back and immediately wield forward, hurling the arched steel staff flying to the sky, toward the mountain rock at the opposite

side. With a loud 'Clang!' the staff's head struck the rock; the noise reverberated for a long time.

As Qiu Qianren demonstrated his hands' power, the crowd of beggars was amazed and frightened. Huang Rong was even more astonished, she thought, "This old man is obviously a useless swindler; how can he become so fierce all of a sudden? Could it be that he colluded with Yang Kang and Jian Zhanglao to perform this trick? Perhaps there is some secret on that steel staff."

The moon had reached the middle of the sky, all around the torches adding up its brightness. Huang Rong looked clearly, it was really the Qiu Qianren she saw at the Cloud Village and the Ox Village. She turned her head toward Guo Jing. He was still looking up to the sky, mumbling intelligibly. Could it be that he was so scared and angry he turned insane? She was deeply concerned about Guo Jing, so she no longer watched Qiu Qianren's acrobatic play; her pair of beautiful eyes watched Guo Jing's expression closely.

Qiu Qianren said with a cold voice, "The Iron Palm Clan with your precious Beggar Clan is usually like the water of the river, does not mix with the water from the well. Upon hearing that your precious Clan is having a general assembly at Mount Jun I come to pay a visit with a good intention. Why did as soon as we met your precious clan's Bangzhu demonstrated his power?"

Jian Zhanglao was intimidated by Qiu Qianren's power and reputation, he was already scared; hearing the hostility in Qiu Qianren's voice he busily said, "Qiu Lao Bangzhu misunderstood. Lao Bangzhu's prestige has shaken the four corners of the world; we always admire you. Today we are very honored to have Lao Bangzhu shines your glorious light upon us."

Qiu Qianren looked up to the sky without saying anything; his demeanor was very arrogant and threatening. After a long while he said, "I heard Hong Lao Bangzhu passed away. We have one less great hero of this world. Pity! It is a pity! Your precious clan also elected this kind of new Bangzhu. Ay! Pity! It's a pity!"

By this time Yang Kang had regained his consciousness; he heard he was being ridiculed at his face, he was angry but did not dare to say anything. He felt his right hand was still burning hot; his five fingers were so swollen they looked like five Chinese yams. The Four Elders of the Beggar Clan did not know how to respond.

Qiu Qianren said, "My visit today is to ask an important favor from your precious Clan; in return, I am going to offer something to you."

"We don't dare," Jian Zhanglao replied, "But please Qiu Lao Bangzhu tell us."

Qiu Qianren said, "Recently some brothers from my clan received the Old Man's order to take care of some business. I don't know how they had provoked two friends from your precious Clan that they were beaten and suffered heavy injuries. My brothers' skills were unrefined, so there is nothing I can say; but if this matter is spread out within the Jianghu, the Iron Palm Clan will certainly lose our face. Old Man does not know the good from evil; I want to ask for some lessons from the two friends from your precious Clan."

From the start Yang Kang did not have the slightest bit of care toward the Beggar Clan; how could he dare to offend Qiu Qianren for the sake of two Beggar Clan disciples? Immediately he said, "Who has dared to cause trouble and fight with friends from the Iron Palm Clan without

authorization? Quickly come out and apologize to Qiu Lao Bangzhu."

Ever since Hong Qigong became the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, they had never lost power and prestige within the Jianghu. Now as soon as Hong Qigong was dead, the new Clan Leader was this weak; as the crowd of beggars heard this order, they were filled with contempt and resentment. Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing came out several steps from among the crowd. With a clear voice Li Sheng said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: our Clan's fourth commandment clearly states that every one of us must uphold justice and chivalry; helping others in suffering. The day before yesterday while we were on our way the two of us saw some friends from the Iron Palm Clan bullying common people, taking some women captive. We could not hold our patience; we stepped forward to stop them. We fought and in the end have injured the friends from the Iron Palm Clan."

Yang Kang said, "No matter what you have to apologize to Qiu Lao Bangzhu."

Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing looked at each other; they were furious. If they did not apologize, they were disobeying their Clan Leader's order; if they apologized, this humiliation was difficult to bear. Li Zheng loudly called out, "Brothers, if Lao Bangzhu was still alive he would not allow us to throw this face away. Today Xiao Di [little brother, referring to himself] prefers to die rather than be disgraced!" With a smooth motion he pulled a short dagger from his leg and stabbed it into his own heart; he died immediately. Yu Zhaoxing pounced forward to snatch the short dagger, then he stabbed his own chest; he died on top of Li Zheng's body.

The crowd of beggars saw these two would rather commit suicide than to be insulted; their hearts were tumultuous, but the Beggar Clan's regulation was extremely strict, without the Clan Leader's command, nobody dared to move.

Qiu Qianren smiled wryly, he said, "Let this matter be settled this way then. Now I want to give your precious Clan a gift." His left hand waved; a dozen or so men dressed in black behind him opened a chest they brought along. Each one held out a tray and respectfully presented the tray to Yang Kang. The trays glittered brightly, they were full of gold, silver, jewels and pearls. The crowds of beggars were astonished to see them suddenly present these jewels.

Qiu Qianren said, "Although the Iron Palm Clan has enough food to eat, we cannot afford to present you with any appropriate gift. This gift is from Zhao Wangye [Prince Zhao, lit. King Zhao] of the Great Jin who asked the Old Man to pass along to you."

Yang Kang was pleasantly surprised; he asked quickly, "Where is Zhao Wangye? I must see him."

Qiu Qianren replied, "Several months ago Zhao Wangye sent his people to deliver this gift along with his message for the Old Man to pass them along to your precious Clan."

Yang Kang uttered an 'Hmm', he thought, "It was before father even made a plan to go south. I wonder what he had in mind with these beggars."

He heard Qiu Qianren continued, "Zhao Wangye admires the heroes of your precious Clan; he asked the Old Man to come over personally and deliver this gift."

Yang Kang happily said, "How can we be worthy to receive Lao Bangzhu's precious effort?"

Qiu Qianren said with a smile, "Yang Bangzhu is young, but you are very broadminded; you far surpass Hong Bangzhu."

When he was still at Yanjing Yang Kang had not heard Wanyan Honglie mention anything about the Beggar Clan; he was anxious to hear his intention. "I wonder what does Zhao Wangye want with my Clan? Would Lao Bangzhu give us directions?" he asked.

"Giving you direction, that I cannot do," Qiu Qianren smiled, "Zhao Wangye told the Old Man, that the land of the north is barren and its people are poor, it is difficult to set your feet on ..."

Yang Kang caught fast, "So Zhao Wangye wants us to move to the south?"

Qiu Qianren laughed, "Yang Bangzhu is very smart, the Old Man is impressed. Zhao Wangye said: in Jiangnan the lakes are wide, the land is warm, the people rich; why don't the brothers from the Beggar Clan move to south? It far surpasses the cold northern land.

Yang Kang smiled, "Thank you for Zhao Wangye's and Lao Bangzhu's kind direction. I will certainly comply."

Qiu Qianren did not expect that the Beggar Clan would readily accept his proposal; his face showed doubt. He had not anticipated this response. His mind churning, he thought this man was young and weak; and when he had just squeezed his hand with Iron Palm, he fainted from the pain. It was obvious that this man was afraid of him; so it was not strange that no matter what he said this man did not dare to defy. However, the Beggar Clan had a deep root in the north, how could he easily agree to move to the south? When the Beggar Clan talked about it later, they were bound to regret this decision. Therefore, he decided to put the last nail on the coffin by saying, "A real man

cannot breach his own word. Today Yang Bangzhu gave your word; once the Beggar Clan brothers cross the great river, you will not return to the north, correct?"

Yang Kang was about to comply, but Lu Youjiao suddenly said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: we beg for a living, what use we have for gold and silver? Besides, our Clan has hundreds of thousands of members spreading all over the world, how can we limit their movements? I beg Bangzhu to reconsider."

By now Yang Kang had understood clearly Wanyan Honglie's intention. He knew that at the north of the river the Beggar Clan had always fought the Jins. Each time the Jins attacked to the south the Beggar Clan would disturb the rear of the army's movement; either by assassinating the high ranking military officers or burning their provisions down.

If the Beggar Clan moved to the south, naturally it would tremendously help the Jin's effort in attacking the south. Thereupon he said, "This is Qiu Lao Bangzhu's kind intention; if we refuse, we would be disrespectful to him. I don't want any of the gold and silver; four honorable Elders can divide it among the brethrens after the assembly is over."

Lu Youjiao anxiously said, "Our Hong Lao Bangzhu was widely known as the Northern Beggar. Everybody in the world knows that our base is in the north. How can we move so easily? Our Clan has vowed our loyalty and patriotism to serve our country, we have been enemies with the Jins forever. We surely cannot accept their gift; and most certainly we cannot move across the Changjiang."

Yang Kang was furious; he was about to reply when Peng Zhanglao said with a smile, "Lu Zhanglao, the important

matter in our Clan is decided by our Bangzhu; it is not decided by you, is it?"

Lu Youjiao imposingly said, "I would rather die than forgetting about loyalty and patriotism to my country."

"Jian, Peng, Liang Zhanglaos, what do you say" Yang Kang asked.

Jian and Liang Zhanglaos hesitated before answering; they also thought moving across the Changjiang was not an appropriate thing to do. But Peng Zhanglao with a loud voice replied, "We rely on Bangzhu's decision. How can subordinates dare to disobey?"

"Good," Yang Kang said, "We will move across the Dajiang [Great River] by the first of the eighth month."

As he said this, more than half of the crowd of beggars broke in clamor. Hearing this reaction Yang Kang was temporarily at a loss. Jian, Peng and Liang three Elders shouted their orders for the noise to stop, but most of those who were angered were from the Dirty Clothes Faction; they ignored these three Elders.

Peng Zhanglao shouted, "Lu Zhanglao, are you going to rebel against our Bangzhu?"

Lu Youjiao imposingly said, "Even if a thousand sabers chop my body to pieces, I will not dare to rebel against Bangzhu. But Lu Youjiao does not dare to abandon the wishes of our forefathers even more! The Jin kingdom is our Great Song's archenemy. What would Hong Lao Bangzhu say to us?"

Jian and Liang two Elders hung their heads without saying anything; they started to regret their indecisiveness.

Qiu Qianren saw the situation was not good; he was afraid it would be difficult to attain success if he does not deal with

Lu Youjiao. He coldly laughed and said to Yang Kang, "Yang Bangzhu, is this Lu Zhanglao always this bossy?" As his words come out, his palms ferociously struck out to grab Lu Youjiao's shoulder.

As soon as Qiu Qianren sneered, Lu Youjiao was ready to protect himself; he knew Qiu Qianren was fierce, he did not dare to parry. He bent his waist and slipped through under Qiu Qianren's crotch. Without straightening up his body, 'whoosh! whoosh! whoosh!' he already sent three kicks toward Qiu Qianren's buttocks. He was called Lu Youjiao [Lu with a foot/kick], it was because his leg skill was really good; the kicks were very swift and fierce.

Qiu Qianren thought this man's way of evading his attack by slipping underneath his crotch was very strange; and then he felt the gust of wind from behind, quickly his palm slapped backwards. If Lu Youjiao's third kick hit its target, it would certainly cause some damage; but if the kick was hit by the opponent's Iron Palm, his own shin could break. Hence Lu Youjiao pulled it back abruptly when it was still midway; he rolled sideways and suddenly spat thick phlegm toward Qiu Qianren's face. Qiu Qianren leaned his head sideways to evade; he was startled by the opponent's strange move.

"Lu Zhanglao, don't be rude to the honored guest!" Yang Kang shouted.

Lu Youjiao immediately went back two steps as soon as he heard his Clan Leader's order. But Qiu Qianren actually showed no mercy whatsoever; his hands went straight toward Lu Youjiao's throat like a pair of pliers. Lu Youjiao was startled; he turned around to evade, but heard the enemy shout 'hey' and both of his hands were grabbed.

Lu Youjiao had fought hundreds of battles; he stayed calm in face of defeat. With all his might he raised his hands but failed to lift the enemy, he immediately struck the enemy's stomach using his head. Since he was little, Lu Youjiao had trained his head in 'tong chui tie tou' [copper hammer iron head]; with his head he was able to make a hole in the wall. Many times he made a bet with his fellow beggars to strike his head against a bullock's. Each time the two heads collided, his head was not injured, but the bullock actually passed out.

This time he understood that he might not be able to injure the enemy, but he hoped he could get his hands freed up from the enemy's grasp. Who would have thought that as the top of his head touched the enemy's stomach he felt he was hitting a soft object; as if he was entering a soft cotton pillow. He knew it was not a good sign; so he hastily withdrew his head, but to his surprise the enemy's stomach also followed his head. Lu Youjiao struggled with all his strength, yet Qiu Qianren's stomach had a very strong suction, holding Lu Youjiao's head firmly. Lu Youjiao was frightened since he felt his head was gradually burning hot; at the same time he felt as if his hands were also entering a hot furnace. The pain was unbearable.

"Do you surrender?" Qiu Qianren shouted.

"Stinky old thief," Lu Youjiao cursed, "Why would I surrender to you?"

Qiu Qianren exerted more strength to his left hand. 'Crack! Crack!' he broke Lu Youjiao's right hand fingers. "Do you surrender?" Qiu Qianren asked again.

"Stinky old thief," Lu Youjiao cursed, "Why would I surrender to you?"

'Crack! Crack!' Lu Youjiao's left hand fingers were broken. He was in so much pain that his mind was in a daze, but his mouth kept shouting curses.

Qiu Qianren said, "If I add more strength to my stomach, your head will be crushed. I want to see if you can keep cursing."

He had not finished speaking when suddenly someone leaped out from among the crowd of beggars; he was tall and broad-shouldered, it was none other than Guo Jing. He was walking in big strides toward Lu Youjiao's back. He lifted his right palm high, 'slap, slap, slap!' he slapped Lu Youjiao's buttocks three times so hard that the sound was heard loud and clear.

Although these three slaps hit Lu Youjiao's buttocks, Qiu Qianren felt strong bursts of energy flowing from Lu Youjiao's head toward his stomach. 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' the energy melted the suction force of his own stomach.

Lu Youjiao felt his head was free, he hastily withdrew, trying to stand up; but his hands were still firmly gripped by the enemy. Guo Jing called out, "You are not Qiu Lao Qianbei's [old senior Qiu] match; get out of the way!" His left leg swept away, kicking Lu Youjiao's left shoulder.

This kick of his looked ordinary, yet although it landed on Lu Youjiao's body, the force was actually transmitted to Qiu Qianren's arms. Qiu Qianren felt his palms were shaken and involuntarily loosened his grip. Lu Youjiao took advantage of this good opportunity; he borrowed the strength from Guo Jing's kick and threw himself aside. Only his head was captured for quite a long time and he felt dizzy; he was not able to stand steadily and tumbled down on the ground.

Qiu Qianren was startled to see Guo Jing's three slaps and one kick; he thought this man was young, but unexpectedly

possessed this kind of transferring force skill. He did not think that there was somebody like this among the Beggar Clan. He immediately put his guard up and did not dare to attack rashly.

The crowd of beggars was not clear on what was going on; they still believed Guo Jing was an accomplice of the enemies who killed their Clan Leader, and then they saw Guo Jing kick Lu Youjiao. They shouted angrily and pressed forward to surround him.

Earlier Guo Jing was bound tightly by the braided steel wire and cowhide rope; he could not move even the slightest bit. His eyes kept looking up to the Big Dipper constellation. He recalled the Quanzhen Seven Masters' movements he saw at the Ox Village and compared it to the Nine Yin Manual he memorized so well, which was difficult to understand. He pondered it in his heart, and one by one those passages became clear to him.

The Nine Yin Manual was the result of a highly-skilled senior's comprehension of the Taoist Canon; it was closely interlinked with the Quanzhen Sect's internal energy cultivation technique Ma Yu had passed on to him and with the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Big Dipper Formation. It was just that the technique was profoundly deep and Guo Jing's comprehension was rather shallow so even after several months he still had not understood the correlation. This time, looking at the Big Dipper constellation he vaguely saw the link between what he memorized and what he saw.

When Qiu Qianren talked with Yang Kang, Jian Zhanglao, Lu Youjiao and the others, Guo Jing was deeply engrossed in deciphering the 'shou jin suo gu fa' [collecting muscles shrinking the bones]. It was the most advanced technique in the Manual; similar to the ability of a mouse to go through small holes. When it was trained to perfection the

practitioner would be able to shrink his whole body to minimum, just like a hedgehog would curl up when facing an enemy.

On the Mingxia [bright red clouds] Island Guo Jing followed Hong Qigong's instruction to train the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bones technique]. By this time he had mastered a little bit of this technique, and it served as an excellent foundation for him. So it happened that when he started practicing according to the Manual the ropes that bound his hands and his feet were loosened. His skill was so good that it was ten times better than his brain power; although the ropes were loosened he still did not know how it happened.

Peng Zhanglao was on guard by Guo Jing's side; when he suddenly saw Guo Jing escape, he was very shocked. He tried to grab him, but failed; he looked down and saw the empty ropes lying on the ground. The ropes were still tied in knots, but the man inside had already slipped out just like a slippery loach. He was about to pursue when he saw Guo Jing was helping Lu Youjiao. Peng Zhanglao thought that even if he boldly step forward, he may not necessarily be able to subdue Guo Jing. Thereupon his mouth shouted loudly, "Capture this little thief!" yet his feet did not move.

Guo Jing had been bound for a long time, he was really angry. Moreover, he thought about Huang Rong's feelings; she was still somewhat childish, so she must be very angry. He knew that this crowd of beggars was swindled by Yang Kang and did not really have any enmity with Huang Rong and him, but right now seeing the crowd of beggars shouting and rushing forward to attack, he thought, "If I can't beat you well today, Rong'er's anger won't disappear easily!"

He wanted to use the Big Dipper Formation he had just thought through; his arms lifted up, his feet stepped on to the 'tian quan' [sky authority/power] position. But seeing that about six, seven beggars were pouncing him from behind, Guo Jing stood upright with a mountain strong stance, his left hand in horizontal position in front of his chest.

The first three beggars arrived, they held out their hands to grab his arm. Guo Jing stayed motionless; in a short moment several more beggars arrived. Guo Jing dropped his arm and with a floating motion he made a circle, attacking these several beggars' backs with his hands and feet. Some were hit on their backs, some on their waists, and some others were hit on their buttocks. A succession of cries were heard, "Aiyo!" "Aiyo!" "Thief male servant bird!" six, seven people fell on the ground.

Guo Jing was pleased, "This technique really works," he thought. He turned around, wanting to grab Yang Kang to settle the debt with him; but then under the moonlight he saw that two beggars were about to attack Huang Rong. He was afraid they might injure her, while he was too far to help and he did not carry any secret projectiles with him. In desperation he stooped down to take his cloth shoes off and threw them toward the attackers. He was not a quick thinker that he would invent this trick all by himself; he had heard stories from his masters, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, how during the fight at the Fahua Temple his Second Master Zhu Cong took off his shoe and threw it toward Qiu Chuji. Therefore, he simply copied the trick.

Those two beggars were afraid that Huang Rong possessed the same ability as Guo Jing; able to free herself from the ropes. They approached her with caution, unsheathed the sabers in their hands, intending to kill her to avenge their Lao Bangzhu. Unexpectedly just when they arrived in front

of Huang Rong, before they even lifted their weapons, they heard a strong gust of wind on their backs; something was flying toward them, apparently an enemy was attacking them. The one with higher martial art quickly turned around and Guo Jing's shoe hit him on the chest. The other one was slower, the shoe hit his back.

Although the cloth shoes were soft and light, because of Guo Jing's internal strength the force carried by those shoes was not a small matter; the two beggars were unable to stand, one fell backward face up to the sky, the other dove face down to the ground. Peng Zhanglao was standing nearby; he was scared to see how with a pair of cloth shoes Guo Jing was able to hit people swiftly and fiercely. He hastily withdrew several steps back.

Guo Jing swept his hand to push back three beggars; he anxiously went to Huang Rong. He stooped down to untie the ropes, but he only managed to untie one rope before he was surrounded by the crowd of beggars again. Guo Jing simply sat on the ground, copying how Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others battled the enemy using the Big Dipper Formation. His right palm blocked the enemies, he put Huang Rong on his knees and using his left hand he slowly untied the knots. He had mastered Zhou Botong's skill of 'shuang shou hu bo' [Mutual Hands Combat]; one hand two techniques. This time he used his left hand to untie the knots, his right hand to fend off the enemies' attacks; he did it so casually, without the slightest degree of rush.

In less than the time needed to drink tea, Jing and Rong two people were thickly surrounded by hundreds of beggars. Without looking back Guo Jing simply blocked the attacks from his back. All along Guo Jing took a defensive stand and had never launched any deathly attacks. It was only after he untied all ropes from Huang Rong's hands and feet did Guo

Jing took the cloth from her mouth and said, "Rong'er, are you injured?"

Huang Rong leaned on his knees; without standing up she replied, "No injuries, just numb all over my body."

"Good," Guo Jing said, "Just lie down to rest for a while; let me vent your anger for you."

Two people, one sat on the ground one of them laid down, were talking amiably as if they were not disturbed by the clamoring noise of the weapons and commotion of the beggars around them. Huang Rong laughed and said, "You may fight them, just don't injure my disciples and grand disciples."

"I'll remember that," Guo Jing said. His left palm lightly stroke her beautiful hair, his right palm suddenly shot out; 'Bang! Bang! Bang!' three beggars flew out above the crowd's heads.

The crowd of beggars was thrown into confusion. Four more beggars were flung away by Guo Jing's palm strength. Then from among the crowd someone was calling out, "Brothers, step back! Let the eight-bag disciples deal with these two little thieves." It was Jian Zhanglao's voice.

As the crowd heard his command they dispersed immediately until only three people left nearby Guo Jing and Huang Rong, and then five more people came from behind; this brought the total to eight people surrounding them all around. There were eight sacks on each of these people's back; their rank in the Beggar Clan was only second to the four elders. Each one of them was in command of a group of beggars. Two fat and skinny beggars who met and escorted Yang Kang earlier were also among them. There were originally nine eight-bag disciples, but Li Sheng killed himself so only eight were left.

Guo Jing was aware that although the number of the enemies has decreased, each one of them was a highly skilled pugilist. He was about to stand up when with a low voice Huang Rong said, "Keep sitting down; you can fight them. Just don't look them in the eye."

Guo Jing thought, "If the eight of them fight together, they will be difficult to block; I must overthrow some of them first." Recognizing the two beggars, fat and skinny, who met Yang Kang at the Ox Village his left hand snatched the rope he untied from Huang Rong's body; then with a 'duan jing pan ta' [breaking shins coiling strike] the rope swept like a whip. It was from the 'jin long bian fa' [golden dragon whip technique] he learned from Ma Wang Shen [horse god, lit. divine horse king] Han Baoju. The move was the same, but his internal energy had advanced tremendously, so the power carried by the whip was also increased.

The fat and skinny beggars saw the steel rope come sweeping, they quickly leaped away to evade. Guo Jing turned the steel rope into a wall, blocking their front, left and rear sides, leaving the right side open. The fat and skinny beggars were actually on this right side, while the other six beggars were blocked by the rope wall, so they could not attack. The two beggars saw the opportunity and pounced forward immediately, only to hear Jian Zhanglao anxiously call out, "Don't attack!" But it was too late; Guo Jing's palm moved like the wind, 'Slap! Slap!' he struck the two beggars' shoulders. The two beggars flew out toward the group of black-dressed Iron Palm Clan's men.

Although these two beggars were struck by the same force, since one was fat and the other skinny, the effect was not the same; the fat one fell near, while the skinny one flew out further. 'Bang! Bang!' they knocked down two men in black.

Originally Qiu Qianren only stood on the side watching the fight, he also thought little of the two beggars flying away; but as he heard the sound of the collision he was startled. "If they didn't die, our men must be injured." He rushed forward but saw the fat and skinny beggars leap to stand up, without suffering any injuries. The Iron Palm Clan men on the other hand, suffered broken bones; they crawled on the ground. Qiu Qianren was angry; he was about to turn around when suddenly he heard a strong wind on his back, two other eight-bag Beggar Clan disciples were flung by Guo Jing's palm strength.

Qiu Qianren knew that Guo Jing transmitted his energy in such a way that it was heavy in a distant and light nearby; the Beggar Clan disciples only suffer light force, while the ones they bumped actually bear the brunt of the energy. Immediately he pushed and redirected one beggar to an empty space, and then with a grunt both of his palms struck toward the other beggar's back. This time he was using his life-long cultivated Iron Palm energy. If his strength exceeded Guo Jing's, then not only he could counteract the incoming force, but he could also inflict heavy injury to the beggar; otherwise, even if he would not suffer injury, he would certainly be knocked down backwards.

The Beggar Clan's Four Elders and Huang Rong knew that in this pair of palms Qiu Qianren was staking it all to compete head-to-head against Guo Jing; the stake between victory and defeat was not small. They were watching with rapt attention. But as the palms thrust out, the eight-bag disciple flew another 'zhang', and then lightly landed on the ground. He was at a loss for a moment before turning around and went back to face Guo Jing. Surprisingly he did not suffer any injury at all.

In one hand the Four Elders of the Beggar Clan found out that Guo Jing's martial art was about the same level with

Qiu Qianren's; perhaps Guo Jing was somewhat inferior, but the difference was not too much. They were astonished and scared. On the other hand Huang Rong was even more surprised, she thought, "This Old Swindler's martial art is just ordinary, how can he block Jing Gege's palm strength? He was obviously using real power, not some crafty trick. He is really difficult to predict."

With this one move Qiu Qianren had tested Guo Jing's true skill. In term of internal energy cultivation he was still superior to Guo Jing by half a notch; but it was difficult to say whether this kid was a friend or a foe of the Beggar Clan. Qiu Qianren was in a dangerous place. It was not worthwhile to continue fighting; hence he waved his right hand and took the Iron Palm Clan people to leave that place.

The martial art of the eight-bag disciples of the Beggar Clan was more or less at the same level with Yin Zhiping, Yang Kang and their peers. Guo Jing had knocked down four people. Although one came back to join the fight, how could these five beggars resist to the power of Guo Jing's Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms combined with mysterious variations of the Big Dipper Formation? If not due to the fact that Guo Jing looked up to his Shifu's face, these five beggars would have been already dead or heavily injured.

A dozen moves later he struck down two more beggars with his palm strength. The other three beggars did not dare to attack; they turned away to run. Guo Jing wielded the steel rope in his left hand and swept two beggars' ankles, pulling them near him.

"Tie them down!" Huang Rong said. Guo Jing took the steel rope and tied the hands and feet of these two beggars behind their backs.

Seeing him reaping a big victory Huang Rong was astonished and delighted. She wanted to capture that smiling face beggar, Peng Zhanglao, who held them prisoner earlier. She recalled her Shifu had once said that in Jianghu there was a method of influencing the mind, capable to make someone suddenly fall asleep so that that person could be manipulated, incapable of resisting. She believed this Peng Zhanglao had actually used this kind of hypnotics to them. "Jing Gege," she asked, "is there any 'she xin fa' [method to influence other people's mind, lit. intimidating heart/mind technique] in the Nine Yin Manual?"

"No ..." Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong was quite disappointed, she whispered, "Guard against that smiling face beggar, don't look into his eyes."

Guo Jing nodded, "I want to beat this fellow to vent my anger!" he said, then he propped Huang Rong's body up and they stood up together. Guo Jing stared at Yang Kang and walked toward him in big strides.

Yang Kang had seen Guo Jing's impressive power when he fought the crowd of beggars, he was anxious and restless. He was hoping that the crowd of beggars would win by sheer numbers, but unexpectedly they retreated in defeat, now Guo Jing was coming towards him. How could he keep his life if Guo Jing got hold of him? In his fright he called out, "Four Elders, we have so many heroes and warriors over here, how can we let this mad little thief do as he will?" His mouth was shouting anxiously, his legs were not slow either; he quickly hid behind Jian Zhanglao.

Jian Zhanglao turned around and in a low voice said, "Bangzhu, don't worry; even if this thief's martial art is

higher, he won't overcome our number. We will use 'che lun zhan kun' [chariot wheels fighting as a bunch] to kill him." Raising his voice he called out, "Eight-bag disciples, spread out and form 'jian bi zhen' [strong wall formation]!"

One eight-bag disciple shouted their compliance and immediately led more than a dozen beggars to line up in two rows, their arms linked one to the other. Sixteen, seventeen people formed one strong wall. They shouted together and then lowering their heads they charged toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong yelled; lightning fast she leaped to the left. Guo Jing turned around to the right. But from the east and west two more rows of beggars came forward. Guo Jing saw the crowd of beggars' battle strategy was strange. He waited until these walls came near, but then he could not withdraw anymore; both of his palms struck forward to push the wall in front of him. Although his palms were strong, this wall consisted of more than a dozen men, plus their momentum in moving forward together was quite strong; how could Guo Jing push the wall away? As the center of the wall bore the brunt of the push, its two wings outflanked to the center. Guo Jing staggered, he almost fell down by the strong push of this wall. Hastily his left foot kicked the ground and he flew over the human wall. But before he landed he cried out in distress, for ahead of him another human wall came closing in. Quickly he regulated his breath, his right foot kicked and again he flew over the beggars' heads. Who would have thought that there are more walls ahead, seemingly inexhaustible. As Guo Jing just passed the front wall immediately the rear wall took its place; like a rolling wave, or a big wheel turning over. Even if Guo Jing's martial art were stronger he would eventually be overwhelmed by sheer numbers; in the end he felt like his movements were restricted.

Huang Rong was agile, her lightness kungfu was also better than Guo Jing's; but after a while more and more moving walls came closing in. She ran around to escape and gradually felt her heart throb and her breathing shorten. After flashing to the east and dodging to the west for a moment to her surprise she came close to Guo Jing, slowly they were pushed into a corner of the mountain peak.

Suddenly Huang Rong got an idea, "Jing Gege," she called out, "Retreat to the edge of the cliff."

Guo Jing heard her, he did not know her intention, but he pushed toward the edge of the cliff nonetheless. They were still about five, six feet away from the edge of the cliff, and unexpectedly the Beggar Clan walls stopped and did not charge forward. And then Guo Jing understood, "Ah, this is a deep canyon; unless they stop their steps, it would be strange if they won't fall down and die." He looked towards Huang Rong to praise her intelligence, but saw that her face showed anxiety. He turned his head and saw row after row of thick and wide human walls slowly step forward. They did not charge forward ferociously, but obviously they were going to push these two people slowly into the canyon below. There were hundreds of them in dozens of rows; it was simply impossible to jump over them.

When he was still at Mongolia, Guo Jing had been trained by Ma Yu to climb a steep cliff every night. The cliff of Mount Jun here was not as dangerous as the one in the Mongolian desert. Guo Jing assessed their situation by looking at the cliff wall and called out, "Rong'er, let me carry you on my back; we are going down."

"We can't," Huang Rong sighed, "They may throw rocks at us. This is a dead end."

Guo Jing was indecisive. Somehow, in the verge of life and death situation he suddenly remembered a section in the Nine Yin Manual; he said, "Rong'er, there is a section in the Manual about 'yi hun da fa' [altering soul great method], I believe it is similar with that 'she xin fa' you just mentioned ... All right, let's stake it all and fight; let us go down the canyon together."

Huang Rong sighed, "These are all Shifu's subordinates, they are his brothers; what good is it to kill so many people?"

Guo Jing suddenly stretched out his arms to lift her up, he said with a low voice, "Quickly run away!" He kissed her lightly on her cheeks, then exerting all his might he hurled her toward the Xuanyuan Platform.

Huang Rong felt like she was mounting the cloud and riding the mist, flying over the heads of several hundreds of people. She knew Guo Jing wanted to fight the crowd of beggars alone to give her a chance to escape. She bent her knees slightly and gently landed on the platform with a bitter sweet feeling in her heart. She saw that Yang Kang was standing on a corner of the platform; looking so complacent, flailing his hands and feet, shouting his commands over the combat. She did not want to miss this good opportunity, before she even stood firmly she pounced forward, her left hand grabbed the head of the green bamboo stick.

As he was watching the battle, Yang Kang was startled to suddenly see Huang Rong descend from the sky; hastily he lifted up the stick to strike her. Two of Huang Rong's right fingers swiftly moved toward his eyes, while at the same time her left foot turned around, and she snatched the bamboo stick away.

Yang Kang's martial art was inferior to Huang Rong's to begin with; and now Huang Rong was using the 'ao kou duo zhang' [snatching stick from a mastiff (dog)'s mouth] from the Dog Beating Stick Technique Hong Qigong had passed on to her. It was specifically created to take back the stick if it ever fell into an enemy with high martial art skill. Apparently this stance was several folds better than Yang Kang's skill, so he had no chance in keeping the stick in his hand.

Huang Rong's snatching the stick was real, while attacking the eyes was fake; but since her movement was so swift, her fingers unexpectedly poked Yang Kang's eyeballs. Yang Kang was in a lot of pain and he momentarily went blind. Yang Kang tried to guard his eyes and did not have any choice but let the stick go and then leap down the platform.

With both of her hands Huang Rong held the bamboo stick high over her head, with a clear and loud voice she called out, "Brothers of the Beggar Clan, please stop! Hong Bangzhu has not returned to heaven yet. Everything was made up by this traitor disciple."

As soon as the crowd of beggars heard her, they were completely taken aback; it was such an abrupt turn of eventa that it was hard to believe, but they were happy to hear the good news and mad to hear the bad news, a natural response to this kind of news. Everybody turned their heads and looked at the tall platform.

Huang Rong called out further, "Brothers, come over here, I want to tell you news about Hong Bangzhu."

Yang Kang's eyes were sore, but his ears could hear everything clearly; he also called out from below the platform, "I am the Bangzhu! Brothers, listen to my command: Quickly push the male thief over the cliff, and

then come back here to capture the nonsense-talking female thief.”

The Beggar Clan members always regarded their Clan Leader as a deity; even if there was a very important matter, they would not dare to disobey his command. Hearing Yang Kang’s command, they shouted and charged forward.

Huang Rong called out, “Everybody look clearly! Bangzhu’s Dog Beating Stick is in my hand; I am the Beggar Clan’s Bangzhu!”

The crowd of beggars was startled; they had never heard of the Bangzhu’s Dog Beating Stick being taken away by someone else. They hesitated and stopped their steps.

Huang Rong called out, “Our worldwide Beggar Clan is being bullied today, Li Sheng and Yu Zhaoxing two brothers are killed by others, Lu Zhanglao is seriously injured; all of that for what reason?”

The crowd of beggars was angered; more than half of them turned their heads to listen to her. Huang Rong continued, “It was because of this traitor surnamed Yang is conspiring with the Iron Palm Clan. They fabricated a rumor saying that Hong Lao Bangzhu is dead. Do you know who this man surnamed Yang really is?”

The crowd of beggars called out one after another, “Who is he? Tell us, quick! Tell us!” But some actually said, “Don’t listen to this female thief; she is creating a confusion.” Everybody talked at once, nobody knew which one was right, which one was wrong.

Huang Rong called out, “This man’s surname is not Yang, it is Wanyan. He is the son of Zhao Wangye of the Great Jin. He deliberately comes to destroy our Great Song.”

The crowd of beggars was startled, nobody believed what they heard. Huang Rong considered, "It is difficult to convince everybody at once; I'll have to use poison to fight poison. I'll place the blame on him." She put her hand into her pocket and groped around the contents one by one; finally she took out the iron palm Zhu Cong took from Qiu Qianren the other day. She lifted it up high above her head and called out, "I have just taken this thing from this surnamed Wanyan traitor's hand. Everybody please take a good look, what is this?"

The crowd of beggars was some distant away from the Xuanyuan Platform; they could not see clearly under the moonlight. Their curiosity was aroused and they approached the platform. Someone called out, "That is the Iron Palm Clan's Iron Palm token of authority; how could it be in his hand?"

Huang Rong loudly said, "That's right, he is the spy sent by the Iron Palm Clan, so naturally he carried this token. The Beggar Clan has upheld chivalry and justice in the north for several hundred years; how can this fellow surnamed Yang easily comply to move to Jiangnan?"

Underneath the platform Yang Kang listened with an ash grey complexion; his right hand raised, he shot two steel awls straight toward Huang Rong's chest. The distance was near and his hand was quick, so the two silver lights violently flew to their target. Huang Rong did not pay the slightest attention. Among the crowd of beggars there were about a dozen people shouted loudly, "Watch out the secret projectile! Be careful!" "Aiyo! Not good!" But the two steel awls struck the soft hedgehog armor and 'clank, clank' they fell to the platform.

Huang Rong called out, "Wanyan Kang, if you don't have any guilty conscience, why did you use secret projectiles to

harm me?"

The crowd of beggars unexpectedly did not harm her, they were astonished to the extreme; they talked to one another, "Who is right and who is wrong?" "So Hong Bangzhu has not died yet?" Everyone's face showed a frightened and confused look. They turned their eyes toward the Four Elders, expecting them to make a decision. The row after row of strong wall formations had been dispersed early on. From among the crowd Guo Jing walked towards the platform and nobody tried to stop him.

End of Chapter 27.

Chapter 28 - Peak of the Iron Palm Mountain

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox)



Elder Jian rapidly retreated to avoid being hit, but Huang Rong did not lose momentum and kept targeting his accupoints intensely. He started running, but the faster he ran, the faster the stick followed him. He had to continue jumping about until sweat was dripping down his white beard.

At this time Lu You Jiao was having a debate with the other 3 elders. He said, "We have yet to learn the truth, so we should question them in more detail to determine the fate of our Clan Leader." The Clean-Faction 3rd Elder said, "We have already established our new Clan Leader, how can we change that at our whim? The rules established at the founding of our Clan states that we must never disobey the orders of our Clan Leader." The 4 Elders were having a heated argument. Lu You Jiao's fingers were broken and he bit his teeth to bear the pain but showed no sign of backing down. The Clean-Faction 3rd Elder made a hand sign and walked over to Yang Kang. Elder Peng said loudly, "We only trust Leader Yang. This evil girl helped cause the death of Leader Hong and cunningly escaped death, yet she's still here talking rubbish. Don't pay attention to her. Brothers, let's torture her till she confesses." Guo Jing jumped up and shouted, "Who dares touch her?" No one dared make a move on seeing his imposing figure. Qiu Qian Ren and his followers stood a distance away as they stood on the fence, taking delight in the Beggars' Clan's internal conflict. Huang Rong said clearly, "Leader Hong is now in the palace in Lin'an enjoying the Imperial Chef's food and is unable to reveal his identity. Hence he tasked me with the responsibility of this Clan's Leadership. When he's done savouring the food, he will naturally return." All the members of the Beggars' Clan knew about Hong Qi Gong's gluttony and felt there was much truth in her words, but

still could hardly believe that such a young lass could be their new Leader.

Huang Rong continued, "This thief of the Jin Kingdom conspired with the Iron Palm Sect to harm me and steal the Clan Leader's Dog-Beating Stick, yet you people don't attempt to shed light on the truth? Our 4 Elders are very experienced and knowledgeable, yet how was it possible for them to fail to see through such a simple ploy?" When they heard her, the clan members looked at their 4 Elders with doubt.

At this point Yang Kang could only stubbornly maintain his stand, saying, "You claim that Leader Hong is still alive, so why did he want you to be the Clan Leader? How do you prove your claim?" Huang Rong waved the bamboo stick, saying, "This is the Clan Leader's Dog-Beating Stick, isn't this proof enough?" Yang Kang laughed loudly, "Ha ha, this was originally mine and you snatched it away in front of everyone just moments ago. What 'proof' is this?" Huang Rong smiled, "If Leader Hong handed the Dog-Beating Stick to you, why didn't he teach you the Dog-Beating Skill too? If he did, how could I have snatched the Dog-Beating Stick from you?" When Yang Kang heard her mention the 'Dog-Beating Stick' 4 times, he felt that she made a blunder and he bellowed, "This is the token of authority of this Clan, what 'Dog-Beating Stick'? How dare you insult the treasure of this Clan?" He thought that his words could please the Beggars' Clan members but he was unaware that this stick was actually called the 'Dog-Beating Stick'. The 2 beggars with him deeply respected the Dog-Beating Stick and did not dare mention the name to him during their journey. Yang Kang had clearly showed his ignorance on the bamboo stick's name, and the Clan members all glared at him with displeasure. Yang Kang realized that he had said something wrong but could never have guessed that his mistake lay in

the fact that the immensely important bamboo stick did actually have such an uncouth name. Huang Rong smiled, "Treasure? Take it if you like." She held the stick out for him.

Yang Kang was delighted and wanted to take it but was afraid of Guo Jing. Elder Peng said, "Leader, we'll protect you. Take it first." Yang Kang jumped up with Elder Jian and Elder Liang. Lu You Jiao saw that Huang Rong was alone and jumped up too. He thought, "Though my fingers are broken, I still have my legs. My name Lu You Jiao (Lu Has Legs) is not for nothing."

Huang Rong gallantly handed the bamboo stick over to Yang Kang. He was wary of her and made sure his vital organs were protected before taking the stick. Huang Rong let go of the stick and laughed, "Are you holding it tightly yet?" Yang Kang said sharply, "What?" Huang Rong suddenly laid her left hand on the stick and shot her leg up. She tossed the stick down and said, "Once you've held it properly, I'll snatch it again." Elder Jian waved his sleeve and retrieved the stick. This move was clean and fast, and the beggars around cheered. Elder Jian then handed it back to Yang Kang. He gripped it and thought, "Unless you chop off my hand, you're not going to snatch it again."

Huang Rong laughed, "When Chief Hong handed this stick to you, didn't he teach you to hold it properly so that others wouldn't snatch it easily?" The crowd laughed as Elder Jian and Elder Liang moved in front of Yang Kang. Elder Jian's leg moved out as he tried to grab her but Huang Rong used a leaping technique from Hong Qi Gong's [Carefree Boxing]. She moved like a swallow, causing Elder Jian to grab thin air even though he was so close to her. His heart trembled slightly just as he heard the bamboo stick swishing towards their legs. The 2 Elders jumped away to avoid the strike. Huang Rong laughed, "Pardon me, but the

name of this stroke is [Rod Hitting 2 Dogs]!" Her white sleeve floated as she stood at the edge, the bright green bamboo stick glowing radiantly in her hand. This time she had moved even faster and no one could see what strokes she used. Guo Jing cheered, "Who did Chief Hong teach the [Dog-Beating Skill] now? Isn't this clear enough?" The beggars gathered around had seen her snatch the stick trice, each time faster than the previous, and they started debating among themselves. Lu You Jiao said clearly, "Brothers, this lady's strokes are indeed from our Chief's martial arts." The 3 Elders looked at each other. Knowing Hong Qigong for so many years, they knew that it was indeed from his martial arts. Elder Jian said, "Since she's our old Chief's disciple, it's natural that she knows some of his skills." Lu You Jiao said, "We also know that the [Dog-Beating Skill] is taught exclusively to our Clan Leaders only." Elder Jian laughed coldly, "That lass learnt some weapon-snatching skills, and though she's pretty good, how can it be proven that this is actually the [Dog-Beating Skill]?"

Lu You Jiao also had his doubts and said, "OK, young lady, please display the [Dog-Beating Skill] for all to see, and if it's really genuine, all the beggars will be convinced." Elder Jian said, "We've all heard about this skill, but none of us has actually seen it in action. How do we know if it's genuine?" Lu You Jiao asked, "What do you suggest?" Elder Jian clapped his hands and said loudly, "If this lady is able to defeat my [Pork Palms] with the [Dog-Beating Skill], I shall recognize her as our Chief. Should I have any 2nd thoughts, may my body be pierced with a thousand knives and arrows." Lu You Jiao protested, "Hey, you're a top expert in this Clan with your name known in Jiang Hu for 20 years now. How old is this lady? She's new to this skill, how can she be a match for your decades of experience?" As they were arguing, Elder Liang became impatient and jumped

towards Huang Rong, shouting, "The truth about the [Dog-Beating Skill] shall be known now! En garde!" His sabre chopped trice through the air, the cold light glinting on the blade. The chops were fast and fierce, yet they avoided her body with the accuracy of an expert. Huang Rong stuffed the bamboo stick in her belt and without moving her feet, she avoided the chops. She laughed, "With you, why do I need the [Dog-Beating Skill]?" Her left hand started her stroke while her right hand tried to snatch his sabre with brute force.

Elder Liang was a well-known figure, so he was furious that such a young inexperienced girl did not take him seriously. He immediately chopped towards her shoulder using his special move. Elder Jian no longer felt any enmity towards Huang Rong and instead thought that there was more to it then it met the eye, so on seeing Elder Liang's ferocity, he cautioned, "Elder Liang, don't apply lethal force!" Huang Rong laughed, "It's OK!" Her motion changed abruptly, punching and kicking, pushing and jabbing, changing between more than 10 different martial arts in rapid succession.

The beggars around glued their eyes to the action. An 8-Pocket skinny beggar shouted, "Ah! [Lotus Palms]!" The fat beggar then exclaimed, "Eh, she knows the [Bronze Hammer Boxing]!" Before he finished, she changed martial arts again, and the experts each exclaimed, "Ah it's the Chief's [Sky-Striking Skill]." "Hey, she's using the [Iron-Curtain Kicking Technique]!" "This move is [Limp Hands Overcoming the Enemy]!"

Hong Qi Gong was actually a lazy person who disliked taking martial disciples. It was only when the Beggars' Clan members made some important contribution that he would teach 1 or 2 strokes as a reward. Even when one of them performed his duties without regard for his life, Hong Qi

Gong only taught him one of the strokes of the [18 Dragon Subduing Palms] - the [Divine Dragon Displays its Tail]. Hong Qi Gong also had another habit where he would not teach the same stroke to more than 1 person, so whatever the Beggars' Clan members learnt would not share any common ground. It was only due to Huang Rong's intelligence and fantastic culinary skills that pleased him into teaching her dozens of different martial arts. But because she loved to play, she only learnt a few strokes each. Besides, Hong Qi Gong was too lazy to train her properly, so Huang Rong could only display the skills without the finesse. Still, her purpose was just to display the martial arts Hong Qi Gong taught her, and the beggars exclaimed when they saw that it was something they knew. Elder Liang's sabre skills were far better than Huang Rong's; it was due to her rapid change in martial arts that momentarily dazzled him, preventing him from attacking and forcing him to defend himself.

As the sabre flashed, Huang Rong suddenly withdrew her palms to her side and laughed, "Do you admit defeat?" Elder Liang had yet to use all his stances, why should he admit defeat? His sabre flipped outwards from his bosom. Huang Rong did not evade the strike, causing the beggars around to call out in surprise as the sabre flew towards her. Elder Jian and Lu You Jiao shouted for him to stop. Elder Liang also knew something was not right and hastily tried to pull the sabre upwards, but could not pull back in time and it hit her left shoulder. He groaned silently, "Oh no!" The force behind the strike was not very light and he felt that he must have injured her. Suddenly his arm went numb and the sabre hit the ground with a clang. Little did he know that Huang Rong was wearing the Soft Armour and that she seized the opportunity when he hesitated with his strike to tap his accupoint using her family's [Flower-Plucking Hands]. She stepped on the sabre and smiled,

"Well?" Elder Liang was so certain that he injured her in his strike that he was shocked by this sudden turn of events and wordlessly stepped away. Yang Kang said, "She's Huang Yao Shi's daughter, so there's nothing strange about her wearing the Soft Armour." Elder Jian creased his eyebrows in doubt. Huang Rong laughed, "You don't believe it?" Lu You Jiao observed that though her martial arts were good, she was still far behind Elder Liang. If not for her trick, she could only hope for a draw at best. Elder Jian was much better than Elder Liang and she was not his match, yet she was still giggling indifferently. Lu You Jiao was worried but the pain in his broken fingers was preventing him from speaking as he sweated profusely. Elder Jian lifted his head and said, "Miss, allow me to spar with you!" Guo Jing saw his imposing figure and solid steps and also knew Huang Rong was not his match, so he picked up the bundled cow skin and rushed forward. He tossed it out and wrapped it around Elder Jian's bronze staff (which Qiu Qian Ren lodged in the stone) and shouted, "Up!" The staff trembled and jerked upwards. The staff was facing Elder Jian but Guo Jing dashed in between and struck out with the [Six Dragon Palms] and hit it from the side. This was one of the strokes from the [18 Dragon Subduing Palms] and its force was something to be reckoned with. The impact caused the staff to change direction abruptly. Guo Jing caught hold of the staff and used it to execute the stroke [Clouds Without Rain] while his right hand executed the stroke [Convincing Sarcasm]. He applied the [Dual-Hand Skill] to execute 2 moves at the same time and the bronze staff rose up steadily. He then used the move [Sighting the Dragon in the Farm] and struck the middle of the staff. He shouted, "Watch it!" as it flew towards Elder Jian.

The staff flew like the snow and Elder Jian knew if he stretched out to intercept it, his hand would be dislocated,

so he jumped aside. He feared that it may hit the beggars around so he shouted, "Get away!" However Huang Rong stretched out the bamboo stick and tapped the middle of the bronze staff and gently pressed it downwards. This was a good example of the saying "4 liang moving a thousand jin". Though the move was gentle, it was one of the ingenious strokes of the [Dog-Beating Skill] called [Pressure on the Dog's Back] which made very efficient use of the applied forces. She pressed down on the staff and laughed, "You use the staff, I use the stick. Let's have some fun."

Elder Jian was stunned and gave up all thoughts of sparring. He bent down to pick up the staff and held it head-down, then bowed and said, "Miss, please show leniency." This action was actually supposed to be a mark of respect of a junior to an elder indicating inequality between their skills and the desire to seek pointers from the elder.

Huang Rong stretched out the bamboo stick and used the stroke [Facing the Dog to the Sky] and tossed the head of the staff upwards. She laughed, "Please dispense on ceremony. I may not be as skillful as you." This bronze staff had been Elder Jian's precious weapon for decades and yet he almost could not hold on to it firmly as it brushed his forehead as he hastily withdrew the weapon. He was surprised and quickly applied the stroke [Qin King Whips the Stone] and hit downwards from behind - a stroke originated from the martial arts of the heroes from Liang Mountain Slope (Liang Shan Po) called the [Mad Demon's Staff Skill]. Huang Rong saw that this strike was strong and fierce and felt that if he managed to sweep her down, she would still sustain internal injuries even with the Soft Armour. She increased her pace and used the [Dog-Beating Skill] and slid the stick up the bronze staff. The bronze staff weighed around 30 jin while the stick was only about 10

liang but the skill was profound and ingenious and easily allowed the bamboo stick to prevent the staff from breaking through within just a few strokes.

At first Elder Jian was only afraid that he would break the bamboo stick, so he restrained himself, withdrawing the staff once it made contact with the stick. However, with Huang Rong's proficiency in the stick, Elder Jian was repeatedly forced to defend himself. Within a few more moves, he only saw the shadows of the stick in all directions and had to use all his strength to hold his ground and could not care if he hit the stick forcefully or not.

Guo Jing sighed in admiration, "Master's martial arts are really unfathomable." He then thought, "I wonder where Master is now? I hope he has already recovered." He suddenly saw Huang Rong change tactics again. She held the stick with 3 fingers and it flew into a circular dance. Elder Jian was momentarily dazzled when he struck out towards her shoulder. Huang Rong flipped the stick to keep it close to the head of the staff, then she 'lured' the staff outwards, borrowing up to 90% of the staff's own momentum. Elder Jian felt as though the staff was about to fly out of his hands and he hastily tried to pull back but did not expect the stick to 'glue' to his staff. In his shock he changed moves 7 or 8 times in quick succession but found that he just could not 'shake off' the stick.

The [Dog-Beating Skill] has 8 main principles - Trip, Block, Trap, Poke, Pick, Lure, Steal and Turn. Huang Rong used the Trap technique to make the stick like a vine winding round a tree; no matter how the tree grows in width, the vine would not be separated from the tree. After more strokes, he tried to execute the [Massive Diamond Strength Staff Skill], causing the staff to produce a swishing sound but the stick still followed his staff around. Huang Rong hardly used any strength at all and simply used her stick to

chase his staff, so it looked like she was being controlled by the staff when in fact she was like a shadow using his own strength against him, just like how Guo Jing tamed his Little Red Horse years ago. Elder Jian no longer doubted her and was about to concede defeat when Elder Peng suddenly shouted, "Use the [Hand-Catching Technique] and grab the stick!" Huang Rong said, "OK, go ahead!" Her stick now changed to the Turn technique, which forced the opponent to follow himself, but causing the opponent to see a mass of flashes and shadows. He suddenly found that 5 of his vital accupoints on his back being threatened. Those were sensitive accupoints and a hit could be fatal. Elder Jian knew that the situation was critical and he rapidly retreated to avoid being hit but Huang Rong did not lose momentum and kept targeting his accupoints very intensely.

Elder Jian ran out of ideas and simply rushed forward. He managed to avoid the stick but it came up from behind. He stepped harder and started running, but the faster he ran, the faster the stick chased him. The beggars saw him jumping and running in circles around Huang Rong. She stood in the centre and made sure the stick did not leave his back by continuously changing hands to wield the stick; hence, she did not need to move around. Elder Jian's circles became larger and Lu You Jiao had to get down with the other two Elders to avoid being hit. Elder Jian hastily said, "Yes! Yes! Greetings to the Clan Leader!" He wanted to bow in respect but Huang Rong showed no sign of stopping, so he had to continue jumping around till the sweat was dripping down his white beard. Huang Rong laughed and used the Pick principle and tossed the bronze staff upward, borrowing much of Elder Jian's own jumping momentum. Elder Jian immediately bowed and cupped his hands in salute. The beggars around saw her brilliant performance with the [Dog-Beating Skill] and no longer had any doubts. So they loudly cheered, "Greetings to our Clan Leader!"

Elder Jian stepped forward to spit on Huang Rong's face, but when he looked at her jade white delicate face which shone like the blooming flower, how could he bear to spit on her? He hesitated and finally swallowed his spit back into his throat.

Just then, someone jumped up and caught hold of the bronze staff – it was Elder Peng. Huang Rong fell for his hypnotic trick before and utterly disliked him, so she looked at him in wary silence before lifting the stick to tap the accupoint on his chest using the Turn principle, which left him with no room for retreat. However, Elder Peng was very cunning, and as he knew his martial were below Elder Jian's he did not try to evade but simply cupped his hands and bowed.

After tapping his accupoint, Huang Rong angrily said, "What do you want?" Elder Peng said, "Allow me to pay my respect to Chief." Huang Rong starred at him and met his gaze, causing her heart to shudder and she hurriedly turned away. Still, she could not help but look at his eyes again. She turned back and saw his piercing gaze and this time, she could not turn away so she quickly shut her eyes. Elder Peng grinned "Chief, you're tired. Please take a rest!" His voice was silky and gentle. Huang Rong felt the fatigue rapidly overcoming her. When Elder Jian acknowledged Huang Rong as the Clan Leader, he felt that he had the responsibility to protect her, so when he saw Elder Jian using his hypnotic trick, he growled, "Elder Peng, what are you doing to chief?" Elder Peng smiled and said softly, "Chief needs rest; she's tired. Can you help her?" Huang Rong realized the danger but her body was dizzy and limp and she closed her eyes to fall into a deep sleep. In her semi-conscious state, she suddenly recalled something that Guo Jing mentioned and snapped out of her dream, exclaiming, "Brother Jing! Did you say the manual contains

some [Soul-Shifting Skill]?” Guo Jing had long noticed something wrong and would have killed Elder Peng in one palm strike if he tried any tricks; when he heard her, he jumped up and whispered something in her ear. Huang Rong heard him recite the passage, and with her high intelligence and good internal energy foundation, she was able to compose herself and force her eyes wide open, oblivious to the surroundings. Elder Peng saw her close eyes for some time and was secretly elated that his trick worked but he suddenly saw her re-open her eyes and smile at him. He smiled back but before he realized it, he felt his body floating and burst into laughter. Huang Rong knew that the skill in the [Nine – Yin Manual] was indeed superior and managed to hypnotize him with just one smile, so she chuckled. Elder Peng realized everything was wrong and tried to concentrate but instead lost further control of himself and stood up in wild laughter. The echoes of his laughing could be heard clearly all around the nearby lake.

The beggars around looked at each other and wondered what he was laughing at. Elder Jian kept shouting, “Elder Peng, What are you doing? How dare you show disrespect to the Chief?” Elder Peng pointed at his nose and bent his waist in laughter. Elder Jian thought it was something on his face and roughly brushed his hand across his face. Elder Peng laughed even more wildly and somersaulted down, rolling on the ground. The beggars realized something was not right. Two of his own aides tried to support him up but he shoved them away amidst his laughter. For this sort of hypnotizing technique, it required a substantial amount of internal energy and will power to control the other party. For an ordinary person, if subjected to such treatment, the person would simply fall asleep, but because Elder Peng was concentrating on controlling Huang Rong, the effect on him was ten times worse when she suddenly ‘attacked’ him while in such a state.

Elder Jian was worried that he would die from exhaustion, so he bowed to Huang Rong and said, "Chief, Elder Peng has been disrespectful, but I beg that Chief would be magnanimous and spare his life." Elder Liang and Lu You Jiao came forward and bowed too. Huang Rong asked Guo Jing, "Do you think it's enough?" Guo Jing replied, "OK, let him off." Huang Rong said, "Elders, if you want me to spare him, fine, but you folks must not spit on me." Elder Jian hurriedly said, "The clan rules are set by the Chief, and can be altered by the Chief, we will listen to you." Huang Rong was delighted to hear that she could avoid the spitting and laughed, "Ok, go tap his accupoint." Elder Jian jumped to Elder Peng and sealed two of his accupoints, causing him to stop laughing and he panted heavily. Huang Rong giggled, "Now I can rest! Hey, where's Yang Kang?" Guo Jing replied, "Gone!" Huang Rong jumped, asking, "How did that happen? Where did he go?" Guo Jing pointed at the lake and said, "He went off with that old man Qiu," Huang Rong saw the blur figures a distance away and did not pursue, knowing that Guo Jing let him off on account of their family ties.

When Yang Kang witnessed the match between Huang Rong and Elder Jian and saw her gain the advantage, he knew that if he did not leave now, his life would be at stake, so he slipped away to join the Iron Palm Sect while everyone was concentrating on the match. Qiu Qian Ren saw Huang Rong take the Clan Leadership and realized that with Guo Jing's and Huang Rong's good martial arts, coupled with the numerical strength of the Beggars' Clan, it was unwise for them to stay, so he led the Iron Palm Sect members and Yang Kang off the island by boat. Some of the beggars observed them leaving, but with the ongoing match, there was no one controlling the situation, so they ignored the party. Huang Rong held the stick up and said clearly, "Before Chief Hong returns, I shall preside over all

matters in this Clan. Elder Jian and Liang should lead some 8-Pocket members to welcome Chief Hong back; Elder Lu should remain here to recover from his injuries." The beggars all cheered.

Huang Rong then said, "How do you people propose we handle Elder Peng?" Elder Jian said, "Brother's offense is major and he deserves a serious punishment, but based on his merit for the Beggars' Clan, please spare him from death." Huang Rong laughed, "I knew you'd plead for him, Fine, he's already had enough laughing, so just demote him from Elder to an 8-Pocket member." The four Elders thanked her. Huang Rong said, "Brothers, you hardly meet and so must have much to say, you must give Li Sheng and Yu Tiao Xin a good burial. I see that Elder Lu is of good character, so all big matters will be decided by him. Elders Jian and Liang, please assist him. I shall take my leave now and we shall meet in Lin'an." She held Guo Jing's hand and left.

The beggars escorted them down the mountain and watched until their boat could no longer be seen before assembling again to discuss their plans.

The couple returned to the Yue Yang mansion by dawn and found the red horse and the two condors waiting for them. Huang Rong looked around and saw the red sun rising up from the lake; it was a beautiful scenery. She laughed, "Brother Jing, the essay by Master Fan Wen is really well written : 'The distant mountain swallows the river and is vast without boundaries. Day by day it stands majestically.' How can we not appreciate such a wonderful scene? Let's drink a few cups." Guo Jing agreed and they went upstairs. They thought of the previous night's events and laughed. They were drinking merrily when Huang Rong suddenly became angry and said, "Brother Jing, It's your fault!" Guo Jing was lost in confusion and begged, "Rong-er, please say

it." She said, "Ok, let me ask you, last night when we were both facing the Beggars' Clan formation you felt that your life was in danger, but why did you abandon me? If you had died could I still live? Don't you understand my heart?" Her tears fell into the cup. Guo Jing felt her deep feelings for him and was filled with love, grabbing her hand in his wordlessly. After some time, he said, "Yes, It was my fault. We should face death together." Huang Rong sighed and was about to reply when she heard someone on the stairs, when they saw each other, all three were surprised. It was Qiu Qian Ren.

Guo Jing quickly stood up and shielded Huang Rong as he was afraid of Qiu Qian Ren's murderous intent. However, Qiu Qian Ren merely laughed and went down. The laughter seemed to indicate surprise and panic. Huang Rong said, "He's scaring us. This is strange; I'll go check it out." She did not wait for Guo Jing's reply and ran downstairs. Guo Jing yelled, "Be careful!" He hurriedly dug out a piece of silver and plonked it on the counter before dashing out. He looked around but did not see them and remembered Qiu Qian Ren's vicious martial arts and underhand methods and was worried that Huang Rong might meet some mishap, so he shouted, "Rong-er, where are you?"

Huang Rong heard him but did not respond as she was closely tailing Qiu Qian Ren and knew that the slightest sound could betray her position. Huang Rong hid behind a wall and waited for Qiu Qian Ren to move further so that it would be safer for her to tail him. However, when he heard Guo Jing shouting, he knew she was behind and he too hid behind the wall on the other side. After some time, both of them heard nothing stirring and peered round the corner at the same time. They came face to face with each other and their expressions changed simultaneously.

The two people gasped and turned to walked away. Huang Rong was afraid of his palm strength but did not want to give up, so she went one big round, then used her Qinggong to dash behind the other corner of the wall. Qiu Qian Ren expected her to do that and he too made a circle then used his Qinggong to dash to the corner of the wall, but he went in the other direction and bumped into her again. Huang Rong thought, "If I turn around, he'd surely strike my back and I might not avoid it." She thought, "I should stall for time until Brother Jing comes." He laughed, "We met in Lin'an the other day and we meet here again. Miss, how are you?" She thought, "I clearly saw this scum last night yet he's still trying to fake it. I think I'll test him out with the [Dog-Beating Skill]. She shouted, "Brother Jing, strike his back!" Qiu Qian Ren turned and saw no one, he realized he was tricked and he heard swishing sound around his legs. He hurriedly jumped and managed to avoid being hit, but the [Dog-Beating Skill]'s Trip principle is continuous like the flowing river and would continue to target the opponent until it succeeds. Though the technique is only about tripping the opponent, it contains many variations. He jumped faster and faster, but he kept seeing the stick's shadow dancing around his legs. By the 17th step, he accidentally slackened his pace and immediately found himself slamming onto the ground. He yelled, "Wait! I've something to say." Huang Rong laughed and waited for him to get up before tripping him again. He fell another five times and did not attempt to get up again but instead remained motionless on the ground. Huang Rong laughed, "Stop faking death." He stood up and snapped his belt. Holding on to his pants, he said, "Are you leaving? I'm going to let go!" Huang Rong was shocked, as she never expected a reputable clan leader to use such a dirty trick. She feared that he would really let his pants drop so she turned to leave. She heard him laughing behind as he grabbed his

pants and chased her. The normally cunning Huang Rong somehow ran out of tricks and simply evaded him, finding it infuriating yet funny. He was about to catch up when he saw Guo Jing jumping out from the corner and shielding Huang Rong with his palms ready to strike. Qiu Qian Ren saw that this was a powerful stance so he laughed, "Ah! Oh no!" Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, hit him." From what Guo Jing saw the previous night, he knew Qiu Qian Ren's martial arts level was comparable to Ouyang Feng, Huang Yao Shi and Zhou Bo Tong so he did not dare underestimate him. He concentrated his Qi in his Dan Tian to prepare for his enemy. Qiu Qian Ren still held on to his pants saying, "You dolls better listen to Master here - today I ate something bad and my stomach's upset." Huang Rong repeated, "Brother Jing, hit him." But she herself stepped backwards. Qiu Qian Ren said, "I know what you're up to. You won't be satisfied unless old Master here teaches you a lesson. But today, I've got trouble with my stomach. Fine; listen up, within 7 days, meet me at the foot of Iron Palm Mountain. Do you dare come?" Huang Rong heard him refer to himself as Master and held her bronze needles to throw at him for talking rubbish. Just as she was about to release the needles, she heard "foot of the Iron Palm Mountain" and remembered the 4 lines of words in the painting she saw at Qu Ling Feng's place. She said, "OK, we should come to take a look. When we meet then, we're not going to play with you. How do we get there?"

Qiu Qian Ren said, "From here, head west, pass through Chang De, Chun District, then proceed up Chao Yuan River. There will be a 5-peak mountain shaped like a palm. That's it. That's a dangerous place; if you're afraid, then apologize to me and don't come." Huang Rong became more excited and said, "OK, it's a promise. See you there." Qiu Qian Ren nodded before exclaiming, "Ah!" and rushed off clutching his waist.

Guo Jing said, "Rong-er, there's something I don't understand. Please explain." Huang Rong asked, "Yes?" Guo Jing said, "This old man's martial arts are good; we're not his match, but why does he try to fool us? That day at the Gui Yun mansion, he struck my chest. If he'd used his full strength, I'd be dead. What is he driving at?" Huang Rong nibbled her finger, saying, "I've got no idea. When I tripped him just now, he did not try to use his skill, maybe what he did with the bronze staff last night was a trick." Guo Jing shook his head, "He broke Lu You Jiao's hands - that can't be faked."

Huang Rong bent down and used her hairpin to draw on the ground. After a moment, she sighed, "I can't figure out what this old thief is up to. Anyway when we reach the 5-peak mountain, we could find out." Guo Jing asked, "Why should we go there? We should find Master. This old man is a trickster, yet you believe him?" Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, the painting that father handed you was wet by the rain and some words were revealed; what were they?" Guo Jing shook his head. "The words were not complete, I can't infer anything meaningful." Huang Rong laughed "Really?" Guo Jing knew he could not have understood it on his own, so he quickly said, "Rong-er, you must know it, quick, tell me." Huang Rong wrote the lines of words and said, "The first line had the word 'Wu' missing, so it should be 'Wu Mu Yi Shu' (Yue Fei's War Strategies Manual '□□□□'). I couldn't have guessed the 2nd line if not for that old man, so it should be either 'Mountain' or 'Peak'." She recited the lines, "Wu Mu Yi She, Zhai Tie Zhang Shan (The manual's at the Iron Palm Mountain)." Guo Jing clapped and exclaimed, "Yes! Let's go! The Iron Palm Sect is corroborating with the Jin troops - they'd surely hand the manual to Wanyan Hong Lie. What's next?" Huang Rong laughed, "That old man said the mountain is shaped like a palm, and the 3rd line is 'Zhong Zhi Feng Xia'

(under the peak of the middle finger)." Guo Jing said excitedly, "Yes, Yes Rong-er, you're brilliant! The 4th line!" Huang Rong said, "I'm not sure. Di er...jie' (The 2nd ...)." She tossed her hair in the wind, saying. " I give up. We'll talk when we get there."

They rode towards the place described and reached it within a day. They asked around but everybody shook their heads. They were disappointed and put up at an inn. Huang Rong asked the waiter but he did not mention anything relevant. Huang Rong said, "This place is boring. Is there anything worth seeing?" The waiter could not resist and said, "There's this Monkey's Claw Mountain - the scenery is unparalleled." Huang Rong asked, "Where is that?" The waiter did not reply but instead said, "Never mind," and walked out.

Huang Rong chased him and pulled him back and placed a silver ingot on the table, saying, "Tell me more and this is yours." The waiter gently touched the ingot and said, "You are sure about this?" Huang Rong nodded with a smile. The waiter said in a low voice, "I'll talk, but you must not go. That place is reputed to be inhabited by beasts and demons. Whoever goes within 5 miles of the mountain can dream of coming back alive." The couple nodded. Huang Rong said, "The mountain has 5 peaks shaped like a monkey's hand, isn't it?" The waiter exclaimed, "Yes! So you already knew! I didn't say that. But there's something strange about the mountain." Guo Jing asked, "What?" He replied, "The mountain being shaped like a hand isn't really strange, what's strange is that every 'finger' on the mountain has 3 segments, just like our fingers." Huang Rong jumped up, shouting, "The 2nd segment, the 2nd segment!" Guo Jing yelled happily, "Correct! Precisely!" The waiter did not know what was going on and starred at the couple blankly.

Huang Rong asked for more details and handed him the silver. The waiter left happily.

Huang Rong stood up and said, "Brother Jing, Let's go." Guo Jing said, "It's less than 30km from here. We can use the Red Horse to rush there now, and we can pay them a visit tomorrow morning." Huang Rong laughed, "What visit? Steal the book." Guo Jing exclaimed, "Yes! I'm so dense, I didn't think of that." They did not want to arouse any attention so they left through the window and galloped southeast. The waist-length grass hindered their movement, but when they were 20km away, they saw the 5-peak mountain in the distance. Guo Jing excitedly said, "The mountain looks exactly like the painting, see the pine trees at the summit?" Huang Rong laughed, "We're short of a general up there. Brother Jing, go up and display your sword skills." Guo Jing laughed, "But I'm not a general." Huang Rong replied, "Isn't that easy? Eventually Genghis Khan..." Her words trailed off. Guo Jing knew what she meant and turned his head away, not daring to face her.

They left their horse at the foot of the mountain and utilized their Qinggong to scale the mountain. After many twists and turns, they came to a thick clump of pine trees. They stopped to discuss if they should continue upwards or investigate the clump of trees when they saw a faint light among the trees. They exchanged hand signs and crept stealthily towards the light. Suddenly, there was a whoosh and two black-clad armed men jumped up and blocked the road. Huang Rong thought, "If we fight them, it would be difficult to steal the book." She had an idea and took out Qiu Qian Ren's Iron Palm token and showed them wordlessly. When the two men saw it, they were shocked and quickly bowed and stepped aside. Huang Rong swiftly drew her bamboo stick and struck their accupoints then kicked them into the tall grass. She crept closer and saw a large stone

house with two boxes on the left and right of the entrance. In the center, a large urn was burning on a stove and the burning smell was easily detectable. Two young attendants stood on each side of the stove, one of them stirring the mixture inside with an iron ladle. From the sizzling sound, it was clear that the urn contained iron filings. An old man sat close by, breathing deeply – it was Qiu Qian Ren. After a while, he lifted his palms then stood up suddenly and struck his palms into the urn. Qiu Qian Ren practiced on the burning iron filings for a while then struck towards a cloth sack suspended above. The palm hit the sack with a solid slap, yet the sack did not even move.

Guo Jing was secretly shocked, thinking, “This cloth sack is not supported by anything, yet it didn’t move. His palm skill must be extremely good.” Huang Rong, however felt that it must be a trick; if she wanted to steal the book first, she would have said so earlier. He struck his palms into the urn then struck the cloth sack again, repeating this process several times. Huang Rong just could not figure out how he did this trick and thought, “If 2nd Master were here, he’d surely guess it. I’m not as smart as he is.” They peeped into the adjacent room and had another shock. Inside, a male and female seated together – it was Yang Kang and Mu Nian Ci. Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong wondered, “How did Sister Mu get here?” They heard Yang Kang’s sweet and flattering words and discovered that he was trying to trick her into marriage earlier. Mu Nian Ci, however, insisted that he kill Wanyan Hong Lie first before going into a relationship. Yang Kang said, “My dear, how could you be so short-sighted?” Mu Nian Ci queried curiously, “How so?” Yang Kang said, “Yes! Wanyan Hong Lie is surrounded by many bodyguards. Based on just myself alone, how could I succeed? If you marry me, I could pretend to take you to visit your in-laws. With the two of us, our chances are naturally better.” Mu Nian Ci felt that this made sense, so

she remained silent. Yang Kang saw that she was willing and so he held her hand and gently stroke it, then stretched his hand to hug her waist. Huang Rong could not take it and wanted to step forward and expose his plan when she heard an old rasping voice behind her, "Who dares trespass my mountain?" The couple turned around and saw Qiu Qian Ren's face glowing under the moonlight. Though he must have been playing a trick, his menacing gaze showed that he should not be trifled with. Huang Rong was startled, then thought, "He's on his own mountain now, of course he'd try to put on airs. Yup, he already discovered our presence earlier on, so he deliberately set this up for us, isn't it?" She laughed, "Old Qiu, we are here on your invitation. Have you forgotten the 7 -day appointment?" Qiu Qian Ren snapped, "What appointment? Rubbish!" Huang Rong laughed, "Hmm, how could you forget it so soon? Is your stomach upset gone yet? If not, you should consult a physician before exchanging blows with me, to prevent ... hehehe!" Qiu Qian Ren did not respond but launched both palms towards Huang Rong's shoulder fiercely. She giggled and ignored his strike, wanting to use her Soft Armour to pierce his palms. Just then Guo Jing exclaimed, "Get away!" She felt a gust of wind and knew Guo Jing tried to intercept him but felt a heavy blow smashing right into her. She fell backwards and everything went black.

Qiu Qian Ren felt a shock to his palms as they bled profusely. He was shocked and furious when he saw Guo Jing's palms flying to him, so he quickly retracted his palms and met Guo Jing's strike. Their palms met with a smack and both retreated three steps. Qiu Qian Ren stood firmly while Guo Jing stumbled, which clearly showed the difference between their palm strengths. The previous night when they exchanged blows, Guo Jing appeared to be on par only because he used the Big Dipper Formation. Guo Jing was concerned about Huang Rong, so he withdrew

from the battle and hugged her up to go, but he heard the wind gust from behind – he was being attacked again. Guo Jing struck his right hand backwards without turning around, using the move [Dragon Displays Its Tail] – this was a special move designed to save lives, and now when he was in great danger, the power of the move was increased. Qiu Qian Ren hit his palms and felt his body go slightly numb. He checked his hands and found the blood glistening in the moonlight and was afraid Huang Rong's protective vest could be poisoned. He looked closely and saw that the blood was still bright red, so he breathed a sigh of relief. Guo Jing took advantage of his procrastination to grab Huang Rong and dash out towards the summit. He only ran a few dozen steps when he heard angry shouts from behind. He turned and saw numerous black – clad men with torches swarming towards him. In the chaos he happened to discover that Huang Rong was not breathing. He screamed, "Rong-er! Rong-er!" There was no response. With this slight delay, Qiu Qian Ren's men came within a dangerous distance. Guo Jing thought, "If I were alone, I could break through this encirclement easily, but Rong-er is severely injured. I can't take this risk."

He ran faster and climbed directly upwards. He had learnt mountain-scaling skills before, so it was not long before he threw his pursuers far behind. Still, he did not stop, and when his face came into contact with Huang Rong's face, he felt the warmth of her cheeks and felt greatly relieved. However, she had yet to respond to him. He looked up and saw that the summit was quite narrow and could be easily surrounded, so he tried to find somewhere where he could save Huang Rong first. He thought he saw a cave in the darkness, so he dashed in that direction and found that it was really a cave, and its entrance had some stacks of jade stones. Guo Jing ignored any danger which may have lurked inside and rush in. He placed her down and put his hand on

her “Ling Tai” accupoint to aid her breathing. The Iron Palm Sect members could be heard shouting and yelling in the distance, but even if an army charged in row, he would still save her first. After some time, she coughed and regained consciousness, groaning feebly, “My chest hurts.” Guo Jing was delighted and exclaimed, “Rong-er, don’t be afraid, I’m here.” He walked to the entrance and looked down, and got a shock. The torches below formed a neat wall surrounding them and one prominent figure stood in the middle – it was Qiu Qian Ren. Yet for all the yelling and shouting, none of the people below moved any closer. He could not guess what they were up to, so he went back in to check on her when he suddenly heard footsteps in the darkness. Guo Jing was surprised and used his palm to guard his rear while he turned around, but he could not see who it was in the darkness. He called out, “Who’s that? Come out now.” The echo could be clearly heard in the cave, and after a slight pause, there was someone laughing, and he sounded just like Qiu Qian Ren. Guo Jing could make out a figure walking into the light – it was indeed Qiu Qian Ren. Guo Jing had clearly seen him down the mountain shouting and cursing, yet how could he get there in the blink of an eye? He felt the cold sweat trickling down his spine. Qiu Qian Ren laughed, “You 2 dolls aren’t afraid of death and came here to find your master, good.” He then said loudly, “This is the forbidden territory of the Iron Palm Sect, and all who trespasses it shall die, are you dolls tired of living?” Guo Jing could not guess his intention, but Huang Rong quietly said, “Since it’s forbidden, why are you here?” Qiu Qian Ren was taken aback and said, “I’ve got something important to do and I’ve got no time for your question.” He tried to leave the cave. Guo Jing saw his quick steps and feared that he would try to ambush him and harm Huang Rong, so he thought, “I should strike first.” Both his palms flew out toward Qiu Qian Ren’s shoulders and he expected Qiu Qian Ren to block him, so Guo Jing would then strike his waist.

This move was invented by the scholar Zhu Cong, with emphasis on masking the actual target so that the enemy could not block it. As expected, Qiu Qian Ren blocked him, but just as Guo Jing changed direction to hit him, Guo Jing felt that his opponent was not using any strength at all, totally unlike what he experienced just moments ago. Guo Jing did not think as fast as he moved, so he naturally grabbed his opponent's hands. Qiu Qian Ren struggled frantically but could not break free. But with this struggle, he allowed Guo Jing to see through his martial arts. Guo Jing knew there was no danger and released him. Qiu Qian Ren stumbled towards him, allowing him to simply seal his "Yin Du" accupoint. Qiu Qian Ren collapsed immobilized onto the ground and said, "Young master, this is a dangerous situation, how could you play games with me?" Now the yelling and chanting were getting much louder – the rest of the Iron Palm Sect members had rushed to the scene. Guo Jing said, "Bring us safely down the mountain." Qiu Qian Ren numbly shook his head saying, "My own life is in danger, how could I still help you?" Guo Jing said, "Ask your disciples to make way. When we reach the foot of the mountain, I'll release your accupoint." Qiu Qian Ren frowned, "Master, why torture me? Go to the entrance and see for yourself."

Guo Jing went to the entrance and looked down and was startled. Qiu Qian Ren stood in front of his disciples yelling away. Guo Jing quickly turned around and saw him lying down. He asked in a confused voice, "You...you...Why are there 2 of you?" Huang Rong said, "Silly boy, don't you see, there are 2 of them. One is highly skilled in martial arts while the other can only brag and boast. They look exactly alike and this is the big-mouthed one." Guo Jing was perplexed for a while before the truth dawned on him and he said, "Is that right?" Qiu Qian Ren made a sour face and said, "Since she said so, then it's so. We're twins and I'm the

elder. At first I was better in martial arts but my brother's improved drastically later." Guo Jing said, "Then who is Qiu Qian Ren?" He replied, "What difference does it make? Isn't it the same if I'm Qian Ren or he is? We were pretty close since young, so we share the same name." Guo Jing said, "Quick, tell me." Huang Rong said, "Isn't it obvious? He's the impersonator." Guo Jing said, "Eh, old man, then what's your name?" He could not avoid the question so he said, "I remember Father called me something like 'Qian Zhang'. I felt it didn't sound nice, so I didn't use it." Guo Jing laughed, "Ha, you're Qiu Qian Zhang." He replied, "So, what can you do about that? Ten 'chi' makes one 'zhang', and 7 'chi' make one 'ren', so 1000 'zhang' is longer than 1000 'ren' by 3000 'chi'." (Refers to the meaning of their names.) Huang Rong said, "I think you should change your name to 'Qian Fen' (1000 cm)."

Guo Jing said, "Why is he yelling there? What doesn't he come up?" Qiu Qian Zhang said, "Without my orders, who dares come up?" Guo Jing half-believed him. Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, don't trust this wily old fox. Hit his 'Tian Tu' accupoint!" Guo Jing stretched out finger and tapped it.

This accupoint was beneath the throat, and once hit, Qiu Qian Zhang felt as though a thousand ants were crawling all over him, and he felt extremely numb and itchy. He kept squealing, "Ah! Ah, are you trying to kill me?" Guo Jing, "Then answer me now and I'll release you." Qiu Qian Zhang shouted, "Alright, I can't win you." Bearing with the discomfort, he revealed everything. So Qiu Qian Ren and Qiu Qian Zhang were actually twins, and their similarities in looks made it difficult to differentiate them. When they were 13, Qiu Qian Ren unintentionally saved the life of the previous Iron Palm Sect Leader; The Leader repaid him by teaching him all his martial arts. When he was 24, Qiu Qian Ren's martial arts were very outstanding, so when the

previous leader passed away, he became the new sect leader. With his talent and determination, he managed to expand his sect and improve its reputation; hence Jiang Hu was well aware of the name “Iron Palms Floating On Water.” During the first Mt. Hua Sword meet, Wang Chong Yang invited him, but though his palm skills were powerful, he knew he was no match for Wang Chong Yang, so he declined to attend the tournament. During the past decade he practiced diligently, hoping to clinch the ‘World No. 1’ title at the 2nd Mt. Hua Sword Meet. It was at this stage that Qiu Qian Zhang took on his brother’s name for himself to brag around outside. The one Guo Jing and Huang Rong met at Gui Yun Manor and Lin’an Mansion was Qiu Qian Zhang. Because of their resemblance and Huang Rong’s carelessness, she sustained such a life-threatening injury. Now this second segment of the middle ‘finger’ was designated as the burial ground for all the previous leaders. The leader would enter this cave to await death when he was about to breathe his last. If the leader died while away, it was considered an honor for any disciple to bring the leader’s remains inside and die with him. Hence, it was declared a sacred and forbidden ground and all who entered must not leave alive. Therefore, when Guo Jing and Huang Rong barged into the cave, the members could only curse them from a distance as none dared enter. Even the leader himself had to stoop to cursing them. Why then, did Qiu Qian Zhang dare to enter? Whenever a leader was close to death, he had to bring his favorite weapons and treasures with him, so the cave accumulated a lot of valuables. Hence, Qiu Qian Zhang wanted the weapons for himself to show off. He never expected to see Guo Jing and Huang Rong turn up here. Guo Jing listened to his narration and thought, “This place is forbidden to them, but there’s no other way down, how do we get out of this?” Huang Rong said, “Brother Jing, try looking inside.” Guo Jing said,

"Allow me to check your injuries first." He lit a torch and proceeded to undo her outer dress and Soft Armour. Her snow-white shoulders revealed two black palm-marks, indicating the grave condition of the injuries. If left untreated, the injuries would eventually claim her life. Guo Jing thought, "Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qian Ren's martial arts are about the same, so Huang Rong's injuries are probably just as a huge problem as Master's injuries." He stared into blank space. Qiu Qian Zhang yelled, "What rubbish is this lass talking now? Hurry up and unseal my accupoint. The itch is killing me, why don't you try it yourself?" Guo Jing, though, was oblivious to all that.

Huang Rong smiled, "Silly boy, relax. Release that old man." Guo Jing then walked over and released his accupoint. Qiu Qian Zhang's itch stopped but his 'Yin Du' accupoint was still sealed, so he remained motionless apart from his pupils. Guo Jing found a 2-foot long club and lit it as a torch, saying, "Rong-er, I'll go take a look inside, will you be OK here alone?" Huang Rong's temperature rose and dropped rapidly and the pain was almost unbearable, but she forced a smile, "With this old man, I'm not afraid, go ahead."

Guo Jing raised up the torch and treaded carefully. After 2 turns, he came to a large natural cave which was 10 times larger than the cave outside. He scanned the room and observed many skeletons; some sitting, some lying, some scattered on the ground while some had missing bones. Each skeleton had some sort of weapon or treasure at its side. Guo Jing dreamily thought, "These ex-leaders must have been the great men of their day, yet today they are reduced to bones. Still, at least they have each other for company. This is good; at least it beats being buried alone." It was as though he did not notice the weapons and treasure in his anxiety for Huang Rong. Just as he was about to leave, he happened to lay his eyes on a wooden box

next to a skeleton. He shone his torch on it and looked closely and saw the inscription, "Secrets to Overcoming the Jin," He started, "Maybe this is the manual by Grand Marshal Yue," He tugged at the box when the skeleton suddenly 'leapt' toward him.

Guo Jing was shocked and hurriedly jumped back while the skeleton smashed on the ground. He grabbed the box and dashed out. He then supported Huang Rong up and opened the box in front of her. There were two books inside. Flipping through the first book, Guo Jing saw that its contents were Yue Fei's essays and other literary works. As he glanced through the words and passages he was filled with a strong surge of loyalty and righteousness, and he sighed in admiration. Huang Rong said, "Read a passage to me." He flipped through casually and recited the passage <The Five Hill Treaties>, "Since the strife in the Central Plains began, the Barbarians have invaded, anger flowed like the spring river; rising united, armies assembled, fighting hundreds of battles. Though we failed to advance far, we cleansed their lair, and swiftly ending the feud between states. Yet today the lone army marches on, for Yixing. The war of Jing Kang defeated and humiliated our lands, and our hatred will not rein our horses. The troops lay in wait for the enemy, raising the morale of the soldiers; battling through time, moving through the northern desert, shedding blood in the cities, exterminating the Barbarians, welcoming the return of the 2 sages, capturing their land; the Imperial Court had no worries, the Emperor slept in peace, and so Yue Fei wrote." The passage summarized Yue Fei's life ambitions. Though Guo Jing's literacy was limited, he was filled with the desire to serve the people. While he read some of the words wrongly, he nevertheless felt the essay was extremely well written.

If they were back at Gui Yun manor, Qiu Qian Zhang would not have hesitated to mock and scorn Yue Fei, but now he feared his accupoint would be sealed again. Though he was not well informed about Yue Fei, he still nodded his head, saying, "Yes, it's indeed well written, and a worthy hero is reading a hero's essay, nothing could be better."

Huang Rong sighed, "No wonder Father kept lamenting that he was born decades late; if not he would definitely meet such a great hero. Please recite his poems," Guo Jing went through a few poems, and some like <The Crimson River> were familiar to her, while others like <Title of a soldier's pavilion> were new to her.

The Iron Palm Sect members continued to shout and curse; Guo Jing let Huang Rong's head rest on his thigh while he continued to recite Yue Fei's works, "The title is <Title of the Sun Dragon's Residence> : At the Wei Mountain Monastery, the mountain spring defeats the stillness. At the Buddha's statue in Zijin, the snow covered the old monk's head. The cold lake water welcomes a new month, and the pine tree welcomes the autumn wind. I leave the dragon's words, hoping to aid the people in the storm." The wind blew and the birds chirped as Huang Rong rested snugly in Guo Jing's arms. Guo Jing said, "Grand Marshal Yue deeply remembered the suffering of the people; he is a true hero indeed." Huang Rong nodded and smiled, "The young hero is reading the works of a great hero while and old 'hero' is listening in. How redundant." She then asked, "What's the contents of the other book?" Guo Jing read a few lines inside and excitedly exclaimed, "This... this is really Grand Marshal Yue's hand written text on the war strategies! Wanyan Hong Lie would never have imagined that this it. Fortunately it's not been taken by him." On the first page was written, in 18 bold words: Repeatedly examine plans, Tough/rigorous training, Equal rewards/punishments, Clear

uncompromising orders, Fair/just rules, Everyone sharing hardship.

As they were reading, the shouting below abruptly ceased and not a single voice was heard. Suddenly, they were left in the unnatural silence. Guo Jing and Huang Rong listened carefully and heard the crackling of burning grass in the distance as Qiu Qian Zhang groaned loudly, "Today you 2 dolls have caused my destruction." In his panic, he called them "dolls" again. Guo Jing rushed out and saw a whole wall of fire swiftly burning towards them. As the mountain was filled with tall grass, the flames rapidly spread to form a sea of fire.

Guo Jing gasped, "They don't dare step into this forbidden territory, so they're attacking by fire. The cave doesn't have any flammable objects, but we'd surely be fried." He immediately grabbed Huang Rong when he heard Qiu Qian Zhang screaming on the ground, so he kicked him lightly to unseal his accupoint to let him make his own escape. He then snatched the wooden box and ran up the mountain. They were still a few hundred metres from the summit. Guo Jing gathered his concentration and sprinted upwards with Qiu Qian Zhang following behind. Guo Jing looked down and saw the fire spreading in the distance and knew that thought they temporarily safe, it would not be for long, so he gave a long sigh. Huang Rong suddenly said, "Grand Marshal Yue's given name is 'Fei' (fly), styled 'Crane'. Let's try 'Condor', how about that?" Guo Jing asked, "What condor?" Huang Rong said, "Call the condors up to fetch us down." Guo Jing jumped up and exclaimed, "That would be fun. I'll summon them. But I'm not sure they can take our weight." Huang Rong sighed, "After all we're heading for doom, so we might as well take the risk." Guo Jing sat properly and gathered his Qi in his Dan Tian and made a loud, shrill whistle which propagated in all directions. This

was the result of his internal energy training under Ma Yu, and with the [Nine Yin Manual], his internal energy improved by leaps and bounds. Though it was quite a great distance between the base and the summit, it was not long before the condors flew up and stopped in front of them. Guo Jing helped Huang Rong remove the Soft Armour and placed her on a condor's back. He was worried that she might not be able to hold on tightly to it with her injury, so he strapped her down with a cloth belt. Mounting the other condor, he whistled and the condors flapped their wings. They trembled greatly as they took off, but once in flight, the condors stabilized. At first, Guo Jing feared that he might be too heavy, but once it spread its wings, it flew effortlessly. Huang Rong, being a child at heart, felt this was an interesting sight, so she guided the condor towards Qiu Qian Zhang and it glided gracefully past him. Qiu Qian Zhang was shocked and shouted, "Miss, take me along. The fire will consume me soon!" Huang Rong laughed, "It can't take the weight of 2 people. Why don't you try begging your brother? Since he's shorter by 3000 chi, wouldn't he listen to you?" She tapped the bird and flew away; Qiu Qian Zhang became more and more nervous and called out, "Miss, don't you think this is interesting?" Her curiosity was aroused and she turned around to what he was up to. Suddenly, he launched himself forward, throwing his body off the mountain to grab her. He knew that either way he would die, so he took such a desperate gamble. With the sudden increase in weight, the condor plunged swiftly. It flapped its wings frantically but still could not produce enough lift. Qiu Qian Zhang grabbed Huang Rong's back and tried to yank her off and toss her down, but she was strapped to the condor which prevented her from falling off. They were about to plunge to their death, and the Iron Palm Sect members who witnessed them were too shocked to speak. At this critical moment, Guo Jing's condor flew straight at them and pecked at Qiu Qian Zhang's head. He felt a sharp

pain shoot through his head and he stretched out his hands to shield his head. But he lost his grip and flipped downwards, screaming madly as he fell into the valley below. The decrease in weight allowed the condor to regain its thrust and it gained altitude. The two condors then flew north.

End of Chapter 28.

Author's Note:

Yue Fei's poem <The crimson River> (血紅河) was very well known, but the Song Dynasty had no known records of it. Yue Fei and Sun Yue He's <Jin Soldier's Passages> and <Domestic Calling Volume>, a compilation of Yue Fei's literary works have not been found to date. The text quoted above first appeared in the Ming Dynasty, so some believe that it belongs to the works of Ming Dynasty authors. Some sources claim that these works are of no value as they merely used Yue Fei's name for the works.

Chapter 29 - The Lady of the Black Marsh

Translated by Frans Soetomo



On the long table were seven oil lamps, arranged in the Big Dipper formation; on the ground squatted a grey-haired lady, her attention focused on the countless bamboo strips scattered on the ground. So deep was her concentration that even when she heard people come in, she did not raise her head to look.

Riding on the back of the eagle Guo Jing repeatedly shouted, calling the little red horse on the ground to follow them. In a short moment the pair of eagles had covered quite a distance. Although this pair of eagles was extraordinarily big, they were not able to fly too far while carrying humans on their back. Not too long afterwards, they started to descend and finally landed on the ground.

Guo Jing immediately jumped down the eagle's back and rushed to see Huang Rong's condition. He found out that Huang Rong had passed out while on the eagle's back. Hastily he untied her belt and massaged her pulse. After a while Huang Rong regained her consciousness, but she was still in a daze and was unable to utter any word.

By that time the dark clouds were hanging on the sky, blocking the moon and stars from shining their lights to the ground. Having barely escaped from death, when he recalled what had just happened Guo Jing still shivered with fear. He held Huang Rong in his hands, standing in the middle of the wilderness. He felt the world was vast and obscure and did not know where he should go. He did not dare to call his little red horse for fear that Qiu Qianren would hear his call.

After standing still for half a day, he had no choice but to start walking. Every step he took he treaded on either a bush or tall grass; there was no pathway at all. His calves were pricked by thorns along the way. Although feeling the

pain, he doggedly walked forward. All around him was pitch-black; even if he tried to open his eyes wide he still could not see his hands in front of his eyes. He was forced to walk very slow, for fear that he would step into an empty space; yet because he feared the Iron Palm Clan people would pursue, he did not dare to pause.

After walking miserably for about two 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5 km] suddenly he saw a big star twinkling low on the horizon to his left. He looked attentively, trying to get his bearing; he found out that that was not a star, but a fire light. And where there was light, there were bound to be people around. Guo Jing was delighted; he sped up his footsteps walking directly to that light. He saw that the light sometimes disappeared among the tree; it looked like the source of that light was inside a thick forest ahead of him. But once he entered the forest he was unable to walk straight, the pathway was bent to the east and turned to the west, so very soon he lost sight of the light. It was difficult to see where he was going in that thick forest, so he jumped up a tree and looked around; he found out that the light was already behind him.

He walked back, but very soon he lost sight again. After seemingly walking in circles his head was spinning; no matter where he went, he simply could not reach that light. He was thinking about his pair of eagles and his horse, but did not know where they went. He was thinking about jumping from tree to tree, but it was so dark that he could not see where to step; also he was afraid the tree branches would hurt Huang Rong. But they had to find lodging for the night for he knew they could not stay in this dark forest waiting for dawn. He determined to keep walking even if he had to bump his head on the trees. Therefore, he decided to calm down and caught his breath first, taking a short break.

By now Huang Rong had slowly regained her consciousness; on Guo Jing's back she felt how he walked around, turning to the east and curving to the west. Although she could not see anything she began to understand the pathway of the forest. "Jing Gege, walk diagonally to the right," she said in low voice.

"Rong'er, are you all right?" Guo Jing happily asked.

Huang Rong mumbled indistinctly, she was still too weak to speak. Guo Jing walked following her direction. Huang Rong silently counted his footsteps. After about seventeen steps she said, "Walk to the left eight steps." Guo Jing followed her instruction. Huang Rong again said, "Walk diagonally to the right again for thirteen steps."

With one giving direction the other following, two people made a good progress in that pitch-black winding forest pathway. When Guo Jing walked back and forth earlier, Huang Rong had deduced correctly that this pathway was manmade. She had partially mastered Huang Yaoshi's wonderful 'wu xing qi men' [five ways strange/wonderful/mysterious gates] technique; even though the pathway was confusing, she could see it clearly with her eyes closed. If it were daylight, she would have arrived sooner, but in the dark she could not identify any safe trail at all.

By following Huang Rong's instructions, Guo Jing walked sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, sometimes diagonally several steps to the left or to the right; sometimes seemingly he walked further away from the light, but in less than a time needed to drink a cup of tea the light source suddenly appeared in front of them. Guo Jing was delighted, he dashed forward.

“Not too fast!” Huang Rong anxiously called out. “Aiyo!” Guo Jing cried out. His feet sank straight into a moat. Quickly he kicked his feet to pull out from the moat. Once they were back on solid ground, a strong fume of mud from his feet attacked their nostrils. They looked ahead and vaguely saw two thatched huts surrounded by a thin layer of mist. The light was coming from these huts.

Guo Jing loudly called out, “We are passing visitors, also suffering a serious injury. We beseech the master of the house to grant us a place to rest and some water to drink.” But after waiting for half a day no reply came out from the huts. Guo Jing called again, but still nobody answered. After calling out for the third time a female voice answered from the huts, “You can get this far, certainly you have the ability to enter the house. Must I come out to greet you?” Her voice was exceptionally cold and indifferent; obviously she did not welcome the visitor and did not want to be disturbed.

Under normal circumstances Guo Jing would prefer spending the night in the forest, he also hated to deliberately disturb unwelcoming host; but for now Huang Rong’s well-being was more important to him. However, in front of him was a wide marsh, which he did not know how to cross; therefore, with a low voice he discussed this thing over with Huang Rong.

Huang Rong thought for a moment then said, “These huts are built in the middle of a pond of mud. Take a look clearly and tell me whether the shapes of those huts are one square and the other round.”

Guo Jing opened up his eye wide for a moment then he exclaimed, “That’s right! Rong’er, you know everything.”

“Go to the back of that round hut, from there walk straight to the light three steps, then turn diagonally to the left four steps, then straight three steps and diagonally to the right four steps. By carefully walking straight and diagonally like this, you won’t make a wrong step,” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing followed her instruction to the letter; and sure enough, every time he stepped his foot down, he would step on a submerged wooden stake. Only those wooden stakes were not firm, some of them wobbled and some were planted on an angle; if his lightness kungfu was not good, they would fall into the marsh. He focused all his attention to walk three steps diagonally and four steps straight; and after walking a total of 119 steps they arrived at the front of the square hut.

The hut was actually without a door. Huang Rong whispered, “From here you jump forward, make sure you land on the left side.”

Carrying Huang Rong on his back Guo Jing jumped forward and landed on the left side, he could not help but feel amazed, “Everything is exactly as Rong’er has anticipated.”

There was a courtyard inside the wall, which was divided into two parts: on the left was solid ground, while on the right was a pond. Guo Jing crossed the courtyard and entered the main hall. Outside the hall was a moon gate without any door on it. “Go straight ahead,” Huang Rong said, “There is nothing strange from here on.”

Guo Jing nodded. With a loud and clear voice he said, “The passing visitors took the liberty to enter the house; I beg the esteemed host to forgive our boldness.” He waited for a moment then proceeded to enter the hall.

Inside the hall there was a long table; on it were seven oil lamps, arranged in the Big Dipper formation. On the

ground squatted a grey-haired lady, her clothes were made from coarse fabric. Her attention was focused on the countless bamboo strip scattered on the ground; so deep was her concentration that even when she heard people came in, she did not raise her head to look.

Guo Jing gently lowered Huang Rong on a chair. Under the lamp light they saw that lady's countenance to be thin and pallid, as if she did not have any blood; they felt compassionate toward her. Guo Jing was about to open his mouth asking for some water but seeing that lady so engrossed in whatever she was doing, he was afraid to interrupt her train of thought; hence he refrained from making any noise.

After sitting down for a moment, Huang Rong's spirit was slightly revived. She saw the bamboo strips on the ground to be approximately four 'cun's [about 13cm or 5inches] long and two 'fen's [about 7mm or 1/2 inch] wide; they were bamboo strips usually used for calculation. Again she looked closer, those computation were based on 'shang, shi, fa, jie' [business/commerce, reality, law, lending (money)] method of calculation with four decimal point. Right now she was calculating the square root of 55,225; with the 'shang' position had shown the result to be 230. But that lady was still struggling with the third digit.

Huang Rong quipped, "Five! Two hundred and thirty five!"

That old lady was startled, she raised her head, her eyes were gleaming, looking at Huang Rong with a penetrating gaze, and then immediately lowered her head to continue her calculation. When she raised her head, Guo and Huang, two people saw her face; it was simple and beautiful. They believed she was not even forty years of age yet. Perhaps the hair on her temples had turned grey because she had too much in her mind.

After computing for while, the lady figured out the answer was indeed 'five'; she raised her head to look at Huang Rong again. She looked confounded, but also angry, as if she was going to say, "You are but a young girl; you have made a lucky guess, what's so strange about that? Just don't mess with my business here." She wrote down '235' five characters [er bai san shi wu] on a piece of paper, then proceed to the next problem.

This time she was looking for the cube root of 34,012,224. She started by putting down the 'shang' and 'shi' and 'fang' [square], followed by 'lian' [inexpensive], 'yu' [corner] and 'xia' [lower], six strips; and found the first digit to be 'three'.

Huang Rong softly said, "Three hundred and twenty four."

That lady uttered an 'Hmm' sound, how could she believe her? She continued calculating for a long time, and after a time needed to drink a cup of tea later, the result came out, it was indeed '324'.

That lady straightened up her back and stood up; it appeared that her forehead was full of wrinkles, but her cheeks were full, her face looked round. The upper half of her face look old, the lower half looked young, looked like both parts differed by as much as twenty years. Her eyes stared at Huang Rong, suddenly she pointed toward the inner room and said, "Come with me." She took an oil lamp and walked in.

Guo Jing propped Huang Rong up and followed her inside. The inner room's wall was round; the floor was covered with fine sand. On the sand were written many weird symbols, vertical and horizontal lines and circles; also some characters such as 'tai' [great], 'tian yuan' [first/primary

sky], 'di yuan' [first/primary earth], 'ren yuan' [first/primary human], and 'wu yuan' [first/primary object].

Guo Jing had no idea what they were; he was afraid to mess these symbols up, so he stopped at the door and did not dare to step into the room.

Since her childhood Huang Rong had been trained by her father in all kinds of mathematics. She looked at the symbols on the ground and immediately recognized it was an advance technique in mathematics called the 'tian yuan zhi shu' [sky primary technique]. Even though it looked complicated, it should not be too difficult to solve as long as one understood the principle.

[Author's note: It very much resembles the modern day algebra. Our country since the ancient times had developed this calculation technique, with 'tian', 'di', 'ren' and 'wu' as four unknown variables; much like the X, Y, X and W variables in western algebra]

Huang Rong pulled the bamboo stick from her waist; leaning on Guo Jing she started writing on the sand. In a short while all seven, eight mathematics problems on the sand were solved. That lady had painstakingly tried to solve those problems in months; seeing the solutions, she could not help but feeling deeply confounded. She was silent for half a day then suddenly asked, "Who are you?"

Huang Rong showed a faint smile and replied, "What's so special about 'tian yuan si [four] yuan zhi shu'? The mathematics book has nineteen primaries, after the 'ren' there are 'xian' [immortal], 'ming' [bright], 'xiao' [firmament], 'han' [from Han dynasty], 'lei' [rampart], 'ceng' [layer], 'gao' [high], 'shang' [top/above], and 'tian' [sky]. Before the 'ren' are 'di' [earth/ground], 'xia' [below/under], 'di' [low], 'jian' [subtract], 'luo' [drop], 'shi'

[die], 'quan' [fountain], 'an' [hidden/secret], and 'gui' [sly/crafty]. Once you mastered the nineteenth primary, all problems will look easy!"

That lady looked dejected, her body trembled; she dropped to the ground, holding her head in her hands as she was lost, deep in thought. A moment later she raised her head and with a delighted face asked, "Your mathematics skill is a hundred times better than mine, but let me ask you this: you have a three by three array of number one thru nine, no matter how you add it up, vertically, horizontally or diagonally, the sum of any three numbers has to be fifteen. How do you arrange it?"

Huang Rong thought, "My father established the Peach Blossom Island based on the five ways variation; what's so mysterious about it? The 'jiu gong' [nine palace or halls] is the foundation of the Peach Blossom Island diagram; how could I not know about it?" Therefore, with a calm voice she recited, "The 'jiu gong' diagram is constructed like the pattern on the turtle shell [Translator's note: do a google search with keyword 'Lo Shu Square']; four and two are the shoulders, eight and six are the feet. Three on the left and seven on the right; put on nine and tread on one, while five occupies the center." While reciting this she made a diagram of the 'jiu gong' on the sand.

That lady's countenance turned ashen, she sighed, "I thought I developed this secret formula. Turned out there is a song about it handed down for generations."

Huang Rong smiled, "Not only 'jiu gong', even four by four array, or five by five, down to the hundred by hundred array, are not too difficult," she said, "Take four by four array for example; we have 16 numbers in four rows. First we determine the four corner pairs; one and sixteen made a pair, so are four and thirteen. Then we determine the four

pairs inside; six and eleven make a pair, so are seven and ten. This way the sums of all horizontal, vertical, and diagonal rows are all 34.”

That lady made the diagram on the sand and sure enough, it was as Huang Rong had said. Huang Rong continued, “Each hall of that nine halls diagram can be transformed into ‘ba gua’ [eight-diagram]. Eight by nine equal to 72 numbers. These numbers: 1 to 72 loop around the ‘jiu gong’ like wreaths. Each loop consists of eight numbers; each four-loop forms another bigger loop, there are four corner loops altogether, which make the total number of loops to be 13. The sum of the numbers in each loop is 292. This diagram variation recorded in the Luo Shu [luo – name of a river, shu – book] is divinely wonderful; no wonder you are not aware of it.” While explaining it, Huang Rong also drew the 72 numbers of the eight diagrams of the nine halls on the sand.

The lady was dumbfounded, she faltered and asked, “Miss, who are you?” But before Huang Rong could answer her, she felt a shot of pain on her chest; her face paled, and anxiously she took a vial from her pocket and swallowed a green pill from the vial. After half a day her face relaxed, she sighed and said, “It’s finished, it’s finished!” Two drops of tears rolled down her cheeks.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other; they thought this lady’s behavior was so weird.

That lady had not spoken anything when suddenly there was an intermittent call from the outside. It was the Iron Palm Clan pursuers. “Are they friends or enemies?” the lady asked.

“They are enemies pursuing us,” Guo Jing said.

“Iron Palm Clan?” the lady asked.

“Yes,” Guo Jing replied.

The lady inclined her ear to listen for a while and then said, “Qiu Bangzhu [Clan Leader Qiu] personally leads his clan to pursue. Who are you actually?” When asking this her voice was stern.

Guo Jing moved forward one step, stood up in front of Huang Rong, and with poise in his voice he said, “We are the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar Hong Bangzhu’s disciples. My martial sister is injured by the Iron Palm Clan’s Qiu Qianren. We took refuge here. If Senior has a close relation to the Iron Palm Clan and is unwilling to give us shelter; then we will take our leave.” Having said this he raised his cupped fist and then turned around to help Huang Rong stood up.

That lady smiled indifferently and said, “You are young, yet so mule-headed. You can survive but do you think your martial sister can? So you are Hong Qigong’s disciples, no wonder you have this kind of skill.”

She heard the shouts of Iron Palm Clan people were sometimes far and sometimes near, sometimes high and sometimes low; she sighed and said, “They can’t find the way, they can’t come in; just relax. Even if they manage to enter, you are my guests, how can Divine ... Divine ... Ying Gu let other people bully her esteemed guests?” She thought, “Originally I was called ‘shen suan zi’ [Divine Mathematician] Ying Gu; but this young miss’ mathematical skill is a hundred times better than mine. How could I call myself ‘shen suan zi’ anymore?” Therefore, she only said the first word ‘shen’ but could not bring herself to utter the next two characters.

Guo Jing bowed to express his gratitude. Ying Gu slipped the clothes from Huang Rong’s shoulder to see her injury.

She creased her brows but did not say anything; she took the vial from her bosom and dissolved the green pill in a bowl of water.

Huang Rong took the bowl but she hesitated, they did not know whether the lady was a friend or a foe; how could she took her medicine?

Ying Gu saw her hesitation, she coldly said, "You are injured by Qiu Qianren's Iron Palm; do you still think you can recover? If I want to harm you, do you think I need to bother myself? This medicine is a pain-reliever; you don't want it? Fine!" She grabbed the bowl back and poured the content on the ground.

Seeing her rudeness toward Huang Rong, Guo Jing was unable to restrain his anger. "My martial sister is seriously injured; how can you be so mad at her?" he said, "Rong'er, let's go."

Ying Gu coldly smiled and said, "Ying Gu's two small huts; do you think two juniors like you can easily come and easily go?" With two bamboo strips in her hands, she stood on the doorway, blocking the exit.

Guo Jing thought, "Talk is useless, must use force." He called out, "Senior, forgive me for being rude." He bent his knees a little bit; making a circle with his arms he launched the Proud Dragon Repents straight to the door. This stance was his fiercest one; he was afraid Ying Gu could not resist it, so he only used 30% of his strength. His intention was simply to clear the way; he did not want to harm anybody. As the gust of wind arrived at Ying Gu's body, Guo Jing watched closely how Ying Gu would block this attack; whether he should increase his strength or retract it immediately. Who would have thought that Ying Gu only leaned her body slightly, her left palm made a diagonal

moved to lightly push his arm and Guo Jing's strength was diverted sideways.

Guo Jing did not expect her to possess such a high skill; he was pushed forward half a step from the momentum of his own force. Ying Gu was also surprised that with such strong attack Guo Jing was able to hold his stance firmly on the sand and did not fall down. From this one exchange, both were secretly admiring their opponent's skill.

"Kid, have you learned your Shifu's entire skill?" Ying Gu loudly called out. While shouting out she used her bamboo strip to hit the 'qu ze' [crooked marsh] acupoint on the bend of Guo Jing's right arm. It was a vital acupoint, Guo Jing did not dare to neglect this attack. He counterattacked with another stance from the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms.

After exchanging several moves Guo Jing realized that Ying Gu's martial art was purely 'yin' [negative, female] in character, from the 'soft' side. Obviously she did not have a single frontal strike, but each one of her moves contained a lethal counter-strike; if Guo Jing did not know mutual hands combat, he would have been injured early on.

The more he fought, the more he did not dare to underestimate her; gradually he increased the strength of his palms, but Ying Gu's martial art was one of a kind; her stances appeared to be soft and powerless, yet it was like a mercury flowing swiftly, penetrating every hole, making her very nearly impossible to guard against.

Several moves later Guo Jing was compelled to withdraw two steps back. Suddenly he remembered Hong Qigong's advice when he was sparring with Huang Rong's 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling leaves divine sword palm technique]; that regardless of thousands of changes or tens of thousands variations the opponent used, he should

ignore them all and keep fighting using the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' to secure a victory.

Initially he thought he did not have any desire to fight; besides, the lady looked like a good and kind-hearted Senior. But without having any enmity or committing any wrongdoing she had prevented them from going out the gate. Guo Jing still did not want to be entangled or worse, to injure her life; hence he only used 30% of his strength; who would have thought that this lady was very ferocious. If he was being negligent even so slightly, both of them would die in that place.

Guo Jing took a deep breath, raised up both of his elbows slightly, right hand forming a fist and left hand a palm, one struck vertically, the other pushed horizontally, one quick the other slow, both hands moved out. It was the sixteenth stance of the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms', the 'lu shuang bing zhi' [treading on frost to reach the ice], which was taught by Hong Qigong at the Liu ancestral hall in Baoying. Within this stance hard and soft complemented each other, upright and upside down completed each other; its advantage was unlimited.

Hong Qigong's martial art was from the 'hard' and 'yang' [positive, male] side, but when the hardness reached its peak, by default there would be softness in the middle of hardness. The fundamental of this martial art can be found in the Book of Changes ['I Ching'], where the older 'yang' gave birth to the younger 'yin'. Hence, within the Proud Dragon Repents and the Treading on Frost to Reach the Ice the hard energy and soft power blended together and was impossible to distinguish.

"Ah!" Ying Gu softly exclaimed and hastily eluded; she managed to get away from Guo Jing's right fist, but was hit

by his left kick. She also could not avoid Guo Jing's horizontal left palm, which pushed her right shoulder.

As his palm strength hit its target, Guo Jing was certain she would be pushed back against the wall. He was afraid the dirt wall of this thatched-roof hut would not be strong enough and collapse; but strangely as his palm was touching her shoulder he felt like her body was covered with a layer of exceptionally slippery thick lubricant that his palm slipped to her side. But her body was also shaking and the two pieces of bamboo strips in her hand fell to the ground.

Guo Jing was startled, quickly he restrained his force; but Ying Gu's agility was extraordinary, she had already taken advantage of a favorable situation. Her ten fingers shot forward and attacked the 'shen feng' [divine grace] and 'yu shu' [jade letter] acupoints on Guo Jing's chest. Her acupoint sealing technique was excellent.

Guo Jing found it was too late to parry; he leaned slightly to the side. His move resembled the stance he used just now, but a killing strike was concealed within the move. Something stirred in his heart, "Her acupoint sealing technique is somewhat similar to Zhou Dage's [Big Brother Zhou]; if I had not practiced with Zhou Dage for thousands and tens of thousands times in that cave, I wouldn't be able to avoid her attack just now."

Ying Gu felt a burst of energy coming out from Guo Jing's body through his right arm heading toward her own arm; she realized that if her arms were hit by the enemy's power, her arms would be broken for sure. Hence once again she used her Loach Maneuver to make Guo Jing's palm slipped by her shoulder.

These several moves were very exquisite, each one of them was unanticipated by the opponent; both were startled, they leaped back several steps almost simultaneously, both were taking defensive position. Guo Jing thought, "This lady's martial art is so weird! If I can't touch her, then I will be the one who will always fall under attack."

Ying Gu was also astonished, she thought, "This youngster is so young, how can he possess this kind of martial art skill?" Following which she thought, "I have been hiding here for more than a dozen of years, diligently training hard; inadvertently mastering a wonderful martial art skill, thinking I have become invincible in the world, very soon I can go out of this forest to seek revenge and to rescue someone. Who would have thought that in mathematics I am inferior to this young girl by a long shot, in term of martial art I can't even match this youngster who is still wet behind his ears? Much less he is carrying somebody on his back. If we fight for real, I would have lost early on. For dozens of years I endured pain and suffering, will it all be flushed in running water? Shall I give up my desire to seek revenge and rescue someone?" Having thought this, her eyes turned red and her nose ache; she could not restrain tears from rolling down her cheeks.

Guo Jing knew the strength of his own palm had shaken her, he busily said, "Junior had rudely offended Senior, I truly did not mean it; please forgive me and let us go."

Ying Gu noticed that while speaking Guo Jing repeatedly looked at Huang Rong with utmost concern in his face. She recalled her own misfortune, how she was separated from her lover and could not see each other until that day; her jealousy raged and she coldly said, "This girl was hit by Qiu Qianren's Iron Palm. There is a dark shadow on her face, she won't live to see the fourth day; why are you still concerned about her?"

Guo Jing was shocked, straightaway he examined Huang Rong's face, and indeed he could see a layer of dark shadow in between her eyebrows like it was smeared with ink. His heart turned cold, immediately he held Huang Rong up and with a trembling voice asked, "Rong'er, you ... how do you feel?"

Huang Rong felt her chest and abdomen fiery hot while her four limbs were icy cold. She knew that that lady did not speak nonsense; she sighed and said, "Jing Gege, during these three days, don't ever leave me even for a single step. Can you?"

"I ... I won't leave you even for half a step," Guo Jing said.

Ying Gu sneered and said, "Even if you won't leave her for half a step, you will only have seventy-two hours."

Guo Jing raised his head up, his eyes full of tears. He looked at that lady earnestly implored her not to say anything that might hurt Huang Rong's feeling.

Ying Gu was an unfortunate woman, dozens of years of suffering had given her a calloused heart. Seeing these two people who loved each other were going through a disaster, her heart was filled with delight. She was going to say something to hurt their feeling when she saw Guo Jing's miserable expression. Suddenly an idea come flashing like a lightning strike in her mind, she thought, "Ah, ah, the heaven sent these two here to help me fulfill my wish to revenge." She lifted her head and mused, "Heaven, oh Heaven!"

At that time the sound of people shouting outside the forest was getting louder. Apparently they had searched everywhere and came to the conclusion that Jing and Rong, two people were still in the forest; only they were unable to find the way to enter.

After about half a day, Qiu Qianren's voice was heard calling out from outside the forest, "Divine Mathematician Ying Gu, Qiu from the Iron Palm requests an audience." His words were shouted against the wind, but surprisingly could be heard clearly, an indication of a profound internal energy.

Ying Gu walked to the window, gather her 'qi' on her 'dan tian' and shouted back, "I usually don't see outsiders; whoever comes to the black marsh die, don't you know it?"

"There were one man and one woman who came into your black marsh; please deliver them to me," Qiu Qianren replied.

"Who can come into my black marsh? Qiu Bangzhu underestimates Ying Gu too much," Ying Gu called out.

Qiu Qianren let out a 'hey, hey, hey' cold laugh; seemed like he believed her words. Then they heard the shouting of the Iron Palm Clan people gradually getting father away. Ying Gu turned around to Guo Jing and asked, "Do you want to save your martial sister?"

Guo Jing was dumbstruck, immediately he bent his knees to kneel down and said, "If Senior is willing to give direction ..."

Ying Gu's face suddenly appeared to be covered with a layer of frost, sternly said, "Senior! Do you think I am old?"

"No, no!" Guo Jing hastily said, "Not too old."

Slowly Ying Gu's eyes moved from Guo Jing to look outside the window, she muttered softly, "Not too old. Hmm, after all, that means I am old."

Guo Jing was happy and anxious at the same time; listening to the way she talked, looked like Huang Rong could be saved. But his words had offended her, he was not sure if

she was still willing to render assistance. He wanted to say something to correct himself, but actually did not know what to say.

Ying Gu turned back to him, saw him to be sweating profusely, looking so distressed; there was a stab of pain in her heart, "If only my man showed one-tenth of the compassion this dumb kid has, ay, my life won't be in vain," she said in her heart. Then she softly recited, "'Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away. It's a pity; not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white. When the green spring grass ripples, in the deepest of dawn's cold, standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes.'"

Listening to her reciting this short poem, Guo Jing's heart was stirred, he silently thought, "It sounds familiar, I have heard it before." But tried as he might, he could not remember who wrote it. It was not his Er Shifu [Second Master] Zhu Cong, it was not Huang Rong either; so with a low voice he asked, "Rong'er, who composed the poem she recited? What does it mean?"

Huang Rong shook her head, "This is the first time I hear it, I don't know who composed it. Hmm, 'It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.' That was good! Mandarin ducks always have white head ..." [Translator's note: 'bai tou' literally means 'white head', but can also translated as 'white haired head' or 'old age'] Speaking to this point her eyes involuntarily turned toward Ying Gu's grizzled hair. "Exactly 'It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.'!" she thought.

"Rong'er was taught by her father, she knows everything. If it was a well-known poem, she would definitely know who composed it," Guo Jing thought, "Who recited this poem then? It couldn't be her, couldn't be her father, also I am

sure it couldn't be the Cloud Village's Master Lu. But I am sure I have heard it before. Ay, it doesn't matter who recited this poem as long as this Senior really has a way to save Rong'er. She asked me a question and I gave her a wrong answer. I wish I have a way to make amends. I don't care what she will ask me to do ..."

Presently Ying Gu was still immersed in the memory of her past; her face sometimes showed delight, sometimes showed sadness. In a short moment her heart was recalling decades' worth of gratitude and grudges. Suddenly she raised her head up and said, "Your martial sister has been hit by Qiu's Iron Palm. I don't know if he restrained the strength of his palm, or if it was you who blocked his palm, that she did not die immediately. Either way, in just three short days ... Hmm, there is only one man in this whole wide world who can save her life!"

Guo Jing was listening to every word she said, his heart was thumping madly. Hearing her last sentence he dropped down to his knees and 'bonk, bonk, bonk' knocking his head on the ground three times while calling out, "Please Sen ... No, no. Please, help us. We will be forever grateful."

Ying Gu coldly said, "Humph! Do I have the skill to save others? If I do have this divine power, why do I have to endure a damp and bitterly cold place like this?" Guo Jing did not dare to open his mouth. A moment later Ying Gu continued, "Just consider yourselves lucky you met me and I know this person's whereabouts; also consider yourselves lucky that he lives not too far away; you might be able to reach his place within three days. Only whether that man is willing to help or not, it's really hard to say."

Guo Jing was delighted, "I will earnestly ask him to help," he said, "I believe he won't go so far as seeing someone in distress and doesn't want to help."

Ying Gu smirked, "What do you mean 'won't go so far as seeing someone in distress and doesn't want to help'? Seeing someone dying and do nothing is human's natural behavior. You are going to ask earnestly, do you think other people did not? Do you think you can persuade him to help you? What have you done to him? Why would he want to help you?" Her voice was full of bitterness and resentment.

Guo Jing did not dare to open his mouth; presently there was a ray of hope for Huang Rong, he was afraid he might make a mistake even for half a word and thus ruined this opportunity. He saw that lady walked outside to the square room, sat down at the table, took a pen and started writing.

After writing for a while she folded the paper and wrapped it with a cloth, and then she took a needle and sewn the cloth into a tight pouch. In a similar matter she made three pouches, only then did she return to the round room. "After leaving this forest, avoid the Iron Palm Clan people, go straight northeast. When you arrive within the border of Taiyuan County, open the white pouch. Inside you will find what you are to do in detail. You are not to open the pouch for any reason before you arrive there."

Guo Jing was very happy, he gave his promise repeatedly, and held out his hand to receive the pouch. Ying Gu drew back her hand and said, "Not so fast! If that man is not willing to help, so be it. But if he is willing and can save her life, I have a request to make."

"We have received your kindness," Guo Jing said, "If Senior has anything for us to do, just let us know."

Ying Gu coldly said, "If your martial sister did not die, within a month she has to come back here and stay with me for a year."

"What for?" Guo Jing wondered.

"It's none of your business," Ying Gu sternly said, "I only ask her if she is willing or not?"

Huang Rong interrupted, "You want me to teach you 'qi men shu shu' [lit. strange/wonderful/ mysterious way counting method]. How difficult is that? All right, I give you my promise."

Ying Gu cast her glance toward Guo Jing and mocked, "It's useless for you to be a man; your intelligence is not even one-tenth of your martial sister's." But she handed out the three pouches to him anyway.

Guo Jing held out his hand. Other than the white pouch, he saw the other pouches were red and yellow. He put everything securely in his pocket and then bowed down to express his gratitude.

Ying Gu quickly moved aside, did not want to accept his gratitude. "You don't have to thank me," she said, "I don't need it. You two are neither my family nor my friends, why would I want to save her? Even if we were related you still don't need thank me profusely! Let me be frank with you in advance, I am helping her for my own behalf. Humph, whoever does not do things for themselves, let the Heaven punishes them to their death."

Her words sounded so cruel in Guo Jing's ears, but he had never been good with words, so he did not want to contradict her; besides, this time he had Huang Rong to think about, he did not dare to say anything even more, he simply listened respectfully.

Ying Gu looked at them condescendingly, she said, "You two must be tired tonight, also hungry. Have some porridge."

Huang Rong lied down on a couch, half awake and half asleep. Guo Jing stood by her side with heart full of

disquieting thoughts. A moment later Ying Gu came back with a wooden tray in her hands. There were two big bowls of steaming and sweet-smelling rice porridge on the tray, along with a big plate of wild chicken dish and a small plate of preserved fish.

Guo Jing had been hungry for a while; previously he forgot about food because he was deeply concerned about Huang Rong's condition. Right now he was in a better mood. Seeing the chicken, fish, and rice porridge he was forced to swallow a mouthful of saliva. Gently he tapped Huang Rong's hand and said, "Rong'er, wake up and eat some porridge."

Huang Rong opened her eyes slightly, shook her head and said, "My chest hurt very much, I can't eat."

Ying Gu sneered, "I have medicine to stop the pain, yet you were terribly suspicious."

Huang Rong ignored her, "Jing Gege," she said, "Take a Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill and give it to me." These were the pills given by Lu Chengfeng at the Cloud Village the other day. Huang Rong always carried them around in her pocket. When Hong Qigong and Guo Jing were injured by Ouyang Feng, they took some of these pills. Although the pills could not heal their injuries, but they could stop the pain and refresh their spirits. Guo Jing complied and untied her pouch, taking a pill out.

When Huang Rong mentioned the 'Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill', suddenly Ying Gu's body slightly shook; afterwards she saw the red pill, she sternly said, "Is that the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill? Let me take a look."

Guo Jing thought the way she spoke was really strange, unconsciously he lifted his head to stare at her. He saw a

glint of fierceness in her eyes, he felt even more strange; but he gave the pouch of pills to her nonetheless.

Ying Gu took the pills and brought them up to her nose. A whiff of fragrance attacked her nostrils, giving them a cool feeling. She looked at Guo Jing with penetrating gaze and asked, "This is the Peach Blossom Island's special medicine. Where did you get it? Tell me, tell me!" Her last sentence carried an extremely fierce tone.

Huang Rong's heart was moved, "This lady learned 'qi men wu xing' [mysterious gate five path]; is she related to one of my father's disciples?" She heard Guo Jing replied, "She is the daughter of the Peach Blossom Island's Master."

Ying Gu jumped up in shock, "She is the Old Heretic Huang's daughter?" Her eyes shone brightly, one arm extended, the other pulled back, as if she was about to strike.

"Jing Gege, give those three pouches back to her!" Huang Rong said, "She is my father's enemy, we don't need her pity."

Guo Jing took out the pouches, but he hesitated to hand them over. Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege, Just put them down! I may not necessarily die. Even if I die, so what?"

Guo Jing had never disobeyed Huang Rong from the start; he put down the pouches on the table with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Ying Gu was looking outside the window, muttering, "Heaven, oh Heaven!" Suddenly she walked to the other room. Her back was facing them, so they did not know what she was doing.

“Let us go,” Huang Rong said, “I am sick of seeing this woman.”

Before Guo Jing could answer, Ying Gu walked in and said, “I diligently studied mathematics because I want to enter the Peach Blossom Island. But judging from the Old Heretic Huang’s daughter, even if I study for another hundred years it will still be useless. It was fate. What more can I say? Just go. Take away these pouches.” While saying it she pushed the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pill pouch and the three pouches she made into Guo Jing’s hand. To Huang Rong she said, “These Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills are harmful to your injury. Don’t take it no matter what. After you are healed, don’t forget your promise to stay with me for a year. Your father had destroyed my life; I’d rather give all these food to the dogs than to let you eat them.” She threw the porridge, chicken and fish out the window.

Huang Rong was seething with anger; she wanted to answer back sarcastically, but then she changed her mind. She held Guo Jing’s hand and stood up, then with her bamboo stick she wrote three mathematics problems on the ground:

The first one included the ‘ri, yue, shui, huo, mu, jin, tu’ [sun, moon, water, fire, wood, metal and earth] collection of the ‘qi yao jiu zhi tian zhu bi suan’ [seven dazzling nine grasping Indian method of calculation].

The second one was ‘li fang zhao bing zhi yin gei mi ti’ [lit. ‘standing up soldier supplying silver’ topic]. [**Author’s note:** This is the vertical theory of numbers in western mathematics].

The third one was ‘gui gu suan ti’ [ghost valley mathematic problem]: “There is an unknown number; three and three has two as the remainder, five and five has three as the

remainder, seven and seven has two as the remainder, what mathematical operand is that?" [**Author's note:** this problem belongs to the theory of numbers of higher mathematics; our Song Dynasty scholars have been quite profound in this kind of study.]

After writing these three problems, Huang Rong slowly walked out, holding on Guo Jing's arm. As he stepped over the door, Guo Jing turned his head around and saw Ying Gu's hand grasping her computing device, her eyes fixed to the ground like she was entranced. As soon as they were outside Guo Jing carried Huang Rong on his back, still following Huang Rong's direction, walking step by step out of the marsh. Guo Jing was afraid he might miscount his steps, so he did not dare to say anything; but as soon as they left the forest he asked, "Rong'er, what did you write on the sand?"

Huang Rong smiled, "I gave three mathematical problems to her. Humph, I doubt it if she will be able to solve them in half a year. Let all her gray hair turn white. Who told her to be so rude?"

"What enmity does she have toward your father?" Guo Jing asked.

"I have never heard Father mentioned it," Huang Rong replied. After being silent for about half a day she suddenly said, "She must be very beautiful when she was young. Jing Gege, don't you agree?" Actually she bore a suspicion in her heart, "Is it possible that in the former days my father and she were lovers? Humph, most likely she wanted my father to marry her but my father did not want her."

Guo Jing replied, "Doesn't matter if she was beautiful or not; even if she cannot solve your problems she still won't be able to chase us and take the pouches back."

"I wonder what's inside those pouches. I doubt it if she had our well-beings in her mind. Let's open them and take a look," Huang Rong said.

"No, no!" Guo Jing hastily said, "We must follow her instructions, we must not open it until we arrive at Taoyuan."

Huang Rong was very curious; she persuaded Guo Jing to open it, but Guo Jing firmly refused; finally Huang Rong resigned.

After being busy the whole night finally the sky turned brighter. Guo Jing leaped up a tree to take a good look around; he was relieved not to see any trail of the Iron Palm Clan disciples. He whistled loudly several times, and the little red horse came galloping fast. Not too long afterwards his pair of eagles was also seen flying above their heads.

Two people were just mounting the horse when suddenly they heard shouts coming out of the forest. Dozens of Iron Palm Clan disciples came rushing forward. They have been guarding around the forest for half a night. As soon as they heard Guo Jing's whistle they came out to catch them. Luckily Qiu Qianren was not among these people. Guo Jing called out, "You missed!" He squeezed his legs on the horse's belly and the little red horse ran like the wind; in a moment they could not see their pursuers anymore.

By noon that day the little red horse had run for more than a hundred 'li's; they stopped by a small restaurant by the roadside. Huang Rong's chest was still hurting, but she managed to drink half a bowl of rice soup. Guo Jing asked around and found out that they had arrived within Taoyuan County border. Quickly he took the white pouch and cut the thread. Inside he found a map with two lines of characters which read, "Follow the route shown on the map. At the end

of the road you will find a waterfall with a thatched hut next to it. Open the red pouch when you arrive there.” Guo Jing did not tarry any longer; they remounted the horse and galloped away.

After traveling for about seventy, eighty ‘li’s, the road was getting narrower. Eight, nine ‘li’s later they entered a narrow passageway with mountain walls on both sides. Soon the pathway turned into a winding alley so narrow that one person could barely squeeze through. They were compelled to leave little red horse to graze by itself on the side of the hill. Guo Jing took Huang Rong and carried her on his back; together they entered the alley. Following the steep mountain pathway they walked for about two hours. Sometimes the alley was so narrow that Guo Jing had to lift Huang Rong up and he walked sideways, squeezing in between the mountain walls.

It was already the seventh month, the weather was scorching hot and it felt like the heat would be enough to melt metal. Fortunately there were skyscraping mountain peaks around them cooling down their path.

A moment later Guo Jing was hungry; he took some dried buns from his pocket and tore several pieces to feed Huang Rong. He did not stop walking however; he was eating while walking forward. After eating three buns he was thirsty. Suddenly he heard from a distant a faint sound of a waterfall. His spirit arose and he sped up his steps.

In the quietness of the mountain, that waterfall echoed in the valley, creating a loud rumbling noise like a torrential flood. The closer he got, the louder the noise became. When he reached the top of the hill he saw a big waterfall like a white dragon coming out from in between a pair of peaks opposite the hill where he was standing, falling down to a big pond below with astonishing force.

From the top of the hill Guo Jing looked down and saw a thatched hut next to the waterfall. Guo Jing sat on a piece of rock and took the red pouch from his pocket. Inside was a piece of paper with these words: 'The injury this girl suffers can only be healed by Emperor Duan ...'

Seeing those three characters 'Duan huang ye' [Emperor Duan] Guo Jing was startled, "Emperor Duan, isn't he the Southern Emperor who share the same fame as your father?" he asked.

Huang Rong was exhausted, but hearing him mentioned the Southern Emperor her heart was stirred. "Emperor Duan?" she said, "Shifu also said that his injury can only be healed by Emperor Duan. I heard my father mentioned Emperor Duan is the emperor of Dali in Yunnan. Isn't that ...". Suddenly she remembered that this place was separated with Yunnan by 'ten thousand rivers and a thousand mountains' [wan shui qian shan - meaning 'the trails and tribulations of a long journey']. It was impossible to reach in three days. Suddenly her chest felt cold. She made an effort to sit down and leaning on Guo Jing they read the paper together.

'The injury this girl suffers can only be healed by Emperor Duan. Because many of his conducts were not righteous he hid himself in Taoyuan and made it very difficult for outsiders to see him. Anyone seeking medical help is a taboo to him; if you mention your intention, before you reach his residence you will be stopped by the vicious hands of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar. Therefore, you must say that you have an important message from your master Hong Qigong and want to have an audience with the Emperor. Once you are in the presence of the Southern Emperor, give him the yellow pouch. Your fate depends on this.'

Finished reading Guo Jing turned his head to Huang Rong only to see her frowning silently. "Rong'er," he asked, "Why did Emperor Duan do many unrighteous conducts? Why is it seeking medical help is a taboo to him? What are the vicious hands of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar?"

Huang Rong sighed, "Jing Gege, please don't think that I am so smart that I know everything."

Guo Jing was taken aback; he held out his arms and gave Huang Rong a hug. "Very well, let us go down," he said. Casting his glance to the distant he could see there was a man sitting under the willow tree next to the waterfall. That man was wearing a bamboo hat, but because the distance was quite far he could not see clearly what that man was doing.

First, he was in a hurry, second, the pathway down was a lot easier, therefore, without needing to much time Guo Jing with Huang Rong on his back quickly arrived by the waterfall. He saw that man was wearing a raincoat, sitting on a piece of rock, fishing.

The falling water created a strong rapids, the water flowed too fast, how could there be any fish? Even if there was, how could the fish have time to take the bait?

Guo Jing saw that man was about forty years old, his face was black like the bottom of a pot, full with beards and whiskers sprouting out like wire brush. His eyes stared motionless toward the water. Seeing he was fishing with a full concentration Guo Jing did not dare to disturb, he put Huang Rong down by the willow tree to rest, while they waited to see what kind of fish live in that waterfall.

After waiting for a long time suddenly a golden streak of light came flashing out of the water; that fisherman's face

showed delight, his fishing pole was bent downward. They saw something about a foot long biting the fishing line. That something did not look like either a fish or a snake, it looked so strange.

Guo Jing was astounded, he could not restrain from calling out, "Ah! What is that?"

By that time another golden streak jumped up the water to bite the fishing line. That fisherman was delighted, he kept the fishing pole steady. But the pole was bent more and more. The fisherman struggled to keep it straight. 'Crack!' suddenly the pole broke. Two strange fish let the fishing line go, then swam away complacently. The water current was very strong but it seemed like those fish were swimming in a still water. In an instant they disappeared under a rock.

The fisherman turned around with eyes bulging, glaring angrily, shouted loudly, "Stinky kid, your old man has waited painstakingly for half a day, and then you little thief came and scared them away." His hands stretched out with palms open wide, moved forward two steps ready to pounce. But for an unknown reason he managed to control his temper and held his big hands; his finger joints made cracking sounds; his face was full of anger.

Guo Jing realized he had inadvertently caused trouble therefore he did not dare to talk back. "Uncle is angry, that was my fault. But what kind of strange fish are they?" he humbly asked.

That fisherman scolded him, "Are you blind? Those are not fish, those are 'jin wawa' [golden baby or baby doll]."

Guo Jing was not angry even though scolded; he smiled and asked further, "Please forgive my ignorance, but what is a 'jin wawa'?"

That fisherman flew into a rage, he shouted, "'Jin wawa' is 'jin wawa', why do you stinky little thief want to know anyway?"

Because Guo Jing earnestly wanted to ask him to show the way to see Emperor Duan, he did not dare to say anything, he simply raised his cupped fists to apologize.

Huang Rong could not hold her patience much longer, she interrupted, "'Jin wawa' is a golden colored giant salamander. We raise several pairs of them in my home. What's so strange about it?"

Listening to Huang Rong correctly explained what a 'jin wawa' really was, the fisherman was slightly confounded, he scolded, "Humph, you are blowing your horn very loud! Raising several pairs of them! Let me ask you, what's the purpose of a 'jin wawa'?"

"What's the purpose?" Huang Rong asked, "They are attractive, can make a 'ya ya ya' noise like a little baby, so we raise them to play with them."

Hearing her saying the right thing, that fisherman's face softened, he said, "Little baby girl, if you raise several pairs in your house, then you must give me a pair to compensate my loss."

"Why must I compensate you?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman pointed to Guo Jing and said, "I happened to catch one with my fishing pole, but he came and rudely shouted, so the other one appeared and pull apart my fishing pole. This 'jin wawa' is very smart; once it escaped danger, don't ever think of catching it for the second time. If I don't ask you to compensate me, whom should I ask?"

Huang Rong smiled, "Even if you did catch it, you only caught one. Try as you might, but how could the second one be willing to take your bait?"

The fisherman could not find any word to answer this; he scratched his head and said, "All right then, just give me one."

"If you separate a pair of 'jin wawa', within three days both of them, the male and the female, will die," Huang Rong said.

That fisherman did not have any doubt anymore; he cupped his fists and bowed respectfully to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, "All right, just consider it my fault," he said, "Would you share a pair with me?"

Huang Rong smiled. "Tell me first, what are you going to do with 'jin wawa'?" she asked.

The fisherman hesitated a little bit, then explained, "All right, I'll tell you. My martial uncle is an Indian. He had come to visit my master these past few days. On the way here he managed to catch a pair of 'jin wawa'; he was very happy. He said there was an extremely poisonous insect harming a lot of people in India. There was no way of exterminating this insect. This 'jin wawa' is actually the insect's adversary. He asked me to take care of them for a few days, and then hand them back to him by the time he is done talking to my master and is ready to go down the mountain. He is going to take them back to India and breed them. Who would have thought ..."

"Who would have thought you were not careful and let the 'jin wawa's run away into this waterfall," Huang Rong cut him off.

That fisherman was startled, "Ah! How did you know?" he asked.

Huang Rong pouted her little mouth and said, "Is that so difficult to guess? This 'jin wawa' is really not easy to keep. Originally we have five pairs, later on two pairs ran away."

The fisherman's eyes gleamed, his face showed a happy expression. "Good Miss, please give me a pair. You will still have two pairs. Or else my martial uncle will be mad at me; I may not be able to take it," he begged.

Huang Rong laughed. "It's not difficult to give you a pair, but why were you so vicious to us earlier?" she asked.

That fisherman smiled awkwardly, he sheepishly said, "Ay! My bad temper; I really have to change. Good Miss, where is your mansion? Is it alright if I follow you? Is it far from here?"

Huang Rong gently let out a deep breath and said, "If you say it's near, it is not; but if you say it is far, it isn't either. Maybe about three, four thousand 'li's from here."

That fisherman was startled, his brush-wire whiskers stood up, he roared, "Little girl, you are swindling me!" His vinegar-bowl sized fist raised up, ready to smash Huang Rong's head; but realizing she was only a young and feeble girl, he was afraid he might kill her. His fist stayed midair then slowly dropped down to his side.

Guo Jing was ready, as soon as that fisherman strikes, he would block the attack immediately. Huang Rong smiled and said, "Why worry? I have already had a good idea from the start. Jing Gege, please call the white eagles."

Guo Jing was not clear of her intention, but he whistled to call the eagles anyway. That fisherman was secretly

surprised; Guo Jing's whistle echoed throughout the valleys and mountains, supported by a profound internal energy. "Luckily I did not fight with him earlier," he thought, "Otherwise this little kid will beat me to death."

Not too long afterwards, the pair of eagles came flying by, following the whistle sound. Huang Rong peeled a piece of tree bark, and then carved a line of characters with a needle, 'Father, I want a pair of 'jin wawa'. Let the eagles carry them back here. Your daughter Rong pays respect.'

Guo Jing was delighted; he cut two pieces of cloth from his belt and firmly tied the bark on the male eagle's foot. "Go to the Peach Blossom Island, quickly go and quickly come back," Huang Rong told the pair of eagles.

Guo Jing was afraid the eagles did not understand, he pointed to the east and said three times, "Peach Blossom Island." The pair of eagles let out a long cry, lifted up their wings and soared away. They made a circle in the air, headed east and then disappeared behind the clouds in a short moment.

The fisherman's jaw dropped and stayed open for a while; he muttered, "Peach Blossom Island, Peach Blossom Island? What is Huang Yaoshi, Venerable Huang to you?"

"He is my father, why?" Huang Rong proudly said.

"Ah!" that fisherman exclaimed; he was at a loss of words.

Huang Rong said, "My white eagles will bring the 'jin wawa' here in a few days; it won't be too late, will it?"

"I hope not," the fisherman said. He looked up and down Jing and Rong two people to size them up with eyes full of suspicions.

Guo Jing bowed and asked, "We haven't found out Uncle's honorable name."

The fisherman did not answer, instead he asked questions, "What are you doing here? Who told you to come here?"

Guo Jing respectfully answered, "Junior has come to seek an audience with Emperor Duan." Initially he wanted to say as Ying Gu had directed them to say, that Hong Qigong had sent them to come; but he was not able to lie, eventually he did not say anything.

"My Shifu does not see outsiders," that fisherman sternly said, "What do you want from him?"

By Guo Jing's natural disposition, he wanted to speak the truth, but he was afraid they would not be able to see the Southern Emperor, and thus jeopardizing Huang Rong's life. He could not say the truth, yet he did not have the power to lie; so he hesitated before answering the question.

The fisherman noticed his indeterminate expression, also Huang Rong's thin and pale countenance; he had guessed 70, 80% correctly. "You want my Shifu to heal your injury, don't you?" he roared.

Guo Jing felt like a heavy load was taken from his mind, he had nothing to hide any longer. He had no other choice but nodded his head, but his heart was filled with anxiety and regret, he hated himself for not being able to tell a lie.

The fisherman was almost shouting, "Don't ever think of seeing my Shifu. Even if I have to bear my Shifu and Shishu's [martial uncle] scolding, I don't want your 'jin wawa' or 'yin wawa' [silver baby] anymore. Just go down the mountain, quick!"

His words without any doubt did not give them the slightest amount of leniency. Guo Jing was silent for half a day, sucking in cold air. After a moment he stepped forward and bowed respectfully. "The injured is the Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang] of Peach Blossom Island's daughter. Currently she is also the Bangzhu of the Beggar Clan. I am asking Uncle to consider Island Master Huang and Hong Bangzhu's golden faces and show us the way so that we can seek an audience with the Emperor Duan."

Hearing the three characters 'Hong Bangzhu', the fisherman's countenance softened; he shook his head and said, "This young miss is the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu? I don't believe it."

Guo Jing pointed his finger to the bamboo stick in Huang Rong's hand, he said, "This is the Beggar Clan Leader's Dog-beating Stick; certainly Uncle recognize it."

The fisherman nodded. "What is the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar to you, then?" he asked.

"He is our Benevolent Master," Guo Jing replied.

"Ah!" the fisherman exclaimed, "Is that so? Are coming to see my Shifu on the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's instruction?"

Guo Jing hesitated before answering, Huang Rong quickly answered, "Certainly."

The fisherman lowered his head in doubt, he thought, "The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar has an extraordinary friendship with my Shifu. How should I handle this matter?"

Huang Rong understood his hesitation, she wanted to take advantage of this opportunity; she said, "Our Shifu sent us here to seek an audience with Emperor Duan, other than to

ask him to treat injury, also to respectfully inform him on a very important matter.”

The fisherman suddenly raised his head up, with eyes blazing like a thunderbolt he fixed his gaze on Huang Rong and sternly asked, “The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar told you to seek audience with Emperor Duan?”

“That’s right!” Huang Rong said.

“Did he really say ‘Emperor Duan’ and not some other name?” the fisherman pressed.

Huang Rong knew there must be something in the way he said that name, but she could not correct herself; she had no choice but nodded her head in affirmative.

The fisherman moved two steps forward and with a loud voice shouted, “Emperor Duan has been no longer in this world for a while now!”

Jing, Rong, two people were shocked; with a shaking voice they asked, “He died?”

The fisherman said, “When Emperor Duan was leaving this world, the Senior Nine-fingered Divine Beggar was by his side. How could he tell you to visit Emperor Duan? Who told you to come here? What kind of evil scheme are you playing? Quickly tell me.” While still speaking he took a big step, his left hand brushed away, his right hand stretched horizontally to grab Huang Rong’s shoulder.

Guo Jing had guarded from the start against the possibility that he would resort to violence. As soon as his right hand was within a foot from Huang Rong’s body, Guo Jing’s left palm made a circle, his right palm went straight forward, in the ‘jian long zai tian’ [Seeing Dragon in the Field] posture, blocking in front of Huang Rong’s body.

This move was a purely defensive in nature, like a strong invisible wall was suddenly appeared in between Huang Rong and the fisherman. The fisherman saw that although Guo Jing sent out his palm, but he was leaning to one side, hence he did not actually attack him; he was slightly surprised, but his hand continued to grab Huang Rong's shoulder. When his hand was about half a foot apart from his target, Guo Jing's palm met his, and he felt a shot of pain on his arm, flowing up to his chest, like his attacking force rebounded and attacked his own body. He was afraid Guo Jing would take advantage of this unfavorable situation and launched another attack; he hurriedly leaped back with arm horizontally situated in front of his chest. "I heard it when Hong Qigong discussed martial art with Shifu; this is precisely his '18-Dragon Subduing Palms'. Then these two youngsters are truly his disciples; they were not lying," he thought.

He saw Guo Jing cupped his fists across his chest with modesty and respect; even though Guo Jing had gained the upper hand, yet his expression did not show the least bit of self-complacency, making a good impression on the heart of the fisherman. He said, "Although you two are really the Senior Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's disciples, but he was not the one who sent you here, was he?"

Guo Jing did not know how he could guess correctly, but since their lie had been uncovered, he was unable to deny and was compelled to nod his head. The fisherman's face was not as fierce and full of enmity as before. "Even if the injured were the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar himself, Xiao Ge [lit. little 'elder brother', he was referring to himself] still cannot take the Senior to go up the mountain and see my Shifu. I beg for your forgiveness."

"Even if my Shifu is here you still cannot take him up?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman shook his head, "I can't! Even if you kill me I still can't!" he said.

In her heart Huang Rong was thinking over, "He clearly admitted that Emperor Duan is his Shifu; but he also said that Emperor Duan has already died, and that Benevolent Master Hong was by his side when he died. There are too many strange things here, but this man is really difficult to talk to." She thought further, "His Shifu is on this mountain, for that I am certain; whether he is Emperor Duan or not, we have to go up and see him." She lifted her eyes to see the mountain was so high that its peak disappeared into the cloud above; it was higher than the Iron Palm's Middle Finger Peak, the mountain rocks looked slippery, not even a blade of grass grew. It looked like the waterfall was coming out of nowhere. There was no visible path going up the mountain. She thought, "Li Bai [a famous poet from the Tang Dynasty] said the water of Huang He [Yellow River] went up to the sky; this water truly comes from the sky."

Following the waterfall her gaze moved down; her mind was still churning a way to climb up the mountain, suddenly her eyes caught a golden light glittering under the water, something was moving in the water. Slowly she walked to the side of the waterfall to see more clearly. Turned out it was the pair of 'jin wawa' beneath a rock, their tails were swaying back and forth outside. Quickly she beckoned Guo Jing to come over and see.

"Ah!" Guo Jing exclaimed, "Let me go down to catch them," he said.

"No! Don't!" Huang Rong said, "The current is too strong, how can you set your feet down? Don't be so foolish."

But Guo Jing thought, "If I take the risk to catch these two strange fish for the fisherman, maybe his heart will be

moved and he will take us to see his master. Otherwise, will I have to see Huang Rong suffer from her injury helplessly without anybody to heal her?" He knew Huang Rong would stop him, therefore, without saying anything, without even took out his shoes or socks, he jumped into the waterfall below.

"Jing Gege!" Huang Rong anxiously called. She stood up and tried to rush forward, but her legs were feeble, she was staggering.

The fisherman was also stunned, he extended his hand to hold Huang Rong; then immediately rushed toward the thatched hut. It looked like he was going to fetch something to rescue Guo Jing.

Huang Rong sat back on a rock to watch Guo Jing. She saw he was standing steadily in the water; the waterfall flushed on him crazily, attacked him fiercely, but surprisingly his body did not falter at all. Slowly bending his waist he grabbed the 'jin wawa'. With each hand holding the 'jin wawa's tail, he gently pulled them out. He was afraid to injure the strange fish, hence he did not use too much strength; who would have thought that the 'jin wawa's body was really slippery. By wriggling their tails they managed to get loose from Guo Jing's grab and sneaked back under the rock. Guo Jing quickly reached out, but he was still a little bit slow; in an instant the fish disappeared without any trace.

Huang Rong cried out in dismay, suddenly she heard somebody called out in alarm behind her back. She turned around and saw the fisherman stood behind her. There was a shiny black small boat on his left shoulder and two iron oars in his left hand; obviously he was ready to rescue Guo Jing.

Guo Jing sent his strength to his feet, with 'qian jin zhui' [thousand-catty fall] he stood firm on a rock, steady as a pillar. He held his breath and reached down to the rock under which the strange fish escaped, trying to lift it up. To his delight the rock slightly moved. Using the 'dragon fly to the sky' from the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms his hands jerked the rock up; with a loud splash that huge rock was unexpectedly lifted up.

Guo Jing moved wonderfully fast; with the 'qian long wu yong' [hidden dragon is useless(?)] he shoved the rock horizontally. The rock was hit both by his palm and the waterfall; it fell down next to his body, with a rumbling and gurgling noise it disappeared into the deep abyss below. The noise echoed throughout the valley for a long time. Guo Jing lifted high his arms with a 'jin wawa' in each hand; step by step he came out of the waterfall.

Day and night the water fell down, with the passage of time it had created a gully some two 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3 meters] deep. The fisherman saw Guo Jing was standing at the bottom of this gully; how could he jump up? Hence he held out his oar for Guo Jing to grab, then he would lift it up. But Guo Jing hands were full with a pair of strange fish, he was afraid if he loosened up his grip the fish would slip away. Gathering his strength his right foot pushed the bottom, followed by his left foot kicking the edge of the gully; he managed to borrow the strength to leap up ashore.

Even though they have been together for a while, Huang Rong did not expect his skill had improved this much. She was pleased and amazed at the same time to watch him standing firm under water, lifting up the rock, grabbing the fish, and leaping up from underneath the strong force of the waterfall like it was nothing.

Actually, in order to save Huang Rong Guo Jing did not think about how he recklessly braved the danger, but as he was ashore he turned his head to see the rushing water splashing everywhere, he could not help but feel dizzy and scared. He could not believe he had this kind of guts to go underwater.

The fisherman admired him endlessly; he knew that if Guo Jing's internal energy, lightness kungfu and external strength were less than excellent not only he would not be able to catch the fish, but he would certainly drowned into the deep abyss underneath the fall.

The two 'jin wawa's struggled in Guo Jing's hands with their 'wah wah' calls, just like a baby's cry. Guo Jing laughed, "No wonder they are called 'wawa' fish, they sounded just like a baby crying." He held out his hands to give the fish to the fisherman.

The fisherman's face bore a delightful expression, he dropped his oars and held out his hand to receive the fish when suddenly he remembered something. He withdrew his hand and said, "Just throw them back into the water, I can't take them."

"Why?" Guo Jing wondered.

"Even if I receive your 'jin wawa' I still can't take you up to see my Shifu," the fisherman said, "Receiving a favor and did not pay it back; won't I be the laughingstock of the world's heroes?"

Guo Jing was startled, with a solemn face he said, "Uncle cannot take us up, you must have your own difficulty, how could Junior force our will? But this pair of fish is such a trivial matter, who said anything about favor? Uncle does not need to think about it, please take them." While saying it he shoved the fish into the fisherman's hand.

The fisherman finally took the fish, his face looked awkward. Guo Jing turned to Huang Rong and said, "Rong'er, as the saying goes, life and death is in the fate's hand, a long life is difficult to predict; even if your injury is incurable, on the cloudy road of life you will always have your Jing Gege to keep you company. Let us go!"

Listening to Guo Jing revealing his true feeling Huang Rong's eyes turned red; but she still had something in her heart. She turned to the fisherman and said, "Uncle, you are not willing to lead us up, that's all right. But there is something I don't understand. If you don't tell me, then I will die unsatisfied."

"What is that?" the fisherman asked.

"This mountain peak is smooth as a mirror," Huang Rong said, "There is no pathway to the top. Even if you are willing to take us up, how would you do that?"

The fisherman thought, "If I don't take them up, there is no way they can go up the mountain by themselves. I guess it won't do any harm to tell them." Thereupon he said, "If you think it's difficult, then it is, but if you say it's easy, it really is very easy. Just around that horn-shaped hill on the right there is no waterfall, the current is not as strong. I can sit on this iron boat and paddle against the flow. One time up I can take somebody with me, the second time up I can take two people."

"Ah!" Huang Rong exclaimed, "That's how it is. Farewell now!" She stood up and leaning on Guo Jing for support she turned around and left. Guo Jing cupped his fists across his chest but did not say anything.

The fisherman saw they were walking down the mountain, he was afraid the 'jin wawa' would escape, he dashed toward the thatched hut to put them away for safekeeping.

“Quick! Grab the iron boat and the oars and go to that horn-shaped peak,” Huang Rong said,

Guo Jing was stunned. “This ... isn’t this inappropriate?” he stammered.

“Fine! You want to be a gentleman, then be a gentleman!” Huang Rong said.

“Which is more important? Saving Rong’er’s life or be a gentleman?” This thought flashed through Guo Jing’s mind several times; it was hard for him to decide. But then he saw Huang Rong had started walking quickly to the peak; he did not have time to contemplate much longer. He heaved the iron boat up and hastily went to the peak. With a loud shout, “Up!” he tossed the boat onto upstream of the waterfall. Once the boat was out of his hands he grabbed the iron oars and held them underneath his left armpit, while with his right hand he embraced Huang Rong.

By that time the iron boat had been floating downstream, carried by the current. Suddenly he heard a sound of secret projectile behind his head; immediately he ducked and let the secret projectile flew over his head. He leaped forward and in an instant both of them landed inside the boat. A secret projectile hit Huang Rong’s back, fortunately it hit the soft hedgehog armor inside the sack on her back. Amidst the rumbling noise of the water they heard the fisherman’s loud roar, but they could not hear clearly what he was saying.

Very soon the boat was on the verge of the waterfall. If they fell over the edge in this fast flowing waterfall their bodies would certainly shattered to dust. Guo Jing’s left hand grabbed the iron oar and hastily rowed with all his might; the boat moved upstream a few feet. His right hand

released Huang Rong and grabbed the other oar and pulled; again the boat moved a few feet forward.

The fisherman stood by the bank, pointing his two fingers, angrily cursing and scolding. Amidst the wind and the water noises they could hear some 'stinky girl' and 'lowly scoundrel' words. Huang Rong giggled and said, "He still thinks you are the good man. He is only cursing me."

All Guo Jing's attention was focused on rowing the boat; he did not hear what she said. His arms frantically paddled the boat against the flow; the iron boat's keel was slowly cutting the wave. The current on that place was not as strong as the waterfall, but it was strong and rapid enough to make Guo Jing's face turned red from exerting his strength. Several times he was almost pushed back downstream.

A moment later they arrived at the part where the current was slightly slower; by that time Guo Jing had started to understand how to handle the oars. Using the mutual hands combat technique he launched the 'divine dragon swings its tail' successively. Each paddling movement was supported by the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms' strength; his palm strength was transmitted to the end of the oar. The left hand paddled with 'divine dragon swings its tail', followed by the right hand with 'divine dragon swings its tail', the iron boat slowly moving upstream through a winding river ways.

"Even with that fisherman paddling, the boat would not necessarily move faster than this," Huang Rong complimented.

A short moment later there was sandy beach on either side of the river; and after turning a bend, the scenery was picturesque: the clear brook softly murmured, the river

flowed very smoothly, on some parts it even looked like a still water. The river was only about a 'zhang' wide, with weeping willow trees on either side, their leaves brushing the water. Just behind the green willow trees they could see countless peach trees. It must be very beautiful in the spring time when the peach trees were in full bloom. Currently there was not a single peach blossom in sight, but the river banks were full of clusters of white florets, the air was thick with their fragrance.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong both were very relaxed; they had never expected that in this high mountain peak there was a whole different world. The water was deep green like a jade, so deep that they could not see the bottom. Guo Jing lowered the iron oar, trying to gauge the river's depth; but he was startled since the oar was almost slipped from his grip. Turned out while on the surface the water was smooth like a mirror, there was a strong current flowing deep below the surface.

The iron boat slowly moved forward; birds were flying and chirping among the green willow leaves. Huang Rong sighed, "If my injury is incurable, I'd like to be buried here; I don't want to go back down again," she said.

Guo Jing was about to say some encouraging words when the iron boat suddenly entered a tunnel. Inside the tunnel the fragrance was very thick while the water flowed faster; they heard some loud noise ahead. "What's that?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong shook her head, "I don't know."

Very soon they saw a light, the iron boat had come out of the tunnel; two people could not help to gasp, "Beautiful!"

Outside the tunnel they saw an enormous fountain, perhaps its height reached two 'zhang's. The white bubbles and

jade-green streams formed a giant water column spurting straight up to the sky from the middle of a rock. The noise they heard came from this fountain. The creek stopped here; turned out this fountain was the spring from which the river and the waterfall originated.

Guo Jing helped Huang Rong came ashore. He pulled the iron boat up a rock and turned his head around. He saw the sun light shone through the water column, created a dazzlingly beautiful rainbow. The scenery was out-of-this-world; even if they had hundreds praises, they would not be able to find one that is suitable to describe what they saw. All they could do was holding each other's hand and sat side by side on a rock; their heart was bright and clean, with nothing to worry.

After enjoying this scenery for half a day, they suddenly heard a sound of singing coming from behind the rainbow. The tune was 'shan po yang' [hillside sheep]:

"Cities and towns turned bad, where are the heroes? Can the dragon in the cloud explain? Thinking about prosperity and decline, constricting the chest. Tang Dynasty arose Sui Dynasty declined, the way of the world is like an ever changing cloud. Quick, is the heaven and earth's fault; slow, also is the heaven and earth's fault!"

The 'hillside sheep' was a popular song from the end of the Song Dynasty, everybody everywhere could sing the song. The tune was only one, but the lyrics could be changed as the singer wished, so unavoidably there are hundreds of thousands variations out there, only most of them were rustic and vulgar.

Huang Rong noticed that this song was lamenting the rise and decline of human race, carrying a profound meaning; she secretly applauded the singer. She saw the singer came

out from behind the rainbow; his left hand carried a bundle of firewood, while his right hand holding an axe; turned out he was a woodcutter.

Huang Rong recalled Ying Gu's note that read, 'Anyone seeking medical help is a taboo to him, if you mention your intention, before you reach his residence you will be stopped by the vicious hands of a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar.' At that time she was not clear what 'a fisherman, a woodcutter, a farmer and a scholar' meant, but now she realized the man catching 'jin wawa' was the fisherman, and now she saw the woodcutter. Then the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar must be Emperor Duan's disciples or trusted aides. She could not help feeling anxious, "It was really not easy to go through that fisherman. This woodcutter's song was not vulgar, looks like he is not easy to deal with. I wonder what kind of people are the farmer and the scholar?"

In the meantime the woodcutter continues to sing, "On the Tianjin bridge, leaning against the railing looking afar, the air of the royalty has withered and fallen. Amidst the dark green trees and the vast water, from the cloud platform the resurgence is nowhere to be seen. From eternity, in a cycle of life, everything perished. Merit, won't last forever! Name, also won't last forever!"

He slowly walked near and looked toward Jing and Rong, two people's direction; but it was as if he did not see them, he simply drew his axe and started chopping wood on the hillside.

Huang Rong noticed this man's face was grand and heroic, his appearance like that of a tiger's. The way he lifted his hand or took a step carried an impressive power like that of an army general. If he wasn't wearing coarse clothes and chopping woods in this secluded mountain, he surely gave

an impression as the general who is in charge of a large army. Huang Rong's heart was stirred, "Shifu said that the Southern Emperor, Emperor Duan is actually an emperor of Dali in Yunnan; could it be that this woodcutter was actually his general? Only why did his song carry a desperate and mournful sentiment?" she thought.

The woodcutter continued singing, "Mountain peaks stand as if they are gathered together, the billows roll as if they were angry. The mountains and rivers in and around the road to Tongguan; looking to the west, hearts full of doubts. Grieving Qin and Han dynasties, their palaces have turned into dust. Flourished, common people suffered; perished, common people suffered!"

Listening the last two lines, Huang Rong remembered her father often said, 'What is emperor or general? All are criminals harming common people. Toppling dynasty, changing surname; in the end the common people suffered!' She was unable to restrain from shouting her praise, "Good song!"

The woodcutter turned his head, inserting the axe back to his waist he asked, "Good? What's good about it?"

Huang Rong was about to answer, but then she thought, "He loves to sing, why don't I sing the 'hillside sheep' to answer him?" Thereupon she smiled slightly, lowered her head and sang, "Green mountains waiting for each other, white clouds love each other; not even dreaming of purple robe and golden belt. One thatched hut among the blooming wild flower; why worry over who flourished and who perished? Sufficient is a humble pathway and a single ladle. Poor, spirit does not change; success, the will does not change!"

She had concluded that this woodcutter must be the general who followed the Southern Emperor to this secluded place; formerly he must be in charge of the whole army, one who once held a prominent place in the kingdom. Accordingly the song she sang was a praise to his merit and name, to the one who lived contentedly in a wild mountain forest. Actually, even though she was witty and intelligent, by all means she was not a scholar who in a short time was able to compose a good song like the one she had just sung. When she was on the Peach Blossom Island she heard her father sang this song; only she changed several characters to emphasis this woodcutter's former days of riches and honor and place great importance on his meritorious achievements. It was a pity she was suffering an injury that her internal energy was not as strong and her voice was rather weak. As the saying goes, 'qian chuan wan chuan, ma pi bu chuan!' [lit. thousand times bore through, ten thousand times bore through; horse's fart does not bore through - meaning "Anything gets through me except horse fart" (Courtesy of Sunnysnow)] This song had made the woodcutter very pleased when he heard it. He had noticed that Jing and Rong, two people were riding on the iron boat and using the iron oars to paddle along the river; surely it must be the fisherman down the mountain who lend the boat to them. He did not have any suspicion, and without asking too many questions he simply pointed to a hillside and said, "Go up that way!"

They saw a long rattan about the size of a human's arm hanging along the hillside going up to the peak. Jing and Rong, two people looked up above to see half of the peak was hidden in the cloud, it was unclear how high the peak was.

When Huang Rong and the woodcutter were singing songs, Guo Jing did not understand even half a word of what they

were talking about. As the woodcutter let them go and directed them to go up, he still did not know the reason; but fearing the woodcutter might change his mind, without saying anything he carried Huang Rong on his back, grabbed the long rattan with both of his hands, and with a heave started climbing up.

His arms alternately pulled and they crawled up fast. Just in a short moment they had climbed about a dozen of 'zhang's; indistinctly they could still hear the woodcutter singing something like, " ... in the past people struggled, but where are they now? Victory, they all turned into dust! Defeat, they all turned into dust!"

Crouching on Guo Jing's back Huang Rong laughed and said, "Jing Gege, according to what he said, we don't need to seek medical help."

Guo Jing was baffled, "What?" he asked.

"In any case everybody will die; if I am healed, I will turn into dust! If I am not healed, I will still turn into dust!" Huang Rong said.

"Pei!" Guo Jing spat, "Don't listen to him."

Huang Rong softly sang, "Alive, you carry me on your back! Dead, you carry me on your back!"

Along with Huang Rong's playful song, two people had entered the cloud; all they saw was a vast expanse of whiteness everywhere they looked. It was still summer, the weather was hot, but actually they felt the chill in the air. Huang Rong sighed, "Right in front of our eyes are countless marvels; even if my injury cannot be healed, our trip here will not be in vain."

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “Can you just not mention life and death anymore?”

Huang Rong lowered her head and laughed, she gently blew her breath on the back of Guo Jing’s neck. Guo Jing felt his neck warm and itchy, he called out, “Don’t give me trouble! If my hands slip, both of us will plunge to our death.”

Huang Rong laughed, “Fine!” she said, “This time it wasn’t me who talk about life and death!”

Guo Jing laughed, he could not answer; he crawled up faster and a short moment later they got to the end, or to be precise, the root where the rattan grew. Turned out they had arrived at the peak. They had just set their feet on solid ground when suddenly a loud rumbling was heard, as if a mountain rock burst apart; and then they also heard an ox bellowing loudly, followed by a man’s loud shout.

Guo Jing was surprised, “This peak is so high, yet there is an ox here. So strange!” Carrying Huang Rong on his back he rushed toward the noise.

“The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar. If there is a farmer, then there must be an ox,” Huang Rong said.

She had just finished talking when they saw a yellow ox on the hillside with its head lifted up, bellowing loudly; but the ox was actually in a very odd position. It was lying on its back on a rock, its four legs struggled but could not stand up. The rock was shaking, ready to fall down, below the rock was a man suspending the rock with both of his hands on top of his head like a letter T; if his hands slipped, both the rock and the ox would fall down into the canyon below. That man was standing on a piece of protruding cliff, there was nowhere he could step back. If he did not want to give

that ox up, the rock would crush down and not only break his arms, but his legs as well. Looking at their condition, apparently that ox was grazing on a hillside and stepped on a loose rock. That man being near tried to save the ox by catching the rock but ended up in this precarious situation.

Huang Rong smiled, "Just now we heard the song 'hillside sheep', and now we see the 'hillside ox'!" she said.

On that mountain peak there was a piece of flat land, already plowed ready for cultivation, about twenty 'mu's [around 1.6 acres or 2/3 of a hectare] rice field. There was a hoe by the edge of the field. The man who held the rock was bare-chested, his legs were covered with mud up to his knees; looked like the ox fell down when he was weeding the grass.

Huang Rong looked around to assess the situation, she mulled over in her heart, "This man obviously is the 'farmer' from 'the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar'. The ox weighs approximately three hundred catties [about 300 lbs or 150 kg]; looks like that rock is not lighter than the ox. Even though half of the rock is leaning on the hillside, yet looking at his steady feet, this man has an astonishing strength."

Guo Jing had already put her down and rushed to help. Huang Rong hastily called out, "Not so fast, don't be rash!" But Guo Jing thought helping others was more important; he had already arrived by the farmer's side.

He crouched underneath the rock and lifted it up while saying, "I'll hold it, you go and save the ox first!"

That farmer felt his load was getting lighter, but he was still afraid that Guo Jing might not be strong enough to support both the ox and the big rock. He let go his right hand and leaned to the side, but his left hand was still supporting the

bottom of the rock. Guo Jing steadied his legs, then exerted his internal strength and pushed upward with both of his arms; the rock was lifted up for about a foot, giving that farmer an opportunity to let his left hand go.

The farmer waited for a moment. After seeing that the big rock would not crush down, he knew Guo Jing's strength was enough to support it. Finally he stooped down and got out from underneath the rock, leaped to the hillside to save the yellow ox. He could not help but stealing a glance toward Guo Jing to see what kind of hero had suddenly come and offered help. He was astonished since what he saw was an eighteen, nineteen years old youngster. More surprisingly, this youngster's hands were holding up the rock and the ox seemingly without straining himself.

That farmer was always proud of having an outstanding physical strength, but obviously this youngster's strength was far above his. His suspicions arose; he also looked down the hillside and saw a young woman leaning against a rock, her facial expression was weary, like she was suffering from a serious illness. His suspicion deepened, "Friend, what are you doing here?" he asked Guo Jing.

"To seek an audience with your master," Guo Jing replied.

"For what purpose?" the farmer asked again.

Guo Jing was startled and for an instant did not know how to reply. Huang Rong on the side called out, "Quickly pull the ox to safety first, it won't be too late to ask question later. If his hands slip, won't the man and the ox fall down together?"

The farmer thought, "These two are here to see Shifu, how come my two elder martial brothers down the mountain did not shoot whistling arrows? If these two broke through them, that means their martial arts are not to be trifled

with. Now while his hands are not free, I need to understand this matter better." Thereupon he asked, "Are you going to ask my Shifu to treat your injury?"

Guo Jing thought, "The people down the mountains are already aware anyway, there is no need to hide the truth from him." He simply nodded his head.

The farmer's countenance slightly changed, "I need to ask first," he said. Without pulling the ox away he leaped down the hillside.

"Hey!" Guo Jing shouted, "Help me put down this rock first, then we can talk!"

The farmer smiled, "I will be back right away."

Observing what was going on, Huang Rong had already guessed early on that farmer's intention; he wanted to waste Guo Jing's strength. He would deliberately wait for Guo Jing to be weary from suspending the rock, and then he would comeback and lent a hand. By that time it would be easy to expel these two people to go down the mountain. She hated herself for being injured at a time like this that she was unable to help Guo Jing shove away the big rock. She saw the farmer dashed out of the field, did not know when he would be coming back; she was anxious and angry at the same time. "Hey, Uncle!" she called out, "Please come back!"

That farmer paused and smiled, "He has a tremendous strength, nothing bad will happen to him in three-quarter or an hour time, don't worry," he said.

Huang Rong was angry, she thought, "Jing Gege was kind enough to help you, but you actually tricked him and let him trapped for three-quarter or an hour. I have to find a way to give you a lesson." She creased her eyebrows and thought

of an idea, "Uncle," she called, "You want to ask your Shifu's advice, that is very reasonable. Here is a letter from Benevolent Master Hong Qigong to be delivered to your master. Can you take it with you?"

"Ah!" hearing Hong Qigong's name that farmer exclaimed in surprise, "Turned out Miss is the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's disciple. Does this Xiao Ge [lit. little/young elder brother] also belong to Senior Hong's school? No wonder he is this good." He came back to fetch the letter.

Huang Rong nodded, "Hey, he is my martial brother, capable of lifting several hundreds catties. Speaking of martial art he is not too far below Uncle." Slowly she opened her sack, pretending to find the letter; but first she took the soft hedgehog armor, and then turned her gaze toward Guo Jing, her face had a frightened look. "Aiyo! Not good!" she called out, "His palms are about to be smashed up. Uncle, quickly find a way to help him."

The farmer was startled, but then he laughed, "He is fine," he said, "Where is the letter?" He held out his hand to get the letter.

"You don't know," Huang Rong anxiously said, "My martial brother is practicing the 'pi kong zhang' [hacking/slicing/splitting empty air palm technique]. His palms were soaked in vinegar just last night, but his training is not complete yet. If his palms are put under pressure for a long time, they will be destroyed." On the Peach Blossom Island her father had trained her in 'pi kong zhang' hence she was familiar with the training method.

Although the farmer did not know this martial art, but he was a martial art expert's disciple, his knowledge was extensive; he had heard about this particular martial art, he thought, "If for no apparent reason I caused injury to the

Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's disciple, not only my Shifu would rebuke me, but I would also regret it for the rest of my life. Moreover, he was kind enough to help me. Only I don't know whether what this young miss said was a truth or a lie. I am afraid she is just tricking me into releasing him from underneath the rock."

Huang Rong understood his hesitation, she took the soft hedgehog armor out and shook it. "This is the Peach Blossom Island's most precious treasure, the soft hedgehog armor; blade and sword cannot harm it. I am asking Uncle to put it on his shoulder as a cushion and let him support the rock with his shoulder. That way he won't be able to walk away, but he won't suffer any injury, won't that satisfy both parties? Or else you will cause injury to his palms and my Shifu won't hold you innocent and will find your Shifu to settle the score."

The farmer had also heard about the soft hedgehog armor; half believing and half doubting he took the armor. Huang Rong saw that he was not convinced yet, so she said, "My Shifu taught me not to lie to others, how can I deceive Uncle? If Uncle does not believe me, then try chopping this armor several times."

The farmer saw her innocent face, he thought, "Nine-fingered Divine Beggar is an honorable Senior with high skill, his words are like gold and jade; whenever my Shifu mentioned his name, he always do so with utmost respect and admiration. This young miss also does not look like a liar." It was because he was thinking about his master's safety and well-being that he did not dare to act carelessly. Hence he drew the short blade from his waist and chopped the soft hedgehog armor several times. Sure enough, the armor did not show any trace of damage; it was truly one of the Wulin world's treasures. All his doubts were gone, "Very well, I will put this on his shoulder as a cushion," he said.

Not in a million years did he know that behind Huang Rong's innocent and childlike face hid a heart and mind full of tricks. He took the soft hedgehog armor and went toward Guo Jing. He threw the armor on Guo Jing's shoulder and exerted his strength toward his arms he lifted up the rock and said, "Let your hands go, support this rock with your shoulder."

Leaning on a mountain rock Huang Rong kept her attention toward those two men. As soon as the farmer picked up the big rock she called out, "Jing Gege, 'fei long zai tian' [dragon fly to the sky]!"

Guo Jing felt his hands were free, he also heard Huang Rong's shout; almost without thinking his right palm pushed forward, his left palm made a turn from the right wrist, launching the 'fei long zai tian' from the 18-Dragon Subduing Palms. He leaped to the air, again his right palm turned ahead of his left palm and pushed forward; he landed by Huang Rong's side, with the soft hedgehog armor still perched nicely on his shoulder. He heard the farmer shouting curses; so he turned his head to see the farmer with his hands high in the air, supporting the big rock and was not able to move.

Huang Rong was very proud of herself, she said, "Jing Gege, let's go." Turning her head to the farmer she said, "You have a tremendous strength; nothing bad will happen to you in three-quarter or an hour time, don't worry."

The farmer cursed her, "Little girl, you deceived this old man! You said the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar always keep his words. Humph! This honorable Senior's illustrious name is ruined by a little girl."

Huang Rong smiled, "What did I ruin?" she said, "My Shifu taught me never to tell a lie, but my father said that

deceiving people once in a while is not a big deal. I love to listen to my father, my Shifu cannot do anything about that.”

“Who is your father?” the farmer was angry.

“Ah! Didn’t I let you test the soft hedgehog armor?” Huang Rong asked.

The farmer cursed even more, “I deserve to die! I deserve to die! Turned out this sly little girl is the Old Heretic Huang’s daughter. Why was I so muddleheaded?”

Huang Rong laughed, “That’s right! My Shifu’s words are like a mountain, he has never deceived anybody. This is very difficult to learn, I don’t want to follow his teaching. I’ll say my father’s teaching is better!” She giggled and pulled Guo Jing’s hand, leading him to follow the pathway.

[Author’s note: the popular tune originated from the Northern Song Dynasty during its peaceful years. Since its appearance, the tune had become a popular folk song during both the Song and Jin era. The source of “Hillside Sheep” sung by the woodcutter and Huang Rong was actually the later version of the tune.]

End of Chapter 29.

Chapter 30 - Reverend Yideng

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Successively crossing seven gaps, they heard someone reading aloud; it seemed like they had arrived at the end of the stone bridge. On the

other side of the gap a scholar was sitting cross-legged, a book in his hand, from which he was reading. Behind the scholar there was another short gap.

Two people walked forward following the mountain pathway and before long the pathway had come to an end. Ahead was a stone bridge about one foot wide, perched in between two mountain peaks, covered with cloud that the other end was invisible. If this stone bridge were laid on the ground, it would act just like a narrow alley, nothing to be afraid of; but under the stone bridge was a deep canyon. Just looking at it would cause the heart to tremble with fear, let alone walk across it.

Huang Rong sighed, "This Emperor Duan hid himself really well. If an enemy came full of enmities arrived to this place, half of his hatred would disappear first," she said.

"Why did that fisherman say Emperor Duan has left this mortal world?" Guo Jing asked, "He really caused my heart unrest."

"I really cannot guess what he meant by that," Huang Rong replied, "Looking at his face he didn't seem to be lying. He also said that our Shifu saw it with his own eyes when Emperor Duan passed away."

"Things have come this far, we can only move forward and not go back," Guo Jing said. He squatted to carry Huang Rong on his back, and then with his lightness kungfu walked toward that stone bridge.

The stone bridge's surface was bumpy, plus it was enveloped in thick cloud all year long, which made it exceptionally slippery. The slower they walked the higher

was the chance for them to fall down. Hence Guo Jing dashed forward quickly. After about seven, eight 'zhang's later suddenly Huang Rong called out, "Careful, the bridge's broken ahead."

Guo Jing also saw that the stone bridge was suddenly broken with about seven, eight feet gap in between. Instead of slowing down he ran faster and borrowing the momentum he leaped across the gap.

Huang Rong had already gone through terrible danger; early on she had already disregarded life and death. She laughed and said, "Jing Gege, your flying is not as steady as the white eagles."

Dashing through a section, jumping over a gap, very soon they had crossed seven such gaps. Across the mountain ahead they saw a stretch of flat land. Suddenly they heard someone was reading aloud. Looked like they had arrived at the end of the stone bridge, but at the end of the bridge there was actually a very long gap, almost a 'zhang' wide [about 10 feet or 3 meters]. On the other side of the gap a scholar was sitting cross-legged, a book in his hand, from which he was reading aloud. Behind the scholar there was another short gap.

Guo Jing halted, he stood firm on the bridge, he was at a loss of what to do next, "Jumping over this gap is not too difficult," he thought, "But that scholar is sitting right in the middle of the bridge; other than the place he occupies, there is no place I can set my feet on." Thereupon with a loud voice he called out, "Juniors are seeking audience with your Honorable Master, we are asking Uncle to show us the way."

The scholar's head was swaying while he read with rapt attention, as if he did not hear Guo Jing. Guo Jing raised his

voice and called out one more time, the scholar still turned a deaf ear to him. "Rong'er, what do we do?" Guo Jing said in a low voice.

Huang Rong frowned without saying anything, she looked at the place where that scholar was sitting and realized this matter could be complicated. The stone bridge was so narrow that fighting on it meant a life and death situation. Even if Guo Jing won, they were coming to seek help, how could they harm anybody? She looked at the scholar again, who still did not pay any attention, and could not help but secretly feel worried. She tried to listen to what the scholar was reading, and found out that it was the widely common book of 'lun yu' [Analects of Confucius]. He was reading: "An evening in the spring time, the spring garments were ready. Five, six people wearing hat, six, seven people were young. Taking a bath by the river bank, the breeze made the fountain dance, and the song carried back by the wind."

He was reading with flourish and ardent interest, sighing three times, resembling the spring breeze carrying the song faraway, like he was enjoying the book immensely. Huang Rong thought, "If I want him to open his mouth, I must provoke him." Thereupon she sneered and said, "It's useless even if you read the Confucian Analects a thousand times but do not understand the Master's sublime words with deep meaning."

The scholar was startled and stopped reading immediately. He raised his head and said, "What sublime words with deep meaning? Please enlighten me."

Huang Rong took a good look on that scholar; he looked to be around forty years of age, 'xiao yao jin' [scholar hat] on his head, a folding fan in his hand, a long black beard under his chin, truly he had a scholar's appearance. She coldly

laughed and asked, "Sire, do you know how many disciples Confucius had?"

The scholar smiled, "What's so difficult about that?" he said, "Confucius had 3000 disciples altogether, among those, 72 were his best students."

"From the 72 disciples, some were old and some were young," Huang Rong continued, "Do you know how many disciples wore hat [meaning 'older'] and how many were young?"

The scholar was startled and said, "It was not recorded in the Confucian Analects; other classics and commentaries also do not have that information recorded."

"I said it's useless if you do not understand the Master's sublime words with deep meaning, did I say anything wrong?" Huang Rong asked. "I clearly heard you read just a moment ago, 'Five, six people wearing hat; six, seven people were young.' Five times six is thirty, there were 30 older disciples; six times seven is forty-two, there were 42 younger disciples. You add two numbers together and you will get exactly 72 people. I see you are reading without understanding. Hey! Dangerous! Really dangerous!"

The scholar heard how she made a strong argument on an obscure matter in the classic book, he could not stifle his laugh, but in his heart he also admitted her intelligence and quick-wit. He smiled and said, "Young Miss really has a mind filled with poetry books. My utmost admiration. You want to see my Shifu, may I know for what business?"

Huang thought, "If I say we are here to seek treatment, he will certainly do his utmost to make things difficult for us. But his question cannot be left unanswered. Fine. He was reading the 'Confucian Analects', I will also quote from Confucius to dodge his question." Thereupon she said, "A

Sage I don't have to see! A Gentleman, I may see. A friend came from afar, isn't that a delight to the heart?"

The scholar looked up to the sky and laughed hard for half a day. "All right, all right," he said, "I have three subject tests for you. If you pass, I will take you to see my Shifu. But if you fail even one, I will have to ask you two to go back to where you came from."

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong said, "I haven't read too many books, if it is too difficult I might not be able to answer."

"Not difficult, not difficult," the scholar said, "I have a poem here, inside it hidden my origin in four characters. Let's see if you can guess it."

"Good, a riddle!" Huang Rong said, "It should be interesting. Please say it."

The scholar twisted his beard and started to recite, "Six scriptures have been in the chest for a long time, one sword for ten years has been sharpened in the hand ..."

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and said, "Skilled in both pen and sword [wen wu quan cai – lit. literature and martial art complete skills], that's terrific!"

The scholar smiled and continued, "On top of an apricot flower a branch hung horizontally; if you are afraid to divulge the heaven's secret, don't open the mouth. One dot escalated as big fight, nevertheless cannot even cover half a bed. The name completed, the hat hung, time to turn back home. My true identity, does Sir know?"

Huang Rong thought, "'The name completed, the hat hung, time to turn back home. My true identity, does Sir know?' Looking at your appearance, you must be Emperor Duan's minister of the days past; hanging your hat following your

master, returning to this hidden wooded mountain. What's so difficult to guess?" Thereupon she said, "When you add a character 'one' (一) and 'ten' (十) underneath the character 'six' (六), it becomes the character 'xin' (新). Add a horizontal line to the character 'apricot' (杏), and take away the character 'mouth' (口), it becomes the character 'wei' (魏). Add a character 'big' (大) to half of a bed (半) and put a dot on it, it becomes the character 'zhuang' (庄). Take the hat off the character 'complete' (全), it becomes the character 'yuan' (元). Xin Wei Zhuang Yuan; please accept my respect. Turned out Sir was the Zhuang Yuan [number one scholar, the title conferred to a person who came out first in the highest imperial examination] of the Xin Wei year."

The scholar was taken aback; he thought his riddle was very difficult. Even if one could finally come out with an answer, it should have taken at least half a day. These two youngsters' martial art skill might be high, but they would not be able to stand on this narrow stone bridge for too long. He thought he would advise them to give up and nicely went back down the mountain. Who would have thought that almost without thinking Huang Rong was able to give him the correct answer. He could not help but feel utterly surprised. He now knew this girl was exceptionally smart; he had to find a more difficult question for her.

He swept his gaze around and saw a row of palm trees by the hillside, the leaves swaying gently in the light breeze, resembling the movement of a fan. He was a zhongyuan, naturally he was more gifted than an average scholar. He waved the fan in his hand and said, "I have the top part of a couplet, asking Miss to please complete it."

"Completing a couplet is not as interesting as a riddle," Huang Rong said, "All right, looks like if I can't complete it, you won't let us pass. Bring it on!"

The scholar waved his fan, pointing to the row of palm trees and said, "The wind sways the palm trees, like a thousand hands waving the folding fan." This top part not only depicted the scenery, but clearly lifted up his position as well.

Huang Rong thought, "If I only mention any object without meaningful correlation, my victory won't be complete." She also swept her gaze around and saw a tiny temple with a lotus pond in front of it. It was the seventh month, the middle of summer, but on this high mountain the mornings were cold; most part of the lotus leaf had already withered by frost. Her heart was moved, she smiled and said, "I have the second part of that couplet, but it will offend Uncle; it's inconvenient for me to say it."

"You might as well say it," the scholar replied.

"You must promise you are not going to get angry," Huang Rong said.

"I won't," the scholar promised.

Huang Rong pointed to the 'xiao yao jin' on his head and said, "Very well. My second line is: The frost withers the lotus leaf, like a one-legged demon wearing a 'xiao yao jin'."

At this second line the scholar burst out in laughter. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" he said, "Not only the line is very appropriate, it came very quick too!"

Guo Jing saw the lotus stem did indeed prop up a withered leaf, looking like a single-legged ghost wearing a 'xiao yao jin'; he could not help laughing too. Huang Rong smiled, "Don't laugh, don't laugh!" she said, "Once we fall down we will become a pair of ghosts without the 'xiao yao jin'!"

The scholar thought, "Ordinary couplet won't baffle her; I will have to resort to the ultimate." Suddenly he remembered when he was a young student his teacher mentioned a couplet that for dozens of years nobody could ever complete; he decided to make things difficult for her; thereupon he said, "I have another couplet, asking Miss to complete it: 'qin se pi pa (琴瑟琵琶) [qin, se and pi pa are all stringed-instruments], all heads adorned by eight big kings'."

Listening to this Huang Rong was delighted, "Qin se pi pa four characters altogether have eight 'king' (王) characters on them; originally it was a very difficult couplet. It's a pity this couplet is not your own creation. Father had solved this couplet many years ago on the Peach Blossom Island when he had nothing else to do. I will pretend to have difficulty completing it to tease him."

She wrinkled her brow and made her face looked distressed. The scholar was delighted she was finally baffled; he felt very smug. But then he was afraid Huang Rong would ask him back, so he said up front, "This is a very difficult couplet, I don't have the answer either. But we have agreed that if Miss cannot answer it then you must return."

Huang Rong smiled, "What's so difficult to complete the couplet? Only I have just offended Uncle, now with my answer I will offend all four of you, the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar; that's why I was so hesitant to say it."

The scholar did not believe her, he thought, "Just completing the couplet is an extremely difficult task to do; how can you offend us four martial brothers at the same time?" Hence he said, "If you really can complete the couplet, what harm will a little joke bring?"

Huang Rong smiled, "If that's the case, let me ask for your forgiveness first. The second line is, 'chi mei wang liang (痴 魔 王 凉) [mountain elf, demon, elf, fairy - all are fairy tales supernatural characters; all characters have 'demon' (魔) on their sides], four little demons with their belly and intestines'."

The scholar was astonished, he sprang up to stand; with his long sleeve fluttered he dashed toward Huang Rong, "I give up with full admiration," he said.

Huang Rong returned his obeisance and said with a smile, "If four honorable Uncles did not do your utmost to hinder us going up the mountain, your couplets were really difficult to complete."

Turned out when Huang Yaoshi solved this riddle, Chen Xuanfeng, Qu Lingfeng, Lu Chengfeng and Feng Mofeng, four disciples were by his side; Huang Yaoshi meant this second line as a joke to his four disciples. That time Huang Rong was not even born yet. Later she heard her father recalling this story and today she managed to use the same line to make fun of the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar.

"Humph," the scholar snorted. He turned around to make a small gap and said, "Please."

Guo Jing was standing quietly listening to these two exchanging literary attacks to each other; he was afraid Huang Rong would not be able reply and thus waste all previous efforts. Seeing that the scholar moved aside to make a way for them, he was very delighted. He exerted his strength and jumped over the gap; landed on the spot where the scholar had previously sat. Finally he jumped over the last gap.

The scholar noticed how Guo Jing leaped over the gaps with ease even while carrying Huang Rong on his back; he sighed and said in his heart, "I pride myself as highly skilled in both literary and martial art; actually in literature I am inferior to this young girl, and in martial art I am not this youngster's match. Ashamed, I am really ashamed." He glanced sideways to see Huang Rong's delighted expression; he thought this girl had just beat an honorable and highly educated 'zhuang yuan', no wonder she could not hide her upbeat feeling. He thought, "Let me tease her, teaching her not to be too self-complacent!" Thereupon he said, "Miss' literary talent is extraordinary, but your behavior is lacking."

"I beg your explanation," Huang Rong said.

The scholar replied, "Mengzi [Mencius] wrote in his book: 'Men and women do not get intimate, that is only proper.' I see Miss is an unmarried woman, this 'Xiao Ge' [little elder brother] is not your husband; how can he carried you on his back? Mengzi said a brother can help a drowning sister-in-law, or an uncle helps his niece. Miss has not fallen into the water, this 'Xiao Ge' is also not your brother-in-law. This kind of carrying and hugging is truly violating religious teaching."

"Humph," Huang Rong thought, "Brother Jing is good to me, yet other people always make a big deal of the fact that he is not my husband. Shige [martial (older) brother] Lu Chengfeng also said the same thing as this scholar." Thereupon she said point-blankly, "Mengzi loved to talk nonsense; how can you believe what he said?"

The scholar was offended, "Mengzi was a great and worthy sage; why can't we believe what he said?"

Huang Rong smiled and recited, "How can a beggar have two wives? Where did the neighbor have so many chickens from? The Zhou (dynasty) still had an emperor, why discuss many matters with the Wei and Qi (dynasties)?"

The more the scholar thought, the more he realized the truth in what she said. He stood there staring blankly, unable to say a single word.

Actually it was Huang Yaoshi who wrote that saying. He loathed the traditions and despised empty alms; he loved to scrutinize, refute, ridicule and satirize the empty meanings of old sayings handed down from great and worthy sages. Once he made many poems and songs to satirize Confucius and Mencius.

Mencius told a story about a man from the Qi dynasty who had a wife and a concubine and yet he begged for cold rice and spoiled soup; also about another man who everyday stole a chicken from his neighbor. Huang Yaoshi said that these two stories were used to swindle others. About the later sayings the story went like this: During the Warring States period (475 – 221 BC) the Zhou Emperor was still on his throne, yet why did Mencius not support the royal family; but went to Prince Liang Hui and Prince Qi Xuan to whom he asked for a governmental position? Huang Yaoshi thought this action greatly disobeyed the way of the saints and sages.

The scholar thought, "The man of Qi stealing chicken was a metaphor, unworthy of deeper study; but the last sentence, I am afraid even Mengzi himself under the ground would have difficulty refuting." He looked at Huang Rong's eyes and thought, "She is so young, how can she possess such weird intelligence?" Without saying anything else he led two people walked forward.

When passing the lotus pond his gaze was caught by a lotus leaf on the pond; he could not help stealing a glance toward Huang Rong. Huang Rong stifled her laugh and turned her head another direction.

The scholar led the two people entering the temple, asked them to sit in the east wing and had a young monk serve tea. "Please wait for a moment here," the scholar said, "I am going to report to the Master."

"Wait!" Guo Jing said, "That Farmer Uncle is still holding up a big rock on the hillside; he can't get away by himself. Uncle please help him first." The scholar was startled and dashed out.

"Now we can open the yellow pouch," Huang Rong said.

"Ah, if you did not mention it, I would have totally forgotten," Guo Jing said. Hastily he took out the yellow pouch and tore it open. Inside the pouch was a plain sheet of paper without any characters written on it, only a drawing.

The drawing depicted a man wearing royal attire of the India. The man was cutting his own flesh with a knife; his whole body was a mass of cuts and bruises, dripping with blood. There was a scale in front of him; on one end of the balance stood a white pigeon, on the other piled his cut flesh. The pigeon looked small, but it was heavier than the pile of flesh on the other end. A fierce looking hawk stood next to the scale.

The pen stroke of the drawing was quite shoddy. Huang Rong thought, "Turned out that Ying Gu has not learned how to draw; her handwriting is not bad, but this drawing is like a child's scribbling." She looked at the drawing for half a day, but could not decipher what it meant.

Seeing Huang Rong could not guess what the drawing was about, Guo Jing thought it was useless for him to try. He folded the drawing and held it in his hand.

Not too long after they heard footsteps coming into the hall; the farmer walked in, ablaze in anger, supported by the scholar. He was very weary supporting that big rock for a long time.

About the time needed to drink a cup of tea later a young monk walked in; clasping his hands in front of his chest he said, "Gentleman and lady have come from a far; I wonder what your noble concern was?"

"We are seeking an audience with Emperor Duan," Guo Jing replied, "We must inconvenience you to announce our visit."

"Emperor Duan is no longer in this mortal world, your wearisome trip has been in vain," the young monk clasped his hands again, "Please have some vegetable dish, and then Little Monk will see you down the mountain."

Guo Jing was very disappointed; he thought of their untold hardship to get to this place, and now they have to go back down the mountain, how could this thing be good? But when Huang Rong saw the temple she was 30% sure, now seeing this young monk, she was 50, 60% sure. She took the drawing from Guo Jing's hand and said, "Disciples Guo Jing and Huang Rong are here, hoping your respectable master would respect past relationship with the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar and the Peach Blossom Island, and grant us audience. We would appreciate it if you could give this sheet of paper to your master."

The young monk received the drawing. He did not dare to open it up; he only clasped his hands and turned around to go inside. Before long he came back, lowered his head and

clasping his hands he said, "Respectfully invite you to come." Guo Jing was ecstatic, he helped Huang Rong up and together they followed the young monk went inside.

Although the temple looked small, it was very deep. Three people walked through a small alley covered with green flagstones, passed through a dense and shady small bamboo grove. The place was very quiet and serene, causing whoever went inside to shed their impure thoughts.

There were three stone houses hidden among the bamboo trees. The young monk lightly shoved the door open and stepped aside, bowing his body to let the two to enter in.

Guo Jing had a very good impression toward this polite and courteous monk; he smiled to express his gratitude, then side by side with Huang Rong he walked in.

Inside the room he saw a small table with a sandalwood incense burner on top of it; next to the table two Buddhist monks sat on circular meditation mats. One monk had a dark complexion with high nose and deep eyes; apparently he was an Indian monk. The other monk was wearing a robe made of coarse cloth; his white eyebrows so long that they drooped down from the corner of his eyes. His face was gentle; although his eyes showed a trace of sadness, at a glance his overall expression was that of a graceful and majestic person. The scholar and the farmer were standing behind him.

All of Huang Rong's suspicion vanished; she lightly pulled Guo Jing's hand and walked to the monk with long eyebrows; she knelt and bowed down to the ground and said, "Disciples Guo Jing and Huang Rong greet Shibo." [Translator's note: Shibo - martial uncle, the character 'bo' here denotes 'older than one's father' or 'father's elder brother', but since English does not differentiate between

'older' and 'younger' uncles, the generic word of 'Uncle' will be used throughout the chapter.]

Guo Jing was startled, but without thinking he simply followed Huang Rong's example and bowed to the ground, kowtowing four times.

The monk with long-eyebrows smiled slightly; he stood up and held out his hands to raise the two people up. He said with a smile, "Qi Xiong [Brother Qi] had accepted a fine disciple, and Yao Xiong [Brother Yao] had gotten a fine daughter. I heard them say," he pointed his finger to the farmer and the scholar, "Your martial arts are far superior to my disciples'. Ha ... ha ... congratulations, congratulations!"

Listening to him speaking Guo Jing thought, "This speech obviously belonged to Emperor Duan; fitting his position as an emperor, but how come he turned into a monk? It's very confusing. Why did they say that he is no longer in this mortal world? How did Rong'er know he is the Emperor Duan?"

He heard the monk said to Huang Rong, "Are your father and Shifu well? When we met during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua your father has not married yet. Unexpectedly it has been twenty years and he got this beautiful daughter. Do you have any brothers or sisters? Which Senior hero is your mother's father?"

Huang Rong's eyes turned red, she said, "My mother gave birth to me only; she passed away long time ago. I don't even know her family."

"Ah!" the monk exclaimed, lightly patting her shoulder consolingly. "I have been meditating for three days and three nights, and ended just a moment ago," he said, "Have you been waiting long?"

Huang Rong pondered, "Looking at his face, he is very happy to see us. If that's the case, then stopping us and not letting us go up the mountain was his disciples' idea." Hence, she replied, "Disciples have just arrived. Fortunately these Uncles did their utmost to make things difficult for us; otherwise we would have arrived much earlier, Duan Shibo would still be in meditation and our visit would be in vain."

The monk chuckled and said, "They are afraid that I see too many outsiders. But actually how can we consider you as outsiders? Young Miss' sharp tongue must come from your family. Emperor Duan has early on left this mortal world; I am now called Monk Yideng. ['yi deng he shang' - (Buddhist) monk 'one lamp'] Your Shifu was present when I followed the three treasures; but I am afraid your father did not know."

It was only then did Guo Jing finally understood, "It turned out that Emperor Duan shaved his head and became a monk. He left the life of common man; that's why his disciples said Emperor Duan has left this mortal world. Shifu witnessed it when he became a monk; if it was him who told us to come here, naturally he would not tell us to find Emperor Duan, but to see Reverend Yideng [yi deng da shi - great master Yideng; 'da shi' was a common respectable term to address a Buddhist monk]. Rong'er is really smart; just by looking at him she understood everything."

He heard Huang Rong say, "My father did not know anything about it; my Shifu also did not tell disciples."

Yideng smiled, "Certainly. There are more things going into your Shifu's mouth than things coming out of it. He eats a lot, he speaks a little. He wouldn't discuss the Old Monk's business with others. You have been through a lot of hardships; have you eaten yet? Ah!" Speaking to this point

he suddenly startled. He pulled Huang Rong's hand and took her to the door to look at her face under the bright sunlight. He carefully examined her with a puzzled look on his own face.

Although Guo Jing was slow, he was aware that Reverend Yideng had discovered Huang Rong's injury. His heart was broken; abruptly he bent his knees and kowtowed several times. Yideng held out his hands underneath Guo Jing's arms to raise him up. Guo Jing felt a burst of energy lifting his body up. He did not dare to use his strength to resist; riding on the force he slowly stood up and said, "I beg the Reverend to save her life!"

When Yideng raised Guo Jing up, he was not only asking Guo Jing not to have too much ritual, but was also testing Guo Jing's strength. Yideng was only using 50% of his strength; if he felt that Guo Jing was not able to resist, he would have retracted his force. He did not have any intention to use force against Guo Jing, if Guo Jing stayed motionless he would not add any more strength. However, in this one encounter he found out Guo Jing's martial art to be deep. He did not expect Guo Jing to be able to ride on his force and stand up, automatically dispersing his energy. This surprised Yideng more than if Guo Jing only resisted by staying motionless on the ground. Yideng secretly thought, "Qi Xiong had really accepted a very fine disciple; no wonder my own disciples candidly admitted their defeat."

It was at this moment that Guo Jing said, "I beg the Reverend to save her life!" He had just finished speaking when suddenly he felt his legs wobble, his body involuntarily moved forward one step. Quickly he exerted his strength to resist but his body refused to obey his mind; his face turned red all over. He was shocked. "Reverend Yideng's force can continue for so long!" he thought, "I've already tried to disperse it; unexpectedly it continued to lift

me up. The incoming force has been broken, but a short moment later my own opposing force uncontrollably propelled myself forward. If it were a real fight wouldn't my little life be gone? Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar truly deserve their reputations." This time he bowed and kowtowed with much more admiration; what he felt in his heart showed on his face.

Yideng noticed Guo Jing's countenance showed a scared and admiring look, he stretched out his hand to gently pat Guo Jing's shoulder and said with a smile, "You have trained to this level, it really is not easy." Meanwhile he had not released Huang Rong's hand; he turned his head and smiled, "Child, don't be afraid, set your heart at peace," he said with a gentle voice. Then he helped her to sit on the meditation mat.

In all her life Huang Rong never had anybody treated her with such compassion. Her father loved her very much, but his manner was a little bit eccentric. Normally he would treat her as a friend, without revealing the deep love a father had for his daughter. This time listening to Yideng's warm words all of a sudden Huang Rong was overwhelmed as if she suddenly felt her mother's tender love; the love she had never experienced. All the pain and suffering she endured for quite some time since she was injured suddenly burst out uncontrollably. "Wah!" she broke into tears.

Reverend Yideng said with a comforting voice, "Good child, don't cry, don't cry! Uncle will certainly fix all the pain you feel." Who would have thought that the gentler and more comforting his words were, the more Huang Rong was overwhelmed and she cried even louder. It was not until much later did her cry eventually become sobs as she tried to regain her composure.

Hearing his promise Guo Jing was ecstatic, but upon turning his head around he saw the scholar and the farmer's stiff eyebrows and bulging eyes; they were staring at him with angry looks on their faces. Guo Jing felt bad while thinking, "We can reach this place entirely due to Rong'er's craftiness, no wonder they are mad. Reverend Yideng is this compassionate, yet his disciples were determined to hinder us. I wonder why?"

He heard Reverend Yideng say, "Child, how did you get injured? How did you get to this place? Why don't you tell your uncle everything?" And so Huang Rong wiped her tears and told him how she mistook Qiu Qianren as Qiu Qianzhang, how she took his palms strike and everything that happened.

When Yideng heard the name Iron Palm Qiu Qianren, he frowned slightly, but immediately went back to listening Huang Rong attentively. While speaking, Huang Rong kept her eyes open to see Yideng's face; even though his frown was very slight it did not escape Huang Rong's eyes. When she got to the point where they met Ying Gu at the Black Marsh forest and how she gave them direction to find this place, Reverend Yideng's countenance once again momentarily changed; he lowered his head in deep thought, seemingly he was reminiscing over past events, and was grieved and pained over them.

A moment after Huang Rong shut her mouth Reverend Yideng heaved a sigh and asked, "And then what happened?"

Huang Rong continued by recounting how the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar had used all possible means to make things difficult for them. The woodcutter easily let them go up the mountain, therefore, she said some praising words on his behalf; but to the rest

of them she added some spices to make their offenses worse than they were. Deliberately she made the scholar and the farmer mad.

Several times Guo Jing interrupted her, saying, "Rong'er, don't talk nonsense; these Uncles are not that bad!" But Huang Rong kept talking like a spoiled child in front of Reverend Yideng, telling him all kind of things, making the faces of the two disciples standing behind Yideng turn red and blue. They did not dare to open up their mouths in the presence of their master.

Reverend Yideng repeatedly nodded his head, "(Sigh), how can you treat guests coming from afar like that? These kids were really rude towards friends; I am going to tell them to apologize to you two later."

Huang Rong stared at the scholar and the farmer with a smug expression; meanwhile her mouth did not stop; she told everything until how they ended up at the temple's gate. "Afterwards I gave that drawing for you to see, and you asked me in; then they did not dare to hinder us anymore," she said.

"What drawing?" Yideng was surprised.

"It's about some eagle, some pigeon, and someone cutting his own flesh," Huang Rong replied.

"Whom did you give it to?" Yideng asked.

Before Huang Rong could answer the scholar took the drawing from his pocket and presented it with both hands. "Disciple has it," he said, "Shifu has not finished meditation just now, I have not presented it to Shifu yet."

Yideng held out his hand to take the drawing, he smiled to Huang Rong and said, "You see, if you did not mention it, I

wouldn't know a thing." Slowly he opened up the drawing and looked at it; he knew what the drawing meant. He smiled and said, "Turned out others were afraid I would not help you and sent this drawing to stir me up. Don't you think they underestimated the Old Monk too much?"

Huang Rong turned her head to see anxiety and deep concern on the scholar and the farmer's faces; she felt strange. "Why is it that when they heard their Shifu promise to treat me they looked like they are losing their lifeblood? Is the medicine the most precious pill that they hate to give it up?" She turned her head back to see Yideng was carefully examining the drawing. He brought it under the sunlight to see the quality of the paper, he lightly flicked it several times; his face showed suspicions.

"Did Ying Gu draw this picture?" he asked Huang Rong.

"Yes," Huang Rong answered.

Yideng was silent for half a day then asked again, "Did you see it with your own eyes when she did it?"

Huang Rong knew something was amiss; she tried to recollect what happened that time and said, "When Ying Gu wrote those, her back was toward us. I saw her pen moved, but I did not see with my own eyes whether she was writing or drawing."

"You said she gave you two other pouches; let me see the contents of the other pouches," Yideng said.

Guo Jing took the pouches from his pocket and Yideng examined them; his face changed slightly. "Indeed that is so," he muttered softly. He gave the three sheets of paper to Huang Rong and said, "Yao Xiong is an expert in calligraphy and paintings; your educational background came from your family, certainly you understand connoisseurship. Why

don't you take a look at these three sheets and tell me what you think."

Huang Rong took the papers to take a look and immediately said, "These two sheets are ordinary 'yu ban zhi' [jade register paper], but the drawing was made on a 'jiu jian zhi' [old cocoon paper], a rarely seen type of paper."

Yideng nodded his head, "Hmm, in calligraphy and painting I am a layman, what do you think about this drawing?"

Huang Rong examined the drawing carefully; she smiled and said, "Uncle is only pretending to be a layman! You have known from the start that it was not Ying Gu who draw this picture."

Yideng's countenance slightly changed, "Then it is true it was not her painting? I am only guessing based on logic, I really was not looking at the drawing."

Huang Rong tugged his arm, saying, "Uncle, look, the writing on these two sheets of paper are delicate and elegant while the stroke on this drawing is very stiff. Hmm, this drawing is made by a man. Yes, I am sure it is a man's pen-stroke. This man did not know a thing about calligraphy or painting, but his pen-stroke is powerful, it even penetrated the paper to its back ... This ink looked very old, I think it is even older than my own age."

Reverend Yideng heaved a heavy sigh; he pointed his finger to a book on top of a bamboo table, signaling the scholar to fetch it. The scholar walked over and fetched it, and handed it over to his master. Huang Rong saw on the yellowing page of the cover two rows of characters that read, 'The Great Buddhist Scripture by Maming Bodhisattva. Translated by 'san cang jiu mo luo shen' [name of a saint] of Guizi in the Western Region.' She thought, "I am not going to understand anything if he starts preaching to me."

Yideng casually flipped open the cover of the book, put the drawing next to it and said, "Take a look."

"Ah!" Huang Rong softly exclaimed, "The same paper quality." Yideng nodded.

Guo Jing did not understand, he whispered, "What paper quality is the same?"

Huang Rong said, "Look carefully, isn't the paper quality of this book the same as that drawing?"

Guo Jing looked over carefully; the paper of the book was coarse and thick, mixed with strands of yellow silk threads, exactly the same as the paper of the drawing. "They are the same," he said, "So what?"

Huang Rong did not reply, she looked at Reverend Yideng, waiting for an explanation.

Reverend Yideng said, "This book was brought by my martial brother from the western region."

During the entire time Guo Jing and Huang Rong talked to Yideng, they had not paid any attention to the Indian monk; only now did they turn their gaze to him. He was sitting cross-legged on the meditation mat, as if he was oblivious to the discussion of these people.

"This book came from the western region, this drawing also came from the western region," Yideng continued, "Have you ever heard of the western region's White Camel Mountain?"

Huang Rong was startled, "Western Poison Ouyang Feng?" she asked.

Yideng slowly nodded, "Correct," he said, "This picture was drawn by Ouyang Feng." Hearing this Guo Jing and Huang

Rong were shocked and could not say anything for a while.

Yideng smiled and said, "This Ouyang fellow had planned this for a long time; he truly anticipated far ahead."

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "I didn't know this drawing came from the Old Poison; this man always harbors evil intentions."

Yideng smiled and said, "For a Nine Yin Manual men can do great things."

"This drawing has something to do with the Nine Yin Manual?" Huang Rong asked.

Yideng saw her excitement and surprise, he noticed her cheeks turned red; looked like she was straining and was able to stay awake due to her strong internal energy. Thereupon Yideng held out his hand to support her right arm and said, "Let's talk about this some other time, right now it is more important to treat your injury."

Yideng helped her up and walked slowly toward the building next door. When they arrived at the door opening, the scholar and the farmer exchanged a glance and together they rushed toward the door. They knelt down and said, "Shifu, let your disciples try to treat this Miss' injury."

Yideng shook his head, "Do you think your skill is sufficient? Can you treat her until she is completely cured?"

The scholar and the farmer said, "Disciples will try to do our best."

Yideng's face turned serious. "Human life is an important matter, how can you easily try?"

The scholar said, "These two came here by some evil people's direction; definitely without any good intention."

Although Shifu's mercy is abundant, you can't fall into evil people's treacherous plan."

Yideng heaved a sighed, "What did I teach you day in and day out? Go and take a good look at this picture." While speaking he gave the drawing in his hand away.

The farmer knocked his head to the ground and said, "This drawing was made by Ouyang Feng; Shifu, this is Ouyang Feng's evil plan." While speaking thus his anxiety was obvious; tears flowing down his cheeks.

Jing and Rong two people were puzzled, "How does the evil plan relate to treating an injury?" they thought.

Reverend Yideng gently said, "Get up, get up. Don't make our guests' hearts uneasy." His voice was gentle, but full of resolution. The two disciples knew it was useless to argue further; they stood up with their heads hung low.

Reverend Yideng took Huang Rong to the next door building. He beckoned Guo Jing and said, "You also come." Guo Jing followed them entering the room.

Yideng unrolled the bamboo curtain hung above the door down. He took an incense stick and stuck it on the burner on top of a small bamboo table.

The four walls of the room were drab, other than the small bamboo table there were only three meditation mats. Yideng ordered Huang Rong to sit on the middle mat while he himself sat cross-legged on the mat next to her. He turned his gaze toward the bamboo curtain and said to Guo Jing, "You stay and guard that door, don't let anybody come in, including my own disciples." Guo Jing complied.

Yideng closed his eyes, but suddenly he opened his eyes and added, "If they resort to violence you must fight. Your

martial sister's life depends on it. Remember, it's very important."

"Yes!" Guo Jing said, but actually he was confused, "His disciples revere him, how can they dare to disobey their master's order and come barging in?" he thought.

Yideng turned toward Huang Rong and said, "Relax your whole body; no matter how much you feel hurt or itchy, you must not resist at all."

Huang Rong smiled, "I consider myself dead already."

Yideng also smiled, "You are such a smart doll." He closed his eyes immediately, his eyebrows hung down, he circulated his energy. When the incense was about an inch burnt suddenly he leaped up, left palm on his chest, right index finger stretched out, slowly he pointed his finger toward the 'bai hui' [hundred joins] acupoint on Huang Rong's head. Huang Rong's body slightly jumped up involuntarily; she felt a stream of heat flowing from the top of her head down.

Reverend Yideng retracted his finger immediately, without moving his body his second finger hit the 'hou ding' [rear peak] acupoint located about one 'cun' five 'fen' [1 cun is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is about 1 third of a centimeter (a little over 1/8 of an inch)] behind the 'bai hui' acupoint. Successively he hit the 'qiang jian' [powerful space], 'nao hu' [brain door], 'feng fu' [wind manor], 'da zhui' [big spine], 'tao dao' [pottery way], 'shen zhu' [life pillar], 'shen dao' [divine way], along the 'ling tai' [soul platform] downward; so that when the incense was halfway burnt he had already hit thirty consecutive main acupoints of the 'du mai' [supervised arteries or channels] group on her body.

By this time Guo Jing's martial art knowledge and experience was already incomparable to the past. He stood

on the side watching Yideng's finger move slowly, his arm floating in the air. He hit these thirty acupoints with thirty different acupoint sealing techniques. Each one was a mind opening technique; admittedly the Six Freaks of Jiangnan had never taught him this kind of technique, the 'sealing acupoint section' in the Nine Yin Manual also did not contain this technique. He had never seen anything like this before, he had never even heard about it. He was having a blurred vision just by watching; his tongue tied. He only knew that Reverend Yideng was demonstrating an upper class martial art; it never crossed Guo Jing's mind that Yideng was using his lifetime cultivated energy to open up Huang Rong's eight main arteries.

After the 'du mai' group was done, Yideng sat down to take a rest. After Guo Jing lighted up another incense he leaped back up and started to hit Huang Rong's 'ren mai' [assigned arteries/channels] group consisting of twenty-five acupoints. This time his hand movements were very swift; his arms vibrated, just like dragonflies soaring above the water. Just in one breath he had finished hitting all 'ren mai' acupoints. These twenty-five moves were lightning fast, but each finger movement did not miss even a single hair width.

Guo Jing was frightened and full of admiration at the same time; he thought, "(Sigh) There is such skill in the world!"

Meanwhile Yideng had started with the 'yin wei mai' [negative preserved arteries/channels] consisting of fourteen acupoints. Once again he used different technique; this time he moved powerfully like a flying dragon or striding tiger. Although Yideng was wearing a kassaya [Buddhist robe], but in Guo Jing's eyes he did not look like a monk who followed the three-treasure way, but an emperor, ruler of tens of thousands people.

The 'yin wei mai' group finished, without taking a rest Reverend Yideng continued with the 'yang wei mai' [positive preserved arteries/channels] consisting of thirty-two acupoints. This time he did it long distance; for instance, he moved about a 'zhang' away from Huang Rong, then suddenly pounced forward and hit the 'feng chi' [wind reservoir] acupoint on Huang Rong's neck, followed by leaping backward. He did this in succession, without any perceivable pause.

Guo Jing thought, "Fighting closely with an expert is dangerous; by using this technique not only I can overcome the enemy, but putting up a strong defense as well. This is a very wonderful technique." With rapt attention he watched Yideng go back and forth; the movements were truly marvelous. It was especially difficult to attack and withdrew that fast, with matchless agility of a fish darting in the water or a rabbit running away from the hunter. Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "When I fought Ying Gu, her body was very slippery. For a third part her technique resembled the Reverend's attacking acupoint technique; seemed like she got her inspiration from the Reverend, but her skill is fallen short, far below his."

Two incense sticks later Reverend Yideng had finished with her 'yin wei mai' and the 'yang wei mai' two arteries [or channels] groups. When he started the 'ju gu' [gigantic bone] acupoint on her neck, suddenly Guo Jing's heart stirred, "Ah! Doesn't the Nine Yin Manual contain this? I was so stupid not to understand this earlier." Silently he recited the Manual while watching Reverend Yideng's movements and compared them with the Manual; he found out that Reverend Yideng's sealing acupoint technique carried infinite variations. It was like Reverend Yideng was acting out and opening out the secret of the marvelous martial arts in the Nine Yin Manual. Guo Jing had not

learned enough and he did not dare to learn Yideng's Solitary Yang Finger, but with his knowledge of the Manual he had quite a comprehension of this unique skill.

At last the 'dai mai' [band/belt arteries/channels] group were opened successfully. The blood was flowing unobstructed through all the seven groups of passageways contained in the manual. 'Dai mai' was the passageway looped around the waist like a belt. Presently Reverend Yideng was behind Huang Rong's back, walking backward with his finger pointed backward slowly hitting her 'zhang men' [section gate] acupoint.

The 'dai mai' consisted of eight acupoints. Yideng stretched out his hand slowly, as if with great difficulty; his mouth gasping for breath, his body swaying, like he could not even support his own weight.

Guo Jing was shocked; he saw beads of perspirations trickling down Yideng's forehead, sweat dripping down like rain from the tip of his long eyebrows. Guo Jing wanted to step forward and help, but he was afraid he might mess things up. He turned to look at Huang Rong's condition and saw her clothes were soaked with sweat. She was knitting her brows and biting her lips; like she was trying to resist unbearable pain with all her might.

Suddenly Guo Jing heard a 'shua' sound, the bamboo curtain behind him was opened and somebody shouted loudly, "Shifu!" and somebody barged in through the door.

Almost without thinking Guo Jing launched the 'divine dragon swings its tail'; his right palm swung backward and with a slapping sound it hit that person's shoulder. Guo Jing turned around to see somebody was staggering two steps backward; it was the fisherman.

Because his iron boat and iron oars were stolen he was unable to go upstream the creek to the mountain peak; he had to take a long walk more than 20 'li's around the back of the mountain. Upon arriving he heard his Shifu has already started treating that young miss' injury; he was very anxious and rushed toward the room with the intention of imploring his master not to do that. Unexpectedly he was pushed back by Guo Jing's attack. He stood back up to try again. In the meantime the woodcutter, the farmer, and the scholar three people had also arrived outside the door.

"It's over; what else can we stop?" the scholar angrily said.

Guo Jing turned around to see Reverend Yideng sit cross-legged on the meditation mat, his face deathly pale, his monk robe completely soaked in sweats. Huang Rong was lying down on the floor, unmoving; it was not clear whether she was dead or alive. Guo Jing was very shocked; he rushed forward to prop her up. First thing he noticed was a fishy stench coming out of her nose. He looked at her face and found it was bloodless bluish pale, but the faint black shadow on her face had actually gone. He held out his hand to feel her breathing and was greatly relieved to find a steady albeit weak breathing.

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar were sitting around their master in silence, with apprehensive looks on their faces. Guo Jing kept his eyes on Huang Rong. He saw her face gradually turn pink, he was ecstatic; who would have thought that the pink turned to red and very soon her cheeks were fiery hot. A short moment later beads of perspiration started to form on her forehead while her countenance was gradually turning back to white. This cycle happened three times, every time she was sweating profusely.

“Mmm,” Huang Rong moaned softly then she opened her eyes. “Jing Gege, where is the stove, uh, the ice?” she asked.

Hearing her voice Guo Jing’s delight was unspeakable, with a trembling voice he said, “What stove? What ice?”

Huang Rong looked around, shook her head and smiled, “Ah, I was having a nightmare,” she said, “I saw Ouyang Feng, Ouyang Ke and Qiu Qianren. They put me inside the stove to be roasted; and when I was hot, they put ice to cool me down. Once I cool down they put me back into the stove. (Sigh), it was really scary. Uh, how is Uncle?”

Yideng slowly opened up his eyes and smiled, “Your injury is healed, all you need is a day or two of total rest – you can’t move unnecessarily; and you will be all right.”

“I don’t have any strength left in my entire body,” Huang Rong said, “I can’t even lift up a finger.” The farmer was looking at her angrily. Huang Rong ignored him, she turned to Yideng and said, “Uncle, you have spent so much energy to treat me, you must be very tired. I have some Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills, made according to my father’s recipe. How about you take some?”

Yideng happily said, “Good, I did not think you would bring these energy-booster miracle pills. That year when we had the Sword Meet of Mount Hua each one of us was dead tired after the competition; your father gave us some of these pills and the effectiveness was marvelous.”

Guo Jing quickly took the small bag of pills from Huang Rong’s backpack and handed it over to Yideng. The woodcutter went to the kitchen to fetch a bowl of clear water, while the scholar poured the pills on his palm and presented them to his master.

Yideng laughed, "Why so many? These pills are not easy to make, we'll just take half."

The scholar anxiously replied, "Shifu, all the miracle pills in the world won't be enough."

Yideng conceded since he felt extremely exhausted; he took several dozens of Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills from his disciple's hand and swallowed them all, washed by a bowl of clear water. He turned to Guo Jing and said, "Take your Shimei [Martial (younger) Sister] to have a couple of days' rest and then you can go down the mountain. You don't need to see me again. Hmm, I have something I want you to promise me."

Guo Jing bowed to the ground and 'bonk, bonk, bonk, bonk', knocked his head to the floor. Huang Rong ordinarily loved to joke around and be casual with everybody. Even in the presence of her father and her master she still did not follow proper junior-senior relationship; yet this time she actually bowed down reverently and said with a low voice, "Uncle has saved my life, I will not dare to forget even for a moment."

Yideng smiled and said, "It's better if you forget about it; don't let it hang in your mind." Turning his head to Guo Jing he said, "Don't tell anybody that you have come up this mountain; don't ever tell it, even to your Shifu."

Guo Jing was just thinking about taking Hong Qigong up the mountain to ask Yideng to treat his injury; hearing this he could not help but was taken aback and did not know what to say.

Yideng smiled and continued, "Later on don't even bother to come back here, since very soon we are going to move away."

“Where are you moving to?” Guo Jing hastily asked. Yideng smiled without say anything.

Huang Rong said in her heart, “Silly Brother, because their whereabouts has been discovered by us they will have to move away; how can he tell you?” She thought about how Yideng, master and disciples, had spent a lot of effort laboriously developing this place and now because of her they would have to abandon everything; she felt sorry and thought it would be difficult for her to pay back this kindness. No wonder the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar did everything they could to prevent them from going up the mountain. Thinking of this she turned her gaze toward the four disciples, wanted to say something to express her apology and gratefulness but she could not find any appropriate words.

Suddenly Reverend Yideng’s countenance changed, his body swayed and he fell to the ground. The four disciples, along with Guo Jing and Huang Rong were extremely shocked; they rushed forward trying to help. They saw his face twitching like he was trying to suppress a great pain. The six of them were very anxious, they stood around with their hands hanging down, nobody dared to make any noise.

About the time needed to drink a cup of tea later Yideng’s face showed a faint smile, he said to Huang Rong, “Child, did your father personally make these Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills?”

“He did not,” Huang Rong replied, “It was my martial brother Lu Chengfeng who made them according to my father’s secret recipe.”

“Have you ever heard your father said that these pills would be harmful if taken excessively?” Yideng asked further.

Huang Rong was stunned, she thought, "Is there something wrong with these Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills?" She hastily said, "Father said the more the better; only because these pills were not easy to make, he did not want to take too much."

Yideng lowered his head and knitted his brows for half a day; finally he shook his head and said, "Your father can be considered a genius, but his actions are unpredictable; how can I guess what he is up to? Could it be that he was punishing your Martial Brother Lu by giving him a fake recipe? Or could it be that your Martial Brother Lu had a grudge against you and mixed some poison into the pills?"

Hearing the word 'poison' everybody called in alarm in one voice. "Shifu, are you poisoned?" the scholar asked.

Yideng smiled and said, "It's a good thing your Shishu [Martial (younger) Uncle] is here; even a more lethal poison won't kill anybody."

The four disciples could not hold their anger anymore, they cursed Huang Rong, "Our Shifu was so kind to save your life, but you have the guts to actually harm other with poison?" They surrounded Guo Jing and Huang Rong, ready to strike.

This turn of events happened so abruptly that Guo Jing was at a loss; he did not know the best action to take. Ever since Yideng's first question Huang Rong had correctly guessed that the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills had caused a disaster. Her mind quickly recalled the succession of events concerning these pills since she received them at the Cloud Manor [gui yun zhuang]; when she arrived at the thatched hut in the Black Marsh forest she remembered how Ying Gu brought the pills to the other room and examined them for quite some time before she re-appeared. Suddenly a

thought came into her mind like bright light. "Uncle, I know it!" she called out, "It was Ying Gu."

"It was Ying Gu?" Yideng asked.

Immediately Huang Rong told him everything that happened inside the thatched hut in the Black Marsh forest. She furthermore said, "She repeatedly warned me not to take any of these pills; apparently it was because she had already mixed some poison in them."

"Hmm," the farmer sneered angrily, "She was really good to you; she was afraid you might die."

Ever since she learned that Yideng was poisoned Huang Rong's heart was full of regrets; she did not feel like arguing. She lowered her head and said, "She was not afraid to kill me, but she was afraid that if I take the pill then Uncle would not be poisoned."

Yideng could only sigh, "Karma, karma," he said. His face turned gentle. He turned toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong and said, "This is the result of my own sin; it has nothing to do with you. It was that Ying Gu; and I am reaping what I sow. You go ahead and take some rest, then you can go down the mountain, there is no need to worry over me. Although I am poisoned, my martial brother is here and he is an expert in healing poison related sickness." He finished speaking; he closed his eyes and did not say another word.

Jing and Rong two people bowed. They saw Yideng's face showed a smile, he waved his hand lightly. Two people did not dare to tarry much longer, they slowly turned around and went out. The young monk was waiting outside, he led two people to rest at a small building in the rear courtyard. The little building was also empty except for a couple of bamboo couches and a small bamboo table. Not too long

afterwards two older monks came in with some vegetarian dishes; "Please eat," they said.

Huang Rong was still concerned over Yideng's condition. "Is Reverend well?" she asked.

"Xiao Seng [lowly monk] does not know," the old monk replied with a sharp voice. He bowed and went out the door.

"Listening to their voice I thought they were women," Guo Jing said.

"They are eunuchs," Huang Rong said, "They must be Emperor Duan's former attendants."

"Oh," Guo Jing muttered. Their minds were filled with concern, how could they eat?

The courtyard was secluded and very quiet, with light breeze occasionally stirred the bamboo leaves. After a long time Guo Jing broke the silence, "Rong'er, Reverend Yideng's martial art skill is very high.

"Hmm," Huang Rong mumbled. Guo Jing continued, "Our Shifu, your father, Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou], Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren, these five people's martial art is also high, but they won't necessarily superior to Reverend Yideng."

"In your opinion, which one among these six is the Number One in the world?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing hesitated for half a day before answering, "I think each one of them has their strengths and weaknesses, it's really difficult to judge. This one is stronger than that one, yet that one is fiercer than this one."

“What about ‘wen wu quan cai’ [well versed in both literature and martial art]? Who’s the best?” Huang Rong asked.

“Without question your father is the best,” Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong was very proud; she smiled showing her dimples, beautiful as flowers. But then suddenly she sighed and said, “That’s why it’s very strange.”

“What do you mean ‘strange’?” Guo Jing hastily asked.

“Just think about it,” Huang Rong replied, “Reverend Yideng has such high skill; the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar, his four disciples’ skills are not superficial either. Why would they hide themselves in fear in this remote mountain? Why is it that every time they hear somebody’s coming they shiver in fear? Among those six experts, perhaps only Ouyang Feng and Qiu Iron Palm are their enemies; but they are people of high reputation. Could it be that they will disregard their ranks and join hands in making things difficult for him?”

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “Even if Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren join hands to seek enmity, we don’t need to be scared.”

“How come?” Huang Rong asked in surprise. Guo Jing’s face showed embarrassment, he looked bashful. Huang Rong laughed, “Ah! Why are you embarrassed all of a sudden?”

Guo Jing answered, “Reverend Yideng’s martial art is not inferior to the Western Poison. To say the least they are even. I think his backhand acupoint sealing technique is the Toad Stance’s black star.”

“What about Qiu Qianren?” Huang Rong asked, “The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar are certainly not his match.”

“That’s right,” Guo Jing said, “I have exchanged a palm with him at Dongting Lake, Mount Jun and the Iron Palm Peak. If it is fifty stances or less, I think I can fight him evenly; but after a hundred stances I don’t think I can block his attack. Today I saw the way Reverend Yideng’ acupoint sealing method to treat your injury ...”

Huang Rong was delighted, “You learned his skill? Now you can defeat that scoundrel Qiu the Iron Palm?” she interrupted.

“You know I am dim-witted,” Guo Jing said, “This acupoint sealing technique is so deep, how can I learn it? Moreover, Reverend did not pass the theory to me, naturally I can’t learn his skill. But looking at his technique, some things from the Nine Yin Manual that I did not understand before become clearer. Defeating him, I can’t do; but I believe I can hold against him for a moment longer.”

Huang Rong sighed, “Too bad you have forgotten one thing,” she said.

“What is it?” Guo Jing asked.

“That the Reverend is poisoned and we don’t know when he is going to be well,” Huang Rong replied.

Guo Jing was silent. After a while he hatefully said, “That Ying Gu is so evil.” Suddenly he called out, “Ah, this is bad!”

Huang Rong jumped up in surprise. “What is it?” she asked.

“You have promised Ying Gu that after your recovery you will accompany her for a year. Shall we fulfill this promise or not?” Guo Jing said.

“What do you say?” Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing replied, “If she did not give us direction then we would not be able to find Reverend Yideng. It would be difficult to say what your injury’s condition will be ...”

“What would be difficult to say?” Huang Rong cut him off, “Just say it plainly that my little life could not be preserved. You are a gentleman whose words are as a mountain; you certainly want me to abide by mine.” She was thinking about how Guo Jing was not willing to cancel his engagement with Huazheng; she could not help dejectedly hang down her head.

Guo Jing did not have the slightest idea his girl was pouring out her heart’s contents; Huang Rong was on the verge of tears, but he was oblivious. He said, “Ying Gu said your father possesses divine mathematical skill and he is a hundred times superior to her. Let’s just say you are willing to teach her some mathematical skill, in the end it will still be difficult to her to even scratch your father’s skin; then why would she still want you to accompany her for a year?”

Huang Rong covered her face and did not answer. Guo Jing was indifferent, he repeated his question. Huang Rong was angry, “You are so dumb that you don’t know anything!” she scolded him.

Guo Jing did not understand why she suddenly lost her patience and scolded him; he could only scratch his head and said, “Rong’er! I am dumb, that’s why I am asking you to explain it to me.”

Huang Rong had already regretted her words as soon as they left her mouth, now listening to him meekly admitting his stupidity she could not hold herself any longer; she threw herself to his bosom and cried. Guo Jing became more confused than ever, he gently patted her back trying

to console her. Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's sleeve and used it to wipe her tears. She smiled and said, "Jing Gege, I am the bad one; next time I certainly won't scold you anymore."

"I am dumb, so what's wrong with you saying it out loud?" Guo Jing said.

"Ay, you are a good man, I am a bad girl," Huang Rong said, "All right, let me tell you. That Ying Gu has an animosity against my father. She wants to learn mathematic so she can go to the Peach Blossom Island to seek revenge. Afterwards she found out that in mathematics she is inferior to me, in martial art she is inferior to you; she knew it was hopeless for her to seek revenge. Therefore, she wants to keep me as a hostage and tell my father to rescue me. This way from a guest she becomes the host and she can build a treacherous plan to harm him."

Suddenly Guo Jing understood; he slapped his thigh and said, "Ah, that's totally right! Then you don't have to fulfill your promise."

"What do you mean not fulfilling my promise? I have to fulfill my promise," Huang Rong said.

"Huh?" Guo Jing was puzzled.

Huang Rong said, "That Ying Gu is very crafty; just look at how she managed to mix some poison in the Nine Flowered Jade Dew Pills to harm Reverend Yideng. She could do the same again. If we don't get rid of her, this woman will become a thorn to my father in the future. She wants me to accompany her, I have to accompany her. Now that I know, I can guard against her craftiness. No matter what kind of treacherous plan she has, I am confident I can see through them one by one."

"Ay! But that is like you are living with a tiger," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was about to reply when suddenly they heard commotion from the direction of the house where Reverend Yideng was. Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other. They strained their ears to listen closely, but it seemed like the commotion had ceased.

"I wonder how the Reverend is," Guo Jing said. Huang Rong shook her head. Guo Jing continued, "Eat something, and then you take a rest." Huang Rong shook her head again. Suddenly, "Somebody's coming!" she called out. And sure enough, they heard footsteps coming closer from the front courtyard.

"That little girl is so sly, we'll kill her first," an angry voice was heard; it was the farmer's voice.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled. They also heard the woodcutter said, "Don't be rash, we need to ask them clearly first."

"What is there to ask?" the farmer said, "These two little thieves must be sent by Shifu's enemy. We kill one and let the other live. If we must ask, it's enough to ask that dumb kid." While talking, the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar had arrived and stopped at the door. It looked like they were not afraid Jing and Rong two people would hear them.

Without hesitation Guo Jing launched the Proud Dragon Repents; his palm struck the wall behind them. With a loud rumbling noise a hole appeared on the earthen wall. He bent down to let Huang Rong climb on his back and swiftly jumped out the wall. While they were still airborne the farmer stretched out his hand, quick as the wind, trying to grab Guo Jing's leg.

Huang Rong's left hand swept lightly, brushing the 'yang chi' [positive pond] acupoint on the back of the farmer's palm. It was her family's 'lan hua fu xue shou' [brushing orchid acupoint sealing technique]. Although she was weakened from the injury her light and quick stroke floated with elegance, attacking the acupoint in a strange way; truly it was not a simple matter to parry.

The farmer was no stranger to sealing acupoint techniques; he saw her finger was lightning fast, he was shocked and hastily withdrew his hand to parry her attack. His acupoint was saved, but this attack had slowed his grab so that Guo Jing managed to jump out of the wall carrying Huang Rong on his back.

Guo Jing darted forward a few steps. Suddenly he called out in alarm, it turned out behind the buildings there were thorn bushes as tall as a person, dense and numerous, full of thorns covering quite a distance away; there was no way out through the bushes. He was forced to turn around and saw the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar four people had arrived, blocking their way.

Guo Jing said with a clear voice, "The honorable master has given us permission to go down the mountain. You have heard it with your own ears. Why do you disobey his order and detain us here?"

The fisherman stared at them and with a thunderous voice said, "My master has shown you great mercy, willing to sacrifice his life to help you, but you ..."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were shocked, "What do you mean sacrificing his life to help us?" they asked.

"Pei!" the fisherman and the farmer spat. The scholar sneered and said, "Our Shifu sacrificed his life to save Miss' life; do you really not know it?"

"We really don't know. We beg for your explanation," Guo Jing and Huang Rong asked in surprise.

The scholar saw their sincere faces; they did not seem to be pretending. He looked at the woodcutter and the woodcutter nodded. The scholar said, "Miss had suffered a very serious internal injury. It was necessary for Shifu to use both 'yi yang zhi' [Solitary Yang Finger] and 'xian tian gong' [inborn/innate strength/energy] to open up the eight main arteries' acupoints and cure the injury. Ever since the death of the Quanzhen Sect's founder Chongyang Zhenren [lit. true/real man, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest], only my Shifu knows the 'yi yang zhi' and 'xian tian gong', these two marvelous skills. But by treating injury in this manner, his own body will suffer a serious injury; he will lose all his martial arts for the next five years."

"Ah!" Huang Rong exclaimed, she felt more ashamed.

The scholar continued, "Hereafter for the next five years he will have to diligently and painstakingly re-cultivate his energy every day and night. If he makes the slightest mistake, not only his martial art will not recover, but he will at the least be paralyzed, at the most lose his life. My Shifu has shown such kindness to you; how could you be so heartless and repaid kindness with enmity?"

Huang Rong wriggled down and knelt on the ground, facing the house where Reverend Yideng was she kowtowed four times and sobbed, "Uncle has graciously saved my life; I didn't know your sacrifice was this deep."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar saw her bowing down, their faces turned slightly softer. The fisherman asked, "Your father sent you over to harm our Shifu; and you really did not know it?"

Huang Rong was indignant, "How could my father send me to harm Uncle? My father, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, is what kind of person? How could he commit such a despicable act?"

The fisherman cupped his fists and said, "If Miss was not sent by your father, then please forgive my offending words."

"Humph," Huang Rong snorted, "If my father heard you, even though you are Reverend Yideng's outstanding disciple, he would still make you eat a little bit of suffering."

The fisherman smiled and said, "He is known as the Eastern Heretic, his action ... his action ... hey, hey ... We thought what the Western Poison is able to do, your father can also do. Now it looks like we have thought erroneously."

Huang Rong said, "How can you compare my father with the Western Poison? What has that old thief Ouyang Feng done anyway?"

The scholar said, "All right, now everything is clear; let's go back to the house and talk some more."

Immediately six people returned to the meditation room and sat down. The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar sat in such a way that they blocked the doors and windows. Huang Rong knew they were guarding against them escaping; she smiled slightly but did not expose her awareness.

"Do you know anything about the Nine Yin Manual?" the scholar asked.

"We do," Huang Rong replied, "But what does this Nine Yin Manual have to do with this matter? Ay, this book is really dangerous." She could not help but recall how her mother

had died due to over-exertion in re-writing the manual from memory.

The scholar said, "In the first Sword Meet of Mount Hua the Quanzhen Sect's founder was crowned the Number One Martial Artist of The World [wu gong tian xia di yi]; therefore, the manual fell into his hand. It went without saying that the other four experts felt a heartfelt admiration to him. In that Sword Meet of Mount Hua everybody demonstrated his marvelous strength; Chongyang Zhenren was impressed with my Shifu's Solitary Yang Finger. The following year he came to Dali accompanied by his Shidi [younger martial brother] to pay a visit and discuss martial art skills."

"His Shidi?" Huang Rong interrupted, "Isn't that the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

"That's correct," the scholar replied, "Miss is young, yet actually knows a lot of people."

"No need to praise me," Huang Rong said.

The scholar continued, "Zhou Shishu [Martial Uncle Zhou] was a very funny man, but I did not know he was called the Old Urchin. That time my Shifu had not become a monk."

"Ah," Huang Rong said, "He was still an emperor."

"Exactly," the scholar said, "The Quanzhen Sect's founder and his martial brother stayed for a dozen of days in the imperial palace, we four people were always by their side to accompany them. Our Shifu explained the essence of the Solitary Yang Finger and everything there is to know to Chongyang Zhenren. Chongyang Zhenren was completely delighted; in turn he bequeathed the fiercest 'xian tian gong' to our Shifu. We were at their sides when they were discussing these marvelous skills, but because our

experience and knowledge were shallow, we heard but did not comprehend anything.”

“What about the Old Urchin?” Huang Rong asked, “His martial art skill is not low.”

The scholar replied, “Zhou Shishu liked to move around and did not like to stay still. Several days in the Dali palace he wandered to the east and strolled to the west, he played around everywhere; even the empress and the concubines’ palaces did not escape his visits. The court eunuchs were aware he was the emperor’s honorable guest, so they did not do anything to stop him.” Huang Rong and Guo Jing were smiling.

The scholar continued, “Just before Chongyang Zhenren left he said to our Shifu, ‘Lately my chronic illness has come back to me; I don’t think I am going to live much longer. Fortunately I have found an heir to my ‘xian tian gong’; it will strengthen the Emperor’s Solitary Yang Finger. There will be somebody in this world who can control him. I won’t be afraid he would run amuck with unseemly behavior anymore.’ It was then that my Shifu understood that Chongyang Zhenren had traveled thousands of ‘li’s to the Dali with the sole purpose of bequeathing the ‘xian tian gong’ to Shifu so that after his death there would be somebody who can control the Western Poison Ouyang Feng. But because the Eastern Heretic, the Western Poison, the Southern Emperor, the Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity shared the honor of the present age, if he said he came to impart a skill, it would be disrespectful to my Shifu; therefore, he first asked my Shifu to teach him the Solitary Yang Finger, then in exchange he taught the ‘xian tian gong’. As Shifu understood his intention he was very grateful and straightaway he diligently trained the ‘xian tian gong’. Chongyang Zhenren did not live long after he learned the Solitary Yang Finger; he did not have time to

study thoroughly, and I heard he had not bequeathed it to any of his disciples. Later on there were some unfortunate events in our Dali kingdom; my Shifu's heart was broken. He shaved his head and became a monk."

Huang Rong thought, "Emperor Duan did not want to be an emperor anymore, but became a monk; this must be because of an enormously grieving matter. Others did not tell, it would be inconvenient to ask." Glancing sideways she saw Guo Jing was about to open his mouth to ask; hastily she signaled him with her eyes. "Oh!" Guo Jing muttered and closed his mouth.

The scholar's face turned dark; he was reminiscing over past events. After a while he opened his mouth and continued, "Somehow the news that Shifu was training the 'xian tian gong' leaked out. One day, my martial brother," he pointed toward the farmer, "received an order to go gather some medicinal herbs. He went to the 'ta xue shan' [Big Snow Mountain] at the western border of Yunnan; where somebody injured him using the Toad Stance."

"It must be the Old Poison," Huang Rong said.

"Who else but him?" the farmer angrily said, "First a young man unreasonably picked a fight with me; he said this Big Snow Mountain belonged to his family. He wouldn't let anybody trespass and gather herbs without authorization. The Big Snow Mountain spans thousands of 'li's; how could it belong to his family? Without a doubt this person was intentionally provoking me. I remembered Shifu's teaching to endure patiently; I was yielding to him over and over. Who would have thought that this young man got an inch and wanted a foot! He said he wanted me to kowtow to him 300 times before he let me go down the mountain. Finally I couldn't hold myself much longer and we fought. This young man's martial art was not bad, we fought for half a day

without anybody gaining an upper hand. Unexpectedly the Old Poison suddenly appeared from a valley and without saying anything struck out a palm and severely injured me. That young man then carried me on his back and brought me over to 'tian long si' [sky/heaven dragon temple] where Shifu stayed."

"Somebody had already avenged you," Huang Rong said, "This young master Ouyang was killed."

The farmer was angry, "Ah, he's dead. Who killed him?"

"Hey, somebody avenged you; why are you angry?" Huang Rong asked.

"I want to seek revenge myself, I want to kill him with my own hand," the farmer replied.

Huang Rong sighed, "Too bad you can't do that anymore."

"Who killed him?" the farmer asked.

"It was another bad person," Huang Rong replied, "His martial art was below young master Ouyang; but he used craftiness to kill him."

"Good riddance!" the scholar said, "Miss, do you know why Ouyang Feng injured my martial brother?"

"What's so difficult to guess?" Huang Rong said, "Based on Ouyang Feng's martial art, he could kill your martial brother with only one strike; but he only injured him severely and sent him to your Shifu's door. Undoubtedly he wanted the Reverend to waste his energy by treating his disciple's injury. You told me that this type of treatment would require a lot of internal strength; he would need five years to recover his energy. Then on the next Sword Meet of Mount Hua the Reverend would definitely not be able to compete."

“Miss is really smart,” the scholar sighed, “But your guess is only half-correct. That Ouyang Feng’s evil heart was difficult to fathom. After Shifu treated my martial brother’s injury, before Shifu recovered, he launched a secret attack with the intention of killing Shifu ...”

Guo Jing interrupted, “Reverend Yideng is so compassionate and kind, how could he have any enmity with Ouyang Feng?”

“Xiao Ge [little elder brother],” the scholar replied, “What you said is not right. First, merciful and compassionate good people do not coexist with sinister and ruthless evil people. Second, whenever Ouyang Feng wants to harm anybody, it really doesn’t matter whether that person has any enmity with him or not. Just because he knew that the ‘xian tian gong’ is the black star of his Toad Stance he must kill my Shifu with all possible means.”

Guo Jing nodded his head repeatedly; “Did the Reverend receive any harm from him?” he asked again.

The scholar replied, “Shifu saw through Ouyang Feng’s evil scheme as soon as he saw my martial brother’s injury; that very night we moved away and the Western Poison lost our track. We know he has failed once, he would not give up that easily. He has looked for us everywhere until finally he found this secret place of ours. After Shifu recovered his strength we martial brothers proposed to go to the White Camel Mountain and settled this account with the Western Poison, but Shifu prohibits us to take any revenge; we must not allow ourselves to create any trouble. With great difficulty we managed to live peacefully all these years, who would have thought that with your craftiness you managed to go up the mountain. We only know you are the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar’s disciples; we did not know you meant to do our Shifu harm, hence we did not stop you with

all of our strengths. Otherwise we would put our four lives at stake and in no way would allow you to enter the temple. Who would have thought that the man did not have any intention to harm the tiger, but the tiger is harming the man. Ay! In the end my Shifu still fall under your evil hands." Speaking thus his face turned fierce, with a tiger like power he slowly stood up. With a 'shua' sound the sword on his waist went out its sheath, glimmering cold, dazzling the eye.

The fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer also stood up unsheathing their weapons, surrounding them from four directions. Huang Rong said, "I came to ask the Reverend to treat my injury, not knowing it would require all of the Reverend's strength that he would lose his internal energy for five years. There is poison in those pills; I was framed by somebody else. The Reverend has shown me this kind of mercy; even if I don't have a heart, I still will not repay kindness with evil."

With a stern voice the fisherman said, "Then why do you take advantage while Shifu's strength is gone and he is poisoned you lead the enemy going up the mountain?"

Jing and Rong two people were stunned, "We did not!" they said with a confused voice.

"You still deny it?" the fisherman said, "As soon as my Shifu is poisoned, the enemy delivered a jade bracelet on the foot of the mountain. If you did not scheme it ahead, how can there be such coincidence?"

"What jade bracelet?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman was angry, "You still act stupid!" The iron oars in his hands moved; the left oar swept horizontally, the right oar went down vertically, attacking both Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

Guo Jing was sitting side by side with Huang Rong on meditation mats on the floor. As he saw the oars arrive he leaped up with his right hand forming a hook brushing away the horizontally sweeping oar, while his left hand caught the flat of the oar and jerked it hard. This jerking action carried a very strong force; the fisherman felt pain and tingling sensation which forced him to let the oar go. Guo Jing pushed the oar forward. 'Bang!' it hit the farmer's iron rake; sparks flew everywhere. Immediately Guo Jing shoved the iron oar back into the fisherman's hand. The fisherman was surprised; he took the oar back. Exerting his strength to his right arm he struck down together with the woodcutter's axe.

Guo Jing's palm came one after another, carrying strong gusts of wind, coming fast toward the two men's torso. The scholar knew the fierceness of the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms', "Back off quickly!" he anxiously shouted.

Both the fisherman and the woodcutter were disciples of a well-known expert; their martial arts were anything but ordinary. Before Guo Jing's stance arrived they had hastily withdrew their weapons and leaped back. Suddenly they felt a jerk dampening their backward movement; turned out their weapons were pulled forward by Guo Jing's palm strength. They had no choice but let their weapons go; saving their own lives was more important.

Guo Jing caught the iron oar and the steel axe, he lightly tossed them back and called out, "Catch these!"

"Good martial art!" the scholar praised; his long sword threatening Guo Jing's right side.

Seeing this attack Guo Jing was startled; among Yideng's four disciples this scholar looked the most refined, but actually his martial art surpassed those of his colleagues;

hence Guo Jing did not dare to underestimate him. His palms fluttered in the air, enveloping Huang Rong and his own body with tremendous force. This defense was truly stable, like an abyss stopping a mountain peak; there was not a single hole in it. His palms were like rainbow, continuously circling around bigger and bigger that the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar were gradually pushed back till their backs were against the wall. Never mind counterattacking, merely defending themselves was not easy.

By this time if Guo Jing added more force to his palms these four people would inevitably suffer injury. Fighting a moment longer Guo Jing held back his strength, he attacked hard then backed off hard, struck light then fended off light, it seemed like his force was there and then disappeared; throughout the battle he steadily held the power balance so they were on the level ground, nobody won and nobody lost.

The scholar's sword technique suddenly changed; his long sword vibrated, creating a continuously buzzing noise. His sword turned into six swords on the top, six swords on the bottom, six swords on the front, six swords on the back, six swords on the left and six swords on the right, successively stabbing like six by six, thirty six swords altogether. It was the Yunnan's 'ai lao shan' [Mount Ailao] thirty-six sword; considered one of the best offensive sword techniques in the world.

Guo Jing's left palm parried the fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer three people's weapons; his right palm followed the movements of the scholar's sword: up and down, front to back, left to right. Although the sword underwent countless changes, Guo Jing had always succeeded in diverting the sword stab by the power of his palm. Each sword stab passed very close to his clothes, but

never once did it manage to even make a scratch on Guo Jing's skin.

Blocking to the thirty-sixth stab, Guo Jing bent his right middle finger under his thumb; he waited for the incoming sword to lose its momentum before he suddenly flicked the body of the sword. It was the 'tan zhi shen tong' [Divine Flicking Finger], Huang Yaoshi's special skill which was considered unparalleled in the present age. Huang Yaoshi used this special skill when he played shooting marbles with Zhou Botong; and again in the Cloud Village, when he was giving direction to Mei Chaofeng. Guo Jing watched him fighting the Quanzhen's Seven Masters at the Ox Village near Lin'an using this special skill. Having learned a certain amount of the martial art secrets from the Manual he managed to imitate the flicking finger technique. Although it was inferior to Huang Yaoshi's subtle and elegant flicking finger, but it still carried a tremendous force.

With a metallic clank the long sword was shaken; the scholar's arm was numb, the sword almost fell from his hand. The scholar was shocked; he leaped backward and called out, "Hold it!"

The fisherman, the woodcutter and the farmer three people leaped backward at once. Only their backs were very close to the wall to begin with, so there was no place they could withdraw to. The fisherman leaped out of the door, the farmer jumped out over the hole in the wall Guo Jing made earlier. The woodcutter inserted his axe back into his waist. He smiled and said, "I told you these two did not have any evil intentions, but you did not believe me."

The scholar put his sword back into its sheath; he cupped his fists toward Guo Jing and said, "Xiao Ge [little elder brother] has held back your palms, we are feeling grateful."

Guo Jing busily bowed down to return the gesture, but his heart was full of questions, "From the start we did not have any ill-intention; why didn't they believe us? Why is it after we fought they changed their minds and believed us?"

Huang Rong noticed his confused expression, she knew what he was thinking; she whispered to his ear, "If you harbor ill intentions, then you would have injured these four people. How can even Reverend Yideng be your match right now?" Guo Jing thought it was true, he nodded his head repeatedly.

The farmer and the fisherman walked back into the room. Huang Rong asked, "I wonder who the Reverend's enemy is? What is this jade bracelet that was delivered earlier?"

The scholar replied, "It's not that we don't want to tell you, but frankly speaking we don't even know the truth surrounding this matter. All I know is that the reason my Shifu became a monk is closely related to this matter."

Huang Rong was about to inquire further when suddenly the farmer jumped up and shouted, "Aiyo! It's dangerous!"

"What is it?" the fisherman asked.

The farmer pointed his finger to the scholar and said, "Shifu has lost all his strength, he is telling everything, concealing nothing; if these two harbor any ill intention while the four of us are powerless to hold them up, will Shifu be still alive?"

The woodcutter said, "The Honorable Zhuangyuan can predict with divine accuracy. If he could not predict the outcome of this small matter, how could he become the Dali's Prime Minister? He had known from the start that these two are friends and not foes; but he deliberately

proceeded with fighting them. First, to test these two friends' martial art; second, to convince the two of you."

The scholar showed a faint smile. The farmer and the fisherman looked at each other; they were partly admiring the scholar, partly blaming their own rashness.

At that moment they heard footsteps coming in from outside the door. A young monk came in. He clasped his hands and said, "Shifu orders four martial brothers to send the guests off." Everybody stood up immediately.

Guo Jing said, "The Reverend is expecting an enemy; how can we walk away just like that? Forgetting my own inability Xiao Di [little/lowly younger brother] wants to collaborate with the four martial brothers to face the visitor."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar looked at each other with delighted expressions. "Let me ask Shifu," the scholar said.

Four people went in together. They stayed inside for quite a long time. When they came back out Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw their crestfallen expression and knew that Reverend Yideng did not allow them to help. And sure enough; the scholar said, "Shifu thanks the two of you very much; but he said that everybody reaps what he sows, other people must not interfere."

"Jing Gege," Huang Rong said, "Let us talk to the Reverend." They went to the building where Reverend Yideng's meditation house is. Guo Jing knocked the door for half a day but nobody answered. He could have shoved the door open, but how could he dare to play rough?

The woodcutter low-spiritedly said, "Shifu cannot receive the two of you. The mountain is high and the river is long, we will meet again some other time."

Guo Jing felt deeply grateful toward Reverend Yideng, his warm blood bubbling up his chest; he was unable to restrain himself, with a loud voice he said, "Rong'er, whether the Reverend allows us or not, let us go down the mountain. If we see anybody messing around, we'll beat the hell out of him first, then we'll talk."

"That is a wonderful idea," Huang Rong replied. "If the Reverend's enemy is so fierce that we die in his hands, consider that we are repaying the Reverend's kindness."

Guo Jing spoke with power, Huang Rong also intentionally raised her voice, of course Reverend Yideng heard them. They were just about to turn around when the wooden door suddenly opened. An old monk with a sharp voice said, "The Reverend invites you to come in."

Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised; alongside Huang Rong he walked into the room. Reverend Yideng and that Indian monk were still sitting cross-legged on the meditation mats just as before. Two people bowed down to the ground. They raised their heads and saw that Yideng's complexion was yellow and sickly; totally different from the first time they saw him. Two people's hearts were overwhelmed with gratitude and regret at the same time; they did not know what to say.

Yideng turned toward his four disciples on the door, "Everybody come in, I want to say something."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar went inside the meditation room and paid their respects to their master and martial uncle. The Indian monk nodded his head to acknowledge, then he went back into his meditation, did not pay more attention to anybody. Reverend Yideng gazed at the rising incense smoke, he

seemed to be lost in thought; his hand played with a sheep-white colored jade bracelet.

Huang Rong thought, "It is obviously a woman's bracelet. I wonder what is Reverend's enemy's intention in sending it over?"

A moment later Yideng heaved a sigh and turned to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, "The Old Monk gratefully accepts your kind intention. This matter relates to a complicated cause and effect; if I did not talk, I am afraid there will be casualties on both sides, and that is not the Old Monk's original intention. Do you know what kind of man I was?"

"Uncle was the Emperor of the Dali country of Yunnan," Huang Rong replied, "The only emperor of the southern sky, with awe-inspiring power and prestige; who in this world has never heard about you?"

Yideng showed a faint smile. "Emperor is superficial, Old Monk is also superficial, awe-inspiring power and prestige is fake. You, a young miss, are also a fake."

Huang Rong did not understand his allegorical words; she stared at him with her bright, crystal clear beautiful eyes.

Yideng slowly continued, "My Dali kingdom was founded by the Emperor Shen Sheng Wen Wu Tai Zu [lit. divine/holy literature and martial art (or civil and military) great ancestor] in the year of Ding You. It was twenty-three years before the Great Song's founder, Zhao Kuangyin, Emperor Zhou staged a rebellion and assumed the throne of the Song Dynasty. Seven generation from the Emperor Shen Sheng Wen Wu, the throne was passed on to Emperor Bing Yi. He became an emperor for only four years before he became a monk, bequeathing the throne to his nephew, Emperor Sheng De. Following Emperor Sheng De were Emperor Xing Zong Xiao De, Emperor Bao Ding, Emperor

Xian Zong Xuan Ren, and then my father, Emperor Jing Zong Zheng Kang; all had become monks. From Tai Zu [great ancestor/founder] to me, there are eighteen emperors, among which seven had left their home [meaning: became monks].”

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar were people of Dali; naturally they knew their country’s history. But Guo Jing and Huang Rong felt strange, they thought, “Reverend Yideng did not want to become an emperor but became a monk instead was already surprising; turned out many of his ancestors had taken the same path. Could it be that being a monk is better than being an emperor?”

Reverend Yideng continued, “By divine providence our Duan family has been ruling with a great power over a small area ever since. Each generation realizes his own virtue and ability. In reality we all are insufficient to bear this heavy responsibility; hence all along we fulfill our duty with fear and trepidation, did not dare to overstep our boundary. Didn’t the emperors eat without plowing? Wearing clothes without weaving? Going out and coming in to the palace in a carriage? Are these not the common people’s blood and sweat? When the emperors reached their advance years their own hearts convicted them of all their merit and guilt; always enjoying the toil of the people while contributing only a few, how they have committed a multitude of sin while performing their office duty. Therefore, oftentimes they decided to abdicate their thrones and became monks.”

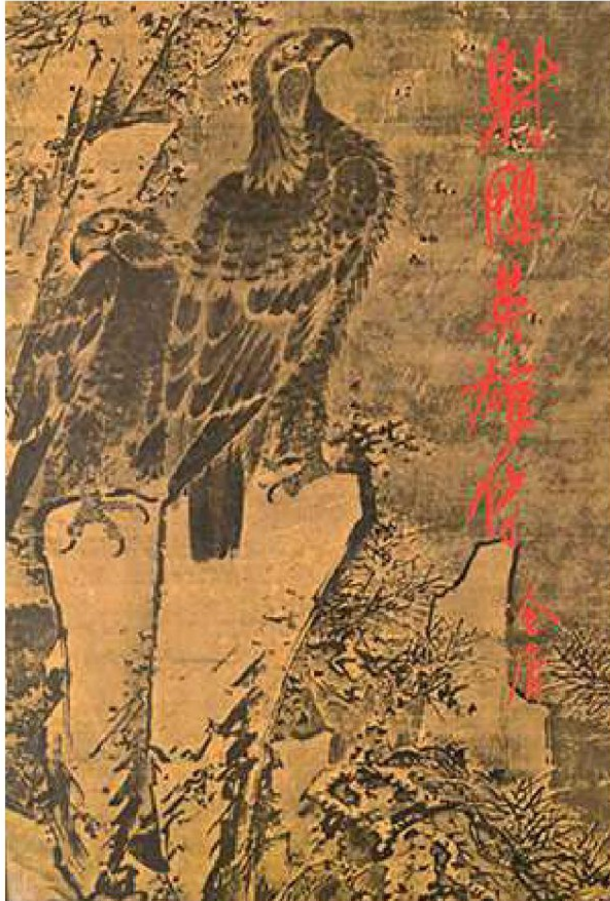
Speaking to this point he raised his head looking outside, the corners of his mouth revealed a smile, while his eyebrows showed a grieving heart. Six people listening silently, nobody dared to make any noise. Reverend Yideng raised up his left index finger with the jade bracelet on it.

He spun it around several times and said, "As for me, I did not become a monk for the same reason. Actually, it has something to do with the Sword Meet of Mount Hua, where we compete over the Manual. That year the Quanzhen Sect's founder, Chongyang Zhenren won the Manual. The following year he paid a visit to Dali, passing along the 'xian tian gong' to me. He stayed in my palace for about half a month. We were having the time of our lives discussing martial art. But his martial brother Zhou Botong was fidgety after about ten days of doing nothing; he roamed to the east and strolled to the west inside the palace, and had caused an incident."

Huang Rong said in her heart, "It would be strange indeed if the Old Urchin Zhou Botong did not create any trouble."

End of Book 3

She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan
Eagle Shooting Hero Book 04
by
Jin Yong



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She Diao Ying Xiong Chuan Eagle Shooting Hero Book 04

by
Jin Yong



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Unfortunately there does not appear to a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to fan translators for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience.

Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

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Our ultimate goal is to get all the major wuxia works translated and available to English readers in one location

If you or a friend would like to help, please get in touch at N1ghtT1iger71@gmail.com

Table of Contents

[Chapter 31 - Lovers' Handkerchief](#)

[Chapter 32 - Rushing River Rugged Shore](#)

[Chapter 33 - Upcoming Disaster](#)

[Chapter 34 - Radical Changes on the Island](#)

[Chapter 35 - In the Temple of the Iron Spear](#)

[Chapter 36 - Expedition to the West](#)

[Chapter 37 - Descending From the Sky](#)

[Chapter 38 - Secret Order in Embroidered Pouch](#)

[Chapter 39 - Discerning Good From Evil](#)

[Chapter 40 - Sword Meet of Mount Hua](#)

Chapter 31 - Lovers' Handkerchief

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Reverend Yideng narrated all kinds of gratitude and grudges, love and hate that he went through with Concubine Liu in the past. Guo Jing and

Huang Rong sat on the mediation mats in front of him, listening intently; while the 'Fisherman', 'Woodcutter', 'Farmer' and 'Scholar', his four disciples, stood behind Reverend Yideng.

Reverend Yideng lowered his head and sighed, "Actually I only have myself to blame for this unfortunate disaster. You see, my Dali kingdom is small; although it cannot be compared to the Chinese emperor's palace where there are more than 3,000 women, speaking about the empress and concubines, I had a few. Ay! It truly was a sin. I was very fond of martial arts; very seldom did I come near a woman. Even my own empress could see me only once every few days; how much less time did I have for my concubines?"

Speaking to this point he said to his four disciples, "This is an inside story, you did not know the details before. Today I am going to tell you everything so you'll understand."

Huang Rong thought, "They really did not know it, they did not lie to me."

Yideng continued, "Day in and day out my concubines saw I train martial arts. Some were interested and expressed their desire to learn. So I casually gave directions to one or two of them. I thought by learning martial arts they would be healthier and might have a longer life. Among them a concubine surnamed Liu was the most gifted. She was so smart that each time I taught her something she would understand everything right off. She was young and she trained hard everyday; her martial art advanced greatly. And so it happened one day as she was practicing martial art in the garden she met Zhou Botong, Zhou Shixiong [Martial Brother Zhou] quite by accident. First of all Zhou Shixiong was crazy about martial arts; his natural disposition was also naïve, he did not guard against male-

female relationship. He saw Concubine Liu was training enthusiastically, immediately he came forward and sparred with her. Zhou Shixiong's martial art came from his martial brother, Wang Zhenren [lit. true/real man, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest]; how could Concubine Liu be his match ...?"

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong softly exclaimed, "He did not know whether his hand was light or heavy and has injured Concubine Liu?"

"Nobody was injured," Reverend Yideng answered, "Only about three moves or two stances later he sealed Concubine Liu's acupoint, and then he asked if she would admit defeat or not. Naturally Concubine Liu admitted defeat. Zhou Shixiong unsealed her acupoint. He was so proud of himself that he started to talk about the wonderful secret of sealing acupoint technique. Concubine Liu had actually asked me to teach her the acupoint sealing technique before; but just think about it: how could I pass on this profound martial art to an imperial concubine? What she heard from Zhou Shixiong was exactly what she desired. Immediately she respectfully asked him to teach her."

"(Sigh)! The Old Urchin must be very happy," Huang Rong said.

"You know Zhou Shixiong?" Yideng asked.

Huang Rong laughed, "We are old acquaintances; he stayed at the Peach Blossom Island for more than ten years, never once leave the island even for a single step."

"With his character, how can he stay that long?" Yideng wondered.

Huang Rong smiled, "My father imprisoned him, and he was released just recently."

"That's so," Yideng nodded his head, "Is Zhou Shixiong well?" he asked.

Huang Rong replied, "His body is well, but the older he gets the crazier he becomes. He doesn't have any manners." Pointing her finger to Guo Jing she pursed her lips and continued with a smile, "The Old Urchin has performed a ritual to become sworn brothers with him."

Reverend Yideng could not help smiling; then he continued, "The acupoint sealing technique is only taught by a father to his daughter, mother to her son, husband to his wife; other than that no man can teach a woman and no woman can teach a man ..."

"Why is that?" Huang Rong asked.

"Because male and female cannot be intimate," Yideng replied, "Just think, if we don't touch one's whole body acupoints one by one, how can we teach this skill?"

"But didn't you touch my whole body's acupoints?" Huang Rong asked.

The fisherman and the farmer was irritated she kept asking questions and diverting the story; they stared at her angrily. Huang Rong stared back at them and said, "What? Can't I ask any question?"

Yideng smiled, "You can, you can," he said, "You are a little girl, your life was in danger, of course we have to make an exception."

"All right, so be it," Huang Rong said, "And then what happened?"

Yideng continued, "And then one taught, the other learned. Zhou Shixiong was at the prime of his life, Concubine Liu was just coming of age; their flesh and skin touched each other everyday, before long their feelings grew and finally they created a problem which was very difficult to rectify ..."

Huang Rong wanted to ask; her lips were about to move but in the end she held back. She heard Yideng continue, "Some people came and reported to me. Although I was angry, I still honored Wang Zhenren's reputation, I pretended not to know. Who would have thought that after Wang Zhenren found out; he interrogated Zhou Shixiong and he did not conceal anything ..."

Huang Rong was unable to hold back much longer, she blurted out, "What is it? What is the problem that was difficult to rectify?"

Yideng temporarily at a loss of what to say, he hesitated before answering, "They really were not husband and wife, but they acted like one."

"Ah, I know," Huang Rong said, "The Old Urchin and Concubine Liu had a child."

"Ay! It's not that," Yideng said, "They had known each other only for about ten days, how could they have a child? After Wang Zhenren discovered this affair, he bound Zhou Shixiong's hands and took him to my presence for me to judge. We are martial art practitioners; we value loyalty above everything else, we did not put too much of a regard toward women. How could I injure our friendship over a woman? I immediately untied him and summoned Concubine Liu at the same time. I ordered them to get married. Who would have thought that Zhou Shixiong raised a clamor; he said he did not know what he did was

wrong, that if he knew, he would have not done it even if he were to be killed. No matter what, he was not willing to take Concubine Liu as his wife. At that time Wang Zhenren sighed and said, 'If I did not know any better, that he is a fool who doesn't know good from evil, a sword would have already cut him into two as he committed this awful crime.'

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and said, "The Old Urchin was in a big trouble!"

Yideng continued, "At first I was offended, I said, 'Zhou Shixiong, I am sincerely willing to part with my treasure and give her to you, do you think I have another agenda? There is an ancient saying, 'Brothers are like hands and feet, wives are like clothes'; what is a woman for you to consider it a very big deal?"

"Pei! Pei!" Huang Rong spat, "Uncle, you disregarded women, what you said was a pile of rubbish!"

The farmer could not hold his patience any longer, he shouted, "Just shut up and don't talk nonsense, will you?"

"What he said was wrong, I must refute it," Huang Rong was adamant.

To the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar, Reverend Yideng was not only their lord, but also their teacher. It never occurred to them to talk back, let alone refuting his words. They regarded him with utmost reverence; now hearing Huang Rong's unrestrained mouth they were shocked and angry at the same time.

Reverend Yideng actually did not seem to mind; he continued his narration, "As Zhou Shixiong heard me, he shook his head. I became angry, I said, 'If you love her, why don't you want her? If you don't love her, why did you do what you did? My Dali is a small country, but do you think

you can just drop in and throw an insult like this?’ Zhou Shixiong was silent for half a day. Suddenly he bent his knees and kowtowed to me several times; he said, ‘Emperor Duan, I am guilty. If you want to kill me, just do it, I won’t dare to hit you back.’ I was taken aback, I have never expected him to say such thing; I was at a loss momentarily. Finally I said, ‘How can I kill you?’ He said, ‘Then I am leaving!’ He took out an embroidered handkerchief from his bosom, handed it over to Concubine Liu and said, ‘I give it back to you.’ Concubine Liu smiled sadly, she did not take the handkerchief. Zhou Shixiong let the handkerchief go and it fell near my feet. Zhou Shixiong did not say anything else; he turned around and stormed out of the palace. It has been more than a dozen years and I haven’t heard anything about him ever since. Wang Zhenren apologized to me over and over again; and then he also left. I heard he passed away that autumn. Wang Zhenren was a brave and heroic man, there was nobody can be compared to him. Ay ...”

“Wang Zhenren’s martial art skill might be higher than yours,” Huang Rong said, “But speaking of bravery and heroic spirit, I think he did not necessarily exceed Uncle. He had accepted seven disciples and they are all just average, there is nothing special about them. Anyway, what happened to the embroidered handkerchief?”

The four disciples were annoyed that Huang Rong cared so much about trivial things like handkerchief or clothes; but they heard their master said, “I saw Concubine Liu was staring blankly, like her soul had left her. I was very angry; I picked up the handkerchief only to see a couple of embroidered mandarin ducks playing on the water. (Sigh), it was Concubine Liu’s gift to her lover. I laughed coldly. I then saw next to the pair of mandarin ducks there was a line of poem ...”

Huang Rong's heart was stirred, she hastily asked, "Was it, 'Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away'?"

With a stern voice the farmer shouted, "Even we do not know it, how did you know? Always talk nonsense and disturb the story!" Who would have thought that Reverend Yideng sighed and said, "It was indeed that poem; you knew it?" At his words the four disciples looked at each other in astonishment.

Guo Jing sprang up and called out, "I remember now! That day on the Peach Blossom Island Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] was bitten by a venomous viper; he was delirious and he muttered this poem. It was, it was ... Four weaving machines, a pair on mandarin ducks, and some head turned white. Rong'er, how did it go? I can't remember it anymore."

With a low voice Huang Rong recited, "Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desires to fly together right away. It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white. When the green spring grass ripples in the deepest of dawn's cold; standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes."

"Exactly!" Guo Jing slapped his thigh, "Zhou Dage once advised me against good-looking women; he said he had seen one and as a result he offended a good friend and provoked his Shige [elder martial brother] to anger. He also said don't ever let her touch your acupoints, otherwise you'll be covered with germs. Rong'er, he even urged me not to be good to you."

"Pei!" Huang Rong angrily spat, "Old Urchin! Next time I see him I am going to twist his ears!" Suddenly she giggled and said, "That day in Lin'an prefecture I teased him that

he wasn't able to find a wife; the Old Urchin sulked for half a day. Turned out it was because of this matter."

"When I heard Ying Gu recited this poem I thought I have heard it somewhere, but tried as I might, I could not remember where I heard it. Uh, Rong'er, how come Ying Gu also knew this poem?" Guo Jing said.

Huang sighed, "Ay, it's because Ying Gu is that Concubine Liu."

Among the four disciples, the scholar was the only one who had already guessed 50, 60%; the other three were extremely astonished, they turned toward their master at once. Yideng spoke in a low voice, "Miss is really smart; truly worthy to be Yao Xiong's [Brother Yao] daughter. Concubine Liu's first name was 'Ying'. That day I tossed the handkerchief to her, afterwards I no longer called for her. In my depression I neglected the affairs of the country; I trained martial art every day ..."

Huang Rong interrupted him again, "Uncle, do you know that you loved her very much in your heart? If you did not, you would not be so unhappy."

The four disciples was shocked at her audacity, "Miss!" angrily they called out in one voice.

"What?" Huang Rong said, "Did I say something wrong? Uncle, tell me, was I wrong?"

Yideng gloomily said, "Hereafter in more than half a year I have never called for Concubine Liu, but in my sleep I often dreamt of being with her. One evening I dreamt about her, at midnight I woke up; I could not hold my patience much longer and made up my mind to pay her a visit. I did not let the palace guards or the eunuchs know about my intention, quietly I went to her quarters, I wanted to know what she

was doing. As I arrived on top of her roof I heard a child was crying inside. (Sigh), outside the frost was thick and the wind was cold. I stood in shock for half a night and did not get down until it was dawn. Afterwards I caught a very serious illness.”

Huang Rong thought how he was revered as the emperor, yet in the middle of the night roaming around the palace roof to visit his own concubine; it was truly unusual. The four disciples also recalled their master’s sickness. It was not only very bad, but also took a long time to recover. All this time they wondered: with his profound martial art cold wind would not easily make him sick; even if he was sick, he should not take that long to recover. Only now did they know that it was more of a crushed spirit than a physical illness that he did not use his own internal strength to battle the sickness. She asked again, “Concubine Liu had given you a child; certainly it was good, wasn’t it? Uncle, why were you not happy?”

“Silly kid,” Yideng said, “It was Zhou Shixiong’s child.”

“But Zhou Shixiong had left for a long time,” Huang Rong said, “Could it be that he came back secretly to see her?”

“No,” Yideng replied, “Have you heard the phrase ‘ten-month pregnancy’?”

Huang Rong was suddenly enlightened, “Ah, I know! That child must look like the Old Urchin very much, with pointy ears and high nose; otherwise how did you know it was not your child?”

Reverend Yideng answered, “That is not necessarily so. I haven’t been intimate with Concubine Liu for some time, naturally the child wasn’t mine.”

Huang Rong seemed to understand but she did not understand, but she was aware it was not appropriate to keep asking questions, so she did not pursue further.

Meanwhile Yideng continued, "I was sick for more than half a year; after I recovered, I poured out my attention to internal strength cultivation to dispel boredom and no longer gave thought to this matter. One night about two years later I was meditating in my bedroom, suddenly the curtain on the door was raised and Concubine Liu rushed in. Outside the door a eunuch and two palace guards quickly tried to stop her, but wherever they went, they were struck away by her palm. I looked up and saw she was carrying the child on the crook of her elbow. She wore an extremely panic-stricken expression; she knelt down and cried loudly, she kowtowed in front of me and called out, 'I ask the Emperor to show mercy, to be infinitely compassionate and spare this child's life!' I stood up to take a look. That child's face was deep red; he was breathing heavily. I took him from her bosom to examine further and found out that five of his ribs were broken.

Concubine Liu wept, 'Emperor, your lowly concubine has committed a heinous crime worthy of ten thousands death; but I am asking the Emperor to spare this child's lowly life.' I was surprised to hear her, so I asked, 'What happened to the child?' But she kept knocking her head entreating me. I asked again, 'Who injured the child?' Concubine Liu did not answer but kept weeping, 'Please Emperor, show mercy to him.' I scratched my head in confusion. She said, 'If the Emperor bestowed death to me, I would not complain for even half a word, but this child ... this child ...'

'Who bestowed death to you?' I asked, 'How did the child get injured?' Concubine Liu looked up and with a trembling voice asked, 'So it wasn't the Emperor who sent a palace guard to kill this child?' I knew something was amiss, I

busily asked, 'So it was a palace guard who injured the child? Which slave did have so much guts?' Concubine Liu called out, 'Ah! It was not the Emperor's imperial edict, so the child's life can be saved!' After saying that she fainted and fell to the ground. I helped her up and put her on the bed; I also put the child down on her side. Only after about half a day later she finally awoke. She pulled my hand and weeping she told me what happened.

Turned out she was patting the child to put him to sleep that night, when suddenly from outside the window came a palace guard wearing a mask on his face. The guard pulled the child away and hit his back with a palm. Concubine Liu hurriedly went forward to stop him, but the guard shoved her away. Then his palm hit the child's chest. Finally he laughed a big laugh and jumped over the window. That palace guard's martial art skill was very high. She thought it was me who sent him to kill her son; she did not dare to pursue, but she came to my palace to entreat.

The more I heard her story the more amazed I became; I re-examined the child but I could not tell what kind of martial art caused the injury. All I can tell was that the child's 'dai mai' [waist arteries] were shaken and broken. That assassin's hands were lethal, but obviously he had shown mercy; the baby was so young and weak, but he was still breathing after two palm strikes. Immediately I went to her quarter to investigate, and sure enough, I found very faint tracks on the window sill and on the tile outside the window. I told Concubine Liu, 'This assassin's martial art skill is very high, especially his lightness kungfu; it was not a small matter. Apart from me there is no one with this kind of ability in the whole Dali kingdom.' Suddenly Concubine Liu called out in alarm, 'Could it be him? Why would he want to kill his own son?' After saying that her face turned ash gray."

Huang Rong also muttered in a low voice, "The Old Urchin couldn't be that bad, could he?"

Reverend Yideng said, "At that time I actually believed it was Zhou Shixiong. Other than him, who in this present age had that kind of ability, and who without any reason at all would injure a baby? I guessed he was not willing to leave an illegitimate child behind and became a disgrace in the Wulin world. After Concubine Liu uttered those words she was bashful and anxious, frightened and ashamed at the same time. She was at a loss. But suddenly she said, 'No, it definitely was not him! That laughter was not his!' I said, 'You were frightened, how could you hear clearly?' She replied, 'I will remember this laughter forever, even if I become a ghost I will still remember that laughter! No, it definitely was not him!'"

Listening to this part everybody suddenly felt a chill in the air, goose bumps appeared on their skins. Guo Jing and Huang Rong recalled Ying Gu's voice and demeanor; they imagined her facial expression when she said those words with clenched teeth, they could not help but shiver in fear.

Reverend Yideng continued, "I heard her so convinced, I believed her. But for the life of me I could not guess who the assassin was. I once thought it might be one of Wang Zhenren's disciples, maybe Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji or Wang Chuyi? Perhaps they were trying to save Quanzhen Sect's reputation that they took the thousands of 'li's journey to a remote place and kill to close someone's mouth ..."

Guo Jing's lips moved, he wanted to say something, but he did not dare to interrupt Reverend Yideng's story. Yideng saw it and said, "You want to say something? You may as well say it."

Guo Jing said, "Ma Daozhang [Taoist Priest Ma], Qiu Daozhang, they are all chivalrous heroes; they can't possibly do this thing."

"I have met Wang Chuyi at Mount Hua," Yideng said, "His conduct was alright, but I don't know about the other disciples. But if they could kill the baby with one palm, why did they leave the baby half dead and half alive?" He raised his head and turned his gaze toward the window, staring blankly. Obviously he had not been able to forget the unsolvable mystery of more than ten years ago. The meditation room was quiet. A moment later Yideng said, "All right, let's talk about that later ..."

Huang Rong suddenly exclaimed, "Without a doubt, it must be Ouyang Feng."

Yideng said, "Afterwards I also suspected him. But Ouyang Feng is a western region's man, he is big and tall; he is at least a head taller than average local men. Concubine Liu said that compared to average men, the assassin can be considered short."

"That's strange," Huang Rong said.

"My thought precisely," Yideng said, "Concubine Liu was hugging the child and sobbing. This child's injury was not as severe as Miss Huang's, but he was very young; he did not have any immune system yet. If I was to treat his injury, it would have consumed all my energy. I hesitated for a long time. I saw Concubine Liu was crying pitifully. Several times I was going to open my mouth to tell her that I would treat his injury, but every time I remembered that if I do that, I can forget about competing against the other experts at the incoming second Sword Meet of Mount Hua to win the Nine Yin Manual. Ay! Wang Zhenren had said that this Manual was the Wulin world's big root of trouble; it brought harms

to many people and brought out the worst of human's heart. He was absolutely right. Because of that book I lost my compassion towards others. After hesitating for almost two hours I finally started to lean toward treating his injury. Ay, during these two hours I felt like I was lower than an animal. The worst part was, my decision to treat his injury was not because I wanted to do something good, but because I was tired of Concubine Liu's constant cry for help."

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "I said you loved her very much, I was not wrong."

Yideng did not seem to hear her, he simply continued his narration, "As Concubine Liu heard my promise to help, she was so happy that she fainted again. I massaged her acupoint to awaken her, then I started to untie the child's swaddling clothes so that I could massage his acupoints using the 'xian tian gong' [inborn/innate energy]. Who would have thought that under the swaddling clothes that child was wearing a 'du dou' [an undergarment covering chest and abdomen] on his chest. I stopped on my track, unable to say anything; because on the 'du dou' was a pair of embroidered mandarin ducks, and next to the ducks was that 'four weaving machines' poem. Turned out this 'du dou' was the handkerchief given to Zhou Shixiong a couple of years ago.

Concubine Liu saw my expression and she knew things had turned bad for her. Her face was ashen. Clenching her teeth she pulled a dagger from her waist and pointed it toward her own chest. 'Emperor,' she called out, 'I do not have any face to live longer in this world. I am asking your infinite mercy and compassion, I am willing to trade my life for the child's. In my next life I will become a dog or a horse to repay your kindness.' As she said that she pushed the dagger into her chest, hard." Although everybody knew

that Concubine Liu was still alive, they could not help but gasp in horror.

As he narrated this part, it was as if Reverend Yideng did not tell the past events to others, but it seemed like he was simply thinking out loud, "I quickly used 'qin na fa' [grappling, capture and seize technique] to snatch her dagger away. I was fast, but her dagger had already penetrated her chest. Blood was seeping out her clothes. I was afraid she might try to kill herself again, so I sealed the acupoints on her hands and feet. I tended the wound on her chest and let her rest on a chair. She did not say anything, but her eyes looked at me full of sorrow. Neither of us said anything. The room was quiet, save the sound of that child gasping for breath.

While listening to that child's breathing many, many past events flashed in my mind: how she entered the palace for the first time, how I taught her martial art, how I had loved her. She had always revered me, feared me, gently attended to all my needs, never dared to disregard my will; but she had never loved me. At first I was not aware of her true feelings, but that day I saw the way she looked at Zhou Shixiong, then I understood. When a woman truly and wholeheartedly loves a man, she will look at him with that kind of look. I remembered the way she looked when Zhou Shixiong threw that handkerchief down, the way she looked when he turned around and left the palace. That scene had haunted me for several years, made my sleeps restless and my meals taste like sawdust. Even today I can still see it vividly in my mind.

This time once again her heart was broken; not over her lover, but over her son, whose life she was willing to trade her own with! I am an honorable man, and I felt disgraced. Me, the ruler of a country! Having this thought my heart was filled with fury; I lifted my foot and smashed an ivory

stool in front of me. I looked up and was dumbstruck. I said, 'You ... what happened to your head?' She did not seem to hear me, her gaze was fixed to her child. I have never really understood before, how someone's gaze could contain so much love, so much compassion. By that time she had realized I was not going to save her child's life, so she wanted to look at him as long as he was still alive.

I took a mirror and held it out in front of her. I said, 'Look at your hair!' In just a short period of time it seemed like she had become several decades older. She was only eighteen, nineteen years old; yet because of fear, anxiety, remorse, despair, grieve, and all kinds of deep emotional attacks innumerable hair on her temples had turned white!

She did not seem to care toward the change in her appearance. She blamed the mirror to be in the way, obstructing her view to the child. 'The mirror, take it away!' she said, candidly. She had forgotten that I was the Emperor, her master. I felt strange; I thought she had always treasured her own looks, why didn't she pay any attention to it now? I tossed the mirror aside only to see without blinking her gaze was fixed on the child. I had never seen such gaze; full of love and hope, a hope that her child would live. I understood that if she could, she would gladly take her own soul and put it inside her child's body to replace his slowly departing soul."

Listening to this Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other; both were thinking in their hearts, "When I was seriously injured and there was little hope for it to be healed you also looked at me that way." Forgetting their surroundings they held out their hands to hold each other. Two hearts beating as one; they felt warmth creeping up their bodies. Amidst listening to how others were grieving of misfortune they could not help of thinking their own good fortune; due to the fact that their loved one was sitting

right next to them at that time, that place. Because her injury had been healed; she would not die. Yes, she would not die. In these two youngsters' hearts their loved one would not die forever.

They heard Reverend Yideng continue, "I could not take it much longer; several times I wanted to just take the child and treat his injury, but I kept looking at that handkerchief wrapped around the child's chest. The handkerchief with a pair of mandarin ducks embroidered on it, their necks intertwined with each other. The mandarin ducks had white heads, symbolizing they would grow old together. But why it was written, 'It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.'? As I turned my head I saw the hair on her temples had turned white, I broke in cold sweats. At that time my heart turned hard, I said, 'Fine, go ahead and grow old together; just leave me lonely and cast away in this palace as an emperor! This is you and your lover's child; why would I sacrifice my whole energy to revive him?'

She looked at me, her last glance. It was full of blame and hatred. Afterwards she had never looked at me anymore, but this one look I will not forget till the day I die. She coldly said, 'Let me go, I want to hold my child!' She was speaking with authority and determination; it was as if she was my master, made it difficult for me to disobey. Thereupon I unsealed her acupoints.

She held the child in her bosom. The child was so much in pain that he wanted to cry, but no sound came out of his tiny lips. His small face had turned purple; he looked at his mother as if asking her to help him. I was so hard-hearted; I did not have the least bit of compassion. I saw one by one her black hair had turned to ash grey, and from ash grey to white. I don't know whether it really did happen, or it was my imagination playing tricks on me.

I heard her gently saying, 'Child, Mama does not have the ability to save you, but Mama also can't let you suffer. Child, have a peaceful rest. Sleep Child, sleep. Don't wake up forever!' I heard she sang a gentle lullaby. It was a very beautiful song. It went like this, 'hmm, hmm ...' Listen!"

Everybody heard him say those words, but actually they did not hear the least bit of a song. They looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Shifu," the scholar said, "You have talked long enough, you must be tired. Please take a rest."

Reverend Yideng did not seem to hear, he kept talking, "The child's face showed a faint happiness, but the pain made his whole body spasm. With a gentle voice she said, 'My precious, my heart and my soul, sleep tight, then you won't feel the pain anymore, not the least bit of pain!' Suddenly 'stab!', her dagger went straight into the child's heart."

Huang Rong screamed in fright; she grabbed Guo Jing's arm tightly. The rest of the listeners were also so shocked that their faces did not show any trace of blood.

Reverend Yideng was oblivious to his surroundings, he continued, "I was so shocked that I cried out and drew back several steps, almost tumbled down. My heart was in turmoil, I was totally at a loss. I saw her slowly stand up and in a low voice she said, 'There will come a day, I will stab your heart with this dagger.' She pointed her finger to the jade bracelet on her wrist and said, 'You gave this to me the day I entered the palace. Just wait, the day I return this jade bracelet to you, will be the day my dagger will follow!'"

Speaking to this point Yideng spun the jade bracelet on his forefinger one time; he showed a faint smile and said, "This is the jade bracelet, I have waited several years for this. At last that day has come."

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "She killed her own son, what did it have to do with you? You did not injure her child. Moreover, she had used poison trying to kill you; what enmity she had for you had been paid in full. I am going down the mountain to send her off, I won't allow her to create any disturbance here ..."

She had not finished her words when that young monk came rushing in. "Shifu," he said, "Somebody delivered this at the foot of the mountain." He held out both hands to present a small cloth bundle to his master.

Yideng took the bundle and unwrapped it. Everybody called out in alarm as one voice. Turned out inside that bundle was the 'du dou' made of the embroidered handkerchief. The silk had turned yellow of age, but the embroidered mandarin ducks were still bright as new. There was a knife hole in between the ducks; the edge of the hole was black from the bloodstain. Yideng stared blankly at the 'du dou', overwhelmed with grief. After a long time he finally said, "The weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away, hey, desiring to fly together; in the end it was just a dream. She hugged her child's lifeless body tightly, uttered a long laugh, and jumped over the window sill, flew out of the room and in the blink of an eye disappeared without any trace. I couldn't drink, I couldn't eat, and was miserable for three days and three nights. Finally I came to my senses. I bequeathed the throne to my eldest son and decided to tread the immortal path by becoming a monk." He pointed at his four disciples and said, "They have followed me for a long time and did not want to leave me. Together we went out of the Dali city wall and lived at the 'tian long si' [celestial dragon temple]. For the first three years they took turns in helping my son to run the country. Later my son has understood the government affairs; the kingdom was at peace and nothing serious happened. So

we went to the Big Snow Mountain to gather medicinal herbs. There Ouyang Feng injured my disciple and we moved to this place. We have never gone back to Dali ever since.

I was so hard-hearted that I was not willing to save that child's life. Hereafter for the last ten years or so, day and night I have never had a peaceful rest. I always hoped to save many people to redeem my great sin. They did not know my miserable inner feeling, so they always tried to hinder me. Ay, even if I could save thousand people, ten thousand people, that child would still be dead. How else would I repay his life if not with my own? Everyday I have been waiting for Ying Gu, waiting for her to stab her dagger into my heart. I was afraid she might come here too late; I am already dead, then it would be difficult to redeem my sin. Good, finally she will be here. Why would she mix the poison into the Nine-flowered Jade Dew Pills? If I knew she would arrive soon after she poisoned me, I wouldn't have wasted these past several hours trying to survive, also my martial brother would not need to waste his divine power to neutralize the poison."

Huang Rong indignantly said, "This woman's heart is so evil! She had found out Uncle's dwelling early on, but was afraid that her own martial art would be insufficient; so she deliberately waited for a good opportunity. Coincidentally she met me, suffering the Iron Palm injury, so she guided me to seek your help. She wanted to employ two methods to achieve one goal; first she wanted you to waste your strength, then to seize that opportunity to poison you. I was so gullible to become the unaware weapon of this wicked woman. Uncle, how did Ouyang Feng's drawing ended up in her hand? What does this drawing have to do with her?"

Reverend Yideng took The Great Buddhist Scripture from the small table beside him, turned several pages and

started to read, "The story of the picture is originated from an ancient Indian city: Once there was a king, his name was Shipi. He was a diligent ascetic practitioner, always followed the way of the true enlightenment. One day there was a hawk chasing a pigeon. The pigeon flew in and hid underneath Shipi's arm, seeking refuge. The hawk demanded the king to return the pigeon to him, he said, 'If the king saves the pigeon, the hawk will die of starvation.' The king realized he could not save one without harming the other. Thereupon he took a knife and cut his own flesh for the hawk. The hawk said, 'If the king cuts his own flesh, it must be the same weight as the pigeon.' Shipi ordered his guard to fetch a balance. He placed the pigeon on one end and his flesh on the other; but no matter how much he cut his flesh, the pigeon end was still low. The king cut his chest, his back, his arm, his side, but the pigeon was still heavier. Finally he put his whole body onto the balance. Right away the earth shook; music came from the sky, the deities scattered flowers and sweet fragrance filled the whole earth. The dragons, the demons and all heavenly creatures sighed, 'Shan zai, shan zai [lit. good, peace], there has never been this kind of bravery.'" It was only a myth, but Yideng narrated it full of compassion and mercy, and the audience's hearts were moved.

"Uncle," Huang Rong said, "She was afraid you might not be willing to treat my injury, so she used this picture to move your heart."

Yideng smiled and said, "It seemed that way. When she left Dali that day, her heart was set on seeking revenge, so it seems logical for her to roam the Jianghu [lit. rivers and lakes] to learn martial art from a highly skilled person. Some way or another she met Ouyang Feng, and as Ouyang Feng learned about her intention he helped her plan this scheme, he drew this picture and gave it to her. This book is

well-spread in the western region, and Ouyang Feng is from the western region, so he must be familiar with this story.”

Full of hatred Huang Rong said, “The Old Poison used Ying Gu, in turn Ying Gu used me. This is an evil plan of murder with a borrowed knife.”

Yideng sighed, “You don’t need to be upset. If you had not met her, she would injure someone else and send that person to me to be treated. Only if that person does not have a highly skilled escort, he won’t be able to go up the mountain easily. Ouyang Feng must have drawn this picture a long time ago; they have been setting up this plan for at least ten years. Contrary to their expectation, they were unable to find someone for ten years; that is also because of fate.”

“Uncle, I know it,” Huang Rong said, “She has something else in her mind which is more important than harming you.”

“Ah!” Yideng exclaimed, “What matter?”

Huang Rong replied, “The Old Urchin was imprisoned by my father on the Peach Blossom Island. She wanted to help him out.” And then Huang Rong told him how Ying Gu painstakingly learned ‘qi men’ [strange/wonderful/mysterious gate] and mathematics. Finally she said, “Afterwards she found out that even if she studied for a hundred years more it would still be difficult for her to overcome my father, plus she saw me getting injured, thereupon ...”

Yideng uttered a long laugh; he stood up and said, “Fine, fine. All’s well that ends well. Everything has come together. Today finally she will get her wish.” With a calm face he turned to his four disciples and said, “You go and welcome Concubine Liu, no, welcome Ying Gu and take her up the

mountain. You must not utter even half a word of disrespect." As if by prior agreement the four disciples bowed to the ground and cried, they called out together, "Shifu!"

Yideng sighed, "You have followed me for many, many years, don't you understand your Shifu's heart?" Toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong he said, "I am asking you two a favor."

Jing and Rong answered together, "Just say it, we won't dare to disobey."

"Good," Yideng said, "Now I want you to go down the mountain. All my life I owed Ying Gu a lot. In the future, whenever she is facing a difficulty or is in danger, I am asking you for the Old Monk's sake, to lend a hand as much as you can. If you two can help in the matter of successful conclusion of her and Zhou Shixiong's affair, the Old Monk will be forever grateful."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other in astonishment; they did not dare to reply. Yideng saw those two were silent, he pressed again, "This Old Monk's request, is it difficult for you to give your consent?"

Huang Rong reluctantly replied, "Since Uncle has asked, we will obey." She tugged Guo Jing's sleeve and bowed down to bid farewell.

"You don't have to meet Ying Gu," Yideng said, "Go down from the back of the mountain."

Huang Rong gave her reply, pulled Guo Jing's hand and turned around to go. The four disciples saw she appeared calm without any trace of grief, they secretly scolded her as cold-hearted and mean, seeing her savior was facing danger she was indifferent and walked away. Guo Jing knew

Huang Rong would not rest before she cooked another plan, so he followed her out.

When they got to the door Huang Rong whispered something in his ear. Guo Jing looked hesitant but finally he nodded his head. He turned around and slowly walked back.

Yideng said, "Your heart is honest and upright, you will accomplish great things in the future. I am entrusting Ying Gu's business to you."

"Very well!" Guo Jing replied, "Junior will do my utmost to tend to the Reverend's business." Suddenly he reached backward and grabbed the Indian Monk's hand sitting next to Yideng. Guo Jing's left hand went straight and hit his 'hua gai' [fancy canopy] and 'tian zhu' [heaven's pillar] two main acupoints. These acupoints were located one on the hand, the other on the foot; once they were sealed then four limbs would be immobilized. This move totally took Yideng and his four disciples by surprise; they called out, "What are you doing?"

Guo Jing did not reply, his left hand went straight toward Yideng's shoulder. Yideng's right palm made a turn and fast as lightning grabbed Guo Jing's left hand. Guo Jing was startled; he thought Yideng was already shrouded inside his palm's strength, unexpectedly not only he managed to break through but launched a counterattack as well. Moreover, Yideng's attack was targeting his vital point. It was truly an exquisite skill. Only as Yideng's palm came within an inch of his hand he could feel Yideng's palm was weak. Guo Jing took this opportunity to turn his palm around to protect his hand, while his right hand launched 'Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail' to repel the fisherman and the woodcutter who attacked him from behind. The forefinger of his left hand was still moving straight forward

to seal the 'feng wei' [phoenix's tail] and 'jing cu' [near energy] on Yideng's side. "Uncle," he said, "I beg your forgiveness."

Meanwhile Huang Rong had pushed the farmer out of the door using the Dog Beating Stick technique. The scholar was surprised with this abrupt turn of events; he did not understand Guo Jing and Huang Rong's intention. "If you have something to discuss, say it; please don't fight!" he repeatedly shouted.

Seeing his Shifu's condition the farmer was like a mad tiger; neglecting his own life he charged toward the meditation room. But the Dog Beating Stick was too much for him, he charged three times and three times Huang Rong's stick pushed him back.

Guo Jing's palms moved in circles with a strong gust of wind, forcing the fisherman, the woodcutter and the scholar to move back step by step toward the door. Huang Rong abruptly swung her stick from the ground upward to the farmer's eyebrow. This move was so swift that the farmer cried out, "Aiyo!" He threw his head backward and leaped back several feet.

"Good!" Huang Rong exclaimed. She reached backward and closed the door. With a chuckle she said, "Gentlemen, please hold your hands! I have something to say."

Every time the woodcutter and the fisherman met with Guo Jing's palm they felt their arms went numb and their feet staggered. They saw Guo Jing was about to strike again, quickly they stood side by side, ready to receive Guo Jing's palm with their combine forces. As Guo Jing heard Huang Rong's words he stopped his palm midway and withdrew it back. Cupping his fists he said, "Please forgive my offense."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar looked at each other in consternation. With a serious face Huang Rong said, "I have received Honorable Master's kindness; now I know that Honorable Master is facing a difficulty, how can I just leave and do nothing? We have offended you with the intention to help."

The scholar stepped forward, bowed deeply and said, "The enemy is our Master's wife; it would be inconvenient for us to offend her. If she wants to go up the mountain, we won't have any way of stopping her. Moreover, ever since that ... that young master died, for more than ten years our Shifu's heart was restless. Even if his energy were still intact and he were not poisoned, when he saw Concubine Liu arrive he would not defend himself against her dagger. We cannot disobey our master, yet our hearts are burning with anxiety. We have exhausted our wisdom and used up all our strengths, still we don't know what to do. Miss is so smart; if you can show us a way, even if our bodies and bones are ground to dust we will wish to repay your kindness."

Hearing him speaking earnestly Huang Rong did not dare to joke around like she previously did, she said, "We, martial brother and sister, are very grateful for the Honorable Master's kindness, no different than the four of you, we will use all means possible to help. It will be best if we can prevent Ying Gu from entering the meditation room, but to think that she has been waiting patiently at the Black Marsh for more than ten years, she must have made ample preparation. I am afraid it won't be easy to block her. Little sister's plan involves a great danger. If we succeed, we can expect smooth sailing in the future, without any imminent trouble. But it is extremely risky, that Ying Gu is very astute and sly, her martial art skill is also high, so there is a possibility for failure. My ability and wisdom is very shallow and simple, I can't think of any foolproof plan."

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar said, "We beg your explanation."

Huang Rong raised her pretty eyebrows and laid down her plan. As the four disciples listened to it, they looked at each other and did not say anything for half a day.

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It was the tenth hour (5 - 7 pm), the sun slowly sank behind the mountain. The strong mountain breeze swayed the leaves of the palm trees planted in rows outside the meditation courtyard. The withered lotus leaves on the pond also made a rustling noise. The evening sun cast its light from behind the mountain peaks, the mountain ridges looked like a silhouette of a giant reclining on the ground. The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar sat cross-legged on the ground by the stone bridge. They opened their eyes wide looking to the front. Each heart was heavy with restlessness.

They had waited for a long time. The sky had darkened, the dusk gradually turned into night. The crows crowed while they were flying in the valley below. A thin white mist rose up from the canyon below. But still no one appeared from the turn at the mountain cliff beyond the stone bridge. The fisherman thought, "If only Concubine Liu has a sudden change of heart and does not blame Shifu, maybe she reined her horse beyond the cliff and decided not to come over ..."

The woodcutter thought, "This Concubine Liu is very crafty; she must have been preparing a really sinister plot."

The farmer was more anxious and impatient than the others, he thought, "The sooner she arrives, the sooner we can get it over with; whether it will be disaster or fortune,

good or evil, we will find out sooner. She said she would come and she hasn't arrived yet, it really is exasperating."

The scholar thought, "The more delayed she is, the more dangerous the threat will be. This matter is really difficult to be solved nicely." It goes without saying that he was a good schemer and tactician; he had been the prime minister of Dali kingdom for more than a dozen of years. He had seen major battle and faced many difficult situations, yet this time he was nervous. He had given this matter a lot of thoughts, but could not put out the least bit of idea. His eyes scanned the darkened surrounding area; his ears heard the distant cry of an owl. Suddenly he remembered when he was a child he often heard people say, 'The owl [lit. night cat] hides in a secret place and stealthily counts human's eyebrows. Whoever got his eyebrows counted correctly, that person will not live to see the daylight.' It was obviously a myth to deceive little children, but in this situation suddenly hearing the cry of the owl, he involuntarily shuddered. "Could it be that Shifu won't be able to escape this disaster and die under this woman's hands?" He had just finished his thought when suddenly the woodcutter whispered urgently with a trembling voice, "She is here!"

The scholar lifted his head and saw a black shadow flew across the stone bridge and light as a feather jumped over the gap, as if floating without exerting any energy at all. The four people were astonished, "When she started training with Shifu, we have already been under his tutelage for a long time. How can her martial art exceed ours? In this last dozen of years or so, where did she go to learn such a marvelous skill?" they thought. As they saw that dark shadow come near, four people stood up and positioned themselves on either side of the way.

In a blink of an eye that dark shadow has arrived at the end of the stone bridge; she was wearing black clothes, and her facial features could be vaguely recognized as Concubine Liu whom the Emperor Duan loved very much in the years past.

Four people knelt down and kowtowed, "Xiao Ren [little/lowly people] greets Niang-niang [madam, or in this case can be translated as 'empress']."

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted. Her gaze swept the four people's faces and she said, "What Niang-niang? Concubine Liu had died long ago, I am Ying Gu. Hmm, the Prime Minister, the General, the Admiral, and the Commanding Officer of the 'yu lin jun' [lit. defending woods troops. I am not sure, but I think 'yu lin jun' is the personal bodyguards of the emperor] are all here. I thought the Emperor had forsaken worldliness and became a monk, who would have thought that he is hiding in this remote mountain and lives in peace and security as an emperor." Her voice carried so much hatred that their hearts trembled.

The scholar said, "The Emperor does not look like his former self. I am sure Niang-niang will not recognize him anymore."

Ying Gu laughed a cold laugh, "You keep saying Niang-niang this and Niang-niang that; are you mocking me? You are stiffly sitting on your knees down here, are you wishing me dead?"

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar looked at each other and then they stood up. "Your servants wish for your health," they said.

Ying Gu waved her hand, "The Emperor ordered you to stop me here, do you still have to perform this empty obeisance? If you want to fight, then just fight. You are lords and

royalties, I don't know how many common people you have harmed; why would you still pretend in front of an ordinary woman like me?"

The scholar said, "Our Emperor loves the people like his children, full of generosity and benevolence, the common people of Dali country still praise him even until today. Our Emperor not only has never harmed the innocent all his life, even toward criminal with grave offense oftentimes he bestowed abundant favor. Doesn't Niang-niang know?"

Ying Gu's face turned red, with stern voice she said, "Do you dare to offend me?"

"Wei chen [lowly officer] doesn't dare," the scholar replied.

Ying Gu said, "With your mouth you acknowledge me as your superior, but in your heart how can you still think there is any royalty-officer relationship between us? I want to see Duan Zhixing; will you let me or will you not?"

'Duan Zhixing' was Reverend Yideng's given name. Although the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar knew it, they never dared to mention it casually. Now that Ying Gu mentioned his name irreverently they could not help but feel offended. The farmer was formerly the Emperor Duan's personal bodyguards' captain; he could not endure patiently. With a loud voice he shouted, "One day became an emperor, he will be honored for the rest of his life. How can it be that you speak without propriety?"

Ying Gu let out a long laugh and without saying anything charged forward. Four people respectively shot out their arms to block; they thought, "Even though her martial art skill is high, with us combining our efforts we should be able to stop her. We are going to disobey our order, but the situation is dire, we'll talk later."

Who would have thought that Ying Gu did not use her palm or fist to attack, but utilizing her lightness kungfu she bumped them. The woodcutter saw her coming fast, he did not dare to touch her body, he moved aside swiftly, then stretched out his hand trying to grab her shoulder. His hand was quick and powerful, but as soon as he touched her shoulder he felt like he was trying to grab something exceptionally slick, so that his hand slipped away.

By this time with a loud shout the farmer and the fisherman attacked from left and right. Ying Gu ducked and just like a slithery snake she slipped underneath the fisherman's armpit. The fisherman's nostrils caught a faint whiff of fragrance, it smelled like an orchid but not quite like an orchid, like musk deer but not quite like musk deer. He was frantic and did not dare to catch her body in between his arms; he opened up his arms instead for fear of touching her body.

The farmer was indignant, "What are you doing?" he shouted. With his ten fingers forming a pair of claws he tried to grab Ying Gu's waist.

"Don't be impolite!" the woodcutter called out.

The farmer turned a deaf ear to him, very soon his fingers had reached Ying Gu's waist, but somehow it was like his fingers were touching a very smooth and oily surface that they slipped away from her waist.

Ying Gu had used the 'ni qiu gong' [mud loach maneuver] she perfected in the Black Marsh to go through these three people. Now she knew that these four were helpless to block her. Her palm slapped backward toward the farmer. The scholar swung his arm with his finger aimed toward the acupoint on her hand. To his surprise Ying Gu did not retract her hand but stuck her index finger up and quick as

lightning two fingers collided in the air. The scholar had exerted all his strength to his right hand finger, suddenly he felt his finger went numb, his body felt like he was electrocuted. "Aiyo!" he cried out and fumbled down to the ground. The woodcutter and the fisherman busily stooped down to help.

The farmer's left fist went straight ahead like a hammer hurled toward Ying Gu's body. This attack carried a strong gust of wind, the force was astonishing. Seeing this strong attack Ying Gu stood her ground and did not evade. The farmer was alarmed; he thought if his fist hit her head, her skull would be cracked. Hastily he tried to withdraw his power, but by that time his fist had already touched the tip of Ying Gu's nose. Ying Gu leaned her head slightly, the fist slipped from her nose and slid to her cheek. The farmer retracted his left arm, but it was too late. His hand was grabbed by his opponent and with a 'crack' sound he felt a shot of pain on his arm. His elbow joint was broken by the back of her fist. The farmer gritted his teeth, ignoring the pain, his right hand index finger swiftly attacked the crook of the opponent's elbow.

The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar's acupoint sealing technique was taught by Reverend Yideng. It was inferior to the Solitary Yang Finger with its infinite variations, but it could be considered as a first class acupoint sealing technique in the Wulin world; how would they know that fighting Ying Gu they were like fighting their black star. She was determined to avenge the death of her son; she fully realized Reverend Yideng's finger skill was very fierce, thereupon she spent a great deal of time and energy to find a method to subdue that skill. She was very skillful in embroidery, so she found her inspiration from the wonderful needlework technique. She wore a tiny golden hoop on the tip of her right hand index

finger; on the hoop was a three-fen (about 1 cm) long golden needle, which tip was dipped in poison. Her vision was excellent, her hand was steady; after training hard for several years she was able to prick a fly flying in the air. This time fighting the enemy she was able to prick the scholar's index finger. Seeing the direction of the farmer's finger she laughed coldly, lifting up her delicate hand she aimed her fingertip to his and pricked the farmer's finger.

As the saying goes, 'ten fingers join the heart', the tip of the index finger is connected to the hand's 'yang ming' [positive and bright] passage to the large intestine. As the golden needle pricked in, it hit the 'shang yang xue' [positive quotient acupoint] squarely.

In his last effort to score victory amidst a defeat, the farmer had exerted all his strength to his finger. Ying Gu on the other hand, did not have to exert any strength; all she needed to do was to position her golden needle right on the path of the farmer's finger. Hence she let the farmer prick his own finger by the needle.

As his finger was pricked, the farmer roared like a tiger and fumbled to the ground. Ying Gu coldly mocked, "Nice Captain!" and she dashed toward the courtyard in front of the meditation building.

"Niang-niang, stop!" the fisherman shouted.

Ying Gu halted her step and turned around; "And just how are you going to stop me?" she sneered. By that time she had already at the front of the lotus pond. The pond was connected to the meditation building by a small stone bridge. Ying Gu was standing on the bridge's end, staring at the fisherman. The night was dark, barely enough ambient light to recognize her face. The fisherman stood facing her,

he felt her stares were very cold; he shivered involuntarily and did not dare to step forward to stop her.

Ying Gu coldly said, "The Prime Minister and the Captain have been hit by my 'qi jue zhen' [seven lethal needle], nobody in this world can save their lives. Do you want to send your own life off?" Without waiting for an answer she turned around and slowly walked forward. Not once did she turn her head; apparently she was not afraid of any sneak attack.

It was only about twenty steps from the small bridge to the building. As she reached the end of the pathway, suddenly someone came out from the darkness; cupping up his fists he said, "Senior, how are you?"

Ying Gu was startled; she thought, "This person waited quietly here and appeared suddenly; why didn't I heard his breathing before? If he had evil intention I would have been dead or at least wounded." She fixed her eyes to look closer and saw this person was tall and broad-shouldered, with thick eyebrows and big eyes; it was precisely the person she gave directions to, Guo Jing. "Is the young miss' injury healed?" she asked.

Guo Jing bowed and said, "Thank you so much for your directions, Senior. Reverend Yideng has cured my martial sister's injury.

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted, "Why didn't she thank me in person?" Her mouth was speaking, but her feet also kept walking forward.

Guo Jing was standing at the other end of the bridge. "Senior, please return!" he hastily said.

Ying Gu ignored him; she slightly leaned her body sideways and utilizing the 'ni qiu gong' she slipped past by him. Even

though Guo Jing had fought Ying Gu at the Black Marsh, he did not anticipate she would slip pass him while still talking and that her body could be this slippery. In his desperation Guo Jing flung his left arm backward, attacking Ying Gu using the marvelous Vacant Fist of Zhou Botong.

Ying Gu thought that she had already slipped through Guo Jing; who would have thought that suddenly a soft yet strong gust of wind came from his fist pounced toward her face, forcing her to draw back. But Ying Gu was determined not to return, so no matter how strong Guo Jing's attack was, she bravely charged forward as if wanted to receive the blow head-on.

"Watch out!" Guo Jing hurriedly shouted. He felt a warm and soft female body was thrown into the crook of his own elbow. He was stunned. Taking advantage of his situation Ying Gu swept his feet and both of them fell into the lotus pond.

When they were still midair, Ying Gu's left hand slipped underneath Guo Jing's right arm pit, wound around his back and grabbed his left shoulder, her middle finger curled toward Guo Jing's throat while her thumb and index finger pinched the back of his neck with all her strength. It was the fiercest 'qian feng hou bi qi' [sealing front throat shutting air] technique from the 'qin na shou' [grab and capture]; so long as one pinch hit the mark, the enemy's air passage would be sealed and he would not be able to breathe.

While he was falling down Guo Jing felt his shoulder was grabbed, he knew his situation was not good. He bent his right arm to clasp Ying Gu's neck. It was also a technique from the 'qin na shou' called the 'hou xie jing bi qi' [clasping the back of the neck to close up breathing]. Ying Gu knew Guo Jing's arm strength was devastating, and that her own

strength was far too inferior; she knew although she attacked first but she could not compete with him in terms of brute force, so she let her hand off Guo Jing shoulder and stretched her finger to prick him instead. Guo Jing used his left arm to parry her finger.

Falling from the stone bridge to the lotus pond actually took a short moment, but two people had exchanged attacks and counterattacks swiftly; in a blink of an eye they had exchanged no less than three stances. Both were utilizing close combat techniques of 'qin na shou'. Ying Gu's skill was profound, yet Guo Jing's strength was astonishing. In these three stances victory and defeat could not be decided. 'Splash!' two people fell into the pond.

The bottom of the pond was covered with mud about three feet high; as they fell, they were immersed in the water up to their chests. Ying Gu's left hand scooped down some mud and smeared it toward Guo Jing's mouth. Guo Jing was shocked and lowered his head to avoid the mud. Ying Gu had lived on the Black Marsh for more than ten years. Her Loach Maneuver was developed based on watching loach diving and moving around in the mud. Fighting on land she was exceptionally slippery, how much more in the mud? She was like a tiger that grew wings. She intentionally dragged Guo Jing to the pond because she was aware of his martial art; she knew it would be difficult to cross the bridge with Guo Jing guarding it. Her finger-pricking technique was actually several times faster in the mud than on dry land; plus every now and then she scooped a handful of mud and smeared it on Guo Jing's face.

Both of Guo Jing's feet sank deep into the mud; moreover, he did not dare to use too much strength and accidentally injure her, so after about only four or five stances he was already at a disadvantage. He heard a swishing sound of mud coming toward his face; hastily he dodged sideways.

Who would have thought that as the first mud flew past; the second mud had arrived, followed by the third handful of mud, which hit him squarely on his face so that his mouth, nose and eyes were covered in stinky mud.

The Six Freaks of Jiangnan had taught him well, so he knew if he was hit by a secret projectile, he must not frantically try to pull out the projectile, because then the enemy would seize the opportunity to assault and make a kill. At this moment he could not breathe and could not open his eyes; he moved his palms and launched three fierce stances so no one would be able to come within five feet near him. Just then he wiped the mud from his face with his left hand and opened his eyes; but Ying Gu had already leaped up to the stone bridge and dashed toward the meditation courtyard.

As Ying Gu successfully went through Guo Jing she secretly scolded herself, "Ashamed! If there were no pond, how would I overcome this dumb kid? It looks like the Heaven is helping me to seek revenge today."

She sped up her steps and arrived at the temple door shortly. She raised her hand to push; the door was not bolted, it opened immediately with a soft creaking sound. This time she did not rush in, expecting an ambush or some booby trap on the door. She waited outside the door only to see the room was empty, nothing astir. Slowly Ying Gu entered the room. She saw it was a meditation room with a single oil lamp illuminating the image of Buddha with a dignified face. Ying Gu's heart turned sour, she knelt on the meditation mat and offered a silent prayer.

She just barely prayed for a short moment when suddenly she heard someone chuckle softly behind her. Immediately her left hand flung backward in a sweeping movement to block any potential sneak attack, while her right hand

pushed down the mediation mat, borrowing the momentum to leap upward and made a graceful somersault in the air before landing back down to the ground.

"Excellent skill!" she heard a woman's voice applaud. Ying Gu turned to look and saw a young girl wearing green clothes with red belt around her waist and a bunch of golden hoops flickering under the lamp light on her hair, her pair of beautiful eyes stared at Ying Gu with a hint of smile in them; there was a gleaming dark green bamboo stick in her hand. Needless to say, it was Huang Rong. "Senior Ying Gu, I thank you for your kindness in saving my life," she said.

"I gave you directions to treat your injury, but my real intention was to harm others," Ying Gu said matter-of-factly, "So I really was not saving your life. Why should you thank me?"

Huang Rong sighed, "Vengeance and debt of kindness is really difficult to understand. My father imprisoned the Old Urchin Zhou Botong on the Peach Blossom Island for fifteen years. In the end he still could not save my mother's life."

As she heard the name 'Zhou Botong' was mentioned, Ying Gu was extremely shocked. "What relation did your mother have with Zhou Botong?" she asked sternly.

Hearing her tone Huang Rong knew she suspected Zhou Botong had some love affair with her mother and consequently was imprisoned by her father on the Peach Blossom Island. Apparently even after more than a dozen years her feeling toward Zhou Botong did not subside; otherwise why would she drink vinegar over nothing?

Lowering her head, in a mournful voice Huang Rong said, "My mother died of exhaustion due to the Old Urchin."

Ying Gu was more suspicious than ever. Under the dim light she could see Huang Rong's skin was as white as snow, her eyes and eyebrows were beautiful; even Ying Gu in her prime years was not as beautiful as she was. She deducted that Huang Rong's mother must also be beautiful; it would be difficult for Zhou Botong to see her and not be attracted to her. Ying Gu frowned involuntarily.

"Don't you have any ideas," Huang Rong said, "My mother is like an angel; that Zhou Botong is as stupid and stubborn as a cow. Unless the woman has eyes but fails to see, nobody would have a crush on him."

Ying Gu knew Huang Rong was mocking her, but her suspicion was gone; she was instantly relieved. Without batting an eyelid she coldly retorted, "Since there is someone who loves Guo Jing who is as stupid as a pig, there must be someone who loves a man as stupid and stubborn as a cow. How did the Old Urchin cause your mother's death?"

Huang Rong pouted and said, "You scold my martial brother; I won't talk to you." She brushed her sleeve and turned around, pretending to be mad.

Ying Gu really wanted to know about Zhou Botong, so she busily said, "All right, I won't do that anymore. Your martial brother is actually very smart."

Huang Rong halted her steps and turned around. "That Old Urchin did not intentionally cause my mother's death," she said, "It was very unfortunate of my mother to die because of him. In his anger my father imprisoned him on the Peach Blossom Island; but afterwards my father regretted it. Injustice has its cause, debt has its originator. If someone killed your loved one you should go to the ends of the earth

to seek vengeance on the murderer. Why would you vent your anger toward others?"

This speech was like a severe blow on Ying Gu's head; she stood still without making any noise. She heard Huang Rong continue, "My father had long ago freed the Old Urchin ..." Ying Gu was pleasantly surprised, "Then I don't have to rescue him?" she asked.

Huang Rong smiled, "If my father had not released him, were you going to rescue the Old Urchin?" she asked. Ying Gu was silent.

When Ying Gu left Dali her intention was to look for Zhou Botong. The first few years was spent without hearing any news about him. Then quite by accident she heard from the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind that Zhou Botong was imprisoned on the Peach Blossom Island by Huang Yaoshi; but as for the reason behind it she could not inquire. That day when Zhou Botong renounced her and left Dali she knew that it would be very difficult for him to have a change of heart if not because of some significant cause. This time as she learned about his predicament she was both happy and sad at the same time; sad because the man she loved was in trouble, happy because she thought this was a good opportunity. If she managed to rescue him, how could he not have deep affection toward her? Who would have thought that the roads and pathways on the Peach Blossom Island had a thousand turns and a hundred detours? No need to mention rescuing anybody, she almost died of starvation for three days and three nights. If Huang Yaoshi did not send a deaf and mute servant to show her the way, she would never leave that island alive. Thereupon she made the Black Marsh her residence, diligently learning math and theory of numbers. Now she heard that Zhou Botong had been released she stared blankly with all kinds of thoughts bubbling up in her heart.

Huang Rong smiled and gently said, "The Old Urchin is most willing to listen to me; he won't dare to turn down whatever I say. If you want to see him, follow me and go down the mountain. Let me be the matchmaker between the two of you; just consider it my way of saying thanks for saving my life." Her words had made Ying Gu's cheeks turn red with her heart thumping wild.

Seeing her speech might turn murderous intent into a happy occasion Huang Rong felt smug. Suddenly she heard a slapping sound; Ying Gu's palms struck each other. Her face looked like it was covered with a layer of frost; sternly she said, "What makes him listen to you, a girl surnamed Huang? Why would he follow your direction? Because of your good looks? I have never shown kindness to you, I don't need you to repay. Quickly make way for me, or else don't blame me for being merciless."

"Aiyo, you want to kill me?" Huang Rong laughed.

Ying Gu raised her eyebrows. "What if I do?" she coldly said, "Others are scared of the Old Heretic Huang, I am not afraid of the heaven and the earth."

Huang Rong chuckled, "Killing me is not a big deal," she said cheekily, "But who would help you solve the three mathematical problems I left for you?"

Since that day Huang Rong wrote three mathematical problems on the sand inside the thatched hut at the Black Marsh, Ying Gu had painstakingly racked her brain day and night; but she did not have any clue on how to solve them. At first she studied mathematics with the intention of rescuing Zhou Botong; but later on she was captivated with this complex yet mysterious subject. The further she dug into it, the more fascinated she became that sometimes she forgot to eat or sleep, and could not stop even if she wanted

to. She knew perfectly well that even if she could solve these problems, compared to Huang Yaoshi's, her skill would still be like heaven from earth; in other words, it would not help her the least a bit in her plan to rescue Zhou Botong. But curiosity had forced her to rack her brain; without a clear answer it would be difficult for her to keep her mind at peace. Now that Huang Rong mentioned it, the three subjects immediately flashed on her mind clearly; without realizing it her face showed hesitation.

"Don't kill me, I'll teach you," Huang Rong said. She took the oil lamp from the image of Buddha and placed it on the ground. Taking a golden needle out, she started writing numbers and letters on the brick floor.

The first subject was the 'qi yao jiu zhi tian zhu bi suan' [seven dazzling nine grasping Indian method of calculation]. As Ying Gu saw the solution she was dazzled and could not help but secretly sigh in praise. Huang Rong continued with the second subject, the 'li fang zhao bing zhi yin gei mi ti' [lit. standing up soldier supplying silver topic] had profound changes in it. As Ying Gu waited for her to write the last answer she sighed and said, "This middle subject surely has an endless wonderful secret."

A moment later she said, "If we say the third subject to be easy, then it is easy; but if we regard it as difficult, then it is difficult. There is an unknown number; three and three has a remainder of two, five and five has a remainder of three, seven and seven has a remainder of two. What number is that? I know it was twenty-three; but that was a hard guess. I need to line up every number for all interchangeable computational patterns, but even after thinking until I split my head I could not figure it out."

Huang Rong smiled, "It is very easy. Calculating three and three, it amounts to seventy. Calculating five and five, it

amounts to twenty-one. Calculating seven and seven, it amounts to fifteen. Adding three numbers together, if not greater than 105, then that's the correct answer. Otherwise, subtract 105 or its multiple."

Ying Gu calculated it in her heart and sure enough she got the correct answer. With a low voice she recited, "Calculating three and three, it amounts to seventy. Calculating five and five ..."

Huang Rong said, "You don't have to memorize it like that. Let me give you a poem to help you memorize it easier: Three people travel together in seventy directions, five plum blossom trees have twenty one branches, seven children reunite for half a month, a hundred and five remained to be known."

Listening to 'three people travel together' and 'reunite for half a month' Ying Gu felt offended, she thought, "This girl knows him, she knew my shameful secret from early on. 'Three people traveling together' is me one woman serving two men. Could it be that by 'reunite for half a month' she was ridiculing me of having a love affair knowing him for only a dozen of days?" What she did in the years past had become a matter of the heart to her, unavoidably she became quite over-suspicious to everybody. "All right," she said flatly, "Thank you for your directions. 'Asking direction in the morning, bored to death in the evening'. Must I stay to listen to you speaking more nonsense?"

Huang Rong smiled, "'Asking direction in the morning, bored to death in the evening.' The one who died is the one asking; but I've never heard the one asking question kill the one preaching the sermon."

Ying Gu stole a glance toward the meditation room; she knew Emperor Duan must be residing in the back. She saw

Huang Rong kept pestering her, something was amiss. Even though Huang Rong was young, her intelligence and eccentricity was not inferior to her father's. How could a thirty-year-old lady bicker with a baby? She was afraid her luck would turn bad just like a ship capsized in the gutter. She had wasted not a few moments because she wanted to look at Huang Rong's calculations; while a very important matter was still ahead of her. How could she allow senseless thought over mathematics consume her energy? Therefore, she decided not to answer and immediately lifted up her feet to walk inside.

Crossing over the worship hall she saw there was a dark room ahead with only one flickering light inside. As a wary person she did not dare to rush in; raising her voice up she called out, "Duan Zhixing, are you or are you not going to see me? You hide your tail in the dark, what kind of real man are you?"

Huang Rong followed behind her, laughing, "You don't like there is no lamp in here? The Reverend was afraid too much light would scare you away, so he ordered us to put the lights out."

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted, "I am the kind of person who is not afraid to go to hell, why would a mountain of blades or boiling oil scare me?"

Huang Rong clapped her hands and laughed, "That's very good! I want to play around the mountain of blades with you." Taking out a flint from her pocket, lighted it up, then she stooped down and lighted a lamp next to her feet.

Turned out there was an oil lamp on the ground; it surprised even Ying Gu. She looked closer to see that it was not an oil lamp, but a small porcelain tea cup filled halfway with oil, with a cotton ball dipped in it as the wick. Next to

the cup was a sharpened bamboo stick about a foot long, inserted on the ground with the sharpened end on the top; it looked really sharp.

Huang Rong did not pause, she kept moving and in just a short moment the floor was filled with flickering lights like stars on a dark night. Next to each cup was a sharp bamboo stick. Before Huang Rong even finished Ying Gu had started counting, and she found out there were 113 teacups with 113 bamboo sticks next to them. She was greatly baffled, "If it is the 'mei hua zhuang' [plum blossom stake] arrangement, then it must have either 72 sticks or 108 sticks, but it has 113 sticks; what kind of arrangement is this? The array seems random, not the 'jiu gong ba gua' [nine-palace eight-diagram], also not 'mei hua wu chu' [plum blossom five arrangements]. Moreover, these bamboo sticks are so sharp, how can somebody stand on them? Ah, right, she must be wearing iron-soled shoes." She further thought, "This girl is prepared, I can't fight her on these things yet I can't ignore this. I'll just go through it then." Thereupon with big strides she walked forward, but the bamboo sticks were densely packed, it was difficult to walk through them, so she kicked around and broke five, six sticks while saying, "What crafty trick is this? The old lady doesn't have time to play around with the baby."

Hurriedly Huang Rong called, "Ah, ah! Don't do that! Don't do that!" Ying Gu ignored her and kept kicking. "All right!" Huang Rong called out, "You don't want to talk reason with me, I am going to turn off the lights. Quickly memorize the bamboo sticks' positions."

Ying Gu was startled, she thought, "If these people gang up and plan to attack me, they must have memorized the position of these sticks early on. I could get killed among the bamboo sticks in the dark. I must leave this dangerous

place quickly!" She gave her spirit a boost and sped her steps up, kicking furiously.

"Shameless!" Huang Rong called out. She brandished her bamboo stick trying to block Ying Gu. The oil lamp shone on the dark-green bamboo stick, creating a spooky shadow dancing in front of Ying Gu's face. Of course Ying Gu did not think much about a teenage girl's stick technique. Her left palm hacked vertically down; she thought one palm should be enough to break the bamboo stick. Who would have thought that Huang Rong's stick technique was the Dog Beating Stick's sealing technique; the stick moved horizontally, it was not aimed at the enemy's body, but it turned into a piece of jade-green wall blocking in front of the door. As long as the enemy did not tread a step, the wall would not hurt the least bit, but if one attacked one would immediately hit.

As Ying Gu hacked down her palm, 'crack!' her palm was hit by the end of the stick. Hastily she withdrew her already pain and numb hand. She was not hit on a vital acupoint, but the pain was severe. Formerly Ying Gu did not think much of Huang Rong's martial art, but as she was hit she became startled and angry. She realized now that this young crafty kid was not easy to deal with. She swallowed her anger and cautiously guarded against the opponent's martial art, trying to gain more understanding before deciding on the next course of action. She thought, "I have seen the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind's martial art. Their skills were very profound, but they were already thirty, forty years old. How can this little girl attain this kind of level? It must be that Huang Yaoshi has passed on his lifelong achievement to his only beloved daughter."

When she went to the Peach Blossom Island she had suffered a bitter defeat without even seeing Huang Yaoshi, almost died on the island; therefore, she always feared the

Master of the Peach Blossom Island. She actually did not know that this Dog Beating Technique was the Beggar Clan Leader's unique skill, that even if Huang Yaoshi were there, he would not necessarily be able to penetrate the stick's defense immediately.

While Ying Gu hesitated and held her attack back, Huang Rong kept moving her stick with the sealing technique, blocking Ying Gu from entering the door. In the meantime Huang Rong's feet did not stay idle, she moved from one bamboo stick to the other with agility like a dancing butterfly, kicking the flames one by one. In a short moment she had extinguished most of the 113 oil lamps.

The way she kicked the lamps was amazing; not only she did not step on any teacup, none of the teacups was kicked upside down or smashed, also only a little bit of oil was splashed over. She was fully utilizing the Peach Blossom Island's 'sao ye tui fa' [sweeping leaves leg/kicking technique]. Her movement was swift and accurate, but Ying Gu could see that her skill had not yet reached perfection, it was far inferior to the marvelous changes of the bamboo stick technique. Moreover, although her injury had been healed, her strength had not fully recovered yet. Ying Gu thought that if she attacked the lower part of Huang Rong's body she might score a victory within dozens of stances. However, as Ying Gu was contemplating her course of action only about seven or eight oil lamps were left flickering in the wind on the northeast corner of the room; while the other three corners were already pitch-black.

Suddenly Huang Rong's stick moved twice, Ying Gu was startled; under the faint yellow light of the oil lamp she saw a clearance in between two sharp bamboo stick on the ground, giving her an opportunity to retreat one step. Huang Rong stuck her stick on the ground and using it as a pole her body floated in the air horizontally; her long sleeve

whisked off and extinguished the seven, eight remaining lamps.

Ying Gu groaned inwardly, "Although I believe I have a way to score victory, among these sharp bamboo sticks every step I take can pierce a hole on my foot; how am I going to fight?" she thought. In the darkness she heard Huang Rong call out, "Have you memorized the bamboo sticks position? Let us fight for thirty stances; if you can defeat me, I will let you go in to see Emperor Duan, all right?"

Ying Gu replied, "You are the one who arranged these sticks. I don't know how much time you spent practicing here; while you only gave others a wink to look at these many oil lamps."

Huang Rong was still young and proud, she always tried to outdo others, she also had a high confidence on her excellent memory, so she smiled and said, "What's so difficult about it? If you want you can light up the oil lamps rearrange the bamboo sticks as you wish, then extinguish the lamps before we fight again, all right?"

Ying Gu thought, "This is not a martial art contest, but a memorization competition. This little demon's intelligence is matchless, how can I risk my life playing memory game with her while my big enmity is not avenged?" But suddenly she got an inspiration; after thinking about it for a moment she said, "Fine, that's fair enough. Let the Old Lady accompany you playing." Taking a flint from her pocket she lighted the oil lamps.

"Why do you keep calling yourself an old lady?" Huang Rong laughed, "I think you are beautiful, you are prettier than a sixteen years old girl. No wonder Emperor Duan was so crazy about you."

Ying Gu was about to pull a bamboo stick and move it someplace else; hearing this she stopped dead on her track. "He was crazy about me?" she coldly said, "I was in the palace two whole years; just when did he pay any attention to other people?"

"Ah," Huang Rong was surprised, "Didn't he teach you martial art?" she asked.

Ying Gu retorted, "Is teaching martial art considered paying attention?"

"Ah, I know," Huang Rong said, "Emperor Duan was training the 'xian tian gong' [innate/inborn strength/energy], that's why he could not get intimate with you."

"Humph," Ying Gu snorted, "What do you know? How come he got the crown prince?"

Huang Rong leaned her head sideways; she thought for a moment before answering, "The crown prince was born before he started training 'xian tian gong'."

Ying Gu snorted again but did not say anything. She kept pulling the sticks and inserted them back in different places. As she inserted the bamboo sticks one by one Huang Rong memorized their positions carefully; she did not dare to be careless. It was a matter of life and death, if she missed just a few inches during the fight, it would mean immediate disaster to her foot.

A moment later Huang Rong spoke again, "Emperor Duan was not willing to save your son because of his love for you."

"You knew everything?" Ying Gu said, "Humph, because of his love to me?" Her voice was brimming with bitterness.

"He was jealous of the Old Urchin," Huang Rong said, "If he did not love you, why would he be jealous? He saw your 'four weaving machines' mandarin ducks handkerchief and was extremely grieved because of it."

Ying Gu had never thought Emperor Duan had this kind of feeling toward her, she could not help but be lost in thought. Huang Rong continued, "I think you'd better come back."

Ying Gu coldly said, "Only if you have the ability to defeat me."

"All right," Huang Rong said, "Since you insist, I have no alternative but risking my life to accompany you. If you can break through my defense, I definitely will not hinder you anymore. But what if you can't?"

"I will never go up this mountain again," Ying Gu said, "I will also free you from your obligation to accompany me for a year."

"Wonderful!" Huang Rong clapped her hands, "It would be really unbearable for me to accompany you on that rotten black marsh."

While talking Ying Gu had already inserted about fifty, sixty sticks; immediately she kicked the oil lamps one by one and said, "The rest of them can stay as they are." In the darkness her five fingers formed a claw fiercely attacking Huang Rong.

Remembering the sticks location Huang Rong slanted her body sideways and without hesitation her left foot landed exactly in between two sticks; while the dog beating stick in her hand shook and attacked Ying Gu's left shoulder. Who would have thought that Ying Gu ignored her attack, she kept moving forward in big strides and with a series of

cracking sound she broke about a dozen bamboo sticks with her feet; hence freely she walked to the rear courtyard.

“Aiyo!” Huang Rong was startled; she realized immediately what had happened, “I am duped. Turned out when moving the sticks around she exerted her strength and secretly pinched the sticks broken.” Because she was trying to outdo others she had not suspected Ying Gu would do such thing; she could not help but feel really vexed.

Rushing to the rear courtyard Ying Gu stretched out her hand to shove the door open. She saw an old monk sitting on a meditation mat in the middle of the room; his silvery beard hung down to his chest, a thick monk robe wrapped around his body up to his cheeks, his head hung low in meditation. The fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar, along with several old monks and young apprentices stood on either side.

The woodcutter saw Ying Gu came in, he stepped forward to the old monk, clasped his palms and said, “Shifu, Liu Niang-niang has come to visit.” The old monk slightly nodded his head without saying anything.

There was only a single oil lamp in the entire meditation room, so Ying Gu could not see everybody’s face clearly. She had known earlier that Emperor Duan had become a monk, but actually she did not think that after about a dozen years without seeing each other a heroic martial artist emperor could turn into such a fragile old monk. Recalling Huang Rong’s speech she realized now that the Emperor was not totally pitiless toward her. Her heart melted and her firm grip of the dagger slowly turned loose.

Lowering her head she saw the embroidered handkerchief that was wrapped around her baby was laid in front of the meditation mat where Emperor Duan was sitting. On top of

that 'du dou' was the jade bracelet which the Emperor gave her. Instantaneously past events like entering the palace, training martial art, meeting Zhou, love and passion, giving birth to her son, mourning his death, everything came flashing through her mind one by one like scenes on the stage; then she saw her son's look when he was in so much pain. Although he was still a baby it seemed like his eyes spoke thousand sentences ten thousand words wondering why his mother did not alleviate his pain and suffering. Her anger rose, she raised her dagger up and with a swift movement the dagger stabbed Emperor Duan's chest, all through the handle.

She knew Emperor Duan's martial art skill, this stab might not necessarily kill him; moreover, when the dagger went into his chest she had a slightly different feeling. Right away she pulled the dagger back to stab him the second time. Who would have thought that the dagger was firmly stuck between his ribs; she was unable to pull it back in a moment.

The four disciples called out in alarm and rushed forward simultaneously. In her bitterness Ying Gu had painstakingly practiced this stab thousands of times over a dozen of years period. She knew perfectly well that Emperor Duan would surely guard against her attack, so while her right hand did the stabbing, her left palm had already fluttered around, guarding the left, right and the back, three sides of her own body. Now that she could not pull the dagger back, she saw the circumstances had turned to her disadvantage. Her feet moved and she leaped toward the door. Turning her head around she caught a glimpse of Emperor Duan with his left hand on his chest, seemingly in great pain.

Now that her big enmity had been avenged, just as quick she was not sure of what she did anymore; suddenly remembered, "I had an affair with someone else and gave

birth to a child, he did not speak even half a word of reproach and left me live freely in the palace. Not only he did not execute me, but he abundantly provided everything for me. In actuality he was always very good to me." All along she only remembered that Emperor Duan did not save her son's life, her heart was filled with hatred. Only after stabbing his chest did she remember all his kindness. She heaved a deep sigh, turned around and went out the door.

As she turned around she gasped in horror with sweats came pouring down her body, because she saw an old monk clasping his palms in front of his chest was standing on the door. Under the lamp light she could see his face looked grand and his eyes showed compassion; although he was wearing a monk robe it was as clear as the day that he was the former ruler of the southern kingdom, Emperor Duan. It was as if Ying Gu was seeing an apparition; like a flash of lightning a thought came into her mind, "Did I just kill the wrong person?" She swept her gaze backward and saw the monk she had just stabbed was slowly standing up; while removing his monk attire his left hand pulled on his chin and the white long beard came off. Ying Gu uttered another cry of shock; it turned out that old monk was Guo Jing in disguise.

It was precisely Huang Rong's scheme: Guo Jing sealed Reverend Yideng's acupoint and deliberately took his place to receive Ying Gu's dagger. He was afraid the Indian Monk's martial art skill might be high, so he attacked him first; who would have thought that the Indian Monk did not even know martial arts. Later on Huang Rong delayed Ying Gu by explaining the three mathematical problems in the courtyard; and then using the dog beating technique she fought her amidst the sharpened bamboo sticks by the oil lamps. In the meantime the four disciples quickly helped

Guo Jing wash up the mud and shave his head clean. They also shaved Reverend Yideng's long white beard and stuck it underneath Guo Jing's chin. Actually the four disciples did not feel comfortable treating their master in such a disrespectful manner and to let Guo Jing brave a grave danger; they were feeling very uneasy. But in order to save their master's life they did not have any other choice; if it were one of the four disciples disguising themselves, their martial art was inferior to Ying Gu, they might die under Ying Gu's dagger.

As Ying Gu stabbed her dagger Guo Jing deftly moved his two fingers inside the monk robe to pinch the flat sides of the dagger. Who would have thought that Ying Gu's stab was so powerful that even with Guo Jing's finger strength the blade still cut through about half an inch of his flesh; luckily it did not break his ribs and he only suffered a superficial wound. He could have worn the soft hedgehog armor, which was impenetrable by the dagger; but Ying Gu was cunning; she would perceive the difference, then they would not get rid of the source of the disaster. If she failed this time, she would come back to seek revenge in the future.

Everybody was delighted to see this 'jin chan tuo qiao zhi ji' [lit. golden cicada sheds its shell tactic] accomplished successfully; who would have thought that Yideng chose this very moment to make a sudden appearance. Not only Ying Gu was startled, but everybody else also did not anticipate this to happen.

Because Yideng suffered a heavy injury and lost his strength, Guo Jing did not dare to seal his acupoint with too much strength for fear of injuring him further. In the back room Yideng slowly circulated his internal energy to unseal his own acupoint, and then he went back to the meditation room, arriving exactly at this moment.

Ying Gu's face was pale like that of a corpse, she thought she had fallen into this trap and certainly would not have a good fortune. But Yideng told Guo Jing, "Return the dagger to her."

Guo Jing did not dare to defy, he returned the dagger to Ying Gu. Ying Gu absentmindedly took the dagger while staring at Yideng. She was wondering what kind of torture he would use against her. But she saw that he slowly removed his monk robe and also his undergarment, and then said, "Nobody shall give her any trouble, let her go down the mountain in peace. All right, go ahead and stab me; I have been waiting for you for a long, long time."

These words were said very gently, but in Ying Gu's ears they were like thunderous lightning in a bright daylight. She stood motionless for half a day, then her grip loosened and the dagger fell to the ground with a clanking sound. Covering her face with both hands she rushed out of the room. They heard her footsteps as she went farther and farther away until finally they could hear her anymore.

Everybody looked at each other in shock, nobody made any noise. Suddenly 'thump, thump' the student and the farmer fell backward to the ground. Turned out because their fingers were poisoned, in the commotion that followed they suppressed the poison using their internal energy; by now they saw their master was well, their hearts were relieved and could not hold the poison much longer.

"Hurry, invite Martial Uncle!" the woodcutter called out.

Before he finished Huang Rong had already accompanied the Indian Monk walking into the room. He was an expert in treating poison related illness. He quickly gave two people some medicine to take, also cut their fingers to get rid of the black blood. His face looked very serious, while his

mouth mumbling in sanskrit, “A ma li, ha shi tu, si gu er, qi nuo dan ji.”

Yideng understood Sanskrit, he knew his disciples’ lives were not in danger. They would have to be treated for two months then they would be healed completely.

Meanwhile Guo Jing had removed his monk robe and treated the wound on his chest; he bowed to the ground in front of Yideng to apologize. Yideng busily held out his hand to raise him up; he sighed and said, “You risked your life to save mine; nothing to forgive.” Then he turned toward his martial brother and explained in Sanskrit what Guo Jing had done.

The Indian monk said, “Si li xing, ang yi na de.”

Guo Jing was startled; he knew these two sentences, and he could even recite the next line, “Si re que xu, ha hu wen bo ying ...”

Zhou Botong had taught him to recite the Nine Yin Manual in its entirety. The last part of Manual was full of all these strange sentences. Guo Jing did not understand its meaning, but he was forced to memorize the entire Manual including all these mumbo-jumbo; hence he was able to recite it effortlessly.

Hearing him speaking Sanskrit Yideng and the Indian Monk were stunned; moreover, what he had just said was related to excellent technique to cultivate internal energy; they were even more astonished. Yideng asked him the whole story and Guo Jing told him without concealing anything. Yideng was endlessly marveled, he said, “I have heard the story behind the Nine Yin Manual from Chongyang Zhenren. Huang Shang, the person who compiled the manual was not only highly skilled, he was also well-versed in the Daoist canon, skilled in the internal energy

cultivation, and understood Sanskrit. When the manual was complete, the last chapter was actually the essence of it. Suddenly he realized that if this manual falls into the hand of criminals, they would be able to turn the world upside down without anybody controlling them. But he was also unwilling to destroy this last chapter; thereupon he rewrote the chapter in Sanskrit, but with Chinese transliteration. He thought that it was difficult to say whether the Manual could be passed on to the future generation; the people of Central Plains who knew Sanskrit was very few, and even more rare was the number of people who were well-versed both in martial art and Sanskrit literature. If the Manual fall into the hand of an Indian, although he is proficient in Sanskrit, but he does not speak Chinese. Huang Shang arranged it this way; actually it was the same as not allowing the future generation to understand the content. Because of this Sanskrit part even Chongyang Zhenren did not understand the Manual's meaning. Who would have thought that through divine intervention you who do not understand Sanskrit can actually memorize this lengthy great theory that sounds like incantations? It is truly a very rare opportunity." Thereupon he asked Guo Jing to recite the Sanskrit part slowly while he translated it into Chinese, wrote it on a piece of paper and gave it to Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

The overall guiding principle of energy cultivation in the Nine Yin Manual was mysteriously deep; although Reverend Yideng was a proficient scholar with profound internal energy, he could not dissect the theory completely in such a short period of time. "Stay on the mountain for a few days, let me dig into it comprehensively, then I will transfer my knowledge to you two," he said. He further said, "Usually as my internal strength is damaged, I will need five years of continuous training for a full recovery; but if I practice according to the Manual, it seems like in less than three

months I will get a five-year-worth of internal energy cultivation. Although what I practiced is a Buddhist martial art, which was different from the Taoism method of internal energy cultivation in the Manual, but looking at this principle, as the martial art is trained to the highest level, different approaches will lead to the same result; it is no different than the Buddhism method.”

Huang Rong told him how Hong Qigong was injured by Ouyang Feng. Reverend Yideng showed great concern. “You two must tell your Shifu about the Nine Yin internal energy cultivation method; I am certain he will recover his internal strength,” he said. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very delighted to hear this.

Two people stayed on the mountain for more than ten days. Everyday Reverend Yideng explained the Nine Yin energy cultivation method to them. Huang Rong also took this opportunity for her own recovery.

One particular day they were walking idly outside the meditation building when suddenly they heard anxious cry of eagles in the air; they saw a pair of white eagles in the distance coming from the east. Huang Rong clapped her hands, “Jin wawa [lit. golden baby – see Chapter 29] is here!” The pair of eagles folded their wings and landed, they looked weary. Two people could not help to be alarmed; they saw a gaping wound on the breast of the female eagle. It looked like an arrow wound, but the arrow was no longer there; apparently the eagles had pulled the arrow themselves. There was a piece of green cloth tied on the male eagle’s foot; but they did not bring any ‘jin wawa’ with them.

Huang Rong recognized this piece of green cloth as coming from her father’s robe; then the pair of eagles had indeed been to the Peach Blossom Island. Could it be that there

were powerful enemies on the Island? Could it be that Huang Yaoshi was too busy engaging the enemy that he did not have a chance to fulfill his daughter's request?

The pair of eagles was smart animals, yet the female eagle was hit by an arrow; indicating the person shooting the arrow must have been an excellent martial artist. Guo Jing quickly applied some ointment and wrapped the wound on the female eagle's breast. Huang Rong was thinking hard for half a day, but in the end she still did not have any clue as to what was happening. Too bad the eagles could not talk, otherwise they would be able to tell what they saw on the Peach Blossom Island.

Two people worried over Huang Yaoshi's safety; hence they bid farewell to Reverend Yideng immediately. "We can still be together for many days to come, but since there is something happening on the Peach Blossom Island I cannot retain you anymore. However, Yao Xiong [Brother Yao] is all-resourceful; he is wise and smart. I believe no one in the present age is able to harm him; you two do not have to be too anxious."

Yideng then sent for the fisherman, the woodcutter, the farmer and the scholar; together with Guo Jing and Huang Rong they sat on meditation mats in front of him. He explained the essence of martial art for several hours. When he was finished Guo Jing and Huang Rong bid their farewell reluctantly. The scholar and the farmer had not recovered yet, so they only sent them off to the gate. The fisherman and the woodcutter walked them off to the foot of the mountain. They waited until the two people found their little red horse and at last said their goodbyes with heavy hearts.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong returned via the same road, the scenery was still the same; but their feeling was entirely

different from when they went up the mountain just several days ago. Remembering Reverend Yideng's profound kindness could not help but cause her to bend her knees and bow toward the mountain peak. Guo Jing followed her and kowtowed several times.

Along the way although Huang Rong was concerned about her father, she thought that all the time he had roamed the world far and wide he rarely suffered any setback. Even if he met a powerful enemy, perhaps he would not win, but at least he had enough ability to defend himself; just like Reverend Yideng had said, "No one in the present age is able to harm him." Therefore, she was not overly anxious.

Two people sat on the little red horse's back, chatting casually in light mood. Huang Rong laughed, "I don't know how many times we faced dangers since we met each other, but every time we suffered some loss, we also had some gains. Like this time I suffered injury under that old Qiu Qianren's palms; in the end we found out the marvelous secret of the 'jiu yin shen gong' [lit. nine yin divine strength/energy]; which Wang Chongyang himself did not understand."

"I would rather not know any martial art as long as you are safe and well," Guo Jing said.

In her heart Huang Rong was very happy but she laughed and said, "Aiyo, if you want to flatter others you don't need to blow such a big horn! If you don't know martial art, you would be long dead. Let's not talk about Ouyang Feng, Sha Tongtian and the others; even a black-dressed Iron Palm Clan member would be able to cut your head with a knife."

"No matter what I can't allow you to be injured anymore," Guo Jing said, "Last time when I was injured in Lin'an I felt

all right; but these past few days looking at you suffering so much pain, ay, that was really not good.”

“Humph,” Huang Rong smiled, “You are a heartless man.”

“Why?” Guo Jing wondered.

“You would rather be injured,” Huang Rong said, “Do you think I will feel all right?”

Guo Jing was taken aback; and then he let out a long laugh. His legs kicked the little red horse’s ribs and the horse ran faster; it looked like its four feet were flying above the ground that by noon they had arrived at Taoyuan prefecture. Huang Rong had not yet recovered fully; after half a day of riding she was very tired, her cheeks were flushed and she was panting for breath. There was only one decent restaurant in the city of Taoyuan, it was called ‘bi qin jiu lou’ [evading qin (dynasty) wine shop; lou – multi-story building]. Its name came from the ‘tao hua yuan ji’ [a note on the origin of peach blossom] a literary work of Tao Yuanming [Translator’s note: different characters from the ‘Taoyuan’ prefecture].

Guo Jing and Huang Rong took a seat and immediately called for food and wine. To the wine shop attendant Guo Jing said, “Brother, we need to go to Hankou; I am wondering if you could go down to the river and invite a boatman to come over here to talk to us.”

The wine shop attendant said, “If Sir is willing to ride the boat together with other people, you will save quite a bit of money. To charter a boat just for the two of you will cost you a lot of money.”

Huang Rong rolled her eyes; she took a silver ingot worth five ‘liang’s and tossed it to the table. “Is it enough?” she asked.

"Enough, enough," the wine shop attendant busily said with a smile. He turned around and went downstairs.

Guo Jing was afraid Huang Rong's condition has worsened, so he forbade her from drinking wine; as a result, he also restrained from drinking himself, they only ate the meals. They just ate half a bowl of food when the wine shop attendant came back with a boatman; saying that the boatman agreed to take them to Hankou, the rice was included but the dishes were not, and the total cost would be three 'liang's and six 'qian's of silver. Huang Rong did not bargain; she simply gave the silver ingot to the boatman. The boatman took the silver and cupped his hands in an expression of gratitude; he pointed to his own mouth and made several hoarse throaty 'Ah' sounds. Turned out he was a mute. His hand flailing to the east and pointing to the west, making some hand signals. Huang Rong nodded and also made some hand signals. It seemed like their signals were very complicated and they were communicating at length, exchanging signals incessantly. At last the mute looked pleased, he nodded his head repeatedly and left.

"What were the two of you discussing?" Guo Jing asked.

"He said we'll leave as soon as we finish eating here," Huang Rong replied, "I told him to buy several chickens, several catties of meat, some good wine and vegetables; and not to worry about money. I will reimburse everything later."

Guo Jing sighed, "If I met this mute boatman by myself, I wouldn't know what to do," he said. Since all the servants on the Peach Blossom Island were deaf and mute, Huang Rong had learned how to communicate in sign language since she was two years old.

The honey-steamed cured fish of that restaurant was really tasty; Guo Jing ate several pieces and remembered Hong Qigong. "I wonder where 'en shi' [benevolent master] is, and how is his injury?" he said, "Thinking about him makes me worried." He wished he could wrap some cured fish and gave it to Hong Qigong.

Huang Rong was about to reply when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. A Taoist priestess appeared. She wore grey Taoist robe with a veil over her face to protect her against the dust. The veil covered her mouth and nose so that only her eyes were visible. The priestess chose a table in the corner and sat down. The wine shop attendant promptly greeted her. The priestess talked in low voice. The wine shop attendant gave his reply and went downstairs. A short moment later he came back with a bowl of vegetable noodle. Huang Rong thought this priestess looked familiar, but she could not figure out where she saw her.

Guo Jing followed her gaze and turned his head toward the priestess, who hastily turned her head around. Apparently the priestess was also looking at him. Huang Rong smiled and whispered, "Jing Gege, that priestess' heart is moved by worldly desire; she must think that you are outstandingly good-looking."

"Pei," Guo Jing spat, "Don't talk nonsense. How can you make fun of 'chu jia ren' [lit. people who leave their homes to become monks or priests]?"

Huang Rong laughed, "If you don't believe me, just wait and see."

They finished eating and walked to the stairs. Huang Rong was still in doubt, she cast another glance toward that priestess, who at that moment lifted up her veil a little bit, revealing her face. Huang Rong gasped and almost cried

out in surprise. The priestess shook her hand, put the veil back down immediately and lowering her head she resumed eating the noodle. Guo Jing had walked down and was oblivious to what was going on.

They went downstairs and settled the bill. The mute boatman was already waiting outside the restaurant door. Huang Rong made several hand signals, saying that they needed to buy some things and would be little bit late coming to the boat. The mute boatman nodded, pointed to a boat with a black sail by the river. Huang Rong nodded, but she saw the boatman did not leave, so she took Guo Jing walking to the eastern end of the road. As they walked to a corner they stopped and hid behind a wall, so that they were not visible from the restaurant while they could still see the restaurant entrance.

Not too long afterwards the priestess left the restaurant; she looked at the little red horse and the pair of eagles nearby. It appeared she was looking for Guo Jing and Huang Rong. After looking at four directions without seeing anybody she turned and walked to the west.

“Right, just as I expected,” Huang Rong said in a low voice. She pulled Guo Jing’s sleeve and hastened to the east. Guo Jing was baffled, but he did not ask any questions, he simply followed her obediently.

The town of Taoyuan was not big; in a short moment they had arrived at the eastern gate. Huang Rong turned around to the south. After passing the southern gate they turned again to the west.

“Are we following that priestess?” Guo Jing asked in a low voice, “Don’t play a joke on me.”

Huang Rong laughed, “What joke?” she said, “The priestess is so beautiful like an angel; if you don’t pursue her you will

regret it later.”

Guo Jing anxiously halted his steps, “Rong’er, if you keep making this kind of talk I will be angry,” he said.

“I am not afraid,” Huang Rong said, “I want to see you mad.”

Guo Jing was dumbfounded; he had no choice but to continue walking. Approximately five, six ‘li’s later they saw in the distant that priestess was sitting underneath a locust tree. As soon as the priestess saw Jing and Rong arrive, she stood up and walked along a small pathway leading to a hill. Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing’s hand and they walked toward the pathway.

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing anxiously said, “If you deliberately want to create trouble, then I’ll have to hold you and drag you back.”

“I am really tired of walking,” Huang Rong said, “I think you’d better follow her by yourself.”

Guo Jing’s face showed a deep concern; he squatted and said, “If you are tired then let me carry you on my back.”

Huang Rong giggled and said, “I am going to pull her veil away so you can take a look at her face.” She sped up her footsteps to pursue the priestess. The priestess turned around, waiting for them. Huang Rong grabbed her veil and uncovered her face.

Guo Jing followed behind, he called out, “Rong’er, don’t create trouble!” But as he saw the priestess’ face he was stunned and was at a loss of words. He saw a deep crease between her beautiful eyebrows, her eyes brimming with tears, her face had a pitiful look; obviously she was in distress. She was none other than Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong hugged her waist, "Mu Jiejie [elder sister Mu], what happened? Did that kid Yang Kang bully you?" she asked. Mu Nianci hang down her head without saying anything.

Guo Jing came near and greeted her, "Sister." Mu Nianci uttered a soft 'mmm' sound.

Huang Rong pulled Mu Nianci's hand toward a weeping willow by a small creek; they sat down underneath the tree. "Sister, how did he bully you?" Huang Rong asked, "We'll find him to settle the score. Brother Jing and I also suffered and our two lives were almost gone under his hands." Mu Nianci lowered her head, still did not say anything. Huang Rong and her images were reflected on the clear creek water. Petals of flowers fell down on the water and slowly floated by, disrupting the reflections.

Guo Jing sat on a rock a few feet apart from the two, his mind was filled with questions: why did Sister Mu dressed as a priestess? Why didn't she greet them at the restaurant? Where did Yang Kang go?

Seeing Mu Nianci's grieving look Huang Rong did not ask anymore questions; she quietly held her hands tight.

After a quite while Mu Nianci opened her mouth, "Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], Brother Guo, the boat you hired belongs to the Iron Palm Clan. They are setting up a trap to harm you."

Jing and Rong two people were startled; "That mute boatman?" they asked with uneven voices.

"Exactly," Mu Nianci said, "But he is not mute. He is one of the Iron Palm Clan's henchmen, his voice is so loud that he is afraid if he opens his mouth he will rouse your suspicion; hence he pretends to be mute."

Huang Rong was secretly alarmed, "If you did not say I wouldn't see through his disguise," she said, "No wonder this fellow's sign language is very good; he has often disguised himself as a mute many times."

Guo Jing leaped up the willow tree; he swept his gaze around, but other than two, three farmers in the field he did not see anybody else. He thought, "If not because of Rong'er and Sister Mu walked in circle I am afraid the Iron Palm Clan people would be here by now."

Mu Nianci heaved a long sigh and slowly said, "You have already known my affair with Yang Kang. Later on I brought adoptive father's and mother's coffin to the south. I met him again on a desolate place in the Ox Village of Lin'an."

Huang Rong opened her mouth, "That, we also knew; we even saw him killing Ouyang Ke with our own eyes." Mu Nianci looked at her with eyes wide open, Huang Rong's words were hard to believe. Thereupon Huang Rong told her briefly how Guo Jing and she were hiding in the secret room to treat his internal injury, also how Yang Kang had assumed false identity as the Beggar Clan Leader, how two people narrowly escaped danger and so on. It was a long story with all its takes and turns, but Huang Rong was eager to know Mu Nianci's experience, so she only raised the important parts.

Gritting her teeth Mu Nianci said, "This man did all kinds of evil, someday he will not have a good end. I regretted myself to have eyes but failed to see, that I will have to go through all these calamities by unexpectedly meeting him."

Huang Rong groped her pocket for a handkerchief and gently wiped the tears on her cheeks. Mu Nianci's heart was troubled; all kinds of bad things had come her way that in a moment she did not know where to start. She tried to

gather her thoughts and slowly calmed herself down; only then did she open her mouth to tell her story.

End of Chapter 31.

Chapter 32 - Rushing River Rugged Shore

Translated by Frans Soetomo



The mute boatman took out an axe and with two chops he cut the mooring rope. Immediately afterwards he raised the anchor. As the boat came free, the rushing water washed it out down the river. It made a sudden turn as the hull slanted sideways and rushed away as though flying down the river.

Mu Nianci let Huang Rong hold her right hand; she looked at the fallen flowers floating on the water and said, "When I saw him kill Ouyang Ke I thought he was going to repent from his evil ways. Moreover I saw the two masters from the Beggar Clan were so respectful toward him when they went to the west. I've met those two Beggar Clan uncles before; they were Senior Qigong's trusted aides. Seeing them treat him that way I was very happy; so I followed them till we get to Yuezhou, where the Beggar Clan was having their congress on Mount Jun.

Before then he quietly told me that he had received Hong Enshi's [Benevolent Master Hong] order to become the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu [Clan Leader]. I was surprised and happy. In all honesty it was hard to believe, but I saw even the highest ranking Elders of the Beggar Clan treat him with utmost respect, I didn't have any choice but to believe him. I am not a member of the Beggar Clan, so naturally I could not participate in the congress and had to wait for him in Yuezhou city. I thought that as he become the leader of the Beggar Clan heroes he would be able to do much good for the people and the country, to achieve great things, and in the future would be able to repel the invaders and avenge adoptive father and mother.

That night my mind went back and forth and I couldn't sleep; I thought from now on everything would be all right. It was almost daybreak when I finally felt tired and was about to fall asleep when suddenly he jumped in from the

window. I jumped in fright; I thought he was having some ideas towards me. But he actually spoke in low voice, 'Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], things did not go well, we must go.' I was surprised and asked him what happened; he said, 'There was an internal dispute in the Beggar Clan; the Dirty Clothes Faction refused to accept Hong Bangzhu's order. The Clean Clothes Faction and the Dirty Clothes Faction battled each other in this new Clan Leader business; many people were killed.' I was shocked, 'What should we do?' I asked. He said, 'Because too many people has died, I withdrew my nomination, I did not want to become the Clan Leader anymore.' Taking the entire situation into consideration, I thought he was doing the right thing. He said further, 'The Clean Clothes Faction did not want to let me go; fortunately Qiu Bangzhu from the Iron Palm Clan came to my assistance and helped me leave Mount Jun. Right now we'd better go to the Iron Palm Mountain first and we'll talk it over later.' I did not know whether the Iron Palm Clan was a good clan or an evil one; but since he said so, I followed him.

When we got to the Iron Palm Mountain, I did not see the Qiu Bangzhu from the Iron Palm Clan, but I was watched over with cold eyes. I noticed that the Iron Palm Clan's behavior was sneaky, I saw strange things everywhere. I said to him, 'Although you did not become the Beggar Clan leader, you shouldn't walk away from them. I think you'd better find your Shifu, the Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest], and ask him to gather the heroes of the Jianghu to uphold the justice, to help the Beggar Clan elect a person of virtue and prestige within their clan to assume the Clan Leader position to avoid a bloodbath within the clan. Hence you will be fulfilling Hong Enshi's order to you.' He mumbled indistinctly, neither said yes nor no; but actually raised the matter of his marriage

with me. I rebuked him severely; he became angry. We ended up having a heated argument.

The next day I started to regret my harshness; I thought even though he could not differentiate the important from the trivial, friends from foe, and oftentimes acted childish, nevertheless he was always kind to me. I felt I was being too hard on him, no wonder he was mad at me. That evening the more I thought about it the more restless I became. I lit a lamp to write a note, saying I did not blame him. Quietly I went to his room; I was going to slip the note through his window, but suddenly I heard him talking with somebody. I took a peek from the window; I saw a rather short white-bearded old man, he was wearing a yellow coarse-linen short robe, with a large palm leaf fan in his hand."

Guo Jing and Huang Rong exchanged glances, they both thought, "I wonder if he was Qiu Qianren or Qiu Qianzhang?"

Mu Nianci continued, "That old man took a small porcelain vial from his pocket and put it on the table, he said, 'Brother Yang, if your fiancée does not listen to you, that is a very simple matter. Just take some medicinal powder from this vial and put it in a cup of green tea, let her drink it, I guarantee you will enjoy a wedding night tonight.'"

As Jing and Rong two people heard this, they both thought, "It was Qiu Qianzhang."

Mu Nianci continued, "To my surprise that boy Yang Kang beamed with joy and repeatedly said thanks. I was so angry that I almost passed out. A moment later that old man took his leave. Quietly I followed behind him. After it was far enough, I pounced on him, I beat his chest and struck him down. If I were not in a dangerous place, I would've taken a

knife and killed him right then and there. I repeatedly hit him until he passed out, then I searched his body. This old man's pocket really did contain many things; some rings, broken sword, a piece of brick, and all kinds of strange things. I think all of them are things to harm people. I also found a book. I didn't know what it was, but I thought it might be useful somehow, so I put it in my pocket. The more I thought, the madder I became. I made up my mind to deal with Yang Kang.

I went back to Yang Kang's room. Who would have thought that he was standing at the door? He smiled at me and said, 'Meizi, please come in.' Early on I have decided that tonight I must make myself clear to him, so I went in. He pointed to the porcelain vial on the table and smiled, 'Meizi,' he said, 'Can you guess what's inside this vial?' I was angry, 'Who knows all these kinds of dirty things?' I said. He smiled and said, 'A friend gave it to me a moment ago, he said if I take some of this medicinal powder and put it in a cup of green tea and give it to you, then everything will happen as I wish.' His words have actually blown me away, my anger vanished immediately. I took that porcelain vial and threw it out over the window. 'Did you do it?' I asked. 'I respect and adore Meizi like a deity, how can I engage myself in this kind of filthy business?' he replied."

Guo Jing nodded his head, "Brother Yang has done the right thing," he said. "Humph," Mu Nianci snorted but did not say anything. Huang Rong recalled that day on the Iron Palm Mountain she peeked through the window and saw Yang Kang sit on the edge of the bed, embracing her and talking softly with Mu Nianci. At that time Mu Nianci was smiling, her face was tender. Apparently that happened after she threw the vial away.

"And then what happened?" Guo Jing asked. Zhou Botong told him that whenever somebody was telling a story, a 'And

then what happened?’ every now and then would help keep the story-teller’s interest high; but unexpectedly Mu Nianci’s face turned red, she turned her head away and hang her head low without saying anything.

“Ah, I know!” Huang Rong suddenly called out, “Afterwards you bowed to the heaven and earth and became man and wife.”

Mu Nianci turned her head back, actually her face was a little pale; she bit her lower lip and her eyes shone with a strange look. Huang Rong was scared; she knew she said something wrong. “I am sorry, I talked nonsense,” she hastily said, “Good Sister, please don’t be offended.”

Mu Nianci spoke with a low voice, “You did not talk nonsense, it was I who messed up. I ... I have become his wife, but we did not ... we did not bow to the heaven and earth. I hate myself for not having a stronger self control ...” Speaking to this point tears came streaming down her face.

Seeing her miserable look Huang Rong stretched out her left arm to hold her shoulder. She wanted to say something to comfort her so after a while she pointed to Guo Jing and said, “Sister, you don’t have to feel sorry, it was nothing. That day in the Ox Village Jing Gege and I also became man and wife.”

As he heard this, Guo Jing was dumbstruck. He was blushing profusely and did not dare to look up; he only mumbled, “We ... we did not ... did not ...”

Huang Rong laughed, “Don’t tell me you did not think about that?” she asked.

Guo Jing’s face was red from ear to ear; he lowered his head and said softly, “I was not being good.”

Huang Rong stretched her right arm and patted Guo Jing's shoulder. "You want to become man and wife with me, and I like that very much. What do you mean you were not being good?" she said with a gentle voice.

Mu Nianci sighed and thought, "Although Sister Huang is extraordinarily smart, she is too young to understand the man-woman relationship. It is truly fortunate for her to meet such an honest and considerate fellow like this Brother Guo."

"Sister," Huang Rong asked, "And then what happened?"

Mu Nianci looked at the creek and said in low voice, "And then ... and then ... I heard commotion outside, like there was a fight going on. He told me not to make any noise, that it was the Iron Palm Clan's internal affair, it had nothing to do with us. Some time later somebody knocked our door, saying that Qiu Bangzhu wanted to talk. He hastily got up and told me to hide in the bed and not to move. He lit up a lamp and someone came in. I looked through the curtain and to my surprise I saw that bad old man I met a while ago. I was worried to find out that he was the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan; I feared he came to interrogate me about why I plotted against him. How would I know that ... that he was the Clan Leader? Luckily he did not bring this matter up; actually Yang Kang and he discussed things like how to destroy the Beggar Clan and how to support the Jin army movement to the south."

Huang Rong smiled, "Sister, those two old men are not the same person," she said.

"Not the same person?" Mu Nianci was surprised.

Huang Rong laughed, "Those two are twin brothers; they look exactly alike. The one you flattened was called Qiu Qianzhang; his martial art was only so-so, all he could do

was just some tricks to deceive people. This Qiu Bangzhu, Qiu Qianren is amazing. Luckily you beat the fake Clan Leader; if you came across the real Clan Leader, with just one strike of his Iron Palm, I am afraid your little life would be difficult to protect.”

“That’s so,” Mu Nianci gloomily said, “Actually it would be better if I met with the real Qiu Bangzhu that day and if he struck me dead with one palm.”

Huang Rong laughed, “Our Brother Yang might not want to give you up,” she said.

Mu Nianci twisted her body around so that Huang Rong’s hand fell from her shoulder. “Don’t talk to me like that,” she said sternly.

Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and laughed, “All right, it’s me who don’t want to give you up.”

Mu Nianci stood up and said, “Brother Guo, Sister Huang, I am leaving. You two take care; be careful of the Iron Palm Clan’s evil scheme on the boat.”

Huang Rong hastily stood up and held her hand. “Good Sister, please don’t be angry,” she pleaded, “I won’t dare to talk nonsense anymore.”

Mu Nianci heaved a deep sigh, “I wasn’t angry with you, I ... I was grieving.”

“Why?” Huang Rong asked, “Did that boy Yang Kang provoke your anger?” She pulled Mu Nianci to sit back down.

Mu Nianci said, “That night from behind the curtain I heard Yang Kang and that old man surnamed Qiu discussing all kind of plans to betray our country and harm the people; the more I heard the angrier I became. I wanted very much

to jump out and kill that old man. They were talking for a long time. Suddenly the commotion outside got louder. That old man said, 'Xiao Wangye [Young Prince, lit. young king master], I am going to take a look. We'll talk again later.' Then he left the room."

"That's right," Huang Rong interrupted, "He went out to pursue Jing Gege and me."

"After that old man left," Mu Nianci continued, "Yang Kang went back to make small talk with me. I asked him whether the things he discussed with that old man was a real thing or was he only pretending. He said, 'We have become man and wife; I don't need to conceal anything from you. It won't be long before the Jin army will invade the south. We have received Iron Palm Clan's great help to strike from both inside and outside. By attacking from two fronts, our victory is guaranteed.' He was talking excitedly. He said that after the Great Jin destroyed the Song Dynasty, his father king, Zhao Wangye [Prince, lit. king master] will ascend to the great treasure, becoming the Emperor of the Great Jin; he will then be the crown prince. By that time riches and honor will be limitless. I listened without saying anything. He suddenly said, 'Meizi, at that time you will be the Empress.' I ... I could not hold my patience much longer; I slapped his face fiercely and ran out the door, anxiously rushed down the mountain.

By then the commotion on the Iron Palm Peak had worsened; countless clan members with torches in their hands rushed toward the highest mountain peak. I was the only one going down the mountain, so I did not meet any resistance.

After this incident my heart felt like it was dying; as a matter of fact, I wanted to die very much. I did not know east from west, north from south, I just kept walking and

walking, wandering aimlessly. Finally I saw a Taoist temple. I rushed toward the temple and barely stepped into the door when I fainted. Fortunately there was an old priestess living in that temple who gave me shelter. I was sick for more than ten days and I just got well not a few days ago. I donned this priestess garb and set on a journey to the Ox Village. Unexpectedly I met with you two here."

Huang Rong was delighted, "Sister, we are on our way to the Peach Blossom Island and happened to go the same way. What do you say the three of us travel together? Then our journey will be more fun. If you don't look down on me, I'll teach you some martial arts along the way."

Mu Nianci shook her head and said, "No, I ... I want to go alone. I appreciate Sister's good intention very much." She stood up, took out a book from her pocket and gave it to Guo Jing; she said, "Brother Guo, this book contains some matters concerning the Iron Palm Clan. Please give it to Senior Qigong whenever you see him; perhaps he will have some use for it."

"Yes," Guo Jing said, holding out his hand to receive the book.

Mu Nianci walked quickly so that in a short moment she was far away; never once did she turn her head around to see them. Guo Jing and Huang Rong watched her back disappear behind a row of willow trees in the distance. They were silent for half a day.

Guo Jing said, "She is all alone, traveling thousands of 'li's to Zhejiang. I do hope she won't meet some bullies along the way. It's a good thing that her martial art is not weak; she does not have to fear ordinary criminals."

"That is difficult to say," Huang Rong said, "Even people like you and I are still bullied by some bad people."

Guo Jing sighed, "Er Shifu [Second Master] often said, 'In a tumultuous time, people are not better than dogs.' There is nothing we can do about it."

"All right, let's kill that mute dog then," Huang Rong said.

"What mute dog?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong made some 'ah, ah, uh, uh' noise, flailing her hands and feet. Guo Jing laughed. "Are we going to ride this mute's boat?" he asked.

"Absolutely," Huang Rong said, "That old traitor Qiu Qianren had caused me a lot of pain, how can I just let it go? I am not his match, but I want to kill some of his disciples and followers first and talk about it later."

They went back to the restaurant immediately, and saw that mute boatman snooping around the restaurant to find them. As he saw them, his face was beaming, he busily greeted them. Jing and Rong two people acted like nothing happened; they followed him boarding the boat.

The boat was not too big nor it was too small, it was covered with black matting; it held around eighty, ninety sacks of rice. This kind of boat was very common along the Yuanjiang [Yuan River], transporting commodities from the hills of Xiangxi and rice from the fields of the lake front. Two bare-chested young men were scrubbing the deck.

As soon as Jing and Rong two people embarked, the boatman untied the rope and pushed the boat to the river, raising the sail. Under the strong southerly wind and following the current, the boat sailed down the river like an arrow. Guo Jing thought about the affair between Yang Kang and Mu Nianci, and could not help but heave a deep sigh. "Yang Kang is my sworn brother," he said in his heart, "We have made a vow to share fortune and disaster. Now

he is making a wrong choice, I cannot ignore it; no matter what, I have to persuade him to leave his evil ways and go back treading the path of righteousness." Leaning against the cabin wall he was lost in thought.

Huang Rong suddenly said, "Let me see the book Sister Mu gave you. I wonder what's written in it."

Guo Jing took the book out of his pocket and gave it to her. Huang Rong flipped the pages, browsing the book. "Ah, so that's how it is!" she suddenly called out, "Take a look here."

Guo Jing moved closer, sat right next to her and read the book in her hand. It was late afternoon, the bright red sunset shone on the river reflecting the ripple of the water on Huang Rong's face, her clothes, and the book in her hand, creating a waving light dancing on her body.

It turned out that the book was written by the thirteenth Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Shangguan Jiannan; a journal of important events within the Clan year after year. Shangguan Jiannan was formerly a high-ranking army officer serving under General Han Shizhong. After Qin Gui killed Yue Fei, Han Shizhong resigned from his military duty to live as a commoner. Most of his officers and soldiers also returned to civilian lives [jie3 jia3 gui1 tian2 - lit. removed armor return to the (rice) field].

Shangguan Jiannan loathed the way the traitor ministers run the government, so he led a group of brethrens to become outlaws in the Jing Xiang district, and later on they joined the Iron Palm Clan. Not long afterwards the old clan leader died and Shangguan Jiannan took over the clan leader position. The Iron Palm Clan was originally a tiny underworld organization, after he consolidated it, the clan managed to do much chivalrous deeds. A lot of heroes and

warriors around the two Hu's [i.e. Hunan and Hubei] heard of his patriotism and joined the clan so that in a few years the Clan enjoyed equal reputation among the Jianghu people with the Beggar Clan of the north.

Shangguan Jiannan had never forgotten where his loyalty and patriotism lie, although he lived in the wilderness he had never forgotten his duty to defend the country and destroy the enemy, and to restore his homeland; therefore, he frequently dispatched his men to Lin'an, Bianliang and the surrounding areas to gather information, waiting for a good opportunity.

A few years had passed. An Iron Palm Clan brother happened to be a good friend of the warden where Yue Fei was held prisoner. He learned that after Yue Fei was executed, his belongings were confiscated by the government, among which was a book containing military tactics and strategies. He went to many places to inquire and indeed learned that the book was kept in the imperial palace. A fast horse carrying this piece of information was dispatched to the Iron Palm Peak. That very day Shangguan Jiannan led a group of his highly skilled pugilists to enter the palace in the middle of the night and without too much effort they succeeded in stealing the book away. That very night they delivered the book to his former superior, retired general Han Shizhong.

At that time Han Shizhong was already old; he lived in seclusion by the West Lake (Xihu) with his wife, Madame Liang Hongyu. As he saw Shangguan Jiannan bring over the Yue Fei's Legacy he remembered how the hero died of false accusations and the injustice had not been avenged, he drew his sword and chopped a table in front of him. Holding up his wrist he heaved a long sigh.

In memory of his old friend, Han Shizhong compiled Yue Fei's writings: poetry, essays, military strategies, into one volume and presented this volume to Shangguan Jiannan as a gift; with the hope that he would continue Yue Wumu's [another title of Yue Fei] aspiration of uniting the heroes of the Central Plains to drive away the invaders and restore their land [he2 shan1 - lit. river and mountain].

While Han Shizhong and Shangguan Jiannan were talking, they suddenly remembered: everywhere in this military strategy book Yue Fei always exhorted the people's loyalty and patriotism to dedicate themselves to the service of their country to match Yue Fei's life aspiration. This book contained a lesson in life attitude; in no way Yue Fei would write this book to accompany him to the grave. It must be because Qin Gui's tight guard that he was not able to smuggle it outside the prison. However, considering Yue Fei's extraordinary wisdom, he must have had some way to overcome this obstacle; only it was not clear to whom did he leave his final words. If his message came too late, and that person came to the palace to fetch the book, wouldn't he snatch empty air?

After discussing this matter further, Shangguan Jiannan drew a painting of the Iron Palm Mountain, with a piece of paper hidden in between the layers containing this message: 'Wumu's Legacy at the Iron Palm Mountain, middle finger peak, second knuckle'. Han Shizhong was afraid that person will not understand the message, so he added a poem written by Yue Fei in the old days. He thought the heir of this military strategy book must be either Yue Fei's child or younger brother or his former subordinate; so he must be familiar with this poem, therefore, he added some additional details to the painting. Finally Shangguan Jiannan re-entered the palace and left

the painting behind, so that the heir could follow the trail to the Iron Palm Mountain.

Afterwards Shangguan Jiannan returned to the Iron Palm Mountain and assembled a group of patriots to discuss a military expedition to the north. Who would have thought that the government was too afraid of the Jins; not only did they not support this movement, they sent out imperial troops to surround and eventually crush the Iron Palm Clan. After all Iron Palm Clan was smaller and weaker than the army, hence the imperial army managed to break through their defense on the mountain. Shangguan Jiannan himself suffered a heavy injury and eventually died on the Iron Palm Peak.

Guo Jing flipped over the last page and sighed, "I did not think this Shangguan Bangzhu was actually a good man. Up to the point of his death he was still holding dear the Legacy's teachings. I thought he was of the same kind with this Qiu and his brethren; colluding with the Jins and selling our country for his personal gain. I used to despise him very much. If I knew this fact earlier, I would have bowed in front of his remains to show him my respect. I am surprised that the Iron Palm was such a heroic and patriotic Clan in the past, and today it turned into a gang of thieves. If Shangguan Bangzhu's spirit in the underworld knows, he must be very angry."

Meanwhile the sky was turning dark; the boatman cast his anchor nearby a village and went out to butcher the chicken for their dinner. Huang Rong was afraid he might put something into the meal, so with a pretense that she did not want his dirty dishes, she took Guo Jing along and went into the village to find a peasant house and prepare the food herself. The boatman was staring at them angrily, but because he pretended to be mute, he could not openly curse them and was forced to swallow his indignation. He

saw Huang Rong make some hand signals, saying ‘witticism like a bead of pearl, smart tooth like an ivory’ [or something like that]. He had no way of debating her, so all he could do was clench his teeth and wait until Jing and Rong two people went ashore; only then he went into the cabin and swore under his breath.

After dinner two people enjoyed the cool evening breeze underneath a tree in front of a peasant home. Guo Jing said, “When Shangguan Bangzhu ran to the Iron Palm Peak, why didn’t the imperial army go up the Peak to capture him?”

“I don’t know the answer either,” Huang Rong said, “It is likely the middle finger peak is dangerously rugged, so the soldiers did not want to risk their lives climbing it. Or it could be that some highly skilled Clan members were defending the peak and the soldiers were unable to break through, so they simply declared victory and left.” After a moment of silence Huang Rong continued, “I did not expect Qu Lingfeng, Martial Brother Qu had unintentionally rendered this great service.”

Guo Jing just stared at her with a dumb look. Huang Rong explained, “This ‘Wumu Legacy’ was originally hidden in the cave behind the waterfall near the Cui Han Tang [Jade-Green Cold Hall], Shangguan Jiannan had stolen the book, he drew that painting, naturally he would put the painting on the original place where the book laid, wouldn’t he?”

Guo Jing nodded, “That’s true.”

“After my Qu Shige [martial (older) brother] was expelled from the Peach Blossom Island, he longed for his school to take him back. He knew my father loves calligraphy, paintings and antiques; he also knew that the imperial palace naturally was the best place to find the world’s rarest treasures. Therefore, he took a risk by entering the

palace and robbed not a few of famous paintings, calligraphy, books ...”

“That’s right, that’s right,” Guo Jing cut her off, “Your Qu Shige stole this painting together with others artworks, and stashed it away inside that secret chamber in the Ox Village. He meant to present them all to your father; unfortunately he was killed by a palace guard. And then when that old traitor Wanyan Honglie came, not only the Wumu Legacy was gone, the painting containing the directions to find it was also gone. Ay, if we knew this early on, we did not need to desperately risking our lives defending the cave; I wouldn’t be injured by the Old Poison, and you did not need to worry for seven whole days and nights.”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Huang Rong said, “If you did not treat your injury inside that secret room in the Ox Village, how could you have seen the painting? Also how could ...” Suddenly she recalled seeing Huazheng in the Ox Village, she could not help but feel depressed. Trying to change the subject she said, “I wonder how father is doing these past few days?” Looking up she saw the crescent moon on the horizon. “Very soon it will be Mid-autumn festival of the eight month. After the martial art contest at the Misty Rain Tavern of Jiaying, are you going back to Mongolia?” she gently asked.

“No,” Guo Jing replied, “I must kill the traitor Wanyan Honglie first, to avenge my father and Uncle Yang.”

Staring at the moon Huang Rong asked again, “After you kill him, then what?”

“We still have many businesses to tend,” Guo Jing said, “I want to treat Shifu’s injury then I want to take Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] to the Black Marsh to see Ying Gu. And

there are my six Shifus, I want to go and visit them one by one at their homes. I also want to find my father's grave."

"And after you take care of all these business, must you go back to Mongolia?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing could not say he must go, but he also could not say he would not go; in all honesty he did not know what would be the best thing to do.

All of a sudden Huang Rong laughed and said, "Silly me, why should I worry about all these things? As long as we are together, an hour of happiness must be enjoyed for a full hour. As we go through one day, we will have one less of these kind of happy days. Let us go back to the boat and play a joke on that fake mute boatman."

At the time the two returned to the boat, the boatman and his two helpers had actually fallen asleep on the stern. Guo Jing whispered on Huang Rong's ear, "Go ahead and sleep, I am going to watch over them."

Huang Rong said with a low voice, "I'll teach you some curse words in sign languages; tomorrow you can show them to him."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong chuckled lightly, "Those are vulgar language; a girl from an honorable family shouldn't say those kind of words."

"It turns out mute people can curse others too," Guo Jing said in his heart; but his mouth said, "Go and take a rest now; it won't be too late to curse him tomorrow." After recovering from her injury Huang Rong had not gotten her strength back. In all honesty she was tired, so she put her head down on Guo Jing's legs and slowly she fell asleep.

Initially Guo Jing was thinking of meditating to cultivate his internal energy, but he was afraid the boatman might be suspicious, so he decided to lie down on the cabin deck, silently reciting the theory of energy cultivation from the Nine Yin Manual, which Reverend Yideng translated from Sanskrit. Then he practiced according to the theory for about an hour and he felt his four limbs and all the bones in his body were full of energy. He was delighted. Suddenly he heard Huang Rong mumbled, "Jing Gege, don't marry the Mongolian Princess; I want to be your wife."

Guo Jing was startled, he did not know how to answer her; but then he heard Huang Rong said again, "No, no. I was wrong; I don't want anything. I know in your heart you love me very much, and that is enough for me."

"Rong'er, Rong'er," Guo Jing called in a low voice. But Huang Rong did not reply, her breathing was even, apparently she was sleeping. Turned out she was talking in her sleep. Guo Jing felt deep affection and pity toward her at the same time. He started blankly at Huang Rong's face illuminated by the moonlight. She was just starting to recover from her injury, her face was still pale and under the moonlight it looked like her face was translucent. Guo Jing stared at her for a long time. He saw her eyebrows wrinkle slightly and there were drops of tears in her eyes. Guo Jing said in his heart, "She must be dreaming of the challenges we are facing. All day she acted like she was carefree, laughing and joking, but in her heart she actually was grieving. Ay, it was I who caused her worries. I wish we did not meet at Zhangjiakou, then her life would be better. But what about me? Would I be willing to give her up?"

One was sleeping with a sad dream, the other was awake with heavy heart; suddenly he heard the water ripple, a boat was coming downstream. Guo Jing thought, "The terrain of this River Yuan is so rugged; what kind of boat is

so daring as to travel here in the middle of the night?" He was about to poke his head out of the cabin to take a look when suddenly from the stern of his own boat came three clapping sounds. The clapping was very light, but in the stillness of the night the sound traveled far on the surface of the water. He then heard the sound of a sail being lowered and the oars paddling the water. That incoming boat came closer to the right hand side riverbank and slowly positioned near their boat. A short moment later it was side to side with the boat Guo Jing rode.

Guo Jing gently patted Huang Rong to wake her up; he felt the hull shook slightly. Quickly he raised the cabin covering to look outside, right in time to see a dark shadow leaping from his boat to the incoming boat. Judging from the appearance, that shadow looked like the mute boatman.

"I'll go over to take a look, you stay and guard here," Guo Jing said. Huang Rong nodded.

Guo Jing crouched and stealthily walked to the bow; he saw that the incoming boat was swaying on the water, he leaped and landed on the horizontal part of the sail mast, which happened to be the center of gravity of the boat. The hull slightly sunk in, but the inclination of the boat did not change one bit; nobody on that boat noticed. He opened his eyes wide, trying to see through some openings on the cabin's roof. He saw three men standing in the cabin; they wore the black uniform of the Iron Palm Clan. One of them was quite tall; he was wearing a green cloth wrapped around his head, looked like he was the leader.

Guo Jing's movement was so quick that even though that pretend-to-be-mute boatman leaped to this boat first, by this time he was just entering the cabin. He cupped his fists and greeted the tall man, "Leader Qiao."

“Those two little thieves are still in?” Leader Qiao asked.

“Yes,” the boatman replied.

“Do they have any suspicion?” Leader Qiao asked again.

“No suspicion,” the boatman replied, “But those two thieves did not want to dine on board, so I did not have any chance to do anything.”

“Humph,” Leader Qiao said, “They are going to die at the ‘qing long tan’ [green dragon shore]. The day after tomorrow at noon you will arrive at the Green Dragon Shore. About three ‘li’s from the beach is the Green Dragon Village. Break the boat’s rudder there; we will be waiting for you.”

The boatman gave his reply. Leader Qiao continued, “Those two little thieves are very skilled in martial arts, you must be very careful. After the successful completion of this mission our Bangzhu will heap you with generous reward. Now go back from the water, don’t rock the boat and alert them.”

“Yes,” the boatman replied, “Do you have further instructions, Leader Qiao?”

“No,” Leader Qiao waved his hand. The boatman cupped his fists again and retreated; he went down the water from the side of the boat and quietly swam back.

Guo Jing leaped from the mast back to his own boat and told Huang Rong everything he just heard. Huang Rong smiled coldly and said, “We have been through Reverend Yideng’s torrential stream going up the mountain; why should we be scared away by Green Dragon Rugged Shore or White Tiger Rugged Shore? Let’s sleep.”

Their minds were at ease knowing the bandits' plot. The next day they enjoyed the scenery light-heartedly; and had a good rest in the evening, did not even bother to keep a night watch. Early morning the third day the boatman was about to raise the anchor when suddenly Huang Rong said, "Hold on, let the horse come ashore first, otherwise it will die when the boat capsizes at the Green Dragon Shore."

The boatman's face changed slightly, which could not be disguised. Huang Rong raised her both hands, she could not help to 'say' several vulgar words to curse him. Each one of the deaf and mute servants of the Peach Blossom Island was a criminal; their skills at cursing people were naturally above average. When Huang Rong started learning those words, she did not understand their real meaning. This time two of her left fingers made a circle, carrying a vulgar sense; with a giggle she let her hand dropped; and then she came alongside Guo Jing taking the horse ashore.

Suddenly Guo Jing said, "Rong'er, let's not play around with them anymore. We leave the boat and ride the horse from here."

"Why?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing replied, "These Iron Palm Clan people are criminals, why should we squabble with them? As long as we can live together peacefully, we don't have to prove that we are stronger."

"Can we live together peacefully forever?" Huang Rong asked. Guo Jing was silent. He saw Huang Rong loosen the little red horse's rein and point to the north. The little red horse had a divine intelligence, it had been separated from its master several times and right now understood that its masters wanted to part again temporarily. Without

hesitation it ran to the north and in a short moment its shadow could not be seen anymore.

Huang Rong clapped her hands, "Let's get on board."

"You are not fully recovered yet," Guo Jing said, "Must you brave the danger?"

"You can't just let it go," Huang Rong replied and walked the downward slope toward the boat. Guo Jing had no other choice but follow her to the boat. Huang Rong smiled, "Sha gege [dumb older brother], we have been through many strange and fantastic adventures together. Someday when we are not together anymore, we will have many memories we can cherish, wouldn't that be good?"

"In the future, must we ... must we really part?" Guo Jing stammered. Huang Rong stared at him but did not say anything. Guo Jing did not have the slightest idea until today that when at the Ox Village he promised Tuolei he would marry Huazheng he had caused a deep wound in Huang Rong's heart.

It was almost noon; they have been sailing for a few hours. The further they went, the steeper and steeper the banks became on both sides of the River Yuan. The Green Dragon Shore must be not too far ahead. Jing and Rong two people stood on the bow looking into the distance. They saw that the passing boats were pulled by porters on the banks. Big boats needed more than a dozen men, while the smallest boats needed three, four men. The porters were stooping down at their waists, at several places their foreheads were almost touching the ground; step by step they pulled the boats upstream against the strong current, sometimes as if the boats were motionless, dead as a nail.

The porters wore white headbands, their upper bodies naked, with beads of sweats trickling down their bronze

skins, glittering under the bright hot sun; their mouths shouted heave-ho. Several 'li's up and down the river the valley was full of their continuous shouts. With these porters' help the boats were able to move gently and rapidly through the rushing water.

Seeing this Guo Jing was secretly alarmed, he came near Huang Rong and in a low voice said, "Rong'er, I did not know there is such a dangerous part on the Yuan River; we must never let our guards down. It looks to me that the rushing water covers quite some distance. If our boat capsizes while you are not completely fit, I am afraid we'll face disaster."

"What do you think we should do?" Huang Rong asked.

"Overthrow the mute boatman, steer the boat to the shore," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong shook her head, "That is not fun."

"At a time like this you still want to have fun?" Guo Jing anxiously said.

Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled, "I love to play!"

Looking at the muddy water between the steep river banks, Guo Jing saw the current was very strong. Frantically he tried to think some way out of this, but he was slow, what could he possibly come out with?

Ahead of them, there was a bent on the river. In the distance they saw several dozens of houses by the river banks. The houses were scattered high and low on the side of the hill. The current carried the boat rapidly along the river, swifter than a running horse, so that in a short moment they had arrived near those houses. They saw that several dozens of porters were waiting along the bank. The

mute boatman tossed a couple of ropes from the boat to the shore. The porters took the ropes and wound them around a big capstan. More than a dozen porters turned the capstan, pulling the boat closer to the shore. This boat was of a very good size, it required about thirty men huffing and puffing to pull it ashore. As they were done, some of the porters lied down by the water, exhausted; it looked like they were unable to move again.

Guo Jing thought, "It looks like the undercurrent is much stronger than on the surface." He saw among the porters were some old men with grey hair, yet some of them were youngsters of fourteen, fifteen years of age; all of them were so thin that their ribs were visible. Suddenly Guo Jing realized that everybody in the world had to work hard to earn a living; his throat choked up involuntarily.

As the boat was ashore, the boatman dropped out the anchor. Guo Jing saw there were more than twenty boats that also dropped their anchors on the nearby bank. Huang Rong asked a man standing nearby, "Brother, what is this place?"

"Green Dragon Village," that man replied.

Huang Rong nodded. She kept a close attention to the mute boatman. She saw him make some hand signals with a big man standing on the sloping bank. Suddenly the boatman took out an axe and with two chops he cut the mooring rope. Immediately afterwards he raised the anchor. As the boat became free, the rushing water washed it out down the river. It made a sudden turn until the hull slanted sideways and flushed away like flying down the river. The people on the shore cried out in alarm.

After the Green Dragon Shore the riverbed changed abruptly, creating a short waterfall. The river current was

so strong that water was splashing everywhere. The mute boatman kept his hands on the rudder, with eyes steadily fixed on the surface of the river. His two helpers held long punting poles in their hands, standing on the either side of him. It seemed like they were guarding against the boat from having an accident, but it also looked like they were protecting the boatman from Jing and Rong, two people's attack.

Guo Jing saw that the current was getting stronger and stronger, the boat sailed like crazy; it could smash against a rock any moment and would certainly break. "Rong'er, snatch the rudder!" he loudly called out and ran to the stern.

The two helpers heard his shout; they raised the poles up and blocked Guo Jing from both sides. Guo Jing ignored these two; he kept going toward the starboard.

"Hold on!" suddenly he heard Huang Rong shouted.

Guo Jing halted his steps and turned his head, "Why?"

With a low voice Huang Rong said, "Are you forgetting about our eagles? We'll wait for the boat to capsize then we'll fly away with the eagles. I want to see what they are going to do."

Guo Jing was delighted, he thought, "No wonder Rong'er is not scared of this torrential river; she has already thought about it early on." He then beckoned to the pair of eagles to land on his sides.

The mute boatman saw Guo Jing came rushing toward him but suddenly stop dead on his tracks; he did not know that those two had already prepared an escape plan. He thought these two babies, who were still wet behind their ears, were

helplessly frightened by the rushing river that they did not know what to do. Inwardly he was very happy.

Amidst the rumbling sound of the water they could hear the heave-ho of the porters in the distance. A moment later they saw another boat similar to their own was pulled against the current; a black flag was fluttering from this incoming boat's mast. As the mute boatman saw this boat, he raised his axe and with several cracking sound he hacked down the tiller; and then he stood at the port side, ready to jump toward the incoming boat.

Guo Jing pressed down the female eagle's back and called out, "Rong'er, you go first!"

"No need to rush!" Huang Rong replied. Suddenly an idea came into her mind, "Jing Gege, throw the anchor to that boat." Guo Jing complied and snatched the anchor.

By now their boat had already lost its rudder, it floated along the fierce current uncontrollably. Very soon the distance between two boats was only a little over one 'zhang' [about 3 meters or 10 feet]. The incoming boat changed its course to avoid collision. The men on the incoming boat, together with the porters on the hill shouted in alarm. Guo Jing threw the anchor with all his might; the iron anchor flew and hit the pole where the towing rope was tied on the bow of the incoming boat.

The tow rope was made of several hundreds 'zhang's of bamboo fibers tightly braided together; it was strung tight like the string of a bow. The iron anchor hit the pole squarely and with a loud 'crack' it broke into two pieces. Dozens of porters were pulling the rope with all their might; as the pole broke, they tumbled down to the ground. The incoming boat was like a kite with its string broken; the strong current turned it around so that its stern faced

forward and its bow faced backward, it was flushed away downstream. Everybody shouted in alarm; their voices reverberated on the surrounding hills above the noise of the rushing river.

The mute boatman was taken by surprise; his face turned deathly pale and with a loud voice he screamed, "Hey! Help! Help!"

Huang Rong laughed, "The mute can speak, it truly is a wonder of the world."

Guo Jing had thrown one anchor away; the boat still had one more anchor. He saw that their boat and the incoming boat floated together almost side by side at a very close distance. He took a deep breath and lifted the other anchor, turned his body around three times and hurled the anchor toward the rudder of the incoming boat. He was sure the anchor would hit the rudder and then both boats would be completely destroyed; but suddenly somebody leaped in front of the cabin. That person snatched the long punting pole and shook it toward the handle of the anchor. He exerted his strength toward the pole and made it bent like a bow. 'Crack!' the pole broke; but the anchor's trajectory was also diverted. With a loud splash both the anchor and the half punting pole fell into the water.

The person holding the pole wore a short yellow coarse robe, his white beard curled to his ear, blown by the river wind. Even though the boat was violently jolted by the water, he was standing steadily on the deck. His presence brought an impressive air around him. He was none other than the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren.

Seeing Qiu Qianren on the boat Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled. They have not recovered from the shock when suddenly there was a loud crashing sound; the bow of

their boat was colliding with a reef. The crash was so hard that two people were sent flying until their backs hit the cabin door.

The boat sank so fast that in a short moment the water had risen to their ankles; they did not have enough time even if they wanted to escape by riding the eagles. In this critical moment Guo Jing acted without thinking; he flew forward and called out, "Follow me!" With the 'dragon flies to the sky' he threw his body toward Qiu Qianren. He knew at this moment the difference between life and death was only as wide as a hair strand; if he landed someplace else on the enemy's boat, Qiu Qianren would definitely make a surprise attack from the side. With his power right now he knew he would be able to bear that attack, but it would compel him to take the defensive and would not give him any chance to set a foothold on the enemy's boat.

Qiu Qianren was fully aware of his intention; he swung the broken pole in his hands to stab several points on Guo Jing's body in the air, forcing him to change his direction and not land on the boat. Guo Jing inwardly groaned, "Not good!" Stretching his arm toward the pole his body continued falling toward the enemy's boat; but because of this the 'dragon flies to the sky' lost its momentum.

With a long laughter Qiu Qianren let the pole go and his palm struck toward Guo Jing's chest. With him standing steadily on the deck while the enemy was in the air, and his palm striking up, the enemy would be forced to plunge into the water. But before the pole fell, another bamboo stick intercepted it, and borrowing the momentum someone was leaping to the boat; it was Huang Rong. Before the person landed, her stick had already arrived, striking downward three times with killer strikes. Qiu Qianren did not anticipate she was capable of moving this fast; his left eye

was in danger of being poked, so he had no choice but immediately withdrew his palm.

Guo Jing seized the opportunity to land on the bow and immediately launched a converging attack. Qiu Qianren did not dare to underestimate this attack, he moved sideways to evade the bamboo stick, while his right leg swept away, forcing Guo Jing to retreat one step; and then 'swish, swish' both of his palms struck out.

How can Iron Palm martial art be ordinary? The Iron Palm Clan built their headquarters on a mountain and for the last several hundred years its power and prestige spread over the Central Plains; it was all because of the exquisiteness of their palm technique. Shangguan Jiannan and Qiu Qianren added even many more subtle variations and refined the stances. Although its overwhelming power was inferior to the 'Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms', but its palm technique was ingenious and finer than the 'Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms'.

In a short moment two men had exchanged seven, eight stances on the bow of the boat. Although they were wary of each other, their palms and feet did not stop moving. The noise of the rushing water was loud, but it could not cover the strong gusts of wind from the four palms.

By now an Iron Palm Clan member had taken over the rudder, slowly steering the boat on the right direction so that they were swiftly floating downstream. The mute boatman's boat had already broken into two sections; the planks, the sail, the mute boatman and his two helpers were marooned on a big silt in the middle of the river with vortex of water all around them. The mute boatman's miserable cry for help could be heard from a distance; surely his voice was loud and clear.

Huang Rong busily waved her left hand behind her back, making a hand signal, 'scolding' the mute boatman. In any case nobody was watching her, so she could be as vulgar as she wished.

Even though the mute boatman and his two helpers were holding to the silt for their dear lives, the vortex was too strong; in a blink of an eye they were sucked into the bottom of the river.

The black-flagged boat was floating swiftly so that when Huang Rong turned her head around, they were already two, three 'li's away from the vortex. The pair of eagles was flying in circles above them, continuously crying. Huang Rong wielded her bamboo stick to push the Iron Palm Clan people from the bow; she intended to help Guo Jing fight Qiu Qianren. Suddenly with the corner of her eye she caught a flash of a blade inside the cabin, somebody was about to chop something inside. Without knowing clearly what it was, her left hand launched a steel needle, hitting that person's arm. That person's saber fell and slashed his own right thigh, and he screamed loudly.

Huang Rong rushed into the cabin, lifted up her leg to kick him out of the way, only to see someone was lying on the deck; with all her hands and feet bound that she could not move. Her cold eyes were staring at Huang Rong; she was the Divine Mathematician Ying Gu.

Never in her life did Huang Rong expect to save Ying Gu's life in this place. She picked the saber from the deck and cut of the ropes binding Ying Gu's hands. As soon as her hands were free Ying Gu stretched out her right hand and snatched the saber from Huang Rong's hand. Huang Rong was startled; she saw the blade flash and Ying Gu had killed that black-dressed man. Only then did she stoop down to cut off the ropes on her own feet.

“Although you have saved my life, don’t expect me to repay you in the future,” she said.

Huang Rong smiled. “Who wants you to repay?” she said, “You have saved my life, and today I saved yours. Now we are even, nobody owes anybody anything.”

Before she finished speaking she had dashed forward to the bow with her bamboo stick to help Guo Jing. Qiu Qianren was attacked from both front and rear; he increased the strength of his palms, trying to stay on the offensive side. But then he heard ‘splash, splash’ and ‘aiyo, aiyo’ successively; Ying Gu with saber in her hand had attacked the Iron Palm Clan people and forced them to fall into the river. In this turbulent water they could not expect to keep their lives.

Initially when he was fighting Guo Jing, Qiu Qianren had gradually gained an upper hand; but now Huang Rong came to Guo Jing’s rescue with her Dog Beating Stick technique, he was alone against two enemies. A dozen or so stances later he was forced to move back around the boat defending himself. His back was facing the water so that Huang Rong could not attack him from behind.

Guo Jing launched several fierce attacks successively, but Qiu Qianren’s feet were as if nailed to the deck, he could not be pushed further even for half an inch. By now he was so close to the edge that one more step backward would make him fall into the river.

Huang Rong said in her heart, “Although your title is ‘Iron Palm Floating on the Water’, but with the ‘floating on the water’ part you are merely boasting your excellent lightness kungfu. Not to mention this turbulent water and wild waves of this river, even on a mirror-like calm lake you won’t be able to float on the water; unless you have

mastered your older brother's trick by planting several thousands or several hundreds wooden stakes under the water beforehand." She noticed that while his palms moved steadily, his eyes were repeatedly scanning the water; it seemed like he was hoping another boat would come to his rescue. She thought, "This old fellow's martial art skill might be high; but with three against one today, if we cannot defeat you, we can consider ourselves as dung."

By then Ying Gu had swept the boat clean of all Iron Palm Clan people, except the man who control the rudder. She saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong could not gain an upper hand, she coldly said, "Little girl, move away, I am coming!"

Hearing the condescending tone in her remarks Huang Rong could not help but be angry; her bamboo stick moved forward and she launched two stances successively; while her feet kept moving forward. When Qiu Qianren stepped aside to evade, she leaped backward two steps while pulling Guo Jing's sleeve and said, "Let her fight." Guo Jing used his palm to guard then he pulled back.

Ying Gu coldly said, "Qiu Bangzhu, your reputation in Jianghu cannot be considered small, but while I was resting in an inn unguarded you used incense to drug me. It was low, even for you."

"You are captured by my subordinates, what else do you have to say?" Qiu Qianren replied, "If I personally went into action, using only this pair of hands I would be able to capture even ten Divine Mathematicians."

Ying Gu coldly said, "When did I ever offend the Iron Palm Clan?"

Qiu Qianren replied, "These two little thieves without authorization broke into our Iron Palm Peak's holy ground; why did you give them asylum at the Black Marsh? I spoke

nicely to you asking you to release them, but you dared to lie to me; do you think I, Qiu Qianren, am an easygoing person?"

"Ah, turns out it was because of these two little thieves," Ying Gu said, "If you have the ability, go and get them; I won't mind other people's business anymore." After saying that she went back several steps and sat cross-legged on the side of the boat, her face looked indifferent; it seemed like she determined to watch the tigers fight, expected Jing and Rong two people and Qiu Qianren to suffer injury. Her action was truly unexpected by Qiu Qianren, Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

It turned out that when her plan to assassinate Reverend Yideng was thwarted by Guo Jing in disguise, and then seeing Yideng bare his chest to her, suddenly she realized Yideng's kindness to her and she did not have a heart to make a move. She went down the mountain dejectedly, with memory of the tragic death of her son lingering in her mind. She stopped by at an inn to spend the night; confusion, anger and resentment filling her heart, putting her in a very vulnerable situation. Right at that time the Iron Palm Clan people used incense to drug her. Otherwise, with her skill and intelligence, how could she fall into the hands of some lowly, nameless juniors? Right now she saw Guo Jing, Huang Rong, two people, she wanted to vent her anger and frustration by hoping those three people all die in this rushing river.

Huang Rong thought, "All right, we will cope with Qiu Qianren first, we'll deal with you later." She made a facial signal to Guo Jing and two people, one with a bamboo stick, the other with his pair of palms, attacked Qiu Qianren side by side. In a moment three people were engaged in a fierce an inextricable combat.

Ying Gu watched the fight with rapt attention. She saw that even though Qiu Qianren's palm technique was swift and fierce, in the end it would be difficult for him to score victory against these couple. She noticed Qiu Qianren kept moving step by step; it looked like he was trying to defeat the enemies by a surprise attack.

Guo Jing was concerned over Huang Rong's condition; her serious injury had just recovered, she might lose her strength if this fight was prolonged. "Rong'er," he said, "Take a rest for a while, then you can come back to help me later."

"All right!" Huang Rong said with a smile. She raised her stick and withdrew from the fight.

Ying Gu saw the closeness of these two people; Guo Jing loved Huang Rong very much. "Throughout my life, when did someone treat me this way?" she thought. From envy she became jealous, from jealousy came hatred. Suddenly she stood up and called out, "Two against one, what kind of skill is that? Come, let us four people fight in two pairs to determine victory or defeat." She reached into her pocket with both of her hands and took out two bamboo planks. Without waiting for Huang Rong to reply the pair of planks went down vertically and swept away horizontally, attacking Huang Rong.

"You are a crazy old woman," Huang Rong cursed her; "No wonder the Old Urchin did not love you."

Ying Gu raised her eyebrows and intensified her attacks. Once she went into action, the situation on the boat changed considerably. Although Huang Rong's Dog Beating Stick technique was exquisite, her internal energy level was still inferior to Ying Gu's; not to mention after a heavy injury her internal strength had not fully recovered, her

movements were not as agile as they used to be. She had to rely on the 'sealing' technique with all her strength to barely guard herself against the enemy. Ying Gu was slippery as a fish, the jolting and swaying of the boat only added to her fierceness.

On the other front Guo Jing fought Qiu Qianren; for a while it would be difficult to decide victory and defeat. After receiving instructions from Reverend Yideng on the internal energy cultivation his level of energy actually increased one layer; to his own surprise by exerting all his strength he was able to protect himself thus far. On the other hand Qiu Qianren was baffled by Ying Gu's action; first she acted as his enemy and did not care to help either side, suddenly now she came to lend him a hand. Inwardly he was delighted, his spirit rose and his palms became fiercer. He believed with a prolonged fight he would eventually subdue Guo Jing.

Qiu Qianren saw Guo Jing's palm wipe out fiercely, he leaned sideways to avoid a frontal attack, his right palm high, left palm low, they clapped down together. Guo Jing responded by stretching out his palms and four palms collided with a great force. "Hey!" two people shouted together and both withdrew three steps.

Qiu Qianren stumbled toward the stern and grabbed the rudder to steady himself. Guo Jing's left foot tripped on a rope and he nearly tumbled down. Afraid of the enemy's subsequent attack while his defense line was empty he continued by rolling down on the deck while readied his palms to protect his body. Qiu Qianren thought victory was at hand, watching the enemy tumble down and at a disadvantage he let out a long laugh and stepped forward.

In the meantime Ying Gu had succeeded in making Huang Rong huffing and puffing, panting for breath; she saw

beads of sweat trickling down her forehead, she was delighted. Suddenly she heard the laughter, she was greatly shocked; her countenance abruptly changed and absentmindedly she withdrew the attack with the bamboo plank in her left hand.

Huang Rong saw this opportunity and she did not want to miss it; the bamboo stick in her hand turned to attack Ying Gu's chest. But as the bamboo stick was about to hit the 'shen cang' [divine storage] acupoint on her chest, Ying Gu's body shook as if she was suffering from a sudden illness. "So it was you!" Ying Gu screamed and pounced toward Qiu Qianren like a mad tiger.

Qiu Qianren saw her with arms opened wide, fiercely throwing herself at him without any regard for her own life. Her mouth opened wide exposing rows of white teeth, as if she wanted to bite him alive. Although his martial art skill was high, seeing this disregarding-her-own-life kind of attack he could not help but was startled. Hastily he leaped sideways to evade and called out, "What are you doing?"

Ying Gu did not answer; she kept throwing herself on him. As soon as her feet landed, she would pound him again and again. Qiu Qianren struck with his left palm toward her head, but Ying Gu kept going with arms extended as if she wanted something; she completely ignored the incoming attack, still ferociously trying to throw herself at him. Qiu Qianren was shocked; he thought if he was caught by this insane woman, he would not be able to break free easily, and if at that time Guo Jing came up with a palm, how could he still alive? Therefore, he abandoned his palm strike immediately; saving his own life was more important, hastily he ducked to the left.

Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing's hand; they moved to the side. Seeing Ying Gu suddenly lost her mind they could not help

but feel scared. They saw Ying Gu madly pounced forward, her mouth let out 'heh, heh' sound, her lips opened to reveal her teeth, trying to embrace Qiu Qianren without regard of her own life.

Although Qiu Qianren's martial art skill was high, but Ying Gu attacked him like she did not want to live anymore, he could not keep up with her; he was forced to dodge to the west and evade to the east. He saw the muscle on her face twitch, her expression so ferocious, he became more and more afraid. "Revenge, revenge!" he inwardly groaned, "Today I will die under this mad woman's hands."

Ying Gu pounced several more times, Qiu Qianren evaded her until he arrived next to the rudder. Ying Gu's eyes were red as if they were going to spurt blood. One more time her grab missed its target. She raised her palm and 'bang!' she struck the man controlling the rudder throwing him into the river; then her leg flew and she kicked the rudder broken. The boat immediately floated chaotically as it lost its rudder.

Huang Rong groaned inwardly, "This woman was going to turn mad sooner or later; it seems that we, four people, will have difficulty escaping death this time." Immediately she pursed her lips and whistled loudly to summon the eagles down to save their lives.

Right at this moment the boat hit a big rock. With a loud crashing sound a big hole appeared on the bow. As Qiu Qianren saw Ying Gu break the rudder he knew she had made up her mind to die together with him. He saw the shore was not too far; he thought whether dead or alive he must risk everything to escape; therefore, he jumped toward the shore with all his might. But the shore was still a distance away, 'splash!' he fell into the water and immediately drowned to the bottom of the river. He was

aware that as soon as he went up to the surface, the strong current would flush him away and it would be impossible for him to struggle free; hence he firmly held onto the rock at the bottom of the river and using his hands and feet he crawled underwater toward the shore. Utilizing his outstanding martial art, plus the fact that near the shore the current was not as strong as at the middle of the river, although he had to swallow about a dozen mouthful of water, he finally reached the shore. He was utterly exhausted, he sat on a rock to catch his breath and saw the boat quickly turned into a black dot in the distance. Remembering Ying Gu's clenched teeth and scary expression he shivered in fear.

As Ying Gu saw Qiu Qianren jump out the boat she loudly called out, "Evil thief, where are you running to?" She rushed toward the side of the boat, ready to jump into the water. But by then the boat had been flushed to the middle of the river where the current was strongest; in this dangerous billows, how would she survive if she really jumped into the water?

Guo Jing could not bear to see her; he rushed forward to grab her back. Ying Gu was angry, she reached behind her back to attack. Guo Jing hastily ducked to evade. Huang Rong saw the pair of eagles had landed in front of the cabin. "Brother Jing," she called out, "Why do you mind this mad woman? Let us go quickly."

The water violently surged up and very soon it rose up to their ankles. Guo Jing let his grab went loose. Ying Gu covered her face with both hands, crying loudly. "Child! Child!" she shouted miserably.

Huang Rong repeatedly urged him to go, but Guo Jing remembered Reverend Yideng's request to look after Ying

Gu. "Go ashore with the eagle, then send them back here to rescue us," he called out.

"There's not enough time," Huang Rong anxiously objected.

"Go, quick!" Guo Jing said, "We can't neglect Reverend Yideng's entrusting."

Huang Rong recalled Yideng's kindness in saving her life, reluctantly she mounted the eagle, knowing she did not have any choice. Suddenly her body shook. With a violent crash the boat hit a big reef in the middle of the river. The water bubbled up toward the cabin, in a flash the hull sank several feet.

"Jump to the reef!" Huang Rong called out. Guo Jing nodded, he went over to take Ying Gu along.

By then Ying Gu was in daze, she knew Guo Jing held out his hand to hold her, she did not resist. Her eyes were staring blankly at the river. Guo Jing slipped his right hand under her armpit and called out, "Jump!" Three people jumped to the reef.

That reef was actually about a foot under the water; the river surrounded three people, splashing their clothes wet. When they stood firm on the reef, they saw the boat slowly sank beside them. Although she had played in the great waves since her childhood, but seeing the muddy water swirling around her Huang Rong could not restrain from having a dizzy spell; she raised her head up looking at the sky, did not dare to look directly into the water.

Guo Jing whistled to call the eagles to come and carry them over; but the eagles were afraid of the water. They flew in circles overhead but did not dare to set their feet on the submerged reef.

Huang Rong looked around and saw a big willow tree on the bank toward their left, about a dozen 'zhang's away. Immediately she had an idea, "Jing Gege," she said, "Hold my hand." Guo Jing took a good grip of her left hand. With a splash Huang Rong disappeared into the water.

Guo Jing was startled; he saw she dove to the sunken boat, he quickly stooped down until his upper body also went into the water. He extended his arm as far as possible while his legs firmly gripped a sticking rock on the reef. With all his strength his right hand gripped her left wrist, lest the current was too strong and he lost his grip, then she might never be able to come up.

Huang Rong dove toward the mast; she pulled down the sail rope, then wound it around the reef. Next, her hands alternately pulled the sail rope until she got about twenty 'zhang's of rope; then she took out her dagger and cut the rope down. Afterwards she extended her arm, calling the female eagle to perch on her shoulder.

By now the pair of eagles was grown and they were quite heavy. Guo Jing was afraid Huang Rong could not take it, so he extended his arm to take the eagle. Huang Rong wound the end of the rope to the female eagle's foot, she pointed to the big willow tree and made a hand signal telling the eagle to fly.

The eagle took the rope and flew in circle several times above the willow tree, then flew back. Huang Rong anxiously said, "Ay! I told you to fly around the tree before coming back." But of course the eagle did not understand what she said, so Huang Rong sighed anxiously. They tried again and on the eight try the eagle coincidentally flew around the tree and came back. Jing and Rong two people were delighted; they pulled the rope to tighten it, then firmly tied the other end to the protruding rock on the reef.

“Rong’er, you go first,” Guo Jing said.

“No,” Huang Rong replied, “I am staying with you. Let her go first.”

Ying Gu stared hard at them. Without saying anything using both hands she pulled herself along the rope, coming ashore.

Huang Rong laughed, “This is my way of having fun when I was little. Master Guo, please be generous with your rewards!” With one leap she landed on the tight rope and utilizing her lightness kungfu to the fullest she walked along the rope just like a tight-rope walker; brandishing her bamboo stick, traversing the great waves of the rushing river below, toward the willow tree on the shore.

Guo Jing had not learned the same trick, he was afraid to make a wrong step, so he did not dare to fool around like her. Just like Ying Gu, he used both hands to pull himself hanging on the rope, heading to the shore.

He was still about several ‘zhang’s from the shore when suddenly he heard Huang Rong called out, “Hey, where are you going?” She sounded baffled. Guo Jing was afraid Ying Gu had not come to her senses and did something foolish, so he sped up and before even arrived at the willow tree he jumped down.

Huang Rong pointed to the south and said, “She is leaving.”

Guo Jing focused his eyes and saw Ying Gu was running with all her might over the rocky mountain path. “Her mind is confused, I am afraid she would hurt herself. Let us pursue her,” he said.

“All right!” Huang Rong said; lifting up her legs she was ready to run, but suddenly her legs went weak and she fell

sitting down, shaking her head.

Guo Jing knew that she had used excessive strength after the injury; she was exhausted and did not have enough energy to run. "Just sit here and take a rest, I will pursue her and take her back," he said. Immediately he ran toward the direction Ying Gu was last seen; but after crossing a plain in front of him was a fork on the road going three separate directions. Ying Gu's shadow was nowhere to be seen; he did not know which way she took. Here the rocks were big, the grass reached his chest; everywhere he looked he did not see anybody else. Meanwhile the sun was setting behind the mountain, the sky was turning dark; he was afraid Huang Rong would be worried over him, so he decided to go back.

Two people spent the night among the rocks, hungry and tired. At daybreak they woke up and started to walk along the small pathway by the river banks. They had to find their little red horse before coming back to the main road.

After walking for half a day they found a small inn by the roadside; they bought three chickens, one for them to eat, while with the other two they fed their eagles. The pair of eagles perched on top of a tall tree, eating their cockerels that the feathers fluttered down like snowfall.

They were eating heartily when suddenly the female eagle let out a long cry, dropped the half-eaten cockerel, raised its wing and flew to the north. The male eagle followed its mate with an anxious cry.

"Those two eagles sound very angry, I wonder what they saw?" Guo Jing said.

"Let's take a look," Huang Rong said. Two people ran along the main road. They saw the eagles fly in circles in the distance; suddenly they swooped down and soared up

again. They circled several more times, then swooped down again.

“They are fighting an enemy,” Guo Jing said.

They sped up their steps and after about two, three ‘li’s they saw a row of houses standing very close to each other; it was a small town. The pair of eagles circled above this town, it seemed like they had lost their enemy’s track. Guo Jing and Huang Rong hastened to the outskirts of the town; they tried to call their eagles down, but the eagles ignored them, they kept circling above as if they were still looking for the enemy.

“I wonder with whom do these eagles have big enmity with,” Guo Jing said.

Only some times later the pair of eagles finally did come down one after another. The male eagle’s left foot was dripping with blood from a really deep saber cut; looked like if its muscle and bone were not strong, that foot would be chopped through. The female eagle’s right claw was firmly grabbing a piece of blackish object. They looked closer and found out that it was a piece of human scalp, with a big clump of hair on it. It looked like the scalp was freshly plucked right from a head, with stains of blood still around it.

Huang Rong applied some cut wound medicine on the male eagle’s foot. Guo Jing flipped over the scalp he took from the female eagle and muttered, “This pair of eagles is so tame ever since they were small; they had never harmed anybody unless they are provoked, how could they suddenly fight with someone?”

“Something is amiss here,” Huang Rong said, “If we can find this person who lost the scalp, we’ll understand everything.”

Two people went into town and found an inn to spend the night; then they went out separately to inquire. But that town was rather big, with quite a large number of people around; they investigated until dark, but did not find the slightest clue.

"I've been everywhere to look for a person without a scalp, but could not find anything," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong smiled, "A person without scalp could always wear a hat to cover his head," she said.

"Ah!" Guo Jing exclaimed, suddenly enlightened. He remembered seeing quite a lot of people wearing hat in town, but of course he could not take their hats off one by one to take a look.

By daybreak the pair of eagles came back with their little red horse. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were worried about Hong Qigong's injury, also the martial art match at the Misty Rain Tavern on the mid-autumn festival was drawing near, besides, the enmity the eagles had with whoever was not that important, so they decided to start their journey to the east immediately.

Two people rode on the speeding little red horse with the pair of eagles followed above them. Along the way Huang Rong kept talking and laughing, playing around, looking a lot more lively than she was; sometimes far into the night she was not willing to take a rest. Guo Jing knew she was exhausted, he often urged her to take a rest, but Huang Rong simply ignored him. Sometimes late at night she sat cross-legged on the bed chit-chatting with him over some trivial matters.

One day from the western Jiangnan road they arrived at the southern road within the Zhejiang border. They had been riding the horse for a whole day. It was not too far from the

Eastern Sea shore. They stopped by an inn to spend the night. Huang Rong borrowed a shopping basket from the innkeeper; she wanted to go to town to buy some meat and vegetables to prepare some dishes.

"You are tired after traveling the whole day," Guo Jing tried to persuade her, "Let us just eat in the restaurant here."

"I want to cook for you," Huang Rong replied, "Don't you like my cooking anymore?"

"Naturally I like your cooking," Guo Jing said, "But I want you to take a lot of rest. Wait till you are well, then you can cook for me. It won't be too late, will it?"

"Wait till I am well; at that time ..." Huang Rong said. Her arm carried the shopping basket, one foot had already stepped outside the room, she paused as if she was startled.

Guo Jing did not understand her thought; he gently pulled the shopping basket from her arm and said, "That's right. Wait till we find Shifu, then we can enjoy the food you prepare together."

Huang Rong stared blankly for half a day. Finally she returned to the bed and soon she looked like she was asleep. The innkeeper came with their food. Guo Jing called her to eat. Huang Rong jumped out of bed at once and said with a laugh, "Jing Gege, we won't eat this food, come with me."

Guo Jing complied and followed her out of the inn, they walked toward downtown. Huang Rong randomly picked a house with white fence wall and black door, a rich family's house. They circled to the back and leaped over the wall, broke into the house. Guo Jing did not know what was going on, but he followed her nonetheless. Straightaway Huang

Rong went to the front hall only to see the hall was bright with candles; the host was having a party.

“Wonderful!” Huang Rong called out in delight, “I picked the right house.” Giggling and walking forward she shouted loud and clear, “Everybody get out of my way!”

There were three banquet tables in the hall; the host and about his thirty guests were startled. They saw her as a beautiful looking young girl; they looked at each other, puzzled. Huang Rong casually seized a fat man, her foot moved to trip that fat man, sending him tumbling to the floor. “You still don’t want to scramble?” she said with a laugh.

The guests scrambled at once in great confusion. The host cried out, “Guards! Where are the guards?”

Amidst the commotion two martial art instructors led about a dozen villagers with sabers and sticks in their hands came rushing in. With a laugh Huang Rong rushed forward and with two moves she flattened the two instructors. She snatched a saber and brandished it, creating a bright white light, pretending she was about to make a kill. The guests screamed in terror; they staggered along and running against each other trying to escape.

As the host saw the unfavorable situation, he tried to slip away; but Huang Rong reached out and pulled his beard, her right hand brandished the saber as if she was going to chop him away. The host was so scared that he dropped to his knees and with a trembling voice said, “Nu ... Nu Da Wang [lit. female big king; ‘Da Wang’ was how the people addressed a robber], Good ... Good Miss; you want gold or silver, I will certainly present everything to you. Please just spare my old life ...”

Huang Rong laughed, "Who wants your money?" she said, "I want you to accompany us to drink." Grabbing his beard with her left hand she pulled him up. The host was in pain but he did not dare to cry out. Huang Rong pulled Guo Jing along to sit at the head table.

"Everybody sit down!" Huang Rong ordered, "Why are you still standing?" Raising the saber in her hand she hacked down and the saber stuck on the table.

The guests were startled and scared, they crowded around the other two tables, nobody dared to sit at the head table.

Huang Rong shouted, "You don't want to accompany me drinking, do you? Whoever don't come over, I'll butcher him first!"

Everybody rushed forward, shoving and elbowing one another, causing seven, eight chairs to tumble over. Huang Rong shouted again, "You are not three years old, are you? Why can't you sit nicely?"

Still shoving and elbowing one another the guests scrambled over and after half a day they finally managed to sit nicely around the three banquet tables.

Huang Rong poured herself a cup of wine and gulped it down in one go. "What kind of party is this?" she asked the host, "Anybody died in your family? How many have died?"

The host stammered, "Actually, a child was born for me in my later years. Today he is one month old, so I invited friends, relatives and close neighbors to celebrate."

Huang Rong laughed, "That's wonderful! Let me take a look at your child," she said.

The host turned pale; he was afraid Huang Rong would harm the child, but seeing the saber stuck on the table he

did not dare to refuse; he ordered the wet nurse to bring the child out.

Huang Rong held the child in her arms; she looked at his small face under the candlelight, and then she looked up to the host. Leaning her head sideways she said, "He doesn't look the least bit like you; are you sure he is your child?"

The host looked awkward; his whole body quivered, he said, "Yes, yes!" It was unclear if he was saying that the child was his, or he was saying, "What Miss said was true." The guests felt funny, but nobody dared to laugh.

Huang Rong took out a gold ingot from her pocket and gave it to the wet nurse; she also handed over the child back to her. "It's a small gift. Just consider it a first meeting gift from his maternal grandmother," she said.

Everybody could see that she is very young, but she called herself a grandmother; they could also see her grand appearance, she looked both heroic and rich; they looked at each other.

The host was overjoyed with this unexpected turn of events, he repeatedly expressed his thanks.

"Come," Huang Rong said, "I'll toast you one bowl!" She took a big bowl and poured wine to the brim, shoving it in front of the host.

The host said, "This old man's drinking capacity is shallow. Miss, please forgive me."

Huang Rong raised her beautiful eyebrows, stretched out her hand to pull his beard. "Are you or are you not going to drink?" she barked.

The host had no choice but to raise his bowl and 'glug, glug' he drank the whole bowl down.

"That's right!" Huang Rong laughed, "Now we are having fun. Come, we'll have drinking stories."

If she wanted to have drinking stories, who at the banquet table dared to refuse? But the guests around the table were not rich merchant or educated people, only peasants and villagers, how could she find a true scholar among them? Everybody was trembling with fear trying to make up some wild stories.

After a while Huang Rong became impatient and shouted loudly, "Everybody stands aside!"

Like they had just received pardon everybody scrambled to stand up. Suddenly 'boom!' the host fell backward on his chair. Turned out he was totally drunk and could not stand up anymore. Huang Rong burst out in laughter. She kept drinking wine and talking with Guo Jing as if there was nobody else around, letting the guests helplessly standing on the side just watching them.

They were eating and drinking until the first watch of the night. Several times Guo Jing tried to persuade her and finally Huang Rong had enough and was willing to leave.

Returning to their inn Huang Rong asked with a laugh, "Jing Gege, are you having fun today?"

Guo Jing replied, "Without reasons you scared people to their deaths; why bother to come in the first place?"

"I am looking for my own well-being and enjoyment," Huang Rong said, "Why would I bother over other people's life and death?"

Guo Jing was startled; he felt her manner of speaking was rather unusual, but momentarily he could not figure out the profound meaning behind those words.

Huang Rong suddenly said, "I want to go out and take a walk. Are you coming?"

"It's the middle of the night," Guo Jing said, "Where do you want to go?"

"I think that child is amusing," Huang Rong said, "Grandmother wants to hold him and play with him for a few days; then I'll give him back to his family."

"How can you do that?" Guo Jing anxiously said.

Huang Rong only smiled and headed out the door, leaping over the wall. Guo Jing hastily overtook her, pulled her arm trying to stop her, "Rong'er, you have played around for along time," he said, "Don't you have enough?"

"Definitely not enough," Huang Rong stood still and replied. She paused for a second then continued, "I want you to keep me company. Only then will I have enough fun. In a few more days you will leave me, you will be with that Princess Huazheng; she definitely won't let you see me again. Our time together is numbered. Each day that passed means one less day I am with you. I want to make one day lasts like two days, like three days, like four days. Still it's not enough for me. Jing Gege, I don't want to sleep at night, I want to play around and talk with you. Do you understand my feelings? Please don't try to stop me."

Guo Jing grabbed her hands tight, he felt deep compassion and love. "Rong'er," he said, "I am so dumb, I have never realized you have this kind of love to me. I ... I ..." Speaking to this point he actually did not know what else to say.

Huang Rong smiled slightly. "Father used to teach me to read many classic poems about anxiety, about hatred, and the like. I only know that he missed my departed mother, that's why he loved to read about those kinds of things.

Today I discovered that happiness and joy only come for a moment, but pain and suffering are the matters of a lifetime."

The crescent moon rose atop the willow tree, the night was as cold as the water, gentle breeze brushed their clothes. Initially Guo Jing was ignorant, even though he knew Huang Rong's deep feelings toward him, he did not realize she loved him this much. As he listened to her speaking, everything that happened all throughout that day became clear to him. He said in his heart, "I am a crude and straightforward man. In the future I won't be with her. Although I will certainly think about her often, miss her, eventually I will get over her. But what about her? She will live alone on the Peach Blossom Island with only her father to keep her company. Won't she be lonely?" He thought further, "Someday her father will die, then only some deaf and mute servants will accompany her. She loves to have new ideas, doing new things. With nobody to accompany her, won't she die of boredom?"

Thinking about these things his body trembled involuntarily. His grip on her hands tightened, his eyes stared hard at her face. "Rong'er," he said, "Even if the sky falls down, I want to be with you on the Peach Blossom Island for as long as I live!"

Huang Rong trembled, she raised her head and said, "You ... what did you say?"

Guo Jing said, "I don't care about Genghis Khan, about Princess Huazheng. All my life I want to be with you."

Huang Rong let out a soft cry and buried her head in his bosom. Guo Jing stretched out his arms and embraced her tightly. This matter had been vexing him for a while. This moment, ignoring everything else he suddenly made up his

mind; his heart felt happy and relieved. Two people hugged each other tightly; they had forgotten everything else around them.

After a while Huang Rong gently asked, "What about your mother?"

"I will fetch her and take her to the Peach Blossom Island," Guo Jing replied.

"Aren't you afraid of your master, Jebek, and your sworn brother Tuolei?" Huang Rong asked again.

"They love me very much, but I can't have a divided heart," Guo Jing answered.

"What about your six masters of Jiangnan? What about Ma Daozhang [Taoist Priest], Qiu Daozhang? What will they say?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing heaved a sigh and said, "They will surely be enraged, but I will slowly talk to them earnestly. Rong'er, you must not leave me, I also won't leave you."

Huang Rong said with a laugh, "I have an idea. We can go hiding on the Peach Blossom Island and do not come out forever. My father arranged the island in such a mysterious way that even if they come to the island, they won't be able to find you and scold you."

Guo Jing thought this idea of hers might not be appropriate; he was about to ask her of a better idea when suddenly they heard footsteps about a dozen 'zhang's away outside the room. Two night-walkers were using their lightness kungfu rushing from the south heading north. One of them said, "The Old Urchin has fallen into Brother Peng's trick; we don't have to be afraid of him. Let us go quickly."

End of Chapter 32.

Chapter 33 - Upcoming Disaster

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Huang Rong cursed, "Do you want to die?" and pushed lightly on Lingzhi Shangren's shoulder. Without answering that monk tumbled to the

ground face up, his hands and his feet did not move, maintaining the cross-legged sitting position; he looked very strange.

At this moment Guo Jing and Huang Rong were enjoying happiness and contentment in their hearts; they did not want to mind other people's business. But hearing 'The Old Urchin' three characters their hearts were stirred. They both jumped at the same time and pursued those two men. The men's martial art skills looked ordinary; they did not have the slightest idea that they were being followed. Leaving the town they ran for about five, six 'li's more before turning into a valley. They heard continuous shouts and curses coming from behind the mountain.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong picked up their speed and followed into the valley. They saw that a bunch of people were gathered on a part of a field. Two of them had torches in their hands. In the middle of the field Zhou Botong was sitting motionless. It was not clear if he was alive or dead. Facing Zhou Botong there was someone sitting cross-legged, wearing a red kassaya; it was Lingzhi Shangren [lit. upper/above man, a respectful term to address Buddhist monk]. He too, was motionless. On Zhou Botong's left there was a cave. Its entrance was small, so anybody wanted to enter must stoop down. Outside the cave there were five, six people shouting and cursing, but nobody dared to get within a few 'zhang's of the cave, as if they were afraid something might come out of the cave and hurt them.

Guo Jing recalled one of the night walkers say, "The Old Urchin has fallen into Brother Peng's trick;" and now he saw Zhou Botong was sitting motionless just like a corpse. He was afraid that Zhou Botong was injured; he was very anxious and was about to jump forward when Huang Rong

pulled his arm and whispered, "Before we do anything, let's investigate what happened first."

Two people hid behind a mountain rock and looked at the people outside the cave. It turned out they were all old acquaintances: Shen Xian Lao Guai [Ginseng Immortal Old Freak] Liang Ziwen, Gui Men Long Wang [Dragon King of Guimen (lit. ghost gate)] Sha Tongtian, Qian Shou Ren Tu [Thousand Hands Butcher] Peng Lianhu, San Tou Jiao [Three Headed Scaly Dragon] Hou Tonghai, plus the two night-walkers they followed earlier. The light from the torches illuminated their faces and Jing and Rong recognized those two as Liang Ziwen's disciples; Guo Jing had fought them the first time he learned the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms.

Huang Rong thought that now these people were not Guo Jing's and her matches; she looked to all directions but did not see anybody else. With a low voice she said, "With the Old Urchin's skill, how could these several fellows defeat him? It seems like the Western Poison Ouyang Feng is lurking somewhere."

She was about to think of a way to investigate further when Peng Lianhu shouted loud and clear, "Thief male servant bird! [I know this one sounds weird, but it is the literal translation. I'll leave it to the editors to find a more suitable curse words ...] If you don't come out, Old Man here will smoke you out!"

From the cave came a stern voice, "Whatever stinky tricks you have; bring it on!"

Guo Jing recognized it was his Da Shifu [First Master] Ke Zhen'e's voice; he did not care if Ouyang Feng was lurking around somewhere. "Shifu!" he shouted, "Your disciple Guo Jing is here!" His hands had already made some moves

while he was still shouting. He grabbed Hou Tonghai's back and flung him aside.

The people outside the cave were thrown into confusion. Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu made a simultaneous attack. Liang Ziweng turned around Guo Jing's back, ready to make a sneak attack. Ke Zhen'Einside the cave heard everything; he raised his hand and launched a 'du ling' [poisonous water caltrop] toward Liang Ziweng's back.

The projectile carried a fierce gust of wind. Liang Ziweng hastily lowered his head; the 'du ling' flew over his head, cutting several strands of his hair. He was so shocked that cold sweats trickled down his back. He knew Ke Zhen'e's secret projectiles contained a violent poison on it; the other day Peng Lianhu nearly got killed under this weapon. Hastily he leaped back several 'zhang's, stretched out his hand to feel the top of his head. Luckily his scalp was not injured. Straightaway he took some 'tou gu ding' [Bone Penetrating Nails] from his pocket and walked quietly toward the left of the cave; he wanted to enter the cave to extract his revenge.

He was just about to raise his hand when suddenly his wrist was numb; something hit his hand. With a clanking noise the 'tou gu ding' fell to the ground. And then he heard a female voice said with a laugh, "Kneel down! Or you'll eat my stick!"

Liang Ziweng quickly turned his head and saw Huang Rong stood smiling, with a bamboo stick in her hand. He was scared and angry at the same time; his left palm struck toward her shoulder, his right hand tried to grab the bamboo stick. Huang Rong stepped aside to evade his left palm, but did not move the bamboo stick, she let him to have a good grip on it. Liang Ziweng was delighted, he held out his hand, thinking that if this young girl did not let go,

he would snatch the stick away. As soon as he pulled, he did indeed manage to pull the bamboo stick away, but unexpectedly the end of the stick shook and slid right out of his palm. By this time the end of the bamboo stick had entered his circle of defense. His hands were so close to the stick that he hurriedly reached back to grab; but he was too late. A dark green shadow flashed and 'slap!' his head was squarely hit by the bamboo stick.

Overall his martial art skill was not weak; in this critical moment he was still able to throw himself to the ground and he rolled away more than a 'zhang' away before he sprang back up. He looked with a shocked expression at this young girl with bright eyes and ivory teeth. The top of his head was hurting, his mind was confused, and his face looked awkward.

Huang Rong said with a laugh, "Do you know the name of this stick method? You have been beaten by me, so what did you turn into?"

Liang Ziwen had suffered hardship under this Dog Beating Stick Technique in the past; he was beaten half dead and half alive under Hong Qigong's hands. It had been several years since then, but he still had a lingering fear in his heart. He noticed that the stick was indeed Hong Qigong's Dog Beating Stick, and the stick method was indeed Hong Qigong's Dog Beating Stick Technique, used up against him. It looked like this young girl was truly Hong Qigong's heir. With the corner of his eyes he saw Sha and Peng two people continuously step back under the power of Guo Jing's palms without being able to counterattack; he called out, "In honor of the Old Hong Bangzhu [Clan Leader Hong] we'd better go!" He called out his two disciples and turned around to flee.

Guo Jing's left elbow circled around forcing Sha Tongtian to retreat three steps; followed by the sweep of his left hand. Peng Lianhu saw that this palm carried a strong gust of wind, he did not dare to take it head-on, he hastily stepped aside to evade. Guo Jing's right hand made a hook, grabbed his back and lifted him up.

Peng Lianhu was rather short, being lifted high in the air his legs were kicking around frantically. He tried to hit and kick to free himself, but he did not have any strength left. He saw Guo Jing's left hand make a fist, ready to strike his chest like a hammer pounding a nail; how could he endure this strike? He hastily shouted, "What date is today?"

"What?" Guo Jing was startled.

"Are you going to keep a good faith? Do you stay true to your own promise?" Peng Lianhu asked.

"What?" Guo Jing asked again; his right hand was still holding Peng Lianhu high in the air.

"We have agreed to have a martial art contest in Jiaxing on the fifteenth of the eighth month, at the Misty Rain Tavern," Peng Lianhu said, "We are not in Jiaxing, and today is not the Mid-autumn Festival. How can you injure me?"

Guo Jing thought he was right; he was about to release him when suddenly he remembered something. "What did you do to my Zhou Dage [big brother Zhou]?"

Peng Lianhu replied, "The Old Urchin is betting against that Tibetan monk; whoever moves first lose. What does it have to do with me?"

Guo Jing cast a glance toward the two people sitting on the ground, he felt relieved. "So that's how it is," he thought. Then he shouted, "Da Shifu [first master], are you Senior

well?" Ke Zhen'Eonly uttered an 'Hm' sound from inside the cave.

Guo Jing was afraid as soon as he let Peng Lianhu go, he would kick him on the chest; hence with his right hand he flung Peng Lianhu several feet away, while calling out, "Off you go!"

Peng Lianhu took that opportunity to somersault and land on the ground. He saw Sha Tongtian and Liang Ziwen had already run away. He inwardly scolded them for not remembering their friend. He cupped his fists toward Guo Jing and said, "Seven days later at Misty Rain Tavern we will decide victory and defeat." He turned around and displaying his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] he ran away. He was wondering about one thing, "Each time I meet this kid, his martial art is improving by leaps and bounds. Isn't that strange? Did he eat some magic pills or find some immortal secret?"

Huang Rong went toward Zhou Botong and Lingzhi Shangren; she noticed that both of them were staring at each other without blinking their eyes. Looking at the situation she recalled the conversation between those two night-walkers and knew that this must be Peng Lianhu's evil scheme. They must be scared of the Old Urchin's martial art, so they tricked him into making a bet against this Tibetan monk to stay still. Lingzhi Shangren's martial art was nowhere near the Old Urchin's; but by keeping him from moving, others would have the opportunity to deal with Ke Zhen'e.

The Old Urchin would be happy to have someone accompany him to play; he would not care about other matters, so it would be useless to speak reason with him. Although there was an earth-shattering fight going on next to him, he would sit still like Taishan [Mount Tai]; he would

not even move his little finger, he was determined to win his bet against Lingzhi Shangren.

“Old Urchin! I’m here!” Huang Rong called out.

Zhou Botong heard her, but he was afraid to lose, so he did not respond.

Huang Rong said, “The way you bet, even if you sit for several more hours you won’t know who wins and who loses; what kind of fun is that? You know what, let me do this: I will tickle both of you on your ‘xiao yao xue’ [laugh waist acupoint] with my both hands; I will make both hands have the same strength. Whoever laughs first will lose.”

Zhou Botong had been sitting impatiently; hearing Huang Rong’s words he agreed wholeheartedly, but he did not dare to show his approval. Huang Rong did not say anything more, she went in between the two and sat down. She put her Dog Beating Stick on the ground and stretched both arms, two index fingers hit both men’s ‘xiao yao xue’. She knew Zhou Botong’s internal energy far surpassed the Tibetan monk’s, so she was not being unfair; she exerted equal strength. But to her surprise while Zhou Botong admittedly did not move, Lingzhi Shangren also seemed like he did not feel anything.

Huang Rong secretly admired him; she thought, “This monk’s skill in closing up his acupoints is really good. If I were hit like this, I would have rolled around in laughter.” Then she exerted more strength to her hands.

Zhou Botong used his internal energy trying hard to resist the strength of Huang Rong’s finger; but this ‘xiao yao xue’ was located very close to the ribs, the muscle was very tender, it was very difficult to send the energy to that spot. If he straightened up his back he could borrow the momentum from the movement to unload the strength; but

that would cause him to move and lose the bet. He felt Huang Rong's finger getting stronger and stronger, he had no choice but desperately resist her finger.

A moment later he could not take it any longer, the muscle under his ribs contract and expand to repel Huang Rong's finger. He leaped up and laughed out loud, saying, "Fat Monk, you are good! The Old Urchin admits defeat!"

Seeing him admit defeat, Huang Rong was regretful, "If I knew this would happen, I would have add a little more strength to the fat monk's body," she thought; and then she stood up and said toward Lingzhi Shangren, "You won. Your grand-aunt does not want your life. Just go! Go!"

Interestingly Lingzhi Shangren seemed not to hear her; he was still sitting motionless. Huang Rong put out a hand and pushed his shoulder, while shouted loudly, "Who wants to see your stupid face here? Do you want to die?" She only pushed lightly, but to her surprise Lingzhi Shangren fell down to the ground, still in the cross-legged sitting position, just like a wooden carving of Buddha.

Zhou Botong, Jing and Rong were stunned. Huang Rong thought, "Could it be that his closing up acupoints skill is not perfected yet and he died while doing it?" She held out her hand to feel his breathing and found that Lingzhi Shangren was still breathing. Immediately she understood what was going on; she was angry but amused at the same time. To Zhou Botong she said, "Old Urchin, you fell into others' trick without knowing it. You are really dumb!"

Zhou Botong opened his eyes wide. "What?" he was angry.

Huang Rong said with a smile, "You unseal his acupoints first, then we'll talk."

Zhou Botong rolled his eyes then he stooped down and traced Lingzhi Shangren's body. He tapped several places and found out that eight of Lingzhi Shangren's major acupoints were sealed by someone else. He jumped up in anger and shouted, "That did not count! That did not count!"

"What did not count?" Huang Rong asked.

Zhou Botong replied, "His friends sealed up his acupoints after he was seated, of course this fat monk could not move. Even if we sit for three more days and nights he won't lose." Turning toward Lingzhi Shangren lying on the ground, he called out, "Come, we'll compete again."

Seeing Zhou Botong was exuberant, he was not by any means injured, Guo Jing was worried about his Shifu. He no longer listened to Zhou Botong talking nonsense, he sneaked into the cave to see Ke Zhen'E without saying anything.

Zhou Botong stooped down to unseal Lingzhi Shangren's acupoints while talking nonstop, "Come, we'll compete again, we'll compete again!"

Huang Rong coldly said, "What about my Shifu? Where did you throw him?"

Zhou Botong was taken aback. "Aiyo!" he cried and turned around, rushing toward the cave. He moved so abruptly that he almost collided with Guo Jing at the cave entrance. Guo Jing was holding Ke Zhen'E's hand, leading him out of the cave. He saw his Shifu was wearing plain white cloth and white headband; Guo Jing was startled, "Shifu!" he asked, "Have any of your family members died? Where are Er Shifu [Second Master] and the others?"

Ke Zhen'E raised his head to the sky without saying anything, two lines of tears flowed down on his cheeks. Guo Jing was shocked, but did not dare to ask. Then he saw Zhou Botong was helping someone else going out of the cave. That person's left hand was holding a wine gourd, his right hand holding half a chicken, his mouth busily nibble on the chicken leg, a broad smile on his face, and he kept nodding his head. He was none other than the Nine-fingered Divine Beggar Hong Qigong.

Jing and Rong two people were overjoyed, "Shifu!" they called out together.

Ke Zhen'E's face suddenly appeared very angry; he lifted up the iron staff and fiercely hit the back of Huang Rong's head. The staff movement was swift and fierce, it was a lethal strike from the 'fu mo zhang fa' [demon subduing staff technique], which he had painstakingly trained to perfection in the Mongolian desert, with the intention to use it against the blinded Mei Chaofeng. It was created so that even though Mei Chaofeng could hear the staff's wind, she would not be able to evade it.

Huang Rong had just seen Hong Qigong after a long time and was squealing with delight; she had never guarded against any sneak attack from her back. By the time she was feeling the wind, the blast of the iron staff had already enveloped her completely. Guo Jing saw the staff was about to shatter her skull, in his desperation his left hand swept horizontally shoving the staff aside; while his right hand stretched out and grabbed the head of the staff. In panic he had used too much power, without realizing that by this time his strength had increased tremendously. The move of his left palm was from the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms.

Ke Zhen'E felt a sudden surge of strong energy. He was unable to block and the iron staff fell down from his hand, he himself also tumbling down to the ground. Guo Jing was startled; hastily he stooped down to pick him up. "Da Shifu! [First Master]" he called out. Guo Jing saw Ke Zhen'e's nose was swollen and two of his teeth were broken.

Ke Zhen'E spat the teeth, along with some blood, into his palm. "For you!" he said in a cold voice.

Guo Jing was dumbstruck. He knelt down and said, "Disciple deserves to die. Shifu, please punish me severely."

Ke Zhen'E was still holding out his hand, saying, "For you!"

Guo Jing wept. "Da Shifu ..." He choked, not knowing what to say or do.

Zhou Botong laughed and said, "I've seen master beating his disciple, but I've never seen disciple beating his master until today. Amusing! Truly amusing!"

Hearing this Ke Zhen'E was more furious. "Fine," he said, "There is a saying: swallow the knocked down tooth and the blood. Shall I do it for you?" Holding out his hand he tossed the teeth into his mouth, throwing his head backward he swallowed the teeth into his belly. Zhou Botong clapped his hands, burst out in laughter and cheered loudly.

Huang Rong noticed the situation was unusual. The grievous expression on Ke Zhen'E's face had not disappeared. It was unclear why he wanted to kill her; her heart was full of questions. Slowly she went to Hong Qigong and pulled his hand.

Guo Jing knocked his head to the ground and said, "Even if I have to die ten thousands times, disciple will never dare to

offend Da Shifu. I was out of my mind to let my hand slip and struck Da Shifu."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Shifu this and Shifu that, who is your Shifu? You have the Master of the Peach Blossom Island as your father-in-law, why would you need a Shifu? The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan do not have the ability, how can we be worthy to be Guo Daye's [big master Guo] Shifu?"

Guo Jing heard his words were getting sharper and sharper; he kept knocking his head to the ground.

Finally Hong Qigong could not bear it much longer; he interrupted by saying, "Ke Daxia [Great Hero Ke], Master and disciple spar with each other, somebody losing control is a common occurrence. The stance Jing'er used just now was taught by me. Just blame it on the Old Beggar. Please accept my apology." And he did indeed cup his fists in respect.

Listening to Hong Qigong, Zhou Botong thought, "Why don't I say something too?" Thereupon he said, "Ke Daxia, Master and disciple spar with each other, somebody losing control is a common occurrence. The technique Brother Guo Jing used to grab your iron staff just now was taught by me. Just blame it on the Old Urchin. Please accept my apology." And he also cupped his fists in respect.

He was just talking nonsense and meant it as a joke, but Ke Zhen'E was livid. He believed Zhou Botong intentionally insulted him, and as a result he also regarded Hong Qigong's good intention as a bad one. With a loud voice he said, "You, Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar, always think that your martial art skills are matchless and you can turn this world upside-down? Humph! I say many of your deeds are not righteous, certainly nothing good comes out of you."

With a surprised voice Zhou Botong asked, "Hey, what did the Southern Emperor do to you that you include him in your curse?"

Huang Rong was listening quietly on the side; she knew the more they talked, the worse the situation had become. The Old Urchin being there would only make it more difficult to make Ke Zhen'E's fury subsided. She opened her mouth and said, "Old Urchin, 'the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away' is looking for you; aren't you going to see her?"

Zhou Botong was startled; he jumped three feet into the air and shouted, "What?!?"

Huang Rong said, "She wants to 'stand face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes when the green spring grass ripples in the deepest of dawn's cold' with you."

Zhou Botong was even more shocked. "Where? Where?" he shouted.

Huang Rong pointed to the south and said, "Over there! Go see her, quick!"

Zhou Botong said, "I won't see her. Good Miss, I will do whatever you tell me to do; just don't ever tell her that you have seen me ..." Before he even finished talking, his feet moved and he ran to the north.

"I'll hold on to your promise!" Huang Rong called out.

From a distant came Zhou Botong's reply, "Once the Old Urchin make a promise, I won't regret it." As the words 'regret it' came out of his mouth, like a flash of lightning his shadow had already disappeared.

Huang Rong's original intention was for him to see Ying Gu. Who would have thought that Zhou Botong avoided Ying Gu

like a serpent or a scorpion and ran away from her in fear. It totally blew her mind away; nevertheless she succeeded in getting rid of him.

Up to this time Guo Jing was still kneeling in front of Ke Zhen'E. With tears in his eyes, he said, "For disciple's sake Seven Shifus had traveled to a faraway desert. Even if disciple's body is ground to dust and my bones are shattered, it will still be difficult for me to repay Seven Shifus' kindness. This palm of mine had offended Da Shifu, disciple does not want it anymore!" Drawing the dagger from his waist Guo Jing chopped it down on his left wrist.

Ke Zhen'E swung his iron staff horizontally, striking the dagger to the side. Although the dagger was light and the iron staff heavy, when the two weapons collided sparks flew up; Ke Zhen'E felt a tingling sensation on his palms. He knew Guo Jing was using his entire strength, thus showing his sincerity.

"Fine," he said, "If that's the case, then you must do what I say."

Guo Jing was very happy. "Whatever Da Shifu says, disciple will not dare to disobey," he said.

"If you don't do what I say, I forbid you to see my face in the future and thus our master-disciple relationship is severed," Ke Zhen'E said.

Guo Jing said, "Disciple will do my best. If I can't do it, I'd rather die."

Ke Zhen'E struck his iron staff heavily on the ground and shouted, "Go and cut the Old Heretic Huang's and his daughter's heads; then you can come back to see me."

To say Guo Jing was shocked was an understatement. "Da ... Shi ... Shifu ..." he stammered with a trembling voice.

"What?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"I wonder how did Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang] offend you?" Guo Jing asked.

Ke Zhen'E heaved two heavy sighs. Suddenly he gritted his teeth and said, "I really wish the Heaven would restore my sight if only for a moment so I can see your face; you, an ungrateful little animal!" Lifting his iron staff high he hacked it down toward the top of Guo Jing's head.

As Ke Zhen'E asked Guo Jing to do something for him, Huang Rong had already had a vague guess. When Ke Zhen'E's iron staff suddenly struck and Guo Jing did not evade, she thought whatever happened, saving Guo Jing's life was more important; hence from the side her bamboo stick intercepted the iron staff before it reached Guo Jing's head with the 'e gou lan lu' [cutting off a vicious dog's path] stance. As it hit the iron staff, the bamboo stick shook and coiled around the staff, pushing it slanting sideways. This Dog Beating Stick Technique was truly marvelous; although her strength was inferior, by borrowing the staff's strength she managed to re-orient its path.

Ke Zhen'E staggered; without waiting for his feet to come to a complete stop he fiercely beat his own chest twice and then ran away to the north. Guo Jing ran after him while calling out, "Da Shifu, wait!"

Ke Zhen'E halted his steps and turned around; with a stern voice he said, "Guo Daye wants to take my old life?" His expression looked mean and ferocious. Guo Jing was taken aback; he did not dare to continue. Hanging his head down he heard the sound of the iron staff against the ground getting farther and farther away, before completely faded

away. Remembering his Shifu's kindness he could not help but go down on his knees and wept bitterly.

Taking Huang Rong's hand Hong Qigong walked to his side. He said, "Ke Daxia and the Old Heretic Huang both have a very strange temperament; they are always in some kind of disagreement with each other. Don't worry, leave it to the Old Beggar to be the mediator between them."

Guo Jing wiped his tears and stood up. "Shifu," he said, "Do you know ... do you know what it was about?"

Hong Qigong shook his head. "The Old Urchin fell into their trick and was betting against them in staying still. Those traitors wanted to harm me. Luckily we met your Da Shifu outside the Ox Village by accident, and he protected me by taking me hiding in this cave. Thanks to the fierceness of his 'du ling' secret projectiles those traitors did not dare to rush in, so we could hold our ground this long. Ay, your Da Shifu has a noble heart, he was very brave in battle defending justice. He accompanied me in that cave resisting the enemy. Undoubtedly he was determined to fight to the death."

Speaking to this point he took two mouthfuls of wine, and then took a bite on the chicken leg. Biting and chewing the chicken went into his belly; and then he wiped his greasy mouth with his sleeve. Only then did he continued speaking, "The battle was fierce; my martial art skill is gone. I could not offer any help in fighting the enemy. I only saw your Da Shifu's face, but did not have the luxury of talking to him about anything. Judging from how he was very angry, I don't think it was because of your slip of hand. He is a chivalrous hero, how can he have such a narrow mind? Luckily in just a few more days it will be the Mid-autumn Festival of the eight month. Wait till the martial art contest at the Misty Rain Tavern is over, the Old Beggar will speak

on your behalf.” Swallowing his tears Guo Jing uttered his gratitude.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, “Your two babies’ martial art skills have advanced tremendously. Ke Daxia can be considered a prominent character in the Wulin world, yet as soon as you two babies made your moves he fell into awkward positions. What is the story behind it?”

In his heart Guo Jing was ashamed; he did not know what to say. Laughing and giggling Huang Rong told Hong Qigong everything they went through after they were separated.

Hong Qigong cheered loudly when he heard that Yang Kang killed Ouyang Ke; he shot curse words when he heard the Beggar Clan’s Elders were swindled by Yang Kang, “Little Bastard! Four old muddle-headed! Lu Youjiao has feet does not have brain!” He was entranced when he listened to how Yideng Dashi [Reverend Yideng – great master Yideng] saved Huang Rong’s life; and how Ying Gu came at midnight to seek vengeance. Finally his expression slightly changed when he heard Ying Gu suddenly went insane at the ‘qing long tan’ [green dragon shore]. “Ah!” he exclaimed.

“Shifu, what is it?” Huang Rong asked, “Do you also know Ying Gu?” While in her heart she mused, “All his life Shifu has never had a wife. Could it be that he was also mesmerized by Ying Gu? Hmm, what’s so good about this Ying Gu anyway? Mystifying, acting like a mad woman, but can captivate the attention of so many experts of the Wulin world?” Luckily Hong Qigong’s answer was pleasing to her ears.

“Nothing,” Hong Qigong said, “I don’t know Ying Gu, but when Emperor Duan left home [meaning: become a monk], I was there by his side. That day he sent a letter to the

north, inviting me to go to the south. I knew he wouldn't send for the Old Beggar if he did not have a very important matter. I also remembered Yunnan's ham, the 'over the bridge' rice-flour noodle, and the chunk of cakes and delicacies; so I left at once. When I saw him, his face was haggard, like he was suffering from a serious illness; it was completely different from when I saw him during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua, where he looked alive with a dragon or a tiger's appearance. I felt very strange. After I have been there for a few days with the pretense of discussing martial art he wanted to teach me the 'xian tian gong' [inborn/innate strength/energy] and 'yi yang zhi' [solitary yang finger]. The Old Beggar thought: in the past his Solitary Yang Finger was in a level ground with my Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, the Old Poison's Toad Stance, the Old Heretic Huang's 'pi kong zhang' [splitting the air palm] and Divine Flicking Finger; nowadays he had mastered Wang Chongyang's 'xian tian gong'. In the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua the title of Number One Martial Artist in the World would certainly belong to him; why would he want to pass on these two special skills to the Old Beggar, without any reason whatsoever? If he wanted to exchange knowledge, why wasn't he willing to learn my Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms? There must be something behind this.

Later on the Old Beggar mulled over this matter, I talked to him and his four main disciples; finally I found a clue. It turned out that after he passed on these two skills to me he was going to commit suicide. Only why he was grieving so much, even his own disciples were unclear."

Huang Rong said, "Shifu, Emperor Duan was afraid that after he died nobody will be able to control Ouyang Feng anymore."

“That’s right,” Hong Qigong said, “When I found out, I was adamant of not willing to learn anything from him. At last he told me the truth; he said that although his four disciples were loyal and diligent, their minds have been occupied by the kingdom’s affairs for a long time, that they could not concentrate on training martial art, hence it would be difficult for them to achieve success. It seemed like the Quanzhen Seven Masters’ martial art also could not reach the pinnacle of perfection. He said it was fine for me not willing to learn the Solitary Yang Finger, but if the ‘xian tian gong’ is lost, he would not have any face to meet Wang Chongyang Zhenren [lit. true/real person, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] in the underworld. I asked him to reconsider his decision, but my persuasion was useless. Only, I was unyielding in my stand not to learn from him, with the hope of saving his life. Emperor Duan could not change my mind; finally he relented by abdicating his throne and becoming a monk. I was by his side the day they shaved his head. It has been more than ten years ago. Ay, finally this enmity can be resolved, this is very good.”

“Shifu,” Huang Rong said, “We have finished telling our story, what about you?”

“About me?” Hong Qigong asked, “Hmm, at the imperial kitchen I ate four dishes of ‘yuan yang wu zhen kuai’ [minced five-treasure mandarin duck]; it was enough to satiate my craving; and then I ate litchi fruit and kidney, quail soup, sheep tongue in thick sauce, snail in ginger and vinegar sauce, oyster fermented in sheep’s tripe ...” on and on he listed the name of the dishes he ate at the imperial kitchen, while constantly swallowing his own saliva and licking his own lips.

“Why is it that later on the Old Urchin could not find you?” Huang Rong interrupted.

Hong Qigong smiled, "The imperial kitchen chefs repeatedly found their prepared dishes vanished into thin air; they thought there was a fox fairy making disturbance in that place, so they burned incense and lighted candles to worship me. Later on they told the chief of the imperial palace guards, who then dispatched eight palace guards to the imperial kitchen to catch the fox. The Old Beggar thought it was a serious situation; and neither the Old Urchin nor his shadow could be seen. I had no choice but slipped away to a remote part to hide for a while. That place was called 'e lu hua tang' [green calyx flower hall] or something, it was full of plum flower trees. From the look of it, it was the winter quarter where that fellow, the Emperor, spends his days enjoying the plum blossoms. Only it was the middle of summer; except several old eunuchs sweeping the ground everyday early in the morning, not even a ghost's shadow came to that place. The Old Beggar was free to roam around. Everywhere in the imperial palace there were things to eat; even a hundred beggars won't die of starvation in that place, thereupon I was able to heal my injury in peace and quiet.

I stayed there for more than ten days. One day in the middle of the night I suddenly heard the Old Urchin's voice pretending to be a ghost; and then the voice turned into dog's howling and cat's meowing. He was turning the palace upside down with the noise. And then I heard some people call out, 'Hong Qigong, Hong laoyezi [old master Hong], Hong Qigong, Hong laoyezi!' I took a peek. Turned out they were Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian, Liang Ziweng and the other crafty fellows."

"Ah!" Huang Rong exclaimed in surprise, "Why did they look for you?"

"I thought it was very strange too," Hong Qigong said, "As soon as I saw them I went back into hiding. Who would have

thought that the Old Urchin had already spotted me. He was ecstatic; he dashed forward and hugged me, saying, 'Thank the heaven and thank the earth for letting me find you at last.' Immediately he ordered Liang Ziweng and the others to follow behind us ..."

"How could Liang Ziweng and the others listen to the Old Urchin's order?" Huang Rong wondered.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "At that time I was also racking my brain but could not figure out the reason. All I can say was that they were very afraid of the Old Urchin. Whatever he said, they did not dare to disobey. He ordered Liang Ziweng and the others to follow behind us, while he carried me to the Ox Village to find you two people. Along the way he told me that he had looked for me everywhere but could not find me, he was very worried. And then quite by accident he bumped into Liang Ziweng and the others by the city wall. In his frustration he beat each and every one of them really bad, and then ordered them to comb all streets and alleys the whole day and the whole night to look for me. He said they had been searching around the imperial palace for a while, but the palace was huge while I was hiding in a remote place. All throughout, they did not see me."

Huang Rong said with a smile, "I did not expect the Old Urchin to be that smart, able to make those devil heads to follow his orders obediently. I wonder why they did not run away."

Hong Qigong smiled and said, "The Old Urchin employed a mischievous trick. He rubbed some dirt from his body and made more than a dozen pills. He forced them to take three pills for each person, said that this poison would react in seven by seven, forty nine days. The poison was so lethal and nobody in the world other than himself would be able

to neutralize it. If they were obedient, he would give them the antidote on the forty-eighth day. Although these wicked thieves half believed and half doubted, they certainly could not take a risk with their own lives; in the end they did not have any choice but to believe and they were compelled to listen to the Old Urchin's yelling and screaming, without daring to defy."

Initially Guo Jing was grieving, but hearing Hong Qigong's story he could not help but smile. Hong Qigong continued, "When we arrived at the Ox Village we could not find you two. The Old Urchin again forced them to go out and search for you. Last night they all came back with their heads hung low. The Old Urchin scolded and cursed them. He was getting angrier and angrier until suddenly he said, 'If by tomorrow you still cannot find those two babies Guo Jing and Huang Rong, I will make urine pulp pills and give them to you!' Of course they began to get suspicious and repeatedly provoked him to talk. The Old Urchin was screaming and kicking, finally they found out that the pills they took earlier were not poison at all. I know the situation would turn dangerous; these traitors would certainly create not a small trouble. I told the Old Urchin to kill them all. Who would have thought that Peng Lianhu also saw the danger, immediately he hatched a deception; he told that fat Tibetan monk to compete against the Old Urchin in sitting still in meditation. I could not stop them, and was forced to run out of the Ox Village. I came across Ke Daxia outside the village. He protected me and we ran to this place. Peng Lianhu and the others chased us. Although the Old Urchin was muddle-headed, he knew better than leaving me alone, so he busily overtook us here. These traitors constantly provoked him, until finally the Old Urchin could not take it anymore and agreed to bet against the monk."

Listening to this story Huang Rong was both angry and amused at the same time, she said, "If we did not meet them by accident, Shifu, your life would be delivered under the Old Urchin's hand."

Hong Qigong said, "My life is almost gone anyway, it doesn't really matter whose hand will deliver it away."

Huang Rong suddenly remembered something. "Shifu," she said, "That day when we came back from Ming Xia Dao [bright red clouds island] ..."

"It's not Ming Xia Dao, it's 'ya gui dao' [crushing ghost island]," Hong Qigong interrupted.

"Fine," Huang Rong smiled slightly, "It's Ya Gui Dao then. Now, that Ouyang Ke is not the least bit a fake ghost, he is a real ghost. That day when we rescued Ouyang Feng uncle and nephew, on the wooden raft the Old Poison said that there was one man in this whole wide world who can heal your injury. Only this person's martial art is matchless; so we can't use force against him, and you are not willing to harm others to benefit yourself by asking him to help you. At that time you were not willing to mention this person's name. Later on Jing Gege and I went to Xiangxi. Naturally now we know that other than Emperor Duan then, or Reverend Yideng now, there is no one else."

Hong Qigong sighed, "If he used Yiyang Zhi [Solitary Yang Finger] to attack my 'qi jing ba mai' [lit. marvelous/mysterious passage 8 pulses, Kwok & Huang Yushi from Wuxiapedia translated it as: Eight Extraordinary Channels], without a doubt he would heal my injury. But this kind of skill will injure his own internal strength for as long as five years or as few as three years, it's hard to say. Let's just say that he does not care about the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua, but he is already over sixty years of age; just

how much longer is he going to live? How can the Old Beggar open his mouth and ask for his help?"

"Shifu," Guo Jing said happily, "This is great! We don't need anybody's help, I can go through your 'qi jing ba mai'."

Hong Qigong was surprised, "What?" he asked.

Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege recited that babbling and mumbling part from the Manual and Reverend Yideng has translated it for us. He told us to tell you, Senior, to use this technique to open your own 'qi jing ba mai'." Straightaway she recited Yideng's translation from memory.

After listening to this Hong Qigong pondered for a long time, and then he jumped in joy and exclaimed, "Wonderful! Wonderful! I believe I will need only about one and a half year to recover."

Huang Rong said, "In the Misty Rain Tavern martial art contest our opponent will surely invite Ouyang Feng to help their side. The Old Urchin's martial art might not be inferior to his, but he is a wild person. I am afraid he won't show up during the competition time. We must go to the Peach Blossom Island to get my father's help to ensure victory."

"What you said is not wrong," Hong Qigong said, "I will go to Jiaying first, the two of you go to the Peach Blossom Island."

Guo Jing was reluctant to leave his shifu, he insisted on escorting Hong Qigong to Jiaying. Hong Qigong said, "I will ride your little red horse. If there is any problem along the way, the Old Beggar will just run away. Who can chase after me?" Immediately he mounted the horse. With a couple of 'glug, glug' he drank his wine, and then pressed the horse's belly with his legs. The little red horse let out a long neigh

toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong, as if it did not want to leave them, and then galloped like the wind to the north.

Guo Jing watched until he could not see Hong Qigong's shadow anymore, he also recalled how Ke Zhen'E wanted to kill Huang Rong, his heart was heavy. Huang Rong did not try to comfort him. She went alone to find a boat for hire then they set sail toward the Peach Blossom Island.

When they arrived on the Island, they immediately sent the boat away. Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege, I am going to ask a favor from you. Will you promise to grant it?"

"What is it?" Guo Jing asked, "I don't want to do something I won't be able to do."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "I am not going to ask you to cut off your six masters' heads."

Guo Jing was upset. "Rong'er," he said, "Can't you not mention this matter anymore?"

"Why can't I mention it?" Huang Rong countered, "You may have already forgotten about it; but I can't. Even though I am good to you, I don't want you to cut down my head."

Guo Jing sighed and said, "I really don't understand why Da Shifu was so angry. He knew you are the love of my life. I'd rather die a thousand times, ten thousand times, than hurting you the least bit."

Huang Rong could hear the sincerity in his voice, her heart was moved. She pulled his hand and leaned against his body. Pointing to a row of willow trees by the creek she said with a tender voice, "Jing Gege, do you think this Peach Blossom Island is beautiful?"

"It truly looks like a fairyland," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Rong sighed, "I want to live here forever, I don't want to be killed by you," she said.

Guo Jing gently stroked her hair and said, "Good Rong'er, how can I kill you?"

Huang Rong said, "What if your six masters, your Mama, your good friend, they all ask you to kill me? Will you do it or not?"

Guo Jing confidently said, "Even though everybody in the world wants to make things difficult for you, I will always protect you."

Huang Rong held his hand tightly and asked, "Will you be willing to leave all these people for me?"

Guo Jing hesitated and did not answer. Huang Rong looked up and gazed at his eyes, with anxious expression on her face, waiting for his answer.

Guo Jing finally said, "Rong'er, I said that I would accompany you on the Peach Blossom Island for the rest of my life. I have made that decision before I opened my mouth."

"Good!" Huang Rong said, "Then from this day on, you are not going to leave this island."

Guo Jing was taken aback, "From this day on?"

"Um, yes," Huang Rong said, "From this day on! I am going to ask Father to go to Misty Rain Tavern and fight for us. Father and I will go to kill Wanyan Honglie to avenge your father. Father and I will go to Mongolia to fetch your Mama. I will even ask Father not to blame your six masters. I am going to take care of every single one of your concerns for you."

Guo Jing saw the expression on her face was a little bit unusual; he said, "Rong'er, what I said to you, you can definitely count on it. Don't you worry; you don't have to do all these things."

Huang Rong sighed, "The matters in this world are difficult to say," she said, "When you agreed to marry that Mongolian Princess, did you ever think that someday you'll regret your own decision? Previously I only knew that whatever I wanted, I got it. But now I know ... Ay! Whatever you wish you have, just pray that the Heaven will not make things difficult for you." Speaking to this point she could not restrain her eyes from turning red. She hung her head low.

Guo Jing was silent; his heart was filled with tumultuous thoughts. He realized how much Huang Rong loved him, and it made him wanting to stay on the Island to be with her forever. But he felt it was inappropriate for him to ignore all his concerns; only why it was inappropriate, he did not know.

Huang Rong softly said, "It's not that I don't believe you or want to force you to live here; it's just that I am really scared." Speaking of this she suddenly threw herself into his arms and sobbed on his shoulder.

Guo Jing was caught by surprise; he was at a loss of what to do. He quickly said, "Rong'er, what are you afraid of?" Huang Rong did not reply, but she started to weep.

Ever since Guo Jing knew her, they had been through many difficult and dangerous, sometimes miserable situations, but he had always seen her smiling and laughing. This time she was back in her home and very soon will see her father; why was she scared all of a sudden? He asked, "Are you afraid your father has met some accident?"

Huang Rong shook her head. Guo Jing asked again, "Are you afraid once I leave this island I won't be coming back?" Again Huang Rong shook her head. Guo Jing successively asked four, five questions but she shook her head again and again.

After a while Huang Rong lifted her head up and said, "Jing Gege, I don't know what I am afraid of. I remember your Da Shifu's expression when he told you to kill me, I just can't shake it off my mind. I always feel there will come a day you are going to listen to him and kill me. That was the reason I asked you not to leave this place. Will you promise me?"

Guo Jing smiled and said, "I was wondering what important matter worries you so much; turns out it is only over this. That day in Beijing didn't my Six Shifus cursed you as little female demon [xiao yao nu, yao - goblin/witch/devil/monster] or something like that? Afterwards I ran away with you, but we don't have any problem until today. My Six Shifus seem strict and mean, but their hearts are kind and loving. Once you get to know each other I am sure they will certainly like you. Er Shifu's [Second Shifu] skill in picking other people's pocket is amazing; you can learn from him. I am sure you'll have a lot of fun. Qi Shifu [Seventh Shifu] is tender and friendly ..."

Huang Rong cut him off, "So you are determined to leave this place?" she asked.

Guo Jing replied, "The two of us will leave together; we'll both go to Mongolia to fetch my Mother, we'll kill Wanyan Honglie together, and then together we will come back to this place. Won't that be great?"

With a startled look on her face Huang Rong said, "If that's the case, I am afraid we won't be coming back together forever, we won't be together for rest of our lives."

“Why?” Guo Jing wondered.

Huang Rong shook her head and said, “I don’t know. But when I saw your Da Shifu’s expression that was what I felt. It seemed like killing me is not enough; his hatred went deep into his bones and marrow.”

As Guo Jing listened to her, he could see that her heart was broken. Although her face still showed that childlike naïveté, her eyebrows and the corner of her eyes clearly showed her feelings towards the upcoming disaster. He recalled that she was always right; if this time he did not listen to what she said and some day a disaster befell her, how would that be good? Thinking about this his heart ached; he was overwhelmed with emotion and blurted out, “All right! I am not going to leave this place, ever!”

Hearing him Huang Rong fixed her gaze to his face for half a day without saying anything; two streams of tears slowly flowed down her cheeks. Guo Jing said in low voice, “Rong’er, what else do you want?”

“What else do I want?” Huang Rong said, “I want nothing else!” She raised her beautiful eyebrows up. “Even if I want something else, the Heaven won’t let me.” Her long sleeve gently rose up, she danced underneath the flower trees. As she turned her head around, the golden band on her hair glittered under the sun. Her clothes fluttered in the breeze. She danced faster and faster; every now and then she held out her hand to shake down the trees and petals of flowers fell down like rain: red flower, white flower, yellow flower, purple flower, they fluttered in the air just like butterflies dancing around her, creating a very beautiful scenery.

She danced for a moment, suddenly leaped up a tree, and then leaped over to another tree, dancing from tree to tree performing the ‘yan shuang fei’ [the fly of a pair of

swallows] and 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling (leaves) divine sword palm technique] stances. She looked so happy.

Guo Jing thought, "Mama often told me stories about a fairy mountain on the eastern sea, where many fairies lived. I wonder if there is a fairy mountain more beautiful than the Peach Blossom Island, and if there is a fairy more beautiful than Rong'er?"

End of Chapter 33.

Chapter 34 - Radical Changes on the Island

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Inside the room the table was flipped over and the stool lay on its side, books, pen and ink were

scattered on the floor and half the scrolls of painting and poems on the wall were pulled down. Guo Jing stood motionless; his eyes looked straight without any expression on his face.

While Huang Rong was dancing in the air, suddenly she let out a soft exclaim, "Ah!" and jumped down the tree. Beckoning to Guo Jing she walked into the forest. Guo Jing was afraid he would get lost, so he followed closely and did not dare to lag more than half a step behind her. Huang Rong walked fast along the winding pathway and then abruptly stopped. Pointing her finger to a yellow pile on the ground she asked, "What is that?"

Guo Jing rushed forward several steps and saw it was a yellow horse lying on the ground. He quickly came closer and stooped down to take a look; he recognized it was his San Shifu [Third Shifu] Han Baoju's yellow horse. He held out his hand to feel the horse's back and found it was already cold; the horse had died many days ago. This horse had followed Han Baoju to the far away desert; Guo Jing had known the horse since he was little. It was like a good friend to him. To suddenly see the horse dead here Guo Jing was grieved. He carefully considered, "This horse was old, but it was a divine steed and not an ordinary horse. It had galloped north and south all these years with nimble footsteps, it did not show any sign of old age; how could it unexpectedly fall dead in here? San Shifu must be very sad."

He looked closer and noticed that the yellow horse did not lie on its side, but curled with its legs under its belly, crumpled together into one heap of meat. Guo Jing's heart turned cold; he remembered how with just a strike of his palm Huang Yaoshi had killed Princess Huazheng's horse

just like this. Quickly he stretched out his left arm trying to lift underneath the horse's neck, and held out his right hand to examine the horse's front legs. He found out that the bones of the legs were broken. He withdrew his hands and retraced the horse's back, only to find that the backbones were also broken. Guo Jing was increasingly alarmed. He took his hand off the horse and jumped in fright because he saw that his palm was full of blood. The blood had turned purplish black, but the blood smell remained. It seemed like the blood was about three, four days old. Quickly he turned the horse's body around to examine it closely, but he did not see a single wound on its entire body. Absentmindedly he sat on the ground and thought, "Could it be San Shifu's blood? Where is he?"

While Guo Jing was examining the horse Huang Rong stood quietly on the side; only then did she say in a low voice, "Don't you worry, let us investigate this matter carefully." Brushing the flower bushes away she looked to the ground and slowly walked forward. Guo Jing also saw the trace of dripping blood on the ground. Without thinking that he might get lost, he slipped through Huang Rong and anxiously rushed ahead to follow the bloodstain.

The trace sometimes disappeared so Guo Jing took the wrong turn several times. Huang Rong was always careful; she would examine the nearby bushes or the thick patch of grass among the rocks to find the trace of blood. Sometimes the bloodstain vanished altogether so she looked for a hoof print or some horse hair.

After following the trace for several 'li's they saw that ahead of them was a row of short flower bushes, with a grave in the middle of the grove. Huang Rong anxiously rushed toward the grave. Guo Jing had seen this grave before when he first came to the Peach Blossom Island, so he knew it was Huang Rong's mother's grave. He saw the tombstone

lying on the ground, so he raised it up to stand. He saw the line of characters on the tombstone, 'tao hua dao nu zhu feng shi mai xiang zhi zhong' [the fragrant burial ground of Mistress surnamed Feng of the Peach Blossom Island].

Huang Rong saw the grave's door was open and vaguely guessed that there were radical changes on the island. She did not enter the tomb right away, but looked carefully around the grave. She saw the green grass toward the left of the grave was trampled really bad, while there were some vestiges made by blade on the door of the grave. She listened attentively for half a day by the doorway and did not hear anything from the inside, finally she stooped down and entered in.

Guo Jing was afraid he might lost her, he immediately followed. Everywhere along the pathway inside the tomb he saw chipped or even shattered stones from the wall, a sign of a very fierce fight. Two people were very alarmed.

Several 'zhang's ahead Huang Rong stooped down to pick something from the floor. The pathway inside the tomb was dim, but they vaguely recognized that it was a half of Quan Jinfa's balance beam. This balance beam was made of wrought iron, it was as thick as a child's arm; but right now they saw the beam was broken by someone. Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other, they did not dare to say anything. They knew in their hearts that there were only a handful of people in this whole wide world capable of breaking this balance beam barehanded; on this Peach Blossom Island, naturally there was nobody else aside from Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Rong held the broken beam with trembling hands. Guo Jing took the beam from Huang Rong's hand and inserted it in his belt. He stooped down trying to find the other half of the beam. He felt like his heart was pulled

down by fifteen buckets of water; filled with tumultuous thoughts. Part of him hoped he would find it, part of him hoped he would not.

Several steps later the pathway was getting darker. Guo Jing groped on the floor and found a round object. Turned out it was the balance weight, which Quan Jinfa usually used as flying hammer to strike the enemy. Guo Jing put it inside his pocket. Suddenly he felt his hand touching something cold, soft and somewhat greasy; it felt like someone's face. He jumped up in fright and bumped his head to the ceiling of the tomb pathway. Without feeling the pain he hastily fetched his fire paper and lit it. He let out a bitter cry, feeling like the sky was turning around him and the earth shook beneath him, he fell backward and fainted.

The fire paper was still in Guo Jing's hand and the fire was still flickering. Under the fire light Huang Rong saw Quan Jinfa with his eyes open, dead on the ground; the other half of the balance beam stuck out from his chest. Everything became clear to Huang Rong now. She calmed herself down, and then gathering up her courage she took the fire paper from Guo Jing's hand. She placed the fire underneath Guo Jing's nostrils. The smoke rose up, Guo Jing sneezed hard twice and regained his consciousness. He stared blankly at Huang Rong before finally standing up, and two people walked to enter to tomb.

They saw the tomb was in chaos; one corner of the sacrificial table was broken, Nan Xiren's shoulder pole was laid slanting on the floor. On the left corner they saw someone lying down; he was wearing a cloth headband on his head, his shoes fallen down. From the look of his back who else but Zhu Cong?

Guo Jing quietly walked near and pulled Zhu Cong's body. Under the fire light he saw that the corner of Zhu Cong's

mouth showed a faint smile, while his body had been cold for a long time. In his condition, the smile appeared to be strange yet sad. With a low voice Guo Jing said, "Er Shifu [Second Shifu], disciple Guo Jing is here!" Gently he picked Zhu Cong's body up. 'Clink, clink, clank, clank' there was a series of light noise, countless pearls and precious stones fell down from Zhu Cong's pocket, scattered on the floor.

Huang Rong picked a handful of jewels to take a closer look, but threw them away immediately. With a long sigh she said, "These are things my Father placed here to accompany my Mother."

Guo Jing fixed his gaze at her, his eyes looked like they are about to spurt out blood, with a low and calm voice he said, "You are saying ... saying that my Er Shifu came here to steal the gems? You dare to say my Er Shifu ..."

Huang Rong did not flinch under his glowering stare at all; she stared back at Guo Jing, only her stare was full of desperation and painful anxiety.

Guo Jing continued, "My Shifu was a warrior and a true hero, how could he steal your father's jewels? He couldn't possibly ... couldn't possibly come over to plunder your Mama's grave." But looking at Huang Rong's expression his tone gradually changed from angry to sad. The fact was, the jewels fell from Zhu Cong's pocket, he also remembered his Er Shifu was known as 'miao shou shu sheng' [Magic Hand Scholar]; he was able to effortlessly pick anything from anybody's pocket. Could it be that he really came over here to steal the jewels from this grave? No, no, his Er Shifu was always honest and frank, he simply could not do such a dirty and despicable act; there must be an explanation to this. Guo Jing was grieved and angry at the same time, the hair on his forehead was wet with sweat, his mind was dark, he

clasped his fists so hard that the joints were making cracking sounds.

Huang Rong softly said, "When I saw your Da Shifu's expression the other day, I had a feeling that it would be difficult for you and I to have something good between us. If you want to kill me, just do it. My Mama is here. I only ask you to bury me by her side. After burying me, quickly leave the island, don't let my father see you."

Guo Jing did not answer; he walked back and forth in big strides, breathing heavily at the same time. Huang Rong's gaze was fixed on the painting of her mother on the wall. Suddenly she saw something of the face of the painting. She came closer and saw two secret projectiles. Carefully she took them down and gave them to Guo Jing; they were the 'du ling' [poisonous water caltrop] Ke Zhen'E used. She pulled the curtain behind the sacrificial table open, revealing her mother's coffin behind it. She walked to the coffin's side, and was unable to restrain exclaiming, "Ah!" She saw Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying, brother and sister have died behind the jade coffin.

It seemed like Han Xiaoying had slashed her own throat, her hand was still holding tight the sword hilt. Half of Han Baoju's body was draped over the coffin, five finger holes were clearly seen on the center of his forehead.

Guo Jing walked past Huang Rong to take Han Baoju's body away, while mumbling, "I personally saw Mei Chaofeng has died; who else but Huang Yaoshi in this world who can use this 'jiu yin bai gu zhua' [Nine Yin White Bone Claw]?" He gently put Han Baoju's body on the floor, then he went back to take Han Xiaoying's body, and brought the body outside. He walked past Huang Rong without looking at her, as if he did not even know she was there.

Huang Rong's heart turned cold; she stared blankly for half a day. Suddenly the tomb was dark; the fire paper had been burned out. She was used to coming over to this tomb, but now there were four dead people inside. She could not help but feel afraid of the darkness and hastily ran out of the tomb. She tripped on something and almost fell over, but she ran ahead. Only after she was out of the tomb did she recall that she must be stumbling over Quan Jinfa's body.

She noticed the tombstone was askew; she put out her hand to straighten it up. She was about to close the grave's door when suddenly something dawned on her, "After killing the Four Freaks of Jiangnan, how come Father did not close the door of the grave? He loves Mama very much. Even though he was in such a hurry, he would not leave this door open wide like this." One thought led to another, her suspicion aroused, "How could Father let the Four Freaks accompany Mama in the grave? It's impossible. Could it be that Father also met a mishap?" Immediately she pushed the tombstone three times to the right and three times to the left to close the door, and then rushed to the house.

Guo Jing left the tomb earlier than she did, but after walking a dozen of steps, turning to the left and circling to the right, he was lost. He saw Huang Rong walking by and immediately followed behind her.

Without saying anything two people walked through the bamboo grove, over the lotus pond, toward the study room where Huang Yaoshi took up his residence. They saw the building was in a mess; the beams were broken and the pillars bent.

"Father! Father!" Huang Rong called out; rushing inside she saw that the table was flipped over and the stool laid on its side, books, pen and ink were scattered on the floor, half of the scrolls of painting and poems on the wall were pulled

down, but where was Huang Yaoshi's shadow? Huang Rong propped herself on the turned over table, her body shook and she was about to fall.

After half a day she managed to calm herself down. She rushed toward the mute servants' quarter, but did not see a single soul. The ashes on the stove had turned cold. If they did not die, all of them had left some time ago. It looked like there was nobody else on this island except Guo Jing and herself.

Slowly she walked back to the study room, only to see Guo Jing inside standing motionless; his eyes looked straight without any expression on his face. With a trembling voice Huang Rong said, "Jing Gege, go ahead and cry. Quickly cry, then we'll talk!" She knew Guo Jing and his six shifus had a parents and child relationship; right now his heart was extremely grieved. His internal energy had been trained to such an excellent level, that if he was unable to vent his great sadness and pain he would suffer a serious internal injury. Who would have thought that Guo Jing did not seem to hear anything; he only stared at her blankly.

Huang Rong wanted to urge him again, but she was overwhelmed with grief as well. She only said, "Jing Gege," and could not say anything else.

Two people stood silently for half a day; Guo Jing mumbled with a low voice, "I must not kill Rong'er, I must not kill Rong'er!"

Huang Rong's heart was bitter, she said, "Your Shifus are dead, just cry your heart out."

Guo Jing thought aloud, "I am not crying, I am not crying."

After this exchange, the room fell into silence one more time. The sound of the distant waves was faintly heard; in

just a short moment a multitude of thoughts swirling inside Huang Rong's mind. All kinds of things she went through on this island, since she was little until she was fifteen years old, one by one flashed through her brain clearly; and then her body shook again.

She heard Guo Jing said as if he was talking to himself, "I must bury my Shifus first. Must I? Must I bury my Shifus first?"

"Right," Huang Rong replied, "We must bury Shifus first." She went out to show the way, back to her mother's grave. Without saying anything Guo Jing followed behind her.

Huang Rong held out her hand to open the grave, suddenly Guo Jing rushed ahead, his right leg flew up, sweeping toward the middle of the tombstone. The tombstone was made from solid and extremely hard granite; even if Guo Jing's kick was ten times stronger all he could do was to push the tombstone slightly askew, and not making the slightest dent on it. His right foot was bleeding, but he did not seem to feel the pain. His pair of palms ferociously struck and pushed the stone. He pulled the half of Quan Jinfa's balance beam and struck the tombstone over and over. Sparks and debris flew everywhere. Suddenly, 'crack!' the beam snapped. With both of his hands Guo Jing furiously cracked the stone open, revealing the steel rod inside it. He grabbed the steel rod, trying to break it; but the grave door had actually opened before the rod was bent.

Guo Jing stared with a dull expression; suddenly he shouted, "Other than Huang Yaoshi, who can open the gate? Who can lure my 'en shi' [benevolent/kind master] to enter this crafty grave? If it is not he then who is? Who is it?" He threw his head back and shouted, then ran into the grave.

Guo Jing's blood on the broken stone flowed down to cover his hand print. Seeing his deep hatred toward her mother's grave Huang Rong was determined, "If he destroys my mother's jade coffin to vent his anger, I am going to die over it first." She was about to enter the grave when Guo Jing walked back out carrying Quan Jinfu's body. He put the body down on the ground, then went back in and respectfully carried Zhu Cong, Han Baoju and Han Xiaoying one by one and laid them down on the ground.

Huang Rong stole a glance toward him and saw the love and admiration on his face; her heart turned icy cold, "He loves his shifus a lot more than he loves me. I must look for my Father, I must look for my Father!"

Guo Jing carried his four shifus' bodies into the forest, several hundreds steps away from the grave, before he finally stooped down to dig a hole. At first he dug using Han Xiaoying's long sword, he dug faster and faster and finally the sword snapped; even the handle was broken. Suddenly a burst of heat bubbled up from his chest and he spat out two mouthfuls of blood. He did not stop; he bent down his waist and used his hands to continue digging; scooping the earth and throwing it aside like crazy.

Huang Rong went to the quarter of the mute servants in charge of planting the tree and took two shovels. She tossed one shovel to Guo Jing and used the other to help digging the hole. Without saying anything Guo Jing snatched the shovel from her hand, broke it into two and tossed it to the ground; while he continued to dig alone with the other shovel. Huang Rong did not cry at all; she simply sat on the ground to watch.

Guo Jing exerted all his strength and he managed to dig two holes, one big and the other small, within the time needed to cook rice. He put Han Xiaoying's body into the

small hole. He knelt down and knocked his head on the ground several times; and then stared blankly at Han Xiaoying's face for half a day before he finally covered it with earth. Next, he picked Zhu Cong's body and was about to put it into the big hole when suddenly his heart was stirred, "How can Huang Yaoshi's filthy jewels accompany my Er Shifu in his grave?" Thereupon he put forth his hand into Zhu Cong's pocket and took the pearls, jade, and gemstones one by one and without looking at them he tossed everything to the ground. At last he reached the bottom of the pocket and took a sheet of paper out. He unfolded the paper and read these words:

'From Jiangnan, the humble Ke Zhen'E, Zhu Cong, Han Baoju, Nan Xiren, Quan Jinfa and Han Xiaoying are paying a visit to the Senior, Master of the Peach Blossom Island. A short while ago we heard a rumor that disregarding their own lack of ability the Quanzhen Six Masters are about to settle their matter with the Peach Blossom Island. Juniors here realize this matter involves some miscommunication, only we regret that we are not able to act as the mediator between the two parties involved. Senior is an expert of the present age, a peer of the late Wang Chongyang, Wang Zhenren [lit. true/real man, a term of respect to a Taoist priest]; how can Senior let your honor and prestige fall by arguing with younger generations about right and wrong? In the past Lin Xiangru yielded to Lian Po, and it was regarded as a grand occasion in history. A heroic gentleman's heart is as broad as the sea, and would certainly not be bothered by bickering chicken and worms. The day will come when the Quanzhen disciples will humble themselves in front of the Island Master, and the warriors of the world will admire Senior's honorable chivalry; wouldn't that be great?'

Guo Jing recognized his Er Shifu's handwriting, he held the paper with trembling hands; he said in his heart, "When the Quanzhen Seven Masters were fighting Huang Yaoshi at the Ox Village, Ouyang Feng launched a sneak attack and killed Changzhen Zi [Eternal Truth] Tan Chuduan. At that time Ouyang Feng shifted the blame to Huang Yaoshi. This Old Heretic Huang is a haughty man, he did not bother to argue, so naturally the Quanzhen Sect hates him to the bone. When my six Shifus learned the Quanzhen Sect was coming in full power to seek revenge, they were afraid both sides would suffer injury, so they wrote this letter urging Huang Yaoshi to temporarily avoid confrontation and think of ways to reveal the truth in the future. My Shifus had a kind intention, how could this old thief Huang Yaoshi made his move and brought this calamity upon them?" But then he thought, "Er Shifu had already written this letter, why didn't he deliver it, but kept it in his pocket? Ah, right, the situation must be pressing, the Quanzhen Six Masters were coming quickly, so they did not have enough time to deliver this letter; therefore, my Six Shifus came in a hurry to prevent the battle." Following which he thought, "Old Heretic Huang, oh, Old Heretic Huang, you must think my Six Shifus came to help the Quanzhen Sect; and thus without separating the green from the red or black or white you just attacked with your poisonous hand."

He was busy with his own thought for a while, and then he folded the paper to put it back into his pocket, suddenly he saw several characters were scribbled on the back of the letter. He quickly turned it over and his heart was thumping hard and jumping madly since he saw some crooked writing, "This business has turned for the worse, everybody guard against ..." the last character was only written three strokes; looked like the disaster had already stricken, so it was unfinished.

Guo Jing called out, "This is obviously the character 'east'; Er Shifu warned everybody to guard against the Eastern Heretic; what a pity he did not have enough time." He crushed the paper into a ball; clenching his jaws he said, "Er Shifu, Er Shifu, the Old Heretic Huang has viewed your good intention as an evil one." His grip loosened and the paper ball fell to the ground. Stooping down he picked Zhu Cong's body.

Huang Rong had always kept her eyes on Guo Jing as he was reading the paper; she saw his expression change several times, she knew the letter must be very important. As the paper fell, she slowly walked over and picked it up, she read both sides and said in her heart, "His Six Shifus came to the Peach Blossom Island with a good intention. Too bad this Magic Hand Scholar had a crooked heart; he was accustomed to stealing his entire life, so that when he saw my mother's many rare treasures he could not help but violating my Father's biggest taboo ..."

In her grief and remorse she saw that Guo Jing was laying down Zhu Cong's body. Zhu Cong's left hand was tightly curled into a fist. Guo Jing pried it open and took something out and held it in his hand. Huang Rong looked closer and saw it was a women's shoe carved from a green jade, approximately an inch long. Although it was a toy, it looked just like a real shoe; the carving was fine and exquisite, truly it was an expensive work of art. Only she had never seen this shoe in her mother's grave before; she wondered where Zhu Cong got it from.

Guo Jing turned the shoe over in his hand to take a look; there was a 'zhao' [to recruit] character engraved on the sole, while another character 'bi' [contest/compete] was engraved inside, other than these characters there was nothing unusual about the shoe. Guo Jing hated these treasures very much, 'swish!' he tossed the shoe to the

ground. He stared blankly for a while, then slowly picked Zhu Cong's, Han Baoju's and Quan Jinfa's bodies and put them in the hole. He was about to cover them with earth, but looking at his three shifus' faces he could not bear to do so. He called out, "Er Shifu, San Shifu, Liu Shifu [Sixth Shifu], you ... you died!" His voice was gentle, the same voice he had used when talking to his shifus in the past.

After about half a day he cast a sidelong gaze toward the pile of treasure by the hole; his anger rose. With both of his hands he scooped them up and walked briskly toward Huang Rong's mother's grave. Huang Rong was afraid he was going to violate her mother's jade coffin; she anxiously caught up, stretching out her arms she blocked the entrance of the grave. "What are you doing?" she imposingly asked.

Guo Jing did not answer, his left arm gently shoved her aside; both of his hands threw the treasures inside the grave. A series of long clinking noise was heard as the jewels hit the ground. Huang Rong saw that jade-green shoe fell near her feet; she stooped down to pick it up and said, "This one is not my Mother's." She handed the shoe over to him. Guo Jing only stared at her blankly, ignoring her. Huang Rong put the shoe in her pocket. Guo Jing turned around and returned to the hole; he shoveled the earth and buried his three shifus' bodies.

Guo Jing was busy for half a day. The sky had gradually turned dark. Huang Rong still did not see him cry; she was getting more and more concerned. She thought perhaps if she leaves him alone he would cry; so she went back to the house to fetch some salted fish and ham and cooked some simple dishes. She put everything in a basket and went back to see that Guo Jing was still standing next to his shifus' grave. It took Huang Rong approximately an hour to prepare the dishes, yet not only Guo Jing did not move a

single step; his expression also did not change the slightest bit.

To see Guo Jing standing like a stone statue in the dark Huang Rong was alarmed and scared. "Jing Gege, how are you feeling?" she called out; but Guo Jing did not pay her any attention. Huang Rong called again, "Come here and eat, you have been hungry for a whole day!"

"I'd rather die of starvation than to eat anything on the Peach Blossom Island," Guo Jing said.

Hearing him talking Huang Rong was somewhat relieved; she knew his stubborn temperament. His heart was broken and hurt, once he said he would not eat anything on this island then he would not eat. Thereupon she slowly put the basket down on the ground and sat down.

One standing up the other sitting down, time quietly passed, the crescent moon rose from the sea and slowly reached the top of their heads. The food in the basket had already turned cold, as cold as the hearts of this couple.

In this chilly wind under the cold moon, amidst the faint sound of waves breaking the shore, suddenly from a distance came a cry. The sound was intensely mournful, like a wolf's howl or a tiger's roar, but it also sounded like a human's voice. The sound was transmitted by the wind, so when the wind died, the sound also disappeared. Huang Rong inclined her ears to listen attentively; she vaguely recognized it was the voice of someone struggling in severe pain, only it was not clear whether the voice belonged to a human or a beast. After determining where the voice came from, she moved her feet and rushed toward that voice.

Actually she wanted to take Guo Jing along, but then she changed her mind, "Most likely this is not something good, it will only increase his anxiety." Darkness enveloped her on

every side, she was actually afraid to go alone; fortunately she knew every grass and every tree on the Peach Blossom Island very well, hence although her heart was thumping hard, she gathered all her courage and went forward.

She had only walked for about a dozen of steps when suddenly felt a gust of wind by her side; Guo Jing dashed past her and was running ahead of her. He did not know the way, so very soon he was lost. Huang Rong saw his hands hacking and his feet kicking, trying to destroy the trees and bushes blocking his way, as if he was losing his mind. "Follow me," Huang Rong said.

"Si Shifu [Fourth Shifu], Si Shifu!" Guo Jing called out. He had recognized his Si Shifu, Nan Xiren's voice.

Huang Rong's heart turned cold, she thought, "It will be very strange if his Si Shifu saw me and did not want to take my life." But by now she had already disregarded all consequences; she knew perfectly well a big disaster was looming ahead, but she did not even try to run away from it. She led Guo Jing into the thick forest on the east side of the island. They saw underneath a peach tree a man was rolling around with twisted body.

Guo Jing cried out and rushed ahead to hug him. Nan Xiren's face showed a smile, his mouth produced 'heh, heh' sound. Guo Jing was scared but also happy; suddenly, 'wah!' he broke into crying. He was crying and calling out, "Si Shifu! Si Shifu!"

Nan Xiren did not say anything; he struck Guo Jing with the back of his palm. Guo Jing was taken by surprise; instinctively he ducked to avoid the blow. As his palm did not hit its target Nan Xiren's left fist struck out. This time Guo Jing thought that his shifu was punishing him; he was happy, so he let Nan Xiren's fist to hit him. Who would have

thought that Nan Xiren's fist carried a surprisingly strong force. 'Bang!' Guo Jing was sent rolling down on the ground.

Since he was little Guo Jing had practiced fist technique with Nan Xiren several hundreds or thousands times; he knew perfectly well the strength of Nan Xiren's fists and palms, he was greatly surprised to find Nan Xiren's strength suddenly increased several folds. Guo Jing had just barely stood up when Nan Xiren's fist came again. Guo Jing still did not want to fend off. This fist carried an even stronger force; Guo Jing saw stars dancing in front of his eyes, he almost passed out. Nan Xiren stooped down to pick a big rock up, and fiercely pounded it down on top of Guo Jing's head. If Guo Jing did not evade, this big rock would certainly crack his skull open and turn his brain to mush.

From the sideline Huang Rong saw the critical situation, she quickly flew forward and pushed Nan Xiren's arm with her left hand. Nan Xiren, with the rock still in his hands, fell down to the ground. His mouth made a 'heh, heh' sound and to everybody's surprise he did not crawl back up.

"Why did you push my Si Shifu?" Guo Jing shouted angrily.

Huang Rong's sole purpose was to save Guo Jing, she did not expect Nan Xiren would be this weak; as soon as she pushed, she hastily held out her hands to help him up. Under the moonlight she saw his face was smiling, but this smile resembled the exaggerated smile of an actor on stage; his face looked very frightening. Huang Rong called out in alarm and withdrew her hands immediately, she did not dare to touch his body. All of a sudden Nan Xiren turned over and struck her left shoulder with his fist. Two people shouted in pain simultaneously.

Although her body was protected by the soft hedgehog armor, this fist had given her enough pain and sent her staggered a few steps back. Blood was dripping from Nan Xiren's fist, which was pricked by the thorns on the armor. Amidst the two people's shouts Guo Jing called out, "Si Shifu!"

Nan Xiren looked at Guo Jing as if he had just recognized him; he opened his mouth to speak, but no matter how much the muscle around his mouth twitched, he still could not say anything. His face showed a smile, but his eyes showed extreme despair.

"Si Shifu," Guo Jing said, "Please take a rest. Whatever it is you want to say, you can say it later."

Nan Xiren tried hard to say something, he lifted his neck to look up, but his lips were unable to form the words. After straining for a while his head dropped, looking down to the ground.

"Si Shifu!" Guo Jing repeatedly called out; he rushed forward to lift Nan Xiren up.

From the side Huang Rong could see clearly. "Your Shifu is writing," she said.

Guo Jing looked sideways and saw Nan Xiren's right index finger was slowly writing on the soft earth. Under the moonlight he saw Nan Xiren wrote character by character: "My ... killer ... is ..."

Huang Rong noticed he wrote with great difficulty, her heart was thumping hard; suddenly she remembered something, "He is on the Peach Blossom Island, even an idiot will know that it is my Father who killed him. But he is on the verge of death and is still using his very last strength to write the killer's name, could it be that the murderer is

someone else?" She was watching Nan Xiren's finger with a rapt attention; she noticed that the finger moved slower as if losing its strength, so she kept praying in her heart, "If he is going to write some other name, please, please let him write it down quickly."

Nan Xiren was writing the fifth character [Chinese character, that is], he started from the upper left hand corner and wrote a small 'ten' (十) character, then his finger trembled and stopped moving all together.

Guo Jing was kneeling on the ground, hugging his shifu. He felt Nan Xiren's body shook violently then he stopped breathing. He looked at the small 'ten' character and called out, "Si Shifu, I know you were going to write the Huang (黄) character, you were going to write the Huang character!" He threw himself on Nan Xiren's body and wept bitterly. In this one cry he had vented up the grief and indignation that had been welled up in his heart the whole day. He cried for quite a while, then his body fell on top of Nan Xiren's lifeless body; he had fainted.

Without knowing how much time had passed, he woke up under the bright morning sunlight. He stood up and swept his gaze around. Huang Rong was gone, and Nan Xiren's body was still lying down on the ground with his eyes open. Guo Jing remembered a saying, 'die without closing his eyes'; he was unable to restrain tears from flowing down his cheeks again. Stretching out his hand he gently closed Nan Xiren's eyes. Suddenly he recalled just before he died Nan Xiren's facial expression was very strange; he wonder what kind of injury was so fatal. Thereupon he untied Nan Xiren's clothes to examine his whole body. Strange to say, except for the pricked hand from hitting Huang Rong's soft hedgehog armor last night, from head to toe, Guo Jing could not find a single scar on Nan Xiren's body. Neither his chest nor his back showed any sign of injury by internal

strength strike; the skin was neither black nor burnt, so there was no sign of poisoning either.

Guo Jing picked up Nan Xiren's body and carried it to be buried together with Zhu Cong and the others; but the pathways in the forest were so strange that after about dozens of steps he lost his bearing. He had no choice but turn back and dig a hole underneath a peach tree to bury Nan Xiren.

Guo Jing had not eaten for a whole day; his stomach hurt from hunger. He wanted to find a way to go back to the shore and find a boat to return to the mainland, but the farther he went, the more confused he became. He sat down to take a rest for a while, then he stood up with a renewed vigor and walked again. This time he had an idea, regardless of he found a pathway or not, he would keep his eyes toward the sun in the east.

After walking for a while ahead of him was a dense forest, seemingly impassable. Nothing strange about the forest, it was just that each tree was full of long and thorny rattan cane; it would be truly difficult for him to set his feet on. He made the decision, "I am not coming back today!" and then jumped up to the tree top.

He only walked one step on the tree when 'rip!' the corner of his trouser was tore by a thorn and his calf was bleeding from several cuts. He walked two more steps, and his left leg was entangled in some long canes. He took his dagger out and cut the canes. Lifting his head up he saw far ahead the rattan trees were very dense, seemingly without end. He called out, "Even if my legs are sheared, I have to leave this cursed island!"

He was about to jump ahead when suddenly Huang Rong called out from the ground, "Get down, I'll take you out."

He looked down and saw Huang Rong standing underneath a rattan tree on his left.

Guo Jing did not reply, he jumped down and saw Huang Rong's face was deathly pale, as if her blood was drained completely out. He could not help but startle; he wanted to ask whether her injury recurred, but he forced himself to bite his lips. Huang Rong noticed he wanted to say something, but as soon as his lips started to move he turned his head around. She waited for a moment without seeing any response from Guo Jing; she sighed gently and said, "Let's go!" Two people walked along the winding path heading east.

Huang Rong's injury had not been completely healed, and she had to face this heavy misfortune; she was tossing and turning in her sleep the previous night. She knew she could not blame her Jing Gege, she could not blame her father, and she could not even blame the Six Freaks of Jiangnan. She only resented herself; why would she have to endure the Heaven's punishment like this? Did the Heaven hate people who lead a happy life?

She led Guo Jing toward the beach; knowing in her heart that this time he would never come back, it would be difficult for them to see each other anymore, so she felt that with every step a piece of her heart was also taken away.

Just beyond the rattan trees forest they could see the beach ahead. Huang Rong felt weary, she was unable to restrain her body from shaking; hastily she used the bamboo stick to brace herself, but unexpectedly there was no strength left on her arm, the bamboo stick skewed and she fell down to the ground.

Instinctively Guo Jing outstretched his right hand to hold her, but just as his finger was about to touch her arm, the

injustice his shifu suffered flashed in his mind. His left hand moved and 'slap!' it struck his own right wrist. He was using Zhou Botong's Mutual Hands Combat Technique; as his right hand was stricken, he turned his palm over and leapt backward immediately.

Without receiving any help Huang Rong fell down to the ground. As Guo Jing saw her falling down, remorse, affection, grief, indignation and all kinds of emotions bubbled up inside his heart. Even if his heart was made of stone he could not restrain himself from stooping down and pick her up. He looked at all directions trying to find a comfortable place to lay her down, and it was then did he saw a green cloth flutter in the wind on the rock toward his northeast.

Huang Rong opened her eyes and saw Guo Jing's gaze was fixed on a distant place; she followed his gaze and also saw the green cloth. "Father!" she called out in alarm. Guo Jing let her down, and hand in hand they ran toward the rock. They saw it was a long gown, stuck in the crook of the rock; they also saw a piece of human skin mask lying next to it. Obviously they belonged to Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Rong was really alarmed; she stooped down to pick up the gown and clearly saw a bloody hand print on the lapel of the gown, with the fingers left winding traces. It looked very scary.

Guo Jing remembered, "After killing my San Shifu with the Nine Yin White Bone Claw Huang Yaoshi must have wiped his fingers with this cloth."

Initially he was holding Huang Rong's hand, but now his blood was boiling inside his chest; he shook Huang Rong's hand away, snatched the gown, and with a 'rip!' sound he tore the gown into two parts. He saw the corner of the

gown was torn, looked like it was the green piece of cloth tied on the eagle's foot. The blood print was so clear that under the bright sunlight it looked as if the palm would jump out of the clothes and slap someone on the face; but it provoked Guo Jing's anger even more so that he felt he was going to go insane from grief and indignation. He tucked his own gown into his belt and waded into the water towards a sailboat.

The mute and deaf servants on the boat had long gone, disappeared without a trace. Without looking back to Huang Rong he drew his dagger out and cut the rope, hoisted the anchor and sailed to the sea.

Huang Rong watched the boat sail to the west. At first she was hoping that he would change his mind, turn the rudder and head back to the island to take her traveling together; but then she saw the boat was getting smaller and smaller, while her heart was turning colder and colder. She stared blankly at the sea until the boat disappeared on the horizon. Suddenly she remembered that she was alone on the island; Jing Gege had gone, and she did not know whether her father would ever return. How could she pass the rest of her days? Would she just stand on this shore forever? Rong'er, Rong'er, you must not take a short cut and die!

All by himself Guo Jing steered the boat, leaving the Peach Blossom Island, heading west. He had sailed for several dozen 'li's when he suddenly heard the eagles' anxious cry high above his head. The pair of eagles had followed him and perched on the sail arms. Guo Jing thought, "The eagles come after me, Rong'er is alone on the island, she must be very lonely!" Overcome with pity and regret he spontaneously turned the rudder around, wanting to take her to travel together. But after sailing for a short while he remembered, "Da Shifu told me to cut Huang Yaoshi's and

Rong'er's heads before I can come and see him. Da Shifu, Er Shifu and the others came to the Peach Blossom Island and fell under Huang Yaoshi's poisonous hands. Although Da Shifu is blind, he can hear clearly. For some reason he was fortunate to escape and stay alive. He raised his iron staff to kill Rong'er; he wanted me to kill Rong'er, what did Rong'er do? I can't kill Rong'er; Er Shifu and the others were not killed by Rong'er. But how can I be together with her? I must cut Huang Yaoshi's head and take it away to see Da Shifu. If I am not the Old Heretic Huang's match, then I'll let him kill me." Immediately he turned the rudder again, making a circle on the sea surface, heading west once more.

Late on the third day the boat reached the shore. Out of hatred of everything from the Peach Blossom Island he took the anchor and smashed the bottom of the boat before leaping onto the beach. He watched while the sailboat slowly leaned sideways and sunk to the bottom of the ocean. He could not help but feel a loss in his heart. Leaving the shore he walked to the west; he found a peasant home and bought some rice to eat. After finding the right direction he went straight to Jiaxing.

That evening he spent the night by the bank of Qiantang River; he saw the reflection of the bright moon on the river, like a big golden wheel floating on the water. Suddenly he jumped up with a start; he was afraid he missed the martial art contest appointment at the Misty Rain Tavern. Immediately he asked the host where he lodged, and found out that today was the thirteenth of the eighth month. Hastily he crossed the river that very same night; he bought a healthy horse and whipped the horse to gallop quickly, and arrived at Jiaxing by early afternoon of the next day.

Since his childhood he had heard his six shifus recounted their battle with Qiu Chuji; how they had a wine drinking

contest out of the huge copper vat at the Drunken Immortal Tavern [zui xian lou], the exquisiteness of their martial art skills and the heroism surrounding that battle. Six people loved to tell the story good-naturedly. So as soon as he entered the southern gate he asked the location of the Drunken Immortal Tavern.

The Drunken Immortal Tavern was located by the bank of Nan Hu [South Lake]. Guo Jing arrived at the front of the tavern. He looked up and saw this tavern's appearance was exactly like what Han Xiaoying had told him. The tavern had been imprinted in his mind for a dozen of years, today he had seen it for the first time with his own eyes; he noticed the exquisiteness of the carving of the eaves, it was truly a beautiful building. At the front of the tavern stood a big wooden sign with 'tai bai yi feng' [the great (Li) Bai (a famous poet of the Tang Dynasty)'s left behind manner/custom/air] four letters engraved on it; while above the main entrance there was a sign with 'zui xian lou' [Drunken Immortal Tavern], inscribed by Su Dongpo [a famous calligrapher of the Song Dynasty], in golden letters, gleaming under the bright sunlight.

Guo Jing's heart was thumping madly; walking and leaping, he went upstairs. A wine shop attendant welcomed him and said, "Honorable Guest, please use the downstairs room, since the upstairs is already reserved for some other guests."

Guo Jing was about to reply when suddenly someone was calling, "Jing'er, you are here!" Guo Jing looked up and saw a Taoist priest sitting and drinking wine, his long beard reached his chest, his face was ruddy; it was none other than Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji.

Guo Jing rushed forward and bowed to the ground, "Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest Qiu]!" he called out. His voice was

somewhat choked.

Qiu Chuji held out his hand to raise him up; he said, "You are a day early, that is very good. I am also a day early. I thought tomorrow we are going to fight Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others, so I want to be here early to drink wine and reminisce about the past with your Six Shifus. Have your Six Shifus arrived? I have prepared some tables for them."

Guo Jing saw there were nine tables on this upstairs floor; except for Qiu Chuji's table, which was full with dishes and wine, the other eight tables only had a pair of chopsticks and a wine cup. Qiu Chuji said, "Eighteen years ago I met your Seven Shifus for the very first time in this place; they arranged the tables just like this. This one table of vegetarian dishes was for Jiaomu Da Shi [Reverend Burnt Wood], it's a pity that I can no longer meet him and your Wu Shifu [Fifth Shifu]." He sounded very grieved. Guo Jing turned his head around, did not dare to look at him straight ahead.

Qiu Chuji did not notice anything, he kept talking, "That day we had a contest on drinking from the copper vat, so today I went to 'fa hua si' [magnificent (Buddhist) way temple] and fetched the vat. As soon as your Six Shifus are here we can drink again just like in the old days."

Guo Jing turned his head to look at the big copper vat by the screen. The outside of the vat was blackish green from the copper rust, but the inside had been washed and scrubbed clean, and filled to the brim with high quality wine, the fragrance attacked his nostrils. Guo Jing stared blankly at the copper vat for half a day then he turned his attention to the eight empty tables. He thought, "Other than Da Shifu, nobody would be able to enjoy the banquet again. If only I can see my seven benevolent masters sit

together, drinking wine, talking and laughing, getting drunk for the whole day, I would be very happy even if I have to die immediately.”

He heard Qiu Chuji continue, “At that time we agreed that on the twenty-fourth day of the third month this year, you and Yang Kang will have a martial art contest in here. I respect your Seven Shifus as noble hearted chivalrous warriors; I was hoping you would win and lift up the name of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan in the world. Besides, I was always wandering everywhere, weeding out the criminals from this world; I did not have enough time to spend on nurturing Yang Kang. It was all right not to teach him a good martial art, but I should have taught him to have loyalty and chivalry. For this I am so ashamed toward your Uncle Yang. Although he now thoroughly repented of his former misdeeds, the evil influence in his life will be difficult to eradicate completely; when I think about this, my heart is filled with utmost regret.”

Guo Jing wanted to recount Yang Kang’s dishonorable behavior, but it was a long story so he did not know where to start. Meanwhile Qiu Chuji continued, “In a person’s life, literary or martial art skill is not everything, the most important things are two characters, loyalty and patriotism. Even if Yang Kang’s martial art skill is better than yours a hundred folds, speaking of character, the martial art contest of the Drunken Immortal Tavern is still won by your shifus. Hey, hey, Qiu Chuji lost with a satisfied heart.” He laughed a big laugh. Suddenly he saw Guo Jing’s tears flow down like rain, he was surprised, “Ah, why are you so sad?”

Guo Jing scrambled over one step, he bowed to the ground and wept, “My ... my ... my five benevolent masters have passed away.”

Qiu Chuji was shocked. “What?!?” he almost shouted.

Still crying Guo Jing said, "Except for my Da Shifu, the other five are ... are dead."

These two sentences struck Qiu Chuji like a loud thunder in bright sunlight; he was silent for half a day. He was hoping he would meet some old friends and have a good time together, who would have thought that suddenly disaster struck. Although his time together with the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan was not much, for the last eighteen years he had already regarded them as his lifelong friends. Now that he heard this shocking news, his heart was filled with grief. He went over to the railings in big strides; he looked out toward the vast lake in front of him, throwing his head backward he let out a long cry. One by one faces of the Seven Freaks flashed in his mind. He turned around and picked up the copper vat, with a loud voice he cried out, "My friends are dead, what use do I have of you?" Sending his strength to his arms he threw the vat away. The copper vat fell into the lake with a loud splash, the water flew everywhere. Turning his head toward Guo Jing he grabbed Guo Jing's arms and asked, "How did they die? Tell me!"

Guo Jing was about to reply when with the corner of his eye he caught sight of someone silently enter the room; he was wearing green clothes, his face was elegant and unrestrained, it was the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi. Guo Jing looked twice, he was afraid of mistaking him for someone else; he fixed his eyes with rapt attention. Who was he but Huang Yaoshi?

Huang Yaoshi also saw him here and was surprised. Suddenly he felt a gust of wind on his face; Guo Jing attacked him over the table using the Proud Dragon Repents. In this one palm Guo Jing had sent out his whole strength, the power was astonishing. Huang Yaoshi slightly moved sideways, his left hand shot out and pushed Guo Jing's palm to the side. A series of cracking noise were

heard, Guo Jing could not hold his ground; he bored through the wooden partition and fell downstairs.

It was a bad day for the Drunken Immortal Tavern, Guo Jing happened to land on the shelf containing cups and bowls. 'Bing! Bang! Bing! Bang!' bowls, plates, trays, wine cups; everything was smashed to hundreds and thousands of pieces.

That afternoon, when the old innkeeper heard Qiu Chuji ordered the tables to be arranged in such a way, also saw him bringing the huge copper vat upstairs, he remembered what happened eighteen years ago; he had already had a queasy feeling about it. Now that the upstairs and downstairs were shattered, he could not help but bitterly cry out. He prayed head over heels, "Please help those in distress, oh Goddess of Mercy, the Jade Emperor of Heaven, the God of the City ..."

Guo Jing was afraid the dishes and bowls fragments would injure his palm, so he did not dare to push himself up. He twisted his waist and leaped up, and rushed back upstairs immediately. He only saw a grey shadow flashed, followed by a green shadow; Qiu Chuji and Huang Yaoshi leaped down the window one after another. Guo Jing thought, "This old thief's martial art is above mine; I can't fight him barehanded." He drew two kinds of weapons from his waist, with his mouth he bit the dagger given by Qiu Chuji, in his right hand he held the golden blade given by Genghis Khan. He thought, "Even if I have to stake it all and endure that old thief's fist or kick, I have to make a couple of holes on his body." He rushed to the window and jumped down.

By now the street was bustling with pedestrians; they heard that some people jumped out from the tavern and came to take a look. Suddenly they saw that someone else was jumping out of the window with a shining blade in his hand;

the crowd cried out in alarm, they pushed and shoved each other and several people tumbled down. Guo Jing could not see Qiu, Huang two people because of the crowd; he quickly took the dagger from his mouth and asked an old man nearby, "Where did the two people that jumped down from the upstairs go?"

That old man was startled, he cried out, "Mr. Hero, please spare my life, it's none of my business."

Guo Jing repeated his question, but that old man was so scared that he kept calling out, "Help! Help!" Guo Jing gently pushed him aside and rushed out from the crowd, but Qiu and Huang two people had disappeared completely.

He rushed back upstairs and looked to all directions, he saw a small boat on the lake carrying Qiu and Huang two people; it looked like they were heading toward the Misty Rain Tavern on the island in the middle of the lake. Huang Yaoshi sat in the cabin, while Qiu Chuji sat on the stern, rowing. When he saw this Guo Jing was startled, he thought, "Those two people will certainly fight to the death at the Misty Rain Tavern. Qiu Daozhang is brave, but how can he be that old thief's match?" Anxiously he rushed back downstairs, grabbed a small boat and paddled furiously to catch up with them.

Seeing his enemy ahead it was very difficulty for him to be calm, but he knew he ought to be patient on the water; 'snap' the handle of oar was broken because he exerted too much energy. He was furious and anxious at the same time; he took a plank from the boat and used it to paddle the boat. Now instead of going faster he was going slower; the distance between his boat and the two people's boat gradually increased. By the time he managed to land the boat with a great deal of trouble, those two had already gone.

Guo Jing thought aloud, "I have to swallow my anger, I can't lose my life before avenging this enmity." He took a deep breath and spat three times; then he cocked his ears in full attention. He heard from behind the tavern faintly came the noise of blades splitting the air, mixed with people calling and responding each other; apparently it was not Qiu and Huang two people. Guo Jing looked around assessing the situation around him, and then tiptoeing into the Misty Rain Tavern. He saw nobody downstairs, so he rushed upstairs only to see by the window someone was leaning against the railings, looking out, his mouth was still noisily chewing something. It was none other than Hong Qigong.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing rushed forward and called out. Hong Qigong nodded his head, pointed outside and raised a cooked half lamb leg in his hand and took a big bite.

Guo Jing quickly went to the window. He saw flashing swords in the clearing behind the tavern, eight, nine people were surrounding Huang Yaoshi. Seeing the enemy was fighting a multitude of opponents he was slightly relieved; but after looking clearly at who these people were, he could not help but feel surprised. He saw his Da Shifu Ke Zhen'E wielding his iron staff with a young Taoist priest standing behind him. He thought, "How come Da Shifu is also here?" He looked again and found out that the young priest was Qiu Chuji's disciple Yin Zhiping; who was wielding his long sword to protect Ke Zhen'E's back, not to attack Huang Yaoshi. The other six were all Taoist priests, they were Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the rest of the Quanzhen Six Masters.

Guo Jing watched for a moment and realized the Quanzhen Sect was using their Big Dipper Formation to fight the enemy. Only the Changzhen Zi [Eternal Truth] Tan Chuduan had died, so the 'tian xuan' [sky jade/gem] position was occupied by Ke Zhen'E. Too bad his martial art skill was not on par with the others, plus he was not familiar with the

formation, so Yin Zhiping was protecting his back while giving him directions. The Quanzhen Six Masters were brandishing their swords, advancing and retreating, dispersing and gathering together, keeping Huang Yaoshi inside their circle fighting an intense battle.

That day during the fierce battle at the Ox Village only two of the Quanzhen Seven Masters wielded their long swords; the rest of them were fighting using their bare palms, the battle was already very intense. This time there were seven long swords and one iron staff, so the fierceness was scary.

Huang Yaoshi remained barehanded; he floated around amidst the flashing swords and staff, as if he was forced to defend himself without being able to launch any counterattack; for dozens of moves he only moved around to avoid the enemies' blades without launching a single fist or kick. Guo Jing was secretly delighted, "Regardless of your resourcefulness, it will be difficult for you to run away from justice today."

Suddenly he saw that Huang Yaoshi swept his right foot around his body twice with his left foot firmly on the ground; compelling eight people to simultaneously withdraw three steps. "Excellent Sweeping Leaves Kick Technique!" Guo Jing praised.

Huang Yaoshi turned his head and waved his hand toward Hong and Guo two people upstairs and nodded his head in greeting. Guo Jing saw his face was relaxed and composed; he did not look like someone who was gasping for breath, which caused Guo Jing to be suspicious. He saw Huang Yaoshi's left palm sweep diagonally towards the top of Changsheng Zi [Eternal Life], Liu Chuxuan's head; so Huang Yaoshi had moved abruptly from defensive to offensive.

Actually Liu Chuxuan should not fend off against this palm; the 'tian quan' [sky power/authority], Qiu Chuji and the 'tian xuan' Ke Zhen'E should have made flank attacks from the side to rescue him; however, Ke Zhen'E was blind, unlike average people, he relied on his acute hearing, how could he guard against Huang Yaoshi's silent and brilliant palm technique? Qiu Chuji's sword flickered toward Huang Yaoshi's right armpit, Ke Zhen'E moved following Yin Zhiping's direction, but he was one step too late. Liu Chuxuan heard the palm slicing the wind just above his head, in his shock he threw himself to the ground and rolled away.

Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi realized the situation was critically dangerous, they launched a simultaneous flank attacks with their swords. Liu Chuxuan escaped the danger, but the Big Dipper Formation was broken. Huang Yaoshi laughed and dashed toward Sun Bu'er; he only moved for three steps, suddenly turned around and hit Guangning Zi [Infinite Peace] Hao Datong's chest. Hao Datong had never seen this kind of strange move, he hesitated slightly before stabbing his sword toward Huang Yaoshi's back. Huang Yaoshi moved like a rabbit, he broke through the encirclement and stood about two 'zhang's away from the crowd.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "Old Heretic Huang, that was a very smart move!"

"I am going down," Guo Jing called out and moved toward the stairs.

"Slow down, slow down!" Hong Qigong said, "From the start your father-in-law has never hit back. At first I was worried about your Da Shifu, but looks like he does not have any intention to harm anybody."

Guo Jing returned to the window and asked, "How can you tell?"

Hong Qigong replied, "If he wanted to harm anybody, do you think that skinny monkey priest will still be alive? That little priest is not his match, not his match at all!" He took another bite at the lamb leg and said, "Before your father-in-law and Qiu Chuji arrived, I saw these old priests and your Da Shifu arrange their formation over there; but how can the Big Dipper Formation be learned in such a short time? Those old priests persuaded your Da Shifu to temporarily fill the empty position. Your Da Shifu clenched his teeth without saying anything. I don't know what enmity your Da Shifu has against your father-in-law. He followed that young priest to take the 'tian xuan' position; but in the end they still cannot block your father-in-law's deathly hand."

"He is not my father-in-law," Guo Jing said, full of hatred.

Hong Qigong was surprised, "Eh, what do you mean he is not your father-in-law?" he asked.

Clenching his teeth Guo Jing said, "He ... he ... humph!"

"How is Rong'er?" Hong Qigong asked, "You had an argument with her, didn't you?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with Rong'er," Guo Jing answered, "This old thief, he, he has killed my five shifus. My hatred to him is as deep as the ocean."

Hong Qigong jumped in surprise, he quickly asked, "Is that so?" But Guo Jing did not hear his question; his attention was focused on the fierce battle downstairs. By now the situation has changed, Huang Yaoshi was using his 'pi kong zhang fa' [splitting the air palm technique], creating strong gusts of wind, blocking his eight opponents' attacks.

Speaking about martial art skills of Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others, Huang Yaoshi should not be able to penetrate within a 'zhang' of their defense by relying on his bare palm only; but in the Big Dipper Formation they moved forward and backward together, Sun Bu'er, Ke Zhen'E and Yin Zhiping three people's martial art was comparatively weaker, as one person was compelled to draw back, the rest of the formation would have no choice but to follow. And so for each step forward everybody was forced to retreat two steps; they were separated farther and farther away from Huang Yaoshi, but the Big Dipper Formation was not the slightest bit chaotic.

By this time the Quanzhen Sect's long swords were already too far to reach Huang Yaoshi's body; it looked like he was just waiting for an opportunity to attack. Several moves later Hong Qigong said, "Hmm, so that's how it is."

"What is it?" Guo Jing busily asked.

Hong Qigong replied, "The Old Heretic Huang is deliberately forcing them to open up their formation, because he wants to learn the Big Dipper Formation's mystery; that's why he has not launched any killer attack yet. In less than ten moves he is going to reduce the circle once again."

Although Hong Qigong had lost his martial art power, his judgment was still very clear; and sure enough, Huang Yaoshi hacking palm's strength weakened and the Quanzhen Masters gradually tightened their encirclement. In less than a time to drink tea later everybody crowded together into one lump of people. Liu Chuxuan, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and Hao Datong were simultaneously stabbing their swords into Huang Yaoshi's body, but somehow when their swords almost reached Huang Yaoshi's skin, they all missed by several inches. If not for their fast reactions,

these four swords would have pierced a hole on their fellow apprentice's body.

Fighting in this tight circle the difference between one move to the other was only a hair's width. Guo Jing knew that as soon as Huang Yaoshi was well acquainted with the formation he would not leisurely fight these people anymore. To break the formation he must struck the weakest link, which was his Da Shifu and Yin Zhiping two people. He was too far from those people, if the situation became critical he would not have time to help, while right now he saw dangerous situations occur one after another. "Disciple goes down," he said to Hong Qigong. Without waiting for an answer he dashed downstairs.

When he got near the battle situation was again changed; Huang Yaoshi continuously moved toward Ma Yu's left side, but the more he moved the farther away he was from the crowd, as if he was trying to run away. Guo Jing held the dagger in his hand, ready to pound as soon as he had the opportunity. Suddenly Wang Chuyi let out a whistle and he, along with Hao Datong and Sun Bu'er, who formed the handle of the Big Dipper, turned forward from the left, to keep Huang Yaoshi in the middle of the formation.

Huang Yaoshi changed his position three times, but Wang Chuyi also moved the handle of the Big Dipper, just like Qiu Chuji was also moving the four stars of the Dipper, preventing Huang Yaoshi from occupying the position by Ma Yu's left side. As he was making his fourth attempt suddenly Guo Jing understood, "Ah, right, he wants to steal the north polar star position."

When he was treating his injury at the Ox Village, from behind the wall he saw the Quanzhen Seven Masters fought Mai Chaofeng, and later on Huang Yaoshi, using the Big Dipper Formation. Later on he learned in detail from Huang

Rong the Big Dipper constellation and the north polar star; he knew that the 'tian shu' [sky pivot] and 'tian xuan' [sky jade/gem] were linked in a straight line with the north polar star. Since the north polar star is always on the north, every night the Big Dipper constellation would revolve around this star. Later on he was captured by the Beggar Clan on Mount Jun at the Dongting Lake, again he pondered about this Big Dipper constellation; not only did he gain more than a few understanding of the Big Dipper characteristics, but also the movement of the Big Dipper Formation, and applied this ingenious method to advance his own martial art skill.

Huang Yaoshi's intelligence was a hundred folds better than Guo Jing's; he was also well-versed in astronomy and the study of yin-yang wu hang [lit. negative and positive five lines]. After he failed to break the Quanzhen Seven Masters' Big Dipper Formation during the battle at the Ox Village he meditated over this for a long time, until he finally comprehended the flaw of this formation.

Guo Jing was thinking about this formation because he wanted to 'learn' it; while Huang Yaoshi thought it was not worth his time to learn Wang Chongyang's technique, so he concentrated on 'breaking' the formation. He knew that all he needed to do was to snatch the north polar star position, and the formation would break; or at least if he occupied the central position, he would be able to control the formation, he could wait leisurely for the enemy to be exhausted, while he himself would stand in an invincible position.

The Quanzhen Masters were also aware that he was trying to break the formation by stealing the crucial position; they were inwardly anxious. If Tan Chuduan were still alive, the seven of them could move as one body, certainly they would not let Huang Yaoshi steal the north polar star position. This

time the 'tian xuan' was occupied by Ke Zhen'E and Yin Zhiping; which, admittedly had inferior martial art skill, and were not familiar with the formation technique, as a result the Big Dipper Formation's effectiveness was significantly reduced.

Ma Yu and the others knew that a prolonged fight would not do them any good; moreover, Guo Jing was standing on the side, if Huang Yaoshi was in a real danger, as a son-in-law, how could he not help? But their martial uncle's and brother's death must be avenged. Their deceased master Wang Chongyang was the number one martial artist of the world; if six of his disciples joined forces against one Huang Yaoshi and still could not gain any victory, the reputation of Quanzhen Sect would be ruined.

They heard Huang Yaoshi laugh and say, "I didn't know Chongyang's disciples are so stubborn that they do not know what's good for them!" While talking he moved swiftly towards Sun Bu'er and hacked with his palms three times. Ma Yu and Hao Datong raised their swords to rescue her. Huang Yaoshi slightly leaned sideways to evade the swords, 'swish! swish! swish!' he hacked three more times toward Sun Bu'er.

The Master of the Peach Blossom Island's palm technique was naturally very exquisite. Even if Wang Chongyang lived again, or Hong Qigong recovered from his injury, they would not be able to evade these six palms easily; how could Sun Bu'er block them off? She saw the palm was coming swiftly, she had no choice but to brandish her sword in a flower pattern and furiously protect her face with all her might. Suddenly Huang Yaoshi swept his legs repeatedly and kicked her six times. These 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling (leaves) divine sword palm technique] and 'sao ye tui' [sweeping leaves kick technique] were the Peach Blossom Island's 'kuang feng jue ji' [fierce wind

stunt/unique skill]; if the enemy did not retreat within the first six moves, the next six moves would follow, faster than the previous ones. Within six by six, thirty six moves even if a hero or a warrior could avoid the slap, he would not be able to evade the kick.

Ma Yu and the others noticed that Huang Yaoshi concentrated his ferocious attack toward Sun Bu'er; immediately they came to her rescue, as a result, in this pressing situation the formation became disorderly. Ke Zhen'E was blind, so the movement of the formation was somewhat delayed; Huang Yaoshi let out a long laugh and he was already on Ke Zhen'E's back. "Aiyo!" suddenly Ke Zhen'E heard someone cry out in midair, that person was flying to the top of the roof of the Misty Rain Tavern. It turned out that Huang Yaoshi grabbed Yin Zhiping's back and threw him away.

The gap in the formation was getting bigger. Without giving the enemy any opportunity to mend the formation, Huang Yaoshi dashed toward Ma Yu, fully expecting Ma Yu to evade. To his surprise as his sword fended off the attack, the sword in Ma Yu's left hand went straight toward Huang Yaoshi's eyebrow; his movement was steady, backed by a profound internal energy.

Huang Yaoshi was forced to lean sideways to evade, he could not restrain from praising, "Good! You deserve to be the Quanzhen Sect's head disciple." Suddenly his leg swept downward, kicking Hao Datong's leg while at the same time he stooped down to snatch Hao Datong's sword and stabbed it toward his chest. Liu Chuxuan was shocked; he wielded his sword to parry. Huang Yaoshi laughed a big laugh and flicked his hand. 'Crack!' both swords were broken.

A dark green shadow flashed, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island was moving toward the north polar star position. By this moment the formation was in total chaos, nobody was able to stop him. The Quanzhen Masters cried out bitterly, they knew Huang Yaoshi was about to exercise mastery over them. Ma Yu heaved a deep sigh and was about to throw his sword to admit defeat and ready to take whatever punishment the enemy would send their way. Suddenly he saw the dark green shadow flashed back; there was already someone occupying the north polar star position. It was Guo Jing.

Among the Quanzhen Masters, only Qiu Chuji was overjoyed; he had seen Guo Jing staked it all in attacking Huang Yaoshi at the Drunken Immortal Tavern. Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi knew Guo Jing was kind-hearted and honest; even though they thought he was going to help his father-in-law, certainly he would not harm his own shifu Ke Zhen'E. The rest of the Masters were shocked, they saw Guo Jing had already occupied the north polar star position; as soon as these father-in-law and son-in-law joined hands, Quanzhen Sect would die without any burial place. But they were even more surprised to see Guo Jing was attacking Huang Yaoshi with a bare left palm and a sword in his right hand.

As he succeeded in breaking the formation, Huang Yaoshi wanted to force Quanzhen Sect to admit they were wrong; who would have thought that suddenly someone was occupying the north polar star position. His attention was focused on fighting the Quanzhen Masters, so without looking back he sent his palm backward using the 'pi kong zhang' toward the enemy's chest. That person stretched out his left palm to parry the incoming force, yet he did not move even for half a step. Huang Yaoshi was surprised, he thought, "Very few people in the world have the strength to

block my palm, who is this person?" He turned his head to look and saw that it was Guo Jing.

By this time Huang Yaoshi was surrounded by the enemies front and rear; if he could not drive Guo Jing away, the Big Dipper Formation would outflank him from behind and that would put him in a very dangerous situation. He sent out three palm attacks in succession toward Guo Jing, one palm was fiercer than the last, but each time Guo Jing simply blocked it away. The fourth palm contain a fake and a real attack, expecting Guo Jing to take advantage of an opening and launch a counterattack; who would have thought that Guo Jing only took a defensive position and did not counterattack. Guo Jing lifted the dagger up in front of his chest, while his left palm slowly swept across his own lower abdomen. In this way although he received one stance with two attacks from Huang Yaoshi, both attacks were neutralized.

Huang Yaoshi was startled, he thought, "This dumb kid knew how to defend and break the formation; he steadily defending the north polar star position and did not want to move even half a step. Ah, right, he must have received Quanzhen Masters' instruction and came here to help them to fight me."

He did not know that his guess was only half correct. Guo Jing did indeed know the secret of the Big Dipper Formation, but he learned it from the Nine Yin Manual and not from the Quanzhen Masters. As Guo Jing was facing the enemy with whom he held an enormous enmity, he suppressed his anger to keep his position; it was as if his feet were firmly planted to the ground, he simply turned his eyes blind to whatever trick Huang Yaoshi used to tempt him to attack.

Huang Yaoshi groaned silently; he thought, "This dumb kid doesn't know when to proceed and when to retreat! Humph! Even if Rong'er blames me, I am going to hurt you today; otherwise you won't want to back off." His left hand made a circle about seven inches in front of his chest, his right palm rode on the left hand; borrowing the strength from the left hand it was propelled forward, the force doubled. But before it hit Guo Jing's face, he suddenly remembered, "If he doesn't evade, this palm will certainly cause him a heavy injury. Whatever the reason, Rong'er will not be happy for the rest of her life."

Guo Jing saw him borrow the strength of his left hand to launch a palm attack, he knew the incoming force would not be a small matter; gritting his teeth he launched the 'xian long zai tian' [dragon appears on the field], a stake-it-all stance from the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms. He realized his martial art was far inferior to the enemy's; he would suffer serious injury if he took the incoming palm head-on, but in order to evade the attack, he would have to leave the north polar star position, which would set him back into a more difficult situation. Hence in this one move he was ready to sacrifice his own life. Who would have thought that as his palm was about a foot away from his face, Huang Yaoshi suddenly withdrew his attack and called out, "Dumb Kid, go away! Why do you make things difficult for me?"

Guo Jing held his sword tight, he looked at Huang Yaoshi with full attention to protect himself against any trick he might do; he did not reply. By now the Quanzhen Masters had already reorganized their formation; they made encirclement some distance away from Huang Yaoshi's back, waiting for an opportunity to attack.

"Where is Rong'er?" Huang Yaoshi asked.

Guo Jing still did not answer, his face looked gloomy, his eyes spouted anger. Seeing his expression Huang Yaoshi's suspicion grew; he was afraid his daughter had met some accident. "What did you do to her? Speak up!" he barked.

Guo Jing gritted his teeth and bit his lips; his right hand, which was holding the sword, slightly trembled. Huang Yaoshi's attention was focused on him; each slight movement Guo Jing made did not escape his eyes. Seeing Guo Jing's unusual expression he was even more alarmed. "Why is your hand trembling? Why aren't you talking?" he called out.

Guo Jing recalled how his shifus died a horrible death on the Peach Blossom Island, grief and indignation burst forth in his heart; his body shook violently, his eyes bloodshot. Seeing him not willing to talk, tears streaming down his face, Huang Yaoshi was more alarmed. He knew his daughter had a heated argument with Guo Jing over the Princess Huazheng's affair; he was afraid Guo Jing had killed Huang Rong. He kicked his feet and pounced forward.

As soon as Huang Yaoshi made his move Qiu Chuji thrust his long sword out, at the same time the Big Dipper Formation started to move. Wang Chuyi and Hao Datong attacked from Huang Yaoshi's left and right, one with sword in his hand, the other with a bare palm. Guo Jing's palm neutralized the incoming attack, while his dagger stung with a lightning speed to make a counterattack move. Huang Yaoshi did not fend it off; he flipped his hand over trying to seize the dagger. Although his movement was accurate and swift, Wang Chuyi's sword had already arrived at his back; he had no choice but to twist his waist to evade, and thus his fingers missed Guo Jing's dagger by two inches. Guo Jing used this opportunity to stab forward. This

fierce battle was several times more intense than the previous one.

The Quanzhen Masters' sole desire was to kill Huang Yaoshi to avenge Zhou Botong and Tan Chuduan. Huang Yaoshi knew perfectly well that there was a misunderstanding here, but he was a proud man, he also felt that as someone of higher rank it would be beneath his dignity to explain. He wanted to defeat them completely; to make them throw their swords and surrender, and then he would make everything clear. Thereupon he launched attack after attack while being lenient; otherwise, although Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others might be able to defend themselves, but how could Sun Bu'er and Yin Zhiping keep their lives? Unexpectedly Guo Jing appeared and not only he did not help Huang Yaoshi, but it seemed like he hated Huang Yaoshi to his death. Huang Yaoshi thought that if Guo Jing did not kill Huang Rong, why was he so afraid of him?

This time Huang Yaoshi did not show any mercy; he wanted to grab Guo Jing and ask for some explanation. If Guo Jing did indeed kill Huang Rong, even if he tore him apart to pieces it would not be enough to vent his anger. Unfortunately Guo Jing occupied the north polar star position; although Yin Zhiping had not crawled down from the Misty Rain Tavern's roof, the battle situation had been reversed. The Big Dipper Formation moved like a billowing wave; they launched offensive moves without ceasing.

Huang Yaoshi tried several times to penetrate Guo Jing's defense but failed, he started to get impatient. Each time he launched a fierce attack the Quanzhen Masters were always there to block him. He wanted to launch a deathly attack and kill some of them to break the formation, but the Big Dipper Formation gradually tightened its encirclement. He started to think that although he could shake himself loose, it would be difficult for him to escape unscathed.

Fighting for a while Ma Yu pointed his sword and called out, "Hold on!"

The Quanzhen Masters held their hands, firmly stood on their respective positions. Ma Yu said, "Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang], you are a prominent grandmaster of your martial art school; how can we, the younger generation, dare to offend you? Today we rely on sheer number to fight you; it is because the situation forces us to do so. We want to know how you are going to settle the blood debts of our Zhou Shishu [martial uncle] and Tan Shidi [martial (younger) brother]!"

With a cold laugh Huang Yaoshi said, "What else there is to say? Just go ahead and kill the Old Heretic Huang to protect the Quanzhen Sect's reputation; won't that be great? Be on your guard!" Without moving his body or lifting up his arm his right palm had already chopped toward Ma Yu's face.

Ma Yu tried to evade sideways in panic, but Huang Yaoshi's palm came without warning; this feign hack was immediately followed by the real attack. This combination of void and solid was a killer stance from the 'luo ying shen jian zhang fa'. Huang Yaoshi had perfected it for ten years; he intended to use it in the second sword meet of Mount Hua. This stance was not designed to fight a group of enemies, but it was very effective in a one on one combat. Danyang Zi's [Scarlet Sun] skill might be profound, but how could he be the Eastern Heretic's match?

It would be better if Ma Yu did not evade; once he moved to the right, the second attack came. Ma Yu groaned inwardly, "Not good!" He was going to block by stretching out his hand, but the enemy's palm had already arrived at his chest. As soon as Huang Yaoshi exerted his strength, Ma Yu's internal organs would be shaken and he would suffer serious internal injury.

The Quanzhen Five Masters were shocked; swords and palms came to the rescue, but how could there still be time? They saw Ma Yu was at the point of death, surprisingly Huang Yaoshi laughed and withdrew his palm; he said, "If I break your formation this way, you won't accept your defeat easily. The Old Heretic Huang may die, but how can I let myself be the laughingstock of all the heroes under the sky? Good Priests, come, let us fight!"

Liu Chuxuan snorted and shook his fist, Wang Chuyi followed with his sword; the Big Dipper Formation was ready to go into action. It was to be the seventeenth stance, Wang Chuyi was supposed to move after Ma Yu. He stabbed his sword into the air, ready to strike; but Ma Yu did not move forward, on the contrary, he retreated two steps backward and called out, "Hold it!" Everybody held their steps again. Ma Yu said, "Huang Daozhu, thank you for holding your hand."

"You flattered me," Huang Yaoshi replied.

Ma Yu said, "Reasonably said, right now wanbei's [younger generation, he was referring to himself] life should have been gone, and this formation developed by my deceased master should have been broken by you. If we know good from evil, we should admit defeat and throw ourselves at your mercy. But we do not dare not to seek revenge because of our deep enmity with you. After this matter is settled, wanbei will slash my own throat as a gesture of gratitude toward Daozhu."

Huang Yaoshi's expression was gloomy, he waved his hand and said, "It's useless to talk too much, you can just begin. The matter of kindness and enmity in this world is difficult to understand."

Guo Jing thought, "Turned out Ma Daozhang and the others fight him to avenge their Shisu and Shidi. But Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] is still alive and well, also Tan Daozhang's death has nothing to do with Huang Daozhu. However, if I explain the real situation the Quanzhen Masters will withdraw themselves from the battle, leaving Da Shifu and me two people; how can we be his match? Let's not talk about avenging Shifus' death, we can't even guarantee we will still be alive by the time we are done." But then he remembered, "If I do not tell the truth, how am I going to be different from a coward? Shifus often said that we might lose our head, but not our righteousness." Thereupon with a loud and clear voice he said, "Ma Daozhang, Qiu Daozhang, Wang Daozhang, your Zhou Shisu has not died yet; and it was Ouyang Feng who killed Tan Daozhang."

"What did you say?" Qiu Chuji was surprised. Thereupon Guo Jing recounted how he treated his injury inside a secret room at the Ox Village, how from behind the wall he saw and heard Qiu Qianzhang fabricate a rumor to incite both sides to fight each other, how Ouyang Feng place the blame on Huang Yaoshi, he told them everything. Although he was clumsy with words, everybody understood his explanation very clearly.

The Quanzhen Masters were listening, half believing and half doubting. Qiu Chuji loudly asked, "Are you telling the truth?"

Guo Jing pointed his finger to Huang Yaoshi and said, "Disciple hates this old thief that I do not wish to live in the same earth with him, why would I help him? Only it was the truth, so disciple cannot keep his mouth shut."

The Six Masters knew him as an honest person; moreover, he had shown so much hatred toward Huang Yaoshi, so

what he said must be the truth.

It was beyond Huang Yaoshi's expectation to hear him saying things in his favor; he was astonished and asked, "Why do you hate me so much? Where is Rong'er?"

Ke Zhen'E cut him off, "You don't know what you did? Jing'er, although we can't win, we must fight this old thief to our deaths." Finished speaking he lifted his iron staff and swept it toward Huang Yaoshi.

Hearing his shifu, Guo Jing knew that he was forgiven; he felt very happy and immediately tears flowed down his face. "Da Shifu," he called out, "Er Shifu and the others, they ... all five of them died a miserable death!"

Huang Yaoshi was grabbing the head of Ke Zhen'E staff with an outstretched hand, he turned to Guo Jing and asked, "What did you say? Zhu Cong, Han Baoju and the others were nicely received as guests on my island, why did you say they are dead?"

Ke Zhen'E furiously tried to pull his iron staff, but it did not even budge. Huang Yaoshi asked Guo Jing again, "Disregarding your elders and superiors you talked nonsense to me, attacking me like crazy, is that because of Zhu Cong and the others?"

Guo Jing's eyes looked like they were spurting blood; he called out, "You have harmed my five Shifus with your own hands, and now you pretend you did not know?" Lifting his dagger up, he stabbed it forward with a straight arm.

Huang Yaoshi moved the iron staff in his hand to block; 'bang!' the staff and the dagger collided, sparks flew out everywhere. The dagger was so sharp that it actually nicked the iron staff. Huang Yaoshi asked again, "Who saw it?"

Guo Jing said, "I buried my Five Shifus with my own hands, are you saying that I slander you?"

Hung Yaoshi laughed coldly and said, "So what if you slander me? For all my life the Old Heretic Huang come and go alone; why would I deny killing these several people? You are correct, I killed your shifus!"

Suddenly a female voice was calling out, "No, Father, it wasn't you. Don't take the blame on your own shoulder."

Everybody turned their heads around and saw the one who spoke was indeed Huang Rong. They had been so engrossed in the fierce battle that nobody knew she had arrived. As Guo Jing saw her again, he was lost in thought, he did not know whether he should feel happy or anxious.

As Huang Yaoshi saw his daughter was alive and well, he was very happy; his hatred toward Guo Jing disappeared, he laughed a big laugh and said, "Good child, come, let Father hug you."

For the past several days Huang Rong had been suffering a lot of heartache, it was only today she heard a loving word for the first time; she dashed forward and threw herself into her father's bosom and cried, "Father, this dumb kid slandered you, he ... he also bullied me."

Huang Yaoshi embraced his daughter and said with a smile, "The Old Heretic Huang always does as he pleases, ever since dozens of years ago ignorant people have always put the crime of the world on your father's head, so what difference will it make to add several more crimes to the pile? The Five Freaks of Jiangnan were your Mei Shijie's [martial (older) sister] archenemies, so of course I killed them with my own hands."

"No, no," Huang Rong anxiously said, "It wasn't you. I know it wasn't you."

Huang Yaoshi showed a faint smile and said, "That dumb kid is so bold, he dares to bully my good child. Just watch, Father will teach him a lesson." He had just finished speaking when suddenly like a lightning the back of his palm struck, without a shadow, without a trace. Guo Jing was thinking about what these father and daughter were talking about, when 'slap!' he felt a burning sensation on his left cheek. He was just about to raise his hand to block, but Huang Yaoshi's palm had already returned to Huang Rong's head, gently stroking her elegant hair.

This palm made a loud noise, but actually the force was weak; Guo Jing felt his cheek burning, but he did not suffer any injury. He was at a loss; did not know whether he should charge forward or he should stay where he was.

Ke Zhen'E heard the slap on Guo Jing's face, he was afraid Huang Yaoshi might have stricken him with a deadly blow. "Jing'er, how are you?" he anxiously asked.

"I am all right," Guo Jing replied.

Ke Zhen'E said, "Don't listen to this demon and this witch telling lies. I don't have eyes to see, but your Si Shifu [Fourth Shifu] said: he saw this old thief killed your Er Shifu and forced to death your Qi [Seventh] ..." Guo Jing did not wait for him to finish, he charged forward toward Huang Yaoshi. Ke Zhen'E followed by wielding his iron staff.

Huang Yaoshi let his daughter go and evaded Guo Jing's palm, while at the same time stretched his hand to grab Ke Zhen'E's iron staff. This time Ke Zhen'E had guarded against his grab so that Huang Yaoshi missed the staff. Master and disciple joined hands fighting a tight battle with Huang Yaoshi.

Although Guo Jing had repeatedly met some outstandingly able people and had learned not a few of wonderful martial art skills, he was still too far behind compared to this grandmaster of a martial art school, the Master of the Peach Blossom Island. Even with Ke Zhen'E's help he could not do much. After only about twenty, thirty moves he had already moved his hands and feet with great difficulty.

Qiu Chuji thought, "In a critical time Quanzhen Sect has received these master and disciple's help; currently these two are in the brink of defeat, how can we sit down and watch without doing anything? Whether Zhou Shishu is alive or dead, we need to defeat the Old Heretic Huang first, then we'll talk later." Brandishing his sword he called out, "Ke Daxia [Chivalrous Hero], go back to your position!"

By this time Yin Zhiping had already crawled down from the Misty Rain Tavern's roof. Although he was black and blue and had a swollen nose from the fall, he did not suffer a serious injury. He rushed toward Ke Zhen'E's back and wielded his sword to protect him. Once again the Big Dipper Formation went into action, encircled Huang Yaoshi, father and daughter in the middle.

Huang Yaoshi was enraged, he thought, "Before it was a misunderstanding, so I can understand you attacking me; but after this dumb kid explained everything this crowd of mixed-up hairs still rely on sheer numbers to attack me. Do you think the Old Heretic Huang cannot kill people?" Like a flash of shadow he had already moved toward Ke Zhen'E's left.

Huang Rong saw the murderous look on her father's face; she knew his hands would not be light, her heart turned cold. She saw that Wang Chuyi and Ma Yu blocked her father's palm; Ke Zhen'E's iron staff ferociously struck toward her shoulder while his mouth shot curses,

“Unforgivable lowly criminal, female demon! The Peach Blossom Island’s slut!”

Huang Rong had never been willing to swallow the least bit of defeat; listening him open up his mouth in foul language, anger started to rise up her chest, she called out, “Scold me again if you have guts!”

The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan grew up in the marketplace where all kinds of people buy and sell, cursing each other for generations, what was so difficult about scolding other people? Ke Zhen'E hated Huang Yaoshi, father and daughter; listened to her say so, immediately his extensive vocabulary of malicious words flew out of his mouth. Huang Rong had always lived alone since she was little; she never had any experience with this kind of foul language. To her advantage she was very intelligent so that each time Ke Zhen'E scolded she was able to figure out what he was talking about and even scold him back; but afterwards the more she listened the more she could not talk back, because the more she did not understand. She spat and said, “Shame on you! You are someone’s shifu yet you are not afraid to have a filthy mouth.”

Ke Zhen'E scolded back, “With a clean person the old man talks clean words, with stinky and lowly people I speak filthy words! You are a filthy person, so the old man here talks even dirtier words.”

Huang Rong was angry; she raised her bamboo stick toward Ke Zhen'E's face. Ke Zhen'E returned the attack with his iron staff; who would have thought that the Dog Beating Stick Technique was extremely marvelous beyond his imagination. Only several moves later his iron staff was completely under Huang Rong's control, using the 'lead' letter of the technique; as the stick went east the staff went

east, when the stick went west the staff followed, it totally did not have the mind of its own.

Ke Zhen'E was occupying the 'tian xuan' position of the Formation. As soon as his movement was restrained, the entire formation's movement was somewhat restricted. Qiu Chuji's flickering sword stabbing Huang Rong's back, his intention was to help Ke Zhen'E; but Huang Rong relied on the armor she was wearing, to his surprise she ignored the stab, changing her stick movement she sent out three stances in succession. Qiu Chuji's sword was about to touch her clothes when he suddenly thought, "What kind of person is the Old Qiu, how can I harm this little girl?" The tip of his sword touched Huang Rong's back, but he did not push further.

Taking advantage of this slight hesitation Huang Rong's bamboo stick pulled Ke Zhen'E's iron staff. Borrowing his 'fu mo zhang fa' [demon subduing staff technique] energy Huang Rong push the staff down and then jerked it up to the left. Ke Zhen'E was not able to control his strength; the staff left his grasp and flew to the air, 'splash!' it fell into the Nan Hu [South Lake].

Wang Chuyi was afraid Huang Rong might use this opportunity to harm Ke Zhen'E; he rushed in front of Ke Zhen'E with his sword blocking in front of his chest. Although his experience was vast, he had never seen the Dog Beating Technique before, so he was caught in surprise.

Seeing his master suffer a setback, Guo Jing called out, "Da Shifu, go and take a rest, I'll fight for you." Leaving the north polar star position he jumped into the 'tian xuan' position. By this time his martial art skill had already exceeded those of the Quanzhen Masters, plus he was

familiar with the Big Dipper method; so as soon as he made his move the Formation's power increased substantially.

Actually the Big Dipper Formation revolved around the 'tian quan' position, but as soon as he entered, the key position moved to 'tian xuan' position, and the Formation's movement was altered. This modification was actually inferior to the original movement, but in this short moment Huang Yaoshi was not able to find a way to penetrate the formation's airtight defense; although he had his daughter to help, they were defending themselves with difficulty. Luckily for the most part the Quanzhen Masters took a defensive position; Guo Jing was the only one who fought with his life, forcing Huang Yaoshi to reluctantly face him.

Guo Jing kept pressing forward, forcing Huang Yaoshi to fight a tight battle. With the Quanzhen Masters backing Guo Jing up, Huang Yaoshi was not able to inflict any injury to him, and was forced to use his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] to evade Guo Jing's series of a mad-tiger-like attacks.

Huang Rong saw that Guo Jing's normally genial and kind face was now enveloped by a layer of murderous look; his expression was so frighteningly ferocious that he looked like a different person, completely different from the Guo Jing she used to know. She was startled and frightened at the same time; she stepped in front of her father and said, "Kill me first!"

Guo Jing glowered at her and barked, "Get out of my way!"

Huang Rong was taken aback, "How can you speak to me like that?" she thought.

Guo Jing charged forward and shoved her aside then he pounced towards Huang Yaoshi. Suddenly he heard someone laughed loudly and called out behind him, "Don't

worry Yao Xiong [Brother Yao], I have come to help you!" His voice was like ear-piercing grating metals.

Nobody dared to turn their bodies right away; the entire Big Dipper Formation turned around Huang Yaoshi's back before they finally saw five, six tall and short people standing on the lakeside, led by someone with long arms and long legs, which was none other than the Western Poison Ouyang Feng.

The Quanzhen Six Masters cried out in anger. Qiu Chuji said, "Jing'er, let us settle the debt with the Western Poison first!" His long sword raised, the Quanzhen Six Masters surrounded Ouyang Feng. Who would have thought that Guo Jing's gaze was fixed on Huang Yaoshi; it seemed like he did not hear Qiu Chuji at all. As soon as the Quanzhen Six Masters left, he pounced toward Huang Yaoshi again and in a short moment two people had quickly exchanged five, six moves.

Both sides did not hit their target, so both leaped backward, looking over their shoulders, staring at each other. Guo Jing gave out a loud shout then attacked forward. Several times they exchanged several stances and then separated again.

This time the Quanzhen Six Masters had rearranged their battle formation. They looked at Ke Zhen'E and saw him barehanded, standing behind Huang Yaoshi, his head inclined, listening attentively; his arms were open wide, revealing his intention to sacrifice himself, throwing himself to grab Huang Yaoshi firmly, giving Guo Jing the opportunity to strike Huang Yaoshi's vital point. Because of this Qiu Chuji beckoned to Yin Zhiping, telling him to occupy the 'tian xuan' position.

Ma Yu loudly recited, "Holding hands the departed soul forcing itself to leave like a bead of pearls. Heart opens to hear the sound of nature, unlike the blowing flute!" It was the poem Tan Chuduan recited just before he closed his eyes. As the Quanzhen Masters heard it, their anger rose; with flickering swords and floating palms they attacked Ouyang Feng together.

The snake staff in Ouyang Feng's hand pushed and pulled abruptly, forcing the seven Quanzhen people to back off. Ouyang Feng had seen the Big Dipper Formation's fierceness at the Ox Village; he was quite intimidated by that, so he decided to keep a tight defense and wait for the enemy to reveal its own flaw. Once the Big Dipper Formation unfolded, it struck to the front and hit to the back, like a continuous wave of attacks. Ouyang Feng carefully met stance with stance, while opening his eyes wide to see any potential to break the formation. A moment later he noticed Yin Zhiping's 'tian xuan' was the Formation's weak link. He thought if he could destroy this link, he did not have anything else to fear; therefore, he brandished the snake staff in his hand trying to inflict some harm, while his eyes scanning around, assessing the situation around him.

Guo Jing and Huang Yaoshi were still engaged in a tight combat. Huang Rong moved her bamboo stick to keep Ke Zhen'E more than a 'zhang' away from these two people. She kept shouting, "Please stop fighting; please listen to me!" But Guo Jing turned a deaf ear to her; palm by palm he struck ferociously, in total disregard of his own life.

At first Huang Rong saw her father holding back, but Guo Jing kept provoking him so that gradually she saw his anger rise, his hands were getting heavier and heavier. She knew the situation was critical; either one of them would certainly suffer a heavy injury if he made a slight mistake. She lifted

his head and saw Hong Qigong was leaning against the railing of the Misty Rain Tavern, watching the battle. “Shifu, Shifu,” she hastily called, “Come down and help me explain everything.”

Hong Qigong has seen early on that the situation was far from good, he regretted losing his martial art skill and was powerless to settle this dispute, and hence he was really anxious. Hearing Huang Rong cry out he had an idea, “If only the Old Heretic Huang still has some respect to me left, I think I can still do something.” His hands pressed on the railing and he floated in the air coming down. “Everybody hold your hand!” he called out, “The Old Beggar has something to say.” The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar had such a prestige in the Jianghu that when they saw his sudden appearance everybody’s heart shivered and they could not help but to stop fighting.

Ouyang Feng was the first to secretly groan, he thought, “How can the Old Beggar’s martial art come back?” He did not know that after listening to Guo Jing’s explanation on the Sanskrit part of the Nine Yin Manual Hong Qigong spent these past few days to practice according to the technique and was able to open up his ‘qi jing ba mai’ [marvelous/mysterious passage 8 pulses, Eight Extraordinary Channels].

Hong Qigong’s martial art skill was very profound to begin with, after listening to an excellent internal energy secret such as treating one’s own internal injury, with his divine comprehension within this short period of time he managed to open up one of the eight pulses; his lightness kungfu was 30, 40% recovered. Strictly speaking, if he were involved in a brawl just relying on his fists’ and palms’ strength, he could not even defeat a strong man who did not know any martial art. But in leaping up and down his movement was

light and lively, at least in Ouyang Feng's eyes he did not look like someone who was devoid of any internal strength.

Hong Qigong was amazed to see these people were still in awe of him, he considered it carefully, "If the Old Beggar does not put on some airs, today's crisis will be difficult to resolve; but what can I say, so that the Quanzhen Masters will listen to my order, and also the Old Poison will comply without giving me too much difficulty?" Momentarily not knowing what to do he threw his head backward and laughed a big laugh; while he was looking up, he saw the moon was beginning to rise up, the bright circle looked like a wheel made of ice with one side of it slightly broken. An idea came into his mind, he said, "You are all experts in the Wulin world, but you deal with each other just like scoundrels and rascals, your words are just like farts."

Everybody was startled. They knew Hong Qigong always talked crazy words without any restrain, so they did not think much about his language; however, he must have a reason to say such thing. Ma Yu bowed in respect and asked, "Asking Qianbei [Senior] to grant us instruction."

Hong Qigong angrily said, "The Old Beggar heard some people say that on the eighth month's mid-autumn day this year there will be people fighting at the Misty Rain Tavern. The Old Beggar was afraid that his hearing was not clear, so while it is still early I want to laze around and sleep in peace and quiet here. Who knew that since early this morning I have been hearing clackety-clack and yakety-yak of people quarreling and fighting nonstop. I heard chamber pot formation or bed urinal formation, and then there was a husband beating his wife, a son-in-law attacking his father-in-law; very noisy just like killing pig or slaughtering dog, so noisy that the Old Beggar cannot take a nap in peace and quiet. Look at the moon, what day is today?"

Listening to his speech everybody remembered that today was the fourteenth of the eighth month, so the martial art contest was going to be the next day. Besides, Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and their company had not arrived yet, so fighting today did not make much sense. Qiu Chuji said, "Lao Qianbei [Senior] is right, we should not have made disturbance here today." He turned his head toward Ouyang Feng and said, "Ouyang Feng, let us find someplace else to decide who will be alive and who will be dead."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Ouyang Feng laughed, "I'll gladly accompany you."

Hong Qigong's face turned sour, he said, "As soon as Wang Chongyang returned to heaven, the Quanzhen Sect's bunch of mixed-up hair has become a reckless empty-headed bunch. Let me tell you something: five priests and one priestess, plus a little priest with low martial art skill, all of you join hands, you are still not the Old Poison's match. Wang Chongyang has never left anything good for me; it is none of the Old Beggar's business whether the bunch of mixed-up hairs will be alive or dead, but let me ask you this: you have a martial art contest appointment tomorrow, who will keep the appointment? Will seven dead Taoists be able to fight?"

This speech sounded like he was ridiculing the Quanzhen priests, but in it he reminded them that by fighting Ouyang Feng they would die and would not live. The seven of them could not defeat Huang Yaoshi then, obviously now they were not Ouyang Feng's match. All of the Six Masters were experienced Jianghu characters, how could they fail to catch the real meaning of his speech? But they were facing their archenemy right now, how could they cower?

With the corner of his eye Hong Qigong saw Guo Jing was staring angrily at Huang Yaoshi; while Huang Rong was

crying with tears streaming down her cheeks. He knew whatever it was, it must be a very complicated matter; he thought carefully, "I'll wait for the Old Urchin; with his martial art skill he will be able to subdue everybody. At that time the Old Beggar will speak again." Thereupon he shouted, "The Old Beggar is going to take a nap; whoever lift up his fist or his kick deliberately wants to offend me. Come tomorrow evening, I don't care if you turn the sky over or shake the earth, the Old Beggar will not help anybody. Ma Yu, take this bunch of mixed-up hairs and sit down here with me cultivating your internal energy. Make a one notch internal strength gain is a gain; waiting for the last minute will not guarantee your victory. Jing'er, Rong'er, come over here and massage my legs."

Ouyang Feng was rather scared of him; he thought that if Hong Qigong joined hands with the Quanzhen Masters, they would be difficult for him to fight. He said, "Old Beggar, Yao Xiong and I two guys have some unfinished business with the Quanzhen Sect. The Nine-fingered Divine Beggar's words are like mountain; I'll follow your direction today, and tomorrow you may not help either side."

Hong Qigong was secretly amused, "If you push me with your little finger now, I am afraid I will fall down." Thereupon he loudly said, "The Old Beggar's fart is still sweeter than your words; I said I won't help, then I won't help. Are you sure you'll win?" Then he laid down face up on the ground, using his wine gourd as a pillow and called out, "Two children, come and massage my legs!"

By now only the bone was left of the lamb leg in his hand, but he was still reluctant to throw it away, he kept gnawing and licking like it was still tasty. He looked at the clouds looming over the horizon and said, "Those clouds look strange, I am afraid the weather will change very soon!" He also noticed thin mist rose from the surface of the lake; he

took several deep breaths and shook his head, "It's very strange!" Turning his head toward Huang Yaoshi he said, "Yao Xiong, do you think I can borrow your daughter to massage my legs?"

Huang Yaoshi only showed a faint smile. Huang Rong came over and sat next to Hong Qigong, then started to massage his leg gently. Hong Qigong sighed, "Ay, these old bones have never enjoyed this kind of good fortune!" Staring at Guo Jing he said, "Dumb kid, are your dog's paws broken by the Old Heretic Huang?"

"Yes," Guo Jing replied. He came over the other side of Hong Qigong and started massaging his leg.

Ke Zhen'E was leaning on a willow tree by the lakeside; his pair of blind eyes was fixed at Huang Yaoshi. He was using his ears in place of his eyes. Huang Yaoshi was pacing around by the water. He walked to the east, Ke Zhen'E's head followed his movement to the east, he turned west Ke Zhen'E followed him to the west. Huang Yaoshi did not pay him any attention, only the corners of his mouth showed a cold smile.

The Quanzhen Six Masters and Yin Zhiping were sitting cross-legged on the ground, maintaining their respective positions of the Big Dipper Formation; their heads were hung low, they were quietly training their internal energy.

Ouyang Feng's servants, the snake shepherds, took out a table and a chair, set them up underneath the Misty Rain Tavern and served wine and food. With his back toward everybody else Ouyang Feng sat alone eating and drinking; he was wondering in his heart how Hong Qigong could recover that quick from the heavy injury his palm inflicted.

Meanwhile the weather was stifling hot, small insects were flying everywhere, and thin mist hovered on the surface of

the lake. Hong Qigong said, "My thigh bone is sore, a storm must be coming; if we can see moon tomorrow at the mid-autumn festival, I will chop my own thigh and give it to you." Casting a sidelong glance toward Guo Jing and Huang Rong, he noticed that their eyes had always looked somewhere else, and had never looked at each other. Hong Qigong was always frank and honest; seeing this awkward situation, how could he keep his peace? But after asking several questions, those two mumbled indistinctly without giving him any answer.

Hong Qigong raised his voice asking Huang Yaoshi, "Yao Xiong, what is the other name of this Nan Hu?"

"It's called 'yuan yang hu' [Mandarin Duck Lake]," Huang Yaoshi replied.

"Indeed!" Hong Qigong said, "How come on this 'yuan yang hu' [Translator's note: mandarin ducks have always been regarded as the symbol of lovers] your daughter and your son-in-law are having an argument and the father and father-in-law did not advise them?"

Guo Jing stood up immediately, he pointed to Huang Yaoshi and said, "He ... he ... has killed my five shifus, how can I still call him my father-in-law?"

Huang Yaoshi coldly laughed and said, "Is that strange? The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan are not completely dead; there is still a stinky blind kid left. I'll say he won't live to see tomorrow ..."

Without waiting for him to finish Ke Zhen'E had already pounced toward him. Guo Jing also jumped forward, and despite the fact he moved later, he arrived sooner. Huang Yaoshi launched a single stance, his palms crossed and 'bang!' he shook Guo Jing's body, forcing him to retreat two steps.

Hong Qigong shouted, "I said don't fight! Do you think the Old Beggar's words are just fart?"

Guo Jing did not dare to attack again, his stared angrily at Huang Yaoshi. Hong Qigong asked, "Old Heretic Huang, the Six Freaks of Jiangnan are chivalrous heroes, why did you kill the innocents? The Old Beggar thinks this kind of behavior is not pleasing to the eyes."

Huang Yaoshi said, "I kill whoever I want, why do you care?"

Huang Rong called out, "Father, his five shifus were not killed by you; I know it. Please say that you did not kill them."

Under the moonlight Huang Yaoshi saw his daughter's face was thin and pale, he could not help but feel compassion toward her; but when he turned his eyes toward Guo Jing he saw murder written all over Guo Jing's face, his heart turned hard and he said, "I killed them."

With a choking voice Huang Rong said, "Father, why do you insist on confessing the murder?"

With a loud voice Huang Yaoshi replied, "Everybody says your father is wicked and strange, didn't you know it? Can a criminal do a good deed? All crimes in the world are your father's. The Six Freaks of Jiangnan considered themselves righteous and chivalrous heroes; when I see this kind of self-proclaimed hero I become angry."

Ouyang Feng burst out in laughter and loudly said, "Yao Xiong, your words are right on target. Let Xiong Di [younger brother, referring to himself] toast you!" Lifting up his wine cup he drank it in one go; he said, "Yao Xiong, let me present you a gift." His right hand slightly waved, he threw a cloth bundle away.

He was several 'zhang's apart from Huang Yaoshi, but by a casual wave of the hand the bundle flew like a bullet cutting the air; everyone was astonished and impressed. Huang Yaoshi held out his hand to receive it; the content of the bundle felt like a human head to him. After unwrapping the bundle he found it was indeed a human head, newly beheaded; the head wore a square hat, with beard on its chin, the face was not of someone he knew.

Ouyang Feng said with a laugh, "Xiong Di left for the west this morning and took a rest at a schoolhouse. I heard this rotten scholar taught the students to be loyal ministers and filial sons. Xiong Di loathes hearing such things, so I killed this rotten scholar. You and I are the Eastern Heretic and the Western Poison, we both are of the same kind." Then he let out a long laugh.

Huang Yaoshi's face changed, he said, "All my life I always respect loyal ministers and filial sons." Stooping down he dug a hole with his hand, buried that human's head, and respectfully bowed three times.

Ouyang Feng lost his interest, but he laughed and said, "The Old Heretic Huang has enjoyed a false reputation, turns out he also adheres to propriety and etiquette."

Huang Yaoshi imposingly said, "Loyalty and being filial is integrity, it is not propriety and etiquette!"

He had just closed his mouth when suddenly a thunder crashed. Everybody looked up and saw black clouds covering half of the sky; a thunderstorm was coming. Right at that moment they heard loud music; seven, eight big boats on the lake approached near. The boats were decorated with red lanterns; on the bows stood signs like 'Su Jing' and 'Hui Bi'; looked like they belong to a high ranking government officer.

End of Chapter 34.

Chapter 35 - In the Temple of the Iron Spear

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Two soldiers were forced to carry Ke Zhen'E as they continued their journey. Huang Rong moved

her bamboo stick, constantly whipping them. Towards the evening they arrived at the Temple of the Iron Spear. On the tall pagoda next to the temple crows had made their nests for generations; thousands crows flew back and forth in the air.

As the boat reached the shore, twenty, thirty people came ashore; among them were Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and their company. The last ones to come ashore were two men, one tall the other short; the tall one was the Great Jin's Prince Zhao, Wanyan Honglie, the short one was the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren. Apparently Wanyan Honglie relied on Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren to help them; so he was confident they would win this martial contest, hence he went as far as personally come over to Jiangnan.

Pointing to Qiu Qianren Huang Rong said, "Father, this old man has hit your daughter with his palm that I nearly lost my life."

At the Cloud Village Huang Yaoshi had seen Qiu Qianren's disgraceful act; he did not know it was actually Qiu Qianzhang in disguise. He thought it was strange how with just a little bit of trick this man could injure his daughter.

In the meantime Ouyang Feng was having a discussion with Wanyan Honglie and the others; they were talking in a low voice. After about half a day Ouyang Feng came to Hong Qigong and said, "Qi Xiong, you have said that in the upcoming martial art contest you are not going to help either side, haven't you?"

Hong Qigong said in his heart, "I have the desire but am powerless; even if I want to help I don't have the ability to

do so.” With no other choice he replied, “Contest or no contest, I said the fifteenth of the eighth month.”

“That is so,” Ouyang Feng said, “Yao Xiong, the Quanzhen Sect and the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan are seeking enmity with you; you are a grandmaster and a senior, it will be below your dignity to deal with these people. Let Xiong Di [younger brother, referring to himself] deal with them on your behalf, you can just stand on the side and be the spectator, what do you say?”

Huang Yaoshi thought about the battle situation from both sides’ point of view: if Hong Qigong did not go into action, the Quanzhen Masters would certainly fall under Ouyang Feng’s deadly hand, thus the Quanzhen Sect faced an imminent destruction. If Guo Jing helped them by defending the ‘tian xuan’, Ouyang Feng would not be the Big Dipper Formation’s match; but if this dumb kid kept pestering Huang Yaoshi, the situation would not be the same, he thought, “This kid Guo Jing is still wet behind his ears, the Quanzhen Sect’s life or death, fortune or disaster, actually depends on him. If Wang Chongyang in the underworld knew, all he could do is to laugh bitterly.”

Ouyang Feng saw that he looked indifferent without answering his question, if Zhou Botong arrived, the situation would be detrimental to him; therefore, he let out a long laugh and called out, “Everybody, attack! What are you waiting for?”

Hong Qigong was angry, “Was that a human speaking or a dog farting?”

Ouyang Feng pointed to the sky and said with a smile, “‘Zi shi’ [first hour, midnight, between 11pm and 1 am] has passed, right now it is already early morning of the fifteenth of the eighth month.”

Hong Qigong looked up only to see that the moon had slightly shifted to the west, half of it was still covered by the dark clouds, it was indeed the end of the 'zi shi' and the start of 'chou shi' [second hour, between 1 am and 3 am].

Ouyang Feng's snake staff struck, its target was Qiu Chuji's chest. Facing their archenemy, with Peng Lianhu watching intently on the side, ready to strike, the Quanzhen Six Masters knew that the slightest mistake today would result in their demise; hence they pulled themselves together immediately and fought Ouyang Feng with all their might, but after just a few stances, the six of them groaned inwardly.

This time the Western Poison's intention was to show off his power in front of everybody; everything he displayed was swift and deadly move, particularly the two snakes on the head of his staff, which was extended or withdrawn, striking or evading in sudden movements, it was virtually impossible to guard against. Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others had tried several times to stab these snakes, but how could they match their speed?

Huang Rong saw Guo Jing was still staring angrily at her father; it was only because Hong Qigong was on his way that he did not dare to attack. She got a sudden inspiration and said, "All day long talking about avenging his father, humph, now that the killer is here he is afraid."

Her words reminded Guo Jing, he turned his gaze to her and thought, "Kill the Jin dog first, then look for Huang Yaoshi; it won't be too late." Drawing his dagger he charged toward Wanyan Honglie.

Together Sha Tongtian and Peng Lianhu dashed forward, blocking in front of Wanyan Honglie. Guo Jing flicked his wrist and the dagger in his hand stabbed slanting down.

Peng Lianhu blocked with his pair of judge pens, 'clang!' the weapons collided and he felt tingling sensation on his palms. Guo Jing successively went passed two people. Sha Tongtian's 'yi xing huan wei' [altering form changing position] technique was also unable to stop him; hastily Sha Tongtian tried to pursue him. Lingzhi Shangren and Liang Ziweng, each with weapon in their hands positioned themselves to intercept Guo Jing.

Guo Jing flashed sideways to evade two of Liang Ziweng's 'tou gu ding' [bone penetrating nail]; his both hands, one with a dagger the other with a palm, launched 'di yang chu fan' [ram charging fence], throwing his whole body forward.

Liang Ziweng saw that the incoming force was swift and fierce; he rolled away on the ground to evade. Lingzhi Shangren was big and fat, he was not as agile; he thought if he evaded, the enemy would have clear access to the Prince Zhao, so he raised his pair of cymbals, trying to block this attack. With two loud 'Bang! Bang!' his hands were shaken and the two cymbals flew to the air, while the wind from Guo Jing's palm continued hacking toward his face. Relying on the strength of, and poison on, his palms, Lingzhi Shangren fended off Guo Jing's palm, only to feel his chest constricted and his arm sore and numb; his palms hang loosely down, his wrist joints were shaken and to his shock he could not use his poisonous palm skill. He stood dumbly without knowing what to do. If Guo Jing took this opportunity and sent out a palm, he could easily take Lingzhi Shangren's life, but he remembered his main target was Wanyan Honglie, so he did not give Lingzhi Shangren another look.

The pair of copper cymbals flew in the air and glimmering under the moonlight one after another they fell back down to the earth. 'Bang!' the first cymbal landed on Lingzhi

Shangren's head. Luckily it was in a horizontal position; otherwise with its knife-like sharp edge it would chop the Tibetan monk's bald head in two. Another loud 'Bang!' followed, louder and brighter than the first; the second cymbal landed on the first, creating a continuous buzzing noise, which reached far into the lake and echoed back on the surface of the lake.

Wanyan Honglie saw how Guo Jing was able to go through four martial art masters without missing a step and suddenly arrive in front of him, he was unable to restrain his great shock and cried out, "Aiyo!" while turning his body around and run away.

With the dagger in his hand Guo Jing chased him; but he only managed to pursue several steps when suddenly a yellow shadow flashed by, a pair of palms came slanting down on him. Guo Jing stepped aside to evade, while the dagger in his hand stabbed forward; but his body was swayed by the incoming palms; hastily he steadied his step and saw that the enemy was the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren. Guo Jing knew the enemy's martial art skill is superior to his own, so he would not be able to pursue his personal enemy; immediately, with the dagger in his right hand and a bare palm on his left, he focused his attention to fight the enemy.

Peng Lianhu knew the critical situation had passed as he saw Guo Jing was tied down by Qiu Qianren while Liang Ziwen and Sha Tongtian were guarding in front of Wanyan Honglie; he turned his attention to Ke Zhen'E and said with a smile, "Ke Daxia, how come only one freak out of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan showed up?"

Ke Zhen'E's iron staff was thrown into the Southern Lake by Huang Rong; hearing the enemy's insult he waved his hand to send out an iron caltrop, while he immediately

jumped backward. Under the dim moonlight the iron caltrop looked so swift and powerful. Peng Lianhu had experienced suffering because of this poisonous secret projectile; he was scared like a bird was scared of a bow, he did not dare to fend off with his judge pen, so he hastily pushed the pens on the ground to using it as a brace to help him jump high in the air. With a 'swish' sound the iron caltrop barely missed the bottom of his foot. He noticed Ke Zhen'E did not have any weapon in his hand; clenching his teeth he struck forward with his pens.

Ke Zhen'E was disabled; he usually walked aided by his staff. He heard the wind as the enemy attack arrived, he had no choice but using all his strength he leaped two steps to the side, and almost fell down as his left foot landed on soft earth.

Peng Lianhu was delighted; with his left pen he guarded against Ke Zhen'E, should he be desperate enough to launch an attack to save his own life, while his right pen fiercely smashed down toward Ke Zhen'E's chest.

Ke Zhen'E listened to the sound to distinguish the shape, he rolled away to evade. Peng Lianhu's steel judge pen struck a rock on the ground, sparks flew everywhere. "Blind thief," he cursed, "You are very slippery!" The pen in his left hand also struck.

While he was rolling away, 'swish!' he released another iron caltrop. Lingzhi Shangren was standing nearby, his left hand was holding his right hand, his mouth was busy cursing in Tibetan; as he saw Ke Zhen'E was rolling near him, he raised his foot trying to trample him.

Ke Zhen'E heard the wind; using his left hand to brace the ground he threw himself sideways to escape. But evading the Tibetan monk's foot he could not escape the pair of

judge pen on his back. He felt a stabbing pain and secretly shouted, "Not good!" He closed his eyes, ready to die. Suddenly he heard a tender voice called out, "Off you go!" followed by "Aiyo!" finally he heard a loud 'bang!'

Turned out Huang Rong used the Dog Beating Stick Technique to block the judge pen, turned it around and jerked it up, throwing both the pen and Peng Lianhu away. This stick technique was exactly the same stance Huang Rong used to fling Ke Zhen'E's iron staff away; only Peng Lianhu held his pens tight and would not let them go no matter what, so both Peng Lianhu and his pen fell down together.

Peng Lianhu was shocked and angry at the same time, he crawled back up only to see Huang Rong was using her stick to protect Ke Zhen'E, giving him the opportunity to stand up. "Little witch [Translator's note: the Chinese characters used were 'xiao yao nu', with 'yao' being 'goblin/witch/demon/monster', see also Chapter 25], who asked for your help?"

Ignoring him Huang Rong called out, "Father, look after this blind muddle-head, don't let anybody harm him." While saying that she rushed toward Guo Jing to help him fight Qiu Qianren.

Ke Zhen'E was dumbstruck; he stood motionless not knowing what to do. Peng Lianhu saw Huang Yaoshi was standing quite a distant away, with his back facing them, apparently he did not hear his daughter's call. Quietly Peng Lianhu went behind Ke Zhen'E and suddenly lunged his judge pen toward Ke Zhen'E's back. This move was both swift and violent, so much so that even if Ke Zhen'E still had the iron staff in his hand he would not necessarily be able to block it. Peng Lianhu saw he was about to succeed when suddenly a 'swish' sound was heard; something flew

splitting the air, hit the judge pen, and shattered into dust; turned out it was a small grain of gravel. Peng Lianhu's palm was numb and the judge pen fell to the ground.

Peng Lianhu was shocked; he did not know where the gravel came from, and how could it carry such a tremendous force. He saw Huang Yaoshi with his hands behind his back, still looking at the black clouds on the horizon.

At the Cloud Village Ke Zhen'E had heard this Divine Flicking Finger skill; he knew it was Huang Yaoshi who saved him. In rage he pounced toward Huang Yaoshi's back, while shouting, "Seven brothers and sister only one left, why would I want to live?"

Huang Yaoshi still did not turn his head; he waited until Ke Zhen'E was about three feet away before his left hand lightly waved backward. Ke Zhen'E felt a strong force pushing him back that he fell face up. Quickly he sat down, but felt his blood surging up his chest and he was not able to stand up.

By this time the sky was getting darker, the fog hovering on the surface of the lake was getting thicker, it spilled over to the ground; submerging everybody's legs in it. Guo Jing and Huang Rong managed to fight Qiu Qianren evenly. On the other side, the Quanzhen Sect was in dire circumstances; Hao Datong's thigh was swept by the snake staff, half of Sun Bu'er's Taoist robe was torn. Wang Chuyi was secretly alarmed; he knew that if this fight continued, someone would be either dead or wounded before long. So when Ma Yu and Liu Chuxuan were launching a flank attack, he took a rocket from his pocket. With a hissing sound the rocket flew up to the sky, like a meteor with a long tail in the dark sky.

Actually, all Seven Masters of the Quanzhen Sect had accepted not a few disciples; they formed quite a number of the third generation disciples. Besides Yin Zhiping, there were Li Zhichang, Zhang Zhijing, Wang Zhitan, Qi Zhicheng, Zhang Zhixian, Zhao Zhijing, and the others; they were all outstanding people. In the martial art contest at Misty Rain Tavern in Jiaxing this time, the Seven Masters were afraid that Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others would bring their disciples in their attempt to gain victory by sheer numbers; therefore, they also took their disciples along to Jiaxing and told them to wait by the shore of the Southern Lake. As soon as they saw the rocket they were supposed to immediately come and render their assistance. So now recognizing their precarious situation Wang Chuyi released the rocket. Unfortunately the fog was too thick; even separated by several feet it was already difficult to distinguish people, so he was afraid the disciples would not be able to see through this fog.

Later on, after fighting a little while, the white fog was getting heavier, everybody was enveloped inside the thick fog that they suddenly felt alone. The gathering dark clouds in the sky were getting thicker and thicker; the dim moonlight which penetrated these layers of cloud was getting weaker and weaker, until finally it disappeared all together. Everybody was alarmed; although they did not stop fighting, the distance between them were getting farther and farther away, their stances were most of the time defensives and very few offensives.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were fighting Qiu Qianren together; suddenly the thick fog welled up and shrouded these three people. Guo Jing saw Qiu and Huang two people suddenly disappear, he decided to look for Wanyan Honglie immediately. His eyes were wide open, trying to catch a glimpse of the flashing of the golden crown on Wanyan

Honglie's head. But the fog was very dense; he could not even see anything beyond three feet. He hurried to the east and dashed to the west to seek the enemy, suddenly he heard someone was calling out in the fog, "Zhou Botong is here, who wants to fight with me?"

Guo Jing was ecstatic, he was about to reply but Qiu Chuji beat him, "Zhou Shishu [martial uncle], are you Senior well?"

Right at this moment the dark clouds revealed a gap and suddenly everybody could see their enemies were actually almost within reach of each other, if anybody launched any attack, they would certainly be injured. As if by prior agreement they all cried out in alarm and leaped back.

Zhou Botong was giggling as he stood among these people, he said in a loud voice, "There are so many people here, very lively. Wonderful! Wonderful!" His right hand reached beneath the crook of his left elbow, he rubbed some dirt and rolled it, he said, "I'll give you some poison!" and he shoved the dirt into Sha Tongtian's mouth nearby.

Sha Tongtian quickly evaded, but although he used his 'yi xing huan wei', he was still not fast enough; his left arm was grabbed by Zhou Botong and the dirt was squeezed into his mouth. He had suffered quite a bit under Zhou Botong's hand, he knew if he spat the dirt, he would certainly be beaten; therefore, he had no choice but stay silent and keep the dirt in his mouth. He knew the dirt was not poison, so he certainly was not afraid.

As Wang Chuyi saw Zhou Botong suddenly arrive he was overjoyed, "Shishu," he called out, "Turned out it's true that you are not killed by Huang Daozhu [Island Master]."

"Who said I am dead?" Zhou Botong angrily asked, "The Old Heretic Huang had always wanted to harm me, but it's

been more than ten years and he still has not succeeded yet. Ha, Old Heretic Huang, come and try again.” While saying that he waved his fist toward Huang Yaoshi’s shoulder.

Huang Yaoshi did not dare to ignore him; he counterattacked with a stance from the ‘shen jian luo ying zhang’ [divine sword falling leaves palm] while calling out at the same time, “The mixed-up hairs from Quanzhen Sect blamed me of killing you, they are pestering me without any reason, saying that they were seeking revenge for you.”

Zhou Botong was angry, “You killed me? Are you dreaming? When did you kill me? Look clearly, am I a human or am I a ghost?” While spouting nonsense he fought faster and faster.

Huang Yaoshi knew Zhou Botong would not listen to reason, and he was attacking him out of a whim, but his moves were very exquisite and marvelous; Huang Yaoshi had no choice but fight him with all his might.

The Quanzhen Masters thought that as soon as their Shishu arrived, he would join hands with Huang Yaoshi to fight Ouyang Feng; who would have thought that this Shishu did not want to listen to them but entangled Huang Yaoshi in a close combat instead. “Shishu, don’t fight with Huang Daozhu!” Ma Yu repeatedly called.

Ouyang Feng interjected, “That’s right Old Urchin, you are in no way the Old Heretic’s match; quickly run away to save your life! Quick, quick!”

Listening to this provocation Zhou Botong was all the more not willing to give up. Huang Rong called out, “Old Urchin, you use the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual to fight my father; what would your Shixiong [martial brother] say in the underworld?”

Zhou Botong burst out in laughter, he sounded very smug when he said, "Look carefully, do you see I am using the martial art from the Manual? I have spent a great deal of effort trying to forget the Manual. Hey, hey, learning was easy, forgetting is actually a lot of trouble! What I am using now is the 72-stance Vacant Fist, the Old Urchin's very own creation, do you think it is the same as the Nine Yin Manual even for a fart?"

When fighting him at the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi thought his fist and kick strength was much stronger; now he saw that although his fist technique was refined and wonderful, the strength was actually less than he remembered, but Zhou Botong was able to fight evenly with him, which he thought was very strange. Listening to Zhou Botong's words Huang Yaoshi was secretly impressed; regardless of what kind of bizarre technique he employed, Zhou Botong was able to create an excellent martial art all by himself and thus he founded his own martial art school.

From inside the fog Ouyang Feng could indistinctly see the fight between Zhou Botong and Huang Yaoshi; he was inwardly very happy, but was also afraid that as soon as he defeated Huang Yaoshi Zhou Botong would join hands with the Quanzhen Masters and deal with him. Thereupon he thought as he had the opportunity, he should break the Big Dipper Formation first. Immediately he wielded his snake staff and pressed on bit by bit, placing the Big Dipper Formation in more and more dangerous situation.

Wang Chuyi and Liu Chuxuan called out, "Zhou Shishu, kill Ouyang Feng first!"

Zhou Botong saw his martial nephews' desperate situation, with a left palm and a right fist he swept horizontally. When he was very close to Huang Yaoshi's face, suddenly with a

laughter the fist changed into a palm and the palm became a fist, continuing their attack across each other.

Huang Yaoshi had never anticipated this kind of strange move, he hurriedly raised his arms to block, but the tip of his eyebrow was brushed lightly by the edge of Zhou Botong's palm. He was not injured, but Huang Yaoshi felt his eyebrow was burning hot.

As Zhou Botong's palm brushed his opponent suddenly he was shocked; his left hand slapped his own right wrist and he cursed, "Damn it! Damn it! This is the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual!"

Huang Yaoshi was slightly startled; but his palm had already struck with a lightning fast speed, without any noise landed on Zhou Botong's shoulder. Zhou Botong bent his waist and shrunk his shoulder. "Aiyo!" he cried out, "The payback is so quick!"

Meanwhile the fog was getting thicker; it was getting more difficult to see anything. Guo Jing was afraid his two shifus would be injured; he held out his hand to help Ke Zhen'E, pulling his arm toward Hong Qigong. With a low voice he said, "Two Shifus, please take a rest at the Misty Rain Tavern; we'll wait for the fog to recede then we'll talk again." He heard Huang Rong called out, "Old Urchin, are you going to obey me or not?"

"I can't beat your father," Zhou Botong replied, "So don't worry."

"I want you to beat the Old Poison," Huang Rong said, "Just don't kill him."

"Why?" Zhou Botong asked; but his hands and feet were not slowing down.

Huang Rong called out, "If you don't do what I say, I am going to reveal your stinky history."

"What stinky history?" Zhou Botong asked, "You talk nonsense."

"All right," with deliberation Huang Rong said, "Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desiring to fly together right away."

Hearing these two sentences Zhou Botong was so scared that it was as if his soul had left him; "All right, all right, I'll listen to you," he busily said, "Old Poison, where are you?" He heard Ma Yu's voice penetrating the thick fog, "Zhou Shishu, occupy the north polar star to surround him."

Huang Rong said again, "Father, this Qiu Qianren collaborates with a foreign kingdom, he is a big traitor; please kill him quickly."

"Child," Huang Yaoshi said, "Come to my side." In the heavy fog he could not see where Qiu Qianren was. But he heard Zhou Botong was laughing a big laugh while calling out, "Old Poison, quickly kneel down and kowtow to your grandfather; I'll spare your life today."

Guo Jing sent Hong and Ke two people to the side of the tavern; then he turned his body around, trying to find Wanyan Honglie. Who would have thought that as he left the Misty Rain Tavern, not only he could not find Wanyan Honglie, but also Sha Tongtian, Qiu Qianren and the others had all disappeared. He heard Zhou Botong call out, "Uh, where is the Old Poison? Where did he run to?"

This fog was unusually thick, everybody was very close to each other, yet one could not see the face of someone else standing next to them; they only saw a vague image of a human form. Their voices were also somewhat muffled by

the fog, as if there was some layers separating each other. Each one of them was an experienced fighter, yet in this battle they felt like they were blindfolded; not a single one of them was not anxious. Huang Rong was leaning close to her father, Ma Yu was giving out orders in low voice to shrink their circle. Everyone was straining their ears to listen to any enemy's activity; for a moment nobody made any noise. A little while later suddenly Qiu Chuji called out, "Listen! What's that?"

They heard hissing noise all around them, strange noise from a distant coming near. Huang Rong called out in alarm, "The Old Poison dispatches his snakes! Really shameless!"

At the end of the tavern Hong Qigong had also heard the snakes, he loudly called out, "It's the Old Poison's snake formation; everybody quickly come up the stairs!"

Zhou Botong's martial art could be considered number one among those present, but for all his life he was afraid of snakes, so with a loud cry he dashed wildly toward the Misty Rain Tavern. He was afraid the snakes would bite his heel, so he skipped the upstairs room and utilizing his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] to the fullest he leaped onto the roof, and sat on the highest ridge, still trembling with fear.

Not too long afterwards the sound of the snakes was getting louder. Huang Rong pulled her father's hand to go up the Misty Rain Tavern. Holding each other's hand the Quanzhen Masters were groping their way upstairs. Yin Zhiping stepped on a crack and fell down real hard that his head grew a swollen lump; quickly he crawled back upstairs.

Huang Rong had not heard Guo Jing's voice, she was concerned; "Jing Gege, where are you?" she called. After

calling out several times she still had not heard any reply; she became anxious and said, "Father, I am going back to look for him."

Suddenly she heard Guo Jing's cold voice, "Why should you look for me? Don't call me; I am not going to answer you." It turned out he was right next to her.

Huang Yaoshi was angry, "Muddle-headed kid, stinky boy," he scolded; his arm swung across sending out a palm. Guo Jing ducked his head to evade; he was just about to launch a counterattack when suddenly 'whiz, whiz' noise of arrows was heard, several long arrows soared in the air and nailed the window lattice.

Everybody was startled; they heard shouts and feathered arrows came one after another. In the darkness nobody knew how many soldiers had arrived; they heard clamoring noise of people outside the building, they were shouting, "Don't let these thieves escape!"

Wang Chuyi was angry, "Looks like the Jin dog colludes with Jiaxing's corrupt government official; they are sending out troops to deal with us!"

Qiu Chuji called out, "Let's go down and completely route them."

"Not good, snake, snake!" Hao Datong shouted. They heard the noise of the arrows getting thicker, while the hissing noise of the snakes getting closer; they realized that Wanyan Honglie and Ouyang Feng had arranged this treacherous plan in advance; only this thick fog was beyond anybody's anticipation, so whether a curse or a luck, it was difficult to say.

Hong Qigong called out, "We can fight the arrows, but cannot fight the snakes; if we evade the snakes, it will be

difficult to keep off the arrows! Everybody quickly withdraw!" They heard Zhou Botong, still shouting abusive words from the top of the roof; he had caught two arrows and used them to fend off the incoming arrows.

Three sides of the Misty Rain Tavern faced the water. The soldiers rode on small boats surrounding the building and showered it with arrows. It was because of the thick fog that they did not dare to press closer to the banks. Hong Qigong called out, "We go to the west, we take the land route." He was the chief of the world's largest clan; each word he said carried a lot of authority and influence. In this chaotic situation everybody accepted his leadership without question; they groped their way back downstairs. They tried hard to open their eyes, but could not see farther than half a foot ahead; how did they know which direction was east, west, south or north? They struck down several arrows while walking in line, holding each other's hand to avoid getting lost. Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi led the way with swords in their hands; their swords combined and complemented each other, forming a sword umbrella to keep off the arrow rain.

Guo Jing's right hand was pulling Hong Qigong, while his left hand grabbed someone's hand behind him. He felt this hand was soft, warm and slightly sweaty; turned out it was Huang Rong's small hand. His heart skipped a beat; hastily he let her hand go, only to listen to Huang Rong's cold voice said, "Who needs your concern?" Suddenly he heard Qiu Chuji called out, "Turn around, quick! There are snakes ahead; we can't go through!"

Huang Yaoshi and Ma Yu were at the end of the line blocking the pursuing soldiers; hearing Qiu Chuji's cry they turned their head anxiously. Huang Yaoshi picked a couple of bamboo sticks and swept them outward to strike the snakes. In the fog they heard the hissing sound of the

snakes, and a foul stench attacked their nostrils. Huang Rong could not endure it any longer, with a 'wah!' sound she threw up. Huang Yaoshi sighed and said, "There is no way out, everyone fight for your own life!" Tossing his bamboo sticks aside he carried his daughter in his hands.

Based on everyone's martial art skill, actually the soldiers' arrows would not be able to stop them; but the Western Poison's snake formation was tens of thousands more lethal, as soon as one was bitten, one's life immediately would be gone. Listening to these frightening snakes everybody could not help but feel terrified. Huang Yaoshi's jade flute was broken, Hong Qigong's steel needles were not easy to be launched; the most difficult part was the fog was too thick that nobody could see anything. Even if there were an escape route, nobody knew where to go.

In this critical situation suddenly they heard someone with a cold voice say, "Little witch, give your bamboo stick to this blind man." It was Ke Zhen'E's voice.

Hearing him saying the 'blind man', two characters, Huang Rong immediately understood his intention; she was very happy and without hesitation handed over the Dog Beating Stick to him. Ke Zhen'E maintained his composure; tapping the stick on the ground he said, "Everyone, follow this blind man to safety. There is always fog and mist around the Misty Rain Tavern; what's so strange about it? Otherwise how can it be called the Misty Rain Tavern?" He was a native of Jiaying; ever since he was little all streets and alleys around the Misty Rain Tavern had been ingrained in his heart. Both of his eyes were blind, normally he would be inferior to ordinary man, but now the fog was really thick, black clouds covered the sky; to him it was not the least bit of obstacle.

Listening to the snakes and the arrows he knew that there was an alley to the west with no enemies in that direction. Limping away he immediately led the way. Who would have thought that over the past several years this small alley had been covered with green bamboos, which render it impassable. Ke Zhen'E was very familiar with this road; yet he had not visited this place for decades, so he did not know that this alley had turned into a bamboo grove. He walked only for seven, eight steps and had to stop because the bamboo was on his way. Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi again brandished their swords and the bamboo flew out, opening up a passageway where everybody could pass through.

Ma Yu called, "Zhou Shishu, come over here! Where are you?" Zhou Botong was still sitting on the roof; hearing the sound of snakes all around him, how could he dare to reply? He was most afraid that the snakes' favorite food was the Old Urchin's flesh, so if he opened his mouth and let the snakes heard his voice, wouldn't he be finished then?

Walking for dozens of 'zhang's they saw the bamboo grove was getting thin; ahead they could see an alley. The snakes sound was getting farther away, but the soldiers' shouts were actually getting closer; it sounded like some of the soldiers came around to outflank them. This group of warriors was afraid of snakes, they did not even look at ordinary soldiers. Liu Chuxuan said, "Hao Shidi [martial (younger) brother Hao], let us kill some of the dog officers to vent our anger."

"Good!" Hao Datong replied. Two people brandished their swords to block the incoming arrows which came suddenly like locusts.

Walking a little longer they arrived at a bigger road; above them lightning flashed and thunder struck, followed by heavy rain pouring down from the sky. But because of this

downpour the fog cleared up. Although the sky was still covered with dark clouds, they started to be able to see each other's shadow. "Good, good," everybody said, "The thick fog is dispersing."

Ke Zhen'E said, "The danger has passed, everyone can do as they please." Giving the bamboo stick back to Huang Rong he walked to the east without turning his head back.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing called out.

Ke Zhen'E said, "You go and send Hong Laoxia [Old Hero Hong] someplace peaceful and quiet where he can recover from his injury; then come to the Ke Jia Cun [Ke Family Village] to see me."

"Yes," Guo Jing replied.

Huang Yaoshi stretched out his hand to block one incoming arrow, then he went to Ke Zhen'E and said, "I was not willing to explain to you if not for the fact that you saved my life today ..."

Ke Zhen'E did not wait for him to finish, he spat thick phlegm toward the bridge of Huang Yaoshi's nose; he cursed, "Because of what I did today, I won't have any face to see my six brothers and sister!"

Angrily Huang Yaoshi raised his palm. Guo Jing watched this in shock, he flew in trying to rescue; he knew that as soon as this palm struck down, his Da Shifu's life would be gone. But he was more than a dozen steps away from Ke and Huang two people, so he knew he would be too late. Under the dim light of the moon he saw Huang Yaoshi's palm slowly went down. Huang Yaoshi laughed a big laugh and said, "What kind of a man is Huang Yaoshi? How can I lower myself to the same level with you?" With his sleeve he

wiped the phlegm from his face; turning around to Huang Rong he said, "Rong'er, let's go!"

Hearing these words Guo Jing's heart was shaken with doubt; only he was unclear of what had actually stirred his doubt. He only vaguely felt that something was not completely right. It was like something was flashing in his mind, then suddenly it disappeared into a thick fog.

Suddenly he heard an outburst of shouting, a group of soldiers came charging in. The Quanzhen Six Masters with swords in their hands engaged the enemy. Huang Yaoshi felt it was beneath his dignity to fight soldiers, so he turned around to pull Hong Qigong's arm and said, "Qi Xiong, let us two brothers go on ahead and drink some wine; we'll talk about it later."

It was precisely what Hong Qigong had been expecting; he said with a laugh, "Wonderful, just wonderful!" In a moment two people disappeared into the darkness.

Guo Jing wanted to take Ke Zhen'E away, but another group of soldiers came attacking them. Guo Jing did not want to kill too many people, so he pushed his arms forward to open a way. In this confusion he heard Qiu Chuji and the others were fighting a fierce battle; it turned out Wanyan Honglie had dispatched several of his own personal bodyguards among the soldiers, also joining their ranks were a group of valiant Iron Palm Clan people, making them difficult to push back in a short period of time. Guo Jing was afraid his shifu would be injured in this chaotic battle, he shouted, "Da Shifu, Da Shifu, where are you?" By now the battle cry and the clashing of the weapons had merged into one chaotic noise; but all along he did not hear Ke Zhen'E's reply.

After taking the bamboo stick back from Ke Zhen'E's hand Huang Rong had stayed near him all the time. She saw him

spitting her father, her mind was tumultuous. She believed this matter had grown out of proportion; her long life's beautiful dream was shattered into pieces. Hence when the soldiers came she just stood alone, leaning on a tree; when the soldiers galloped quickly past her, it was as if she did neither see nor hear them, she was totally lost in her thought.

Suddenly she heard a call, "Aiyo!" It was Ke Zhen'E's voice. Following the source of the sound she went out to take a look, only to see Ke Zhen'E was laying by the roadside; an officer was holding a saber high above his head, ready to chop it down into Ke Zhen'E's back. Ke Zhen'E rolled away to evade, he sat up and threw a backward fist, hitting the officer squarely that he fainted. Ke Zhen'E was about to stand up when he suddenly fell back down. Huang Rong rushed forward and saw that his leg was hit by an arrow; immediately she pulled his arm and helped him up.

Ke Zhen'E made an effort to shed her hand away, but one of his legs was lame, the other was injured by the arrow; his legs lost their strength that his body staggered, he swayed forward and fell back down. Huang Rong held out her right hand to grab the collar on the back of his neck; she said with a cold laugh, "Still flaunting your heroism?" Her left hand lightly waved, she sealed the 'jian shen xue' [shoulder chaste acupoint] on his right shoulder with a move from 'lan hua fu xue shou' [brushing orchid acupoint technique]. Then she released his collar and grabbed his left arm.

Ke Zhen'E wanted to struggle free, but half of his body was numb; he was unable to move. He had no choice but let her help him up, but his mouth did not stop muttering curses.

Huang Rong let him away for a dozen of steps and took him hiding behind a big tree. They were just catching their breath when another group of soldiers spotted these two

people. A dozen or so arrows came whizzing by. Huang Rong stepped forward and brandished her bamboo stick to protect her head and her face from the arrows; letting the arrows hitting her soft-hedgehog armor.

Ke Zhen'E heard the arrows and knew she was risking her life to save his; his heart softened, he said in a low voice, "You don't need to worry over me, just go save yourself!"

"Hmm," Huang Rong said, "I want to save you; I want you to receive my kindness. What are you going to do about it?"

While they were talking, two people slowly withdrew behind a short wall. The arrows no longer came, but Ke Zhen'E was heavy, Huang Rong was exhausted, her breathing was short; she leaned against the wall to rest. Ke Zhen'E sighed, "It is finished, between you and me gratitude and grudges are over. Off you go, from now on just consider the blind man Ke has died."

With a cold voice Huang Rong said, "Obviously you are not dead, why do you consider yourself dead? You are not seeking revenge against me, I will come looking for you." The bamboo stick in her hand swiftly stretched out and swiftly shrunk back, sealing the 'wei zhong xue' [I don't know how to translate this] on the back of his knees.

Ke Zhen'E was totally caught off guard, he fell sitting down on the ground. Silently he cursed and wondered what kind of malicious method this little demon would use to torture him. His heart was thumping in anger, but he heard her footsteps were getting farther away, it sounded like she was leaving the short wall. By now the battle noise was farther and weaker; apparently the Quanzhen Masters had either killed or driven the soldiers away. Amidst this faraway noise he faintly heard Guo Jing's voice calling out, "Da Shifu!" But the call was going farther and farther away, indicating Guo

Jing was looking for him in the wrong direction. He wanted to call, but because of his injury he could not gather enough strength, he could not even hear his own voice.

A moment later all he could hear was quietness, with roosters started crowing in the distant. Ke Zhen'E mused, "This is the last time I hear the rooster! Tomorrow all across the Jiaying prefecture the roosters will crow again, but I will die under the little demon's hands and won't hear it anymore." Thinking to this point he suddenly heard footsteps; three people came over. The first's footsteps were light, he recognized it to be Huang Rong; the other two were heavy, sounded like they were dragging their feet.

He heard Huang Rong say, "This is Daye [lit. big master], quickly lift him up." While saying that she stretched out her hand to massage his body and unsealed his acupoints.

Ke Zhen'E felt he was lifted up by two people and placed on a bamboo stretcher, and then he was taken away. Ke Zhen'E was flabbergasted; he wanted to ask, but suddenly remembered the last time he said something it backfired to him. While hesitating he heard a 'swish!' sound, the man carrying him on the front cried out in pain, "Aiyo!" It sounded like he ate Huang Rong's stick. He also heard her scolding, "Walk faster! What are you mumbling about? You, the soldiers, are used to bully common people; no one is good!" Then another 'swish!' was heard; the man on the back also ate her stick, but this one did not dare to say anything.

Ke Zhen'E understood, "It turned out she captured two soldiers to carry me up; she is so smart to come up with this idea." By this time the arrow wound on his leg was getting more painful, but he was afraid Huang Rong might mock him, so he bit his lips to prevent any moan from escaping his mouth. He felt his body was jolted up and down, he

knew he was being carried along a rugged pathway. A moment later he felt tree branches and leaves brushing his head and face, so he knew they were walking in the woods. The two soldiers staggered along, they were gasping for breath, but Huang Rong's bamboo stick kept whipping them mercilessly.

About thirty 'li's later Ke Zhen'E estimated that it was already the end of sixth hour [9 - 11am], early seventh hour [11am - 1pm]; the early morning rain had long gone, the sun had dried out half of his wet clothes. He heard the cicadas calling and the dogs barking, a distant sound of men and women singing in the field; it was a perfect picture of peace and tranquility, a totally different world from the vicious battle at the South Lake this morning.

They stopped by a peasant home to take a rest. Huang Rong bought two big pumpkins from the peasant family, she cooked them with rice, and placed a bowl in front of Ke Zhen'E.

"I am not hungry," Ke Zhen'E said.

"Your leg hurts, do you think I don't know?" Huang Rong said, "What hungry or not hungry? I want you to be in so much pain that you will listen to me."

Ke Zhen'E was very angry; using both hands he lifted up the bowl full of hot steaming pumpkin and threw it to her face. Huang Rong laughed coldly, but one of the soldiers called out in pain. Ke Zhen'E knew she must have moved sideways to evade and the bowl of hot pumpkin must have splashed on the soldier's body.

"What?" Huang Rong scolded, "Ke Daye [Big Master Ke] is giving you the pumpkin to eat, you are not happy? Quickly eat them up." That soldier was afraid Huang Rong might beat him again, but also his stomach was very hungry; so

enduring the burning ache on his face he picked the pumpkin up and ate it piece by piece.

This time Ke Zhen'E could not decide whether he should be angry or whether he should laugh; half standing and half sitting he leaned against the bench. He felt very awkward; he wanted to pull out the arrow, but was afraid his blood would spurt out like crazy. She certainly would see someone in danger and not willing to help; most probably she would even mock him.

While he was still hesitating he heard Huang Rong said, "Go get some fresh water, quick!" Her speech was followed by a 'Slap!' apparently she had just slapped one of the soldiers on the ear.

In his heart Ke Zhen'E mused, "This little demon, she is all right as long as she does not say anything; but as soon as she opens her mouth, she makes others suffer."

Huang Rong continued, "Take this knife and cut the clothes around Ke Daye's arrow wound." One of the soldiers complied and did as she said. Huang Rong said, "You, the one with surname Ke, you'd better not cry out in pain; otherwise, your Miss may not pay you any more attention if she is annoyed."

"Who wants your attention anyway?" Ke Zhen'E angrily replied, "Just scram as far as possible." He had not finished his words when suddenly he felt a severe pain on his wound. It seemed to him that Huang Rong had grabbed the shaft of the arrow, and instead of pulling it out, she thrust it into his flesh. Ke Zhen'E was shocked and angry; he was about to throw a punch out when he felt another stab of severe pain and suddenly his palm was holding a shaft of arrow. Turned out Huang Rong had pulled the arrow out and squeezed it into his hand.

Ke Zhen'E heard Huang Rong say, "You move one more time, I am going to slap your ear really good."

Ke Zhen'E knew she was capable of doing what she said she would do. Currently he was not the little demon's match; if she killed him with a blade, then it would be a clean end to his life, but if she ever slapped his face, he would suffer disgrace for the rest of his life, so with a pale face he stayed silent. Hearing some ripping sounds he knew she was tearing several strips of clothes. She wrapped the cloth around his thigh, above and below the wound, tightly to stop the bleeding; and then he felt icy cold water on his wound, apparently she was washing his wound with cold water. He was stupefied, thinking, "If she had evil intention, why did she save me? But if she said she doesn't harbor evil intention, humph, humph, can anything good come out of the Peach Blossom Island's sorcerers, father and daughter? She must have some evil plan for me later on. Ay, these people are so full of craftiness; it is really difficult to guess her real thoughts."

While he was busy with his own thoughts, Huang Rong had already applied some cut wound medicine and wrapped it up properly; he felt his wound was cool and for the most part the pain was gone, but suddenly he heard rumbles from inside his tummy.

Huang Rong coldly said, "I thought you were not hungry, but it turns out you are really starving. Too bad we don't have anything to eat right now. All right, let's go!" With two 'slap, slap' sounds her stick beat the two soldiers, telling those two to lift Ke Zhen'E up and continue their journey.

About thirty, forty 'li's later, the sky was getting dark. They heard the loud cry of crows; hundreds of thousands crows flew back and forth in the air. Hearing these crows Ke Zhen'E knew they were in the vicinity of the 'tie qiang miao'

[Temple of the Iron Spear]. This Temple of the Iron Spear was built to honor a well known general from the Five Dynasties period, the Iron Spear, Wang Yanzhang. Next to the temple there was a tall pagoda. For generations the crows had made their nest on top of this pagoda. There was a legend among the locals that the crows of the Temple of the Iron Spear were the spirits of dead soldiers and generals, so nobody dared to disturb them to such an extent that the crows breed and multiplied, became as many as they were that day.

“Hey,” Huang Rong said, “The sky is getting dark, where can we spend the night?”

Ke Zhen'E thought for a moment, “If we lodge at someone's residence I am afraid they might open their mouths and lead the soldiers to come and arrest us.” So he said, “Not too far from here there is an old temple.”

“What's so interesting about crows?” Huang Rong scolded, “You have never seen one before? Go!” This time Ke Zhen'E did not hear the sound of the stick, nevertheless the two soldiers cried out in pain. He wondered whether she pierced them with her finger or kicked them with her foot.

Not too long afterwards they arrived in front of the Temple of the Iron Spear. Ke Zhen'E heard Huang Rong kick the temple door open. The strong odor of crows' dung and dust assaulted their nostrils. Apparently this temple had been deserted for a long time. He was afraid she would complain of the filth, but surprisingly it seemed like she did not even notice. He heard her ordering the two soldiers to sweep the floor; she also ordered them to go to the kitchen and boil some water. Then he heard she was softly singing a song about some 'pair of mandarin ducks desire to fly together' and some 'not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white.'

A moment later the soldiers brought the hot water over. Huang Rong changed the wrap on Ke Zhen'E's wound first before washing her own face and feet. Ke Zhen'E was lying down on the ground, using the meditation mat as his pillow. Suddenly he heard she spat and said, "Why are you looking at my feet? Do you think my feet are for you to look? I'll dig your eyeballs out!"

That soldier was so scared that his soul almost left him; 'bonk, bonk, bonk' he knocked his head on the ground. Huang Rong asked, "Tell me, why did you look at me washing my feet?"

That soldier did not dare to lie; while still knocking his head he said, "Xiao De [lit. little/lowly one] deserves to die. Xiao De saw Miss' feet are very ... very beautiful ..."

Ke Zhen'E was startled, he thought, "This thief male servant bird's death is imminent, he still has a lewd heart! I wonder if the little demon will pull his muscle out or peel his skin alive." Surprisingly Huang Rong only laughed and said, "A crude and stupid man like you knows what's good and what's ugly?" 'Bang!' the stick in her hand shot out and that soldier rolling around on the ground, but she did not pursue this matter further.

The two soldiers ran to the rear courtyard with their tails between their legs, and did not dare to reappear. Ke Zhen'E stayed still, quietly waiting for what would happen next. He heard Huang Rong pacing back and forth in the main hall; she muttered, "Wang the Iron Spear's prestige shook the world in his era; in the end he was captured and decapitated. How could he flaunt himself as a hero? As some kind of warrior? Hmm, I am afraid this iron spear is not made of real cast iron."

When he was little, Ke Zhen'E, along with Zhu Cong, Han Baoju, Nan Xiren, Zhang Asheng and the others, often came to this temple to play. Although they were kids, every one of them had already had exceptional strength; they took turn brandishing that iron spear to play. When he heard what Huang Rong had just said he opened his mouth, "Of course it is made of real iron; how can it be faked?"

"Hmm," Huang Rong stretched out her hand to pull out the iron spear; she said, "It is about thirty 'jin's [catty; 1 jin = about 0.5kg]. I have lost your iron staff and momentarily can not give you any replacement. Tomorrow we'll bid good-bye; we'll go our own ways. You don't have any weapon with which to defend yourself. Why don't you use this spear as temporary replacement of your iron staff?" Without waiting for Ke Zhen'E to reply she went out and took a large rock from the courtyard; 'bang, bang' she broke the spearhead and handed the pole over to him.

Since his parents and brother died, Ke Zhen'E was inseparable with his six brothers and sister. Right now he did not have any relative left. Although he had been together with Huang Rong for only a day, unconsciously he felt that he hated to part with her; listening to her saying, "Tomorrow we'll bid good-bye; we'll go our own ways' he suddenly felt something was lost. Absent-mindedly he received the iron spear, thinking that this spear was approximately the same size and weight as his lost staff, so definitely he could use this weapon. He also thought, "She gave me this weapon, so she did not have any evil intention."

He heard her saying, "This is the 'tian qi sha dan san' [powdered medicine made of tian qi (lit. field/farm seven) shark's gallbladder] made by my father; it is very beneficial to your wound. You hate us father and daughter; whether you want to use it or not, it's up to you!" She handed the

medicine pouch over to him. Ke Zhen'E held out his hand to receive it, and then slowly put it in his pocket. He wanted to say something, but nothing came out of his mouth. He hoped she would say something else, but she only said, "All right, let's take a rest!"

Ke Zhen'E laid down on his side, with the iron spear by his side; his heart was filled with disquieting thoughts, how could he sleep? He heard the noisy crows on top of the pagoda eventually quiet down until all he could hear was silence everywhere. He did not hear her sleeping, but he heard her tossing and turning; it seemed like she was also restless.

After half a day he heard she was reciting quietly, "Four weaving machines, the weaving of mandarin ducks desires to fly together right away. It's a pity not yet old but the hair on the head has turned white. When the green spring grass ripples in the deepest of dawn's cold; standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes."

He heard she repeated the recitation softly, as if she was trying to understand its meaning. Ke Zhen'E did not understand literature, he did not understand what she was reciting, but he could hear the sadness in her voice, as if she was grieving of a heart break; he could not help but feel dazed.

A long time passed. He heard her arrange some meditation mats for her bed; then she lay down and her breathing gradually slowed down, sounded like she was falling asleep. Ke Zhen'E gently stroked the iron spear by his side; all kinds of childhood memories came flooding back into his mind. He saw Zhu Cong with an old book in his hand, reading aloud with his head swaying back and forth. He saw Han Baoju and Quan Jinfa were riding on the idol's shoulders, pulling its beard; Nan Xiren and himself were

pulling one end of the iron spear while Zhang Asheng was pulling the other end; they were playing tug-of-war with each other. At that time Han Xiaoying was only about four, five years old; two lengths of braided hair on her head, giggling and laughing, cheering over them. There were bright red ribbons on her braids, bobbing along as she moved her head. Suddenly everything turned pitch-black. Six sworn brothers and sister, his own brother, and his pair of eyes, everything was successively destroyed under Huang Yaoshi's and his disciples' hands. His heart was burned with hatred, which was very difficult to suppress.

Slowly he raised his iron spear, he quietly walked toward Huang Rong. He heard her gentle and even breathing, she was sleeping soundly. He thought, "Once my iron spear goes down, she will die without feeling anything. Hey, if not, the Old Heretic Huang's martial art is matchless, how can I avenge this deep enmity in this lifetime? His daughter is sleeping right here; the Heaven is granting me a very good opportunity, so that he knows the pain of mourning for his daughter."

But then another thought came into his mind, "This girl has saved my life, how can I repay kindness with evil? (Sigh!) After killing her, I am going to kill myself right next to her to repay today's kindness." Thinking of this, he made up his mind; he thought, "I, Ke Zhen'E, have been an upright man all my life; for decades I have never done anything shameful against the world. Right now I am going to launch a sneak attack toward a sleeping person; it is a cowardly act, but with my death I am going to repay her kindness."

Lifting his iron spear, he was just about to strike Huang Rong's head when suddenly he heard someone was laughing in the distant; the sound was ear-piercing, in the dead of the night it caused the hair on his back stood up on its end.

Huang Rong was awakened by the laughter; she leaped up and saw Ke Zhen'E with the iron spear lifted up, right in front of her. She was so shocked; she called out, "Ouyang Feng!"

Hearing her woke up, Ke Zhen'E could not strike his iron spear anymore; he heard people talking and walking toward the temple. Only they were still quite a distance away that he did not hear clearly what they were talking about. A moment later he started to hear some footsteps; there were about thirty, forty people. Ke Zhen'E was very familiar with this temple with its front hall and rear courtyard; with a low voice he said, "The Old Poison and the others must have seen the crow pagoda and come over here. Let us try to hide from them."

"Yes," Huang Rong said. She kicked the meditation mats to scatter them around the hall.

Ke Zhen'E led her hand toward the rear courtyard; he tried to push the gate, but it was bolted from the outside. "Those two thief soldiers!" he scolded viciously. He guessed those two soldiers were running away in the dark; they were afraid Huang Rong would find out, so they bolted the door in advance.

By now it was too late to strike the gate with his iron spear, since he heard the main gate was pushed open. He knew there was no hiding place in the main hall; he whispered, "Behind the idol."

Two people had barely sat behind the idol when about a dozen people entered the main hall. Ke Zhen'E heard a 'chi' sound, followed by a burst of sulfur smell; he knew someone was lighting the fire. Then he heard Ouyang Feng said, "Zhao Wangye [Prince Zhao; lit. master king], although we

did not get what we want at the Misty Rain Tavern, in the end, we managed to dampen the enemy's spirit."

Wanyan Honglie laughed and said, "This entire battle was under Mister's control."

Ouyang Feng let out some 'heh, heh' laughter, then he said, "Xiao Wangye [Young Prince] arranged an ingenious plan; gathering the soldiers from Jiaxing prefecture, firing out tens of thousands of arrows. We should have been able to round up the whole gang in one swoop; unexpectedly at the right time the thick fog came and gave this group of traitors the opportunity to slip away."

A young voice said, "With Mr. Ouyang and Qiu Bangzhu [clan leader] go into action, although the group of traitors escaped today, they will be annihilated one by one in the future. Only too bad 'wan bei' [junior, younger generation] was one step too late that I could not see Mr. Ouyang greatly unfold his divine power. It was truly a pity."

Ke Zhen'E recognized it was Yang Kang's voice; he could not restrain rage from filling his heart. Then he heard Liang Ziwen, Peng Lianhu, Sha Tongtian and the others uttered flattering words; they praised Ouyang Feng to the utmost, saying how he single-handedly fought the Quanzhen Sect, placing the group of Taoists in an extremely difficult situation, Qiu Qianren was nothing compared to him.

Listening to these many masters gathered together like this, Ke Zhen'E did not dare to breathe out loud. Just now he wanted to end his life together with Huang Rong; but somehow, this time he was afraid to be discovered by the enemy and Huang Rong and he would be killed. He heard Wanyan Honglie's people prepare some bedding and then invite Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang three people to sleep on them.

Yang Kang heaved a deep sigh and said, "Mr. Ouyang, your nephew's martial art skill was high, his conduct was natural and elegant. Wan bei admired him very much; I hoped to be good friends with him, unexpectedly he was harmed by the Quanzhen Sect's mixed-up hairs. Each time 'wan bei' remembers that, I am always grieved to the utmost. I swear to kill those evil Taoists from Quanzhen Sect one by one with my own hand to console Brother Ouyang's soul in heaven. It's a pity 'wan bei's martial art skill is meager; I truly have the desire but lack the power to do it."

Ouyang Feng was silent for a long time then he slowly said, "My nephew was unfortunate to meet his tragic death. At first I thought he died under Guo Jing's violent hand; but listening to you recount Qiu Chuji's words, I have just found out it was the Quanzhen Sect's group of evil Taoists who did it. Nowadays my White Camel Mountain does not have any heir, let me take you as my disciple."

"Shifu!" Yang Kang loudly called out, "Disciple pays his respect to you." His voice was full of happiness, followed by 'bonk, bonk, bonk' noise as he crawled into Ouyang Feng's presence and kowtowed several times.

Ke Zhen'E thought this person was a good and loyal man's descendant, yet he not only admitted an enemy as his father, but took an evil man as his master as well; he was drowned deeper and deeper. Ke Zhen'E was afraid it would be too difficult for Yang Kang to turn around; he was very angry. He heard Wanyan Honglie say, "In this foreign place we don't have any gift to offer the master, we will do it properly in the future."

Ouyang Feng sighed and said, "Pearls and jewels, the White Camel Mountain also has some. Ouyang Feng simply looks at this child's intelligence; I only wish to have an heir of the martial art I possess."

"Xiao Wang [lit. little king, referring to himself] spoke incorrectly," Wanyan Honglie said, "Mister, please forgive me."

Immediately one by one Liang Ziwen and the others offered their congratulations to these three people. In this clamor suddenly someone was calling out, "Shagu is hungry, I am starving to death; how come nobody is giving me food to eat?"

Ke Zhen'E was greatly surprised to hear Shagu's cry; he wondered how did this girl hang around with Wanyan Honglie, Ouyang Feng and the others? He heard Yang Kang say with a laugh, "That's right, quickly get some refreshments for this Miss to eat; don't let her get ill from starvation."

A moment later Shagu was heard chewing loudly, she was eating. While still chewing she said, "Good Brother, you said you are going to take me home if I listen to what you say; how come we are not home yet?"

"We'll get there tomorrow," Yang Kang replied, "Eat until you are full, then go to bed."

Yet another moment later Shagu suddenly said, "Good Brother, there is some noise in that pagoda, what is that?"

"If not bird, then it must be a mouse," Yang Kang answered.

"I am scared," Shagu said.

Yang Kang laughed, "Sha Guniang [dumb miss], what are you afraid of?" he asked.

"I am scared of ghosts," Shagu replied.

Yang Kang laughed, "We have many people here, ghosts won't dare to come."

"I am scared of that short and fat man's ghost," Shagu said.

Forcing a laugh Yang Kang said, "Don't talk nonsense, what short and fat man?"

"Hmm," Shagu said, "I know, that short and fat man died inside 'popo's [maternal grandmother] grave; popo's ghost will chase that short and fat man's ghost away, she won't let that him stay in the grave. He will come over here to ask retribution from you."

"You talk too much," Yang Kang shouted, "I am going to call your grandfather and he'll come and get you, he'll take you back to the Peach Blossom Island."

Shagu did not dare to say anything anymore. Suddenly Sha Tongtian shouted, "Hey, don't step on my foot! Just sit nicely and don't move!" It seemed that because of her fear of ghosts Shagu had randomly squeezed herself into the crowd.

As Ke Zhen'E heard this exchange, his doubt arose: the short and fat man Shagu mentioned must be his San Shidi [third martial (younger) brother], Han Baoju. He died on the Peach Blossom Island, obviously was killed by Huang Yaoshi; how could his ghost come looking for Yang Kang for retribution? Although Shagu was dumb, there must be a reason behind what she had said earlier. Too bad there were too many powerful enemies in their presence that he could not go out and ask her clearly. He further thought, "In front of the Misty Rain Tavern Huang Yaoshi said to me, 'What kind of a man is Huang Yaoshi? How can I lower myself to the same level with you?' If he did not want to kill me, why did he kill my five brothers and sister? But if it was not Huang Yaoshi, why did Si Di [fourth (younger) brother] said he saw with his own eyes that Huang Yaoshi killed Er

Di [second (younger) brother] and Qi Mei [seventh (younger) sister]?”

He was mulling around these thoughts in his mind when suddenly he felt Huang Rong pull his left hand. With her finger she wrote on his palm one character, ‘qiu’ [ask/request], followed by character after character, ‘...you a favor.’

Ke Zhen'E wrote back on her palm, “What is it?”

Huang Rong wrote, “Tell my father who killed me.”

Ke Zhen'E was startled, he did not understand her intention; he was about to pull her hand to ask further when he felt a breeze right next to him. Huang Rong had leaped out. He heard her said with a smile, “Uncle Ouyang, how are you?”

Nobody had ever expected that someone was hiding behind the idol. ‘Ca, ca, zheng, zheng’ were heard as the people unsheathed their weapons and surrounded her, while shouting, “Who is it?” “Assassin!” “Who are you?”

Huang Rong smiled and said, “My Father told me to wait for Uncle Ouyang here; what are you making such a fuss for?”

“How did your father know I will be here?” Ouyang Feng asked.

Huang Rong replied, “My father knows medicine, divination and astrology, there is nothing he doesn't know. He can do the Wang Xiantian divine calculation and he'd know everything.” [Translator's note: I am not sure about this part]

Nine out of ten Ouyang Feng did not believe her, but he knew even if he asked, she would not tell the truth anyway, so he just smiled and did not say anything. Sha Tongtian

and the others went outside the temple to take a look and did not find anybody else, so they went back in and stood around Wanyan Honglie.

Huang Rong sat on a meditation mat, smiling and chuckling she said, "Uncle Ouyang, you have given my father a hard time!"

Ouyang Feng smiled without answering. He knew that although Huang Rong was young, she was full of tricks. If he gave her one wrong answer, she would grab the opportunity to ridicule him; and in front of all these people he simply could not lose face. Therefore, he waited for her to explain her purpose in coming here before he would decide on the appropriate countermeasure. He heard her said, "Uncle Ouyang, my father is surrounded by the Taoist priests of Quanzhen Sect at the Xincheng town of Xiaopenglai; if you don't rescue him, I am afraid it would be difficult for him to escape."

Ouyang Feng showed a faint smile; "Is that so?" he asked.

Huang Rong anxiously said, "You say it as it is nothing! A real man will take responsibility of his own action; clearly it was you who killed Tan Chuduan from the Quanzhen Sect, but I don't know how it started, those stinky priests are always pestering my father. On top of that, Zhou Botong stirred up the muddy waters; while my father refused to argue with them. What do we do?"

Inwardly Ouyang Feng was delighted; he said, "Your father is a martial art expert; how can those several mixed-up hairs from Quanzhen Sect defeat him?"

"The Quanzhen Sect's ox-nosed plus the Old Urchin, my father is not their match," Huang Rong said, "My father told me to come to you and say that after painstakingly

pondering for seven days and seven nights, finally he understood the meaning of some sentences.”

“What sentences?” Ouyang Feng asked.

Huang Rong said, “Si li xing, ang yi na de. Si re que xu, ha hu wen bo ying.”

To Ke Zhen'E, Wanyan Honglie and the others, these mumbling sentences did not mean anything, but Ouyang Feng was surprised; it was the strange sentence from the last part of the Nine Yin Manual. Could it be that Huang Yaoshi really understood its meaning? His heart was thumping fast, but his face did not show any changes; he indifferently said, “Little girl loves to swindle people. Who can understand those mumbling sentences?”

Huang Rong replied, “Father has translated these strange characters; from top to bottom, clearly. I saw it with my own eyes; how can I swindle you?”

Ouyang Feng knew Huang Yaoshi's ability very well. Originally he thought that if nobody was able to solve these strange characters, then so be it; but if there was anybody who could find the solution, it must be Huang Yaoshi, for nobody else in this world had the same intelligence. Still, with an unenthusiastic voice he said, “Let me congratulate your father, then.”

Huang Rong caught the real meaning behind his words, she knew he was still half believing and half doubting; she continued, “I think I still remember some of what I saw. I don't mind if you want to listen to it.” Immediately she recited, “Either when the body moves, or feels heavy as if pressed by something, or feels light like it is ready to fly, or feels constricted, or feels extraordinarily cold or hot, or feels delightful or restless, or feels like touching something nasty and the hair stood on its end, or feels happy while

drunk; all these things must be channeled through divine passages according to the following method.”

This explanation of the Manual made Ouyang Feng’s heart unbearably itch. Turned out Huang Rong recited the section Reverend Yideng translated from the Nine Yin Manual. All these strange conditions were actually the actual situations anybody who cultivated internal energy would experience; each one of these conditions was enough to intimidate the state of mind that may cause the practitioner to suffer a fire-deviation. If there was a method to channel these conditions through the divine passages; then the method could truly be considered as highly valuable. So what Huang Rong said was indeed from the Manual and not from her own random fabrication. Ouyang Feng’s internal energy was exquisite, naturally he knew whether what he heard was real or fake. His suspicion was gone. “What comes next?” he asked.

Huang Rong said, “I don’t remember the rest, but I vaguely remember something like this: At the time the pores all over the body are empty, right away with careful consideration examine the thirty six matters inside the body; it will be like opening the door to the barn and see various kinds of straw and peas, the heart is pleasantly surprised, and quickly becomes quiet and peaceful.” First she explained the strange conditions from the Manual, and then she described the marvelous method of training; in a way she had divulged the secret method of the Manual. But Ouyang Feng was silent; he thought with her intelligence, it was impossible for her to forget, so she must be deliberately unwilling to tell him; he wondered what her intention really was.

Huang Rong continued, “My father told me to ask Uncle Ouyang: Do you want 5,000 characters, or 3,000 characters?”

“Please explain it to me,” Ouyang Feng said.

Huang Rong said, “If you go and help my father, two people join forces to destroy the Quanzhen Masters. In that case I am going to recite all 5,000 characters of this marvelous ‘jiu yin shen gong’ [Nine Yin Divine Energy] for you.”

Ouyang Feng smiled, “And if I don’t go?” he asked.

Huang Rong replied, “Then Father asked you to avenge him. After you kill Zhou Botong and the Quanzhen Six Masters, I will read the 3,000 characters for you.”

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, “Your father and I are just casual acquaintances, how come he suddenly places so much respect toward the Old Poison?”

Huang Rong said, “My father said that: First, the killer of your nephew is a Quanzhen Sect’s disciple, so he supposed you will want to seek revenge ...”

Listening to this part Yang Kang could not help but shiver; he was Qiu Chuji’s disciple, so with her words Huang Rong obviously meant him. Shagu was standing right next to him, she asked, “Good Brother, are you cold?” Yang Kang mumbled his reply.

Huang Rong continued, “Second, after translating the Manual, he was challenged into battle by the Quanzhen priests; he did not have time to explain everything to me. Thinking that this matchlessly wonderful book is difficult to find, how can he let it be lost with his demise? Nowadays you are the only one who has similar personality with him. He remembered Uncle Ouyang went to the Peach Blossom Island to seek a marriage alliance. Although your nephew was unfortunate to fall under the Quanzhen Sect’s disciple, my father said you should not thinking about him too much;

therefore, he wanted you to train this 'shen gong' [divine power/energy] and teach it to me later on."

Ouyang Feng felt a pang of pain in his heart; but he thought, "What she said was reasonable; if there is no direction from an expert, although this little girl memorized the Manual in its entirety it will still be useless." But then something else came into his mind, he said, "How do I know you will tell me the real Manual or a fake one?"

Huang Rong replied, "Guo Jing, that muddle-head has written the Manual for you; as I read the crucial points from the translation, you check it against your copy, then you'll know whether it is real or fake."

Ouyang Feng said, "You are right. Let me think about it; we'll leave in the morning to rescue your father."

Huang Rong anxiously said, "Helping people is like fighting fire, how can we wait till tomorrow?"

Ouyang Feng said with a laugh, "Then I will avenge your father; won't that be the same?" He had made a decision that as the Manual had already been in his hand, later on he could compel Huang Rong to recite to him the crucial points; and then he could think it over to understand the meaning. For now, let Huang Yaoshi and the Quanzhen Sect fight each other. Hopefully both sides would hurt each other; wouldn't that be great?

Hiding behind the idol Ke Zhen'E was listening to two people conversing about the Nine Yin Manual; he wondered why Huang Rong wrote on his palm 'Tell my father who killed me,' seven characters [the original Chinese was 'gao wo fu he ren sha wo,' 7 characters]; he did not understand her intention. He heard Huang Rong say, "Then we will leave early in the morning tomorrow, is that all right?"

"Absolutely," Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "Now you go take a rest!"

Ke Zhen'E heard Huang Rong drag a meditation mat over to sit nearby Shagu. "Shagu," she said, "Yeye [lit. paternal grandfather] took you to the Peach Blossom Island, how come you are here?"

"I don't want to follow Yeye, I want to go home," Shagu said.

"This good brother surnamed Yang; didn't he come to the island and took you on his boat, and come over here together?" Huang Rong asked.

"That's right," Shagu said, "He treats me really good."

Ke Zhen'E's heart was stirred, "When did Yang Kang come to the Peach Blossom Island?" He heard Huang Rong asked again, "Where did Yeye go?"

Shagu was startled, "Don't tell him I am running away," she said, "Yeye will beat me."

Huang Rong smiled, "I won't tell him, but whatever I ask you, you must answer me nicely."

"You must not tell Yeye," Shagu said, "He wants to take me back and teach me to write."

Huang Rong laughed, "I certainly won't tell him," she said, "Did you say Yeye wanted to teach you to write?"

"That's right," Shagu said, "That day Yeye took me to his study room and taught me to write; he said my father's surname was Qu Qu-something, so my surname is also Qu Qu-something. He wrote the Qu Qu-something character and told me to remember. He also told me my father's name was Qu Qu-something, something Feng. I could not

remember the name. Yeye got angry and scolded me that I am very dumb. I AM called Shagu [sha - dumb, gu - paternal aunt, see also my note in Chapter 23]!”

Huang Rong laughed, “Shagu is naturally dumb. Yeye scolded you, Yeye is bad, Shagu is good!” Shagu was very happy to hear that. “And then what happened?” Huang Rong asked.

Shagu said, “I said I want to go home, Yeye was even angrier. Suddenly a deaf and mute servant came, his finger pointing to the east and to the west, his mouth uttered ‘yi yi ah ah’. Yeye said, ‘I don’t want to receive any guest; tell them to go back!’ A moment later that mute servant came back with a piece of paper in his hand. Yeye took a look and then put it down on the table. He told me to go with the mute servant to receive the guest. Ha, ha, that short and fat man was so ugly! I stared at him and he stared back at me.”

Ke Zhen’E remembered that when they visited the Peach Blossom Island to seek audience, it was exactly like Shagu had just said; at first Huang Yaoshi did not want to see the six of them, then Zhu Cong wrote a letter to be delivered, afterwards Shagu came out to receive them. But the Third Brother was no longer alive; he could not help but feel grief in his heart.

He heard Huang Rong ask again, “Did Yeye see them?”

Shagu said, “Yeye told me to accompany the guests to eat, but he went out. I don’t like to see that short and fat man, so I slipped away and went out. I saw Yeye was sitting behind a rock, looking out at the ocean. I also looked at the ocean. I saw a boat in the distant coming toward the island. On the boat there were some Taoist priests.”

Ke Zhen’E thought, “That day we heard the Quanzhen Sect was going to go to the Peach Blossom Island to seek

revenge; so we went ahead of them to inform Huang Yaoshi to temporarily keep himself away from them, and wait for the Six Freaks of Jiangnan to explain the whole story to the Quanzhen Sect. But all along we have never seen the Quanzhen Masters on the Island, why did this Shagu said that there were Taoist priests came in by boat?"

He heard Huang Rong asked, "Then what did Yeye do?"

Shagu replied, "Yeye beckoned me to come over. I jumped in fright; turned out he had already seen me slipping out to play. I did not dare to come over, I was afraid he would hit me. He said "I won't hit you, you come over here". So I went over. He said he wanted to take a boat ride and go fishing, he told me to wait for the Taoist priests and to let them in as soon as they came ashore; he told me to let them eat together with the short and fat man six people. I said I wanted to go fishing too. Yeye said I could not come; I had to wait for the Taoist priests and let them in, because they did not know the way on the Island."

"And then what happened?" Huang Rong asked.

Shagu said, "And then Yeye went beyond the big rock and set sail. I know, these Taoist priests are ugly, Yeye did not want to meet them."

Huang Rong praised her, "That's right, what you said is totally correct. When did Yeye come back?"

"Come back?" Shagu said, "He did not come back."

Ke Zhen'E was shaken; he heard Huang Rong ask, "Are you sure? Then what happened?" He could hear her voice was slightly trembling; apparently she also realized this was a crucial point.

Shagu replied, "Yeye was about to set sail, suddenly a pair of big birds came flying by; they were your birds. Yeye beckoned and whistled toward the birds, this pair of birds came down. There was something tied on the bird's foot, it looked so amusing. I shouted, 'Yeye, give it to me, give it to me!' ..." Speaking to this point she actually shouted loudly.

Yang Kang chided her, "Quiet! Everybody is trying to sleep."

"Shagu," Huang Rong said, "Just continue your story."

Shagu said, "I will speak quietly." And she indeed lowered her voice, "Yeye ignored me; he ripped a cloth from his robe and tied it up on the big bird's foot, then he let them go."

"Hmm," Huang Rong talked to herself, "Father was going to avoid the Quanzhen Masters, no wonder he did not have time to fetch the 'jin wawa' [see Chapter 29]. But who shot the female eagle with an arrow?" So she asked, "Who shot an arrow to the bird?"

"Arrow? There was no arrow," Shagu said; and then she went silent like she was lost in thought.

"All right," Huang Rong said, "Why don't you continue?"

Shagu continued, "Yeye saw his robe was torn, he took it off and told me to go and get another one for him. But when I came back Yeye was gone, the Taoist priests' boat was also gone, I only saw that torn robe lying on the ground."

Listening to her to this point Huang Rong no longer asked; she silently mulled it over in her head. Half a day later she said, "Where did they go?"

"I saw them," Shagu said, "I called Yeye, but he did not reply. I climbed to the top of a big tree and looked, I saw Yeye's little boat in front, the Taoist priests' big boat

followed behind, slowly they sailed on the ocean and disappeared. I don't like to see that short and fat man, I stayed on the beach, kicking the gravel and playing all day until dark, and came back with this Yeye and this good brother."

"So it was this Yeye, and not the one who taught you to write?" Huang Rong asked.

Shagu giggled and said, "This Yeye is good, not only he did not want to teach me to write, he even gave me a piece of cake."

"Uncle Ouyang," Huang Rong said, "Do you still have the cake? Can you give her some more?"

Ouyang Feng dryly laughed, "I do."

Ke Zhen'E felt as if his heart was jumping out his throat, "Turned out Ouyang Feng was on the Island that day," he thought.

"Aiyo!" suddenly he heard Shagu cry out, followed by 'slap, slap' two times, some people were fighting, and then someone leaped back and landed again. He heard Huang Rong call out, "You want to kill her to close her mouth?"

Ouyang Feng laughed, "This matter might be hidden from other people, but certainly won't be hidden from your father. Why would I want to kill this dumb girl? If you want to ask, then just ask her." But Shagu was moaning and groaning and could not talk anymore. Ke Zhen'E wondered which part of her was hit by Ouyang Feng.

"I don't have to ask," Huang Rong said, "I've already guessed correctly; I only want Shagu to say it with her own mouth."

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "This little girl is really smart. How did you guess? Why don't you tell me?"

Huang Rong said, "When I first saw the situation of the Island, I also thought that Father had killed the Five Freaks of Jiangnan. But then I remembered something, and I knew it must not be him. Just think, how can my father leave these stinky male corpses in my mother's grave to accompany her? How can he leave the grave without closing the door?"

"Aiyo," Ouyang Feng slapped his thigh, "We really overlooked that. Kang'er, isn't that so?"

Hearing this Ke Zhen'E felt his chest was about to burst open; only now did he realize that Huang Rong had early on known that the killers were Ouyang Feng and Yang Kang, two people. The reason she suddenly went out and sacrificed her own life was to reveal the truth and clear up her father from being wrongly accused. She knew perfectly well that when she went out, most likely she would be unfortunate rather than fortunate; that was why she asked Ke Zhen'E to tell her father who killed her. Ke Zhen'E was filled with grief and regret, he said in his heart, "Good Miss, it would be enough if you just told me who the killer is; why do you deliver your life in vain?" But then he thought, "I, the 'fei tian bian fu' [Flying Bat, lit. bat flying to the sky], am so hot-tempered. I am blind, yet I placed the blame on father and daughter. Even if she told me clearly, would I believe her? Ke Zhen'E, oh, Ke Zhen'E, you stinky blind man, you deserve to be killed with a thousand blades; you have forced this good Miss' death."

In his regret he wanted to lift his hand and fiercely slap his own ear, but he heard Ouyang Feng said, "How did you guess it was me?"

Huang Rong said, "Is it difficult? In this present age, those who are able to strike the yellow horse and to break the balance beam are not many. But at first I was thinking of a different person. At the point of his death Nan Xiren had written several characters with his finger on the ground, 'My killer is ten'; he died before the fifth character [translator's note: the original Chinese text was 'sha wo zhe nai shi'] was finished. I thought your name does not start with a 'ten' (十), so I thought it was the character 'Qiu' (仇) from Qiu Qianren."

Ouyang Feng laughed out loud, he said, "This man Nan Xiren was truly a die hard; unexpectedly he survived and saw you."

Huang Rong said, "I saw his condition before his death, I was sure he was hit by a strange poison; I thought Qiu Qianren practiced poisonous palm skill, that's why I guessed it was him."

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "Qiu Qianren's martial art is based on palm strength and not poisonous palm. His palms do not have any poison on them. He used boiling poison to train his palms, but it is merely palm strength's training method. He forced the poison gas to come out, henceforth his palm strength increased. When he died, that Nan Xiren opened his mouth, but could not say anything, his face showed a smiling expression, is that right?"

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "What kind of poison is that?"

Ouyang Feng did not answer, he asked again, "His body was twisted, he was rolling around on the ground, he suddenly possessed unusually great strength, is that right?"

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "This violent poison, I thought other than the Iron Palm Clan, nobody in the world

can possibly have it.”

It was obvious that Huang Rong said that to provoke Ouyang Feng, and he knew it very well, but he still could not restrain from being agitated and angry, “Do you think people call me the Old Poison for nothing?” He stomped his snake staff heavily on the ground and shouted, “The snake on this staff bit him on his tongue, that’s why there was no wound on his body, but he could not speak.”

Hearing this Ke Zhen’E felt warm blood bubbling up straight to his brain, he almost fainted several times. Huang Rong heard movement from behind the idol, she let out some coughs, trying to cover up the noise, and then slowly said, “The Five Freaks of Jiangnan died under your hands, Ke Zhen’E who escaped does not have eyes to see, in the end nobody knew the real killer.”

Listening to her Ke Zhen’E’s heart was stirred, “She is saying that to remind me, telling me not to act rashly so that the two of us will not lose our lives and die without explanation.” He heard Ouyang Feng laugh dryly, “How can that stinky blind man escape my palm? I deliberately let him go.”

“Ah, right,” Huang Rong said, “You killed five people, and let him believe it was my father who killed them. He would go and publicize this matter, then rally the heroes of the world to attack my father.”

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, “It was actually not my idea, but Kang’er’s; isn’t that right?” Yang Kang mumbled his reply.

Huang Rong said, “It is truly a divine and marvelous strategy. My utmost admiration!”

Ouyang Feng said, "You changed the topic; what made you think of me?"

Huang Rong replied, "I thought Qiu Qianren and I fought at the southern road between Hunan and Hubei; even though it is possible for him to overtake us and arrive at the Peach Blossom Island ahead of us, it was actually very difficult with us riding the little red horse. I thought again about what Zhu Cong wrote at the back of the letter, he called everybody to stay on their guard. The last character was not finished, he only made three strokes: one horizontal line, one vertical, and another horizontal like a hook. It could be the start of 'east' (东) character, or it could be 'west' (西) character, couldn't it? If not 'Eastern Heretic' then it must be 'Western Poison'. I have thought about this on the Peach Blossom Island; but there are some details I do not understand yet."

Ouyang Feng sighed, "I thought I have done everything flawlessly, who would have thought there are so many trails I left behind. That dirty scholar was so quick, I did not even see him moving his pen to write anything."

"He was known as the Magic Hand Scholar," Huang Rong said, "Naturally he would not let you see whatever he was doing. I pondered deeply over the character 'ten' (十) Nan Xiren wrote; I wonder what could it be? It was because I thought this Xiao Wangye's [young prince, lit. young master king] martial art skill is so low that definitely he did not have the ability to kill the Five Freaks of Jiangnan in one stroke, therefore, I have never suspected him."

"Humph," Yang Kang snorted.

Huang Rong continued, "That day I was all alone on the Peach Blossom Island, tossing and turning between being asleep and awake; I could not find the right conclusion. I

was dreaming of many, many people, I dreamt about Mu Jiejie [elder sister Mu], I dreamt she was in Beijing, during the joust to find a spouse. I suddenly was awakened from the dream, sprang up, and only then did I know the killer was actually this Xiao Wangye!”

Hearing Huang Rong saying these words with sharp voice Yang Kang was drenched in cold sweats; forcing a laugh he said, “Did Mu Nianci tell you in a dream?”

“That’s right,” Huang Rong said, “If not for this dream, how could I guess it was you? Where is that little emerald shoe of yours?”

Yang Kang was startled, with a stern voice he asked, “How did you know? Did Mu Nianci also tell you in a dream?”

With a cold smile Huang Rong said, “Do you think I need it? After you two killed Zhu Cong, you stuffed the treasures inside my mother’s grave in his pocket; so that when other people see it, they would think he robbed the treasures and was found out by my father; thus he lost his life. Framing someone like this is actually a clever idea; only you forgot one thing: Zhu Cong was known as the Magic Hand Scholar.”

Ouyang Feng’s curiosity arose, “What about the Magic Hand Scholar?” he asked.

“Humph,” Huang Rong sneered, “He only knows putting treasures on other, he actually did not know that other took a treasure from his body.”

Ouyang Feng did not understand, “What treasure?” he asked.

Huang Rong said, “Although Zhu Cong’s martial art skill was inferior to you, at the point of his death again he

displayed his magic hand skill; he took something from this Xiao Wangye and grasped it in his hand, of course you did not know. If not because of this thing, not in a million years would I expect this Xiao Wangye to pay a visit on the Peach Blossom Island."

Ouyang Feng said with a smile, "This matter becomes more and more interesting; this Magic Hand Scholar was actually highly skilled, his life had already gone yet he was still able to leave you a clue. The thing he took must be that little emerald shoe you were talking about."

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "I have seen all the treasures inside Mother's grave since I was little; and I have never seen this little emerald shoe before. Even in his death Zhu Cong still grasped this shoe tightly; there must be a reason behind it. The front of this shoe has a 'bi' [contest, compete] character on it, while on the opposite side there was a 'zhao' [to recruit] character. I painstakingly thought about this, but all along could not penetrate the mystery. That night I had a dream, I saw Mu Jiejie on a street corner in Beijing showing off her martial art skill. There was an embroidered banner stood on the side, with the word 'bi wu zhao qin' [Joust to find a spouse - lit. martial art contest to recruit a relative/person with intimate relation] on it. Suddenly it dawned on me and everything clicked together."

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, "Turned out these two characters on the shoe have this romantic history! Ha, ha, ha, ha!" He laughed happily, but actually Ke Zhen'E was listening in indignation, since he did not understand what it was that dawned on Huang Rong's mind.

Huang Rong knew Ke Zhen'E did not understand, so with the pretense of talking to Ouyang Feng, she explained clearly, "That day in Beijing Mu Jiejie was jousting for a

spouse, Xiao Wangye happened to display his full capability. Lucky for me I was there in the crowd to witness this lively occasion. After contesting for a while, Xiao Wangye snatched Mu Jiejie's embroidered shoe. He won the martial art contest, so he should marry her, but actually there were many complicated affairs involved."

This joust to find a spouse did indeed have too many repercussions later on. At that time Liang Ziweng, Sha Tongtian and the others were also present to be the witnesses: Wanyan Honglie mourned his wife, Yang Kang met his biological father, and all kinds of circumstances surrounding it. Listening to this point everybody's heart was filled with sadness and regret.

Huang Rong said, "After I remembered this, I was able to figure out what had happened. Xiao Wangye and Mu Jiejie privately agreed to spend their lives together in the future; naturally they decided the engraved jade shoes would make the best token of engagement. This pair of jade shoes complement each other; one has the 'bi' and 'zhao' two characters, the other must have the 'wu' [martial art] and 'qin' [relative/person with intimate relation] on it. Xiao Wangye, did I guess correctly?" Yang Kang did not answer.

Huang Rong continued, "Once I figured this thing out, the rest was easy. Han Baoju was killed by the 'jiu yin bai gu zhua' [Nine Yin White Bone Claw]. In this world only 'hei feng shuang sha' [the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind] practiced this martial art; but these two had already died. Others would certainly think that the Twin Killers of the Dark Wind's shifu must be also proficient in this skill. Who would have thought that my father had never practiced this Nine Yin White Bone Claw or any skill similar to this martial art; yet the Copper Corpse Mei Chaofeng had received a skilled disciple when she was still alive. Therefore, the tiny 'ten' character Nan Xiren wrote must be the start of 'yang'

(黄) character. Unexpectedly that muddle-head kid Guo Jing insisted it was the 'huang' (黄) character." Speaking to this point Huang Rong could not help feeling gloomy.

Ouyang Feng let out a long laugh and said, "No wonder that Guo Jing kid disregarded his own life attacking your father at the Misty Rain Tavern."

Huang Rong sighed, "Your trick was really marvelous; in his anger that muddle-head kid could not distinguish right from wrong. At first I thought you captured one of the deaf and mute servants and forced him to show you the way; only today did I realize it was Shagu who let you in. Xiao Wangye must have promised to take her back to the Ox Village; Shagu was so happy and did whatever you told her to do. Hmm, you two must have set up an ambush inside my mother's grave; then you told Shagu to invite the Six Freaks of Jiangnan in my father's name, telling them to come into the grave. With Uncle Ouyang blocking the grave entrance, how could the Six Freaks of Jiangnan escape your cruel hands? It was truly capturing the turtle inside an earthen jar."

Listening to her Ke Zhen'E got the impression that she was there to witness everything; the feeling when that day they fought powerful enemy in the tomb came back to his mind. He heard Huang Rong continue, "Uncle Ouyang had seen my father's long robe on the shore; he took and wore it. The light inside the grave room was dim, in a flash several of the Six Freaks were injured or killed, how could the rest of them recognize the enemy in that desperate situation? So Nan Xiren told Ke Zhen'E that the killer was my father. Zhu Cong and Quan Jinfa were killed by Uncle Ouyang; Han Baoju was killed by Xiao Wangye while Han Xiaoying cut her own throat. Ke and Nan two people managed to escape from the grave, and fought furiously in the study room. You deliberately let Ke Zhen'E escape. By the time Nan Xiren

recognized the killer to be the one surnamed Yang, he had already been bitten by the snake.”

Ouyang Feng sighed, “This little girl has a god-like analytical ability. All these things happened by chance; it was the Six Freaks’ fate that they should die this way. When I went to the Peach Blossom Island with Kang’er, we did not know the Six Freaks of Jiangnan would be there.”

“That’s true,” Huang Rong said, “Although the Six Freaks of Jiangnan enjoyed sound reputation in the Jianghu, it was because of their ‘xia yi’ [chivalry], two characters. If we are talking about martial art skill, Uncle Ouyang would not even look at them. So if you two went through great length executing your scheme, you must have another big plan in your mind.”

Ouyang Feng smiled and said, “Little girl is very smart; you must have guessed correctly.”

Huang Rong said, “Indeed I have; but I ask Uncle Ouyang’s forgiveness if it is incorrect. I believe your initial intention was to see the Quanzhen Masters and my father fight each other and injure each other, and then just like Bian Zhuang stabbing the tiger you would destroy both Quanzhen Sect and the Peach Blossom Island in one fell swoop. Who would have thought that you were one step too late; my father and the Taoist priests of Quanzhen Sect have already left the Island. Xiao Wangye interrogated Shagu, and found out that the Six Freaks of Jiangnan were there. Mmm, thereupon you two fully displaying your capabilities by killing the Five Freaks, and arranged it so that all blames will fall to my father. You killed all the deaf and mute servants on the Island, and burned their bodies down to leave no trace; hence there would be no evidence at all. Later on when this matter is known, how can Hong Qigong, Emperor Duan and the others not make things difficult for my father? Xiao

Wangye was afraid my father would return early and erase all sorts of traces you left behind on the Peach Blossom Island; therefore, you intentionally let Ke Zhen'E escape. This man is blind, but his tongue is not rotten yet. It's true that he cannot see, but he can say all kinds of nonsense."

Listening to this Ke Zhen'E could not help but feeling grieved and angry, but also ashamed. He heard Ouyang Feng sigh and say, "I really envy the Old Heretic Huang to have such a good daughter. Everything that happened was really very complicated, but you guessed everything correctly, as if you have seen everything with your own eyes. Little baby doll, you are really smart."

End of Chapter 35.

Chapter 36 - Expedition to the West

Translated by Frans Soetomo, with special thanks to Mr. Jamin Soetomo



Ke Zhen'E moved his spear to attack the incoming hand. Ouyang Feng raised his arm a little and Ke

Zhen'E's arms were numb and he felt pressure on his chest. His spear flew upward, making a hole in the ceiling and landing on the temple's roof.

Huang Rong quietly said, "I appreciate Uncle Ouyang's compliments to me. Too bad Guo Jing is so gullible that right now he doesn't even want to live in the same world as my father and I. After you save my father, if your nephew were still alive, ay! Couldn't the marriage proposal of the past be pursued further?"

Ouyang Feng's heart was stirred, "What is she getting at by bringing this matter up?" he pondered. In the meantime, Huang Rong continued, "Shagu, this good brother is very nice to you, isn't he?"

"Yes," Shagu answered, "He is going to take me home. I don't want to play on that island anymore, I want to go home."

"What are you going to do at home?" Huang Rong asked, "There is a dead man in your house; there is a ghost there."

"Ah!" Shagu cried, she was scared, "Ah! There is a ghost in my house, a ghost! I don't want to go home."

"Who killed that man?" Huang Rong asked.

"I saw it, it was this good brother ..." Shagu answered, but before she finished, 'bing! bing!' a couple of metallic sounds were heard, two secret projectiles fell down on the ground.

Huang Rong laughed, "Xiao Wangye [Young Prince], you don't want her to talk? Fine. Just don't use secret projectiles to hurt her."

Yang Kang was indignant, "This idiot talked nonsense, with ghost and everything."

"Shagu," Huang Rong said, "You can keep talking. This nice Yeye [grandpa] loved to hear your story."

"No," Shagu answered, "Good brother doesn't want Shagu to talk, Shagu won't talk."

"That's right," Yang Kang said, "Go lie down and sleep. If you open your mouth for just one more word, I'll have the ghost come over and eat you."

Shagu was very scared, "Oh, Oh," she said. Then Ke Zhen'E heard some rustling sound. It was Shagu's clothes, she lied down and slept.

"Shagu," Huang Rong said, "If you don't want to talk to me, I'll get Yeye to take you back to the Island."

"I don't want to go, I don't want to go," Shagu screamed.

"Then you'll have to talk," Huang Rong said, "This good brother has killed someone in your house; what kind of man has he killed?" Everybody felt strange on why she suddenly wanted to talk about Yang Kang killing a man.

Yang Kang's heart was thumping loudly, he got his right hand ready; as soon as Shagu revealed his secret about him killing someone at the Ox Village, even if it would arouse Ouyang Feng's suspicion, he would use the 'Nine Yin White-bone Claw' to kill Shagu. He was wondering in his heart at the same time, "When I killed Ouyang Ke, only Mu Nianci, Cheng Yaojia and Lu Guanying, three people saw it. Did any one of them leak the secret? Hmm, it is likely that Shagu was also there to witness it, I was not being careful."

The temple was quiet and everybody was waiting for Shagu to open her mouth. Ke Zhen'E could feel the tension, but he

did not dare to make a slightest move. After waiting for half a day Shagu still did not say anything, only her light snore was heard; apparently she had fallen asleep.

Yang Kang breathed out a sigh of relief; his palm was sweating cold, "This Shagu poses a great danger to me," he thought, "I must think of a way to get rid of her." He cast his glance toward Ouyang Feng who was sitting quietly with his eyes closed. The moon illuminated the side of his face. He looked indifferent, seemed like he was unconcerned of everything that was going on around him.

Everybody else thought Huang Rong was just talking nonsense. Shagu was asleep; looked like the case was closed. They started to lie down or sat leaning against the wall, trying to get some sleep.

Just when the moon was rising higher they heard Shagu's startled voice. She jumped up and shouted, "Don't hurt me! Ouch, it hurt!"

With shrilling voice Huang Rong cried, "Ghost! Ghost! It's a ghost without legs! Shagu, you killed that young mister without legs; he is coming to get you!"

In the quietness of the night Huang Rong's voice made the hair on everybody's back rose up.

"No!" Shagu cried, "It wasn't me! It was this good brother ..." she had not finished when suddenly 'Ah!' 'Bang!' 'Aiyo!' were heard simultaneously. Yang Kang abruptly sprang up, his arms outstretched, his fingers forming a claw heading straight toward Shagu's skull, but Huang Rong had used her dog-beating stick to entangle his legs.

The temple was in chaos; Sha Tongtian and the others immediately surrounded Huang Rong. Huang Rong, however, seemed oblivious to all this, her left index finger

pointed toward the temple's door; she cried out, "Mister with no legs, come here, Shagu is here!"

Shagu looked at the temple door. It was dark, so all she could see was blackness, but she was always scared of ghosts ever since she was little; quickly she pulled Huang Rong's sleeve and cried in panic, "Don't come to take my life, it was this good brother who killed you with an iron spearhead. I was in the kitchen watching through the door ... ghost with no legs, don't come looking for me!"

Not in a million years would Ouyang Feng guess that his beloved nephew was killed by Yang Kang; yet he always thought that Yang Kang was unable to tell lies. Obviously Shagu could not lie.

Sad and angry he laughed maniacally, casting a sharp glance toward Yang Kang. "Xiao Wangye, my nephew deserved to die. It's good that you killed him, it's good!" he said. His laughter sent a chill on everybody's spine; his voice was very mournful, making ears buzzing like innumerable needles were piercing their eardrums at the same time. Everybody was trembling, their teeth chattered. There were thousands of white-head crows on the temple's pagoda that night; Ouyang Feng's laughter startled them. 'Caw! Caw! Caw!' they were crying noisily and then they flew away loudly flapping their wings.

Yang Kang thought he would not live to see another day; both eyes looking left and right, trying to find a way to escape.

Wanyan Honglie was also secretly frightened. After the crows noise subsided he said, "This girl is insane, Mister Ouyang, how can you believe what she said? Your honorable nephew came by Xiao Wangye's invitation because Xiao Wang [lit. little king - he was referring to himself] is relying

heavily on his assistance. How could Xiao Wangye harm him without any reason?"

Seemingly without making any effort Ouyang Feng stood up, his body glided over and with a slight bend on his knees he landed on Shagu's side. His left hand grabbed Shagu's arm. "Why did he kill my nephew? Speak up!" he roared.

Shagu was scared to death. "I didn't kill him, don't hurt me! Don't hurt me!" she cried. She struggled hard, but Ouyang Feng's grip was like a pair of steel pliers, how could Shagu free herself? The more she struggled, the harder his grip became. Shagu was frightened and cried, "Mama!"

Ouyang Feng repeated his question several times; Shagu became so scared from crying that she did not dare to cry anymore. She only stared at Ouyang Feng's face with a blank expression.

"Shagu," Huang Rong soothingly said, "Don't be afraid, this nice grandpa is going to give you a cake."

Her words reminded Ouyang Feng. He realized that if he used force, Shagu would not dare to talk; therefore, he groped inside his pocket and produced a dried and already cold steamed bun and held it out to Shagu's hand. "That's right! Here, you can eat this cake."

Shagu grabbed the bun, her fear was gone. "Yeye, you grabbed my arm, it hurt, you must not grab me anymore," she said.

"Good Shagu, you are an obedient child," Ouyang Feng warmly said, "Yeye won't grab your arm anymore."

Huang Rong said, "That day the mister without legs was hugging a lady. Tell me, was she pretty?"

Shagu nodded. "Very pretty. I wonder where she is going."

Huang Rong asked again, "Do you know who she is? You don't know, do you?"

Shagu's face lit, she was so proud of herself; she clapped her hands and said, "I know, I know! She is this good brother's wife!"

Hearing this, any doubt left in Ouyang Feng's heart was gone. He knew his nephew's lecherous character; it must be because of Mu Nianci that his nephew met his fate. But, Ouyang Ke's martial art was higher than Yang Kang's; even though his legs were injured, Yang Kang was still not his match; he could not figure out how Yang Kang was able to kill him? He turned his head toward Yang Kang and said, "My nephew was oblivious to what's good and what's not, he dared to offend the Xiao Wangye's concubine; he deserved to die ten thousand times."

"No ... No ..." Yang Kang stammered. "It wasn't me ..."

"Then who?" Ouyang Feng sternly asked.

Yang Kang was so scared that his knees turned into rubber, cold sweats pouring down his forehead; his usual shrewdness was gone, he was unable to utter a single word.

Huang Rong sighed, "Uncle Ouyang, you can't blame the Xiao Wangye of being heartless, you can't blame your nephew flirtatious character either, you have only your superb martial art to blame."

"How so?" Ouyang Feng was puzzled.

Huang Rong answered, "I don't know why, but in that house at the Ox Village I heard a couple, a man and a woman, were talking. I do not understand what they were discussing."

Listening to this muddy talk with so many unknown Ouyang Feng was more confounded, "What did they say?" he asked.

Huang Rong answered, "I will repeat what they said word for word, I won't add or subtract a single word; please Uncle hear me out. I did not see their faces, I don't know who the man was, I don't know who the woman was either; what I heard was that man said, 'If this fact that I killed Ouyang Ke ever leaks out, won't that be a disaster?' That woman replied, 'A real man is not afraid to take responsibility of his action. If you are afraid, you shouldn't have killed him yesterday. Even though his uncle is very fierce, we can run away to some far away place, he won't be able to find us.'"

Listening to Huang Rong, Ouyang Feng said, "That woman was right. What did the man say?"

While these two were talking, one asked the questions and the other answered, Yang Kang was getting more and more afraid than ever. The moon cast its light through the temple's door, throwing a slanting column of light illuminating the face of the temple's idol. Yang Kang slowly moved away from the light, quietly walked toward Huang Rong's back. He heard Huang Rong answered Ouyang Feng's question.

"That man said, 'Meizi [sister/beloved], I have another thought: his uncle's martial art is unparalleled, I wanted to take him as my master, I have had this thought for a while, but they followed a very strict rule: they only take one disciple per generation. Now that this man is dead, his uncle might take me as his disciple!"

Huang Rong did not mention anybody's name, but she had an uncanny ability to imitate Yang Kang's accent. Yang Kang grew up in the northern area, but Bai Xirou, his

mother, was a native of Lin'an in the south; so Yang Kang's accent was a mixture between northerners and southerners. As soon as Huang Rong said these things, everybody knew it was Yang Kang she was imitating.

Ouyang Feng laughed coldly; he turned his head but did not see Yang Kang.

Suddenly they heard 'whack!', then 'Aiyo!' Someone was crying in alarm. They saw Yang Kang standing under the moonlight with blood dripping from his right hand, his face was deathly pale.

Turned out that when Yang Kang heard Huang Rong was revealing his secret he could not restrain himself much longer; he leaped ferociously, his claw was aimed toward Huang Rong's head. As Huang Rong imitated Yang Kang's accent, she was fully aware he would certainly attack her; therefore, she had guarded against this attack from the start. Her martial art level was higher than Yang Kang's. As soon as she heard the gust of wind she leaned her head sideways to elude, so the claw fell on her shoulder.

Yang Kang had launched the 'Nine Yin White-bone Claw' with all his might, his five fingers landed on the soft hedgehog armor Huang Rong was wearing. A shot of pain traveled from his fingers to his brain; he almost pass out.

The others were clueless as whether it was Yang Kang who made the sneak attack, or was it Huang Rong or Ouyang Feng who attacked him. They were all scared of Ouyang Feng, so nobody dared to say anything.

Wanyan Honglie rushed forward, trying to help. "Kang'er, what happened to you? Where does it hurt?" he asked. Casually he took out the dagger on his belt and placed it on Yang Kang's hand. He realized Ouyang Feng would not

have good intention. He was hoping that in a chaotic battle they, father and son, would be able to save their lives.

Enduring his pain Yang Kang said, "I am all right." He held out his hand to grab the dagger, but his hand was numb, 'clank!' the dagger fell on the floor. Hastily he stooped down to pick it up, but strangely his arm was stiff; it did not want to follow his command anymore. He was extremely shocked. He tried to pinch his right arm with his left fingers, but he did not feel anything. He looked up toward Huang Rong and cried out in horror, "Poison! Poison! You used poison to harm me!"

Peng Lianhu and the others knew they were going to offend Ouyang Feng, but Wanyan Honglie was the Great Jin's prominent Prince; surely this Ouyang Ke affair could be discussed peacefully later. Seeing Yang Kang's frightened expression, they immediately rushed forward to offer words of sympathy and called out to Huang Rong, "Quickly give the antidote to Xiao Wangye!" but everybody stayed as far as possible from Ouyang Feng.

Huang Rong was indifferent, "Don't make a fuss; my soft hedgehog armor does not have any poison on it. There is somebody here who wants to kill him, I don't have to lift a finger to harm him."

But suddenly Yang Kang shouted, "I ... I ... I can't move!" His knees buckled, his body slowly slid down, his mouth was producing a growling noise much like a wild beast.

Huang Rong felt strange and she turned toward Ouyang Feng, but saw that he was carrying a puzzled expression as well. She turned back toward Yang Kang, she saw Yang Kang was strangely happy, a crack of smile appeared on the corners of his mouth. Under the silvery moonlight he looked

inhumanly ghastly. Suddenly a thought came into her mind, she said, "It was Uncle Ouyang who poisoned you."

Ouyang Feng was puzzled, "From the look of him, it was indeed my marvelous snake's poison. I had wanted him to taste it, this little girl had done it on my behalf. Wonderful! Wonderful! But those snakes, I am the only one in this world who owns them, where did the little girl get it from?"

"Where can I get that kind of snakes?" Huang Rong asked, "This is your own poison, you have unwittingly poison him yourself."

"You are talking weird," Ouyang Feng said.

"Uncle Ouyang," Huang Rong said, "I remember your bet against the Old Urchin. You took the poison from your snakes and feed it to a shark. As this shark died of the poison, the second shark ate its flesh and died of the same poison. This way the poison was spreading endlessly. Isn't that so?"

Ouyang Feng laughed, "If my poison is not extraordinary, won't my title 'Western Poison' be in vain?"

"That's right," Huang Rong said, "Nan Xiren was the first shark."

By that time Yang Kang was already rolling around on the ground like a madman. Liang Ziweng wanted to comfort him, but how could he stop him?

Ouyang Feng ignored everything, he knitted his eyebrows trying to understand what Huang Rong was saying, but it was still dark to him. "Please elaborate," he said.

"Hmm, you used your viper to bite Nan Xiren. That day I came across him on the Peach Blossom Island and he hit me. His fist landed on my left shoulder. The sharp needles of

my soft hedgehog armor punctured his hand, so his poisonous blood was transferred to my soft hedgehog armor, which became the second shark. When Xiao Wangye attacked me, heaven's net tightened, his claw grabbed my shoulder. Nan Xiren's poisoned blood was transferred once again to him. Hey, hey, he is the third shark."

Hearing Huang Rong's explanation everybody realized how deathly Ouyang Feng's poison was. They also remembered Yang Kang's treacherous plan in killing the Five Freaks; in the end it was Nan Xiren's blood which kill him. It was truly a revenge well-deserved. A chill crept into everybody's back.

Wanyan Honglie walked toward Ouyang Feng, knelt in front of him and asked, "Mr. Ouyang, please help save my son's life; Xiao Wang will always remember your benevolence."

Ouyang Feng laughed sinisterly, "Your son's life is a life indeed, my nephew's life was not a life!" His gaze swept through Peng Lianhu and the others' faces and coldly said, "Which hero does not agree with me, please speak up!" Everybody recoiled simultaneously. Who would dare to open his mouth?

Yang Kang suddenly leaped up, 'bang!' he hit Liang Ziwen, sending him somersaulted in the air and passed out. Wanyan Honglie stood up, calling, "Quick! Take Xiao Wangye back to Lin'an; we'll find a good doctor to cure his injury."

Ouyang Feng laughed, "Who in this world can neutralize The Old Poison's venom? Which doctor won't want to live and dare to mess up my handiwork?"

Wanyan Honglie ignored him, he shouted toward his martial artists, "What are you waiting for? Quickly take Xiao Wangye away."

Suddenly Yang Kang jumped high until his head almost hit the beam. He pointed his finger at Wanyan Honglie and he shouted, "You are not my father! You killed my mother, now you kill me!"

Wanyan Honglie stepped back and stumbled down. Sha Tongtian said, "Xiao Wangye, please calm down." He stepped forward to grab Yang Kang's arms. Unexpectedly Yang Kang flipped his hand to push away Sha Tongtian's hand and quickly seized his arm. Yang Kang's left hand formed a claw scratching Sha Tongtian's arm.

Sha Tongtian cried in pain, hastily he rolled backward to escape, but a moment later he felt itchiness on his arm. He was terror-stricken!

"This is the fourth shark," Huang Rong coldly said.

Peng Lianhu and Sha Tongtian were good friends, moreover, Peng Lianhu was also an expert poison user, he knew Sha Tongtian was poisoned and his life was in grave danger. In this critical moment almost without thinking he took the saber from his waist and swiftly chopped Sha Tongtian's arm halfway down.

Hou Tonghai did not understand Peng Lianhu's good intention, "Peng Lianhu, you dare to hurt my 'Shige'? [Elder martial brother]" He charged Peng Lianhu disregarding his own safety.

Sha Tongtian endured the pain and shouted, "Idiot, back-off! Brother Peng was saving my life!"

By this time Yang Kang's mind was cloudy, he was charging to the east and striking to the west, kicking and biting randomly. Everybody saw what happened to Sha Tongtian, nobody dared to come close to him; shouting and yelling they darted out of the temple.

It was a very chaotic situation; the crows on the pagoda were startled, they flew around in confusion under the moonlight around the temple's courtyard. Their noisy cries intermingled with Yang Kang's neighing voice.

As Wanyan Honglie was heading toward the temple door he turned his head one more time and called out, "Kang'er! Kang'er!"

Yang Kang's eyes were brimming with tears; he also called out, "Fu Wang! Fu Wang! [Father King]" He walked toward Wanyan Honglie.

Wanyan Honglie was delighted, he spread out his arms and hugged Yang Kang tightly, "Child, are you feeling better?"

Under the moonlight Yang Kang's face suddenly changed; he opened his mouth, revealing two rows of white teeth, ready to bite. Wanyan Honglie was shocked. His left hand pushed out, breaking the hug. Yang Kang's strength was completely gone; he fell backwards. He struggled hard to crawl back up to no avail.

Wanyan Honglie did not dare to linger much longer, without looking back he hurriedly went out the temple, mounted his horse and ran as fast as he could. The others were close on his heels, and in a short moment the temple was quiet again.

Ouyang Feng and Huang Rong saw Yang Kang was rolling around on the ground, each with his/her own thought, nobody said anything. A moment later Yang Kang's body curled up and then ceased to move altogether.

"Enough commotion for half a night," Ouyang Feng coldly said, "It's almost daybreak; let us go looking for your father."

"Right now my father is on the Peach Blossom Island," Huang Rong said, "Why do you want to look for him?"

Ouyang Feng was taken aback, "So the little girl was lying all along," he sneered.

"The first few sentences were indeed to swindle you," Huang Rong admitted, "What kind of man do you think my father is? How could he let himself surrounded by a bunch of stinky Quanzhen priests? If I did not mention the Nine Yin Manual you wouldn't let me interrogate Shagu."

By this time Ke Zhen'E had totally admired Huang Rong, but he was sad and full of regret at the same time. He only hoped she would find a clever trick to escape soon. He heard Ouyang Feng said, "There were three parts truth in your lies, otherwise, the Old Poison wouldn't be so easily deceived. All right then, recite your father's translation to me from the beginning to the end, don't skip even half a word."

"What if I don't remember?" Huang Rong asked.

"It will be best if you remember, otherwise the beautiful face of a smart little girl would be bitten by my snakes, now that won't be fun, will it?" Ouyang Feng threatened.

When Huang Rong jumped out from behind the idol she was ready to die; but seeing Yang Kang's pitiful death she could not help but feeling frightened. She thought, "Even if I give him Reverend Yideng's translation he still won't let me go. Is it so difficult to escape from his grip?"

She paced back and forth for a while but still could not think of a good way to escape, so she decided to buy some time and think again later. "If I read the original text I might remember the interpretation. Why don't you recite it to me, let me try explaining it to you," she said.

“Who could memorize these mumbo jumbo sentences?”
Ouyang Feng said, “You don’t have to confuse me.”

As she heard Ouyang Feng was not able to recite it from memory Huang Rong got a sudden inspiration. After contemplating it back and forth she came to a conclusion, “He can’t memorize it, so he must treat the manual as precious as his life.” She quickly said, “All right then, take out the manual and read it to me.”

Ouyang Feng was determined to hear the explanation; immediately he took an oil-cloth package from his pocket, after opening three layers of cloth he produced Guo Jing’s altered manual from it. Huang Rong was amused, “Jing Gege wrote a whole bunch of nonsense, yet the Old Poison treats it as the most precious object.”

Ouyang Feng lighted a fire and found a half-burned candle from the worship table, with which light he started to read the manual, “Hu bu er, ken xing duo de, si gen liu bu.”

“That means ‘differentiate it well then divide it into twelve air passages’,” Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng was delighted, “Ji er wen hua si, ha hu,” he read again.

“Capable of healing various illness, gradually entering divine perfection,” Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng read, “Qu da bie si tu, en ni qu.”

Huang Rong hesitated for a moment, shaking her head she said, “Not right, you did not read correctly.”

“No, I read it correctly,” Ouyang Feng said, “That is what was written.”

"That's strange," Huang Rong said, "How come it's so muddled?" Her left hand on her head, she pretended to be thinking hard.

Ouyang Feng was anxious. He stared at her, hoping she would find the answer quickly. A moment later Huang Rong exclaimed, "Ah, I know! It must be that dumb kid Guo Jing writing it wrong. Let me see."

Ouyang Feng was not afraid Huang Rong would steal it from him, he handed the manual over. Huang Rong held out her right hand to take the manual, while her left hand took the candlestick, pretending to examine the manual closely. Suddenly her feet kicked the ground; she leaped backward for more than a 'zhang' [10 feet/3 meter]. She held the manual within half a 'chi' [approximately half a foot] to the candle and shouted, "Uncle Ouyang, this manual is fake, I'd better burn it down."

Ouyang Feng was shocked, hastily said, "Hey, hey, what are you doing? Quickly give that back to me."

Huang Rong smiled, "Do you want the manual, or my life?"

"What do I want your life for? Quickly give that back to me," Ouyang Feng said. His voice was urgent, unusually anxious. His body leaned forward as if ready to strike anytime.

Huang Rong held the manual two more inches closer to the candle. "Stop! I am going to burn this manual as soon as you move one more step, then you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

Ouyang Feng silently agreed with what she said. "Humph, you win," he said, "Put that manual down and go before I change my mind!"

"You are a grand master of your school, you must not go back on your own words," Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng calmly said, "I said just put the manual down and you can go."

Huang Rong knew that he was a proud man; although he was evil and cruel he had never broken his promise to anybody, so she put the manual along with the candle on the ground and smiled, "Uncle Ouyang, please excuse me." Carrying her dog-beating stick she turned around and walked away.

Contrary to what she was expecting, Ouyang Feng did not even look at her. He jumped back and with a loud 'bang!' he smashed the Wang Yanzhang idol with the back of his hand, the idol broke halfway down. "Blind man Ke, roll out!" he shouted.

Huang Rong was startled; she turned her head only to see Ke Zhen'E had jumped out from behind the idol, brandishing his iron spear in front of his body. Huang Rong immediately realized her misjudgment, "With the Old Poison's ability how could he not know Master Ke was hiding behind the idol? He must've heard his breathing early on, only he waited patiently for a good opportunity to expose him." She dashed forward quickly, standing in front of Ke Zhen'E with the bamboo stick in front of her body.

"Uncle Ouyang, I am not going, you let him go," said Huang Rong.

"No, Rong'er, you go" Ke Zhen'E said, "Go find Jing'er, tell him to avenge our six lives."

Huang Rong mournfully answered, "If he is ever going to believe what I say, he would have already believed what I said. Master Ke, if you don't go, my father and I will have a

hard time proving our innocence. Tell Guo Jing that I don't blame him, tell him not to feel bad." But how could Ke Zhen'E let her embrace danger to save his own life? Two people were bickering incessantly.

Ouyang Feng became impatient, "Little girl, I let you go, you don't want to go. What are you waiting for?"

"I'd love to stay," Huang Rong said, "Uncle Ouyang, get this blind man out of here, I will accompany you chit-chatting, just don't hurt him."

Ouyang Feng thought, "You want to stay, that was what I want. Whether this blind man lives or dies, what does it have anything to do with me?" With big strides he went forward, holding out his hand to grab Ke Zhen'E on his chest.

Ke Zhen'E moved his spear to attack the incoming hand. Ouyang Feng raised his arm a little bit and Ke Zhen'E's arms were numb, he felt pressure on his chest. 'Clank!' his spear flew upward, made a hole on the ceiling and landed on the temple's roof.

Ke Zhen'E hastily leaped backward, but before his feet landed on the floor he felt his collar was pulled, his body was hung in front of Ouyang Feng. His battle experience was vast; in this dangerous moment he did not get nervous. His left hand moved slightly and two 'du ling' [poisonous water chestnut] flew toward the enemy's face.

Ouyang Feng did not anticipate that in the face of danger Ke Zhen'E was still able to attack. They were very close to each other, the incoming attack was strong, it was difficult to parry; Ouyang Feng bent his body backward but his hand did not let Ke Zhen'E go, Ke Zhen'E was thrown across the top of his head.

When he jumped out from behind the idol Ke Zhen'E was facing the temple's door, so Ouyang Feng's throw made him fly out of the door. Because Ouyang Feng's force was so strong, Ke Zhen'E's body was actually flying faster than his own 'du ling'. The 'du ling' missed Ouyang Feng's head and flew straight toward Ke Zhen'E's body.

"Aiyo!" Huang Rong cried out. But she saw that while he was airborne Ke Zhen'E was able to turn his body slightly, stretched out his right hand and deftly caught his own two 'du ling's. His ability to hear and differentiate secret-projectiles wind had been trained to near perfection; his ears could hear as clearly as other people could see.

"You are good!" Ouyang Feng exclaimed, "Blind man Ke, I'll let you go."

Ke Zhen'E landed on his feet, he was reluctant to go. Huang Rong laughed, "Master Ke, Ouyang Feng wanted to be my disciple; he wants to learn the Nine Yin Manual from me. You still want to stay; do you also want to be my disciple?"

Ke Zhen'E knew that although Huang Rong talked jokingly, but her situation was extremely precarious. He stood on the temple courtyard, but was hesitant to go.

Ouyang Feng looked up to the sky and said, "It's daybreak. Let's go!" Pulling Huang Rong's hand they walked out the temple's door.

"Master Ke, remember the letter I wrote on your palm," Huang Rong called out. They moved really fast, Huang Rong's last few words were heard from several 'zhang's away.

Ke Zhen'E stayed motionless for a long time. He heard flock upon flock of crows that came into the temple to feast on the corpse, so he leaped onto the roof to find his spear pole.

Leaning against his pole on the roof again he stayed motionless for a while, thinking the heaven and earth are boundless, but what kind of place could a blind man like him call home? Then he heard the crows cried mournfully and they dropped to the ground one by one. Turned out those crows were feasting on Yang Kang's corpse and they were poisoned one after another. Ke Zhen'E could not help but heaving a long sighed. He jumped back down to the ground, wielding his spear he walked to the north.

On the third day suddenly he heard eagle cry high up in the sky. He thought that if the birds were close by, then Guo Jing must not be very far; therefore, he raised his voice and shouted in the middle of the wilderness, "Jing'er, Jing'er!"

Not too long afterwards he heard hoof beats; it was indeed Guo Jing riding the little red horse coming toward him. He was separated from Ke Zhen'E in the chaotic battle the other night; this time he saw his master was well his joy was unspeakable. He did not even wait for the horse to stop; he jumped from the horseback and rushed to embrace his master, calling loudly, "Da Shifu!"

Unexpectedly Ke Zhen'E slapped him left and right until his ears were red. Guo Jing was stunned, but did not dare to fend off. He let his master off his embrace. Ke Zhen'E continued to slap Guo Jing with his left hand, while his right hand slapped his own face until his own ears were red.

Guo Jing was confounded, "Da Shifu, what happened to you?"

Ke Zhen'E viciously scolded, "You are the little muddle-head; I am the old muddle-head."

Dozens or so slaps later he calmed down and stopped. Both men's faces were red and swollen. Ke Zhen'E kept cursing

Guo Jing and himself for half a day before finally he narrated everything that had happened in the temple.

Guo Jing was surprised yet happy, sorrowful yet ashamed, "So that's what actually happened. I had wrongly accused Rong'er," he thought.

"Tell me, don't we deserve to die?" Ke Zhen'E shouted. Guo Jing agreed, he also said, "Disciple deserves to die; Da Shifu's eyes are not perfect, you cannot be blamed."

Ke Zhen'E was angry, "Damn it! My eyes are blind, is my heart also blind?"

Guo Jing tried to divert his attention, "We must quickly think of something to rescue Rong'er."

"What about her father?" Ke Zhen'E asked.

"Huang Daozhu [Island Master Huang] had taken Hong Enshi [Benevolent Master Hong] to recuperate on the Peach Blossom Island," Guo Jing answered, "Da Shifu, where do you think Ouyang Feng is taking Rong'er?"

Ke Zhen'E pondered for a moment, then said, "Rong'er is in his hands, even if she did not die, I don't know what kind of tortures she would be subjected to. Jing'er, you quickly rescue her, I am going to kill myself to thank her."

"No!" Guo Jing cried out in alarm, "Don't even think of doing such thing." However, he knew his first master's stubbornness very well, he would not listen to other people; once he said he would die, he was not going to back off; therefore, Guo Jing quickly said, "Da Shifu, you'd better go to the Peach Blossom Island to ask Huang Daozhu to lend us a hand. In all honesty, I am not Ouyang Feng's match."

Ke Zhen'E thought it was not a bad idea, so he picked his spear and left. Guo Jing was reluctant to part with his first

master, he followed him behind. Ke Zhen'E knew he was being followed, he swung his spear backward and scolded, "You are still not going? If you don't rescue my beloved Rong'er, I am going to take your little life!"

Guo Jing had no choice but stopped, his gaze followed his master until he disappeared beyond the mulberry grove toward the east. He had no idea where to start looking for Huang Rong. After thinking hard for quite a while he took his horse and pair of eagles and walked back to the Temple of the Iron Spear.

Around the temple he saw countless dead crows; on the courtyard he saw a pile of human remains. Guo Jing hated Yang Kang for killing his masters, but thought that Yang Kang was already dead, so he was willing to write-off that debt; moreover, he was his sworn brother. Guo Jing picked the remains and buried Yang Kang on the temple's courtyard. He bowed in respect in front of the grave and said, "Brother Yang, if you know how I buried your remains today, you have to bless me in finding Rong'er; that way you can make up for your crimes during your lifetime." Afterward Guo Jing started to make inquiries everywhere, trying to track Huang Rong's trail.

Half a year had passed, autumn turned into winter, then winter turned into spring. Guo Jing, accompanied by his red horse and a pair of eagles have looked everywhere; he asked the Beggar Clan, went to the Quanzhen Sect, and inquired all Wulin characters he knew, yet nobody heard even a little bit of news about Huang Rong. He was miserable. He imagined how much suffering Huang Rong had to endure this past half a year; it was like a knife was piercing his heart. He was determined to find her, even to the end of the earth.

He had been to Yanjing, twice he had tried to find Wanyan Honglie at Bianliang, yet Wanyan Honglie also disappeared without a trace. The Beggar Clan members all over the country had tried to find their Bangzhu [Clan Leader], but still there were no words about Huang Rong. Guo Jing also stopped by the Cloud Village, but the village was burned to the ground. He did not know what kind of disaster Lu Chengfeng and Lu Guanying had encountered.

One day he arrived within the Shandong border. Nine out of ten houses he saw along the way were deserted; he barely saw other people walking around. He heard that the Mongolians and the Jins were fighting each other in that area. The Jins were defeated and while retreating they stopped at nothing; raping and plundering the people along their way.

Guo Jing walked for three more days heading north. The further he went, the more devastation he witnessed. His heart was embittered looking at the suffering of the common people as the result of war.

That day he arrived at a small village by a river bank in a valley; he was going to stop by for food and water for him as well as his horse, when suddenly he heard a commotion just ahead of him. People were screaming and horses were neighing in panic; dozens of Jin soldiers had entered the village. They set the village on fire, forcing the people to go out of their houses. If there was a young girl in the house, the soldiers would seize her and bind her with ropes. The rest of the people, young and old alike, were killed right there and then.

Guo Jing was seething with anger; he charged his horse toward the leader of this pack, snatching his spear; the back of Guo Jing's left hand smacked his 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint. By that time Guo Jing had already reached high

level in term of martial art skill; his strength was profound. With just one hit that officer's eyes came out of their sockets and he died instantly.

The rest of the soldiers were shouting and yelling; sabers and spears attacked simultaneously. The little red horse was not afraid of battle; it dashed forward carrying Guo Jing on its back. Guo Jing snatched a saber with his left hand, and using the mutual hands combat technique he thrust the spear in his right hand and hacked the saber in his left, attacking the soldiers left and right.

As soon as the Jin soldiers saw this person's fierceness, they lost their will to fight; they turned around and fled from the village. But suddenly a big banner appeared amidst the smoke; a squad of Mongolian soldiers had arrived. The Jin soldiers who had been defeated earlier did not dare to fight the Mongolian troops head-on so they turned back to the village, hoping they would be able to slip by Guo Jing relying on sheer numbers.

Guo Jing hated the Jin soldiers for cruelly abusing the people; he charged his horse toward the village entrance and single-handedly defending it against the intruders. About a dozen or so soldiers courageously attacked him; Guo Jing killed them all. The rest of the soldiers did not dare to attack but they could not go back either; they ran around in confusion, screaming in fear.

The Mongolian soldiers saw ahead of them somebody was helping them; they charged the rest of the Jin soldiers and killed them all. The 'bai fu zhang' [leader of a 100 men unit] was about to inquire Guo Jing's background when suddenly one the Mongolian soldier recognized him. That soldier shouted, "Jin dao fu ma! [the golden-blade consort]" and immediately knelt on the ground.

The 'bai fu zhang' heard Guo Jing was their Great Khan's son-in-law, he did not dare to be impolite; hastily he dismounted his horse and also kneeled on the ground while dispatching a courier to quickly inform their commander-in-chief.

The villagers, young and old, were coming out of their hiding places to thank Guo Jing when suddenly from outside the village came a loud thundering noise of cavalry's hoof beats. The people were frightened; they looked at each other in blank dismay.

A bay horse with a black mane came fast, a young general shouted, "Where is Guo Jing Anda [Mongolian term for sworn brother]?"

Guo Jing saw it was Tuolei, he was delighted. "Tuolei Anda," he answered. They rushed forward and hugged each other. The pair of eagles recognized Tuolei, they flew down and lovingly rubbed their necks to him.

Tuolei ordered a 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000-men unit] to pursue the Jin soldiers, while the rest of his troops pitched their tents right there on the hillside; then he told Guo Jing everything that had happened since the last time they parted.

Tuolei told the war affair of the northern countries; only then did Guo Jing find out that within the last few years Genghis Khan attacked to the east and sent expedition to the west, expanded his territory. Jochi, Chagatai, Ogedei and Tuolei, four princes; plus Mukhali, Borchu, Boroul and Chilaun, the Great Khan's four heroes, his right-hand men, all had established many distinguished services.

Presently Tuolei and Mukhali were leading their troops to attack the Jin toward the east; they had fought several battles and utterly routed Jin's army. The Jins ran to the

fortified city of Tongguan; did not dare to come out to Shandong to fight.

Guo Jing stayed with Tuolei's troops for several days. A fast dispatch came one day; Genghis Khan ordered all princes and generals to go back north for a general assembly. Tuolei and Mukhali did not dare to linger much longer, they assigned their second-in-commands to lead the troops and that very same night they rode north. Guo Jing missed his mother, so he came along with Tuolei to the north.

In less than a day they had arrived at the bank of River Onon. As far as eyes could see, the vast prairies were full of tents, tens of thousands of warhorses running around and neighing, tens of thousands spearheads gleaming brilliantly under the bright sun light. In the middle of countless gray tents towered a big yellow silk tent. The tent ornaments were made of cast gold; above it fluttered nine big banners.

Guo Jing's horse stood on the river bank as he watched this awe-inspiring military prowess. He thought about how the great power in this Golden Tent had shaken the desert, wiping out the other rulers of the area. He imagined how Genghis Khan would issue his commands from the Golden Tent; then fast horses would be dispatched to deliver the orders to the tens of thousands soldiers under the princes and the generals. The bugles would sound and the beacons on the prairie would be lighted, their fires reaching the sky. Arrows would fill the sky like a swarm of locusts, spears and blades would flash, horses and infantrymen would march amidst the dust rising to the sky.

Guo Jing thought, "The Great Khan wants to amass this much land, I wonder what he wants to do with it?" Suddenly he saw the dust rise and a group of cavalry came to welcome them. Three people, Tuolei, Mukhali and Guo Jing entered the Golden Tent to see the Great Khan. To his

surprise he saw all the princes and the generals were already sitting on either side of the tent.

Genghis Khan was overjoyed to see these three people. Tuolei and Mukhali immediately reported the military situation. Guo Jing stepped forward and kneeled, saying, "The Great Khan has assigned me to sever the Jin prince, Wanyan Honglie's head. I met him several times, yet every time he was able to escape. I am ready to accept The Great Khan's punishment."

Genghis Khan laughed, he said, "When the young eagle grows up, there will come a day when it will catch the fox. Why would I want to punish you? You arrived just in time; I often thought about you."

The assembly then proceeded by discussing military plans to destroy the Jins. Mukhali proposed that since the Jins occupied the fortified city of Tongguan, it would be difficult to attack; the best plan would be forming an alliance with the Southern Song and execute a converging attack.

"Good! Let us do it then," Genghis Khan said. Immediately he assigned his secretary to write the letter and sent an envoy to go south. The general assembly convened until dusk that day.

Guo Jing left the Golden Tent, under the darkened sky he walked to his mother's tent. Suddenly a pair of hands appeared from behind, about to cover his eyes. With his current martial art skill how could he let anybody launched a sneak attack? He leaned sideways and was going to push that person away when suddenly his nostrils caught a whiff of perfume, then he saw it was a girl. Quickly he pulled back his hand and called out, "Sister Huazheng!" It was indeed Princess Huazheng standing in the dark with smile all over her face.

They have not seen each other for several years. This time they met again, Guo Jing saw she was growing taller. She just stood there among the tall grass, her skin jade-white; she looked beautiful yet valiant. Guo Jing called again, “Meizi! [Younger Sister, used in a more intimate way]”

Huazheng was extremely happy that tears flowed down her cheeks, “You really came back!”

Guo Jing was touched by the sincere expression of her feeling. Thousands of words were dancing around his mind, but he did not know where to start.

After a few minutes of silence Huazheng said, “Go see your mother. You came back alive, guess who will be happier, your mother or I?”

“My mother will be very happy, I am sure,” Guo Jing said.

Huazheng pouted, “Do you think I am not happy?”

The Mongolians were more frank, they would say what they think. Guo Jing had lived among the southerners for quite some time; unconsciously he had been influenced by the way the southerners talked. Now he went back to his childhood home and heard Huazheng talked in a friendly manner, a warm feeling filled his heart. Two people walked hand in hand toward Li Ping’s tent. Mother and son met and there were more tears of happiness.

Several days later Genghis Khan summoned Guo Jing, “I have heard your conducts and deeds from Tuolei. You keep your words and have an upright heart, I like that very much. Just wait several more days, I am going to give you my daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Guo Jing was startled, he thought, “Right now I don’t even know if Rong’er is dead or alive. How can I marry someone

else?" Seeing Genghis Khan's imposing appearance, although he wanted to disobey, he stammered and nothing intelligible came out of his mouth. Genghis Khan misunderstood his behavior; he thought Guo Jing was ecstatic that he turned silly. Immediately Genghis Khan prepared a dowry for Guo Jing: one thousand maidservants, one hundred catties of gold, five hundred cows, two thousand sheep, plus he was told to prepare his own wedding and take anything he needed from Khan's treasury.

Huazheng was Genghis Khan's only daughter from his first wife; she was her father's beloved since she was very little. By that time Genghis Khan's power had already spread throughout the Mongolian desert, he had subdued many other Khans; who, upon hearing their Great Khan was going to give his daughter's hand in marriage, immediately sent precious gifts in abundance. Not too long afterwards, more than a dozen big tents were needed to store all the gifts.

Princess Huazheng was so happy that she could not erase the smile from her face; Guo Jing, on the other hand, looked so haggard, his mind was filled with anxiety. He was often caught looking blankly to a far away place with a dejected look on his face.

Li Ping noticed her son's countenance was unusual, one evening she asked Guo Jing point blankly inside their tent. Guo Jing recounted everything about Huang Rong, from the day they met until they parted a few months ago. Li Ping listened attentively; she was silent for half a day.

"Ma [Mother]," Guo Jing asked, "Your son is in a difficult situation, I don't know how to manage this."

"Great Khan has shown profound kindness to us, how can we forget it?" Li Ping answered, "But that Rong'er, that Rong'er, ay! Even though I have never met her, I believe she is an adorable girl."

"Ma," Guo Jing suddenly said, "If Father were in this situation, how would he act?"

This question was unexpected to Li Ping; she was silent for half a day; remembering her late husband's personality; and then with conviction in her voice said, "Your father would rather suffer a hardship than offending other people."

Guo Jing stood up, with a quivering voice he said, "Even though this son of yours has never seen his father, I should follow my father's footsteps. If Rong'er is safe, your son will honor my promise to marry Princess Huazheng; but if Rong'er faced calamity, your son will not marry for as long as I live."

Li Ping thought, "That is a proper thing to do, but how can I let you be the last descendant of the Guo family? Nevertheless, this child is the same as his father, both were stubborn. Once they made a decision what other people say would be useless." Thereupon she asked, "How are you going to report to the Great Khan?"

"I will tell the Great Khan the truth," Guo Jing answered.

Li Ping was willing to support her son's intention. "Good," she said, "We can't put this off much longer. Go ahead and say thank you to the Great Khan, we, mother and son, will leave for the south even today." Guo Jing nodded his approval.

That very same evening mother and son prepared their bags. Other than a few changes of clothes and some silvers,

they left the Great Khan's gifts in the tent.

As soon as they were finished Guo Jing said, "I am going to take my leave from the Princess."

Li Ping hesitated, "How can you tell her? We'd better leave quietly, spare her the heartache," she said.

"No," Guo Jing said, "I will personally tell her." Leaving his tent, he walked towards Huazheng's tent.

Huazheng and her mother lived in a big tent; they were busy discussing the wedding preparation. Suddenly Huazheng heard Guo Jing's voice calling her from outside the tent. She was blushing, "Ma!" she said.

Her mother smiled, "You are going to get married in a few days, yet you cannot bear not to see each other for just a day. All right, you may go."

Huazheng smiled and walked out the tent. "Guo Jing Gege [big brother]," she called.

"Meizi [younger sister], I have something I need to tell you," Guo Jing said. He led her walking to the west. Two people walked several li's into the prairie, far from the big camp, and sat side by side on the grass.

Huazheng leaned against Guo Jing's body. Lowering her head she said, "Jing Gege, I also have something I want to tell you."

Guo Jing was slightly startled, "Ah! So you know already?" he said. He thought it would be better for her to find out, since he did not know where to start.

"Know what?" Huazheng was confused, "I wanted to tell you that I am not the Great Khan's daughter."

“What?” Guo Jing was surprised.

Huazheng lifted up her eyes toward the crescent moon on the horizon, she slowly said, “After I am married to you, I will forget that I am the Great Khan’s daughter, I am only Guo Jing’s wife. If you want to beat me or scold me, go ahead and do it. Don’t think that because my father is the Great Khan you have to submit to me.”

Guo Jing felt a mixture of bitter-sweet and warm and fuzzy feeling in his heart, he said, “Meizi, you treated me very well. It’s a pity I don’t deserve to have you.”

“What do you mean you don’t deserve me?” Huazheng countered, “You are the kindest man in the world, except for my father, nobody is better than you. Even my four elder brothers don’t hold a candle compared to you.”

Guo Jing was silent for a long time; he was going to leave Mongolia for the south early in the morning the next day, yet he did not know how to tell her.

Huazheng continued, “These past several days I have been so happy. I remember that time when I heard you had died I was going to die with you. Lucky for me Brother Tuolei snatched the dagger from my hand; otherwise how can I marry you now? Guo Jing Gege, I’d rather die than not being your wife.”

Guo Jing silently thought, “Rong’er won’t talk to me like this; but both of them are very kind to me.” Thinking about Huang Rong he could not help letting out a long sigh.

“Uh, why did you sigh?” Huazheng wondered.

“It was nothing,” Guo Jing reluctantly said.

Huazheng said, “Hmm, my first brother and second brother didn’t like you, but my third brother and fourth brother are

very fond of you. I have told my father frankly that the first brother and second brother are not good, third brother and fourth brother are good, so you don't have to worry."

"Why would I worry?" Guo Jing wondered.

Huazheng was very proud of herself, "I heard mother said that since Father is getting older, he wants to appoint the Khan's Crown Prince. Can you guess who will be chosen?"

"Naturally your first brother, Jochi. Not only he is the oldest, but has rendered most service as well," Guo Jing said.

Huazheng shook her head, "My guess is not the first brother, most likely the third brother, or even the fourth brother."

Guo Jing knew Genghis Khan's eldest son Jochi was smart and very competent; the second son, Chagatai was brave and a good strategist. These two men did not bow to each other, their competition was most ardent. The third son Ogedei loved to drink and to hunt; generosity was one of his traits. He realized that after his father passed away, the successor would be either his first or second brother. But among the four princes of the Khan, actually Tuolei was his father's favorite. He realized he had no chance to become the next Khan; therefore, he had never fought over the position of the crown prince. He was in good terms with all of his three brothers.

Guo Jing was not convinced by Huazheng's explanation, "Would the Great Khan appoint the Khan's Crown Prince based on what you said?" he asked.

"I am not sure about that either," Huazheng said, "That was my blind guess. But even if the first brother or the second brother becomes the next Khan, you don't have to worry

either. If they make things difficult for you, I will fight them to the death." Huazheng was Genghis Khan's beloved daughter; 30% of the time her four elder brothers yielded to her.

Guo Jing knew she would do what she said; he slightly smile and said, "You don't have to do that."

"Why not?" Huazheng said, "If my brothers don't treat us nicely, we can go together to the south."

"That's what I was going to say," Guo Jing blurted, "I must go back to the south."

Huazheng was silent for a moment, "I am afraid mother and father won't let me go," she said.

"It's only me ..." Guo Jing started to say, but Huazheng cut him off, "Hmm, I will always listen to you. If you say we are going south, I am coming with you. If mother and father won't give their permission, we'll elope."

Guo Jing could not hold himself much longer, he jumped and stood up, "It's only two people, me and my mother who are going back south," he said. Having said this, one was standing up, the other was sitting down, four eyes looked at each other, both stayed still like a pair of statues.

Huazheng's face showed confusion and despair, she did not understand what he was saying. "Meizi," Guo Jing broke the silence, "Please forgive me! I can't marry you."

"Why? What did I do wrong? You are blaming me for not killing myself, are you not?" Huazheng was confused.

Guo Jing almost shouted, "NO! No! It's not your fault. I don't know whose fault it is; I have thought back and forth, and if I should blame anybody, it should be me."

Henceforth he started telling Huazheng everything about Huang Rong. When he got to the part on how Huang Rong was currently held captive by Ouyang Feng, and that he had searched high and low for half a year without finding any trace of her; Huazheng could feel the excitement in his voice, she was unable to hold her tears from falling down.

Finally Guo Jing said, "Meizi, please just forget me, I must go and look for her."

"After you found her, would you come back here looking for me?" Huazheng asked.

"If she is safe and well, I will certainly go back north," Guo Jing promised, "At that time, if you did not shut me off and still want me, I will marry you. I definitely won't regret it."

Huazheng slowly said, "You don't have to say that. You know I will always want you to marry me. Go and find her, whether it will be ten years, twenty years, as long as I am still alive, I am going to wait for you in this grassland."

Guo Jing was excited, "Yes," he exclaimed, "Ten years, twenty years, I am going to look for her. Ten years, twenty years, I will also remember that you are waiting for me in this grassland."

Huazheng sprang up and threw herself into his bosom, weeping uncontrollably. Guo Jing embraced her gently, his eyes were turning red. Two people hugged each other without saying anything. Things had come this far, they knew if they say another word they would only grieve the other.

After a long time, they saw four riders from the west came rushing by; they swept pass by Guo Jing and Huazheng's side, went directly to the Golden Tent. They were still about dozens of 'zhang's away from the Golden Tent when

suddenly one of the horses fell down and was unable to stand again; it was obvious that this horse was very tired, it dropped dead right then and there. The rider stood up and without casting a single glance toward his dead horse he dashed wildly into the Golden Tent.

A short moment later ten men with horns in their hand rushed out of the Golden Tent; they faced four directions and blow their horns, "Whooo! Whooo! Whooo!"

Guo Jing knew it was Genghis Khan's most urgent call, whether it was his own son or his beloved general, if anybody did not show up by the time the Great Khan had bent all his ten fingers, he would be beheaded immediately, no question asked.

"The Great Khan summons us!" Guo Jing shouted. Without saying anything to Huazheng he used his lightness kungfu and flew toward the Golden Tent. He heard hoof beats coming urgently from all directions.

When Guo Jing arrived at the tent, Genghis Khan had only bent three fingers; and when he had bent eight fingers all the princes and senior generals were fully assembled. Genghis Khan loudly roared, "Does that dog king Muhammad have quicker princes? Does he have such gallant generals?"

"NO!" the assembly answered in unison.

Genghis Khan beat his chest and shouted, "Look! These are my special envoys to Khoresm; see how did that dog king Muhammad treat my loyal servants?" Every eye followed the Great Khan's finger. They saw several Mongolians with their faces swollen black and blue; their beards completely burnt. Beards were the Mongolian warriors' sign of dignity; it was considered a great insult just to bump into it, how

much more insulting was it to burn it completely? As soon as the assembly saw this, everyone exploded in angry roars.

Genghis Khan said, "Khoresm is a big country with a strong army, but are we afraid of them? Because we have been concentrating our effort to battle the Jins, we were very lenient to them. Jochi my son, tell everybody how we should deal with that dog king Muhammad."

Jochi stepped forward and said with a loud voice, "That year Father King sent your son to attack the deserved-to-die Mergid people. Your son returned triumphantly. That dog king Muhammad also sent a big army to attack the Mergids. Two armies met. Your son sent a good-will envoy, saying that Father King sincerely wished to be friend with the Khoresm. That red-bearded dog king actually said, 'Genghis Khan did not order you to attack me, but Allah had sent me to attack you.' As a result we were engaged in a fierce battle. We had gained the upper hand, but because the enemy was ten-times our number, we quietly withdrew the troops at midnight."

Boroul suddenly said, "For all that the Great Khan still showed respect towards this dog king. We sent a trade caravan, but the cargo was robbed by that dog king, while our merchants were killed. This time we sent ambassadors of goodwill, that dog king has listened to that Jin dog prince Wanyan Honglie's instigation; he killed half of the Great Khan's messengers, while burning the other half's beards and sent them back home."

Hearing the name Wanyan Honglie, Guo Jing's heart turned cold, "Is Wanyan Honglie at the Khoresm?" he asked.

One of the burnt messengers answered, "I recognized him. He sat by that dog king's side, constantly talking in low voice with that dog king."

Genghis Khan called out, "The Jin dog has joined forces with Khoresm, they are going to press us from both sides, are we afraid of them?"

The assembly answered with one voice, "Our Great Khan is peerless in the world. You order us to attack the Khoresm, we will crush their cities, burn down their buildings, kill their men off, taking captive of their women and livestock!"

Genghis Khan shouted, "We must capture Muhammad! We must capture Wanyan Honglie!" The assembly answered his cry with a cheering so loud that the candle lights inside the tent swayed. Genghis Khan took his saber out and swung it in front of him. He rushed outside the tent, leaped onto his horseback. The assembly followed him out of the tent and mounted their horses.

Genghis Khan rode his horse several 'li's into the prairie until he arrived at a small hill. The assembly knew he wanted to be left alone to think, so they did not go up the hill, but formed a ring surrounding the small hill. Genghis Khan saw Guo Jing was standing not too far from him, he called, "Son, come here." Guo Jing galloped his horse uphill.

Genghis Khan swept his gaze on the prairie, where the light from his army camp flickered like stars scattered throughout the vast grassland. He raised his whip and said, "Son, that day we were surrounded by Sangum and Jamukha on the mountain, I had said something to you. Do you remember what I said?"

"I remember," Guo Jing answered, "The Great Khan said that we the Mongolians have many valiant men. As long as we do not fight our own people and join our forces, we will be able to call the world our grazing land."

'Crack!' Genghis Khan twirled his horse whip into the air, he called out, "That's right! Now the Mongolians have

joined forces, let us go and capture that Wanyan Honglie.”

Guo Jing had decided to go back south with his mother the next day, suddenly this matter arose, how could he forget to avenge his father’s death? Moreover, his mother and he have received Khan’s generosity. The opportunity had presented itself for him to repay this debt of gratitude; so he called out, “This time we will surely capture that scoundrel Wanyan Honglie.”

“Rumor has it that the Khoresm army is one million men strong, but I estimate their number to be close to six, seven hundred thousands,” Genghis Khan said, “We only have two-hundred thousand men, but we have to spare several thousands men to fight the Jin dogs. A hundred and fifty thousands against seven hundreds, what would you say? Will we win?”

Guo Jing was completely oblivious of battle strategy, but he was not a coward. Hearing the Great Khan so inquired, he boldly said, “We will win!”

“Of course we will win,” Genghis Khan said, “That day I said I will treat you as my own son. Once Temujin says something, he won’t forget it. You come with me on this expedition to the west; once we have captured Muhammad and Wanyan Honglie, we will go back home and consummate your marriage with my daughter.” This was precisely what he was hoping for, so Guo Jing agreed immediately.

Genghis Khan rode his horse descending that hill, “Summon the soldiers!” he gave his command. Immediately his personal guard sounded the bugle while Genghis Khan speedily went back to his camp.

Along the way men were seen moving around like shadows and horses were galloping back and forth but not a single

voice was heard; a sign of a highly disciplined army. Before the Khan even arrived at the Golden Tent, his thirty thousand soldiers had already neatly arranged on the prairie. The bright moonlight shone on row upon row of spears and blade, making the prairie glittered with silvery gleams.

Genghis Khan entered the Golden Tent and called his secretary, assigning him to write a war declaration. The secretary immediately composed a lengthy letter on a sheet or parchment; then he knelt down in front of the Great Khan to read his letter: "The Heaven has appointed me as the Great Khan over many nations, enlarged my territory by tens of thousands 'li's, helped me to crush countless countries. From the ancient of days there is no one who can be called my equal. Once my thunder strikes, how can you resist? Your country's existence until today depends on three things: unless you send a tribute, the great Mongolian army will ..."

The more Genghis Khan heard, the angrier he became; he kicked that white-bearded secretary upside down and cursed him, "Who are you writing to? Why would Genghis Khan used such flowery words toward a dog king?" Raising his horse whip he struck the secretary's face several times, and then called out, "Listen to me, what I say, you write down."

That secretary gingerly crawled back up, he took a fresh parchment and knelt on the floor, looking intently to the Great Khan's lips.

Genghis Khan walked to the tent entrance and opened up the curtain, looking toward his thirty-thousand strong cavalry. With a low and calm voice he said, "Write it this way, only six characters." He paused for a moment then

shouted, "If you want to fight, then fight!" [ni yao zhan, bian zou zhan - 6 characters]

The secretary was stunned, thinking this kind of official document was so scandalously unusual, but his face was still burning from the whip earlier, how could he dare to object? He wrote those six characters in large letters immediately.

"Put my gold seal on it and send it by the fastest horse," Genghis Khan commanded. Mukhali put the seal on the letter and dispatch a 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000 men unit] with his troops to deliver the letter.

The rest of the assembly learned about the Great Khan's letter, which only had six characters on it, their spirit rose. They heard the hoof beats of the messengers gradually disappear into the prairie, suddenly as if by prior agreement they shouted in one voice, "If you want to fight, then fight!" While outside, the thirty-thousand soldiers cheered, "He hu! He hu! [lit. 'hey! (or 'I say!) Shout!'] It was the Mongolian cavalry's battle cry. As the horses heard their masters shout they neighed loudly while lifting up their front legs. The noise on the prairie that night was deafening, as if they were in an actual battle.

Genghis Khan dismissed his army then he sat alone in his Golden Tent, deep in thought. The chair he was sitting on was taken from the Jins; a dragon snatching a giant pearl was carved on its back, while a pair of ferocious tiger heads was carved on its two armrests. It was the throne that belonged to the Jin emperor.

Genghis Khan reminisced his own youth, which was full of sufferings and difficult times; he recalled his own mother, his wife, his four sons and a beloved daughter; he also remembered his beautiful concubines, his ever-victorious

army, his vast and boundless empire; at last he thought about the upcoming war against a powerful enemy.

Although he was getting old his hearing was as keen as when he was young; he heard a distant mournful cry of a warhorse, then the cry stopped abruptly. He understood it was an old horse with an incurable disease; its master could not bear to see it suffer, so he must have killed the horse. Suddenly he remembered, "I am also getting old, this time I am going to war, will I go back home alive? If I lose my life in the battlefield, my four sons will fight over the Great Khan position; it definitely will be a devastating fight. Ay, I wish I can live forever and not see death."

Even if one was an invincible, fearless warrior; once one's strength gradually faded, one's mind would involuntarily think about 'death'. He could not help but feeling trepidation; his heart trembled with fear.

"I heard in the south there exists a class of people called 'Taoist Priests' who can teach people how to become deity who will never grow old and never see death. I wonder if it is true?" he mused. Clapping his hands twice he called a guard to summon Guo Jing into the tent.

As soon as Guo Jing arrived Genghis Khan asked him about this matter. "I don't know about becoming immortal deity, but there indeed some people who can teach you how to meditate, to do breathing exercise, circulating your energy; in the end, it will prolong your life," Guo Jing answered.

Genghis Khan was delighted, "Do you know such person? Quickly go and find one to see me," he said.

"This kind of people won't come with any casual invitation," Guo Jing replied.

“Correct,” Genghis Khan said, “I am going to send a high official to invite him to the north. Tell me, whom should I invite?”

Guo Jing thought, “Among the Taoist orthodox sects, the Quanzhen is the best. Among the Quanzhen Six Masters, Qiu Daozhang’s [Taoist Priest] martial art is the highest, he is also the most amiable, perhaps he would be willing to come.” Therefore, he mentioned the name of Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji.

Genghis Khan was ecstatic; he summoned his secretary immediately, told him his intention and ordered him to write an imperial letter.

The secretary had a bitter experience earlier that day, he thought for a long time, then finally wrote the imperial letter, “I have something to talk, please come immediately [zhen you shi, bian ji lai].” He followed the Great Khan’s literary style, also only used six characters. He thought this time surely the Great Khan would be pleased with his work. Who would have thought that as soon as Genghis Khan heard the letter, he was angry, and once again his whip hit the secretary’s face.

“I said that way to a dog king, but how can I treat an honorable Taoist Priest the same way?” Genghis Khan scolded, “You must write a long letter, a modest and respectful one.”

The secretary knelt down on the ground and started to compose this imperial letter:

“The Heaven despises the arrogant in the Central Plains, I rule in the northern desert yet I also share the sentiment. I wish for a simple and pure character, shun the extravagance and embrace frugality. Each clothes each meal, along with the livestock in the corral enjoying the

Heaven providence. Regarding the people like newborn babies, raising warriors like brothers, seeking harmony with the earth's element and the living beings.

Training tens of thousands soldiers, dispatching hundreds of military expeditions with me leading in the front; within seven years I have completed great undertakings, uniting six elements into harmony. Not by my own virtue, but because of the Jin's government's lack of patience and the Heaven bestowed its blessing and gave honor to me.

To the south I made an alliance with the Zhao family's Song Dynasty, to the north annexed the Hui Ge, to the east Xia and to the west Yi [name of countries, not sure the exact location]; all acknowledging Genghis Khan's sovereignty, unparalleled since the founding of my Great Mongolia for thousands of years and hundreds of generations. However, my responsibilities are heavy; there is something I lack to maintain peace.

Just like marking the side of the boat where the sword fell into the lake, thinking that the water did not flow [meaning: vanity, something stupid]. I need worthy men to assist me in achieving peace under the sky. I assumed the throne with diligent mind to build a better nation; but three out of nine positions is not filled properly.

I seek Master Teacher Qiu to give guidance, governing nature, nourishing an exhausted mind; applying the strong Taoist virtue, cherishing the respected manners of honorable people of old; embracing the sage's elegant deeds, living above the cliffs and valleys leading an invisible life. Enlightened forefathers have left behind a message: to devote one's life in the way of the warrior.

An ancient saying shows the paths to immortality, every single one worthy of praise. Even after taking up arms, I am

aware that the Master still possesses secret ancient way which I look up to cherish as my own.'

The secretary wrote to this point, he raised his head and asked, "Is it long enough?"

Genghis Khan smiled and said, "Such a nice letter. Enough. Write that I am dispatching a Han high ranking officer, Liu Zhonglu with my greetings to invite him over."

The secretary continued,

'If not for the battle how can one realize he needs the assistance of a secluded expert, that he visited the thatched hut three times? [Background info: Liu Bei visited Zhuge Liang three times before the latter agreed to help the former] The mountains and rivers are vast, yet missed to give a revered welcome.

It is time for me to leave my position. I fast and clean up my body, and I send my officer Liu Zhonglu, riding a plain carriage, enduring a thousand 'li's travel, to respectfully invite the Master to spare a moment from your journey treading immortal path, to brave the desolate desert in distant land, to tend to the affair of common people; and perhaps to give relief to the weary.

I long to go to the immortal place and wish not the immortal Master to spit on my desire. I will be happy to hear just one word of encouragement clearly; sincerely hope the Master would be willing to take the higher road to befriend me and not disappoint the hope of all living beings. Herewith the imperial letter ends; to be read by the appropriate addressee.'

Genghis Khan said, "Good, let it be like that." He rewarded that secretary five 'liang's of gold; he also asked Guo Jing to write a personal letter of invitation to earnestly ask Qiu

Chuji to come over. That very same day he sent Liu Zhonglu with the imperial letter to the south.

[Author's note: Genghis Khan's invitation to Qiu Chuji was based on the original text according to historical documents]

The next day Genghis Khan held a general assembly of all his high-ranking officials discussing the expedition to the west; conferring Guo Jing the title of 'Noyon', placing him in command of a ten-thousand men unit. 'Noyon' was the Mongolian highest official title, normally given only to the Great Khan's close relative or a very senior general. By this time Guo Jing's martial art had advanced immensely, but his military strategy knowledge was next to zero. He had no alternative but went to Jebek, Subotai and other senior generals, asking for some advice. But he was slow and military tactics had an almost infinite variation; how could he learn it all in just a short period of time?

He saw the other generals were busy preparing their soldiers, gathering provisions and choosing their horses and weaponry; everybody was very busy. One hundred and fifty thousands cavalry went on an expedition to the west, going through bitter cold and barren desert lands, the preparation was certainly not a small matter. He had no clue on what to do, hence he simply assigned ten 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000 men unit] under his command to separately handle the preparations and Jebek and Tuolei oftentimes giving their advice to help him out.

A month or so later he still felt his preparation to be inadequate. He realized it was beyond him to command his troops. To attack a strong army of a million using the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' or even the Nine Yin Manual would not be possible. If he issued a wrong order even for only one time, he would be defeated by the enemy. Not only

Genghis Khan's reputation would be marred, but the lives of ten thousand men would be jeopardized as well.

That day he was seriously contemplating to see the Great Khan and resign from his position; he was willing to be a low ranking soldier under somebody else's command, fighting the enemy as an individual, when suddenly his second-in-command came to report that more than a thousand Han people were waiting outside, they were seeking an audience with him.

Guo Jing was delighted, he thought, "Qiu Daozhang has arrived this soon?" Hastily he went out his tent to welcome the visitor. To his surprised however, he saw on the prairie stood a group of people dressed as beggars. Three men rushed forward and bowed to greet him; turned out they were the Beggar Clan's Lu Youjiao, along with Jian and Liang Zhanglao [Elders].

"Have you heard anything about Miss Huang Rong?" Guo Jing anxiously asked.

"Xiao Ren [lit. little/lowly person] had anxiously waited for any news, but the Bangzhu's whereabouts is still unknown. We heard Sir ['guan ren', lit. government officer] is commanding a troop on the expedition to the west. We come to offer our assistance," Lu Youjiao answered.

Guo Jing was greatly surprised, "How did you know?"

"The Great Khan sent a messenger inviting Qiu Chuji, Priest Qiu; we heard it from the Quanzhen people," Lu Youjiao replied.

Guo Jing was silent for half a day, staring blankly toward the clouds on the southern horizon, he thought, "The Beggar Clan has eyes and ears all over the world, yet they don't know Rong'er's whereabouts. I am afraid her being in

danger is more likely than not.” Thinking about Huang Rong his eyes turned red involuntarily. He assigned his second-in-command to help the newcomers settled down while he himself went to inform the Great Khan.

“Good,” Genghis Khan said, “Place them under your command.”

When Guo Jing conveyed his intention to resign, Genghis Khan was angry, “Who can fight a battle as soon as they are born? Nobody can. After fighting several battles you will pick up. You grew up with me, what are you afraid of? How could Genghis Khan’s son-in-law not go to war?”

Guo Jing did not dare to say another word. He returned to his tent with an anxious face. Lu Youjiao asked him what the matter was, and then tried to console him. When evening came Lu Youjiao came to his tent and said, “If I knew it would be this way, Xiao Ren would have brought ‘Sun Tzu’s Art of War’, or ‘Tai Gong’s Summary of Military Strategy’ from the south; then everything will be all right.”

It suddenly dawned on Guo Jing that he had the ‘Wumu’s Legacy’ by his side. It was a military manual; how could he forget about it? Right away he took the book out from his clothes pouch, and then read it by the lantern light all night long through the next day, stopping only because he felt tired.

This book contained all kinds of military strategy; from reconnaissance, planning an attack, defense strategy, to military training, officer management, troop disposition, field operation, as well as safety and danger situation overview and escape strategy, all were discussed in details.

That day Guo Jing had browsed through it on the boat at Yuanjiang, he did not pay too much attention. But this time he needed military guidance, so he read until he had a good

grasp of what was written. When he did not understand any part of the book, he would invite Lu Youjiao to ask his advice. Lu Youjiao would answer, "Right now Xiao Ren does not understand, but let me think about it." He would leave Guo Jing's tent only for a moment then came back with a very detailed explanation. Guo Jing was delighted and would ask him more questions. Strangely, Lu Youjiao would always not able to answer immediately; he always asked for some time to think, but then afterwards would always come up with answers no matter how difficult the problem was. At first Guo Jing did not notice, but after several days this answer-finding-process repeated, he could not help but feeling suspicious.

One evening Guo Jing picked a character from the book and asked him what it meant. Lu Youjiao said he wasn't clear about that, so he needed sometime to think about it, then he went out the tent. Guo Jing thought, "The book is difficult, it's all right if you need some time to ponder its meaning; but it is only a character, how could you not know its meaning?"

Although holding a position of general, Guo Jing was still very young and he still had a childish character. As soon as Lu Youjiao exited his tent he followed immediately. He stealthily hid among the tall grass wanting to know Lu Youjiao's secret. He saw Lu Youjiao entered a tiny tent, and in just a short while he went out the tent again. Guo Jing hastily went back to his own tent. Lu Youjiao went in and said, "Xiao Ren has thought about it." Then he proceeded by explaining the character's correct pronunciation and its meaning.

Guo Jing smiled, "Lu Zhanglao, you have an expert master; why don't you invite your master to see me?"

Lu Youjiao was startled, "I don't," he said.

Guo Jing grabbed his hand and smiled, "We will go out and see." He pulled his hand and went out the tent, walked toward that tiny tent he saw earlier.

Outside that tiny tent two Beggar Clan members were standing on guard duty. As soon as they saw Guo Jing they coughed lightly. Guo Jing noticed their coughs he let Lu Youjiao's hand go and darted toward the tent. As soon as he lifted the tent's entrance he saw the rear part of the tent fluttered a little bit. Definitely someone has just gone out the tent. Guo Jing rushed forward and lifted up the tent, but he only saw tall grass, not a single human's shadow was to be seen. He was perplexed, was silent for a while.

Guo Jing turned around and asked Lu Youjiao, but Lu Youjiao said the tent was his, nobody else lived there.

Guo Jing did not give up, he kept asking Lu Youjiao difficult questions from the 'Wumu's Legacy', but from now on Lu Youjiao would wait for the next day before he could answer his questions.

Guo Jing knew the person in that tent did not have any ill intention, only did not want to see him. Guo Jing decided that person must be an expert from the Jianghu, and it would be difficult to deal with people like that, so he put this matter aside temporarily.

He studied the book in the evening then trained his soldiers during the day according to method he learned from the book. The Mongolian cavalry was used to fight an open battle, now they had to train battle formations; they were having a very difficult time. But an order is an order, they did not dare to disobey, so they had no choice and trained hard.

Another month had passed; Genghis Khan's army and its logistic were ready. Guo Jing managed to train his ten

thousand soldiers in all eight battle formations: 'tian fu' [high as the sky], 'di zai' [strong as the earth], 'feng yang' [scattered like a wind], 'yun chui' [dangling like a cloud], 'long fei' [flying dragon], 'hu yi' [winged tiger], 'niao xiang' [soaring bird], and 'she pan' [coiling snake]; which they have mastered skillfully.

These eight formations were originally created by Zhuge Liang based on ancient methods; when they got to Yue Fei's hand, he added many changes and variations. When Yue Fei was young, he went to war under Zong Ze who said, "Your bravery, wisdom and skill have exceeded those of the ancient times; however, in a real battle we can't predict everything." He was referring to the troop disposition method. Yue Fei answered, "In a real battle, the art of war does not change. Whoever manages to utilize its wonder will save their own hearts and minds." Zong Ze could not help but agree to what he said. Later on Yue Fei led many other troop movements. He was aware that he could not always follow certain method, yet he still trained his officers and soldiers according to these methods. Only when it came to the real battle he executed his plan dynamically, thus had defeated countless enemies. This process was also recorded in the 'Wumu's Legacy' book.

One particular day the weather was clear and the air was fresh, the sky stretched out for tens of thousands miles, blue like it was fresh from the laundry. The one hundred and fifty thousand Mongolian cavalry were arranged in row after row on the prairie. Genghis Khan offered a sacrifice to the heaven and earth, making a vow before going into battle. Toward all his generals he said, "Stone has no skin, but there is a limit to human's life. My hair and beard have all turned white. This time I go to war, don't know if I am going back home alive. My concubine has reminded me last

night, and I think she was right. I have to assign one of my sons today to lift high my banner after I am gone.”

The generals had fought hundreds of battle, following Genghis Khan’s attacks to the east and expeditions to the west. His white hair had been gray. Suddenly hearing the Great Khan was going to appoint his successor, they were all surprised and delighted at the same time. All eyes gazed toward his face, waiting for him to say his successor’s name.

Genghis Khan said, “Jochi, you are my eldest son, tell me, whom should I appoint?” Jochi’s heart skipped a beat. He was very capable, had rendered the most service, besides, he was the eldest son. He had always thought that when his father king died, naturally the position would fall into his lap. Now that the Great Khan suddenly asked, he did not know how to reply.

Genghis Khan’s second son, Chagatai, was like a raging fire. He did not live harmoniously with his eldest brother. Hearing his father king asking his brother, he opened his mouth, “He wants Jochi to speak, what order will he receive? How can we let this Mergid bastard rule over us?”

Actually when Genghis Khan was young, his army was weak; as a result his wife was captured by their enemy, the Mergids. After several years in captivity, his wife was taken back, but by that time she had already given birth to Jochi. Genghis Khan accepted this fact with an open mind; he regarded Jochi as his own son.

Listening to his own brother’s insult Jochi could not hold his patience any longer, he charged forward, grabbing Chagatai’s chest, shouted, “Father King had never regarded me as an outsider, how dare you insulted me? What skill do you have that I don’t? You are nothing more than an irritable hot-tempered arrogant man. Let’s go out

and have a duel; if I lost to you in archery, I will rip my own thumb. If I lost to you in martial arts, I will throw myself on the ground and never get up!" Turning his head toward Genghis Khan he said, "Father King, please give your order." Two brothers grabbed each other's chest, ready to have a duel right then and there.

The rest of the generals stepped forward to separate them; Bourchu pulled Jochi's hand, while Mukhali held Chagatai's hand.

Genghis Khan was silent; he remembered his own disgrace in his youth that he was not even able to defend his wife's honor, which had caused today's dispute. The generals all blamed Chagatai for bringing up past events and hurt their parents' hearts.

"Both of you, drop it!" finally Genghis Khan said, "Jochi is my eldest son; I will always love him no matter what. I forbid anyone to speak bad about him."

Chagatai let Jochi go, he said, "Jochi is very capable, everybody knows that. But in term of generosity and benevolence, he is inferior to the third brother, Ogedei. I vote for Ogedei."

"Jochi, what do you say?" Genghis Khan asked.

Jochi could see the unfavorable situation; he knew his hope to be the Great Khan was shattered. He had always had good relationship with his third brother; he knew the third brother was kindhearted, certainly would not do him any harm in the future, therefore, he said, "Very well, I also support Ogedei."

The fourth prince Tuolei did not challenge that nomination, Ogedei was about to decline; but Genghis Khan said, "You don't need to decline. Your battle skill is inferior to your two

elder brothers, but you treat people kindly. When you become the Great Khan in the future, all princes and generals won't fight each other. We the Mongolian people will have no enemy as long as we don't fight each other. What are we anxious about then?"

That day Genghis Khan threw a big feast in celebration of the newly appointed crown prince. All the troops, from the generals to the soldiers drank until very late that night. Guo Jing went back to his tent a little tipsy. He was just about to take out his clothes to sleep when suddenly one of his officers came rushing in, gave him this report, "'Fu Ma Ye' [Master Consort], it's not good; the First Prince and the Second Prince were drunk. Each took his troops to kill each other."

Guo Jing was stunned, quickly said, "Inform the Great Khan!"

"The Great Khan is also drunk, we couldn't wake him up," the officer replied.

Guo Jing knew both Jochi and Chagatai had loyal followers, the troops under their flags were ferocious; if they killed each other the Mongolian army's strength would be hurt considerably. They were having a brawl in the Great Khan's presence earlier, but this time both were drunk; he had the urge to help, but how could he separate them? He was lost at what to do, pacing back and forth inside his tent while tapping his own forehead, musing, "If only Rong'er is here, she would know what to do." He heard a distant battle cry, looked like both troops were about to kill each other.

Guo Jing was getting more anxious than ever; but suddenly Lu Youjiao rushed in and handed him a piece of paper with this message, "Use 'coiled snake' to cut off two armies, then use 'winged tiger' to capture those who refuse to

surrender.” By that time Guo Jing had mastered the ‘Wumu’s Legacy’ from top to bottom. As soon as he saw these two lines of characters his mind was enlightened. He shouted, “How could I be so stupid? What’s the use of reading the military strategy book?” Immediately he gave orders for his own troops to move.

The discipline among the Mongolian army was very strict; even though all the officers and soldiers were drunk once the order was given, they armed themselves and mounted their horse; in a very short time had formed a neat battle formation.

The drums were sounded three times, the bugle was blown, the troops under Guo Jing’s command started to move toward the northeast. Several li’s later his scout came back reporting that the First and the Second Princes’ troops had started to battle each other; their ‘He hu! He hu!’ shouts were heard from afar.

Guo Jing was anxious, “I am afraid I come one step too late and not able to prevent this big calamity.” Hastily he waved his hand to give orders; his ten thousand men divided itself, the right-hand ‘hou tian’ [rear sky]’s three axes moved forward, the right-hand ‘hou di’ [rear earth]’s three axes moved toward the tail; the right ‘hou tian’ charged, the right ‘hou di’ charged, moved toward northwest and northeast they occupied the right-hand position. Their corresponding left-hand teams did the same and occupied the left-hand position; while Guo Jing’s big banner moved in the center, followed by a ‘coiled snake’ formation fiercely broke through the front.

Jochi and Chagatai had each brought their twenty-thousand men, fighting with long saber in their hands. Guo Jing’s ‘coiled snake’ suddenly charged in between still

maintaining their neat formation. The battling troops were startled, they scattered slightly disorderly.

Chagatai's loud voice was heard, "Who's there? Who's there? Are you coming to help me or to help this bastard Jochi?"

Guo Jing paid no attention, his command flag waved, his teams moved around, the 'coiled snake' changed into 'winged tiger' immediately, the four smaller groups left-hand and right-hand 'qian tian' [front sky] occupied the front position, the rest of the groups enveloped Chagatai's troops from both sides, their corresponding left groups outflanked Jochi's troops on the other side.

By this time Chagatai could see Guo Jing's banner clearly; angrily he swore, "I knew from the start the southern barbarian is not a good person." He gave an order to his troops to kill Guo Jing's. But those tiger's wings contained subtle variations; each was very powerful; it was the formation Han Xin used to crush Xiang Yu at Gai Xia. It was called, "Ten principles to surround the enemy" in the military strategy books. It was said to have a power of surrounding the enemy ten times stronger, the principle of small number surrounding many using ever changing movements.

Chagatai's troops saw Guo Jing's small groups came and went continually, they did not know the exact number of the enemy and their hearts trembled with fear. In a short moment Chagatai's twenty-thousand troops had been cut off, each group could not help the other.

The fight against Jochi's troops took a different turn since their fighting spirit was already weakened. First, it was their fellow countrymen, more than half of them were good friends to each other. Second, they were afraid of the Great

Khan's wrath. As soon as Guo Jing's small groups surrounded them in confusing movements, they lost their will to fight.

Among the troop movement Guo Jing's loud voice could be heard, "We are all Mongolian brothers, no need to kill each other. Quickly put down your sabers, spears, bows and arrows to avoid the Great Khan's beheadings." Almost all officers and soldiers listened to his plea; immediately they dismounted their horses and threw their weapons to the ground.

Chagatai and about a thousand of his loyal followers charged ferociously toward Guo Jing's troops, but three drumbeats were heard, eight groups of riders came surrounding them from all directions; they carried horse-tripping ropes. One by one the thousand troops fell down their horsebacks. From those eight groups, four or five soldiers surrounded one of Chagatai's loyal followers. They were forced to sit on the ground with their hands tied behind their backs.

Jochi saw how Guo Jing's troops routed Chagatai, he could not help but feeling scared but happy. He was about to move forward to talk to Guo Jing when suddenly the horn sounded again, Guo Jing's front teams moved backward and the rear teams moved forward, very soon Jochi was surrounded on all directions.

Jochi had an extensive battle experience, but he had never seen anything like this. Hastily ordered his men to attack, but Guo Jing's ten thousand men split into twelve smaller groups, did not charge forward, but moved backward instead. Jochi was marveled; he did not know that these twelve groups were:

'da hei zi' [black darkness, 11pm – 1am, the first hour],
'po di chou' [worn out enemy, 1 – 3am, the second hour],

‘zuo tu yin’ [dashing to the left, 3 – 5am, the third hour],
‘qing she mao’ [green snake, 5 – 7am, the fourth hour],
‘cui xiong chen’ [terrible devastation, 7 – 9am, the fifth hour],
‘qian chong si’ [charge forward, 9 – 11am, the sixth hour],
‘da chi wu’ [great scarlet, 11am – 1pm, the seventh hour],
‘xian feng wei’ [first tip (of the tool/weapon), 1 – 3pm, the eighth hour],
‘you ji shen’ [right-hand strike, 3 – 5pm, the ninth hour],
‘bai yun you’ [white cloud, 5 – 7pm, the tenth hour],
‘jue sheng xu’ [sure victory, 7 – 9pm, the eleventh hour],
and ‘hou wei hai’ [rear guard, 9 – 11pm, the twelfth hour],
according to the twelve two-hour periods of the day; with strange variations, swiftly moved back and forth.

These twelve groups moved around, the right-hand groups charged to the left, the left-hand groups strike to the right; Jochi’s troops were confused. Less than the time to eat a bowl of rice later Jochi and his men were also surrounded and captured.

Jochi remembered when all of them were kids he had whipped Guo Jing half-dead. Chagatai also remembered he let his dogs loose and bite Guo Jing really bad. Both were afraid that Guo Jing would seek revenge; they sobered up immediately. They were also really scared that their father king would punish them severely.

After capturing these two people Guo Jing thought that as an outsider he had interfered in this sibling rivalry; he was not sure if his action might result in disaster or good luck. He was thinking of discussing this matter over with Ogedei and Tuolei when suddenly he heard loud horn sound; amidst the flickering torches the Great Khan’s nine big banners came galloping fast.

Genghis Khan had sobered up from wine, he received the report that his two sons were about to kill each other. He was startled and angrily jumped out of his bed. Without wearing clothes or armor, with his hair unkempt he jumped on his horse and sped to the prairie.

When he came near, he saw his sons' troops sat on the ground, with Guo Jing's troops standing around, guarding them. His two sons, although they were still sitting on the horsebacks, but each were surrounded by eight of Guo Jing's men wielding unsheathed blades in their hands. He was very surprised.

Guo Jing stepped forward and knelt down on the ground, reporting everything. Realizing that a major disaster had been unexpectedly thwarted, Genghis Khan's delight was unspeakable. He came rushing in thinking that two Mongolian armies had fought each other, the casualty must be serious; his two sons might be dead already. Who would have thought that his two sons were alive and well, three armies were intact. Of course he was delighted.

Immediately he called a general assembly of all the princes and generals. He scolded Jochi and Chagatai, and heavily rewarded Guo Jing and his men. He said to Guo Jing, "Do you still say that you cannot lead troops to war? Your merit in this matter alone can easily dwarf the war against the Jin country. If we cannot destroy the enemy's city wall today, we can always come back tomorrow and try again. But if my sons were dead, how can we make them alive again?"

Guo Jing took the rewards, but divided the gold, silver and livestock to his troops. There was a thunderous cheering and applause among his troops that day. All generals came to congratulate him on this great merit.

After sending off the guests, Guo Jing took out the note given to him by Lu Youjiao. He examined it carefully, the handwriting was shoddy, most likely it was Lu Youjiao's handwriting, but he was suspicious, "Although I have trained my troops in 'coiled snake' and 'winged tiger' formations, but I have never mentioned these names to Lu Zhanglao. The difficult parts of the book that I asked him for advice also do not have anything to do with this battle formations. How did he know? Did he read my military strategy book without my knowledge?"

Right away he invited Lu Youjiao into his tent. "Lu Zhanglao, if you like to read this military strategy book, I will gladly lend it to you."

Lu Youjiao smiled, "A poor beggar like me will not become a general in my lifetime; leading a whole bunch of little beggars also did not need to use the art of war. What use will the military strategy book for me?"

Guo Jing pointed his finger to the note, "Then how did you know about the 'coiled snake' and 'winged tiger' formations?"

"Sir has mentioned it to Xiao Ren, have you forgotten?" Lu Youjiao said. Guo Jing knew he was not telling the truth. The more he thought about it the more he was perplexed; but he was not sure what did Lu Youjiao hide.

The next day Genghis Khan held another general assembly. The vanguard was under Chagatai and Ogedei's command. The left flank was under Jochi's command, while the right was under Guo Jing's. Each of the vanguard, left and right units were thirty thousand men strong. Genghis Khan and Tuolei commanded over sixty thousand soldiers as the main army. Each soldier rode on one of a pair of horses; they would ride one horse at a time to conserve the horses'

strength. The officers took even more horses. With one hundred and fifty thousand men, they took with them nearly a million horses.

The horns were sounded, the drums were beaten, the noise was deafening. The thirty-thousand strong vanguard cavalry unit started to gallop majestically to the west. The great army moved farther and farther west, entering Khoresm territory with irresistible force. Muhammad's army was bigger, but they were not the Mongolian's army match. Guo Jing led his unit destroying cities and killing the enemies, he had rendered not a few merits.

End of Chapter 36.

Chapter 37 - Descending From the Sky

Translated by Frans Soetomo



From all over the camp officers and soldiers alike came to the command tent to watch the

marvelous sight. The soldiers joined strength to raise the ice column. Under the bright torch light they saw Ouyang Feng showing his teeth with an angry look on his face, his hands and feet splayed wide. He was frozen inside the ice column and could not move even one bit. The officers and soldiers erupted in thunderous applause.

One day Guo Jing's troops pitched a camp by a riverbank. In the evening Guo Jing was reading the military strategy book when suddenly there was a commotion outside his tent. The curtain to his tent was opened, and somebody was forcing his way in. The guards outside shouted, trying to stop him, but that person moved his hand and one by one the guards fell to the ground. That man lifted up his head and laughed. Under the bright candlelight Guo Jing could see his face clearly; it was none other than the Western Poison Ouyang Feng, whom Guo Jing had searched high and low for tens of thousands 'li's. Unexpectedly he appeared here in a foreign land, Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised. He jumped up from his seat and called out, "Where is Miss Huang?"

"I was just about to ask you," Ouyang Feng replied, "Where is that little girl? Quickly hand her over to me!"

Hearing this, Guo Jing's delight was beyond measure, "So Rong'er is still alive; not only that, but she managed to escape from his evil hands too," he thought.

"Where is that little girl?" Ouyang Feng sternly asked again.

"She went with you in Jiangnan, then what happened? She ... is she well? You haven't killed her, I really should thank you! I ... I must thank you," Guo Jing said. He was sobbing from overwhelming delight.

Ouyang Feng knew Guo Jing was not able to lie, but all signs indicated that Huang Rong was with him; how could he be so oblivious, Ouyang Feng had to re-think his assumptions. He sat cross-legged on the carpet in Guo Jing's tent.

Guo Jing wiped out his tears, then unsealed his guards' acupoints and asked them to deliver 'ru jiu lao cha' [lit. milk wine cream tea - don't know exactly what kind of drink it was].

Ouyang Feng drank a bowl of 'ma ru jiu' [horse milk wine], he said, "Dumb kid, I might as well speak frankly with you. That little girl was with me since we were at the Temple of the Iron Spear in Jiaxing, unexpectedly several days later she escaped from me."

Guo Jing cheered ecstatically, he said, "She is so smart, once she decided to escape, she will find a way to escape. How did she do it?"

Ouyang Feng full of hatred said, "At the Cloud Manor, by Lake Tai ... Bah!" he spat, "Why would I tell you? In short, she ran away."

Guo Jing knew Ouyang Feng was a conceited man; he did not expect him to personally reveal his own setback, so he stopped asking question. Knowing Huang Rong was alive and well he was elated, he kept shouted, "Wonderful! Just wonderful!"

Ouyang Feng was annoyed, "What do you mean wonderful?" he asked, "After she escaped I was hot on her trail; several times I almost caught her, but every time she managed to get away relying on her craftiness. But I always followed her closely, she could not run away to the Peach Blossom Island. I chased her to the Mongolian border then suddenly her trail disappeared. I thought she must be

hiding in your troops; therefore, I am standing on my guard to prevent her from running away again."

Hearing that Huang Rong was in Mongolia, Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised, "Have you seen her?" he asked.

Ouyang Feng was indignant, "If I saw her, wouldn't I capture her?" he said, "Day and night I stayed in your troops keeping my eyes open, I did not even see this little girl's shadow. Dumb kid, what kind of crafty trick are you playing?"

Guo Jing was silent for half a day, he asked, "Day and night you are in my troops? How come I did not recognize you?"

Ouyang Feng smiled, "I am just a lowly western area soldier in your 'tian qian' [front sky] group; you are the commander-in-chief, how would you recognize me?" In the Mongolian army, there were many prisoners of war who were then given jobs as soldiers; Ouyang Feng was from the west, once he intermingled with other soldiers from the same region, it was really not easy to single him out.

Listening to him Guo Jing was startled, he thought, "If he meant me harm, I would be dead by now." He muttered, "Why did you say Rong'er is in my army?"

"You captured the Great Khan's two sons, you destroyed cities and crushed the enemies, if not by that little girl's direction, how can a dumb kid like you accomplish all that?" Ouyang Feng replied, "But that little girl has never shown herself up; it's really strange. I have no choice but forcing you to hand her over to me."

Guo Jing smiled, "If Rong'er is willing to show herself up that will be my earnest desire. Just think: would I hand her over to you?"

“Fine,” Ouyang Feng said, “You are not willing to hand her over to me, I’ll find my way to get hold of her. You have great authority as the commander of tens of thousands soldiers, but in Ouyang Feng’s eye, hey, hey ... outside or inside this tent, I can come and go as I like; who can stop me?”

Guo Jing nodded, silently agreed to what he said.

“Dumb kid, what do you say we make an agreement?” Ouyang Feng asked.

“What agreement?” Guo Jing replied with a question.

Ouyang Feng said, “You tell me her hiding place, I guarantee not to harm even a single strand of her hair. But if you don’t want to tell me, I will find her sooner or later anyway. When that time comes, humph, it doesn’t matter anymore, does it?”

Guo Jing knew Ouyang Feng was smart and resourceful; as long as Huang Rong was not on the Peach Blossom Island, there would come a day when she would be captured by him. Ouyang Feng was not making an empty threat. He hesitated for a moment before finally saying, “All right, I am going to make an agreement with you, but not like what you said.”

“What do you mean?” Ouyang Feng asked.

“Mr. Ouyang,” Guo Jing said, “Your martial art is a lot higher than mine, but I am a lot younger than you are. One day you will grow old and your strength will be gone; you won’t be able to defeat me anymore.” Before, Guo Jing always called him ‘Uncle Ouyang’ but since he killed Guo Jing’s five benevolent masters, Guo Jing’s hatred was as deep as the ocean; therefore, he could not say the word ‘Uncle’ anymore.

It never occurred to Ouyang Feng that someday he would grow old and lose his strength; this revelation sent a chill to his heart, "What this dumb said is actually not dumb at all," he thought. "What then?" he asked.

"There is very deep enmity between us," Guo Jing said, "I can't leave this enmity un-avenged. Even if you fly to the sky, there will come a day when I will come looking for you."

Ouyang Feng lifted up his head and laughed loudly, "Before I grow old and lose my strength, I will kill you!" As soon as he finished talking he bent his knees slightly, and thrust both palms forward with an earth-shattering force.

By this time Guo Jing had mastered the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone] from the Nine Yin Manual. Also he had trained himself in the part that Reverend Yideng had translated; his internal energy had enjoyed quite a bit of improvement. He leaned his body slightly to avoid the attack, and at the same time counterattack with 'jian long zai tian' [seeing dragon in the field].

Ouyang Feng received Guo Jing's attack head-on, thinking that he was already familiar with this '18-Dragon Subduing Palms'. Besides, Guo Jing was Hong Qigong's disciple, so his strength should be a lot less than Hong Qigong. Hence, he did not put too much energy on his defense. But unexpectedly when their palms met he was shaken. If his internal energy was not strong enough, he would be seriously injured. He was being careless and nearly lost in Guo Jing's hand. He was shocked, "Perhaps this kid will already catch up with me before I grow old and lose my strength" he thought. Quickly he sent his left palm out.

Guo Jing again leaned sideways to evade, then returned the attack. This time Ouyang Feng did not dare to take it head on, he flicked his hand to redirect Guo Jing's palm. Guo Jing

did not know Ouyang Feng's real intention, he thought Ouyang Feng simply parried his attack, who would have thought that inside that defensive move there was a hidden attack; Guo Jing felt a strong force surging toward his face, there was not enough time to evade, so he was forced to stretch out his right palm to block.

Speaking about internal energy strength, Guo Jing was still one level inferior to Ouyang Feng. The current situation was similar to the day at the imperial palace in Lin'an, inside the cave behind the waterfall; although Guo Jing would be able to hold his ground for a while, but in the end he would suffer a heavy injury or even death.

Ouyang Feng's movement resembled a gourd, enticing the opponent to enter; which Guo Jing did. Ouyang Feng was delighted, but suddenly sensed Guo Jing pulled his right palm slightly, like he was losing his strength. Ouyang Feng sent more force to his palm, pressing harder; who would have thought that Guo Jing's palm slid a little bit and thus avoid being crushed.

Ouyang Feng grunted ferociously, sending all his strength to his palm, thinking, "Today is the day you are going to die."

Seeing the opponent's fingertip swept to his chest, Guo Jing parried by sweeping his left palm horizontally while his right-hand index finger stretched out and fiercely went to Ouyang Feng's 'tai yang' [sun] acupoint. It was the 'Solitary Yang Finger' he saw Reverend Yideng used. However, what he learned was superficial, he only saw the form, but did not know the variations within. In this critical moment instinctively he used mutual hands combat technique.

'Solitary Yang Finger' was the 'Toad Stance's adversary, how could Ouyang Feng not startled when he saw it? He

leaped backward to elude, shouted angrily, "Old Duan Zhixing wants to give me a hard time?"

Unfortunately Guo Jing's finger technique was not the real 'Solitary Yang Finger', hence it could not break the Toad Stance; but Ouyang Feng was scared away, without looking clearly he jumped back in shock. Only afterwards did he remember that the Solitary Yang Finger had an infinite variations; how could after launching an attack Guo Jing retracted his finger? Hence he knew Guo Jing had not learned it in its entirety. Without waiting for Guo Jing to launch the next stance both of his palms, one upward the other downward, one attack the other guarded, moved toward Guo Jing. This attack was so swift that Guo Jing did not have time to think, he simply jumped back to escape. 'Crack!' the small table behind him was smashed by the Western Poison's palms.

Since he was gaining an upper hand, Ouyang Feng continued his attack by successively sending his palms; but suddenly he felt a gust of wind coming from behind, somebody attacked him. Without turning around he sent his left foot kicking backward. Turned out the attacker was also using his leg, so two legs collided, the attacker was thrown backward; luckily his bone was not broken, it looked like he had anticipated Ouyang Feng's counterattack.

Ouyang Feng turned his head around only to see three old beggars standing on the tent's entrance, they were the Beggar Clan's three elders, Lu, Jian and Liang. Lu Youjiao swiftly moved toward Jian and Liang Zhanglao [Elders], then interlinked his arms with theirs. It was the Beggar Clan's technique of combining power to fight a superior enemy using the-weak-subdue-the-strong method. During the Beggar Clan general assembly at Mount Jun to elect the new Bangzhu [Clan Leader] the other day, the Beggar Clan

disciples had formed a human wall, rendering Guo Jing and Huang Rong helpless against them.

Ouyang Feng had never fought these three people, but from his first contact with Lu Youjiao's leg he knew that Lu's internal energy was not weak. The other two beggars looked not much different. If he fight Guo Jing one on one, he was certain he would win; but with the addition of these three stinky beggars he knew things would not end too good for him. He laughed a big laugh and said, "Dumb kid, your martial art has improved tremendously."

He bent his legs and sat on the carpet, totally ignoring Lu Youjiao and the other two beggars. "What kind of agreement you want to make? Let me hear it," he said.

"You want Miss Huang to explain the Nine Yin Manual to you," Guo Jing said, "Whether she is willing to do that or not, it is entirely up to her; you must not harm even a single strand of her hair."

Ouyang Feng laughed, "If she is willing, of course I won't want to harm her in any way. Do you think it is easy to deal with the Old Heretic Huang?" he said, "But if she is not willing, how can it be that I can't use a little bit of persuasion?"

Guo Jing shook his head, "No, you can't."

"Well, you want me to agree to this, what is there for me?" Ouyang Feng asked.

"From now on, if you fall into my hand, I will spare your life three times," Guo Jing replied.

Ouyang Feng stood up, letting out a long laughter. His laugh was supported by a strong internal energy; it

traveled far into the prairie. The horses were disturbed, they neighed and made commotion.

Guo Jing's gaze pierced Ouyang Feng's eyes, with a low voice he said, "This is not funny, and you know it. There will come a day you will fall into my hand."

Although he was laughing Ouyang Feng was actually scared. He realized this kid knew the secret of the Nine Yin Manual, his martial art was improving by leaps and bounds; he really must not underestimate him. While his mouth was laughing, his mind had made a decision. "I, Ouyang Feng, am going to ask you, a stinky kid, for mercy? All right, let's just wait and see," he said with a smile.

Guo Jing extended his hand and said, "Once a gentleman said a word."

Ouyang Feng smiled and replied, "Like a fast horse getting a whip." He also extended his hand and patted Guo Jing's hand three times. This was the way the people of Song Dynasty sealed their agreement; whoever broke it would be despised and disgraced for the rest of his life.

After sealing their agreement Ouyang Feng was about to interrogate Guo Jing on Huang Rong's whereabouts some more, but suddenly with the corner of his eyes he caught a shadow moving outside the tent. That shadow was very swift; Ouyang Feng's heart was stirred, quickly he went out the tent, but did not see anyone. He turned his head and said, "Within ten days I am going to visit you again. We'll see whether you will spare my life, or will I spare yours?" With a loud laughter he moved swiftly, and a sort moment later his laughter was heard dozens of 'zhang's away.

Lu, Jian and Liang three elders looked at each other in astonishment, they thought, "This man's martial art is really

high. He is an extraordinary character, truly in par with our Hong Bangzhu."

Guo Jing then told the three visitors the reason of Ouyang Feng's visit. Lu Youjiao said, "He said Huang Bangzhu is in our army, that's nonsense. If the Huang Bangzhu is here, how could we not know? Besides ..."

Guo Jing sat back down, one hand supporting his cheek. "I actually think what he said is very reasonable. Oftentimes I have a feeling that Miss Huang is by my side; no matter how difficult the problem I am facing, she always gives me a wonderful solution. Only no matter what I think, I still can't see her." Speaking thus his eyes welled up with tears.

Lu Youjiao tried to console him, "Sir, please don't worry, to be separated but for a moment, to be united forever in the future."

"I have offended Miss Huang," Guo Jing said, "I am afraid she won't be willing to see me again. I don't know what I must do to pay for this guilt."

Lu, Jian and Liang three people looked at each other without saying anything.

Guo Jing continued, "Even if she is not willing to talk to me, if only she would let me see her once, I will be very much comforted."

"Sir is tired, better go to bed soon," Jian Zhanglao said, "Tomorrow morning we will discuss how we are going to deal with Ouyang Feng if he stirs up trouble again."

The next morning the army continued their journey to the west. That evening after they pitched camp Lu Youjiao came and said, "Years ago Xiao Ren bought a painting in Jiangnan. I am a rough uneducated man, how could I

comprehend the meaning behind this painting? While Sir is lonely in this army, Sir may enjoy this leisurely.” While speaking he put a roll of painting on the table.

Guo Jing unrolled the painting to take a look, he could not help but feeling astonished. The painting depicted a young maiden with a flower on her hair; she was sitting weaving silk on a loom. Her appearance resembled Huang Rong’s, only she looked distressed; her eyebrows were knitted together and her face looked thin and pale.

Guo Jing looked in surprise for half a day, he saw next to the picture were two lines of poem. The first one read, “Seven looms, in the springtime silkworms spit their raw silk, it is not easy to weave them into silk cloth. Do not use a pair of scissors so recklessly, otherwise the immortal ‘luan’ [a mythical bird] and the phoenix will be separated on two sides of the clothes.” The other one read, “Nine looms, a pair of flowers, a pair of leafs, and a pair of branches. From ancient time a shallow love often parts. From head to toe two hearts are bound together, passing through a strand of silk thread.” These two stanzas resembled the ‘si zhang ji’ [four looms/weaving machines] poem of Ying Gu, but the pain they carried was twice the ‘four looms’ had.

Although it was hard for Guo Jing to interpret the poem, he understood the ‘From ancient time a shallow love often parts’ part. After pondering it for half a day he thought, “This painting must be Rong’er’s handiwork; where did Lu Zhanglao get it from?”

He raised his head to ask, but Lu Youjiao had left early on. Hastily Guo Jing ordered his personal guard to summon him back. Lu Youjiao was persistent with what he said earlier, that he bought that painting at a bookstore in Jiangnan. Even if Guo Jing was ten times dumber, he’d know something was wrong. Lu Youjiao was a straightforward

and rough warrior; how could he stroll into a bookstore and buy a painting? If the painting was a gift, he would throw it away without giving it a second thought. If he did buy it at a bookstore in Jiangnan, how come the maiden in the painting bore a very close resemblance to Huang Rong? But Lu Youjiao was determined not to reveal the truth; there was nothing he could do.

While he was hesitating, Jian Zhanglao walked in and whispered in his ears, "Just now Xiao Ren saw a shadow of a man moving on the tent toward our northeast; it swiftly disappeared without any trace. I am afraid that old scoundrel Ouyang Feng is going to sneak in tonight."

"Good," Guo Jing said, "We, four people will cooperate here to capture him."

"Xiao Ren has an idea," Jian Zhanglao said, "Let's see if Sir will agree."

"Any idea is good," Guo Jing said, "Please tell me."

Jian Zhanglao said, "This is a very ordinary idea: we dig a deep hole here, then we place twenty soldiers with bags of sand waiting outside. If he did not show up, consider him lucky, but if he did, I guarantee he can come but won't be able to leave."

Guo Jing was delighted, he thought that Ouyang Feng was very conceited, never considered others worthy to be looked at. This idea was an old trick, but actually very effective against somebody like him.

The three elders immediately supervised several soldiers to dig a very deep hole. The top of the hole was then covered with a rug, and a light wooden chair was placed on top of the rug. Twenty soldiers with sand bags in their hand were waiting outside the tent.

It was not uncommon for an army to dig holes in the desert, looking for water; so the activity was gone unnoticed.

The set up was completed and Guo Jing waited by the candlelight, reading. But Ouyang Feng did not show up that night. After pitching their camp the next day, again the three elders had some soldiers dug another hole, but again nothing happened that night. Toward the evening of the fourth day Guo Jing heard some strange noise among the tents; his heart was thumping fast. Suddenly there was a rustling noise outside his tent; with a long laugh Ouyang Feng walked inside his tent then casually walked toward the wooden chair.

‘Crack! Crack!’ with a loud noise both the man and the chair fell into the hole. The trap’s depth was about seven, eight ‘zhang’s [70 – 80 feet, about 25 meters], the mouth was narrow. Even if Ouyang Feng’s martial art were higher, how could he jump back up easily? Twenty soldiers swarmed the tent, and forty bags of sand were rapidly poured into the hole, burying Ouyang Feng’s body.

Lu Youjiao burst up in laughter, “Huang Bangzhu predicts like a deity ...” he said.

Jian Zhanglao cast him a glance; Lu Youjiao closed his mouth immediately.

“What Huang Bangzhu?” Guo Jing quickly asked.

“Xiao Ren had a slip of tongue,” Lu Youjiao said, “I mean Hong Bangzhu. If Hong Bangzhu were here, he would have been delighted.”

Guo Jing stared at him, hard. He was about to ask another question when suddenly the soldiers outside his tent were shouting noisily. Guo Jing and the three elders quickly went out the tent to see the soldiers were pointing their fingers

to the ground, shouting loudly. Guo Jing rushed forward to take a look, he saw the ground was rising up gradually, looked like something was trying to come out of the ground. Immediately Guo Jing realized what was going on, "With his excellent martial art Ouyang Feng is drilling the ground, trying to climb up," he said. He commanded a dozen or so of his soldiers to ride their horses and trampled the ground at once.

The weight of the dozens or so soldiers and their horses was heavy enough to trample the raising ground back down. Even though Ouyang Feng's strength was incredible he was not able to penetrate the ground, so the earth was slowly leveled up as before. To everybody surprise, in another location the ground was starting to rise again. The soldiers simply rode their horses to wherever the ground rose and trampled it flat.

Not too long afterwards the ground no longer rose anywhere. They assumed Ouyang Feng had lost his strength or even died of suffocation. Guo Jing ordered the soldiers to dismount their horses and dug the ground. It was already the first hour [between 11pm - 1 am]; the soldiers lifted up their torches high, they stood in a circle surrounding the digging.

About a dozen soldiers used spades and shovels dug a little over a 'zhang' before finally they saw Ouyang Feng was standing inside the sand. This location was a few 'zhang's away from the tent. Although the sand was soft, yet by using his bare hands Ouyang Feng was able to dig underground just like a mole. It was a demonstration of a very strong internal energy, truly extraordinary. The soldiers were astounded but full of admiration; they lifted him up and laid him on the ground.

Lu Youjiao probed him for breath, but felt his chest was still warm; he ordered the soldiers to get some iron chain to tie him up, for fear that Ouyang Feng would create problem once he was awake. Who would have thought that when he was crawling in the sand Ouyang Feng was unable to excavate his way upward because of the horses, he feigned death, thinking he would escape later. He suspended his own breath, and did not see Lu Youjiao stood beside him. But as soon as Lu Youjiao shouted his order to take some chain, Ouyang Feng leaped up, gave a loud shout, and grabbed Lu Youjiao's main artery on his right hand.

It was a sudden change; a corpse went back to live. Everybody was shocked. Guo Jing rushed forward, his left hand pressed the 'tao dao' [pleasing talk] acupoint on Ouyang Feng's back, while his right hand attacked the 'ji zhong' [spine's central] acupoint on Ouyang Feng's waist. These two were two main acupoints on the back; if Ouyang Feng was not buried under the ground, half-dead, and was very tired, how could he let his main acupoints be sealed that easily?

Ouyang Feng was startled, he swung his hand backward trying to fend off, but his acupoints were numb. He realized Guo Jing did not use his full strength; otherwise his internal organs would be shaken. Moreover, his hands and feet were weak; even if Guo Jing did not seal his acupoints still he would not be Guo Jing's match. He was forced to let Lu Youjiao go and stood still.

"Mr. Ouyang," Guo Jing said, "May I ask did you see Miss Huang?"

"I saw her shadow, that's why I came looking for her," Ouyang Feng replied.

"Did you see her clearly?" Guo Jing pressed.

Ouyang Feng hatefully said, "If that sly little girl is not in this, I bet you wouldn't think of some clever trap like this."

Guo Jing was silent for half a day, then he finally said, "You can go. I spare your life." His right hand lightly waved, sending Ouyang Feng tumbled down a little over a 'zhang'. He was afraid if he freed him in close proximity, Ouyang Feng would suddenly execute a counterattack.

Ouyang Feng turned around and said coldly, "I've never used any weapon dealing with a junior; but you are secretly helped by that sly girl of yours. She is very crafty. What happened to me tonight was the proof. I will be back within ten days with my snake staff. You have seen the vipers with your own eyes. Just watch out." As soon as he finished speaking, Ouyang Feng flew away.

As Guo Jing looked at his shadow swiftly disappearing into the dark towards the north a chill crept up his spine. Remembering the venomous snake staff and the exquisiteness of Ouyang Feng's stick technique very well; he could not refrain from feeling apprehensive. Although he had trained extensively in weaponry from the Six Freaks of Jiangnan, among those he had mastered none would be adequate to fight someone Ouyang Feng's caliber; while it certainly was not a good idea to face the snake staff with his bare hands.

He was at a loss for a while; lifting up his eyes toward the sky he saw white snow flakes floating down in the darkness. Not long after he returned to his tent the weather turned cold. His soldiers started bonfires and got their horses inside their tents to protect them against the bitter cold weather outside.

The Beggar Clan people did not have any fur coats with them; with the sudden change in temperature they were

forced to circulate their internal energy to keep their bodies warm. Right away Guo Jing ordered his troops to slaughter some sheep and make some leather coats. They were not as good as the tanned leather coats, but they helped the beggars to fight the cold.

The next day the weather turned even colder; the snow on the ground had turned into ice. The Khoresm's army took advantage of this cold weather and made an attack; luckily Guo Jing had already anticipated this possibility. Using the 'flying dragon' formation they scored a big victory over the enemy; chasing them far into the night towards the snow-covered northern plains.

There was an ancient poem about the expedition to the west amidst a bitter cold weather: "The army general did not take out their golden armor at night. In the middle of the night the army set aside their spears, the wind blowing like a cutting knife. The sweats on the horses' mane rose up like steam in the snow, the five-petal flower pattern on the (money) coin felt like ice, inside the tent the liquid ink to write letters froze over."

Then there was another poem: "The soldiers and prisoners squeezed in the same station, the bones on the battlefield wrapped around the grassroots. Blowing wind like the blade of a sword sweeping wide, the horses' hoofs got away from the frozen sand and stone."

Guo Jing grew up in the northern desert, he was used to the bitter cold weather, but he remembered if Huang Rong were really in his army, she was raised in the south (Jiangnan), would she be able to withstand this bitter cold weather? His anxiety multiplied. The next several nights he roamed around the tents without alerting anybody; quietly investigate each and every tent, but not even Huang Rong's shadow was to be seen.

Returning to his command-center tent, he saw Lu Youjiao was supervising the soldiers to dig another hole. "This Ouyang Feng is sly and alert, first time he fell into the trap, how can he fall for the second time?" Guo Jing asked.

"He would certainly think that we are going to prepare some other trap, but he would not expect us to prepare the same trap," Lu Youjiao said, "It is called 'a void inside a solid, and solid in an emptiness,' an indiscernible combination of void and solid."

Guo Jing cast a glance toward him, he thought, "You said leading little beggars did not need to use any military strategy, but you remembered the content of the military strategy book very well."

Lu Youjiao continued, "But this man must have thought of a way to escape the sand piling on top of him, therefore, we must strive for a different method. We are going to use boiling water to soak him up."

Guo Jing saw dozens of soldiers preparing about twenty big iron pots outside his tent. The soldiers used hatchets to break the ice and feed them into the pots using shovels. "Won't he die of scalding?" Guo Jing asked.

"Sir had made an agreement with him that if he falls into your hands you will spare his life three times. But this time if he die from scalding, he won't die in your hands, even if you want to spare his life you are powerless, therefore, it can't be said that you break your promise," Lu Youjiao reasoned.

Not too long afterwards the hole was dug, the mouth was covered with a rug, and a light wooden chair was placed on it. Outside the tent the soldiers were busy adding fuel to the fire underneath the pots; the ice were slowly melting into water, but the weather was just too cold; the water on the

surface was slowly turning back into ice. "More heat, more heat!" Lu Youjiao urged.

Suddenly on the snow outside a shadow came lightning fast; Ouyang Feng with the stick in his hand had arrived on the tent's entrance. "Dumb kid, whatever trap you prepared, your grandfather is not scared!" he said while flying toward the chair to sit.

Elders Lu, Jian, and Liang did not expect Ouyang Feng would arrive this soon; the ice inside the pots were barely melted into water; a very cold water, which certainly would not scald people to death. The water was even too cold to take a shower. They saw Ouyang Feng moved toward the chair, they could not help but feeling disappointed.

'Crack!' one more time with loud cursing the man and the chair fell into the hole. This time there were no sand bags around. With his level of martial art it was an easy matter for Ouyang Feng to climb back up. The three elders were helpless, they were afraid Guo Jing would be injured, "Sir, get out of the tent, quick!" they shouted in panic.

But suddenly somebody shouted from behind the tent, "Pour the water!" As soon as Lu Youjiao heard this voice, without hesitation he shouted, "Pour the water!" The soldiers lifted up the pots and poured the water into the hole.

Ouyang Feng was about to jump back up when the water from the first pot was poured over his head. He was shocked and was forced to fall back down. He used his snake staff as a brace against the bottom of the hole, and tried to jump up for the second time. This time he was prepared, he was sure he would not be forced to fall down by pouring water. Unexpectedly to him the weather was really cold, as the water left the pot it froze up immediately;

as Ouyang Feng was jumping up, the water around his feet was turning into ice. With his incredible strength he tried to jump up, but 'Bonk!' he felt a shot of pain as his head was hit by a block of ice. He tried hard to kick around, but his feet were firmly buried in ice, he could not even move them. He was extremely shocked; with a loud shout he struggled with all his might; but just as his feet start to loosen up, his upper body was drenched in cold water, which also turned into ice.

The soldiers pouring the water had been trained well; four soldiers lifted the pot to pour water, while the other four-man teams were ready behind them. One team after another they pour water into the hole like a waterwheel. To protect themselves from the boiling water, each man bound a cloth on their faces. Who would have thought that the snow would not boil, but the cold water could also paralyze the enemy. In a short period of time twenty pots of water had been poured into the hole, forming a four, five 'zhang's and about seven feet in diameter ice column.

Everybody was excited, what they thought was a failure turned into a huge success. The three elders supervised the soldiers to dig around the hole; then tied a rope around the ice column. With the help of twenty horses the ice column was pulled up to the ground.

From all over the camp officers and soldiers alike came to the command-center tent to watch the marvelous sight. The soldiers joined their strength to raise the ice column up. Under the bright torch light they saw Ouyang Feng showing his teeth with an angry look on his face, his hands and feet splayed wide. He was frozen inside the ice column, could not move even one bit. The officers and soldiers erupted in thunderous applause.

Lu Youjiao was afraid with his profound internal energy Ouyang Feng would be able to melt the ice; he ordered the soldiers to melt some more ice and pour the water on the ice column to make it thicker.

"I had made an agreement with him, to spare his life three times. Break the ice, let him go!" Guo Jing ordered.

The three elders were disappointed, but a hero ought to keep his words, so they did not say anything. Lu Youjiao took a hammer and walked toward the ice column to break it when suddenly Jian Zhanlao called out, "Hold on!" He turned to Guo Jing and asked, "Sir, with his ability, how long do you think Ouyang Feng will survive inside the ice?"

"He might be able to survive for a couple of hours," Guo Jing said, "Longer than that his life might be in danger."

"Very well," Elder Jian said, "Let him suffer two more hours. We can spare his life, but he has to suffer for a while."

Remembering Ouyang Feng had killed his masters, Guo Jing nodded his head in approval.

The news traveled fast, officers and soldiers from other units heard about it and they came to watch. To the three elders Guo Jing said, "From the ancient times there was a saying, 'a hero could be killed, but not humiliated.' Although he is an evil man, but he is still a grandmaster of his martial art school. How can we let him be the laughingstock of others?" Straightaway he ordered his soldiers to erect a tent around the ice column and arranged a sentry duty. Nobody was allowed to enter the tent to see, not even a general.

Two hours later the three elders shattered the ice column, let Ouyang Feng free. Ouyang Feng sat cross-legged on the

ground, circulating his energy. After vomiting three mouthfuls of dark blood he went away angrily.

Guo Jing and the three elders were watching him the whole two hours; although looked weary he was able to walk away just like that, he had made them sighed in admiration.

All this time Guo Jing was continuously in a daze. He was afraid when Ouyang Feng was still inside the ice column, but after Ouyang Feng was gone, he still could not calm his heart down.

He sat down, thinking hard. Never in his life had he felt so lonely, his heart was empty. He tried hard to think the reason behind it all. Suddenly it dawned on him that before Lu Youjiao issued the command to pour the water, he recalled hearing someone shouted in low voice, 'Pour the water!' He felt that voice was so familiar, he was 80, 90% certain that voice had Huang Rong's accent; but because Ouyang Feng was falling into the trap that he was thinking of a more urgent matter and did not pay too much attention to the voice. 'Pour the water!' these words were buzzing in his ears while his heart was full of doubt. He sprang up and muttered, "Rong'er is really in the army. I have to examine everybody, officers and soldiers alike, not overlooking anyone. I am sure she won't get away this time." But then another thought came into his mind, "She doesn't want to see me, why would I painstakingly force her to come out?" Unrolling the painting, he stared blankly at the girl in it; his heart was filled with bitter sweet feeling.

In the quiet night suddenly he heard hoof beats coming fast from afar. A short while later he heard his guard asked permission and soon a messenger entered his tent, bringing Genghis Khan's military dispatch. Turned out the Mongolian army had advanced far into the enemy's territory, enjoying victory everywhere they went. Just a few

hundred 'li's to the west they would reach Khoresm's fortified city of Samarkhand. Genghis Khan had learned that this city had become Khoresm's new capital. It was defended by a large army of at least a hundred thousand strong with enough provision to last a long time. The defense was solid; the city wall had enjoyed a notorious reputation as unbreakable. Therefore, Genghis Khan ordered the four armies to join forces and attack simultaneously.

At daybreak the next day, Guo Jing's army left their camp heading south along the river. In ten days they arrived outside Samarkhand's city wall. Seeing Guo Jing's small army, the enemy went out the city to engage them in fierce battle. With his 'feng yang' [scattering wind] and 'yun chui' [dangled cloud] Guo Jing managed to kill about five thousand enemy's soldier in just half a day. With this defeat the Khoresm army was forced to go back inside their fortified city.

On the third day Genghis Khan's big army, as well as Jochi's and Chagatai's, arrived one after another. More than a hundred thousand soldiers surrounded the city, attacking it from all directions. But Samarkhand's defense was so tight; thousands of Mongolian soldiers and officers were wounded or dead, yet the city was still standing strong.

The next day Chagatai's eldest son attempted to render meritorious merit; bravely he attacked the city wall, unfortunately an arrow was shot from the city wall, hit his head and he died. Genghis Khan loved this grandson, seeing him die in the battlefield his grief and anger was unspeakable. When the grandson's personal guards brought his body over, Genghis Khan threw himself over the corpse with tears in his eyes, embracing his dead grandson. He pulled the arrow that killed him, only to see it was a wolf tooth arrow decorated with an eagle's feather, the shaft

was inlaid with gold, engraved with four characters, 'da jin zhao wang' [Prince Zhao Wang of the Great Jin]. The people around him who were literate read those words to him.

"Ah!" Genghis Khan angrily roared, "It's that scoundrel Wanyan Honglie!" Leaping to his horseback he issued a decree, "All officers and soldiers, big and small, hear this: Anybody who is brave enough to break the city's defense and capture Wanyan Honglie to avenge my grandson; the city's women and children, jade and silk, everything is his." A hundred riders immediately were dispatched everywhere to announce the Great Khan's decree.

The other three armies heard this proclamation and their spirit rose; like a swarm of locust they attacked the city wall with earth-shattering battle cry. Some were trying to climb the wall barehanded; some were scaling ladders, some were throwing ropes with hook, some were using large tree trunk as a battering ram against the city gate. But the warriors on the city wall defended their city bravely. The battle continued until evening; the Mongolians had lost about four thousand men, yet the city of Samarkand was still standing like a mountain.

Since his military expedition against Khorasm started, this was Genghis Khan's first major defeat. That night inside his tent he grieved over his beloved grandson's death, his anger erupted like a thunder.

Guo Jing went back to his tent, browsing through his 'Wumu's Legacy', trying to find a way to break the city; but Samarkand was different from the cities in China, hence the methods described in the book were useless.

Guo Jing invited Lu Youjiao to his tent to discuss this situation. Knowing Lu Youjiao would go to Huang Rong for advice, as soon as he left the tent, Guo Jing followed behind.

Who would have thought that Lu Youjiao had arranged Beggar Clan disciples to stand all the way from Guo Jing's tent to his own? As they see Guo Jing, those disciples saluted him with loud voice.

Guo Jing understood immediately, "This must be another one of Rong'er's schemes," he thought, "Ay! She has always found a way to evade me. She is able to predict my every action and every movement accurately."

More than two hours later, Lu Youjiao came back and reported, "This big city is really difficult to break, Xiao Ren has not found any good idea. Let us wait a few more days, perhaps an opportunity will present itself for us to attack."

Guo Jing nodded without saying anything. When he left Mongolia heading south for the first time, he was just a naïve and simple-hearted youngster; but over the past year he had experienced misery, difficult and sometimes dangerous days. His experience had matured him tremendously. That night inside his tent he could not help but feel emotional as he quietly pondered the meaning of two lines of poems in the painting. He thought, "Rong'er must think I am heartless, she is waiting for me to apologize. Too bad I am stupid since the day I was born, I don't know how to make amends, I don't know how to do as she wishes." Thinking these things he became more anxious than ever.

That night he could not sleep well, his thought was full of Huang Rong; he kept tossing and turning in his tent. It was after the third hour that he finally was able to sleep. He dreamt of meeting Huang Rong. He asked her how he could apologize to her. Huang Rong replied by whispering something in his ears. Guo Jing was elated, he woke up immediately; but then he could not remember what Huang Rong had said. He tried painstakingly to remember, but no

such luck. He wanted to go back to sleep again and asked Huang Rong in his dream, but it seemed like the sleep had already left him.

Burning with anxiety he knocked his own head several times; suddenly he got an inspiration, "I can't remember, but why don't I ask her again?" He loudly shouted, "Quickly invite Lu Zhanglao to come over."

Lu Youjiao thought what kind of urgent military affair would need his attention? Wrapping his body with the sheepskin he went barefooted to Guo Jing's tent.

"Lu Zhanglao, no matter what I want to meet with Miss Huang tomorrow evening," Guo Jing said, "I don't care how you'd do it. Whether you come up with an idea yourself, or you ask others, but I want you to present me with a clever idea how I can see her. I give you until noon tomorrow."

Lu Youjiao was flabbergasted. "Huang Bangzhu is not here, how can Sir meet with her?"

"You have a divine wisdom, you should be able to think of something," Guo Jing replied, "If you can't present a good idea by noon tomorrow, I am going to handle you according to the military law." Being aware that he was speaking nonsense, Guo Jing was secretly amused.

Lu Youjiao was about to reason when Guo Jing turned his head to tell his guard, "Prepare a hundred soldiers to act as executioners tomorrow at noon." His guard acknowledged with a loud voice.

Lu Youjiao looked distressed; dejectedly he walked back to his tent.

It was snowing heavily early morning the next day; the city wall was covered with ice, slick like oil. It was impossible to

scale the wall. Genghis Khan withdrew his army that day. He thought the winter was coming, the coming days would get colder and colder; they wouldn't see warmer days until the second or third month, which was still several months away. If he decided to leave this city and proceeded to the west, then he would practically leave around a hundred thousand enemies behind him, with a potential to cut his way back to Mongolia. But if he stationed some of his army to guard the city, he was afraid the enemy would get some enforcement then his troops would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Once a battle broke, his troops might be scattered in this foreign land and he would lost considerable men and horses.

Genghis Khan paced back and forth in front of his tent with his hands behind his back. He was lost in thought and stared blankly at the snow-covered peak on which the city was built. That peak was so high that it reached to the clouds above. Genghis Khan creased his brows. He saw the peak was extremely weird; it towered alone in the middle of a desert. There was no vegetation grew on it, the locals called it 'tu mu feng' [the bald wooden peak]. Samarkhand was built leaning on this peak, the foothill was actually served as the west city wall. He imagined whoever built this city must have spared no expense; the military strategists and the builders who designed this city must have had incredible ability and wisdom. This hill was very steep, practically a huge solid rock, nothing could grow on it; even monkeys or apes had no way of climbing it up. Samarkhand had this kind of truly impenetrable defense.

Genghis Khan thought, "Ever since the start of my military career, I have been in hundreds of battles, big and small; yet I have never faced as difficult situation as I have today. I wonder if the Heaven is going to cut me short?" He sat on the horseback, staring blankly at the falling snowflakes. The

tents were covered with snow; while inside the city smokes went up the chimneys. Everything just added to his misery.

Guo Jing's mind was filled with another kind of apprehension; he was wondering if his brute force method of forcing Huang Rong to show herself would actually make her hate him even more. What if Lu Youjiao had determined not to open his mouth? Certainly he could not behead him, could he?

It was almost noon, with composed face Guo Jing sat in his tent; while on the either sides of the tent stood the executioners, waiting. Then the bugle sounded, announcing it was noon.

Lu Youjiao walked into the tent, "Xiao Ren has thought of an idea, but I am afraid Sir would find it difficult to do," he said.

Guo Jing was delighted, "Tell me, quick! I don't care even if it requires my life. What's so difficult?" he asked.

Lu Youjiao pointed to the peak of the 'bald wooden peak' and said, "Tonight about half an hour to midnight, Huang Bangzhu will be waiting there."

Guo Jing was silent. "How can she climb there?" he asked, "Aren't you just making a fool out of me?"

"Didn't I say from the start it's not going to be easy?" Lu Youjiao said, "Even if I invented an ingenious plan, it would be in vain anyway." Finished speaking he made a bow, turned around and walked out the tent.

Guo Jing thought, "Sure enough it was Huang Rong's words; she is calling me useless. This bald peak is a lot steeper than the Iron Palm Peak, the Mongolian cliff was

nothing compared to it. I wonder if there is a deity on the peak who will hang down a rope for me to climb?"

Dejectedly he dismissed the executioners then walked toward the peak, staring blankly at the top. He noticed that from top to bottom the peak did not show any difference, its surface was covered with a thick layer of ice, looked like a slippery crystal, much like the ice column enclosing Ouyang Feng the other day. It was an out-of-this-world mountain, other than birds, no man or beast would be able to reach the top.

Guo Jing looked up to the peak; suddenly 'splat!' his fur cap fell on the snow. In an instant a thought came flashing in his mind, "If I can't see Rong'er, it would be better to die anyway. Although this peak is dangerous, I should risk my life climbing it. Even if I fall down and die, I would still die for her." Once he reached a decision he felt better immediately.

That evening he ate until he was full; then he inserted a dagger on his waist and slung a coil of rope on his back. It was not dark yet when he walked out his tent. To his surprise he saw the three elders Lu, Jian, and Liang were waiting outside, they said, "Xiao Ren will see Sir off to the peak."

"See me off to the peak?" Guo Jing was confused.

"Certainly," Lu Youjiao said, "Doesn't Sir have an appointment to meet Huang Bangzhu on the peak tonight?"

Guo Jing was pleasantly surprised, "So Rong'er is not deceiving me after all," he thought. With a delighted heart he walked along the three elders to the 'bald wooden peak'.

He saw dozens of his soldiers were waiting by the peak with dozens of cattle and sheep. Lu Youjiao said, "Butcher!"

The soldier lifted up his saber and slashed the sheep's hind leg. While the blood was still warm, the leg was planted on the peak's wall. The blood froze in short time, the leg was firmly planted on the stone wall, then it was further reinforced with iron nails.

Guo Jing had not understood yet what they were doing. Another soldier chopped the other sheep's hind leg and stuck it to the wall, approximately four feet above the first one. Guo Jing was delighted, he understood now that the three elders were making sheep legs ladder. It was cruelty against the animals, but there was simply no better way of doing this.

He saw Lu Youjiao leaped vertically up and perched on the second leg; Jian Zhanlao chopped the next sheep leg and tossed it upward, Lu Youjiao stuck the leg to the wall. Several legs later, this 'sheep ladder' had reached dozens of 'zhang's high; when the legs were chopped on the ground and tossed up, they would freeze up by the time they reached their destination. Guo Jing helped the three elders hung the rope down. They hoisted the sheep up alive and butcher them just before sticking up their legs on the wall.

As the 'sheep ladder' had reached about a half way up, they felt the wind was a lot stronger compared to the ground. Fortunately these four were martial art experts; their bodies slightly swayed, but their feet were steadily planted on the legs. Still, for fear that they might skid on the legs and lose their footing they tied a long rope on their waists, so the four of them would be able to help each other in case of an accident.

They were busy working until almost midnight when finally the 'sheep ladder' reached the peak. The three elders no doubt were exhausted, while Guo Jing himself was sweating

profusely. Lu Youjiao was panting and smiling at the same time, "Sir, can you forgive Xiao Ren?" he asked.

Guo Jing felt bad, but also grateful, "I really don't know how to repay three gentlemen's kindness," he said.

"It was Bangzhu's idea, even if it is more difficult than it was, we still would have to obey. Who told us to have such a cunning and weird Bangzhu?" Lu Youjiao said. Three elders burst in laughter, turned around and slowly descended the peak.

Only after watching the three elders step by step scaling the hillside safely that Guo Jing turned around and saw the magnificent scenery on the hilltop. Ten thousands years of cold had created a world of crystal of many colors; some resembled reddish-green flowers and grass; some resembled strange beast or exotic birds; some resembled a forest of rocks; some resembled tree branches or bamboo grooves. Guo Jing enjoyed the scenery with amazement; his heart was full of praises.

Thinking that very soon Huang Rong would climb the 'sheep ladder' to see him, his blood rushed through his body, giving him a warm, fuzzy feeling, making his cheeks red. He was in daze. Suddenly he heard a girl's soft giggle. This giggle was like an electric shock surged through Guo Jing. He turned around quickly, and saw under the moonlight a young girl smiled sweetly looking at him. Who else if not Huang Rong? Although Guo Jing knew perfectly well that she had promised to see him there, but to actually see her in person, he felt like he was dreaming.

Two people stared at each other for a moment then both of them rushed toward each other, ignoring the slippery cold ice of the peak; because of their grief and joy, they ran and slipped together. Guo Jing was afraid Huang Rong might be

injured, before he even touched the ground he kicked back and propelled his body forward, grabbing her, embracing her in his arms. They had been separated for more than a year and they missed each other like crazy. This time they meet again, how could they not be happy?

After quite a while Huang Rong gently pried herself loose. They sat side by side on a round-stone-like ice block. "If I did not see how crazily you missed me, I wouldn't want to see you," she said.

Guo Jing only stared at her, did not say even half a word. After a long time he opened his mouth, "Rong'er."

"Mmm?" Huang Rong answered.

Guo Jing was extremely joyful; he called again, "Rong'er."

Huang Rong smiled, "Haven't you called me enough?" she asked, "These past few days, even though I was not with you, haven't you called me dozens of times every day?"

"How did you know?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong smiled again, "You could not see me, but actually I saw you quite often."

"You are always in our army, how come you did not let me see you?" Guo Jing asked.

"You still have a face to ask me?" Huang Rong was angry. "Once you found out I am alive and well, aren't you going to marry that Princess Huazheng? I'd rather not let you know my whereabouts. Do you think I am dumb?"

As soon as he heard she mentioned the name 'Huazheng' Guo Jing's delight was gone; his face looked so depressed that Huang Rong quickly looked around and said, "That

crystal palace is so beautiful, let us go inside and find someplace to sit and chat.”

Guo Jing followed her gaze and saw a bulk solid ice resembling a cavern; under the dim moonlight it glowed beautifully. It did look like a big crystal block carved into a palace. Two people walked hand in hand entering the cave, and then found someplace to sit on.

“Speaking about how you treated me on the Peach Blossom Island, tell me, should I forgive you?” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing stood up and said, “Rong’er, let me kowtow to you a hundred times to apologize.” He was serious, immediately knelt down and started kowtowing.

Huang Rong sweetly smiled, held out her hands to stand him up. “Let it be. If I haven’t forgiven you, I wouldn’t want to crawl to this peak even if you chop Lu Youjiao’s head a hundred times!”

Guo Jing was really happy, “Rong’er, you are really good.”

“What are you talking about good or not good?” Huang Rong said, “Originally I thought you wholeheartedly wanted to avenge your masters, certainly you don’t have the least of me in your heart; naturally I was really angry! Later on I learned about how you strike an agreement with Ouyang Feng; you are willing to spare his life three times for my sake. Only then did I know that you still have me in your heart.”

Guo Jing shook his head, “I can’t believe it’s only now that you know my heart.”

Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled, “Did you see what I am wearing?” she asked.

Thus far Guo Jing's eyes only looked at Huang Rong's face; only after Huang Rong mentioned it that he turned his gaze to her clothes. Turned out she was wearing the black sable fur coat that he gave her when they first met at Zhangjiakou [Kalgan]. His heart was moved, he held out his hand and tightly hold Huang Rong's hand.

Two people sat leaning to each other for a moment. Finally Guo Jing broke the silence, "Rong'er, Da Shifu [First Master] said that you were captured by Ouyang Feng at the Temple of the Iron Spear; how did you manage to escape from his hand?"

Huang Rong sighed. "I feel sorry for Lu Shige's [Martial (older) Brother] nice Cloud Village. The Old Poison wanted me to explain the Nine Yin Manual for him. I said the explanation is not difficult, but I needed a good and quiet place. The Old Poison said if that was the case, we would find some secluded temple. I said Buddhist monks are disgusting, I don't like eating vegetarian food. The Old Poison then asked what I wanted. I said nearby Lake Tai there was a place called the Cloud Village; the scenery is beautiful, the food and wine are superb. The only thing is that the village master is my friend; it made him rather suspicious."

"That's right," Guo Jing said, "Did he decide not to go?"

"No, he is arrogant," Huang Rong said, "He is never afraid of other people. The more I told him, the more he wanted to go. He said no matter how many friends I have, the Old Poison would face them all. When we arrived at the Cloud Village, actually Lu Shige father and son were not home; they went north of the river to the city of Baoying, to visit their in-laws, Cheng Da Xiaojie's [Eldest Miss Cheng] family. You know that the Zhuangzhu [Village Master] had learned building technique from my father according to the 'wu

xing ba gua' [five ways eight diagram]. As soon as the Old Poison stepped into the village, he felt something was not right. He wanted to pull me out of there, but I entered to the east and turned to the west, very soon he lost my track. Hard as he tried, he could not find me, and in his anger he burned the Cloud Village down."

"Ah!" Guo Jing gasped, "I did stop by the Cloud Village looking for you, but I found it in rubble. Turned out it was the Old Poison's doing."

"I knew he was going to destroy the village," Huang Rong said, "So I warned everybody to get out. Although he could not catch me, the Old Poison is really evil and cruel. He guarded the way toward the Peach Blossom Island, hoping to catch me there. Several times I was nearly caught. Afterwards I ran to the north, toward the Mongolian border, and he followed. 'Sha gege' [dumb big brother], luckily you are dumb. If you are as smart as the Old Poison, you two will surround me from both directions. I may not know where to hide."

Guo Jing simply blushed and smiled stupidly.

"But finally you are getting smarter, you knew how to push Lu Youjiao to think of something," Huang Rong said.

"Rong'er, it was you who taught me," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was astonished, "I taught you?"

"You taught me in a dream," Guo Jing replied. Then he told her the dream he had the other night.

This time Huang Rong did not laugh at him, in fact, her heart was moved. She said quietly, "The people of ancient times used to say that perfect honesty and sincerity could

open up metal and stone. You think about me and miss me this much; I should've let you see me sooner."

"Rong'er," Guo Jing said, "Later on you will never leave me forever, won't that be good?"

Huang Rong swept her gaze around the marvelous structures cluttered on the peak. "Jing Gege, I am cold," she suddenly said.

Guo Jing hastily took his own fur coat off and wrapped it on Huang Rong's body. "Let us go down," he said.

"All right," Huang Rong said, "We'll come back here tomorrow night. I am going to explain the Nine Yin Manual in detail for you."

Guo Jing was astounded, "What?" he asked.

Huang Rong's right hand was still holding Guo Jing's left hand; she squeezed her hand and said, "My father has translated the last part of the manual, where the sentences were jumbled. I'll explain everything to you tomorrow night."

"This Sanskrit part is obviously translated by Reverend Yideng," Guo Jing thought, "Why did she say it was his father?" He was full of doubts, was about to ask again when Huang Rong squeezed his hand one more time. He knew there must be a reason, so he agreed without asking anymore questions. Two people went down the peak.

Once they were in his tent, Huang Rong whispered in his ear, "Ouyang Feng also climbed the 'bald wooden peak', he hid behind us as we speak, secretly listening to us."

Guo Jing was startled, "Ah! I didn't even know he was there."

“He was hiding behind a huge ice block,” Huang Rong said, “The Old Poison is extremely crafty, but this time he forgot that the ice is transparent, it could not conceal anything. It was not until the moonlight shone on it did I see a blurry shadow behind it.”

“So you talked about the Nine Yin Manual was actually for his benefit,” Guo Jing said.

“Hmm, I want to lure him to the peak, then we remove the ‘sheep ladder’; let’s see if he can meditate to become an immortal on that mountain peak, maybe he’ll become a deity,” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing was very happy; he clapped his hands and cheered.

The next day Genghis Khan attacked the city again. Another thousand or so Mongolian soldiers died. The Khoresm soldiers on the city wall threw some insults and cursed their enemy. Genghis Khan flew into rage; but sweeping the battlefield with his eyes he saw the dead body of Mongolian soldiers and horses; he was upset.

That very evening Guo Jing, Huang Rong and the three Beggar Clan Elders readied themselves, they only had to wait for Ouyang Feng to climb the peak, then they would destroy the sheep ladder immediately. Who would have thought that Ouyang Feng was so cunning and had anticipated this; as long as Guo Jing and Huang Rong did not climb up, he also stayed down, hiding.

Huang Rong was forced to think of something else. She took some ropes and soaked them in oil. Khoresm was rich in petroleum; more than a thousand years ago the people dug a well to find water, but they found oil instead. Since then the people had used oil to cook their meals. The

Mongolian army had seized several barrels of this oil and used them as fuel.

Jing and Rong, two people climbed to the peak with ropes soaked in oil on their back. Then they hid the ropes behind a big ice block. Two people sat inside the crystal palace talking to each other. Not too long afterwards they saw Ouyang Feng's indistinct shadow appeared behind a big ice block. His lightness kungfu had been trained to perfection; he was extremely quiet, he never expected those two people to be aware that he was there.

Right away Huang Rong started talking about the manual, which they discussed earnestly. Of course they were discussing the real Manual. Ouyang Feng listened attentively, he found the manual was really marvelous; could not help but feeling ecstatic. He thought even if he compelled this little girl to explain, she might not tell him the whole thing, but right now he was eavesdropping he felt very fortunate.

Huang Rong slowly explained, and Guo Jing pretended to ask a lot of questions. Ouyang Feng thought, "He did not get such a simple truth, he is really stupid."

Suddenly the horn was sounded urgently on the ground. Guo Jing jumped up immediately, "The Great Khan summons the generals, I have to go," he called out. Actually it was a false alarm; he had made this arrangement in advance.

"We'll go down together," Huang Rong said.

"We are going up and down this peak, so much hassle," Guo Jing said, "Can't we do it inside my tent?"

"No, that Old Ouyang Feng has been looking for me everywhere, he is so cunning; it is extremely difficult to find

a place to hide from him,” Huang Rong said, “But even if he were ten times more cunning, definitely he won’t guess that we are able to come up to this peak.”

Ouyang Feng was really smug, he thought, “Hey, this tiny, tiny peak is nothing; even if you run to the end of the earth I will still chase you.”

“Then you’d better wait here,” Guo Jing said, “I should be finished within an hour or so; I’ll hurry back up here.”

Huang Rong nodded her approval.

Without saying anything else Guo Jing climbed down the peak. He was a little bit apprehensive about leaving Huang Rong alone on the top with Ouyang Feng, but he thought Ouyang Feng must be dying to listen to the Manual’s secret; certainly he would not harm Huang Rong yet.

About the time needed to eat a bowl of rice later Huang Rong stood up and thought aloud, “Why is Jing Gege not back yet? I wonder if there are ghosts on this peak. Maybe Yang Kang or Ouyang Ke’s ghosts are here. I think I’d better go down, I’ll comeback with Jing Gege later on.”

Ouyang Feng was afraid she might see him, he curled up behind the ice block, did not dare to move even so slightly. He saw Huang Rong was climbing down the peak.

Guo Jing and the three elders were waiting on the ground. As soon as Huang Rong was down, they lighted a fire and burned the rope. Turned out when Guo Jing went down, he wrapped the oil-soaked rope on each of the sheep legs. As the rope was burned, the heat melted the ice that held the legs frozen to the wall, so that the legs dropped one by one to the ground.

The fire slowly crept upward along the winding rope. The dark night made the fire's reflection on the snow and ice looked frighteningly beautiful. Huang Rong clapped her hands in delight and asked, "Jing Gege, would you say we should spare his life this time?"

"This is the third time," Guo Jing said, "We can't break our agreement."

Huang Rong smiled, "I have an idea," she said, "You don't have to break your agreement, but you can kill him to avenge your masters."

Guo Jing was delighted, "Rong'er, you are always full of ideas," he said, "Tell me your marvelous idea."

Huang Rong smiled, "It's not difficult," she said, "We let the Old Poison eat the northwest wind for ten whole days and nights; let him freeze and starve, he will be dead tired. Then we rebuild the 'sheep ladder', help him get back down. That will be the third time we spare his life, won't it?"

"That's correct," Guo Jing said.

"You have spared his life three times by then, you don't have to show leniency anymore," Huang Rong said. "We wait here on the ground. As soon as he is down, we can start fighting him. We will have the three elders' help; so with five people against a half-dead man, you say can we kill him?"

"We certainly can," Guo Jing said, "But this way we are not acting too gentlemanly, don't you think?"

"Hey," Huang Rong scolded, "Do we need to talk gentlemanly toward this kind of evil and cruel man? Did he act gentlemanly when he killed your five masters?"

Thinking about his benevolent masters' cruel death, Guo Jing was enraged. He also thought that Ouyang Feng's skill was so high that if he let him off this time, he might not find another opportunity to seek revenge. Therefore, he gritted his teeth and said, "Very well, let's do it."

Two people went inside the tent. This time they discussed the Nine Yin Manual for real. They found out that the other party's martial art was progressing tremendously, they were really grateful.

After the discussion Guo Jing said, "That traitor Wanyan Honglie is inside the city wall. We know he is there, but there is nothing we can do. Can you think of some marvelous way to break the city's defense?"

Huang Rong was doubtful. "These past several days I have been racking my brain," she said, "I can think of at least a dozen ways to do it, but none of these guarantees victory."

Guo Jing replied, "Within the Beggar Clan there are some brothers, perhaps a dozen of them, whose lightness kungfu is superb. What if they plus we, two people, try to climb the city wall?"

Huang Rong shook her head. "Not that easy," she said, "Every 'zhang' of the wall is heavily guarded by soldiers with bows and arrows. Let's not talk about climbing the wall; once inside, there are more than a hundred-thousand troops. We can't even force our way to open up the gate."

Two people talked all night long; they did not even go to sleep.

The next day Genghis Khan attacked the city again. About ten thousand Mongolian soldiers used rock-throwers, rained the city with large rocks. But the soldiers defending the city took shelter inside blockhouses; the stones

devastated the common people's residences, but the casualty among the defending troops was actually only a few. The attack went on until the third day. The Mongolian army had used hundreds of different tactics, but so far the result was minimal.

On the fourth day snowflakes came floating down from the sky. Guo Jing looked up the peak and said, "I think we don't have to wait for ten days, Ouyang Feng would be frozen to half-dead."

"His internal energy is very profound," Huang Rong said, "Chances are he will survive for ten days." She was just closing her mouth when both of them cried out in alarm; something was falling from the peak, it looked like Ouyang Feng.

Huang Rong clapped her hands, "The Old Poison can't take it anymore, he is killing himself!" she said; but straight away she called out in wonder, "Uh, strange! How did he do that?" Ouyang Feng did not fall straight down, but his body was floating in the sky like a kite.

Jing and Rong, two people were extremely astonished; how could someone fall from thousands of 'zhang' tall mountain peak did not meet a violent death, but floating slowly instead? Could it be the Old Poison possessed some witchcraft?

In the meantime, Ouyang Feng had fallen further down. Now two people could see clearly that he was naked, but there were two balloon-like things on top of his head. Suddenly Huang Rong understood what was going on, "It's too bad!" she called out.

Turned out when Ouyang Feng was stranded on the 'bald wooden peak', although his martial art was profound, he knew he could not slide down this thousand-zhang peak.

After enduring several days of hunger and cold he had a sudden inspiration. He stripped down to his underpants and firmly tied his trousers into knots. Afraid that his trousers might not be enough, he took the robe and tied it to his pants, then tied the whole thing onto his waist. Clenching up his teeth he jumped down from the mountain peak.

It was an extremely risky endeavor, but he was desperate; he had no other alternative. Once he jumped from the peak, his pair of trousers ballooned up and weakened his fall. He was naked, his hands were nearly frozen; he fought the cold and the wind by circulating his deep internal energy.

Huang Rong was amused and upset at the same time; momentarily she was at lost on how to deal with this new development.

By this time both armies inside and outside the city wall had found out about this; tens of thousand pairs of eyes looked up to see this flying man in the sky. Many low-ranking soldiers thought it was a deity descending to the earth; they all knelt down on the ground, worshiping.

Guo Jing saw the direction Ouyang Feng was falling; looked like he was going to land inside the city wall. He waited until Ouyang Feng was dozens of 'zhang's away, then grabbing an iron bow and an arrow he shot Ouyang Feng's body. He thought being airborne, Ouyang Feng would not be able to fend off; however, he still remembered his agreement to spare Ouyang Feng's life three times, so he aimed at a non-fatal spot; Ouyang Feng's thigh.

While he was airborne, however, Ouyang Feng opened his eyes wide, looking to all directions. He saw the arrow coming his way, he bent his waist, swept his legs and struck down Guo Jing's arrows one by one.

Although in a different army unit, Genghis Khan was also aware of Guo Jing's agreement. He ordered his troops to shoot arrows. Immediately tens of thousands arrows shot out like a swarm of locusts flying toward Ouyang Feng.

Even if he had a thousand hands and ten thousands legs, it was no way Ouyang Feng could knock all the arrows down. He was naked, and being airborne his movement was limited; perhaps very soon he would look like a porcupine. In this dire situation Ouyang Feng let his hands go, he fell down head first to the ground. Hundreds of thousands people shouted with one voice, the noise was earth-shattering.

Amazingly Ouyang Feng flexed his waist midair and threw himself toward a flag inside the city. That time the northwesterly wind was blowing very strong, the flag fluttered straight from west to east. Ouyang Feng stretched out his left hand and grabbed the corner of the flag, tearing it into two pieces. Borrowing the strength of the flag, Ouyang Feng made a somersault, hurling his legs toward the flag pole. Hugging the pole he slid downward and vanished inside the city wall.

Both armies witnessed this marvelous show, they talked about it to each other, momentarily forgot they are in the midst of a battle.

"This can't be considered sparing his life," Guo Jing thought, "How can I still have to spare his life next time? Rong'er must be very upset." Who would have thought that as he turned his head he saw Huang Rong's eyes were gleaming with smile on her face. Quickly he asked, "Rong'er, what's wrong? Why are you so happy?"

Huang Rong clapped her hands and laughed, "I present to you a great gift, wonder if you'll like it or not?"

“What gift?” Guo Jing asked.

“The City of Samarkhand,” Huang Rong replied.

Guo Jing was dumbstruck.

“The Old Poison has taught me a method to break the city’s defense,” Huang Rong said, “Go and prepare your troops. Tonight you will render a great service.” Then she whispered in Guo Jing’s ear, explaining what to do next. Once he understood, Guo Jing was so happy that he repeatedly cheered and applauded.

That afternoon Guo Jing issued a secret order, assigned his troops to take their tents down and cut them into round umbrella shapes; then to tie leather ropes to this umbrella. He wanted ten thousands of umbrellas to be sewn and ready within an hour.

All the officers and soldiers were puzzled. They thought without tents in this bitter cold weather, the nights were unendurable. But the commander-in-chief had issued an order; they had no alternative but to comply.

Guo Jing also ordered his army to gather the cattle and sheep under the snowy peak. Furthermore he assigned a ten thousand men unit to be ready outside the north gate in four battle formations: ‘tian fu’ [sky high], ‘di zai’ [strong earth], ‘feng yang’ [scattered wind], and ‘yun chui’ [dangling cloud]; ready to assault the enemy. Then he placed another ten thousand men unit on the either sides of the north gate in four battle formations: ‘long fei’ [flying dragon], ‘hu yi’ [winged tiger], ‘niao xiang’ [soaring bird], and ‘she pan’ [coiled snake]. Their main assignment was to drive the enemy into the first unit’s ambush. The third ten thousand men unit was readied on the side to be deployed later.

That evening Guo Jing's troops ate their provisions until everybody was satisfied, then the two ten-thousand men units moved to their appointed position on the north gate. Around the end of the eleventh hour, early the twelfth hour [approximately 9pm] Guo Jing dispatched one of his guards to report to the Great Khan, asking him to dispatch the army to surround the city, for the gates were about to be broken. Genghis Khan was surprised, he was doubtful. He told the guard to go and summon Guo Jing to his Golden Tent. That guard replied, "The Golden Blade Consort [jin dao fu ma] at this very moment has already led his troops to launch an attack. He is waiting for the Great Khan to render assistance."

Right around that moment a horn sounded from the direction of Guo Jing's troops; about a thousand soldiers started to butcher the cattle and the sheep, building the sheep ladder on the peak wall. The Beggar Clan disciples with their high level of martial arts skill went up and down lending their hands; very soon dozens of 'sheep ladders' were constructed.

Guo Jing shouted his command, and was the first to go up the peak. Ten thousand officers and soldiers followed, with long ropes tied to their waists, slowly climbing up the ladder. They were all under a strict order that was issued earlier not to make any noise at all.

In the dark night dozens of long strings of soldiers crawling and twisting like gigantic dragon slithering up the peak.

The top was actually not very wide, so it was impossible to hold ten thousand men at once. As soon as he had gathered enough people, Guo Jing led the soldiers to tie the umbrella to their waist; then with unsheathed weapons in their hands they were ready to leap into the city. Their target was the south gate.

With a clap of his hands Guo Jing was the first to jump down, followed by several hundreds of the Beggar Clan disciples.

Actually this jumping down from the peak was very dangerous, but the Mongolian soldiers were very brave. Earlier that day they saw Ouyang Feng had jumped from the peak with a pair of trousers as his parachute; they believed their umbrellas were a lot safer than the trousers; moreover, their commander-in-chief had given them the example; therefore, one by one they leaped down courageously. Very soon the sky was full with thousands of blooming parachutes, taking the officers and soldiers slowly down.

Huang Rong was sitting on an ice block on the peak. She saw the first phase of their plan was successfully completed; she could not help but feeling ecstatic. "Whether Genghis Khan can break the city defense or not, it has nothing to do with me. But if Jing Gege listens to what I say, he can seize the opportunity to do great things."

Once his feet landed on the ground Guo Jing tore the parachute from his waist, brandishing his big saber he fiercely swept the defending troops. By that time there were some defending troops on night watch duty. They saw thousands of enemy troops descending from the sky; they were amazed and scared, they lost their will to fight. Moreover, those who landed first were the Beggar Clan disciples, each one skilled in martial art. In a short moment they were approaching the city gate.

After that the Mongolian army successively landed. Although there were some soldiers who lost their lives because their parachutes failed to open, but in ten soldiers, nine actually made it to the ground safe and sound. Some of them were blown away by the strong wind and landed

outside the city gate; some landed separate from their unit, these soldiers were either captured or killed by the enemy. But those who landed successfully were numbered around one or two thousands. Guo Jing ordered half of them to fight the enemy, while the other half moved toward the city gate.

Genghis Khan saw Guo Jing's troops flew into the city, he was amazed and pleasantly surprised. He ordered all three units of his army to attack concurrently. They saw the south gate was widely open; several hundreds Mongolian soldiers with spears in their hands guarded the gate, letting several thousands of their companions enter the city; and then they immediately joined themselves with Guo Jing's troops, decimating the enemies.

The hundred-thousand defending troops were in panic; they did not know where the enemy came from. The Mongolians killed and splashed oil everywhere, setting the city on fire. The inferno reached the sky, Khoresm army was in total chaos.

It was almost dawn, the defending troops were scattered everywhere. The Khoresm king, Muhammad, received a report that there was no enemy at the north gate, so he rushed to the north to escape. Unexpectedly to him, Guo Jing's ten thousand men had already waited at the either sides of the north gate; arrows and spears moved and made a great kill.

Muhammad did not want to prolong the fight. He ordered Wanyan Honglie to command the defending troops, while he took his personal guards trying to save his own life.

Guo Jing's sole purpose was to find Wanyan Honglie; seeing his golden helmet flashing among the chaotic battle, Guo Jing ordered his troops to hunt him down. The Khoresm

army knew they had lost, but their number was greater; they fought desperately, almost to the point of disregarding their own lives. Guo Jing's troops were smaller, their movement was hindered. From the front came a fast horse reporting that the enemy troops soon would make a breakthrough.

Guo Jing remembered the military strategy book had this saying, "Do not eat enemy's bait, do not stop retreating troops. Surrounded troops are not necessarily weak, exhausted enemy should not be pursued too far." He issued an order to change tactic immediately. His signal flag unfolding, the four formations: sky, earth, wind and cloud, dispersed to surround the enemy. By that time the enemy troops remained around the palace was about ten thousand men; although all were warriors, but they realized the imminent defeat and had lost their fighting spirit; they were easily captured by Guo Jing's troops.

Guo Jing examined the prisoners, but did not see Wanyan Honglie among them. Even though he had achieved victory, but his heart was unavoidably discontented.

By daybreak the city defense was completely destroyed. Genghis Khan held a general assembly inside Muhammad's imperial palace. Guo Jing was in the process of going through his troops, taking care of the dead and comforting the wounded, when he heard the Great Khan's golden horn sounded. Immediately he rushed toward the royal palace.

By the palace gate he saw a small squad of soldiers; Huang Rong, Lu Youjiao and the other elders were standing among them. Huang Rong clapped her hands and two soldiers stepped forward carrying a big gunnysack. She smiled and said, "Hey, can you guess what's inside this sack?"

Guo Jing laughed, "This city has all kinds of strange and wonderful things, how can I guess?" he said.

"This one is my gift to you, I am sure you will like it," Huang Rong said.

Suddenly Guo Jing remembered; could it be that she found a good looking woman in the city and gave her to him as a joke? Quickly he shook his head, "I don't want it," he said.

Huang Rong laughed, "Are you sure?" she asked. "You can't change your mind after you see it."

Immediately she shook the sack and indeed somebody rolled out of it. His hair was disheveled, his face was full of blood; he was wearing a Khoresm army uniform. Guo Jing looked at his face intently, and to his awe, found out that he was the Great Jin's Prince Zhao, Wanyan Honglie. Guo Jing was ecstatic, "Amazing! Where did you capture him?" he asked.

Huang Rong said, "I saw the defeated and dispersed soldiers were fleeing toward the north gate. A squad of soldiers bearing the Prince Zhao's banner were heading east with someone wearing a golden helmet leading them. I thought this scoundrel Wanyan Honglie was slyer than that; in no way would he blatantly flaunt the Prince Zhao's banner in time of defeat. I thought if his banner flew to the east, he must be running to the west; so I took Elder Lu and the others to prepare an ambush in the west. We did indeed capture this scoundrel immediately."

Guo Jing bowed deeply to her, he said, "Rong'er, you have avenged my dear father for me. I really don't know how to express my gratitude."

Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled, "It was just a coincidence. You have rendered this great service, the

Great Khan will generously reward you. Won't that be great?" she said.

"I don't want anything," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong stepped to the side and whispered, "Come here." Guo Jing followed. "You really don't want anything in the world?" Huang Rong asked.

Guo Jing was taken aback, "All I want is never to be separated from you anymore," he earnestly said.

Huang Rong smiled. "Today you have rendered this great service. Whatever you ask, I believe the Great Khan won't get angry at you."

"Hmm," Guo Jing still did not understand. Huang Rong continued, "Right this moment if you ask him to appoint you as some high ranking official, he won't deny it. If you ask him not to appoint you, it will also be difficult for him to deny. Important thing is, you have to make him promise in advance. Whatever you ask, he has to grant it."

"Right!" Guo Jing said.

Listening to his short reply 'Right!' without saying anything else, Huang Rong shook her head; she was mad. "Looks like becoming the Golden Blade Consort is the best thing that ever happened to you, isn't it?"

Her words made Guo Jing understand, he called out, "Hmm, I understand. You want me to ask the Great Khan to cancel my marriage; but I have to make sure he promises in advance he won't deny whatever I ask."

Huang Rong was hurt, "It all depends on you. You probably do want to be the Consort?"

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “Sister Huazheng treats me with nothing but sincerity, but my love to her is a brotherly love. At first I thought I was holding to my gentleman’s agreement, since I did not object to the marriage arrangement a long time ago. But if the Great Khan is willing to nullify the agreement, that would certainly satisfy all parties involved.”

Huang Rong was overjoyed; she cast a sidelong glance to him with the sweetest smile on her face. Guo Jing wanted to stay and talk with her some more, but the horn was sounded for the second time from the palace. He placed his hand on hers and said, “Rong’er, wait for my good news here.” He dragged Wanyan Honglie inside the palace to see the Great Khan.

Genghis Khan was very delighted to see Guo Jing arrived; he left his throne to greet him, and then took his hand to enter the hall together. He ordered Guo Jing to take a stool covered with embroidery work and tell him to sit next to him. Listening to Guo Jing’s report on the capture of Wanyan Honglie he was even happier. Seeing Wanyan Honglie kneel down in front of him Genghis Khan lifted his right foot to tread on Wanyan Honglie’s head. Smiling broadly he said, “That day you came to Mongolia flaunting your military power and prestige, did you ever think that there will come a day like today?”

Wanyan Honglie knew his death was imminent, he raised his head boldly and said, “That time my Great Jin country was rich and powerful. I regret the fact that we did not extinguish your tiny Mongolia early on, rather than living to this day.”

Genghis Khan laughed a big laugh, ordering his guard to take Wanyan Honglie out and behead him in front of the

palace. Guo Jing remembered his father's death was finally avenged; his heart was filled with happiness and grief.

Genghis Khan said, "I have promised that whoever breaks the city defense and capture Wanyan Honglie I will give this city's women and children, with all its gold and silk. Go ahead and receive your rewards."

Guo Jing shook his head, "My mother and I have enjoyed the Great Khan's benevolence. We have enough food and clothing. I don't have any use of slaves or gold and silk."

"Good," Genghis Khan said, "That was precisely the true quality of a hero. What then you do want? All you have to do is ask, I will not deny anything."

Guo Jing left his seat and bowed in front of the Khan. "I do have a favor to ask; Great Khan, please do not get angry," he said.

Genghis Khan laughed, "Just say it," he said.

Guo Jing was about to talk about the betrothal when suddenly he heard a heart-rending, earth-shaking cry of thousands of people from a distance. The assembled generals leaped up from their seats, unsheathing their weapons. They thought the surrendered Khoresm soldiers and people suddenly staged a rebellion; they were ready to dash out and suppress it. Genghis Khan laughed. "It's all right! It's all right!" he said, "This dog city refuses to subdue under the Heaven's power, had killed many of my officers and soldiers, it even killed my beloved grandson; it has to be cleansed by slaughter. Let us go and take a look." He left his seat immediately followed by the generals.

They left the palace on horseback heading toward the western part of the city. The nearer they got, the more miserable the cry became. Just outside the city gate they

saw hundreds of thousands common people running around wailing loudly, they pushed and rolled and threw themselves down in panic, with Mongolian soldiers on horseback chasing them, killing the people with long sabers.

Earlier the Mongolian soldiers ordered all the inhabitants to go out of the city, nobody was left behind. At the beginning the people thought the Mongolians were going to search for spies among them; who would have thought that after searching for weapons, they also searched for all kinds of valuables; then they took all good looking young women, married or not, tied them together with long ropes. Samarkhand's residents now realized that they were facing a grave danger. Some people showed resistance, but they were killed immediately with long sabers. Finally several thousands of Mongolian soldiers with loud battle cries charged toward these people, and went on a killing spree with their long sabers. Male or female, young or old, they were randomly chopped down. This massacre was truly with unprecedented brutality; from white or gray haired old men and women, to babies on their mothers' arms, nobody could escape by luck.

When Genghis Khan and his entourage arrived to watch; more than ten thousands people had already fallen victim to the soldiers' brutality; flesh and blood splattered to all directions, the Mongolian horses' iron horseshoes tread on corpses everywhere; going back and forth among the people and kill some more.

Genghis Khan laughed big and called out, "Kill well! Kill well! Let them know my fierceness."

After watching for a short moment, Guo Jing could not endure patiently, he dashed to the front of Genghis Khan's horse and called out, "Great Khan, please spare their lives."

Genghis Khan waved his hand, shouted loudly, "Kill them all, don't leave anybody standing."

Guo Jing did not dare to say anything, but then he saw a boy about seven, eight years old, dash out from the crowd and threw himself down at a woman who was just knocked down by a horse, calling out, "Mama!" A Mongolian soldier dashed in and swung his long saber, mother and son were chopped into four parts. The child's hands were still clutching tightly to his mother.

Guo Jing's blood boiled; he forgot everything and called out, "Great Khan, you said that this city's women and children, along with all gold and silk are mine; why did you give your order to massacre them?"

Genghis Khan was startled; he smiled, "You said you didn't want it."

"You said that whatever I ask you, you will not deny it, didn't you?" Guo Jing asked.

Genghis Khan nodded, still smiling.

With a loud voice Guo Jing said, "The Great Khan's words are like a mountain; I am asking you to spare this tens of thousands lives."

Genghis Khan was greatly astounded, not in his wildest dream would he guess Guo Jing would ask him this; but he had already given his promise, how could he refuse? He was enraged, his eyes blazing with fire looking at Guo Jing. His hand squeezed his saber's hilt, he roared, "Kid, you really want this?"

All the princes and generals were scared to see Genghis Khan this angry. Genghis Khan was surrounded by brave warriors, each one had fought countless battles, none were

weak or had a feeble heart, they faced death straight in the face; but facing Genghis Khan's anger they could not help but tremble.

Guo Jing had never seen Genghis Khan look at him this way, he was also extremely scared; his body could not stop shivering, but he said, "I am asking the Great Khan to spare these people's lives."

With a low growling voice Genghis Khan asked, "You won't regret it?"

Guo Jing remembered Huang Rong told him to ask for cancellation of his betrothal; now he let this good opportunity slipped away. He had lost the Great Khan's favor forever, which he didn't mind; but he actually realized his relationship with Huang Rong was just being thrown down the drain. He had seen and heard these hundreds of thousands common people wailing pitifully; how could he see others facing death and do nothing? Therefore, boldly he said, "I won't regret it."

Genghis Khan heard his trembling voice, he knew Guo Jing was scared to death, but still he boldly made a request. He was forced to admire Guo Jing's guts; drawing a long saber he called out, "Withdraw troops!"

His guard blew the horn. Tens of thousands Mongolian cavalry with blood all over their bodies reined their horses and arranged themselves in neat formation.

Since Genghis Khan became the Great Khan, nobody had ever dared to defy his order. This time Guo Jing bravely hampered his order to massacre the city; he was really angry. With a loud shout he threw his long saber to the ground; then sped his horse back to the city.

The other generals cast their angry looks toward Guo Jing; now that the Great Khan was angry who knew who would be unlucky enough to bear the brunt of his anger. They were also discontented, since as Samarkhand's defense was broken, they were hoping to plunder and kill to their hearts' content for several days; but now their hopes were shattered.

Guo Jing knew the resentment of others, but he ignored them all, he rode his little red horse slowly to a secluded place. Since the beginning of the war, thousands upon thousands homes had been burnt to the ground, corpses scattered everywhere, the snow covered plain was dyed red with blood. He thought, "War brings wretched disaster; bad as it is now. In order for me to seek vengeance for my father I have commanded troops to kill these many people. In order to rule the world, the Great Khan has killed even more people. But for the officers, soldiers, and the common people, what did they do to deserve the cruelest death; their bones abandoned in the wilderness?"

The more he thought, the more restless his heart became, "I destroyed a city to avenge my father, actually killed these many people. In the end, is it worth it?" He wandered around the wilderness on horseback, going back and forth while painstakingly thinking deeply. It was dark when finally decided to go back to his camp.

As he arrived at the camp's gate, he saw the Great Khan's two personal guards were waiting outside. They stepped forward and bowed, reporting, "The Great Khan summons Master Consort. Xiao Ren had been waiting for a long time; asking Master Consort to quickly go."

Guo Jing thought, "Today I have defied his command; the Great Khan might want to behead me. It has gone thus far, I just have to wait and see what will happen." Beckoning to

his own guard he whispered to his ear, ordering him to tell Lu Youjiao that he is going to the palace. He was anxious, but he had determined, "No matter how angry he is, I won't take back my request to spare these people's lives. He is the Great Khan, he can't go back on his words."

His heart was full of the idea that the Great Khan would unleash his anger, who would have thought that as he approached the palace gate he actually heard the Great Khan's merry laughter were heard intermittently from inside the palace. Guo Jing could not help but to be a little bit surprised. He sped up his footstep entering the main hall.

He saw next to the Great Khan sat a man, and next to his foot a young maiden sat leaning on his knee. The man had a ruddy face with white hair, he was none other than the Perpetual Spring [Changchun Zi] Qiu Chuji. As for the young woman; who else but Princess Huazheng?

Guo Jing was delighted, hastily he rushed to meet them. Suddenly Genghis Khan snatched a long halberd from his guard's hand, turned around and fiercely attacked Guo Jing's head with the halberd.

Guo Jing was shocked, he leaned sideways to elude. 'Crack!' the halberd's shaft hit his left shoulder and broke into two pieces. Genghis Khan burst into laughter, "Kid, let the bygone be bygone. If I am not looking at Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest] and my daughter's face, I should have taken your head away today."

Princess Huazheng sprang up, she called out, "Father, you must be bullying my Brother Guo Jing while I am not here."

Genghis Khan tossed the broken halberd to the floor. He laughed, "Who said that?"

"I've seen it with my own eyes, how could you deny it?" Huazheng said, "For that reason my heart was troubled, I came with Qiu Daozhang to take a look."

Genghis Khan laughed, he pulled his daughter with one hand, and Guo Jing with the other; he said, "Let's not bicker, just sit nicely, listen while Qiu Daozhang recites his poem."

At the battle of Misty Rain Tavern ['yan yu lou' - 'lou' means upper level of buildings with more than one floor] Qiu Chuji saw with his own eyes that Zhou Botong was alive and well; he also realized that Tan Chuduan was killed by Ouyang Feng. Along with Ma Yu and the others they went to apologize to Huang Yaoshi. Later on Quanzhen Six Masters came across Ke Zhen'e who told them everything, which made everybody sigh deeply. Qiu Chuji regretted deeply that he had been careless with his disciple, he taught Yang Kang martial arts, but did not take him out of the palace. The youngster was spoiled in riches and honor, and finally met his tragic end.

One day he received Genghis Khan's and Guo Jing's letter; he thought Mongolia was getting stronger and might swallow up China. It was exceptional that Genghis Khan should invite someone to come over. He thought he might want to seize the opportunity to give the Khan some advice, trying to open up his heart to the truth, so if he might prevent the slaughter of countless people all over the world, that would be his greatest contribution to mankind. Also, he missed seeing Guo Jing; therefore, braving the cold he took more than a dozen of his disciples to the west.

Qiu Chuji saw Guo Jing had been through wind and snow, his skin was darker, but his body actually looked stronger and healthier; Qiu Chuji was delighted. Before Guo Jing arrived he had been discussing what he had seen and heard

with the Great Khan. He said that he experienced the harshness of the weather first hand, so he composed several poems. Stroking his beard he started to recite: "For ten years the people had dreaded the calamity of war, among millions not even one or two could survive. The past year met a good fortune receiving merciful imperial order, this spring braving the cold making the journey. Taming the three-thousand 'li' of northern mountain range, roaming two-hundred eastern hill provinces. Exhausted and anxious, gasping for the last breath of life; consumed by the people's suffering."

An officer with understanding of Chinese literature called Yelu Chucai translated the poem into Mongolian. Genghis Khan listened; he nodded his head but did not say anything.

To Guo Jing Qiu Chuji said, "That year when your seven masters and I were having a martial art contest at the Drunken Immortal Tavern, your Second Master took a half-finished poem from my pocket. This time I am traveling to the west without being able to see your seven masters again; but finally I have finished this poem." He started reciting immediately, " 'Since the ancient time, the moon of 'zhong-qiu' [mid-autumn festival] has always been the brightest; the cool breeze of the night is so clear. The day the shooting star is brighter than the Milky Way, the dragons of the four seas leaped from the water.' These first four lines were the ones your Second Master had read; I have just finished the next four, he had not seen them yet. 'The song from the Wu and Yue kingdoms tower was heard extensively, the military barrack of Qin kingdom was full with songs, food and wine. I arrived before the emperor upstream of the river, desiring to stop the spears, wishing for peace and security.'"

Remembering The Seven Freaks of Jiangnan, Guo Jing's eyes were brimming in tears.

Genghis Khan said, "During the journey to the west, the Priest must have seen my Mongolia's military prowess. I wonder if you have composed a poem about it?"

Qiu Chuji answered, "Along the way I have seen the Great Khan's power in destroying the cities and ransacking the earth. It made a deep impression in my heart, gave me inspiration to write two stanzas. The first one is, 'The Heaven has sent a messenger down to the earth, why not try to save millions of suffering souls? These millions of souls day and night put to death by dismemberment, drinking the wrath, swallowing their weeping without uttering a word. They looked up and cried to the Heaven, but the Heaven did not answer; it was a mere trivial thing unworthy of Heaven's attention. Peace among thousands of chaos, without religion building refined souls.'"

Yelu Chuchai thought Genghis Khan would not be happy listening to this, so he hesitated and did not translate immediately. Qiu Chuji ignored him, he continued, "My second poem is this, 'Alas, the world is opened wide, on it live millions of living beings. Cruelty and wickedness battle each other incessantly, carrying the human suffering to its utmost. The Emperor of Heaven, the Queen of the earth, along with all deities, witnessing death; why not help? The messenger is sad but helpless, day and night full of heartache in vain'" [Translator's note: all these poems consist of seven-character sub-sentences]

These two poems although not really deep, but the essence of lamenting the fate of mankind was so obvious. Earlier that day Guo Jing had witnessed first hand the massacre of the people in that city, he was even more somber.

"The Priest's poems must be good, what did they say? Quick, translate them for me," Genghis Khan said.

Yelu Chuchai thought, "I have advised the Great Khan not to kill too many innocent civilians, but he didn't want to listen. Luckily this Priest has a deep merciful feeling and composed these beautiful poems. I hope he can persuade the Great Khan." He translated the poem immediately.

Listening to the poems, Genghis Khan was dissatisfied, he turned to Qiu Chuji and said, "I heard there is a technique to reach immortality, to never get old, in China. I hope the Priest would teach me that."

"There is no such thing as reaching immortality, to never get old," Qiu Chuji replied, "But there is indeed a Taoist method of circulating the breathing that will result in preventing illness and prolong life."

"May I ask what the most important thing in that breathing exercise is?" Genghis Khan asked.

"The way of Heaven knows no favorite, always recognizes good man," Qiu Chuji answered.

"Which one would you call good?" Genghis Khan asked.

"A saint's heart is undivided, his heart is for the common people," Qiu Chuji said.

Genghis Khan was silent. Qiu Chuji continued, "There is a scripture in China, it is called the 'Dao De Jing' [Holy Scripture of Virtue] which we, Taoists view as our treasure. The 'the way of Heaven knows' and 'a saint's heart' were taken from that book. There is another saying in that book, 'Soldiers and weapons are inauspicious devices, not the tool of person with noble character. The tool will be used against his own will, not to gain fame or fortune from it. But woe is the man who loves to murder. Those who love to kill will not be able to realize his wish under the sky.'

When Qiu Chuji was traveling to the west, he saw the savageness of the war disaster; his heart was filled with sorrow. He took advantage of Genghis Khan asking him the secret of long life to repeatedly pleading for common people's lives.

Genghis Khan was getting old, his strength waned, he wanted to learn the technique of immortality; he was very delighted to see Qiu Chuji arrive, thinking that very soon he would learn the technique to defy death and the method to prolong his life. Who would have thought that instead he was advised not to resort of military power and not to kill too much? This conversation did not suit his taste. Therefore, after talking a little bit more he turned to Guo Jing and said, "Go and accompany the Priest to take a rest."

[Author's note:

1. Khoresm is a great Islamic country, located on the southern part of Soviet Union, near Afghanistan and Iran. Samarkhand is located in modern day Soviet Union's Uzbekistan Republic. According to the 'yuan shi' [the history of Yuan dynasty], Genghis Khan attacked Khoresm during the year of 'yu long jie chi' [jade dragon, scarlet hero], using petroleum to burn the city down and break their defense.
2. According to historical records, Qiu Chuji and Genghis Khan exchanged correspondence three times before finally he took eighteen of his disciples traveling through the snowy Kunlun Mountains. His disciple, Li Zhicang compiled a book called 'chang chun zhen ren xi you ji' [Changchun (perpetual spring) Sage's journey to the west], recording their experience en route.

This book is still highly esteemed by the scholars of today.]

End of Chapter 37.

Chapter 38 - Secret Order in Embroidered Pouch

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Guo Jing grabbed one end of his long robe and let his horse run close to Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng

held out his hand and grabbed the other end. Guo Jing squeezed his legs and gave a loud shout. The little red horse furiously charged forward and with a loud splashing sound Ouyang Feng was pulled out of the mire and dragged along on the snowy ground.

Guo Jing accompanied Qiu Chuji and his eighteen disciples, among them were Li Zhichang, Yin Zhiping, Xia Zhicheng, Yu Zhike, Zhang Zhizsu, Wang Zhiming, and Song Defang. When they went out of the palace, they saw Huang Rong and the three elders, Lu, Jian, and Liang, as well as about a thousand Beggar Clan disciples all on horseback, waiting outside the palace.

As soon as she saw Guo Jing leave the palace, Huang Rong slapped her horse to move forward, smiling she asked "Is everything all right?"

Guo Jing smiled, "My luck is not bad; Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest] arrived just in time, changing the Great Khan's mood to the better," he said.

Huang Rong paid her respects to Qiu Chuji, then she asked Guo Jing again, "I was afraid the Great Khan would kill you in his wrath, I took everybody here ready to rescue you. What did the Great Khan say? Did he agree to cancel your betrothal?"

Guo Jing hesitated for half a day before replying, "I did not ask."

"Why?" Huang Rong was startled.

"Rong'er, please don't get angry," Guo Jing said, "It was because ..." Right then Princess Huazheng rushed out of

the palace, loudly called out, "Guo Jing Gege [big brother – a term of endearment]."

As soon as she saw her, Huang Rong's face changed immediately. She quickly mounted her horse and galloped away. Guo Jing was about to open his mouth to explain, when Huazheng pulled his hand and said, "Weren't you surprised I came here? Are you happy to see me?"

Guo Jing nodded, he turned his head to see Huang Rong, but she had already disappeared. Huazheng only had her eyes to Guo Jing, she did not notice Huang Rong at all; she held his hand, laughing, giggling and telling him how much she missed him.

Guo Jing secretly groaned, "Rong'er must think it was because I saw Huazheng that I did not ask the Great Khan to cancel my betrothal." He was silent and did not hear what Huazheng was saying.

A moment later Huazheng realized Guo Jing was in a daze, she was offended, "What's the matter with you? I came from far away just to see you and you do not pay any attention to me?"

"Meizi [younger sister – term of endearment]," Guo Jing said, "I have a very important matter I need to take care of, we will talk when I come back." Without waiting for her answer he assigned his personal guard to take care of Qiu Chuji, then hurriedly he went back to his camp, looking for Huang Rong.

His guard said, "Miss Huang came back to take the painting, then left toward the eastern gate."

Guo Jing was startled, "What painting?" he asked.

"The painting Master Consort frequently looked at," his guard replied.

Now Guo Jing really freaked out. "She took away this picture that means she really severed her relationship with me. No matter what, I have to go south to look for her." Hurriedly he wrote a letter to Qiu Chuji, then mounting his little red horse he went out of town to pursue.

That little red horse was very fast; but Guo Jing was afraid he might not see Huang Rong anymore, so he kept urging the horse to run even faster. In a short moment they had covered more than ten 'li's, already at the outskirts of the city; soldiers and horses' remains scattered everywhere. Another dozen or so 'li's later, all he saw was a vast open prairie covered with white snow. To his delight, there were horse's tracks on the snow heading east.

"The little red horse is so swift that no other horse in this world is its match. A little more time and I should be able to catch Rong'er," he thought, "I will take mother, then the three of us will go south at once. I don't care if Huazheng Meizi would blame me."

Another dozen of 'li's the track suddenly turned north, and there were human footprints beside the horse's track. The footprints were really peculiar, since the distance between two feet was about four feet; also, the size of the feet were big, but sank into the snow only lightly, only a few inches deep. Guo Jing was startled, "This person's lightness kungfu is excellent." Immediately he recalled something, "There is no one other than Ouyang Feng who has this kind of ability. Could it be that he is pursuing Rong'er?" Thinking of this, even though the cold wind was blowing, he could not help but sweat all over. The little red horse was truly smart, somehow it knew its master was in distress; so without Guo Jing pulling the rein it immediately ran following the tracks.

Guo Jing saw the footprints were always right by the horse's track. Several 'li's later both the track and the footprint suddenly turned west, and then turned south; turning and winding around, there was not a single section that was straight. Guo Jing thought, "Rong'er must have found out Ouyang Feng was chasing her, so she tried to shake him off. But the track is imprinted clearly on the snow, Old Poison won't have any difficulty following her."

Another dozen of 'li's or so, the footprint and the horse track intermingled, they were overlapping another set of footprint and horse track altogether. Guo Jing dismounted the horse to look closer. He was able to tell which set was made earlier and which set was made later. Looking both sets of tracks stretched out far on the snow he suddenly realized something, "Rong'er must have used her father's 'qi men zhi shu' [strange/wonderful/mysterious gate technique]; deliberately winding around to the east and circling to the west to confuse Ouyang Feng. Once he lost her track, she came back to her original route."

He stood back up, his heart was happy and anxious at the same time; happy because he knew most probably Ouyang Feng would not be able to overtake Huang Rong, anxious because of the confusing horse's track he also lost his trail. Standing on the snow he thought, "Rong'er went in circle, but eventually she must be heading east. I have to pursue to the east then." Leaping to his horseback, he looked to the sky to find his bearing then he rode to the east.

After speeding for quite some times, the horse's track indeed reappeared. He saw in the distance, where the blue sky met the snowy plain, a shadow of a person. Guo Jing urged his horse to run even faster and saw that the person was indeed Ouyang Feng. By now Ouyang Feng had also recognized Guo Jing, he called out, "Come, quick! Miss Huang has fallen into the quicksand." Guo Jing was

shocked, his legs squeezed his horse, and the little red horse shot like an arrow forward.

When he was still about a dozen 'zhang's away from where Ouyang Feng was standing, suddenly he felt his horse's hoofs no longer tread on a solid ground, as if under the white snow was some kind of marsh. The little red horse also felt it was stepping on a softer ground, hurriedly it pulled its leg and sped forward. Guo Jing brought the horse in a big circle and came back, only to see Ouyang Feng continuously running around a small tree.

"Is he doing some kind of black magic?" Guo Jing wondered. He pulled his rein to stop the horse because he wanted to ask a question; who would have thought that his little red horse did not want to stop, but sped forward and circled back. Guo Jing realized immediately, "Turned out underneath the snow is a soft-mud marsh; we will sink down as soon as I stop." But then his blood froze, "Is it possible that Rong'er fell into this marsh?"

"Where is Miss Huang?" he called out to Ouyang Feng.

Ouyang Feng did not stop running, he called out, "I followed her horse's track to this place, then suddenly it disappeared. Look!" While speaking he pointed his finger toward the small tree.

Guo Jing sped past the tree on the horseback, he saw a bright yellow ring on the tree branch. He made the little red horse run close to the tree, stretched out his hand and snatched that ring. It was the golden band Huang Rong wore on her hair. His heart almost jumped out through his throat.

He turned his horse's head toward the east. Several 'li's later he saw something glittering on the snow ahead. Bending his body, hanging from the horseback he stretched

his arm out and scooped that thing. It was the flower-patterned gold inlaid pearl head ornament that Huang Rong often wore. Guo Jing was very anxious, "Rong'er, Rong'er, where are you?" he shouted at the top of his lungs. He looked around as far as his eyes could see, but there was not a single movement on the vast and boundless white plain.

He went several 'li's further, toward his left he saw a black sable fur coat lying on the snowy ground. It was his own coat that he gave to Huang Rong when they first met at Zhangjiakou [Kalgan?]. He made the little red horse circle around the coat, while shouting loudly, "Rong'er!" His voice traveled far on the open snowy plain. There was no hill or mountain around, therefore, there was no echo answering his call. Guo Jing was extremely anxious, he wanted to cry but no sound was coming out from his throat.

A moment later Ouyang Feng arrived, "Let me rest on your horseback, then we will seek Miss Huang together," he said.

Guo Jing was indignant, "If you did not chase her, how could she fall into this marsh?" he scolded. Squeezing his legs he made his little red horse leap forward.

Ouyang Feng was angry, he leaped forward, and in three jumps he had already behind the horse, stretching his hand to grab the horse's tail.

Guo Jing did not expect him to come this quick, with a 'Divine Dragon Swings Its Tail' his right palm shot backward, crashing Ouyang Feng's palm, both people were using their full strength. Guo Jing was blown by Ouyang Feng's palm strength, his body flew from his saddle. Fortunately his red horse dashed forward; he stretched his left hand, grabbing the horse's buttocks, and swinging his body forward he was back on his saddle in no time.

Ouyang Feng, on the other hand, was pushed two steps backwards. Because of Guo Jing's palm strength he landed heavily; his left leg unexpectedly fell deeply into the mud, straight to his knee. Ouyang Feng was totally shocked; he knew on this kind of quicksand, as soon as he exerted his strength and tried to jump out, his right foot would also fall into the mud. Once both legs were in, it did not matter if his skill was as high as the sky, he would have a very difficult time pulling his own body out of the mud. In desperation he laid his body horizontally on the ground, then rolled around while at the same time kicked his right leg to the air. Using 'lian huan yuan yang tui' [chain mandarin duck's leg] he borrowed the strength from his right kick to lift his left foot. Mud splashed everywhere, but his legs were free.

He turned over and stood up, only to hear Guo Jing's loud calls, "Rong'er! Rong'er!" The man on the horse had left him for more than a 'li'. He saw the little red horse was running steadily; apparently they were already out of the marsh area. Ouyang Feng decided to pursue, but the further he ran, the more he felt the ground underneath his feet was getting softer; as if he was at the edge of the marsh and now he had treaded into the center of it.

Three times had Ouyang Feng fallen under Guo Jing's hands; the last time he was forced to be naked in front of hundreds of thousands people. It was an extremely dangerous situation; other people might admire his martial art skill, but he actually thought that was his greatest disgrace. This time he met Guo Jing again, alone. Good or bad he simply had to seek revenge. Even though the terrain was dangerous, he simply could not let this good opportunity pass. Much less Huang Rong's life or death was still unknown; he could not give up in light of this, no way; therefore, in his anger he decided to pursue Guo Jing.

Displaying his excellent lightness kungfu; in just several 'li's he had reached the speed of a fast horse. Guo Jing heard footsteps on the snow behind him; he turned his head quickly only to see Ouyang Feng was only several 'zhang's behind his horse's tail. He was startled, hastily urged his horse to run faster. In just a short moment they have covered more than a dozen 'li's.

Guo Jing did stop calling, "Rong'er!" but he saw the sky was getting darker; Huang Rong's fate was increasingly uncertain. His voice was hoarse from shouting, his occasional choke turned into sobs. The little red horse understood the danger they were on from the start, as it felt softer ground underneath, it ran even faster; eventually its four hooves moved so fast as if they were flying above the snow.

'Han xue bao ma' [precious horse with blood-like sweats] was a rare animal capable of running very fast; but Ouyang Feng's lightness kungfu was not inferior. Unfortunately he was getting tired, after running for a long time his breathing was getting heavier, his legs' strength diminished, his footsteps gradually slowing down. Little red horse was also sweating profusely; beads of red sweats trickled down from its body, splashing to the white snow below, next to its hoof tracks, like cherry blossom in full bloom.

By the time the sky was completely dark the little red horse had completely left the marsh; early on Ouyang Feng had disappeared without a trace. Guo Jing thought, "The horse Rong'er was riding did not have this kind of divine speed; it wouldn't run for half a li into the marsh without falling into the mud below. Even if I have to lose my life I must try to rescue her." He very well realized that Huang Rong had been missing for a very long time; if she did fall into the marsh, even if he could pull her out, he would not be able to

bring her back to life. So his motivation was really for his own peace of mind.

Guo Jing dismounted his horse to give it a rest; caressing his horse's back he said, "Little horse, oh little horse, today I am asking you not to be afraid of exhaustion. Let's take a short rest and then we'll go again."

Guo Jing leaped back to his saddle and pulled the rein to turn the horse's head. The little red horse was afraid to tread back into the marsh, but Guo Jing kept urging it to go. Finally with a loud neigh the horse's four hooves splashed back into the marsh. The horse knew their destination was still far away, so it ran with all its might, faster and faster into the marsh.

Suddenly they heard Ouyang Feng's desperate cry, "Help! Help!" Guo Jing sped his horse up. Under the glimmering reflection of the white snow he saw Ouyang Feng had fallen into the mud. His hands were high in the air, flailing chaotically. The mud was slowly rising, it already reached his chest. As soon as it reached his mouth and nose, he would certainly be suffocated to death.

Guo Jing could see his desperate situation; he recalled Huang Rong might face similar danger. His blood boiled inside his chest; he almost dismounted his horse and fell into the same trap; but decided against doing so at the last minute.

"Quick, help me!" Ouyang Feng cried out.

Guo Jing gritted his teeth and said, "You killed my benevolent masters, you also killed Miss Huang; do you still want me to save you? Dream on!"

With a stern voice Ouyang Feng replied, "We had made an agreement, you have to spare my life three times. This is

the third time. Are you saying you don't give a thought to the good faith?"

With tears in his eyes Guo Jing said, "Miss Huang is no longer alive, what use is our agreement?"

Ouyang Feng shouted curse and abusive words, but Guo Jing simply ignored him; he rode his horse away. Only a dozen 'zhang's later he heard Ouyang Feng's pitiful cry. Guo Jing could not bear it anymore. He heaved a sigh and turned his horse around. The mud had already reached Ouyang Feng's neck. "I am willing to save you, but if both of us ride on this horse, we will sink into the mud together," he said.

"Use a rope to tow me," Ouyang Feng suggested. Guo Jing did not carry any rope, but he remembered his long robe. Grabbing one end, he let his horse ran close to Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng held out his hand and grabbed the other end. Guo Jing squeezed his legs and gave a loud shout. The little red horse furiously charged forward and with a loud splashing sound Ouyang Feng was pulled out of the mire and dragged along on the snowy ground.

If they were heading east, very soon they were going to leave the marsh area; but Guo Jing was very anxious over Huang Rong, how would he be willing to give up searching for her? Therefore, they were galloping to the west. Ouyang Feng was still holding on to the robe, he laid down facing up, being dragged rapidly on the snow. He used this opportunity to catch his breath.

The little red horse ran very fast, before daybreak they had crossed the marsh. Guo Jing saw horse's track on the snow; it was Huang Rong's horse entering the marsh area. The track was still there, but what about Huang Rong? Guo Jing dismounted his horse, stood on the snow, lost in thought.

In his grief he had completely forgotten his archenemy; he stood with his left hand holding the rein, and his right hand holding the fur coat, his eyes gazing into the distance, his heart was shaken, beating rapidly.

Suddenly he felt a light touch on his shoulder. He turned around in shock, only to see Ouyang Feng's palm was touching his 'tao dao' [pottery way] acupoint. When Ouyang Feng fell into Guo Jing's trap and he came out from the sand, Guo Jing had sealed his 'tao dao' acupoint. This time Ouyang Feng managed to do the same to Guo Jing, it was a pay back time; Ouyang Feng could not help but laugh merrily.

Guo Jing was overwhelmed with grief, he had no regard of his life anymore; "If you want to kill me then just kill me; we don't have any agreement that you should spare my life anyway," he wryly said.

Ouyang Feng was taken aback; he had thought of torturing Guo Jing to disgrace him before finally taking his life. Who would have thought that Guo Jing did not expect to live? Ouyang Feng thought, "This dumb kid loves that little girl very much; if I kill him, then I am helping him fulfilling his desire to die together in the name of love." He changed his mind and thought, "That little girl is already buried beneath this snow; he becomes my only hope of the explanation of the manual." Grabbing Guo Jing's arm he lifted him up and leaped to the horseback. They rode toward a valley in the south.

About the sixth hour [between 9 - 11 am] he saw a village by the roadside. Ouyang Feng steered the horse to enter the village, but everywhere he looked there were corpses scattered around the village. Because the weather was cold, the corpses were preserved; they looked exactly like the day they were mutilated and killed by the passing

Mongolian army. Ouyang Feng called out several times, but nobody answered; looked like everybody in that village had died. Instead, he heard cattle mooing and sheep bleating. Ouyang Feng was delighted. He took Guo Jing to a stone house and said, "You are my prisoner now. I won't kill you. If you can defeat me, you are free to go." Having said that he took a sheep, butchered it, and boiled it in the kitchen.

The more Guo Jing saw his smug expression, the more he hated Ouyang Feng. Ouyang Feng threw a mutton leg to him and said, "I'll wait until your stomach is full, then we'll fight."

Guo Jing was angry, "You want to fight then fight. Why wait for the full stomach?" His body flew, his palm hacked down. Ouyang Feng raised his hand to block then sent out a fist to counterattack.

Very soon they were fighting inside the stone house, among upturned table and broken chairs. About thirty stances later Guo Jing had to admit his inferiority; he was half a step in front of Ouyang Feng when Ouyang Feng's right palm swung onto his side. It was very difficult for Guo Jing to fend off, all he could do was to wait for his death. Unexpectedly Ouyang Feng did not exert any strength; he laughed and said, "It's enough for today. You go ahead and train martial art from the manual; tomorrow we'll fight again."

"Bah!" Guo Jing spat; he sat on an overturned chair, picked the mutton leg up and started to eat. He thought, "He wanted to see me using the martial art from the manual, so that he might observe and steal it. I won't be fooled. If he wants to kill me, let him kill ... Hmm, his swing just now, how would I block it?"

Thinking about all kinds of fist techniques and palm methods in the manual, he could not find a single move capable of blocking Ouyang Feng's attack. He did remember, however, that there was a technique in the manual called 'fei xu jin' [flying cotton strength], which would allow him to strengthen his back and render Ouyang Feng's attack useless.

"I'd better train internal strength; even if he wants to see it, he can't," Guo Jing thought. Immediately he ate the mutton leg clean then sat cross-legged on the ground; he recited the manual in his heart then started practicing according to the manual. Since mastering the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone technique], his foundation was getting stronger; moreover, with what Reverend Yideng had taught him the Manual became like a second nature to him. This 'fei xu jin' for instance, in less than four hours he had learned how to use it.

With the corner of his eye he looked at Ouyang Feng, who was also sitting quietly, meditating. "Watch out!" Guo Jing called out. Without standing up his palm hacked down on the enemy.

Ouyang Feng parried the attack while sending out a counterattack. He wanted to repeat his earlier stance toward Guo Jing's side. But to his surprise his palm slid down Guo Jing's back, slanting to one side; because of his own strength he was slightly propelled forward. Taking that opportunity Guo Jing's left palm shot toward his neck.

Ouyang Feng was startled and pleased at the same time; he continued moving forward and thus had evaded the attack. He turned around and called out, "Good move! Was it from the Manual? What is it called?"

"Sha cha yi tui, ai mo qin er," Guo Jing said.

Ouyang Feng was startled, but then he remembered the weird sentences from the manual. He thought, "This dumb kid has a profound strength, but he is as hardheaded as a bull. I have to trick him since brute force will be useless." Changing his tactic he fought Guo Jing carefully.

Two people fought without ceasing. As soon as Guo Jing lost they would stop, then Guo Jing would train himself in new stances. Guo Jing slept soundly during the nights, but Ouyang Feng slept with trepidation; he was afraid Guo Jing might attack him in the middle of the night, or that he would try to escape in the dark.

They lived like that in the stone house for over a month, and had eaten almost half of the cattle and sheep in the village. Within this one month Guo Jing was forced to train his martial art, while Ouyang Feng tried hard to steal it. What Ouyang Feng had learned was already profound, but when he verified what he saw at Guo Jing, he realized there were many discrepancies; it was very difficult from him to link from one sentence to the next. The more he pondered, the more he did not understand; and he could not get anything from Guo Jing. In the meantime, within this month Guo Jing's martial art had unexpectedly advanced by leaps and bounds.

Ouyang Feng could not help but secretly anxious, "If we continue like this, before I understand the essence of the manual, I might not be this dumb kid's match."

The first several days Guo Jing was filled with hatred; after every fight he would be more determined than ever to score a victory, he wanted to master a fierce martial art to kill his enemy. However, he soon learned that this matter was extremely difficult. He was not discouraged nonetheless; his anger had decreased somewhat, but his firm resolution had actually increased.

One day he picked a steel sword from among the corpses lying around in the village; then trained hard on swordsmanship to fight Ouyang Feng's wooden staff.

Ouyang Feng's original snake staff fell and was lost in the ocean when he was fighting Hong Qigong on the boat. Afterwards he made another cast steel staff complete with new pair of strange snake; but it was also lost when he was trapped inside the ice block, destroyed by Lu Youjiao. Right now he was using an ordinary wooden staff, without any assistance from his strange snakes; but his staff technique was still out-of-this-world, with infinite variations. Several times the staff shook the sword in Guo Jing's hand and made it fly. If there were snakes on his staff, definitely Guo Jing would not be able to resist at all.

In the meantime they heard Genghis Khan's army returning to the east; the people and the horses were marching noisily, the noise did not stop for several days. But two people were engrossed in fighting each other violently, they did not pay the slightest attention to this. One evening the noise simply stopped, the army had all gone and nothing was heard except the quietness of the night.

Guo Jing raised his sword straight up, thinking, "Although I can't win over you tonight, your wooden staff won't shake my sword in any way." He was anxious to try the new stance he had just learned, but he waited calmly for the opponent to attack first. Suddenly from outside the house somebody was shouting loudly, "Traitor! Where are you running to?" Guo Jing was absolutely certain it was the Old Urchin Zhou Botong's voice.

Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing looked at each other in bewilderment, they both thought, "Why did he go thousands of miles to the west?" They wanted to say something, but heard footsteps came approaching; then

two people, one after another, rushed toward the stone house. There were numerous other buildings in the village, but apparently they saw that firelight came from this house.

Ouyang Feng waved his left hand and with his internal strength extinguished the fire. By that time the front door was shoved open, somebody rushed in, with somebody else hot on his heels; the latter one was indeed Zhou Botong. Both men's footsteps were extraordinarily light and nimble; the man in the front's martial art certainly not below Zhou Botong's.

Ouyang Feng marveled greatly, "This man surprisingly able to escape the Old Urchin's hand. His skill is very rare among the experts of this generation. If it were Huang Yaoshi or Hong Qigong, the Old Poison won't be so surprised." Because of this thought he refrained from making any move.

They heard the man in the front jump vertically up and sat on the beam. Zhou Botong laughed, "The Old Urchin's favorite game is the hide-and-seek; I won't let you slip away anymore." In the darkness they heard him closing down the front door, and placed a nearby big rock behind it. He called out, "Stinky thief, where are you?" At the same time he groped around back and forth to find him.

Guo Jing was thinking of making some noise to tell him the enemy was on the beam, when suddenly Zhou Botong leaped high while laughing loudly, grabbing that man on the beam. Turned out he was aware from the start that his enemy was on the beam. He was deliberately groping around to the east and to the west to throw him off guard, then suddenly launched a sudden attack.

The man on the beam was not weak either; without waiting for Zhou's fingers to touch him he somersaulted and

crouched by the north wall. Even though his mouth was babbling nonsense, but Zhou Botong was actually very wary of this man. He stopped to listen to his exact location; did not dare to act rashly. In the quietness of the night he heard three distinct breathings. He had known from the start that this house must be occupied, since he saw the fire was extinguished. But since they did not make any sound, he thought they must be frightened; thereupon he called out, "Master of the house please don't be afraid, I am here to capture this little thief. Once I get him I will go out immediately."

He knew ordinary people's breathing was rough and heavy, while those with strong internal energy would breathe slowly and long, light and deep; with just a little attention they were very easy to distinguish. But when he cocked his ears to listen, the people toward his north, east and west were all breathing low and slowly.

Zhou Botong was greatly surprised, "Traitor," he called out, "You have prepared an ambush here!"

Guo Jing wanted to open his mouth to greet him, but changed his mind at the last minute; he thought, "Ouyang Feng is lurking on the side, the man Zhou Dage [Big Brother Zhou] is chasing is another powerful enemy. I'd better stay quiet and wait for a good opportunity to help him."

Zhou Botong moved step by step toward the front door while mumbling, "Looked like before the Old Urchin can capture the enemy, he would be captured by the enemy." He had made a decision to dash out the door if the situation was unfavorable. Right at that moment came a rumbling noise from a distance; hoof beats sounded like an evening tide came crashing the shore. It looked like a strong army with multitude of horses had arrived to kill.

Zhou Botong called out, "You have more and more helpers coming, the Old Urchin doesn't want to play anymore." While saying that he picked the rock stopping the door as if he was about to open the door and leave; but then suddenly he hurled the rock toward the man he chased. The rock was not light; Ouyang Feng placed that rock behind the door every night, so that if Guo Jing wanted to sneak out he would find out even when he was sleeping.

Ouyang Feng heard the wind carried a lot of strength in it, he thought that when the Old Urchin threw the stone, his right flank must have been defenseless; if he attacked him first, not only he would have one less enemy for the present time, but also during the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua he would have one less powerful contestant. Having this intention he bent his knee, slightly squatting, pushed both hands together to launch a 'Toad Stance' attack.

He was squatting on the west, therefore, his attack was toward the east, carrying a very strong energy. Guo Jing had fought him for dozens of days, he knew by heart Ouyang Feng's every action and every movement even though the room was pitch black. As soon as he heard the gust of wind, he knew Ouyang Feng was attacking Zhou Botong. Guo Jing stepped forward and launched the 'Proud Dragon Repents' to meet Ouyang Feng's 'Toad Stance' head-on.

In the meantime the man who was standing on the north also heard the big rock was flying his way; he bent his knees to get a stronger stand, and push both hands forward, creating a strong force striking the big rock.

Four people from four directions sending out four forces; even though they did not release their energy at exactly the same time, but the forces were actually not inferior one to another. The big rock was struck by forces from east, south,

west and north; it fell on the center of the room. 'Crash!' with a loud noise it broke the table to smithereens.

The sound was actually very loud; which Zhou Botong thought amusing. He could not restrain from bursting into loud laughter. But his laughter was drowned by the sound of thousands of cavalry soldiers entering the village. They could hear the warhorses neighing, the weapons clashing, and the soldiers shouting their battle cry.

Guo Jing listened to the officers' commands, and he found out they were the defeated army of Khoresm entering the village, perhaps trying to hold their ground in the village; but it sounded like the Mongolian army had pursued them. He heard the hoof beats, the sound of battle flag fluttered in the wind, the loud battle cry, as well as flying arrows near and far. It sounded like the armies were engaged in a close hand-to-hand combat. The four people in the house did not know for certain how many soldiers were fighting outside. Suddenly someone shoved the door open and came in. Zhou Botong grabbed that person and flung him back outside; then he lifted the rock and placed it back behind the door.

As Ouyang Feng's attack failed, he thought that he had been discovered anyway, so he called out, "Old Urchin, do you know who I am?"

Zhou Botong indistinctly heard someone speaking, but because of the noise he could not distinguish who the speaker was. He raised his left hand to guard against an attack while stretching his right hand to grab. Ouyang Feng easily neutralized this grab with his right hand, while slapping with the back of his left hand. Zhou Botong parried this attack, he was startled, "The Old Poison! You are here?" he called out. He swayed his body slightly, leaning to the left. At that very moment the man on the north took the opportunity to attack Zhou Botong's back.

Zhou Botong's right hand engaged Ouyang Feng, while his left fist parried the attack to his back. He was thinking of testing the mutual hands combat that he created on the Peach Blossom Island. Until that day Zhou Botong had not tested his special skill against two masters; so even though he was in danger, he could not let this good opportunity to pass. But suddenly Guo Jing from the east threw himself into the fight; his right hand parried Zhou Botong's fist, while his left hand engaged that person's attack.

Three people simultaneously called out in alarm; Zhou Botong shouted, "Guo Xiongdi [Brother Guo]," that person shouted, "Guo Jing," and Guo Jing himself cried out, "Qiu Qianren."

Zhou Botong was scared by the snakes at the martial art contest at the 'yan yu lou' [Misty Rain Tavern]; he saw no way to escape, so he laid down on top of the tavern's roof, using layers upon layers of split-bamboo sheets to cover up his body. Because his 'armor' was so thick no arrow could harm him, Ouyang Feng's vipers were also helpless to climb to the roof. When the morning fog was gone, the snakes, as well as the soldiers were also gone; so was everybody else, he did not know where they went. He was bored to death, so he just wandered around everywhere.

A few months later a Beggar Clan disciple delivered a letter to him; it was from Huang Rong. In the letter Huang Rong reminded him that he had promised no matter what Huang Rong asked, he would comply. Now Huang Rong wanted him to go kill the Clan Leader of the Iron Palm Clan, Qiu Qianren. She explained that Emperor Duan's Concubine Liu had a very deep enmity against this man; if he killed him, Concubine Liu would not look for him anymore. Otherwise, Concubine Liu would find him even to the end of the earth, to take him as her husband. Huang Rong also gave him the detail of the Iron Palm Peak's exact location.

Zhou Botong thought that his promise 'to comply no matter what' was actually given to Huang Rong; but that old scoundrel Qiu Qianren colluded with the Jins, he was a traitor, so he felt it was appropriate to kill him. As for his own affair with Concubine Liu, he realized he had offended her deeply; she had a deep enmity against Qiu Qianren, so if he lent her a hand, she might not come and bother him anymore, and that would be an awfully good luck for him. Therefore, he decided to go to the Iron Palm Peak.

At first Qiu Qianren was able to match him stance for stance, but as soon as Zhou Botong used the mutual hands combat technique, Qiu Qianren was forced to withdraw. When martial art masters contended, as soon as one admit inferiority, then victory or defeat should be decided; who would have thought that Zhou Botong did not want to stop and kept chasing him. Qiu Qianren did ask him the reason behind it several times, but Zhou Botong only looked at him with a blank expression; could not tell him the real reason. He only said three characters 'liu gui fei' [Concubine Liu]; and that would be enough to take his head.

Two men fought and stop, one ran away the other chased; they went farther and farther away. Zhou Botong's martial art was slightly superior to Qiu Qianren's; yet it would not be easy for him to kill Qiu Qianren. Qiu Qianren had tried any means possible to get rid of him; but Zhou Botong doggedly chased him anywhere he went. He thought, "Would you still chase me if I go to the bitter cold west?" On the other hand Zhou Botong thought, "I want to see where you would go; then I'll go back home."

As soon as they arrive at the desert outside the great wall, the landscape was flat, it was easy to follow someone's trail; Qiu Qianren did not have any place to hide. Fortunately Zhou Botong had shown a good faith toward him; whenever Qiu Qianren needed to sleep or sat down to eat his meal, or

perhaps he was having a bowel movement or urinating, Zhou Botong did not disturb him in any way; he simply did the same. But no matter what Qiu Qianren did, no matter how bad he cursed him, the Old Urchin haunted him like a ghost, continuously pestering him.

The more Zhou Botong fought Qiu Qianren, the more excited he became. Several times he did gain an upper hand, but unexpectedly he did not kill Qiu Qianren. That particular day, two men fought and ran and by a pure coincidence rushed into the stone building.

Now Zhou and Guo two people knew who the other three people were, but when the three of them called out each other's name, their voices were drown by the loud commotion outside; hence Ouyang Feng still did not know who the other person was. He only knew that person was Zhou Botong's enemy. On the other hand, Qiu Qianren thought the other two were on the same side.

Zhou, Qiu and Ouyang, all three people possessed outstanding martial art skills; but after battling Ouyang Feng for more than a month, Guo Jing's martial art level was also improving by leaps and bound, which enable him to keep pace with the other three. These four martial art masters were confined in a pitch-black, approximately two 'zhang's square room; they could not see a thing, could not hear each other, and could not talk to each other. It was as if they had turned into deaf, mute and blind people.

"If I block Ouyang Feng, then Zhou Dage can finish off Qiu Qianren. After that it won't be too difficult for us two people to join forces to kill Ouyang Feng," Guo Jing thought. Once he reached that decision, his hands started to move. His right hand hit an empty air, while his left palm met someone else's hand.

On the Peach Blossom Island Guo Jing had fought Zhou Botong countless of times; therefore, as soon as his palm touched Zhou's hand, he knew immediately it was his Zhou Dage, he retracted his palm quickly. Unexpectedly Zhou Botong's childlike enthusiasm was aroused; he slightly shrank his left arm then sent out a right fist toward Guo Jing's shoulder. This hit did not carry any strong internal energy, but since Guo Jing did not guard against it, he felt pain nonetheless.

"Hao Xiongdi [Good Brother], you want to test your Dage's martial art? Be careful!" Zhou Botong said, his left palm shot out. Guo Jing could not hear what he said, but this time he was prepared; he wielded his arms and neutralized the attack.

By this time Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren had also exchanged several stances; as a result they recognized the opponent by his martial art. These two men did not have any enmity against each other, but they both thought that the Sword Meet of Mount Hua was coming. Potentially they were going to fight a life and death battle against each other anyway; therefore, why not try to inflict as much damage as possible to the opponent since they have the opportunity now? Hence they did not slack one bit.

After fighting for a moment they felt gusts of wind blowing behind them, to their surprise Zhou Botong was fighting Guo Jing. They were bewildered, but then they remembered Zhou Botong always handled matters differently, he was an unpredictable man; besides, it gave them a good opportunity, why wouldn't they be happy? Thus without prior agreement they both attacked Zhou Botong and Guo Jing.

After exchanging more than a dozen moves with Guo Jing; Zhou Botong found out that Guo Jing's martial art was far

more advanced than what he had known, he was pleasantly surprised. "Xiongdi, where did you learn your martial art from?" he asked. But the noise outside was deafening, how could Guo Jing hear what he said? Zhou Botong was offended, "Fine, you don't want to tell me. Do you think I care?" Right at that moment he felt a gust of wind on his face, Ouyang and Qiu's attacks had arrived. Zhou Botong kicked the ground and leaped up to the beam. "I'll let you fight these two alone!" he called out.

Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren felt the wind from Zhou Botong's sleeves, they realized he had jumped to the beam; they had the same thought of joining forces and kill this dumb kid, suddenly Guo Jing had to face a converging attack from left and right.

Initially Guo Jing was surrounded by Zhou Botong's attacks; he had tried four, five different techniques but was unable to free himself. He was waiting for Zhou Botong to withdraw when two powerful enemies attacked; which forced him to groan inwardly. He had no choice but braced himself and used the mutual hands combat technique to resist these two.

After fighting for a while Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren were unable to restrain their amazement. Knowing Guo Jing's skill, either one of Ouyang Feng or Qiu Qianren should be able to defeat him easily. Who would have thought that after fighting two against one, Guo Jing's left palm could block Ouyang Feng's attacks, while his right fist thwarted Qiu's palms? Two people were helpless against one.

Zhou Botong was sitting on the beam; he had decided to get down, but was afraid Guo Jing might get hurt, so quietly he slid down the wall, stretching out both his hands arbitrarily, and by coincidence caught Ouyang Feng's back.

Ouyang Feng was squatting on the ground, ready to strike Guo Jing with his fierce Toad Stance; suddenly he felt somebody on his back, hastily he sent his palms backward. Guo Jing seized this opportunity to kick Qiu Qianren then leap to the corner of the house, gasping for breath. If Zhou Botong were one step late, he would be injured by Ouyang Feng's attack.

Four people in the pitch-black room clashed to each other then separated from each other. Sometimes Zhou Botong fought Qiu Qianren, sometimes Guo Jing fought Qiu Qianren, sometimes Ouyang Feng fought Qiu Qianren, sometimes Zhou Botong fought Ouyang Feng, and sometimes Guo Jing fought Zhou Botong. Four people engaged in this mixed-up fight, among them Zhou Botong was most excited; it was the most fun among all of his fights, of course he would not let this opportunity pass.

After fighting for a while an idea popped up in his head. "My two hands can be considered two people; Ouyang and Qiu are also two. See if you can fight four people at once. Have you ever tried this?" he asked Guo Jing.

Guo Jing did not hear what he said, but suddenly felt three people attack him at the same time; desperately he tried to block and evade. "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid," Zhou Botong encouraged him, "I will help you if you are in danger." But in this dark room, as soon as somebody sent out a fist or a kick, his life would be in grave danger; how could Zhou Botong have time to help?

A dozen or so stances later Guo Jing was already dead-tired; he felt Ouyang and Qiu, two people's fists were getting heavier and heavier, he was forced to step back one step after another. He wanted to jump up the beam to catch his breath, but Zhou Botong's palms did not give him any slack. He was both alarmed and angry, finally he lost his

patience, "Zhou Dage, you silly old man, why do you bother me?" but his words were drowned by the commotion outside, nobody heard him.

Guo Jing withdrew several more steps, suddenly his feet knocked the big rock on the ground; he nearly tumbled down. Before he had any chance to straighten up his waist, Qiu Qianren's iron palm was ready to slap him down. In this dire situation Guo Jing did not lose his wit, swiftly he picked the big rock up and held it in front of his chest. Qiu Qianren's palm hit the rock. Guo Jing focused his strength on his arms and pushed the rock forward to meet the attack. Suddenly he felt gust of wind coming from his left; Ouyang Feng's palm had arrived. With a loud shout Guo Jing threw the big rock upward, while he jumped sideways to evade the attack.

The big rock flew through the roof; bricks and plasters fell down like rain. Immediately the stars in the sky above cast a dim light through the hole. Zhou Botong was angry, "Look what you did! Now we lost all the fun!"

Guo Jing was extremely exhausted; he kicked the ground and jumped out through the hole. Ouyang Feng hastily flew up to chase him. Zhou Botong shouted, "Don't go! Don't go! Stay here and play with me." He stretched out his hand to grab Ouyang Feng's left foot. Ouyang Feng was startled, quickly his right foot kicked, forcing Zhou Botong's hand to let go; but as a result he could not jump and was forced to land back down.

Qiu Qianren did not wait for him to land, he sent out a kick toward Ouyang Feng's chest. Ouyang Feng slightly pulled his chest back while stretching out his arm to grab Qiu Qianren's ankle. Three people once again engaged in a fierce battle against each other. This time they could vaguely see each other's shadow; while the battle noise

outside was also gradually diminishing. The thrill of the fight decreased substantially.

Zhou Botong was upset, he lost his interest; he vented his disappointment toward these two people. His fist technique changed abruptly, he fought the two people with murderous intention.

After escaping from the house via the roof, Guo Jing saw the troops and horses running around swiftly; he could also hear the sound of clashing weapons in a distance. Oftentimes he heard heart-rending groan and cry of soldiers wounded by blades or arrows. He dashed through these miserable people, running toward a small wood outside the village to lie down and take some rest.

He had fought fiercely for half a night, as he lay down, he felt his whole body, muscles and bones were aching, like they were going to crack. Recalling the fight inside that stone house, he shivered involuntarily. Although worried about Zhou Botong's safety, but with his martial art level he knew even if he came back there he would not be able to help Zhou escape. Finally he closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Early morning the next day he felt his face was wet and cold, something was wiggling around on his face. Startled he opened his eyes and leaped up, only to listen to a happy neighing sound. Turned out it was his little red horse licking his face. Guo Jing was delighted, immediately he hugged the horse's neck; one man and one horse embraced in a joyful reunion.

When Guo Jing was held captive by Ouyang Feng, the red horse was let loose outside; it went grazing on the nearby prairie. During the fierce battle last night the horse utilized

its swift legs to escape. When the soldiers were gone, the horse came back and found its master.

Guo Jing led the red horse returned to the village only to see broken bows and arrows everywhere, dead soldiers and horses scattered all around. Here and there he saw injured soldiers who were still alive, crying out pitifully. He had been in a lot of battles, he was accustomed to dead or wounded soldiers; but recalling his own life experience he could not refrain from feeling a great sorrow.

Quietly he returned to the stone building. Cocking his ears outside he tried to listen, but the house was quiet. He took a peek through a crack in the door and saw no one inside. He pushed the door open to see; but Zhou Botong, Ouyang Feng, and Qiu Qianren three people had already disappeared without any trace.

He stared blankly for half a day then mounted his horse heading east. The little red horse ran very fast, very soon they caught up with Genghis Khan's main army.

By this time Khoresm cities had either surrendered or been destroyed; hundreds of thousand warriors had fallen like broken tiles. Khoresm king, Muhammad, was a haughty tyrant; he was deserted by his friends and allies. He led the remnants of his defeated army desperately escape to the west. Genghis Khan assigned his senior generals, Subotai and Jebek to lead twenty thousand soldiers to pursue to the west; while he led the main army went home to the east.

Subotai and Jebek pursued to the west of modern day city of Moscow, to the city of Kiev nearby the bank of Dnieper River. They crushed several hundred thousands of Russia and Kipchak alliance army; destroyed the city of Kiev and killed the Hertog [Grand Duke] of Kiev along with eleven princes by running a chariot over them. This war was called

'The Battle of the Kalka River'. Since then the Russian prairie groaned under the Mongolian horses' hoofs.

Muhammad went as far west as he could, finally he escaped to a deserted island on the Caspian Sea and died of illness there.

When suddenly Guo Jing disappeared at Samarkhand, Genghis Khan was very worried. He was afraid that Guo Jing somehow got killed in the chaotic battle without anybody knowing it. Seeing him return safe and sound he was really thrilled. Needless to say, Princess Huazheng was even more overjoyed.

Qiu Chuji followed the main army went back to the east. Along the way he was always giving advice to the Great Khan to love the people more and kill innocent civilians less. Although Genghis Khan did not necessarily agree with his view, he realized the Priest spoke reasonably, hence he did not argue too much. In the chaotic battles that followed, Qiu Chuji had succeeded in saving innumerable civilians' lives.

Khoresm was located tens of thousands of 'li's from Mongolia; the return of Genghis Khan's army to the east took a very long time. As soon as they arrived back home, he held a big feast to celebrate their victory by the bank of Onon River; while giving the injured soldiers time to recuperate. Qiu Chuji and his disciples, along with Lu Youjiao and the rest of the Beggar Clan disciples took their leave and went back to the south.

Several months later Genghis Khan saw his warriors had eaten to their hearts' contents, their horses galloped freely on the prairie; his interest to attack the south was rekindled. One day he held a general assembly to discuss strategies to defeat the Jin country.

Ever since Huang Rong's death, Guo Jing was broken hearted; oftentimes he went riding alone with only his little red horse and his pair of eagles to keep him company, wandering the vast Mongolian prairie. Most of the time he would just stare blankly and not say anything for a few days. Princess Huazheng was always trying to speak warmly to him, but it seemed like he did not hear anything she said. Everybody knew his feelings, knew that he was grieving, so nobody dared to bring up the wedding plan; while Genghis Khan was busy preparing the expedition to the south and did not pay attention to this matter.

That day at the general assembly inside the Great Khan's Golden Tent, many generals proposed various tactics and strategies to attack the south; yet Guo Jing did not utter a single word.

After dismissing his generals, Genghis Khan went to the top of a small hill and stayed there for half a day, to think of the actions he would take. The next day he dispatched his army to attack the Jins from three directions. At that moment his eldest son Jochi and his second son Chagatai were still busy consolidating their conquests in the west; therefore, he put the main army to take the Jins down under his third son, Ogedei; while the left flank was placed under the command of his fourth son, Tuolei, and the right flank was placed under Guo Jing's command.

Genghis Khan summoned the three commander-in-chiefs privately; he even ordered his personal guards to leave the tent. To Ogedei, Tuolei and Guo Jing he said, "The Jins concentrate their defense in the city of Tongguan; the city is bordered on the south by a mountain and on the north by a river, it really is difficult to break. Numerous generals' proposals all have some ground to them, but if we advance frontally, unavoidably we will waste a lot of time. Currently our Mongolia has formed an alliance with the Great Song; I

think the best strategy would be advancing through the Song territory. From Tangzhou the army to proceed via Dengzhou straight to the Jin capital Daliang.”

As Ogedei, Tuolei and Guo Jing three people heard to this point, they jumped and hugged each other, loudly shouted, “Ingenious plan!”

Genghis Khan smiled and asked Guo Jing, “You are very good in battle strategy; truly a man after my own heart. Let me ask you, after attacking Daliang, then what?”

Guo Jing contemplated for a while then shook his head, “We are not attacking Daliang,” he said.

Ogedei and Tuolei clearly heard their father king said they were going to attack Daliang, why did Guo Jing say they were not going to? They were startled and looked at him with a questioning look. Genghis Khan still showed a faint smile on his face, “Not attacking Daliang, then what?” he asked.

“Not attacking is actually attacking; attack but do not attack, do not attack but attack,” Guo Jing said. He made Ogedei and Tuolei more confused than ever.

“Attack but do not attack, do not attack but attack [gong er bu gong, bu gong er gong],” Genghis Khan smiled, “These eight characters were very well said. Explain it to your two brothers.”

Guo Jing complied. “I can guess the Great Khan’s troops advancement method; we pretend to attack the Jin capital, destroying the enemy under the city wall. Daliang is where the Jin Emperor resides, but the troops stationed there are actually not too many. As soon as it is under attack, the Jins will immediately send troops from the neighboring city Tongguan to rescue. Chinese military strategist said, ‘A

massive troops movement can't be done in a day; traveling hundreds of 'li's is draining the energy and crippling the three generals. Strong at first, weary in the end. This is the eleventh method.' By traveling fast for a hundred 'li's, the soldiers strength will be reduced to only 10% of their original strength. As they leave Tongguan and go to Daliang, the great distance is their biggest disadvantage; they should take ten rest stops, but can only take one instead. Even if they reach Daliang on time, they will be weary and unable to fight. Our troops simply have to wait for the exhausted enemy then we can easily destroy the Jin army. Once the strong Jin army is defeated, then Daliang will fall. If we concentrate on directly attacking Daliang, not only it will be difficult, but we can be attacked from both front and rear."

Genghis Khan clapped his hands and laughed aloud, he called out, "Well said, well said!" He pulled a scroll out and spread it on the table. Three people looked at it and were greatly astonished. Turned out it was the map of Daliang and its neighboring area. On it were drawn routes of troop's movement, both theirs and the enemy's. It also contained strategies on how to attack the enemy's rear flank, how to attack the enemy's main body, how to lure and destroy the incoming enemies from Tongguan, how to make them weary and obliterate them outside the city wall; everything was just as Guo Jing had said.

Ogedei and Tuolei looked at their father king, also looked at Guo Jing with bewilderment and admiration on their face. Guo Jing's heart was also full of admiration, he thought, "I learned the military strategy from the 'Wumu Legacy', nothing strange about it; but the Great Khan is illiterate, he possesses a natural ability for this kind of things."

Genghis Khan continued, "In our expedition to the south this time, I am sure the Jins will be destroyed. I have here

three embroidered pouches for each one of you. After Daliang falls, the three of you should gather inside the imperial palace of the Jin emperor; you can open them up and act accordingly." Upon saying that he took those embroidered pouches from his pocket and gave one to each of them.

As Guo Jing received the pouch, he saw that the mouth was sealed with wax and the seal carried the image of Genghis Khan's signet ring.

"Before entering Daliang, I forbid you to open the pouch without authorization," Genghis Khan said, "Before you open them, I want the three of you to examine each other's pouch to see if the seal is damaged."

The three of them bowed and said, "Who dare to defy The Great Khan's decree?"

Genghis Khan asked Guo Jing, "You are usually slow in dealing everyday affairs; but how come you are so resourceful in dealing with military strategy?" Guo Jin then told him how he studied the military strategy from the 'Wumu Legacy'. Genghis Khan asked him the life story of Yue Fei. Guo Jing told him how Yue Fei scored a big victory over the Jins at the 'zhu xian zhen' [vermillion immortal small town]; that the Jins gave him a nickname, 'Yue Yeye' [grandfather Yue]; that they had a saying, 'shaking a mountain is easy, shaking Yue's army is difficult'; Guo Jing recounted everything.

Genghis Khan was silent, carrying his hands behind his back he paced back and forth inside his tent; sighing, "I regret I was not born a hundred years earlier to befriend this great hero. In this world today, who can be my rival?" His words carried a great loneliness.

As he was leaving the Golden Tent, Guo Jing remembered that in the past several days he had been busy with military business and did not spend as much time with his mother as he should. Since the next day he was going south leading the troops to avenge his country, the Great Song, against its archenemy, the Jin; today he wanted to spend as much time with his mother as he could. Hence he immediately headed toward his mother's tent.

To his surprise, the tent was empty, all her clothes and other belongings were moved someplace else; only an old soldier stayed there on guard duty. He asked the soldier, and was told that the madam surnamed Li had received the Great Khan's order to move to another tent. Guo Jing asked where the new tent was, and quickly walked over. He was surprised to see the tent was several times bigger than the one she used to live in. He lifted the curtain to enter, and he was even more surprised; the tent was full of gold, jade, and precious jewels, as well as fancy clothes and embroidery works; they were all the spoils of Mongolian army's military expedition.

Princess Huazheng was sitting next to Li Ping, listening to her story about Guo Jing's childhood. As she saw Guo Jing enter, she smiled, stood up and greeted him.

"Ma [mother], where did all these things come from?" Guo Jing asked.

"The Great Khan says you have rendered a great service in the west; therefore, he bestowed all of these for you to enjoy," Li Ping answered. "Actually, we are simple people and have no use of these extravagances."

Guo Jing nodded, he also saw there were more than eight maids attending to his mother's needs; they were also captives that the troops seized.

After making some idle talk with Guo Jing and his mother for a while, Huazheng took her leave. She thought Guo Jing would leave for another long journey the next day, so he must have had a lot to talk about with her today. Who would have thought that after waiting outside the tent for half a day Guo Jing did not come out. Li Ping understood, she said, "Jing'er, Princess is waiting for you outside, you need to say goodbye to her."

Guo Jing replied in affirmative, but did not budge from his chair. Li Ping sighed, "We have lived in this northern country for twenty years. Although we have received the Great Khan's benevolence like we are part of his family, but actually I miss my hometown very much. I hope you can defeat the Jin country soon, so that we, mother and son, will be able to return to our hometown. We can live in the Ox Village, where your father's home used to be. I know you are not greedy of fame and fortune, so you don't need to go back north. Only this business with the Princess, I don't know how to deal with; it is a really difficult matter."

"Your son had early on told the Princess, that if Rong'er died, your son will never marry for the rest of my life," Guo Jing said.

Li Ping sighed, "Perhaps the Princess can accept that, but what worries me most is the Great Khan."

"What about the Great Khan?" Guo Jing asked.

"These past few days the Great Khan all of a sudden treats us, mother and child, with an unusual kindness," Li Ping answered, "He showered us with money, precious jewels, everything. He said it was your reward from the expedition to the west, but I have lived in this northern Mongolian desert for twenty years, I know the Great Khan's

personality. I feel like there is more to it than what meets the eye."

"Ma," Guo Jing said, "What do you think it is?"

"I am just a simple woman, how could I have a respected opinion?" Li Ping said, "But if my intuition is right, the Great Khan wants to compel us to do something for him."

"Hmm, perhaps he wants me to marry the Princess," Guo Jing guessed.

"Getting married is a good thing," Li Ping answered, "Even if the Great Khan does not know your feeling, he does not need to compel you. The way I see it, you are commanding a big army to the south; maybe the Great Khan is afraid you will have a change of heart and rebel against him."

Guo Jing shook his head, "I have no intention to gain riches and honor, and the Great Khan knew it. Why would I rebel against him?"

"I have an idea," Li Ping said, "We will find out quietly what the Great Khan's real intention is. Tell him that I miss my hometown very much, and want to go along to the south with you. Tell him that, see what he would say."

Guo Jing was delighted, "Ma, why didn't you say so earlier? We go home together, that will be wonderful! I am sure the Great Khan will give his permission." He went out the tent and did not see Huazheng outside. He thought perhaps she had waited for a while and could not wait much longer.

Guo Jing was gone for half a day, and he came back dejected. "The Great Khan did not give us his permission, did he?" Li Ping asked.

"I don't understand," Guo Jing replied, "Why would the Great Khan want to keep you here?" Li Ping was silent.

"The Great Khan said," Guo Jing continued, "That as soon as the Jin country is defeated, he will let me take you home; we will return with all the glory and honor. Why would I want that? I said mother misses her home very much and wants to go home sooner. The Great Khan suddenly looked angry, he kept shaking his head, did not give us his permission."

Li Ping hesitated. "What else did the Great Khan say to you today?" she asked.

Guo Jing told her everything that happened inside the Golden Tent earlier, how he received his assignment, including the secret order he received inside the embroidered pouch.

"Ay!" Li Ping sighed, "If only your Second Master and Rong'er were here, they should be able to shed some lights on this matter. It's a pity I am only a simple country girl. The more I think about it, the more restless I became; I don't know why."

Guo Jing played with the embroidered pouch in his hand; he said, "When the Great Khan gave this embroidered pouch, his face looked unusual. I am afraid it has something to do with this secret order."

Li Ping took the embroidered pouch from his hand; she looked at it carefully, then she dismissed all the maids and suddenly said, "Let's open it up and take a look."

Guo Jing was shocked, "No! Breaking the royal seal means death."

Li Ping smiled, "Do you know that the embroidery work of the Lin'an prefecture is well-known throughout the world? Your mother is a Lin'an native, I have learned embroidery since my childhood. I can open up this pouch without

damaging the seal, and I can sew it back on as good as new. Nobody will find out."

Guo Jing was delighted. Li Ping fetched her needles and carefully undid the silk thread that was holding the embroidered pouch together. She took a folded paper through the seam and spread it out to take a look. As they read the paper, mother and son looked at each other; a chill crept up their bodies.

Turned out it was Genghis Khan's secret order to Ogedei, Tuolei and Guo Jing; as soon as the Jin is defeated, they were to proceed south to Lin'an in the shortest time possible, to defeat the Song and unify it under the Great Mongolia. The secret order also said that if Guo Jing rendered a great merit, he was to be crowned the prince with all glory and honor belonging to that title; but if he harbored a different mind, Ogedei and Tuolei were to behead him immediately, and his mother must also be executed.

Guo Jing stared blankly for half a day, finally he said, "Ma, if not for your skill in opening up this pouch, I don't know if we, mother and child, could have kept our lives. I am a citizen of our Great Song, how could I sell my own country for personal gain?"

"What are we going to do?" Li Ping asked.

"Ma, I regret that you will have to suffer some hardship," Guo Jing said, "We are running away to the south, tonight."

"Absolutely," Li Ping replied, "Go and make necessary preparation; don't let anybody find out our plan."

Guo Jing nodded; quickly returned to his own tent. He only took several changes of clothing. Other than his little red horse, he took eight horses, with the thought of his mother

and he could rely on those horses to escape in case the Great Khan's army pursued them. He left all the gold and precious jewels the Great Khan gave him, along with the tiger-head hilt golden blade, in the tent. He removed his general uniform and put on regular leather clothing. He grew up in the desert, today he was going to leave for good, never to return, he could not refrain from feeling sadness in his heart. He left the tent he considered to be home with a heavy heart. He saw the sky was getting darker, so quickly he went back to his mother's tent.

Lifting the tent cover his heart skipped a beat. His mother was gone; only two bundles lying on the ground. "Ma!" he called out, but nobody answered. He felt something was terribly wrong; he was about to go out of the tent to look for his mother when suddenly the curtain was lifted up, a bright light from a torch dazzled his eyes. General Chilaun was standing outside the tent, calling out, "The Great Khan summons the Golden Blade Consort!" Chilaun was accompanied by a great number of soldiers, all wielding spears.

Seeing this situation Guo Jing was really anxious. If he relied on his martial art, Chilaun would not be able to do anything to him, but he remembered his mother, "Mother must be captured by the Great Khan, how I could escape alone?" he thought. Thus he followed Chilaun walking toward the Golden Tent.

He saw two-thousand of the Great Khan's archers were arrayed in row after row outside the tent, all wielding long sabers or halberds. Chilaun said, "The Great Khan ordered me to bind you. Please forgive me for offending the Consort." Guo Jing nodded, put his hands behind his back, then in big strides he entered the tent.

It was very bright, almost like a daytime, with dozens of butter candles burning inside the tent. Genghis Khan looked very angry, he slapped a table and shouted, "I have never treated you badly; I raised you up since you were little; I also gave my beloved daughter to be your wife. Little thief, you dare to rebel against me?"

Guo Jing saw the embroidered pouch and the letter inside it were lying on the table; he knew he would die soon. Boldly he answered, "I am the Great Song's citizen. How can I obey your order to attack my own country?"

Hearing him boldly defying his words, Genghis Khan was enraged. "Take him out and execute him!" he shouted.

Guo Jing's hands were tightly tied behind his back, while eight soldiers wielding sabers guarded him; he was unable to resist, he shouted loudly, "You made an alliance with the Great Song to defeat the Jins; halfway there you renounced your own promise, you failed to keep your word, what kind of hero is that?"

Genghis Khan was livid; his foot flew out and kicked the table upside down, shouted loudly, "After the Jin is defeated my alliance with the Song will be completed. If I attack the south, how can you say I break my promise? Quickly behead him!"

A lot of the generals were actually good to Guo Jing, but seeing their Great Khan was in fury, nobody dared to say anything. Guo Jing did not say another word. He walked out of the tent in big strides.

Suddenly from the prairie Toulei came rushing in, riding on a horseback, shouting loudly, "Hold your blade!" His upper body was naked, while only wearing a pair of leather pants on his lower body. It looked like he was asleep when the report came; hastily he came over to plead for Guo Jing. He

rushed into the Golden Tent and said, "Father King, Guo Jing Anda has rendered a great service; he had saved your life as well as mine. Although he had committed a capital crime, you can't behead him."

Recalling Guo Jing's merits Genghis Khan called out, "Bring him back!" The guards took him back into the tent.

Genghis Khan was silent for half a day; he finally said, "You are loyal to the Song; what good does it bring you? Once you told me the story of Yue Fei; he was utterly loyal, serving his country, yet in the end he was executed anyway. You help me conquering the Song Dynasty, today in front of all these people I give you my oath that I am going to make you the king of the Song, then you can unify your river and mountain [jiang shan - meaning country]."

"I have never dared to rebel against the Great Khan," Guo Jing said, "But if you want me to sell my own country in exchange of my own riches and honor, then although a thousand blades and ten thousand arrows should pierce my body, I still cannot follow your order."

"Bring his mother here!" Genghis Khan ordered. Two of his guards took Li Ping out from the back of the tent.

Guo Jing saw his mother, "Ma!" he called out trying to approach her, but the guards raised their blades to block. "This matter is only known to us, mother and son, who could have leaked our secret?" Guo Jing thought.

Genghis Khan said, "If you will obey my command, you and your mother will enjoy abundant riches and glory; if not, your mother will be executed, that means you bring your own mother's death. You will become an unfilial son."

Guo Jing was intimidated by his words, he was terror-stricken, and could only lower his head without knowing

what to do.

“Anda,” Tuolei urged, “You grew up in Mongolia, you are no different than Mongolian people. The Song Dynasty is a corrupt government, colluding with the Jins in killing your father and forcing your mother to leave home. If not for my Father King’s benevolence, where would you be today? You and I are brothers who love each other so much; I cannot let you become an unfilial person. I do hope you will reconsider your decision; receive and obey the Great Khan’s command.”

Guo Jing looked at his mother, wanting to ask her opinion; but he recalled what his mother had taught him all this time he was growing up. He also remembered the pitiable condition of the people of the western countries Mongolia had conquered; how families were broken up and killed. It was truly a difficult dilemma he was facing.

Genghis Khan’s pair of tiger eyes stared at him, waiting for him to speak. The several hundreds people inside the Golden Tent held their breath; all eyes were trained toward Guo Jing.

“I ...,” Guo Jing said, moved forward one step, but did not continue.

“Great Khan,” suddenly Li Ping opened her mouth, “I am afraid this child doesn’t understand this matter clearly; why don’t I try to give him some advice?”

Genghis Khan was delighted, he quickly agreed, “Very well, quickly advice him.”

Li Ping stepped forward, pulled Guo Jing’s arm, took him to a corner of the Golden Tent, then they sat down together. Li Ping embraced her son tight in her bosom, then gently said, “Twenty years ago at the Ox Village in Lin’an prefecture, I

was expecting a child: you. It was snowing heavily that day, when Priest Qiu Chuji met your father. He presented a gift of two daggers; one he gave to your father, the other he gave to your Uncle Yang.” While saying that, she took the dagger from Guo Jing’s waist, and pointed to the two characters carved on the dagger’s hilt, ‘Guo Jing’. She said, “Qiu Daozhang gave the name ‘Guo Jing’ to you, and ‘Yang Kang’ to Uncle Yang’s child. Do you know the story behind those names?”

“Qiu Daozhang wanted us not to forget the disgrace of Jingkang,” Guo Jing answered.

“Right,” Li Ping said, “That Yang family kid regarded an enemy for a father, and as a result his body perished and his name disgraced. But it’s useless to talk about him. I just feel bad for your Uncle Yang; he was such a great hero, his own son has tarnished his illustrious name.” Sighing heavily she continued, “I have endured suffering and shame for many years; raising you in this bitter cold desert of the north, why did I do that? Would I raise someone who would sell his own country and become a traitor; so that your father in the underworld would be grieved and disgraced?”

“Ma!” Guo Jing almost shouted; tears flowing down his cheeks.

Li Ping was speaking in Chinese, Genghis Khan, Tuolei, and the other generals did not understand what she said, but they saw Guo Jing burst into tears; they thought Li Ping was afraid of death and she had succeeded in persuading her son, they were secretly pleased.

Li Ping continued, “Man can only live for a hundred years, it will pass in a flash; what’s the big deal about living or dying? As long as you live with an upright heart and keep your honor clean; then your life won’t be in vain. If other

people treat us badly, we don't need to repay their wickedness. Child, remember what I said!" She looked at Guo Jing intently for a long time; her face looked very tender. Finally she said, "Child, you must take a good care of yourself!" While saying that she raised the dagger and cut the ropes binding Guo Jing's hands; then straightaway turned the blade and thrust it into her own chest.

Guo Jing untied his hands, and rushed to snatch the dagger away, but he was too late. The dagger was extremely sharp, it had already entered her chest up to the hilt.

Genghis Khan was shocked, "Seize him!" he shouted. The eight guards did not dare to hurt the Consort; they threw their blades to the ground and pounced on Guo Jing.

Guo Jing's heart was full of sorrow; while holding his mother tight, he swept his leg and two guards were sent flying and tumbling down to the ground. His left elbow shot backwards, and with a 'crack' sound hit a guard on the chest, breaking his ribs.

Several generals shouted and stepped forward. Guo Jing dashed toward the back of the tent. His left hand pulled the rope that held the tent taut, and half of the golden tent collapsed, falling on top of the officers' heads.

Amidst the confusion he leaped up and out of the tent, still holding his mother tight. But the horn was sounded, officers and soldiers mounted their horses and pursued after him. Guo Jing was weeping and calling his mother, "Ma!" yet his mother did not answer; he felt for her breathing, but his mother had already died. Holding his mother's corpse he tried to take advantage of the dark and break through the camp, but everywhere he heard people shouting and horses neighing; then torches were lighted up, illuminating the camp like millions of stars illuminating the dark night.

He was nervous not knowing which way he should go; everywhere he looked he saw Mongolian officers and soldiers. Even if he were supernaturally brave, but he was only one man; how could he face tens of thousands Mongolian army by himself? If he were riding on his little red horse, then he could outrun all these people, but he was on foot carrying his mother. It was a million times more difficult to escape from danger.

He stopped crying and without saying another word ran forward as fast as he could. He thought that as long as he could reach the cliff, he could use his lightness kungfu to climb the cliff. Although Mongolian soldiers were many, nobody could crawl up the cliff. Hence he might evade their chase momentarily and thought about ways to escape.

While rushing forward suddenly he heard shouts coming from the front, a cavalry was coming, under the torch light he saw they were led by a red-face, white-bearded general; it was one of the four warriors, senior general Chilaun. Guo Jing leaned sideways to evade Chilaun's hacking saber. Instead of turning back to run away, he charged into the cavalry. The Mongolian soldiers were startled and shouted even louder.

Guo Jing stretched out his left hand, grabbing a 'shi zhang fu' [leader of a ten men unit] right leg; at the same time his right foot kicked the ground and he flew upwards. He landed on the horseback, put down his mother's corpse on the horseback. Without too much trouble he threw the 'shi zhang fu' to the ground while simultaneously snatched his spear.

The jump to the horseback, putting down his mother, throwing the 'shi zhang fu' down, and snatching his spear; four actions were executed in one swift and fluid motion. On the horseback he became like a tiger grew a pair of wings;

his legs squeezed the horse, and sweeping his spear he charged through the cavalry. Chilaun shouted his order and his troops turned back to pursue Guo Jing.

He managed to escape from the enemy, but the direction his horse was running was actually opposite to the direction to the cliff; the more the horse ran, the farther they became. Should he run directly to the south, or should he try to reach the cliff?

While he was still contemplating which way to go, another senior general, Bourchu had arrived with his troops. This time Genghis Khan had flown into a rage; he passed an order to capture Guo Jing at all cost. Group by group the cavalries were dispatched; thousand of riders ran quickly to the south, trying to block all passages leading to the south. Guo Jing outran the group led by Bourchu; his clothes and his horse were full of blood.

It was a good thing that the Great Khan ordered them to capture Guo Jing alive; otherwise the Mongolian soldiers would assault him with arrows. With arrows coming from all three directions, even if Guo Jing were supernaturally brave, how could he escape this tight siege?

Guo Jing felt his mother's body in his hand turned colder and colder; he struggled hard to hold his tears, urging his horse to keep running south. He had left the pursuers far behind, but the day was getting brighter, soon it would be dawn; while he was still in the center of Mongolian territory; ten thousands 'li's away from the Central Plains. With only a horse and a spear, how could he escape to his hometown?

Riding for a while, he saw the dust was rising from the ground ahead of him; a group of cavalry was coming his way. Guo Jing held the rein and turned to the east. But his

horse had been running for half a night, continuously supporting Guo Jing and his mother's body; suddenly its front legs gave up, it fell kneeling on the ground, unable to stand any longer. It was a very critical situation, yet Guo Jing still did not want to be separated from his mother's corpse. With his left arm holding her and his right arm wielding the spear, he charged into the incoming cavalry.

He saw the cavalry was getting very close; suddenly amidst the rising dust came a swishing noise, an arrow flew in and hit his spear. The arrow was very strong, Guo Jing's hand was shaken and the spearhead was broken. While he was still in shock, another arrow flew toward his chest. Guo Jing tossed the broken spear sideways and held out his hand in front of his body to catch the arrow. To his surprise, the arrowhead was already broken. He lifted his head only to see a general holding his rein and stopped in front of Guo Jing. It was the man who taught him archery; the Divine Archer Jebbeh.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing called out, "Are you going to take me back?"

"Absolutely," Jebbeh said.

Guo Jing thought, "In any way it will be difficult for me to escape this tight siege today. Rather than let others capture me, why don't I let Shifu have this merit?" Therefore, he said, "Very well, just let me bury my mother first."

Looking at four directions he saw toward his left a small mound. He carried his mother's body to that mound; dug the earth with his broken spear and lowered his mother gently into the hole. He saw the dagger in her chest, but he could not bear to take it out. He knelt on the ground and kowtowed several times before finally pouring the sandy soil on top of her body. He remembered his mother's bitter

suffering in raising him since he was a baby until he became an adult; and in the end he had to bury her just like this. He was overwhelmed with grief that he was unable to cry anymore.

Jebbeh dismounted his horse and kowtowed four times in front of Li Ping's grave. He stood up, then took his quiver, his bow, and his spear; and gave everything to Guo Jing. He also led his horse by the reins, and placed the reins in Guo Jing's hand, he said, "Go. I am afraid we are not going to see each other anymore."

Guo Jing was taken aback, "Shifu!" he called out.

"You dared to risk your life for me in the past; am I not a real man that I don't dare to risk my life for you?" Jebbeh said.

"Shifu, you are defying the Great Khan's order," Guo Jing said, "You will be in great danger."

"I have followed him attacking to the east and going to war in the west, my contribution is not small," Jebbeh said, "At most the Great Khan will beat me to half dead, he won't behead me. Just go, quick!"

Guo Jing was still hesitating; Jebbeh continued, "I am afraid my own troops would not want to listen to me, so I took the troops you led in the expedition to the west. Go ahead and asked them, whether they are greedy of riches and honor to turn you in?"

Leading his horse Guo Jing stepped forward; the cavalry dismounted their horses at once, and then knelt down on the ground, shouted, "Xiao Ren respectfully send General home to the south." Guo Jing raised his eyes to see, and they were indeed the officers and soldiers who faced death with him in the west. Guo Jing's heart was so moved. He

said, "I have offended the Great Khan, deserving a capital punishment. You let me go; if the Great Khan finds out, all of you will be in big trouble."

The soldiers replied, "General has treated us with benevolence as high as the mountain; we won't forget that."

Guo Jing sighed. He raised his hands to say goodbye to the troops, then with the spear in his hand he leaped to the horseback. He was about to move when suddenly the dust rose ahead of him, another group of cavalry came approaching.

Jebbeh, Guo Jing, and the troops' expression changed. Jebbeh thought, "I have deliberately defied Khan's order by letting Guo Jing go; but if I fight these troops, that would be a blatant rebellion." Yet he did not change his mind, "Guo Jing, go!" he shouted. However, from the incoming army came a loud shout, "Don't hurt the Consort!" Everybody was stunned. They saw the rushing army bore the Fourth Prince's banner.

Amidst the rising cloud of dust Tuolei appeared and arrived in a flash; turned out he was riding Guo Jing's swift little red horse. He held his rein and jumped down from the horseback, anxiously asked, "Anda, are you all right?"

"I am fine," Guo Jing replied, "Master Jebbeh is going to take me back to see the Great Khan." He was deliberately protecting Jebbeh; so that the Great Khan would not find out the real story.

Toulei cast a sidelong glance toward Jebbeh, he said, "Anda, take this little red horse and leave quickly." He also put a bundle on the saddle and continued, "Here is a thousand 'liang' of gold; we brothers will see each other again some other time."

They were both great warriors; in time like this there was no need to say another word. Guo Jing stood up and mounted his little red horse. "Tell Huazheng Meizi [little sister – term of endearment] to take a good care of herself. Tell her to marry another man, just forget about me."

Tuolei heaved a long sigh, "Huazheng Meizi will never agree to marry another. I think she is going to look for you in the south. At that time I will send somebody to escort her."

"No, don't come looking for me," Guo Jing hastily said, "Not to mention the world is big, but even if she can find me, that will only add to our agony."

Tuolei was silent; they looked at each other without saying anything. After half a day finally Tuolei said, "Just go, I will see you off for a while."

Two people rode fast to the south; very soon they have covered more than thirty 'li's. "Anda," Guo Jing said, "'Even if one sees someone off a thousand 'li's, in the end they must part', you can go back now!"

"Let me see you off some more time," Tuolei answered.

About ten more 'li's later, both men dismounted their horses and said their goodbyes; tears rolling down their cheeks.

Tuolei gazed at Guo Jing's back, which became smaller and smaller; it looked like a dark shadow on the vastness of the desert, finally disappeared on the southern horizon. He stood motionless for a long time, then sadly mounted his horse and headed back north.

End of Chapter 38.

Chapter 39 - Discerning Good From Evil

Translated by Frans Soetomo



It was actually Mount Hua's most dangerous place, called the 'to give one's life cliff' [she shen

ya]; whoever jumped from this place would certainly meet a cruel death. Huang Rong dashed forward to grab Guo Jing's clothes. Her hand pulled hard as she jumped over his shoulder and a moment later she was the one standing at the edge of the cliff.

Guo Jing rode his horse for several days, leaving the dangerous area, slowly heading south. The day was getting warmer, the grass looked longer; along the way he saw the remnants of war: broken walls and ruined homes, human bones scattered here and there. The sights, the smell ... Everything brought a dreadful and nauseating feeling in his heart.

One day he stopped to take a rest in a pavilion by the roadside. He saw these inscriptions on the pavilion's wall, "A poem from a Tang Dynasty man: 'Water trickles downward day by day, ultimately overpowering the cry of chicken and dogs. Thousand villages fell to become food to the wild animals. The people vanished in smoke to give way to the flowers.' My Central Plains' beautiful river and mountain unexpectedly fallen victim to violent battles. People turned into ashes as if the above poem was written for today's situation."

Looking at these lines of characters Guo Jing was entranced, sadness came creeping into his heart and he could not refrain from shedding some tears.

He had roamed this vast and boundless world, but actually did not know where he should go. Within just one short year his mother, Huang Rong, his five masters, the people that were dear to him had all died. Ouyang Feng had killed his masters and Huang Rong; he was going to find him and

seek revenge. But as soon as he thought about the words 'seek revenge', the tragic massacre of the people of Khoresm came into his mind. In order for him to avenge his father's death he had to kill so many innocent civilians, how could he have peace in his heart? It looked like this 'seeking revenge' matter was not necessarily a right thing to do.

Thinking about all other things, he came into this thought, "All my life I painstakingly trained myself in martial arts that finally I reached my current level, and then what? I can't even protect my own mother and Rong'er, then what use is my martial art skill? I wanted with all my heart to be a good person, but in the end who would be happy because of me? Mother, Rong'er, both died because of me. Huazheng Meizi has to suffer forever because of me. Truly the number of people who suffered miserably because of me is not a few."

"Wanyan Honglie and Muhammad were bad people. But what about Genghis Khan? He killed Wanyan Honglie; so I should say he is a good person. But then he ordered me to attack the Great Song. He took care of my mother and me for twenty years, but in the end he had caused my mother's death."

"Yang Kang and I became sworn brothers, but our hearts were a world apart from the start. Sister Mu Nianci is a good person, but why did her heart set on loving only Yang Kang? Tuolei Anda and I love each other, but when he leads the army attacking south and we meet each other on the battlefield, should he and I kill each other? No, no. Everybody has a mother, a mother who carries him for ten months, who painstakingly nurture and raise him up; how could I kill somebody's son and cause his mother to weep bitterly? He doesn't have a heart to kill me; I don't have a heart to kill him. However, shall I ignore the fact that he kills my Great Song's innocent people?"

“Training martial art is for beating and killing people, it looks like I spent twenty years of my life incorrectly; I studied and learned diligently, painstakingly; in the end all I can do is bringing harm to other people. If I knew it from the start, I wouldn’t train to have a better skill in martial art. But if I don’t learn martial art, then what should I do? I live in this world, in the end, what is my purpose of life? Decades from now, what will happen to me? Is it better to live longer, or to die sooner? Right now I have already had endless anxiety, if I live longer, won’t I have more anxiety? But if I die sooner, why would my mother give birth to me? Why would she endure hardship and suffering to raise me up?” Tossing and turning with these thought, the more he thought, the more confused he became.

For several days he could not eat during the day, and could not sleep during the night; he went back and forth in the wilderness pondering all these things.

“Mother and my benevolent masters all taught me to uphold justice and keep my words. Therefore, although I loved Rong’er dearly I could not ask the Great Khan to cancel our betrothal. But in the end, not only I drove mother and Rong’er to their injustice death, but did I make the Great Khan, Tuolei, and Huazheng happy? The Seven Heroes of Jiangnan, my seven masters, and benevolent master Hong, are all heroic people of honor, yet none of them ended up enjoying the fruit of their good deeds. Ouyang Feng and Qiu Qianren do not uphold justice and righteousness, yet they live free and unrestrained. Is there any justice in this world? Can ‘lao tian ye’ [the Heaven, God] really see?”

One day he arrived at a small town in Jinan prefecture, Shandong province. He stopped by a restaurant to drink some wine. He had just drunk three cups when suddenly a man rushed in, pointed his finger to Guo Jing and cursed

him, "Barbarian thief, you have destroyed my home and killed my family; I must kill you!" While saying that his fist flew toward Guo Jing's face.

Guo Jing was startled, he turned his left hand around and caught his hand, gently twisted it; and the man fell tumbling down. Apparently that man did not know martial art at all. Guo Jing did not have any intention to harm him; he felt really bad that he had caused that man to fall down and bleed from his head. Hastily he held out his hand to raise that man up, saying, "Brother, you must have mistaken me for others!"

That man was bawling and kept cursing him, "Barbarian thief!" Dozens more men came from outside and start kicking and hitting Guo Jing for no reason at all. After pondering about the dire consequences of using martial art, Guo Jing had made a decision not to harm others using his martial art skill. Besides, these people were neither known to him nor did they know any martial arts; they were attacking him randomly. Hence he only evaded to the east and dodged to the west, but did not fight back at all. However, there were more and more people coming in from outside; the restaurant was small, so against his will Guo Jing had to taste some fists and kicks nonetheless.

He was about to use his strength to shove his way out of the restaurant when suddenly somebody loudly called from outside, "Jing'er! What are you doing here?"

Guo Jing raised his head up and saw the person calling was wearing a Taoist robe, with a long white beard; it was none other than the Changchun Zi [Eternal Spring] Qiu Chuji. Guo Jing was delighted, "Qiu Daozhang [Taoist Priest Qiu]," he called, "These people are hitting me for no reason at all."

Qiu Chuji pushed his arms out and opened up a way for Guo Jing to escape; he pulled Guo Jing out of the restaurant. The people rushed out to attack them, but Qiu and Guo, two people faced them while moving backward step by step. Once outside Guo Jing whistled to call his red horse and not too long afterwards two people riding on one horse sped out of the town and disappeared into the wilderness.

Guo Jing again told about how those town people without any reason pounced on him and beat him. Qiu Chuji smiled, "You are dressed as a Mongolian; they thought you are a Barbarian Mongolian." Then he proceeded by telling Guo Jing how the Mongolians and the Jins had violent battles in the Shandong province. The local people had been under the Jin's oppression for a long time, they raised arm to help the Mongolians. Who would have thought that the Mongolian's officers and soldiers were as oppressive and tyrannical as the Jins were; they destroyed, they killed, they took captive and they plundered; they made the lives of the common people miserable beyond description. When a Mongolian army was passing through, the people did not dare to do anything, but if there was a lone Mongolian officer or soldier left behind, usually he would be killed by the people.

"Why did you let them beat you?" Qiu Chuji asked, "Just look at you, bruised and swollen all over."

Guo Jing heaved a deep sigh and then told him how Genghis Khan had issued a secret order to him to attack the south, and how his mother had died because of it. He told Priest Qiu everything.

Qiu Chuji was shocked, "If Genghis Khan is going to attack our Great Song, then we must go south immediately to inform the government to guard against this invasion," he said.

Guo Jing shook his head, "What good will that bring? The result would be corpses of officers and soldiers from both sides piling up as high as a mountain; innocent people's families being broken and killed."

"But if the Song perishes under the Mongolia, the common people will suffer even more," Qiu Chuji said, "An endless hardship!"

"Qiu Daozhang," Guo Jing said, "There are so many things I am not able to think through; I want to ask you to give me directions."

Qiu Chuji pulled his hand, led him to a big locust tree and took him sitting underneath it. "Speak to me!" he said.

Guo Jing immediately poured out what had been troubling his heart these past few days; how he felt that his skill in martial art only brought harm to other people. Finally he sighed and said, "Therefore, disciple has decided not to fight with anybody for the rest of my life. I wish I could forget everything I know about martial arts, only an old habit will always come back. I was careless today, and made someone bleed from his head."

Qiu Chuji shook his head, "Jing'er, your thinking is incorrect," he said, "Dozens of years ago, the Wulin world secret manual, the Nine Yin Manual, appeared for the first time. I don't know how many warriors of the Jianghu had died from fighting over this book. Afterwards at the Sword Meet of Huashan [Mount Hua] my master Chongyang Zhenren [Sage, lit. true/real man, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] had defeated everybody and took possession of the manual. Initially he intended to destroy the book, but later on he said, 'Water can carry the boat, but can also capsize it; be it fortune or calamity, in the end it depends on the person who uses it.' In the end he decided

to preserve the manual. Every talent in the world, whether it is 'wen' [literature] or 'wu' [martial art]; a strong army or a sophisticated device, not a single one of them does not benefit mankind; but the opposite is also true, every single one of them has the potential to bring calamity to the world. As long as you have a good heart, the stronger your martial art, the better it is for you. Why would you want to forget it?"

Guo Jing hesitated for a moment before saying, "What Daozhang said was not wrong, but among the current Jianghu heroes; the Eastern Heretic, the Western Poison, the Southern Emperor and the Northern Beggar have the strongest martial arts. Disciple has been thinking carefully; to reach the martial art level of these four experts one must undergoes difficulties, to the point of almost impossible, hardship and suffering. Yet even if one is able to endure all that, what good would that be for people other than oneself?"

Qiu Chuji was silent for a moment before answering, "Huang Yaoshi is an eccentric man; although outwardly he shows anger to the world and detests mundane affair, but in his heart there is an unspeakable bitterness. He acts as he pleases, he does not have any consideration toward other people. I won't take him as an example. Ouyang Feng does all kinds of evil; we don't need to talk about him. Emperor Duan is compassionate and benevolent; if he stayed on the throne he would be able to benefit the common people. It's a pity that because of personal resentment over a tiny, tiny affair he withdrew from society and lives in seclusion; he can't be regarded as great man with great courage. Only Hong Qigong, Hong Bangzhu [Clan Leader Hong] is left who is a great hero to uphold justice; always helping those in distress. He has my full admiration. The second Sword Meet of Mount Hua is right around the corner; I think there

might be someone who can exceed Hong Bangzhu in term of martial art. But I believe the people will elect him as the Number One in the Wulin World."

Hearing the four characters 'Sword Meet of Mount Hua', Guo Jing's heart shivered. "Is my benevolent master completely healed from his injury? Do you think the Senior is going to attend the meeting at Mount Hua?" he asked.

"After returning from the west, I have never seen Hong Bangzhu," Qiu Chuji said, "But whether he will take part in the Sword Meet or not, I think he will go to Mount Hua. Actually, I am passing through this place on my way over there; why don't you come with me to take a look?"

These past several days Guo Jing was very downhearted; he lost interest in, and loathed all kinds of, fighting. He shook his head and said, "Disciple is not coming, please forgive me."

"Where are you going?" Qiu Chuji asked.

Guo Jing awkwardly said, "Disciple does not know; I'll go wherever my feet lead me!"

Qiu Chuji could see that his face had lost its color, he looked so ghastly; like someone who was just recovered from a severe illness. Qiu Chuji was very concerned, but no matter how he persuaded, Guo Jing simply shook his head and did not say anything. Qiu Chuji thought, "He would normally listen to Hong Bangzhu; if he goes to Mount Hua, then master and disciple will see each other, his spirit might be aroused and be back to his old kind self. But how can I convince him to go?" All of a sudden a thought came into his mind, "Jing'er," he said, "If you really want to forget the martial art you have already learned, I think I might have a way."

“Really?” Guo Jing said.

“I know someone who had accidentally learned the Nine Yin Manual’s excellent martial arts,” Qiu Chuji said, “But later on he realized that he had broken his own promise, he had betrayed something entrusted to him; in the end he strived to forget the skills he had learned. If you really want to follow his example, you must talk to him.”

Guo Jing jumped up immediately. “Right!” he exclaimed, “It’s Zhou Botong, Zhou Dage [big brother Zhou]!” But suddenly he remembered that Zhou Botong was Qiu Chuji’s martial uncle, while he casually called him big brother; he felt he was usurping Qiu Chuji’s seniority by one generation. He could not restrain from feeling really awkward.

Qiu Chuji simply smiled slightly, he said, “Zhou Shishu [Martial Uncle Zhou] has never had any regard of anybody’s seniority; you can call him whatever you like, I don’t mind a bit.”

“Where is he?” Guo Jing asked.

“I am sure Zhou Shishu will not miss the meeting at Mount Hua,” Qiu Chuji replied.

“Very well,” Guo Jing said, “In that case I will come with Daozhang to Mount Hua.”

Two men traveled together to the nearest town ahead then Guo Jing took out some silvers and bought a steed for Qiu Chuji to ride. They went riding to the west, and in less than one day arrived at the foot of Mount Hua.

This Mount Hua was one of the five mountains called the Western Mountains; people of the ancient time equate these five mountains with five scriptures. They said Mount

Hua was like 'chun qiu' [spring and autumn period - 770-476 BC], possessed the same lethality as the Wei kingdom. Among the mountains in the world, the ruggedness of Mount Hua was matchless.

Two men arrived at the 'shan sun ting' [mountain grass pavilion] at the southern entrance of Mount Hua. Next to this pavilion they saw twelve big dragon rattans, so called because their trunks and branches intertwined each other resembled flying dragons.

Looking at these ancient twelve rattans with their branches rising up to the sky, suddenly the 'fei long zai tian' [dragon flies to the sky] came into Guo Jing's mind. Following the Nine Yin Manual principles, these twelve rattans formed different stances of the dragon postures, creating twelve grand stances where the move might be executed. From being lost in thought, suddenly he woke up with a start, "I was hoping I could forget the martial art I already learned, how I could think about creating a new move to defeat and to kill others? I have fallen too deep, truly I am incorrigible."

Suddenly Qiu Chuji voice was heard, "Mount Hua is our Taoist holy mountain; these twelve dragon rattans were supposedly planted by 'chen tuan lao zu', [ancestor Chen Tuan].

"Chen tuan lao zu?" Guo Jing asked, "Was he the deity who slept for many years without waking up?"

"Chen tuan lao zu was born toward the latter part of the Tang Dynasty," Qiu Chuji explained, "During the Five Dynasties period: Liang, Tang, Jin, Han, Zhou, every time he heard the kingdom changed ruler, he was always worried and not happy; so he closed his door and refused to come out. Hence the people said he was sleeping for many years.

Actually he was just troubled by the world's anxiety, that the common people always suffered hardships; that's why he was not willing to go out. Finally he heard 'Song Dai Zu' [the great ancestor of Song Dynasty] rose up to the throne; he laughed heartily and in his happiness he fell from the donkey's back, saying that the world henceforth would be peaceful. Song Dai Zu was kind and had a deep affection toward the common people; his contribution was truly not a few."

"If Chen tuan lao zu were born today, he would unavoidably close his door and sleep for exhausting years and tiring months," Guo Jing commented.

Qiu Chuji heaved a deep sigh and said, "Mongolians rule in the north, deliberately will invade the south. It's a pity the Song Dynasty's princes and ministers are muddle-headed idiots; they have eyes but cannot see the problem we are facing. But we are real men, although we realize we are helpless, still we need to fight. Even though Chen tuan lao zu was an honorable person, he hid himself whenever the world was in trouble; that was a bad example of chivalry."

Guo Jing silently agreed.

Two men had to leave their steeds at the foot of the mountain. They continued on foot; slowly climbing through the 'tao hua ping' [peach blossom plain], crossing the 'xi yi xia' [lit. rare barbarian box, I don't know what it is], climbing 'sha meng ping' [grassy dream plain]. The further they went, the more dangerous the terrain became. After reaching 'xi xuan men' [western mysterious gate] they had to ascend holding on to an iron chain. Utilizing their lightness kungfu, two men climbed up rapidly. After about seven 'li's, they reached the 'qing ping' [green plain]. Beyond this plain they saw a row of rocks that looked like

they were truncated. Toward the north of this wall there was a big rock blocking the pathway.

“This rock is called ‘hui xin shi’ [lit. turn-around heart stone],” Qiu Chuji said, “Beyond this stone the pathway is getting more rugged and dangerous than ever. Casual travelers are advised to turn back here.”

In the distant they saw a small stone pavilion. “That is the ‘du qi ting’ [gambling chess pavilion],” Qiu Chuji explained, “Legend has it that the Song Emperor, Song Dai Zu made a bet playing chess with Mister Xi Yi [the same ‘xi yi’ as in the paragraph above]. The Mount Hua was the stake. The Emperor lost, and ever since the Mount Hua territory is exempt from paying tribute.”

Guo Jing said, “Genghis Khan, the Khoresm King, the Great Jin Emperor, the Great Song Emperor; seemed like they are all gambling with this world as the stake.”

Qiu Chuji nodded. “Absolutely,” he said, “Jing’er, looks to me like you have done a lot of thinking lately. I can see the difference; you are no longer your muddle-headed-dumb-kid previous self.” Then he continued, “These emperors and generals view the world as their gambling stake; if they lose, not only they will lose the ‘jiang shan’ [lit. river and mountain – country/homeland], they will also lose their lives, as well as making the world a living hell for common people.”

Crossing the ‘qian chi xia’ [thousand-foot gorge], the ‘bai chi xia’ [hundred-foot gorge], they had to walk sideways. Guo Jing thought, “It will be very difficult to ward off if suddenly an enemy attack in this place.” He was just having this thought when suddenly someone shouted from ahead of them, “Qiu Chuji, we spared your life at the Misty Rain

Tavern [yan yu lou]; what are you doing climbing Mount Hua?"

Qiu Chuji hastily rushed ahead several steps until he reached a small cavity on the side of the cliff before he raised his head to see Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Lingzhi Shangren [lit. upper/above man, a respectful term to address Buddhist monk], and Hou Tonghai, four people standing at the end of the pathway.

When he climbed the mountain, Qiu Chuji had expected at some point to see Ouyang Feng, Qiu Qianren and other archenemies; he thought Zhou Botong, Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and the others would meet their match. But he had never expected that Sha Tongtian and the others had the guts to climb this mountain. Although he was standing on an open space, the terrain was extremely dangerous. If he was crowded by the enemy, chances are he would fall into the tens of thousands 'zhang's deep canyon below.

In this critical time he did not have time to think, with a 'shua' sound he pulled his sword and with 'bai hong jing tian' [bright rainbow across the sky] he ferociously attacked Hou Tonghai. Among these four enemies, Hou Tonghai was the weakest, but he was also the closest; Qiu Chuji's sword stance was precisely aimed to the weakest point of the enemy.

Hou Tonghai saw the sword was swift and fierce, he had no alternative, he leaned sideways to evade and lifted up his three-prong fork to block the sword. Peng Lianhu's judge pen and Lingzhi Shangren's copper cymbals made a converging attack with the intention of forcing Qiu Chuji to fall into the ravine below.

As Qiu Chuji's sword made contact with Hou Tonghai's three-prong fork, he transferred his energy to the tip of the

sword and borrowing the strength, his body soared above Hou Tonghai's head. Sparks flew everywhere as Peng Lianhu and Lingzhi Shangren's weapon hit a rock.

Sha Tongtian had lost an arm at the Temple of the Iron Spear; by this time his wound was completely healed. Seeing his 'shi di' [younger martial brother] fail to block the enemy, he executed the 'yi xing huan wei' [altering shape changing position] technique right in front of Qiu Chuji to prevent him from running away. Qiu Chuji's sword moved swiftly; Sha Tongtian only saw bright lights flashing around him, aiming his vital points. Sha Tongtian was dazzled and unable to fend off the sword; he was forced to move back several steps, giving Qiu Chuji an opportunity to dash forward.

Sha and Peng shouted loudly and pursued him. Qiu Chuji turned his sword around and launched several stances. At that moment Lingzhi Shangren arrived sweeping his cymbals. Three different types of weapons clashed.

Seeing Qiu Chuji's precarious condition Guo Jing should have gone forward and help, but he felt that people who resort to violence were very bad. He loathed watching both sides fought violently; turning his head, unwilling to watch, he continued his journey, holding on to a rattan branch. Unexpectedly the path was sloping down.

While strolling leisurely two thoughts were waging war inside his mind, "Shall I help Qiu Daozhang? Or shall I stick to my commitment of not fighting anybody anymore?" The more he thought, the more confused he became. He considered, "If Qiu Daozhang is killed by Peng Lianhu and the others, how can I not blame myself? But if I did help and struck Peng Lianhu and the others that they fell into the ravine below, do they really deserve to die?"

He walked farther and farther away until he could not hear the clashing sound of the weapons anymore. He sat leaning on a rock, deep in thought. After a long time suddenly he heard a noise from behind the pine tree next to him, and a man appeared. Guo Jing turned around to see that man had white hair, but ruddy face; turned out it was 'shen xian lao guai' [ginseng immortal old freak] Liang Ziweng. But Guo Jing ignored him; he still sat quietly lost in thought.

Liang Ziweng was startled, he knew Guo Jing's martial art had advanced greatly; early on he was not Guo Jing match anymore. Immediately he shrunk back behind the tree. A moment later he saw Guo Jing did not pursue, he also saw that Guo Jing looked to be absentminded, his eyebrows creased on a distressed face; he was mumbling indistinctly, like he was possessed by some kind of evil spirit. Liang Ziweng thought, "Today this kid looks so weird. Let me try provoking him." He did not dare to approach; he picked up a pebble and threw it toward Guo Jing's back.

Guo Jing heard the wind, but he simply leaned sideways to evade, and still did not pay any attention to Liang Ziweng. Liang Ziweng became bolder; he came out from behind the tree, came several steps closer, and called out in a soft voice, "Guo Jing, what are you doing here?"

"I am thinking," Guo Jing replied, "If I use martial art to fight someone, do I have a good reason for it?"

Liang Ziweng was stupefied and delighted at the same time, he thought, "This dumb kid has become crazier." He approached several steps closer and said, "Hurting people is a very bad thing, of course you don't have any reason to do it."

"You think so?" Guo Jing said, "I really hope I can forget all the martial arts I've learned."

Liang Ziwen saw Guo Jing's eyes were gazing into the horizon with a blank look on his face; slowly he came from behind Guo Jing's back. "I am also in the process of forgetting my own martial art, how about I lend you a helping hand to forget yours?" he softly asked.

"Fine," Guo Jing said, "What should I do?"

"Hmm, I have an idea," Liang Ziwen said. Both of his hands made a sudden movement and expertly grabbed two major acupoints: 'tian zhu' [sky pillar] on Guo Jing's neck and 'shen tang' [divine hall] on his back.

Guo Jing was shocked, he felt his whole body went numb and he could not move. With a wicked grin on his face Liang Ziwen said, "Let me suck the blood out of your body, then you will forget using your martial art ever again." Opening his mouth wide he bit into Guo Jing's throat and sucked with all his might. He remembered how this dumb kid had sucked the valuable blood of the viper he laboriously raised so this dumb kid's martial art had improved tremendously while his own did not make any progress; by sucking Guo Jing's blood he hoped he would gain some benefit while venting off his anger at the same time. Actually, it had been a long time since Guo Jing drank the viper's blood, that the effectiveness of the blood had long gone; but in his deep resentment he ignored that fact completely.

This sudden turn of event shocked Guo Jing; he felt a severe pain on his neck that he was seeing stars in his eyes. Hastily he tried to struggle free, but his two major acupoints were sealed by enemy, his whole body unexpectedly did not have the least bit of strength. He saw Liang Ziwen's pair of eyes was red, his face looked so scary; Guo Jing felt his bite was getting harder and harder. It felt like his throat was about to be cut, then his life would leave him for sure.

In desperation he did not have time to think whether it was appropriate to use martial art to resist the enemy or not; immediately he used the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone] to send out internal energy from his 'dan tian' toward the 'tian zhu' and 'shen tang' acupoints.

Both of Liang Ziwen's hands were holding Guo Jing extremely tight when suddenly he felt a surge of energy bursting out from within his victim's body through the two major acupoints, his hands shook and they could not help but slip. Guo Jing lowered his head and shrank his shoulder, and then using his waist's strength he struggled up. As a result Liang Ziwen's body was lifted up and flung away. With a hair-raising shriek he fell into the tens of thousands 'zhang's deep canyon below.

His scream reverberated on the canyon walls, creating a series of terrifying echoes seemingly coming from everywhere. Guo Jing was horrified; the hair behind his back rose up involuntarily. He was in a daze for half a day before he gradually calmed down. Absent-mindedly he caressed his injured neck and only then he remembered that he had accidentally killed a man using his martial art. But he thought, "If I did not kill him, he would kill me. If I don't have any reason to kill him, did he have any reason to kill me?" He stretched his neck trying to see into the valley below, but the canyon was so deep that he could not even see the bottom; did not know where Shen Xian Lao Guai's body could be.

Guo Jing sat on a rock. Tearing a piece of cloth from his robe he wrapped the wound on his neck. Suddenly he was startled by a 'bonk, bonk, bonk' noise; it sounded like a monster was coming out from behind the cliff. He was frightened; he turned his gaze to look, turned out it was a human. But this man stood with his head on the bottom and his feet on the top; with a stone in each hand. He used

those hands in place of his feet, and those 'bonk, bonk, bonk' noise was actually the sound of the stones knocking the mountain's stony pathway. Guo Jing was stunned; he squatted down to take a good look at that man's face, and he was even more surprised. That weird man was actually the Western Poison, Ouyang Feng.

Guo Jing had just received a surprise attack; seeing Ouyang Feng in this weird position he believed he was up to no good. Guo Jing retreated two steps, fully alert to guard against any potential attack. But Ouyang Feng only bent his arms and jumped on top of a big rock; standing upside down using his head as his feet, his arms stretched wide, resembled a stiff corpse.

Guo Jing's curiosity was piqued, "Mr. Ouyang, what are you doing?" he called out.

Ouyang Feng did not answer; seemed like his mind was someplace else and he did not even hear his question.

Guo Jing withdrew several more steps to make more distance between them. He raised his left hand in front of his chest to guard against Ouyang Feng's sudden attack; only then did he pay close attention of what Ouyang Feng was doing.

For about the time needed to drink a cup of tea Ouyang Feng stood upside down motionless. Guo Jing was more curious than ever; he wanted to see more clearly, so he stooped down and looked through his legs to see Ouyang Feng's face was sweating profusely; he looked in pain, like he was cultivating some strange internal energy. A moment later he stretched his arm horizontally, his body started spinning like a big top, turning faster and faster until his clothes created a strong gust of wind.

“He really is practicing martial art,” Guo Jing thought, “But this kind of martial art that requires upside down position is so strange.” Further he thought that a person who practice internal energy cultivation was usually vulnerable, probably because while circulating the energy within, the body itself devoid of any defense against outside circumstances. That was the reason usually somebody, be it his master or a friend with high level of martial art skill, would stay alongside to protect that person. Moreover, they would usually find a secluded place to avoid mishap. But strangely Ouyang Feng was practicing alone without anybody to accompany him; seemingly oblivious to outside interference. It was almost time for the second Sword Meet of Mount Hua; there would be many martial art experts in attendance, with more enemies than friends to Ouyang Feng; how could he be so bold as to practice martial art alone in this place? At this time, not to mention an expert in martial art, if even an ordinary person without any martial art skill would hit or kick him, he would certainly suffer a severe internal injury.

In Guo Jing’s eyes Ouyang Feng was like a sacrificial animal on the table, ready to be butchered. If Guo Jing did not seek revenge now, what was he waiting for? Only he had just killed Liang Ziweng; he had this heavy guilty feeling in his heart. He only moved forward a couple of steps then stood still, unable to kill Ouyang Feng.

Ouyang Feng practiced for about the time needed to boil tea; he gradually slowed down until his body stopped spinning. Finally he stretched his arms and grabbed the rocks, then ‘bonk, bonk, bonk’ he went back to where he was coming from.

Guo Jing’s curiosity was really piqued, he wanted to know where Ouyang Feng was heading, and what kind of

marvelous martial art he practiced by standing upside down; therefore, quietly Guo Jing followed after him.

Ouyang Feng walked using his hands, surprisingly it was not any slower than walking with his feet. He climbed to a hill peak, going higher and higher. Guo Jing followed not too far behind until they arrived at the jade-green lush, beautiful peak. He saw Ouyang Feng was heading straight into a cave and stopped in front it. Guo Jing hid himself behind a big rock; suddenly he heard Ouyang Feng sternly said, “Ha hu wen ying, xing er ji jin, si gu er. Your explanation is not right; I could not practice appropriately.”

Guo Jing was startled, at first he thought that those three lines were the Sanskrit lines from the Nine Yin Manual; but it sounded a little bit different. And then he immediately remembered that those were the lines he deliberately altered per his benevolent master Hong’s instruction on the boat. But why did Ouyang Feng suddenly recite those lines? Whom did he speak to?

He heard a crisp and clear female voice came out from the cave, “Your martial art is not adequate, of course you can’t practice appropriately. How could I explain incorrectly?” Guo Jing was so surprised that he almost cried out; it was the voice Huang Rong for whom he day and night mourned with grief. Didn’t she get killed in the desert? Was he dreaming? Was he in heaven? Or perhaps because of his deep affection he thought it was Huang Rong’s voice?

“I have practiced according to what you said, no mistake about it, but why did my ‘yi ren mai’ [appointed arteries] and ‘yang wei mai’ [positive dimension arteries] unexpectedly flow in reverse?” Ouyang Feng asked.

That female voice answered, “You didn’t want to wait, your strength is wanting.” This voice was clearly Huang Rong’s

voice, Guo Jing had no doubt whatsoever. He was so surprised and happy at the same time that he became giddy and faltered, almost lost his conscience. Because of this excitement the wound on his neck was broken, blood seeped through the wrapped cloth; but he did not seem to notice it.

He heard Ouyang Feng turn angry, "By noon tomorrow the sword meet will start; how can I practice leisurely? Quickly translate the whole manual for me, don't try to mess with me."

At last Guo Jing understood why Ouyang Feng practiced internal energy cultivation right there; turned out he was anxious about the sword meet and wanted to get a quick result. He heard Huang Rong laugh, "You have made an agreement with my Jing Gege; he would spare your life three times in exchange of you not compelling me against my wishes. You have to wait until I am happy enough to teach you."

Hearing her say the word 'my Jing Gege' a sweet, happy feeling flooded Guo Jing's heart. He was almost unable to refrain from leaping out and shout his delight.

Ouyang Feng coldly said, "This is important, my business today takes precedence over all agreements I made in the past." After he said that, he moved his arms, flexed his body and stood right-side up. Then he walked toward the cave in big strides.

"You are shameless!" Huang Rong called out, "I am not going to teach you!"

Ouyang Feng grinned wickedly, "I want to see if you are going to teach me or not," he said in low voice.

Guo Jing heard Huang Rong cry out, "Aiyo!" then he heard Ouyang Feng's cold laugh, followed by a sound of ripping clothes. At a moment like this Guo Jing did not have any time to think whether it was appropriate to fight anybody using his martial art; he leaped out and shouted, "Rong'er! I am here!" With the left palm guarding in front of his body he rushed into the cave.

Ouyang Feng's left hand was grabbing Huang Rong's bamboo stick, while his right hand was just about to grab her left arm. Huang Rong launched the 'bang tiau lai quan' [carrying a skin-diseased dog on a stick] by slanting her stick in front of her body and with a jerk pulled the stick from Ouyang Feng's hand. Ouyang Feng shouted and was about to continue his attack when suddenly he heard Guo Jing's voice outside.

Ouyang Feng was the grand master of his martial art school; he had never broken his words to anybody. This time it was in his desperation that he used force against Huang Rong; when suddenly Guo Jing arrived. His face turned beet red, he was ashamed of breaking his own agreement. He flicked his sleeve to cover his own face then fast as lightning he darted through Guo Jing's side, went out of the cave in a hurry and in a moment not even his shadow was to be seen.

Guo Jing rushed forward to grip Huang Rong's hands, he called out, "I almost died thinking about you!" He was so agitated that his whole body shivered.

Huang Rong pulled her hands out and coldly said, "Who are you? Why are you holding my hands?"

Guo Jing was stunned. "I ... I am Guo Jing. You ... you are not dead. I ... I ..." he stuttered.

"I don't know you!" Huang Rong cut him off; and then she went out the cave.

Guo Jing followed her outside, repeatedly bowing in front of her. "Rong'er, Rong'er, please listen to me!" he begged.

"Hmm," Huang Rong snorted, "Do you think you can call Rong'er's name just like that? What are you?"

Guo Jing opened his mouth wide, but did not know what to say.

Huang Rong looked at him; she saw he was rather thin, his face haggard; for an instant she felt sorry for him. But immediately she remembered how he had dumped her over and over; her anger flared. She took a step forward.

Guo Jing was really anxious, he pulled her sleeve and said, "Please listen to me."

"Speak!" Huang Rong said.

"I saw your golden hair band and black sable fur coat on the marsh, I thought you ..." Guo Jing said. But Huang Rong cut him off again, "Very well, you wanted me to listen to you, and I did!" She pulled her sleeve and walked away.

Guo Jing felt awkward and anxious at the same time. He knew how exceptionally mule-headed Huang Rong could be; he was afraid he might lose her again but he did not know how to express himself. Seeing her sleeve floating while she was climbing the mountain, he had no choice but silently follow.

When she came across Guo Jing earlier, Huang Rong was overwhelmed with mixed feeling. She recalled how she deliberately threw Ouyang Feng from her trail by leaving her golden hair band and her black sable fur coat on the marsh. Then heartbroken she headed back to the east. Her intention was to go back to the Peach Blossom Island to see her father; unfortunately when she reached Shandong she

fell sick with nobody to care for her. On her sickbed, while her body was either feverishly hot or cold, she lamented the fact that Guo Jing was a fickle lover; she regretted that her parents had given birth to her that now she had to endure pain and sufferings. When she recovered from her illness she came across Ouyang Feng on the southern Shandong road; and was compelled to follow him to Mount Hua to explain the manual to him.

Looking back to the past she hated everything that had happened. She heard Guo Jing was following her closely. When she walked quickly, Guo Jing also walked quickly; when she slowed down, Guo Jing also slowed down. After walking for a while she turned around abruptly and shouted, "Why are you following me?"

"I will forever follow you, I will never leave you as long as I live," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong sneered, "You are the Great Khan's son-in-law, what do you want from me, a poor little girl?"

"The Great Khan has caused my mother's death, how can I become his son-in-law?" Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong was angry, her entire face turned red, "Good! I thought you still have a heart for me. Turned out the Great Khan has kicked you out! Now that you are not the Master Consort anymore you come looking for the poor little girl. Am I that cheap that you can bully me as you wish?" Speaking to this point she could not control her anger any longer and broke in uncontrollable sobs.

Seeing her bursting in tears Guo Jing was flabbergasted. He wanted to say some comforting words, but he was tongue-tied, did not know what to say. After stayed silent for half a day he finally opened his mouth, "Rong'er, I am here. You want to hit me or kill me; you can do what you want."

"Why would I want to hit you or kill you?" Huang Rong asked mournfully, "Let's just say that we have known each other in vain. Please, I am asking you, stop following me."

Seeing she was not willing to forgive him, Guo Jing's countenance paled. With a trembling voice he asked, "What do I have to do to make you understand what's in my heart?"

"Today you are good to me, but if tomorrow you see Huazheng Meizi or Huazheng Jiejie [elder sister], you will immediately shove me away from your brain," Huang Rong said, "Only if you die in front of me will I believe what you said."

The blood in Guo Jing's chest boiled; he nodded and turned around, walked in big strides toward the cliff nearby. It was actually Mount Hua's most dangerous place, called the 'she shen ya' [to give one's life cliff]; whoever jumped from this place would certainly meet a cruel death.

Knowing his strong-willed temper well, Huang Rong realized Guo Jing was capable of doing what he said he would do. Hastily she dashed forward to grab his clothes. Her hand pulled hard and she jumped over Guo Jing's shoulder that a moment later she was the one standing at the edge of the cliff. She was angry and anxious at the same time; with tears in her eyes she said, "Fine! I know you don't care about me one bit. I spoke thoughtless words out of anger and you didn't miss that opportunity. I am telling you: you don't need to get angry with me; just don't see me anymore."

Huang Rong's body trembled, her face was snow-white; she stood on the edge of the cliff, leaning against ice-covered rock. She looked like a white 'cha hua' [camellia?] gently swaying in the wind.

Because he did not care about his own life, Guo Jing had exerted his strength to jump into the canyon below; but now seeing Huang Rong on the cliff edge he was afraid she might lose her footing. "Come over here," he hastily said.

Huang Rong could hear the affection in his voice, she was unable to restrain from feeling sad; she cried, "Who wants to hear your fake words? I was sick in Shandong, nobody cared for me; you didn't even come looking for me. I was captured by that old scoundrel Ouyang Feng and was unable to escape; you didn't come to rescue me. My mother did not want me; she died and left me to fend for myself. My father did not want me; he did not come looking for me. Worst of all, you obviously did not want me either! There is nobody in this world wants me, nobody loves me!" While saying that she stomped her feet and cried loudly; sounded like she was releasing all anger, sadness, and frustration pent-up for several days.

Guo Jing's heart was overwhelmed with love and affection, yet he realized what she said was not wrong; the more he listened to her, the more he hated himself.

A cold wind blew, Huang Rong felt cold, her body trembled a little bit. Guo Jing took out his outer coat and was about to drape it across her shoulder when suddenly someone shouted from the side of the cliff, "Who has such guts, dared to bully my Miss Huang?" A man with white beard and long hair appeared, climbing up the cliff. It was none other than the Old Urchin Zhou Botong.

Guo Jing's attention was focused on Huang Rong; he did not care who came toward them. Huang Rong was not in the mood to joke around, she shouted, "Old Urchin, I told you to kill Qiu Qianren. Where is his head?"

Zhou Botong giggled, he did not know how to answer her; so before she pursued further, he tried to shift the blame, "Miss Huang, who made you angry? The Old Urchin will vent your anger for you."

Huang Rong pointed her finger to Guo Jing, "Who else if not him?" she said.

Zhou Botong only knew he had to win Huang Rong's heart, so without saying anything his hand moved; once with the back of his hand, then another with his palm, 'Slap! Slap!' he whacked Guo Jing's ears twice.

Guo Jing's mind was someplace else, he did not guard against any attack; the Old Urchin's hand was rather heavy, Guo Jing's vision turned black and his cheeks were swollen red.

"Miss Huang, is that enough?" Zhou Botong asked, "If not enough I will beat him some more."

Seeing Guo Jing's face was swollen with red five-finger print on each cheek, Huang Rong's anger turned into affection; and her affection toward Guo Jing turned into anger toward Zhou Botong. "I am angry at him, what does it have to do with you? Who told you to beat him up?" she angrily said, "I told you to kill Qiu Qianren, why didn't you do what I told you?"

Zhou Botong stuck out his tongue, could not answer her question; he said in his heart, "Turned out in wanting to beat a horse fart the Old Urchin has beaten the horse's hoof instead." In that difficult situation he suddenly heard from behind the cliff some noise of weapons clashing and indistinct voices of people fighting. He thought if he did not slip away right now, he would not get another chance; he called out immediately, "Most probably that old Qiu Qianren has arrived. I am going to kill him at once." Before he

finished speaking, he had disappeared behind the cliff in a flash.

Actually, if it was really Qiu Qianren, Zhou Botong would not dare to even come near to him. That day Zhou Botong blindly fought with Qiu Qianren, Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing inside the stone house in the western region; Guo Jing escaped and Ouyang Feng followed not too long afterwards. Then Qiu Qianren finally found an opportunity to run away. Zhou Botong did not give up chasing him until Qiu Qianren was exhausted. Qiu Qianren was furious and desperate; he was the clan leader of a big clan in Wulin world, and he was forced to run away from the enemy, he felt really humiliated. He thought he would be better off killing himself rather than falling into the enemy's hands and suffer further humiliation. He caught a glimpse of several vipers on the sand and stone by the road side. He knew this kind of viper was very poisonous; once he got bitten, the whole body would be numb immediately and he would die without too much pain. Therefore, he caught one viper and held it by pinching the snake at seven inches from the head; he called out, "Zhou Botong the old thief, look here!"

He was about to let the viper bite his own hand; but who would have thought that Zhou Botong was extremely afraid of snakes that he cried out, turned around and ran away. Qiu Qianren was startled, but after half a day, he realized Zhou Botong was afraid of his snake. Unexpectedly the situation was reversed to his benefit. With his left hand he caught another viper, and shouted loudly he gave Zhou Botong a chase.

Zhou Botong was terrified, he ran like crazy. Qiu Qianren was known as the 'tie zhang shui shang piao' [iron palm floating on the water]; his lightness kungfu was superior from Zhou Botong's. If he was not scared of Zhou Botong, he would have caught up with him early on.

Two men chasing each other noisily until the day turned dark. Zhou Botong ran with all his might, Qiu Qianren was actually looking for an opportunity to escape; he was secretly amused and pretended to chase Zhou Botong seriously. On the second day Zhou Botong found a horse which he quickly mounted and rode back into the east; afraid that Qiu Qianren might overtake him.

Seeing Zhou Botong sneaked out, Huang Rong cast a sidelong glance toward Guo Jing, sighed, and lowered her head without saying anything.

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing called.

“Hmm,” Huang Rong lightly uttered.

Guo Jing wanted to apologize and asked for her forgiveness, but realizing he was clumsy, he was afraid he might say something wrong and actually stirred up her anger. Two people stood side by side in the wind; suddenly Huang Rong sneezed. Immediately Guo Jing took his coat off and spread it over Huang Rong’s body. Huang Rong lowered her head, seemingly oblivious to him. Suddenly they heard Zhou Botong’s loud laughter, followed by his shouts, “Wonderful! Wonderful!”

Huang Rong held out her hand, touching Guo Jing’s hand, “Jing Gege, let’s take a look,” she said with a low voice. Guo Jing was so happy that tears rolled down his cheeks, he could not say anything. Huang Rong wiped out the tears with her sleeve; she laughed and said, “You have tears on your face; also fingerprints on your cheeks. People will say I beat you until you cry.” Her smile was so graceful; signifying the two of them had been reconciled. After this incident, actually the bond between them grew deeper.

Hand in hand the two of them walked down the cliff; they saw Zhou Botong was bending over with laughter, he

looked so proud of himself. Qiu Chuji stood on the side with a sword in his hand. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, Lingzhi Shangren, and Hou Tonghai, four people were seen with weapons in their hands in various postures; some were attacking, some were retreating or eluding an attack, but they all looked like motionless wooden statues. Turned out their acupoints had been sealed by Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong said, "The other day I made some pills from the dirt on my body and gave them to you. But you stinky thieves are actually crafty and smart; as soon as you found out they were not poisonous, you did not want to obey your grandfather anymore. Hmm, hmm ... how about today?"

Even though he managed to overpower these four men, but actually he had no idea what to do with them. Hence, as soon as he saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong walked over he said, "Miss Huang, I present these four stinky thieves to you!"

"What do I want to do with them?" Huang Rong said, "Hmm, you don't want to kill them, you also don't want to release them. You subdued these four stinky thieves, yet don't have any idea what to do with them. Call me 'Good Elder Sister' three times, I will teach you what to do."

Zhou Botong was delighted; immediately he called, "Good Elder Sister!" three times; each time he added a cupping of his fists.

Huang Rong pursed her lips and laughed. Pointing her finger to Peng Lianhu she said, "Search his pocket."

Zhou Botong immediately complied; from Peng Lianhu's body he took out a ring with poisonous needle on it, and two bottles of antidotes.

"He had once used this needle to prick your Martial Nephew Ma Yu, now prick him several times with that same needle," Huang Rong said.

Peng Lianhu and the others could hear everything clearly, they were so frightened that they felt their souls were leaving their bodies; but their acupoints were sealed, they could not move. They felt severe pain since each of them was pricked several times by Zhou Botong.

"The antidote is in your hand, whatever you want them to do, I want to see if they will dare to defy," Huang Rong said.

Zhou Botong was delighted; he rubbed some dirt from his body and mixed them with the antidote, he made some pills from the mixture and gave the pills to Qiu Chuji. He said, "You take these four stinky thieves as prisoners; take them to Mount Zhongnan, imprison them at the Chongyang Palace for twenty years. If they behave well along the way, give each of them one of my wonder pill; otherwise let them enjoy the poison. This is called taking consequences for their own actions. Show no mercy!"

Qiu Chuji bowed and complied.

Huang Rong laughed, "Old Urchin, what you said was very reasonable. I haven't seen you for a year and look how far you have progressed!"

Zhou Botong was very pleased with himself, he unsealed Peng Lianhu and the others' acupoints and said, "You go to the Chongyang Palace, stay there meditating your lives for twenty years. If you are really willing to repent, you might still be able to live as good people in the future. But if you don't want to repent, hmmm ... just know that our Quanzhen people are experts in killing people without batting an eye; we can torture without creasing an eyebrow; we can make you four stinky thieves into

meatballs and everybody can come and eat you. By that time I want to see what other trick you have in your sleeve?"

Peng Lianhu and the others did not dare to say anything; they only nodded and mumbled their consents. Qiu Chuji stifled his laughter; he bade Zhou Botong farewell, then with a sword in his hand herded four people walking down the mountain.

Huang Rong laughed, "Old Urchin, when did you learn to teach others? The front part of your speech made a lot of sense, but the latter part was a lot of nonsense."

Zhou Botong looked up to the sky and laughed; but suddenly he saw toward his left there was a flashing white light. Apparently it was a weapon reflecting the sunlight. "Well, what is that?" he called out.

Jing and Rong lifted their heads to see, but the flashing light was gone. Zhou Botong was afraid Huang Rong would raise Qiu Qianren's matter to him, he quickly said, "Let me take a look." And he flew to the nearby peak.

Jing and Rong two people had a lot to talk; they looked for a cave and poured out their hearts' content to each other. They talked and talked until the sun disappeared behind the western peak; still there were more to talk about. Guo Jing took some dried food from his backpack and gave some to Huang Rong.

Huang Rong ate and smiled, "That old scoundrel Ouyang Feng compelled me to explain to him the Nine Yin Manual; his source was the one you wrote randomly, so I also gave him a random explanation. He accepted it as real, and he trained hard on it for several months. I told him that this type of martial art has to be practiced upside down; he really turned head over heels training diligently. He

managed to reverse the whole body passage through which vital energy circulates. It was really not easy; his 'yin wei' [negative dimension], 'yang wei' [positive dimension], yin and yang; four main arteries are flowing in reverse. I don't know how he will look like if his entire system flows in reverse." Having said that she giggled.

Guo Jing was also smiling, "No wonder I saw him upside down in the middle of the road," he said, "It was really not easy to do."

"You are coming to Mount Hua; are you going to join the contest to win the title Number One Martial Artist of the World?" Huang Rong asked.

"Rong'er, why are you teasing me?" Guo Jing said, "I am here to ask Zhou Dage on how I can forget the martial arts I have already learned." And then he told Huang Rong everything he had pondered in his heart these past several days.

Huang Rong leaned her head slightly and thought for a moment. "Ay! It's good if we can forget it," she said, "The more we train, the stronger our martial art become; but actually our heart is not getting happier. I wish we were just like little children who don't know anything; nothing burdened our minds, no worry, no anxiety." She forgot that as one grew older, the more hardship and anxiety one would have to face; it had nothing to do with whether one's martial art skill was high or not.

Huang Rong continued, "I heard Ouyang Feng saying that tomorrow is the sword meet day; I am sure my father will come to this mountain. You said you are not going to join the contest; how about we think of something to help my father win the title?"

“Rong’er,” Guo Jing said, “It’s not that I don’t want to help you, but I think in term of conduct, Benevolent Master Hong is superior to your father.”

Originally Huang Rong was leaning against Guo Jing’s body, but as she heard him saying her father was not good, she pushed him away in anger. Guo Jing was startled, he was confused. But suddenly Huang Rong laughed, “Hmm, actually Benevolent Master Hong’s treatment to us was not bad. Let’s just not help any of them, what do you think?”

“Both your father and Benevolent Master Hong are honorable warriors; they won’t like it if we secretly help them,” Guo Jing said.

“Fine! Now you are saying that I am sly and crafty, that I am a wicked traitor coward?” Huang Rong said pulling up her face.

“I am sorry,” Guo Jing said, “I am a fool, always say wrong things and provoke you to anger.” His face looked really terrified.

Huang Rong stifled her laughter, “I don’t know how many more times I am going to be mad at you.”

Guo Jing was perplexed; he scratched his head and looked at her with blank expression.

“If you don’t dump me anymore, we will have many days to be together. I really don’t care how many more times you are going to say stupid things,” Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing was ecstatic, he gripped her hands tight and earnestly said, “How can I dump you? How can I?”

“It was because the princess didn’t want you that naturally you have no choice but looking for me, a poor little girl,” Huang Rong said.

What Huang Rong said had brought back a flood of sad memories into Guo Jing's mind; he remembered his mother's tragic death in the desert, he looked so dispirited and was silent. It was a new moon, silver light like water shone on them. Huang Rong saw his dejected countenance and realized she had offended him deeply; she quickly tried to change the subject. "Jing Gege, let us not talk about past matters. Being together with you like this makes my heart so happy. How about I let you kiss my cheek?"

Guo Jing's entire face turned red; indeed he did not dare to kiss her. Huang Rong flashed a captivating smile; she was fully aware that she had embarrassed both Guo Jing and herself, so she changed the subject again, "On the sword meet tomorrow, who do you say will win?" she asked.

"That is really difficult to say," Guo Jing replied, "I wonder if Reverend Yideng is coming?"

"The reverend has entered emptiness; he would not want to fight over empty reputation," Huang Rong reasoned.

Guo Jing nodded his agreement, "I think so too. Your father, Benevolent Master Hong, Big Brother Zhou, Qiu Qianren and Ouyang Feng, five people; each one is the grandmaster of their respective school, each one has their own unique skill. I am just wondering if Benevolent Master Hong has recovered from his injury. Can his skill level back to where it was?" Remembering his master Guo Jing was saddened.

"Reasonably speaking, the Old Urchin's martial art is the strongest," Huang Rong said, "However, if he does not use the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual, then he is still inferior to the other four."

Two people talked until Huang Rong felt tired; then she leaned on Guo Jing's bosom and fell asleep. Guo Jing was also weary and was dozing off when suddenly he heard

footsteps approaching. Two dark shadows, one in front of the other, were rushing over the cliff. Those two people's clothes were fluttering in the wind, they were running very fast. From their footwork, looked like the one in the front was the Old Urchin Zhou Botong, and the one pursuing him was surprisingly Qiu Qianren. Guo Jing did not know that Qiu Qianren had used vipers to scare Zhou Botong off; he was baffled, in the western region Qiu Qianren was running away for his life because of Zhou Botong, how come the situation was reversed now? Lightly he nudged Huang Rong and whispered in her ear, "Look!"

Huang Rong raised her head and saw under the moonlight Zhou Botong eloped to the east and escaped to the west; did not dare to face the enemy at all. Zhou Botong was heard shouting, "Old thief surnamed Qiu, I have somebody here who is an expert in catching viper; you'd better run away as quick as you can!"

Qiu Qianren laughed, "Do you think I am a three-year old kid?" he said.

"Guo Xiongdi [Brother Guo], Miss Huang! Come and help me, please!" Zhou Botong shouted.

Guo Jing was about to leap out, but Huang Rong pushed his chest back, "Don't move!" she hissed.

Zhou Botong had run around in circles yet did not see Jing and Rong two people come out, he started to curse, "Stinky Kid, Crafty Girl, if you don't come out, I am going to curse your ancestors to the eighteenth generation."

Huang Rong stood up and laughed, "I don't want to come out, curse if you can."

Zhou Botong saw the vipers in Qiu Qianren's hands lifted their heads high with their tongues stuck out; he was so

scared that his knees turned into jelly. "Miss Huang, please come, please come. What about if I curse my own ancestors to the eighteenth generation?" he begged.

Qiu Qianren was shocked to see Jing and Rong two people were standing nearby. Quickly he cooked up some ideas to slip away; otherwise if those three people ganged up against him, definitely things would not go well for him. Tomorrow would be another story; he would fight each of them on a one-to-one battle, he was not afraid of any of them. He started to move his feet, but before running away he flung the vipers toward Zhou Botong's face.

Zhou Botong wielded his sleeve in panic, he stepped aside to elude; suddenly there was a light plopping sound and he felt something cold fell on his neck, straight through his collar into his back. That something wiggled and bounced around inside his clothes; it felt slippery. He was so scared, it felt like his soul was leaving his body. "I am dying, I am dying!" he cried. He did not dare to put his hands into his clothes to pull the 'snakes' out; he only jumped around wildly. Suddenly he felt the 'snake' bit him in the chest; he thought he really died this time, his whole body tingled with numbness and he fell down to the ground.

Jing and Rong two people were shocked, they quickly leaped forward to help. Seeing Zhou Botong suddenly fall down, Qiu Qianren was also surprised; he was about to seek a way to go down the mountain when suddenly a black shadow appeared from among the trees. That shadow coldly said, "Old thief Qiu, today you can't run away anymore."

That person's back was facing the moon, so Qiu Qianren could not see that person's face clearly. Qiu Qianren felt a chill creep up his back. "Who are you?" he barked.

Zhou Botong was lying on the ground, bedazzled. He felt he would soon be gone to the underworld; but suddenly he felt someone helped him up. "Master Zhou, don't be afraid, that is not a snake," he heard that person said. Zhou Botong was startled, he quickly stood up, but that cold thing on his back started to bounce around again; he jumped around and shouted madly, "It is biting me, it's a snake, it's a snake!"

"It's a 'jin wa wa' [golden baby doll, see Chapter 29] fish, not a snake," that person said. By now Jing and Rong two people could see clearly that person's appearance; turned out it was the Fisherman from the Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and Scholar, four main disciples of Reverend Yideng. They saw him stretching out his arm and took a 'jin wa wa' from Zhou Botong's clothes.

Turned out that fisherman saw a pair of 'jin wa wa' in a creek nearby; he caught them and kept them in his bosom. One of them slipped and jumped high into a tree; as luck had it, it fell down inside Zhou Botong's collar. That 'jin wa wa' did not bite, but Zhou Botong was so scared of snakes that he imagined this cold and slippery thing was actually a viper biting his back. If the Fisherman was one step late, Zhou Botong might pass out of fright.

Zhou Botong opened his eyes and saw the fisherman; but he was still in shock. He knew he had met this person before, but he could not remember who it was. He turned his head to see Qiu Qianren was walking step-by-step backward, while the black shadow in front of him walked step-by-step forward, slowly approaching. Zhou Botong was a little bit relaxed but then he was startled and frightened out of his wits; he saw clearly that the black shadow was precisely the Concubine Liu Ying Gu from the Dali country's royal palace.

Qiu Qianren was led to believe at the present time only Zhou Botong's martial art was superior to his. If he managed to scare Zhou Botong away with his snakes, then on the sword meet the next day he was certain he would have a great chance to come out the winner. Unexpectedly on the eve of the sword meet Ying Gu appeared. That day on the 'qing long tan' [green dragon shore] she madly fought him; he thought that if this granny entangled him in another fight while his enemies were standing on the side; his life would be in grave danger. But then he heard she hissed with a throaty voice, "Give me back my son's life!"

Qiu Qianren's heart turned cold; he thought that that night when he entered the royal palace and injured her son in his attempt to force Emperor Duan to waste his strength he had disguised himself carefully. Who would have thought that the emperor did not save the child's life, and now she had somehow learned the truth? He forced a smile and said, "Crazy Granny, why are you bothering me?"

"Give me back my son's life!" Ying Gu called out.

"What son?" Qiu Qianren asked, "Your son died, it has nothing to do with me."

"Hmm, that night I did not see your face, but I remember your laughter," Ying Gu said, "You laugh, now! Laugh! Laugh!"

Qiu Qianren saw her stretching both hands to pounce on him; he withdrew two steps, slightly leaned his body to the side, then his left palm slapped his right, and his right palm swept diagonally to strike Ying Gu's abdomen. It was the fiercest one of his thirteen stances Iron Palms, called the 'yin yang gui yi' [negative and positive converge into one].

Ying Gu realized the fierceness of this attack; she used the Loach Maneuver to evade. Who would have thought that

the enemy's strike was so swift that before she could even move her feet, his palm was already less than half a foot from her body. Ying Gu felt a stab of pain in her heart; knowing that her hope of seeking revenge was shattered. Disregarding his palm, she jumped forward with the intention of grabbing his body so that both of them would fall down into the canyon below. Suddenly she heard a gust of wind and a fist cut like a knife in front of her. Just before his palm reached its target, Qiu Qianren was forced to retract his arm and parry that incoming fist. He was angry, "Old Urchin, it's you again!"

When Zhou Botong saw the danger threatening Ying Gu, he used the skill he learned from the Nine Yin Manual to its fullest extent to defeat the Iron Palm stance. Zhou Botong did not dare to look straight to Ying Gu; putting his back to her he said, "Ying Gu, you are not this old scoundrel's match. Quickly go! I will go too!"

He was about to fly down the mountain when suddenly Ying Gu called out, "Zhou Botong, why don't you avenge your son?"

Zhou Botong was dumbstruck. "What? My son?"

"Exactly," Ying Gu said, "Your son is killed by Qiu Qianren."

Zhou Botong still did not know that his affair with Ying Gu had resulted in their having a child. His mind was muddled; he was at a loss. He turned his head to see that there were several more people standing next to Ying Gu; other than Guo Jing and Huang Rong, there were Reverend Yideng and his four disciples.

At that time Qiu Qianren had walked away from the edge of the cliff less than three feet, suddenly he saw in front of him a group of formidable enemies while the terrain they were on was really dangerous. He knew he was facing a grave

danger. He clapped his hands and boldly said, "I am climbing the Mount Hua to fight over the 'Number One Martial Artist in the World' title. Hmm, hmm ... all of you gang up to get rid of a powerful opponent. It's truly despicable!"

Zhou Botong thought what this old thief said was reasonable, he said, "All right, I am going to wait until after the sword meet tomorrow, then I am going to take your dog life."

Ying Gu angrily called out, "I want to seek revenge, how can I wait until tomorrow?"

Huang Rong also said, "Old Urchin, toward a person with a good faith we speak with a good faith; toward a deceitful person we speak deceitfully. Let us just get rid of him once and for all; I want to see what he is going to do."

Qiu Qianren face turned deathly pale, he realized his precarious situation; but suddenly he got an idea, "Why do you want to kill me?" he called out.

The scholar replied, "You have done all kinds of evil deeds; everybody deserved to punish you."

Qiu Qianren lifted his face to the sky and laughed, "Speaking about martial art, you rely on numbers to bully me, certainly I am not your match. But speaking about right and wrong, good and evil, hey, hey ... Qiu Qianren is not alone. Whoever among you who has never killed anybody or done anything wrong; you can start punishing me. I will stretch out my neck to die in your hand; if I even creased my eyebrows; don't consider me a real man."

Reverend Yideng heaved a deep sigh, he was the first to step back then he lowered his head and sat cross-legged on the ground. Everybody else was deeply affected by Qiu

Qianren's words; each thought how they have committed countless errors in their lives. The Fisherman, Woodcutter, Farmer, and the Scholar were all high-ranking government officials of the Dali country; they had killed people. Although they were acting in enforcing the justice, in the end they had unavoidably made some mistakes.

Zhou Botong and Ying Gu looked at each other; they recalled the love and hate between them, and each felt ashamed. During the expedition to the west Guo Jing had killed numerous people, and he still blamed himself for that. Huang Rong remembered how she had made her father suffer, how she was being an unfilial daughter, and how many times she had deceived others; truly she had committed not a few faults of her own.

Qiu Qianren thought that his speech had silenced everybody, now it was a good time to slip away; therefore, with big strides he walked pass Guo Jing's left side to leave. He saw Guo Jing step aside to let him go; he exerted his strength and about to flee when suddenly a bamboo stick appeared from behind the mountain rock, blocking his way. This bamboo stick was so swift, Qiu Qianren's left palm flew up, his wrist made a turn, trying to catch the stick's end; but unexpectedly the stick poked three times swiftly, targeting three major acupoints on his chest. Qiu Qianren was shocked; he felt that the bamboo stick's incoming force was like a strong wind. He was unable to neither parry nor evade, and had no choice but step backwards and thus return to where he started, by the edge of the cliff. From behind the rock a dark shadow appeared with the stick in his hand, and then stood up in front of him.

"Shifu!" Guo Jing and Huang Rong cried out. The 'jiu zhi shen gai' [nine-fingered divine beggar] Hong Qigong had arrived.

“Stinky beggar, you come to meddle. It’s not time for the sword meet yet,” Qiu Qianren cursed.

“I came to get rid of a traitor. Who wants to have a contest with you?” Hong Qigong said.

“Fine! What a great hero and warrior [actually, here he used the term ‘da ying xiong da xia shi’ - I don’t know how to differentiate ‘ying xiong’ and ‘xia’] you are, and I am a traitor. You are a good man and have never committed any misconduct,” Qiu Qianren said.

“That’s correct,” Hong Qigong replied, “During my lifetime the Old Beggar has killed 231 people; all these 231 people were wicked, if not greedy and corrupt officials, then they were local bullies or criminals who oppressed common people; they were all evil people who had no regard of justice and honor. The Old Beggar is a glutton, but in all my life I have never killed an innocent person. Qiu Qianren, you are the 232nd person!”

His speech had made Qiu Qianren shiver with fear; he felt like his life had been taken from him. Hong Qigong continued, “Qiu Qianren, your Iron Palm Clan’s past Clan Leader Shangguan Jian Nan was a true hero; he devoted his entire life to serve the country, he was loyal till the day he died. Didn’t your master advise you to be a real man? You succeeded your master as the Iron Palm Clan Leader; yet you colluded with the Jins, betraying your own country. When you die, do you have any face to meet your master and Shangguan Jian Nan, Shangguan Bangzhu? You climb Mount Hua in a vain attempt to compete against other martial art experts to win the ‘Number One Martial Artist in the World’. Not only your martial art is inferior to everybody else’s; but even if your martial art were matchless, which hero of this world would want to submit to a traitor who sells his own country?”

This speech was like a bucket of cold water drenched over Qiu Qianren; everything he had ever done in the past dozens of years came into his mind one by one. He remembered his master's instructions. How his master at his deathbed had imparted the Iron Palm Clan rules and regulations after he assumed the Clan Leader position; earnestly warning him to be a patriot, loyal to his country and love its people. Who would have thought that the older he got, the stronger his martial art became, the more he forgot his oath to love his country; he has become a traitor and a criminal, killing people who oppose his personal ambition. He fell deeper and deeper, until the clan members who were loyal and righteous left him, and in their place he took criminals as his disciples. He went as far as changing the upright Iron Palm Clan into a gang of bandits; sheltering evil people and support their evil practices; carrying out all kinds of evil things.

He lifted up his eyes to see the bright moon in the sky; he lowered his eyes to see Hong Qigong's bright pair of eyes with a penetrating gaze looking at him. Suddenly his conscience was awakened; he felt that among all of his life conducts not one could be called honorable. His body was drenched in cold sweats; he sighed, "Hong Bangzhu, you are right." He turned around and jumped into the canyon below.

Hong Qigong was holding tight his bamboo stick to guard against Qiu Qianren lest he would launch a sudden attack from shame. This person's martial art is nothing to be trifled with; in his desperation his attack must be really fierce. Not in a million years would he expect him to suddenly attempt to commit suicide. He was stunned, but suddenly a grey shadow flew by his side; Reverend Yideng had arrived at the cliff edge. Initially he was sitting cross-legged, and when he moved, he was still cross-legged. His

left arm stretched out and grabbed Qiu Qianren's feet, pulled him strongly back to safety.

"Zhan zai, zhan cai!" he said, "The sea of bitterness knows no bounds; turn around and you will see the shore. You have already repented of your previous wrong doings; it's not too late to become a new man."

Qiu Qianren wept loudly, he knelt down in front of Yideng. He had millions of things he wanted to say, but was unable to utter a single word.

Ying Gu saw his back was in front of her; it was a very good opportunity for her to seek her revenge. She took a dagger from her bosom and fiercely thrust it into Qiu Qianren's back.

"Wait!" Zhou Botong called out; stretching his hand to block Ying Gu's dagger.

Ying Gu was angry, "What are you doing?" she asked sternly.

Since the first time Zhou Botong saw Ying Gu, he had been scared. Now that she scolded him, he shouted, "Aiyo!" and turned around, rushing down the mountain.

"Where are you going?" Ying Gu called out and immediately pursued him.

"I have tummy ache, I need to defecate!" Zhou Botong shouted. Ying Gu was startled only for a second, then she ignored him and did not stop pursuing Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong was stunned, "Aiyo! Not good! I have shits all over my pants; it stinks to high heaven. Don't come over here!" he anxiously shouted.

Ying Gu had been searching for him for over twenty years; she believed that if she missed him again this time, she would not see him anymore. Hence she did not care whether Zhou Botong was really defecating or just pretending, she kept pursuing him.

Zhou Botong heard the sound of footsteps approaching; he was scared out of his wits. Initially he said he was defecating to scare Ying Gu out from coming near him; he was hoping that he would find an opportunity to slip away. Who would have thought that Ying Gu ignored his words. He was so frightened that he cried out; and from pretending, Zhou Botong actually did start urinating and defecating.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were amused to watch this couple who quickly disappear beyond the cliff in the distant; and then they turned their heads to see Reverend Yideng was speaking in low voice on Qiu Qianren's ears. Qiu Qianren did not say anything, he simply nodded his head repeatedly. Yideng spoke for a long while then finally he stood up and said, "Let's go."

Jing and Rong two people hurriedly went forward to pay their respects; they also bowed to the Fisherman, the Woodcutter, the Farmer and the Scholar. Yideng held out his hand to stroke their heads; he looked at them tenderly with a gentle smile on his face. "Qi Xiong," he turned to Hong Qigong, "You are in good shape, your bravery is as great as I remember it; you also received these two fine disciples. I must congratulate you."

Hong Qigong bowed and said, "Reverend is also well."

Yideng smiled, "The mountain is tall and the river is long; till we meet again," he said. Putting his palms together he turned around and left.

“Tomorrow is the sword meet, why are you leaving?” Hong Qigong called out.

Yideng turned his head and smiled, “The Old Monk is an outsider; how could I dare to compete with world class heroes over a title? The Old Monk is here today to take care of twenty years’ worth of gratitude and grudges; and I am happy my intention has been achieved. Qi Xiong, who is the present age hero but you? Why are you being modest?” Again he put his palms together, took Qiu Qianren’s hand, and walked down the mountain.

The four main disciples of Dali bowed toward Hong Qigong then followed behind their master. The Scholar walked by Huang Rong’s side. Seeing her cheeks were glowing he raised his eyebrows and smiled while reciting a line, “On the marshy land there was a ‘chang chu’ tree, its branches are soft and willowy!”

Hearing him tease her, Huang Rong replied with another line, “The chicken perched on their roost, the evening has arrived.”

The Scholar laughed a big laughter, he cupped his fists and left.

Guo Jing was bewildered, “Rong’er,” he asked, “Was that another Sanskrit line?”

“No,” Huang Rong smiled, “It was from ‘the book of poems’” she explained.

Hearing they were exchanging poetry, Guo Jing did not ask further. Looking at him Huang Rong smiled. She thought, “This ‘zhuang yuan’ [honorable title conferred to the person who scored highest in the imperial examination] is really smart; he had guessed correctly what’s in my heart. The next lines of what he recited from the book of poems are

‘pleasure does not need knowledge, pleasure does not need a family, pleasure does not need a room’. It was about a maiden adoring a bachelor’s love song. It is very appropriate to Jing Gege’s situation; he was saying that this scattered brain dumb kid has finally found a wife. I am very happy!” Having thought this suddenly she uttered a soft cry, “Aiyo!”

“What is it?” Guo Jing hastily asked.

Huang Rong smiled and said, “The next lines of what I recited are ‘The sheep and the cows coming down, the sheep and the cows went into the pen.’ The poem says that it was getting late, the sheep and the cows from the hillside returned to the fold and the gate was closed. In short I called that ‘zhuang yuan’ an animal. But it can be considered that I called Reverend Yideng an animal too!”

Guo Jing did not pay too much attention to this poetry exchange; he was pondering on what Hong Qigong had said to Qiu Qianren earlier. His heart was heavy with doubts and anxiety for these past several days; all his questions were answered in just a few words. His mind became open and he understood, “Shifu said he has killed 231 people; but these 231 people were all wicked. As long as he did not kill an innocent person, then his conscience is clear. Look how Shifu reprimanded Qiu Qianren, physical prowess is useless. This Qiu Qianren’s martial art is not necessary below that of Shifu’s, but because his heart was not upright, he cowered in Shifu’s presence. As long as I use my martial art to uphold justice, why would I want to put my martial art behind?”

It was actually a clear cut truth, even Qiu Chuji had spoken to him about the same truth. It was not that he did not believe Qiu Chuji, it was just that he recently joined Genghis Khan’s expedition to the west; he saw with his own eyes the

terrible massacre, the cruelty on the battlefield, the suffering of the people, the tragic death of his mother under his own dagger; he loathed all kinds of war and violence and his mind was overwhelmed with this bitter thought. But after going through this deep thinking in his mind, finally his determination to do good deeds was getting stronger.

Jing and Rong two people went forward and kowtowed in front of their master; then they talked about things that happened after they parted. Turned out Hong Qigong followed Huang Yaoshi back to the Peach Blossom Island to tend to his injury. Using the method from the Nine Yin Manual he was able to revive his internal strength and open up the passages through which the vital energy circulate. It took him about half a year to heal his internal injury, then another half a year to recover his internal strength.

Huang Yaoshi was worried about his daughter; therefore, as soon as Hong Qigong's injury was healed, he went to the north looking for her. Hong Qigong left the island much later than Huang Yaoshi did, and only a few days ago he came across Lu Youjiao; thus for the most part he had learned what happened to his disciples Jing and Rong.

Three people talked for a while. Finally Guo Jing said, "Shifu, please take some rest. Come daybreak you will compete in the sword meet; you will need a lot of energy."

Hong Qigong laughed, "The older I get, my desire to outdo others is actually getting stronger; but thinking that very soon I am going to fight the Eastern Heretic and Western Poison, my heart is anxious. It is ridiculous! Rong'er, in the recent years your father's martial art has improved tremendously. Tell me, in the upcoming contest between your father and your Shifu, who is strong and who is weak?"

Huang Rong replied, "The martial art of yours, Senior, and that of my father's are always difficult to compare; but now you have mastered the 'jiu yin shen gong' [nine yin divine energy]; how can my father be your match? Later when I see my father I am going to advise him not to compete with you; he'd better go back home to the Peach Blossom Island early on."

Listening to her manner of speaking, Hong Qigong felt something was strange. After pondering it for a while he understood her intention. He laughed loudly and said, "You don't need to talk in circle to me; I got the 'jiu yin shen gong' from you two. You don't have to goad me; the Old Beggar's face is not thick enough to use that skill. When I compete with the Old Heretic Huang later, I am going to use only my own original skills."

Huang Rong was expecting him to say these exact words; so she smiled and said, "Shifu, if you lose under my father's hand, I am going to prepare a hundred types of food for you to eat. So winning you will no doubt be delighted, losing you will also be happy."

Hong Qigong swallowed his saliva. "Hmm, this girl's heart is not good. You provoke me then you bribe me. You are wickedly shrewd; you hope wholeheartedly your own father will win."

Huang Rong smiled, but before she could answer Hong Qigong suddenly stood up. He pointed his finger toward Huang Rong's back and called out, "Old Poison, you arrived very early!"

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were startled; quickly they sprang up and stood next to Hong Qigong. They turned their heads and saw Ouyang Feng with his tall stature standing nearby. He arrived so quietly that these two

people were not aware of his presence; they were greatly astonished.

End of Chapter 39.

Chapter 40 - Sword Meet of Mount Hua

Translated by Frans Soetomo



Genghis Khan fetched his iron bow and aimed the arrow toward the female eagle. The eagle was

able to skew itself and sweep its wing to strike the arrow. The male eagle was angry; it let out a long cry and dived to strike Genghis Khan's head.

Ouyang Feng coldly said, "Arrive early compete early, arrive late compete late. Old Beggar, tell me, our contest today, is it just to decide victory or defeat, or is it for our lives?"

"To achieve victory sometimes means risking our lives," Hong Qigong said, "When we start, you don't need to be lenient."

"Good!" Ouyang Feng said. His left hand was behind his back, but suddenly he moved it forward, showing a snake staff. Tapping the staff's end to a rock he asked, "Here, or do you need a more open space?"

Hong Qigong has not opened his mouth when Huang Rong interrupted, "Mount Hua is not a good place to compete, we'd better go to find a boat."

Hong Qigong was puzzled, "What?"

"To give Mr. Ouyang another good opportunity to reply kindness with evil, to make a sneak attack from behind again," Huang Rong explained.

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "Fall into a trap once, learn to be smart once; don't expect the Old Beggar to show mercy anymore."

Listening to Huang Rong's insult Ouyang Feng's face did not show any emotion. He bent his knees a little bit, moved his staff to his right hand, and launched the Toad Stance with his left hand.

Huang Rong gave the dog-beating stick in her hand to Hong Qigong, "Shifu, use the Dog Beating Stick Technique and the Nine Yin Manual's martial arts. We don't talk about honor and honesty with an old traitor like him."

Hong Qigong thought, "It really is not easy to win relying on my own martial arts alone; if I spend too much energy fighting the Old Poison, I won't be able to fight the Old Heretic Huang later on." So he nodded his head and took the dog-beating stick. Immediately his left hand launched 'da cao jing she' [beating the grass scaring the snake], while his right hand launched 'bo cao xun she' [brushing the grass aside looking for snakes]; attacking from both sides.

Ouyang Feng had fought him several times yet he had never seen Hong Qigong use the Dog Beating Stick Technique. Even in a critical situation when they were fighting on the burning boat Hong Qigong did not use this technique. Ouyang Feng had seen Huang Rong use this technique before and he did not dare to look down on the technique; now that the stick was in Hong Qigong's hand it moved fast, carrying gusts of wind, truly not something to be trifled with. The snake staff in his hand shook; parried the left and evaded the right, he struck toward the middle.

He had lost his snake staff twice; the one currently in his hand was a new one. The staff had the same scary head carved on it, but the two venomous snakes wrapped around it were new; even though their poison was as lethal as the previous ones, but they haven't been used too long; thus their effectiveness was inferior to the previous ones.

In the past Hong Qigong had been bitten by this kind of venomous snake, he had also suffered under Ouyang Feng's vicious palms to the point of almost losing his life; which took him nearly two years to recover and get his martial art

skill back. That was his greatest defeat and greatest danger he had to face his entire life; how could he not avenge this enmity? Thus he moved his stick with all his might, attacking furiously.

The first time those two fought was over the Nine Yin Manual during the Sword Meet of Mount Hua. The second time was on the Peach Blossom Island, fighting over Guo Jing and Ouyang Ke's marriage proposal; this fight was to decide victory and defeat only, not a life-and-death situation. The third time was on the small boat in the middle of the sea; where life and death were separated only by a thin line, but Hong Qigong still held his uprightness. This fight was the fourth time they battled each other fiercely; each one threw everything they had, no more mercy. They both knew that the opponent had trained hard and improved their martial art skill throughout all these years; their martial arts were very fierce, so if they were careless and yield even for half a stance, it would be difficult not to lose their own lives.

Two people turning around and hitting each other for about two hundred moves when suddenly the moon disappeared, the darkness came blanketing everything. It was the darkest hour of the night before dawn. Both were afraid the opponent would launch a sneak attack, so they were focusing their attention on defense and did not care much on offense. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were anxious about their master's safety; each moved forward several steps, ready to help if Hong Qigong's life were threatened.

While watching intently on the fierce battle in front of his eyes, Guo Jing had a disquieting thought, "These two people are the top skilled martial artists, but one is heroically upholding justice, while the other one is deceitfully wicked. Obviously martial art in itself does not differentiate good from evil; it all comes back to the person using it. If used to

do good deeds, then the higher the skill the better, but if it used to do evil deeds, then the higher the skill the more wicked the martial art becomes.”

The darkness made the battle difficult to watch, but the weapons made loud clashing sound and strong gusts of wind; Guo Jing’s heart was beating faster. “Shifu has wasted two years worth of training because of his injury. Originally they were in par with each other; this time the outcome will be decided by a step forward or backward; I am afraid Ouyang Feng will gain a half-step advantage because of that. If I knew this would happen I wouldn’t have shown mercy to him three times,” he silently mused.

Guo Jing remembered Qiu Chuji once explained the ‘xin yi’ [trust and honor], that big trust and big honor should be differentiated from small trust and small honor. If a person’s entire being lacking trust and honor, it was the same as if that person did not have any trust and honor at all. Thinking about this, he felt his blood rushing through his system, he thought, “Although Shifu and Ouyang Feng clearly said that the battle will be a one-to-one combat, but what if Ouyang Feng harmed Shifu? What if from this time on, he would run amuck in the world? I don’t know how many good people will be hurt in his hands. I wasn’t clear about truth and righteousness before, hence I committed not a few foolishnesses.” Because of this thought he lifted up his palms, ready to move forward to help his master.

But suddenly he heard Huang Rong called out, “Ouyang Feng, you and my Jing Gege had made an agreement which resulted in you being spared from death three times; who would have thought that you still relying on your strength bullying me? You proved yourself untrustworthy, much like a nameless pawn of the Wulin; yet you are still dreaming of becoming the number one martial artist of the world?”

Ouyang Feng had committed countless ruthless acts in his life, but he was a proud man, he would call 'one' as 'one', and 'two' as 'two'; never backed off on his own words. If it was not because of his desire to learn the Nine Yin Manual he wouldn't break his promise to Guo Jing. This time he was fighting a fierce battle with Hong Qigong and suddenly Huang Rong brought it up; his ears turned red and his mind was muddled; he lost his concentration and the dog beating stick almost hit him.

"You are known as the Western Poison," Huang Rong continued, "So all kinds of evil are not stranger to you; but to have a junior sparing your life three times? You have lost your face. Where is your honor? How could you swallow your own words toward a junior? You have become the laughingstock of all the valiant people of the Jianghu till their mouths crooked. Ouyang Feng! Oh, Ouyang Feng! There is one title you deserve to have: you are the number one shameless man of the world!"

Ouyang Feng was angry, but he realized it was Huang Rong's clever trick to break his concentration; to make him feel ashamed. And as long as his internal strength was affected he would fall under Hong Qigong's hands, hence he turned a deaf ear toward Huang Rong. Who would have thought that Huang Rong kept accusing him with more and more evil and wicked deeds; sounded like every crime ever committed in the martial art world was his doing. If it was just ruthless deeds, Ouyang Feng did not care, but Huang Rong's tongue was getting more and more vicious. She mentioned all kinds of lowly and cowardice acts that even a bandit in the Jianghu would not do. Furthermore she said Ouyang Feng kissed Lingzhi Shangren's rear end; that he respectfully called Sha Tongtian his 'beloved uncle'; that he regarded Peng Lianhu as his 'honorable father' and begging for the secret ingredient of the poison Peng was

using; that he repeatedly asked Wanyan Honglie for the captain of the guards position, so that he could live at the Zhao palace and be their night watch. She went as far as how Guo Jing in the west had spared his life three times, how Guo Jing rescued him from the sand, but Huang Rong add some spices to her story, made Ouyang Feng appear completely helpless and the rescue ten times more dramatic.

At first Ouyang Feng was still able to control his emotion, but as the story progressed to extreme nonsense he could not restrain from refuting Huang Rong several times. It was exactly what Huang Rong wanted: to engage him in useless debate and deliberately losing his fighting concentration. Thus Ouyang Feng had to fight in two fronts: with his hands and feet he fiercely battled Hong Qigong, with his mouth he argued with Huang Rong. Unfortunately for him, Huang Rong's mouth was a lot sharper than Hong Qigong's hands and feet.

After fighting for half a day Ouyang Feng began to feel the pressure, he thought, "It would be difficult to win if I don't use the martial art from the Nine Yin Manual." Although he had not mastered Huang Rong's explanation on reversing the blood flow through vital energy passages, he had been able to train for half a year; due to his own intelligent and profound martial art, he managed to somewhat improve his internal strength. Therefore, his snake staff suddenly made strange movements.

Hong Qigong was startled; he had to increase his attention. Huang Rong called out, "Yuan si ying er, ba ba xi luo zhao, xue liu wen bing." Ouyang Feng was startled, "What is the meaning of that?" he asked himself. How would he know that Huang Rong was letting her tongue loose and talk whatever came into her mind? That it did not carry any meaning at all? Huang Rong repeatedly talked gibberish,

changing the tone of her voice; sometimes sounded like she was scolding him, other time encouraging, but suddenly turned to a sigh; then the sigh turned into cheers. Some sentences sounded like they were questions; or urgently asking for advice. Ouyang Feng had determined to ignore her, but in the end his curiosity won, "What are you talking about?"

Huang Rong answered him using Sanskrit sentences she learned. Ouyang Feng was confused; he tried hard to remember the altered manual Guo Jing wrote for him. Suddenly a flood of chaotic sounds, images, strategic moves and martial arts theories came streaming into his mind. He felt dizzy and suffer a momentary memory loss.

Hong Qigong saw an opening in Ouyang Feng's staff movement, "Got you!" he cried, and swung his stick toward the top of Ouyang Feng's head.

This hit did not carry tremendous strength; Ouyang Feng was already confused, but after his head was hit he became more confused. He was in a daze; screamed and dragging along his snake staff he ran away.

"Where are you running to?" Guo Jing called out. He jumped to catch up. Ouyang Feng leaped high, made three somersaults in the air; then rolling and crawling, climbing a hill nearby, he disappeared without a trace.

Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other, perplexed; then they smiled out of surprise. Hong Qigong sighed, "Rong'er, your part in my victory over the Old Poison today is actually big. But with us, master and disciple, against one opponent, it was a rather shallow victory."

Huang Rong smiled, "Shifu, it was you who taught me this skill."

Hong Qigong laughed, "It was your natural ability," he said, "Only a crafty old fellow as your father can have a crafty daughter like you."

Suddenly someone called out from behind the mountain, "Good! You talk about other people behind their backs. Old Beggar, aren't you ashamed?"

"Father!" Huang Rong called and leaped to him.

It was dawn, the morning light shone on a man wearing a green robe, walking leisurely. It was none other than the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi.

Huang Rong threw herself into her father's bosom; father and daughter hugged each other. Huang Yaoshi could see the childish expression had gone from his daughter's face; she had grown into a beautiful young woman. She looked much like his late wife, that his heart was both happy and sad at the same time.

"Old Heretic Huang," Hong Qigong said, "Didn't I tell you on the Peach Blossom Island that your virgin daughter is so smart? She is so crafty; others won't bully her that easily, so there is nothing for you to worry. Now tell me, was the Old Beggar wrong?"

Huang Yaoshi smiled faintly, holding his daughter's hand he went near and said, "Congratulations! You made the Old Poison ran away. His defeat means you and I have one less problem to face."

"You and I are the current experts of the world," Hong Qigong said, "As soon as I saw your daughter the worms in my tummy started to dance around, my mouth watered. Let us just compete and get it over with; you become the number one is fine with me, I become the number one is also good. I only want to eat Rong'er's cooked meals."

“Not so fast,” Huang Rong laughed, “Only if you lose I will cook something for you to eat.”

“Bah!” Hong Qigong spat, “You are shameless. You are extorting me, aren’t you?”

“Old Beggar,” Huang Yaoshi said, “You have wasted two full years to recover from your injuries. I am afraid you are not my match. Rong’er, no matter who wins and who loses, you will cook some food for your Shifu to eat.”

“Right!” Hong Qigong exclaimed, “Now THAT is a speech befitting a great master of a martial art school! How can the Master of the Peach Blossom Island have the same petty thought as a little girl? We don’t have to wait until noon to start our competition. Come!” He swung his bamboo stick and moved forward to begin.

Huang Yaoshi shook his head, “You have just fought the Old Poison for quite a while. Although your energy is not completely depleted, you are tired nonetheless. How can Old Huang gain a slight advantage over you? We will wait till noon to compete, you need to restore your strength.”

Even though Hong Qigong knew what he said was right, but he was too impatient to wait, so he insisted on starting right away. Huang Yaoshi simply sat on a big rock, totally ignoring him.

Seeing these two could not reach any agreement Huang Rong said, “Father, Shifu, I have an idea: the two of you can compete immediately without Father taking any advantage over Shifu.”

“Good! What is it?” Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi asked.

“The two of you have been friends for many-many years, no matter who wins or loses; your friendship will be damaged.

But today is the Sword Meet of Mount Hua, so no matter what, victory and defeat must be decided, does it not?"

Hong and Huang two people's interests were piqued. They were aware that she was right; and if she indeed had an excellent idea, then they would kill three birds with one stone: one, they could compete immediately; two, Huang Yaoshi would not take any advantage over Hong Qigong; three, their friendship would not be damaged. So they enthusiastically asked, "Tell us your great idea."

"My idea is this," Huang Rong explained, "First, Father compete with Jing Gege. We will see how many stances Father will need to defeat him. Then Shifu will also compete with Jing Gege. If Father uses 99 moves to score victory but Shifu needs 100 moves, then Father wins. But if Shifu only need 98 moves, then Shifu wins."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Hong Qigong exclaimed.

Huang Rong continued, "Jing Gege will compete with Father first; both are still fresh. Then when he competes with Shifu, both parties have each fought one time. Don't you say it is a fair deal?"

Huang Yaoshi nodded his head, "This is a good idea. Jing'er, come! Are you going to use weapon or not?"

"I am not going to," Guo Jing said. He was about to step forward when Huang Rong said again, "Hold on a second. There is one more thing I want to say: What if you two seniors cannot defeat Jing Gege in 300 moves?"

Hong Qigong burst out in laughter, "Old Heretic Huang, originally I envy you of having a smart daughter, who is always looking after her Father's well-being. Ay! Who would have thought that a girl is always a girl; born to leave home.

Actually she wanted this dumb kid to hold the title 'Number One Martial Artist in the World'!"

Huang Yaoshi might be eccentric, but he loved his daughter with all his heart. He secretly thought, "Let me help her achieve her wish." So he said, "What Rong'er had said is true. If we two old men cannot defeat Jing'er in 300 moves, would we have any face to become the Number One?" But suddenly he had another thought, "I intended to hold back and let him to fight me for 300 stances, but what if the Old Beggar does not hold back and score victory in less than 300 moves? Then I won't be holding back for Jing'er's sake, but for the Old Beggar's." He hesitated on what to do.

Hong Qigong shoved Guo Jing forward, "Go, fight! What are you waiting for?" he said.

Guo Jing staggered and stepped forward to face Huang Yaoshi. "All right," Huang Yaoshi thought, "Let me try his skill first, then I'll decide what to do later." Raising his left palm he hacked diagonally toward Guo Jing's neck. "First move!" he called out.

While Huang Yaoshi was not sure what to do, Guo Jing also had some doubt of his own, "There is no way I can win the world's number one title; but shall I let Daozhu [Island Master] win, or shall I let Shifu win?" He was still thinking when Huang Yaoshi had made his move. Guo Jing lifted up his right hand to parry. His body shook and he almost fell down. "Stupid!" he scolded himself, "Why would I worry about whom I should let to win? Even if I fight with all my might I may not be able to keep up for 300 stances."

In the mean time Huang Yaoshi had launched the second move, so he was forced to focus his attention. He made a decision right then and there, to compete with those two people with all his might. Who is swift and who is slow, let

them use their skill to defeat him. He would not be one sided.

Several stances later Huang Yaoshi was astonished. "How did this dumb kid reach this level? If I held back, not only I might not be able to defeat him in 300 stances, I might even lose in his hands." In a battle between martial art experts one cannot let back even half a step. Because initially Huang Yaoshi was only using 70% of his strength, he fell under Guo Jing's control. He started to feel alarmed, and busily launched the 'luo ying shen jian zhang' [falling flower divine sword palm technique], his body floating around at full strength. But Guo Jing now was not the same as Guo Jing then. Huang Yaoshi had used dozens different palm techniques, yet it was still difficult for him to gain an upper hand.

After about one hundred moves Huang Yaoshi suddenly launched a trick move. Guo Jing did not expect him to make such move; he was almost kicked down by Huang Yaoshi's left leg. Frantically Guo Jing retreated two steps and steadied himself. Because of this Huang Yaoshi managed to even up the battle situation.

Huang Yaoshi took that opportunity to take a deep breath. "Amazing!" he secretly praised.

Huang Yaoshi worked very hard to gain an upper hand, but unexpectedly Guo Jing's position was very firm. Guo Jing had decided all along to put up a very tight defense line; he knew it was impossible for him to win, so he only hoped he would not lose.

Listening to his daughter on the side counting, "Two-hundred and three, two-hundred and four," Huang Yaoshi became impatient. "Old Beggar may use a heavy hand; if he defeats Jing'er in 100 moves, where would I put my face

at?" he silently thought. He changed his attacks: now his palms floating around like a shadow; his hands were very swift.

Guo Jing started to feel the pressure; his chest tightened, like it was pressed under a huge mountain. He started to get disoriented, but he bravely stood his ground.

Huang Yaoshi's hands moved faster and faster, his offensive power increased. In the meantime Huang Rong's mouth was also counting faster and faster.

Guo Jing started to feel his lips and tongue dry up, his movements became sluggish; getting more and more difficult. The only thing kept him going was his strong will. In this critical moment suddenly he heard Huang Rong call out, "Three hundred!"

Huang Yaoshi's countenance changed, he leaped back.

Guo Jing, on the other hand, still felt dizzy. His body did not stop spinning; he turned around more than a dozen times. He knew he was going to fall, hence he focused his energy to his left leg with 'qian jin zhui' [thousand-catty plummet], trying to anchor his body down. But Huang Yaoshi power was incredible; even after he pulled back his hands, the force did not vanish away. Guo Jing lost his balance and fell down; but he used his right hand to push himself back up again. Immediately he launched dozens of stances from the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' and thus cleared his mind up. He stayed silent for a moment, then turned his head toward Huang Yaoshi and said, "Huang Daozhu, several moves more and I will fall down to the ground."

Seeing Guo Jing was unexpectedly able to withstand his more than ten years worth of 'qi men wu zhuan' [wonderful gate five revolutions] cultivation, Huang Yaoshi was not angry; on the contrary, he was happy. "Old Beggar," he said,

"I am useless, the title Number One in the World is yours." He cupped his fists and turned around to leave.

"Not too fast! Not too fast!" Hong Qigong said, "I won't necessarily win. Could you lend your iron flute to Jing'er, please?"

Huang Yaoshi's jade flute was already broken, so he wielded an iron flute on his waist instead. He pulled the flute and gave it to Guo Jing.

Hong Qigong turned to Guo Jing and said, "You use a weapon. I will fight you barehanded."

Guo Jing was dumbstruck, "This ..."

Hong Qigong said, "Your bare hand techniques came from me. If you use your hands and feet, how can we call it competition? Come!" His left hand's fingers forming a hook, showing off his grabbing skill, trying to snatch the iron flute in Guo Jing's hand. Guo Jing did not understand his intention; he let the flute go without any resistance.

"Dumb kid!" Hong Qigong scolded, "We are competing martial arts skill!" With his left hand he gave the flute back to Guo Jing, while with his right hand he tried to snatch it one more time. This time Guo Jing moved his flute to evade the attack. Huang Rong started counting, "First move!"

In the battle between experts, using weapon or being barehanded did not make too much difference. Hong Qigong used his '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' attacking ferociously; the gust of wind could be felt a 'zhang' [10 feet/3 meters] away. Even with the iron flute in his hand, how could Guo Jing get close to him? Moreover, Guo Jing was not used to use weapon until in the western region he was forced to battle Ouyang Feng on the stone cliff. It was then that he started improving his sword technique. Even

then he did not put too much emphasis on the offense; his swordsmanship was 80% for defense, and only 20% for offense.

The weapon techniques he learned from the Six Freaks of Jiangnan were inadequate to battle an expert; it was after he learned the Nine Yin Manual that his weapon technique improved greatly. Actually it was inside that stone building in the west he started learning many defensive techniques in using a sword to defend against Ouyang Feng's snake staff. This time he was using an iron flute as a sword to ward off Hong Qigong's fierce palm attacks; and he was able to defend himself quite well.

Hong Qigong could see his strong defense line and was delighted, he thought, "This kid made a tremendous advancement; I did not teach him in vain. But it won't look good for the Old Heretic Huang if I defeat him in under 200 moves. I'd better wait until after 200 moves then I am going to increase my power." And so Hong Qigong kept using his '18-Dragon Subduing Palms', from the first variation to the ninth; with gusts of wind so strong surrounded Guo Jing completely.

This was where Hong Qigong made a mistake. Guo Jing's weapon skill had not reached perfection yet; if he kept pressing Guo Jing with a heavy hand, Guo Jing would not be able to withstand, but he wanted to wait until after the 200th move. Initially Guo Jing's strength was already profound; after completed the 'yi jin duan gu pian' [changing muscle forging bone chapter], his internal strength increased by leaps and bounds. On the other hand, Hong Qigong had advanced in age, plus he had suffered a heavy injury under Ouyang Feng's snake staff. It was true that he had completely recovered, but his stamina could not compete with Guo Jing's in an endurance race. To make

matter worse for him, the '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' required a lot of energy; so after 9 rounds (or 162 stances) even if his attacks were still strong and fierce, but his stamina was gradually decreasing.

After about 200 moves not only the iron flute in Guo Jing's right hand increased in offensive power, but he was actually getting better in coordinating the right sword technique with his left hand palm technique. Hong Qigong was secretly groaning; realizing that he would not win relying on his brute force, he had to use strategy to defeat this dumb kid, so immediately he changed the way he fought. He opened his hands wide.

Guo Jing was startled, "Shifu has not taught me this stance yet," he thought. If it was a fight against an enemy, he would attack toward the chest since it was wide open, but the opponent he faced was his own benevolent master, how could he use a killer strike?

While he hesitated, Hong Qigong smiled and said, "You are tricked!" His left foot swiftly moved upward to knock the iron flute in Guo Jing's hand down, while his right palm slanting downward, attacking Guo Jing's shoulder. He only used 80% of his strength on this attack since he did not have any intention to hurt Guo Jing. He only wanted to knock Guo Jing down, and thus achieved victory.

Who would have thought that these past several years Guo Jing had endured wind and frost; his body became resilient. This heavy blow made him stagger and caused him to suffer a severe pain, but he did not fall down.

Hong Qigong was surprised Guo Jing was able to withstand his palm, he busily said, "Quickly spit three times and breathe in, breathe out; see if you suffer an internal injury."

Guo Jing followed his advice, and his chest was not constricted, anymore so he said, "Disciple has lost."

"No," Hong Qigong said, "We have to keep fighting. If you admit defeat, the Old Heretic Huang won't accept it. Come!" Immediately he sent his palm to attack.

Guo Jing did not have any weapon in his hand anymore, while the incoming attack was fierce, so he used Zhou Botong's Vacant Fist to parry the attack.

The Vacant Fist technique was the softest fist technique in the world; it was created by Zhou Botong based on the Taoist principles found in the 'Dao De Jing' [moral/virtue scripture - Taoist's holy scripture]. The 'Dao De Jing' said, 'A strong army can be decimated; a strong tree can be broken. Strength will fail; suppleness will prevail.' Also, "The most flexible substance under the sky is water, but it is not easy to withstand its strong attack. Suppleness' victory is powerful; softness' victory is strong. No one in the world is unaware, no one can stand.'

On the other hand, '18-Dragon Subduing Palms' technique was the strongest/hardest martial art. There was a saying, 'Softness can overcome hardness.' However, if it was Hong Qigong's level of 'hardness,' then it would not be easy for Zhou Botong's 'softness' to overcome. Fortunately, Guo Jing had mastered the mutual hands combat technique, so with his right hand he launch the soft Vacant Fist, while with his left he employed the Dragon Subduing Palm; hard and soft worked together, yin and yang complemented each other. No matter how fierce Hong Qigong's attack was, he could not penetrate Guo Jing's defense.

On the side Huang Rong kept counting; it was almost 300 stances, and Guo Jing did not show any sign that he would be defeated soon. One move after another ... Hong Qigong

heard her calling out the number two hundred and ninety-nine; he became edgy, wanted to win the contest; so for the last move he launched the 'Proud Dragon Repents' full-strength, with earth-shattering power to back it up. But once it was launched, he began to feel regret; afraid that Guo Jing would not be able to withstand and suffer a heavy injury, so he shouted, "Watch out!"

Guo Jing understood his warning, but the gust of wind had already reached his face; he knew it was very strong. He also knew that his Vacant Fist wouldn't be able to parry this attack; so in this critical moment his right hand made a circle and with a loud shout launched the very same 'Proud Dragon Repents'.

Two palms collided with a deafening sound; both men felt their bodies shook violently. Huang Yaoshi and Huang Rong both cried out in shock, simultaneously they jumped toward the men, only to see both men stood still with their palms stuck together like they were glued to each other.

Guo Jing had a mind to yield, but knew very well that his master's overbearing power was still pushing his palm. If he let go and his master did not take his strength away, he might end up getting seriously injured. Hence he was forced to wait for his master to take the pressure away then he would admit defeat.

Seeing Guo Jing was able to block this palm, which he sent with his lifetime cultivation of energy, Hong Qigong could not help but feel pleasantly surprised. He regretted his proud thinking of wanting to be the number one; now he wanted his disciple to win this contest and build up a name for himself. Therefore, gradually he decreased his power to nothing.

Right when these two men were still in a stalemate position, where nobody wins or loses, suddenly someone was heard shouting three times from behind the cliff; then someone leaped and made three somersaults in the air before landing on the ground close to them; it was the Western Poison Ouyang Feng. Hong Qigong and Guo Jing simultaneously retracted their palms and leaped backward.

Ouyang Feng's clothes were tattered, his face full of blood, he shouted, "I have mastered the Nine Yin Manual! My martial art is number one in the world!" Lifting up his snake staff he swept away all four people.

Hong Qigong picked up his dog-beating stick and parried the snake staff. After a while all four people were astonished. Ouyang Feng's stances had always been unusual, but this time they were weirder than ever: he would suddenly claw his own face or kick his own buttock; while launching an attack he would suddenly change direction midway in an unpredictable way. Hong Qigong was extremely amazed; he put a strong defense with his dog-beating technique and did not dare to act carelessly.

While fighting ferociously, 'Slap! Slap! Slap!' suddenly Ouyang Feng slapped his own face red, then he shouted loudly; put down his hands and crawled around like an animal.

Hong Qigong was surprised, but also amused, he thought, "My stick technique is the best at beating dogs, you act like a dog, aren't you just coming straight for the trap?" Lifting up his bamboo stick he aimed for Ouyang Feng's waist. Unexpectedly Ouyang Feng rolled his body around and pinched the stick to the ground; then he rolled alongside the stick upward. Hong Qigong was so startled that his grab loosened and the bamboo stick fell down. Ouyang Feng suddenly leaped up and kicked both feet toward Hong

Qigong's head. Hong Qigong was taken by surprise and forced to step back in anxiety.

By this time Huang Rong had already bent down and picked the iron flute up, giving it to her father. Huang Yaoshi used that flute as a sword piercing toward Ouyang Feng. "Emperor Duan! I am not afraid of your 'Solitary Yang Finger'!" Ouyang Feng called out; he jumped and threw himself up.

Seeing his behavior like that, Huang Yaoshi knew that his mind was confused; but to Huang Yaoshi's amazement his attack was fiercer than before. Even though he was smart, Huang Yaoshi did not have any idea what had happened. He did not know that Ouyang Feng had diligently trained himself according to the altered manual Guo Jing wrote for him; and then Huang Rong led him along the wrong path by giving him random interpretation. Driven by his desire to win the competition he followed her instruction blindly and trained hard. Only his martial art was profound, so even though following the wrong path with lots of mistakes, he somehow managed to achieve some improvement and gave Hong and Huang, two men of great learning and integrity, a hard time.

Dozens of stances later Huang Yaoshi was forced to admit defeat. Guo Jing stepped forward to face the enemy. Ouyang Feng suddenly stopped and wept, "My son, you died a tragic death!" Throwing his snake staff aside he opened up his arms wide to hug Guo Jing.

Guo Jing knew he was remembering his nephew, Ouyang Ke. Ouyang Feng's voice sounded so miserable that Guo Jing felt sorry for him; but he was also scared, so he held out his hand to shove Ouyang Feng's arms away. But Ouyang Feng turned his left wrist over and grabbed Guo Jing's arm, while his right arm tightly hugged Guo Jing's

body. Guo Jing frantically struggled to free himself but Ouyang Feng was too strong for him; he could not get away from Ouyang Feng's embrace.

Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi, father and daughter, were shocked; they moved together to rescue Guo Jing. Hong Qigong stretched out his finger to attack the 'feng wei' [phoenix tail] acupoint on Ouyang Feng's shoulder, to force him loosen up his grip. Unexpectedly by that time Ouyang Feng's energy passages had been reversed, his acupoints were entirely dislodged, that although Hong Qigong's finger was right on target seemed like he did not even aware of the attack.

Huang Rong picked up a rock and smashed the top of Ouyang Feng's head. Ouyang Feng casually swung his right fist upward; Huang Rong was not able to hold the rock, it flew toward the valley below. But because of this interference Guo Jing was free from Ouyang Feng's right arm; he struggled hard and leaped backward. After calming down a moment he saw Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi were engaged in a fierce battle.

Huang Yaoshi had inserted his flute back to his waist and fought barehanded. This time Ouyang Feng's movement was really bizarre, weird beyond imagination. Sometimes he stood upright, some other time he would lean to the side with body as straight as a stick, yet some other time his body was horizontally off the ground, supported with one hand while the other hand launched strange attacks. Huang Yaoshi had to put all his concentration to face this kind of opponent, since Ouyang Feng's movement was totally unpredictable.

Hong Qigong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong three people were watching intently with their hearts beating fast. Seeing her father's precarious condition, Huang Rong called out,

“Shifu, toward this lunatic we don’t have to follow Wulin’s rules, let us fight together!”

Hong Qigong shook his head, “If it were some other day, we can cooperate to capture him, but today is the Sword Meet of Mount Hua; the men of valor under the heaven must fight one on one. If we relied on numbers we will be disgraced by the heroes of Jianghu.” But he also could see that Ouyang Feng’s mental condition was so severe; his mouth foaming, spitting his saliva everywhere. Huang Yaoshi had a difficult time avoiding this attack and was forced to step back.

A moment later Ouyang Feng stooped down, seemingly in pain; his back was completely undefended. Huang Yaoshi was delighted, he thought, “His madness is spreading after all.” With the ‘Divine Flicking Finger’ he attacked the ‘ying xiang’ [welcoming fragrance] acupoint on the side of Ouyang Feng’s nose. This finger attack was executed swiftly but unexpectedly as soon as it touched his face, Ouyang Feng slightly turned his head and bit Huang Yaoshi’s index finger.

Huang Yaoshi was so startled and quickly hit the ‘tai yang’ [sun] acupoint with his left hand; forcing the mouth to loosen up. Ouyang Feng thrust his right hand up while his mouth bit even harder.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong simultaneously attacked from both sides. Ouyang Feng was forced to loosen up his bit on Huang Yaoshi’s finger, but his ten fingers forming two claws tried to grab Huang Rong’s face. Under the bright sunlight his face looked so nauseatingly fierce and full of blood. Huang Rong was so scared that she ran away screaming.

Guo Jing hurriedly came to her rescue; Ouyang Feng was forced to parry this palm attack toward his back, giving

Huang Rong an opportunity to escape.

Only about a dozen of so stances later Guo Jing's shoulder and leg were hit one after another. "Jing'er, back off! Let me try," Hong Qigong shouted, rushed ahead barehanded. Two people were engaged in a fierce battle for the second time in one day, this time more ferocious than the last.

Hong Qigong had been paying close attention when Ouyang Feng battled Huang Yaoshi and Guo Jing. He found out that even though Ouyang Feng's movements were strange, he could see a pattern on them; they were actually based on the 'Toad Stance' launched backward, like upward movement became downward, left became right. Although his comprehension was incomplete, but Hong Qigong thought that with 70, 80% certainty he had a general idea on how to battle him. He proceeded with utmost caution, and was able to launch a counterattack for roughly every three attacks he received.

Huang Rong took out her handkerchief and wrapped her father's wound. Huang Yaoshi turned his attention to the ongoing battle and after watching a moment he started to shout one after another, "Qi Xiong, kick him upside down." "Strike his 'ju que' [gigantic capital]!" "Hack his 'tian zhu' [pillar of heaven] with the back of your hand."

As a spectator Huang Yaoshi could see clearly; Hong Qigong followed his instructions and a short while later was able to gain a slight advantage over his opponent. But actually these two people were ashamed of what they were doing, they thought, "This time the Eastern Heretic and the Northern Beggar two people join forces to battle the Western Poison, one person." Seeing his defeat is imminent, suddenly Ouyang Feng opened up his mouth and spat his saliva toward Hong Qigong's face.

Hong Qigong quickly leaned sideways to evade, but unexpectedly Ouyang Feng had already anticipated his move. Ouyang Feng's palm flew and slapped the side of Hong Qigong's head; while simultaneously spat saliva toward his face. Hong Qigong was in an awkward position; he did not have any chance to evade. If he let the spittle hit his eyeball he knew he would suffer an injury, or at least very hurt; and if the opponent used that opportunity to attack it would be very difficult for him to parry. He did not have any choice but extending his right hand and took the spittle with his palm, while his left hand counterattacked.

Several stances later Ouyang Feng again spat his saliva; looked like he was using his spittle as secret projectile to confuse enemy's defense. Hong Qigong felt icky and angry at the same time. He still had the spittle on his right palm; he was not able to shake it loose or wipe it on his clothes since he had to focus his entire concentration to fight the enemy. With a sudden movement he stretched his right palm and shouted, "Got you!" He smeared his right palm on Ouyang Feng's face. Looked like he was casually smearing the spittle on Ouyang Feng's face, but in actuality his palm carried a murderous intention.

Even though Ouyang Feng's mind was confused his senses were as keen as before. Seeing Hong Qigong's palm was about to wipe his face he leaned sideways slightly, evading the attack. Hong Qigong flipped his palm and moved vertically up. Ouyang Feng turned his head slightly and opened his mouth to bite. It was exactly the same bite that defeated Huang Yaoshi's unique skill. It looked ridiculous, but since his movement was so quick that even somebody who had reached martial art perfection like Huang Yaoshi was not able to evade.

Huang Yaoshi, Huang Rong and Guo Jing could see clearly Hong Qigong's palm went straight into Ouyang Feng's

mouth; and within an inch from the target suddenly the mouth opened showing two rows of white teeth gleaming under the bright sunlight; ready to bite Hong Qigong's finger. They could not refrain from shouting in alarm, "Watch out!"

What these three people, along with Ouyang Feng, forgot was that Hong Qigong was widely known as the 'jiu zhi shen gai' [Nine-fingered Divine Beggar]. One time because of his gluttonous character he was late in saving the life of a Jianghu's man of valor. In his regret and anger toward himself he chopped off his right index finger.

Ouyang Feng's bite was swift and accurate, if it were other people he would certainly succeed in biting other's finger; but because Hong Qigong did not have an index finger 'clack!' his teeth were biting air.

Actually Ouyang Feng, and everybody else for that matter, knew that Hong Qigong only had nine fingers; but in a ferocious battle situation like this, who would have time to remember little detail like that? The battle between experts, where both contenders' martial arts have been refined through fire, more often than not the end result would be decided by slight oversight like this. When Ouyang Feng bit an empty space, how could Hong Qigong let this opportunity pass? With the 'xiao kou ya ya' [the laughter of a mute] immediately his middle finger struck the 'di cang' [earthen storehouse] acupoint on the side of Ouyang Feng's mouth.

Seeing Hong Qigong's attack went well, the three spectators were ready to applaud, but their mouths were just saying the word 'good' when suddenly Hong Qigong somersaulted several times backward; while Ouyang Feng staggered backward like a drunk before finally came to a stop and let out a big laugh.

Turned out the energy passages in his body were reversed, so that when Hong Qigong hit his major acupoint of 'zu yang ming wei jing' [lit. positive foot, bright stomach passage] he only experienced a slight numbness, then immediately back to normal. Taking that opportunity his palm hit Hong Qigong's shoulder. Lucky for him, because his finger was stretched out, he did not get hit too severely. Hong Qigong further neutralized the hit by somersaulting backward while launching the 'jian long zai tian' [seeing dragon on the field], which made Ouyang Feng stagger back.

Hong Qigong avoided serious injury by moving fast, yet his body was sore, temporarily unable to move. Hong Qigong was the grand master of his respective martial art school; even if he did not want to admit defeat to a confused man, yet he had to admit that the opponent's martial art was admirable. He cupped his fists and said, "Ouyang Xiong, the Old Beggar admits defeat, you are the Number One Martial Artist in the World!"

Ouyang Feng looked up to the sky and let out a long laugh, his arms waving chaotically in the air. He turned toward Huang Yaoshi and asked, "Emperor Duan, do you or do you not admit defeat?"

Huang Yaoshi was not happy, he thought, "The Number One Martial Artist in The World title fell to a lunatic; won't the Old Beggar and I become the laughingstock of the heroes of the world?" But he realized that even if he'd fight again, it would be difficult for him to score victory anyway, so he did not have any choice but nod his agreement.

Ouyang Feng turned to Guo Jing and said, "Son, your father's martial art is matchless, unrivalled in the world, aren't you happy?"

Ouyang Ke was officially his nephew, but actually he was his son; they were known as uncle and nephew but actually they were father and son. In his confused mind he saw Guo Jing as Ouyang Ke, and thus revealing the secret he had kept for decades.

Guo Jing thought no one present was able to defeat him, so he was worthy of the title Number One Martial Artist in the World; "We can't defeat you!" he said.

Ouyang Feng giggled foolishly, he turned toward Huang Rong and said, "Good daughter-in-law, aren't you happy?"

Huang Rong saw her father, her master and Guo Jing were defeated one after another; she had been thinking of a way to cope with this lunatic early on, but could not think of anything good. Now Ouyang Feng was asking her, she saw he was dancing joyfully with a strange facial expression. Under the bright sunlight his shadow was also dancing back and forth in confusion; suddenly an idea came into her mind, "Who said you are number one in the world?" she asked, "There is one person you can't defeat for sure."

Ouyang Feng was very angry, he beat his chest and roared, "Who? Who? Let him come here and fight me!"

"This man's martial art is so high, you are not his match," Huang Rong said.

"Who? Who? Let him come here and fight me!" Ouyang Feng said.

"He is called Ouyang Feng," Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng scratched his head, musing, "Ouyang Feng?"

Huang Rong continued, "Right! Your martial art may be high, but you won't stand against Ouyang Feng."

Ouyang Feng's mind was totally confused; he knew the name 'Ouyang Feng' to have a very close relationship with himself, but who could that be? "Who am I?" he asked nobody in particular.

"You are you," Huang Rong sneered, "You don't know who you are, why do you ask me?"

Ouyang Feng's heart turned cold, he leaned his head sideways, trying to think hard; but his brain did not want to cooperate, he could not figure out who he was, he could not understand anything.

He was an intelligent man; oftentimes when he was alone he liked to ponder the old-age philosophical questions like, "Who am I? What am I during my lifetime? What will I become after I die?" Ouyang Feng was a smart person, his comprehension ability was outstanding; these questions sometimes came flashing in his mind. That particular day he had defeated three great martial artists but his energy passages were reversed; he would be happy but suddenly turn angry. Listening to Huang Rong he looked around in confusion and muttered, "I, who am I? Where am I? What happened to me?"

"Ouyang Feng wanted to fight you, he wanted to snatch the Nine Yin Manual away from you!" Huang Rong said.

"Where is he?" Ouyang Feng asked

Huang Rong pointed toward his own shadow and said, "Look! He is behind you!"

Ouyang Feng quickly turned around and saw his own shadow. He was shocked. "This ... this ... he ... he ..."

"He is going to beat you!" Huang Rong said.

Ouyang Feng squatted and hacked the shadow. The shadow also squatted and hacked him.

Ouyang Feng was scared, he hacked and he chopped left and right, but the shadow also moving incessantly. Ouyang Feng felt his opponent was so fierce, he turned around to evade. Facing the sunlight he did not see his shadow anymore "Where did you run?" he shouted, and ran toward the left.

Their left side was actually a barren rock wall. The sun was behind him, casting a shadow on the wall. It looked like the enemy was standing straight in front of him. Ouyang Feng sent out his right palm, striking the wall with all his might. He felt a shot of pain straight to his bone. "Very fierce!" he shouted. Immediately he sent a left kick toward the wall, and the shadow also sent him a kick. His foot hit the wall, hard. The pain was unbearable. Ouyang Feng did not dare to fight again; he turned around and ran away.

This time he was running toward the sun, the enemy disappeared. Several 'zhang's later he turned around to look, and to his surprise the enemy was right behind him. He was frightened and shouted loudly, "You can be the world's number one, I admit defeat." But the shadow was motionless.

Ouyang Feng turned around and ran again, but as soon as he turned his head he saw the shadow was closely following him. He could not run, he could not fight, his heart was stricken with terror; screaming and cursing he ran toward the valley below. A moment later his voice could still be heard from the other side of the hill, "Don't chase me, don't chase me!"

Seeing a great grand master of martial art of their generation ended up this way Huang Yaoshi and Hong

Qigong looked at each other and heaved a deep sigh. By that time Ouyang Feng's cry was intermittent, it sounded like he was already several 'li's away. The mountains and valleys echoed his cry, which sounded like a wolf's howl or a ghost's cry. The four of them were standing under the bright sunlight, yet they felt coldness creep into their hearts.

Hong Qigong sighed, "This man won't live much longer."

All of a sudden Guo Jing mumbled, "I? Who am I?"

Huang Rong knew him to be honest and upright, she was afraid he might think over this matter too much and as a result being possessed by an evil spirit; quickly she said, "You are Guo Jing, Jing Gege. Quickly think about yourself, don't think too much about other matters."

Guo Jing shivered in cold, startled, and came to his senses, "Right! Shifu, Huang Daozhu, let us go down the mountain."

"Dumb kid!" Hong Qigong scolded him, "You are still calling him Huang Daozhu? I'm going to give you several slaps on your face."

Guo Jing was startled; he saw Huang Rong was blushing, looked like she was smiling, yet she was not. He knew what to do; bashfully he called, "Father-in-law!" his face was red.

Huang Yaoshi laughed a big laugh; he pulled his daughter's hand with one hand, then pulled Guo Jing's hand with the other, said to Hong Qigong, "Qi Xiong, martial art study is inexhaustible. Today we've seen the Old Poison's martial art, which made others frightened and ashamed at the same time. Ever since Chongyang Zhenren died, there is no more the Number One Martial Artist in the World."

“Rong’er’s culinary skill is number one in the world, this I can guarantee,” Hong Qigong said.

Huang Rong pursed up her lips and laughed, “No need to praise me, let us go down the mountain; I am going to prepare some good food for you to enjoy.”

Hong Qigong, Huang Yaoshi, Guo Jing and Huang Rong four people went down Mount Hua. Huang Rong demonstrated her superb culinary skill by handpicked the ingredients and cooked some out-of-this-world quality dishes. Hong Qigong ate to his heart’s content.

That very evening four people slept in an inn; Huang Yaoshi father and daughter shared a room, while Guo Jing and Hong Qigong shared another. Early the next morning Guo Jing awoke only to find the other bed empty; Hong Qigong was nowhere to be seen. On the table top he saw three letters written with grease: ‘I am gone’; it was unclear whether the letters were written with a chicken leg’s bone or a pork hoof.

Guo Jing quickly went to the other room to alert Huang Yaoshi father and daughter. Huang Yaoshi simply sighed and said, “Qi Xiong leads a busy life, he is like a divine dragon; we can see its head but not its tail.” He turned his gaze to Jing and Rong couple and said, “Jing’er, your parents have passed away, the closest relative to you would be your Da Shifu Ke Zhen’e. Why don’t you come along with us to the Peach Blossom Island and ask your Da Shifu to act in your parents’ behalf to preside at your wedding with Rong’er?”

Guo Jing was both grieved and joyful, he could not say anything but nodded his head repeatedly. Huang Rong pursed her lips and smiled; she wanted to scold him ‘Dumb’ but looking at her father she refrained from saying so.

Three people traveled together crossing mountains and rivers, heading southeast. In less than a day, they arrived in between the two parts of Zhejiang; the Peach Blossom Island was not too far ahead. Suddenly they heard an eagle's cry high up in the air; two white eagles were seen flying from the north. Guo Jing was delighted, he whistled and the pair of eagle dived down and perched on his shoulders.

When he left Mongolia Guo Jing was such in a hurry that he did not take his eagles along; but now that they met his joy was unspeakable. He held out his hands to stroke the eagles' back and then he saw a piece of leather rolled into a small cylinder tied on the male eagle's foot. Quickly he used his dagger to take the leather and found a letter carved on it. It was written in Mongolian characters and read, 'We are going south to attack Xiangyang, Knowing my lord's loyalty to his country I braved death to inform you. I have caused my lord's mother tragic death, am so ashamed I don't have the face to see you. I want to say goodbye, am going to the west to live with my eldest brother; won't come back to my homeland forever. I wish my lord's good fortune, long life and happiness.'

The letter did not bear any signature, but as soon as he saw it Guo Jing recognized Princess Huazheng's handwriting. He translated the letter for Huang Yaoshi father and daughter, and asked, "Father-in-law, what do you think?"

Huang Yaoshi answered, "This place is close to Lin'an, but if we inform the royal government they won't necessarily believe us; even if they did, it will take a long time for them to react. This is an urgent matter; your little red horse is swift. Leave for Xiangyang today. If the garrison commander is willing to cooperate, help him defend the city. If not, kill him and lead the troops and the people to fight

the Mongolians. Rong'er and I will wait for you on the Peach Blossom Island."

Guo Jing asserted his agreement, but Huang Rong's countenance changed. There was nobody who knows her heart better than her father, so Huang Yaoshi smiled and said, "Very well, Rong'er, you can go too. Come home as soon as you are done; if the government wants to reward you, don't take it."

Huang Rong was ecstatic, "That's for sure," she said.

The young couple took their leave from their father, riding the little red horse heading west. Guo Jing was afraid they would be late; if the Mongolians had already attacked the city, he knew the massacre would be unimaginable; therefore, they continued their journey almost nonstop.

One night they stopped by an inn to spend the night. They were already nearing the two southern roads which linked towards Jiangxi. Guo Jing's mind was occupied with Huazheng's letter; he recalled their childhood together, how he, Huazheng and Toulei played together in the desert. And then his mind wandered to things that happened since until today. His heart was depressed. Huang Rong saw he was staring blankly, lost in thought; she sat by the lamp sewing her clothes.

"Rong'er," suddenly Guo Jing broke the silence, "She said she had caused my mother's tragic death that she is ashamed to see me ever again; what did she mean by that?"

"Her father had forced your mother to her death; naturally she felt sorry for that," Huang Rong reasoned.

"Mmm," Guo Jing mumbled. Lowering his head he tried to recall the scene surrounding his mother's death. Suddenly he leaped up and slap the table, "I know! So that's how it

is!" Huang Rong was startled that the needle punctured the tip of her finger and a drop of blood came out. She smiled and asked, "What is it? You made a fuss about nothing; what did you know?"

Guo Jing said, "When my mother and I opened the Khan's secret order and decided to go back south there was nobody around, yet Khan immediately found out and captured us, mother and son. In the end my mother committed suicide and died. Who reported on us? I have been thinking hard about it. Turned out ... turned out it was she."

Huang Rong shook her head, "Princess Huazheng loved you very much; it is impossible for her to betray you."

"She did not mean to," Guo Jing explained, "She was outside, accidentally heard everything my mother and I said. She told her father so that Khan would prohibit us from going back home; who would have thought that it ended up in a great tragedy?" Saying thus he sighed and sighed again.

"Because she did that unwittingly, you must go to the west to find her," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing disagreed, "I love her as my sister. She is now with her brother in the west; she has all the honor and riches she deserves; why would I go and seek her?"

Huang Rong smiled, secretly she was very happy.

Another day they arrived at the southern Jiangxi town of Shangrao; the horse trotted along the mountain road where the grass was tall. It was a desolate place. Ahead of them was a dark forest thick with trees. High above them the pair of eagles let out a loud angry cry, and then they dived down and in a blink of an eye disappeared into the

forest. Jing and Rong knew something was not right, quickly they urged their horse to run ahead.

Winding through the forest path they saw their eagles were spiraling down above a man who was trying to fight them frantically. They came closer and found out that the man was Peng Zhanglao [Elder Peng] from the Beggar Clan.

Peng Zhanglao was brandishing a steel saber trying to protect himself. The saber moved swiftly; although the eagles were brave it would be difficult for them to score victory. The female eagle made a sudden attack from behind and managed to snatch Elder Peng's head covering, showing a patch of baldness on his head. Peng Zhanglao's saber swept up, cutting down some of its feathers.

As soon as Huang Rong saw the baldness on Elder Peng's head she remembered something, "That day the eagle's breast was injured by a short arrow; turned out it was this evil beggar who did it. Afterwards the pair of eagle fought the criminal again by the 'qing long tan' [Green Dragon Shore] where they managed to snatch a piece of scalp; so it was this evil beggar."

"Surnamed Peng!" Huang Rong loudly called out, "Look who is here."

Peng Zhanglao lifted up his eye to see two people, he was scared out of his wits; he turned around and ran away. The male eagle dived down and struck the top of his head. Peng Zhanglao swung his saber to protect his head. The female eagle swooped from the side and pecked his left eye. Peng Zhanglao screamed, throwing his saber away he ran without looking where he was going and entered thick thorn bushes nearby. Peng Zhanglao valued his life more than a few stabbing pain from the thorns, so he went even

deeper into the bush. The pair of eagles still did not want to let him go, they circled above the thorn bushes.

“He has lost one eye, just let him go,” Guo Jing called his pair of eagles. Suddenly he heard a baby’s noise among the thick patch of grass nearby. “Ah!” Guo Jing cried. Quickly he dismounted his horse and parted the grass only to see a baby sat on the ground. Next to that baby he saw a pair of a woman’s feet. He parted the grass further and saw a woman wearing dark green clothing was fainted on the ground. It was none other than Mu Nianci.

Huang Rong was pleasantly surprised, “Mu Jiejie [Elder sister]!” she cried; then she stoop down to help her up. Guo Jing carried the baby in his arms. The baby’s bright eyes were staring at him intently, they did not show any sign of fear at all.

Huang Rong massaged several acupoints on Mu Nianci’s upper body; then she also pinched the acupoint next to her nose. Mu Nianci slowly regained her consciousness; she opened her eyes and saw these couple. She thought she was dreaming, “You ... you are Guo Dage [eldest brother Guo] ... Huang Jia Meizi [younger sister from the Huang family] ...”

“Sister Mu, why are you here? Are you injured?” Guo Jing asked.

Mu Nianci struggled to stand up, but she fell down again; turned out her hands and feet were bound by pieces of ropes. Huang Rong quickly took her dagger out and cut the ropes. Mu Nianci quickly took the baby from Guo Jing’s arms. After calming down herself for half a day bashfully she started to recount what had happened to her.

Turned out Mu Nianci lost her chastity to Yang Kang at the Iron Palm Peak, and she was pregnant. She had hoped to

return to her hometown at Lin'an, but when she reached Zhangrao she was too weak to continue; so she found an empty hut in the forest and took a rest. Not too long afterwards she gave birth to a baby boy. Since she had no desire to see other people, she stayed in the forest, hunting and picking up wild fruits to survive. Luckily the baby boy was so smart, so she was comforted amidst her suffering and loneliness. That particular day she took the baby out to gather some fire woods, unfortunately they met with Peng Zhanglao. Seeing her beauty Peng Zhanglao wanted to rape her. Mu Nianci's martial art was not weak, but Peng Zhanglao was one of the four Elders of the Beggar Clan; he was the peer of Lu Youjiao Zhanglao; second only to the Bangzhu [Clan Leader], Hong Qigong. Naturally Mu Nianci was not his match. She was subdued easily and her hands and feet bound. In her anger and desperation she passed out. If Jing and Rong, two people did not arrive at this exact moment, and with their sharp eyes their pair of eagles spotted their common enemy, Mu Nianci would suffer a terrible fate, molested and disgraced by this evil man.

That evening Jing and Rong spent the night at Mu Nianci's hut. When Huang Rong told her that Yang Kang had died at the Temple of the Iron Spear in Jiaying, Mu Nianci's tears came down like rain. Huang Rong understood the depth of her love to him, so Huang Rong did not dare to tell her the details surrounding his death; she only said that Yang Kang was poisoned by Ouyang Feng. "I did not lie, didn't he die because of Ouyang Feng's snake venom?" she said in her heart.

Guo Jing saw the boy was handsome, he recalled how he became sworn brothers with Yang Kang, could not refrain from heaving a deep sigh.

Amidst her tears Mu Nianci said, "Guo Dage, would you give this child a name, please?"

Guo Jing thought for a moment, then said, "His father and I were sworn brothers; it's a pity he did not finish well. I regretted the fact that I was not able to fulfill my responsibility to steer him from his wrong way of life. I hope when he grows up this child will cross over/change ('guo') the mistakes and correct ('gai') them; he will uphold justice and righteousness with all his might. I am giving him the name Yang Guo, alias Gaizhi; is it all right with you?"

Mu Nianci thanked him and said, "I hope it would be like just what Guo Dage said."

Early the next morning Guo Jing and Huang Rong presented Mu Nianci not a few silver 'liang's to help them, mother and son, to pass the days. Guo Jing urged her to return to Lin'an; but Mu Nianci shook her head. A moment later she softly said, "We, mother and son, are going to the Temple of the Iron Spear in Jiaying so he can see his father's grave."

Three people bid farewell to each other and Guo Jing and Huang Rong left with heavy hearts.

Two people headed west and arrived at the Hunan-Hubei border, then they turned north and in less than a day they arrived at Xiangyang. They saw the people were calm, the city was prosperous, there was no sign of any military activity; they knew the great Mongolian army had not arrived, they were relieved.

Xiangyang was an important city located on the northern border of the Southern Song Dynasty. It was under the authority of a garrison commander in charge of the troop to defend the border. Guo Jing thought the situation is critical, so without trying to find any inn they went directly to the Commander Lu Wende's official residence.

This commander was in charge of the whole garrison, he was a high-ranking officer. Even though Guo Jing was a marshal in the Mongolian army, but in the Southern Song Dynasty he was a nobody. How could he seek audience with a high-ranking officer just like that?

Huang Rong knew that money solved everything, so she gave a 'liang' of gold to the receptionist. Immediately the receptionist treated them nicely; he looked happy, but still could not guarantee audience that very same day. He said that the earliest opportunity would be half a month away; even then he could not guarantee the commander would be willing to receive Guo Jing.

Guo Jing's temper flared, "This is an urgent military situation, how can I wait?" he shouted.

Huang Rong quickly cast a meaningful glance toward him, pulled him to the side and whispered, "We'll come back tonight."

They found a temporary lodging, waited until the second hour that night and using their lightness kungfu they went to the commander's mansion. Commander Lu Wende was having a private party, he hired some professional female entertainer and was having fun with his concubines. Guo and Huang two people jumped down from the roof. Guo Jing cupped his fists, "Xiao Ren [little/lowly people] has an urgent military matter to report," he said.

Lu Wende was startled, "Assassin!" he shouted; shoving the female entertainers away he went hiding underneath the table.

Guo Jing stepped forward in big strides and said, "Commander, please calm down. Xiao Ren does not have any ill intention toward you." He pulled the commander back to his seat.

Lu Wende's face was pale, he kept trembling. Then he saw dozen or so soldiers with their swords and spears ready to rescue him. Huang Rong immediately took out her dagger and pointed it toward Lu Wende's chest. The soldiers yelling and shouting loudly, but nobody dared to go forward. "Tell them to shut up, we have something to say to you," Huang Rong said.

Lu Wende was still trembling all over, he signaled the soldiers to be quiet. Guo Jing silently sighed seeing the man who held authority over the troop with a heavy responsibility to guard against the enemy was such a useless fool. He reported that the Mongolian army was going to attack Xiangyang and asked the commander to deploy troops immediately and arranged the necessary defense.

In his heart Lu Wende did not believe him at all, but his mouth repeatedly said yes. Huang Rong saw he kept trembling, "Did you hear what he said?" she asked.

"I did ... I heard," Lu Wende answered.

"What did you hear?" Huang Rong pressed.

"That ... that the Jin army are planning a sneak attack, must arrange defense, must arrange defense," Lu Wende mumbled.

Huang Rong was angry, "It's the Mongolian army, not the Jins!" she said.

Lu Wende was scared out of his wits, "Mongolian army? That's impossible, that's impossible. The Mongolians have signed an agreement with our minister to fight the Jins together; they won't breach that agreement."

Huang Rong was really angry, "I said the Mongolian army! It is the Mongolian army!"

Lu Wende repeatedly nodded his head, "If Miss says it is the Mongolian army, then it is Mongolian army."

"The whole country and the people's lives are in the hand of 'Da Ren' [lit. big person - common term for government official]. Xiangyang is the Southern Song's first defense, Da Ren must really care about it," Guo Jing said.

"Right, right," Lu Wende said, "What 'lao xiong' ['old chap'] said was absolutely right."

Jing and Rong two people sighed. They leaped over the wall and went out, amidst the chaotic shouting, "Catch the assassins! Catch the assassins!"

Two people waited for two more days, but did not see any increased activity on the city wall at all. "This Commander is to be cursed!" Guo Jing said, "Father-in-law was right, I'd better kill him and think about something later."

"The enemy will arrive within the next few days," Huang Rong said, "Killing this dog government official is not enough. The city will certainly be chaotic, the troops will not have anybody to lead them; it will be difficult to fight the enemy."

Guo Jing creased his brows, "Then, what do we do?"

Huang Rong hesitated, "The 'zuo zhuan' [lit. left biography] has a story called 'xian gao kao shi' [Xian Gao presenting a gift to an army]. We might be able to follow this example."

Guo Jing was delighted, "Rong'er, reading books truly brings endless wonders. What story was that? Quickly narrate it for me. Can we do it?"

Huang Rong said, "We can do it, but it all depends on your body."

Guo Jing was puzzled, "What?"

Huang Rong did not answer, but she softly laughed.

A moment later she continued, "Very well, I'll narrate the story for you to hear. During the 'chun qiu' period [spring and autumn, ca. 770-476 BC] in the Zheng country there was a merchant whose name was Xian Gao. While doing business out of town he came across the Qin army who was going to attack the Zheng country. That time the Zhengs were not prepared, therefore, if the Qins attacked they would surely perish. Even though Xian Gao was a businessman he was also a patriot. He cooked up a plan. He dispatched a courier traveling at night to alert his country, while he himself prepared twelve oxen and requested an audience with the enemy's general. He said he represented the Zheng government to present a gift for the Qin army. The Qin's army general thought that the Zheng had already prepared to battle; he did not dare to proceed and pulled the army back to their own country."

Guo Jing was delighted, "That was a wonderful story; but what does it have to do with my body?" he asked.

Huang Rong laughed, "Didn't he use twelve oxen? Your zodiac is the ox, isn't it?"

Guo Jing threw his hands in desperation, "Good! You used a story to indirectly curse me." He stretched his fingers to tickle Huang Rong. Huang Rong laughed and ran away.

After having a good laugh, Huang Rong said, "Tonight we'll plunder the Commander's residence for gold and precious jewels. Tomorrow I will disguise myself as a male government officer and welcome the great army of

Mongolia. We'll see whether we can deceive them to withdraw their troops."

Guo Jing applauded.

That very evening two people plundered the Commander's mansion. They found Lu Wende had amassed riches as high as a mountain. They took away a large amount of gold and jewels plus a set of government official's costume; while the people inside the mansion slumbered.

Huang Rong dressed herself in the costume and she was transformed into a handsome high-ranking officer. Taking the gold and jewelry she rode the little red horse headed north.

Guo Jing was waiting for the news from Huang Rong outside the north gate about mid-day on the second day when he saw the little red horse came galloping fast; dust flying behind. Huang Rong pulled the rein; her face was ashen. With a trembling voice she said, "The Mongolian army is more than a hundred thousand strong; how can we fight them?"

Guo Jing was shocked! "That many?" he muttered.

"Looked like Genghis Khan has determined to crush the Southern Song in one swoop," Huang Rong said, "I presented the gift to the commander of their vanguard regiment. He did not know that we are already aware of their real intention; he said they were going to attack the Jins and not the Songs. When I told him point blankly he was startled and immediately held their movement and sent words to their general."

"It certainly is best if they decided to withdraw, but I am afraid ... I am afraid ...," Guo Jing said.

Huang Rong raised her beautiful eyebrows. "Judging from their preparation, they won't withdraw that easily."

"Can you think of another wonderful idea?" Guo Jing asked.

Huang Rong shook her head. "I have racked my brain for a whole day and a whole night. Brother Jing, if we fight one on one, there are probably only two or three people in the world that can defeat you; even if the enemy is ten or a hundred men strong, we won't be deterred by them; but the enemy is thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands strong; what can we do?"

Guo Jing heaved a deep sigh. "Our Great Song people are actually dozens times more than the Mongolians. If all the millions people are all of one mind; why would we fear the Mongolian army? It's a pity our government officials are cowards and fools; that the people have to suffer."

"The Mongolians are not here yet; even if they were, we can always kill some of them. If the situation becomes really critical we can still depend on the little red horse to escape. The anxiety of this world is enough to burden us down," Huang Rong said.

Guo Jing's expression changed, "Rong'er, please don't say such a thing. Both of us have already learned the art of war from the book 'Wu Mu' [General Yue Fei] left behind; how can we forget Yue Wu Mu's teachings, 'jin zhong bao guo' [with utmost loyalty serving the country]? Even though the two of us won't make significant contribution, but we must dedicate our lives to defend the country with all of our might. Even if we have to lay down our lives here, we won't let our parents' and masters' upbringing in vain."

Huang Rong sighed, "I knew early on that it would be difficult to avoid a day like this. All right! You live I live, you die I will also die!"

Once these two made a decision, their hearts were peaceful. They returned to their lodging immediately, drinking and chatting. They knew the enemy was threatening the border; they knew they might part forever, so they felt closer than in the previous days.

They were drinking until about the second hour that evening, when suddenly a commotion outside the city wall was heard. It was so loud and sounded really bad. "They are here!" Huang Rong called out.

Two people jumped and rushed to the top of the city wall to see outside the city thousands of refugees had arrived; young and old, endless streams of people rushing to the city. Who would have expected that the captain of the guards had ordered the soldiers to shut the gate tightly; not allowing the refugees to enter the city? Not too long afterwards Lu Wende sent reinforcement with bows and arrows. They started shooting toward the refugees, forcing them to withdraw from the city wall.

"The Mongolian soldiers come and kill us!" the refugees loudly shout. But the captain did not open the gate. The refugees under the city wall cried and screamed, their voices shook the sky.

Jing and Rong two people stood atop the city wall; they looked as far as their eyes could see, and saw in the distant a column of torches flickering in the wind coming near. The vanguard regiment of the Mongolian army had arrived.

Guo Jing had served under the Genghis Khan for quite a while. He knew that the Mongolian's tactic to break city walls was forcing refugees to flee into the city and attack as soon as the city gate was open. Guo Jing saw tens of thousands of refugees gathered around the city gate; as

soon as the army arrived, they would kill everybody, outside and inside the Xiangyang's city wall.

In this critical moment Guo Jing made up his mind. He stood on top of the city wall, he raised his arm and loudly shouted, "If the Mongolian army breaks Xiangyang's wall, nobody will live. Men of valor, quickly follow me to kill the enemy!"

The captain of the guards at the north gate was one of Lu Wende's trusted aides; hearing Guo Jing's shout he was angry, "A traitor trying to trouble people's mind; arrest him!"

Guo Jing leaped down from the top of the city wall; stretching his right arm he grabbed the captain's chest, lifted his body up and mounted his horse.

There were many patriots among the soldiers and people of the Central Plains. They saw how the refugees were crying bitterly outside the city wall; they were indignant. This time Guo Jing grabbed the captain they could not help but feel pleasantly surprised; obviously nobody went forward to rescue the captain.

Guo Jing barked his order, "Quick, tell the soldiers to open the gate!"

The captain was a coward; he had no alternative but to comply. The north gate was opened, and the refugees came flooding in.

Guo Jing handed out the captain to Huang Rong while he himself took a spear and went out of the city gate on the horse back. "Wait!" Huang Rong called. She took the captain's helmet and armor and put them on Guo Jing. "Use a fake imperial decree; command the troop to go out of the city," she whispered in Guo Jing's ear. With the back of her

hand Huang Rong struck the captain's acupoint and threw him by the city gate.

Guo Jing thought it was a great idea, so he shouted loud and clear, "Hear the imperial decree: Due to his incapability, the Garrison Commander Lu Wende is removed from his duty. The army is to follow me going out of the city and fight the enemy." His speech was supported by profound internal strength; so that although the city was in chaos but his voice was clearly heard above the clamoring people. For a brief moment everybody was quiet. In this panic-stricken situation who could differentiate whether the decree was real or not? Almost everybody in the army, from top to bottom, did not hold Lu Wende in high regard; they knew he was a coward, afraid of death. This time a powerful enemy was threatening their border. In this time of panic suddenly hearing that the corrupt official is being removed from his office and somebody stepping up to lead them to face the enemy, they were cheering with one voice.

Guo Jing lead about six, seven thousands of infantry and cavalry troops going out of the city. They were not observing military discipline, the troop was scattered in disorder; how could they be compared to the refined Mongolian army?

Guo Jing recalled Yue Fei's book had this principle, 'in a critical situation, use unconventional tactic', he ordered over three thousands soldiers and their sergeants to hide on the eastern hillside; as they heard the canon once, they were to shout at the top of their lungs, raising and waving flags, but did not go out to fight the enemy. Then he ordered another three thousands soldiers and their sergeants to hide on the western hillside; as they heard the canon twice, they were to do the same.

Both companies could see Guo Jing's confidence, giving up orders with ease and competence; they accepted the command and went to their respective positions.

It was already dawn when the entire refugees had entered the city. They heard the drums and the battle cry, the sound of iron horseshoes treading on the ground. They also saw the dust rising from the earth; the vanguard regiment of Mongolian army had arrived at the city wall.

Huang Rong had also donned battle armor; mounting on a horse she took a spear and rode next to Guo Jing to face death. Guo Jing gave his order loud and clear, "Open wide all four city gates! Everybody in the city hide inside the houses. Whoever dares to come out will be beheaded immediately!"

Actually he did not need to issue this order; early on everybody in the city had disappeared into the houses, while the brave soldiers had positioned themselves on the east and western hillsides. Lu Wende hid underneath a table, busily read his prayers with a trembling voice.

Hundreds of Mongolian cavalry galloped like the wind spreading out along the city wall; they saw Xiangyang's city gate was wide open and a pair of young people, a man and a woman, on horsebacks with spears in their hands. Their horses stood in front of the hanging bridge across the moat.

The vanguard regiment's 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a thousand unit] felt strange; he did not dare to proceed without authorization. Quickly he dispatched a messenger to the 'wan fu zhang' [leader of a ten thousand unit]. The 'wan fu zhang' was a veteran; listening to this strange report he rode his horse to the city wall. When he saw Guo Jing he was shocked. He had joined the expedition to the west, time and again he had seen Guo Jing's strange and

wonderful tactics in battle. Guo Jing's troops were invincible. His paratroopers flying down and breaking Samarkhand defense was a legend, making Guo Jing the object of full admiration of the whole Mongolian army; as a matter of fact, his accomplishments were still the talk of the troops. This time he saw Guo Jing was standing in front of the city, while the city looked empty and deserted; how could he dare to attack? Immediately he dismounted his horse, raised his hands in salute and called out, "Jin dao fu ma [golden blade consort], your subordinate pays his respect."

Guo Jing returned his salute, but did not say anything. That 'wan fu zhang' withdrew and flew to report to his commander-in-chief. About an hour or so later a group of riders bearing a large military banner came near; a young looking general came forward to the bridge. It was the Fourth Prince Tuolei. He shouted, "Guo Jing Anda [Mongolian term for sworn brother], how are you?"

Guo Jing moved his horse forward and said, "Tuolei Anda, so it is you?"

Whenever these two sworn brothers met in the past, they would always hugged each other in delight, but this time both of them held their horses' reins when they were still about five 'zhang's [about 50 feet or 15 meters] apart as if they had a prior agreement.

"Anda, you are leading your troop to attack my Great Song, are you not?" Guo Jing asked.

"I bear my 'fu huang's [Emperor Father] decree, I don't have liberty. I ask for your forgiveness," Tuolei replied.

Guo Jing swept his gaze across the field; he saw flags fluttering like clouds, the blades gleaming white like snow; he did not know for sure how many soldiers were there.

"Once this cavalry attacks, I, Guo Jing, will give up my life," he thought. With a clear voice he said, "Very well! Then go ahead and take my life!"

Tuolei was taken aback, he mused, "This man commands an army like a deity, truly I am not his match; much less he and I are as close as flesh and blood brothers. How could I injure this sworn brother's relationship?" He hesitated and did not know what to do.

Huang Rong turned her head and signaled with her right hand. Immediately the soldiers in the city shot a canon. As soon as they heard the canon, the soldiers on the eastern hillside raised their voices and waved their flags. Tuolei's face changed. The canon was shot again, and the soldiers on the western hillside were also shouting loudly. Tuolei thought, "Not good! I fell into his ambush."

Tulei had served under Genghis Khan fighting to the east and attacking to the west; he had been in countless battles. What major battle he had not seen? How could this little ambush by several thousands soldiers scare him? It was because during the expedition to the west Guo Jing had demonstrated wonderful and strange warfare. Tuolei was already scared of Guo Jing. Now he saw the situation was unusual, he was afraid he might fall into Guo Jing's trap. He gave an order for his troops to withdraw about thirty 'li's and pitched a camp there.

Seeing the Mongolian army retreat, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other and smiled. "Jing Gege, congratulations on your empty city tactic."

Guo Jing smiled, but his face still showed anxiety, he said, "Tuolei is smart and brave. He retreated today, but he will be back tomorrow. How would we fight him?"

Huang Rong hesitated for half a day before opened her mouth, "I have an idea, but I am afraid you love your sworn brother too much and will not be willing to do it."

Guo Jing's heart turned cold, "You want me to assassinate him?" he asked.

"He is the youngest and most beloved son of the Great Khan," Huang Rong replied, "Unlike other senior generals, he holds incomparable honors. If the Fourth Prince dies, the troops will retreat immediately."

Guo Jing lowered his head without saying anything; they turned back and entered the city. Seeing the enemy retreat, the troops marched back to the city, still in disorderly manner. Lu Wende heard how Guo Jing made the enemy retreat simply by talking; he was overjoyed and immediately paid two people a visit at their lodgings, inviting them back to his mansion for a drink.

Guo Jing wanted to discuss city defense with him, but as soon as Lu Wende heard that the Mongolian army would be back the next day his knees weakened and he was speechless for half a day. When he finally opened his mouth what he said was, "Prepare a sedan chair, I am going home. Prepare a sedan chair, I am going home." He determined to abandon the city and head south that very same night.

Guo Jing was very depressed, he could not eat. The sky gradually darkened. He heard people crying all over the city. He was afraid that by this time the next day there wouldn't be a single living Great Song people in Xiangyang. He had seen not a few times where the Mongolian troops were on a killing spree, washing the city wall they subdued with the blood of the people. He could never take the massacre of the people of Samarkhand out of his mind. "Crack!" he slapped the table with his palm and shouted,

“Rong’er, the people of old sacrificed their own family for the country; today how can I concern myself with sworn brotherhood?”

Huang Rong sighed, “This is actually a very difficult matter.”

As soon as his mind was made up, Guo Jing changed into night clothing. Together with Huang Rong they rode the little red horse toward the Mongolian camp. They stopped at a hill nearby to leave the red horse then walked the rest of the way, looking for Tuolei’s tent.

They caught two night watch guards, sealed their acupoints, and donned their uniforms. Guo Jing grew up among the Mongolian warriors; he spoke their language, and was familiar with Mongolian army regulations; so without too much effort they found the big tent where Tuolei slept.

It was a pitch black night; two people crouched down behind the big tent, peeking inside through the tent seams. They saw Tuolei was pacing back and forth, his face gloomy. Tuolei was muttering, “Guo Jing, Anda! Anda, Guo Jing.”

Guo Jing was startled; he thought his presence had been detected. He almost opened his mouth to answer when Huang Rong, who had anticipated early on what would happen, immediately covered his mouth with her hand. Guo Jing silently cursed his own stupidity, he felt partly funny, partly mad at himself.

Huang Rong whispered in his ear, “Do it now, a real man takes the bull by the horns; wavering is useless.”

Right at that moment they heard a distant sound of horse hoof galloping fast; the sound was getting closer as the rider came toward the big tent. Guo Jing knew it was an

urgent military dispatch, so he bent back down and whispered in Huang Rong's ear, "I want to listen to the military situation, it won't be too late to kill him later."

They saw the messenger dressed in yellow dismount his horse and enter the tent. He bowed to Tuolei, "Fourth Prince, a message from the Great Khan," he said.

"What did the Great Khan say?" Tuolei asked. The messenger bent his knees and started to sing. The Mongolian culture had not been developed too long; although they had written words, Genghis Khan was not literate; he could neither read nor write. The decree would be issued orally; and to avoid mistakes in the transmission, oftentimes the decree was made into a song which the messenger memorized and recited over and over along the way before finally delivering it to the recipient.

The messenger only sang three lines when Toulei and Guo Jing were both shocked; Tuolei even shed some tears. It turned out that after the expedition to the west Genghis Khan got sick; for the last few days he got worse, sometimes he lost consciousness. He summoned Tuolei to go back home as soon as he could. At the end of his message he said that he missed Guo Jing very much; and if Tuolei in the south knew his whereabouts, to invite him back north and bade farewell with the Great Khan. Khan had pardoned every single offense he had committed.

Listening to this part Guo Jing used his dagger to rip open the tent. He jumped in and called out, "Tuolei Anda, I am coming with you."

Tuolei was startled, but seeing it was Guo Jing his delight was unspeakable. Finally they both hugged each other.

The messenger recognized Guo Jing, he stepped forward and kneeled in front of Guo Jing and said, "Jin dao fu ma,

the Great Khan requested you come to the Golden Tent to see him.”

Hearing the messenger still called him ‘jin dao fu ma’ Guo Jing was anxious for fear that Huang Rong would make a big deal out of it. Immediately he jumped out through the rip on the tent and pull Huang Rong’s hand, “Rong’er, you and I will go together and return together.”

Huang Rong lowered her head but did not say anything.

“Don’t you believe me?” Guo Jing nervously asked.

Huang Rong smiled sweetly, “If you are still thinking of becoming ‘fu ma’ or ‘fu niu’ [fu ma – consort, ma – horse, niu – cow], I’ll kill you with this dagger.”

That very evening Tuolei issued an order to withdraw the army; they would be leaving at daybreak.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong went back to get the red horse and their pair of eagles, ready to leave with the army heading north the next morning.

Tuolei was afraid he would not be able to see his father, so he delegated his command to his second in command, while he himself sped up north with Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

In less than a month they had arrived at Genghis Khan’s golden tent. From the distant Tuolei saw in front of the golden tent nine big banners were still fluttering in the wind. He knew the Khan was still well; he shouted in joy and urged the horse to run faster.

Guo Jing held his rein. He recalled Khan’s generosity in raising him up; yet the same Khan had caused the tragic death of his mother. He loved and hated Khan at the same time. He lowered his head and did not say anything.

Suddenly he heard the bugle being sounded, two rows of Khan's personal guards lined up in front of the Golden Tent. Genghis Khan, wearing a black eagle's feather coat, walked out in big strides supported by Tuolei's shoulder. His footsteps were as majestic as in days past, but he was trembling slightly.

Guo Jing rushed forward and kneeled down. Genghis Khan's eyes were brimming with tears, with a trembling voice he said, "Get up, get up! I am thinking of you every day."

Guo Jing stood up. He saw the Great Khan's face was full of wrinkles; his cheeks were deep, it looked like his days in this world were numbered. Suddenly he felt he did not hate Khan that much anymore.

Genghis Khan placed his other hand on Guo Jing's left shoulder. He looked at Tuolei, then at Guo Jing, and heaved a deep sigh. He lifted up his eyes to the distant desert and stood silent, lost in thought. Guo Jing and Tuolei did not know what he was thinking, they did not dare to make any noise.

After a long time Genghis Khan sighed, "A long time ago Anda Jamuqa and I became sworn brothers; who would have thought that there came a day when I had no choice but to kill him. I have become the Great Khan; he died under my own hands. A few more days and what difference will we have? Won't I be the same with him, return to the yellow dirt? Who succeeds and who fails, in the end what difference does it make?" Tapping both men's shoulders he continued, "You two have to live in harmony from the beginning to the end; don't ever think of killing each other. Anda Jamuqa had died, the matter between us is finished; but every time I remembered our brotherhood, many, many nights I could not close my eyes to sleep."

Tuolei and Guo Jing remembered how they almost killed each other outside the Xiangyang's city gate, they were secretly ashamed.

After standing up for a while Genghis Khan felt tired. He was about to return to his tent when suddenly a small group of riders approached fast. The one in the front wore a white robe with a golden belt on his waist. As soon as Genghis Khan saw his enemy, his spirit rose.

The men held their reins quite a distance away, dismounted their horses and anxiously stepped forward. They kneeled on the ground from a far, did not dare to approach at all. Respectfully the leader said, "The Jin emissary seeks an audience with the Great Khan."

"The Jin is not willing to surrender, what does it want by sending someone to see me?" Genghis Khan angrily asked.

That emissary bowed to the ground and said, "Our lowly country realized that we have been too bold; offending the divine power of the Great Khan; a crime deserving death. We are offering one thousand pearls to appease the Great Khan's anger; we are asking the Great Khan to pardon our sins. These thousand pearls are our country's heritage treasure; we earnestly hope the Great Khan would accept this humble gift." The emissary took a big bundle from his back, produced a jade tray, and again from his sack poured innumerable pearls onto the tray. He knelt on the ground and lifted the tray high above his head with both hands.

Genghis Khan slightly squinted and looked at the pearls; those were big pearls, about the size of a fingertip each, surrounding a giant pearl in the middle of the tray. Just one pearl would worth a fortune, let alone a thousand of them. Except for the giant pearl in the middle, the rest of them were roughly of the same size. The pearls were gleaming

brilliantly under the sun light; there was a layer of rainbow-like light above the jade tray.

On a normal day Genghis Khan would love this kind of gift; but that particular day he only raised his eyebrows and to his personal guard said, "Take it." The personal guard took the jade tray.

Seeing the Great Khan accepted the gift, the emissary's joy was unbounded. He said, "The Great Khan has accepted our humble gift; our lowly nation, from the ruler to the people, are very grateful."

Genghis Khan was indignant, "Who said I accept your gift? I am going to dispatch my army to attack the Jin dogs left and right. Seize him!" His personal guards immediately surrounded the emissary and his men.

"Even if there are a thousand more pearls, it is still difficult for me to live longer!" Genghis Khan sighed. He took the jade tray from his guard and threw everything high in the air; the pearls scattered everywhere. Everybody was startled.

Many of these pearls were later picked up by the Mongolian soldiers and people; but many more were still hidden among the tall grass that hundreds of years later lucky herdsmen would find them.

Genghis Khan was indifferent, he returned to his tent.

That evening just before dusk he told Guo Jing to accompany him for a stroll along the prairie. Two people on horseback had ridden for about a dozen of 'li's when they heard the cry of eagles high above their heads. They looked up and saw Guo Jing's pair of eagles circling in the air. Genghis Khan fetched his iron bow and aimed the arrow toward the female eagle.

“Great Khan, don’t shoot!” Guo Jing cried out in alarm.

Although Genghis Khan was feeble, his hand was still quick; by the time Guo Jing cried, the arrow had already left the bow. Guo Jing secretly groaned, he was fully aware that Genghis Khan had an outstanding physical strength. Once the arrow left his bow his beloved eagle would be killed for sure. Who would have thought that the eagle was able to skew itself and sweep its wing to strike the arrow. The male eagle was angry, it let out a long cry and dived to strike Genghis Khan’s head.

“Eagle, you want to die?” Guo Jing barked and raised his whip to hit the male eagle. The male eagle saw its master was angry flew back to the sky, letting out a loud cry a pair of eagles soared to the sky.

Genghis Khan was dejected, he threw his bow and arrow to the ground and sadly said, “For dozens of years this is the first time I could not shoot an eagle down; I guess my time is drawing really near.”

Guo Jing wanted to console him but actually he did not know anything good to say. Suddenly Genghis Khan kicked his legs and his horse sped to the north. Guo Jing was afraid he would be lost, so he urged his horse to follow. The little red horse ran like the wind and in a blink of an eye they caught up with the Great Khan.

Genghis Khan held his rein; looking at all direction he suddenly said, “Jing’er, I built this great country; no other dynasty, past or future, can match its splendor. It will take one full year to travel from the center of my kingdom to the outermost part of it, east, west, south and north. Tell me, among the heroes of the world, who achieved more than I do?”

Guo Jing hesitated a moment before answering, "Great Khan's accomplishment is exceptional, no one can match it since time immemorial. However, for Great Khan one person to achieve this level of awe-inspiring power, I don't know how many bones have been piled up, how many orphans and widows out there, and how many tears have been shed?"

Genghis Khan's eyebrows were raised. He lifted his horsewhip high, ready to strike Guo Jing's head; but seeing Guo Jing imposingly looking at him without any trace of fear in his eyes, his whip stopped midair. He roared, "What did you say?"

Guo Jing said in his heart, "After today the days for me to say goodbye to the Great Khan are numbered; even if I provoke him to anger I have to make him understand what's in my heart." Therefore, fearlessly he said, "Great Khan, you raised me up and taught me, yet you also caused my mother's tragic death. This is personal grudge and gratitude; let us not talk about it. I only want to ask you: when somebody died and buried, how much land would he occupy?"

Genghis Khan was startled, but he answered anyway, "About this big," he made a circle with his whip.

Guo Jing said, "That's right. Then you killed so many people, shed so much blood, and invaded so many countries; in the end, what's the use of all that?"

Genghis Khan was silent.

Guo Jing continued, "The true measure of a real hero, the one admired by the future generation, is how much he did for the benefit of his people; who always seek the good of the common people. In my opinion, someone who killed

many people is not necessarily a hero." [Translator's note: the word 'hero' here is 'ying xiong'.]

"Are you saying that in all my life I did not do a single good deed?" Genghis Khan asked.

"Good deeds, certainly there are many, but you attacked the south and conquered the west, piling dead bodies like a mountain. Whether that act could be considered right or wrong, might be very difficult to say," Guo Jing answered. His natural disposition was simple and straightforward, he said what was in his heart.

All of his life Genghis Khan was a conceited man, nobody dared to tell him anything. This time he was scolded by a youngster, worse yet, he found it difficult to refute what Guo Jing had said. He looked back to his past, also looked around him on the horseback. He felt something is suddenly taken away from him. Half a day later, 'wah!' he spurted fresh blood to the ground.

Guo Jing was scared, he realized his tongue had been too sharp; busily he held out his hand to support the Khan and said, "Great Khan, let's go back and rest. I have been too bold and affronted you, I beg for your forgiveness."

Genghis Khan gave a slight wry smile, his face was pale like a yellow wax, he sighed, "Among the people around me, there is none who is as bold as you are, dare to tell me what you really think in your heart." Immediately his eyebrows were raised, put an arrogant face and proudly said, "I have wandered back and fro over the earth, crushing countless countries, yet in your opinion I can't be counted as a hero? Hey! It truly is childish talk!" He raised his whip and struck his horse's back, speeding back to his tent.

That very evening Genghis Khan collapsed inside his Golden Tent. Just before he died he mumbled, "Hero ... hero ..."

Apparently he had been pondering in his heart what Guo Jing had said earlier.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong paid their final respect to the Great Khan; and after bidding Tuolei farewell, they headed south that very same day.

Along the way two people saw the white bones that were scattered among the tall grass of the prairie; they could not refrain from lamenting incessantly; both were thinking that the two of them loved each other, they would live harmoniously, they did not have any regrets; yet the common people's misery was deep; they did not know the day peace and prosperity would reign on earth. It was as written:

*After the soldiers and fire become ashes,
Only then the poor village sprouting families.
No one's to know when the war is over,
Until they are buried in the cold sand under the
waning moon.*

(The end of the entire book. The narration of Guo Jing, Huang Rong, and the others' accomplishment is continued in the 'Divine Eagle, Gallant Knight'.)

THE END

The Return of the Condor Heroes

Jin Yong

Shen Diao Xia Lu (Divine Eagle, Gallant Knights)

by Jin Yong

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 - No Love under the Wind and Moon](#)

[Chapter 2 - A Friend's Son](#)

[Chapter 3 - Seeking Tutelage at Mount Zhongnan](#)

[Chapter 4 - Under the Teaching of Quanzhen Sect](#)

[Chapter 5 - Tomb of the Living Dead](#)

[Chapter 6 - The Jade Heart Manual](#)

[Chapter 7 - Chongyang's Markings](#)

[Chapter 8 - Girl in White](#)

[Chapter 9 - A Hundred Ideas to Avoid the Enemy](#)

[Chapter 10 - The Young Hero](#)

Chapter 1 - No Love under the Wind and Moon

Translated by Noodles



Within the boat were five girls picking lotuses ... a lonely heart like a string struggling to be untangled ... there are no lovers meeting under the wind and moon, the past is like a dream cut short

The fog has lightened due to the strong winds, but as time approaches, solitude lies by the stream. A mysterious song is heard from afar, seemingly from the Jiangnan province. A soft and graceful tune was played which carried across the lake's surface under the cover of the mist. Once the song had finished, a small boat appeared. Within the boat were five girls who were singing and laughing, picking lotuses into the boat. The lyrics the girls sang were from the poem *The Butterfly Loves the Flower*, written by the Song poet Ouyang Xiu, the words sung matched what the girl was feeling inside; though only sixty words were sung, the season, time of day, place, scenery and the girl's face, clothes, hair adornments, emotions were all described meticulously. The next part of the song is as if someone is narrating a scene, a love story, which is close at heart yet far away, but a love which isn't yet exhausted.

Ouyang Xiu was in Jiangnan as a court official where he lived a leisurely lifestyle, doing as he pleased, absorbed in what he was doing (reading, writing etc.,). People of Song shouldn't use their position to abuse the town's people, but it is not forbidden to use poetry for leisure. As long as a line of poetry came out, as long as there is well water to accompany a song, as the Jiangnan spring comes and the willow buds, as lotuses are on the autumn lake, everything that follows is an Ou poem.

It was during the year when Southern Song was established, and when the South Lake became popular. It was near mid autumn, as lotus leaves began to decay, and when lotus pods were at their best. A song spread across the lake to a Taoist priestess's ear. As she sat alone underneath a willow tree

quietly, the night winds forced her to place an apricot yellow robe on. The winds managed to brush a piece of dirt on her neck. She hid her feelings, as 'a lonely heart like a string struggling to be untangled'. The song gradually moves away, the song is a verse of Ouyang Xiu's Butterfly Loves a Flower. A light breeze carried two sentences; "there are no lovers meeting under the wind and moon, the past is like a dream cut short". The song comes to a rest. A smile came upon her lips.

She let out a sigh and raised a left hand revealing a bloody palm. "What do you find so funny?" she mumbled to herself. She sang to herself, without understanding the regret and sorrow within the poem.

Standing about one hundred feet away from the priestess, a plainly dressed bearded old man was standing silently unmoved but as he heard the two sentences he let out an extremely quiet sigh.

A little boat gently glides across the blue jade lake. The girls on the boat were young; three of them about fifteen or sixteen, the other two were around nine. Two of the girls were cousins. The older of the two was called Cheng Ying; the younger was called Lu Wushuang. The difference in age was about six months. The other three girls were singing songs constantly, the boat emerging from a pile of lotus leaves.

Cheng Ying said, "Cousin, can you guess who that old man is?" pointing to the man underneath the willow tree.

The hair on that man is all messed up, his beard loose, the colour of his beard was black like a crow's, indicating that he is not very old, although his face has traces of wrinkles like those of a seventy or eighty year old. He is wearing blue, around his neck is hung a bright satin bib. On it was embroidery of cat jumping at a butterfly, though the picture is now old and fading away.

Lu Wushuang said, "That strange man has sat there for half a day now, why doesn't he move?"

Cheng Ying said, "If you want to call him something, call him old grandpa. If you call him strange, surely he would get angry."

Lu Wushuang laughed, "Is he not strange? He's old yet he is still wearing a bib. If the bearded man gets up and becomes angry, that is surely something to be watched."

From within the boat a disheveled lotus was lifted up and is thrown towards the man. The boat is about ten feet from the man. Lu Wushuang is young but the strength in her arms is not feeble, the one stroke was very accurate.

Cheng Ying shouted out, "Cousin!"

It was meant to delay her but she saw the lotus was in front of her face and flew past.

As the man looked up, he saw the lotus flying towards him, but he didn't put his hand up to catch it and let it hit him in the face. He started to eat the petals from his face and clothes even though the petals were bitter, and smiled as the boat is rowed closer and eventually came ashore.

Cheng Ying ran towards the man and tugged his clothes saying, "Old grandpa, those are not nice to eat."

She reached into a pocket and pulled out a lotus flower, split it open, peeled off eighteen petals, then split open the blue green skin of the lotus and removed the bitter core, and then passed it onto the man's hand. The man put it into his mouth and started to chew, and felt an extremely sweet taste, completely different to what he had eaten before. He cracked a smile at Cheng Ying and nodded his head. Cheng Ying did this again and gave another lotus to the man. The man put it in his mouth and chewed for a while and then looked up at

the sky and said, "Follow me?" While he said this he was striding in a westerly direction.

Lu Wushuang grabbed hold of Cheng Ying's hand and said, "Cousin lets follow him."

The one of the other three girls spoke up and said, "Let's go home, if you go now, Lady will scold at us."

Lu Wushuang put on a naughty face after she saw the strange man had run away extremely quickly and said, "If you don't come, fine", then released her cousin's hand and chased after the man. Cheng Ying had come out to play with her cousin and couldn't leave her alone and so followed. The other three girls were older than them, but they didn't have the same courage and just called out a few times, as they watched the old man disappear into the mulberry forest followed by the two cousins.

The old man ran very fast, but saw that the two cousins couldn't keep up so stopped and waited. However, in the end he would not wait any longer and turned around towards them, grabbed the girls, put one underneath each of his armpits, and flew towards his destination. The two girls could only hear the sound of the wind in their ear, the stones and grass on the ground flew past their eyes. Lu Wushuang became frightened and shouted, "Let me go! Let me go!" The strange man ignored her, and instead moved even quicker. Lu Wushuang looked up, and bit fiercely on the man's hand. Teeth marks were left on the man's palm but he hid the pain. Lu Wushuang loosened her teeth. She shouted and screamed with all her life. Cheng Ying stayed quiet.

The old man hurried for a while and then put the two girls down onto the ground. They had arrived at a cemetery. Cheng Ying's face was pale white, while Lu Wushuang's face was swollen and red. Cheng Ying said, "Old grandpa, we need to go home, we don't want to play anymore!"

The strange man stared at her without flinching. Cheng Ying saw that his eyes revealed a sorrow, a lonely aura, and filled her with pity. She gently said, "If you've got no one to play with; then wait by the lake again tomorrow and I'll peel lotus for you to eat again."

The strange man sighed and said, "Yes, it has been ten years, I've had no one for company within these last ten years." His eyes were still exuding an ominous light. He then fiercely said, "Where's Yuanjun? Where do you live?"

Cheng Ying heard his serious voice, and became frightened. Quietly she said, "I, I? I don't know."

The man grabbed her arm, shook her a few times. His voice sunk, "Where's Yuanjun?" Cheng Ying was scared and wanted to cry, tears rolled from her eyes. Yet she didn't cry.

The old man clenched his teeth. "Cry, cry. You won't cry? Hmm, you were like this ten years ago. I won't let you marry him. You said you couldn't bear to leave me, so why did you leave with him. You said you were touched by my kindness, leaving me would leave you heartbroken. Ha! Those are all deceiving words! If you are really hurt, why don't you cry?"

He held onto Cheng Ying fiercely. Cheng Ying had been pale due to fright but still the tears wouldn't come. The man shook her again. Cheng Ying clenched her teeth and said to herself "I won't cry, I won't cry!"

The strange man said, "You won't even cry one tear for me, not even one. What use is my life now?" He suddenly let go of Cheng Ying, bent his legs, crouched, and thrust himself into a tombstone causing a crashing sound. He lay on the ground unconscious.

Lu Wushuang said, "Cousin, quickly escape" and grabbed hold of Cheng Ying's hand, turned and ran. Cheng Ying

hurried a few steps, but as she saw the strange man lying with blood on his head, her heart couldn't stand it and said, "Old grandpa is dead". Lu Wushuang said, "Now he's dead, won't he turn into a ghost?"

Cheng Ying gulped, scared that he would turn into a ghost, scared that he would suddenly wake up, and remembered the mad words he was saying. She saw his head covered in blood and felt pity, she comforted herself, by saying, "Old grandpa is not a ghost, I'm not scared, he won't blame me". She slowly walked towards the old man. "Grandpa, are you hurt?"

The man let out a groan. Cheng Ying got a bit braver, and tended to his wounds with a handkerchief. But the force of the collision was great, so the wound on his head was very severe. The handkerchief was soaked in blood. She used her left hand to press hard on the wound and after a while the bleeding stopped. The man began to open his eyes, and saw Cheng Ying by his side. "Why did you save me? Why don't you let me die?" As Cheng Ying saw he had awakened, her spirits raised and said softly "Does your head hurt?" The strange man shook his head. "My head doesn't hurt, my heart hurts." Cheng Ying thought this was strange thinking, "There is a large wound on his head, yet while his head doesn't hurt, his heart does." She thought no more of this as she untied her waistband and gave it to the man to tie his wound.

The man took a breath and sat up. "You agreed not to see me ever again; we are going to part now. You won't shed a single tear for me?"

Cheng Ying heard his words were full of sorrow; saw his head full of blood, eyes earnest, and couldn't help but be filled with sorrow and two drops of tears emerged. As the man saw the tears, his face changed to a more joyful expression, but

at the same time a mournful sound came out. Cheng Ying saw his sobs, her own tears like drops of pearls, rolled down her cheeks, then reached out and hugged his neck. Lu Wushuang saw how these two strangers are sobbing together, and wanted to laugh. She couldn't hold it in any longer and burst out in a laugh.

The strange man heard this, and said to the sky, "The words that came out of your mouth said you won't leave me, but as you grow older you will forget the things you've said; just remember the little white face. You laugh with real joy!" He looked down at Cheng Ying. "Yes, yes, you are Yuan, my little Yuan. I won't let you leave, I won't let you leave with the little white face", as he held tightly onto Cheng Ying. Lu Wushuang saw he had become deeply disturbed and didn't dare to laugh again.

"Yuan, I've finally found you. Let's go home, from now on you will follow father." Cheng Ying said, "Old grandpa, my father died a long time ago." The strange man said, "I know, I know. I'm your stepfather, you don't recognize me?" Ying shook her head. "I don't have a stepfather."

The strange man gave a howl, and pushed Ying away. "Yuan, you don't even recognize step father?" Ying said, "Old grandpa, my name is Cheng Ying, not your Yuan."

"You're not Ah Yuan? You are not Ah Yuan?" he was expressionless for half an hour. "Hmm, around twenty years ago Ah Yuan was your age. Now Yuan has grown up and doesn't need father anymore. The only thing in your heart is Lu Zhanyuan, that swine."

Wushuang sighed knowingly; "Lu Zhanyuan?"

The man asked, "You know him, don't you?? She shook her head smiling, "I just recognized that man is my uncle." The man's complexion changed to a vengeful colour. He grabbed

hold of Wushuang and asked, "Where is that swine? Lead me to him."

Though Wushuang is scared inside, she put on a smile and said, "My uncle lives close by. You really want to find him?"

"Yes, yes. I've been searching for him for three days, so I could settle my debt with that swine. Little girl lead me to him and old grandpa won't trouble you." As he said this, his voice changed tone from angry to gentle and released his grasp. She used her right hand to touch her sore left arm.

"You really hurt me. I don't know where he lives anymore." The man's eyebrows rose, as if he was about to go mad again, but thought it is not right to force the little girl, and put on a clown like smile. He put his hand in his sleeve and said, "It was grandpa's fault. You don't have to follow me. Grandpa has some sweets for you." He reached around his sleeve but couldn't find any sweets. Wushuang smiled and clapped.

"You don't have any sweets, aren't you ashamed to lie? Alright, my uncle lives near here." She pointed to two faraway giant trees. "It's near there."

The man reached out his long arm and carried the girls underneath his armpits again, and hurriedly flew towards the two trees. He followed the path in front, until there is a small obstruction but cleared it in a leap. In a flash, the three of them were by the two trees. The strange man dropped the two girls, and saw two grand tombs below the trees. On the tombstone was written: "Here lies the grave of Lu Zhanyuan." On another was written "Here lies the wife of Lu." The grass around the path to the tombs was knee deep, indicating that the tombs had been here a long time.

The man just stared at the tombstone and said, "Lu Zhanyuan is dead... how long ago?" Wushuang laughed as

she replied, "Three years ago."

"He deserved to die, good. What a pity that he didn't die beneath my hands!" he said as he laughed at the sky. The laugh could be heard from faraway, but the laugh was a regretful, a lamenting laugh, not one of joy.

It was deep within the night, the field of grass covered by fog. Wushuang tugged at her cousin's sleeve. "Let's go now." The strange man said, "The little white face is dead. Ah Yuan, where can you go now? I'll take you back to Dali. Hey little girl, take me to your dead uncle's wife."

Wushuang pointed to the tombstone, "Can't you see? My aunt also died." The man picked himself up and his voice like thunder, shouted, "Are those words real or a lie? She... she really is dead?" Wushuang's face turned pale, and in a quivering voice said "Father said not long after uncle died, my aunt followed. I don't know anymore, I don't know. Don't shout at me, I'm scared!"

The man beat his chest and shouted, "She's dead... she's dead? No, you can't die before seeing me again. I followed your instructions; ten years later, we'll meet again. You didn't wait for me?" He shouted wildly and jumped around madly, his cries like a wild tiger. He swept his leg across the right tree, which shook the branches of the tree. Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying held each other tightly and retreated a few steps not daring to be closer. The man suddenly grabbed hold of one of the trees, and shook it violently, and tried to pull it out. The tree is around a thousand pounds so how could he pick it up? "You promised, but now you break it? You said we would meet again. Does the promise not count?" After a shout, the noise became quieter. He crouched down, and moved his chi through his two arms, his head gradually heated up and steam arose, the muscles in his arm clenched, and his back straightened. He shouted "Rise!" As the tree

was being pulled, a strange noise occurred. Amidst the noise, there were now two pieces of the tree. He picked up one part of the tree and stood still before saying quietly, "Die! Die!" He exerted some strength and flung the piece of tree away far away. Like the handle of an umbrella it was flying through the air. He stood in front of the tomb and mumbled, "You are right, the wife of Lu is indeed Ah Yuan." His eye blurred, the two tombs had become the image of two people. One of them a smiling young girl with the pupils in the eyes full of hope; the other is well dressed, collected young man. The couple was sitting together.

The strange man opened his eyes and said, "You seduced my daughter, I'll kill you with my finger." He stretched out his right hand and finger (the shi finger), stood up straight, blocking the path of the young man. A severe pain went through his shi finger and he released the pain. It hit the tombstone. However the image of the young man remained. The strange man shouted: "Where can you escape to now?" He struck out twice with his left palm, making two sounds, aimed at the same tombstone. He kept on hitting out, with each palm getting more severe each time. After ten palms, blood began to seep through. Cheng Ying could no longer hold back and shouted, "Old grandpa, stop fighting, you are going to hurt yourself."

He laughed and shouted back, "I'm not hurt, I'm going to kill the swine Lu Zhanyuan." He then laughed heartily, stopped and then said: "I must see your face, I must." With ferocious strength in his two hands he plunged ten fingers into the ground of Mrs. Lu's tomb. He pulled back with two arms, and two lumps of the ground came with him. His two palms like an iron spade, he dug lump after lump out of the ground.

The two cousin's faces had become colourless, and they had the chance to escape. While the man was busy digging, they could leave unnoticed. The two girls hurried around a few

bends, and as they saw the man didn't follow, they relaxed a bit. The two girls were unfamiliar with the place, so they looked for locals to help them along the road. They walked deep into the night when they eventually found their way back to the Lu house.

Wushuang shouted, "Something terrible is happening, something bad! A madman is digging up the graves of uncle and aunt!" She ran into the hall, only to see her father Lu Liding raise his head and stare at the wall. Ying followed into the hall, and their eyes followed Lu Liding's, and saw three sets of palm prints, two at the top, two in the middle, below five, in total there were nine. Each one was printed with blood. Lu Liding saw his daughter and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"There is a madman digging up the graves of uncle and aunt," said Wushuang. Her father stood up: "Nonsense!"

"Uncle, it's true!" Cheng Ying replied. Lu Liding knew what her daughter was like, mischievous and naughty but Cheng Ying never tells lies. "What has happened?"

Wushuang told her father what happened. Her father was troubled, and before she finished, had picked up a blade and hurriedly headed for the graves. When he got there, not only did he see the graves had been disturbed, but the coffins had been opened. When he heard that someone was digging up the graves, he had known what to expect, but when he saw it with his own eyes, his heart skipped a beat. There was no sign of the bodies, the ash in the coffins, paper money, cotton cushions were all in a mess. It must be a god, and then saw on the lids of the coffins were traces of what looks like an iron tool. He looked in despair at the state of the graves. He didn't ask his daughter who did this, but wondered who could have such debts with his brother and

sister-in-law that even after their deaths, their graves and corpses wouldn't be left alone. He held tightly to his knife.

He knew his brother had taught the martial arts. He was a careful, generous, dependable man, who didn't dabble in Jianghu affairs. He was a learned man. After he circled the area, and couldn't find any traces of the suspect, he waited for half an hour before finally returning to his home.

He approached the main hall. He sat down on a chair and placed his knife by his side, and stared at the nine blood prints on the wall. He thought, "Before brother died, he said he had an enemy, a Taoist priestess, named Li Mochou, with the nickname 'Scarlet Serpent Deity', whose kung fu was extremely high. She was cruel and vindictive person. He anticipated that after ten years of marriage, she would come and seek revenge on the couple. At the time Lu had said: 'My illness is not getting better; I guess the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' cannot take her revenge. In three years, it will be the time. You must persuade my wife to go into hiding.'" I had promised him, but who could have guessed that on the night he had passed away, sister-in-law would cut her throat? Brother had passed away three years ago, and the time approaches. The couple had passed away so why does she still come? Brother also said that before the priestess kills, she would place bloody handprints on the wall on the target's home, with one print meaning one life. My home only has seven people in total so why nine prints? The two prints are for my brother and sister-in-law, but now they are dead she must have dispatched people to ravage their grave. I've been at home all day, so how did that evil witch manage to place the prints? Could she get in here without disturbing even gods and ghosts? He shivered.

Soft footsteps can be heard behind him, a small soft pair of hands covered his eyes. He recognized it was his daughter's voice when she spoke. "Father, who am I?"

Lu Wushuang had always been close to her father. When she was three years old, she played this game with him. This made her parents laugh. He was sad, so now his daughter is trying to cheer him up. Under normal circumstances this would have worked. But today it would be no use as he pulled his daughter's hands away. "Father has no time to play, let's go inside and play!"

Lu Wushuang stood there. She always had the love of her father and now he had no time for her. She let out a sigh and wanted to share in her father's misery only to see the male servant Ah Gen hastily arriving.

"There's a guest outside master."

"You tell them I'm not at home."

"Master, she doesn't want to see you. She just wants to spend the night here."

Lu Liding said, "Who? Are they women?"

"No, it's a mother with two small boys. They've been waiting a long time."

When Lu Liding heard it was a mother with her two sons, he was able to relax a bit. "It's not a Taoist priestess?"

Ah Gen shook his head, "No. It's a plainly dressed woman, she looks like a mother of a respectable family."

"Alright, take them to the guest room and treat them well. Give them something to eat." Ah Gen hurriedly went out. Lu Wushuang said, "I'm going as well" as she hastily exited. Lu Liding stood up, he wanted to go inside to discuss how to face this enemy with his wife. He made his way into the hall. He showed her the prints, and told her about the missing corpses. Mistress Lu pondered and said, "We are going to have to hide the two girls?"

Master Lu pointed at the wall. "The girls are inside, but I fear that the monster that did this won't let them escape so easily. We have practiced kung fu for several years now, when the person enters our home; remember not to show any emotion."

Mistress Lu stared at the wall, "There are nine prints? We only have seven people within the household." As soon as Lu Liding heard this, his limbs went numb and looked at his wife startled, and cried. He reached out and held her arms.

"Dear, when the time comes, there is no need to be afraid. The top two palm prints are for Brother and his wife, the middle two are ours. In the last group, two are Ying and Wushuang, there are three are for Ah Gen and our two maids. Blood will fill this house tonight."

Mistress Lu quivered and said, "Brother and sister-in-law?"

"I don't know what deep debt the witch is after, but brother and his wife are dead. She has sent people to dig up the grave and disturb the corpses."

"You are saying that madman was sent by her?"

"Correct."

Mistress Lu saw that her husband's head was covered with sweat. "Why don't you go into your room, clean yourself up, and rest a while before we discuss this again."

Lu and his wife went into their room. "Wife, today it will be hard for the Lu family to avoid death, but if we survive we will honour Brother and sister-in-law's name." "You are correct," replied mistress Lu.

The two of them thought, Lu Liding is not a famous name, but the name Lu Zhanyuan is. The He Yuanjun couple was famous throughout the Jianghu world. The Lu name was

famous and no one in the Jianghu dared make fun of the name.

The two of them went to the back garden after they heard a sudden sound from the east wall. Near the top of the wall was a person. Lu stepped in front to shield his wife. He looked up and saw a young boy sitting on the wall, trying to pick a ling flower. By his leg, someone shouted out, "Careful, don't fall." It was Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang and a boy picking flowers by the wall.

Lu thought, "The girls are naughty, getting someone else to do their errands."

The boy on the wall managed to pick a flower. Wushuang shouted, "Give it to me-give it to me!" The boy smiled, and threw it to Cheng Ying. Cheng Ying caught it and gave it to her cousin. Lu Wushuang was angry, and threw the flower onto the ground. She took a few steps, and angrily shouted, "Who cares? I don't want it anymore."

Lu and his wife saw how the kids were playing and arguing, and sighed. They withdrew to their room. Cheng Ying saw Wushuang crush the flower and asked, "Cousin, why are you angry?"

"I don't want his. I'll pick one myself." As she said this, she moved her right foot a little, and leapt. She hung onto a purple cane hanging from the tree. She used her strength and managed to leap up higher a few times, and landed on a silver branch of the Cinnamomum cassia tree (one of the group of aromatic trees like camphor and cinnamon) The boy on the wall clapped. "So you are joining me!"

Wushuang swung on the branch a few times and released her grip, throwing herself towards the wall. Although she has learned a little lightness kung fu, this leap was very dangerous. But since she was angry with the boy giving the

flower to Ying and not her, she wanted to keep her pride in front of the boy. She wasn't used to jumping such a distance. The boy gulped and said, "Stretch your hand out" as he reached out. If the boy hadn't reached out, Wushuang would have made it, but when she saw his hand in midair she shouted, "Move!" and leaned to the side to avoid his hands. The ability to twist in the air is part of a higher level of kung fu; she had seen her dad perform this once before, but without the supervision of her parents how could she try it? As she turned, her hand wasn't able to reach the top of the wall. She shouted, "Oh no!" before falling to the ground. Another boy near the foot of the wall reached out to catch her. The wall was about ten feet tall. Though Wushuang was light, the force of her hitting the ground would still be high. The boy managed to grab her waist, the both of them falling onto the ground. Only to hear two "ka ka" noises, as the bone in Lu Wushuang's left leg snapped. The boy changed colour to that of the flowers on the stone altar, as blood spouted out. Cheng Ying wanted to help the boy who tried stopping the disaster up. The boy got up, and pressed hard on the heavy wound. Wushuang had already fainted. Cheng Ying picked up her cousin and shouted, "Uncle, aunt, hurry!"

The couple rushed out of their rooms to see to injured children, as well as a middle-aged woman who also rushed out from her room. It was the woman who had come to ask for shelter for the night. They saw her pick up the injured children and rush into the hall. Ignoring her own child's injuries, she tended to Lu Wushuang's leg, intending to put the snapped bone back in place. Mistress Lu fetched a piece of cloth and tied it around the boy's head before going to see her daughter. The woman then pressed down on the "bai hai" (white sea) pressure point and the "wei zhong" (middle gathering) pressure point on Lu Wushuang's leg to ease the pain, as she place one hand each on the broken pieces of bone, then put the bone into place. Lu Liding saw her

movements were swift, her pressure point "dim yue" kung fu was at a respectable level, and his curiosity was raised. "Who are you? Why did you come here?" The woman was busy tending to Wushuang's leg and didn't reply to the questions.

At the same time, a laugh was heard on the roof. "I'm here to take the nine lives of the Lu family, come out."

The woman heard the chilling laugh from the rooftop, swallowed, and continued to tend to Wushuang's injuries. As she twisted her hands, Wushuang let out a scream in sheer pain and she fainted again.

Everyone went outside, only to see a young priestess standing by the overhang of the roof, the moonlight lit up her face. She was about fifteen or sixteen years of age, and a long sword with a blood red sash hung on her back, the sash moving in the wind.

Lu Liding said calmly, "I'm Lu Liding. Are you under the command of priestess Li?"

The priestess's lips were skewed when she replied, "It's good that you know. Go collect your wife and daughter, kill them and then kill yourself to spare me the trouble."

The words were said with coldness, at a speed neither too slow nor fast, and with disregard for the audience. When Lu Liding heard these words, his body quivered. "You...you" He wanted to jump on to the roof and fight the girl, but she was young and was just a girl, how could he fight her? As he hesitated, suddenly something swept passed his body; it was the woman who had come to ask for shelter, in her hand was a long sword, ready to fight that young priestess.

The woman wore a grey traditional dress, the priestess an apricot yellow robe. Under the moonlight, the images of grey and yellow resembled some sort of flying dance; three

flashes of light were produced as three sword-clashing sounds were made. Lu Liding's skills were taught by his brother, and though he has never fought an enemy before, his eyes weren't poor, and saw every stance of the two fighters. He saw the sword held in the priestess's hand turned from defense into attack, attack into defense, her sword stances were without mercy. The woman's sword matched hers. The sounds of clashing blades were heard, both swords turned over, suddenly the little priestess's sword flew into midair. The little priestess chased after her sword, her face losing its calmness and she shouted out, "I'm under the orders of my master to take the lives of the Lu family. Who are you, and why are you meddling in these affairs?"

The woman gave out a cold laugh and said, "It seems like your master has great ability, she went out to find Lu Zhanyuan to settle her debts, but she knew that he was dead, so she's taking out her anger on his loved ones, isn't that correct?"

The little priestess wielded three small silver needles with her right hand and threw them ferociously, two at the woman, one at Lu Liding who was standing in the middle of the courtyard. It was such an unexpected movement. As the woman fended off two needles with her sword, Lu Liding managed to catch the other needle with two fingers. The little priestess laughed out coldly and jumped down from the building, and quickly flew away hearing the chasing footsteps.

The woman jumped down to the courtyard, and saw Lu Liding was still holding the silver needles. She shouted, "Drop it!" Lu Liding hesitated before doing so. She cut off a piece of her belt and wrapped it firmly around the wound on his right hand.

Lu Liding jumped. "The needles have poison on them?"

The woman replied, "Nothing can compare to this poison." She gave him a granule of medicine to take. Lu Liding felt his arms swelling and numbing. The woman used her sword tip to cut deeply into the two infected fingers of Lu, and saw drops of black blood seeping out.

Lu Liding jumped and thought to himself, "My finger wasn't cut, I only touched the silver needles and the effects are so severe. If the needles actually cut me then my life would surely have been gone." He then looked in the direction of the woman and said, "I have eyes but I fail to see TiaShan Mountain*, please, can madam tell me her name?" (*This phrase basically means he didn't see his benefactors even though they were in front of him.)

The woman replied, "My husband is named Wu, Wu Santong." Lu got up in awe and said, "So it is Madam Wu. I've heard the Wu's are under the order of Reverend Yideng in the south in Dali, is that right?"

"You are right. Reverend Yideng is indeed my husband's teacher. I have learned a little in terms of martial arts from my husband, who is nothing more than a farmer. I hope master Lu won't laugh."

Lu thanked her for the helping hand. He had heard from his brother, out of all the martial artists he had seen, those under the teachings of Reverend Yideng were the best. After Yideng had abdicated as the ruler of Dali, he became a monk and had four students, "Fisherman, Woodsman, Farmer and Scholar". The farmer was called Wu Santong. Wu disliked his brother, but at the time his brother had not told him how the feud between them started. Why did Madam Wu not treat them as enemies but instead help them by fighting off the Scarlet Serpent Deity's disciple? The reasons are hard to fathom.

Everyone went back to the main hall. Lu Liding carried his daughter inside, and saw she had regained her consciousness, her face now white. She's holding in the pain and refraining from crying, not particularly aware.

Madam Wu said, "Now that witch's disciple had escaped, she herself will come here. Master Lu, I'm not looking down on you but even if you and your wife joined forces with me, we are never going to be able to compete with her. But even if we run it will be no use. We might as well wait for her and let fate decide."

Mistress Lu then asked, "Who exactly is the witch waiting for? And what feud has our family with her?" Madam Wu looked Lu Liding in the eye and said, "Master Lu never mentioned this before?"

Mistress Lu replied, "He only mentioned that it was something to do with brother and sister-in-law, something to do with love affairs, he isn't exactly sure himself."

Madam Wu sighed, "It must be something to do with that. I'm an outsider so it is not my place to speak. Master Lu's brother went to Dali ten years ago. Li Mochou, the Scarlet Serpent Deity is now infamous throughout the Jianghu world, but ten years ago she was a gentle beauty, and wasn't yet a priestess. This was before she sinned, after she saw your brother and fell under the enchantment of love. After many twists and turns, your brother eventually married Ah Yuanjun. However this wasn't any fault of Yuanjun. This kind of business is best kept under wraps; it's just today's events have forced me to retell these events. Yuanjun was my stepdaughter."

The Lu couple simultaneously gave out an understanding sigh. Madam Wu touched her injured son's shoulder in comfort. She stared into the flame of a candle and carried on.

"Your sister-in-law He Yuanjun was an orphan. We took her in and she became our stepdaughter. We loved her dearly. Eventually she met your brother, and they fell in love with each other, and wanted to get married. Firstly, my husband didn't want her to leave the family; secondly, he was too strict saying Jiangnan people were crafty and cunning; they can't be relied upon and forbade the wedding. Ah Yuan secretly ran away with your brother. On the wedding day, both my husband and Li Mochou went to find the couple and cause them trouble. Luckily, a high monk from the Dali Sky Dragon temple passed by and took the matter in his own hands. He requested, on his behalf, that they would grant the couple ten years of peace. Li Mochou and my husband agreed to this. My husband was angry, and after this event he became confused and disturbed; his teacher, fellow students and even I were unable to persuade him, or understand him. He just counted down the ten-year deadline. According to my calculations, today ten years exactly has passed. It was hard to predict that the couple would not enjoy the ten years of bliss that they had been granted." She dropped her head after she finished, her whole face changed to a mournful look.

Lu Liding said, "So according to what you have said, the person who dug up brother and sister-in-law's grave was your husband."

Madam Wu replied in shame, "After hearing what the two misses have said, it is indeed my husband."

Lu shaking his head said, "Your husband's actions are not trivial. There wasn't a feud in the first place. Even if there was, now that my brother and sister are dead, things should be bygones. But now he's stolen the corpses, is that the action of a hero?"

When it comes to status, the Wu couple is higher than that of Lu's. But now that his heart is full of fury, his words did not carry the proper tone of respect.

Madam Wu sighed, "Master Lu is right to blame my husband. He is confused and has stopped talking; he doesn't deserve any pity. I've brought my two children along here, to try and stop the wrong doings of my husband. Right now, I'm the only person who he takes any notice of." She looked at her two children and said, "Go and kowtow (kneel down) in front of Master and Mistress Lu to apologize for your father." The boys did as they were told.

Mistress Lu gave a hand to help the boys up and asked what their names were. The one who threw himself down and cut his forehead was called Wu Dunru, the older brother; the younger was called Wu Xiuwen. The difference in age was one year, one of them twelve, the other eleven. The two had been taught martial arts and were relatively learned. Madam Wu and her husband were getting old, and hoped that they could reach a good level of kung fu and schooling, so they could withhold the Wu name in Wuxia, and not just rely on it.

Madam Wu did not divulge the darker reason for her husband's behavior. She sighed and thought, "Those lies are only good for now. I mustn't tell anyone about the truth." In reality, when Yuanjun had grown to eighteen or nineteen she had become a beautiful woman. The feelings that Wu Santong had for her did not limit itself to the father daughter relationship. He was considered a hero in the Jianghu world so he could do nothing and he was relatively content. But when he saw that she had fallen in love with a Jiangnan youngster, he was angry that it wasn't him. That's why he said Jiangnan people are untrustworthy and unreliable, to get rid of his love rival. The reason he said this was that he had suffered the craftiness of Huang Rong. She tricked him into replacing Guo Jing in pushing down an ox and large stone,

and couldn't escape afterward. Although this matter was cleared up later, the words "Jiangnan people are untrustworthy" were etched into his head.

Madam Wu then said, "To think that before my husband had arrived, Li Mochou is already here seeking revenge." As she said this, a voice was heard from the roof.

"Ru'er, Wen'er, come with me!"

The words were unexpected, as no footsteps had been heard on the rooftop, yet someone was up there calling. The Lu couple gulped as they realized it was Wu Santong. Cheng Ying and Wushuang also recognized it was the weird lotus eating man. They saw a blur, as Wu Santong flew down and grabbed his sons, one in each hand before returning to the roof. Madam Wu shouted, "Hey, why don't you come and see master and mistress Lu, and return the corpses that you took from them? Hurry." Wu Santong did not reply as he had already long gone.

He ran wildly for a while, and hurriedly entered a forest. He put down Xiuwen but still held on to Dunru, as his trace disappeared and his son was left alone in the forest. As Xiuwen saw that his father had gone over hundred feet away, he shouted, "Father, father!" He heard a voice far away.

"Wait there. I'll come back for you." Wu Xiuwen knew his father was always acting strange, and doesn't plan anything. Although he was frightened alone in the black forest, he thought his father won't be long and sat down on a log. After a long while, his father still hadn't come. He said to himself, "I'll go and find mother!" as he headed back to the Lu home.

Jiangnan is a place where roads lead in all directions, where paths are twisty and windy; it is hard to travel by day so what about traveling at night? As he ran, the paths got narrower, and on numerous times he stepped into the middle of muddy

fields. Eventually he came across a forest, and realized he had gone in circles. He wanted to cry, and shouted, "Father, father! Mother... mother!" Who would hear him in the middle of the night? He heard a few noises, and recognized it was the call of a falcon. He once heard that falcons love to count the brows on people and if they counted clearly, it would be an ominous sign for the person. Immediately he spat out some saliva to wet his fingers, and then moistened his brow, so that it would be difficult for the falcon to count. But the falcon did not stop calling, He hid behind the trunk of a tree, keeping his brows covered with his finger, his heart jumping, not daring to move. After a while he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

In the morning, in a sleepy haze, he heard few clear screeches. He opened his eyes and looked above, and saw two extremely big white eagles hovering, wings spread out, looking magnificent. He had never seen this type of eagle before, his interest was raised and shouted, "Brother, come look at the big eagle," not realizing he was alone, as he was always by his brother's side.

Suddenly he heard two whistles behind him; the sound was gentle and soft, coming from the mouth of a little girl. The two eagles circled twice before descending. Wu Xiuwen turned around and saw a young girl, who was raising her arm to the sky. The eagles came down by her side. The girl gave one look to Wu Xiuwen and then stroked her two eagles saying, "Good eagle...clever eagle." Wu Xiuwen thought, "So the two eagles are her eagles. He looked at the eagles, which were exuding an air of superiority, standing taller than the girl. He walked up to the girl and asked, "Are those eagles yours?"

The girl pouted, and her face changed color. "I don't recognize you. I'm not going to play with you."

Wu Xiuwen touched the backs of the eagles without any intentions. The girl whistled, and the eagles raised their left wing. There was a high force behind the wings, and Xiuwen didn't guard against it; he ended up on the ground. He rolled around on the ground, eyes fixed on the eagles, and said admiringly, "Those eagles are great and they really listen to you. I'll get father to catch me one so I can train it."

"Huh, you think your father can catch one?"

Wu Xiuwen was just curious, but each time she caused embarrassment. He looked at her closely; she was wearing an elegant green dress, a pearl necklace hung around her neck, her face was white, almost like butter, her eyes moving and face delicate. Wu Xiuwen thought she was extremely beautiful, and wanted to approach her but saw she was cold, and stayed back in fear. The girl stroked the eagles back with her right hand, and examined Wu Xiuwen. "What's your name? Why are you alone?"

"My name is Wu Xiuwen. I'm waiting here for my father. What about you, what's your name?"

"I don't play with naughty boys," said the girl as she turned her back and walked away.

Xiuwen stood there before saying, "I'm not a naughty boy", and trying to chase the girl at the same time. He saw that the girl was younger than him by two, three years; her steps aren't very large and he should catch up with her very soon. Though he used his lightness kung fu, the girl's steps were very fast, and in a flash a distance of ten feet was between them. The girl hurried a few steps and then shouted back, "Hey, can you catch me?" "Of course", replied Xiuwen and immediately stepped up his efforts. The girl turned and ran, and then hid behind a tree. Wu Xiuwen followed. As soon as he was near, she suddenly stretched out her left foot, and tripped him up. He didn't anticipate this and fell forward. He

wanted to use the "Iron Tree Stump Stance" but the girl stuck out her right foot and kicked him fiercely in the behind. Wu Xiuwen fell down, his nose hitting a stone as he fell, causing a nose bleed and blood poured over his clothes. When she saw the blood, she stopped, and wanted to run away and leave the boy there. Suddenly, a voice from behind said, "Fu'er, you are bullying again, aren't you?"

"Who says? He just tripped by himself, what does it have to do with me? Don't listen to what father says." she replied without turning back. Wu Xiuwen stood up and held his nose. Although it didn't really hurt, the blood made him nervous. As he heard the voice talking to the girl, he turned around and saw an old man holding a metal walking staff. The hair on the man's temple was like frost, his appearance was strange, his eyes were white, he was a blind man. He heard the man laugh and say, "Just because I'm blind doesn't mean you can lie to me, I can hear everything. You act terribly now, so what's going to happen when you get older?"

She walked over to the man and held his hand, and gently said, "Grandpa, don't listen to what father says, okay. He tripped and he's got a nose bleed. Can you stop the bleeding?"

The old man walked forward and grabbed Wu Xiuwen's arm, then stretched out his right hand and used his finger to press on the "Wen Xiang Xue" (Smell Fragrant) pressure point by the nose. Wu Xiuwen's nosebleed was beginning to slowly stop, and as he touched his nose a few times, it did. He felt the man's fingers were like iron pliers, long and stiff, holding his arm tightly. He was scared, and didn't move; as soon as his hand was released, he used the grabbing hand kung fu taught by his mother, he pushed out a palm in a semi circle to repel the man. The old man wasn't anticipating this kid would strike out, and was hit by a sweetly timed palm. The man didn't react and gave out an approving sigh, while

holding to his wrist. Wu Xiuwen tried to distribute his chi in case he can't escape and has to fight.

The old man said, "Little fella, don't be scared. What's your name?"

"My name is Wu."

"Your accent is not local. Where are you from? Where are your parents?" As the man said this he released his wrist. When he mentioned parents, Wu Xiuwen remembered that he has been away from his parents for a night and didn't know how they were. He wanted to cry. When the girl saw his expression she sang, "Ashamed dog, eyes are red, ready to cry!"

Wu angrily replied, "I'm not going to cry again!"

The family was waiting at the Lu home for the enemy, when his father came and took him and his brother away; he spent a night alone in the forest. He was getting aggravated, his words were jumbled but the old man managed to make out seventy or eighty percent of it. They were from Dali, his father's name is Wu Santong; his most refined kung fu was the "Solitary Yang Finger".

"Your father is a disciple of Reverend Yideng, correct?"

"Yes, you know our emperor? You've seen him? I've never seen him," said Wu Xiuwen.

Wu Santong was the head of the Imperial Wood Transport, when the Emperor was Duan Zhi. The emperor became a monk, with the new name "Yideng". But Wu Santong couldn't let the past go and still called him Emperor. That's why his sons also refer to him as Emperor.

"I haven't yet had the luck to meet the legendary "Southern Emperor". This girl's parents were the receivers of great

kindness from him. That means we are not really strangers. Do you know who your mother's enemy is?"

"I heard from mother and master Lu that it's Scarlet something, something Chou.

The old man raised his head and mumbled, "Scarlet something?" He slammed his staff and said loudly, "Could it be the Scarlet Serpent Deity, Li Mochou?"

"Yes! It's the Scarlet Serpent Deity!" The old man's complexion changed completely. He said, "You two play here. Don't leave. I'll go and take a look."

The little girl said, "Grandpa, I want to come."

"Me too," added the boy.

The old man said, "No! Never! That witch is really powerful; I can't beat her. But when there are friends in need, one must go. You must listen." He walked away, his staff digging into the ground as he took each step.

Wu Xiuwen said respectfully, "Old Grandpa is blind and lame, yet he moves so fast."

The girl bent her lips and said, "What's so strange? If you saw my father's and mother's lightness kung fu you would be even more shocked."

"Your father and mother are also blind and lame?"

The girl angrily replied, "Your parents are blind and lame!"

It was now deep into the day, the farmers are in their fields; every man and woman was singing folk songs. He was originally from these parts. Though he was blind, he walked and asked for help at the same time, and in not too long he had reached the home of the Lu's. From afar he heard the exchange of blades, the "ping ping pang pang" clashing

indicating some ferocious stances. The Lu Zhanyuan family is a famous family in this area and he's just commoner. Although he is now a fairly famous martial artist he didn't approach and he also knew that he wasn't the Scarlet Serpent Deity's match. He knew that rushing in would just produce another corpse. But the matter involved a disciple of the Reverend Yideng and his debts to him were too many to measure (not exactly his debts, but what the girl's parents owed Yideng), he couldn't just stand by. He used more energy, and hurried to the village.

He heard fierce fighting on the roof involving four people. He turned his ear to one side to listen more carefully. From the breathing and sword clashing sounds, he could tell it was one versus three, though the three couldn't fend off the enemy and were losing.

Last night Wu Santong had carried off his sons, and the Lu couple wondered what he was up to now.

Madam Wu's spirits raised and said, "Though my husband acts wildly, when in danger he thinks clearly." Mistress Lu asked what she meant by this. Madam Wu replied, "I don't know if I've guessed correctly. Let's just wait and see."

As the night went on, Lu Wushuang fell asleep in her father's arms. Cheng Ying also eventually fell asleep. Mistress Lu wanted to take the children into their rooms.

Madam Wu said, "Leave them for a little longer." At that moment, someone shouted from the rooftop, "Throw them up here!" It was Wu Santong. His lightness kung fu was superb, mistress Lu didn't even notice he was on the roof. Madam Wu took Cheng Ying outside and threw her up to Wu Santong who caught her. The Lu couple swallowed, as Madam Wu threw Lu Wushuang up to Wu Santong as well, who then took them away.

Lu Liding was concerned and said, "Where are you taking them?" as he leapt onto the roof. But it was pitch black; there wasn't a trace of Wu Santong and the girls. Master Lu wanted to give chase, but Madam Wu shouted out, "There's no need to chase them, he's trying to do good."

Lu jumped down back into the hall and quivering asked, "What good deed?"

Mistress Lu said, "Wu Santong is scared that the witch is going to harm the children, so he has delivered them to a safe place." After he heard his wife say this he said, "Yes, it must be this." But as he thought about how Wu Santong took the corpse of his brother and sister-in-law away, he started to worry.

Madam Wu said, "Ever since Ah Yuan got married, every little girl he looked at reminded him of his troubles. I predicted that he would come back to carry the girls away and try to protect them. The first time he came here and took Ru'er and Wen'er away, I caught him glancing at the girls a few times; his face had an affectionate look, with no evil intent. He's pretending that they are Ah Yuan. Indeed he did come back for them. I hope this time he's not going to do anything stupid." She sighed twice, "You two better get some rest, we don't know when the witch will come, there's no need to wait anxiously."

The Lu couple was extremely worried about their daughter and niece, but decided to rest a little. Their fear and hate for the enemy filled them as they waited for her in the main hall, the both of them carrying swords and concealed weapons. They did not rest anymore. The couple has been married for eighteen years; through that time, the everyday business of running the home had its fair share of problems. But now when they think about the enemy, and what Brother and Madam Wu said about the enemy's strength, her cruel and

vindictive ways; they knew time was running out and held each other.

After a long while, in the midst of the solitude, a soft song was heard from afar, seemingly a long distance away but the lyrics were crystal clear, "O mortals, what is love, that binds beyond life on earth, to all corners, in pairs we fly" .

Each word seems to be getting closer and closer, the person singing the song seems to be approaching extremely fast. By the beginning of the third line, the person had arrived at the door.

The three of them were startled, as suddenly a crashing sound was heard; the bolt on the main door had broken, the door flew in two different directions. An attractive priestess, with an evil smile gently stepped in; she was dressed in an apricot yellow gown. It was the Scarlet Serpent Deity Li Mochou.

Ah Gen at the time was cleaning the courtyard; he spoke first. "Who are you?"

Lu Liding quickly said, "Ah Gen... runaway!" Could he escape?

Li Mochou moved her hand in a sweeping motion; Ah Gen's head was split open, dying without a sound. Lu Liding drew his sword. Li Mochou leaned to the side and brushed past him, and with another sweeping motion with her fly whisk, caused the two maids to die. She laughed evilly, "Where are your girls?"

The Lu couple had just seen three lives taken in the blink of an eye. They knew they would have no luck today; with swords in their hands they rushed to attack her from the left and right. Li Mochou was about to attack again when she saw Madam Wu at the side holding a sword and cackled, "So an

outsider wants to interfere, fine, you can join the dead in this house today!" Her voice was soft and graceful, her form exuding a delicate air. She had a pair of bright eyes, her skin white, and was a real beauty. They didn't see her leg movements as she floated to the rooftop. The Lu couple and Madam Wu leaped up to follow. Li Mochou swept her whisk and the weapons flew out of their hands. She gracefully said, "Master Lu, if your brother was still alive and told me he would divorce He Yuanjun, that slut, then I could have spared your whole family. But now, your luck is bad; you can't blame me, blame your short lived brother."

Lu Liding said, "Who asked you to spare us?" as he waved and chopped his knife blade at her. Madam Wu and mistress Lu both attacked from the front. Li Mochou saw Lu Liding's skills were very average, but the way he used his knife, his kicks and palms, reminded her of her loved one. Her heart ached, and she wanted to see this type of kung fu as long as she could. If she killed him, the "Jiangnan Lu Family Blade" kung fu would be lost forever, so she flung her whisk without any real intent, and allowed her three enemies to circle her, her heart in a tangle, unable to use her normal array of ruthless moves. Suddenly Li Mochou gently whistled, she moved from the house, and headed towards the river bank, and to a lame old man holding an iron walking staff, and swept her fly whisk at him trying to wrap it around his staff. Before her legs had touched the ground, she had already unleashed an attack on her enemy. Unleashing it when he wasn't prepared, her moves ruthless; she could teach the enemy how she could kill at all costs.

The old man heard the incoming attacks clearly; he lifted his staff across his body, getting ready to fight. He was aiming to pierce her right wrist. The iron staff is a heavy and clumsy weapon, only being able to sweep and smash. The old man is using a "piercing" type of kung fu, using the staff as a sword, and the moves he will unleash will be light and leisurely. Li

Mochou waved her fly whisk, the silver threaded end up, wrapping it around the old man's weapon. She shouted, "Let go!"

They struggled, borrowing strength to use strength, the fly whisk using the force in the iron staff to pull and drag the enemy towards it. The old man's arms were shaking severely, and struggling to hold on, he jumped up, his body slanting in midair to escape, and managed to fend off a skilful stroke of hers. He thought, "This tyrant does live up to her name." Li Mochou used the stance "Great Granddad Goes Fishing" (tai gong diao yu) followed by "Luring the Old Man" (yuan zhe shang diao) to snatch away the enemy's weapon. Usually this is a great move and would guarantee success, but before she could snatch away the iron staff, the man had anticipated this move. She thought, "Who is this lame old man? Why has he the ability to last this long?" On closer inspection, she could see that he was blind and immediately called out, "You are Ke Zhen'E!" The blind lame man was the head of the Jiangnan Seven Freaks "Flying Bat" Ke Zhen'E.

After Guo Jing and Huang Rong had participated in the Hua Mountain martial arts tournament, Huang Yaoshi organized their wedding on Peach Blossom Island. Huang Yaoshi had always been eccentric and disliked company, so after a few months of living with his daughter and son-in-law, he left the island in search of a more peaceful place to reside and left a letter. Huang Rong knew her father's temperament, but couldn't think of a solution so she reluctantly did nothing. At first her father would send news every few months, but after a year, news of him disappeared. Huang Rong missed her father and her teacher Hong Qigong, so along with Guo Jing, they went out in search of them, wandering Jianghu for months, but something made them return to the island. Huang Rong had become pregnant during this time. Huang Rong's body and health wasn't like normal people and she didn't have a moment's peace. Since she was pregnant,

traveling was not convenient, her mind was troubled, and she blamed her problems on Guo Jing.

A pregnancy reduces the body's ability to handle stress, although she loved Guo Jing deeply, she always found a reason to quarrel with him as he didn't care about searching. Guo Jing knew his wife's temper, so ignored what she said and treated it as a joke. She had a great deal on her mind and eventually stopped smiling; this troubled Guo Jing. Ten months passed and Huang Rong gave birth to a baby girl, and she was named Guo Fu. Huang Rong was unhappy during the pregnancy but after she gave birth, she spoiled her daughter. When she was just one, she exhibited the signs of disobedience and of being spoiled. Sometimes Guo Jing would not let things stand and scolded his daughter, but every time Huang Rong would protect her. The result was that the daughter became even more of a spoilt brat. When Guo Fu was five, Huang Rong began to teach her martial arts. Once, Guo Fu turned her room into her own animal playground when she cut and plucked every single insect, bird and beasts on the island. Their feathers and fur were gone, not even leaving any on their heads. Firstly, Guo Jing loved his wife dearly; secondly, he also loved his mischievous daughter very much. Whenever he tried to punish her, she would put on a pitiful face and say she was sorry; he would just sigh, and slowly put down his raised hand.

As time went on, there was still no news of Huang Yaoshi and Hong Qigong. The couple missed them terribly whenever they thought about them. Guo Jing also tried a few times to invite his Great Master Ke Zhen'E to the island to enjoy his old age. But Ke Zhen'E was a city dweller at heart, drinking and gambling was a hobby to him and so declined the invitation. One day he went to the island by himself, not being picked up by Guo Jing. What had happened was that he was having no luck, the more he gambled the more he lost, and he ended up with great debts. He had nowhere to

go, and had to escape his debts. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were delighted to see him, and kept him on the island not permitting him to leave. Huang Rong eventually found about the debts, and secretly sent out someone to pay them. Ke Zhen'E didn't know about this, so he dare not return to Jiaxing, and resided on the island with nothing to do. As a result he had become a playmate for Guo Fu.

A couple of years passed and Guo Fu had become nine. Huang Rong still missed her father and with Guo Jing was going to leave the island in search of him. When Ke Zhen'E knew about this, he insisted that he would come along. That meant that Guo Fu had to come along with him. When they left the island, Ke Zhen'E said, "We can go anywhere, anywhere but Jiaxing."

Huang Rong smiled and said, "Great Master, you don't know, I already paid your debts a long time ago." Ke Zhen'E laughed and insisted they go to Jiaxing first.

Once the four had arrived in Jiaxing, they stayed at an inn. Ke Zhen'E heard from his sources that a few days ago, an old man dressed in a blue green gown was drinking alone in the Smoke Rain inn. From the description it sounded like it was Huang Yaoshi. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were delighted by this news, and searched the town and villages of Jiaxing. It was a beautiful day, so Ke Zhen'E took Guo Fu along with the eagles to the forest to play, and by a coincidence bumped into Wu Xiuwen.

After Ke Zhen'E exchanged a few moves with Li Mochou, he knew that he wasn't her match and thought, "That witch's skills are high, not below the once alive Mei Chao Feng. He used the "Ambush Evil Cane" moves, guarding the door. Li Mochou thought, "I've heard from brother Lu that in Jiaxing the more famous of the martial artists was the Jiangnan Seven Freaks. Their kung fu not at all simple and they had a

famous disciple, Guo Jing. He is the head of the Seven Freaks and he indeed lives up to his name. He is blind and lame, and now very old, yet he can still manage to last ten or so moves with me." Suddenly she heard the shouts from the Lu couple and Madam Wu heading up attack at her. "Hurting that old Ke Zhen'E is not a hard thing to do, but if I have the Guo couple tracking me, then that would make things hard. Today I'll just let him go."

The fly whisk extended, the silver threads stiffened, the whisk now like a spear heading towards Ke Zhen'E's chest. The whisk's threads are soft but behind a skilled force, the whisk is able to harm the major pressure points, any hits it lands will be lethal. Ke Zhen'E had planted the iron walking staff in the ground, relying on it to jump backwards. Li Mochou jumped ahead, advancing to attack from behind. Her waist extremely flexible, she turned and jumped behind him, with Madam Wu not further than two meters from her shoulder. Madam Wu gulped, and hurried a left palm aimed at her forehead. Li Mochou gently moved her waist, like a flower floating in the wind, and escaped while unleashing a palm, hitting mistress Lu in the abdomen.

Mistress Lu walked forward three steps, and fell to the ground. Master Lu saw his wife on the ground and waved his blade with his right hand, using his lone blade to drive Li Mochou back. Then he used his two hands and rushed at her, wanting to perish together with his wife. Li Mochou, after she failed in love, she detested signs of love, and when she saw Lu Liding rushing at her, she was filled with immense hatred, and used her whisk to hit the lone blade. She swept her fly whisk, and after a "shua" noise, he was hit on the crown of his head.

Li Mochou had seriously wounded the couple in just a wink, even though they had the help of Ke Zhen'E and Madam Wu. She laughed and asked, "Where are the two girls?" Before

Madam Wu could reply, a flash of yellow went into the house. Li Mochou searched high and low but there was no trace of the girls. She got a torch from the kitchen, and set the firewood alight in the room. She came out and laughed, "I don't have any past feuds with Peach Blossom Island, or Reverend Yideng. You two can leave."

Ke Zhen'E and Madam Wu knew how ruthless and malicious she was and with hatred on their faces, they attacked her. Li Mochou dodged the sword and staff, and waved her whisk; Madam Wu's weapon was tangled. The two pulled their weapons, but the force behind the whisk was greater and after a sound, the sword had been broken into two pieces, the sword tip heading towards Madam Wu, and the handle towards Ke Zhen'E.

Madam Wu had lost her weapon, swallowed, and couldn't believe that she could use her fly whisk to break a sword in half, and immediately deflect the two pieces of sword towards the two. The blade was coming at her extremely fast; she quickly lowered her head, and felt the blade brush past her, cutting a segment of her hair.

Ke Zhen'E heard the sound of a sword breaking, and used his staff to dodge the flying handle. He heard Madam Wu shout. He moved his staff like wind, attacking with every movement. His left hand holding three small poisonous projectiles, poised, but thought about Li Mochou's deadly "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" If he used his projectiles, she would certainly use hers; since he's blind, he would not be able to see them so he refrained from using his.

Li Mochou still went soft on him, thinking, "The blind old man's not resorting to concealed weapons; he must be scared of me returning the favour." She lightly twisted her waist, and used her whisk to wrap around the old man's iron staff. Ke Zhen'E just felt a strong force pulling him, wanting

to take his weapon out of his grasp. He circulated his internal energy, channeling it through his iron walking staff, and contested internal energy with his opponent. But didn't know exactly where she was. In a flash, his bones started to shake, his strength draining out of him. Li Mochou had used her left hand to push away the staff to one side; a left palm had already gently pushed Ke Zhen'E in the chest. She laughed, "Old Man Ke, the "Divine Scarlet Palm" has hit you in your chest!"

Ke Zhen'E had no ability to defend himself now, and thought, "Lowlife, you can finish me, what more do you want now?"

Madam Wu saw this, and felt deeply responsible. Li Mochou leapt up from the iron staff, and in midair stretched her hand out towards Madam Wu, gently touching her on the face. She laughed and said, "You chased away my disciple, you sure have guts." After a few graceful laughs she fled. Madam Wu had felt her soft and gentle palm, the place where she had touched had become relaxed. She saw her heading towards the thick growth of willow trees, and in a flash had disappeared. She thought about the few moves she exchanged with Li Mochou, her moves seemed designed to let her live and weren't at full strength. Suddenly she felt she had no strength and fell to the ground paralyzed. Ke Zhen'E was touched in the chest and he too was struggling by a rock, He breathed in quickly, then slowed his breaths.

After a long while, Madam Wu exerted some strength to get up, and saw black smoke rising, the Lu home in flames. At the time, Ke Zhen'E tried to carry the Lu couple out but saw they were short of breath and thought to himself; "If I move them now, they are just going to die quicker, but I can't leave them here. What should I do?"

In the middle of this problem, a loud voice suddenly called out, "Wife, are you alright?" It was Wu Santong's voice.

End of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 - A Friend's Son

Translated by Noodles



Suddenly a flash of yellow went over to Wu San Tong, Li Mo Chou had landed on the tree branch that Wu San Tong was holding, and swept her fly whisk at him forcing him to drop it. Wu San Tong jumped, and hurriedly picked up the branch from the ground. After ten moves or so, when Wu San Tong tried to sweep her with the branch, she flew onto the top of a willow tree. She let him attack with the tree trunk.

These past ten years he has never shown a touch of concern towards her, so she was delighted when she heard this, and replied, "I'm over here."

Wu Santong leapt in front of her, the Lu couple carried in each hand. He said, "Quickly follow me," and went on his way. Ke Zhen'E and Madam Wu followed behind him.

Wu Santong swerved east and twisted west for a few miles, and led the two to an old, broken kiln. It was a large old kiln used for making wine bottles. Madam Wu entered, and saw her two sons, Xiuwen and Dunru were safe and sound. She let out a sigh of relief. The Wu brothers were sitting on the ground playing with stones with Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang. When Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang saw the Lu couple, they threw themselves onto them, shouting and crying.

Ke Zhen'E heard Lu Wushuang cry out mother and father he immediately said, "Oh no, we've lured the ghost out, that witch is going to be here soon!"

Madam Wu's heart was afraid. She asked, "How?"

Ke Zhen'E replied, "That witch wants the Lu girls, but doesn't know where they are."

Madam Wu suddenly realized what he meant and swallowed. "Yes, she purposely let us go so she could secretly follow us."

Wu Santong shouted out, "If the Scarlet Witch is following, then I'll go and face her." He turned around and stood at the opening of the kiln.

Lu Liding's skull had been severely injured but he had one last wish so he strained out a breath and called out to Cheng Ying.

"Ah Ying, take out the handkerchief that I've got on my chest."

Cheng Ying, her eyes full of tears, stretched out her hand and took out the handkerchief. It was a white satin handkerchief, in the four corners were sewn a red flower. The red flower looked withered and by it was a jade green leaf. The white satin was old and had become yellow, the embroidery of the flower and leaf were beautiful, almost like the real thing. Lu Liding said, "Ah Ying, tie the handkerchief around your neck, you mustn't untie it, you understand?" Cheng Ying didn't know what her uncle meant, but did as she was told and nodded.

Mistress Lu was severely hurt but when she heard her husband's words, she forced her eyes open and said, "Why aren't you giving it to Shuang'er? Give it to Shuang'er" Mistress Lu quickly added, "You haven't got a heart. Are you not worried about your own daughter's safety?" As she said this her eyes went white, her voice faded. Lu Wushuang didn't know what her parents were arguing about and she cried out, "Father...Mother!" Lu Liding softly said, "Dear wife, you love Shuang'er very much, so why don't we let her follow us?"

Originally, the red flower and green leaf handkerchief was a lover's gift from Li Mochou to Lu Zhenyuan. The red flower was the famous Man Tuo Luo flower from Dali. Li Mochou figured that Lu sounds like green, the green leaf representing her beloved, and thought "Red Flower Green Leaf, will always be together." Before He Yuanjun died, she knew that on the ten-year deadline, Mo Chou and Wu Santong would come and cause trouble. She had a plan to deal with the two, but didn't expect the sudden illness of Lu Zhenyuan. She knew Lu Liding's kung fu was average, and wouldn't be able to escape when the time came, so she gave him the handkerchief, and made him understand, if it was

Wu Santong who came to seek revenge, to act normal and restrain from attacking as he does not intend to take any lives. But Li Mochou had become infamous in Jianghu in recent years with her cruel and vindictive methods, meeting her would be your bad luck. If it was her, then tie the handkerchief around your neck, this will stir up any old memories that witch would have of your brother and hopefully she will let you go. But Lu Liding was a proud man, and would not beg Li Mochou for his life.

Cheng Ying was the daughter of his brother. Before he died, he requested that Lu Liding bring up his daughter like his own. He was obligated by the request of a good friend, but in the danger that they are now in, he would not be able to fulfill this request and so gave the life saving handkerchief to Cheng Ying. Mistress Lu had realized what he was doing and saw that he was sacrificing his own daughter. Under the strain she suffered severe pain and left the world.

Cheng Ying saw that the handkerchief was the cause of her aunt's troubles, took off the handkerchief, and gave it to her cousin saying, "Aunt said to give this to you, take it!"

Lu Liding said, "Shuang'er, it's your cousin's, don't take it."

Madam Wu was standing to the side when she heard all this and said, "I am going to tear the handkerchief in half, half to each, is that a good idea?"

Lu Liding had not the strength to reply anymore, and just nodded. Madam Wu tore the handkerchief in half, and gave each half to the cousins.

Wu Santong was standing by the entrance when he heard all the commotion, and went inside to see what all the fuss was about. He saw his wife's face and on the left cheek was a black patch. Startled, he pointed to his wife's face and asked, "Why is your face like that?"

Madam Wu reached out and touched her face and said, "Like what?" only to feel no sensation in her left cheek, her heart jumped and realized it was where Li Mochou had touched her. Can it be that when she touched her face gently she used the chance to emit poison?

Wu Santong was inside asking questions when a voice from the entrance said, "The two little girls are inside, aren't they? They can't live so just give them to me. If you don't, I'll burn you all in this kiln. The voice was clear and gentle.

Wu Santong jumped out of the kiln, and saw Li Mochou standing at the entrance, and thought in wonder, "It has been ten years, yet she still looks like she did then."

He had recognized that she had now become a priestess, but he couldn't change his way of greeting her, and greeted her as he had before as Miss Li. Within these past ten years, no had called her "Miss Li"; now when she heard those words, her heart moved, her memories and feelings as a young girl rushed to her chest. But then she remembered she could have spent her life with the person she loved, but there existed a He Yuanjun who caused her to lose her loved one. She was resigned to being alone forever. As she thought about this her emotions came over her again and she was unable to resist the pain.

Wu Santong is another one who had his love rejected; even though their love was a different sort, it is still love. When he was searching for Lu Zhanyuan, he saw with his own eyes Li Mochou kill He Lao Quanshi's family, a total of twenty men, women, old and young without remorse or feeling. To think about it made him shiver. He Lao Quanshi and she had never met; they had no feuds and no relations to He Yuanjun. But because they shared the same surname, it provoked her hate and fury and she killed every last member of the He family. Even before he died, he didn't know the reason for

his death. At the time Wu Santong didn't intervene, as he didn't know the background to the matter. Only after he heard that it was for this simple reason, he swore to himself that he would treat her with the utmost hate and disgust. He saw that she had a gentle, kindly smile but she could change that to a cold and evil smile immediately. He was extremely worried about the safety of the two girls.

Li Mochou said, "I only printed nine palms on the Lu's wall, I must kill those two girls. Wu Santong, please step aside."

Wu Santong replied, "Lu Zhenyuan and his wife are dead now, his brother and wife died under your hands, its only two girls, you can just leave them."

Li Mochou grinned and shook her head, gently saying "Wu Santong, please step aside."

Wu Santong gripped tighter to his chestnut tree and said, "Miss Li, the reason for your hatred is Ah Yuan."

When the two words 'Ah Yuan' was said, Li Mochou's face changed and she said, "I once swore that whoever mentioned that slut's name in front of me will be killed by me or I would perish trying. I once destroyed sixty-three families in their boats on the river Yuan simply because they shared the name of that slut. Surely you've heard of this? Master Wu, it is your fault, so don't blame me." While she said this she swung her weapon at Wu Santong's neck.

Though she seemed to have swung her fly whisk lightly, the stroke was fierce and quick, causing Wu Santong to fly right and left above her to avoid the strokes. She knew that Wu Santong is a high disciple of Reverend Yideng, although he is in a state of confusion, his kung fu was still solid; when the need arose he could still kill. Wu Santong's left hand straightened, the tree trunk came out with great force, and swept across. Li Mochou saw the power in this, and

immediately floated away, avoiding getting struck by the trunk. She didn't wait for him to use the trunk again and flew in front attacking, trying to break inside. Wu Santong saw that she was heading into the kiln, and raised his right hand, and pointed a finger at one of her pressure points, and unleashed "Solitary Yang Finger" at her.

Though his "Solitary Yang Finger" wasn't fast enough to hit a pressure point, the move had many changes, and had to be avoided. Li Mochou used "Strike the Golden Clock" and immediately jumped back ten feet. Wu Santong saw her moving forwards and backwards, in a flash she had advanced and retreated so many times, his heart secretly quivered. When she was retreating he used his strength and used the tree trunk again to force her back. But as soon as he did this, she advanced right in front of him, if it wasn't for the "Solitary Yang Finger", he would have been out matched long ago. The tree trunk was heavy, and every time he moved it, he would exert a lot of strength, Li Mochou had noticed this, and tried to wear him out using this method.

Suddenly a flash of yellow went over to Wu Santong, Li Mochou had landed on the tree branch that Wu Santong was holding, and swept her fly whisk at him forcing him to drop it. Wu Santong jumped, and hurriedly picked up the branch from the ground. Li Mochou laughed, as she hurriedly went over to the tree trunk and stepped on it. Wu Santong turned around and extended a finger. She moved again, heading back towards the tree branch. After ten moves or so, when Wu Santong tried to sweep her with the branch, she flew onto the top of a willow tree. She let him attack with the tree trunk. This way, Wu Santong would use even more strength. Although she was fairly light she added to the weight of the tree that she was standing on, the trunk would not be able to knock her off. This position also allowed her to attack the kiln. She was in a position where she could not lose. Wu

Santong glanced at her, and knew he must be patient; he wasn't too concerned about his own life, but if the kiln full of old and young fell into her hands it would be terrible. At that time the tree trunk was flying wilder and quicker, fiercely colliding with the tree trying to shake Li Mochou out of it.

After a moment he heard Ke Zhen'E shout, "Fu'er, you have arrived, quickly, get the eagles to get rid of that evil woman." Following this a girl's whistle could be heard, in the sky were two white images in formation descending. It was the two large eagles, attacking Li Mochou from the left and right. Guo Fu had arrived with the eagles. Li Mochou saw the two eagles coming at her so she held on to the tree tightly with her left foot. The eagles' attack wasn't successful and they headed back to the sky. The girl whistled again a few times. The two eagles came in for a second attack, and aimed at the underside of the tree.

Li Mochou had heard Peach Blossom Island's Guo Jing and Huang Rong had a pair of giant eagles, who were almost telepathic with each other. At the time the eagles were coming together for an attack. She wasn't worried about the eagles, but the fact they belonged to the Guo couple meant that the Guo couple must be nearby. This would complicate matters. Li Mochou dodged a few times, and then launched her own attack on the eagles, injuring one of the eagles' left wing; the eagle screeched and fell to the ground. When Guo Fu saw that her eagle was hurt, she shouted out, "Eagle don't be scared, keep attacking that evil woman." Li Mochou looked at the girl who said this, and saw a little girl that seemed to have come from a beautiful painting and thought, "I've heard that heroine Huang was one of the most beautiful women in the world. I wonder how she compares with me? Is this girl her daughter?"

While she was being distracted, her moves slowed. Wu Santong saw that although the eagles were helping, they

could still not force Li Mochou from the tree. Amid the chirping and screeching he fiercely hit the ground with his two hands, and caused Li Mochou to fly off the tree. Li Mochou could not predict that he would unleash such an unusual move, and was forced tens of feet into the air. When the eagles saw that she was in the air, they went in for another attack from above. When she had a secure grip, the eagles could not really harm her but now that she is in the air, how could she compete with them? In this desperate situation, she waved her fly whisk in front of her face to protect her head, and withdrew three "Soul Freezing Silver Needles", and shot them out hurriedly. Two were aimed at the eagles, the other one at Wu Santong's chest. The eagles saw the needles coming and quickly flew higher to evade them, but the needles were traveling at such a high speed, and after a second, the male eagle was hit in a claw. Wu Santong was looking up when he saw the incoming needle, and leapt out of the way in a rush, but was still hit in his left leg. Wu Santong got up after a roll. He knew he had been hit in his left leg but didn't call out. Left kneeling, he circulated his inner strength to allow him to support himself. His leg was now swollen and numb. He stooped down, and used his hands to try to support himself; but he could not and eventually fell down on to the ground motionless.

Guo Fu shouted, "Eagles, eagles come here quickly." But the two eagles had flown far away, and didn't turn back.

Li Mochou said, "Little girl, is your name Guo?"

Guo Fu saw that the woman standing in front of her was beautiful, she had a friendly disposition and did not look like an 'evil woman' and replied, "Yes, my name is Guo. What is yours?" Li Mochou laughed and said, "Come, I'll take you to play," while slowly walking towards her, with the intention to grab her.

Ke Zhen'E, supporting himself with his iron staff, rushed out of the kiln and shouted, "Fu'er, run quickly!" Li Mochou laughed and said, "Scared I'm going to eat her up?"

At that time, a young boy in ragged garments holding a chicken in his left hand, and singing a folk song, rushed over and saw the people in the kiln and said, "Hey, what are you people doing in my home?" He went over to where Li Mochou and Guo Fu were and laughed and said, "He-he, old beauty you're pretty, little beauty you are cute, are you two here to find me? However this person named Yang hasn't got any beauties for friends." His face carried a smirk and his attitude was sly.

Guo Fu sneered and said, "Who wants to look for you?"

The boy replied, "If you are not looking for me, why are you at my home?" and pointed to the kiln, indicating it was his home.

"Huh, who wants to go to that unsightly place?"

Madam Wu saw that her husband was on the ground, and didn't know whether he was dead or alive. She came rushing out of the kiln to his side and said, "Brother San, are you okay?" Wu Santong gave out a moan and struggled to get up, but in the end he could not stand up. Guo Fu gazed afar but still couldn't see the two eagles, and shouted, "Eagles, eagles, come back here!"

Li Mochou thought, "If I wait for the Guo couple to arrive, it'll be hard for me to escape." She laughed evilly and headed for the kiln. Madam Wu rushed to cut her off, and waved her sword saying, "You can't enter!"

Li Mochou smiled and replied, "This is the little brother's home, how can you be in charge here?" Her left palm was facing the sword's tip, and headed straight for it, wanting to

touch the blade, her palm twisted; her three fingers now holding the sword's sides, she flipped the sword tip towards Madam Wu. It was pointing towards Madam Wu's forehead, there was a sound and her forehead had been cut. Li Mochou laughed and said, "Sorry for the offence!" She placed her fly whisk in her belt, and headed into the kiln. She grabbed Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying in each hand, and without turning her back, she flipped herself over and headed out of the kiln, avoiding Ke Zhen'E's iron staff.

The ragged young boy saw Li Mochou had hurt Madam Wu and snatch the two girls so didn't dare to step out of line again. But when he heard the cousin's cries, he jumped onto Li Mochou shouting, "Hey old beauty, you've hurt and snatched people, you haven't even greeted the owner, you are too rude, let the girls go."

Li Mochou was carrying the girls in both her arms, and had no way to stop the young boy from grabbing onto her. Her heart shivered, as there was a pair of arms holding onto the side of her body, her whole body softened involuntary. At the time she charged her palms, and flung the two girls away, and immediately grabbed the boy. Within these last ten years a man has never touched her, and though she had lived for thirty years she is still a virgin. In the past when Lu Zhanyuan was infatuated with her, he still treated her with respect. A lot of young heroes in Jianghu had seen her beauty but dare not show their feelings as they knew that they will die a violent death from the "Scarlet Serpent Deity's" palm. But today, a young boy is holding onto her; she grabbed him and intended to charge her palm and shatter the boy's heart, but then thought about how he praised her beauty sincerely, in her heart she was pleased. When those words came from the mouths of men, she loathed it but from the mouth of a thirteen or fourteen year

old, the words felt different. In a moment of weakness she did not lower her palm onto him.

Suddenly she heard the cries of the eagles; they had come back for another raid. Li Mochou gathered two "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" and immediately shot them out. The pair of eagles had previously suffered from this concealed weapon, and rushed to fly higher, but the silver needles were coming at them at a fast pace. The eagles could fly fast, but the needles were faster and eagles cried out in fright. Li Mochou saw that the eagles had retreated once again, and was extremely pleased. Suddenly she heard two shouts, two small objects rapidly appeared in the sky and after a loud noise the two small objects knocked the needles out of the air in a flash. Whoever threw the objects, their power must be extremely high. She gulped and dropped the young man, and went over to see. It was two small stones. She thought, "The person who shot out the stones must be extremely skilled, I'm not his match, I better evade him first and think about this later."

She turned around and stretched out her palm, facing Cheng Ying. She wanted to hurt the two cousins first and then escape. As her palm was about to reach her chest, Li Mochou saw there was a satin handkerchief tied around her neck, the embroidery on it was of a red flower and green leaf, it was the handkerchief that she had personally sewn and had given it to her lover. She didn't move and lowered her palm, her heart was turning over with memories of before, and thought, "Although he married the He slut, he could not forget me and kept this handkerchief. He wants me to spare his heirs, should I spare them or not?" She could not decide, and decided to kill Lu Wushuang and discuss this later. She took out her fly whisk, the silver thread end facing Lu Wushuang, and as she headed for her chest, she saw another handkerchief tied around Lu Wushuang's neck. She

thought, "How come there are two handkerchiefs? One of them must be a fake." She curled up her whisk, and held Lu Wushuang's neck as she shook and moved her around.

At this time, a sound cutting through the air was heard; a small stone was flying towards her chest. Li Mochou took out her fly whisk and immediately struck out, knocking the stone out of the air. She shouted out in pain as her palm heated up, her body shaking. Just a small stone with so much power, whoever threw must be extremely skilled. She couldn't stay here anymore, and grabbed Lu Wushuang, and used her lightness kung fu. She swept over the ground like a gust of wind and in a flash there was no trace of her.

Cheng Ying saw that her cousin had been taken away and shouted, "Cousin! Cousin!" and tried to follow. Li Mochou's steps were extremely rapid, how could she catch them?

Jiangnan is a wet area and full of rivers, and after a while Cheng Ying had come upon a river blocking her way, with no way to proceed. She followed along the bank, and suddenly saw a yellow image on the left side, a person crossing the bridge alone. Cheng Ying waited a while and saw that Li Mochou was on her own, Lu Wushuang wasn't to be seen anywhere. Cheng Ying saw her turn around and though extremely frightened, dared to ask, "Where's my cousin?" Li Mochou saw her white skin and handsome smile and coldly laughed, "You two look the same, she has many days in front of her, don't worry about her. You should worry about yourself. Why didn't you die early, the world would have less trouble." She raised her fly whisk, and hit out. She saw that the stroke she was going to use to strike the chest had become slow and light. With the fly whisk behind her back, she was going to attack in front of her but as she sped up, something was holding onto the whisk's tail and she was unable to fling it. She swallowed and turned around to look, and saw the ground was raised over her about ten feet in the

air and collapsing. It was an extraordinary situation. She protected her chest with her left palm and channeled energy through her fly whisk and pierced through the dirt. How can it be that there was no one behind it, just empty space? She had fought hundreds of battles throughout her life, but had never encountered a situation like this, her brain flicking through many scenarios, "A monster... a demon?" She used a stance of "First Mixing Form", the fly whisk forming a circular boundary shielding her before she turned around again.

She saw, standing by Cheng Ying, a tall, lean strange man dressed in a blue jade gown, with no expression on his face. Who was he, and as she looked at him she couldn't think of anything to say. She took two steps back and in this short space of time she could not think who in Jianghu this powerful person might be. As she was about to inquire who he was, she heard the man speak to Cheng Ying.

"Little girl, that woman is really evil, and you went to fight her." Cheng Ying raised her hand and head and replied, "I wouldn't dare." The man said, "What are you afraid of? Go ahead." Cheng Ying didn't dare to. The man grabbed her and pushed her towards Li Mochou.

In this situation, Li Mochou didn't know how to react. She planned to use her fly whisk; she stretched out her left hand to reach it, aiming to hit Cheng Ying on the waist. Suddenly a chi sound was produced; her arm was numb and sore, and she was unable to pick up her weapon. Cheng Ying approached her with her palm out, and after a clashing sound, Li Mochou was struck in the chest with a palm. Li Mochou had never suffered such an insult in her life, and in a rage, forgot her worries and reached out for her weapon and struck out in fury. Her whisk flew out of her hand, causing her to shake; the man had shot out another pebble,

knocking her weapon to the ground. Cheng Ying was standing there steadily.

Li Mochou knew that she had met trouble today; if she didn't escape now her life would be in danger. She laughed lightly and turned around and hurried away. After she was many steps away she waved her hands behind her. A glimmer of silver appeared, ten plus "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" were shot out towards the man in light green. She shot her concealed weapons without turning back, but every single needle was heading towards the man. The man was caught off guard, not knowing that her needle throwing skill was so deadly. He immediately flew backwards to evade the needles. The needles were coming at him at a fast pace, but his leaps were quicker. Only after he had heard all the needles hit something did he stop and return to ground. Li Mochou knew that she wouldn't be able to hit him, the ten or so needles were meant to distract him, when she heard the wind sounds caused by him retreating backwards, her hand waved again, a lone needle was shot out at Cheng Ying. She knew that the needle must hit the target; afraid of exchanging blows with the man she didn't look back and increased her efforts in escaping, her body disappearing into the mulberry forest. The man in the blue green gown said, "Ah!" and picked up Cheng Ying and saw a needle had hit her shoulder, her face had changed colour and she gave out a quiet moan. Carrying her he hurriedly headed west.

The kidnapping of Lu Wushuang had startled Ke Zhen'E. The ragged young man said, "I'll take a look."

Guo Fu replied, "What is there to look at? That evil woman is going to kick you to death."

The young man smiled and replied, "You kick me to death? I wouldn't want to see that." As he said this he headed in the direction of Li Mochou.

Guo Fu said, "Idiot! I didn't say I was going to kick you." Guo Fu didn't realize that boy made a play on the words and said she was the evil woman.

The boy hurried as fast as he could for a while when he suddenly heard the calls of Cheng Ying shouting out, "Cousin, cousin!" He followed the sound of the calls. He ran over a great distance following the calls and he eventually arrived at where the calls seemingly came from. But when he got there was no trace of the two girls in any direction. He turned his head and on the ground glimmering were ten or so silver needles, the needles forming a pattern. He stooped down and picked up a needle, holding it in his left hand. By the needles there was a large centipede with its underside facing up, dead. He thought this was strange, and took a close look and saw a large number of ants were dead, but a few steps away were many ants rushing and moving. He picked up a needle and poked at them a few times, and some of the ants rolled over a few times before facing up. The same happened with a few other insects.

The young boy was happy, thinking this would be great to use on mosquitoes and flies, but suddenly felt that his left hand was not responding as normal. A fierce voice from behind said, "The needles have poison on them! You are holding it in your left hand how can it not be dangerous?" He opened his left palm and abandoned the needle. There is a black mark already forming in the place where the needle was held, and his two fingers were also turning black. He was extremely frightened, and stretched out his hand and rubbed it on his leg fiercely. The numbness on his left hand slowly increased, and within minutes the numbness had reached his joints. He was once bitten by a poisonous snake, and almost lost his life; at the time, the place where he was bitten became numb. He was in danger and he eventually cried out due to the pain. A voice from behind said, "Little

baby, you know how powerful it is now huh?" The sound was like the clanging of metals piercing his ear, as if it was coming from the ground. He turned around and gulped as he saw a man standing upside down. The boy retreated a few steps and asked, "Who...who...who are you?"

The man's hands were on the ground supporting himself, his body upright and with a jump; he traveled thirty feet to face the boy.

"Who am I? It would be great to know who I am."

The boy was startled and started to run away, only to hear a 'du' 'du' 'du' noise behind him. He turned around and was so scared that his soul jumped out of his body. The man is using his hands as his feet, each hand held a stone, and although he was walking upside down his speed was faster than walking on two feet, and was just a few meters behind him. He ran even faster scared for his life only to hear a sound as the man jumped over his head and landed in front of him. The boy shouted out, "Mother!" and turned around to escape but wherever he went the strange man would jump in front of him. He had two feet, but he wasn't a match for a person using his hands to walk. He turned around a few times but the man was getting closer so he stretched out his palm wanting to push him; his hand was numb and he had lost control over it long ago. His head was covered with sweat and now didn't know what to do, his legs went limp and he sat down on the ground.

The strange man said, "The more you run and move about, the quicker the poison will spread." The boy worried for his life, got down on his knees and said, "I beg old grandpa to save my life."

The strange man shook his head and said, "It's difficult, it's difficult."

The boy replied, "You have so much skill, you can save me."

After the old man heard these words of praise, he was pleased and grinned, "How do you know that I'm so skilled?" The young boy heard his tone had become friendly and replied, "You run so fast while upside down. No one on earth can compete with you." The boy had added the phrase "No one on earth can compete with you" knowing that words of praise would please the old man. The old man laughed loudly, his laugh shaking the trees in the forest and said, "Flip upside down, let me take a look."

The boy was bright, and immediately flipped upside down by himself, he couldn't tell if the man was sincere but he did as he was told and flipped his body upside down so that his head was on the ground. His right hand still had feeling in it and managed to support himself firmly. The strange man glanced at him a few times, his brows lowered and wrinkled. The boy was upside down but still managed to take a clear look at the man; he had a tall nose and deep set eyes, his face covered in a short white beard, his limbs like metal, he talked to himself in strange phrases which was hard on the ear. The young boy was scared that the man wasn't going to save him and said, "Good Grandpa, please save me." The man saw he was a strapping boy and was pleased by his flip and replied, "Fine, saving you is not hard, but you got to promise one thing."

"Whatever you say, I'll listen. What do you want me to promise you?"

The strange man smiled and said, "I only want you to promise me one thing. Whatever I say, you must obey."

The boy thought, "I must obey everything you say? I've got to listen even when you tell me to be a dog or eat feces?"

The man saw that he was hesitant and slow to reply said, "Fine, you can die!" As he said this he got onto his hands and leapt away several meters.

The boy was afraid that the man had gone too far, and wanted to chase him to ask for help but he forgot that he could not walk upside down like the man, so he got back upright and chased a few steps and called out, "Grandpa, I agree. Whatever you say, I will obey."

The man turned around and said, "Fine, you've to swear it." The boy's left hand was becoming increasingly numb, and he was becoming increasingly concerned about his life so he could do nothing but swear an oath.

"If grandpa saves me by ridding my body of the poison, I will listen to whatever he says. If I don't, then let the poison return to my body." He thought, "If I never pick up any more silver needles then how will the poison return? I wonder if the strange man will accept this oath?"

He looked at the old man, and saw his expression had changed and he seemed pleased, and he in turn became pleased as well as he thought, "The old man believes me."

The old man nodded and went upright. He grabbed hold of the boy's arm, and pushed it a few times and said, "Good, good, you are a good boy." When the boy was pushed in the arm, he felt the numbness had lightened, and shouted out, "Grandpa, push me a few more times!" The strange man frowned and said, "Don't call me grandpa; call me father!"

The little boy replied, "My father's dead, I don't have a father."

The man shouted at him, "The first thing I ask and you don't even listen, what use have I with a son like you."

The boy thought, "Oh, the man wants me to be his son." He had never seen his father before, and heard from his mother that his father had died before he was born. Whenever he saw other children with their father he would envy them. Now he sees this strange man in front of him, acting weird and crazy. He didn't want to accept this old man as his stepfather.

The strange man shouted at him, "You don't agree to call me father, fine. There are other people who are willing, I won't agree to my promise." The boy tried to think of another way to deceive him into saving him. The man suddenly bellowed out a strange noise, and said a curse and started to walk away. The boy quickly said, "Father, father where are you going?" The man gave out a great laugh and said, "Good boy, come, I'll teach you a method to rid your body of poison." The boy walked over to him. The strange man said, "You have contracted Li Mochou's "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" poison, it is quite difficult to cure this poison."

He then passed on the words of circulating air and the method to practice it, the head must be below the legs, so the blood will flow the opposite direction, the poison will eventually flow out from within the body. Since he is a beginner, he can only remove a few drops of poison every day, but within a month, all the poison would be removed from his body. The boy was extremely clever, and he absorbed everything and memorized it. He then followed the method and indeed, the numbness decreased. After a little while, small drops of black blood seeped from his fingers. The strange man was pleased and said, "Good! You don't have to practice anymore today, I'll teach you something new tomorrow. Follow me." The boy was startled, and said, "Go where?" The strange man replied, "I am your father, wherever a father goes, the son of course follows."

As he said this, the air was filled with the sound of eagle calls; the two large eagles were approaching. The strange man looked at the eagles, and hit his head as he frowned, searching for something in his mind. Suddenly, he seemed to have found what he was looking for, his face changed and shouted out, "I won't see them, I won't see them!" As he said this he took a stride; the stride was extremely large, and by the second stride he had moved over ten feet. After a few more strides he disappeared into the mulberry forest. The boy shouted out, "Father, father!" and tried to follow.

He eventually wound up at a willow tree and suddenly he felt a gust of wind behind him, as the eagles flew over from behind him and started to descend. From behind the willow tree out came two people, a male and female, the eagles stopped behind the two. The male had dense brows and large eyes, a broad chest and waist, he was about thirty years of age, and his top lip had the beginnings of a moustache. The woman was about twenty six or twenty seven years of age, she had a beautiful face, her eyes sparkled, and looked at the boy a few times and said to the man, "Who do you think that boy looks like?" The man turned around to the boy and replied, "You say he looks like somebody?" as he said these words he stopped.

The two people were Guo Jing and Huang Rong. That day they were at a restaurant searching for news of Huang Yaoshi, when they suddenly saw flames far away and after a while, a person in the street hurriedly said, "The Lu's mansion is on fire!" Huang Rong shivered as she remembered that Jiaxing's Lu's mansion belonged to Lu Zhanyuan, a fairly famous person in the wuxia world, and although they had never met, she had admired the name. In Jianghu many people had mentioned that Jiangnan has two Lu mansions. There are countless Lu mansions in Jiangnan, the two that the Wuxia members mentioned were the Lu

mansion by the Tai Lake and Jiaxing's Lu mansion. For Lu Zhanyuan to be mentioned in the same breath as Lu Chengfeng, he was surely not an ordinary person. After asking a few questions, it turned out it was Lu Zhanyuan's mansion that was being burned. The two hurried for the site but once they got there, the fire had died down, the mansion had been burnt down to the ground, a few bodies were found at the scene but they were burned beyond recognition.

Huang Rong said, "Something strange may have occurred."

Guo Jing asked, "What?"

Huang Rong replied, "Lu Zhanyuan is a fairly famous name in Jianghu, his wife Yuanjun is also a heroine of this generation. If the mansion caught fire, how come no one managed to escape? The only explanation is that an enemy of theirs had come to take their revenge."

Guo Jing thought this must be the reason and replied, "Yes, let us think, who the suspect can be?"

The two examined the site but found no traces of any evidence. Huang Rong suddenly saw something on one of the remaining walls and shouted, "Look, what's that?"

Guo Jing looked up and saw a few blood handprints on the wall; after being burned, the blood prints became more prominent. The wall collapsed and on the lower section were two prints. Guo Jing gathered himself and suddenly spurted out, "The Scarlet Serpent Deity!"

Huang Rong replied, "It must be her."

They had long heard of Li Mochou, the "Scarlet Serpent Deity". Her kung fu was high, and no one can compare with her poisonous ways. She was comparable to the one called

‘Western Poison’. She was in Jiangnan and it was a chance to track her down.

Guo Jing nodded his head, "People in Wulin have said she is extremely difficult to deal with, if we can find your father it would be good."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "The older they get, the less we have to worry."

Guo Jing said, "You're right. The more someone practices martial arts, the less work they have to do."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "You are modest Master Guo! I find the more I practice the worse I get."

The two laughed and joked, but secretly they were on the guard as well. They looked around, and by a pond they saw two “Soul Freezing Silver Needles”. One of the needles was half submerged in the pond, the ponds eighty or so gold fishes' white bellies were facing up. It was the deed of the poison of the needle. Huang Rong stuck out her tongue and broke off two pieces of twig from a tree and used it to fish the needle out, and then placed it in her gown sack. The two searched everywhere, and then saw the two eagles and eventually met the boy.

Guo Jing thought that the boy looked familiar, but at the time could not think of who he looks like. His nose suddenly picked up a strange scent, and sniffed a few more times and felt his brain start to smother. Huang Rong had already noticed this, and knew the origin was nearby. She turned around to search for the source and saw the male eagle had a wound on its left claw, and after a closer examination, the source of the scent was indeed from the wound. The two gulped, and carefully examined the wound, the skin was broken only slightly yet the leg had swollen to more than twice its size, the skin and flesh had started to rot. Guo Jing

thought, "What caused this wound, why is it so severe?" He suddenly saw the boy's hand was black and asked, "You've been poisoned as well?"

Huang Rong went over and took his hand and looked at this palm; she pulled up his sleeve and took out a knife and slit the boy's wrist to draw out the poison blood. Only to see that the blood flowing out was red. She thought this was strange and thought, "His palm's black and definitely has poison so why doesn't his blood have it? She didn't know that when the strange man had bestowed his skills to the boy, the poisoned blood had already flowed out of his fingertips, and the poison did not rise back. From her bag, she took out a "Nine Flower Jade Dew" pill, and said, "Swallow this." The boy took the pill, smelt it first and noticed a nice scent, and put it into his mouth. He felt a fragrance fill his mouth, the sweetness was incomparable. A cool clear air filled his "dan tian". Huang Rong took out another two pills and fed it to the two eagles.

Guo Jing was immersed in thought, but he still managed to whistle a tune. The boy heard his high tune and knew it wasn't easy; this gave him a surprise. Suddenly, a whistling sound came from afar, flocks of birds in the forest flew in all directions, and the branches of a nearby willow tree were shaking incessantly. As soon as the first song was finished, a second one followed, the sound of the two combined resonated and folded, herd of horses galloped hurriedly far away. Huang Rong knew that it was her father sending an invitation to Li Mochou for a battle. As the third whistle came, she filled her "dan tian" line, and followed the whistle with her own, Guo Jing's whistle was loud and spacious, and Huang Rong's was high and soaring. The two's whistles combined together was like a large fabulous bird and a small bird in a competition to see who can fly higher, as they flew the higher they got, the little bird not settling for being

behind the large bird. When the two were on Peach Blossom Island they refined and cultivated their internal strength, their internal energy had reached new levels. Right now, their sounds soared and resonated for many miles.

When the whistles reached the strange man, he quickened his steps, as he hurried to escape. When it reached the blue green-gowned man who was carrying Cheng Ying, he laughed and said, "You've finally arrived, this old man had better run to avoid getting caught."

Li Mochou was carrying Lu Wushuang by her side, hurrying in her escape when she suddenly heard the whistles; she halted in her tracks, and waved her fly whisk. She turned around and laughed coldly, "Hero Guo's name shakes through Wulin, and I must take a look to see if he lives up to his name." She then heard a clear, crisp whistle follow the last one, the two sounds superimposed on each other produced a sharp yet soft sound, the power of it was increased further. Li Mochou's heart shivered, she knew she had met a formidable foe; she thought about how the Guo couple swept Wulin, supporting each other, yet she was alone, her thoughts became grey, and sighed as she carried Lu Wushuang across her chest and ran away.

At that moment, Madam Wu supported her husband, taking her two children with her preparing to leave along with Ke Zhen'E. After the battle with Li Mochou, Ke Zhen'E was afraid that she would come back and harm Guo Fu; he wanted to take her to a safe place and hide for a while. When he heard the calls by the Guo couple he was glad and relieved. Guo Fu shouted out, "Father, mother!" and ran out. One old, one young followed the sounds of the whistles and hurriedly rushed to the Guo couple. Guo Fu threw herself onto Huang Rong and smiled as she said, "Mother, grandpa fought off an evil woman, his skills were unbelievable." Huang Rong knew she was lying but could only smile. Guo

Jing reprimanded her "Young children should always tell the truth." Guo Fu stuck out her tongue as she said, "Grandpa's skills are not good? How can he be your master?" Afraid that her father will scold her again, she ran on ahead and pointed to the boy saying, "You go pick some flowers for me and arrange it into a crown for me to wear!" The boy followed her. Guo Fu saw that his palm was black and said, "Your hand is disgusting, take the flowers you pick and cover your smell with it."

The boy calmly said, "Who wants to play with you?" and took large steps as he walked away.

Guo Jing said, "Little brother, don't run. The poison in your body has not fully been removed; when it reacts again it will be painful."

The little boy wished that he would mind his own business, and after being spoken to like that by Guo Fu, he carried on walking ahead, ignoring the man's words. Guo Jing walked in front of him and said, "Why have you contracted poison? Let me cure it for you first, it won't be long."

The boy replied, "I don't recognize you, what had this got to do with you." He increased his speed and wanted to walk past Guo Jing. Guo Jing saw that the boy's face seemed to carry a noble air, his face looking like someone he has met before, his feelings were aroused and asked the boy, "What's your surname?" The boy gave him a glance and walked around him, still wanting to get away. Guo Jing caught his wrist. The boy couldn't shake himself free, and formed a fist with his left hand punching Guo Jing in the stomach. Guo Jing just smiled, and took no notice of the punch. The boy wanted pull back his fist, but his fist seemed to be held within the man's stomach, unable to move. His face became red, and pulled back with all his strength until his arm ached, but he couldn't over come the pull of the man's

stomach. The man smiled and said, "If you tell me what your name is, then I'll let you go."

The boy replied, "My surname is Ni, first names Laozi, now let me go." Guo Jing was disappointed with the answer and relaxed his abdomen, he didn't realize that the boy had tricked him and called himself, "I'm your father". The boy's hand was now free and thought, "You've got great ability, your father can't compare to his good son." Huang Rong saw the boy had a devious expression on his face, and still felt that he looked like someone from the past so tested him again.

She smiled and said, "Little brother, if you are my husband's father that means you are mine too." She stretched out her hand and held the boy's neck from behind. The boy felt the hold came from an extremely strong force, and tried desperately to pull away. Huang Rong loosened her grip, the boy got a glimpse of the sky before falling over. Guo Fu clapped and laughed. The boy hid his embarrassment and got up, and took a few steps back, and swore at her. Huang Rong was already standing in front of him, she held his shoulder and looked him in the eye and gently said, "Your surname is Yang, first name Guo. Your mother's surname is Mu, isn't that correct?" The boy was indeed named Yang Guo, and somehow Huang Rong had called it out, the shock was too much for him, he felt pain in his chest, the poison in his hand had returned, his brain started to get blurry and he fainted.

Huang Rong managed to hold onto him. Guo Jing pushed him a few times using his internal energy, but his eyes did not open, his teeth had bitten his tongue, his mouth full of red blood, and he didn't wake up. Guo Jing was happy and worried at the same time and said, "He, he is brother Yang Kang's son." Huang Rong saw that Yang Guo's poison was

serious and gently said, "Let's first get to an inn, then we'll mix up some medicine for him."

Huang Rong had seen that the boy looked extremely like Yang Kang, and remembered that she had met Mu Nianci in an inn. When she held the back of Mu's neck, instead of pushing forward, Mu pushed backward. This was a secret skill of Hong Qigong's. It was part of his circulating air and practicing energy method. If the boy was Mu Nianci's son, then their kung fu would be the same. Huang Rong was a disciple of Hong Qigong's and knew the arts of her master well, so she tested him, and indeed he was who she thought he was.

Guo Jing carried the boy, and along with Ke Zhen'E, Huang Rong, Guo Fu and the pair of eagles returned to the inn. Huang Rong wrote out an herb list, and gave it to the inn's waiter to go to the medicine shop and pick them out. However the herbs she picked out were all rare, even in a place like Jiaying the shops did not have them. Guo Jing saw that Yang Guo was still unconscious and was extremely worried about him. Huang Rong knew that after Yang Kang had died, her husband had felt responsible, and now he had found his son, he would be ecstatic. But now the boy had contracted a lethal poison, his life in the balance, and said, "We will go and gather the herbs ourselves."

Guo Jing knew that if there is a glimmer of hope to cure the poison, she would try to reassure him but he saw her expression was one of worry. He ordered Guo Fu that she mustn't run around as she pleased, and the couple went off to gather the herbs and grasses.

Yang Guo slept quietly without waking until it was night. Ke Zhen'E checked up on him a few times, using his hands to feel him. The poison on his darts could not compare to that of the "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" and so could not use

the antidote that he had. He was afraid that Guo Fu would slip away, so he made sure she was asleep.

Yang Guo was unconscious for a long time when suddenly someone placed a palm on his chest and used their internal strength to wake him up. He slowly woke up, and opened his eyes. He saw a flash of black, as someone escaped out of the window. His strength slowly returned as he supported himself on a table by the window so he could have a look. He saw a man on the roof overhang of the room and the man was upside down. It was the strange man who earlier wanted him to call him father. He was moving about, and could drop down to the room when he pleased.

Yang Guo was surprised and said, "It's you."

The strange man replied, "Why aren't you calling me father?"

Yang Guo said, "Father!" but thought, "You are my son, I'll just turn the roles around and call you father for now."

The man was very pleased and said, "Come up here." Yang Guo climbed out of the window and leapt onto the roof. But his body was weak due to the poison, he wasn't at full strength and his fingers weren't able to grab the roof edge. As he was falling he called out, "Ah!"

The man stretched out his hand and grabbed the boy's back and gently placed him on the rooftop. He turned upright, and was about to say something when he heard someone from a room to the west blow out a candle. He felt that someone had discovered him and so he carried Yang Guo and hurriedly escaped. Ke Zhen'E had leapt on the roof, but there wasn't a trace of anyone.

The strange man carried Yang Guo outside the small town and reached a piece of uncultivated land and put him down.

He said, "Use the method I taught you to force some of the poison out." Yang Guo got into position, and after a short while, a few drops of poisoned blood came out, his chest became relaxed and more comfortable.

The strange man said, "You are a clever boy, and can use it straight away just after one lesson. You are even better than my real son." "Ai...Son...ah!" He thought about his deceased son, his eyes became watery as he stroked Yang Guo's head, and let out a sigh.

Yang Guo had never had a father in his life and his mother passed away due to illness when he was eleven years old. Before she died, she told him that his father died in Jiaxing's Iron Spear monastery, and instructed him to cremate her and bury her outside the monastery. After he had taken care of his mother's burial, he wandered around Jiaxing and lived in the old kiln, in poverty. Mu Nianci had taught Yang Guo some of her family's kung fu but her skills weren't great, and Yang Guo at the time was young and so couldn't learn much. Within these few years, Yang Guo had made trouble and enemies, and although he had never met the strange man before, the man had treated him well and the feelings were real. He was touched and leapt up and grabbed the man around his neck and called out, "Father, father!" Ever since he was three years old, he always wished he had a loving father. Sometimes in his dreams he would see a heroic and loving father but when he woke up his father was gone and because of this he would cry for a while. His wish for many years had come true, and buried within the calls of 'father' were real feelings of joy and respect, not the calls of lies and deceit.

Yang Guo was very emotional right now; the strange man was even more happy and emotional inside. When they first met, Yang Guo was forced to call him father to save his life, and didn't want him as a father, now both of them had the

same feelings, they were like a real father and son, but he felt that the man had something on his mind. His feelings were so strong that he was willing to die for him if need be. The strange man was laughing and crying at the same time and said, "Good son, good son, obedient son. Call me father again." Yang Guo called him twice, and then leaned on his body.

The man smiled and said, "Good son, come here, I will teach you all the martial arts I know." As he said this he dropped down and made three strange noises and then pushed his hands out. The sound of an explosion was produced, the earth in front of him rose up like a violent grey mudflow and then the dirt scattered. Yang Guo looked on with his mouth open, his tongue out, shocked and asked, "What is that skill called, can I learn it?"

The strange man replied, "Its called "Ge Ma" stance (Toad Stance), if you work hard, you will be able to learn it."

Yang Guo said, "If I learn it then no one can bully me again?"

The man's eyebrows raised and said, "If anyone bullies my son then I'll rip their skin and tear their muscles."

The strange man was the "Western Poison" Ouyang Feng.

Ever since Huang Rong had made him go mad at the second Mount Hua tournament, he has traveled, for these last ten years, to the edge of the world and always asked one question, "Who am I?" Whenever he is near a lush land, he would always linger on trying to find the answer to his question; these past months he has been staying in Jiaxing. These few years he has been practicing the "Contrary Nine Yin Manual". His internal energy has been increasing to new levels, his mind had become clearer, but he was still mad. His memories were slowly coming back but he still could not remember who he was.

Right now, Ouyang Feng was passing on the formula to practice "Toad Stance" to Yang Guo. The "Toad Stance" is one of the top skills in the martial arts world, the changes refined, mysterious and clever, and its internal energy aspect hard to beat; but if it is practiced wrong, not only will the body be harmed, but the practitioner will expel blood and die. Because of this, he didn't even pass it on to his son when he was alive. At this moment in time, he was touched and added to the fact he wasn't mentally clear, he couldn't differentiate between important and dangerous things. He didn't take this into consideration and taught the skill to his stepson.

Yang Guo does not have a good martial arts foundation, though he learnt the formula to the skill and memorized it, would he be able to understand the meanings behind the words?

Though he was extremely clever, there were phrases which he didn't understand. Ouyang Feng had taught him for half a day now, and when he listened to Yang Guo's explanation and it wasn't making sense, he had another mental attack and wanted to hit him. But when he saw his handsome and cute face in the moonlight, it reminded him of his own son when he was younger, and so he lowered his hand.

"You're struggling. Go and rest, I'll carry on tomorrow."

After Guo Fu had ridiculed him because of his hand, he had a dislike for her family and said, "I want to follow you, I don't want to return."

Ouyang Feng didn't understand his own problems but he was aware of the world's problems and said, "I have some trouble with my mind, I'm afraid I can't take care of you if you follow me. You return first and when I've solved one problem I will come and collect you, we won't part, okay?"

After the death of his mother he has never talked to someone as if they were family and grabbed his hand and said, "Collect me soon."

Ouyang Feng nodded and said, "I will secretly follow you, wherever you go I'll be there. If someone bullies you, I'll break their ribs into seventy or eighty pieces." He then picked up Yang Guo and returned him to the inn.

Ke Zhen'E had gone to check on Yang Guo and found he wasn't there. He searched the entire inn but still couldn't find him; he became extremely concerned. He checked on Yang Guo's room again; Yang Guo had returned. He was about to ask where Yang Guo had been when he heard the wind generated by someone passing along the rooftop. He knew two people had passed along on the roof, their skills extremely high, he picked up Guo Fu and then placed her by his side. He went over to the window with his iron walking staff, afraid that the two people were enemies; he listened carefully and heard that the wind created by the two people was coming closer and eventually had arrived on the roof above them.

"Did you see who he was?"

"Strange, strange, was it him?" replied the other person.

It was Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

Ke Zhen'E was relieved and opened the door to let them in. Huang Rong said, "Senior master, did anything happen?"

"Nothing," replied Ke Zhen'E.

Huang Rong turned to Guo Jing and said, "Did we recognize the wrong person?"

Guo Jing replied shaking his head, "No, I'm ninety percent certain it was him."

"Who was it?" asked Ke Zhen'E.

Huang Rong tugged on Guo Jing, trying to tell him not to say. But Guo Jing didn't dare to lie to his master and said, "Ouyang Feng."

Ke Zhen'E despised this man, as soon as he heard his name his complexion changed and quietly said, "Ouyang Feng? Isn't he dead?"

Guo Jing said, "When we came back from picking the medicine, we saw someone on the roof, the person's movements were quick and strange, when we went to take a look, the person had already gone. It looked like Ouyang Feng."

From the description, Ke Zhen'E knew it must be Ouyang Feng and no one else. Guo Jing was concerned about Yang Guo so grabbed a candle and went over to the bed. He saw that Yang Guo's face was red, his breathing relaxed and sleeping peacefully. He was pleasantly surprised and called out, "Rong'er, he's better!" Yang Guo was really awake and he was just pretending to be asleep, he had secretly listened in and now knew his stepfather was called Ouyang Feng. The three of them were extremely concerned about him, and now they were all relieved and pleased.

Huang Rong took a closer look, and was surprised, before his arm's poison had returned but now after just a few hours, the black colour of the poison had faded; the poison seems to have disappeared. She was greatly surprised by this. She and Guo Jing had searched for medicine all day, but could not gather everything they wanted, so they decided to return with what they had and give it to him for the time being.

The next day, Guo Jing, Huang Rong and Ke Zhen'E with the two small ones headed west from Jiaxing, intending to return

to Peach Blossom Island, and firstly cure Yang Guo's poison before deciding to do anything else. That night they were in another inn, Ke Zhen'E and Yang Guo were in one room, the Guo family in another. The Guo couple slept into the middle of the night when suddenly they heard a noise on the rooftop. They heard Ke Zhen'E call out through the wall, and jumped out of the window. The couple quickly jumped out of the window only to see on the rooftop Ke Zhen'E was fighting barehanded with someone, the enemy was tall and had long hands, it was Ouyang Feng. Guo Jing swallowed, frightened that Ouyang Feng would take his master's life in one move and he jumped up onto the roof to help. Only to hear Ke Zhen'E shout and fall off the roof. Guo Jing flew over to him, and before Ke Zhen'E head had met the ground, he lightly caught him from behind and gently placed him gently down on the ground.

He asked, "Senior Master, are you okay?"

"I'm not dead yet. Go and fight Ouyang Feng." Ke Zhen'E replied.

"Yes," replied Guo Jing and he jumped onto the roof.

At the time, Huang Rong was fighting with her palms, the palms like a flying dance. It has been ten years since she has seen her old enemy, and right now they were fighting ferociously. Her internal energy has improved tremendously over the last few years, her internal energy is now very forceful, the palms she were using were changing mysteriously and cleverly; after ten moves, Ouyang Feng didn't gain any advantage.

Guo Jing called out, "Mr. Ouyang, how have you been."

Ouyang Feng replied, "What did you say? What did you call me?" His face changed, in the fight with Huang Rong he did not attack, he had a feeling that the two words 'Ouyang' was

significant to him. Guo Jing was about to say something when Huang Rong interrupted as she saw that he wasn't clear about who he was and said, "You are called Zhao Qiansunli, Zhou Wuchenwang!"

Ouyang Feng listened, "I'm called Zhao Qiansunli, Zhou Wuchenwang?"

Huang Rong replied, "Correct, your nickname is Zuo Fengchengchuwei, Jiang Shenhanyang." Huang Rong had randomly picked out some surnames. Ouyang Feng was originally confused but after hearing her call him many names, he scratched his head and asked, "Who are you? Who am I?"

Suddenly someone behind shouted out, "You are the old animal that killed my five brothers." Before the sentence was finished, an iron walking staff came out, it was Ke Zhen'E. When Ouyang Feng knocked him off the roof, he wasn't hurt and went into his room to get his iron walking staff to battle him again. Guo Jing shouted out, "Careful master!" Ke Zhen'E smashed down his iron walking staff on Ouyang Feng's back but he didn't move, he made a strange noise and the walking staff fiercely came back out at Ke Zhen'E. Ke Zhen'E couldn't hold on, and let go of his walking staff and fell into the courtyard. Although Guo Jing knew that his master was falling, it wasn't going to be serious but Ouyang Feng had used his back to launch a lethal attack so he shouted, "Watch out!" His left leg bent, his right palm circled, and then pushed out; it was the "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" 'Overcoming the Dragon with Regret' (Kang Long You Hui). He had practiced this particular stance night and day without a break, when he first learned the stance its power was obvious, but after ten years of practicing, it was now at a flawless level. When he first unleashed it, it looked light and fragile but when it meets an obstruction, it will be able to unleash its force in thirteen

levels, each level stronger than the last one. It will move the unyielding, there is no force it can't overcome. He had incorporated ideas in the "Nine Yin Manual" into the palms and modified them, like Hong Qigong had modified the palms years ago, although it was only the stances and not the mysterious energy behind it.

Ouyang Feng had just knocked Ke Zhen'E off the roof when he suddenly felt a gust of wind throwing itself at him, although the wind wasn't strong, it caused his breathing to be uneven, and knew it wasn't something ordinary so quickly crouched down and pushed out his two palms, it was his most refined skill the "Toad Stance". They exchanged three palms; both of them were hit once. Guo Jing's palm strength increased; the next level higher than the last, like a torrent of waves throwing it self forwards. Ouyang Feng made two 'Ka Ka' noises, his body getting lower, as if he was going to fall down any minute. Guo Jing's palms were getting stronger, his counteracting strength also increased.

The two haven't exchanged moves for over ten years, now they meet again in Jiangnan, they must test each other to see how they have advanced over the years. Long ago at the Mount Hua tournament, Guo Jing couldn't match Ouyang Feng, but since then he has refined his internal energy, his skills have vastly improved. Ouyang Feng has been practicing the "Contrary Nine Yin Manual" and got what he deserved. However, one phrase real and one phrase fake, eventually he produced a learnable copy from the fake and up until now, Guo Jing was fighting him to a draw, unable to distinguish who has the upper hand. Huang Rong wanted her husband to win by himself so stood to one side and didn't interfere.

The roofs in south were very different to the roofs in the north. The roofs in the north had to support the amassed snow in winter, the roofs were solid. In the south it was wet

weather that had to be addressed, the roofs were covered in tiles, with removing rain in mind. Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng were matching internal energy through their palms, and braced their legs, and after a moment, the sound of something creaking was heard below their feet, with one sound followed by another, the beams of the roof snapped, a hole was made in the roof as the two of them fell in. Huang Rong gulped and jumped down the hole and followed them, only to see the two still competing, their feet supported by some more beams, but they were above one of the inn's guests. The guest was sleeping, how would he know the roof was falling in, at that moment his legs broke and he was screaming out in pain. Guo Jing didn't want to hurt any innocent bystanders and so didn't use his legs for support, but Ouyang Feng didn't care if anyone dies because of them. The two of them were equally matched but because Guo Jing didn't use the beams as support, his palms had no foundation to rely on. He was on his way to losing. He used one hand to push against Ouyang Feng's two palms, he channeled all his strength in his right hand, his left hand was empty, there was no strength for it to use. Huang Rong saw her husband was being pushed backwards, although it was only half an inch or so, he was losing.

She shouted, "Hey, Zhang Sanlisi, Hu Tuwangba, watch out," and aimed a light palm on Ouyang Feng's shoulder. Though this palm was light, it was from the "Descending Brave Divine Sword Palm" (Luo Ying Shen Jian Zhang) skill, when it lands, the internal energy will spread through the internal organs. Though Ouyang Feng is one of the most powerful martial artists of his time, he would still suffer from this blow. Ouyang Feng heard her call out weird surnames at him and was distracted for a second. As he saw the palm come in, he pushed his two palms, forcing Guo Jing back another inch, and in a flash he held onto Huang Rong's shoulder, his five fingers like a hook, trying to tear a piece of her flesh off.

When this move came out, the three of them swallowed simultaneously. Ouyang Feng felt severe pain in his fingers; she was wearing soft armour with needles, he couldn't loosen his hand. At this time, Guo Jing's palm's power increased again, and Ouyang Feng pushed out a palm to counteract this, in the midst of this danger he used all his strength. After a clashing sound, both of them moved back, the room was full of dust and dirt as the walls collapsed.

When the two clashed palms, it was under the shroud of night and the both of them could not see each other clearly, the large force of the "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" and the "Toad Stance" hit each other on the shoulder. The two of them were sent through opposite walls; half of the roof fell in. Huang Rong had suffered a blow but she wasn't hurt although she had a fright and made her flush. In the midst of all this she flew out of the room before the roof collapsed. She saw Guo Jing and Ouyang Feng five feet apart motionless; the both of them had suffered internal injuries. Huang Rong didn't attack the enemy and instead just walked over by her husband's side to guard him. The both of them shut their eyes to try to control their chi, but after two stuttering noises both of them spat out a mouthful of blood.

Ouyang Feng said, "The "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms", good stuff, good stuff!" A mad laugh followed as he ran away, in a blink of an eye he was nowhere to be seen.

Presently, the inn was in the midst of chaos. Huang Rong knew that they couldn't stay here any longer, and from the hand of Ke Zhen'E grabbed her daughter and said, "Master, you carry brother Jing and follow us." Ke Zhen'E put Guo Jing on his shoulder and step by step slowly headed north. After a while, Huang Rong suddenly remembered Yang Guo, she didn't know where he had gone to, but she was more concerned about her husband's injuries so left this matter

until later on. Guo Jing understood, but because of the injury caused by Ouyang Feng, he couldn't speak. He breathed evenly while on Ke Zhen'E's back, circulating his energy to unravel his veins, after they had travel about seven, eight miles, his veins had all been cleared and said, "Master, I'm okay." He put Guo Jing down and said, "You've recovered?"

Guo Jing shook his head and said, "The "Toad Stance" is a great skill!" He saw his daughter supporting herself on her mother's shoulder sleeping peacefully, and said, "Where's Guo'er?" Ke Zhen'E had forgotten about Yang Guo, and struggled for words.

Huang Rong said, "Don't worry, first we'll find a place to rest. Then I'll go back and look for him."

The sky was beginning to brighten, and under the moon they recognized a house by the forest. Guo Jing said, "My injury is not serious, we'll go find him together."

Huang Rong frowned and said, "That boy is extremely clever, you don't have to be too concerned." As they said this they arrived at the house, suddenly they saw someone come out from behind the white wall and then was about to return again. Huang Rong went over there and grabbed the person, it was Yang Guo.

He laughed and said, "Auntie," and carried on saying, "You guys arrived? I've been waiting for a long time now."

Huang Rong couldn't explain but she suspected something and replied, "Fine, follow us."

Yang Guo laughed, and followed. Guo Fu opened her eyes, and asked, "Where have you been?"

Yang Guo replied, "I went to catch some crickets to see them fight. It was great fun."

"What's so much fun about that?" Guo Fu said.

"Huh, what's not fun about that? A large cricket was fighting with an old cricket. When the old one lost, two little crickets came to help out, three versus one. The large cricket jumped around, kicked out a foot there, and bit one over there, it was extremely powerful." When he reached this point, he didn't add anything else. Guo Fu had listened carefully and asked, "Then what happened?"

Yang Guo said, "You said it's not fun, so why are you interested?"

Guo Fu touched her nail, and angrily turned her head away, ignoring him. Huang Rong could tell that his words were praising Ouyang Feng and ridiculing the couple and Ke Zhen'E. She said, "Tell Auntie, who won in the end?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Just when things were getting interesting, you came along, the cricket jumped away."

Huang Rong thought: "Like father like son," but kept her suspicions of him to herself.

After a while, they arrived at a village. Huang Rong went to a large residence to look for the owner. The owner was very hospitable, when they heard someone was hurt, they quickly prepared two rooms for the guests. Guo Jing ate three bowls of rice, and then sat on the couch, closed his eyes and meditated. Huang Rong saw that her husband was resting, and managed to relax, sitting next to her husband guarding him. She thought about Yang Guo in all the situations they have been in, and felt although he was young, there are a lot of strange things that couldn't be explained, and when he was asked for detailed explanations, half of it was a lie. She made a mental note to herself to pay extra attention to Yang Guo and be wary of him. She'd had a tiresome day, and after a meal, she went to bed.

Yang Guo and Ke Zhen'E were sharing the same room, and in the middle of the night he quietly got up. When he heard Ke Zhen'E snoring in his deep sleep, he quietly opened the door, he slipped out of the room and went over to the wall, and to a Cinnamomum Cassia tree, climbed it, and leapt over the wall slipping away. The dogs outside the wall picked up a human scent, and started to bark. Yang Guo was prepared; he took out a piece of bone out of his bag, and threw it to them. The dogs bit onto the bone, and stopped their barking.

Yang Guo checked his bearings, and headed southwest, and in seven, eight li, he had reached the Iron Spear Monastery. He pushed open the doors and called out, "Father, I'm here!" He heard a noise coming in from within. It was Ouyang Feng. Yang Guo was happy, he went inside and felt out a table, and found candle. He lit it and saw Ouyang Feng reclining on top of some statues, his body unwell, and his breathing weak. He and Guo Jing have suffered similar injuries, but because Guo Jing has amassed an abundant amount of rich internal energy over the years, he is able to recover very rapidly; Ouyang Feng is closer to old age, his energy isn't as good.

What had happened on the previous night was that Ouyang Feng had come again for Yang Guo, but Ke Zhen'E was awake in the room, so they started to fight. Afterwards when Huang Rong and Guo Jing came and joined in the battle, Yang Guo was watching. Eventually both Ouyang Feng and Guo Jing had suffered injuries, and so Ouyang Feng escaped. In the chaos, everyone forgot about Yang Guo, and he sneaked away after Ouyang Feng. At first Ouyang Feng was moving at a fast pace, Yang Guo could not catch up, but Ouyang Feng's injury was agitated, moving was hard. Yang Guo eventually caught up and took him aside to rest. Yang Guo knew that if he didn't return Huang Rong and Ke Zhen'E

would come and look for him, and feared his stepfather's life would be in danger. So he arranged with Ouyang Feng to meet in the Iron Spear Monastery. Both were familiar with the monastery so knew where it was. When Yang Guo was guarding the road, Guo Jing and the others had come up behind them. Only now, in the middle of the night, was he able to come and check. Yang Guo took seven or eight buns out of his bag and handed them over to Ouyang Feng, "Father, eat something." Ouyang Feng had nothing to eat for the whole day, he was frightened he would meet one of his enemies, and was stuck in the monastery all day. He ate a few of the buns and was conscious for a while and asked, "Where are you and the others at?" Yang Guo told him everything.

Ouyang Feng said, "The one named Guo suffered from one of my palms, it would be difficult for him to recover within seven days. His wife will have to look after him, she won't leave his side, and I'm worried about that Ke old man. If he doesn't come tonight, he will be here tomorrow. It's a pity I don't have an ounce of energy in me. Hmm...I think I did kill his brothers but I don't know whether is it four or five." As he said this he let out a cough.

Yang Guo sat on the floor, his hand on his cheeks, many thoughts going through his little mind and suddenly thought to himself, "I've got it, I'll put some sharp objects on the floor first, so when the old man comes he'll suffer some injuries."

He then went over to the table with the candles on it, and tipped out the candles and collected the holders, and placed them by the entrance, and then closed the entrance, and emptied an old incense holder and placed it on top of the door. He looked around, trying to think of more traps for any enemies, and saw a large bell hung in the room. Three people could not move the bell; it weighed about a

thousand kilos. On the bell's neck were an extremely thick metal hook and a large wooden trestle system. The Iron Spear monastery was old and hasn't been maintained for a long time, but the large bell and system was undamaged. He thought, "If that old man comes, I will climb into the bell, he won't find me." He held the candle holders and was looking for sharp objects in the hall, when he suddenly heard a 'du du du' sound from the road, caused by a metal staff, and knew it was Ke Zhen'E and was going to blow out the candles when he thought, "That old man is blind, I don't need to blow it out." The sounds came closer, Ouyang Feng sat up and wanted to transfer all of his body's strength into his right hand, wanting to attack first and cause a violent death. Yang Guo turned the metal carvings on the candle holder up, and guarded Ouyang Feng and thought, although my martial arts skills are low, I will do my best to help stepfather to rid of the old man.

Ke Zhen'E knew that Ouyang Feng had a serious injury and would not be able to travel far; the Iron Spear Monastery was close by and an old hangout of his. He won't stay at an inn or at a family's shelter; he would hide in the monastery. He thought about his five brothers dying at his hands and today he has a chance to get revenge, would he be able to say no? In the midst of the night he woke up and called out, "Guo'er, Guo'er!" and when he heard no reply, he thought he was sound asleep. He didn't check and hurriedly went out. The two dogs outside the house were busy gnawing on the bone that Yang Guo threw at them and didn't bark when they saw him. He slowly made his way to the monastery, and listened carefully. Indeed there was the sound of breathing within the monastery. He shouted out, "Old animal, old man Ke is here, if you've got balls, come out now." As he said this he slammed his walking staff onto the ground. Ouyang Feng was afraid that he will lose the chi in his "dan tian" and didn't move.

Ke Zhen'E called out a few times, and stabbed his walking staff outside the monastery doors. He entered only to hear a clattering noise from above as the incense holder fell, his left foot stepped onto the candleholders metal protrusions and pierced his boots. Ke Zhen'E didn't understand and waved his metal walking stick about, when suddenly there was an extremely loud noise deafening him, he knocked away the incense holder and it rolled onto the floor, luckily the metal protrusions didn't pierce his foot. By his side were some more of those candleholders, one of them was piercing his shoulder. He pulled it out with his left hand and blood poured. He didn't dare to be careless anymore and listened for Ouyang Feng's breathing. His foot sliding across the ground, getting closer step by step, until he was three meters away. He held out his iron walking staff and said, "Old animal, what have you got to say today?" Ouyang Feng had already transferred all his energy into his right hand, when the opposition raises his weapon he would send out a palm, and take Ke Zhen'E with him. Ke Zhen'E knew that his enemy had suffered a serious injury, but didn't know how serious, he held his ground waiting for the opponent to move first; then he would know how much strength he has. The two of them stood there silently, motionless. Ke Zhen'E could hear his breathing was heavy, his mind suddenly filled with the voices of his stepbrothers Zhu Cong, Han Bao Ju, Nan Xi Ren and others. The voices urged him to act, he couldn't resist and with a loud shout, unleashed "King Qin's Whipping Stone" (qin wang bian shi), sending the iron walking staff smashing downwards.

Ouyang Feng moved liked lightning, wanting to strike out his palm, but as he moved his arm half an inch he couldn't hold on and fell down to the floor. He heard the a loud noise, sparks flying everywhere, the iron walking staff smashing down on the bricks of the floor. Ke Zhen'E missed with his first move, and raised his weapon again, and struck out in

the direction of Ouyang Feng. The other day, Ouyang Feng just lightly pushed back and managed to force the iron walking staff out of his hand, and forced him to leap over the roof. But today Ouyang Feng's body was weak. He couldn't even use an ounce of his strength; he could only roll on the floor, trying to avoid the strikes. Ke Zhen'E used the "Dropping the Demon" set of strokes, with each stance faster than the last. Ouyang Feng was struggling to avoid the strokes, and eventually was hit by the "Concealed Medicine Poke" (Chu Fu Yao Cha) on the left shoulder.

Yang Guo was listening from the side, and couldn't hide his anguish, he wanted to help his stepfather, but with his level of martial arts, he would just be sending himself to his death. Ke Zhen'E managed to strike Ouyang Feng again; this time on the body. Ouyang Feng deserved what he was getting today, but his internal energy was deep. Though he had no power to attack, he could still avoid and parry some attacks. Only superficial injuries were apparent on him, his joints and his internal organs were still unharmed. Ke Zhen'E was slightly surprised, and thought to himself, that old animal's ability is certainly not simple, every time when it seems like I'm about to hit him, he manages to slip away. He manages to dissipate ninety percent of the power in my hits. If I utilize a soft type of attack, he won't be able to dodge. He then transferred his energy into his staff, and attacked his head. Ouyang Feng moved his head and managed to avoid the attacks for a few times but all of a sudden, he was trapped by the walking staff's wind, and he suffered a blow on the head. He managed to keep a hold of his life.

By luck he found himself within grasping range of Ke Zhen'E and grabbed his chest. Ke Zhen'E moved his walking staff out of reach of the enemy. He could only retaliate with his hands. The both of them rolled down on the floor together. Ouyang Feng didn't dare release his hands, and held on

tighter. His left hand reached for his waist, he felt something solid and reached out to grab it. It was a knife. It was Zhang Ah Sheng (One of Ke Zhen'E's stepbrothers) weapon, the slaughtering cow blade, however contrary to its name; it can't actually be used to slaughter cows. The knife can chop gold and break jade; its sharpness cannot be compared. After Cheng Ahsheng was killed by Chen Xuanfeng in the plains of Mongolia, Ke Zhen'E has kept the knife by his side to remind himself of him, and it never left him. Ouyang Feng went closer in to his body and snatched the knife out; he twisted his left arm, and aimed to pierce his enemy's side. As the knife was about to enter, Ke Zhen'E released his staff, and punched Ouyang Feng with his right hand a few times. Ouyang Feng was dazed, and waved the knife in the direction of the enemy. Ke Zhen'E heard the wind of the knife, and dodged away, only to hear a 'dang' sound, the sound didn't die down; the knife had struck the hall's large bell. Although this thrust by Ouyang Feng didn't carry much force, the knife's blade was extremely sharp, and caused it to quiver.

Yang Guo was standing next to the bell, the tip of the knife was heading for his cheeks. Yang Guo was frightened, his heart jumping to his throat, and quickly scrambled on top of the bell. After this move, Ouyang Feng went behind the bell. The bell's ringing had not diminished so Ke Zhen'E could not hear the breathing sounds. He went to the side and tried to pick up the sounds. The moonlight shone on the hall in the monastery; his hair was a mess, and he was leaning on the staff listening, his appearance frightening. Yang Guo saw what had happened and reached out for the knife, and then thrust it at the bell, causing a loud 'dang' sound, covering their breathing. Ke Zhen'E heard where the sound came from and headed in that direction. Ouyang Feng was still behind the bell. Ke Zhen'E stuck out his walking staff, Ouyang Feng evaded it.

The staff struck the bell and caused another loud deafening noise. Yang Guo felt his eardrums starting to hurt. Ke Zhen'E understood, and didn't aim for the bell. The ringing sound had not disappeared when another noise came from behind, getting clearer. Ouyang Feng was concerned, although Guo Jing is hurt, if the ringing continues, Huang Rong would eventually come and help. While the sound of the bell was deafening, he would take the chance to lightly step away and escape from the back of the hall. But Ke Zhen'E had very sensitive hearing, even with the loud ringing noise; he could still distinguish between light sounds, and heard the steps of Ouyang Feng. He knocked the bell with his staff, to lure out Ouyang Feng; when he is out in the open, he would attack his upper body with his walking staff. Although Ouyang Feng strength is weak at the moment, he has experienced a lifetime of storms and squalls (troubles and battles), how would he not know the tactics and tricks used in battle? When he saw Ke Zhen'E's right shoulder was raised, he knew what was going on, before the iron walking staff was raised, he moved back behind the bell. After he had suffered the serious injury, Ouyang Feng had already found it hard to move; though he has developed a profound level of internal energy in the last ten years, in this life-threatening situation he was unable to call upon it.

Ke Zhen'E called out, "Even if I don't kill you, you are going to die," and went over to the bell. Yang Guo saw the two circling around the bell, if this is kept up, his stepfather will definitely weaken. He suddenly thought of something, and climbed up on top of the bell and waved his hands about, trying to signal with his hands. Ouyang Feng was preoccupied with his enemy and didn't see this. Only after two more circles did he see Yang Guo, his hands pointing to the floor and telling him to move away. He didn't understand what he meant, but if he wanted him to move away, he must have a plan so he hurried move out the way. Ke Zhen'E

didn't move, he first needed to hear which direction his enemy moved in. Yang Guo took off his shoes and threw them to the back of the hall, making two thud sounds. Ke Zhen'E was baffled; he had heard Ouyang Feng was moving towards the doors so how come there was a noise at the back of the hall? When Ke Zhen'E was distracted, Yang Guo grasped the 'Slaughter Cow' knife, and with all his strength chopped at the wooden beam holding the large bell up. The beam was thick, Yang Guo was weak, the precious blade sharp; could he chop the beam in half? However the metal bell was extremely heavy, and after a few chops by the blade, the beam could not support the bell any longer. A creaking sound followed and the beam snapped, the large bell generated a wind as it fell, heading straight down on the Ke Zhen'E's head.

Ke Zhen'E had already heard the wind generated above him, thinking it was strange. The large bell fell down, he couldn't escape but the bell landed straight down on the iron walking staff, the staff held up the bell. As the bell was hindered he took this chance and slipped out of the way. He then heard a metallic snapping noise, and the metal walking staff snapped in half. The bell tipped over and rolled along the ground, hitting Ke Zhen'E in the shoulder, and flinging him out of the hall. He rolled around a few times and eventually landed on his nose, causing a nosebleed, his forehead also had a cut. Ke Zhen'E was blind and couldn't see anything, and didn't know what caused this. He was afraid that there was some strange being in the hall, and got up and escaped.

Ouyang Feng was by the side watching this, his heart able to relax and said, "What a pity, what a pity. Good son, very clever!"

Yang Guo climbed down, pleased with himself, and said, "That old man won't dare to come back."

Ouyang Feng shook his head saying, "He has a profound hatred for me, after a while, he will come back."

Yang Guo said, "We must go quickly."

Ouyang Feng shook his head again and said, "My injury is very serious, I won't be able to get far." He had escaped temporarily, but now he felt his bones were coming loose, he couldn't even move one step.

"What should we do?"

Ouyang Feng thought for a while and said, "There is a way. Break another bell's beam, and put me underneath it."

"How would you get out?" asked Yang Guo.

"I'll be meditating under the bell for seven days. After my strength has returned, I will be able to escape. If the old man returns within these seven days, he doesn't have the ability to lift the bell up. If Huang Rong doesn't come, I doubt if there is anyone that can break through. If Huang Rong does come, then the plan may fail."

Yang Guo thought carefully, and knew apart from this plan, nothing else will work. So he asked carefully again will he be able to escape from the bell without anyone's help and then said, "You won't have anything to eat within these seven days, right?"

Ouyang Feng said, "Go and find a basin, and fill it with clean water and place it beside me. There are still a few buns left. This will last for seven days if I eat them slowly."

Yang Guo went to the kitchen and found a large basin, and then filled it with clean water. He then placed it underneath another hung bell, and supported his stepfather directly underneath it, and sat him down.

Ouyang Feng said, "Son, follow the one called Guo. I will come and find you later on." Yang Guo agreed and climbed up to the bell, and broke the beam, sending the bell down, covering Ouyang Feng.

Yang Guo shouted out 'Father'. When he didn't hear a reply, he knew that he couldn't hear from within. As he was about to leave, he couldn't let go and went back to find another basin and filled it with water and placed it next to the bell. He then flipped over and placed his left hand in the bowl, and followed the method to reverse blood flow taught by Ouyang Feng to force some poison out. As he had just begun practicing this skill, he could only force out ten or so drops of blood before his head was full of sweat. Afterwards he ripped off some of the cloth from the statues, and then wrapped it around a rod, dipped it into the blood and water mixture, and covered the bell with it. He thought that if Ke Zhen'E does return, if he tries to move the bell, he would definitely be poisoned for sure.

Another thing that came to his attention was that his stepfather would definitely suffocate to death under the bell in seven days, so he would use the knife to dig out a brick tile beside the bell, and dig out a hole the size of a fist to allow the circulation of air. As he was digging the hole, the blade struck at another slab of stone underneath the tile and snapped. The blade was sharp, but it was very thin, and as he was digging the precious blade snapped. He didn't know the blade was precious, it wasn't his and he didn't feel it was a pity and threw the knife away. He knelt down on the ground and spoke through the opening, "Father, I'm going now. Come and collect me soon. Be careful when you come out, there is poison on the bell." Yang Guo bent his ear to the opening and hear Ouyang Feng replied weakly, "Good son, I'm not scared of poison; the poison should be scared of me. You be careful. I will definitely come back for you."

Yang Guo sat there for a while not willing to leave yet, but then started to hurry back; worried that Ke Zhen'E will notice that he has gone. When he got back to the room, he saw that Ke Zhen'E had not returned to the room, neither was he outside.

When morning came, he heard someone using a branch knocking on his door. He leapt out of his bed and opened the door. He saw it was Ke Zhen'E supporting himself on a wooden branch, his face grey and pale; he leant over into the room and fell onto the floor. Yang Guo noticed that his hands were black, he indeed did return to find Ouyang Feng. He was pleased that he had fallen into the trap that was left for him and pretended to be concerned, and shouted, "Grandpa Ke, what's the matter?"

Huang Rong and Guo Jing heard the shout, and hurried to see what the matter was; when they saw Ke Zhen'E on the floor they gasped. Guo Jing was still injured and struggled to walk, and so it was Huang Rong who supported Ke Zhen'E onto the bed. She asked, "First master, what did you do?"

Ke Zhen'E shook his head, and didn't reply. Huang Rong saw his hands were black and said angrily, "It was that Li bitch again. Brother Jing, I'll go and battle her." She tied her belt and walked out.

"It wasn't her," said Ke Zhen'E.

Huang Rong returned and asked, "Who was it then?"

Ke Zhen'E couldn't defeat a man who hasn't even got the strength to kill a chicken and it was he in return that was injured. It reflected badly on him. Ke Zhen'E was a stiff-necked man, it was what was called, 'tired of the ginger being old and not spicy', and didn't say a word about his wound. The two knew his behavior, if he wants to say, he will say it. The more they ask the angrier he'll get. It was lucky

that the poison only got on his skin; the potency wasn't that strong. He'll feel a bit light headed, after taking a "Nine Flower Jade Dew" pill, he'll be alright.

Huang Rong already planned what they should do; at the moment Guo Jing and Ke Zhen'E are hurt, Li Mochou's poison is trouble, so the children and two wounded must be sent to Peach Blossom Island. Later on she will find Li Mochou and settle this score. They spent the morning resting in the inn, in the afternoon they got on a boat and headed east.

Yang Guo was happy with the fact that Huang Rong did not attempt to find Ouyang Feng and thought, "Father was scared that Auntie Guo will come and search for him. Auntie Guo is such a beautiful lady, could it be that she is more powerful than Ke Zhen'E?"

The boat had traveled for half a day, the sky now getting dark. The boat anchored by the shore, the owners of the boat preparing the rice for supper. Guo Fu saw that Yang Guo had ignored her when she wanted to talk and argue with him. She sat by the window, and looked out. Under the shade of willow trees were two boys sobbing, it looked like the two Wu brothers. Guo Fu shouted out, "Hey, what are you doing there?"

Wu Xiuwen replied, "We are crying, can't you see?"

Guo Fu said, "What's the matter, did your mother beat you?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "My mum's dead!"

Huang Rong gasped when she heard this and leapt onto the shore. She saw the boys sobbing over their mother. Madam Wu's face was completely black, she had died a long time ago. Huang Rong asked for news of Wu Santong and Wu Dunru replied, "We don't know where he went."

Wu Xiuwen said, "Mother sucked the poison out of father, a lot of black blood came out. Father got better, while mother died. When father saw that mother had died, he went mad again. We called after him, but he ignored us and went away." They cried as they said this.

Huang Rong thought, "Madam Wu sacrificed herself for her husband, she is a great woman." She asked, "Are you hungry?" The boys nodded their heads. Huang Rong sighed and ordered the boat keeper to take the boys on board and feed them. When they reached a town, she bought a wooden coffin for Madam Wu, and prepared her body for it. She bought a piece of land and buried her at dawn. The brothers sobbed in front of the grave.

Guo Jing said, "Rong'er, the two boys have lost their parents, why don't we take them back to Peach Blossom Island and we'll care for them." Huang Rong agreed, and took the boys under her wing. They traveled on the boat until they reached the sea, and then hired a large boat and headed east, towards Peach Blossom Island.

End of chapter 2.

Chapter 3 - Seeking Tutelage at Mount Zhongnan

Translated by Noodles



Wu Xiu Wen jumped on Yang Guo's body. Held down by the two brothers, four fists rained down fiercely on him. Yang Guo bit his teeth and didn't make a sound. Guo Fu saw the beating was severe and was a little bit scared. But when she felt the red mark left by Yang Guo on her, she felt pleased and shouted out, "Hit him harder, harder!"

Guo Jing meditated on the boat, and after a few days, his energy has recovered by more than half. Huang Rong and Guo Jing raised the topic of Ouyang Feng, saying they hadn't seen him in ten years. Not only does it seem he hasn't aged much but his kung fu has improved. That palm he struck in Guo Jing's chest was lethal; it will take at least ten days to half a month to fully recover. The two moved on to Hong Qigong, they didn't know where he was and missed him very much. Huang Rong lived on the Peach Blossom Island, but she held the position of the Beggar Clan leader so all the clan's affairs had to be cleared through her. One of the reasons she returned to Jiangnan was to meet with elder Zhu and discuss what was happening with the clan, and to search for news of Hong Qigong. But Guo Jing had suffered an injury, so they had to return to the island first. Then they talked about Yang Guo, and Huang Rong called him into the boat and told him to explain everything. Yang Guo told them that his mother had died due to an illness, and how he had wandered around in Jiaying afterwards. The Guo couple reminisced about their friendship with Mu Nianci and couldn't help but feel depressed. After Yang Guo had returned to the deck, Guo Jing said, "I've always had one wish and you know this. Today, heaven has given me this chance to see Guo'er, my wish can be completed."

Years ago, Guo Jing's father Guo Xiaotian and Yang Guo's grandfather Yang Tiexin became brothers, and both their wives were pregnant. The two agreed that if their wives gave births to boys, they will become brothers; if they were girls

they would be sisters; if it was one girl and one boy then it would be arranged for them be married. Eventually they had two boys, Guo Jing and Yang Guo's father Yang Kang became brothers. However Yang Kang recognized an enemy as his father, his deeds were unchivalrous and eventually he died tragically near Jiaying's Iron Spear Temple. Guo Jing still felt responsible for this. When he mentioned this, Huang Rong understood his intentions and said, "I won't agree."

Guo Jing asked, with light surprise, "Agree what?"

Huang Rong said, "Fu'er won't be married to that boy."

Guo Jing said, "His father didn't do any good, but our families friendship is a long one. Yang Guo has a handsome face, he's extremely clever, and under our teaching he will achieve great things in the future."

Huang Rong said, "I'm afraid that he is too clever for his own good."

Guo Jing replied, "Weren't you clever? What is wrong with that?"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "I eventually fell for a dumb boy."

Guo Jing chuckled and said, "When Fu'er grows up, she may not find a dumb boy to love. Anyway, another boy as dumb as me, I doubt there'll be another one."

Huang Rong put on a shy face and said, "Are they rare?" The two joked around for a few more words before Guo Jing turned serious and said, "My father only had one wish, Uncle Yang Tie Xin also relied on me before he died. I didn't do my best with brother Yang and sister Mu. If I don't treat Guo'er as my own, how can I face father and uncle Yang?" He sighed, and looked disappointed.

Huang Rong gently said, "The two of them are young, there is no need to rush. If in the future Guo'er doesn't develop any bad points, then you can do what you like."

Guo Jing got up and clapped his hands, his spirits raised and said, "Thank you for your permission; I can't say how thankful I am."

Huang Rong replied, "I didn't agree to anything. All I said was watch what becomes of Guo'er in the future."

Guo Jing stood up and his waist straightened. He knew what Huang Rong meant and said, "Brother Yang Kang was raised in the palace of the Jin, and learned his ways from them. Guo'er will be on our island and he won't turn bad. It was I who named him all those years ago. His name is Yang Guo, "to correct past mistakes"; if he does do wrong he will be able to change and right it. You can relax."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "How can a name decide things? You are called Guo Jing, are you peaceful and quiet? Ever since you were young, you would jump around like a big monkey." Guo Jing thought about what she said, and wasn't able to respond. Huang Rong smiled, and changed the subject, and didn't mention the affair again.

The boat was quiet as they reached the island. Guo Fu was ecstatic that she had gained two little friends who were about the same age as her. Yang Guo had taken Huang Rong's antidote, and now his poison had dissipated completely. He and Guo Fu had their arguments when they first met, but they were still kids. After a few days they had forgotten about it. However in a few days, the four would argue again in game of catching crickets.

One day, Yang Guo came out of the house, looking for crickets again. He was relaxing, enjoying the scenery and whistling to himself when he suddenly heard laughing and

joking behind the hills. He rushed to have a look, and saw Guo Fu and the Wu brothers lifting rocks and pushing aside grass; they were looking for crickets. Wu Dunru was holding a bamboo tube, Guo Fu was holding a basin. Wu Xiuwen moved a rock and gave a laugh, a large cricket jumped out. Wu Xiuwen jumped on it, and held it with his two hands and laughed joyfully. Guo Fu said, "Give it to me, gimme."

Wu Xiuwen picked the cricket up and said, "Fine, I'll give it to you." He opened the lid of the basin and put the cricket in. The cricket's head and legs looked healthy, it had a thick waist and abdomen, and it looked like a spirited cricket. Wu Xiuwen said, "This cricket is going to be an invincible general, brother Yang, all the crickets that you have caught won't be a match." Yang Guo was unconvinced and took out a few bamboo tubes containing crickets. He picked out his liveliest one to fight. After a few rounds, the large cricket bit the waist of Yang Guo's cricket, causing it to slip out of the basin, fluttering its wings, looking weird.

Guo Fu laughed, "I won!"

Yang Guo said, "Wait, I've got more." He took out three but they lost too, the third one bitten in half by the large cricket. Yang Guo's face turned and said, "I'm not playing." and turned around and walked away. Suddenly he heard three "ji" noises behind him in the grass, it was the call of a cricket, but it sounded different than normal.

Wu Dunru said, "Another one." He parted the grass and suddenly jumped back, gasping, "Snake, snake!" Yang Guo turned around and saw a striped poisonous snake, flicking its tongue out of the grass. Yang Guo picked up a stone, and aimed it at the snake. It struck it on the head, the snake twisted and turned a few times and died. He saw beside the dead snake was a black cricket, its appearance strange,

spreading out its wings to call out. Guo Fu laughed and said, "Brother Yang, catch the black one."

Yang Guo heard that there was a ridiculing tone behind her words. Yang Guo's proud character rose and said, "Fine." He then went and caught it.

Guo Fu chuckled and said, "That thing, what do you want it for? You want to battle with my invincible general?"

Yang Guo said, "If you want to battle fine, this little one won't let others bully it." He placed the black cricket into Guo Fu's basin. What was strange was that when the large cricket saw the small black one, it looked startled and seemed to shrink away from it. Guo Fu and the Wu brothers shouted and called out to encourage it. The little black cricket raised its head and jumped in front of the big one. The big cricket, not daring to face it in battle, wanted to jump out of the basin. The black cricket jumped up and, high in midair, bit the end of the large cricket, and both of them fell out of the air. The large cricket shook a few times, and then turned on its abdomen and died. Amongst crickets, there are types, which liked to live with poisonous worms or with poisonous centipedes. This type is called the "Centipede Cricket" and those which live with poisonous snakes are called "Snake Crickets". Because of the poison on it, the normal types of cricket aren't their match. Yang Guo's cricket was a "Snake Cricket".

Guo Fu was very displeased with the fact that her invincible general had died, and after thinking for a while said to Yang Guo, "Brother Yang, give the black one to me."

Yang Guo replied, "Giving it to you originally wasn't a problem, but why did you ridicule the little black one?"

Guo Fu replied, "If you don't give it to me fine, who wants it?" She picked up her basin and turned it over, the little black

cricket fell onto the ground, and she squashed it with her right foot. Yang Guo gasped, his blood began to boil, his face went red, he couldn't control himself and he hit her hard by the side of the ear.

Guo Fu didn't know whether to stay quiet or cry. Wu Xiuwen shouted at him, "The little boy hits people!" and threw a fist towards Yang Guo's chest. His family's skills are deep. Ever since he was little his parents had taught him martial arts, so his martial arts roots are good, the fist that was coming towards Yang Guo's chest was not light. Yang Guo flared up, and threw a fist back but Wu Xiuwen dodged it. Yang Guo leapt up to attack, but Wu Dunru stuck out his leg to hook Yang Guo's leg, Yang Guo fell on the ground. Wu Xiuwen turned around and jumped on Yang Guo's body. Held down by the two brothers, four fists rained down fiercely on him.

Though Yang Guo was two years older, it was difficult for two fists to defend against four. The Wu brothers had been taught some higher martial arts, and Yang Guo had only learnt very basic martial arts from Mu Nianci. He wasn't their match. He bit his teeth and didn't make a sound.

Wu Dunru said, "If you apologize and beg we'll let you go."

Yang Guo shouted, "Never!"

Wu Xiuwen threw out another two fists. Guo Fu was watching aside pleased that the Wu brothers were helping her to get revenge.

The Wu brothers knew that if they attacked the head, it would leave wounds, and if Guo Jing and Huang Rong found out, they would be blamed. So they treated Yang Guo's body with fists and kicks. Guo Fu saw the beating was severe and was a little bit scared. But when she felt the red mark left by Yang Guo by her ear, she felt pleased and shouted out, "Hit

him harder, harder!" The Wu brothers listened, and hit harder.

Yang Guo was on the ground, and when he heard Guo Fu's instructions he thought, "Guo Fu you evil little bitch, I'm going to get you for this." He felt extreme pain all over his back and it looked as if he would endure more. The Wu brothers had practiced martial arts since they were young, so their punches and kicks were strong. A normal adult wouldn't withstand it. If Yang Guo had not practiced a bit of internal energy, he would have long ago fainted. He bit his teeth harder and waved his hands wildly. Then he suddenly felt a cold and slippery object; it was the dead poisonous snake. He picked it up and threw it back at the Wu brothers.

When the Wu brothers saw the stripped poisonous snake, they gasped. Yang Guo turned his body around, and threw a fierce fist, hitting Wu Dunru in the nose causing a nosebleed. Yang Guo scampered up and quickly ran away. The Wu brothers were indignant, and chased after him. Guo Fu shouted out, "Catch him, catch him!" and followed.

Yang Guo ran on for a while and then turned around to see Wu Dunru's face full of blood, the expression on his face was furious, and knew if he was caught by the two brothers he would suffer an even more severe beating than before. So he ran and hurried to the foot of "Practicing Sword Peak", and climbed up.

Though Wu Dunru's face was full of blood, the wound didn't really hurt. It was just that feeling his face full of blood that made him angry, and he hurried after Yang Guo. Yang Guo climbed up the peak with the Wu brothers close behind unrelenting. Guo Fu was at the foot of the peak, hearing the footsteps she looked up and was pleased to see what was happening. Yang Guo hurried for a while, only to see a cliff, with nowhere else to go. Years ago, whenever Huang Yaoshi

invented a new stance, he would jump across the chasm and then go to the peak top and practice it. Could Yang Guo jump across? He thought, "I'd rather jump and die, than get caught by those two and get beaten up again." He turned around and shouted, "If you come one step closer I'll jump!" Wu Dunru stopped, while Wu Xiuwen shouted back, "Jump if you want, who cares about you? You don't have the guts anyway!" As he said this he crept closer.

Yang Guo's blood rose again, and was about to jump when he saw a large loose rock from the corner of his eye. In a rush of blood and not thinking about the consequences, he stretched out his hand to move the smaller stones, the large stone did indeed begin to move. He moved behind the large stone, and pushed with all his strength, the stone bounced twice and after a crashing sound, the stone began to roll down the hill. The Wu brothers were shocked when they saw him push the stone, the colour of their faces changed, and they hurriedly moved out of the way. The large stone carried numerous pieces of dirt and sand, and after moving past the Wu brothers, turned over many flowers and plants before heading into the sea. Wu Dunru panicked, his foot slipped, and he started to roll down. Wu Xiuwen caught him a rush. The two of them couldn't stand up on the slope and the both of them rolled down for about sixty or seventy feet; luckily a tree managed to block their path.

Huang Rong was in the house when she heard a sound far away, and followed the sound quickly to "Practicing Sword Peak", only to see a field of dirt and sand, her daughter hidden in the grass, so frightened that she couldn't cry, and the Wu brothers' heads and faces full of blood. Huang Rong picked up her daughter and asked, "What happened?" Guo Fu buried herself into her mother and cried. After she finished crying she explained that Yang Guo had hit her for no reason, and when the Wu brothers helped her, Yang Guo wanted to roll a stone on them to kill them. She pushed all

the blame onto Yang Guo. She didn't say anything about her squashing his cricket, or the Wu brothers beating Yang Guo. Huang Rong listened, and saw the red mark left on Guo Fu's face, the slap must have been strong, and she sympathized with her and comforted her.

Guo Jing also hurried to the scene, and saw the Wu brothers hurt and asked what happened. He was angry but also concerned about Yang Guo, and hurried up to the peak; he searched around but couldn't see a trace of him. He raised his voice and called out, "Guo'er, Guo'er." The loud voice resonated out for miles, but he did not see Yang Guo, nor did he hear a reply. Guo Jing waited a while becoming increasingly concerned and eventually descended down from the peak. He rowed around the island in a boat, searching for him until it was dark but still he couldn't see a trace of Yang Guo.

When Yang Guo pushed the stone and saw the Wu brothers roll down the peak, he had seen Huang Rong coming, and knew he would face a heavy punishment and so hid himself among the rocks in the cliff. He heard Guo Jing's call but did not reply. Yang Guo was hungry but he did not move from his hiding place among the rocks. He saw it was approaching dusk, the sea beginning to darken, and there was no sound of people anywhere nearby. After a while, the sky was lit up with stars, a cool wind was blowing; he felt cold and came out of his hiding place and gazed down the mountain. He saw clearly a light coming out from the window, and imagined the Guo couple, Ke Zhen'E, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers, eating a meal around the table; chicken, duck, fish and meat filling the table, and couldn't stop by drooling. But he thought of how they were talking about his punishment behind his back, and couldn't help but be furious. He stood there at the foot of the mountain, in the sea breeze he thought about how he had been bullied all his life, everyone looking at him coldly; he was filled with a feeling of indignity.

In reality, when Guo Jing could not find Yang Guo, how could he eat? When Huang Rong saw that her husband was troubled, she knew he wouldn't listen to her so she did the same as him, and accompanied him in his torment. Before the next day was bright the two went out searching again. Yang Guo had endured hunger for a day and a half now, and on the second morning he gave in, descended the peak, and went to a stream and caught some frogs. He peeled off their skin and picked up some dry leaves, wanting to roast them on a fire. He was by the streamside and wanted to cook the frogs immediately to cure his hunger but thought that Guo Jing and Huang Rong might see the smoke, so he went into a cave and prepared the fire. As soon as the frog's legs were golden, he ate straight away, eating a leg in one big bite. He suddenly heard Guo Jing's voice calling out, "Guo'er, Guo'er!? He thought, "You want me to come out so you can beat me, I'm not going to come out."

That night he slept in the cave and after he had slept for a while, he awoke suddenly and saw Ouyang Feng come into the cave. He said, "Son, I've come to teach you kung fu in order for you to avoid getting beat up by the two little Wus." Yang Guo was happily surprised and followed him out of the cave, only to see him crouch on the ground, and gave out a few "gu" sounds before pushing out two palms. Yang Guo tried to follow, but his palms and kicks weren't the same. Ouyang Feng curled his hand into a fist and threw it out, Yang Guo couldn't avoid it and it landed on top of his head, the pain was severe and he got up.

After being hit on the head, he woke up; it seemed it was all just a dream. He felt his head, and came across a bump. It ached severely and he sighed repeatedly, thinking, "It looks like father has recovered and has escaped from the bell. When is he going to come and collect me, and teach me kung fu so I can avoid being bullied by others?"

He went out of the cave, and looked up at the sky, and saw many stars hanging within the branches of the trees, and remembered that Ouyang Feng had taught him kung fu. He had forgotten about this; he crouched down, gave out a few “gu” calls; he wanted to use the formula of the “Toad Stance” that Ouyang Feng had taught him in Jiaying. He tried to use his fists and legs, but whatever he did, he couldn’t do this stance. He searched his mind, and threw out two palms, like he did in his dream, but that was a completely different thing. He was alone at the foot of the peak, and stared out at the sea, the lonely feeling in his heart was stronger than ever. Suddenly he heard a gentle voice from the sea calling, “Guo’er, Guo’er.” He immediately replied, “I’m here. I’m here.” He ran down onto the beach where Guo Jing could see him from faraway. In high spirits Guo Jing rowed quickly to the shore, and jumped onto the beach. The stars shone on the two as they rushed to each other. He picked up Yang Guo into his chest and just said, “Come back and have supper.” He was emotional, his voice almost cracking. When they reached the house, Huang Rong had prepared supper for them. They never mentioned what had happened again.

At dawn the next day, he called Yang Guo, the Wu brothers and Guo Fu out the hall, and invited Ke Zhen’E as well. He instructed the four disciples to kowtow to the six Jiangnan Freaks headstone, and then said to Ke Zhen’E, “Senior Master, I request your permission to take in four grand apprentices.”

Ke Zhen’E was delighted and said, “That will be for the best, I congratulate you.” Guo Jing then instructed Yang Guo, the Wu brothers to first kowtow to Ke Zhen’E and then underwent the ritual of a new disciple to a master towards the Guo couple.

Guo Fu smiled and asked, “Mother, I need to do this as well?”

Huang Rong replied, "Of course."

Guo Fu gleefully kowtowed to the three.

Guo Jing said seriously, "From today onwards, you four are apprentice brothers."

Guo Fu interrupted, "Wrong, its apprentice brother and sister."

Guo Jing gave his daughter a look and said, "When father has not finished speaking, don't open your mouth." He waited and then said, "From now on you four must treat each other with love and respect, share in good fortune and suffer in misery together. If there are any disturbances or conflicts, I won't look lightly upon it." He looked at Yang Guo when he said this. Yang Guo thought, "As long as you treat your daughter the same, then I won't push her around."

Ke Zhen'E took over, and passed on the rules and regulations of their school, it was the usual don't bully the weak, don't harm the innocents. The Seven Freaks had numerous rules but Ke Zhen'E couldn't remember all of them so just said the main ones. Guo Jing said, "I have learned a variety of skills, apart from the skills of the Jiangnan Seven Heroes (this is what Guo Jing called them.). The Quanzhen Sect's internal energy, the Peach Blossom Island and Beggars Clan's skills; I have learned a bit of all of them. You mustn't forget your roots so today I will teach you Grand Master's skills first.

As he was about to pass on the formula, Huang Rong saw that Yang Guo's head was down and his body was sticking out, his face had an indescribable aura, like Yang Kang's. Her heart was troubled, and thought, "Although his father didn't die directly by my hands, it could be said that I caused his death. If I don't watch over him, he will become trouble in the future." She smiled as she thought of a plan, "Teaching four of them will be hard work. I'll teach Guo'er." Before Guo Jing

could agree, Ke Zhen'E clapped his hand and said, "What an excellent idea! Your intelligence is incomparable; you can definitely make something out of this disciple." Guo Jing was pleased in his heart, he knew his wife was infinitely cleverer than him, her methods must exceed his. He didn't open his mouth to object.

Guo Fu was afraid of her father's strictness and said, "Mother, I want you to teach me."

Huang Rong smiled, "You want me because you can cause trouble and you won't be able to learn any kung fu. It will be better if your father teaches you." Guo Fu sneaked a glance at her father, and saw him staring at her; she turned around and didn't dare speak out again.

Huang Rong spoke to her husband and said, "We will set a rule: you mustn't teach Guo'er and I won't teach your three. The four of them can't pass on skills to each other, just in case they practice incorrectly, there is no need to get hurt for no reason."

Guo Jing replied, "Of course."

Huang Rong said, "Guo'er, follow me."

Yang Guo loathed Guo Fu and the Wu brothers, when he heard what Huang Rong had said, about not mixing with the other students, it was what he wanted, and followed her into the inner hall. Huang Rong led him to the study, and picked up a book saying, "Your teacher had seven teachers, their names were the Jiangnan Seven Freaks, first master is Grandpa Ke, second master was the Swift Hand Scholar Zhu Cong, now I will teach his skills to you."

As she said this she opened the book and read clearly, "Zi Yue: When practicing what you are taught, can you change? If you've got friends all over, is it extreme?" (N.B. Sorry about

this translation, it's supposedly from "The Analects of Confucius", my Chinese is not at the level where I can decipher old sayings and writings.) The book that she picked was "The Analects of Confucius". Yang Guo thought this was strange but didn't dare to question her, and just repeated what she read and wrote down what she said. Throughout the day, all Huang Rong taught him was reading and writing, and refused to mention teaching kung fu.

One day after Yang Guo finished studying, he went to the back of the mountain to take a walk, and remembered Ouyang Feng. He didn't know where he was, he thought of fond memories, and at that moment flipped his body upside down, and copied the movements of Ouyang Feng. After a while, following the formula for contrary blood flow, he felt the more he stayed upside down the smoother it felt. He flipped upright and after a loud "gu" call, pushed out his two palms. He felt his body was smooth and relaxed, the gracefulness incomparable, and his body was covered with sweat. He didn't know that after a session of practicing, his internal energy had increased a level. All Ouyang Feng's kung fu was dangerous; the most lethal types of the higher set of skills. Yang Guo's intelligence and comprehension was high. Although he had learned very little in the past few days, now that he had begun to practice, his internal energy improved.

From now on, he would study and recite books and manuscripts with Huang Rong everyday, and whenever he had spare time in the evenings he would go to the secluded mountainside and practice his martial arts. He didn't intend to practice in order to learn the frightening skill; it was because every time he practiced, his body would be filled with a relaxed feeling. After he has achieved this then he would stop.

He secretly practiced and Guo Jing and Huang Rong didn't know. Huang Rong taught him literature, and within three months she had taught him the whole of "The Analects of Confucius". Yang Guo was able to memorize the texts quickly. Yang Guo was able to memorize the texts quickly. Though he disliked learning texts and manuscripts, he didn't raise any objections.

In reality, Huang Rong was not happy just teaching him how to read and study, but thought, "His intelligence is not below mine and if his character is like his father's and he learns kung fu he could definitely cause a lot of trouble in the future. Why not teach him to study, and shape him into a worthy and honest person. That had its good points." That's why she picked "The Analects of Confucius" and now she would follow it with "Meng Zi".

A few months past and Huang Rong had still not passed on any martial arts, nor had Yang Guo asked about it. Ever since the fight with the other children, he had not tried to mingle with them, and kept himself to himself, becoming even more of a loner. He thought that although Guo Jing had taken him in as a student, he didn't have the intention of passing any skills to him. He already wasn't a match for the Wu brothers. If he had a fight with them after a year or so under Guo Jing's teachings, it would be difficult for him not to die at their hands. He made a decision, when there was a chance to leave the island, he would take it.

One afternoon when Yang Guo was supposed to study a few passages of "Meng Zi", he slipped out of the library and went out for a walk on the beach. He looked out at the sea, at the white waves and foam, and thought, "When will I be able to leave this place, and happily leave the others where they are." As he was gazing, he suddenly heard some wind sounds from the Peach Blossom forest. Curious, he went over to have a look, and eventually found his way. From a distance could

see it was Guo Jing in the forest teaching the Wu brothers some fists and kicks. He was teaching them a stance of the "Trapping Hand", "Holding the Bridge", "Changing the Pillar" (tuo liang huan zhu). Guo Jing gave them pointers, and then demonstrated it, instructing the Wu brothers to copy him. Yang Guo just took a glance, and recognized the essence of the stance immediately, but the Wu brothers practiced and practiced but couldn't quite get it. Guo Jing himself wasn't the best at picking things up immediately, and knew how hard things could be, so did not lose his temper with them and repeated this move again.

Yang Guo sighed and thought, "If Uncle Guo was willing to teach me, I wouldn't be as stupid as them." Feeling unhappy, he returned to his room and slept. After supper he read a few more books, but thought this was a waste of his time and so he went to the beach again. He practiced the punch and kicks that Guo Jing taught, and went over it a few times before he started to feel troubled and thought, "If I secretly practice their skills to a much better standard than the Wu brothers, I won't have to be scared of them." This idea initially was good but as he thought about it he changed his mind. "Uncle Guo doesn't want to teach me so why should I learn it in secret? Hmm... even if he decides to teach me, I won't learn it. I may get beaten to death but who cares?" As he thought about this, he felt pride but also sadness. He sat and leaned on the cliff face; the soothing sound of the waves of the sea eventually sending him to sleep.

In the morning, Yang Guo did not go for breakfast, nor did he go to the library to study, he was by the sea and managed to gather several large clams which he roasted on a fire and ate. He thought, "Even if I don't eat Guo food, I won't starve to death." He saw a large boat and a small boat by the shore. "I won't be able to operate that large boat, and I can't row far in that small boat, how can I escape from this island?" He thought about this for half a day, having nothing to do, he

went beside a large cliff face and flipped his body, and practiced the internal energy that Ouyang Feng taught.

At the point where his blood was beginning to flow quickly, where his body felt lucid and smooth, he suddenly heard a shout from behind. He was caught unawares and fell down, his legs and arms numb, he couldn't get back up. It was Guo Fu and the Wu brothers arriving on the scene. Behind the cliff face was an extremely quiet and peaceful area, with no one around. Because the paths of the island were designed to follow the five changes, Guo Fu and the brothers didn't dare to run about blindly. They were looking for a place to play and followed a path, eventually winding up here where Yang Guo was practicing. It was fortunate that Yang Guo's internal strength was shallow; otherwise the interruption by the three would have scrambled his veins and meridians, causing him to suffer paralysis.

Guo Fu clapped her hand and said, "What are you doing here?" Yang Guo supported himself on the cliff face and slowly pulled himself up, gave Guo Fu a stare, turned around and walked away.

Wu Xiuwen called out, "Hey, apprentice sister asked a question; are you pretending to not care or are you ignoring us?"

Yang Guo coldly said, "How can you take charge in this matter?"

Wu Xiuwen was offended and said, "We only care about having a good time, not greeting mad dogs."

Yang Guo replied, "You are right, mad dogs will bite when they see people, three mad dogs have just come, barking and howling madly."

Wu Dunru angrily said, "You said three mad dogs? You abuse people?"

Yang Guo laughed and replied, "No, I only scold dogs, not people."

Wu Dunru could not take anymore and curled a fist and threw it out at Yang Guo, who managed to avoid it. Wu Xiuwen remembered what their teacher had said about not fighting amongst each other. If news of this ever got to teacher, they would be punished, so he grabbed hold of his brother's arm and laughed coldly at Yang Guo saying, "Big brother Yang, you've been under the care of master wife learning martial arts, we three from master. A few months have passed but we don't know who has advanced the most. How about sparring with each other, comparing skills, do you dare?"

Yang Guo was aggravated and originally wanted to say, "I don't have your luck. Master wife has not taught me any kind of martial arts." But when he heard the four words "do you dare to", he extinguished his angry feelings and prevented himself from saying what he intended to. He gave out a grunt and stared coldly at him.

Wu Xiuwen said, "We are here to test each others skill, no matter who wins and who loses, no one is allowed to tell master or master wife. Even if your head is cracked open, you must say you fell. If the loser complains about the winner, then they are born of dogs, a bastard; big brother Yang, do you dare?" As he said the words "do you dare" his eyes went blank, as Yang Guo threw a heavy fist into Wu Xiuwen's left eye. Wu Xiuwen jumped back to prevent himself falling over.

Wu Dunru said, "You don't care about face do you with a punch like that." He then used the punches and kicks that Guo Jing taught him, and attacked Yang Guo in the abdomen. Yang Guo could not avoid this punch and got hit. Then he saw Wu Dunru throw out a kick at him, and then he suddenly

thought of something and he remembered the moves that Guo Jing taught to the Wu brothers yesterday. He bent his right leg, and with his left hand pushed the incoming right leg, it was the “Secret Hero in the Noisy City” Quan Jinfan’s “Trapping Hand”, the stance of “Holding the Bridge, Changing the Pillar” (tuo liang huan zhu), though it wasn’t a very special move, it is useful when facing an enemy. Yesterday when Guo Jing repeated the move, the Wu brothers learned it, but when it was put in use for real, it didn’t compare with the Yang Guo’s, who only had a glance at it and just went over it once. Wu Dunru fell over after this move by Yang Guo.

Wu Xiuwen was already aggravated with the punch he received in his eye, but when he saw his brother fall he picked himself up and threw out a left punch. Yang Guo dodged to the left, but he only knew very little of the stances of the punches, so he couldn’t compete as a right fist of Wu Xiuwen hit him squarely on the right side. Wu Dunru picked himself up and the brothers attacked from both sides. The brothers’ martial arts foundation was already stronger than Yang Guo’s, and he wasn’t a match. Added to the fact that the Wu brothers had been training under Guo Jing for a few months, how would he be able to stand up against them? After a while, seven, eight punches had landed on Yang Guo’s head, back and waist. Yang Guo flared up and thought, “Even if I get beaten to death by you, I won’t try to escape.” He wildly threw some punches out; they weren’t at all from any set of orthodox skills.

Wu Xiuwen saw the state that Yang Guo was in and was slightly afraid. They had already taught him a lesson and didn’t want to carry on. He said, “You’ve already lost, we’ll let you go, there’s no need to fight more.”

Yang Guo shouted, “Who wants you to ease off?” and dashed at him, attacking fiercely. Wu Xiuwen stretched out his left

hand and with his right hand grabbed hold of his chest, trying to pull him forward in a rush. At this time, Wu Dunru threw two punches at Yang Guo's back. Yang Guo couldn't stand steadily, and fell forwards. Wu Dunru held his head with two hands and said, "You ready to give up?"

"Who wants to give up to you mad dogs?"

Wu Dunru was offended and pushed Yang Guo's face in the sand and said, "If you don't give up then suffocate to death."

Yang Guo's eyes, nose, and face were full of sand and dirt; he couldn't breathe, after a while, his body felt like cracking. Wu Dunru was holding his head with two hands, Wu Xiuwen was on his back, Yang Guo could not escape and as he was finding it difficult to breathe, the internal energy of the "Toad Stance" that he has been practicing over the last few days suddenly became fluent; a warm chi was flowing through his "dan tian". All of a sudden, his body was full of energy as he leapt up fiercely, his eyes closed when he threw out two palms. It hit Wu Xiuwen in the lower abdomen; Wu Xiuwen gave out a cry before falling to the ground unconscious. The palm's power came from Ouyang Feng's "Toad Stance", the power of it of course could not compare to Ouyang Feng's, and Yang Guo had not intentionally used it. But since he was in danger he involuntarily used it, and Wu Xiuwen could not withstand it.

Wu Dunru jumped back but when he saw his brother didn't move and his eyes were rolled back, he knew that Yang Guo had killed his brother. He was startled but shouted out, "Master, master, brother has died!" He sobbed as ran to take the news to Guo Jing. Guo Fu was scared, and followed.

Yang Guo spat out the sand and dirt, and rubbed the sand off his face, but felt he didn't have an ounce of strength left in his body; it was extremely difficult for him to even move one step. He saw Wu Xiuwen in front of him, not moving, and

heard Wu Dunru cry out, "My brother is dead!" and knew something was wrong but he didn't have the strength to run away.

Some time passed before he saw Guo Jing and Huang Rong hurriedly leaping to the scene. Guo Jing picked up Wu Xiuwen and placed his palm on Wu Xiuwen's chest. Huang Rong ran to Yang Guo's side and asked, "Where's Ouyang Feng? Where is he?" Yang Guo did not reply. Huang Rong asked, "When did he teach you the "Toad Stance"?" It looked like Yang Guo was listening, but it also seemed that he wasn't, his eyes losing their focus, just staring in front, his mouth tightly closed, scared of letting one word slip out. Huang Rong saw that he didn't care, so held his two arms and said, "Tell me! Where's Ouyang Feng?" Yang Guo still did not move.

After a while, Wu Xiuwen regained consciousness after Guo Jing had channeled his internal energy into him. Guo Jing then brought Ke Zhen'E and Guo Fu to the scene. When Ke Zhen'E heard from Guo Fu that Yang Guo flipped his body, and heard that he had killed Wu Xiuwen, he knew that Yang Guo was Ouyang Feng's heir. Full of hate and revenge, he rushed to Yang Guo's side, hearing Huang Rong ask, "Where is Ouyang Feng." But Yang Guo still didn't care. He walked up to Yang Guo and held his iron staff high, and shouted out, "Where is Ouyang Feng that scoundrel? If you don't tell me, I'll kill you with one strike!"

Without care for his life he shouted back, "He's not a scoundrel, he's a good person. You can kill me if you want, but I won't say a word."

Ke Zhen'E was angry and raised his weapon, ready to strike down. Guo Jing shouted out, "Senior Master, don't! Only to hear a thudding sound, as the staff evaded Yang Guo's body and struck into the sand. Ke Zhen'E had wanted to scare him

into saying something but as the weapon reached his head, there was still no reply so he let his weapon slip.

Ke Zhe E shouted out, "You refuse to speak?"

Yang Guo shouted back, "If you've got guts go ahead and kill me, I'm not scared of you blind man." Guo Jing rushed over, and slapped Yang Guo across the face fiercely. "You dare to be disrespectful towards your Grand Master!"

Yang Guo did not cry, and calmly said, "You people won't raise your hands to kill me, fine. I'll do it myself!" He turned around and rushed towards the sea.

Guo Jing shouted, "Guo'er, come back!" Yang Guo walked even faster. Guo Jing went over to stop him but Huang Rong said, "Stop." Guo Jing stopped only to see Yang Guo enter the sea, heading into the waves.

Guo Jing gasped and said, "He can't swim well, Rong'er, we need to save him." and went to rescue Yang Guo.

Huang Rong said, "He's not dead yet, there's no need to rush." After a while, Yang Guo had not returned. She admitted defeat to Yang Guo's pride, and went into the sea. She was a good swimmer, rescuing someone close to the shore was easy for her, she dived into the water and pulled up Yang Guo and carried him back to the beach. She put him on the cliff side rocks, letting him spit out the sea water by himself and slowly regain consciousness.

Guo Jing looked at his master, and then his wife and asked, "So?"

Huang Rong replied, "He learned his kung fu before arriving on the island; even if Ouyang Feng did come, we would know about it." Guo Jing nodded. She asked, "How's little Wu's injury?"

Guo Jing replied, "It looks like he'll need at least two months rest."

Ke Zhen'E said, "Tomorrow I'll leave for Jiaxing."

Huang Rong and Guo Jing looked at each other, understanding his intentions; he would never live with someone who was related to Ouyang Feng in any way. Huang Rong said, "Senior Master, this is your home, why do you give in to the child?"

That night Guo Jing summoned Yang Guo to his room and said, "Guo'er, all that has happened is in the past, we won't mention it. You were disrespectful to Senior Master, I cannot allow you to stay with my school, from now on, call me Uncle Guo. I'm afraid that Uncle Guo's inability to teach you will lead to your future failures. In a few days, I'll take you to Mount Zhongnan to Chongyang Palace and request Quanzhen sect's elder Changchun Zi (Eternal Spring) to accept you into their sect. Quanzhen sect is famous for its martial arts, I hope you take this opportunity in Chongyang Garden to hone your skills and reflect on your character, and so, hopefully, you will become a gentleman."

Yang Guo replied, "Yes, Uncle Guo." He changed his greeting, and didn't regard Guo Jing as his teacher anymore.

Guo Jing got up early in the morning and prepared money and luggage; he said goodbyes to his wife, his master, his daughter and the Wu brothers. He left with Yang Guo by boat. They arrived at Zheijang's Red Sea. Guo Jing bought two horses, and he and Yang Guo traveled north. Yang Guo had never ridden a horse before, but now his internal energy has some foundation, and after a few days of adjusting, he could freely control the reins. He was young and eager, always riding ahead of Guo Jing.

The next day, the two passed the Yellow River (Yangtze) and arrived at Xiaxi. Ever since the Jin lost to the Mongols, everywhere north of the Yangtze was under the influence of the Mongols. In Guo Jing's younger days, he once was a general in the Mongol army. If he met any one who knew him, he knew there would be trouble so he changed his two horses for two rough looking mules and changed into old torn clothing; he disguised himself as a troubled villager. Yang Guo also changed his clothing and wore a blue green hat, and then got on the mule. The mule was bad tempered, and it was slow, Yang Guo spent the next few days trying to break its temper.

One day they arrived at Cage Village (Fanchuan); it was in the area of Mount Zhongnan. The village got its name from the Kai General Fan who had successfully captured a city. Along the way they passed winding mountain ranges, pine forests, fields of vegetables and cotton; its scenery not unlike that of Jiangnan.

After Yang Guo left Peach Blossom Island, his feelings towards the events on the island were still there but he would not mention them. He couldn't hold onto this stance, and it slipped out, "Uncle Guo, this place is quite similar to our island."

When Guo Jing heard him say "our island" he was pleased to no end and said, "Guo'er, we are not far from Mount Zhongnan, remember to take this opportunity at Quanzhen and learn from their teachings. A few years later on, I will come back for you and take you back to the island."

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I will never go back to the island." Guo Jing forgot about Yang Guo's young age, the words that he said came straight from his heart. Guo Jing had no reply to this. After a while he said, "You are angry with Uncle and Auntie Guo?"

Yang Guo replied, "How can I dare to? It's you that should be angry with me." Guo Jing gave up, and didn't open his mouth again.

The two of them went up a hill, and in the afternoon, they arrived at a temple on the hill's peak. Guo Jing saw three words were written on top of the doors, "Light Everywhere Temple". He tied the mules to a pine tree outside the temple and went inside for a meal. Inside the temple were seven or eight monks, when they saw he was plainly dressed, the monks calmly gave them two bowls of noodles and seven or eight buns for them to eat. Yang Guo and Guo Jing sat on a rock underneath a pine tree to eat their noodles; they glanced around and saw there was a large stone slab behind the pine tree. Tall grass was concealing what was on the slab, only two words could be seen, "Changchun". Guo Jing was moved, and went over to take a closer look. It was Changchun Zi Qiu Chuji's writing, and on it was a poem left by him; "The gloomy sky has come to earth, why doesn't it teach ten thousand souls to be bitter? The ten thousand souls want to be delayed; the cries of the dead have no sound. Shouting up to the sky but it won't reply, their fragmented slender forms toil. The thousands are confused in peace, teaching the living to live their soul."

When Guo Jing saw this poem, it reminded him of the events ten years ago when he was on the plains of Mongolia, touching the stone slab without saying a word, reminiscing about the time when he first met Qiu Chuji.

Yang Guo asked, "What is written on the stone slab?"

Guo Jing replied, "It is a poem written by your Grand Master Qiu. He has seen the troubles of the world and was extremely sad." He then explained the poem to Yang Guo and said, "Elder Qiu's martial arts are outstanding; he cares about the common people and is a respected teacher. Your father was

an able student of elder Qiu. I'm sure that on your father's behalf, he will treat you especially well. Do your best at studying the martial arts there and you will definitely become something in the future."

Yang Guo asked, "Uncle Guo, I have one question I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"How did my father die?"

Guo Jing's face lost its colour, as he remembered the events of the Iron Spear Temple, his body trembled, unable to speak.

"Who caused my father's death?" Guo Jing did not reply.

Yang Guo remembered when he asked his mother the same question, she responded the same way. Although Guo Jing treated him like his own son, Huang Rong was neglectful of him. Although he was young, he felt that there was a hidden secret to this matter. He couldn't hold back and shouted, "My father's death was caused by you and Auntie Guo wasn't it?"

Guo Jing was shocked, and slammed down his hand on the stone, and bellowed angrily, "Who told you these lies?" The power in his palm was great; because of his angry reaction the stone slab continually shook. Yang Guo saw his anger and said, "I'm sorry, I won't ever say these sorts of things again, don't be angry Uncle Guo."

Guo Jing loved him very much, and when he heard Yang Guo's apology, his feelings dissipated and he was about to comfort him when he heard a "hey" shout from behind, the voices behind it were startling. He turned around, and saw that it was two middle aged Taoists standing at the entrance to the mount; their eyes fixed on him, their faces with a furious expression. They were taking great interest in the stone slab and wanted to take a closer look at the two. The

Taoists took a glance and then moved. Guo Jing saw that their steps were light; they possessed martial arts. He thought that since Mount Zhongnan is not far; the places around here should be filled with people from the Chongyang Palace. The two Taoists were about forty, and were the students of the Quanzhen Seven Masters. For as long as Guo Jing had lived on Peach Blossom Island in seclusion, he hadn't sent news to Ma Yu. He wasn't familiar with the students of Quanzhen, and only knew that Quanzhen had become famous so that Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chu must have accepted many students. Their name in Wulin had become increasingly famous; they had done heroic deeds, solved troubles and disasters, done countless good deeds. Whenever someone hears the name Quanzhen in Wulin, they could only admire it. He wanted to ascend the mount and greet Qiu Chuji, and it was luck that he could be accompanied by two of their students.

He stepped up his pace to the entrance of the mountain, only to see the two Taoists step up their pace to about one hundred feet in front of him, not turning back. Guo Jing called out, "Please wait Taoist brothers, I have a request." His voice was clear and strong, his voice could be heard near and far but the two Taoists did not stop but sped up again. Guo Jing thought, "Could those two be deaf?" He increased his efforts and within a few steps his was in front of them. He turned around and said, "Greetings." He said this while carrying the luggage.

The two saw how swift his movements were and their faces changed. They saw he was carrying luggage, and thought he was going to circulate his chi and ambush them so they took a few steps and one evaded right, the other left then turned around and asked, "Who are you?"

Guo Jing said, "Are you two the students of Mount Zhongnan's Chongyang Palace?"

The leaner of the Taoist replied, "Why are you here?"

Guo Jing said, "I'm an old friend of elder Qiu, I've come to see him, sorry for the trouble."

The other shorter Taoist replied, "If you've the nerve go, why don't you move!" As he said this he struck out a palm quickly. Guo Jing had to move right to avoid it. The two Taoists moved into position immediately after the palm moving left and right, wanting to attack together. Guo Jing was cut off in the middle. The two moves were called "Cutting off the Door". It was the refined skills of the Quanzhen sect, how would Guo Jing not know it? He saw that the two Taoists did not ask for an explanation and had already used force to try to harm him. He was slightly startled, wondering whether there was a misunderstanding, he didn't try to clear it up, nor did he try to evade as he heard two sounds, as two palms landed on the side of his body from the two Taoists.

From the two palms, Guo Jing already knew how strong they were. Guo Jin felt that the two Taoists internal energy was able, confirming that they were the students of Seven Masters of Quanzhen, and thought that he could be classed in the same generation as them. When the two palms were coming at him, Guo Jing had already circulated his chi for defense so all he needed to do was bring his internal strength up to the right level and he wouldn't be hurt. But he also didn't return the power in the palms, causing the Taoists palms to hurt and swell. It wasn't serious; after some initial pain the feeling dissipated.

The Taoists had practiced that move for ten years, but the move didn't even seem to affect him one bit, and they were astonished. They both gave a whistle; they leapt up and ferociously kicked out at Guo Jing's chest. Guo Jing thought this was odd, "The students of Quanzhen have been taught

the values of Taoism, and they treat people with great respect, why have these students started to use violence for no reason?"

He saw that the two used "The Mandarin Duck's Looping Kick" (yuan yang lian huan tui) set of stances, but still his face did not change and he ignored the attack. He heard numerous crashing sounds as several footprints were left on his chest. The Taoists kicked out six times in all, as if they were kicking a sand bag. They relaxed only to see the enemy motionless, not even being harmed one bit. They were astonished since they had attacked harder than last time by several levels. They thought, "How come this crook is so powerful? Even our teacher and his apprentice brothers do not have this amount of skill." They carefully studied Guo Jing; he had dense eyebrows and large eyes, a sturdy body, clothed in rough clothes, like a villager, he had no intention of leaving and stood there, without making a sound.

Yang Guo saw that the Taoists were punching and kicking Uncle Guo but Guo Jing did not retaliate. He couldn't stand it and shouted out, "You two smelly Taoists, why are you hitting Uncle Guo?"

Guo Jing quickly said, "Guo'er, keep your mouth shut. Come over here and greet the two Taoist brothers."

Yang Guo walked forwards and thought, "What's the matter with you Uncle Guo, why are you protecting them?"

The two Taoists gave each other a glance, and after two "sha" noises, they withdrew their swords from their waists. The short Taoist used the stance "Scour the Ocean to Slaughter the Dragon" (tan hai tu long) and aimed for Guo Jing's lower body, the other used "Starry Wind Sweeping Leaves" (gang feng sao ye) and aimed to cut down Yang Guo's right leg.

Guo Jing did not pay attention to the sword that was coming in at him, but instead looked at the skinny Taoist who was unleashing a lethal move and thought, "The child has not done anything to you, so why such a lethal move? How can it be that the sword is aiming to cut his leg in half?" He then moved his body, his left hand placed on the short Taoist's sword handle, "Smoothly Pushing the Boat", and lightly pushed to the left. The short Taoist turned his sword around involuntarily, and after a clashing sound, the skinny Taoist's sword was intercepted, stopping his stance. Guo Jing used the enemy to fight the enemy, the move coming from the "Empty Hands Entering A Hundred Blades" set of kung fu, right now there are only two enemies, even if there was eight or ten people attacking at once, he could still use the enemy's knife to attack the enemy's sword, the enemy's spear against the enemy's whip, utilizing the enemy to attack the enemy, one beating many.

The two Taoists felt their wrists were getting numb, and starting to feel pain; they slanted their bodies and jumped away, turning their bodies. They stared at Guo Jing, frightened but also admiring him at the same time, they whistled out again and their swords were thrust out, once again.

Guo Jing thought, "You two have just learned the "Big Dipper Formation". Though it is a higher set of sword skills, there are only two of you, your foundation for sword skills is not yet good enough, what use is it?"

Afraid that their swords would strike Yang Guo, he moved his body and evaded the two swords, and picked up Yang Guo with his right hand. He shouted out, "I am elder Qiu's old friend; there is no need for this."

The skinny Taoist said, "Even if you are elder Mao Chongma's old friend it wouldn't matter."

Guo Jing said, "Indeed; Elder Ma has taught me kung fu as well."

The short Taoist angrily replied, "You lying crook; the next thing you are going to tell me is that ancestor Yang has taught you kung fu." They straightened their swords and aimed for Guo Jing's chest.

Guo Jing saw that the two did belong to Quanzhen sect, but he could not believe that they are treating him as an enemy. His relationship with the Seven Masters of Quanzhen wasn't anything ordinary, and he wanted Yang Guo to learn martial arts at Chongyang Palace; he couldn't be rude to the Palace's Taoists so he just evaded and did not attack.

The two Taoist were frightened. They had known long ago that their opponent was superior to them, and they wouldn't be able to hit him, so they made a hand signal, and changed their sword style. They sent out many strokes, now all aimed at Yang Guo's chest, sides and back. Every stance they used was intended to kill.

Guo Jing saw that Taoists did not hold anything back with their sword strokes towards a child; he couldn't hold back his anger for any longer. The short Taoist came in with a ferocious stroke, Guo Jing suddenly shot out his right hand; the first and second fingers opened, and held the blade of the sword. He twisted his wrist inwards, his elbow now facing the short Taoist's nose. The short Taoist used his strength to pull free, but couldn't move his long sword, he saw that Guo Jing's elbow coming towards him, and knew that if he didn't die from it he would be seriously hurt so he let go and jumped back.

Guo Jing's martial arts were at a level where he could do what he wanted. It didn't matter if he lifted his hand or raised his foot; the result would be the same. He moved the fingers of his right hand, the sword now stood erect, the handle

flicking upwards. The skinny Taoist was aiming for Yang Guo's neck, his sword tip was struck but the sword handle moved, and after a clashing sound, his right arm grew hot, his body was shaking and he could do nothing but let go.

The two said together, "The perverted scoundrel is too powerful, let's get away!" They turned around as they said this.

Guo Jing had been insulted many times in his life, he has been called, "fool", "idiot", even a "crook", but this is the first time that someone has called a perverted scoundrel. He didn't put Yang Guo down, carrying him he hurried after the two, after one step with his right foot, he leapt over the two Taoists then he turned around and shouted, "What did you call me?"

The short Taoist was frightened, but managed to say, "If you don't want to marry the one named Long, then why have you come to Mount Zhongnan?" As he was speaking, he was afraid that Guo Jing would attack and retreated three steps at the same time.

Guo Jing stopped and thought, "I want to marry the one named Long, who is this girl named Long? Why do I want to marry her? I've already have Rong'er, why would I want to marry someone else?" He stood there as he thought about what was going on. The two Taoists saw that he was standing still, he seemed to be distracted; they glanced at each other and quickly ran past him, hurrying up the mountain.

Yang Guo saw that Guo Jing was not fully aware; he lightly came down to the ground and said, "Uncle Guo, the two smelly Taoists have escaped."

Guo Jing woke from his daydream and grunted, before saying, "They said I wanted to marry the girl named Long, who is she?"

Yang Guo said, "I don't know, the two didn't even try to clear things up before using force, they must thought you were another person."

Guo Jing smiled, "It must be, how come I didn't think of that? Let's go up the mountain!"

Yang Guo picked up the two swords that the two Taoists abandoned. Guo Jing looked at the sword handle; "Chongyang Palace" was imprinted on the handle. The two went on their way. After about an hour they came to the Golden Lotus Chamber and without stopping carried on through the rugged terrain. They stepped on some loose rocks as they reached Mao Yuan Cliff (Hanging Brave Cliff), then the two ascended up it. As they passed the Sun and Moon Cliff (ri yue), the sky was getting dark; when they got to Holding Son Cliff (bao zi), the new moon came out. The appearance of the Holding Son Cliff was peculiar, like a mother holding her son. The two traveled for a while, before Guo Jing said, "Guo'er, are you tired?"

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "No."

Guo Jing said, "Okay, we'll continue on our way."

They walked on, only to see a large rock formation blocking their way. The impression of the rocks was like being in a haunted forest, with one looking like an old woman bending over them. Yang Guo was slightly frightened, and then heard a sound from behind the rock, and four Taoists leapt out, blocking the way and standing motionless.

Guo Jing placed the luggage in front of him and said, "I am Peach Blossom Island's Guo Jing, and I am here to see elder Qiu."

A tall Taoist stepped forward and chuckled, "Hero Guo is known by everyone, he is also senior Huang's son in law; how

can you be so shameless and pretend to be him? Leave quickly!"

Guo Jing thought, "How am I shameless?" He held his temper and said, "I am indeed Guo Jing, could you request elder Qiu to sort this matter out."

The tall Taoist retorted, "You've come to Mount Zhongnan with force, you must be tired of your life. I don't care how powerful you are, you are incapable of reaching Chongyang Palace." As he was speaking the short and skinny Taoist thrust out a sword, and as soon as he finished his sentence he stepped up, ran along the peak of the rock and used the "Separating the Flower, Brushing Away the Willow" (fen hua fu liu) aiming at Guo Jing's waist.

Guo Jing thought, "I haven't been in Jianghu for ten years, have the rules changed?"

He moved his body to evade the strike, and as he was about to speak, the other three Taoists extended their swords, surrounding Guo Jing and Yang Guo.

Guo Jing said, "What can I do to convince you four that I am Guo Jing?"

The tall Taoist snorted, "If you could remove my sword from my grasp." As he said this, he performed another move, this time the sword heading straight for the chest. The sword that was coming at him was light, the tip of the sword swaying. It wasn't like an ordinary sword hacking downward and he wasn't showing any respect to Guo Jing; he performed this move casually.

Guo Jing chuckled and thought, "How hard will it be to remove your sword?" As he saw the tip coming towards him, he held his second finger with his thumb and flicked out at the sword tip, after a "weng" noise, the Taoist couldn't hold

on to the sword, and sword was released in midair. Guo Jing didn't wait for the sword to come down, three more flicks followed by three "weng" noises, and the handles of the other three long swords were up in the air, the blades brightly shining in the moonlight.

Yang Guo shouted out, "Are you convinced now?" Normally Guo Jing would aim to keep the opponent standing, but he was offended by the tall Taoist's lack of respect in his stance so he used the "Divine Flicking Finger" skill. This was Huang Yaoshi's most refined skill; Guo Jing had lived on Peach Blossom Island for a few years and was taught it by him. His internal energy is profound and when he used the skill; it was something out of the ordinary.

The four Taoist's swords were forced from their hands, and they didn't know what move the enemy used to do this. The tall Taoist shouted, "The scoundrel uses witchcraft, let's leave." As he said this he jumped behind the Old Woman Cliff, and hurriedly escaped. The other three followed and disappeared into the night.

Today, Guo Jing heard someone call him a "scoundrel" for the first time, and now someone said he uses witchcraft; he didn't know whether to be angry or to laugh. He said, "Guo'er, place the swords neatly on a rock near the path."

Yang Guo said, "Yes." He picked up the swords, and along with the two he was holding, placed them on a green rock. He was in awe of Guo Jing's skills, his mouth wanted to open up and say the words, "Uncle Guo, I don't want to learn from the smelly Taoists, I want to learn from you." Then he remembered all the events of Peach Blossom Island and he swallowed the words.

The two turned around two bends and eventually wound up at what seemed to be a large area of wilderness. Suddenly, the sound of weapons unsheathing could be heard; seven

Taoists leapt out from the pine forest, each one holding a long sword.

Guo Jing saw that they had leapt into a formation, four to the left of him, three to the right; it was the “Big Dipper Formation”. His heart shivered, and thought, “There will be some difficulty in facing this formation.” He didn’t dare to be over confident, and quietly whispered to Yang Guo, “Go back to the rock behind us and wait for me there, go as far as possible so I won’t be hindered by looking out for you.”

Yang Guo nodded. He didn’t want them to look weak in front of Taoists, so he loosened his pants and called out, “Uncle Guo, I’m going to the toilet.” After he said this, he turned around and hurried to the rock. Guo Jing was pleased, “The child is very clever, catching up to Rong’er, but I hope he goes on the righteous path and learns well.”

Guo Jing turned around to face the seven Taoists. The seven had their backs facing the moon, he couldn’t see their faces that clearly, but he saw that the first six had long beards, they were not young, the seventh was smaller, and his age must be lower compared to the others. He thought, “The most important thing is to go up the mountain and explain any misunderstanding to elder Qiu, why should I tangle with these people?” He shifted his body, and shimmied to the left, assuming the “Northern Star Position”.

The seven didn’t hear him say anything, only seeing him hurriedly moving to the left, and didn’t know what he was up to. The Taoist in the “Tian Quan” position whistled, ordering the six others to the left, wanting to encircle Guo Jing. Guo Jing knew they would move together so he moved right two steps to force the enemy to move again, still assuming the “Northern Star Position”. The Taoist in the “Tian Quan” position wanted three of them to attack, but saw Guo Jing’s position was strange; the three of them weren’t able to

attack him. Instead, the seven of them were open to attack; the seven weren't able to defend each other and each of them suffered a sudden attack. Their left hands waved, and then they turned their formation around. As they were moving their feet, Gou Jing moved two steps forward maintaining the "Northern Star Position", spreading the position of the "Big Dipper Formation". The seven were in an ineffective position; it was hard for them to attack and hard for them to defend.

The "Big Dipper Formation" was the Quanzhen sect's highest kung fu. At its most refined state, when seven people of extremely high martial arts combined together, it could be said that it has no match under heaven. Guo Jing knew the essence of the formation; only by assuming the "Northern Star Position" was he able to drive the position, and control its movements, not allowing it freedom. However, because the seven of them weren't fluent with the formation it allowed him to do this. If it was Ma Yu, Qiu Chui Ji who was controlling the formation, the enemy would not be allowed to so easily to assume the "Northern Star Position". The seven of them changed positions a few times, Guo Jing dominated the formation and he didn't make a sound, just concentrating on maintaining the important position.

The Taoist in the "Tian Shu" (Hanging Sky) position was experienced and noticed that something wasn't right and called, "Change formation!" The seven Taoists scattered, heading right and swerving left, hurrying from east to west, wanting to jumble up the formation, trying to confuse the enemy. After a short while, the seven Taoists were in formation again. The Taoists had changed positions amongst themselves, and now they had moved from a western position to a southeast position where they arranged the formation. Once they were in position, the Taoists in the "Tian Xuan" (Jade Sky) and "Yu Heng" (Weighing Jade) positions pointed their swords and rushed forward, seeing the enemy

in a northern position from their rearrangement, his feet motionless and his palms uneven, a smile crept upon their faces. However they suddenly realized, "If us two go and rush forward, the positions "Kai Yang" (Opening Sun) and the "Tian Xuan" (Jade Sky) will be in great danger." As they stopped, the Taoist in the "Tian Shu" shouted out, "Don't attack, quickly retreat!" After a motionless while, the startled Taoist in the "Tian Quan" position ordered the other six to change formation.

Yang Guo didn't understand, only seeing the Taoists moving around wildly. Guo Jing would either move east, west, south or north a few steps, the seven Taoists still could not unleash even half a move. The more he watched, the more interested he became, and suddenly Guo Jing clapped his palms together shouting, "Apologies!" and moved left two steps.

The "Big Dipper Formation" was now in Guo Jing's control, and he rushed to the left. If the seven Taoists didn't follow, their backs will be exposed with no way to defend. In martial art terms this was extremely serious and ominous so the seven Taoists had no choice but to follow to the left. After a while, the seven Taoists fell into Guo Jing's trap, unable to hold the formation. When Guo Jing ran fast, the seven Taoists ran fast, when Guo Jing slowed down, the seven Taoists slowed down. The young Taoist had the weakest internal energy and after being forced to circle around over ten times in an urgent manner by Guo Jing, his head spun and his breathing was ragged. He felt like he could collapse at any minute but he knew that if the "Big Dipper Formation" had one less person, the whole formation would break down; he could only grind his teeth and exert all his energy to hold on.

Guo Jing wasn't young, but since he had lived on the island with Huang Rong and he had little contact with the outside world, he had lost little of the young Guo Jing. When he saw the seven Taoists were rushing around amusingly he thought,

“Today I have suffered insults for no reason at all; not only did they call me a perverted scoundrel, they said I used witchcraft. I didn’t use any witchcraft for you to see; then doesn’t that mean I’ve been insulted in vain?” He then loudly called out, “Guo’er, watch me use some witchcraft!” He suddenly leapt up to the tall rocks. The seven Taoists were under Guo Jing’s control, they of course had to follow; if they didn’t follow, the weakness of the formation will be revealed. As a few of them hesitated, the Taoist in the “Tian Quan” position quickly ordered everyone to leap up, bringing the formation onto the cliff. Before their legs had steadied themselves, Guo Jing swiftly moved onto the top of a pine tree. Although they were at a distance from each other, it was neither too far nor too close; he was still maintaining the “Northern Star Position” and it would be convenient for him to attack from above.

The seven Taoists all secretly feared the worst and thought, “Where on earth did this tyrant appear from; today our sect will lose face.” With these thoughts in their minds, they couldn’t afford to stop and each one leaped up to a tree branch.

Guo Jing laughed, “Come down!” He leapt down from the tree and stretched out his hand towards the Taoist in the “Kai Yang” position and grabbed his leg.

The strongest aspect of the “Big Dipper Formation” is being able to respond from the left and right, mutually aiding each other. As Guo Jing attacked the “Kai Yang” position, the “Yao Guang” (moving light) and “Yu Heng” position could not come down and help. If the two did come down, the “Tian Shu” and “Tian Quan” positions would have to come down with them; the whole formation will be pulled down. Yang Guo was watching closely from the side, being surprised endlessly, thinking, “If I could reach the level of Uncle Guo in the future, I wouldn’t mind suffering a lifetime of hardships.”

But then he changed his thoughts, "How can I ever achieve the level that he is at? Only Guo Fu and the Wu brothers have that sort of luck. Uncle Guo knew that the rotten Taoist's kung fu couldn't compare with his and that is why he sent me here to learn martial arts." The more he thought, the more troubled he became, he almost cried. He turned his head away from Guo Jing battling the seven Taoists. He was still a child, and eventually could not resist turning his head back to the fight.

Guo Jing thought, "By now, you should believe that I am Guo Jing. One mustn't overdo things; it wouldn't look good for elder Qiu." He saw that the Taoists were turning around quickly but he stood still and folded his arms in salute and said, "Taoist brothers, I have offended you many times and apologize, please give way."

The Taoist in the "Tian Quan" position was hot tempered, he saw that the opposition was highly skilled, knew the "Big Dipper Formation" and assumed he had nothing but evil intent towards his sect. He clearly shouted, "Scoundrel, you've carefully studied our sect's formation, your intent is ruthless. You've come to Mount Zhongnan to cause trouble, our Quanzhen sect regards all evil as our enemy, and we can't wait around and do nothing."

Guo Jing was startled, and asked, "How have we caused trouble?"

The "Tian Shu" Taoist added, "Judging from your kung fu, you do not belong with the dirty scoundrels. I can give you some advice; you better leave the mountain quickly." His tone reflected his respect of Guo Jing's skills.

Guo Jing said, "I have come from thousand of miles to the south up here to the north; I have a matter which I want to discuss with elder Qiu. If I can't see the elder, then how can I leave?"

The “Tian Quan” Taoist said, “You persist on seeing elder Qiu, what do you want?”

Guo Jing said, “I am in the debt of elder Ma and elder Qiu. I haven’t seen them in ten years and long to see them. Apart from paying my respects, I also have another matter to request of them.”

The “Tian Quan” Taoists hate for the enemy increased when he heard this; his face changed colour as if he had something on say. In the world of Jianghu, the words debt and revenge are not looked upon lightly. Sometimes when one has made enemies and they say they have come to pay their debts, in reality they have come for revenge. The Taoist said, “Twenty years ago I chopped off someone’s upper arm, the debts that I have to pay cannot be forgotten? Today I am going to receive what I am owed.”

A request in these cases seems to have evil intent, and after being beaten by someone stronger, they would normally reply, “We brothers are short of food and clothing, and want the old man to help, to spare us some money.” But today, Quanzhen sect is facing enemies and the “Tian Quan” Taoist knew this. Guo Jing’s polite words were turned around and interpreted the other way by the Taoist, and he calmly said, “I’m afraid that my defeated teacher elder Yu Yang is also indebted to you.”

As Guo Jing heard this, he remembered the events years ago at King Zhao’s palace, Yuyang Zi Wang Chu wasn’t concerned about danger, and faced a number of enemies and helped to save his life, his debts to him were not trivial. He said, “So Taoist brother is under the teaching of elder Yuyang. Elder Wang has also been kind to me, if he is at the palace, then that will be good.”

The seven Taoists were all disciples of elder Wang and after hearing this they extended their swords. The seven swords

were all moving at the same time towards Guo Jing's body. Guo Jing raised his eyebrows; the more respectful he was, the fiercer the enemy's reaction, he didn't know what the reasons were for this. It is a pity that Huang Rong was not here; if she was she could sort out the misunderstanding in the blink of an eye. He slanted his body and moved forwards, and stood in the "Northern Star Position". In a clear voice he said, "I am Jiangnan's Guo Jing, I have no evil intent on this sacred mountain, how can I make you believe me?"

The "Tian Quan" Taoist said, "You have already removed six swords from Quanzhen sect's students, can you take our seven swords?" The Taoist in the "Tian Xuan" position had not said anything so far, he broke his silence and said, "Scoundrel, you have come here for the girl called Long, does that mean you think its good for you to provoke our sect?"

Guo Jing said, "Who is this girl named Long, I have never seen her before."

The "Tian Xuan" Taoist laughed and said, "Of course you have not seen her. What man under heaven knows her? If you've got guts, loudly insult her and call her a little bitch."

Guo Jing was startled, he didn't know who this Long girl is so how can he, for no reason, slander her? He said, "Why should I insult her?"

Three or four Taoists said at the same time, "Why don't you confess?"

The Taoists had accused Guo Jing innocently, the more he heard, the stranger it sounded. He thought that if he breaks into Chongyang Palace and sees elder Ma, elder Qiu and Wang Chu, everything would become clear. He calmly said, "I must go up to the mountain, if everyone here tries to stop me, don't blame me for offending you."

The seven Taoists extended their swords, and leapt forward two steps. The “Tian Xuan” Taoist loudly said, “Don’t use your witchcraft, we will just use our kung fu to compete.”

Guo Jing smiled, he had already thought of something, and said, “I want to use some witchcraft. You watch, my hands will not touch your weapons, but I will still be able to take your long swords out of your hands.”

The seven Taoists all looked at each other; their faces had a look of disbelief, and thought, “Although your skills are high, can it be that without using your hands you can rid us of our weapons? Even if you’ve reached the peak of “Empty Hand Entering a Hundred Blades” kung fu, you still need your hands.”

The “Tian Shu” Taoist said, “Fine, we will see how good your kicking kung fu is.”

Guo Jing said, “I will also not use my legs. If I touch your weapons with my hands or legs, then I admit defeat. I will turn around and immediately leave, never entering your sacred mountain again.”

The Taoists heard his wild claims, and they mulled over it. The “Tian Quan” Taoist waved his sword, and led the formation.

Guo Jing slanted his body and rushed forward, again assuming the “Northern Star Position”, ready to move to the left of the “Big Dipper Formation”. The “Tian Quan” Taoist knew they would be in danger and led the formation quickly to the right. Whenever two enemies fight each other, they must face the opposition, if the opponent moves behind you, turning around to face your enemy is something that shouldn’t be done. Right now, Guo Jing was heading for this position, wanting to aim for the back of the formation; he didn’t need to attack. The seven Taoists would have to move

the formation and attack, so that they could face each other. But Guo Jing just kept on heading left, and didn't turn back. Sometimes he would move fast, sometimes slow, sometimes straight and sometimes in a crisscross, but he kept on hurrying to the left. He was in the "Northern Star Position"; the seven Taoists could do nothing but follow him to the left.

The more he hurried, the quicker he became; eventually his speed surpassing that of a horse, his form a blur, he had ran for tens of feet. The seven Taoist's kung fu was not ordinary; although they were facing adversity they managed to stay in formation. The "Tian Shu", "Tian Xuan", "Tian Ji" (Sky Pearl), "Tian Quan", "Yu Heng", "Kai Yang", and "Yao Guang" Taoists held their positions, but they were being forced to hurry around not of their own accord.

Guo Jing could not help but think, "Sure enough, the students of Quanzhen are not ordinary." He took a deep breath, and increased his speed; it appeared that his legs were not even touching the ground.

At first the Taoists could just about manage to keep up by exerting all their strength, but as time passed, the difference in each one's lightness kung fu could be seen. The "Tian Shu", "Tian Quan" and "Yu Heng" Taoist's lightness kung fu was the highest, and they moved quickly, the others slowly fell behind and the "Big Dipper Formation" cracked. They were all afraid and thought, "If the enemy attacks the formation now, I'm afraid we will not be able to defend." They couldn't keep up with him, and could only use their internal energy to try to go around and hit him.

One game that children play is sling throwing. A rock is threaded onto a string, spun around and then at its fastest point, the sling is released, the stone taking the string with it faraway. At the moment, the formation was winding around hurriedly, it was similar to a sling spinning around, the seven

Taoists were scurrying around Guo Jing, their swords held above their heads, the faster they went, the harder it was for them keep the sword still. It was as if a strong force was pulling the swords outwards, wanting to pull the swords out of their grasp.

Suddenly, Guo Jing shouted out, "Let go!" as he flew away to the left. The seven Taoists were caught unaware, and could only follow him quickly. They didn't know what happened as the seven swords flew out of their hands, like seven silver snakes, and flew into the surrounding pine forest. Guo Jing stopped, and laughed as he returned.

The seven Taoist's faces were grey, and stood there without moving, but each one was still holding their position, the formation still held. Guo Jing saw that after being forced to hurry and rush around madly, they still kept the formation and didn't allow it to get out of shape and he knew they spent a lot of time practicing their skills. The "Tian Quan" Taoist gave a sigh of resignation and the seven Taoists escaped behind a cliff.

Guo Jing called out, "Guo'er, let's go up the mountain." He called out twice, but there was no reply. He searched around, but he couldn't see him anywhere but behind a tree he saw a small shoe. Guo Jing swallowed, "Besides the seven Taoists there was another one hiding nearby, he must have taken him away." But then he thought that the group of Taoists had just mistaken him for someone else, and though they had a misunderstanding, the Quanzhen sect has always been righteous and done good. They would never dare to harm a small child; there was no need to be alarmed. He then took a breath, and hurried up the mountain. He had resided on Peach Blossom Island for ten years, though he practiced martial arts every day, he has not faced an enemy for a very long time, and sometimes he felt lonely. Today, having fought

with a crowd of people and being able to respond to every move, he could not help but be satisfied.

The mountain was now rugged and steep. Sometimes he had to lean his body over to pass an obstruction, and after traveling for less than half an hour, the moon was covered and the mountain became dark. Guo Jing thought, "I don't know these paths well and these Taoists are sneaky, I must be on my guard." He then eased up and slowly made his way.

Another while passed and the moon came out again, the mountain lit up, he had only one thing on his mind. Suddenly he heard the breathing sounds of a crowd of people coming from nearby. Though the sounds were quiet, there were many people; Guo Jing had already noticed this. Guo Jing tightened his belt, and turned to the path. In front of him was a large plain, the four sides surrounded by the mountain, at the foot of the mountain was a large pond, and the surface of the water reflected the moon, the silver light shimmering. In front of the pond were about one hundred Taoists, wearing yellow hats and dressed in grey gowns, a long sword in their hands, the swords shone brightly to the eye.

Guo Jing looked on, the crowd was made up of groups of seven, and formed fourteen sets of the "Big Dipper Formation". Each group of seven sets of the "Big Dipper Formation" formed one single large "Big Dipper Formation". From the "Tian Shu" to the "Yao Guang", the force of them was extraordinary. The two large "Big Dipper Formations" were different from each other, one normal, one odd, opposing each other, forming the angle of a wing. Guo Jing gasped, "I have never heard of this type of "Big Dipper Formation" from elder Qiu, presumably this formation has been created within the last few years. Compared to the original one that ancestor Yang created, this is another level." He slowly made his way forward.

He heard a whistle from a person within the formations, ninety-eight Taoists scattered, moving forwards and backwards, the formations changed irregularly, and circled Guo Jing. Each one pointed their swords to the ground; their eyes fixed on Guo Jing and didn't make a noise.

Guo Jing folded his hands in salute and turned around once and said, "I have sincerely entered this sacred mountain to meet elder Ma, elder Qiu and elder Wang, I plead with you please do not block my way."

A long bearded Taoist from the formations said, "Our guest here has excellent martial arts, so why do you not use it for good, instead of causing trouble with the evil ones? I offer you some good advice: a woman can cloud someone's mind and your skills that you have trained hard for over the last ten years could be threatened and lost in a single day. Our Quanzhen sect has never met you, and we have no quarrels, so why have you come to our mountain and caused so much trouble over this witch? If you leave immediately now, we could still meet again another day." He spoke with a deep voice, but every word was crystal clear, it was clear that his internal energy was profound, his advice was sincere.

Guo Jing was angry but was also laughing, he thought, "I don't know whom the Taoists have mistaken me for, if Rong'er was by my side, then there wouldn't be any of this misunderstanding. He said, "I know nothing of being clouded by women or witches, if you allow me to see elder Ma, elder Qiu and elder Wang, then everything will become clear."

The long bearded Taoist coldly said, "You still do not heed the advice and persist on wanting to see elder Ma and elder Qiu and try out your skills on them, well first you are going to have to break our large 'Big Dipper Formation'."

Guo Jing replied, "I am only one person, my skills are of a low level, how could I dare come up against your sect's greatest

skill? Please release the child that came with me, and allow me to see your sect's master and elder Qiu."

The long bearded Taoist shouted out, "You have come here, caused trouble, and put on a show in front of Mount Zhongnan's Chongyang Palace; how can we let such a scoundrel be so rude." As he said this, he waved his sword in the air, the blade pierced the wind, the sound of the blade lingered. The crowd of Taoists waved their long swords, ninety-eight blades swept across, a wind was created, and the swords resembled a shiny net.

Guo Jing was secretly worried, "The two large formations are the opposite of each other; how can I maintain the "Northern Star Position" by myself? Today's matter is really troublesome."

Before Guo Jing made up his mind, the ninety-eight Taoists merged together from the left and right, the light from the swords weaved about, he was trapped like a fly and it would be difficult to escape. The long bearded Taoist said, "Pick up a weapon! Quanzhen sect will not harm an empty handed person."

Guo Jing thought, "This formation may be hard to break, but you may still not be able to harm me. The formation has many people, its power great, but each one's skill varies. There will definitely be a weakness; I'll study this formation first before I decide on anything." He slowly turned around, and then quickly moved in a northwest direction and used the "Eighteen Subduing Dragon Palms", the stance "Hidden Dragon Has No Use" (qian long wu yong), one palm out and one in, as he pushed off against the ground. Seven young Taoists swapped their swords into their left hand, each one joining together and stretched out their right palm, using their strength to repel his palm. The palm skill that Guo Jing used had been practiced and refined, and has now reached

its peak; the force he generated was extremely strong, and he had more powerful moves hidden. Each one of them used all their strength to block this fierce attack but they didn't expect a strong force pulling them forward. The seven could not stand still, and all of them fell onto the ground; though they got up straight away, each one of them had dirt on their face, and was slightly embarrassed.

The long bearded Taoist saw that Guo Jing had unleashed a powerful stance; in just one move he had caused seven Taoists to fall onto the ground, he was slightly frightened. He gave a whistle and led the fourteen "Big Dipper Formations" and merged them. Even if the enemy's palm strength was ten times stronger, it would be difficult for him to push away ninety-eight people.

Guo Jing remembered the battle that he had on Jun Mountain (Lord Mountain); he and Huang Rong were battling the beggar clan, although individually they were weak, but once they united they were hard to defend against. He didn't dare to use force to overcome them; he could only use his lightness kung fu and escape from the formation, and try to find its weakness.

He hurried to the east and leapt to the west, and drew the formation with him, in just a short while he realized that if he wanted to break the formation by himself, it would be a difficult task made harder. One, he didn't want to hurt anyone; two, the formation's defense was second to none. There wasn't a single weakness; thirdly, Guo Jing is not the most astute person; the formation changed quickly so even if there was a weakness, he would not pick it up in such a short period of time.

Under the light of the full moon, the light from the swords resembled water, the scene like a wave, there was no point in trying to run away again.

They fought for a period of time, the formation was getting tighter, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to dodge within the gaps. Guo Jing thought, "Why don't I rush through the formation and make a dash for Chongyang Palace and see elder Ma and elder Qiu?" He raised his head and faced west; he saw there were twenty or thirty buildings and a few of them had large open spaces. He thought that Chongyang Palace must be one of them; he then hurried rapidly to the east, and after a few leaps, he turned and ran towards the west.

The multitude of Taoists saw that he was increasing in speed; a grey blur was within the formation like a falling star rushing through the sky. It was almost impossible to see where he was, they were dazzled or dazed, and they slowed down. The long bearded Taoist called out, "Everyone be careful, don't fall into the scoundrel's trap."

Guo Jing was angry, he thought, "They still call me a scoundrel. If this spreads out throughout Jianghu, how would I be respected again?" He had another thought, "The formation is led by him and if I aim for him, I then could set up a way to break the formation. He separated his palms, and headed straight for the long bearded Taoist. One thing the formation tries to do is to lure the enemy to attack the one leading the formation, each small formation will use this and come from the east and west, the south attacking the north, the enemy would then fall into their trap. Guo Jing rushed seven, eight steps, before he felt something was wrong, the force pressing him from behind suddenly increased, the two sides were flooding in and coming to attack. He turned around and dodged to the right, the two small formations in front of him all attacked with their swords. The fourteen swords were placed so that the enemy will be forced into a harmful position; there was no place to run, no place to hide. Guo Jing was faced with danger all around him, but he did not panic, only his anger began to rise, he thought, "You still

mistake me for some scoundrel, some evil person. Taoists are supposed to be enlightened and merciful, so why is every stance that is used aiming to kill the opponent? Unless you must have my life at all costs? And what is this about? Quanzhen sect never harms an opponent without a weapon?" He slanted his body and escaped, his right leg came out, his left hand came in search of something, he kicked a young Taoist and took his weapon, he saw seven swords came in to his waist from the right, he waved his left hand out, the eight swords clattered, after a sound, each one of the seven swords broke into two pieces, the sword in his hand was still in perfect condition. The sword that Guo Jing took wasn't an especially sharp blade, but because he distributed his chi throughout the sword, he was able to use it to shatter the seven swords.

The seven Taoists gasped, the expression on their faces darkened and they stood still for a while. The two formations at one side came in immediately and raised their swords protecting each other. Guo Jing saw that the fourteen Taoists were using their left hands to hold on to the right shoulder of the Taoist next to them, the fourteen united the energy into one. He thought, "You want to see how strong my internal energy is exactly?" He waved his long sword, and placed the sword onto the fourteenth Taoist's sword.

The Taoist tried to pull away quickly, but the sword in his hand felt as if it were welded to a copper anvil, and was unable to pull it free. The remaining thirteen Taoists circulated their chi, wanting to use the combined force of the fourteen to repel the enemy. Guo Jing wanted them to do this. As soon as he felt the force trying to pull free increase, he shouted out, "Take care!" His right arm rose, after an interlude of sound, twelve swords broke as a result of seemingly pushing against a large object. The remaining two swords flew into the air. The fourteen Taoists gasped and were frightened; they quickly jumped away. Guo Jing secretly

sighed, "My internal energy has yet to reach its peak, but there were still two swords that I was unable to break."

After this, the Taoists became even more wary of him and they were more careful in unleashing their moves. Although twenty-one Taoists had lost their weapons, they resorted to using their palms; they were able to generate a wind force with their palms, and their power was not weak. While Guo Jing was shattering swords, he wasn't able to do what he wanted and now he felt the formation's defense becoming increasingly tighter. He didn't know what new techniques and formations for the "Big Dipper Formation" that elder Ma and elder Qiu had devised. If the enemy had more advanced formations, it would be difficult for him to deal with. He was afraid that he would not be able to escape the clutches of the Taoists, so he decided to act right away and shouted out, "My Taoist brothers, if you still won't give way, then forgive me if I don't hold back."

The long bearded Taoist looked on, he knew that Guo Jing was skilled, and thought that even if Guo Jing was able to shatter all ninety-eight swords, he still wouldn't be able to escape from our formation. When he heard what Guo Jing said, he laughed coldly and did not reply, and made the formation even tighter.

Guo Jing crouched his body against the ground and leaped to the northeast, but he saw the two small formations from the southwest coming towards him. He then pointed his sword towards them. In the blink of eye he had unleashed fourteen moves; all fourteen moves made at the same time and each stance pierced a Taoist's right wrist on the "Positive Valley Point" (yang gu yue). At the highest levels of swordsmanship, the sword is able to move like wind and flash like lightning, every move accurate to the millimeter. It would be no different than fourteen different concealed weapons thrown at the same time. He unleashed the moves lightly, each

Taoist had a numb feeling in their wrist, there were no strength in their fingers; the fourteen swords fell onto the ground. With this shock, the Taoists jumped back quickly, and examined the wounds on their wrists. Each saw the wound on the “Yang Gu Yue” was slightly red but there wasn’t a drop of blood. They knew their opposition had used the sword tip to touch this pressure point only, their skin was not pierced. The Taoists gasped, and thought that although the scoundrel was offensive, he was not ruthless; if he hadn’t held back, he could have harmed our palms without using the slightest effort.

During this time, thirty-five swords had been forced out of their hands. The long bearded Taoist was very angry; Guo Jing had not even used his best kung fu, yet he had already made their sect lose so much face. If he managed to break into the palace, the effects would be disastrous. He then gave out an order, “Defend the formation closely.” He wanted the ninety eight Taoists to surround him, and slowly crowd him to death.

Guo Jing thought, “That Taoist does not know how to repay kindness; it’s unspeakable. I can only teach them a severe lesson.” He hid his left palm, and pushed his right palm to the left. A formation came and faced the palm.

Guo Jing quickly went into the “Northern Star Position”, but another formation came to attack. There were fourteen “Big Dipper Formations”, there were also fourteen “Northern Star Positions”, and Guo Jing had no way to separate himself, and could not stand in all of the fourteen important positions at once. He used his lightness kung fu, as soon as he had stepped in the “Northern Star Position” of one formation, he immediately leapt to another “Northern Star Position”; he did it a number of times and the formations became disorganized.

The long bearded Taoist knew something was wrong and gave out an order quickly; he ordered everyone to scatter and reorganize the formations and keep calm. He knew that if everyone went and chased Guo Jing wildly, the way he was moving, he would definitely create worse disturbances in the formations. But if they didn't move and just held their position, the fourteen "Northern Star Positions" would be far away from each other. Even if Guo Jing was faster, he would not be able to assume every position.

Guo Jing gathered himself and thought, "That Taoist knows the important aspects of the formation and sure enough he saw the danger quickly. Now that they are standing still, I could head for the palace." He then changed his mind, "Actually, better not, elder Ma and elder Qiu are not usually in the palace, otherwise how can it be that I have fought these Taoists for so long and they haven't noticed? He lifted his head towards the palace, and saw sparks flying around in the corner of the building. Someone was fighting with weapons, but because he was far away, he could not see clearly who was fighting and the sounds of the weapons clashing was also too far to hear.

Guo Jing suddenly became alarmed, "Who would have the guts to raise their hands in Chongyang Palace? There must be some reason behind tonight's events." He wanted to rush over there to take a close look, but the fourteen "Big Dipper Formation" came in closer and closer. He was in a rush, and with his left palm he unleashed "Seeing the Dragon in the Field" (jian long zai tian) and with his right he used "Overcoming the Dragon with Regret". He used the "Mutual Left Hand Right Hand Combat" technique to do this, and used two separate attacks to the left and right. He saw that the forty-nine people in the "Big Dipper Formation" on the left were blocking this attack; the other forty-nine people in the other "Big Dipper Formation" on the right also blocked his attack. Before he has finished unleashing the two moves,

he changed them around, the left hand had changed from “Seeing the Dragon in the Field” to “Overcoming the Dragon with Regret”, his right hand changing from “Seeing the Dragon in the Field” to “Overcoming the Dragon with Regret”.

With the “Mutual Left Hand Right Hand Combat Technique”, he was able to do the hard task of using two different stances at the same time, and then to interchange them in the middle of it. This was something that the Taoists have never seen nor heard of. Originally the formation on the left side was able to resist the “Overcoming the Dragon with Regret”, the right was able to resist “Seeing the Dragon in the Field”, when the two stances were swapped around, the Taoists on both sides were resisting, they didn’t know that Guo Jing could swap his stances around so easily. They then saw a flash of movement as Guo Jing escaped from the formation. The forty-nine people on the left and the forty nine people on the right were pushing forward with all their might, and at this moment how could they keep their legs in check? There came a loud noise as the two formations collided with each other, swords wounded some from behind, some knocked their noses against those in front and thirty of them fell onto the ground.

The long bearded Taoist who was leading the formation managed to dodge quickly and evade harm from the other Taoists. He couldn’t bear what had happened and quickly whistled again, rapidly setting up the formation again. He saw that Guo Jing was heading rapidly for the pond at the foot of the mountain, the Yu Qing Pond (Pure Jade). He led the fourteen formations and chased after him. The Quanzhen sect’s kung fu was based on calmness and tranquility, using softness to overcome hardness, letting anger control your actions is breaking one of the major rules of the sect; with his anger and fury, it could be said that he was not considering the enemy carefully, he was just reacting to their actions.

Guo Jing quickly reached the Jade Pond, in front of him the water glistened, as he lifted his sword up with his right hand, and chopped a coarse branch off a willow tree that was by the pond. He threw away the sword and picked up the branch with both arms, and flung it faraway into the pond. He increased the strength in his legs and his body soared into the air, his right foot touched the branch once and it sank, he used it to reach the shore on the other side. The crowd of Taoists rushed to the pond but they couldn't stop in time. A splash followed another, as forty or fifty people fell into the pond. The last ten either stepped onto the back of those who had fallen in or managed to stop themselves. A few of the Taoists couldn't swim, and began to struggle in the pond. Those who could swim hurried over to rescue them. At the Pure Jade Pond, the Taoists made a commotion, as they were drenched with water and mud.

End of Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 - Under the Teaching of Quanzhen Sect

Translated by Noodles



The Jade Bees were like smoke, and were flying onto Guo Jing and Qiu Chu Ji. Qiu Chu Ji circulated chi through his "dan tian", and blew out through his mouth at the bees that were coming towards him. Guo Jing had learnt this type of skill, and then he created a gust of wind. The swarm of bees could not resist and flew past the two.

After Guo Jing escaped from the Taoists, he headed swiftly for Chongyang Palace, when he suddenly heard the ringing of a bell; it was coming from Chongyang Palace. The sound was urgent; it was the alerting signal. Guo Jing turned his head to see what was happening, he saw sparks flying in the air coming from the large courtyard in the back. He thought, "Sure enough, today Quanzhen sect's enemies have arrived, I'd better rush over there to help."

He suddenly heard a crowd behind him rushing up, he then understood, "The Taoists must have mistaken him as a confederate of their enemy. With this danger, no wonder they wanted to fight to the death." He ignored those behind him, and made his way up the mountain.

He used his lightness kung fu, in a flash he had moved over one hundred feet, in less than the time to make a cup of tea; he was already at Chongyang Palace. He saw flames and smoke, the dense smoke was unrestrained, the blaze was fierce, but what was strange was that in Chongyang Palace there were countless Taoists, yet no one had come out and tried to put out the flames.

Guo Jing was afraid. He saw ten Taoist residences empty and untidy about the mountain. The flame in the back courtyard was large, but it had yet to breach into the main courtyard. However, insults could be heard from there, as well as the clashing of weapons. He leapt up onto a roof, and saw a large group of people battling. He stood still and looked on, he saw

that forty-nine Taoists dressed in yellow gowns had formed seven “Big Dipper Formations” and were resisting about one hundred enemies. The enemies were all shape and sizes, tall and short, fat and skinny. According to the way they were dressed and the skills they used, it seems that they are from different sects. Some used weapons, some used their palms, and they all were attacking the “Big Dipper Formation” from all sides. The attackers’ skills weren’t weak, and they were large in number. Eventually the Taoists began to lose. But because the enemy was fighting them separately, the “Big Dipper Formation” allowed them to help each other and were able to defend tightly. Though the opponents were strong, they could still resist them. Guo Jing listened carefully, and heard breathing sounds in the hall; there were people battling there as well. From the sounds of the wind generated by the fists in the hall, the skills of the people battling there were superior to those who were fighting outside. He jumped down from the roof, twisted his body and then made a dash forward. He dodged east and then darted west, and was able to go through the cracks of three “Big Dipper Formations”. The Taoists were alarmed, and tried to follow, but because of the onslaught they were facing, they couldn’t separate and chase him.

Normally the hall would be lit with ten large candles, but because of the flames in the back courtyard, its light overpowered the light from the candles. He saw that there were seven mats lined up on the floor, seven Taoists were sitting on them, the left palm of each joined to the next person, their right palms out, resisting the attacks of ten people around them.

Guo Jing ignored the attackers and first studied the Taoists. He saw that there were three old and four young, the old were Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi, he could only recognize one of the four young Taoists and that was Yin Zhiping. The seven were sitting in the positions of “Tian Shu”

to “Yao Guang” to form the “Big Dipper Formation”; they sat there and didn’t move. In front of the seven was a Taoist lying on the floor, he didn’t know whether he was alive or dead. He saw his hair was white but could not see his face. Guo Jing saw that Ma Yu and the others were in danger, his blood began to boil, he didn’t care who the enemy was and came out in a flash, and shouted , “How dare you scoundrels come and cause trouble in Chongyang Palace?” He stretched out his hands, and grabbed the backs of two attackers, and wanted to throw the attackers out, but he didn’t know that the two were good fighters. Their feet stood firm to the ground, and couldn’t be pulled from the floor. Guo Jing thought, “Where did all these good fighters come from? No wonder the Quanzhen sect feels that today will end in ruin for them.” He let go and swept his legs out. The two were using the “Thousand Kilogram Fall” (qian jin zhui) skill to resist the attacker, but they didn’t predict that he would suddenly change stance, and in a flash, the two soared in midair and crashed through the door.

The attackers saw that powerful help had come for the Taoists and were alarmed; but they were curious and wanted to know his name. Two of them came out and shouted out, “Who are you?” Guo Jing ignored them, two “fu” sounds were heard, as two palms came out. The two were not near Guo Jing’s body, but they were hit by the palm’s power and couldn’t stand still. Two sounds were heard as the men crashed against the wall, blood came out of their mouths. The remaining attackers saw that Guo Jing had wounded four of them in one go, they were frightened, and no one dared to confront him.

Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi recognized who he was and were delighted, and thought, “Now he’s here, our sect will escape danger!”

Guo Jing did not even consider the attackers as he knelt down and kowtowed to Ma Yu and said, "Disciple Guo Jing greets you." Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi nodded and greeted him in return. Yin Zhiping suddenly called out, "Brother Guo, careful!" Guo Jing heard a noise from behind, and knew someone wanted to ambush him from behind. He pushed against the floor with his arm and elbow, his body in the air, and pushed out his knees and hit the two attackers on their "Soul Entrance" (hun men) pressure points. The two of them fell immediately to the floor. Guo Jing remained kneeling down with two mats beneath his knee.

Ma Yu smiled, and said, "Jing'er rise, I haven't seen you in ten years; your skills have improved tremendously!"

Guo Jing got up and said, "I'll let the elder decide on how I should get rid of the others." Before Ma Yu replied, Guo Jing heard two laughs from behind; the laughs were very strange. He turned around, and saw two people standing there. One was wearing a red gown, his head was shiny, his body lanky, and he was a monk. The other wore a light yellow embroidered gown, his hand holding a folded fan. He was dressed like a wealthy man, and was about thirty, his face carrying an arrogant expression. Guo Jing saw that their breathing was measured and deep, and were completely different to the others. He didn't dare to be rash. He asked, "Who are you? Why have you come here?"

The nobleman said, "And who are you? Why have you come here?" His pronunciations weren't exactly correct; he wasn't from the central plains.

Guo Jing said, "I am the disciple of these elders."

The man chuckled, "Who would have thought that there resided a man like this in the Quanzhen sect." He was younger than Guo Jing by a few years, but he spoke with the air of an old man, and with arrogance.

Guo Jing did not regard himself as a true disciple of the Quanzhen sect, but when he heard him speak, he could tell they had a hidden agenda. He didn't want to talk but under these circumstances he had to say something. "What is the story behind your intrusion into the Quanzhen sect? Why have you brought so many people and set the place on fire?"

The man chuckled again, "Since you belong to the lower generation of the Quanzhen sect, how can you speak out."

Guo Jing said, "You have come here and have caused trouble, you have been too reckless." The flames were getting closer, and it wouldn't be long before the main courtyard was set on fire.

The man opened his fan and took a step forward; he laughed and said, "I brought those people along! If you can receive thirty stances of mine, I'll let the old Taoists go, how about that?"

Gou Jing saw that they were in an urgent situation, he couldn't hesitate. He stretched out his right hand, and grabbed the man's fan and pulled it, the man did not let go of the fan, and tried to pull him closer.

With this pull, the man wobbled slightly but he held onto his fan. Guo Jing thought, "This man isn't old; he could actually fend off my pull. The way he circulated his chi was similar to the monk Lingzhi Shangren but compared to Lingzhi Shangren his was more fluid. It appears that he must belong to a sect in the west. The frame of his fan is made of metal, it's actually a weapon." He increased the power in his hands and said, "Let go!" The nobleman's face suddenly turned a shade of purple, but in a second it had disappeared. Guo Jing knew that he had urgently raised his chi to try to resist him; he too increased his strength at the same time. He knew that if the man's face turned purple three times, he would suffer serious internal injuries, but thought that learning this type

of kung fu wasn't an easy task. He didn't want to harm him seriously so he gave a sly smile.

With the fan in his hand, the man's strength began to decrease. Guo Jing had transferred all the power in his palm into the fan and into the opponent's hand, wanting to neutralize the man's energy. The man used all the strength he had accumulated during his life but he couldn't transfer any of it into the fan, and was about to lose hold of it. The man realized that his opponent's skills exceeded his so he kept a calm face, let go of the fan and jumped back. His face was red, and said, "Please allow me to know your famous name."

Guo Jing said, "My name is not worth knowing, just know that elders Ma, Qiu and Wang are my teachers."

The man questioned this, and thought that he had just fought with a bunch of old Quanzhen Taoists. "If they fought one on one and didn't rely on the power of the "Big Dipper Formation", they wouldn't be a match for him, so how could a student of theirs be so good," he took another look at Guo Jing to get the measure of him. His face looked ordinary, his clothes were coarse, he looked just like a villager, but he possessed great skills, he said, "Your skills are alarmingly good, I am in awe, I will come again in ten years time and test myself again. I have some unfinished business so I must leave now." He folded his arms in salute as he said this. Guo Jing held his fist in salute and acknowledged, "We will meet again in ten years time."

The man turned around and started out of the palace. As he reached the door, he said, "This affair between me and the Quanzhen sect, I have decided to resolve at a later date. I hope the members of the Quanzhen sect do not take this personally and come searching for me to settle their own private affairs."

According to the rules of Jianghu, if a person stops pursuing a matter and sets a date later on to resolve it, and the persons involved meet during the time period, they must not settle their issues there and then, they must wait for the agreed date.

Guo Jing heard what he said and replied, "Of course."

The man chuckled and he spoke a few words in Tibetan to the Tibetan monk. As he was about to leave, Qiu Chuji shouted out, "There is no need for a ten year wait, I, Qiu Chuji will come in search for you." His voice shook the tiles of the roof, demonstrating his profound internal energy. When the man heard this, he shivered, and thought, "That old Taoist's internal energy is not weak, when I was fighting them a while back, he wasn't at full strength." He didn't dare linger and quickly dashed through the doors. The Tibetan monk in red stared at Guo Jing with fury, as he and the others left. Guo Jing looked at the men, they were all strange looking, they had high noses and deep eyes, they weren't from the central plains, his suspicions were raised, but he heard the sounds of weapons clashing outside had died down, and knew the enemy was leaving.

The group of seven including Ma Yu stood up, but the old Taoist who was lying on the floor did not get up. Guo Jing took a look, it was Guangzhu Zi Hao Datong. He knew that though the seven were being affected by the fire, but they remained and sat there without moving. They wanted to protect their own people. He saw that his face was golden; his breathing shallow, his eyes were closed and knew that he had suffered a serious internal injury. Guo Jing opened his gown, he gasped as he saw a hand print on his chest, five fingers were spread out, the print was deep purple, it had penetrated inside. He thought, "The enemy's kung fu is indeed from western Tibet, it's the "Great Handprint" skill. Although there is no poison on the palm, the power of it is

much stronger than that of Lingzhi Shangren.” He examined Hao Datong and he was pleased to find that there was still a strong pulse. Hao Datong had practiced martial arts for many years and had built up a high level of internal energy; his life would not be in danger.

The fire from the back courtyard was coming closer. Qiu Chuji picked up Hao Datong and said, “Let’s go!”

Guo Jing said, “Where’s the child that I brought with me? Who took him away? I don’t want him to get harmed by the fire.”

Qiu Chuji and the others were all occupied with fighting the enemy; they didn’t know anything about it. When they heard this they asked, “Whose child is it? Where are they?”

Before Guo Jing could reply, a small dark figure suddenly appeared and jumped down from a beam of the roof. The person laughed and said, “I’m here.” It was Yang Guo.

Guo Jing was delighted, he quickly asked, “Why were you hiding up there?”

Yang Guo chuckled and said, “You are with the seven rotten Taoists.”

Guo Jing scolded, “Shut up! Come here quickly and greet the Grand Masters.”

Yang Guo stuck his tongue in and out of his mouth and kowtowed to Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi, when he reached Yin Zhiping and saw that he was young, he turned his head around and asked, “He’s not a Grand Master is he? I think I don’t have to kowtow anymore.”

Guo Jing said, “That is Martial Uncle Yin, quickly kowtow.” Yang Guo didn’t want to but he still did it. Guo Jing saw him stand up and didn’t kowtow to the other three, he scolded,

“Guo’er, how come you don’t kowtow, have you no manners?”

Yang Guo chuckled and said, “By the time I’ve finished kowtowing, it’ll be too late, don’t blame me.”

Guo Jing asked, “Too late for what?”

Yang Guo replied, “There is a Taoist who is tied up in a room; if we don’t go and save him, I’m afraid he’ll be burned to death.”

Guo Jing urgently asked, “Which room? Quickly tell us!”

Yang Guo pointed to the east and said, “I think it’s over there, I don’t know who tied him up.” He laughed after he said this.

Yin Zhiping gave him a glance, and rushed to the eastern double room, he kicked open the door but saw no one. He then ran to the room where the third generation students cultivate their internal energy and opened the door. The room was full of smoke but he saw a Taoist tied to a column crying out, he was in danger. Yin Zhiping picked up a sword, cut the rope, and rescued the Taoist.

Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi, Guo Jing, Yang Guo and the rest of them left the hall and went up the mountain to a building where they watched the fire. They saw the back courtyard was in flames, the fire lighting up half the sky. There were few sources of water around, only a small spring that was used for everyday purposes; it would be useless to use it to try to put out the fire. They could only look on as the back courtyard was burnt down to ashes. The Quanzhen students worked together to stop the fire from spreading, the other halls and buildings were not harmed. Qiu Chuji was originally blithe and didn’t have a care. But he was also rash

and bad tempered, as he saw the fierce flames, he ground his teeth and cursed.

Guo Jing was about to ask who the enemy were, and why did they respond in this way when he saw Yin Zhiping's right hand was around a large Taoist's waist. He had come out from the smoke and flames. The large Taoist was overcome by smoke and continuously coughed. Tears were in his eyes but when he saw Yang Guo he was furious, and jumped towards him. Yang Guo chuckled and hid behind Guo Jing. The Taoist did not know who Guo Jing was, he stretched out his hand and pushed his chest, wanting to move him out of the way and grab Yang Guo. But it was like pushing a brick wall; he didn't move an inch. The Taoist stopped and pointed to Yang Guo and loudly shouted, "You little bastard, you wanted to kill me!"

Wang Chuyi sternly said, "Jingguang, what are you talking about?"

The Taoist Lu Qingdu was an apprentice grandson of Wang Chuyi; he had barely escaped with his life and he was furious when he saw Yang Guo. He wanted to jump forward and grab him. He ignored the fact the elders were there and only when he heard Wang Chuyi call out once more did he realize he was out of order. He broke out in a cold sweat, he bowed his head and dropped his hands and said, "Disciple deserves to die."

Wang Chuyi said, "What exactly happened?"

Lu Qingdu said, "It's my fault for being useless, I request the elders to punish me."

Wang Chuyi frowned and said, "Who said you were useless? I asked you, what is this about?"

Lu Qingdu replied, "Yes, yes. I was ordered by Master Zhao to guard the back courtyard. After a while, he came back with the little, little..." He wanted to say "Little bastard", but he knew he couldn't act out of order in front of the elders again so he changed his words and said, "little boy and gave him to me, and said he was brought here by a formidable enemy of our sect. Martial Uncle Zhao had captured him and told me to guard him and don't let him escape. So I took him to the eastern meditation room; after a while, he tricked me and said he needed the toilet and wanted me to untie him. I thought that he was just a small kid and wasn't concerned that he would be able to get away so I untied him. I didn't think that he was just sitting on the toilet and pretending to go; when he suddenly got up, picked up the bucket and threw the waste contents at me." When Lu Qingdu got to this point, Yang Guo burst out laughing. Lu Qingdu angrily shouted, "What are you laughing at?"

Yang Guo lifted his head, his eyes towards the sky and said, "I want to laugh; what can you do about it?"

Lu Qingdu wanted to curse back when Wang Chuyi said, "Don't quarrel with the child; continue."

Lu Qingdu said, "Yes, yes. Elder you don't know, but that little boy is very sly and crafty. When I saw the waste coming at me, I quickly dodged out of the way, but he laughed and said "Ah, Mr. Taoist, you've got some on your clothes!"

When the crowd heard him impersonate Yang Guo, his voice sounded funny, the others secretly wanted to laugh. Wang Chuyi frowned; he secretly cursed him for acting this way in front of others.

Lu Qingdu continued, "I was angry, and wanted to go over and beat him, but he raised the bucket and threw it at me. I shouted out "Little bastard" and quickly used "Rapid Flowing Retreat" (ji liu yong tui) and moved out of the way. One of my

feet stepped into the waste but after two wobbles I managed to stay on my feet. I wasn't prepared when the boy took advantage of me while I was unsteady and took my sword from my waist and pointed it at my chest and said if I moved, he would pierce through my chest. I didn't want anything to happen to me so I stood still. The boy held the sword with his left hand and with his right hand tied me up to a column, and then stuffed my mouth with a piece of cloth. Eventually the room caught fire and I couldn't move I couldn't call out; if it wasn't for Martial Uncle Yin, would I not have been burnt to death by that boy?" After he said this, he stared furiously at Yang Guo.

After everyone heard this, they looked at Yang Guo and then looked at the Taoist, one was a small boy, the other a large fat man, they couldn't help but burst out laughing. When Lu Qingdu heard them laugh out loud, he touched his ear and cheek; he didn't know what to do with his hands and feet.

Ma Yu chuckled and said, "Jing'er is he your son? He takes after your wife, very quick and clever."

Guo Jing said, "No, he is my brother Yang Kang's son.

Qiu Chuji shivered when he heard this; he gave Yang Guo two glances and saw that he did indeed look like Yang Kang. Yang Kang was his first official student; he wasn't obedient, yearned for wealth and riches, and acknowledged a scoundrel as his father. Every time Qiu Chuji went over this in his mind, he felt that he was to blame for Yang Kang's behavior. He didn't teach him properly and caused him to turn out like that. When he heard that Yang Kang had an heir, he was sad and delighted at the same time, he quickly asked for the details.

Guo Jing glossed over Yang Guo's situation, and told them he wanted Yang Guo to study under the Quanzhen sect. Qiu

Chuji said, "Jing'er, your martial arts have long exceeded ours, why don't you teach him yourself?"

Guo Jing said, "I will tell you everything later. I have offended a lot of Taoist brothers today on the way here, I'm very sorry, I apologize to all the elders, and I hope you can forgive me. He held his hands together to those Taoists who he had fought.

Ma Yu said, "If you hadn't arrived just in time, our sect would have been destroyed. We are not strangers; there is no need to apologize."

Qiu Chuji's brows rose, and after Ma Yu had finished he said to him, "Zhijing led the formation outside; he couldn't tell the difference between friend and foe. I thought it was strange that there was a strong formation placed outside, but when I looked away for a second the enemy managed to break through and attacked us. Huh, so it was him who led the formation away to try to catch you." His eyes squinted, he was livid; he summoned two disciples to him, and asked how they could mistake Guo Jing for the enemy.

The two disciples were frightened and changed colour, the older of the two said, "Apprentice brothers Feng and Wei ran up to us, and said hero Guo had smashed the stone slab at the "Everywhere Light Temple", and knew that he must have been with the enemy."

Guo Jing remembered the events, and couldn't believe all the misunderstanding arose from that, he said, "You can't blame these Taoist brothers. When I was at the Light Everywhere Temple, I inadvertently slammed down a heavy palm on the stone slab that had your poem on it; it was because of this that the misunderstanding was created."

Qiu Chuji said, "So it was because of this, what a coincidence. We already knew that the enemy would come

today, and they would use the slamming of the rock as a signal.”

Guo Jing said, “Who were they? How come they were so daring?”

Qiu Chuji sighed and said, “It is a long story, Jing’er, come, I am going to show you something.” He then nodded to Ma Yu and Wang Chuyi; he turned around and headed for the back side of the mountain. Guo Jing turned around to Yang Guo and said, “Guo’er, stay here.” He followed Qiu Chuji. He saw him heading around mountain, his steps rapid, like those of a young man.

The two arrived at the peak of the mountain; Qiu Chuji went up to a large stone slab and said, “There are some words written here.”

It was dark; on the back of the large stone were some words. Guo Jing reached out to the back of the stone, and felt that there were some words written on it, he tried to recognize the words, it was a poem: “His will flows under the bridge. Assisting the Han to gain influence, a winding pillar under the sky, wanting to be free to roam, he walked away after succeeding. Raising people and raising books, the price is heavy. Chongyang raised Quanzhen, his wish had been done, the hero’s disposition had gone, clearly marking his separation. Enduring this, the heart lives in a tomb. A person becomes a man of religion, two immortals will meet. Forever on Mount Zhongnan, a mist will linger.” Guo Jing touched the rock and traced the writing with his fingers at the same time, he was startled, the writing matched the strokes of writing with his fingers, it was as if the writing on the rock was carved on using a finger, he exclaimed, “It was written using a finger?”

Qiu Chuji said, “It startles people when they hear this, indeed it was written using a finger!”

Guo Jing said, "There is such a thing as a god on earth?"

Qiu Chuji said, "The poem was written by two people. The two of them are both famous people in the world of Wulin. The person who wrote the first part of the poem is a very special person, eloquent in both kung fu and the arts; they had reached that stage with ease. It's not a god, but a once in a hundred years outstanding personality."

Guo Jing was full of admiration, and asked, "Who was this senior? Could elder introduce me to them so I could meet them."

Qiu Chuji said, "I have never seen that person. Sit down; I will explain the reasons for today's events."

Guo Jing sat down on the rock and looked on at the fire dying down at the foot of the peak, and said, "It is a pity that Rong'er is not with me, wouldn't it be great if we could hear this interesting story together."

Qiu Chuji said, "Do you understand the poem?" Guo Jing is now middle aged, but the tone that Qiu Chuji spoke in was the same as if he were talking to the young Guo Jing of ten years ago, it wasn't deliberate.

Guo Jing understood the meaning and said, "The first part of the poem is talking about Zhang Liang, I have heard his story from Rong'er so I understand a little. He met an old man underneath a bridge and picked up his shoe; the man treated him like his son and taught him the arts. Later he helped to regain the land of the Han and became one of the three heroes; he eventually retired and lived free from care. The latter part is about ancestor Chongyang, so I don't know much about that."

Qiu Chuji said, "Do you know what type of person Founder Chongyang was?"

Guo Jing thought for a while and said, "Founder Chongyang was your teacher, he was the one who built the Quanzhen sect, and at the first Mount Hua tournament he was the victor."

Qiu Chuji said, "You are correct, what about when he was younger?"

Guo Jing shook his head and replied, "I don't know."

Qiu Chuji said, "The hero's disposition had gone, clearly marking his separation. My teacher hadn't always been a Taoist. When he was young, he first learned the arts; then studied martial arts, and was a respected hero in Jianghu. But because of his hate for the Jin soldiers entering his homeland, ruining his homeland and killing his people, he carried the flag and fought the Jin. He set up a boundary, and managed to do great things in the central plains, but eventually the Jin army broke through, my teacher lost the battles. Many soldiers died. He eventually became a Taoist. He became "the living dead", and for a few years he lived in the tomb in our mountain. He didn't take a step out of the tomb; his meaning was that he was alive but dead. He didn't want to live under the same sky as the Jin scoundrels. What was called "bu gong dai tian" (will not live under the same sky as one's enemy) and that was his intention."

Guo Jing said, "I understand now."

Qiu Chuji said, "After a few years, an old friend of my teacher came and tried to persuade him to leave the tomb and do great things with him again. My teacher was still downhearted, and felt that he couldn't face his old Jianghu friends anymore; and so didn't leave the tomb. Eight years later, a lifelong rival of my teacher arrived outside the tomb and cursed and insulted him for seven days and for seven nights; my teacher couldn't stand it anymore and came out of the cave to confront him. Who would have thought that

the person would give a laugh and say, "You've come out now, there is no need to return!" My teacher was startled at his words, and realized that the enemy had good intentions. He felt it was a pity that someone of his ability would hide themselves in the tomb and tricked him into coming out. The two changed the relationship, from enemies into friends, and both re-entered the world of Jianghu."

When Guo Jing heard about this senior's actions, he was curious and asked, "Who are these persons? Are they in the same class as the four greats Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor and Northern Beggar?"

Qiu Chuji said, "No. When it comes to martial arts, she is above the four greats, but because she is a woman, she didn't like to attract the attention of other people and so outsiders did not know much about her; even her name was unknown.

Guo Jing said, "Oh, so it was a girl."

Qiu Chuji sighed, "That senior was actually in love with my teacher, and wanted to marry to him. That year they kept on arguing and fighting, but it was because the girl wanted to get closer to my teacher. But she was a very proud woman and didn't want to be the one to show her feelings first. Eventually my teacher understood, but my teacher could not forget that he had to help his country to drive out the enemy, and said, "I have not completed my wishes, how could I settle down now?" My teacher rejected her love and didn't know what to do. That senior thought that my teacher didn't respect her feelings and the feud between them restarted. They had been enemies who turned friends but became enemies again because of love, and agreed to a date to duel on Mount Zhongnan."

Guo Jing said, "There was no need for it."

Qiu Chuji replied, "Yes! My teacher knew her feelings and had to let her win. Who would have thought the senior's character was strange, she said, "If you let me win, then that means you have even less respect for me?" My teacher could do nothing else but to duel with her. The two then fought each other, a few thousand moves passed, my teacher did not use any powerful moves, and eventually it was hard to pick a winner. The woman said, "You are not using all your ability to fight, who do you think I am?" My teacher said, "It is hard to pick out a winner from dueling, how about we test our literature skills?? The woman said, "Fine. If I lose, I won't ever see you again so you can be in peace." My teacher then said, "What do you want if you win?? The woman's face turned red, and she couldn't reply; she eventually clenched her teeth and said, "You've got to give up your Living Dead Tomb for me to live in." The woman had a hidden meaning behind her demand, if she won, she would live with my teacher and be together. My teacher felt awkward, he knew his martial arts skills were slightly higher than hers; he would be forced to beat her otherwise he wouldn't have any more quiet days. So he asked her, "How are we going to compete."

She said, "Today we are both tired, we'll meet again tomorrow night." When it was approaching dusk, the two met again. She said, "Before we compete, we need to set a rule." My teacher said, "What rule do you want to set?" The woman said, "If you win, I'll immediately kill myself; I won't see you ever again. If I win you have to give the Tomb of the Living Dead to me, obey me forever and mustn't question anything. If you don't, you have to become a man of religion; I don't care if you become a monk or a Taoist. Whether you become a Taoist or a monk, you will need to build a temple and accompany me for ten years."

My teacher understood, "obey her forever" means that she wants me to marry her. If I don't and become a monk or a Taoist, I won't be able to marry another. But how can I win

and watch you kill yourself? It is also hard for me to accompany you for ten years here.” My teacher hesitated on his decision. The senior excelled in terms of looks and martial arts; my teacher was touched by her love, but when it came to getting married, they just weren’t destined to. My teacher thought for a while, and eventually made his decision, and knew she would do what she had said. If she lost she would definitely kill herself, and decided no matter what they competed at he would let her win. He said, “Fine, as you said.”

The woman said, “If we just competed in literature it would be too easy. We’ll write some words on that stone using our fingers, whoever writes the best will be the winner.”

My teacher shook his head and said, “I’m not a god, how can I use my finger to write on that stone?”

The woman said, “If I can then, you’ll admit defeat?”

My teacher was forced to agree with no other option. He knew that no one on earth could do this and so exploited it and thought of a way that there will be no winner or loser, and the competition would end. He said, “If you’ve got the ability then I’ll admit defeat. If you can’t do it, there is no difference between us and we will not compete anymore.”

The woman gave a laugh and said, “Fine, get ready to be a Taoist.” As she said this, her left hand stroked the rock for a while, and after a while she said, “What should I write? Ah, the first hero who became a man of religion was Zhang Zhifang. He gave up his name and wealth, he’s your ancestor.” She then stretched out her right hand and extended her index finger, and wrote on the stone. My teacher saw her finger touch the rock, and dust flowed from the rock, she had carved a word, he had never been so startled in his life. She wrote the first part of the poem.

My teacher had lost and had nothing to say, he immediately moved out of the tomb and let her move in, and near the tomb he built a small Taoist temple; it was the predecessor of the Chongyang Palace.”

Guo Jing also couldn't believe it, he extended his finger and traced the writing on the rock, the carvings were indeed written with a finger and said, “That senior's finger kung fu would indeed frighten people when they hear about it.”

Qiu Chuji raised his head and laughed out to the sky, “Jing'er, this event could fool my teacher, me and now even you. But if your wife was here, she would not be fooled.”

Guo Jing opened his eyes wide and said, “Is there some kind of trick involved?”

Qiu Chuji said, “Could it be? Who on earth has the best finger kung fu?”

Guo Jing said, “Of course it's Reverend Yideng and his “Solitary Yang Finger”.”

Qiu Chuji replied, “Yes! But even with Reverend Yideng's finger kung fu, it would be hard for him to accomplish this feat on a piece of wood, how would he be able to do it on a piece of rock? And could someone else achieve this? My teacher became a Taoist and still could not figure out what happened. Later, your father in law Island Master Huang came and visited my teacher. He knew that he was a very intelligent man and so told him the events, and asked him to help. Island master Huang thought for a while and then gave a chuckle, “I understand. I have yet to complete this type of kung fu; I'll come back in one month's time.” He laughed as he left the mountain.

After a month, Island Master Huang came back and went with my teacher to look at the rock again. When that senior wrote

her poem, she ended it with “Raising people and raising books, the price is heavy?” Her meaning was that she wanted my teacher to have the same fate as Zhang Liang, leave the world and enter religion. Island Master Huang stroked the rock slab with his left hand for a while, his right hand stretched out and extended his finger and wrote a few words, he wrote everything from “Chongyang raised Quanzhen” to “Forever on Mount Zhongnan, a mist will linger”; he wrote to praise my teacher.

My teacher saw that the words were deep, and were exactly the same as what happened last time, and was even more startled and thought, “Huang Yaoshi’s kung fu is definitely below me, how on earth did he managed to obtain such a powerful finger skill?” He was suspicious and extended his finger on to the rock and he managed to make a hole in it.

He then led Guo Jing’s hand to where his teacher had made the hole. Guo Jing felt the mark, and put his finger in it, true enough, it was as if someone had made it with their finger. He thought, “Could it be that the rock is especially soft, and not like any other rock?” He generated chi in his finger and pressed into the rock, but he felt his fingertip start to ache, the rock did not move.

Qiu Chuji laughed, “Even the foolish little boy can’t figure it out. Before the woman wrote on the stone slab, her left hand had stroked the rock for a while. She was actually holding a piece of small rock, and made the rock surface soft, within the time it takes to burn an incense stick, the stone slab would remain soft. Island Master Huang saw through the trick, and went away to find a suitable stone to do this and then came back to demonstrate this.”

Guo Jing didn’t say anything and thought, “My father in law’s intelligence is not below that of that senior, but where is he now?” He missed him a lot.

Qiu Chuji didn't know what he was thinking and carried on, "When my teacher first became a Taoist, he was still vehement, but as he read more Taoist books, he knew it was meant to be, he became enlightened and decided to spread our sect's name. When you think about it, if it weren't for that senior's plan, the Quanzhen sect would not exist; I would not be here today, and we wouldn't know where you, Guo Jing, would be."

Guo Jing nodded, and asked, "So what is that senior's name, and is she still alive?"

Qiu Chuji sighed and replied, "When that senior was in the world of Wulin, she was always discreet, very few people actually saw her. Apart from my teacher, I don't think anyone else knows her name, and my teacher never actually mentioned her name. That senior had passed away before the time of the first Mount Hua tournament, otherwise with her martial arts and character, how can it be that she did not appear?"

Guo Jing nodded his head and said, "It must be. Does she have any descendants?"

Qiu Chuji sighed and said, "All of today's trouble comes from this point. That senior didn't take in a disciple during her life; she only had a maid with her. That maid did not enter the world of Jianghu, so no one knew about her, but she took in two disciples. The eldest disciple is called Li, you must know about this, in Jianghu they call her the "Scarlet Serpent Deity" Li Mochou."

Guo Jing gave an "ah" sound and said, "That Li Mochou is vindictive and ruthless, so those are her origins."

Qiu Chuji said, "You've seen her?"

Guo Jing replied, "A few months ago, I came across her in Jiang Nan. Her kung fu is at a very high level."

Qiu Chuji said, "You hurt her?"

Guo Jing shook his head, "No, we didn't actually meet each other, I only saw how she killed countless women, her ruthlessness has no comparisons, like Mei Chaofeng was when she was alive."

Qiu Chuji said, "It was fortunate you didn't hurt her, otherwise there'd be trouble. Her apprentice sister is named "Long"."

Guo Jing shivered and said, "She is the girl called Long?"

Qiu Chuji's face changed colour slightly, and said, "What? You've seen her? How did this happen?"

Guo Jing said, "Disciple has not seen her before. When I was coming up the mountain, the Taoist brothers insulted me and called me a perverted scoundrel, and said I came for the one called Long, this made me confused."

Qiu Chuji laughed out loud, and sighed at the same time, "Chongyang Palace took the matter into its own hands. If we hadn't made this error, and created the misunderstanding, not only would the large "Big Dipper Formation" have repelled the attackers, you would have arrived here earlier, and apprentice brother Hao would not have been hurt."

He saw that Guo Jing's face was fascinated and continued, "Today is the one named Long's eighteenth birthday."

Guo Jing opened his mouth and said, "Ah, it's her eighteenth birthday!" However he did not understand how a girl's eighteenth birthday could cause so much trouble.

Qiu Chuji said, "Outsiders do not know her first name so all of those troublemakers call her Xiao Longnu, we'll call her that as well. One night eighteen years ago, there was the cry of a little baby girl outside Chongyang Palace, a palace disciple came out to take a look, and saw the little baby girl wrapped in a bundle on the ground. It was inconvenient for the palace to take in a baby girl, but Taoists are supposed to be merciful so we couldn't leave her there. At the time my apprentice brother who was the master of the sect, and I were not on the mountain, and before any of the disciples of the palace could do anything, a middle aged woman suddenly came out from behind the mountain and said, "The little baby is unfortunate and pitiful, I'll take her in!" The disciples couldn't have asked for more, and so gave the baby girl to her. Later, apprentice brother Ma and I returned to the palace, when they told us about this event, from the description of the woman, we knew she was the maid from the Tomb of the Living Dead. She had met the seven of us a few times before, but we had never spoken. Although we are neighbors and because of our seniors' relationship, it is difficult for us to talk to her about it. When I heard that the matter was resolved, I didn't keep it in my mind. Later, her disciple the "Scarlet Serpent Deity" Li Mochou, left the mountain. She was ruthless and vindictive, her martial arts were very high, and caused trouble around the world of Jianghu. Our Quanzhen sect requested to talk to the maid about this many times, to get her to do something about it. Eventually, we didn't act out of respect for her. We wrote a letter and sent it to the tomb. It was extremely respectful and polite. After we sent the letter, it was like a stone sinking into the sea, she still did not reply, and she tolerated Li Mochou's actions, and didn't govern her.

One day, after a few years, outside the tomb we saw a white banner hung on a pine thorn thicket and we knew that the woman had passed away, so the six of us went to the tomb to pay our respects. As we were going through the ceremony, a

thirteen or fourteen year old girl emerged from the pine thorn thickets, greeted us and thanked us for the ceremony, and said, "Master has left the world, and has ordered me to tell all you elders that if that person still causes trouble, my master has a plan to punish her, please don't worry." When she finished, she turned around and went back inside. We wanted to ask her some questions about this but she had already gone back into the tomb. Our master had made a rule; everyone under the order of the Quanzhen sect must not take one step into the tomb. When she left, we pondered and wondered, our Taoist friend is dead, so how could she punish her student? We felt sorry for the little girl and so we sent her food and supplies, but each time she did not touch them, and ordered a servant to return them. She was strange. She was just like her teacher, and her ancestor. But she had a servant to look after her, so we didn't worry about her. Eventually we all had business to attend to, and were rarely present in the palace. We didn't hear anything from the girl. For some reason, news of Li Mochou disappeared and she didn't cause any more trouble. We knew that our Taoist friend had come up with an ingenious plan, and we all were in awe.

Spring came, me and apprentice brother Wang had to go away to Shanxi for some business. We were at a hero's home in Guangzhou when we heard startling news. We heard that one year later, all types of crooks, scoundrels and evildoers would descend on Mount Zhongnan and cause havoc. Mount Zhongnan is the root of our sect and the reason they've come to Mount Zhongnan is to fight our sect, how could we not take precautions? Apprentice brother Wang and I were afraid that the news was unreliable, so we sent out people to investigate; true enough, the news was real. But it wasn't because they wanted to duel with our sect, but it was to do with Xiao Longnu of the Tomb of the Living Dead.

Guo Jing asked, "She is just a young girl, and has never left the tomb, how did she make enemies with all those people?"

Qiu Chuji replied, "The reasons for all this wasn't related to us and originally we didn't care. One day when the evildoers started to descend on Mount Zhongnan, we decided we couldn't just stand by, so we listened for more news, and discovered that Xiao Longnu's apprentice sister Li Mochou started all this business."

Guo Jing said, "Li Mochou?"

Qiu Chuji said, "Yes. Her master had taught her martial arts for a few years and had discovered her character was ill, and so said she had completed her training, and ordered her to leave the mountain. When Li Mochou's master was still alive, although she did evil deeds, she was still slightly worried. But when her teacher died, she used the excuse of paying her respects to enter the Tomb of the Living Dead, and tried to expel her apprentice sister. She knew that she had not learned everything from her master or her sect's founder, and wanted to come to see if there were any kung fu manuals or manuscripts hidden in the tomb. She knew that there were many booby traps in the tomb, and remembered them. She entered through two sets of doors of the tomb, and by the third one she saw a letter left by her teacher. Her teacher had predicted that she would come back, and left this letter for her and part of the letter said: "On a certain year, month, date, it will be your apprentice sister's eighteenth birthday. If you do not stop your evil ways and repent, then your apprentice sister will assume leadership and seek you out and rid the sect of so treacherous a disciple."

Li Mochou was furious, and burst through the third set of doors, and fell into the poisonous trap left by her teacher; if it wasn't for Xiao Longnu curing her poison, she would have died. She knew that it was lethal and so left the tomb. But she had failed, would she let it go? Eventually she came back a few times but each time she suffered. In her last attempt, she actually fought with her apprentice sister. Xiao Longnu

was only fifteen or sixteen years of age at that time, but her skills exceeded that of her apprentice sister. If she hadn't let her off, it would not have been a hard task to take her life."

Guo Jing interrupted, "I'm afraid that could be just a rumour of the Jianghu world."

Qiu Chuji asked, "Why?"

Guo Jing replied, "My master hero Ke has fought with Li Mochou twice, and said that her skills had their fine points. Even Reverend Yideng's high disciple Wu Santong lost to her. Xiao Longnu has not even reached twenty yet, even if her skills were higher, it would be hard for her to beat Li Mochou."

Qiu Chuji said, "That piece of news was heard by apprentice brother Wang from a friend of his from the Beggar Clan. Whether Xiao Longnu did or did not defeat her apprentice sister, there wasn't a witness so no one knows apart from them. I only know that this was what people of Jianghu said. Li Mochou was upset and jealous that her teacher was biased, and passed on the higher set of skills to her apprentice sister. So she created a rumour, and said that on a certain year, month and date, the one called Xiao Longnu who lives in the tomb will have a martial arts competition to decide her marriage." Guo Jing heard about this, he immediately thought about when Yang Kang and Mu Nianci met in Yanjing, and let out a quiet sigh.

Qiu Chuji knew what he was thinking and he too gave a sigh, and said, "She revealed: whoever beats Xiao Longnu, not only will they get to marry her, all the riches and kung fu manuals of the sect will be theirs. The evildoers did not know who Xiao Longnu was, but Li Mochou widely spread the fact that her apprentice sister's beauty exceeded hers. The "Scarlet Serpent Deity" is said to be a very beautiful woman,

her beauty is very rare within the world of Wulin, and even women from brothels can't compare with her."

Guo Jing thought, "What is so special about that? My Rong'er exceeds her beauty over one hundred times."

Qiu Chuji continued, "Many evildoers of the Wulin world lusted after Li Mochou. But those who give a prolonged glance, or did not treat her with respect she would immediately punish them. Now they hear she has an apprentice sister whose beauty exceeded hers, and who had publicly announced that she will have a competition to decide her marriage, so they all thought why not and try their luck?"

Guo Jing was startled and said, "So all those people that were here were in search of marriage. Its no wonder the students of the palace called me a perverted scoundrel."

Qiu Chuji said, "I also heard that these people did not even care about the Quanzhen sect. When a large crowd of people descended on Mount Zhongnan, we wanted to intervene and become a needle in their eyes. Apprentice brother Wang and I had received the news, and decided to repel the evildoers. We had gathered all the students of our sect ten days earlier. Apprentice brother Liu and apprentice sister Sun were in Shanxi and couldn't return. We arranged to practice the "Big Dipper Formations" and we also sent a letter to the tomb to invite Xiao Longnu to the palace. The letter was sent, but there was no reply, Xiao Longnu had ignored us."

Guo Jing said, "So she left the tomb."

Qiu Chuji said, "No. From the top of the mountain and looking downwards, you could see smoke coming out from the tomb everyday. Take a look, it's over there." He pointed to the west. Guo Jing followed his finger and looked to the west, but all he could see for ten miles was forest, he did not know

where the Tomb of the Living Dead was. He thought about the young eighteen-year-old girl, living in the tomb all the time; if it was Rong'er, she would be bored to death.

Qiu Chuji said, "All our apprentice brothers were set to meet the enemy. Five days ago, the scouts who were sent out came back and discovered who the two most powerful people were from the crowd of evildoers. They had agreed to first meet at the foot of the mountain at the Everywhere Light Temple, and used the smashing of the stone slab as the signal. You inadvertently smashed the stone slab, and frightened people with your strength; it was no wonder my grand disciples made such a commotion.

The two tyrants' names are quite famous; they have entered the central plains this year to shake the world of Wulin. You have resided on Peach Blossom Island so you wouldn't know about the affairs of the outside world. That nobleman is a Mongolian prince, it was said that he is Genghis Khan's close nephew. Other people call him Prince Huo Dou. You've lived on the plains of Mongolia for a long time, and you were familiar with the royalty, can you remember meeting anyone like him?"

Guo Jing quietly repeated "Prince Huo Dou", he recalled his face, but couldn't remember whose son he could be, but he felt that his face was handsome, proud but also carried a devious air. Genghis Khan had four sons, the eldest Shu Chi [Jochi] was violent and brave, the second son Cha He Tai [Chagatai] was a clever planner, the third prince Wo Kuo Tai [Ogedai] is the khan of the Mongols at this moment in time, he was easy going, the fourth prince Tuo Lei [Tolui] was the most humane, when he thought about it, Huo Dou did not resemble any of the four princes.

Qiu Chuji said, "I'm afraid that a man of his stature coming to create havoc here has an ulterior motive. His kung fu

originates from Western Tibet; he arrived in the central plains at the beginning of the year. He wounded the three heroes of Henan, and later on he single-handedly killed the seven Lords of Lanzhou. His name was spread widely throughout the land, we didn't predict that he would have the nerve to come to our sect and cause trouble. The other Tibetan monk is called Da'erba; he has supernatural strength, and his kung fu is from the same school as Huo Dou. It appears that he is the senior apprentice brother. He is a monk, of course he hasn't come here to get married; he's here to aid Huo Dou.

When the rest of the evil men heard the two were coming, they remembered the matter of dueling for marriage. Years ago, in front of a crowd of people, Li Mochou had said the tomb contained mountains of treasures, and had countless kung fu manuscripts and manuals; saying there was the formulae to the "Eighteen Subduing Dragon Palms", the "Solitary Yang Finger" and numerous others. Although the crooks and scoundrels were unsure, they thought that if they went up to the mountain and opened up the tomb, they would be able to get a share of the spoils. About one hundred or so of them came up the mountain. Originally our "Big Dipper Formation" could have easily repelled them away from the foot of our mountain, not allowing them to come through and teach them not to take one step into Chongyang Palace. We were resisting them when the misunderstanding occurred; there is no need to say anymore."

Guo Jing felt very guilty and apologetic, and wanted to say a few words of apology. Qiu Chuji waved his hand and laughed, "Letting a laugh out rids your worries and the moon is still in the sky above the western lake. The halls and buildings are just objects; human possessions mean nothing, so why worry about them? You have honed your martial arts for the last ten years, could it be that you do not understand the meaning of this?"

Guo Jing laughed and said, "Yes!"

Qiu Chuji laughed and said, "Actually when I saw the back courtyard being burned down to the ground, I was very angry and furious, but after a while I calmed down. Compared to how calm apprentice brother Ma was, I am nowhere as enlightened as he is."

Guo Jing said, "You can't blame yourself for getting angry at all those crooks and scoundrels."

Qiu Chuji said, "As you fought with the main "Big Dipper Formation", the two tyrants led a pack of scoundrels and took advantage of the situation and led them to Chongyang Palace. As soon as they arrived, they set fire to the buildings; apprentice brother Hao led a formation out against Prince Huo Dou. He was wary of Huo Duo's skills as they were very strange. Apprentice brother Hao was careless and rash when he was fighting him, and ended up being struck in the chest. We set up a formation to protect him. Without apprentice brother Hao in the formation we had to replace him with students whose skills were much inferior, thus the power of the formation was reduced and limited. If you hadn't arrived just in time, today would be the day where the Quanzhen sect would have been destroyed. When I think about it, even if the other students didn't mistake you for the enemy, though they would be able to stop all the scoundrels and crooks from entering the mountain, they would not be able to stop Da'erba and Huo Dou. If the two combined together and attacked our formation, we would not have lost, but we definitely would not have defeated them as quickly and as spectacularly as you did."

As he said this, they heard a sound from the west; someone was blowing a horn. The horn sound was pleasant and relaxing, as Guo Jing listened, he imagined himself back in

the Mongolian plains, looking out at the yellow sands of Mongolia, giving off a beautiful glow.

After a while, he heard “an intent to kill” was beginning to emerge from the sounds of the horn, as if it was trying to invite someone for a duel. Qiu Chuji’s face turned angry and shouted, “Beasts, beasts!”

He looked at the forest to the west and said, “Jing’er, you and that scoundrel have set a ten year date; you are going to meet again in these ten years, I advise to you not to intervene. Is there such a sincere and honorable thing under heaven? Let’s go!”

Guo Jing said, “It is Prince Huo Dou?”

Qiu Chuji replied, “It is him. He is trying to get Xiao Longnu to duel with him.” While saying this, he was already flying down the mountain. Guo Jing followed.

The two traveled for about a mile, when they heard the horn sound was getting closer, but within the sound of the horn, they could make out the sound of a weapon was being used; it was Da’erba.

Qiu Chuji was angry and said, “How can two martial artists gang up and bully a young girl; they really don’t care about face.” He increased his efforts and sped up. In a flash, the two were at the foot of the hill, passing a stone slab. All Guo Jing could see in front of him was a black forest. Outside the forest stood one hundred short and tall scoundrels and crooks, it was the same people who had just attacked Chongyang Palace. The two of them hid behind the stone slab, surveying their actions. They saw Prince Huo Dou and Da’erba get up. Prince Huo Dou raised his horn and blew. Da’erba raised a large golden pestle (rod shaped object used for crushing) with his left hand. He tapped the golden bracelet on his right wrist with the pestle, and created a

noise, the two noises combined, trying to draw out Xiao Longnu. The two did this for a while, but no sounds came from the forest.

Huo Dou put down his horn, and clearly said, "I am Mongolia's Prince Huo Dou; I have come to congratulate Xiao Longnu on your birthday."

As he finished, three chords from a zither was heard, it was Xiao Longnu replying. Hu Dou was happy and said, "It is known far and wide that Miss Long will have a duel to find a husband. I have dared to come forward, and meet this challenge, I ask Miss Long to make her move. A resounding sound was suddenly heard from the zither, clearly showing signs of anger. The rest of the crowd didn't move, they could hear from the zither notes the intent of the player, wanting them to leave. Huo Dou chuckled and said, "I am from an affluent family, handsome, sincere and willing, I wouldn't dare to offend you. Miss Long is a heroine in the world, please don't be shy."

When he finished, the sound of the zither soared, a note of reproving could be heard from within the sound. Huo Dou glanced at Da'erba, the monk nodded. Huo Dou said, "If Miss does not show herself, then I will have to enter." He then picked up his horn, waved his right hand and leapt into the forest. The crowd of people also went forward, and all thought, "Even the famous Quanzhen sect could not stop us, Xiao Longnu is alone and is just a young girl, aren't we overdoing things?" But they were all thinking about getting to the treasure first and ignored this, pushing and shoving they entered the forest.

Qiu Chuji shouted out, "This place is Quanzhen sect's Founder Chongyang's old residence, leave quickly."

When the crowd heard this, they were all startled, but their feet didn't stop moving forwards.

Qiu Chuji was angry and said, "Jing'er, let's use force!" The two emerged from behind the stone slab and were about to enter the forest; then they suddenly heard cries from the crowd of people, and they were dashing back out of the forest.

Qiu Chuji and Guo Jing stopped, they saw tens of people flying out of the forest, even Huo Dou and Da'erba came flying out, they were rushing out much quicker than they did when they were forced away from Chongyang Palace. Qiu Chuji and Guo Jing wondered, "What method did Xiao Longnu used to drive these people away?" As they wondered, they suddenly heard the sounds of something approaching quickly, under the moonlight they saw a collection of white and grey blurs emerging from the forest, and were diving onto the crowds of evildoers.

Guo Jing asked, "What is that?" Qiu Chuji shook his head and did not reply, and looked closer, some of the people who were running slower were being dived on by the things and they immediately dropped down onto the ground, holding their heads and screaming.

Guo Jing was startled and said, "It's a swarm of bees, why are they white?" As he said this, a swarm of jade colored bees stung five or six people. In front of the forest were ten people who were rolling about on the ground, crying and screaming. It would have sent shivers down the backs to those who could hear them. Guo Jing thought, "It does hurt if you get stung by a bee, but there is no need to cry out like that; could it be that the Jade Bee's poison is very potent?" He saw a grey image flying towards him, the Jade Bees were like smoke, and were flying onto Guo Jing and Qiu Chuji. The bees were ferocious and it was hard to repel them, Guo Jing wanted to turn around and escape, Qiu Chuji circulated chi through his "dan tian", and blew out through his mouth at the bees that were coming towards him. The swarm of bees

was flying forwards fiercely, but when they met the fierce gust of wind they were pushed back. As Qiu Chuji's first breath finished he sent out a second one. Guo Jing had learned this type of skill, and then did the same; he and Qiu Chuji created a gust of wind. The skills they used were advanced orthodox skills, the swarm of bees could not resist and flew past the two and chased after Huo Dou and Da'erba. The people who were rolling along on the ground were crying out for mercy, calling out for their fathers and mothers, and sobbing uncontrollably. Someone said, "I'm sorry, I beg goddess Xiao Longnu to save my life!"

Guo Jing was startled; "He is a member of the Jianghu world, even if his arm or leg was chopped off, he may not call out in pain. How can just a little sting by a bee be so lethal?" Suddenly the sound of the zither was heard from the forest, accompanying it was a white mist. Guo Jing and Qiu Chuji could smell the scent of an extremely sweet and fragrant flower. After a while, the sounds of the bees came closer, the bees sensed the aroma and returned to the forest, it was Xiao Longnu who had created the scent to order the bees back.

Qiu Chuji and Xiao Longnu had been neighbors for eighteen years but he didn't know that she had such skills; he was in awe but also felt amused, and said, "If we knew our fragrant neighbor was so prepared, the Quanzhen sect should not have been so nosy." Although he was talking to Guo Jing, he had said it with his chi and wanted Xiao Longnu to hear it. The music from the forest changed, gentle and peaceful, the sense of appreciation was hidden within the music. Qiu Chuji laughed out loud, and said clearly, "Miss, there is no need for all this. This Old Taoist and disciple Guo Jing wish you well on your birthday." Two notes were heard from the zither and then nothing more.

Guo Jing sensed that within the notes there was a feeling of sorrow and pity. He said to Qiu Chuji, "Elder, why did she let

them go?"

Qiu Chuji replied, "Miss Long makes her own decisions, let's go." The two turned around and headed east, on the way, Guo Jing once again requested Qiu Chuji to accept Yang Guo into Quanzhen.

Qiu Chuji sighed, "Your godfather Yang Tiexin was a great hero, why did he have no descendants? I played a part in the downfall of Yang Kang. Don't worry, I will do my best and teach the boy how to be a good person."

Guo Jing was pleased, and got down on his knees to say thanks. The two chatted away as they reached Chongyang Palace; the sky had now begun to get bright. Many Taoists were clearing up the back courtyard and tending to the damage.

Qiu Chuji summoned a group of Taoists to meet Guo Jing, and pointed out to the bearded Taoist who had led the "Big Dipper Formation" against him and said, "That is apprentice brother Wang's first disciple, his name is Zhao Zhijing. Out of all the third generation disciples, his kung fu is the highest, we'll let him teach Guo'er kung fu."

Guo Jing had exchanged hands with that person, and knew his kung fu was high, and he was pleased, and ordered Yang Guo to undergo the custom of greeting a new master to Zhao Zhijing, and he himself apologized to Zhao Zhijing. Guo Jing remained on Mount Zhongnan for a few days, and repeatedly gave advice to Yang Guo, then, after saying goodbyes to him and the Taoists, he returned to Peach Blossom Island.

Qiu Chuji remembered years ago when he taught Yang Kang kung fu, and let him do as he pleased in the palace. Eventually this led Yang Kang to make wrong choices and thought, "Being strict will create a good student, and being harsh will bring a filial son. I must be strict and keep a close

eye on Guo'er; otherwise he will follow the same road as his father." He then summoned Yang Guo, and then gave him a stern talking to, and told him he will have hardships ahead, he must listen to every word that his master says, and must not be lazy.

Yang Guo did not even want to be on Mount Zhongnan, and for no reason he was given a strict scolding, he was angry, he held in his tears and didn't reply, when Qiu Chuji left he let out a cry and sobbed.

Suddenly a voice from behind coldly said, "What's the matter? Has Martial Grand Master wronged you?"

Yang Guo was startled; he stopped crying and turned around only to see his master Zhao Zhijing, he quickly dropped his hands and said, "No."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Why did you cry?"

Yang Guo said, "I was thinking about Uncle Guo and became sad."

He had just heard Qiu Chuji giving a stern scolding to him, now Yang Guo is saying it is because he misses Guo Jing, he wasn't convinced and thought, "He is so crafty already at such a young age; if I don't punish him now, how could he change?" He then shouted, "You dare to lie to your master?"

Yang Guo had seen how Guo Jing had beaten the Taoists so spectacularly and convincingly, and had seen Qiu Chuji and the others being forced back onto their hands and feet by Huo Dou and the evildoers. They depended on Guo Jing to save them, so he had already made up his mind on the Quanzhen kung fu being nothing but ordinary. He didn't respect Qiu Chuji, what about Zhao Zhijing? Guo Jing had neglected to explain to him that the Quanzhen sect's kung fu was orthodox and profound, years ago Wang Chongyang's

kung fu was the best in the world, other family's' and other sects' best fighters could not compare. The reasons for what he saw was not because of the Quanzhen sect's kung fu was useless, but because the group of Taoists who he had seen fighting had not practiced enough. Yang Guo then believed that it must be because that the Guo couple did not want him as a disciple, and just gave him to anyone to learn martial arts. He had seen with his own two eyes that the Taoists' swords had been forced out of their hands, even if Guo Jing had explained, Yang Guo would not have believed it. He saw that his master's expression wasn't pleasant, and thought, "I only became your disciple because I had no choice; even if I learned everything you know, what use would it be? Why are you acting like you are in charge?" He didn't reply.

Zhao Zhijing was angry; his voice became even louder and said, "I asked you a question, you dare to not reply?"

Yang Guo said, "Whatever master wants me to say, I'll say it."

Zhao Zhijing heard that he was disrespectful, he could not hold his temper anymore, he hit him across the face and left a deep red mark. Yang Guo cried out, and began to cry and ran away. Zhao Zhijing quickly followed and caught him, and asked, "Where are you going?"

Yang Guo said, "Let go of me, I don't want to learn from you."

Zhao Zhijing was irate and shouted, "Bastard, what did you say?"

Yang Guo immediately became bold, and shouted, "Rotten Taoist, you dog, you can kill me!"

A disciple master relationship was looked upon as very significant, in the world of Wulin; a disciple master relationship was the same as a father son relationship. If the

master wanted to kill the student, the disciple would not dare to resist. Yang Guo had dared to insult his teacher, it was a rarely seen and rarely heard event; it was treason and heresy. Zhao Zhijing's face turned yellow, he raised his hand and wanted to give him another slap. Yang Guo suddenly jumped up, and grabbed his arm, and bit on his right index finger. After Yang Guo had received Ou Yangfeng's method of practicing internal energy, he practiced it occasionally; he now had a decent foundation. Zhao Zhijing was angry, and didn't have his guard up against a small child. Being grabbed and fiercely bitten, he couldn't move and his finger was in pain; he couldn't endure it. Zhao Zhijing raised his left fist and heavily hit Yang Guo on the shoulder, and shouted, "Do you want to die? Let go!?" Yang Guo was furious, even if he were threatened by swords and spears he would not let go, but he felt pain in his shoulder. His teeth bit even harder, a "ka" sound was heard, he had bitten through the bone. He shouted, "Ah!" and fiercely threw a left fist at Yang Guo's head, and made him faint. He opened his jaw and took out his right index finger. He saw his hand was full of fresh blood, though he managed to fix his finger back into place, his finger would not have the strength that it used to have. This will affect his kung fu, he became furious and kicked Yang Guo a few times.

He ripped some cloth of Yang Guo's sleeve, and wrapped it around his wound. He took a look around, it was lucky that no one was about. He thought that if someone saw this, it would be spread throughout the Jianghu world that Quanzhen's Zhao Zhijing's finger was bitten off by his little disciple; he would lose all his respect. He then went and filled a basin with cold water and splashed it over Yang Guo to wake him up. When Yang Guo woke, he was like a madman and wanted to fight again. Zhao Zhijing grabbed his chest and shouted, "Animal, you really don't want to live do you?"

Yang Guo shouted, "Scoundrel, rotten Taoist, calling me an animal, after being beaten to the ground by my Uncle Guo and eating faeces off the floor, begging for mercy won't help your descendants; you're the animal!"

Zhao Zhijing extended his right palm and hit him again. He kept his guard up, if Yang Guo wanted to attack him, how could he get near? In the wink of an eye he kicked him a few times. If Zhao Zhijing wanted to hurt him, it would be too easy, but he remembered that Yang Guo was his disciple. If he hurt him badly, how would he answer if my master or martial uncles asked about it? Yang Guo ferociously attacked, as if Zhao Zhijing was his most hated person in the world; although he was punched and kicked, and couldn't bear the pain, he did not intend to back down.

Zhao Zhijing punched and kicked him, though in his heart there was some feelings of regret. He saw that although he was bruised all over, he became bolder as he fought. In the end he had no other choice but to stretch out his left finger and touched the side of his body, sealing his pressure point. Yang Guo lay down on the ground and wasn't able to move, but his eyes were full of hate and fury.

Zhao Zhijing said, "You ingrate, do you submit now?" Yang Guo stared at him, with no intent to submit. Zhao Zhijing sat on a rock and recovered his breath. It was as if he had just dueled with a highly skilled opponent, fighting until he was out of breath. At the moment it wasn't because his arms and legs were tired, it was because he was troubled.

One disciple, one master; both looked at each other angrily, Zhao Zhijing tried to think of a good punishment for the rebel child, in the middle of his thoughts, he suddenly heard the bell ringing; it was the leader calling to gather the students. Zhao Zhijing was startled; he turned to Yang Guo and said, "If you don't cause anymore trouble, then I'll let

you go.” He extended his finger and unsealed his pressure point. Yang Guo immediately jumped up and leaped at him. Zhao Zhijing stepped aside two steps, and said, “I won’t hit you, how about that?”

Yang Guo said, “You won’t ever hit me again?”

Zhao Zhijing heard the bell ringing was becoming urgent, and didn’t dare to procrastinate and said, “If you are obedient, why should I hit you?”

Yang Guo said, “Fine, if you won’t hit me, I’ll call you master. If you hit me again, I won’t ever acknowledge you are my master.”

Zhao Zhijing was angry, but he put on a smile and nodded his head, and said, “The leader is summoning everyone, quickly follow me.” He saw that Yang Guo’s sleeve was ripped, his face swollen, he was afraid that someone will ask what happened so he cleaned him up, took his hand, and quickly went to the assembly at the front of the palace.

Zhao Zhijing and Yang Guo arrived, and both went into their respective groups. Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi were sitting in front of them. Ma Yu clapped his hand three times, and the clearly said, “Elder Chang and the Sage of Tranquility have sent news from Shanxi, and said the business they are attending to has become really troublesome. My two apprentice brothers and I have decided that elder Eternal Spring (Qiu Chuji) and elder Shining Jade (Wang Chuyi) will take along ten disciples and immediately set off to rendezvous with them.” The rest of the Taoists all looked at each other, some were startled, and others were excited. Qiu Chuji then called out the names of ten disciples, and then said, “Everyone get prepared, you will leave with elder Shining Jade and I first thing tomorrow. The rest of you are dismissed.” The Taoists were dismissed; they quietly discussed the news amongst themselves. “That Li Mochou is

just a woman, how powerful can she be? Even elder Eternal Life Martial Uncle Liu can't handle her." Another said, "Isn't the Sage of Tranquility Martial Uncle Sun a woman? There are capable women, don't be surprised." Another Taoist said, "Now that Elder Qiu and Elder Wang are going, that Li Mochou won't be able to do anything."

Qiu Chuji went over to Zhao Zhijing and said to him, "Originally I wanted to take you along, but I'm worried that Guo'er's progress in martial arts will suffer, so you will stay here." He then saw the wounds on Yang Guo's face, and was startled, and said, "What's this? Who have you been fighting with?"

Zhao Zhijing was afraid, he knew that if Martial Uncle Qiu found out what happened, he would be severely scolded; he looked at Yang Guo and signaled to him with his eyes. Yang Guo had already decided what to do, when he saw the worried expression on Zhao Zhijing, he didn't let him know what he was doing and didn't respond to his pleas.

Qiu Chuji sternly said, "Who hit you like this? Who did this? Quickly tell me."

Zhao Zhijing heard Martial Uncle Qiu's voice was becoming sterner, and became even more scared.

Yang Guo said, "I wasn't in a fight, disciple tripped and fell down a ditch."

Qiu Chuji didn't believe him, and said, "You are lying; how could you trip for no reason? The wounds on your face aren't from falling over."

Yang Guo said, "Earlier, Grand Master told me to learn martial arts diligently."

Qiu Chuji said, "Yes, what about it?"

Yang Guo said, "After Grand Master left, the disciple thought that what you said was right, the disciple must work harder than ever before, and must not disappoint the hopes that Grand Master has for me." His pleasant words pleased and calmed down Qiu Chuji and he gave out a grunt. Yang Guo continued, "A mad dog came suddenly out of nowhere, and for no reason leapt at me trying to bite, the disciple tried to kick him away but he became more and more fierce. The disciple tried to turn around and run, but I was careless and fell down in a ditch. It was lucky that my teacher arrived, and rescued me."

Qiu Chuji listened, and then looked at Zhao Zhijing, signaling to him, asking if it was the truth. Zhao Zhijing was startled and thought, "How dare he, how dare the little bastard call me a mad dog." But in this situation he had no choice but to help him lie, he nodded his head and said, "It was I who saved him."

Qiu Chuji believed him, and said, "After I've left, teach him our sect's kung fu well, every ten days, your Martial Uncle, our leader will test him." Zhao Zhijing did not want to do this at all, but he couldn't refuse an order from his Martial Uncle, and could only agree. Right now, Yang Guo was busy being pleased with himself for making Zhao Zhijing call himself a mad dog, and didn't really digest what his Grand Master was saying. After Qiu Chuji had walked away about twenty paces, Zhao Zhijing's blood rose to the surface, he couldn't resist and raised his hand; he wanted to hit Yang Guo across the face again.

Yang Guo shouted out, "Grand Master Qiu!"

Qiu Chuji was startled and turned around, asking, "What's the matter?"

Zhao Zhijing's hand was in midair, he did not dare to hit out, he was caught in an embarrassing situation and he

reluctantly pulled his arm back and scratched the hair by his temples.

Yang Guo ran towards Qiu Chuji, and said, "Grand Master, after you've left, there will be no one to look after me, there are many Martial Uncles who want to hit me."

Qiu Chuji's faced changed and shouted, "Rubbish! Is there such a thing?" On the outside he appeared strict, but he was worried inside, he thought about how hard it is for an child to be on his own and clearly said, "Zhijing, you take good care of him, if anything happens, I'll be asking after you." Zhao Zhijing could only accept.

After supper, Yang Guo slowly walked towards the room where his master was residing, and shouted out, "Master!"

It was the time of day when they were refining the kung fu; Zhao Zhijing had already sat on his couch for half a day thinking, "That child is very mischievous, if I don't tame him quickly, when his martial arts are high, who else could restrain him? But Martial Uncle Qiu and Master ordered me to teach him kung fu; if I don't teach him then I am not following orders." He kept searching in his mind but couldn't think of anything, he saw Yang Guo entering the room slowly, his eyes lit up, he gave a laugh in an ostentatious manner as he thought of a plan, "I've got it, he doesn't know anything about our sect's martial arts, I'll just teach him the formula to our sect's skills, but I won't teach how to practice it. Even if he remembers the few hundred sentences of the formulae what use is it to him? If Master or the Martial Uncles ask about this, I'll push the blame away and say it was his fault for not working hard enough." Now his mind was made up, with a kind and pleasant expression he said to Yang Guo, "Guo'er, come here."

Yang Guo said, "Are you going to hit me?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "I'm going to teach you kung fu, why should I hit you?"

Yang Guo saw that he was lively, and had come out with a surprise, he slowly entered, but he was on his guard, afraid that he has some evil scheme. Zhao Zhijing pretended nothing was going on and said, "Our Quanzhen sect's kung fu is learned from within to the outside, it is very different to other types of kung fu. I am now going to pass on to you the formula of our sect's internal energy, you must remember it clearly." He then passed on the formulae to the sect's internal energy theories, and recited a segment.

Yang Guo just listened to it once, and had already memorized it, and thought, "That old goat hates me, why would he teach me real kung fu? He's probably trying to make a fool out of me and teach me some useless fake formulae."

After a while, he pretended to forget, and asked Zhao Zhijing to repeat it again. Zhao Zhijing repeated it again.

The next day, Yang Guo asked his teacher again, and heard that it was exactly the same as it was the day before, he then believed they were real, if the formulae were made up, then it would be impossible that every single word was the same when repeated three times.

Ten days passed this way, Zhao Zhijing only taught him the formulae, and did not say one word on how to practice them. On the tenth day, Zhao Zhijing took him to Ma Yu, and said that he has taught him their sect's formulae for practicing internal energy, and told Yang Guo to recite it to Grand Master. Yang Guo recited the whole thing; he didn't say one word wrong. Ma Yu was pleased, and praised him for being so clever. He was a kind and generous Taoist, a gentleman; he would never have thought that Zhao Zhijing had such a scheme.

Summer went and autumn arrived, autumn passed and winter came, a few months passed in the wink of an eye. Yang Guo had memorized a stack of formulae, but he had not learned an ounce of kung fu, he had not improved his martial arts or his internal energy since he had been on the mountain. A few days after he first began to remember and recite the formulae, he knew that his teacher was making a fool out of him, but he didn't dare to complain. But he had no other ideas; the headmaster of the sect was peaceful and soft hearted, if he told him, he would only reproach Zhao Zhijing with a few words. He was scared that the old goat would conjure up some other plan to torture him; he could only wait for his Grand Master to come back before he could do anything. But after many months, Qiu Chuji still had not returned. It was fortunate that Yang Guo did not respect the martial arts of the Quanzhen sect, he didn't care if he learned them or not, but because Zhao Zhijing had used such a plan, he hated him even more. Yang Guo didn't want to suffer for no reason so he pretended to be even more respectful to him.

Zhao Zhijing felt pleased with himself and thought, "You caused offence to your master, in the end who suffers?"

Time passed and it was soon the last month of the lunar year, a custom that had been passed down by Wang Chongyang requests that in the three days before the eve of the new year, all the sect's students will spar with each other, testing how much each student has advanced in the last year. Every student knew the date was approaching, and each one of them trained non-stop.

On the day of the celebration, the students of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen had their own competitions, forming several small competitions. The students formed seven groups, the disciples and grand disciples of Ma Yu forming one group, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and the others disciples and grand disciples formed the others. Although Tan

Chuduan was dead, his disciples and grand disciples still flourished and formed a group. Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others often thought about his early death, and so would pay special attention to his students. Because of this, at each year's duel, the students of Tan Chuduan would not lose to the other students.

After this year's incident at Chongyang Palace, where the Quanzhen sect was almost overthrown, all of the students thought that although the sect's kung fu is famous throughout the world for its orthodox style, they became a good challenge for many schools and sects. The title they had is highly dangerous, so everyone trained harder than ever before.

Wang Chongyang founded the Quanzhen sect and he was the sect's first generation. May Yu and the other seven of them were his disciples, and they made up the second generation. Zhao Zhijing, Yin Zhiping, Cheng Yaojia are the students of the seven, and they formed the third generation. Yang Guo was therefore in the fourth generation of the sect.

After the morning meal, the Shining Jade elder's students who included Zhao Zhijing and Cui Chifang and others assembled in the southeastern plain, where they dueled with each other. Wang Chuyi was not present, so his eldest student Zhao Zhijing was in charge of the proceedings. The fourth generation students demonstrated their punches and kicks, then with swords and spears, after that they performed with projectiles and finally showed off their internal energy, with Zhao Zhijing and the other third generation students in the group as the judges.

Yang Guo was the last one to enter the sect out of all of them; he sat aside and watched. He saw Taoists who were older than him, some who were about the same age as him and others who weren't Taoists demonstrate impressive skills, but

he wasn't envious, instead he was full of hate. Zhao Zhijing saw that something was up with him, and wanted to make a fool out of him again, and so waited for two Taoists to finish competing with projectiles and then called out, "Come here Yang Guo!"

Yang Guo stopped for a second and thought, "You haven't taught me an ounce of martial arts, why are you calling me out?" Zhao Zhijing called out again, "Yang Guo, come here now!"

Yang Guo had no choice but to walk to where they were sitting, and then made a bow and said, "Disciple Yang Guo hereby greets teacher." Quanzhen sect was made up mostly of Taoists, but there were some members who were like Yang Guo and not Taoists, and so he performed the greeting for these members.

Zhao Zhijing pointed out to the Taoist in the arena who had just won and said, "He's only a few years older than you; you go and compete with him."

Yang Guo said, "Disciple does not know any martial arts, how can I compete with apprentice brother?"

Zhao Zhijing scolded, "I've taught you for half a year, how can you say you don't know any martial arts? What have you been doing for the last few months?"

Yang Guo had nothing to say and hung his head.

Zhao Zhijing said, "You are lazy and mischievous, you don't practice, of course your punches and kicks will become rusty. I ask you "What use is there to study the scheme of life? The heart dies, and passion with it." What are the next two lines?"

Yang Guo replied, "The pure air fills the tools of movement; The light of the soul shines brilliantly on the body."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Correct, I ask you again, "The teacher passes on the secret and comprehended at first; eventually there is no me." What are the next two lines?"

Yang Guo replied, "Every year the dust is ground to the end; One side of the soul dazzles to emptiness."

Zhao Zhijing gave a wry smile, and said, "Very good, not one word wrong. Go and use those formulae, enter the arena and compete with your apprentice brother."

Yang Guo was startled once again, and said. "I won't."

Zhao Zhijing was pleased with himself, his face was furious and he shouted, "You've learned the formulae but don't practice and only make up excuses, go down to the arena now."

Within those few lines are the most important ideas in cultivating internal energy, teaching that the heart must be calm, refining the chi, but each line needs a fist or kick to accompany it, only then will a set of Quanzhen sect's fist be formed. The rest of the Taoists heard Yang Guo reciting the formulae with their own ears, and not one word out of place, and knew that he was scared of competing, and tried to encourage him by ridiculing and laughing mockingly. The students of the Quanzhen sect are all good people, but after their battle with Guo Jing where the Taoists were beaten to the ground, he had offended many people. Many of them shifted their anger onto Yang Guo, and wished misfortune on him, although they might not have really meant it, they just wanted a way to vent their anger.

Yang Guo saw many people were urging him on, some were saying harsh words to get at him, he couldn't control his anger and made a decision and thought, "Today, I'm not going to care what happens to me." He then jumped into the arena, and moved his arms, running straight into the young

Taoist. The Taoist saw that he wasn't showing respect for the opponent, and was not following the sect's rules by politely requesting a duel; he was shocked. He saw that Yang Guo was running around and fighting like a madman, he was surprised and moved back a few steps. Yang Guo had already decided to disregard his own life and ferociously attacked, every step going forward. The young Taoist moved back a few steps and saw that Yang Guo's lower body was unstable, he slanted his body and threw a kick, the stance "Sweeping Wind Descending Leaves" (feng sao luo ye), and swept his leg. Yang Guo didn't know how to dodge, he couldn't stay upright and fell down on the ground, hitting his nose and blood flowed.

The Taoists saw how he fell, and some laughed. Yang Guo flipped around and picked himself up, he didn't wipe the blood away; he dropped his head and jumped at the Taoist. The Taoist saw Yang Guo jumping at him and dodged to the side. Yang Guo did not use any orthodox kung fu, he reached with his two arms, and grabbed the opponent's left leg. The young Taoist's right palm came down, the stance "Wiping the Dust" (kai mo chen gou), it was a way to rid obstructions on your lower body. Yang Guo had not learned any martial arts when he was on Peach Blossom Island, and had not received any useful skills while at Chongyang palace, and didn't have a clue as to what stance the opponent would use. He only heard a thudding noise, he felt a sharp pain in his shoulder; he had been struck fiercely by a punch. The more he suffered, the more ferocious he became, he head butted the opponent's right leg; the Taoist's leg became unsteady and he was forced onto the ground by him. Yang Guo whirled his fist, and ferociously struck out at his head.

The young Taoist gained victory from the jaws of defeat, his elbow struck Yang Guo's chest fiercely, causing him severe pain, and used the chance to escape. He pushed and swung his hand, and caused Yang Guo to drop again; he had used

the stance “No Debts No Dues” (wu qian wu yu). The young Taoist checked and said, “Apprentice brother Yang, thank you!”

Originally when dueling amongst each other from the same sect, once there was a clear winner the duel would stop, but he didn’t know Yang Guo was not finished. He came rushing forwards again. After two or three moves, Yang Guo was once again on the ground, but he became bolder as he went on, his punches and kicks coming out faster and faster.

Zhao Zhijing shouted, “Yang Guo, you’ve already lost, why are you still carrying on?”

Yang Guo ignored him, and kicked out; he had no plans to back down. The rest of the Taoists first thought it was funny but then thought, “When did our sect have such a reckless and rough kung fu?” After, they saw that he was fighting for his life and were afraid that something might happen. Many people called out, “Forget it...forget it. Its only sparring amongst apprentice brothers, there is no need to be so serious.”

They fought for another while; the young Taoist became frightened; all he did now was dodge and block, not daring to come close to him. There’s a saying: One man fighting for his life cannot be stopped by ten thousand men. Yang Guo had suffered for half a year on Mount Zhongnan, and he let it all out. The young Taoist’s skills were higher than Yang Guo’s, but how could he cope? He saw that he couldn’t block anymore, he could only hurry around the arena avoiding him.

Yang Guo chased after him, and shouted, “Rotten Taoist, you’ve had fun hitting me, now you want to run?”

The ten people who were watching from the side at that time, eight or nine of them were Taoists, when they heard him say rotten Taoist, scoundrel Taoist and other insults, they were

angry but also thought it was funny. They all said, "That kid needs a good lesson."

The young Taoist was chased and harried, he was scared and shouted, "Master, master!" and hoped the Zhao Zhijing would come out and stop Yang Guo. Zhao Zhijing shouted, but Yang Guo did not take any notice.

When Yang Guo didn't stop, a shout came out from the crowd, and out came a large Taoist, he stepped in and grabbed Yang Guo's neck, picked him up, and struck three times across the face, the slaps were fierce, half of Yang Guo's face immediately swelled up. Yang Guo was dazed by the three slaps, when he looked up, it was the Taoist whom he had a run in with, Lu Qingdu. When Yang Guo first came to Mount Zhongnan, he was almost burned to death by Yang Guo, after that, his apprentice brothers ridiculed him saying he got outsmarted by a little kid. He had always kept this in his mind, now he saw Yang Guo was being rebellious; he couldn't resist and reacted.

When Yang Guo saw that it was Lu Qingdu, he knew that he was out of luck, and since he was being held up, he couldn't fight. Lu Qingdu smiled wryly, and struck him across the face three more times, and shouted, "You don't listen to master's orders, you are our sect's traitor, and anyone can hit you." He raised his hand again, wanting to hit out once more.

Zhao Zhijing's apprentice brother Cui Zhifang had seen Yang Guo fight and he had not used any of their sect's kung fu. He knew what kind of character Zhao Zhijing was, so he was afraid that there was another reason for all of this; he feared someone was going to get hurt so he called out, "Qingdu, stop!"

Lu Qingdu heard his Martial Uncle's shout, although he didn't want to, he had to put Yang Guo down and said, "Martial Uncle don't you know, that child is extremely mischievous

and crafty, if we don't punish him heavily, how can there be order within our sect?"

Cui Zhifang ignored him, and went over to Yang Guo, he saw that both sides of Yang Guo's face were heavily swollen, there were blue and purple marks, his nose and mouth were bloody; he looked a very sorry sight. He softly said, "Yang Guo, your master taught you martial arts, why didn't you work hard and practice, and instead causing fights among your apprentice brothers?"

Yang Guo angrily said, "What master? He hasn't taught me anything."

Cui Zhifang said, "I heard with my own ears you reciting the formulae, not one word was wrong."

Yang Guo remembered how on Peach Blossom Island Huang Rong had made him read books and recite manuscripts, and knew that Zhao Zhijing had taught him something that was not related to practicing martial arts. He said, "I don't know how to incorporate them, what use is being able to recite a few words?"

Cui Zhifang pretended to be angry, and wanted to test that he really did not know any of their sect's kung fu; he then put on a face, and said, "You are talking to a senior, how can you have no manners?" He stretched out his arm and pushed his shoulder. Cui Zhifang is one of most skilled students of the third generation, although he can't be compared with Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping, he was skilled, his internal energy high. His push was gentle yet it's strength was judged just right, but he felt Yang Guo's shoulder lean to the side, his internal energy emerged, and had already dispersed with just under half the force in his push. Although he stumbled back a few steps, he did not fall down.

Cui Zhifang was startled, he became suspicious and thought, "He is young, and has only entered our sect for just over half a year, how can he have such strong internal energy? He has good internal energy, just now when he was dueling; he was fighting madly, could there be something wrong here?" He didn't know that Yang Guo had practiced Ouyang Feng's formulae for internal energy cultivation; unwittingly his internal energy has gone up another level. The White Camel Mountain's sect's internal energy is easy to learn, progress can be made very quickly, but it cannot compare with the Quanzhen sect's kung fu foundations. Within the first ten years of practicing, the students of White Camel Mountain's internal energy will have increased very quickly until ten years pass, then the students of Quanzhen sect will have slowly caught up and start to overtake it. The two sect's internal energies are very different, but because Cui Zhifang had just given a push without any real intent, it was hard for him to tell the difference.

Yang Guo had been pushed by him, and was winded, and knew that he wanted to fight him. Right now, he feared neither heaven nor earth, even if Qiu Chuji was here in person, he would still fight him, why would he care about Cui Zhifang? He then lowered his head and rushed forward, aiming for his lower abdomen. How could Cui Zhifang mess around with a child, he smiled and stepped aside, he wanted to see his real kung fu, so he said, "Qingdu, come and duel with apprentice brother Yang, watch yourself and don't be too severe!"

Lu Qingdu could not believe those words, he immediately jumped in front of Yang Guo, his left palm came down, Yang Guo escaped to the right, Lu Qingdu hit out his right palm, this palm was the "Tiger's Way Hand", the strength behind it was not weak, a thudding sound, as Yang Guo was struck in the chest. If Yang Guo had not been practicing the White Camel Mountain's internal energy, he would have definitely

thrown up a pool of blood. He felt a severe pain in his chest; his face was as white as a sheet of paper. Lu Qingdu saw that he had not felled Yang Guo with this palm, and secretly felt that he was careless, his right fist now came down at Yang Guo. Yang Guo stretched out his arms to attack; he didn't understand the finer points of fist skills; so he didn't know the best way to repel this incoming attack. Lu Qingdu moved his right fist and came out with his left fist, another thudding sound as he hit Yang Guo in the stomach. Yang Guo bent down with pain. Lu Qingdu didn't hold back, a right palm came crashing down on Yang Guo's neck. He wanted to hurt him, wanting him to fall over now, wanting to avenge what he did to him. His life was on the line now but he still did not fall down, but now Yang Guo was dazed and didn't have the strength to retaliate.

Cui Zhijing knew then that he didn't know any martial arts skills and said, "Qingdu, hold!"

Lu Qingdu said to Yang Guo, "Do you respect me now?"

Yang Guo shouted, "You damn Taoist, I'm going to kill you one day!"

Lu Qingdu was furious, and punched him twice in the nose.

Yang Guo was beaten badly, he was wobbling and was about to fall down. He didn't know where he was when suddenly a flow of warm chi surged through his "dan tian", and he saw that Lu Qingdu was about to throw a third punch at him. There was no way to dodge, no where to escape, he spontaneously bent both legs and gave out a loud shout, his palm pushed out, hitting Lu Qingdu in the stomach. He saw a large body fly through the air, a thudding sound as dust flew everywhere in the arena, falling about ten feet away. The body was lying on the ground, and didn't move.

The crowd of Taoists at the side watched Lu Qingdu taking advantage of his size and bullying someone smaller than him, and hitting Yang Guo venomously. It wasn't right, the older generation apart from Zhao Zhijing came over to stop him, but they didn't know there had been a sudden reversal of fortune. Lu Qingdu had been sent flying by Yang Guo's palm, his body lying there like a corpse not moving, everyone was astounded and rushed over to take a closer look.

Normally Yang Guo would not have been able to use the "Toad Stance", but in a life threatening situation, it could be used automatically. The first time this happened was on Peach Blossom Island where he knocked out Wu Xiuwen. After many months, his internal energy had increased; that, plus the fact that he hated Lu Qingdu, and it was comparable to the hate he felt for the Wu brothers, with this in mind, he was able to knock him flying across the arena. He heard the other Taoists say, "Oh no, it's terrible, he's dead! He's not breathing; his internal organs have been hurt! Quickly go and tell the leader and bring him here."

Yang Guo knew he had caused a major incident, no one was thinking in the midst of this chaos, he picked himself up and ran away. The Taoists were too busy with Lu Qingdu's life and didn't notice that Yang Guo had slipped away. Zhao Zhijing saw that Lu Qingdu's eyes were rolled back, and didn't know whether he was dead or alive. He was startled and angry, and shouted out, "Yang Guo, Yang Guo, where did you learn this witchcraft?" His skills were high, but he had remained at Chongyang Palace for most of the time, he didn't know much, of course he would not recognize the techniques of the "Toad Stance".

The Taoists turned around, but didn't see Yang Guo. Zhao Zhijing then gave out an order, and told them to go and

capture Yang Guo; they thought how far could a small child like him get to in a short space of time?

Yang Guo didn't know the roads, and just ran, he eventually chose to dive into a forest. After a while, he heard shouts behind him, everyone was calling out from all directions, "Yang Guo, Yang Guo, come out quickly!" He was nervous, and ran away again; he felt someone was in front of him, a Taoist had seen him, and came after him. Yang Guo quickly turned around; in the west was another Taoist, who called out, "Here! Over here." Yang Guo crouched down and crawled underneath a bush. The Taoists were too big to crawl through; they had to go around it to find him. Yang Guo managed to escape but didn't know where to go. After Yang Guo went through the bush, he headed straight and after running for a while, he heard the voices become quieter but he still didn't dare stop. He avoided the paths, and ran through the long grass and rocks; he became bruised and cut up all over. When he couldn't move any more he sat down on a rock to catch his breath. He sat for a little while, but then he thought; "Escape quickly, escape quickly." But his legs felt like they weighed a ton, he almost couldn't stand up straight. He heard someone laugh coldly from behind, Yang Guo was startled and turned around, his heart jumped out of his mouth, as he saw a man with deep brows and flared eyes, a beard hanging to his chest, it was Zhao Zhijing.

The two stared at each other for several minutes; during this time they did not move an inch. Yang Guo suddenly shouted and turned around to run away. Zhao Zhijing went forward and stretched out his arm and grabbed his chest. Yang Guo jumped forward and it was lucky he gained a few inches and managed to escape his clutches. He then picked up a rock, and flung it backwards with all his strength. Zhao Zhijing swerved to the side, he increased his speed and the distance between the two closed. Yang Guo ran madly for about twenty steps, and saw a deep ditch in front of him but he had

run out places to run to; he didn't know whether below was a deep valley or a mountain gorge but he didn't give it a thought and threw his body forward.

Zhao Zhijing ran to the steep ditch and looked on, he saw Yang Guo rolling through the grass down the slope, and eventually into a cluster of trees. From where he was standing to the bottom was about sixty or seventy feet, he didn't dare jump down; he quickly ran down the grassy slope. He saw the trail of flattened grass left heading into the forest, but he didn't see a trace of Yang Guo. As he went deeper it became tighter, eventually so dense that light was shut out. He went forward for about one hundred feet, and then suddenly stopped; he was now on the land of the Tomb of the Living Dead where the sect's ancestor had spent his younger years. Their sect had a strict rule: no one is allowed to take one step into the place. "Had Yang Guo escaped into here?" He wasn't pleased, he shouted, "Yang Guo, Yang Guo come out quickly!"

He shouted a few times, the forest became silent, he became bold and took a few steps forward and saw a large stone slab. He took a closer look. Some words were engraved on it, "Outsiders stop now". Zhao Zhijing paced back and forth for an hour, he then loudly called out, "Yang Guo you little scoundrel, if you don't come out I'll catch you and beat you to death." After he said this, he suddenly heard a sound coming from the forest, he saw a grey mist moving, and a swarm of white bees came out from the leaves and flew towards him.

Zhao Zhijing was startled, he waved his sleeve trying to push away the bees, his internal strength was deep, there was considerable power in his sweeps, but after waving many times, the swarm of bees became two, one coming from the front, the other coming from behind. Zhao Zhijing became even more frightened; he didn't dare to be slow and waved

his arms frantically, protecting his body. The swarms dispersed, but then came back to attack from all directions from top to bottom, east to west, north and south. Zhao Zhijing didn't dare to defend anymore, he protected his face and turned around and ran out of the forest.

The swarm of Jade Bees followed, although they weren't very quick there wasn't anywhere to hide. Zhao Zhijing headed east, the Jade Bees followed and headed east, he headed west, the Jade Bees followed and headed west. His arm movements became slower; two bees flew through the gap and stung his right cheek. In a short while, Zhao Zhijing felt numb and it was hard to move, his internal organs began to itch, he thought, "My time is up today!"

Eventually he couldn't keep his legs still, and rolled in the grass by the forest, crying out loudly. The swarm of bees flew around his body for a while, and then returned to the forest.

End of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 - Tomb of the Living Dead

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo climbed onto the bed; his body shivered and his teeth chattered noisily. He saw Xiao Long Nu take out a rope, and tied one end to a hook on the eastern side of the room, and tied the other end to a hook on the western side of the room, the rope was off the floor at a height similar to that of a person. She lightly jumped up and lay across the rope, using it as a bed.

Yang Guo had fallen down the hill, and rolled into the forest's long grass, he passed out, he didn't know how much time had passed when he suddenly felt his body being pierced, he opened his eyes and saw countless white bees flying around his body, he heard the buzzing sounds, then he felt his whole body itch to the bone, a white blur was all he saw, he didn't know whether it was real or an illusion, and he fainted again.

Some time passed when he suddenly felt a cold and fragrant liquid in his mouth, slowly flowing into his throat and then into his stomach but felt that he couldn't speak; he opened his eyes and suddenly saw just two inches in front of him an ugly face full of warts and pimples, the eyes were fixed on him. Yang Guo was startled, and fainted again. The ugly person stretched out the left hand and held his jaw, the right hand held a container, and then poured some more of the sweet liquid down his throat.

Yang Guo felt that the strange itching pain he had slowly diminish, and noticed that he was now sleeping on a bed, and knew that the ugly person had rescued him, he smiled, trying to say thank you. The ugly person also smiled, she finished feeding him the liquid and then put the container down on a table. Yang Guo saw that her smile was also extremely ugly, but within the ugliness was a soft and gentle look, he was touched and there was a warm feeling in his heart, he pleaded, "Grandma, don't let my master catch me!"

The ugly old maid softly said, "Child, who is your master?" Yang Guo had not heard such a soft and caring voice for such a long while, he became hot and started to cry. The old maid's left hand held his hand, she didn't say anything to console him, she just smiled and looked at him, her eyes were full of love and care; she waited for him to finish crying and then said, "Do you feel better?"

Yang Guo heard her tender voice; he couldn't help it and cried again. She wiped away his tears and comforted him, "Good child, good child, don't cry, don't cry, the pain will go away in a little while." The more caring she was, the harder Yang Guo cried.

Suddenly a soft voice from outside a hanging curtain said, "Grandma Sun, the child doesn't stop crying, what is wrong?"

Yang Guo raised his head; he saw a white jade hand lift the hanging curtain, a girl entered. The girl wore an old fashioned delicate white dress, it was as if her body was covered with smoke and mist, she looked like she was about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Apart from her black hair, her body was as white as snow, her face was extremely beautiful, with just a hint of redness on her cheeks, and her face was pale and white. Yang Guo blushed, he immediately stopped crying; he lowered his head and felt slightly embarrassed. From the corner of his eyes he took a quick peek, and saw that she was looking at him; he quickly lowered his head.

Grandma Sun laughed and said, "I don't have any ideas, you better take a look." The young girl came by to the bedside, she looked at the wounds that were caused by the bee stings; she stretched out her hand and touched his forehead and felt that he wasn't feverish. When her hand touched Yang Guo's forehead, he felt that it was extremely cold; he couldn't help but shiver a little. The young girl said, "It is

nothing. You've already drunk the Jade Bee honey; you'll recover in half a day. Why did you enter the forest?"

Yang Guo raised his head, and looked into her eyes, he thought that she was beautiful, without comparison, but she exuded an icy and emotionless aura. She was as hard and as cold as ice and it was difficult to tell whether she was pleased or angry, a friend or foe. He thought, "Is that girl made out of crystal or made out of snow? Is she a person, a ghost, or an angel?" Although he heard her voice was soft there was no warmth in it, he didn't dare to reply.

Grandma Sun laughed and said, "Sister Long is the owner of this place, if she asks you something, you'd better reply!"

The beautiful girl in white was the owner of the Tomb of the Living Dead, Xiao Longnu. In reality her eighteenth birthday had passed, but because she had lived in the tomb since she was little and hadn't seen the light of day, the internal energy skill she has practiced restricted her emotions. That is why she looked younger than she really was. Grandma Sun was her teacher's maid, but since her teacher left the world, the two looked after each other. She heard the bees, and knew someone had entered the forest near the tomb, so Grandma Sun had come out to see who it was. She saw Yang Guo poisoned and unconscious on the ground; she rescued him and brought him back here. According to their sect's rules, no outsiders can enter the tomb even one step; a man entering the tomb was even worse. But Yang Guo was young, and she saw that his whole body was covered with wounds, so Grandma Sun could not ignore him and broke the rules to save him. Yang Guo got up from the stone bed and got onto the floor. He kowtowed to Grandma Sun and Xiao Longnu and said; "Disciple Yang Guo greets Grandma Sun, and greets Gu Gu (Auntie) Long."

Grandma Sun laughed then quickly went over to pick him up and said, "Ah, your name is Yang Guo, there is no need for such formalities." She has lived in the tomb for a few years, and had never interacted with outsiders, she saw that Yang Guo was handsome and polite; she was pleased. Xiao Longnu only nodded her head, and sat on a stone chair next to the bed.

Grandma Sun said, "How did you get here? How come you are wounded? Who beat you like this?" After she asked her questions she didn't wait for him to reply and went out to get some dim sum and cakes, and insisted on him having some.

Yang Guo ate a few delicacies, and told her his life story from start to finish. He was good with words, his story was already engaging, he added his emotions to it and it became even more touching. Grandma Sun kept on sighing, sometimes she would add her own comments, and her words all favored Yang Guo. She said that Huang Rong was a biased woman and unjust in her actions, and commented that Zhao Zhijing was narrow minded, bullying a child. Xiao Longnu didn't make a sound and sat still on the chair, but when Yang Guo mentioned Li Mochou, she and Grandma Sun looked at each other. When Grandma Sun heard Yang Guo finish, she stretched out her arms and hugged him, and said, "My poor child."

Xiao Longnu slowly got up, and said, "His wounds are not serious, Grandma, send him out!" Both Grandma Sun and Yang Guo were startled. Yang Guo loudly said, "I won't return, I'd rather die."

Grandma Sun said, "Miss, if he returns to Chongyang Palace, his master will punish him."

Xiao Longnu said, "You return with him, find his master and tell him there is no need to punish the child."

Grandma Sun said, "Ah, it's another sect's business, we can't do anything about it."

Xiao Longnu said, "Take a bottle of Jade Bee honey with you, and then tell them, the old Taoist will listen."

Her words seemed to be suggestions, but there was strictness within her tone, it was hard for a sect member to disobey. Grandma Sun sighed, she knew she always spoke her mind, and there was no use to try to argue. When she looked at Yang Guo; her eyes had a different intent.

Yang Guo got up and made a bow, and said, "Thank you Grandma and Gu Gu for tending to my wounds, I'll leave now!"

Grandma Sun said, "Where are you going to go?"

Yang Guo stood still for a while and then said, "The world is a big place, and there are many places for me to go." But he didn't really know where he would go, his face revealed a mournful expression.

Grandma Sun said, "Child, it's because Miss doesn't dare to let you stay, it's a rule of our sect not to allow outsiders, don't be sad."

Yang Guo raised his head and said, "Grandma why do you say this? We'll meet again some day."

He spoke like an adult, but his voice was young, when Grandma Sun heard him she thought it was funny, but also felt sorry for him. She saw that his eyes were watery, and he was holding back the tears. She said to Xiao Longnu, "Miss, it's the middle of the night, why don't we let him stay until morning and let him leave then?"

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "Grandma, have you forgotten the rules set by Master?"

Grandma Sun sighed and got up, she quietly said to Yang Guo, "Come, child, I'll give you an object to play with."

Yang Guo stretched out his hand and wiped his eyes, he lowered his head and rushed out of the door and said, "I don't want it, I'd rather die than return to the Taoists."

Grandma Sun shook her head and said, "You don't know the way, I'll lead you out." She held his hand. Outside the room, all Yang Guo saw was darkness, he was led by Grandma Sun, he felt them going around one corner and then another, he didn't know how Grandma Sun recognized her way in these dark and twisty paths.

Although the Tomb of the Living Dead was called a tomb, in actual fact it was a large spacious underground storeroom. Before Wang Chongyang had started to fight the Jin, he had used thousands of man-hours and many years to construct the tomb. He secretly stored some supplies there, and it became an important base in the area. From the outside it looked like a tomb, but this was to disguise the building from the ears and eyes of the Jin, and even if they did enter, the tomb had countless traps to repel the invaders.

If Wang Chongyang's soldiers failed in battle, they would retreat into the tomb. There were many rooms within the tomb, there were complicated tunnels, if outsiders entered, in the dark or even with bright torches and candles they would get lost easily.

The two exited the tomb, and in the middle of the forest they suddenly heard someone from the outside clearly shouting out, "It's Quanzhen's disciple Yin Zhiping, master has ordered me to greet Miss Long." The voice was spaced out; it came from a distance.

Grandma Sun said, "There are people outside looking for you, don't go out."

Yang Guo was angry and alarmed, his body shivered and said, "Grandma, don't worry about me. A person should be responsible for their actions, I accidentally killed someone, let them kill me." When he finished he ran out.

Grandma Sun said, "I'll follow you."

Grandma Sun held Yang Guo's hand and exited the forest, arriving in the open land in front of the forest. Under moonlight they saw six or seven Taoists standing together, another four of them were holding torches, and they carried the heavily wounded Zhao Zhijing and Lu Qingdu. The Taoists saw Yang Guo, they said a few quiet words amongst themselves and all took a few steps forward.

Yang Guo escaped from Grandma Sun's grasp and ran forward and said, "I'm here, if you want to kill or torture me, it's up to you."

The Taoists could not believe that such a small child was so bold; it was completely unexpected. A Taoist came forward and grabbed Yang Guo's neck and dragged him. Yang Guo chuckled and said, "I'm not going to escape, what's the hurry?" That Taoist was Zhao Zhijing's eldest student; he knew that his teacher suffered the pain of the Jade Bee's sting because of Yang Guo. He was in extreme pain and didn't know whether his life could be saved. He had always respected his teacher, and felt that the worst offence anyone can do is to rebel against their teacher. When he saw Yang Guo coming, he threw a punch at Yang Guo's head.

Grandma Sun and the Taoists had always been on relatively good terms, but when she saw Yang Guo being dragged; she wasn't pleased at all. Now he is being beaten, how could she control her temper? She immediately took a large step forward; she swept her sleeve and brushed away the Taoist's hand. The Taoist felt a severe pain in his wrist, and automatically loosened his hand. He was about to shout

when Grandma Sun picked up Yang Guo, turned around, and walked away.

When they first saw her, they thought that she was just an old and feeble maid, but she was rapid in her movements in taking Yang Guo. The Taoists stood still for a while; she had already taken Yang Guo about ten feet away. Three Taoists angrily shouted, "Let him go!" and rushed forward.

Grandma Sun stopped and turned around; she chuckled and said, "You men want to stop us?"

Yin Zhiping knew that the people of the Tomb of the Living Dead and his sect had a deep affiliation, and didn't dare to offend them, he quickly stopped everyone and said, "Everyone spread out, and show manners in front of Senior."

He then walked up, and greeted Grandma Sun and said, "Disciple Yin Zhiping greets Senior."

Grandma Sun said, "What do you want?"

Yin Zhiping said, "That child is a disciple of the Quanzhen, can Senior please return him."

Grandma Sun's brows rose, she yelled, "You beat him when you were still in front of me. When you take him back to your palace, you are going to find ways to torture him. You want me to release him; not in a million years!"

Yin Zhiping kept his temper and said, "That child is extremely disobedient and mischievous, he showed no respect for his seniors, and broke the rules of our sect. In the Wulin world, one of the most important rules is to respect your master and seniors, it is right to blame him for his troubles."

Grandma Sun shouted, "Not respecting seniors; its just words." She pointed to the Taoist lying on the stretcher, Lu

Qingdu, and said, "The child dueled with that fat Taoist, it was your Quanzhen sect's rules. To start with, he didn't want to compete, but you lot forced him into the arena. If you are going to fight, of course there is going to be a winner and a loser, if that fat Taoist is useless, who else can you blame?" She was already ugly, but now she was angry and swelled up, she was even more frightening. In the middle of her words, another ten Taoists came and stood behind Yin Zhiping, discussing the situation; they didn't know who the loud ugly old woman was.

Yin Zhiping thought to himself, hurting Lu Qingdu wasn't Yang Guo's fault, but he couldn't admit they were wrong in front of outsiders and said, "This matter is complicated, we will inform our leader, and let him be the judge of this. Can senior please return the child?"

Grandma Sun chuckled, "How could your leader be a fair judge? The Quanzhen sect from Wang Chongyang to now, there hasn't been one good person. Otherwise, how could you live so close and yet you don't associate with us?"

Yin Zhiping thought, "It's your sect who don't associate with us, how can you blame our Quanzhen sect? You've insulted our sect leader with your words and that may be a bit too disrespectful." But he didn't want to say anything to harm the relationship between the two sects, and said, "Senior please forgive us, if our sect has offended you, then our sect leader will apologize to you publicly."

Yang Guo held Grandma Sun's neck and whispered into her ear, "That Taoist is sly, grandma don't fall into his trap."

Grandma Sun had brought up Xiao Longnu for the last eighteen years, and she had a desire to bring up a boy. Yang Guo was warm towards her like she was towards him; she was extremely pleased. She made up her mind and thought,

“Whatever they say, they are not going to take the child away.”

She then called out. “You insist on taking the child, how exactly are you going to torture him?”

Yin Zhiping was startled, and said, “This disciple here and his father are from the same sect, I wouldn’t dare to harm a friend’s son, senior you can relax.”

Grandma Sun shook her head, “This old woman never listens to outsider’s words, leave me.” As she said this she continued on her way into the forest.

Zhao Zhijing was lying on the stretcher, the wounds from the Jade Bees were unbearable but he knew what was going on. He heard that Yin Zhiping couldn’t argue with Grandma Sun and the more he heard the angrier he got, he suddenly leapt off the stretcher, chased after Grandma Sun and shouted, “He is my disciple, if I want to beat him and insult him, it’s my choice. Not letting the master order his disciple, where is there such a rule in Wulin?”

Grandma Sun saw his face had swollen so much that he looked like a pig. When she heard these words, she knew that he was Yang Guo’s master, she didn’t have anything to say at the moment and could only make her way forward thinking, “I won’t let you order him, what can you do?”

Zhao Zhijing shouted, “What relation is that child to you? How can you stick your nose into this matter?”

Grandma Sun was startled, and shouted, “He isn’t a member of the Quanzhen sect anymore. He is now a member of our sect and has elected my master Xiao Longnu as his master; under heaven only Xiao Longnu can command him. There’s no need for you to meddle.”

When she said this, the Taoists were shocked. According to the rules of Jianghu, without the consent of your teacher, one must not have another teacher, even if that other teacher is ten times more skilled than their teacher. You are not allowed to do as you please and spread your wings whenever you want; to do so, they will have committed one of the worst offences there is. They will be despised by their peers in the Jianghu world.

When Guo Jing took the Jiangnan Seven Freaks as his masters, and later learned from Hong Qigong, he didn't call him master. Only later did Ke Zhen'E and the others allow this and he and Hong Qigong had a master disciple relationship.

Because Zhao Zhijing had made Grandma Sun speechless, and because she had never associated with people of Wulin she didn't know any rules. When she said what she said she didn't know she had broken a major rule.

Most of the Taoists originally felt sorry for Yang Guo, and felt that Zhao Zhijing had not done the right things. But when they heard that Yang Guo had openly expelled himself from the sect...well, there hadn't been such a thing since the founding of the Quanzhen sect and they were incensed.

Zhao Zhijing's wounds reacted to his anger and he was in pain; it was difficult for him to bear and he felt like dying, but he suddenly said, "Yang Guo, is this the truth?"

Yang Guo did not know how high the sky was or how deep the earth was, he only knew that Grandma Sun was arguing with Zhao Zhijing to protect him. Even if she said he did thousands or millions of wrong things, he would have said he did them. Now it's just a matter of changing sects and it was what he had wanted. She said he had made Xiao Longnu his master. Even if he was going to take a pig or a dog his master he wouldn't delay, he said, "Rotten Taoist, scoundrel face,

dog brain, bull nose old goat, you hit me; why should I acknowledge you as my master? It's correct, I have already kowtowed and accepted Grandma Sun and Miss Long as my masters." Zhao Zhijing's temper flared up, he flew over, his hands aiming to grab his shoulders.

Grandma Sun insulted, "Scoundrel, you want to die?" Her right arm came out, aiming for Zhao Zhijing's wrist. Zhao Zhijing was Quanzhen's third generation's highest skilled fighter, when it came to martial arts he was above Yin Zhiping; although he had a serious injury, he was still able to produce a fierce attack. The two clashed, and both took two steps back.

Grandma Sun gave a 'humph' sigh, and said, "Scoundrel, you're not weak either."

Zhao Zhijing's first attack failed, and so launched a second. Grandma Sun didn't dare to clash with him and stepped aside, her leg came out of nowhere from under her skirt. Zhao Zhijing heard the wind sound, and tried to dodge but his wounds from the Jade Bee stings started to itch, he called 'ai', held his head and crouched down. Before he finished his shout he was kicked by Grandma Sun in the side of his body. Zhao Zhijing flew into the air; whilst in the air he called out 'ai' again because of the itching pain.

Yin Zhiping rushed forward two steps, stretched out his arms, caught Zhao Zhijing and passed him on to the other disciples. He saw that the ugly old woman's skills were extremely strange, he was up against a strong opponent, he made a signal, and six disciples came up and circled them, and formed a "Big Dipper Formation", with Grandma Sun and Yang Guo in the middle.

Yin Zhiping called out, "Apologies!" As the 'Tian Shu' and 'Yao Guang' Taoists on either side of him attacked. Grandma Sun didn't know the formation, after just a few stances she

knew she was dealing with something powerful. She could only fight with one hand; the danger became evident after twelve or thirteen moves. Every attack she made was neutralized by Yin Zhiping's command of the formation, and the attack of the formation was relentless. Ten moves passed then Grandma Sun's right palm was trapped by two Taoists; from her left another two Taoists attacked, she had to drop Yang Guo and fend them off with her left hand. A whistle came from within the formation; two Taoists burst forward and grabbed Yang Guo.

Grandma Sun was alarmed and thought, "Those rotten Taoists do have some skill, and this old woman here can't handle it." She kicked away two of them, and a low 'weng' moaning noise was produced from her mouth. That moaning noise was initially quiet, and the Taoists did not take any notice of it, but after this noise, she made an opposite sound, high and low, the sound became louder.

Yin Zhiping raised his hands against Grandma Sun to guard himself. He knew the senior that used to live in the tomb had great skills and had competed with his sect's founder to see whose were greater; he knew that her descendants must not be ordinary. When he heard the noise, he knew that this was a type of resonating sound skill, he quickly prepared himself in case the enemy tried anything; he listened for a while and her sounds were getting louder, he didn't feel anything was wrong with himself and thought that this was strange. He suddenly thought of something and immediately became pale with fright. He was about to order the Taoists to leave, when he heard a 'weng' noise from far away, similar to the noise coming out of Grandma Sun's mouth, and then immediately called out, "Run quickly!"

The other Taoists all stopped, and thought, "We have the upper hand here, we have captured the young and old in a

short time, the old woman is just calling out madly, what is there to be afraid of?"

Suddenly a grey blur emerged from the forest, out came a swarm of Jade Bees, all aiming to land on the Taoists' upper body. The Taoists had all seen the suffering of Zhao Zhijing, they all were frightened out of their wits, and immediately scattered and ran away. The swarm of bees chased after them.

When Grandma Sun saw that the Taoists could not escape, she laughed loudly. She suddenly saw an old Taoist dashing out of the forest, his hands holding two torches; thick smoke came out of the flames and he waved them at the swarm of bees. The black smoke smothered the bees, their formation became disorganized, and they couldn't hold together and flew away.

Grandma Sun was alarmed, she looked at the old Taoist, and she saw that he had white hair and eyebrows, his face was long and he looked like one of the highly skilled fighters of the Quanzhen sect. She shouted, "Hey, who are you old Taoist? You scattered away my bees."

The old Taoist laughed and said, "This old Taoist is Hao Datong, greetings Grandma."

Grandma Sun did not associate with any people of the Wulin world. But because she lived a stone throw away from Chongyang Palace, she knew that Hao Datong was one of the seven disciples of Wang Chongyang. She thought how Yin Zhiping, Zhao Zhijing and the other Taoists' abilities were not below hers, but now that old Taoist came and it would be troublesome. She smelled the thick smoke from the torches, it stank and almost made her vomit, and she then realized it was made from herbs that are used to kill insects. She saw that there were no bees around so she had to leave while she could, she shouted, "You've harmed my Mistress's bees, you'll

pay for the damage, I'll resolve this with you later." She picked up Yang Guo and entered the forest.

Yin Zhiping said, "Martial Uncle, shall we follow or not?"

Hao Datong shook his head and said, "Our founder had set a strict rule, no one can enter the forest, we'll return to our palace and discuss what's to be done there."

Grandma Sun held Yang Guo's hand and took him back inside the tomb. The two had just shared a difficult situation and had become closer. Yang Guo was worried that Xiao Longnu will not allow him to stay. Grandma Sun said, "Don't worry; I'll be able to convince her to let you stay." She then ordered him to rest in a chamber, and then went to look for Xiao Longnu to inform her of the situation.

Yang Guo waited a long time, but still did not see her return, he became anxious and thought, "Long Gu Gu most probably decided not to accept me, even if Grandma Sun forced her to accept, there would be no point in me staying here." He thought for a long while and eventually made up his mind, he quietly went outside.

As soon as he left the room, Grandma Sun came over and asked, "Where are you going?"

Yang Guo said, "Grandma, I'm going now, when I get a bit older, I'll come and see you again."

Grandma Sun said, "No, I'll take you to a place, and tell people not to bully you."

When Yang Guo heard those words, he knew Xiao Longnu had not allowed him to stay, he was disappointed and sad, he lowered his head and said, "There's no use. I'm a mischievous child, where ever I go, no one will want me. There's no need for Grandma to waste your energy."

Grandma Sun had argued with Xiao Longnu for half a day, she saw that she will not be moved, she was troubled and didn't know what to do. She felt sorry for Yang Guo, her blood rose and said, "Child, if no one wants you, Granny wants you. You follow me, where ever you go, Grandma will follow you."

Yang Guo was delighted, he extended his hand and grabbed her's, the two of them exited the tomb. Grandma Sun was still angry and did not turn back to collect some luggage, she scoured around in her pockets and touched a container, and remembered she had to give Zhao Zhijing the antidote for the bee stings. She thought that the Taoist was detestable but death was maybe a bit too extreme and she didn't want to leave the trouble behind in case it caught up with them. So she took Yang Guo, and headed for Chongyang Palace.

Yang Guo saw that they were hurriedly heading for Chongyang Palace, he was frightened, he quietly said, "Grandma, why are you going there?"

Grandma Sun said, "I have to give your rotten master the antidote." After a few paths, they had arrived. She leapt onto the roof, and was about to go for the courtyard, when suddenly the bell started to ring in the darkness, and she heard whistle sounds near and far. In a second noises came from everywhere, and knew that she was heavily surrounded; she became alarmed.

The Quanzhen sect is Wulin's number one orthodox sect, they were normally well guarded, but things had happened recently and so they were more alert. There were lookouts everywhere and when they saw someone enter the palace, they sounded the alarm. The palace's disciples all came to repel the foe. Another group of Taoists scattered around, one, so they surrounded the enemy, and secondly, so they can repel any reinforcements that the enemy might have brought along.

Grandma Sun quietly cursed, "This old woman here has not come to fight; who are you trying to scare?" She loudly called out, "Zhao Zhijing, quickly come out, I have something to say to you."

Someone called out from the main hall, "Coming here in the middle of the night, what do you want?"

Grandma Sun said, "This is the antidote for the bee stings, take it!" She threw over the container.

A Taoist caught it, and believed her but then thought, "Does she have good intentions in coming back to give us the antidote." He called out clearly, "What medicine is this?"

Grandma Sun said, "Don't ask so many questions, just give it to him to drink, and you'll see the results."

The Taoist called out, "How do I know whether you've come with good or bad intentions, and how do I know if this is actually medicine not poison. Apprentice brother Zhao has been tortured enough by you, when did you gain the heart of Buddha?"

Grandma Sun heard his words, her good intentions had turned into some evil intent, she was furious and put Yang Guo down on the roof, then quickly jumped in front of the Taoist and snatched the bottle back. She opened the bottle, and said to Yang Guo, "Open your mouth!"

Yang Guo didn't understand but did as he was told. She tipped the bottle and poured the bee honey into his mouth and said, "Fine, just in case you think its poison. Guo'Er lets go!" She held Yang Guo's hand and ran to the edge of the roof and jumped down.

That Taoist was called Zhang Zhiguang, and was Hao Datong's second disciple, he was cursing himself. He regretted his words when he realized that she had bought

along the real antidote, Zhao Zhijing now had no antidote and it would be difficult for him to survive, he quickly followed and blocked them with his hands. He smiled and said, "Old Senior, why are you so furious? I was just joking, there's no need to take it seriously. We are neighbors, and have seen each other a few times, ha-ha, please bestow the medicine to us."

Grandma Sun did not like his smooth talk, she stopped, and chuckled, "There is only one bottle of medicine, if you want some more, there isn't any. You can find your own way to cure Zhao Zhijing's wounds!" As she said this she sent out her hand and said, "Since you don't greet a senior, I'll teach you a lesson." The palm was extremely quick, Zhang Zhiguang couldn't avoid it, a clashing sound was heard, he was struck on the cheek, and his face was stinging.

By the door the two Taoists' faces changed and both of them said, "Even if you are a senior, how can we let you do what you want in Chongyang Palace?" One sent out his left palm, the other his right, the two of them attacking together from two sides. Grandma Sun had fought the "Big Dipper Formation" before and knew it was powerful; she knew it would be best to avoid it. If she went to attack them, how could she fight them all in their formation? She dodged past the two palms, and picked up Yang Guo and headed for the rooftops. She saw that there was no one on the roof; she wanted to escape via this route when suddenly someone jumped up on the roof and shouted, "Drop down!" sending two palms out. Grandma Sun was in midair, she had nothing to lean against, and could only fight with her right hand, one palm clashed with two, both of them were forced back, each of them on either side of the wall. Six or seven Taoists whistled, and crowded her into the corner.

These Taoists were the best fighters of Quanzhen's third generation, and had come out to protect the main hall. In a

flash, they moved back, and then rushed forward; the Taoists used a storming tactic and attacked many times. Grandma Sun was forced into the corner, and tried to break out with Yang Guo in her hand, but the Taoists formed a human wall and kept her back, she tried to break through many times but was forced back each time.

Ten moves passed. The one in charge of guarding the main hall Zhang Zhiguang knew that the enemy could not do anything and immediately lit a torch. Ten large candles were lit up all around the main hall, and shone on Grandma Sun's pale face, an ugly face of a frightful person who hides in the forest.

Zhang Zhiguang called out, "Retreat."

The seven Taoists who were attacking Grandma Sun took a step back, their hands across their chests, each holding their position. Grandma Sun caught her breath and then chuckled, "The Quanzhen sect is famous throughout the world, indeed they live up to their name. Over ten young and athletic men teamed up together to bully an old woman and a child. Ha-ha, so powerful, so powerful!"

Zhang Zhiguang's face turned a shade of red and said, "We are only trying to catch an intruder in the palace. We don't care if it's an old woman or a young man, if they were tall when they enter, they'll be short when they leave."

Grandma Sun chuckled and said, "What do you mean 'short when they leave'? You want me to crawl out of here, is that it!"

Zhang Zhiguang had just been slapped painfully by Grandma Sun, he wasn't going to let her off lightly, and said, "If you want me to let you go, it's not hard, just agree to three things. One, you called your bees to hurt brother Zhao; you have to leave the antidote. Two, that child is a student of the

Quanzhen sect, how can he expel himself from the school without the permission of our leader? You've got to leave him here. Three, you broke into Chongyang Palace, you have to kowtow in front of ancestor Chongyang to apologize."

Grandma Sun laughed loudly and said, "I have long said to Mistress Long that none of the Taoists here have a good future, aren't the old woman's words true? Come, come I'll go and kowtow."

Grandma Sun lowered herself and began to kneel down. For Zhang Zhiguang this was unexpected, he was stunned, he saw Grandma Sun lowering her head, when suddenly he saw a flash, a projectile was thrown straight at him. Zhang Zhiguang cried out 'ai ya', he had tried to move out of the way quickly but the projectile was extremely quick and hit the corner of his left eye, his forehead was full of blood.

Grandma Sun had scoured her pocket and had grabbed the empty bee honey bottle, and calmly used her sect's projectile throwing technique to send the projectile out. Her sect's kung fu was designed for females, the techniques were all soft and of a ying nature, the changes mysterious, this stance "First Bow Greet After" (qian ju hou gong) was unexpected. Though it was just an empty bottle, but because of the short distance it was shot out from, Zhang Zhiguang did not expect it and could not avoid it.

The Taoists saw that Zhang Zhiguang's head was covered with blood, they all shouted at the same time, and took out a weapon. Quanzhen's Taoists all used swords, the courtyard lit up with the blades light. Grandma Sun got up and chuckled, she knew that it would be hard for her to complete this day. But she was strong and stubborn, she wouldn't surrender, she turned her head and asked Yang Guo, "Child, are you afraid?"

When Yang Guo saw the long swords brandished, he had already thought to himself, "If Uncle Guo was here, even if there were more Taoists I wouldn't be scared. But with Grandma Sun's skills, we will not be able to break out." When he heard Grandma Sun ask him the question, he clearly replied, "Grandma, just let them kill me. This business has nothing to do with you, leave quickly."

Grandma Sun heard the child's proud resilient air, and his concern for her, and loved him even more, she loudly said, "Grandma will die with you to grant the rotten Taoists their wish." She suddenly shouted out "Now!" and dashed forward, she stretched out her arms, and caught hold of two Taoists' wrists; she twisted them and snatched their swords. Her "Empty Hands Entering a Hundred Blades" kung fu was extremely strange; it was reckless yet it was mystifying and not ordinary. The two Taoists could not defend against this, and all of a sudden they had lost their weapons.

Grandma Sun gave one of the swords to Yang Guo and said, "Child, do you dare to fight against the rotten Taoists?"

Yang Guo said, "Of course I'm not afraid. It's a pity that there are no other people here."

Grandma Sun said, "What other people?"

Yang Guo loudly said, "The Quanzhen sect is world renowned, such a heroic deed as bullying an orphan and an old woman, isn't it a pity that there's no one to spread this story?" He had heard how Grandma Sun and Zhang Zhiguang argued, and understood one of the points raised. His words were clear and simple, his voice was bright and loud.

When the Taoists heard his words, half of them felt ashamed, they thought that ganging up on a small child and an old

woman was a shameful thing to do. Someone quietly said, "I'll go and tell our leader, and hear his decision."

Right now Ma Yu was ten miles away at the far side of the mountain meditating in a small room; the sect's affairs were handed to Hao Datong. The Taoist who said this was a disciple of Tan Chuduan, he felt that the situation has got out of hand and now the sect's reputation was on the line. This matter had to be dealt by their sect's leader personally.

Zhang Zhiguang's face was struck by the empty jar and his left eye was covered in blood; he was furious and acted out on impulse. He knew that their sect leader was peaceful and he would order them to release Yang Guo and Grandma Sun. He will have suffered for no reason. He called out loudly; "First we'll catch that evil witch, then we'll let leader decide what to do. Everyone, catch them."

The "Big Dipper Formation" gradually shrank back; they saw that she only had one hand to fight with but who would guess that when the seven of them rushed to within three paces of her, her sword swirled, and defended tightly; they couldn't advance another step. The formation was led by Zhang Zhiguang, and needed a change of direction, but he was afraid that the projectile that struck him had poison on it. If he fought then the poison would spread faster, he closed his left eye and stood to the side controlling the formation. Since he had decided not to fight, the formation's power weakened. The Taoists fought for a long time but couldn't make any progress and began to get impatient. Suddenly Grandma Sun gave a shout and flung her long sword away, she dashed forward three steps and dodged pass the Taoists' swords, and grabbed a young Taoist's chest and picked him up, she shouted, "Scoundrels, will or will you not let us pass?" The Taoists stopped, but suddenly a body flew out from behind them, stretched out their arm and attacked Grandma Sun's wrist. Grandma Sun did not see that person's

face clearly; she felt a numbing sensation in her wrist and the young Taoist she had in her hands was taken by him. She felt a strong wind coming towards her, the person was sending out a palm to attack her. Grandma Sun thought, "That person's palm is extremely fast." She quickly pushed out her own palms to repel the attack. The two palms met and made a clashing sound, and Grandma Sun took a step back. The person also took a slight step back, about an inch or so, then immediately followed with a second palm without a pause. Grandma Sun also sent out her palms to attack, and was forced back another step. The person took half a step forward and sent out a third palm. The three palms sent out were faster than the last, and forced Grandma Sun back three steps, she didn't have a chance to see who her opponent was, by the fourth palm, Grandma Sun's back was forced up against the wall; she had nowhere to retreat. The person sent out a right palm, and locked palms with Grandma Sun, and he calmly said, "Grandma, leave the antidote and the child here!"

Grandma Sun raised her head, and saw that the person had a head full of white hair and white eyebrows, his face was purple, it was the man who had earlier used poison smoke to fend off her bees, Hao Datong. After the first three palms, she knew that his internal energy was profound, and above hers, if he increased his palm's power, she would not be able to hold on, but she was strong and stubborn, she would rather die than give in, she shouted, "If you want me to leave the child, first you have to kill me."

Hao Datong knew their sect and his teacher had a deep history and didn't wish to harm her, he held back on his palm, and said, "We have been neighbors for over ten years, why risk our friendship over a small child."

Grandma Sun chuckled, and said, "I originally came here to give you the antidote, so ask your disciples, what this is all

about.”

Hao Datong turned his head around to ask his disciples when suddenly Grandma Sun sent out a kick, aiming for his legs. That kick came out of nowhere, her body or skirt didn't move, the opponent's leg was coming into his stomach, there wasn't time to move back, under this threat he reacted, and channeled more strength into his palm, a 'hey' sound was heard as Grandma Sun was pushed backwards. His push contained all the internal energy he has cultivated over the years using Quanzhen's advanced internal energy cultivation techniques. He heard a thudding sound as dust from the upper part of the wall fell down. Grandma Sun spat out a pool of blood, and slowly dropped down onto the floor.

Yang Guo was shocked, and hugged her body and said, “If you want to kill someone, kill me. There is no need to harm Grandma.”

Grandma Sun opened her eyes and chuckled and said, “Child, looks like we are going to die in the same place.”

Yang Guo loosened his arms, and guarded her, his back to Hao Datong and the others, he ignored his own safety. Hao Datong's palm was serious, he saw that his opponent was injured and was very regretful about his attack. He wanted to go over and take a closer look at Grandma Sun's injury, and give her medicine to heal the wound, but Yang Guo blocked his way and he couldn't get close. He softly said, “Yang Guo, move out of the way, let me take a closer look at Grandma.”

Yang Guo didn't believe him and held Grandma Sun tightly. Hao Datong tried to persuade him a few times but saw that Yang Guo was ignoring him; he became impatient and stretched out his arm to pull him away. Yang Guo loudly shouted, “Rotten Taoists, scoundrels, you can kill me, I won't let you harm Grandma.”

Just as he was saying he won't surrender Grandma Sun, a cold voice from behind suddenly said, "Bullying a child and an old woman, how heroic is that?"

Hao Datong heard the cold and icy voice, his heart shivered. He turned around to take a look and saw an extremely beautiful young girl standing at the entrance to the main hall. Her clothes were as white as snow, and her eyes froze those who looked at her. Once the palace's bell rang, within ten li, the area would be tightly guarded. Yet the girl managed to enter without alerting anyone. No one knew how she managed to enter without making a sound.

Hao Datong asked, "Miss, who are you? What do you want?"

The young girl glanced at him and didn't reply, and went over to Grandma Sun. Yang Guo raised his head and mournfully said. "Long Gu Gu this evil Taoists killed Grandma!" The girl in white was Xiao Longnu. She had witnessed everything clearly from Grandma Sun leaving the tomb with Yang Guo, going to the palace, and Grandma Sun fighting. If Hao Datong had not used such a lethal move, she would not have shown herself, but now Grandma Sun had suffered a serious injury. Had she wanted to come and help it was now too late. She had seen with her own eyes how Yang Guo had disregarded his life to protect Grandma Sun; his eyes were full of tears. She nodded and said, "Everyone dies, there is nothing special about death."

Grandma Sun had brought her up by herself and treated her like a daughter; but Xiao Longnu had lived in a detached state for these eighteen years, and cultivated the sect's internal energy; she didn't have a touch of grief or anger in her. She saw that Grandma Sun was beyond help and so there was no need to feel sorrow. However, for a split second, she felt grief for a loved one, but no emotion was shown on her face. Hao Datong heard Yang Guo had called her 'Long

Gu Gu', and knew that it was the Xiao Longnu who had chased Prince Huo Dou away, and he was surprised. The news of how Huo Dou had been forced to run away had spread throughout the world of Jianghu. Though Xiao Longnu had never taken a step away from Mount Zhongnan, her name was now known throughout the Wulin world.

Xiao Longnu turned her head around slowly, and looked at the Taoists. Hao Datong's internal energy was deep and he was able to keep a still body and mind. When the other Taoists saw her clearly, and looked into her frosty and captivating eyes, they could not stop their hearts from trembling.

Xiao Longnu stooped down to take a closer look at Grandma Sun and asked, "Grandma Sun, how are you?"

Grandma Sun sighed and said, "Miss, I have never requested anything from you in my entire life, I beg you, will you allow me a request or won't you."

Xiao Longnu wrinkled her elegant brows slightly and said, "What do you want me to do?"

Grandma Sun nodded her head, and pointed to Yang Guo, she wasn't able to speak for the time being.

Xiao Longnu said, "You want me to take care of him?"

Grandma Sun forced a deep breath and said, "I beg you to look after him forever, don't let others harm him, can you promise me that?"

Xiao Longnu hesitantly said, "Look after him forever?"

Grandma Sun sternly said, "Miss, if this old woman doesn't die, I will look after you forever. Who clothed you, fed you and changed you when you were little, wasn't it all done by this old woman? How...how...how have you repaid me?"

Xiao Longnu bit her lip and said, "Alright, I promise."

A smile crept upon Grandma Sun's face. Her eyes looked at Yang Guo; she wanted to say something but couldn't catch her breath. Yang Guo knew what she wanted and lowered his ear to her mouth and quietly said, "Grandma, you want to say something to me?"

Grandma Sun said, "Lower your head a bit more."

Yang Guo lowered himself further, and placed his ear right by her mouth.

Grandma Sun whispered, "Your Auntie Long has no one to depend on, you...you..." when she got up to this point she couldn't say anything more. She suddenly spat out a mouthful of blood, Yang Guo's face and clothes were speckled with blood, her eyes closed and she passed away.

Yang Guo shouted, "Grandma, Grandma!" He was grief stricken; he held her body and sobbed.

The Taoists who saw this felt a touch of sorrow, and Hao Datong was even more regretful, he went up to Grandma Sun and paid his respects and said, "Grandma, I didn't mean to hurt you. This sin that has come upon me is ruled by your fate. Grandma, go peacefully!"

Xiao Longnu stood up, but didn't say anything and waited for him to finish. The two of them stared at each other. Half an hour passed then Xiao Longnu frowned again and said, "What? You are not going to kill yourself to repay your debt; you want me to do it for you?"

Hao Datong was startled and said, "What?"

Xiao Longnu said, "You killed someone so you need to pay the life back, kill yourself and finish this and I'll spare the lives of all the Taoists here."

Before Hao Datong could reply, the Taoists that were around him spoke out. There were about thirty or forty Taoists here in the main hall, all saying; “Little girl, leave quickly now and we won’t make it hard for you.”

“What crap! Kill yourself and finish this, and you’ll spare our lives” “This young girl does not know how high the sky is or how deep the earth is.” When Hao Datong heard the Taoists clamor he quickly waved his hand to tell them to be quiet.

Xiao Longnu ignored all the Taoists’ comments, and slowly took out a silk object from her pocket, the object was a glove and she slipped it on her right hand. She separated her hands, with her right she placed a silk belt into her left hand and she quietly said, “Old Taoist, you are a coward, you are afraid of killing yourself, take out a weapon and get ready to fight!”

Hao Datong smiled and said, “This old man hurt Grandma Sun by accident, I don’t want to fight with you, take Yang Guo and leave this place.” He thought that although she has become famous for forcing Huo Dou to run away, she just relied on the threat of her Jade Bees. She is of a young age, even if her skills have their fine points, she would not be any better than Grandma Sun. So he decided to let her leave; firstly because of their sect’s first generation’s relationship, secondly he was troubled by accidentally killing Grandma Sun; it was for the best.

He didn’t guess that Xiao Longnu would not take any notice of his words, her left arm raised, a strip of silk suddenly flew out from the floor, heading straight for Hao Datong’s face. That move came without making a noise and out of nowhere, there was no warning. Under the candlelight, he saw a gold coloured sphere tied to the silk belt. Hao Datong saw that she unleashed her move extremely quickly, and the weapon she used was extremely strange, and was uncertain on how to

react. He was old and the years had made him more prudent; although he had faced many skilled fighters before, he didn't dare to receive the attack head on and moved to the left.

He didn't know that Xiao Longnu's belt could change direction in midair. Hao Datong leaped to the left, the belt followed him to the left, three sounds were heard as the gold sphere shook three times, and hit his face's 'Meeting Fragrance' (Ying Xiang), 'Receiving Tears' (Cheng Qi) and 'Central' (Ren Zhong) three pressure points. The moves used to hit the pressure points were extremely fast, nothing more could be done during this time. It was one of the best skills in the Wulin world. He heard the gold sphere rattle two times, and although it wasn't loud it was extremely strange. As it entered the ear it moved the heart and shook the soul. Hao Datong was alarmed and quickly used the "Metal Board Bridge" (tie ban qiao), his body moved backwards; the silk belt swept swiftly inches away from his face. He was afraid of the gold sphere pursuing and attacking him. His kung fu was refined, and as he was stepping back he suddenly leaped up three meters. Xiao Longnu didn't predict this; a 'zheng' sound was made as the sphere hit the floor. Her pressure point hitting technique with the sphere was all linked and continuous, but in the midst of danger, Hao Datong managed to luckily escape. Hao Datong straightened his body, his face changed colour. The surrounding Taoists were either his disciples or were his martial nephews and they all respected his skills. Though he wasn't harmed, they were astonished at the way he scampered out of the last attack. Four Taoists raised their swords and aimed for Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu said, "Yes, you should have used your weapons long ago!"

She waved her hands, two silk belts moved out like snakes, two 'ting' sounds were heard, the 'Spirit Channel' (ling dao) pressure points on their wrists were struck, and the four

swords struck the floor. The Taoists' faces changed color, none of them dared to attack again after that move.

Hao Datong had initially thought Xiao Longnu's skills were ordinary, but didn't think that he would almost lose to her. His dislike for the enemy increased and he took a long sword out of the hands of one of the disciples, and said, "Miss Long's skills are excellent, this old Taoist applauds, come, come, let the old Taoist test some of Miss Long's advanced skills."

Xiao Longnu nodded her head, two 'ting' sounds were heard, the two belts swept in from the left and right.

According to seniority, Hao Datong was one level above Xiao Longnu and out of respect for dueling with a senior, Xiao Longnu should hold back on the first three moves. But her stances were full of killer intent immediately, and ignored any rules of the Wulin world.

Hao Datong thought, "Although the girl's skills are not weak, she doesn't seem to understand rules. She hasn't had much battle experience; I doubt that she can show much more ability in this battle." His left hand followed the sword as his right hand held it, and he fought against the white silk belts.

The Taoists all circled around and watched the battle closely. Under the flickering candlelight, one could only see a girl dressed in white, an old Taoist in grey. The belts looked like rainbows and the sword moved like lightning as they engaged in battle.

Hao Datong had put sweat and blood into training his sword skills. When it came to sword skills, his were ranked third or fourth. But Xiao Longnu flipped and rolled and avoided many of his stances, he wasn't able to gain any advantage. Xiao Longnu's silk belts were like sinuous snakes circling around,

and the two gold spheres continuously sent out 'ting' sounds which was even more disturbing for the opponent.

Hao Datong had fought for a long while without gaining the upper hand. Although he wasn't losing, it was slightly embarrassing. He thought about how he was well known as a skilled fighter in the world of Wulin, yet he had fought over one hundred stances with the young girl but still was unable to gain any advantage. He became impatient and changed his sword style, fast became slow, though his stances became much slower than before, the force behind the sword increased many times over. At first he was only able to avoid his sword tip being trapped by the silk belts; now the sword strength increased, he was able to cut and chop the belts.

More stances passed when suddenly a clashing sound was heard as the sword tip clashed with a golden sphere. Hao Datong's internal energy was profound and he knocked the golden sphere out of the way, hitting it towards Xiao Longnu. He then attacked forward. The Taoists saw the sword pass the advance of a silk belt, heading for Xiao Longnu's wrist. They thought that she had to let go of the silk belt otherwise her wrist would be pierced.

Who would have guessed that Xiao Longnu's right hand turned over and caught the blade of the sword; a 'ka' sound was heard as the sword snapped in half.

The Taoists all gasped in surprise. Hao Datong quickly jumped backwards, his hand holding the snapped sword, and was left standing in shock. He didn't know that the opponent's glove was made out of an extremely fine and extremely tough white gold thread; it was a unique weapon that was passed down by her ancestors. Although it was fine and light, no blade or spear could pierce it; not even precious knives or sharp swords could damage it. She had held the sword's blade and used her strength to break it.

Hao Datong was pale; he had just suffered a great defeat. He didn't realize that there was something special about her glove and thought that she had mastered the advanced skills of being impenetrable by swords and spears. His voice quavered as he said, "Good, good, good, this old Taoist admits defeat. Miss Long, take the child and leave."

Xiao Longnu said, "You've killed Grandma Sun; now just a word admitting defeat and that's it?"

Hao Datong laughed out at the sky and said, "I'm really stupid!" He raised his broken sword and aimed for his neck.

A sudden noise was heard, his hand shook severely; a coin had come from beyond the walls, and knocked the sword out of his hand onto the floor. His energy was profound, how easy could it be for someone to knock the sword out of his hand?

Hao Datong shivered, from the ability to use a coin to knock the sword out of his hand, he knew his martial brother Qiu Chuji had arrived. He raised his head and said, "Martial Brother Qiu, little brother is useless." He heard a long laugh coming from outside the walls, followed by, "Winning and losing are normal; if those who lost cut their throats then even if your Martial Brother had eighteen necks they all would have been cut long ago."

Qiu Chuji leaped over the wall and into the scene, his hand holding a long sword. He was a very straightforward man, he hated unnecessary talk, and stretched out his sword, pointing it at Xiao Longnu's arm and said, "Quanzhen's Qiu Chuji wishes to test our neighbor's great skill."

Xiao Longnu said, "You are very straightforward." She stretched out her left palm and held Qiu Chuji's sword.

Hao Datong quickly warned, "Apprentice brother, careful!" But he was too late, Xiao Longnu exerted her energy, and Qiu

Chuji channeled his energy into his sword. The two of them competed; a 'ka' sound and the sword broke in half. But Xiao Longnu's arm was shaken and was slightly numb; she felt a pain in her chest. Within this stance, she knew that Qiu Chuji's ability was well above Hao Datong's. She herself has not finished studying the "Jade Heart Manual", and she would not be able to beat him. She threw the broken blade onto the floor. Her left hand lifted the body of Grandma Sun, her right hand Yang Guo; then she leapt up and soared into the air, flying away gracefully from the top of the wall.

Qiu Chuji, Hao Datong and the others saw her demonstrate her lightness kung fu and they looked on in astonishment. Qiu Chuji and Hao Datong had fought with her; they knew that she was blessed with refined skills. But her martial arts level was still significantly weaker than theirs; however they had never seen such an admirable display of lightness kung fu.

Hao Datong sighed, and said, "It's finished, it's finished!"

Qiu Chuji said, "Apprentice brother, you have studied Taoism for many years, how could it be that you are not able to see past a small mistake? Our brothers and sister in Shanxi, didn't we have another set of problems?"

Hao Datong was alarmed and said, "What? Was anyone hurt?"

Qiu Chuji said, "It's a long story, we'll go and see apprentice brother Ma first."

After Li Mochou killed the Lu family she traveled to Shanxi, in Jinbei she killed a few more heroes of the Wulin world. She eventually provoked public indignation; the leaders of the Wulin world in that area sent our heroes invitations, inviting them to attack her. The Quanzhen sect was the receiver of one of these hero invitations. At that time, Ma Yu and Qiu

Chuji discussed how Li Mochou has done many evil deeds, and though her sect and theirs had a long history, it would be best if they solved it and give her a chance to turn over a new leaf. Liu Chuxuan and Sun Bu'Er were at Meibei. However Li Mochou hid her tracks, and traveled around discreetly, Liu Chuxuan and Sun Bu'Er couldn't stop her and she hurt some more good men of Jinnan and Jinbei. Eventually Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi brought with them ten disciples, and rendezvoused with Liu Chuxuan and Sun Bu'Er. Li Mochou knew that it would be difficult for one person to fight off so many good fighters, and so she agreed with Qiu and Wang to a duel. The first day's duel was with Sun Bu'Er. Li Mochou secretly used her 'Soul Freezing Silver Needles' and pierced her. She immediately went up to them and gave them the antidote, and told Qiu Chuji they must accept it. This meant that they accepted a favour from her. According to the rules of Jianghu; they wouldn't be able to chase after and fight her. The Taoists could only laugh bitterly as they made their way back. It was lucky that Qiu Chuji hurried back by himself, not traveling with the group, and managed to arrive in time to save Hao Datong's life.

After Xiao Longnu left Chongyang Palace, she put Yang Guo down and carried Grandma Sun's body back to the Tomb of the Living Dead. She put her body on the bed that she normally slept on, and sat down on the chair in front of the bed and didn't speak a single word. Yang Guo threw himself on Grandma Sun's body and cried incessantly. After a while Xiao Longnu said, "She's already dead, why are you crying? Even if you cried some more, she wouldn't know about it."

Yang Guo was startled, and felt that her words were cold and emotionless, but when he thought about it her words made sense; then he was struck with grief once more and burst out crying again.

Xiao Longnu looked at him coldly, her expression remained the same, after another while she said, "We are going to bury her, follow me."

She picked up the body and exited the room. Yang Guo wiped away his tears with his sleeve and followed her. The tomb's passageways were pitch black, he opened his eyes wide but could only see the ghostly white image of Xiao Longnu, he could only follow closely, he didn't dare to lose track of her.

She twisted east and winded west, after half an hour, she pushed open a heavy stone door and from her pockets she took a match and lit two oil lamps on a stone table. Yang Guo took a look around and shivered, he saw a large empty room with five stone coffins. He took a closer look and saw that two of them were tightly closed, the other three were half open, and he didn't know if there were corpses inside.

Xiao Longnu pointed to the first coffin on the right and said, "Ancestor Grandma lies there." She pointed to the second one and said, "Master lies there."

Yang Guo saw her pointing to a third coffin, his heart jumped, he didn't know who she was going to say lies in that one. The lid was not closed; if there was a corpse inside wouldn't it be extremely putrid? He heard her say, "Grandma Sun will lie in that one."

Yang Guo knew it was an empty coffin, and let out his breath. He saw the other two coffins and became curious, he asked, "What about those two coffins?"

Xiao Longnu said, "One is for my apprentice sister Li Mochou, the other is for me."

Yang Guo froze and said, "Li Mochou! Miss Li is going to return?"

Xiao Longnu replied, "My teacher planned it all, she will return. There is one coffin short because my master didn't plan for you."

Yang Guo was shocked and quickly said, "I don't want one...I don't want one!"

Xiao Longnu said, "I promised Grandma Sun that I was going to look after you forever. Since I won't leave, then that means you won't either."

Yang Guo heard her talk about his life and death; he lost any sense of concern and said, "Even if you don't let me go, when you die, I'll be able to leave."

Xiao Longnu said, "I promised to look after you forever, I won't die before you."

Yang Guo said, "Why not? You are older than me!"

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "Before I die, I will kill you."

Yang Guo's heart jumped into his throat, and thought, "Maybe not. People have got legs, won't I run away?"

Xiao Longnu went up to the third coffin and opened the lid, she then picked up Grandma Sun and placed her inside. Yang Guo didn't want to abandon her just yet and said, "Let me take another look at Grandma." Xiao Longnu knew they had just known each other for a over a day yet they managed to become so closely bonded, she agreed to his request. She frowned and picked up the corpse of Grandma Sun unmoved. Yang Guo looked at Grandma Sun under the dim light, and wanted to cry again. Xiao Longnu looked at him, then placed Grandma Sun's body into the coffin; she pulled the lid over, a click sound, and the lid locked into place tightly sealing the coffin.

Xiao Longnu was afraid that Yang Guo would cry again and said, "Let's leave!" She waved her left sleeve, the two oil lamps in the room were put out, and the room was plunged into darkness. Yang Guo was afraid that she would trap him in there and quickly ran out.

In the tomb, there is no difference between night and day. The two of them had a long day and were tired. Xiao Longnu ordered Yang Guo to sleep in Grandma Sun's room. Yang Guo had wandered around Jianghu by himself since he was very young; he would normally sleep rough or in old temples, and was brave. But now, sleeping by himself in this room, he began to think about the dead people in the coffins and was frightened out of his wits. Xiao Longnu said a few words but he did not reply.

Xiao Longnu said, "Did you not hear me?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm scared"

Xia Long Nu asked, "Scared of what?"

Yang Guo replied, "I don't know. I'm afraid to sleep by myself."

Xia Long Nu frowned and said, "You can sleep with me in my room." She then led him to her room. She was used to the darkness and would not usually light a candle, but because of Yang Guo she lit a wax candle. Yang Guo saw that she was beautiful, the clothes she wore were as white as snow, with not a speck of dust, and he thought that her room must be very elegant and refined. When he entered however, he was disappointed; he saw that her room was empty and was like the room with the coffins. There was a blue green stone bed with a cover of long grass, a white cloth for use as a blanket, and apart from these objects there were nothing else in the room.

Yang Guo thought, "Where am I going to sleep? I'm afraid that she wants me to sleep on the floor." Then Xiao Longnu said, "Sleep on my bed!"

Yang Guo said, "That's not right. I'll sleep on the floor."

Xiao Longnu's face changed and said, "If you want to stay here then you have got to do as I say. If you want to fight with the Taoists of Quanzhen, it's up to you. If you argue with me, I'll immediately punish you with death."

Yang Guo said, "If you say you won't use that terrible punishment, then I'll listen to you."

Xiao Longnu said, "You dare to talk back?"

Yang Guo saw that she was young and beautiful, but she was strict and domineering, he stuck out his tongue and didn't say a word.

Xiao Longnu saw and said, "Why are you sticking out your tongue? You refuse to obey is that it?"

Yang Guo didn't say anything, he took off his shoes and climbed onto the bed and went to sleep. He slept on the bed a while and then awoke as he felt his bones chilled, he was alarmed and quickly jumped off the bed. Xiao Longnu saw that he was frightened out of his wits and sympathized with him, but there was a slight smile on her face as she said, "What is it?"

Yang Guo saw that smile on her face, he smiled and said, "There's something strange with that bed; you wanted to make a fool out of me."

Xiao Longnu became serious again and said, "Who's making a fool out of you? The bed is like that, quickly, go to sleep." As she said this she took out a broom from behind the door

and said, "If you get off the bed again, you will get ten whacks with this broom."

Yang Guo saw that she was serious, and could only climb onto the bed again, but this time he was prepared and wasn't shocked. It was as if there was a block of ice underneath the layer of long grass; the longer he slept the colder he became, his body shivered and his teeth chattered noisily. After a while, the coldness went into his bones, he couldn't endure anymore and got off the bed again.

He turned around and saw Xiao Longnu looking at him; her face seemed to smile but didn't smile. She had a punishment in mind for him, he secretly cursed himself in his heart and he clenched his teeth tightly and used all his strength to resist the coldness of the bed. He saw Xiao Longnu take out a rope, and tie one end to a hook on the eastern side of the room, and tied the other end to a hook on the western side of the room. The rope was off the floor at a height similar to that of a person. She lightly jumped up and lay along the rope, using it as a bed. She waved her left palm and the wind of the palm blew out the candle.

Yang Guo was in awe and said, "Gu Gu, could you teach me this skill tomorrow?"

Xiao Longnu said, "This skill is nothing. Practice hard, I have many great skills to teach you."

When Yang Guo heard that Xiao Longnu was going to sincerely teach him martial arts, he then immediately wiped away his initial feelings about her. He was grateful and tears were forming in his eyes, and said, "Gu Gu, you treat me very well, before I hated you."

Xiao Longnu said, "I forced you out of the tomb, of course you would hate me, what is so strange about that?"

Yang Guo said, "I thought you were going to be like my previous master, teaching me useless kung fu."

Xiao Longnu heard him shiver as he talked and said, "Are you cold?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes, there's something strange underneath this bed, why is it so cold?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Do you like it or don't you?"

Yang Guo said, "I...I don't."

Xiao Longnu chuckled and said, "You don't like it, yet there are many skilled fighters on this earth who wish they could have the chance to sleep on this bed."

Yang Guo asked, "You aren't punishing me?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I treat you well, and you think I'm punishing you, you really don't know what's good for you."

From her tone, it seemed as she was saying that sleeping on this bed was a blessing, so he softly asked, "Gu Gu, what is so good about this cold bed, can you explain it to me?"

Xiao Longnu said, "If you sleep on this bed for the rest of your life, you'll find out the benefits for yourself. Close your eyes, don't speak anymore."

In the darkness he heard her clothes rustle lightly, it seemed like she was turning over; she was sleeping on a rope in midair, yet was able to turn over when she wanted to. It was uncanny.

Her last two sentences were said with a strict tone, Yang Guo didn't dare to question any further. He closed his eyes to sleep, but the coldness from below advanced on him; then he thought about Grandma Sun and he was depressed again, how could he sleep? After a while he quietly called out, "Gu

Gu, I can't stand it." He heard Xiao Longnu's slow breathing; she was asleep. He quietly called out twice, but there was no reply and he thought, "If I get off the bed and sleep on the floor, she wouldn't know." He then quietly sneaked down from the bed, and stood on the floor, not daring to breathe out.

As soon as his feet touched the floor, a 'se' sound was made as Xiao Longnu leapt down from the rope, and bent his left arm behind his back, and forced him onto the floor. Yang Guo shouted in shock. Xiao Longnu grabbed the broom, and hit his backside with force. Yang Guo knew there was no use in pleading so he clenched his teeth and took the blows. The first five were very painful, but by the sixth hit Xiao Longnu held back a little, and by the last two hits she was afraid that he won't be able to endure it anymore and they were even lighter. After the ten blows, she put Yang Guo on the bed and said, "If you get off the bed again, I'll hit you again."

Yang Guo lay on the bed, and didn't make a noise; he heard her place the broom in the corner and then leaped back onto the rope. Xiao Longnu thought that he would definitely cry, but didn't think that he wouldn't make a sound. She was surprised and asked, "Why aren't you making any noise?"

Yang Guo said, "What is there to cry about, you said you were going to beat me, you beat me, even if I begged it wouldn't be of any use."

Xiao Longnu said, "Humph, you are cursing me secretly in your heart."

Yang Guo said, "I am not cursing you secretly in my heart, you are much better than my previous master."

Xiao Longnu asked, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "Although you hit me, you cared for my well being. The hits became lighter, you were afraid that I would be in pain."

Xiao Longnu blushed slightly when she heard those words, it was lucky that it was dark and Yang Guo didn't see her, she scolded, "Humph, who cares for you, the next time you are disobedient I'll beat you even harder."

Yang Guo heard her gentle tone and smiled and said, "If you beat me harder, I'll like it even more."

Xiao Longnu spat out, "Little rascal, I'm afraid you won't be able to sleep each day without a beating."

Yang Guo said, "It depends on who beats me. If it was someone who cared about me, then I won't be angry, I'll be pleased instead. If it were someone who hates me, insults me one word, when I grow up, I'll take my revenge on them."

Xiao Longnu said, "Listen to your words; who's going to hate you and who's going to love you."

Yang Guo said, "This is all clear in my mind. There is no need to mention those who hate me; there are countless people. The people who love me are my deceased mother, Uncle Guo, my Godfather, Grandma Sun and you."

Xiao Longnu chuckled and said, "Humph, I won't love you. Grandma Sun told me to take care of you; I will take care of you. There is no point in hoping that I will treat you well."

Yang Guo was feeling cold already, but when he heard those words it was like someone had poured a bucket of cold water over him. He asked, "What's wrong with me? Why do you hate me?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Whether you are feeling good or bad, what is that to do with me? And I don't hate you. I have lived

in this tomb all my life, I don't love anything, and I don't hate anything."

Yang Guo said, "Is there anything fun around here? Gu Gu, have you ever been outside?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I have never left Mount Zhongnan, there's just trees and mountains, the sun and moon outside, what is so good about that?"

Yang Guo clapped his hand and said, "Ah, then you haven't lived properly. There are many colorful and interesting objects in the city, you should see them." Then he described all the things he had seen in his life. He was a good speaker, he added his own colorful descriptions and the objects he was describing sounded even more interesting and strange, he described hundreds of things. It was fortunate that Xiao Longnu had lived in the tomb for the past eighteen years; she didn't question his descriptions and believed them all, after he had finished, and she gave out a sigh.

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, I'll take you out to play, how about that?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Don't say such things! Ancestor Grandma passed down a rule; those who have lived in the Tomb of the Living Dead must not leave Mount Zhongnan one step."

Yang Guo was shocked, and thought, "Peach Blossom Island is an island in the middle of the sea, I went there and was able to leave, how can this large tomb keep me here?" and he asked, "Miss Li Mochou is your apprentice sister, she lived in the Tomb of the Living Dead, how did she leave Mount Zhongnan?"

Xiao Longnu said, "She didn't obey my Master, it was my Master who sent her out of the tomb."

Yang Guo was pleased and thought, "If there is such a rule, when I want to leave all I've got to do is disobey you and you will send me out of the tomb." He thought how he mustn't let this slip otherwise his plan wouldn't work.

The two of them talked, just for a moment, Yang Guo forgot all about the cold, but after a while his body started to shiver and shake. he then pleaded with Xiao Longnu, "Gu Gu, spare me please. I don't want to sleep on this bed."

Xiao Longnu said, "When you were fighting with your master in the Quanzhen sect, you didn't say a word about mercy, why are you like this now?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Those who ill treat me, even if they beat me I won't say a word. Those who treat me well, I'll be willing to die for them, what's a word of mercy compared to that?"

Xiao Longnu gave a 'humph' and said, "Little rogue, who's going to treat you well?"

Xiao Longnu was brought up by her teacher and Grandma Sun, and for these last eighteen years they were her only company. The two of them treated her well but because her Master wanted her to learn the "Jade Heart Manual" so, ever since she was small, she was told to purge her emotions. When she cried or smiled she would be punished heavily. Grandma Sun was a warm person but she didn't dare to disturb her refinement of the skill, and so Xiao Longnu became a cold, unfeeling, lonely girl. Now Yang Guo came. He was a young hot-blooded, emotional person, and the way he spoke was completely the opposite of Grandma Sun and her Master. Xiao Longnu heard him speak; she was aware that something was strange but she listened to him talking and forgot about their tiredness. When she first agreed to take in Yang Guo, it was at the request of Grandma Sun. Later

on when she heard Yang Guo say that she treats him well, she felt that she indeed did treat him well.

Yang Guo heard her tone had no more strictness within it, he said loudly, "Its cold...its cold, Gu Gu, I can't endure it anymore." Indeed he was cold, but it wasn't anything too serious.

Xiao Longnu said, "There's no need to be noisy, I'll tell you about the bed."

Yang Guo was pleased and said, "Great, I won't call out anymore, please tell Gu Gu."

Xiao Longnu said, "I said that there are many fighters who wished that they had the chance to sleep on this bed, that wasn't a lie. The bed is made out of an ancient Chilled Jade; it aids those who practice advanced types of internal energy."

Yang Guo asked, "Isn't it just a stone?"

Xiao Longnu chuckled and said, "You've said that you have seen countless strange and wondrous objects, haven't you ever seen an icy cold piece of rock before? It was Ancestor Grandma who spent seven years of blood and sweat in the extreme cold of the northern plains to dig out the Chilled Jade from under thousands of feet of ice and snow. If you practice your internal energy on this bed, one year is equivalent of ten years of normal practicing."

Yang Guo was surprised and said, "Oh, so it has such benefits."

Xiao Longnu said, "When you first sleep on it, it is extremely cold and hard to endure. Only by circulating your chi to oppose it and slowly getting used to it, you'll be able to practice your internal energy in your sleep. A normal person who practices internal energy, even the most energetic, will

have to spend a few hours each day in sleep. You have to be aware that practicing internal energy is opposing the natural flow of things, chi and blood intermix; it is completely different to what happens normally. But each night when you sleep, the chi that is produced in your sleep does not waste the energy you have accumulated in the day, it enhances your internal energy.”

Yang Guo understood and said, “If you sleep on ice and snow at night, then you will have the same effect.”

Xiao Longnu said, “Not so. Firstly, when you sleep on ice or snow, your body’s heat will eventually melt the snow and ice into water; secondly, the Chilled Jade is much colder than ice and snow. When you are refining internal energy, the most important thing to avoid is fire deviation; when you are practicing normally, half of your refined energy clashes with the fire in your heart. The Chilled Jade Bed is the world’s most yin and cold object. When sitting on the bed and refining your internal energy, the fire in your heart is cooled and neutralized. That means you will be able to press on further when cultivating your internal energy; how can that not be faster than practicing internal energy normally?”

Yang Guo was delighted, and said, “Gu Gu, you treat me very well, you lend the bed for me to sleep on, that means I won’t be scared of the Wu brothers and Guo Fu. Although Zhao Zhijing and the rest of the Taoists have practiced martial arts for so long, I still will be able to catch up with them.”

Xiao Longnu calmly said, “One of the decrees that Ancestor Grandma passed down was that once you have lived in the tomb, you must forget your struggles with other people.”

Yang Guo quickly said, “Even though they bullied me and killed Grandma Sun, we will just leave it just like that.”

Xiao Longnu said, "Everyone will die. Even if Grandma Sun did not die at the hands of Hao Datong, in a few years she would die of old age. Live a few more years or live a few less years, what difference does it make? Don't mention anything about revenge to me again."

Yang Guo felt that, although her words made sense, he could not let go; but he wasn't able to think of a reply to what she said. Then, the coolness of the bed entered his body again, he shook continuously.

Xiao Longnu said, "I'll teach you a method to oppose the coolness of the bed."

She then passed on the formulae and the way to practice internal energy to him; it was their sect's foundation kung fu. Yang Guo practiced according to the instructions. He had only practiced it for a while when he felt the coolness retreating; by the third repetition, his body felt like it was on fire. He didn't feel the bed's coolness, and instead felt that sitting on the bed was extremely comfortable, his eyes closed, and slowly he fell asleep. He slept for half an hour; his hot chi disappeared, and was wakened by the bed's coolness. He then repeated the method again. He spent the night this way, falling asleep and waking up again, but when he suddenly woke up he didn't feel any tiredness. In just a night, his internal energy level increased further.

The two of them ate breakfast, and then Yang Guo took the bowls and chopsticks into the kitchen and washed them, before returning to the main hall.

Xiao Longnu said, "There is one thing you must understand. If you really want me to be your master, you must obey me for eternity. If you don't want me to be your master, I will still teach you martial arts. If in the future you become better than me, then you can leave the tomb because of your skills."

Yang Guo replied without considering, "I am willing to take you as my master. Even if you don't teach me a drop of martial arts, I will still do as you say."

Xiao Longnu asked, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, don't you think I know that you care for me?"

Xiao Longnu made a face and said, "Whether I treat you well or not, don't talk about it. Since you've decided to enter my sect, then follow me and you will undergo the ritual."

Yang Guo followed her into the back hall, only to see it was sparse and empty, apart from two paintings on the eastern and western wall. On the western wall was a picture of two girls. One of them was around twenty five or six years of age, facing a mirror combing and adorning her hair. The other was a fourteen or fifteen years of age maiden, her hand holding a bucket, standing to the side. The tall girl looking in the mirror was extremely beautiful, her eyebrows tidy, yet in her eyes there was an air of death. Yang Guo took a few glances at the painting, and felt fear and respect towards the girl.

Xiao Longnu pointed to the tall girl in the painting and said, "That is our Ancestor, kowtow to her."

Yang Guo strangely asked, "That's our Ancestor, why is she so young?"

Xiao Longnu said, "She was young in the picture, later she wasn't as young anymore." Yang Guo focused on the two sentences, 'She was young in the picture, later she wasn't as young anymore', he felt sorrow and regret in his heart and tears came to his eyes.

Xiao Longnu didn't notice that he was thinking and pointed to the young girl and said, "That is my Master, quickly kowtow." Yang Guo looked at the painting, and saw the

young girl, who could believe that she would become Xiao Longnu's Master; he didn't hesitate and immediately kowtowed.

Xiao Longnu waited for him to stand up and then pointed to the painting hung on the eastern wall and said, "Spit on that Taoist." Yang Guo took a look at the painting and saw the Taoist was quite tall, a long sword by his side, the index finger on his right hand pointing to the north eastern corner, his back facing out, his face could not be seen.

He was curious and asked, "Who's that? Why should I spit on him?"

Xiao Longnu said, "That is the Quanzhen sect's founder Wang Chongyang, our sect has a rule, after kowtowing to our Ancestor we need to spit on him."

Yang Guo was pleased, he hated the Quanzhen sect, he felt this rule of the sect was a suiting finish; he spat out at the painting, and felt that this was not enough and spat out twice. He was about to do it again when Xiao Longnu said, "Enough!"

Yang Guo asked, "Did our Ancestor really hate Wang Chongyang?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Yes."

Yang Guo said, "I hate him as well. How come the painting is hung on the wall but not destroyed?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I don't know, I only heard from Grandma Sun and my Master that there isn't one good man on earth."

Her voice suddenly became strict and she said, "When you become older and do bad things, shall I spare you or not?"

Yang Guo said, "Of course you'll spare me."

Xiao Longnu originally meant this as a warning, she didn't know he would answer, she was startled and didn't know what to do with him and said, "Quickly greet your Master."

Yang Guo said, "Of course, I must kowtow to my Master. But first you have to got to promise me one thing otherwise I won't kowtow."

Xiao Longnu thought, "According to Grandma Sun, before accepting a disciple, only the Master can request things from the disciple, how can it be turned around and the disciple requests something from the Master?"

She was an emotionless person and didn't get angry, she said, "What is it? Let me hear what you've got to say."

Yang Guo said, "I regard you as my Master, I respect you and obey you, but I don't want to call you Master, I want to call you Gu Gu."

Xiao Longnu was bemused again and asked, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "I had taken that rotten Taoist from the Quanzhen sect as my Master, he didn't treat me well at all, in my dreams I curse my Master. That's why I want to call you Gu Gu, in case I mistakenly insult you when I insult my Master."

Xiao Longnu smiled slightly and felt that the way in which this child thinks was amusing, and said, "Fine, I agree to this."

Yang Guo then knelt down grandly, and kowtowed loudly eight times in front of Xiao Longnu and said, "Disciple Yang Guo hereby pays respect and acknowledges Xiao Longnu Gu Gu as my Master. Yang Guo will obey her words forever, if Gu Gu is in any sort of danger, I will give up my life to protect her, if someone insults Gu Gu, then I will kill them." In reality Xiao Longnu's skills were better than his by ten fold, but he

saw that she was a beautiful, gentle and fragile girl, a feeling of duty to protect weak girls stirred, and he came out with those words.

Xiao Longnu heard his sincere words, although he spoke with a childish tone, she was touched nonetheless.

Yang Guo finished kowtowing and picked himself up, his face full of glee.

Xiao Longnu said, "Why are you so pleased? My skills can't compare with Quanzhen's Qiu Chuji or your Uncle Guo."

Yang Guo said, "I don't care if they were even more skilled, you are really going to teach me kung fu."

Xiao Longnu said, "Actually there isn't much use in learning kung fu. It's just that there isn't much to do in the tomb, that's why I'm teaching you."

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, what's our sect called?"

Xiao Longnu said, "When our Ancestor came and lived in the tomb, she didn't have any contact with the Wulin world, our sect didn't have a name. Later my apprentice sister Li Mochou left and wandered around the world of Jianghu, others said she was a disciple from 'Gu Mu Pai' (Ancient Tomb sect), so let's call our sect the Ancient Tomb sect!"

Yang Guo shook his head, and said, "Ancient Tomb sect isn't a good name."

He had just entered the sect and found fault with the name, but Xiao Longnu wasn't too concerned and said, "Does it matter if the name is good or not? Wait here for me; I'm going outside for a while."

Yang Guo remembered that he would be on his own in the tomb and became scared and said, "Gu Gu, I'll go with you."

Xiao Longnu looked at him and said, "You said you'll obey for eternity, my first order and you don't listen?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm scared."

Xiao Longnu said, "You are a man, what is there to be afraid of? You said you were going to help me get rid of bad people."

Yang Guo thought for a while and said, "Fine, come back quickly."

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "I can't be certain how long I'll be; I don't know if I can catch them so quickly."

Yang Guo said, "Catch what?" Xiao Longnu didn't reply and walked away.

As soon as she left, there wasn't a sound in the tomb. Yang Guo wondered what on earth she's going to catch. She said she will never leave Mount Zhongnan, which means she was going to catch a Quanzhen Taoist, but who could it be. After capturing him I'll torture him for a while, that'll be fun; but Gu Gu is by herself, she might be in danger. He thought wildly for a while, and then exited the hall and headed west in the passageways. After ten or so steps, it was pitch black in front of his eyes. He was afraid that he was going to get lost, he touched the wall and made his way back but after twenty steps or so he lost the light of the main hall. He was afraid, and walked forward faster. He had originally been on the wrong path, but as he carried on, he became even more lost. He ran faster and faster, he crashed into the east and bumped into the west, but felt that there were paths everywhere; he was never going to reach the main hall again. He then loudly called out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu, save me quickly." The echo resonated for a while before disappearing.

He ran around again for a while, but then felt the ground was damp, his foot had stepped into some mud. He wasn't on the level of the tomb but had run into one of the passageways underground; he was scared and thought, "If I got lost in the tomb, Gu Gu will be able to find me. Now that I'm running around, she won't be able to find me, and when she finds out I escaped she will be very upset." He didn't dare run around anymore; he felt out a stone and sat down, he wanted to cry out but he couldn't.

He sat there for over an hour when he suddenly heard the faint calls of "Guo'er, Guo'er!" Yang Guo was delighted and quickly got up and shouted, "Gu Gu, I'm over here!" The calls of "Guo'er, Guo'er" became fainter. Yang Guo was in a rush and shouted at the top of his voice, "I'm over here!" After a while, he didn't hear anything, when suddenly he felt his ear being tugged, someone was pulling on his ear.

At first he was alarmed but now he was pleased and shouted out, "Gu Gu, you've come, how come I didn't notice anything?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Why are you here?"

Yang Guo said, "I took a wrong turn."

Xiao Longnu sighed and took his hand and walked, though it was pitch black, it was as if she was under the sun, she went around corners and changed paths, she walked extremely fast.

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, how can you see in here?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I grew up here in the darkness, so I don't need any light."

Yang Guo had sat there for over an hour and was frightened and regretful, now that he was rescued, he was delighted but he didn't know what to say.

After a while, Xiao Longnu took him to the main hall again. Yang Guo sighed and said, "Gu Gu, just now I was really worried."

Xiao Longnu said, "Worried about what? I'd eventually find you."

Yang Guo said, "I'm not worried about that, I was afraid that you might have thought that I had escaped and become sad."

Xiao Longnu said, "If you did escape, I wouldn't be able to keep the promise I made to Grandma Sun, what is so sad about that?"

Yang Guo heard this and knew there was no use, and said, "Gu Gu, you've caught it then?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I've caught them."

Yang Guo said, "Why did you go and catch them?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I caught them so you can start learning kung fu. Follow me!"

Yang Guo thought, "So she has caught a Taoist to fight with me; that will be interesting. It will be best if she caught that Zhao Zhijing; after being taken care of by Gu Gu, he will have to endure my punches and kicks without being able to retaliate, that'll be great fun." As he followed Xiao Longnu, the more he thought about it, the happier he was.

Xiao Longnu turned a few bends, pushed open a door, and entered a chamber lit with candles. The room was small; it was difficult to turn around with the two of them in there. The ceiling was low, and if Xiao Longnu stretched out her arm she would be able to touch the ceiling. Yang Guo didn't see any Taoists; he was slightly disappointed and asked, "Where is the Taoist you caught?"

Xiao Longnu said, "What Taoist?"

Yang Guo said, "Didn't you say you were going to catch some people to help me practice kung fu?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Who said anything about people? It's in there." She went over the corner of the room and picked up a bag; she untied the bag and tipped it upside down, three sparrows flew out.

Yang Guo thought, "Oh, so Gu Gu went out to catch some sparrows."

Xiao Longnu said, "Catch the three sparrows and give them to me. You mustn't harm their wings or claws."

Yang Guo said, "Fine!" He threw himself forward to catch them. But the sparrows were swift and quick; they flew to the west and darted to east. Yang Guo was out of breath, his head covered with sweat, yet he couldn't even touch a feather of theirs.

Xiao Longnu said, "You won't catch them like that, I'll teach you a way." She then taught him the technique to jump high and dart low, and the ability to catch things quickly. Yang Guo had realized that she caught the sparrows to teach him kung fu; he made sure he remembered this. Although he understood the formulae and method, it wasn't easy to use it straight away. Xiao Longnu let him practice, and left the room.

On the first day Yang Guo wasn't able to catch one. After supper he practiced on the Chilled Jade Bed. On the second day, he could jump higher than before, and his arm movements were much quicker. On the fifth day he eventually managed to catch one. Yang Guo was excited and quickly told Xiao Longnu. He couldn't guess that she wouldn't have any words of praise or encouragement. She

calmly said, "What use is catching one; you must catch all three."

Yang Guo said, "I've already caught one, how hard could it be to catch all three?" He was mistaken; he tried for two days but wasn't able to catch them. Xiao Longnu saw that the sparrows were tired, so she fed them and then let them fly off. She then caught another three for him to practice with. By the eighth day, Yang Guo managed to catch all the sparrows in one go.

Xiao Longnu said, "It's time to go up to Chongyang Palace."

Yang Guo was alarmed and said, "Why?"

Xiao Longnu didn't reply and took him out of the tomb. Yang Guo had not seen daylight in seven days, when he was in the daylight again, he struggled to open his eyes. The two of them arrived at Chongyang Palace. Yang Guo was worried, he kept on glancing at Xiao Longnu but she was expressionless, he couldn't tell what she was thinking. Then he heard her call out in a clear voice, "Zhao Zhijing, come out quickly."

When they arrived at Chongyang Palace, there were people who had gone in and gave the message of their arrival. After she finished speaking, out came tens of Taoists. Two young Taoists supported Zhao Zhijing, his face was haggard, his eyes deep, he had no way of standing up by himself. When the Taoists saw the two of them, they all held their weapons tightly and angrily glared at them.

End of Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 - The Jade Heart Manual

Translated by Noodles



Xiao Long Nu's pair of delicate hands flew out, checking and tapping; the eighty-one sparrows were all kept within a meter of her. Her arms were as if there were engaged in a flying dance, her palms formed a thousand hands and a thousand palms, no matter how hard the sparrows tried to fly away, they couldn't escape from the boundary of her palms.

Xiao Longnu took out a container from her pocket and placed it in your Yang Guo's hand and loudly said, "This is the antidote to the Jade Bee stings, give it to Zhao Zhijing."

When Yang Guo saw Zhao Zhijing, he ground his teeth in fury, but he didn't want to disobey Xiao Longnu so he quickly walked up to Zhao Zhijing and placed the bottle down heavily in front of him. When the Taoists heard that Xiao Longnu had returned to the palace, they thought that she had come back to avenge Grandma Sun, they put up their guard and quickly told Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the other elders the news, but they didn't guess that she had come back to bring the antidote, they were startled and could not think of anything to say.

After Yang Guo put down the bottle, he looked at Zhao Zhijing, a vicious expression was on his face; he turned around and walked away.

When Lu Qingdu saw Yang Guo, his blood began to boil, and shouted out, "Little punk, you've been kicked out of our sect, why have you come back?"

The day the "Toad Stance" struck him, he lost his breath, but because Yang Guo's internal energy was shallow, he wasn't seriously hurt. After a few restoring palms by Qiu Chuji and a few days rest, he recovered. Now, he immediately dashed out, wanting to avenge that day's push.

Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'Er, if you want, fight back."

Yang Guo heard footsteps behind him, and heard the wind of a palm, someone was aiming for his neck. In the Tomb of the Living Dead he had slept on the Chilled Jade bed for eight days, and practiced eight days of sparrow catching techniques. Although Xiao Longnu only taught him how to catch sparrows, the Ancient Tomb's lightness kung fu is outstanding, his skills today and that day in the arena were completely different. He didn't move backwards or forwards, and waited for Lu Qingdu's hand to arrive; he crouched down and darted out of the way, and tugged on the sleeve of that hand. Lu Qingdu could not believe that in just a few days, his lightness kung fu had increased dramatically. Influenced by anger he had acted without thinking about the enemy. He had quickly dashed out, his body inclined, his legs unsteady and after being tugged by Yang Guo, he fell down heavily onto the ground.

By the time he picked himself back up, Yang Guo had already hurried to Xiao Longnu's side. Lu Qingdu shouted and cursed, and wanted to go after him. Suddenly a Taoist hurried out from the crowd, grabbed his arm, and pulled him back. When Lu Qingdu was grabbed, he froze, he looked up to see Martial Uncle Yin Zhiping; he cursed under his breath and retreated.

Yin Zhiping called out clearly; "Thank you Miss Long for the antidote." He bowed down and greeted her.

Xiao Longnu didn't take any notice and held Yang Guo's hand and said, "Let's go."

Yin Zhiping said, "Miss Long, Yang Guo is a disciple of the Quanzhen and you insist on taking him away. How can we resolve this?"

Xiao Longnu was startled and said, "I don't want to hear annoying words." She held Yang Guo's arm and went back into the forest. Yin Zhiping, Zhao Zhijing and the other Taoist stood there startled.

The two went back into the tomb. Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'Er, your kung fu has improved, but you tripping the fat Taoist was wrong."

Yang Guo said, "That fat Taoist beat me up badly last time, it's a pity that I wasn't able to get some punches in. Gu Gu, why shouldn't I trip him?"

Xiao Longnu said, "It's not that you shouldn't trip him, it's the way you did it that was wrong. You shouldn't have pulled him to the ground, you shouldn't have raised your hands to make him fall, but let him fall by himself."

Yang Guo was pleased, and said, "That's a fun method, Gu Gu, teach me."

Xiao Longnu said, "I'll be Guo'Er, you'll be the fat Taoist, come and catch me." She then walked forward slowly.

Yang Guo laughed as he went to catch her. It was as if Xiao Longnu had eyes in the back of her head, when Yang Guo ran fast, her steps were fast, when he slowed down, she slowed down, the distance between she and Yang Guo stayed at around a meter.

Yang Guo said, "I'm going to catch you now!" He threw himself forward, Xiao Longnu didn't move. Yang Guo saw that his hands were going to grab her shoulders, but his hands grasped thin air as Xiao Longnu darted backwards, escaping his clutches. Yang Guo quickly turned around to try to catch her, but this move was rushed, he used a force opposite to his momentum, his legs became unsteady, he looked at the ceiling as he fell to the floor and his back ached.

Xiao Longnu took him by the right hand and pulled him up. Yang Guo said, "How come you are so fast?"

Xiao Longnu said, "If you catch sparrows for a year, then you can do this as well."

Yang Guo said, "I've caught them already."

Xiao Longnu chuckled and said, "That counts as catching sparrows? How can our sect's kung fu be learned so easily? Follow me." She then led him to another room. This room was larger than the room where Yang Guo first practiced catching sparrows, at least twice the size. There were six sparrows in this room. This room was larger than before; catching the sparrows will be more difficult. Xiao Longnu passed on some more lightness kung fu and catching techniques to him, eight or nine days later Yang Guo was able to catch the six sparrows in one go.

After that, the stone chambers became larger and larger, the number of sparrows also increased, eventually he moved to the main hall, with eighty-one sparrows.

The Ancient Tomb sect's formulae for internal energy were wondrous, the Chilled Jade Bed's ability to enhance internal energy cultivation was incredible, in just three months, Yang Guo could catch all eighty-one sparrows in one go. Xiao Longnu was pleased with his rapid progress, and said, "We will now go outside and catch sparrows."

Yang Guo had lived in the tomb for three months, and was becoming slightly restless, when he heard that he was going outside to practice, his expression changed to one of delight.

Xiao Longnu said, "What is there to be pleased about? This kung fu is hard to master. There are eighty-one sparrows, you must not let one go."

The two arrived outside. It was March, on the eve of spring. In front of them was a deep green forest, Yang Guo breathed in deeply, and the fragrance of flowers and grasses flowed into his lungs, it was extremely relaxing.

Xiao Longnu opened the bag, the sparrows flew out, then, her pair of delicate hands flew out, checking to the west, and tapping in the east, and forced the sparrows that had flew out to return. The flock of sparrows suddenly got their freedom back, how come they didn't all scatter everywhere? It was strange but Xiao Longnu was checking and tapping, the eighty-one sparrows were all kept within a meter of her. Her arms were as if they were engaged in a flying dance, her palms formed a thousand hands and a thousand palms, no matter how hard the sparrows tried to fly away, they couldn't escape from the boundary of her palms.

Yang Guo looked on with his mouth open. He was startled and pleasantly surprised; he pulled himself together and thought, "Gu Gu is teaching me a wondrous palm technique. Quickly concentrate." He studied her hand movements, how she attacked and how she took her palms back. Her palm technique was extremely quick, but each and every palm was clear, forming the different stances. Yang Guo studied them for over half an hour, although he didn't understand completely the essence of the palms, he understood a bit more than he did at the start.

Xiao Longnu demonstrated the palms again, then she separated her palms and placed them behind her back, the sparrows suddenly flew up towards the sky. Xiao Longnu waved her long sleeves, the two gust of wind from the sleeve pushed out, the sparrows were all pushed back, after much screeching, they beat their wings again to fly away.

Yang Guo was delighted; he tugged her sleeve and said, "Gu Gu, I don't think even Uncle Guo could do that."

Xiao Longnu said, "This set of palms is called the "Force of Nets Above and Snares Below" (tian luo di wang shi), it is one of the Ancient Tomb sect's foundation skills. Work hard and learn it!" She then taught him the stances of the palms; Yang Guo remembered all of them. Within ten days, Yang Guo learned all eighty-one stances of the "Force of Nets Above and Snares Below", and made more progress in his skills.

Xiao Longnu caught a sparrow, and told Yang Guo to prevent its' escape with his palms. At first he could only repel the escape two or three times before the sparrow escaped through the spaces in his hands. Xiao Longnu was standing to the side, she stretched out her hand and sent the sparrow back. Yang Guo continued with his palms, but because his palms weren't fast enough, in just two or three stances again the sparrow flew away. Xiao Longnu again forced the sparrow back so Yang Guo could practice again.

He continued practicing, spring turned to summer, and he advanced his skills a little further. Yang Guo was naturally gifted, and he worked tirelessly, his palm skills kept on improving, by mid autumn, he had mastered this set of "Force of Nets Above and Snares Below". When he used the palm skills he was now able to keep the eight-one sparrows under his control. However, because his internal energy wasn't refined enough, there were times where there were gaps in his stances and he allowed the birds to escape and so he wasn't able to do it all in one go.

That day Xiao Longnu said, "Now that you've completed this set of palms, when you meet that fat Taoist you'll be able to trip him up a few times without using any effort."

Yang Guo said, "What if I fight with Zhao Zhijing?"

Xiao Longnu didn't reply and thought, "When Zhao Zhijing fought Grandma Sun, if he wasn't poisoned, Grandma Sun

may not have won. At the moment, your skills can not compare with his.”

Yang Guo knew what she was thinking when she didn't reply and said, “It doesn't matter if I can't beat him now, in a few years I'll be able to beat him. Gu Gu, our Ancient Tomb sect's skills are better than Quanzhen's, aren't they?”

Xiao Longnu looked up at the ceiling and said, “On this earth, only you and I believe that. When I fought with that Quanzhen Taoist named Qiu, I couldn't beat him, but this isn't because our Ancient Tomb's skills cannot compete with Quanzhen's, it's because I have yet to complete our sect's most refined kung fu.”

Yang Guo had believed all along that Xiao Longnu's skills exceeded Qiu Chuji's, when he heard about this he was curious and said, “Gu Gu, what is this skill? Is it hard to learn? Why don't you practice it again?”

Xiao Longnu said, “I'll tell you a story, then you'll understand our sect's origins. Before you kowtowed to me as your Master, you also kowtowed to our Ancestor. Her surname was Lin, her first name Chaoying, years ago; the two most skilled fighters were our Ancestor and Wang Chongyang. Originally, it was hard to decide who was better, later on Wang Chongyang was busy fighting the Jin, he was occupied night and day; our Ancestor concentrated on her martial arts and eventually became a level higher than him. But our Ancestor did not meddle in the affairs of Wulin, she didn't like showing off, and so hardly anyone in the world of Jianghu knew who she was. Eventually, Wang Chongyang failed in his quest to repel the Jin and resided in the Tomb of the Living Dead; he had nothing to do and refined his martial arts. Our Ancestor wasn't feeling well, and had two serious illnesses, so by the time Wang Chongyang left the tomb our Ancestor was below him again. Eventually the two dueled and made a bet, Wang

Chongyang admitted defeat to our Ancestor, and gave the tomb to her. Come, I'll show the things that the two left behind."

Yang Guo clapped and said, "So this stone tomb was taken out of Wang Chongyang's hands by our Ancestor Grandma. If I had known earlier, I would have been even more pleased with living in the tomb."

Xiao Longnu smiled slightly, and took him to another chamber. Yang Guo saw that the room was extremely strange, it was narrow at the front and wide at the back, the east side was a semi circle, the west side was triangular, and he asked, "Gu Gu, why is this room so strange looking?"

Xiao Longnu said, "This is the room where Wang Chongyang refined his skills, at the front he practiced his palms, at the back he practiced his fists, at the east side he practiced with swords and the west side he practiced projectiles."

Yang Guo looked around the room but didn't find anything special about it.

Xiao Longnu stretched out her hand and pointed upwards and said, "The essence and core of Wang Chongyang's skills is up here."

Yang Guo looked up, but all he saw were some markings and scribbles, they were made by projectiles, some were deep and some were shallow, how could you pick up the essence from that?

Xiao Longnu went over to the east side and pushed an arc a few times, a large stone slowly moved across, revealing a door. She held a wax candle and told Yang Guo to enter. It was another room. It looked like the previous room but it was the complete opposite. The front was wide and the back was narrow, the west side was round and the east triangular. Yang

Guo looked up, and again the ceiling was marked in carvings and symbols.

Xiao Longnu said, "Those are the kung fu left by our Ancestor. She used her intelligence to win the tomb, had she used her martial arts, she would have lost to Wang Chongyang. After she moved into the tomb, she discovered the martial arts skills left by Wang Chongyang. Then she painstakingly developed a set of skills to counter all the skills left by Wang Chongyang. It's all marked down here."

Yang Guo was delighted and said, "That's great. Even if Qiu Chuji, Hao Datong and the rest of them have high skills, they could not be better than Wang Chongyang. All you've got to do is practice the skills left by our Ancestor and you'll be able to beat all the Taoists."

Xiao Longnu said, "You are correct, but it's a pity that there isn't anyone to help me."

Yang Guo said, "I'll help you."

Xiao Longnu glanced at him and said, "It's a pity that your skills aren't good enough." Yang Guo blushed and was embarrassed.

Xiao Longnu said, "The skill that Ancestor Grandma left is called the "Jade Heart Manual", it requires two people to practice it, mutually helping each other. Back then, Ancestor Grandma practiced it with my teacher. Ancestor Grandma had not practiced for long before she passed away, my master did not complete it."

Yang Guo suddenly became delighted again and said, "I'm your disciple, we could learn it together."

Xiao Longnu said, "Yes! Let's take a look. The first step, you have to learn our sect's skills. The second step is to learn the skills of Quanzhen sect. The third step is to learn the skill

that counters Quanzhen sect's skills, the "Jade Heart Manual". When my master passed away, I was fourteen years old. I have learned all our sect's skills, and had just started to practice Quanzhen's martial arts; there is no need to talk about the "Jade Heart Manual". The first step I can teach you, the second and third steps we'll study and practice together."

From that day on, Xiao Longnu passed on all the martial arts of the Ancient Tomb sect to him; palm skills, fist techniques, projectile throwing and weapon stances. After two years, Yang Guo learned it all, plus with the help of the Chilled Jade Bed, his progress was amazing, but his internal energy was not developed as much. A woman developed the Ancient Tomb sect's skills, and the three generations have been women, it was unavoidable that the skills were of a soft nature, the hardness was inadequate. Yang Guo was impatient and rash; the way his skills developed reflected this.

Xiao Longnu had grown slightly older, and became even more beautiful. That year, Yang Guo was sixteen, he became taller, his voice broke, and was now a teenager. He was completely different from boy that first entered the tomb, but Xiao Longnu still looked upon him as the child that first came here. Yang Guo was becoming more and more respectful of his master. In these two years he had curbed his rebellious nature. Before Xiao Longnu opened her mouth to tell him what to do, he had already completed it. But Xiao Longnu's cold and emotionless persona did not change, she didn't casually smile at him, she was detached, she did not show any sign of caring for a loved one. Yang Guo did not mind though. Sometimes Xiao Longnu would play the zither, the music from it was peaceful and serene. Yang Guo would listen quietly by her side.

One day Xiao Longnu said, "You have already learned all of the Ancient Tomb's kung fu, tomorrow we'll learn Quanzhen's kung fu. It will not be easy, back then, even my master did not understand it all, and I of course understood even less. We'll learn from the beginning again, feel free to comment whenever you like."

The next day, the two of them went to the strange shaped room, and practiced according to the markings and symbols that Wang Chongyang left. Because Yang Guo's foundation was now strong, he was able to understand most of the points, and made rapid progress. But after the first ten days, though he practiced for many days instead of making progress he felt that he was going backwards, the more he practiced the worse it got. Xiao Longnu and he discussed this, and both felt there were some difficulties. Yang Guo was impatient and got in a blue mood.

Xiao Longnu said, "When my master and I learned Quanzhen's kung fu, after practicing for a while, we found it was difficult to make any sort of progress, and because Ancestor Grandma had passed away, we could not ask anyone. We didn't know the formulae to accompany it, and so we couldn't solve this problem. I once wanted to go and steal the formula from Quanzhen, and give it to master to study. This is all there is of this skill, it's only Quanzhen's skills, it's not too important if we can't learn it now. There is no need to be angry, there is a solution, all we got to do is go and capture a Quanzhen Taoist and force the formulae out of him, and then our problems will be solved. Let's leave."

These words suddenly awakened something in Yang Guo, and he remembered that Zhao Zhijing had taught him 'The Quanzhen Taoist Song'. 'When first practicing one must open the nine openings. The first originating from the back (wei luu) pressure point. First the spring flows from the bottom of the feet to the knee. Past the knee up to the back, the back's

intent quickly reaching the peak. The Gold Lock passes under the Magpie Bridge, twelve palaces topple as it goes.” He then recited those words out loud.

Xiao Longnu listened to the meaning of the song and said, “It does sound like the important aspects of practicing Quanzhen’s kung fu. If you know more, that’ll be good.” So Yang Guo recited all the formulae that Zhao Zhijing had taught him. The formulae that Zhao Zhijing had taught him was the basics of Quanzhen’s advanced internal energy cultivation, but because he wasn’t taught how to use it, the ‘spring flows’, ‘twelve palaces’ and ‘backs intent’ were all words to him and he didn’t understand, so he just remembered it and didn’t use it.

Xiao Longnu was more experienced and pointed out the key points, and then Yang Guo understood immediately. Within a few months, the two managed to understand and grasp the essence of the skills that Wang Chongyang left on the ceiling.

One day, the two were in the room sparring with swords when Xiao Longnu sighed and said, “At first when I heard that Quanzhen’s martial arts were the most orthodox in the world, I didn’t think too much of it, but today, I know now Quanzhen’s kung fu is actually very profound. Although we have grasped the essence of these skills, if we wanted to learn it to a state where body and mind becomes one, I don’t know how many years and months it is going to take.”

Yang Guo said, “Although the skills of Quanzhen sect are refined, Ancestor Grandma did leave a way to counter their skills, the ability to beat them. That’s called each mountain has its own peak.”

Xiao Longnu said, “From tomorrow onwards, we will learn the “Jade Heart Manual”.

The next day, the two went to the second strange room, and practiced according to the markings left on the ceiling. It was much easier to learn than Quanzhen's skills, since the techniques were used to counter Wang Chongyang's and originated from her own kung fu. A few months passed, and the two had learned the external skills of the "Jade Heart Manual". Sometimes, Yang Guo would use Quanzhen Sword skills; Xiao Longnu would then use the Jade Sword skills to counter it. When Xiao Longnu used Quanzhen Sword techniques, he would use the Jade Sword techniques to neutralize it. The Jade Sword technique was indeed the Black Star (the neutralizing opposite) to Quanzhen's Sword techniques, every stance was designed to stop the attack of Quanzhen's Sword techniques, every step matched the other, every move restricted the opponent and predicted their next move, no matter what the user of Quanzhen Sword skills did, it could not break the confinement of the Jade Sword technique.

The external skills had now been learned; it was time to advance into learning the internal techniques. Quanzhen's internal energies were deep and profound, to invent a method to defeat Quanzhen's internal energies, how easy could that be?

Lin Chaoying's intelligence was unbeatable; she actually did find a way using unorthodox techniques. Xiao Longnu raised her head and looked at the symbols on the ceilings, she was deep in thought and didn't speak; she looked at it for days on end without saying a single word.

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, is it hard to learn?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I heard from master that the manual's internal energy requires two people to practice at the same time, but I know I will not be able to practice it with you."

Yang Guo was shocked and quickly said, "Why not?"

Xiao Longnu said, "If you were a girl, then we could."

Yang Guo said, "What is the difference? Aren't a boy and girl the same?"

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "No, not the same; look up at the ceiling, what kind of shapes are they?"

Yang Guo looked in the direction she pointed, and saw the ceiling was marked with countless forms of body shapes, there were about seventy or eighty of them, a closer look revealed that they were the shape of women, the bodies had lines going away from them. Yang Guo didn't understand and turned around to look at Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu said, "The manual states, when practicing the whole body will emit heat, a spacious and deserted place is required; the body will need to be free of clothes to practice, this will enable the heat to disperse immediately. There mustn't be any obstructions, otherwise it will return to the body; a small consequence will be a serious illness, at worst the body will be destroyed."

Yang Guo said, "We'll take off our clothes to practice."

Xiao Long said, "Eventually, the two people will need to use their internal energy to protect the other, you are a boy and I am a girl, how can we do that with decency?"

Yang Guo had concentrated on practicing his kung fu for the last two years, and didn't take any notice of the difference in sex between him and his master. He felt there was nothing wrong with taking off their clothes and facing each other to practice the manual; he couldn't see what exactly was wrong with this. Xiao Longnu was now twenty years old and has lived in the tomb ever since she was small; she didn't know anything about the outside world. One of the important points of her sect's kung fu is to purge your emotions.

Although the two were of different sexes and faced each other night and day, one was cold and emotionless, the other was honest and respectful, so there weren't any formalities between them. But now when they were talking about taking their clothes off to practice, she felt awkward and didn't agree with his viewpoint.

Yang Guo suddenly said, "I've got it! We could practice on the Chilled Jade Bed."

Xiao Longnu said, "We mustn't. The heat will be drawn back by the coolness of the bed, after practicing for a few days, we both would be dead."

Yang Guo thought for half an hour and asked, "Why do you need two people to practice it? We could practice it by ourselves, if I don't understand anything, can't I ask you later?"

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "It won't work. With this type of internal energy, every step is extremely dangerous and you will go wrong at certain points. If there isn't anyone to help you, you will fire deviate; only if we mutually aid each other can we pass the dangerous phases."

Yang Guo said, "Learning this type of internal energy is indeed troublesome."

Xiao Longnu said, "If we master the external techniques, we will be able to beat the Taoists. We aren't really going to fight with the Taoists, so even if we can't beat them, so what?"

Yang Guo heard his master's words and agreed, and didn't keep the matter to heart.

One day after finishing practicing his kung fu, he went out of the tomb to forage for food. After a while, he chased after a grey rabbit; the rabbit dodged west and darted east, its agility was not like a normal rabbit's. Yang Guo's lightness

kung fu was proficient, but he couldn't catch it. He was surprised but he didn't want to use a projectile to hit it; he wanted to chase after it with his lightness kung fu until the rabbit couldn't run anymore. The boy and rabbit ran faster and further away. As they went on, the rabbit turned into a treed enclosure in the mountain, and suddenly darted into a thicket of red flowers. The thickets were tens of feet wide, the layers close together; a fragrant scent was produced from them. He went around the thickets, but the rabbit had long disappeared. Yang Guo had chased the rabbit for half a day; but he liked living things, if he had caught up with it he would have let it go, so if he didn't catch it, it didn't matter. Yang Guo looked at the thickets; they had red flowers and green branches, and were beautiful to look at. Surrounding them were low hanging branches that hid them, forming a natural room made of flowers and a house made of trees. Yang Guo thought for while, and quickly hurried back and got Xiao Longnu to take a look.

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "I don't like flowers, if you like it, you can play here."

Yang Guo said, "No, Gu Gu this is a good place to practice martial arts, you go on one side, I'll be on the other. When we take off our clothes, we won't be able to see each other. Isn't that a good idea?"

Xiao Longnu heard this and thought it made sense. She leaped up onto a tree and looked around, all she could hear was the sound of a spring flowing and birds chirping; it was peaceful and serene all around, and there wasn't any trace of human activity. It was a good place to practice martial arts, and so she said, "It was lucky that you found this place, we'll come here tonight and practice."

That night, the two of them delved deep into the enclosure. In the still of the night, the flowers were even more fragrant.

Xiao Longnu then recited the formulae to practice the internal energy of the “Jade Heart Manual”. Yang Guo made sure he understood the intricacies of the manual, and the two went either side of the thickets and took their clothes off, and started practicing. Yang Guo’s left arm went through the thicket, and met with Xiao Longnu’s right palm, if either came up with difficulties during the practice; the other will notice and immediately circulate their chi to help them.

The two then used the night for work, and the day for rest. It was summer; the night was cool when they practiced; after two months of practicing there were no problems. The “Jade Heart Manual” was divided into nine sections, one night, Xiao long Nu had reached the seventh level, and Yang Guo the sixth. That night, the two were practicing their own levels, their body emitted great heat, and the scent of the flowers was carried in the heat, and was even more aromatic. Gradually the moon moved into the middle of the sky, another half an hour and the two will have finished completing their respective levels. Suddenly the sound of footsteps and people talking came from some distance away; two people were talking and coming closer.

On the odd levels of the “Jade Heart Manual” the practitioner has to ‘Yin Jin’ (forcing yin to the limit), the person on the even levels has to ‘Yang Tui’ (Drawing back the yang). Yang Guo was practicing the ‘Yang Tui’ techniques, and could rest at any time, but Xiao Longnu was practicing the ‘Yin Jin’ technique, which had to be completed in one go without the slightest pause. Right now she was at the most important phase of the technique, and ignored the sounds of speaking and footsteps.

Yang Guo heard this clearly, he was alarmed, and forced the chi that was in his ‘dan tian’ out of his body, and breathed in three times and stopped practicing. He heard the two people gradually getting closer, their voices seemed familiar; one of

them was his previous master Zhao Zhijing, the other Yin Zhiping. The voices became louder as they went on, the two were arguing.

He heard Zhao Zhijing say, "Apprentice brother Yin, there is no point in denying it. I'll go and tell Martial Uncle Qiu, and let him judge."

Yin Zhiping said, "You keep on pressing me, what do you want? You think I don't know? You want to become the head of the third generation students, so in the future you can become the sect's leader."

Zhao Zhijing chuckled and said, "You don't keep to the rules. Now that you've broken one of sect's rules, how can you be the head of the third generation disciples?"

Yin Zhiping said, "What have I done wrong?"

Zhao Zhijing scolded, "The fourth rule of Quanzhen sect, wanton!"

Yang Guo hid in the thicket and peeped out, and saw the two Taoists standing facing each other. Yin Zhiping's face was pale, under the moonlight it was colorless, and he said deeply, "What wanton crime?" As he said these words he reached for the handle of his sword.

Zhao Zhijing said, "Ever since you saw that Xiao Longnu from the Tomb of the Living Dead, you daydream all the time. You have thought about taking Xiao Longnu many, many times and doing unspeakable things to her. Our sect aims to bring enlightenment, but with these thoughts, how have you not broken the 'wanton' rule?"

Yang Guo respected his master very much, when he heard those words from Zhao Zhijing, he was furious, and hated the two Taoists even more.

He heard Yin Zhiping tremulously saying, "What rubbish; just how could you know what I think?"

Zhao Zhijing chuckled and said, "The thoughts in your heart, of course I don't know them, but when you mumble in your sleep, is there anyone to hear it? When you write Xiao Longnu's name repeatedly, is there anyone to see it?"

Yin Zhiping shuddered twice, and didn't say anything.

Zhao Zhijing looked smug, and took out a piece of paper from his sleeve and waved it around and said, "Isn't this your handwriting? I'll show this to our leader Martial Uncle Ma and your master Martial Uncle Qiu."

Yin Zhiping couldn't endure this anymore, and drew out his sword with a shout and thrust out. Zhao Zhijing leaned to the side to avoid it, and put the piece of paper in his sleeve and laughed, "You want to kill me and shut my mouth? I'm afraid it won't be easy."

Yin Zhiping didn't say a word and thrust out his sword three times, but each thrust was avoided. By the fourth thrust, a sound was made as Zhao Zhijing drew out his own sword, and fought with him by the thicket of red flowers. The two of them were the highest skilled fighters of Quanzhen's third generation, one, Yin Zhiping, was Qiu Chuji's finest disciple, and the other, Zhao Zhijing, was the head disciple of Wang Chuyi. Yin Zhiping clenched his teeth and fought with his life, within the exchange of moves, Zhao Zhijing would say a few sarcastic words, angering his opponent into making mistakes. Yin Zhiping had the highest martial arts amongst Qiu Chuji's disciples, however in the recent years Yin Zhiping has placed Taoist cultivation above martial arts. Hence, his younger martial arts brother Yin Zhiping and Wang Chuyi's head disciple, Zhao Zhijing, have surpassed Yin Zhiping in the field of martial arts. Yin Zhiping often retreated to contemplate Taoist philosophies and meditation and had

expressed no interest in leadership. Zhao Zhijing had the highest martial arts of the entire third generation disciples. The Six Masters of Quanzhen intended to appoint him as the leading disciple of the third generation. However, he made two enormous errors; one was leading the Big Dipper Formation against Guo Jing instead of Huo Du and his men. As result a portion of the Chongyang Palace was burnt down. His second error was mistreating Yang Guo, which angered the six masters. As result they felt that Zhao Zhijing's martial arts may be good, but he does not have the talent to lead. So after much deliberating the Six Masters agreed to appoint Yin Zhiping as the leading disciple of the third generation.

Yang Guo had learned all the stances of Quanzhen's Sword skills, and saw them fight, attacking and defending, though the stances were quick and changes numerous, he saw through all of it and thought how his Gu Gu had indeed taught him correctly. He saw them struggle for tens of stances; Yin Zhiping had used all his attacking stances as Zhao Zhijing kept on moving. He chuckled, "I have learned all that you have learned, and you have learned all that I have learned. You want to kill me? You're dreaming." He defended smoothly, Yin Zhiping had used all his strength but each stance was blocked. After a while, he saw that the two was getting closer to Xiao Longnu, Yang Guo was alarmed and thought, "If they two fight until they get to Gu Gu, it would be terrible!"

Suddenly Zhao Zhijing counterattacked, and forced Yin Zhiping back. He quickly sent out three stances, Yin Zhiping moved back three steps. When Yang Guo saw the two getting further away from his master, he was pleased, but suddenly Yin Zhiping handed his sword over to his left hand and sent out a palm, aiming for the chest.

Zhao Zhijing laughed and said, "Even if you've got three hands, you've only got the ability to be a petty thief, you

can't kill me." He then sent out his left palm to meet it. The two exchanged sword stances and palms, and the struggle became fiercer.

Xiao Longnu was concentrating, and ignored everything that was around her. When the two took a few steps closer, Yang Guo became worried; when they took a few steps further away he relaxed a bit.

After a while, Yin Zhiping suddenly called out and attacked, he ignored the opponent's sword and just rushed forward. Zhao Zhijing thought about it, and knew that he had nothing to lose, if he killed him, then he wouldn't be able to blackmail him. Although the two weren't on friendly terms, he had no intent in killing him, and after a while, he was on the way to losing. After a number of moves, Yin Zhiping then thrust out his sword, threw out a palm and his left leg swept out, it was Quanzhen's "Three Circulations". Zhao Zhijing leapt up ten feet, and swung his sword down. Yin Zhiping threw his sword away, and threw himself at his opponent, a 'hei' sound was made by him as he threw out his two palms. Yang Guo saw that the last few stances were ruthless, it wasn't how he knew them to be, he broke out in a cold sweat, he saw Zhao Zhijing's body in midair, one was yielding, one was firm, it looked like the two palms were aiming to break his bones. How it could be that in this urgent and dangerous situation, Zhao Zhijing managed to flip himself in midair, fly back a few meters and lightly land.

From the way he was going to land, it looked like he was going to land right in front of Xiao Longnu, Yang Guo was alarmed and had not time to think, he stood up, his left palm shot out from below his right palm, and pushed the back of Zhao Zhijing, a stance of "Bright Building Flinging the Ball" (cai lou pao qiu), he pushed out with strength, and hit him away about seven meters. Right now his internal energy wasn't developed enough, he had used an enormous amount

of strength in this attack, all concentrated in his left arm, his lower body was weak, he could not stand up properly and his left foot stepped on a branch. The branch quickly rebounded back to its original position, and touched Xiao Longnu in the face. It was only a slight touch, but Xiao Longnu was greatly disturbed, she broke out in a sweat, at that time she was in the middle of rapidly circulating her chi and holding it in her 'dan tian', it didn't disperse and she fainted.

All of a sudden Yin Zhiping saw Yang Guo jump out, and saw the woman he has been thinking about hiding in the thicket, he froze, and didn't know whether this was real or an illusion. Zhao Zhijing had steadied himself by this time, and under the moonlight he was able to recognize Xiao Longnu's face. He said, "Ah, so she's here; and with a man!"

Yang Guo was alarmed and shouted out, "Don't go anywhere you two rotten Taoists, I'll come back and finish this." He saw Xiao Longnu had fallen onto the ground and was not moving. He remembered that he was told that when they were practicing they must stay together to help each other, if there were any disturbances a disaster would happen. Now Xiao Longnu had experienced a shock, she would have serious injuries; he was extremely frightened and touched her forehead. It was cold as ice; he quickly grabbed her clothes and covered her up. He picked her up and said, "Gu Gu, are you alright?" Xiao Longnu moaned but didn't say anything.

Yang Guo was slightly more relaxed and said, "Gu Gu, we'll go back to the tomb first, then I'll come back and kill the two Taoists." Xiao Longnu had no strength and lay limp in his arms. Yang Guo advanced in large steps, and went past the two Taoists. Yin Zhiping stood there like a statue.

Zhao Zhijing laughed and said, "Apprentice brother Yin, your dream lover and that man over there have just done dirty

things; you want to kill me, you should kill him!” Yin Zhiping didn’t take any notice and didn’t reply.

Yang Guo heard the words ‘done dirty things’, although he didn’t know exactly what he meant, he knew it was an insult and he was furious. He lightly put Xiao Longnu down and rested her against a tree and took a branch in his hand, and pointed to Zhao Zhijing and shouted, “What rubbish are you talking about?”

Two years had passed, Yang Guo had changed from a small child to a tall young man, at first Zhao Zhijing didn’t know who he was, when he heard him a second time and saw his face under the moonlight, he recognized it was his disciple. He had been made to fall by him and was angry, he saw his body was exposed and shouted, “Yang Guo, so it’s you, you little bastard!”

Yang Guo said, “You can insult me, but why are you insulting my Gu Gu?”

Zhao Zhijing laughed and said, “Everyone knows the Ancient Tomb sect is a female sect, skills are only passed on to women and not men, all of them are pure and untouched virgins, but it’s a filthy sect, secretly hiding a man, doing these things in the open!”

Xiao Longnu had just wakened up and heard what he said, and was alarmed. Her chi had begun to flow normally but now it flowed the opposite way, her chi and air were both stimulated and she knew that she was suffering from internal injuries. She could only shout “You talk rubbish, we have not...” before she spat out blood violently from her mouth.

Yin Zhiping and Yang Guo were worried when they saw this, and both of them rushed closer.

Yin Zhiping said, "How are you?" and bent down to take a closer look at her injuries.

Yang Guo knew that he wanted to harm her and pushed him in the chest with his left hand. Yin Zhiping moved his palm to block it. Yang Guo was familiar with every stance of Quanzhen's kung fu, he turned his palm over and grabbed his wrist, he first pulled and then let go, and tossed him away.

At present, Yang Guo's kung fu could not actually compare with that of Yin Zhiping, and if Yang Guo fought with other sect's fighters who were of the same ability as Yin Zhiping he would definitely have lost. But years ago Lin Chaoying had invented techniques to counter Quanzhen's, every stance matched every stance. Since she invented these techniques they had never been used in practice, so Quanzhen's disciples do not know that there is a kung fu which is the 'Black Star' of theirs. Yang Guo now used it. Yin Zhiping was not prepared and wasn't concentrating, and didn't have any way to respond; although he didn't fall, he was flung over six meters and was standing next to Zhao Zhijing.

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, ignore them, I'll take you back to the tomb first."

Xiao Longnu struggled for air as she said, "No; kill those two so they can't...can't talk about me outside."

Yang Guo said, "Fine." He leapt out at them, his branch pointing at Zhao Zhijing's chest. Zhao Zhijing didn't care about Yang Guo and waved his sword, cutting down at his branch. He didn't know that Yang Guo was using the 'Black Star' of Quanzhen's sword skills; the branch swiveled past and struck the pressure point on Zhao Zhijing's wrist. Zhao Zhijing's wrist went numb, and he secretly cursed. Yang Guo's left hand chopped across, aiming for his left cheek, this was an extremely strange move, and it was the most

unexpected. If Zhao Zhijing wanted to keep his sword, he would have to straighten his head and suffer the chop, if he wanted to avoid the chop, the sword will definitely be lost.

Zhao Zhijing was skilled, although he was in a precarious situation he kept calm, he let go of his sword and ducked his head, if he followed it with a left palm, he will be able to get his sword back in the blink of an eye. He could not have guessed that years ago Lin Chaoying had thought of how the enemy would react, and developed techniques to counter any changes, no matter how good, clever or lethal, any of highly skilled Quanzhen fighters were. Zhao Zhijing felt that he made the best decision possible, and would allow him to definitely gain victory from the jaws of defeat. But he didn't know that Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo had learned all the techniques that would counter their changes.

Yang Guo removed the enemy's weapon and saw his left palm move, and knew what he was going to do; he pushed the sword forward, aiming to pierce the opponent's wrist. Zhao Zhijing was alarmed and quickly moved his arm back. Yang Guo pointed the sword tip at his chest and shouted, "Get down!" as his left leg hooked out. Zhao Zhijing was afraid of being pierced and had to move, he was hooked and fell backwards. Yang Guo raised the sword, wanting to thrust at his stomach.

Suddenly, a wind came from behind him, a sword was approaching and someone shouted out, "You dare to kill your master?" That stance was to attack first and then allow him to rescue Zhao Zhijing, Yang Guo was in the middle of an angry attack but could still see what was happening, and he immediately parried it with his sword, the two swords clashed. Yin Zhiping saw that the sword was extremely fast and couldn't help from secretly praising it, and suddenly felt his sword going out of his control, sticking to the opponent's sword. Alarmed, he quickly circulated his chi to get it back.

His internal energy was profound, the two competed, and Yang Guo's sword was lead along. He didn't know that Yang Guo lured him into doing this, he held the sword for a split second before letting go, his arms straightened and he attacked the enemy's chest. At that point the sword handle rebounded up, two palms and a sword, the three of them with the same intent, even if Yin Zhiping's skills were higher, he would not be able to block this extremely strange attack.

At this time, Yin Zhiping could only throw away his sword and send out his own palms, he quickly put his hands across his chest to block this move, but because his arms were too bent, he could not put any strength in them. Yang Guo's internal energy wasn't high enough and wasn't able to break his arms with this move, but was still able to strike his chest painfully. Yin Zhiping's arms became numb; he moved back three steps and circulated his chi to protect the important pressure points in his chest. Zhao Zhijing got up. The two swords were in Yang Guo's hand, and he attacked both of them.

In just a few moves, the two of them were made to hurry around and scamper by a teenager; they were both afraid and angry and didn't dare be careless. The two of them stood up, and used their palms skills; they only defended and didn't attack. They wanted to find out more about their opponent's techniques before doing anything. Although Yang Guo had weapons to fight against his empty handed opponents, the two defended tightly, and weren't being beaten as badly as they were at the start. The "Jade Heart Manual's" sword techniques did not have any stances that countered Quanzhen's fists and kicks. Lin Chaoying wanted to defeat Wang Chongyang's techniques completely, she felt that using weapons to defeat his hand to hand combat techniques was unfair and below her so she did not give it any thought. That, plus the fact that the Taoists internal energy was well above Yang Guo's, and since all they cared

about was to remain undefeated, Yang Guo's swipes and chops did not have much effect, and eventually he began to lose.

Zhao Zhijing's internal energy was profound; he kept incessantly producing palm winds that aimed at Yang Guo's sword.

Yin Zhiping stopped, and secretly thought that here they were, two seniors attacking a young boy, how ridiculous did they look? He saw that victory was in sight but worried about the safety of Xiao Longnu so he shouted, "Yang Guo, quickly take your Gu Gu away, what are you doing tangling with the two of us?"

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu hates you for talking rubbish, and told me that I must kill you."

Yin Zhiping sent out a palm that shook Yang Guo's sword in his left hand and then jumped left three steps and said, "Leave!"

Yang Guo said, "You want to escape?"

Yin Zhiping said, "Yang Guo, you want to kill us but that will not be possible; but your Gu Gu can relax, if the one named Yin reveals a single word about what happened today, I will immediately kill myself to apologize. If I don't do this" as he said this, he suddenly leapt towards Yang Guo and took the sword in his left hand and said, "then I'll be like these fingers!" He spread his left hand and cut down with his right, and cut the last two fingers off his hand.

Those few moves happened extremely quickly and Yang Guo wasn't prepared. He stopped and knew that he was sincere and thought, "It is indeed difficult to kill them both; why don't I first kill the one named Zhao and then come back and kill him."

He then shouted, "The one called Yin, what use is cutting off your fingers? If you cut off your head, then I'll believe you."

Yin Zhiping smiled and said, "If you want my life, all I need is a word from your Gu Gu, then why not?"

Yang Guo said, "Go!" He leapt forward two steps and suddenly thrust out behind him, straight at Zhao Zhijing's chest.

The move "Orchid Shoots Back" (mu lan hui she) was extremely ruthless, Zhao Zhijing was listening to what they were saying and never thought that he would suddenly ambush him, he was frightened. The tip of the sword pierced his stomach. Zhao Zhijing felt a slight pain, and immediately circulated his chi throughout his 'dan tian', and his stomach pulled back half an inch, he raised his right leg and kicked Yang Guo's sword out of his hand. Yang Guo didn't wait for his leg to come and down, and extended his finger and pointed at the pressure point on his knee. Although Zhao Zhijing had escaped with his life, he couldn't stand up, his right knee kneeling down in front of Yang Guo.

Yang Guo caught the descending sword and pointed at Zhao Zhijing and said, "I once kowtowed eight times to you as you were my master, now you are not my master anymore, give the eight kowtows back."

Zhao Zhijing had completed circulating his chi, his face became purple, almost becoming black. Yang Guo pressed the sword tip into his throat.

Zhao Zhijing shouted, "If you want to kill me, kill me, why are you talking so much?"

Yang Guo was about to thrust the sword forward when suddenly he heard Xiao Longnu say, "Guo'Er, killing your master is not auspicious, tell him to swear that he won't

reveal today's events and let him go!" Yang Guo regarded Xiao Longnu's commands above all else, and after hearing what she said, he said, "Swear it."

Zhao Zhijing was angry, but his life was more important and said, "I won't say anything, what need is there to swear it?"

Yang Guo said, "That won't do. You must swear a venomous oath."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Fine, today's events will be kept between the four of us, if I reveal it to a fifth person, then let my name be in ruins, be expelled from my sect, everyone in Wulin will be against me, and I'll have a terrible death."

Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo did not know much about the world's matters and thought that he was really swearing a venomous oath."

Yin Zhiping heard that there was a hidden meaning in his oath and wanted to warn Yang Guo but felt that it wasn't right to help outsiders; he watched Yang Guo carrying Xiao Longnu, his steps extremely quick, and they disappeared around a bend in the mountain. His fingers hadn't stopped bleeding; he stood up bemused without stopping it.

Yang Guo carried Xiao Longnu back to the tomb and placed her on the Chilled Jade Bed.

Xiao Longnu sighed and said, "I'm seriously injured, how can I oppose the Chilled Jade Bed?"

Yang Guo said 'ah' and was alarmed, he secretly thought, "So Gu Gu's injury is very serious." He then carried her to her room. When she first let Yang Guo sleep on the Chilled Jade Bed, she slept in the same room as him; after about a year she moved into the next room. As soon as she arrived in her room, she spat out another pool of blood, and covered Yang

Guo's exposed body. Yang Guo was so frightened that he couldn't move his arms and legs, and started to cry.

Xiao Longnu calmly laughed and said, "Now that I've spat out this blood, I won't throw up anymore, what is there to be sad about?"

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, don't die."

Xiao Longnu said, "You are afraid of dying aren't you?"

Yang Guo was startled and said, "Me?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Before I die, I will kill you first."

These same words were spoken two years ago, Yang Guo had forgotten them long ago, and didn't expect that she would bring it up again now.

Xiao Longnu saw that Yang Guo was astounded and said, "If I don't kill you, how will I be able to see Grandma Sun? Who will look after you if you are alone in the world?"

Yang Guo's mind was scrambled, and didn't know what to say.

Xiao Longnu had thrown up blood, but she looked fine as if nothing was wrong. Yang Guo thought of something, he quickly went to find a jar of Jade Bee honey and gave it to her to drink. The honey did have healing properties; after a while she slept on her bed. Yang Guo was able to relax, but he was worn down with worry, and wasn't able to endure anymore, he sat down and slept against the wall.

After some time, he felt someone cold against his throat, and was awakened. He has lived for a long time in the tomb, although he wasn't able to see things in the dark as clearly as Xiao Longnu could, he could still see things without the aid of candlelight. He opened his eyes, and saw Xiao Longnu

sitting forward on the bed holding a sword, pointing at his throat. He was alarmed and said, "Gu Gu! You..."

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "Guo'Er, my injury won't get better, after I kill you we'll both see Grandma Sun together!"

Yang Guo quickly replied, "Gu Gu!"

Xiao Longnu said, "You are afraid, aren't you? It will be quick, one slash and that's it."

Yang Guo saw Xiao Longnu's eyes light up, and knew that she wanted to kill him immediately. He wanted to live, and didn't consider what will happen later, he rolled around and kicked out at Xiao Longnu's sword. Though Xiao Longnu's internal injuries were serious, she was still very swift, not slower than normal; she avoided his kick and pointed the sword at his throat again. Yang Guo used many different stances, but each one of them had been taught by Xiao Longnu so how would she not know what he would do? The sword moved swiftly, not leaving him by more than three inches.

Yang Guo was frightened; his body was covered with sweat. He thought, "If I don't want to die today, then I must kill Gu Gu."

In this urgent situation he pushed out his two palms, he took advantage of her not having any strength after her injury, her stances were refined but she did not have the internal energy to clash palms with him. Xiao Longnu knew what he was thinking, she slanted her body slightly and let his palms' power skim over her shoulders and called out, "Guo'Er, don't fight anymore!" Her sword extended out, the tip quivered a little, an incomparable stance in terms of mastery and exquisiteness was used, "Separating Flower Splitting Willow", shimmering to the left but moving to the right, and the sword pointed at Yang Guo's throat. She then circulated

her remaining energy wanting to pierce his throat; but she saw his pleading eyes, and felt pain in her heart. At that instant, her eyes went blank, her body went limp, a 'dang lang' sound was made as the sword dropped to the floor, as Xiao Longnu fainted.

Had the sword been thrust forwards, Yang Guo would have died; he didn't know that she would faint at the most vital point. He stopped, wondering if he'd really escaped death, and quickly ran out of the tomb. The sun dazzled in his eyes, the light breeze blew his clothes, the scent of flowers was around him, birds sang in the trees, isn't this better than living in the tomb?

Yang Guo made his decision; he utilized his lightness kung fu and ran down the mountain, he became quicker as he ran, and by midday he was at the foot of the mountain. When he knew Xiao Longnu had not chased after him, he relaxed, and slowed his pace. After a while, his stomach growled. He had wandered the world of Jianghu ever since he was little; his ability to search for food was brilliant. He looked all around, and on the western slope, he saw a large field of corn, went over, and then picked five stalks. The corn wasn't ripe but it was still edible. He had a match and was about to light a fire to smoke the corn, when he suddenly heard footsteps behind him, someone was approaching.

Yang Guo first hid the corn in case a farmer had caught him in the act of stealing, and then peaked out. It was a Taoist priestess, dressed in apricot yellow, her steps were light and she was slowly advancing. A pair of swords hung on her back, a blood red tassel was tied to the handles, floating in the breeze. Yang Guo thought that this person must be a member of the Quanzhen sect, and was likely to be a disciple of Sun Bu'Er. Yang Guo was still slightly afraid and didn't want to cause any trouble so he looked down at a branch.

The Taoist priestess went up to him and asked, "Hey, point the way to Chongyang Palace?"

Yang Guo secretly thought, "If this girl is a disciple of Quanzhen, then how come she does not know the way up there? Something was wrong here." He then pointed to the mountain without looking around and said, "Just follow that main road."

The Taoist priestess saw that Yang Guo's upper body was uncovered, he was wearing a pair of old and worn trousers, and was here picking up firewood, and assumed that he was just a villager. She regarded herself as an attractive woman; any man that looked at her would stare at her without blinking for half an hour. This young boy just took a glance at her and didn't look back again, like if he was blind. She couldn't refrain from getting angry and suddenly thought, "What does a stupid villager like him know?" She then said, "Stand up; I have something to ask you."

Yang Guo hated everyone in the Quanzhen sect, so he pretended to be blind and dumb, and pretended not to hear.

The Taoist priestess said, "Foolish boy, you didn't hear what I said?"

Yang Guo said, "I heard, it's just that I don't want to stand."

When the Taoist priestess heard him she laughed and said, "Look at me, I told you to stand up!" Her voice in the last two sentences was soft, enchanting and sweet. Yang Guo shivered and thought, "Why does she speak so strangely." He looked up and saw her skin was smooth and white, her cheeks were red, her eyes were like staring into a pool of water, there didn't seem to be any evil intent; after looking at her again, he lowered his head.

The Taoist priestess saw that his expression had a childish air, though he did look at her for a second time, he wasn't moved. Instead of being angry she laughed, and thought, "It's just a kid who doesn't know anything." She took out two silver ingots [small boat/shoe shaped silver castings of a few ounces known as Yinzi] from her pockets, two 'ting' noises were heard as they collided with each other, she said, "Little brother, if you follow my instructions then I'll give these ingots to you."

Yang Guo originally didn't want to have anything do with her, but he heard that her words were suspicious and wanted to find out what she wanted so he pretended to be stupid, and looked at the ingots and said, "What use do those shiny rocks have?"

The Taoist priestess smiled and said, "It's money. If you want new clothes, chickens, rice, you could buy them with this."

Yang Guo put on a baffled expression and said, "You want to lie to me, I don't believe you."

The Taoist priestess laughed and said, "When have I lied to you? Hey, little kid, what is your name?"

Yang Guo said, "Everyone calls me 'Sha Dan' (Dumb Egg), don't you know that? What's your name?"

The Taoist priestess laughed and said, "Sha Dan, you can call me Angelic Priestess, where's your mother?"

Yang Guo said, "My mum just scolded me, and went over to the other side of the mountain to chop firewood."

The Taoist priestess said, "I need a hatchet, go to your home and get one, and then lend it to me."

Yang Guo was curious, he opened his eyes wide, drooled and made himself look even more like a stupid person, he shook

his head incessantly and said, "I can't; I can't lend my family's hatchet. If dad finds out I'll be punished."

The Taoist priestess smiled and said, "When your parents see the money, they'll be too pleased to punish you." As she said this she passed an ingot in his direction. Yang Guo extended his hand to catch it, and then pretended to miss it, and let the ingot hit his shoulder and when it came down it hit his right foot, he held his right foot with his hands and hopped on his left foot and called out, "Ah, ah, you hit me! I'm going to tell mother!" He called and shouted; he ignored the ingot and ran forward.

The Taoist priestess thought that he was interesting, and smiled. She took off her belt, and waved it at his right foot. Yang Guo heard the wind sound and turned his head around, he was alarmed, and thought, "That's our Ancient Tomb sect's kung fu! Isn't she a disciple of Quanzhen?" He didn't dodge and let her belt wrap around his right leg, he fell on the ground and relaxed his body, letting her pull him towards her, and secretly feared, "Is she going up the mountain to attack Gu Gu?"

He thought about Xiao Longnu, he didn't know whether she was dead or alive, he was extremely worried about her. He made up his mind, even if he was going to die by her hand he needed to see her. As he was thinking he was pulled up to the Taoist priestess, she saw that although his face was covered with dirt, he was handsome, and thought, "This country hick is handsome, it's a pity that although the top is like a beautiful flower, the lower part is a pile of grass." She heard him shouting and calling out, making a commotion; she smiled and said, "Sha Dan, do you want to die or do you want to live?" She took out her sword and pointed at his chest.

Yang Guo saw that she used the stance “Flower from the Embroidery Pen” (jin bi sheng hua), it was a sword stance of the Ancient Tomb sect, he was perplexed, “This person is probably a disciple of Martial Uncle Li Mochou, and has come to find Gu Gu, she must have ill intentions, from her belt and sword stances her kung fu is good, I’ll keep on pretending to be dumb so she’ll be off guard.”

He put on a frightened expression and begged, “Xian Gu (Angelic Priestess), don’t...don’t kill me, I’ll listen to you.”

The Taoist priestess laughed and said, “Good, if you don’t listen to me I’ll kill you with one sword stroke.”

Yang Guo called out, “I’ll listen...I’ll listen.” The Taoist priestess waved her belt, and it returned to her waist, her expression was leisurely. Yang Guo quietly said, “Great!” but his face still had a blank expression. The Taoist priestess thought, “How could the stupid boy appreciate this skill? I might as well show it off in front of a blind man.” She said, “Quickly go home and get the hatchet.”

Yang Guo hurried to a nearby farmer’s house, he pretended to limp; his footsteps were heavy, strutting and staggering, appearing clumsy. The Taoist priestess saw he wasn’t a pleasant sight and shouted, “Don’t tell anyone, hurry.”

Yang Guo replied, “Okay!”

He quietly opened the door to the farmer’s house, and saw no one was inside, and assumed that they were working in the fields; from the wall he picked up a short hatchet that was used to chop firewood. He also took an old shirt from a rack and wore it, and then returned still carrying the dumb expression.

Although he was trying making a fool out of the Taoist priestess, he was worried about the safety of Xiao Longnu,

and couldn't stop from having a burdened look on his face.

The Taoist priestess angrily said, "What's with the crying face? Quickly smile for me."

Yang Guo opened his mouth and laughed foolishly.

The Taoist priestess wrinkled her brows and said, "Follow me up the mountain."

Yang Guo quickly said, "I can't...I can't, mother told me not to run around."

The Taoist priestess shouted, "If you don't listen then I'll kill you immediately." She stretched out her left hand and held his ear, while her right hand raised her sword, as if she was about to slash down.

Yang Guo quickly blurted out, "I'll go...I'll go!"

The Taoist priestess thought, "That person is as stupid as a pig, just what I need." She then pulled on his sleeve and started up the mountain. Her lightness kung fu was not weak so naturally her steps were quick. Yang Guo kept on stumbling about, his left foot high, right foot low, he was far behind her and after a while he sat on a rock by the roadside, incessantly wiping away his sweat and was out of breath. The Taoist priestess ran on ahead.

Yang Guo said, "You run like a rabbit, how can I keep up?"

The Taoist priestess saw that the sun was in the west, she was troubled and impatient, she returned and grabbed his arm, and hurriedly went up the mountain.

Yang Guo couldn't keep up, his arms and legs were everywhere, and soon kicked her in the back of the leg.

The Taoist priestess shouted "Ai ya!" and angrily said, "Do you want to die?" But she saw that he was out of breath and

extremely tired, so she stretched out her left hand and grabbed his waist and said, "Let's go!" She seized his body and headed up the mountain, she utilized her lightness kung fu, and in a few moments she had passed over many li.

As Yang Guo was being carried by her, he felt her soft body and smelled her feminine scent, he didn't waste an ounce of energy and let her carry him up the mountain. She hurried for a while and then looked down and saw a smile creep upon his face. He was looking very comfortable; she couldn't stop from being angry, loosened her arm, and tossed him on the ground and angrily shouted, "Are you feeling happy?"

Yang Guo rubbed his backside and called out, "Ai yo, ai yo, the Xian Gu hurt Sha Dan's backside."

The Taoist priestess was angry but was amused at the same time and said, "Why is your surname Sha (Foolish/Dumb)?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes, I'm called Sha Dan. Xian Gu, mother said my surname is not Sha; it's Zhang. Why is your surname Xian (Angel/Immortal)?"

The Taoist priestess said, "Just call me Xian Gu, and don't worry about my surname." She was the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' Li Mochou's disciple Hong Lingbo. She was the young Taoist priestess who was sent to kill the Lu couple and Madam Wu. Yang Guo wanted to know her surname but she didn't reveal it. The Taoist priestess sat on a rock, the wind scattered her hair. Yang Guo secretly glanced at her and thought, "That priestess is quite pretty, but can't compare with Peach Blossom Island's Auntie Guo, and of course cannot compare with my Gu Gu."

Hong Lingbo glanced at Yang Guo, smiled and said; "Sha Dan, why are you staring at me?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm just looking what reason is there? If you don't let me look, I won't look, what's so special?"

Hong Lingbo said, "Look then! Hey, am I nice to look at?" She then took out a comb from her pocket, and slowly combed her hair.

Yang Guo said, "You are nice to look at, but...but..."

Hong Lingbo said, "But what?"

Yang Guo said, "But you are not white enough."

She had always regarded her skin as white and smooth as gems, when she heard him say this; she couldn't refrain from getting angry, she stood up and shouted, "Sha Dan, do you want to die? Saying I'm not white enough...humph!"

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "Not white enough."

Hong Lingbo said, "Who's whiter than me?"

Yang Guo said, "The one that slept by my side last night is much whiter than you."

Hong Lingbo said, "Who? Is it one of your family members?" The thought of killing the woman who had whiter skin than her crossed her mind.

Yang Guo said, "Nope, it's my family's white lamb."

Hong Lingbo turned her anger into laughter and said, "You really are stupid, how can you compare a person with an animal? Let's go!" She took his upper arm and hurried up the mountain. Straight ahead was the road to Chongyang Palace, but Hong Lingbo headed west, in the direction of the Tomb of the Living Dead.

Yang Guo thought, "Indeed she is trying to find my Gu Gu."

Hong Lingbo ran for a while and then took out a map from her pocket, looking for her destination.

Yang Guo said, "Xian Gu, we can't go ahead, there are ghosts in the forest."

Hong Lingbo said, "How do you know this?"

Yang Guo said, "The forest has a large tomb, the tomb has evil spirits, no one dares to go near it."

Hong Lingbo was delighted and thought, "True enough, the Tomb of the Living Dead is around here."

In the past few years, she has been under the tutelage of Li Mochou, and her martial arts had made good progress. In Shanxi, she helped her master to defeat many people of the Wulin world, and pleased her master. She heard her master mention the matter of dueling with the Quanzhen Elders, and said if she'd mastered the "Jade Heart Manual", she wouldn't have feared the Quanzhen Taoists. She said that there was a pile of manuals and scriptures of their sect's skills in the tomb. Hong Lingbo asked why she didn't go to the tomb and study their sect's skills. Li Mochou ambiguously replied, saying that she had conceded the place to her younger apprentice sister, there wasn't much friendly feeling between the two, and were not in contact with each other. Li Mochou was extremely proud, the many times she tried to enter the tomb, being found out and being sent scurrying away were not mentioned to her disciple. Instead she said that her apprentice sister was young, her martial arts were ordinary, and being the elder apprentice sister it wasn't right to bully the younger one. She then encouraged her master to enter the tomb and take the manuals. In reality, there wasn't a day that Li Mochou didn't think about this, but she wasn't familiar with the booby traps in the tomb, and so did not dare to do anything. When she heard her disciple talking about this she just smiled and did not reply.

Hong Lingbo mentioned this many times, but when she saw that her master did not care one way or another, she secretly decided to be more attentive, and asked her about the way to Mount Zhongnan's tomb. She managed to draw a map, but she didn't know that Li Mochou had not revealed everything to her. At this time, Li Mochou had sent her on a mission to kill one of their enemies; after she finished, she went to Mount Zhongnan by herself, and by coincidence met Yang Guo; she now ordered Yang Guo to chop down the pine trees that were blocking the way to the tomb.

Yang Guo thought that even with a year and a half of pine chopping, they would not be anywhere near the tomb; but he pretended to be dumb and followed her orders. More than half an hour later, the sky became dark, they had not even traveled a few li, and they were still very far from the tomb. He was becoming more and more anxious about Xiao Longnu. He thought, why not lead her forward to the tomb and see what she has planned; so he raised his hatchet and hacked down a few times, and then hacked a rock, sparks flew and the edge of the hatchet rolled up.

He loudly shouted, "Ai ya, ai yo, there's a rock here. The hatchet is ruined; father is going to beat me. I...I need to go back home."

Hong Lingbo was extremely anxious, she looked for the way to the tomb, she must enter the tomb tonight, and shouted out, "Sha Dan, stay here!"

Yang Guo said, "Xian Gu, aren't you scared of ghosts?"

Hong Lingbo said, "If ghosts try to scare me then I'll chop them in half with my sword."

Yang Guo was happy and said, "You aren't lying to me?"

Hong Lingbo said, "Why should I lie to you?"

Yang Guo said, "Since ghosts are scared of you, I'll take you to the large tomb. If ghosts come out, you must scare them away!"

Hong Lingbo delightedly said, "You know the way to the tomb? Quickly take me there." Yang Guo was afraid that she was going to become suspicious and so made her promise three times that she must kill the evil ghosts. Hong Lingbo comforted him, and told him to relax, and promised him that even if ten ghosts come out she will kill them all.

Yang Guo said, "A few years ago, I was grazing my lambs near the tomb and fell asleep, when I woke up it was the middle of the night. I saw a female ghost dressed in white exiting the tomb, it scared me to death, and I tripped while I was trying to run away and cracked my head, look there's a scar here." He then walked up to her, wanting her to feel his forehead. She had carried him all along the way, and he felt that she had the scent of orchids around her, leaning against her was quite relaxing. He continued with his plan, and put his forehead in front of her face.

Hong Lingbo laughed and said, "Sha Dan!" and just felt his forehead, she didn't feel any scars but didn't really notice and said, "Take me there quickly."

Yang Guo took her hand and lead her out of the forest, and took her to the secret path leading to the tomb. It was nearing the middle of the night; there was no light from the stars or moon. Yang Guo took her hand, and felt a warm and soft hand and wondered, "Gu Gu and her are girls, why is it Gu Gu's hands are as cold as ice and hers are warm." He took her hand and pulled it. If anyone from the Wulin world treated Hong Lingbo with any disrespect, she would have killed them, but she knew that Yang Guo was just a simple fool, and she wanted his help. She thought that he was handsome, she was secretly quite pleased and quietly said,

“That Sha Dan is not completely stupid; he knows that I’m good looking.”

Very soon, Yang Guo had led Hong Lingbo to the tomb. When he’d left the tomb he was confused and flustered, he didn’t close the tomb’s door; now he saw the large stone slab that was used as the door was still to the side. His heart jumped around and he prayed, “I hope Gu Gu is not dead so I’ll be able to see her again.” He decided that he couldn’t mess around with Hong Lingbo, and said, “Xian Gu, I’ll lead you forward, if a ghost eats me up and I become a ghost, I’ll haunt you forever.” They then entered.

Hong Lingbo thought, “That Sha Dan is strangely brave.” She didn’t give it any more thought, and followed closely in the dark, she had heard from her master that the paths in the Tomb of the Living Dead were complicated, all you need to do is take one wrong step and you’ll be lost. She watched Yang Guo moving without delaying for the slightest second, turning to the east and then twisting to the west, opening a door there, and pushing a stone over here, like he knew the way.

Hong Lingbo thought, “What’s so hard about the paths in the tomb? Could it be that master lied to me, in case I entered alone?” In just a few moments, Yang Guo had led her deep into the tomb, outside Xiao Longnu’s room.

He opened the door lightly, and listened carefully, he couldn’t hear anything and wanted to call out “Gu Gu!” but remembered that Hong Lingbo was right behind him so he quietly said, “We’re here!”

Hong Lingbo was now deep within the tomb, although she was skilled in martial arts and daring, she felt uneasy. When she heard Yang Guo say this, she quickly entered and took out a match, and lit the candle on the table. She saw a girl in white lying on a bed. She knew she would meet her Martial

Uncle in the tomb, but she didn't know that she would find her lying down peacefully, not knowing whether she was sleeping or ignoring her. She held her sword across her chest and said, "Disciple Hong Lingbo greets Martial Uncle."

Yang Guo opened his mouth, it felt as if his heart jumped out of it, he concentrated on the Xiao Longnu's movements, but she didn't move an inch. After a while, she gave out a quiet 'en' sound. From when Hong Lingbo first said something to Xiao Longnu up to Xiao long Nu's reply, Yang Guo was extremely anxious and worried, he wanted to throw himself on Xiao Longnu to hold her and cry. When he heard her reply he was very relieved; he was also extremely delighted and wasn't able to hold in his tears and cried loudly.

Hong Lingbo asked, "Sha Dan, what's wrong with you?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm...I'm scared."

Xiao Longnu slowly turned around and quietly said, "Don't be afraid, I've just died once, it wasn't painful at all."

Hong Lingbo saw that she had an extremely beautiful face, and was startled. She thought, "Such a beautiful girl living on this earth!" She couldn't but feel inferior, and said, "Disciple Hong Lingbo greets Martial Uncle."

Xiao Longnu quietly said, "My apprentice sister? Is she here?"

Hong Lingbo said, "My master told me to come here first, and asked about Martial Uncle's well being."

Xiao Longnu said, "Just leave, this place is not for you, even your master can't come here."

Hong Lingbo saw that her face looked unwell, there were bloodstains on her chest, she was short of breath when

talking, it looked like she had a serious injury. She then let down her guard slightly and asked, "Where's Grandma Sun?"

Xiao Longnu said, "She died a long time ago...just leave now."

Hong Lingbo became even more relaxed and thought; "It's fate; who would have thought that I, Hong Lingbo, would become the heir to the tomb." She saw that Xiao Longnu seemed to be on death's doorsteps, and was afraid that if she died, no one would know the whereabouts of the "Jade Heart Manual". She quickly said, "Martial Uncle, Master ordered me to obtain the "Jade Heart manual". If you give it to me, then I'll immediately help you cure your injury."

Xiao Longnu had practiced the tomb's martial arts for a long time, she didn't have any emotions, nothing was able to affect her; but now she was suffering a serious internal injury and lost her self control. When she heard what she said, she was alarmed, and fainted again. Hong Lingbo dashed over and searched her body, Xiao Longnu woke up and said, "Where's my apprentice sister? Get her here; I have something to say to her."

Hong Lingbo saw that their sect's highest arts were within her grasp, she couldn't wait, she chuckled and took out silver needles from her pocket, and said, "Martial Uncle, you recognize these needles, if you don't give the "Jade Heart Manual" to me then don't blame me for being impolite."

Yang Guo had experienced the poison of the "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" before; he had only held one in his hand and he felt the effects. If one pierced the body, what's going to happen then? He saw the danger and quickly called out, "Xian Gu, there's a ghost, I'm scared." He threw himself over her, hugging her back, and used his finger to press down on the 'Chaste Shoulder' (jian zhen) and 'Main Entrance' (jing men) pressure points. Hong Lingbo could not have dreamed

that 'Sha Dan' would possess such advanced martial art skills, her whole body became numb and she stood there paralyzed. Yang Guo was afraid she had the ability to unblock her pressure points so he heavily pressed down on 'Large Bone' (ju gu) pressure point, and said, "Gu Gu, this girl is really evil, should I prick her a few times with these needles?" He wrapped his hand with his garment and picked up the needles.

Hong Lingbo wasn't able to move an inch and she heard what he said clearly. He saw him pick up the needles and laughing 'ha-ha' towards her, she was frightened out of her wits. She wanted to plead but couldn't open her mouth, her eyes revealed the state of mind she was in.

Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'Er, close the door to the tomb in case my apprentice sister arrives."

Yang Guo said, "Yes!"

He was about to turn around when he heard an enchanting female voice from behind saying, "Apprentice sister, how are you? I arrived a long time ago."

Yang Guo turned around alarmed, under the candlelight, he saw a beautiful Taoist priestess standing at the door, her cheeks peach, her mouth seemed to form a smile but it did not, it was the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' Li Mochou.

When Hong Lingbo first started to ask about the whereabouts of the Tomb of the Living Dead, she knew that Hong Lingbo would go to the tomb herself to steal the "Jade Heart Manual". When she sent Hong Lingbo to Changnan to kill, she had really planned it all. She secretly followed all along; she saw how Hong Lingbo met Yang Guo, how they entered the tomb, how she tried to force Xiao Longnu to hand over the manual and how she lost. Because she was extremely

quick and her steps extremely light, Hong Lingbo and Yang Guo did not notice her. Now she revealed herself.

Xiao Longnu got up and called out, "Apprentice sister!" then coughed incessantly.

Li Mochou coldly pointed at Yang Guo and said, "Who is he? Ancestor Grandma's rule, no man is allowed to take one step into the tomb, and you allow him here?" Xiao Longnu was coughing violently, and had no way to reply. Yang Guo stood in front of Xiao Longnu protecting her and clearly said, "She's my Gu Gu, this is none of your business."

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Good Sha Dan, you're very brave!" She waved her fly whisk three times, making three 'fu' sounds. Although the three moves were done one after the other, they arrived at the same time. It was one of the lethal stances of the Ancient Tomb sect; other sect's fighters do not know the essence of the stance and would have their bones broken as soon as she used it. Yang Guo was familiar with all the skills of the Ancient Tomb sect, though his internal energy wasn't as profound as Li Mochou's he was still able to dodge the three moves in one "Three Swallows in the Forest". Li Mochou's fly whisk returned, she was secretly alarmed, she saw that his dodging techniques were from their sect, she sternly said, "Apprentice sister, who is this little scoundrel?"

Xiao Longnu was afraid that she was going to throw up blood again and didn't dare raise her voice, and quietly said, "Guo'Er, greet your Martial Uncle."

Yang Guo gave a 'humph' sound and said, "She counts as my Martial Uncle?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Bend your ear over, I've got something to say to you."

Yang Guo knew that she wanted him to kowtow to Li Mochou, but he didn't want to, so he still lowered his ear.

Xiao Longnu quietly said, "On the corner of the bed by my leg, there is a stone panel, turn it to the right and quickly leap up onto the bed."

Li Mochou thought that she was ordering her disciple to apologize to her; in front of her was a seriously injured person, the other was a youngster, why would she care about them? She was thinking of a way to torture them and force her apprentice sister to hand over the "Jade Heart Manual".

Yang Guo nodded his head, and clearly said, "Disciple greets Martial Uncle!" He slowly stretched out his hand towards the part of the bed near Xiao Longnu's leg, indeed there was a stone panel, so he turned it with all his strength and quickly leaped onto the bed.

Li Mochou was shocked, and remembered there were booby traps everywhere in the tomb. Her master was biased; she concealed them from her and taught her apprentice sister where they were and how to use them; she immediately dashed over to grab Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu had no strength to retaliate at present. The bed was heavy, Li Mochou had spotted this earlier, and she was extremely quick in her movements and was about to grab Xiao Longnu off the bed. Yang Guo was alarmed, and with all his strength pushed out a palm to repel her hand away. He suddenly saw darkness in front of him, two thudding sounds, and the bed had dropped into a lower level. The stone slab on the ceiling automatically pushed back up; Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo were separated from Li Mochou and her disciple.

Yang Guo could make out that there was a table and some chairs in the room, he made his way to the table and took out

a match and lit a half burned candle.

Xiao Longnu sighed and said, "There isn't enough blood in my body, I am unable to circulate my internal energy to heal myself. Even if I wasn't hurt, the two of us would not be able to beat my apprentice sister". When Yang Guo heard her say there wasn't enough blood in her body, he raised his left arm, and singled out his vein on his wrist and bit down on it as hard as he could; blood came flowing out. He placed his wound by Xiao Longnu's mouth, and his blood dripped in.

Xiao Longnu's body was ice cold, when the warm blood entered her, her body started to warm up, she knew this wasn't right and wanted to struggle, but Yang Guo knew what she was thinking and pressed down on a pressure point on her waist, stopping her from moving. After a while, the wound started to dry up, Yang Guo bit on it again, and then bit his right wrist. After donating blood several times, Yang Guo felt faint and dizzy, he sat up straight and unsealed her pressure point. Xiao Longnu looked at him for a while and didn't say anything then started to heal herself. Yang Guo saw that the candle was about to burn out, and replaced it.

That night the two of them meditated together. Yang Guo was recovering from his lost of blood. After taking in Yang Guo's blood, Xiao Longnu strengthened, and knew that her life was saved. She opened her eyes and smiled slightly towards Yang Guo. Her cheeks were normally white, but Yang Guo now saw that they were red, like rouge on white jade; he was delighted and said, "Gu Gu, you've recovered." Xiao Longnu nodded her head. Yang Guo was happy but didn't know what to say.

Xiao Longnu said, "We'll go to Grandma Sun's room, I have something to say to you."

Yang Guo said, "Aren't you tired?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I'm fine." She stretched out her hand and pulled on a bracket on the wall, a stone slab moved and revealed a path. Yang Guo had never seen this path before. Xiao Longnu led him in the darkness and eventually arrived at Grandma Sun's room.

She lit a candle, and turned Yang Guo's garment into a bag, and placed her gold silk gloves in it. Yang Guo stood there looking at her and asked, "Gu Gu, what are you doing?"

Xiao Longnu didn't reply, and placed two jars of Jade Bee honey into the bag.

Yang Guo delightedly said, "Gu Gu, we are leaving, aren't we? That will be great."

Xiao Longnu said, "You go by yourself, I know you are a good boy, you treat me very well."

Yang Guo was shocked and said, "What about you?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I made an oath to my master, I must stay in the tomb and never leave. Unless...unless...I won't leave." She shook her head as she said this.

He saw that her face was stern, her voice still, she wasn't going to allow any back chat from him so he didn't say anything. But this was an important matter; he eventually plucked up the courage and said, "Gu Gu, if you don't go, I won't go. I want to stay with you."

Xiao Longnu said, "Right now, my apprentice sister is probably guarding the paths out of the tomb, she wants to force me to hand over the "Jade Heart Manual". My kung fu is not near hers, and I'm hurt, I won't be able to beat her, will I?"

Yang Guo said, "No."

Xiao Longnu said, "The food we've got left will only last twenty days if we stretch it, if we also eat the Jade Bee honey, we'll last a month. After the month passes, then what?"

Yang Guo stood there for a while and said, "We'll rush out, although we won't beat Martial Uncle, it may be possible to escape with our lives."

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "You know your Martial Uncle's martial arts and temper, and should know that we won't be able to escape. Not only will she torture us, but our deaths will be unbearable."

Yang Guo said, "If this is the case, it will be even harder for me to escape by myself."

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "No! I'll fight with her and lure her deep within the tomb; this will give you a chance to escape. When you get to the entrance, shift the large stone on the left, and pull on the brackets, two large stones weighing ten tonnes will drop down, sealing off the tomb forever."

Yang Guo became even more startled as he heard this, and said, "Gu Gu, you'll be able to open the stones, won't you?"

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "No. Years ago when Wang Chongyang was rebelling against the Jin, he made a plan; this stone tomb was his storage place for money, supplies and weapons. It is heavily booby trapped, the layout a secret, and he set up two large ten tonne stone slabs at the entrance, called the "Dragon Snapping Stones" (duan long shi). In case they failed against the Jin and the Jin found out about this place and came to attack, it would be a few against many. In that case he would lower the stone, sealing off the tomb; the attackers of the tomb would not be able to leave with their lives. Once the stone drops, it will not open

again. You know how narrow the path leading into the tomb is; it only allows for one person at a time to pass. Even if there were thousands of the enemy that entered the tomb, they could only form a long line; only one person could touch the large stone and that one person will not be able to lift the stone. With this plan, that old Taoist was saying that even in death he will not give in, and he wanted to perish with the enemy. After he failed against the Jin, he lived by himself in the tomb. The Jin emperor knew where he was, and sent tens of martial artists to kill him; in the end they were all captured or killed by Wang Chongyang. Not one returned. Later, that Jin emperor died suddenly, a new emperor was appointed, and left him alone, and so the two 'Dragon Snapping Stones' were never used. When Wang Chongyang left the tomb, he told Ancestor Grandma about all of the tomb's booby traps.

The more Yang Guo listened the more startled he became, with tears in his eyes he said, "Gu Gu, I'll follow you in life and death."

Xiao Longnu said, "What use is there in following me? You said the outside world was a great place to play, just go and play. With your standard of martial arts, the Quanzhen Taoists will not be able to do much to you. You managed to trick Hong Lingbo, you are much cleverer than me; there is no need for me to look after you."

Yang Guo rushed up to her and hugged her, crying, "Gu Gu, if I'm not able to leave with you, I won't be able to enjoy my life."

Xiao Longnu was cold and loveless, her words were cold and harsh, but right now for some reason she felt a rush of warm blood to her chest, her eyes ached, she wanted to cry. She was startled and remembered what her master had told her before she died, "The kung fu you are practicing is an emotionless type of advanced martial arts, if, later on, you

cry and reveal your true feelings, not will only your martial arts suffer, your life will be in danger. Remember this.” Then she pushed Yang Guo away and coldly said, “Whatever I say, you have to listen.”

Yang Guo saw that she was still strict and stern, and didn't dare to say another word. Xiao Longnu put the bag on his back and took a long sword off the wall, and gave it to him and then sternly said, “When I tell you to go, you must immediately go, once you are outside, immediately lower the stone to close off the tomb. Your Martial Uncle is extremely ruthless, the chance will be gone very quick, are you going to obey me?”

Yang Guo choked, “Yes.”

Xiao Longnu said, “If you don't do as I have told you, when I'm dead in hell, I'll hate you forever. Go!” She took hold of his hand, opened the door and left. Whenever Yang Guo touched her hand, it always felt like ice, but now in her grasp, he felt her palm was sometimes cold, sometimes warm, and completely different from normal. But right now he was too emotional; he had no time to think about such trivial things, and followed her out. After traveling for a while, Xiao Longnu touched a stone slab and quietly said, “They are just in front. I'll lure my apprentice sister away, and you'll leave by rushing to the exit in the northwest corner. If Hong Lingbo chases you, attack her with ‘Jade Bee Needles’.” Yang Guo's heart was fluttering all over the place, and just nodded.

The “Jade Bee Needles” are a skill of the Ancient Tomb sect; years ago Lin Chaoying had two lethal projectiles, one was the “Soul Freezing Needles”, the other was the “Jade Bee Needles”. The “Jade Bee Needle” was a gold needle that was as thin as a hair, sixty percent was made of gold, the other forty percent consists of steel, and had a drop of poison from

the Jade Bees on it. Although it was small, the gold was heavy and allowed it to be thrown over a long distance. This projectile was too venomous, Lin Chaoying rarely used it; after her middle age, her kung fu had reached the acme of perfection, and so there wasn't a need to use them at all. Because Li Mochou had not agreed to swear an oath that she would remain in the tomb forever, when her master passed on the skill of the "Soul Freezing Needles" she did not teach her the "Jade Bee Needles".

Xiao Longnu waited, and then rotated the brackets on the wall, two 'zha' 'zha' sounds were made as the wall slowly opened to the left. Her pair of silk belts immediately flew out, the left heading for Li Mochou, the right heading for Hong Lingbo, her body flying extremely swiftly forwards. Li Mochou had long ago unblocked Hong Lingbo's pressure points and she had shouted at her for a little while. They were in the room trying to figure out where they were and looking for a way out when suddenly they saw Xiao Longnu attacking, the both of them were startled.

Li Mochou's fly whisk flew out to block Xiao Longnu's belt. The fly whisk and the silk belt were soft objects, soft against soft, but Li Mochou's internal energy was superior to that of Xiao Longnu's, the two weapons clashed, and Xiao Longnu's weapon was sent back. The belt in her left hand returned, the right was sent out, in just a short while many stances were exchanged, the two silk belts were gentle and swift. Li Mochou was startled and angry, thinking, "So master was biased, she did not teach me these skills!" But she was able to defend against it, but didn't want to try to kill her, firstly the "Jade Heart Manual" wasn't yet in her hands, if she killed her it would be difficult to find the manual in this large stone tomb, and secondly, she wanted to see what other great skills that her master had bestowed on Xiao Longnu.

Hong Lingbo had always regarded herself as intelligent, but today she was tricked by a boy, she was fooled into thinking he was dumb for over half a day and wasn't able to see through it. She was furious with him, she saw that her master and Xiao Longnu were fighting heatedly, and said, "Sha Dan, your little scoundrel's trickery isn't bad." She took out her swords, and took half a step and called out, "See if I can cut your nose off." Her swords chopped and slashed, 'chi' 'chi' 'chi' as several stances were unleashed. Yang Guo saw that she was advancing fiercely and could only raise his sword to block. In normal circumstances, Yang Guo would make some sarcastic comments and joke around with her, but now he was thinking about having to part with Xiao Longnu, warm tears were in his eyes, everything was blurry in front of him, he made a few stances, but there wasn't any intention of attacking.

Hong Lingbo had used many stances; although she wasn't able to hurt him, she saw that there was no strength in his stances. She thought that he must possess average skills. She became even more careless, and didn't even consider the fact that he had sealed her pressure points before.

Li Mochou and Xiao Longnu fought for another ten moves, Li Mochou's fly whisk flipped up wrapping around her left silk belt and said, "Apprentice sister, take a look at my skills." She dispersed her chi into her weapon and the belt was cut into two pieces. In normal duels with weapons, it was difficult for one person's weapon to shatter the enemy's weapon. The fly whisk and the silk belts were extremely soft objects, she had just used her fly whisk to split the belt in half, and this was ten times more difficult than using a sword to shatter another sword. Li Mochou demonstrated her skills and her face swelled with pride.

Xiao Longnu didn't react, and said, "How good are your skills?" Her half belt shot out and wrapped itself around the

thread end of the fly whisk, the belt in her right hand shot out and tangled the handle, one pulled to the left and one to the right, and the fly whisk snapped in half. In terms of power, this move was lower than when Li Mochou had snapped the belt in half, but it was extremely fast and the technique of dispersing her chi into the belts was exquisite, Li Mochou's move cannot compare with Xiao Longnu in this department. She was slightly alarmed and threw down her weapon; she snatched the belts, gradually forcing Xiao Longnu back. Another ten moves passed and Xiao Longnu was forced to the eastern wall, and saw that she had nowhere else to go. She suddenly touched the wall and called out, "Guo'Er, escape quickly!" A 'ka' sound was heard as an exit appeared in the northwest corner.

Li Mochou was shocked and quickly turned around, wanting to stop Yang Guo. Xiao Longnu threw down her belts and threw out two palms with the intent to kill. Li Mochou had to turn around to block it.

Xiao Longnu shouted, "Guo'Er, why aren't you leaving?"

Yang Guo looked at Xiao Longnu and saw that there was no over turning of this decision and shouted, "Gu Gu, I'm going now!" He quickly threw out three stances, the sword tip pointing towards Hong Lingbo.

Hong Lingbo had seen Yang Guo's sword stances were weak, but of a sudden it had strengthened so much, she could only jump back from the danger. Yang Guo darted out of the door, he turned around, wanting to look at Xiao Longnu for one last time.

Xiao Longnu and her apprentice sister were fighting bare handed, after practicing the "Jade Heart Manual" her variation of stances had greatly increased, although she was seriously wounded, she managed to hold her own after tens of moves. She saw the image of Yang Guo's back at the door,

and thought how they would never meet each other again, her chest heated up, her eyes ached, wanting to cry. She has never shown her true emotions before; today she wanted to cry twice. She was frightened.

When clashing palms with a highly skilled fighter, how can one allow oneself to be slow? Li Mochou saw Xiao Longnu standing there and took the opportunity to advance; she grabbed her wrist and sealed the 'Returning Orthodox' (hui zong) pressure point, and hooked out a leg. Xiao Longnu wasn't able to stand upright and fell onto the floor.

Yang Guo turned his head around, only to see Xiao Longnu hooked onto the floor by her apprentice sister. He then saw Li Mochou was about to harm his master, blood rushed through his chest and he called out, "Don't harm my master!" He darted back into the room, then leapt over to her and grabbed Li Mochou by the waist. This move didn't belong to the stances of any school or sect; it was just an urgent reaction from Yang Guo in this dangerous situation.

Li Mochou was preoccupied with wanting to pick up Xiao Longnu, and wasn't prepared for Yang Guo coming back and grabbing her, for the time being she wasn't able to escape. She was ruthless and violent, not restrained by the practice of religion like she should be, but she guarded her body like a treasure. After spending many years wandering the world of Jianghu, she was still a virgin, and now suddenly she was held tightly by Yang Guo. All she felt now was the warmth of a man spreading from her back into her heart, her heart stirred, her whole body softened, her face was red, and there was no strength in her hands. Xiao Longnu took the chance to unblock her pressure point, but Hong Lingbo was now pointing her sword towards Yang Guo's back. Xiao Longnu was looking up from the ground, when she saw the sword coming she rolled to the left, and moved Yang Guo and Li

Mochou at the same time, Hong Lingbo's sword pierced thin air.

Xiao Longnu leapt up and shouted, "Guo'Er, get out quickly!"

Yang Guo held tightly onto Li Mochou's waist and called out, "Gu Gu, get out quickly, I'm holding her down, she won't be able to move." During this time, Li Mochou's head was filled with thoughts, she knew that this was a urgent situation where there is only a hair separating life and death, but being held by Yang Guo caused her heart to be enchanted, and didn't think of escaping.

Xiao Longnu was curious and wondered, "With my apprentice sister's martial arts, how could she be held down by Guo'Er, not moving an inch? Could it be that her pressure points have been blocked?"

She saw that Hong Lingbo's left hand was about to try to pierce Yang Guo again, so she stretched out two fingers and pushed the flat side of the sword in her right hand, the sword leaped up, heading for the sword in Hong Lingbo's left hand. A clashing sound, Hong Lingbo's hands became numb, the handles of the swords dropped on the floor. She jumped back in shock.

When the swords clashed, sparks flew, it was during this time when Li Mochou noticed that Xiao Longnu had looked at her strangely; she couldn't stop from being furious and shouted, "Little punk, do you want to die?" She generated chi into her arms and escaped from Yang Guo's hold, she leapt up and was about to throw out a palm towards Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu was busy concentrating on Yang Guo's movements when she suddenly felt Li Mochou's palm arriving, there was no time to use stances to neutralize the palm, she could only return a palm to block, but she felt her apprentice sister's profound internal energy, she felt pain in

her chest. She saw Yang Guo had picked himself up, and was coming to help her, she shouted, “Guo’Er, you aren’t going to listen to me, are you?”

Yang Guo said, “I’ll listen to whatever you say, but I won’t listen to what you are saying now. Gu Gu, I’ll follow you in life and death.”

Xiao Longnu heard his sincerity in his words, and was touched again, she saw that Li Mochou was about to throw out another palm, she knew right now that with her serious internal injuries, she would not be able to take this palm, so she ducked and darted to the side and picked up Yang Guo, and hurried out of the room through the stone door. Li Mochou followed the blur, and stretched out her hand to grab her back and shouted, “Don’t go!”

Xiao Longnu waved her hand back, ten or so “Jade Bee Needles” were shot back. Li Mochou suddenly smelled the sweet scent of honey, and knew that this projectile was lethal. She was startled and quickly bent back, she knocked into Hong Lingbo and both of them dropped onto the floor.

They heard extremely quiet ‘ding’ ‘ding’ ‘ding’ sounds, as the needles struck the wall, then they heard two ‘zha’ ‘zha’ sounds, it was Xiao Longnu who had taken Yang Guo out of the room, turned the switch, and closed the door.

End of Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 - Chongyang's Markings

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo pushed open one of the stone lids, gently placed her inside the coffin, and then leaped inside, lying together face to face with her. The two of them together in the coffin didn't allow much space to move. Xiao Long Nu was happy and also puzzled.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu rushed through the passages of the tomb, and hurriedly exited the tomb; Yang Guo was delighted and took some deep breaths under the starlight. He said, "Gu Gu, I'll lower the 'Dragon Snapping Stone' and trap the two evil women in the tomb." As he said this he searched around for the switch to the booby trap.

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "Wait, let me return inside first. My master instructed me to guard the tomb, and mustn't allow it to fall into other people hands."

Yang Guo said, "If we block the door, they won't be able to live."

Xiao Longnu said, "If that happens, I won't be able to return to the tomb. I will never dare to disobey my master. Not like you!" She stared at him.

Yang Guo's blood rose through his chest, he held her arm and said, "Gu Gu, I'll listen to you orders."

Xiao Longnu resisted her feelings, she was afraid of getting emotional, she didn't dare to say another word and pulled his hand off, she entered the tomb and said, "Lower the stone!" She kept her back to him, she was afraid she was going to change her mind so she didn't look at him again.

Yang Guo made up his mind, he breathed in deeply, his chest was filled with the fragrance of flowers and grasses, he looked up and saw the sky filled with stars, glittering continuously, and thought, "This is the last time I'll be able

to look at stars.” He quickly went to the left of the tomb’s monument, and followed the instructions of Xiao Longnu, he used his internal energy to shift a stone, behind it was a round stone, he held the round stone and pulled out. The stone revealed a hole, sand started to pour out, and the two large stones above the tomb’s door descended slowly down.

The two stones weighed over ten tonnes, years ago when Wang Chongyang was designing the tomb; he had used the combined strength of hundreds to complete it. Now the tomb was being sealed, even if Li Mochou, Xiao Longnu and Hong Lingbo’s skills were higher, they will not be able to escape from the tomb. Xiao Longnu heard the sound of the stones descending; she couldn’t hold back her tears and turned around. Yang Guo waited for the stone to be two feet away from the ground and then suddenly used a stance “The Jade Girl’s Dive” (yu nuu tou suo), his body like an arrow darting through the space.

Xiao Longnu gave out an alarmed call, Yang Guo got up, smiled and said, “Gu Gu, you can’t send me out anymore.” As he finished, heavy loud sounds were heard, the two large stones had reached the ground.

Xiao Longnu’s tears and emotions reached their peak, her face looked as if she was going to faint again, she leaned against the stone wall out of breath, after a while she said, “Fine, we’ll die together.” She held Yang Guo’s hand and went back into the heart of the tomb.

Li Mochou and her disciple were searching around for the switch everywhere; they didn’t have the slightest clue and were getting anxious, when the two suddenly appeared. They couldn’t help from being pleased. Li Mochou’s body immediately darted behind the two, blocking their path of escape.

Xiao Longnu coldly said, "Apprentice sister, I'll take you to a place."

Li Mochou didn't reply and thought, "There are traps everywhere in the tomb, don't listen to her. If she's up to something then I won't be able to guard against it."

Xiao Longnu said, "I'm taking you to see Master's tomb, if you don't want to, fine."

Li Mochou said, "There is no need to use Master's name to lie to me." Xiao Longnu chuckled and didn't reply, and walked out of the door. Li Mochou felt that her words seemed like an order, it sounded like no one can disobey, and so the two of them followed, taking care in every step, not daring to be careless. Xiao Longnu held Yang Guo's hand and led the way, she wasn't afraid of being ambushed by Li Mochou, and led the two to the coffin room.

Li Mochou had never been here; she remembered the teachings of her master and felt slightly touched; but then she thought of how her Master was biased and her emotions immediately changed to anger. She didn't kowtow to her Master's coffin and said, "Our master disciple relationship has long been cut; why have you brought me here?"

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "There are two empty coffins, one for me and one for you. I'll let you pick, which one do you want?" She pointed to the two coffins.

Li Mochou was alarmed and shouted, "You dare to make fun of me?" As she finished she threw out a palm towards Xiao Longnu's chest. She didn't know that Xiao Longnu would ignore the palm when she saw it coming. Li Mochou was alarmed and thought, "This palm will kill you." The palm was inches away from Xiao Longnu's chest, when she took the palm back.

Xiao Longnu said calmly, "Apprentice sister, the tomb's 'Dragon Snapping Stones' have been activated!"

Li Mochou's face immediately turned white, although she didn't know much about the tomb's booby traps, she knew that the 'Dragon Snapping Stones' were the tomb's most powerful and last line of defense. Years ago her master had come up against a strong enemy, she almost activated the 'Dragon Snapping Stones', blocking the enemy outside, but eventually she was able to hurt the enemy with the "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" and "Jade Bee Needles". She would never have guessed that her apprentice sister would trap herself in the tomb, alarmed and frightened, her voice quavered, "You have another way out, don't you?"

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "When the 'Dragon Snapping Stones' are set, there is no other way out of the tomb, don't you know this?"

Li Mochou clutched Xiao Longnu's dress and said, "You lie!"

Xiao Longnu didn't move and said, "The 'Jade Heart Manual' that master left is over there, if you want to take a look, go ahead. Guo'er and I are here; if you want to kill us, go ahead. But if you want to leave the tomb alive, then I'm afraid it won't be possible!"

Li Mochou's hand gradually loosened, and she stood still. She saw that Xiao Longnu had a carefree air, and knew that she wasn't lying and said, "Fine, I'll kill you two first!" She threw out a palm at Xiao Longnu. Yang Guo quickly moved in front of Xiao Longnu's body, shielding her and called out, "Kill me first!"

Li Mochou's palm became heavy, when the palm reached Xiao Longnu she wasn't able to exert its power, she looked at Yang Guo with hate and said, "The way you are protecting her, you are willing to die for her, aren't you?"

Yang Guo calmly said, "That's correct!"

Li Mochou's left hand darted out and took the sword from his waist, and pointed it at his throat and said, "I am only going to kill one person. Tell me, is it going to be you or her?" Yang Guo didn't reply, he only looked at Xiao Longnu and smiled. The two of them had already forgotten about life and death; they didn't care who Li Mochou was going to kill.

Li Mochou sighed and said, "Apprentice sister, your oath has been released, and you can leave the mountain now."

Years ago, the ancient Tomb's founder Lin Chaoying recollected her feelings for Wang Chongyang, and was unable to forget him in the end. A broken hearted Lin Chaoying made a rule, those who wanted to be her heir will first have to swear an oath that they will live in the tomb forever, never to leave Mount Zhongnan; but if there was a man who was willing to die for them, then the oath will be released. But the man must not know this oath. Lin Chaoying was positive that there wasn't a man on earth who treated love above all else. The hero Wang Chongyang had become a Taoist, for her there wouldn't be a man who would die willingly for their loved one. If there was such a man, her descendants will not leave the mountain in vain. Li Mochou entered the sect before Xiao Longnu, but because she didn't take the oath, Xiao Longnu became the heir.

Li Mochou saw that Yang Guo was sincere towards Xiao Longnu, and couldn't help becoming envious. She became angry again as she remembered how Lu Zhanyuan rejected her, she frowned as she called out, "Apprentice sister, you are very lucky." She thrust the sword towards Yang Guo's throat. Xiao Longnu saw that she was really going to kill him, now that the time had come, she wasn't able to stop herself from saving him. She waved her left hand; more than ten "Jade Bee Needles" were thrown out.

Li Mochou quickly leapt back to avoid the poisonous needles. Xiao Longnu took Yang Guo's hand and darted to the door, she turned around and said, "Apprentice sister, it doesn't matter whether my oath has been released or not, our four lives will perish in the tomb. I don't want to see your faces, just go and die on your own." She extended her hand to a switch and activated it, the stone door descended, separating the four again.

Xiao Longnu was emotional; it was hard for her to walk. Yang Guo took her to Grandma Sun's room to rest, and took out two jars of Jade Bee honey; he fed her a bottle and drank one himself.

Xiao Longnu quietly sighed and said, "Guo'er, why were you willing to die for me?"

Yang Guo said, "On this earth, only you treat me well, why should I be afraid to die for you?"

Xiao Longnu didn't say anything. Half an hour later she said, "If I'd known earlier, then there was no need for us to return to the tomb and die with them. But if we didn't return, I wouldn't have known that you were willingly to die for me; my oath would not have been released."

Yang Guo said, "Why don't we try to find a way to get out of here?"

Xiao Longnu said, "You know about the tomb, so you should know that that there is no way out for us." Yang Guo sighed.

Xiao Longnu said, "You regret it, don't you?"

Yang Guo said, "No, now I'm with you, outside, there's no one that loves me."

Xiao Longnu had not allowed him to say 'you care about me' in the past, and Yang Guo never mentioned it again; but now

she's had a change of heart, when she heard this she couldn't help but feel touched, and asked, "So why did you sigh?"

Yang Guo said, "I was thinking that if we left the mountain, there are countless fun things to do, and with you by my side, life would be immensely enjoyable."

Xiao Longnu had grown up in the tomb, her heart has always been as cold as ice, her master and Grandma Sun never mentioned the matters of the outside world, so of course she never thought about it. Now Yang Guo mentioned it, she felt her emotions soar, but felt blood rising up into her chest, and tried to circulate her chi to counter it, however she wasn't able to make herself calm, and was frightened. She has never experienced this in her life, and knew that after recovering from her injury, she will not be able to recover her internal energy. She didn't know that this method of suppressing her emotions was against the natural flow of things, being loveless doesn't mean you will be able to do this, only by applying chi strictly can one succeed. She was now past twenty, in her time of danger, a young man was willing to die for her, and she didn't want to reveal her true feelings and wanted to guard against injuring herself further. She tried to suppress her thoughts. She sat on the bed and meditated for a while, but became impatient, and got off the bed and walked around, she was becoming bored. Her steps became quicker and she was dashing around the room. Yang Guo saw that her cheeks were red, and she seemed emotional, he had never seen her like this before, and he was startled. After walking around for a while she sat down heavily on the bed, and looked at Yang Guo, and saw a concerned expression on his face and thought, "Right now I am about to die, so is he. Why should we distinguish ourselves as master and disciple, auntie and nephew? If he comes and hugs me, I won't push him away, and will allow him to hold me tightly."

Yang Guo saw that she had tears in her eyes, she was gasping for breath and assumed that she was having a reaction to her injury again and quickly said, “Gu Gu, are you okay?”

Xiao Longnu softly said, “Guo’er, come here.”

Yang Guo went over to the bedside and Xiao Longnu grasped his hand and lightly brushed her face with it and quietly said, “Guo’er, do you love me?”

Yang Guo felt her face was as hot as a fire; he was frightened and quivered, “Does your chest hurt?”

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, “No, my heart feels extremely comfortable. Guo’er, I’m going to die soon, tell me, do you love me very much?”

Yang Guo said, “Of course, on this earth, you are my only loved one.”

Xiao Longnu said, “If another girl treats you the way I treat you, would you treat them like you treat me?”

Yang Guo said, “Whoever treats me well, I’ll treat them well back.” When he said this he felt the hand that Xiao Longnu held him with quivered, and immediately turned cold as ice, he raised his head and saw that her red face had now turned pale and white, as she was normally.

Yang Guo was alarmed and said, “What did I say wrong?”

Xiao Longnu said, “If you are going to love other girls then its better that you don’t love me.”

Yang Guo smiled and said, “We’ll die in a few days, when will I be able to love other girls? Could it be that I’m going to treat Li Mochou and her disciple well?”

Xiao Longnu smiled captivatingly and said, "I'm really stupid. But I want to hear you swear an oath with your own mouth."

Yang Guo said, "Swear what?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I want you to say, from now on you will only have me in your heart, if there is another girl, I will be allowed to kill you."

Yang Guo smiled and said, "It goes without saying, I will never do this, if I actually did something wrong and don't listen to you, then I deserve to die." He then swore, "Disciple Yang Guo, I will only have Gu Gu in my heart in my lifetime, if my heart changes, there will be no need for Gu Gu to kill me, when I see her face I will kill myself."

Xiao Longnu was delighted and said, "Very good, I can relax now." She held his hand tightly, not letting go. Yang Guo felt warmth returning to her hands.

Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'er, I haven't been kind."

Yang Guo quickly said, "No, you have always been kind."

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "I treated you terribly before, at first I kicked you out of the tomb, it was lucky that Grandma Sun made me promise to take care of you. If I didn't turn you away, Grandma Sun would not have died!" When she said this, she couldn't stop tears flowing from her eyes. She had begun to practice martial arts at the age of five, and had never cried since; now she cried heavily, she was in a disturbed state of mind, her bones and joints made cracking noises, and she felt her internal energy draining away from her.

Yang Guo was alarmed and said, "Gu Gu, what's happening? How are you feeling?"

Just as he said this, two 'zha' 'zha' noises were heard from behind and the stone door opened, Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo entered. Once the 'Dragon Snapping Stone' had been set, Li Mochou thought they were going to die anyway so there wasn't any need to be wary of the tomb's booby traps, and boldly dashed throughout the tomb. She managed to go through some rooms before finally arriving at Grandma Sun's room. She knew she must have had extraordinary luck, she managed to avoid the booby traps but she didn't know that the tomb's booby traps were actually designed to repel Jin soldiers, once the large heavy stones had been set, someone must activate the traps to ambush the enemy. Xiao Longnu didn't do this, and so the tomb's booby traps were not armed.

Yang Guo immediately darted across, and blocked Xiao Longnu.

Li Mochou said, "Move out of the way, I have something to say to your master."

Yang Guo was afraid that she was going to harm his master and didn't dare to move and said, "Just say it there."

Li Mochou stared at him for a while and sighed, and said, "There are very few men like you left in this world."

Xiao Longnu got up and asked, "Apprentice sister, is it good or bad that you have described him this way?"

Li Mochou said, "Apprentice sister, you have never left the mountain, you don't know how evil people's hearts can be. Someone who views love and passion as deeply as him, it would be difficult to find another under heaven's skies." She has been hurt by love, her anger and fury was great, and she killed many men in the world who were loving and passionate.

Xiao Longnu was extremely pleased and quietly said, "If that is true, then having him die with me won't make my life be without purpose."

Li Mochou said, "Apprentice sister, who exactly is that person to you? You want to marry him?"

Xiao Longnu said, "No, he is my disciple. He said I treat him extremely well. But whether I have been kind or not, I don't know."

Li Mochou was puzzled, she shook her head and said, "Apprentice sister; let me see your arm." She stretched out her left hand and grasped Xiao Longnu's arm, she lifted her right arm's sleeve and saw on her white skin a red dot, it was the 'shou gong sha' (virginity dot) left by her master. Li Mochou was secretly respectful, "The two of them having a relationship like this in the tomb yet they've kept respect, she is still a pure and untouched virgin." She then rolled up her sleeve, a 'shou gong sha' was on her arm, the sight of two white arms next to each other was captivating. She had no alternative but to be chaste; however her apprentice sister has a lover who was willing to die for her, fortunate and unfortunate. The two women were very different, she couldn't stop herself from sighing, and let go of Xiao Longnu's hand.

Xiao Longnu said, "What have you got to say to me?"

Li Mochou had originally wanted to insult her, saying that she seduced men and had brought the sect to shame, and thereby anger her into revealing the way out of the tomb. But right now she had nothing to say. After a while, she had another idea, and said, "Apprentice sister, I have come to apologize to you."

Xiao Longnu was shocked by this, she knew that her apprentice sister was a very proud woman, never has she

lowered her head to anyone, she didn't know what she wanted. So she calmly replied, "You live your life, and I live mine, we go our own ways, there is no need to apologize for anything."

Li Mochou said, "Apprentice sister listen to me, in my entire life, the happiest time was when I had a lover. There's an old saying 'It's easy to get money and treasures, but it's difficult to find a lover'. There is no need to talk about sister's bitter life. That young man treats you well, you do not lack anything."

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "Yes, I am very happy. I know that he will never forget about me."

Li Mochou's heart ached and said, "You should leave the mountain and enjoy life. It's a beautiful world; the two of you together will have boundless pleasures."

Xiao Longnu raised her head and quietly said, "Yes, it's just a pity that it is too late now."

Li Mochou said, "Why?"

Xiao Longnu said, "The 'Dragon Snapping Stones' has been set, even if our Master was resurrected, will we not be able to get out of here."

Li Mochou quietly breathed out, blowing through her lips and thought, "you had hoped to take advantage of Xiao Longnu's will to live, and rely on her familiarity with the tomb to find a way out; but in the end it was useless", she became angry and her urge to kill suddenly emerged, her hand twisted slightly and she raised a palm towards Xiao Longnu's head.

Yang Guo was at the side listening to the two of them talking when he suddenly saw Li Mochou attack, alarmed, he automatically lowered his body and threw out two palms, called out, and unleashed the "Toad Stance" that Ouyang

Feng had taught him. This was the kung fu he learned when he was younger, but since he lived in the tomb he did not practice it. But it was etched in his mind, at the most dangerous times he would use it without thinking. Li Mochou's palm had yet to be unleashed, when she suddenly felt an extremely powerful wind pushing her from the side, she quickly sent the palm out to block the attack. Yang Guo had practiced martial arts in the tomb for two years, his internal energy had improved, though it was different to the internal energy of the "Toad Stance", the power behind the push was still great, a thudding sound was made as he sent Li Mochou across the room, and she crashed into the wall causing pain in her back.

Li Mochou was angry and she wiped her palms, in the middle of a battle she fell into someone's trap.

Xiao Longnu knew that Yang Guo's last attack was a lucky hit, if her apprentice sister used her most refined "Divine Serpent Palm", Yang Guo and she would not be able to hold her off. She grabbed Yang Guo's arm and dashed towards the door.

Li Mochou sent out a palm, she didn't guess that while her palm was in midair she would be struck across the left cheek. Although it didn't hurt the sound was crisp, she heard Xiao Longnu call out, "You want to learn the skills of the "Jade Heart Manual"; well here it is!" Li Mochou was struck on the right cheek and she was also startled by what she said. She knew that the "Jade Heart Manual" was extremely powerful, and now she saw Xiao Longnu's palm was extremely swift and quick, the variations mysterious, it was undoubtedly from their sect's skills. But she couldn't see through it or understand the essence of the palm, but knew that the skills just used belonged to the "Jade Heart Manual". She immediately became frightened, and stared as her apprentice sister took Yang Guo's hand and exited the room,

shutting the door. She felt her cheek and thought, "At least she held back, if she used all her strength behind the palms, wouldn't I have died?" She didn't know that Xiao Longnu had yet to complete this kung fu, although the palm stances were refined, the power in them would not hurt anyone.

Yang Guo saw his master strike Li Mochou's cheek and was delighted and said, "Gu Gu, Li Mochou would definitely not be able to beat the manual's skills" before he finished he saw Xiao Longnu shaking and she wasn't able to control it, alarmed, he called out, "Gu Gu, how are you...you" and Xiao Longnu shivered and said, "I'm... I'm cold."

Although the attacks she used were light, she still had to use her internal energy. She had yet to recover her internal energy; this injury was serious. She has always practiced on the Chilled Jade Bed, her foundation was of this nature, now the strength to oppose was gone; an extreme cold penetrated her and her teeth chattered incessantly.

Yang Guo was alarmed and called out, "What should I do?" In this urgent situation he held Xiao Longnu tightly, using his body heat to counter the cold, but after a while he felt she was becoming colder, he himself gradually could not endure it for much longer.

Xiao Longnu felt her internal energy dripping away, and said, "Guo'er, I won't make it, take me to the room with the stone coffins."

Yang Guo was distressed and couldn't say anything, but he thought about how they only had a few days to live anyway, it would be just the same if he died with her now so he quickly replied, "Fine." He carried her to the room and then placed her on one of the lids and lit a candle. In candlelight, and with the backdrop of the stone coffins, Xiao Longnu appeared even weaker.

Xiao Longnu said, "Push one of the lids open and place me in the coffin."

Yang Guo said, "Alright!"

Xiao Longnu couldn't hear any sadness in his voice and was slightly surprised. Yang Guo pushed open one of the stone lids and placed her inside the coffin, and then leaped inside, lying together face to face with her. The two of them together in the coffin didn't allow much space to move.

Xiao Longnu was happy and also puzzled, she asked, "What are you doing?"

Yang Guo said, "Of course I'm going to follow you. I'll let the other two sleep in the other coffin."

Xiao Longnu gave a deep sigh, she was feeling calm and relaxed, her body's coldness wasn't as severe as before. She turned her eyes on Yang Guo and saw his eyes looking at her. Her dress was on top of Yang Guo, she wished that Yang Guo would put his arms around her, but she saw his arms were straight; they were placed in his lap as they should be, afraid that he was going to touch her.

Xiao Longnu was slightly embarrassed, her face turned red, she turned her face away not daring to look at Yang Guo; her mind was enchanted for half an hour when she suddenly saw that something was written on the coffin lid. She looked closely and indeed there were some words:

"The art of the Jade Heart Manual wants to overcome Quanzhen's. But Chongyang, in his life, was inferior no one."

The words were written in heavy ink, the words refined and their form large. The lid was only half open yet it was very clear.

Xiao Longnu gave an 'hmm' sound and said, "What does this mean?"

Yang Guo followed her eyes and saw the words; he pondered and said, "It's written by Wang Chongyang?"

Xiao Longnu said, "It looks like it was written by him. He is saying that our "Jade Heart Manual" is superior to Quanzhen's kung fu, but he is saying that he is not weaker than our Ancestor Grandma, isn't that it?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "That old Taoist is bullshitting."

Xiao Longnu looked at the words again, and saw that after them, there were many small words, because the words were small and they were lower down on the lid, Xiao Longnu couldn't make it out and said, "Guo'er, get out."

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I won't leave."

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "Just get out for a second and you can come back to be with me later." Yang Guo climbed out of the coffin.

Xiao Longnu sat up, and got Yang Guo to lower the candle, and then turned her body around to read the small words. She looked at the words and read each one, after she finished two passages she felt that she had no strength left and the candle fell onto her chest. Yang Guo's hand quickly darted in and pulled her out of the stone coffin and asked, "What is it? What does the writing say?"

Xiao Longnu regained her composure and then sighed again, and said, "After Ancestor Grandma died, Wang Chongyang returned to the tomb."

Yang Guo asked, "Why did he come back?"

Xiao Longnu said, "He came back to pay his respects to our ancestor. He saw that the "Jade Heart Manual" martial art skills left on the ceiling of the training room had defeated all the skills of the Quanzhen sect. The writing left on the lid says that the martial arts that our ancestor defeated were Quanzhen's basic and coarse skills, but compared with the most advanced skills of Quanzhen, the skills of the "Jade Heart Manual" could not defeat them?"

Yang Guo gave an 'humph' sound and said, "Ancestor Grandma is dead, he could say whatever he wants."

Xiao Longnu said, "He also said that in another room he has the techniques to defeat the "Jade Heart Manual", if her descendants were fated to, they will know it when they see it."

Yang Guo was curious and said, "Gu Gu. Let's go take a look."

Xiao Longnu said, "Wang Chongyang stated that the room is below this one. I have lived here for a lifetime and didn't know that such a room exists."

Yang Guo begged, "Gu Gu, let's think of a way to get there."

Xiao Longnu wasn't strict with him anymore, although she was tired, she let him have his way and smiled, and said, "OK!"

They looked all around the room, and in the end they came back to the coffin they had just rested in and she said, "This stone coffin was left by Wang Chongyang. The base opens."

Yang Guo was delighted and said, "Ah, I know, it's the way to that room." He leapt into the coffin and searched around; true enough, he found a hollow for a hand, he pulled up strongly, but nothing happened.

Xiao Longnu said, "First turn to the left and then pull up."

Yang Guo followed the instructions, a 'ka' sound was heard as a stone panel on the base of the coffin responded to the switch; he was delighted and called out, "Let's go!"

Xiao Longnu said, "There's no need to rush, let the old air rush out first and then we can go."

Yang Guo was sitting restlessly, after a while he said, "Gu Gu, can we go now?"

Xiao Longnu sighed and said, "With your impatient character, it must have been hard for you living with me for the last few years." She slowly got up, and picked up a candle, and went down into the coffin with Yang Guo, below it was a series of stone steps that formed a short passageway, after a few turns they did indeed arrived at a stone chamber.

The room was empty, and both of them looked up at the ceiling, it was covered with carvings and symbols; on the far right were written the words "Nine Yin Manual".

The two of them didn't know the "Nine Yin Manual" was martial arts at its highest level; they looked at it for a while and felt that it was hard to explain.

Xiao Longnu said, "Even if that kung fu is unbeatable, it is of no use to us."

Yang Guo sighed and was about to lower his head when something got his eye in the southwestern corner, a picture, it had nothing to do with martial arts, he looked closer and saw it looked like a map and asked, "What's that?"

Xiao Longnu followed his finger and stared at it for a while, her body was like a corpse, not moving an inch. After a long while, she was still like statue, lost in thought as she examined the map closely. Yang Guo was frightened and tugged her sleeve, and asked, "Gu Gu, what is it?"

Xiao Longnu gave a moan, and suddenly fell into his chest and started crying.

Yang Guo softly said, "Your body hurts again, isn't it?"

Xiao Longnu said, "No, it's not that." After half an hour she said, "We can escape from here."

Yang Guo was delighted and leapt up, and called out, "Really?"

Xiao Longnu nodded her head and quietly said, "That map reveals the secret passage out of here." She was familiar with the layout of the tomb, one look and she understood the map.

Yang Guo was ecstatic and said, "That's great! Why are you crying?"

Xiao Longnu contained her tears and smiled, and said, "I never used to fear death, I was going to live in the tomb forever, die early, die late, what difference would it make? However in the last few days I've felt the urge to go and see the outside world. Guo'er, I'm afraid and happy."

Yang Guo tugged her hand and said, "Gu Gu, when we go outside together, I'll pick flowers for you to wear, and I'll catch crickets for you to play with, okay?"

Although he has grown up, all his thoughts were either amusing or about things that children play and do. Xiao Longnu had never played with anyone, she listened quietly to what he said, and thought, "It'll be better if we leave as soon as possible." But her body was sore, and had no strength, she wasn't able to endure anymore and slowly rested on Yang Guo's shoulder. Yang Guo talked for a while and didn't hear her reply so he turned his head around to take a look, her eyes were closed, her breathing slow, she

had fallen into a deep sleep. He was feeling tranquil; he was tired as well and eventually also fell asleep.

After a long while, he felt his back ached; someone had sealed the 'Centre' (zhong shu) pressure point on his back. He woke up alarmed, and wanted to jump up but someone was holding his neck down and preventing him from moving. He turned his head and saw Li Mochou and her disciple standing there laughing; his master also had her pressure points sealed. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu didn't have the Jianghu experience of guarding yourself; in their delight, they had forgotten to go back up and close the coffin lid. Li Mochou had discovered that there was a room below the coffin and succeeded in her ambush.

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Good, this is such a comfortable place here, and the two of you escaped to enjoy such comfort. Apprentice sister; think long and hard, you might be able to think of a way out of here."

Xiao Longnu said, "Even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

Li Mochou had believed what she said before, once the 'Dragon Snapping Stones' were set, there was no way out; but judging from the tone in her last two sentences, it sounded like she did know the way out of here. When Li Mochou heard this she was delighted, and said, "Kind apprentice sister, if you take us out of here, I will never bother you again."

Xiao Longnu said, "You came here by yourself, you can find a way out by yourself, why do you need me to lead you out."

Li Mochou knew that her apprentice sister was tough to break, even in the days when master was still here, she still had to be wary of her, using force would be of no use. But right now it is a matter of life and death; she still needed to try to force it out of her some way so she sealed their

'Charging Sky' (tian tu) pressure points on their necks, and sealed their 'Fifth Centre' (wu shu) pressure point on the abdomen. The 'Charging Sky' pressure point was where the body holds together its yin, the main blood vessels return here, the 'Fifth Centre' pressure point is where the 'little yin' vessels return. Li Mochou used the pressure point skills of the Ancient Tomb sect. She knew that in not too long, their body would start to become numb and the pain hard to endure, they would have to reveal the secret.

Xiao Longnu closed her eyes and ignored it. Yang Guo called out, "If we knew the way out, then why didn't we escape instead of staying here?"

Li Mochou laughed and said, "You have just revealed that you know the way out, don't deny it. Of course she would know that the tomb has to have a secret passage out, when you two had rested fully, you would have got out. Apprentice sister, are you going to tell me?"

Xiao Longnu quietly said, "When you get out, all you are going to think about is how to kill people, what good is having you leaving this place?"

Li Mochou folded her arms and sat to one side, she chuckled and did not reply.

Yang Guo couldn't endure anymore and said, "Hey, Li Mochou, the pressure point sealing techniques that Ancestor Grandma passed down was supposed to be used on the enemy, why are you using it against us? You are using it to harm your apprentice sister, how can you face Ancestor Grandma?"

Li Mochou laughed and said, "You are calling me Li Mochou, we are not old friends."

Yang Guo whispered into Xiao Longnu's ear and said, "Don't reveal the secret path out, if she doesn't find out, she won't kill us; once she finds out she will kill us immediately."

Xiao Longnu said, "Ah, you are correct, I didn't think of that. I wasn't planning on telling her anyway." She was lying on the floor, she opened her eyes and saw the map and thought, "It would be awful if apprentice sister finds out about the map. I mustn't look at it in case I draw her attention."

Years ago, Wang Chongyang had known that Lin Chaoying had left the earth, and reminisced about her; his debts to her were immeasurable, but people and ghosts are worlds apart. He wasn't able to console the pain he had in his heart so he secretly entered the tomb. He avoided her maid, and stared at the things that his old friend left, and cried, and then took a look around the tomb he designed. He saw the painting that Lin Chaoying drew, and saw the markings left by her in the two training rooms. He saw the skills of the "Jade Heart Manual" were refined and ingenious, every stance was the "Black Star" to Quanzhen's martial arts, he couldn't stop his face from turning grey and he left the tomb.

He retreated deep into the mountains and built a thatched hut. He didn't leave it for three years, studying a way to break the skills of the "Jade Heart Manual"; although there were a few successes, he wasn't able to develop a complete set of skills to counter it. He was down heartened, and respected Lin Chaoying's intelligence even more, he admitted defeat and stopped researching.

Ten or so years later, he managed to get his hands on the extraordinary "Nine Yin Manual" after the Mount Hua tournament. He made his mind up, he wasn't going to learn the skills within the manual, but curiosity defeated him, and he couldn't refrain from taking a look.

His martial arts at that time was the world's greatest, the skills in the "Nine Yin Manual" were all profound and refined, after a glance and pondering for ten days, he understood, he laughed out loud to the sky, and returned to the tomb, and left the main aspects of the "Nine Yin Manual" on the ceiling in the most hidden room in the tomb, and the stances that would defeat the "Jade Heart Manual". He studied the tomb's circumstances, and assumed that the heirs of Lin Chaoying would use the empty coffin. They would only use it when they were about to die and waiting for death, and at that time then they would know that the founder of the Quanzhen sect had never lost to anyone in his life. He left words on the lid of the coffin, telling the descendants of Lin Chaoying before they died, that the martial arts of the founder of the Quanzhen sect would not be defeated by the skills of the "Jade Heart Manual".

At that time, he was just impulsive and proud, he didn't mean to leave the "Nine Yin Manual" behind in the world, and assumed that when the descendants of Lin Chaoying saw the "Nine Yin Manual", they would be at their last breath and could only take the secret to the grave with them.

Wang Chongyang and Lin Chaoying were both gifted in martial arts, and formed a heavenly pair. Between the two, there wasn't a third person that interfered with the relationship; also they didn't have any matters to resolve with relatives, apprentice brother, sister or enemies. Before Wang Chongyang entered the priesthood, he concentrated on fighting the Jin, and had no time for relationships. When he lost the war and retreated to the tomb, it was Lin Chaoying who came and comforted him, she was kind and touching, there wasn't any reason for them not to be together. But from love it turned to hate, one became a Taoist; the other lived until death in the stone tomb. The actual reasons behind this, Qiu Chuji and the others did not know, it was difficult for Wang and Lin to explain themselves,

they could only use the words 'not meant to be' to label what happened. 'Not meant to be' was the result and not the reason for their falling out.

Both of them were highly skilled and very proud; each assumed they were the higher. Every time the seeds of love were about to sprout, they struggled over their martial arts, neither backing down, even until death. Lin Chaoying invented the "Jade Heart Manual" to defeat the skill of the Quanzhen. Wang Chongyang didn't admit defeat and so left the "Nine Yin Manual" in the tomb. Wang Chongyang thought about how Lin Chaoying invented the "Jade Heart Manual" by herself, and he himself relied on a book written by someone else, after their exchange, he yielded. After that he always warned his students to allow for times when they will be subdued, and to learn the Taoist ways well.

The map on the ceiling was left there when the tomb was first created, just in case the Jin surrounded the tomb, they would still have a way to escape. Even Lin Chaoying did not know about this passageway. Lin Chaoying only knew that once the 'Dragon Snapping Stones' have been set, they will perish with the enemy, she didn't know that when Wang Chongyang designed the tomb, he had a strong will to retake the central plains, how could he allow one defeat to stop him? Later on when Wang Chongyang gave up the tomb to Lin Chaoying, he was afraid that Lin Chaoying would look down on him for leaving a way to save his life if he had to use the 'Dragon Snapping Stones'. He would lose his manly air, so he didn't tell her about it out of pride.

Xiao Longnu didn't dare to look at the map, her eyes looked at another corner, and the words "Unsealing Pressure Points Technique" caught her eye. She shivered, and looked at the words and was delighted, almost too delighted in fact as she almost forgot to hide her joy by calling out. The technique shows how to unseal one's pressure points, if one fire

deviates when refining their kung fu, and the pressure points are sealed, they could use this technique to unseal it themselves. Those who practiced the “Nine Yin Manual” would have reached an extremely high standard of martial arts, it will be very rare for them to have their pressure points sealed by someone else; this technique was devised to quell one’s inner demons. When one cultivates highly advanced skill, one’s thoughts should be pure and clear. If your concentration is suddenly disturbed by random thoughts or anxiety (inner demons) the chances are high that you’ll die. In Xiao Longnu’s present situation, it was a life saving technique.

She thought, “If I’m able to unseal my vessels, but can’t defeat my apprentice sister, then it will of no use.” She then searched the writings on the ceilings, trying to search for a skill that she can use immediately, one that will, as soon as she uses it, allow her to subdue Li Mochou. After a quick glance she could see that each skill was hard and complicated, even the easiest one will take ten of days to learn. She didn’t dare to any more; she was afraid that Li Mochou will follow her eyes, look above, and discover the ceiling’s map and “Nine Yin Manual”.

She heard Yang Guo calling and shouting, arguing with Li Mochou. It was fortunate, her careful apprentice sister was now not taking any notice of her, she suddenly thought of a plan. She turned her head and memorized the “Nine Yin Manual’s Unsealing Pressure Point Technique” and “Air Closure Technique” (bi qi mi jue) sections, she moved her lips over Yang Guo’s ear and quietly taught him. Yang Guo immediately understood.

Xiao Longnu whispered, “First unseal your pressure points.”

Yang Guo was afraid that Li Mochou and her disciple would find out, so he loudly called out and talked rubbish, “Ai ya,

Martial Uncle Li, you are too ruthless, you are not respecting Ancestor Grandma, you further do not respect Ancestor Grandma's grandma, grandma's great grandma."

The two followed the instructions of the "Unsealing Pressure Point Technique" left by Wang Chongyang. The two have a good foundation, and in just a short while they managed to unseal their two pressure points. On the outside the two appeared still, but Li Mochou felt something was wrong and shouted, "What are you doing?" and walked up to them. Xiao Longnu quickly got up and threw out a palm, lightly striking her shoulder, it was the more advanced skills of the "Jade Heart Manual". Li Mochou could never have guessed in a million years that she had the ability to unseal her pressure points and was alarmed, and quickly jumped back.

Xiao Longnu said, "Apprentice sister, do you want to leave?"

Li Mochou was happy when she heard this, her kung fu seemed high, her intelligence rarely seen, right now she had been made a fool of and had been struck by the palms of a girl who has never seen the outside world. She couldn't prevent herself from getting furious, but she thought that she must hold her temper for the time being, first leave the tomb and then it still wouldn't be too late to finish them off. Although her stances were strange, there was no power behind them. It wasn't that she held back but because she didn't have internal energy; this meant that she wasn't anything special. Li Mochou laughed and said, "That's a good apprentice sister, I've already apologized, take us out of here."

Yang Guo thought this would be a good chance to get in between the relationship of Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo and said, "Gu Gu said that she is only able to take one of you out, is it going to be you or your disciple?"

Li Mochou said, "You little scum, shut your mouth."

Xiao Longnu didn't know what Yang Guo meant but protected him and said, "That's right, I can only take one person, I can't take anymore."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Martial Uncle, why don't you let apprentice sister Hong leave, you are older than her, you've lived enough. She's also prettier than you."

Though Li Mochou was older than Hong Lingbo, she was more beautiful. When she heard this she became angrier, but didn't make a sound.

Yang Guo said, "Fine! We're going! Gu Gu leads the way, I'm second, the last one will not be able to get out."

Xiao Longnu now knew what he meant and smiled; she held Yang Guo's hand and left the stone chamber. Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo moved forward at the same time and both reached the door; they were afraid that Xiao Longnu was going to switch on a trap and leave the last person there in the tomb.

Li Mochou angrily said, "Trying to take the place from me?" Her left hand shot out, wanting to strike Hong Lingbo on the shoulders. Hong Lingbo knew that her master was ruthless; if she didn't stop she would die violently at the hands of her master. She knew she had to let her master go first; she was both angry and frightened.

Li Mochou followed the back of Yang Guo tightly, making sure she was always within one step of him; she felt Xiao Longnu turning west and winding east, the path was heading lower. At the same time she felt her feet getting damp, she knew that they would leave the tomb soon but she glanced up and saw there were branches in the path everywhere. After a while, the path suddenly became steep, almost like a straight drop, if the four of them didn't have such good martial arts, they would have slipped long ago.

Li Mochou thought, "Mount Zhongnan is not high, if we keep going like this we'll be at the foot of the mountain, could it be that we are in the depths of the mountain?"

After dropping for an hour the path became level, the dampness in the air became stronger, and eventually they could hear running water. Soon they were in water up to their ankles. As they went further, the water grew deeper, from the legs to the stomach, and gradually to the chest.

Xiao Longnu quietly asked Yang Guo, "Do you remember and understand the "Air Closure Technique"?"

Yang Guo quietly replied, "I remember."

Xiao Longnu said, "In a minute remember to lock your air, and don't take in any water."

Yang Guo said, "Yes, Gu Gu, you have to be careful yourself." Xiao Longnu nodded.

While they were speaking the water had reached their throats. Li Mochou was secretly alarmed, and called out, "Apprentice sister, do you know how to swim under water?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I've lived in the tomb for all my life; how would I know how to swim underwater?"

Li Mochou became slightly more relaxed, she took another step, and felt nothing was there, water seeped into her mouth. She was alarmed and quickly leapt back, but she saw Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo dive underwater. At this stage, even if it was a mountain of knives or an ocean of swords she would still have to enter. She felt her clothes tighten, her dress was grasped by Hong Lingbo; she quickly attacked behind her, the attack wasn't light but she wasn't able to push her away. Right now the water was making a terrific noise, as though it was flowing down into the ground, the sound was frightening. Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo didn't

know how to swim, they couldn't stand and floated up. Li Mochou was a skilled fighter, but right now she was alarmed and flustered, she extended her arms and legs and madly thrashed. In the midst of this she felt something so she used her strength to hold on; it was Yang Guo's left arm. Yang Guo was sealing his air, and was following Xiao Longnu on the floor of the water passage walking forward step by step. He was grabbed suddenly by Li Mochou and quickly tried to free himself; but Li Mochou was holding on tightly, how could she let go? Water rushed into her mouth and nose, but even when she passed out she was still holding on. Yang Guo tried a few times but was unable to pry her off; he was afraid that he was exerting too much energy and will start swallowing water, so he left her alone.

The four of them moved on for a while, then Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo couldn't hold their breath any longer and swallowed some water. Luckily the water slowed and the ground began to rise; not long after, they managed to get their heads above the water. After the time it takes for an incense stick to be burned, the path became brighter, and they exited through a cave. The two were exhausted and first circulated their chi to get rid of the water they swallowed, and then lay on the ground, recovering their breath.

Li Mochou was still holding onto Yang Guo tightly and Hong Lingbo onto her. Yang Guo loosened her fingers and took her hands off him. Xiao Longnu first sealed the pressure points on their shoulders, and then placed them on a rock, and let the water seep out of them slowly. After a while, Li Mochou spluttered and gave a few 'ah' sounds, she'd regained consciousness first and she saw the sun in her eyes. She was actually seeing daylight again. She remembered being trapped in the tomb and the danger and fear of diving under the water. Though her body was aching and numb, she felt much better than before. Not too long later, Hong Lingbo slowly woke up.

Xiao Longnu said, "Apprentice sister, you can go now!"

The arms of Li Mochou and her disciple were both paralyzed but the lower body could move freely; they got up, looked at each other and walked away.

Yang Guo took a look around, and saw they were in a shaded area, flowers were everywhere, he was delighted and said, "Gu Gu, isn't this nice?" Xiao Longnu nodded and smiled. The two remembered the events of the past few days; it really was the complete opposite. There wasn't anyone around; the cave was at the foot of Mount Zhongnan in a rare piece of uncultivated land. That night, the two slept under the shelter of a tree on the grass.

They woke up in the morning, Yang Guo said they could now go out and play, but Xiao Longnu has never seen the outside world before, and didn't know what it was like, she was frightened and said, "No, we'll first recover and then we'll finish learning the "Jade Heart Manual"."

Yang Guo slapped his head and said, "I'm so dumb! I forgot about your injuries." He thought again about how it would be inconvenient to take off their clothes here and practice, so he first helped Xiao Longnu to cure her injuries. Within two weeks, Xiao Longnu had recovered.

Under a large pine tree, they built two thatch huts for shelter. The roof was filled with purple rattan. Yang Guo liked the scent of flowers, so in front of his hut he planted roses, jasmine and the like. Xiao Longnu however liked simple decorations, and said the scent of the pine needles was better than a flower's, and so there wasn't anything in her hut, and surrounding it was just open space and grass.

The two of them slept in the day and practiced at night. In a few months, Xiao Longnu had completed learning the "Jade Heart Manual". A month or so later, Yang Guo also finished.

The two had completed everything and had nothing to do, and so Yang Guo mentioned going out into the world again.

Xiao Longnu felt the way of life now was great, nothing in the world could compare to it. But then she thought about how difficult it would be for Yang Guo's character to stay here, and so said, "Guo'er, our kung fu is now much better than before, but how are they compared to your Auntie and Uncle Guo?"

Yang Guo said, "We are still no where near them."

Xiao Longnu said, "Your Uncle Guo passes on his skills to his daughter, and the Wu brothers, if we meet them, then we'll have to suffer them."

When he heard this Yang Guo leaped up and angrily said, "If they bully me again, how will I be able to just let them?"

Xiao Longnu calmly said, "You can't beat them, it'll just be pointless."

Yang Guo said, "You can help me."

Xiao Longnu said, "If I can't beat your Uncle Guo, then it's no use."

Yang Guo lowered his head and tried to think of a plan. After a while he said, "Out of respect for Uncle Guo, I won't start trouble with them."

Xiao Longnu thought, "He has lived in the tomb for two years and practiced the Ancient Tomb's kung fu, his temper has mellowed."

Actually, when Yang Guo became older, he understood a lot of things; he knew that the way Guo Jing treated him was out of love and caring, he was touched. Now he was willing to back down, and besides, he didn't really have any serious

feuds with Guo Fu and the Wu brothers. All they had was a little argument over crickets when they were younger, as time passed his feelings about this went away.

Xiao Longnu said, "It's good that you won't have fights and arguments with them. But according to you, even if you concede to others, others will still come and bully you; if we don't learn the kung fu that Wang Chongyang left, when we meet skilled enemies, we won't be able to fight them off."

Yang Guo knew that she didn't want leave this peaceful place, and he couldn't bear to go against her wishes and said, "Gu Gu, I'll listen to you, from tomorrow onwards, we'll begin practicing the "Nine Yin Manual".

As a result of this conversation, the two lived in the valley for another year. The two went back into the tomb via the secret passage, and learned the text of the "Nine Yin Manual". When they were sure they remembered every single word, they left and practiced outside. Within the year, their internal and external skills improved in every aspect. But the markings that were left in the tomb by Wang Chongyang were only the parts which could defeat the "Jade Heart Manual" and consisted only a small part of the "Nine Yin Manual", compared with what they know and what Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew, it was much inferior, but now, they weren't the only two that knew it.

One day after finishing practicing their martial arts, both of them felt that they had made great improvements. Yang Guo jumped up and down in delight, while Xiao Longnu was worried and unhappy. Yang Guo kept on telling jokes to help break her boredom. Yang Guo knew that they now have learned all the kung fu that Wang Chongyang left in the tomb. If they wanted to learn it to its highest level, one didn't know how many years it would take, but they grasped the essence and ideas behind the skills. All they needed to do

now is to keep practicing and the skills will become more refined. He knew that Xiao Longnu did not want to leave the mountain, but there wasn't anything to stop them now, he was troubled and said, "Gu Gu, if you don't want to leave, then we'll stay here forever."

Xiao Longnu delightedly said, "Good" but as she said this she stopped, she knew that Yang Guo didn't want to stay, she wouldn't live happily, she quietly said, "We'll talk about this tomorrow." She didn't eat supper, and returned to her hut and slept.

Yang Guo sat down on the grass and stared, up until there were stars in the sky, and then retired to his hut. He slept until the middle of the night, when he heard wind sounds, the sounds were urgent, something was wrong. He woke up alarmed, and listened; it was the sound of fists and palms. He quickly darted out of his hut, and went outside of his master's hut and quietly said, "Gu Gu, can you hear?"

Right then, the sounds of the winds were louder, Xiao Longnu would definitely hear it but there was no reply from the hut. Yang Guo called out twice, and then entered, the room was empty; his master was not here. He became even more alarmed, and searched for the origins of the wind sounds. He ran for about a hundred feet, he didn't see anyone but from the wind sounds, he knew one of them was his master, but the opponent's wind from their palms were heavy and severe, their kung fu level would be above his master's.

Yang Guo dashed over, in the moonlight he saw Xiao Longnu and a strongly built person hovering around, fighting frantically. Although Xiao Longnu was swift and quick, the opponent's skills were powerful and strong; under the force of those palms, Xiao Longnu had to use all her strength to avoid them.

Yang Guo was startled and said, "Master, I'm here!"

The two of them came down, and Yang Guo was at their sides and faced that person, he was happily surprised, the person had a beard, his limbs like lances, his long face like a thorn, it was his Godfather Ouyang Feng.

But he saw him standing there like a mountain, throwing out palms at Xiao Longnu, she could only dodge them, she didn't dare to meet their power.

Yang Guo called out, "We all know each other, there's no need to fight."

Xiao Longnu was startled and thought how could this madman be a friend of theirs, while she was thinking she slowed down. Ouyang Feng threw out a palm, a strong force threw itself at her, it was extremely powerful. Yang Guo was startled and quickly leapt in front of them only to see Xiao Longnu's left palm meeting Ouyang Feng's right, he knew that his Master's internal energy couldn't compare with his Godfather, she will suffer a serious internal energy in a short while, so he stretched out his five fingers and stroked Ouyang Feng's elbow lightly, it was the newly learnt skill from the "Nine Yin Manual" "Hand Waves Five Strings" (shou hui wu xian). Though he wasn't too familiar with this skill, he knew the aspects of this attack, Ouyang Feng's arm became numb, his body's strength dispersed.

Xiao Longnu saw a chance to gain victory, she felt the enemy had become weak and immediately attacked, in a flash Ouyang Feng had become completely defenseless, just a light attack would have seriously hurt him.

Yang Guo intercepted his Master's palm, and sandwiched himself between the two, he smiled and said, "Watch it you two, we're friends." Ouyang Feng had not recognized him, he just saw that this young man was extremely skilled and angrily said, "Who are you? What friends?"

Yang Guo knew he was mad and disturbed and was afraid he would forget who Yang Guo was so he loudly called out, "Father...it's me, I'm your son." His words were filled with emotion. Ouyang Feng stood still, he took his head and studied his face under the moonlight, it was the son he has been searching for the past few years, but because he had grown tall, and his martial arts were high, it was hard for him to recognize him. He held Yang Guo and called out, "Son, I've endured many hardships searching for you!" The two held each other tightly, both of them producing tears.

Xiao Longnu has always been cold and detached, she knew that the only person in the world whose emotions towards her were as hot as fire was Yang Guo, but right now, when he saw Ouyang Feng, he was also like this. She feared leaving the mountain and sat aside pondering.

After Ouyang Feng and Yang Guo separated at the Iron Spear Temple, he hid under the large bell; Ke Zhen'E couldn't get at him. He meditated with his divine skills to cure his internal injuries, after seven days and nights his internal energy had recovered. But the external injuries that he received from Ke Zhen'E were not minor; he wasn't able to recover from them in such a short time. When he left the large bell, he went to an inn and rested his wounds for twenty days. When his wounds were healed, he went and looked for Yang Guo. But a month had passed, the world is a large place, how could he find him? He thought, "The child is most probably on Peach Blossom Island." He got a small boat and sailed to the island. He didn't dare to approach during the day, so at night he anchored in a bay behind a mountain. He knew he wasn't a match for Guo Jing and Huang Rong, plus he didn't know that Huang Yaoshi wasn't on the island. Even if his skills were twice as good, he wouldn't be able to fight all three of them. During the day he hid in a cave on a wild piece of land, and patrolled at night. The layout of the island was ingenious; he didn't dare run around where ever he pleased. Over the year,

he was extremely cautious, in the light of day he didn't dare to take one step out of the cave, no one discovered him. One night, after his one meeting with Yang Guo, he heard the Wu brothers chatting and then he knew that Guo Jing had sent Yang Guo to the Quanzhen sect to learn martial arts. Ouyang Feng was pleased, he stole a boat and left the island, and rushed to Chongyang Palace. But he didn't know about the incident between Yang Guo and the Quanzhen sect, or that he was now in the Tomb of the Living Dead. Quanzhen was ashamed of what happened, no one talked about this matter, Ouyang Feng couldn't get any news from them. He searched for miles and miles around Mount Zhongnan, but he didn't know that Yang Guo was below ground so of course he couldn't find him.

Tonight by chance, he was walking by the valley when he saw a girl dressed in white with folded arms, sighing and looking at the moon.

Ouyang Feng asked madly, "Hey, where's my son? Have you seen him?"

Xiao Longnu glanced at him, then ignored him. Ouyang Feng went over to her and grabbed her arm, and shouted, "Where's my son?"

Xiao Longnu felt that his hands were extremely powerful, she had never met someone with such high skills, even the skilled fighters of Quanzhen could not compare. She was startled and used her a little capturing hand kung fu to escape. Ouyang Feng's grab was a certainty but he could not have guessed the opponent could just lightly brush him off; he didn't ask who she was and attacked. That's how the two started their fight.

The two of them told each other what had happened to them. Ouyang Feng was half clear and half confused, he wasn't able to explain clearly what had happened in the past, and

didn't understand much of what Yang Guo said. But when he mentioned that in the past few years he has been learning martial arts from Xiao Longnu, Ouyang Feng loudly said, "Her kung fu is not as good as mine. Why are you learning from her? Let me teach you." Xiao Longnu didn't want to argue with him, she smiled calmly and went off to the side by herself.

Yang Guo felt this wasn't polite and said, "Father, Master has treated me extremely well."

Ouyang Feng was jealous and said, "So she's good and I'm not?"

Yang Guo smiled and said, "You are good as well. On this earth, only you two treat me well."

Ouyang Feng's words didn't make sense, but Yang Guo knew that he had suffered many hardships in the past few years searching for him.

Ouyang Feng held his hand, he laughed foolishly and after a while he said, "Your kung fu is not bad, it's a pity that you don't know the world's two most powerful martial arts."

Yang Guo said, "What are they?"

Ouyang Feng's eyebrows rose and he shouted, "You are a martial artist yet you don't know the world's two most powerful skills. What's the point of having her for a master?"

Yang Guo saw that he was pleased and angry; he was concerned about him and thought, "Father's illness is serious, when will he be able to recover from it?"

Ouyang Feng laughed loudly and said, "Hmm, let father teach you. The two most powerful skills are, one, the "Toad Stance", two, "Nine Yin Manual". I'll first teach you the

foundation of the “Toad Stance”. He then recited the formulae for it.”

Yang Guo smiled and said, “You’ve taught me before, don’t you remember?”

Ouyang Feng scratched his head and said, “So you’ve already learned it, that’s great. Show it to me.”

Since Yang Guo entered the Ancient Tomb sect, he hasn’t practiced the strange skill that Ouyang Feng taught him; when he heard what he said, he immediately did as he was told. He had practiced it when he was on Peach Blossom Island, now with the advanced internal energy he has developed; he was able to demonstrate it spectacularly.

Ouyang Feng laughed and said, “Good! Good! Even though the stances don’t match, it’s better than nothing. I’ll teach you the rest of it now.” He waved his hands and bent his legs, and started reciting non stop, he didn’t care if Yang Guo remembered it or not, he taught a section of “Toad Stance”, and then taught him a section of the “Contrary Nine Yin Manual” (the deliberately flawed version of the Nine Yin Manual). Yang Guo listened for half an hour, and felt that the formulae’s ingenuity was boundless, but it was complicated and strange, how would he be able to understand in just a short while of time?

Ouyang Feng continued for a while when he caught a glimpse of Xiao Longnu from the corner of his eye, and called out, “Ah, it’s no good, I don’t want your baby Master to secretly listening in on us.” He went over to Xiao Longnu and said, “Hey, little girl, I’m teaching my son kung fu, don’t secretly listen in.”

Xiao Longnu said, “What’s so good about your kung fu? Who wants to steal it?”

Ouyang Feng thought for a while, and said, "Fine, just go far away."

Xiao Longnu was leaning against a tree and calmly said, "Why do I want to listen? If I want to go, I'll go, if I don't want to go, I won't."

Ouyang Feng was angry, his eyebrows raised and he stretched out his hand to grab her face, but Xiao Longnu pretended she didn't see and ignored him.

Yang Guo called out, "Father, don't disrespect my Master."

Ouyang Feng took his hand back and said, "Fine, fine, we are going to a far away place, are you going to follow us and listen in?"

Xiao Longnu thought that Guo'er's Godfather was extremely impolite; she didn't want anything to do with him and turned around without a reply. She didn't guess that her back would suddenly become numb, Ouyang Feng had stretched out his arm and sealed a pressure point on her back, he was uncannily fast, plus Xiao Longnu wasn't aware, by the time she felt something was wrong and put her guard up, it was too late, her whole body was paralyzed. Ouyang Feng then sealed another pressure point on her waist, he smiled and said, "Little girl, don't be anxious, after I've completely taught my son kung fu, I'll come back and release you." He then laughed loudly and walked away.

Yang Guo was memorizing the formulae of the "Toad Stance" and the "Nine Yin Manual", and felt that some of it was unclear and some a complete mess, but there were many ingenious points within it so he didn't suspect anything was wrong. He pondered deeply; he didn't know what was happening to Xiao Longnu.

Ouyang Feng came over and took his hand, and said, "We'll go to another place so your Master can't hear."

Yang Guo wondered why Xiao Longnu would try to listen; even if you were trying to teach it to her she wouldn't learn it. But his godfather's mind was confused and disturbed, there wasn't a need to argue with him and so he let him have his way and went with him.

Xiao Longnu was laying paralyzed on the ground, she was angry but also wanted to laugh, thinking that although her skills were refined, she has little experience in fighting real enemies. She was ambushed by Li Mochou and now her pressure points had been sealed by a crazy man; so she utilized her "Nine Yin Manual" skills, and tried to unseal the pressure points herself, she breathed in deeply to clear her pressure points. How could it be that the two pressure points did not show any sign of unsealing, but instead they became even more sore and numb, she couldn't stop herself from being startled. Ouyang Feng's pressure point skill was from the "Contrary Nine Yin Manual", and she used the "Nine Yin" skills that Wang Chongyang had left in the tomb. Instead of unsealing them it became worse. She tried a few more times, but the pain just got worse so she didn't dare to try it again and thought that after that madman has taught his kung fu, he will come back and unseal the pressure points. She thought there was no need to rush, she looked up at the sky and looked at the stars, and soon closed her eyes and fell asleep.

After a while she felt something brushing against her eyes, she could see things as clearly at night as if it were in the day, but now she couldn't see a thing. Someone had blindfolded her eyes, and at the same time she felt someone's arm holding her. When that person first held her, they were extremely afraid, but afterwards they gradually became more daring and didn't show any restraint.

Xiao Longnu was extremely frightened; she wanted to open her mouth and call out, but her mouth and tongue wouldn't move. She felt that person's mouth was coming close and kissed her on the cheek. She first thought that it was Ouyang Feng who was trying to rape her, but she felt this person's face was smooth; it was not Ouyang Feng's face which was bearded. Her heart shook, and her fear gradually disappeared, a passionate desire began to appear; she thought that it was Yang Guo who had come back to her. She felt his hands were beginning to become more and more improper, slowly taking her clothes off. Xiao Longnu had no way to move, and could only let him do as he pleased, she couldn't help herself from being embarrassed and surprised.

Ouyang Feng saw that Yang Guo was extremely clever, although he wasn't able to understand the formulae he passed on completely, he memorized it all. He was pleased and he spoke until the sky became bright before he had explained all the main aspects of the two skills. Yang Guo memorized it all and after a while said, "I have also learned 'Nine Yin' kung fu, but it is very different to your version. But what is the reason?"

Ouyang Feng said, "Rubbish, apart from this one, what other 'Nine Yin Manual' is there?"

Yang Guo said, "Take for example the method to learning the 'Changing Muscle Forging Bone' technique, you said the third step was air and blood must flow contrarily, surging through 'Sky Pillar' (tian zhu) point. My Master said, first protect the 'dan tian' and then surge through the 'Sealing Door' (zhang men) point."

Ouyang Feng said, "No, it's not correct, wait" he did what Yang Guo told him, and felt the way his internal energy was circulating was completely different. He didn't know that the manual that Guo Jing wrote out for him had been changed;

he couldn't help but go mad. He murmured to himself, "Why? Am I wrong or is your baby Master wrong? How is there such a thing?"

Yang Guo saw that his eyes stared straight, he looked like he was in a trance, he called him several times but there was no reply. He was afraid that Ouyang Feng was going to go mad again and was deeply concerned. He suddenly heard a noise from a tree behind him, an image appeared; within the thickets of flowers he saw the corner of an apricot yellow Taoist gown. This place was secluded, why would someone be here? The person was sneaking around, showing they weren't up to any good; he couldn't help but get suspicious, and chased after him. The person's steps were fast; from behind it appeared to be a Taoist.

Yang Guo called out, "Hey, who are you? What are you doing here?" He utilized his lightness kung fu and chased the person down.

When the Taoist heard the shouts he increased his speed; Yang Guo also increased his slightly, his body like an arrow shooting forward and he grabbed the Taoist's shoulder. He turned him around and saw that it was Quanzhen's Yin Zhiping. Yang Guo saw that his gown was untidy, his face was red for a while and then white for a while, he called out, "What are you doing here?"

Yin Zhiping was the head of the third generation students of Quanzhen, his martial arts were high. Usually he has an air about him, but for whatever reason now, his face was flustered and he couldn't speak a word. Yang Guo saw that he was extremely frightened, and remembered that day when he cut off his fingers and swore an oath. He wasn't a bad person and so he loosened his hand and let him go. He said, "Since it's nothing, go!" Yin Zhiping turned around and took a few glances back and hurried away.

Yang Guo laughed, "That Taoist looks like he's lost his soul, very amusing."

He returned towards the thatch huts and saw Xiao Longnu's legs appearing out of a thicket of flowers not moving at all, it looked as if she was asleep.

Yang Guo called out twice, "Gu Gu!" But there was no reply. He went over to her only to see Xiao Longnu lying on the ground; a blue green cloth was covering her eyes.

Yang Guo was slightly alarmed. He took off the blindfold; her eyes and cheek seemed to be different, seemingly showing a limitless delicate shyness.

Yang Guo asked, "Gu Gu, who tied this blindfold?"

Xiao Longnu didn't reply, her eyes hinted at his responsibility. Yang Guo noticed that her body was paralyzed, it appeared that her pressure points had been sealed, he stretched out his hand to pull her up, indeed, she couldn't move. Yang Guo thought for a while and assumed, "It must be Godfather who used his contrary pressure point sealing skill, otherwise no matter how high one's pressure point sealing skill is, Gu Gu would be able to unseal it herself." He then used the technique that Ouyang Feng had just taught him and unsealed her pressure points. Before, when Xiao Longnu's pressure points were sealed, she wasn't able to move, but he didn't predict that when he unsealed them, she would still lay softly in his arms, as if all her muscles and bones had melted away. Yang Guo stretched out his arm and supported her shoulders and softly said, "Gu Gu, my Godfather does things without any thought, don't take much notice of him."

Xiao Longnu placed her head on his chest and softly said, "You do things without thinking, you should be ashamed talking about other people like that!"

Yang Guo saw that she was completely different than she normally was, he was confused and said, "Gu Gu, I...I"

Xiao Longnu raised her head and irately said, "You still call me Gu Gu?"

Yang Guo became even more confused and said, "If I don't call you Gu Gu, what should I call you? You want me to call you Master?"

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "The way you treated me, how can I be your master any more?"

Yang Guo asked, "How...how did I treat you?"

Xiao Longnu rolled up her sleeve and revealed an arm that was as white as jade with no flaws; where there was a red 'Shou Gong Sha' before, now it had disappeared, embarrassed she said, "Take a look."

Yang Guo touched his head and stroked his ear and said, "Gu Gu, I don't understand."

Xiao Longnu, irritated, said, "I told you, don't call me Gu Gu anymore." She saw Yang Guo was frightened, and unable to speak his feelings so quietly said, "The disciples of the Ancient Tomb sect have always been virgins. Every generation has been virgins. My master gave me the 'shou gong sha', last night...last night what you did to me, how would my arm still have the 'shou gong sha'?"

Yang Guo said, "What did I do to you last night?"

Xiao Longnu turned red and said, "There's no need to talk about it."

After a while she softly said, "Before, I was afraid to leave the mountain, it's different now, where ever you go, I'm willing to follow you."

Yang Guo was delighted and called out, "Gu Gu, you're great."

Xiao Longnu's face changed and said, "Why are you still calling me Gu Gu? Could it be that you've not treated me genuinely with all your heart?" She saw that Yang Guo did not reply, her heart was anxious, she shivered, "What exactly am I to you?"

Yang Guo earnestly said, "You are my Master, you took care of me, you taught me, I swore that I will respect and revere you for the rest of my life, and listen to all you say."

Xiao Longnu said loudly, "Could it be that you don't regard me as your wife?"

Yang Guo had never ever thought about this; after being asked this he didn't know how to reply, he mumbled, "No, no! You can't be my wife, how could I be worthy to be your husband? You are my Master, you are my Gu Gu."

The chi in Xiao Longnu's body was aggravated; she spat out a pool of blood.

Yang Guo's arms and legs were flailing, and called out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu!"

Xiao Longnu heard that he was still calling her this way and stared at him with hate, she raised her left palm, wanting to strike down on his head, but the palm did not come. Her eyes turned from fury to blame, and then turned from blame to pity, she sighed and quietly said, "Since it's like this, then there's no need to see me ever again." She waved her sleeve, got up and hurried down the mountain.

Yang Guo called out loudly, "Gu Gu, where are you going? I'll come with you."

Xiao Longnu turned around, beads of tears were swirling in her eyes, she said, "If you see me again, then I'm afraid...I'm afraid I won't be able to control myself, I won't be able to spare your life."

Yang Guo said, "You are angry at me for learning martial arts with my Godfather, is that it?"

Xiao Longnu coldly said, "Why would I blame you for learning martial arts from other people?" She turned around and flew away.

Yang Guo was startled by all this and didn't know what to do, he saw her white image gradually getting further away, and eventually disappeared around the mountain side. He was filled with sorrow; he fell onto the ground and cried. He thought and thought, he didn't know what he did to disrespect his Master. What made her behave so strangely, she was gentle and tender one minute, the next she was furious? Why did she say she wanted to be his 'wife', why wasn't he allowed to call her Gu Gu anymore, he thought for half a day. "This must have something to do with my Godfather; he must have disrespected master somehow." So he ran to Ouyang Feng, but Ouyang Feng's eyes still blankly stared into space, he didn't move an inch.

Yang Guo said, "Father, what did you do to disrespect my Master?"

Ouyang Feng said, "Nine Yin Manual", "Nine Yin Manual".

Yang Guo said, "Why did you seal her pressure points and make her so angry?"

Ouyang Feng said, "Is it surge through 'Sky Pillar' contrarily, or is it surge through 'Sealing Door'?"

Yang Guo desperately said, "Father, why did my Master run away? Tell me, what did you do to her?"

Ouyang Feng said, "Who is your Master? Who am I? Who is Ouyang Feng?"

Yang Guo saw that his illness was acting up again, he was frightened and sad, he softly said, "Father, you are tired, we'll go and rest in the huts."

Ouyang Feng flipped upside down, his head on the ground and called out, "Who am I? Who am I? Where is Ouyang Feng?" He waved his palms wildly, his body flipping around, he used his hands to walk, and like the wind, he flew down the mountain.

Yang Guo called out, "Father!" He wanted to grab him but was kicked on the chin by his flailing leg. It was a heavy kick; Yang Guo couldn't keep upright and fell backwards. By the time he got back up, Ouyang Feng was over a hundred feet away. Yang Guo chased after him for a few steps, then stopped; he stood there for half an hour, and by that time there wasn't a trace of Ouyang Feng. He looked around, and saw the valley was empty, he could only hear the quiet sound of birds.

He became frightened and called out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu! Father...Father!" After a while, the valley echoed back, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu! Father...Father!"

Within the past few years he had never been away from Xiao Longnu one step, like a mother and son, a sister and brother; now she suddenly went away without an explanation. How could anyone tell him not to be sad? In his grief he thought about crashing his head into a rock and killing himself. But there was optimism in his heart; if his Master could suddenly leave, she could suddenly come back. His Godfather may have disrespected her, but when she considers that I haven't done anything, she will come back and search for me.

How could he sleep well that night, as soon as he heard the wind blow, or the cry of birds, he would think that Xiao Longnu had returned. He would laboriously get up and call out, "Gu Gu!" and go out to meet her; but each time he was disappointed. Eventually he decided against sleeping, he hurried to the summit of the mountain, and strained his eyes and looked around, he looked until the sky got bright. The peak was covered in mist, and on this large earth, there was only Yang Guo left.

Yang Guo suddenly thought, "Master isn't coming back, I'll find her myself. As long as I can see her, I don't care if she shouts at me or beats me, I won't ever leave her. If she wants to beat me to death, then I'll let her." He made up his mind and he felt rejuvenated. He went back to the huts and put his and Xiao Longnu's belongings into a bag, strapped it across his back, and headed away from the mountain.

As soon as he arrived at a place where there were people, he would ask if they have seen a beautiful girl dressed in white. In half a day, he asked tens of villagers, they all shook their head and said no. Yang Guo was anxious and asked again, but he lacked any manners in the way he asked. The villagers saw this young man boldly asking about the whereabouts of a beautiful girl, they couldn't help but get angry; someone asked him who the girl was. Yang Guo said, "That doesn't concern you. I ask you have you seen a girl like that pass here." The person wanted to question him instead.

An old man to one side tugged at his sleeve, pointed and said he saw a beautiful angel heading east, "I thought that the Goddess of Mercy had appeared but it was your woman." Yang Guo did not wait for him to finish and quickly thanked him and headed in the direction he pointed, he heard a laugh behind him as he hurried, but he didn't take any notice. He didn't know that the old man had seen that he was young and impolite so deliberately lied to him.

After a while, a fork appeared in the road, he didn't know which one to pick. He thought, "Gu Gu doesn't like crowds, it's more likely she will pick a quiet and secluded road." He picked the small twisty path on the left. How would he know that the path became wider as he walked, after a few turns, the path joined up with a large road. He hadn't had anything to drink or eat for one whole day, his stomach growled, and then he saw a few buildings in front of him. It was a town, he hurried to the inn and called, "Bring me some rice and vegetable dishes."

The inn owner bought him some everyday vegetable dishes and rice, he took a few gulps before he started to feel sad, he was beginning to choke up, he couldn't eat anymore. He thought, "Although it is dark, I still need to find Gu Gu. If I miss this chance to tonight, I'm afraid that I will never be able to see her again." He pushed away the dishes and called out, "Inn owner, I have something to ask you."

The inn owner smiled and walked over, "What orders has Master got for me? Aren't the dishes to your taste? I'll go and make something else, what does master like to eat?"

Yang Guo waved his hand and said, "It's nothing to do with the food. I ask you, have you seen a beautiful girl dressed in white pass by here?"

The inn owner pondered and said, "In a white dress, hmm, why is the girl dressed like that? Has someone from her family died?"

Yang Guo was getting impatient and asked, "Have you seen her?"

The inn owner said, "A girl yes, and she was wearing white."

Yang Guo was pleased and said, "Which way did she go?"

The inn owner said, "She's been gone for half a day! Master, it's best not to provoke that girl," he suddenly lowered his voice and said; "I offer you advice! Don't go and try to find her."

Yang Guo was alarmed and pleased, he's finally found the whereabouts of his Gu Gu, he quickly asked, "Where is she?" His voice quivered as he said this.

The inn owner said, "I'll ask you first, do you know that girl knows martial arts?"

Yang Guo thought, "How wouldn't I know?" He quickly said, "I know she knows kung fu."

The inn owner said, "Why are you still looking for her? It's dangerous."

Yang Guo said, "What exactly happened?"

The inn owner said, "First tell me, who exactly is that beautiful girl dressed in white to you?"

Yang Guo had no other ideas, it seemed like if he didn't answer his question the inn owner would not tell him the whereabouts of Xiao Longnu so he said, "She is...she is my older sister, I need to find her."

When the man heard him he immediately became even more respectful but shook his head and said, "It doesn't look like it, it doesn't look like it."

Yang Guo was impatient and grabbed him by the throat, then shouted, "Are you going to tell me or not!"

The inn owner's tongue hung out and said, "Yes, yes, it looks like it!"

Yang Guo shouted, "What doesn't look like and what does?"

The inn owner said, "Master, first let go, my throat is being choked by you, 'hei' 'hei', I can't talk. I can of course force myself to talk but..."

Yang Guo thought about this person and decided that using force on him would be in vain so he let go.

The inn owner coughed a few times and said, "Master, I said it doesn't look like it because that girl, 'hei' 'hei', your bigger sister looks younger than you, it looks more like your younger sister, not older. When I said it looks like it, I was talking about your fiery temper was the same as hers, both of you like using your fists."

When Yang Guo heard this he became slightly more relaxed and a smile appeared, and said, "My...my sister fought someone?"

The inn owner said, "Is that bad news? Not only did she fight, she hurt some people as well, look, look." He pointed to some weapon marks on a table. He said, "It was extremely dangerous, your sister's skills are great, one chop and she cut off two Taoists' ears."

Yang Guo laughed and asked, "What Taoists?" thinking that it must have been the Quanzhen Taoists who were causing trouble for his Gu Gu.

The inn owner said, "They are..." as he said this, his face suddenly changed, his head shrunk back and he turned around and walked away.

Yang Guo knew something was wrong and didn't chase after him; he picked up his bowl of rice and chopsticks, and scooped rice into his mouth. He glanced over, and saw two Taoists entering the inn. They were about twenty-six or seven years of age, there was a bandage across their cheeks and they sat at the table next to Yang Guo. A thick browed Taoist

gave an order to quickly bring out some dishes and wine. The inn owner smiled and came over; he winked at Yang Guo and twisted his lips in their direction. Yang Guo pretended he didn't see and buried his head and started eating. When he heard news of Xiao Longnu his appetite was better, after one bowl there came another. His clothes were Xiao Longnu's work, they were rough and simple; traveling for one day and night covered his body with mud and dirt; he looked like a young villager. The two Taoists didn't look at him; they talked to each other quietly.

Yang Guo deliberately ate noisily, and twisted his body over to listen to what they were saying.

He heard the thick browed Taoist say, "Apprentice brother Pi, do you think Han and Chen will come tonight?"

The other Taoist had a large jaw, he replied deeply, "Those two are good and honest men of the Beggar Clan, and have a friendship with our Martial Uncle Shen. At Martial Uncle Shen's request, they will definitely be here."

Yang Guo took a closer look at them, and surveyed their faces; he didn't know them and thought, "The Quanzhen have over a thousand Taoists, I can't recognize them but they could recognize that I'm the little punk that was expelled from the sect, I better not face them. Huh, they couldn't beat my Gu Gu, now they are meeting some Beggar Clan members to get help."

The thick browed Taoist said, "You really can't be sure, it's a long journey..." The Taoist named Pi said, "Hmm, apprentice brother Ji, there's no use in worrying about it now, forget the fact that she is a girl, she has..."

The Taoist name Ji quickly said, "Drink the wine, don't talk about it." They talked to the inn owner, and ordered an upper class room; they were going to rest in the inn that night."

Yang Guo heard their words, and thought that if he followed them quietly, he would be able to see his master. As he thought about this, there was no limit to his happiness. After the two went to their room, he ordered the inn owner to prepare a small room for him next to theirs. The inn owner took a lamp and quietly whispered into Yang Guo's ear, "Master, you need to be careful, they want to take revenge on your sister for cutting their ears off."

Yang Guo quietly said, "My sister's temper is extremely good, why would she cut off their ear?"

The inn owner revealed a smile and quietly said, "Of course your sister treats you well, but not to others. Your sister was having a meal here... 'Hei' 'hei', is she really your sister? I don't really believe it, even if it was your sister, all the Taoists did was sit by her and stare at her leg a few times. Your sister got into a rage; she took her sword and started to attack the Taoists..." he wanted to carry on. Yang Guo saw that the light next door had been extinguished, he waved his hand to tell him to keep quiet, he was angry and thought, "The Taoists must have seen that my Gu Gu was beautiful and stared at her, making her angry. Huh, why would there be any good people in the Quanzhen sect?" He then thought, "Gu Gu once had a fight with Chongyang Palace, the two Taoists would recognize her, why were they staring at her face?"

He waited for the inn owner to leave, and then extinguished his light and got into bed. He decided he wouldn't sleep that night, he went over the two skills that Ouyang Feng had taught him, but the two skill's formulae were very complex, Ouyang Feng had recited it confusingly, he could only remember at most twenty or thirty percent, he didn't dare to give it much thought just in case he became lost in thought and become unaware of what happened next door.

He quietly kept guard up until the middle of the night, then suddenly he heard two noises; someone was jumping over the wall from outside. The window next door opened.

The Taoist named Ji asked, "Is it Han and Chen?"

Someone replied, "It's us."

The Taoist named Ji said, "Please enter!" He lightly opened the door and lit the oil lamp. Yang Guo concentrated and listened in.

He heard the Taoist named Ji say, "We Ji Qingxu and Pi Qingxuan greet the heroes Han and Chen."

Yang Guo thought, "The Quanzhen follow the motto 'Aim for Tranquility', these two Taoists belong to the fourth generation disciples, I don't know whether they follow the teachings of Hao Datong or Liu Chuxuan."

He heard a person with a high voice say, "We received the message from your Martial Uncle Shen, we didn't even stop our horses once and rushed straight here. Is that little bitch so powerful?"

Ji Qingxu said, "It's embarrassing, the two of us fought for a while but we weren't her match."

That person said, "What kind of martial arts does she have."

Ji Qingxu said, "Martial Uncle Shen suspects that she is a disciple of the Ancient Tomb sect, though she is young she has very good martial arts."

When Yang Guo heard the three words 'Ancient Tomb sect' he couldn't refrain from making two quiet grunts.

He heard Ji Qingxu add, "When Martial Uncle Shen mentioned the Ancient Tomb sect, the little bitch cursed and

insulted the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' Li Mochou, but we don't know what it was about."

That person said, "So it looks like she doesn't have any powerful connections. You are going to meet tomorrow? How many people has the opposition got?"

Ji Qingxu said, "Martial Uncle Shen and that girl agreed to meet tomorrow at high noon, at 'Chailang' (wolf) valley forty li southwest from here, and having a duel to decide the matter. We don't know how many people the opposition has. With the help of the skilled Beggar Clan fighters Han and Chen, we won't be afraid that the opposition has too many people."

The other older voice said, "Fine, we'll be at that place at high noon tomorrow, brother Han, let's go."

Ji Qingxu showed them to the door and quietly said, "We are not far from Chongyang Palace, this duel must not be known to the Grand Masters Ma, Qiu, Wang, Liu, otherwise we'll be punished severely."

The one named Han laughed and said, "Your Martial Uncle Shen had already said this in his letter, and otherwise, why would you need the help of us two when Chongyang Palace has so many skilled fighters?"

The one named Chen said, "Relax, we won't leak anything. It goes without saying that Elder Ma, Liu, Qiu, Wang, Hao, Sun mustn't know about this; if your Martial Uncles find out about this I'm afraid that it'll be the same result for you." The two Taoists agreed at the same time.

Yang Guo thought, "They are ganging up together to bully my Gu Gu, but are afraid that others will find out, huh, sneaking around like this, they know they are scoundrels."

He heard the four speak a few more words, and then Ji Qingxu and Pi Qingxuan escorted them to the wall where Han and Chen departed.

End of Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 - Girl in White

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo saw Lu Wushuang was now staring danger in the face; he had no time to delay; he poked the bull in the buttocks. The bull started to dash at the six. The six of them were absorbed in battle when they suddenly saw a mad bull rushing forward; they were all alarmed and leaped out of the way.

Yang Guo quietly opened the window and slipped inside the room of the two Taoists. He saw two bags on the bed, he lifted one up and felt its weight, there were about twenty taels of silver and thought, "Just what I need for traveling expenses." He took it and placed it into his pocket. The other bag was around four feet long; it held two long swords. He took each one out separately and easily snapped the two swords; then placed each back into their sheath. He then wrapped the swords up. He was about to leave the room when another thought crossed his mind, he took off his trousers and urinated all over the Taoists' quilts and blankets.

He heard the sounds of someone climbing up a wall, and knew that the Taoists' lightness kung fu was very ordinary; they weren't able to clear the wall in a single leap. They had to first climb up on top of the wall and then leap down. He quickly darted back into his room, quietly closing the window. The Taoists did not notice anything. Yang Guo placed his ear against the wall to hear what was happening. He heard the Taoists quietly talking; they seemed to think that victory in tomorrow's duel was in their grasp. They were undressing when suddenly Pi Qingxuan called out, "Hey, why are the blankets damp and wet? Ah, it stinks, apprentice brother Ji, why are you so lazy; wetting yourself on the blankets?"

Ji Qingxu spat out, "What wetting yourself?" He picked up the blanket and called out, "When did a stinking cat urinate

here?”

Pi Qingxuan said, “How can a cat urinate so much?”

Ji Qingxu said, “Hmm, that’s strange; where’s our money?” Suddenly the room was turned upside down as the two searched for their money. Yang Guo sniggered.

He heard Pi Qingxuan call out loudly, “Inn owner, inn owner, this is an evil inn, isn’t it? Stealing money from guests in the middle of the night?”

They called out a few times; the inn owner woke up from his sleep and came to ask what they wanted. Pi Qingxuan grabbed his chest and said that he was running an evil inn. The inn owner made a clamor, and alerted the inn’s waiters, kitchen staff and the attendants. The guests of the inn also all came out to see what it was all about. Yang Guo hid himself amongst the crowd, and saw the inn owner having his way in the argument, his mouth and tongue couldn’t stop moving, refuting so much that the two Taoists couldn’t get a word in edgeways. That inn owner loved to argue; normally he would stir up trouble with others even when nothing had happened. Now someone had started to provoke him first, in spite of the fact was that justice was completely on his side. He spoke until his mouth started to foam up, and his spirits were becoming more and more intense. The two Taoists were angry and embarrassed; they wanted to use force but they remembered the rules of their sect. They were now at the foot of Mount Zhongnan, how would they dare start trouble? They could only swallow their anger, close their door, and sleep for the night. The inn owner continued to chatter and grumble outside non-stop.

The next morning Yang Guo got up and ate a bowl of noodles. The chatty inn owner came over to greet him and he kept on mumbling curses and insults under his breath. Yang Guo smiled and asked, “How are those two villainous Taoists?”

The inn owner brashly said, "Real bastards. Those Taoists wanted to eat and live here free and so in respect for the Chongyang Palace I was going to allow it. But they dare to say that I am running an evil inn. Huh, I'm definitely going to tell the Chongyang Palace. The Taoists of Quanzhen are thousands and thousands in number, which one of them doesn't adhere to the strict rules and regulations? I can clearly remember the two villainous scoundrel Taoists' faces; I'm definitely going to point them out..." Yang Guo was amused and stirred in a few words of his own; he gave him the money for the room and food, and then made sure he knew the way to 'Wolf Valley' and he left.

In the wink of an eye he had already traveled over thirty li and wasn't far from the 'Wolf Valley'. He looked up at the sky and saw that it was still early. He thought, "I'll first hide off to the side and watch how Gu Gu copes with the enemy. It's best if Gu Gu does not recognize me at first."

Yang Guo thought about the day when he fooled Hong Lingbo, and felt pleased with himself, and decided to do the same once more. He went to a nearby farmer's house, and looked around in the back garden, he saw a large bad tempered bull, its horns knocking into the bull pen and making loud noises. Yang Guo's brain lit up and thought, "I'll pretend to be a farmer, and Gu Gu will definitely not be able to recognize me."

He quietly sneaked into the house. In the house he saw two babies playing on the floor so he didn't dare make any sort of noise. He found a set of farmer's clothes and changed into them and then put on a pair of grass shoes. He got some dirt and rubbed it onto his face. On the wall was a bamboo rain hat, which he took and wore. He picked up a grass rope and tied it around his waist, and then inserted a short flute in it. He went out and opened the gate to the bull pen. When the

bull saw him coming, it began to get angry and when it saw the gate was open, it charged forward aiming to ram into his body. Yang Guo's left palm pushed down on the bull's head, and he flipped onto its back. The bull was tall and bulky; each leg weighed nearly one hundred kilos, its tail long and horns sharp. It was extremely large. In the blink of an eye it had already charged onto the main road. It was angry, violent and hot-tempered at this moment in time; it used all its strength to jump upwards, wanting to buck Yang Guo off its back. Yang Guo rode on its back steadily, and was extremely pleased with himself. He laughed and said, "If you don't obey you are going to suffer." He raised his palm, and chopped down on the bull's head. He only used twenty percent of his strength, and the bull could not endure it and bellowed. It wanted to jump again but Yang Guo sent down another chop. He chopped it on the head about ten or so times and the bull eventually did not dare to retaliate. Yang Guo then poked the bull's neck with his finger on the left side and it turned right; when he poked it on the right side of the neck, it turned left, when he poked it on the back it moved forward, and when poked at the front it moved back. He was able to control its movements with his finger. Yang Guo then used his strength to poke its behind and the bull headed forward fiercely. It dashed ahead as if it were a horse. In a short while they passed a forest, and came to a valley surrounded by mountains. It was how the inn owner described it. He leapt down from the bull's back, and allowed it to graze on the grass on the mountain slopes. His hand held the rope as he lay down on the ground.

He looked at the sun and saw it gradually approaching the middle of the sky. He was becoming more and more nervous; he was afraid that Xiao Longnu would ignore the meeting and wouldn't show up. It was quiet and peaceful all around, with only the bull making a few snorting noises. Suddenly, at the entrance to the valley were the sounds of palms clashing,

followed by more sounds of palms clashing from the south side. Yang Guo was lying on the slope, one muddy leg crossed over his knee, his bamboo hat was covering his face, only his right eye was revealed.

After a while, three Taoists appeared at the entrance to the valley. Two of them were the Taoists from last night at the inn, Ji Qingxu and Pi Qingxuan, the other was about forty years old, he was quite short. He was probably Martial Uncle Shen. Yang Guo studied his face and remembered that he saw him at Chongyang Palace before. Two men followed. One was a rugged looking man; the other was an old man with a head full of white hair. They were the Beggar Clan members Chen and Han. The five walked closer and saluted each other. Then they formed a line, all looked around.

At that time, a quiet trotting sound was heard from outside the mouth of the valley. The five men all looked at each other and stared at the entrance to the valley. They heard the sound getting closer and closer; then there was a black and white object at the entrance of the valley. It was a girl in white riding on top of a black donkey coming forward.

When Yang Guo saw this his heart quivered, "It's not Gu Gu! Could it be another one of their team?" He saw the girl rein in the donkey a few feet away from the five. She glanced at them coldly; her face was filled with contempt and it looked like she didn't want to speak to them.

Ji Qingxu called out, "Little Bitch, well, well, well, you do have guts; you might as well call your help out."

The girl chuckled, a 'shua' sound was heard as she pulled out a small thin saber from her waist; it looked like the curved moon, the silver glittering in one's eye.

Ji Qingxu said, "There are five of us, we can't wait patiently for your help to arrive."

The girl waved her saber and said, "This is my help." The saber producing a 'weng' noise as it was waved in the air." When she said this, the six of them were shocked. The five were shocked at the fact that a girl, by herself, would have the guts to fight five skilled fighters without any help. Yang Guo was extremely disappointed and hurt, he was sure that he would see Xiao Longnu. How could he know that the so-called 'beautiful girl in white' was another person? The air in his chest surged up; he wasn't able to control it anymore and called out. When he called out, the other six were alarmed; but all they saw was a farmer letting his bull graze on the slope and they didn't take any notice of him. They thought that it was just a young country bumpkin who had suffered some problem and was crying out.

Ji Qingxu pointed at the one named Han and said, "This is the Beggar Clan's hero Han." He pointed to the one named Chen and said, "This is the Beggar Clan's hero Chen." He then pointed to 'Martial Uncle Shen' and said, "Our Martial Uncle Shen Zhifan, you've seen him before."

The girl ignored him, her eyes cold, she glanced at them a few times, treating them as nothing.

Shen Zhifan said, "You came on your own; so we can't fight with you. We'll give you a deadline of ten days. In ten days you need to bring four helpers to meet us."

The girl answered, "I've said I've already got my help; against you bunch of nobodies why do I need to get more people?"

Shen Zhifan angrily said, "Little girl, you really are bold." His words were meant to be insults and he managed to force himself to ask, "Are you from the Ancient Tomb sect?"

The girl said, "So what if I am? So what if I'm not? You stupid old Taoist, do you have the guts to fight with me or don't

you?”

Shen Zhifan saw that she was alone but was sure that she had strong back-up and had them nearby. He was also afraid that he would invite trouble from the Ancient Tomb's Li Mochou so he said, “Miss, I have a question; why did you hurt members of my sect for no reason? If it was our fault, then I will publicly apologize to your master, but if Miss can't give a good reason then forgive us for being impolite.”

The girl chuckled and said, “Of course it was those two bullish Taoists' fault and I just taught them a lesson. If there weren't so many scoundrels in the world, why would I cut off their ears?”

Shen Zhifan saw that she was extremely brash and couldn't help being startled. The beggar named Chen was old but he still had a temper; he took a step forward and shouted, “Little girl, you are talking to Seniors here, how come you haven't got off your donkey?” As he said this he shot forward towards the black donkey and stretched out a hand to grab her right arm. His hand came out extremely quick. The girl wasn't able to dodge it and she was grabbed immediately. Her right hand was also the hand that was holding her blade, so she wasn't able to use it to repel the attack. Unexpectedly, the cold light of the saber moved, the girl's arm twisted and the curved blade sliced down. Beggar Chen was startled and quickly let go. At least he was alert, and quickly changed his stance but the blade had cut two fingers. He quickly leapt back and drew out a saber and called out, “Bitch, you must be bored with your life.” The beggar named Han drew out a lead hammer, and Shen Zhifan drew out his sword. Ji Qingxu and Pi Qingxuan took hold of their swords' handles and pulled them out. But they felt that something was wrong with the sword's weight. Both of them called out ‘Ai!’ in shock, the swords in their hands were broken.

When the girl saw the two Taoists' expressions she couldn't stop herself from laughing. Yang Guo was lamenting at this time, when he heard the girl laugh he looked at the two Taoists' embarrassed expression. He couldn't stop himself from turning his tears into laughter. He saw the girl bend her waist and hack down with her saber at Pi Qingxuan's head. Pi Qingxuan quickly pulled back his head but he didn't know the move wasn't finished, a slight turn of the wrist and the saber turned in the air and eventually cut Pi Qingxuan's right cheek; blood started to flow from it. The other four were alarmed and angry, they quickly surrounded her. The Taoists Pi and Ji retreated to the rear, their hands holding onto the broken swords. They didn't want to throw them away but they weren't much use. They didn't know what to do.

The girl called out clearly, her left hand pulled on the reins and the donkey dashed forward. Beggar Chen and Han were the closest, the blade and the hammer both attacked. Shen Zhifan followed and used Quanzhen's sword techniques, every stance aiming for the important points of the enemy. Yang Guo saw that although his sword skills were vicious, compared with Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping, their skills were far apart. Out of the Taoists with the name Zhi, he was the lesser skilled. Yang Guo was now calm, he studied the girl's face carefully; he saw that she had a pretty oval face and she was younger than him by a year or so. It's no wonder the inn owner didn't believe that the 'beautiful girl in white' was his older sister. Though she wore white, her skin was slightly dark; it was very different from the brilliant snow white of Xiao Longnu. He saw that her saber stances were light and swift and seemed to be derived from the Ancient Tomb sword stances; there were more stabs and thrusts and rather less chops and hacks.

Yang Guo watched for a few stances and thought, "Indeed she is using our sect's kung fu, could it be that she is a student of Li Mochou?" Yang Guo thought that both sides

weren't good people and he didn't care less who won or lost; but then another thought entered his mind. "How could you be the 'beautiful girl in white'? You're not even worthy to be my Gu Gu's maid." He folded his arms behind his head and lay down facing the sky, watching the battle.

For the first ten moves or so, the girl was able to hold her own; she was on the donkey's back, attacking from above with the saber. The five of them had no choice but to jump back and dodge. Another ten moves passed, Ji Qingxu saw that the broken sword in his hand was useless, then thought suddenly entered him and he called out, "Apprentice brother Pi, follow me." He quickly headed to the nearby woods and picked a fine small tree; he chopped its roots and branches with his broken swords and made a large club. Pi Qingxuan did the same. The two attacked from the left and right, thrusting toward the donkey.

The girl quietly said, "Shameless!" She waved her saber at them to fend them off and became distracted. Beggar Han's hammer and Shen Zhifan's sword arrived. The girl quickly used a risky technique; she lowered her head and slanted her body, the hammer's wind swept over her face. A clashing sound was heard as the saber met with the sword and at that moment the black donkey cried out in pain and reared. Ji Qingxu had struck it with the club. Beggar Chen did a roll and used his saber techniques. The flat side of his saber struck heavily down on the donkey's leg; the donkey immediately rolled over. The young girl was now unable to fight them from the donkey's back. She saw a sword coming straight at her and immediately flew away; she grabbed Pi Qingxuan's stick and snapped it in half. Her legs landed on the ground and she slashed across with her saber, repelling beggar Chen's chop.

Yang Guo was startled, "What? Is she hurt?"

The girl was actually slightly lame in her left leg, from the leap, one could see her restricted movements, and this is why she had refused to come down from her donkey. Yang Guo's heroic nature was moved and he wanted to intervene and help her. But a thought entered his mind, "Gu Gu and I were fine living in the tomb; it was that evil woman Li Mochou who caused us to be in this situation. That girl pretends to be my Gu Gu, wanting people to call her the 'beautiful girl in white', she's shameless!" He turned away and stopped watching.

But he kept on hearing the continuous sounds of clashing weapons and wasn't able to curb his curiosity, he turned his head again. He saw that the situation had now changed, the girl was now dodging east and evading west, and she was defending more than attacking. Suddenly the Han beggar's metal hammer came flying in, the girl moved her head and dodged it, at the same time, Shen Zhifan's sword slashed across. A 'ding' sound was heard, her silver hair loop was cut; half her hair swept down. The girl's brows raised, her mouth opened, a frosty look came upon her face as she turned her hand and slashed across.

Yang Guo saw her angry expression and his heart shook, "When Gu Gu was angry, she looked exactly like this." Because the girl became angry Yang Guo decided to help her. He picked up seven or eight stones and placed them in his pocket. He glanced at her again and saw that she was in a frantic situation.

Shen Zhifan called out, "What exactly is your relationship to the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' Li Mochou? If you don't tell us truthfully, don't blame us for our actions!"

The girl's saber slashed across, hooking across the back of his head. Shen Zhifan couldn't predict that she would do this

and wasn't able to block. Beggar Chen quickly called out, "Careful!"

Ji Qingxu fiercely struck the curved saber with his large stick and managed to save the life of Shen Zhifan. The five saw that her stances were all ruthless, not leaving anything to chance. In a short while, the girl continuously unleashed a series of dangerous stances. Shen Zhifan was sure that she was connected to Li Mochou somehow; if news of this ever got to that evil woman, he would have boundless troubles. He saw that she indeed did not have any back up, now was a good chance to kill her and seal her mouth. Every stance he used was aiming to wound the girl.

Yang Guo saw that the girl was now staring danger in the face; he had no time to delay so he flipped up and got on the bull's back. He hung his legs from its back and dangled down underneath and then poked the bull in the buttocks. The bull started to dash at the six.

The six of them were absorbed in battle when they suddenly saw a mad bull rushing forward; they were all alarmed and leaped out of the way. Yang Guo was dangling below the bull and saw the pressure points on the backs of the five men, the pebbles shot out, they were struck in the 'Soul Entrance' and the 'Spirit Hall' pressure points. He heard calls of 'Ai Ya!' and the five felt their arms become numb; their weapons dropped from their hands. Yang Guo then sent the bull up the slope. He dropped down from the bull's stomach onto the ground and called out, "Oh no, the bull's gone mad!"

Shen Zhifan's pressure points were sealed and his weapon escaped from his hand; but he didn't see the enemy do this and thought that this was the deed of the girl's backup. That person was highly skilled, how did he dare to fight anymore? Luckily his legs were still able to move, he quickly ran away but he still remembered his friends and called out, "Brother

Chen, Brother Han, let's go!" The others didn't think about it and followed. Pi Qingxuan lost his bearings and was actually running towards the girl. Ji Qingxu called out, "Apprentice brother Pi, over here!" Pi Qingxuan was about to turn around when the girl took a step forward and chopped down with her saber. Pi Qingxuan was alarmed, he didn't have a weapon and quickly dodged to the side, but how would he know that the girl's saber wasn't chopping down in a fixed direction, it went east and then west, the light of the blade glimmered as it was about to slash down across his face. Pi Qingxuan raised his arm; a 'ca' sound was made as the saber hacked off four fingers. He had yet to feel the pain as he quickly turned around and ran away.

Beggar Han ran ten or so steps and saw that the girl did not follow and thought, "That Bitch is lame, how can she chase us?" When he considered that she was lame, he glanced at her left leg, then turned around and hurried away. How would he know that look angered the girl, she couldn't contain her fury and shouted out, "Scoundrel, don't you think I can't catch up with you?" She lifted her saber and swung it around a few times; a 'fu' sound was made as she threw it. She saw the saber glimmer in midair, a 'pu' sound was heard as the saber plunged itself in the left shoulder of beggar Han. That person kept on running with the saber in his back. In a short while, the five of them had escaped into the forest.

The girl chuckled but was suspicious, "Could there be someone nearby? Why did they help me?" The beggar named Han had taken the saber that she normally used away; she felt that it was such a pity. She picked up the saber that Beggar Chen had left and quickly went over to the forest to take a look but there wasn't a trace of anyone around and returned to the valley. She saw Yang Guo sobbing miserably on the ground, calling and shouting out that woe is me.

The girl asked, "Hey, little farmer, what woe are you talking about?"

Yang Guo said, "The bull's gone mad, it's skin and body is ripped and bruised, when I get back to Master's house he's definitely going to kill me."

The young girl took a look at the bull, but saw nothing was wrong with it and said, "Fine, your bull did help me out, I'll give you some money." As she said this she took out some money and threw it down to the ground. She thought that Yang Guo was going to thank her, but she didn't predict that Yang Guo would still have the same expression on his face, shaking his head not picking up the money.

The young girl said, "What's wrong with you fool, its money."

Yang Guo said, "One ingot is not enough." The girl took another ingot and threw it down to the ground. Yang Guo wanted to tease her some more and shook his head.

The young girl got angry and raised her eyebrows, and shouted, "I've no more fool!" She turned around and walked away. When Yang Guo saw her angry expression, he couldn't stop the blood in his chest and head rushing. His eyes ached, he remembered the expression that Xiao Longnu had when she scolded him, he made a decision, "If I can't find Gu Gu for the time being, I might as well look at that girl's angry look." He stretched out and grabbed her right leg and called out, "You can't go!"

The girl tried to pull away but he held her so tightly that she wasn't able to escape; she became even angrier and shouted, "Let go! Why are you holding onto me?"

Yang Guo saw that her anger was growing and he became happier. He called out, "I'm not going to return home, save me." He then loudly called out, "Save me, save me!"

The young girl was angry but was amused at the same time, she raised her saber and called out, "If you don't let go I'll chop you to death in one go."

Yang Guo held on even tighter and pretended to cry, he said, "Chop me to death, I'll be dead anyway if I return home."

The girl said, "Where do you want to go?"

Yang Guo said, "I don't know, I'll follow you."

The young girl thought, "There's no reason to have a little idiot following me around." She raised her saber and hacked down. Yang Guo thought that she wasn't really going to do it so he held tightly to her leg. He couldn't have guessed that the girl was ruthless; her chop was really heading for his head. Although she didn't want to kill him she did want to cut down on his head and let him suffer a little so he won't dare to bother her again. Yang Guo saw the saber coming down on him, when there was just a few inches between his head and the blade he rolled away and called out, "Murderer, murderer!"

The girl became angrier and dashed forward wanting to slash down again. Yang Guo was lying on the ground, his legs flying everywhere, he called out, "I'm dead...I'm dead!" His muddy legs and hands were scrambling about everywhere; he made himself look as dreadful as possible. But when the girl came hacking down with her saber, his leg would kick her wrist and in the end she wasn't able to hack down again. Yang Guo saw her angry expression; it was what he wanted to see and he stared at her. The girl saw that he was looking weird and shouted, "Get up!"

Yang Guo said, "Are you going to kill me?"

The girl said, "Fine, I won't kill you." Yang Guo picked himself up and gasped deeply, he secretly restricted his blood flow,

and his face became pale, as if he was scared to death.

The young girl was pleased with herself and gave an 'humph' sound, and said, "Let's see if you'll still dare to trouble me." She raised her saber and pointed to the slope where Pi Qingxuan's fingers were hacked off and said, "I'm fierce and violent; I slashed off his fingers." Yang Guo pretended to be frightened and worried, he kept on shuffling backwards. The girl placed the saber in her belt and turned around to search for her black donkey, but the donkey had long disappeared. She could only travel by foot.

Yang Guo picked up the money and placed it in his pocket. He held the bull's rope and followed her and said, "Gu Gu, take me away."

The girl ignored him and sped up, in a short while she had left him without a trace. Who could have guessed that while she was taking a little break, he was hurrying towards her with the bull calling out, "Take me away...take me away."

The girl eyebrows raised and then utilized her lightness kung fu, in one breath she had gone a few li, and knew that he wouldn't be able to catch up. But in a short while she could hear a quiet call of "Take me away!"

The girl became furious; she turned around and took out her saber, raising it in the air.

Yang Guo called out, "Oh no!" He held his head and ran away. The girl just wanted him to stop following and that was it, she then turned around and walked away. Soon, she heard the snort of a bull; she turned around and saw Yang Guo about forty steps away, holding on to the bull following behind her. She stopped and waited for him. When Yang Guo saw her stop, he stopped moving as well, when she walked, he followed and when she chased after him with the saber he

ran away. This stopping and following continued until it started to get dark; the young girl was still unable to escape from Yang Guo's pursuit. The girl saw that although he looked dumb, his pace was not ordinary and she thought that he must be used to running around in the mountains. She wanted him to catch up to her so she could knock him out or hurt his legs but each time he was able to roll out of the danger and escape.

After a few while, the girl was becoming tired; her left leg was lame and moving was troublesome. She had an idea and called out, "Fine, I'll take you away, you have to listen to what I say."

Yang Guo said delightedly, "You really are going to take me away?"

The girl said, "Yes, why would I lie to you? I'm tired; you ride on the bull and then let me ride with you."

Yang Guo lead the bull forward and caught up, under the cloudy skies, he saw her eye glistened and knew that she was up to something. He climbed onto the back of the bull. The girl's right leg pushed up and she lightly flew up onto the bull's back, sitting in front of Yang Guo. She thought, "My donkey is gone, riding on this bull won't be bad." She kicked the bull hard in the side. The bull felt pain and dashed forward quickly. The girl chuckled and suddenly elbowed backward with strength, hitting Yang Guo in the chest. Yang Guo called out 'Ai Ya!' and rolled off the back of the bull.

The young girl was extremely pleased and thought, "You little scoundrel, you suffered at my hands in the end." She poked the bull in the side and the bull hurried forward even faster. She suddenly heard the calls and shouts from Yang Guo, and the voice was just behind her, she turned her head to look around and saw him holding tightly onto the bull's tail, his legs in midair. He was towed in the air by the bull and his

face was full of dirt and mud. Tears flowed from his eyes; he was extremely frantic but he still held onto the bull's tail tightly. The young girl had no other ideas and so raised her saber aiming to slash down at his arm. She suddenly heard a clamor; the bull had reached a little town.

In the crowd of people the bull had nowhere to go and stopped. Yang Guo wanted to tease the young girl and see her angry face; he lay on the ground and called out, "My chest hurts, you're beating me to death!" The town's people all gathered around and asked why.

The girl was going to take this chance of being surrounded by people and slip into the crowd and escape; but she didn't foresee that Yang Guo would pick himself up and hold onto her right leg. He called out, "Don't go... don't go!" Yang Guo called out, "She's my wife; she doesn't want me and beats me."

A person said, "A wife beating her husband, what is the world coming to?" The girl's eyebrows raised and she kicked out with her left leg. Yang Guo clambered up to the side of a burly man and gave him a push; the kick landed on his waist. The burly man shouted, "Little Bitch, kicking people?" He raised his massive fist. The young girl held the man's elbow and used his strength to fling him away. The hundred kilo body flew into the crowd, causing the people in the crowd to scream and shout, making quite a scene. The girl used all her strength to pull free but how could she when Yang Guo was holding on with all his life? She saw that another five or six people were coming up towards her, adding to her problems. She could only lower her head and say, "I'll take you away, quickly let go."

Yang Guo said, "Are you still going to beat me?"

The young girl said, "Fine, I won't!" Yang Guo loosened his hand and stood up. The two of them rushed out of the crowd

and headed out of the town. They heard shouting from behind. Yang Guo had managed to hold on to the bull.

Yang Guo laughed, and said, "People say that the wife cannot beat the husband."

The young girl angrily said, "Stupid Sha Dan [Dumb Egg]! If you keep on talking this rubbish, saying I'm your wife and what not, just watch me cut your head off." She raised her saber as she said this.

Yang Guo held his head and jumped to the side and pleaded, "Miss, I won't say it anymore."

The girl said, "Look at you, even an ugly old hag wouldn't marry you." Yang Guo laughed foolishly and didn't reply.

Now, the sky was dark, the two stood in the unkempt land; they turned around, and saw smoke from cooking rising up from the town and both felt hungry.

The young girl said, "Sha Dan, go to the market and buy ten buns."

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I won't go." The young girl's face turned angry and she said, "Why not?" Yang Guo said, "I won't go! You are tricking me to go buy some buns so you could sneak off." The young girl said, "I said I won't slip away so I won't." Yang Guo shook his head. The girl curled up her fist wanting to hit him but he quickly jumped to the side. The two of them ran around the bull like they were playing hide and seek. The girl was lame and it wasn't easy for her to move. She saw the boy tripping up in front of her crying and shouting out, yet, although she possessed lightness kung fu, she was still unable to catch up with him.

The girl was furious, she thought about her martial arts, yet for some reason, she had allowed an ugly and smelly country bumpkin Sha Dan to stay on her tail. She had no way to

escape, it might be said that she was incompetent. Yang Guo had made himself so much like the character he was supposed to be that when the girl failed three or four times to kill the Sha Dan, she was not suspicious. She followed the main road south and she saw that Yang Guo was holding onto the bull and catching up. She thought that she must find a way to kill him unexpectedly. In the short time it takes to cook rice, the sky had become even darker. She saw an old and run down stone house; it looked abandoned and thought, "Tonight I'll sleep here and when that idiot is sleeping in the middle of the night, I'll kill him with one slash." She walked towards the house and entered, dust entered her nose, the chairs and tables were broken and it appeared that this house was deserted long ago. She cut some grass and wiped a long table clean; she lay on the table, closed her eyes and rested. She saw that Yang Guo hadn't followed her, and called out, "Sha Dan! Sha Dan!" She didn't hear a reply and thought, "Could it be that the fool knows that I was going to kill him and left!" She wasn't concerned with it, and after a while she fell asleep. Suddenly the smell of cooking meat entered her nose. She got up and went outside. She saw Yang Guo sitting in the moonlight holding a piece of meat and opening his mouth to bite into it. Before him was a fire, on top of the fire was an array of branches, meat was roasting on it, the smell of it floating towards her.

Yang Guo saw her come out and laughed, and said, "You want some?" He picked up a roasted piece of the meat and threw it towards her. She caught it with her hand and looked at it, it was a shank of meat, and she was hungry and started to eat it. Although it had no salt, it was still tasty. She sat by the fire and politely ate the meat. She first tore the meat off the shank, and then placed it into her mouth slowly, but she saw Yang Guo munching noisily, annoying her. She was hungry so

she turned around and looked away from him. When she finished her meat, Yang Guo gave her another piece.

The young girl said, "Sha Dan, what's your name?"

Yang Guo said, "Are you an angel? How do you know I'm called Sha Dan?"

The young girl laughed and said, "Ha, so your name is Sha Dan. Where are your parents?"

Yang Guo said, "They've been dead a long time. What's your name?"

The young girl said, "I don't know. Why are you asking?"

Yang Guo thought, "Since you won't say then I'll anger you." He said brashly, "I know, you are called Sha Dan too, that's why you won't say."

The young girl got angry. She got up and punched him in the head and scolded, "Who said I'm called Sha Dan? You are the Sha Dan."

Yang Guo cried out and covered his head and said, "When someone asks me what I'm called, I say I don't know so other people call me Sha Dan; since you don't know, that means you are a Sha Dan as well."

The young girl said, "Who says I don't know? I just don't want to tell you. Do you know that my surname is Lu?"

This young girl was the little girl who was picking lotuses in Jiaxing's South Lake, Lu Wushuang. When she was plucking flowers with her cousin Cheng Ying and the Wu brothers, she broke her leg. While Madam Wu was helping to set her leg bones back together, Hong Lingbo arrived to take their lives, so her leg bones weren't set properly. When it healed, her left leg was shorter by an inch or so. Because of this she walks

like a lame person. Although her skin was not white, she was still beautiful. When she was grown up she was even more so, but because her leg was lame, she was hateful.

When Li Mochou killed her parents and took her away, she was going to kill her but when she saw the handkerchief on her neck she remembered Lu Zhanyuan, and so she did not kill her. Lu Wushuang was clever; she knew that her life was hanging on a thread now that she was in Li Mochou's grasp. That witch goes and comes like the wind; she would not be able to run away, so she pretended to be obedient and tried to please her. Eventually the urge to kill the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity', who kills without blinking, calmed down. Sometimes Li Mochou remembered the hurtful events of the past and would summon Lu Wushuang and shout at her for a while. Lu Wushuang would put on a pitiful face and limp along. When Li Mochou saw her sorry look and after shouting at her and getting rid of her anger that would be it. Lu Wushuang pleaded to stay with her, and because she was just a little girl, Li Mochou did eventually allow her to stay. She buried her thoughts of revenge for her parents in her heart. If Li Mochou asked her about it, she pretended that she had forgotten all about them. When Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo were practicing kung fu, she would stand to the side and pass over swords and towels, tea and fruits, concentrating on the practice. She already had a decent foundation, when she watched them practice she noted everything, and when Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo went out, she would secretly practice. She would normally try to get in Hong Lingbo's favour. Later Hong Lingbo took advantage of the mood that Li Mochou was in and pleaded on behalf of Lu Wushuang. Eventually she became her disciple. A few years passed, Lu Wushuang's kung fu improved every day, but Li Mochou was still suspicious of her so did not teach her the most advanced skills. Even the intermediate skills were not passed on. Hong Lingbo took pity on her and would give her some pointers in

secret. Although it couldn't be said that Lu Wushuang's skills were high, her skills were not low either. That day when Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo went to the tomb to search for the "Jade Heart Manual", Lu Wushuang noticed that they did not return for a long time, so she decided to escape and go to Jiaxing in search of news of her parents. Although she saw with her own eyes Li Mochou seriously wounding her parents, she had not seen them die; there was still a glimmer of hope. She held onto this glimmer of hope and went to find out the truth. Before she left, she thought she might as well go all the way, and took Li Mochou's book, the 'Five Poison Codex'; it was a copy of a list of poisons and their antidotes.

Her left leg was lame, and she hated those who looked at it. One day in an inn, two Taoists looked at her leg and she immediately shouted at them. The two Taoists did not have good tempers, so after a few words they used force and they started to fight. With her curved saber, she cut off their ears and agreed to meet them at Wolf Valley the next day.

That day when Li Mochou took her away and headed north, she and Yang Guo met each other at the entrance to the cave. They were both young, their faces had now changed; they weren't able to remember their encounter of years ago.

Lu Wushuang was full after she finished the second piece of roasted meat. Yang Guo used the light of the fire to look at her face, "Where on earth is my Gu Gu? If the girl in front of me was Gu Gu, and I was roasting meat for her, wouldn't that be wonderful?" He was deep in thought, and stared at her as if he was mad.

Lu Wushuang thought, "I'll endure your disrespectful stare for now; I'll kill you later in the middle of the night." She then returned to the stone house and slept.

In the middle of the night, she quietly got up; she went outside and saw Yang Guo by the fire not moving. The fire

had gone out long ago. She went over to him and slashed him with her blade across his back. Her wrist suddenly shook, it started to ache; she couldn't hold onto the saber and let it go. She felt that the place she slashed across was like metal or stone. She became extremely frightened and leapt away, and thought, "Could it be that Sha Dan has reached the state of being impenetrable by blades and spears?" She moved away tens of feet, but Yang Guo had not chased after her. She turned around; he was still by the fire, not moving an inch.

Lu Wushuang was suspicious and she called out, "Sha Dan... Sha Dan, I have something to say to you." Yang Guo did not reply. She took a careful look, and saw Yang Guo's body had formed a circle, it looked extremely strange, she boldly went over and saw that it did not look like the body of a person, she stretched out her hand and touched him, it felt like the clothes were placed on top of a rock. She grabbed the clothes and lifted up; indeed there was a large rock below. Where was Yang Guo?

She stood there for a while and called out, "Sha Dan, Sha Dan!" She didn't hear a reply so she listened carefully; there seemed to be a snoring noise coming from the house. She went over there quietly and saw Yang Guo sleeping on the table that she had just slept on. His back towards her and he was snoring loudly in a deep sleep.

Lu Wushuang was angry, and didn't even think about how he ended up sleeping on the table. She immediately leapt forward raising her saber, and pierced into his back.

The saber's tip had plunged into flesh but she didn't feel any resistance in her hands. She heard Yang Guo snore a few times and then said in his sleep, "Who's scratching my back, don't, don't, I'm scared."

Lu Wushuang turned pale, her arms quivered, thinking, "Is this person a demon?" She turned around to run but her legs

didn't listen. She then heard him say, "There must be a mouse on my back trying to steal my meat." He stretched out his hand to his back and took out a lump of meat, and threw it onto the ground.

Lu Wushuang finally breathed out and understood, "So that Sha Dan put the meat on his back and just now I stabbed into that, I've just suffered a fright for no reason."

She had failed twice to stab him and she hated him even more, she clenched her teeth and quietly said, "Rotten Sha Dan, see if I'm able to kill you this time." She dashed forward and raised her saber, then slashed down across his back. In the midst of the snoring, Yang Guo turned his body, the saber slashed down deeply into the wood. Lu Wushuang circulated her chi around her hands trying to remove the saber. Yang Guo pretended he was having a nightmare, "Mum, mum, the little mouse is biting me." His muddy legs shot out, the left leg striking Lu Wushuang's 'Crooked Reservoir' (qu chi) pressure point on the side of her body, his right leg landing on her shoulder sealing the 'Shoulder Well' (jian jing) pressure point. Those two points are two of two of the body's important pressure points. When those legs came out, of all the places to hit, they hit precisely those two places. Lu Wushuang wasn't able to move, she stood there, becoming a support for his legs.

Lu Wushuang was furious, although her body wasn't able to move, her mouth still could, she shouted out, "Hey Sha Dan, quickly move your stinky feet away." She just heard his snoring becoming louder. She didn't know what to do, in anger she opened her mouth and spat at him. Yang Guo moved his body; his right foot brushed across and struck her 'Large Bone' pressure point. Lu Wushuang's body immediately became numb all over, even her mouth wasn't able to open, the stench from his feet flowed into her nose.

In a short while, Lu Wushuang's anger stirred up again, and she swore to herself, "Tomorrow when my pressure points are unsealed, I'm going to chop up Sha Dan into seventeen or eighteen pieces."

After a while, Yang Guo felt that he'd had enough fun, he released his legs and turned around, although it was dark, he was still able to look at her angry expression clearly. The angrier she got, the more she looked like Xiao Longnu. Yang Guo stared at her in a daze, how would he be able to close his eyes? In actual fact, Lu Wushuang and Xiao Longnu did not look like each other. It's just that when girls get angry they all have a similar look. Yang Guo missed his master and looking at Lu Wushuang's angry expression reminded him of Xiao Longnu. It was like looking at a picture of her.

After a while, the moon was in the west, its light shooting into the room. Lu Wushuang saw Yang Guo's eyes were open, staring at her in a daze and shivered, "Could that Sha Dan be pretending to be mad? He sealed my pressure points, could it be that it wasn't an accident?" When she thought about this, she couldn't stop herself from breaking out in a cold sweat. At this moment in time, she saw Yang Guo's eyes looking at the floor; she followed his eyes and saw three shadows. There were three people standing at the entrance. She looked carefully and saw that the three shadows were holding weapons, she secretly cursed herself, "Crap, the enemy has to come now when Sha Dan has sealed my pressure points." Although she was suspicious, she couldn't believe that this dirty and humble farmer possessed a set of good martial arts.

Yang Guo closed his eyes and snored loudly. He heard someone call out from the door, "Little Bitch, come out, do you think this Taoist Master will let you off by standing still?"

Yang Guo thought, "Oh, it's him again."

Another person said, "We don't want your life, we just want to cut off your two ears and three fingers." The third person said, "This Old man is waiting for you outside; just get it over and done with." As they said this they moved outside. The three of them stood in a semi circle.

Yang Guo stretched up and slowly sat up and said, "Why are you calling outside, Miss Lu, you are here? Why are you standing there without moving?" He pushed her in the back a few times. Lu Wushuang felt a surge of strong chi running into her body, her body shook and the three pressure points in her body unsealed. She didn't bother thinking about what had happened and immediately got up and took up her saber. She leaped out of the house and saw three men with their backs facing the moon. She didn't say anything and flipped her wrist and thrust out at the person on the left. That person was holding a chain and saw the saber slashing towards him. His chain was heavy, its power was great and so was its accuracy. A clashing sound was heard as Lu Wushuang's saber flew out of her hand. Yang Guo was lying across the table and saw Lu Wushuang leap to the side, her left hand stretched out and thought, "Good, that Taoist will not be able to hold on to his sword." Indeed when her wrist turned up, she used the Ancient Tomb sect's kung fu, and she had taken the Taoist's sword. She chopped down, a 'pu' sound; the Taoist's shoulder had been struck by the sword.

Lu Wushuang used the sword and fought with the man who used the chain. The other short man held a spear; he pierced east and west, but was out of the order and stayed back. The man using the chain had good martial arts, after ten moves or so, Lu Wushuang gradually felt that she wouldn't be able to stand still. That person's steps seemed to be measured, he honored his status, Lu Wushuang had failed to get at him many times yet he didn't force the issue.

The Taoist wrapped up his wound, pointed at Lu Wushuang and cursed, "Ancient Tomb Bitch, such evil attacks!" He ran towards her attacking with his fists and legs. A white light glimmered; the Taoist's back was pierced by the sword. At that time, the short man thrust his spear at Lu Wushuang's back, and the man using the chain smashed down on her shoulders.

Yang Guo thought, "Oh no!" He picked up two stones and flicked them out, one at the spear, the other at the man's right wrist. He didn't know that the man was skilled, once the stone struck his wrist, he wasn't able to smash down with his chain, but his left palm came out like lightning and struck Lu Wushuang on the chest. Yang Guo was alarmed, he was young and inexperienced and wasn't able to tell that the man's fists and palms were good. He quickly dashed out and grabbed onto the man's neck, the man's body suddenly flew up and was flung away tens of feet. The Taoist and the short man saw that Yang Guo was powerful; they picked up the man and ran away without turning back.

Yang Guo lowered his head and took a look at Lu Wushuang, he saw that her face was golden and she was breathing weakly, her injury was serious. He put his arm around her back and slowly sat her up. He heard 'ge la' 'ge la', two light sounds, it was the sound of bones grinding. Two of her ribs had been broken by that man. She had passed out but once the bones moved, the pain was intense and woke her up; she gave out a quiet groan. Yang Guo said, "What is it? Does it hurt?"

Lu Wushuang was in extreme pain, she clenched her teeth and scolded, "Why are you asking? Of course it hurts. Carry me into the house."

When Yang Guo picked her up, it was unavoidable that there was going to be some movements. Lu Wushuang's ribs

touched each other and the pain ignited again, she scolded, "Fine, bastard Sha Dan, you...you want to torture me. Where have the three scoundrels gone?" When Yang Guo used his skills, she had already fainted and didn't know that it was him that saved her life.

Yang Guo laughed, and said, "They thought you were dead, they clapped and left."

Lu Wushuang scolded, "Why are you laughing? Bastard Sha Dan, the more pain I'm in the happier you are, is that it?" Every time she shouted at him, Yang Guo would remember how Xiao Longnu would scold him. He lived in the Tomb of the Living Dead for a few years with Xiao Longnu and it was the happiest time in his life. Each time Xiao Longnu scolded him; he couldn't help but be moved as he knew that his Master was treating him with her heart. At present he wasn't able to find his Master, but at this time when he was alone, he had at least bumped into another girl in white. In actual fact, Xiao Longnu was cold and detached; when she scolded him it was just a few calm words. How was she like Lu Wushuang who screamed and shouted out insults and curses? In Yang Guo's present state, having a young girl scolding him was better than having no one, he ignored her insults and curses and just smiled, he placed her on the table. When Lu Wushuang lay on the table, her broken ribs moved again, she couldn't endure the pain and called out. When she called out in pain her lungs breathed out and this disturbed the ribs again causing further pain. She clenched her teeth as cold sweat poured off her head.

Yang Guo said, "Shall I fix your ribs back in place for you?"

Lu Wushuang scolded, "Rotten Sha Dan, what bones do you know how to fix?"

Yang Guo said, "My dog at home fought with the neighbor's dog. Its bone was bitten in half and it was me who fixed his

bone back in place. Also, when Uncle Wang's sow had its rib broken, it was me who fixed it back into place."

Lu Wushuang was angry, but she didn't dare to shout out loudly, she huskily said, "You're calling me a sow, a dog. You're the dog, the sow."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Even if I was a pig, I'd be a boar. Furthermore, that dog was a bitch; a male dog won't be like that."

Although Lu Wushuang was clever and quick with words, every time she spoke a word her chest would hurt, she wanted to argue with him but she had no strength left, she closed her eyes and endured the pain and ignored Yang Guo.

Yang Guo said, "Once I fixed that dog's bone it recovered after a few days. When it fought again, it was as if its bone had never been broken."

Lu Wushuang thought, "It could be that Sha Dan really knows how to connect bones. If no one heals me I'll be dead. But if he helps to fix my ribs, he's going to touch my chest, how can I let him? Hmm, if he doesn't cure me, then we'll die together, if he does cure me, I won't let one who's seen my body live."

She'd had a tragic life since she was young. She endured it and fought for her life. Her character was different to others; she had been with Li Mochou a long time, her ears and eyes had endured many things. She had learned Li Mochou's ruthless and vindictive streak and at such a young age she was already filled with many evil thoughts. She quietly said, "Fine! If you lie to me Sha Dan, your death will be painful."

Yang Guo thought, "If I don't make it hard for her now, I'm not going to have a chance again." He calmly said, "When Uncle Wang's sow broke its ribs, his daughter begged and

pleaded with me for help, she called me 'Big Brother' one hundred times, and then I helped her"

Lu Wushuang said, "Bull, bull, bull, rotten Sha Dan... rotten Sha Dan, ai ya" her chest was filled with severe pain again.

Yang Guo laughed and said, "If you won't call me that then fine. I'm going home now, have a nice rest." He got up and turned towards the door.

Lu Wushuang thought, "If that person goes, then I'm definitely going to die." She had to hold down her temper and said, "What do you want?"

Yang Guo said, "Originally, all I wanted was for you to call me 'Good Brother' one hundred times, but all along you have scolded and insulted me. I'll help you if you call me that one thousand times."

Lu Wushuang planned it in her heart, "I'll promise him now, once I get better, it won't be too late to get rid of him." So she said, "I'll call good brother, good brother, good brother ai ya ai ya"

Yang Guo said, "Fine, there are still nine hundred and ninety seven times left, remember that, you can finish it when you are better." He walked over to her, and stretched out his hand to take off her clothes.

Lu Wushuang automatically cringed back, she was alarmed and said, "Go away, just what are you doing?"

Yang Guo took a step back and said, "I don't know how to put your bone back in place with your clothes in the way, the dog and sow didn't have clothes when I fixed their bones."

Lu Wushuang thought this was funny but she would be embarrassed if she allowed him to take her clothes off. After

a while she lowered her head and quietly said, "Fine, I won't trouble you."

Yang Guo said, "If you don't want to be healed, then don't. I don't care..."

As he said this, he heard someone suddenly say from outside, "That little Bitch must be within twenty miles of here, we'll quickly search around here..." when Lu Wushuang heard this voice she immediately turned pale with fright, she didn't care about her pain and covered Yang Guo's mouth, the person who was talking outside was Li Mochou.

When Yang Guo heard this voice he too was alarmed. He heard the voice of another girl say, "The saber that was planted in that man's shoulder looked like the silver saber of apprentice sister, and it's a pity that we couldn't get it for a closer look." That person was Hong Lingbo.

After the two left the tomb, they returned to Scarlet Cloud Manor, and discovered that Lu Wushuang had escaped, Li Mochou wasn't too bothered, but they didn't expect that she had also stolen the 'Five Poison Codex'. When Li Mochou roamed Jianghu, what the martial artists of the Jianghu world were afraid of was not her kung fu, but her 'Divine Five Poison Palm' and her 'Soul Freezing Silver Needles'. In the 'Five Poison Codex', it had the types of poison, its concentration, the antidote and the processing technique of the 'Divine Five Poison Palm' and 'Soul Freezing Silver Needles'. If the secrets were leaked, the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' would be like a poisonous snake without its fangs. She had long ago memorized the contents of the codex; there was no need to take it with her, and she hid the codex in a secret place in the Scarlet Cloud Manor. But she didn't know that Lu Wushuang was especially aware and noticed every detail, and knew her master's hiding place. When she decided to escape, she took the book with her.

Li Mochou was furious; she took Hong Lingbo and chased after her night and day. But Lu Wushuang had left long ago, and she kept to the small roads. Li Mochou and her disciple went north and then south, she searched east to west, and then she went over the places again several times but still couldn't find any trace of her.

One night, by coincidence, the two of them were near Tongguan, and heard members of the Beggar Clan spreading news that there was going to be a meet for the members along the western roads. Li Mochou considered the fact that there are numerous Beggar Clan members everywhere, their ears and eyes see and hear everything; there must be someone who had seen Lu Wushuang. The two rushed to the meeting place to scout for news. On the way there they saw a fifth band disciple being carried by another Beggar Clan member, around them was seventeen or eighteen Beggar Clan members escorting them. Li Mochou saw the person had a saber in his back; it was Lu Wushuang's silver saber. She slipped to the side to listen in, and heard a few angry Beggar Clan members talking, saying that it was a lame little Bitch who did this. Li Mochou was delighted when she heard this, she knew that this person was recently wounded so she quickly left and scouted around, eventually coming up to the stone house. When she got there, she saw the remains of the fire and smell of fresh blood and under the moonlight she saw drops of blood on the floor, they were new stains. It displayed the signs of a recent battle. Li Mochou tugged her disciple's sleeve and pointed to the house. Hong Lingbo nodded; she took out her sword and charged in.

When Lu Wushuang heard the voices of her Master and apprentice sister she knew that she had ran out of luck, she decided to lay there and wait for her death. She heard the sound of the door, a person in yellow dashed in, it was her apprentice sister Hong Lingbo. Hong Lingbo had friendly sentiments towards her apprentice sister, but she knew that

this time her master would use every method that she knew to torture her and then slowly kill her. She saw that Lu Wushuang was lying on the table and thrust a sword at her chest to spare her the pain. As the sword tip was about to pierce her chest, Li Mochou stretched out her hand and patted Hong Lingbo's shoulder; her hand lost all her strength immediately and lowered.

Li Mochou chuckled, "Do you think I won't kill her? Why do I need you to rush into it?" She faced Lu Wushuang and said, "You see your Master in front of you and you don't greet her?" Although she was furious, her tone was normal.

Lu Wushuang thought, "Now that I'm in her clutches, even if I beg or plead, I'm going to suffer." She calmly said, "You and my family had deep feuds over the years, there is no need to say anything." Li Mochou stared at her; one couldn't tell if her eyes were filled with joy or hate. There was an expression of pity on Hong Lingbo's face. Lu Wushuang's lips curled up, her expression was one of pride.

The three of them stared at each other and after a while Li Mochou said, "Where's the book? Give it to me."

Lu Wushuang said, "An evil Taoist and a beggar took it!" Li Mochou was startled inside. Although she hasn't done anything to offend the Beggar Clan, she's had run ins with the Quanzhen. She knew that the Beggar Clan and the Quanzhen sect had a deep history; what's going to happen now that her book has fallen into outsiders hands? Lu Wushuang saw a wry smile on the face of her Master and knew that she was thinking up ideas of how to torture her. All along during her escape, the only thing she was afraid of was that her Master was going to catch up with her and now she has. Instead of first feeling fear she thought, "Where's Sha Dan? Where did he go?" She is facing death and when she thought about the ugly and dumb farmer, unwittingly she

felt a warm feeling inside her. Suddenly a light from a fire appeared, a rumbling sound was heard.

Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo turned around to see a large bull heading inside. On the bull's right horn there was a saber attached to it, on the left horn was a torch; the force it was approaching at was frightening. Li Mochou immediately leapt to the side but saw the bull turn around in the house and rush out. When the bull first entered it was dashing ferociously, when it left it rushed away with the same speed. In the wink of eye it had traveled tens of feet. Li Mochou looked at the image of the bull running away and at first wondered, "Who attached the saber and torch to the bull's horn?" She turned around and both she and Hong Lingbo called out in shock, the body of Lu Wushuang that was lying on the table had disappeared.

Hong Lingbo searched the house and leaped up onto the roof. Li Mochou thought that it must have something to do with the bull so she chased after it. In the darkness she saw the light of the torch on the bull's horn entering the forest. By the light of the torch she saw that no one was on the bull's back, Lu Wushuang had not escaped on the bull. She then thought, "It must be, someone outside sent the strange bull in to divert my attention and then rescued her." She didn't know which direction to chase after, she then sped up and in a flash she had caught up with the bull. She leaped up onto the bull and saw that there wasn't anything strange so she leapt down again. Then she kicked the bull in the behind. She whistled and signaled Hong Lingbo, one was going to scout north to south, the other west to east.

Of course it was Yang Guo who sent the bull into the house. When he heard the voices of Li Mochou and her disciple, he slipped out through the backdoor and listened in through the window, after just one sentence he knew that Li Mochou had come to take Lu Wushuang's life. He immediately thought of

a plan, he went over to the bull and attached the saber that Lu Wushuang had earlier dropped to the bull's horn, he then gathered some twigs and attached it to the other horn and lit them. He then hung below the bull and forced the bull to rush into the house; quickly he grabbed Lu Wushuang and hid underneath the bull, exiting the house. His movements were quick and the bull looked weird, Li Mochou had good eyesight but was caught unaware and didn't notice anything wrong. By the time Li Mochou had caught up with bull, Yang Guo had carried Lu Wushuang into the long grass and hid. When she moved, she was in severe pain, so all of the things that had happened; how Yang Guo rescued her, how they hid underneath the bull and how they dived into the grass was all unclear to her. After a while she regained her awareness and called out an 'ah' sound. Yang Guo quickly covered her mouth and whispered into her ear, "Don't make a noise!" They heard footsteps and Hong Lingbo's voice saying, "How can someone disappear in the flash of an eye?" Further away Li Mochou said, "Let's go. That little Bitch must have gone far away." They heard the footsteps of Hong Lingbo gradually moving away. Lu Wushuang was being smothered and was in pain. Yang Guo still held his hand over her mouth without loosening. Lu Wushuang struggled for a little. When she felt that she was being held in his arms she was embarrassed and anxious, she wanted to hit him.

Yang Guo whispered in her ear, "Don't move, your Master is lying." As soon as his words were said, they heard Li Mochou saying, "She really isn't here." Her voice was extremely close by; it seemed that they were right next to them.

Lu Wushuang was startled and thought, "If it weren't for Sha Dan, I would be dead!"

Li Mochou had suspected that she was hiding nearby. While she was talking far away, she immediately used her lightness

kung fu without making a sound and arrived close by. Lu Wushuang almost fell into the trap.

Yang Guo carefully listened, when the two had really gone he removed his hand and laughed, "There's no need to be scared now."

Lu Wushuang said, "Let me go."

Yang Guo lightly placed her flat onto the grass and said, "I'll immediately push your bones back into place and then we'll leave this place. If we wait until tomorrow we won't be able to escape." Lu Wushuang nodded.

Yang Guo was afraid that she would call out in pain when he pushes the bone back into place and alert Li Mochou and her disciple. He sealed her numbing pressure points and stretched out his hand to take off her clothes, and said, "Don't make a noise whatever you do."

After taking off her outer garment, a white undergarment was revealed, removing this revealed an apricot yellow brassiere. Yang Guo didn't dare to take it off and looked up, and saw Lu Wushuang's eyebrows wrinkled, her eyes closed tightly, she was embarrassed and scared. Yang Guo had his first awakening of lust; when he smelled the fragrant scent of a virgin girl, his heart pounded wildly.

Lu Wushuang opened her eyes and quietly said, "Just cure me!" After she said this, she closed her eyes again and turned away. Yang Guo's hand shook as he unbuttoned her underwear; when he saw her breasts, he didn't dare to touch her chest. Lu Wushuang waited a while but felt a cool breeze brushing across her naked chest, she felt cold and turned around opening her eyes, and saw Yang Guo looking at her in a daze, she angrily said, "What...What are you looking at?"

Yang Guo was startled; he stretched out his hand and touched her ribs, when his hand touched her skin he shivered, like as if his hand was touching a fire, he immediately pulled back.

Lu Wushuang said, "Quickly close your eyes, if you look at me again I'll... I'll..." When she said this, tears flowed from her eyes.

Yang Guo quickly said, "Yes, yes, I won't look anymore, don't cry." He closed his eyes and felt out the broken ribs and pushed them back into place, he quickly covered up her chest with her underwear and calmed down. He gathered four sticks and placed two across the front of her and two behind. He then got some vines and tied the sticks tightly into place so the bones won't move out of place. He then buttoned up her garments and unsealed her pressure points.

Lu Wushuang opened her eyes and saw the moonlight on Yang Guo's face. His cheeks were red, he was blushing, he looked at her face and their eyes met, he quickly turned away. Her bones were now fixed into place, although they still hurt, it wasn't as painful as before. She thought, "That Sha Dan does know how to seal pressure points." She now could see that Yang Guo isn't an ordinary person, he is definitely not a 'Sha Dan', but ever since she met him she had insulted him and looked down on him. Now she had seen him save her yet she didn't change the way she talked to him.

She asked, "Sha Dan, what do you think we should do now? Shall we wait here or run away and hide."

Yang Guo said, "What do you think?"

She replied, "Of course we should run. Are we going to wait here for our death?"

Yang Guo said, "Where?"

Lu Wushuang said, "I want to go Jiangnan. Can you accompany me there?"

Yang Guo said, "I need to find my Gu Gu, I can't go far."

When Lu Wushuang heard this, her face dropped and said, "Fine, leave! Let me die here."

If Lu Wushuang had kindly asked him Yang Guo would of course reject her request, but when he saw her angry face, it reminded him of Xiao Longnu. It was hard for him to reject her and he thought, "Maybe Gu Gu headed south, if I escort Miss Lu there, maybe good deeds will be repaid, and the heavens might pity me and let me see Gu Gu again." He knew that this was a remote possibility but he had no way to reject Lu Wushuang's request, so he convinced himself, sighed, and then picked her up.

Lu Wushuang angrily said, "Why are you picking me up?"

Yang Guo laughed, "I'm carrying you to Jiangnan."

Lu Wushuang gave a smile and was delighted, she said, "Sha Dan, Jiangnan is far from here, can you carry me all the way there?" Though she said this, she was leaning on Yang Guo peacefully without moving.

The large bull had disappeared. Yang Guo was afraid that they might bump into Li Mochou and her disciple so he kept to the small paths. Although his legs were quick, his upper body did not move and did not disturb Lu Wushuang's wound. Lu Wushuang saw the trees by her recede, he was hurrying along the path like a dashing horse. He was much faster than she would be without carrying anything. His lightness kung fu was not below her Master's; she was curious and thought, "So this Sha Dan is highly skilled, how could he learn to such a level at such a young age?"

Not long after, the east began to lighten, she lifted her head and saw that although his face was dirty, he was handsome, his eyes captivating, and her heart was moved. She gradually forgot about the pain and after a while she fell into a deep sleep.

When the sky became bright, Yang Guo felt a little tired, he dashed over to a large tree and placed her gently down, and then rested next to her. Lu Wushuang opened her eyes and smiled, she said, "I'm hungry, aren't you hungry?"

Yang Guo said, "Of course I'm hungry, let's find a restaurant and get something to eat." He got up and picked her up again, but because he had carried her for half the night his arms felt numb so he lifted her onto his shoulders and slowly walked.

Lu Wushuang's legs were bouncing off lightly off Yang Guo's chest, she laughed and said, "Sha Dan, what exactly is your name? If you don't tell me I'll call you Sha Dan in front of others."

Yang Guo said, "I don't have a name, everyone calls me Sha Dan."

Lu Wushuang hurtfully said, "If you don't want to say, fine! Who's your Master?"

When Yang Guo heard the word 'Master', he didn't dare mess around because he respected Xiao Longnu so much, he turned serious and said, "My Master is my Gu Gu."

Lu Wushuang believed him and thought, "So his skills are passed on from his family." She asked again, "What family or sect is your Gu Gu from?"

Yang Guo dumbly said, "I don't know whether she is at home or what rank she is." (Yang Guo is playing on her words, the

word for family can also mean home, the word for sect can also mean order.)

Lu Wushuang angrily said, "You idiot! I ask you, from whose school of martial arts have you learned?"

Yang Guo said, "Are you asking about my family's main door? It's made out of wood." (Again, a play on words)

Lu Wushuang's heart sank and thought, "Could this person really be a Sha Dan (Dumb Egg / idiot)? His martial arts are good but he's dumb?" So she softly said, "Sha Dan, tell me honestly, why did you save my life."

Yang Guo couldn't think of a reply, after a while he said, "My Gu Gu told me to save you so I saved you."

Lu Wushuang said, "Who is your Gu Gu?"

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu is Gu Gu. Whatever she tells me to do I'll do it."

Lu Wushuang sighed, and thought, "This person really is dumb." She had some warm feelings for him but now they turned into loathing.

Yang Guo didn't hear her say anything and said, "Why aren't you speaking?"

Lu Wushuang gave a grunt. Yang Guo asked again.

Lu Wushuang angrily said, "If I don't want to speak, I won't speak! Sha Dan, shut your mouth!"

Yang Guo knew that her face right now was a nice sight, but since she is sitting on his shoulders he wasn't able to see, he couldn't help but think, "What a pity."

Not long after, they reached a little town. Yang Guo found a restaurant and ordered rice and dishes, and the two sat down together. Lu Wushuang smelled the stench of cow shit on him

and wrinkled her eyebrows, and said, "Sha Dan, sit over there, don't sit at my table."

Yang Guo laughed and sat at another table. Lu Wushuang saw that he was still looking at her, she was vexed, the more she looked at him the more loathsome he was, she hid her face and said, "Don't look at me." She pointed at a faraway table and said, "Sit over there."

Yang Guo gave a laugh and grabbed his bowl and sat at the entrance of the inn, and ate his rice.

Lu Wushuang said, "That's better." Although she was hungry, her chest hurt, it was hard to swallow. She felt an urge to take her anger out on Yang Guo but he sat faraway, she wasn't able to shout at him. Just as she was feeling troubled some people were outside singing, "Little Miss do good deeds." Another person followed, "Give the beggar a bowl of rice!"

Lu Wushuang raised her head and saw four beggars outside lined up all looking at her, she could tell from their eyes that they had come with ill intentions; she was secretly alarmed. She heard the third beggar singing, "The path of heaven is not for you!" The fourth one sang, "Hell has no doors yet you've entered through!" The four beggars were singing the 'Lotus Falling' begging tune, each one holding a bowl in their right hand and a stick in their left. There were four coarse pockets on their shoulders. Lu Wushuang once heard her apprentice sister say that the Beggar Clan members use the coarse pockets to differentiate between rank within the clan, fourth band members will have four pockets, these beggars were fourth band members. She remembered how she fought beggars Han and Chen yesterday at Wolf Valley, they had five pockets; it seems they were a level higher than these people in front of her. If she wasn't injured, she wouldn't fear the beggars; now she hardly had the strength to pick up

chopsticks. How could she fight the enemy? Sha Dan's lightness kung fu maybe excellent, but he acts mad. Even if he knows martial arts it won't be too high a level. She couldn't help but be at a wits end.

Yang Guo was worrying about his stomach; it was as if he hasn't seen the beggars yet. After he finished his bowl he went over to the rice bucket and filled another, he stretched out his hand and picked a fish up from the plates in front of Lu Wushuang, the soup and juices of the fish spilled all over the table, he laughed foolishly and said, "Ha-ha, I'm going to eat a fish."

Lu Wushuang frowned slightly; she had no time to scold him. She heard the four beggars sing again, singing 'Little Miss' again. The four beggars repeated this three times, the eight eyes all fixed on her. Lu Wushuang didn't know how to deal with them, she slowly spooned the rice, pretending that she didn't hear but she was extremely worried inside.

One of the beggars loudly called out, "Little Miss, if you won't spare a bowl of rice, then how about sparing a curved saber." Another one said, "Come with us and we won't make it hard for you. We just want to clear a few things up and come to a fair conclusion." After a while someone said, "Just quickly come, do you really want us to use force?" Lu Wushuang thought that it would be no use whether she replied or kept quiet; she didn't know what to do. The fourth beggar said, "We won't use force against you, the heroes of Jianghu would laugh at the four of us for bullying a little girl, we just want you to come along and talk." From their tone, Lu Wushuang knew that they were about to attack, she knew that it would be hard for her to fight them off, yet she couldn't wait for defeat. Her left hand held the bench, when the enemy came she would use the bench to fight them off.

Yang Guo thought, "Time for me to do my stuff!" He ran over to Lu Wushuang's table and picked up the bowl of soup, his

mouth was biting down on the fish, he mumbled, "I'm...I'm going to spill the soup!" The bowl tipped and half the hot soup spilled on the Lu Wushuang's right arm. She was facing east, her arm was slightly inwards, and when the soup came she immediately pulled back and turned around to take a look.

Yang Guo called out, "Ai Ya!" He used his right arm and wiped her arm and leg and at the same time, his left hand waved, four bamboo chopsticks flew out, each one shooting out at the beggars. The four chopsticks were extremely fast; before the beggars could see it their arms were in pain, a crashing sound was heard as four bowls crashed onto the floor. Yang Guo used his garment and wiped Lu Wushuang's sleeve continuously and said, "Don't...don't get angry...I'll...I'll...I'll wipe it clean."

Lu Wushuang scolded, "Don't mess around!" She turned around to look at the beggars and was alarmed. She saw the backs of the beggars going around the street corner and disappearing, the floor covered with the remains of broken bowls.

Lu Wushuang questioned, "Those four beggars are strange; why did they leave all of a sudden?" She saw Yang Guo's hands was filled with fish soup and vegetable sauce, and was wiping frantically on the table, she scolded, "Go away, aren't you embarrassed?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes, yes!" He wiped his hands on his clothes.

Lu Wushuang frowned and asked, "Why did the four beggars go?"

Yang Guo said, "They saw you were short tempered and wouldn't spare anything, there wasn't any use in begging anymore so they left." Lu Wushuang pondered for a while and didn't understand, she took out some money and told

Yang Guo to buy a donkey with it. After she paid her bills she got on the donkey. As soon as she got on the donkey, her ribs moved and she shouted out in pain.

Yang Guo said, "It's a pity that I'm dirty and smelly, otherwise I could support you."

Lu Wushuang said, "Humph, still talking crap." She pulled on the rope, the donkey was extremely stubborn, and it leaned against the wall and forced her against the wall as well. Lu Wushuang had no strength in her arms and legs, she called out and fell off the donkey. Her right leg landed on the ground and slowly stood up, her wound was disturbed again and she was in pain. She angrily shouted, "You saw me fall yet you didn't help me."

Yang Guo said, "I'm dirty."

Lu Wushuang said, "Can't you wash first?" Yang Guo gave a stupid laugh and didn't say anything.

Lu Wushuang said, "Help me get on the donkey." Yang Guo did as he was told and helped her onto the donkey. As soon as the donkey felt someone on its back it immediately started to buck. Lu Wushuang said, "Quickly lead the donkey."

Yang Guo said, "No, I'm scared that the donkey is going to kick me. It would be better if it was my bull."

Lu Wushuang was exasperated and thought, "He's not completely stupid. Obviously he wants to hold on to me." She had no alternative and could only say, "Fine, you can ride on the donkey as well."

Yang Guo said, "Remember you told me, don't shout at me for being dirty and smelly."

Lu Wushuang said, "Yes, why are you wasting time?"

Yang Guo laughed and climbed onto the back of the donkey, his arms gathered around her, he kicked with a bit of strength in his legs, the donkey felt pain and didn't dare to cause trouble anymore and obediently walked forward. Yang Guo said, "Which way are we going?"

Lu Wushuang had already planned out her route, she wanted to go east through Tongguan and then through Zhongzhou and then go south following the main road. But after seeing the four beggars, she knew that she would encounter more Beggar Clan members along the way so she thought about going along the small paths. Go through the bamboo forest and towards Colt Dragon Stockade and then south via Purple Meadow. Although this would make the journey longer, it was a lot safer and it would be harder for her Master to catch up with her. After pondering for a while she pointed southeast and said, "That way."

The donkey trotted along slowly, as soon as they left the town, a small child rushed up to them and called out, "Miss Lu, I have something for you." As she said this she flung a flower to them, and then turned around and ran away. Lu Wushuang stretched out her hand and caught it, and saw a letter wrapped around it, she quickly opened the envelope and saw a yellow piece of paper, it read; "Your Master will be here shortly, quickly hide!" The yellow paper was coarse but the writing on it was elegant. Lu Wushuang gave out an alarmed shout, she pondered, "Who is that little kid? How does he know my name is Lu? And how do they know that my Master is going to be here shortly?" She asked Yang Guo, "You know that child don't you? It was your Gu Gu who sent him isn't it?"

Yang Guo had already read the letter from behind her and thought, "That kid was just a normal country kid, he must have been ordered to take the letter to us by someone. But who wrote the letter? It looks like it has good intentions. If Li

Mochou really caught up, what should I do?" Although he had learned the "Jade Heart Manual" and "Nine Yin Manual", and possessed two of the greatest skills in the world of Wulin, he had only practiced them for a short time. Though he understood the essence behind them his internal energy wasn't deep enough. If Li Mochou caught up he would not be a match for her and in broad daylight there wasn't anywhere to hide. He was pondering but had no idea. When Lu Wushuang asked him he replied, "I don't know that little Sha Dan, but my Gu Gu did not send that kid."

As soon as he said this, he heard a noise; ahead was a carriage. Tens of people were crowding and pushing around; there was a wedding taking place. Although it was the countryside, the event was done with an extravagant air; it was done with much enthusiasm and energy.

A thought suddenly popped up in Yang Guo's mind, he asked, "Do you want to be a bride?"

End of Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 - A Hundred Ideas to Avoid the Enemy

Translated by Noodles



Lu Wushuang seemed to still feel the pain of her broken ribs in her dreams. When Yang Guo saw her face like this he immediately remembered Xiao Long Nu and then remembered the oath he swore. He broke out in a cold sweat and two slapping sounds were heard, he had slapped himself heavily across his cheeks.

Lu Wushuang was frightened at this moment in time, when she heard him ask such a stupid question she angrily said, "Sha Dan! What the hell are you talking about?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Let's play bride and groom. Why don't you pretend to be a bride? Won't that be beautiful? With a red veil covering your face, when people look they won't see your face."

Lu Wushuang was startled and said, "You're instructing me to pretend to be a bride to avoid my master?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "I don't know, you pretend to be a bride and I'll be the groom."

This was an urgent matter, Lu Wushuang had no time to scold him, she thought, "Sha Dan's idea is a strange one, but apart from this idea, there's nothing else." She asked, "How should we do it?"

Yang Guo didn't want to waste time, he lashed the donkey and it hurried forward. The small roads of the countryside were tight and narrow, with eight people carrying the sedan chair lining up along the road; the two groups had nowhere to pass. When the people saw the donkey charging forward they all shouted, telling the riders to rein it in and slow down. Yang Guo squeezed his legs, and urged the donkey to go even faster, in a flash it had come up to the crowd. Two strong men had earlier stepped up wanting to pull the donkey back so that it won't knock into the sedan chair. Yang

Guo's rope lashed out and wrapped around the two men's arms, he raised his arm and let go, the two men fell onto the ground. He turned around to Lu Wushuang and said, "I want to be a groom." He leaned forward and stretched out his hand to grab the groom who was riding on a white horse. The groom was about seventeen or eighteen years of age, he was fitted out with new clothes and with gold flowers on his head; the sudden grab by Yang Guo frightened him. Yang Guo lifted his body and flung him up, his body flew up over a distance of ten feet, when he was about to land, the people shouted and called out, stretching out their arms to catch him. There were about thirty people who were helping to celebrate, half of them were tall strong men of Guanxi but when they saw his skills and the groom in his hands, how did they dare attack? An experienced old man dashed up; thinking it was bandits, he said, "Please spare the groom Da Wang (king). The amount of money that Da Wang wants, we can discuss it."

Yang Guo turned around to Lu Wushuang and said, "Wifey, why are they calling me Da Wang? My surname is Da? I think he's even more stupid than me."

Lu Wushuang said, "Don't waste time, I think I can hear the bell of my master's donkey."

Yang Guo was startled, he listened carefully, and indeed he could hear a faint ringing sound. He thought, "She's quick." He then said, "Ling Zi (Bell) What Ling Zi? It's a sweets seller? Great, let's buy some sweets to eat." He turned around to the old man and said, "If you listen to my instructions then I'll let you go, otherwise" he lifted up the groom and threw him up in the air. The groom was so frightened that he began to cry. The old man made a bow and said, "We'll do as Da Wang instructs."

Yang Guo pointed to Lu Wushuang and said, "That's my little Wifey, when she saw that someone was getting married she thought that it was amusing, she herself wants to take part too."

Lu Wushuang scolded, "Sha Dan, what did you say?"

Yang Guo ignored her and said, "Quickly take the bride's clothes and put them on her, I'll be the groom."

It's not unusual for kids to pretend to be a bride and groom. But who would think that a bandit on a narrow road would suddenly want to play this game? The people all looked at each other in dismay, and refused. Looking at the two, one was a young man, the other was a young girl, and one could describe them as a married couple. But the crowd of people didn't care. Yang Guo heard the ringing of the bell getting closer so he leapt off the donkey and placed the groom on the saddle letting Lu Wushuang guard him and went over to the sedan chair, he pushed aside the curtain and pulled the bride out. The bride screeched out in fright, her face was covered with a red veil and didn't know what was happening outside. Yang Guo brushed aside her red veil and saw a face like the moon, a face full of joy. He laughed and said, "The bride is beautiful." He lightly touched her cheek. The bride froze in fright and didn't make a sound.

Yang Guo's left hand held up the bride and called out, "If you want me to spare her, quickly take her clothes and give them to my Wifey to wear."

Lu Wushuang heard the ringing of her master's donkey getting closer, she gave him a stare and thought, "That Sha Dan doesn't know how high the sky is or how deep the earth is and his mouth is still joking at this time?" She heard the old man following his instructions, "Quick, quick! Quickly change the bride's clothes." The nanny accompanying the bride quickly took off her phoenix headdress and her bridal

costume and dressed Lu Wushuang with them. Taking off the groom's costume, Yang Guo changed himself. He turned around to Lu Wushuang and said, "Good Wifey, enter the sedan chair." Lu Wushuang told the bride to enter the sedan chair first and then she entered, lowering the curtain afterwards.

Yang Guo took a look at his grass shoes and wanted to change them when he heard the ringing sound from just around the bend in the road, he called out, "Turn around and head in a southeast direction, quickly! If someone comes and asks about us don't say you've seen us." He leapt onto the white horse and rode along with the groom on the donkey. When the crowd saw the couple had fallen into their hands, they didn't dare to disobey; they raised their gongs and cymbals and started their tune.

The sedan chair was picked up and turned around but after about a hundred feet, the ringing sound was becoming quicker, two donkeys trotted after them. Lu Wushuang was thinking about whether she would be able to escape from this danger and heard the now much closer ringing sound; her heart jumped and she carefully listened to the activities of outside.

Yang Guo pretended to be embarrassed and lowered his head looking at the horse's neck. He heard Hong Lingbo call out, "Hey, have you seen a lame girl walking past here?"

The old man from the crowd called out, "No...no..."

Hong Lingbo asked again, "Have you seen a girl on an animal pass by?"

The old man said, "No." The two passed the crowd and rushed on by. After a short while the two pulled the donkeys around and returned. Li Mochou's fly whisk flew out and wrapped around the sedan chair curtain, she pulled back and

after a 'chi' sound, the curtain ripped in half. Yang Guo was alarmed and rushed forward, as soon as the fly whisk comes out a second time he will make his move and rescue her. He didn't know that after one look in the sedan chair, Li Mochou would smile and say, "The bride is handsome." She raised her head and said to Yang Guo, "Little punk, your luck isn't bad." Yang Guo lowered his head not daring to face her, but heard them trotting away.

Yang Guo wondered, "Why did she spare Miss Lu?" He opened the sedan chair curtain only to see the bride scared out of her wits, and Lu Wushuang had disappeared. Yang Guo was even more baffled and called out, "Ai Ya, where's my Wifey gone?"

Lu Wushuang laughed and said, "I've disappeared." He saw the bride's dress move and Lu Wushuang darted out; she had hidden underneath the bride's gown. She knew that her master was very meticulous and careful, she would examine all possibilities; she knew that her master would come back so she hid.

Yang Guo said, "You can relax and be the bride from now on, sitting in the sedan chair is much more comfortable than riding on the donkey."

Lu Wushuang nodded and said to the bride, "You are suffocating me, quickly get out." The bride could do nothing and exited the sedan chair and rode on the donkey that was previously ridden by Lu Wushuang. The bride and the groom had never met before, the groom saw that the bride was healthy and attractive, the bride saw the groom and she too was pleased. The two were delighted even with their fear, and soon forgot that they were being held hostage by a bandit.

They walked on for about twenty li (10 km/6.2 miles) and the sky gradually became dark. The old man kept on pleading

with Yang Guo to let them go in case they missed the wedding's lucky period.

Yang Guo scolded, "Why are you so annoying?" As soon as he said this, something flashed by the roadside and two people hurried into the forest. Yang Guo was suspicious and chased after them. Indeed he saw the backs of two people, their clothes were old and torn, and they looked like beggars. Yang Guo reigned in his horse and thought, "Could the Beggar Clan have seen through us and set up a trap ahead? But at this moment in time, all we can do is head forward."

Not long after, the sedan chair caught up with him. Lu Wushuang poked her head out and asked, "What did you see?"

Yang Guo said, "Your curtain is torn and your face is not covered by the red veil. To be a proper bride one must cry and sob, even if the bride wants to get married, tears should flow and noses should run, calling out for your father and mother but not daring to leave. Where can you find such an unabashed bride as you under heaven's skies?" Lu Wushuang heard his words and understood the meaning behind it, their movements seemed to have been discovered. She lightly called out 'Sha Dan' and didn't say anymore. After a while the mountain path in front of them became steep, narrow and rugged, the people leading the procession were extremely tired long ago but didn't say anything in case they incurred Yang Guo's wrath.

In the wink of the eye the sun was now above the mountain, crows screeched as they flew in the sky. Suddenly, voices were heard around the mountain, they were singing, "Little Miss do a good deed, please spare us a silver saber."

Lu Wushuang's face turned pale, and she thought, "So the four beggars are hiding around here."

After the sedan chair turned a corner, three men could be seen in front of them, they were beggars. They were tall and strongly built; they were completely different to the four beggars they previously encountered.

Yang Guo saw that there were five pockets on their shoulders and thought, "These three five pocket beggars must be better than the other four, it looks like I'm going have to use my real skills."

The crowd carrying the couple had waited impatiently, one of them had taken a whip and lashed out at one of the beggars calling out, "Move out of the way... move out of the way!" The beggar did not move, he held the tip of the whip and pulled, the person holding the whip fell down. If this happened normally the crowd of people would have rushed up, but they had been frightened by Yang Guo previously and all thought, "So the three beggars are with him." No one dared to move forward and instead took a few steps back.

One of the beggars clearly said, "Congratulations Miss, little beggar here just want to beg for some money."

Lu Wushuang quietly said, "Sha Dan, I'm injured at the moment and can't fight, get rid of them for me."

Yang Guo said, "Fine."

He galloped forward on his horse and said, "Today is my wife's special day, she doesn't want any beggars to spoil it, now move." One of the beggars took a few glances at Yang Guo but couldn't recognize him from anywhere. The four beggars who had been struck in the wrist by the chopsticks all thought it was Lu Wushuang who did this and so did not tell their Martial Uncles about Yang Guo.

One of the beggars waved out his right hand. Yang Guo's horse was frightened and reared up. Yang Guo pretended to

wobble and fell off the back of the horse and didn't pick himself up for a long time. The three beggars all thought, "So that person really is the groom."

The Beggar Clan is a righteous and chivalrous clan; they have always helped the weak against the strong and aided those who were in danger. They had only decided to go after Lu Wushuang because she hurt a member of their clan. When they saw Yang Guo falling onto the ground and didn't seem to know ANY martial arts they all felt apologetic, one of the beggars stretched out a hand to pull him up and said, "Sorry."

Yang Guo mumbled, "What's wrong with you people, if you want to beg for money then beg for money, why are you scaring my horse." He took out some change and handed it out. The three beggars thanked him according to the clan's rules.

Yang Guo laughed and said to Lu Wushuang, "You told me to give them money, I've already done it."

Lu Wushuang angrily said, "What use is there of pretending to be stupid to me?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes, yes!" He stepped to the side and brushed off the dirt off his body.

Lu Wushuang saw the three beggars were still blocking the way, she calmly said, "What do you want?"

One of the beggars said, "Miss is a skilled fighter of the Ancient Tomb sect, the three of us admire your skills and want a few pointers."

Lu Wushuang said, "I have a serious wound, how can I fight with you? If you don't like it, then we can arrange a later date and test out each other's skills after my injury has healed. You are skilled fighters of the Beggar Clan, today you are

ganging up on an injured young girl; can you still call yourself a hero?"

After hearing her words, the three beggars felt that they were indeed in the wrong. Two of them said, "Fine! We'll come back for you after your wound has recovered."

The other beggar said, "Wait, where exactly are you injured? You have to let me take a look to see whether it's real or fake. If it is a real wound then I'll spare you today."

He didn't know that she was hurt in the chest; his words had no harmful intentions. But Lu Wushuang's cheeks immediately turned red, and couldn't stop herself from being angry. Feeling this anger she wasn't able to think of anything to say, after half a minute she scolded, "In Jianghu the Beggar Clan is known to be heroic and chivalrous, this is a lie, you people are in fact shameless scoundrels."

When the three heard her denigrate the Beggar Clan's name their faces immediately changed, one of them was rash and impatient; he dashed forward, stretching out his hand wanting to grab her out of the sedan chair. Yang Guo saw that the situation had become urgent, he called out, "Wait... wait. You lot asked for money, I gave you money, why are you still arguing with my wife?" He dashed forward in front of the sedan chair and said, "Although you three are beggars now, according to your faces you will become rich and become officials in the future, how can you do such disgraceful things and treat my new wife with such disrespect?"

The three beggars were startled and had no reply. The impulsive beggar said, "Move out of the way, we just want to test out the Ancient Tomb's kung fu, who's bullying who?" He lightly pushed out his hand. Yang Guo called out loudly and dropped to the side. The Beggar Clan has a rule, one must not hit out at someone who doesn't know martial arts. The beggar didn't know that this groom was so useless, just a

light push and he fell onto the ground. If he was seriously hurt he would be punished within the clan and the other two would not be able to escape punishment as well. The three of them were startled and went over to pick him up.

Yang Guo shouted and called out, "Ai Ya, Ai Yo, mum!" The three beggars could not see clearly if he was hurt or not.

Yang Guo called out in pain and said, "You three are stupid, my wife is shy; how can she speak to strangers? And about this, what do you want to test out? First tell me. I'll then go and ask my wife and then come back to speak with you, is that alright?" The three of them saw that he was dumb but not stupid, they had had enough of this but it wasn't suitable to attack him. The oldest of the beggars thought, "That Lu girl is pretending to be a bride; if that young man really is the groom then he should help her. But if he is pretending to be a groom then he shouldn't be so useless." He carefully studied him but couldn't find anything wrong. The impulsive beggar waved out his hand and shouted, "Are you going to move?"

Yang Guo spread out his two hands and loudly said, "You can't harm my wife."

Another beggar said, "Miss Lu, are you ordering this Sha Dan to block for you, could it be that you think we won't be able to get to you with this obstruction? Just get it over with and come out here."

Yang Guo said, "Oh, you know that I'm called Sha Dan, how strange."

The impulsive beggar faced Lu Wushuang and said, "We don't have to fight, we just want to see how you used your saber to hack into someone's shoulder, what is this move called?"

Lu Wushuang knew that Yang Guo was trying to annoy them but without results, she was thinking about how to escape when she heard the beggar's question and replied without thinking, "It's called "The Mink greets the Moon", what about it?"

Yang Guo interrupted and said, "Correct, once my wife's saber comes out, with a 'fu' sound, it will be in your shoulder." His right hand extended out and found its way to the beggar's shoulder. He pushed downwards and the palm of his hand lightly touched the shoulder. When the three beggars saw this move they were all startled, and all thought, "He pretended to be a fake groom all along to trick us."

Although Yang Guo had not put any strength into his palm, the impulsive beggar who was struck felt embarrassed, and called out, "Fine, you scoundrel, pretending to be dumb, come, let me first test out your skills."

Yang Guo said, "You said you wanted to fight with my wife first, why do you want to fight with me now?"

The beggar angrily said, "It's all the same if I fight with you."

Yang Guo said, "Oh no, I don't know what to do." He turned around to Lu Wushuang and said, "My darling wife, my little Wifey, tell me what should I do to them?"

Lu Wushuang was beyond doubt now, she knew that he must be highly skilled, the palm he had just demonstrated was crisp and clean, she couldn't manage something like that but she didn't know what his martial arts origins were so she just said, "Do another stance of "The Mink greets the Moon" (diao chan bai yue)."

Yang Guo said, "Fine!" He bent his waist and extended his hand, a clapping sound was heard as he struck down on the

beggar's shoulder again. The three beggars were astonished with that last attack. Yang Guo was definitely facing away from them and he didn't take a step to turn around, all he did was stretch out his hand and the chop came down on the Beggar's shoulder; that palm technique was extremely strange.

Lu Wushuang's heart shook, "That's definitely my Ancient Tomb sect's kung fu, how does he know it?" She then said, "A stance of 'The West Offers the Heart' (Xi Shi Peng Xin)."

Yang Guo said, "Alright!" His left fist came out, and landed on his opponent's chest. The beggar who was struck in the chest felt a strong force pushing him forward; he couldn't stop himself from flying away about a ten feet. He struggled to stay on his feet but the area of his chest where he was struck was not in pain, it was if someone had carried him and placed him further away. The other two beggars dashed up.

Yang Guo called out urgently, "Wifey, I don't know how to deal with them, teach me."

Lu Wushuang said, "The Illustrious Gentlemen Pushes Out" (zhao jun chu sai), "The Numb Nun Offers Life" (ma gu xian shou)."

Yang Guo's left hand rose and slanted, the fingers on his right hand stretched out, his form was in the position of strumming a zither, his five fingers flicked out at the beggar on the right, this was "The Illustrious Gentlemen Pushes Out". He immediately moved across and kicked the beggar on the left, his fists came together and pushed upwards, a clashing sound was heard as his fists struck the opponent's jaw. He then called out, "This is 'The Numb Nun Offers Life', isn't it?" He didn't want to hurt anyone so he didn't put any strength behind his attacks.

The four stances he used were all exquisite stances of the Ancient Tomb's "Beauty Fist Techniques". Ever since Lin Chaoying founded the Ancient Tomb sect, all the arts were passed on to females, never males. Lin Chaoying's "Beauty Fist Technique" took the names of famous beauties for the name of its stances. When it is used it is elegant, graceful and enchanting, yet it was deadly at the same time. Yang Guo learned martial arts from Xiao Longnu so of course he learned this set of fist techniques. He felt that although it was a refined set of skills, its nature meant that when a man practiced it, it wasn't appealing. When he was practicing he inadvertently changed its soft nature to hard and yang; its changes became swift and stylish, though the nature of it was slightly different, the technique of this set of fists remained intact.

The three beggars were all struck by the stances without knowing what happened but they didn't feel any pain from the stances. They weren't in awe of Yang Guo's skills; they whistled and attacked all at once. Yang Guo dodged to the east and darted to the west, he called out, "Wifey, it looks like it's becoming desperately serious; you are going to be a widow today!"

Lu Wushuang scoffed and said, "Heaven's Grandson Weaves Cotton"! (tian sun zhi mian).

Yang Guo's right hand wiped his left, his left pushed the right, and his stance resembled a loom weaving cloth, one scatter one push; his hands struck the beggars on the shoulders again.

Lu Wushuang called out again, ""The Civil Gentlemen as a Stove" (wen jun dang lu), "The Concubine is Drunk" (gui fei zui jiu)!"

Yang Guo raised his hand as if he was pouring wine and cut down on the impulsive beggar's forehead and caught his

body; he twisted him around and flung him out to the right, his shoulder hitting another beggar squarely in the chest. The three beggars were alarmed and angry, the three of them used the kung fu they had obtained throughout their lives, yet now they couldn't even touch this kid's clothes. The boy looked and his hand waved out, whoever he wanted to hit he struck; although it wasn't painful when they were hit, it was extremely weird.

Lu Wushuang called out three stances in a row, "'Foolish Jade Blows the Flute' (nong yu chui xiao), 'The Descending Goddess Encroaches the Wave' (luo shen ling bo), 'Enticing Shoot Holding Fist' (gou yi wo quan)." Yang Guo did as he was told. Lu Wushuang was in awe, she deliberately gave him a hard stance, as Yang Guo was throwing out his fist, she immediately called out, "'Ruling Sky Hangs' (ze tian chui)." According to his form at the moment, it was impossible to use this stance, but because Yang Guo's internal energy was much higher than the enemy's, he actually managed it; his body went forward, his palms hanging down. The three beggars saw that his chest was exposed and there was a weakness, they were delighted and dashed forward, but they didn't know that his internal energy would hold them back and force them to retreat a few steps.

Lu Wushuang was pleasantly surprised and called out, "'One Laugh Overturns the Country' (yi xiao qing guo)!" This was a stance that she had just invented. A captivating beauty could overturn cities and countries with a smile, but how could this be used to fight with others?

Yang Guo was startled; he immediately laughed out loud, "Ha-ha-ha-ha, hei-hei-hei-hei, hu-hu-he-he", and circulated the profound internal energy of the "Nine Yin Manual". Although he hadn't refined this internal energy to a good level that could be used to fight off skilled fighters, the three band five beggars were just run of the mill fighters. When

they heard this strange laugh, they couldn't stop their heads from shaking and eyes from being dazzled; their bodies shook a few times and they fell down onto the ground. Every person has a moon shaped small object in their ear which controls the person's balance, if this object is forced to shake, headaches and feeling light headed will be unavoidable. Eventually they won't be able to stand upright. Yang Guo's laugh was created by his strong internal energy, everyone's eardrums were being shaken continuously, and it was like the earth and sky were flipping over. Lu Wushuang felt faint and urgently grabbed onto the carriage to support herself. Calls of 'ai ya' and thudding noises all sounded together, the well wishers of the wedding, the bride and groom all fell onto the ground.

Yang Guo's laughter stopped, the three beggars got up, their faces grey and they ran away without turning their heads back. The rest of the party rested for half an hour and then carried the sedan chair on, now they treated Yang Guo's order as words from the gods, they didn't dare to revolt.

At 'er geng shi fen' (I assume its nine o'clock in the evening) they reached a town and Yang Guo let the people go. The people knew that they would be detained after being captured by this bandit, and would most likely suffer his wrath. How were they to know that this bandit really wanted to have a laugh and pretend to be a newly wed? They were surprised and all thanked and expressed gratitude to Yang Guo. The nanny was much more vocal and said, "Da Wang and his wife would stay together for hundred of years until both of you are old with white hair. You are going to have many little 'Da Wangs'." This made Yang Guo laugh; Lu Wushuang was embarrassed and angry with this.

Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang found an inn and called for some rice and other dishes. They were about to eat when they saw someone enter and after seeing the two of them,

immediately turned around and walked away. Yang Guo knew something was wrong and went over to the entrance and saw two people standing in a pavilion. It was the two Taoists who fought with Lu Wushuang at Wolf Valley, Shen Zhifan and Ji Qingxu. The two of them took out their long swords and darted forward.

Yang Guo thought, "Why are you two trying to make trouble for me? Are you looking for pain?"

The two approached but slanted their body and brushed past him; they hurried into the hall and headed for Lu Wushuang. At this time, the ringing of a bell was suddenly heard, 'ding ling' 'ding ling'.

By the time the ringing sounds were in their ears, the source had arrived. The two Taoists' faces changed and they glanced at each other. They darted to the first room of the western wing and closed the door, and didn't come out again.

Yang Guo thought, "Rotten Taoists, you've probably tasted Li Mochou's pain before, that's why you're acting like this."

Lu Wushuang quietly said, "My master is near, Sha Dan, what should we do?"

Yang Guo said, "What shall we do? Let's run!" As soon as he stretched out his hand to help her up, the ringing sound had arrived at the entrance of the inn. They heard Li Mochou say, "Guard the roof."

They then heard the waiter say, "Angelic priestess, old senior's room, ai ya, I ..." A thudding sound was heard as he landed on the floor, there wasn't another sound. He didn't know that Li Mochou hated people who mentioned the word 'old'. What about when someone called her 'old senior'? The fly whisk was waved and robbed the old waiter of his life. She asked another waiter, "There's a lame girl here, where is

she?" That waiter was already scared out of his wits, he couldn't reply and just said, "I...I..." Li Mochou kicked him away with her left foot; her right foot kicked open the door of the first room of the western wing. She went in and took a look; it was where the Taoists Shen and Ji were staying.

Yang Guo thought, "It's best if we leave by the backdoor, although Hong Lingbo will see us, it won't be too much trouble." He quietly said, "Wifey, escape with me."

Lu Wushuang looked at him and got up, thinking that if she was able to escape this time then heaven must be looking out for her. As soon as the two got up, a guest from the table in the eastern corner came up to them and quietly said, "I'll lure the enemy away, quickly think of a way to escape." That person sat in an out of sight place, Lu Wushuang and Yang Guo couldn't see his face. When the person was speaking his face was turned away, as soon as they finished speaking, he immediately left through the main door. They could only see the person's back. That person wasn't tall; he wore a flowing blue green gown. Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang looked at each other and then heard the bell ringing, going towards the north.

Hong Lingbo called out; "Master, someone's escaping." A yellow blur came out of the room; Li Mochou dashed out of the inn and chased after the escapee.

Lu Wushuang quickly said, "Quickly run!"

Yang Guo thought, "Li Mochou's lightness kung fu is extremely quick, she will be able to catch up with that person in just a second, and then she will return here. I won't be able to go that fast with Miss Lu on my back; we won't be able to run away." An idea dawned on him; he dashed into the first room of the western wing. He saw the Taoists Shen and Ji sitting by the bed, their faces' were still carrying the shocked look from before. There was no time to delay, Yang Guo didn't

allow for the two to get up and ask questions as he dashed forward and moved his finger, sealing the two's pressure points, keeping them still. He called out, "Wifey, enter." Lu Wushuang entered the room. Yang Guo closed the doors and said, "Quickly take off your clothes!"

Lu Wushuang's face blushed and hissed, "Sha Dan, what are you saying now?"

Yang Guo said, "It's up to you whether you want to take off your clothes or not, I'm going to." He took off his outer garment and put on Shen Zhifan's Taoist gown and hat.

Lu Wushuang then understood, and said, "Fine, we'll pretend to be Taoists to fool my master." She stretched out her hand and undid her buttons. Her face turned red and she kicked Ji Qingxu. She said, "Close your eyes you filthy Taoist!" The two Taoists could not move but still had control of their five senses. They closed their eyes immediately; how would they dare to look at her?

Lu Wushuang said, "Sha Dan, turn around, don't watch me change."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "What are you worried about, I helped you fix your ribs back into place, haven't I already seen you?" As soon as he said this he felt that he was impolite and had offended her, he couldn't stop himself from feeling a bit embarrassed. All Yang Guo had to do was to lower his head and move away but he was in a trance, a slap came and he was heavily struck on the left cheek. Lu Wushuang thought that she could never have hit him in a million years, still she didn't hold back. She felt apologetic; she laughed and said, "Sha Dan, does it hurt? Who told you to speak such crap?"

Yang Guo touched his cheek and laughed, he turned around.

Lu Wushuang changed into the Taoist gown and laughed, "Take a look! Don't I look like a young Taoist?"

Yang Guo said, "I can't see so I don't know."

Lu Wushuang said, "Sha Dan, turn around."

Yang Guo turned around and saw her Taoist gown was flowing, it showed off her figure even better, he was about to say something when Lu Wushuang gave a grunt and pointed to the bed, and saw a Taoist's head sticking out of the covers, it was the Taoist whose fingers had been cut off by her, Pi Quanxuan. All along he had been lying on the bed resting, when he saw Lu Wushuang enter, he immediately hid his head under the covers. The two of them were preoccupied with changing and didn't notice him.

Lu Wushuang said, "He...he..." She wanted to say 'he saw me changing' but couldn't say the words. At this time, the donkey's bell was heard. Yang Guo listened and knew that Li Mochou had taken the donkey back. When the guest in blue green rode the donkey, the bell's ringing was scattered, when Li Mochou rode her donkey, though she rode it fast the bell's ringing was ordered. An idea came; he picked up Pi Quanxuan and sealed his pressure point at the same time. He opened the compartment underneath the bed and placed him in there. It's cold in the north, on winter nights the bed will be warmed by a fire underneath it, it was now summer, there was no need to light a fire but there was ash and coal beneath, Pi Quanxuan's face was covered with grey ash. The ringing sound of the bell stopped, Li Mochou had come back to the inn.

Yang Guo said to Lu Wushuang, "Sleep in the bed."

Lu Wushuang's brows raised and said, "A smelly Taoist has slept there, its dirty, how can I sleep in it?"

Yang Guo said, "It's up to you!" As he said this he stuck Shen Zhifan underneath the bed as well and unsealed Ji Qingxu's pressure point at the same time. Though Lu Wushuang felt that the bed and covers were dirty, she thought about how venomous her Master was so she got into the bed, facing the wall. As soon as she pretended to sleep, Li Mochou kicked open the door and came to search the room for a second time. Yang Guo took a tea cup and lowered his head, drinking tea, his left hand covering the fatal pressure point on Ji Qingxu's back. Li Mochou saw that there were still three Taoists, Ji Qingxu's face was grey and was shaking; Li Mochou laughed and searched the second room.

When she searched the room for the first time, she had studied the faces of the three Taoists carefully afraid that Lu Wushuang had disguised herself as one of them; she didn't take a closer look the second time.

That night Li Mochou and her disciple searched the town's inns, disturbing everyone. Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang lay on the bed with their heads together; he smelt her womanly scent and was happy. Lu Wushuang had many thoughts, she felt that Yang Guo was an extremely strange person, if one said he was a 'Sha Dan', he was extremely clever, if one said he was intelligent, he would act mad and crazy. She lay on the bed not daring to move, thinking that Sha Dan would definitely try to hug her, what would she do then? A while passed but there was no movement from Yang Guo, she was actually disappointed. She smelt the manly scent of Yang Guo and was captivated by it; time passed as she slowly fell asleep.

When Yang Guo woke up the sky was bright, he saw Ji Qingxu in deep sleep across the table; Lu Wushuang was quiet, her cheeks were rosy, her red lips slightly apart, he couldn't stop himself from being moved and thought, "If I lightly kiss her, she won't know."

He's a young man who is experiencing his first awakenings of desire (qing dou chu kai). He had never been close to a girl before and right now he was at his most emotional state. He thought about the time when he was fixing her ribs and saw her naked breasts, it was even harder for him to resist. Yang Guo moved his head forward, wanting to kiss her on the lips. Before the lips met he smelt a fragrant scent, his heart stirred, his blood rushed, then her brows crinkled; she seemed to still feel the pain of her broken ribs in her dreams. When Yang Guo saw her face like this he immediately remembered Xiao Longnu and then remembered the oath he swore, "I will only have Gu Gu in my heart in my lifetime, if my heart changes, there will be no need for Gu Gu to kill me, when I see her face I will kill myself." He broke out in a cold sweat and two slapping sounds were heard, he had slapped himself heavily across his cheeks and leapt off the bed.

This woke up Lu Wushuang; she opened her eyes and asked, "Sha Dan, what are you doing?"

Yang Guo was feeling embarrassed and guilty, he mumbled, "Nothing, it's just a mosquito biting my face."

Lu Wushuang remembered how she slept with him last night, her face suddenly turned red, she lowered her head and gently said, "Sha Dan, Sha Dan!" Her voice carried a soft and caring tone. After a while she raised her head and asked, "Sha Dan, how come you know the Ancient Tomb's "Beauty Fist Technique"?"

Yang Guo said, "When I dream at night many beautiful women and minks came and taught me a stance, that's how I know."

Lu Wushuang gave a 'humph' sound; she knew that he wouldn't answer anything about it if she asked again. Just as she was about to change the subject, she suddenly heard the ringing sound of Li Mochou's donkey. They headed in a

northwest direction and then returned. Li Mochou thought about how the 'Five Poison Codex' was in Lu Wushuang's hands; another day without the book meant another day of danger, she didn't dare to waste any time. Before the sky became bright she rode her donkey and searched everywhere nearby.

Yang Guo said, "When she can't find us she will leave. It's a pity that you're hurt and can't move much, otherwise we would steal a pair of horses and gallop for one day and one night, how would she be able to catch up then?"

Lu Wushuang angrily said, "You're not hurt, why don't you go and steal a horse and gallop for a day and night?"

Yang Guo thought, "This girl takes everything to heart, I just said something without thinking and she got angry." But he wanted to see her angry expression and wanted to anger her further and said, "If it weren't for you begging me to take you to Jiangnan, I would have long gone."

Lu Wushuang was furious and said, "Just go, go! Sha Dan, just looking at you makes me angry, just go and die by yourself."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Huh, I'll miss you if you die." He was afraid that Lu Wushuang was going to get angry for real and aggravate her injury so he laughed and exited the room. He found an ink block and returned to the room. He placed the ink block in a basin of water and rubbed it about, and then suddenly he touched Lu Wushuang's face. Lu Wushuang wasn't prepared for this hand coming towards her and touching her face, she scolded, "Rotten Sha Dan, bastard Sha Dan." She then saw him take out a pile of ash from underneath the bed, he smeared the ash and brushed the water on his face, his face was dirty and unsightly, as if his face was full of pimples and boils.

She then understood, "Although I've changed into Taoist clothes my face hasn't changed, if my master catches up with me, how could she not recognize me?" She then smeared the ink water over her face. Girls naturally love to make themselves as beautiful as possible, although she was smearing ink water, she applied it as if she was applying make up.

The two finished with their disguises. Yang Guo stretched out his leg underneath the bed and unsealed the two Taoist's pressure points. Lu Wushuang saw that Yang Guo didn't even take a look and after some kicks the two Taoists made a relieved grunt. She was secretly in awe of him and thought, "That Sha Dan's kung fu is ten times better than mine." But she didn't show any sign of this and instead kept on scolding him, as if she thought nothing of him. Yang Guo went to the market to look for a cart but the market was too small, there were no carts for rent, he could only buy two horses. That day, Lu Wushuang's injury had eased; both of them rode on the horses and slowly went southeast.

They rode for a few hours; Yang Guo was afraid that she was tired so he helped her down off the horse and sat on a rock and rested. He remembered how he almost treated Lu Wushuang with disrespect; although he felt that treating Lu Wushuang with disrespect wasn't anything serious, he would have done something disrespectful to his Gu Gu. He was a bastard. He was insulting and cursing himself when Lu Wushuang suddenly asked, "Sha Dan, why aren't you talking to me."

Yang Guo smiled and didn't reply. He suddenly thought of something and asked, "Ai ya, crap, I'm so dumb."

Lu Wushuang said, "You are dumb!"

Yang Guo said, "When we disguised ourselves, the three Taoists saw us. If they tell your master, won't that be a

disaster?”

Lu Wushuang pursed her lips and smiled, then said, “Those three Taoists rode past us long ago and my master is still behind us. What’s wrong with you Sha Dan, what were you in a daze about, you didn’t even see them ride past us.”

Yang Guo gave an ‘ah’ sound and laughed. Lu Wushuang felt that his laugh had a hidden meaning behind it, she remembered the words she just said, “What’s wrong with you Sha Dan, what were you in a daze about”, she couldn’t stop her face from turning red. At this time, they suddenly heard the neigh of a horse.

Lu Wushuang turned around and saw two beggars approaching from around the corner. Yang Guo took a look and saw a head peep out and withdraw back behind the edge of the mountain, it was Shen Zhifan and Ji Qingxu. He thought, “So the three Taoists told the Beggar Clan that we’ve dressed up as Taoists.”

He held up his hand and said, “Beggar masters, if you want to ask for food or money, old Taoist here has already given as much as he could today, you’ll have to leave empty handed.”

One of the beggars had a voice like an overwhelming bell, he said, “Even if you shaved your head and disguised yourselves as a monk or a nun, you won’t be able to get past my eyes and ears. Don’t play dumb anymore, just get it over with and come with us to see the elder and sort this matter out.”

Yang Guo thought, “Those two old beggars have eight pockets on their back, I’m afraid that they might be very skilled.”

The two beggars were eight band members, they saw that the two of them were at most twenty years old yet they

managed to defeat four band four members and three band five members. They thought that there must something strange going on here.

Both sides were suspicious of each other. In the northwest the ringing of a gold bell could be heard, 'ding ling' 'ding ling', it was light and swift, it was pleasant to the ear.

Lu Wushuang thought, "Crap... crap. Although I have disguised my face, I had to bump into those two old beggars at this time, if they've uncovered my identity, how will I be able to escape from my master? Oh crap, I'm really out of luck this time. There had to be someone with nothing better to do with themselves once they've been fed, they just had to come and find me."

In a short while, the bell's ringing became closer. Yang Guo thought, "I won't be able to beat her, the only thing I can do is to quickly find a path to escape on." He said, "You two aren't begging for alms, and you won't come close, just let us pass." As he said this he took large steps forward. The two beggars saw that his steps weren't solid; it seems that he didn't know any martial arts; each one stretched out their arm and grabbed him.

Yang Guo chopped out his right hand and clashed with the two palms, the three palms pulled back and each one took three steps back. The two eight band Beggar Clan members have practiced martial arts for tens of years, their internal energy was profound, in the world of Jianghu there were few who could match them. In terms of kung fu foundation they were ahead of Yang Guo but when it comes to the mastery of exquisite stances, they weren't a match for him. Yang Guo borrowed strength to use strength and dispersed the two's palms but if he wanted to dash pass them, it would be impossible. The three of them were secretly startled. At this time Li Mochou and her disciple had arrived at the scene.

Hong Lingbo called out, "Hey, Beggar, Taoist, have you seen a lame girl pass by here?"

The two beggars had a high status in the world of Wulin, when they heard Hong Lingbo question them like this they became angry but the Beggar Clan had strict rules, the members mustn't get into feuds with others as they pleased so the two just replied, "No!"

Li Mochou's eyes were sharp and saw the back of Lu Wushuang, she was suspicious and thought, "I think I've seen those two before?" She saw the four facing each other, their weapons braced as if they were about to fight, she thought she should stand aside and see what happens.

Yang Guo glanced over and saw that she had a wry smile on her face, standing by watching the battle, he had a thought, "I've got it, and if I do this I'll erase her suspicions." He turned around and went over to Hong Lingbo to ask her something, he disguised his voice and said, "Greetings Taoist friend." Hong Lingbo returned the greeting.

He said, "This Taoist was just passing by when these two evil beggars started to cause trouble, wanting to fight me. This Taoist has not got weapon, I hope you will lend me a weapon in respect of Lao Jun." As he said this he made another bow.

Hong Lingbo saw that his face was black and ugly, but he was respectful and modest, he referred to the Taoist's Tai Shang Lao Jun. It didn't seem right to reject his request so she held out her sword and glanced at her master. She saw that she was nodding her head and so handed the sword to him. Yang Guo bowed as he received the long sword, the tip pointing to the ground, he said, "If this Taoist can't fight off the enemy, I hope that Taoist friend here will look upon the fact that we are people of religion and will assist me."

Hong Lingbo raised her eyebrows and gave a 'humph' sound without replying.

Yang Guo turned around and loudly said to Lu Wushuang, "Apprentice brother, sit by the side and watch and don't move, I'm going to teach the Beggar Clan beggars the skills of our Quanzhen sect."

Li Mochou shivered, "So the two Taoists are from the Quanzhen sect. But Quanzhen sect and the Beggar Clan have always been good friends, why are they arguing?"

Yang Guo was afraid that the two beggars would speak and reveal who Lu Wushuang was so he raised his sword and dashed forward, calling out, "Come, come, come, I'll fight two by myself."

But Lu Wushuang was concerned, "Sha Dan doesn't know that my master has fought Quanzhen sect on many occasions, how would she not be able to recognize the stances of the Quanzhen sect? There are many Taoist sects in the world, Zhengyi, Dadao, Taiyi, they are all good choices for our cover why the hell did he pick Quanzhen?"

The two beggars heard him say 'From the Quanzhen sect' and were alarmed, the both called out, "Are you really from Quanzhen sect? You and..."

Yang Guo didn't allow them to mention Lu Wushuang and thrust his sword forward, separately attacking the stomachs of the two; it was Quanzhen's "Di Chuan" sword skills. The two beggar's status was high, they could gang up and fight a young boy like him but Yang Guo's stance came out extremely quick. They had to attack together with their sticks. As the metal rods were raised, Yang Guo's sword darted through the gap and aimed for their chests. The two beggars could never have predicted that his sword skills were extremely quick; they quickly retreated. Yang Guo

didn't hold back, he kept on applying the pressure, in a flash he had unleashed eighteen swords, every stance had two intentions, when the sword comes out it was one stance, but within it was artifice, the sword stance separated into two. This was Quanzhen's "One Sword into Three Distinctions" (yi jian hua san qing) technique; every stance can be made into three. Every stance that Yang Guo threw out, the beggars moved back three steps, after the eighteen stances had been unleashed, the beggars had not even attacked back once, and they had retreated back a total of fifty-four steps. The kung fu of the "Jade Heart Manual" was designed to counter Quanzhen's kung fu. Before Yang Guo practiced the "Jade Heart Manual" he practiced the kung fu of the Quanzhen sect. But because he had not practiced enough and it wasn't refined enough, he wasn't able to do "One Sword into Three Distinctions", but he was good enough to turn it into two distinctions.

Li Mochou saw that the young Taoist's sword skills were refined, she couldn't help being shocked and thought, "No wonder Quanzhen's name is so famous, there are able people from the sect, in ten years time how will I be able to beat him? It looks the mantel of the Quanzhen sect is going to fall into his hands in the future."

If she fought with Yang Guo, she would know that although the stances were real on the outside, underneath it was the Ancient Tomb's kung fu, but from its appearance, it was hard to distinguish between the two. Yang Guo had learned the Quanzhen song from Zhao Zhijing, and practiced it afterwards, and so his Quanzhen kung fu wasn't completely a fake. Lu Wushuang and Hong Lingbo looked on, dazzled.

Yang Guo thought, "If I slow down and allow the two beggars to talk, we'll be finished." Once the eighteen stances had passed, the long sword quickly turned around and attacked the two beggars backs, another set of two distinctions. The

two beggars quickly turned around to attack. Yang Guo didn't allow the metal rods and the sword to collide, he quickly darted behind the two's backs. The beggars turned around, Yang Guo darted behind the beggars again. He knew that if it came to a real kung fu contest, he would not be able to handle one beggar let alone two; he utilized his lightness kung fu and circled around the two beggars. In the Quanzhen sect, as soon as one has refined their kung fu to a high level, they will practice lightness kung fu so later on they will be able to use it when practicing the "Big Dipper Formation". Although Yang Guo is now using the steps of Quanzhen's kung fu, but his breathing and circulation are from the formulae of the "Jade Heart Manual". The Ancient Tomb's lightness kung fu was second to none in the world, as soon as he used it, the two skilled Beggar Clan fighters were not able to catch up, they saw him moving like lightning, a white blur, the sword piercing forwards. If he wanted to kill them, even if twenty beggars were here he would be able to kill them. The two beggars quickly turned around and waved their rods in defense, right now they weren't able to defend against the incoming stances; they used all their strength in defense and hoped that heaven was on their side. They ran around like this for around ten loops, the two beggars were dizzy and dazed, their feet rapid, they felt that they were about to faint.

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Hey, my Beggar Clan friends, I'll teach you a method, stand back to back so you won't have to keep on turning around." With this pointer, the two beggars were filled with joy, they were about to follow this method when Yang Guo thought, "Crap! If this happen I'm going to lose." He stopped circling them, two stances in one, as the sword was thrust forwards aiming for their backs. The two beggars heard the wind sound from the sword; they weren't able to use their rods to block it so advanced forward. As soon as they took a step the stance arrived, they

were shocked and quickly hurried out of the way. How could they have predicted that Yang Guo's sword was like a shadow, no matter how fast they ran away, the sword remained behind their backs? The two's steps slowed, their backs were pierced by the sword. The two beggars knew that Yang Guo didn't want to kill them; otherwise all he had to do was just add an ounce more strength. The sword would have moved an inch further; wouldn't the sword have gone through their chests? But they still didn't dare to slow their steps. The three used their energy and in a flash they had moved over two miles, leaving Li Mochou and the others behind. Yang Guo suddenly sped up and dashed in front of the two. He laughed and said, "Walk slowly, be careful of tripping!" The two threw out their rods at the same time. Yang Guo stretched out his left hand and held onto one of the rods, at the same time he extended the flat side of his sword and hit the metal rod to the left. His left palm opened and held the two rods. The two beggars felt something was wrong and quickly distributed their chi. Yang Guo's internal energy wasn't a match for theirs, he didn't dare to try and match them, and swept the long sword across. If the two beggars didn't let go, their eight fingers would be slashed off immediately, they could only let go and jump back. Their faces had an expression of embarrassment. Not being able to win and using such a way to escape may have been going too far.

Yang Guo said, "My sect and your clan have always been friends, please don't believe what others say my friends. Every event has its source, the Ancient Tomb's 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' Li Mochou is over there, why aren't you questioning her?"

The two beggars did not know Li Mochou but knew that she was ruthless and vindictive, when they heard Yang Guo say this they both shivered and said at the same time, "Is this true?"

Yang Guo said, "Why should I lie? That witch chased this Taoist until I had nowhere else to run, that's why I had to fight with you two." As he said this, he raised the metal rods and politely gave them back to the beggars. He said, "It is well known what objects the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' always carries with her, haven't you two heard about this?"

One of the beggars understood and said, "Yes, she holds a fly whisk, her donkey has a golden bell. The woman is in yellow isn't she?"

Yang Guo smiled and said, "Correct, correct. The girl who used the silver saber to hurt your clan member is her disciple." He then made his voice slightly deeper and said, "I'm afraid that it's ominous, it ominous."

The beggar with the voice like an overwhelming bell was impatient and asked, "What are you afraid of?"

Yang Guo said, "Ominous, ominous."

The beggar urgently asked, "What's ominous?"

Yang Guo replied, "Li Mochou is notorious in Wulin, everyone is afraid of her. Your clan may be powerful but no one is her match. Since it was a disciple of hers who injured one of your members, it would be best to leave it."

He angered that beggar; the beggar raised his metal rod and said, "Huh, I don't care if she's the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' or 'Lizard Deity', I must fight her today." As he said this he headed back towards the path. The other beggar was more cautious, thinking how they could not overcome a young man, if they incurred the wrath of the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' are they not signing their death warrants? He held the other beggar's arm and said, "There's no need to rush, let's go back and plan this first." He made a salute to Yang Guo with

one hand and said, "Please can we have the pleasure of knowing your name."

Yang Guo smiled and said, "My surname is Sa, first names Huazi. Hope we'll meet again." He made a bow and turned around hurrying back to the others.

The two beggars mumbled, "Sa Huazi, Sa Huazi? I have never heard this name; this person's skills are excellent at such a young age..." One of the beggars suddenly leaped up and cursed, "Scoundrel, animal!"

The other beggar asked, "What?"

The beggar replied, "He's called Sa Huazi, it means kill beggars (Kill a beggar has the same Pinyin as Sa Huazi), we've been insulted without knowing it." Though the two cursed, they didn't dare to return to finish this matter with him.

Yang Guo laughed on the inside, he quickly returned and saw Lu Wushuang on top of the horse looking to the side, revealing how anxious she was. As soon as she saw Yang Guo her spirits immediately raised, she quickly met him on the horse and quietly said, "Sha Dan, leaving behind me, that was so thoughtful!"

Yang Guo smiled and offered the long sword back to Hong Lingbo with the handle end facing towards her. He bowed and said, "Thank you for the sword." Hong Lingbo stretched out her hand to receive it. Yang Guo was about to turn around when Li Mochou suddenly said, "Wait." She saw that the young Taoist was skilled; she thought that if she let him go now he would become a problem in the future. While his kung fu was still lower than hers, she would get rid of the potential problem now.

As soon as Yang Guo heard the word 'wait' he knew something was wrong, he lowered the sword a few inches into Hong Lingbo's hand and immediately took his hand away. Hong Lingbo could only take the handle of the sword and smiled, she said, "The young Taoist has some fierce skills."

Li Mochou originally wanted to anger him into attacking and kill him in one stroke with her fly whisk. But now he did not have a weapon. She was of a high status and so could not use her weapon to harm him. She flashed her fly whisk to one side and asked, "Which of the Quanzhen seven masters is your master?"

Yang Guo smiled and said, "I'm Wang Chongyang's disciple." He had no good feelings towards the Quanzhen sect; he had no respect for them. Although Qiu Chuji treated him fairly well, he was only with him for a short while, but before he left he was strictly scolded by him. He knew he didn't mean any harm but in his heart he was still angry. When he remembered Hao Datong and Zhao Zhijing, he became even angrier. In the Ancient Tomb he had practiced the important aspects of the "Nine Yin Manual" left by Wang Chongyang, so technically he could say that he was his disciple. But according to his age, he could only be the disciple of Taoists in Zhao Zhijing's and Yin Zhiping's generation. When Li Mochou saw that his skills weren't weak and asked him which one of the Quanzhen seven masters was his master, it was holding him in a lofty light. If Yang Guo replied Qiu Chuji or one of the others, Li Mochou would have believed him. But he didn't want be a generation lower than the Taoist who killed Grandma Sun, Hao Datong, so he said Wang Chongyang. Wang Chongyang was the person who founded the Quanzhen sect. In his lifetime he had only taken in seven disciples; everyone knew this in the Wulin world. When this young Taoist was born Wang Chongyang had left the world long ago.

Li Mochou thought, "This ugly freak doesn't know how high the sky is or how deep the earth is, and he doesn't know who I am, how dare he talk such nonsense in front of me." She then thought, "How could a Quanzhen Taoist use their founder for a joke? And how could they dare to say the words 'Wang Chongyang'? But if he isn't a disciple of Quanzhen, then how come each of his stances were from Quanzhen?"

Yang Guo saw that although she had a smile on her face, she was frowning and she was in deep thought. He thought about the day when he pretended to be a farmer to trick Hong Lingbo, and in the tomb they had exchanged blows. He couldn't let them find out who he really was through his words so without delay he carried on; he raised his hands in respect. He turned around and leapt onto the horse, and was about to gallop away.

Li Mochou floated over in front of his horse and said, "Come down, I have something to say to you."

Yang Guo said, "I know what you want to ask me. You want to ask me have I seen a pretty girl, who is lame in her left foot, isn't that it. And where has she taken your book?"

Li Mochou was shocked and calmly said, "Yes, you are clever. Where is the book?"

Yang Guo said, "Just now, my apprentice brother and I were resting by the side of the road, we saw that girl fighting with three beggars. One of the beggars suffered a slash from the girl but when the other two beggars joined in, she wasn't a match for them. Eventually she was captured by them."

Li Mochou was always calm no matter what, but when she thought about Lu Wushuang being caught by the beggars and her 'Five Poison Codex' falling into their hands, she couldn't stop herself from showing signs of being alarmed.

Yang Guo saw that the lie worked and continued, "One of the beggars fished out a book from the girl's pockets, she wouldn't give it to them and suffered disrespect from him."

Lu Wushuang glanced at him and thought, "Fine Sha Dan, talking rubbish about me, you think I won't do anything to you?"

Yang Guo knew that she was frightened but deliberately asked her, "Apprentice brother, doesn't it get people mad? That girl was touched all over the place by the beggars and suffered great insults didn't she?"

Lu Wushuang hung her head down and gave a grunt. As he said this, there were the sounds of horse hoofs around the hill, a crowd of horses and people came up. It was a group of Mongolian soldiers. Once the Jin were overthrown, everything north of the Mie River was under the control of the Mongolians. Li Mochou didn't care about the soldiers, but she was in a rush to find out the whereabouts of Lu Wushuang. She didn't want anything to delay her so she stood aside feeling the ground shaking as over a hundred Mongolian soldiers escorting an official passed by. The Mongolian official wore a bright garment, a bow hung from his waist, his horse riding technique was excellent and he exuded an air of calmness as he rode past. Once the soldiers passed, Li Mochou wiped the dust away from her body using her fly whisk. Every time the fly whisk waved, Lu Wushuang's heart missed a beat, she knew if the fly whisk was waved at her and not the dust, her head would have split open immediately.

After she finished cleaning herself up she asked, "And then?"

Yang Guo said, "The beggars took the girl and headed north. This young Taoist couldn't just stand by and tried to interfere, and two of the beggars stayed behind to fight with me."

Li Mochou nodded her head and smiled, she said, “Good, thank you. My name is Li Mochou, people in Jianghu call me the ‘Scarlet Serpent Deity’, and some call me the ‘Serpent Demon’. Have you heard my name before?”

Yang Guo shook his head and said, “I have never heard of you. Miss, with your beauty you are like a deity, how can you be a demon?”

Li Mochou was thirty, but she had profound internal strength, her skin was soft and tender, her face had no wrinkles and one could mistake her for a twenty year old. She had always regarded herself as beautiful and when she heard him praising her like that she was pleased, she fluttered her fly whisk and said, “You joked with me. Saying that you are the disciple of Wang Chongyang, I should make you suffer and then kill you. Since you’ve said this, I’m going to teach you a lesson with my fly whisk.”

Yang Guo shook his head and said, “That won’t do, that won’t do, this young Taoist cannot fight with someone in a lower generation than he is.”

Li Mochou said, “You are about to die and you still joke. How am I in a lower generation than you?”

Yang Guo said, “My master is elder Chongyang, he is in the same generation as your ancestor; how am I not in an older generation than you? You are just a pretty young girl; an old man can’t bully you.”

Li Mochou gave a wry smile and said to Hong Lingbo “Let him borrow the sword again.”

Yang Guo waved his hand and said, “That won’t do, that won’t do, I...” Before he finished his words Hong Lingbo pulled out the sword from its sheath, a ‘ting’ sound was heard; her hand holding only the handle, the blade remained

in the sheath. She was startled but then understood, when Yang Guo returned the sword he had done something to it; he broke the sword but kept the handle intact. As soon as someone applied some force to the sword, it immediately broke. Li Mochou's face changed colour.

Yang Guo said, "Originally I didn't want to fight pretty girls who are beneath me, but since you are forcing me to fight, then so be it! I'll face three stances of your fly whisk empty handed. Let's make it clear first, as long as you can receive my three stances then I'll let you go, but once the three stances are over, you can't trouble me anymore." In this present situation he knew that he must use force otherwise he won't be able to get out of this situation. But if they really fight, he won't be a match for her. So he acted like a senior and made her promise that she will only use three stances and not more. He was not her match anyway so it didn't matter if he had a weapon or not; hopefully she would not use her most lethal fly whisk stances.

How could Li Mochou not understand his intentions, she thought, "You think you can receive three of my stances?" She said, "Fine, senior, let junior experience your skills."

Yang Guo said, "You're too kind" but suddenly he saw a yellow blur; there were traces of the fly whisk everywhere. This stance of Li Mochou's is called "No Holes that can't be Penetrated" (wu kong bu ru), attacking the enemy's bones all over their body. Although this is one stance, the threads were all over the place, so in one stance it included tens of stances, attacking all the body's main pressure points. She had seen him fight with the beggars and saw that his sword skills were refined, he wasn't a weak opponent. Hurting him in three stances was not going to be easy so she used the techniques that she was most proud of, "Three Without Three Without Hands" (san wu san bu shou). She had invented these three stances; even Xiao Longnu had never seen these

stances before. When Yang Guo saw this he jumped back in shock. There was actually no defense to this stance. Moving to the left and right would result in one's pressure points to be sealed; moving forward would result in the pressure points on the back being harmed. Only fighters who were much more skilful than she was could force her back. Attacking her front ruthlessly would force her to use her fly whisk to defend. Yang Guo did not have this ability. In this urgent situation he flipped around, his head below his legs and used the skill that Ouyang Feng taught him, "Reversal of the Veins". His pressure points were all closed; he felt all his pressure points ache a little and then nothing more. He quickly flipped over and gave out a flying kick. Li Mochou had seen that she had hit many of his pressure points but he still had the ability to counter attack. She was shocked and followed with a stance of "Penetrate Everywhere" (wu suo bu zhi). This stance attacked all the pressure points on his sides. Yang Guo's head was on the ground, he stretched out his left hand to seal her right knee's 'Central' pressure point. Li Mochou was even more shocked and leapt away. The "Three Without Three Without Hand" technique's third stance "Stop At Nothing" was immediately used.

This stance does not aim to seal pressure points; instead it attacked the eyes, throat, stomach, the groin and all the places that are soft and delicate. That's why it's called "Stop at Nothing", it was ruthless and showed no respect towards the opponent. When she refined this skill she did not know that there were people who knew how to fight upside down. When she rushed out in this stance, she used it as she normally would, but there was no way the attack hit the eyes, it struck the leg, where it attacked the throat it struck the lower thigh, where it attacked the stomach it struck the upper thigh, where it attacked the groin it struck the chest, it aimed for the soft points but struck the hard and the stance was not effective at all.

This shocked Li Mochou to the extreme. She had seen many battles in her life, she had met those who were better fighters than her so she knew what the enemy would do, how they attacked, defended, dodged, she knew it all; but she couldn't have guessed this young Taoist had such unimaginable kung fu. As she stood there in a daze, Yang Guo opened his mouth and bit down on the fly whisk; he flipped his body and stood up. Li Mochou's hand shook; her fly whisk was taken away.

At the second Mount Hua competition, Ouyang Feng reversed his veins and bit down on Huang Yaoshi's finger. When one reverses their veins, chi is distributed through their lips, the mouth will open and close, the intent to bite someone is automatically created. In the body, nothing can compare with the strength of teeth biting down; the teeth can shatter and tear things that hands can't. Because of this, although Yang Guo's internal strength was weaker than Li Mochou's, once his teeth bit down on the fly whisk; he was able to pull it from her hands.

This move shocked Lu Wushuang and Hong Lingbo, both of them called out in surprise at the same time. Li Mochou was also shocked but she didn't show any fear, her palms lightly came out, she was using her "Diving Serpent Palm" and jumping forward to snatch back her fly whisk. She was about to hit out with her palms when she suddenly called out, "What! It's you! Where's your master?"

Yang Guo's face had been covered in dirt but after a series of quick flips, some of the dirt was brushed off, revealing half of his face. At the same time Hong Lingbo recognized Lu Wushuang and called out, "Master, it's apprentice sister." Before, Lu Wushuang had dared not to face Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo. When Yang Guo and Li Mochou were fighting, she was concentrating on watching the fight and forgot about hiding her face from Hong Lingbo.

Yang Guo's left foot touched the ground lightly and flew onto Li Mochou's donkey, at the same time his left hand flicked out, a 'Jade Bee Needle' was shot at the head of Hong Lingbo's donkey. Li Mochou was furious and flew over to Yang Guo who flew away from the saddle and flipped the fly whisk around, a 'pu' sound was heard as he struck the donkey on the head and called out, "Wifey, quickly take your husband away." He leapt on the back of the horse and he waved the fly whisk madly behind him. Lu Wushuang immediately spurred the horse on. Once Li Mochou utilized her lightness kung fu, she could catch up to four legged animals that were within half li or so. But after being shocked by Yang Guo's strange stances she didn't dare to chase too closely, she just used her trapping hand kung fu to snatch back her fly whisk. On her fourth stance three of the fingers on her left hand managed to grab hold of the threads of the fly whisk; she turned her hand and pulled. Yang Guo couldn't hold on and the fly whisk flew out of his hand.

Hong Lingbo's donkey had been struck with the 'Jade Bee Needle', it suddenly went mad, and it rushed up to Li Mochou and started to bite.

Li Mochou shouted, "Lingbo, what are you doing." Hong Lingbo said, "The donkey is resisting." She pulled the reins with all her strength causing the donkey to have a mouthful of blood. Suddenly the donkey's legs became soft and it fell over, Hong Lingbo leapt up and called out, "Master, let's chase after them!" But by then Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang were half a li away, they weren't able to catch up.

Lu Wushuang and Yang Guo rode hurriedly for a while. She turned around and didn't see her master chasing after them and said, "Sha Dan, my chest really hurts, I can't stand it anymore!"

Yang Guo leapt off the horse and placed his ear against the ground, there weren't any sound of footsteps behind and he said, "There's no need to be afraid, let's go slowly." The two then carried on normally. Lu Wushuang sighed and said, "Sha Dan, how did you manage to take my Master's fly whisk?"

Yang Guo said, "I threw out some words of praise which pleased her and so she gave the fly whisk to me. Old man didn't feel right taking the young girl's things so I gave it back to her."

Lu Wushuang said, "Huh, why was she pleased, she thought you were handsome?" As she said this she blushed.

Yang Guo laughed and said, "She saw that I was an interesting fool, that's why."

Lu Wushuang said, "Crap! What's so interesting about you?"

The two traveled slowly for a while but they were afraid that Li Mochou would catch up so they rode fast. They did this slowing down and speeding up until it was dusk.

Yang Guo said, "Wifey, if you want to save your little life, you'll have to endure the pain in your chest and ride throughout the night."

Lu Wushuang said, "If you talk crap again, just see if I continue to pay attention to you."

Yang Guo stuck out his tongue and said, "It's a pity that our horse is tired, another night of riding and we could escape."

It was now getting dark but suddenly, the sound of horses could be heard ahead, Yang Guo was delighted and said, "Let's change horses."

The two hurried on for about a mile and saw over a hundred horses outside a village. It was the group of Mongolian

soldiers that they had seen earlier. Yang Guo said, "Wait here, I'll go and take a look." He leapt down from the horse and headed towards the village. He saw a light coming from the window of a large house. Yang Guo darted forward and looked inside; he saw a Mongolian official sitting in the room with his back facing the window.

Yang Guo's mind suddenly lit up, "If we're going to change horses why not change people." He waited for a while and saw the Mongolian official stand up, walking up and down across the room. That man was about thirty years old; it was the official in bright clothing he had seen earlier in the day. He had an air about him; it appeared that his post wasn't low. Yang Guo waited until he turned his back and quietly opened the window and slipped in. The official heard a wind sound behind him, he took a step forward and raised his left hand for protection and turned around, and his ten fingers like an eagle's claws came out ferociously. It was the lethal technique of the "Vigorous Eagle Claw Stance". Yang Guo was slightly surprised by this, he didn't know that a Mongolian official would know some kung fu; he slanted his body and dodged past his hands. The official clawed out many times but each time they were calmly dodged. That official had been under the tutelage of the Eagle Claw sect when he was younger, his kung fu was quite good, but after exchanging many stances with Yang Guo, he had no way of using his moves. Yang Guo saw that his hands were coming in ferociously once again, he suddenly leapt up, his left hand grabbed the man's left shoulder, his right hand grabbed the man's right, he circulated his chi through his arms and shouted, "Sit down!" The official's knees became weak and he sat down on the floor. His chest felt like he was being smothered, it seemed like a surge of blood was rushing up to his head. Yang Guo stretched out his hand and rubbed the pressure points on his chest. The official immediately felt his chest loosen, a breath of air was released and he slowly got

up. He stared at Yang Guo, startled. After a few minutes he asked, "Who are you? Why are you here?" Those two phrases in Han were spoken quite clearly.

Yang Guo laughed and asked him some questions instead, "What is your name? What post do you hold?" The official's eyes lit up in anger, he was about to jump out at him again. Yang Guo ignored him and sat down on the seat that the official had previously sat on. The official's arms came out waving up and down, attacking ferociously; Yang Guo just waved out his hands without trying and didn't use any strength to neutralize his attacks. He said, "Hey, you've got a wound on your shoulder, its better if you don't use any energy."

The official was startled and said, "What wound?" His left hand rubbed his right shoulder, there was a slight pain there, he quickly stretched out his right hand and checked his left shoulder, and there was an identical pain. He had not moved his shoulders so didn't notice the wounds; when he used his fingers to touch his shoulder, there was a small area that ached to the bone. The official was shocked, he quickly took off his garment and looked over his shoulder; he saw a red dot on his left shoulder and there was a similar dot on his right. He understood, just know when Yang Guo held his shoulders, he had a concealed weapon in his hands and now had fallen into his scheme. He was startled and shocked, he shouted, "What weapon did you use? Does it have poison or not?"

Yang Guo gave a wry smile and said, "You've learned martial arts, how come you don't know the rules? Large concealed weapons have no poison, small ones of course have." The official believed him but hoped that he made it up to scare him. His face's expression seems to be convinced but also seemed to be suspicious.

Yang Guo smiled and said, "Your shoulder has fallen victim to my divine needle, its poison deepens an inch every day, by the sixth day the poison will have reached the heart, then you'll be dead."

The official wanted him to cure the poison yet he didn't dare ask. In anger he shouted, "Since it has ended up like this then this Master is going to take you with me." He threw himself forward again. Yang Guo slipped past him.

He took out two 'Jade Bee Needles' and waited until his claws came out again, the hands came out, he sent the needles into his palms. The official felt a pain in his palms and stopped, he raised his hands to take a look and saw a fine needle in his palms. He immediately felt his palms go numb; he was shocked and didn't dare to attack again. Another half hour passed before he said, "Fine, I admit defeat!"

Yang Guo laughed out loud and asked, "What's your name?"

The official replied, "My name is Yelu Jin, can I have the honour of knowing the hero's name?"

Yang Guo replied, "My name is Yang Guo. What post do you hold within the Mongolian government?"

Yelu Jin told him everything. He was the Mongolians Prime Minister Yelu Chucai's son. Yelu Chucai aided Genghis Khan and Wo Kuo Tai (Ogedai) to take over many lands. His achievements were outstanding, that is why although Yelu Jin was of a relatively young age, he held the high position of 'Bianliang Jinglue Emissary' (Military Governor of Bianliang city), he had come south to Henan to complete a mission.

Yang Guo didn't know what kind of position this was, he just nodded his head and said, "Fine, fine."

Yelu Jin said, "I don't know what I have done to disrespect the hero, please forgive my ignorance. If the hero has an order

please say it.”

Yang Guo laughed and said, “You haven’t done anything.” He suddenly darted out of the window.

Yelu Jin was shocked and called out, “Hero Yang” and ran to the window, but there was no trace of Yang Guo. Yelu Jin was troubled, “This person comes and goes as he pleases. I’ve fallen victim to his poison needles, what should I do?” He quickly took out the needles from his palm and felt the numbness in his palms and shoulders to begin to feel unbearable. In the midst of all this the window opened, Yang Guo suddenly returned and the room had another person, it was Lu Wushuang.

Yelu Jin said, “Ah, you’ve come back.”

Yang Guo pointed to Lu Wushuang and said, “She is my Wifey, kowtow to her!”

Lu Wushuang shouted, “What did you say?” She turned her hand and gave him a slap. If Yang Guo wanted to avoid it how would she be able to hit him? For an inexplicable reason, when he was slapped and scolded by her he felt good. He didn’t move and a slapping sound was heard as his cheek was hit. Yelu Jin didn’t know that these two always argued like this. He assumed that Lu Wushuang’s kung fu was stronger than Yang Guo’s; he stared in a daze at the two.

Yang Guo rubbed his cheek and laughed at Yelu Jin. He said, “You’ve suffered the poison of my divine needles, but you won’t die straight away. All you’ve got to do is listen to my orders and then I’ll heal you.”

Yelu Jin said, “I’ve always admired heroes and good men, but I have never seen people with such abilities. Today I have finally met someone worthy of this title, it is an honour. If hero Yang doesn’t tell me to live, I could still die with my eyes

closed.” These words maintained his high status but praised the other at the same time. Yang Guo had never spoken with officials before and he didn’t know that they’ve all learned how to praise their superiors; the higher the official, the better they are at flattery without being obvious. The officials from Mongolia were rough and coarse people but after they entered the central plains, they learned the ways of the officials of China. After some words of praise, Yang Guo was pleased, he raised his finger and said, “Well, I didn’t guess that you are a man of honour as well. Come, I’ll immediately cure your poison.” He then used a sucking metal stone to remove the needles from his shoulder and then applied the antidote to the wounds.

Lu Wushuang had never seen the ‘Jade Bee Needles’ before; she saw that the needles were as fine as hair and it looked as though if one placed the needles on water, they will float. She thought, “A gust of wind can blow that away, how can you use it as a concealed weapon?” She was even more in awe of Yang Guo but the words from her mouth said, “That type of evil weapon isn’t honorable, aren’t you afraid of others laughing at you?”

Yang Guo laughed and ignored her, he said to Yelu Jin, “The two of us want to rely on you, your honour and be your attendants.”

Yelu Jin was startled and quickly said, “Hero Yang jokes with me, whatever you want just tell me.”

Yang Guo said, “I’m not joking, I really want to be your attendant your honour.”

Yelu Jin thought, “So the two want work for the government and gain something for themselves.” He couldn’t stop himself from being pleased, he gave a cough and returned to a serious face and said, “Hmm, you’ve learned great martial arts, working for our king will lead to great prospects.”

Yang Guo laughed and said, "You've got it all wrong. We are being chased by an extremely powerful foe. We can't beat her and want to disguise ourselves as your attendants to evade her."

Yelu Jin was disappointed, his serious face loosened then he chuckled and said, "With your martial arts, who gives a care about enemies. If there are too many of them I'll gather my troops and catch them and let you decide on what to do."

Yang Guo said, "Even I can't beat them, there is no need for you worry about it your Honour. Quickly order your attendants to give us some clothes to change into." He said this casually but there was a stern tone within his voice.

Yelu Jin ordered his attendants to bring some clothes for them to change into. Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang went to another room to change. Lu Wushuang got a mirror and examined herself, the person in the mirror was dressed in bright clothes, their eyes sparkled; it looked like a handsome Mongolian general. She felt that this was going to be interesting. They left early next morning. Lu Wushuang and Yang Guo were in a sedan chair lifted by attendants, Yelu Jin was still on horseback, before noon they heard the faint sounds of a ringing bell, from afar it came near, and it brushed past the crowd of people.

Lu Wushuang was delighted and thought, "Comfortably sitting here in the sedan chair resting my wound is an ideal situation. Sha Dan's mad idea has its good points. I'll let them carry me to Jiangnan."

They traveled like this for two days and didn't hear the bell sounds of Li Mochou again. Li Mochou must have gone straight ahead without turning back. There were also no traces of the beggars and Taoists that were looking for Lu Wushuang. By the third day they arrived at the Colt Dragon Stockade. This was an important trafficking point, many

towns and cities flourished around here. After supper, Yelu Jin entered Yang Guo's room and asked for martial arts advice. Words of flattery were said to Yang Guo, praising him highly. Yang Guo gave one or two pointers to him. Just as Yelu Jin was about to listen intently an attendant rushed in and said, "Your honour, our master has sent a letter here."

Yelu Jin was delighted and said, "Fine, I'll come now." He was about to stand up and say goodbye to Yang Guo when he had a thought, "If I open the letter in front of him and show that I don't treat him as an outsider, he'll definitely teach me with all his efforts." He then said to the attendant, "Send the messenger in."

The attendant had a look of surprise on his face and said, "That ...that..."

Yelu Jin waved his hand and said, "Don't delay, and tell him to enter."

The attendant said, "It's the master himself."

Yelu Jin's face fell and he said, "Why are you still wasting time, quickly go" before he finished someone laughed from outside and entered, and said, "Jin'er, you couldn't have guessed that it was me."

Yelu Jin was shocked and pleased, he quickly dashed forward. He said, "Father, why are you..." That man laughed and said, "Yes! I've come here in person." That person was Yelu Jin's father, the Mongolian Prime Minister Yelu Chucai.

Yang Guo heard Yelu Jin call that man father, but didn't know how powerful that person was. He was under one person but above millions; the person with the most power in court, the Prime Minister. He saw that he wasn't very old, his face elegant, within his air of authority was an air of peace; he couldn't stop himself from respecting this person.

As soon as that person sat down on a chair, two other people entered, they greeted Yelu Jin and called him 'Big Brother'. It was one male and one female. The male was around twenty-three or four years of age, the female was about the same age as Yang Guo. Yelu Jin was pleased and said, "Brother, sister, you are here as well." He said to his father, "Father, I didn't have a clue that you had left the court."

Yelu Chucai nodded and said, "Yes, there is some important business that must be attended to; if I didn't do it myself I wouldn't be able to relax." He looked at Yang Guo and the rest of the attendants, indicating that he wants them to leave.

Yelu Jin was in a dilemma, he should tell his attendants to leave but Yang Guo was a person you couldn't mess around with, his face had an expression of being unsure of what to do. Yang Guo knew what he was thinking; he laughed and exited the room by himself. Yelu Chucai was aware of Yang Guo, when he entered by himself all the other attendants greeted and bowed to him except for one, the person did as he pleased and had a proud air, he couldn't stop himself from being wary and asked, "Who is that?"

Yelu Jin was a high official, if he said who Yang Guo was in front of his brother and sister he will have lost face, he answered ambiguously, "He is a friend that I made along the way. Father has made the trip to Henan personally, what is this about?"

Yelu Chucai sighed; his face looked troubled and slowly explained everything. When Genghis Khan died, his third son Wo Kuo Tai (Ogedai) succeeded him. Wo Kuo Tai was the Khan for about thirty years before he too died, his son Gui You (Guyuk) succeeded. Gui You lost himself in drink and died just after three years of being the Khan, his queen (Oghul Ghamish) took over the affairs of state. The queen trusted

very few, the first generals and ministers caused chaos in the court. Yelu Chucai was a senior member of the court, and was one of the people who founded the state; whenever the queen made a wrong decision he would speak up truthfully. The queen saw that he opposed her orders, and of course was angry, but because he was a powerful minister and what he said was right, the queen could not take action lightly. Yelu Chucai knew that once he offended the queen the hundred or so lives of his family would be in danger and so he thought of a plan. He said that Henan in the south was not under control; a minister was needed to go down there and sort it out and he nominated himself. The queen was delighted, thinking the further this person goes the better and she can avoid getting angry everyday. So she agreed to the order. So Yelu Chucai took his second son Yelu Qi and daughter Yelu Yan to Henan. Officially he was down here to dissipate the unrest, but unofficially he was down here to avoid a disaster.

Yang Guo went into another room and chatted and joked with Lu Wushuang but Lu Wushuang turned away and ignored him. After getting no reply, Yang Guo crossed his knees, sat down and meditated. Lu Wushuang wasn't interested. She saw that he closed his eyes and didn't move for half a day and said, "Hey, Sha Dan, why are you meditating now?" Yang Guo didn't reply. Lu Wushuang angrily said, "There is no need to rush your kung fu, are you going to chat with me?" As she was about to move him with her hand, Yang Guo suddenly leapt up and quietly said, "There's someone on the roof!"

Lu Wushuang didn't hear anything, she raised her head and look up at the roof, she said, "Are you lying again?"

Yang Gu said, "No, they're on the roof two buildings over."

Lu Wushuang didn't believe him. She laughed and quietly scolded him, "Sha Dan." She assumed that he was playing

dumb.

Yang Guo tugged her sleeve and quietly said, "Let's hide before your Master finds us."

When Lu Wushuang heard the word 'Master' and her back broke out in a cold sweat and she followed him to the window. Yang Guo lifted his head to the west, Lu Wushuang also lifted her head, and indeed, she saw someone in black on the roof of the building two rooms over. It was now the middle of the night, there was no light from the moon and stars; if one didn't carefully examine the roof, it would be hard to spot anything. She admired him secretly, "How did Sha Dan detect this?" She knew that her Master held herself very highly, when she moved at night she would still wear her apricot yellow gown, she would never wear black. She bent over to Yang Guo's ear and whispered, "It's not Master."

As soon as the words were spoken, the person in black suddenly got up and flew across the roofs arrived outside the window of the room that Yelu Chucai was in. She kicked open the window, and leapt in holding a saber, she called out, "Yelu Chucai, I'm going to take you to hell along with me." It was a girl's voice.

Yang Guo's heart shook, "That girl's movements are extremely fast, her skills are above Yelu Jin. His father is afraid that his life will be in danger."

Lu Wushuang called out, "Let's go." The two hurried to the scene and witnessed what was happening through the window. He saw that Yelu Jin was holding up a bench moving back and forth, battling with the girl in black. The girl was young but her saber techniques were vicious, the Willow Leaf Saber in her hand was extremely sharp, a series of slashes hacked off the four legs of the bench. Yelu Jin saw he that wasn't going to hold her off and called out; "Father, run away!" He then shouted, "Men, men!" The girl threw out a

kick; Yelu Jin was not prepared for it and was kicked in the waist, his body flipped as he fell onto the floor. The girl dashed forward and raised her saber above Yelu Chucai's head and slashed down.

Yang Guo thought, "Oh no!" Thinking that he should rescue that person first and then talk about it later, he held a 'Jade Bee Needle' and was about to shoot it out at the girl's wrist when he heard Yelu Chucai's daughter Yelu Yan called out, "This one mustn't have any manners!" She chopped out at the girl's face with her right palm; her left hand used "Empty Hands Entering a Hundred Blades" kung fu to take her saber. Those two moves suited each other exquisitely, the girl moved her head to avoid the palm and her wrist was held by Yelu Yan, she quickly threw out a kick, Yelu Yan had to move back, her blade wasn't taken away. Yang Guo saw that the two girls' attacks were swift and quick and was slightly surprised. In a flash the two had hacked and slashed and seven or eight moves had passed.

At that time, ten guards burst into the room; when they saw the two girls fighting, they dashed forward. Yelu Jin said, "Wait! Sister doesn't need your help."

Yang Guo quietly said to Lu Wushuang, "Wifey, those two girls' skills are better than yours."

Lu Wushuang was angered and threw out a palm. Yang Guo slipped away and laughed, he said, "Don't get angry, it's better to watch them fight."

Lu Wushuang said, "Tell me the truth, am I better or are those girls better."

Yang Guo quietly said, "One on one, the two girls' have nothing on you. Two on one, based on kung fu only, you will lose. But they are too honest in their attacks. They can't

compare with your tricks, ruthlessness and viciousness, and so you would win.”

Lu Wushuang was pleased, and whispered, “What ‘tricks, ruthlessness and viciousness’, that doesn’t sound too nice! When it comes to trickery, no one can compare with Mister Sha Dan.”

Yang Guo smiled and said, “Doesn’t that mean you are Mrs. Sha Dan?” Lu Wushuang gave a quiet grunt.

They watched the two girls battle. Yelu Yan did not have a weapon and after many tries still could not take the girl’s saber away, and now she was forced to defend and evade with no way to attack. Yelu Qi said, “Sister, let me try.” He slanted his body and moved forward, his right hand threw out three palms in succession. Yelu Yan stood by the wall said, “Fine, let’s watch you.”

After Yang Guo saw Yelu Qi’s three stances, he couldn’t stop himself from being slightly surprised. His left hand was planted on his waist not moving, his right hand extended and pulled back, his feet didn’t move. He was able to fend off the girl’s saber, his stances were refined, and positioning accurate, he wasn’t ordinary. Yang Guo thought, “That person is exceedingly good, his skills looks like Quanzhen yet there are some things different.”

Lu Wushuang said, “Sha Dan, his skills are much better than yours.” Yang Guo was in a trance as he watched and he didn’t even hear what she had said.

End of Chapter 9.

Chapter 10 - The Young Hero

Translated by Noodles



Li Mochou felt Yang Guo's sword skills were extremely refined and ingenious. Every stance and every move of hers was predicted by the opponent and was intercepted by him. She thought her Master was really biased. She changed her stance and suddenly moved forward, leaping onto a table, her right leg kicked out, her left leg supporting herself on the top of the table. Her body moved back and forth without effort, like a leaf floating in the breeze.

Yelu Qi said, "Sister, watch carefully. I'll hit her 'Scholarly Arm' (bei ru) pressure point and she will move her body and retreat, I'll follow this by hitting her 'Big Bone' pressure point, she must raise her saber to attack. At this time the attack must be fast and then you'll be able to snatch her saber."

The girl in black said, "Huh, it won't be that easy."

Yelu Qi said, "It will be like that." As he said this he used his right hand to attack her 'Scholarly Arm' pressure point. This palm was sent out in a crisscross, blocking all her paths to the front, back and right, leaving only a space to the left. If the girl wants to avoid his palm she must retreat two steps. Yelu Qi nodded his head and indeed, he did strike her 'Big Bone' pressure point.

The girl had always remembered, "I mustn't raise my saber to counterattack." But in this situation the only way to get any sort of advantage is to raise the saber and slash down; at that time she didn't think for long, she raised her saber and slashed down.

Yelu Qi said, "Just like that!" Everyone thought he was going to snatch the saber away but who would have thought that he would take his right arm back and put his hands together in his sleeve. The girl had not slashed down with her saber yet, when she saw his arms in his sleeves she stopped momentarily. Yelu Qi suddenly stretched out his right arm, his

two fingers held the saber's blade and he lifted up; the girl could not hold on, her saber was snatched away.

After the crowd of people saw this great skill they stood there for a while, the room quiet as though empty. The girl in black stood there without moving, her face looked dejected. Everyone thought, "Second Master hasn't made another move, he's giving her a chance to run away. If she doesn't escape, what does she want?"

Yelu Qi slowly moved away and said to Yelu Yan, "She hasn't got a weapon now, fight with her again, be a bit braver and be more aware of her palms and kicks."

Yelu Yan stepped forward two steps and said, "Wanyan Ping, we are giving you a chance to run, but you still remain here and keep forcing us to fight, will you not give up today?"

Wanyan Ping did not reply, her head lowered in deep thought. Yelu Yan said, "If you want to fight with me then quickly get it over with!" After she said this she dashed forward and threw two fists towards her front. Wanyan Ping leapt back and said coldly, "Give back my saber."

Yelu Yan was startled and said, "My brother took away your weapon so we could have a fair fight, why are you asking for your weapon?" She said, "Fine!" She took the Willow Leaf Saber from her brother's hand and flung it towards her.

A guard offered out his saber and said, "Third mistress, you use a weapon as well." Yelu Yan said "No." But then she thought, "I can't beat her empty handed, we'll compete with sabers." She took the saber and tried out two slashes, the sword was a bit on the heavy side but she could use it if she had to.

Wanyan Ping's face was pale white, her left hand raised her saber, her right hand pointed at Yelu Chucai and said, "Yelu

Chucaï, you helped the Mongols kill my parents; I won't be able to take my revenge in this life. We'll sort this out in hell!" After she finished her words her left hand raised the saber and moved it towards her neck.

Yang Guo heard her words and saw that her eyes and expression was cold and mournful. His heart jumped, his chest was in pain, his voice cracked as he said, "Gu Gu!"

At this time, Wanyan Ping had raised her saber to kill herself. Yelu Qi dashed forward two steps, his right arm came out and stretched out his two fingers and snatched the saber back again, and sealed her arm's pressure points. He said, "You're fine at the moment, why must you be so short sighted?" The time it took the saber to rise and its being snatched away happened in a flash. By the time the crowd of people saw what had happened, the saber was in Yelu Qi's hand. Everyone in the room let out a call of surprise, no one noticed Yang Guo's shout of 'Gu Gu', but Lu Wushuang was by his side and heard what he had said, she quietly whispered, "Who are you calling? Is she your Gu Gu?"

Yang Guo quickly replied, "No! No." When he saw Wanyan Ping's eyes showing a feeling of hurt and grief, her expression was bleak; it was just the way Xiao Longnu had looked like when she left him. After he saw this he was sentimental and mad; he didn't know where he was.

Yelu Chucai slowly said, "Miss Wanyan, you have tried to kill me three times. I am the Prime Minister of Mongolia; I overturned your country and killed your parents. But do you know who killed my ancestors?"

Wanyan Ping shook her head and said, "I don't know."

Yelu Chucai said, "My ancestor were Da Liao's (Khitan) royals; Da Liao was conquered by the Jin. The Wanyans didn't leave many of us behind. When I was young I made an oath; I will

help the Khan of Mongolia to rid the world of you Jin. Ah... When will this cycle of revenge end?" When he said these two last sentences, he looked out of the window and thought about how helping these countries to fight for power had resulted in the loss of many lives; mountains of bodies and rivers of blood were a result.

Wanyan Ping had no reply, she revealed a few of her white teeth as she bit down on her lip; she gave a grunt and said to Yelu Qi, "I failed three times because my abilities aren't good enough; I want to leave it at that. I want to kill myself, what does that have to do with you?"

Yelu Qi said, "If Miss promises that she won't come back to seek revenge again then you can go!"

Wanyan Ping gave another 'huh' sound and stared angrily. Yelu Qi used the handle of the Willow Leaf Saber and touched her waist lightly, unsealing her pressure points. He then threw the saber back towards her. Wanyan Ping struggled to catch it but eventually did, she said, "Master Yelu, you have let me go many times and have held back each time, do you think I don't know this? It's just that the debts between the Wanyans and Yelu's are as deep as the sea, I must avenge my parents."

Yelu Qi thought, "That girl insists on following us, and she's not weak; if I leave father's side just a few steps what will happen then? Ah, why don't I force her into coming after me only?" He clearly said, "Miss Wanyan, you are seeking revenge on behalf of your parents, I admire your will. It's just that the older generation's matters should be dealt with by the older generations. We juniors have our own debts. The matter between our families should be dealt with between us; if you want to take revenge, find me. If you go after my father again, then next time we meet I will not make it easy for you."

Wanyan Ping said, "Huh, my martial arts aren't as good as yours, how can I avenge my parents? Just leave it, leave it." She turned around to exit. Yelu Qi knew that as soon as she leaves she plans to end her life. He wanted to save her and chuckled, "Huh, the Wanyan girl has no will."

Wanyan Ping stopped and turned around and said, "How do I have no will?"

Yelu Qi chuckled and said, "You are correct when you said my skills are higher than yours, but what's so good about that? It's only because I have been taught by a great Master, and not because I have some kind of great ability. Your "Iron Palm" kung fu is one of the best palm techniques; it's just that the person who taught you has not reached a refined stage. You have only begun to practice it recently; of course it will be hard for you to defeat enemies with it. You are young, all you've got to do is to find a better Master, can't you do this?" Wanyan Ping was angry originally but after hearing these words she nodded.

Yelu Qi continued, "Every time I fight with you I only use my right hand it's not because I'm arrogant. It's just that my left hand is strong, every attack aims to hurt someone. How about this, after you've studied under a better Master, you can come and find me at anytime. All you've got to do is to force me to use my left hand and my life will be in your hands." He knew that the difference between their skills was great. Even after getting advice from a skilled teacher, it will be hard for her to beat his one hand. When someone wants to kill themselves it's just an impulsive decision; once she searches for a Master, her priorities will change and eventually the thought of killing herself will have gone.

Wanyan Ping thought, "You're not a god! I'll practice hard; do you think I won't be able to use my two hands to beat your one

hand?" She raised her saber in the air and slashed down and she said, "The words of a gentlemen"

Yelu Qi finished, "A whip on a fast horse!" Wanyan Ping did not look at the crowd and held her head high as she left, but her face could not hide her anguish. When the guards saw that second Master had let her go, they didn't dare to block her. They all paid their respects to Yelu Chucai and exited. Yelu Jin saw that this event was like heaven and earth turning upside down. Yang Guo did not show himself, he was surprised.

Yelu Yan said, "Second Brother, why did you let her go again?"

Yelu Qi said, "What?"

Yelu Yan smiled and said, "If you want her to be my sister in law then you shouldn't have let her go."

Yelu Qi's face turned serious and said "Don't talk rubbish!"

Yelu Yan saw that he was serious, she was afraid that he would get angry so didn't tease again.

When Yang Guo heard Yelu Yan say 'want her to be my sister in law', for no reason at all his heart ached slightly. He saw that Wanyan Ping was heading in a south easterly direction and said to Lu Wushuang, "I'll go and take a look."

Lu Wushuang said, "Look at what?" Yang Guo didn't reply and utilized his lightness kung fu and chased after her.

Wanyan Ping's martial arts skills weren't strong but her lightness kung fu was good, Yang Guo chased after her but only saw her again after they were outside the Colt Dragon Stockade town. He saw her arriving at a manor; she opened the door and entered. Yang Guo followed and hid by the wall. After half an hour, a light could be seen from the double

room in the western wing, followed by a long sigh. That long sigh contained much anguish, hate and worry. Yang Guo heard this from outside the window; he was startled and was moved. Unconsciously he too gave out a long sigh. Wanyan Ping heard that someone was sighing outside her window so she quickly blew out the light and went over to the wall and quietly asked, "Who is it?"

Yang Guo said, "Someone like you, someone whose heart is in pain."

Wanyan Ping was startled; she heard that his voice did not seem to carry any evil intent so she asked, "Who exactly are you?"

Yang Guo said, "There's a saying; 'When a gentleman wants revenge, ten years is not long'. You failed a few times and then wanted to kill yourself; are you viewing your life with disregard? What about your revenge, aren't you disregarding that matter even more?"

A creaking sound was heard as the doors were opened; Wanyan Ping lit a candle and said, "Please enter." Yang Guo made a bow outside the door and entered. Wanyan Ping saw that he was dressed in the clothes of a Mongolian General and was very young. She was astounded and said, "Your advice makes sense, could I have pleasure of knowing your name?"

Yang Guo didn't reply, he placed his arms in his sleeves and said, "That Yelu Qi talks big, thinking that only using his right arm makes him highly skilled. Sealing pressure points and snatching a saber away, how hard can it be if it's done with no hands?"

Wanyan Ping objected to this but because she didn't know he was teasing she didn't rebuke him.

Yang Guo said, "I'll teach you three stances and you'll be able to force Yelu Qi to use both hands. I'll fight with you now, I won't use my arms and legs, how about that?"

Wanyan Ping was shocked, she thought, "Could it be that you know some kind of witchcraft, you could blow me down in one breath?"

Yang Guo saw that she was hesitating and said, "Use your saber; if I can't avoid it then I'll die without complaining."

Wanyan Ping said, "Fine, I won't use my saber, I'll only use my fists and palms."

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "No, you'll only believe me if I can snatch away your saber without using my arms and legs."

Wanyan Ping saw that he seemed to be joking but serious at the same time. She was slightly angry and said, "I have never heard or seen someone who has your abilities." As she finished she waved her saber and slashed down at his shoulder. She saw that Yang Guo's hands were in his sleeves as if nothing was happening. She was afraid that she would hurt him so moved her saber slightly to the side. Yang Guo understood, he didn't move and said, "Don't hold back, and hack down for real!" The Willow Leaf Saber hacked down; there were only a few inches between the saber and his shoulder. Wanyan Ping saw that he didn't make body movements and respected his courage, she thought, "Is he a demon?" The Willow Leaf Saber slanted and hacked down, she wasn't holding back with this slash. Yang Guo lowered his body and the saber brushed past him; there were only a few inches in between. Wanyan Ping concentrated; she raised her saber and slashed down again. Yang Guo dodged past the slash and said, "You can add your palm attacks as well."

Wanyan Ping said, "Fine." The saber slashed across, followed by a palm.

Yang Guo slanted his body and evaded these attacks and said, "There's no harm in going faster."

Wanyan Ping started to use her saber techniques, she used her palms in between, and it became faster as she used them. Yang Guo said, "Your palms are swift, it's better than your saber techniques. Yelu Qi said this was the "Iron Palm" technique, is it?"

Wanyan Ping nodded; her attacks became even more lethal. Yang Guo's hands were still in his sleeves, it floated around in between the saber and palms. Wanyan Ping used a saber and her "Iron Palm" but didn't even manage to touch his clothes. She had used over half her saber techniques and Yang Guo said, "Careful, within three moves I'll take your saber."

Wanyan Ping respected him but still did not believe him. Would he be able to take her saber in three moves? She couldn't stop herself from holding the handle of the saber even tighter and said, "Come and get it!" She slashed her saber across using the stance "Qin's Crossing" (yun heng qin ling) and slashed across his throat. Yang Guo lowered his head and darted below the blade; he slanted his head and his forehead struck her elbow's 'Crooked Pond' pressure point. Wanyan Ping's arm went numb, her fingers lost their strength. Yang Guo moved his head up and opened his mouth; he lightly and skillfully snatched the saber away. His head moved, the handle of the saber struck her side, hitting a pressure point. Yang Guo raised his head and loosened his teeth, he flung the saber upwards a ways so he could speak clearly, he said, "How about it, are you in awe?" As he finished the saber dropped back down, he opened his mouth and caught it. He laughed as he looked at her. Wanyan Ping was startled but pleased, she nodded her head.

Yang Guo saw that her eyes were sparkling, her beauty was enchanting and moving, he couldn't stop himself from wanting to hold her, kiss her. But this was too daring, he bit down on the saber as his face blushed.

How could Wanyan Ping know what he was thinking, she saw that he had a strange expression and was slightly surprised. She felt her whole body going soft, her legs were about to give way and she would fall over. Yang Guo stepped forward, he was just about an inch away, he wanted to fling the saber away and kiss her on her eyelids when he suddenly thought, "She's touched by the respect that Yelu Qi treats her with, could it be that I'm inferior to him? Huh, I want to beat him in every department." He lowered his head and swung it; the handle of the saber touched her waist and unsealed her pressure points. He offered the handle to her.

Wanyan Ping did not take the saber; her knees bent down onto the floor and said, "I beg Master to teach me, I'll be forever indebted to you if I can avenge my parents."

Yang Guo quickly picked her up and took the saber from his mouth, he said, "How can I be your Master? However, I can still teach you a method to take Yelu Qi's life."

Wanyan Ping was pleased and said, "As long as I can kill him. I'm not afraid of his brother and sister and then I'll be able to kill his father." She suddenly thought of someone and sadly said, "Ai... by the time I've achieved the ability to kill him, will Master Yelu still be alive? I still won't be able to avenge my parents' death."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "That Yelu Chucai's life will still be there for you to take."

Wanyan Ping wondered, "How?"

Yang Guo said, "How hard is it to take Yelu Qi's life? I'll teach you three stances, you'll be able to kill him tonight."

Wanyan Ping had tried to kill Yelu Chucai three times, but each time Yelu Qi stopped her. She knew that Yelu Qi's skills were ten times better than her's, she thought that although the young Mongolian general in front of her was skilled, he may not be able to beat Yelu Qi. Even if he could beat him, there is no way that teaching her three moves will allow her to kill Yelu Qi. And to kill him tonight was even more difficult. She was afraid that Yang Guo would get angry so she didn't say anything to rebuke him. She just shook her head slightly, and her eyes showed that she was thinking that he was mad.

Yang Guo knew what she was thinking and said, "Correct, my kung fu may not be better than his. If we really fought, it could be that I would have more losses than wins. But teaching you three moves to take his life is not a difficult task. I'm only afraid that because he spared you three times you won't kill him."

Wanyan Ping's heart shook, and immediately said without any feelings, "Though he has been kind to me, I must avenge my parents."

Yang Guo said, "Fine, I'll teach you the three stances. If you have the chance to kill him and you spare him, what then?"

Wanyan Ping said, "I'll do whatever you say. With your ability, you can beat me or kill me, how can I escape?"

Yang Guo thought, "How can I kill you? If you kill him or not, what has that got to do with me?" So he chuckled and said, "Actually doing the three stances isn't anything special. Watch carefully." He picked up the saber and slowly slashed from the left to the right, and said, "The first stance, it's 'Qin's Crossing'."

Wanyan Ping thought, "I already know that move, who needs you to teach it to me?" She saw the saber coming towards her and slanted her body to avoid it. Yang Guo suddenly stretched out his hand and grabbed her right hand and said, "The second stance is the stance that you've used twice before, "The Rattan around the Tree"."

Wanyan Ping nodded and said, "Yes, it's my "Iron Palm's" trapping hand stance."

Yang Guo held her soft and smooth hand, his heart stirred and he smiled and said, "You should have learned the Jade Flesh Palm kung fu, why did you learn the "Iron Palm's" capturing hand kung fu?"

Wanyan Ping didn't know he was joking and said, "Is there a "Jade Flesh Palm"? The name sounds beautiful." She felt him holding her palm, tight and then loose, the force behind it was extremely light, she felt that this palm technique wasn't as lethal as her "Iron Palm's" capturing hand techniques and thought, "I know the first two stances that you are teaching me, could it be that just with the third stance, Yelu Qi could be killed?"

Yang Guo stared at her eyes and said, "Watch closely!" Suddenly he flipped his wrist and slashed the sword towards his neck.

Wanyan Ping was startled and called out, "What are you doing?" Her right hand was held tightly by Yang Guo, she quickly stretched out her left hand to snatch away his saber. Even though it was an urgent situation, her "Iron Palm's" capturing hand came out with great accuracy, she grabbed his wrist and pulled backwards, the saber was pulled away from his neck. Yang Guo loosened his hand and took two steps back. He laughed and said, "Do you understand?"

Wanyan Ping wasn't settled yet; her heart was jumping all over the place, and didn't understand what he meant.

Yang Guo laughed and said, "First use 'Qin's Crossing' and then use 'The Rattan around the Tree' holding tightly to his right hand, the third stance is to kill yourself; he will definitely rescue you with his left hand. He swore an oath to you, all you've got to do is to force him to use his left hand and he'll let you kill him without objecting. Won't that do?"

Wanyan Ping thought this would happen, she stared at him, startled.

Yang Guo said, "Those three stances will not fail; if it doesn't work I'll kowtow to you."

Wanyan Ping shook her head and said, "He said he won't use his left hand, he definitely won't. What then?"

Yang Guo said, "What about it? Since you'll never be able to avenge your parents then won't dying be a clean solution?"

Wanyan Ping nodded her head mournfully and said, "You are right. Thank you for the advice. Who exactly are you?"

Before Yang Guo replied, a girl's voice from outside the window called out, "He's called Sha Dan; don't listen to what he says."

When Yang Guo heard Lu Wushuang's voice he laughed and didn't reply. Wanyan Ping went over to the window and saw a black image, a person leapt over the wall.

Wanyan Ping wanted to chase after them but Yang Guo pulled her hand and laughed, he said, "There's no need to chase after her, it's my companion. She loves to make trouble for me."

She looked at him and thought deeply for a while, and said, "Since you don't want to tell me then I won't force you. I believe that you have good intentions."

Yang Guo saw her eyes sparkled, her expression was crystal clear, he couldn't stop himself from being filled with pity and sympathy, and he pulled her hand and sat shoulder to shoulder on the bed. He softly said, "My surname is Yang, first name Guo, I'm a Han, not a Mongol. I'm like you, my parents are also dead."

When Wanyan Ping heard his words her heart felt sad, two tear drops escaped from her eyes. Yang Guo was emotional and suddenly cried out. Wanyan Ping took out a handkerchief from her pocket and gave it to him. Yang Guo took it and wiped his face, he remembered his past and more tears rained down. Wanyan Ping smiled and said, "Master Yang, you're making me cry now."

Yang Guo said, "Don't call me Master Yang. How old are you?"

Wanyan Ping said, "I'm eighteen, what about you?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm eighteen as well." He thought, "If I'm born later than her and she calls me little brother, it won't seem right." I was born in the first month; you can call me big brother Yang. I won't be formal with you; I'll call you sister Wanyan."

Wanyan Ping blushed, she felt that he was straightforward and extremely strange but it seemed that he had no ill intentions towards her so she nodded her head. When Yang Guo saw that she nodded her head he was pleased. Wanyan Ping's face was elegant, she was slim but she's had tragic experiences, it seemed that she was born to attract sympathy and pity. But what was most important was that her eyes and Xiao Longnu's were extremely alike. He didn't consider the fact that when someone's heart is full of grief,

their eyes will be filled with sorrow and anguish. Everyone is different in this world, when he thought that her eyes looked like Xiao Longnu's he was just consoling himself. As he stared into her eyes, he imagined her black clothes were white; he turned her slim and oval face into Xiao Longnu's beautiful face. He was in a daze as he stared at her, his face revealed an expression of beseeching, of being sentimental, of affection, of love. Wanyan Ping was slightly afraid and lightly pulled her hand away, she quietly said, "What are you doing?"

Yang Guo woke up from his dream and sighed. He said, "Nothing. Are you going to kill him?"

Wanyan Ping said, "I'm going now. Brother Yang, are you coming with me?"

Yang Guo was about to say "Of course" but then he thought, "If I'm there, she will know that she has strong backup. She won't really commit herself to suicide; Yelu Qi will not fall into the trap." He said, "I'm not going with you."

Wanyan Ping's eyes showed some signs of disappointment. Yang Guo's heart softened, he was about to agree when Wanyan Ping suddenly said quietly, "Fine brother Yang, I'm afraid I won't see you again."

Yang Guo quickly said, "Why...why...I..."

Wanyan Ping shook her head she exited the manor and in a flash had arrived at the Yelu's residence. At that time, Yelu Chucai and the others were about to go to bed. Wanyan Ping knocked twice at the front door and clearly said, "Wanyan Ping wants to see Master Yelu Qi."

Some guards were about to go up to her and block her way when Yelu Qi opened the door and asked, "What can I do for Miss Wanyan."

Wanyan Ping said, "I want to test your skills."

Yelu Qi wondered, "How come you don't admit your limits?" He slanted his body and stretched out his right hand and said, "Please enter."

Wanyan Ping entered the room with her saber and unleashed three strokes with it, sandwiched between the slashes were six "Iron Palms", this "One Slash with Two Palms" attacked together from the left and right. Yelu Qi's left hand hung down, his right hand chopped and grabbed as he neutralized the three slashes and six palms. He thought, "How can I force her to go away and stop her from bothering our family ever again?" The two fought for a while and Wanyan Ping was about to use the three stances that Yang Guo taught her, when a girl's voice from outside called out, "Yelu Qi, she wants to trick you into using your left hand, careful." It was Lu Wushuang.

Yelu Qi was startled, Wanyan Ping didn't give him time to think and immediately used a stance of Qin's Crossing" and waited for him to slant his body to dodge it. She stretched out her left arm and used "The Rattan around the Tree", she grabbed his right arm, and her right arm turned over and slashed the saber towards her throat. In that short period of time many thoughts ran through Yelu Qi's mind, "Must I save her? But she's tricking me into using my left hand, once I use it my life will be in her hands. How can a gentleman stand by and do nothing?"

Yang Guo had seen through Yelu Qi's thoughts, once the three stances were out, he would definitely try to rescue her, but he couldn't have predicted that Lu Wushuang will have popped up and messed with the plan, informing Yelu Qi of the danger.

The plan wouldn't have worked, but Yelu Qi was heroic and generous, he knew that if he saved her his life would be hers.

In this danger he still stretched out his left hand and blocked Wanyan Ping's right wrist, his wrist turned and took her Willow Leaf Saber. After these three stances, each one of them took two steps back. Yelu Qi didn't wait for her to open her mouth and threw the saber back and said, "You have forced me to use my left hand, you can kill me but I have one request."

Wanyan Ping's face was pale and said, "What is it?"

Yelu Qi said, "I beg you not to harm my father." Wanyan Ping gave a 'humph' grunt and walked forward, she raised the saber; under the candlelight she could see that he was still calm, and saw his manly air. She thought about how he used his left hand to save her, how could she hack him down? The intent to kill in her eyes slowly turned to peace, she threw down her saber and left.

She ran without thinking and someone followed her steps until she arrived at a stream outside the town. She stared at the reflection of the stars in the stream, her mind and heart in a mess. After a while, she sighed.

Suddenly, a sighing noise could be heard from behind. Wanyan Ping was startled, she turned around and saw someone standing behind her; it was Yang Guo. She called out 'Brother Yang' and didn't say anything else.

Yang Guo went forwards and held her hands; he consoled her, "Avenging your parents isn't an easy thing to do. There is no rush."

Wanyan Ping said, "You saw everything?" Yang Guo nodded. Wanyan Ping said, "Of course it will be hard for one as useless as me to avenge their parents. All I need is half your ability and I wouldn't be in this situation."

Yang Guo took her hand and led her to under a tree where they sat next to each other and said, "Even if you learned everything I know, what use is it? Although you can't avenge your parents now, at least you know who to take revenge against; won't you have chances again in the future? What about me? I don't even know how my father died, let alone who killed him, I can't even talk about revenge."

Wanyan Ping froze and said, "Your parents were killed by someone too?"

Yang Guo sighed and said, "My mother died from an illness, my father died without reason. I never saw my father."

Wanyan Ping said, "How do you know?"

Yang Guo said, "By the time I was born, my father had died. I ask my mother how did my father die, who is our enemy? Every time I asked mother she would always end up in tears and wouldn't reply. After a while I stopped asking. At that time I thought it wouldn't be too late if I asked her when I get a bit older; but I didn't think that mother would die suddenly. Before she died I asked her again. Mother just shook her head and said, "Your father... your father... ai... son, don't ever, ever think about revenge. Promise mother that you'll never think about avenging your father." I was sad and grief stricken, I called out, "I won't promise, I won't promise!" Mother didn't breathe again and died. Ai...tell me what should I do?" He wanted to say these words to console Wanyan Ping but after he finished he himself was sad. There's a saying, 'One mustn't live under the same sky as the person who killed your father'. If someone didn't avenge their father, that is the most unfilial thing to do; they would suffer disgrace and humiliation and be despised by other people. Yang Guo didn't even know the name of his father's killer; he had hidden this matter in his heart for a long time,

now that he got it off his chest, his voice was filled with sadness and anger.

Wanyan Ping said, "Who brought you up?"

Yang Guo said, "Who else? It was me of course. Once my mother died I wandered around the world of Jianghu, I asked for a meal here and pleaded for shelter there, sometimes I couldn't endure hunger any longer and would steal a melon or a potato from a family. I always got caught and got beaten for a while. Look, I have many scars, my bones stick out, and these are all from when I got beaten when I was younger." He smiled and rolled up his leg for her to see. The stars and moonlight was indistinct, Wanyan Ping could not see clearly, Yang Guo took her hand and rubbed it over the scars on his lower leg. Wanyan Ping could make out the bumps of the scars and couldn't stop her heart from aching. She thought about herself, how although she has lost her family, her father had many old friends and acquaintances, and had left money and treasures; compared to him, she was a lot more fortunate.

The two were silent for a while, Wanyan Ping pulled her hand lightly away from his leg but her hand was still held by him, she quietly asked, "How did you learn your great martial arts? And how did you become a Mongolian official?"

Yang Guo smiled and said, "I'm not a Mongolian official. I'm wearing Mongolian clothes so I can hide from my enemy."

Wanyan Ping was pleased and said, "That's good."

Yang Guo asked, "What's good?"

Wanyan Ping's face turned slightly red and said, "The Mongols are the mortal enemies of the Jin, of course I hoped that you weren't a Mongolian official."

Yang Guo held onto her soft and smooth hand, his mind wasn't settled, and said, "If I was a Jin official, how would you treat me?"

When Wanyan Ping saw that he was handsome and skilled in martial arts, she had liked him a bit, and now in her troubled times she had his help. She heard about his past and sympathized with him even more. Right now, she heard his voice had some ill intent but she was not angry and sighed, saying, "If my father was alive, whatever you wanted, my father could have given it to you. Now my parents are gone, what use is there in talking about it?"

Yang Guo heard her voice was gentle and peaceful, he stretched out his hand and placed it on her shoulder and whispered into her ear, "Sister, I have one request."

Wanyan Ping's heart jumped, she had an idea as to what he wanted to ask and quietly asked, "What?"

Yang Guo said, "I want to kiss your eyes, relax! I just want to kiss your eyes; I won't do anything to violate you."

Wanyan Ping had thought that he wanted to ask for her hand in marriage, and was afraid that he wanted to get intimate, if she refused and he used a little force, how would she be a match for him?

She was a girl touched by young love, her hand was tightly held by his strong, coarse hand; she was enchanted by the tangles of love. Without saying he would use force and even if he didn't use force, it was hard for her to refuse. Who would think that all he wanted was to kiss her eyes; she couldn't stop herself from letting out a sigh of relief, but there was a touch of disappointment in her heart. She felt surprise and her heart was tangled up like thread. Her eyes sparkled as she stared at him, startled, her eyes revealed a touch of shyness. Yang Guo stared at her eyes and remembered the

time Xiao Longnu left him. Her shy and loving eyes stared at him; he couldn't help groaning and he jumped up.

Wanyan Ping flinched in fright; she wanted to ask what it was but couldn't open her mouth.

Yang Guo's heart was in a mess, all he saw in front of him were Xiao Longnu's eyes. That last day when he saw her eyes, he was a young boy who wasn't yet clear about things; he respected Xiao Longnu but didn't understand what her words meant. After leaving the mountain, he had now spent a few days with Lu Wushuang; and now he was brushing Wanyan Ping's face by the side of her ear. Suddenly his heart came alive, he understood now, he now understood the affection and love of Xiao Longnu. He couldn't refrain from feeling thousands of regrets and grief. He wanted to run into a tree and kill himself. He thought, "Gu Gu loves me deeply and said she wanted to be my wife. I unexpectedly rejected her good intentions; where on earth do I start searching for her?" He suddenly cried out and threw himself forward, holding Wanyan Ping, and kissed her eyes forcefully.

When Wanyan Ping saw his forceful and mad actions she was frightened and pleased; she felt his arms were like metal, holding tightly to her waist, she closed her eyes and let him do what he wanted. She felt his lips kiss her eyes only and didn't move from them. She thought how although his action is forceful, he kept his word, but she didn't know why he kissed her eyes only.

Abruptly Yang Guo called out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu!" The voice carried the warmth of love, yet it carried extreme sorrow. Wanyan Ping was about to ask him who is he calling out when suddenly a girl's voice from behind said, "May I trouble you two!"

Yang Guo and Wanyan Ping were both startled; they both jumped away from each other and saw someone standing by

the tree. That person wore a blue green gown.

Wanyan Ping's heart was still jumping; her face red, she lowered her head and tugged at the corner of her clothes, and didn't dare look at the person.

Yang Guo recognized this person, it was the one who had lured Li Mochou away from the inn a few days ago; he and Lu Wushuang had their lives saved thanks to that person. She had two knots of hair on her head, it was a girl; he bowed deeply and said, "I won't forget Miss's help that day."

The girl returned the greeting and said, "Master Yang, at this moment in time do you still remember your companion?"

Yang Guo said, "You are talking about..."

The girl clearly said, "Li Mochou and her disciple have just captured her!"

Yang Guo was shocked; his voice quivered and said, "Really? Is she ...she in danger?"

The girl clearly said, "She will be alright for the time being. Miss Lu said that the beggars took the codex, the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' is holding her and chasing after them. Her life will be safe for the moment but she won't avoid torture."

Yang Guo called out, "We'll quickly go and rescue her."

The girl shook her head and said, "Master Yang's kung fu is high but I'm afraid you are still not a match for the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity'. There is no use in us losing our lives in vain."

Under the flat starlight he saw that the girl's face was unspeakably ugly, the flesh on the face did not move, like the face of a dead person. When one sees it, they can't refrain from being terrified. Yang Guo looked at her a few times and then didn't dare to look at her again, but thought,

“That girl is a kind and considerate person, but she has such an odd face, what a pity. If I look at her again, I’ll show some signs of being shocked; I’ll offend her then.” He asked, “Can I have the name of Miss?”

The girl said, “There is no need to remember such a lowly name, Master Yang will know it in the near future; what’s most important now is to think of a way to rescue Miss Lu.” When she talked, the flesh on her face didn’t move, if one didn’t hear words coming from her mouth, they would think that she was a walking corpse. But it’s strange, her voice was simple, soft, and gentle, it could revitalize a tired person and make one forget their worries.

Yang Guo said, “Since it is so, we’ll rely on Miss’s advice to rescue Miss Lu. I will listen to your orders.”

The girl was courteous and said, “Master Yang please don’t be so formal, your skills are better than mine ten times over. When it comes to intelligence, I’m even further behind. You are older than me, and you are a man; whatever you say we’ll do; this young girl will follow your decisions.”

Yang Guo heard that these words were polite and gracious, his heart had an incredibly comfortable feeling, he thought that although the girl’s face was frightening, her words were gentle and soothing; one should not judge someone by their looks. He pondered and then said, “How about we follow them in secret and make the rescue when the chance comes.”

The girl said, “That’s a good idea; but what about Miss Wanyan?” As she said this she moved away and let the two discuss the matter.

Yang Guo said, “Sister, I need to go and rescue a friend, we’ll meet again some day.”

Wanyan Ping lowered her head and said, "Although my abilities are low, I can still be of help. Brother Yang, I'll follow and help you in your rescue."

Yang Guo was pleased and said, "Good, good!" He raised his voice and said to the blue green girl, "Miss, Miss Wanyan is willing to come along with us for the rescue."

The girl came closer and said to Wanyan Ping, "Miss Wanyan, you are of an important status, you must think about this. Our enemy is extremely ruthless and vindictive; people in Jianghu call her the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity'. It's really in one's best interests to avoid her." Her tone was still courteous and polite.

Wanyan Ping said, "Without mentioning the fact that I'm indebted to brother Yang, his business is my business. A friend like sister is definitely worth making. I'll follow sister and we'll be cautious."

The girl came over and held her hand and softly said, "Nothing could be better than that. You are older than me, call me younger sister."

In the dark, Wanyan Ping could not see her ugly face, but she heard her soft and gentle voice, a soft and tender hand held onto hers, she assumed that she was a beautiful girl. She was happy and asked, "How old are you?"

The girl laughed lightly and said, "Let's not compare our ages. Master Yang, what's most important now is to rescue your friend, is it not?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes. Can Miss please show us the way?"

The girl said, "I saw them heading in a southeast direction, they must be heading for Wuguan."

The three then utilized their lightness kung fu and hurried to the southeast. The Ancient Tomb sect's kung fu's forte is lightness kung fu; it could be classed as the world's number one. Wanyan Ping's martial arts may not be anything special but her lightness kung fu was not weak. How was it that the girl in blue green followed behind her without breaking speed? When Wanyan Ping was going fast, she went fast, when she slowed down, the girl slowed down, the gap between them remained constant at one or two paces. Yang Guo was secretly surprised, "What sect is that girl from? From her lightness kung fu, her skills are higher than sister Wanyan's." He didn't want to lead the two girls and so slipped to the rear.

They traveled until the sky became bright; the girl took out some food from her bag and gave it to the two. Yang Guo saw that although her blue green gown was plain and natural, its design was exquisite, it fitted perfectly to her body. On her, the gown showed off her slim, graceful and elegant disposition, it was superior to embroidered clothing. Water, food and all other supplies were prepared by her, showing off how meticulous and careful she was.

Wanyan Ping saw her face and was startled; she didn't dare to take any more glances and thought, "Is there such an ugly girl on this earth?"

The girl waited for the two to finish their food and said, "Master Yang, Li Mochou knows you, yes?"

Yang Guo said, "She's seen me a few times."

The girl took out a thin towel like object from her bag and said, "This is a human skin mask, when you wear it she won't be able to recognize you."

Yang Guo took it in his hand and saw that the mask had four holes for the eyes, mouth and nose, when he placed it on his

face it matched the shape of his face, like as if he was born with it, he thanked her with joy.

Wanyan Ping saw Yang Guo put on the mask, his face was now extremely ugly and then she understood, "Sister, so you're wearing a human skin mask as well; I'm really foolish, I thought you really were born with that weird face. I'm really sorry."

The girl gave a quiet laugh and said, "With Master Yang's handsome face, wearing this mask is asking a lot from him. With my face, it's the same whether I wear it or not."

Wanyan Ping said, "I don't believe that! Sister, could you take off your mask and let me see your face?"

Yang Guo also was curious and he too was anxious to see her face, but the girl took two steps back and laughed, and said, "Don't look, don't look, my face will scare you guys." Wanyan Ping saw that she won't take it off and so didn't ask her again.

By midday the three arrived at Wuguan. They found a restaurant in the town and had something to eat. The waiters saw Yang Guo was wearing Mongolian clothes and didn't dare to be slow; they made sure they tended to his needs first. The three were halfway through their food when they saw three females enter the restaurant; it was Li Mochou and her disciple along with Lu Wushuang as their captive.

Yang Guo thought that although Li Mochou could not possibly recognize him at this moment in time, his strange face would attract her suspicions. It wouldn't be convenient for him to act so he turned around and ate his rice, shifting his body to hear their conversation. Who would think that Lu Wushuang would not make a sound? After Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo ordered, they too didn't speak.

Wanyan Ping had heard Yang Guo describe Li Mochou and her disciples before. She was anxious and dipped her chopstick into a bowl of soup and wrote on the table, "Time to move?"

Yang Guo thought, "Even with the three us and 'Wifey' it'll be hard for us to beat the two of them. We can only win by using our brains, we can't use force." He waved his chopstick.

There were footsteps from the stairs and two people emerged. Wanyan Ping glanced over; it was Yelu Qi and Yelu Yan. The two people also noticed that Wanyan Ping was there and both were surprised; they nodded and then found a table to sit down. The two knew that Wanyan Ping had left and wasn't going to try to assassinate their father again so they left their father and brother and went traveling. They were even more relaxed when they saw Wanyan Ping was here.

Li Mochou was troubled by the fact that the 'Five Poison Codex' had fallen into the hands of the Beggar Clan. These past few days she had no appetite for food; she just ate half a bowl of noodles and then placed her chopsticks on the table. She raised her head and looked out of the restaurant; on the corner of the street she saw two beggars, on their backs their were five pockets, they were five band beggar clan members. She had a thought and went over to the window, she signaled to the beggars and said, "Beggar Clan members, please come here, This Taoist priestess has a message for your clan's chief." She knew that if she asked them to come up for no reason, they might not come, but if she said she had a message for their chief, they would definitely come. Lu Wushuang heard her Master calling the beggars and knew that she wanted to inquire about the whereabouts of the 'Five Poison Codex'; her face couldn't refrain from turning white. Yelu Qi knew that the Beggar Clan was a powerful force up here in the north, yet this beautiful priestess actually had something to say to them; he didn't know who

she was, his curiosity was roused, he stopped drinking and watched them.

In a short while, the sound of footsteps could be heard outside, two Beggar Clan members entered and greeted Li Mochou and said, "What does the Angelic Priestess want, we'll honor the request." After they greeted her they stood up. One of the beggars saw that Lu Wushuang was present and his face immediately changed, he had tangled with her before, he pulled his friend and leapt to the stairs entrance.

Li Mochou gave a wry smile and said, "Please take a look at the back of your hands." The beggars looked on their back of their hands only to see three red prints, they didn't know how on earth she managed to do this; she had used her "Divine Five Poison Palm" without 'disturbing ghosts or gods' (roughly 'completely un-seen'). The beggars didn't even know she had done anything, even Yang Guo and Yelu Qi couldn't see clearly what had happened.

The beggars were startled and both called out, "You're... you're the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity'?"

Li Mochou softly said, "Go and tell your chief, 'your clan and the one named Li have always kept away from each other', say 'the river water does not mix with the well water'. I have always admired the heroes of the Beggar Clan, it's just that I've never had the chance to acquaint myself with the clan, I really regret that."

The beggars looked at her and thought, "It sounds nice but why did you use your poisonous techniques on us for no reason?"

Li Mochou took a break and then carried on, "The two of you have fallen victim to the "Divine Five Poison Palm", don't worry, all you've got to do is return the book you stole and I will help you cure it."

One of the beggars said, "What book?"

Li Mochou laughed and said, "That old book isn't worth much, if your clan won't return it, its not too important. I'll just take the thousand Beggar Clan member's lives as compensation."

The two beggars' arms didn't feel anything strange but each time they listened to a sentence, they would look down at their hands. They have heard about how evil and poisonous the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' was; after falling victim to her, you will suffer extreme pain as you die. Their hearts were now imagining things, the three red marks on their hands seemed to be getting bigger and they heard the ruthlessness and evil way she spoke. They wanted to go and tell their elders and plan what to do. They looked at each other and hurried down the stairs.

Li Mochou thought, "If your chief wants you to live, she will definitely hand over the 'Five Poison Codex' obediently... crap! If they copy the book and return the original to me what then?" She had another thought, "My divine palm's and concealed weapons' antidotes are all written in the book, they've got the book, why will they beg me?" When she thought about this her face changed, she flew over to them and blocked their path. Two palm clashes were heard as she pushed them up the stairs. She was a yellow blur as she moved up and down the stairs. When she returned upstairs she held one of the beggar's arms and twisted it, a 'ka la' sound and the bone was broken. The other beggar was alarmed but he was loyal to his friend, he didn't run away and dashed forward to protect his friend. He saw Li Mochou coming forward and threw out a fist. Li Mochou grabbed his wrist without effort and twisted it; the arm was broken. The two beggars knew that they had suffered serious injuries in just one stance and they knew that they were out of luck

today; the two stood back to back and raised their good arm, deciding to fight to the end.

Li Mochou said courteously, "You two better stay here and wait for your chief to bring the book here as ransom."

The two beggars saw her return to her table and drink wine, her back to them; they slowly edged towards the stairs and waited for a chance to escape.

Li Mochou turned around and laughed and said, "It seems that the two of you are going to remain here only if your legs are broken." She stood up.

Hong Lingbo couldn't bear it anymore and said, "Master, just let me guard them, I won't let them escape."

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Huh, you've got a good conscience." She slowly walked towards the two beggars.

Yelu Qi and his sister had been watching from aside, they couldn't bear it any longer and both of them stood up. Yelu Qi whispered, "Sister, run away, this woman is very powerful."

Yelu Yan whispered, "What about you?"

Yelu Qi said, "As soon as I've saved the two beggars, I'll immediately run as well."

Yelu Yan knew that there weren't many people that her brother couldn't beat; when he said that he needs to run to escape with his life, she couldn't believe it.

At this time, Yang Guo slapped the table with force, and went over to Yelu Qi and said, "Brother Yelu, how about we save them together?" He knew that if he wanted to save Lu Wushuang, he would eventually have to fight. With a skilled

person who was willing to save someone like Yelu Qi, how could he avoid dragging him down with him?

Yelu Qi saw that he was dressed in the clothes of a Mongolian general, his face was extremely ugly, and he had never seen this person in his life. He thought that if this person was actually sitting with Wanyan Ping then he knew who he was; but with Li Mochou's kung fu, it would be hard for him to win. If a normal person intervened they would definitely lose their life in vain. He couldn't reply for the time being. Li Mochou heard Yang Guo talk and examined him, his voice seemed familiar but no one can forget a face like his, and decided that she didn't know him.

Yang Guo said, "I don't have a weapon, I need to borrow one." As he said this he flew past Hong Lingbo's body and picked up the sword from her belt; he smelled her scent and said, "Very fragrant!" Hong Lingbo threw out a palm, he ducked and darted underneath it, then stood between Li Mochou and the beggars. The essence of his movements were remarkable, it was the advanced kung fu he learned while catching sparrows in the ancient tomb. Li Mochou was secretly alarmed.

Yelu Qi was delighted and said, "What is this brother's name?"

Yang Guo swung his left arm and said, "Little brother is called Yang." He raised the sword sheath and said, "I stole a broken sword." He took the sword out of its sheath, the sword was indeed broken.

Hong Lingbo realized who he was and called out, "Little punk! Master, it's him!"

Yang Guo took off his mask and said, "Martial Aunt, apprentice sister, Yang Guo greets you."

When he said 'Martial Aunt, apprentice sister', Yelu Qi was mystified; Lu Wushuang was even more surprised, "Why on earth is Sha Dan calling them Martial Aunt and apprentice sister?"

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Hmm, how's your Master?"

Yang Guo's heart ached a little, his eyes went red.

Li Mochou then coldly said, "Your Master has taught a good disciple."

Days ago, Yang Guo had used unorthodox techniques to neutralize her most lethal stances the "Three Without Three Without Hands" technique, and after he took away her fly whisk with his teeth. His skills were strange, in fact they were unimaginably strange; although she managed to take her fly whisk back and knew that her skills were much higher than his, she pondered, "This little punk is making very rapid progress, and apprentice sister is even more extraordinary. So the "Jade Heart Manual" is this good. It was lucky that apprentice sister did not team up with him to fight me, otherwise, otherwise..." Now he's appeared again, she was secretly afraid as she looked around, checking to see whether Xiao Longnu was here or not.

Yang Guo knew what she was thinking; he laughed and said, "My Master asks after Martial Aunt's health."

Li Mochou said, "Where is she? We sisters haven't seen each other for a long time."

Yang Guo said, "Master is nearby. You will see her shortly." He knew that he wasn't a match for her, even with Yelu Qi's help it would still be difficult, so he used an 'Empty City Idea', frightening her by mentioning his Master.

Li Mochou said, "I'm disciplining my disciple, what has that got to do with your Master?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "My Master pleads with Martial Aunt to let apprentice sister Lu go."

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "You had relations with your senior, you and your Master have done such disgusting things, in front of others, yet you say Master this and Master that, aren't you ashamed?"

Yang Guo knew that she was insulting his Master, his blood boiled up in his chest; he picked up the sword sheath and unleashed his sword skills, and fiercely attacked.

Li Mochou laughed and said, "You can do such unspeakable things, yet you are afraid of others talking about it?"

Yang Guo used the sword sheath and attacked continuously; it was severe and pressed forward without restraint. It was the sword skills left by Wang Chongyang to counter Lin Chaoying's Jade Sword techniques. Li Mochou didn't dare to be careless; she used her fly whisk and concentrated on the incoming stances. The techniques of Li Mochou's whisk originated from the Jade Sword techniques; many stances passed and she felt the opponent's sword skills were extremely refined and ingenious. Every stance and every move of hers was predicted by the opponent and was intercepted by him. If were not for the fact that she was much more powerful than he, she would have begun to lose. She thought with anger, "Master was really biased; only teaching apprentice sister this set of sword techniques. Huh, she probably wanted apprentice sister to use this to neutralize me. Although this sword technique is extraordinary, does that mean I'm going to be afraid of it?"

She changed her stance and suddenly moved forward, leaping onto a table, her right leg kicked out, her left leg supporting herself on the top of the table. Her body moved back and forth without effort, like a leaf floating in the

breeze. She laughed and said, "Did your lover teach you this move? I don't think even she will know this one."

Yang Guo was alarmed and angrily said, "What lover?"

Li Mochou laughed, "My apprentice sister had sworn a serious oath, if there wasn't a man who was willing to die for her, she would spend eternity in the tomb and never set foot off the mountain. She has followed you down from the mountain; you two aren't husband and wife, if she isn't your lover then who is?"

Yang Guo was extremely angry and didn't reply; he rushed forward with the sword sheath and leaped onto the table. His lightness kung fu couldn't compare with his opponents' so he didn't step on the top of the table, he stepped on some bowls but he remained steady and chopped across fiercely with the sheath.

Li Mochou raised her fly whisk and repelled the sheath. She laughed and said, "Your lightness kung fu is not bad! Your lover has treated you well, it could be said that she loved you very much."

Yang Guo was furious and couldn't restrain himself, he shouted, "The one called Li, are you a human? Are you speaking a human language?" He raised his sheath and quickly attacked again.

Li Mochou calmly said, "If you don't want others to know then don't give them anything to know about. My Ancient Tomb sect has come up with these two scum; we have lost all face." As she was attacking, she incessantly came out with sarcastic comments. She may be ruthless but when she spoke she was normally polite and courteous; what she was saying now was against her character. It was because she was worried about Xiao Longnu watching from the side, if she suddenly came out and attacked it would be difficult for her to fight them off,

so she kept up the insults, wanting to make Xiao Longnu so ashamed that she wouldn't appear.

Yang Guo could not bear it, if she was insulting him, he wouldn't care but Xiao Longnu was the one being insulted. With such anger, his arms and legs shivered, his head felt faint, his eyes suddenly went blank and he couldn't stand up and fell from the table. Li Mochou raised her fly whisk and attacked down onto the crown of his head.

Yelu Qi saw that this was an urgent situation; he picked up some wine cups and threw them at Li Mochou. Li Mochou heard the wind sounds and took a glance; it was some wine cups, she breathed deeply and protected the pressure points on her back. She had to kill Yang Guo now and worry about this later, thinking, why should she be worried about two little wine cups. Who would have thought that before the cups arrived the wine splashed out, she felt her 'Two Yang', and 'Central' pressure points go numb after being hit by the wine, she secretly thought, "Crap! Apprentice sister is here. If the effects of the wine are like this, what about the wine cups?" She quickly turned her fly whisk around and knocked the two wine cups away just in time. She felt her arms shake, and was even more worried, "How did she get so strong?"

When she turned around, she saw that it wasn't Xiao Longnu who shot the cups out, it was a tall young man dressed in Mongolian clothes, and she was extremely surprised. "Are there so many good fighters in the younger generation?" She saw him take out his long sword and clearly say, "The Angelic Priestess's attacks are ruthless; I want to experience a few stances." Li Mochou saw him slowly advancing, his foot steps solid. He was about twenty or so, but judging from how he shot out the cups and how he was moving with his sword, his internal energy exceeded his age. She examined him and laughed, "Who are you? Who is your Master?"

Yelu Qi bowed and said, "I am Yelu Qi, I'm under the tutelage of the Quanzhen sect."

Yang Guo had leapt to the side, when he heard that Yelu Qi was from the Quanzhen sect he thought, "He indeed is from Quanzhen; could he be Liu Chuxuan's disciple? Hao Datong can't teach something to such a standard."

Li Mochou asked, "Is your Master Ma Yu or Qiu Chuji?"

Yelu Qi said, "No."

Li Mochou asked, "Is it Liu, Wang or Hao?"

Yelu Qi said, "Wrong as well."

Li Mochou chuckled and pointed to Yang Guo, "He said he was the disciple of Wang Chongyang that makes you two apprentice brothers."

Yelu Qi was surprised and said, "It's not true is it? Elder Chongyang died a long time ago, how can that brother over there be his disciple?"

Li Mochou's brows wrinkled and said, "Hei, hei, Quanzhen has many disciples who can lie without blinking, I'm going to change Quanzhen's name into 'Quanjia', prepare!" (Quanzhen could be translated as Whole Truth, Quanjia is translated as Whole Fake.) Her fly whisk moved and attacked his head.

Yelu Qi's left hand raised his sword, his left foot stepped forward, a stance of "Fixed Yang Needle", the sword was thrust upwards, it was the orthodox sword skills of Quanzhen. This stance's air and chi were absolute, the strength, power and movement all has its fine points. At first appearance it looks very ordinary, but to reach a state where there was no weakness is incredible. People whose talent is just slightly lacking may not be able to reach such a state with a lifetime

of practice. Yang Guo had learned the Quanzhen sword techniques in the Ancient Tomb so of course he knew the essence of the sword skills; but he just learned it without really practicing it. No matter what, he would not be able to demonstrate this stance with such profoundness.

When Li Mochou saw him unleashing this stance she knew that he was a strong enemy, she strode across and lashed her fly whisk. Yelu Qi saw a grey blur move, the fly whisk's threads were to the left and back of him, sweeping in from all directions, his battle experience was shallow and this is the first time he has met a strong enemy; he concentrated and used all his strength to fight her. In a flash forty stances were exchanged, Yelu Qi coiled his sword back slightly, he saw defeat in front of him but if Li Mochou wanted to win right now, she would not succeed.

She secretly praised him, "This little punk is indeed using the refined skills of Quanzhen; although he can't compare with Qiu, Liu and Wang, he wouldn't lose to Sun Bu'Er. There are indeed many able people in Quanzhen.

A few more stances passed when Li Mochou made a dummy move. Yelu Qi didn't know it was trap, he raised his sword and thrust forward, Li Mochou suddenly threw out her left leg and struck his wrist. Yelu Qi's arm was in pain, the sword escaped from his hands. Though he was being defeated he didn't panic, his left hand slashed across, his right hand used the "Trapping Hand Techniques" to try to steal her fly whisk.

Li Mochou smiled and praised him, "Very handsome kung fu!"

After many moves, she felt that his techniques had extreme softness, Liu Chuxuan and Sun Bu'Er and the others did not have this; she was secretly surprised.

Yang Guo interrupted with an insult, "Bitch, I'll never acknowledge you as my Martial Aunt ever again." He raised the sword sheath and attacked.

Li Mochou saw Yelu Qi's sword had fallen, she wrapped the sword with her fly whisk and shot it out at Yang Guo's face and laughed, saying, "You are your Master's man; you could call me apprentice sister."

Yang Guo saw the incoming sword and raised his sword sheath forward. Lu Wushuang and Wanyan Ping both called out in alarm, but there was a 'shua' noise as the sword was shot into the sword sheath exactly. The placement of the sheath to catch the sword was extremely difficult. If the sheath was just a millimeter or so out and with the force that Li Mochou shot the sword with, the sword would have pierced his chest. However, he had learned the art of projectile throwing in the Ancient Tomb, the timing, weight and accuracy of his skills had reached a stage where there weren't any errors. The hair like 'Jade Bee Needle' would hit its target as soon as he shoots it out, so catching the sword with the sheath wasn't a difficult skill for him. He took the sword out of the sheath and attacked with Yelu Qi.

The tables and benches were all overturned, bowls were broken, and all the guests had long gone. In all the time that Hong Lingbo had been with her Master, she has never seen her losing in battle. She lost out to Xiao Longnu in the Ancient Tomb because she couldn't swim. Her fly whisk was snatched away by Yang Guo but was taken back immediately and she forced Yang Guo to back away. Watching the two teaming up and attacking her Master, she was slightly worried about her but she stood to the side and watched. The three of them fought engagingly in battle; Li Mochou changed her stances, her fly whisk producing strong winds, forcing the two to wobble. In a flash, Yang Guo and Yelu Qi faced some dangerous stances.

Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping both called out; “Oh no.” They both stepped up to help. After using just three stances, Yelu Yan was struck on the left leg with the fly whisk; she was flung to the side and knocked into a table. Yelu Qi saw that his sister was hurt and became flustered, under the fierce attack of Li Mochou he kept retreating backwards.

The girl in blue green saw the situation was urgent, she dashed forward to take Yelu Yan out of the danger. Li Mochou’s eyes saw everything and ears heard everything. She saw that the girl’s movements were light, displaying signs that she was a disciple of a famous name; she swung her fly whisk across her face and asked, “What is Miss’s name? Who is your Master?” There was a distance of over ten feet between them, in a flash the fly whisk was swung in front of her face. The girl in blue green was startled, her right hand waved out; from her sleeve she took out a weapon, and blocked the fly whisk. Li Mochou saw that this weapon was extremely strange, it glittered like a gem, it was about one meter long and it looked like a jade flute, she searched her mind, “Which sect or family uses such a weapon?” She quickly attacked wanting her to display her skills. The girl could not hold on, Yang Guo and Yelu Qi dashed forward to help. But it was hard to defend against Li Mochou’s swift and fluent style. Stances from the east and palms from the west, in a flash danger came again.

Yang Guo thought, “All we’ve got to do is make one little mistake and our lives would be hard to protect.”

He opened his mouth and called out, “My good Wifey, sister, my sister in blue green, sister Yelu, let’s all leave the restaurant and take a break! This Bitch is very lethal.”

The four girls saw him calling out madly; no one could say a word, they frowned and saw it was now a very urgent and desperate situation. Lu Wushuang first went downstairs

followed by the girl in blue green who was supporting Yelu Yan. The two beggars saw the young heroes fighting Li Mochou because of them, they wanted to go forward and help but their arms were broken and they couldn't fight. The two were very loyal, although Li Mochou was not watching them; they didn't dare to leave before Yang Guo and the others.

Yang Guo and Yelu Qi fought together against Li Mochou's stances, which were becoming more and more lethal; they carried Wanyan Ping and retreated downstairs.

Yang Guo said, "Brother Yelu, our movements are restricted, let's go downstairs and fight." He thought that once they were in a crowded place, they would be able to escape.

Yelu Qi said, "Fine!"

The two stood shoulder to shoulder and retreated down the stairs. Li Mochou kept on attacking, although she was winning she was angry, "In my life, whoever I wanted to kill I killed; today two young punks are blocking my way, if that little Bitch Lu Wushuang escapes, where will the great name of the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' go?" She wanted to snatch back Lu Wushuang and so attacked down the stairs.

Everyone fought with all their strength; they battled from the restaurant into the street, from the street they battled into the suburbs.

Yang Guo kept on calling out, "Good Wifey, my dear sister the further you run the better. Sister Yelu and my sister in blue green, you'd better leave, the two of us won't die."

Yelu Qi didn't say a word; he was older than Yang Guo by only a few years, but he had a serious and stern air, completely different to Yang Guo's easy going, rash and hot-tempered personality. The two of them fought together against the

enemy, Yelu Qi dealt with the ruthless attacks of the enemy, Yang Guo darted around to divert the enemy's attention.

Li Mochou saw that Xiao Longnu had not appeared and was now at ease, she concentrated on the battle. The internal energy that Yang Guo and Yelu Qi had accumulated could not compare with Li Mochou's. As they battled to this point, the two of them were red faced and out of breath.

When Li Mochou saw this she was pleased, "In under an hour I'll be able to take their lives."

At this moment, the air was suddenly filled with the calls of birds, the calls were clear, two large eagles attacked her head, four wings created gusts of wind, dirt and dust filled the area, the force of the calls was tremendous.

Yang Guo knew that it was the pair of eagles that belonged to the Guo couple. When he was younger, he had played with the eagles on Peach Blossom Island; since the eagles were here, the Guo couple would be nearby. He had expelled himself from Chongyang Palace and didn't want to see Guo Jing again; he quickly leapt back many steps and put on the human skin mask.

The eagles flew left and right, up and down, their wings attacking Li Mochou incessantly. The two eagles had a very good memory; they kept in their hearts what had happened years ago when they suffered the pain of the 'Soul Freezing Needles'. When they saw her from faraway they immediately came and attacked, but they were still afraid of her needles, every time she waved her hands, they quickly circled around.

Yelu Qi was watching carefully and knew that it would be hard for the two eagles to win, he called out, "Brother Yang, let's go again, how would she cope with the four of us?" He was about to dash forward when he heard the sounds of

horse hoofs from the southeast; a horse was galloping straight for this place.

The horse was extremely fast, by the time the sounds of hoof beats reached him, the horse was in front of him, it was long and tall, covered in red fur, its spirit was amazing.

Li Mochou and Yelu Qi were both startled, “How can this horse gallop so fast?” There was a girl in red on the horse’s back; the girl and horse looked like an oncoming flame, the only thing that wasn’t red was the girl’s white face. Yang Guo saw the eagles and red horse and knew that it was the daughter of Guo Jing and Huang Rong, Guo Fu. He saw her reign in the horse, the horse immediately held its ground. The horse stopped after being ordered to, it didn’t make a sound and was composed. Yelu Qi grew up in Mongolia, he has seen countless spirited horses; but one with such a magnificent air he had never seen, he couldn’t stop himself from being surprised. He didn’t know that this horse was a blood sweating precious horse that Guo Jing obtained from the plains of Mongolia. Then it was just a foal, now it was grown up and could be said to be in its senior years; but this extraordinary horse was different from other horses in old age, its bones and muscles were extremely strong, it hadn’t lost any of its strength in its transition to old age.

Yang Guo hadn’t seen Guo Fu for a long time. He remembered she was an arrogant and bullying little girl; now she had grown into a young girl who was as pleasant as a spring flower. After riding urgently for a time, sweat had formed on her forehead; her cheeks reflected her red dress and looked even more glamorous. She looked at the eagles for a while and then glanced at Yelu Qi and the others. She saw Yang Guo dressed in the Mongolian uniform wearing the human skin mask; his face was extremely strange, she frowned, showing signs of disrespect.

Yang Guo and she had never got along since they were young. He saw her looking at him with disgust and his feelings of hate and humility were strengthened. He thought, "You don't respect me but does that mean that I want you to look upon me with respect? Your father is a living hero, your mother is the chief of the Beggar Clan, your grandfather is one of the prominent martial artists in the world; there is no one who doesn't look at the Guo family with respect. What about my father and mother? My mother was a country girl and I don't know who my father was. He died without reason. I don't want to compare myself with you; I was born into hardship, and suffered the abuse of others. If you try to insult me again I won't care."

He stood aside, feeling hurt and wretched; he felt that no one in the world looked upon him highly; there was no good reason to live on in this world. Only his Master Xiao Longnu treated him with love, but where is she now? Is there going to be a day in this lifetime when they will see each other again? His heart was filled with sorrow; he heard the sound of horse hoofs and two more horses rode arrived. One of the horses was grey, the other yellow, they both were good quality animals but there was a big gap when compared to Guo Fu's red horse. On the horses were two young men, both of them wearing yellow.

Guo Fu called out, "Wu Brothers, it's the evil woman again."

The young men on the horse were the Wu brothers, Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen. Both of them saw Li Mochou; she was the person who killed their mother. In these past few years there wasn't a day when they didn't remember this. Who could have thought that they would meet again here; they quickly leapt off the horses, each drew out a long sword and attacked from the left and right.

Guo Fu called out, "I'm going as well." She took out a precious sword by the horse's reigns and leapt off the horse to help.

Li Mochou saw that the longer the battle went on the more enemies there were; even though they were young. As soon as the two young men came forward, their faces and eyes red, they fought fiercely with their lives; the sword techniques refined showing that they were under the tutelage of a famous Master. The young girl in red joined in as well; as soon as she attacked the tip of her sword quivered slightly, sparkling in the eye, the sword thrust forward. Buried within the stance was an extremely lethal secondary aim, though the internal energy was weak, the sword technique was profound and ingenious. Her heart shivered and she called out, "You are Peach Blossom's Island Miss Guo?"

Guo Fu chuckled and said, "So you know me." She unleashed two stances aiming to harm her chest.

Li Mochou raised her fly whisk and blocked the stances, thinking, "This little girl is very arrogant; attacking me without respect with your lowly skills. If I wasn't afraid of incurring your parent's wrath, even if there were ten of you, I'd kill you all." The fly whisk flipped around, she wanted to take away her long sword, when suddenly the sounds of wind came from each side; the Wu brothers thrust forward at the same time. Guo Jing taught the Wu brothers and Guo Fu martial arts personally; the three lived and played together on the island, their sword skills were the same. The three sword skills were tightly matched, the advance and retreat complimented each other, although it wasn't some kind of formation. As the swords came forward, the force of it wasn't weak. The three and the pair of eagles continuously attacked, placing Li Mochou in their confinement. With the ability of the three, in a little while longer Li Mochou could

definitely hurt one of them and the other two would not be able to protect themselves. But in front of her were many enemies, if she attacked forward it still wouldn't be easy for her. And if she forced the Guo couple to come out and attack, she wouldn't be able to escape; she took back her fly whisk and chuckled, "Little babies, watch how the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' fights monkeys."

She unleashed six stances in a row, every stance aimed to harm, forcing Guo Fu and the Wu Brothers to scurry, leaping and jumping around to avoid the stances, they did look a bit like monkeys jumping around.

Li Mochou stood on her left leg and laughed, she turned around and called out, "Lingbo, let's go!" The two of them hurried away in a northwest direction.

Guo Fu called out, "She's scared of us, go after them!" She ran after them. The Wu brothers utilized their lightness kung fu and followed.

Li Mochou waved and brandished her fly whisk behind her, carefree and smoothly. Not an ounce of dust rose from beneath her feet and she lightly floated away as though walking slowly. Hong Lingbo ran hurriedly.

Guo Fu and the Wu brothers increased the energy in their legs but the distance between them and the Li Mochou Master and disciple was getting greater and further away. Only the pair of eagles were faster; they repeatedly attacked. Wu Dunru saw that they would not be able to take their revenge today so he whistled and called the eagles back.

Yelu Qi and the others were afraid that the three of them would lose the battle and hurried to meet up with them; only to see Guo Fu and the others returning. They went forward and greeted them. All of them were young, and in just a few words they spoke with great joviality. Yelu Qi suddenly

thought of something and called out, "Where's brother Yang?"

Wanyan Ping said, "He left by himself. I asked him where he was going but he ignored me." She hung her head after she said this.

Yelu Qi hurried to a hill and took a look all around, only to see the girl in blue green walking shoulder to shoulder with Lu Wushuang faraway. There wasn't a trace of Yang Guo. Yelu Qi felt at a sense of loss; the first time they met they fought together to repel an enemy, though it was for just a short time; but their lives were on the line so many times and both shared a bitter hate for the enemy. Now he had suddenly disappeared without a trace, it was as if he had lost an old friend.

When Yang Guo saw the Wu brothers arrive with Guo Fu, they attacked Li Mochou; the three of them were very close, the sword skills they used were refined and in a few moves they had driven Li Mochou back. But he didn't know that Li Mochou left because she was worried about the Guo couple. It was not because buried within the sword stances were extremely strong internal energies that forced her to flee. That day when Guo Jing took him to Mount Zhongnan to learn martial arts, he had seen him show his might, defeating countless Quanzhen Taoists. His martial arts were extremely high. This was etched into Yang Guo's young mind, and he thought that disciples of Guo Jing would be ten times better than him. He thought of worrying about himself first. When he saw Guo Fu and the Wu's unleash their superb stances, he assumed that there must be some kind of ingenuity and mastery behind it. He was getting angrier as he watched. He remembered how he had fought with the Wu brothers when they were younger, with Guo Fu by the side calling out, "Hit him harder, harder!" And remembered how Huang Rong deliberately chose not to teach him martial arts and Guo Jing

with his great skills did not dare to pass on any martial arts to him. Instead he sent him to Chongyang Palace to suffer torture and abuse. He felt anger and hatred in his chest, he couldn't stop himself; then he saw Wanyan Ping, Lu Wushuang, the girl in blue green, Yelu Yan all looking at him. They looked surprised and he thought, "You believe the insults that Li Mochou called out at my Gu Gu. It doesn't matter if you look down on me but how can you dare to look down on my Gu Gu? My face is angry because I'm angry at Guo Fu, the Wu brothers, Uncle Guo and Auntie Guo. You think that I've done unspeakable things with my Gu Gu and that's why I look like this, is that it?" He suddenly ran away; he didn't follow the main roads and just ran without thinking into the wild lands. Right now he couldn't pull himself together; he thought that everyone in the world was against him. He didn't remember that he was wearing the human skin mask, although there was jealousy, hate and anger on his face, how could Wanyan Ping and the others see this? Why would others laugh at him for no reason at all? Li Mochou's infamy is well known throughout the Wulin world, who could believe what she says?

He originally was heading from northwest to southeast, but he wanted to get away from these people as far as possible so turned and headed northwest instead. His heart was in a mess, he loathed the world; he took off his mask and ran madly in the wild hills and mountains. When he was hungry, he plucked some wild fruits and vegetables to ease his hunger. He traveled further and further; within a month, his hair was wild and unkempt, his clothes old and torn, and reached a tall mountain. He didn't know that this was one of the most famous five mountains in the world, Mount Hua. He saw the mountain was dangerous and rugged; he became mad and climbed up the mountain furiously. Though his lightness kung fu was good, Mount Hua is a dangerous place, one could not climb it on a whim. By the time he was halfway

up the mountain, the weather suddenly became cold, the ground became hard, and the north wind gradually blew stronger and flakes of snow began falling from the sky. He was angry; he wanted to torture himself and did not try to find a place to avoid the snow. The stronger the wind and snow, the further he traveled. He carried on until it became night, the snow was heavy, the ground was slippery, and it became harder to recognize the paths. If he stepped into an empty space, he would definitely fall down to his death in the deep valley. He didn't care and took his life lightly; he looked up and walked forward.

After a while, he suddenly heard a light 'chi' 'chi' sound, it sounded like some kind of beast was traveling in the snow; he immediately turned around and saw the image of a person flash past, darting into a valley. Yang Guo was startled and quickly went over to take a look in the valley. He saw someone hooking his three fingers into the rock, hanging in midair. Yang Guo saw that the three fingers supported the whole body above the valley; this person's martial arts were extremely high and had reached an unimaginable level. So he politely said, "Old senior please come up!"

The person laughed, his voice shaking the valley, his fingers pulled up and he leapt up from the side of the mountain. The person suddenly shouted, "You are with the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border aren't you? What are you doing sneaking around here in the middle of the night during a snowstorm?"

Yang Guo was scolded for no reason and thought, "What am I doing sneaking around here in the middle of the night during a snowstorm?" This disturbed his thoughts and he suddenly let out a cry; remembering how unlucky he was, suffering the abuse of others, and his most respected and loved one Xiao Longnu blamed him for not understanding and had disappeared. They would probably never meet again in this lifetime. As he cried about this, all his life's worries and all

the resentment and abuse he had suffered surfaced in his mind.

When that person saw him cry he was shocked; he heard him getting more pitiful as he cried, and was even more surprised. When the person saw that his cries weren't going to end he suddenly laughed, the laughter and crying joined together and shook the snow down from the mountaintops.

When Yang Guo heard the laugh, his crying stopped and he angrily said, "What are you laughing at?"

The person laughed and said, "What are you crying about?"

Yang Guo was about to reply hatefully when he remembered this person's martial arts were extraordinary; he calmed down his anger and politely bowed and said, "Junior is Yang Guo, I hereby greet Senior."

The person held a bamboo rod in his hand, and he lightly pushed him on the arm. Yang Guo did not feel any great force yet his body couldn't stop from falling backwards. With the force of that push, one would fall down and have to struggle to get up. But he had learned the "Toad Stance" where one's legs are above their head; he flipped over in the air and remained upright.

Neither of them could have guessed what had just happened. With Yang Guo's present abilities, making him fall in one push wasn't easy, even Li Mochou or Qiu Chuji and the like couldn't do this to him. The other person saw him standing up steadily after flipping over in midair, he widened his eyes and looked at him and asked, "Why are you crying?"

When Yang Guo examined him, he was a white haired and bearded old man; the clothes on him were old and torn. It appeared that he was a beggar. Although it was dark, the white snow reflected off him, there was a red glow to his face,

yet he looked graceful. Yang Guo's respect for him became evident and he replied, "I'm a person with a life full of despair, there is no point in living, I should just die."

The old beggar heard that his voice was full of resignation and resentment; the beggar nodded his head and asked, "Who's bullying you? Quickly tell Grandpa."

Yang Guo said, "My father was killed by someone, but I don't know who. My mother died from illness, there is no one left in the world who loves or cares for me."

The old beggar gave an 'en' grunt and said, "That is sad. Who is the Master who taught you kung fu?"

Yang Guo thought, "Auntie Guo technically was my Master but she didn't teach me any martial arts. Mentioning the Quanzhen Taoists fills me with hate. Ouyang Feng is my godfather, not my Master. My kung fu was taught by Gu Gu, but she said she wants to be my wife. If I said she is my Master she will be angry. Wang Chongyang and Lin Chaoying ancestors left their martial arts in the stone rooms, how can I say they are my Master? I have many Masters but I can't mention any of them."

This question disturbed his feelings again and he let out a cry again, calling out, "I don't have a Master, I don't have a Master!"

The old beggar said, "Fine, fine! If you don't want to say, that's fine."

Yang Guo sobbed, "It's not that I don't want to say, it's just that I don't have one."

The old beggar said, "If you haven't got one, you haven't got one, what need is there for crying? Do you know the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border?"

Yang Guo said, "I don't know them."

The old beggar said, "I saw you alone in the dark and thought that you were the friend of the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border, since you aren't then that's good."

This person was the "Nine-Fingered Wondrous Beggar", Hong Qigong. After he passed on the position of the Chief of the Beggar Clan to Huang Rong, he traveled alone, savoring the world's finest foods. The weather in Guangdong was pleasant and the amount of exquisite foods endless. Afterwards he went to Lingnan and he had all the food he wanted; for the last ten years he had not returned to the central plains.

In the lands of Guangdong, poisonous snakes were used in soups, tough cats were used in stews, fishes were like mice, the prawns were like dragons, fat snails were fried, dragon lice were steamed, the roast piglets had crisp skin and the flesh of simmered fruit was red. Hong Qigong was in heaven, his pleasure boundless. Whenever he saw injustice, he would secretly help; he killed evil doers and punished traitors with his abilities. No one knew where he was or where he went. Sometimes he would listen in on some Beggar Clan members talking; he knew that under the orders of Huang Rong and Lu Youjiao, the Beggar Clan was calm. The internal fight between the 'dirty' clothed and 'clean' clothed factions was subsiding; so had the outside force of the Jin and the Iron Palm Clan. He had no worries; everyday he would just open his mouth, chew and swallow.

This year, the second clown of the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border killed some innocents in cold blood, killing numerous people. Hong Qigong wanted to take revenge; he was going to kill that clown, but thought killing one person is easy, finding the other four would be hard. So he secretly followed the second clown, waiting for him to meet up with the other four and then he would kill them all at once. But he didn't

predict that he would have to follow him north for thousands of li, eventually winding up at Mount Hua. Right now, four clowns were present, only the first one had yet to arrive. In the middle of the night, Hong Qigong bumped into Yang Guo in the snow.

Hong Qigong said, "Let's stop chatting, I can see you are hungry, let's cure our hunger first and then we'll talk some more." He cleared the snow, found some firewood and made a fire. Yang Guo helped him pick up some firewood and said, "What are you going to cook?"

Hong Qigong said, "Centipedes!"

Yang Guo knew he was joking and he gave a chuckle and didn't ask again.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "I've chased the Five Tibetan Border Clowns from Lingnan to Mount Hua, if I don't have something good to eat, how can I say I'm sorry to this?" He patted his stomach. Yang Guo saw that his bones and muscles were distinguished; only his stomach was a bit paunchy.

Hong Qigong continued, "Mount Hua is the world's most cold and shady place; centipedes that are born here are soft and tender. Guangdong is a warm place, living things grow quickly, the centipedes there have tough and coarse flesh.

Yang Guo heard that he was serious; it seems that he wasn't joking, Yang Guo was confused.

Hong Qigong surrounded the fire with four stones, he took a pan from his back and placed it on the stones, he took two lumps of snow and placed them in the pan and said, "Follow me to catch some centipedes."

After some ups and downs, they came across a twenty foot tall cliff. Yang Guo saw the cliff was extremely steep and

didn't dare to leap up.

Hong Qigong called out, "Useless boy, come up quickly!"

Yang Guo hated people who looked down on him, when he heard this he clenched his teeth, his spirit rose and thought, "What's there to be scared of? If I fall to my death then so be it." His courage grew and there was more intent in his lightness kung fu when he used it. He followed close to Hong Qigong, in an extremely dangerous and slippery place; he actually managed to pull himself up.

In a short while, the pair climbed up to a peak where there were traces of human activity. Hong Qigong saw that he possessed much courage and lightness kung fu and was very pleased. With his experience he couldn't tell the boy's martial arts origins, he wanted to ask but remembered about his food so he went over to a rock and dug the soil with his hands. Not long after a dead chicken was revealed.

Yang Guo was curious and asked, "Hey, how come there's a chicken here." He immediately understood and said, "Ah, Senior must have buried it here."

Hong Qigong gave a chuckle and picked up the chicken. Yang Guo could see clearly in the reflection of the snow; he saw over a hundred centipedes, each about seven or eight inches long, biting into the chicken. The centipedes were large, had red and black stripes and were wiggling about. He had wandered around the world of Jianghu since he was young, he wasn't afraid of poison but when he suddenly saw the large centipedes he couldn't refrain from being afraid.

Hong Qigong was pleased with himself and said, "Centipedes and chickens are of an opposite nature; I buried this chicken yesterday and indeed it has lured centipedes from all over." He took out a bundle of cloth and wrapped it around the chicken and centipedes, he descended the peak delightedly.

Yang Guo followed behind wondering, "Could it be that you can actually eat centipedes? But judging from his actions, it doesn't seem like he's trying to scare me."

The lumps of snow in the pan had now turned to boiling water; Hong Qigong opened his bundle and picked up the centipedes by the tail, and threw them into the pan. The centipedes struggled for a second or two but were soon boiled to death.

Hong Qigong said, "Before it dies, the centipede excretes all of its poison, the poison in that pan is incomparable." Yang Guo threw the pan of poisonous water down the valley. Hong Qigong took out a small knife and chopped off the heads and tails of the centipedes. He took the shell off to reveal the flesh; it was white as snow and was like a large shrimp, quite an attractive sight.

Yang Guo thought, "Using this method, I'm afraid that you really can eat them."

Hong Qigong melted another two lumps of snow and cleaned the flesh of the centipede so there would be no traces of poison, and then he took out seven or eight small and large boxes from his back pack. In the boxes were ingredients such as oil, salt, jams, vinegar and the like. He placed some oil in the pan and fried the centipedes, immediately an appetizing scent flowed into the nose. Yang Guo saw that he was drooling, revealing his glutton side, he couldn't stop himself from being startled and laughed at the same time. Hong Qigong fried the centipedes until they were slightly golden, and then mixed in some other ingredients. He stretched out his hand and placed a centipede in his mouth, he lightly chewed it a few times and closed his eyes and sighed. He felt that none of the pleasures in the world can be compared with this. He took a wine gourd from his back and placed it to the side and said, "When eating centipedes don't drink wine,

otherwise the taste of the centipedes will be ruined." He ate ten or so centipedes in one go and then said to Yang Guo, "Just eat; why are you being so polite?"

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I don't want to eat."

Hong Qigong was startled and then laughed, he said, "That's right, that's right, I've seen many heroes and good men who can kill without blinking but none of them dare to eat centipedes with this old beggar, hei-hei, so you are just a cowardly punk."

Yang Guo angered by him and thought, "I'll close my eyes and swallow without chewing, this'll stop him from looking down on me."

He picked up two small twigs and used them as chopsticks and picked up a centipede. Hong Qigong knew what he was thinking and said, "You are going to close your eyes and swallow without chewing; that's called being a scoundrel, not a hero."

Yang Guo said, "What's so heroic about eating poison?"

Hong Qigong said, "There are many people who talk big and class themselves as heroes, but those who dare to eat centipedes are few and far between."

Yang Guo thought, "Nothing is bigger than death." He placed the centipede in his mouth and bit down. As soon as he bit down, he felt his mouth fill with a sweet taste, it was crisp and fragrant and extremely sweet. He had never tasted anything like it in his life, he chewed a few more times and swallowed; he then picked up a second centipede and said, "Extraordinary, extraordinary."

Hong Qigong saw that he was eating with pleasure and was delighted. The two of them grabbed and snacked, soon the hundred or so centipedes were all gone. Hong Qigong licked

the juices around his lips and wished that there could be another hundred centipedes for his stomach.

Yang Guo said, "I'll go and bury the chicken again, and lure some more centipedes."

Hong Qigong said, "It's no use, one, the chicken has lost its attraction, secondly, there aren't anymore fat and large centipedes around here anymore." Hong Qigong stretched and yawned, he got down onto snowy ground and said, "I have rushed here without sleeping for five days and five nights; now that I've had a great meal, I'm going to sleep for three days. Don't wake me even if the sky falls down. Look after me, don't let any monsters bite my head off in one go while I'm not aware."

Yang Guo laughed, "Yes sir." Hong Qigong closed his eyes and in a short while, he fell into a deep sleep.

Yang Guo thought, "This Senior is really an extraordinary person. Is he really going to sleep for three days? It doesn't matter if he's lying or telling the truth, I have nowhere to go anyway, I'll just wait for three days."

The Mount Hua centipedes are one of the coolest objects in the world, after Yang Guo ate them, he felt a chill in his stomach so he found a rock to sit on and after a while of meditating, his body became more comfortable. Right now the sky was filled with falling snow that was like the feathers of swans; it snowed without stopping. Hong Qigong's head and body was covered with snow, he was like a lump of cotton wool. A person breathes warm air, as soon as a snowflake meets it, it will immediately melt; how did the snow remain intact on his face? Yang Guo did not understand at first but then it was clear to him, "That's it; when he is sleeping he is circulating his incredible internal energy, keeping the warm air within his body. He is a living person, but when he is sleeping he looks like a corpse, this level of

internal energy is frightening. Gu Gu let me sleep on the “Chilled Jade Bed” in hopes that I would be able to refine my internal energy to a such profound state. Ai... ‘Chilled Jade Bed, Chilled Jade Bed’.”

Dawn came. Hong Qigong’s body was buried within the snow, nothing could be seen where he was except for the fact that the snow on the ground was higher there. Everywhere was deep with snow, but Yang Guo was not tired. He suddenly heard footsteps in the snow towards the mountains in the northeast, he looked carefully and saw five black shadows approaching; their movements were rapid, the sabers on their backs glittered.

Yang Guo thought, “They are probably the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border that senior mentioned.” He hid behind a large rock.

In a short while, the five people arrived in front of the rock. One of them said ‘ah’, and called out, “It’s the old beggar’s gourd!”

Another one’s voice quivered as he said, “He’s...he’s on Mount Hua?” The five of them were frightened; they came together and quietly consulted with each other. Suddenly, the five of them separated, and descended down the peak. The paths of the peak were narrow; one of them dashed forward a few steps and stepped onto Hong Qigong, and felt something soft below his feet. The person called out ‘ai’. The other four stopped and drew near; they wiped away the layers of snow and saw Hong Qigong lying on the ground, appearing as if he had died a long time ago.

The five of them were delighted, they stretched out their finger across his nose, there was no breathing, and his body was as cold as ice. The five of them shouted out in joy and leapt about, they were a hundred times happier than the joy they would feel if they found a precious treasure.

One of them said, "The old beggar has been following all along, he made things hard for me and he died here."

Another person said, "That scoundrel Hong Qigong has extraordinary martial arts, why would he die all of a sudden?"

Another one said, "Even if one's martial arts are high, does that mean they don't have to die? Just think, that old scoundrel is pretty old."

The other four called out together, "It's lucky that the devil has come and taken him, otherwise he'd be difficult to handle."

The one ranked first said, "Come, let's vent our anger on the old beggar by chopping him a few times. No matter if he is the 'Nine Fingered Wondrous Beggar' Hong Qigong, hero of the world; in the end, he's going to end up being chopped into seventeen or twenty eight pieces by the Five Heroes of the Tibetan Border."

Yang Guo thought, "So that old Senior is Hong Qigong, no wonder his martial arts are so good."

He had heard Hong Qigong's name and of his famous "Eighteen Subduing Dragon Palms" from Xiao Longnu before when they were talking. But Hong Qigong's appearance and behavior weren't known to Lin Chaoying let alone Xiao Longnu. His hand held some 'Jade Bee Needles', thinking fighting the five of them together would be hard, he could only ambush them with his projectiles. After hurting two or three of them, he could deal with the remaining ones. As he heard them say that they would chop up Hong Qigong to vent their anger; he was afraid that they would harm him. He didn't shoot out the needles and immediately shouted and leapt out from behind the rock. He didn't have a weapon so he picked up two twigs; he quickly unleashed his swift stances diverting the five. The five stances were extremely

fast, it was a pity that he called out first and gave the five clowns some time to prepare, otherwise one or two of them would have been hit. The five clowns were worried about themselves first and darted and dodged away to avoid the attacks.

The five turned around and saw it was a young kid with old and torn garments, his hands holding two branches, their fright now dissipated.

The big clown shouted, "Little punk, you're a little beggar of the Beggar Clan aren't you? Your old beggar ancestor has gone to heaven, quickly kneel and kowtow to us five Masters."

Yang Guo saw how they moved; their movements revealed their kung fu. The five of them had a large saber on their backs, their kung fu came from the same Master; there were some difference between their abilities but they all had the same type of stances. If it was one on one, he would definitely win, but if the five of them attacked all at once he would not be able to fight them off. He heard the big clown telling him to kowtow and replied, "Yes, junior here will kowtow to the five Masters." He took a step forward and bowed down. He kneeled and bowed according to the stance "First Greet Bow After", this move was used by Grandma Sun on the Quanzhen Taoist Zhang Zhi Guang when he wasn't expecting it. An empty container shot out and almost took his eye. After Yang Guo used the stance "First Greet Bow After", he followed with a stance of "Push the Window to see the Moon", his arms swept across and the two branches came out from the left and right. On his left was the fifth clown; on his right was the third clown. This stance of "Push the Window to see the Moon" was extremely evil; the third clown's kung fu was quite high, he quickly brought down his saber to block it. The back of his saber had been struck and his hand heated up, he almost lost his saber. The fifth clown

was struck on the leg, a 'ka la' sound was heard, although the leg wasn't broken it was still painful, he couldn't stand up. The other four clowns were angry, four sabers chopped down, 'fu fu fu fu'. Yang Guo was swift and nimble, he darted east and dodged west, the four clowns couldn't do anything to him for the time being. After fighting for a while, the fifth clown joined in, he was extremely angry and fought with his life.

Yang Guo's lightness kung fu was much higher than the five clowns, if he wanted to escape it wasn't hard, but he remembered Hong Qigong. He was afraid that if he left then the clowns will kill Hong Qigong. But he couldn't beat the five of them fighting together; he unleashed some dangerous stances and in the middle of it he bent down and picked up Hong Qigong. His right hand fought with the branch as he found a path to escape. He took a deep breath and hurried over a hundred feet. The Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border chased after him.

Yang Guo felt that Hong Qigong was icy cold, he couldn't stop himself from being alarmed. He thought that if Hong Qigong was going to get deeper into his sleep he won't be able to wake up. Could it be that he really was dead? He called out, "Senior...Senior!"

Hong Qigong didn't move an inch, it appeared that he was dead but he wasn't stiff like a corpse. Yang Guo stretched out his hand and felt his chest, there seemed to be a faint heartbeat but there were no indication of breathing from the nose.

In this pause, the first clown caught up with them, but because he saw that Yang Guo's skills were excellent, he was worried and didn't dare to fight alone. By the time the second clown and fourth clown arrived, Yang Guo had gone another hundred feet. The Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border

saw him ascending the peak and saw that there was only one trail up there. They thought, "Could it be that you know how to fly?" There was no need to rush, they followed step by step.

The mountain path was getting more and more treacherous as he went on; when Yang Guo turned around a corner he saw an extremely narrow path before him. It wasn't easy for one person to pass. By the narrow path was a two thousand foot deep abyss; the mists obscured the bottom, he thought, "This is the best place, I'll fend them off here." He quickened his pace and got over the narrow path. He placed Hong Qigong down by a large rock and turned around; the first clown had reached the entrance to the narrow path.

Yang Guo dashed over and shouted, "Ugly freak! Do you dare to come over?"

The first clown was really scared of being knocked over into the abyss by Yang Guo and hurriedly leapt back. Yang Guo stood at the entrance of the path, the morning sun was now in the sky. The eye could see a fine jade mountain, gems circled the floor of the abyss, and the sunlight reflected off the white snow; the scene was magnificent.

Yang Guo placed the human skin mask on his face and shouted, "Are you ugly or am I ugly?"

The Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border were ugly, but they weren't that ugly. The 'Clown' comes from their actions and the amount of bullshit they talk about on the road. They saw Yang Guo touch his face and his face changed. His face was yellow, looked wooden, like a corpse out of a cemetery; the five clowns looked at each other and all without exception were startled.

Yang Guo retreated to the narrowest point of the path, he used "The Kicking Force of the Leading Star"; his left leg

stood on the ground, his right leg kicked out at the sky, his body moving lightly like the wind in midair. In the blink of an eye, his heroic air emerged, even if the enemy was thousands of soldiers and ten thousand horses, I could still block them one on one.

The five clowns muttered to themselves, "Where from the Beggar Clan did this strange young kid come from?" They saw that in front of them was dangerous ground, they didn't dare to rush through and they consulted each other, "We'll wait here and take turns to leave the mountain for food, within two days, he will definitely have no strength due to hunger." Four of the clowns lined up at the mouth of the narrow path and let the second clown descend the mountain to look for food.

The sides were deadlocked, Yang Guo didn't dare go over, and the four clowns didn't dare go over either.

By the second day, the second clown had come back with food; the five clowns took big bites and ate noisily. Yang Guo was already burning up with hunger, he turned around and looked at Hong Qigong and saw him looking the same as the day before and thought, "If he is sleeping, then he would toss and turn in his dreams, but he hasn't moved an inch, I'm afraid that he really is dead. If I endure another day, I will have no strength, it will be even harder for me to defend, why don't I leave now and I may have a chance of escaping." He slowly stood up and thought, "He told me that he is going to sleep for three days and told me to look after him, I promised him with my own mouth; how can I leave him now?" He fought off the hunger and closed his eyes to rest.

By the third day, Hong Qigong was still motionless like he was on the first day, Yang Guo looked on and began to question himself, "He's already dead, and I'm still guarding him, that's too dumb. If I endure another half a day of

hunger, there will be no need for the five clowns to kill me; I will have already died of starvation.” He picked up some snow from the rocks and swallowed some, his empty stomach gradually felt a bit better. He thought, “I haven’t been filial to my parents, I have hurt Gu Gu, I have no brothers or sisters, I haven’t even got a best friend, I should stop mentioning the words ‘personal loyalty’. The words trust, good and bad echoed in his mind; I still need to guard him.” He continued, “When Auntie Guo and I were talking about literature, we talked about the meeting of a boy and girl underneath the bridge. The girl was stopped by a flood but the boy didn’t dare to miss the meeting, he held onto the bridge and died in vain. Later, that person was famous for hundreds of years. I, Yang Guo have suffered the world’s mistreatment, if I don’t keep to this promise then I’ll be even more despised by the world, even if it means death, I must guard him for three days.”

A day and night passed by in the wink of an eye, early on in the fourth day, Yang Guo went over to Hong Qigong and checked his breathing; still there was no sign of life. He sighed and saluted him saying, “Senior Hong, I have kept to my promise of guarding you for three days, it’s too bad that Senior has passed away tragically. This disciple has not got the power to protect your corpse; it would be best if I throw you into the deep valley and avoid the insults and disrespect of the scoundrels.” He picked up his body and went over to the narrow path.

The five clowns knew that he couldn’t endure the hunger and now wanted to escape; they all called out and flew over. Yang Guo gave a shout and flung Hong Qigong down the deep valley, and dashed forward to the first clown.

End of Chapter 10.

Shen Diao Xia Lu (Divine Eagle, Gallant Knights)

by Jin Yong



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 11 - A Pause from Roaming](#)

[Chapter 12 - The Heroes' Feast](#)

[Chapter 13 - The Chancellor of Wulin](#)

[Chapter 14 - Defending against Custom and Tradition](#)

[Chapter 15 - The Disciples of Eastern Heretic](#)

[Chapter 16 - Avenging a Father's Death](#)

[Chapter 17 - The Secluded Passionless Valley](#)

[Chapter 18 - Valley Master Gongsun](#)

[Chapter 19 - The Old Woman Underground](#)

[Chapter 20 - A Hero's Imperative](#)

Chapter 11 - A Pause from Roaming

Translated by Noodles



Northern Beggar and Western Poison have been adversaries for many years, they hated each other, how could it be that they ended up dead

together on Mount Hua. The two of them were enemies when they were alive, just before they died they were hugging each other and laughing. All the feuds and arguments that they have had over the years were finished with a laugh!

Yang Guo had dashed forward only two steps when suddenly a gust of wind brushed over his head, a person darted past and stood between him and the five clowns and laughed, "That was a great slumber!" It was the 'Nine-Fingered Wondrous Beggar' Hong Qigong. Yang Guo was delighted while the five clowns were startled and shocked. When Hong Qigong first lay down on the snow he really was sleeping, but woke up when the fifth clown stepped on him. He wanted to test the young man and see whether he could keep his promise of guarding him for three days. Every time Yang Guo checked his breathing, he would stop breathing and pretended to be dead. Now he was standing at the mouth of the path with an awe-inspiring air. His left hand made a semi-circle, his right hand pushed out a palm; it was his life's proudest work, the stance of "Overcoming the Dragon with Regret" from the "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms". The first clown couldn't avoid it; he knew he couldn't meet this stance head on but all he could do was to push his palms out and use his strength to fend off the attack.

Hong Qigong was keeping his palm's power in check; he only used ten percent of his internal energy but the first clown felt his arms go numb and his chest ache. The second clown saw that he was in danger; he was afraid that Hong Qigong's palms will force him into the deep valley so he quickly stretched out his hand and pushed the first clown's back. Hong Qigong's palm power increased; the second clown moved back, almost slipping down into the deep

valley. The fourth clown was standing behind them and stretched out his arm to support them. Hong Qigong's palms power spread through them, it spread towards the fourth clown who in turn passed it onto the third clown and the third clown spread it towards the final one in the line, the fifth clown. The clowns had nowhere to hide and nowhere to run; in the blink of an eye, they were defeated by Hong Qigong's single palm.

Hong Qigong laughed, "You five scoundrels are evil and wicked you should be able to die without complaint under the single palm of the Old Beggar."

The five of them positioned themselves into the mount posture; they flared up their chi and united their internal energy to resist the single palm but they felt the force of the palm getting heavier. Their chests felt tighter and gradually it was becoming more difficult to breathe. Hong Qigong suddenly gave out a 'yi' call showing his surprise. He took back eighty percent of his palm's power and said, "Your internal energy has its good points, who is your master?"

The first clown still had his two palms pushing out against him; he struggled for breath as he said, "We are... are under the tutelage of Master Da'erba."

Hong Qigong shook his head and said, "Da'erba? I haven't heard of him. Hmm, your internal energy can be spread mutually to each other, this kung fu is terrific."

Yang Guo thought, "To get Hong Qigong to say 'terrific', then it really must be terrific. Yet when I looked at their skills I thought they were very ordinary and none of them can beat me."

Hong Qigong asked, "What's your sect?"

The first clown said, "Our master is... is the second... second disciple of Western Tibet's Holy ... Holy Monk Jinlun Fawang."

Hong Qigong shook his head again, and said, "Western Tibet's Holy Monk, Jinlun Fawang? I've never heard of him. Western Tibet has a monk, his name is Reverend Lingzhi, he I have seen; his kung fu is stronger than yours but his skills aren't advanced. Your kung fu is good; hmm, it makes sense. Go and get your Grand Master here to fight with me."

The first monk replied, "Our Grand Master is a holy monk, the living Buddha, Mongolia's number one martial artist, all knowing and all powerful. How...how..."

The second clown noticed from Hong Qigong's tone that he was going to spare them, but with the way that the first clown was replying they were cutting off their escape route so he quickly interrupted and said, "Yes, yes. We'll quickly go and get our Grand Master here to duel with Hong Qigong. Only our Grand Master can fight with senior Hong. We juniors will raise our wine gourds and... and..."

As he said this, there came a 'duo' 'duo' 'duo' sound; a person appeared from around the corner of the mountain. His body was upside down, each hand holding a piece of rock, walking with his palms, it was Western Poison Ouyang Feng. Yang Guo's voice cracked as he called out, "Father!"

Ouyang Feng did not bother to find out what was happening and leapt behind the five clowns and stretched out his right foot and placed it on their backs; a strong energy rushed through the five clowns. Hong Qigong was shocked with the sudden appearance of Ouyang Feng; he heard Yang Guo call him 'Father' and understood that he was his son; no wonder he was so good. He felt his arm sink

as the opponent's internal energy reached him; he quickly increased his strength and returned the attack.

Since the second Mount Hua competition, Hong Qigong had not seen Ouyang Feng for over ten years. Although Ouyang Feng's mind was unclear, he practiced the "Contrary Nine Yin Manual"; the more he practiced the stranger his kung fu became, and the stranger it became the more powerful he became. Guo Jing and Huang Rong had recited a small portion of the manual to Hong Qigong; it made an impression on his kung fu and great progress in his martial arts. The final stage of the "Nine Yin Manual" is superior to the "Contrary Nine Yin Manual", although Hong Qigong only knew a little; he wasn't inferior to Ouyang Feng.

Tens of years ago it was difficult to separate the two, since then they had both met new boundaries. Today they came across each other on Mount Hua for the third time, once internal energy went out; it was indeed hard to differentiate between the two. The ones that were to be pitied are the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border; being sandwiched between two of the world's most powerful fighters, they became the apparatus for kung fu practice. A sandbag for punches and kicks, they were cold for a while, then hot for a while, their breathing was tight and then slow, the bones all over their body made 'ka la' noises; it was a hundred times more excruciating than the most severe punishments. Ouyang Feng suddenly asked, "The five's internal energy is very good. What sect are you from?"

Yang Guo thought, "Even Godfather says their internal energy is very good; the five clowns indeed are not run-of-the-mill fighters."

He heard Hong Qigong say, "They said they are the grand disciples of Western Tibet's Holy Monk Jinlun Fawang."

Ouyang Feng said, "Jinlun Fawang compared to you, who's better?"

Hong Qigong said, "Don't know, I don't think there's much difference."

Ouyang Feng said, "How about compared with me?"

Hong Qigong said, "He's better than you a bit."

Ouyang Feng was shocked and called out, "I don't believe it!"

In between the exchange of words, the energy in the hand and foot increased. Hong Qigong sent out different levels of palm energy but they were all dispersed by Ouyang Feng's foot energy; the power in the foot increased but it was difficult to move Hong Qigong back even half an inch. After this exchange both admired each other, they laughed and jumped back.

The strong force within the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border suddenly disappeared; they couldn't stop themselves wobbling about as if they were drunk on wine. The five had the internal energies of two great fighters circulated to and fro between them, their internal organs had been seriously injured, the muscles weakened and bones softened; they had become invalids. They wouldn't be able to fight off even a small child of seven or eight years of age.

Hong Qigong shouted, "You five scoundrels, your lifelines haven't reached their end today; it doesn't matter anyway since you can't do anymore harm, just crawl away. Remember to go and tell your Grand Master Jinlun Fawang to come to the central plains and find me so we can do a little sparring."

Ouyang Feng said, "With me too." The Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border all agreed and limped away, supporting each other as they descended down from the peak.

Ouyang Feng flipped upright and stared at Hong Qi Gong and then shouted, "Hey, your kung fu is very good, what's your name."

After hearing this and seeing the confused look on his face, Hong Qigong knew that since he went mad over ten years ago, he hadn't recovered and so said, "I'm called Ouyang Feng, what's your name?"

Ouyang Feng's heart shook, he felt that the words 'Ouyang Feng' were very familiar but he couldn't remember what he was called, and he shook his head and said, "I don't know. Hey, what am I called?"

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "You don't even know your own name. Go home and think about it."

Ouyang Feng angrily said, "You must know, tell me."

Hong Qigong said, "Fine, you're called Smelly Toad." The word 'Toad' was very familiar to Ouyang Feng, when he heard this it felt right, but there was also a feeling that it was wrong. He and Hong Qigong had been adversaries for tens of years; the hate had been etched deeply into his mind, although he didn't understand right now. Yet when he looked at him, Ouyang Feng felt aggravated.

Hong Qigong saw him standing there in a daze, a fierce glow was in his eyes. Hong Qigong secretly put his guard up, indeed he heard Ouyang Feng shout out and ruthlessly throw himself forward. He didn't dare hesitate and immediately used his "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms". The two fought in the wind and the slippery snow on a narrow path that was only about a foot wide; using their

greatest skills with great effort in the battle. On one side was a two thousand foot deep chasm, just one little mistake and they would fall to their deaths; this was much more dangerous than fighting on flat, even ground. The two of them were now fairly old, though their vigor has lessened; their study of martial arts had reached an extremely pure level. The stances were pure and profound, so profound that everything was ingenious and masterly, only ten or so moves were exchanged. The two couldn't stop themselves from admiring each other.

Ouyang Feng said, "The Old Beggar is very lethal."

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "Smelly Toad is also terrific."

Yang Guo knew that the terrain was extremely dangerous, he was afraid that Ouyang Feng would fall down into the valley; but then he could see that Hong Qigong was in distress and hoped that he too would be safe. Ouyang Feng was his Godfather, he had deep feelings for him; nevertheless, Hong Qigong was gallant, he had the air of a great hero around him. As soon as he met him an impression was left in his heart. He had endured hunger, cold, extreme dangers in guarding Hong Qigong for three days and three nights. Although they didn't say a word to each other in the three days, in Yang Guo's mind, it was as if they both endured hundreds and hundreds of life threatening dangers together.

Tens of stances later, Yang Guo saw that the two's incomparably swift and powerful attacks had changed from dangerous to safe. He soon forgot about the safety of the two and concentrated on watching the masterly kung fu that was on display. The "Nine Yin Manual" is the peak of the world's martial arts, he only knew odd fragments of it; now he saw the two use the theories of the manual within

their stances. He couldn't help himself from being shocked and surprised, he thought, "So even an ordinary sentence from the manual has so many ways to express its meaning."

Over a thousand stances passed, although the two had yet to use all their skills, their age was catching up with them. They felt they were getting out of breath and their hearts were beating faster, it was unavoidable that their arms and legs would get slower."

Yang Guo called out, "You two have been fighting for over half a day, you must be hungry, how about eating first and then carry on later?"

As soon as Hong Qigong heard the word 'eat' he immediately jumped back and said, "Great idea, great idea!"

Yang Guo had seen the fifth clown bring up cold food in a bamboo basket and had placed off to the side. He went to it and brought it over and opened the lid, he saw cold chicken and meat, white wine and cold rice; everything that was needed was there. Hong Qigong was delighted, he picked up a cold chicken and bit down with large bites hurriedly, eating noisily.

Yang Guo picked up some cold meat and passed it to Ouyang Feng and softly said, "Father, where have you been all this time?"

Ouyang Feng stared at him and said, "I've been searching for you."

Yang Guo's heart ached and thought, "There is someone on this world that actually loves me like this." He held his arm and said, "Father, you are Ouyang Feng. Senior Hong is a good person, don't fight him."

Ouyang Feng pointed to Hong Qigong and said, "He's Ouyang Feng, Ouyang Feng is a bad person." Yang Guo saw that his mind was confused and felt sad.

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "You're right, Ouyang Feng is a bad person, Ouyang Feng deserves to die."

Ouyang Feng looked at Hong Qigong and then at Yang Guo. He exhausted his strength trying to remember but his mind and memories were still scrambled. Yang Guo fed Ouyang Feng some food and then stood up, he said to Hong Qigong, "Senior Hong, he is my Godfather. He has a severe mental illness, his mind is confused, please pity him and don't make it hard for him."

Hong Qigong heard this and nodded a few times, and said, "Young man, so he's your Godfather."

Who could have expected that Ouyang Feng would suddenly leap up and called out, "Ouyang Feng, we can't find a winner using our fists and kicks, we'll compete again using weapons."

Hong Qigong shook his head and said, "There's no need to compete, let's just say you win."

Ouyang Feng said, "What win or lose? I must kill you." He stretched out his hand and broke off a branch; he took off the twigs and leaves from the branch forming a staff. He attacked downwards at Hong Qigong's head. His snake staff was famous years ago, it was extremely lethal, although there wasn't a snake at the head of this staff, before the attack arrived, the wind produced was so strong that it made it difficult for Yang Guo to breathe. Yang Guo quickly dived out of the way. When he looked up at Hong Qigong, he saw him pick up a branch and used it as a short rod, the two battled again. Hong Qigong's "Dog Beating Stick Technique" has nothing like it in the world, but he doesn't

use it casually; apart from this technique, he has many refined and ingenious rod stances and right now he was using them.

This heated battle was another spectacular fight like the last one with fists and kicks; the stick was like an elusive dragon, the staff like an efficacious dancing snake. It was like watching a rainbow traveling across the sky or a shooting star chasing after the moon, the fight held Yang Guo entranced as he watched. The staff and stick went to and fro, they fought until dusk, and again it was difficult to separate the two. Yang Guo saw that the ground was extremely dangerous; the mountain was covered with ice and snow and was extremely slippery. The two of them were old, if they fought for much longer they would definitely lose their footing so he loudly called out, telling them to stop. But Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng were fighting with great pleasure, why would they stop? Yang Guo knew that mentioning food to Hong Qigong made him stop, so he thought that luring him with good food would be effective. So he went to the wild mountainside and dug up some mountain herbs and yams, started a fire and roasted them.

Hong Qigong smelt the fragrant scent and called out, "Smelly Toad, I don't want to fight with you, eating is more important." He ran to Yang Guo's side and picked up two clumps of mountain herbs and ate them. Although they burnt his mouth he kept on chewing. Ouyang Feng rushed over and raised his staff over Hong Qigong's head chopping down. Hong Qigong ignored him and threw him a clump of the mountain herbs and called out, "Just eat!" Ouyang Feng stopped. He caught it and started to eat it, forgetting about the heated battle they were just in.

That night the three of them slept in a cave. Yang Guo wanted to help his Godfather regain his memories and mentioned past events to him. Ouyang Feng stood there in

a daze not replying, sometimes he would hit his head with his fist, showing that he's trying extremely hard to remember but he could not, it was extremely hard for him. Yang Guo worried that he would get even crazier so made him go to sleep, he himself was tossing and turning and couldn't sleep. He was thinking about the fist and palm stances that the two used, the more he thought about it the more excited he got. He couldn't stop himself and got up quietly. Studying them, he felt that the ingenuity and mastery of the stances was boundless; he practiced into the middle of the night until he was extremely tired and went to sleep.

The next morning, Yang Guo had not yet wakened up from his sleep when he heard gusts of wind from outside the cave, in between them were the sounds of leaping and jumping. He quickly hurried outside to see Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng battling each other heatedly again. He sighed and thought, "These two old seniors aren't acting their age, what's the point of fighting like this?" He could only sit aside and watch. He saw Hong Qigong's stances and understood every stance and every move but it was difficult for him to grasp Ouyang Feng's strange stances, every time Hong Qigong seemed to gain the upper hand, Ouyang Feng's strange stances would bring them to a level pegging again.

The two of them battled in the day and slept at night, they fought for four days running, both of them were exhausted but neither of them dared to let slip even half a stance. Yang Guo pondered, "Whatever happens tomorrow I mustn't allow them to fight again." That night he waited for Ouyang Feng to go to sleep and then quietly said to Hong Qigong, "Senior, please come outside, I have something to say." Hong Qigong followed him outside. About a hundred feet away from the cave, Yang Guo suddenly got down on

his knees, and kept on kowtowing, yet he didn't say a word. Hong Qigong was startled but understood; he knew that Yang Guo wanted him to have pity on Ouyang Feng and his illness and leave. He laughed at the sky and said, "So be it."

After only walking away for a few tens of feet, his garments were held in a gust of wind, Ouyang Feng darted out of the cave and swept out his staff angrily shouting, "Old Beggar, trying to escape?"

Hong Qigong conceded three stances to him as he tried to find a path of escape but he was held up by the gusts of wind created by the staff. When skilled fighters are dueling, one mustn't concede even half a move, Hong Qigong had the intention of conceding to him and immediately fell into danger. It was a desperate situation; many times he almost lost his life to the staff. He saw the staff heading straight for him, attacking his lower abdomen; he knew that this stance must have a lethal move to follow it. He couldn't avoid it and let him have this stance. He raised his stick to block it. He suddenly felt a powerful internal energy surging through the staff, he couldn't stop himself from being shocked, "You want to compete internal energy with me?" He thought, "The enemy's internal energy is arriving, there is no other way to defend apart from using my own internal energy to block it." He quickly circulated his internal energy and prepared to defend. If they lose concentration for a split second and get struck by the opponent's weapon or palm, their internal energy will be all over their body and will defend against the attack. Although they would be injured, it won't be anything serious. Now that they are competing with internal energy, they couldn't concede to the other one iota; they had reached a stage where it wouldn't finish unless one died. The two of them had fought each other many times in the past, and each time both were worried about their own safety and how strong the other was.

Normally they wouldn't use such a dangerous way to attack each other since they were afraid that in their quest to seek glory, they would be disgraced instead and lose their lives for no purpose. But Ouyang Feng wasn't thinking properly; he hadn't managed to gain victory in the last few days so suddenly circulated his internal energy to attack.

Decades ago, Hong Qigong hated Ouyang Feng to the bone, but now he was old and had mellowed. Now Ouyang Feng was mad and Yang Guo had pleaded for his life; Hong Qigong had no intentions of killing him, so he circulated his chi throughout his 'dan tian'. He just defended and didn't attack, waiting for Ouyang Feng to exert all his energy. He didn't know that his opponent's internal energy was like the waves of a large river, the source of it incessantly sending out waves of internal energy. After one wave, came another, there was no sign of it weakening but instead it was getting fiercer and fiercer. Hong Qigong always believed that his internal energy was profound. In these past years he had refined his fierce internal energy to new levels; even if he couldn't beat Western Poison, if he used all his energy to defend, he would not lose. But who could have guessed that after all these exchanges of internal energy, Ouyang Feng was getting stronger and stronger.

Hong Qigong remembered the time when he was competing internal energy with Ouyang Feng with the Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border sandwiched in between them; Ouyang Feng had sent out his internal energy with his foot three times, each time stronger than the last. He noticed, at that time, that before the first wave of internal energy had dissipated the second wave had arrived, after the second wave arrived, the third followed. If he just defended and let him keep on pressing, it would definitely be hard to defend against. Only by returning his own energy between the gaps and forcing him to defend will he stop Ouyang Feng

from amassing a great force. Once he thought about this he immediately circulated his internal energy and attacked. The two's bodies shook as the energies collided.

When Yang Guo saw the two competing internal energy he was extremely worried; if he attacked Hong Qigong's back, he would help his Godfather gain victory. He looked at Hong Qigong and saw a head full of white hair, and within his commanding air there was a compassionate and merciful part. In the spaces between his heroic natures there was peacefulness to go with it. He couldn't stop himself from bowing down to him, not to mention that he had responded to his plea and was willing to leave. How could he harm him?

The two of them froze for a while, white smoke came out from Ouyang Feng's head, and gradually it became denser and denser, like steam coming from a steamer. Hong Qigong had also used all his strength to defend; right now he had no way to control whether or not he would harm his opponent's life. If he could just protect himself that would be fortunate enough.

They competed from dawn until morning, from morning until midday until Hong Qigong gradually felt his internal energy draining away. However, his opponent's internal energy kept on surging towards him like a violent storm. He quietly said, "So the madder the old poisonous animal gets, the more powerful he becomes; the Old Beggar's life is going to end today." He knew that his battle would have an ending; he now had no way to avoid this and could only use all his strength to resist. But he didn't know that Ouyang Feng's internal energy was also declining due to exhaustion, it was hard for him to maintain his palm's power. They continued for another four hours until it got dark. Yang Guo saw that their faces had changed; he thought that if they battled any longer, they would definitely

perish together. The difference in internal energy between him and the two was vast. If he wanted to break them up himself, most probably he would not be able to separate them. Instead he would lose his life in the attempt. He delayed for a while and saw Ouyang Feng's face looked worried and Hong Qigong was out of breath, he thought, "Even if it is dangerous I need to save their lives." So he went and broke off a tree branch and got down on his knees between the two; he circulated his chi around his body to protect himself and stretched out his branch placing it in between the staff and stick.

Who could have known that this separation would not waste any energy? The two's internal energy rushed into the branch and after meeting his circulated chi, the energies were dispersed. A strong bow cannot pierce a silk cloth; although the Northern Beggar and Western Poison are two of the most renowned men in the world of Wulin, they had spent many days consuming and exhausting their energy. After being disturbed by his interference, the two of them fell onto the ground, their faces grey as ash and it was hard for them to move.

Yang Guo was alarmed and called out, "Father, Senior Hong, are you okay?"

The two of them struggled to breath and didn't reply. Yang Guo wanted to move them into the cave to rest but Hong Qigong lightly shook his head. Yang Guo knew that the two were severely injured and could not be moved. That night he slept between the two, afraid that they would get up in the middle of the night and fight again. The two of them couldn't even circulate their chi to recuperate, how could they fight each other? The next morning, Yang Guo saw that they looked like they were on the point of death, they looked worse than yesterday. He was alarmed and flustered; he dug up some more mountain herbs and

roasted and fed it to them. On the third day, the two of them showed signs of being a little better. Yang Guo moved them into the cave, placing them on either side with him in the middle.

They rested like this for several days. Once Hong Qigong regained his appetite he started to recover. Ouyang Feng didn't say anything but his expression was calm, Yang Guo tried to get him to talk but he wouldn't say anything.

That day, the two of them were lying on the ground facing each other when Hong Qigong suddenly called out, "Smelly Toad", do you revere me now?"

Ouyang Feng said, "Revere what? I still have many stances that I haven't used, once I use them all, you'll be beaten into dust."

Hong Qigong laughed and said, "What a coincidence, I too have many kung fu that I haven't used yet. Have you heard of the Beggar Clan's "Dog Beating Stick Technique"?"

Ouyang Feng trembled, and thought, "The "Dog Beating Stick Technique" sounds familiar, it seems to be extremely potent, could it be that the Old Beggar knows it? But how come he hasn't used it when we've been fighting for our lives? He's probably used it already. Or, he doesn't know it." So he said, "What's so special about the "Dog Beating Stick Technique"?"

Hong Qigong was regretful; during the days when he was fighting with him, all he had to do was just use a few stances of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" and he would definitely be able to subdue him. But he felt that Ouyang Feng was mentally unstable so he already has an advantage over him. Using the Beggar Clan's treasured "Dog Beating Stick Technique" against him wouldn't be fair. It was not the actions of a hero. But who knew that although his mind was

unstable, his kung fu did not decline one bit. In the end, both of them ended up seriously injured. He wanted to use this set of skills but he had no energy to do so. When he heard Ouyang Feng ask this question he couldn't take it and had a thought, he signaled to Yang Guo telling him to lower his ear and said, "I am the Beggar Clan's previous chief, do you know that?"

Yang Guo nodded, in Chongyang Palace he heard the Taoists talk about the famous people of the world. They said that the Beggar Clan's previous chief the "Nine Fingered Wondrous Beggar" Hong Qigong had supreme martial arts and was courageous, a real hero.

Hong Qigong said, "I have a set of techniques that I'm going to teach you. This set of techniques is passed onto the Beggar Clan's chief only and never to outsiders. Because your Godfather is belittling me with his words, I want you to perform it for him to see."

Yang Guo said, "Since this skill of Senior's is never passed on to outsiders, this junior will not learn it. My Godfather's mind hasn't recovered yet, there is no need for Senior to torment him."

Hong Qigong shook his head and said, "If you learn the stances but don't know the formulae to accompany it, should you face an enemy, it would be useless. And so, you can't really say that I'm teaching you kung fu. I don't want you to attack your Godfather, just demonstrate it to him and once he sees it, he will understand."

Yang Guo thought, "Since that this set of kung fu is a treasure of the Beggar Clan, my Godfather may not be able to beat it; why should I help you to defeat my Godfather?" He rejected the offer, saying that he can't learn the secret skill of the Beggar Clan.

Hong Qigong saw through him and loudly said, “Smelly Toad”, your Godson knows that you can’t beat my “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, he doesn’t dare to demonstrate it to you.”

Ouyang Feng was angry and called out, “Son, I have many great skills that I haven’t used yet, why should I be afraid of him? Quickly demonstrate it for me.”

The two were forcing him, he had no other response but to go over to Hong Qigong’s side. Hong Qigong told him to take a branch and taught him a stance of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, “The Stick Beats Two Dogs”, carefully describing it to him. Yang Guo understood immediately and demonstrated it. Ouyang Feng saw that the stick technique was indeed wondrous and powerful, it would be difficult for him to overcome it straight away, he thought for a while and taught a staff technique stance to Yang Guo.

Hong Qigong gave a slight smile and said, “Fine, here’s another stance.”

The two of them then compared martial arts with their mouths and tongues. They continued until night fell, only ten or so moves were exchanged yet Yang Guo was exhausted and sweating all over. The next morning they continued, and they carried on for three days, by then, the thirty six stances of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” were described. Though there were only thirty six stances, the changes in between them had boundless ingenuity, in the end, Ouyang Feng took longer and longer to come up with a solution. But the stances that he came up with attacked and defended at the same time, the strength and power of them was excellent; when Hong Qigong saw this he let out a sigh of respect.

By the night of that day, Hong Qigong described the thirty-sixth stance “No Dogs Under Heaven” sixth change. This was the “Dog Beating Stick Technique’s” final stance and final change; once this stance was used, there would be a stick everywhere and when the internal energy arrived, had there been eighty evil dogs, all of them would be killed at the same time. It was called “No Dogs Under Heaven” because of this, the ingenuity and mastery of the rod technique had reached the highest echelons of martial arts. Ouyang Feng couldn’t think of a reply. He spent that night tossing and turning as he pondered that stance.

Before Yang Guo woke up the next morning, Ouyang Feng suddenly called out, “I’ve got it... I’ve got it. Son, use this staff stance to break his.” His voice was excited and urgent at the same time. Yang Guo could hear that there was something wrong with him, he took a look and was shocked. Though Ouyang Feng was old, his internal energy was profound, so the hair on his face and head was grey white in colour; but he had exerted himself too much that night thinking. In just a night his hair became completely white, as if he’d suddenly aged ten years.

Yang Guo was sad, he wanted to ask Hong Qigong to stop the competition, but Ouyang Feng repeatedly forced him to do as he said, in the end he could only comply. This stance was extremely complicated, Ouyang Feng repeated it and explained it until Yang Guo understood and did as he was instructed. When Hong Qigong saw this stance his face changed. He was lying on the floor, unable to move; suddenly he somehow gained divine strength and leapt up calling out, “Old poisonous animal, Ouyang Feng! Today, Old Beggar is in awe of you.” He jumped forward and hugged him tightly. Yang Guo was startled, he assumed that he was trying to harm his Godfather. He tried to pull him away but Hong Qigong was holding on tightly, he was unable to pull

him away. He heard Hong Qigong laugh and called out, "Old poisonous animal, Ouyang Feng, you actually thought of a stance to break mine, you really are something! Good Ouyang Feng, good Ouyang Feng."

After many days of fighting and a whole night of thinking, Ouyang Feng had exhausted all his strength. When he heard Hong Qigong call him 'Ouyang Feng' three times, suddenly something lit up in him. His mind was like a mirror, all the events of the past came before his very eyes; he also laughed and called out, "I'm Ouyang Feng! I'm Ouyang Feng! I'm Ouyang Feng! You're the Old Beggar Hong Qigong!"

The two white haired men hugged each other and laughed. After a bout of laughter, the voices became quieter, then suddenly stopped, and the two of them lay motionless.

Yang Guo was shocked and kept on calling out, "Father, Senior!" neither replied. Yang Guo pulled Hong Qigong's arm, but as soon as he did so the arm hung limp, he was dead. Yang Guo was startled and bent over to take a look at Ouyang Feng; he too had all lost signs of being alive. Though the two's laughter has ended, their faces still held a smile, and the valley quietly echoed back the sounds of two people laughing. Northern Beggar and Western Poison had been adversaries for many years and they hated each other. And now they ended up dead together on Mount Hua. The two of them were enemies when they were alive, but just before they died they were hugging each other and laughing. All the feuds and arguments that they have had over the years were ended with a laugh!

Yang Guo was shocked and sad at the same time; he had no idea what to do. He remembered that Hong Qigong pretended to be dead for three days and three nights, could it be that the two of them were pretending to be dead? But

judging from how they looked, it didn't appear that they were pretending. He thought, "Maybe after dying for a while they'll come back to life. Their martial arts are extremely good; they wouldn't die just like that. Maybe they are competing again, seeing who can fake death the longest."

He guarded the two for seven days and nights and every time a day passed, a bit of his hope drained away. He saw that the two's faces had changed colour and knew then that they had really passed away. He sobbed for a while, and then, in the side of the cave, he dug two holes and buried the two extraordinary figures of the Wulin world. The weapons they used and Hong Qigong's wine gourd were buried with them. He saw that the footprints that the two had left when they were fighting had turned to ice, the prints were still here yet their bodies have now been placed in the ground. Yang Guo stepped into the footprints and reminisced, he couldn't stop himself from being depressed again. He then thought about how even with their frightening abilities, in the end they were buried by someone the world despised. What is fame, what is reputation; it's just a dream that's finished.

He kowtowed eight times in front of their tombs, thinking, "Though Godfather was brilliant, in the end he was a level below Hong Qigong." When the "Dog Beating Stick Techniques" were demonstrated, Godfather had to think for quite a while before he overcame them, if he really faced this in battle, who would allow him to carefully study it and then think of a way to counter it?"

After many sighs, he found a path down the mountain and left it behind. This time when he was leaving the mountain, he was trusting in his footsteps again, he didn't distinguish between east, south, west or north. He thought that since the world is a large place, he was alone, he would wander

around and when his time comes, he'll lie on the ground somewhere and die. He hadn't been on Mount Hua for a month, yet to him it was like many years had passed. When he was ascending the mountain, he was thinking about how everyone looked down on him, he was full of hate and anger. As he descended, he felt life was like a passing cloud, if others respect him or look down on him it's all the same. What's it have to do with him anyway? At such a young age, he was resentful of the world's customs, he won't rise in respect for the world.

Within a day's time he arrived at a wild place in Xianan; he took a look around and saw withered trees and wilted grass everywhere. The grass was fluttering in the wind. The sound of quiet hoofs could be heard in the west, dust and smoke rose, after a short while, tens of wild horses galloped past about a mile or so in front of him. He saw the herd of horses galloping wildly, freely, Yang Guo also felt carefree and joyous. With wild lands in front of his eyes and horses galloping afar, the world was vast and had no obstructions. Just as he was feeling satisfied he suddenly heard a horse hissing out for mercy from behind.

Yang Guo turned around and saw a yellow haired skinny horse pulling a cart of firewood slowly along the main road. He thought that the horse must have seen the other horses galloping freely in the wild lands. It was toiling with hard work and it hissed out as it lamented for itself. The horse was so skinny that its breast bone was sticking out, its four legs had no muscle and they were as thin as branches. Its fur was patchy, its skin was covered in scabies, and there were numerous traces of blood from wounds caused by whipping. A rude man was sitting on the cart, he disliked that the horse was going slow and whipped it incessantly. Yang Guo has suffered by others many times before; when he saw the horse suffering such punishment, it felt like he

himself was suffering the whippings. His chest ached and tears almost escaped from his eyes. He stood in the road and angrily shouted, "Hey you, why are you whipping the horse?"

The rude man saw a kid in torn and old garments looking like a beggar blocking the road, he raised his whip and shouted, "Move out of the way now, don't you want your life?" As he said this he slapped his whip on the horse's back again. Yang Guo was furious and called out, "If you hit the horse again, I'll kill you." The man laughed and lashed out at Yang Guo's head. Yang Guo stretched out his hand to take the whip and turned it around. He swung the whip and it made a tangling loop around the man's neck and pulled him down, beating him on the head and face. Although the skinny horse was ugly, it was very lively, when it saw the man getting beaten; it neighed with delight and stretched out its head rubbing Yang Guo on the leg, displaying signs of affection. Yang Guo pulled apart the cart's collar and harness then patted the horse on the back. He pointed in the direction of the other horse's trail and said, "Go, no one's going to harm you anymore."

The horse reared and neighed, and galloped forward. But the horse's body was weak; he wasn't able to continue this sudden burst. It galloped for around a hundred feet then its front legs weakened and it fell onto the ground. Yang Guo couldn't bear it, he ran over and picked up the horse by its stomach and shouted, "Up", pulling the horse back onto its feet. The man saw Yang Guo's unbelievable strength and was frightened, so frightened that he didn't want his cart of firewood. He picked himself up and ran. About half a mile away, he shouted, "There's someone strong stealing horses and firewood!"

Yang Guo thought this was funny. He pulled up some green grass for the horse. He saw that the horse had such an

unfortunate life and couldn't help but feel linked with it. He stroked the horse's neck and said, "Horse, horse, follow me from now on." He held its rope and walked slowly to a town. He bought some barley for the horse to eat. On the second day the horse seemed to regain its spirit and so he rode it slowly. At first the horse struggled along and limped, when wasn't losing its footing it would stumble, but the further it walked the better it got. After seven or eight days of having enough to eat, it regained its strength; its steps as light as if it were flying. Yang Guo couldn't speak his delight and took even more care of it.

One day Yang Guo was in an outdoor restaurant awaiting an order when the horse walked over to a table and kept neighing at a bowl of wine on the table, as if he wanted to drink the wine. Yang Guo was curious and ordered a large bowl of wine and placed it on the table, and then stroked the horse's head. The horse drank it all in one go; its tail raised its legs stepped, it was feeling very pleased. Yang Guo felt that this was interesting and called some more wine; the horse drank over ten bowls one after the other, and wasn't finished. Yang Guo wanted to call for more wine but the waiter saw he was dressed in ragged garments and afraid that he had no money to pay so said that they didn't have any more wine. Afterwards he got on the horse. The horse was under the influence of the wine and took large steps, galloping like crazy; the trees by the side of the road receded, it was extremely fast. When a normal spirited horse galloped, it would gallop steadily. Though this horse was fast, its body would be high and then low, jolting about very uncoordinated, if it weren't for the fact that Yang Guo possessed excellent lightness kung fu, he would not have been able to ride it. The horse also had another strange characteristic, whenever there was another animal on the road, it would speed up and overtake it, no matter if it was a cow, horse, pony or donkey, it would gallop past them

before slowing. This proud and competitive air seems to have come about because of the suffering it has had in its life.

Yang Guo thought that this thousand-mile colt has been trapped in the hands of the villager, wasting half its life; now that its spirit is free, it wants to gallop and fly over the lands. This behavior was similar to Yang Guo's; the man and horse were like good friends. He was bored sometimes and would play with the horse, in a few days he was happy again. He has been heading south and had arrived at the banks of Han Shui. As he rode the horse he thought about how he teased Lu Wushuang and tricked the Li Mochou Master and disciple team, he couldn't stop laughing. He then remembered he didn't know where Xiao Longnu was or when they were going to meet again, he became sad and despondent.

That day he traveled until noon and on the road he kept on seeing beggars. From their appearances, most of them knew kung fu, he thought, "Could it be that the matter between Wifey and the beggars hasn't finished yet? Or could it be that the Beggar Clan has summoned all these people to fight with Li Mochou? I must take a look." He didn't like the Beggar Clan much, but because he admired Hong Qigong, he couldn't stop himself from feeling close to the Beggar Clan. He thought as long as the beggars don't trouble Lu Wushuang he will give them the news that Hong Qigong had passed away. He carried on for a while and saw the road was filling up with more and more beggars. When the beggars saw Yang Guo they were surprised, there was no difference in the way they were dressed but if there wasn't an urgent matter, members of the clan would not travel by horseback. Yang Guo ignored them and slowly carried on.

He continued until afternoon when suddenly he heard the cries of eagles in the air; two white eagles flew past, and descended ahead of him. He heard a beggar say, "Chief Huang is here, there's probably going to be an assembly tonight."

Another beggar said, "Will Hero Guo come?"

The first beggar replied, "The two are never apart." he saw Yang Guo reign in his horse listening to their words; he gave him a glance and closed his mouth.

When Yang Guo heard the names Guo Jing and Huang Rong he was slightly alarmed, and then in his heart laughed coldly. "Earlier I lived in your home, ate your food and you made a fool out of me; then I was young and useless and I suffered a lot. Right now I'm relying on the world, who needs your support?" He had another thought, "Why don't I pretend I have nowhere to go and have come to them for help and then see how they treat me."

He then found a quiet place and messed up his hair. Then he punched himself in the left eye, he scratched his cheek a few times; there was now a blue green bruise on his left eye and there were some red marks on his face. His clothes were already torn and old but he tore them even more making them look even more ragged. He rolled in the mud and dust a few times and then got up on the horse that was covered in scars and skin ulcers. Indeed, he now looked like he was a person with nowhere to go and on his last legs. As soon as he finished he limped back to the main road, he didn't ride on the horse and walked amongst the beggars. He didn't lead the horse along, the horse just followed on its own. Someone from the Beggar Clan asked whether he was on his way to attend the great feast, Yang Guo stared and didn't reply and slipped back into the crowd, walking back and forth. The group of people wound along the road and

eventually came up to a large, old and ruined temple. He saw the two white eagles roosting on top of a pine tree in front of the temple.

One of the Wu brothers was holding a dish, while the other took a slab of meat from the dish and flung it towards the eagles. Yang Guo had seen the two before when they teamed up with Guo Fu to fight Li Mochou, but at that time he was too busy thinking about Guo Fu. He didn't take the two to mind, but now he took a closer look at the two. He saw Wu Dunru looked intense, he was concentrating one hundred percent, on the other hand Wu Xiuwen was active and lively; he ran to east and darted to the west, not taking a moment's respite. Wu Dunru was wearing a purple coloured Chong silk gown, Wu Xiuwen was wearing a large blue coloured Shandong silk gown, and around their waists were tied an embroidered satin 'hero' sash. They were indeed young heroes, standing out from the crowd. Yang Guo went up to them and made a bow, and stammered, "Greetings... greetings brothers Wu, I hope you've been... been well."

At this time there were beggars everywhere around the temple, all their clothes were ragged, so although Yang Guo was covered in dirt, he did not look out of place in the crowd of beggars. Wu Dunru returned the favour and glanced up and down at Yang Guo, he couldn't recognize him and said, "Forgive my inexperienced eyes, what is brother's name?"

Yang Guo said, "There is no need to worry about such a lowly name, little brother... little brother wants to meet with Chief Huang."

Wu Dunru thought his voice sounded slightly familiar, he was about to question him when a voice like a silver bell

came from the entrance of the temple, "Big brother Wu, I asked you to buy me a soft horse whip, have you bought it?"

Wu Dunru quickly moved Yang Guo aside and walked forward saying, "I bought it ages ago, give it a test, does it feel right?" He fished out a horse whip from his pocket as he said this.

Yang Guo turned his head and saw a girl in a light green dress hurrying from the temple's doors; her brows were curved, her little nose slightly raised, her face like white jade, her smile like a flower, it was Guo Fu. The adornments in her hair weren't extravagant, only a pearl was worn in her hair, the light make her look as if she was adorned with jade gem make up. Yang Guo only gave her a glance but he couldn't stop himself from having a feeling of inferiority; he turned his head and didn't look back. Wu Xiuwen also dashed forward and the two brothers spent all their effort talking to her. After speaking with Guo Fu for a while, Wu Dunru remembered Yang Guo and turned around saying, "You've come because of the 'Heroes Feast'?"

Yang Guo did not know what the 'Heroes Feast' was and just answered agreeably. Wu Dunru summoned one of the beggars with his hand and said, "Take care of this friend, tomorrow take him to Da Xingguan." After he said this he turned his attention back to Guo Fu and ignored him. The beggar agreed and after greeting each other, asked for his name. Yang Guo told him truthfully. He was a nobody. Of course the beggar won't have heard of his name before and wouldn't think anything of it. The beggar called himself Wang Shisan; he was a second band Beggar Clan member. He asked, "Where has brother Yang come from?"

Yang Guo said, "From Xiayi."

Wang Shisan said, "Ah, Brother Yang is from Quanzhen sect?"

As soon as he heard the words 'Quanzhen sect' Yang Guo's head ached, he shook his head and said, "No."

Wang Shisan, "Brother Yang you've got the 'Heroes' invitation with you?"

Yang Guo was startled and said, "I've just wandered around Jianghu, how can I call myself a hero? I have met your clan's chief Huang once before, I only want to see her and ask for some money to return to my home."

Wang Shisan's eyebrows wrinkled and he thought for a while and then said, "Chief Huang is receiving the heroes at the moment, I'm afraid that she won't have time to see you." Yang Guo had deliberately made himself such a sorry sight, the lower the regard the other person had for him, the prouder he'll get, he made himself more pitiful and pleaded earnestly.

The members of the Beggar Clan are all people from poor environments, they have always helped those in need and distress; they would never look down on other poor people. Wang Shisan heard him speak with such grief and woe, and so said, "Little brother Yang, have a meal first, tomorrow we'll go to Da Xingguan together. I'm your big brother, I'll go and tell the elders, who in turn will inform our chief. We'll wait and see what orders she gives, how about that?"

Wang Shisan had called him brother Yang, but now he heard that he wasn't one of the guests for the 'heroes' feast. He was a fair few years older than him so he changed his greeting to little brother Yang. Yang Guo thanked him repeatedly. Wang Shisan invited him into the derelict temple and bought out some rice and dishes for the guest. One of the rules of the Beggar Clan is when a Beggar Clan

member arrives to celebrate a ceremony, they'll first need to get chicken, fish, beef and lamb and leave it until it starts to rot, and gets like a soup of spoiled meat. The meaning was that they shouldn't forget their origins; but when treating guests, proper wine and dishes are bought out.

As Yang Guo was eating, a flash of light shone in his eyes, he saw Guo Fu enter the hall, her face with a smile, the Wu Brothers followed behind on her left and right. He heard Wu Xiuwen say, "Fine, we'll leave tonight and travel through the night to rush to Da Xingguan. I'll go and get your red horse." The three of them were too busy talking to notice Yang Guo who was sitting on the floor eating. The three of them went to the back garden to get their bags and weapons and exited the temple. Many hoof beats could be heard as the horses galloped away. Yang Guo planted his chopsticks into his bowl, and heard the hoof beats of the horses become distant; a hundred emotions went through his mind, but was it worry or hate, anger or sorrow?

The next day, Wang Shisan looked after him as they went back to the road. On the road, apart from the crowds of Beggar Clan members, there were many eminent names of Wulin, some traveled by horseback, some traveled on foot, all heading for the 'Heroes Feast'. Yang Guo didn't know what the 'Heroes Feast' was or what the 'Heroes' invitation was about; he knew that Wang Shisan wouldn't dare to reveal it to him so he pretended to be stupid and miserable. They arrived at Da Xingguan at around seven o'clock that night. Da Xingguan is an important strategic point in the Henan province, the topography of the area was divine yet there weren't many towns and cities around. This was because the Mongolian soldiers were situated north of here. Wang Shisan led Yang Guo past a town and traveled for another seven or eight miles. In front of them were hundred of Japanese Scholar trees surrounding a large

manor; all the heroes were heading for this manor. Building followed building inside the manor, all folding over each other and it was hard to see how many rooms there really were; but it appeared that the manor could easily hold thousands of guests and have room to spare.

Wang Shisan was just a lowly member of the Beggar Clan, he knew that their Chief was occupied right now; how could he go disturb her over such a trivial matter such as borrowing traveling money? He arranged quarters for Yang Guo and then went away with his friends.

Yang Guo saw that this was a very grand manor, there were many servants busy with serving the guests; he was curious and wondered who the master of the manor was and how come they had so much respect? He suddenly heard the three blasts from a trumpet and a musical ensemble started their music. Someone said, "The master and mistress of the manor are meeting the guests now, let's go take a look and see who the hero is that just arrived?" He saw the guest and servant move to one side. The crowd of guests also stood to either side of the hall.

A man and a woman entered the hall shoulder to shoulder, they were both around forty years of age. The male wore an embroidered gown, he had a slight moustache, exuding an air of authority and prosperity; the woman had white skin, she was courteous and gracious like an affluent mistress. The guests quietly discussed amongst themselves, "Master Lu and Mistress Lu are greeting this important guest personally."

Behind them was another couple, when Yang Guo saw them his heart trembled, he became flustered; it was Guo Jing and Huang Rong. He hadn't seen them for many years, Guo Jing seems to be more serious, there was a slight smile of Huang Rong's face; her beauty had not diminished slightly.

Yang Guo thought, "So Auntie Guo is this beautiful, I never noticed it when I was younger."

Guo Jing wore a coarse long gown, Huang Rong was wearing a light purple silk gown, but because she was the Chief of the Beggar Clan, she could only tie the gown with pins in the places where it doesn't catch the eye and that was it. Behind Guo Jing and Huang Rong followed Guo Fu and the Wu brothers. Right then, the hall was lit up with countless red candles, under the candle light the crowd could see that the males were noble and the girl was lovable and glamorous.

The crowd pointed, "That is hero Guo, and that is Madam Huang, Chief Huang."

"Who's that girl who's cute as a flower?"

"It is the Guo couple's daughter."

"Are those young men their sons?"

"No, they're their disciples."

Yang Guo didn't want to meet the Guo couple in the crowd so he hid behind a tall man and watched; four Taoists appeared from the direction of the music. When Yang Guo saw them, he couldn't refrain from feeling angry. The first one that entered was an old Taoist with a head of white hair, his face was purple, it was the Blithe Elder Hao Datong; behind him was a grey haired old Taoist priestess, Yang Guo has never seen her before. Behind them entered two middle-aged Taoists standing shoulder to shoulder, one was Yin Zhiping, and the other was Zhao Zhijing. Master and Mistress Lu greeted them; they greeted the old Taoist priestess Master; they received the Guo couple, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers and led them forward.

Yang Guo heard from the crowd, "That old Taoist priestess is Quanzhen's sword heroine; her name is Sun Bu'Er."

"Ah, she's the Sage of Tranquility, famous throughout the northern and southern sides of the Changjian River."

"Yes. She is Mistress Lu's master. However, Master Lu's kung fu was not taught by her."

Master Lu's first names are Guanying, his father Lu Chengfeng was a disciple of Huang Rong's father Huang Yaoshi, and so, they could be regarded a generation lower than Guo Jing and Huang Rong. Lu Guanying's wife Cheng Yaojia is Sun Bu'Er's disciple. The couple originally resided in Lake Tai's Returning Echo Manor. The manor was burned down by Ouyang Feng. Lu Chengfeng was furious and influenced by his anger, he told his son that he didn't want to be on the minds of Lake Tai's bandits again; so he took his family north and resided in Da Xingguan. Lu Chengfeng had now passed away. Years ago, Cheng Yaojia was in trouble, she was rescued by Guo Jing, Huang Rong and the Beggar Clan; she had always remembered this. When the Beggar Clan sent out the 'Heroes' invitation, the Lu couple took on the task themselves and arranged the 'Heroes Feast' here at their manor.

Guo Jing waited for the greetings to be over and led Hao Datong and Sun Bu'Er towards the hall to meet the gathering of heroes. Hao Datong stroked his beard as he said, "When Ma, Qiu, Liu and Wang received Chief Huang's invitation, they wanted to come here in person but apprentice brother Ma has not been feeling well, apprentice brother Liu and the others are helping him to recuperate and can't leave him, they can only apologize to Chief Huang."

Huang Rong said, "Well said, well said. Those seniors are too polite."

Though she was young, she was the leader of the world's greatest clan, Hao Datong and the others treated her with great respect. Guo Jing and Yin Zhiping knew each other when they were young and had met when Qiu Chuji took Yin Zhiping and 18 or 20 others to meet Genghis Khan. When they saw each other both of them were delighted; the two of them entered together. Guo Jing asked about Ma Yu's illness and missed him very much. The main hall was arranged for the feast, the noise of people and the reflection of the red candles created a great atmosphere.

Yin Zhiping looked to the east and then west, it was as if he was searching for someone in the crowd of people.

Zhao Zhijing chuckled and quietly said, "Apprentice brother Yin; will the one named Long make an appearance here?" Yin Zhiping's face became red and didn't reply.

Guo Jing did not know they were talking about Xiao Longnu and interrupted, "There's a hero named Long? Are they your friend?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "It's apprentice brother Yin's friend, I dare not to make such a friend." Guo Jing saw they looked strange; there was something else going on and he didn't inquire any further.

Suddenly, Yin Zhiping spotted Yang Guo in the crowd; his whole body trembled like he was struck by lightning. He knew that if he's here, Xiao Longnu would also be here. Zhao Zhijing followed his gaze and his face suddenly changed, he angrily shouted, "Yang Guo! It's Yang Guo! That ... That Xiao Longnu is here as well!"

When Guo Jing heard the two words 'Yang Guo' he immediately turned around. The two haven't seen each other for years; Yang Guo has now grown up, Guo Jing would have not been able to recognize him straight away. But when he heard Zhao Zhijing's shout, he immediately recognized who he was. He was shocked and delighted, he dashed over and took his hand and said with joy, "Guo'er, you're here as well? I was afraid that I was going to disturb your training so I did not request your presence. It's great that your master has bought you here."

Everyone in Quanzhen was ashamed about the incident of Yang Guo expelling himself from Chongyang Palace; no one had leaked a word about this to outsiders. Guo Jing did not know about it; at the time he was on Peach Blossom Island. The reason that Zhao Zhijing came to the 'Heroes Feast' was to tell Guo Jing about this event, he couldn't predict that he would encounter Yang Guo here. He was afraid that he had heard Yang Guo's account of the events and would take his side, but judging from his reaction he knew that the two had just met again. His face became clear and faced the sky saying, "How could this Taoist dream of being Master Yang's Master?"

Guo Jing was shocked and asked, "Why does brother Zhao say this? The child does not listen to your teachings?"

Zhao Zhijing saw that the hall was filled with heroes, if he talked about this he would definitely get into an argument with Yang Guo. Quanzhen sect would lose face; he just chuckled coldly and didn't say a word. Guo Jing was worried about Yang Guo, he saw his eye was bruised and nose blue, his garments were torn and ragged, his body covered in mud. It showed that he had suffered a lot and he held him to his chest. As soon as Yang Guo was held, he secretly circulated his chi to protect his body from harm. This hug was out of love, why would Guo Jing have any intentions to

harm him? He called out to Huang Rong, "Rong' Er, look who's here."

When Huang Rong saw Yang Guo she was shocked. She did not feel Guo Jing's delight and calmly said, "Great, you're here as well."

Yang Guo lightly struggled free and said, "My body is filthy, there is no need to dirty your clothes." His sentence was said coldly and he had a scornful tone in his voice. Guo Jing felt slightly sad and thought, "This child doesn't have a father or mother; it looks like even his Master doesn't care for him." He held his hand, wanting him to sit at the same table as he. Yang Guo arranged to sit in the corner table. He didn't want to sit with such people and said coldly, "I'll sit over there. Uncle Guo, take care of your important guests." Guo Jing felt that since there were many guests here, it wasn't convenient to leave the guests alone so he lightly patted his shoulder and made a toast at the main guest's table.

After three rounds of wine, Huang Rong stood up and said clearly, "Tomorrow is the day for the 'Heroes Feast'. There are still many heroes and good men who have yet to arrive. Tonight I ask you to enjoy your appetite and don't stop drinking until you are drunk; we'll talk about the serious matters tomorrow."

Meat piled up like mountains on the tables, wine flowed like rivers; the guests either played drinking games or told stories. That day, the amount of pigs and sheep that were prepared and the amount of wine that was poured in the Lu manor were beyond measure.

After the meal, the servants led the guests to their rooms to rest. Zhao Zhijing said a few quiet words to Hao Datong, Hao Datong nodded. Zhao Zhijing stood up and saluted with

his hands towards Guo Jing and said, "Hero Guo, the Taoist has a heavy burden to reveal. It is extremely shameful, and today I have come to apologize because of this."

Guo Jing quickly returned the greeting and said, "You are too modest apprentice brother Zhao. We'll go and speak in the study. Whatever the child has done to offend apprentice brother Zhao, I will heavily punish him to ease apprentice brother Zhao's anger." He said these words clearly, though Yang Guo was a couple of tables away, Yang Guo heard it and decided, "If he shouts at me just once, I will get up and leave and never see him again. Though my kung fu cannot compare to his, if he beats me I will fight him with my life." Once he made this decision he felt slightly more comfortable, he wasn't as fearful as he was when he first saw Zhao Zhijing. He saw Guo Jing signaling to him with his hand and went over to him and followed behind him.

Guo Fu and the Wu brothers were drinking wine at another table, she didn't know who Yang Guo was, but after being told the news by Guo Jing and Huang Rong, she remembered that it was the boy who they played with when they were younger on Peach Blossom Island. They had been separated for a long time; young people change their appearances the most, and after a few months great changes can be seen, let alone a few years. The fact that Yang Guo had made himself look in such a sorry state, and then hiding himself in the crowd, of course Guo Fu would not know who he was.

When she saw Yang Guo had returned, she couldn't help herself from thinking: she remembered how they had a little argument when they were small on the island, would he still be angry at this event? She saw him in such a weary state, compared with the graceful and the distinguished look of the Wu brothers; they were poles apart. She couldn't help but feel some pity for him and said to the Wu

Dunru, "Father sent him to Quanzhen to learn martial arts; I wonder how his skills are compared to ours?"

Before Wu Dunru could reply, Wu Xiuwen interrupted, "Master's skills are unequalled; how could he compete with us?"

Guo Fu nodded, "His foundation was bad before, it would be difficult for him to make any progress, how did he end up in such a state?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "Those old Taoists stared at him as if they wanted to swallow him whole. That kid has such a bad temper; he must have caused a major incident."

The three of them talked quietly for a while, and then they heard Guo Jing inviting Hao Datong and the others to the study. He said he was going to punish Yang Guo heavily; she was curious and said, "Quick, we'll go and hide ourselves in the study first and listen to what they are talking about."

Wu Dunru was worried about being punished by their master if they found out and didn't reply. Wu Xiuwen agreed and went ahead. Guo Fu's right leg stopped; a slightly angry expression came across her face and she said to Wu Dunru, "Don't listen to me then."

Wu Du Run saw her face showed signs of anger but her brows, eyes and smile were still exuding their beauty, his heart jumped and he couldn't disobey and followed her quickly. As soon as they hid behind the bookshelf, Guo Jing and Huang Rong led Hao Datong and the others to the study, and they sat down. Yang Guo followed and stood to one side.

Guo Jing said, "Guo'er, just sit!"

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I won't sit." Even in the presence of six great fighters of the Wulin world he was still bold, but he couldn't help but feel a little bit restless.

Guo Jing had always treated Yang Guo as his own son, he was also extremely respectful of the Quanzhen seven masters. He thought that it wasn't necessary to ask about the rights and wrongs of what happened; it must be the junior's fault, he put on a face and said to Yang Guo, "You are very bold, how dare you not greet your master. Quick, kowtow to your Martial Grandmasters, your Master and your Martial Uncle to apologize."

The relationship between an emperor and his subjects, a father and son, a master and disciple were all very significant. When a subject is called upon by an emperor to die, they dare not stay alive; if the father wants the son to perish, the son must do so; the same can be said for the Wulin relationship between Master and disciple, a hint of disobedience is not allowed. Guo Jing reprimanded him this way because he pitied him for the suffering he has had alone, his tone was very gentle and soft. Had it been someone else, he would have shouted 'bastard, animal' long ago, and struck him with his fists on the head and face.

Zhao Zhijing stood up and chuckled, "How can I be Master Yang's Master? Hero Guo, there is no need for you to ridicule me. Our Quanzhen sect has done nothing to offend hero Guo, why is it necessary to insult me in public? Master Yang, this little Taoist will kowtow to apologize to the Senior; it was my fault for being blind, I didn't recognize such a hero and good man."

The Guo couple saw that his expression had changed completely, the more he said the angrier he became, both of them were shocked. If a disciple did something wrong, the Master punishing them would be normal, why is it

necessary for such a reaction? Huang Rong knew that whatever Yang Guo did, it was very serious. After this bout of anger by Zhao Zhijing, Guo Jing couldn't speak so she slowly said, "I am extremely sorry for giving apprentice brother Zhao such trouble. Please don't get angry apprentice brother Zhao, sit down and discuss what the child has done to offend his Master."

Zhao Zhijing said loudly, "How can I, Zhao Zhijing dare to be someone's Master with my lowly skills? Won't that just make the heroes and good men of the world laugh their heads off? How does that make me look?"

Huang Rong's eyebrows wrinkled, she was resentful. She and the Quanzhen sect weren't the greatest of friends; years ago they used the "Big Dipper Formation" against her father. Qiu Chuji also tried to arrange for Mu Nianci to be Guo Jing's bride; though these events happened long ago, the animosity had disappeared; but this outburst by Zhao Zhijing in front of her may have been a bit too impolite. Though both Hao Datong and Sun Bu'Er felt that it was hard to blame Zhao Zhijing for getting so angry, but the way he was acting was not how a Taoist should act.

Sun Bu'Er said, "Zhao Zhijing, explain everything to hero Guo and Chief Huang. Look at the way you're acting and think how it looks! We are Taoists, what kind of Taoism have we been studying?" Though Sun Bu'Er was a woman, she was very stern, her juniors all feared her; when Zhao Zhijing heard her speak slowly he didn't dare to make any more outbursts and said, "Yes, yes." He returned to his seat.

Guo Jing said, "Guo'er, look how your Master treats his Seniors with such respect, why don't you follow his example."

Zhao Zhijing wanted to say, "I'm not his Master", but he took a look at Sun Bu'Er and managed to restrain himself. But who knew that Yang Guo would say loudly, "He's not my Master!" When he said this, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were both extremely shocked; Guo Fu and the Wu brothers who were hiding behind the bookshelf were also extremely surprised. The master disciple relationship was very significant in the world of Wulin, there's a saying, "A Master for one day, a Father for life."

Guo Jing was brought up the Jiangnan Seven Freaks and was taught martial arts by Hong Qigong; he was very grateful to his Masters. Ever since he was young he believed that the ways of his Masters were right and proper. How would he know that Yang Guo would dismiss his Master in public, and say such treasonous and heretical things? He got up and pointed at Yang Guo; his voice trembled as he said, "What...what... what did you say?" He wouldn't scold anyone but his face went green, he was very angry. Huang Rong had very rarely seen him get so angry; she whispered to him, "Brother Jing, that child has always been bad; there is no need to get angry over him."

Yang Guo was actually afraid but when he saw his loving Uncle Guo change his face to such an angry expression, he made a decision and thought, "Nothing is greater than death, and the worst that will happen is that you people will kill me." So he said clearly, "My character has always been bad, but I have never begged you to teach me martial arts. You two are eminent people of the Wulin world, why was it necessary for you to use such a crafty plan to harm a child who doesn't have a mother or father?" When he said 'who doesn't have a mother or father', he pitied himself, his eyes became slightly red but he bit down on his lips and thought, "Even I die today, I won't shed a single tear."

Guo Jing angrily said, "Your Auntie Guo and Master taught you martial arts sincerely because of the friendship between me and your deceased father, who... who used a crafty plan? Who...who wants to harm you?" He wasn't the most articulate; he stuttered even more now that he is angry.

Yang Guo saw how impatient he was and spoke even slower, "Uncle Guo has treated me very well, I will never forget this."

Huang Rong slowly said, "Auntie Guo has wronged you; if you want to remember this for the rest of your life that's up to you."

At this stage, he might as well boldly go on, he said, "Auntie Guo has not treated me badly, nor has she wronged me. You said you were going to teach me martial arts, in reality, you taught me to study. You didn't teach me an ounce of kung fu. Studying is a good thing; this nephew has learned a few more words and heard you speak about the stories of the past. But those old Taoists" He pointed to Hao Datong and Zhao Zhijing and said furiously, "There will be a day when I will take my revenge."

Guo Jing was shocked and quickly asked, "Whaa...What? What revenge... what happened?"

Yang Guo said, "The one named Zhao calls himself my Master, he didn't teach me any martial arts, fine, but he ordered many young Taoists to beat me up. Auntie Guo didn't teach me martial arts and the Quanzhen sect didn't teach me martial arts, I could only take the beatings. The one named Hao saw that there was a Grandma that loved me, and he killed her. The rotten Taoist named Hao, speak, isn't this the truth?" When he remembered how Grandma

Sun died for him, he ground his teeth and wanted to leap over to Hao Datong and kill him.

Hao Datong was an eminent Taoist of Quanzhen, he had learned martial arts, and he had reached a deep level in both areas. He accidentally killed Grandma Sun and in all these years he hadn't had a moment's peace. This was the most hateful thing he had done in his life. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen had killed countless people in their lives, but all the people they had killed were scoundrels, traitors and crooks; they had never harmed an innocent. Now, he heard Yang Guo blaming him in front of everyone, he couldn't stop his face from turning grey. The events of that day when he made Grandma Sun throw up blood with his palm flashed in front of his eyes. He didn't have a weapon so he stretched out his left hand and took a long sword from Zhao Zhijing's waist.

Everyone thought that he wanted to stab Yang Guo with the sword, Guo Jing took a step forward to protect Yang Guo but who could have known that he would turn the long sword around with the handle facing Yang Guo and say, "Correct. I killed the wrong person. Take revenge for Grandma Sun, I won't retaliate."

When everyone saw him do this, they were surprised. Guo Jing was afraid that Yang Guo would take the sword and harm him so he called out, "Guo'er, don't be impolite."

Yang Guo knew that he wouldn't be able to avenge Grandma Sun in front of Guo Jing and Huang Rong; he said coldly, "You know that Uncle Guo won't let me attack, so why are you pretending to be so gracious? If you really want me to kill you, then why don't you hand me over the sword in a place where there isn't anyone about?"

Hao Datong was a Senior of Wulin, he was made speechless by the words of this young man. He couldn't hand over the long sword or take it back; he circulated his chi through his hands and forced the sword to snap in half. He flung the sword on the floor and gave a long sigh, he said, "It's finished, it's finished!" He exited the study. Guo Jing wanted to persuade him to remain behind but his head did not turn back.

Guo Jing looked at Yang Guo and then at Sun Bu'Er and the others, he thought that from what had happened, the child has not lied. He thought for a while and said, "Why didn't Quanzhen teach you any martial arts? What have you been doing for the past few years?" As he said this, his words had slowed down a lot more.

Yang Guo said, "When Uncle Guo went up Mount Zhongnan, he defeated hundreds of Taoist without reply, even if Ma, Qiu, Liu, Wang and the others didn't mind, would the others just forget about it? They couldn't do anything to Uncle Guo but could it be that they wouldn't vent their anger on a child like me? They wished they could kill me; why would they teach me martial arts? These few years I have experienced days where there was no light, the fact that today I have the chance to see Uncle Guo again is all down to heaven opening its eyes." Those words did not mention the fact that he expelled himself from Quanzhen and pushed all the blame on Guo Jing. He said he had endured 'days where there was no light', this wasn't a lie exactly, when he was living in the tomb, he didn't see much light or day. When Guo Jing heard these words, he couldn't stop his pity and compassion from rising.

Zhao Zhijing saw that Guo Jing more or less believed him and became anxious, he said, "You... you bastard talking such crap, the name of Quanzhen has been tarnished by... by"

Guo Jing believed that what Yang Guo said was the truth. Huang Rong's face was not moved, she saw Yang Guo's eyes sparkled and he had a clever expression on his face; she thought, "This child is extremely crafty, there must be a lie somewhere." She said, "From what you said, you don't know any martial arts? All these years in Quanzhen were wasted?" As she asked these questions she slowly got up, she suddenly stretched out her left hand and sent put a palm towards the crown of his head. The fingers of the palm was aiming for the head's 'Hundred Meetings' pressure point, the base of the palm was heading for the 'Rising Star' pressure point that was an inch from the hairline, these two main pressure points were fatal. If there was a heavy blow to these places the person would die, there would be no saving them.

Guo Jing was shocked and he called out; "Rong'er!" But Huang Rong was extremely fast, this palm was her family's "Descending Brave Divine Sword Palm", there was no warning, as soon as the hand moved the palm arrived; if Guo Jing wanted to save him, it was too late.

Yang Guo moved back slightly and wanted to avoid it, but with Huang Rong's kung fu, now that she had attacked, just how would he dodge it; he saw the palm going towards his head. Yang Guo was shocked, he quickly stretched out his arm to react but his mind had a quick thought, his right arm moved slightly and then hung down. Someone such as Guo Jing who was greatly skilled but slow in thought would not understand what was happening; they would quickly repel this attack. But Yang Guo was extremely quick, he immediately understood, "Auntie Guo is trying to test my kung fu, if I avoid this palm, then it will show that I've been lying." He saw Huang Rong's attack was fatal, if she wasn't testing out his kung fu and he himself didn't react, wouldn't that mean he will have lost his life in vain? In a flash he

fired up his stubborn nature and thought, "Fine, if I die then I die!" Though his kung fu may not be as good as Huang Rong's, if he wanted to stretch out his hand and repel her palm, it wouldn't be hard, but now he risked his life and didn't move his arms.

Indeed Huang Rong was testing his kung fu with this stance, as soon as the palm reached his head she didn't increase her strength, she saw a frightened and shocked expression on his face. He didn't stretch out his hand to repel this attack and he didn't secretly circulate his chi to protect his vital pressure points, showing he didn't know an ounce of martial arts. She smiled and said, "I didn't teach you kung fu because I wanted what was best for you. It looks like the Taoists of Quanzhen had the same thought as me." She returned to her seat and quietly said to Guo Jing, "He really hasn't learned any of the Quanzhen's martial arts." As soon as she said this, her mind secretly called out, "Ai yo, something's wrong! I almost fell for his lie." She remembered how when he was little he used the "Toad Stance" to attack Wu Dunru; he had some kung fu foundation. Even if he hasn't made an inch of progress but knew she was about to strike with her palm, he would definitely block the attack. She thought, "Young man, young man, you're too clever, if you scrambled and waved your hands in a frantic state to block my attack, I might have believed your lie. But there is one point that doesn't make sense in your charade, you've left a flaw." She didn't reveal this and thought that she would watch him and see what other schemes he'll come up with. She looked at Zhao Zhijing and then at Yang Guo, and she just smiled slightly.

Zhao Zhijing saw Huang Rong test out a stance on Yang Guo who didn't fight back, he knew that Yang Guo had managed to conceal his kung fu from her, displaying even more signs that he was in the wrong. His anger erupted

and said loudly, "That bastard is very crafty; if Chief Huang couldn't find anything then let me try." He went over to Yang Guo and pointed to his nose and said, "Little bastard, you really don't know any martial arts? If you don't defend, I will not hold back, if you want to live or die, it's up to you." He knew that Yang Guo's kung fu was above his, but under his fatal attacks, there would be no other option for him but to reveal the truth. If he still kept up this charade, he might as well take his life. The worst that would happen is he will lose the Guo's couple's friendship and be heavily punished by his sect's leader. Fury filled his chest, hate filled his guts, he thought, "You knew that Chief Huang wouldn't harm your life that's why you were so bold; you acted very well. Let's see if you still have the guts to keep up the charade?" His sleeve waved, he was about to attack.

Guo Jing called out, "Please wait!" He was afraid that he would harm Yang Guo's life and wanted to intervene.

Huang Rong tugged his sleeve and quietly said, "Don't do anything." She knew that Zhao Zhijing was extremely angry, his attacks would not be light, and Yang Guo had no way to avoid his attacks by mere luck. When he defends, the truth will come out. How would Guo Jing know that there are so many other things going on here; he was worried but knew that his wife's plans had never failed before. He didn't say anything else and just took one step forward, if there was a real danger he would still be able to make a rescue.

Zhao Zhijing said to Sun Bu'Er and Yin Zhiping, "Martial Uncle Sun, apprentice brother Yin, that bastard is pretending that he doesn't know martial arts, I am forced with no other option but to test him myself. If he keeps it up to the end and I kill him, please be a witness for me in front of our leader, Martial Uncle Qiu and my Master."

Sun Bu'Er knew what had happened with the incident of Yang Guo expelling himself from the Quanzhen sect. She saw him using his wits and craft to make sure Zhao Zhijing could not back down and make sure it was Quanzhen sect who was in the wrong. She hoped Zhao Zhijing would force him to use his martial arts and chuckled, "That disobedient disciple and traitor to our Quanzhen sect. Killing him wouldn't be anything serious." She is an eminent Taoist, how could she tell someone to kill? Those words were actually meant to scare Yang Guo, wanting him to stop pretending.

Zhao Zhijing had his Martial Uncle's support and was even more daring; he raised his right foot and aimed for Yang Guo's abdomen. The stance "Flying Past Heaven's Mountains" had softness within its hardness; in the yang there was yin, it was a really lethal stance. Though this kick was very powerful, it wasn't very profound; it was a stance that is taught when one first enters the Quanzhen sect. It was a very ordinary stance when it is used, and as long as someone knows a little kung fu, they would be able to neutralize it. On the first day of practicing martial arts, the disciples of Quanzhen would first learn the stance of "Flying Past Heaven's Mountains" and then "Force of the Retreating Horse"; this was the stance to avoid the stance of "Flying Past Heaven's Mountains". One attack one defense, this was the most basic set of kung fu. By using this stance, he wanted Guo Jing and Huang Rong to understand one thing, "Even if I did not teach him advanced martial arts, could it be that I didn't even teach him the basic kung fu of our sect's very first lesson?"

When Yang Guo saw the kick come, he did not use the "Force of the Retreating Horse"; his left hand hung down protecting his abdomen. Zhao Zhijing saw that he was so bold that he didn't even move or dodge, he didn't hold back

on his kick and kicked straight across, when the tip of his foot was about three inches away from Yang Guo's abdomen, he saw in the moonlight Yang Guo's left thumb slightly sticking out, aiming for his right foot's ankle 'Large Opening' pressure point. If he kicked out with power, before the tip of the foot had reached the abdomen, his pressure point will be sealed first; the opponent wouldn't actually seal the pressure point themselves. As the foot strikes his finger, it will be struck on the pressure point, sealing it in the process.

He was the best fighter of Quanzhen's third generation; in the midst of danger he quickly changed his stance, he turned and changed the direction of the kick, his right leg passing Yang Guo's side. At least he was able to avoid the trap but his body was off balance, and his face turned red.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were behind Yang Guo and didn't see his thumb, they thought it was because Zhao Zhijing was holding back, at the very last second he changed his stance. But Sun Bu'Er and Yin Zhiping could see this clearly. Yin Zhiping didn't say a word.

Sun Bu'Er stood up and shouted, "Little punk, very crafty!"

Zhao Zhijing's left palm hung in the air, his right palm aimed to chop across Yang Guo's left cheek; this stance of "Purple Lightning Striking through Words" was a refined stance of advanced martial arts. As the palm arrives halfway, the direction suddenly changes, originally aimed to the left cheek it now was aiming to chop down on his neck on the right side. How could he know that Yang Guo has learned the "Jade Heart Manual" to a very fluent state, the manual was the Black Star of Quanzhen's kung fu. Every lethal fist techniques and palm stances that Wang Chongyang invented were all defeated ingeniously by Lin Chaoying years ago. When Yang Guo saw his left palm

hanging in the air, he quickly covered his head with his arms as if he was scared, his left index finger hid itself by his neck on the right side but because he covered it with his right palm, Zhao Zhijing had no way to see it. As soon as the palm arrives, Yang Guo's right hand slanted slightly, a 'bo' sound was heard as the finger sealed the 'Back Stream' pressure point on Zhao Zhijing's palm.

Once again, it was Zhao Zhijing himself who forced his own pressure point to be sealed by hitting it on his finger; Yang Guo knew what the opponent would do and prepared his finger in place. Once Zhao Zhijing's pressure point on his palm was sealed, his arm immediately went numb; he knew he had fallen into his trap. He was furious and his left leg came sweeping out.

Yang Guo called out, "Oh no!" He bent his left arm and placed his elbow two and a half inches above his waist. When Zhao Zhijing's left leg came, the elbow struck his ankle's 'Reflecting Sea' and 'Great River' pressure points. This kick came out of fury; it was kicked with great strength. The pressure points were severely struck, his left leg went numb and he kneeled down on the floor.

Sun Bu'Er saw that her martial nephew was being embarrassed, she stretched out her left arm and pulled him up with her hand and then pushed his back a few times, unsealing his pressure points. Yang Guo quickly backed away. He saw that she unsealed Zhao Zhijing's pressure points with ease. He knew that her martial arts were far superior Zhao Zhijing's. Yang Guo was afraid of her and kept a distance between himself and Sun Bu'Er. Though she had been practicing Taoism for many years, she was still very stubborn and strong. She saw that his kung fu was extremely crafty, it looked like that it was their sect's Black Star; if she fought herself she might not be able to win, so she called out, "Let's go!" She then said goodbye to Guo

Jing and Huang Rong. Her sleeve swept out and she leapt out of the study through the window, and then jumped up onto the roof.

Yin Zhiping had seemed to be out of it all this time; he wanted to tell Guo Jing and Huang Rong what happened when Zhao Zhijing angrily shouted, "What more is there to talk about?" He pulled on his sleeve and the two of them leapt out of the window and then followed Sun Bu'Er.

With Guo Jing's and Huang Rong's awareness, of course they knew that Zhao Zhijing's pressure points had been sealed, but Yang Guo had not stretched out his finger, could it be that a eminent person was secretly helping him?

Guo Jing immediately went over to the window to take a look, where was the person? Guo Jing thought that as Zhao Zhijing was about to kill him, he couldn't bear to and so pretended to have his pressure points sealed and left in the confusion. However, Huang Rong could see this was the doing of Yang Guo, firstly because she was behind him and couldn't see his elbow and secondly, she was not aware of the existence of a martial art skill such as the "Jade Heart Manual". This enabled the prediction of the enemy's reaction and countered the skills of Quanzhen without reply; she wasn't able to understand exactly what had happened. She wouldn't act like Guo Jing and view others with the heart of a gentleman. When she saw the four Quanzhen Taoists sweeping their sleeves and leaving, it was very impolite, secretly, she was furious. She pondered and turned around to see Guo Fu's dark green shoes sticking out from under the bookshelf, she immediately called out, "Fu'er, what are you doing here?"

Guo Fu laughed and came out with a silly look on her face and said, "Me and the Wu brothers are looking for a book to read."

Huang Rong knows that the three of them have never been interested in books, why would they have suddenly taken an interest today? One look at her daughter's face and she knew that they must sneaked in earlier to hide so they can eavesdrop on what was happening. As she was about to tell them off, a Beggar Clan member came with news of a guest arriving, she took a look at Yang Guo and then she and Guo Jing went out to meet the guest.

Guo Jing said to the Wu brothers, "Brother Yang is a childhood friend of yours, take good care of him."

The Wu brothers had never been friendly with Yang Guo; right now they looked at the state that he was in. They knew that he hadn't learned any martial arts at the Quanzhen sect and was called 'bastard, animal' by his Master. They looked down on him even more; they summoned a servant and told him to take care of Yang Guo.

However, Guo Fu was very curious about Yang Guo, she asked, "Brother Yang, why doesn't your Master want you?"

Yang Guo said, "There are many reasons. I'm dumb and lazy, I have a bad temper and I don't know how to treat the relatives of my Master well. 'Buying horse whips and donkey whips and what nots'."

When the Wu brothers heard this their faces changed, Wu Xiuwen was the first who couldn't control himself anymore and shouted, "What did you say?"

Yang Guo said, "I said I'm useless, I don't know how to please my Master."

Guo Fu smiled captivatingly, and said, "Your Master is a Taoist, how would he have a daughter?" Yang Guo saw her smile, it was as if a flower suddenly blossomed, bright, beautiful and glamorous, unconsciously his heart jumped,

his face went red and he turned his head away. Guo Fu had managed to control the Wu brothers and could mess them around long ago, now she saw Yang Guo turn his head away and knew that he was moved by her beauty, she was very proud of herself.

Yang Guo looked to the west and saw a couplet on the wall, the first line said: 'The image of peach blossoms descending with the divine flying sword', the second line was 'The jade sea brings new waves according the jade flute'. Yang Guo has seen this couplet in the practicing sword pavilion on Peach Blossom Island. He knew that it was Huang Yaoshi who wrote it but underneath this couplet was signed 'The five useless people who were ill fated'. Compared to the three people in front of him, he was only a few years older but as he read and studied the writing it was as if he was ten years older. When he saw the words 'the five useless people', he remembered about himself, how all those close to him had either died or have gone away; he wandered the world alone, there was no difference between himself and a useless person. The pride he felt just now forcing Zhao Zhijing to scamper away disappeared; a sad, lamenting feeling filled his heart, he couldn't stop himself from dropping his head and pitying himself.

Guo Fu softly said, "Brother Yang, go and rest, I'll come and speak with you tomorrow."

Yang Guo calmly replied, "Fine!" He followed the servant out of the study and heard Guo Fu flare up at the Wu brothers, "I want to speak with him; can you two stop me? His kung fu is not good, I'll ask father to teach him."

End of Chapter 11.

Chapter 12 - The Heroes' Feast

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo said, "Miss Guo, please tell your parents that I've gone." Guo Fu was shocked and said, "You're fine, so why are you leaving?" Yang Guo

gave a dull laugh and said, "There's no reason, originally I came here for no real reason, and now that I've been here I feel I should go."

The next morning, while Yang Guo was eating breakfast in the hall, Guo Fu signaled him to the courtyard. The Wu brothers were at the side looking a bit troubled. Yang Guo was amused and went over to Guo Fu and asked, "You're looking for me?"

Guo Fu laughed and said, "Yes, come with me outside, I want to ask what you've done in the last few years." Yang Guo exhaled deeply, thinking that it wasn't easy to explain, even if he spoke for three days and nights he would not have finished, and how could he reveal these things to her?

The two of them walked shoulder to shoulder to the main door, Yang Guo slightly turned his head and saw the two Wu brothers following. Guo Fu had noticed a long time ago and pretended that she didn't see them and talked to Yang Guo. Yang Guo picked some insignificant events to talk about, he pushed and pulled making Guo Fu laugh. She knew that Yang Guo was keeping things from her but she still felt amused by his words. The two slowly walked to a Willow tree. Suddenly they heard a neigh; a skinny and scabby horse came hurrying over to Yang Guo, rubbing against him in an affectionate manner.

When the Wu brothers saw such an ugly horse, they couldn't hold themselves back and burst out laughing. They went over to the two. Wu Xiuwen laughed and said, "That precious horse is very special, only someone with your ability could one find a horse like that. When are you going to find me one like that?"

Wu Dunru said seriously, "That is a Da Shi Guo's (Great Master Guo's) priceless treasure, how could you buy it?"

Guo Fu looked at Yang Guo and then at the ugly horse, when she saw the two had the same dirty and pitiful appearance, she couldn't resist laughing. Yang Guo laughed and said, "I'm ugly, my horse is ugly, we're a match. The horses that the Wu brothers ride must be very spirited horses."

Wu Xiuwen said, "The horses that we ride are only a bit better than yours. Sister Fu's red horse, now that is a precious horse. You've seen it before when you were on Peach Blossom Island."

Yang Guo said, "So Uncle Guo gave the red horse to a girl."

The four of them chatted as they walked. Guo Fu suddenly pointed to the west and said, "Look, mother's teaching stick techniques again." Yang Guo turned his head and saw Huang Rong with an old beggar walking towards the mountainside, the two of them holding a stick in their hands.

Wu Xiuwen said, "Elder Lu is so dumb, he's been practicing the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" for so long but he still hasn't managed to learn it."

When Yang Guo heard the words "Dog Beating Stick Technique" his heart trembled but he didn't show any signs of it, he turned around and looked away, pretending to appreciate the scenery. He heard Guo Fu say, "The "Dog Beating Stick Technique" is the treasure of the Beggar Clan; my mother said that the mastery and ingenuity of the stances are unbeatable. It has the most powerful stances in the world of weapons; you can't just learn it in ten days or a fortnight. You said he's dumb, are you very clever?"

Wu Dunru sighed and said, "It's a pity that apart from the Chief of the Beggar Clan, no one is allowed to learn it."

Guo Fu said, "If you become the Chief of the Beggar Clan in the future, Chief Lu will impart it to you. Even my father does not know this skill, there's no need to cry."

Wu Dunru said, "How can I be the Chief of the Beggar Clan? Sister Fu, why did Master's wife select Elder Lu to replace her?"

Guo Fu said, "Over the last few years, my mother just held the title. The running of the clan is all done by Elder Lu Youjiao. All the many bothersome things that go on in the clan give my mother a headache. She said why is it necessary to have the name and not do anything; so why not pass the position on to Elder Lu and make it official. Once Elder Lu learns the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", my mother will pass on the position to him officially."

Wu Xiuwen said, "Sister Fu, how exactly do you use the "Dog Beating Stick Technique"? Have you seen it before?"

Guo Fu said, "I haven't seen it. Ah, I have seen it!" She picked up a branch off the ground and lightly attacked his shoulder and laughed, "It's like this."

Wu Xiuwen called out, "Fine, just see if I'll let you go now you've called me a dog." He stretched out his hand to grab her. Guo Fu laughed and jumped away. Wu Xiuwen chased after her. The two ran around a few times and returned to their original places.

Guo Fu laughed and said, "Little Brother Wu, don't get angry. I've got an idea."

Wu Xiuwen said, "Fine, tell me."

Guo Fu said, "We'll watch in secret, we can see exactly how special the "Dog Beating Technique" is." Wu Xiuwen clapped his hand in agreement.

But Wu Dunru shook his head and said, "If Master's wife finds out we are secretly trying to learn the skill she will lecture us severely."

Guo Fu said, "We are just going to watch, we're not trying to learn it in secret. Anyway, an ingenious and masterly kung fu such as this, how could you learn it after just a few glances? Big brother Wu, so do you count as someone who's amazing?" After this put down, he just smiled slightly. Guo Fu continued, "Last night when we were in the study eavesdropping, did my mother shout at anyone? You're just a little chicken. Little Brother Wu, let's go."

Wu Dunru said, "Fine, fine, your reasoning does make some sense; I'll go with you."

Guo Fu said, "Is it possible that you don't want to watch one of the world's best skills? It doesn't matter if you don't go, once I've learned it I'll come back and beat you with it." As she said this she raised her stick and waved it at him.

The three of them had heard about the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" a long time ago and were fascinated by it but they had never seen what it looked like. Guo Jing once discussed martial arts with them; he told them how years ago on Mount Jun Huang Rong used the technique at the Beggar Clan's gathering to beat everyone there and claimed the position of the Chief of the Beggar Clan. The three of them listened enchanted. Right now Guo Fu was encouraging them to take a look, though Wu Dunru spoke out against it, in his heart there wasn't anything he wanted to do more. He pretended to be coerced into it and all he's

doing is listening to Guo Fu's suggestion; if they are found out then his Master's wife can't blame him.

Guo Fu said, "Brother Yang, you come as well." Yang Guo was gazing at the faraway mountains as if he was absorbed in thought and didn't hear what they said. Guo Fu called out again and Yang Guo turned his head around, his face looked lost, he asked, "Fine, fine, follow you where?"

Guo Fu said, "Don't ask; just follow me."

Wu Dunru said, "Sister Fu, why do you want him to come, he won't understand; his dumb brain is going to make some noise, how can Master's wife not notice?"

Guo Fu said, "Relax, I'll take care of him. You two go first; brother Yang and I will follow. The four of us will make too much noise with our footsteps." The Wu brothers didn't want to but they knew they couldn't defy Guo Fu's orders. The two of them walked ahead discontentedly.

Guo Fu called out, "We'll hide in a large tree nearby first; my mother will not notice if we are careful and don't make any noise." The Wu brothers nodded in reply and quickened their steps.

Guo Fu glanced at Yang Guo and saw his clothes were extremely ragged and torn, she said, "When we get back I'll get mother to buy you some new clothes; once you've changed, you won't be as ugly."

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I was born ugly; even if I change clothes and tidy myself up I'll still be ugly." Guo Fu said fine and didn't take it to mind; she glanced at the backs of the Wu brothers and gave out a light sigh.

Yang Guo said, "Why are you sighing?"

Guo Fu said, "My mind is really troubled, you wouldn't understand."

Yang Guo saw a delicate redness on her face, her eyebrows slightly wrinkled, she really was an extremely beautiful girl. Compared to Lu Wushuang, Wanyan Ping and Yelu Yan, she was more beautiful than they. His heart was moved slightly and said, "I know why you are so troubled."

Guo Fu said, "That's strange, how would you know? You really are talking rubbish."

Yang Guo said, "Fine, if I guess correctly, you can't deny it."

Guo Fu placed her little white and tender finger against her right cheek, her pupils glimmered, a smile was on her lips and said, "Fine, take a guess."

Yang Guo said, "It's not simple. The Wu brothers both like you, they both try to please you, and it's hard for you to give up one of them."

After hearing this, Guo Fu's heart raced. He knows about this, the Wu brothers know about this, her parents know about this and even Ke Zhen'E knows about this. But it was hard for anyone to mention it; everyone knew in their hearts but no one mentioned a word about it. Now, Yang Guo suddenly mentioned this matter, she couldn't stop her face from going red; she was happy but sad, she wanted to laugh but also wanted to cry, droplets of tears rolled from her eyes.

Yang Guo said, "You're thinking 'Big Brother Wu is courteous and reliable, Little Brother Wu can keep me entertained. The two of them are both handsome, their martial arts are excellent and they treat me with respect and listen to me. The elder has his good points, the younger

has his strong points; I'm just one person, how can I marry two men?"

Guo Fu listened to him startled, after she heard his last sentence, she said, "Your mouth is full of rubbish, who wants to pay attention to what you say?"

From her reaction, Yang Guo knew he had guessed correctly, he quietly repeated, "I'm just one person, how can I marry two men?" After repeating it a few times, Guo Fu still seemed to have something on her mind; it was as if she didn't hear him.

After a while she said, "Brother Yang, tell me, who do you think the better of the brothers?" She asked this quite suddenly. Though she and Yang Guo were childhood friends, there was still some animosity between the two even though they not seen each other for a long time. Now that they're grown up, how can she reveal such things to him? Yang Guo is a lively person, as long as you don't get on the wrong side of him, he will joke with you, laugh with you, in a flash he will make you feel as if you were in a spring breeze, as if you were drinking a beautiful wine. Anyway, Guo Fu had gone over this hundreds and thousands of times in her mind. She felt that both of them had their good points; when it came to playing around and joking, she got on with Wu Xiuwen very well, but when it came to doing something serious Wu Dunru was much better. She was a girl going through puberty; she would alternate from being angry with them, or be pleased with them. She made the brothers fall in love with her; in her heart she was really troubled, she didn't know who to treat better. As she and Yang Guo raised this point she couldn't help herself but ask this question.

Yang Guo laughed and said, "I don't think either of them is good."

Guo Fu was startled and asked, "Why?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "If those two are good then what chance have I, Yang Guo, got?" He had been used to joking around with Lu Wushuang on the road and he didn't mean what he just said, he was just teasing her when he said it.

Guo Fu was stunned, she was a girl who was used to being pampered and treated well, no one has ever said half an offensive word to her. Right now she didn't know whether or not to be angry; she put on serious face and said, "If you don't want to say, fine, who wants to joke with you? Let's go." As she said this she utilized her lightness kung fu and hurried along the small path to the mountainside.

Yang Guo felt there was no point to this and thought, "Why am I mixing with these three? I'd rather be far away and be on my own!" He turned around and slowly walked away, thinking, "The Wu brothers think that girl is a goddess, they're afraid that she won't marry them. If they really marry her, and spend everyday with such a pretty yet bullying girl, they will definitely experience more pain than joy, huh; crazy people like them are very funny."

Guo Fu hurried for a while and assumed that Yang Guo would go after her and apologize; but after stopping for a while there was no trace of Yang Guo. She had a thought and said, "That person does not know martial arts, of course he won't be able to catch up. She turned around and returned to see that he had actually gone in the opposite direction. She thought this was strange and went over to Yang Guo. She asked, "Why aren't you coming?"

Yang Guo said, "Miss Guo, please tell your parents that I've gone."

Guo Fu was shocked and said, "You're fine, so why are you leaving?"

Yang Guo gave a dull laugh and said, "There's no reason, originally I came here for no real reason, and now that I've been here I feel I should go."

Guo Fu has always like crowded atmospheres; although she didn't think very highly of Yang Guo, listening to him joking felt fresher and newer than listening to the Wu brothers. She really didn't want him to leave, she said, "Brother Yang, we haven't seen each other a long time, I have many things to say to you. Anyway, tonight is the 'Heroes Feast, all the heroes from all over the world will be gathering here, why don't you want to experience this?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm not a hero, if I'm actually there, won't I just become an object of ridicule in front of all the heroes?"

Guo Fu said, "That makes sense." She pondered for a while and said, "There are many people in the Lu Manor who don't know martial arts, just eat and drink with the servants."

When Yang heard this he was very angry, he thought, "Little Bitch, you class me with nobodies." His face didn't show any signs of anger; he laughed and said, "That's a pretty good idea." He had wanted to leave but now had a change of heart, he decided he was going to do something that would embarrass and disgrace her. Guo Fu was used to being pampered and cared for. She wasn't wise and didn't understand worldly matters; she didn't have any ill intent in her words and didn't know that she had deeply offended someone.

She saw that Yang Guo had changed his mind, she laughed and said, "Let's go, if we're late and mother gets there first, we won't be able to peek." She hurried ahead with Yang

Guo following behind, he appeared out of breath and his footsteps seemed heavy showing that he was extremely clumsy and inept. They easily arrived in time at the place where Huang Rong normally taught Lu Youjiao the stick techniques. They saw the Wu brothers in a tree looking out. Guo Fu leapt up on the branch and then reached out her hand to Yang Guo pulling him up. When Yang Guo held her soft and warm hand, he couldn't stop his heart from stirring but immediately thought, "Even if you were ten times as beautiful, you can't compare with my Gu Gu."

Guo Fu quietly asked, "My mother hasn't arrived yet?"

Wu Xiuwen pointed to the west and quietly replied, "Elder Lu is practicing over there, Master and Master's wife went away to talk about something."

The only person that Guo Fu is afraid of is her father, when she heard that he was here she felt slightly uneasy. But when she saw Lu Youjiao holding a bamboo stick pointing to the east and stirring to the west, she forgot her fear and quietly said, "That's the 'Dog Beating Stick Technique'?"

Wu Dunru said, "Most likely. Master's wife was teaching him when Master came over and said he had something to discuss with her, he led her to the side while Elder Lu practiced by himself."

Guo Fu watched a few stances and felt that it was sluggish and didn't see anything special about it, she said, "Elder Lu hasn't learned it yet, and it isn't nice to watch, let's go."

Yang Guo saw that the stances that Elder Lu was using were identical to the ones that Hong Qigong taught him on top of Mount Hua, he chuckled in his heart, "That girl doesn't know anything."

The Wu brothers always followed Guo Fu's orders, they were about to jump down when they heard footsteps below; the Guo couple were walking over. They heard Guo Jing say, "Of course a decision about Fu'er's future can't be decided so lightly and suddenly. But Guo'er is young; it is unavoidable that young people will get into trouble. That business with the Quanzhen sect doesn't seem to be all his fault."

Huang Rong said, "I don't care about him causing trouble at Quanzhen. You are respecting the long friendship between the families of Yang and Guo, as you should. But Yang Guo is very crafty, the more I look at him the more he looks like his father, how can I relax and allow Fu'er to get married to him?" When Yang Guo, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers heard this, they all were shocked. The four of them knew that the Guo and Yang families had some ties but they didn't know that the previous generations had such deep ties. They could never have guessed that Guo Jing wanted to betroth his daughter to Yang Guo. That sentence affects all four of them, they all listened carefully, their hearts all racing.

Guo Jing said, "Brother Yang Kang was unfortunate that he ended up in the Jin palace and fell in with the wrong crowd. That's how he ended up like he did, in the end he died without a full corpse. (a soul?) Had he been in the care of Uncle Yang Tiexin, he would never have ended up like that."

Huang Rong sighed as she remembered the frightening events of that night at Jiaxing's Iron Spear Temple, her heart froze and she quietly said, "You could say that."

Yang Guo does not fully understand his background, he knew that his father died earlier by someone's hand but his own mother never revealed how he died or who killed him. Now he heard Guo Jing talking about his father and

mentioned 'ended up in the Jin palace and fell in with the wrong crowd' and 'died without a full corpse', his body quivered as if he was struck by lightning, his face turned grey. Guo Fu glanced at him and saw that he was looking like he was in a trance; she was frightened and worried that he would suddenly fall and drop to his death.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong sat down on a rock with their backs to the tree. Guo Jing lightly stroked Huang Rong's arm and warmly said, "Since you've been carrying our second child, your body has not been feeling well; quickly pass on all the responsibilities of the Beggar Clan to Lu Youjiao so you can rest properly."

Guo Fu was delighted, "So mother's having a baby, it'll be great to have a little brother. How come mother never told me about this?"

Huang Rong said, "I don't worry about the matters of the Beggar Clan that much. What I'm worried about is Fu'er's future."

Guo Jing said, "Since the Quanzhen won't take in Guo'er, I'll teach him myself. He's a very clever boy, once he's learned all my skills in the future, the brotherly vow between his father and I won't have been in vain." Yang Guo now knew that Guo Jing was his father's sworn brother, the words 'Uncle Guo' had a real meaning behind it, when he heard Guo Jing treating him with love in his words he was touched, tears almost rolled from of his eyes.

Huang Rong said, "That's what I'm afraid of, in case he's too clever for his own good. That's why I taught him to study and didn't teach him any martial arts. I hoped that he would become a deep, understanding and righteous man, even if he didn't know any martial arts. I would have happily betrothed Fu'er to him in that case."

Guo Jing said, "You have always planned everything to the last detail. This idea would have been good but with Fu'er's temper and martial arts, wouldn't having her to marry a weak scholar be a bit harsh for her? Tell me, how could she respect him? In my opinion such a couple would not get on well with each other."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "You're shameless! So the reason why we are such a good couple is because you have better martial arts than me. Hero Guo, come, come, come, let's have a duel."

Guo Jing laughed and said, "Fine, Chief Huang, give me your best." A light sound was heard as Huang Rong lightly patted on Guo Jing's shoulder.

After a while Huang Rong sighed and said, "Ah... this matter is complicated, even with Guo'er to one side, how can you separate the two Wu brothers? In your opinion, who is better?" Guo Fu and the Wu brother's hearts naturally jumped. This wasn't related to Yang Guo but he wanted to hear Guo Jing's opinion of the two.

He heard Guo Jing go 'hmm' and didn't say anything for a while, in the end he said, "I can't give my opinions on them on small matters. Only when a person is faced with an important matter will they show their real character." His voice became soft and said, "Fu'er is still young, we can still wait a few years. It could be that by then everything will have sorted itself out and we won't have to worry about it. There's no need to exert your self too much when teaching Lu Youjiao the stick techniques. In the last few days I've noticed that you don't seem to look well, I'm worried. I'll go and find Guo'er and talk to him." After he said this he got up and walked to the road.

Huang Rong sat on the rock and evened her breathing for a while before she instructed Lu Youjiao to come over and perform the techniques. Lu Youjiao displayed all thirty-six strokes of the technique, but Lu Youjiao had yet to understand the formulae. Huang Rong kept her patience and explained everything more clearly to him. The stances of the “Dog Beating Stick Techniques” are of course ingenious and masterly, and the formulae behind it extremely clever and ingenious, otherwise how could a little bamboo stick become the treasure of the Beggar Clan? Even with Ouyang Feng’s great skills he had to think deep and hard for a long while; how could the opponent overcome a stance or half a move? Huang Rong had used a month’s time to teach Lu Youjiao the stances. Now she recited the formulae and the principles behind the changes a few times, and told him to remember this. When it comes to understanding and being able to use the skill, it depends on the person’s ability and intelligence. The Master cannot teach the disciple this.

Guo Fu and the Wu brothers did not understand the stick techniques, they didn’t have a clue as to what was going on. What the ‘seal’ point was like, how the ‘coil’ aim was meant to be, how the eighteenth change transforms into the nineteenth change and how the nineteenth change can be altered into the twentieth change. The three of them wanted to leap down from the tree but were afraid that Huang Rong would discover them; they hoped that she would go through it quickly and then leave with Lu Youjiao. But who could have guessed that Huang Rong had decided to hand over the position of Chief to Lu Youjiao today before the ‘Heroes Feast’. She decided she would impart all the formulae to him now, if he didn’t understand it she would slowly go over it with him later on. According to the rules of the clan, when he takes over the position he must have learned the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”; this is why that

she spoke almost non-stop for around two hours. However, Lu Youjiao wasn't the most gifted and he was now old, his memory is fading, how could he remember all this in just a short time? Huang Rong kept on going, passage after passage; it was hard for him to remember everything. Huang Rong had met Guo Jing when she was fifteen and was used to being around someone who was slow and not the most gifted. She was angry about Lu Youjiao's poor memory. The rules of the clan states that the formulae to the technique must be passed on down orally and must not be written down. Otherwise writing it down and letting him slowly memorize it would have saved a lot of effort and energy.

That day on the peak of Mount Hua after both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng had suffered internal injuries in their duel, Hong Qigong had taught Yang Guo every stance and every change so that he could perform it for Ouyang Feng. But he didn't teach him a single word of the formulae that are needed when fighting an enemy. Hong Qigong thought that without the formulae, the techniques would be useless to him. This doesn't really go against the rules of the clan and at the time he wasn't fighting Ouyang Feng for real, so there was no need to pass on the formulae to the technique. Who could have guessed that Yang Guo would now hear the whole thing in its entirety? He was over a hundred times more gifted than Lu Youjiao; after just three recitations he was able to remember the whole thing without forgetting a word, but Lu Youjiao still wasn't able to remember as he recited it ambiguously.

When Huang Rong became pregnant for the second time, she became careless one day while meditating and disturbed the chi of the fetus; because of this she has become very weak. Today she had taught for over half a day and had become very tired, she sat on the rock and rested,

she closed her eyes for a while and then called out, “Fu’er, Ru’er, Wen’er, Guo’er, come down at once!”

The four of them were shocked and thought, “So she knew we were here long ago!”

Guo Fu said, “Mother, you really are great, nothing can be kept from you.” As she said this she used a stance of “The Forest Sends a Sparrow” and lightly leapt down in front of her. The Wu brothers followed while Yang Guo climbed down slowly.

Huang Rong gave a ‘heng’ sound and said, “You wanted to steal a look with your kung fu? If I couldn’t even notice you little rascals, I’m afraid that when that I’m traveling around Jianghu I’d be ambushed in half a day.”

Guo Fu felt embarrassed by her mother’s comments but knew that her mother was lenient and wasn’t afraid of being scolded by her. She laughed and said, “Mother, I brought these three along to take a look at the world famous “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, but who knew that when Elder Lu uses it, the skill doesn’t look good at all. Mother, perform the skill for us.”

Huang Rong laughed and took the bamboo stick from Lu Youjiao’s hand, she said, “Fine, watch out, I’m going to trip a little puppy.”

Guo Fu concentrated on her lower body, as soon as the bamboo stick comes towards her, she will immediately jump and avoid the trip. Huang Rong’s bamboo stick flashed across, Guo Fu quickly leapt up, her legs were half way away from the ground when the bamboo stick came across and skillfully and lightly tripped her up. Guo Fu got up and called out, “I’m not taking about that! It was my fault.”

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Fine, you chose what you want to do."

Guo Fu steadied herself in the Mount Posture and stood solidly, she had another thought and then said, "Big brother Wu and little brother Wu, come to my side and get into the Mount Posture as well." The Wu brothers did as they were told and stood solidly. Guo Fu stretched out her arm and hooked it around the Wu brothers' arms combining the strength of the three, as solid as Mount Tai. She said, "Mother, I'm not afraid of you, only father's "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" can push us."

Huang Rong gave a slight smile and waved the stick across the three's faces, a strong gust of wind rushed upon them. The three of them all moved backwards to avoid it, the Mount Posture of the lower body loosened as a result. Huang Rong's bamboo stick returned and used the 'turn' formulae, the stick brushed across the three's legs, the three of them could not stand steady and all fell down at the same time. At least the three's kung fu had a good foundation, their bodies had just touched the ground slightly and they up immediately. Guo Fu called out, "Mother, that's just trickery; I'm not taking about that either."

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Just now I passed on the eight formulae to Lu Youjiao, 'trip', 'chop', 'coil', 'poke', 'stir', 'lead', 'seal' and 'turn'; which one uses reckless strength? You said this is trickery, that's correct, in the martial arts, ninety percent of it is used to trick someone, as long as you've tricked a skilled fighter, you've won. Only your father's "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" type of martial arts uses real kung fu to battle and doesn't use any sort of trickery. But how many people in the world can reach such a stage?"

These words made Yang Guo nod in secret, he remembered the formulae that Huang Rong had recited and combined it with the stances that Hong Qigong taught him, the ingenuity and mastery behind it really was boundless. Though Guo Fu and the others understood what Huang Rong said, they didn't appreciate the meaning behind it. Huang Rong continued, "The "Dog Beating Stick Technique" is Wulin's most unique kung fu, it forms a branch on its own, and does not involve any other sect's kung fu. If you just learn the stances but don't know the formulae to accompany it, it is useless. Even if you are extremely clever it will be very difficult to come up with formulae to accompany the stances. But if you just know the formulae without me personally teaching you the stances, and only know the eight words 'trip', 'chop', 'coil', 'poke', 'stir', 'lead', 'seal' and 'turn', the result is the same. Because of this I'm not afraid of letting you four rascals eavesdrop. If I teach any sort of kung fu, without my permission, you must not eavesdrop or practice in secret ever, understand?"

Guo Fu agreed and laughed, "Mother, why should I try to practice your kung fu in secret? Could it be that you have other skills that you dare not teach me?"

Huang Rong used the bamboo stick to lightly hit Guo Fu's behind, she laughed, "Go and play with your two Wu brothers. Guo'er, I want to speak with you. Elder Lu, take your time, if you can't remember it all I'll teach you again tomorrow." Lu Youjiao, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers went on their way back to the Lu Manor, only Yang Guo remained.

Yang Guo's heart raced, he was afraid that Huang Rong knew that he had secretly learned the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" and now wanted to take his life. Huang Rong saw the frightened expression on Yang Guo's face; she took his hand and told him to sit down on the rock. She softly

said, "Guo'er, there are many things that I don't understand about you, if I ask you, I know you won't tell me. But I can't blame you. When I was young I was extremely eccentric, your Uncle Guo had to tolerate me in everything I did." As she got up to this point, she lightly sighed and then a smile came across her face as she remembered the times when she vented her anger when she was younger. She continued, "I didn't teach you martial arts because I wanted what's best for you, who could've known that this caused you to suffer many hardships instead. Your Uncle Guo loves and adores me; of course I will do my best to repay his love. He has great faith in you and hopes that you will become a great man. I will do my best to help you so his wish can be granted. Guo'er, don't ever disappoint him, please!"

Yang Guo has never heard Huang Rong speak to him like this before, soft, gentle and sincere, he saw her eyes were filled with love and he couldn't stop himself from being moved, hot blood rose to his chest and he groaned. Huang Rong stroked his hair and softly said, "Guo'er, I won't keep anything from you anymore. In the past I didn't like your father, which is why I have always disliked you. But from now on, I will treat you well; once my body has recovered I will teach you all the martial arts I know. Uncle Guo said he will do the same thing as well."

Yang Guo was feeling sadder, he cried even louder and choked, "Auntie Guo, there are many things that I've kept from you, I'll...I'll... I'll tell you everything."

Huang Rong stroked his hair and said, "Today I'm very tired, it won't be too late if you tell me in a few days, all you've got to do is be a good child and I'll be happy. When the Beggar Clan's meeting is on, come and take a look."

Yang Guo thought that important news such as the passing away of Hong Qigong needed to be revealed at the meeting,

he wiped his tears and kept on nodding.

The two of them spoke with their true feelings under the tree and managed to scatter away the mutual dislike that they used to have for each other. As they finished, Yang Guo's tears turned into a smile, he remembered the faith and love that Guo Jing had in his words to him, this is the first time he had felt so warm and affectionate since he and Xiao Longnu split up.

After speaking for a while, Huang Rong felt a slight pain in her stomach; she slowly got up and said, "Let's go." She held his hand and they slowly walked.

Yang Guo thought that he should tell her the news of the Hong Qigong's death and said, "Auntie Guo, I have something very important I have to tell you."

Huang Rong just felt the chi in her 'dan tian' was uncomfortable and not fluent; she frowned and said, "Tell me tomorrow, I'm... I'm not feeling well."

Yang Guo saw that she was pale and couldn't help from worrying, he felt her hand was slightly cold, he became bold and secretly circulated his chi and sent a warm energy from his hand into her. When he and Xiao Longnu were practicing the "Jade Heart Manual" on Mount Zhongnan, he had become very fluent in this technique of passing energy through the palms. But he was afraid that his and Huang Rong's internal energy would clash with each other so at the start he only sent a little; afterwards when he felt no resistance, he started to increase the energy. Huang Rong felt the internal energy that he was passing on was soft and concentrated; it was very different to the internal energies of the Quanzhen sect. It was soft and fluid, it wasn't below the skilled fighters of Quanzhen, her body had a use for it and in a short while she felt the opposing chi and her blood

flow became more fluid and comfortable, her cheeks glowed, she was surprised, "Where did the child learn this advanced internal energy?" She smiled at him.

Just as she was about to ask him, Guo Fu called out from afar, "Mother, mother, guess who's here?"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Today all the heroes of the world are gathered here, how do I know who's here?" She suddenly had a thought and said happily, "Ah, it's the Wu's Martial Uncles; I haven't seen them for many years."

Guo Fu said, "Mother, you are really clever, how did you get it in one guess?"

Huang Rong smiled and said, "What's hard about that? The Wu brothers never leave your side, since they're not following, it must be because their relatives have arrived." Yang Guo has always been assured of his intelligence but when he saw that Huang Rong predicted things like a god, he couldn't stop himself from being startled and in awe of her.

Huang Rong continued, "Fu'er, congratulations, you can learn another advanced martial art but I'm afraid that you might not be able to learn it."

Guo Fu asked, "What kung fu?"

Yang Guo blurted out, "The 'Solitary Yang Finger'!"

Guo Fu ignored him and said, "What do you know? Mother, what kung fu is it?"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Hasn't brother Yang mentioned it?"

Guo Fu said, "Ai... so mother told you." Yang Guo and Huang Rong both smiled and didn't say anything. Huang

Rong thought, "Guo'er is very intelligent, he's ten times cleverer than the Wu brothers. And there's no need to mention Fu'er. He knows that the "Solitary Yang Finger" is Reverend Yideng's skill, the Wu brothers' Martial Uncles are here, and they will pity the Wu brothers because of their parents and will definitely teach them the "Solitary Yang Finger". The brothers are always trying to please Fu'er, whatever they learn will be passed onto her."

Guo Fu was surprised, "Why did mother tell Yang Guo first, could it be that she wants to betroth me to that little beggar?" When she thought about this, she gave Yang Guo a look and put on a silly face.

Reverend Yideng of Dali has four disciples: 'Fisherman, Woodsman, Farmer, and Scholar'. The Wu brothers' father Wu Santong is the third disciple, Farmer. Ever since the battle with Li Mochou where he was wounded, he hadn't been seen since. The ones that have arrived for the 'Heroes Feast' today are the Fisherman, Si Shuiyuyin and the Scholar, Zhu Ziliu. Whenever Huang Rong and Zhu Ziliu meet, they start to battle with their wits. They haven't seen each other for over ten years and as soon as they saw each other, they were at it again. After the greetings, Si Shuiyuyin and Zhu Ziliu found a room and they indeed did start to teach the "Solitary Yang Finger" to the Wu brothers.

That morning, the Lu Manor was filled with countless heroes and good men; though the Lu Manor was large, there were people everywhere. After lunch, the members of the Beggar Clan assembled in the forest outside the Lu Manor. The ceremony of the old Chief passing the position to a new one is the grandest ceremony in the Beggar Clan. All the members from the east, south, west and north no matter what rank gathered here. The heroes that were

invited to the Lu Manor were also invited to watch the ceremony.

Over the last ten years or so, Lu Youjiao had helped Huang Rong in running all the matters of the clan; he was just, he did things boldly and accepted the consequences, the members from the 'dirty' clothed and 'clean' clothed factions all respected him. Elder Jian of the 'clean' clothed faction had passed away, Elder Liang has been incapacitated by illness and Elder Peng had revolted and left. There wasn't anyone that could challenge for the position of chief; this is why this year's ceremony proceeded smoothly. Huang Rong acted accordingly to the clan's rules, after passing on the clan's historic treasure, the Dog Beating Stick, to Lu Youjiao, she and the rest of the members spat on him to complete the procession. His face and body was covered in spittle.

Yang Guo saw that this procession was extremely strange. He was just about to go and tell them the news of Hong Qigong's death when suddenly an old beggar leapt up onto a rock and said loudly, "Chief Hong Lao has an order, he told me to tell everyone." When the clan members heard this they all gave a cheer. They hadn't had any news from Hong Qigong for over ten years, they all missed him, now they heard that he had news, they all called out in joy. An old beggar in the crowd called out, "Blessings to Elder Hong Lao!" The crowd all cheered, their voices really shook the earth. Cheer followed after cheer, and only after a while did it cease.

Yang Guo saw that everyone was moved, some even had tears on their faces, he thought, "If a man can achieve respect like this, his life will not be in vain. Look at all these people's joy, how can I tell them that Hong Qigong has passed away? Never mind the fact that I'm a nobody; if I tell them such news they might not believe me. Once they hear

this there'll be chaos, this isn't good news anyway, why spoil things for them?" He continued his thought, "If they asked 'how did Hong Qigong die', I can't keep the fact that he was dueling with Godfather from them. The Wu brothers know that I've learned the "Toad Stance" from Godfather, what reason have they got not to tell everyone this? There are many beggars here and it would be unavoidable for some of them to be suspicious that I might have helped my Godfather kill Chief Hong Lao. I'll have no way to argue against hundreds of mouths. After the meeting I will explain everything carefully to Auntie Guo and allow her to tell them the news." He thought that it was fortunate for him that the old beggar dashed out and allowed him time to think, if he blurted it out, he would have caused himself a lot of trouble. He heard the old Beggar say, "Half a year ago, I was on the Guangnandong road in the Shao province and met Elder Hong Lao in Xingjun, and drank wine with him. He's very healthy and his appetite is great; his drinking ability is the same as before and it's still the only one of its kind."

The crowd of beggars all cheered with delight again; within the cheers were sounds of laughter. That old beggar interrupted and continued, "Over the last few years, Chief Hong Lao has killed many unscrupulous officials and evil scoundrels who have terrorized our citizens. He said he had heard news that there are five evil bastards called the 'Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border' who are following the orders of the Mongols. They have done many evil things in places like Chuandong and Huguang, he said that he was going to take a look himself and if it is true, of course he's going to take their lives."

A middle-aged beggar got up and said, "The 'Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border', they caused trouble a while back, but they move without a trace, our brothers in Chuandong were

not able to find them. Recently, there has been no news of them; Chief Hong Lao must have sorted out this problem.” The beggars and heroes who watched the ceremony all applauded.

Yang Guo was gloomy, “How would you people know that after Chief Hong Lao and my Godfather made the ‘Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border’ into invalids, the two of them left the world not long after.”

The old beggar continued, “Chief Hong Lao said, ‘Right now the world is in a mess, the Mongols are slowly invading southwards, eating into our Song land. Those in our clan must have loyalty in our hearts, swear to kill our enemies and defend against aggressors with all our might.’ All the beggars agreed and their spirits soared. The beggar said, “The government is in a mess, corrupt ministers hold the power, and we can’t expect some rotten officials to protect the people and defend the land. They’ll never be able to do this. The foreign aggressors are getting closer, everyone must have the will to protect our country, and Chief Hong Lao ordered me to tell all of our brothers to remember the word ‘loyalty’.”

All the beggar clan members responded; they all called out, “We swear to follow Chief Hong Lao’s orders.”

Yang Guo had never been taught much since he was young and didn’t know how important the word ‘loyalty’ is; he saw the beggars all trembling with justice and righteousness, and he couldn’t stop himself from being touched. He felt that his making fools out of the Beggar Clan members before was wrong.

After the meeting, the clan’s matters were discussed; there was no need for the outsiders to listen and they took their leave.

When evening came, the Lu Manor was filled with lanterns and candles, all glowing brilliantly. There were over two hundred tables all together in the main hall, side halls, back and front halls, and the courtyard; over half of the world's heroes attended this feast. This 'Heroes Feast' is an exceptional event, a once in a lifetime event; if the host didn't have so many acquaintances who all respected him, it would be difficult for anyone to invite so many heroes of the Wulin world. Guo Jing and Huang Rong accompanied the main guests and sat in the main hall. Huang Rong arranged a place for Yang Guo and he sat at the table next to hers. Guo Fu and the Wu brothers sat quite a distance away.

Guo Fu was surprised at first and thought, "That person doesn't know martial arts, why did mother give him such a good seat?" She had a sudden thought, and couldn't stop herself from being alarmed, "Oh no, crap! Father said he was going to betroth me to him, could it be that mother is listening to father?" The more she thought about it the more frightened she became; she remembered how she saw her mother holding Yang Guo's hand while walking, looking very close. She also thought about how her father and mother respected each other, if her father wants to do this, mother would not disagree. She was worried and angry, she thought, "How can I get married to that little beggar?" She wanted to cry.

Wu Xiuwen happened to speak at this time, "Sister Fu, look at where that punk named Yang is sitting. He counts as a hero?"

Guo Fu forced out, "If you've any skill then drive him away!"

The Wu brothers had originally just looked down on him but after hearing Guo Jing saying that he wanted to betroth Guo Fu to him, they made him their enemy.

Wu Xiuwen heard what Guo Fu said and thought, "Why don't I insult and embarrass him? He'll be humiliated in front of all these heroes. Master's wife has always favored those with a strong character, when the one named Yang trips up in public, Master's wife will not want him to be her son-in-law." He had just learned the "Solitary Yang Finger" from his Martial Uncle, now was a good time to test it, he said, "Since he wants to pretend that he is a hero, I'll let him show off and then make him lose face." He stood up and poured two cups of wine; he went over to Yang Guo and said, "Brother Yang, you must be proud of yourself regarding these last few years. I give you a toast."

When Yang Guo saw Wu Xiuwen coming towards him, he had seen him glancing over at Guo Fu incessantly and his face had a sly look, showing that he didn't have any good intentions. He thought, "He's come over here to give a toast, he must be up to something. But he wouldn't dare put poison in the wine." So he stood up and received the wine, he said, "Thank you." He drank the wine in one gulp.

Just at this moment, Wu Xiuwen stretched out his index finger and touched Yang Guo's waist. He turned his body to block the view of others, he had sealed Yang Guo's 'Laughing Waist' pressure point, according to his Marshal Uncle, if you use the "Solitary Yang Finger" to seal an enemy's 'Laughing Waist' pressure point, the opponent will laugh and call out. If the pressure point is unsealed, the opponent will keep on laughing without stopping.

Yang Guo had already put his body on guard, how could he fall for the surprise attack? With Yang Guo's present skills, he would never be ambushed by his opponent's surprise attack. With Yang Guo's temper, normally he would not take this ill intent and would definitely counterattack fiercely. If he hadn't caught Wu Xiuwen out then he would have sealed Wu Xiuwen's 'Laughing Waist' pressure point instead. But

after having that conversation with Huang Rong, he was feeling happy and relaxed, he thought, "Although there is some animosity between us, you are still Uncle and Auntie Guo's disciple, I won't mess around with you." He secretly circulated the internal energy that Ouyang Feng had taught him, in a flash all his bodies' veins circulated the opposite way, all his pressure points changed places, but because he wasn't upside down and he didn't have much experience with this type of kung fu. After one inhalation and one exhalation, his body reverted back to normal; he needed to circulate his internal energy again to reverse his veins. But this short period of time it was enough to render Wu Xiuwen's attack useless.

Wu Xiuwen saw that after touching his pressure point, Yang Guo had a little smile on his face, he was still sitting in his original position and there was no reaction from him. He was surprised and returned to his table. He quietly said, "Brother, how come the kung fu that Martial Uncle taught us doesn't work?" Wu Xiuwen told him what had just happened.

Wu Dunru chuckled and said, "Your stance must have been wrong or you've pointed to the wrong place."

Wu Xiuwen quickly said, "What's wrong? Take a look." He raised his finger and then pointed to his brother's waist; the appearance, stance and strength were exactly the same as the method that his Martial Uncle taught him.

Guo Fu's lips pursed and she said, "I thought that the "Solitary Yang Finger" was something amazing, huh! It doesn't look like its much use." She knew that the Wu brothers had learned the "Solitary Yang Finger" but she herself didn't know it. She knows that they will definitely teach her eventually, she still had a feeling of unhappiness in her.

Wu Dunru stood up and poured two cups of wine, he went over to Yang Guo and said, "Brother Yang, me and my brother haven't seen you for many years, now we meet again, junior also presents a toast to you."

Yang Guo laughed in his heart and thought, "Your little brother has already shown his skills, let's see what other great skills you have as the elder brother." He was holding up a piece of beef with his chopstick and didn't put it down; he stretched out his left arm to take the cup and laughed, "Thank you."

Wu Dunru didn't try to hide it, he stretched out his right arm, his sleeve carried a gust of wind, he stretched out his finger to seal the pressure point on Yang Guo's waist. Yang Guo saw that the finger was coming in fiercely, his kung fu of reversing his veins was limited and he was afraid that he would not be able to block this attack. He dropped his arm and used the slab of beef to protect his 'Laughing Waist' pressure point. This move started second but arrived first, Wu Dunru did not notice this, and his finger went forward and pierced the slab of beef. Yang Guo placed his chopsticks down and said, "After drinking wine, it would be best to follow it with a slab of beef." Wu Dunru raised his hand and saw his five fingers holding onto a large piece of beef, its juice dripping everywhere, he couldn't hold onto it but couldn't fling it away, he gave a furious stare at Yang Guo and scurried back to his seat. Guo Fu saw that he was holding a piece of beef, it was very strange and she asked, "What's that?"

Wu Dunru's face turned red, he couldn't reply. Just at this time, the Beggar Clan's new chief Lu Youjiao raised a cup and stood up. He gave a toast to all the heroes and then clearly said, "Our clan's Chief Hong Lao has passed on an order, and he said that the Mongols are invading south and commanded all our clan members to defend our country

against them with our lives. All the heroes of the world are gathered here today, everyone here has loyalty in their hearts, we need to discuss the situation and come up with a plan that will drive the Mongols away, never to come back to the land of the Song.”

After he finished, all the heroes stood up, a word here and there, everyone had the same thought. Most of the heroes that attended this feast are patriots, when they saw that their country was close to danger, they all were worried, and now someone has raised this issue, all the loyal and patriotic heroes responded.

A silver bearded old man stood up, his voice was like a bell as he said, “There’s a saying, ‘A snake without a head will not move’, we have loyalty in our hearts but without a leader we will not be able to accomplish our goals. Today, most of the world’s heroes are here; we need to elect a worthy, revered and respected hero who will take charge and lead us.”

A lot of them shouted out, someone called out, “Let the Senior take charge!” “There is no need to elect someone else!”

The old man laughed and said, “What sort of class does a rotten old man such as I belong to? The great fighters of Wulin have always been Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity. Central Divinity Elder Chongyang had passed away long ago, Eastern Heretic Island Master Huang does as he pleases by himself, Western Poison does not belong to our group; Southern Emperor is far away in Dali and is not a Song citizen. Only Northern Beggar senior Hong Lao can be the Chancellor of all the heroes here.” Hong Qigong is one of Wulin’s most eminent men, everyone agreed to this and started to clap, no one had any other suggestions.

A voice from the crowd said, "Of course Chief Hong Lao can be the Chancellor of the heroes here. Apart from him, is there another who is as skilled, as revered and has the ability to take on such an important position?"

The voice was clear; everyone looked in the direction of the voice but didn't see anyone. Actually, it was a very short person who had spoke out and was covered by the others around him. Someone asked, "Who said that?" The short man leaped on the table. He was about three feet tall, over forty years of age; his face exuded a serious air. A few of the crowd knew that he was a good man of Jiangxi, 'Short Lion' Lei Meng. The crowd wanted to laugh but when they saw his fierce eyes, they swallowed their laughter.

They heard him continue, "But Chief Hong Lao goes and comes as he pleases; over the last ten years he has only shown himself once. But when we discuss the important matter of defending against the enemy, but have no way to call on him, what should we do then?"

Everyone thought, "What he said does make sense."

Lei Meng said, "Everything we are doing today is for protecting our country, not for ourselves. We will elect a Vice Chancellor; since Chancellor Hong Lao is roaming around the lands, we will follow the Vice Chancellor's orders."

In the midst of shouts and applause, someone called out, "Guo Jing Hero Guo!" Someone else called out, "Chief Lu is the best candidate." Another person said, "The previous Beggar Clan chief is wise and clever, and she is the disciple of Chief Hong Lao, I elect Chief Huang." Someone called out, "Let the present Master Lu..." Another one called out, "The Quanzhen sect leader Ma Yu. The "Eternal Spring" Elder Qiu..." Everyone discussed this. In this chaos, four

people quickly entered the main hall; it was Hao Datong, Sun Bu'Er, Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping.

When Yang Guo saw they had returned he thought, "Huh, you want to go another round with me?" Guo Jing and Lu Guanying were delighted; they left their table to meet them. The Quanzhen sect is famous for its orthodox martial arts, if there were not any skilled fighters from Quanzhen attending today's 'Heroes Feast', of course their reputation will be tarnished. Hao Datong whispered into Guo Jing's ear, "There is an enemy coming to cause trouble, be careful. We have come back especially to bring this news."

Guo Jing pondered, the "Blithe Elder" Hao Datong is one of the skilled fighters of Quanzhen, there aren't many people in the world of Jianghu with better skills than him; he trembled slightly as he said these words, the enemy must be extremely powerful, he quietly asked, "Ouyang Feng?"

Hao Datong said, "No, it is the Mongol that I've suffered from before."

Guo Jing searched his mind and nodded, "Its Prince Huo Dou?" Before Hao Datong could reply, the sound of a horn blowing was heard outside.

Lu Guanying called out, "Greet the guest!" As soon as he finished, tens of people short and tall stood at the front of the hall.

There many heroes that were eating and drinking happily in the hall and all were slightly surprised when they saw these people suddenly enter, but they assumed that these people had come to attend the 'Heroes Feast'. They didn't see anyone they knew and didn't take much notice.

Guo Jing passed on this news to Huang Rong, the both of them stood up and along with the Lu couple, they went out

to meet the visitors. Guo Jing knew the elegant and prosperous looking Mongolian Prince Huo Dou; the sharp faced and skinny Tibetan monk was Huo Dou's apprentice brother Da'erba. Guo Jing had met the two before; though the two were extremely good fighters, their skills were below his, there was no need for him to be alarmed. He saw the two standing away from each other, a person in a red gown walked forward; the person was extremely tall and skinny. It was a Tibetan monk who looked like a bamboo tree; there was a groove on his head, like a plate. Guo Jing and Huang Rong glanced at each other. Huang Yaoshi had told them about the martial arts of the secret school of western Tibet before. When one has reached an extremely high level, the person's head will have a groove. This person has a very deep groove; could it be that this person's skills are extremely high? How come they had never heard about such a highly skilled fighter from the Western Tibet Jianghu world? The both of them were on guard. They bowed to greet the visitors at the same time.

Guo Jing said, "Everyone has come from afar, come in and have a few drinks." He knew that they were the enemy and didn't use any fake pleasantries. Lu Guanying ordered his servants to set up another table. The Wu brothers have always helped their Master and Master's wife in general affairs. They directed the servants and arranged for a table to be placed at the best position. They kept on apologizing to the guests as they did this and asked them to move their seats.

Guo Fu saw Yang Guo was sitting there comfortably without moving; she didn't like this one bit and thought, "You count as a hero? When all the world's heroes die, it still won't be your turn." She made a signal to Wu Xiuwen with her eyes and then mouthed in the direction of Yang Guo. Wu Xiuwen understood, he went over to Yang Guo and said, "Brother

Yang, you need to move your seat a little.” He didn’t wait for his reaction and instructed the servants to move his cup and chopsticks to the table in the furthest corner in the room. Yang Guo’s temper started to flare up, but he didn’t say anything and just chuckled to himself.

Prince Huo Dou said to the tall Tibetan monk, “Master, I’ll introduce you to the two most famous heroes in the central plains.”

Guo Jing was alarmed, “So he’s the Mongolian Prince’s master.”

The monk nodded, his eyes seemed to be open but also appeared to be closed. Prince Huo Dou said, “That person has been Mongolia’s Western Levy Right General Guo Jing...Hero Guo, and that is Mrs. Guo, she is the Beggar Clan’s Chief Huang.”

When the monk heard the words ‘Mongolia’s Western Levy Right General’ he suddenly opened his eyes and looked around, He took a look at Guo Jing’s face and then his eyes half closed again, he didn’t take the Beggar Clan’s Chief to heart.

Prince Huo Dou said clearly, “This is my mentor, the holy monk of Western Tibet; everyone calls him Jinlun Fawang. The reigning Mongolian Queen has assigned him the title of the First Protector of Mongolia.” Those words were said very clearly; all the heroes that were present heard everything he said. The crowd was stunned and looked at each other thinking, “We are here discussing the Mongols invading the South, where on earth did this Protector of Mongolia come from?”

Yang Guo was even more alarmed, he remembered how Hong Qigong and his Godfather praised the kung fu the ‘Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border’, calling it terrific. They

told them to tell their Grandmaster to come down and have a duel. Right now both Jinlun Fawang and the master of the 'Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border' Da'erba are here, while his Godfather and Hong Qigong have both passed away, he was sad. He knew that this tall and skinny Tibetan monk must be extraordinary.

Guo Jing didn't know how to confront these people, he just said calmly, "You have come from afar, please have a few drinks."

After three rounds of wine, Prince Huo Dou stood up and opened his fan, revealing a delicate and beautiful peony flower; he said with a clear voice, "We have not received a 'Heroes' invitation but we have come here to attend the 'Heroes Feast'. We are uninvited guests, but when I considered all the worthy and admirable people that would be gathered here, I had to take the risk. The gathering of the world's heroes is a rare event. In my opinion, a chancellor needs to be elected who will organize the Wulin world in the interests of the worlds' heroes, what does everyone think?"

'Short Lion' Lei Meng said loudly, "What you said is not wrong. We have already elected the Beggar Clan's Chief Hong Lao as our chancellor, now we are in the middle of the electing a vice chancellor, what are your views?"

Huo Dou chuckled, "Hong Qigong had passed away a long time ago. By electing a spirit as a chancellor, do you treat us all as dead people?" As he said this, all the heroes made a clamor, the Beggar Clan members were especially angry, all were shouting.

Huo Dou said, "Fine, if Hong Qigong isn't dead, then please invite him here."

Lu Youjiao raised the Dog Beating Stick twice and said, "Chief Hong Lao is roaming the world; he never stays in one place. How can you see him so easily?"

Huo Dou chuckled, "Without mentioning the fact that it isn't clear whether Hong Qigong is alive or dead, and even if he was alive and were sitting here, with his martial arts and virtue, how could he compare with my master Jinlun Fawang?" All the heroes of the world listened. "Apart from my master Jinlun Fawang; there isn't a second person who can take the position of the Chancellor of Wulin."

When the crowd heard these words, they all knew the reason these people had come here. They knew that the 'Heroes Feast' would not be in the best interests of Mongolia and so came here to compete for the place of Wulin's Chancellor. If Jinlun Fawang manages to take the place of Chancellor by virtue of his kung fu, the heroes of the central plains will of course ignore his orders. But the Han defensive force against the Mongols would have been severely weakened.

Everyone knew that Huang Rong was wise and ingenious; they all turned their heads and looked at her, thinking, "Even if these people's kung fu was a lot stronger, they will never be a match for the few thousands of us that are here. Whether it is one on one or a mass brawl, we won't lose. Everyone just listen to Chief Huang's instructions."

Huang Rong knew that today's matters would not be settled unless martial arts were used. A mass brawl will of course result in victory but the opposition will not be convinced. She said clearly, "Right now, all the heroes here have elected Hong Qigong to be the Chancellor of Wulin. This Mongolian gentleman has another suggestion and wants to elect a person that no one here has heard of or seen; someone called Jinlun Fawang. If Hong Qigong were here,

then they both could show their divine skills and duel to a result, but senior is roaming the world and enjoying life. Killing Mongols and getting rid of our country's traitors, he didn't predict that today you would come here by your own choice. He isn't here to greet you; when he hears of this news later on, he would definitely regret his absence. Luckily, Hong Qigong and Jinlun Fawang both have disciples, why don't we let the disciples represent their masters in this exchange?"

Most of the heroes of the central plains knew that Guo Jing's skills were terrifyingly good and now in the prime of his life, he could be said to be the world's number one fighter. Even if Hong Qigong came out right now, he might not be stronger than him. If he fights with the disciple of Jinlun Fawang, victory is certain, there is no way for him lose. Everyone called out and shouted loudly, shaking the tiles of the roof. When those in the side halls and back hall heard this news, they all rushed over. The front and back courtyard, the entrances to the room were full of people, everyone calling out to help enforce this suggestion. The numbers on Jinlun Fawang's side were small, their voices could not compete.

Years ago, Huo Dou had been defeated by Guo Jing in one stance. He thought that Guo Jing was a disciple of Quanzhen's sect; after that he looked into who he was and found out about his background. His apprentice brother Da'erba and he were afraid that even if the two of them went up at once, they would most probably lose to this disciple of Hong Qigong, Hero Guo. But if they didn't follow Huang Rong's suggestion, they would not be able to challenge for the position of Wulin's Chancellor. This change of events really was unexpected and they couldn't think of a way to respond.

Jinlun Fawang said, "Fine, Huo Dou, go ahead and compete with the disciple of Hong Qigong." Those words were extremely heavy, he said this all in one breath without a need to breathe in again. He had always lived in Western Tibet and thought that with Huo Dou's martial arts, he would have little competition in the central plains. The only people that he wouldn't be able to beat are the likes of seniors such as Northern Beggar, Eastern Heretic, and Western Poison. He didn't know that he had lost to Guo Jing before.

Huo Dou agreed but then quietly said, "Master, that disciple of Hong Qigong is amazing, this disciple is afraid that he will not be able to achieve victory. I do not want to tarnish Master's name."

Jinlun Fawang's face sank, and said, "Could it be that you can't beat someone else's disciple? Go now."

Huo Dou was in a very embarrassing situation; he had kept the matter of losing to Guo Jing away from his master. Right now he didn't dare to tell him about it in this final moment. He knew that his master has the ability to go through heaven and penetrate earth; he had no match under heaven. He thought that all that they had to do was to hurry to the 'Heroes Feast' and the position of Wulin's Chancellor will be in their hands. How could he have guessed that he would have to fight with Guo Jing? In this urgent situation, a fat man dressed in the clothes of a Mongolian official went over to him and whispered a few words into his ear. As soon as Huo Dou heard this he was delighted, he stood up and opened his fan, fluttering it a few times before he said clearly, "I have heard that the Beggar Clan has a treasured martial art, its called the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" or something; it is Chief Hong Lao's most powerful skill. Little Prince is brazen; I'll rely on my fan to break this skill. If I

break this skill, then it appears the martial arts of Hong Qigong are merely mediocre!”

At first, when Huang Rong saw someone whispering into Huo Dou’s ear, she didn’t take it to heart; suddenly she heard him mentioning the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”. In just a few words he had placed their most powerful fighter Guo Jing to one side; who exactly came up with this plan? She took a look at that Mongolian and then it became clear; she recognized that it was one of four elders of the Beggar Clan Elder Peng. So he has gone over to the Mongols; he is now wearing Mongolian clothes and has grown a beard. His hat hung down, covering his eyes and if she hadn’t studied him carefully, she would not have been able to recognize him. Only he would know that the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” is passed on from chief to chief only; though Guo Jing’s skills are high, he doesn’t know this set of kung fu. These words were deliberately aimed to challenge Huang Rong and Lu Youjiao.

Lu Youjiao had just started to learn the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, his understanding is limited and may not be able to use it; she herself will have to fight.

Guo Jing knew that his wife’s “Dog Beating Stick Technique” is ingenious; it would be able to beat Huo Dou. But in the past few months, her baby’s chi had moved, her body was not in tune, she cannot fight with someone else; so he got out of his seat and stood between the tables and said, “Chief Hong Lao has never used his “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, come and experience his “Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms”.”

Jinlun Fawang’s eyes half opened and half closed, he saw Guo Jing moving out of his seat and standing up, he had an extraordinary air about him. He couldn’t stop himself from

being secretly alarmed, “This person really is extraordinary.”

Huo Dou laughed and said, “At Chongyang Palace in Mount Zhongnan, we met once before; that day, you said that you are under the tutelage of Ma Yu, Qiu Chu Ji and the other Taoists; why are you now calling yourself a disciple of Hong Qigong’s?”

Guo Jing was about to reply when Huo Dou continued, “A person having many masters is a common thing. Today, it is an exchange of kung fu between Jinlun Fawang and Hong Qigong; though your kung fu is great, your skills come from a variety of schools, you cannot show Hong Qigong’s real abilities.”

His argument made some sense; Guo Jing was clumsy with words and had no way to rebuke.

The crowd all called out, “If you’ve got guts, then fight with hero Guo, if you haven’t scurry away with your tail hanging behind you.” “Hero Guo is Hong Qigong’s disciple, if he doesn’t qualify, then who can represent Hong Qigong?” “First suffer under the “Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms”, you’ll still have time to experience the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”.”

Huo Dou laughed towards the sky, as he laughed he circulated his internal energy, ‘ha’ ‘ha’ ‘ha’ ‘ha’, ‘he’ ‘he’ ‘he’ ‘he’; he drowned out the clamor made by the heroes; his voice shaking the flames of the candles in the hall. The heroes looked at each other, their faces losing color, they thought, “Who would have thought that such a young man, who looks like a well to do person, have such strong internal energy.” In a flash, it had become quiet.

Huo Dou said to Jinlun Fawang, “Master, we have allowed ourselves to be wronged by these people. At first, when we

heard that today is the 'Heroes Feast', we rushed to attend from thousands of li away, but who knew that these people are cowards. Let's go quickly, if you unluckily become the Chancellor of these people, it'll make our people say that you are in the same league as these people, won't that tarnish your great name?"

The heroes all knew that he was trying to anger them, wanting to force Huang Rong to come out and battle; but his words were extremely infuriating, it really was difficult for anyone to endure them.

In the midst of these shouts and calls from the crowd, Lu Youjiao showed his bamboo stick and walked forward, standing between the tables. He said, "I am the newly appointed Beggar Clan Chief Lu Youjiao, I have only learnt less than ten percent of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", I actually shouldn't use it. But if you insist on tasting the pain of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", I'll beat you with a few stances."

Lu Youjiao's martial arts was already profound, though he hadn't learned all of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", it had improved his martial arts a significant level. He saw that Huo Dou was around thirty years of age; he thought that even with a great teacher, his internal energy will not be profound. He saw that Huang Rong wasn't well, whether he wins or loses, he couldn't let her take the risk.

Huo Dou just wanted to ensure that he would not have to fight Guo Jing; he wasn't afraid of anyone else and immediately held his hand and bowed, he said, "Chief Lu, nice to meet you. There's no one better to exchange moves with than you."

Huang Rong was secretly anxious, but she remembered that Lu Youjiao was the newly appointed chief; since he had

made the challenge she couldn't stop him. Otherwise she will question Lu Youjiao's clout and show that her power is above the chief's; she had to allow him to fight for a while and then decide what to do afterwards.

The managers of the Lu Manor instructed the servants to move the tables, creating seven or eight tables' worth of space and added more red candles, lighting up the centre of the hall as if it were daytime.

Hou Dou called out, "Ready!" As he said this his fan swept across, a gust of wind threw itself towards Lu Youjiao, carrying a slight fragrance. Lu Youjiao was afraid that the wind carried poison and quickly darted out of the way of the wind. Huo Dou's fan waved out, a 'ca' sound was heard; the fan folded and formed an eight-inch long pressure point sealing stick, and was thrust towards the enemy's side. Lu Youjiao's bamboo stick went forward, he ignored the threat of having his pressure point sealed and used the 'coil' formulae to trip and lift. The "Dog Beating Stick Technique" really was extremely ingenious, its direction is extremely difficult to predict; Huo Dou lightly leapt up to avoid this but he couldn't have guessed that the stick would suddenly flip up fiercely and would hit his lower leg. He stumbled, leaped forward three steps and stopped himself from falling down.

The watching heroes all cheered and called out, "The dog's been hit!" "This will teach you the power of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique"!"

Huo Dou's face turned red immediately after this, he gracefully turned around and threw out a left palm. Lu Youjiao kicked out his left leg and swept with bamboo stick, the stick was in a flying dance, it kept on changing without stop.

Huo Dou was secretly alarmed, "The "Dog Beating Stick Technique" does live up to its name!" He concentrated and used all his strength with the fan in his right hand and palm with his left. Lu Youjiao has yet to complete the final stage of the stick technique, he had victory in his grasp many times but in the end it was a waste of his efforts. Guo Jing and Huang Rong watched from the side and kept on saying to themselves, "What a pity!"

After another ten stances or so, the weaknesses in Lu Youjiao's "Dog Beating Stick Technique" began to show themselves. Yang Guo saw every stance clearly and couldn't stop himself from frowning. Luckily the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" name is famous, and as soon as it was used, Huo Dou was struck in the lower leg. Huo Dou was worried and didn't dare get too close, otherwise Lu Youjiao would have lost long ago. Huang Rong saw that something was wrong and was about to call out and tell Lu Youjiao to come back when Lu Youjiao suddenly used a stance of "Hitting the Dog's Back from the Side", the bamboo stick flashed across and struck Huo Dou's left cheek. But his stance was too heavy; the lightness of the skill was lost. Huo Dou suddenly stretched out his hand and held the bamboo stick in his hand, he had no more worries and suddenly threw out a palm that struck Lu Youjiao in the chest and then followed it by a sweep, a 'ka la' sound was heard as Lu Youjiao's leg was broken. He spat out a pool of blood as he fell forwards. Two seven band members dashed forward to support him. When everyone saw how ruthless Huo Dou was, they were extremely angry and they all shouted and cursed.

Hou Dou displayed the gem green jade bamboo stick; he was proud of himself and said, "The Beggar Clan's treasure is the Dog Beating Stick, so it's nothing more than this." He wanted to insult the central plain's largest heroic clan. He

held the Dog Beating Stick in his two hands and wanted to snap it in half.

Suddenly a green image flashed, an elegant and beautiful young woman stood in front of him, she said, "Wait!" It was Huang Rong.

Huo Dou saw that her movements were extremely fast and was in shock, all he could say was, "You..." Her left hand swept across and her right hand scoured across his eyes. Huo Dou quickly stretched his arm out but by that time, Huang Rong had already snatched the Dog Beating Stick back. This stance of snatching the stick back is called, "Snatching the Stick from the Dog's Mouth" and is one of the extremely advanced stances of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique". Years ago at the Mount Jun Beggar Clan gathering, Huang Rong used this technique to snatch the Dog Beating Stick away from Yang Kang three times. The changes of this stance are extremely mysterious; when snatching the stick in a hundred ways there would be one hundred successes, even a stronger opponent cannot avoid this.

All the heroes cheered. Huang Rong returned to her seat with the Dog Beating Stick by her side, leaving Huo Dou in the middle of the room in an embarrassing situation. Though his martial arts were profound, he couldn't explain how Huang Rong snatched the stick away, he thought, "Could it be that this woman knows how to perform illusions?" He heard the onlookers ridiculing him; he glanced at his master and saw his face was not pleased. He thought that such a beautiful woman must have limited abilities so he called out, "Chief Huang, I have handed the Dog Beating Stick back to you, please come and exchange a few moves. You won't dare turn this invitation down will you?" As soon as he said this, indeed there were people who thought that it wasn't Huang Rong who had snatched back

the Dog Beating Stick, but it was Huo Dou who handed it back to her so they can duel. Only people with high martial arts could see that it was Huang Rong who had used force to take the Dog Beating Stick back.

When Guo Fu heard these words she was extremely angry, in her life she had never seen anyone who dared treat her mother with such disrespect. A 'shua' sound was heard as she took out her precious sword. Wu Xiuwen said, "Sister Fu, I'll help you vent your anger." Wu Dunru also had the same thought, the two of them leapt into the heart of the main hall at the same time.

One of them said, "My Master's wife's body is very precious."

The other one said, "How can she fight with a ruffian like you."

The other said, "First experience little Master's kung fu first before doing anything else."

Huo Dou saw that the two were young but their movements were steady, they have been taught by famous masters, he thought, "We have come here today to show off our martial arts and break the spirits of the Han martial artists, fighting a few more rounds will be great. But there are many of them and few of us, if we induce a brawl, things would be hard to handle." So he said, "All the world's heroes listen, these two little punks want to duel with me, if I do fight then I'm afraid that people will say I'm bullying them. If I don't I'm afraid that people will think that I'm afraid of them. Let's do it this way, we will agree to compete for three rounds, whichever side wins two rounds, then the place of Chancellor goes to them. The fight between Elder Lu and me does not count, we will start again. Does

everyone agree?" Those words were said with his status in mind, displaying his great generosity.

Guo Jing, Huang Rong and all the special guests discussed this quietly; they felt that it would be difficult to reject this suggestion. Today, apart from Huang Rong who cannot come out and fight, the strongest people here are Guo Jing, Hao Datong and Reverend Yideng's fourth disciple Zhu Ziliu. Zhu Ziliu is a citizen of Dali but he still had ties to this matter. Dali and Song depended on each other, and in the recent years Dali has suffered the oppression of Mongols; it could be said that they shared the same enemy. Never mind the fact that he had a very good friendship with the Guo couple, he was duty bound to help. They decided that Zhu Ziliu would battle with Huo Dou in the first round, Hao Datong with Da'erba in the second, Guo Jing and Jinlun Fawang in the final round. Whether or not this plan would assure victory was uncertain; suppose Jinlun Fawang's martial arts are so high that even Guo Jing can't withstand him. It wouldn't be inconceivable that they would lose all three rounds, and if that happens they would really have suffered a crushing defeat. Before the decision was definite, Huang Rong suddenly said, "I have a way to guarantee victory."

Guo Jing was delighted and was just about to ask her when suddenly wind sounds created by weapons could be heard, everyone turned their heads and saw the Wu brothers using their long swords fighting with Huo Dou and his fan. The Guo couple and the disciples of Reverend Yideng Diancang Yuyin and Zhu Ziliu were worried about their safety so all of them concentrated on the battle.

The Wu brothers heard Huo Dou was rude towards them in his words, calling them little punks, these words were heard by everyone, how could they live this down? Never mind the fact that they just saw their Master's wife snatch

the bamboo stick back from him. They thought that although he beat Lu Youjiao, it was because Lu Youjiao's kung fu wasn't up to scratch, not because that this person is terrific. They also thought that since they both had been taught great martial arts by Guo Jing, if one of them can't beat him the two of them will definitely be able to overcome him. They didn't care about competing over three or four rounds, they really were like newborn calves that were not afraid of tigers, the brothers signaled with their eyes and thrust out their swords together.

However, though Guo Jing's martial arts were high, he had yet to pass on most of his skills to his disciples. He himself understood the theories of advanced martial arts but when he was passing it on, he wasn't able to express clearly its meanings. The Wu brother's natural endowments were just average to normal, how much could they learn in just a few years? In just a few moves, their long swords were controlled by Hou Dou; they were unable to use them fully. Hou Dou wanted to show off in front of these people, he saw Wu Xiuwen's sword coming in and threw up his left index finger holding up the sword on the flat side, the fan waved across and the base struck the top of the blade, a 'zheng' sound was heard as the sword snapped in two. The Wu brothers were shocked, Wu Xiuwen quickly leapt out of the way, Wu Dunru was afraid that his brother would be hurt so he extended his sword towards Huo Dou's back forcing him to stop his attack. Huo Dou had predicted this move, he didn't turn back and folded his fan sending it backwards. The two weapons met, the fan hitting against the flat side of the sword, Huo Dou twisted his fingers around twice. Only his fingers moved but the Wu Dunru's sword followed the fan in turning around, his joints would definitely twist out of place if he didn't let go. He could only loosen his hand and let go of the sword. He leapt back and saw the sword flying

upwards, the sword glimmered in the candlelight before it fell down to the floor.

The Wu brothers were shocked and angry, although they were empty handed they were not afraid. Wu Dunru's left hand hung horizontally in the air, holding the position of a stance of "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms". Wu Xiuwen's right hand hung down, his left index finger slightly crooked; as soon as the enemy attacks he would use the "Solitary Yang Finger".

Hou Dou saw that these stances looked serious, he was wary and didn't dare to look lightly upon them, he thought, "Winning up to this point is enough, there is no need to refuse something good, asking for more is not in my interests." The "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" and "Solitary Yang Finger" are first class skills in the world of martial arts, though the Wu brothers' internal energy was weak, the stances they put out were perfect. When normal people saw it they didn't think much of it, but in the trained eyes of Huo Dou, he knew that it wasn't that simple, he laughed and then bowed with his hands, he said, "Please sit down, we are just trying to find a winner, not fighting to the death." His tone sounded a lot more polite.

The Wu brothers' faces showed signs of embarrassment; they knew that fighting empty handed with him will most probably result in an even more embarrassing defeat. The two of them hung their heads with a gloomy expression and retreated to the side, but not going back to where Guo Fu was. Guo Fu dashed forward and called out, "Wu Brothers, the three of us will go up and fight him again." The crowd looked on. Guo Fu's right hand held her sword and her left hand waved out, she said, "We three, apprentice brother and sister, will go up together."

Guo Jing shouted, "Fu'er, stop making trouble!" Guo Jing was the person that Guo Fu most feared; she could only retreat a few steps and stare angrily at Huo Dou. Huo Dou saw that she was beautiful and desirable, he laughed as he nodded his head. Guo Fu gave him a glance and turned her head away, ignoring him. The Wu brothers were really frightened that Guo Fu would ridicule them, now they saw her shielding them, showing care for them, they felt great comfort in their hearts.

Huo Dou opened his fan and fluttered it a few times and then said, "Of course that last battle does not count. Hero Guo, the three people from our side will be my master, my apprentice brother and I. My kung fu is the weakest; I'll be in the first round. Who have you elected to fight? Whoever wins or loses, it is now not a game."

Guo Jing heard that his wife had a plan for a guaranteed victory; he knew that she was cunning and intelligent and had hundreds of ideas. Though he didn't know what ingenious plan she had in mind he had great confidence in her and said loudly, "Fine, we will decide this over three rounds."

Huo Dou knew that the strongest person on the opposite side was Guo Jing, his master has no match on earth, he will definitely beat him. Though Huang Rong used a strange move to take the stick back, judging from her delicate and apprehensive appearance if she really fought she may not be that strong. The others don't even need any consideration, his eyes swept across the crowd and then said, "If anyone has another suggestion then please express it now. Once victory is decided, then the orders of the Wulin Chancellor must be followed."

The heroes wanted to agree but they had seen him defeat Lu Youjiao and the Wu brothers one after the other

sparingly; they didn't know what other abilities he hadn't shown yet, none of them dared to interrupt and all turned their heads towards the Guo couple. Huang Rong said, "You are competing in the first round, your apprentice brother in the second, your master in the third, that's decided and won't change right?"

Huo Dou said, "That is correct."

Huang Rong said quietly to those around her, "Our victory is assured."

Guo Jing said, "How?"

Huang Rong said quietly, "Now, the king wins when the third class 'si' (team of four horses) competes against his first class 'si'." After she said this she looked at Zhu Ziliu. Zhu Ziliu laughed as he continued quietly, "Beat the king by using first class 'si' against his second class 'si'; beat the king by using middle class 'si' against his third class 'si'. The result of these races was that Tain Ji lost the first one but won the last two and received a thousand gold bars from the king." Guo Jing looked blank; he didn't understand what they were talking about. Huang Rong whispered into his ear and said, "You're well versed in military techniques, have you forgotten the ingenious plan of the ancestor of military strategies Sun Bin?"

Guo Jing immediately remembered the times when he read 'Wu Mu Yi Shu' (a book containing military strategies) when he was younger; Huang Rong had told him a story; Qi's general Tain Ji and the King of Qi had a horse race, the stake was a thousand gold bars. Sun Bin taught Tian Ji a method that would guarantee victory; use his third class horses to compete against the King of Qi's first class horses, use his first class horses against King of Qi's second class horses, use his second class horses against the king of Qi's

third class horses. The result was two wins and a loss, winning the thousand gold bars. Now, Huang Rong was using this idea.

Huang Rong said, "Apprentice brother Zhu, with your "Solitary Yang Finger", beating that Mongolian Prince is not a hard thing to do."

Years ago, Zhu Ziliu had been a lawyer and a governor in Dali; he was an educated and intelligent man. The martial arts of the school of the Mu Li Duan's rely on one's understanding. When Zhu Ziliu first entered the tutelage of the Southern Emperor, his kung fu was the worst out of the four disciples 'Fisherman, Woodsman, Farmer, Scholar'; ten years later he moved up to second place, now his martial arts were much higher than his three older apprentice brothers. Reverend Yideng treated his four disciples equally, he taught them all the same kung fu; in the end it was Zhu Ziliu who had understood the most, especially the "Solitary Yang Finger", he had refined it to a superb state. Right now his kung fu could not compare with Guo Jing, Ma Yu and Qiu Chu Ji but he was better than Wang Chuyi, Hao Datong and the others.

When Guo Jing heard his wife say this he interrupted, "Asking Taoist Hao to fight Jinlun Fawang may be a bit too risky. If the victory or loss won't affect the overall result, then I'm afraid during that round the enemy might too be ruthless, it would be difficult to defend against him." He spoke frankly and didn't care that he counted as the first class 'si', regarding Hao Datong as the third class 'si' may be a bit too impolite.

Hao Datong knew that this duel will affect the fate of the country; this was not the normal duels for fame that occurs frequently in the world of Wulin. If the position of the Chancellor of Wulin is taken by the Mongolian Protector,

not only will the Han martial artists lose face, they will also lose their spirit. The goal of uniting together and fighting against the invaders will be unachievable, he said, "There is no need to worry about that, as long as it'll help my country, losing my life to that Tibetan monk is not important."

Huang Rong said, "All we need to do is to win the first two matches, then there will be no need for the third match." Guo Jing was delighted and agreed.

Zhu Ziliu laughed and said, "I have an important mission; if I lost to that Mongolian Prince then I'd suffer a lifetime of insults from the world's heroes."

Huang Rong said, "There's no need to be modest, please go ahead."

Zhu Ziliu went to the middle of the hall and saluted Huo Dou with his hands and said, "In the first match, it will be me who'll be asking for some advice. My surname is Zhu first names Ziliu; the things that I love most in life are poetry and literature, my kung fu is very coarse. I have come to request some pointers from you." As he said this he searched himself, from his sleeve he took out a pen, he circled it a few times in the air, looking completely like a scholar.

Huo Dou thought, "These types of people will have profound skills, I cannot take it easy." He held his fists and returned the greeting and said, "Little Prince requests pointers from senior, please show your weapon."

Zhu Ziliu said, "Mongolians are a barbaric nation, they have yet to be enlightened, since you want some pointers, then I will point you in the right direction."

Huo Dou was furious, "You insult my country; then I can't spare you." He opened his fan and said, "This is my weapon,

are you going to use a saber or a sword?"

Zhu Ziliu wrote the word 'pen' in the air and laughed as he said, "In my life I have always been associated with a pen; how would I know how to use other weapons?"

Huo Dou concentrated on his pen, he saw the bamboo tube and the brush head, at the tip of the pen was half an inch of black ink, there was nothing special about it. It was completely different to the 'chun gang' pen that people in Wulin used for sealing pressure points, he was about to ask about it when a girl in white entered from outside.

She stood at the entrance of the hall, her eyes slowly scoured across the crowd; it was as if she was looking for someone. Everyone in the hall was concentrating on Zhu Ziliu and Huo Dou when the girl in white entered; they turned their heads involuntarily and looked at her. They saw her face was pale white as if she was ill; though the light of the candles was like red clouds, her face had no hint of blood in it, showing off her elegance even further, her beauty was incomparable. People use the phrase 'as beautiful as a goddess' to describe a girl's beauty but no one knew how beautiful a goddess was. As soon as these people saw this girl, they couldn't stop the words 'as beautiful as a goddess' from running through their minds. It was as if a light fog, a thin mist, surrounded her body; she appeared real but also looked like an illusion; she was not from this world.

As soon as Yang Guo saw this young girl, he was overjoyed, his chest felt like it had been struck by a metal hammer; he leapt from the corner of the room and hugged her, he called out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu!" That young girl was Xiao Longnu.

After she left Yang Guo, she circled around the land a few times and then returned to the ancient tomb. Before she

was eighteen, living in the ancient tomb was not hard for her, but after she met Yang Guo and experienced many twists and turns, she could never return to the way she was before, not caring about anything.

Every time she sat on the chilled jade bed to practice her martial arts she remembered that Yang Guo had slept on this bed; when she sat at the table eating she remembered the times when she ate with Yang Guo. After practicing kung fu for a little while she would become troubled and impatient, it was difficult to carry on. She spent over a month like this before she could endure it no longer; she decided to look for Yang Guo. She didn't know how she would treat him once she had found him. She didn't know anything about worldly matters, similar to a person from the mountains or wild lands, now something had suddenly changed and was unfamiliar, she was completely at a loss. After she left the mountain, everything that she saw was new to her; how would she know the roads, whenever she saw someone passing by she would ask, "Have you seen Yang Guo?" When she was hungry she would take other people's food because she didn't know that money was needed. She created a lot of trouble along the way. But when people saw that she was innocent and beautiful, they couldn't refrain from making her allowances; no one caused trouble for her. One day she heard two men talking in a restaurant, they said that the famous heroes of the world will be going to Da Xingguan's 'Heroes Feast' at the Lu Manor. She thought that Yang Guo might be there so she found out how to get there and headed for the Lu manor.

Apart from Hao Datong, Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing, no one amongst the two thousand present knew a thing about her; all they saw was that she was extremely beautiful, everyone's heart felt touched. Sun Bu'Er knew about this person but had never seen her before. Yin Zhiping's face

was pale, his body trembled. Zhao Zhijing looked at him and chuckled. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were greatly surprised with how Yang Guo reacted to her. Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'er, indeed you are here, I've finally found you."

Tears flowed from Yang Guo's eyes as he choked, "You... you won't abandon me again will you?"

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "I don't know."

Yang Guo said, "Where ever you go I will follow." There were over a thousand people here in the main hall but the two acted as if no one else was there, talking naturally. Xiao Longnu held Yang Guo's hand, she didn't know whether she was happy or sad.

Though Huo Dou's heart was moved when he saw Xiao Longnu, he didn't know that this was the girl whose hand in marriage he was trying to get years ago at Mount Zhongnan. He saw that Yang Guo's garments were ragged and torn but the two of them looked very close, his heart was disgusted and he said, "We are dueling, go and find another place for this!"

Yang Guo was not in the mood to talk to him, he held Xiao Longnu's hand and went over to the side and they sat down shoulder to shoulder on the rock base of a pillar. His heart was bursting with joy. Huo Dou turned around and said to Zhu Ziliu, "Since you are not using a weapon, we'll fight with our fists."

Zhu Ziliu said, "Not so. We Chinese are a polite nation, not like the barbaric Mongols. In a treaty, one uses a pen to communicate; the enemy has a pen but no saber, so who needs a weapon?"

Huo Dou said, "Since it is like this, prepare!" He opened his fan and swept it across. Zhu Ziliu slanted his body, a step to

the side and swung his head. His left hand swept lightly across himself, the pen in his right hand went towards Huo Dou's face. Huo Dou moved his head to avoid it; he saw the opponent's movements were light and his stances strange. He didn't dare to attack, waiting to see through his kung fu clearly before making a decision.

Zhu Ziliu said, "The enemy's pen can sweep away a thousand soldiers, you need to be careful." As he said this the tip of the pen went forward. Huo Dou learned martial arts in Western Tibet, Jinlun Fawang was very knowledgeable, there was nothing he didn't know about the central plains' martial arts. When Huo Dou's training was drawing to a close, he decided to go to the central plains to make his name, and so Jinlun Fawang taught him how to defeat the proudest kung fu of the central plain's most famous sects. How could he know that he would meet up with Zhu Ziliu, the weapon he used was strange, his stances were unimaginably strange, he had never heard of such things. He saw the pen tip stroking across and hooking down; it was as if he was writing but the places where the pen was pointing were the places of the body's main pressure points.

Zhu Ziliu is the number one calligrapher of the northern sky, though he practices martial arts he hadn't stopped studying literature, in the end, the more he practiced his kung fu the further refined it became and eventually the two arts became connected to each other. The "Solitary Yang Finger" and calligraphy became one. This kung fu was his own invention; if the opponent was stronger but didn't have a background in literature, it would be extremely difficult for them to defend against this martial art. From literature and literature on martial arts came a kung fu where both literature and martial arts have reached an extremely advanced state. Luckily, Huo Dou has studied

under a Han scholar when he was young, he had read books and recited poems, and was able to defend against this attack. He saw the tip of the pen flashing across, in the calligraphy was the aim of sealing pressure points, in the pressure point sealing was the aim of calligraphy. It was like a silver hook and metal scull, the strokes were swift and powerful and in the midst of this there was a leisurely and elegant air.

Guo Jing wasn't versed in literature, as he watched he thought this kung fu was extraordinary. Huang Rong's father taught her both martial arts and literature, when she saw this excellent kung fu, she couldn't stop herself from admiring and enjoying it. Guo Fu went over to her mother's side and asked, "Mother, he's holding that pen, stroking it here and there, what kind of game is that?"

Huang Rong was concentrating on the battle and just replied, "The Fang Xuan Ling Inscription."

Guo Fu didn't understand and asked, "What Fang Xuan Ling Inscription?" Huang Rong was absorbed in the battle and didn't reply.

The 'Fan Xuan Ling Inscription' is a work written by the Tang minister Chu Sui Liang, and it is also a refined calligraphy style. The people before them have judged Chu's book and likened it to 'a girl from heaven scattering flowers'; the calligraphy style was firm, graceful and elegant, concentrating on creating beauty, every stroke was airy, completely focusing on this aspect. Zhu Ziliu's "Solitary Yang Book Finger" uses a pen as the finger; every stance was measured and cautious, like a pen writing a book.

Though Huo Duo did not understand the intricacies of the "Solitary Yang Finger", at least he had read the 'Fang Xuan Ling Inscription' before, he knew that the horizontal stroke

will be followed by a vertical stroke, he defended well, and he didn't show signs of losing. Zhu Ziliu saw that he knew this style of calligraphy; he called out and shouted, "Careful! A cursive calligraphy style is coming." Suddenly he took off his hat and shot it at him, his sleeve flew across the air, and he dashed forward madly, his stances not following the style. He looked as if he were mad, crazy, drunk, as if a spell was put on him, the pen's aim raining down, the finger moving like a dragon and snake. Guo Fu was startled and laughed as she asked, "Mother, has he gone mad?"

Huang Rong said, "If he drank three cups of wine then the pen would be even better." She picked up a wine pot and poured three cups, she called out, "Brother Zhu, drink three cups to further your enjoyment." The cup was in her left hand, the middle finger of her right hand flicked it, and the wine cup flew steadily across to him.

Zhu Ziliu raised his pen and brushed down, forcing Huo Dou to the side as he caught the cup, drinking it in one go. Huang Rong flicked the second and third cup over in the same way. Huo Dou saw the two of them offering wine in the battle, not even noticing that he was there, he wanted to wave his fan and knock the cups out of the air but Huang Rong followed Zhu Ziliu's pen's intent, she flicked out the cups in the gaps. Huo Dou was unable to knock them out of the air. Zhu Ziliu drank the three cups dry and called out, "Thank you. That is very handsome "Divine Flicking Finger" kung fu!"

Huang Rong laughed and said, "Very spirited 'Zi Yan Tie'!"

Zhu Ziliu gave a laugh and thought, "I have always thought that I am clever, but I am still a level below that girl. I have studied this skill diligently for over ten years; just one look and she saw through it."

The work that he was using now was Zhang Xu's 'Tie Yin Tie' of the Tang dynasty. Zhang Xu has been given the title of 'Cao Sheng', the saint of cursive calligraphy. Du Fu's poem 'The Song of the eight drinking Immortals' says; "Zhang Xu's three cups passes onto Cao Sheng, the hat is removed showing his head in front of the king, the pen descending on the paper like a fog."

Huang Rong offered him three cups firstly to acknowledge the class of kung fu he was using, secondly, once the influence of wine increases, the calligraphy will be even better, and lastly she wanted to dampen Huo Dou's spirits. She then saw Zhu Ziliu write 'The Bold Man Fights for the Road', on the 'road' word, the pen hooked up and brushed across Huo Dou's clothes. The heroes all laughed as Huo Dou retreated backwards.

End of Chapter 12.

Chapter 13 - The Chancellor of Wulin

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo's five fingers then gently waved out, a slight smile on his face; it was a stance of "Dressing of Li Hua" from the Jade Maiden. Yang

Guo's smile infected Da Er Ba, he followed and smiled. Yang Guo's face was handsome and striking, when he smiled, he was even more so, Da Er Ba's cheekbones were high and his cheeks deep, when the crowd saw him follow Yang Guo and smile, all of them shivered.

Jinlun Fawang's eyes sometimes opened and sometimes closed, it was as if he didn't care about what happened in the battle but in actual fact, he saw everything clearly. When he saw Huo Dou was losing he suddenly called out, "A gu si jin de er, mi ma ha si deng, qi er qi er hu!" The crowd didn't know what these Tibetan sentences were but Huo Dou knew, his master was reminding him not to defend so tightly, he needs to start using the "Ferocious Wind Rapid Thunder Skill" against the enemy, Huo Dou started to whistle, the fan on the right and his sleeve on the left created a strong gust of wind, rushing forwards to Zhu Ziliu.

The force of the wind was very strong, the crowd who were watching couldn't help but move backwards slowly, they heard him making thunderbolt like noises with his mouth, they all thought that apart from using weapons, fists and kicks, this "Ferocious Wind Rapid Thunder Skill" also uses the surprising calls of thunder to subdue and control the opponent; it is a very powerful technique. Zhu Ziliu's sleeve took flight, he carried himself proudly and matched him.

The two of them went back and forth for over a hundred moves, Zhu Ziliu had finished writing the 'Zi Yan Tie', the intention of his pen changed, his moves were slow and delayed, the pen strokes were fine and stiff, overflowing with ancient intent.

Huang Rong soliloquized, "There's an ancient saying: 'The fine and obstinate direction leads to the soul', this "Stone Carving of Commending the Wrong Path", never has there been such a display."

Huo Dou continued to use the "Ferocious Wind Rapid Thunder Skill" but because the opponent's strength was strong, the power in his fan increased as did the volume of his shouts and calls. The people who were watching the fight in the main hall could not stand still; step by step they retreated to the courtyard.

Huang Rong saw Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were sitting shoulder to shoulder by the pillar, they were only about ten feet away from the battle, deep in conversation, completely ignoring the battle. The wind that Huo Dou generated had completely no effect on them. She saw Xiao Longnu's belt floating in the wind but Xiao Longnu was unmoved, she just stared lovingly at Yang Guo. The longer that Huang Rong looked, the more curious she became, in the end, she was concentrating on these two more than the battle between Huo Dou and Zhu Ziliu, she thought, "That little girl looks like she possess advanced martial arts, Guo'er and she are so close, I wonder which eminent master is she a disciple of?"

Xiao Longnu was now twenty years old, she had lived in the ancient tomb all her life, avoiding the sunlight, her skin was especially soft and delicate, her internal energy was high, from her appearance, she looked like a sixteen or seventeen year old. Before Xiao Longnu met Yang Guo, experiencing happiness, anger, grief and joy was a rare thing for her. Emotions have the greatest harmful affect on the body and its appearance; and she had spent the last two years like a normal person. If she actually followed her master's teachings and practiced with a clear mind, not only could she meet her hundredth birthday, but when she reaches

that age, her appearances would be the same as a normal fifty year old. Because of this, in Huang Rong's eyes, Xiao Longnu looked younger than Yang Guo, her childlike and innocent air was even more obvious than Guo Fu, no wonder Huang Rong thought that she was a little girl.

Now, Zhu Ziliu's pen was becoming unsightly, but its power was becoming stronger, the delivery of the pen was like a spider web, strong yet soft. Huo Dou was secretly alarmed; it was gradually becoming harder for him to grasp his kung fu.

Jinlun Fawang shouted, "Ma mi ba mi, gu si hei si." No one knew what those eight words meant but the words shook everyone's ears, leaving a ringing sound in them.

Zhu Ziliu was getting impatient, he thought, "If he changes his technique again, I don't know when this battle will end. I am fighting in Dali's name for the Song in this first round, I must not lose. Otherwise shame will be bought onto our nation and school." He suddenly changed his calligraphy style again, the pen didn't appear to be writing words, it now resembled a hatchet hacking into rocks.

Guo Fu managed to see what was happening and asked her mother, "Uncle Zhu is carving words?"

Huang Rong smiled and said, "My daughter is not stupid, the finger technique he's now following is the 'shi gu' script. This is the scriptwriting that one uses in the spring and autumn period; it's the characters that can be seen when one uses a hatchet to carve words on a stone drum. See whether you can recognize the words that Uncle Zhu is writing."

Guo Fu followed the pen but saw that every word he wrote was windy and twisty, all looking like a small painting, she didn't know one word. Huang Rong smiled and said, "That's

an ancient style of calligraphy (used in Zhou dynasty c11 to 256BC), no wonder you wouldn't know any of them; even I can't recognize all of them."

Guo Fu clapped and said, "Naturally, it'll be even harder for that Mongolian idiot to recognize them. Mother, take a look at him, his head is full of sweat and his legs and arms are all over the place."

Indeed, Huo Dou could only recognize a word or two of this ancient style of calligraphy. Since he doesn't know what the opponent is writing, of course he will not be able predict where the pen will attack. It was now difficult for him to respond.

Zhu Ziliu kept on producing word after word of this ancient calligraphy, the characters were profound with an ancient air, and the power of the "Solitary Yang Finger" which the calligraphy style uses as a base also increased.

Huo Dou's fan waved out but he was a bit too slow to take it back, Zhu Ziliu's pen moved and scripted an ancient character on his fan. Huo Dou took a look and asked uncertainly, "Is that 'net'?"

Zhu Ziliu laughed and said, "Wrong, that is 'you'." He then wrote another character on his fan.

Huo Dou said, "Most probably that's 'moon' isn't it?"

Zhu Ziliu shook his head and said, "Wrong, that's 'hence'."

Huo Dou was discouraged, he shook his fan to shake off the pen tip and stop Zhu Ziliu from writing on his fan but he didn't predict that Zhu Ziliu would suddenly sent out a left palm to attack. Huo Dou sent out a palm to block this but this allowed Zhu Ziliu in and he wrote another two characters on his fan but because there wasn't much time,

the characters were not written in the ancient calligraphy style but cursive calligraphy. Huo Dou recognized these characters and called out; “Barbarian!”

Zhu Ziliu laughed and said, “Correct, it is ‘You are hence a barbarian’.”

Everyone hated the Mongols for invading their country and killing their citizens, hate and anger was in their hearts; when they heard Zhu Ziliu insulting Huo Dou by saying ‘You are hence a barbarian’, they all cheered and shouted.

Huo Dou could not handle Zhu Ziliu’s “Solitary Yang Book Finger” with the cursive and ancient calligraphy, he was already afraid. When he heard the cheers and calls, he was even more disturbed. He saw Zhu Ziliu’s pen shaking and waving, writing three ancient characters in a row in midair, how could he think about trying to recognize these characters?

He could only force himself to fight on; he raised his fan to try to protect his vital points on his chest when suddenly he felt his knee go numb. His pressure point had been sealed by the opponent’s pen as it turned. Huo Dou’s knee felt numb and wanted to collapse, but he thought if he kneels, he would have no face. He took a deep breath and surged a current of chi towards the pressure point in his knee. He wanted to leap away and admit defeat when Zhu Ziliu’s pen came in like lightning, sealing his pressure point again. Zhu Ziliu used his pen to replace the finger, using the tip of the pen to make use of the “Solitary Yang Finger” technique, continuously attacking. Could Huo Dou defend against this? His knee became numb and he eventually knelt down onto the floor, his face was devoid of colour.

All the heroes cheered with thunderous noise. Guo Jing said to Huang Rong, “Your ingenious plan worked.” Huang Rong

gave a slight smile.

The Wu brothers were watching from the side, when they saw the boundless changes of their Martial Uncle Zhu's "Solitary Yang Finger", they were both in awe, and were thinking, "Martial Uncle Zhu's internal energy is profound and strong, embedding itself into calligraphy, there are many ingenious and masterly aspects within it. I don't know when I will be able to reach such a stage."

One called out, "Brother!"

The other called, "Little brother!"

The both of them were thinking of the same thing and were about to say something in praise of their Martial Uncle's martial arts. Suddenly Zhu Ziliu called out, 'ah', they quickly turned their heads and saw that he had fallen.

Everyone was shocked at this sudden change of events. After Huo Dou had admitted defeat, Zhu Ziliu had come over to unseal his pressure point. The technique of sealing pressure points using the "Solitary Yang Finger" is completely different than conventional pressure point sealing; it is extremely difficult for others to unseal it so Zhu Ziliu went over to him and tapped his sides a few times, circulating his chi to unseal his pressure point. He couldn't have known that as soon as Huo Dou's pressure point was unsealed, there was an opportunity for Huo Dou to take advantage of him. He gave a grunt and before he stood up, he activated a booby trap in his fan; four poison nails flew out from the fan's spine, all of them hitting Zhu Ziliu in the body.

When skilled fighters duel, when a win or loss is declared, they cannot act again. Never mind that everyone was watching, who could have guessed that that he would suddenly launch an ambush? If Huo Dou had launched his

projectiles in the middle of the duel, even though the booby trap was ingenious, he would not have succeeded in harming his opponent. When Zhu Ziliu was unsealing his pressure point, he was only an inch away from him. The weapon was activated close to the body, even if one's skills were higher, it would have been difficult to avoid this attack. The poison on the nails was produced from the snowy mountains of Western Tibet and is very lethal. As soon as Zhu Ziliu was struck with the nails, his body broke out in unbearable pain; it was difficult for him to stand up properly.

Everyone was shocked and angry, they were all pointing at Huo Dou, insulting and cursing him, saying that he was a brazen scoundrel and despicable.

Huo Dou laughed and said, "The 'Little Prince' has turned defeat into victory, what shame is there in that? Before we started, we did not forbid the use of projectiles. If that brother Zhu succeeded in using a projectile against me, I would have admitted defeat."

Though not everyone agreed with what he said, they did not have a reply to his words, but the insults and curses kept on coming.

Guo Jing dashed over and picked up Zhu Ziliu, he saw the four nails sticking out of his chest, his face looked strange. Guo Jing knew that the poison on the nails was extremely exotic, he quickly sealed three main pressure points to slow down the blood flow, the veins were completely sealed stopping the poison from reaching his heart. He asked Huang Rong, "What should we do?"

Huang Rong frowned without replying, she knew that if she wanted to cure this poison, the antidote must come

personally from Jinlun Fawang or Huo Dou. For the time being, she paced back and forth without an idea.

When Diancang Yuyin saw that his apprentice brother was poisoned, he was worried and angry; he tucked in his gown, wanting to dash forward and fight Huo Dou.

Huang Rong was still thinking about the plan, she thought, "The opponent has already won a match, if Brother Fisherman goes, Da'erba will be the one who will be sent out to meet him, and we won't have a way to win." She quickly said, "Brother, please wait!"

Diancang Yuyin asked, "What for?"

Though Huang Rong was wise and clever, she couldn't give a reply, they had already lost the first match, and there will be some difficulty in the last two matches.

Huo Dou used a trick to beat Zhu Ziliu and he stood at the front of the hall pleased with himself, he took a look all around and felt that he was on top of the world. In the corner of his eye he saw Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo sitting shoulder to shoulder on a stone base, holding each other hands, engaged in conversation. They completely ignored his victory as if nothing had happened; he couldn't stop himself from getting angry and pointed his fan at Yang Guo, shouting out, "Bastard; get up!"

All of Yang Guo's attention was on Xiao Longnu, though the world is a big place, there was nothing that would distract him. Because of this, the heated battle between Huo Dou and Zhu Ziliu was nothing to him; he didn't see or hear it.

In the years he lived with Xiao Longnu in the tomb, he didn't know that he had etched Xiao Longnu deep into his heart and soul, in life or death. That day when Xiao Longnu said she wanted to be his wife, it was such a sudden event,

he had never thought about this before and, startled, he could not think of a reply. After Xiao Longnu had disappeared, he repeated in his heart hundreds of times, "I want her, I want her. Even if I die immediately, I want Gu Gu to be my wife."

The love between he and Xiao Longnu bloomed unconsciously, after they departed, the love kept on flourishing without stop. Yang Guo wasn't afraid of anything, Xiao Longnu was blind to the world and its ways, they just knew that if they desired to love, they loved, if they desired happiness, then they'd get happiness, what had it to do with other people? One didn't care and the other didn't understand, in the midst of a thousand people in the middle of a heated battle, the two of them were holding hands talking to each other, wrapped in love.

When Huo Dou cursed him, Yang Guo was still oblivious of him. Huo Dou wanted to curse him further when Jinlun Fawang ordered, "Our side has won the first round, and we can now proceed onto the second round."

Huo Dou glanced at Yang Guo with hate and then returned to his table and said clearly, "We have won the first round, my apprentice brother Da'erba will fight in the second round, which hero from the other side will come out to meet him?"

Da'erba took out a weapon from his Buddhist robe and went to the middle of the hall. When everyone saw his weapon, they were all shocked; it was a long coarse golden rod. The "Golden Demon Subduing Rod" was around four feet long, the ends of the rod were thick and rough, and the body of the rod glittered with a golden light. It appeared that the weapon was made out of pure gold; it was a lot heavier than an identical rod made out of steel.

He went to the middle of the hall and bowed to the heroes,

and then threw his metal rod up in the air. The golden rod fell down and with a crash sound; two of the large jade flower bowls on the floor were smashed. The rod buried itself one foot into the floor. This was meant as a warning; he was a shriveled and skinny monk but he had the ability to use such a weapon, indicating the level of martial arts he had.

Huang Rong thought, "Brother Jing can subdue this rude monk but Fawang will fight in the third round, then our side will have no one to fight him, the match will be over. This is unspeakable; I'll go and force myself to fight using masterly kung fu to battle him." She raised the Dog Beating Stick and said, "I'll go!"

Guo Jing was extremely shocked and quickly said, "You can't...you can't. Your body is not well, how can you fight?"

Huang Rong felt that there was no other way to achieve victory, if they lost this round then there will be no need for the third round. Just as she was hesitating, Diancang Yuyin called out, "Chief Huang, allow me to fight that evil monk." When he saw the condition that his apprentice brother was in after contracting the poison, his heart was burning and he wanted to take revenge. Huang Rong had no other good ideas, she thought, "We can only struggle on, if he beats the monk, brother Jing will fight Jinlun Fawang to settle this." So she said, "Please be careful apprentice brother."

The Wu brothers took the pair of metal oars that their Marshal Uncle used to him. Diancang Yuyin held them under his arms and went to the middle of the hall. His eyes were red with fury as he circled Da'erba. Da'erba didn't know what it was about, when he saw him walking around him, he turned with to him. Diancang Yuyin suddenly called out, his oars waved out as he hacked down towards his head. Da'erba's movements were extremely fast; he quickly

picked up his Golden Subduing Rod and raised it up in response. The rod and oars met, the clashing sound rang in everyone's ears. Both of them felt a slight pain and both knew their opponent's power was strong, and then they both leapt backwards. Da'erba said a sentence in Tibetan while Diancang Yuyin insulted him in a Dali dialect. Though the two didn't understand the other, they suddenly came close to each other again, the oars and rod came out at the same time, another clashing sound of gold and metal colliding was heard.

This battle was completely different to the graceful and civil fight between Huo Dou and Zhu Ziliu. The two of them fought like copper versus iron, brute force against brute force, the two of them fought with advanced external hard kung fu. The oars and rod created gusts of wind; the onlookers were shocked and astonished.

Diancang Yuyin's natural strength was already high; when he was serving Reverend Yideng he lived in secret in Xiangxi, he used his irons oars to row upstream against the current everyday, his arms became like steel. He is the first disciple of Reverend Yideng and was under his teaching for the longest time. Because he was simple and crass, Reverend Yideng had always treated him with care and love. His natural ability was lacking, his internal energy couldn't compare with Zhu Ziliu's. However, his external hard skills were extremely powerful. Right now, the two were competing with their external hard skills, his strong point; his oars flew up and down as he attacked. Each metal oar was about fifty kilos (110+ lbs) but he lifted them up as if they were light, he was as fluid as normal people with sabers or swords that weighed a few kilos.

Da'erba has always thought shi natural strength was unbeatable; he couldn't have guessed that he would meet a man with such divine strength in the central plains. Not

only was the opponent's strength high, his stances were also profound, he needed all his efforts to use his golden rod. The rod attacked the oars, the oars attacked the rod; the two of them attacking more than defending.

When Zhu Ziliu and Huo Dou were fighting, the people who were watching were forced backwards because of the great gusts of the winds they generated. Now, three extremely heavy weapons were clashing; along with resisting the wind generated by the weapons, the loud noises created by the clashing of the weapons was also extremely hard to endure. Most of them covered their ears as they watched.

Under the candlelight, the golden rod glittered, the two steel oars were like two streaks of black, the weapons swirled and tangled with each other; the fight was becoming more and more spectacular.

The crowd had never seen such a battle in their lives. Of course there had been even more dangerous and perilous situations, but when skilled fighters compete with internal energy one with another; the effects are on the inside. From the outside, it looks very ordinary. When it came to the stances and the countering techniques of weapons and fists, it had ingenious and refined aspects but it couldn't compare with the ferocious aspects of the stances. It is extremely rare to see someone with Diancang Yuyin's kind of divine strength, but it is even rarer to see two people with the same kind of divine strength engaged in such a heated battle as this one.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong watched with sweating palms. Guo Jing said, "Rong'er, do you think our side will win?"

Huang Rong said, "I can't make it out right now."

In reality, how would Guo Jing not know what was happening in the battle, but he hoped that his wife would

say 'Yuyin can win' so his heart could be comforted.

Tens of moves passed but their energy didn't decrease; instead it became even more vigorous. Diancang Yuyin called out as he attacked with his oars to increase his clout.

Da'erba asked, "What did you say?" He spoke in Tibetan, how would Diancang Yuyin understand?

He too called out, "What did you say?" Da'erba didn't understand either.

The two of them assumed that they were insulting each other, they fought fiercely, the chairs and tables in the hall flew up. The crowd was worried that the one of them would lose concentration and hit one of the pillars in the hall, causing the hall to collapse.

Jinlun Fawang and Huo Duo were both secretly alarmed, if this battle continued on for much longer, even if Da'erba gains victory, he will be severely injured. But how could the fight stop with the two battling so heatedly?

The two of them leapt and jumped around, calling out as they fought violently, the yellow glow and dark trail forced the candlelight to darken; suddenly, a ferocious heaven shattering noise was heard, the two of them called out and leapt away at the same time.

When the oar in Yuyin's right hand collided with the golden rod, the two of them were using all their strength, the handle of the oar was narrow and not as firm as the golden rod, hence, the oar snapped in half. The blade part flew away and a 'dang' sound was heard as it dropped in front of Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu was completely absorbed in conversation with Yang Guo, she was unaware and the oar blade part struck

her on the toes of the left foot. She gave out a cry of 'ai ya' and leapt up. When she called out in pain, Yang Guo was alarmed and quickly asked, "Are you hurt?" Xiao Longnu rubbed her toes, the wincing at the pain that could be seen on her face.

Yang Guo was furious; he turned around to look for the person who used the metal slab to hurt his Gu Gu. He saw Diancang Yuyin holding the handle of the broken oar in his right hand and was disagreeing with Da'erba; he wanted to use his single oar to fight him. Da'erba shook his head; he knew that the enemy's strength and stamina compared to his was six of one and half a dozen to the other. If they continued, it would be difficult to get a result, since now he has the advantage in weaponry; the winner of this round is himself.

Huo Dou stood up tall and said clearly, "We have won two rounds out of the three; the position of the Chancellor belongs to my master, everyone..."

Before he finished, Yang Guo said to Yuyin, "How did your steel oar break, how did it fly over and hit my Gu Gu?"

Yuyin said, "I... I..."

Yang Guo said, "Your steel oar is poorly made, quickly go and apologize to my Gu Gu." Diancang Yuyin saw that he was a little boy and didn't pay him any attention. Yang Guo suddenly stretched out his arm and snatched the broken handle out of his hand and called out, "Quickly go and say sorry to my Gu Gu."

Huo Dou was interrupted by him and was furious, he shouted, "Little bastard! Get out of the way!"

Yang Guo called out, "Little bastard is insulting who?"

When Huo Dou heard him say ‘Little bastard is insulting who’ he replied without much thought, “Little bastard is insulting you!” How would he know that boys from the south had always talked in this manner to argue, he wasn’t concentrating and fell into the trap.

Yang Guo laughed out loud and said, “Correct, it is a little bastard who’s insulting me!”

Everyone in the main hall was very worried and anxious, but after hearing this young man’s sudden comment, everyone broke out in laughter. Huo Dou was furious; he took out his folded fan and attacked Yang Guo’s head.

Everyone had just seen Huo Dou in action and knew that his martial arts were terrific, if the fan lands on Yang Guo’s head, if he didn’t die, he would be severely injured, they all called out, “Hold it!” “You can’t bully someone younger.”

Guo Jing darted out and was about to snatch the fan away when Yang Guo ducked down and darted underneath Huo Dou’s arm. The handle of the oar swirled round; Yang Guo used the “Dog Beating Stick Technique’s” ‘coil’ formulae and tripped up Huo Dou’s legs. Huo Dou could not stand up properly; he stumbled and almost fell onto the floor. Huo Dou was highly skilled, he changed the stumbling force into a leaping force, he leapt into the air and came down steady.

Guo Jing was startled, he asked, “Guo’er, what’s the matter?”

Yang Guo laughed and said, “Nothing. He doesn’t respect Hong Qigong’s “Dog Beating Stick Technique”. I wanted to use the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” to trip him up; it’s a pity that he managed to jump away.”

Guo Jing was surprised and asked, “How do you know this technique?”

Yang Guo lied and said, "Just now when Chief Lu fought him; I learned a few stances after watching him."

Guo Jing knew that he wasn't the sharpest tool in the box, he knew that there are a lot of people who were cleverer than him, and he believed what Yang Guo said without any doubts.

Huo Dou assumed that it was his fault for being careless and this allowed Yang Guo to make him stumble; how would he know that a teenager like Yang Guo would possess such great martial arts? The most serious matter now is fighting for the position of the Chancellor of Wulin, it won't be too late if he first completes the serious task and then punishes the punk. So he took a large step towards Guo Jing and said, "Hero Guo, it is we who are the victors in today's duel, my master Jinlun Fawang is the Chancellor of Wulin. If there is anyone who doesn't agree with this..."

Before he finished, Yang Guo sneaked up behind him, he sent the oar handle forward and used the "Dog Beating Stick Technique's" fourth stance of the 'poke' formulae, suddenly poking Huo Dou's backside. With Huo Dou's abilities, how would he not know when someone was sneaking up behind to ambush him? However, the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" is extremely ingenious and masterly; though he realized what was happening, his sudden dodge was not perfect and there was still a chance to hit him. A 'pu' sound was heard as he was hit in the backside. Even though his internal energy was profound, the buttocks are an area of the body with a lot of flesh, the attack was very painful, and was coupled with the shock of getting hit. He thought that he would definitely avoid this attack but the attack managed to get him, and he couldn't stop himself from giving out a 'ah' call.

Yang Guo shouted, "What was that? I don't agree to this!"

In a flash the hall was filled with laughter. The heroes all thought not only is this teenager naughty, he was extremely bold, the Mongolian Prince was twice undone by him.

Now that it has reached this point, how could Huo Dou not be angry? He turned his hand and wanted to smack him across the face to vent his anger before doing anything else. This was a casual palm but the force behind the palm is derived from the main theories from the school of Tibet. This palm was meant to knock the young man unconscious.

Guo Jing knew that this palm was powerful, he stretched out his left arm and hooked it up, grabbing Huo Dou's palm. Guo Jing said, "How can you mess around with a little kid?"

When Huo Dou's arm was grabbed, he felt half his body going numb, he couldn't stop his shock and anger from rising.

Yang Guo took the opportunity and swept the oar handle across, striking him heavily across the backside, he called out, "Disobedient bastard, father's going to spank you!"

Guo Jing shouted, "Guo'er, get back, don't make trouble." But the crowd all laughed.

The Mongolian warriors on the other side were all calling out, "Two versus one?" "You don't want face!" "Does that count as dueling?"

Guo Jing was startled, and released Huo Dou's hand.

Huang Rong saw Yang Guo's trip and poke that he just used were definitely the stances of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique"; she was very suspicious. "Where did he steal this technique from? Could it be that in the past few months that I've been teaching Lu Youjiao, he has been spying on us? But each time I start teaching, I've searched around,

how could he hide from me?" She called out, "Brother Jing, come back."

Guo Jing returned to this wife's side but he was worried that Yang Guo would suffer, his eyes did not leave the two people in the middle of the hall. He saw Huo Dou sending out palms and kicks, attacking Yang Guo.

Yang Guo was dodging and calling out at the same time, "I'm going to spank you, spank you!" The oar handle kept on attacking Huo Dou's backside, but Huo Dou's movements were quick, each hit met thin air. Huo Dou wanted to use his folded fan to hit Yang Guo on his head, but Yang Guo kept on using the oar handle to hit his backside. The two were chasing and rushing around; the two of them circled the hall very rapidly but neither of them could hit each other. At first, the onlookers just felt something weird was going on, but when they saw the two of them circling around the hall, they were extremely shocked. Though Yang Guo is of a young age, his footsteps were light and his movements were swift and nimble, there was no difference between him and Huo Dou. Huo Dou attacked him a few times but each time, Yang Guo managed to escape cleverly.

Dianchang Yuyin and Da'erba were originally arguing about their weapons and staring angrily at each other. One would want to dash forward and fight again; the other was completely prepared in case the opponent suddenly attacked. When they saw that Huo Dou couldn't handle such a young man, they both were extremely surprised; one of them opened his mouth and laughed loudly, the other shouted out insults in Tibetan.

In the blink of an eye, Huo Dou and Yang Guo had circled around the hall three times; Huo Dou could see that his opponent's lightness kung fu was terrific, if he continued to

follow and chase him like this, he might lose. He suddenly turned around, his left palm came out in front of him to grab the oar handle, the fan in his right hand came out to seal the 'Looping Jump' pressure point of the side of his leg.

However Yang Guo did not want to meet him face on, he swerved his body around the fan and kept on hitting out with the oar handle, calling out, "Father wants to spank you! A day doesn't go past without three spanks, I have spanked you twice, there's one more!" To use such a method to ridicule your opponent in battle without danger, your kung fu must be a lot better than the opponent's in all areas. Although Yang Guo had learned many advanced martial arts, his kung fu still could not compare with Huo Dou's; acting like this would definitely result in trouble. However, the crowd was watching with passion, they all cheered, called out, and they applauded to urge him on.

When Huo Dou heard this, his mind was disturbed; if his backside is struck once more by this child in front of these people, even if he killed this boy, he still will have lost a lot of face. Because of this he concentrated on dodging and evading and forgot about attacking; Yang Guo was able to avoid danger for now.

By now, Huang Rong could tell that an eminent master had instructed Yang Guo, his kung fu really was terrific. She also remembered the day when he passed on his internal energy to her to help her recuperate; the internal energy he had developed was not ordinary. She thought that by allowing him to stir up trouble for a while, attention had actually been drawn away from the two defeats, so she called out, "Guo'er, go and fight him, I don't think he's your match."

Yang Guo stuck his tongue out at Huo Dou and said, "Do you dare?" He stood still and pointed to his nose.

Although Huo Dou was furious, he couldn't allow a little thing like this get in the way of the mission. Their side had now won two rounds; they have taken the position of Chancellor of Wulin. Why should he get involved with a little kid? He said, "Little bastard, I'll take my time in teaching you a lesson. Right now, the Chancellor of Wulin Jinlun Fawang will say a few words, everyone listen to his orders."

All the heroes made a hue and cry, disagreeing, clamoring and shouting.

Huo Dou said loudly, "We agreed before hand, two wins out of three. Doesn't your word count?"

All these heroes are famous people of the Jianghu world, they all knew what his words meant, he wanted them to go back on their words, this would never happen; but they had lost the last two rounds in a unjust way. The first round they lost due to an ambush, in the second, only the weapon was broken, they haven't really lost that round yet, and it was difficult for them to accept that justice was done. When Huo Dou asked them this question, they didn't have a reply.

Yang Guo said, "Look at that old monk, look how tall and skinny he is, he looks weird, how can he be the Chancellor of Wulin? I don't think he's worthy."

Huo Dou angrily said, "Who's the Master of this child? Take a control of him. If he continues to cause trouble, I won't hold back."

Yang Guo said, "My Master is worthy to take the position of the Chancellor of Wulin, what skill does your master have?"

Huo Dou said, "Who is your Master? Please invite them out." He saw Yang Guo's martial arts weren't ordinary; he assumed that his master must be a skilled fighter so he used the word 'please' in his sentence."

Yang Guo said, "Today, the disciples are representing their masters to fight for the position of Chancellor of Wulin, isn't that it?"

Huo Dou said, "Correct, our side has won two of the three rounds, because of this, my Master is the Chancellor of Wulin."

Yang Guo said, "Fine, even if you beat them all, so what? You won't be able to beat my Master's disciple."

Huo Dou asked, "Who is you Master's disciple?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Donkey! My Master's disciple is of course me." The crowd listened to his words with amusement and broke out in laughter. Yang Guo said, "We'll compete for another three rounds, if you can win two rounds out of the three, I'll recognize that monk as the Chancellor of Wulin. If I win two rounds, then sorry, the position of the Chancellor of Wulin goes to my Master."

When the crowd heard him say this, they all thought, "Could it be that this boy's master is some eminent master, and has come here to challenge the position of Chancellor of Wulin with Hong Qigong and Jinlun Fawang? They didn't care who the master of this boy was; at least they are Han. The young man cannot beat Huo Dou; however victory to the Mongols will allow them to take the position of Chancellor. Our side has already been defeated, a new complication might bring about a reversal of fortunes so they all said, "Correct, I agree, only if you Mongols gain another two victories." "That young brother is correct." "The central plains have many great fighters, you were lucky in gaining those two rounds. Who cares about that?"

Huo Dou pondered, "The opponent's two strongest fighters have already lost, what's there to be afraid of in fighting two more rounds? I'm only afraid that after two comes

another two.” He said to Yang Guo, “Your Master has a right to challenge for the position of the Chancellor of Wulin, however, there are thousands and thousands of heroes in this world, after one round comes another, when will it stop?”

Yang Guo raised his head and said, “My Master doesn’t care about who takes the place of the Chancellor of Wulin, but when she saw your Master, her anger flared up.”

Huo Dou said, “Who is your Master? Where is Senior?”

Yang Guo laughed and said, “Senior is in front of your eyes. Hey, Gu Gu, he asks how Senior is.” Xiao Longnu gave an ‘en’ sound and nodded to Huo Dou.

Everyone was startled at first but then burst out in laughter. They saw that Xiao Longnu was beautiful, she was younger than Yang Guo; how could she be his master? The young man must be joking, trying to make a fool out of Huo Dou. Only Hao Datong, Sun Bu’Er, Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping knew that he was telling the truth.

Though Huang Rong was intelligent and wise, she could not believe such a pretty, delicate, young girl could be his master.

Huo Duo was furious, he shouted, “Little bastard is talking crap! There are many important matters to be resolved today at this heroes gathering, how can I allow you to make trouble here? Crawl away.”

Yang Guo said, “Your Master is ugly and dark, his words are gibberish, it is extremely hard on the ears. Look at how beautiful my master is, graceful and elegant; if she is the Chancellor of Wulin, won’t that be a lot better than your ugly monk Master?” When Xiao Longnu heard Yang Guo praising her beauty, she was delighted, she revealed a

smile, it really was like a flower blooming, a halo of beautiful jade, unparalleled elegance.

The crowd saw that Yang Guo was becoming more and more daring in his attempt to make a fool of his opponent, they felt great delight; a few experienced people were secretly worried that Huo Dou would take his life.

Indeed, Huo Dou could no longer take it and called out, "All the world's heroes, please can I have your attention; when the young Prince kills this little punk, he will only have himself to blame, it is not my fault." His folded fan moved, he was about to attack Yang Guo's head.

Yang Guo impersonated his voice and stuck out his chest, he called out, "All the world's heroes, please can I have your attention, when the little punk kills this Prince, he will only have himself to blame, it is not the fault of the little punk!" In the midst of the laughter, he suddenly swept the oar handle towards Huo Dou's backside.

Huo Dou moved out of the way and sent his fan out along with a lightning left palm, straight towards his head. The fan was a decoy, the palm was not; all his strength was behind that palm, his intention was to split open Yang Guo's head in one stroke. Yang Guo slanted his body and moved away, along the way, he pushed out a table towards him, a 'ge' sound was heard as Huo Dou's palm landed on the table; splinters flew everywhere as the table was split in half.

The onlookers gulped as they saw Huo Dou's frightening strength.

Huo Dou kicked the table out of the way and immediately afterward followed it up with another attack. Yang Guo saw that his palm was ruthless and didn't dare to take it easy anymore; he used the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" with

the oar handle to fight him. Hong Qigong personally taught him the stances of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” that day on the peak of Mount Hua. He had performed the technique’s most ingenious and masterly aspects for Ouyang Feng; he had now also heard the formulae and changes of the technique from Huang Rong when she was teaching Lu Youjiao. When the two aspects were combined, he was able to use the technique properly. But the oar handle was too heavy and too short, it wasn’t very convenient, after another ten moves, the oar handle was trapped to one side by Huo Dou’s fan.

Huang Rong saw that he really was using the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, though the stances weren’t smooth and not fully utilized. When he used it, the techniques he used looked proper and like the real thing, she knew that his weapon wasn’t convenient for him so she went into the middle of the hall and stuck the stick in between the two and said, “Guo’er, to beat dogs you need the Dog Beating Stick. You can borrow Chief Lu’s Dog Beating Stick. After you’ve finished beating the evil dog, return the stick.”

The Dog Beating Stick is the property of the Beggar Clan’s Chief; it had to be clear that it was being borrowed.

Yang Guo was delighted and received the stick. Huang Rong whispered into his ear, “Force him to give up the antidote.” As soon as she said this she returned to her place.

Yang Guo had not paid any attention to Zhu Ziliu falling victim to a concealed weapon; he didn’t know what antidote she was talking about and was slightly startled; Huo Dou’s palm chopped down. Yang Guo raised the Dog Beating Stick and pointed towards Huo Dou’s belly. The bamboo stick was strong and sturdy, the length and weight was perfect; using the Dog Beating Stick to perform the “Dog Beating Stick

Technique” can only result in an increase of power. Huo Dou had sent out a palm that was chopping across his neck when he saw the bamboo stick come out, it was aiming for the ‘Sealed First’ pressure point three inches below his navel. This was an important pressure point to the movement of the veins; this little punk’s ability in recognizing pressure points was so precise that Huo Dou couldn’t help being shocked.

As he had tangled with Yang Guo, he thought that Yang Guo was just a nimble young man who had been advised by a great master; after he saw this stance of piercing towards his pressure point, he began to treat him as an opponent who could match him. He didn’t dare to take it easy; he returned his palm and used his fan to protect his chest. The onlookers saw that he had changed his stance into defense showing that he was worried about Yang Guo, they were even more surprised.

Yang Guo said, “Wait, this little punk does not fight for no reason, there has to be a wager.”

Huo Dou said, “Fine, if you lose, kowtow to me three times and call me Grandfather three times.”

Yang Guo again used a trick that children from Jiang Nan used to take advantage of others, he pretended he didn’t hear and asked, “Call what?”

Using this trick makes it very easy for the other person to fall into the trap. Huo Dou had grown up in Mongolia and Tibet and had always been surrounded by honest people, how would he understand the craftiness of Jiang Nan kids, so he casually replied, “Call grandfather!”

Yang Guo responded, “En, good Grandson; say it one more time.”

The crowd broke out into laughter again and Huo Dou knew that he had again fallen for a trick; he clenched his teeth, with the fan in his right hand and his left palm, he attacked like a violent storm.

Yang Guo used all his strength to repel him and said, "If you lose, you need to give the antidote to me."

Huo Dou angrily said, "I'll lose to you? Stop daydreaming bastard!"

Yang Guo raised the bamboo stick and shouted, "Little bastard is scolding who?"

Huo Dou said, "Little bastard is scolding..." As he got up to this part, he suddenly became aware; at least he managed to rein back the horse from the cliff, the last word 'you' was held back.

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Little Prince, I've taught you a few things, remember it." Though his words were said easily, it was becoming more and more difficult for his hands to cope.

Huo Dou is Jinlun Fawang's proudest disciple, he had received the important aspects of the Tibetan school, and he was able to exchange almost a thousand stances with Reverend Yideng's strongest disciple. His internal energy was profound; he and Yang Guo should not be mentioned in the same breath.

At first, Yang Guo was able to get an advantage by making him angry; Huo Dou had not fought with his full strength, now he really was fighting. After twenty moves or so, the comparison between he and Yang Guo was clear; Yang Guo was definitely inferior. The crowd saw that he was of a young age yet he managed to last so long against Huo Dou, they all praised him and said, "This child is amazing." They

all asked each other whose tutelage is this young man under.

Huo Dou saw that his opponent was weaker than him and sent out stronger and stronger palms. The “Dog Beating Stick Technique” that Yang Guo was using is ingenious and inspired, Huo Dou’s fan and palm techniques could not match it; but all Hong Qigong taught him was the stances, he had heard the formulae and principles from Huang Rong. He was clever and managed to force himself to combine the two and use it, but it was impossible for him to understand and comprehend everything immediately, so of course the power of the technique cannot be fully utilized. After a while, Yang Guo was dodging and flashing around, but it was difficult for him to attack.

Ever since the first fight started, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers had been watching intently, quietly talking to each other. When Yang Guo came out and started to fight, they were shocked and surprised. The Wu brothers said that he was rash and impudent, he’s just asking for trouble, Guo Fu was on the opposite side, she praised Yang Guo, saying that he was daring and ardent. When the Wu brothers heard this, their hearts ached with an uncomfortable feeling. When the two brothers first saw the closeness between Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo when she first arrived, the two of them glanced at each other and were able to relax. When they heard Yang Guo say that she was his master, though they didn’t know whether this was true or not, their hearts sank. Now, they saw that Yang Guo was forced onto his back foot (as sign that he is losing) by Huo Dou, the two brothers knew that they shouldn’t wish that the enemy would win, but deep in their hearts, they hoped that the more he suffers the better. Because of the trouble in their hearts, the two experienced many different emotions in the blink of eye.

Guo Fu didn't have any good feelings towards Yang Guo but she didn't loathe him either; she just treated him as a down on his luck, incapable person. He was insignificant, but when she heard her father wanted to betroth her to him, she was angry. But she still thought that this would never happen so she didn't take it to mind. Later on, she saw that his martial arts were anything but ordinary, she was just surprised and nothing more; yet when she saw that he was in danger, she couldn't stop herself from worrying about him.

Yang Guo knew that if this continued, within ten moves he would succumb to his opponent. He had glanced over and saw that although Xiao Longnu was still sitting on the stone base, her back was no longer leaning against the pillar. She was paying close attention, at any moment she would leap out and help him. He had an idea; he suddenly waved the stick and flew across, leaping over Xiao Longnu's legs.

Huo Dou shouted, "Where are you going?" He followed after him.

Xiao Longnu's legs raised slightly, the tip of her left foot aimed towards Huo Dou's 'Descendant's Arrangement' pressure point on his right ankle, the tip of her right foot kicked towards his left foot's 'Surging Spring' pressure point.

At least Huo Duo's skills were profound and refined, he saw what was happening, there was a nimble change, Xiao Longnu's legs had risen a little, and the bystanders didn't think anything of it. He himself knew that Xiao Longnu had used a lethal attack, in the midst of this he used a stance of "The Mandarin Duck's Looping Kick"; his legs kicked thin air in a loop and avoided the motionless pressure point kick by Xiao Longnu.

When Yang Guo went by Xiao Longnu's legs, he knew what was going to happen; he didn't wait for his opponent to fall to the ground and attacked with his Dog Beating Stick.

Huo Dou stretched out his fan and supported it against the stick and used the force to move faraway from Xiao Longnu. He couldn't stop himself from glancing over at her, thinking, "Indeed there are many able people in the central plains, that boy and girl are still in their teens, how come they are so good?"

With the advantage of an extra stance, Yang Guo kept on attacking with the stick technique, he used three critical stances in a row, and Huo Dou was scrambling about, using all his strength to repel the attack. However, Yang Guo did not have an ingenious fourth attack to continue the chain, he slowed down momentarily and allowed Huo Dou to counterattack, and was on the receiving end again.

The onlookers did not understand the stick technique and it went by them, Huang Rong however kept on calling out "What a pity" in secret, she couldn't hold in her thoughts and said, "The stick returns across the ground under the clever hand, striking the twin dogs without return." This was one of the formulae of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", though Yang Guo knew the stances and formulae, he didn't know when to use them; when he heard Huang Rong recite this, he immediately brushed the stick across the ground and attacked forward without returning.

The direction and force of this stick was weird, though he used it, he didn't know what use it had. How could it be that as soon as the stick attacked forward, it happened just at the same time as the opponent raised his fan? Huo Dou had not finished using this stance but knew something was wrong, he hurriedly jumped up and moved away.

Huang Rong continued, "When the dog leaps over the wall how can it be beaten? Quickly hit its backside and chop its tail." This stick technique had been passed from generation to generation in the Beggar Clan. Beggars aren't the most elegant and cultured, the words of course would be vulgar.

The bystanders thought that Huang Rong was ridiculing him by calling him a dog; they didn't know that she was giving martial arts advice to Yang Guo. Though the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" wasn't taught to anyone other than the chief; but firstly, Yang Guo had already learned it, and secondly, this match was extremely important, victory was needed. Huang Rong couldn't care about the clan's rules anymore, when she saw the two of them advancing and retreating, attacking and defending, she kept on calling out pieces of advice.

Every phrase she called out was ingenious and what was needed, and along with Yang Guo's intelligence, he was able to unleash the stances power. After he gained the upper hand many times, he didn't wait for Huang Rong to finish the line before he continued, he just needed the first few words and was immediately able to use right technique. The power of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" was indeed strong, even with Huo Dou's level of martial arts, a bamboo stick was able to run circles around him, and he had no chance to attack. Everyone saw that after a few more moves, the skilled Prince of the other nation would lose. The heroes' surprise and delight rose. The hall was filled with cheers.

Huo Dou quickly unleashed two stances with his fan forcing Yang Guo away a few steps and then called out, "Hold it!"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "What? My Grandson admits defeat?"

Huo Dou's face was angry and said firmly; "You said you are challenging for the position of Chancellor for your master, why are you using the martial arts of Hong Qigong? If you say you are representing Hong Qigong, we've just had two rounds. Are you people trying to cause confusion, deny it or not?"

Huang Rong didn't think wrongly, these words were difficult to refute, she was about to argue with him when Yang Guo interrupted, "This time you are speaking like a person, indeed this stick technique is not my Master's, even if I beat you, you won't take it. If you want to test out my skills, it's not hard. Just know I used another sect's kung fu because I was afraid that when I unleash my own sect's kung fu, you'd lose even more tragically." When he heard Huo Dou's words, he looked over towards Xiao Longnu and realized something, "Luckily that Prince woke me up. If I use the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" to beat him, how will I be able to show off Gu Gu's abilities? How could Gu Gu not be offended if I've forgotten her great kindness in teaching me martial arts?" In reality, Xiao Longnu was really innocent and naïve, her heart was filled with love and passion for Yang Guo. As long as she could see him, she was fulfilled; she didn't care about anything else. If he wins that's great, if he loses there's no harm, it doesn't matter. And when it comes to whether he uses their sect's kung fu or not, or whether he'd listen to Huang Rong's advice, she didn't take any of that to heart.

Huo Dou thought, "If you don't use the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", how hard will it be to take your life?" So he chuckled and said, "Fine, I'll experience your Master's great stances."

The most refined techniques that Yang Guo had learned under Xiao Longnu were swordplay, so he faced the crowd and said, "Please can I borrow one of you Senior's sword."

Within the two thousand or so people in the hall, three hundred of them carried a sword, when they heard Yang Guo's request, they all agreed and offered their swords.

Before Hao Datong and Sun Bu'Er entered the tutelage of Wang Chongyang, they were patriotic people; after they were nurtured by Wang Chongyang; their desire to repel the barbarian invaders was even stronger.

They were of course angry with Yang Guo, who expelled himself from the Quanzhen sect, but now when they saw that he was helping China to fend off the enemy, they flung their sect's feud with him to one side.

Sun Bu'Er was the weakest of the Quanzhen Seven Masters, before Wang Chongyang died, he gave her Quanzhen's sharpest and most precious sword to help compensate for her weak kung fu. She saw that Yang Guo was requesting a sword to fight off the enemy so she dashed forward to the front, her hands holding a glittering, precious sword and said, "Use this sword!"

Yang Guo saw that the sword was like a clear autumn river, he knew that it was a weapon which could cut through gold and jade, if he used it to fight Huo Dou, he would definitely be able to gain some advantage. But as soon as he saw the Taoist gown that Sun Bu'Er was wearing, he immediately thought about the suffering that he had in Quanzhen, and also remembered how Grandma Sun died under the palm of Hao Datong. He rolled his eyes and didn't take the sword, he instead turned around and borrowed a dark and rusted iron sword from a Beggar Clan member and said, "I'll borrow this brother's sword." He left Sun Bu'Er standing there like a corpse; she couldn't advance forward or go back. Though she practiced Taoism, it is hard to cleanse the fiery nature of martial artist; this young man dared to throw back her good intentions of lending her sword, she couldn't

stop herself from getting angry. She wanted to scold and curse him but the enemy was here, it wasn't convenient to start another argument, she forced herself to endure her anger and returned to the crowd.

Yang Guo's character was too determined and stubborn, he loved and hated in the extreme; originally he would have taken this opportunity to repair some of the damage between him and Quanzhen, but his reaction deepened the hatred between the two sides.

When Huo Dou saw that Yang Guo didn't take the precious sword but chose a rusty iron sword instead, he was worried. When one reaches an extremely high level in martial arts, flowers and leaves can be used to harm people, not needing the sharpness of weaponry. He pondered about the opponent taking such a blunt sword, was he really that strong? He opened his fan and fluttered it twice; he was about to open his mouth to signal the start of the battle.

Yang Guo's sword pointed to the four words written by Zhu Ziliu on his fan, he laughed and said, "You are hence a barbarian, everyone knows that, there's no need to spread it everywhere."

Huo Dou's face went red, a 'pai' sound was heard as the fan close and became a short stick, he pointed the fan towards Yang Guo's 'Shoulder Well' pressure point, his left palm came chopping out with the force of a strong wind, ruthless and swift. Yang Guo's iron sword moved as he used the "Jade Maiden Sword Technique" in response.

Years ago when Lin Chaoying studied bitterly in the stone tomb, she didn't leave the tomb again after she developed the "Jade Heart Manual" kung fu. She passed this skill onto her maid, who imparted it to Xiao Longnu who in turn

passed it onto Yang Guo. Not only did the maid not take a step into the world of Wulin, she never took a step off Mount Zhongnan. Though Li Mochou is Xiao Longnu's senior apprentice sister, she was not taught the advanced and profound sword techniques of her master. She gained fame throughout the Jianghu world through the use of her projectiles, fly whisk and palm techniques. Right now, he used the Ancient Tomb sect's sword techniques, many skilled fighters from various schools and sects were amassed in the hall today, but apart from Xiao Longnu, no one knew this sword technique.

The martial arts of the Ancient Tomb sect was developed by a woman, the next two generations were also women, it was unavoidable that the martial arts developed too much lightness and softness, and there wasn't enough power and fierceness. When Xiao Longnu taught him these stances, the stances carried thirty percent of this gracefulness and elegance. After he understood it completely, automatically he removed the femininity from the stances and turned its nature into a swift, at ease and airy style. The Ancient Tomb's lightness kung fu is unparalleled; Yang Guo was now moving around the main hall, before a stance was finished, a second stance arrived.

When the sword stances were first unleashed, the body was on the left, when the stances were repelling the enemy the body had turned to the right, it was as if the sword and user were completely separated. The two of them had nothing to do with each other; he only used around ten stances of this sword technique. Everyone was startled and watched in admiration. Huo Dou's fan techniques were also a great skill; it had swipes, strikes, thrusts and pierces, and this too relied on swiftness, lightness and softness to overcome the enemy. But now it had met up with the Ancient Tomb's matchless lightness kung fu and he was unable to unleash

his moves. Plus, he was ridiculed by Yang Guo because of the four words written by Zhu Ziliu, he didn't want to open his fan again and so the 'swiping' aspect of his fan technique could not be used.

When Guo Fu and the Wu brothers saw how excellent Yang Guo's sword techniques were, their six eyes were opened widely and they didn't have anything more to say.

The happiest person in the crowd was Guo Jing, he saw that the son of Yang Kang had learned such a good level of martial arts; even he couldn't see what the origins of these techniques were. When he remembered the deep ties between the Guo and Yang families, he couldn't stop sadness and joy from stirring in his heart. Huang Rong glanced over at her husband, she saw that his eyes were red, a smile was on his lips; she knew what he was thinking and stretched out her hand and took his right hand.

When Huo Dou saw that he couldn't handle his enemy, he began to get impatient; he thought that if he loses to this young punk today, his name will be in ruins, how could he make his name in the central plains? He saw Yang Guo's sword pointed at an angle, the sword tip dispersed and he attacked three places in quick succession; if he only was able to dodge them, he would be on his way to losing, so he opened his fan and blocked these three attacks. He called out again and used the "Ferocious Wind Rapid Thunder Skill" again to counterattack. With his status as a skilled fighter of Wulin, he should not use all his abilities and effort in fighting a young man. He'll lose all face if he wins in such a manner. But all he cared about right now was winning, how could he care about such things? He kept on calling out; a ruthless stance followed by an even more ruthless stance.

Yang Guo's sword was light and lively, the stances kept on coming without stopping, and it really was graceful, elegant and leisurely. This set of "Beautiful Maiden Sword" overcomes the opponent through grace and subtlety, and in contrast with the opponent's calls and shouts, Yang Guo's gracefulness and exquisiteness was even more emphasized. Though Yang Guo was wearing a torn and ragged garment, the sword technique's elegance and grace became clear in the eyes of the crowd; they felt that he was handsome and striking, and must be a fine son of a well to do family.

However, as Yang Guo prioritized in achieving the elegance and gracefulness of the stances, the power of the sword technique became difficult to unleash. Huo Dou fought without care for his life, he fought more and more fiercely; Yang Guo's strength gradually started to drain away.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw that he was on his way to losing and their eyebrows creased. They then saw the gusts of wind created by Huo Dou's sleeve and fan becoming stronger and stronger, they couldn't stop themselves from calling out in their hearts, "Oh no!"

Suddenly Yang Guo held his sword up and called out, "Careful! I'm going to use a projectile!"

Huo Dou had used his fan's poison nails to injure Zhu Ziliu; when he heard Yang Guo say this, he knew that the iron sword was like his fan, there is a secret weapon hidden within. No wonder he didn't pick the sharp sword and instead chose the rusty one. Since he used such a method to gain victory, the opponent could do so too. When he saw Yang Guo's sword pointing to his front, he quickly leapt away. But all he saw was Yang Guo's left hand leading the sword, thrusting forward; what projectile?

Huo Dou knew he had fallen into Yang Guo's trap and cursed him; "Little bastard!"

Yang Guo asked, "Little bastard curses who?" Huo Dou didn't reply and pressed forward with his palm.

Yang Guo's left hand rose up and he called out, "The projectile is coming!" Huo Dou quickly dodged to the right, the opponent's sword was coming in exactly from the right; Huo Dou quickly pulled back and turned his waist, the sword tip brushed past his ribs from the right. This sword was extremely vicious, when it missed; the crowd all called out, "What a pity!"

The Mongolian warriors secretly thought, "Shameful!"

Though Huo Dou managed to escape from death, his back had broken out in a cold sweat due to fright; he saw Yang Guo's left hand rise up again and call out, "Projectile!" He didn't take notice of him anymore and advanced forwards with his palms, indeed, the opponent was using a trick again.

Yang Guo's sword pierced thin air as he attacked forwards, his left hand rose up a fourth time and loudly called out, "Projectile!"

Huo Dou scolded, "Little...."

Before the second word was said, a flash of gold suddenly appeared in his eyes; he was now close to his opponent and after all the false calls by his opponent, he was completely off guard. He quickly leapt up but felt his leg pricked by a very small and fine projectile. Although a projectile hit him, he thought it was small and wouldn't do much; furiously, his fan slashed forward and his palm chopped out, he wanted to kill that crafty kid right there and then.

Yang Guo had now achieved his aim, why should he continue to fight so hard; he just used his sword to defend, he laughed as he said, "I warned you on many occasions about launching a projectile, and you didn't believe me. I didn't lie, did I?"

Huo Duo was about to attack with his palm when he suddenly felt his leg go numb and itchy as if a large mosquito had bitten him. He tried to endure it and finish attacking but the numbness and itchiness became stronger and stronger. He was alarmed, "Damn, that little bastard's projectile has poison on it!" After this quick thought, the numbness and itchiness became unbearable, he didn't care about the situation he was in and stretched out his arm to scratch it. But after only one scratch, he felt his heart starting to feel itchy and irritated, he couldn't stop himself from calling out and falling down onto the floor.

The potency of the poison on the Ancient Tomb's Jade Bee Needles was rarely seen in the world, just one little needle would cause unbearable pain. Never mind the fact that in the middle of battle, his blood was flowing around quickly and he was struck by several needles.

Da'erba took a large step forward and picked up his apprentice brother and placed him in his master's arms. He turned around to Yang Guo and said, "Little kid, I've come to fight you!"

The golden rod swept forwards, aiming towards Yang Guo's waist.

A golden light was carried forward with this sweeping rod. The golden rod was extremely heavy, as soon he used it, the golden light could be seen; his natural strength was great, his movements were quick. Yang Guo's legs didn't move, he bent his waist in a few inches and the golden rod brushed

past him. Who could have known that Da'erba wouldn't wait for the golden rod to finish the sweep, his wrist used some force, and the sweeping force of the golden rod turned into a thrusting one, moving towards Yang Guo's waist. With such a heavy weapon and such heavy and fierce stances, the ability to suddenly change direction midway was completely unexpected by everyone, Yang Guo too was shocked, he quickly pushed his sword against the rod and used its force to fly away.

Da'erba didn't wait for him to land, he followed up with another attack; Yang Guo's sword landed on the rod again and he flew away for a second time. Da'erba called out, "Where can you run?" The golden rod attacked again. Yang Guo's body was in midair, it was not convenient for him to do anything; he saw that he was in an extremely dangerous situation and decided to test his luck and take a risk. He stretched out his arm and grabbed the golden rod, hacking down with his sword at the same time. If he had the strength of Diancang Yuyin, then the opponent would have definitely let go. The reality was that Da'erba was much stronger than him; he pulled back and quickly retreated. Yang Guo took a chance and landed lightly on the ground. He was forced into the air three times in succession; his life really was within a space of a breath, though he didn't manage to take away the opponent's weapon, he had escaped the danger. The crowd all breathed out a sigh of relief.

Da'erba saw that his lightness kung fu was excellent and his stances lively, he said, "This kid's kung fu is not bad at all, who taught you?" He said this in Tibetan, of course Yang Guo would not understand. He had assumed that the monk was insulting him, and so copied what he said. The tone was perfect, there wasn't a mistake in the order of the words, in the ears of Da'erba, he heard, "This kid's kung fu is not bad

at all, who taught you?" So he replied, "My Master is Jinlun Fawang. I am not a little kid; you should call me big monk."

Yang Guo didn't want to suffer or be the receiving end of anything, he thought, "I don't care how you insult me, all I've got to do is give back what I get and I won't lose out to him. You call me a bastard, a pig, a pig in another language; I'll do the same to you." He concentrated on what he said and when he finished, he repeated in Tibetan, "My Master is Jinlun Fawang. I am not a little kid; you should call me big monk."

Da'erba was surprised, he looked up and down at him, he's definitely a little kid; how could he be a big monk? And how could your Master be Jinlun Fawang? So he said, "I am Fawang's first generation disciple. What generation are you?"

Yang Guo repeated, "I am Fawang's first generation disciple. What generation are you?"

In the Lama schools of Tibet, they had always talked about reincarnation, especially the reincarnation of the Da Lai and Ban Chan (religious figures of the lama Buddhists) back into this world; the disciples of the lama schools all believed in reincarnation without any doubts.

When Jinlun Fawang was young, he had taken in a disciple; that disciple died before he was twenty. Da'erba and Huo Dou had never seen him, they just knew about this matter. Da'erba is Fawang's second disciple, and Huo Dou the third, that was it. When Da'erba heard these words, he knew that it was his apprentice brother reincarnated, and he thought that if it wasn't him reincarnated, then how could this young kid have such high martial arts? Anyway, how would a young central plains kid know such good Tibetan? He slanted his head and studied him for a while; the more he

thought, the more likely it seemed to be true. He suddenly flung his golden rod away; he lowered his head and bowed to Yang Guo, he said, "Senior apprentice brother, junior apprentice brother Da'erba greets you."

Yang Guo was surprised with what just had happened, he thought that the monk couldn't beat him verbally so lowered his head in defeat. He saw that the monk was extremely respectful to him and his words were definitely not insults. They were words of respect, there was no need to copy him and so he nodded and smiled, showing that he accepted Da'erba's words.

The crowd was even more surprised, they didn't understand Tibetan; they didn't know what Yang Guo and the monk were jabbering on about. After talking for a while, he actually managed to tame this monk of terrifyingly divine strength.

Only Jinlun Fawang understood what was happening, he knew that his disciple, always straight and simple, had fallen into Yang Guo's trap; so he loudly said, "Da'erba, he's not your reincarnated apprentice brother, go and fight him."

Da'erba leapt up in shock and said, "Master, I think he must be apprentice brother, otherwise, at such a young age, how could he have such a high level of martial arts?"

Jinlun Fawang said, "Your apprentice brother's martial arts were much better than yours; that kid is not a match for you."

Da'erba shook his head, not believing him. Jinlun Fawang knew that he was very simple, he wouldn't understand straight away so he said, "If you don't believe it, go and test him out."

Da'erba has always treated his Master's orders as orders from above; since he said that Yang Guo was not his apprentice brother reincarnated then most probably he was not. But he had such high martial arts at such a young age, and said that he was his apprentice brother; it was difficult for him to not believe, but he followed his Master's orders to go and test out the kid's kung fu. The truth would be revealed by whoever wins or loses so he raised his hand to Yang Guo and said, "I'm going to duel with you, victory will decide whether this is the truth or not."

Yang Guo saw him stand up and say a few words, he looked very respectful. The words must be of a polite nature so he repeated what he said flawlessly, Da'erba heard, "I'm going to duel with you, victory will decide whether this is the truth or not." When he heard those words he felt very frightened, "Master said senior apprentice brother's martial arts were much better than mine, I definitely won't be able to compete with him."

Yang Guo saw that there were signs of fear on his face, he thought, "I'll give him another scare and send him away." So he said, "You have five disciples, they are called the 'Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border'; a few days ago they were rude towards me on the top of Mount Hua, and I crippled their kung fu. Are those punks still alive?" He spoke in Chinese, of course Da'erba would not understand, so he got one of the Mongolian warriors to translate for him. When Da'erba heard this, he was even more frightened. After the 'Five Clowns of the Tibetan Border' had their bodies' crippled by Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong, when they returned to him, they weren't even able to speak. When Da'erba examined their injuries, he thought that even his master Jinlun Fawang didn't have such high internal energy to destroy the five's veins yet still keep them alive. The thing that did this must have the ability to move heaven and

earth; it could only be a god or a demon. How would he know that Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong's internal energy was not below his master's; with the two combined, the internal energy would be twice as strong as Jinlun Fawang's. When he heard this, his fear flourished even more, he turned around and looked at Jinlun Fawang. He saw that there was an angry expression on his face, he didn't dare to not exchange blows with Yang Guo, he could only say, "Please hold back."

Yang Guo copied his Tibetan and said, "Please hold back."

Guo Fu saw the two of them speaking in Tibetan without pause, she went over to Huang Rong and said, "Mother, what are they saying?"

Huang Rong knew that Yang Guo was just copying what Da'erba had said, doing what children do to annoy other people, but she didn't understand why Da'erba had bowed to him. When she heard her daughter ask about this, she just gave an 'en' sound and said "Brother Yang is joking with him!"

Just at this point, Da'erba suddenly swept his golden rod out towards Yang Guo; he thought that since he's made it clear, the opponent would have been prepared. But Yang Guo had seen that he had a respectful expression on him, he didn't predict that he would suddenly lash out; this attack almost hit him, he leapt back urgently to avoid it.

He quickly retreated and hurried forward, immediately unleashing three strokes with the sword. Fear was in Da'erba's heart, he was afraid that his apprentice brother had learnt frightening martial arts from his master, and now that he's reincarnated, he would have even greater abilities. He just defended with his golden rod, not daring to make a single mistake. Many moves passed and Yang Guo

could see that he was just defending and not attacking. Though he didn't understand what was meant by this, he launched himself forward; he floated and darted around, a thrust from the east, an attack from the west, the "Jade Maiden Sword Techniques" were used with a clear gallant air and a flourishing beauty.

Over a hundred stances were exchanged, Jinlun Fawang was becoming impatient with the events and shouted, "Da'erba, quickly counterattack, he's not your senior apprentice brother!"

Da'erba's martial arts were well above Yang Guo's but because there was fear in his heart, he only used half of his abilities, whereas Yang Guo took the chance and fought with everything he had. One of them wanted to take the upper hand, the other kept on retreating and allowing the opponent to attack. Though Yang Guo had the advantage, he was unable to harm him; this convinced Da'erba further and he thought that his apprentice brother was holding back.

Jinlun Fawang was furious and loudly shouted, "Counterattack now!" This line was said with a surprising ferociousness, it caused ringing in the ears of the people watching. Da'erba didn't dare to defy his Master's orders; he straightened his golden rod and immediately attacked ferociously.

This ferocious attack forced Yang Guo to go on the defensive; he kept on dodging and darted around, the weaknesses in his stances were gradually beginning to show up. Da'erba saw that his sword stances were slightly loose and flung his rod towards it, Yang Guo couldn't pull back in time and the two collided. In a duel, weapons clashing were a regular event, but the rod was too heavy, Yang Guo's sword had kept its distance, not daring to

collide with the golden rod. Now when the weapons collided, he felt a sudden surge of a great force, shaking and causing him pain, a 'pai' sound was heard and the iron sword was snapped in two.

Da'erba called out, "I'm the victor!" He pulled back his rod and placed it on the ground vertically, his arms folded and bowed to him. Though he won, he didn't dare to lose his manners in front of his senior apprentice brother.

Yang Guo also used Tibetan to say, "I'm the victor!" He shot the broken sword towards him.

Da'erba moved his body to avoid it, he was alarmed, "How did senior apprentice brother win? Could it be that stance was a decoy, a trap? He saw Yang Guo dashing forward empty handed moving his hands; Da'erba didn't dare to hesitate and quickly used his golden rod to protect his body.

In the ancient tomb, Yang Guo learned palm techniques from Xiao Longnu; he reached a state where his two palms could keep eighty one sparrows within his control, not letting one fly away. This "Force of Nets Above and Snares Below" is a secret skill of Lin Chaoying's; it had never left Mount Zhongnan one-step. Now as it was used, indeed it was extremely soft, continuous and unyielding, though he was empty handed, the power of it was not inferior to the power he had when he was equipped with a sword. Da'erba's golden rod created gusts of winds as he used it, but Yang Guo used extremely high lightness kung fu to move around within the spaces of the rod. Though danger was always within a hair's breadth, the golden rod was not able to touch him at all. He clawed, hacked, slashed and chopped, within his little trapping hand stances as he used the "Force of Nets Above and Snares Below" for attack after attack.

After another while, Da'erba's strength increased, Yang Guo too got quicker and nimbler. During his time in the ancient tomb, he had refined his internal energy on the chilled jade bed, now in the middle of battle, the internal energy he spent years refining surged forward and showed itself.

Xiao Longnu sat on the stone rock next to the pillar with a slight smile on her face as she watched the two fight. She saw that Yang Guo had fought for a long time without losing, from her pockets, she took out a pair of snow white gloves and called out, "Guo Er, catch them!" Her right hand waved out and shot the gloves towards Yang Guo.

The pair of white gloves was made from very fine and very strong white gold silk, though it was thin, no type of precious blades or sharp swords could harm it.

When Hao Datong saw the white gloves in the air, his face changed slightly. Years ago at Chongyang Palace, Xiao Longnu wore these gloves to break his sword, forcing him to almost commit suicide. When he saw them again, he couldn't stop himself from being disturbed.

Yang Guo caught the gloves, retreated a step, and he quickly put them on. He used the Ancient Tomb's sect most ingenious and exquisite kung fu the "Beautiful Maiden Fist". He had used a few stances from this fist technique before to help Lu Wushuang against her enemies; forcing the Beggar Clan members to retreat. Every stance of this technique is meant to take on the aura and impression of a famous beautiful woman of the past. Originally, when a male uses it, the stances do not look elegant at all. But when Yang Guo was studying this technique he had changed some of the appearance of the stances; the names and fist techniques were the same, but in the interval between

palms and kicks, he changed its delicate and enchanting air into something graceful and stylish.

The heroes who were watching became even more perplexed; they saw him suddenly move and then suddenly stop; his expression and aura changing, it was extremely mystifying.

A woman's state of mind goes through many things, many changes. Along with the different extraordinary characters of each of the famous historic woman, came laughter, as brows were knitted, joy with worry; it was even more difficult to understand and surmise. Incorporating the hundreds and thousand year old feelings of these beautiful woman into martial arts, and then adding stances that reflect the beauty of goddesses, the mystery surrounding angels; how could ordinary people understand it?

Yang Guo used a stance of "Hong Yu Beats the Drum" his two arms attacking one after the other; Da'erba raised his rod and attacked. Yang Guo changed into "Hong Fu Hurries in the Night", unexpectedly he charged forward. Da'erba pushed his rod down vertically to block it. Yang Guo suddenly used "Luu Zhu's Falling Building"; he threw himself onto the ground and attacked his lower body.

Da'erba was shocked and thought, "How come senior apprentice brother's stances are so hard to comprehend?" He quickly leapt up and avoided his left palm's hack. Yang Guo's palms kept on attacking downwards without stop; it was the stance of "Wen Ji Returns to Her Man", in total there were eighteen palms.

Every stance of his had a background to it; Da'erba is a Tibetan monk, so how could he know about these histories of the central plains? In a flash he was forced to suddenly go high and then low, east and then west, his arms and legs

were all over the place. With the Golden Silk Gloves, whenever Yang Guo had the chance he would use the stances “Hong Xian Steals the Box”, “Mu Lan Curved Bow”, “Ban Ji’s Poem” and “Chang E Steals Medicine” to snatch away Da’erba’s golden rod, forcing him to roar incessantly, looking embarrassed. The heroes were delighted and called out and cheered to support him.

Jinlun Fawang saw that his disciple’s martial arts were definitely better than this young man’s, but because he was afraid, he kept on allowing the opponent to attack and was forced back embarrassingly. He shouted with a stern tone, “Quickly use the “Supreme Strength Rod Technique”!”

Da’erba replied, “Yes!” He held the rod’s handle with one hand and started to move it around. Using one hand to move the rod was already frightening, now he used the strength in his two hands and the strength in his waist at the same time; the gusts of winds created by the rod were even louder.

The “Supreme Strength Rod Technique” does not have many variations; there are only eight sweeping stances, and eight thrusting stances, sixteen stances in total, but when the sixteen stances were used repeatedly, sweeping and thrusting, it forced Yang Guo farther away as he avoided it. He didn’t dare to meet the gusts of wind created by the rod let alone meeting the rod itself.

After Diancang Yuyin’s oar broke, he had refused to accept his defeat, but when he saw the power of the “Supreme Strength Rod Technique”, he pondered on the fact that his oar stances did not contain anything as fierce and wild as this, he couldn’t help but give his respect to him.

After another period of fighting, several candles in the main hall were extinguished by the wind created by Da’erba’s

rod. Yang Guo just used his lightness kung fu to leap and jump around all over the place, just dodging and evading, but now that he was concentrating on avoiding the rod attacks, how could he attack? All of the heroes of the central plains were afraid and didn't make a sound, the Mongolian warriors all cheered thunderously.

Yang Guo was faced with no other choice but to keep on retreating, in a short time he was forced into the corner of the hall. He wanted to change his stances but there was no way for him to do so.

This "Supreme Strength Rod Technique" causes one to carry some degree of blind fury, once this became evident in Da'erba, he forgot that he was fighting his reincarnated senior apprentice brother. He saw that Yang Guo had nowhere else to retreat, and then shouted out, "Die!" The golden rod swept across, a ferocious explosion noise was heard, smoke and dust filled the air, and a large hole was made in the wall of hall.

In this extremely perilous situation, Yang Guo managed to leap over his head and even in this extreme situation he did not forget to repeat what he said in Tibetan, "Die!" That leap was a technique from the "Nine Yin Manual". He and Xiao Longnu had studied the markings of the manual left by Wang Chongyang on the ceiling of the stone chamber in the ancient tomb. They had learned some of the fist, kick and sword techniques but there was no one to advise them on practicing the internal aspect. They practiced it but they did not know if they practiced properly, right now he was facing a formidable enemy, how could he dare use it? He would never have thought that in the face of such a danger, he would use it naturally, saving his life in the process.

The crowd all thought that Da'erba would definitely hit his target with this stance; Guo Jing did not wait for the sweep

to hit its target and dashed out, wanting to grab his back. He saw a red flash in front of his eyes; Jinlun Fawang's palm was coming towards him. Guo Jing saw that the palm was coming in extremely fast so he quickly used a stance of "Seeing the Dragon in the Field". The two of them did not make a sound as the palms clashed; two flashes were seen as the two separated.

Guo Jing took three steps back while Jinlun Fawang stood his ground steadily. His strength was much stronger than Guo Jing's and his internal energy was profound, but the proficiency of his palms could not compare with Guo Jing's. Guo Jing took the steps back to disperse the enemy's force and avoid injury. But Jinlun Fawang was too proud; he forced himself to meet this palm solidly, enduring the pain in his chest, as he stood there without moving. Even great fighters such as Guo Jing and Jinlun Fawang thought that Yang Guo would definitely meet danger, so one of them flew out to save him; one of them came out to hinder the help. Who would have known that Yang Guo would use such an extraordinary stance, escaping in the space where the golden rod was sweeping next to his body. When the two of them saw that he avoided danger, both were surprised, one was comforted, the other lamented, and both of them retreated.

Da'erba didn't turn around after this failed attack; he swept the golden rod backwards fiercely. Yang Guo saw that this stance was coming in extremely quickly and automatically, he brushed across the floor like a sparrow gliding, he was a foot or so off the floor, going across it evenly, avoiding the golden rod with a few inches to spare. Again, this was kung fu from the "Nine Yin Manual".

Huang Rong was surprised and said, "Brother Jing, how come Guo'er knows the "Nine Yin Manual"? Did you teach him?" She thought that Guo Jing had taught Yang Guo the

“Nine Yin Manual” on the way to Mount Zhongnan out of his feelings and memories of the past.

Guo Jing said, “No, if I did teach him, why would I keep it from you?”

Huang Rong gave an ‘en’ sound; she knew that her husband had always told the truth to other people, towards her he was even more truthful. She saw Yang Guo shifting and moving, every time he was in danger he would rely on the martial arts of the “Nine Yin Manual” to protect himself. But he showed that he had yet to completely master it, he didn’t know how to counterattack according to the manual to achieve victory. Though he was able to protect his life, as the battle continues, he would still end up losing.

Huang Rong sighed to herself, “Guo’er is really an extraordinary talent, if he followed me for a year or so and learns the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” and “Nine Yin Manual” completely, how on earth would this Tibetan monk be a match for him?”

At this troubled time, she glanced over at a space and saw the Beggar Clan traitor Elder Peng in the midst of the Mongolian warriors, his face full of joy. She suddenly had an idea and called out, “Guo’er, “Soul Altering Spell”, “Soul Altering Spell”!”

The “Nine Yin Manual” has a technique called the “Soul Altering Spell”, using the power of the heart and soul to subdue the enemy and achieve victory. Years ago at the Beggar Clan meeting on Mount Jun, Huang Rong had used this technique to subdue Elder Peng’s hypnotizing “Fearful Heart Art”; because of this, when she saw this person she thought of it.

Yang Guo remembered the method of using the “Soul Altering Spell”; he didn’t have the confidence to completely

focus on the enemy and subdue them to gain victory so he had never practiced it. But he was conscious of Huang Rong's abilities, he thought, "Since Auntie Guo mentions this, there must be a reason, anyway, defeat is already definite so I might as well give it a try."

So his body continued avoiding the attacks, in his mind however he was purging his thoughts, following the method stated in the manual, from 'controlling the limits of the mind' to 'the limits of the real body'; everything became one, there weren't any other thoughts in his mind. At this time, he relied on his natural reactions, when he heard anything he leapt and darted, when he felt the gust of wind he hurriedly dodged it, his eyes fixed on the opponent.

More stances passed, Da'erba suddenly felt something was wrong with Yang Guo's movements; he glanced at him and then sent his golden rod forward fiercely.

Yang Guo used another stance of the "Beautiful Maiden Fist", "Man's Fine Waist", his waist swung lightly to avoid the attack. As he's using the "Soul Altering Spell", his body and mind have become one, whatever stances his hands and feet are using, then the face will reflect whatever feeling and aura the stances exude.

Da'erba saw that his face suddenly seemed to look like a scroll of literature, how on earth could he know that Yang Guo was copying the posture of the Tang's dynasty poet Zhu Letian's concubine Xiao Man' He couldn't stop himself from being taken aback, the golden rod attacked forward towards his head. Yang Guo moved his head to avoid it, he spread his five fingers and brushed it through his hair, his five fingers then gently waved out, a slight smile on his face; it was a stance of "Dressing of Li Hua". Zhang Lihua was Li Hou's favorite imperial concubine, her hair was seven feet long, its light could reflect people, because of her, Li Hou

abandoned his political duty and let the country go to ruin; her beauty was immensely enchanting.

Yang Guo's smile infected Da'erba, he followed and smiled. Yang Guo's face was handsome and striking, when he smiled, he was even more so, Da'erba's cheekbones were high and his cheeks deep, when the crowd saw him follow Yang Guo and smile, all of them shivered.

Yang Guo saw that he was taken aback and stretched out his finger, jabbing out; it was the stance "The Divine Needle Ping Ji". Da'erba slanted his body and moved away, his face copied Yang Guo's in making an expression that one has when concentrating on sewing.

Huang Rong saw that Yang Guo understood her and managed to affect the opponent using the "Soul Altering Spell", she was delighted; she whispered to Guo Jing, "Guo'er is extraordinary; when you were his age you didn't have such a level of kung fu."

Guo Jing expressed his joy, he nodded his head and concentrated on the two people in the middle of the hall without blinking.

The "Soul Altering Spell" uses the power of the heart and soul to affect the opponent; if the opponent's mind and will was strong and still, it would not be effective. If the opponent's internal energy was higher as well, the attack would be reflected back towards the user and they, instead, would fall under the control of the other person. When two people are dueling, if the user's martial arts were better than the other person's, then they could defeat them through weaponry, fists and kicks. There would be no need to resort to this technique. If on the other hand the user's internal energy was weaker, they wouldn't dare use this technique hastily. Though this technique is deep and

profound, it didn't have much use when facing a superior enemy.

Da'erba had heard Yang Guo speak a whole lot of Tibetan and had believed with some certainty that he was the reincarnation of his senior apprentice brother, but because there was fear in his heart, he was affected very quickly by this technique. Yang Guo was able to succeed in one go; if the target was Huo Dou, Yang Guo would definitely be in danger because he had never practiced this technique before and his internal energy could not match Huo Dou's.

Yang Guo performed the "Beautiful Maiden Fist", whatever he did, whether his steps made lotuses or he moved like a willow, Da'erba copied. The watching crowd was startled and amused.

Guo Fu had felt this was extremely amusing, she said to her mother, "Mother, this technique of brother Yang is really something, why don't you teach me?"

Huang Rong said, "If you learned the "Soul Altering Spell", heaven and earth would definitely be turned upside down; it would be trouble, you would suffer and so would others." She held her hand and said seriously, "Don't think this is fun, brother Yang and that monk are fighting with their lives; this is much more dangerous than fighting with sabers and swords!"

Guo Fu stuck her tongue out and watched Yang Guo, she still felt this was fun, when Yang Guo smiled, so did Da'erba, when Yang Guo was angry Da'erba was angry, so she copied him. How would she know how powerful the "Soul Affecting Spell" was, she copied just two movements when her heart and mind became unclear and blurred, and she started to take steps towards the centre of the hall.

Huang Rong was shocked and quickly pulled her hand. At this time, Guo Fu was being controlled and used her strength to fling her mother away. Huang Rong twisted her hand and Guo Fu's wrist, turning her face around, stopping her from facing Yang Guo. Guo Fu struggled for a bit, the hold restricted her vein's movements, she fainted and fell unconscious into her mother's arms.

Right now, Da'erba was completely controlled by Yang Guo, when he saw Yang Guo use a stance of "Xi Zi Offers the Heart" immediately followed by "Dong Shi Knits her Brows", then another stance of "Descending Goddess' Subtle Step", he copied the steps and scurries, "Gliding like a frightened Crow, Slithering like a slippery Snake".

Jinlun Fawang had noticed something was wrong long ago, he had called out many times but Da'erba acted like he didn't hear. Yang Guo saw that time had come, he suddenly used a stance of "Cao Ling Slices her Nose", and he waved his hand and cut a palm across his face, a left palm cut across followed by a right without stop.

In ancient times, a man called Cao Wenshu had a wife whose last name was Ling, after her husband died; she cut off her nose, showing that she will never marry again.

This stance originally uses the cut across the face to repel an enemy's attack, however, Yang Guo had made the cuts closer to his face by a few inches, cutting across his cheeks, it looked like it was a very heavy blow but in reality he just lightly brushed across his face. But how would Da'erba know this, his palms attacked his own face with the great force. He possessed frightening strength, every palm had a force of over a hundred kilos (220lbs), over ten palms later, he couldn't stand it, and he knocked himself dizzily to the floor.

Yang Guo quietly retreated a few steps and sat next to Xiao Longnu, his right hand supported his cheek, his left waved out lightly; he gave a long sigh, a lonely feeling on his face. This was the last stance of the “Beautiful Maiden Fist”, it’s called “Secluded in the Ancient Tomb” but this stance was invented by Yang Guo himself, Lin Chaoying did not know about this and Xiao Longnu too, did not know it. When Yang Guo completed learning the “Beautiful Maiden Fist”, he thought about how Ancestor Grandma excelled in beauty and grace, she did not lose compared to beauties of the ancient times, she was not in this fist technique, the beauty aspect is not really complete, so he devised his own stance. Though he said he invented this stance because of Lin Chaoying, the aura and feeling of this stance was that of his master Xiao Longnu. When Xiao Longnu first saw this, she just gave a little smile and let him be.

The heroes all cheered out in delight and called out, “We’ve won the second round as well!” “The position of Chancellor of Wulin belongs to the skilled fighters of the Song!” “You Mongols better crawl out of here and don’t show your face again in the central plains!”

The Mongolian warriors dashed out during this commotion and carried Da’erba back.

Jinlun Fawang saw that his two disciples had lost but not because their kung fu wasn’t good enough, they lost in some stupid way. He was furious but his face showed no signs of emotion, he sat on the chair and called out, “Young man, who is your Master?” Apart from excelling in martial arts, he was also knowledgeable in many things; he even knew how to speak Chinese.

Yang Guo pointed to Xiao Longnu and laughed as he said, “This is my Master, come and bow down to the Chancellor of Wulin!”

Jinlun Fawang saw that Xiao Longnu was beautiful and delicate, she was younger than Yang Guo, he did not believe that she was his master and thought, "The Han of the central plains are very sly and crafty but can you trick me?" He suddenly stood up; a clanking sound was heard as he took out a gold wheel from his compartment. The golden wheel was a foot and a half in diameter, cast out of solid gold, the Tibetan scriptures were inscribed on the wheel, in the middle were nine little spheres, a shake of the hands and a prolonged noise was heard.

Jinlun Fawang pointed to Xiao Longnu and said, "Huh, how is that this little girl is worthy of being the Chancellor of Wulin? If you can withstand ten stances of my golden wheel I'll acknowledge you as the Chancellor of Wulin."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "I've already won two rounds, two out of three, and your side said that at the start, so why are you trying to deny it?"

Jinlun Fawang said, "I want to test out her kung fu and see if she has the ability to take this task on."

Xiao Longnu did not know that Jinlun Fawang's abilities are shockingly brilliant, neither did she know what the Chancellor of Wulin was, the thought of whether to take this on had never crossed her mind. When she heard him say that he wanted to test whether she can withstand ten stances of his golden wheel, she stood up and said, "In that case I'll have a try."

Jinlun Fawang said, "If you can't withstand ten stances, what then?"

Xiao Longnu said, "If I can't, I can't, what about it?" Though she treated Yang Guo with love and compassion, when it comes to other things she didn't have a care.

The heroes of the central plains and the Mongolian warriors did not know that this was her character, and they saw that she didn't give Jinlun Fawang any consideration; they thought that she really must possess deep and profound martial arts. After seeing Yang Guo use the "Soul Altering Spell", others thought that she knew witchcraft and was a young witch. At that time, they all burst into conversation.

Jinlun Fawang really was afraid that she knew witchcraft, he started to chant a mantra, "ji li gu lu, ji li gu lu", he recited the "Devil Subduing Mantra" from the Tibetan scriptures. Yang Guo heard this and thought that the monk was insulting his master in Tibetan so he quickly concentrated and remembered every single word clearly. Once Jinlun Fawang finished reciting the mantra, from the golden wheel a period of 'lang lang' noises was heard, he shouted, "Young man, I'm about to start!" He said these two words in Chinese.

Yang Guo shook his hand, he didn't want to speak a word, he was afraid that once his concentration was disturbed, he would forget the passage of Tibetan he had just remembered, he then began to recite every word and tone of the passage.

Da'erba regained consciousness at this time, he saw that his master was holding a golden wheel and was about to fight someone. Then he heard Yang Guo recite the 'Devil Subduing Mantra' from the Tibetan scriptures, this was something that was kept within the school, and it was never passed on to outsiders. If Yang Guo wasn't the reincarnation of senior apprentice brother, how would he know this mantra? He quickly jumped up in urgency and knelt down in front of his master, he called out, "Master, he really is the reincarnation of senior apprentice brother, take him back into the school!"

Jinlun Fawang angrily said, "Rubbish! You don't even know that you've fallen into his trap."

Da'erba said, "It really is, this is the truth, it's definitely not a lie."

Fawang saw that he was confused; he picked him up by the back and flung him away. Da'erba weighed about a hundred kilos (220lbs); the way he was tossed lightly aside was as if he weighed nothing.

The heroes had seen the frightening strength of Da'erba when he fought Diancang Yuyin and Yang Guo, but the toss by Jinlun Fawang showed that his strength was even stronger. They looked at the delicate appearance of Xiao Longnu, without even mentioning the ten stances, if he just used force to blow at her, she would be blown over, and they couldn't stop themselves from worrying about her.

Many of the Mongolian warriors have seen Jinlun Fawang display his abilities, his skill could hold back ten thousand men, and his strength exceeded that of nine bulls. Though Xiao Longnu was the enemy, they saw that she was childlike, frail and beautiful. Even if she did know witchcraft, she may not be able to defend against the mysterious divine abilities of Jinlun Fawang. They couldn't stop themselves from secretly hoping that Fawang would not be too ruthless.

After Yang Guo finished reciting the mantra, he whispered to Xiao Longnu, "Gu Gu, be careful of that monk."

When Jinlun Fawang heard that Yang Guo had not recited one word wrong, he had respect for him, he praised him, "Young man, only you."

Yang Guo said, "Monk, only you."

Jinlun Fawang looked at him and said, "Only I what?"

Yang Guo said, "Only you've got the courage to fight with my Master, she is the reincarnation of the Goddess of Mercy; she has the ability to move heaven and earth, the power to subdue dragons and tigers, you better take care." He saw that this monk was very powerful, he wanted to make him worry so he won't fight with his full abilities, then it would be easier for his Master to defend against him.

But Jinlun Fawang is a hero that Tibet had never seen before; he excelled in both martial arts and the arts, how would he fall into the trap; he called out, "The first stance is coming, little miss, show your weapon!"

Yang Guo took off the golden silk gloves and put them on his Master before stepping back. Xiao Longnu took out a white silk belt from her pockets, the belt flew out and met the wind, a golden sphere was tied to the white belt. Something was inside the golden sphere, as the belt moved, the sphere rang like a bell, 'ding ling, ding ling', it was crisp and clear.

Everyone saw that the two's weapons were extremely strange, they thought that today they would really experience something, one weapon was extremely short, the other was extremely long, one extremely hard, the other extremely soft, and by coincidence, both weapons made 'ding dang' noises.

The golden wheel that Jinlun Fawang uses traps the opponent's weapon; no matter if it's a saber, sword, spear, lance, pike, whip or stick. When the weapon meets the wheel, they would be tangled up; when a normal person sends a stance over, the weapon in their hand will be lost. If he didn't see how impressive Yang Guo's martial arts were, he would never have said ten stances. In his life, very few

people have managed to take three stances of his golden wheel.

Xiao Longnu's belt flew out, she was attacking first.

Jinlun Fawang said, "What is this?" He sent out his left hand to grab the belt, he saw that the silk belt moving gently and swiftly, he knew that there would be many variations. That grab he sent out covered all directions, up, down, left, right and middle, wherever the belt goes, it would not escape his clutches. He couldn't have known that the golden sphere would counterattack, ringing as it moved, it was heading for his 'Central Islet' pressure point on the back of his hand. Jinlun Fawang was extremely swift in changing his stance, his palm turned around and went for the sphere again. Xiao Longnu's wrist moved slightly, the sphere turned around, moving up and down, aiming to strike his arm's 'Combined Valley' pressure point. Jinlun Fawang's palm turned again, this time he stretched out his two fingers to catch the sphere. Xiao Longnu understood what he was doing, the belt rushed forward slightly, the sphere went for the 'Crooked Marsh' pressure point around the elbow area.

Those few variations were done within just the turn of a hand, Jinlun Fawang turned his palm twice, Xiao Longnu twisted her wrist three times; the two had exchanged five stances.

Yang Guo understood what was happening and loudly counted, "One, two, three, four, five... that's five stances!" There are five stances left."

Jinlun Fawang wanted Xiao Longnu to take ten of his stances, wanting her to defend against ten of his attacks. Yang Guo tried to be clever and counted the stances exchanged by both sides. Jinlun Fawang is a leading master of martial arts, why would he allow himself to get into an

argument over numbers with this crafty young man? His left arm went to the side and avoided the sphere, and then sent his golden wheel forward.

Xiao Longnu heard the urgent 'lang lang' noise and saw a gold flash in front of her eyes, the enemy's golden wheel was now only a foot or so in front of her. This move was sudden, she couldn't even think about repelling this move, evading this attack was impossible. In this danger she flicked her wrist again, the silk belt went straight forward, the sphere attacked Fawang's 'Wind Pond' pressure point on the front of his head. This is a fatal pressure point, even if you're martial arts were higher, once this point has been struck, your life would be at risk. She had no other choice but to use this risky stance of making both sides suffer great losses and to force the opponent to take back his wheel.

Indeed, Jinlun Fawang did not want to risk his life with her, he lowered his head to avoid the attack, but once his head was lowered, the wheel in his hand became slower. Xiao Longnu took this opportunity and summoned back her silk belt and a 'ding ding dang dang' sound was heard as the sphere collided with the golden wheel, neutralizing Jinlun Fawang's attack. All that happened in the blink of an eye, Xiao Longnu went from facing death to staying alive in a matter of seconds, she urgently utilized her lightness kung fu and retreated to the side, her face had a fearful expression.

Jinlun Fawang had just used one stance to attack but Yang Guo called out loudly, "Six, seven, eight, nine, ten... great, my master has received ten stances of yours, what more have you got to say?"

After that exchange, Jinlun Fawang knew that although Xiao Longnu's martial arts were high, it was no where near his

level. If they exchanged moves properly, he would definitely defeat her within ten stances. He did not like Yang Guo stirring the situation from the side, talking rubbish, and disturbing his concentration. He thought, "I'll ignore the young man's rubbish, I'll intensify my attacks and beat the little girl first and then reason with them." His sleeve carried forward and the golden wheel flashed, it was another extremely lethal fatal attack.

Yang Guo called out loudly, "You don't want face! Ten moves have passed and you're continuing, eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen..." He didn't care how many stances were exchanged in defense and attack by the two, his mouth kept on counting up.

After receiving one of his stances, Xiao Longnu was extremely afraid; she didn't dare to receive another attack head on. She utilized her lightness kung fu and flew around the hall, the belt in her hand floating in the air, the golden sphere quickly turning, forming a streak of fog, a path of yellow light. The sounds that the golden sphere was producing sped up suddenly, slowed suddenly, lightened suddenly and loud suddenly, it was like a song. When she lived in the tomb, she studied the zither manuscripts left by Lin Chaoying and played the zither accordingly; she became rather wonderful with it. Later on, she started to practice with the silk belt and gold sphere, she noticed that the tones made by the sphere possessed a rhythm and tone, her character was still childlike then, and she managed to integrate music into this set of kung fu techniques.

Everything possesses a rhythm, from the way the world passes on, how trees and grass grow, to a person's heartbeat and pulse. Music is created by the natural manipulation of the sounds of nature by people; music pleases the ear whereas noise creates trouble in the heart. When kung fu and music is combined, it is performed even

more smoothly and softly, the body following whatever the mind wants.

The lightness kung fu of the Ancient Tomb sect belongs to its own class, other sects' lightness kung fu cannot compare with it. When using it in the open plains, it is difficult to identify the strong points of the technique, right now, it was being used in the hall, the grace and ease of it was unparalleled, moving in thousands of different directions. She has practiced her martial arts in the rooms of the ancient tomb, within a radius of over ten feet, she really did move like a goddess.

Though Jinlun Fawang's martial arts were much superior to hers, as she hurriedly leaped and suddenly shifted, there wasn't anything he could do about it. He heard the 'ding ling ding ling' sounds of the sphere was like a song, after listening to it a while, he found himself fighting along with the music. He quickly swung his golden wheel to create a noise, mixing up the 'ling' sounds. In a flash the room was filled with the clashing of the two sounds, suddenly it was soft then loud, high then low. The sounds from the bell was crisp and clear, when one hears them they felt carefree and joyous, the sounds that Jinlun Fawang produced were like metal being forged, like a scraping of a cauldron, like killing a pig, beating a dog, many indescribable noises.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were watching from the side and remembered how years ago they heard Hong Qigong, Ouyang Feng and Huang Yaoshi use the sounds of music to battle with each other on Peach Blossom Island. As they reminisced about it, it felt like it was lifetime ago. Though the martial arts of the two were masterly, when it comes to using music to fight, they could not compare with Hong, Huang and Ouyang.

Yang Guo had already counted up to, "One thousand and five, one thousand and six, one thousand and seven..." But Xiao Longnu had kept away from facing her opponent; Jinlun Fawang had yet to use ten stances. Guo Fu was unconscious in her mother's arms but she was awakened by the sounds of the golden wheel, she raised her head, her face as dazed and she did not know what was going on.

Jinlun Fawang felt very impatient, he felt that with the status of a leading martial artist, if he was unable to beat this young girl after so long, and if the battle went on, he would eventually win but he would have lost all face. He suddenly stretched out his left arm, the golden wheel slanted across; his left palm pushed out low towards the left, the golden wheel went upwards towards the right. The two of them had fought for a long time, now Jinlun Fawang had grasped half of Xiao Longnu's lightness kung fu; those two attacks were meant to block her escape routes, only allowing her to move forward, escaping backwards was not an option.

In this danger, Xiao Longnu waved her silk belt and wrapped it around a group of white flowers, her body quickly flew up.

Fawang's golden wheel turned around, binding the silk belt. If it were a normal weapon, he would have taken it away long ago, but the silk belt did not have any stiffness, it just lightly slipped away from the hole of the golden wheel. Jinlun Fawang shouted, "That is the second stance, the third stance is coming!" He took a step forward; the golden wheel suddenly escaped from his hands, and was sent flying towards Xiao Longnu.

No one predicted that stance, the golden wheel spun urgently as it slashed towards Xiao Longnu. Xiao Longnu was extremely startled, she lowered her body and darted

backwards, she suddenly heard a 'chi chi' sound, a yellow light passed her face within an inch, the gusts of wind created by the wheel hurt her tender face.

In the startled calls of the crowd, Fawang dashed forward and stretched out his arm, his palm gave a push on the wheel's rim, turning it in midair, heading towards Xiao Longnu again. Xiao Longnu saw that the force the wheel was spinning with was extraordinary, how could she dare to use the silk belt to trap it? She could only use her matchless lightness kung fu to jump to the side to avoid it.

Jinlun Fawang had missed twice and called out, "Great lightness kung fu!" He dashed forwards and stretched out his left fist, a 'dang' sound was heard as he struck the wheel, at the same time he sent out both palms, blocking Xiao Longnu's path forward, while the golden wheel flew with a 'lang lang' sound towards the back of her head.

The golden wheel wasn't extremely quick, but before the wheel arrived, the gusts of wind created by the wheel moved towards Xiao Longnu, it was an extremely ferocious force. When Fawang punched the wheel, he had already calculated where the opponent could escape to, that is why the wheel seemed to have grown an eye; after making half a circle in midair, the wheel returned and headed for Xiao Longnu's back. Xiao Longnu jumped and used all the skills that she had learnt in her life, but she still saw the Tibetan monk's palms opened in front of her, blocking her way. The heroes' ears were filled with calls, their eyes were dazzled, and all of them had fear in their hearts.

Yang Guo saw that Xiao Longnu was in danger; he was extremely concerned and picked up Da'erba's golden rod. He used all his strength and flung it upwards towards the wheel, a loud 'dang' sound was heard, the rod managed to go through the wheel's opening in the middle, but the force

of the wheel was really ferocious, it shook his arms so much that his wrists split open, blood poured out, as he brought the wheel and rod crashing to the floor.

Xiao Longnu glanced over and saw that the wheel was on the floor, the threat from behind was taken away but her body was in midair, how could she avoid the enemy that was in front of her? She urgently waved out her silk belt, wrapping it around the pillar in the west and then pulled with all her strength, her body used this force to fly away towards the pillar, she smoothly and lightly slipped down behind the pillar, in the space of a hair's breadth, she managed to avoid Fawang's mountain shattering palm.

Jinlun Fawang had victory in his grasp but was again stopped by Yang Guo. Not only did the enemy get away, even his unbeatable weapon was knocked on to the floor by him; he has never experienced such a frustrating setback in his life. He originally was meticulous, wise and intelligent, yet right now he couldn't stop himself from reacting without thinking. He didn't wait for Yang Guo to get up and sent a palm chopping down on him.

According to his status as head of a school, what he was doing did not match how he had always thought of himself; Yang Guo was a junior, and he was on the floor when he sent out this palm, but in his great anger he couldn't care less.

Guo Jing saw him staring angrily at Yang Guo, his shoulder was raised and arm taken back, Guo Jing knew that he was about to kill him, he called out in quietly, "Oh no!" If he took a step forward, he would still be able to block this attack but Yang Guo would still suffer a serious injury. In this urgent situation there was no time to think carefully, he used a stance of "Flying Dragon in the Sky", his whole body leapt into the air, and attacked Jinlun Fawang's head. If

Jinlun Fawang didn't take back this palm, though he would be able to kill Yang Guo, his life would be taken away under the matchless lethal and swift Dragon Subduing Palm. The force of his palm quickly turned around, he gave a 'hei' shout, and exchanged palms with Guo Jing.

This was the second time that two great masters of the present time exchanged palms. Guo Jing was in midair and had nothing to brace against, he used the opponent's force and made a half somersault, landing backwards. Yet, Jinlun Fawang stood his ground steadily, his body didn't sway and his legs didn't shift, it was as if nothing had happened.

Hao Datong, Sun Bu'Er, Diancang Yuyin and the others knew about Guo Jing's kung fu; after they saw this they all were shocked, that monk's kung fu really is extraordinary.

In reality, Guo Jing was just following the orthodox rules of martial arts by retreating backwards, naturally dispersing the enemy's force.

After Yang Guo had interfered many times, Jinlun Fawang had lost face, he wanted to regain it back and so took Guo Jing's palm; he actually consumed a lot of his chi and internal energy, though he looked like he was superior, he was suffering on the inside. The two of them are outstanding men of the world; it would be difficult to separate the two in tens of moves. Jinlun Fawang forced himself to take this stance without moving, his chest throbbed with pain again, luckily the aim of the opponent was just to stop him and he did not continue to attack. He closed his lips and eyes and circulated his internal energy, unblocking the motionless chi in his chest.

Yang Guo escaped death and picked himself up, he hurried to Xiao Longnu's side, just as Xiao Longnu was about to come over and take a look at him. Both of them asked at the

same time, "Are you okay?" The two nodded at the same time, a smile was on their faces, their hands held each other's with joy in their hearts.

Yang Guo picked up the golden rod and placed the golden wheel on top, he rotated the wheel and it made 'lang lang' noises; he loudly called out, "All you Mongolian warriors listen; I've manage to take the weapon of your country's great protector, how can you still talk about being the Chancellor of Wulin? Go and crawl back to Mongolia you Mongolian asses!"

None of the Mongolian warriors accepted what had happened, they saw that Jinlun Fawang was about to win in the duel between him and Xiao Longnu, the opponents came up with not only Yang Guo, but Guo Jing as well, they all called out, "It was Fawang who flung the wheel away himself, how could a little punk like you take it?" "One versus one" and "without the help of others!" "Correct, fight again," They all made a clamor but it was all in Mongolian, apart from Guo Jing, no one understood what they were saying.

The heroes of the central plains were all reasonable and understanding people; they felt that when it comes to martial arts, Jinlun Fawang was indeed superior to Xiao Longnu. But they cannot allow a Mongolian to take the position of the Chancellor of Wulin; otherwise, the central plain's Wulin would have lost all its face. Before it actually began, the spirits of the amassed heroes who planned to defend against the foreign invaders had been dampened. The younger members of the crowd also began to argue and shout. When they heard the clamor of the Mongolian warriors, they began to quarrel with them. Both sides raised their weapons; the situation was developing into a mass brawl.

Yang Guo raised the golden rod and golden wheel; he said to Jinlun Fawang, "You still won't admit defeat? You have lost your weapons, what face have you got left? How can the world have a Wulin Chancellor whose weapon can be taken away by someone else?"

Jinlun Fawang was secretly circulating his internal energy right now, he heard every single word that Yang Guo said but he didn't dare to open his mouth and speak.

Yang Guo looked at the situation and knew what was happening, quickly, he loudly said, "All the heroes please can I have your attention: I'm going to ask him three times, if he doesn't reply then that means he admits defeat."

He was afraid that as time passes, Fawang will have finished circulating his internal energy, he didn't waste any time, he asked in one breath, "Did you or did you not lose? Are you still thinking about the position of the Chancellor of Wulin or not? If you don't say anything then that means you admit defeat, right?"

Fawang had just finished ridding the motionless chi, the pain in his chest had cleared up, he was about to reply when Yang Guo saw his lips move, he quickly got in ahead and said, "Fine, since you've admitted defeat we won't give you any trouble, you had better leave." He then raised the golden rod and golden wheel and handed them over to Guo Jing. He actually wanted to hand them over to his Master but was afraid that Jinlun Fawang's fury will erupt again; Xiao Longnu would not be able to block the attack.

Jinlun Fawang was so angry that his face swelled and turned purple. He was worried about how excellent Guo Jing's martial arts were; his weapon has also fallen into the enemy's hands. If he fights empty handed, it would be difficult for him to win. He also saw that there were many

martial artists of the central plains here, if it became a mass brawl, their side would definitely lose. A good man doesn't endure the suffering that's in front of him, he could only retreat first and come up with another plan. He loudly said, "The barbarians of the central plains are crafty and sly, they win due to numbers, they are not heroes and good men, let's go." His left hand waved and the Mongolian warriors all headed towards the exit. He made a departing motion towards Guo Jing from faraway, he said, "Hero Guo, Chief Huang, today I have experienced your great skills. The mountains will remain green, the rivers will flow, and we will meet again."

Guo Jing returned the gesture and bowed, he said, "Reverend's martial arts are deep and profound, I respect your abilities deeply. Please take back the weapons." As he said this, he offered the golden rod and wheel back.

Yang Guo loudly called out, "Jinlun Fawang, you are thinking about taking them back, do you want face?"

Guo Jing shouted, "Guo'er, stop talking rubbish." Jinlun Fawang had already turned around with his sleeve floating behind, he didn't look back as he exited the hall.

Yang Guo suddenly remembered something, he called out, "Hey, your disciple Huo Dou has contracted my poison, quickly bring the antidote to his poison and swap it with mine."

Jinlun Fawang had always thought very highly of his own abilities; mysterious and divine martial arts, profound medical knowledge, he can cure any poison. He had an extreme dislike for Yang Guo because of his slyness and craftiness, he ignored what he said and left.

Huang Rong saw that Zhu Ziliu had his eyes closed and was asleep, she considered that many of the people here are

experts in using poison projectiles, there would be someone who has the ability to cure this poison, and she wasn't too concerned with Jinlun Fawang's refusal.

Now, the Lu manor was filled with thunderous cheers and calls; all of it was for Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu defeating Jinlun Fawang. Hundreds of people were around the two, one word here and another word there. Some said that Yang Guo defeated Huo Dou in the way he deserved, dealing with a man as he deals with you. Others said that the speed and ease of Xiao Longnu's lightness kung fu was in a class of its own, actually managing to avoid the fierce and dangerous attacks of Jinlun Fawang. When it came to Yang Guo using the "Soul Altering Spell" to make Da'erba knock himself out, many of them did not understand what had happened. When someone asked about it, Yang Guo just made up a reply.

End of Chapter 13.

Chapter 14 - Defending against Custom and Tradition

Translated by Noodles



The upstairs of the restaurant became covered by a layer of broken wood. The three of them battled

on the debris without any obstructions. Jin Lun Fa Wang moved around in large steps, the iron wheel flashing around, 'lang lang' sounds were heard, his arms in motion as he attacked Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu two people ferociously.

The banquet opened again at the Lu manor, wine and many dishes were once again prepared. Yang Guo had suffered a lifetime of wrongs, mistreatment and being looked down upon, and today he had displayed himself well. He got rid of his anger, everyone's eyes were opened as he achieved great merit for the central plain's Wulin, he was extremely proud of himself.

Xiao Longnu did not understand the ways of the world, though she didn't understand the reason for Yang Guo's delight, she too was extremely happy. Huang Rong liked her very much, she held her hand as she asked short and long questions, wanting Xiao Longnu to sit next to her.

Xiao Longnu saw that Yang Guo was sitting in between Guo Jing and Diancang Yuyin, faraway from her, she quickly motioned her hand and said, "Guo'er, sit next to me."

But Yang Guo knew that girls and boys have their differences, at first when he saw her, he forgot about this and showed his true feelings, now in front of the glare of all these heroes, it would be improper to show this closeness again. When he heard her call out like this, he couldn't stop himself from blushing and smiled slightly but he didn't go over.

Xiao Longnu called out again; "Guo'er, why aren't you coming?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm fine over here, Uncle Guo is talking to me."

Xiao Longnu's elegant brows frowned and said, "I want you to sit next to me."

When Yang Guo saw her angry expression, his heart shook, that slightly angry look made him feel if he were to die, he would die willingly.

That day when he met Lu Wushuang, he used all his might to defend her against her enemies and protected her for thousands of miles because of the resemblance of her angry expression to Xiao Longnu's. Now the real person is here, how could he defy her? He immediately stood up and went over to her place.

The way the two acted made Huang Rong slightly suspicious. She ordered another chair and asked Yang Guo; "Guo'er, who taught you kung fu?"

Yang Guo pointed to Xiao Longnu and said, "She is my Master. Auntie Guo, why don't you believe me?"

Huang Rong knew that he was crafty and sly, she saw that Xiao Longnu was innocent and naïve, she thought that she wouldn't lie so she turned her head and asked her, "Sister, his kung fu was taught by you?"

Xiao Longnu was very proud and said, "Yes. Tell me, did I teach him well?"

Huang Rong now believed it and said, "Extremely well! Sister, who was your Master?"

Xiao Longnu said, "My Master is dead." As she said this, her eyes went red, she was feeling rather sad. Her Master had taught her to curb her emotions but now her love for Yang

Guo had surfaced, the emotions buried deeply within her heart also started to slowly show.

Huang Rong asked, "What is your Master's name?"

Xiao Longnu shook her head and said, "I don't know, Master is Master."

Huang Rong thought that she didn't want to say, refusing to mention the matters involving their sect's Master was common within the Wulin community so she didn't ask further.

In reality, her Master was just Lin Chaoying's maid, she only had the name that Lin Chaoying gave her, and even she herself did not know what her surname was.

At this time, all the heroes gave a toast towards Guo Jing, Huang Rong, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu, celebrating the fact that they defeated such a strong opponent as Jinlun Fawang.

Because Guo Fu was always by her parent's side, she had the respect of others, right now she was being overshadowed, and she couldn't stop from feeling depressed. Apart from the Wu brothers by her side who revered her, no one took any notice of her. She felt annoyed, she said, "Big brother Wu, little Brother Wu, let's go outside and play instead of drinking wine."

Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen both agreed. The three of them stood up and were about to leave the hall when Guo Jing suddenly called out, "Fu'er, come over here." She turned her head and saw that her father had changed places and was now sitting at the same table as her mother, smiling and signaling her over so she went and called out, "Father, mother!" and leaned on Huang Rong.

Guo Jing smiled and said to Huang Rong, "At first you were worried about Guo'er's character and were afraid that his martial arts weren't up to scratch, you can't say anything now, can you? He has achieved a great merit for the heroes of Wulin, without saying that he hasn't done anything wrong. Even if he had, it cannot compare to what he has done today."

Huang Rong nodded, she smiled and said, "It was my mistake, Guo'er's character and martial arts both are good, I am very pleased as well."

Guo Jing heard that his wife had now agreed about their daughter's marriage and was delighted, he said to Xiao Longnu, "Miss Long, your disciple's father and I are sworn brothers. The Yang's and Guo's have had a great relationship for generations, I have a daughter, her beauty and martial arts are both passable..." He had always been straight forward, whatever is in his heart will be said.

Huang Rong interrupted, she smiled and said, "Ai ya, who praises their own child like that, you're not afraid of making sister Long laugh."

Guo Jing laughed and followed on, "I wish to betroth my daughter to your disciple. Both his parents have passed away, the responsibility of making the decision is now passed onto Miss Long. I want to take the opportunity with all these heroes here, to add another celebration on top of the last one. Let's ask two heroes of a venerable age and eminent virtue to be the matchmakers, and arrange the marriage, how about that?"

Marriage is decided by the orders of the parents and the words of the matchmakers, the boy and girl don't actually have a say. This is why, years ago, there was the matter of an arranged marriage decided by Guo Jing's father Guo

Xiaotian and Yang Guo's grandfather Yang Tiexin for their children. When Guo Jing said this, he laughed out loud and looked at Yang Guo and his daughter, thinking that Xiao Longnu will definitely agree to this. Guo Fu was already embarrassed, her face was red and she hid in her mother's arms, she felt this was inappropriate but she didn't dare to say anything.

Xiao Longnu's face changed slightly and before she replied, Yang Guo stood up and gave a prolonged bow to Guo Jing and Huang Rong and he said, "The gratitude that I have for Uncle Guo's and Auntie Guo's love and care would be impossible to repay. But nephew is from an ordinary family, my character is lowly, I am not worthy for your precious daughter."

Guo Jing thought that because he and his wife are famous throughout the Wulin world, and his daughter's character, beauty and kung fu are first class, now that he's personally saying that he wants to betroth her to him, he thought he would definitely be ecstatic. He couldn't have known that he would reject this, he couldn't help being startled. Then had another thought; it must be because he is young, it was unexpected and he wanted to postpone it. Guo Jing gave a laugh and said, "Guo'er, the two of us aren't exactly strangers, this matter involves your future, there is no need to be embarrassed."

Yang Guo gave another deep bow to him and said, "If Uncle Guo has any other requests, nephew here will oblige without delay. But I dare not comply with this request of marriage."

Guo Jing saw that his face was serious and he was surprised, he looked at his wife in hope that she would explain it.

Inside, Huang Rong blamed Guo Jing for being so straightforward. Without checking beforehand, he openly raised this matter in front of all these people, making a big mistake. She saw that the way Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo treated each other was like a couple in love, but they said they were Master and disciple, could it be that the two act in a manner contrary to the norm and have actually intermixed the relationships?

This was something that was extremely hard to believe, she thought that although Yang Guo may not be a man of honour, he would not do such a thing as this. The Song respect tradition above all; the relationship between Master and disciple were like that of an emperor and his minister, a father and son, they can never intermix. Though Huang Rong suspected it, this matter was so serious that she didn't dare to believe it so she asked Yang Guo, "Guo'er, Miss Long really is your Master?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes!"

Huang Rong asked again, "You've kowtowed and gone through the ceremony of entering a Master's tutelage?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes." His mouth was replying to Huang Rong but his eyes were fixed on Xiao Longnu, his face filled with joy, tenderness, love and affection. Without mentioning how clever and wise Huang Rong was, even an ordinary person could tell that the two's relationship was not a normal Master and disciple relationship.

Guo Jing did not understand what Huang Rong was doing, thinking, "He has already said that Miss Long is his Master, their kung fu is from the same school, what's untrue about that? I was talking about our daughter's marriage, why did Rong'er ask them whether they were Master and disciple again? Ah, he first entered Quanzhen sect and then entered

another sect later on, though it's not according to the rules of Wulin, it's not that difficult a thing to clear up.

Huang Rong was secretly alarmed at Yang Guo's and Xiao Longnu's expressions, she signaled with her eyes towards her husband and said, "Fu'er is still young; why is there a need to rush things? Today the heroes of the world are amassed here, it's more important to discuss how to protect the country. Let's put aside our personal matters."

Guo Jing thought this was correct so he quickly said, "Yes, yes. I almost put my personal affairs over public matters. Miss Long, we'll carry on discussing Guo'er's and my daughter's marriage at a later date."

Xiao Longnu shook her head, "I myself will be Guo'er's wife," she said, "He cannot take your daughter as his wife."

Those two sentences were crisp and clear, hundreds of people in the hall heard this. Guo Jing was startled, he stood up and didn't believe his eyes, he saw her holding Yang Guo's hand, looking affectionate towards him, he had to believe it, he stuttered, "He's... he's your disc... disc... disciple, could it be that he's not?"

Xiao Longnu had lived in the ancient tomb for a long time; she was not exposed to the sunlight, because of this there were no traces of color in her cheeks and her skin permanently white. But right now her heart was filled with joy and delight; her face looked tender and enchanting, just like when a flower first blooms. She smiled and said, "Yes! I taught him kung fu but now his kung fu is as strong as mine. He loves me in his heart and I love him. Before..." As she reached this point she lowered her voice, though she was very innocent, the embarrassment and shyness of girls began to show, she said gently, "Before... I thought that he didn't love me, he didn't want me to be his wife, my... my

heart was in unbearable pain and I thought death would be better. But today, I know that he really loves me, I... I..."

Hundreds of people in the hall were silent, listening to her revealing her feelings. Even if a girl is filled with love, how could she tell it all in public? And how could she tell it to Guo Jing who had nothing to do with it? But she does not know anything about customs, tradition and the conduct of others, she just felt that these words needed to be said and immediately came out with them.

Yang Guo was extremely moved by her words of love but he looked at the crowd, some were startled and surprised, some looked awkward and some did not approve. He thought that Xiao Longnu was too unknowing, she shouldn't have said this in this place, he pulled her hand and stood up, he softly said, "Gu Gu, let's leave!"

Xiao Longnu said, "Yes!"

The two of them headed towards the exit shoulder to shoulder, though the hall was filled with people, in Xiao Longnu's eyes there was only Yang Guo.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other startled, the couple had been through countless strange events, endured many dangers, but they could never have predicted what was happening right now. For the time being, they didn't know what to do.

Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo were about to leave the hall when Huang Rong called out, "Miss Long, you're the Chancellor of Wulin, everyone is under your command, you need to think this over."

Xiao Longnu turned her head and showed a smile, she said, "I don't know how to be whatever Chancellor, sister if you want it, then you take the position."

Huang Rong said, "No, if you want to elect someone else, then you ought to elect senior Chief Hong."

The Chancellor of Wulin is the most revered position in the view of martial artists, but Xiao Longnu couldn't have cared less and just replied, "Just do whatever you want, I don't understand it anyway." She pulled Yang Guo's hand and headed for the exit again.

Suddenly there was a gust of wind, the candlelight swayed, and a person darted out. The person was dressed in a Taoist gown, a long sword in his hand; it was the Quanzhen Taoist Zhao Zhijing. He blocked the exit with his sword and said loudly, "Yang Guo, you disobeyed your Master and showed disrespect for Quanzhen's founder, and today you have done such a monstrous thing, how can you still have the nerve to stand on this earth? As long as Zhao has one breath in him, I will not allow it."

Yang Guo did not want to argue with this person in front of everyone, he deepened his voice and said, "Move!"

Zhao Zhijing said, "Apprentice brother Yin, come over, you have a say as well, that night on Mount Zhongnan we saw with our eyes two people naked, what's all that about?"

Yin Zhiping stood up shakily, his left arm rose. People could see that the last two fingers on his hand were missing; though they didn't know the intricacies of the situation, but judging from the way his body froze and the strange expression on his face, they knew that there must be something more to this.

That night, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were practicing the "Jade Heart Manual" in the flower thicket when Zhao and Yin saw them. Yang Guo had forced Zhao Zhijing to take up a venomous oath, he couldn't tell this matter to a fifth person, how could he have known that today, Zhao Zhijing

would belittle and accuse them without restraint in front of everyone, Yang Guo was extremely furious, he shouted, "You swore an oath, you are forbidden to reveal this to a fifth person, why are you now... why..."

Zhao Zhijing laughed and said loudly, "Correct, I swore I won't reveal this to a fifth person but in front of me there is a sixth, a seventh. It's not a fifth person when there's hundreds and thousands present. Naturally, I can tell everyone about this immoral thing that you two did."

Zhao Zhijing had seen the two naked, in the middle of the night in a flower thicket, how could he think that they were practicing advanced martial arts? It came out now due to anger, and he didn't care if he was falsely accusing them or not.

That night, Xiao Longnu was so angry that she threw up a pool of blood, almost losing her life. Now she heard him twisting his words and arguing his way, she couldn't stand it any longer, she stretched out her hand and lightly grabbed his chest, she said, "You'd better stop talking rubbish." She had completed the "Jade Heart Manual" and now the palm came out of nowhere, that, plus the fact that the "Jade Heart Manual" is the Black Star (the matching opposite) of Quanzhen's kung fu made the move extraordinary. Xiao Longnu's hand had gone through Zhao Zhijing's urgent attempt to repel it, grabbing his chest.

Zhao Zhijing blocked thin air and was startled, but the opponent's palm just touched his chest briefly and then immediately departed, he didn't feel anything and didn't take it to heart, he chuckled and said, "Why are you touching me? I'm not..." Before he finished, he's eyes suddenly went blank, a 'peng' sound was heard as he fell onto the ground, he had suffered a severe injury.

When Sun Bu'Er and Hao Datong saw their martial nephew hurt, they dashed forward to see his chi and blood had been forced upwards, his face was completely red as if he was drunk. Sun Bu'Er chuckled and said, "Fine, your Ancient Tomb sect really wants to start something with my Quanzhen sect." She held out a long sword, about to start a fight with Xiao Longnu.

Guo Jing urgently got out of his seat and stood between the two, he said, "We're on the same side, stop this fighting." He said to Yang Guo, "Guo'er, both sides are your Master and elders. Advise them to return to their seats, and then we can quietly clear things up."

Xiao Longnu had never thought that such a thing as not keeping to your word and breaking a promise existed, she was really troubled, she pulled Yang Guo's hand with a frown, saying, "Guo'er, let's leave, we won't see these people ever again!" Yang Guo followed her lead and took two steps forward.

Sun Bu'Er's sword moved and she shouted, "You've hurt someone and now you want to leave?"

Guo Jing saw that both sides were about to fight, he said seriously, "Guo'er, you must stop your feet, you must be a good person, don't destroy yourself and your name. I was the one who named you; do you know what the word 'Guo' means?"

When Yang Guo heard this, his heart trembled, he suddenly remembered all the events from when he was a child, thinking about all the sad and painful events he's been through, and then he thought, "How come it was Uncle Guo who named me?"

Guo Jing loved Yang Guo very much, it was unavoidable that he would want to plead and scold him deeply and severely.

Today he saw Yang Guo show himself in front of all these heroes, he was feeling delight and content when he suddenly found out that Yang Guo had done something he should never have done. His heart was anxious and urgent, his tone was especially strict, he continued, "Your deceased mother must have told you this before, your name is 'Guo', what are the words that accompanies it?"

Yang Guo remembered that his mother had told him this before, but then he was young, no one had used these words in regards him, he himself almost forgot it. Yang Guo replied, "They're 'Gai Zhi'."

Guo Jing said with a severe tone, "Correct, and what does it mean?"

Yang Guo thought for a while and remembered the literature that Huang Rong had taught him when he was younger, he said, "Uncle Guo is saying that 'if I have made mistakes then I must correct them'."

Guo Jing's tone now became gentler, he said, "Guo'er, people make mistakes, mistakes can be changed; this is the greatest advice. They are the words of the first virtuous men and sages. You've been disrespectful towards your seniors; this is a big mistake, think well about it."

Yang Guo said, "If I was wrong, of course I would change. But he..." He pointed to Zhao Zhijing and said, "He beat me, insulted me, lied to me and hated me, how can he still be my Master? Gu Gu and I are clean and innocent, the day can be our witness. I respect her, and love her, could it be that's wrong?" He said this boldly, with justice on his side.

Guo Jing's intelligence and verbal ability couldn't compare with his, how could he argue with him? But he knew that his actions were very wrong yet he didn't know how to tell him clearly, he could only say, "This... this... you're wrong..."

Huang Rong walked forward slowly and softly said, "Guo'er, Uncle Guo is looking out for your well being, you must understand this."

Yang Guo was moved by her soft and gentle words; he lowered his voice and said, "I know that Uncle Guo has always treated me extremely well." His eyes became red, he almost cried.

Huang Rong said, "He's giving you sincere advice, don't take this the wrong way."

Yang Guo said, "I don't understand, what, exactly, have I done wrong?"

Huang Rong's face sank and said, "You really don't understand, or are you deliberately stirring things up?"

Yang Guo was angry in his heart, he thought, "You have treated me well, I have paid you back well, what more do you want from me?" He bit down on his lips and didn't reply.

Huang Rong said, "Fine, since you want me to tell you the truth, I won't go around in circles. Since Miss Long is your Master, she is your senior, you cannot be lovers."

This rule was not unheard of by Yang Guo as it was by Xiao Longnu, but he couldn't accept it; why couldn't Gu Gu be his wife just because she taught him some kung fu? Why even Uncle Guo doesn't believe that he and Gu Gu have done anything immoral? When he thought about this, his anger erupted. He was already someone who wasn't afraid of neither heaven nor earth; now that he's being accused, he was even bolder and loudly said, "What have I done that has hindered you people? Who have I hurt? Gu Gu has taught me kung fu but I still want her to be my wife. Even if you chop me up into a thousand pieces I will still want her to be my wife."

These words shocked and startled those who heard it. The Song at that time adhered to customs and traditions strictly; where on earth have they heard such fearless, wanton and rebellious logic? The person that Guo Jing respected the most was his Master, when he heard this, his anger erupted and he dashed forward, stretching out his arm, grabbing his chest.

Xiao Longnu was shocked and stretched out her hand to block this grab. Guo Jing's martial arts were much stronger than Xiao Longnu's and now he was furious; he used all his strength, a lead and a wave and he had flung her over ten feet away. He stretched out his arm and grabbed Yang Guo's 'Celestial Charge' pressure point; with his left hand raised he shouted, "You animal, you dare to say such heresy?"

Yang Guo's lost all his strength by this grab, but there wasn't a shred of fear in his heart, he said, "Gu Gu loves me with all her heart; I treat her the same way. Uncle Guo, if you want to kill me then do it. But I will never change my mind."

Guo Jing said, "I treat you like my own son, I cannot allow you to do wrong and not change."

Yang Guo said proudly and boldly, "I haven't done anything wrong! I haven't done anything bad! I haven't harmed anyone!" Those words were like the sounds of metal clanging.

Everyone's heart shook when they heard this; his words really did have some reason in them. If a Master and disciple didn't say anything and they got married on some remote island or deserted location then no one would know about it, it would not affect anyone. But publicly announcing

such a wrong really contradicts the mentality of the people of this time, and means becoming the scum of Wulin.

Guo Jing raised his palm and mournfully said, "Guo'er, my heart is in great pain, do you understand? I'd rather you die than let you do bad things, do you understand?" As he reached this point, his voice choked.

When Yang Guo heard him say this, he knew that if he didn't change what he said, Uncle Guo would kill him with one palm. Though he was crafty and sly at times, at this point, nothing could compare with his stubbornness, he said clearly, "I know I haven't done anything wrong, if you don't believe it then kill me."

Guo Jing raised his palm; what chance has he of living if the palm landed on his head? Everyone watched without making a sound, hundreds of eyes stared at his palm.

Guo Jing's palm stopped in midair for a second and he looked at Yang Guo again. He was biting down on his lips, his brows wrinkled. What Guo Jing saw was the picture of his father, Yang Kang, from years ago. His heart ached and he let out a long sigh, he loosened his right hand and said, "Think well about what you're doing." He turned around and went back to his place; he didn't take another glance at Yang Guo, his face was full of hurt and grief. He was extremely disheartened.

Xiao Longnu signaled to him with her hand and said, "Guo'er, these people are extremely unreasonable, let's go." She didn't know that just now, Yang Guo's life was hanging by a thread.

Yang Guo thought that the word 'unreasonable' was extremely apt, he stepped towards the exit, holding Xiao Longnu's hand as they went out. Outside the manor, they lead the skinny horse along as they made their way.

Everyone watched their backs as they left, a few were shocked, others despised them, some were regretful and a number of them were angry.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu walked shoulder to shoulder; it was deep into the night now. The two of them had finally reunited with each other; all the things that had happened today, the heated battle, the arguments, they were all clearly forgotten. They felt as though they were in heaven right now; all those wasted days they had lived apart before were in vain. Now there was no need to worry about the days that were to come. The two of them were linked to each other by thought; they didn't exchange a word as they walked on silently. The two arrived at a willow tree and sat down by the tree trunk. They gradually grew tired and fell asleep. The skinny horse was grazing on grass faraway, making quiet neighing noises.

The sky was bright when they woke up; the two looked at each other and smiled. Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu, where are we going?"

Xiao Longnu pondered for a while and said, "Let's go back to the tomb." Ever since she'd left the tomb she felt that, although outside was bustling and flourishing, it wasn't as carefree and comfortable as the tomb. Yang Guo was deep in thought, "If I could spend the rest of my life with Gu Gu in the tomb, I would have no other desires." Before, he longed for the outside world, hoping that she would let him leave the tomb but after going outside, he too longed for the quiet life in the tomb. The two of them slowly started to head north. One still called the other 'Guo'er', the other one still called the other 'Gu Gu', and they both felt that being together and calling each other this way felt the most natural.

By midday, the two started to talk about Jinlun Fawang's martial arts, they both said that his martial arts were excellent; it would be extremely hard to defend against it.

Xiao Longnu suddenly said, "Guo'er, we haven't completed the final stage of the "Jade Heart Manual", can you remember it?"

Yang Guo said, "I can remember it but we spent a lot of time pondering about it and still were unable to succeed; it seems like there's something wrong somewhere."

Xiao Longnu said, "Originally, I didn't understand it but last night when the Taoist nun took her precious sword out, it allowed me to remember something."

Yang Guo recalled the stance that Sun Bu'Er used last night and immediately understood, he called out, "Ah yes, yes, it requires the kung fu of the Ancient Tomb to be used simultaneously with the kung fu of Quanzhen, no wonder we've been going wrong."

When Lin Chaoying developed the "Jade Heart Manual" alone in the ancient tomb, she wanted to defeat the techniques of the Quanzhen sect; but her love for Wang Chongyang still had not been extinguished. When she devised the final stage, she imagined that one day she would be fighting shoulder to shoulder with her lover. Because of this, the stage requires one person to use the techniques of the "Jade Heart Manual", the other Quanzhen martial arts, mutually aiding each other and attacking together. That day, Lin Chaoying was filled with thoughts of love and affection, she was wrapped up in them; all those feelings were placed into this stage.

The pair of swords being horizontal and vertical is not the main aim; the most important aspect lies in fighting the enemy together hand in hand. But it wasn't appropriate to

mark this matter of the heart down clearly on the rooms ceiling. When Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo first practiced, their love had yet to blossom; they had no way to understand what their Ancestor Grandma sought. When they studied, both of them practiced the formulae of their own sect so of course they could not grasp the intricacies within.

Both of them now understood; they went and broke off a willow branch each, and began to study the stances. Xiao Longnu slowly used the "Jade Maiden Sword", Yang Guo used the sword techniques of Quanzhen. After many stances, they felt that it was difficult to use them together harmoniously. The two of them did not envisage that when Lin Chaoying developed this particular swordplay, she was imagining herself fighting shoulder to shoulder with Wang Chongyang against an enemy. Every stance and move was designed to mutually protect the other. Right now, when Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo were studying it, they were treating each other as the enemy, thrusting and attacking each other. Killing the opposition was not what was intended. In reality, Lin Chaoying and Wang Chongyang were the first class fighters of the world at that time; there wasn't anyone that was a match for just one of them. This particular set of unity kung fu didn't have much use; it was just the unrestrained imagination of Lin Chaoying, showing her heart's feelings. When she developed this swordplay her martial arts had already reached their pinnacle; the stances, postures and power were pressing, tight and continuous, not allowing a hair to be out of place. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu did not understand the workings within and so, of course, it would be difficult for them to achieve this final level.

The two practiced for a while but still felt that something was wrong.

Xiao Longnu said, "It could be that we've remembered it wrong, let's go back to the tomb and clarify things and then practice it again."

Yang Guo was about to reply when suddenly the sounds of horse hoofs could be heard, and then a horse galloped past. The horse had red hair, the person on it was wearing purple, and they galloped past like the wind; it was Huang Rong who was riding on the little red horse.

Yang Guo didn't want to be troubled by the Guo family so he discussed with Xiao Longnu about changing paths and followed a small path instead so they won't bump into them again. Xiao Longnu was the Master; but aside from martial arts, she didn't understand anything else, she had no opinions. That night the two lodged in a small inn. Yang Guo slept on the bed, Xiao Longnu hung a rope across the room and slept on the rope. The two had decided to marry each other, but naturally they still followed the sleeping arrangements that they'd had in the tomb for years. After meeting again and practicing martial arts as they used to, when they thought about their loved one being by their side, both felt limitless delight.

By midday the next day, the two arrived at a large town. People were everywhere, horses came, carts went; it was a great atmosphere. Yang Guo took Xiao Longnu to a restaurant for something to eat; as soon as they went upstairs he was surprised as he saw Huang Rong and Wu brothers at a table eating.

Yang Guo thought that since they've met, it wasn't inappropriate for him to pretend that he didn't see them so he greeted them and called out, "Auntie Guo."

Huang Rong frowned, her face looked anxious and worried, she asked, "Have you seen my daughter?"

Yang Guo said, "No. Isn't sister Fu with you?"

Before Huang Rong could reply, the stairs rattled, and a group of people came up. The first person was tall and slender; it was Jinlun Fawang. Yang Guo quickly turned around and didn't carry on speaking with Huang Rong, he quietly went over to Xiao Longnu and whispered, "Turn your back, don't look at them."

But Jinlun Fawang's eyes were very sharp, all the people upstairs entered his eyes, he gave a chuckle and sat down at a table. Yang Guo was about to turn his head around when suddenly Huang Rong called out, "Fu'er!" He couldn't stop himself from turning his head, and saw Guo Fu sitting at the same table as Jinlun Fawang. Her eyes were staring at her mother but she didn't dare go over.

After Jinlun Fawang failed in his plan at the Lu Manor, he was angry and couldn't accept what had happened. He was trying to formulate a plan to turn defeat into victory; also Huo Dou had fallen victim to the Jade Bee needles. The poison was showing its effects; he tried many methods to cure this poison but none of them were effective. He had to find a way to get the antidote and so they didn't go far and stayed in the area around the Lu Manor. It was Guo Fu who happened to meet danger; in the early morning she took the red horse out for a ride, meeting this great enemy at this time. He took her off the horse in one swipe. The little red horse was quick witted; it dashed back to the manor and hissed out in distress incessantly. Guo Jing and the others knew that Guo Fu had met with danger; they were alarmed and immediately went out to look for her separately.

Though Huang Rong was pregnant, she still went and took the Wu brothers along to search for her. They saw Yang Guo and his Master. They didn't guess that it was Jinlun Fawang

who was detaining Guo Fu; and then they too arrived at this particular restaurant.

When Huang Rong saw her daughter, she was happy but alarmed at seeing her in the hands of the enemy. After giving one call, she didn't say another word. Holding a pair of chopsticks in her hand and waving them about on the table, and trying to come up with a plan to save her daughter. Just as she was pondering, Jinlun Fawang suddenly said, "Chief Huang, is this your lovely daughter? Yesterday I saw her in your arms, relaxing; it was really charming."

Huang Rong gave a 'heng' sound, not replying.

Wu Xiuwen stood up and shouted, "And you're supposed to be a leader of martial artists! You lost in the duel so you went to bully someone's young daughter, aren't you ashamed?"

Jinlun Fawang ignored his words and continued, "Chief Huang, when we dueled yesterday, we were clearly the winner yet you people made up a lot of excuses and complications; that is not the action of good men. First give me the antidote and then we'll set a date for a duel; we'll compete fairly and properly for the place of the Chancellor of Wulin."

Huang Rong gave another 'heng' sound, not saying a word.

Wu Xiuwen said loudly, "First release Miss Guo; we'll deliver the antidote immediately and there'll still be time to discuss the matter of dueling again later on."

Huang Rong glanced over at Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu thinking, "The antidote is on them, yet you hastily promised them the antidote without knowing whether or not they'll give it to us."

Jinlun Fawang said, "Could it be that only you know how to use poisonous projectiles? You people used a poisonous needle to injure my disciple. I can also prick your daughter with a few poisonous needles. If you give me the antidote, then I'll cure her here. When it comes to releasing her, I'm afraid it won't be easy."

Huang Rong saw that her daughter looked normal, it looks like she wasn't hurt, but the love between a mother and daughter is deep, she didn't know what to do. There's a saying; 'worry then panic'; though she was matchless in terms of coming up with ideas and plans, right now, she was at her wit's end.

She saw the waiter bringing dishes and wine to Jinlun Fawang's table. Jinlun Fawang and the others ate heartily, talking and laughing. Guo Fu sat there frozen, just staring at her mother, not picking up her chopsticks. Huang Rong felt as if her heart was being cut open; she disturbed her internal chi and air and suddenly her lower abdomen ached.

After Jinlun Fawang finished eating and drinking, he stood up and said, "Chief Huang, follow us."

Huang Rong was startled and understood, not only is he going to take her daughter but he wanted to take her away as well. Right now everything was in place; she only had the Wu brothers at her side and they were not his match; she couldn't stop her face from completely changing.

Jinlun Fawang continued, "Chief Huang, there's no need for you to be frightened, you are an eminent person of Wulin, we will treat you with respect. Once a decision has been made about the position of Chancellor of Wulin, we will immediately return you to the south."

When he saw Huang Rong upstairs, he knew he had a great opportunity; all he had to do was capture her and the martial artists of the central plains would have no choice but to submit. This was a hundred times better than capturing Guo Fu; this really was the deal of a lifetime that had landed on his lap. Huang Rong was worrying about her daughter and didn't think about this possible situation.

The Wu brothers saw that their Master's wife was distressed; they knew they weren't a match but they couldn't just sit there doing nothing. A pair of long swords was drawn out to protect their Master's wife.

Huang Rong whispered, "Quickly jump out of the window, then go and find your Master for help."

The Wu brothers glanced at her and glanced at Guo Fu, then hurried to the window.

Huang Rong secretly cursed, "Idiot, how could you allow such a delay?"

Indeed, just a little delay and it was too late. Jinlun Fawang's long arms came sweeping out, each arm grabbing the back of a brother, like an eagle catching two little chicks. The Wu brothers urgently thrust their swords back but Jinlun Fawang didn't move out of the way; his arms swung a little, Wu Dunru's sword was now heading towards his little brother, Wu Xiuwen's sword was heading towards his big brother. They were startled; they quickly stopped the thrusts and flung their swords away. A 'dang lang' sound was heard as the swords landed on the floor with the Wu brothers avoiding injury.

Jinlun Fawang's arms shook as he flung the two over ten feet away and said, "Just be obedient and follow me." He turned his head towards Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu and said, "If you aren't with Chief Huang then leave at your

convenience, but don't hinder my plans again. Your kung fu is excellent; take care and practice for another ten or twenty years, by then, you won't have a match under heaven."

He wasn't actually praising them; he knew that although Huang Rong, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu's martial arts could not compare to his, if they fought together it would be difficult to handle them. Although he'll win, he may not be able to capture Huang Rong. Because of this he deliberately tried to divide them, concentrating on the trunk and ignoring the branches.

He didn't know that Huang Rong was pregnant and inconvenienced; he calculated that her extremely ingenious "Dog Beating Stick Technique" would make her a strong opponent.

Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'er, let's leave! That old monk is really powerful, we can't beat him." All that she hoped for was to return to the ancient tomb and spend the rest of her life with Yang Guo. She did not care about the world's blood affairs. When she saw Jinlun Fawang she was afraid and so immediately said what she was feeling. Yang Guo agreed; he stood up and went to the top of the stairs, thinking that, now that they're returning to the ancient tomb, most probably he won't ever see Huang Rong again. He couldn't stop himself from turning his head around and giving her another glance.

He saw her face looked bleak, her left arm holding her lower abdomen, showing that she was secretly in pain. Yang Guo thought, "Uncle and Auntie Guo were rather meddlesome in not allowing me and Gu Gu to be together, but they did not have any ill intentions. Today Auntie Guo's in trouble, how can I just leave like this? But the enemy is too strong; me and Gu Gu fighting together won't be a match for that Tibetan monk. I can't save Auntie Guo, so

why should I throw away mine and Gu Gu's lives? It would be better for me to go and tell Uncle Guo and let him lead the rescue."

Yang Guo took Xiao Longnu's hand and moved his foot to walk down the stairs when he saw a Mongolian warrior going over to Huang Rong, coarsely saying, "Come quickly! Why are you delaying?" He stretched out his arm and grabbed her upper arm, treating her as a prisoner.

Huang Rong had been the Beggar Clan's Chief for over ten years, her position and status was respected by all in Wulin. Although she is in a distressing situation today, how could she allow herself to be disgraced by this ruffian? She saw a pair of hairy hands reaching out towards her and immediately swept her sleeve. The sleeve covered his wrist as she flung out and a 'hu' sound was heard as the fat body of the Mongolian warrior flew out of the window, landing in the street, barely alive. Huang Rong didn't want her hand to touch his wrist so she first covered his arm with her sleeve and then separated the sleeve throwing him away.

At first when they spoke politely, the people in the restaurant didn't take much notice of them; when they suddenly saw a fight had broken out, the restaurant was in chaos.

Jinlun Fawang chuckled and said, "Indeed Chief Huang has great kung fu." He copied the actions of the Mongolian warrior, stepping up to her and stretching out his hand to grab her arm. Huang Rong knew that he wanted to show off his martial arts; though he was using the same method, she could never do the same thing to him, she could only take a step back.

Yang Guo had taken a few steps down the stairs when he saw a struggle suddenly arising with Huang Rong about to

suffer an insult; it stirred his heroic nature, he didn't care about the dangers to himself, he flew over and picked up the sword that Wu Dunru dropped. He used a stance of "The Green Dragon Exits the Sea", urgently thrusting towards Jinlun Fawang's back. He shouted, "Chief Huang is carrying a child and you're taking this opportunity to make your move, aren't you ashamed?"

Jinlun Fawang heard the noise of a blade cutting through air behind him, he didn't turn around and turned his finger towards the dull side of the blade, striking it. A 'dang' sound was heard; Yang Guo's arm trembled with numbness as the sword tip went downwards. Yang Guo quickly flew out of the way.

Jinlun Fawang turned around and said, "Young man, leave quickly! You're young yet your martial arts are not weak, in the future you will be able to far exceed me. But you are not a match for me now, why come forward to die by my hands?"

Those sentences both praised and warned Yang Guo. Jinlun Fawang hated the two of them for knocking his golden wheel out of the air and interfering with this plans to take the position of the Chancellor of Wulin. Right now, he weighed up what was more important; capturing Huang Rong was the number one objective, he didn't want to be distracted by other people. He hoped that Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu would leave this dispute and there'll still be time for him to vent his anger on the two juniors later on. He calls himself a Hero of Tibet; not only are his martial arts frightening, his scheming ability was rather good.

Those words were neither haughty nor humble, yet were not deceiving either. Yang Guo was young and when he heard that in the future his martial arts would be much better than Jinlun Fawang, he was secretly pleased. He

laughed and said, "There's no need to be polite big monk, it's not easy to reach a level as high as yours. Chief Huang raised me, so don't give her any trouble. If she didn't have an illness, your martial arts might not be able to defeat hers. If you don't believe it, why don't you wait until she recovers and then have a duel with her?"

He knew that Jinlun Fawang thought very highly of his martial arts; goading him like this might actually change his mind and he'd let Huang Rong go. How would he know that Jinlun Fawang was worried about Huang Rong, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu joining together to fight him. That was why he was polite towards Yang Guo. When he heard these words he glanced at Huang Rong's face; indeed her face did look distressed, her illness was not light. He thought, "Why should he be worried about the threat of Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu?" He then gave a chuckle and went over to the stairs, he said, "You stay as well!"

Xiao Longnu stood on the stairs with Jinlun Fawang between her and Yang Guo; she didn't like this and said, "Get out of the way monk, let him come down."

Jinlun Fawang frowned, he sent a stance of "Opening the Tablet with a Single Palm", his natural strength was already high, and attacking from above made this force even stronger. How could Xiao Longnu dare receive this stance head on? She was waiting for Yang Guo at the top of the stairs, she didn't leap backwards; her legs lightly lifted, she used her amazing lightness kung fu to pass the opponent's body to reach Yang Guo, standing shoulder to shoulder next to him.

When she was passing Jinlun Fawang's side, he stuck out his elbow but it missed; he was in awe of the swiftness and agility of her movements. Yang Guo picked up Wu Xiuwen's

sword and passed it into her hand, he said, “Gu Gu, that monk is so rude, let’s give him a beating.”

A ‘qiang lang’ sound was heard as Jinlun Fawang took out a wheel from his gown; this wheel was the same size as his golden wheel but was dark green and was made out of iron. This wheel also had the Tibetan scriptures marked on it. He has a total of five wheels; golden, silver, bronze, iron and lead; when he met a strong enemy he really could send out all five wheels at once, but he had always used the golden wheel only. With it he had defeated countless strong enemies and because of this he received the nickname of ‘Jinlun Fawang’ (King of the Golden Wheel or Golden Wheel Monk). He had never used the other four wheels before so really, according to martial arts level he has reached, it should be ‘Wu Lun Fawang’ (King of the Five Wheels or The Five Wheeled Monk). In the Lu Manor, his golden wheel was taken out of the air by Yang Guo using the golden rod; now he took out his iron wheel and said, “Chief Huang, are you joining them as well?”

Though he saw that Huang Rong’s looked ill, he was still worried about her martial arts, he called her ‘Chief Huang’ to remind her of her status as the chief of a clan, joining up with others to fight one person would lower her.

Yang Guo called out, “Chief Huang is going home now; she hasn’t any time for you.” He turned around to Huang Rong and said, “Auntie Guo, take sister Fu and go.” He had made his decision; though he and Xiao Longnu would not be able to beat the enemy, they could force themselves to last a while. If it came to escaping, they would probably still be able to get away; luckily they weren’t fighting for victory but trying to escape from the devil’s grasp. So what if they had to run away pathetically?

He raised his sword and thrust towards Jinlun Fawang. Xiao Longnu saw that he was using the techniques of the “Jade Heart Manual” so she followed and attacked from the side; she hadn’t given any thought to it, when she saw Yang Guo attacking the monk, she too started to fight him to aid Yang Guo.

Jinlun Fawang used his wheel to block the two swords, but he didn’t like how cluttered the restaurant was, it hindered his movements. On one occasion he was fighting using his wheel, on another he kicked away the chairs and tables.

Yang Guo was thinking, “If we meet you head on, we’ll definitely lose; only by obstructing you will we last a little longer.” He saw that Jinlun Fawang was kicking away the tables and chairs, he did the opposite and pushed the tables and chairs in between them. His and Xiao Longnu’s lightness kung fu was superb, they darted around, not fighting the enemy properly; they would suddenly throw a jug of wine over, suddenly tip the dishes over causing the restaurant to be covered in wine and juices from the dishes.

Huang Rong took this opportunity to snatch Guo Fu back. After Da’erba fell under Yang Guo’s “Soul Altering Spell” he was out of it; sometimes he would be awake, sometimes in a daze. Huo Dou was seriously injured with the poison and the rest of the Mongolian warriors weren’t very skillful; how could they fend off Huang Rong?

Yang Guo called out, “Auntie Guo, leave quickly!”

But Huang Rong saw that the stances of Jinlun Fawang were lethal; even if Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu used all their strength it would be difficult for them to defend against the attacks. As of now they were able to fend him off by fighting like this, but once Jinlun Fawang finds a weakness and then makes his lethal move, how could their

lives remain intact? Huang Rong thought, "He's risking his life for me, how can I look out for myself only and leave?" She stood at the entrance of the stairs, quietly watching the battle.

But the Wu brothers kept on urging Huang Rong, "Master wife, let's go, you're not feeling well, you need to take care."

At first Huang Rong ignored them but when they kept on pressing her she said angrily, "What use is it to learn martial arts if you don't behave with 'heroic' values? What use have you got living in this world? The one named Yang is a hundred times better than you. Huh, you brothers better think well about this."

The brothers felt embarrassed, their good intentions dismissed just like that by their Master's wife.

Guo Fu picked up the broken leg of a table off the floor and called out, "Brother Wu's, let's all fight him."

Huang Rong held her back and said, "Going up there with your lowly kung fu, do you want to die?"

Guo Fu pouted, not believing her mother. She saw that the stances that Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu weren't anything special, sometimes their form looked Masterly but the sword stances weren't at all lethal.

Every time Jinlun Fawang went to attack, the chairs and tables would impede him while Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu moved around vibrantly, flying here and suddenly darting there, fighting as they floated around.

He had a thought, he suddenly used the force in his legs, non-stop sounds of 'ka la ka la' were heard as the overturned tables and chairs were crushed and broken. He

used the iron wheel in his hands to attack while his legs used the “Thousand Kilogram Fall”; the chairs and tables all broke wherever his legs were. After a while, the upstairs of the restaurant became covered by a layer of broken wood. The three of them battled on the debris without any obstructions.

Jinlun Fawang moved around in large steps, the iron wheel flashing around, ‘lang lang’ sounds were heard, his arms in motion as he attacked the two ferociously. There were now fewer tables and chairs in the way, so Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu had to use real martial arts to defend against him. Jinlun Fawang did not give an inch, on the fourth stance he smashed forward fiercely, a ferocious gust of wind rushed forward before the iron wheel even arrived.

Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo both thrust forwards, the sword tips striking the wheel, they were able to block this wheel with their combined strength but the swords were bent by the force.

The two used all their strength to repel the wheel, Yang Guo then thrust forward attacking the enemy’s upper body, Xiao Longnu cut urgently across the enemy’s left leg. Jinlun Fawang kicked out towards Xiao Longnu’s wrist, the iron wheel swerved and attacked Yang Guo’s neck. Yang Guo ducked and crouched to avoid the iron wheel. At that time, Jinlun Fawang suddenly let go with his right hand, the iron wheel dropped downwards towards Yang Guo’s head, at the same time Jinlun Fawang tried to grab Xiao Longnu’s shoulders with his free hand.

In just a flash of an eye, the two had fallen into great danger. Huang Rong gave an ‘ah’ cry and was about to go forward to save them when she saw Yang Guo swerve and fly just above the floor, before he touched down, the sword went towards Jinlun Fawang’s back. That stance achieved

two aims at once, attacking and defending at the same time, solving the crisis he was in. He used the idea of 'surrounding Wei to save Zhao', and stopped Jinlun Fawang from attacking Xiao Longnu. This stance was called "The Wild Goose Attacks from the Side", a technique from Quanzhen swordplay.

Jinlun Fawang gave a 'yi' call, before the iron wheel fell on the floor, the back of his right leg knocked against the wheel sending the wheel flying up with 'lang lang' noises, smashing towards Yang Guo's head. In the midst of danger, Yang Guo had used a stance of Quanzhen swordplay which was surprisingly effective, so he used another Quanzhen stance, "The White Rainbow Traveling Across the Sky", the flat side of the sword struck the wheel.

The sword was light, the wheel heavy, that attack originally had no chance, but the strike was just at the right place, fulfilling the martial art theory of 'Four Liang Moving a Thousand Jin', and the iron wheel changed directions, flying towards Jinlun Fawang's head. Guo Fu clapped her hands as she watched with delight.

Jinlun Fawang dared to release his weapon because he thought that his enemies had no way to receive the wheel; if the opponent used their weapon to strike out against the wheel, even if it was a heavy whip or saber, once it meets the wheel the weapon will be knocked from the opponent's hand. He could not have predicted that Yang Guo had the ability to redirect the wheel! Jinlun Fawang was furious, he caught the wheel and secretly used his spin technique and sent the wheel flying out again. This time his internal energy was more pressing, the wheel made no sounds because the iron wheel was spinning too fast and the spheres in the wheel could not collide with each other. When Yang Guo struck the wheel for the first time, he used the techniques of the "Nine Yin Manual" unwittingly, this

time when he stretched out his sword to strike the wheel; a 'dang' noise was heard as the sword shook out of his hands. Jinlun Fawang immediately used "The Falling Obelisk Hand", heavily smashing towards him. Yang Guo wasn't completely familiar with the techniques of the "Nine Yin Manual"; this time the force he put behind his strike was incorrect.

When Xiao Longnu saw Yang Guo was in danger, she twisted her trim waist and urgently thrust her sword forward. The force of this stance had an assured lethality, the appearance attractive and extremely graceful; she was actually using the martial arts of the final stage of the "Jade Heart Manual".

Huang Rong and her daughter watched with joy and both called out; "Wonderful!"

Jinlun Fawang took back his palm and leapt away, he used his wheel to fend off the sword. Yang Guo took this opportunity to recover his sword. Yang Guo really had escaped from the death's clutches just now, but when one is at death's door they are especially alert. He suddenly had a thought, "When Gu Gu and I both use the "Jade Maiden Swordplay", it was difficult for us to defend against him. But when I used the "Quanzhen Swordplay" and Gu Gu the "Jade Maiden Swordplay" we actually managed to turn danger into safety. Could it be that the final stage of the "Jade Heart Manual" is used this way?"

He immediately called out, "Gu Gu, "The Traces of Waves at Heaven's Cliffs"!" As he said this he slanted his sword and thrust forward.

Xiao Longnu didn't give it much thought and followed his instructions and used the "The Traces of Waves at Heaven's Cliffs" as stated in the manual, she waved her sword and

chopped forward. The names of the stances are the same but they had a difference, one of them was a lethal sword stance from the "Quanzhen Swordplay", the other a dangerous stance from the "Jade Maiden Swordplay". When the two were used in unison, the power of it immediately increased to a frightening level.

Jinlun Fawang had no way to block both of the swords so he quickly moved back; two 'chi' sounds were heard as the swords thrust at his body. Luckily, he dodged appropriately, the two sword tips brushed past him and just made some holes in his clothes. He broke out in a cold sweat from the shock.

Jinlun Fawang urgently moved back another two steps to avoid the tip of the swords. He then heard Yang Guo call out, "'Flowers under the Moon'!" The attack came downwards, like an icy wheel hanging in the air; a light glimmering crossed the floor. Xiao Longnu's sword quivered, like a flower fluttering in the wind, cutting across to and fro, dazzling Jinlun Fawang's eyes, he didn't know where the attacks were coming from, he could only leap back to avoid it.

Yang Guo called out, "'Drinking Wine Purely'!" The sword handle was raised, the sword tip aimed downwards, like raising a wine jug and pouring the wine. Xiao Longnu's sword was the opposite, the tip aiming upwards towards her cherry lips, like raising a cup of wine and drinking it.

Jinlun Fawang saw that the sword stances of the two were becoming stranger and stranger, but they were matching each other; all the weaknesses of one were covered by the strengths of the other, and the lethal aspects of the stances were increasing without end. He was becoming more and more frightened, thinking, "The world is a large place, indeed there are many able people; how could I ever dream

of such unimaginable swordplay in Tibet? Ai! I'm just a frog at the bottom of the well; I have seen little of the world's heroes." He was disheartened and looked even more like a defeated man.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu had studied this final level of swordplay many times without reward, now they were in extreme danger, the two of them concerned for each other. Both put the other's life above theirs as they rescued their lover first, fulfilling the main aim of this swordplay. Every stance of this swordplay displays actions done by two, perhaps "Stroking the Zither and Playing the Flute", or maybe "Sweeping Snow and Preparing Tea", or perhaps "Playing Chess under the Pine" or "Exchange of the Cranes by the Pond", all of them show a male and female together. The gracefulness and exquisiteness of the stances really was indescribable.

Lin Chaoying, lost in the game of love, spent the rest of her life in the tomb. She was versed in all the martial arts and literature, music and other arts; in the end she incorporated all the things she had learned in her life into this set of martial arts. When she was developing this set of martial arts, she was trying to comfort herself; how would she know that tens of years later, a pair of lovers would use this set of martial arts to fight off a strong enemy. This was something that she could never have predicted.

At first Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu did not completely understand the swordplay's ingenuity but eventually as they kept on using it, their proficiency in the swordplay kept on getting better. If the male and female who used this set of sword plays weren't lovers, there would be many aspects of the swordplay they would not be able to comprehend. The two would not have a feeling of being linked with each other. If it were friends who were teaming up they would be too polite, if it were a senior and junior it

wouldn't be suitable to rely on each other. However, if it were a husband and wife, they would be able to use some of the Masterly aspects of this swordplay, but without the feelings of being drowned in love, the shyness, the feeling of being close yet far, the pain of gains and losses, they would be a level lower. Now Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were deeply in love but they had yet to marry, their hearts were concerned about the hardships of the future, they were joyous and sad, sweet and bitter, this feeling of gradually being linked with each other was what Lin Chaoying had intended to create when she developed the "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Sword".

Huang Rong watched from the side and she saw Xiao Longnu's cheeks going red, looking shy; Yang Guo would glance over at her all the time, returning her affection. Though they were fighting a strong enemy, they displayed their delights and joys, and the appearance of being deeply in love. Huang Rong couldn't stop from being startled, but at the same time she was infected by the two and she began to remember feelings and events when she fell in love with Guo Jing.

The restaurant was filled with the noise of a life and death battle, but in the midst of this, unexpectedly, there were the boundless feelings of love showing.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were now in tune with each other, it was even harder for Jinlun Fawang to defend. He regretted the fact that he had smashed up the chairs and tables earlier on, otherwise, with the table and chairs as obstructions, the enemies' attacks would not be as lethal and swift. He saw that if he continued, he would definitely lose his life. He retreated down the stairs, step by step. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu attacked from above and they saw that they were about to drive him away.

Huang Rong called out, "Rid the evil completely, Guo'er, don't let him go."

She saw that the reason why Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu could beat Jinlun Fawang was because of this ingenious swordplay. It was somewhat fortunate that they had come up with this. If they spared Jinlun Fawang today and let a person with such abilities in martial arts go back and study for a way to defeat this swordplay, when the need to take his life arises again in the future, the task would be extremely difficult.

Yang Guo agreed and launched a fatal attack, "Cultivating the Chrysanthemum in the Little Garden", "Speaking at Night at the Western Window", "The Couplet in the Willow's Shade", "Bamboo Falling into the Pond", when these stances came out, Jinlun Fawang nearly wasn't able to evade these attacks let alone trying to counterattack.

Yang Guo had originally listened to Huang Rong's instructions to take his life, but what he didn't know was that when Lin Chaoying developed this particular swordplay, she was doing this to comfort herself, there was no intention to wound or kill the enemy especially with a heart filled with love. Though this swordplay was powerful, it did not aim to take the opponent's life. Though Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu managed to force Jinlun Fawang to scramble around in a pathetic manner, taking his life was not an easy task.

Jinlun Fawang did not know about the background of this swordplay, he just saw that the opponent's extraordinary stances folded in on each other, he knew that the enemy had yet to unleash their most powerful move. If the two attack, his old life would be lost. In this danger, a plan came into his mind; he used strength in his legs and snapped a stair step. He knew that with the obstruction of the hole in

the stairs between him and the two, they would have no way to advance. By the time that a third step was snapped, the long swords could not reach his body.

Jinlun Fawang raised his iron wheel and said, "Today, I have seen the martial arts of the central plains, I am completely in awe. What is the name of your swordplay?"

Yang Guo said seriously, "The martial arts of the central plains are led by the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" and the "Donkey Piercing Sword", our swordplay is the "Donkey Piercing Sword"."

Jinlun Fawang was startled and said, "'Donkey Piercing Sword'?"

Yang Guo said, "Yep, a swordplay that pierces bald donkeys."

Jinlun Fawang then knew that Yang Guo was insulting him, he was furious and shouted, "Rude punk, you'll get to know the power of Jinlun Fawang." The iron wheel rang out with 'lang lang' noises as he left taking large steps.

All they saw was his body floating away quickly like a flash, disappearing in the shadows by the corner. Yang Guo knew it would be difficult to catch up; he turned around and saw Da'erba stand up holding up Huo Dou, his face pale. He said, "Senior apprentice brother, are you going to kill me?"

Yang Guo saw that the two looked pitiful; he said to Huang Rong, "Auntie Guo, should we let them go?" Huang Rong nodded. Yang Guo saw that Huo Dou looked like he was in unbearable distress; he took out a bottle of Jade Bee honey from his pockets and pointed to Huo Dou. He took medicine to Da'erba and gave the jar to him. Da'erba was delighted and he chatted with Huo Dou for a while.

Huo Dou took out a packet of medicine and gave it to Yang Guo, he said, "The Senior who used the pen fell under my poison nails; this is the antidote."

Da'erba saluted Yang Guo and said, "Thank you Senior apprentice brother."

Yang Guo copied his actions and smiled as he imitated his Tibetan, "Thank you senior apprentice brother."

Da'erba was surprised, "Why did Senior apprentice brother call me Senior apprentice brother?" A thought went through his mind and then he understood, "He's reincarnated as another person and is allowing me to be the senior apprentice brother; he doesn't want to fight for this position with me." He was even more touched and bowed deeply, he stretched out his arms and picked up Huo Dou and then left with the rest of the Mongolian warriors.

Yang Guo gave the antidote to Huang Rong and made a salute, he said, "Auntie Guo, nephew will leave now. Auntie and Uncle Guo take care." He felt sad as he thought about how this would be the last time he would see her.

Huang Rong asked, "Where are you going?"

Yang Guo said, "Gu Gu and I are going to live in seclusion in a place where there will be no people, never leaving again to avoid bringing shame to your and Uncle Guo's name."

Huang Rong thought, "Today he has risked his life saving me and Fu'er, this is not a small deed; now I'm watching him going down this dark path, how can I not save him?" So she said, "There's no need to rush, we're all tired; we'll rest some rooms and rest for the night, we could part tomorrow." Yang Guo saw that she was earnest and sincere, it would be inappropriate to reject her offer so he agreed.

Huang Rong took out some money and gave it to the restaurant owner for the damages done, and then they went to an inn to rest. That night after supper, Huang Rong got rid of Guo Fu by telling her to go and talk with the Wu brothers; she called Xiao Longnu into her room and said, "Sister, I have something to give to you."

Xiao Longnu said, "What?"

Huang Rong pulled her in front of herself and took out a comb and brushed her hair, seeing her black silk hair hanging down across her shoulders, soft and shiny, extremely cute. She carefully rolled up her hair and removed a golden hair clasp from her own head and said, "Sister, I'm giving you this to wear."

The gold hair clasp was exquisitely produced; the body of it resembled the stem of a rose, the stem and flower looped around; the place where it connected formed an unfolding rose. Huang Yaoshi collected countless treasures, out of them she had picked out this golden hair clasp of masterly artisanship.

Xiao Longnu had never worn any type of jewelry, to tie her hair she used a pine hairpin; though she saw the hair clasp was striking, she did not think anything of it, she just thanked her casually. Huang Rong fitted the hair clasp on her hair and then immediately chatted with her in a leisurely manner.

After talking to her for a while, she found that Xiao Longnu was very innocent and naïve, she didn't know a thing about the ways of the world. Under the candlelight she saw her elegant and beautiful face, an extraordinary beauty; if she and Yang Guo weren't Master and disciple, the two really were a great match. She asked, "Sister, you really love Guo'er, don't you?"

Xiao Longnu beamed and said, "Yes, why won't you people allow him to be with me?"

Huang Rong was startled, she remembered the times when she was young, her father wouldn't allow her to marry Guo Jing, the Jiang Nan Seven Freaks called her a 'little witch', only after many trials and tribulations did she and Guo Jing finally marry. She saw that Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu really loved each other; could she make herself stop them?

But the fact is that they are a Master and disciple, if they become lovers it would be greatly unethical, what face would they have left with the heroes of the world? She gave a sigh and said, "Sister, there are many things that you don't understand about the world. If you and Guo'er become husband and wife, others will look down on you for a generation."

Xiao Longnu gave a slight smile and said, "What's so important about others looking down on me?"

Huang Rong was startled again, she felt that her words had the same attitude as that of she and her father, a real feeling of 'I do whatever I want'; not caring about the views of the world. When she thought about this, she nodded, such a character would not confine herself to the views of the world, but she then thought about the deep love and affection of her husband for Yang Guo. It wouldn't matter whether Yang Guo was going to become her son in law or not, she just hoped that his character and morals would be perfect, so she said, "What about Guo'er? Others will look down on him as well."

Xiao Longnu said, "He and I will live in a place where no one can see us for rest of our lives, happy for ever, why should we care about others?"

Huang Rong asked, "What place where no one can see you?"

Xiao Longnu said, "It is a large ancient tomb, I have always lived there."

Huang Rong was stunned and said, "Could it be that you would live in there forever and never come out?"

Xiao Longnu was very happy, she stood up and paced back and forth across the room and then said, "Yes, why go outside? The people outside are so bad."

Huang Rong said, "Guo'er has always roamed about since he was young, won't he be bored staying in an ancient tomb forever?"

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "With me by his side, why would he get bored?"

Huang Rong sighed and said, "At first of course he won't be bored. But after a few years he would start to remember the beautiful outside world, if he can't come out when he gets older, he would be greatly troubled."

Xiao Longnu was originally very happy and delighted; when she heard these words her heart sank and said, "I'm going to ask Guo'er, I don't want to speak with you anymore." She left the room.

Huang Rong saw that her beautiful face suddenly showed signs of being disturbed, her words just now had really hurt the heart of this innocent and naïve girl. She immediately felt rather regretful but she had another thought, she had seen many things but this pair of young lovers were deeply in love, even if these words aren't nice to the ear, it's the heart that matters. She thought, "What would Guo'er say?"

So she quietly went over to Yang Guo's window to listen to their conversation.

She heard Xiao Longnu ask, "Guo'er, would you be troubled if you spent the rest of your life with me? Would you get tired of it?"

Yang Guo said, "Why are you asking me again? You know that there isn't anything more I want in this world. We'll be together until we're old, our hair white and our teeth falling out, we would still love each other as we do now, not ever parting." His words were said earnestly and with real sincerity.

When Xiao Longnu heard this, her heart was moved, she couldn't stop herself from being overwhelmed, after a while she said, "Yes, my feelings are the same." She took out a rope from her bag and hung it across the room, she said, "Go to bed!"

Yang Guo said, "Auntie Guo said, tonight you should go and sleep in the same room as she and her daughter, I with the Wu brothers in another room."

Xiao Longnu said, "No! Why does she want two boys to be with you? I want to be with you and sleep with you." She waved her hand out and extinguished the oil lamp.

When Huang Rong heard these words outside, she was extremely startled, "Those two really are doing such things! Then the words of that old Taoist Zhao Zhijing weren't a lie!"

When she thought about the two of them sleeping together on the same bed, she felt that it would be inappropriate to eavesdrop on them and was about to leave when she suddenly saw a white flash going across the room. Someone was lying in midair, after moving for a bit, they stopped.

Huang Rong was surprised and used the moonlight in the room to see what was going on. She saw Xiao Longnu lying on a rope in midair while Yang Guo slept on the bed. Though the two slept in the same room, they kept their respect. Huang Rong stood in the courtyard, she felt that the actions of these two were greatly different to others, it really was difficult to discuss their rights and wrongs.

She stood there for a while and was about to enter her room to rest when she heard footsteps, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers had returned. Huang Rong said, "Dun'er, Xiu'er, you brothers go and get another room to rest in, don't stay with brother Yang." The Wu brothers agreed.

Guo Fu asked, "Mother, why?"

Huang Rong said, "It's none of your business."

Wu Xiuwen laughed and said, "I know why. Those two are a Master and disciple yet they aren't; that dirty couple is sleeping in the same room."

Huang Rong reprimanded him; "Xiu'er, what dirty things are you saying?"

Wu Dunru said, "Master wife, you are too kind, why should you care about those sorts of people? I won't speak to him."

Guo Fu said, "Those two saved us; that was a great deed."

Wu Xiuwen said, "Huh, I rather die by the hands of Jinlun Fawang than suffer a favour from animals."

Huang Rong didn't look happy, she said, "Stop talking, go and rest."

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu heard all this. Yang Guo had never gotten on with the Wu brothers ever since they were kids; he just snickered and didn't take it to heart.

But Xiao Longnu was carefully thinking, "Why is it that if Guo'er and I are together, he becomes an animal and us a dirty couple?" She couldn't grasp this and in the middle of the night she woke Yang Guo up and asked, "Guo'er, there is one thing that you must answer truthfully. After living with me in the ancient tomb for a few years, would you start to think about the outside world?"

Yang Guo was startled and didn't reply for a while. Xiao Longnu continued to ask, "If you don't go out, would you become troubled? Though your love for me will never change, would you get bored living in the tomb for such a long time?"

Yang Guo felt that it was difficult to answer these questions, as he thought about it, living with Xiao Longnu forever really would be better than living as a god; but in a cold and dark tomb, even if he didn't get tired of the tomb in ten or twenty years, what about in thirty years? What about forty years? Replying casually, "I would never get bored" would be easy but he has always been frank and true towards Xiao Longnu, he had never said half a lie to her. He pondered for a while and said, "Gu Gu, if we get bored and tired of living in the tomb, we'll go out together."

Xiao Longnu gave an 'en' sound, not saying anymore. She thought, "Mrs. Guo's words weren't a lie. In the future he will get bored and will leave the tomb, and then everyone will be looking down on him, how can he live like that? Why do people look down on him if he and I get together? It looks like I'm an ominous person. I love him, I care for him; I would give my life for him. But these feelings will lead him to have an unhappy life; it looks like it would be better for him not to marry me. It must be for that reason that he refused to agree to marry me that night on Mount Zhongnan."

She kept on going over this in her mind for a long while. Yang Guo's breathing slowed; he was in deep sleep. Xiao Longnu leapt down lightly and went to his bedside, she stared at his handsome face, her heart was in a mess, her emotions kept on turning over, she couldn't stop tears from flowing.

Yang Guo woke up the next morning and felt his shoulder and head was wet; he was slightly surprised and saw that Xiao Longnu wasn't in the room. He sat up and saw some words carefully carved on the table with a golden needle.

'Take care, forget about me.'

Yang Guo's mind immediately became a confused; he stood there stunned and was at his wit's end. He saw that the tears on the table had yet to dry, the dampness on his shoulder and head were also caused by her tears. He wasn't thinking straight, he opened the window and leapt out, calling out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu!"

The waiter of the inn came over to serve him. Yang Guo asked him when the girl in white left and which direction she headed in. The waiter stared at him; he didn't know how to reply. Yang Guo knew that the opportunity to find her was ever diminishing, if he can't find her today; then there may not be a chance to see her ever again. He went to the stables and leapt onto the skinny horse. At this time, Guo Fu came out of her room and asked, "Where are you going?"

Yang Guo heard but didn't reply, he hurried to the main road and galloped north, in a short while he had gone over tens of li. He kept on calling out, "Gu Gu, Gu Gu!" on the way but where was Xiao Longnu?

After a little while, he saw Jinlun Fawang and his followers on horseback heading west. They all felt shocked when they

saw him riding by himself. Jinlun Fawang pulled his reigns and galloped towards him.

Yang Guo had not brought a weapon with him, meeting the enemy like this was extremely dangerous but the only thing on his mind right now was Xiao Longnu, he didn't even consider his own safety. When he saw Jinlun Fawang coming towards him, he actually turned his horse towards him and went forward to meet him, he asked, "Have you seen my Master?"

Jinlun Fawang was surprised that he didn't run away, he was even more startled when he heard him ask this, he casually replied, "No, isn't she with you?"

At first both of them didn't really think too deeply as they asked and replied, but shortly after, both of them thought about how Yang Guo, being by himself, was not a match for Jinlun Fawang. The two of them looked each other in the eye and both knew. Yang Guo kicked his legs as Jinlun Fawang sent out a hand to grab him. But the skinny horse was exceptionally spirited; it galloped like the wind past him. Jinlun Fawang tried to catch up but Yang Guo and the horse had galloped afar, it would be difficult to catch up with him. Jinlun Fawang had a thought and reigned in his horse, "Since he and his Master has separated, what more have I got to be afraid of? If Chief Huang hasn't gotten far... ha-ha...!" He then gathered his men and led them back.

Yang Guo searched for another while and still there was no trace of Xiao Longnu within tens of li. Emotions stirred in his heart, he felt dizzy and shaky and almost fainted on the back of the horse. He thought with sadness and lamented, "Why did Gu Gu leave me again? How have I offended her again? She cried many tears before she left, she's not angry with me." He suddenly thought of something, "Ah, yes, it must be because of what I said about getting tired of the

ancient tomb, she thought that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with her." His eyes glistened as it became clear as to what he should do, "She's returning to the tomb. I'll just go back and be with her." Yang Guo's tears turned into smiles and he flipped over a few times on the horse's back.

Now, as the horse dashed and galloped, he wasn't thinking straight and didn't clarify which direction he was heading in. Then he settled down, he determined where north was and turned the horse around and headed for Mount Zhongnan. The more he thought about it the more he believed this was most likely as to where she would be. Most of the pain and despair had now disappeared. He opened his mouth and sang a mountain song.

After midday, he arrived at a small roadside eating place. He finished eating some buns but remembered that when he left in a rush, he forgot to bring money with him. When the owner of the shop was off guard, he quickly leapt onto the horse and galloped away. He heard the insults of the owner from faraway, but what could he do to Yang Guo? He couldn't stop himself from laughing inside.

He continued traveling until 'shen pai shi fen' (evening), all he saw in front of him now was a dense, dark and deep forest, shouts and insults could be heard from within the forest. He was slightly alarmed and listened closely; it was the voices of Jinlun Fawang and Guo Fu.

He knew something was wrong and leapt off the horse. He placed the reigns on the saddle and hid behind trees. He slowly followed the voices and after about a hundred feet or so, he saw Huang Rong and her daughter with the Wu brothers fending off Jinlun Fawang in a pile of jumbled rocks deep in the forest. He saw bloodstains on the faces and clothes of the Wu brothers, Huang Rong's and Guo Fu's

hair was in a mess, and they looked wretched. It appeared that if it wasn't for the fact that Jinlun Fawang wanted to keep them alive, they would have long ago died by his iron wheel.

Yang Guo watched for a while and thought, "Gu Gu is not here, if I go up and help them I could lose my life for no reason. What should I do? How can I save Auntie Guo? He suddenly saw Jinlun Fawang send his wheel smashing out; Huang Rong had no way to receive this attack and retreated backwards behind the pile of rocks. Jinlun Fawang hovered around the outside of the rocks, he actually couldn't attack her.

Yang Guo was surprised, he took a closer look and saw that Guo Fu and the Wu brothers also relied on the rocks to avoid danger, in the midst of this danger all they had to do was hide behind the rocks. Da'erba and the others circled from afar, they could close in from any direction; at that time, Guo Fu and the others would hide behind another pile of disorderly rocks.

Yang Guo was extremely surprised, those normal looking pile of rocks actually had such an ingenious use; it really was uncanny. It looked like Huang Rong and the others would be safe from danger but there was no way for them to leave the rock formation.

Jinlun Fawang kept on attacking without stop, though he managed to injure the Wu brothers, it wasn't life threatening, and on their side, one of the Mongolians died by Guo Fu's sword. He saw that there was something strange with this pile of rocks formed by Huang Rong; he first had to grasp and see through the theories behind it before he could get to the four.

He had always thought highly of his intelligence, it's not too urgent at the moment since they can't escape his clutches. Once he's seen through this formation he'll break into it and capture them, showing his power. So he waved out his left hand and ordered his men back, he also retreated back ten feet or so, staring at and studying the rock formation. Most formation uses variations of the 'Wu Xing Ba Gua' trigram; Jinlun Fawang was well versed with these types of tactics, he thought that although the formation was strange, it won't be too far off from the theories of the five elements.

He studied it for a long while, when it looked like he saw through an aspect of the formation, he pondered on it further and it then didn't make sense. The left wing was correct but the right wing changed, when he seemingly saw through the front of the formation, it was difficult to understand the back of it. He was taken aback by this, he was startled and in awe. He excelled in everything, a real outstanding person of the world; with this difficult problem in front of him, he wanted to rely on his own intellect to solve it.

Yang Guo watched as Jinlun Fawang stood there without moving, his eyebrows raised; suddenly his eyes glistened and he flashed over, breaking into the formation, grabbing Guo Fu's arm and quickly retreated. Huang Rong and the brothers were extremely shocked with this sudden change of events. They were at their wit's end, if they left the formation to rescue Guo Fu, they would definitely suffer under his hands.

What had happened was that Guo Fu became careless when she saw the enemy frozen like that; she didn't follow her mother's instructions as to where to stand and was out of the formation's protection. When Jinlun Fawang saw this opportunity he immediately went over and captured her; he

then sealed a pressure point on the side of her body and placed her down on the ground. He deliberately kept her mute pressure point unsealed, letting her call out and plead, wanting her to agitate Huang Rong into exiting the formation.

Guo Fu felt her body ache unbearably and she couldn't stop herself from calling out. How could Huang Rong not know what the enemy was planning, but when she heard the calls of her daughter, her heart ached unbearably, she could only bite down on her lips and endure it.

From behind a tree Yang Guo understood what was happening. He saw Huang Rong raising her stick, about to come out from the rock formation and rescue her daughter; this was extremely dangerous, he didn't give it much thought and suddenly leapt out and grabbed Guo Fu from behind, throwing himself forward into the rock formation.

Jinlun Fawang's iron wheel flew out towards Yang Guo's back. Yang Guo was in midair, it would be difficult to dodge this attack; he pushed Guo Fu towards Huang Rong and used the "Thousand Kilogram Fall". His body dropped straight down and fell down solidly onto the pile of rocks, he heard the 'qiang lang lang' sound of the iron wheel brushing past his head, the wheel circled around and came back into Jinlun Fawang's hand.

Huang Rong hugged her daughter lovingly. She saw Yang Guo pick himself up from the rocks, his eyes were green and nose bruised, she quickly stretched out her stick and led him into the formation.

Jinlun Fawang's plan had failed and again it was due to Yang Guo, but instead of being angry he was actually pleased, he gave a chuckle and said, "Fine, coming here now saves me the trouble of finding you later on."

Yang Guo risked his life for this rescue out of righteous indignation; only after entering the formation did he see that by doing this, his life would most probably end soon. He would never have the opportunity to see Xiao Longnu ever again. He couldn't stop himself from feeling regret.

Huang Rong asked, "Where's your Master?"

Yang Guo gloomily said, "She suddenly left in the middle of the night, I was in the middle of searching for her."

Huang Rong sighed and said, "Guo'er, why did you have to risk your life again?"

Yang Guo gave a bitter laugh and shook his head, he said, "Auntie Guo, I'm not too bright, once my emotions get the better of me I can't control myself."

Huang Rong said, "Good child, you have a great heart, your father..." She stopped mid sentence.

Yang Guo's voice trembled, "Auntie Guo, my father was a bad person, wasn't he?"

Huang Rong's head hung down and said, "You want to know about it?" She suddenly called out, "Careful, come over here!" She pulled him over two piles of rock and avoided Jinlun Fawang's sneak attack.

Yang Guo took a look at the rock formation in awe, he said, "Auntie Guo, there isn't anyone one else in the world who has your intelligence and wisdom."

Huang Rong unsealed her daughter's pressure point and massaged her; she gave a slight smile but didn't reply.

Guo Fu said, "What do you know? My grandfather taught my mother's skills. My grandfather is as intelligent."

Yang Guo had seen the handwriting and articles of Huang Yaoshi before when he was on Peach Blossom Island but then he was young, he didn't understand the intricacies within it. When Guo Fu reminded him, he nodded and drifted away, he sighed and said, "When will I be able to greet this Senior? If I do my life won't be all in vain."

Suddenly Jinlun Fawang charged past two rock formations and attacked. Yang Guo didn't have a weapon and quickly picked up the stick that Huang Rong had flung on the ground and dashed out to stop him, he sent out two strokes with the stick, using the "Dog Beating Stick Technique". Jinlun Fawang saw that his stick technique was profound, he concentrated and fought with him, after a few stances, both of them suddenly tripped up on the jumbled rocks, both stumbled. Fawang was afraid that he would be ambushed and leapt out of the formation.

Huang Rong led Yang Guo back and ordered Guo Fu and the Wu brothers to move the stones and change the formation. She asked Yang Guo, "Where exactly did you learn this stick technique from?"

Yang Guo told her the truth about how he met Hong Qigong on Mount Hua, how the Northern Beggar dueled with Western Poison, how Hong Qigong taught him the "Dog Beating Stick Techniques". He then told her of the passing of both Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng.

Huang Rong felt deep sorrow at this news, but then sighed and said, "You've come upon such extraordinary meetings; it really is rare to come across such events." She suddenly had a thought, and said, "Guo'er, you are very clever, think of a way to escape today's dangers."

Yang Guo looked at her, judging from her expression she had already thought of a plan, he pretended he didn't know

and said, "If you were feeling well, me and you could beat Fawang; or if we could get my Master to come here, then that would be a way as well."

Huang Rong said, "How can my health recover over such a short period of time? We don't know where your Master has gone. I have another plan; it involves the rock formation. This formation was devised by my father, there are hundred of variations; we haven't used even twenty percent of them yet." Yang Guo was shocked and pleased, he sighed in awe as he thought about the knowledge that Huang Yaoshi possessed.

Huang Rong said, "My Master only taught you the stances of the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", and you've only heard the main points of the formulae while you hid in the tree. I'm now going to teach you all the profound and subtle variations and changes of this technique."

Yang Guo was delighted but he pretended to dismiss this, he said, "I'm afraid that won't do, the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" is passed onto the Beggar Clan's Chief only, it has never been passed onto an outsider."

Huang Rong rolled her eyes, she said, "What are you trying in front of me now? My Master has taught you thirty percent of this technique, you learnt another twenty percent when you eavesdropped, today I'll teach you another twenty percent. The final thirty percent relies on your intelligence and how you grasp and understand the technique; no one can teach you this. One, no one is teaching you the whole thing, two, today's situation is desperate, just follow the order."

Yang Guo knelt down on the ground and bowed to her, he smiled and said, "Auntie Guo, when I was young you said

you were going to teach me martial arts, today you are teaching me.”

Huang Rong gave a subtle smile and said, “You’ve always bitterly kept this in your heart, haven’t you?”

Yang Guo said, “How would I dare?”

Huang Rong then quietly imparted all the aspects of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” to him.

From outside the rock formation, Jinlun Fawang saw Yang Guo kowtowing to Huang Rong, the two of them laughed as they talked, he didn’t know what on earth they were trying now. It appeared that they were confident about the situation, and it looked like they weren’t even giving him a second thought. Though he was angry, he had always been careful and meticulous; though he knew that their martial arts could not compare with his, the two of them are extremely crafty. Why should he be careless and fall into their traps? He wanted to see through what they had in mind and then make his decision.

Luckily, he slowed his attacks; without the distraction of the enemy, Huang Rong passed on everything to Yang Guo in under an hour’s time.

Yang Guo’s intelligence and perception was a hundred times better than Lu Youjiao; if you asked him one thing he knew ten, if you ask him to raise one point he raised three. He had spent a great deal of effort in learning this technique and had pondered hundreds of times on the things he didn’t understand. Because of this fact, when Huang Rong advised and pointed him in the right direction, he immediately understood and grasped everything about the technique.

From afar, Jinlun Fawang saw that Huang Rong looked at ease, her lips moving slightly yet Yang Guo was scratching his ear and touching his cheeks; he didn't know what the two were conjuring up, most probably it wasn't to his best interests, he should break up their conversation.

After listening to the important aspects, Yang Guo asked ten or so difficult questions. Huang Rong explained it all to him. She said, "Good, since you can ask these questions then that means you understand a great deal. The second stage is to trap the monk in the formation."

Yang Guo was startled and said, "Capture him?"

Huang Rong said, "What's so hard about that? With you and I teamed up, we've got more intelligence and strength than needed. Right now, I'm going to explain the key points of this rock formation to you. You most probable won't be able to understand it in such a short time but luckily you have a great memory, all you've got to do is remember thirty six different types of changes." She then started to list them: how the green dragon appears as the white tiger, how the black forces transforms into the vermillion sparrow.

The rock formation was derived from Zhuge Liang's 'Central Map of the Eight Formations'. Years ago, Zhuge Liang had set up a formation on the shores of the Changjiang River using stone slabs. After Dong Wu's general Lu Xun entered the formation, it was difficult for him to escape.

Now, Huang Rong had set up one of Zhuge's methods, but because time was pressing, Huang Rong did not set up the formation completely, however only a few things were missing. Even so, the formation disturbed Jinlun Fawang, he stared at the five of them but he didn't dare make a move.

The thirty-six variations of this formation were very complicated, even with Yang Guo's intelligence he could only remember ten or so changes.

It was now evening, Jinlun Fawang slowly waited to make his move.

Huang Rong said, "With these ten or so changes; it's enough to trap him. Go out and lure him into the formation, I'll then change it and trap him in there."

Yang Guo was delighted and said, "Auntie Guo, if I visit Peach Blossom Island again, would you be willing to teach me this type of skill?"

Huang Rong gave a smile, and said, "If you are willing to visit the island, why wouldn't I be willing to teach you this? You risked your life and saved Fu'er and I twice now, could I still treat you the same way as before?"

When Yang Guo heard this, he was filled with an extremely relaxed and comfortable feeling throughout his chest; what does it matter whether Huang Rong teaches him or not? He felt that even if he had a hundred deaths he would not have any regrets. He raised his bamboo stick and exited the formation calling out, "Rusty old Jinlun Fawang if you've got guts then come over and go through three hundred stances with me!"

Jinlun Fawang was worried that they had planned something in the formation to ambush him; he couldn't have asked for more when he saw Yang Guo coming out of the formation. The iron wheel rang 'qiang lang lang' as he chopped out. He was afraid that Yang Guo would escape back into the formation if he started to lose; after the first two stances, he had already blocked his path back, forcing him as far away from the formation as possible.

How could he know that after Yang Guo learned the important aspects of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” his technique was superb? When he used the eight key formulae of ‘trip’, ‘chop’, ‘coil’, ‘poke’, ‘stir’, ‘seal’, ‘lead’ and ‘turn’, the variations and changes were indeed subtle and ingenious. When he made a careless attack, Yang Guo poked him in the leg, though he managed to shut his pressure point to the danger and stop injury, the pain lasted a long time.

He didn’t dare be careless after he suffered that attack, he spun his wheel and concentrated on the battle; though his opponent was just a young man in his teens, he treated him as formidable enemy. He attacked with respect and defended tightly, looking upon him as a great Master.

When he did this, Yang Guo immediately felt he couldn’t hold on; though the “Dog Beating Stick” was ingenious, it is difficult to perform straight after learning it. Yang Guo used the ‘seal’ formulae to block the attack of the iron wheel and then shifted his legs, suddenly going east and then surging west.

Jinlun Fawang followed the changes of his bamboo stick, he felt that it was about time to act. When he saw Yang Guo surging and attacking away from the formation Fawang kept on moving backwards to lure him as faraway from the formation as possible. He didn’t predicted that after moving back over ten or so steps, his right leg suddenly tripped over a large rock; he had unwittingly been lured into the formation.

He knew something was wrong. He then heard Huang Rong call out, “The Vermillion Sparrow Displaces the Green Dragon, the ‘Xun’ position changes to the ‘Li’, wood into water.”

Guo Fu and the Wu brothers shifted the rocks and changed the formation. Jinlun Fawang's face lost its colour from shock, he stopped his wheel to inspect the surroundings, while Yang Guo's bamboo stick coiled its way around towards him. Though Yang Guo's "Dog Beating Stick Technique" wasn't good enough to meet him head on, it was more than enough to confuse and distract him. Fawang's legs were tripped up a few times and he almost couldn't stand up. He knew that this formation was powerful, the longer he was in it the more confusing it became. In this danger he shouted and leaped up on top of a pile of rocks. Normally, being on top of the rocks keeps one from being trapped and confused by the formation and allows them to regain their sense of direction. He thought that if he went forward in a straight line he will be able to get out of the formation. But he didn't know that he just went from east to west, north to south, and had circled around a couple of times over an area of a hundred feet. Eventually his vigor was depleted and he stopped on the rocks. As soon as he landed on top of the pile of rocks, Yang Guo waved out the bamboo stick to his leg. Fawang's weapon was short and couldn't be used to protect all of his body; he could only drop down back to the ground and sweep out his wheel to counterattack.

After another ten or so moves, the sky had darkened, he was surrounded by rocks everywhere; the formation seemed to give off an eerie air. Even someone as bold as he couldn't stop himself from being slightly frightened, suddenly his mind lit up; he had a plan.

His left leg lifted up, a twenty plus kilo (44lb) stone was lifted in the air and sent flying. His right leg came out and another large stone went flying. He darted around, his legs kept on kicking out, the rocks collided with each other and sparks flew. In a flash, the formation had been broken.

Huang Rong, Yang Guo and the others were extremely shocked by this and they had to keep on moving to avoid the rocks falling from the sky.

If Jinlun Fawang just wanted to leave the formation it couldn't be easier, but he turned defense into attack and his left palm came searching out to capture Huang Rong. Yang Guo sent the tip of the stick towards his back, Fawang swerved his iron wheel and repelled it; however, his left palm had hung onto Huang Rong's shoulder. If she leapt back she could have avoided this but she heard a urgent gust of wind coming down, a large rock was smashing down behind her at that time, she could only use the "Great Trapping Hand" to reverse his grab and hooked onto his left wrist.

Jinlun Fawang said, "Good!" He let her hook his left wrist and waited for her to use force to fling him away; he suddenly circulated his strength and pulled her towards him.

If it was any other time, Huang Rong could have circulated her internal energy and escaped from this pull, but right now she didn't have sufficient internal energy, she called out, "Ai ya!" and fell.

Yang Guo was extremely alarmed; he threw away any care for his life and threw himself forward, grabbing Jinlun Fawang's legs. The two of them started to fall.

Jinlun Fawang's martial arts were much higher than his, before they hit the ground, his right palm had come waving out towards Yang Guo's chest. Yang Guo quickly stretched out his left arm to block it; a 'pai' sound was heard as their palms struck. Yang Guo felt blood surging upwards from his chest; his body flew away like a rock.

Just at this time, the last remaining rock fell down fiercely from the sky; a 'peng' sound was heard as it struck Jinlun Fawang on the back.

It was an extremely heavy collision, even if Jinlun Fawang's internal energy were higher, he would not be able to take it, though he circulated his internal energy to divert the rock away, his body wobbled a few times and he eventually fell forward onto the ground.

In a short period of time, the formation had been broken and stones had rained down. Huang Rong, Jinlun Fawang and Yang Guo were all on the ground injured.

End of Chapter 14.

Chapter 15 - The Disciples of Eastern Heretic

Translated by Noodles



*Yang Guo saw a girl in blue green by the window,
her left hand was holding down a piece of paper,*

her right holding a pen, she was in the middle of doing calligraphy. Her back was towards the couch and he couldn't see her face, her back was slender with a fine waist, extremely elegant and beautiful.

Inside the formation were the extremely shocked Wu brothers and Guo Fu; outside the formation were Da'erba and the Mongolian warriors. They dashed forward to rescue Fawang. Da'erba had terrifying strength, there were many skilled fighters within the crowd of Mongolian warriors; how could Guo Fu and the Wu brothers fight them off? Suddenly a swaying Jinlun Fawang stood up and waved his iron wheel, the 'qiang lang lang' sounds were soul disturbing, his face was pale. He laughed out at the sky yet his laugh was filled with a cold and mournful feeling; the band of people all looked at each other startled and stopped their advance.

Jinlun Fawang hissed, "I have never suffered even half an injury whilst in battle in my entire life; today I actually injured myself." He stretched out his hand and grabbed Huang Rong's back.

Yang Guo's chest was severely injured by Jinlun Fawang's palm, he didn't have any strength to stand up and crawled across the ground; when he saw Huang Rong in danger he again swept out his stick to repel this grab. But as soon as he used any strength, he spat out a pool of blood.

Huang Rong said mournfully, "Guo'er, we give in, don't fight on, take care of yourself."

Guo Fu raised her long sword and protected her mother.

Yang Guo quietly said, "Sister Fu, run away quickly, it's important to tell your father about this."

Guo Fu's mind was in a mess, she knew her martial arts were poor but how could she leave her mother?

Jinlun Fawang swung his iron wheel slightly and the wheel collided with Guo Fu's sword, a 'dang' sound was heard and a white light glimmered, the sword flew up into the air and landed in the forest.

Jinlun Fawang was about to push her out of the way and grab Huang Rong when suddenly a girl's voice from behind said, "Wait!"

A blue green flash leapt out of the forest. She stretched out her hand to catch the sword and hurried to the middle of the pile of rocks.

Jinlun Fawang saw that her face was extremely terrifying; it looked three parts human and seven parts ghost, he has never seen such a strange face before in his life. He couldn't stop himself from being startled and said, "Who are you?"

The young girl didn't answer and pushed a rock in between Jinlun Fawang and Huang Rong. She said, "You're the famous Jinlun Fawang?" Her face was ugly but her voice was gentle and tender.

Fawang said, "Correct, what is your name?"

The girl replied, "I'm a nameless young girl, you won't know me." As she said this, she moved another slab of stone three inches.

The sun had gone down long ago; the forest was full of darkness. Jinlun Fawang's mind lit up and shouted, "What are you doing?" He was about to stop the girl from moving

the stones when she suddenly called out, "The Horned Wooden Dragon Changes into the Overbearing Golden Dragon!"

Guo Fu and the Wu brothers were startled and they all pondered, "How does she know the changes of the formation?" But they heard her voice had a commanding tone and immediately started to move the rocks according to her instructions. Four, fives stones were moved, the scattered formation changed again.

Jinlun Fawang was alarmed and angry, he shouted, "Little girl, you dare to come and mess things around!"

He just heard her say, "The Moon Fox Turns into the Day Rabbit, the Crow of the Final Moon Shifts into the Wooden Wolf of 'Kui', Bat of the Earth Enters the Room of the Fire Pig." All the things that she called out were the twenty-eight positions of 'su'. Guo Fu and the Wu brothers felt that the way she led the formation was exactly the way that Huang Rong did while she led formations. They were delighted and used all their efforts in moving the rocks; they saw that they were about to trap Jinlun Fawang in the formation again.

Jinlun Fawang had circulated his internal energy with force to protect himself from the wound from the collision with the rock; though the injury didn't react for now, he actually had a serious internal injury. He had no way to start kicking the stones again. He knew that in just a little while he would be trapped in the stone formation again; his disciple Da'erba was brave but he doesn't understand the formation and so it would be difficult for him to help. He saw that Huang Rong was picking herself up, struggling to stand upright; all he needed to do was take a few steps forward and he would be able to capture her. But saving himself was

more important right now; he picked up his iron wheel and sent an attack towards Wu Xiuwen's head.

After he suffered the injury his arms had no strength; he was forcing himself to move the iron wheel. If Wu Xiuwen had a sword, he would be able to knock the wheel out of his hands. But Fawang was surrounded by a powerful air; though the stance had no force behind it, it still looked like the real thing. How could Wu Xiuwen dare to take this attack; he immediately withdrew back into the formation.

Jinlun Fawang slowly walked out of the formation and stood there in a daze for a while thinking, "I'm afraid that I'll never get an opportunity as good as this again. Could it be that heaven is protecting the Song and stopping me from succeeding? The Wulin of the central plain have many able people; these few youngsters are already versed in both the arts and martial arts. Just they alone make strong opponents; our Mongolian and Tibetan warriors pale by comparison." He held his chest and sighed. He turned around and walked away. Ten or so steps later, a 'qiang lang lang' sound was heard; the wheel had fallen to the ground as he struggled to stay up.

Da'erba was alarmed and called out, "Master!" He dashed over and held him up and said, "Master, are you alright?" Fawang frowned and didn't reply, he stretched out his arm and leaned on his shoulder and quietly said, "What a pity! What a pity! Let's go!" A Mongolian warrior led a horse over. Due to his injury, Jinlun Fawang had no strength to pull himself up on the horse. Da'erba used his left palm and pushed his master's waist and helped him up on the horse. They left heading east.

The girl in blue green slowly walked towards Yang Guo. She stopped and bent down to examine his face, wanting to see how seriously injured he was. It was now deep into the

night; things couldn't be seen clearly even if it was just a distance of one inch away from your face. She went up to Yang Guo's face and saw that his eyes were open wide, seemingly in a trance; his cheeks were red and his breathing rapid, it appeared that his injury was not light.

In this blurry state, all he saw was a pair of soft and gentle eyes in front of his face, like the way Xiao Longnu's eyes appeared when she looked at him. It was soft and gentle, understanding and caring, he opened his arms and grabbed the girl and called out, "Gu Gu, Guo'er is hurt, don't leave me."

The girl in blue green was embarrassed and flustered, she struggled slightly. Yang Guo's chest immediately suffered a flash of pain and he couldn't stop himself from calling out 'ai ya!'"

The girl didn't dare to struggle and quietly said, "I'm not your Gu Gu; let me go."

Yang Guo stared at her eyes and pleaded, "Gu Gu, don't leave me... I'm... I'm... I'm your Guo'er."

The girl's heart softened and said gently, "I'm not your Gu Gu."

The sky was even darker now; the girl's terrifying face was hidden, showing only a pair of bright pupils.

Yang Guo pulled her hand and pleaded, "You are, you are! Don't... don't leave me again."

The young girl was held by him. Her body burnt up with embarrassment; she didn't know what to do.

Suddenly Yang Guo's mind became clear; he saw that the girl in front of him was not Xiao Longnu. He was extremely disappointed, his mind turned upside down and he fainted.

The young girl was shocked. She saw Guo Fu and the Wu brothers surrounding Huang Rong, showing concern and serving her yet Yang Guo had no one. She knew that his injury was serious, if he doesn't take her Master's medicine, his life will be in danger. She supported his waist and pushed and pulled him out of the formation and then slowly walked out of the forest. The skinny horse was very sharp; it recognized its master and rushed towards him. The girl put him on the horse's back but she didn't get on, she held the horse's reigns and walked on.

Yang Guo was conscious one moment and in a daze the next; sometimes he thought that the person next to him was Xiao Longnu and he called out in delight; other times he found out that she wasn't and his whole body felt as if it was in an ice cellar.

After sometime, he felt a clear fragrance enter the places where his chest was injured, it was extremely comfortable. He was startled and discovered that he was now lying on a couch, a thin blanket covered his body; he wanted to sit up but suddenly felt a severe pain going through his chest, he couldn't move. He turned his head and saw a girl in blue green by the window; her left hand was holding down a piece of paper, her right holding a brush, she was in the middle of doing calligraphy. Her back was towards the couch and he couldn't see her face; her back was slender with a fine waist, extremely elegant and beautiful. He took a look around and found out that he was in the room of a thatch house; the benches, chairs, table and bed were all simple and crude, the four walls were gloomy, yet it felt peaceful and serene. Beside the bed were a long zither and a jade flute. All he remembered was how he fought with Jinlun Fawang in the forest but his mind was a blank as to how he got to this place. He concentrated harder and recalled that he was on his horse's back; someone was

leading them, a girl. Now he remembered, the girl in front of him was that girl.

She was now concentrating on her calligraphy; he saw her arm moved lightly, her form graceful and elegant. There wasn't a sound in the room; it felt like he had arrived in a completely different world to the heated battle he had just been in. He didn't dare to make a noise and disturb the young girl, he just lay down on the couch peacefully; it was like settling down again after a dream, he really didn't know what world he was in.

His mind suddenly lit up, the girl in blue green in front of him was the girl who gave him the warning on the Changan road, and later on she helped him save Lu Wushuang. There were no ties between him and her, why was she treating him so well? He couldn't stop his mouth from opening, "Sister, so it's you who has saved me again."

The girl stopped her brush but she didn't turn around, she said softly, "You can't really say I saved you. I happened to be passing by and saw how unreasonable that Tibetan monk was, and you were injured as well..." She lowered her head slightly after she said this.

Yang Guo said, "Sister, I... I..." He was touched but his throat choked up and he couldn't make a sound.

The young girl said, "You have a good heart; you save other people without regard for your life. I just gave a little help; it's nothing."

Yang Guo said, "Auntie Guo raised me, of course I had to use all my efforts in saving her when she was in danger, but sister and I..."

The young girl said, "I'm not talking about your Auntie Guo, I'm talking about Lu Wushuang sister Lu."

Yang Guo hadn't heard the name Lu Wushuang for a long time, when he heard her mention this name he quickly asked, "Is Miss Lu safe? Has she recovered from her injury?"

The young girl replied, "Thank you for your concern, she has recovered from her injury. You haven't forgotten her."

From her tone, Yang Guo could tell that she and Lu Wushuang are very close. He asked, "I wonder how sister greets Miss Lu?"

The young girl didn't reply, she gave a subtle smile and said, "Don't call me elder sister this, elder sister that, I'm not older than you." After a while, she laughed and said, "I'm afraid that it's a bit too late now to change your greeting after calling me 'Gu Gu' a few times."

Yang Guo's face went red; he knew that when he was dazed and unclear after the injury, he must have wrongly recognized her as Xiao Longnu, incessantly calling out, 'Gu Gu'. It could be that he also said some tender and affectionate things, the more he thought about it, the more uneasy he got, he stuttered, "You... you... you're not offended are you?"

The young girl laughed and said, "Of course I'm not offended; just rest here peacefully. You can search for your Gu Gu when you've recovered from your injury." She continued, "Don't be too worried, you'll eventually find her."

Those few words were affectionate and considerate and within the softness there was respect; it made a person feel at ease and happy. This was completely different to all the other girls he knew. She wasn't like Lu Wushuang who was vivacious and wily, and even further away from the unrestrained pride of Guo Fu. Yelu Yan was straight to the point and Wanyan Ping was long-suffering and piteous.

When it came to Xiao Longnu: at first she was cold as frost and unfeeling, but eventually she fell in love and all her emotions were stirred and brought forward. This girl in blue green was cultured and refined, warm and attentive. She knew that he missed his 'Gu Gu' so she advised him to rest peacefully first, and once he had recovered he could go and find her. He felt that being with her made him feel relaxed and calm. After she said these words she picked up her brush again.

Yang Guo said, "Sister, what is your surname?"

The girl said, "Don't ask questions, just rest peacefully on the bed and stop thinking so much, your injury will recover quicker."

Yang Guo said, "Fine. Actually, I knew that I was asking in vain, you wouldn't even let me see your face let alone know your name."

The young girl sighed and said, "My face is ugly, you've seen it before."

Yang Guo said, "No...no! That's when you had the human skin mask on."

The young girl said, "If I'm as beautiful as your Gu Gu, why do I need to wear this mask?"

Yang Guo was pleased when she praised Xiao Longnu's beauty, he asked, "How do you know my Gu Gu is beautiful? You've seen her before?"

The young girl said, "I haven't seen her before. But the way you think about her, spell bound and completely enchanted, she must be the number one beauty in the world."

Yang Guo sighed and said, "I long for her not because of her beauty, even if she was the ugliest woman in the world, I

would still long for her like this. But... but if you see her yourself you will definitely praise her beauty even more."

If Guo Fu or Lu Wushuang heard these words, they would definitely answer back with some chiding comment; but this young girl replied, "It must be true. Not only is she beautiful, she treats you extremely well." After she said this, she continued on with her calligraphy.

Yang Guo looked up at the ceiling for a while, but he couldn't stop himself from turning around and facing the slender back of the young girl. He asked, "Sister, what are you writing?"

The young girl replied, "I'm practicing calligraphy."

Yang Guo said, "What 'bei tie' (beautiful calligraphy written on silk/beautifully presented calligraphy) are you copying?"

The young girl replied, "My writing is ugly, how can one describe it as a copy of a 'bei tie'."

Yang Guo said, "You're too modest, I can tell it's definitely great."

The young girl laughed and said, "Strange, how can you tell?"

Yang Guo said, "Someone as elegant and refined as you must have calligraphy that is also elegant and refined. Sister, how about letting me look at what you've written?"

The young girl gave another light laugh and said, "My writing can't see the light of day; I'll need to ask you for lessons when you've recovered."

Yang Guo secretly said, "Shameful." He couldn't stop himself from appreciating the lessons of literature and calligraphy that Huang Rong taught him on Peach Blossom

Island. If he didn't have that experience, he wouldn't be able to tell what someone was writing let alone distinguish the difference between beautiful and ugly calligraphy.

As he was lost in thought, he felt a throbbing pain in his chest. Immediately he circulated his internal energy, chi flowing through his pressure points. He gradually felt comfortable and at ease and soon he fell into a deep sleep.

By the time he woke up, the sky had already gone dark. The girl had prepared a few dishes and had put them on a short table next to the bed he was on. She helped him to eat. Though the bamboo chopsticks and clay bowl were coarse implements, they were all new and specially prepared for him.

The dishes were nothing special, just ordinary vegetables, tofu, eggs and fish, but they were all cooked deliciously. Yang Guo ate three bowls of rice in one go and kept on praising her cooking. Though her face was hidden by the mask and covered her expression, her bright eyes showed signs of delight.

Yang Guo's injury had recovered a little more by the next day. The young girl had moved a chair next to the end of the bed. She sat there and mended his long gown. She lifted up the gown and said, "How can a person like you wear something like this?" After she said this she left the room and returned with a roll of blue green fabric and started to prepare a gown according to the fitting of his old one.

From her voice and figure, she was no older than seventeen or eighteen; but not only was she like an older sister to Yang Guo, she was tender and loving to him like a mother. His mother had passed away a long time ago but today he experienced the feeling of being that child once again; he

was touched and surprised and asked, "Sister, why are you treating me so well? I really can't accept it."

The young girl replied, "What's so difficult about making a gown? You risked your life to save someone; that was a much harder task."

The morning of that day passed peacefully. After midday, the girl once again sat at the table and practiced calligraphy. Yang Guo really wanted to see what she was writing but after pleading a few times she still said no. She practiced for about two hours; she wrote one piece and then thought for a while before she ripped it up and started another piece. It appeared that she couldn't get what she wanted; she wrote a piece and then ripped it up. It seemed like she was writing some sort of martial arts manual. Eventually she gave a sigh and asked, "What do you want to eat, I'll make something for you."

Yang Guo had an idea and said, "I'm afraid that it might be too time consuming."

The young girl said, "What? Tell me."

Yang Guo said, "I want to eat zong zi (glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in leaves)."

The young girl was startled and said, "What's so hard about wrapping a few zong? I'd like to eat some myself. Do you like sweet or savory ones?"

Yang Guo said, "Whichever is fine. As long as I can eat some I'll be satisfied, how can I be picky?"

Indeed, that night the young girl did wrap up a few zong zi for him. The sweet ones were filled with soy beans, the savory filled with ham; they were both delicious. Yang Guo ate and praised her incessantly at the same time.

The young girl sighed and said, "You really are clever, you've finally guessed who I am."

Yang Guo was surprised and thought, "I haven't guessed! How have I guessed who you are?" But his reply was, "How did you know?"

The young girl replied, "Jiangnan, my home, is famous for its zong zi; there were many things for you to pick from but you had to pick zong zi."

Yang Guo recalled the events of years ago in Zhexi where he met the Guo couple, the fight with Li Mochou, how he became Ouyang Feng's godson but he could not remember who this girl was.

He wanted to eat zong zi for another reason. When he finished eating, he waited for the moment when the young girl was not looking and placed a piece in his palm. When the girl collected up the chopsticks and bowls, he quickly took a piece of fabric that the girl had left behind when she was making the gown for him and attached some zong to one end and then shot it out towards the pieces of torn paper on the table. When he pulled a piece back and took a look, he couldn't stop himself from being startled. The words that were on the paper were: 'since a gentleman has passed my eyes, the clouds are not pleasant.' That phrase was from the 'Shi Jing'. Years ago Huang Rong had taught him the meaning of this phrase: 'since I've seen such a man, how come I am not pleased?' He shot out the piece of cloth again for another piece. The same thing was written on it but the 'since' word was torn in half. Yang Guo's heart ran, he had collected ten pieces of paper but the same thing was written on all of them. He carefully thought about the meaning and went off into a daydream.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps, the young girl was returning to the room. Yang Guo quickly hid the pieces of paper underneath his blanket. The young girl gathered up the rest of the pieces of paper and burned them outside.

Yang Guo thought, "She wrote 'since a gentleman has passed my eyes', could that gentleman be me? I've only spoken a few words with her, what could she see in me that she likes? Anyway, how can someone describe me as a gentleman? But if it isn't me, who else can it be since there's no one else around."

Just as he was in deep thought, the girl returned to the room. She stood quietly by the window for a while and then blew out the candle. The pale light of the moon shone through the window, covering the floor.

Yang Guo called out, "Sister."

But the young girl did not reply and slowly left the room.

After a while, he heard the sound of a flute coming through the window. Yang Guo had seen her use a jade flute to fight with Li Mochou, her martial arts weren't weak; her musical skills with the flute were great as well.

During his time in the Ancient Tomb, Xiao Longnu would occasionally play the zither and he would sit by the side and listen to her explain the meaning of songs; thus he was coarsely learned in music. He could tell that she was playing a tune of 'Wu She Shang', the song of 'qi ao'. This song was peaceful and serene; Yang Guo had heard it a few times but he didn't love it. He heard that she kept on repeating the first five phrases, 'Looking into the distance of the mysterious Qi, the green bamboo aplenty, there's a gentleman, like a clean cut, polished and carved jade.' Whether it's high or low, whether there are sudden drops and rises, the tunes are variations of these five phrases,

winding and drowning in its meanings. Yang Guo knew that these five phrases also came from the 'Shi Jing', it praises the elegance of a male, cut and polished elegantly like the smoothness of beautiful jade.

Yang Guo listened for a while and couldn't stop himself from quietly reciting, "Looking into the distance of the mysterious Qi, the green bamboo aplenty..." The flute suddenly stopped after these two phrases. Yang Guo was startled and lamented his actions, "She was playing the flute to comfort herself; by quietly reciting those lines I showed that I understood what she was thinking, that is a bit too impolite."

When the young girl brought breakfast in the next morning, she saw that Yang Guo was wearing the human skin mask, she was taken aback, and then laughed and she said, "Why are you wearing that?"

Yang Guo said, "You gave this to me; you don't want to show your true face so I'm wearing this."

The young girl said calmly, "That's fine." After she said this she placed the breakfast down and left the room; she didn't say anything else to him that day.

Yang Guo was feeling uneasy; he was afraid that he had offended her and wanted to say a few apologetic words. She didn't stop in the room for the rest of the day. Later on during the evening, she waited for Yang Guo to finish eating supper before returning to collect the bowls and chopsticks; as she was about to leave, Yang Guo said, "Sister, you play the flute really well, can you play a tune for me?"

The young girl gave a subtle moan and then said, "Fine." She left the room and collected her jade flute. She returned and sat by Yang Guo's bed, playing a tune on the flute. This

time she played the song 'Ying Xian Ke' (Meeting the Divine Guest), it was a graceful and joyous tune, a song that greets a guest.

Yang Guo thought, "So your flute also wear's a mask, not willing to show the song that is in your heart."

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps could be heard in the midst of the flute's music; someone was hurrying towards this place. The young girl placed the flute down and went to the door, calling out, "Cousin!"

Someone rushed to the house and was panting as they said, "Cousin, that witch has picked up our traces and she's on her way now; let's go!"

Yang Guo was pleased when he heard Lu Wushuang's voice, but he was alarmed when he heard that witch Li Mochou was on the way. He then thought, "So that girl is Wifey's cousin."

He heard the young girl say, "Someone's injured and is recuperating inside."

Lu Wushuang said, "Who?"

The young girl replied, "The person that saved your life."

Lu Wushuang replied, "Sha Dan! He's... he's in there!! She dashed into the room as she said this.

The joy and delight on her face could be seen in the moonlight; she called out, "Sha Dan, Sha Dan! How come you're here? This time, it seems like it's your turn to be the injured one."

Yang Guo said, "Wifey..." He could only say one word before he thought about the elegant and refined young girl in blue

green standing aside, he stopped joking and took back his words, he asked, "How did Li Mochou find you again?"

Lu Wushuang said, "After that battle at the restaurant, you suddenly left and my cousin took me to this place to recuperate. Actually, I recovered from my wound a long time ago; I was feeling bored so I went to Xianguang for a little while. That day, I bumped into two beggars, I eavesdropped on them and heard that there was a 'Heroes' gathering at Da Xingguan. I hurried to Da Xingguan to take a look but by the time I got there, it had finished. I was afraid that my cousin was worrying about me so I hurried back. Outside a teashop at the town ahead, I saw that witch's donkey, her donkey has changed but the ringing of the golden bell hasn't..." As she got to this point, her voice trembled as she continued, "At least my time wasn't up yet, if I had bumped into her head on, I wouldn't have been able to see you two."

Yang Guo said, "This girl is your cousin? She saved me but I still don't know her name."

The young girl replied, "I..."

Lu Wushuang suddenly stretched out her hand and pulled their masks off at the same time and said, "That witch is going to get here soon; why are you two still mucking around with these masks at a time like this?"

A bright light shone in Yang Guo's eyes; the young girl had an oval face that sparkled, her skin glimmered like snow; though her beauty couldn't match Xiao Longnu's, she was still an extremely beautiful girl.

Lu Wushuang said, "She's my cousin Cheng Ying, a disciple of the Master of Peach Blossom Island, Master Huang."

Yang Guo bowed and greeted her, "Miss Cheng."

Cheng Ying returned the greeting and said, "Young Hero Yang."

Yang Guo thought, "She's of such a young age, yet she's actually a disciple of Island Master Huang? Counting back from Auntie Guo's status, doesn't that mean I'm a generation lower than her?"

Years ago when she was captured by Li Mochou and almost lost her life by the Scarlet Serpent Deity's hand, it was Peach Blossom Island's Island Master Huang Yaoshi who rescued her while passing by. After his daughter married, Huang Yaoshi roamed Jianghu making the world his home. He was old and by himself, so it was unavoidable that he would get lonely. When he saw that Cheng Ying was weak and had no where else to go, he couldn't stop himself from pitying her. After he cured her poison, he took her with him. Cheng Ying served him carefully and meticulously. This was much better than the naughty, restless and unruly Huang Rong. Huang Yaoshi grew from his pity to love her and took her in as his disciple. Though Cheng Ying's intelligence could not compare to Huang Rong's, she was extremely careful and paid attention to everything. She studied the lesser points but she still managed to learn a considerable number of skills from Huang Yaoshi.

This year, her martial arts became able and she told her Master that she was going north to search for her cousin. On the Guanxia road, she bumped into Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang; it was she who gave the warnings along the way and she who gave news of Lu Wushuang's capture. After the battle with Li Mochou in the restaurant with all the other youngsters, she took Lu Wushuang to a secluded place and built a hut to allow her to recuperate.

The day before, Lu Wushuang had left by herself and had not returned after a long period of time. Cheng Ying

worried about her and went out in search of her. Instead of finding her, she saw Huang Rong using the stone formations to fend off Jinlun Fawang. She had learned the formations from Huang Yaoshi; although she didn't know much, the things that she did know were learned thoroughly. And so, by coincidence, she managed to rescue Yang Guo.

Lu Wushuang said, "In a situation like this, why are you two still so formal?"

Yang Guo said, "Did Li Mochou see you eventually."

Lu Wushuang said, "You really are naïve! If she saw me and you weren't there to rescue me, how would I be able to escape from her? As soon as I heard the donkey's bell, I hid behind the teahouse; I didn't even dare to breath. I heard her ask the manager of the teahouse if he had seen two girls, one was a little lame and the other one was an extremely ugly girl. Cousin, she said you were an ugly girl, but she didn't know that you are the exact opposite, a beautiful girl..."

Cheng Ying's face went slightly red and said, "Don't talk rubbish, Young Hero Yang will laugh."

Yang Guo said, "I can't take a title such as Young Hero Yang; just call me Yang Guo."

Lu Wushuang angrily said, "As soon as you saw my cousin, you're all nice and polite; you even told her your name, yet with me you lied and messed me around."

Yang Guo gave a light laugh and said, "You called me 'Sha Dan', I listened to your orders and pretended to be a 'Sha Dan', isn't that obedient enough?"

Lu Wushuang pouted and said, "I'll deal with you later on." She turned around to Cheng Ying and said, "Cousin, whenever you went into town to buy things, you would wear your mask, the townspeople recognized you. The manager of the teahouse could never have dreamed that a courteous and polite Taoist priestess would have ill intentions, so of course he would tell her where we are. The witch thanked him and asked him where she can seek lodgings and then she took apprentice sister Hong to search. She has always killed people at the first light of day; it looks like we've got six hours."

Cheng Ying said, "Yes. That day when she attacked cousin's home, it was 'yin mo mao chu fen' (I think it's the fourth hour)." The three of them talked about how Li Mochou killed Lu Wushuang's parents and then realized that they had met before in Jiaxing when they were kids. The cousins recalled staying in the old kiln that Yang Guo lived in, and then remembered that they have indeed met before; they all felt a close and intimate feeling.

Yang Guo said, "That witch's martial arts are extremely high; even if I wasn't injured, the three of us would not be able to beat her. Let's just leave everything as it is, leave the lamps lit and escape."

Cheng Ying nodded and said, "We've got six hours left. Brother Yang's horse has great speed and stamina, if we leave now the witch might not be able to catch up."

Lu Wushuang said, "Sha Dan, you're injured, can you still ride?"

Yang Guo sighed and said, "I can't but I'll force myself; at least it's better than falling into the hands of that witch."

Lu Wushuang said, "We've only got one horse. Cousin, take Sha Dan and head west, I'll head east and lure her away."

Cheng Ying's face went slightly red. She said, "No, you go with brother Yang. I don't have any ties or debts with Li Mochou, even if I do fall into her hands, she might not harm me; if you fall into her hands, you'll suffer."

Lu Wushuang said, "She came for me, if she sees me with him, won't his life be lost in vain because of me?" The cousins reasoned with each other, trying to push the other into accompanying Yang Guo in escaping.

Yang Guo was extremely touched by this, these two girls were filled with loyalty, yet in this danger they were both willing to risk their lives for him; even if I die at the hands of this witch, my life wouldn't exactly have been lived for no purpose.

He then heard Lu Wushuang ask, "Sha Dan, say something, do you want my cousin to go with you or me?"

Before Yang Guo replied, Cheng Ying said, "Why do you keep on calling him Sha Dan this, Sha Dan that, are you not afraid of making brother Yang angry at all?"

Lu Wushuang stuck out her tongue, she laughed and said, "Look at how courteous and considerate you are to him; brother Sha would definitely want you to go with him." Changing her greeting from 'Sha Dan' to 'Brother Sha' was her way of showing her sincerity.

Cheng Ying's face was distinctly white and it was very easy to make her blush, so when Lu Wushuang said this, Cheng Ying's face immediately turned red as a rose. She gave a slight laugh and said, "He calls you 'Wifey', doesn't he? How can the wife not go along with him?"

This time it was Lu Wushuang's turn to blush. She stretched out her hand and tried to tickle Cheng Ying; Cheng Ying turned around and leapt away. In a short while, the room

felt as if a gentle relaxing breeze was blowing through the room, the three of them didn't appear to be as worried and frightened as they were at the start.

Yang Guo thought, "If Miss Cheng escapes with me, then Wifey's life would be in danger. If Wifey goes with me, then Miss Cheng would be in extreme danger." He said, "I am extremely touched by the way you two treat me. I say that you two should escape and let me handle the witch. My master and she are apprentice sisters; she would still have some respect towards that relationship. Not only that, she's afraid of my master, she wouldn't dare to do anything to me..."

Before he finished, Lu Wushuang interrupted, "That won't do...that won't do."

Yang Guo knew that the two would not abandon the other so he said clearly, "The three of us will escape together. If we do encounter that witch then we'll fight for our lives; whether we live or die, let the heavens decide."

Lu Wushuang clapped her hands and said, "Fine, let's do that."

Cheng Ying said grimly, "That witch comes and goes like the wind, if the three of us travel together, she will definitely catch up with us. We're going to fight with her on the way so why don't we remain here and wait for her to come when she's exhausted."

Yang Guo said, "That's right. Sister knows how to use formations, she could even trap that monk Jinlun Fawang, the Scarlet Serpent Deity may not be able to break through it."

Once he said this, the three's eyes lit up softly.

Cheng Ying said, "That formation was set up by Mrs. Guo, I just added a few variations to it, I can never set something up like that. We'll do our best and let fate decide. Cousin, come and help me."

Yang Guo thought, "When Auntie Guo taught me the formation, I could only remember ten or so different types and it could only be used to lure the rusty Jinlun Fawang into the formation; it would have no use in blocking that heaven hating and world resenting Li Mochou. This type of art is extremely complicated; to be well versed in it requires at least one year's worth of work. Miss Cheng is young so of course the things that she has learned cannot compare with Auntie Guo, she wasn't trying to be modest. But no matter how simple and crude her formation is, it's better than nothing."

The two girls picked up an iron shovel and a hoe, they went outside and started to dig up earth and move stones as they started to set up the formation. They had worked urgently for two hours when the faint calls of cockerels could be heard from faraway. Cheng Ying's head was covered with sweat as she looked at her efforts. She saw that her formation was miles apart from the rock formation that Huang Rong had set up; she was slightly depressed as she thought, "Mrs. Guo's talents exceeds mine by a hundred times over. It really would be extremely difficult to try to fend off the Scarlet Serpent Deity with such a coarse earth formation." She was afraid that her cousin and Yang Guo would get depressed about it so she did not tell them her thoughts.

Under the moonlight, Lu Wushuang saw something was wrong with her cousin and knew that her cousin wasn't completely confident. She took out a book from her pockets and returned to the hut and handed the book over to Yang

Guo. She said, "Sha Dan, this is my master's 'Five Poison Codex'."

Yang Guo shivered slightly at the sight of the blood covered book.

Lu Wushuang said, "I lied to her about the book falling into the Beggar Clan's hands; if she catches me she will definitely search me and discover the book. Take a good look and once you've memorized it, burn it." She had never talked in a serious manner with Yang Guo before, but she had no interest in joking around in this time of danger. Yang Guo saw her expression was bleak and just nodded and accepted the book.

Lu Wushuang also took out a handkerchief and quietly said to him, "If you're unlucky and fall into the hands of that witch, when she wants to take your life give this handkerchief to her."

Yang Guo saw that one side of the handkerchief looked that it was torn from somewhere, the embroidered red flower on the handkerchief was torn in half, he didn't know what she meant by this and was startled, he did not take it and asked, "What is this?"

Lu Wushuang, "I'm asking you to give this to her, are you going to promise me?"

Yang Guo nodded and placed it by the side of the pillow. Lu Wushuang picked it up and put it in his pockets and whispered, "Don't let my cousin know." She suddenly smelt the manly scent on him and remembered how he undressed her and helped her fix her broken rib in place on the Guanxia road. And how they slept on the same bed; her heart stirred and she stared at him in a trance before turning around and leaving the room.

Yang Guo saw that her eyes were filled with boundless love, his heart raced. He opened the 'Five Poison Codex' and flipped through a few pages and remembered the antidote to the "Five Poison Palm" and the "Soul Freezing Silver Needles". He thought, "These two antidotes are both extremely hard to create but if I don't die today, these two antidotes will eventually have a use later."

He heard the hut's door creak as someone pushed opened the door. He raised his head and saw Cheng Ying with red cheeks, she came over to the bed and he could see pearls of sweat on her forehead. Her breathing was slightly fast. She said, "Brother Yang, the earth formation that I have set outside is not good enough to hold back the Scarlet Serpent Deity." She then took out a handkerchief from her pockets and offered it to him. She continued, "If she breaks through and enters the house, give this to her."

Yang Guo saw that it was only half a handkerchief, the decoration and quality was the same as the one that Lu Wushuang gave him. He was surprised and raised his head, his eyes met hers and he saw eyes that glistened with tears, she was embarrassed and pleased at the same time. He was about to ask further when Cheng Ying suddenly blushed and whispered, "Whatever you do, don't let my cousin know about this." When she finished, she swiftly exited.

Yang Guo took out the handkerchief that Lu Wushuang gave him and lifted it up. Indeed, the two pieces of handkerchief came from the same one; the handkerchief was old, the white silk was now a pale yellow colour, but the embroidered red flowers were still as beautiful as before. He looked at the handkerchiefs and knew that there was something behind this. Why did the two of them each give half the handkerchief to me? Why did they want me to give it to Li Mochou? Why did they want to keep the fact they gave the handkerchief to me away from each other? Why

was it that when they handed the handkerchief over to me, their faces were filled with awkwardness and embarrassment?

He sat on the bed, thinking to himself in a trance. He heard the faraway faint calls of a cockerel followed by music from a flute, he knew that Cheng Ying had finished setting up the formation and was now playing the flute to comfort herself. She was playing the song 'Liu Bo' (Flowing Waves). The flute was soft and gentle, there was no sorrow within the music, and instead there was a soothing feeling, like the feeling of being carefree. Yang Guo listened for a little while and quietly followed along with it.

Lu Wushuang sat behind the pile of earth and listened to her cousin's flute and Yang Guo following along to it. Dawn was gradually approaching in the east. She thought, "My master will be here very shortly, my life won't be able to pass this hour. I hope that when master sees the handkerchief pieces, she will spare cousin and him, the two of them..."

Lu Wushuang had always been sharp and astute; her cousin had always given her some degree of leeway ever since they were kids. But in the face of danger, she truly hoped that Yang Guo would be able to avoid harm. She loved him in her heart and secretly wished that he would be able to escape, even if he married her cousin, she would have no regrets in death.

Just as she was thinking about this, she raised her head suddenly and saw a Taoist priestess dressed in apricot yellow standing outside the earth formation. Her right hand held a fly whisk, her gown fluttering in the wind; it was her master Li Mochou.

Lu Wushuang trembled. She picked up her sword and stood up. Li Mochou stood there without moving, just listening with her ears.

When she heard the flute and song, she recalled events of years ago when she was playing music along with Lu Zhanyuan. One played a flute, the other a panpipe, this song 'Liu Bo' was the song that they used to play.

This was twenty years ago; now the music was of old yet for her there was 'no secret exchange of the lover under the moon and wind'. When she heard the soft and tender tune of the flute and song, she felt pain and sorrow and eventually couldn't stop herself from crying.

Lu Wushuang could not have expected this sorrowful crying by her master; she had always known her to be a ruthless killer, where did this gentle and tender side come from? She has come here to kill, how come she's crying? But her cries were extremely sorrowful and somber; she couldn't stop her heart from suffering the sadness.

Yang Guo and Cheng Ying were startled when they heard the crying of Li Mochou and the song became disorganized.

Li Mochou had a thought and suddenly started to sing, her voice graceful and mournful, she sang:

"O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?

To all corners, as pair we fly... braving summer and winter, by and by...

Union is bliss, parting is woe, agony is boundless, for a lovelorn soul, sweetheart...

Give me word, a trail of clouds drifting forward...

And mountains capped with snow, whither shall my lonesome shadow go?"

The flute was originally joyous, but Li Mochou's song was filled with sorrow, her tone mournful, it was completely different from the tune of 'Liu Bo'. The voice became quieter, but the quieter it got, the higher it got.

Cheng Ying was slightly disturbed, she actually began to follow the song from 'union is bliss' and by 'parting is woe', she could no longer stop herself from following her. She was alarmed and quickly changed the tune, but the music from a flute is peaceful and serene but her internal energy was shallow, she could not produce a high tune to subdue the song of Li Mochou. She stumbled slightly and headed into the hut. She placed the jade flute down and sat aside. She began to play the zither. Yang Guo also started to sing to help.

Li Mochou's song was becoming more and more mournful; Cheng Ying's strings were producing higher and higher notes, a 'zheng' sound was heard as the first 'zheng' string on the zither suddenly snapped.

Cheng Ying was startled and her fingers became slightly disorganized, the zither's second 'yu' string snapped. Li Mochou's prolonged song was filled with tears, the third 'gong' string also snapped. Huang Yaoshi taught Cheng Ying the flute and zither; though she learned from a great master she was still young, her abilities with them were not profound.

Li Mochou had originally wanted to take the chance, when the opponent was disturbed and distracted with the broken strings, to break straight through. But she thought that, although the earth formation outside the hut seemed to be in a mess, yet hidden within were the changes of the five elements. She didn't understand this particular art and she had suffered many times in the ancient tomb, there were some worries in her mind. She suddenly had an idea; she

wound around to the right and crashed through the wall in the midst of the music and song.

Cheng Ying's earth formation was placed to protect the front of the house and it slipped her mind that the sides of the house weren't guarded. Li Mochou slipped around the house and with her two palms crashed through the earth walls. Lu Wushuang was alarmed; she raised her sword and rushed into the house.

Yang Guo was injured and had no strength to stand up and fight, he could only lie there, not moving. Cheng Ying knew that if she fought Li Mochou she would lose her life in vain. She made a decision and forgot about life and death; she started to play the zither, a song of 'tao yao'. It was a beautiful tune, flowing with joy. In her heart she was thinking, "I have had a life of hardships, dieing here by brother Yang's side means at least my life hasn't been in vain." She looked towards Yang Guo. Yang Guo gave a subtle smile towards her, Cheng Ying was filled with joy and bliss, she sang:

*"The beauty of the blossom burns brightly,
The zither flows the ocean spray,
The music carries the fragrance of flowers, the
soothing spring breeze."*

The bitterness on Li Mochou's face gradually disappeared, she asked Lu Wushuang, "Where's the book? Was it the Beggar Clan who took it?"

Yang Guo took out the 'Five Poison Codex' and threw it over to her. He said, "The Beggar Clan's Chief Huang and Chief Lu are righteous and virtuous people, what do they want with this evil book? They long ago passed down an order to Beggar Clan members to not to open even one page of this book."

Li Mochou saw that this book was in its original condition; she knew the Beggar Clan was a righteous clan and had strict regulations; most probably they did not take a look at her book.

Yang Guo also took out the two half pieces of handkerchief from his pockets and placed it down on the end of the bed and said, "Take these handkerchiefs away!"

Li Mochou's face changed completely, she waved her fly whisk and wrapped it around the handkerchiefs bringing them towards her. She held them in her hand, startled, her thoughts stirred, and her state of mind unstable.

Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying looked at each other and both were red faced; they didn't guess that the other would give a handkerchief half to Yang Guo, who now had brought them out into the open.

As one looked at the other, their hearts were filled with many thoughts and their eyes glistened. The air of death that was in the hut had now changed into an air of love. Cheng Ying's song 'Tao Yao' was played with even more happiness.

Suddenly, Li Mochou tore the handkerchief in four and said, "The past is the past, why is there a need to return there?" Her hands ripped urgently for a while and then flung the pieces into the air; the pieces of the torn handkerchief fell like descending petals.

Cheng Ying was startled and after a 'zheng' sound, another string of the zither snapped.

Li Mochou angrily shouted, "Break another string!"

In the midst of the mournful song, the fifth 'gen' string did indeed snap. Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Now I'm going

to make you suffer, you won't be able to beg for your life nor death, quickly wail for me."

The zither had two strings remaining, Cheng Ying's abilities with a zither were ordinary and it was difficult for her to form a tune.

Li Mochou said, "Quickly play mournful notes! There is too much suffering in the world, what joy is there in living?"

Cheng Ying played two notes, although it didn't form a tune, it was still following the music of the 'Tao Yao'.

Li Mochou said, "Fine, I'll first kill one of you, will you be mournful then?"

That severely toned shout caused another string of the zither to snap, she raised her fly whisk, about to strike down on Lu Wushuang's head.

Yang Guo smiled and said, "The three of us dying together today is a much happier experience than you will have living alone in the world. Sister Ying, Sister Shuang, come over here." Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying went over to the bed. Yang Guo's right hand held Lu Wushuang, his left held Cheng Ying, he smiled and said, "The three of us dying together will allow us to chat and joke on the Huang Guan path (road to underworld), isn't that ten times better than being that evil woman?"

Lu Wushuang smiled and said, "Yes, good Sha Dan, you're right." Cheng Ying gave a warm smile. The two cousins were both enchanted as Yang Guo held onto their hands.

Yet Yang Guo was thinking, "It's a pity that it isn't Gu Gu who is by my side." But he forced a joyful smile, he lightly pulled the two closer against his body.

Li Mochou thought, "He's right, those three dying like this is better than living like me." She pondered, "How can you have things that are to your advantage on this earth? I'll make sure that you're filled with sorrow and grief before you die." So she lightly swung her fly whisk and with a face resembling bitter frost, she started to quietly sing. She was singing the 'O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?' song; the song and tone was filled with sorrow and grief, like an abandoned woman crying, like a night ghost wailing.

The three of them held hands together as they listened, after a while, they couldn't stop themselves from feeling hurt in their hearts. Yang Guo's internal energy was relatively profound and wasn't moved, his face still carried a subtle smile; Lu Wushuang was strong, she would not be easily moved; Cheng Ying however could endure no longer and tears flowed. The longer Li Mochou sang, the quieter it became, eventually, it was as if there was no song.

As soon as the three cried, the Scarlet Serpent Deity will wave out her fly whisk and kill them all. Just as soon as the song was becoming extremely sad and depressing, someone from outside the hut suddenly laughed out loud and clapped as they made their way towards the hut.

It was a woman's voice, it appeared that the voice was not young but what she was singing was a naïve and innocent song: "Sway, sway, sway, sway until granny's bridge falls, granny calls me my precious, sweets in one bag, fruit in the other, once I've finished I'll take another."

The song was filled with joy and happiness, Li Mochou's sadness and the sorrow in her song was disturbed. The song was getting closer and closer. After a while someone entered the hut from the front door, it was a middle-aged woman with disheveled hair and clothes, her eyes round

and wide open, she laughed foolishly and her hand held a fire fork (fireplace fork).

Li Mochou was startled, "How did she get past those piles of earth and enter through the main door so easily? If she isn't with them then she must be versed in art of formations and changes." As she concentrated on this, the power of her song immediately decreased.

When Cheng Ying saw this woman she was delighted and called out, "Senior Apprentice Sister, that woman wants to hurt me, help me."

That disheveled hair woman was Sha Gu. She was actually a generation lower than Cheng Ying but she was a lot older, that's the reason why Cheng Ying called her senior apprentice sister.

Sha Gu clapped her hands and laughed, she started to sing some songs at the top of her voice, she would sing songs like 'Sparkling star in the sky, nothing on the ground my oh my', 'Precious Pagoda tip, surging up, the sky it rips'. Sometimes she would remember the wrong lyrics and replace them with whatever she thought of.

Li Mochou wanted to use the sorrowful and mournful song to subdue her but how would she know that it wouldn't affect her. Love comes from the heart, but since her heart was full of confusion and disorder, even if the outside influence was stronger there will be no way to create and stir up these feelings. Instead, Sha Gu's muddled up songs disturbed Li Mochou's sorrowful tones, it ended her control over Yang Guo and the others.

Li Mochou was furious and thought, "I need to get rid of this person first." Before the song finished, she waved her fly whisk and attacked her head.

Years ago, Huang Yaoshi punished his innocent disciples out of anger and as a result caused his disciple Qu Lingfeng to die at the hands of his enemies. He regretted this and so took in Qu Lingfeng's daughter Sha Gu under his care and decided to teach everything he knew to her. However, when Sha Gu saw her father being harmed, she suffered a severe shock and it remained in her mind, no matter how many times Huang Yaoshi tried to make her better. A man cannot turn time back, without mentioning the futility of trying to teach her all the arts and martial arts he knew. Even trying to get her to recognize a few words and learn a few coarse martial arts was something that he couldn't do. But over the last ten years, under the instruction of a great master, Sha Gu had learned a set of palm techniques and a fork technique. It's called a set but really there were only three stances of palm and fork techniques.

Huang Yaoshi knew she would not remember any sort of variations or extraordinary stances so he thought deeply and came up with three palm stances and three fork stances. Those six stances were ordinary and didn't have any variation behind them; the power of these techniques all comes from practice. When normal people practice martial arts, a little practice will lead to only tens of stances being learned, a lot will lead to variations surpassing a thousand. Sha Gu only practiced the six stances so as time went by, naturally these stances will be refined and precise; though there are few stances, it was not anything ordinary.

As to how she went through the formation, it was because she had lived on Peach Blossom Island for a long time, the formation that Cheng Ying had set up was a coarse and basic skill of Peach Blossom Island. Sha Gu didn't even need to take a look and just naturally followed her steps forward to the hut.

Now, she saw Li Mochou's fly whisk coming towards her; she thrust out the fork towards her chest. Li Mochou heard that the sound of air being sliced through and was furious, she couldn't stop herself from being alarmed, "Hard to predict that this woman possesses such profound internal strength." She quickly stepped to the left and sent the fly whisk towards her head. Sha Gu didn't care what the opponent's stance was and just thrust her fork forward. Li Mochou's fly whisk twisted and wrapped around the head of the fork. It was as if Sha Gu didn't see what had happened, the fork kept on going forward. Li Mochou circulated her internal energy to fling the weapon away but the fire fork didn't move an inch, in a flash it was now in between her breasts. Li Mochou's martial arts were high and she managed to use "Steps of the Turning Seven Stars" in this danger, and leapt out of the hole in the wall, avoiding this lightning like attack but, because of the fright, she broke out in a cold sweat.

She concentrated and leapt back into the hut and attacked with her fly whisk in midair. Sha Gu didn't change her stance with the enemy's and just thrust forwards again but because the enemy was in the air, the fork was now aiming for her opponent's abdomen.

Li Mochou saw the incoming attack was fast and powerful; she turned her fly whisk around and used the handle to block the attack and used its force to dart away. She looked at her stunned, thinking, "Just know, my three attacks contained nine different variations and twelve different follow ups; a skilled fighter of Wulin would not be able to see through them just like that. This woman just uses one fork and neutralized my sixty-three variations in these stances. This person's martial arts are excellent, I'd better leave!"

She didn't know that Sha Gu's fork technique only had three stances; if Li Mochou fought for a little while longer she would be able to see through her martial arts and win easily. Sha Gu had three fork stances, just by using one fork stance she scared away an extremely powerful enemy, the master of Peach Blossom Island should be very proud.

Li Mochou turned around and was about to leap out of the hut through the hole in the wall when she saw someone sitting down by the hole. The person was in a blue green gown and had a long beard; it was the person who saved Cheng Ying from her clutches all those years ago, Huang Yaoshi. Island Master Huang. He was sitting down and had placed Cheng Ying's zither on a stool.

When Li Mochou was in battle, her eyes and ears were extremely alert; how had Huang Yaoshi entered, how had he taken the zither and when had he sat down on the floor? She failed to notice all those things; if he had ambushed her from behind, wouldn't taking her life be as easy as turning his palm?

When Li Mochou was exchanging stances with Sha Gu, she was worried about Cheng Ying and the others joining in to help so she did not stop her song, keeping their state of mind unbalanced. As she saw Huang Yaoshi sitting there quietly strumming the zither, she trembled and her song stopped.

Huang Yaoshi played one note on the zither and sang; "O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?" He sang Li Mochou's song. The zither only had the 'yu' string remaining but he still managed to play the notes of the 'gong', 'shang', 'jiao', 'zheng' and 'yu'. With the mournful tone of the zither, Huang Yaoshi overwhelmed Li Mochou's song.

Li Mochou was extremely familiar with this song; as soon as Huang Yaoshi added the tune, she was affected ten times deeper than when Yang Guo and the others were affected by her song. Huang Yaoshi had known long ago about her evil ways, today he wanted to take the opportunity to get rid of her.

Years ago he had used his jade flute to compete against Ouyang Feng's iron zither and Hong Qi Gong's whistling and fought to a draw. That was many years ago; because of his age, his vigor wasn't what it used to be but his internal energy became more and more profound as he practiced. How could Li Mochou resist? In just a short while she felt her mind slipping out of her control.

Huang Yaoshi's song and tune would suddenly turn joyous, then anger, resounding and overbearing, then suddenly lowly and humble, many changes in the wink of an eye. He was forcing Li Mochou to suddenly feel delight and then sorrow, suddenly anger then worry; when this song finishes, Li Mochou would have been forced to go mad.

Just at this time, Sha Gu turned her head around and suddenly saw Yang Guo, under the candlelight; he was an image of his father Yang Kang. The thing that Sha Gu is most afraid of are ghosts; the images of what had happened when Yang Kang died due to poison were deeply etched into her mind. She would never forget it. When she saw Yang Guo sitting there, she knew that it was Yang Kang's ghost coming back to haunt her. She quickly leapt up and pointed to him, saying, "Brother... brother Yang, don't... don't hurt me... it... it wasn't me who killed you... go... go and find someone else."

Huang Yaoshi wasn't prepared for her disturbance and a 'zheng' sound was heard as the final string on the zither snapped.

Sha Gu hid behind him and called out, "Ghost... ghost... grandpa, it's brother Yang's ghost."

With this pause, Li Mochou quickly used her fly whisk and extinguished all the candles in the room and leapt out through the hole in the wall.

Huang Yaoshi had yet to take her life and eventually she managed to escape; he had to uphold his status and so he could not go and chase after her.

Sha Gu was even more afraid in the dark and called out even louder, "It's an evil ghost, grandpa, beat that ghost, beat that ghost!"

Huang Yaoshi kept Sha Gu in check. Cheng Ying lit the candles and then knelt on the floor and bowed to her master. She stood up and then told him the simple background of Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang.

Huang Yaoshi laughed and said, "My martial grand daughter has always been simple like this. She knew your father. You indeed do look a lot like him."

Yang Guo bent his waist and bowed to him from the bed and said, "Forgive junior, I have an injury and cannot bow properly."

Huang Yaoshi's face was very friendly and said, "You didn't give a care about your life and saved my daughter and granddaughter, you really are a good child." Huang Yaoshi had seen Huang Rong and knew what had happened, he heard that Cheng Ying had rescued him so he took Sha Gu with him and searched for them.

Huang Yaoshi took out some effective recuperative medicine and gave it to Yang Guo to take. He then circulated his internal energy and passed it into Yang Guo

through his palm to help him recover. Yang Guo felt as if his arms were on fire, his body started to create a force to repel this. Huang Yaoshi felt him tremble and noticed that his veins and chi were circulating, there was a resisting internal energy that was being created so he increased the strength in his hands. After a while, Yang Guo felt his limbs and bones were at ease and soothed, and gradually he fell into a deep sleep.

When Yang Guo woke up the next day, he opened his eyes and saw Huang Yaoshi sitting at the end of the bed. He quickly sat up and greeted him.

Huang Yaoshi said, "Do you know what title I go by in Jianghu?"

Yang Guo said, "Senior is Island Master Huang?"

Huang Yaoshi said, "And?"

Yang Guo felt that it was inappropriate to say the words 'Eastern Heretic' but he had a thought, since his nickname is 'Eastern Heretic', his character will be different to normal people so he boldly said, "You are the 'Eastern Heretic'!"

Huang Yaoshi laughed and said, "Correct. I've heard that your martial arts are not bad, your heart is good but you do things in heretical ways. I also heard that you want to marry your Master, is that right?"

Yang Guo said, "Correct, senior, no one will allow me to do this, but even if I'll die I still want to marry her."

Those words were like a nail striking metal; Huang Yaoshi stared at him for a while and then suddenly raised his head and laughed towards the sky, shaking the grass on the roof.

Yang Guo said angrily, "What's so funny about that? I thought that because you are called 'Eastern Heretic', you would have some extraordinary opinion, but who would have thought that you are just like the others."

Huang Yaoshi loudly said, "Good, good, good!" After he said this, he turned around and left.

Yang Guo sat on the bed startled, he thought, "My words really offended that senior. But how come he didn't show any signs of anger on his face?"

He didn't know that as Huang Yaoshi roamed the world and the one thing he hated most were the present custom and traditions of the world. His actions and words did not match with the normal and because of this he was given the name 'Heretic'. He had met many people, but in his life, he did not have an understanding friend. Though he had a daughter and son-in-law as loved ones, they did not understand him. He didn't know that in his later years he would come upon Yang Guo.

The events of the heroes meet had already spread to his ears and Huang Rong told him about this young man's actions and behavior. After speaking to him a few times he found that Yang Guo matched his expectations even more.

That night, Huang Yaoshi returned to the room and said, "Yang Guo, I heard you expelled yourself from the Quanzhen sect and beat up your Master, you are rather heretical. Why don't you leave the Ancient Tomb sect, and then enter my tutelage."

Yang Guo was startled and said, "Why?"

Huang Yaoshi laughed and said, "First you'll acknowledge that Xiao Longnu is not your Master and then marry her, won't that be proper?"

Yang Guo said, "That's a good idea. But who set the rule that you can't marry your Master? I want her to be my Master and my wife."

Huang Yaoshi clapped and laughed, he said, "Good! The way you think is a level higher than me." He stretched out his hand to help him recuperate through his palms and said, "I originally wanted you to enter my tutelage so I could let the world know that after Senior Heretic Huang, there's a young Heretic Yang. You don't want to be my disciple; I can't do anything about that."

Yang Guo said, "I don't have to be your disciple to spread your 'Heretic' name. If you don't mind me being of a young age and have poor martial arts, we could be friends or else we could become brothers."

Huang Yaoshi angrily said, "You sure are bold for a little kid. I'm not the Old Urchin Zhou Botong, how can there be no order between us?"

Yang Guo said, "Who's the Old Urchin Zhou Botong?"

Huang Yaoshi then told him a few things about Zhou Botong's character and how he became sworn brothers with Guo Jing.

The two of them chatted and hit it off perfectly, there's a saying: 'A thousand cups is too little for understanding friends who meet through wine, half a word is too much for those whose words don't get along'.

Yang Guo was good with words and they got along because of the closeness of his character to Huang Yaoshi's. Whenever he spoke, Huang Yaoshi would sigh as someone who understood him. For Huang Yaoshi, it really was like the first meeting of an old friend, a meeting that has come extremely late in life. Though he didn't admit it through his

words, in his heart he treated him as a friend of old. That night he told Cheng Ying to prepare another bed for him in the same room and the two continued their exchange.

Days passed and Yang Guo recovered from his injury. He and Huang Yaoshi were like glue, like paint, it was difficult to separate the two. Huang Yaoshi had originally wanted to take Sha Gu south but now he didn't mention one word about leaving. Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang watched the old and young with amusement; in the day they would drink wine together and at night, they would talk in the candlelight without end. They felt that the old man didn't maintain the status of a Senior and the young man was too unrestrained and fearless.

When it came to discussions of knowledge, Yang Guo wasn't anywhere as knowledgeable as Huang Yaoshi. But whatever Huang Yaoshi said, Yang Guo would concentrate on understanding. When he made a comment he would just add a single word yet his comment had its fine points. Huang Yaoshi couldn't stop himself from treating him as the closest friend in his life.

In these past few days, apart from spending time with Huang Yaoshi talking, he would always think about how Sha Gu mistakenly recognized him as his father and the words that she said, "It wasn't me who killed you, go and find someone else!" He knew that Sha Gu must know who had killed his father; other people might not say, but Sha Gu is mad and crazy and maybe he could get the truth from her.

After midday, Yang Guo said, "Sha Gu, come, I have something to say to you."

Sha Gu felt that he looked too much like Yang Kang and was still afraid; she shook her head and said, "I don't want to play with you."

Yang Guo said, "I know circus tricks, are you going to watch?"

Sha Gu shook her head and said, "You're lying, I don't want to watch." She closed her eyes after she said this. Yang Guo suddenly flipped upside down with his legs above his head and called out, "Quickly look!" He used the martial arts that Ouyang Feng taught him of walking upside down and leaping forward. Sha Gu opened her eyes and was delighted as soon as she saw this, she clapped and cheered and followed behind him.

Yang Guo kept on leaping forward and arrived at a hidden and covered wood faraway from the hut, he turned upright and said, "Let's play hide and seek, you want to? But the loser has to be punished."

Sha Gu has been following Huang Yaoshi for the past few years; nobody played with her. When she heard Yang Guo say this, she was ecstatic and clapped her hands, most of the fear she had for him disappeared and she said, "Yes, yes. Good brother, what is the punishment?" She called his father brother, and she also called him brother.

Yang Guo took out a handkerchief and blindfolded her and said, "Come and catch me. If you catch me, then whatever question you ask I'll have to answer it truthfully. If you can't catch me then I get to ask you a question, you have to answer it truthfully as well."

Sha Gu replied, "Good, good!"

Yang Guo called out, "I'm over here, come and catch me!"

Sha Gu opened her arms and followed the calls. Yang Guo possessed the lightness kung fu of the Ancient Tomb sect, even if Sha Gu wasn't blindfolded she would not be able to catch him, after chasing for a while, she crashed into a tree

and bruised her forehead as a result; she started to cry out in pain.

Yang Guo was afraid that Sha Gu would not want to play anymore so he deliberately slowed down and made light noise. Sha Gu rushed forward and grabbed his back and called out, "I've caught you, I've caught you!" Her face was full of delight as she took off her blindfold.

Yang Guo said, "Fine, I've lost, ask me ask a question."

She stared at him, startled, her mind was uncertain; she didn't know what to ask. After a long while, she asked, "Good brother, have you eaten yet?"

She thought for so long but came up with such a simple question, Yang Guo almost laughed. He didn't make a sound and seriously replied, "I've eaten already."

Sha Gu nodded and didn't say anything else.

Yang Guo said, "What else do you want to ask?"

Sha Gu shook her head and said, "I don't want to ask anymore, let's play again."

Yang Guo said, "Fine, come and catch me."

Sha Gu touched the bruise on her forehead and said, "This time it's your turn to catch me." This time, she didn't act crazy, Yang Guo didn't predict this but since this was what he wanted he took the handkerchief and blindfolded himself. Though Sha Gu was mad, her lightness kung fu was pretty good; Yang Guo couldn't see, how could he catch her? He leapt forward a few times and then secretly he tore an opening in the blindfold and saw her hiding on the right behind a large tree. He deliberately faced the left, pretending to think, he said, "Where are you? Where are you?" He suddenly flipped over and caught her wrist. He

quickly put the handkerchief in his pockets with his left hand in case she saw the ripped handkerchief. He laughed and said, "This time it's my turn to ask you a question."

Sha Gu said, "I've eaten already."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "I'm not asking about that. This is my question, you know my father, right?" His face was extremely serious as he said this.

Sha Gu said, "Who's your father?"

Yang Guo said, "There's a person who looks just like me, who is that?"

Sha Gu said, "Ah, that's brother Yang."

Yang Guo asked, "You saw that brother Yang being killed by someone didn't you?"

Sha Gu said, "Yeah, it was in the middle of the night in a temple, there were lots of crows calling out 'wu ai', 'wu ai', 'wu ai'!" The forest was covered and hidden and was already dark; the calls made the forest seem even more eerie.

Yang Guo trembled and asked, "How did brother Yang die?"

Sha Gu said, "Auntie wanted me to say something but brother Yang didn't allow me to say it; he struck Auntie with a palm and laughed out loud, ha-ha! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" She used all her efforts in copying Yang Kang's laugh before he died, her laugh even scared herself and her face was filled with fear.

Yang Guo listened puzzled, he asked, "Who is Auntie?"

Sha Gu said, "Auntie is Auntie."

Yang Guo knew that the puzzle to his father's death was about to be solved, he was full of emotions and was about to ask another question when suddenly someone from behind said, "What are you two playing here?" It was Huang Yaoshi's voice.

Sha Gu said, "Good brother is playing hide and seek with me. It was he who wanted me to play, not me wanting him to play. Don't scold me."

Huang Yaoshi smiled a little and then looked at Yang Guo, he looked as if he has seen through what Yang Guo was thinking about.

Yang Guo's heart raced, he was about to say a few words to cover it up. Suddenly, footsteps could be heard from outside the forest, Cheng Ying was holding Lu Wushuang as they hurried towards them and she said to Huang Yaoshi, "Master is right, she is still around." She then pointed to the hill in the west.

Yang Guo asked, "Who?"

Cheng Ying said, "Li Mochou!"

Yang Guo was extremely shocked; he was thinking why on earth was she so bold, he looked at Huang Yaoshi, hoping that he will be able to explain.

Huang Yaoshi gave laugh and said, "Let's go over there and take a look." None of them had any fear with him around, so they headed towards that hill in the west.

Cheng Ying knew that Yang Guo had questions in his heart and quietly said, "Master said that Li Mochou knows that he has the status of a great Master. That night he wanted to take her life but he was unable to at the first attempt, a second attempt on her life would be shameful."

Yang Guo understood. Alarmed he said, "Because of this she could guard this place confidently and wait for the chance to take our lives. If Island Master Huang hadn't seen through this, we would have thought that she had long gone and let our guard down and eventually suffered by her hands."

Cheng Ying smiled warmly and nodded. Lu Wushuang interrupted, "You think you are cleverer than most people; but compared with Island Master Huang, there's a long way to go."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "I'm Sha Dan, I'm dumber than most people; I'm Sha Gu's good brother."

The five of them soon arrived on the hill. There was a small hut beside a large tree, it was broken and dilapidated; there was a piece of paper nailed onto the door. On it were four lines:

The master of Peach Blossom Island,
Disciples he has many,
Five against one,
It's the laughing stock of Jianghu!

Huang Yaoshi laughed and casually picked up two pebbles and placed them in between his middle finger and thumb, after a 'chi' 'chi' sound, the pebbles shot forward forcefully. A 'pai' sound was heard as the two small pebbles, from over ten paces away, knocked the doors open.

When Yang Guo was on Peach Blossom Island, he heard from Guo Fu that her grandfather had a skill called the "Divine Flicking Finger"; today, he saw it with his own eyes and it far exceeded the tales about it; he was in awe.

Once the doors opened, they saw Li Mochou sitting on a mat on the floor, her hands holding her fly whisk, her eyes

closed; she looked collected and was meditating just like a Taoist. She was in the hut by herself; Hong Lingbo was nowhere to be seen. A thought went through Yang Guo's mind and he understood, "She's laughing at Island Master Huang for having many disciples and winning through numbers, that's why she sent Hong Lingbo away to make it even more apparent. She's confident not because she can defend against Island Master Huang, it's because since she's by herself. With Island Master Huang's status, it would not be appropriate to attack her."

The memories of her parents' death and the torment she's had through the years stirred in Lu Wushuang; she suddenly drew out her sword and called out, "Cousin, Sha Dan, we don't have the same restraints as Island Master Huang about fighting her, let's all attack her."

Sha Gu rubbed her knuckles and palms and said, "And me!"

Li Mochou opened her eyes and glanced across at the five; a look of contempt was on her face and she closed her eyes again; it was as if she was ignoring the enemies in front of her. Cheng Ying looked at her master, waiting for his orders.

Huang Yaoshi sighed and said, "Indeed, old Heretic Huang has many disciples, if any of my four senior disciples Qu, Chen, Mei, Lu were here, how would she be allowed to say a word?" He then waved his hand and said, "Let's leave."

The four of them did not understand what he was thinking and followed him back to the hut. They saw that he was unhappy; he went to bed and didn't even eat supper.

Yang Guo slept on the bed next to his and recalled the things he said with Sha Gu; he then pondered about Li Mochou, and he thought, "She's laughing at us because it's five against one. I've recovered from my injury now, with my

strength alone I might not lose to her; why don't I sneak away and fight a round with her. This way I can clear her insults about me and Gu Gu and help Island Master Huang vent his anger."

He made his decision and dressed himself quietly. Though he was impulsive, he did things rather carefully; he knew Li Mochou was a very strong foe, if he made just one wrong move he would die by her hands. So he sat on his bed circulating his chi and prepared himself, once he was at his peak, he would go and fight the duel to the death.

He had sat there for around an hour when suddenly his eyes lit up, chi was everywhere in his body and he couldn't stop himself from calling out. The call was like the roar of a dragon, like a tiger bellowing in a deep valley, the sound spreading far and wide.

Huang Yaoshi had noticed that he was awake when he had got up to dress himself; when he heard this extraordinary call, he was shocked and delighted. He hadn't predicted that Yang Guo's internal energy would make a break through right at this time.

When someone's internal energy reaches a certain stage, they would unconsciously call out.

Later on in the Ming Dynasty, the Da Ru King Yang Ming was practicing his chi in the middle in the night in his encampment when he suddenly made a prolonged call, shocking his entire camp.

Yang Guo's chi was abundant and it was hard for him to control, the bellow spread for many li.

Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang were extremely startled; even Li Mochou was frightened when she heard it. But she thought that it was Huang Yaoshi who was exercising his

chi, there was no need to be afraid since he wasn't going to do anything.

Yang Guo had the help of the 'Chilled Jade Bed' and had practiced the important aspects of the "Jade Heart Manual" and "Nine Yin Manual"; his accumulated internal energy had become profound. A few days before, Huang Yaoshi had helped him to recuperate, but Island Master Huang's internal energy was of a different nature to his. It was provoked by this extremely profound internal energy, now he couldn't control himself and released a long bellow.

The bellow continued for a while before gradually it quieted and then stilled.

Huang Yaoshi thought, "I have always thought that my talents were not of this earth, yet I had to wait until I was thirty before reaching such a stage. This young man has reached this stage at least ten years before me; I wonder what events he has encountered?" He waited for Yang Guo to finish and stand up before asking, "Tell me, what do you think is Li Mochou's most powerful skill?"

When Yang Guo heard this, he knew that his intentions had been seen through and replied, "It is the "Divine Five Poison Palm" and her fly whisk techniques."

Huang Yaoshi said, "Correct, since your internal energy has some foundation it shouldn't be difficult to neutralize her most proficient skill." Yang Guo was delighted and bowed down to him. Yang Guo was very proud; though he recognized Huang Yaoshi was a senior and his abilities were superb, he wouldn't lower his head to him. Now that he heard that the martial arts Li Mochou used to roam the realm could be neutralized, how could he not be in awe?"

Huang Yaoshi then taught him the skill of the "Divine Flicking Finger" to neutralize Li Mochou's "Divine Five

Poison Palms” and a sword technique derived from his “Jade Flute Swordplay” to neutralize the fly whisk techniques.

Yang Guo listened to him point out the important aspects of these techniques and then asked him to explain some of the difficulties; he concentrated and committed them to memory. But he felt that although these two types of martial arts are profound and masterly, to make some progress, one will need to practice for at least a year. If he wanted to reach a stage where he would be able to beat her, it would take three years and no less. He said, “Island Master Huang, there is no way to beat her right now.”

Huang Yaoshi said, “Three years will pass in the blink of an eye. Then you’ll be twenty one or twenty two years of age, and will have learned these two types of martial arts. Isn’t that enough?”

Yang Guo said, “I’m... I’m not doing it for me...”

Huang Yaoshi patted his shoulder and said warmly, “When you kill her for me three years from now, I will be extremely touched. Years ago I destroyed my disciples, shouldn’t I get some kind of payback today?” He gave a long sigh after he said this.

Yang Guo knelt down and kowtowed eight times to him and then called out, “Master!” He knew that Huang Yaoshi had passed on martial arts to him so that he will be able to cleanse the four lines of Li Mochou’s insult. To do this, they will have to be recognized as master and disciple. But Huang Yaoshi knew that his ties with the Ancient Tomb were extremely deep, he would be unwillingly to accept another master so he helped him up and said, “When you fight that witch, you are my disciple, at all other times, you are my friend. Little brother Yang, do you understand?”

Yang Guo laughed and said, "To be able to make a friend like you really is a glorious event."

Huang Yaoshi said, "The two of us meeting is the luck of three generations." The two of them laughed, their sounds moving the four walls.

Huang Yaoshi once again explained in detail the secrets and ideas of the "Divine Flicking Finger" and the "Jade Flute Swordplay" to him. Yang Guo noted that he was explaining them thoroughly and knew that he was about to leave.

He said gloomily, "We've just met and now we are about to part; when will we be able to meet again?"

Huang Yaoshi laughed and said, "The two of us are linked; even if we are at the opposite ends of the world, we'll still be like neighbors. If in the future I find out that someone is blocking your marriage, even if I'm ten thousand li away, I will rush back and help you."

Yang Guo was comforted by this promise and laughed, "I'm afraid that the first person who will come out and stop this marriage will be your loved one."

Huang Yaoshi said, "She marries her ideal man and forgets about the suffering and bitterness of others? My precious daughter only listens to her husband, ha-ha, 'obey the husband when married', that really is something!" He laughed loudly after he said this and turned around and left the room, in a flash his laughter could be heard tens of feet away, he really moved like a divine dragon leaving no trace.

Yang Guo stood there for a while stunned and then sat down and went over the two martial arts that he had just learned. Not long after, the sky became bright. He saw the door open, Cheng Ying had entered with blue green cloth

and a blue green gown in her hands; she gave a little smile and said, "Try this on, see whether it fits you."

Yang Guo was extremely touched; his hands trembled slightly as he received it.

Their eyes met and he saw that Cheng Ying's eyes were full of love and boundless tenderness. He went over to the side of the bed and tried the new gown. He felt that the gown fitted perfectly and said, "I'm... I'm... I'm really grateful."

Cheng Ying showed another smile but immediately a depressed expression was on her face, she sighed and said, "Master has gone, I don't know when I'll be able to see him again." She was about to sit down and say something when she saw a yellow image at the door that immediately disappeared. She knew it was her cousin outside and thought, "That girl has too many thoughts, it's not appropriate for me to stay in his room for too long." She stood up and slowly walked out.

He carefully studied the gown and noticed that the stitching was careful and tight, he thought, "She and Wifey treat me the same but my heart belongs to someone else, I can't love any others. If I don't leave soon, I'll be giving those two a lot of grief." He thought about this for half a day. He was also afraid that when he leaves, Li Mochou would come and attack them. He went to her hut to take a look and saw that in its place was a pile of ash, Li Mochou had burned the hut and left.

The enemy had left and so that night, he wrote a parting letter by candlelight; he thought about the two girls' love and felt depressed. He saw that his letter wasn't worded with great aptitude and his handwriting was poor; he was afraid that Cheng Ying would laugh and so ripped the letter

up. That night he tossed and turned in his bed as he tried to sleep.

In his blurry state, he suddenly heard Lu Wushuang tapping his door and calling out, "Sha Dan, Sha Dan! Quickly come and take a look." Her voice sounded rather anxious and afraid.

Yang Guo got up, dressed himself, and opened the door; he felt a slightly chilly breeze and the sky wasn't bright yet.

Lu Wushuang's face was filled with fear and pointed at the outside of the door. Yang Guo followed her hand and was shocked; there were four blood red handprints on the door. Li Mochou must have come over to survey the group and found that Huang Yaoshi had left; the four prints were left to tell them that she was going to kill the four of them.

Cheng Ying came out after them and asked, "When did you see this?"

Lu Wushuang said, "Before the sky started to get bright." Once she said this, her face went red. She was longing for Yang Guo and had paced back and forth below his window.

Cheng Ying pretended that she didn't know and said, "Luckily you didn't bump into her. The sun has begun to rise, that witch won't come again today. We've still got time to plan." The three of them returned to Yang Guo's room and discussed what to do about the situation.

Lu Wushuang said, "She had a taste of Sha Gu's kung fu the other day, how come she's not afraid of her?"

Cheng Ying said, "Apprentice sister's fork technique only has a few stances. She went away and thought about it carefully and must have come up with a way to neutralize it."

Lu Wushuang said, "However, Sha Dan has recovered from his injury; with the two Sha people together, won't their power be great?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "With Sha Dan plus a Sha Gu, you've got dumb and dumber, what power?"

The three of them continued their discussion for a while but couldn't come up with any great plan. They thought about the four of them fighting together; they won't be able to beat her but could protect themselves. They decided on fighting her with all their might when she came again the next day.

Yang Guo said, "The two Sha people will join up and fight her from the front, you two attack from the sides. Let's go find Sha Gu and practice our plan."

The three of them called for Sha Gu but there was no reply. They didn't know where she was and the three of them began to worry. The three of them split up to search for her.

Cheng Ying searched for a little while and suddenly saw Sha Gu lying on a pile of rocks, her breathing was weak. Cheng Ying was alarmed and quickly took off her clothes to take a look; she saw that there was a red palm print on her back; she had fallen victim to Li Mochou's "Divine Five Poison Palm". Cheng Ying quickly called for Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang and then fed a 'Nine Flower Jade Dew' pill to her.

Yang Guo remembered the method to cure this palm from the 'Five Poison Codex' and quickly circulated his internal energy and controlled her pressure points.

Sha Gu laughed foolishly and said, "Evil woman, behind, hit me. Sha Gu, hit back, hit her." The counterattack that Sha Gu used was one of the three palms techniques that Huang

Yaoshi taught her. Though Li Mochou succeeded in her ambush, she was struck on the arm and her arm was almost broken; she was frightened and in pain so she left swiftly, not daring to continue her stances and take Sha Gu's life.

The three took Sha Gu back to the hut and sat anxiously; with one of the good fighters hurt, in tomorrow's battle it would be even harder to defend against her. Sha Gu had a serious injury; if they escaped with her in tow, they would definitely be caught by Li Mochou.

Yang Guo looked at Cheng Ying and then at Lu Wushuang. Then he then picked up a piece of string from the needle basket that was at hand and then grabbed a pair of scissors and started to cut.

Sha Gu was lying on the bed and suddenly called out "Cut it; cut that evil woman's broom! Cut that broom!" She didn't know it was called a 'fly whisk' and called it a 'broom'.

Yang Guo had an idea, "That witch's fly whisk is a soft weapon and she uses it superbly; precious sabers and sharp swords can't harm her. If there really was a large pair of scissors that could be used as a weapon and cut her fly whisk, that would be great." As he thought about this, the string in his left hand started to move like a fly whisk, the scissors in his right hand came forward and cut the string in two. He then pondered about the fly whisk's movements and how to control the scissors to attack; dreaming up a set of techniques.

Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang watched for a while and then understood, delight was on their faces.

Cheng Ying said, "There's a blacksmith seven or eight li north of here..."

Lu Wushuang interrupted and said, "Good, we'll go and get that blacksmith to forge a large pair of scissors."

Yang Guo thought, "It would be difficult to forge this weapon in such a rush and I'll have to adjust to the change of battle. This is a lot easier than learning the "Jade Flute Swordplay", and anyway, we don't have another plan so we've got to give it a try."

If one of them leaves and takes the order to the blacksmith, it will be extremely dangerous if Li Mochou were to suddenly ambush that person. Right now the four of them could not be separated. So Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang set up some bedding on the horse and placed Sha Gu on the back of the horse. They made their way to the blacksmith.

After the Mongols conquered the Jin, they entered the boundaries of the Song land. This place was the northern frontier of the Song borders, the Mongols had ransacked cities and towns and the whole place was in ruins.

The blacksmith shop was very simple; in the middle was a large anvil, on the floor were pieces of coal and fragments of metals and there were a few plows and sickles hung on the wall. There was no one in the shop.

Yang Guo looked at the shop and thought, "How can weapons be made here!" But since they've made their way here, he might as well ask so he called out loudly, "Is the blacksmith home?"

After a while, an old man entered from a side room; his beard and hair was grey, he was about fifty years old. The man had a hump, most probably from bending down to forge metal over a long time; his eyes were red and small because of smoke from the fires. His left leg was crippled and he had a crutch under his arm. He said, "How can I help you?"

Yang Guo was about to reply when suddenly the noise of galloping horses could be heard; two horses rushed towards the shop. On one of the horses was a Mongolian captain, on the other was a Han, Yang Guo didn't know whether he was a translator or a guide.

The Han loudly said, "Blacksmith Feng? Come over here and listen to the orders."

The old man greeted them and said, "I am he."

The Han said, "The captain has the following orders: all the blacksmiths of this town have three days to gather together at Xian city to aid the army. You have to be there tomorrow, you hear?"

Blacksmith Feng said, "I am old..."

The Mongolian captain raised his whip and said a few words.

The Han said, "If you're not there tomorrow, you'll watch your head get cut off." After he said this, the two left.

Blacksmith Feng stood there and was lost in thought. Cheng Ying saw that he was old and pitiful; she took out some money and placed it on the table. She said, "Master Feng, you're old and can't move well, won't working in the Mongolian camp lead to losing your life for no reason? Take this money and run away!"

Blacksmith Feng sighed and said, "Thank you for Miss's kindness. This old blacksmith has lived for so long, living and dying isn't much to me. But the thousands and thousands of lives of Jiangnan will be in danger."

The three of them were startled and asked, "Why?"

Blacksmith Feng said, "The Mongolian army is gathering blacksmiths to forge weapons. Once they have enough, they will definitely invade south into the land of the Song."

The three of them heard that his words were carefully thought and were very reasonable; they wanted to ask further when Blacksmith Feng said, "What do you three want to order?"

Yang Guo said, "Since Master Feng has other matters to attend to, I shouldn't disturb you but I need it urgently so I have to trouble you." Yang Guo then described the form and size of the scissors to him. The scissors were a special object but no one would have thought that as soon as Blacksmith Feng heard it, there were not any signs of surprise on his face. He nodded and pushed and pulled the air bellows and started the furnace up. He then placed two pieces of iron into the furnace.

Yang Guo said, "Will it be forged by tonight?"

Blacksmith Feng said, "I will do my best and go as fast as possible." He pulled and pushed the air bellows furiously, the coals turned a blood red color.

Sha Gu was on a table; half lying down and half sitting up. Yang Guo and the others whose homeland was Jiangnan, though young, when they heard their homeland was in danger, they were worried. The three of them looked at the furnace and thought about the trouble and strife of the world. Human lives weren't regarded as important and there was worry, hardships and danger everywhere. Though they were facing difficulties the next day, the fear in their hearts diminished a little.

In a little over two hours, blacksmith Feng had heated the iron. He used tongs in his left hand and placed the softened metal on the anvil, with his right, he used an iron hammer

to forge the metal. Though he was old, he was still strong; it seemed as if he didn't use any effort in using the hammer. After a while, the two pieces of metal started to take the rough shape of a large pairs of scissors, forming gradually.

Lu Wushuang said happily, "Sha Dan, it's going to be made in time."

Suddenly a voice from behind said coldly, "Making a pair of scissors to cut my fly whisk?" The three of them were startled and turned their heads around, only to see Li Mochou standing at the entrance, lightly waving her fly whisk about.

The weapon had yet to be finished but the enemy had arrived. Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang both drew their swords. Yang Guo looked at an iron rod by the furnace, as soon as the enemy makes her move, he will grab the rod and use it.

Li Mochou chuckled, "Forging a pair of large scissors to cut my fly whisk; only you kids would think of that. I'll sit here and wait for you to finish, there's still time." She then sat on a bench, and looked upon the three as nothing to worry about.

Yang Guo said, "That's good. I say that your fly whisk will definitely be cut by the scissors."

Li Mochou saw Sha Gu sitting up on the table and thought, "That woman took a palm of mine and is still able to sit up, she's quite good." She asked coldly, "Where's Huang Yaoshi?"

When Blacksmith Feng heard the three words 'Huang Yaoshi' he shivered and looked up at her and then immediately lowered his head, continuing with the forging.

Cheng Ying said, "You know that my master is not here, so why ask? If you knew he was still here, even if you've got the greatest gall of anyone, you wouldn't dare come."

Li Mochou gave a 'humph' sound and took out a piece of paper from her pockets and said, "Huang Yaoshi got his fame by taking in many disciples and relying on numbers to win. Huh! Out of all his disciples, which one was really able?" She waved out her left hand and the paper flew away, her arm moved slightly and a silver needle shot out, pinning the piece of paper on a pillar. She said, "I'll leave this as evidence. When that old 'Heretic' Huang comes back, he'll know who killed his two precious disciples." She turned her head around to Blacksmith Feng and said, "Work quicker, I'm getting impatient."

Blacksmith Feng squinted his red eyes and looked at the piece of paper, he saw the words:

The Master of Peach Blossom Island,
Disciples he has many,
Five against one,
It's the laughing stock of Jianghu!

He looked up at the roof and was lost in thought.

Li Mochou said, "Why aren't you working quickly?"

Blacksmith Feng lowered his head and said, "Yes, quicker, quicker." His left hand stretched out the iron tongs and held the needle and paper, he placed them into the flaming fire of the furnace; in a flash the paper burned to ash.

Everyone was extremely surprised by this event. Li Mochou was furious; she raised her fly whisk and wanted to strike down on his head but thought, "This small town blacksmith is extremely bold, could it be that he is an extraordinary

person?" She was now standing, she then slowly sat down asked, "Who are you?"

Blacksmith Feng said, "Can't you see? I'm an old blacksmith."

Li Mochou said, "Why did you burn my piece of paper?"

Blacksmith Feng said, "The words on the paper are wrong; it's best not to hang it in this shop."

Li Mochou said sternly, "What's wrong with the words?"

Blacksmith Feng said, "The Master of Peach Blossom Island has the ability to move heaven and earth, all his disciples need to do is to learn one art of his and they will be able to roam the realm. His first disciple is called Qu Lingfeng, his lightness kung fu is divine, and he is specialized in the art of the Iron Eight Trigram Palms, the variations in his martial arts are incredible. His second disciple is Chen Xuanfeng, he has trained his body to the point of that his bones and muscles are as strong as bronze and iron, impenetrable by sabers and spears. Have you heard about this?" When he was talking, he was still forging at the same time; the hammering sounds increased the force of his words.

Li Mochou was surprised when she heard him mention Qu Lingfeng; Yang Guo and others were also surprised. They would never have thought that an old blacksmith in a place like this would know about the people of Jianghu.

Li Mochou said, "Humph, there's a tale around Jianghu, that someone snuck into the imperial palace to steal treasures and he was killed by the imperial guards. That was the Qu Lingfeng with his incredible variations in martial arts. As for the Bronze Corpse Chen Xuanfeng, I heard that a little child stabbed him to death, what is so powerful about him? Impenetrable by sabers and spears, bah, such nonsense!"

Blacksmith Feng said: "Hmm, hmmm....The Master of the Peach Blossom Island's third disciple is called Mei Chaofeng, although she is a woman. Her claw and whip techniques are very fierce."

Li Mochou laughed and said, "Yes, that woman's claw and whip techniques were just too fierce, because of this the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan blinded her and later on, Western Poison Ouyang Feng shattered her lungs."

Blacksmith Feng was stunned for a while and then said bleakly, "That happened? I didn't know about it. The Master of Peach Blossom Island's fourth disciple is Lu Chengfeng, his lightness kung fu is divine, the "Slashing Air Palm" extraordinarily powerful."

Li Mochou said, "Someone with two broken legs and who can't walk, that must be Lu Chengfeng with his divine lightness kung fu. Without working legs, he should rely on the wind (Chengfeng means 'ride on the wind') to fly, Ha-ha! Powerful "Slashing Air Palm"... every palm that comes out meets thin air; that is the "Slashing Air Palm" of the Master of Peach Blossom Island."

Blacksmith Feng lowered his head, two 'chi' sounds were heard as two tear drops landed on the heated iron and turned into steam.

Lu Wushuang was sitting the closest to him and saw his tears clearly; she secretly wondered what it was about. She just saw him raised his hammer even higher, the striking sounds of the metal now even louder.

After a while, Blacksmith Feng continued, "Peach Blossom Island has four senior disciples; Qu, Chen, Mei, Lu. The fourth disciple Lu Chengfeng had not only great martial arts; he was also well versed in the arts of formations and

changes. If you meet him, you definitely won't be able to escape."

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "What use is the art of formations and changes? He built the Returning Cloud Manor by Lake Tai, the men of Jianghu said that is was extremely ingenious, but someone burned it to the ground. From then onwards there was no news of him; most probably he got burned to death along with his manor."

Feng Mofeng continued: "The beloved daughter of the Master of the Peach Blossom Island is also the leader of the Beggars' Clan. Chief Huang's intelligence is unsurpassed and she is famous throughout the realm. If she wanted to deal with you, you would never be able to see it coming."

Li Mochou scoffed: "Young Huang Rong, I dare to say that she doesn't really have any true martial arts. She just relies on her husband's fame and great martial arts. The reason why she could become the leader of the Beggars' Association is due to the fact that her teacher was Hong Qigong and he supported her in becoming the leader."

Blacksmith Feng raised his head and said sternly, "You talk rubbish priestess, all the disciples of the Master of Peach Blossom Island are highly skilled in martial arts, how could they all fall at the hands of others? Are you trying to take advantage of this country bumpkin not knowing the matters of the world?"

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "Ask those three kids and you'll know."

Blacksmith Feng turned his head towards Cheng Ying, his eyes inquiring.

Cheng Ying stood up and said gloomily, "My apprentice brothers and sisters have been unfortunate, they have all

passed away. I haven't been in the school for long, my martial arts are low and I can't help Master fight. I really am ashamed. Do you have ties with my Master?"

Blacksmith Feng didn't reply and examined her; he looked suspicious and said, "The Master of Peach Blossom Island took in another disciple in his later years?"

Cheng Ying saw that Blacksmith Feng's left leg was crippled, she suddenly had a thought and said, "Master was lonely in his later years, he ordered me to serve him at his side. With my age and study, I really wouldn't dare to say that I'm a disciple of Peach Blossom Island, I haven't even taken a single step onto Peach Blossom Island." The way she phrased her words, she admitted that she was a disciple of Peach Blossom Island.

Blacksmith Feng nodded, his eyes were very gentle, there was a feeling of being close to someone, he lowered his head and continued to forge metal, it was as if he was in deep thought about something.

Cheng Ying saw that when his hammer was in the air, it made half a circle, when it descended onto the anvil, it was tilted and dragged, the hand movements were extremely similar to her school's "Divine Descending Sword Palm Technique", she understood further and said, "When Master had spare time, he would talk to me; he talked about how years ago he sent his disciples away from the island, Chen and Mei were the ones who did wrong. Qu, Lu, Wu and Feng were innocent but because of those two they were punished. What was especially tragic was apprentice brother Feng, Feng Mofeng. He was young and had a harsh background; when Master thought about this, he would feel uncomfortable and extremely regretful."

In reality, Huang Yaoshi's character is eccentric, though his heart had these thoughts, he would never say them. Cheng Ying was warm, kind and understanding, when her Master was lonely and chatted with her, he would reveal a little of his thoughts through his words. She herself guessed what he wanted to say, though what she said right now was not exactly from her Master's mouth, it wasn't against his intentions.

From the way the two talked, Li Mochou had guessed who he was; then she heard Blacksmith Feng sigh and his tears fell like rain, 'chi' 'chi' 'chi'. As the tears struck the hot metal and turned into steam, she couldn't stop her heart from softening, but after thinking, she became strong again. She thought, "Even if they got another fighter, the old blacksmith is crippled, how could he help?" She chuckled and said, "Feng Mofeng, congratulations on your reunion with your apprentice sister."

That blacksmith was Huang Yaoshi's junior disciple Feng Mofeng. Years ago when Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng stole the "Nine Yin Manual" and escaped from the island, Huang Yaoshi broke the legs of all the remaining disciples before expelling them from the island. Qu Lingfeng, Lu Chengfeng and Wu Tianfeng had both their legs broken, but when he came to Feng Mofeng, because he was young and his martial arts low, pity stirred in his mind and he just broke his left leg. Feng Mofeng was extremely hurt inside; he eventually came to this place and made a living as a blacksmith. He didn't keep any contacts with the Jianghu world and had silently lived here for the past thirty years. He couldn't have predicted that today he would have news of his Master and apprentices again. Huang Yaoshi saved his life from his enemies. Huang Yaoshi brought him up, his debts to him were great; no matter how Huang Yaoshi had treated him, there was no hate in his heart. When he heard

the words of Cheng Ying, his emotions were stirred and his grief and sorrow came out.

End of Chapter 15.

Chapter 16 - Avenging a Father's Death

Translated by Noodles



A cool breeze blew and pieces of Li Mochou's clothing flew away, her arms, shoulders, chest and

legs were revealed. She wasn't able to control her embarrassment; she wanted to turn around and run away when suddenly her back felt cool, a large piece of cloth flew away from her back.

Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang were both shocked and pleased to hear that blacksmith Feng was actually Cheng Ying's apprentice brother. Being Huang Yaoshi's disciple, his martial arts can't be that bad, unexpectedly they suddenly had another strong helper in this danger.

Li Mochou chuckled, "You've been expelled by your Master yet you still can't let go, isn't that extremely stupid? Today I'm going to kill three kids and a mad woman; you better just stand aside and take in the atmosphere."

Feng Mofeng said slowly, "Though I've learned martial arts, I have never fought anyone before in my life and my left leg is crippled, I can't really fight."

Li Mochou said, "Yes, that's the best thing for you, you can't afford to throw your life away."

Feng Mofeng shook his head and said, "I cannot allow you to harm a single hair of my apprentice sister's head, since these people are friends of hers you better find somewhere else to do evil."

Li Mochou's murderous intent was stirred and she laughed, "The four of you fighting me at once, that's great." She stood up.

Feng Mofeng was unmoved and kept on striking the metal with his hammer, he was like a character from an opera following prompts from a gong, he struck the metal and then followed it with a few words. He said, "I left my school

over thirty years ago, my martial arts have gone rusty long ago, I need to think hard about them.”

Li Mochou laughed and said, “Half my life I’ve roamed Jianghu but I’ve never seen a person like you who grabs the feet of Buddha and prepares for battle at the last minute. Today my eyes have been opened. Feng Mofeng, have you really never fought anyone before in your life?”

Feng Mofeng said, “I never offend others, when others beat me and insult me I don’t do anything, so of course my hands have never been raised against anyone.”

Li Mochou chuckled and said, “Ha-ha, old ‘Heretic’ Huang actually picked a bunch of face losing crap to be his disciples.”

Feng Mofeng said, “Please don’t speak ill of my merciful Master like that.”

Li Mochou gave a wry laugh and said, “He abandoned you as a Master long ago yet you still merciful Master this, merciful that, you’re not afraid of making people laugh.”

Feng Mofeng continued to strike down with his hammer and said, “I have no one in this world, the only loved one I have is my merciful Master, if I don’t respect him, love him, who should I think about? Little apprentice sister, is Master well?”

Cheng Ying said, “Master is very well.” Feng Mofeng’s face lit up with joy. When Li Mochou saw his feelings, she thought, “Old ‘Heretic’ Huang is a good Master, and indeed there is something great about him. He beat his disciple into this state yet this person still remains loyal to him.”

The metal that was being forged was now gradually getting colder, Feng Mofeng again used his tongs to place the metal

into the furnace but he was preoccupied and actually sent the hammer in his right hand into the furnace instead. Li Mochou laughed and said, "Blacksmith Feng, just slowly think about your Master's martial arts, there's no need to lose your mind as well." Feng Mofeng didn't reply and stared at the flaming furnace in deep thought, after a while, he sent the crutch under his left arm into the furnace.

Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang both said, "That's your crutch!"

Cheng Ying also called out, "Apprentice brother!"

Feng Mofeng still did not reply and gazed into the furnace. The crutch didn't burn in the furnace, instead it gradually became red; the crutch was actually made of metal. After another while, the hammer also became red but his hands weren't burned as he held onto the handle of the hammer and crutch. Li Mochou's disdain turned into precaution, she knew that this rough looking man must have qualities that excel. She was afraid that he would suddenly attack and she would fall victim to him so she urgently waved her fly whisk about to protect her front's fatal areas and leapt outside, calling out, "Blacksmith Feng, let's just get it over with!"

Feng Mofeng responded and exited the shop, his movements were swift and light, it didn't look like he was crippled. He placed his red crutch into the ground and said, "Angelic Priestess", please don't insult my Master and please stop troubling my apprentice sister. And spare the bitter life of this old blacksmith!"

Li Mochou was again greatly surprised and thought "Why is he begging just before he's about to fight?" She said, "I will spare you only; if you are afraid then don't intervene."

Feng Mofeng clenched his teeth and said, "Fine, then kill me first!" As he said this, he trembled; he was afraid but was also emotional.

Li Mochou raised her fly whisk and struck down towards his head. Feng Mofeng quickly leapt away, his dodging was very sharp but his arms trembled, he actually was afraid to counterattack. Li Mochou attacked three times in a row but each time, Feng Mofeng avoided the attacks with great movements yet he still did not counterattack. Yang Guo and the others were standing to the side watching; when the time came they will go and help. They saw that Li Mochou's attacks were gradually intensifying and Feng Mofeng really looked like someone who has never fought before. In accordance with his peaceful nature, he didn't make an attack with his red hammer.

Yang Guo thought that this isn't good, though this person's martial arts are strong, he didn't have any intent to fight, and he must be stirred so he said loudly, "Li Mochou, why did you insult Island Master Huang by calling him heartless, unrighteous and wicked?"

Li Mochou thought, "When did I insult him?" She sped up her attacks and did not reply.

Yang Guo continued, "You said that Island Master Huang seduced other's daughters and wives, captured other's sons and brothers, did you see that with your own eyes? You said he lied to friends, betrayed his benefactors, did those things really happen? Why did you spread all these things over the world of Jianghu and tarnish Island Master Huang's name?"

Cheng Ying was startled and didn't understand, Feng Mofeng's fury erupted when he heard this, his valor stirred and he attacked with his hammer and crutch at the same time. His left leg was on the ground, assuming the form "Golden Cockerel Standing Alone", it was like he was nailed to the ground, sturdy and still; the hammer and crutch produced a fierce gust of blazing air, heading straight towards Li Mochou. Li Mochou saw that the incoming force

was ferocious, she didn't dare to meet it front on and leapt out of the way, looking for a gap to attack him.

Yang Guo carried on, "Li Mochou, you said that Island Master Huang is a liar and a shameless scoundrel. I say that you're the shameless one!"

Feng Mofeng was becoming angrier and angrier as he heard this, the hammer and crutch swept and lunged forward with unstoppable force, at first his stances looked rather rusty but as he fought on, they became more and more fluid. The two's internal energy weren't that far apart but Li Mochou had roamed Jianghu for many years and had been in hundreds of battles; her experience was far greater than his. After about twenty or thirty stances, Li Mochou knew that Feng Mofeng's internal energy wasn't weak but he lacked experience and had one good leg only. After a while, she knew that he would lose so she decided to wait until his anger disperses and then counterattack. Indeed, after another ten or so moves Feng Mofeng's anger gradually disappeared, his will faded and he began to slip away. Li Mochou was thrilled and attacked with her fly whisk towards his chest.

Feng Mofeng swept his hammer across to block. The fly whisk curved its way around and wrapped around the hammer's head; this was the special stance that Li Mochou used to take the opponent's weapon. All she needed to do was trap the weapon and pull; the hammer would then leave Feng Mofeng's hand. But as she did this, 'chi' 'chi' 'chi' sounds were heard, smoke rose, everyone smelt an unpleasant smell; the hairs of the fly whisk were burned off.

Instead of taking the opponent's weapon, Li Mochou had lost her own, she remained calm and threw the handle of the fly whisk away and changed her attack to her "Divine Five Poison Palm". Though this palm technique was

powerful, one has to be very close to the opponent to use it. Feng Mofeng had a hammer in his right hand and a crutch in his left, he was using it swiftly and forcefully with gusts of wind generated, he was now able to do as he wished. However in between the two images, smoke kept on rising up; Li Mochou's gown was being burned by the hot hammer and crutch, piece by piece her gown was getting burned. She was furious, she was definitely going to gain victory but the old blacksmith had an advantage in his weaponry. She could not take it at all and wanted to strike him with a palm to vent her anger.

This was the first time that Feng Mofeng fought somebody, if he had been held back and on the receiving end of a beating, he would have retreated; but now he had the upper hand, the stances of the hammer and crutch were coming out with extreme mastery. Li Mochou was almost struck by the hammer and crutch a few times in her quest to land a palm on him, if it wasn't for her speed, her palm would have been burned. Suddenly Feng Mofeng called out, "I don't want to fight; I don't want to fight, look at you, what decency have you left?" With his single good leg he leapt back five feet.

Li Mochou was stunned, a cool breeze blew and pieces of her clothing flew away, her arms, shoulders, chest and legs were revealed. She was a virgin, she wasn't able to control her embarrassment; she wanted to turn around and run away when suddenly her back felt cool, a large piece of cloth flew away from her back.

Yang Guo saw that she was in a wretched state, he tore off his belt and took off his gown; he circulated his internal energy and shot it over to her. The gown was like a person hugging her. Li Mochou quickly put her arms in the sleeves of the gown and buttoned it up. She has seen countless battles in her life but right now she was frightened and

embarrassed. Her face was red one moment, white the next, she didn't know whether or not to keep on fighting. She thought, "If I fight him again, this gown will be burned off again, I can only swallow my anger and do something about it later."

She nodded at Yang Guo, thanking him for giving her the gown. She then turned her head towards Feng Mofeng and said, "These crafty weapons are indeed the evil skills of old 'Heretic' Huang. To tell the truth, if it was a battle with proper martial arts alone, could you beat me? If old 'Heretic' Huang's disciples fought fairly and squarely one on one with me, could they beat me?"

Feng Mofeng said with ease, "If you didn't lose your weapon, after a while, you'd be able to beat me."

Li Mochou said arrogantly, "It's good that you know it. My words on that piece of paper about the disciples of Peach Blossom Island winning by numbers aren't wrong."

Feng Mofeng lowered his head and pondered, after a while he said, "That is not correct! If my apprentice brothers and sister Qu, Chen, Mei, and Lu were here, any one of them would be stronger than you. I don't even need to mention my highly skilled apprentice brothers Qu and Chen; you wouldn't be able to beat my apprentice sister Mei Chaofeng who's also a woman like you."

Li Mochou chuckled and said, "All those people are dead and can't prove anything, why are you talking about them? Old 'Heretic' Huang's martial arts aren't all that good. I wanted to test out his daughter Mrs. Guo's martial arts but I don't think there's a need to now." She turned around and was about to leave.

Yang Guo had a thought in his mind and said, "Wait!"

Li Mochou's brows raised and she said, "What?"

Yang Guo said, "You're wrong about Island Master Huang's martial arts being so-so. I heard of swordplay from him, called the "Jade Flute Swordplay", it can neutralize your fly whisk techniques." He picked up an iron rod and drew on the ground. He explained, "Your attacks from the front are indeed swift and powerful but if his sword cuts down from this direction, you will not be able to take back your attack. If you counterattack, the sword will attack quickly from this direction. If you sweep the fly whisk and attack the pressure points, then he'll use a tiger claw form and grab your whisk's tips, turn his sword around and use the handle to strike the 'virtuous' pressure point on your shoulder. Can you imagine that?"

That stance was indeed unimaginably strange but it was also ingenious. Brushing the pressure points in front of her were one of Li Mochou's fly whisk technique's lethal stances, the stance that Yang Guo described left her with no reply, in such a case she could only throw down her fly whisk and admit defeat. Yang Guo made another comparison and said, "When it comes to your "Divine Five Poison Palm", Island Master Huang will use his fingernail to neutralize your palm. When your palm arrives, he will use the "Divine Release of the Flicking Finger", his fingernail flicking against your palm; how can your palm not be crippled as a result? All he needs to do is to immediately cut off his fingernail and the palm's poison won't spread to his body." He continued and described over ten other different stances that could neutralize her martial arts.

These words turned Li Mochou's face grey, every word of his was reasonable and logical, the stances that he described were ingenious; she wouldn't be able to fend them off.

Yang Guo said, "Island Master Huang was angry at your words; he has the status of being a great Master and cannot fight you personally so he passed these techniques to me so I could take care of you. But I thought about how my Master and you are still apprentice sisters. Today I give you a warning about the power of Island Master Huang, next time you see his disciples, you better run as far away as possible."

Li Mochou was silent for a while and then said, "I give up...I give up!" She turned around and ran away; in a flash her image disappeared behind the hills, her speed was really something rarely seen in the world of Jianghu.

In reality, although Huang Yaoshi did pass these techniques to Yang Guo, to be able to reach a state where he could use it to neutralize and defeat an enemy requires years of practice. Yang Guo's description of these techniques was enough to intimidate and overawe her and from now on she would never dare to say one derisive word about Huang Yaoshi.

In the vicinity of Li Mochou, Lu Wushuang's heart would jump at the sound of her voice; when she saw that Li Mochou had gone, it was like a heavy load had been removed from her. She clapped and laughed, saying, "Sha Dan! You're pretty good with words; you could even scare away my Master."

Cheng Ying had seen Yang Guo throw away the gown she had personally made to Li Mochou. It was a pressing situation then and that was that; but she saw that underneath the new gown, he was still wearing the torn and ragged old one. She knew that Xiao Longnu must have made it; he was attached to familiar things and would never forget about things of old. Her heart ached a little but she pretended she didn't care. Then, the four of them returned

to the shop to take a look at Sha Gu. Just as they entered the sudden clamor of men and neighing of horses could be heard from beyond the hills; the four of them turned around.

Yang Guo said, "I'll go take a look." He leapt on his horse and galloped around the hill and arrived at the main road. He saw dust and dirt flying up everywhere; it was a division of Mongolian soldiers heading south, they had iron bows and long sabers, their force like a crashing wave. Yang Guo has never seen an army marching before, he watched with a thumping heart, stunned.

Two soldiers raised their long sabers and shouted, "Barbarian, what are you looking at?" They rushed over. Yang Guo turned his horse around and galloped away, the two Mongolian soldiers raised their bows and shot an arrow towards his back. Yang Guo turned his head back and caught them but felt the great force behind the arrows. If he didn't know martial arts, these arrows would have pierced his chest. The two soldiers were frightened when they saw his abilities and reined in their horses, not daring to continue pursuing him. Yang Guo returned to the blacksmiths and told them what he saw.

Feng Mofeng sighed, "The Mongolian army are indeed heading south. The Chinese citizens are going to suffer!"

Yang Guo said, "The Song army will not be able to defend against the archery techniques of the Mongolian army; this is going to be a great disaster."

Feng Mofeng said, "This is just the time for a brave and heroic young man like Master Yang; why don't you return south and join the army and help fight off the invaders?"

Yang Guo was taken aback, he said, "No, I have to go north to find my Gu Gu. The Mongolian army's power is vast; I'm

just one person, what use would I be?"

Feng Mofeng shook his head and said, "Though the force of one person is small, the force of many is strong. If everyone thought like you, who'd come out to defend the country against invaders?"

Yang Guo knew that his words were right, but now, there was nothing more important to him than finding his Gu Gu. He had wandered around Jianghu ever since he was small; he had suffered the abuse of officials. He saw that the Mongolians were indeed violent and ruthless, but the Song Emperor may not be a good person himself. There was no need for him to help the emperor. He just gave a wry smile and didn't reply. Feng Mofeng gathered his hammer, tongs and air bellows and hung them across his back; he turned to Cheng Ying and said, "Apprentice Sister, when you see Master please tell him that disciple Feng Mofeng will never forget his teachings. Today I'm going to join the Mongolian army and I'm going to kill one or two of these generals who are invading my land. Apprentice sister, take care. I'm extremely delighted at seeing a disciple of Master's." He supported himself on his crutch and left, not even turning his head again; he didn't take another look at Yang Guo.

Yang Guo looked at Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang, he said, "It was unexpected that we would meet such a person like him here."

Lu Wushuang favored Yang Guo in her heart and said, "Cousin, apart from you, the people under the tutelage of your Master are either mad or crazy."

Cheng Ying smiled and said mildly, "Everyone has their own will, you can't force them. You said he was mad and crazy; he in turn might be calling us heartless. Anyway, don't I possess a touch of madness and craziness myself?"

Yang Guo's heart jumped when he heard this, she looked different and he couldn't tell whether her words were meant to be ambiguous. Suddenly a thumping sound was heard as Sha Gu fell from her bench. The three of them were alarmed and quickly put her up on a bed; her face was red and her eyes stared ahead blankly, the poison from the "Divine Five Poison Palm" was flaring up again.

Cheng Ying fed her some medicine while Yang Guo helped her sooth her pressure points. Sha Gu looked at him startled, her face was full of fear as she called out, "Brother Yang, don't look for me for revenge, it wasn't me who killed you."

Cheng Ying said softly, "Sister, don't be scared, he isn't..."

Yang Guo suddenly thought, "She's not fully conscious at the moment, I can force her to reveal the truth." He turned his hands and grabbed onto her wrists and said with a severe tone, "Who killed me? If you don't tell me then I'll take my revenge on you."

Sha Gu begged, "Brother Yang, it's not me."

Yang Guo said angrily, "You're not telling me! Fine, I'll strangle you to death!" He stretched his hands around her throat. Sha Gu gave out a piercing scream. How would Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang know what Yang Guo was doing, they both called out to stop him, one called out, "Brother Yang", the other called out, "Sha Dan!" One said, "Don't frighten her further", the other said, "Why are you mucking around at a time like this?"

Yang Guo didn't take any notice; he closed his hands slightly tighter, the expression of an evil spirit was on his face; he clenched his teeth and said, "I'm brother Yang's evil ghost. I died a horrible death, do you know that?"

Sha Gu said, "I know, after you died, crows ate your flesh."

Yang Guo's heart felt as if a knife was plunged into his heart, he knew that his father had died under someone else's hands but he didn't know that after he died, his body was actually eaten by crows and wasn't buried, he called out, "Who killed me? Tell me, tell me."

Sha Gu strained out, "It was you who hit Auntie, Auntie had poison needles on her body, you died."

Yang Guo yelled loudly, "Who is this Auntie?"

Sha Gu couldn't breathe with Yang Guo holding her throat and wanted to faint, she said quietly, "Auntie is auntie."

Yang Guo said, "What's Auntie's surname? What's her name?"

Sha Gu said, "I... I... don't know, let me go!"

Lu Wushuang saw that the situation was becoming urgent; she went over to pull away Yang Guo's hands. Right now, Yang Guo was like a madman, he waved out with all his strength, how could Lu Wushuang defend herself? She was thrown away and crashed into a wall painfully. Cheng Ying saw that the usually peaceful, warm and graceful Yang Guo was now like a mad tiger, she was so frightened that her limbs went limp.

Yang Guo thought, "If today I can't get the name of the person who killed my father, I'll immediately throw up blood and die." He asked, "Is Auntie's surname Qu? Is Auntie's name Mei?" He thought that since Sha Gu's surname was Qu, her auntie's surname would most probably be Qu, or perhaps it could have been Mei Chaofeng.

Sha Gu struggled with all her strength, though she has practiced martial arts for a longer time than Yang Guo, her

martial arts couldn't compare to his. The pressure points on her wrist were being held and she couldn't break free, she could only say urgently, "Go and find Auntie for revenge, don't... don't look for me!"

Yang Guo said, "Where's your Auntie?"

Sha Gu said, "Me and Grandpa left! She's with a man on the island."

Yang Guo's spine chilled when he heard these words, he quivered, "What does your Auntie call your Grandpa?"

Sha Gu said, "Father, what else?"

Yang Guo's face went grey but he was afraid he was wrong and asked, "Your Auntie's man is called Guo Jing, isn't he?"

Sha Gu said, "I don't know. Auntie just calls him 'brother Jing, brother Jing (Jing ge ge)!' She copied the way Huang Rong called Guo Jing; suddenly her legs flailed about and squealed, "Help, help! Ghost... ghost..."

What doubts did Yang Guo have now? All the suffering and bitterness of the past rushed to the surface and he thought, "If father wasn't killed, my mother wouldn't have been in pain all the time and die so early like that. I wouldn't have endured all the pain and suffering I've been through." He continued, "When I was on Peach Blossom Island, the Guo couple were not at ease with me, they were a bit too polite, they seemed to be covering up something and didn't treat me like the Wu brothers. Telling them how things are, shouting at them when needed. I felt something then but how would I know that it was because they carried the guilt of killing my father. It's because of this that they didn't want to teach me martial arts and sent me to the Quanzhen sect to suffer." His anger and fear stirred throughout him, his

limbs became limp. Sha Gu called out loudly and leapt up from the bed.

Cheng Ying went over to Yang Guo and said softly, "Sister Sha has always been a bit crazy, you know about this. She's even worse after suffering this injury, don't believe her whatever you do." But in her heart she believed that the words of Sha Gu were true, and she knew that consoling him like this would be no use. But her heart couldn't endure seeing his face full of anger, despair, bitterness and sorrow.

Yang Guo did not take in any of these words; he stood there stunned for a while before calling out. He got on his horse, kicked with his legs and the horse galloped forward, in a flash it had gone over a hundred feet. Faint calls of 'Sha Dan!' and 'Brother Yang!' were heard behind him but he ignored them. The only thought in his mind was, "I need to take revenge, I need to take revenge!"

He galloped in a single stretch for two hours and had gone tens of li. Suddenly he felt a pain on his lips; he lifted his hand and felt them. His hand was covered in blood; in his anger and pain, he had bitten down and actually pierced his lower lip. He thought, "Auntie Guo has always treated me badly, but recently she suddenly began to treat me well, but it was all fake. I don't care about this but Uncle Guo... Uncle Guo..." He had always revered Guo Jing; he felt that his actions and martial arts were one of a kind, and he had always treated him exceedingly well. Now he knew that this was one big lie; he felt that this person was even more cunning than Huang Rong. Anger and resentment filled him, almost bursting out of his chest.

When he thought about the pain he was in; he got off the horse, covered his head and began to cry. This release of sorrow was extremely distressing; it was like all of the world's pain and troubles had all amassed in him. He had

never seen his father and had never heard anyone talk about him; not even his own mother. But ever since he was little, he had the image of the perfect father in his mind; there wasn't another who was as kind as him. Yet this hero was killed by a devious trick of Guo Jing and Huang Rong.

He cried for a while before hearing the sounds of horses; four horses galloped from the north, the riders all Mongolian warriors. The first rider was holding a long spear; on the spear was a child that was two or three years of age. He was laughing as he galloped along. The baby was still alive; it was giving out a weak cry. The four warriors were a little surprised when they saw Yang Guo in the middle of the road but a ragged clothed young Han like him could be found everywhere so they didn't take any notice. One of them called out, "Move out of the way, move out of the way." As he said this, he thrust his spear forward.

Yang Guo was deep in the middle of his troubles right now; without thinking he pulled the spearhead forward and dragged the warrior down. He turned his hand and swept the spear; the warrior went flying over ten feet away, his skull was crushed and he died. When the remaining three warriors saw his valor, they called out, turned around and galloped away. A 'pai' sound was heard as the baby fell onto the ground.

Yang Guo ran up to it and saw that it was a Han child; it was healthy, chubby, and very cute. The pierce to its stomach wouldn't kill it right away but it would be difficult for it to recover and live. It was calling out 'a' 'a' 'a', as if it was calling out for its mother. Yang Guo was overwhelmed with sorrow and grief and sympathy stirred in his heart. He picked up the barely alive baby and tears flowed again; he saw that its pain was unbearable so he lightly gave it a palm and stopped its pain. He used the Mongolian warrior's spear to dig a hole so he could bury the baby.

He dug ten or so times before he heard the thunderous noise of horses and horns; a group of Mongolian soldiers were rushing towards him. Yang Guo's left hand held the dead baby; his right extended the spear as he got on the horse. The skinny horse was actually an experienced battle horse; when it saw it was about to go into battle, its spirits soared; it neighed and charged towards the Mongolian soldiers. Yang Guo's hand raised, the spear descended, he turned over three or four soldiers in one go, but he saw that countless soldiers were coming; he turned the horse around, went onto the wild lands and rode away. Arrows rained down behind him like locusts; he swung the spear and deflected the arrows away. The skinny horse was extremely fast; in a short while it had left the Mongolian soldiers behind but it didn't stop; it continued galloping away like the wind into the wild lands.

After another while, Yang Guo saw that the sky was beginning to get dark; he looked around and saw that long grass and strange rocks were everywhere. Dusk was covering the area; it was quiet without any sounds of people, and there wasn't even a crow or sparrow about. He got off the horse with the baby still held in his hands. The face still looked alive but covered in extreme suffering; pain filled his heart, he thought, "The parents of this child must have loved it very much; now that he's dead, his parents must be feeling great pain. I don't know how many people have died by the hands of these vicious and violent Mongolian soldiers as they head south."

The more he thought about it, the more difficult he found to endure; he dug a hole by a large tree and buried the child. He then thought about the words of Sha Gu again, "When this child died, it had me to bury it, but my father's body was eaten by crows. You killed him, what harm is there in

burying him? You really are evil! If I don't take revenge, Yang Guo isn't a human!"

That night he slept in a tree. The next morning he rode the horse and let the horse go as it pleased; sometimes he thought about going back to the tomb to see Xiao Longnu, and at others he would think about how he must kill Guo Jing and Huang Rong first, no matter what, to avenge his father. When he felt hungry, he would pluck wild fruits to eat.

On the fourth day, he saw someone faraway, leaping up to a tree to pick some wild fruits. Yang Guo rode closer and saw that it was the disciple of Jinlun Fawang, Da'erba. Every time he jumped, he could only pick one fruit; eventually he became impatient and attacked the tree a few times. The tree gave a 'craack' as it broke; he then plucked the wild fruits from the tree and placed them in his pockets.

Yang Guo thought, "Could it be that Jinlun Fawang is nearby?"

He and Jinlun Fawang originally didn't have any ties; but now he had recognized Guo Jing and Huang Rong as his father's killers. He regretted helping Guo Jing and Huang Rong in opposing Fawang; he quietly followed Da'erba to see where he was going. He saw him moving like he was flying, straight towards the mountains. Yang Guo got off the horse and followed from a distance behind. Da'erba headed into a forest; the further he went, the higher he got. Yang Guo followed him up to the peak of a mountain.

At the top of the mountain was a small exposed hut. Jinlun Fawang was sitting in the middle of the hut, meditating with his eyes closed and eyebrows drooping down. Da'erba put the wild fruits down on the floor and turned around; his face changed as he suddenly saw Yang Guo approaching.

He called out, "Senior apprentice brother, you've come to cause further harm to Master?" He dashed forward to Yang Guo and stretched out his arm to twist the front of his garment. His martial arts are better than Yang Guo's, but he was affected by the perilous situation that his Master was in and in his fear he lost control of his state of mind. This stance was a mess and broke one of the rules of martial arts; Yang Guo grabbed his arm in return and tossed him away.

Da'erba had always thought that Yang Guo was the reincarnation of his senior apprentice brother and now he was thrown on the ground by him; he rolled over a few times, picked himself up and then leapt in front of Yang Guo.

Yang Guo thought that he was going to raise his hands again so he took a step backwards, he didn't know that Da'erba would suddenly fall down to his knees and kowtow, "Senior apprentice brother, please remember your relationship with Master in your previous life. Master has a serious injury and is now trying to recuperate, if you disturb him, then... then..." His voice croaked as he reached this point and tears flowed.

Though Yang Guo did not understand his Tibetan, from his emotional state and Jinlun Fawang's distressed look, he more or less understood. He quickly helped him up and said, "Relax, I'm not going to harm your Master."

Da'erba saw that his face was gentle and peaceful; he was pleased. Although he didn't understand his words, his wariness started to go away.

Right at this time, Jinlun Fawang opened his eyes; he was shocked when he saw Yang Guo. He was concentrating on circulating his chi and didn't hear the words of Da'erba and

Yang Guo. Suddenly he saw the enemy in front of him; he gave a sigh and said slowly, "I have practiced martial arts for many years but I still have yet to find a way to break through the echelon barrier, I didn't know that today I would die in the central plains." When he suffered that blow from the rock, he had suffered serious internal injuries; in the past few days he had built a hut on the top of the mountain so he could recuperate. It was unexpected that Yang Guo would actually find his way here. He wasn't able to use even one ounce of strength at the moment; he immediately ordered Da'erba to force Yang Guo away. But in the middle of their battle his state of mind would be disturbed and it would be difficult to recover from this serious injury.

How would he know that Yang Guo would bow; then say, "I have not come here to do any harm to the Reverend, please don't be wary."

Jinlun Fawang shook his head and was about to say something when he felt a severe pain in his chest; he quickly closed his eyes and circulated his chi. Yang Guo went inside the hut and stretched out his right hand, placing it on the 'To Yang' pressure point. This pressure point is just below the seventh vertebrae and is one of the major pressure point that regulates the veins and arteries.

Da'erba was shocked when he saw this; he sent out a fist towards Yang Guo. Yang Guo shook his left hand and made a signal with his eyes.

Da'erba saw that nothing was wrong with his Master, a slight smile was forming on his face and he took back his fist.

Yang Guo's internal energy was not deep and he didn't know anything about Tibetan internal energy; when he felt

a Fawang's internal chi stirring, he circulated his internal energy and sent chi to him to help him clear upwards the 'Spirit Stage', 'Divine Route', 'Body Pillar' and 'Chest Route'; then clearing the downwards 'Withdrawing Muscle', 'Central Hinge', 'Central Spine' and the 'Suspending Hinge' pressure points. These were up to Fawang; he could only help him protect his veins and arteries.

Though Da'erba's martial arts were strong, all he'd learned were external martial arts and couldn't help his Master to recuperate. In the past few days he could only worry anxiously.

Since Jinlun Fawang now had no worries, his chi ran through his body and he used all his strength to heal the injuries in his chest and lower abdomen; after two hours the pain had lessened and his face was red. He opened his eyes and nodded to thank Yang Guo; he joined his palms and said, "Master Yang, why are you suddenly helping me?"

Yang Guo did not hide anything from him; he told him how he recently found out that Guo Jing and Huang Rong killed his father, and how he decided to go and take revenge. He explained how he accidentally bumped into Da'erba and followed him here.

Jinlun Fawang knew that this young man was crafty; in ten words it was difficult for him to believe one of them. But today, killing him would have been as easy as turning his palm, but instead of killing him, Yang Guo actually helped him to recuperate. He really did not have any ill intent towards him and he said, "So Master Yang has such heavy matters on him. But the Guo couple's martial arts are extremely high, I'm afraid that it would be difficult for Master Yang to take revenge."

Yang Guo was silent, after a while he said, "Fine, then both father and son will die at their hands!"

Fawang said, "At first, I thought I was invincible and just by my power alone, I could hold down the heroes of the central plains and take the position of the Chancellor of Wulin. But the warriors of the central plains do not follow the rules of fighting one on one, and they all came at once; I can only make another plan. When I've recovered, I'm going to need to invite many skilled fighters to assist me. Once my forces are large, the central plains martial artists can't use numbers to overcome me and everyone can compete fairly. Have you got intentions of joining my side?"

Yang Guo was about to agree but he thought about the killings by the Mongolian soldiers and said, "I cannot help Mongolia."

Fawang shook his head and said, "If you want to kill the Guo couple by yourself, it would be almost impossible."

Yang Guo thought for a while and said, "Fine, I'll help you get the position of the Chancellor of Wulin, you help me to take my revenge."

Jinlun Fawang stretched out his palm and said, "That's settled, we'll exchange palms to seal this deal."

The two of them exchanged three palms to set this deal.

Yang Guo said, "I'm just going to help you to take the position of the Chancellor of Wulin, I cannot help you in your quest to help the Mongols attack Jiangnan and kill its citizens."

Jinlun Fawang laughed and said, "Everyone has their will, one cannot force them. Brother Yang, don't mind me commenting, but your martial arts have many styles;

learning martial arts from many schools is of course good, but it would be unavoidable that your martial arts won't be refined. What is your most proficient skill? What martial arts are you planning to use against the Guo couple?"

Those words froze Yang Guo's tongue; it was hard for him to reply. Yang Guo has had extraordinary encounters in his life and his character was also covetous; Quanzhen, Ouyang Feng, Ancient Tomb, the Nine Yin, Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi, he had learned numerous martial arts from these schools. All the martial arts of these schools are ingenious and Masterly, but they all need a lifetime of difficult work to reach the upper level of these skills. He took a bit here and a bit there, but none of his martial arts had actually reached a great level.

When he meets second rate fighters, the martial arts he uses are all flowery and fancy, causing confusion to opponents; but when he meets a first rate martial artist, he will eventually be proved inferior. He can't even compare to Jinlun Fawang's disciples Da'erba and Huo Dou. He lowered his head and pondered about it; these words by Jinlun Fawang were a real warning to him and showed up the weakness in the foundations of his martial arts.

He had another thought, "Since I've decided to stay with Gu Gu forever, how can I have relationships everywhere? Cheng Ying, Wifey and there's also Wanyan Ping. I don't have any real feelings for them, how can I treat them improperly like this? Being greedy is really not a good thing." He continued thinking, "No matter if it's Hong Qigong, Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng or even the Quanzhen Seven Masters and Jinlun Fawang, every one of them is a famous Master. They just practiced the martial arts of their own school; they understand other sect's and school's martial arts but they don't practice them. They just make

themselves aware of them. In that case, what school of martial arts should I concentrate on?"

Based on his background, he should concentrate on the "Jade Heart Manual" of the Ancient Tomb sect; but then he thinks about the Mastery and ingenuity of Hong Qigong's "Dog Beating Stick Technique", the subtlety of Huang Yaoshi's "Jade Flute Swordplay"; if he ignores all of them, isn't that a pity? There's godfather's "Toad Stance" and "Reversal of the Veins". There are the martial arts of the "Nine Yin Manual" as well. Any one of them is enough to make your name in the world. It was difficult to learn them, how can I just give them up like that?"

He left the hut and walked around the peak, thinking bitterly; it was extremely troubling. He thought for half a day when suddenly his mind lit up, "Why don't I take the best of all these schools and form my own? The martial arts of the world were all formed by someone; if others can do this, could it be that I can't?" His eyes lit up as he thought about it. He thought from morning to midday, from midday to night and didn't eat or drink. All the martial arts he had seen in his life were floating around in his mind, clashing with each other. He had seen Ouyang Feng and Hong Qigong compete martial arts verbally and he himself frightened away Li Mochou by using words from his mouth; but right now, the martial arts competing in his mind were even more rapid and spectacular than describing them verbally. Eventually he involuntarily started to wave out fists and kicks. At first, it could be distinguished that this stance was from Hong Qigong, the other was Ouyang Feng but eventually everything became muddled up, he couldn't hold on any longer and fainted.

Da'erba watched from afar, he saw that he was acting crazy, pointing out his hand and sweeping his legs, he didn't understand what it was all about. Suddenly he saw him

falling onto the ground, he wanted to go over there and help him but Jinlun Fawang laughed and said; "Don't disturb his thoughts. It's a pity that your intelligence is mediocre and you can't grasp the meanings within."

Yang Guo slept for half a night and continued with his thoughts the next morning. In seven days, he fell unconscious five times. He thought he wanted to invent his own school of martial arts, but how easy is that? With his present abilities it would be almost impossible to succeed. This isn't something that can be achieved in ten days or two weeks. But after studying for several days, he suddenly understood. Since he couldn't combine all these martial arts together, there was no need to force the issue. He realized that all martial arts were at his fingertips; later on when he meets an enemy, he'll use whichever is needed. There was no need to think about the source of the martial art and this wasn't far off from his intentions of forming his own school. Once he understood this point, he was immediately filled with comfort.

In the past few days, Jinlun Fawang has been self-recuperating; his injury was now almost fully recovered and he can move as freely as usual. Today, he saw Yang Guo's expression was now at ease and calm, and knew that he had advanced another level in his martial arts. He said, "Little brother Yang, I'll take you to see someone. This person is a great hero, an extremely open minded person, once you see him you'll definitely be in awe."

Yang Guo said, "Who?"

Jinlun Fawang said, "The Mongolian Prince Khubilai. He is the grandson of Genghis Khan and the fourth son of Prince Tolui."

After seeing the unrestrained violence of the Mongolian soldiers, Yang Guo hated Mongolians; he frowned and said, "I'm anxious to avenge my father, I don't need to see that Mongolian prince."

Jinlun Fawang laughed and said, "I agreed to help you, how can I break my word? But I was summoned here by Khubilai; I need to go and see him. His camp is not far from here; it's within one day's travel."

Yang Guo had no choice but to agree; he alone was not a match for Guo Jing and Huang Rong whether it came to a battle of wits or strength. Without Jinlun Fawang's help, it would be difficult for him to take revenge; he could only go along with him.

Jinlun Fawang was the First Protector of Mongolia and the Mongolian soldiers revered him. When they saw him, they immediately went and told the news to their prince. Mongolians have always lived in tents; though they've entered a city, they weren't used to living in palaces. Because of this, Khubilai stayed in the tents of the encampment.

Fawang took him along to the royal tent. Yang Guo saw that this tent was twice as large as a normal Mongolian tent but the arrangement within was very simple and crude. A twenty-five or six year old man was sitting down reading. When this person saw the two enter, he quickly got up to meet them and laughed, "I haven't seen the Protector for many days, I have been thinking about you."

Jinlun Fawang said, "Your highness, I'll introduce you to a young hero. Though this brother Yang is young, he is an extraordinary personality."

Yang Guo knew that this Khubilai is Genghis Khan's grandson; if he didn't have a noble appearance then at least

he should have a powerful air around him. How would he know that this person was just a Han speaking, modest and mild young man; he was rather surprised.

Khubilai studied Yang Guo. He pulled on Fawang with his left hand and then said to his servant, "Quickly bring some wine, I want to have a drink with this brother."

The servant brought in three bowls of Mongolian milk wine. Khubilai took a bowl and drank it all in one go. Fawang did the same. Yang Guo rarely drank wine, but now that the host has shown his hospitality, it wouldn't be appropriate to reject it; so he took the wine and drank it all in one go. He felt the wine was extremely harsh and rather sour.

Khubilai laughed, "Little brother, how beautiful is this wine?"

Yang Guo said, "This wine is harsh and sour, it's like a knife going into your mouth; the taste isn't great but this is something that a true man drinks."

Khubilai was pleased and called for more wine; each of them drank three bowls. Yang Guo's internal energy was profound enough; he maintained his composure as he drank.

Khubilai said with joy; "Protector, where did you find this talented young man? My Mongolia is really fortunate."

Jinlun Fawang then revealed Yang Guo's history to him; he played up Yang Guo with his words, describing him as if he was one of the eminent figures of the central plains. When Yang Guo heard how Jinlun Fawang described him, he couldn't help but feel a little proud.

Khubilai was ordered to take the Song land and has stayed in the central plains for a while now. He liked Han culture,

his companion was Confucius; he read books and studied scriptures. He employed skilled martial artists, made acquaintances with them, planning to go south and attack the Song.

If it were another person who saw such a young man like Yang Guo, it would be difficult for them to accept Fawang's words. But Khubilai was a wise and supremely magnanimous and he also had believed Jinlun Fawang without question; he was delighted and ordered a feast.

In a short while a feast was set up, wine and food which included both Han and Mongolian dishes, the bowls overflowed.

Khubilai said to his servant, "Invite the heroes from the Virtuous Guesthouse." The servant complied and exited the tent.

Khubilai said, "Some able people have been made guests here in the past few days; it really is my country's luck to have these people. But the thing is, that they cannot compare with Fawang and gentleman Yang."

In the middle of this, the servant returned with the guests; the tent door opened and in came four people.

The first one that came in was tall and skinny, his face was pale, and he looked like a corpse. Khubilai introduced him to Fawang and Yang Guo, he was Xiangxi's Xiaoxiang Zi.

The second person was extremely short and dark; he was a skilled fighter from Tian Zhu (India), Nimoxing.

One of the last two was a strongly built eight foot tall person with a foolish laugh on his face and blank eyes. The other was high nosed deep eyed with crooked hair and a yellow beard; he was a Hu (from northern and western

China) but he was wearing Han clothes. He wore pearls around his neck and jade bracelets on his wrists, a rich air surrounded him. Khubilai introduced them separately. The Han was from Huijiang; his name is Ma Guangzuo. The Hu was a merchant, his family traded treasures in Kaifeng, Cheung An Tai Yuan, his Chinese name was Yin Kexi.

When Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi heard that Jinlun Fawang was the 'First Protector of Mongolia' they examined him coldly, their faces showed disrespect. When they saw the young Yang Guo, they thought that he was Fawang's disciple or grand disciple and didn't even give him another look.

After three rounds of wine, Nimoxing could endure it no longer and said, "Your highness, the lands of Mongolia are vast, this monk is the 'First Protector of Mongolia', his martial arts must be extremely good. I want to experience his skills."

Khubilai gave a subtle smile and didn't reply.

Xiaoxiang Zi followed on, "Brother Nimoxing is from India, Tibetan martial arts originates from India, could there such a thing as getting green from blue in this world? I don't really believe it."

Jinlun Fawang saw Nimoxing's eyes light up; Xiaoxiang Zi's face was exuding a green air; Fawang knew that these two people's internal energy was profound. Yin Kexi was laughing, using all his strength to produce an extremely uncultured and plain air; the more this person tries to show that he is unable, the greater the ability this person is likely to have. Fawang could not take him lightly; but he had no worries about the Han, Ma Guangzuo. He gave a wry laugh and said, "I was given the position of Protector because of

the kindness of the Khan and the Fourth Prince. Originally I did not dare to accept this position.”

Xiaoxiang Zi said, “Then you should give it up for a person more worthy.” He glanced over at Nimoxing as he chuckled wryly.

Jinlun Fawang stretched out his chopsticks and picked up a piece of beef, he laughed, “This is the fattest piece of beef on the plate. I originally didn’t want to eat it but I just happened to stretch out my chopsticks and happened to pick this piece; I just accept it as fate. If you are interested, you can pick it yourself.” He hung the piece of beef over the plate, waiting for each one of them to come and take it.

Ma Guangzuo did not understand the meaning behind Jinlun Fawang’s words; he was talking about a piece of beef, but in reality he was referring to the position of the ‘First Protector of Mongolia’. When Ma Guangzuo saw him offering the piece of beef, he stretched out his chopsticks to catch it. His chopsticks were about to touch the beef when Fawang suddenly swept out one of his chopsticks and lightly touched his chopsticks. Ma Guangzuo felt his arm tremble with great intensity; he couldn’t hold on to them and the pair of chopsticks fell onto the table. Fawang’s chopstick returned in time to keep hold of the piece of beef. The others looked at each other startled.

Ma Guangzuo still did not understand, he picked up the chopsticks and held onto them tightly with his five fingers, he thought, “This time you won’t be able to knock it away...” He stretched his chopsticks towards the piece of beef.

Fawang did the same thing again, sweeping out one chopstick. This time, Ma Guangzuo was holding them tightly, indeed Fawang could not knock them out of his hands but a ‘ka la’ sound was heard, the chopsticks broke

into four pieces as if a knife had sliced through them and two pieces of chopsticks dropped onto the table.

Ma Guangzuo was furious; he called out and threw himself forward to battle Fawang.

Khubilai laughed, "There's no need to get angry warrior Ma, if you want to duel, there's time to do this after we've eaten."

Ma Guangzuo was afraid of his highness; he returned to his seat and pointed to Fawang, shouting, "What witchcraft did you use to break my chopsticks?"

Jinlun Fawang laughed, still holding out the piece of beef in front of him.

At first, Nimoxing did not have any respect for Jinlun Fawang, but after seeing how profound his internal energy was, he did not dare to continue looking down on him. He was an Indian; when he ate he did not use chopsticks, he just stretched out his hand and said, "I want to eat this piece of beef that the big Han couldn't take." His five fingers came out suddenly like a metal claw towards the beef. Fawang swept out his right chopstick, it moved like lightning as he attacked the pressure points on his palm, arm, wrist and the tip of his middle finger.

Nimoxing's palm quickly turned and chopped down at Fawang's wrist. Fawang's arm didn't move, he turned his chopstick around and struck out swiftly again, Nimoxing felt the chopstick striking him on the hand and quickly took his arm back. Fawang's chopstick twisted back into its original position, still holding onto the piece of beef.

His attack of the pressure points were extremely swift; he made many attacks and returned the chopstick into position before the piece of beef slipped away. Yang Guo and the

others could see what had happened. The two had exchange many stances in just a short period of time. Fawang's attacks with the chopstick were indeed fast but Nimoxing's martial arts were also excellent, he was able to take back his hand in an extremely critical situation.

Xiaoxiang Zi called out, "Good skill!"

Khubilai knew that the two were using advanced martial arts to test each other but he couldn't see what type of martial arts they were using. Ma Guangzuo's eyes were wide open; he looked at them, puzzled.

Yin Kexi laughed and said, "Everyone's too polite! You're offering it to the others, but don't want to eat it yourself, nor do you want anybody else to. Everything will be cold by the time you've finished." He then slowly stretched out his chopsticks, the emerald and jade bracelets collided with each other noisily. Before his chopsticks touched the beef, Fawang's chopsticks were forced to tremble slightly by his internal energy; he was getting in the first attack, keeping Fawang's chopsticks in check. Fawang moved his chopsticks forward and allowed him to take the piece of beef. When his internal energy reaches his chopstick, he attacked his arm. Yin Kexi urgently circulated his internal energy and counterattacked. How would he know that Fawang's internal energy would suddenly withdraw? The beef was initially held by him but his internal energy moved it forward and Fawang once again got hold of the piece of beef.

Fawang laughed, "Brother Yin is too polite by offering it to me." This time he used cleverness to win. Yin Kexi fell into the trap and at the same time found out that the opponent's internal energy far exceeded his own. Luckily he hadn't embarrassed himself yet; he gave a wry laugh and picked up a small piece of beef from the plate. He said, "The only

things I love in life are treasures and precious objects, I don't really like fatty meat; I better just eat a small piece." He placed the small piece of beef in his mouth and then slowly chewed.

Jinlun Fawang thought, "This Hu merchant is broad-minded." He turned to Xiaoxiang Zi and said, "Since you offered it to me so modestly, I will accept." He slowly took the chopsticks back half a foot. He guessed that Xiaoxiang Zi's internal energy wasn't weak and so didn't dare to be careless, by taking it back half a foot, if he needed to circulate his internal energy it will be half a foot closer and half a foot further away from his enemy.

Xiaoxiang Zi chuckled and slowly raised his chopsticks; suddenly he sent them forward and caught the piece of beef. He used the force to take it back and he managed to pull it back half a foot.

Jinlun Fawang did not predict that the opponent's movements would be so quick; he quickly circulated his internal energy and pulled back. The piece of beef moved back towards him inch by inch.

Xiaoxiang Zi stood up and placed his left hand on the table. The table made 'ka la' noises under this force but he still could not stop the force that Fawang produced in taking back the piece of beef.

Fawang looked at ease whereas drops of sweat poured from the forehead of Xiaoxiang Zi, the result was clear.

Suddenly a loud call by someone faraway could be heard, "Guo Jing, brother Guo, where are you? Quickly come out Guo Jing, the punk named Guo!"

At first the call came from the east but then it came from the west. There was a distance of a couple of li between the

calls from the east and west and it appeared as if there were two people calling out from the east and west. But the voice was the same and there was no pause between the calls from the east and west. This person's movements were extremely fast and the internal energy behind the calls was profound; this was something that was little seen in the world.

Everyone looked at each other startled. Xiaoxiang Zi loosened his chopsticks and sat back down in his seat.

Jinlun Fawang laughed and said, "Thank you, thank you!" He was about to place the piece of beef in his mouth when suddenly the tent door opened, someone flashed across and stretched out their hand and snatched Fawang's beef and then took a large bite out of it.

This shocked everyone; they all stood up and looked to see who this person was. It was an old man with white hair, a white beard and a smiling red face. He sat down on the rug and started chewing the beef noisily. Jinlun Fawang thought back on the movements of this man when he took his piece of beef; the more he thought about, the more shocked he was.

The guards outside the tent who failed to stop this man all called out, "Stop the assassin!" Four spears were thrust towards the man's chest. The old man stretched out his left hand and grabbed all the spearheads at once; he turned to Yang Guo and said, "Little brother, I'm really hungry, pass over some more beef to me."

The four Mongolian soldiers pushed forward with all their strength but they couldn't move an inch; the four then tried to pull back but again it was to no avail. As they strained with red faces, the spearheads seemed as if they were

trapped under an iron mountain, they were not even able to pull them back half an inch.

Yang Guo thought this guy was entertaining and picked up the plate of beef, he threw it easily to him and said, "Help your self!"

The old man caught it with his right hand and placed it against his chest; suddenly a piece of meat from the plate jumped up and flew into his mouth as if it were alive. This entertained Khubilai, he thought the old man was performing magic and gave out a cheer. But Jinlun Fawang and the others knew that the old man had circulated internal energy through his palm into the plate, forcing the piece of meat upwards.

An ordinary person could force a piece of meat to jump if they tap the plate, but they would definitely knock everything up at once sending the juices everywhere. It would be impossible for them to knock them up piece by piece; the palm power of this old man had reached a stage where he could do as he pleased. Everyone else at the feast knew that they would not be able to do it themselves; fear and respect sprang up in their hearts.

The old man chewed and swallowed; as soon as one piece went down another piece jumped up. In a short while he had completely cleared the plate. His right hand waved out and sent the plate flying out in an arc towards Yang Guo and Yin Kexi. The two of them had already seen how good this man's martial arts were; they were afraid that he had used some kind of strange move in throwing the plate and didn't dare to stretch out their hand to catch it. The two quickly moved out of the way. The plate flew steadily through the air and landed on the table, knocking into a plate of roast lamb. The plate of roast lamb flew towards

the old man while the empty plate stopped dead after a couple of turns.

He had used a stream of “Tai Chi Energy”, according to the continuous intent of Tai Chi. Uninterrupted, if it were shot outwards towards an open space, the plate would circle around. It is not difficult to use this force. There were a fair number of people who were skilled in using the variations of this force, but what was difficult was using the right amount of energy to get the most benefit. Skillfully sending the plate onto the table, stopping the empty plate dead and sending a plateful of food to his hand was such a skill.

The old man laughed out loud extremely proud of himself; he circulated internal energy into his hands and a piece of roast lamb jumped from the plate into his mouth. He finished the plate shortly. The four soldiers that were still in his hands were looking pitiful, they could not take back their spears but they didn't dare to let go. The rules of the Mongolian army were strict; abandoning a weapon in battle was an offence that led to execution. There was that, and the fact that they were responsible for the safety of Khubilai; they could only use all their strength and try to struggle free.

The old man saw that they were at a loss and was becoming more and more pleased. He suddenly shouted, “Change, change, change, two of you kowtow, two of you face the sky! One...two...three!” On three, their arms shook and the spears snapped. The forces from his fingers were directed in two directions, on two of the spears he circulated energy to push away, on the other two he circulated energy to pull. An ‘ai yo’ sound was heard as two soldiers fell and kowtowed and the other two fell backwards facing the sky.

The old man clapped and sang, “Little precious, the harder you fall, the taller you grow!” This was a song that adults

sing to console children after they've fallen.

Yin Kexi suddenly got up and asked, "Senior is named Zhou?"

The old man laughed, "Yep, ha-ha, do you know me?"

Yin Kexi folded his fists and said, "So it's the Old Urchin Zhou Botong, Senior Zhou Lao."

Xiaoxiang Zi had heard of him before but Jinlun Fawang and Nimoxing had not heard of Zhou Botong before. They saw his martial arts were profound but his actions were rather mischievous and childish; indeed, the title 'Old Urchin' is not in vain. Everyone's wariness disappeared slightly as their faces showed a smile.

Jinlun Fawang said, "Forgive me for not knowing this Senior of Wulin. How about a seat? Our highness is eager to meet great people, he will be extremely happy at meeting such an eminent person today."

Khubilai saluted with his hands and said, "That is correct; please have a seat Mr. Zhou."

Zhou Botong shook his head and said, "I'm full, I don't need to eat anymore. Where's Guo Jing, is he around?"

Huang Yaoshi had told Yang Guo about how Zhou Botong and Guo Jing became sworn brothers, immediately he replied coldly, "Why are you looking for him?"

Zhou Botong had always been childlike and loved making acquaintances with young people; he was pleased when he saw that Yang Guo was young and he was even more pleased when he heard him say 'you' and not something like 'Mr. Zhou' or 'old Senior'. He said, "Guo Jing is my sworn brother, do you know him? He loved being around Mongols

ever since he was young; because of this, when I saw this camp I came over to see whether he's here or not."

Yang Guo frowned and said, "Why are you looking for Guo Jing?"

Zhou Botong had no worries, how would he know to conceal his thoughts, he just casually replied, "He sent a letter to me, telling me to attend the 'Heroes Feast'. I had a few games on the road as I rushed from faraway; when I got there I was a couple of days late, the feast had finished, I was damn disappointed."

Yang Guo said, "Didn't he leave a letter for you?"

Zhou Botong eyes rolled over and said, "Why are you asking all the questions? Do you know Guo Jing or not?"

Yang Guo said, "How wouldn't I know them? Mrs. Guo is called Huang Rong, isn't she? Their daughter is called Guo Fu, isn't that right?"

Zhou Botong clapped his hands and said, "Wrong, wrong! That Huang Rong is a little girl herself, what daughter?"

Yang Guo was startled but then immediately understood, he asked, "When was the last time you saw them?"

Zhou Botong counted with his fingers, each finger was counted twice, he said, "At least twenty years."

Yang Guo laughed, "Is she still a little girl after twenty years? Wouldn't she have a child in these twenty years?"

Zhou Botong laughed, his beard fluttering about, he said, "You're right! You're right! Is their daughter pretty?"

Yang Guo said, "Their daughter looks a lot like Mrs. Guo, a little like Guo Jing, just what you'd think."

Zhou Botong laughed, "That's great, if a girl has dense brows and big eyes with a dark oval face like my brother Guo, of course that girl won't be pretty."

Yang Guo knew that he wasn't wary anymore and continued, "Huang Rong's father is Island Master Huang Yaoshi, he and I are great friends, do you know him?"

Zhou Botong was shocked and said, "You little kid, how can you call old 'Heretic' Huang as brother? Who's your Master?"

Yang Guo said, "My Master's abilities are extraordinary, I'm afraid if I tell you that I'll scare you silly."

Zhou Botong laughed, "I can't be scared silly any more." He waved out his right hand and sent the empty plate flying towards him with a tremendous force.

Yang Guo knew that Zhou Botong was the Martial Uncle of Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji and the others. He saw that his arm didn't bend as he threw the plate, he was using his fingers alone; this was a technique of the Quanzhen. He had no fear of Quanzhen martial arts; he stretched out his left index finger and pushed against the bottom of the plate, the plate spun around on his finger. This delighted Zhou Botong whereas Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi, Nimoxing and the others looked at each other startled.

When Xiaoxiang Zi first saw the young Yang Guo in his ragged clothes, he didn't give him another look but right now he was thinking, "With the force that plate was coming in with, I wouldn't dare to stretch out my hand to catch it never mind just relying on a single finger. If the force used to catch it were just slightly out of place, the plate would snap a wrist. Who exactly is this young man?"

Zhou Botong called out; "Great!" He could see that he was using a Quanzhen technique and asked, "Do you know Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji?"

Yang Guo said, "How wouldn't I know those two old goats?"

Zhou Botong was delighted. Though he didn't have any grudges with Qiu Chuji and the others, he felt that their rules were annoying, they were too prudent; there was some feeling of looking down on them. The person he respects most in his life, apart from his apprentice brother Wang Chongyang, is the carefree Nine Fingered Wondrous Beggar Hong Qigong. He didn't think too much of Huang Yaoshi's heretical nature and Huang Rong's cleverness. When he heard Yang Guo calling Ma Yu and Qiu Chuji 'old goats', it was music to his ears, he asked, "How are Hao Datong and the others?"

Yang Guo's anger erupted as soon as he heard the name 'Hao Datong', he insulted, "That old goat is a damn fool, and one day I'll make him suffer."

Zhou Botong was getting more and more happy as he listened, he asked, "How are you going to make him suffer?"

Yang Guo said, "I'll catch him, tie him up and then let him lie in a cesspit for half a day."

Zhou Botong was delighted and quietly said, "Once you've caught him, don't throw him in the cesspit straight away, first let me know and allow me to take a peek from aside."

He had no ill intent towards Hao Datong, it was just that he loved evil shows; when others are causing trouble and being mischievous; of course he had to join in.

Yang Guo laughed, "Fine, I'll remember to tell you. But why peek? You're afraid of the Quanzhen goats?"

Zhou Botong sighed and said, "I'm Hao Datong's Martial Uncle! If he sees me, he'll naturally call to me for help. It'll be a bit embarrassing if I don't save him but if I do, I won't be able to watch a good show."

Yang Guo thought to himself, "This person's martial arts are excellent and his character is pretty interesting but he's still from Quanzhen and he is the sworn brother of Guo Jing. A man must be ruthless; I need to think of a way to get rid of him."

How would Zhou Botong know that Yang Guo was starting to have ill thoughts about him? He asked, "When are you going to catch Hao Datong?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm about to go. If you want to take in the atmosphere then come along."

Zhou Botong was delighted, he clapped his hands and stood up but suddenly he became depressed and said, "I can't, I need to go to Xiangyang."

Yang Guo said, "What's so much fun in Xiangyang? Just don't go."

Zhou Botong said, "Brother Guo left a letter for me at the Lu Manor; it said that the Mongolian army is invading south and will definitely attack Xiangyang. He's leading the heroes of the central plains to Xiangyang to help, he told me to give a hand as well. I haven't seen him on my travels so I better go to Xiangyang."

Khubilai and Jinlun Fawang looked at each other and both thought, "So the warriors of the central plains have rushed to Xiangyang to protect the city."

Just at this point, the tent opened and in came a monk. He was about forty years old and looked elegant; his expression looked like that of a scholar. He went to Khubilai and the two exchanged whispers. The monk was a Han, his given name Zicong, and was a counsel of Khubilai's. His original name was Liu Kang and he was an official in Xianya and became a monk later on. He was very knowledgeable and did things very thoroughly; Khubilai had a great deal of trust in him. He had received some news from a guard that an important person has arrived in the camp and needs to be received immediately.

Zhou Botong stroked his stomach and said, "Hey monk, move over a little, I'm talking to that little brother. Hey, little brother, what's your name?"

Yang Guo said, "My surname is Yang, first name Guo."

Zhou Botong said, "Who's your Master?"

Yang Guo said, "My Master is a girl, her beauty is unparalleled and her martial arts are excellent, she doesn't allow others to mention her name."

Zhou Botong shivered and remembered his old lover Yinggu; he didn't dare to ask anymore and stood up. He waved his sleeves around to get rid of the dust on his clothes; the tent was filled with dust and dirt as a result.

Zicong could hold on no longer and sneezed twice. Zhou Botong was joyous and waved out with even more strength; suddenly he laughed out loud and said, "I'm going now!" His left hand waved out and the four broken spearheads shot towards Xiaoxiang Zi, Nimoxing, Yin Kexi and Ma Guangzuo. As the spearheads flew through the air, 'wu' 'wu' sounds were made; they were moving extremely quickly and the targets were close; in a flash the spearheads were right before the very eyes of the four.

Xiaoxiang Zi and the others were shocked; they could not dodge out of the way in time and could only circulate their internal energy to catch them. However, when they stretched out their hands to catch them, they caught thin air; a 'pu' sound was heard as the four spearheads flew into the floor.

The spearheads were shot out extremely ingeniously, immediate dispatch and withdrawal, as soon as the spearheads were in front of their eyes, and they suddenly twisted around and shot into the floor.

Ma Guangzuo was a simple minded person and just felt that this was amusing, he laughed out loud and said, "You really have got lots of tricks old man."

But Xiaoxiang Zi and the other two were extremely startled, their faces had changed colour. They all thought about how they missed the spearheads; if the spearhead hadn't changed direction, they would have shot into their stomachs. With the amount of force behind the spearheads, what chance would they have of surviving?" Zhou Botong was extremely proud of himself for making the four of them looking like a fools, he turned around and was about to leave.

Zicong said, "Mr. Zhou, your amazing abilities are rarely seen in this world; I give you a toast on behalf of his highness," He handed a cup of wine to him. Zhou Botong drank it in one go. Zicong sent another cup to him and said, "This one is from me!" Again, Zhou Botong drank it down.

Zicong was about to give another cup to him when suddenly Zhou Botong called out, "Oh no, my stomach hurts, I need to crap." Zhou Botong squatted down and undid his pants, and was about to crap in the tent.

Fawang and the others were amused and all called out for him to stop. Zhou Botong was startled, he called out, "Something's wrong with this stomach ache; I don't need to crap!"

Yang Guo glanced over at Zicong and understood, there was poison in the wine. At the beginning he had some ill intent towards Zhou Botong, wanting to prevent Guo Jing from having a strong ally; but the ill intent he had disappeared immediately. He had no debts and dues with the Old Urchin; he saw that he was childlike and uncomplicated and felt good sentiments towards him. He couldn't endure it when he saw him fall for the dirty trick. He was about to suggest to him to hold Khubilai as a hostage and force Zicong to hand over the antidote when he suddenly heard Zhou Botong call out, "Strange, strange, so its because I drank too little poisonous wine, that's why my stomach ached. Monk, quickly pour me another three cups, the more poisonous the better!"

Everyone looked at each other startled. Zicong was afraid that he would lash out before he died, he didn't dare to go over to him.

Zhou Botong took a large step forward towards the table. Jinlun Fawang stepped in front of Khubilai to protect him; but all he saw was Zhou Botong pulling up his pants with his left hand and reaching for the jug of poisoned wine with his right hand. He then tipped his head backwards and poured all the wine down his throat.

Everyone's face lost its color.

But Zhou Botong laughed and said, "That's better. Now my stomach has got too much poison, won't the Old Urchin turn into the Old Poisonous Animal? I need to fight poison with poison." Suddenly he opened his mouth and shot out a

stream of wine towards Zicong. Jinlun Fawang saw that it was a dangerous situation and quickly picked up a table to block it; an arrow of wine splashed across the table.

Zhou Botong laughed non-stop; he ran to the exit of the tent and suddenly his mischievousness stirred; he grabbed the tent's support pillar and shook a few times. A 'kra ak' sound was heard as the pillar snapped. The tent fell down and covered Khubilai, Jinlun Fawang, Yang Guo and the others inside. Zhou Botong was delighted and got on top of the tent, running back and forth, stepping on everyone inside the tent. Jinlun Fawang sent out a palm and struck the sole of his foot. Zhou Botong felt a great surge of internal energy through his foot and couldn't suppress it, he did a somersault and landed back down, calling out loudly, "Interesting, interesting!" He then left.

Soon, Jinlun Fawang and the others climbed out with Khubilai, and all the guards clamored around to fix the pillar and erect the tent again. Zhou Botong had long gone. Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others apologized to Khubilai for not protecting him properly and letting him experience this shock. Khubilai didn't punish them one bit and instead praised the abilities of Zhou Botong, saying that it is a great pity that he couldn't make him stay. Fawang and the others had an ashamed expression on their faces.

All the cups and plates were set up once again. Khubilai said, "The Mongolian army has attacked Xiangyang many times before but with no success. This time, the heroes of the central plains have gone there to protect the city; that Zhou Botong has also gone there to help. This is an extremely troublesome situation. I wonder, what great plans do you have?"

Yin Kexi said, "Zhou Botong may have great martial arts but we may not be weaker than him. When your highness

attacks the city, it will be soldier against soldier, general against general; the central plains have their heroes but so does the west."

Khubilai said, "Though your words aren't wrong, there's a saying, 'Before a battle, one must plan for victory in the temple; greater planning will lead to victory whereas little planning will not.' Before I attack, I must have a plan to gain victory."

Zicong said, "Your highness's foresight is magnificent..."

Before he finished, a shout could be heard from outside, someone was calling out, "I said that I don't want to go and I mean it; it's of no use if you beg me or anger me." It was Zhou Botong.

What was he doing back here and who was he talking to? Everyone's curiosity was roused and they wanted to go out to take a look.

Khubilai laughed and said, "Everyone, let's take a look, I wonder who the Old Urchin is arguing with."

Everyone took a step outside the tent and saw four people in an arc far away surrounding Zhou Botong. The four people were standing south, west, northwest and north of him, surrounding him but leaving a way out to the east. Zhou Botong stretched out his arm and threw a fist, he called out, "I'm not going, I'm not going."

Yang Guo was surprised, "If he doesn't want to go, who can force him? Why is there a need for arguing?" He saw that the four people were all wearing a green gown; the colors and clothing looked ancient and wasn't the clothing of the present time. There were three middle-aged men wearing tall hats; standing in the north western position was a girl, her green belt could be seen fluttering in the wind.

The man standing in the northern position said, "We didn't have any intentions in troubling you but you kicked over our pill furnace, ripped our spirit fungus, tore our books, and burned our sword room. You must come back with us and explain everything to our Master; otherwise, when our Master blames someone, none of us disciples will face the punishment."

Zhou Botong put on a smile and said, "Just tell your Master that an old man passed by and accidentally caused all this trouble; won't that be the end of it?"

The man said, "You insist on refusing to come with us?"

Zhou Botong nodded his head. The man pointed to the east and said, "Good, he's here."

Zhou Botong turned around to take a look but didn't see anyone. The man made a sign with his hands and the four of them suddenly pulled open a large net and covered Zhou Botong from his head downwards. The four's hand movements were extremely drilled, and extremely strange; even with Zhou Botong's great abilities he was trapped by the net and had no response, he just bellowed and hollered. The four people swerved around him and tied him up tightly. One of the men put him over his shoulders, the other three held onto their swords, protecting him as they flew to the east.

Yang Guo was worried about Zhou Botong's safety and thought, "I must save him." He then followed after them, calling out, "Hey, hey! Where are you taking him?"

How could Jinlun Fawang and the others not want to know what exactly this strange event is all about? They told Khubilai and followed. After a few li, they arrived at a stream. The four people lifted Zhou Botong onto a boat and two of them started to row. The rest of them followed along

the shore; after a while they saw a boat in the stream and all immediately leapt in. Ma Guangzuo had great strength and he rowed the boat, soon they were just a few tens of feet behind. But the stream was windy and after a few turns, the boat disappeared. Nimoxing leapt from the boat onto a cliff side and climbed up over a hundred feet in a flash like an ape. He saw the boat in the west rowing along an extremely narrow brook. A thicket of trees covered the entrance to this brook, if one didn't look from on high, they would not know that the deep valley would have such a passageway. He leapt back onto the boat and pointed out the directions to them. They quickly turned the boat around and rowed towards the thicket of trees. The entrance was a cave; the ceiling of the cave was only three feet away from the water, and everyone had to lie down before they could row on. After leaving the cave they saw the mountains on either side soared; the sky now looked like a string.

The mountains were green, the water blue, the scenery extremely serene; but it was silent everywhere, exuding a feeling of danger. After another three or four li, the brook suddenly had nine large slabs of stone arising from it, like a shield, blocking the way of the boat.

Ma Guangzuo was the first one to call out, "Damn, there's no way to row past."

Xiaoxiang Zi said in a creepy way, "You've got the strength of a bull, just throw the boat over."

Ma Guangzuo angrily said, "I don't have that kind of strength unless you zombies perform some kind of witchcraft."

Before the two started arguing, Jinlun Fawang was thinking about the situation, "How did the small boat pass this stone shield?" When he heard the words of the two, he said, "No

one can pick up the boat on their own but the six of us together can. Brother Yang, brother Yin and I will be on one side, brother Ni, brother Xiao Xiang and brother Ma will be on the other side, the six of us working together, how about it?"

Everyone agreed and followed his instructions; the six of them stood on two sides and each one found a steady place to stand on the rocks. Luckily the brook was extremely narrow; the boat's width was at arm's length.

Fawang called out, "Lift!" Everyone lifted. Yang Guo's and Yin Kexi's strength was the weakest out of the six but the other four had the strength of many, especially Ma Guangzuo who had divine strength. The boat left the water and passed over the rocks.

Everyone leapt back into the boat; they wiped their palms and laughed. The six of them originally were wary of each other but after working together, naturally they became a bit friendlier.

Xiaoxiang Zi said, "Although the martial arts among us aren't anything spectacular, we could be classed as first rate fighters of Wulin. The six of us lifting a boat isn't really a difficult task but..."

Nimoxing followed on, "The four green people's martial arts are all over the place, could they lift the boat over the rocks?"

Out of the six, five of them were already secretly surprised. Ma Guangzuo was still thinking about what the words 'their martial arts are all over the place' meant.

Nimoxing said, "Their boat is smaller... their numbers are smaller also... The four of them being able to do this... their strength must be... must be incredible."

Yin Kexi said, "There's no need to talk about the three men, that girl was a fragile seventeen or eighteen year old teenager, there is no way she could have such skill, there must be something about those rocks. It's just that we can't see through just yet."

Fawang gave a wry laugh and said, "People cannot be judged on appearances alone. Take a look at our brother Yang, he is of a young age but possesses great martial arts, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, who would have believed it?"

Yang Guo said modestly, "The skills I've learned aren't much, what's good about my martial arts? But the four people in green were able to catch Zhou Botong; they must have some aspect that they excel at." His words were modest but he was now talking to these first rate fighters as brother this and brother that.

Everyone had seen with their own eyes Yang Guo catching a plate thrown by Zhou Botong with a single finger; they did not look lightly on him. They all felt his words were reasonable and all started to make their own guesses about this matter.

Out of the six, Yang Guo was the youngest, Jinlun Fawang, Ma Guangzuo and Nimoxing spent most of their lives in the west; Xiaoxiang Zi spent his time along in the mountains and didn't make acquaintances with anyone. Yin Kexi was the only one who was familiar with the sects, personalities and affairs of the central plains yet he had no clue about who these four people in green were. As they talked, they eventually rowed to the end of the brook. The six of them went ashore and followed the path deep into the valley.

There was only one mountain path so there was no way to go wrong; however the path got steeper and steeper as it

went on and became more and more treacherous. The sky darkened and there wasn't a trace of the people in green.

Just as they were getting anxious, there was firelight from faraway; everyone was pleased and thought, "In a wild valley like this, firelight must mean people; apart from those people in green; no one would live in a place with such dangerous terrain as this."

They then increased their speed. They all knew that they were in a dangerous place and each one heightened their defenses. Each one of them had roamed the world of Jianghu by themselves before and had experienced many dangers; now six great fighters were entering the mountain, who on earth could stop them? Though they were wary, they had no fear.

After a while, they reached a wide level open space at the peak of the mountain. They saw an extremely large flaming bonfire. They walked closer a few hundred feet and by the firelight, they saw a large stone building.

Nimoxing called out loudly, "Hey, hey, some guests have arrived! Come out quickly."

The door of the stone house slowly opened and out came three men and a girl. It was the people in green who had captured Zhou Botong earlier on. The four of them bowed and the leading person asked, "What are our guests' names?"

The one thing that Yin Kexi excels most at is speaking; he laughed and then told them who the other five were. He then said, "My name is Yin Kexi, I am a Hu merchant. Apart from eating, the only thing I know are treasures, I am not like the others who are all highly skilled with martial arts."

The person in green said, "Our residence is in an extremely secluded place, we've never had visitors before, it is our luck that some guests have arrived. But what brought our guests here?"

Yin Kexi laughed, "We saw the four of you catch the Old Urchin Zhou Botong, we were curious so we came along to take a look. Your residence is an extremely elegant and beautiful place, it has opened our eyes; this really wasn't a trip in vain."

The first person in green said, "That old man who messed up our place is named Zhou? He certainly lives up to the name Old Urchin."

The second person in green said, "Are you with him?"

Fawang replied, "We've just met him today, one cannot say that we are friends of his."

The first person in green said, "That Old Urchin charged into our valley and ran riot."

Fawang asked, "What did he do? Did he really rip up your books and set the place on fire?"

The person in green replied, "Only that? I was ordered by my Master to guard the pill furnace; I don't know how the Old Urchin broke into the pill room. He started to talk rubbish with me, saying he was going to tell a story and then telling me to follow him in doing somersaults; he was mad and crazy. The furnace was burning at a critical stage; I couldn't leave and kick him out so I pretended that I didn't hear him. He suddenly kicked out and knocked the furnace and the herbs in it over. I don't know how long it will take to collect all these herbs and medicines again." He looked angry as he said this.

Yang Guo laughed, "He must have blamed you for ignoring him and that it was your fault, right?"

The girl in green said, "Correct. I was in the fungi room when I heard the clamor in the pill room. I knew something was wrong and was about to leave the room to take a look when the old man dashed in. As soon as he stretched out his hand, he snapped the four hundred year old spirit fungus in two."

Yang Guo saw that the young girl was about seventeen or eighteen years of age, her skin was extremely white, very soft and delicate, her eyes bright and clear and there was a very small mole by her mouth. She said, "That Old Urchin is an extremely bothersome troublemaker; that spirit fungus had been grown for over four hundred years, it is an extremely valuable object."

The girl sighed, "My father was going to share it on his wedding day with my step mother but who could have known that it would be ruined by the Old Urchin. My father will of course fly into a rage. After the Old Urchin broke the spirit fungus, he placed it in his pockets and said something about not giving it back to me and laughed. I haven't done anything to offend him. Why on earth did he come here and cause trouble for me?" As she said this, her eyes became red, feeling that she has been wronged.

Yang Guo thought, "The Old Urchin had no reason to bully this girl, this is wrong."

Yin Kexi said, "Please can I have your father's name. We inadvertently came here without permission and don't even know the owner's name; our manners are lacking."

The young girl delayed and didn't reply.

One of the men in green said, "Without our Master's permission, we can not reveal it, please forgive us."

Yang Guo thought, "These people are very secretive; they live here in this secluded place and aren't willing to reveal their identity to others." He then asked, "What happened after the Old Urchin stole the spirit fungus?"

The third person in green said, "The one named Zhou wasn't finished; after wrecking the pill and fungi room, he burst into the library, took a book and started to read. I was assigned to the library and so of course I had to stop him. But he said, 'these are just lies that they tell to children, what's so great about this?' and ripped three books in one go. At that time, senior and second apprentice brother came along with apprentice sister. The four of us together were still unable to stop him."

Fawang gave a wry laugh and said, "That Old Urchin has an eccentric character but his martial arts are really spectacular; of course it would not be easy to stop him."

The second man in green said, "After causing trouble in the pill room, fungi room and library, he went for the sword room. He burst into the room and broke out in a temper, saying that there were... there were too many weapons. They're all over the place and almost cut him. He then set the room alight and burnt all the paintings on the wall. While we urgently tried to put out the fire, he escaped. We all thought that this was a serious matter so we chased after him, caught him and brought him back so our Master can deal with him."

Yang Guo said, "I don't know what punishment the Master of this valley will have for him but I hope that he won't kill him."

The third man in green said, "My Master's wedding is not far away, he won't kill that easily. But if that Old Urchin says

something to offend my Master, then it would be his fault if trouble comes to him."

Yin Kexi laughed, "Why would the Old Urchin deliberately stir up trouble for your Master? He may be mischievous but he doesn't seem to have a bad temper."

The girl in green said, "He said that my father is old and he's still marrying..." The senior apprentice brother suddenly cut her off and said, "That Old Urchin is mad, how believable are his words? Everyone has come from afar and must be hungry; I will serve some food to our guests."

Ma Guangzuo said loudly, "Great, great!" His face lit up.

The four people in green entered the kitchen and brought out some rice and vegetables and then set up a table. There were four basins, one had plain green vegetables, another had white tofu, one of the others was filled with yellow bean sprouts and the last one was filled with black mushrooms. There wasn't any meat.

Just three months after he was born, Ma Guangzuo would not eat anything without meat. He saw four trays of vegetables in front of him that didn't even have a drop of oil on them, he was extremely disappointed.

The first person in green said, "We do not eat meat here in the valley, forgive us. Please eat." He then bought out a jug and poured out a clear and clean liquid in the bowls in front of them.

Ma Guangzuo thought, "Since there's no meat, I better drink a few bowls of wine." He picked up the bowl and drank, he noticed that it had no taste and it was actually water, he roared, "This Master is damn stingy; there isn't even a drop of wine for us."

The first person in green said, "Our valley forbids alcohol; this is a rule passed down by our ancestors; please forgive us."

The girl in green said, "We have seen the words 'beautiful wine' in books, but we've never experienced what this beautiful wine is. The books say that wine harms the mind, it appears that it isn't anything good."

Fawang, Yin Kexi and the others saw that these four people weren't old but their actions and words were reserved and trite. Ever since they've spoken with these people, they haven't showed a single smile; though their faces weren't hateful, it wasn't interesting to talk to them. In other words, they didn't speak more than half a word to each other; they stopped talking and lowered their heads as they ate. The four people retreated and didn't come forward again.

After they ate, Ma Guangzuo said that they should leave in the night. But the other five saw that there was something about this place, they were curious and wanted to understand it more clearly.

Yin Kexi said, "Brother Ma, since we're here, we need to meet the Master of this valley tomorrow; how could we just leave?"

Ma Guangzuo roared, "There's no meat or wine, isn't he trying to torture us? I can't live half a day like this."

Xiaoxiang Zi said, "The majority of us are staying; why are you trying to start something?"

Ma Guangzuo has been secretly afraid of his zombie appearance; when he heard him say this, he didn't dare to speak another word.

That night the six of them slept in the stone building on some straw mats on the floor. They felt that this valley was passionless; even stupidly stricter and more prudish than a Buddhist temple. Though the monks of Buddhist temples are vegetarians, they wouldn't treat people so coldly; these people didn't even show half a smile. Yang Guo was used to living in the Ancient Tomb and used to living with the icy cold Xiao Longnu. He was the only one who didn't think anything of this.

Nimoxing said enraged, "The Old Urchin wrecked and set the building alight, that is something!" When he said this, Ma Guangzuo felt the same way and called out loudly in response.

Nimoxing said, "Brother Jinlun, you're our brains, what kind of person do you think the Master of this valley is? Is he a bad guy or a good guy? Are we going to be polite to him or are we going to beat the... beat the crap out of him."

Fawang said, "I'm like all you people here when it comes to trying to fathom what type of person this Valley Master is, it is difficult for us to guess. Tomorrow, we'll just act accordingly."

Yin Kexi said quietly, "The martial arts of the four green disciples of this valley aren't weak, so naturally there will be even better martial artists in this valley. Everyone needs to be careful, just one little slip up and the six of us might die here, that wouldn't be so good."

Ma Guangzuo was still complaining about the food and didn't listen to what Yin Kexi was saying.

Yang Guo said, "If you're not careful tomorrow, you'll be caught and trapped here for the rest of your life; you'll be fed water and rice, vegetables and tofu everyday. When that

happens, I'm afraid that even the tapeworm in your stomach would want to die."

Ma Guangzuo was frightened and quickly said, "Good brother, I'll listen...I'll listen."

That night they didn't sleep too peacefully as they thought about the danger they were in; only Ma Guangzuo slept well, snoring thunderously and calling out in his dreams, "Come, come! Cheers! This slab of beef is massive!"

End of Chapter 16.

Chapter 17 - The Secluded Passionless Valley

Translated by Noodles



*Fan Yi Weng quickly moved his head to the left.
The opponent's attack was fast, his reaction was*

also very swift and his beard followed him and flung upwards. Yang Guo's scissors had been opened and was guarding the right; a 'ka' sound was heard as the scissors cut down. He cut off over two feet of the beard.

After Yang Guo woke up the next morning, he left the stone house and went outside. Last night it was dark and he couldn't see the surroundings clearly but now he could; he was surrounded by emerald green grass, the flowers like a brocade, the scenery of this place was already magnificent but the beauty of this place was even more rarely seen.

He followed where his feet took him and along the path he saw cranes, herds of white deer, squirrels and rabbits but none of them were alarmed by his presence.

He passed two bends and saw the girl in green plucking flowers off to one side. She saw him approaching and greeted, "You wake up really early, have some breakfast." She plucked two flowers from the tree and offered them to him.

Yang Guo accepted them and thought, "Is it possible that flowers can be eaten?" But then he saw the girl tearing the flower petal by petal and placing them in her mouth, he did the same. When he placed the petals in his mouth, he noticed a sweet fragrance, a fragrance like that of honey and there was a subtle air of wine, he felt a feeling of comfort but after a few chews the taste became bitter and sour. He wanted to spit it out but felt that he couldn't give it up; he wanted to swallow but had a little difficulty in getting it go down his throat.

He carefully looked at the plant and saw that the branches were covered in thorns but the flowers were extremely

beautiful, and even more fragrant than lotuses, he asked, "What is this flower? I've never seen it before."

The girl said, "This is the Passion Flower, I've heard that it is a very rare plant. Tell me, what do you think of the taste?"

Yang Guo said, "At first, it is extremely sweet but afterwards it is extremely bitter. This is called the Passion Flower? There's a meaning behind this name." He stretched out his hand to pluck a flower.

The girl said, "Careful! There's thorns on the plant, don't touch it!"

Yang Guo avoided the thorns and was very careful but he didn't notice that behind the flower was hidden another and it pricked his hand.

The girl said, "This valley is called the 'Passionless Valley' yet there are so many Passion Flowers growing here."

Yang Guo said, "Why is it called the Passionless Valley? This name really is... really is special."

The girl shook her head and said, "I don't know why. This is the name our ancestors gave it, maybe my father knows."

The two then started to walk down the path, shoulder to shoulder. The scent of flowers filled Yang Guo's nose, by the side of the path were rabbits and young deer were darting about, it was very adorable sight. He had a feeling of being carefree and joyous, and naturally he started to think about Xiao Longnu, "If the person walking with me was Gu Gu, I really would love to live in this place forever with her and not ever leave." Just as he thought about this, the wound on his finger suddenly became painful, the wound was very small yet the pain was so great, it was like someone smashing a hammer across his chest, he couldn't hold it in

and gave an 'ai' call, placed the finger in his mouth and sucked it.

The girl blandly said, "You're thinking about your lover, is that it?"

Yang Guo's thoughts were guessed; his face went red and asked, "How do you know?"

The girl said, "If you've been pricked by the thorns of the Passion Flower, you cannot think about love for the next twenty four hours otherwise the suffering will be unbearable."

Yang Guo was surprised and said, "There's actually such a strange thing as this in the world?"

The girl said, "My father said: love is like this, when it enters the mouth it is sweet but afterwards it becomes bitter and sour, furthermore, it is covered by thorns, even if you are extremely careful, pain from it would be unavoidable. The flower was given its name most probably because it has this special characteristic."

Yang Guo asked, "How come that within twenty four hours, one cannot... cannot... think about love?"

The girl said, "Father said: there's poison on the thorns of the plant. When people think about love, not only does their blood flow quicker, some unknown thing is created in the blood. The poison of the thorns of the Passion Flower is not harmful normally, but once it meets this something in the blood, it will create unbearable pain in the person."

When Yang Guo heard this, he felt that it was fairly reasonable and believed her with few doubts.

The two slowly walked to the unsheltered mountainside. The light of the sun lighted up this place, the ground and

air were gentle and warm; the Passion Flowers have bloomed early here and there were fruits on the plant.

Yang Guo saw that the fruits were either red or green, but some were red and green and there were hair on the fruits, like a caterpillar.

Yang Guo said, "The Passion Flower is so beautiful yet its fruits are so ugly."

The girl said, "The fruits of the flower can't be eaten, some are sour, some are hot and some stink so much that it makes people want to vomit."

Yang Guo gave a laugh and said, "Is it possible that there aren't any that are sweet as honey?"

The girl glanced at him and said, "Sometimes there are but you cannot tell by its appearance. Some that are extremely ugly are sweet but an ugly fruit doesn't necessarily mean it will be a sweet one. Only by tasting it directly will you know for sure. Out of ten fruits, nine are bitter; because of this we never eat them."

Yang Guo thought, "Though she is talking about the Passion Flower, it is like an analogy for love. Could it be that although the love between lovers is at first sweet, it will eventually turn sour? Can it be that a pair of lovers who are deeply in love with each other will eventually experience more bitterness than sweetness? Could it be that the yearning love I have for Gu Gu will eventually..."

As soon as he thought about Xiao Longnu, his finger suddenly broke out with a piercing pain again and he swung his arm around a few times. He now knew that the words of the girl were indeed true.

When the girl saw him like this, her lip moved a little, as if she wanted to laugh but was refraining from doing so. Sunlight lit up her face and showed a pair of elegant eyes and brows, her skin was white with redness floating on top of it, she looked very beautiful.

Yang Guo laughed, "I once heard a story; there was once an emperor, he set up a fire display and burned all things, throwing away most of his kingdom as a result, and the only reason for this was that he was trying to get a legendary beauty to smile. To be able to see a smile is a fortunate thing, so, the same applies whether it's in the past or in the present."

After being teased by Yang Guo, the girl could no longer hold it in and eventually gave a giggle.

Yang Guo noticed that she had been cold as ice throughout this time and there were some feelings of anxiety in his heart, but after this smile, most of the divide between the two went away. Yang Guo continued, "Everyone knows that a beauty's smile is rare to come by, they say something like a smile can overturn a city, another can overturn a country, actually there's something of a beauty's that is even rarer than a smile."

The girl's eyes opened wide and asked, "What?"

Yang Guo said, "A beautiful girl's name. To have the opportunity to come across a beautiful woman is an extremely lucky event, to be able to see the smile of a beautiful girl would be because of the good deeds of their ancestors and one must go through three lifetimes..." Before he finished the girl giggled again.

Yang Guo continued looking serious and said, "To be able to hear a beautiful girl reveal her name that really requires eighteen generations of great deeds."

The girl said, "I'm not some beautiful girl; no one in the valley has ever called me beautiful, why must you joke?"

Yang Guo sighed and said, "No wonder this place is called the Passionless Valley. But in my opinion, the name should be changed to something else."

The girl said, "Change to what?"

Yang Guo said, "It should be called Blind Man's Valley."

The girl asked surprised, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "Look at how beautiful you are but none of them praise you; aren't the people who live in this valley blind?"

The girl laughed again. Her beauty could be classed as first class but compared to Xiao Longnu's; there were still many li between them. Compared to the gentleness of Cheng Ying and the prettiness of Lu Wushuang, she appeared to be slightly inferior. But she was elegant, graceful and there was a wholesome air about her. No one had praised her beauty before, and this was because the martial arts her valley practiced revolved around abdication. When her fellow apprentices see each other they are always cold and remain unmoved. In the hearts of her fellow apprentices though, they did think that she was very beautiful but none of them dared to say it out loud.

Today she suddenly met Yang Guo. This person's character was dynamic and spirited, the stricter and more restrained she acts, the greater the urge he has to make her get rid of this unfeeling appearance. The girl was pleased with these words and laughed, "I'm afraid that you're the blind man, calling this ugly girl a beautiful girl."

Yang Guo put on a serious face and said, "You never know, my eyes could be wrong. However if you want this valley to remain peaceful and quiet then you can't smile."

The girl asked surprised, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "There's an old saying: 'a smile can overturn a city, another can overturn a country', that saying really ought to be changed. It shouldn't be country; it should be changed to valley."

The girl bowed subtly and laughed, "Thank you, can you stop teasing me please?"

Yang Guo saw her fine, elegant waist and trembled slightly, his heart was moved. Although it wasn't an intense feeling, his finger suddenly broke out in a severe pain again.

When the girl saw him waving his finger about, she felt slightly displeased and said angrily, "I'm talking to you right now yet you're thinking about your lover."

Yang Guo said, "I'm innocent, I'm innocent, it's because of you that my finger hurts and here you are blaming me." The girl blushed and suddenly ran away.

Yang Guo immediately regretted his words as soon as he said them, thinking, "My heart belongs to Gu Gu yet why haven't I changed this type of behavior? Yang Guo ah Yang Guo you little bastard, don't talk such rubbish again." He inherited some of his father's scoundrel's attitude and ungentlemanly behavior. Every time he met a girl he would tease and flirt with them, causing them to fall for him as a result. Although he didn't have any ill intentions, it was something that made him feel joy in his heart.

The girl ran for a few tens of feet and suddenly stopped below a Passion Flower tree and hung her head deep in

thought, after a little while she turned to him and said, "If an ugly girl tells you her name, it must be because your ancestors have done bad deeds for eighteen generations and the bad karma has passed down onto you."

Yang Guo went over to her and laughed, "Of all the things to be born with, you were born with the love of saying negative things. My ancestors for the last eighteen generations have done many good deeds; some of the good karma should be reaped by me." His words were again praising her beauty.

Her face went slightly red and quietly said, "I'll tell you but you cannot tell another and I forbid you to call my name in front of others."

Yang Guo stuck out his tongue and said, "Oh sweet beauty, aren't I afraid of not having any descendants?"

The girl showed another smile and said, "My father's surname is Gongsun..." She still did not want to reveal her name and wanted to go around in circles.

Yang Guo interrupted, "But what is Miss's name?"

The girl smiled and said, "My father gave his only daughter the name Lu'E."

Yang Guo praised her, "The name is as beautiful as the owner."

After Gongsun Lu'E told Yang Guo her name, she felt closer to him and said, "When father invites you to see him, you mustn't smile at me."

Yang Guo said, "What happens if I smile."

The girl sighed and said, "If father knows that I smiled at you and told you my name, I really don't know how father

would punish me.”

Yang Guo said, “I’ve never heard of such a strict father, not even allowing his daughter to smile at someone. He has a beautiful daughter, could it be that he doesn’t love you?”

When Gongsun Lu’E heard these words her eyes went red and said, “My father used to love me very much but after my mother died when I was six, he treated me stricter and stricter. After he marries again, I wonder how he will treat me?” Two drops of tears rolled down her cheeks as she said this.

Yang Guo comforted her, “After your father marries he will be happy, he’ll definitely treat you better then.”

Gongsun Lu’E shook her head and said, “I rather he treats me even stricter than marry another wife again.”

Yang Guo’s parents died when he was young so he didn’t know much about these types of feelings; he wanted to make her happy and said, “Your new mother’s definitely not as half as beautiful as you.”

Gongsun Lu’E quickly said, “You’re wrong, my new mother is a true beauty. Because of her my father... my father... Yesterday we caught that old man named Zhou but my father was busy with organizing the wedding, otherwise he would never have allowed that Old Urchin to escape again.”

Yang Guo was shocked and pleased, he asked, “That Old Urchin escaped again?”

Lu’E frowned slightly and said, “Didn’t you hear me?”

The two spoke for a while and the sun gradually rose up in the sky. Lu’E suddenly realized something and said, “Quickly go back, don’t let my fellow apprentices see us together talking, they’ll tell my father.”

Yang Guo pitied her situation and stretched out his left hand to hold her hand and patted her on the back with his right, consoling her.

Gongsun Lu'E's eyes showed that this touched her, she lowered her head and suddenly her face went red.

Yang Guo was afraid that his thoughts would lead to Xiao Longnu again and cause his finger to break out in a severe pain again, he quickly rushed back to the stone house that he was staying in.

Before he even got back to the stone house he could hear the bellows of Ma Guangzou, complaining how his stomach can't survive on water and vegetables and how could these sweet and bitter flower petals be eaten. Are they trying to kill me?

Yin Kexi laughed, "Brother Ma, you better hide all the valuables that you have; I think the Master of the valley has ill intent."

Ma Guangzou didn't know he was being ridiculed and nodded his head in agreement.

Yang Guo returned to the room and saw a few dishes filled with the petals of the Passion Flower on the table. He watched them eat the petals with squinting faces and he was amused as he thought about how even Jinlun Fawang the monk was affected by effects of the passion flower.

He picked a cup of water and took two sips when he heard footsteps approaching, a man in green came in, bowed to them and said, "Our Master will now see his guests."

Fawang, Nimoxing and the others were all great Masters, no matter where they went, the Master of that place would come out and personally greet them; even Mongolia's

Fourth Prince Khubilai showed great respect to them. They could never have thought that the Master of this secluded valley would be so impudent, they all were angry and thought, "When I see that rude Valley Master I'm going to show him a thing or two."

The six of them followed the man in green for a li or so and suddenly came across a swaying green bamboo forest. Bamboo was rare in the north and such a large piece of bamboo forest was even rarer. In the middle of the forest, the light fragrant relaxing scent of flowers could be noticed. As soon as they passed through the forest, the scent suddenly became overwhelming; everywhere in front of them were Chinese narcissi. A shallow pond with a depth that was less than a foot was filled with the flowers. These flowers were also something that was usually seen in the south, why could they be found here in this mountain valley?

Fawang thought, "There must be some hot springs below the mountain that keeps the ground and air warm."

Every five feet or so was a Mu Chun plant, the man in green darted across the pond over them. The six followed but Ma Guangzou was heavy and had poor lightness kung fu; though his footsteps were large they weren't large enough to takes steps of five feet or so. After stepping on a few plants, he decided to drop into the pond and follow them by wading instead.

They followed a green stone path and from afar, they saw a large stone building built under the cover of the mountains. The seven advanced towards it. Outside the building were two young attendants who were holding a fly whisk in their hands. One of the attendants went inside the house to tell the Master of their arrival while the other opened the door to receive them.

Yang Guo thought, "I wonder whether the Valley Master will come and receive us in person?" Before his thoughts were settled, a bearded old man in green came out of the house.

This old man was extremely short, no more than four feet tall, his appearance was strange but the strangest thing about him was his exceedingly long thick beard that hung down to the ground. He was wearing a dark green gown and had a green rope tied across his waist.

Yang Guo thought, "This Valley Master looks so weird yet his daughter is so beautiful."

The old man bowed deeply to him and said, "It is our luck to have such prestigious guests, please come in for tea."

When Ma Guangzou heard the word 'tea', he frowned deeply and said loudly, "Drink tea! What place doesn't have tea? Why must I come to this place for it?"

The long bearded old man did not know what he meant; he glanced at him and then bowed again receiving the guests.

Nimoxing thought, "I'm a short man but the Master of this valley is even shorter. You win on shortness but let's see who wins on martial arts." He barged forward to the front, stretched out his hand and said, "Nice to meet you." He took the old man's hand and immediately used the strength in his hands.

The others took a couple of steps back when they saw the two stretching out their hands to receive each other, they knew that when two great Martial artists exchange forces, it will be something out of the ordinary.

Nimoxing first used twenty percent of his power in his hands but he found that the opponent did not counterattack nor block; he was slightly surprised and increased another

twenty percent. He felt that it was like holding a slab of solid wood. He increased another twenty percent of the force in his hands. A faint green air glimmered across the old man's face and his hand was still like a rigid piece of wood.

Nimoxing was extremely surprised and didn't dare to use the rest of his strength just in case the enemy counterattacked when he was at full strength, then, he would not be able to defend against the attack. He laughed and released his hand.

Jinlun Fawang was second in line. He saw what had happened and knew that Nimoxing was unable to ascertain the short man's abilities. There was no need for him to make a rash move while the opponent's abilities were still unclear, Fawang folded his arms and gracefully walked past. Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi followed together with Ma Guangzou behind. Ma Guangzou had seen the short man's beard and thought that it was extremely weird. He hadn't eaten anything except the Passion Flowers and that made him even hungrier; at this moment in time he was hungry and angry. When he entered he suddenly stuck out his foot and stepped on the tip of the man's beard.

The old man was unmoved and said, "Please be careful."

Ma Guangzou put his other foot on the beard and said, "What?"

The old man moved his head slightly and Ma Guangzou suddenly flipped over. Such a large person falling to the floor is no ordinary matter.

Yang Guo was the last one to enter; he quickly dashed forward two steps and struck Ma Guangzou on the backside moving his gigantic body forwards. Ma Guangzou stood firmly on the ground and rubbed his backside.

The old man acted as if he didn't see anything; he invited them into hall and sat them on the west side before saying clearly, "The guests have arrived, call for the Valley Master."

Yang Guo and the others were shocked, "So that old man is not the Valley Master."

From the back of the hall, ten or so green clothed disciples came in and stood to the left, Gongsun Lu'E was amongst them. After a while, a person entered the hall and bowed to the six and casually sat down on a chair on the east side. The long bearded old man stood by his chair. From the man's presence, this person will be none other but the Valley Master.

This man was about forty five or six years of age, he had a handsome face and appeared graceful; from the way he greeted them and sat down, he also seems to possess a lofty air. His face was yellow and dried, not looking like someone who possessed great martial arts. As soon as he sat down; some of the disciples in green brought tea forward. The hall was decorated in green, but the Valley Master was wearing a precious satin blue gown, he was extremely eye catching in the deluge of green.

The Valley Master picked up a tea bowl and said, "Please have some tea."

Ma Guangzou took a look at the bowl of tea, he saw that it was cold and had a few tea leaves floating on top; it was extremely bland to him and he snapped, "Valley Master, you don't eat meat and you don't even drink tea, no wonder you look ill."

The Valley Master did not move a muscle. He took a sip of his tea and said, "The people of our valley have been vegetarians for hundreds of years."

Ma Guangzou said, "What's so good about being vegetarian. Does it make you live longer without aging?"

The Valley Master said, "My ancestors have lived here since the Tang dynasty; since then, none of the descendants has ever dared to break the vegetarian code."

Jinlun Fawang folded his arms and said, "So this place was set up in the Tang dynasty and has lasted until now, that really is something."

The Valley Master folded his arms and said, "You're too kind."

Xiaoxiang Zi suddenly spoke in a strange way, "Did your ancestors ever see Royal Concubine Yang?" His tone was extremely peculiar.

Nimoxing, Yin Kexi and the others were familiar with his voice after spending time with him, they were surprised when they heard this voice and all turned towards him. They were even more shocked when they saw his face, it had somehow has completely changed, his face had the appearance of a zombie before but now it looked even odder.

Fawang, Nimoxing and the others were slightly worried, "So this person possesses such great internal energy, even his face changes. He's circulating his internal energy so he can immediately strike out; does he want to show the Valley Master a thing or two?" They all put their guards up when they thought about this.

The Valley Master replied, "My ancestors did work in the Tang court as officials, when they saw what state the court had falling into under Yang Guozhong, they were furious and left to reside in a secluded place."

Xiaoxiang Zi laughed, "Your ancestors must have drunk the water that Royal Concubine Yang had washed her feet with."

Everyone's face in the hall changed as soon as these words came out. It was a challenge to the Valley Master and he was going to make his move very soon.

Fawang and the others were surprised, thinking, "This Xiaoxiang Zi is extremely crafty, he always lets other people go first in all matters, why has he volunteered to go first suddenly?"

The Valley Master ignored him and signaled to the old long bearded man. The old bearded man said clearly, "Our Master has treated you with respect as guests, how can you say such things?"

Xiaoxiang Zi laughed and said in his strange manner, "Your ancestor has definitely drunk the foot water of Royal Concubine Yang; if they haven't drunk it, I'll cut off my head for you."

Ma Guangzou was surprised and asked, "Brother Xiaoxiang, how do you know? Could it be that you drank some that day as well?"

Xiaoxiang Zi laughed, his voice changed again as he said, "If they didn't drink the foot water and upset their stomachs, what other reason is there for them not to eat meat?"

Ma Guangzou clapped and laughed, he called out, "Yes, yes, it must be for this reason."

But Fawang and the others frowned, they all felt that Xiaoxiang Zi's words were going a bit too far; everyone has their own eating habits, how can you use it as a joke? Not mentioning the fact that the six of them were deep in this

valley, the people of this valley were definitely not kind people; even if fists had to be raised, a backup plan should be made first.

The old bearded man could endure this no longer; he went to the middle of the hall and said, "Mr. Xiaoxiang Zi, our valley has not offended you. If you're looking for a fight then please come forward."

Xiaoxiang Zi said, "Good!" He remained in his chair and leapt over the table in front of him; after a 'deng' sound, he landed in the middle of the hall in his chair. He called out, "Long bearded old man, what's your name? It'll be unfair if we fight with me not knowing your name but you knowing mine. I cannot afford to be in this predicament."

His words seemed sound but unsound at the same time; the old man became even angrier but his wariness also deepened after seeing how graceful Xiaoxiang Zi was in moving the chair into the centre of the room, he wasn't anything ordinary.

The Valley Master said, "Tell him, it's not important."

The old man said, "Fine, my surname is Fan, first names Yiweng, please stand up and start."

Xiaoxiang Zi said, "What weapon are you going to use? Go get it and let me take a look."

Fan Yiweng said, "You want to compete with weapons? That's good." His right foot stamped on the floor and he called out, "Bring it!"

Two attendants rushed inside and when they came out, they had an eleven foot long steel Dragon Head Staff on their shoulders.

Yang Guo and the others were shocked when they saw this, "How can this short man use such a long and heavy weapon."

Xiaoxiang Zi didn't take any notice and took out an extremely large pair of scissors from underneath his gown. He said, "Do you know what this pair of scissors is used for?"

When the others saw this weapon, they just felt that it was a strange weapon, but Yang Guo was shocked. He didn't stretch out his hand towards his bag, but instead he just straightened his back a little and noticed that his pair of scissors was missing. He thought, "Blacksmith Feng made that large pair of scissors for me that I had intended to use against Li Mochou. How did that zombie steal it off me in the middle of the night without me noticing?"

Fan Yiweng took his staff and placed it on the floor. The hall was extremely spacious; as soon as the staff landed, it produced 'weng' 'weng' noises and along with the echoes from the room, the noise was tremendous.

Xiaoxiang Zi lifted up the scissors with his right hand and opened them. He held the scissors with all the strength in his fingers. He called out, "Hey, shortie, you don't know the name of my precious scissors, do you want me to tell you?"

Fan Yiweng angrily said, "Such an unorthodox weapon won't have an elegant name."

Xiaoxiang Zi laughed and said, "Correct, the name is not elegant, it is called the Dog Fur Scissors."

Yang Guo was not pleased, "Who wants you to give my pair of scissors such an ugly name."

He heard Xiaoxiang Zi continue, "I knew long ago that there was a long bearded creature around here; because of this I prepared this pair of Dog Fur Scissors so I can cut off your beard!"

Nimoxing and Ma Guangzou burst out laughing, Yin Kexi and Yang Guo too couldn't hold in their laughter and laughed; only Jinlun Fawang kept his self-control and along with the Valley Master, the two appeared as if nothing had happened.

Fan Yiweng swung his staff a little and created a gust of wind, he said, "I was thinking my beard is too long, since you want to be a barber and help me trim it, nothing could be better, let's fight!"

Xiaoxiang Zi lifted his head and looked up at the beam of the hall in thought, it appeared that he didn't hear his words. Suddenly, his right arm came out like lightning and the scissors cut towards the man's beard.

Fan Yiweng would never have dreamed he would actually attack while sitting in the chair; he had no time to dodge and urgently dropped his staff down. His body lifted up and somersaulted through the air about ten feet off the floor with the staff still on the floor.

Xiaoxiang Zi's attack was extremely quick and Fan Yiweng's dodge was also very swift; in that cut and dodge, the two skilled martial artists had displayed their advanced martial arts. But Fan Yiweng still suffered by that attack; though he managed to avoid that cut, three strands of his beard were cut off by the tip of the scissors.

Xiaoxiang Zi was extremely proud of himself. He picked up the three strands of beard with his left hand and blew the strands of hair which flew towards his bowl of tea on the

table. A 'ping pang' sound was heard as the bowl fell onto the floor and shattered.

Yang Guo and the others knew that he was putting on a show and that it was his breath that forced the bowl to drop on the floor. But Ma Guangzou did not know this and thought that the strands of beard had great power after being blown by Xiaoxiang Zi. He called out loudly, "Xiaoxiang Zi, your strands of beard are really something!"

Xiaoxiang Zi laughed, he opened and closed the scissors then called out, "Short beard, do you want to test out my Dog Fur Scissors again?"

Though everyone could see that he was laughing, his face remained unmoved; they were becoming more and more shocked by him. They were thinking, "When someone reaches an advanced state in their internal energy, they can be angry and delighted without showing it on their faces, even to the point where the face looked emotionless. But it is unheard of that someone can laugh so heartily but keep that fearful face." His face was too unsightly for the eyes; everyone just took one look and immediately turned away again.

Fan Yiweng was now furious after being ridiculed again and again; he bowed to the Valley Master and said, "Master, today this disciple cannot continue treating the guests with respect."

Yang Guo was extremely surprised, "That short man is a lot older than the Valley Master; how can he call him Master?"

The Valley Master nodded his head slightly and gently waved out his left hand.

Fan Yiweng swept out his staff towards the chair that Xiaoxiang Zi was sitting on; though he was a short man he

possessed incredible strength, the hundred kilo (220 lb) staff swept out and created a great gust of wind.

Though Yang Guo and the others were on the same side as Xiaoxiang Zi, they did not know exactly how skilled he was. They all watched the men battle with great concentration.

The staff was now half a foot away from the leg of the chair. Xiaoxiang Zi lowered his left hand and actually stretched it out to grab the head of the staff and at the same time, he cut forward towards his opponent's beard with the scissors.

Fan Yiweng was extremely angry, he thought, "You actually dare to look down on me like this!" He swung his head to the side and his beard moved to the side while the staff continued its sweep and struck Xiaoxiang Zi's palm.

The others called out and stood up; they all thought that Xiaoxiang Zi's palm would have suffered a serious injury.

But Fan Yiweng felt as if his staff had struck water, soft as if nothing was there; he knew something was wrong and quickly pulled back. However, Xiaoxiang Zi's twisted his wrist and kept his hold on the staff.

Fan Yiweng felt his opponent immediately pushing outward so he immediately sent the staff forward. The force he applied was ferocious; he assumed that Xiaoxiang Zi would have to leave his seat but he didn't predict that the opponent would again leap away with his chair, this time to the left as the staff thrust towards thin air. He had no choice but to release his grip on the head of the staff.

Fan Yiweng's left hand twisted above his head and the staff made a circle and was sent towards his opponent's head.

Xiaoxiang Zi wanted to ridicule him and leapt up about ten feet with the chair and actually passed over the staff.

The others saw that his hands techniques were extraordinary and swift; though he was in the chair, he moved as if he was not, they all called out in appreciation.

Fan Yiweng saw that his opponent was highly skilled; he poured all his concentration into this battle, the staff created gusts of wind as he moved it around. He knew that hitting him would not be easy but if he smashes his chair, he will be able to get the initiative.

But Xiaoxiang Zi's martial arts were extraordinary; his right hand continued to open and close the scissors and suddenly cut towards his beard while Xiaoxiang Zi's left hand used the "Trapping Hand Technique" to snatch his staff.

In the blink of an eye the two had tens of exchanges; though they appeared to be equal, Xiaoxiang Zi had not left his chair, not giving an ounce of respect towards his opponent.

Jinlun Fawang was shocked inside, "Who would have thought that zombie would actually possess such great abilities?"

More exchanges passed between the two; Fan Yiweng kept on using sweeping stances across the floor, while Xiaoxiang Zi kept on leaping up in the chair, getting quicker and quicker.

The Valley Master suddenly called out, "Don't hit the chair, otherwise you can't handle him."

Fan Yiweng was startled but then immediately understood, "While he's sitting in the chair, I can only fight him to a draw. If his legs were on the ground, then my beard will be cut off in just a few stances." He suddenly changed his stances and urgently waved and twisted the staff around. A circle of silver light covered the short man in green while

on the outside there was a zombie like person leaping up and down without stopping. This was a strange rarely seen spectacle.

The Valley Master knew that Xiaoxiang Zi was deliberately trying to make a fool out of Fan Yiweng; if it continued he would definitely suffer. The Valley Master then stood up and slowly left the table. He said, "Yiweng, you are not a match for that Master, come back."

Fan Yiweng obeyed his Master and said loudly, "Yes!" He straightened his staff and was about to take it back when Xiaoxiang Zi called out, "That won't do, that won't do!" He flew up from the chair and threw himself down onto the staff. A 'ka la' sound was heard as the staff smashed the chair into pieces; but the staff was held onto by Xiaoxiang Zi with his left hand. Xiaoxiang Zi steadied his left leg and opened the scissors. Fan Yiweng's beard was hanging between the blades, a cut now and his beard would be gone.

Who knew that the long beard that Fan Yiweng grew was an extremely soft lethal weapon; the technique for using it is along the same lines as a whip, a chain and a whisk. His head moved slightly and the beard whipped around escaping from the blade of the scissors and wrapped up the scissors instead; he moved his head backwards and a great force pulled the scissors forward.

Xiaoxiang Zi called out loudly, "Ai yo, old shortie, your beard is pretty powerful; Xiaoxiang Zi is in awe of you." One had his beard wrapped around the scissors whereas the other had his hand holding onto the staff, there was no result for the time being.

Xiaoxiang Zi laughed out loud and said, "Interesting, interesting!"

Suddenly a grey blur flashed in from the front door; this person was extremely quick and was pushing both his palms forward towards the back of Xiaoxiang Zi.

The Valley Master shouted, "Who is it?"

This attack was quick and vicious and it was certain to hit its target. Xiaoxiang Zi released his grasp of the staff and turned his left palm around and pushed out at the opponent below the elbow, immediately dispersing the power of his palms.

The person angrily said, "You bastard, I'm going to kill you!"

Yang Guo and the others were incredibly surprised when they saw this person; they all called out, "Xiaoxiang Zi!" The person who had dashed forward and attacked was Xiaoxiang Zi. Can he divide into two? And why was he attacking his own double? They were all puzzled by this.

Once they had settled down, they saw that the person who was tangling with Fan Yiweng was dressed in the clothes of Xiaoxiang Zi; everything was correct from the shoes to the hat. Though his face looked like a zombie, it was not the face of Xiaoxiang Zi. The person who had entered had the face of Xiaoxiang Zi but he was dressed in green. The man in green sent his claw like hands out towards the back of the Xiaoxiang Zi who was holding the scissors and called out, "What kind of hero attacks from an ambush?"

Fan Yiweng was slightly surprised when he saw help had come; this person was dressed in the valley's uniform but he did not know him. He placed his staff to the side and saw the two zombie-like people battle each other.

It was now clear to Yang Guo, the person who was holding the scissors must have stolen his mask as well. He put it on,

changed into Xiaoxiang Zi's clothes and then came here to the hall to stir up trouble. Because Xiaoxiang Zi's face normally was like that of a corpse, no one was able to tell. Though Yang Guo had worn the mask himself, but he did not know what he looked like when wearing the mask. When Cheng Ying had her's on, he didn't dare to look at her too often. He was actually deceived by this person.

He concentrated for a while and recognized the martial arts of the person holding the pair of scissors, he called out, "Zhou Botong, give back my mask and scissors." He then leapt into the middle of the hall and stretched out his hand to snatch the pair of scissors back.

This person was Zhou Botong. He'd had a lapse in concentration and was captured by the fish net of the four disciples of the valley. But Zhou Botong possesses amazing abilities; just a slight lapse in concentration by the four disciples and he immediately broke out of the fish net. Afterwards he hid behind some rocks. He had planned to turn the valley over but then he saw Yang Guo and the other five. In the middle of the night, he ambushed Xiaoxiang Zi; he sealed his pressure points and moved him outside of the house. Then he changed into his clothes. Zhou Botong had great lightness kung fu and he comes and goes without a trace; Xiaoxiang Zi was still asleep when this happened and even Jinlun Fawang didn't notice anything. After he changed clothes, Zhou Botong returned to the stone house and lay down by Yang Guo, and then stole the scissors and mask from his bag. When they woke up the next morning, no one actually noticed anything amiss.

Xiaoxiang Zi tried to unblock his pressure points after they were sealed but Zhou Botong's pressure point sealing skills were powerful; it was six hours before he was able to move his limbs again. At that time, he had only his undergarments on. He was extremely angry and when a valley disciple

passed by, he immediately took his clothes and hurried to the stone building. When he got there, he saw a person dressed in his clothes in a heated battle with Fan Yiweng; his anger was uncontrollable and he threw his palms forward viciously.

Zhou Botong saw Yang Guo coming forward and began to use his skill of left right mutual combat; his left hand came out and in as he fought Yang Guo while his right hand used the scissors and forced Xiaoxiang Zi to stay back. When the scissors opened, the distance between the blades was two feet; if his head were in between the blades when it closed, his head would separate from his neck. Though Xiaoxiang Zi was furious, he did not dare to get close.

When the Valley Master first saw Zhou Botong fight Fan Yiweng, he was already secretly in awe. Now he saw him using two hands to fight two people separately, it was as if he were divided into two. The "Yin Yang Twin Blades" that he practices has some similarities to the technique that Zhou Botong was using; but how could he do two things at the same time like Zhou Botong was doing? He also saw Xiaoxiang Zi's claws were like steel, his stances vicious, and he saw that Yang Guo was graceful and elegant, his form and posture exquisite, he pondered, "There are many able people in this world. The two old men are indeed terrific; though this young man's internal energy is shallow, his form, fists and kicks are filled with elegance." He then said clearly, "Please hold your fists."

Yang Guo and Xiaoxiang Zi leapt back at the same time. Zhou Botong took off his mask and threw the mask along with the scissors towards Yang Guo and then called out, "I've had enough fun, I'm going!" His legs lightly touched the ground and he leapt up onto a beam up in the ceiling.

The valley's disciples gasped when Zhou Botong showed his face. Gongsun Lu'E called out, "Father, it's that old man."

Zhou Botong laughed as he sat on the beam. The beam was thirty feet off the floor; though there were many good fighters in the hall, to follow him and leap up in one go was something that none of them could do.

Fan Yiweng was the Master of the passionless valley's senior disciple and was older than his Master. Apart from his Master, he was the most skilled fighter of the valley; after being ridiculed by Zhou Botong many times, how could he not be angry? He was short and skilled at climbing; his body leapt up and grabbed a pillar, climbing up it like an ape. Zhou Botong loved it when someone tangles with him, he saw him climbing up but couldn't wait for him to reach the beam so he stretched out his hand to receive him.

How would Fan Yiweng know that that it was a kind gesture? When he saw his right hand stretching out towards him, he stretched out his finger and poked the 'Great tomb' pressure point on Zhou Botong's wrist. Zhou Botong felt a slight sensation in his hand and immediately sealed off his pressure point and loosened his muscles. Fan Yiweng felt that his finger was poking something like cotton wool; he quickly pulled his finger back. Zhou Botong's palm turned and struck the back of his arm with a very crisp sound, he called out, "One basket of barley, two baskets of barley, you and me slap the great barley!"

Fan Yiweng was extremely angry, he swung his head and his long beard swept towards Zhou Botong. Zhou Botong heard that urgent gust of wind and propped his left foot against the beam and moved his body, his left hand then held onto the beam and hung his body in the air.

Xiaoxiang Zi knew that Fan Yiweng was not a match for Zhou Botong; even if he went up there to join in as well he would not be able to beat him. He turned around to Nimoxing and Ma Guangzou and said, "Brother Ni and Ma, that old man doesn't give any respect to the six of us; he really has gone too far."

Nimoxing was a rash person and could be offended, Ma Guangzou was slow witted and wasn't clear on what was happening, when they heard him say, 'doesn't give any respect to the six of us', they were angered and both of them shouted. They then leapt towards the beam to grab Zhou Botong's leg. Zhou Botong kicked away their palms with his legs.

Xiaoxiang Zi turned to Yin Kexi and said coldly, "Brother Yin, are you really just going to watch?"

Yin Kexi gave a wry smile and said, "Brother Xiaoxiang, you go first and I'll be right behind you."

Xiaoxiang Zi made a strange whistle, the walls trembled and he suddenly leaped up. His knees were not bent; his whole body and arms were straight as a ruler as he went for Zhou Botong's abdomen.

Zhou Botong saw the incoming attack and pulled in his body and became almost sphere like; his right hand swapped with his left hand in holding the beam. Xiaoxiang Zi clutched thin air and dropped back down. His body was straight as a stick, his feet touched the ground and he jumped up once again. Fan Yiweng was holding onto the pillar and sweeping his beard while Xiaoxiang Zi, Nimoxing and Ma Guangzou kept on going up and down trying to attack him.

Yin Kexi laughed, "This old man's martial arts really are incredible; I'll join in as well." He searched his pockets and

took out a weapon. The hall was lit up with the reflection of pearls and the glimmering of gold; there was a whip in his hand. This whip was made out of gold and silver silk and was embedded with pearls and gems. In the world of Jianghu, one would not be able to find such a precious and lavish weapon as this. There were glimmers of gold and glistening of pearls as the whip was swept towards Zhou Botong's leg.

Yang Guo was amused with what was happening and thought, "These five are showing off their abilities in attacking the Old Urchin; if I don't do something out of the ordinary, I can't claim to be capable." He had an idea; he put on the human skin mask and copied the strange call of Xiaoxiang Zi. He then picked up Fan Yiweng's staff, stood it up against the floor and used the force to throw himself up into midair. The staff was already over ten feet long, so using it as a lever he was able to face Zhou Botong face to face. He called out, "Old Urchin, watch out for the scissors!" The large scissors cut forwards towards his white beard.

Zhou Botong was delighted, he moved his head and called out, "Little brother, your move is pretty amusing."

Yang Guo said, "Old Urchin, I haven't done anything to offend you, why did you make fun of me?"

Zhou Botong, "Things come and go and you haven't suffered one bit; instead you've gained something."

Yang Guo was startled and said, "What came and went?"

Zhou Botong laughed, "Right now I need to be excused, and I can't speak with you." He saw the incoming Golden Dragon whip of Yin Kexi and stretched out his hand to seize it. Yin Kexi's whip twisted and he was about to counterattack his opponent's back when he fell back to the floor.

The Old Urchin said, "Your colorful dead snake is pretty funny." At this moment, Fan Yiweng's beard came sweeping across; his hands were holding onto the pillar and he was relying on his beard to attack his enemy.

Zhou Botong laughed, "So a beard can be used like that?" He copied him and swung his beard towards him, but his beard was a lot shorter than Fan Yiweng's and he had never practiced with it before; the move he made with his beard was useless. A 'shua' sound was heard as he was struck by Fan Yiweng's beard across the cheek leaving a red mark; if he didn't have such profound internal energy, he would have been knocked out. After receiving this attack, Zhou Botong wasn't angry, instead he had great respect towards Fan Yiweng and said, "My beard can't compare to yours, I admit defeat, we don't need to continue."

Fan Yiweng had just had a successful strike and was not going to hold back; his beard came out again. Zhou Botong did not dare to use his beard to meet it again, so his left hand used the techniques of the "Vacant Light Fist", throwing out soft fists. The wind created by the fists forced Fan Yiweng's beard to the right and just at this time, Ma Guangzou had leaped up to make an attack, the beard brushed against his face.

Ma Guangzou's eyes were covered so he grabbed the beard with his two hands. Fan Yiweng's beard had originally been under his control but after being forced away by the wind from Zhou Botong's fists, he lost control of it and it was now in Ma Guangzou's hands. He was startled and did not use force to pull it back. Ma Guangzou was holding it tightly and as he descended, he dragged Fan Yiweng down to the floor.

Ma Guangzou was thick skinned and the fall didn't hurt much. However, Fan Yiweng had fallen on top of him.

Fan Yiweng said angrily, "What are you doing, you still haven't let go?"

Though Ma Guangzou didn't feel much pain from the fall, Fan Yiweng's feet had landed on his stomach and it was quite painful; his anger also erupted and he shouted, "I don't want to let go; what are you going to do about it?" After he said this, he quickly wrapped the beard around his arm.

Fan Yiweng chopped out a right palm and Ma Guangzou moved his head to dodge, however, this was a dummy move and a fist came out from his left hand, landing squarely on Ma Guangzou's nose.

Ma Guangzou called out and returned a punch. When it came to martial arts, Fan Yiweng was much better than Ma Guangzou; but his beard was trapped and he couldn't move his head, so the punch landed on his cheekbone. One tall and one short, the two of them began to fight. Though Fan Yiweng was on top, he could not escape from his opponent.

Jinlun Fawang saw that the hall had fallen into chaos; five people from his side had come out and yet still they were unable to take care of the Old Urchin. This was a bit too shameful. Sounds of 'qiang lang' 'qiang lang' were heard as he took out two wheels, one silver and one bronze. One swept from left to right and the other from right to left forming two arcs of light as they flew towards Zhou Botong. The ringing sounds were urgent and frightening.

Zhou Botong did not know how powerful they were and said, "What are these?" He stretched out his hand to grab them.

Yang Guo called out, "You can't catch them!"

Yang Guo threw the steel staff upwards. A 'dang' sound was heard and the thick, long staff was sent flying towards the corner of the room as sparks flew and dust rose up from the wall. The bronze wheel came back to Fawang and he once again sent it with his left hand. The wheel flew swiftly towards the beam.

After this, Zhou Botong knew that it wasn't good to annoy this monk. He knew that he wouldn't be able to fight off all of them so he flipped downwards and called out, "Excuse me everyone, the Old Urchin has to leave, we'll play again another day." He then ran towards the door. However, four disciples in green had blocked the exit with a large fish net.

Zhou Botong had experienced the fish net before and called out, "Oh no!" He wanted to escape through the window on the eastern side. He saw a green blur and the window was covered by a fish net as well.

Zhou Botong leapt back into the middle of the room and saw that in all four directions there were four disciples in green holding a fish net, blocking his path. Zhou Botong then leapt up onto the beam and used the stance "Surging Sky Palm" to break a large hole in the ceiling. He was about to leap out through the hole when he raised his head and saw that there was also another fish net above. He had nowhere to go and leapt back to the floor. He pointed to the Valley Master and laughed, "Old yellow face, why do you want to keep me here? Do you need a playmate?"

Valley Master Gongsun said dryly, "All you've got to do is return the four things that you took and I'll immediately let you go."

Zhou Botong said surprisingly, "What use have I got with your smelly things? Even if a person could learn martial arts to a state equal to yours, who cares?"

Valley Master Gongsun slowly walked to the middle of the hall. He brushed the dust off his clothes and said, "If today wasn't my wedding day, I would definitely exchange a few stances with you. Just leave the items of the valley here and leave."

Zhou Botong was furious and called out, "So, you say that I've definitely stolen something from you? That's crap, what have you got here in this valley?" He then started to take off his clothes and very soon, he was stark naked. The Valley Master called out to him to stop but was ignored. Zhou Botong then showed his garments inside out, indeed, there was nothing there. The female disciples in the hall were distressed and turned their heads away.

This turn of events was something that the Valley Master had not predicted. The missing objects from the library, pill room, fungi room and sword room were very important and had to be recovered; could it really be that the missing objects were not stolen by the Old Urchin?

Just as he was in deep thought, Zhou Botong clapped his hands and said, "Look at you, you're old but why do you not act your age? You speak without thinking and you act mad and crazy, you do such an embarrassing thing in public, aren't people going to laugh their teeth out?"

These words should have been said to him but he got it in first. The Valley Master didn't know whether to laugh or cry and did not have a reply. He saw that Fan Yiweng was still battling Ma Guangzou so he shouted, "Get up Yiweng, stop tangling with the guest."

Zhou Botong laughed, "Long beard, I like your temper, the two of us can be friends."

In actual fact, Fan Yiweng has been strict and disciplined all his life; he only fought Ma Guangzou because he had no

choice. He wanted to stand up many times but his beard was wrapped around Ma Guangzou's arm and he had no way to escape.

Valley Master Gongsun frowned slightly and pointed to Zhou Botong saying, "I'm afraid that it is you who is embarrassing himself in public and it is you whose actions are laughable."

Zhou Botong said, "I came out of my mother's womb naked and I'm pure and innocent as I stand naked now, what's wrong with that? Look at how old you are yet you still want to marry a beautiful young girl, ha-ha, laughable, laughable!" Those words were like a hammer that smashed into the chest of the Valley Master; his yellow face became red and he couldn't say anything.

Zhou Botong called out, "Oh no, I'm afraid I might catch a cold without wearing any clothes." Suddenly he dashed towards the exit.

As soon as the four disciples in green saw the blur, they immediately moved positions and threw the net over him, trapping him in the net. They felt him struggling fiercely and they tied the corners of the net then carried him over to the Valley Master. The fish net was made out of extremely pliable and soft golden silk; even a precious sword or saber would not find it easy to cut through it. The hand movements of the four disciples were unusual and swift, the net covered heaven and earth as it was brought forward. Even an extremely skilled martial artist would find it difficult to deal with. The only disadvantage was that it required four people to work it; one person alone will not be able to use it. The four of them were extremely proud of themselves after they caught him in one swoop; but when they saw the Valley Master examine the net, he had an expression of displeasure. They quickly looked down; they

were shocked and broke out in a cold sweat. They quickly opened the net up and let two people out; it was Ma Guangzou and Fan Yiweng.

No one could predict that Zhou Botong would suddenly dash out stark naked without his clothes. His hand movements were extraordinarily quick; he had picked up Ma Guangzou and Fan Yiweng and threw them in the net. When the four disciples took in the net, he quickly dashed out. The deception was unnoticeable.

The Valley Master's face was full of humiliation because of what Zhou Botong had done; and even Fawang and the others felt shame in their hearts. They were all thinking, "I class myself as a first rate fighter of Wulin and yet all of us together were unable to capture that mad old man, that is shameful." Only Yang Guo was pleased; he had great respect for Zhou Botong and thought that if he was captured, I would definitely think of a way to rescue him. Since he's managed to escape by himself, then it couldn't be better.

Fawang had originally wanted to learn the background of this Valley Master, but after all this trouble with the Old Urchin, he wasn't in the mood to carry on. He spoke a few words with Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi then stood up and folded his arms, saying, "Thank you for your hospitality, we ought to stay longer and make acquaintances but we all have other pressing matters to attend to and so we say goodbye."

The Valley Master had originally suspected that Fawang and the others were friends of the Old Urchin, but he had later seen Xiaoxiang Zi fight for his life and Fawang, Yang Guo, Yin Kexi, Ma Guangzou and Nimoxing attacking Zhou Botong. They all had showed signs of helping him so he

folded his hands and said, "I have a request; I wonder will our six guests grant me my wish?"

Fawang said, "If it's in our ability then we'll do our best."

The Valley Master said, "After noon, there will be my wedding procession, I request your presence. This valley is very secluded and remote; there have been very few guests over the last hundreds of years. It is the luck of three generations that today six esteemed guests have arrived."

Ma Guangzou said, "Will there be wine?"

The Valley Master was about to reply when he saw Yang Guo's eyes were fixed on something outside, his face was extremely strange; he seemed to be extremely happy but also appeared to be full of anguish. Everyone was surprised and followed his gaze.

They saw a girl in white passing along a corridor outside. The sunlight shone on her white, cold face and it seemed that the sunlight had turned into moonlight. There was a sparkle under her eyelashes and after she walked a couple of steps, a teardrop rolled down her cheek. Her steps were light; it was as if she was gliding on water as she made her way down the corridor. She did not glance over at the people in the middle of the hall.

It was as if Yang Guo's pressure points had been sealed and he didn't move a muscle. Suddenly he called out, "Gu Gu!"

The girl in white was at the head of the corridor when she heard the call, as soon as she did her body trembled and said faintly, "Guo'er, Guo'er, you're here? Is it you that's calling me?" She turned her head around and appeared as if she was looking for something, but her eyes were uncertain as if she was in a dream.

Yang Guo quickly leapt out of the hall and held her hand, saying, "Gu Gu, you're here, I've searched for you continuously!" He then suddenly called out; there was unbearable pain in the place where his finger had been pricked by the passion flower.

The girl in white called out, her body trembled and she sat down on the floor with her eyes closed, it was as if she had fainted.

Yang Guo called out, "Gu Gu, how are you feeling?"

After a while, the girl slowly opened her eyes and stood up. She said, "Who are you? What did you call me?"

Yang Guo was greatly shocked, he stared at her, if it wasn't Xiao Longnu then who else could it be? He quickly asked, "Gu Gu, It's' Guo'er, how... how come you don't recognize me? Are you hurt? Where are you feeling discomfort?"

The girl looked at him and said coldly, "I do not know you." She then walked into the hall and sat down by Valley Master Gongsun. Yang Guo was flabbergasted; he returned to the hall in a daze and leaned on the back of a chair.

Valley Master Gongsun's face had been unmoved all along but now his face was filled with joy, he raised his hand towards Fawang and the others, saying, "This is my bride; the wedding has been set for today after midday." He then glanced over at Yang Guo wryly, offended by his rudeness just now in recognizing someone wrongly and scaring his new bride.

Yang Guo's shock was indescribable; he said loudly, "Gu Gu, could it be... could it be that you're not Xiao Longnu? Could it be that you're not my Master?"

The girl said, "No! What Xiao Longnu?"

Yang Guo clenched his fists, his mind filled with thoughts, "Is Gu Gu angry with me and doesn't want to recognize me? Is it because we're in danger and she's deliberately pretending? Is she like Godfather and has lost her memories? But Godfather was still able to recognize me. Could it be that there really is someone else in the world that looks exactly like her?" He just said, "Gu Gu, you... you... I'm... I'm Guo'er!"

Valley Master Gongsun frowned slightly as he watched him lose his composure, he quietly said to the girl, "Sister Liu, there are many weird people here today."

The girl ignored him and poured a cup of water. She slowly drank it and glanced over at Jinlun Fawang and the others but she avoided Yang Guo, not looking at him again. Everyone saw her sleeve tremble slightly and water splashed from the cup onto her clothes but she did not notice anything.

Yang Guo's mind was turning upside down and didn't know what to do; he turned around to Jinlun Fawang and asked, "My Master and I have dueled with you before, you remember. Tell me... have I recognized the wrong person?"

When the girl entered the hall, Fawang had recognized her as Xiao Longnu but she completely ignored Yang Guo, he thought that the two must have had a lovers quarrel so he smiled wryly and said, "I don't remember."

He had endured a great defeat by them when Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo used the "Simple Heart of the Jade Maiden" swordplay against him; something which had never happened before. He thought that if the two had quarreled, it really was something that was beneficial to him, why should he help them get back together?

Yang Guo was startled again but immediately understood, in his mind, he was furious, "You really are evil. That day on the mountain top, I helped you to recuperate and now you're doing this to me." He wanted to kill him right there and then.

Jinlun Fawang saw that he had fallen to pieces but his eyes revealed hatred, he pondered, "There's hate towards me in his heart now; if I let him live he will be a problem in the future. Today he's making a spectacle of himself; this really is a good chance to get rid of him." He folded his arms to Valley Master Gongsun and laughed, "Since today is Valley Master's day of celebration, of course we'll attend but it is a bit embarrassing that my friends and I have not brought any gifts."

Valley Master Gongsun was delighted when he heard that they would stay for his wedding, he said to the girl, "These people are great Masters of Wulin; just being able to have one present is a great honour never mind being able to..." He wanted to say six of them but he felt Yang Guo was young. Just now when he fought Zhou Botong, though his form and position were exquisite, his internal energy was ordinary. He felt that his martial arts practice aimed for style over substance and couldn't rank him as one of the 'great Masters of Wulin'. But if he leaves him out and says five, it would be a bit too discourteous, he hesitated a little and said, "...invite these heroes."

Fawang thought to himself, "This Valley Master has a majestic air, and from the formation he set to catch the Old Urchin, his martial arts and intelligence are excellent; but he hasn't got the ability to do great things. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu just said a few words and he's agitated."

Valley Master Gongsun said, "Sister Liu, this is Jinlun Fawang..." He then told her who they were and said Yang

Guo's name last. When the girl heard their names, she just nodded slightly, her face unmoved as if she did not care but to Yang Guo's name, she stared outside and didn't even nod.

Yang Guo's face was red, his mind was turning upside like an ocean storm, whatever Valley Master Gongsun said, he didn't hear. Nimoxing, Yin Kexi and the others did not know his background, they thought that he was embarrassed because he had recognized the wrong person.

Gongsun Lu'E was standing behind her father and heard every single word that Yang Guo had said, she thought to herself, "This morning his finger was pierced by the passion flower, and he immediately suffered pain from yearning for his lover. Right now he's filled with these thoughts, could it be that my new mother is his lover? What are the chances of that? Could it be that these people have come to the valley because of my new mother?" She examined her 'new mother' and saw that her face was expressionless, there was no joy or happiness on her face, neither was there any shyness; she did not look like a new bride at all and her suspicions deepened.

Yang Guo's chest felt as if it wanted to burst, he then thought, "Gu Gu must have a reason for being like this, I better stop running away with these thoughts and find out the truth."

He then stood up and bowed to the Valley Master. He said clearly, "I have a close one, that... that looks extremely like that Miss, I apologize for my mistake just now."

When the Valley Master heard these polite words, his face immediately changed and returned the bow. He then said, "It's not unusual to mistake someone for someone else, who can be blamed? But..." He stopped for a while and laughed,

“To have someone else who looks exactly like her is not only a great coincidence; it is also an extremely odd thing.” He was saying how could there be another equally as beautiful girl under heaven’s skies?

Yang Guo said, “Yes, it is extremely odd. Can I take the liberty to ask this Miss’ surname?”

Valley Master Gongsun had a faint smile and said, “Her surname is Liu. Is your close one also named Liu?”

Yang Guo said, “No.” He pondered, “Why did Gu Gu change her name to Liu?” He then had a thought, “Ah, it’s because I’m named *Yang.” [*Yangliu is the combined name for a willow tree. It symbolically indicates the link between them.] After another thought like this, his finger broke out in unbearable pain again.

Gongsun Lu’E saw his suffering and pitied him, her eyes never left his face.

Valley Master Gongsun examined Yang Guo for a while and then looked at the girl in white, her head was lowered and she didn’t make a single sound. He was becoming suspicious and thought, “Just now when she heard this punk call out, I heard her call out quietly ‘Guo’er, Guo’er, you’re here? Is it you that’s calling me?’ Could it be that she really is that little punk’s Auntie? But why is she not recognizing him?” He wanted to ask her but there were many people present; he thought this matter could be explained later after the wedding, so he took back his words.

Yang Guo said, “This Miss has not lived in this valley for long; I wonder how, did you and her meet?”

In ancient times, ordinarily girls would not meet outsiders easily, and they were even stricter about seeing guests on

their wedding day; but Jinlun Fawang and the others didn't take much notice. Some of them were from the west and the others roamed Jianghu; they weren't restrained by customs and traditions. They just felt that wearing plain white silk on her wedding day was a bit too dull. When they heard Yang Guo inquire about someone else's business when he asked the Valley Master how he met the girl, they felt that he had gone too far.

But Valley Master Gongsun also wanted to know about the background of his bride to be, he thought, "It could be that little punk really knows sister Liu." He said, "Brother Yang is correct. Half a month ago, I was picking herbs by the mountain side when I saw her lying at the foot of the mountain; she had a serious injury and was on the point of death. I examined her and knew that she had suffered a fire deviation while practicing internal energy, so I took her back to the valley and used my family's medicine to help her recover. We met by chance."

Jinlun Fawang interrupted, "This is the so called thousand li fate of marriage led by a string. Miss Liu must have wanted to repay this kindness so she agreed to marry. This really is a match that was made in heaven." His words seemed to be praising Valley Master Gongsun but in reality, he wanted to spite Yang Guo.

When Yang Guo heard this, his face did indeed change dramatically; his body trembled and there was a faint sweet taste at the back of his throat, he threw up a mouthful of blood.

When the girl in white saw this she quivered, "You... you..." She quickly stood up and wanted to stretch out her hand to help him up, but she forced herself to stop. Then she too spat out a mouthful of blood; her white dress was stained by it.

This Miss Liu was a name that Xiao Longnu had made up. That night after hearing the words of Huang Rong, she thought to herself that if she married Yang Guo, she will have caused him to be looked down on by everyone in the world. She felt uneasy about this; but if she were to stay with him in the ancient tomb forever, after a while he would get bored and would not be happy. She thought long and hard, eventually she hardened her heart and quietly left. Her love for Yang Guo was immense; to suddenly leave him like this was extremely difficult. She thought that if she returned to the ancient tomb, he would definitely come back and find her so she wandered alone in a wild, vast valley. One day, she sat down to practice when suddenly her thoughts of love surged forward; it was difficult to control and her inner chi suddenly surged through her veins and meridians and caused her old injury to react again. If Valley Master Gongsun hadn't passed by, she would have died there in the wild mountainside.

Valley Master Gongsun had lost his wife a long time ago; when he saw her, he couldn't imagine that someone could be as beautiful as she; his intent to rescue her had salacious thoughts added onto them.

Xiao Longnu was disheartened; she also thought that if she lived somewhere in seclusion by herself, she would not be able to stop herself and would follow the same disastrous path again. Going out again in search of Yang Guo and cause him grief. She saw the love that Valley Master Gongsun had for her and he asked for her hand. She blocked out her heart and agreed; she thought that after she becomes someone else's wife, she will sever her ties with Yang Guo completely. Along with living in such a secluded place, she assumed that she would never see him again. Who could have thought that Zhou Botong would

suddenly appear to cause trouble in the valley? The results would lead him here.

Xiao Longnu was filled with emotional turmoil at this sudden reunion with Yang Guo. She thought, "I've already agreed to marry someone else; I'll just keep up this act and let him leave in anger and hate me forever. With his talents and appearance, what need is there to worry that he won't be able to find someone else? Though my heart will be in pain for the rest of my life, he will be able to avoid the suffering of the future." Because of this, although she saw Yang Guo suffering, she ignored him; but her heart was mournful and it was becoming more and more difficult to endure. When she saw him throw up blood, she was filled with pity and sorrow; she couldn't help herself and she too threw up a mouthful of blood.

Her face was extremely white, she was staggering and wanted to return inside when Valley Master Gongsun said quickly, "Quickly sit down and don't move, don't disturb your veins and meridians." He turned around and said to Yang Guo, "Just leave; don't ever come back."

Hot tears filled Yang Guo's eyes, he said to Xiao Longnu, "Gu Gu, if I've done something wrong, you can beat me, scold me; even kill me with one thrust of a sword. I'm willing to accept all that. But why are you pretending that you don't know who I am?"

Xiao Longnu lowered her head and didn't reply, just lightly coughing twice.

Valley Master Gongsun was furious with Yang Guo when he angered her into throwing up blood. However, his self-control training was extremely good; he didn't break out in a rage. He lowered his voice and said, "If you don't leave then don't blame me for being merciless."

Yang Guo did not take any notice, his eyes were fixed on Xiao Longnu, he begged, "Gu Gu, I promise you that I will stay in the tomb with you forever; I won't regret it, let's leave together."

Xiao Longnu raised her head and her gaze met his; she saw his face was filled with boundless love along with thousands of pieces of pain and worry. Her heart was moved and thought, "I'll leave with him now!" But she immediately had another thought, "I didn't leave him on a whim. I have thought about all the good and bad points in detail. If I give in, I will bring him trouble in the future." So she turned her head to the side and gave a long sigh before saying, "I don't recognize you, I don't understand what you are saying. Just leave!"

There was no force behind the words but it was filled with love and passion; apart from Ma Guangzou who was a slow person and had no perception, everyone in the hall could tell that she loved Yang Guo and these words were against her heart's feelings.

Valley Master Gongsun was jealous, he thought, "Though you have agreed to marry me, you have never said half a word with such feeling." He looked at Yang Guo and saw a handsome face, his valiant air exuding everywhere; he and Xiao Longnu did indeed make a perfect couple. He pondered, "It looks like these two must be lovers. Because they had an argument, sister Liu agreed to marry me out of anger, she still has feelings for this punk. 'Gu Gu', 'Master', these must be pet names that they use when they are flirting with each other. This punk is older than sister Liu, how can he really call her 'Auntie', 'Master'." As he thought about this, his eyes revealed anger and hatred.

Fan Yiweng was very loyal to his Master. He knew that his Master was lonely and was always thinking of a way that

would be able to solve his Master's loneliness. A few days ago, he saw his Master had rescued a beautiful young girl and the girl had agreed to marry him; he was almost happier than his Master. Now he saw Yang Guo had suddenly come to cause trouble and had made his Master's new wife throw up blood; but his Master was still enduring this. So he came forward and shouted, "The punk named Yang, if you know what's best for you you'll leave! We don't welcome rude guests such as the likes of you."

Yang Guo heard but didn't listen; he said softly to Xiao Longnu, "Gu Gu, have you really forgotten me?"

Fan Yiweng was furious; he stretched out his hand to grab his back, intending to throw him out of the hall.

Yang Guo was concentrating on speaking to Xiao Longnu; he had completely ignored everything that was going on around him. He only noticed something when he felt Fan Yiweng's fingers on his back. He quickly moved out of the way and his opponent clutched thin air, but he heard a 'chi' sound, his opponent had made a hole in the back of his garment.

Yang Guo was becoming more and more anxious after his pleading once again was ignored by Xiao Longnu. If it were in the tomb where there's no one else, he could slowly plead with her; but here in the hall there were many people. Now Fan Yiweng had come out with insults and threats; he felt his whole body was filled with pain and suffering, and he turned all his anger and emotions onto Fan Yiweng. He shouted back, "I'm talking to my Gu Gu, what has it got to do with you Shortie?"

Fan Yiweng shouted loudly, "My Master told you to leave and never come back; if you don't listen then don't blame me for being merciless."

Yang Guo said angrily, "I choose not to leave; if my Gu Gu doesn't leave then I'll stay here for the rest of my life. Even if I die and my bones turn to ash, I'll still follow her." These words were meant for Xiao Longnu.

Valley Master Gongsun looked at Xiao Longnu and saw tears rolling from her eyes and eventually they splashed down on her blood stained dress. He felt sad and worried; he glanced over to Fan Yiweng and made a signal with his hands, telling him to kill Yang Guo and rid the longing that Xiao Longnu had once and for all.

Fan Yiweng was surprised with the signal that his Master had made, he had wanted to send him away from the valley and stop all this trouble and that was it. He didn't think that his Master would actually give him the signal to kill. He said loudly, "Just because it's my Master's day of celebration you think I won't kill you?" He then looked at his Master.

Valley Master Gongsun once again signaled with his hands, telling him to forget about what kind of day it was and just kill him. Fan Yiweng picked up his large staff and slammed it down on the floor, filling the room with vibrations. He shouted, "Little punk, are you really not afraid of losing your life?"

Yang Guo had just thrown up blood and the blood in his chest was rolling about, wanting to be thrown up. The internal energy of the Ancient Tomb sect is all about controlling your emotions, when Xiao Longnu's Master imparted her the formulae, she repeatedly told her to purge her emotions. In the end, Xiao Longnu was not able to control them and as a result, she threw up blood on many occasions.

Yang Guo was taught by Xiao Longnu; his internal energy was of the same nature as hers and now his arms and legs

were as cold as ice. He thought, "I'll throw up blood violently right here and now and die here in front of her; will she still ignore me?" But then he had another thought, "Gu Gu normally loves me very much, there must a reason behind all this; most probably she's being blackmailed by that Valley Master. She has no alternative and that's why she's ignoring me. If I cripple myself, it would be difficult for me to oppose him."

He made up his mind; his heart was stirred and he decided to fight his way out of this problem and rescue Xiao Longnu from this place. He steadied himself and submerged his chi into his dan tian, forcing the blood in his chest to flow back down. He gave a wry laugh and pointed to Fan Yiweng, saying, "This valley feels like it's filled with an air of death. When I want to come, you can't stop me, when I want to leave, don't dream of trying to make me stay."

Everyone saw the emotional state that he was in. He was like a madman but all of a sudden, he had steadied himself; they were all surprised to see this.

When Fan Yiweng saw Yang Guo throwing up blood just now; he felt sorry for him and had no desire to threaten his life. He swept his staff and a fierce gust of wind brushed over Yang Guo's clothes. He shouted, "Are you going to leave?"

Valley Master Gongsun frowned and said, "Yiweng, why are you still going on about leaving?" Fan Yiweng had just received a strict order from his Master; he had no choice but to sweep out his staff towards Yang Guo's shins.

Gongsun Lu'E knew her senior apprentice brother had great martial arts; though he wasn't tall, he possessed great strength and he had learned about seventy to eighty percent of her father's skills. His steel staff had killed

countless wild beasts. She thought that with Yang Guo being of a young age, he would definitely not be able to beat her apprentice brother's eighty one stances of the "Spilling Water Staff". If she waited for them to fight it would be difficult for her to save him. Though she saw her father's face was harsh as frost and filled with anger, she plucked up her courage and stood towards Yang Guo, saying, "Master Yang, staying here will do you no good, why do you want to give your life away for no reason?" Her tone was gentle, filled with compassion.

Fawang and the others looked at her, secretly surprised, thinking, "Yang Guo came to the valley with us; when did he become friends with this girl?"

Yang Guo nodded and laughed, he said, "Thank you for Miss' kindness. Do you want a beard to play with?"

Gongsun Lu'E was startled and asked, "What?"

Yang Guo said, "I'll rid him of his beard and give it to you to mess around with, how about it?"

Gongsun Lu'E lost her color in shock. She thought that he must be bored with his life; actually daring to make a joke like this. The rules of the Passionless Valley were very strict; these few words of advice to Yang Guo would result in a heavy punishment. How could she know that he would reply jokingly? Her face went red; she didn't dare to say anything else and stepped back into the line of disciples.

Fan Yiweng was a short man and was immensely proud of his beard; when he heard these mocking words from Yang Guo, he threw away his staff and rushed forward, shouting, "Little punk, I'll let you experience pain from my beard first." In the middle of his cry, his long beard swept forward.

Yang Guo laughed, "The Old Urchin didn't cut off your beard; let me have a try." He took out his scissors from his bag and cut forward towards the beard. Fan Yiweng's beard was flung forward towards his neck; it had great force behind it. Yang Guo had already moved out of the way; the opened blades of the scissors came forward, a 'ka' sound was heard as they closed.

Fan Yiweng was shocked and he quickly did a somersault to get out of the way; just one slight delay and his beard would have been cut off. This wasn't an ordinary kind of shock. The people who were watching called out quietly.

The reason Yang Guo had asked Blacksmith Feng to make this pair of scissors was so that he could use it against Li Mochou's fly whisk. Li Mochou uses her "Divine Five Poison Palm" and her fly whisk to sweep through Jianghu; her fly whisk techniques were superb. Before Yang Guo could use the scissors to neutralize her fly whisk techniques, he had to first think carefully about how to use it; how he'd need to thrust forward when the fly whisk swayed around; how he'd cut when the fly whisk came forward to attack him. How could he know that before he had the chance to use it against Li Mochou, he would actually come across a person in the Passionless Valley who uses his beard as a weapon? Yang Guo thought, "No matter how good your beard is; it can't be better than Li Mochou's fly whisk." He had no fear and pressed forward with the scissors.

Fan Yiweng had spent over ten years in training his beard technique; because he had his hands for protection, his beard was more lethal than the conventional whip or fly whisk. His head swung around and brought his beard forward; at the same time he threw out two palms towards Yang Guo.

A while go, Zhou Botong had tried to use the scissors to cut off his beard; but instead of cutting it off, the beard wrapped around the scissors, and he could only admit defeat. Everyone had seen the martial arts of Zhou Botong; everyone knew that Yang Guo could not compare to him. Who knew that in the hands of Yang Guo, the scissors swept, cut and threatened; going to and fro like it was in a dance? It was actually better than the way Zhou Botong had handled the scissors and everyone marveled. In the proficiency of martial arts and internal energy level, of course Yang Guo was miles behind Zhou Botong; but he had carefully studied the stances of Li Mochou's fly whisk and had devised scissors stances to counter them. Because the way the beard was used was similar to that of the fly whisk, the scissors were indeed effective against the beard and Yang Guo got the upper hand. Of course this was different to the unplanned and unstructured scissor techniques of Zhou Botong. But Fawang and the others did not know the reason behind it; they saw with their own eyes Zhou Botong thrusting the scissors towards him. In accordance with his character, this would be something that he would devise to cause trouble. Yang Guo was most proficient with a sword and Fawang knew this.

On many occasions, Fan Yiweng was almost injured by the scissors and as a result, he stopped looking down on Yang Guo. He changed his stance and swung his beard wildly around, striking out in all directions, attacking forward and sweeping across. This actually formed another set of stances. Yang Guo cut downwards many times but each time he caught thin air, he also felt the wind from his opponent's palms was fierce. Sometimes the beard was a decoy while the palm was real, at other times the palms lured the opponent and the beard attacked; this was a set of ingenious martial arts that the world of Wulin had never seen before.

In a short while, tens of moves were exchanged. Yang Guo thought, "The Valley Master is vicious and cruel; his martial arts would definitely be much better than this shortie; if I can't beat the disciple, how can I beat the Master?" He became slightly impatient. But Fan Yiweng's beard was thicker and longer than Li Mochou's fly whisk; as the beard spread out, there really were no weaknesses.

After a few more stances, Yang Guo concentrated on his opponent. He saw his opponent's head swinging around; he had a ludicrous appearance and his beard was getting faster and faster. His head was swinging around especially fast and suddenly he had a thought; he had found a way to break this martial art of his. Yang Guo leapt back five feet and called out, "Hold off!"

Fan Yiweng stopped his attack and said, "Since you've admitted defeat little brother, just leave!"

Yang Guo shook his head as he laughed and said, "After your beard's been cut, how long will it take to grow back?"

Fan Yiweng said, "What's it got to do with you? I've never cut my beard before."

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "Pity, pity!"

Fan Yiweng said, "Pity what?"

Yang Guo said, "In three stances I'm going to cut off your beard."

Fan Yiweng thought, "You and I have already fought for tens of stances and we're at a draw; you must be dreaming if you think you can win in just three more stances." Fan Yiweng shouted, "Watch this stance!" His right palm came chopping out.

Yang Guo slanted his left palm and smashed down with the scissors in his right hand, attacking the opponent's forehead on the left side. He was tall, when the scissors attacked his opponent's head it cut downwards. Fan Yiweng slanted his head to avoid the attack but then, Yang Guo's left palm came downwards across his forehead on the right side. There was a vicious force behind the chop; Fan Yiweng quickly moved his head to the left. The opponent's attack was fast, his reaction was also very swift and his beard followed him and swung upwards. Yang Guo's scissors had been opened and was guarding the right; a 'ka' sound was heard as the scissors cut down. He cut off over two feet of the beard.

Everyone called out and all felt shocked; they saw that he did indeed succeed in cutting off Fan Yiweng's beard in three stances.

After fighting for a long time, Yang Guo eventually found out that when Fan Yiweng's beard was flung to the left, his head would first move right; when the beard was swung upwards, his head would first hang down; he cursed himself for being so stupid, "His beard is on his head, if the beard moves, he will of course first move his head. I didn't attack the source and tangled with his beard, what an idiot." He planned his three attacks and then told him that he would cut off Fan Yiweng's beard in three stances.

Fan Yiweng was stunned as he watched the beard that he has grown for half his life floating to the floor; he felt anger and sorrow at the same time. He went up and down as he picked up his staff and then shouted angrily, "If you don't kill me, then don't dream of leaving the valley."

Yang Guo laughed, "I wasn't planning on leaving in the first place!"

Fan Yiweng swept his staff towards his waist.

Ma Guangzou had fought with Fen Yiweng previously and had been on the receiving end; right now he was feeling rather pleased and said loudly, "Old Shortie, you face wasn't the best sight in the first place; but after losing your beard, you look even weirder."

When Fan Yiweng heard this, he clenched his teeth and fought even harder.

Yang Guo only knew what his soft beard techniques were like and didn't know how strong he was; he saw the incoming staff and stuck out his scissors; a 'dang' sound was heard and his arms felt numb, the scissors had been bent out of shape.

Just one stance and the scissors were out of commission. The onlookers had seen Yang Guo gain victory but they didn't predict that the weapons would change and the battle would continue. The difference between the two could be clearly seen, one was holding an extremely long and heavy weapon while the other was holding a piece of scrap metal.

Gongsun Lu'E could not hold back anymore and called out, "Master Yang, you're not as strong as my senior apprentice brother; why continue?"

Valley Master Gongsun was beginning to get angry when he saw his daughter protecting an outsider; he glanced at her and saw her face was filled with concern. He then looked at Xiao Longnu and saw that her expression was calm, appearing like she had no concern for Yang Guo's safety whatsoever; his anger immediately turned to joy. He thought, "So she has no feelings for that punk; otherwise, how could she have no concern for him now that he's facing danger?"

He didn't know that Xiao Longnu knew that Yang Guo was ingenious and his martial arts were above those of Fan Yiweng; when the two fight, victory is certain so there was no need for her to worry.

Yang Guo threw the bent scissors on the floor and said, "Old Fan, you're not a match for me, just throw away your staff and surrender."

Fan Yiweng said angrily, "If you can beat my staff then I'll knock myself dead."

Yang Guo said, "What a pity, what a pity!"

Fan Yiweng called out, "Watch this stance!" A stance of "Pushing Down the Peak of Mount Tai" was sent out towards his head. Yang Guo dodged to the side and his left foot was placed on the head of the staff. Fan Yiweng shook his hands, flinging the staff. Yang Guo followed the staff and was forced into midair, but his left foot was still standing steadily on the staff head. Fan Yiweng shook the staff a few times but couldn't shake Yang Guo off. He was about to turn the staff when Yang Guo's right foot advanced and he was actually running towards him on the staff.

In the eyes of Fan Yiweng and the onlookers, these two stances were inconceivably strange; but in reality, it was a technique of the Ancient Tomb sect that utilizes great lightness kung fu to defeat a long and large weapon.

Years ago when Li Mochou fought Wu Santong in Jiaying, she stood on the chestnut tree that Wu Santong had used as a weapon and she couldn't be shaken off by him. Li Mochou had used this type of martial art.

Fan Yiweng was stunned and in this time, Yang Guo's left foot had advanced a step and he kicked out with his right towards his nose. Fan Yiweng was in an extremely

distressing situation; the enemy was attached to his weapon. If he leapt backwards he would bring the enemy with him and would not be able to avoid that kick. His hands were holding onto the staff so he couldn't use his hands to block; his beard had been cut off and couldn't be used as defensive weapon. It was an urgent situation and he had no choice but to throw away the steel staff and leap back to avoid the kick.

A 'dang' sound was heard as one end landed on the floor. Before the other end landed as well, Yang Guo had picked it up in his hands.

Ma Guangzou, Nimoxing, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others cheered.

Yang Guo placed the staff on the floor and laughed, "What about it?"

Fan Yiweng's face went red and said, "I was careless and fell for your trick, I'm not accepting it."

Yang Guo said, "We'll go again." He threw the staff towards Fan Yiweng who stretched out his hand to catch it. However, when the staff was two feet in front of him, it suddenly swept up. Fan Yiweng clutched thin air while Yang Guo flew over and stretched out his arm, taking the staff once again. Ma Guangzou's and the others' cheers were becoming louder. Fan Yiweng's face was now purple.

Fawang and Yin Kexi looked at each other and both secretly laughed, praising Yang Guo's cleverness. Yesterday, Zhou Botong had shot out broken spearheads towards them with the force immediately taken back as soon as it shot out; after the spearheads flew out, they suddenly changed direction in midair; now Yang Guo was copying him. But there were four spearheads while there was only one staff; the staff was also heavy and to change the force was not

hard; what Yang Guo had done was much easier than what Zhou Botong had done.

But Valley Master Gongsun and his disciples did not know what it was about and all were shocked.

Yang Guo laughed, "What? Do you want to go again?"

His beard had been cut and weapon taken but it was all due to cleverness; how could he admit defeat without any protest? He said loudly, "If you use real martial arts to beat me then I'll admit defeat."

Yang Guo chuckled, "In martial arts, ingenuity comes first. Your Master's mind is unclear; of course the disciples he teaches will be lacking a bit. I'll give you some advice; it's better if you go and find another Master." These words were an insult directed at Valley Master Gongsun.

Fan Yiweng thought, "My study of martial arts is lacking and I've disgraced my Master; if I really can't win then I'll commit suicide to apologize to Master." He clenched his teeth and stood up straight.

Yang Guo swept the steel staff towards him and placed it in his hands, he said, "Be careful this time; if you lose your staff again, you won't be able to blame anyone else."

Fan Yiweng did not reply. He held the end of the staff tightly with his right and thought, "You'll only be able to take away this staff if you cut off my right arm."

Yang Guo called out, "Careful!" He flung himself forward until his left hand rested on the end of the staff; the index and middle finger of his right hand went towards his opponent's eyes; at the same time, his left foot had flipped upwards and was holding down the staff's body. This was a

stance from the “Dog Beating Stick Technique”, “Stealing the Staff from the Mouth of the Tiger”.

On the previous two times that Yang Guo took the staff, though everyone thought his movements were special, they all saw what happened clearly. But this time even Fan Yiweng didn’t know what was going on; he just blinked and the staff was in the hands of the opponent again. Only Jinlun Fawang with his profound martial arts knowledge and his experience of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” knew that Yang Guo had used one of the skills of this stick technique.

Ma Guangzou called out, “The ‘No Beard Long Beard’. Are you in awe now?”

Fan Yiweng called out, “He used witchcraft, and it isn’t real martial arts, why should I admit defeat?”

Yang Guo laughed, “How will you admit defeat?”

Fan Yiweng said, “Only if you use real martial arts to beat me, then I’ll admit defeat.”

Yang Guo returned the staff to him and said, “Fine, we’ll go another couple of stances.”

Fan Yiweng was extremely worried about his clever empty-handed staff snatching techniques; he thought, “No matter how much advantage I get, when he’s at a point where he can hold me off no longer he’ll suddenly use his witchcraft. It would be difficult for me to win.” So he said, “I use such a large and long weapon yet you are empty handed, even if I win you won’t take it.”

Yang Guo laughed, “You’re afraid of my “Empty Hands Entering A Hundred Blades” kung fu; fine, I’ll use a weapon.” He scoured the room and all he saw were bare walls, there wasn’t one single weapon that he could use.

However, in the courtyard there were two large willow trees; it had many branches and had emerald green leaves hanging down from it. He looked at Xiao Longnu and said, "Since you want to have Liu as a surname, I'll use a willow branch as a weapon!" He leapt into the courtyard and broke off an inch thick branch; it was about four feet long. The length and thickness was similar to the Beggar Clan's Dog Beating Stick. The branch still had its leaves which gave the weapon elegance.

Xiao Longnu's mind was fluttering all over the place; she had no plans for the future, the longer that Yang Guo was in her sight, the harder it was for her to leave him. She pondered to herself, "Though separating from Yang Guo was heartbreaking, she had a thought about this a hundred times and was able to tolerate it." Right now, he was here in person in front of her very eyes; every word of his, every action, every smile and even his anger, all of them moved and stirred her heart. She wanted to go inside and stop seeing and hearing him but how could she? She lowered her head and didn't say anything; but she was feeling as if a thousand steel knives were cutting right into her heart.

End of Chapter 17.

Chapter 18 - Valley Master Gongsun

Translated by Noodles



Gongsun Zhi was using his greatest skill "Yin Yang Wild Blades". The black sword was originally soft and yin but right now it was hacking and

chopping solidly, changing into the yang and hard nature of saber play. Meanwhile, the heavy and clumsy jagged saber was now piercing and cutting, going down the road of lightness and swiftiness. The saber had become a sword, the sword had become a saber, and it really was extraordinary.

Fan Yiweng was furious when he saw Yang Guo pick a willow branch as a weapon, treating this as if it was a game and showing no respect towards him at all. He didn't know that within the softness of the willow branch there was also toughness and that he was going to use the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" with it. Though it couldn't compare with the bamboo treasure of the Beggar Clan, it was a lethal weapon that matched any precious sword or saber.

Ma Guangzuo said, "Brother Yang, just use my saber!" He took the saber out of the sheath and the blade glimmered; it really was a sharp blade.

Yang Guo saluted with his arms and laughed, "Thank you! This brother isn't a bad person; it's just a pity that he follows the wrong Master. His martial arts are poor and just a willow branch will be enough to beat him." The willow branch moved forward and attached itself to the steel staff.

Once again, Fan Yiweng heard him insult his Master; he was thinking that this time it will be a life and death battle; he was not going to hold anything back. He waved the staff around which generated noises within the air and started to use his eighty-one stances of the "Spilling Water Staff". The reason behind the name 'Spilling Water' is that no splash or spill of water can advance; the staff stances were extremely tight and unyielding.

At first, the staff was swift and powerful, but after a few stances, he felt that the staff was gradually moving towards one side. The head of the staff felt skewed and the wind generated by the staff was becoming weaker.

Yang Guo was using the “Dog Beating Stick Technique’s” ‘coil’ theory; the branch was attached to the staff head and when the staff moved to the east, the branch moved to the east; when the staff was flipped upwards, the branch followed; but at the final stage, his internal energy forced the staff to pull or push a little more in another direction and staff head moved out of the control of Fan Yiweng. This particular ‘coil’ formulae of the “Dog Beating Stick Technique” is derived from the advanced martial art theory of ‘four liang moving a thousand jin’, subtle and ingenious, this theory far exceeded the methods of ‘using force against force’ or ‘using the current to move the boat.’

The onlookers were becoming more and more surprised; they could not believe that the very young Yang Guo would possess such ingenious martial arts. They saw that Fan Yiweng’s staff was gradually becoming weaker while Yang Guo’s willow branch was becoming stronger.

Thirty stances later, Fan Yiweng’s staff was completely under the control of the willow branch; the more strength Fan Yiweng used, the more uncontrollable the staff became. In the end, he felt as if he had entered an extremely strong cyclone, making him dizzy and dazed, completely losing his bearings.

Valley Master Gongsun’s hand came down on the stone table, and called out, “Yiweng, stand down!”

The noise created was thunderous, even Yang Guo’s heart skipped a beat; he thought to himself, “I can’t let him slip away.” He then shook his arm and changed to the ‘turn’

formulae; his body froze and his wrist kept on drawing circles, turning Fan Yiweng around like a spinning top. The faster that Yang Guo turned his hands, the faster Fan Yiweng spun; the staff in his hand acted like the handle of a spinning top. Yang Guo said, "If you can stop your feet and don't fall, then you're a man. But if your master can't teach, then the disciples he teaches will trip up in battle." The willow branch lifted upwards and he leapt backwards over ten feet.

Fan Yiweng's body and mind were not under his control at this moment in time; he was stumbling, and after a few more turns, he would fall to the floor.

Valley Master Gongsun suddenly leapt up and palmed the head of the staff in midair and lightly came back down. That move he did appeared to be ordinary and light but there was a great force behind it; he had slammed the staff two feet into the floor and stopped it spinning. Fan Yiweng grabbed the staff tightly and didn't drop, but his body was stumbling and swaying as if he was drunk, his bearings lost for the time being.

Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the others looked at Yang Guo, and then looked at Valley Master Gongsun; they now knew that these two people were definitely not easy people to deal with. They planned to watch this great battle from the side without interfering. Ma Guangzuo was the only one who had intended to help Yang Guo; he called out, "Brother Yang, great kung fu! Shortie has lost!"

Fan Yiweng breathed in deeply and steadied himself; he turned around and suddenly knelt down before his Master. He then kowtowed four times and without saying a word, suddenly ran towards a stone pillar.

Everyone was shocked; no one had predicted that his character was so fiery that after suffering a defeat he would kill himself.

Valley Master Gongsun called out, "Oh no!" He leapt up from his table and stretched out his hand to grab his back; but they were too far apart and Fan Yiweng was very quick, the Valley Master could only grab thin air.

Fan Yiweng used all his strength in his effort to run into the pillar but suddenly he felt his forehead going into something soft. He raised his head and saw Yang Guo with his two palms out standing in front of the pillar.

He said, "Brother Weng, what is the most painful thing in the world?"

When Yang Guo saw Fan Yiweng kneeling down to his Master, he knew that he was up to something so he prepared himself. He was close to Fan Yiweng and managed to get ahead of him, keeping him from the pillar with his palms.

Fan Yiweng was stunned, he asked, "What is it?"

Yang Guo said mournfully, "I don't know myself. But the pain in my heart is ten times greater than yours yet I haven't killed myself; why are you doing this?"

Fan Yiweng said, "You've won; what pain have you got in your heart?"

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "What's so important about winning and losing in battle? I don't know how many times I've been beaten in my life. When you tried to kill yourself, your Master worried about you. If I tried to kill myself, my Master would think nothing of it; that is a deeply hurtful thing."

Fan Yiweng still did not understand. Valley Master Gongsun called out sternly, "Yiweng, if you have any more stupid thoughts then you'll be disobeying the orders of your Master. Stand to the side and watch me take care of this scum."

Fan Yiweng did not dare to disobey his Master and retreated. He stared at Yang Guo; he himself did not know what he felt towards him...anger, loathing, or respect?

When Xiao Longnu heard Yang Guo say 'If I tried to kill myself, my Master would think nothing of it'; her eyes turned red and more tears fell from them. She thought, "If you died, do you think I'd still be able to live?"

Valley Master Gongsun had kept his eye on her all along and now he suddenly saw her tears once again; he was jealous and angry. He clapped his hands three times and called out, "Catch that little rat." He looked upon himself highly, thinking that it was beneath him to fight Yang Guo. The two groups of disciples from the side responded. They stood in all directions and suddenly called out; each group of four held a fish net and they surrounded Yang Guo.

Yang Guo and Fawang arrived here with the others with Fawang being the head of the group; now that it had come to this, he should come out and make a stand on this issue; but all he did was chuckle and watched from the side.

The Valley Master did not know what Fawang was thinking and assumed that he was laughing at him for not being able to handle Yang Guo, he thought, "I'm going to show what the Passionless Valley is made out of." He again clapped three times.

The sixteen disciples crossed and changed positions, decreasing the size of the encirclement a few steps. The

four nets kept on changing positions, from horizontal to vertical, from straight to bend.

Yang Guo had seen the disciples in green twice use this fish net formation to catch Zhou Botong; its variations were indeed profound and it was extremely hard to defend against. This formation and Quanzhen's "Big Dipper Formation" each had its own strong points. He thought, "The Old Urchin with his martial arts was captured by this net formation; how am I going to cope? If he just wanted to escape and he threw Ma Guangzuo and Fan Yiweng into the nets and took the opportunity to slip away, it would not suit his purpose. My intent is to stay here."

Each net was over ten feet wide and the handlers were hidden behind it; if he wanted to defeat this formation he would first have to attack the green disciples who were holding the nets. But as soon as he got too close, he would be captured by the nets. He had no way of making his move. The sixteen were pressing closer and closer. Yang Guo didn't know what to do and could only use the Ancient Tomb's lightness kung fu to dart and fly around in the hall; floating here and dashing there making it hard for the opponents to predict the direction he was heading.

He moved around in all directions but the sixteen disciples did not follow him; they just shank the encirclement step by step. Yang Guo dashed around as he searched for a way to defeat this formation. He saw that although the nets were turning around extremely swiftly, the places where they overlapped each other remained covered and didn't show a gap at all. He thought, "There's nothing I can do apart from using projectiles to hurt the handlers." He swiveled around once and there were a handful of Jade Bee needles in his hand, he waved out his left hand and shot out seven or eight Jade Bee needles at the four disciples north of him. He saw that the four of them were about to get hit when he

suddenly heard light 'ding ding ding ding' sounds; the Jade Bee needles were sucked in by the net. The fish net was actually embellished with small magnets; with such a large net, no matter how powerful the enemy's projectile, it would still be blocked by the net. The Jade Bee needle was seventy percent gold, thirty percent steel; because of this thirty percent, the Jade Bee needles were attracted by the net's magnets.

Yang Guo thought that this strike would succeed; how would he know that this net actually had so many clever uses? He quickly looked at the Valley Master and knew that it would be of no use to fire out any more projectiles. His right hand went into his pockets and put the needles away. He was just about to think of another way to break the formation when the net from the east side came closer. The leader of the four handlers whistled, a gold light flashed across his eyes as the net came over his right shoulder. Yang Guo darted back and was about to escape to the north west when the nets from the north and west side pressed forwards.

Yang Guo cursed, "It's over...it's over! I wonder what torture I'll endure after falling into the hands of this Valley Master." Suddenly he heard one of the handlers of the southern net call out, "Oh no!" Yang Guo turned his head and saw that Gongsun Lu'E had fallen onto the floor; one of the corners of the net was hanging down loosely.

This was the only route out of the formation; Yang Guo didn't give it another thought and darted out of the encirclement. He saw Gongsun Lu'E had fallen onto the floor calling out in pain but she was signaling with her eyes to leave the valley at once.

Yang Guo thought to himself, "I'm really touched by her kindness. But if I leave the valley, Gu Gu would definitely be

forced into marrying that old Valley Master. I don't care if I get captured and suffer the pain of a thousand knives, I'll never leave." He stood in the corner of the room and looked at Xiao Longnu thinking, "I've just experienced great danger yet you still have no reaction?" He saw that Xiao Longnu was still hanging her head and keeping quiet.

The Valley Master clapped his hands twice and the nets suddenly dispersed. He turned to Gongsun Lu'E and said coldly, "What's wrong with you?"

Gongsun Lu'E said, "My leg suddenly had in a painful cramp."

Valley Master Gongsun suspected that his daughter had fallen in love with Yang Guo and as a result gave him an escape route at such a critical moment. But because there were outsiders here it wasn't appropriate for him to break out in a rage, he laughed coldly and said, "Fine, stand down. Shi Si'er will take her position."

Gongsun Lu'E lowered her head and stood down. A youngster in green responded and stepped forward. This person was only fourteen or fifteen years of age and had their hair tied in two plaits.

Gongsun Lu'E glanced at Yang Guo with grieving in her eyes. Yang Guo felt apologetic and said to himself, "I'm afraid that I won't be able to repay her kindness and compassion in this life."

Valley Master Gongsun clapped his hands four times and suddenly the sixteen disciples retreated. Yang Guo was shocked, thinking, "Could it be that you admit defeat?" Just as he was wondering about this, he turned his head and saw Gongsun Lu'E had a fearful expression on her face; she kept on signaling to him with her eyes to leave the valley. From her appearance, it appeared that he was going to

face something extremely dangerous. Yang Guo smiled; instead of running away, he pulled a chair over and sat down. There was a light ringing noise in the inner halls and the sixteen disciples came out again, their hands still holding fish nets.

Everyone's expression changed as soon as they saw the nets; the fish nets had been changed and now it were full of hooks and blades that glimmered. They were extremely sharp; whoever gets caught in the net would be pierced all over and would have no hope of surviving.

Ma Guangzuo called out, "Hey, Valley Master, do you want to lose face? How can you use such an evil thing to treat your guests?"

Valley Master Gongsun pointed to Yang Guo and said, "I don't want to hurt you. I've warned you many times to leave the valley but you chose to stay here and stir up trouble. This is your final warning, leave quickly."

Even someone with Ma Guangzuo's courage shivered at the sight of the nets; when he heard the hooks and knives colliding with each other, he was even more afraid. He stood up and pulled Yang Guo's hand, "Brother Yang, it would be better for us to leave than face this evil thing; why do you insist on quarrelling with him?"

Yang Guo looked at Xiao Longnu waiting to see her response.

As soon as Xiao Longnu saw the Valley Master summon out blade and hook laced nets, she had prepared for death. As soon as Yang Guo gets caught in the nets she would throw herself on them. They would die together in each others arms. When she thought about this, she felt peace in her heart, thinking that all the world's pain and suffering will be

gone in a flash. Her lips couldn't stop themselves from showing a smile.

How would Yang Guo know what she was feeling at this time? He thought about how he was about to face a great danger yet she could still smile; his heart was in pain, even more deeply than before. In the midst of these feelings of hurt, sorrow, indignation, and approaching danger, he suddenly had an idea and didn't continue on with these thoughts. He went over to Xiao Longnu and bowed lightly. He said, "Gu Gu, Guo'er is in danger today; I would like to borrow your silk belt and silk gloves."

Xiao Longnu was only thinking about the joy of dying with him and nothing else; when she heard these words she immediately took out a pair of silk gloves and a silk belt to give to him.

Yang Guo received them slowly and stared at her, he said, "You're acknowledging who I am now?"

Xiao Longnu was filled with love and smiled, "My heart acknowledged you long ago!"

Yang Guo's spirits were greatly lifted and he quivered, "You've decided to leave with me and not marry that Valley Master?"

Xiao Longnu smiled and nodded, "I've decided to go with you, and of course I won't marry anyone else. Guo'er; naturally that makes me your wife'."

When she said 'go with you', she was talking about dieing with Yang Guo. Yang Guo didn't understand so of course the others would not either; but her words of 'naturally that makes me your wife' couldn't be clearer. Valley Master Gongsun's face went white and he hurried the disciples in

green to make their move. The sixteen disciples set the nets in motion and moved around.

After hearing these words of Xiao Longnu's, Yang Guo felt as if he was bought back to life from death; his courage and valor soared; even if he were facing greater dangers he wouldn't care. He put on the impregnable silk gloves and held the silk belt in his right hand. The silk belt was sent out with its ringing noises like a white snake.

At the end of the silk belt was a gold bell, the belt extended and retracted once, the bell had struck the 'Concealed Valley' pressure point of one of the disciples in the southern position and on its way back it struck the 'Crooked Pond' pressure point of one of the disciples in the eastern position. The 'Concealed Valley' pressure point is found on the knee, the person could not stay upright and knelt on the floor; the 'Crooked Pond' pressure point is found on the elbow area, as soon it was struck, the person's arm became numb and limp, the fish net slipped out of their hands.

After those two pre-emptive attacks, the fish net formation immediately broke up. The four disciples in the west were shocked and when they attacked they were slightly slow; Yang Guo's gold bell turned towards them and after another two strikes, another two disciples had their pressure points struck. But at this time, the net from the north was thrown over his head. The knives and hooks were half a foot away from his head; he couldn't use the silk belt to deal with them.

Yang Guo's left hand turned upwards and grabbed the fish net; he used its force and flung it away. Although he grabbed hooks and daggers, his hands were covered by the silk gloves and were completely protected. The net was now heading back towards the four disciples in green.

When these disciples practiced this net formation, the only thing they were afraid of was the enemy slipping through the net; they concentrated on keeping it tight and unyielding. The thought of the net returning over them had never entered their minds. They watched as the glittering knives and hooks came towards their heads; they knew exactly how powerful the net was and called out in alarm as they let go and leapt away. The youngster who replaced Gongsun Lu'E was weaker than the rest; a dagger eventually pierced his thigh, blood poured and he fell down, crying out in pain on the floor.

Yang Guo laughed, "Little brother, don't be scared, I'm not going to hurt you." His left hand flipped the net away and his right moved the silk belt. Sounds of 'qiang lang lang' and 'ding ling ling' were heard as the hooks and daggers collided with each other with the golden bell ringing. The sounds were extremely crisp. After this, none of the disciples dared to come forward and stood far away by the wall. But because they hadn't received the order to back down by their master, they didn't dare admit defeat and run away. Though they didn't admit defeat, they had already lost.

Ma Guangzuo clapped and cheered for a while but because he was the only one, he felt a bit lonely and glanced over to Fawang saying, "Hey monk, aren't brother Yang Guo's martial arts great? Why aren't you cheering?"

Fawang laughed and said, "His skills are great, extremely good but there's no need to call out like that."

Ma Guangzuo asked, "Why?"

Fawang saw that the Valley Master was frowning and was now making his way towards the centre of the hall slowly. Fawang concentrated on him and ignored Ma Guangzuo.

When Valley Master Gongsun heard Xiao Longnu say, 'naturally that makes me your wife', he knew that his sweet dream of the past two weeks had come to an end; though he was disappointed and angry, he thought, "Even if I can't have your heart I'm going to have you. I'll kill that bastard in one palm and I don't care what your feelings towards me will be, after a time, your heart will eventually return to me."

Yang Guo saw that his eyebrows were rising higher and higher to a point where his brows and eyes looked like they were standing straight up; he didn't know what school of martial arts this was from and became slightly afraid. His right hand lifted the silk belt and his left clutched the net, he was completely prepared. He knew that this battle would decide the life and death of he and Xiao Longnu; he didn't dare to allow one strand of carelessness in his actions.

Valley Master Gongsun circled around Yang Guo slowly. Yang Guo too turned around slowly on the floor; he didn't dare to gaze away from him. He saw that he was still delaying making his move and knew that when he attacked, it will be extremely swift and vicious. All he saw was him raising his hands, leveling them three times in front of him and then his hands came together. The sound generated was as if gold and iron had collided. Yang Guo's heart skipped a beat and he moved back a step. Valley Master Gongsun suddenly stretched out his right arm and grabbed the fish net, pulling it away to one side. Yang Guo felt that his pull had great force behind it; his fingers ached and he could only let go. Valley Master Gongsun threw the net to the four disciples and shouted, "Stand down!"

After having the net snatched away, Yang Guo didn't allow him to make the first move again. The silk belt shot out and the gold bell shook, attacking the opponent's 'Large Bone'

and 'Celestial Tripod' pressure points on the shoulder and neck.

Valley Master Gongsun's chest was open with his arms stretched out to the side but Yang Guo didn't dare to attack the major pressure points on his chest rashly. He first attacked the smaller pressure points on his body to test him out.

Valley Master Gongsun's martial arts were actually from a different school of martial arts; he ignored the pressure point attacks of the bell and stretched out his right arm to grab Yang Guo's arm. A 'ding ding' sound was heard as the 'Large Bone' and 'Celestial Tripod' pressure points were struck but he didn't feel it. A 'hu' sound was heard as the grab turned into a palm, striking towards Yang Guo's chest on the left side.

Yang Guo was alarmed and quickly leaned his body to the side. Luckily for him, his lightness kung fu was excellent and he avoided this sudden palm from his opponent.

Yang Guo had once heard the great fighters of Wulin, Ouyang Feng, Hong Qigong and Huang Yaoshi talk about martial arts, and knew that when someone has reached advanced levels of internal energy that, at the time the opponent strikes their pressure points, they were able to seal off themselves and negate the attack. But they will still show some effects of their pressure points being attacked. Ouyang Feng's martial arts could lead to reversal of the veins and the major pressure points over one's body to change position. When someone sees his legs above his head, they would be able to tell immediately.

But the enemy he is facing now actually made no response to his pressure points being struck; it was as if he didn't have any pressure points on his body. This type of martial

arts is rarely seen or heard of; he couldn't stop some fear from creeping into his heart. He saw his palms had turned over and there seemed to be black air within the palms. While it was coming towards him the wind was forceful and pressing, he didn't dare to receive it head on. He used the silk belt to tangle with him while his left hand protected the vital areas of his body.

Soon, they had exchanged over ten stances. Yang Guo had put all his concentration into fighting him. Suddenly he saw the left palm of his opponent coming lightly towards his chest; it appeared to be a soft palm but it was the opposite; it was actually a palm from the same set of palm skills as Wanyan Ping's "Iron Palm". He quickly leaped away a couple of feet.

When the Valley Master's palm met thin air, he didn't take it back and the palm kept on going forward another two feet; he moved quickly and the palm was now in front of Yang Guo. Normally, when a person fires out a punch or sends out a palm, the strength originates from the arm. They would pull back their arm and send out the attack; but the attack Valley Master had just used now originated from his body. His hand and palm didn't move; he was actually using the force from his body to attack the opponent. Although the force from the body is greater than that from the arm, using it to send out a palm or punch will result in slower attacks; but Valley Master Gongsun's palm was both fierce and swift.

Yang Guo wanted to lean his body to the side to avoid the palm but there was no time, he could only send out his left palm and meet it head on. A 'pai' sound was generated as the palms collided; Yang Guo was jolted back three steps while the Valley Master stood his ground with his body swaying a little.

Standing there without moving, the Valley Master appeared to have the upper hand; but in actual fact the power from Yang Guo's palm had caused a throbbing pain in the side of his body; he was extremely shocked. "I'd used all my power behind that "Iron Palm", but that punk was still actually able to receive it. If we carry on like this I may not be able to kill him. If we fight to a draw, I won't be able to say anything." He clapped his hands twice; the sounds were ear piercingly loud. He said, "The one named Yang, I have been merciful in that palm, do you know that?"

If this were a normal martial arts duel, and if Yang Guo continued fighting, he would definitely lose. When the Valley Master said these words he should have admitted that his martial arts were weaker; but today he knew that the opponent would never allow him and Xiao Longnu to leave in peace. He had no other option but to engage in a fight to the death. Yang Guo still had his ridiculing and derisory nature towards his opponents and Xiao Longnu had returned to him now; his heart was overflowing with joy. He laughed and said, "If you kill me, how can my Gu Gu marry you? If you don't kill me, my Gu Gu still would not marry you. What mercy is there? It's just that you couldn't do anything to me!"

Yang Guo was too kind in his surmising of his opponent's thoughts. The Valley Master would love nothing more than to kill him in one stroke to avoid him causing any problems in the future. Even if it caused Xiao Longnu to hate and loathe him, he couldn't have cared less; he couldn't do anything to Yang Guo because his palms couldn't do anything to him. He turned towards his daughter and said, "Take out my weapons."

Gongsun Lu'E delayed and didn't reply.

Valley Master Gongsun shouted, "Didn't you hear?"

Gongsun Lu'E went pale and could only reply, "Yes!" She then left for the inner halls.

Yang Guo looked at the expression of the two and thought, "I couldn't cope when he was empty handed; now that he's going to use some weird weapon, what chance have I got? If we don't leave now, when should we leave?" He went over to Xiao Longnu and stretched out his hand, softly saying, "Gu Gu, let's leave!"

Valley Master Gongsun gathered energy in his hands; as soon as Xiao Longnu stands and takes Yang Guo's hand, he'll immediately throw himself forward and attack Yang Guo's spine viciously with the "Iron Palm". He made his decision and thought, "I don't care if sister Liu hates me; I'm going to kill that punk. If sister Liu leaves with him, what joy will I have left for the next half of my life?"

But Xiao Longnu did not stand up, just saying calmly, "Of course I'll go with you. But the Valley Master did save my life; we need to explain everything to him and ask for his forgiveness."

Yang Guo was flustered and thought, "Gu Gu doesn't know anything. Do you think he's going to forgive us just like that because you've explained everything to him?"

Then he heard Xiao Longnu ask him, "Guo'er, have you been well over the last couple of days?" She said these words with great compassion and love.

When Yang Guo heard these gentle, loving words and saw her affectionate expression, he felt that if even the sky was falling down on him he wouldn't care. How could he still be thinking about trying to escape? He said, "Gu Gu, you're not angry with me?"

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "Why should I be angry with you? I've never been angry with you. Turn around." Yang Guo listened to her and turned around but didn't know what she wanted to do.

Xiao Longnu took out a little bag with string and needles in them. She threaded the needle and measured the hole that Fan Yiweng had torn on the back of his garment. She sighed and said, "Over these past few days I've wanted to make a new gown for you; but when I thought about how I'll never see you again, I thought 'what's the point?' I could never have dreamed that you would find your way here." The pain and grief in her words turned to joy and delight as she said this. She picked up a pair of small scissors and cut a piece of fabric from the corner of her gown. She slowly helped him repair his garment.

When the two lived in the tomb, whenever Yang Guo's clothes were torn or ripped, Xiao Longnu would call him over and help him repair them just like this. Over the years, this happened countless times. The two of them did not care about life and death anymore; though they were under the stares of many people in the hall, the two of them acted as if no one was there and did as they used to when they lived with each other in the ancient tomb.

Yang Guo was filled with boundless joy and hot tears rolled down from his eyes, he choked, "Gu Gu, just now I made you throw up blood, I... it was my fault."

Xiao Longnu smiled, "It's not your fault. You know I had this kind of illness long ago. I haven't seen you for a few days and your martial arts have advanced so much. You threw up blood as well just now, are you alright?"

Yang Guo laughed, "It's nothing. I've got more than enough blood to spare."

Xiao Longnu smiled, "You love to talk nonsense."

Though the words of the two were ordinary and plain, everyone could hear the love that the two had for each other and that the two had an extremely deep relationship.

Fawang and the others looked at each other. Valley Master Gongsun was shocked and jealous; he stood there stunned not knowing what to do.

Yang Guo said, "I've met some interesting people over the last few days. Gu Gu, guess where I got my pair of large scissors from?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I was wondering about that; it's like you knew that there was a long bearded old man here long ago, so you prepared a large pair of scissors to cut off his beard. You really are naughty; he's taken years to grow that beard and you cut it off just like that, isn't it a pity?" She gave a laugh as her bright eyes sparkled; her appearance was enchanting.

Valley Master could not endure this any longer; he stretched out his hand towards Yang Guo's chest and shouted, "Bastard, you're too disrespectful."

Yang Guo didn't block it and said, "There's no need to rush, I'll continue the fight once Gu Gu finishes repairing my garment."

Valley Master Gongsun's fingers were just a few inches away from his chest; he had the status of being a Master and even though he was furious, it would be inappropriate for him to attack him like this. Suddenly he heard Gongsun Lu'E call out from behind, "Father, the weapons are here." He didn't turn around as he moved backwards a few feet and took the weapons.

His left hand held a thick and wide jagged saber; the blade glittered with gold light and it appeared to be produced from gold; his right hand was holding a fine and long black sword and it shook a little in his hands displaying the softness of the blade. The edges of the blade emitted a blue light and it was extremely sharp. The two weapons were the opposite of each other; one was heavy and hard, the other light and soft.

Yang Guo just took one look at the strange weapons before continuing "Gu Gu, a few days ago I met a woman; she told me who my father's murderer was."

Xiao Longnu's heart trembled and asked, "Who is it?"

Yang Guo bit down on his teeth and said with hatred, "You could never have guessed who they were, and all along I've been thinking that they've been treating me extremely well."

Xiao Longnu said, "They? They've been treating you extremely well?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes, They are..." A clear buzzing sound that resonated without stop was heard; it was Valley Master Gongsun's black sword colliding with his golden saber. His wrist turned and three consecutive swings that sliced through the air were unleashed; one aimed towards Yang Guo's head, one aimed at the left side of Yang Guo's neck and other at the right side of Yang Guo's neck. They all passed within half an inch of his flesh. The Valley Master was looking after his status; since the enemy did not make a move to block these attacks he couldn't land them; but the accuracy of these attacks was unnerving.

Xiao Longnu said, "I've finished!" She patted him on the back.

Yang Guo turned around and smiled. He then made his way towards the centre of the hall with the silk belt.

Valley Master Gongsun's "Yin Yang Twin Blades", "Fish Net Formation" and "Closure of Pressure Points" were all passed down from his ancestors. But because they have lived in the valley in seclusion for all these years and haven't made any contact with outsiders for hundreds of years, these three extraordinary martial arts were unknown to the outside world. Another reason for its seclusion was that there were great weaknesses within all three sets of these martial arts. If a skilled martial artist discovers the weakness, the user would not be able to avoid death. His ancestors had passed down a strict rule; members of the valley were forbidden to go out and get involved in Jianghu affairs for this reason. Over twenty years ago, Valley Master Gongsun also learned martial arts of the Iron Palm School. Although the person who taught him wasn't some extraordinary martial artist, their knowledge was vast. Their thoughts were careful and attentive; this person helped him cover up numerous holes in his family's martial arts. In particular, a lot of changes were made to the stances of the "Yin Yang Twin Blades". This person said to him, "This set of saber and sword technique is now greatly improved; even if you're opponent is extremely clever, they will not be able to see through the trappings of this technique within fifty stances. But once your saber and sword is unleashed, how can your opponent withstand fifty stances of it?"

When he saw Yang Guo motioning the silk belt to battle him, he called out, "Watch out for the sword!" The black sword quivered and it pierced towards Yang Guo's chest; but the sword did not go straight towards his chest; instead it circled around in front of him. Yang Guo did not know

where the sword was aiming and in shock, he leapt backwards.

Valley Master Gongsun's attacks were extremely fast; when Yang Guo leapt back, the circles of the sword were thrust towards him. The circles were becoming bigger and bigger; at first it only circled around the chest area, but afterwards it covered the lower abdomen, and after a few more stances the encirclement gradually reached his neck. All the vital points between the neck and the lower abdomen of Yang Guo were covered by the sword tip. Fawang, Yin Kexi, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others has never seen such a swordplay where circling of the sword is used to press the opponent; they were shocked.

As soon as Valley Master Gongsun unleashed a stance, Yang Guo would immediately dart away; he drew ten circles with his sword and each time, Yang Guo backed away and had no way to attack. Yang Guo saw that the enemy's swords stances were becoming swifter and more intense while the jagged saber in his left hand had still to be unleashed; when he actually uses it he would probably have no chance at all. There wasn't time for any more thoughts and he leapt to the left while motioning the silk belt; a ringing 'ding ling ling' and the gold bell went flying towards the opponent's left eye. Valley Master Gongsun slanted his head to dodge the attack and stopped his attack. Yang Guo was delighted, he quickly motioned the silk belt and wrapped it around his right leg; he was about to pull backwards when Valley Master Gongsun's sword drew downwards and slashed the belt in two; the black sword was actually an extremely sharp weapon.

Everyone gave an 'ah' sound just in time to hear the gust of a fierce wind; Valley Master Gongsun had chopped down with his jagged saber towards Yang Guo. Yang Guo rolled on the floor. A 'dang' sound was heard which echoed

throughout the room; Yang Guo had actually picked up Fan Yiweng's steel staff to block the attack and the saber collided with it; both of their arms trembled and were slightly numb. Valley Master Gongsun was shocked, "This punk really is good; he is actually able to receive ten of my stances." The saber chopped across and the sword pierced diagonally. A saber should take ferociousness and hardness as its aim, a sword swiftness and lightness; the two weapons were complete opposites. To use both a saber and sword at the same time is impossible; but Valley Master Gongsun's attacks were becoming more and more pressing and the sword and saber techniques were both clearly distinguished. There was softness and hardness, yin and yang; this really was a rarely seen great skill of the Wulin world.

Yang Guo gave out a call and waved the steel staff; he used the "Dog Beating Stick Technique's" 'seal' formula, guarding his body tightly. Valley Master Gongsun wasn't actually able to attack him with his twin blades as he did this. But the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" has subtlety and variation as its main aim; a light and fine bamboo stick can be used as pleased, but the heavy and long staff in his hand cannot. After a few more stances, he felt that variation of the stances gradually became ineffective.

Valley Master Gongsun suddenly found a weakness; the gold saber lifted up and the black sword drew down; a 'ka' sound was heard as the black sword cut the steel staff in half.

Yang Guo called out, "What luck! Just when I was thinking that this staff is too heavy!" A great increase in the effectiveness of the stances could be seen when Yang Guo continued using this slashed half staff.

Valley Master Gongsun gave a 'huh' grunt and said, "We'll see whether it's lucky or not." The saber in his left hand chopped forward.

The saber slashed down towards Yang Guo's head. This stance was rather slow and sluggish, all Yang Guo had to do was to slant his body to the side a little and he would be able to avoid it easily; however, the circles from the black sword were covering all his paths leaving him with no way to escape. Yang Guo could only raise his broken staff and use a stance of "Lifting the Sky with One Hand" to meet this stance head on. A loud 'dang' sound was heard as the two weapons collided; sparks flew everywhere as Yang Guo felt his arms go numb. Valley Master Gongsun continued the attack; he used the same stance as before. Yang Guo was knowledgeable in martial arts and he was extremely quick witted in battle yet he wasn't actually able to neutralize such a clumsy stance; there was no other choice for him but to meet this stance in the same way again. Yang Guo's arms ached even more after this second collision; he knew that if this continued, the tendons in his arm would suffer great damage. Before he finished his thoughts, the Valley Master had sent down a third chop. After a few more chops, the saber had hacked a groove on the staff and the joints in Yang Guo's right hand started to bleed.

Valley Master Gongsun saw that even in the face of danger Yang Guo still carried his smile; the saber in his left hand chopped down and he thrust the black sword suddenly towards his lower abdomen. Yang Guo had been forced back into the corner of the hall; when he saw the sword tip coming he stretched out his hand to block it. When the sword arrived at his palm, the blade bent in an arc and flicked away. Xiao Longnu's silk gloves were very tough, even though the black sword was extremely sharp, it still couldn't harm him.

Yang Guo knew that with the gloves he would not have to fear the black sword; he turned his palm around and suddenly stretched out his hand to grab the sword, wanting to do the same thing as Xiao Longnu did when she snapped Hao Datong's sword. But he didn't know that Valley Master Gongsun would flick his wrist lightly and curve his sword around his hand, piercing him in the forearm; blood flowed out of the wound.

Yang Guo was shocked and quickly leapt back. Valley Master Gongsun did not continue the attack and instead chuckled a few times before slowly advancing again. If Valley Master Gongsun had either the jagged saber or black sword only, Yang Guo would definitely have a way to defend against him; but as the soft and hard blades were used simultaneously against him, he was forced on the back foot, struggling against the attacks.

Fawang, Yin Kexi, Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing were all thinking, "The Valley Master's "Yin Yang Twin Blades" is extremely swift, powerful and vicious; but at the same time, that kid is pretty clever, thinking of so many ways to avoid all these vicious stances."

Valley Master Gongsun chopped with his saber and thrust with his sword; Yang Guo was struck in the shoulder and blood trickled over his gown. Valley Master Gongsun said in a deep voice, "Are you in awe of me yet?"

Yang Guo smiled and said, "You came into battle with me having a huge advantage, and here you opening your mouth asking whether I'm in awe of you or not. Ha-ha, Valley Master Gongsun, how come you don't save face?"

The Valley Master took in his sword and saber and then asked, "Please tell me what advantage I have?"

Yang Guo said, "You're using customized weapons; one is a strange saber the other is an extraordinary sword; even if I searched all over the world I'm afraid that I wouldn't be able to find such weapons, isn't that true?"

The Valley Master replied, "So what? Your gloves and silk belt aren't ordinary either."

Yang Guo threw the broken staff onto the floor and laughed, "This belongs to your bearded disciple." He took off the gloves and picked up the two pieces of silk belt. Yang Guo threw them over to Xiao Longnu and said, "These belong to my Gu Gu." He cleaned off the dust on his body not taking any notice of the bleeding wounds that he had; he laughed, "I came to your valley empty handed; what ill intent did I have? If you want to kill me then kill; why must you talk so much?"

Valley Master Gongsun saw that he had a leisurely air about him; his face and eyes were elegant and handsome and even with all those wounds on him, he talked and laughed at ease as if nothing had happened. He couldn't help but feel inferior to him and thought, "I cannot compare with this person; if I let him live, sister Liu's heart will remain his." So he said, "Fine!" He thrust the sword forwards towards his chest.

Yang Guo had already decided, "Since I can't beat him then I'll let him kill me." When he saw the sword coming towards him, he ignored it and instead looked over at Xiao Longnu, thinking, "I will die happy with Gu Gu in my eyes." He saw Xiao Longnu's face carrying a sweet smile and getting closer step by step; their eyes were locked on each other, both of them ignoring the black sword of Valley Master Gongsun.

Valley Master Gongsun had not met Yang Guo before, what feud has he got with him? The only reason he's trying to kill him is because of Xiao Longnu, so when he sent out this sword, he couldn't help but glance over at Xiao Longnu. When he saw her, his heart immediately filled with jealousy; he saw her staring at Yang Guo lovingly, and when he looked over at Yang Guo, he was doing the exact same thing toward her. The black sword had reached Yang Guo and all that was needed was a bit of force from his arms and it would pierce into Yang Guo's chest; but there was no fear or concern on Xiao Longnu's face. Yang Guo also made no attempt to block this attack; the two of them stared madly at each other, their thoughts were one, they had long forgotten about life and death.

Valley Master Gongsun broke out in a great rage, thinking to himself, "If I kill him now, sister Liu will immediately kill herself because of her love for him. I need to think of a way to force her to marry me; once I've bedded her there'll be plenty of time to kill that punk." He called out, "Sister Liu, do you want me to kill him or spare him?"

When Xiao Longnu was staring at Yang Guo, she had not thought about Valley Master Gongsun; only after hearing this sudden call did she wake up and said alarmed, "Move the sword away; why are you pointing your sword at his chest?"

Valley Master Gongsun chuckled, "It's not difficult to stop the sword. If you want him to live, just tell him to leave the valley immediately and let us get married."

Before Yang Guo came, she had decided to never see him again; she didn't care if she would live the rest of her life in grief and pain. All she hoped for was that he would be safe and happy; but now that they've reunited, how could she still agree to marry the Valley Master? For the past few

days, she knew that she couldn't carry out the decision that she had made and would rather die than marry someone else; so she turned her head to the Valley Master and said, "Mr. Gongsun, thank you for saving my life. But I cannot marry you."

The Valley Master knew the reasons but still asked, "Why?"

Xiao Longnu stood with Yang Guo and held his arm, smiling; "I have decided to marry him and spend the rest of my life with him, could you not tell?"

The Valley Master shook his head a few times and then said, "If you hadn't promised me that day, why would I do this and try to force you? You promised with your own lips that it was what you wanted."

Xiao Longnu said, "That is correct, but I cannot give him up. We need to go now, please forgive us." She pulled Yang Guo's hand and headed for the door.

Valley Master Gongsun quickly moved to block the exit and hissed, "The only way you'll leave the valley is over my dead body."

Xiao Longnu said, "I'm indebted to you for saving my life; how can I try to harm you? Anyway, your martial arts are too strong for me." As she talked, she tore off a piece of fabric from her gown and helped Yang Guo tie up his wounds.

Jinlun Fawang suddenly said loudly, "Valley Master Gongsun, you better let them leave."

The Valley Master gave a 'huh' grunt, his face was serious and he didn't reply.

Fawang continued, "If those two joined up with their swords, how would your gold saber and black sword be able

to handle them? Just do them a favour and let them go.”

He'd suffered the greatest humiliation in his life after losing to Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu's "Pure Heart of Jade Maiden Sword"; ever since then, he'd been thinking of a way to defeat this swordplay but was unable to. Now he had seen how powerful the yin yang blades of the Valley Master were; it wasn't below the martial arts of his golden wheel. So he came out with these words to anger him, hoping to make the three go into battle. Firstly, he could get a chance to take a look at Yang Guo's and Xiao Longnu's swordplay again and look for its weakness so he can avenge this defeat. Secondly, he hoped that the three would destroy each other.

In actual fact, if Fawang hadn't come out with these words to anger the Valley Master, he would never agree to let Xiao Longnu leave the valley with Yang Guo. He stared angrily at Fawang and thought, "You dare to say such words in front of my face? I haven't got time for you now, but I'll remember this for the future." He turned his head towards Xiao Longnu and clenched his teeth as he thought, "Your heart doesn't belong to me but your body will. You won't agree to marry me when you're alive, then I'm still going to marry you even when you're dead." At first he had planned to use Yang Guo's life to force Xiao Longnu to submit to him; but when he saw that the two weren't afraid of death, he thought that even if they die together, he wouldn't let them out of the valley. His eyebrows rose again and an air of death gradually showed up on his face.

He suddenly heard Ma Guangzuo call out, "Hey, old man Gongsun, she said that she doesn't want to marry you; why are you still blocking her way? Don't you want to save face?"

Xiaoxiang Zi said eerily, "Don't talk rubbish brother Ma. Valley Master Gongsun has already set up a feast today and has invited us to join in the celebrations."

Ma Guangzuo said loudly, "All he's got is water and vegetables; what's so great about that? If I were that girl I would never marry him. With her beauty, she can be the empress. Why should she stay with this cruel and evil old man for the rest of her life, eating nothing but green vegetables and tofu? Even if one didn't get annoyed to death, they'd be bored to death."

Xiao Longnu turned her head and said gently, "Master Ma, Mr. Gongsun saved my life and I'm indebted to him, I... I... I'll always be grateful for his kindness."

Ma Guangzuo called out, "Fine, old man Gongsun, if you want to show that you're a kind and benevolent person then why don't you let the two of them marry and consummate the marriage today. If you saved a girl because you wanted to bed her, then doesn't that put you in the same class as those raping lowlife bandits?" He was a straightforward man and says what comes into his mind; his words were all hard on the ears but they were hard to refute.

Valley Master Gongsun's intent to kill was stirred; he decided that he'll take care of all the outsiders in one go. He didn't make a move and said dryly, "My Passionless Valley may not be some extraordinary place; but if everyone here comes and goes as they please, then the one named Gongsun may appear to be a bit too humble in the eyes of others. Miss Liu..."

Xiao Longnu showed a smile and said, "I lied to you when I said my surname is Liu; my surname is Long. I named myself Liu because he's named Yang."

Valley Master Gongsun felt even more jealous; he could only pretend that he didn't hear those words and said, "Miss Liu, this..."

Before he finished Ma Guangzuo interrupted, "This girl is named Long, why are you calling her Miss Liu?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Mr. Gongsun is used to calling me that; the blame is on me for lying to him in the first place, he can call me whatever he likes."

Valley Master Gongsun ignored these words and continued, "Miss Liu, all the one named Yang has to do is beat my "Yin Yang Twin Blades" and I'll allow him to leave the valley safely. Our personal affairs will be severed of their own accord; it'll have nothing to do with other people." After all this, he still wanted to rely on his martial arts to force Xiao Longnu to stay.

Xiao Longnu sighed and said, "Mr. Gongsun, I did not want to fight you, but he can't beat you on his own, I must help him."

Valley Master Gongsun's eyebrows became a straight line; he said, "Aren't you afraid of what happened before; you throwing up blood? It'll happen again."

Xiao Longnu felt great remorse towards Valley Master Gongsun and said, "We haven't any weapons; if we fight you empty handed, then we'll definitely lose. You're a great and generous man; just let us go."

Jinlun Fawang interrupted, "Valley Master Gongsun, you've got everything here in this valley, don't tell me you haven't even got two swords? But I'd better warn you first; once those two join up together, your life will be endangered."

Valley Master Gongsun pointed to the western path and said, "The third room over there is the sword room; just pick whatever weapon you want. But I'm afraid even these guests may not have the kind of weapons that I've hidden away." He then laughed coldly.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu looked at each other and both thought, "I will die willingly if we're able to spend time alone with each other away from other people before then." They held each other's hand and headed west, leaving through the side door. They passed two rooms and arrived at the third.

Xiao Longnu's eyes never left Yang Guo's face; when she saw the doors were closed she didn't give it any thought and pushed it open; she was just about to step into the room when Yang Guo suddenly thought of something and urgently pulled her back, he said, "Careful."

Xiao Longnu said, "Of what?"

Yang Guo's kept his left foot outside the room and placed his right foot into the room, quickly touching the floor before taking it back outside. Nothing happened.

Xiao Longnu said, "You're afraid that the Valley Master would leave a trap for us? He's a very kind person; he would never do such a thing..." As soon as she finished saying this, a sudden 'chi chi' sound was heard; there was a flash of light in front of them as eight sharp swords shot out all around the door frame, crossing over horizontally and vertically. If someone had stepped into the room at that time, even if your martial arts were supremely high, getting your body pierced several times over by the swords would be difficult to avoid.

Xiao Longnu let out a deep breath and said, "Guo'er, this Valley Master is so evil; I've really judged him wrongly. We

don't need to fight him; let's just leave."

Suddenly someone said from behind, "Our master invites you inside to pick a sword."

The two turned around and saw eight disciples with a fish net blocking their way. The Valley Master was wary of the two escaping together so he sent these disciples to cut off their escape routes. Xiao Longnu's silk belt had been cut in half by the black sword; she was now unable to use it to strike their pressure points from faraway as Yang Guo did before.

Xiao Longnu said to Yang Guo, "What other traps has this room got?"

Yang Guo held her hands and said, "Gu Gu, we're reunited now, what other worries have you got? Even if we get pierced by ten thousand swords it wouldn't matter; we'll see each other again in death." Xiao Longnu's heart too was overflowing with love. The two entered the sword room together.

The wall, tables, shelves and cupboards were all lined up with sharp weapons of various shapes; there were antique swords, some that had seven foot long blades and others that were quite short. There were iron and steel ones; a few had an overpowering glow. The two's eyes were blinded for a second.

Xiao Longnu stared at Yang Guo for a while and then suddenly threw herself into his arms. Yang Guo held her tightly and kissed her on the lips. Both Xiao Longnu's heart and soul were completely enchanted by that kiss. She stretched out her arms to embrace him around his neck.

Suddenly the door opened and a disciple in green entered who said sternly, "Our master ordered that as soon as

you've picked your weapon, immediately leave, you cannot waste time."

Yang Guo's face went red and he removed her arms. But Xiao Longnu thought that there was nothing wrong with hugging and kissing her loved one. However, there was someone disturbing them which made it difficult for her to feel comfortable; so she gave a sigh and said softly, "Guo'er, once we've beaten that Valley Master, kiss me like that again."

Yang Guo smiled and nodded; he stretched out his left arm and put it around her waist and said, "There isn't enough time in this life for our kisses. Just pick a weapon."

Xiao Longnu said, "It appears that these weapons are indeed all special, there isn't one poor weapon. We haven't got nearly as many in our ancient tomb." She glanced over the weapons on the wall, wanting to pick out a pair of swords that were the same in all ways and most effective for her and Yang Guo to use against Valley Master Gongsun. But after searching for a while, she saw that all the swords were different. She was searching for a weapon and asking a question at the same time. "When we were about to enter the room, you knew that there would be booby traps, how did you know?"

Yang Guo said, "I guessed from the eyes and expression of the Valley Master. He wanted to marry you but when he heard that you were going to help me fight him, he immediately thought about killing you. I didn't believe for a second that someone with his character would allow us to pick out weapons out of the kindness of his heart."

Xiao Longnu gave another sigh and said, "Will we be able to beat him with our "Pure Heart of Jade Maiden Sword"?"

Yang Guo said, "Though his martial arts are strong, he's not better than Jinlun Fawang. The two of us were able to beat Jinlun Fawang; I assume that we'll be able to beat him."

Xiao Longnu said, "Yes. The reason why Fawang kept on trying to force him to fight us is because he wanted to see us in danger."

Yang Guo smiled, "People can have evil thoughts; now, you've learned a bit about this." He then said immediately, "I'm just worried about your health, you've just thrown up blood."

Xiao Longnu's dimples from her smile were like a flower, she said, "You know that whenever I'm angry or upset I throw up blood. Now that I'm extremely happy, this little internal injury isn't anything to me. You threw up blood too, is it serious?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm fine as long as I can see you."

Xiao Longnu said tenderly, "That's how I feel too." She paused and then continued, "You've made much progress in your martial arts recently; and we were able to beat Fawang back then."

When Yang Guo heard these words, he too felt great confidence about this battle. He held her hand and said, "I want you to promise me something, will you?"

Xiao Longnu said tenderly, "Why is there a need to ask me? I haven't been your Master since long ago; I'm your wife. I'll listen to whatever you say."

Yang Guo said, "That's... that's great, I... didn't know."

Xiao Longnu said, "How can I still be your master after what happened that night on Mount Zhongnan, when you

and I were that intimate. Though you didn't want to marry me, in my heart I was already your wife."

Yang Guo did not know exactly what happened that night. Maybe the reason for suddenly bringing this up again is because she's emotional, he thought, "My father Ouyang Feng was teaching me martial arts that day; he sealed your pressure point, but I wasn't intimate with you." But when he heard the tenderness and love in her words, he was completely enchanted and couldn't say anything.

Xiao Longnu rested against his chest and asked, "What do you want me to promise you?"

Yang Guo stroked her hair and said, "Once we beat that Valley Master we'll immediately go back to the tomb; no matter what happens you cannot leave my side."

Xiao Longnu lifted her head and looked into his eyes, she said, "Do think that I have thoughts of leaving you? Do you think that the pain and suffering I'll experience if I part from you won't be as great as yours? Of course I'll promise you; I'll never leave you even if the sky falls down."

Yang Guo was delighted; he was about to say something when the disciple in green who was watching them said loudly, "Have you picked your weapons?"

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "Let's just get it over with." She turned her head to look for a pair of swords when the western wall caught her eye. She was startled; the wall had signs of being set alight and the chairs and tables near it were also burned.

Yang Guo laughed, "The Old Urchin had broken into here previously and set this place alight; that's his handiwork." He then saw two sheaths behind a painting in the corner. He thought, "Those two swords were hidden originally by

that painting; it's only because of the Old Urchin's fire burning that painting that enables me to see them now. Those two swords must be extremely precious to have been hidden away like that." He went over to the wall and took the swords down; he gave one to Xiao Longnu and unsheathed the sword that was in his hand.

Xiao Longnu unsheathed her sword too. Both of them felt a chill as soon as the blades were drawn out; they saw that his sword was black and didn't have any shine to it, like a piece of black wood. Her sword was the exact same as Yang Guo's. When the two swords lined up, the room was filled with a cold air. The swords had no sharp points; the tips of the swords were round and blunt and they looked like a thin wooden whip. Yang Guo turned the sword over and saw the word 'Gentleman' carved on it; he looked over at Xiao Longnu's sword and saw the word 'Lady'. Originally Yang Guo did not like the form of this sword, but he loved the matching names; he looked at Xiao Longnu to see what she thought.

Xiao Longnu said happily, "This sword has no sharp points; this is just right for dueling with the Valley Master. He saved my life before; I don't want to hurt him."

Yang Guo laughed, "The names of the swords are 'Gentleman' and 'Lady'. I'm not worthy of the name. If 'Gentleman' was changed to 'Vagrant', it'd be much better for me to use." He then tested out the sword with two thrusts into the air and felt that the weight was perfect and the sword extremely agile; he said, "Fine, we'll use these two swords."

Xiao Longnu returned her sword into its sheath and was about to leave the room when she saw some extremely beautiful flowers in a vase on the table; but it wasn't arranged properly so she decided to fix it up.

Yang Guo called out, "No, you can't touch them." But it was too late; Xiao Longnu's finger had been pierced by the thorns of the flowers. She turned her head back startled, asking, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "Those are Passion Flowers; you've been living here in the valley for a few days now, don't you recognize them?"

Xiao Longnu sucked her finger and shook her head. She said, "I don't recognize them. Passion Flower; what kind of flower is it?" Yang Guo was about to explain but the crowd of disciples kept on hurrying them so they left the room and returned to the hall. Valley Master Gongsun had been waiting impatiently, he stared angrily at his disciples, blaming them for being useless and allowing the two of them to waste time. All of the disciples were terrified and changed color.

Valley Master Gongsun waited for the two to come near before saying, "Miss Liu, you've picked your weapon?"

Xiao Longnu took out the 'Lady' sword and nodded her head, saying, "We'll use this pair of blunt swords to fight you; we don't dare to fight a life and death duel with the Valley Master, but just until a clear victor can be seen, how about that?"

The Valley Master's heart trembled and said sternly, "Who told you to pick those swords?" His gaze swept across to Gongsun Lu'E and then back to Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu felt slightly surprised and said, "No one told us to pick them. If we can't use them, we'll go and change them."

The Valley Master stared angrily at Yang Guo and said, "If I let you change your weapons, how long will it take, half a

day? There's no need to change, just start."

Xiao Longnu said, "Valley Master Gongsun; let's make things clear before we start. If we fight one on one, neither of us are a match for you. We've got an advantage fighting you two against one. We don't really want to fight you and we're not competing with you. All you've got to do is allow us to leave and we'll admit defeat and thank you."

The Valley Master chuckled and said, "If you beat my "Yin Yang Twin Blades" then I'll let you treat me anyway you want; if I win you have to marry me."

Xiao Longnu gave an unperturbed smile and said, "If we lose, we'll just die here in this valley."

Valley Master Gongsun did not say anything more; the golden saber in his left hand waved out towards Yang Guo.

Yang Guo raised his sword and used a stance of "The White Crane's Bright Wing"; a stance of Quanzhen swordplay.

Valley Master Gongsun thought, "Though this stance is tight and careful, it's just ordinary and steady." His right sword headed towards Yang Guo's shoulder, actually winding past Xiao Longnu, both the sword and saber were aiming for Yang Guo. Yang Guo concentrated on his opponent and guarded his body tightly as he received three stances.

Xiao Longnu waited for the Valley Master to unleash his three stances before she raised her sword. The Valley Master did not use his sword or saber to block her sword stances; only in urgent situations did he use the black sword to repel her attacks. He showed signs of allowance in his stances.

After watching seven or eight stances, Jinlun Fawang gave a wry laugh and said, "Valley Master Gongsun, giving them

such allowances will lead to suffering for you.”

The Valley Master replied, “Big monk, if you don’t think much of me then why don’t you wait for a little while and duel with me later. I don’t need you to waste your breath in trying to give me advice.” He hurried his sword and saber and the wind sounds from the weapons became increasing louder.

After a few more exchanges, Yang Guo used a stance of “Sweeping Across the Northern Desert” from the Quanzhen swordplay while Xiao Longnu used the “The Coloured Pen Painting an Eyebrow” stance from the “Jade Maiden Swordplay” Both of these stances were horizontal strokes, Yang Guo’s sword just swept across a few inches from the left to right while Xiao Longnu flicked her sword subtly twice. The two stances became the stance “Dressing Under the Mirror” from the “Pure Heart of Jade Maiden Sword”. Valley Master Gongsun was shocked, he raised his black sword to block Yang Guo’s sword and swept his saber across to guard his face. Xiao Longnu’s sword drew across above his eyes, the sword and saber clashed, a ‘dang’ sound was heard as the tip of the golden saber was actually cut off by the ‘Lady’ sword.

The onlookers were shocked; they could never have predicted that such an ordinary looking blunt sword would actually be so sharp. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were both surprised; they originally picked these weapons because of the names and the fact that they were the same. They couldn’t have known that they had actually picked a pair of precious swords by luck. Their spirits were greatly roused and swords kept on attacking.

Valley Master Gongsun marveled in secret, “Sister Liu and that punk’s martial arts can’t compare with mine. I originally wasn’t afraid of them joining together, but I didn’t

know that when their swords join it would actually be so powerful. It looks like that bald scoundrel was telling the truth. If I lose to these two... if I lose to these two..." When he thought to this point, the saber in his right hand suddenly attacked left and the sword in his right hand swept left, using his greatest skill "Yin Yang Wild Blades". The black sword was originally soft and yin but right now it was hacking and chopping solidly, changing into the yang and hard nature of saber play. Meanwhile, the heavy and clumsy jagged saber was now piercing and cutting, going down the road of lightness and swiftness. The saber had become a sword, the sword had become a saber, and it really was extraordinary.

Jinlun Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi were all knowledgeable people but the "Yin Yang Wild Blades" was something that they've never seen or heard of before.

Ma Guangzuo called out, "Hey, old man, what weird name has this mad kung fu of yours got? The... the... the older you get, the madder you get!"

Valley Master Gongsun was only around forty years of age. Today he had wanted to marry Xiao Longnu and because of this he's been called old man this and that by this dim witted person; how can he not get angry? Right now he had no time for him. Now he used this kung fu that he'd studied bitterly for the last twenty years. He decided to defeat the two of them before doing anything else.

With the two paired using their swordplay, they had begun to gain the upper hand; but the opponent had swapped his weapons around and his stances were extraordinary. The two were put on their back foot and met many dangerous stances over a short period of time. Yang Guo saw that the black sword was stronger than the golden saber; he intercepted all the sword strokes and allowed Xiao Longnu

to face the golden saber. He thought that because she had an advantage in weaponry, the Valley Master wouldn't dare to clash with the 'Lady' sword and so she shouldn't meet any great danger. But by doing this the two were effectively fighting separately; the swordplay of the "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden" had separated into two and its power immediately decreased.

Valley Master Gongsun was delighted; he unleashed three chops with his black sword while the saber in his left hand used the stances "The Still Yang Needle", "The Form of the Yielding Separates Gold", "The Thorn Pierces Qing" and "The Nine Lotuses". Those four graceful and flowing sword stances were mixed in with the three saber stances. Yang Guo could still block these attacks but Xiao Longnu was getting frantic; she wanted to use the sword to cut off the tip of the saber but the golden saber moved like a flying phoenix, she could not touch it. Yang Guo knew something was wrong and disregarded his safety and used a stance of "The Horse Trampling on the Descending Flowers" from the Quanzhen swordplay, sending the sword from his upper arm aiming upwards, intercepting the opponent's saber and sword. Xiao Longnu immediately took back her sword and protected Yang Guo's upper body. The two once again joined together, returning back to the swordplay of the "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden". The theory of the swordplay lies in the two users having a mutual affinity for each other, as if two became one. In this stance Yang Guo had forsaken his life to save Xiao Longnu; this was the supreme premise of this swordplay. Xiao Longnu saw his front wasn't guarded while he was saving her; she was afraid that he would get hurt and quickly helped him to protect himself. The two had not protected themselves but both became protected as a result; the power of the swords suddenly increased.

Many more stances passed and beads of sweat could now be seen on the forehead of the Valley Master; his sword and saber stances were wanting and a picture of defeat could be seen on him. On the other hand, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were becoming more and more fluid in their swordplay. Yang Guo's left hand held the shaft of the sword and his right hand thrust the sword forward to the enemy's waist on the left. Xiao Longnu held the sword handle with both her hands and flicked the sword upwards; this stance was called "Resting Loftily with a Tidy Brow"; the stance was filled with love, tenderness and gracefulness. Her heart was filled with love and passion; she turned her head to look at Yang Guo. Suddenly her chest felt as if a hammer had smashed up against it and the finger on her right hand had broke out in unbearable pain; she almost dropped her sword. Her face changed and she leapt back three steps.

Valley Master Gongsun chuckled, "Ha, the Passion Flower; the Passion Flower!" The pleasure in his heart was greater than his jealousy.

Xiao Longnu did not understand but Yang Guo knew the poison of the Passion Flower had flared up. Her finger had just been pricked by the Passion Flower and as she thought about love, her finger broke out with an unbearable pain.

Yang Guo had tasted this pain before; he was deeply concerned for Xiao Longnu and softly asked, "Does it hurt very much?"

Valley Master Gongsun took this opportunity to launch an attack; he urgently attacked with his sword and saber at Yang Guo. Xiao Longnu's pain had lessened and she raised her sword again. Yang Guo was concerned for her and said, "Rest a little while longer." But as soon as he stirred his love for her, his finger broke out in pain once again.

Valley Master Gongsun took this chance and chopped heavily with the black sword, a 'dang' sound was heard as he knocked the 'Gentleman' sword out of his hand. The black sword extended forward and was once again at his chest.

Xiao Longnu was shocked and tried to save him but she was blocked by the gold saber and had no way to advance.

The Valley Master called out, "Hold that punk." Four disciples in green responded, they walked forward and twisted the net over him, they circled him a few times and held him tightly in the net.

Valley Master Gongsun asked, "Sister Liu, what are you going to do?"

Xiao Longnu knew that she was not a match for him alone; she threw down her 'Lady' sword on the floor and heard a 'ca' sound; the 'Gentleman' sword and 'Lady' sword leapt closer together, joining up tightly. The two swords actually had great magnetism. Xiao Longnu said solemnly, "If the swords can do this how can we not do it? Just kill the two of us."

Valley Master Gongsun gave a 'huh' grunt and said, "Follow me." He folded his arms towards Fawang and the others, saying, "Excuse me!" He turned into the inner halls. The four disciples followed, dragging the net along with Yang Guo. Xiao Longnu followed.

Ma Guangzuo said, "Hey monk, zombie head, we need to think of a way to save them."

Jinlun Fawang just smiled wryly and didn't reply.

Xiaoxiang Zi chuckled and said, "Hey giant, can you beat that old man?"

Ma Guangzuo stroked his cheek and couldn't think of a plan; he just said, "I'll fight even if I can't beat him! I'll fight even if I can't beat him!"

Valley Master Gongsun advanced forward with his head held high; he entered a small stone room and said, "Cut some Passion Flowers for me."

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu had already decided to die; they looked at each other, smiling, and ignoring what Valley Master Gongsun said or did. Not long after, an enchanting fragrance entered the stone room. The two turned their heads to see what it was; there was a fusion of five colors, from tender red to soft yellow; more than ten disciples in green had entered the room carrying bunches of Passion Flowers in their arms. Their arms were covered in leather, protecting them from the thorns of the flowers.

Valley Master Gongsun waved his right arm; he said coldly, "Throw them on that scum."

It was as if ten thousands wasps were stinging Yang Guo; his limbs, his bones, they all were overpowered with unbearable pain; he couldn't take it and called out in pain.

Xiao Longnu felt pity and anger; she shouted at Valley Master Gongsun, "What are you doing?" She dashed forward wanting to remove the Passion Flowers from Yang Guo.

Valley Master Gongsun stretched out his hand to block her and said, "Sister Liu, today is the day when we would have consummated our marriage; but this punk entered the valley and ruined everything. We do not know each other and we have no debts or feuds; but you and he know each other. If he had acted courteously and respectfully as a guest, of course I would have treated him with great respect; now that it has come to this..." He then waved his

left hand out and sent his disciples away. He closed the door. He continued, "Whether it'll end up in tragedy or joy, it will be up to you."

The pain that Yang Guo was in was indescribable but he didn't want Xiao Longnu to get upset so he clenched his teeth and didn't make a sound. None of the words of Valley Master Gongsun entered his ears as he endured the pain.

When Xiao Longnu saw the suffering he was in; her pity was roused and as soon as this happened, the Passion Flower poison in her finger flared up and she felt the excruciating pain again. She thought, "I've only been pierced once by the Passion Flower and it is already this painful; but he's covered with thousands and thousands of thorns, how can he stand it?"

Valley Master Gongsun knew what she was thinking and said, "Sister Liu, I sincerely want to marry and be with you; I have only admiration and love for you, I have no ill intent, you should understand this."

Xiao Longnu nodded her head and said mournfully, "You have treated me well all along; but even if we met before you saved me and you treated me like an empress you wouldn't be able to win my heart." She hung her head for a short while and then gave a long sigh; she said, "Mr. Gongsun, if you hadn't seen me that day by the mountainside, if you hadn't saved me and had let me die there, it would have been better for the three of us. You know that forcing me to marry you will result in a lifetime of unhappiness for me. What good is that to you?"

Valley Master Gongsun's eyebrows slowly rose again; he deepened his voice and said, "I have always been a man of my word; I don't allow people to insult or lie to me. Since you've agreed to marry me, you have to marry me. When it

comes to happiness, sadness, joy and pain, the future is hard to predict; who knows what tomorrow may bring? Let's just see what happens." He waved his sleeve and said, "This person has been pricked by the Passion Flowers all over his body; the suffering will deepen every two hours; thirty six days from now he will die in excruciating pain. I have a medicine that I can give to him which will cure him within twenty four hours; but after a day, even a god won't be able to save him. It's up to you whether he lives or dies." He walked slowly towards the door and pushed it open; he turned his head and said, "If you'd rather watch him die slowly then you can stay here and watch him for the next thirty six days; it's up to you. I won't harm you so you can relax. If you change your decision within twenty four hours, all you've got to do is give a shout and I will bring the antidote to him." He was about to leave the room.

Xiao Longnu saw that Yang Guo was trembling all over; his lips were bleeding because of him biting down in pain; his eyes had been as bright as a shooting star, but now there was not even a single speck of light in them. The pain that he was in now was already unbearable; but the pain would deepen every two hours for the next thirty six days; even hell wouldn't have such a punishment. She bit down on her lip and said, "Mr. Gongsun, I'll agree to marry you. Quickly let him go and give him the antidote."

Valley Master Gongsun had been trying to force her to say this all along; when he heard this he was delighted but also resentful. He knew that from now on, she would detest him and loathe him. She would never have any love towards him so he nodded his head and said, "It's for the benefit of everyone that you have changed your mind. After we've consummated our marriage tonight, I'll give him the antidote in the morning."

Xiao Longnu said, "First cure him."

The Valley Master sighed and said, "Sister Liu, you think too little of me. I know that agreeing to this is not what you want; even if I was stupid, how would I not know? Do you think I would cure him first?" He turned to leave the room.

Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo looked at each miserably, neither one saying a word for a while. Yang Guo said slowly, "Gu Gu, even when I'm down in the underworld I will feel no pain because of your love. Just kill me with one palm!"

Xiao Longnu thought, "I'll first kill him with one palm and then commit suicide." So she raised her hand and gathered internal energy in her palm.

Yang Guo's face had a smile, his eyes soft and peaceful; looking at her sweetly, he whispered, "This is where we'll consummate our love."

Xiao Longnu saw his air was glorious; she thought, "Why is heaven so cruel towards such a handsome and graceful man, wanting him to die today." Her chest ached and suddenly she tasted sweetness at the back of her throat; it appeared that she would throw up blood again and the internal energy in her arm immediately dissipated. Suddenly, she threw herself on top of Yang Guo; the thousands and thousands of thorns of the Passion Flower pierced her body; she said, "Guo'er, we'll endure the suffering together."

Valley Master Gongsun called out, "Oh no!" in shock, he said, "You... you..." He then said coldly, "Why did you do this? Will your suffering lessen his?"

Xiao Longnu took one deep look at Yang Guo, then slowly turned around. She exited the room and didn't look back.

Valley Master Gongsun said, "Brother Yang, I'll give you the antidote in twenty hours time. All you've got to do in these

twenty hours is cleanse your thoughts and don't rouse any feelings of love. Even if there is pain, it won't be that hard to endure." He then left the room and closed the door.

Yang Guo's body was wracked with pain and his heart was full of hurt. "All the pain and suffering that I've experience before today is nothing compared to the pain I'm experiencing now. The Valley Master is such an evil person; how can I just die like this and let Gu Gu suffer at his hands? Besides, I still have to avenge my father; how can I allow the phony, righteous and benevolent Guo Jing and Huang Rong to not get what they deserve for their evil deed?" When he thought about this, his blood boiled, shaking and stirring him, "I cannot die; whatever happens I cannot die! Even if Gu Gu becomes the wife of the Valley Master I'd still need to save her. I need to train my martial arts and avenge my father." So he clenched his teeth and sat up. Although he couldn't assume the proper form in the fish net, he was still able to submerge his chi into his dan tian and started to circulate his internal energy.

Four hours later, midday had passed. A disciple in green entered with a plate; there were four new buns on it. The disciple said, "Our master is celebrating his wedding and he's allowing you to have a good meal." The disciple placed the plate by the fish net; his hand was covered with a coarse cloth to avoid getting injured by the passion flowers. As Yang Guo stretched out his hand through the net for the buns and ate them, he thought, "Since I'm going to fight with my life against that bastard Valley Master, I can't torture myself."

The disciple laughed, "I couldn't have guessed that you would have such a great appetite."

Suddenly there was a green blur by the door; another disciple had come through the door and had moved up

silently behind the first disciple. That disciple threw a heavy punch against the first disciple's back. The disciple fainted before he could see who threw the punch.

Yang Guo saw that the person who did the sneak attack was actually Gongsun Lu'E; he said with surprise, "You... you..."

Gongsun Lu'E first turned around and closed the door before whispering, "Quiet brother Yang, I've come to rescue you." She untied the knots of the net and cleared the Passion Flowers away from Yang Guo, letting him out. Her hands were covered with a thick piece of cloth.

Yang Guo hesitated, "If your father finds out about this..."

Gongsun Lu'E said, "I'll ignore whatever heavy punishment I'll get." She picked up a Passion Flower and placed it in the mouth of the unconscious disciple so that he won't be able to call for help when he wakes up. Then she placed him in the fish net and threw the Passion Flowers over him. She whispered again, "Brother Yang, hide behind the door if someone enters. I'll go and get the antidote for your poison from the pill room."

Yang Guo was extremely touched. He knew that she was putting herself in danger by doing this; his friendship with her was not even a day old and she's actually rebelling against her father to rescue him. He said, "Miss, I... I..." He was so touched that he couldn't say anything.

Gongsun Lu'E smiled at him and said, "Just wait here for a little while, I'll be right back." She then left the room.

Yang Guo was lost in thought, "Why is she treating me so well? Though I've had an unfortunate life and suffered under other people ever since I was small, there are actually many people who have treated me sincerely. There's no need to mention Gu Gu; there's Grandma Sun,

Hong Qigong, my Godfather Ouyang Feng and Island Master Huang. There's also the girls Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang, and now's there's Gongsun Lu'E as well amongst them; all of them have treated me with great sincerity. My birth date and time must be of an extremely strange nature; otherwise how could those who've been good to me treat me so well and those who've been cruel to me have treated me so badly?" But he never thought about how all his encounters have been extraordinary; the people he meets either treat him with great sincerity or treat him with extreme insincerity. His character was such that he would only get on well with those who could agree with him; those whose words clashed with his, he treated as an enemy. How he treated others was, of course, how others repaid him.

He waited for a long while but Gongsun Lu'E still had not returned. Yang Guo was getting more and more worried. At first he thought that there must have been someone else present in the pill room so she couldn't steal the antidote. But as time went by, he thought that even if she couldn't steal the antidote, she would have come back and told him so. It looks like something must have gone terribly wrong; she took such a big risk for me, how can I not try to save her? He opened the door slightly and peeked out. It was quiet outside and there was no one around; he slipped out but he did not know where Gongsun Lu'E might be.

Just as he was hesitating, he suddenly heard footsteps from around the corner; he quickly hid behind the corner and saw two disciples in green passing by shoulder to shoulder. In their hands was a thorny stick; it appeared that it was something that was used for punishment.

Yang Guo was furious, "Gu Gu would rather die than submit, and that shameless Valley Master is actually trying to force her to submit through torture!" He lightened his

steps and followed the two disciples. The two disciples did not notice him; they turned and twisted along a few corridors before arriving outside a stone room. They said clearly, "Master, the thorny stick is here." They pushed open the door and entered.

Yang Guo's heart raced; he saw that there was a window on the eastern side of the room and ran over to it. He looked inside and saw that it wasn't Xiao Longnu; it was Gongsun Lu'E who was standing in front of her father with her head hanging down. The Valley Master was sitting in the middle of the room while two disciples were holding long swords in their hands, guarding the left and right of Gongsun Lu'E.

The Valley Master took the thorny stick and said coldly, "E'er, you're my own flesh and blood; why did you betray me?"

Gongsun Lu'E lowered her head and didn't say anything.

The Valley Master said, "Do you think I don't know that you've fallen for the one named Yang? I said I was going to let him go; why were you so anxious? When I see him tomorrow I'll betroth you to him, how about that?"

How would Yang Guo not know how Gongsun Lu'E felt about him; but right now when it was said aloud in public, his heart raced.

Gongsun Lu'E still did not say anything and kept her head lowered. After a while, she lifted her head and said clearly, "Father, all you're thinking about right now is your marriage; what time you do have for your daughter?"

Valley Master Gongsun gave a 'heng' grunt and didn't say anything.

Gongsun Lu'E continued, "You are correct; I admire master Yang's decency and honesty, his passion and righteousness. But I know that there is only Miss Long in his heart. I saved him because... because I can't stand what you have done; it is not because of him."

Yang Guo was extremely moved by this and thought, "This scoundrel is so cruel and violent, yet he has a daughter who is so kind and righteous."

Valley Master Gongsun's face was unmoved. There were no signs of being angry on his face as he said dryly, "So according to you, I'm not an honest person; someone who's not righteous and who's not passionate?"

Gongsun Lu'E said, "I do not dare to describe father this way. But... but..."

The Valley Master said, "But what?"

Gongsun Lu'E said, "Master Yang has been pierced by thousands and thousands of Passion Flower thorns; how can he withstand the suffering? Father, you're merciful and kind, just let him go."

The Valley Master chuckled, "I'm going to let him go tomorrow. I don't need you to be so meddlesome."

Gongsun Lu'E tilted her head and pondered; appearing as if she was weighing up whether she should say the words she had on her mind. Eventually her face became resolute and she said, "Father, you're the one who raised me; that master Yang is an outsider I've just met; how can I betray you and help him? If father was really going to let him go and cure his poison, why would I need to take the great risk of going to the pill room?"

Valley Master Gongsun said sternly, "Then why did you go there?"

Gongsun Lu'E said, "I know that you have ill intent towards him. After you've forced Miss Long to marry you, you will kill master Yang to end Miss Long's longing.

Valley Master Gongsun's eyebrows raised again; he said coldly, "Huh, it looks like I've reared an ill boding tiger. I brought you up and here you are now, biting back at me. Give it!" He stretched out his hand.

Lu E said, "What does father want?"

The Valley Master said, "You're still playing dumb? I want the Passionless Pill that cures the poison of the Passion Flower."

Lu E said, "I did not take it."

The Valley Master stood up and said, "Then where did it go?"

Yang Guo examined the room; he saw the cupboards were lined with bottles of medicine and there were countless herbs hung on the wall. In the western side of the room were three pill cauldrons. This room looks like none other than that so called pill room. From the expression of Valley Master Gongsun, it appeared that Gongsun Lu'E would definitely face a heavy punishment.

He heard her say, "Father, it's true, I entered the pill room by myself because I wanted to find the Passionless Pill for master Yang. But I searched for half a day and still couldn't find it, otherwise, would I have been found out by father?"

Valley Master Gongsun said sternly, "The place where I hide this medicine is extremely secretive. The outsiders have stayed in the hall and have not left it. The Passionless Pill

has suddenly disappeared; could it be that the pill grew legs and ran away?"

Lu E knelt on the floor and cried, "Father, spare master Yang's life; just tell him not to enter the valley again and leave it at that."

The Valley Master chuckled, "If it was my life on the line, I don't think you would kneel on the floor and beg someone to save me."

Lu E didn't reply and just hugged his knees.

The Valley Master said, "You took the Passionless Pill; how can I save him now? Fine, if you don't want to admit it that's up to you. You can wait here for a day. Though you've stolen the pill, if you can't get it to him, it will be of no use. I'll let you go in twenty four hours!" He then advanced to the doors.

Gongsun Lu'E bit down as she said, "Father!"

The Valley Master said, "You've got something else to say?"

She pointed to the four disciples in green and said, "First dismiss them."

The Valley Master said, "My valley is united as one; there's nothing that's said that can't be said in front of the others."

Gongsun Lu'E's face went red and then immediately turned white. She said, "Fine, since you don't believe my words then you need to see whether I have it on me." She then began to take off her gown and skirt. The Valley Master quickly waved the disciples out and closed the door. After a short while, Gongsun Lu'E had taken off her gown and skirt and was now left with her undergarments. Indeed, she had nothing on her.

Yang Guo's heart jumped when he saw her white gleaming body. He was a young man and Gongsun Lu'E had an attractive figure, her appearance elegant; his blood raced but then he immediately thought, "Because she's trying to save my life, she didn't hesitate to unclothe herself. Yang Guo ah Yang Guo, if you take another look you're worse than an animal."

He quickly closed his eyes but just as he was feeling troubled and confused, his forehead lightly knocked into the frame of the window.

Though only a faint noise was produced, Valley Master Gongsun noticed it; he went over to the three pill cauldrons and pushed the middle one out of the way. He moved the one in the east to the middle, he moved the one in the west to the east and finally he moved the one that was originally in the middle to the west. He said, "Since it's like this, I'll promise you to spare that punk's life."

Gongsun Lu'E was delighted and bowed, she quivered, "Father!"

The Valley Master sat down on a chair by the wall and said, "You know the rules of the valley. What is the punishment for entering the pill room without permission?"

Lu E lowered her head and said, "Death."

The Valley Master sighed and said, "Though you are my daughter, I cannot break the rules of the valley, go in peace!" He drew out his black sword and raised it in midair; he said softly, "E'er, if you stop pleading for the one named Yang then I'll spare you. I can only spare one of you, you or him?"

Gongsun Lu'E said quietly, "Him!"

Valley Master Gongsun said, "Fine, my daughter really is kind and righteous; much better than her father." He waved his sword out and chopped downwards towards her head.

Yang Guo was shocked and called out, "Wait!" He leapt in through the window as he called out, "You should kill me!" His right foot touched the floor and he was about to stretch out his hand to grab the Valley Master's wrist to stop the black sword from chopping down when the sole of his foot felt soft as if he was treading on thin air. Yang Guo knew something was wrong; he quickly roused his chi and his body leapt up. Valley Master Gongsun pushed his daughter on the shoulders with his palms. Gongsun Lu'E's body quickly went backwards, knocking into Yang Guo.

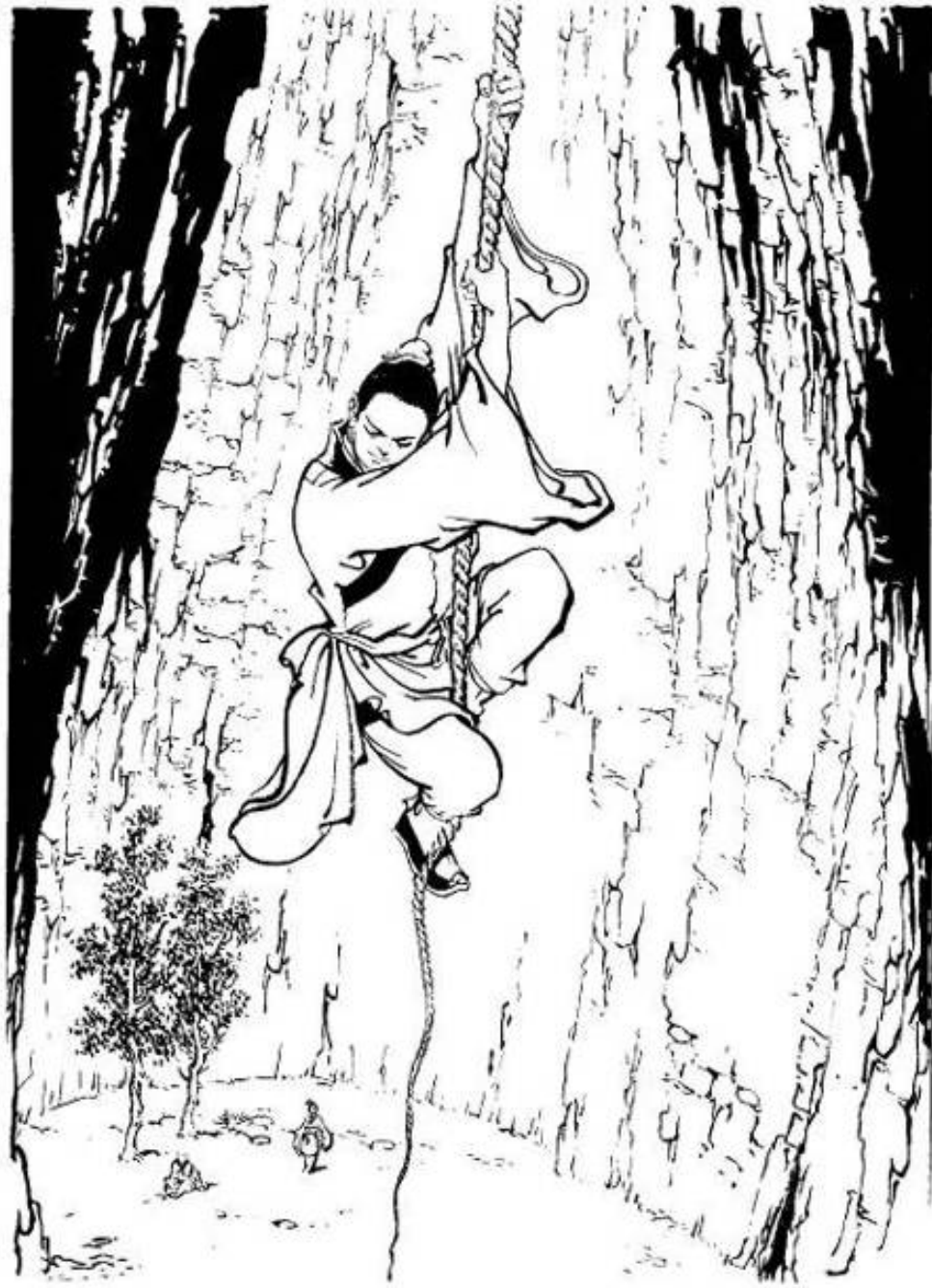
After he leapt back up, of course, he went back down. Gongsun Lu'E had knocked right into his body and the two of them dropped straight down. There was nothing under their feet and they had yet to reach solid ground even after falling for hundreds of feet.

Though Yang Guo was frightened, he still remembered he had to protect the life of Gongsun Lu'E; he quickly held Gongsun Lu'E in his hands. There was just darkness in front of him; he didn't know what they would land on; a mountain of knives or a forest of swords? Or would it be boulders or rocks? Before his thoughts were finished, a 'pu tong' sound was heard as the two fell into water, sinking downwards swiftly; there was actually a deep pool below the pill room.

End of Chapter 18.

Chapter 19 - The Old Woman Underground

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo grabbed the rope with both hands and climbed up it; he looked down and saw that Luu E

and her mother had become two small black images in the indistinct evening light.

Falling hundreds of feet like this on to solid ground could only result in death; but as soon as Yang Guo felt himself splashing into water, he was delighted; he knew that his life was not in danger. The current was strong and he had plunged deep into the water; he felt himself sinking downwards without end as if the water was depthless. He held his breath and waited until he slowed down before he swam upwards with his right hand while holding Lu'E in his left hand. As soon as he reached the surface he took a breath and a sudden stench filled his nose; at the same time, the water on his left was breaking in waves, as if some large aquatic animal was coming towards them to attack.

A thought went through his mind, "That scoundrel trapped us down here, how can it be something good?" With his right hand he chopped a fierce palm towards the left side. A loud sound was heard as he struck a large solid object; a fierce turbulent wave followed. Yang Guo used the force from his palm to move to the right with Gongsun Lu'E.

He wasn't a great swimmer; the reason why he was able to last so long underwater was because he used his internal energy to hold his breath. It was pitch black; all he heard was urgent splashing sounds from behind and to the left of him. He sent his right hand out and suddenly brushed against a cold and coarse object. It appeared to be the scales of that creature, he was shocked, "Could it be that there's such a thing as a Venom Dragon in this world?" He used the force in his hand and soared upwards with the strange creature forced under water by him. He took a deep breath, since he planned to dive underwater once

again; but his right foot actually landed on solid ground. He wasn't prepared for this and the impact on his leg was all wrong; his right leg was in great pain.

But he was too happy to care about the pain in his leg; he stretched out his hand to examine the surroundings and found a rock face by the pool. He was afraid that the strange creature would continue its attack so he quickly climbed to higher ground. Once he sat down, he became calmer. Gongsun Lu'E had swallowed a few mouthfuls of water and she was half conscious. Yang Guo rested her on his lap and let her throw up the water. Then he heard scraping sounds on the rocks and a stench that was gradually becoming stronger and stronger; a few of the strange creatures from the pool had climbed out.

Gongsun Lu'E sat up and hugged Yang Guo's neck; alarmed she said, "What's that?"

Yang Guo said, "Don't be afraid; hide behind me."

Gongsun Lu'E didn't move, she just held him tighter and quivered, "Crocodiles, crocodiles!"

When Yang Guo was living on Peach Blossom Island, he had seen countless crocodiles on the island; he knew that they were extremely vicious and violent, much more than the tigers and wolves of the land. One day, he, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers saw them but they didn't try to annoy them and kept their distance from them. Today unexpectedly, he had come across some crocodiles in this underground pool. He listened carefully and from the sounds, he could tell that there were three crocodiles getting closer step by step.

Gongsun Lu'E whispered, "Brother Yang, who would have thought that you and I would die in such a place?" Her voice was full of joy and comfort.

Yang Guo laughed, "Even if we are going to die, we first need to kill a few crocodiles before doing anything else."

At that time, the first crocodile was already within ten feet of Yang Guo's leg; Lu'E called out, "Hit it quickly!"

Yang Guo said; "Just a little longer." He stretched out his right foot and hung it down by his side; the crocodile advanced a few feet and opened its mouth, biting viciously at his leg. Yang Guo pulled his leg back and sent out a kick, striking the crocodile squarely in the jaw. The crocodile somersaulted in the air and landed back in the pool. The pool splashed and the other crocodiles in it clamored; but the other two crocodiles kept on advancing.

Though Yang Guo was poisoned by the Passion Flowers, his martial arts had not been affected in any way; the kick he just performed had a force of hundreds of kilos behind it. After he kicked the crocodile his foot ached slightly. However, the crocodile that he kicked was still moving freely after it landed back in the pool. He thought, "I can't do anything to all these crocodiles empty-handed; if I continue like this me and Miss Gongsun will eventually end up in their stomachs. I must think of something else; how can I kill all these crocodiles?" He stretched out his hand in search of a large rock to use as a weapon; but there wasn't anything on the rock face, not even a speck of sand. He heard the other two crocodiles getting closer and quickly asked, "Have you got a sword with you?"

Gongsun Lu'E said, "With me?" She remembered how she took off her gown and dress; all she was wearing now was her underwear. Now, she was in the arms of Yang Guo; she immediately became embarrassed and her body flushed with heat. But deep in her heart, there was a sweet feeling of joy.

Yang Guo was just worried about being attacked by the crocodiles at the moment; he did not notice anything wrong with her. He heard the two crocodiles were now within ten feet of him, and there were another two behind him. It would be of no use to send out a palm and knock them back into the pool; after a short while they would come back again. It would just be a waste of effort; so he gathered energy and waited for the crocodiles to get within three feet of him before sending out both palms, striking the crocodiles on the head. The crocodiles weren't that swift in turning and they couldn't move out the way when the palms arrived. But their skin was thick; they were just knocked unconscious and slipped back into the pool. Just at that time, the other two crocodiles behind him arrived; Yang Guo kicked one off the rock face with his left foot. The kick was very heavy; he could not hold Gongsun Lu'E steady and she slanted to the side, slipping downwards off the rock face.

Gongsun Lu'E called out in shock; her right hand braced against the rock face and she circulated her internal energy to leap back up. Yang Guo stretched out a hand to grab her and pulled her back up. This setback allowed the other crocodile to press close to him; it opened its jaws and bit down towards Yang Guo's shoulders. There wasn't enough time to punch or kick it away, he could only move out of its way. As soon as its jaws close, it might actually bite down on Lu'E. With this danger in mind he quickly sent out both hands; one pulled the upper jaw and the other pulled the lower; he circulated his internal energy and gave a shout, a cracking sound was heard as the jaws of the crocodile snapped and it immediately died.

Though Yang Guo had killed this vicious crocodile, his back had broken out in a cold sweat.

Lu'E said, "Are you hurt?"

Yang Guo heard her voice was gentle and concerned; his heart was moved slightly and he said, "No." But the force he had just used was too ferocious and his arms ached.

Lu'E observed that the crocodile was not moving and was lying there on the rock dead; she was in awe of Yang Guo and said, "How did you kill that crocodile empty-handed? And how can you see so clearly in this darkness?"

Yang Guo said, "I've lived with my Gu Gu for many years in the ancient tomb; all I need is the faintest light and I'll be able to see things." When he mentioned living in the tomb with his Gu Gu, he couldn't stop himself from letting out a sigh. Suddenly an excruciating pain broke out in his body. It was extremely difficult to endure, and he hollered and shouted and at the same time, he kicked the dead crocodile back into the pool.

Two crocodiles were climbing up onto the rock face just at that time; when they heard his inhuman calls, they were so frightened that they slipped back into the water. Gongsun Lu'E quickly held his arm and with her other hand, brushed across his forehead gently, hoping that she would be able to lessen his pain.

Yang Guo knew that even if he hadn't fallen into this dangerous situation, he would not live for more than a couple of days because of the poison; he had heard the Valley Master say that the pain would keep on increasing over the next thirty-six days before he finally died. The pain was so unbearable that even if he endured it a few more times, he'd eventually give in to the pain and kill himself. But when he dies, Gongsun Lu'E will have no one to protect her; that would be terrible for her and he thought, "The reason she's in this danger is because of me. No matter what pain I'm in I must endure it; hopefully the Valley Master will still have some love for his daughter and will

come to save her." As he thought about this, his thoughts of Xiao Longnu disappeared for the time being and the pain lessened; he said, "Miss Gongsun, don't be afraid, I think that your father will come for you. He hates me only and has always loved you; he must be feeling very regretful right now."

Gongsun Lu'E cried, "When my mother was alive, father really did love me. But after mother died, he became cold towards me. However, I know that... I know that in his heart he doesn't hate me." She stopped for a while and thought of many strange and hard-to-explain things; she said, "Brother Yang, I've suddenly thought of something; my father has always been afraid of me."

Yang Guo said surprised, "He's afraid of you? That's strange."

Lu'E said, "I just feel that whenever my father sees me he doesn't seem to be at ease; it's like he's got something hidden in his heart and is afraid that I will find out about it. Over the past few years, he's been avoiding me and doesn't want to see me."

She had noticed that her father's expression had been strange; though she wondered about this, she reached the same conclusion every time; the reason he's changed is because he was deeply hurt by her mother's passing away. But this time, falling into the crocodile pit was definitely her father's plan. He had moved the pill cauldrons in the pill room to activate the collapsing floor. If her father hated Yang Guo and wanted to kill him, all he had to do was keep the antidote for the Passion Flower poison away from him and he would have little chance of living. Now that Yang Guo had fallen into the crocodile pit, the chance of him escaping death was next to none; so why did her father push her into the crocodile pit as well? What fatherly love

was there in that push? This wasn't a slip due to anger, he had planned this. The more she thought about it, the sadder she became because it was becoming clearer and clearer to her. There were many words and actions of her father that she did not understand and just used the reason 'eccentric behavior' to explain it all. Right now, as she thought, it appeared that the word 'fear' was more apt. Her father fearing her was something that she could never have conceived.

The crocodile pool broke out in a thrashing roar as all the crocodiles fought over the dead crocodile; they'd stopped climbing up onto the rock face for the time being.

Yang Guo saw that she was deep in thought and asked, "Maybe your father has some kind of hidden secret and you've somehow stumbled upon it by accident?"

Lu'E shook her head and said, "No. My father's actions are honorable; he is very fair, and everyone in the valley had great respect for him. His treatment of you really is wrong; but he has never done such uncharacteristic things like this before."

Yang Guo did not know about the past affairs of the Passionless Valley and so it was hard for him to help her guess what the reasons were behind all this.

The crocodile pool was deep underground and was cold like an ice cave; the two were wet and felt the effects even more. Yang Guo had trained on the Chilled Jade Bed and took no notice of such insignificant coldness; but Gongsun Lu'E kept on shivering and searching for warmth in Yang Guo's arms. Yang Guo knew that this girl would be feeling frightened and sad right now; as he watched the struggle in the crocodile pool he wanted to make her laugh. The crocodiles were opening their mouths and showing vicious

teeth, looking extremely terrifying, so he laughed, "Miss Gongsun, we're going to die together today; when you reincarnate in the next life, what do you want to reincarnate as? Whatever happens, I don't want to change into one of these unsightly crocodiles."

Gongsun Lu'E smiled a little and said, "Then you should change into a narcissus flower; it's beautiful and fragrant, and it's something that everyone loves."

Yang Guo laughed, "The only types of people who are worthy of changing into those kind of flowers are people like you. If it's me, I'll get changed into some ugly daisy or chrysanthemum."

Lu'E laughed, "If the Yan Luo Wang (ruler of hell) tells you to change into a Passion Flower, would you?"

Yang Guo was silent and did not reply. He was feeling great resentment and thought, "With Gu Gu's and my "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Sword", that scoundrel is not our match. At the time he was on his back foot he was about to lose. But things had to happen this way. Gu Gu had been pierced by the Passion Flower in the sword room. When we were about to use swordplay which requires the users to be as one and to be filled with love to make use of its power, the poison prevented it. This is fate; I can't do anything about it. I wonder how Gu Gu is right now?" As soon as he thought about Xiao Longnu again, his body broke out in pain all over.

When Gongsun Lu'E heard him stay silent, she knew that she shouldn't have mentioned the Passion Flower; she quickly changed the subject and said, "Brother Yang, you're able to see the crocodiles while all I see in front of me is darkness."

Yang Guo laughed, "The crocodiles are extremely ugly, it's better not to see them." He patted her on the back gently to console her; but as soon as he touched her, he felt something cold, smooth and soft. Then he remembered how she undressed herself in front of her father in the pill room. She only had on her underwear; her shoulders and neck were uncovered. Yang Guo was slightly alarmed and quickly pulled back his hand. Lu'E thought about how he could see things in the dark; her semi clothed self would be seen clearly by him and she couldn't stop herself from calling out 'Oh no!' She automatically moved away a little.

Yang Guo sat a little distance away from her and took off his gown to cover her with. As he took it off, not only did he think about Xiao Longnu, but he also thought about Cheng Ying who made a gown for him and Lu Wushuang who was willing to die for him. He blamed himself for letting down the kindness of all these beautiful girls, and he felt guilt for not being able to repay them. He couldn't stop himself from letting out a long sigh.

Gongsun Lu'E straightened the gown and tied the belt around herself. Suddenly she felt a small package in the gown's pockets; she took it out and handed it over to Yang Guo, saying, "What's this? Do you need it?"

Yang Guo took it in his hands and felt that it was fairly heavy; he said, "What is this?"

Lu'E laughed, "I found it in your pockets, why are you asking me about it?"

Yang Guo looked at it and saw that it was a small package covered in rough cloth; he had never seen it before and immediately opened it. There was a sudden light in front of his eyes; four objects were within that package. One of them was a little dagger; on the handle was a pearl of the

size of a long yan stone. It glimmered and sparkled, the light shining on Gongsun Lu'E's graceful face; he thought, "People say that pearls are lights of the night, it appears that this isn't a lie."

Lu'E suddenly screamed, "Yi!" She stretched out her hand towards the package and picked up a small emerald colored jar; she called out, "This is the Passionless Pill."

Yang Guo was shocked and delighted; he asked, "This is the medicine that cures the poison of the Passion Flowers?"

Lu'E shook the jar a few times and felt that something was in the jar. She said with delight, "Yes, I was looking for this in the pill room for half a day; when did you take it? How did you take it? How come you haven't taken it yet? You don't know that this is the Passionless Pill, right?" In her delight, her questions were non-stop, not allowing Yang Guo any time to reply.

Yang Guo scratched his head and said, "I don't know anything about this, this... this jar of medicine; how did it get into my pockets? This really is strange."

In the light of the pearl on the dagger, Lu'E could see clearly what other things were in the package. Besides the dagger and the emerald colored jar of the Passionless Pill, there was a square piece of sheep skin about seven or eight inches in length and half of a Spirit Fungus (Lingzhi). A thought went through her mind and she said, "This piece of Spirit Fungus was the piece that was broken off by the Old Urchin."

Yang Guo said, "The Old Urchin?"

Lu'E said, "Yes. I'm in charge of the fungi room and this is the fungus from the 'Hundred Jade Plate'. The Old Urchin turned the sword, pill, fungi and library rooms upside down.

He destroyed books and stole swords; he kicked over the cauldrons and ripped up the fungi; this is all the handiwork of the Old Urchin."

Yang Guo suddenly understood and said, "Yes, yes."

Lu'E quickly asked, "What?"

Yang Guo said, "This package was placed on me by Senior Zhou Lao." He now knew that Zhou Botong had the intention of aiding him; because of this, he changed his naming of 'Old Urchin' to 'Senior Zhou Lao'.

It also became clear to Lu'E, she said, "So he gave it to you."

Yang Guo said, "I didn't even know that he gave it to me. This Wulin Senior does as he pleases in the world; his movements are mysterious. When he took my mask and scissors I didn't notice it; when he put this package on me I felt nothing. My abilities are not even half as good as his."

Lu'E nodded and said, "Yes, father said that he stole things from the valley and said that he must be captured but... but he took off all his clothes in front of so many people and showed that there was nothing on him."

Yang Guo laughed, "He had hidden the package on me before that and actually managed to deceive the Valley Master by taking off his clothes."

Lu'E opened the emerald colored jar and covered it with her left hand, shaking the contents into the palm of her hand. A square looking pill came out of the jar onto her palm; the pill was extremely dark and its smell was overpowering. Most pills are round so one can easily swallow it; but if it was from a slab of medicine, it will be long and flat.

Yang Guo had never seen a square pill before; he took the pill from Lu'E and examined it closely.

Lu'E shook the jar a few times again and patted the jar into her palm a few times before saying, "That's it, there's only one pill; take it now, it'll be terrible if it falls into the pool."

Yang Guo was about to put the pill in his mouth when he heard her say 'there's only one pill', he was stunned and asked, "Only one? Has your father got any more?"

Lu'E said, "That's why it is so precious; because there is only one pill. Otherwise why would my father get so angry?"

Yang Guo was shocked and quivered, "My Gu Gu has this poison as well; how will your father save her?"

Lu'E sighed, "I once heard from my senior apprentice brother that there were originally many Passionless Pills in the pill room; but for some reason, there was only one left. This pill is extremely hard to produce; there was no way to gather all the precious herbs and medicine to make any more. Because of this, my senior apprentice brother warned us that we must be extremely careful of the Passion Flower; if it's a little pierce from it, one will recover from it after a few days; if that happens it's not too serious. But if the poison is deep, it will be difficult for the Valley Master to act because one pill can only save one person."

Yang Guo kept on saying 'Oh no' and then said, "How come your father hasn't come to save you yet?"

Lu'E immediately knew what he was thinking and saw him placing the pill back into the jar; she let out a light sigh and said, "Brother Yang, how can my father feel no shame in light of your love for Miss Long? You're hoping that I'll be able to take the pill back up and save Miss Long's life."

Yang Guo showed a little smile as his thoughts were revealed, he said, "Of course I hoped that such a kind girl as you will leave this dangerous place safely; but I also hope that my Gu Gu's life can be saved. Even if I cure my Passion Flower poison, I won't last long if I stay down here in this crocodile pit. Of course saving my Gu Gu is more important." He thought, "Gu Gu's beauty is unparalleled; it's normal that someone like the Valley Master would want to marry her. But when Gu Gu refused to marry him, he lured her to the sword room to harm her. He really is evil; now he knows that the only Passionless Pill has been taken away, there is no way to cure the Passion Flower poison in Gu Gu. She just has thirty six days to live and all he's concerned about is making her submit to him; even the crocodiles in this pit have more heart than him."

Lu'E knew that no matter how hard she tries to persuade him to take the pill it will be of no use; she regretted telling him that there was only one pill so she said, "This Spirit Fungus can't cure poisons but it can strengthen one's body, eat it quickly."

Yang Guo said, "Yes." He broke the piece of Spirit Fungus into two; he put one piece into his mouth and put the other piece in front of Lu'E's mouth, he said, "We don't know when your father will let you go, so eat this piece to help protect yourself against this cold."

Lu'E saw that he was concerned for her and couldn't bear to refuse, so she opened her mouth.

This Spirit Fungus had been grown for hundreds of years; not long after the two ate it, they felt an extremely comfortable warmth throughout their bodies, a boost in their energy and they felt sharper.

Lu'E suddenly said, "Father must have known that Zhou Botong had stolen the Passionless Pill. He was lying to Miss Long when he said he was going to cure you; and when he was forcing me to hand over the Passionless Pill, he was acting then as well."

Yang Guo had thought about this awhile ago but he didn't want to make her sadder so he kept quiet about it. When he heard her realizing this on her own he said, "When your father let's you out, you need to be extremely careful; the best thing for you to do is leave the valley as quickly as possible."

Lu'E sighed, "You don't know my father; since he's pushed me down here into this crocodile pit he will never change his mind and rescue me. He was already worried about me; after this event, how can he allow me to live? Brother Yang, will you let me die with you?"

Yang Guo was about to say a few words to comfort her when he suddenly heard another crocodile climbing onto the rock face, its front foot stepping onto sheepskin from the package. Yang Guo had a thought, "That sheepskin looked kind of strange." He picked up the dagger and stabbed it between the eyes of the crocodile; a 'pu' sound was heard as it went straight through. The dagger that he was holding was actually extremely sharp and was capable of chopping gold and cutting jade. The crocodile struggled a little bit before falling back into the pool on its back, dead. Yang Guo said with delight, "Now that we've got this dagger, those crocodiles in the pool have run out of luck."

He picked up the sheepskin with his left hand and brought the dagger over, using the faint light from the pearl to carefully study it. The sheepskin was coarse on one side and there was nothing odd about it; but turning it over revealed drawings of many buildings, rooms, rocks and the like.

Yang Guo looked at it for a while but didn't find anything strange about it, he said, "This sheepskin is of no use to us."

Lu'E had been looking over his shoulder all along and suddenly said, "That's a map of our Narcissus Manor of the Passionless Valley. Look, that's the brook that led you here, that's the main hall, that's the sword room, that's the fungi room and that's the pill room..." She pointed to the map as she said this.

Yang Guo suddenly called out and said, "Look, look." He pointed to a drawing of water underneath the pill room.

Lu'E said, "That's the crocodile pool. Ah... there's a passageway here."

The two could see that there was a passageway drawn next to the crocodile pool and their spirits rose. Yang Guo matched the map to the crocodile pool and said, "If the map's right, after passing through the passageway there'll definitely be an exit. But..."

Lu'E interrupted, "But what's strange is that the passageway is going downwards; this crocodile pool is already deep underground; where will the passageway lead if it keeps on going further down?" The passageway on the map finished at the edge of the sheepskin, they didn't know where it leads.

Yang Guo said, "Has your father or senior apprentice brother ever mentioned this crocodile pool before?"

Lu'E shook her head and said, "I only learned today that there were so many terrifying things hidden underneath the pill room; even senior apprentice brother may not know about it. But... but to keep all these crocodiles alive will require regular feeding, why does father..." She trembled all over as she thought about how evil her father was.

Yang Guo took a look around and noticed a dark circular shape behind the rock face; it appeared to be the entrance to a tunnel but it was too faraway. He wasn't really sure; he thought, "Even if that is the passageway, I don't know what other kinds of vicious creatures might be lurking around in there. If we come across them it might be even more dangerous for us than the situation we are in now. Even so, we can't sit here and wait for death; we're going to die anyway, so we might as well take the risk in trying to find a way out. All I want is for Miss Gongsun to get out of this danger and pass the antidote on to Gu Gu." So he passed the dagger into the hands of Lu'E and said, "I'll go take a look; be careful of the crocodiles." His right foot touched the rock face and he flew away into the pool. Lu'E called out in alarm. Yang Guo's right foot landed on the stomach of the dead crocodile and used it to leap forward; he then landed on the back of a crocodile with his left foot. The crocodile sank into the water while Yang Guo leapt to the other shore; he pressed his body against the rock and searched the surface with his hand. He called out, "There's a large cave over here!"

Gongsun Lu'E's lightness kung fu was not anywhere as good as his; she didn't dare to leap over to the cave like he did. Yang Guo thought that if he went back to carry her on his back, their weight will increase. Not only will their leaping be inconvenienced, they will not be able to use the crocodiles as supports. But since it had come to this he had to risk it and called out, "Miss Gongsun, soak your gown and throw it over to me."

Lu'E did not know what he was going to do but did as she was told; she took off her gown and gave it a quick soak in the pool then hurriedly pulled it back up. She made two knots in the gown, forming a ball; she called out, "Its

coming!" She circulated her internal energy and shot it over.

Yang Guo caught it and untied the gown. He found a place to secure his footing and used his left hand to grab tightly onto a piece of jutting rock. His right hand swung the wet gown and he said, "Listen carefully."

He swung the wet gown forward and waved it about, a 'pai' sound was heard as he struck the mouth of the cave. He struck it three times in a row and asked, "Can you tell where the cave is?"

Lu'E had listened and could tell where it was, she said, "Yes."

Yang Guo said, "Jump forward and grab the gown, I'll pull you over."

Lu'E opened her eyes wide and tried to see but all she saw was darkness; she was really frightened and said, "I... I can't..."

Yang Guo said, "There's no need to be scared. If you miss the gown and fall into the pool, I'll dive in immediately to save you. We were afraid of the crocodiles when we first came here; but now we've got this dagger which can slice metal like butter, what have we got to fear?"

He then sent the gown forward.

Gongsun Lu'E clenched her teeth and pushed out with her feet against the rock face; her body flew up into the air and she heard the noise from the flapping gown and stretched out her hands towards it. Her right hand grabbed the lower half of the gown but her left hand grabbed thin air. As soon as Yang Guo felt his arm go heavy, he immediately swung the gown towards the cave. He was afraid that she would

slip so he quickly leapt over to her and lightly grabbed her waist, holding her steadily by the cave entrance.

Gongsun Lu'E was delighted and called out; "Brother Yang that was a great idea."

Yang Guo laughed, "We don't know what kind of vicious beasts are hiding in this passageway; we'll just let fate decide." He then bent his body and went into the cave.

Lu'E handed the dagger to Yang Guo and said, "You take it." Yang Guo gave her the gown and she covered her body with it.

The cave was extremely narrow; the two of them could only go through it on their hands and knees. The dampness from the crocodile pool caused the cave floor to be damp and slippery and the stench was extremely unpleasant.

Yang Guo crawled along and laughed, "This morning we were enjoying the beauty of the Passion Flowers; flowers were everywhere, birds were singing and we were surrounded by fragrant scents. After just a few hours the scenery has changed to this; I really have caused you great trouble."

Lu'E said, "How can it be blamed on you?"

After crawling along for a while, the passageway gradually became higher and they were able to walk along it. They walked for a very long time but still they did not reach the end. The ground became flatter and flatter.

Yang Guo laughed, "Looks like our bitter experience is turning to joy; we're slowly reaching safety."

Lu'E sighed and said, "Brother Yang, I know you're not feeling in the best of spirits, but you don't have to try to

cheer me up..." Before she finished her words, there was a sudden laugh from the left up ahead, "Ha-ha, ha-ha, ha-ha!"

What they heard just now was definitely laughter but it sounded sad; within the 'ha-ha ha-ha' sound there was mourning and sorrow. Yang Guo and Gongsun Lu'E had never heard a sound like this. It didn't sound like calls or laughter. There was also the fact that they were deep down in a cave in complete darkness and weren't prepared for such a noise. This was much more frightening than coming upon some kind of vicious beast. Though Yang Guo was brave, he couldn't stop himself from jumping; his head bumped into the roof of the cave painfully.

Gongsun Lu'E was so scared that she broke out in a cold sweat with goose bumps all over and hugged his legs.

The two of them didn't know what to do; they didn't dare to advance or retreat.

Lu'E whispered, "Is it a ghost?" She said these words very quietly; but after these words the same voice called out, "Yes, I'm a ghost, I'm a ghost, ha-ha, ha-ha!"

Yang Guo thought, "Since they called themselves a ghost, this person isn't one." So he said loudly, "I am Yang Guo, and along with me is Miss Gongsun. The two of us have run into some danger and we're just trying to find a way to escape it; we have no ill intentions..."

That person interrupted, "Miss Gongsun? What Miss Gongsun?"

Yang Guo said, "The daughter of Valley Master Gongsun, Gongsun Lu'E." No further sound came; it was as if that person had suddenly disappeared without a trace.

When that person was howling out with their cry that wasn't a cry and a laugh that wasn't a laugh, the two of them were extremely frightened. But they were even more frightened after this sudden silence in the darkness; the two of them clung to each other, not daring to make a single move.

After a long time, the person suddenly shouted out, "What Valley Master Gongsun; is it Gongsun Zhi?" The words were filled with anger but they could now clearly tell it was a woman's voice.

Gongsun Lu'E plucked up her courage and said, "My father's name is indeed Zhi, does Old Senior know my father?"

The person chuckled coldly and said, "Do I know him? Haha, do I know him?" Lu'E did not dare to interrupt and just kept silent.

After a while, the person shouted, "What's your name?"

Lu'E said, "Junior's name is Lu'E, the Lu (green) as in red and green, E (calyx) as in the calyx of a flower."

The person gave a heng' grunt and asked, "What is your birth date?"

Lu'E was afraid that this person was asking for her birth date because she wanted to use witchcraft to harm her; she whispered in Yang Guo's ear, "Should I say it?"

Before Yang Guo could reply, the person chuckled and said, "You're eighteen this year, your birthday is on the third day of the second month, and you were born at the 'Xu' hour (7-9 p.m.), correct?"

Gongsun Lu'E was shocked and called out, "You... you... how do you know?" Suddenly she was filled with an

indescribable feeling; she knew that this person would not harm her and she brushed past Yang Guo hurrying forward. After turning two bends, her eyes were suddenly dazzled by the light; before her she saw a half clothed granny sitting on her knees on the floor, her face full of anger and with a great presence.

Lu'E gasped and stood there stunned. Yang Guo was afraid that she was in danger and quickly hurried after her.

He saw that the old granny was sitting a natural grotto; there was a large ten foot wide hole in the roof which allowed sunlight in that came from over a thousand feet above. Most likely she accidentally fell down into the hole and couldn't get out. This grotto was deep underground; even if one called and shouted, a passer by may not hear them. What really was extraordinary was that she was actually still alive after falling from so high. He saw many date trees in the places where the sunlight reached; could it be that she somehow landed on the trees just right, saving her life in the process? He saw that she only had tree bark and leaves to cover herself up with; she must have been trapped in this grotto for years. So long that her clothes have all been worn to shreds.

The granny ignored Yang Guo completely and just looked up and down at Lu'E; suddenly she gave a bleak laugh and said, "Miss, you have grown up beautifully."

Lu'E returned the compliment with a smile and went forward to greet her, "How do you do Old Senior."

The granny faced the sky and laughed with her neither cry nor laughter howl; she said, "Old Senior? Ha-ha, I'm great; I'm great, ha-ha, ha-ha!" After she said this, anger filled her face.

Lu'E did not know how she offended her by saying these respectful words; she was very frightened and looked back at Yang Guo for help.

Yang Guo knew that it would be unavoidable for the granny to lose her mind after being stuck down here for such a long time; he shook his head towards Lu'E and smiled a little, trying to say that there was no need to treat her seriously. He studied the terrain, trying to think of a plan to get out. Though the hole in the roof of the grotto was high, with his lightness kung fu, it might not be an impossible task if he took the risk.

But Lu'E was just concentrating on the granny; she saw that most of her hair had fallen out and was almost completely bald; her face was full of wrinkles but her eyes were still full of vigor. The granny was looking at Lu'E without blinking too; the two of them stared at each other, ignoring Yang Guo.

After looking at her for a while, the granny said, "You've got a red birthmark on your waist on the left side, haven't you?"

Lu'E was shocked and thought, "Even father may not know about my red birthmark; how does this granny know about this? She also knows my birthday and time; it looks like this granny has a deep tie with my family." So she said softly, "Granny, you must know my father and my dead mother, isn't that right?"

The granny was startled and said, "Your dead mother? Haha, of course I know her." Her tone suddenly became stern and shouted, "Have you got a birthmark on your waist? Quickly let me take a look. If you're lying I'm going to kill you right where you're standing."

Lu'E turned her head and looked at Yang Guo, her face blushing. Yang Guo quickly turned away and kept his back

towards her. Lu'E took off her gown and uncovered her white gleaming waist. Indeed there was a red thumb size birthmark on her waist; the red and white contrasted each other, like a red plum in the middle of a field of snow, looking extremely adorable.

The granny just took one look and she trembled all over; her eyes were filled with tears and she opened her arms, calling out, "My precious, mother has been thinking about you bitterly."

Lu'E looked at her expression and suddenly her natural instincts were stirred, she threw herself on her and cried, "Mother, mother!"

Yang Guo was startled when he heard one of them call out 'my precious' and the other call out 'mother'; he turned around and saw the two hugging each other tightly. Lu'E was shaking while the granny was in tears; Yang Guo thought, "Could it be that this granny is actually Miss Gongsun's mother?"

The granny's eyebrows suddenly rose and her face was filled with an air of death, just like Valley Master Gongsun when he fought. Yang Guo silently called out, "No!" He was afraid that the granny would harm Lu'E and dashed forward. But all she did was push Lu'E lightly away on her shoulders and shout, "Stand up, I'm going to question you."

Lu'E was startled; she moved away from her and called out; "Mother!"

The granny said sternly, "Why did Gongsun Zhi send you here? He wanted you to come here to lie to me with your sweet talk, didn't he?"

Lu'E shook her head and said, "Mother, you're actually still alive, mother!" Her face was filled with both joy and

sadness, showing a daughter's love; how can this be faked?

The granny kept on asking sternly, "Gongsun Zhi said I was dead, didn't he?"

Lu'E said, "I have been filled with sadness over the years; I thought that I was a child without a mother. But my mother had actually been alive all this time; I'm really overwhelmed with joy today."

The granny pointed to Yang Guo and said, "Who's he? Why did you bring him here?"

Lu'E said, "Mother, listen to me." She then told her how Yang Guo entered the valley, how he contracted the Passion Flower poison, how the two fell down into the crocodile pool; she told it all from the beginning. But she kept the matter of Valley Master Gongsun marrying Xiao Longnu from her in case her mother would be disturbed by this and break out in a jealous rage.

Whenever Lu'E was unclear on something, the granny would ask her carefully about it. Apart from the matter about Xiao Longnu, Lu'E did not keep anything from her. The more the granny heard, the more peaceful she became; her expression towards Yang Guo was also getting more and more pleasant. When Lu'E described how Yang Guo killed crocodiles and how he protected her, the granny kept on calling out, "Good, good! Little kid, looks like my daughter hasn't picked you without good reason."

Lu'E's face went red and she lowered her head.

Yang Guo knew that it wasn't convenient to explain all the intricacies within all these events right now so he said, "Auntie Gongsun, we first need to come up with an escape plan; how do we get out?"

The granny's face sank and shouted, "What Auntie Gongsun? Don't ever say the words Auntie Gongsun again. Don't think that because I look frail I can't do anything; if I want to kill you it'll be as easy as turning my palm."

A sudden 'bo' sound was heard as something came out of her mouth, a 'zheng' sound was heard as it knocked Yang Guo's dagger to the ground.

Yang Guo felt his arm tremble severely; his five fingers couldn't hold on and the 'dang' sound heard was the dagger striking the floor. Yang Guo leapt backwards in shock; he saw that there was a date stone by the dagger, spinning around on the floor. He was still in shock as he thought, "With the force that I grip the dagger with, even if it was Jinlun Fawang's golden wheel, Da'erba's golden rod or Valley Master Gongsun's jagged saber, they wouldn't be able to knock the dagger out of my hands. Though I wasn't prepared, this granny just spat out a date stone from her mouth to do this; this person's martial arts really are awesome."

Lu'E saw his face change color and she quickly said, "Brother Yang, my mother won't harm you." She went over to him and tugged his hand; she turned to her mother and said, "Mother, tell him how to greet you. He doesn't know yet."

The granny laughed and said, "Fine, this old woman's name will never change; the people of Jianghu call me the 'Iron Palm Lotus Qiu Qianchi'. What should you call me? Ha-ha, shouldn't you be kowtowing to me and calling me 'mother-in-law'?"

Lu'E quickly said, "Mother, don't you know, there's nothing between brother Yang and I, he... he just has good intentions towards me and nothing else."

Qiu Qianchi said angrily, "Nothing else? Nothing between you? Where are your clothes? Why have you only got underwear on? Why are you covered by his gown?" She suddenly pitched her voice up and screamed, "If the one named Yang is thinking about being shameless like that Gongsun Zhi I'm going to make sure that he dies without a *complete corpse. [*Refers to hacking the body apart.] The one named Yang, are you going to marry my daughter?"

Yang Guo saw that she spoke madly and was impervious to reason; how could she force him to marry her daughter after just speaking a few words? But if he bluntly refuses, it would be extremely embarrassing for Lu'E. There's also the fact that this granny's martial arts are extremely high and her character extremely weird; if he said any words that were just slightly displeasing, she would kill him immediately. He saw that the most important thing right now was for the three of them to get out of this place so he said, "Please relax Old Senior; Yang Guo is not a man without a conscience; I will never dare to forget the kindness that Lu'E has shown me." These words were extremely agreeable; though he didn't agree to marry Lu'E, the words pleased the ears of Qiu Qianchi; she nodded, "You'd better not."

Gongsun Lu'E of course knew what Yang Guo meant by this; as she looked at Yang Guo, there was a look of disappointment in her eyes and she lowered her head. A while passed before she said to Qiu Qianchi, "Mother, how did you get down here? Why did father say that you were dead and let me stay saddened for all these years? If I'd known you were here, I would have risked my life to come and find you." She saw that her mother was unclothed; if she let her mother wear Yang Guo's gown then she would be insufficiently dressed; so she tore the back and front of the gown and draped it over her mother's shoulders.

Yang Guo was saddened when he saw what a state the gown that Xiao Longnu had made for him had fallen into; it stirred the Passion Flower's poison and his body broke out with unbearable pain once again.

When Qiu Qianchi saw this, her face moved slightly and her right hand searched for something on her person; but after a thought, her hand came out empty handed.

From her mother's expression and actions, Lu'E had an inkling of her mother's thoughts; she pleaded, "Mother, can you cure the Passion Flower's poison that brother Yang has in him?"

Qiu Qianchi said in a subdued manner, "I have my own troubles being trapped down here; if others can't save me, how can I save others?"

Lu'E said anxiously, "Mother, if you save brother Yang, he will definitely help you. Even if you can't save him, brother Yang will do all he can to help you. Isn't that right brother Yang?"

Yang Guo did not have a good opinion of Qiu Qianchi but he should help her on behalf of Lu'E; so he said, "Of course. Senior has been down here for so long, you must be very familiar with the layout and terrain of this place; can Senior tell me one or two things about it?"

Qiu Qianchi gave a long sigh and said, "Though this place is deep in the ground, it's not that difficult to get out." She looked at Yang Guo and said, "You must be thinking that if it's not hard, how come I'm still down here? Ai... The tendons in my arms and legs were destroyed long ago, and all my martial arts went with it."

Yang Guo had noticed a while ago that there was something different about the movements of her arms and legs. But

Lu'E was shocked when she heard this, she asked, "You did this by falling from up above?"

Qiu Qianchi said gloomily; "No! A person did this to me."

Lu'E was even more shocked by this and quivered, "Mother, who did this to you? We must take revenge against that person."

Qiu Qianchi chuckled, "Revenge? Will you be able to do it? The person who destroyed my tendons is Gongsun Zhi."

Ever since Lu'E found out that she was her mother, she had a feeling that something like this had happened; but when she heard this with her own ears, she trembled all over and asked, "Why... why?"

Qiu Qianchi glanced coldly at Yang Guo and said, "It's because I killed someone, a young beautiful girl; huh, it's because I killed Gongsun Zhi's beloved." When she reached this point, her teeth chattered as she bit down. Lu'E was frightened and moved back a little away from her mother while getting closer to Yang Guo. The grotto became silent.

Qiu Qianchi said suddenly, "Are you hungry? There are only dates for food in this grotto." After she said this, she got on all fours and crawled forward like a wild beast; her movements were very swift. Lu'E and Yang Guo both felt awful when they saw this sight. But Qiu Qianchi had been crawling like this for years and didn't think anything of it. Lu'E was about to dash forward to help her when she saw that she had already reached the base of a large date tree.

Years ago, a date seed must have been blown down into the grotto by the wind and sprouted down here, growing and blossoming and slowly flourishing; and from that one seed, fifty or sixty trees eventually grew. If a date seed had not been blown down here or if it had fallen onto infertile

ground, Yang Guo and Lu'E would have come across upon a pile of bones. Who could think that this pile of bones would be an eminent member of Wulin? And Lu'E would never know that this was actually her mother.

Qiu Qianchi gathered a date stone from the floor and placed it into her mouth; she raised her head and spat out, the date stone shot upwards for tens of feet and struck a branch; the branch swayed and tens of dates rained downwards from the branch.

Yang Guo nodded and thought, "So after her tendons were ruined she managed to learn this great date stone spitting skill. The saying 'heaven never seals off all its exits' isn't a lie." His spirits were roused as he thought about this.

Lu'E picked up the dates from the floor and divided them up for her mother and Yang Guo to eat; she ate a few herself as well. In the middle of this underground grotto, she was serving her mother and acting just like a little hostess.

Qiu Qianchi has endured one of the most tragic experience in anyone's life; hate had been gathered up in her heart over the last ten years. Even if she wasn't a hot tempered person and was a peaceful, kind natured woman, she would still have changed into this unreasonable person. But a mother's love is a natural instinct; when she saw the daughter she had been thinking about night and day had grown into such a beautiful girl, her temper was calmed. The warmth of her love towards her daughter was gradually stirred and she asked, "What has Gongsun Zhi been saying about me?"

Lu'E said, "Father has never talked about mother. When I was little I asked if I looked like my mother. What illness did mother die of? Father would suddenly break out in a temper and scold me for a while, telling me not to bring this

up ever again. A few years later I asked him again and once again, he shouted at me.”

Qiu Qianchi said, “What were you thinking?”

Tears formed in Lu'E's eyes and she said, “I thought that my mother must have been a beautiful, gentle woman and father loved you deeply. Whenever other people mentioned you he would be extremely upset and sad; from then on I didn't dare to ask him about you again.”

Qiu Qianchi chuckled and said, “You must be extremely disappointed; your mother isn't a beautiful and gentle woman but a vicious, cruel and ugly old hag. If you knew about this, I think you would rather not see me.”

Lu'E stretched out her arms to hug her around the neck and said tenderly, “Mother, you're how I imagined you would be.” She turned to Yang Guo and asked, “Brother Yang, my mother is beautiful, isn't she? She treats me well and she treats you well, right?” Her words were filled with sincerity; in her heart, she looked upon her mother as the greatest woman in the world.

Yang Guo thought, “She might have been beautiful when she was younger but how can you say that she's beautiful now? You're right when you said that she treats you well but she might not have any good intentions in her heart towards me.” But since Lu'E asked like this, he could only reply, “Yes, you're right.” His tone was not anywhere near as sincere as Lu'E's; Qiu Qianchi knew it straight away when she heard it, she thought, “Heaven has pitied me and has given me the chance to see my daughter again; though she is filled with respect and love for me now, it would be difficult to ensure that it will be like this forever. I need to tell her about all the bitterness and wrong that I've suffered.” So she said, “E'er, you asked, how did I get here?”

Why Gongsun Zhi said that I'd died? Sit down, I'll tell you all about it."

Qiu Qianchi said slowly, "Gongsun Zhi's ancestors were officials in the Tang court. Later on, because they wanted to avoid the troubles of the court, they decided to reside here in this secluded valley. His ancestors worked as military officials and his family's martial arts can be classed as a respectable skill; but his real advanced martial arts were taught to him by me." Yang Guo and Lu'E both felt rather surprised by this.

Qiu Qianchi said proudly, "You two are still young, of course you wouldn't understand the principles within them. The Iron Palm Clan Chief, the 'Iron Palm Water Floater' Qiu Qianren is my brother. Yang Guo, tell Lu'E about the Iron Palm Clan."

Yang Guo was startled and asked, "The Iron Palm Clan? I'm not very knowledgeable; I really don't know what the Iron Palm Clan is."

Qiu Qianchi scolded him, "Little punk, you dare tell lies in front of me! The Iron Palm Clan is famous throughout the world. Along with the Beggar Clan, we're classed as the world's two greatest clans; how can you not know?"

Yang Guo said, "Junior has heard of the Beggar Clan before but the Iron Palm Clan..."

Qiu Qianchi was exasperated and scolded, "Ha-ha, you've practiced martial arts and you don't even know anything about the Iron Palm Clan..."

Lu'E saw that her mother's face had reddened with anger; she interrupted and tried to persuade her, "Mother, brother Yang is not even twenty yet; he has studied with his Master

deep in the mountains ever since he was young; of course there are things about the Wulin that he doesn't know."

Qiu Qianchi ignored her and kept on grumbling.

Twenty years ago, the Iron Palm Clan was indeed very famous; but at the second Mount Hua competition, the Iron Palm Chief Iron Palm Water Floater Qiu Qianren entered religion and the tutelage of the Reverend Yideng. The Iron Palm Clan dispersed immediately after that. When the Iron Palm Clan was dispersing, Yang Guo had just been born and no one had ever mentioned the clan to him before, so naturally he wouldn't know anything about it. His mother Mu Nianci had actually lost her virtue to his father Yang Kang on Iron Palm Peak; his mother became pregnant and Yang Guo was conceived.

Now as Qiu Qianchi talked about this, his eyes stared, not knowing how to reply. Qiu Qianchi had been in the Passionless Valley for almost thirty years; she has not heard about the changes in the Wulin world. She just knew that the Iron Palm Clan had been famous for hundreds of years, so they must be flourishing even more at the present time. But now she heard that Yang Guo hadn't even heard of the three words 'Iron Palm Clan' before; of course she would break out in a thunderous rage.

Yang Guo was being insulted and cursed at for no reason at all; at first he forced himself to take it; but as it went on, the insults were beginning to go too far. He was starting to get angry and was about to answer back when, just as he was going to open his mouth, he saw Lu'E staring at him. Her eyes were filled with tenderness and her face was looking apologetic. Yang Guo's heart softened and his face showed a helpless expression; he was beginning to feel contented as he thought, "The worse your mother treats me the better you treat me. The old bat's words just brush past the ears,

while the beauty's warmth goes to my heart." His brain became active as his heart relaxed; suddenly he thought, "Miss Wanyan Ping's martial arts appeared to be of the same school as Gongsun Zhi; she also said that she practiced the "Iron Palm"; she must have some kind of connection with the Iron Palm Clan."

He closed his eyes and recalled that when Wanyan Ping fought Yelu Qi, he could remember about seventy or eight percent of it. When he fought Gongsun Zhi just a few hours ago, his attacks and form were even clearer in his mind and he called out, "Ah, I remember."

Qiu Qianchi said, "What?"

Yang Guo said, "Three years ago I saw an extraordinary Wulin Senior battle eighteen men from the world of Jianghu; he fought them all empty handed. In the end he seriously injured nine of them and killed the other nine. I heard this great person say that he was from the Iron Palm Clan."

Qiu Qianchi asked quickly, "What did this person look like?"

Yang Guo made it up as he went along and said, "This person was bald and was around sixty years of age, his face glowed and he was tall, he wore a green gown and said he said his surname was Qiu..."

Qiu Qianchi suddenly shouted, "Bullshit! My two brothers are not bald, they are not tall and they have never worn green before. You saw that I'm tall and bald so you said they're bald as well?"

Yang Guo thought, "Crap!" But his face remained unmoved and he laughed, "There's no need to rush me; I didn't say this person was your brother. Could it be that everyone who's named Qiu is your brother?"

Qiu Qianchi could say nothing after this rebuttal and asked, "What were his martial arts like?"

Yang Guo stood up and performed a few fists of Wanyan Ping's mixed up with the form and palms of Gongsun Zhi; eventually he became more and more fluid in his actions and the grotto was filled with elegant palms and powerful punches. Though his stances were slightly wrong, it was somewhat better than the original palm techniques of Wanyan Ping. His natural movements covered up all the places that were out of form with Wanyan Ping's techniques. His hand and leg movements were tight and complete and whenever he sent out a palm, he would deliberately put extra effort in it to make it more vicious.

Qiu Qianchi watched with great joy, she called out, "E'er, E'er, that's the martial arts of our Iron Clan Palm, watch carefully."

Yang Guo performed these stances with Qiu Qianchi pointing out the stances and explaining the lethal aspects of them from the side.

Yang Guo was amused and thought, "If I carry on any longer she'll see through me." He then stopped and said, "At this point, the Wulin senior had won and there wasn't a need to carry on."

Qiu Qianchi was delighted and said, "You've remembered a lot of the stances wrongly, your hand movements are incorrect as well; but to perform it as you did is really something that is difficult to do. What was the name of this Wulin Senior? What did he say to you?"

Yang Guo said, "This extraordinary person's movements were like a divine dragon. After he won he flew away. I just heard from the remaining nine injured men and they were blaming themselves saying, how could we give trouble to

Master Qiu of the Iron Palm Clan? Weren't we signing our own death warrants?"

Qiu Qianchi said with delight, "That's right, the one named Qiu is most probably a disciple of my brother." Qiu Qianchi loved martial arts; but for the last ten years she hadn't been able to move her arms and legs freely. Now, as she saw Yang Guo perform her clan's martial arts, she was thrilled and was itching to have a go. She then started to lecture the two about her clan's palm techniques and lightness kung fu.

Yang Guo was anxious to get out as quickly as possible so he could deliver the antidote to Xiao Longnu. Though what he heard was advanced and refined martial arts that would benefit him, when he thought about the suffering of Xiao Longnu, how could he keep a frame of mind for learning martial arts? He then signaled to Lu'E with his eyes.

Lu'E understood and said, "Mother, why did you teach father martial arts?"

Qiu Qianchi said angrily, "Call him Gongsun Zhi! Why father this and that?"

Lu'E said, "Yes. Mother, please go on."

Qiu Qianchi said, with hate in her voice; "Huh!" After a while she continued, "This happened twenty years ago. My two brothers got into an argument..."

Lu'E interrupted, "I've got two uncles?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "Don't you know?" Her tone became stern with a hint of scolding.

Lu'E thought, "How would I know?" She replied, "No, no one's ever told me before."

Qiu Qianchi sighed and said, "You... you really don't know anything. Pitiful... pitiful!" After a while she continued, "Your uncles are twins, your older uncle is called Qiu Qianzhang, your second uncle is Qiu Qianren. Their voices, figure and faces were the same, but the two's characters and fate were very different. Second brother's martial arts are extremely high but first brother's martial arts were very ordinary. Second brother taught me martial arts but first brother and I were a lot closer to each other. Second brother was the chief of the Iron Palm Clan; he had many clan matters to deal with and was busy with his own martial arts, so we saw very little of each other. When he taught me martial arts, he was strict and didn't say much to me. But first brother was very close to me; he would say, sister this and sister that. Later on when the two argued, I sided with first brother."

Lu'E said, "Mother, what did the two uncles argued about?"

Qiu Qianchi's face suddenly showed a hint of a smile and said, "This matter is not serious but not too insignificant either; it's just that my second brother was too obstinate. When second brother became the chief of the Iron Palm Clan, his name 'Iron Palm Water Floater Qiu Qianren' was famous throughout the world of the Wulin. Very few knew my elder brother's name. Whenever my elder brother went out, he would sometimes borrow my second brother's name for convenience. The two of them looked the same and were real brothers, so what's so bad about borrowing his name? But second brother didn't see it this way; he would argue about this all the time, saying elder brother was a swindler and trickster. My elder brother had a good temper; whenever second brother scolded him he would just laugh and apologize. One time, second brother went too far. I couldn't do anything and so added a few words to help first

brother. This brought trouble onto me and we argued. I left the Iron Palm Peak in anger and never returned.”

“I roamed Jianghu by myself. One time, I was pursuing a scoundrel and came to the Passionless Valley by accident. This was punishment for the bad deeds in my last life and I met Gongsun Zhi... this evil... this evil scoundrel. We eventually got married. I was older than him by a few years and my martial arts were a lot stronger than his. After we got married not only did I teach him martial arts, I looked after his everyday needs; he didn’t have to do anything in the valley. His family’s martial arts have its ingenious aspects but there were too many holes in them. It was me who thought about it carefully and helped him improve it. One time, a strong enemy attacked; if it wasn’t for me driving them away, this Passionless Valley would have been flattened long ago. Who could have predicted that this scoundrel would repay these deeds with ingratitude? After he grew his wings he forgot about where all his martial arts came from, and who saved him in his time of danger.” She then spurted out a load of insults and curses with the insults becoming eviler as it went on.

Lu’E blushed when she heard this; she felt that insulting her husband like this in front of Yang Guo was a bit embarrassing. She kept on calling out, “Mother, mother!” But how could she stop her? Yang Guo loved it; he hated Gongsun Zhi too and enjoyed these insults immensely. He couldn’t stop himself from adding a few words to stir Qiu Qianchi’s mood further. If it wasn’t for Lu’E, he too would have opened his mouth and insulted him as well.

Qiu Qianchi exhausted her insults until nothing new could be added; she had repeated everything she said and had to stop. She continued, “That year I was pregnant with you and it was unavoidable that my character would become a bit more anxious and worried. Who knew that while it

seemed like he treated me the same on the outside, he was having an affair with a maid behind my back. After you were born, he still carried on with this maid. I didn't know anything; I thought that after we had this beautiful daughter, he would treat me better. I was deceived by them for a few years. One day I accidentally stumbled across them and heard them discussing about leaving the valley together and never returning."

"I was hiding behind a tree and heard that scoundrel say that he was worried about how high my martial arts were and the further they went the better; how I was too controlling and didn't give him any freedom. He said he only felt alive when he was with that bitch maid. I had always thought his feelings for me were real, but when I heard this I was so angry that I almost fainted. I wanted to dash forward and kill the two right there and then. Although he was heartless, I still looked back fondly upon the many years of us being a husband and wife. He was originally a good person, this must be the fault of that seducing bitch using her charms on him. I held my anger and stood behind the tree, listening carefully."

"I heard them say that two days later I'll be meditating for seven days and nights without leaving the room. They would take this chance to leave the valley, and by the time I've found out seven days later, they'll be long gone. I shivered when I heard this; heaven must have pitied me to give me this chance to see through their plans. Otherwise, where on earth would I be able to find them seven days later?" By this point, her teeth were chattering with fury.

Lu'E asked, "What was the young maid called? Was she beautiful?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "Crap! Beautiful my arse! This maid seduced him through her words; whatever the bastard said

she agreed with and she would sweet talk him saying that he was the greatest man on this earth, that he was a great hero. Huh, that bitch was called Rou'er. That Gongsun Zhi with his sinful ancestors, what stance or form of his that I don't know? He's a great hero? He's not even worthy to be a follower of my big brother; if he tried to pour wine for my second brother he would be kicked out on his butt."

By this point, Yang Guo was beginning to feel a little sympathy for Gongsun Zhi, he thought, "It must be because you were too controlling and that your looking down on him was what forced him to finally fight back."

Lu'E was afraid that her mother would break out in another bout of non stop cursing, so she asked quickly, "Mother, what happened then?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "The two animals had decided that in the morning on the third day, they'll meet there again and leave together. They said that in the two upcoming days they'll need to be extremely careful and not leave any clues as to what they were doing in case I found out. The two then continued on with talking rubbish. The bitch looked at the bastard captivated, as if she were looking at someone more important than the Emperor; revering him more than gods and goddesses. That bastard felt proud of himself; he kept on praising himself and then hugged and touched that slut. Their shameless actions almost angered me to death right there and then. Early on the third day, I pretended to meditate in the meditation chamber while Gongsun Zhi came over and peeked in a few times through the window. I waited for him to leave and then utilized my lightness kung fu and rushed to their meeting place. That bitch had arrived there before him. Without saying a word I grabbed her and tossed her into a Passion Flower thicket...." Yang Guo and Lu'E both gasped.

Qiu Qianchi glanced at them and continued, "After a while Gongsun Zhi arrived; there is no need to describe the panicky state he was in when he saw Rou'er rolling about and crying out in pain in the Passion Flowers. I leaped out from behind the tree and held him with my two hands then threw him down into the thicket as well. The valley has an antidote to the Passion Flower poison that had been passed down from generation to generation; it is called the Passionless Pill. Gongsun Zhi struggled and picked himself up; he then helped that slut off the ground and rushed to the pill room, wanting to get the Passionless Pill to cure their poison. Ha-ha, guess what they saw?"

Lu'E said, "Mother, what did they see?"

Yang Guo thought, "You must have destroyed all the Passionless Pills; what else could it be?"

Qiu Qianchi did indeed say, "Ha-ha, when he got to the room, he saw a bowl filled with frosty arsenic water and hundreds of Passionless Pills soaking in the bowl. If he wanted to take the Passionless Pill he would have to take in the poison of the frosty arsenic water; if he didn't take it, he would still die. The method of producing the Passionless Pill is a family secret. It is extremely difficult to get all the precious herbs and medicines to produce them. To make a batch of Passionless Pills requires the spring dew and autumn frost; it will take three years to make. He then rushed to the meditation chamber and begged on his knees for their lives. He knew that I would muse over on our marriage and wouldn't destroy all the pills, keeping some just in case. He struck himself across the face many times; he cried and swore that if I spared the two them he would send Rou'er away and never see her again. And he said he would never dare to do such a thing again."

"As I heard him beg, his mouth kept on talking about Rou'er. I was angry and took out a Passionless Pill and put it on the table. I said, 'There is only one Passionless Pill left. Only one of you can live. You know that it would be of no use if you each take half. You decide whether you want to save her or save yourself.' He immediately took the pill with him and hurried to the pill room. I followed after him. By that time, the bitch was in unbearable pain and was rolling about on the floor.

Gongsun Zhi said, 'Rou'er, go in peace. I'll follow you in death.' He then drew out a sword.

When Rou'er saw how loving he was, she was extremely touched and said, 'Good, good. We'll be a husband and wife in the underworld.' Gongsun Zhi pierced her chest with the sword and killed her.

"I was outside the pill room looking in through the window and was slightly alarmed, I was afraid that the second move will go for his throat. When he raised the sword, I was about to call out to him to stop; but then I saw him wiping the blood away from his sword on Rou'er's body before putting the sword back into its sheath. He turned to the window and said, 'Sister Chi, I'm willing to repent; I've killed that bitch with my own hands, just spare me.'" He lifted his hand towards his mouth and swallowed the Passionless Pill. This wasn't something that I had expected, but since it had ended this way and he was repenting sincerely, I was very pleased. He then planned a feast to apologize to me. I scolded him for awhile and he kept on saying that he deserved to die and he swore hundreds of poisonous oaths, saying that he would never betray me again."

Yang Guo thought, "You're falling into his trap!" However Lu'E was in tears.

Qiu Qianchi said angrily, "What? You pity that bastard?" Lu'E shook her head and didn't say anything. She was actually crying at her father's cruelty and heartlessness.

Qiu Qianchi continued, "I drank two cups of wine and chuckled; I then took out another Passionless Pill from my pockets and placed it on the table. I laughed, 'You might have acted a bit too fast; I was just testing what kind of person you were. If you had begged for just a little while longer I would have given two pills to you. You would have been able to save the life of that little beauty, wouldn't that have been great?'"

Lu'E quickly asked, "Mother, if he actually did beg you for a little while longer, would you have given him two pills?"

Qiu Qianchi thought for a while and said, "I don't know. At that time, the thought of saving that slut passed through my mind. If I saved her and sent her away, then Gongsun Zhi would have been touched by this and might have actually come back to me, not daring to do such things again. But all he cared about was his life and he quickly killed his own lover. That can't be blamed on me."

"Gongsun Zhi picked up the Passionless Pill and looked at it for a long while before he raised his cup and laughed, 'Sister Chi, that's in the past, why bring it up? It's better to kill that girl and tie things up neatly. Let's drink.' I was slightly suspicious when he kept on telling me to drink but I was feeling great and joyful and actually became quite drunk. By the time I woke up, I was already down in this grotto and the tendons in my arms and legs had been destroyed by him. That bastard did not have the guts to see me again. Huh, he must have thought that I'd died long ago."

When she finished talking about this, her eyes suddenly developed a fierce light and her expression was terrifying. Yang Guo and Lu'E both turned away, not daring to look her in the eye. The three of them didn't say a single word for a long, long time.

Lu'E took a look around and all saw that the only things in the cave were rocks, hair and grass; she said somberly, "Mother, have you been relying on these dates only for all these years?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "Yes. Do you think that bastard would send me food?"

Lu'E hugged her and cried, "Mother!"

Yang Guo said, "Has Gongsun Zhi ever mentioned an exit to this grotto?"

Qiu Qianchi chuckled, "He never mentioned that there was such a grotto and pool beneath the manor in all the years we were married. If there was another exit, that bastard would not have put me here. He put those crocodiles in the pool afterwards; he was still afraid that that I would somehow manage to get out."

Yang Guo looked around and saw that indeed there was no other way out apart from the entrance. He lifted his head and looked at the hole in the grotto roof. It was at least a thousand feet off the ground, the tallest tree down there was just forty or fifty feet tall, even if twenty of them were stacked together they would not reach the roof. He thought for a while but couldn't come up with anything. He then said, "I'll take a look from the top of the tree." He then leapt on top of a date tree and saw that there were bumps and grooves higher up the stone walls; it wasn't like down below where it was all smooth and slippery. He then climbed up along the wall and was getting higher and higher; he was

pleased and turned back to Lu'E and called out, "Miss Gongsun, if I can get out I'll let a rope down and get both of you out."

He climbed up about six or seven hundred feet; with his outstanding lightness kung fu, he managed to turn all the dangers he met along the way into minor obstacles. But when he was about seventy or eighty feet away from the entrance, the walls became smooth and slippery without any hand holds and the walls slanted inwards as well. You wouldn't be able to get out unless you were a fly.

Yang Guo took a look around and saw that the opening of the cave was around ten feet wide; more than enough space for someone to pass through. He had a plan and slipped back down to the bottom of the grotto and said, "We can get out! But we'll need a long rope." He then took out the dagger and cut bark off the date trees and tied them into a rope. Gongsun Lu'E was delighted and helped him. Although the two were quick, they had to work for over four hours. The sky was dark before they finished forming an extremely long rope made out of tree bark.

Yang Guo held the rope and tugged it a few times with force; he said, "It won't snap." He then used the dagger to cut off a branch that was around fifteen feet in length and tied one end of the rope to the middle of the branch and wrapped the rope up around it. He then climbed up along the wall again until he neared the top. He then used the "Thousand Kilogram Fall" in his legs to secure his footing and circulated energy into his arms. He shouted out, "Get up!" He threw the tree branch towards the opening of the cave. He used just the right amount of energy and when the branch came back down, it hung across the opening of the cave. Yang Guo pulled the rope to make sure the branch was secure across the opening of the cave. Just two tugs, after which he felt the branch was tight, secure and would

be able to take his weight. He called out, "I'm going up!" He grabbed the rope and climbed up it; he looked down and saw that Lu'E and her mother had become two small black images in the indistinct evening light.

He used more strength in his hands and climbed up even quicker; in a short while he had reached the branch that was hanging across the opening of the cave. He bent his arms and a 'hu' sound was heard as he flew out of the cave and landed on the ground.

He took in a few deep breaths and then stood up. He saw that a bright moon had risen in the east above the mountains. He had been trapped down in the pool and grotto for half a day; now as he gained freedom, he felt an indescribable comfort and thought, "Will I feel no boredom at all if I stay in the tomb with Gu Gu? It is clear that the affect of the surroundings depends on one's feelings; if one wants to get out but can't they'll feel troubled in their hearts; but for those who don't want to get out, getting out will create misery." He then lowered the rope.

As soon as Qiu Qianchi saw Yang Guo climb out of the cave, she cursed her daughter, "Stupid girl, how can you let him get out by himself? Why would he still be worried about us once he gets out?"

Lu'E said, "Mother, relax, brother Yang is not that sort of person."

Qiu Qianchi said angrily, "All men are the same; what good men are there?" She then turned her head towards her daughter and looked at her carefully, she said, "Stupid girl, you've been taken advantage of by him haven't you?"

Lu'E's face went red and said, "Mother, what are you trying to say, I don't understand."

Qiu Qianchi was even angrier and said, "If you don't understand then why did your face go red? Let me tell you, when it comes to men you cannot give them one single step, you cannot be careless; can't you see what happened to your mother?" Just as she was beginning to carry on non-stop, Lu'E got up and caught the rope. She tied it around tightly around her mother's waist and smiled, "Look, does brother Yang care about us or not?" She then tugged on the rope signaling to Yang Guo that she had tied her mother in place.

Qiu Qianchi gave a 'heng' grunt and said, "Let me tell you, once we get back up you better make sure you hold onto him tightly and don't give him an inch. Zhang fu, zhang fu (zhang fu=husband, zhang= ten feet), within ten feet they are still your husband but once outside of ten feet, they're not your husband anymore, do you understand? Your grandpa named your mother Qianchi, a thousand (qian) feet (chi) is a hundred zhang, ha-ha, what husband is there outside of a thousand feet?"

Lu'E was amused but sad at the same time; she thought, "Mother's thinking really is wishful; he hasn't got a place for me in his heart." Her eyes went red and she turned her head.

Qiu Qianchi was just about to say something when she felt the rope around her waist tighten and her body lifted upwards slowly into the air. Lu'E looked at her mother and although she knew that Yang Guo would immediately lower the rope to rescue her, she was alone in this grotto all by herself for the time being and started to tremble with fear.

Yang Guo pulled Qiu Qianchi out of the cave and untied the rope from her waist. He lowered the rope down for a second time. Only after wrapping the rope around her waist did Lu'E relax a little; she pulled on the rope and felt it

tighten around her waist; her body rose up into the air. She saw that the date trees at the bottom of the cave were getting smaller and smaller, while the stars above her were getting brighter and brighter. Just a few more tens of feet and she would be able to get out of the cave.

Suddenly she heard someone shout out from the opening followed by the rope getting loose and her body fall straight back down. What chance is there of staying alive while dropping hundreds of feet? Lu'E screamed and almost fainted; she felt her body plummeting downwards but could do nothing about it.

Yang Guo was pulling Lu'E up and saw that he was about to bring her out when suddenly he heard footsteps from behind him; someone had actually come to attack him from behind. He was extremely startled by this; he couldn't worry about trying to turn around to fight off the attacker and just pulled the rope as quickly as possible.

He heard the attacker shout; "What are you doing sneaking around here?" The sound of a ferocious wind followed, and an extremely long and heavy weapon was sent out towards his back.

From the sounds of the weapon, Yang Guo knew it was the short man Fan Yiweng; with this danger he could only return his left hand and push the staff away, dispersing the force of this attack. Fan Yiweng couldn't see Yang Guo's face in this darkness but knew that his opponent was highly skilled. He took back his staff and swept the staff out again towards his opponent's waist; he had put all his strength behind this attack and really wanted to break his opponent into two pieces.

Yang Guo was holding up Lu'E along with the fairly weighty long rope with his right hand only, in a little while he would

struggle to keep control. When he saw the staff come towards him again, he again sent out his left palm to disperse the attack. He didn't predict that this attack of Fan Yiweng's was so ferocious, when his left palm met the staff his whole body trembled, his right hand couldn't hold on and the rope slipped with Lu'E plummeting downwards.

From the screams of Lu'E, one could tell that she was at the top of the grotto; Qiu Qianchi and Yang Guo both called out. Yang Guo didn't care about defending himself against the staff and sent his left hand forward as he bent to take the rope. But the force that Lu'E was falling down with was extremely high; the weight of Lu'E and the rope along with their plummeting speed created a force of about a thousand kilos. Yang Guo just held the rope for a little while before the force pulled him forwards headfirst towards the entrance of the cave. Though his martial arts were high, he couldn't make a single move right now.

Qiu Qianchi's martial arts had been lost along with the tendons in her arms and legs; she could only watch anxiously from the side as the rope outside the cave became shorter and shorter. Once the rope reaches its end, Yang Guo and Lu'E would fall tragically to their deaths. The end of the rope flew towards Qiu Qianchi as the rope pulled down quickly with Yang Guo and Lu'E's weight. As it neared its end, Qiu Qianchi had an idea, "You evil bastard, I'm going to take you with us." She made sure of her aim and struck the rope, though there wasn't much force behind the push, she managed to get the direction right and made it wrap around Fan Yiweng's waist tightly a few times.

Fan Yiweng felt the rope around his waist tighten and quickly used the "Thousand Kilogram Fall" to steady himself. But he had both Yang Guo's and Lu'E's weight to contend with along with their plummeting force; it brought him step by step closer towards the cave entrance. Fan

Yiweng saw that just another step forward and he too would fall into the cave. With this shock he quickly held the rope with his left hand and braced himself against the cave with his right hand, he gave a shout as he used the cave for support and actually managed to stop the rope.

At that time, Lu'E was just a few tens of feet off the ground; she really was a hairsbreadth away from death. The most powerful force is the force of a falling object, a little stone falling from such a height would have tremendous force in it, by the time Fan Yiweng had exerted all his strength to oppose the falling force, his hands only had two hundred or so kilos to contend with, this was nothing to him. His right hand held the rope and he moved his left hand towards his waist to untie the rope to let his enemy fall when suddenly he felt a subtle pain on his back, a sharp object was pressed against the 'Spirit Stage' pressure point below his sixth vertebrae; a woman's voice shouted, "Quickly pull them up! Damage to the 'Spirit Stage' will lead to ruin of the veins!"

Fan Yiweng was shocked, these words of "damage to the 'Spirit Stage' will lead to ruin of the veins" were the exact words of warning that his Master had told him when teaching him pressure point sealing martial arts. He didn't dare to go against this person's orders and pulled Yang Guo and Lu'E up with his arms. The falling force he had just opposed was extremely ferocious; right now he felt pressure in his chest and a desire to throw up blood. He knew that he had suffered an internal injury and he shouldn't use any force; but his life was in the hands of his enemy, he could only risk his life and comply. He pulled Yang Guo up very easily and then felt his chest widen, his limbs became limp and he threw up blood violently before falling down onto the ground.

The roped slipped once more as he loosened his hand. Qiu Qianchi called out, "Quickly save her!" Yang Guo did not

need any prompts; he grabbed the rope and eventually pulled Lu'E up. Lu'E had fainted from shock after being dropped down and pulled up so many times. Yang Guo first sealed the 'Hidden Rabbit' and 'Large Bone' pressure points of Fan Yiweng to stop his arms and legs from moving before waking Lu'E up.

Lu'E regained consciousness slowly; when she opened her eyes she did not know where she was; under the moonlight she saw Yang Guo laughing and looking at her. She threw herself into his arms and called out, "Brother Yang, are we dead? Is this the underworld?"

Yang Guo laughed, "Yep, we're both dead."

Lu'E noticed something was wrong with his tone; there was a hint of teasing behind it and she moved backwards to look at his face clearly. She saw her mother looking at her with her expression that was neither a smile nor a scowl; Lu'E was embarrassed and called out, "Mother!" She stood up.

Yang Guo saw that although Qiu Qianchi had lost her martial arts, she was still able to subdue Fan Yiweng and saved his life as a result. He had much respect for her and asked, "How did Senior subdue that shortie?"

Qiu Qianchi gave a faint smile and raised her hand; there was a sharp stone in it. She taught Gongsun Zhi's pressure point sealing techniques and Fan Yiweng was taught by Gongsun Zhi. The same things were passed from Qiu Qianchi down to Fan Yiweng with no difference in the formulae. She had placed the sharp stone on Fan Yiweng's 'Spirit Stage' pressure point and called out the frightening words of "damage to the 'Spirit Stage' will lead to ruin of the veins"; how could Fan Yiweng not get alarmed? But with the strength in Qiu Qianchi's hand and with such a small stone, how could she cause 'ruin of the veins'?

Right now Yang Guo's thoughts were only about the safety of Xiao Longnu. Since Lu'E and Qiu Qianchi are safe and Fan Yiweng subdued, he said, "You two wait here for a while, I need to deliver this Passionless Pill."

Qiu Qianchi was surprised and said, "What Passionless Pill? You've got a Passionless Pill?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes, please take a look to see whether it's the real thing." He then took out the little jar and removed the square shaped pill from it.

Qiu Qianchi took it from him and sniffed it a few times before saying, "This is it, how did it get into your hands? Since you've got the poison why haven't you taken it yet?"

Yang Guo said, "It's a long story, I'll tell Senior all about it once I've delivered the pill." He took the pill back and was about to go on his way.

Lu'E was sad and concerned for him, she said quietly, "Brother Yang, you must avoid my father, don't let him see you."

Qiu Qianchi shouted, "You still call him father! If you ever call him father again then don't call me mother."

Yang Guo said, "I'm delivering this pill to my Gu Gu to cure her poison; Valley Master Gongsun will not stop me."

Lu'E said, "If he tries to do something evil to you again, what then?"

Yang Guo laughed wryly and said, "Then I'll just deal with it one step at a time."

Qiu Qianchi asked, "You're going to see Gongsun Zhi, aren't you?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes."

Qiu Qianchi said, "Fine, I'll go with you; maybe I'll be able to help."

All Yang Guo wanted to do was to deliver the pill to Xiao Longnu; he hadn't even made a plan yet; when he heard these words of Qiu Qianchi, his mind suddenly lit up. "If that scoundrel's wife is there, how can he marry Gu Gu?" In his delight he suddenly thought, "But there is only one Passionless Pill; though I'll be able to save Gu Gu, death is unavoidable for me." He became depressed as he thought about this.

Lu'E watched the sudden changes on his face, from delight then to distress; she then thought about her parents meeting up again and what kind of trouble that would bring. Her heart was in confusion and turmoil.

But Qiu Qianchi was feeling great, she said, "Lu'E, carry me on your back."

Lu'E said, "Mother, you need to wash first and change your clothes." She was really afraid of what would happen when her parents meet up again and was just hoping to delay things as much as possible.

Qiu Qianchi said angrily, "I'm in rags, I'm dirty all over, whose fault is this? Could it be...?" She suddenly thought about the times when her brother Qiu Qianzhang pretended to be her second brother Qiu Qianren; he had frightened countless members of the world of Wulin by doing this. The tendons in her arms and legs had been destroyed so even if she sees Gongsun Zhi, how is she a match for him? How could she take revenge? The only thing she could do is pretend to be her second brother and frighten Gongsun Zhi; she'll then wait for an opportunity to take his life. Luckily he had never seen her second brother

before and he must have thought that she had died in the grotto long ago; he would have no suspicions. Another thought went through her mind, "We've been husband and wife for so many years; how will he not recognize me?"

When Yang Guo saw the troubled expression on her face, he was fairly certain of what she was thinking and said, "Senior is afraid that Gongsun Zhi will recognize you, right? I've got something on me that may help." He took out the human skin mask and put it on her; a terrifying face was now seen instead.

Qiu Qianchi was delighted and took the mask, she said, "Lu'E, we'll first go and hide in the forest behind the manor. Go and get me a coarse grass linen gown and get me a large fan, and don't forget." Lu'E nodded and picked up her mother.

Yang Guo took a look around and saw that they were on the peak of a mountain. There were luxuriant forests everywhere; he could see the stone manor. It was a couple of li away.

Qiu Qianchi sighed and said, "This peak is called the Angry Ghost Peak. Stories about the peak have been passed down from generation to generation in this valley, saying that there are ghosts around here. No one dares to come up here. Who could have thought that my return into this world would be by way of this Angry Ghost Peak?"

Yang Guo shouted at Fan Yiweng, "What are you doing here?"

Fan Yiweng showed no fear and shouted, "Just kill me quickly, stop your babbling."

Yang Guo said, "Valley Master Gongsun sent you here?"

Fan Yiweng said angrily, "Yes, Master ordered me to scout the surroundings in case there were evil scoundrels around; master was right, there are people sneaking around who are up to no good." As he talked, he took a look at Qiu Qianchi; he didn't know who this old granny was and why on earth did Miss Gongsun call her mother. Fan Yiweng was older than the Gongsun couple; when Gongsun Zhi took him as a disciple, Qiu Qianchi had already been trapped down in the grotto. Because of this, he didn't recognize her; but from the words of the three, he knew they were plotting something against his Master.

From his words, Qiu Qianchi could tell that he was extremely loyal to Gongsun Zhi; she was furious and said to Yang Guo, "Quickly kill that short man, don't leave trouble for the future."

Yang Guo turned around to Fan Yiweng and saw that he showed no fear; he respected the fact that he was a good man and wanted to spare him. Right now he needed help from Qiu Qianchi and couldn't disobey her. He said, "Miss Gongsun, take your mother and make your way, I'll follow immediately once I've killed him."

Gongsun Lu'E knew that her senior apprentice brother was a righteous and good man; she couldn't bear to see him die and said, "Brother Yang, my senior apprentice brother is not a bad person..."

Qiu Qianchi shouted angrily, "Go, go! You don't listen to anything I say, what use have I got for a daughter like you?"

Lu'E didn't dare to say anything else and searched for a way down the peak.

Yang Guo went to Fan Yiweng and whispered, "Brother Fan, the pressure points of your arms and legs have been sealed; they will unseal by themselves in twelve hours time. I

haven't got anything against you and I can't kill you." He then utilized his lightness kung fu and chased after Lu'E.

Fan Yiweng had closed his eyes and was waiting for his death; there was no way that he could have predicted that Yang Guo would treat him like this. He was stunned and couldn't say anything; he opened his eyes and watched the three disappear into the darkness.

Yang Guo was anxious to see Xiao Longnu and didn't like the slow pace of Lu'E so he said, "Senior Qiu, I'll carry you for a while."

At first Lu'E was worried about the frosty reception between Yang Guo and her mother; but when she heard that he was willing to carry her, she was delighted and said, "It's your turn to work a little."

Qiu Qianchi said, "I carried this beautiful daughter in my womb for nine months and she became yours with just a word, don't you think that I deserve to be carried by you for a while?"

Yang Guo was startled but felt it was inappropriate to reply; he put her on his back and stirred his chi, then shot down the mountain like an arrow from a bow.

Qiu Qianren was named the 'Iron Palm Water Floater'; his lightness kung fu could be as considered as the best in Wulin. Years ago when he was chased by Zhou Botong for ten thousands of miles, he went from the central plains straight to Xuyu. Even with Zhou Botong's great martial arts he wasn't able to catch up with Qiu Qianren. Qiu Qianchi's martial arts were taught to her personally by her brother; before her martial arts were lost, her lightness kung fu was first class. Now, as she was being carried by Yang Guo, she felt him move as if his feet weren't touching the ground and he was flying along. He was running fast

and steadily; she gave him much respect and was surprised, "This little kid's lightness kung fu is completely different to my clan's but it is definitely not below that of the Iron Clan's martial arts; I cannot look down on him." She had felt that her daughter was losing out in not marrying this kid; but her daughter had decided there was nothing she could do. Right now she was beginning to feel that this future son in law was deserving of her daughter.

In a short while Yang Guo reached the bottom of the peak. He turned around to look for Lu'E and saw that she was still somewhere around the middle. After a long while she reached the bottom of the mountain; by that time she was breathing heavily and her forehead was covered with sweat.

The three of them made their way quietly to the back of the manor. Lu'E did not dare to go into the manor and went to a neighboring building to borrow clothes for herself and the gown and fan that her mother wanted. She also borrowed a gown for Yang Guo. Qiu Qianchi wore the human skin mask and put on the gown; her hand held the fan and she let Yang Guo and Lu'E support her as they made their way into the manor.

As they made their way, the three of them were filled with thoughts. Qiu Qianchi had not been back here for over ten years; as she returned to old grounds, she felt a great release. But then she saw that grand red lanterns were hung at the door of the manor; she took a closer look and saw that the doors were decorated for a celebration; drums and music could also be heard from inside the hall.

All the servants were startled when they saw Qiu Qianchi and Yang Guo; but when they saw Lu'E with them, they didn't dare to say anything.

The three went straight into the hall and saw that it was filled with guests; most of them were the neighbors of the Narcissus Manor of the Passionless Valley. Gongsun Zhi was dressed in a groom's outfit and stood on the left. The bride was standing on the right wearing a Phoenix Hat and red veil; though her face was covered, one could see that she had a fine figure; this was Xiao Longnu.

The firelight in the courtyard flickered. Three loud noises were heard. The person leading the procession sang, "The time has come, the newlyweds bow to the heaven and earth!"

Qiu Qianchi laughed; it made the candlelight flicker and tiles of the house tremble. She said clearly, "If the newlyweds bow to the heaven and earth, what about the wed of old?"

Though the tendons in her arms and legs were snapped, her internal energy was not affected. She had nothing to do in the grotto and practiced bitterly night and day. Her ten years of cultivation was superior to those who've cultivated for twenty years. As these words were shouted out, the ears of all the people in the room rang. The room darkened as ten or so candles went out.

Everyone was shocked and all turned their heads. Gongsun Zhi was already shocked when he heard the shout; but when he saw Yang Guo and his daughter safe and sound beside this concealed guest, he was even more startled; he shouted, "Who's this guest?"

Qiu Qianchi tightened her throat and chuckled, "You and I have a close relationship; are you pretending that you don't know me?" When she spoke these words she had submerged her chi into her 'dan tian'; though she didn't speak loudly, the words reverberated far and wide.

Mountains surrounded the Passionless Valley and after a while the echoes came back with repetitions of “You don’t know me? You don’t know me?”

Jinlun Fawang, Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi and the others were watching the procession from the side; when they heard Qiu Qianchi’s voice, they knew that an eminent person had arrived and everyone looked at each other.

Gongsun Zhi saw this person was wearing a coarse grass linen gown and was holding a fan; the description of his brother in law Qiu Qianren from his wife matched this person and this person’s internal energy was amazing. But the face looked odd; it looked like the face of Zhou Botong when he was disguising himself as Xiaoxiang Zi. There must be something awry here. He prepared himself and said coldly, “I have never met this guest before so isn’t this close relationship a joke?”

Yin Kexi was versed in Wulin affairs; when he saw Qiu Qianchi’s coarse grass linen gown and fan, his mind lit up and asked, “Could it be that Iron Palm Water Floater Qiu Qianren senior Qiu Lao is here?”

Qiu Qianchi laughed and fluttered her fan a few times before saying, “And I thought that all the people who knew this old and useless man had all died long ago; so there’s one remaining.”

Gongsun Zhi was unmoved and said, “Are you really Qiu Qianren? I’m afraid that it’s just some lying scoundrel.”

Qiu Qianchi was shocked and thought, “This bastard is clever; how does he know that I’m not my brother?” She couldn’t see how he saw through her and just chuckled, not replying.

Yang Guo ignored the games of the couple and dashed over to Xiao Longnu. He held the Passionless Pill in his right hand and lifted the veil across her face with his left hand, he said, "Gu Gu, open your mouth."

Xiao Longnu's heart skipped a beat when she saw Yang Guo again; her shock and delight amassed together at once and she said, "You... you are indeed better." She knew that Gongsun Zhi was an evil and cruel man; she only agreed to marry him because she wanted to save Yang Guo's life. When Yang Guo suddenly appeared in front of her again, she thought that Gongsun Zhi had kept to his word and cured his poison.

Yang Guo placed the pill in her hand and said, "Quickly swallow!"

Xiao Longnu did not know what it was but did as she was told. After a short while, she felt a cool air penetrating through her 'dan tian'.

The hall broke out in chaos; when Gongsun Zhi saw that Yang Guo had come here again to cause trouble, he wanted to go up and stop him; but he was worried about the concealed strange guest. He didn't know whether or not that person really was his brother-in-law Iron Palm Water Floater Qiu Qianren and didn't dare make a move for the time being.

Yang Guo tore off Xiao Longnu's Phoenix Hat and red veil; then pulled her to the side and said, "Gu Gu; that scoundrel Valley Master is going to suffer, let's watch."

Xiao Longnu was confused and just leaned on Yang Guo; she didn't know what to say.

Ma Guangzuo felt unspeakable delight when he saw Yang Guo suddenly appearing here again. He went to him and

kept on asking questions; the thought of him disturbing the two never entered his mind. Yin Kexi had heard that twenty years ago, Qiu Qianren shook the world of Wulin and was extremely famous. Now he heard the laugh and shout which echoed throughout the valley; his internal energy was extremely high and he wanted to meet him. He stepped forward and bowed, saying "Today is Valley Master Gongsun's day of celebration; has Senior Qiu Lao come for the celebrations as well?"

Qiu Qianchi pointed to Gongsun Zhi and said, "Do you know who that person is to me?"

Yin Kexi said, "I don't know, but I would like to know."

Qiu Qianchi said, "You need to ask him yourself."

Gongsun Zhi asked again, "Are you really the Iron Palm Water Floater? That's strange!" He clapped his hands and said to a disciple in green, "Go to the library and bring the box from the shelf on the eastern side to me."

Lu'E did not know what to do and just pulled a chair over for her mother to sit down in.

Gongsun Zhi was surprised, "How come she and that Yang scum are still alive after falling into the crocodile pool?"

In a short while, the disciple returned with the box and handed it over to Gongsun Zhi. Gongsun Zhi opened it and took out a letter. He said frostily, "Years ago, I received a letter from Qiu Qianren. If you really are Qiu Qianren then this letter is a fake."

Qiu Qianchi was shocked and thought, "Ever since brother and I argued, we've never contacted each other; why did he send a letter to me all of a sudden? What's in the letter?"

She then said loudly, "When did I write a letter to you? That really is a load of bull."

When Gongsun Zhi heard her accent, he suddenly remembered someone. He was shocked and his back broke out in a cold sweat; but he immediately thought, "It can't be, it can't be; she died long ago in that grotto, she's just a pile of bones now. But who exactly is this person?" He opened the letter and read it out loud: "To Brother Zhi and Sister Chi: Ever since first brother died at the hands of Guo Jing and Huang Rong on Iron Palm Peak..."

When Qiu Qianchi heard this line she was filled with hurt and sorrow; she shouted, "What? Who said my brother is dead?" The sibling love between she and Qiu Qianzhang was extremely deep; when she heard news of his death her whole body shook and her voice changed. Originally she had submerged her chi into her 'dan tian' and it was difficult to distinguish whether her voice was a male's or female. Now, as her feelings were brought out, the words 'who said my brother is dead' were said with a female voice.

Gongsun Zhi heard that the person in front of him had a female voice and said 'my brother', he was shocked even further; but now he was certain that this person in front of him is definitely not Qiu Qianren, he continued reading:

"...this stupid brother had been extremely shameful in not holding our sibling relationship together and creating this hostility between us; all the blame is on this stupid brother. I pondered in the middle of the night and realized all the countless evil deeds I have done. At the second Mount Hua tournament, Reverend Yideng enlightened this stupid brother; I dropped my knife of slaughter and followed the ways of Buddha. I have just begun my studies; apart from Buddha's teachings my mind is always on the joyous days of the past with brother and sister. I wish to make up for the

things I've done before it's too late. Fate is a hard thing to judge.

From monk Ci'en."

Qiu Qianchi had been sobbing during all this; by the time Gongsun Zhi finished reading the letter she could hold it in no longer and cried out, "Big brother, second brother, you need to know the suffering I've been through." She took off the mask and shouted, "Gongsun Zhi, do you remember me?" This sentence was shouted out sternly, another seven or eight candles in the hall blew out while the ones that stayed alight flickered.

In the gloomy candlelight, an old woman with a long face and wretched expression could be seen; everyone trembled in fear and no one dared to say anything. The hall was silent and everyone's heart was pounding.

Suddenly, an old servant who was standing in the corner threw himself forward and called out, "Matron, Matron, you're not dead."

Qiu Qianchi nodded and said, "Second Uncle Zhang, you remember me."

This old servant was extremely loyal; when he saw his Matron alive and well, he was delighted and kept on kowtowing, calling out, "Matron, this really is something to rejoice."

Apart from Jinlun Fawang and the others, all the guests were residents of the valley; most of the people over thirty or forty years of age could remember who she was and they all rushed forward with their questions.

Gongsun Zhi shouted loudly, "Stand back!"

The crowd was alarmed and moved back. They saw him pointing to Qiu Qianchi, shouting out, "Witch, why have you returned? You've actually still got the face to see me?"

Lu'E had been hoping that her father would admit his mistakes and get back together with her mother. But when her father came out with this, she became emotional and rushed to her father; she knelt down on the floor and called out, "Father! Mother's not dead, mother's not dead. Quickly apologize and ask for her forgiveness."

Gongsun Zhi chuckled, "Ask her for forgiveness? What have I done wrong?"

Lu'E said, "You trapped mother down that grotto and let her stay down there to suffer for over ten years. Father, how could you do that to her?"

Gongsun Zhi chuckled, "It was she who first harmed me; do you know that? She pushed me in the flower thicket and let me endure the suffering of the piercing of thousands and thousands of thorns; do you know that? She placed the antidote in frosty arsenic water, putting me in a situation where if I took it I'd die, if I didn't I'll still die; do you know that? She even forced me to... to kill my lover; do you know that?"

Lu'E cried, "I know that, it was Rou'er."

Gongsun Zhi had not heard this name for over ten years; his face changed as he heard it and he faced the sky, mumbling, "Yes, it was Rou'er, it was Rou'er!" He pointed to Qiu Qianchi and said with revulsion, "It was that evil and cruel witch who forced me to kill Rou'er!" His face was becoming more and more mournful; he quietly called out, "Rou'er... Rou'er..."

Yang Guo felt that sinful couples were not good people. He was poisoned himself and had only a few days to live; he just hoped that he could spend these few days with Xiao Longnu in peace. He didn't care about which one of the Gongsun couple was wrong or right; he lightly tugged on Xiao Longnu's sleeve and whispered, "Let's go."

Xiao Longnu said, "Is that woman really his wife? Was she really trapped down in a cave by her husband for over ten years?" She could not believe that such an evil person could exist.

Yang Guo said, "That couple is taking revenge on each other."

Xiao Longnu thought for a while and whispered, "I don't understand this; could it be that she was the same as me and forced into marrying him?" In her thoughts, if two people aren't forced into marriage then they'll be loving and compassionate towards each other; how could they harm each other?

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "There are many bad people in the world, while there's only a few who're good; the thoughts of these people are hard to fathom..."

Suddenly Gongsun Zhi shouted, "Move!" His right leg lifted up and Lu'E's body flew away; she had been kicked by her father.

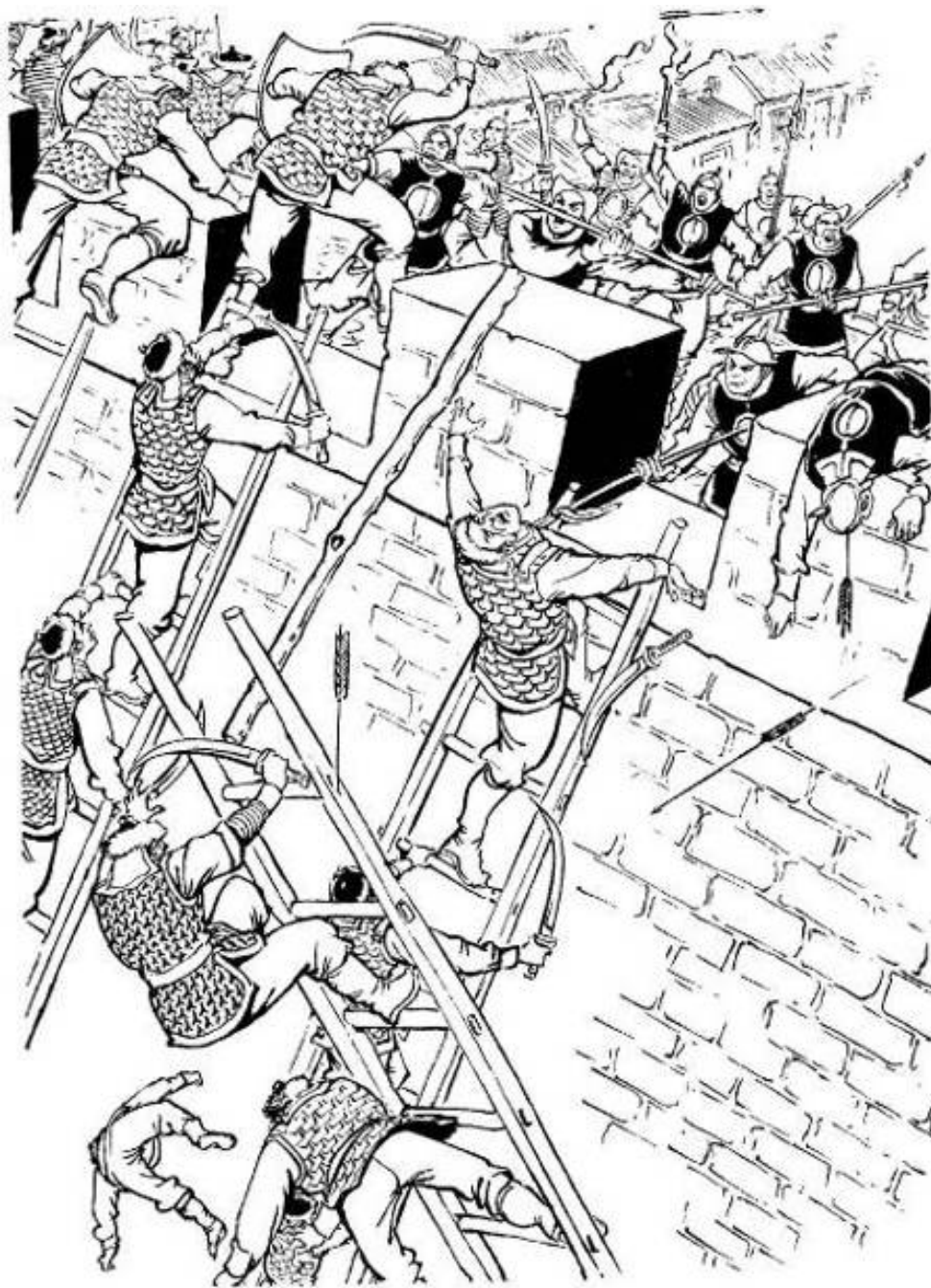
Her body was flying straight towards Qiu Qianchi's upper body. Qiu Qianchi could not move her arms and legs; she could only lower her head to avoid her. But Lu'E was coming in too fast; a 'peng' sound was heard as she crashed into the shoulders of her mother. Qiu Qianchi fell backwards with the chair, her bald head crashing into the stone pillar behind her. Blood stained the stone pillar and she couldn't

crawl back up. After being kicked by her father, Lu'E was on the floor as well, lying unconscious.

End of Chapter 19.

Chapter 20 - A Hero's Imperative

Translated by Noodles



The Mongolians attacked Xiang Yang once again. Arrows and stones were sent towards the city like rain and hail. The soldiers at the front of the

attack placed ladders around the city of Xiang Yang and climbed up. The city was guarded tightly; groups of eight soldiers held a wooden ram in the arms and were knocking the ladders off the city walls.

Yang Guo wanted to keep himself away from this dispute but when he saw how cruel Gongsun Zhi was, his anger erupted and he decided to step forward to argue with him. Just as he was about to do this, Xiao Longnu dashed forward and picked up Qiu Qianchi. She patted her 'Jade Pillow' pressure point a few times and controlled the bleeding. She then tore off a piece of cloth from her sleeve and covered her wound before shouting at Gongsun Zhi, "Mr. Gongsun, she is your wife, how can you treat her like that? Since you've already got a wife, why do you still want to marry me? Even if I married you, won't you treat me just as you've treated her?"

Those three sentences were asked fervently; Gongsun Zhi's tongue was tied and he couldn't reply. Ma Guangzuo couldn't help himself and cheered.

Xiaoxiang Zi said coldly, "This Miss is right."

Gongsun Zhi really did love Xiao Longnu; though he was made speechless by her he didn't get angry, he was just embarrassed; he lowered his tone and said to her, "Sister Liu, how can you compare yourself with that evil woman? I can't love you enough; if I have any ill intent towards you then let heaven condemn me where I stand."

Xiao Longnu said coldly, "All I need is him to love me; even if your love for me is a hundred times stronger I wouldn't care." She then went over to Yang Guo and held his hand.

Yang Guo was filled with resentment, he thought, "Gu Gu loves me like this yet I just have a few days to live and it's all because of this bastard." He pointed to Gongsun Zhi and shouted, "You said you have no ill intent towards my Gu Gu, huh! You left me for dead and then lied to my Gu Gu to get her to marry you; is that good intent? She's been poisoned by the Passion Flowers and you know that there isn't an antidote to cure her, yet you don't tell her, is that good intent?"

Xiao Longnu was shocked and quivered, "Is this true?"

Yang Guo said, "Don't worry; you've already taken the antidote." He then smiled a smile that was filled with grief along with joy, he thought, "I've given the antidote to you; I'm willing to die for you."

Gongsun Zhi looked at Qiu Qianchi and then looked at Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo; his eyes swept across them and jealousy, yearning, anger, shame, embarrassment and disappointment all filled his heart and disturbed him. Although he had great self control, he had now fallen into a semi mad state. He suddenly bent down and took out his yin yang twin blades from under their red cover; he clashed them together and shouted, "Fine, fine! We'll all die together!"

Everyone gasped; they would never have thought that he had actually brought weapons to his wedding ceremony.

Xiao Longnu chuckled, "Guo'er, we don't have to be respectful to such an evil person."

A 'qiang lang' sound was heard as she took out a pair of swords from underneath the bridal gown; it was the 'Gentleman' and 'Lady' swords. Though she wasn't versed in the ways of the world, she did not have an ounce of mercy in her when dealing with such evil people. When she

went to take revenge for Grandma Sun, she frightened all the Taoists of Chongyang Palace witless and the Blithe Sage Hao Datong almost lost his life to her. The thought of killing him entered her mind when Gongsun Zhi had stopped her and Yang Guo from getting back together today. She had hidden the weapons beneath her gown so that when Gongsun Zhi cured Yang Guo, she would immediately take the opportunity to attack him with Yang Guo at her side. If it didn't work then she would kill herself for Yang Guo; not allowing herself to be sullied in this Passionless Valley.

All the guests were shocked when they saw that both of them had prepared weapons. Only Fawang and the others, who were experienced, knew that this celebration would end in tragedy and weren't surprised. They were only surprised with the fall of Qiu Qianchi in one attack; this did not match the abilities of someone with the profound internal energy she had just shown.

Yang Guo took the 'Gentleman' sword from Xiao Longnu and said, "Gu Gu, today we'll kill that man to take revenge for me."

Xiao Longnu's 'Lady' sword trembled and she said surprised, "Take revenge for you?"

Yang Guo was filled with sadness in his heart but he couldn't tell her about it, he just said, "This bastard has harmed many people." He flipped his sword and went for Gongsun Zhi's left side. He knew that this battle was extremely dangerous; though Xiao Longnu's Passion Flower poison had been cured, he was still poisoned. If they come together and used the "Pure Heart of Jade Maiden Swordplay" and stirred feelings of love, he would break out with unbearable pain. He kept his eye on the enemy and used "Quanzhen Swordplay"; every stance and form of his was extremely stringent and cautious. If these stances were

performed by Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the other old Taoists, the stances will of course be performed steadily and controlled, profound and intense. In the hands of Yang Guo it displayed maturity beyond his years but his stances were slightly less smooth.

Gongsun Zhi knew that when the two used their combined swordplay they were powerful so he immediately used the “Yin Yang Wild Blades” with the black sword in his right hand and the gold saber in his left. His stances were getting fiercer and fiercer with every stroke. The “Quanzhen Swordplay” that Yang Guo was using was developed by Wang Chongyang; though it wasn’t vicious and fierce like the opponent’s, it was subtle and had variations. Yang Guo defended cautiously and did not attack as he received three stances. Xiao Longnu called out and raised the ‘Lady’ sword, attacking Gongsun Zhi’s back.

Gongsun Zhi was furious, he thought, “This beautiful girl was going to be my wife and now she’s joined an outsider to attack me.” He continued thinking, “The evil bitch coming back here suddenly and revealing all the things I’ve done has caused me to lose my respect and all face. Not only can’t I force sister Liu to marry me; it looks I won’t be able to keep my position here in the valley.” Though today’s matters are troublesome, he was going to rely on his martial arts to get him out of this mess. All he wanted to do was beat Yang Guo, kidnap Xiao Longnu and run away. He didn’t know that Xiao Longnu’s Passion Flower poison had been cured and still thought that she had less than thirty six days to live; he was still going to force her to marry him. His thoughts were becoming more and more evil and the wild twin blades in his hands were becoming more vicious by the minute.

Xiao Longnu used the “Jade Maiden Swordplay” so that when Yang Guo and she become one, they would be able to

unleash the power of the “Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Swordplay”. But his eyes did not glance over at her once; he was just concentrating on himself as he fought.

Xiao Longnu was extremely surprised and asked, “Guo’er, why aren’t you looking at me?” Her love was gradually being stirred and the light from her sword suddenly enhanced.

When Yang Guo heard her voice, his heart trembled and his chest broke out with an unbearable pain. His sword slowed and a ‘chi’ sound was heard as the black sword cut his sleeve. Xiao Longnu was alarmed and unleashed three stances in a row, blocking Gongsun Zhi’s attack.

Yang Guo said, “I can’t look at you or listen to you.”

Xiao Longnu said tenderly, “Why?”

Yang Guo was afraid that he would meet danger again and replied coarsely, “If you want me to die then continue talking to me!” As soon as his anger stirred the pain immediately stopped and he received the stances of Gongsun Zhi’s black sword.

Xiao Longnu was extremely sorry and said, “Don’t be angry, I won’t say anything more.” Her mind suddenly lit up, “My poison has been cured but his hasn’t! He got the antidote but he didn’t take it and returned here to give it to me.” She was extremely touched and the love in her was boundless; as soon as this feeling grew, the power of the “Pure Heart of Jade Maiden Swordplay” enhanced greatly. The stances that she unleashed protected all of Yang Guo’s vital points. Since she was protecting Yang Guo, Yang Guo should protect her, but he didn’t dare to glance over at her; and so she was completely unprotected and exposed to the enemy’s attack.

Gongsun Zhi's eyes were very sharp; he discovered the weakness in just a few stances but he didn't want to harm a single hair of Xiao Longnu's head. He directed all his vicious sword and saber stances towards Yang Guo. He was attacking like a crashing wave but Yang Guo was defending like an unmovable cliff. With Xiao Longnu using all her efforts to protect him, all of Gongsun Zhi's attacks were actually rendered useless.

By this time, Lu'E had wakened up and stood next to her mother watching the battle. She watched as Xiao Longnu concentrated only on guarding Yang Guo, ignoring all dangers to herself; she couldn't help but ask herself, "If that was you, could you disregard all the dangers to yourself to protect him?" She sighed lightly and said, "I would definitely be able to act like Miss Long, but he would not act the same way towards me."

Just at this time, Qiu Qianchi hissed, "The false saber is not a saber; the false sword is not a sword!"

Both Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were startled when they heard this, they didn't know what she meant by these two sentences."

Qiu Qianchi called out, "The saber is a saber, the sword is a sword!"

Yang Guo had fought Gongsun Zhi twice; all along he has been pondering about where the essence of the "Yin Yang Wild Blades" lies but the light, airy black sword chopped solidly while the heavy gold saber was swift and flighty, following the way of the sword. The stances he was using were the complete opposite to the orthodox martial arts theories. It would be fine if the saber was using sword techniques only and the sword was using saber techniques only; but the reality was, that in the midst of the sword

techniques there were saber stances; buried within the saber stances were the lethality of sword strokes. The variation was mysterious and difficult to grasp; when he heard those words of Qiu Qianchi he thought, "Could it be that the sword techniques of the saber and the saber techniques of the sword are all illusions?" He saw the black sword chopping across his shoulders; this was definitely a saber stance. He then treated it as a sword and extended his 'Gentleman' sword forward; the swords collided and they both took a step back. Only then did he know that the black sword was still just a sword, and the saber stances that he was using were merely trying to confuse his opponent. But if the opponent's martial arts were slightly poor, the saber techniques would still be able to cause harm.

With this immediate success, Yang Guo was delighted and continued to search for weaknesses in the opponent's sword and saber. He was thinking that although the jumbled stances were masterly, the ways of these blades would not be refined. A few more stances passed when he heard Qiu Qianchi say, "Attack his right leg; attack his right leg."

Yang Guo saw that Gongsun Zhi's saber was like a blur; there was no open space to attack on his lower body at all. But he thought that, although Qiu Qianchi was not able to perform martial arts anymore, her knowledge was still there. She was the one who taught Gongsun Zhi martial arts; she would definitely know what was real and what was false; so he listened to her and attacked his right leg. Gongsun Zhi swept his saber across and there was no way to hit his right leg; but as he did this, his left shoulder and left side were left unprotected. Yang Guo did not wait for Qiu Qianchi to prompt him and flashed his sword towards him, cutting through his gown underneath his armpit.

Gongsun Zhi cursed and leapt back; he stared angrily at Qiu Qianchi and shouted, "Old witch; do you think I'm going to let you go?" He then continued to attack Yang Guo with the saber and sword.

Yang Guo raised his sword to block the attack. Qiu Qianchi continued, "Kick his back!"

The two of them were facing each other, there was no way he could kick his back; but Yang Guo was confident in Qiu Qianchi. He knew that there was a deeper meaning behind her words; he didn't care what would happen and dashed towards the back of his opponent. Gongsun Zhi used his saber to cut backwards.

Qiu Qianchi called out, "Pierce his forehead."

Yang Guo thought, "I've just turned towards his back and now you're telling me to pierce his forehead?" It was an urgent situation and he didn't give it much thought, he turned back towards the enemy's front and he was just about to pierce his enemy's forehead when Qiu Qianchi called out, "Cut his arse!"

Lu'E watched with sweaty palms; she knitted her eyebrows and thought, "By calling madly like this, isn't mother helping father instead?" She kept her thoughts to herself but Ma Guangzuo couldn't contain himself and he shouted out, "Brother Yang, don't fall into the trap of that old woman; she wants to kill you."

Yang Guo had twisted and turned many times and had an inkling as to what her meaning was; when she called out go forward he turned forward and when she shouted go backward he immediately dashed behind him. Indeed, after a few twists and turns, Gongsun Zhi's right side was uncovered. Yang Guo sent his sword towards Gongsun Zhi's right side and a 'chi' sound was heard as it the sword cut

through his gown, piercing about an inch into Gongsun Zhi's side; blood immediately flowed down his side.

The crowd gave an 'ah' call and stood up. Fawang and the others now understood. Qiu Qianchi was not instructing Yang Guo on how to gain victory; she was instructing him on how to gain an opportunity to win in a situation where it was impossible to gain victory. She was not pointing out the weakness of Gongsun Zhi, but was trying to make Yang Guo force a flaw in the opponent from his flawless stances. After being prompted by Qiu Qianchi a few times, Yang Guo immediately understood this advanced martial art notion; he was in awe of her and thought, "If the opponent is a skilled fighter, what flaws will they show in their stances? This piece of advice from this senior is more than enough for a lifetime's use."

But to force a flaw in Gongsun Zhi required not only for one's martial arts to be higher than his, but one must also be familiar with his stances. A person must be clear on all his variations and reactions over ten stances beforehand, before luring him step by step into making an error. Only Qiu Qianchi was able to do this. Yang Guo understood but he was not able to realize it. He heard her prompt and the sword suddenly flashed out, attacking Gongsun Zhi's back, front and sides urgently. Over twenty stances later, Gongsun Zhi's leg was cut.

Though this cut wasn't deep, it was long, at least five or six inches long. Gongsun Zhi thought, "The two of them are guarding each other, I can't hurt the one named Yang; if this continues, with the old hag giving advice, I'll die by this bastard's sword." Years ago, in order to save his own life he killed his lover; in this desperate situation he couldn't care about Xiao Longnu anymore. He moved his black sword and swiped his saber, slashing towards Xiao Longnu's shoulders.

Yang Guo was alarmed, he stretched his sword forward to protect her from this attack when he heard Qiu Qianchi call out, "Stab his waist." Yang Guo was startled and thought, "Gu Gu is being attacked right now, how can I not save her? But each time Senior Qiu Lao has given me advice, it has a deeper meaning behind it. It looks like this is a 'surrounding Wei to rescue Zhao' plan." He changed his mind and the sword arrived at Gongsun Zhi's waist. Suddenly Xiao Longnu called out, her right arm was cut and the 'Lady' sword fell onto the floor. Gongsun Zhi's black sword slanted across and blocked Yang Guo's sword.

Yang Guo was extremely shocked and quickly called out, "Move back, I'll take him by myself." His love and care for her was stirred and his chest broke out in an aching pain again. Xiao Longnu's injury was not slight; she moved backwards and tore off a piece of her sleeve, wrapping it around her wound. Yang Guo fought with his life; he was furious with Qiu Qianchi and glanced at her with rage.

Qiu Qianchi chuckled, "Why are you blaming me? I'm just helping you defeat your enemy; who's trying to help you to rescue someone? Ha-ha, what's her life got to do with me? It's better if she dies!"

Yang Guo said angrily, "You and your husband are a perfect match; there isn't an ounce of goodness in either of your hearts!"

Qiu Qianchi just chuckled; she didn't get angry and remained composed as she concentrated on the battle.

Yang Guo glanced over at Xiao Longnu and saw her leaning on a chair with her wound wrapped up. It looked like it wasn't serious and his spirits were roused. His sword techniques suddenly changed from "Quanzhen Swordplay" to "Jade Maiden Swordplay". Gongsun Zhi saw his sword

stances had been steady and cautious; but suddenly they were now supple and lively, graceful and attractive. It was as if Yang Guo had changed into another person. Gongsun Zhi was surprised and thought, "This person is extremely crafty, what is he trying now?" After taking a few stances, he felt that his opponent's swordplay had the same elegant and lofty air of a distinguished family; the same type of swordplay that Xiao Longnu had used. All Gongsun Zhi's doubts were erased and he attacked with both his sword and saber.

Ten or so stances later, Yang Guo was gradually being put on the back foot (a sign of coming defeat) and forced to retreat. Qiu Qianchi gave advice to Yang Guo repeatedly but he was furious with her for deliberately intending to get Xiao Longnu injured. He ignored her and said to himself, "Who needs your annoying words?" He unleashed four strokes and hummed, "The minutiae of a fine horse, a radiant and beautiful coat, the left grabs the many weak, the right receives the forgotten retreat." The verses matched the sword stances and he performed the sword strokes with great elegance.

Gongsun Zhi was startled and said, "What?"

Yang Guo continued, "The galloping wind and the flashing lightning, the chasing image flying away. Swift and powerful from the central plains, appearance is the aim." The stances were grouped in fours, reflecting the verse. Where it said, 'the galloping wind and the flashing lightning, the chasing image flying away', the sword stances were extremely quick; when it said, 'swift and powerful from the central plains, appearance is the aim', the sword strokes were swift and vicious yet also carried elegance along with it.

Gongsun Zhi had never seen these sword stances before. The verses were pleasing to the ear and he slowed down his

attacks, trying to concentrate on the meanings behind each line. He knew that the sword stances and the verses matched each other; all he has to do is to grasp the meaning behind the verses and he'll be able to defeat this swordplay.

Yang Guo continued, "Stopping at the orchid garden, the horse is fed at Mount Hua. The eyes return unto the swan, the hand strumming the five strings." The verse was said with a modest tone but the sword strokes were towering and majestic, especially the last two stances which were extremely exquisite and sudden. It appeared to go to the east but went west, the sword hinted up but went down, one stance but two strokes, and it was difficult to tell what was real and what was false.

Xiao Longnu had now finished wrapping up her wound. She watched Yang Guo's swordplay and felt it was pleasing to the eye; but she had never heard him talk about this swordplay before so she asked, "Guo'er, what swordplay is this; who taught you?"

Yang Guo laughed, "I thought of it myself. Gu Gu, is it good? A few days ago I was resting in bed from some injuries and I saw a book of poetry by the bed. I thought the poems were quite nice so I committed them to memory. At the heroes' feast, Zhu Ziliu merged calligraphy into martial arts; I thought it would definitely be possible to merge poetry into martial arts."

Xiao Longnu said, "It's very good..."

Suddenly, Jinlun Fawang praised, "Brother Yang, I can only look on in awe at your intelligence and wisdom. The following verse is of course, "Bowing to and revering one's content, the good mood of the heart is too obscure, fishing

and searching for something, the trap is forgotten once the fish is caught.”

Gongsun Zhi’s mind lit up, “That monk is trying to help me.” He didn’t think about what the monk wanted but concentrated on the first line of the verse, ‘Bowling to and revering one’s content’, the sword will definitely be aimed upwards followed by a downwards stroke. He guarded his upper body with the black sword and chopped his gold saber from the middle of his body.

Jinlun Fawang was versed in both martial arts and culture. Although he lived in Tibet, he knew Han philosophies, their history and Confucian classics. When he heard Yang Guo reciting the poem, he knew from long ago what the following verses would be. He revealed this to Gongsun Zhi in hope that he would be able to use Gongsun Zhi to kill Yang Guo for him.

Gongsun Zhi did indeed manage to get the first move in when he heard this. Before Yang Guo unleashed his sword strokes, Gongsun Zhi had sealed off all of the sword’s paths while at the same time, chopping out his jagged golden saber from the middle of his body to attack him.

Luckily, Yang Guo had heard Fawang and was prepared for this, he didn’t continue on with his “Four Lined Poem Swordplay” and guarded his midriff with his sword while the middle finger of his left hand flicked out, striking the back of the golden saber.

Gongsun Zhi’s arm trembled and the joints in his hand felt slightly numb from this flick, he was shocked and thought, “This little punk has much strange kung fu.”

This flick of Yang Guo’s was the “Divine Release of the Flicking Finger” that Huang Yaoshi taught him; but he was

unable to subdue his enemy because his internal energy wasn't strong enough. If Huang Yaoshi performed this move, the jagged golden saber of Gongsun Zhi would have flown out of his hand as soon as it was struck. However, this flick of Yang Guo's was still good enough to allow him to regain the upper hand; he moved his sword forward and used Huang Yaoshi's "Jade Flute Swordplay". The "Divine Release of the Flicking Finger" and "Jade Flute Swordplay" both concentrated on attacking the opponent's pressure points. When they were used together, it was ingenious and subtle and even though Yang Guo's mastery of these skills wasn't refined; after a bout of urgent attacking it was still good enough to trouble Gongsun Zhi.

At that time, Qiu Qianchi called out again, "His sword is going for the waist, and his saber is chopping towards the neck". "The sword is going to slash towards your right shoulder while his saber guards his left." She called out every stance of Gongsun Zhi's in advance.

Yang Guo now held the upper hand completely. With his poetry ceased, Fawang was unable to tell where his sword would go and couldn't aid Gongsun Zhi.

Gongsun Zhi's family art the "Yin Yang Twin Blades" were inspected thoroughly by Qiu Qianchi and then subsequently improved by her. All of Gongsun Zhi's stances were known to her; no matter how sudden his changes were, Qiu Qianchi would call it out in advance. As they were absorbed in the battle, Qiu Qianchi suddenly called out, "Both his sword and saber are going to attack your upper body." These words were called out at just the exact time as Gongsun Zhi sent out both his saber and sword; it was now difficult for him to change his stance halfway through. Yang Guo had more than enough time to block this attack.

Yang Guo lowered his head and dashed forward while protecting his back with his sword. His left finger came out and jabbed the opponent's 'Ocean of Air' pressure point an inch and a half below the navel. Yang Guo was delighted with this successful attack at the first attempt. He thought that his opponent would suffer a serious injury with this attack but Gongsun Zhi's leg came out, striking him on the jaw.

Yang Guo was shocked and leapt to the side a few feet. He then remembered how strange the pressure points were on this person; previously he had used the golden sphere silk belt to strike his pressure points but it had no effect on him. Gongsun Zhi came at him once again.

Qiu Qianchi called out once again, "His blades will cross, the right sword attacking left, the left saber attacking right."

Yang Guo did not give it much thought and defended with all his might.

When it came to internal energy, Yang Guo was not a match for his opponent; he would have lost out long ago if it weren't for Qiu Qianchi's advice.

Yang Guo and Gongsun Zhi continued for another seven or eight hundred stances. The members of the valley watched with their hearts on the verge of jumping out of their mouths. At the same time Xiaoxiang Zi and the others were also fixed on the great battle, but they couldn't tell who would win it. In the midst of the blurs of the saber and sword, one could see Gongsun Zhi panting while Yang Guo was soaked with sweat. The movements of the two were now not as quick as before.

Gongsun Lu'E thought that if the two carried on like this, one of them would be seriously injured. Of course she didn't

want Yang Guo to lose; but she couldn't bear to see her father get hurt, so she whispered to Qiu Qianchi, "Mother, tell them to stop. We'll settle this by talking it over."

Qiu Qianchi gave a 'heng' grunt and said, "Pour two bowls of tea."

Lu'E was confused but did as she was told and brought the bowls of teas to her mother. Qiu Qianchi took off the piece of bloody cloth that was wrapped around the wound on her head. When she was knocked into the pillar, blood poured out of her head and it was Xiao Longnu who tore off her sleeve and covered her wound. The bleeding on her head started again as she took off the cloth.

Lu'E was alarmed and called out; "Mother!"

Qiu Qianchi called out, "I won't die!" She threw the bloody cloth onto her knees and took the bowls. Her four fingers held the bowls but the thumb of each hand was in the tea. The blood on her thumbs mixed into the tea. She quickly swirled the tea and the traces of blood were gone. She called out, "You should be tired now; have a bowl of tea!" She said to Lu'E, "Give one bowl of tea to each of them to quench their thirst."

Lu'E knew her mother hated her father deeply and wouldn't have any good intentions towards him. This bowl of tea wasn't meant to quench his thirst but to poison him. However, she poured the bowls of tea herself and there was no poison in any of them; they were just ordinary bowls of tea. It must be because her mother sympathized with Yang Guo. If her father didn't have a bowl, he would not stop and Yang Guo would not be able to take a drink. She saw that the two were really very tired so she went to the middle of the hall and called out clearly, "Please have some tea!"

Gongsun Zhi and Yang Guo were both very thirsty; when they heard Qiu Qianchi call out; they both stopped and jumped backwards.

Lu'E first took the tray of tea to her father. Gongsun Zhi knew that it was Qiu Qianchi who ordered her to bring these bowls of tea to him, so there'll definitely be something wrong with it. Most likely they had poison in them. He held up his hand and said to Yang Guo, "You drink first."

Yang Guo had no fear and casually picked up a bowl of tea; he placed it on his lip and took a sip.

Gongsun Zhi said, "Good, I'll have that bowl!" He took Yang Guo's bowl from his hand.

Yang Guo laughed, "It was your daughter who poured the tea; don't tell me you think there's poison in them?" Yang Guo took the other bowl of tea and drank it in one go.

Gongsun Zhi looked at his daughter's face and saw that it was calm and relaxed, he thought, "Lu'E loves that punk, of course there would be no poison in his cup of tea; I've already swapped the bowls, what have I got to be afraid of?" He too drank the bowl of tea in one go and then clashed his weapons, saying, "There's no need for a break, continue. Huh, if it weren't for that old witch giving you tips, you would have died from my black sword and golden saber long ago even if you had ten lives to spare."

Qiu Qianchi replaced the bandage on her head and said evilly, "His "Closure of the Pressure Points" has been defeated; you can hit his pressure points."

Gongsun Zhi felt a slight taste of blood on his tongue and was shocked; a shock that was indescribable. This particular family art has one big drawback; the practitioner cannot taste an ounce of meat otherwise this art will be

neutralized immediately. His ancestors were afraid that they'd taste meat by accident and so passed a strict order in the valley; no one can eat meat. Though the others didn't practice this art, they were still forced to be vegetarians. Gongsun Zhi had always been very careful; but how would he have known that Qiu Qianchi would actually use such an evil plan and put her own blood in the bowls of tea?

Yang Guo was not affected by drinking this bowl of blood containing tea; but the "Closure of the Pressure Points" technique that Gongsun Zhi had been training bitterly all his life was gone, just like that.

He turned his head around in fury and looked at Qiu Qianchi who had a plate of dates on her knees that had been served to the guests. She was eating them and savoring the taste. She said slowly, "I told you before, twenty years ago, this art of the Gongsun family is hard to learn yet easy to neutralize; it's not worth practicing."

Fire erupted in Gongsun Zhi's eyes and he raised his weapons, dashing forward towards Qiu Qianchi. Lu'E was alarmed and dashed in front of her mother to protect her. Suddenly a gust of wind brushed past her ear; it sounded like some kind of projectile.

Gongsun Zhi howled. Blood poured down from his right eye; he turned around and dashed out of the hall with his sword and saber. A trail of blood was left in his wake. His wretched howl was getting further and further away, gradually getting quieter and quieter until silence fell within the mountain walls of the valley.

Everyone looked at each other, wondering how Qiu Qianchi achieved this.

Only Lu'E and Yang Guo knew that she had used her date stone spitting kung fu to do this.

When Gongsun Zhi and Yang Guo were fighting, she had placed seven or eight date stones in her mouth in advance. She saw that Gongsun Zhi's martial arts had improved greatly; even if she made a sneak attack, he would be able to avoid them. When he's on his guard, it would be difficult to harm him. Because of this, she waited until he was completely absorbed in the battle before using the blood tea to defeat his "Closure of the Pressure Points" technique. While he was reacting furiously, she took the opportunity to suddenly launch her date stone at him. This was the one and only martial art she had and she trained it vigorously over the years; the power and accuracy of it was not below any of the world's greatest projectile arts. If it wasn't for Lu'E dashing forward and blocking her view, not only would both eyes of Gongsun Zhi's be blinded; the pressure point between his eyes would have also been struck. This would have immediately sent him to his death.

Lu'E couldn't bear this. She stood there stunned for a while; before calling out, "Father, father!" She wanted to go after him.

Qiu Qianchi said sternly, "If you want your father then go; don't ever see me again."

Lu'E stopped her feet; she was in a difficult position; but then she thought about how all of this was the fault of her father. All the suffering that her mother endured was tens of times greater than what he endured. Anyway, her father had long gone and she couldn't catch up even if she wanted to. She stopped and turned from the door, silently heading back into the hall slowly, with her head hung down.

Qiu Qianchi sat on her chair and looked to either side of her; she chuckled, "Good, you've all come here for a celebratory drink; won't everyone's mood being ruined if we don't have a drink?" Her icy cold eyes gave everyone

goose bumps; they were all afraid that she was going to spit out some kind of strange projectile without any warning. The people of the valley were afraid while Fawang, Yin Kexi and the others prepared themselves.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were both surprised with the state that Gongsun Zhi ended up in. They both let out a long sigh and reached out for each other's hand, holding it tightly. The two's thoughts were as one and they made their way towards the exit.

When they reached the door, Qiu Qianchi suddenly shouted, "Yang Guo, where are you going?"

Yang Guo turned around and made a long bow to her before saying, "Senior Qiu Lao, Miss Lu, we'll be leaving now." He knew that he didn't have long to live and so he didn't say things like 'I'll see you again'.

Lu'E returned the greeting and kept silent in misery.

Qiu Qianchi's face was filled with anger and she shouted, "I've betrothed my only daughter to you and you do not call me mother-in-law? And you're leaving just like that?"

Yang Guo was startled and thought, "Though you've betrothed your daughter to me, I didn't say that I accepted."

Qiu Qianchi said, "We've got everything here, decorations, candles and guests. We're martial artists, we'll get straight to the point; you two are getting married today."

Jinlun Fawang and the others had just seen Yang Guo fight Gongsun Zhi with his life for Xiao Longnu; when they heard Qiu Qianchi say this they all knew that there was going to be another great show. They looked at each other; some

showed a wry smile and some were shaking their heads slightly.

Yang Guo held Xiao Longnu's elbow with his left hand and his right hand held the handle of the 'Gentleman' sword. He said, "I am extremely touched by senior Qiu Lao's offer. But my heart belongs to someone else." He moved backwards slowly after he said this. He was afraid that Qiu Qianchi would spit out date stones at them in anger and so he held his sword just in case.

Qiu Qianchi's angry eyes swept over Xiao Longnu and said coldly, "Huh, that little seductress is indeed beautiful; no wonder both old and young go mad over her."

Lu'E said, "Mother, brother Yang and Miss Long decided to marry each other long ago; I'll tell you all the details later on."

Qiu Qianchi replied angrily, "What kind of person do you think your mother is? How can I take back what I've said? The one named Yang, my daughter is beautiful and she's more than worthy of you. But even if she was an ugly troll, I'm still going to make you marry her today."

When Ma Guangzuo heard how unreasonable she was he couldn't stop himself from laughing and calling out, "This particular couple in this valley are a perfect match: the husband forces a young girl to marry him while the wife forces a young man to marry her daughter and they don't want anyone else but them, right or wrong?"

Qiu Qianchi said coldly, "Wrong!"

Ma Guangzuo opened his mouth and laughed out loud. Suddenly a 'bo' sound was heard as a date stone flew towards the center of his eyes; the stone came like lightning and there was no way to avoid it. Ma Guangzuo lifted his

head in shock; a 'pai' sound was heard as three of his front teeth were knocked loose. Ma Guangzuo was furious and roared while he threw himself forward. Another two 'bo' sounds were heard as the 'Linking Jump' pressure point on his right groin and the 'Yang Pass' pressure point on his left leg were struck. Both his legs went limp and he fell down onto the floor, unable to get up.

Those three date stones were extremely quick. Yang Guo knew that Qiu Qianchi would make her move when Ma Guangzuo was laughing and drew his sword to go to save him; but it was too late. He picked him up and unsealed his pressure points. Ma Guangzuo admitted defeat; this bald old woman didn't move her legs or arms and was able to defeat him just by opening her mouth. He had great respect for her; he spat out the teeth and said with a mouthful of blood, "Old woman, you're more powerful than me; the one named Ma does not dare to offend you again."

Qiu Qianchi ignored him and stared at Yang Guo. She said, "You've decided to not marry my daughter, true?"

Gongsun Lu'E couldn't bear to suffer such embarrassment in front of everyone and took a dagger from her waist. She pointed it at her chest and said loudly, "Mother, if you ask again, then I'll kill myself right in front of your very eyes."

Qiu Qianchi opened her mouth and a stone shot out, hitting the handle of the dagger. There was great power behind that stone; the dagger flew and planted itself inches into a wooden pillar, the handle quivering in the candlelight.

Everyone gasped.

Yang Guo knew that his time would be wasted if he remained here for much longer so he flicked his blade with his finger and said clearly with the resonation of the blade, "The lonely rabbit, going east watching west. The clothes

are not of new; the person is not like that of before.” He motioned his sword in a flurry and turned around with Xiao Longnu’s hand held in his.

When Lu’E heard the last two sentences, ‘the clothes are not of new, the person not like that of before’, her hurt became even greater; she took off the ragged gown that Yang Guo had given her. She went to him and offered it back to him, saying, “Brother Yang, it’s better to have old clothes.”

Yang Guo said, “Thank you.” He stretched out his hand to take it. He and Xiao Longnu knew that Lu’E was deliberately standing in front of them so her mother wouldn’t be able to attack them with the date stones. Xiao Longnu had a faint smile on her face and nodded her head, showing her thanks.

Lu’E moved her lips to the side, telling them to leave quickly.

Qiu Qianchi mumbled ‘the clothes are not of new, the person is not like that of before’ a few times before she suddenly raised her voice and said, “Yang Guo, you don’t want my daughter; but don’t tell me that you don’t want your life as well?”

Yang Guo gave a bitter laugh and backed another step out of the hall.

Xiao Longnu’s heart trembled and said, “Wait.” She asked clearly, “Senior Qiu Lao, have you got an antidote for the Passion Flower poison?”

Lu’E had been thinking about this all along. Yang Guo gave the only Passionless Pill that her father had to Xiao Longnu while his poison had yet to be cleared. The only hope that he had was her mother, who might have a way to cure this

poison. But she knew that her mother would use this to blackmail Yang Guo, to force him into marrying her; this is why she hadn't mentioned this before. But in this urgent situation she could no longer care about her embarrassment and turned herself around, saying, "Mother, if it weren't for brother Yang, you would still be trapped down in that cave. Brother Yang has not done anything to offend you. We need to pay back this kindness; please cure his poison."

Qiu Qianchi chuckled, "Repay kindness with kindness? Repay vengeance with vengeance? How can the world's vengeance and kindness be distinguished like that? Was that thanks I got from Gongsun Zhi?"

Lu'E said loudly, "I hate men whose hearts are not loyal, men who like the new and forget those of old. If the one named Yang Guo wanted to leave his lover of old and marry me, I'd rather die than marry him."

Those words rang in Qiu Qianchi's ears, but after a thought, she immediately knew what her daughter was trying to do. Her daughter loved him dearly and if he agreed to marry her, she would leap for joy. Because the situation was pressing, her daughter was just hoping that she would save him first before doing anything else.

Jinlun Fawang, Yin Kexi and the others looked at each other in amusement as they watched this second show of a forced marriage. Fawang now knew that Yang Guo had been poisoned and he was feeling pleased. He hoped that Yang Guo would stick to his choice, by refusing to marry Lu'E to save his life; but he was worried about the craftiness of Yang Guo who might lie about the marriage to get the antidote and then refuse. Then he thought that even if Yang Guo tried something, he's there to see through him and alert Qiu Qianchi to his tricks.

Qiu Qianchi's eyes swept across all the guests slowly and then said, "Yang Guo, amongst the people here there are those who wish that you live and those who wish that you die. Think about whether you want to live or die."

Yang Guo placed his arm around Xiao Longnu's waist and said with a clear voice, "If either of us can't marry the other, then we'd rather die together."

Xiao Longnu smiled sweetly and said, "Yes!" The two of them were as one; their love for each other was so deep that life and death was no longer anything important.

Qiu Qianchi did not understand Xiao Longnu and said, "If I don't save him then he will die, do you understand this? Do you know that he can only live for another thirty six days?"

Xiao Longnu said, "If you do agree to save him and let us be together for a few more years then of course we'll be extremely touched. If you refuse, we've still got thirty six days together, that's fine as well! In any case, if he dies, I won't carry on living." Her beautiful face showed no signs of concern as she said this.

Qiu Qianchi looked at her and then looked at Yang Guo; she saw the two staring at each other, their love for each other so passionate, their devotion to each other so intense. This was something that she had never experienced nor even thought about before. So such devoted lovers actually existed in this world. When she saw how dedicated they were, she couldn't help but muse over her and Gongsun Zhi and the way they ended up. She gave a long sigh and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Lu'E went to her and threw herself into her arms; she cried, "Mother, just cure him please; then we'll go and find uncle; he misses you, doesn't he?"

Qiu Qianchi's tears stirred her compassion, but then she immediately thought about the words in the letter from her brother Qiu Qianren; "Ever since first brother died at the hands of Guo Jing and Huang Rong on Iron Palm Peak..."

She herself was crippled and her brother had become a monk, saying something like 'I dropped my knife of slaughter and followed the ways of Buddha'; does this mean that her brother's death can never be avenged? Yang Guo's martial arts weren't weak; though he refuses to marry her daughter she could order him to help her avenge her brother.

She then said, "There were actually quite a lot of Passionless Pills; but apart from three pills, the rest were ruined by me when I soaked them in frosty arsenic water. Out of the three pills, that bastard Gongsun Zhi took one, another he took from me when I was drunk and that was the pill that you gave to that girl. There is only one pill remaining in this world. This pill has been with me for over twenty years. If one doesn't prepare a Passionless Pill for themselves while living in the Passionless Valley, then they are not in complete control of the fate of their lives. Right now, I haven't got long to live and my daughter might not stay here for much longer..." She then took out the last remaining Passionless Pill on this earth slowly and broke it in two with her nail. She took half a pill and placed it in her palm before saying, "I can give you the pill. You don't want to marry my daughter, fine but you have to promise to do one thing for me."

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu looked at each other, both surprised with her sudden kindness. The two weren't worried about life and death; but since there's a way for them to live, of course they'd be happy to take this chance. Both said at the same time, "We'll do our best to fulfill Senior's request."

Qiu Qianchi said slowly, "I want you to get me the heads of two people."

When Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu heard this, they both thought that she wanted them to kill Gongsun Zhi. Yang Guo had no good feelings towards Gongsun Zhi and now that he's lost an eye and his "Closure of the Pressure Point" has been destroyed, it won't be hard to kill him even though he still has his other martial arts remaining. But he was Gongsun Lu'E's father; the girl loves Yang Guo deeply, but killing her father might cause great distress for her and he couldn't help but hesitate.

Xiao Longnu thought that although Gongsun Zhi was evil, he was still the one who saved her life. From Qiu Qianchi's expression, if she didn't kill him Qiu Qianchi would never agree to give the pill to Yang Guo.

Qiu Qianchi saw that they had troubled expressions on their faces and said coldly, "I don't know what ties these two people have with you but I must kill them." She then flung half of the pill lightly upwards in her hand.

From her tone, it didn't appear that she was talking about Gongsun Zhi so Yang Guo asked, "With whom does Senior Qiu Lao have a feud? Whose head do you want me to take?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "Didn't you hear that scoundrel when he was reading out that letter? The names of the people who killed my brother are Guo Jing and Huang Rong."

Yang Guo was delighted and called out, "That's great. Those two people killed my father; even if Senior Qiu Lao didn't ask I'd still kill them."

Qiu Qianchi's heart trembled and said, "Is this true?"

Yang Guo pointed to Jinlun Fawang and said, "This Reverend has crossed paths with those two people. I told him about this matter before."

Qiu Qianchi looked at Fawang and he nodded his head and said, "But at that time, brother Yang helped Guo Jing and Huang Rong to oppose me."

Xiao Longnu and Lu'E were both furious with Fawang for trying to stir up trouble time after time; they both stared at him with anger.

Jinlun Fawang ignored them and smiled, "Brother Yang, did such a thing happen?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes. Once I've avenged my father I'll need to exchange a few stances with Reverend Jin."

Jinlun Fawang folded his arms and said, "Good, good!"

Qiu Qianchi held up her left hand and said to Yang Guo, "I don't care if this is true or false, just take this pill."

Yang Guo went forwards to accept it when he saw that it was just half a pill and immediately understood, he laughed, "I need to get their heads in exchange for the other half?"

Qiu Qianchi nodded and said, "You really are clever; you didn't need anyone to tell you."

Yang Guo thought, "It's better to take half a pill than take nothing." He took the half pill and swallowed it.

Qiu Qianchi said, "There was only one Passionless Pill left in the whole wide world. You've just taken half of it. The other half will be kept in an extremely secretive place. If you bring the heads of Guo Jing and Huang Rong in eighteen days time then I'll give you the other half. Even if you hold me at knifepoint and threaten me or throw me down that

cave again I will never give it to you. The word of Qiu Qianchi's is as solid as rock, I've never taken back what I've said. To all the guests, please leave on your own accord. Master Yang, Miss Long, we'll meet again in eighteen days time." She then closed her eyes and ignored everyone.

Xiao Longnu asked, "Why have you set a deadline of eighteen days?"

Qiu Qianchi said with her eyes closed, "The Passion Flower poison in his body originally would have reacted in thirty six days time. Now that he's taken half a passionless pill, the poison has all come together and is now concentrated in one place; the poison will now react twice as quickly. The poison will be cleared if he takes the other half of the antidote eighteen days from now, otherwise... otherwise... ha-ha!" After she said this, she waved out her hand, ordering everyone to go quickly.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu both knew that this person does not listen to reason and so the two bid farewell to Lu'E and quickly left the Narcissus Manor. Yang Guo couldn't be bothered to find a boat to get out of the valley and instead, he and Xiao Longnu utilized their lightness kung fu and left the valley by going over the mountains.

Yang Guo had stayed in this valley for only three days; but within these three days, he had experienced many near deaths. Now that he's left this place of danger with his lover, it was like he was in a different world.

It was now dawn. The two of them stood on top of a mountain ridge shoulder to shoulder and looked down at the valley. As the morning light sparkled on the luxuriant emerald forest, their eyes were filled with the green color. They felt filled with boundless joy; their hearts floating and swaying around as if they were at one with the clouds.

Yang Guo held Xiao Longnu's hand and the two walked up to a locust tree. He said, "Gu Gu..."

Xiao Longnu leaned on him and smiled, "I don't think you need to call me Gu Gu again."

Yang Guo had stopped viewing her as his Master long ago; the reason he called her 'Gu Gu' was because he was used to it. When he heard this, his heart was filled with a sweet feeling and he stared into her black eyes. He said, "What should I call you?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Call me whatever you want; it's up to you."

Yang Guo thought for a little while and said, "The happiest time of my life was when we were in the tomb together. At that time, I called you Gu Gu. Just let me call you Gu Gu until I die."

Xiao Longnu laughed, "I used to spank you in those days; were they happy days?"

Yang Guo stretched out his arms and embraced her. Yang Guo's soul was completely enchanted as he smelled the fragrance of Xiao Longnu's scent mixed up with the scents of the surrounding flowers and trees. He seemingly lost himself and said softly, "Let's just live like this happily for the next eighteen days; we don't need to go and kill Guo Jing and Huang Rong. Living happily and peacefully for eighteen days is better than rushing about and fighting for our lives."

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "We'll do whatever you say. Before, I wanted you to listen to me; but from now on, I'll listen to you." She has always had an icy cold disposition; but now she was filled with love. She felt warm all over and

felt that the greatest thing in life was to listen to Yang Guo with all her heart and soul.

Yang Guo looked at her startled; and said slowly, "Why are there tears in your eyes?"

Xiao Longnu took his hand and stroked her cheek gently with the back of his hand. She said tenderly, "I... I don't know." After a while, she said, "It must be because I love you too much."

Yang Guo said, "I know what you are sad about."

Xiao Longnu lifted her head and suddenly tears burst from her eyes as she threw herself into his arms. She cried, "Guo'er, you... you... we've only got eighteen days; how is that enough?"

Yang Guo patted her shoulder lightly and said softly, "No, it's not enough."

Xiao Longnu said, "I want you to treat me like this forever; I want a hundred years, a thousand years, ten thousand years."

Yang Guo lifted her head and kissed her on her pale red lips. He said resolutely, "Fine, we'll go kill Guo Jing and Huang Rong." When he tasted her tears on his tongue, the love in his heart was stirred and his whole body felt like as if it wanted to explode.

Suddenly, a voice laughed out loudly from some high place to the left of them and said, "You don't have to be that intimate."

Yang Guo turned his head around and saw Jinlun Fawang, Yin Kexi, Xiaoxiang Zi, Nimoxing and Ma Guangzuo standing shoulder to shoulder about a hundred feet away. The person who said this was Jinlun Fawang. When the two

left the valley hurriedly together, Fawang and the others followed. The two of them were oblivious to everything around them; they didn't see or hear anything but each other. When the two stood below the locust tree acting lovingly towards each other, they did not notice that Fawang and the others were watching them from faraway.

Yang Guo recalled the many times that Fawang tried to stir trouble for him in the valley which almost cost him his life on many occasions. If he could turn back time he would chose to kill Fawang. He had the chance when Fawang was recuperating on the mountain top instead of helping him. He's meant to be a great Master of this generation; yet he repays kindness with ingratitude.

Xiao Longnu saw the fiery anger in Yang Guo's eyes and said, "Ignore them, those people will never experience a second of the happiness that we have."

Ma Guangzuo called out, "Brother Yang, Miss Long, let's leave. There's nothing around here in these wild mountains; no wine, no meat, it's boring around here."

Yang Guo just wanted to spend some quiet time with Xiao Longnu but these people had to come and disturbed them. However, he knew that Ma Guangzuo meant well and so he said clearly, "Brother Ma, you go first, I'll be there in a second."

Ma Guangzuo said, "Fine, just hurry up when you've finished."

Jinlun Fawang laughed, "Who needs you to worry about them? They just want to spend eighteen days here on this wild mountainside."

Everyone had heard Qiu Qianchi talk about how Yang Guo's poison would react in eighteen days. When Ma Guangzuo

heard this he couldn't stop himself from getting angry and grabbed hold of Fawang's sleeve, cursing him, "Bald scoundrel, you really are evil! We came here together with brother Yang; you should have helped him but you didn't. Instead you tried to stir things up; what are you trying to do?"

Fawang gave a wry smile and chuckled, "Are you going to let go?"

Ma Guangzuo said angrily, "I'm not letting go; what are you going to do about it?"

Fawang threw his right fist towards his face.

Ma Guangzuo said, "Fine, you want to fight?" He raised his massive hand to grab Fawang's fist but this fist of Fawang's was a decoy; his left hand suddenly came out and pushed him on the back. He used soft and hard force at the same time, causing the great body of Ma Guangzuo to fly away and down the mountainside. Luckily for Ma Guangzuo, the mountainside was covered in long green grass and he was thick skinned so he wasn't seriously injured. However, his forehead was covered in green bruises. He roared and climbed back up.

When Yang Guo saw the two starting to fight, he knew that Ma Guangzuo would suffer at Fawang's hands so he went forward to help him. But it was too late; he had moved just three steps and Ma Guangzuo had already been sent tumbling downwards.

Though Ma Guangzuo wasn't the sharpest tool in the box; but he knew how to protect his life. He saw that he would not be able to beat that monk face to face and he cried and hollered, "Oh no, oh no, that bald bastard's broken my arm."

Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing did not like the fact that Jinlun Fawang had been proclaimed the First Protector of Mongolia by Khubilai; they were now even angrier with him when they saw how brutish he was; the two glanced at each other.

Xiaoxiang Zi said, "Reverend's martial arts are indeed excellent, you are worthy of the title of the First Protector of Mongolia."

Fawang said, "You're too kind." Fawang knew that the two wanted to make their move on him right now while Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were also edging forward to make their move. As to what Yin Kexi was thinking, Fawang wasn't too sure. He knew his martial arts were strong; but if the five great fighters join together and attack him all at once, not only will he not be able to fight them off; but his life will also be threatened. While his mouth replied dutifully, in his mind he was thinking of a way to escape.

While Ma Guangzuo was calling and hollering, he was making his way slowly towards Fawang. Suddenly, he threw out a fist and struck the back of Fawang's head. With Fawang's abilities, this sneaky attack of Ma Guangzuo's would never have succeeded; but at this moment in time, he was just concentrating on Yang Guo, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others. The idiot he had ignored actually managed to strike him on the back of his head. This attack was hammer like; hammering him into a starry daze. In his anger, Fawang sent his elbow backwards striking Ma Guangzuo squarely in the chest. Ma Guangzuo called out and his body fell forward right onto the shoulders of Fawang. Fawang's legs bent a little and he dashed straight down the mountainside.

Yang Guo was the first one to chase after Fawang as everyone shouted. Though Fawang had a great three hundred 'jin' (150kg/330lbs) body on his shoulders, he still

moved like the wind. Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Nimoxing and the others all had first-rate lightness kung fu; but since Fawang made the first move, they were not able to catch up with him for the first hundred feet. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu increased their speed and gradually got closer to him.

Fawang suddenly stopped and he turned his head around. He laughed, "Fine, are you all going to come up on me at once or will it be one on one?" He held Ma Guangzuo and placed his head next to a large rock on the mountainside. He was about to smash Ma Guangzuo into the rock.

Yang Guo went around him to first block his way before saying, "If you kill him, then of course we'll all attack you at once."

Fawang laughed and threw Ma Guangzuo to the ground before saying, "Do you think I'd trouble myself with this kind of idiot?" He then sent his arms into his gown and out came a white light in his left hand and a yellow light in his left; he had taken out his silver and bronze wheels. He clashed the wheels together and the sounds resonated throughout the valley. He said arrogantly, "Who's first?"

Yin Kexi laughed, "I'm just a merchant, so I'll just watch from the side and see everyone test each other's skills."

Fawang thought, "That's one less strong foe for me to face."

Xiaoxiang Zi thought that he should let someone else go first and allow them to wear Fawang down a bit before he stepped in and finished him off. So he said, "Brother Ni, your martial arts are better than mine, please go ahead!"

When Nimoxing heard his words, he knew what Xiaoxiang Zi was planning; but then he thought about how good his martial arts were. He was matchless in India and had never

met a match in his life; even if he can't beat Fawang he wouldn't lose to him. He went over to one side and casually grabbed hold of a large rock. He shouted, "Fine, I'll test out your two circular things." He picked up the large rock and smashed it towards Fawang's chest. This rock was at least three hundred 'jin' and everyone was startled when they saw him using this to fight.

Jinlun Fawang did not know that this dwarf would possess such strength and actually use a large rock to attack him. He didn't dare to meet it head on and dodged to the side and swept his bronze wheel across the back of Nimoxing. Nimoxing used the large rock to block the attack. The wheel and rock collided with each other and sparks flew everywhere with the sound of the collision echoing throughout the valley.

Fawang's left arm felt slightly numb and he thought, "This dark dwarf's martial arts are extremely strange, I cannot be careless. But even if he was stronger, how long can he last holding up such a large stone?" So he moved his wheels, circling it around Nimoxing's body.

Yang Guo helped Ma Guangzuo up and then stood next to Xiao Longnu. Both were surprised with Nimoxing's great strength and his strange martial arts.

The two of them battled for a while before suddenly Nimoxing shouted, "A Po Xing!" He lifted the large rock and shot it forward towards Fawang.

This throw was one of the greatest skills of Indian monks; it was called "Elephant Shooting of Shijia". In the scriptures it recorded; 'When Shijiamouni (Buddha) was still a prince, he left the city one day and found an elephant blocking his path. He lifted the elephant by the legs and shot it up into the sky. The elephant came back down three days later and

when it landed it made a deep ditch, now called the Shooting Elephant Ditch. This was of course just a story that describes the unimaginable wonders of Buddhism. The later Indian martial artists developed a powerful external martial art, that allowed the user to shoot large objects and was subsequently named after this story. Nimoxing called upon the divine strength of this technique and shot the boulder towards Fawang. The large rock traveled extremely fast towards Fawang, creating a ferocious wind as it went forward.

Though Fawang was greatly skilled, he still didn't dare to receive such a large heavy object head on and moved out of the way. Nimoxing suddenly flew up and struck the large stone with his palms, sending the stone back towards Fawang once again. This second attack was much stronger than the first because it was the combined force of the second propulsion from his palms with the remaining force from the first attack.

Fawang was better at martial arts than Nimoxing; but because he had never seen this "Elephant Shooting of Shijia" he was actually forced on the back foot. When he saw the rock coming towards him again, he could only move out of the way once again. Nimoxing pressed his advantage and the force of the rock become more and more ferocious as he repeatedly increased the force behind it.

Fawang thought, "If this continues I'm going to lose to this dark dwarf; I need to think of something else. Luckily he's up by himself; when I kill him that zombie face would not dare to come up against me. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu have been poisoned and won't be able to use their "Pure Heart of Jade Maiden Swordplay" smoothly."

Suddenly, the thunderous sounds of horses were heard from nearby. Flags fluttered in the air as a group of men on

horseback rushed towards them. Fawang and Nimoxing were in the middle of a heated battle and had no time to look. Yang Guo and the others saw it was a division of Mongolian soldiers on horseback armed with bows and sabers. About a hundred feet from Yang Guo and the others, the leader of the division held up his hand to order his men to stop. The soldiers all reigned in their horses.

Below the flag, a person watched the battle from his horse for a while before riding up towards them and called out, "Stop, stop!" This person wore a yellow gown and carried an iron bow; it was the Mongolian Prince Khubilai.

When Nimoxing heard his voice, he struck the rock with his palms and sent it rolling down the mountainside. Vast amounts of dust and dirt were thrown up as the boulder rolled down the slope.

Khubilai leapt off the horse and held Fawang with his left hand and Nimoxing with his right. He laughed, "So you two are exchanging a few stances here; it really was a great spectacle." He knew that the two were having a real battle but he said this to keep the face of both sides. Fawang gave a wry laugh and said, "Brother Ni's martial arts has its good points; a rare sight, a rare sight."

Nimoxing's eyes glared at him and said, "I thought the First Protector of Mongolia would be someone extraordinary, but you're just... bah!"

Fawang was furious and thought, "Do you really think I can't beat you?" He was just about to say something when Khubilai laughed, "This place has everything, but where's the wine? Men, bring wine! We'll drink three bowls here!"

Mongolians have always lived in the wild and made the world their home. Eating and drinking outside was no different than eating in a hall to them. One of the guards

brought some wine and food to them and laid a rug on the ground.

Khubilai looked at Xiao Longnu and was shocked, "There's actually a girl with such beauty here on this earth." He saw Yang Guo and her holding hands, standing next to each other intimately; he asked Yang Guo, "Who's this girl?"

Yang Guo said, "This is Miss Long; she is my Master and she is also my wife."

After the life and death experiences in the Passionless Valley; the world's customs and traditions meant absolutely nothing to him. He deliberately wanted everyone in the world to know that 'I, Yang Guo, have married my Master'.

Mongolians weren't as strict as the Han when it came to adhering to custom and tradition. When Khubilai heard this he wasn't surprised, but instead, he had great respect for Xiao Longnu when he heard that she was the one who taught Yang Guo martial arts. He laughed, "You two are indeed a match made in heaven, excellent, excellent. Everyone, let's congratulate these two." He raised his bowl of wine and drank it all in one go.

Fawang gave a wry laugh before he too raised his bowl and drank it all in one go. The others followed and Ma Guangzuo drank three bowls in one go.

Xiao Longnu did not hate or like Mongolians; but when she heard Khubilai praising her and Yang Guo as a great match, she was wild with joy. She drank half a bowl of wine and her face became even more beautiful. She thought, "All the Han say that I and Guo'er can't marry each other; while this Mongolian Prince kept on saying excellent, excellent. It looks like Mongolians are more knowledgeable than the Han."

Khubilai laughed, "I missed everyone here while you were gone for these past three days. However, matters at Xiangyang were getting urgent and so I was unable to continue hosting our esteemed guests. I'd left requests for you at the camp to meet up with the army at Xiangyang to aid us. Things will go a lot smoother now that we've met here."

Fawang asked, "Your Highness, how has our army been doing in our attacks on Xiangyang?"

Khubilai frowned and said, "Lu Wenhuan, the General who's guarding Xiangyang, is just a mediocre General; the person I'm worried about is Guo Jing."

Yang Guo's heart trembled and asked, "Is Guo Jing really at Xiangyang?"

Khubilai said, "This Guo Jing is my Senior. He was my father's sworn brother and was my grandfather Genghis Khan's most beloved General. This person was both brave and wise; he commanded an army at Xiyu and used an extraordinary plan to succeed in his task. My father once said to me, 'The Song courts are led by an incompetent Emperor and scheming ministers; they have timid Generals and a weak army. Although they have great numbers they will not be able to defend against our skilled army. But if you come across Guo Jing, you must be careful. Father's foresight was indeed right; our army has attacked Xiangyang many times but all attempts have been unsuccessful. The reason behind all this is Guo Jing.'"

Yang Guo stood up and said, "That Guo Jing is the person who killed my father; I would like to request the order to assassinate him."

Khubilai said with pleasure, "I have gathered all you heroes together for this exact task. But from what I hear, Guo Jing

is the best martial artist of all the Han and he's got many able people under his command. I have ordered many warriors to go and assassinate him but all have failed. They were either captured or killed; none of them returned. Brother Yang might be brave but it would be difficult for you to achieve this on your own. I want to send everyone here to go into Xiangyang and to work together to kill him. Once this person is killed, Xiangyang will fall."

Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others all stood up; they crossed their arms and said, "We will use every ounce of our strength to follow your Highness' order."

Khubilai was delighted and said, "It doesn't matter who kills Guo Jing, and those who go along to help will also be greatly rewarded. However, the Khan will be informed of the name of the person who killed Guo Jing, be given the title of Viscount and be called The Greatest Warrior of Mongolia."

Xiaoxiang Zi, Nimoxing and the others did not care about the Viscount position; but if they got the title of the Greatest Warrior of Mongolia, they'll be famous throughout the world, and achieve their life's dream. The influence of the Mongolian army has spread far and wide; they have countless li of territories in the western regions and have taken two thirds of the land of China. It would take a fast horse a year to travel from the centre of their empire to its boundaries. If they had the title of the Greatest Warrior of Mongolia, all of the world's heroes, bar none, will be in awe of them. Everyone's spirits were motivated and even Fawang reacted to this news; there was a glint in his eyes when he heard it.

Yang Guo gave a bitter laugh and shook his head. Xiao Longnu looked at him lovingly but she was thinking, "Who cares about the title of Viscount, or the title of the Greatest

Warrior of Mongolia? I just hope that you can stay alive and well."

Everyone drank a few more bowls of wine and then stood up. A Mongolian soldier led some horses to them. Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Fawang and the others leapt onto the horses and followed Khubilai, riding southwards towards Xiangyang.

It was a scene of destruction along the way; nine out of ten buildings were empty and the ground was covered with corpses. Whenever the Mongolian soldiers see Han, they would kill them with unrestrained violence. Yang Guo was furious when he saw this and wanted to stop them. But he hesitated because of Khubilai, and thought, "The Mongolians are so violent and cruel and treat my Han people worse than animals; after I've killed Guo Jing and Huang Rong, I'm going to kill a few of the vilest Mongolian soldiers to vent my anger."

A few days later, they arrived outside of Xiangyang. The two sides had now been fighting for around a month and the ground was covered with the remnants of battle; broken spears lay strewn everywhere; blood and bodies covered the ground.

When the Generals and commanders of the army outside Xiangyang learned of the Fourth Prince Khubilai's arrival, they went to greet him thirty li outside of Xiangyang. The sounds of the horses' hoofs and the clanging of the soldiers' armour reflected the grandeur of the army. When the Generals and commanders saw Khubilai's banner, they all leapt off their horses and knelt down by the roadside.

Khubilai rode up near them and reigned in his horse. He took a look around and didn't say anything for a long while. He then gave a 'humph' grunt and said, "Xiangyang city has

been under attack for so long yet you still have not captured it; isn't that a disgrace to the mighty Mongolian army?"

All the Generals and commanders replied at the same time, "We deserve to die; please punish us your Highness."

Khubilai whipped his horse and galloped forward. All the Generals and commanders kept themselves down on the ground for a long time, not daring to get up.

Yang Guo saw that Khubilai was very peaceful and easy going towards him, Fawang and the others; but when he was disciplining his army he was very strict. He thought, "The Mongolian army is so strong and so disciplined; how can the Song defend against them?" He frowned as he thought about this.

Early next morning, the Mongolians attacked Xiangyang once again. Arrows and stones were sent towards the city like rain and hail. The soldiers at the front of the attack placed ladders around the city of Xiangyang and climbed up. The city was guarded tightly; groups of eight soldiers held a wooden ram in their arms and were knocking the ladders off the city walls. After a prolonged attack, a hundred or so Mongolian soldiers eventually managed to get themselves on top of the city walls. The Mongolian army hollered and another hundred or so soldiers climbed up towards the walls for support. The watchman's rattle rang urgently and a group of archers appeared, shooting arrows down on the advance, forcing them back. Another group of Song soldiers appeared with torches in their hands and they burned the ladders, sending the Mongolians on the ladders plummeting down to the ground.

Shouts and calls could be heard from the city as a group of men appeared on the walls with long spears and sharp

sabers, attacking the Mongolians who had climbed up onto the city walls. This group of men did not wear the uniform of the Song army; some wore short black garments, while some wore long green gowns. When they attacked, they didn't attack in a group; their movements were swift and showed that they possessed martial arts. The Mongolians who had managed to get themselves on top of the city walls were all great warriors of the Mongolian army and had never met their match before. But when they came across this group of Han, they were all killed. Some died on the city walls while others fell to their deaths. There was an especially commanding Han in the Song army. This person wore a grey gown and was fighting empty handed; he scanned the walls and when he saw Han soldiers in distress, he would immediately dash over and help them. Wherever his palms went, Mongolian soldiers fell; it was like a tiger in amongst a herd of sheep.

Khubilai was commanding this battle himself and when he saw how brave and heroic this Han was, he was stunned and didn't say anything. After a while he sighed and said, "Out of all the warriors in the world, who can compare with this man?"

Yang Guo was standing beside Khubilai and asked, "Highness, do you know who that is?"

Khubilai was startled and said, "Could it be that he's Guo Jing?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes!"

By this time, most of the hundreds of Mongolians soldiers who had climbed up the city walls had been killed. Only three brave Sergeants of the Jagen (100 man squad) still survived and they were fighting on in a corner with their spears and shields. A Noyan (rank in Mongolian army,

leader of a division of 10,000) below blew their horn and another group of soldiers attacked the city walls, intending to bring the three remaining Jagen Sergeants back to safety.

Guo Jing roared and stepped forward. One of the Jagen Sergeants thrust his spear forward towards him. Guo Jing grabbed the spear and pushed forward. He then kicked out at the shield of another Jagen Sergeant with his left leg. Though these two Jagen Sergeants had great valor, how could they resist the divine strength from such a push and kick? They somersaulted down from the wall and fell to their deaths.

The third Jagen Sergeant was fairly old and had grey hair. He knew that today was the day when he would meet his maker. He swung his long saber wildly like a mad tiger. Guo Jing stretched out his left hand and grabbed the wrist of the hand that was holding the saber. He was about to chop down with his right hand when he suddenly stopped in alarm. The Jagen Sergeant recognized Guo Jing and called out, "Jin Dao Fu Ma (Golden Blade Consort), it's you!" Note: He was betrothed to Genghis Khan's daughter Hua Zhen during his time in Mongolia.

He was actually one of the soldiers that accompanied Guo Jing when he was sent to conquer the western regions. When Huang Rong made the plan to take Samarkand, he was amongst the first warriors who made the attack on the city.

Guo Jing recalled past memories and said, "You are E'er Dou?"

The Jagen Sergeant cried when he saw that Guo Jing remembered his name and he called out, "Yes, yes it's me."

Guo Jing said, "Fine, I'm going to spare your life today because of what happened in the past. If I capture you again, there will be no mercy." He turned to one of his aides and said, "Get a rope and send him back down!" Two soldiers tied a rope around E'er Dou's waist and lowered him.

E'er Dou was a famous warrior in the Mongolian army; when the Mongolian soldiers saw him being lowered down on a rope by the Song army, they were surprised. They didn't know what had happened and retreated a few hundred feet. The Song soldiers at the top of the city stopped firing their arrows and the two sides ceased the battle for the time being.

When E'er Dou got down, he turned to Guo Jing and bowed to him on the ground. He said clearly, "Since Jin Dao Fu Ma (Golden Blade Consort) is here, this servant will not dare fight again."

Guo Jing stood at the top of the wall with a commanding aura around him and shouted out, "The commander of the Mongols, listen: Years ago the Mongols and Han worked together to get rid of the Jin; why are you Mongols now invading our land and killing our citizens? We have ten times more people than you Mongols have. If you don't quickly retreat then we'll gather our armies and kill the hundreds of thousands of soldiers that you have. We'll not even leave them with a body that can be buried." He spoke in Mongolian with great vigor. Though the wall was high and there was a large distance between the two armies, the Mongolian soldiers could hear every single word clearly and they couldn't stop themselves from looking at each other pale faced.

A Noyan led E'er Dou to Khubilai and told him what had happened. E'er Dou then told Khubilai about how he

followed Guo Jing on the expedition to the west and described how the Jin Dao Fu Ma (Golden Blade Consort) used his troops like a god. How he subdued and defeated the enemy, explaining all this with great enthusiasm.

Khubilai's face turned heavy and shouted, "Execute him!"

E'er Dou called out, "Please, I've done nothing!"

The Noyan said, "Please your Highness, this E'er Dou has achieved many great deeds for our army..."

Khubilai waved his hand and four guards came. They took E'er Dou away and executed him, bringing his head back to Khubilai. All the Generals trembled with fear.

Khubilai said to the Noyan, "Apart from the money owed to E'er Dou's family for his services to the army, give his wife ten 'jin' (5kg/11lbs) of gold, thirty slaves and three hundred livestock."

The Noyan was puzzled but replied, "Yes, yes."

Khubilai said, "I've killed him yet I'm also rewarding his family; you do not understand this, do you?"

All the Generals bowed to him and said, "Please enlighten us your Highness."

Khubilai said clearly, "That Jagen Sergeant bowed down to Guo Jing and talked about how powerful Guo Jing is; shouldn't he die for disturbing the morale of the soldiers? But he was brave and led the attacks; he fought with his life up until he reached the final man, shouldn't he be rewarded?" All of the Generals bowed to him.

But after this event, the Mongolian army's morale was low. Khubilai knew that if he continued to battle on today, he would just suffer more losses. He was exasperated when he

saw the hundreds of corpses of his experienced spirited soldiers lying across the battlefield. He then looked at the fortified wall of Xiangyang; it was guarded tightly and there was no way to break through. He couldn't stop himself from releasing a sigh. He immediately gave the order to retreat back forty li.

Two of his guards looked at each other and both said, "This servant would like to share the burdens of your Highness and will go to dampen the morale of the Song." They leapt onto a horse and galloped towards the city. The two mounted their bows and shot the arrows towards Guo Jing.

The two were skilled riders and their archery skills were accurate; their horse galloped like the wind and the arrows were shot out like lightning. By the time warning cries were heard from both the top and bottom of the city walls, the arrows had reached Guo Jing's chest and stomach. It appeared that Guo Jing had no way to avoid the arrows; but he gathered his hands towards himself and grabbed the arrows. He then raised his hands and shot the arrows back. Before the two guards had turned their horses around, the arrows had arrived and shot through their chests. The two fell onto the ground. The Song army at the top of the city wall cheered thunderously.

Khubilai was not pleased and ordered his men north. The army had traveled for a few li when Yang Guo said, "There is no need to be troubled your Highness; I will now go to the city to take Guo Jing's life."

Khubilai shook his head and said, "That Guo Jing is both valiant and wise; he indeed does live up to his reputation. This matter is more troublesome than I thought it would be now that I've seen him with my own eyes."

Yang Guo said, "I lived with Guo Jing for many years and I have helped him before; he will have no suspicions about me. There's a saying; a spear out in the open is easy to dodge, but an arrow in the dark is hard to avoid."

Khubilai said, "When you were standing next to me watching the battle, you were afraid that he would recognize you from the top of the city's walls?"

Yang Guo said, "I was wary of this so when you were attacking the city, Miss Long and I wore hats to cover our faces and fur garments to hide our bodies; he would not be able to recognize us."

Khubilai said, "Well then, I hope you succeed. I will keep my word about the rewards."

Yang Guo casually thanked him and he was about to turn around to Xiao Longnu to leave with her when he saw Jinlun Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the others with strange expressions. His mind lit up, "These people are afraid that I'll get the title of the Greatest Warrior of Mongolia if I succeed in killing Guo Jing; they'll definitely try to stop me." He turned to Khubilai and said, "Your Highness, I have something to tell you. The reason I am going to assassinate Guo Jing is because I want to avenge my father's death and because I need his head in exchange for an antidote to save my life. If I succeed in helping your Highness, I cannot accept the title of the Greatest Warrior of Mongolia."

Khubilai asked, "Why?"

Yang Guo said, "My martial arts can't compare with these people; how can I be the Greatest Warrior of Mongolia? I can only make my move if your Highness promises me this."

Khubilai heard him say this with great sincerity and thought that this really was what he wanted. He then looked at the

expressions of the others and then knew what he meant by this. He said, "Since you've decided this, I can't change your mind. I will not force you."

When Fawang and the others heard this, they indeed did show signs of relief.

Yang Guo turned his horse around and headed for Xiangyang with Xiao Longnu. They took off the disguises along the way and dressed themselves back into Han clothing. It was beginning to get dark by the time they reached the walls of the city; when they got there, a closed gate greeted them. Soldiers with torches were patrolling the city walls.

Yang Guo called out, "My name is Yang Guo, and I've come to see Guo Jing, Master Guo."

The General who was guarding the city walls heard his calls and saw that he was accompanied by a girl. He immediately went to tell Guo Jing the news.

After a while, two youngsters arrived at the top of the city wall and looked down at them. One of them called out, "So it's brother Yang. There are only two of you?"

When Yang Guo saw the Wu brothers he thought, "When Guo Jing killed my father, I wonder whether or not the Wu brother's father was there to help him?" He said, "Big brother Wu, second brother Wu, is Uncle Guo in the city?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "Come in."

The soldiers opened the gate and lowered the drawbridge to allow Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu through.

The Wu brothers led the two to a large house. Guo Jing's face was filled with joy and he dashed out of the house to meet Yang Guo. He greeted Xiao Longnu and then held

Yang Guo's hand and smiled, "Guo'er, you've come here just in time. The Mongols are attacking us intensely and you can help me now that you're here; the citizens of the city are very fortunate."

Xiao Longnu was Yang Guo's Master and Guo Jing treated her as an equal, politely inviting her into the house while he treated Yang Guo with great care.

Guo Jing held Yang Guo's left hand. When Yang Guo thought about the act that his father's murderer was doing now, pretending to be caring and loving towards him, he really wanted to draw out his sword and kill him right there and then. But he was worried about how good Guo Jing's martial arts were so he didn't dare to make a rash move. He forced himself to smile and said, "I wish Uncle Guo great health." He was filled with anger and did not kneel down to him. Guo Jing was a broad-minded person and did not take little details like this to heart.

When they arrived in the hall, Yang Guo wanted to go and see Huang Rong. Guo Jing laughed, "Your Auntie Guo is about to give birth and hasn't been feeling well in the last couple of days; you can see her in a few days time."

Yang Guo was delighted and thought, "Huang Rong is extremely wise and clever; I was afraid that she would be able to see through my plan. But she's ill at the moment; it looks like even heaven wants me to succeed."

As they were talking, a soldier came in and reported, "General Lu requests Master Guo's presence at a feast to celebrate our victory against the Mongols today."

Guo Jing said, "Go and tell the General, thank you for the invitation. However, I have a guest and cannot attend."

The soldier looked at Yang Guo and saw that he was just a young man with nothing special about him; he didn't know why Guo Jing would treat him with so much respect that he would actually reject the General's invitation to the celebratory feast because of him. His mind was full of questions as he went back to report this to Lu Wenhuan.

Guo Jing prepared a family meal in the inner hall in honour of Yang Guo's and Xiao Longnu's arrival. Zhu Ziliu, Liu Youjiao, the Wu brothers and Guo Fu were in attendance. Zhu Ziliu kept on thanking Yang Guo, saying that only he could have gotten the antidote from Huo Dou to cure his poison. Yang Guo just gave a lifeless smile and said a few modest words.

Guo Fu saw that Yang Guo had an aloof expression on his face. She called out, "Brother Yang."

Guo Jing scolded, "Fu'er, if it weren't for brother Yang risking his life to save you from the hands of Jinlun Fawang, not only would you have been in trouble but also your mother; why aren't you thanking him?"

Guo Fu stood up and said, "Thank you brother Yang for saving me."

Yang Guo said, "We're not strangers, why is there a need to say thanks?"

Guo Fu didn't say anything and sat down. During the meal, Guo Fu frowned and it seemed that there was something on her mind. The Wu brothers were seemingly avoiding her glances. But Liu Youjiao and Zhu Ziliu were extremely happy and were chatting about the victory against the Mongols.

By the time dinner finished, it was around eleven o'clock. Guo Jing told his daughter to take Xiao Longnu inside to

rest and he himself took Yang Guo to his room to sleep in the same bed. When Xiao Longnu was about to go inside, she glanced at Yang Guo, telling him to be careful. Her face was filled with love and concern. Yang Guo was afraid that his intentions would be revealed and so turned his head away, not daring to look at her directly.

Guo Jing led Yang Guo to his room and praised Yang Guo for saving Huang Rong, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers from Jinlun Fawang at the restaurant and the stone formations. He then asked about what had happened to him afterwards.

Yang Guo was afraid that he might let something out if he talked too much; and so he kept the events of how he met Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang, Sha Gu and Huang Yaoshi from him. He just said, "After I was injured, I recuperated in a wild valley. Afterwards, I met my Master again and we decided to come here to help Uncle Guo."

Guo Jing got himself readied for bed and said, "Guo'er, there is a strong enemy pressing against the boundaries of our land; the Song Empire is in great danger. Xiangyang is a barrier for our Song land; if this city falls then the thousands and millions of citizens that we have will become the slaves of the Mongols. I have seen the brutality of the Mongols when they kill with my own eyes; it causes one's blood to boil."

When Yang Guo heard this, he remembered the tragic and terrifying scenes of the actions of the Mongols he encountered during his travels. He couldn't stop his teeth from clenching in anger and his chest filled with fury.

Guo Jing continued, "Why do we learn martial arts? Lending a helping hand and getting people out of danger is of course something that we must do; but this is just one of the minor parts of being a hero. The people of Jianghu call

me 'Hero Guo' because they respect me for serving my country and my people and guarding Xiangyang without care for my life. But my abilities are limited, I cannot get my people out of this trouble; I really am not worthy of the title 'Hero'. You are ten times more intelligent than me; your future achievements will definitely exceed mine. I just hope that you remember these words, 'a hero's imperative is to serve your country, to serve your people'. You will be a famous true hero of the people if you remember this."

These sincere words moved Yang Guo. He saw that Guo Jing had a stern face on him and although Guo Jing was his father's murderer, Yang Guo couldn't help but feel respect for him. He replied, "Uncle Guo, after you've gone, I will definitely remember the words that you have said tonight."

How would Guo Jing know that Yang Guo was planning to assassinate him tonight? He stretched out his hand and stroked his hair and said, "Yes, bend your body to the task until your dying day. If our country perishes then your Uncle Guo's life will go along with it. I have heard that Khubilai is skilled in warfare; he retreated today but he will come back to attack again soon. There's definitely going to be a great battle in the upcoming days. It's going to be a spectacular battle. It's getting late, let's go to sleep."

Yang Guo replied, "Yes." He undressed himself for bed and hid the dagger from the Passionless Valley on him. He thought, "I'll wait until you're deep in your sleep and then stab you; even if your martial arts were a hundred times better, how could you avoid this attack?"

Guo Jing had fought in a great battle today and he immediately fell asleep. How could Yang Guo sleep with the thoughts that he had? He lay on the bed and listened to the breathing of Guo Jing. Every inhalation and exhalation was

spaced out with an extremely long gap; he admired how profound Guo Jing's internal energy was.

Some time passed. It was silent everywhere with the exception of the noises from the guards. He sat up quietly and felt out the dagger from underneath his clothes. He thought, "I'll kill him first and then go kill Huang Rong. She's a pregnant woman, what can she do? Once I've killed them, I'll immediately go back to the Passionless Valley with Gu Gu to get the other half of the antidote. Once I've got the antidote, I will go back to the tomb with Gu Gu and enjoy the pleasures of life; who cares about whether this empire is Song or Mongol?"

He felt extremely pleased with himself as he thought about this; but suddenly he heard the crying of a baby from one of the neighboring residences. He then heard the mother of the baby comforting it; the baby gradually stopped crying and fell asleep.

Yang Guo's heart trembled and remembered the time when he saw a Mongolian soldier holding up his spear in midair with a baby hanging off the end of it; the baby had not died and was crying miserably. He thought, "It would be easy for me to kill Guo Jing now; but once he dies, it will be difficult to protect Xiangyang. This city has thousands and thousands of babies; won't they all be killed by the Mongolian soldiers for fun? My avenging of my father will lead to countless deaths, is this right?"

But then he thought, "If I don't kill him, how can I get the antidote from Qiu Qianchi? If I die, Gu Gu will not live on." Nothing in the world could compare to his love for Xiao Longnu and he made up his mind, "Fine, fine, who cares about the lives of Xiangyang; who cares about the Empire of the Song? When I was suffering, who cared about me apart from Gu Gu? The people of the world don't love me;

why should I love the people of the world?" He raised the dagger and gathered all his strength into his right hand. He aimed for Guo Jing's chest.

The candlelight in the room had gone out long ago but Yang Guo had the ability to see things in the dark. When he was about to thrust the dagger, he glanced over at Guo Jing's face. There was a peaceful expression on his face and he was in a deep sleep; all the love that Guo Jing shown him when he was younger suddenly surfaced in his heart. How he treated him lovingly on the Peach Blossom Island; how he took him all the way to Mount Zhongnan to learn martial arts; how he betrothed his only daughter to him. He couldn't stop himself from thinking, "Uncle Guo is a straight and honest man; he is an extremely sincere and kind person; he cannot be the person who killed my father. Could it be that Sha Gu was confused and was talking rubbish? If this knife goes forward and kills an innocent man, I won't be able to redeem this with ten thousand deaths. I'll wait; I need to make sure."

He put away his dagger slowly and thought about all the things that had happened since he'd met the Guo couple; pondering over every single memory. He remembered how Huang Rong always felt uneasy with him around; there were many times when she and Guo Jing were talking about something but would immediately change the subject once she saw him. There was no question about it; the couple was keeping something from him. He continued thinking, "When Auntie Guo took me as a disciple, how come she only taught me to read and write and didn't teach me martial arts? Could it be that the reason why Uncle Guo treats me so well is because he's trying to make himself feel better about killing my father? But if he really did kill my father then how come he is not wary of me at all? He lets me sleep with him and gives me the chance to kill him with one stab

of a knife. He was troubled as his thoughts went to and fro like the tides.

Though Guo Jing was sleeping, he noticed that Yang Guo's breathing was quickening and he opened his eyes. He asked, "Guo'er, what is it?"

Yang Guo trembled a little and said, "It's nothing."

Guo Jing laughed, "If you're not used to sleeping with someone, then I'll go and sleep on the table."

Yang Guo said quickly, "No, it's nothing important."

Guo Jing said, "Fine, just go to sleep. We martial artists need to make sure our states of mind are well rested."

Yang Guo replied, "Yes."

Another while passed. Yang Guo could not hold it in any longer and asked, "Uncle Guo, that year when you took me to Mount Zhongnan, I asked you a question at the Cow Head Monastery at the foot of Mount Zhongnan."

Guo Jing said, "What was it?"

Yang Guo said, "When I asked the question you became furious and smashed down on a stone obelisk; that was why you got all the trouble from the Quanzhen Taoists; do you remember what I asked?"

Guo Jing thought for a while and said, "Yes, I remember, that day you asked me how your father died."

Yang Guo stared at him and said, "No, I asked you who killed my father."

Guo Jing said, "How do you know that someone killed your father?"

Yang Guo choked, "Could it be that my father died just like that?"

Guo Jing stayed silent for a while before giving out a sigh and said, "It was no one's fault but his that he died like that."

Yang Guo sat up; he was extremely emotional and said, "You're lying! How can someone cause their own death? Even if my father killed himself, someone must have forced him to do it."

Guo Jing felt sad and tears rolled down from his eyes. He said slowly, "Guo'er, your grandfather and my father were very close; your father and I were sworn brothers. If your father was killed by someone don't you think I would have avenged his death?"

Yang Guo shook all over and he wanted to say, "You're the one who killed him, how can you avenge him?" But he knew that if he said this, Guo Jing would be wary of him and if that happened, it would be difficult to assassinate him. He nodded his head and stayed silent.

Guo Jing said, "Your father's death is a long complicated story, it cannot be explained in one sentence. When you asked me all those years ago, you were still young; you wouldn't have understood all the causes behind it. That is why I didn't tell you then. You can distinguish between right and wrong now that you've grown up. Once we've made the Mongols retreat, I'll tell you all about it from the beginning." He then laid his head back on his pillow and went to sleep.

Yang Guo had always known him to be completely honest; if he said something it was truthful and he never lied. But when he heard his words he wasn't convinced and was semi suspicious of him. He cursed himself, "Yang Guo, Yang Guo,

you have always done things with an indomitable will; whatever you dared to do you did, why are you acting so timid today? Could it be that you're afraid of how good his martial arts are? If I keep on changing my mind tonight and lose this opportunity, Huang Rong might find out about my motives in the near future. When that happens, I'm afraid that even Gu Gu will be killed without a corpse that can be buried as well."

When he thought about Xiao Longnu, his spirits stirred again and he stretched out his hand to check the dagger. The dagger tip was hot after being pressed against his body.

End of Chapter 20.

Shen Diao Xia Lu (Divine Eagle, Gallant Knights)

by Jin Yong



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 21 – Fierce Fighting at Xiangyang](#)

[Chapter 22 – The Baby Girl of the City in Danger](#)

[Chapter 23 – Sibling Rivalry](#)

[Chapter 24 – Turbulent Emotions](#)

[Chapter 25 – Domestic Strife, Foreign Aggression](#)

[Chapter 26 – Divine Eagle's Heavy Sword](#)

[Chapter 27 – Fighting Strength with Wisdom](#)

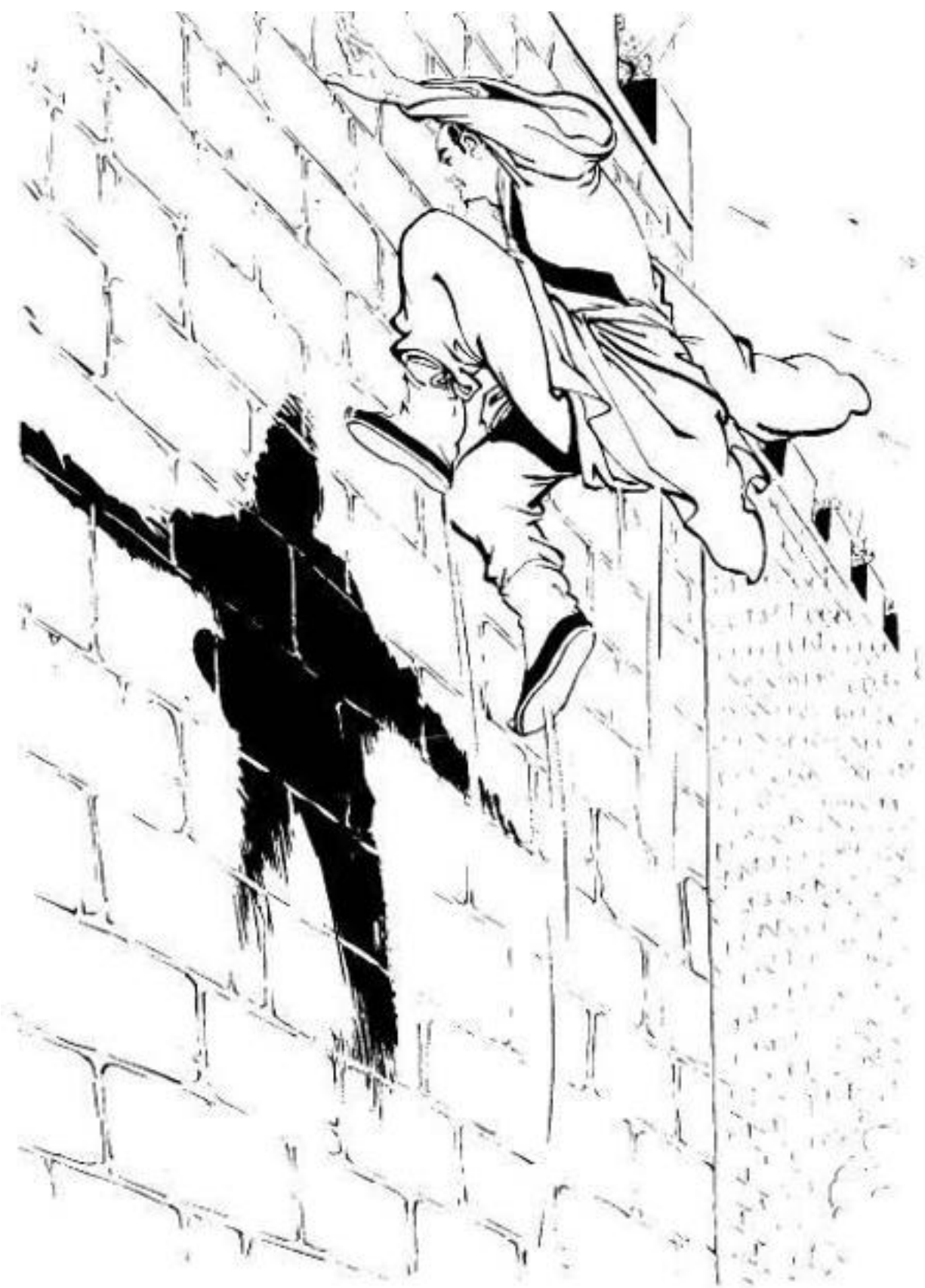
[Chapter 28 – Wedding Festivities](#)

[Chapter 29 – Ultimate Disasters](#)

[Chapter 30 – Strange Encounters](#)

Chapter 21 - Fierce Fighting at Xiangyang

Translated by Noodles



Guo Jing's left foot flicked up against the wall and he flew up over ten feet. His right feet followed and he rose up another ten feet. Silence broke out on the battlefield as tens of thousands spectators fixed their eyes on him.

Yang Guo was just about to take his dagger out and stab Guo Jing when he suddenly heard three light flicks on the outside window. He quickly shut his eyes and kept still.

Guo Jing immediately woke up alarmed and said, "Rong'er? Is there some kind of problem?" No more noises came from the window.

Guo Jing saw that Yang Guo was in a deep sleep and could hear his even snoring. He saw how easily he slept and didn't want to wake him, so he got up from the bed quietly and went to the door. He opened the door and saw Huang Rong in the courtyard signaling him with her hand. Guo Jing went to her and said quietly, "What's the matter?"

Huang Rong did not reply and lead him to the garden. She took a look all around before saying, "I heard you and Guo'er's conversation. He's up to no good, do you know that?"

Guo Jing was startled and asked, "He's up to no good?"

Huang Rong replied, "I could tell from his words that he's been suspicious of you killing his father."

Guo Jing said, "He may be suspicious but I've promised that I'll tell him all about the reasons for his father's death in detail."

Huang Rong said, "Are you really going to tell him everything?"

Guo Jing said, "I have always blamed myself for his father's tragic death. Though Brother Yang Kang went down the wrong path, we did nothing to save him."

Huang Rong gave a 'humph' and said, "How could he be saved? I just wished that I'd killed him earlier. If I had, would your Masters have died on Peach Blossom Island?" When Guo Jing recalled this bitter event, he couldn't prevent himself from heaving a long sigh. Huang Rong said, "Brother Zhu sent Fu'er to tell me that there's something odd with Guo'er and she told me how you two were going to sleep on the same bed. I was worried that something might happen and I have been on guard by the window all along. It's better not to sleep in the same room as him. You should know that people's thoughts are hard to fathom. His father... his father died from poison as a result of striking me on the shoulder."

Guo Jing said, "It can't be said that you killed him."

Huang Rong said, "Both of us had the thought of killing him in our minds and in the end he did die because of me. Although we didn't kill him with our own hands, there's not much difference."

Guo Jing thought deeply for a while and said, "You're right. I won't tell him about this. Rong'er, you've been up for half the night, quickly go back to your room and rest. After tonight, I'll move to the camp." He knew that his wife's wisdom exceeded his a hundred times and although he didn't believe that Yang Guo had any ill intent towards him, he did as she said. He stretched out his hand and put his arm around her waist and led her slowly into the inner halls. He said, "Guo'er used every ounce of strength he had to take back the position of the Chancellor of Wulin for us. He knows what's right and wrong when it comes to matters of the country; he risked his life in saving you and Fu'er twice; how can his father compare with his heroic nature?"

Huang Rong nodded her head and said, "Yes, this is something that's wonderful to see in this young man, but he has two clouds hanging over him. One is the reasons for his father's death and two, his relationship with his Master. I made Miss Long leave him but Guo'er seems to be all-knowing; somehow he found her again. From their expressions, it looks like they'll never be separated again."

Guo Jing kept silent for a while and then suddenly said, "Rong'er, you're even more all-knowing than Guo'er; think of a way to stop Guo'er from going down the wrong path."

Huang Rong sighed and said, "I don't even know what to do about our daughter let alone Guo'er. Brother Jing, I just have you in my heart and you have just me in yours. But our daughter isn't like us; she has two men in her heart, she treats each of the Wu brothers the same. This makes things difficult for us parents."

Guo Jing accompanied Huang Rong to her room and helped her onto her bed. He covered her with a blanket and held her hand, sitting by the bed waiting for her to go to sleep. The pair had been busy with defending the country and hadn't had a chance to spend any quiet time with each other like this. The two looked at each other, in silence, in peace.

Huang Rong held her husband's hand and brushed it gently across her cheeks. She whispered, "Brother Jing, you name our second child."

Guo Jing laughed, "You know I'm not good at that; why are you making fun of me?"

Huang Rong said, "You still say that you're not able. Brother Jing, there's no one in the world that's better than you." She said these words with great sincerity.

Guo Jing lowered his head and kissed his loving wife on her face gently. He said, "If it's a boy, we'll call him Guo Polu, but what if it's a girl?" He thought for a while and shook his head saying, "I can't think of one, you think of a name."

Huang Rong said, "Elder Qiu named you 'Jing' so that you would not forget the shame of the Jing Kang years. The Jin have been destroyed but now the Mongolians are threatening us. This child is going to be born in Xiangyang; we'll call her Guo Xiang so in the future she'll remember that she was born in this city when it was surrounded by warring soldiers."

Guo Jing said, "Good, but hopefully she will not be like her sister. She's grown up now and she still makes us worry about her."

Huang Rong smiled lightly and said, "It doesn't matter if we have to worry but..." She gave a sigh and said, "I really hope that it will be a boy so that the Guo's will have an heir."

Guo Jing stroked her hair and said, "A boy or a girl; will it not be the same? Just go to bed, don't think too much." He pulled the blanket over her and blew out the candles. He returned to his room and saw Yang Guo in a deep sleep. The chime for the third hour could be heard. He returned to the bed and slept.

How would he know that when he was talking to his wife, Yang Guo was hiding behind the pavilion and heard every single word they said? When Guo Jing returned to the inner halls with his wife, Yang Guo stood there in a daze. His mind was repeatedly going over what Huang Rong had said, "I just wished that I killed him earlier... his father died from poison as a result from striking me on the shoulder... both of us had the thought of killing him in our minds and in the end he did die because of me." He thought, "There's no more doubts, my father died because of the two of them. Huang Rong is really wily; she's already suspicious of me. If I don't make my move

today then I don't think I'll ever get another chance like this." He then returned to the room and slept on the bed quietly, waiting for Guo Jing to return.

Guo Jing slipped himself on to the bed and heard Yang Guo's faint snoring. He thought, "This child sleeps so soundly." He rested his head lightly on the pillow, afraid that he would wake him up. A short while passed and he was about to fall asleep when he suddenly felt Yang Guo turning his body around slowly but while he was turning over, his snoring continued. Guo Jing was startled, "Everyone stops their snoring when they turn over in their sleep. There's something wrong with his breathing, could it be that when he's practicing his internal energy he circulated it in the wrong way? This isn't anything trivial." The thought of Yang Guo pretending to sleep never entered his mind.

Yang Guo slowly turned around slowly and saw that Guo Jing did not notice him so he continued his faint snoring and got down from the bed. He had wanted to make his move while he was beneath the blanket but he was worried about how close he was to Guo Jing. It would be extremely dangerous for him. If Guo Jing sends out a last gasp palm at him then surely he would be killed. He had thought about sitting up to do it but he was still worried about how good Guo Jing's martial arts were. In the end he decided to first get off the bed and stab Guo Jing in one of his vital areas before escaping out of the window. He was also afraid that if he stopped his snoring, Guo Jing would notice, so he kept up the pretence while he got down from the bed. But by doing this, Guo Jing was fooled even more. Guo Jing was thinking, "Could it be that the child has a sleepwalking disease? If I make a noise now, he would break out in a shock, his chi in his dan tian would surge the opposite way and he would immediately fire deviate." So he didn't make a move and listened out for his actions.

Yang Guo took out his dagger slowly and braced it against his chest with his right hand. He made his way to the bed step by step and suddenly gathered his chi into his arm to make his attack. Just as he was about to thrust the dagger, he heard Guo Jing call out, "Guo'er, what kind of nightmare are you having?"

Yang Guo was extremely shocked and he immediately darted out of the window. He was fast but Guo Jing was faster; before he touched the ground Guo Jing had already managed to grab him. Yang Guo's thoughts went to despair, he knew that his enemy was much stronger than him and it would be of no use to resist so he closed his eyes and kept silent. Guo Jing carried him back into the room. He placed him on the bed and sat him up with his hands hanging down in front of him, assuming the form of practicing Xuan Men chi. Yang Guo was bitter and afraid, "I wonder what kind of evil method he's going to use to torture me." He suddenly remembered Xian Long Nu. He breathed in deeply and wanted to call out to her, "Gu Gu, I've been captured, quickly run away."

When Guo Jing saw him suddenly breathe in deeply and circulate his chi, he was even more convinced that he was having problems with the circulation of his chi and thought, "In a situation like this one can only breathe in slowly and shallowly, it's extremely dangerous to breathe in so quickly and deeply like this." He quickly placed his palm against Yang Guo's lower abdomen.

Yang Guo's 'dan tian' was suppressed by Guo Jing's profound internal energy and he couldn't call out. He was concerned for Xiao Longnu's safety and struggled until his face went red but with his 'dan tian' suppressed, he couldn't move an inch. Guo Jing said slowly, "Guo'er, you were too anxious in circulating your chi; this is called desiring speed and not transmission. Stop moving, I'll help return your chi back to their original sources."

Yang Guo was startled and didn't know what he meant by this; but then he felt a warm gradual chi entering his 'dan tian' from his palms that was extremely comforting. He then heard Guo Jing say, "Slowly expel your chi and slowly let this warm chi transmit through the 'Water Divide' to the 'Interior Strengthening' through the 'Great Tower Gate', 'Turtledove Tail' to the 'Jade Hall', 'Florid Canopy', first clear the conception vessel, ignore the other meridians.

After hearing these words and feeling his chi clearing his meridians, he more or less gathered what was happening. He thought, "Shocking! He thinks I've lost my mind due to me suffering a fire deviation." He secretly circulated his internal energy and deliberately let his chi run wild, appearing not to be in control. Guo Jing was worried and increased the power in his palms, gathering his wild chi into one place. Yang Guo's internal energy was now not shallow. Guo Jing found it slightly difficult to cope for a while when Yang Guo sent his chi surging wildly around his body. He had to waste around an hour's time before he managed to return his contrary chi back into their original channels.

After this struggle, Yang Guo was completely drained of strength and Guo Jing too was extremely tired. The two of them sat in meditation. The sky lightened before they had recovered.

Guo Jing smiled, "Guo'er, are you okay now? I didn't know that your internal energy has reached such a good level already; even I almost couldn't control it."

Yang Guo knew that in trying to save himself, Guo Jing had wasted a lot of his internal energy and was touched by this. He said, "Thank you uncle Guo for saving me; last night I was almost crippled."

Guo Jing thought, "Last night while you were confused, you actually raised a dagger to kill me; luckily you didn't know

about this, otherwise wouldn't you be ashamed of yourself?" He was afraid that if Yang Guo knew about this he would feel sorry about it so he changed the subject and said, "Come with me outside of the city, we'll take a look at the city's defenses."

Yang Guo replied, "Yes!" The two of them mounted a warhorse each and rode shoulder to shoulder outside of the city.

Guo Jing said, "Guo'er, the internal energy of the Quanzhen sect is the most orthodox in the world, though progress is slow, you will not run into any trouble. You can learn other sect's and school's martial arts but when it comes to internal energy it would be advisable to practice Xuan Men martial arts. We'll study this together once the enemy has retreated."

Yang Guo said, "Don't tell Auntie Guo about me fire deviating last night. If she finds out she'll laugh at me for learning Long Gu Gu's unorthodox martial arts and blame me for making Uncle Guo suffer."

Guo Jing said, "Of course I won't say. Miss Long's martial arts aren't unorthodox; it's just that you weren't concentrating and didn't practice with a clear mind." Yang Guo knew that if Huang Rong found out about this she would immediately know the truth. When he heard Guo Jing promise not to tell Huang Rong, his mind relaxed.

The two of them headed west of the city and arrived at a stream. Guo Jing said, "Though this is a small stream, it is very famous; it is called the Tan Torrent."

Yang Guo said, "Oh. I have heard people talk about the story of the Three Kingdoms; they mentioned that Emperor Liu of Shu leaped over the Tan Torrent on horseback. So, the Tan Torrent is located here."

Guo Jing said, "The horse that Liu Bei rode that year was called De Lu; the horse handler said that it would harm its rider. But in the end De Lu actually leaped over the Tan Torrent and escaped from the pursuing army, saving Emperor Liu of Shu's life in the process." When he talked about this, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about Yang Guo's father Yang Kang. He gave a heavy sigh and said, "The people of the world are just the same as the horse Du Lu; to the good it does good, to the evil it does evil. Is there such a thing as a definite good or evil person? The only difference between the two is that there is a contrast in thought."

Yang Guo's heart trembled and he took a look over at Guo Jing. There was an extremely hurt expression on his face; it appeared that these words weren't meant as an attack on him. Yang Guo thought, "Your words might be right but what is good? What is evil? You and your wife killed my father, could that be the actions of someone who's good? Your words really are brash; you don't know how shameful you are." He had always had great respect for Guo Jing; but from now, whenever he remembers how his father died at their hands, evil thoughts filled his mind.

The two rode on for a little while and arrived at the top of a hill. From above one could see the flow of Han going southwards; refugees from all over were descending on Xiangyang. Guo Jing stretched out his horsewhip and pointed at the refugees. He said, "The Mongolians must have intensified their slaughter of our people in Sixiang, destroying the homes of our citizens. They're abominable."

Looking down from the hill, one could see, by the side of the road, a stone slab with some words written on it. It said: Minister of Works for the Tang Dynasty, Du Fu's hometown lies there.

Yang Guo said, "Xiangyang is no ordinary city. So the hometown of this great poet is here."

Guo Jing swept his whip and recited, "The great city unlike metal, the small cities of over ten thousand zhangs... the joined clouds of lined up battles, the flying birds unable to rise beyond. Self-guarding with ruin, how can Xi Dou be recovered? ... Struggling with long halberds, history needs one man."

Yang Guo heard him recite this with great passion and he recited it himself; "Self-guarding with ruin, how can Xi Dou be recovered? Struggling with long halberds, history needs one man. Uncle Guo, this is a really good poem, was it written by Du Fu?" Guo Jing said, "Yes. A few days ago, your Auntie Guo and I were discussing the defense of Xiangyang and this poem by Du Fu came up. She wrote it out for me. I really like this poem but my memory is bad. I went over this poem many times but all I can remember are just a few lines. There have been many educated men in our history who have written poems; but over the years, they have proclaimed Du Fu as the greatest poet of all and it's all because of his worry for his nation and people."

Yang Guo said, "You said, 'a hero's imperative is to serve your country, serve your people', literature and martial arts are different but the same can be applied to both."

When Guo Jing heard him grasp this he was delighted and said, "I do not understand much about literature; but no matter what one becomes in their life, a merchant, a slave, a soldier, as long as the thought 'serve your country, serve your people' is there, one can be a true man, a true hero."

Yang Guo asked, "Uncle Guo, do you think you will be able to defend Xiangyang?"

Guo Jing thought for a while and then pointed to the hills and trees to the west before saying, "In Xiangyang's history, the most famous person is Zhuge Liang. Twenty 'li' (10km) west of here is a thriving place. It was the place where he lived in seclusion. Coarse people like me can't fathom the deeds that he did saving our nation and bringing peace to our people. He once said that all he knew was that one must follow the phrase 'bending your body to the task until your dying day'. Whether it would lead to success or failure, he didn't know. When your Auntie Guo and I talked about whether Xiangyang can be defended or not; we ended up with these same words."

Just as they were talking, they saw that the refugees who were at the doors of Xiangyang had suddenly turned around while the refugees behind kept on flowing forward towards Xiangyang. It was chaos.

Guo Jing was shocked and said, "Why aren't the guards letting them into the city?" He galloped towards the city and saw a line of archers with their bows armed pointing at the refugees.

Guo Jing called out, "What are you doing? Quickly open the gates." When the guards saw that it was Guo Jing, they quickly opened the gates and let him and Yang Guo in.

Guo Jing said, "These people are being persecuted by the Mongolians, why aren't you letting them in?"

The general guarding the gates said, "General Lu said that spies have hidden themselves amongst the refugees; we cannot let them in for that reason."

Guo Jing shouted, "Even if there are one or two spies, how can we show no regard for these hundreds of lives? Quickly open the gates."

Guo Jing has been guarding the city for a long time now and had many great achievements; though he did not have an official post, the general guarding the city did not dare to disobey his orders and opened the city gates. At the same time, he ordered a messenger to report this to Lu Wende.

Old and young all converged on the city. Suddenly, a dust cloud appeared far away; the Mongolian army was moving in from the north. The Song soldiers scattered and went back inside the walls of the city. A large group of people stood out in front of the oncoming enemy; they were all clothed in rags and all had a stick in their hands, none had a real weapon and they were scattered. They called out, "Don't shoot arrows here; we're Song citizens as well!"

The Mongolian army however sheltered themselves behind the refugees.

Ever since the times of Ji Si Khan, whenever the Mongolian army attacked a city, they would first send the citizens of the surrounding country towards the city they were attacking. If the soldiers who were guarding the city weakened their resolve at this sight, the Mongols would immediately come forward and attack. By using this method, the Mongolian army was able to slaughter the citizens of the nation they were attacking and defeat their opposition in the city, killing two birds with one stone. It was extremely brutal and cruel but effective. Guo Jing had been with Mongolian army a long time and knew about this tactic, but there was nothing he could do to counter it. The Mongolian soldiers held the spears and long sabers to the front as they forced the citizens of the Song forward. The people were forced closer and closer and the people closest the city began to climb up the ladders.

Lu Wende rode his horse and took a look around at what was happening. When he saw the urgent situation they were in

he immediately ordered, "Defending the city is the main priority, fire the arrows!"

Arrows rained down and many people were struck. Those who weren't fell back. The Mongolian army chopped heads with their sabers and pierced bodies with the spears and the refugees were forced back towards the city. Yang Guo stood next to Guo Jing and watched this tragic scene in anger.

Lu Wende called out, "Fire the arrows!" Arrows rained down once more.

Guo Jing shouted, "Stop, you can't kill good people!"

Lu Wende said, "In such an urgent situation, even if it is a good person, we have to kill them."

Guo Jing shouted, "No, how can you kill good people wrongly?"

Yang Guo's heart trembled, "You can't kill good people wrongly! How can you kill good people wrongly?"

Guo Jing called out, "My Beggar Clan brothers and my Wulin friends follow me!" He then rushed down towards the city gates. Yang Guo followed him.

Guo Jing said, "You suffered an injury when practicing chi last night; you cannot exert any kind of strength today. Go back to the city wall and watch what's happening."

Yang Guo saw his fellow Han being treated worse than animals by the Mongolian army and wanted to go down with Guo Jing and do some killing. He was startled when he heard this but he couldn't tell Guo Jing that last night was just an act; so he returned back up the city wall. Guo Jing led a group of people and opened the western gate. They rushed out and attacked the Mongolian flank. The Mongolian troops

who were forcing the refugees forward turned towards Guo Jing.

The people Guo Jing was leading were good fighters of the Beggar Clan and patriots that had been gathered from all over China. They shouted and attacked; over a hundred Mongolian soldiers were immediately forced off their horses. The Mongolian army saw that their thousand soldiers were not able to fend them off and so another thousand came forward from the side. The Mongolian soldiers were all experienced, brave and vicious; though the group Guo Jing was leading knew martial arts, they were not able to subdue the Mongolians for the time being. When the refugees saw that the Mongolian soldiers were not pushing them forward any longer, they scattered.

A horn blew from the east and two Minghan regiments (division of 1000 men) surged forward. Another two Minghan regiments from the west dashed forward and surrounded Guo Jing and his group. Lu Wende was scared witless when he saw the might of the Mongolian army; how would he dare to send men out for a rescue?

Yang Guo stood at the top of the city walls and kept on going over what Guo Jing had said, "You can't kill good people wrongly! How can you kill good people wrongly?" When he saw Guo Jing surrounded he thought, "All the guards had to do was to let some arrows fly and kill a few people and they would have been able to stop this Mongolian attack. The reason Uncle Guo is in all this danger is because he didn't want to kill good people wrongly. He doesn't know these people yet he risks his life to save them; why did he want to kill my father?"

He saw the tragic killing below but all he could think about was this riddle; "He and my father were sworn brothers; this isn't any ordinary kind of relationship, but in the end he still

wanted to harm him. Could it be that my father was an evil person?" Ever since he was little he had always thought of his father as someone who was chivalrous, brave and heroic; one of the greatest men on earth. To acknowledge that his father was an evil person was something that he could not do. But in his heart, he had the feeling that his father could not compare to his Uncle Guo; but whenever he had this feeling, he forced it back down. Right now however, he couldn't stop himself from thinking about this point.

The cries below the city walls were ear shattering. Guo Jing and his group dashed left and surged right but they still were unable to break out. Zhu Ziliu led a group of men and the Wu brothers and Guo Fu led another to save them; but the Mongolian horn was blown once again and another four Minghan units surged forward to the city gates. Khubilai was indeed skilled in warfare. If the city gates opened to save Guo Jing and the others, the four divisions would break into the city.

Lu Wende was shocked senseless now and ordered, "Do not open the city gates!" Two hundred men who were ordered to guard the gates were told to kill anyone daring to try to open the gates. General Wang led a group of archers at the top of the city walls and they fired their arrows incessantly.

Chaos ruled both outside and inside the city while Yang Guo's mind was in the same state; sometimes he wished that Guo Jing would perish in this battle, while at others, he wished that Guo Jing would be able to drive the enemy back.

Suddenly, the formation of the Mongolian soldiers was broken up; thousands of mounted soldiers collapsed back to the sides as though the tides swept them. Guo Jing galloped ahead with a long spear in his hands. The Han behind him formed a tight formation and they surged forward. They managed to get to the city gates. Guo Jing turned his steed

around and went to defend the back of the group. His long spear knocked seven or eight Mongolian Generals off their steeds. The Mongolian soldiers stopped pressing for the time being.

Lu Wende relied on Guo Jing heavily and when he saw him escape danger he was ecstatic; he quickly called out, "Open the gates! But only a little, don't open the gates too wide!"

The city gates opened three or four feet and just allowed one rider in at a time. All the men returned to the city. The yellow flag of the Mongolian army was waved and two divisions of soldiers on horseback charged forward from both sides.

Lu Wende called out, "Brother Guo Jing, quickly get back into the city! We can't wait for the others."

How could Guo Jing enter the city while he still had men outside? He turned his horse back and killed two Mongolian soldiers that had ridden up to him.

But once the army was in motion, they moved like the waves of the sea. Guo Jing was skilled in martial arts, but how could one person defend against the attack of a large army?

Zhu Ziliu saw the situation was urgent and quickly lowered down a rope. He called out, "Brother Guo, grab it."

Guo Jing turned his head and saw the final Beggar Clan member had entered the city but he was followed by ten Mongolian soldiers. The guards at the gates fought them off and began closing the city gates. The two foot thick metal gate slowly closed. Guo Jing shouted and killed an Arban Chief with his spear before leaping up to take the rope. Zhu Ziliu pulled up with all his strength and Guo Jing rose up ten feet.

The Noyan who was supervising the troops ordered, "Arrows!" Immediately, a thousand bows released their arrows. Guo

Jing was prepared for this. He tore off the lower part of his gown and swung it in front of his body with his left hand like a shield while he kept hold of the rope with his right hand. The gown was unyielding and blocked off all the arrows; but the steed that he had left behind outside the city walls was killed by the raining arrows. Zhu Ziliu pulled with both hands and pulled Guo Jing up higher and higher.

Guo Jing was around twenty feet away from the top of the city wall when a tall skinny monk appeared amongst the Mongolian army. He was wearing a yellow Buddhist gown; it was none other than Jinlun Fawang. He took a bow from one of the Mongolian soldiers and raised it. He knew that Guo Jing and Zhu Ziliu's martial arts were high and would be able to avoid any arrows he shot at them so instead he aimed for the rope. It was a vicious move. The arrow was ten feet away from both Guo Jing and Zhu Ziliu; the two had no way to stop this arrow. Jinlun Fawang was afraid that the two might come up with a way to stop this arrow so he fired two more arrows, one at Guo Jing and the other at Zhu Ziliu. The first arrow severed the rope while the second and third arrow headed for Guo Jing and Zhu Ziliu with great force.

When the rope severed, Guo Jing dropped and the arrow aimed at him missed. Zhu Ziliu felt the weight in his hand lessen and called out; "Oh no!" The arrow had arrived. It was a very forceful arrow; the person who fired it must have very profound internal energy. The top of the city walls were filled with people, if Zhu Ziliu lowered his head to avoid this arrow, someone behind might be injured. So he stretched out the second finger on his left hand and touched the stem of the arrow, diverting it back down the city wall.

Guo Jing was slightly alarmed when he felt the rope part; though he won't be injured by the fall, he would be surrounded by thousands and thousands of soldiers. How could he fight his way out of that? The Mongol army is right

next to the city gate now; if my side opens it to let me in, the Mongols would definitely take the opportunity to push through. There was no time to think in this danger; his left foot flicked up against the wall and he flew up over ten feet. His right foot followed and he rose up another ten feet. Very few people were proficient in this “Stairs to Heaven” technique. Even those who were well versed in it could only manage two or three feet per step; but on this slippery wall, each step of Guo Jing’s took him over ten feet. Guo Jing’s martial arts were frighteningly good. Silence broke out on the battlefield as everyone fixed their eyes on him.

Jinlun Fawang was slightly startled when he saw this. However, he knew that when one uses the “Stairs to Heaven”, they must make their leap in one breath. If Fawang could distract him and disturb his breathing then Guo Jing would not be able to make his third step, so Fawang raised his bow again and shot an arrow towards Guo Jing’s back.

The arrow flew like the wind. Shouts of, “No arrows!” were heard from soldiers from both the top of the city walls and down below. Both sides saw the terrifyingly good skills of Guo Jing and were in awe; they all hoped that he would make it. The Mongolians were the enemy but had much respect for great heroes and great men, they were all furious when they saw someone had fired an arrow at Guo Jing.

Guo Jing knew that the arrow behind him had a tremendous force behind it. He called out in alarm, “Not now!” He had to use his hand to deflect it away. Both sides cheered when they saw that the arrow failed to hit him. But with this earth shattering noise, Guo Jing was falling back down the city wall. There were only a few feet to the top of the city wall but Guo Jing had no way to climb up it.

When the two sides were fighting, the same was happening within Yang Guo’s heart. In the short space of time that Guo

Jing climbed up, dropped down, climbed up and dropped down again, Yang Guo's mind repeatedly went over, "He killed my father, should I kill him or not, or should I save him or not?"

When Guo Jing was using the "Stairs to Heaven" technique, Yang Guo had thought about throwing out a palm at Guo Jing. Guo Jing was in midair and had nothing to support himself with; he would definitely suffer a serious injury and fall back down from the city wall.

But as he was hesitating, Fawang had already fired an arrow at Guo Jing that stopped him from coming up. Yang Guo's mind was in confusion. Suddenly, he grabbed the severed rope in Zhu Ziliu's hand with his left hand and leapt down from the city wall towards Guo Jing, grabbing Guo Jing's arm with his right hand.

This was a move out of the blue but Zhu Ziliu responded with great speed. He first lowered the rope down slightly before gathering strength into his arms and urgently pulled the rope upwards. Yang Guo and Guo Jing arced in circle like two large birds flying in the sky. The soldiers on both sides watched with their mouths open.

When Guo Jing was in midair he thought, wouldn't it mean he had lost in this exchange if he doesn't reply to this sneak attack by this evil monk? He saw Fawang had fired another arrow. As soon as his left foot touched the top of the city wall he immediately grabbed a bow from one of the guards and fired an arrow of his own towards Fawang's arrow. The arrows collided in midair and Fawang's arrow was split into two. Fawang was stunned. Suddenly, a fierce gust arrived; a 'zheng' sound was heard as the metal bow in his hands snapped in two.

Though Guo Jing's and Fawang's martial arts were within a hairsbreadth of each other, Guo Jing's archery skills were

unsurpassed. He had learned archery from one of the greatest Mongolian archers, Zhe Bie (Jebbeh), when he was young and his internal energy was profound – when it came to archery, Fawang lost out.

Guo Jing had fired three arrows; the first divided Fawang's arrow, the second snapped Fawang's bow and the third was fired towards Khubilai's flag staff.

Khubilai's flag had fluttered in the wind gloriously amongst the thousands of soldiers, but now it had fallen. Soldiers from both sides shouted and hollered.

Khubilai saw his army's morale drop after Guo Jing's display and immediately ordered his men back.

Guo Jing stood at the top of the city wall and watched the Mongolians retreat. They were marching back in formation and in line; those who were at the front didn't rush and those who were at the back showed no fear. He couldn't stop himself from sighing and thinking, "Our weak Song army cannot compete with the great Mongolian army." He frowned as he worried about the fate of his nation.

Zhu Ziliu, Yang Guo and the others were in awe of Guo Jing when they saw that he had no signs of pride of his face even after displaying his might in front of thousands.

Khubilai pulled his men back tens of miles and then started to think of a plan to take the city. With Guo Jing at the helm, it would be difficult to take it.

Fawang said, "Your highness saw for yourself; if it weren't for Yang Guo, Guo Jing would be dead now. I knew that Yang Guo was not a man of his word."

Khubilai said, "No! I think it's because he wants to Guo Jing to die by his own hands and not at the hands of others. He

appears to be a brave and valiant man; he is not a conniving fellow.”

Fawang didn't agree but he didn't dare to answer back, he just said, “Hopefully your highness is correct.”

Xiangyang city was safe now that the Mongolian army had pulled back. Lu Wende was delighted and threw another banquet to celebrate it. This time, Yang Guo was also invited.

Everyone praised him for his swift and life risking actions in saving Guo Jing. The Wu brothers sat at another table and were filled with jealousy. Yang Guo had made a great achievement immediately after arriving at Xiangyang. They were also afraid that after this event, Guo Jing would again insist on betrothing his daughter to Yang Guo. The brothers didn't say a word and just sat there, drinking wine.

Everyone returned to the Guo residence when the banquet finished. Huang Rong invited Yang Guo into the inner halls and praised him. Yang Guo replied with modest words.

Guo Jing said, “Guo'er, you've just exerted a fierce force, does your chest hurt?” Guo Jing was worried that by using unrestrained force, Yang Guo's internal injury would flare up.

Yang Guo was worried that Huang Rong would ask about this further and see through this so he quickly replied, “I'm fine... I'm fine.” He changed the subject immediately and said, “Uncle Guo, the kung fu that you used to fly up the city wall was excellent, there isn't another who can match that in the world of Wulin.”

Guo Jing gave a little smile and said, “I learned this kung fu a long time ago and haven't practiced it for years; I'm a little rusty with it and that was why I ran into a bit of trouble.” In actual fact, if he hadn't used his chi and internal energy to help Yang Guo protect his 'dan tian' last night, he would have

been able to fly up the city wall using the “Stairs to Heaven” technique even with Jinlun Fawang’s interference. Naturally, he didn’t mention this and said, “Years ago in Mongolia, the Red Sun Elder Ma taught me this skill; who would have thought that I would have to use it today. If you like this skill I’ll teach it to you in a few days time.”

Huang Rong saw that Yang Guo seemed absent minded and his thoughts were somewhere else. His rescue of Guo Jing was seen by thousands, there was nothing suspicious about this but she still felt uncomfortable and said, “Brother Jing, I’m not feeling well tonight, stay with me.”

Guo Jing nodded and said to Yang Guo, “Guo’er, you’re tired, go and rest.”

Yang Guo said his goodnights to the two and went back to his room alone. He heard the call for the second hour. He sat in front of the table and stared at the flickering candlelight with many thoughts running through his head. Suddenly, a noise came from the door. A girl’s voice said, “You’re not sleeping?” It was Xiao Longnu. Yang Guo leapt up in delight and opened the door. Xiao Longnu was standing in front of him dressed in a light green gown.

Yang Guo asked, “Gu Gu what’s the matter?”

Xiao Longnu said, “I wanted to see you.”

Yang Guo held her hand and said tenderly, “I was just thinking about you.”

The two of them strolled out to the garden. The scent of the flowers and trees filled the air. Xiao Longnu looked at the semi-circled moon in the sky and said, “Do you have to kill him with your own hands? We haven’t got much time left.”

Yang Guo quickly whispered into her ear, “The walls have ears here, don’t talk about it.”

Xiao Longnu looked at him enraptured and said, "When the moon is full, the time will be up."

Yang Guo was alarmed and counted with his fingers; it had been nine days since they parted from Qiu Qianchi. If he doesn't kill Guo Jing within the next two days, there will not be enough time to hurry back to the valley before the poison reacts. He let out a sigh and sat down on a taihu stone (limestone rocks found in Lake Tai) with Xiao Longnu. The two looked at each other without saying a word and they became wrapped up in their love, forgetting all about matters of killing and avenging.

Suddenly, the sounds of footsteps could be heard from behind the garden fountain, two people were approaching.

A girl's voice said, "If you're going to keep nagging me then you might as well just get a sword and slit my throat to stop my torment."

An angry male voice said, "Huh, don't you think I don't know that you've got more than one man in your heart? That Yang punk showed off in front of everyone after arriving in Xiangyang. Do you remember what you said before?" It was Guo Fu and Wu Xiuwen.

Xiao Longnu made a face at Yang Guo, trying to scold him for flirting with girls everywhere and tormenting them. Yang Guo gave her a smile and pulled her closer to him. He shook his head lightly, telling her not to make a noise.

When Guo Fu heard these words, she became furious and raised her voice, "Since you've made your mind up then forget everything I said before. I'll go somewhere far away by myself; I'm not going to see Yang Guo and I'm not going to see you." A tearing sound was heard; Wu Xiuwen must have tugged her sleeve and Guo Fu must have pulled it back.

Her voice became even angrier as she said, "What are you doing? So what if he shows off? What's it got to do with me? If my parents betroth me to him I'd rather die than agree to it. If father forces me then I'll run away. That Yang Guo has always been an attention grabber since he was young, but I choose not to give a damn about him. Father thinks he's some kind of treasure whereas I think that he's not a good person."

Wu Xiuwen said quickly, "Yes...Yes. I was stupid just now, please forgive me sister Fu. If I act like that again, then I won't have a good death and when I reincarnate, I'll reincarnate as the king of cowards." Feelings of joy seeped through as he said this. Guo Fu giggled.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu looked at each other and smiled; one was thinking, "Look, look at how others view me." The other thought, "I was wrong just now, I love you but others love someone else."

Though Guo Fu had a scolding tone in her voice and treated Wu Xiuwen almost like a child, making him obedient and completely enchanted. She had tender feelings for him.

Wu Xiuwen then said, "Master wife loves you very much; beg her day and night non-stop. If Master wife agrees not to betroth you to the one named Yang, then master will not be able to say anything."

Guo Fu said, "Huh, what do you know? Father may listen to mother but when it comes to important matters, mother will not stand up to father."

Wu Xiuwen gave a sigh and said, "It'll be great if you treat me the same." Suddenly, a 'pa' sound was heard and Wu Xiuwen called out in pain. He said quickly, "Why are you hitting me"

Guo Fu said, "Who told you to say things like that? I'm not going to marry Yang Guo, and I'm not going to marry you, you little monkey."

Wu Xiuwen said, "Fine, fine. Finally you've admitted it. You don't want to be my wife but you want to be my sister in law. Let me tell you something... let me tell you something..." He was flustered and couldn't finish his sentence.

Guo Fu's voice suddenly became gentle and tender as she said, "Little brother Wu, you've told me a thousand times, a million times how you feel about me, I already know. Though your brother hasn't even said one word of this kind, I know that he loves me. No matter who I pick, one of you brothers will be broken hearted. Don't you know how hard it is for me?"

Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen had always relied on each other ever since they were young because they lost the care of their parents; but in the last few years, the two of them had fallen madly in love with Guo Fu and both were troubled by the other. Wu Xiuwen's heart was filled with angst and tears actually fell from his eyes.

Guo Fu took out a handkerchief and gave it to him. She sighed, "Little brother Wu, we all grew up together, I have great respect for your brother but I find it easier to talk to you. I am not biased towards any of you. You're trying to force me to make a clear choice now, if you were me, what should I say?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "I don't know. All I know is if you marry someone else, life would not be worth living."

Guo Fu said, "Let's stop talking about this. Father fought for his life against the enemy today while we're talking about some trivial stuff here in the garden; if father finds out about this then we'll both be in trouble. Little brother Wu, let me

tell you, if you want to please my parents then why don't you try to stand out, achieve some great deeds in battle? Won't my parents look down on you if you keep on hanging around me?"

Wu Xiuwen leapt up and said loudly, "You're right, I'll go and assassinate Khubilai and rid the threat to Xiangyang. When that happens, will you agree to marry me?"

Guo Fu smiled, "If you can do such a thing then I would have no other choice but to marry you, wouldn't I? But Khubilai has many guards around him. Even my father may not be able to beat that Jinlun Fawang. Stop dreaming, just go and sleep."

Wu Xiuwen stared at Guo Fu's elegant face and said, "Fine, you go and sleep as well." He turned around and walked away a few steps before suddenly stopping. He turned and asked, "Sister Fu, are you going to have a dream tonight?"

Guo Fu laughed, "How do I know?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "If you do dream, what do you think you will dream about?"

Guo Fu gave a little laugh and said, "Most probably about a little monkey."

Wu Xiuwen was filled with joy and skipped away.

Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo listened to their words behind the flower thicket. They couldn't stop themselves from grinning at each other and comparing themselves with them: one was madly in love with the other while the other didn't have a set mind; while they had only each other in mind and could die without regret. That couple's joy and happiness could not compare with the joy and happiness of themselves.

After Wu Xiuwen left, Guo Fu sat on the stone bench and looked up at the moon in deep thought. She stared at it for a long while before letting out a sigh.

Suddenly, someone came out from behind the garden fountain and said, "Sister Fu, why are you sighing?" It was Wu Dunru.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were both slightly startled. Wu Dunru must have hid himself here a long time ago, he was here even before they in fact, otherwise the two would have noticed him when he arrived here.

Guo Fu said with a slight angry tone, "You are always weird like this. You heard everything we said, right?"

Wu Dunru nodded and stood opposite of Guo Fu at quite a distance away but his eyes were still filled with love. The two looked at each other in silence.

After a while, Guo Fu said, "What do you want to say to me?"

Wu Dunru said, "Nothing. You know what I have to say." He turned around and then slowly walked away.

Guo Fu stared at his back while he walked away towards the garden fountain. He didn't turn around even once. She thought, "Wouldn't it be great if only one of them existed?" She gave a deep sigh and returned to her room alone.

Yang Guo waited until she had gone before laughing, "If you were her, who would you marry?"

Xiao Longnu turned her head slightly and thought for a while before saying; "You."

Yang Guo laughed, "I don't count. Miss Guo does not like me one bit. I said if you were her, which one of the Wu brothers would you pick?"

Xiao Longnu compared the two Wu brothers in her mind but still came up with, "I'll still marry you."

Yang Guo was amused and touched. He embraced her and said tenderly, "Others have more than one in their hearts but my Gu Gu loves me only."

The two of them stayed in each others loving arms until daylight.

The sun was on the eastern horizon. The two still did not want to part. Suddenly, a servant rushed up to them and greeted them before saying, "Master Guo requests Master Yang's presence immediately,"

Yang Guo saw that his face was anxious and knew that it was something important. He left Xiao Longnu and followed the servant to the inner halls.

The servant said, "I searched for master Yang everywhere; master Yang was appreciating the scenery in the garden."

Yang Guo said, "Has Master Guo been waiting a long time?"

The servant whispered, "The two masters Wu's suddenly disappeared, Master and Madam Guo are worrying about them and Miss Guo cried a few times!"

Yang Guo was startled when he heard this but he knew what had happened. "The two Wu brothers are trying to fight for the hand of their apprentice sister and want to do something outstanding; they must have gone to assassinate Khubilai. He hurried inside and saw Huang Rong looking distressed in her nightgown with Guo Jing pacing to and fro. Guo Fu's eyes were red and it looked like she was going to cry at any time. There were two swords on the table.

As soon as Guo Jing saw Yang Guo he quickly asked, "Guo'er, the Wu brothers went to the Mongolian camp, do you know

why?”

Yang Guo glanced over at Guo Fu and said, “The Wu brothers went to the Mongolian camp?”

Guo Jing said, “Yes. You young ones always talk to each other, do you have any clue about why they went?”

Yang Guo said, “I didn’t notice anything. The two Wu brothers did not say anything to me. It’s probably because they were worried about the danger that Xiangyang was in so they went to the camp to kill a few senior generals. It’ll be a great achievement if they succeed.”

Guo Jing sighed and pointed to the swords on the table. He said, “Even if their hearts are in the right place, they don’t know what they are getting into; their weapons have been taken away and sent back here.”

Yang Guo was rather surprised by this. He knew that the Wu brothers would not be able to succeed with such great fighters such as Jinlun Fawang, Yin Kexi, Xiaoxiang Zi and the likes around; but he wouldn’t have predicted that it would happen in the past few hours and that their weapons would be sent back.

Guo Jing gave the letter that was on top of the weapons to Yang Guo and glanced at Huang Rong. The two of them shook their heads. Yang Guo opened the letter and saw:

To Hero Guo of Xiangyang from the First Protector of Mongolia
Jinlun Fawang,

Last night when I was hunting, I unexpectedly came upon your disciples by the name of Wu. People say that great Masters will produce great disciples; I cannot deny this. I have long admired and marveled at Hero Guo’s great name. Last time we meet at the heroes’ feast, we did not get the chance to make acquaintances. I have written to you to

invite you to the camp so we may do so and share wine. As soon as you arrive, your disciples will be returned safely. Will you accept this invitation?

The letter had a humble tone and it appeared to be an ordinary invitation for Guo Jing to go to the camp and make acquaintances with Fawang. But what the letter really was saying is that the Wu brothers will only be released if Guo Jing agrees to go to the camp.

Guo Jing waited for Yang Guo to finish reading before saying; "Well?"

Yang Guo knew what this was about, "Auntie Guo's wisdom is ten times greater than mine, Auntie Guo would have come up with any plan that I could think of. The reason she summoned me to discuss this matter is for one reason only; she wants me and Gu Gu to accompany Uncle Guo to the Mongolian camp. Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others together might beat Uncle Guo but it isn't guaranteed that they'll be able to kill and capture him. If Gu Gu and I help him, Uncle Guo will be able to escape." He then immediately came up with, "But if Gu Gu and I suddenly changed sides, to harm him will be as easy as turning my palm. If I can't kill him with my own hands, then I'll just let Fawang and the others to do it for me, wouldn't that be great?" He then gave a wry smile and said, "Uncle Guo, my Master and I will go with you. Auntie Guo has seen our swordplay defeat Jinlun Fawang; they might not be able to keep us there if the three of us go together."

Guo Jing was delighted and smiled, "No one can compare with your intelligence apart from your Auntie Guo. This is the exact thing that your Auntie Guo came up with."

Yang Guo thought, "Huang Rong, oh Huang Rong, you've been clever all your life but today you lose out to me." He said, "We'll go right now. Gu Gu and I will pretend to be your

attendants, that way we will be able to emphasize your heroic manner in coming to this meeting all by yourself."

Guo Jing said, "Good!" He turned to Huang Rong and said, "Rong'er, you don't need to worry, with Guo'er and Miss Long, even if it was a dragon's lagoon or a tiger's lair, we'll still be able to return safely."

He straightened his gown and said, "We'll get Miss Long."

Huang Rong shook her head and said, "No, I just wanted Guo'er to go with you. Miss Long is like a porcelain doll, I cannot let her meet any danger. I want her to stay with me."

Yang Guo was startled but then immediately understood, "Auntie Guo is indeed wary of me. She wants to keep Gu Gu with her as a hostage, that way I won't be able to do anything. If I insist of having Gu Gu with me, she will be even more suspicious." He didn't say anything about it.

But Guo Jing said, "Miss Long's swordplay is excellent, it would be a great help if she comes with us."

Huang Rong countered, "Your Polu or Xiang'er are about to be born. If Miss Long is here to guard me, I can relax a bit more."

Guo Jing said quickly, "Yes, yes, I'm so dumb. Guo'er, let's go."

Yang Guo said, "Allow me to tell my Gu Gu."

Huang Rong said, "I'll tell her in a minute, you two are just going to the camp for half a day, it's not some great event."

When it came to using their minds, Yang Guo found himself losing out to Huang Rong every time. So he decided to use his against the honest and sincere Guo Jing instead. He'll make his move against him in the camp and then come back

to save Xiao Longnu afterwards. He made his mind up and left the city with Guo Jing.

Guo Jing rode the precious red horse and Yang Guo rode his skinny yellow horse. The two horses were fast and they arrived at the camp within one hour.

Khubilai was startled and delighted that Guo Jing had actually decided to come here and he quickly invited him into his tent.

Guo Jing entered the tent and saw a middle-aged Prince sitting in the middle of the tent. He had a square face and large ears with deep-set eyes; Guo Jing was stunned when he saw this and thought, "This person looks so much like his father Tuo Lei." He was very close to Tuo Lei [Tolui] when he was younger but now he had passed away; his eyes turned red at this thought and he almost cried.

Khubilai left his seat to greet him and bowed down to him, saying, "When my father was alive, he always praised the heroic and righteous Uncle Guo. I have always admired Uncle Guo. To have the opportunity to meet you is the fulfillment of my lifelong dream."

Guo Jing bowed to him and said, "Tuo Lei and I were like brothers; when I was younger, my mother and I lived in Genghis Khan's territory and it was your father who looked after us. It is very sad that he died suddenly at such a young age."

Khubilai heard that his words were sincere and they moved him. He then introduced Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the others to him and then invited him to his place.

Yang Guo stood behind Guo Jing and pretended that he didn't know any of them. Fawang and the others did not

know why he came but when they saw him ignoring them, they ignored him.

However, Ma Guangzuo called out, "Brother Ya..." Before he finished saying 'brother Yang', Yin Kexi had pinched his leg tightly. Ma Guangzuo called out, "What are you doing?"

Yin Kexi turned his head around and ignored him. Ma Guangzuo didn't know who did this and kept on shouting out insults. He forgot about greeting Yang Guo.

Yang Guo sat down and drank some Mongolian milk wine. Yang Guo saw that the Wu brothers were not present and was about to ask their whereabouts when Khubilai ordered his attendants; "Invite the Masters Wu in." The attendant did as he was told and pushed Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen into the tent.

Their hands and legs were tied tightly with cowhide. The restraints between their legs were just a foot long so the two couldn't take their normal strides. They could only struggle slowly forwards. Their faces were filled with embarrassment when they saw their Master. They called out, "Master!" and then lowered their heads in silence.

Guo Jing had been extremely angry with them for taking such a risk without telling anyone and causing this mess, but when he saw the two, his feelings changed. Their clothes were torn and blood stained and they were tied up so pathetically, his anger turned to pity. He thought that although the two were reckless, their hearts were in the right place by trying to help the nation, so he said warmly, "A martial artist will endure countless sufferings and countless defeats, what you've suffered is nothing."

Khubilai pretended to scold his attendants and said, "I ordered you to look after these two Masters Wu with great care, why have you treated them like this? Quickly untie

them.” The attendants followed his orders. However, the cowhide was soaked in water after being tied and had shrunk tightly into the skin, the attendants couldn’t untie it.

Guo Jing left his seat and took the ends of Wu Dunru’s restraints. He pulled outwards lightly and the restraints snapped. He then did the same with Wu Xiuwen’s restraints. Guo Jing’s movements looked plain, ordinary and seemed to lack sufficient force, but by succeeding, he showed he possessed great internal energy. Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi, Nimoxing and the others looked at each startled, and all secretly praised his martial arts.

Khubilai said, “Bring some wine quickly so you can apologize to the two Masters Wu.”

Guo Jing thought, “Today’s not going to be plain sailing; something’s going to happen soon. If the Wus don’t leave now, I’m going to be distracted.” He then made a bow to everyone in the tent and said clearly, “Thank you your Highness for teaching my disciples a lesson for their insolence.” He then turned to the Wu brothers and said, “Go back and tell your Master wife that I’m going to stay here for a while and talk with an old friend’s son, I’ll be back soon.”

Wu Xiuwen said, “Master, you...” Last night they failed in their assassination attempt and were captured by Xiaoxiang Zi. He knew that the camp was filled with great fighters and he couldn’t stop himself from worrying about Guo Jing.

Guo Jing waved his hand and said, “Leave now! Go and tell General Lu to guard the city tightly and no matter what happens, do not open the city gates in case of an attack by the enemy.” Guo Jing said this with a mighty aura and was telling Khubilai that even if something happens to him, Xiangyang will not surrender.

When the Wu brothers saw that Guo Jing had come personally to save them, they were touched but also ashamed of themselves. They didn't say anything else and made their goodbyes with Guo Jing before returning to the city.

Khubilai laughed, "Uncle Guo must not have known about your disciples coming here to assassinate me."

Guo Jing nodded and said, "I did not know about this. My disciples don't know how tall the sky is and how deep the earth is, they were extremely impudent."

Khubilai said, "Yes, Uncle Guo and my family have deep ties with each other, the thought of assassinating me would never cross Uncle Guo's mind."

Guo Jing said with a serious expression, "You're wrong here. The matters of the people are more important than my own. Years ago when Tuo Lei led an army here to attack Xiangyang, I once thought about trying to kill him to force the army to retreat. But at that exact time, Genghis Khan fell ill and the army retreated and so our brotherhood was preserved. There's a saying, 'place righteousness above family loyalty', since a family can be gotten rid of, why not friends?"

These words were said with a righteous air and Fawang, Yin Kexi and the others all looked at each other with changed faces.

Yang Guo's chest trembled and he thought, "Yes, killing brothers is his best skill. I wonder what my father did all those years ago to eventually die by his hands. Guo Jing, oh Guo Jing, could it be that you've never made a mistake in your entire life?" As he thought about this, hate and fury slowly filled his chest.

Khubilai did not show any signs of anger and had a smile on his face as he said, "So why does Uncle Guo reproach your disciples when you have the same view?"

Guo Jing said, "Looking at their lowly abilities, what chance had they of succeeding in this task? Their failure is not important, it's just that once they failed, you will be even more wary of someone assassinating you; this task would be made even more difficult for later assassins."

Khubilai laughed and thought, "I've heard that Guo Jing is an honest and simple person who's not very good with words, who knew that he can actually speak with such spirit and gusto."

Actually, Guo Jing was just saying what was on his mind and because he knew what he wanted to convey; he was able to say it with great sincerity.

When Fawang and the others saw that he came alone and empty handed to this vast army without any signs of fear on his face; they were in complete awe of him since none of them could match the spirit that he was displaying.

Khubilai couldn't stop himself from admiring Guo Jing. When he saw Guo Jing's lofty air and thought that if he could convince him to join his command, it would be better than taking down ten Xiangyang cities. So he said, "Uncle Guo, the Song are in disarray. You have an Emperor who is blind to the people's plight, you have scoundrels in your courts and those who are loyal are punished, am I right?"

Guo Jing said, "Correct, Emperor Li Zhonghuang is a blind man and the Prime Minister Jia Sidao is the biggest crook of them all." No one guessed that he would actually insult his own emperor and leaders. Everyone was startled.

Khubilai said, "Yes. Uncle Guo is a great man and a hero of our time so why do you work for such men?"

Guo Jing stood up and said clearly, "Even if the one named Guo is unworthy, why would I allow myself to let those people use me? When I see you violent Mongols invading our land and killing my people, my blood boils. I'm doing this for my people; the angry blood that flows through me is because of them."

Khubilai patted on the arms of his chair and said, "What great words. Everyone, give a toast to Uncle Guo." He raised his bowl and downed the wine in one go.

Everyone was getting anxious and they were all afraid that with these stirring words and his relationship with Khubilai's father, Khubilai might actually let him go. It would be extremely difficult to capture him again but no one could do anything. When they saw Khubilai raise his bowl, they did the same and drank it down in one go. The attendants filled their bowls once more.

Khubilai said, "I once heard an old man say, 'It's the people of the land that are important, not the Khan.' What a truthful phrase. The land of Mongolia is in a state of peace; my people live happily and have what they need. My Khan could not bear to see the people of the Song suffer and when he saw that no one was doing anything about it, he sent his troops south to help end the troubles of the people. This thought is the same as Uncle Guo's, we both have the same heroic view. Come, let's toast again."

Fawang and the others all raised their bowls to their lips. Guo Jing swept his sleeve and sent a gust of wind over. There was a bout of 'qiang lang lang' noises as everyone's bowls fell to pieces on the floor.

Guo Jing angrily shouted, "Stop! Ever since you Mongols invaded our land, you have killed and slaughtered; corpses and bones mount up while blood flows like rivers. My citizens have lost their homes and countless have died by your army's sabers and arrows. What troubles of my people are you ridding them of?"

Though this sweep of the sleeve was extremely sudden and was completely unexpected, it still managed to knock the bowls out of the hands of Fawang and the others who possessed great martial arts. Everyone felt shame and they all stood up, waiting for Khubilai's orders to attack.

But Khubilai gave a long laugh to the sky and said, "The Generals of the Mongolian army say that Uncle Guo is a hero without a match, everyone is full of admiration for Uncle Guo. Indeed after seeing you with my own eyes, I now know that your great name is not a myth. I do not dare harm the brotherly relationship of my father; because of the past let's stop talking about matters of the country?"

Guo Jing saluted with his hands and said, "Tuo Lie's son is a magnanimous and open-minded man, and none of the other Mongolian princes can compare with him. He will no doubt lead the country one day. I have some advice for you, would you like to listen?"

Khubilai said, "I am willing to listen to Uncle Guo's teachings."

Guo Jing folded his arms and said, "The land of the Southern Song is vast and the people many. Talented and learned men are everywhere, and since history began, these kinds of men have not submitted to anyone. You Mongols might be able to expand your territory for a little while but in the future, you will be forced back north. When that happens, it will be disastrous for you and to regret it then will be too late. Please reconsider what you are doing."

Khubilai smiled, "Thank you for your words."

Guo Jing heard him say these words casually and said, "We'll say our goodbyes at that. Goodbye."

Khubilai waved his hand and said, "Escort the guests out."

Fawang and the others looked at each other startled and all thought, "It wasn't easy to catch him, how can we let the tiger escape back into the mountains?" When they saw Khubilai sending Guo Jing out politely, they all felt that it was inappropriate to make a move on him.

Guo Jing strode out of the tent and thought, "This Khubilai is no ordinary person; he is indeed a strong foe." He signaled with his eyes towards Yang Guo, telling him to hurry towards their steeds.

Suddenly, eight Mongols dashed forward from the sides. The leading Mongol said, "You're Guo Jing? You injured many of my brothers at Xiangyang and you've actually dared to come here to our camp to show off your might again. His highness has allowed you to go but we cannot allow it." With a shout all eight men dashed forward towards Guo Jing. These eight men all used Mongolian wrestling techniques as sixteen hands went to grab Guo Jing.

Mongolians are unmatched in wrestling and these eight men were first-rate fighters in the Mongolian army. Khubilai had hid them nearby to capture Guo Jing. But Guo Jing grew up in Mongolia and was well versed in riding, archery and wrestling; when he saw the eight pair of arms coming towards him he stretched out his hands and swept his right leg. In a flash, he had flung four men over ten feet away and tripped the other four onto the ground. He used orthodox Mongolian wrestling techniques but because he had advanced martial arts as a base, the strength in his arms and

legs was stronger than any normal men. How could the eight men defend against this?

Khubilai had stationed his personal Minghan unit outside the tent and each one of them was skilled in wrestling. They saw how fast and clean Guo Jing's movements were in throwing down eight men to the ground in one go. They had never seen such a display and they all cheered.

Guo Jing held out his fist towards the crowd and took off his hat, spinning it in his hand. This was the routine that one did to the crowd after winning a wrestling match. The crowd cheered even louder when they saw him do this. The eight men picked themselves up from the ground and looked at Guo Jing in shock. They didn't know whether to go again or just leave it at that.

Guo Jing said to Yang Guo, "Let's go!"

Suddenly, a horn could be heard and Minghan regiments from everywhere galloped towards them. Khubilai had moved his troops and surrounded Guo Jing and Yang Guo.

Guo Jing was slightly shocked and thought, "Even if we had the greatest of skills, how could we break out of this? Who would have thought that Khubilai had gone to such lengths to get me captured?" He was afraid that Yang Guo would get worried so he kept a normal expression and said, "Our steeds are fast horses. Our main priority is to break out of this encirclement. We need to get two shields to protect ourselves from their archers." He then whispered into his ear, "First gallop south and then go north."

Yang Guo was shocked, "Xiangyang is south of here, why go north?" But he immediately understood, "Hmm, yes, Khubilai must have placed his men around Xiangyang in case he went south. The north will be free of soldiers. First go south and

then go north unexpectedly; they will not be able to respond in time and we can escape. How should I stop him?"

Yang Guo was trying to make his mind up when he saw a few people dart out of the tent. These people had blocked their path. A 'ming ming' sound followed as a bronze and iron wheel flew towards the steeds; it was Fawang.

Guo Jing saw that the wheels were coming in with great force and did not dare to use his hands to catch them. He lowered his head and pressed down on the necks of the two horses with his hands; the horses lowered their front legs just in time for the iron and bronze wheel to brush over their heads. The two wheels turned in midair and flew back into Fawang's hands. This slight delay allowed Nimoxing and Yin Kexi to arrive in front of Guo Jing and Yang Guo. Fawang and Xiaoxiang Zi arrived a little later and the four surrounded them.

Jinlun Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others were all first rate fighters and normally would not lower themselves to fight in numbers, but Guo Jing was too strong and they were all thinking about the title of 'The Greatest Warrior of Mongolia'. White and golden light glimmered as all of them took out a weapon.

Fawang was holding a bronze and iron wheel. Yin Kexi was holding a golden jewel embedded whip. Xiaoxiang Zi was holding a short Ku Sang Rod. The person holding the strangest weapon was Nimoxing. In his hand was a short iron Snake whip that looked like a live snake as it was moved on his arm.

From their running movements and their hand movements in taking out their weapons, Guo Jing could see that the weakest out of the four appeared to be Yin Kexi. He immediately threw both his palms forwards towards Xiaoxiang Zi. Xiaoxiang Zi extended his rod forward, aiming

for Guo Jing's palm. Guo Jing looked at his weapon and saw white silk twirling around it and there was hemp at one end. Guo Jing saw that Xiaoxiang Zi's martial arts were high and his weapon strange, he'll definitely have some strong points about him, so he turned his right arm around and used a stance of "Divine Dragon Sweeping its Tail", he immediately grabbed Yin Kexi's golden whip. Yin Kexi wanted to use his whip to attack his opponent but it had already been grabbed. He followed the opponent's pull and threw his body forward with a glittering dagger in his left hand. This stance was using an attack as a defense and it was the top skill of the "Eighteen Little Grabbing Hand Technique".

Guo Jing called out; "Good!" He used his grabbing hand technique on him again. His right hand still held onto the whip as he went for his dagger. Guo Jing's arms were crossed over as his right hand held onto the whip in Yin Kexi's right hand and his left hand held onto Yin Kexi's left hand. Yin Kexi was sure that by thrusting his dagger forward, his opponent would have no choice but to let go of his whip and avoid the dagger. Who would have thought that his dagger would also be held?

At this time, Fawang's wheels and Xiaoxiang Zi's short rod attacked. Guo Jing did not manage to snatch away the golden dragon whip with his first pull and he shouted out; a surge of great chi went through the whip into Yin Kexi. Yin Kexi felt as if a metal hammer had struck his chest heavily, his eyes saw stars and he threw up a mouthful of blood. Guo Jing let go of the whip and blocked the attacks. Yin Kexi knew that he had suffered a severe injury and he pulled back slowly. He sat down on the ground and circulated his chi through his 'dan tian' and held back the urge to vomit more blood.

Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing were both delighted and afraid when they saw Guo Jing injure Yin Kexi with his first

attack. They were delighted because there was now one less competitor for the title of the 'Greatest Warrior of Mongolia', but they were also afraid because they saw how powerful Guo Jing was. They themselves might suffer the same fate if they weren't careful. The three of them did not dare make any rash moves and defended themselves.

Guo Jing responded to every stance that came to him and studied the strange weapons of Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi carefully. The Ku Sang rod was made out of pure iron and apart from being heavy and sturdy; he couldn't see anything special about it. Nimoxing's snake shaped weapon was very strange, the head of the weapon was like the head of a poisonous snake and the body of the weapon was soft and crooked. Both the head and tail of the snake shaped weapon were sharp but the most powerful aspect of the weapon was that it was hard to predict the weapon's movements. One couldn't tell when the body of the snake would bend over, the head and tail of the weapon had no certain direction; the iron snake whip would suddenly leap up and whirl around in Nimoxing's arms and then suddenly curl up and slither around, the weapon had hundreds of variations.

In his younger years, Guo Jing had seen the stances of Ouyang Feng's snake staff; the staff was like a real snake and it had venomous poison with it. Even if Nimoxing's weapon was extremely powerful, it was still a dead object. When he attacks and when he takes the snake back, there will be certain principles behind it that can be seen through. Because of this, the only person that Guo Jing was worried about was Jinlun Fawang.

The four of them had exchanged several moves when suddenly someone shouted and stepped forward, a man mountain appeared; it was Ma Guangzuo. He was holding a thick and long bronze rod in his hand and smashed it down towards Guo Jing's head from behind Nimoxing. The four of

them were in a heated battle and all of them defended tightly, there was not an ounce of spare space in between any of them. The exchange from Guo Jing's palms, Jinlun Fawang's wheels, Xiaoxiang Zi's short rod and Nimoxing's iron snake had formed a net of force around them. By smashing the rod down, Ma Guangzuo was running up against the force created by the four. Ma Guangzuo's rod suddenly bounced back up as it met this invisible force. He noticed something was wrong and shouted out as he gathered strength into his arms to keep control of the rod. Even though he managed to do this, the joints in his hands bled. He called out loudly, "Evil, evil!" He increased the strength in his arms and smashed down once more.

Fawang was standing in front of him and he saw what was happening, the greater the force he smashes down with, the more he'll suffer and Fawang just chuckled.

Yang Guo watched from the side and knew what would happen; though Ma Guangzuo was strong, his martial arts could no way compare with that of Guo Jing. If he makes a fierce attack blindly and meets up with the world's most yang and unyielding "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palm" of Guo Jing head on, what chance would he have of living? Even if he doesn't die under the palm of Guo Jing, he would be seriously injured by the weapons of Fawang, Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi. He liked this dim-witted person for his simple and straightforward character and for standing up for him on many occasions. If Ma Guangzuo strikes down he would definitely meet great danger so Yang Guo called out, "Ma Guangzuo, watch out for my sword!"

The gentlemen sword went for his back.

Ma Guangzuo was stunned and stopped his bronze rod in midair. He said with shock, "Brother Yang, why are you fighting me?"

Yang Guo insulted, "You Dumbass, what do you think you're doing? Get away!" The long sword quivered as several stances were thrust forward. Ma Guangzuo could do nothing but retreat. Yang Guo pierced forward furiously and forced him back step by step. Ma Guangzuo had long legs and every step of his was the equivalent of two ordinary steps by a normal person. Ten steps later and they became quite a distance away from Guo Jing and the others.

The sword glimmered in front of his eyes. He could never have dreamed that Yang Guo would suddenly try to kill him and even if he used every ounce of strength he had, he would not be able to fend off these attacks by Yang Guo.

Yang Guo waited until he had retreated back a few more steps before quietly saying, "Brother Ma, do you know that I've just saved your life?"

Ma Guangzuo said loudly, "What?"

Yang Guo said quietly, "Keep your voice down, don't let the others hear."

Ma Guangzuo said with his eyes wide open, "Why? I'm not afraid of that Guo Jing." These words were still said clearly and loudly. To him, he was speaking at a normal tone but to others his voice was like someone was shouting and hollering.

Yang Guo said, "Okay don't speak, just listen to me." Ma Guangzuo listened to him and nodded. Yang Guo said, "That Guo Jing knows witchcraft. All he has to do is to recite a curse and he's able to chop someone's head off. It's better if you run away as far as possible."

Ma Guangzuo's eyes opened wider when he heard this and believed his words though he had doubts.

Yang Guo wanted to save his life and he knew if he said that Guo Jing's martial arts were too high, he would never admit defeat; but if he said that Guo Jing knew witchcraft, this slow witted person would probably be scared. He continued, "You tried to smash his head in with your rod but before you even touched his head, the rod bounced back up, isn't that strange? That merchant's martial arts are excellent but how come as soon as he went up to fight him, he was injured?" Ma Guangzuo was becoming slightly more convinced and nodded his head but looked over at Fawang and the others.

Yang Guo knew what he was thinking and said, "That monk knows how to write charms. He gave one to that zombie and one to that dwarf, if you have one on your body, you will be protected against witchcraft. Did that monk give you one?"

Ma Guangzuo said angrily, "No."

Yang Guo said, "Yes, that old baldy didn't give me a charm as well. We'll sort him out afterwards."

Ma Guangzuo said loudly, "You're right. What should we do?"

Yang Guo said, "We'll watch from the side, the further away the better."

Ma Guangzuo said, "Brother Yang, you're a great friend. It was lucky you told me about this." He put away his weapon and watched the battle from afar.

Guo Jing was using the great Wulin skill the "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms". Fawang and the others kept tight on him thinking that even if his internal energy was more profound, he would not be able to keep up so powerful a palm technique for much longer. But Guo Jing had been practicing the "Nine Yin Manual" diligently for the last twenty years; at first his real power did not show but tens of stances later, the "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" suddenly

became powerful and then suddenly gentle, from great hardness came softness. This was something that Hong Qigong did not manage to grasp all those years ago. By using this kind of palm technique to fend off these three fighters, not only did he remain on an even level with them, he was able to counterattack when he had the chance and he was getting more and more fluent as he went on.

Yang Guo watched in awe from the side. He too had practiced the “Nine Yin Manual” in the ancient tomb; but because he had no one to instruct him, he didn’t know that the manual’s arts were this extraordinary. He followed Guo Jing’s palm techniques with the teachings of the manual in mind and immediately he understood countless profound fist theories. His mind concentrated on this and for the time being, he forgot about killing Guo Jing to avenge his father.

Fawang’s martial arts and Guo Jing’s martial arts were separated by the smallest of margins; Guo Jing may have had more fortunate encounters than Fawang but Fawang was twenty years older than he and had twenty years worth of internal energy more than Guo Jing. If the two fought one on one, they would have to exchange over a thousand stances to decide who was better. With first-rate fighters such as Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi by his side, it shouldn’t have been difficult to gain victory over Guo Jing. But Guo Jing’s “Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms” were too powerful and along with his palm technique, he was using Quanzhen’s “Big Dipper Formation”. He went to and fro as he fought and it was as if he had separated into seven. Another reason why he was still holding them off was because of his immediate victory over Yin Kexi; this was a warning to the others and the remaining three made defense their main priority and did not dare to make a rash attack. Although it was three against one, Guo Jing still held his own against them.

After a few more stances, the power in Fawang's wheel gradually increased. The force of the attacks from Nimoxing's iron snake was increasing as well.

Guo Jing was getting anxious and thought, "If this continues, I won't be able to hold them off. Guo'er is over fighting with that giant. That giant's martial arts are just average, Guo'er will be able to manage. I need to get over to him as soon as possible and think of a way to get out of this place." The four were putting all their concentration into their battle and did not dare to even blink; they did not notice Yang Guo and Ma Guangzuo were just watching their battle.

Suddenly a strange whistling noise was heard. Xiaoxiang Zi leapt up several feet into the air and pointed his Ku Sang rod downwards. Guo Jing stepped to the side to avoid it when suddenly everything went dark; a black smoke was being emitted from the Ku Sang rod. A stench filled Guo Jing's nose and he felt slightly faint. He called in alarm to himself and knew that there was something poisonous within the Ku Sang rod and he quickly moved backwards.

Xiaoxiang Zi had seen Guo Jing had definitely taken in the black smoke but he did not faint. He was extremely shocked and thought, "Lions, tigers and any kind of wild beast would faint as soon as they come across my toad poison. But it doesn't seem to have any kind of effect on him; that is strange." He leapt up once again and shot out some more poison from his rod.

Years ago when Xiaoxiang Zi was practicing martial arts in the wild mountains of Hunan, he saw a toad that was hiding itself in a broken coffin. It had poisoned a large python to death. He understood what the toad had done and gathered some toads to extract the venom from them. He developed a poisonous dust and secreted it in the Ku Sang rod. There was a lever at the end of the rod. When his finger pressed down

on the lever it would shoot the poison out. The higher above he fires the poison from, the more effective it becomes. He has used this poisonous dust on pythons and wild beasts before and it knocked them out immediately; but he could not have guessed that Guo Jing's internal energy was so profound that he was actually able to suppress the effects of the poison.

Fawang and Nimoxing were to the side of Guo Jing and although they did not come in direct contact with the dust, they had smelled a little and they immediately had the urge to vomit. They quickly leapt away from it. Xiaoxiang Zi had plugged the antidote to this poison in his nose beforehand and he dashed forwards into the black smoke, waving out his rod to attack.

Guo Jing used a stance of "Seeing the Dragon in the Field" and sent it towards Xiaoxiang Zi's kneecaps. Xiaoxiang Zi used his rod to block the attack and before he had any more time to fire some more poison out, he had been forced back five feet by the palm.

Guo Jing slanted his body to the side only to see Nimoxing coming in with an attack with his iron snake. He sent out a stance of "The Forbidden Submerged Dragon". Nimoxing quickly placed the Iron Snake across his chest and held each end with his hands. However, the power of this palm of Guo Jing's came from the area around the palm and not in the palm itself. Though the palm was going for Nimoxing's chest, there was no kind of force going towards it and he blocked thin air. By the time he knew something was wrong, his abdomen and his face had felt the power of the palm. Luckily for him, he was very short and as a result was very nimble, he quickly threw himself down and rolled away on the ground like a ball.

Guo Jing saw his chance to escape and called out, "Guo'er, let's go!" He leapt out into the open plains. Fawang flew after him. Guo Jing's back was just a few feet away from the Mongolian soldiers and immediately over ten spears were pointed towards it. Guo Jing used his arms to parry away the spears and then grabbed and threw two soldiers towards Fawang. He called out, "Catch!"

If Fawang caught them, it would slow him down and give Guo Jing the chance to run further away so he slanted his left shoulder and knocked into the soldiers and sent them flying over ten feet away. He threw his golden wheel towards Guo Jing's back.

Guo Jing knew if he returned just one stance, he would get caught up in a fight with Fawang. When Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi catch up, it would be difficult to escape again, so he grabbed two spears and thrust them backwards. He did not slow down one bit as he did this and it was as if he had a third eye on his back; one of the spears went towards Fawang's right shoulder and the other for Fawang's chest. Both the direction and power behind it was complete. Fawang secretly praised this and then swept his golden wheel across, smashing the spears in two. By the time his sights were back on Guo Jing, he had already darted into the Mongolian army.

This division of soldiers was ordered by Khubilai to station themselves deeply around the tent to capture Guo Jing. But when Guo Jing darted into their formation, the soldiers could do nothing about him; they could not capture him nor harm him. Sounds of spears and sabers could be heard along with calls and shouts. These soldiers actually hindered Fawang and the others in their chase after Guo Jing.

Guo Jing hiding himself amongst the soldiers and horses was like hiding himself in a dense forest; it was actually easier for

him to escape danger like this than in the open land. He ran up to a Noyan and pulled him down from his horse. He leaped on the horse and galloped left and right amongst the crowd of soldiers. Soon he managed to break through the rear of them and he galloped forward, whistling as he went. The red horse was left at a faraway place and when it heard its master summoning it; it galloped like the wind towards him.

Yang Guo watched from afar as the red horse galloped towards Guo Jing. He thought to himself, "Oh no!" He knew that once Guo Jing got on the red steed, Khubilai would have no way to catch up with Guo Jing even if he sent all the world's men after him.

In this urgent situation, he suddenly called out, "Oh no, I'm feel as if I'm dying!" He wobbled a bit as if he was about to fall down onto the ground. He then whispered to Ma Guangzuo, "Don't say anything, run away now! The further away the better." He had circulated his chi through his 'dan tian' when he called out and even in this clamor, Guo Jing would definitely be able to hear it. When Guo Jing heard this, he would definitely come back for him, but if he sees Ma Guangzuo with him, Guo Jing might actually throw out a palm and send Ma Guangzuo to his death. Ma Guangzuo was very obedient to Yang Guo's words and although he didn't understand what he meant by this, he ran away towards the royal tent.

When Guo Jing heard Yang Guo's call, he was indeed worried. He didn't wait for the red horse and turned his horse back towards him. He went back into the swarm of soldiers and galloped towards where Yang Guo was standing.

A thought went through Fawang's mind and he knew what Yang Guo was trying to do. He allowed him to pass and instead blocked his escape route.

Guo Jing rode up to Yang Guo and said anxiously, "Guo'er what's wrong!"

Yang Guo swayed a little and said, "That giant is not a match for me but for some reason, whenever I try to use any real strength, a surge of chi runs through me and my 'dan tian' feels as if it's being cut up by knives."

This was a completely believable lie; Guo Jing could tell that Ma Guangzuo's martial arts were very ordinary when he attempted to smash down on him with his rod, so if Yang Guo said it was Ma Guangzuo who injured him, Guo Jing would be suspicious. But if he said that something's wrong with his chi, Guo Jing would not be able to tell if he was lying or not from the outside. There was also the fact that Guo Jing mistook Yang Guo for fire deviating the previous night. The likelihood of this type of injury recurring again in the heat of battle is not uncommon.

Guo Jing saw that he was holding his abdomen with his left hand and his head was covered in sweat. It appeared that the injury was not light and he said quickly, "Get on my back; I'll carry you out of here."

Yang Guo said with a false pretence, "Uncle Guo, quickly go, my life isn't worth anything but Xiangyang's fate depends on you. The country, the army, the people, and all their hopes rest on you."

Guo Jing said, "You came here because of me; how can I leave you here? Quickly get on."

Yang Guo dallied as Guo Jing lowered himself. Guo Jing pulled him onto his back. Just at this time, the horse that Guo Jing had snatched was killed by the Mongolian soldiers' arrows.

Guo Jing had experienced countless dangerous situations in his life; the more dangerous the situation the greater his

bravery. He pondered on how to get out of this situation and he said to Yang Guo, "Guo'er, don't be afraid, we are going to fight our way out of here." He stood up and dashed north.

Fawang, Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi were now attacking Guo Jing once again. Guo Jing looked around and saw that soldiers surrounded them; this situation was even direr than the previous time that they were surrounded.

Beneath the camp's banner stood Khubilai. He was holding a bowl of wine and was watching the battle with a monk by his side. There was an arrogant expression on his face as he watched on with victory assured.

Guo Jing gave a shout as he carried Yang Guo towards Khubilai. He arrived in front of Khubilai after just three leaps. Khubilai's bodyguards were alarmed and they pointed their spears at Guo Jing. Guo Jing's palms overcame all obstacles as it sent one of the guards flying away. Just a few more feet forwards and Khubilai would be in range of Guo Jing's palm. All Khubilai's guards defended him with their lives but how could they stop Guo Jing?

Fawang saw it was getting desperate and he threw his golden wheel towards Guo Jing's head. Guo Jing lowered his head to avoid the wheel but did not stop and continued forward.

Yang Guo thought, "If he holds Khubilai hostage, the Mongolians will have no choice but to let him go. If I don't make my move now, when am I going to make it?" He hesitated a little and eventually said, "Uncle Guo was my father really a tyrant that left you with no choice but to kill him?"

Guo Jing was stunned with this question but he had no time to give it much thought in his reply in their present situation and immediately replied, "He took a scoundrel as his father,

he betrayed his country and plotted against his people, he deserved to die.”

Yang Guo said, “Fine!” He hesitated no longer and raised his gentlemen sword and thrust it towards Guo Jing’s back.

Suddenly, a white blur appeared and a rod swept across and blocked his sword. Yang Guo followed the rod and dispersed the opponent’s force. He looked carefully and found out that it was Xiaoxiang Zi who had stopped his sword. He was surprised and thought, “My sword was just about to go through Guo Jing, why are you stopping me?” But he immediately understood his reasons, “That’s right; if I kill Guo Jing then the title of ‘Mongolia’s Greatest Warrior’ will be mine. Huh, this zombie doesn’t know that I’m just trying to avenge my father; I don’t care about titles and whatnot.” He unleashed several stances and forced Xiaoxiang Zi’s rod away. He turned his sword back towards Guo Jing and thrust it towards him once again. Xiaoxiang Zi used his rod and blocked his sword.

At this moment, Guo Jing was fending off Fawang’s wheel and Nimoxing’s Iron Snake with his palms; he didn’t know what Yang Guo was up to. He just thought that Yang Guo was trying to fight Xiaoxiang Zi with all his might and he said, “Be careful of the poison in his rod.”

Fawang and Nimoxing were in front of Guo Jing and could see what was going on clearly and both shouted, “Xiaoxiang Zi, what are you doing?”

Xiaoxiang Zi cackled and suddenly swept his rod towards Guo Jing. Guo Jing moved out of the way. Yang Guo was about to send his sword through Guo Jing for the third time but once again, Xiaoxiang Zi blocked his sword.

Guo Jing was worried about Yang Guo’s injury and was afraid that he would not be able to cope with Xiaoxiang Zi’s rod so

he sent out his left palm towards Xiaoxiang Zi's chest. Xiaoxiang Zi quickly jumped out of the way.

Yang Guo had no one to stop him now and he sent out his sword towards Guo Jing's back. However, Xiaoxiang Zi was worried that Yang Guo would succeed and he advanced immediately after his retreat and sent his rod towards the vital pressure points on Yang Guo's back, forcing Yang Guo to save himself first.

Guo Jing was using his right palm to compete advanced internal energies with Fawang. Both he and Yang Guo were in great danger. He ignored his own safety and tried to save Yang Guo first. His left palm used a stance of "Divine Dragon Swinging its Tail" and collided with Xiaoxiang Zi's short rod. Xiaoxiang Zi's arm burned and his ghastly white face turned red.

But at that exact time, Nimoxing had rolled towards him and extended his Iron Snake towards Guo Jing's left side. Guo Jing was using seventy percent of his energy against Fawang and the remaining thirty percent in blocking Xiaoxiang Zi's rod. He had nothing left to block this attack of Nimoxing and could only move his left side back half a foot. He was able to avoid the iron snake's main attack but the head of the iron snake still managed to embed itself inches into his side.

Guo Jing circulated his chi and his muscles flexed and stopped the head of the iron snake from going in any further. He immediately followed this by a flying left kick and sent Nimoxing tumbling. Nimoxing saw that his iron snake had struck one of his vital areas and thought that the title of the 'Mongolia's Greatest Warrior' would be now be his. But he would never have dreamed that his enemy would have such incredible martial arts that would allow him to grasp victory from the jaws of defeat. This kick landed on Nimoxing's chest and broke three of his ribs.

Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing had both been defeated but Fawang took this opportunity to gain victory and quickly increased the strength in his palm. Guo Jing's chi on his left side has now been disturbed and he could hold on no longer. He felt a mountain shattering and ocean turning force coming towards him. If he continued to take this head on, the result would be death. He could only disperse the power in his palm and rely on his twenty years worth of internal energy to take this stance. His body swayed continuously and he threw up a mouthful of blood. His life was in danger but his thoughts were still on Yang Guo. He called out, "Guo'er, go and get a horse, I'll hold them off."

After seeing Guo Jing protect him with his life, Yang Guo's emotions were stirred and he no longer cared about his revenge. He thought about how righteous and virtuous his Uncle Guo was, if he didn't repay a life with a life then he will have wasted his life on earth. He leapt off his back and flurried his 'Gentleman' sword to protect Guo Jing. He was like a mad tiger and fought with his life with every stance.

Fawang and Xiaoxiang Zi were stunned and shouted, "Yang Guo, what are you doing?"

Yang Guo did not reply and sent out a stance towards Fawang. The tip quivered and another stance was sent out towards Xiaoxiang Zi. The two saw that his eyes were red and that he had a strange expression on his face; they both took two steps back. They assumed that he wanted to kill Guo Jing himself in order to get the title of the 'Greatest Warrior of Mongolia'.

Guo Jing said, "Guo'er, don't worry about me, save yourself."

Yang Guo replied, "Uncle Guo, it's my fault that you've ended up like this. I'm going to die with you." The sword glimmered as he ignored his own safety and protected Guo Jing.

Fawang and Xiaoxiang Zi raised their weapons and attacked Guo Jing together. But Yang Guo's sword stances were extremely lively and he actually kept the two at bay. The Mongolian army surrounded them and roared as they watched the three fights. Guo Jing kept on urging Yang Guo to run away but all he saw was Yang Guo protecting him with his life. He was worried but also touched. His internal injury flared up and he could hold on no longer; his knees went limp and he fell to the ground.

Nimoxing held down the pain of his broken ribs and advanced forward slowly with his iron snake to kill Guo Jing. Yang Guo sent out several wild stances and then put Guo Jing on his back. He dashed north. His martial arts could not compare with Fawang normally but now with Guo Jing on his back, how long could he last? Several exchanges later, his left arm was slashed open by Fawang's golden wheel.

End of Chapter 21.

Chapter 22 - The Baby Girl of the City in Danger

Translated by Noodles



The golden wheel was shot low to the ground. As it got closer and closer, Yang Guo had no other option but to use his sword to repel the wheel. He knew that he had no strength left and knew that it was nigh on impossible for him to succeed but he had no choice but to give it his all. The wheel was now just two feet away from the horse with the wheel generating a soul shaking noise.

Just as Guo Jing and Yang Guo thought they had ran out of luck, the Mongolian soldiers and horses suddenly started to disperse. An old crippled man with a metal crutch in his left hand and a hammer in his right advanced towards them. He called out, "Master Yang, escape quickly, I'll hold them off."

Yang Guo took a glance at him and recognized it was one of Peach Blossom Island's disciples Feng Mofeng. He was extremely surprised by this event, but in this perilous danger, he didn't give it much thought as to how he suddenly appeared.

When Feng Mofeng was forced into working for the Mongolian army, he used the chance to assassinate members of the Mongolian army and had already killed a Noyan and a Jagen leader. He was very careful in making his moves and was yet to be discovered. Today, he heard a great commotion and so he headed up to a high vantage point to see what was happening. He saw that Guo Jing and Yang Guo were surrounded, so he fought his way in to help them. His iron hammer caused gusts of wind as it was swung and those who met it died instantly. A bloody trail was left in his wake.

Yang Guo was delighted with this development and swung his sword to try to break out. However, Fawang used his wheel to intercept Yang Guo's and Feng Mofeng's stances at the same time. Whenever Xiaoxiang Zi's rod came down towards Guo Jing's back, Fawang would allow Yang Guo to

save Guo Jing. If Fawang used his wheel to smash down on Guo Jing, Xiaoxiang Zi would block his attack with his rod. If it wasn't for the two fighting each other, and even if Yang Guo gave his life in trying to protect Guo Jing, Guo Jing would have been dead long ago.

When Khubilai came up with the reward of being 'Mongolia's Greatest Warrior', he had hoped that his men would use all their efforts to achieve this goal; but instead they fought with each other, which was something that he did not predict.

Guo Jing's life might be safe for the time being, but the Mongolian army had positioned themselves all around him like an iron wall, presenting a metal boundary. Fawang and Xiaoxiang Zi were fighting for first place. Nimoxing bit down on his tongue as he held in his pain and looked for a chance to attack, attacking with vicious stances here and there.

By now, Yang Guo and Guo Jing had been battling within the army for over an hour. The sun was now skewed to the side. Fawang suddenly changed his stances and his wheel collided with Yang Guo's long sword. The 'Gentleman Sword' was a blade that can cut through metal like butter; as soon as the weapons collided, a hole was made in the golden wheel. Fawang followed the momentum and kept on going forward. The wheel caused an extremely strong pressing wind over them. Yang Guo was afraid that if he moved out of the way, Guo Jing would be injured so he used his sword to take this attack head on. The wheel slanted slightly and a light 'chi' sound was heard; Yang Guo's right forearm was slashed open. Though the wound wasn't deep, it had cut a vein and blood rushed out. As he fought, he felt his legs going limp and was running out of breath; under these attacks, how could he stop defending in order to stop his bleeding?

Feng Mofeng swung his metal hammer viciously and used every ounce of strength in his efforts to help Yang Guo and Guo Jing. But Fawang's left palm blocked and attacked, reducing Feng Mofeng to a state where he could only defend. If Feng Mofeng hadn't fought for his life, he wouldn't have even been able to save himself.

Xiaoxiang Zi saw his chance had come; he first sent Nimoxing's iron snake to the side and then leapt up into the air. He pointed his rod towards Guo Jing and was about to release the poisonous dust.

Yang Guo was shocked by this and quickly stretched out his left hand to take the rod. At the same time, he sent his sword forward. At that time, his body was completely open; all Fawang had to do was strike him lightly with his golden wheel and he would have been sent to his death. But Fawang wanted to use Yang Guo to send Xiaoxiang Zi away. Fawang forced Feng Mofeng away with his palm and sent out his arm to grab Guo Jing's back. Capturing him alive would be a great achievement. Xiaoxiang Zi did not predict that Yang Guo would actually risk his life to stop him. Before he came back to ground his rod had been grabbed and he couldn't exert any force while in midair. A white light flashed across his eyes as the sword arrived at his chest. He could do nothing but let go of his rod and move out of the way to save his life.

Feng Mofeng smashed forwards with both his hammer and crutch at Fawang's back. Two 'dang dang' sounds were heard as Fawang used his wheel to repel the attack. Feng Mofeng's joints bled from the force. Fawang's left hand went out for Guo Jing's back. Feng Mofeng gave a howl and abandoned his weapons and grabbed Fawang's back. The two fell down onto the ground. Fawang was furious and struck his shoulder with a palm. Feng Mofeng felt as if his insides were turned upside down. Feng Mofeng saw how cruel and vicious the Mongolians were from the camp and saw how they used his

citizens in their attack on Xiangyang. He also saw how Guo Jing fought with his life to drive the enemy away. He didn't know Guo Jing personally and had no idea that Guo Jing was his Master's son-in-law; he just knew that if this person dies, Xiangyang would fall. So he made up his mind; he was going to endure anything in order to get Guo Jing out of danger. Fawang's palms came out with unspeakable speed. Feng Mofeng's bones were broken and his innards severely damaged but still, Feng Mofeng did not let go and dug deep into Fawang with his ten fingers.

The Mongolian soldiers had decided to watch from the side because they thought that Fawang would definitely be able to handle the situation. But when they saw him fall down to the ground, they all rushed forward. In such a situation, even if Guo Jing was perfectly healthy and if his and Yang Guo's martial arts were even better, how could they fight off the rush of hundreds of soldiers?

Yang Guo sighed to himself, "It's over...it's over!" He swung out Xiaoxiang Zi's rod wildly when suddenly there was a light 'po' sound; black dust spurted out from the end of the rod. The ten soldiers that were directly in front of the smoke fell down immediately. In his wild movements, Yang Guo had accidentally triggered the release of the poisonous dust. Yang Guo was slightly startled but immediately understood. He carried Guo Jing and made his way forward; whenever Mongolian soldiers came to meet him, he would trigger the poison and send more men to the ground with the poison.

Though the Mongolian soldiers were great in battle, they were all superstitious. When they saw how their own men suddenly fell down dead to the ground as soon as black smoke came from the rod, they shouted, "His rod is covered by an evil spell, everyone back!"

Khubilai's personal guards were extremely brave and regarded his orders above all else; even though they saw how dangerous it was for them, they still went forward to catch Yang Guo and Guo Jing. Yang Guo sent out some more poisonous dust and immediately sent another ten or so men to their deaths.

Yang Guo whistled and summoned his horse. His yellow horse stretched its legs and flew towards him. Yang Guo used every last ounce of his strength to place Guo Jing on the horse's back but felt his limbs were all drained of energy. He had no strength left to get onto the horse. He could only strike the horse's back lightly and call out, "Quick, leave quickly!" However, the yellow horse was very loyal to its master; when it saw that Yang Guo had no strength to get on, it raised its head and neighed. Yang Guo saw that the Mongolian soldiers were closing in on him; though the poison in the rod was lethal, there's a limit to the amount of poison it holds. He raised his sword wanting to jab his horse to force it to leave, but in the end he couldn't bear to. He called out, "Leave!" He poked the horse with the end of the rod. Because his strength had been drained in battle, his poke wasn't accurate and actually struck Guo Jing. Guo Jing had been unconscious but with this sudden poke, he opened his eyes. He immediately picked up Yang Guo and helped him onto the horse. The yellow horse gave out a joyous neigh and galloped away.

However, the sounds of horns followed closely behind them. Guo Jing gave a whistle and his red horse galloped towards him. The Mongolian army was right behind them. The red horse galloped to the yellow horse's side and kept nuzzling Guo Jing. Yang Guo knew that although his yellow horse was a fine animal, it was still inferior to the red horse. He drew a deep breath and with Guo Jing in his arms, leaped on the red horse. Just at this time, he heard a 'ming ming' sound; Fawang's golden wheel was flying towards them. Yang Guo's

heart ached as he thought, “Feng Mofeng has died at Fawang’s hands.”

His thoughts stilled as the wheel came closer and closer. Yang Guo lowered himself to the horse’s back and hoped the wheel would brush past him. But the wheel sounded from below; it was actually aiming for the horse’s legs.

After Fawang had killed Feng Mofeng, he stood up and saw that Yang Guo and Guo Jing had already gotten onto their horses; it was too late to chase after them. He immediately shot out his golden wheel low to the ground. Fawang knew that if the wheel struck Yang Guo and kills him, the red horse would still escape with Guo Jing. Only by cutting off the horse’s legs would he have a chance to succeed in his task.

As the wheel got closer and closer, Yang Guo had no other option but to use his sword to repel the wheel. He knew that he had no strength left and knew that it was nigh on impossible for him to succeed but he had no choice but to give it his all. The wheel was now just two feet away from the horse with the wheel generating a soul shaking noise. He hung his sword down to protect the horse’s legs but who would have thought that as soon as the horse realized it’s life was in danger, it galloped faster and faster. The wheel remained two feet away from the horse. Yang Guo was delighted as he knew that the wheel would only get slower and slower. Indeed, a little while later the distance between the wheel and the horse’s legs increased to three feet, to four feet, to five feet; the gap was getting larger and larger. Eventually a ‘dong’ sound was heard as the wheel landed on the ground.

Yang Guo was filled with delight, but then he heard a pitiful neigh behind him. He turned around and saw his yellow horse, its stomach filled with arrows, still staring lovingly at its master. Yang Guo’s heart was filled with sadness and tears

fell from his eyes. The red horse galloped like the wind and traveled like a shooting star. In just a short while, it had left the pursuing army behind.

Yang Guo held Guo Jing and asked, "Uncle Guo, are you okay?" Guo Jing let out a moan. Yang Guo checked his breathing and felt that it was still deep and strong; he knew that he was okay. He was now able to relax and he could hold on no longer. He fell into a semiconscious state on the back of the horse and let it go wherever it pleased.

Suddenly, countless numbers of soldiers and horses appeared in front of him. He immediately swung his sword and called out, "Don't harm my Uncle Guo!" He cut and slashed wildly around him. He couldn't see clearly as faces appeared here and there. After a bout of slashing around wildly, he eventually fell off the horse. But he was still calling out, "Kill me, kill me, it was my fault, don't harm my Uncle Guo." Suddenly, he felt as if the world was spinning around him and he eventually fell unconscious.

Some time passed before he woke up again. He called out, "Uncle Guo, Uncle Guo; are you okay? Don't harm my Uncle Guo!"

A tender voice by his side said, "Guo'er, relax, Uncle Guo will be okay after some rest."

Yang Guo turned his head and saw Huang Rong with an extremely grateful expression. Behind her was someone with tears in her eyes, someone staring at him tenderly and lovingly; it was Xiao Longnu.

Yang Guo called out in alarm, "Gu Gu, why are you here? Have you been captured as well? Quick, run away; just leave me."

Xiao Longnu said, "Guo'er, you're back, don't be afraid. We're all safely back in Xiangyang."

Yang Guo let out a relieved sigh. His limbs felt lifeless and he closed his eyes again.

Huang Rong said, "He's awake now, he'll be fine. You stay here with him."

Xiao Longnu agreed but her eyes never left Yang Guo. Huang Rong stood up and was about to leave the room when suddenly a noise came from the rooftops. Her expression changed slightly and with a wave of her left palm, she distinguished the light in the room.

When Yang Guo saw the room plunging into darkness, he sat up in alarm. His injuries were just superficial; the reason he had fainted was due to losing a lot of blood and from over exerting himself in the heated battles. He had rested for half a day now and Huang Rong had fed him the Peach Blossom Island's great medicine the Nine Flowers Jade Dew Pill. With him being young and in great shape, he had almost recovered completely by now. When he heard that someone was on the rooftop, he immediately became alert and was about to get up to face this enemy. Xiao Longnu blocked his way and unsheathed the 'Gentleman Sword' that was beside the bed. She whispered, "Guo'er, don't move, I'll guard here."

A laugh came from the rooftop followed by, "I have come to deliver a letter, is it the custom for the Song to greet their guests in the dark? If you are busy, might I come back later?" It was Fawang's disciple, Huo Dou.

Huang Rong said, "It is the custom of us Song to meet esteemed guests in broad daylight; we meet those who sneak about under the cover of darkness with darkness."

Huo Dou's voice choked up and he lightly leapt down to the courtyard. He said, "I have a letter for Guo Jing, Hero Guo."

Huang Rong opened the door and said, "Please enter."

Huo Dou did not dare to enter the pitch-black room and stood outside the door. He said, "The letter is here, please take it."

Huang Rong said, "You described yourself as a guest so why don't you enter?"

Huo Dou chuckled, "A gentleman in a dangerous place should prepare for the worst."

Huang Rong said, "What kind of gentleman views others with the mind of a scoundrel?"

Huo Dou's face flushed. Dealing with someone with such expertise with words as Chief Huang, it would be difficult for him to gain any sort of upper hand so he decided it would be better to keep quiet. He stood outside the door in silence with the letter held out in his hand.

Huang Rong struck out suddenly with her bamboo rod and attacked Huo Dou's front. Huo Dou, startled by this sudden move, leapt back a few feet, but something was wrong; his hands were empty. Huang Rong had placed the end of her rod on the letter and trapped it with her rod while Huo Dou was jumping back. She was soon to give birth and didn't want to see any outsiders. This is why she kept away from her enemy. After that shock, Huo Dou became despondent; the confidence he had gained from entering the city had all but disappeared. He shouted loudly, "I have delivered the letter; we will meet again tomorrow night."

Huang Rong thought, "If I let you come and go as you please from the city, how will that make us look?" She picked up a teapot from the table and shook it to the side; a spout of hot tea shot outwards.

Huo Dou had been on his guard for projectiles shot at him. But the water from the teapot came out without any kind of noise; it wasn't like your typical projectile that cuts the air with a sound. By the time he found out something was wrong, his neck, chest and right arm was covered with the tea. He felt a hot tingling sensation and called out 'ai ya' in shock while leaping aside. Huang Rong stood by the door and while Huo Dou's feet were still unsteady, she stuck out her bamboo rod and used the "Dog Beating Stick Technique's" 'trip' formulae. She flicked the stick up and sent Huo Dou to the ground. Huo Dou leapt up but the rod strokes of this particular 'trip' formulae has each stroke faster than the last. If you are able to dodge the first stroke, you might then be able to think of a way to evade the next. Huo Dou had already been sent to the ground with the first stroke, how easy was it going to be for him to avoid the next? He felt as if his feet had stepped into a pool of slippery mud; he also seemed to have found himself caught in between countless numbers of tree branches and found he was tripping up as soon as he picked himself up from the ground.

Huo Dou's martial arts were by no means weak; if he fought Huang Rong fair and square he would eventually find himself to be a level lower than Huang Rong. Were his martial arts higher he wouldn't have been tripped up so pathetically as this just after one stance. The reason he was in such a state was because he thought that the tea that landed on him was some kind of lethal poison. Just as he was fearfully thinking about what kind of horrible death the poison would bring him, Huang Rong suddenly attacked. Once the first attack succeeded, there was no way to defend against the second and in the pitch-blackness, he was tripped up until he was black and blue. Just at this moment, the Wu brothers arrived after hearing all the commotion.

Huang Rong shouted, "Capture that little bastard!"

In his moment of danger, Huo Dou became alert. He knew that if he picked himself up again he would definitely be sent down to the ground again so he called 'ai ya' and pretended to have a serious fall. He lay on the ground and didn't make a move. The Wu brothers threw themselves forward to capture him. Huo Dou's metal fan suddenly came out and then 'da da'; he had sealed the pressure point on their legs. He pushed the two forward at the same time to block Huang Rong's rod stances and leapt up to the top of the wall. He made a bow with his hands and said, "Chief Huang, terrific rod techniques, but it's a shame about your disciples!"

Huang Rong chuckled, "With that poison on your body, who in their right mind would come and touch you?"

As soon as Huo Dou heard this, he was scared witless, "This poison burns the skin and carries the scent of tea with it; what kind of weird powerful poison is this?"

Huang Rong knew what he was thinking and said, "You've been poisoned yet you don't even know what the name of the poison is. I guess if you die, you won't die in peace. Fine, there's no harm in telling you. This poison is called 'The Tea of Bones from Midnight to Noon'."

Huo Dou mumbled, "The Tea of Bones from Midnight to Noon?"

Huang Rong said, "Correct. If even one drop of this poison lands on your skin, your whole body will dissolve away to your bones. From midnight you won't see noon, from noon you won't see midnight. You've still got about twelve hours to live; you better make the most of it."

Huo Dou knew that this Chief Huang has great martial arts and possesses an unfathomable mind. Her father Huang Yaoshi is a greatly educated man and with the name Yao Shi (translates as master of medicine), he of course must be

especially skilled in medicine. With Huang Rong's intelligence and her family's skills, to make a poison such as 'The Tea of Bones from Midnight to Noon' would be easier than turning one's palm. He stood on top of the wall in a daze, not knowing whether to go back and wait for his death or to lower his head and beg her for the antidote.

Huang Rong knew that Huo Dou was not an idiot, if a little time passes he will see through this little deception so she said, "I had no feuds with you to begin off with, if it wasn't for your little act of disrespect towards me just now, I wouldn't have condemned you to your death."

When Huo Dou heard these words he knew he had a chance to live. He abandoned his pride and leapt down from the wall. He bowed to the ground and said, "I have been disrespectful to Chief Huang, I ask her for her forgiveness."

Huang Rong hid behind the door and with a light flick of a finger; she shot out a Nine Flowers Jade Dew Pill. She said, "Take it quickly."

Huo Dou caught it and didn't waste anytime in taking this life saving pill. He felt a clear essence entering his dan tian and noticed an extremely relaxing feeling throughout his body. He made another bow and said, "Thank you Chief Huang for the antidote!" By now, all his arrogance had disappeared and he retreated slowly to the wall before flipping over and making a swift exit out of the city.

Huang Rong watched him leave and then went over to the Wu brothers and unsealed their pressure points. She then recalled Huo Dou's words; 'Chief Huang, terrific rod techniques but it's a shame about your disciples!' Though she managed to get rid of Huo Dou with her intelligence, she felt no pride. She may have used the exquisite and deft "Dog Beating Stick Technique" to trip Huo Dou up but her womb still acted up. She sat down on a chair and rested for a while.

Xiao Longnu lit the candles. Huang Rong opened the letter to see:

To Hero Guo from the First Protector of Mongolia Jinlun Fawang;

To be able to meet and admire Hero Guo was a great honour. I had hoped to converse through the night but our meeting was cut short. What did I do to make you leave in such a hurried manner? I will come and visit Hero Guo tomorrow. Until then..."

Huang Rong was alarmed and handed the letter over to Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu to read. She said, "The walls of Xiangyang may be solid but how can it hold out skilled fighters? The enemy is planning an attack but your Uncle Guo is hurt and I can't do much, what are we going to do?"

Yang Guo said, "Uncle Guo..."

Xiao Longnu looked at him with a scolding glance. Yang Guo knew she was angry with him for risking his life and saving Guo Jing. He closed his mouth and didn't say a word.

Huang Rong began to get suspicious and said, "Miss Long, Guo'er has not fully recovered yet, we can only rely on Brother Zhu Ziliu and you to fight off the enemy."

Xiao Longnu has always said whatever that was on her mind and said coldly, "I will protect Guo'er and only him; other people's lives are nothing to do with me."

Even more questions appeared in Huang Rong's mind but she didn't say much about it. She said to Yang Guo, "Uncle Guo said that it was thanks to your efforts that you managed to escape."

Yang Guo thought about the many times he had wanted to kill Guo Jing and felt ashamed of himself. He said, "I'm

useless, it was my fault that Uncle Guo has become injured."

Huang Rong said, "Just rest. When the enemy comes, we'll win by our wits if we can't win with force." She turned to Xiao Longnu and said, "Miss Long, come with me, I have something to say to you."

Xiao Longnu hesitated, "He..." Since Yang Guo returned to Xiangyang, Xiao Longnu had not left his bedside. When she heard Huang Rong summon her, she was afraid that something might happen to Yang Guo.

Huang Rong said, "The enemy said that they will attack tomorrow, nothing is going to happen tonight. I have something to say to you about Guo'er." Xiao Longnu nodded and whispered instructions to Yang Guo to be careful before leaving the room.

Huang Rong took her to her own room and closed the doors. She said, "Miss Long, you want to kill my husband and I, don't you?"

Xiao Longnu might be naïve but she was by no means a fool. Xiao Longnu had made her mind up about killing the Guo couple to save Yang Guo's life. So no matter what Huang Rong would ask her, there was no way she was going to reveal anything to her. However, Huang Rong knew what she was like so she went straight to the point and asked her just like that. Xiao Longnu was shocked by this and hesitated, "I... I... you treat us so well, why should I... why do I want to kill you."

Huang Rong saw her face had become red and knew that she had guessed correctly so she continued, "You don't have to keep it from me, I knew long ago. Guo'er blames us for his parents' deaths and wants to kill us to avenge his father. You love Guo'er so of course are going to help him achieve his wish."

Xiao Longnu could not deny any of this and kept silent for a while. She eventually gave a sigh and said, "I really don't understand."

Huang Rong said, "Don't understand what?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Why did Guo'er risk his life today to save Master Guo? He and Jinlun Fawang and the others had agreed to kill master Guo together."

When Huang Rong heard this, she was extremely shocked. She knew that Yang Guo was up to no good but she never could have imagined that he would actually hook up with the Mongolians. She didn't let any of this show on her face and pretended that she knew all along and said, "It must be because of how well Master Guo has treated him. In the end, Guo'er could not make himself go through with it."

Xiao Longnu nodded and said mournfully, "There's nothing more I can say. Since he has decided to let his life slip away then so be it. I have always known that he is the kindest person in the world. He'd rather die than hurt his enemy."

Many thoughts ran through Huang Rong's mind but she could not figure out what her words meant. When she saw Xiao Longnu's mournful expression, she comforted, "There are still some things you don't know about the death of Guo'er's father, we'll clear everything up with him later on. His injuries are not serious, all he needs are just a few days rest, there's no need for you to be upset."

Xiao Longnu stared at her for a while before bursting into tears and sobbing, "He... he's only got seven days to live, how's resting a few days going to help?"

Huang Rong was stunned and quickly asked, "What is this about only seven days to live? Quickly tell me, we'll find a way to save him."

Xiao Longnu shook her head but eventually she revealed all; the events of the Passionless Valley, how Yang Guo fell victim to the Passion Flower, how Qiu Qianchi gave him half the antidote only and telling them to trade the other half of the antidote for the lives of the Guo couple in a deadline of just eighteen days. She told of the suffering that one goes through when poisoned by the Passion Flower and how the other half pill is the only antidote that exists in the entire world. The more that Huang Rong heard, the more shocked she became. She could never have guessed that Qiu Qianren and Qiu Qianzhang would have a sister named Qiu Qianchi and that this sister would end in such a state.

After explaining everything, Xiao Longnu said, "He's only got seven days left, even if we kill you and your husband tonight there's no guarantee that we'll make it back in time, why should I still want to try to harm you? I just want to save Guo'er; I don't care about avenging his father."

Huang Rong had previously thought that the only reason that Yang Guo was up to no good was because of his father's death, but who would have thought that there were so many other reasons buried within. Saving Guo Jing was just the same as deciding to kill himself. A person that can do such a heroic deed as this is really something to commend.

She stood up slowly and paced back and forth across the room. Even with her intelligence, she could not come up with something to get out of the pressing situation they were in; in just a few hours time, the enemy will come and attack. She may have consoled Yang Guo by saying that 'if they can't win with force then they'll win by wits' but how? How?

Xiao Longnu had just one thing on her mind; Yang Guo. Huang Rong however had two; her husband and her daughter. She was thinking, "How can I keep brother Jing and Fu'er safe?" A thought went through her mind, "Guo'er could

risk his life for others so why can't I?" She then turned around to Xiao Longnu and said, "Miss Long, I have a way to save Guo'er, will you agree to it?"

Xiao Longnu trembled in delight in reaction to this and said, "I... I... even if I have to die... what's death, even if it's something ten times worse than death... I'm... willing..."

Huang Rong said, "Fine, only you and I can know about this, you must not let it slip out."

Xiao Longnu agreed instantly.

Huang Rong said, "Tomorrow, you and Guo'er will protect master Guo; once the danger is over, I will give you my head and you can ride the red horse to get to Passionless Valley and obtain the Passionless Pill."

Xiao Longnu was stunned. She asked, "What?"

Huang Rong said softly, "You value Guo'er more than you value your life, don't you? As long as he's safe and well, you will be happy even if you're dead, right?"

Xiao Longnu nodded, "Yes, how do you know?"

Huang Rong gave a smile and said, "It's because I love my husband the same way as you love Guo'er. You don't have a child so you don't know that a mother's love for her child is also as strong. I just want you to protect the safety of my husband and daughter, what else could I want?" Xiao Longnu didn't reply.

Huang Rong said, "If you and Guo'er don't fight together, we won't be able to fight off Jinlun Fawang. Guo'er saved my husband and I on many occasions, can't I save him just once? The red horse can run a thousand li (500km/310miles) in a day; you will be able to reach Passionless Valley within three days. Let me tell you, Qiu Qianzhang and Guo'er's father

were harmed by me alone, it has nothing to do with Master Guo. Once Qiu Qianchi sees my head, she will have no choice but to hand over the antidote even if she feels it's not enough. Afterwards, it would be great if you two can help to defend the country; but even if you decide to live in some secluded place by yourselves, I will still be touched."

It was clear, there was no other way. In the past few days, Xiao Longnu had been trying to come up with a way to kill Guo Jing and Huang Rong to save Yang Guo. But after hearing these words from Huang Rong's own mouth, she felt uncomfortable and kept on shaking her head, "We can't, we can't!"

Huang Rong was about to explain again when suddenly Guo Fu's voice came from the door, "Mother, mother, are you there?" Her voice sounded urgent.

Huang Rong was shocked and asked, "Fu'er, what is it?"

Guo Fu opened the door and threw herself straight into her mother's arms, ignoring the fact that Xiao Longnu was there. She called out, "Mother, the Wu's are..." She burst into tears.

Huang Rong creased her brows and said, "What is it now?"

Guo Fu choked, "They... they are fighting outside the city."

Huang Rong was furious and shouted, "Fighting? They are fighting each other?"

Guo Fu had rarely seen her mother get so angry and was frightened herself. She mumbled, "Yes, I told them to stop but they didn't listen... they said... they said they were going to fight to the death. They said only one would return... even if the loser doesn't die, they will not come back to... to see me."

The more Huang Rong heard the angrier she got. The lives of the army and the people of the city were at stake here and these two brothers were actually fighting each other over a girl. Her anger disturbed her womb causing her great pain; sweat could be seen on her forehead. She lowered her voice and said, "It must be your doing, tell me everything now."

Guo Fu glanced at Xiao Longnu and became red. She called out, "Mother!"

Xiao Longnu was longing for Yang Guo and had no time to hear about this matter. She turned around and left the room to be with Yang Guo. Her mind was pondering Huang Rong's words.

Guo Fu waited for Xiao Longnu to leave the room before saying, "Mother, it was entirely my fault that the two went to assassinate Khubilai. Father ending up hurt trying to get them was my fault. If I don't tell you all about it, how can I face my mother and father?" She then told her mother about how both brothers were trying to please her and how she suggested going to assassinate Khubilai. Anger filled Huang Rong but she could not let it out, she just rolled her eyes at her with displeasure.

Guo Fu said, "Mother, what shall I do? Each of the brothers has their own good points, how can I choose one over the other? Isn't my suggestion about killing our enemy what you and father want? Whose fault is it that they are so useless and got captured immediately?"

Huang Rong said, "The Wu's martial arts aren't the best, you know that."

Guo Fu said, "What about Yang Guo? He's only a few years older than them, how did he battle Fawang and break out of the camp at the same time and never got caught?" Huang Rong knew that her daughter had been spoiled ever since

she was born and so even at times when Guo Fu knew that she was wrong, she would still try to argue to get her way. Huang Rong did not inquire further about this matter and just said, "They've come back now, why are they fighting outside the city?"

Guo Fu said, "Mother, it's your fault; it's because you said they are shameful disciples."

Huang Rong was shocked and said, "When did I say that?"

Guo Fu said, "I heard from the Wu's that when Huo Dou came with the letter, you told them to capture him but instead they had their pressure points sealed. You then blamed them for being useless."

Huang Rong gave a sigh and said, "If they can't compete with others, what can I do? Huo Duo was the one who called them shameful disciples."

Guo Fu said, "Even so, you didn't argue with him and just stayed silent. The two couldn't accept it and started arguing amongst themselves, saying how it was each other's fault. One blamed the other for being too slow and one blamed the other for getting in the way. The argument became heated and soon they drew their swords. I said 'If you fight in the city and let others see, what'll happen then? Anyway, father is still recovering; if you bring any more trouble to him I will never see either of you again.' They then said, 'Fine, we'll fight outside the city.'"

Huang Rong stayed silent for a while before saying with anger, "I've got much more pressing matters on my mind at the moment. If they want to fight then let them fight all they want."

Guo Fu hugged her elbow and said, "Mother, if either of them gets injured, what then?"

Huang Rong replied, "If the two were injured while trying to fight off the enemy then they deserve our care. But they deserve to die if they are fighting each other." Guo Fu saw that her mother had an angry expression on her face. This was completely different to the way she normally talked to her so she didn't dare say anything else. She left the room and closed the doors.

It was now dawn. Light was coming through the windows; Huang Rong was alone in her room. Though she was angry with the Wus, she was still concerned about them; after all, she had watched them grow up over all these years. Her thoughts then turned to the impending danger and tears flowed from her eyes. She was worried about Guo Jing's injury so she went to see how he was.

Guo Jing was sitting on his bed in meditation when she entered the room. Though his face was pale, his breathing was even and deep. She knew that all he needed was to rest for a few days and he would be back to full health. Memories of when they were younger came flooding back. She thought of the time when they were recuperating in Linan.

Guo Jing slowly opened his eyes and saw that his wife had been crying. A smile appeared on his face as he said, "Rong'er, you know my injury is not serious, what are you worried about? You need more rest than me."

Huang Rong smiled, "Yes. My womb has been acting up over the past few days. Your Polu or Guo Xiang is about to see their father." She was afraid that Guo Jing would worry if he knew about Huo Dou and the letter so she kept it from him, as well as what the Wus were up to.

Guo Jing said, "Tell the Wu brothers to be on extra alert when patrolling the city, the enemy knows that I'm injured and will most probably take this opportunity to attack." Huang Rong nodded. Guo Jing continued, "How's Guo'er's injury?"

Before Huang Rong could reply, the sound of footsteps followed by Yang Guo's voice could be heard from outside the room, "Uncle Guo, I just have superficial injuries, I'm fine now after taking Auntie Guo's Nine Flowers Jade Dew Pill." He then opened the door and entered the room. He continued, "I've been to the city walls and took a look around; everyone is on high alert but the Wus are..." Huang Rong coughed and made a signal to him with her eyes. He immediately understood and said, "The Wus said that it was their fault that you are injured so if the enemy comes to attack, they will fight to the end to repay their debts to you."

Guo Jing sighed, "After this experience, I hope that the Wus are now wiser and don't see everything as achievable."

Yang Guo said, "Auntie Guo, isn't Gu Gu with you?"

Huang Rong replied, "I had a little chat with her just now, she's probably gone back to her room for some rest. Ever since you came back, she hasn't slept a wink."

Yang Guo gave an 'en' sound and assumed that after their little chat, Xiao Longnu must have gone back to see him. She must have just missed him when he went out to take a look around along the city walls. When he first arrived at Xiangyang, he had his mind set on killing the couple. But after the experiences of these past few days and seeing how they risked their lives for the country and how Guo Jing risked his life saving him, he changed his mind and had now decided to repay them by helping them in any way he could. He knew that he only had seven days to live but he didn't care; as long as he could do one or two good deeds in these few days he could say that he has been able to do something with his life. He knew that while Guo Jing was injured, the enemy would definitely take this opportunity to attack the city. As soon as he recovered, he immediately went along the city walls to survey the current situation.

He was longing for Xiao Longnu and was about to leave the room in search of her when suddenly laughter could be heard from the rooftops about one hundred feet away. Two loud noises followed as gold clashed with silver; Jinlun Fawang had arrived.

Guo Jing's face changed slightly and he pulled Huang Rong, trying to hide her behind him.

Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, what's more important, Xiangyang or us? Are you more important or am I?"

Guo Jing let Huang Rong go and said, "Yes, the country comes first!"

Huang Rong took out her bamboo rod and went over to the door. What she had discussed with Xiao Longnu had yet to reach Yang Guo's ears, what was he going to do? Will he help to repel the enemy or will he take advantage of the situation to avenge his father and save his life? His thoughts have always been shrouded in mystery, if he does turn on us it will be even more trouble. Though she was guarding the door, she kept her eye on him.

Though what the Guo couple had said didn't seem much, in Yang Guo's ears, they rang loud and true. Guo Jing's kindness had touched him and he had already decided to pay him back with his life and help him. But as he heard the words 'the country comes first', something stirred in him and he began to remember the teaching of Guo Jing of a few days earlier, "a hero's duty is to serve your country, serve your people," and, "holding your body to the task until your dying day". He saw how deeply the couple loved each other, but even with themselves in such danger, they put the country first. Yet he could not let the death of his father go and he could not let Xiao Longnu out of his mind; when had he ever thought about his country? When had he ever worried about

the suffering of his people? He felt extremely ashamed of himself.

Suddenly, a childhood memory came flooding back to him. It was a memory of Huang Rong teaching him on Peach Blossom Island; the teaching was along the lines of 'dying for a righteous cause' and 'giving your life for justice'. It was now clearer to him than ever before. He seemed a little frightened by this, yet at the same time felt inspired. With life and death now on the line, many things that he'd never thought about never cared about suddenly became crystal clear. He seemed to be a different person with this newfound spirit, taller, bigger and brighter.

Many thoughts flickered through his mind. All this had happened in a short space of time. Huang Rong watched as his face turned from confusion to shame, from poignant to resolute but she couldn't fathom what he was thinking.

Suddenly Yang Guo said quietly, "You can relax!" Unsheathing the Gentleman Sword, he made his way to the door.

Jinlun Fawang stood on the rooftop with a wheel in each hand. He laughed, "Brother Yang, how does it feel to be a man who goes back on his word?"

If it were the Yang Guo of old, these words would definitely have angered him, but the present Yang Guo was calm and clear. He thought to himself, "You're right; my mind had never been set until this day. From now on, no matter how long I live, I will never be one who goes back on their word." He laughed, "Fawang, you're right. I don't know what came over me that day; I don't know why I helped Guo Jing escape. But once he got back to Xiangyang, I don't know where he's gone and I can't find him, It's only now that I've regretted what I've done. Do you know where he is?" He then leapt up to the roof and stood a few feet in front of him.

Fawang squinted, he knew that this little kid was very crafty and didn't know whether he was telling the truth or telling a lie. He laughed, "If you find him, what will you do?"

Yang Guo said, "There's a sword in my hand."

Fawang scoffed, "Huh, you'd actually dare stab him?"

Yang Guo said, "Who said I'd stab him?"

Surprised, Fawang replied, "Who then?"

The Gentleman Sword pierced the air as it came towards Fawang's left side very quickly. At the same time, Yang Guo laughed, "You of course!" This attack came out of nowhere and with great force. With the close distance and being caught unaware, had Fawang's martial arts been just a little lower, like that of Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi, he would surely have died from that attack. Fawang managed to react in time and gathered chi in his left arm and blocked the attack. However, the Gentleman Sword is an extremely sharp blade, his arm was cut by the sword and he suffered a wound inches deep and blood flowed.

Fawang might have known that Yang Guo was sly, but he would never have guessed that he would actually attack him. Getting injured like this just as he entered Xiangyang enraged him and he attacked furiously with the golden wheel in his right hand and at the same time, he threw the silver wheel in his left towards Yang Guo. Yang Guo stood his ground and took three stances before replying with three stances. He laughed, "I owed you one from your attack at the Mongolian camp. Let me tell you something, do you know that there's something special about this sword?"

Fawang couldn't help himself and asked, "What?" as he attacked continuously with his silver wheel.

Yang Guo laughed, "Let me tell you that it's not my fault."

Fawang said, "Damn you punk! What's not your fault?"

Yang Guo said smugly. "This sword came from the Passionless Valley. Gongsun Zhi likes to use a bit of poison here and there so if you want to take revenge, go find him."

Fawang was slightly alarmed as he wondered whether Gongsun Zhi would have laced his swords with poison. Unsettled, his stances become slower.

In reality, what poison was there on the sword? Yang Guo remembered how Huang Rong had scared away Huo Dou with tea and because he knew that his martial arts were not Fawang's match, he tried to use words to disturb his enemy. As soon as he saw it had worked, he concentrated on defending and waited for a chance to pounce. Though Fawang's injury was not serious; even without poison, the wound bled non-stop and as time went by, he would definitely tire. In the current situation, it would be to his advantage to have a quick battle so he hurried his wheels and attacked with even more vigor.

Yang Guo knew what Fawang intended to do and he defended even harder than usual. The power behind Fawang's wheels was getting greater and greater. Suddenly, Fawang's golden wheel attacked upwards and his silver swept across leaving Yang Guo with no other choice but to leap back. Fawang tore a piece of his sleeve off to wrap up his wound but as soon as he did this, Yang Guo came at him again. This game of cat and mouse continued on for a little while before Fawang decided on another plan; as soon as Yang Guo leaps back, he would leap back also and at the same time, throw his silver wheel. This would force Yang Guo to go back even further. This would leave him with enough time to tend to his wound. By the time Yang Guo came back for another attack, Fawang had wrapped up his wound. The fact that there didn't seem to be any discomfort from his

wound indicated that the blade was probably not laced with poison; he relaxed.

At that same time, the sounds of clashing weapons could be heard from a southeastern direction. Yang Guo glanced over and saw Xiao Longnu engaged in battle with Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing. In Xiaoxiang Zi's hand was a rod that looked exactly like the one that Yang Guo had snatched away and lost in his daze at the Mongolian camp, did this one contain poison as well? With the Guo couple directly below him, Yang Guo knew that it would be disastrous if Fawang finds them, he needed to lure him away. He must make sure that he didn't reveal his intentions to Fawang so he called out, "Gu Gu, don't worry, I'm coming!" After a few leaps, he landed behind Nimoxing and he sent his sword forward.

Fawang was of course furious with Yang Guo after being wounded by him but he had come to Xiangyang for Guo Jing; Yang Guo could wait. He called out loudly, "Guo Jing, Hero Guo, I've come to visit; why aren't you here to greet your guests?" He called out a few times but there was no reply.

Shouts and calls could be heard from the northwest; it was his two disciples Da'erba and Huo Dou fighting Zhu Ziliu. The fight between Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu with Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi wasn't going to end anytime soon. More and more guards were coming to see what was going on. Fawang knew that these guards wouldn't be able to do anything to him but in numbers, they would make things cumbersome for him, so he called out again, "Guo Jing, oh Guo Jing, you are a so called Hero so why are you hiding away like some coward?"

He was becoming more and more insulting; the calls went on as he attempted to anger Guo Jing into coming out, but still, there was no sign of him. He thought, "There are thousands of homes in Xiangyang, who knows where he's hiding? He's

willing to accept this abuse to keep his life, but once his injuries have recovered it will be difficult to kill him.” He pondered for a little while and an evil plan hatched. He leapt down from the roof and found where the firewood was kept. He took out his fire knife and splint to the firewood and lit it. He went around and lit several piles of firewood before leaping back up to the roof. Once the fire spreads, Guo Jing will have no choice but to come out.

Though Yang Guo was in battle with Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing, he kept his eye on Fawang. When he saw Fawang suddenly set the place on fire and the rooms north and south of Guo Jing’s room started smoldering, he became alarmed and, as he did so, he almost let Nimoxing’s Iron Snake strike him across the chest. He quickly moved out of the way. If Guo Jing hadn’t broken Nimoxing’s ribs a few days earlier, this attack would have left Yang Guo seriously injured.

Yang Guo thought, “That was close!” His thoughts then turned to Guo Jing. “Uncle Guo is seriously injured and Auntie Guo’s due to give birth. If the two don’t come out then they’ll be trapped by the fire, but if they do, they’ll run into that bald scoundrel.” He had no choice but to leave Xiao Longnu alone to fight the two; so he quickly thrust out two stances towards Xiaoxiang Zi and leapt down. He dived into the fire and flames to look for the Guo couple.

He found Huang Rong by Guo Jing’s bed but at same time, smoke was pouring through the windows. Guo Jing had his eyes closed and was meditating; Huang Rong appeared weak and fragile. When she saw him enter, she could only smile. Yang Guo was put at ease a little when he saw that the two weren’t alarmed and immediately thought of a plan. He whispered, “I’ll lure them away. Take uncle Guo to some place safe and hide.” He then lightly took off Guo Jing’s hat and leapt out of the window.

Huang Rong didn't know what he was up to but the smoke was getting closer and closer. She reached out to help Guo Jing up and she said, "Let's find another place to rest." As soon as she used an ounce of her strength in her arm, she felt a pain in her stomach. She sat down on the bed and cursed, "You little devil, you've got a great sense of timing haven't you; do you want to kill your daddy and mommy?" There were a few days before she was actually due but all the stress and commotions of the past few days had inadvertently sped the birth along.

As soon as Yang Guo leapt out of the window, he saw guards shouting and bellowing everywhere; some were taking buckets of water to dampen the flames, others were firing arrows towards the rooftop. There were some who were slashing their weapons about jumping and cursing. He jumped behind a guard in grey and sealed his pressure point. Yang Guo placed Guo Jing's hat on him and lifted him onto his back. He then leapt up to the rooftops whilst swirling his sword around.

At this time, Xiao Longnu and Zhu Ziliu who were fighting two opponents each in the form of Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi, and Huo Dou and Da'erba, and were losing. Jinlun Fawang on the other hand was threatening Guo Fu with his wheels, waving them around inches away from her face to force her to reveal her parents' location. Guo Fu's hair was in a mess and her sword tip had been smashed to pieces by Fawang's golden wheel, but she bit down on her tongue and kept on fighting, ignoring Fawang's questions. She was extremely angry inside as she thought, "If the Wus hadn't gone off to kill each other, the three of us could take care of this bald scoundrel." She couldn't help herself blurting out, "Fine, go and fight amongst yourselves, I don't care who wins, you'll just be coming back to a corpse!"

Fawang was dumbfounded by her words; “What? Where is Guo Jing?”

He was waiting for Guo Fu to reply when he spotted Yang Guo making his escape in a northwesterly direction with a person on his back; this had to be Guo Jing. He left Guo Fu and immediately chased after Yang Guo. Huo Dou, Da’erba, Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing had also spotted Yang Guo and they left their opponents and chased after Yang Guo. Zhu Ziliu followed to help Yang Guo protect Guo Jing.

When Yang Guo was on the roof, he ran past Xiao Longnu, winked and smiled at her with a crafty expression on his face. Xiao Longnu knew he was up to something but she didn’t know what. With so many people chasing after him, she wanted to go with him to help him but at the exact same time, she heard crying from below; the crying of a baby.

Guo Fu said with joy, “Mother’s given birth!” and leapt down.

Xiao Longnu was curious and along with the fact that Yang Guo seemed to have things under control, she wanted to take a look at Huang Rong’s child, so she too leapt down from the rooftops and followed.

Jinlun Fawang chased after Yang Guo with great effort and saw the distance between them getting smaller and smaller. He thought, “Let’s see how you’re going get out of this one.” He saw that the person on Yang Guo’s back was wearing the same hat that Guo Jing was wearing a few days ago and was sure that it was him.

The Ancient Tomb’s lightness kung fu that Yang Guo had learned could be said to be unequalled under heaven’s skies; even with someone on his back, Fawang would not be able to catch up with him for the time being. Yang Guo ran along the rooftops for a while but he soon heard the footsteps behind him getting closer and closer, so he leaped down into an

alleyway and ran around in circles, playing hide and seek with Fawang.

Yang Guo's lightness kung fu may be a level higher than Fawang's but after all, there was someone on his back. If it was in the open, Fawang would have caught up long ago but in the dark and twisty alleyways, he was able to keep one step ahead of Fawang. After circling in the alleyways a few times, Nimoxing, Xiaoxiang Zi and Zhu Ziliu arrived.

Fawang said to Nimoxing, "Brother Nimo, guard the end of the alley, I'll chase the rabbit out of its den."

Nimoxing rolled his eyes and shouted, "Why the hell should I listen to you?"

Fawang felt that Nimoxing was being unreasonable. He leaped up to the rooftops and took a look around; he spotted Yang Guo trying to catch his breath in a dark corner with Guo Jing on his back. He quietly went closer to him overhead, but just as he was about to jump down and catch him, Yang Guo suddenly called out and disappeared into the smoke.

Fawang had set the fire to force Guo Jing out, but now the smoke from the fire was making it difficult for him to catch Yang Guo. As he was looking around, Da'erba suddenly called out, "He's over there!"

Fawang followed his voice to find Da'erba fighting Yang Guo with his golden rod. Fawang went forward to block Yang Guo's escape route. Yang Guo dashed ahead and in a flash, he was by Da'erba's side. At the same time, Fawang's silver wheel had come shooting out.

The silver wheel came like the wind leaving Yang Guo with no time to dodge; a tearing sound was heard as it brushed past 'Guo Jing', leaving a deep wound.

Fawang was delighted and called out; "Ha! I hit you!"

However, Yang Guo kept on running, ignoring whether or not 'Guo Jing' was still alive or not.

Yang Guo made his way to the end of the alley only to hear a cackling voice, "Little boy, just give up!" It was Xiaoxiang Zi with his rod blocking the end of the alleyway. Yang Guo had no way forward and no way back, he looked upwards and saw a black figure; it was Nimoxing. Yang Guo leapt up but Nimoxing used his Iron Snake to strike downwards, wanting to force him back down into the alleyway. Yang Guo calculated that by now, he had given the Guo couple enough time to escape so he took the guard off his back and threw him towards Nimoxing, calling out, "Here, I'll let you have Guo Jing."

Nimoxing was delighted by this turn of events, he had thought that Yang Guo would give him a lot of trouble, but who would have thought that he would give up and actually give him such a great gift? He stretched out his hands to catch him. Yang Guo sent out a powerful kick that struck him on the behind, sending him down into the alleyway.

Nimoxing called out in delight, "I've got Guo Jing; I'm Mongolia's Greatest Warrior!"

Da'erba and Xiaoxiang Zi were never going to let him take this prize on his own without a fight and both went over to him. The three of them held on to the guard pulling at him with great strength and with such force, that the guard tore into three pieces. The hat fell off the guard's head and only then did the three see that it was not Guo Jing. Stunned, they stood there speechless.

When Fawang saw that Yang Guo had left Guo Jing, he knew something was up so he did not go forward to struggle with the three. Seeing them standing there in a daze, he scoffed, "Idiots!" He continued to go after Yang Guo, thinking that,

even if he does not capture Guo Jing, taking Yang Guo's life would be a good day's work.

But by now, Yang Guo was nowhere to be seen, how was he going to find him? Fawang thought for while and came up with a plan, "Yang Guo must have lured us away from the real target. Guo Jing must have been near where we first started. Fine, I'll lure him out." He made his way to where the flames were strongest.

Yang Guo was hiding underneath a rooftop, observing what was happening. He watched as Fawang headed in Guo Jing's direction. Yang Guo did not know whether Guo Jing had escaped to another place yet so he followed Fawang quietly. Fawang ran back to near the room where Guo Jing was and leapt down. He called out, "So Guo Jing, you're hiding here. Come with me!"

Yang Guo was shocked and was about to jump down when he heard the sounds of clashing weapons. Fawang called out; "Guo Jing, surrender now!" The sounds of clashing metal rang loudly.

Yang Guo rolled his eyes and laughed, "Bald bastard, I almost fell for your trick. Your plan is flawed, why the sound effects? In Uncle Guo's condition, how can he exchange stances with you? And how could he last so long? I'll hide here and watch what else you'll get up to."

Suddenly, Fawang called out, "Yang Guo, this time you die!"

Yang Guo was puzzled, "What's this about me dying this time?" He then knew what Fawang was planning, "Oh, you can't get me to come out so now you're trying to get Uncle Guo to out to save me."

He heard Fawang laughed, "Yang Guo oh Yang Guo, you've lived long enough."

As soon as he finished, a white blur came out of the smoke; a young girl had darted forward and was thrusting her sword towards him.

Yang Guo called out, "Gu Gu, I'm here!" However, Fawang swung his wheels and blocked Xiao Longnu's way. When Fawang was trying to give the impression that Yang Guo was in danger, Xiao Longnu heard him and of course she was concerned so she came dashing out.

Yang Guo rushed forward armed with his sword. After a smile to each other, the two of them used the "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Swordplay", trapping Fawang within the boundary of the swords.

Fawang cursed, "What have I done?" Scalding smoke, burning pillars and falling debris were all around them.

Fawang put everything he had behind his wheels to fend off the swords and quickly retreated to the northwestern corner.

Yang Guo said, "We can't let him escape, we must get rid of him once and for all." He aimed for Fawang's back with his sword.

After tasting defeat from the "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Swordplay", he pondered and tried to come up with a way that would defeat it. But this swordplay was deep and profound, the two users became as one and it was like fighting against a great martial artist who had four arms and four legs. He didn't have much confidence as to whether or not he could actually defeat this swordplay, but in this dangerous situation, he had no other choice but to use the "Cyclone of the Five Wheels" that he had been working on. Though there were still many weaknesses with this technique, he had to give it a try so he searched his body and with a ringing sound, three wheels were in the air and one each in his hands. His five wheels were of different

weights and of slightly different sizes, and they come to and from his hands as he pleased; slanting in the air sometimes and suddenly straightening up.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu felt their eyes dazzled and were slightly alarmed. Yang Guo sent two stances to the left as he leaned right, Xiao Longnu immediately responded and she too sent out numerous stances to the right with her Lady Sword. She moved with force and shifted towards Yang Guo. The two saw that the enemy's stances were too strange so they decided to defend first and try to grasp the techniques that Fawang was using before coming up with a counterattack in response.

Fawang's wheels turned and flew about but the two's swords flew up and then crossed, forming a net of light. Though the power of the five wheels was great, it was unable to penetrate the swords. He sighed, "Looks like even with using five wheels, I am still unable to defeat their swordplay." Just as he was feeling dejected, a baby's crying could be heard coming from Xiao Longnu's arms. Fawang was shocked at this sudden turn of events but he wasn't the only one; Yang Guo was extremely surprised. In shock, their stances slowed.

Xiao Longnu patted the child in her arms with her left hand and said, "Don't cry precious, and watch me drive that monk away." However, the baby cried even louder.

Yang Guo said, "Its Auntie Guo's?"

Xiao Longnu nodded and sent a piercing stroke towards Fawang.

Fawang swept his golden wheel across and blocked the attack. He didn't hear Yang Guo and didn't know what Xiao Longnu was doing with a baby in her arms; but since she's got extra baggage, her swordplay will suffer so he threw out his golden wheel and attacked Xiao Longnu.

Yang Guo intercepted the attacks and turned his head towards Xiao Longnu, asking, "Uncle and Auntie Guo are safe?"

Xiao Longnu said, "Chief Huang and Master Guo escaped..." A clashing sound was heard as she parried Fawang's bronze wheel. She continued, "It was becoming dangerous as it looked like the beam in the ceiling was about to collapse so I took the baby girl..."

Yang Guo slashed out at Fawang's right leg and neutralized the lead wheel's attack directed at Xiao Longnu before asking, "It's a girl?" Yang Guo was slightly surprised that it was another girl since Guo Jing had a daughter already.

Xiao Longnu nodded, "It's a girl, here quickly take her..." She was about to hand the baby over to Yang Guo.

But amongst the cries of the baby, Fawang's attacks were becoming more and more ferocious. Three wheels circled in the air and attacked from the above while vicious attacks still came from the wheels in Fawang's hands.

Yang Guo had to use every ounce of strength he had to fend off these attacks, how could he take the baby?

Xiao Longnu called out, "Quickly take the baby and use the red horse to go to..."

Ringling sounds were heard as the two wheels became more and more threatening; Xiao Longnu no longer had time to speak. The two's thoughts were not in line and so they could not unleash the full power of the swordplay.

Yang Guo knew that if he took the baby from Xiao Longnu, she would no longer be distracted so he moved towards her slowly. Xiao Longnu wanted to hand the baby over to him and now that their thoughts were the same, the power of the swordplay suddenly increased. It was as if the sword had

lengthened and Fawang was forced backwards two steps. Xiao Longnu handed the baby over to Yang Guo and he was just about to take it when a black blur suddenly came towards them; the iron wheel was sent flying towards the baby. Xiao Longnu was afraid that the baby would get hurt so she loosened her grip on the baby and used her left hand to catch the wheel. The iron wheel was coming towards her with great force and it was extremely sharp but Xiao Longnu was wearing the golden silk gloves, and as she met the wheel, she followed the force of the wheel and pushed it to the side to dampen the urgent spinning of the wheel before finally pushing up and catching the wheel; it was a great use of the 'Four Liangs Against a Thousand Jin' theory.

By now, Yang Guo had the baby in his hands and when he saw the wheel in Xiao Longnu's hand, he called out, "Wonderful!"

If Fawang had sent the wheel towards Xiao Longnu, she would not have been able to catch it; she was only able to catch it because the wheel was aimed at the baby.

Xiao Longnu was delighted when she caught the wheel but the icy expression on her face remained. Suddenly, she copied the form of Fawang and raised the wheel, smashing it towards her enemy; she wanted to give him a taste of his own medicine.

Fawang was alarmed, with one wheel missing; his "Cyclone of the Five Wheels" was neutralized. He decided to take in two of his wheels and just use two in his hands, cutting and slashing forwards.

Yang Guo held the baby with his left arm and said, "Let's kill this bald scoundrel first and talk later."

Xiao Longnu said, "Fine!" Her left hand held the iron wheel across her chest as she attacked with Yang Guo. With another

powerful weapon in her hand and with one thing less to worry about, she should have become more powerful but after a few stances, she found that her sword strokes did not match Yang Guo's and they found it difficult to unite.

This swordplay's power lies within the user's pure and complete love for each other, right now the wheel between the two swords was an extra thing. It was like placing a third person between a pair of lovers, causing trouble and unrest, how could their thoughts become one now? The two did not know what was wrong for the time being and after a few more exchanges; they actually found themselves worse off than fighting individually.

Xiao Longnu was getting anxious and she said, "We can't beat him today, quickly take the baby to Passionless Valley and..."

Yang Guo now knew her intentions; if he rode the red horse now, he would definitely be able to reach Passionless Valley within seven days time. Though he wouldn't have the heads of Guo Jing and Huang Rong for Qiu Qianchi, by taking the baby to Qiu Qianchi and telling her that they'll definitely come for it, she would be able to come up with her own way to take revenge. Qiu Qianchi would definitely hand over the antidote. As soon as he recovers, he can rescue the baby from danger. Qiu Qianchi would definitely fall for this plan. If it were two days ago, Yang Guo would have agreed without any hesitation but now, Guo Jing's patriotic spirit had left him in complete awe, he could not risk Guo Jing's daughter for himself. Taking his daughter to Passionless Valley was taking advantage no matter which way you look at it; it is not the act of a true man and because of this he kept quiet before saying, "Gu Gu, no!"

Xiao Longnu said, "You... you..." She had only said two words before a tearing sound was heard as the cloth on her left

shoulder was cut by Fawang's golden wheel.

Yang Guo said, "If I do such a thing, how can I face Uncle Guo? I would not be worthy of using this sword?" He raised the Gentleman Sword.

Xiao Longnu did not know about his sudden change of mind, all she was concerned about was to rid the poison in his body. After hearing him say that he can't treat the person who killed his father like this and how he wants to be a honorable gentleman, she couldn't stop herself from feeling shocked.

With the differing thoughts, it was even more difficult for the swords in their hands to respond. Fawang took this chance to advance forward and elbowed Yang Guo on the left shoulder.

Yang Guo felt numbness go through him and the baby in his arm dropped. The three of them had been fighting on the rooftops and now the baby fell towards the ground. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu both cried out wanting to jump after it but it was too late.

Fawang had heard what the two had said and now knew that the baby was Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter. He may not have caught Guo Jing but by having his daughter as hostage, he could force Guo Jing to surrender, what more could he want? It was now getting urgent and he sent out the golden wheel with his right hand, which intercepted the falling baby.

The wheel was five feet above the ground, carrying the baby with it. The three of them leapt down from the roof to grab the wheel. Yang Guo was closest and saw that the wheel was flying closer and closer to the ground and soon will hit the ground. He immediately rolled over towards the wheel, wanting to sandwich himself between it and the ground so he could take the wheel and baby at the same time, keeping her

safe. Suddenly, an arm stretched out from the side and grabbed the wheel, taking the baby with it. The person turned and ran.

Yang Guo got up and Xiao Longnu and Fawang dashed over to him. She said, "It's my apprentice sister."

Yang Guo saw that the person was wearing an apricot yellow gown and was holding a fly whisk; it was indeed Li Mochou. How could the baby be safe now that it had fallen into the clutches of this evil woman? He immediately ran after her.

Xiao Longnu called out, "Apprentice sister, apprentice sister, that baby is very important, what are you doing?"

Li Mochou did not turn back and replied from afar, "Every generation of my Ancient Tomb sect have been virgins yet you have actually given birth, how shameful!"

Xiao Longnu said, "It's not my child, give it back to me." She called out many times but as she did so, she loosened her chi and she was left behind. She saw that they were headed north and so she followed.

The city was filled with soldiers; as some tried to control the fire and others hunted down the spies. Xiao Longnu ignored them all and ran to the city walls to find Lu Youjiao with a group of Beggar Clan members patrolling the northern gate in case the enemy wished to take advantage of the city being on fire and attack.

As soon as he saw Xiao Longnu he asked, "Miss Long, are Chief Huang and Hero Guo safe?"

Xiao Longnu ignored his question and instead asked, "Have you seen Master Yang and Jinlun Fawang? Have you seen a woman carrying a child?"

Lu Youjiao pointed outside of the city and said, "The three of them leapt down from the wall and left."

Xiao Longnu was startled; the wall was extremely high, even with supreme martial arts your legs and arms would break if you jumped down from such a height; how did the three manage this feat? She was just about to inquire further when she spotted a Beggar Clan member brushing the precious red horse and a thought went through her mind, "Even if Guo'er somehow manages to snatch the baby back, without this horse, how will he get to the Passionless Valley in time?" She darted over to the horse and took its reigns before saying to Lu Youjiao, "I have an urgent matter to attend to and I need to leave the city with this horse."

All Lu Youjiao was concerned with was the safety of Huang Rong and Guo Jing and he asked again; "Are Chief Huang Rong and Hero Guo safe?"

Xiao Longnu mounted the horse and said, "They're safe. Chief Huang's baby daughter has just been snatched away; I need to get her back." Lu Youjiao was shocked by the news and immediately ordered the gate opened.

The city gate was only opened a few feet and the drawbridge had yet to touch the ground when Xiao Longnu had made her way out. After one slap, the gallant red horse flew over the moat spectacularly. The on looking guards all cheered at the spectacle.

Outside the city walls, Xiao Longnu saw the crushed corpses of two soldiers by the city wall along with the carcass of a horse. She looked all around but how would she know what direction they were headed? She was now anxious and desperate. She stroked the neck of the horse and said, "I'm trying to find your baby master, please take me there!"

Who knew whether the horse understood or not but it raised its head and neighed before galloping in a northeasterly direction.

After chasing Li Mochou to the top of the city wall, both Yang Guo and Jinlun Fawang thought with the walls being at such a height, there would be no where else for her to go. However, as soon as she reached the top of the city walls she grabbed a soldier and threw him off the wall before following herself. Before the guard reached the ground, she used him to break her fall and threw herself forward, gliding down to the ground, all without disturbing the baby. The soldier died without ever making a sound.

Fawang cursed, "What a vicious woman!" He did as she did and sent a guard down from the wall using him to break his fall.

Yang Guo could not bring himself to use someone else as a cushion for himself but it was getting urgent. Just at this moment, his mind lit up and he sent a steed off the city wall and before it landed, he leapt onto the horse's back. While the horse met its death, Yang Guo continued his chase.

During the battle at the Mongolian camp a day earlier, Yang Guo was wounded twice by Fawang's wheels and though the injuries themselves were not serious, he had lost a lot of blood, his body was weak and after another day of intense fighting, he felt he could not last much longer. But as he thought about the dreadful fate that would fall upon his Uncle Guo's daughter in the hands of either Li Mochou or Jinlun Fawang, he ignored his pain and urgently chased after them.

The three of them had been running extremely fast but with Li Mochou having to carry a baby and with Fawang taking precautions about his possible poisonous sword wound, none of them were traveling as fast as before. A few miles later,

with Xiangyang far behind them, there was still about a distance of a hundred feet between them. Fawang could not catch up with Li Mochou and Yang Guo could not catch up with Fawang.

After a while, Li Mochou saw that there were hills and mountains in front of her so she sped that way thinking it would be easier to lose her pursuers in the mountain valleys. Though she had heard Xiao Longnu say it was not her child, after seeing how Yang Guo risked life and limb for it, she was sure that it was their bastard child and as long as it was in her hands, they could be forced to hand over her sect's "Jade Maiden's Manual" to her.

The further they went the higher they got as the terrain became more mountainous and wooded. Fawang was afraid that if he didn't stop her now, should she hide in the dense woodland, it would be difficult for him to find her. He had never fought Li Mochou before but after seeing her excellent lightness kung fu, he knew that she would be a strong foe. He had lost two of his wheels and didn't want to risk throwing any. But it was getting urgent, he could not waste any more time so he called out, "Lady, leave the child and I'll spare your life; if you don't, then don't blame this monk for being merciless."

Li Mochou laughed and sped up once again. With a wave of his right arm, he sent out his silver wheel. The wheel became a white streak as it headed for Li Mochou's back.

Li Mochou could not ignore the force of the incoming weapon and she turned around, deciding to use her fly whisk against it. However, as soon as she saw how fast the wheel was turning she changed her mind. She was afraid that her weapon would break; she decided to move out of the way instead. Fawang advanced two steps and threw out his bronze wheel. This time, he threw it outwards so that it would

curve in, smashing its target on its way back. Again, Li Mochou did not dare to take this attack head on; she moved back three steps and bent her waist, using advanced lightness kung fu to avoid this attack. Now, there was only about thirty feet between she and Fawang. Fawang caught his silver wheel with his left hand and threw the lead wheel in his right hand towards her left shoulder.

Li Mochou whirled her fly whisk to the side, forming thousands of golden needles that rained toward Fawang's eyes. Fawang threw his silver wheel upwards to block the attack while at the same time with his free hand; he caught his incoming bronze wheel. He crossed his arms and his wheels collided, ringing throughout the valley. His silver and bronze wheels had changed hands and he now started to use lethal attacks with both.

With a great foe in front of her, Li Mochou's spirit stirred, who would have thought that this tall and skinny monk would possess such great strength and be so swift in his attacks. She fought with everything she knew and gave it everything she had.

After a few exchanges, Yang Guo had made his way to them. He watched from the side, catching his breath and waited for a chance to snatch the baby back. The two of them were fighting quicker and quicker with a fly whisk whirling about amongst the three wheels.

When it came to martial arts and internal energy, Fawang was a level higher than Li Mochou along with the fact that Li Mochou was carrying the child; she would surely be defeated within a hundred stances.

However, towards the beginning of the fight when Li Mochou was trying to protect the child from the sharp blades of the wheels, she noticed that whenever the wheels came close to the baby, Fawang would quickly take the attack back and

she then knew what he was trying to do, "That bald bastard wants to take the child and he doesn't want to hurt it."

With her ruthless nature, she didn't care about the safety of others and now that she knew what Fawang was up to, whenever she found herself unable to withstand his vicious moves, she would hold the baby up to protect herself. The baby was now no longer a hindrance but instead a powerful shield, as soon as it was raised, no matter how vicious and ruthless Fawang's stances were, they would all be taken back.

Fawang attacked several times with the wheel but each time he was forced back by Li Mochou using the baby as a shield. Yang Guo watched with anxiety; a mistake by either of them would surely send the baby to its death. Just as he was about to make his move, Fawang suddenly smashed out and inwards with the silver wheel in his right hand and pushed forward with the bronze wheel in his other hand; by doing this, the wheels trapped Li Mochou within his arms.

Li Mochou's face went red; what kind of monk would actually use such a stance? She whirled her fly whisk behind to block the silver wheel and raised the baby in front of her to protect her chest. When Fawang had decided to use this particular stance, he had calculated the response; he loosened his left finger and his bronze wheel shot upwards towards her face.

The wheel was only about inches away from her; with the wheel suddenly flying towards her like that with such great force, it was not going to be easy to fend off this attack. Luckily for her however, she was an experienced fighter after all these years in the world of Jiang Hu; experience that far exceeded that of Fawang. In this danger she leaned back with her feet nailed to the ground and sent an attack of her own towards his shoulders. Fawang shrugged his shoulders and the fly whisk brushed past; however there were a few

threads that had struck his shoulder. His left hand was empty and so, he chopped down onto her left arm. Li Mochou's arm immediately went numb and she cried out in pain. She leapt away but something was missing; the baby had been snatched away by Fawang.

Just when Fawang thought he had succeeded, a gust of wind came from his side; it was Yang Guo throwing himself forward to grab the baby. Rolling on the ground, he swung his sword into a web of light to protect his body and as he got up, he used a stance of "Sailing with the Waves", stopping his two foes from getting close to him.

When he saw that the baby had fallen into Fawang's hands, he knew that as soon as Fawang got a proper hold on her, it would be near to impossible to snatch her back so he risked life and limb to get her back. In a flash, the baby had exchanged hands twice.

Li Mochou praised him; "Yang Guo, exquisite move!"

Fawang was furious and he knocked his wheels together, the wheels ringing like the roar of a dragon. He waved out his left sleeve and threw the wheel in his right hand towards Yang Guo. Yang Guo pretended to stab forward before turning around to run but something breezed past him; it was Li Mochou blocking his path with her fly whisk. She smiled, "Yang Guo, no running! Let's see you fight a bit with that monk first." Yang Guo saw that Fawang's bronze wheel was only inches away from him; he had no choice but to raise his sword and block the attack.

After dueling with each other for so long, the two were very familiar with the other's martial arts and both attempted to beat the other with speed. The two became a blur as three streaks of light danced around; in a flash the two had exchanged over twenty stances.

Li Mochou was shocked, thinking, "It wasn't too long ago that I last saw him, how on earth has he achieved such a level of martial arts?"

Yang Guo had made improvements in his martial arts but some of the improvement was due to the fact that he knew that he didn't have long to live. He decided to repay Guo Jing back with his life and so, when a dangerous stance came at him, he didn't care and instead replied with one of his own, forcing Fawang to adjust.

Yang Guo may not have cared about his life but it was a different story with the life of the baby. Though he saw that Fawang's and Li Mochou's stances avoided the baby during their fight, this was Guo Jing's child and he was not going to employ the tactic that Li Mochou used and risk the safety of the child. By putting the safety of the child first, he was soon facing death in the face.

Against Li Mochou, Fawang had to take extreme care in avoiding the baby but with Yang Guo doing the opposite of Li Mochou and protecting her, he began to aim for the baby more than he did at Yang Guo. As a result, Yang Guo was forced on the back foot ever further and he couldn't last much longer. He called out, "Martial Uncle Li help me against this bald bastard."

Fawang glanced over at Li Mochou who was standing there watching the fight with a smile on her face.

Fawang didn't understand, "Xiao Longnu called her apprentice sister and she is indeed his apprentice uncle, why isn't she helping? Are they planning something? I need to wound this kid and snatch the baby first." He increased the power in his attacks leaving Yang Guo almost defenseless.

Li Mochou knew that Fawang would not harm the child, no matter how many times Yang Guo asks for help she'd just

ignore him. She placed her hands behind her back and watched at leisure.

After a while, Yang Guo felt a throbbing pain in his chest. He knew that his internal energy could not compare with his opponent; he would not be able to last much longer fighting as hard as this. He hadn't heard the baby's cries for a while and was afraid something was wrong, so he looked within his arms only to see an adorable face with pearl black eyes starring back at him.

Yang Guo had never got on with Guo Fu but he felt something towards this baby girl in his arms, "In seven days time I'll be dead, I'm risking my life and limb for her today and if by some miracle I managed to save her, I wonder whether she'll remember me a few years when she's all grown up like her sister?" In such an emotional state, he almost cried.

Li Mochou saw that he was exhausted and knew that he'll soon die by the twin wheels; she was about to go forward and help him when she thought, "This kid's martial arts have made great improvements, I better leave it to the monk to finish him off to save me future trouble." So, she kept to the side.

Of the three, Fawang had the highest martial arts, Li Mochou was the most ruthless but Yang Guo was the most cunning. After he got over his sadness, he immediately came up with a plan, he thought, "When Auntie Guo told me the story of the Three Kingdoms, she said that Cao Wei was the strongest and when Shu Han rebelled against Cao Wei, Shu needed the help of Sun Quan." Li Mochou may not offer help but he can offer his help to her. He blocked Fawang's attack and threw the baby over to her calling out, "Catch!"

This action was something that Li Mochou did not expect, she didn't know what he meant by this action but took the baby

anyway.

Yang Guo called out, "Apprentice Uncle, take the baby and leave, I'll hold the monk up!" He sent two strokes forward with all his might, keeping Fawang back.

Li Mochou thought, "Oh, he's hoping I'll still respect the fact that we are of the same sect and so I'll keep it alive."

How would she know that Yang Guo had an ulterior motive, as soon as she tried to make her escape, Fawang smashed his silver wheel towards her back, switching his attention from Yang Guo to her. This stance came at her extremely fast and she tried to adjust her movements but the silver wheel followed her like a shadow. Li Mochou had no choice but to use her fly whisk to block the attack.

Yang Guo breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw that his plan had worked, but he did not wait by the side and watch the two destroy each other like Li Mochou had done. As soon as he gathered his breath he immediately dived in and attacked Fawang.

The sun was in the sky and light shone through the canopy of the forest. Yang Guo felt freshened and his swordplay became more fluent. A ringing sound was heard as the Gentleman Sword slashed a piece of the bronze wheel off. Fawang was slightly alarmed but his attacks became even more vicious.

Yang Guo thought of another trick and called out, "Martial Uncle Li; be careful of that wheel, don't let where the wheel was cut touch you, it has poison on it."

Li Mochou said, "How?"

Yang Guo said, "My sword has poison on it!"

After Yang Guo wounded Fawang, Fawang had been worried about being poisoned but because he had yet to feel any effects from wound, he had ceased worrying. Now upon hearing Yang Guo's words, he thought, "Gongsun Zhi is a ruthless man, its more likely than not that there is indeed poison on that sword."

Li Mochou suddenly whirled her fly whisk forward and said, "Guo'er, pierce him with your poisoned sword." She waved her hand out, appearing to shoot some kind of projectile. Fawang used his wheels to protect himself. Li Mochou was trying to scare him off, she knew that with Fawang's martial arts, her "Soul Freezing Needles" would most probably miss the target but this little pause allowed her just enough time to move out of the wheel's range and escape.

Though Fawang suspected there was poison on Yang Guo's sword, his wound had not swollen up and there were no ill effects after all this time. He did not want to leave empty handed after all this trouble and immediately chased after Li Mochou.

Who knew when the battle would end? With them chasing and fighting like this, Yang Guo was worried that if this was kept up, the baby would catch a chill or the like; even if he does manage to rescue her it might end up all in vain. He knew that the first thing he must do is to use Li Mochou to help to defeat Fawang before dealing with her. He called out loudly, "Martial Uncle Li, there's no need to run! This bald bastard has been poisoned, he won't live for long." As soon as he finished, Li Mochou darted into a cave.

Fawang stopped in his tracks and did not dare to enter. Yang Guo did not know what she was going to do with the baby and without care for his life, he burst into the cave with his sword across his chest. He saw a silver flash and immediately

knocked three Soul Freezing needles out of the air. He called out, "Martial Uncle Li, it's me!"

It was pitch black in the cave but he had the ability to see in the darkness; Li Mochou was holding the baby with her left hand and her right was holding some silver needles. To show that he had no ill intent, he turned his back to her and said, "We need to defeat that bald bastard first." then guarded the entrance of the cave.

Fawang knew that the two would not come out for the time being and so he loosened his gown and tended to his wound. He saw that his blood was crimson red and when he touched the wound it ached, after circulating his internal energy he discovered there wasn't anything wrong. He was happy but also furious with Yang Guo for tricking him into worrying about poison for almost half a day. The entrance of the cave was covered with grass and only allowed for one person to enter at a time; with his height he would not find it easy to maneuver if he burst in and would most probably fall victim to an ambush.

Just as he was trying to come up with a plan, he heard a strange voice behind him calling out, "Hey monk, what are you doing here." It was the voice of the Indian dwarf, Nimoxing.

Fawang kept his eye on the cave and said, "Three rabbits have just entered the cave, and I'm going to force them out."

After leaving empty handed from Xiangyang, Nimoxing was on his way back to the Mongolian camp when he saw from a distance Fawang's silver, bronze and lead wheels flying about in the air. He knew that he was in battle with someone and tracked him down. After seeing Fawang staring at the cave, he asked, "Guo Jing is in there?"

Fawang scoffed, "There's two male rabbits and a female one."

Nimoxing was delighted when he heard this and said, "So, not only are the Guo couple in there but also that rascal Yang Guo."

Fawang ignored him and after a look around, he came up with an idea. He gathered some dry wood and placed it in front of the cave before lighting it. The wind was blowing southwesterly and the smoke poured into the cave.

When Fawang was placing the dry wood in front of the cave entrance, Yang Guo knew what he was up to and said quietly to Li Mochou, "I'll check if there's another exit." He went back into the cave which was about sixty feet deep and found that it was a dead end. He returned to her and said, "Martial Uncle Li, they are trying to smoke us out, what shall we do?"

Li Mochou thought that there was no way that she would be able to escape from Fawang if she dashed out, but staying in the cave and getting suffocated wasn't a good plan either. If worse comes to worse she'll just leave the baby behind; with Fawang's main target being the baby, he'll probably let her go. She wasn't anxious and just smiled.

Not long after, the smoke had filled the cave and the two of them held their breath. The baby however started crying and coughing.

Li Mochou chuckled, "Are you upset?"

After the life and death battle that he had experienced with the baby, he started growing attached to her. When he heard her crying louder and louder, he said, "Give her to me!" He stretched out his hands and advanced two paces.

Li Mochou snapped her fly whisk down towards his arm and said, "Don't come any nearer! Aren't you afraid of my Soul Freezing needles?"

Yang Guo leapt back. When he heard the words 'Soul Freezing Needles' a sudden thought popped into his head. He remembered the time when he first met Li Mochou and picked up one of her needles. After just holding it for a little while, he was poisoned. He tore off a piece of cloth from his gown and wrapped it tightly around his right hand before going over to the three needles that Li Mochou had previously shot at him and picked them up. He planted the needles in the ground leaving about an inch of the tip above surface and then he covered them with sand and dirt to conceal the shininess of the needles. The cave entrance was blocked with a fire and the cave was filled with smoke; Fawang and Nimoxing did not see what Yang Guo had done.

After he had finished his trap, Yang Guo went over to Li Mochou and said quietly, "I've got a plan, try to stop the baby from crying." He then called out, "Great, there's an exit; we can get out of here." His voice was filled with joy.

Li Mochou was surprised and actually believed that there was another exit.

Yang Guo then whispered into her ear, "It's a lie; I'm trying to lure that bald bastard into my trap."

Fawang and Nimoxing were shocked when they heard this and believed that they had escaped. It seemed to be true when it suddenly became quiet and the cries of the baby died down. How could they know that Yang Guo had covered the cries of the baby with his sleeve? Nimoxing did not take any time to think and immediately flew around to the other side of the mountain to stop them. Fawang however took his time and noticed that cries of the baby were just muted; they were not coming from afar. He knew that it was Yang Guo trying to trick him into going around the back of the mountain so he could escape with the baby.

He chuckled, "Do you think I'm stupid!" He hid beside the entrance of the cave and armed himself with his wheels as he waited for Yang Guo to come out.

Yang Guo then called out, "Martial Uncle Li, that scoundrel has gone, let's leave." Suddenly he whispered, "We'll both shout in surprise at the same time and trick him into the cave."

Li Mochou didn't know what he had planned but she was well aware of his cunning after falling for his tricks before. Since he was sure of his plan, it would definitely work. Luckily for her, the baby was still in her hands, so after driving away Fawang, Yang Guo would still have no choice but to bring the "Jade Maiden's Manual" to her. She nodded.

Both of them cried out, "You...!" Yang Guo pretended that he was wounded and called out, "Why... why?" He then whispered, "Pretend that you are about to die."

Li Mochou said furiously, "You... though I... have died by your hands today, I'm... not going to die alone." Her voice silenced.

Fawang was delighted when he heard this, he thought that the two had fought over the baby and had destroyed each other before even leaving the cave. He was afraid that the baby would die along with them and if that happened, he would not be able to blackmail Guo Jing. So he brushed away the fire and entered the cave. Just two steps in; he felt a pain in the bottom of his foot.

He made a swift adjustment, and before he trodden down fully, he immediately pushed back with his right foot and leapt back out of the cave. When he landed, his left leg was numb and he almost fell down. With his profound internal energy, even after suffering several hacks and slashes from a knife, he could still remain upright; he realized at once that

he had trodden on something extremely poisonous. Just as he was about to take off his shoe and examine the wound, he heard Nimoxing returning and he was calling out, "That lying punk, there's no entrance at the back, the Guo couple are still in there."

Fawang took his hand away from his shoe and acted normal, saying, "You're right, but there's no more noise coming from the cave, they must have fainted from the smoke."

Nimoxing was delighted when he heard this thinking that finally he has managed to capture Guo Jing alive. However, he did not give a second to himself to think about why Fawang would allow him to do this without a fight. He whirled his Iron Snake to protect himself as he dashed into the cave.

Yang Guo had planted the needles in such a way that no matter how large or small your stride is, you will, step into one of them. Nimoxing was short, had small steps and a fast pace, his right foot stepped onto one and before he could react, his left foot stepped onto another. India is a hot and dry place and the people there don't wear shoes, Nimoxing was no different; though his feet had been conditioned to be as hard as leather, the Soul Freezing needles are extremely sharp and they punctured his feet. He was a manly fellow; a little pain was nothing to him. He used his Iron Snake to check if there were sharp objects and found nothing. Just as he was about to continue on his way to catch Guo Jing and his wife, his legs suddenly went limp and he collapsed. It was only now that he knew that the poison on the sharp objects was extremely venomous and he quickly rolled out of the cave.

He saw that Fawang had taken off his shoe and was holding a black and swollen left foot. Fawang was using his internal energy to suppress the poison.

Nimoxing was furious and he roared, "Bastard, you fell for that trap so why the hell didn't you tell me about it?"

Fawang smiled, "I fell for it and you fell for it, both of us have suffered."

Nimoxing could no longer control his anger as he sputtered, "I... no need capture Guo Jing...Nimoxing...rotten monk...a fight to the death!"

He could no longer use his legs; Nimoxing pushed the ground with his left hand and threw himself forward at Fawang while his right hand smashed down towards Fawang's head with his Iron Snake. Fawang raised his bronze wheel to block the Iron Snake and then swept his arm across, throwing his elbow out. With his body in midair, it was difficult for Nimoxing to avoid this blow; Fawang's elbow came at him extremely fast and struck him in the shoulder.

Nimoxing may have been thick boned, but this attack from Fawang left him in great pain. In such a state of fury he didn't give a damn about his life and threw himself at Fawang again. He hugged him tightly and bit down on Fawang's 'Qi Abode' pressure point. If everything was normal, Nimoxing would never be able to get so close to Fawang and hug him. Even if he did manage to grab him, how would he ever get a clear path towards Fawang's 'Qi Abode' pressure point? But right now, Fawang had fallen victim to an extremely lethal poison and was using all his internal energy to suppress it at the 'Bending Spring' pressure point. As long as he didn't let the poison spread, the most serious thing that would happen to him is the loss of a foot; his life would be safe. When Nimoxing threw himself at Fawang, Fawang had in effect lost his internal energy and was relying on his external martial arts to fend him off. Nimoxing however was giving everything he had and he bit down on the pressure point and didn't let go.

Fawang hooked out his right foot and with Nimoxing having lost use of his legs, they both fell down. Fawang tried to pull him off but with a vital pressure point held down, his strength had diminished, how could he pull him off? He could only hold Nimoxing's 'Great Shuttle' pressure point on his neck to stop him from making a fatal blow. The two were great martial artists but after falling victim to poison, they were now brawling on the ground, and not reflecting their martial arts status.

The two of them rolled around and were getting dangerously close the edge of a cliff. Fawang saw what was happening and he called out, "Let go, another roll and we'll fall to our deaths."

But Nimoxing had lost all his senses, with his internal energy unoccupied, his was greater than Fawang's and Fawang was unable to stop Nimoxing from pushing forward. Just a few inches away from falling into a deep chasm, Fawang's survival senses came to life and he called out, "Guo Jing's here!"

Nimoxing stopped and said, "Where?" As he said this, his mouth loosened. Fawang's pressure point was no longer blocked and he regained his strength, sending out a left palm. Nimoxing knew that he had been tricked and he lowered his head and threw his waist forwards.

Fawang's palm was meant to force Nimoxing back but he had forgotten that, after being poisoned, Nimoxing's legs were no longer in his control, how could he jump back? Instead of sending him back, Nimoxing was now going forward and the two bumped into each other, knocking them over the edge.

When Li Mochou knew that Yang Guo's plan had worked, she secretly praised him. After hearing Fawang and Nimoxing struggling with each other, she thought the danger was over

and was about to exit the cave. Suddenly she heard the two letting out a strange scream.

This was the scream of the two when they fell over the edge. With the cliff being over a hundred yards away and with a boulder blocking their view, they could not see what was happening.

Li Mochou said, "Hey kid, what are they up to?"

Yang Guo could not have guessed that the two had actually fallen off a cliff and said, "That damn monk is very sly, it could be possible that he is copying our trick of being injured to lure us out."

Li Mochou agreed and whispered, "Yes, they must be trying to trick us out to get my antidote." She walked to the entrance in order to take a look at what exactly was happening.

Yang Guo said, "Be careful of the needles." As soon as he said this he regretted his words; "Why should I warn that witch?"

Li Mochou quickly pulled her feet back. The fire at the entrance of the cave was now out and she could not see in the dark like Yang Guo could, if she had continued her steps, she would surely have stepped onto the needles. She may have the antidote but the poison was very lethal, it would leave her in great pain. If she had stepped on one, Yang Guo would have taken advantage and she might have died by her own poisonous needles.

She said, "Remove the needles, why should we stay in here?"

Yang Guo said, "Let's wait for the poison to finish them off."

Li Mochou scoffed at his reply. She was extremely wary of Yang Guo, the longer she stayed with him in the cave the more danger she was exposed to. When it came to martial

arts, she wasn't confident that she could defeat him and she certainly wasn't going to out think him. She lowered her head and tried to think of a way out.

Silence filled the cave. The two were preoccupied with their own thoughts. Suddenly, the baby cried. Ever since she was born, she hadn't been fed; it was a cry of hunger.

Li Mochou chuckled, "Where's my apprentice sister? Don't tell me that she's going to let her child starve to death?"

Yang Guo replied, "Who said its Gu Gu's child, its Hero Guo's."

Li Mochou said, "Do you think using Hero Guo's name would scare me? If it were someone else's child, why would you risk life and limb for it, it's got to be the bastard child of you and her."

Yang Guo shouted angrily, "Yes, I do want to marry Gu Gu but we're not married yet, how can we have a child? Watch your words."

Li Mochou scoffed, "If you want me to watch my words then you should watch your actions."

Yang Guo worshipped Xiao Longnu, how could he not be furious? He shouted, "My Master is pure and chaste, don't tarnish her name."

Li Mochou said, "Pure and chaste sounds so nice, it's just a shame that the virginity spot on her arm is gone."

A whooshing sound was heard as Yang Guo thrust his sword towards her chest. He shouted, "You can insult me but not my Master, I'm going to kill you." Whoosh, swish, swoosh; three strokes in a row were unleashed. His swordplay was clever, his eyes could see in the dark, Li Mochou only survived because she could hear the weapon coming through the air.

Though she didn't get hit, these stances left her staring at death. Luckily for her, Yang Guo was watching out for the baby, he held back on his most threatening stances in case she decided to take the child with her.

The two of them fought for over ten stances when suddenly the baby gave a howling cry before falling silent.

Yang Guo was afraid and immediately took back his sword. His voice was shaking as he said, "You've hurt the baby?"

When Li Mochou saw how much he cared for the baby, she was even more convinced that he was the father and said, "Right now it's alive, but if you don't follow my orders, do you think I'll keep it alive?"

A chill went through Yang Guo. He knew that she was a cold blooded murderer; if someone merely offended her just one little bit she would kill them and destroy their whole family. Killing a newly born child would be nothing to her. He said, "You are my Martial Uncle, as long as you don't insult my Master, of course I'll follow your orders."

Li Mochou could hear that he was willing to back down and knew that as long as the baby was in her hands, he could do nothing. She said, "Fine, I won't insult your Master, you'll obey me. Go out and take a look and see how they are doing against the poison."

Yang Guo obeyed and went outside. He took a look around and didn't see anyone, but he was wary that Fawang was hiding around somewhere so he hacked and slashed the surrounding trees and bushes. He found no one so he returned to the cave and said, "They're gone, the poison must have scared them off."

Li Mochou said, "Huh, even if they ran, how far are they going to get after falling victim to my poison? Go and pick up

the “Soul Freezing Needles” from the cave entrance and hand them over to me.”

After hearing the non-stop cries of the baby, he knew that he should go out and find something for the baby to eat so he followed her instructions. He wrapped his hand with a piece of cloth and gave the needles back to her.

Li Mochou put the needles away and headed for the exit. Yang Guo followed and asked, “Where are you taking the baby?”

Li Mochou said, “Back to my home.”

Yang Guo said anxiously, “Why do you want the baby? It’s not yours.”

Li Mochou blushed before saying with a serious tone, “What are you saying? If you hand over the Ancient Tomb’s “Jade Maiden’s Manual”, I’ll hand the baby back to you without harming a single of its hair.” She then started to use her lightness kung fu and headed north.

Yang Guo followed her and said, “You’ve got to feed her some milk first.”

Li Mochou turned around with a flushing face and shouted, “What the hell are you saying boy?”

Yang Guo said with surprise, “What? I’m just saying that the baby needs milk, otherwise, won’t she starve?”

Li Mochou said, “I’m a pure and chaste virgin, how will I have milk for her?”

Yang Guo smiled, “Martial Uncle Li, I’m saying that you should find some milk for her to drink, I’m not asking for your milk...”

When Li Mochou heard this, she couldn't help but laugh. She had stayed single and chaste, she lived a life of swords and sabers, and she knew nothing about caring for a child. She said, "Where can we get milk? How about feeding her rice?"

Yang Guo said, "Has she got any teeth?"

Li Mochou opened her mouth and shook her head, saying, "Not even one."

Yang Guo said, "We'll go to a village, find a woman who's just given birth and can produce milk to feed her, how about that?"

Li Mochou said with delight, "You are indeed full of ideas."

They climbed to the top of a hill and looked all around. Far away in the west, there was smoke. The two of them traveled very quickly and arrived at a small settlement in a short period of time. The area around Xiangyang had been incinerated and the Mongols had destroyed the large towns and villages near the main roads, the only types of settlements remaining were those in the wild and secluded valleys.

Li Mochou checked the houses one by one and when she got to the fourth one, she found a woman feeding a year old child. Li Mochou was delighted that she had found someone, she went in and picked up the child from the woman's arms and flung it away towards a bed. She then placed the baby girl's mouth in the woman's breast and said, "This child's hungry, feed it."

The woman's child was flailing its arms and legs, crying its eyes out on the bed. The woman quickly went to pick up her child. When Yang Guo saw that the woman was exposed, he quickly turned his back to her before hearing Li Mochou say, "I told you to feed my child, didn't you hear? Who told you to

hold your own child?" Yang Guo heard a thud and quickly jumped around just to see the woman's child by the wall with its head covered in blood. The woman was distraught and put Guo Jing's daughter down and threw herself onto her child, crying and sobbing as she did so.

Li Mochou was furious and she lifted her fly whisk to strike down onto the woman's back.

Yang Guo quickly used his sword to block this blow and thought, "How can there be such an irrational woman?" However, the words that came out of his mouth were, "Martial Uncle Li, if you kill her, there won't be anyone else left to feed the child."

Li Mochou replied angrily, "I'm looking out for your child yet here you are sticking your nose in where it's not wanted."

Yang Guo thought, "This child isn't mine yet you keep on saying so, and if it is, then how can I be sticking my nose in?" He smiled and said, "The baby is hungry, the most important thing right now is to feed her." He then stretched out his hands for her.

Li Mochou raised her fly whisk and blocked his arm, saying, "You dare pick her up?"

Yang Guo took a step back and smiled, "Fine, fine! You take her."

Li Mochou picked up the baby and was just about to place it back into the arms of the woman when she discovered that she was gone. While the two were arguing, the woman had slipped out with her child. Li Mochou was filled with rage and dashed outside to see the woman running away. She flew up and struck down with her fly whisk with a gust of wind; both mother and child died under that strike. She went to find another woman to feed the child but the settlement was

filled with men. Li Mochou became even angrier and she killed a few people at random. She then picked up a burning stick from a stove and set a few thatched houses on fire before leaving the settlement.

Yang Guo sighed to himself when he saw how vicious Li Mochou was. They didn't say a word as they wandered across the plains for several li. The baby had cried itself to sleep in Li Mochou's arms.

Li Mochou suddenly stopped in her tracks; there were two leopard cubs in front of her playing with each other. She took a step forward with the intention of kicking them away when she heard a roar from the side as a leopard leapt at her. She was startled by this and moved to the left. The leopard immediately turned around and leapt forward once again, clawing and slashing. Li Mochou raised her fly whisk and struck the leopard between the eyes. The leopard growled in pain and became even more vicious showing its sharp white teeth. It crouched on the ground and stared at its enemy with its gleaming eyes, waiting for a chance to attack.

Li Mochou waved out her left hand and shot out two needles at the leopard's eyes. Yang Guo called out, "Wait!" He blocked the needles with his sword while at the same time the leopard pounced; it leapt ten feet into the air speeding at him. Yang Guo leapt up and after knocking the needles out of the air with his sword, he punched the leopard on the spine. The leopard was in pain from this blow but immediately after it landed, it attacked again. Yang Guo moved to the side and sent out a left palm with half his energy. The leopard was sent rolling back.

Li Mochou wondered what he was up to; the needles that she had shot out would have killed the leopard, why is he wasting so much effort to save it? She watched as Yang Guo sent out a left palm here and right palm there, keeping the

leopard on the ground. He was relentless but each palm of his avoided the vitals of the leopard. The leopard's roars were becoming quieter and quieter, and after ten palms, it could take it no longer and ran away. Yang Guo was prepared for this and reached out for its tail to pull it back but after being defeated, the leopard ran away dejected with its tail hanging down between its legs and Yang Guo missed. He was about to use his lightness kung fu to chase after it when he saw the leopard turn around and call to its cubs to run. Yang Guo now knew what to do and he picked up the cubs, one in each hand.

Seeing its cubs being captured, the leopard no longer cared about its life and threw herself at Yang Guo once again. Yang Guo threw the cubs at Li Mochou and called out, "Catch them but don't kill them." He leapt up higher than the leopard and aimed to land on its back. When he landed, he pulled at its ears. The leopard used all her strength to throw Yang Guo off but she was no longer in control of her movements.

Yang Guo called out, "Martial Uncle Li, quickly get some tree bark and make some rope to tie it up."

Li Mochou said with annoyance, "I don't have time to mess around with you." She turned around to walk away.

Yang Guo said quickly, "Who's messing? This leopard can give milk!"

Li Mochou now understood and was filled with delight, she laughed, "Only you would come up with something like this." She then went off and tore off ten pieces of tree bark and made a rope with it. She first tied its mouth before tying its legs.

Yang Guo patted the dust off himself and smiled. The leopard could not move and its eyes showed that it was filled with fear.

Yang Guo stroked its head and said, "We just want your milk, and we won't kill you."

Li Mochou then placed the baby at a teat. The baby was starving and suckled immediately. The leopard could provide a lot of milk and as soon as the baby was full she closed her eye and slept.

Their gaze never left the baby girl as she fed and fell asleep. The two were filled with delight as they watched her smiling in her sleep and they smiled at each other.

The smile shared between these two dissolved most of the wariness between them. Li Mochou's face was filled with tenderness and she hummed a song as she held the baby in her arms. Yang Guo found some soft hay and made a bed on a large rock beneath a shady tree. He said, "Let her sleep here!"

Li Mochou quickly signaled with her hand, telling him to be quiet. Yang Guo stuck out his tongue and made a face at her. As he watched the baby sleep peacefully, he gave a sigh of relief before turning his heads to the cubs who were feeding off their mother.

The scent of flowers filled the air, a warm breeze blew through their clothes, the aura of death disappeared as both man and beast felt at ease.

Yang Guo had been through hell and high water in the past few days and it was only now that he could unwind. But it was in the strangest of circumstances; there was a cold blooded murderer to one side of him and a vicious beast on the other.

Li Mochou sat beside the baby and used her fly whisk to chase away the forest's flies. Her fly whisk had killed countless people and could send shivers down the spines of

the people of Wulin; yet now it was doing the first kind thing it had ever done.

Yang Guo watched Li Mochou as she stared at the baby. Sometimes there was a smile, at others there would be sadness on her face. She would look overwhelmed then suddenly, peace would fill her face. Yang Guo guessed that she must have been looking back on her life. He did not know much about her; all he knew were a few things that Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang had told him. Behind all these cruel and vicious acts was someone who must have endured bitter suffering; he had always hated her but right now, he couldn't stop himself from pitying her a little.

After a while, Li Mochou lifted her head and her eyes met Yang Guo's. She was slightly taken aback by this. She said quietly, "It's getting dark, what are we going to do about tonight."

Yang Guo looked around and said, "We can't take that big leopard with us, we'll find a cave to spend the night in for the time being and decide on what to do tomorrow." Li Mochou nodded her head.

Yang Guo looked all around and eventually found a cave that was just about suitable. He gathered some long grass and made a small and large bed in the middle of the cave. He said, "Martial Uncle Li, rest here, I'll go find something to eat." He then went off in search of some food. He was back within the hour with three rabbits and some wild fruits. He untied the leopard's mouth and fed one of the rabbits to it. He then gathered some firewood and roasted the other two rabbits for Li Mochou and himself. Afterwards, Yang Guo said, "Martial Uncle Li, go to sleep, I'll go outside and guard the cave." He took out a long rope and suspended it between two trees, and slept on the rope in midair.

This didn't surprise Li Mochou at all; after all, it was a skill of the Ancient Tomb. Apart from occasionally traveling with her disciple Hong Lingbo, she had always wandered alone. Tonight she had spent time with Yang Guo who tended to all her needs; what a contrast it was to the all the times she spent alone in the wild. As she thought about this, she sighed.

End of Chapter 22.

Chapter 23 - Sibling Rivalry

Translated by Noodles



The eagle was very big, yet uglier even than one's wildest imagination. Sparse feathers covered the eagle's entire body as if most of its feathers had been pulled off by somebody. The giant eagle had a big lump of skin, as red as blood, occupied the top of its head. The eagle strode about in big steps with its two extremely thick legs. There were probably thousands of bird species in the world, but Yang Guo had never seen any bird of prey as imposing and grand as this one.

It was past midnight, something woke Yang Guo. Chirrupings from an eagle came from the northwest. The chirrupings were somewhat croaked, bleak yet intense and lofty. Feeling very curious, he leapt off the rope bed gently and sought the direction of the sounds. The chirrupings would sometimes rise and sometimes stop, but they were much louder than the chirrupings of the two eagles on the Peach-Blossom Island. The path in front of him descended as he went forth and soon he found himself in a valley. The chirrupings weren't far from where he was. He crept forward on tiptoes and then quietly pushed aside the bushes in front of him. After a quick peek, he was astonished.

Right in front of Yang Guo's eyes stood a giant eagle. Taller than a human, yet uglier even than one's wildest imagination. Sparse feathers covered the eagle's entire body as if most of its feathers had been pulled off by somebody. The feathers were of a darkish yellow color, which made the eagle appear dirty. It did look somewhat similar to the two eagles on Peach-Blossom Island, but its ugliness made the difference as vast as from heaven to earth. The giant eagle had a hooked beak, and the big lump of skin, as red as blood, occupied the top of its head. There were probably thousands of bird species in the world, but Yang Guo had never seen any bird of prey as imposing and grand as this one. The eagle strode about in big steps with its two extremely thick legs. Sometimes it would extend its two short wings, so short that

one would wonder if the eagle was capable of flying. But the way it walked, with its head held high, certainly showed great power and grandeur.

After some more chirrups from the eagle, rustling sounds came from nearby, and suddenly, under the vivid moonlight, four poisonous snakes in bright colors shot at the ugly eagle like four arrows. The ugly eagle turned its head back and forth swiftly, and with four precise pecks, killed the four snakes instantly. The accuracy of the pecks and the speed it displayed were almost in match with first-class elite fighters in the Martial World.

Yang Guo was shocked by the magnificent skills the eagle had put on display. Immediately, his belittling thoughts turned into surprise and admiration. The ugly eagle opened its giant mouth and soon swallowed the four snakes.

"If I can catch this ugly eagle and put him next to Guo Fu's two eagles, I am sure this eagle would not be inferior to her's," Yang Guo muttered to himself quietly.

As he was pondering hard as to how to trap the eagle, a sudden stench caught his attention. Something poisonous and big must be close by.

The ugly eagle raised its head and chirped three times as if sending a signal of challenge to the hidden enemy. A loud whistling sound echoed as a giant serpent, as thick as the diameter of a bowl, and a triangle shaped head, emerged, hanging down from a big tree. And within a fraction of a second, the giant serpent had launched its attack viciously on the eagle. The ugly eagle didn't yield, but lunged forward instead. Thrusting its beak out, in a flash, the eagle had taken the poisonous giant serpent's right eye out. The eagle's neck looked short and thick, and it seemed as if it would have a hard time turning its head around, but the eagle shot the beak out and then retracted it back at

lightning speed. Yang Guo couldn't even tell how the eagle had blinded the giant serpent even though he had sharp eyes.

The giant poisonous serpent apparently experienced excruciating pain from losing its right eye. It opened its giant mouth wide and then clamped the huge jaws down hard, biting onto the big red lump on the ugly eagle's head. Yang Guo was astounded. He couldn't help but utter a cry of shock.

Excited by the success, the giant poisonous serpent let itself fall from the tree, and then wrapped its over-twenty-foot-long body around the ugly eagle tightly. It seemed that the ugly eagle was not going to get out alive this time. Not wishing to see the eagle die from the poisonous serpent's attack, Yang Guo sprang forward with his sword and hacked the blade toward the serpent's body. Suddenly, the eagle swung its right wing swiftly and smacked Yang Guo's right arm with tremendous force. Yang Guo was taken by complete surprise. His "Gentleman Sword" flew out of his grip and traveled dozens of feet in the air before falling back down to the ground. Dumbfounded, Yang Guo stared at the ongoing fight and saw the eagle pecking continuously at the serpent's back. Every peck would end up with blood spurting out of the wound like a small fountain.

"I guess you must be certain about your victory and don't want any help from me then!" Yang Guo thought.

The poisonous serpent squeezed tighter and tighter with its giant body. The ugly eagle's feathers almost stood up as it struggled to get out of its grip. Seeing that the eagle seemed to be losing the battle, Yang Guo picked up a large rock and smacked the serpent's body with it again and again. Feeling the pain, the giant serpent let lose its grip slightly and the ugly eagle suddenly reached out its beak and blinded the

serpent's left eye with a swift peck. The giant serpent opened its jaws wide and bit madly. Because both of its eyes were taken out, the bites were vicious but aimless. Its huge and poisonous fangs only struck thin air. The ugly eagle grabbed the serpent's neck with its talons and pressed it against the ground with all its weight. Meanwhile, its sharp beak never stopped pecking down hard on the serpent's head again and again. The serpent twisted and turned and slapped the ground hard with its giant body, trying to get out of the grip, but the eagle seemed to have endless strength and kept the serpent's head under his talons. After a long while, the serpent finally stopped twitching and lay still, dead.

The ugly eagle raised its head high and let out three loud chirps. Then it turned its head toward Yang Guo and chirruped in a much softer tone, as if it was calling out to him. Hearing the friendly chirrups from the eagle, Yang Guo walked slowly near the eagle. "Brother Eagle, your strength is incredible! It's very impressive!" he cheered.

The ugly eagle answered with some more soft chirrups. Slowly, it walked next to Yang Guo and then patted him on the shoulder gently with its left wing. Seeing how smart and unusual the eagle was, Yang Guo was very pleased, so he also patted the eagle gently on its back.

The ugly eagle let out some more chirrups in low pitches. Holding the corner of Yang Guo's shirt in its beak, the eagle pulled a couple of times before letting lose its grip and started walking away in big strides. Yang Guo knew the eagle wanted him to follow, so he tagged along. The ugly eagle's legs moved so swiftly that its speed was no slower than a galloping horse. Yang Guo had to use his Qing-Gong techniques in order to keep up with it. He couldn't help feeling very impressed inwardly. The path the eagle took descended lower and lower. Soon, Yang Guo found himself inside a deep valley. After walking continuously for another

good while, they came to the entrance of a big cave. The ugly eagle nodded its head three times with three chirrups as if it was saluting toward the cave. Then it turned its head to stare at Yang Guo.

“There must be some kind of a hermit Master who lives in the cave. Then of course the giant eagle must be a tamed pet of his. I must show my respect,” Yang Guo thought to himself. So he knelt down in front of the cave and kowtowed.

“Yang Guo hereby shows his respect to a Senior Master. Please forgive me for disturbing your peace,” he said and then waited. But no one answered from inside the cave.

The eagle pulled Yang Guo’s shirt again and then walked inside the cave. Yang Guo stared at the dark cave in front of him, not knowing if there was really an elite Kung Fu Master inside or some kind of goblins or demons. Feeling a bit uneasy and anxious, he decided to give no thoughts to his own safety and followed it in.

The cave was actually not deep at all. Only about thirty feet into the cave, they had already reached the end. Other than a table and a bench made out of stones, there was nothing inside the cave. The ugly eagle chirped again, signaling toward a corner of the cave. Casting a glance toward the corner, Yang Guo saw a pile of rocks and stones of all shapes and sizes jumbled together. It looked like a grave.

“This must be the grave of a lofty hermit. Too bad the eagle doesn’t know how to speak and can’t tell me more about him,” Yang Guo thought aloud.

He looked up and then something caught his attention. The rock wall seemed to have some words written on it. But thick dust and moss almost covered the entire rock wall, and it was hard to tell what words they were in the dark. Lighting a dry stick, Yang Guo wiped the moss off with his hand, and not to

his surprise, three lines of words appeared. The strokes of the words were thin but were carved into the rock wall very deeply. It seemed that the words were carved using a very sharp blade. The three lines said:

“Having roamed the martial world for more than thirty years, I have killed all my villainous foes and defeated all heroic champions. There’s no one who can be my equal under the same sky. Without any other challengers, I could only retreat to this deep valley, living a hermit’s life in seclusion, with only an eagle as my companion. Alas, throughout my life I searched for a match in vain. Unbearable loneliness is my destiny.” The signature at the bottom was, “Demonic Swordsman Dugu Seeking-A-Loss.”

Yang Guo read the three lines back and forth. Astonishment and deep admiration filled his heart. He could clearly feel the sadness and loneliness behind the words. Because there was no match for him in the entire world, this lofty Master had come to live a hermit’s life in seclusion in this deep valley. His understanding of martial arts must have reached the ultimate level. His title was “Demonic Swordsman,” then his skills in sword arts must have been miraculous. And his name was “Seeking-A-Loss,” then he must have traveled all over the world looking for someone who could defeat him, but all his efforts were in vain and he eventually passed away in great disappointment. His imagination filled his mind with thoughts of how the Sword Master had roamed the martial world; Yang Guo was lost in thought.

A long while passed before Yang Guo finally got hold of himself again. Holding the burning stick, he searched around in the cave, but failed to find anything else related to the sword Master. The grave made out of a pile of rocks and stones didn’t have any sign or tombstone on it. He figured that after the sword Master passed away, it must have been the Divine Eagle that had picked all the rocks and stones and

piled them on top of the Sword Master's dead body. Feeling his admiration growing larger and larger, Yang Guo couldn't help but kneel in front of the grave and kowtow. The Divine Eagle seemed to be pleased to see him show great respect towards the grave and gently patted him on the shoulder a couple of times.

"The sword Master Dugu had called the eagle a companion. Then even though the eagle is an animal, it really is a Senior of mine. It would be very appropriate if I call him Brother Eagle," Yang Guo thought to himself. So he said, "Brother Eagle, it must be fate that has brought us together. I need to leave now. Would you like to go with me or would you rather stay here guarding Sword Master Dugu's grave?"

The divine eagle answered with some chirrups. Yang Guo couldn't understand what the eagle had said, but seeing that the eagle stayed by the side of the grave, he thought, "The many Senior Masters I've met in the martial world never mentioned somebody named Dugu Seeking-A-Loss. He must have been someone who existed sixty or seventy years ago. The Divine Eagle had lived here for a long time and became attached to it. Of course he would rather stay than leaving with me." He put his arms around the Divine Eagle's neck and stroked its feathers gently. Then he walked out of the cave.

Throughout his life, other than the intimate relationship he had with Xiao Longnu, he didn't have any other closer friends. Now he met the Divine Eagle; although the eagle was only an animal, he really felt a close relationship, and was reluctant to part with him. After every couple of steps, he would turn and cast a glance back. And every time he turned around, the Divine Eagle would also answer with a loud chirp. Although the two of them were soon hundreds of feet apart, the Divine Eagle could still see him clearly in the dark and chirped every time Yang Guo turned his head back.

Suddenly, Yang Guo's heart burned with indignation. He shouted out loud, "Brother Eagle, I don't have much life left in me. After I take care of the business regarding Uncle Guo's baby daughter and after I bid my farewell to my aunty, I will come back here. If I get to be buried next to Great Hero Dugu, then my life wouldn't have been a waste of time after all." He bowed and then headed out in big strides.

He was worried about the safety of Guo Jing's daughter so he gathered his sword and hurried back to the cave. As soon as he got back to the cave, Li Mochou said, "Where have you been? There's some kind of damn annoying ghost around here."

Yang Guo said, "What ghosts?" As soon as he finished, he could hear a distant cry.

Yang Guo was taken aback by this and said quietly, "Martial Uncle Li, look after the baby, I'll take care of this."

The cries were getting closer and closer until distinct words could be made out, "What a tragic life I lead...what a tragic life I lead! My wife has been killed and now my own two sons are trying to kill each other." Under the starlight, Yang Guo could see a large, scruffy man stumbling around, sobbing with his hands over his face. He could not see his face clearly.

Li Mochou said, "So it's a madman. Send him away; don't let him wake the baby."

The man continued to sob, "I only have two sons and yet these two sons of mine have decided to fight with each other, what is there left for me to live for?" He gave out a long sorrowful howl.

Yang Guo remembered something and thought, "Could it be him?" He walked out of the cave slowly and said, "Is that senior Wu?"

This person had come all the way out here in the middle of the night because he wanted to let all his emotions out; he had not expected that anyone would be out here as well. As soon as he heard Yang Guo's voice, he immediately controlled himself and shouted, "Who are you? What are you doing sneaking around here?"

Yang Guo said, "My name is Yang Guo. Is Senior's surname Wu with first name Santong?"

This person was indeed Wu Santong. After being injured by Li Mochou's silver needles in Jiaxing, he fell unconscious. By the time he came round, he saw his wife crouching above him and she was sucking the poison from the wound above his left eye. He was shocked and said, "Sanliang, the venom of this poison is lethal, how can you suck it out?" He quickly pushed her away. Wu Sanliang spat out a mouthful of blood on the ground and smiled, "The blood has now become red again; you should be alright."

Wu Santong saw that her cheeks were purple and was extremely alarmed. He trembled, "Sanliang, you... you..."

Wu Sanliang knew that by saving her husband, she would die immediately afterwards; she stroked the heads of her two sons and said, "I know that you have been unhappy for as long as we've been married. It's too late to correct the mistake now; all I'm asking is that you take care of our children and watch them grow into men, teach them brotherly love and friendship..." She could no longer finish her words.

After this shock, his madness came back on him once more. As he watched his two sons crying over the body of their dead mother, his mind became blank and he left them as they were. He roamed the realm in this state of confusion for many years, but as time went on, his mind became clearer. After the Heroes' Feast, Sishui Yuyin left with a few friends of

the Jianghu world and as they conversed, talk of a particular character whose description matched his martial brother Wu Santong came up. He went in search of this man and eventually came across his martial brother.

When he heard that his two sons were at Xiangyang, Wu Santong was filled with joy and immediately made his way there. He arrived just after the great battle with Fawang. Guo Jing was still injured and Huang Rong had just given birth. After meeting with Zhu Ziliu and Guo Fu, he found out that his two sons were actually fighting with each other outside the city. Memories of his wife's last request came back to him and he was filled with sorrow. He immediately left the city to look for them. He passed a run down temple and heard the clashing of weapons from within. After taking a peak inside, he saw Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen in battle with each other. At first, he wasn't able to recognize his now grown up sons but soon after seeing the two using a sword in their right hands and the "Solitary Yang Finger" with the left to seal the other's pressure points, he knew they were his sons and immediately jumped in and ordered them to stop.

The two were of course delighted to be reunited with their father but as soon as the name Guo Fu came up, the tension between the two flared up once again. No matter what Wu Santong said or tried to stop the fighting over Guo Fu, nothing worked. The two of them did not dare to argue in front of their father but whenever he was out of sight, the two bickered once more. They then arranged a meeting that night to have a duel to decide this matter once and for all. Wu Santong had overheard them and decided to get to their meeting place first to stop them. The more he thought about this situation the more depressed he got and he could no longer help himself and had to let it all out. Just at this time, a young man popped out from a cave, his natural reaction was one of wariness and he shouted, "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

After hearing that this man was indeed Wu Santong, Yang Guo replied, "Uncle Wu, my name is Yang Guo, I used to live on Peach Blossom Island with your sons in Hero Guo's residence; I have always admired Uncle Wu's name."

Wu Santong nodded and said, "What are you doing here? Ah, that's it, Dunru and Xiuwen have arranged to duel here and you've come to officiate. Huh, you're supposedly a friend to them, why haven't you tried to stop them? Instead, you're here to egg them on, what kind of friend are you?" By now, his voice was becoming shouts and yells as he vented all his anger on Yang Guo. He cursed as he advanced forward with a raised palm, wanting to teach this troublemaker of a youngster a lesson.

Yang Guo knew what he wanted to do by his body language and thought there wasn't a need to get into a fight with him, so he took two steps back and smiled, "I didn't know that the Wu's had arranged a duel here, you cannot accuse me falsely."

Wu Santong shouted, "You are still trying to deny it? If you didn't know about this then why the hell are you here? Of all the places you could be, why have you turned up in this particular place?"

Yang Guo thought what an unreasonable fellow but this meeting was indeed quite a coincidence; he was lost for words as he searched for a reply.

When Wu Santong saw his hesitation, he was convinced that Yang Guo was up to no good. When he was younger, love wasn't kind to him and because of this, every time he saw a handsome young man, he would feel a bit of revulsion towards them. He thought, "This kid might not even know who my sons are, he must be up to no good sneaking around here like this." He did not give it any more thought as his anger took over. He raised his right palm and struck

downwards towards Yang Guo's shoulder. Yang Guo shifted his body leaving the palm striking thin air but Wu Santong immediately followed with an elbow. Yang Guo saw that his stances were very powerful so he did not dare to take it easy; he slanted his body and moved his feet, avoiding another stance.

Wu Santong called out, "Not bad kid, your lightness kung fu is pretty good. Now raise your sword and attack!"

At this time, the baby in the cave suddenly woke up and started to cry. Yang Guo thought, "Martial Uncle Li killed his wife, if the two see each other, it'll surely get ugly. If those two fight, each stance will be a fatal strike; it will not be easy for me to protect the baby in that situation." So he smiled, "Uncle Wu, how can junior exchange stances with a person of your stature? But since you've got it in your mind that I'm up to no good then I'm left with no choice. How about this, I'll let you have three stances to attack. If you don't kill me within these three stances, then you'll have to leave this place. Agreed?"

Wu Santong was furious and shouted, "You arrogant punk, I held back on that last palm and have yet to use my best skills, how dare you look down on me?"

His right index finger suddenly stretched out and used the "Solitary Yang Finger". He had trained this skill for many years and had profound internal energy. Yang Guo saw his index finger moving around and though it was coming at him at a fairly slow speed, all the major pressure points of his upper body were covered within the finger's range leaving him guessing which pressure point was being targeted. As he was trying to figure it out, he realized all nine of his major pressure points were being threatened. He immediately flicked out his index finger and used Huang Yaoshi's "Divine Release of the Flicking Finger".

The “Divine Release of the Flicking Finger” and the “Solitary Yang Finger” have been famous in the Jianghu world for years. Both have their virtues, but Yang Guo’s internal energy was shallow. He’d learned it in a very short space of time and had yet to train it diligently. How could it match the years that Wu Santong put into his skill? As soon as the two fingers touched, Yang Guo’s right arm trembled and his whole body got hot. He staggered back five or six paces and had to hold himself up with a tree stump to keep from falling over.

Wu Santong said, “This kid has indeed lived on Peach Blossom Island.” Out of respect for Huang Yaoshi and out of admiration for his martial arts talent that could actually block this attack at such a young age, he called out, “The second finger is coming, if you can’t take it then don’t force yourself to, I won’t take your life.” As he said this, he advanced forward a few more steps and once again stretched out his finger; this time, Yang Guo’s abdomen was targeted.

This time, even more major pressure points were targeted; the twelve major pressure points of the surging channel, the ‘Free Gate’, ‘Open Valley’, low to mid ‘Pillar’, ‘Fourfold Fullness’, the ‘Pubic Bone’, ‘Meeting of Yin’, all of these places were under the threat of the finger. Yang Guo saw that the incoming force of the finger was extremely quick, if he tried to use the “Divine Release of the Flicking Finger” again, his finger would probably break. His innards will be at risk as well so he immediately used the stance “Clearing of the Zither’s Heart”; a light swooshing sound was produced as he unsheathed the Gentleman Sword and protected the area two inches away from his abdomen. Wu Santong quickly took his finger back from the threat of the blade and sent out a third finger. This attack came out like lightning and the finger aimed for the spot between Yang Guo’s eyes. He thought that Yang Guo surely would not be able to block this attack with his sword. Yang Guo knew that it would be difficult to neutralize such a fast attack so he quickly used a

move from the “Nine Yin Manual”. He crouched down and darted forward between Wu Santong’s legs. Though this move was swift and agile, it looked quite pathetic and using it makes the user lose face; but luckily for Yang Guo, he was a junior so there wasn’t much shame in using it.

Before Wu Santong could say ‘Damn’, he felt Yang Guo patting him on his shoulder before hearing him say, “Uncle, that third finger was very powerful.”

With this shock, he lowered his hands and moved away before saying with gloominess, “Well, it looks there really are heroes amongst the young; there’s no more use for an old man like me anymore.”

Yang Guo quickly sheathed his sword and bowed to him. He said, “That last stance was extremely unsightly, if that were a real duel, it would be a loss for me.”

Wu Santong felt a bit better and sighed, “There’s no need for that, if you had attacked me from behind, I’d have no chance of surviving. It was a very clever move, an old and dumb man such as I can’t compete with smart youngsters such as you...” Before he could finish, the sounds of footsteps could be heard; there were two people coming towards them. Yang Guo tugged at Wu Santong’s sleeve and the two hid behind a bush. The footsteps were gradually becoming louder and louder; the two people that had come were indeed Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen.

Wu Xiuwen stopped and took a look around before saying, “Brother, it’s wide open here, let’s pick this spot.”

Wu Dunru said, “Fine!” He didn’t like talking much. Swoosh; he drew his sword.

However Wu Xiuwen did not draw his sword, he said, “Brother, if I can’t beat you today, and even if you don’t kill

me, I won't be able to live. Remember the three major tasks you have to do; get revenge for our mother's death, look after father and love and protect sister Fu."

When Wu Santong heard these words, tear rolled from his eyes.

Wu Dunru said, "We all know this, why talk? If you beat me, the same applies." He raised his sword and took an open stance.

Wu Xiuwen still did not draw his sword and took a few steps forward before saying, "Brother, we lost our mother when we were young and our father left us; we have always relied on each other and never argued, but now that it's come to this; you don't blame me do you?"

Wu Dunru said, "Brother, it's fate, none of us decided this."

Wu Xiuwen said, "No matter who lives or who dies, this secret can never be revealed to prevent grief for father and sister Fu." Wu Dunru nodded and held his brother's left hand. The brothers looked at each other in silence.

When Wu Santong heard how deep their brotherly bond was, he was deeply comforted. He was about to jump out to stop them from doing anything stupid, when suddenly, they both called out, "Let's start!" Both jumped backwards at the same time. Wu Xiuwen stretched out his hand and unsheathed his sword; three swift strokes were unleashed. Wu Dunru parried the first two strokes and blocked the third before replying with two stances of his own, both of them aimed to strike Wu Xiuwen down. Wu Santong's heart jumped when he saw this but Wu Xiuwen moved his body and leaped to the side, easily avoiding the attacks.

Sounds of clashing weapons echoed throughout the valley as the two brothers fought a duel to the death. Wu Santong was

worried but also sad at the same time; he loved his sons with his life and loved them equally. With the two fighting so viciously it was as if they were fighting their sworn enemies; one of them would come to harm sooner or later. If he came out now and told them to stop, the two would stop the fight; but if things don't end today, then it will continue on tomorrow and he can't always be there to watch over them. The more he watched the greater the pain he felt as he thought about how tragic his life was, tears again fell from his eyes.

When they were younger Yang Guo did not get on with the Wu brothers, and after meeting again, there was still some animosity. He was a stubborn fellow and wasn't the most forgiving. When he first saw the Wu brothers fighting, he had hoped that something would happen to them; but after seeing the anguish that Wu Santong was suffering, he thought about the little time that he had left and his compassionate side surfaced. "I haven't done much good in my life; after I die, Gu Gu will obviously be upset but apart from her, only Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang and Gongsun Lu'E will remember me. Why don't I do something good today and let this old man remember my virtues?" He made his mind up and whispered in Wu Santong's ears, "Uncle Wu, I have a plan to stop your sons from fighting."

Wu Santong turned his tearful face around and gratitude filled eyes looked back at him. However, he was not sure how Yang Guo was going to stop his sons from fighting.

Yang Guo said quietly, "I hope that uncle will not be offended when your sons are humbled."

Wu Santong could not express his thanks and just held Yang Guo's hands tightly. Wu Santong did not experience much love when he was younger, his marriage was arranged by his parents and because of his struggles with love, he was

unable to find peace. After his wife sacrificed her life for him, he began to appreciate his wife more and the feelings that he had for He Yuanjun gradually faded. The only thing that he cared about now was his sons; if he could keep them safe from harm, he would gladly trade his own life for them. Hearing these words from Yang Guo in such a desperate situation as this was like suddenly meeting the Goddess of Mercy in times of difficulty.

When Yang Guo saw his expression, he couldn't stop his heart from aching as he thought, "If my father was still alive, he would definitely love me as much as Wu Santong loved his sons." He whispered, "Don't let them know you are here otherwise my plan won't work."

The duel between the Wu brothers was becoming more and more heated. Both of them were using the "Yue Maiden Swordplay". This skill belonged to Han Xiaoying of the Seven Freaks of Jiangnan. The two had practiced and trained this swordplay countless times over the years but this time, it was not a sparring session; it was a life and death duel where one mistake would be fatal.

Yang Guo watched them for a while and thought, "Uncle Guo's martial arts reign supreme but it appears that his students have not absorbed these skills. With the Wu brother's martial arts talents plainly ordinary, I don't think they have learned even twenty percent of Uncle Guo's martial arts." He suddenly laughed out loud and slowly walked out.

The Wu Brothers leapt back in shock and pointed their swords in the direction of the laugh. When they saw that it was Yang Guo, they both shouted at the same time, "What are you doing here?"

Yang Guo laughed, "What are you doing here?"

Wu Xiuwen gave a laugh and said, "We both felt bored tonight so we've come out here to practice our swordplay."

Yang Guo thought, "Little Wu is pretty alert, he's acting as if nothing was happening." He chuckled, "Practicing so hard that you don't have a care for your life? How hard working you two are."

Wu Dunru yelled, "Go, this is none of your business."

Yang Guo chuckled, "If you guys were really just working hard practicing, of course it wouldn't be my business. But between every stance you are unleashing, you are filled of thoughts for my sister Fu, if this is none of my business then whose business is it?"

Yang Guo's words of 'my sister Fu' pierced the brothers' hearts, leaving their bodies shaking and swords quivering.

Wu Xiuwen roared, "What the hell are you saying?"

Yang Guo said, "Isn't Sister Fu Uncle and Auntie Guo's daughter? Don't the parents arrange a marriage? Uncle Guo betrothed her to me a long time ago; you guys know about this but yet here you are, fighting over my fiancée, what kind of person do you take me for?"

His tone was becoming more and more serious as he said this and he left the brothers speechless. They both knew that Guo Jing had always wanted to marry his daughter to him but Huang Rong and Guo Fu had always disliked Yang Guo. When the two's thoughts were revealed by Yang Guo, they could only glance at each other and didn't know how to reply.

Wu Xiuwen was again alert in urgent times and chuckled, "Huh, betrothed? Only you would say a thing like that! Has there been an agreement between the matchmakers? Has the engagement been stamped down on paper?"

Yang Guo replied, "Okay, so both of you brothers have had the permission of your parents and the agreement from your matchmakers I take it."

Custom was extremely important during this time; marriages must have the agreement of parents and the matchmakers. The two brothers had assumed that after one of them loses, only the winner will go back to Guo Fu leaving with her with no choice. She'll definitely agree to the proposal leaving just the task of convincing the Guo couple to agree. They were not prepared for this meddling from Yang Guo.

Wu Xiuwen took a second to think before replying, "It might be true that Master wants to betroth sister Fu to you. But Master wife has planned to betroth her to one of us. The three of us are in the same boat, none of us can truly say their claim is right, it looks like sister Fu's future is going to be complicated."

Yang Guo laughed at the sky.

Wu Xiuwen snapped when he saw that Yang Guo was laughing loudly non-stop without saying anything and said, "What are you laughing at? Are my words wrong?"

Yang Guo laughed, "Wrong, so wrong. Uncle Guo loves me, Auntie Guo loves me even more, how can you two compete with me?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "Huh, who's going to believe your words?"

Yang Guo laughed, "Why should I lie? Auntie Guo long ago agreed to this marriage, otherwise, why would I risk my life to save them if they weren't my in-laws? It's all because of sister Fu. Tell me, has your Master wife ever promised you they'll betroth their daughter to you?"

The two brothers looked at each other with alarm, their Master wife has indeed not said a single word about this

matter, not even hinted that she'll say something about it; could it be that she has indeed agreed to betroth her daughter to this punk? The two brothers were having a duel to the death with each other; but with this sudden appearance of a common enemy, they both moved closer towards one another.

Yang Guo had heard their conversation with Guo Fu earlier on and wanted to make the two jealous so he smiled, "Sister Fu said to me; 'Those two brothers are annoying me to death', and she couldn't discourage you guys so she said that she liked both of you. Tell me, is there a virtuous girl who'll say she loves two people at once? My sister Fu is more than virtuous, so of course she'd never do a thing like this. Let me make it clear for you; when she says that she likes both of you, she's actually saying that she doesn't like either." He then impersonated Guo Fu's voice on that night and said, "Little brother Wu, you've told me a thousand times, a million times how you feel about me, I already know. Don't you know how hard it is for me? You are always weird like this, what do you want to say to me?"

The brothers' faces turned red. Those words were said by each of them to Guo Fu with no one else around; if she didn't tell Yang Guo, how would he know about it? The two of them felt their hearts' breaking, both thinking that Guo Fu has refused all along to agree to marry them because of this.

When Yang Guo saw their faces, he knew that his plan had worked, he put on a serious face and said, "Look, sister Fu is my fiancée, we're going to stay married for years to come, we'll have sons, daughters, grand children and all..." At this point, a long quiet sigh came from behind; it was Xiao Longnu's voice.

Yang Guo called out, "Gu Gu!" But there was no reply; he immediately thought that Li Mochou had made this sigh and

that person cannot meet the Wu family at all so he said loudly, "If you two continue to act like this, people will only laugh at you. In respect of my in-laws, I'll forget about this matter. You two better go back to Xiangyang and help my in-laws guard the city." He was actually calling the Guo couple his in-laws.

The Wu brothers were now despondent and were now holding each other's arms. Wu Xiuwen said gloomily, "Fine, brother Yang, I wish you and apprentice sister Fu... a long and prosperous life. We'll leave this place for somewhere else; we'll disappear from the world." The two of them turned to leave.

Yang Guo was feeling pleased with himself; the two brothers were still as angry as ever at him but now they'll hate Guo Fu. The two brothers' relationship will now be stronger than ever after this; their father's wishes will at least be fulfilled.

Wu Santong was listening from the bushes and when he heard that Yang Guo had convinced his sons to stop fighting, he was overwhelmed with delight; as he saw his sons walking away, he couldn't stop himself from calling out, "Wen'er, Ru'er, let's leave together."

The two brothers were slightly startled when they heard their father's voice and both replied, "Father."

Wu Santong bowed deeply to Yang Guo and said, "Brother Yang, I will never forget your kindness."

Yang Guo frowned; how could he say this in front of the brothers? By the time he wanted to say something to throw them off the scent, Wu Xiuwen had become suspicious and said, "Brother, that punk's words may not be the truth."

Wu Dunru may not be as articulate as his brother, but he was just as alert; he looked at his father and then nodded to his

brother.

Wu Santong had saw that he had made a mess of things and quickly said, "It's not what you think, I did not get brother Yang to stop you fighting."

At first, the Wu brothers were just suspicious, but after hearing their father trying to cover up his words, they both immediately thought about how Yang Guo and Guo Fu had never gotten on with each other. He and Xiao Longnu were deeply in love, so the things that he had just said were most probably lies.

Wu Xiuwen said, "Brother, we'll go back to Xiangyang and ask sister Fu about this."

Wu Dunru replied, "Yes! We can't be deceived by other people's lies."

Wu Xiuwen said, "Father, come with us as well. Master and Master wife are your old friends, you should go see them."

Wu Santong replied, "I... I..." He became flustered as he tried to decide what to do. He wanted to use his authority to order his sons to stop fighting but was afraid that they'll just agree to please him and then go off fighting as soon as his back was turned.

Yang Guo said coldly, "Little brother Wu, how can you say the words 'sister Fu'? From now on, not only can't you say it, you're not allowed to even think it."

Wu Xiuwen yelled, "What, this from the world's most unreasonable person? I have said the words 'sister Fu' for years now; not only do I want to say it today, I want to say it tomorrow. Sister Fu, sister Fu, my sister Fu..." Suddenly, smack! Yang Guo slapped his left cheek.

Wu Xiuwen leaped back two steps and held up his sword. He lowered his voice and said, "Fine, the one named Yang, it's been a few years since we've had a fight."

Wu Santong shouted, "Wen'er, why start a fight?"

Yang Guo turned to him and said with a serious face, "Uncle Wu, who exactly are you trying to help?" Logically, he would of course help his son, but it was clear to see that Yang Guo was trying to help him stop his sons from fighting, his mouth froze.

Yang Guo said, "How about this, go and sit over there. I won't hurt them and more likely than not, they won't be able to harm me; just watch the show."

He was a lot younger than Wu Santong but as he said this, Wu Santong couldn't stop himself from complying with his instructions and he sat down on a rock.

Yang Guo unsheathed his Gentleman Sword and chopped a large Pine tree at his side in two. He pushed out his left palm and toppled the top half of the tree. The sword left a straight and smooth cut. When the brothers saw how fine a weapon his sword was, they couldn't help but to look at each other in shock.

Yang Guo returned the sword in its sheath and laughed, "Do you think you are worthy of fighting against this sword?" He casually stretched out his hand and snapped a branch. He removed the leaves and left himself with a three-foot long wooden rod. He said to them, "I know that you don't believe that my mother-in-law favors me. How about this, I'll use this wooden rod and you two use your swords against me at the same time. You can use the martial arts that my father and mother-in-law taught you, or you can use the "Solitary Yang Finger" that your Martial Uncle Zhu taught you. I however, will only use the martial arts that my mother-in-law has

taught me; if I use a stance from another sect's martial arts then that means I've lost."

The brothers had been worried about how good his martial arts were; they had seen him in action twice against Jinlun Fawang and the stances that he had used were completely new to them. But with Yang Guo referring to Guo Jing and Huang Rong as his in-laws as if he had already married Guo Fu, how could they not get angry? Also, Yang Guo was being too arrogant and insulting towards them. Two against one with a wooden rod against swords and limiting himself to using only martial arts that Huang Rong had taught him. With these advantages, if they don't win then it would be a disgrace.

Wu Dunru felt that this wasn't fair and shook his head. He was about to say something when Wu Xiuwen said, "Fine, you were the one who made the rules; it wasn't we brothers who asked for it. Should you happen to use a stance of the Quanzhen or Ancient Tomb martial arts what then?" He was thinking that although this punk's martial arts were good, it was only because he had learned the advanced techniques of the Quanzhen and the Ancient Tomb. When we were living on Peach Blossom Island, we beat the hell out of you and you had to run away, how good were you then? He said these words so that the two of them could fight him together.

Yang Guo said, "We are fighting today not because of old grudges or today's feud, we are fighting because of sister Fu. If I lose, just one word or glance at her then I'm a worthless and shameless scoundrel." These words were meant to force the brothers to say the same thing.

Wu Xiuwen could only say, "If we lose, then we too won't see sister Fu again."

Yang Guo faced Wu Dunru and said, "What about you?"

Wu Dunru said angrily, "My brother and I share the same view, what else am I going to say?"

Yang Guo laughed, "Fine, if you lose today and you don't keep to your promise, then you are a worthless, shameless scoundrel, yes?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "Correct. The same applies to you. Let's start!" He stretched his sword forward and aimed for Yang Guo's leg. Wu Dunru attacked at the same time but he came in from the left. Within a stance, the two had moved themselves into the pincer position.

Yang Guo leapt forward and called out, "You brothers are pretty powerful when you fight together."

Wu Dunru attacked again and Yang Guo raised his wooden rod but he did not counterattack, instead he just moved left and right and said, "A wife is like a piece of clothing, brothers are like limbs, if a piece of clothing is torn it can be mended but if limbs snap, there's no return! Have you heard this poem before?"

Wu Xiuwen shouted, "What are you babbling on about? Why aren't you showing us the martial arts that Master wife taught you?" Wu Dunru did not say a word as he fought harder.

Yang Guo said, "Fine, you better watch out, here comes the masterful martial arts that my mother-in-law personally taught me!" He then aimed his wooden rod downwards and used the 'trip' codex from the "Dog Beating Stick Technique". At the same time, he stretched out his left index finger and pretended to go for Wu Dunru's pressure point. Wu Dunru leapt back to avoid this attack. Wu Xiuwen called out as he was tripped.

When Wu Dunru saw that his brother was in trouble, he raised his sword and quickly attacked Yang Guo.

Yang Guo said, "That's right, brothers should share the same fortune." The wooden rod became a blur and within the blink of an eye, the rod was behind him and poked him on the behind. The wooden rod appeared to turn around in a clumsy fashion but the position it came from was one that the opponent had no chance of guessing. The "Dog Beating Stick Technique" is mystifying and unpredictable, not even a ghost or god can guess where it'll end up. Though Wu Dunru didn't feel much from this attack, he had already lost a stance to him and on the inside; he was starting to get worried.

Wu Xiuwen leapt up from the ground and called out, "That's the "Dog Beating Stick Technique", when did Master wife teach you that? You only learned a few stances when we watched in secret as Master wife was teaching Lu Youjiao, how does that count?"

Yang Guo stretched out his wooden rod and tripped him up once again, this time throwing him forwards. Wu Dunru slashed across to protect his brother.

Yang Guo waited until Wu Xiuwen picked himself up from the ground before laughing, "We both watched at the same time yet how come I know how to use it but you don't? My mother-in-law was only teaching Lu Youjiao the codex that time, she taught me the stances personally. Even my sister Fu doesn't know how to use it, how would you know?"

Wu Xiuwen didn't know that Yang Guo had learned the techniques from Hong Qigong during the battle between Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng. Wu Xiuwen was thinking what Yang Guo said was most probably true, otherwise how come he was able to use the technique after just once listening to the codex, while he himself couldn't even understand a single point but he still argued, "That's

because each one's character is different. Only the Beggar Clan Leader can use the stick technique, we only accidentally overheard it, without Master wife's permission, how can we learn it in secret? Only shameless scoundrels would hold onto what they've heard. You're shameless; others will mock you."

Yang Guo laughed out loud. The wooden rod made two noises as it poked the backs of the two brothers. The brothers leapt away with red faces. Yang Guo laughed, "Since I haven't got any evidence at the moment and though I may have used the "Dog Beating Stick Technique" to defeat you, you guys will not accept defeat. Fine, I'll let you experience another martial art that my mother-in-law taught me." He looked at big Wu and then at little Wu before asking, "My mother-in-law's martial arts, who taught them to her?"

Wu Xiuwen said angrily, "Mother in-law this, father in-law that, you're shameless, we're not going to speak to you anymore."

Yang Guo let out a laugh and said, "Why are you so bad tempered? Fine, let me ask you, before your Master wife entered the tutelage of Hong Qigong, who taught her martial arts?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "My Master wife is the daughter of Lord Huang of Peach Blossom Island, her martial arts were taught by Lord Huang, who doesn't know about this?"

Yang Guo said, "That's right. You guys have lived on Peach Blossom Island for many years; do you know what the greatest skills of Lord Huang are?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "Lord Huang's knowledge is vast and wide, he's versed in all, you can't distinguish what a great skill is and a great skill isn't."

Yang Guo said, "You are right there. When it comes to swordplay, what technique does Lord Huang use?"

Wu Xiuwen, "Why the questions when you are already know the answer? Lord Huang's "Jade Flute Swordplay" is peerless in the world of Wulin, it is famed throughout the land, and everyone in the world of Jianghu knows this."

Yang Guo said, "Have you ever seen Lord Huang before?"

Wu Xiuwen said, "Lord Huang is drifting through the lands, he is in one place one moment and gone the next, even Master and Master wife cannot find him, what chance have we juniors of meeting him?"

Yang Guo said, "Have you seen senior's "Jade Flute Swordplay" before?"

Wu Xiuwen gave out a cold laugh and said, "One year when it was Lord Huang's birthday, Master wife dedicated a feast in his honour and after the feast, she performed the swordplay once. My brother and I along with sister Fu saw it with our very own eyes. By that time, brother Yang was in the tutelage of Quanzhen sect."

Yang Guo smiled, "That's right. Later on, my mother-in-law... my mother-in-law taught me the "Jade Flute Swordplay" in secret."

The Wu brothers looked at each other in disbelief, they were thinking that although that Yang Guo had entered Huang Rong's tutelage, all she had taught him was reading and writing, she did not teach him any martial arts. It was because of this that he was not a match for them in the fight they had on the island. They had heard from Grandpa Ke that the final push that he did on Wu Xiuwen was Ouyang Feng's "Toad Stance". The "Jade Flute Swordplay" is complicated and ingenious, even though Guo Fu was Huang Rong's

daughter, she was not taught it even to this day. Since Yang Guo returned from Mount Zhongnan, the meetings that he had with Huang Rong were brief, even if their Master wife wanted to teach him this swordplay, she may not have found time to.

Yang Guo swept his wooden rod lightly and called out, "Watch out, this stance is called "The Flute's Notion to a Dragon"!" Using the rod as a sword, the rod suddenly straightened and thud, the rod struck Wu Dunru on the right side of his chest. If the wooden rod were a sharp sword, the sword would have gone through him taking his life.

Wu Xiuwen was alert and quickly attacked with his sword, attacking Yang Guo's right side but he was still too slow, Yang Guo's wooden rod had turned around and suddenly pierced towards his right side. This stance started second but finished first, Wu Xiuwen's wrist would have been struck by the rod before his sword reached his opponent. If that happened he would surely be disarmed. He quickly changed his stance, pulling his waist in and taking his sword back, as he kicked out with his left leg. However, Yang Guo's rod was now going towards Wu Dunru's shoulder; the rod moved and so did Yang Guo, displaying attack and defense at the same time, avoiding Wu Xiuwen's kick without dodging. Wu Xiuwen's kick hit thin air while Wu Dunru's situation became dire; he used his sword and defended tightly to avoid any more blows to his body.

Within a few more stances, both brothers were struggling; even if they defended with their lives it wouldn't be enough, how would they even have time to try to cut the wooden rod?

Yang Guo called out the stances, "The Clear Tone Away from the Mountain", "Gold Ringing and Jade Resonating", "The Long Call of the Phoenix Song", "The Sound Across the Stage", "The Flowing of the Boat's Song" The wooden rod

attacked continuously, graceful and flowing with every stance an offensive one; before the Wu brothers could neutralize a stance, out came a second, a third and so on. He pierced and slashed with the wooden rod and forced the Wu brothers to defend together and they did not dare to take a step away from each other. When the Wu brothers saw Huang Rong performing the swordplay, they didn't ponder much on it and thought that this handsome and graceful swordplay was only used for show. How would they know that it could be used in such ingenious ways? The stances that Yang Guo called out were the same as the ones that Huang Rong had called out when she was performing the swordplay. With their swords under someone's control and struggling to respond, their spirits were dampened further and both of them were now convinced that Huang Rong had taught Yang Guo this "Jade Flute Swordplay". How would they know that Yang Guo had spent many days with Huang Yaoshi and had his personal tutoring of the "Jade Flute Swordplay" and the "Divine Release of the Flicking Finger"?

When Yang Guo saw their miserable expressions, he felt slightly bad about it but he remembered that he must see this through to the end. If he didn't convince them once and for all to not see Guo Fu ever again, these brothers would definitely fight over her again until one of them lost their life.

What medicine is there that doesn't taste bitter? For good to come out of this, there must be a little suffering. He hurried his swordplay and kept on pressing relentlessly. The brothers became more and more alarmed as they fought on but with the rod like a blur threatening all their vitals, they could only clench their teeth and defend with all they had.

The "Yue Maiden Swordplay" that the Wu brothers had learned was actually itself a powerful swordplay but the two had yet to reach a high level of proficiency with it; when Guo Jing taught them he wasn't too good with his words so he

wasn't able to pass on the more intricate and subtle points of the swordplay to them. As a result, if the Wu brothers fought your average Wulin fighter, the brothers would prove more than a match for them; but under the rod of Yang Guo, there were endless weaknesses. Yang Guo's "Jade Flute Swordplay" had yet to be perfected as well but his martial arts were a lot better than the Wu brothers. Plus, the Wu brothers were in an emotional state and so their stances were even more flawed.

Yang Guo did not use his fatal stances and instead, slowly transferred his internal energy into the rod. After fighting for a while, the two brothers felt that their opponent's rod was exuding a strong sucking force, causing their swords to twist and turn. One sword aimed towards the opponent but the tip of the sword turned in the opposite direction to where it was meant to go. The force that the rod emitted got stronger and stronger until it forced the brothers to fight each other. One stance of Wu Dunru's that aimed for Yang Guo almost struck his own brother and Wu Xiuwen himself almost slashed Wu Dunru; Wu Dunru had to use all his strength to block the attack.

Yang Guo gave a long laugh and said, "There's more to the 'Jade Flute Swordplay' than this, you better be careful!" 'Dang', the wooden rod met with Wu Dunru's sword. The rod had met with the face of the sword and remained completely intact. Wu Dunru felt an extremely powerful sucking force pulling outwards almost forcing the sword out of his hands. He had to quickly transfer his energy to the sword to snatch it back. Yang Guo's wooden rod followed his force and trapped Wu Xiuwen's sword as well. Yang Guo then pushed downwards and forced the swords to the ground. The brothers pulled loose; Yang Guo stepped forward onto the swords tips and raised the wooden rod towards them, lightly touching their throats. Yang Guo laughed, "Well?"

If the wooden rod were a sharp sword, the brothers' throats would have been cut open. And even with the wooden rod, if Yang Guo had put a bit more force behind the attack, the brothers would surely suffer a serious injury. The brothers' faces were ash grey and they kept silent in misery. Yang Guo raised his left foot and leapt back three paces. He watched the brothers' wretched expressions. Memories of the insult of being beaten up by the two filled his mind, now that he's gotten his own back today; a look of satisfaction came over his face.

The brothers no longer had any suspicions and were now convinced that Yang Guo had indeed received teaching of great skills from Huang Rong. But the brothers have been in love with Guo Fu ever since they were young; to end it like this in a single fight and to not ever see her again was something they were not prepared to do. Also, in the sword fight, the opponent had gotten the initiative straight away and they were forced onto the back foot; they had not even used ten percent of what their Master had taught them and there was no chance for them to use their newly learned "Solitary Yang Finger".

Wu Xiuwen shouted, "Brother, if we leave it like this, what point is there in living on? Let's just fight to the death!"

Wu Dunru's heart stirred and he called out, "Yes!"

The two of them lifted their swords and attacked; they no longer cared about defending themselves and attacked with every stance.

This change in approach was indeed impressive, by just attacking and not defending, they were going to try to take Yang Guo's life even if it meant dying by his hand in the process. Yang Guo pointed at their vitals but the two ignored it, using a sword in their right hand and unleashing the

“Solitary Yang Finger” with their left, they used all their best skills as they tried to kill their opponent.

Yang Guo laughed, “Good, this is more like it!” He threw away his wooden rod and moved around within the blades. The brothers fought more and more viciously as they went on but still they were unable to harm him.

Wu Santong watched from the side with mixed feelings; he hoped that Yang Guo would win so his sons would forget about Guo Fu but he also hoped that his sons would be able to defeat Yang Guo as they delivered their dangerous strokes. Suddenly, he heard Yang Guo give a crisp whistle and then saw him flicking the swords with his finger; ‘dang’, ‘dang’, the two swords flew towards the sky. Yang Guo caught the swords in his hands and laughed, “This “Divine Release of the Flicking Finger” was also taught to me by my mother-in-law!”

Now that it’s got to this stage, the brothers knew that continued fighting would just result in further embarrassment for them. Yang Guo flipped the swords around and shot the swords towards them. He bowed and said, “My apologies.”

Wu Xiuwen replied miserably, “Fine, I’ll never see sister Fu again.” He then held his sword across and moved the blade towards his throat. Wu Dunru’s feelings were the same as his brother and he too held his sword across his neck to kill himself.

Yang Guo was shocked to see this and quickly flew across to them; two ‘dang’ sounds were heard as he flicked their swords away with his finger once again. The handles of the sword flipped outwards and swords collided, ‘dong’; and the swords broke in two. As this happened, Wu Santong had leaped out and quickly grabbed his sons around the neck from behind, he yelled, “The two of you are giving up your

own lives for a woman, you don't deserve to be called a man."

Wu Xiuwen lifted his head and said forlornly, "Father... didn't you... didn't a woman cause a life of unhappiness for you as well? I..." Before he could finish, he saw the remnants of tears on his father's face under the starlight showing he was extremely hurt by their actions. Fighting with his brother like this had caused his father great pain and as he thought about this, he called out. Wu Santong loosened his grip and hugged him. His left hand hugged Wu Dunru and the three of them were held in a mutual embrace. Wu Dunru thought about how he had given his heart to Guo Fu but she and Yang Guo had already become a couple. Even their Master wife had kept it from him and his brother that she had picked him out to be her son-in-law and taught him her greatest skills. It appeared that everyone had treated them falsely and only fatherly and brotherly love between them is real; he hugged his father and couldn't stop himself from crying.

Yang Guo had always been an impetuous fellow. On this occasion his intentions were good, but he had caused the Wu brothers great humiliation. As he watched the father and sons in their loving embrace, he felt great satisfaction in his heart. Although he hasn't long to live, he has at least done one good deed before he died.

Wu Santong said, "Stupid boys, why should a man worry about not having a wife? Since that Guo girl doesn't love you why should you keep her in your hearts? We have a great mission that we need to take care of...what is it?"

Wu Xiuwen raised his head and said, "To avenge mother's death."

Wu Santong shouted, "Yes! We have to kill that Scarlet Serpent Deity Li Mochou even if we have to go to the ends of the earth."

Yang Guo was alarmed and thought, "I have to lure these three away, if Martial Uncle Li sees them there will be trouble."

Just as he was thinking this, he heard Li Mochou say coldly from the cave, "Why go to the ends of the earth? Li Mochou has been waiting here a long time." She came out from the cave with the baby in her left hand and her fly whisk in her right, her gown was fluttering in the wind as she exuded a graceful aura.

The Wu family could not have guessed that this demoness would appear right here right now; Wu Santong roared as he threw himself forward. Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen picked up their broken swords and attacked in a pincer formation.

Yang Guo called out, "Please stop everyone, and listen to what I've got to say."

Wu Santong called out, "Brother Yang, we'll talk after this demoness is dead." As he said this, his left palm and right finger had unleashed three deadly stances. The Wu brothers' swords may have been broken but in close combat the broken blades acted like a dagger and they still packed a considerable punch.

Yang Guo knew that they had a blood feud between them and his words alone would not stop them, he was just worried about the safety of the baby and he called out, "Martial Uncle Li, pass the baby to me."

Wu Santong was shocked when he heard this and leapt back two paces. He asked, "Why did you call her Martial Uncle Li?"

Li Mochou laughed, "Good Martial Nephew, you attack him from behind while I hold the baby."

After taking three of Wu Santong's stances, she felt that his internal energy had made great improvements; he was a

completely different opponent to the one she faced in Jiaxing all those years ago. With the Wu brothers, who were no weaklings, attacking her without regard for their lives, it would be difficult to fend them all off. She deliberately called Yang Guo her 'good Martial Nephew' to distract the three of them.

Wu Santong did indeed fall for her trick and shouted, "Dun'er, Wen'er, you be careful of that one named Yang, I'll take care of this witch myself."

Yang Guo kept his hands by his side and moved away. He said, "I'm not helping anyone but you must not harm the baby."

Wu Santong relaxed when he saw that Yang Guo had moved away and increased the power of his palms as he moved forwards.

Li Mochou defended with her fly whisk and then said, "Young Masters Wu, what I saw just now showed me that you are the sentimental kind, you are not like other vile heartless men. Because of this, I will spare your lives today; now leave!"

Wu Xiuwen replied angrily, "You evil, despicable bitch, what do you know about sentimentality?" He then advanced forward and attacked with vicious stances.

Li Mochou said with fury, "You don't know what's good for you fool!" The fly whisk turned around from in to out, forming a circle as it was whipped out. The fly whisk collided with Wu Xiuwen's sword and he felt a throbbing pain in his chest, almost forcing him to drop his sword. Wu Santong chopped a palm forward and Li Mochou turned her fly whisk back to defend. Wu Xiuwen had avoided danger for now.

Yang Guo moved behind Li Mochou slowly so that as soon as there was a slight opening in her stances, he could dive in

straight away and rescue the baby. But the Wu's were fighting extremely hard, forcing Li Mochou to defend her entire body with her fly whisk. He could not find a single opening. Yang Guo watched as the Wu's fought without restraint and there was no intent to avoid the baby in their attacks. If something happened, how would he face the Guo couple? He called out loudly, "Martial Uncle Li, pass the baby to me!" He advanced forward while sending a palm out to knock the fly whisk aside and tried to snatch the baby away.

Li Mochou was completely surrounded with enemies to the left and right, in front and behind, so she had no time to struggle with him but she also was not willing to give up the baby as easily as that. She yelled, "You dare try to snatch her away? If I just squeeze my arm, what do you think is going to happen to her?" Yang Guo was taken aback by this, how could he continue his advance?

With Li Mochou slightly distracted, Wu Santong threw out a fierce left palm that had a finger coming behind it; the index finger of his right hand had sealed a pressure point on her waist. Li Mochou immediately felt half her body going numb, forcing her to stumble and almost fall. But she moved with her momentum and threw out a kick that disarmed Wu Dunru and then she swept down viciously with her fly whisk at Wu Xiuwen. Wu Santong quickly pulled Wu Xiuwen back and allowed him to avoid this fatal strike. Li Mochou's injuries were not light and she motioned her fly whisk about as she escaped back into the cave.

Wu Santong was delighted with this and he called out, "That evil witch has taken a blow from my finger; it's going to be difficult for her to escape from us today." The Wu brothers held their broken swords out and wanted to advance into the cave.

Wu Santong called out, "Wait, be careful of her poisonous needles, we'll wait here and think of a plan to..." Before he finished, a roar came from within the cave and a leopard leapt out.

The Wu's were shocked by the sudden appearance of this beast, and in their shock, came a flurry of silver light; silver needles had suddenly been shot out from beneath the leopard. They could have predicted that this was going to happen but luckily for Wu Santong, his study of martial arts was deep, his reactions swift and agile, and he was able to leap away from this danger. But he heard his sons crying out, giving him the fright of his life. He watched as Li Mochou clung beneath the leopard, with her fly whisk tucked behind her neck, the baby in her left hand and gripping the leopard with her right hand and legs. She gave a cackle as the leopard leapt away and escaped into the mountain brook.

Even Yang Guo was shocked by this sudden turn of events; he watched as the leopard ran away and quickly began to chase after it as he called out, "Martial Uncle Li..."

Wu Santong was worried to death as he saw his sons lying on the ground unable to get up, he called out, "I'm going to kill you today." He reached out to grab Yang Guo.

Yang Guo was taken by surprise and was caught by him, he said quickly, "Let me go! I need to get the baby back!"

Wu Santong said, "Fine, let's all die here today."

Yang Guo quickly used the "Little Trapping Hand Technique" to try to release his fingers. Wu Santong was extremely restless and anxious and his mind was slightly unclear; however his martial arts were completely unaffected. He held onto Yang Guo's waist with his left hand and he too used the "Little Trapping Hand" with his right hand against Yang Guo.

Yang Guo saw that Li Mochou and the leopard were out of sight, he was not going to catch up with them any time soon and sighed, "Why are you holding onto me? The most important thing right now is to tend to their wounds."

Wu Santong said with joy, "Yes, yes, can you cure the poison from the needles?" He released Yang Guo from his grasp.

Yang Guo examined the Wu brothers and saw that Wu Dunru had been struck by a needle in his left shoulder, Wu Xiuwen a needle in his right leg. By now, the poison had taken effect and their breathing was now shallow as they lay there unconscious.

Yang Guo tore a piece of cloth from Wu Dunru and removed the needles.

Wu Santong quickly asked, "Have you got the antidote? Have you?"

Yang Guo saw that it would be difficult to save them from the poison and sadly shook his head.

Wu Santong loved his sons deeply and he was full of pain. He remembered how his wife died from sucking the poison from him; suddenly he threw himself onto Wu Xiuwen and moved his lips towards the wound.

Yang Guo was alarmed by this and called out, "You can't do this!" He sealed his 'Great Shuttle' pressure point with his finger.

Wu Santong was not prepared for this and immediately fell down. He couldn't move and tears rolled down from his eyes as he watched his sons.

Something popped into Yang Guo's head, "In five days time, the Passion Flower poison in me will take effect. There is not much difference between whether I live five days more or

five days less. The Wu brothers are not outstanding characters but this Uncle Wu is one who loves with all his heart, and just like me, he has had a life of misery. So be it, I'll give up my five days so their family can be reunited and his wishes fulfilled." He placed his lips on Wu Xiuwen's wound and sucked the venom out. After spitting out a few mouthfuls of the poison, he tended to Wu Dunru's wound.

Wu Santong watched from the side with indescribable gratefulness, he cursed the fact that his pressure point was sealed and could not join him in extracting the poison. Yang Guo took turns on each of the wounds and after a while, he noticed the bitter taste had gradually become slightly salty. He felt himself getting dizzy and knew that he was poisoned deeply, but he forced himself to suck a few more mouthfuls and after spitting the poison out, his eyes went blank and he fell unconscious.

He was out for a long, long time. Gradually, he could see the blurry images of many people in front of him. He wanted to see what exactly was happening but as he did so, he found it more difficult to focus and his eyes closed once again. A long time passed before he was able to open his eyes once more and as he did so, he saw the delighted face of Wu Santong in front of him calling out, "Good, finally!" Wu Santong knelt in front of him and kowtowed to him many times. He said, "Brother Yang, you... you saved... you saved my sons and you've saved my old life." He picked himself up and then threw himself down in front of another person and kowtowed to him. He called out, "Thank you Martial Uncle, thank you Martial Uncle."

Yang Guo looked at the person closely and saw that he was dark faced with a tall nose and deep set eyes; his appearance was similar to that of Nimoxing, and he had short, curly white hair, a man of old age. Yang Guo knew that Wu Santong was a disciple of the Reverend Yideng but he

didn't know that he also had an Indian Martial Uncle. He wanted to sit up but found that his strength had escaped him; he looked around and saw that he was lying on a bed. It was the room that he had stayed in while he was in Xiangyang. Now that he knew he was still alive and still had a chance to see Xiao Longnu one more time, he couldn't stop himself from blurting out, "Gu Gu...Gu Gu!"

Someone went over to his bed and gently placed their hand on his forehead. The person said, "Guo'er, you need to rest, your Gu Gu has some other business to attend to outside the city." It was Guo Jing.

Yang Guo saw that he had recovered from his injuries and was greatly relieved but immediately thought, "Uncle Guo's injuries require seven days and nights to heal, could it be that I have been unconscious for this period of time? But why hasn't the Passion Flower poison in me taken effect?" With this shock, his mind went into a daze and he fainted once more.

By the time he woke up again, it was night. There was a red candle in front of the bed and Wu Santong was still watching by his bedside.

Yang Guo smiled, "Uncle Wu, I'm alright, you don't have to worry. The young Masters Wu are fine?"

Wu Santong's eyes were filled with tears and he just nodded, not saying a word.

Yang Guo had never received such gratitude from anyone in his whole life and felt uncomfortable with this so he changed the subject and asked, "How did we get back to Xiangyang?"

Wu Santong wiped his tears with his sleeve and said, "My apprentice brother Zhu received instructions from your Master Miss Long to take the red horse to you in the valley.

When he got there, he found the four of us on the ground and quickly rescued us and took us back to the city.”

Yang Guo asked with surprise, “How did my Master know that I was in that valley? Why did she have to ask Uncle Zhu to take the horse to me, why not herself?”

Wu Santong shook his head and said, “When I returned to the city, I did not see Miss Long. Apprentice brother Zhu said that though she is of a young age, her martial arts are abundant; it’s a pity that I did not have the chance to greet her. Aiii, look how able the young are.”

Yang Guo was delighted with his sincere praise of Xiao Longnu. According to age, Wu Santong was more than old enough to be Xiao Longnu’s father but he actually used the word ‘greet’ in his sentences, this respect of the Master is due to the debt of the disciple. Yang Guo smiled and said, “My injuries...”

Wu Santong interrupted, “Brother Yang, though helping others in times of need in the world of Wulin is a common practice, your risking your life to save others, including, of all people, my sons who have deeply offended you in the past, no one can match your kindness except my Master...”

Yang Guo kept on shaking his head and told him to stop. Wu Santong ignored him and continued, “If I call you great benefactor, I know you will not agree to it. But if you keep on calling me uncle, you are showing that you do not respect me.”

Yang Guo had always been straightforward and had usually avoided small talk. He had already set his mind on making Xiao Longnu his wife; he didn’t care about custom and tradition so he said, “Fine, I’ll call you brother Wu. But it will be a bit inconvenient to use this greeting in front of your sons.”

Wu Santong said, "What about that greeting? You saved their little lives; they should listen to your every request, even if it means being your slave."

Yang Guo said, "Brother Wu, there's no need to thank me. I have already contracted the Passion Flower poison; I wouldn't have lived long anyway, so saving your sons wasn't a very important risk."

Wu Santong said, "Brother Yang, you can't say that. Even if your poison is incurable, a normal person would still want to live as long as possible."

Yang Guo smiled and asked, "How long have we been in Xiangyang?"

Wu Santong said, "Today is the seventh day."

Yang Guo had a look of confusion on his face and said, "Logically, I should be dead by now, how come I'm still alive, that's strange."

Wu Santong said with joy, "My martial uncle is a great Indian sage; when it comes to healing wounds and curing poison, he's probably the world's best. Years ago when my Master mistakenly took a poison that Mrs. Guo sent, it was he who cured my Master. I'll go and get him." He hurriedly left the room.

Joy filled Yang Guo's heart as he thought, "Could it be that while I was unconscious, that great Indian sage gave me a miracle panacea that purged even my Passion Flower poison? I wonder where Gu Gu is now? If she finds out I don't have to die, she'll be filled with joy!" As the sentimental thoughts filled his mind, his head ached and his chest felt as if a hammer had smashed against him, the pain was unbearable and he couldn't stop himself from crying out. He hasn't felt such pain since he took half of Qiu Qianchi's antidote, it must

be that the effects of the antidote have now passed while the poison remained; he clutched his chest and clenched his teeth. His head was covered with sweat.

Just as the pain was becoming excruciating, the door suddenly opened and a voice said, "Nanwu Amitufo." The Indian monk's arms were folded as he entered. Wu Santong followed and when he saw Yang Guo in distress, he was shocked and asked, "Brother Yang, how are you feeling?" He turned to the Indian monk and said, "Martial uncle, his poison is flaring up, give him the antidote quickly!" The Indian monk did not understand what he was saying and went over to Yang Guo and checked his pulse.

Wu Santong said, "Oh yes!" He quickly went to get Zhu Ziliu. Zhu Ziliu was well versed in Sanskrit and he was the only person who could communicate with the Indian monk. Zhu Ziliu arrived to translate.

Yang Guo gathered his wits and as the pain lessened, he explained to the Indian monk how he contracted this poison.

The Indian monk asked in great detail as to what the Passion Flower looked like and was shocked with what he heard. He said, "The Passion Flower is a species that has been extinct for a long time. According to the scriptures, the Passion Flower once ravaged the lives of many people; the Buddha Wenshu Shili eradicated the flower with his great wisdom. Who would know that some still existed in the central plains? I have never seen this flower before; I really don't know how to cure this poison." His face was filled with pity.

After Wu Santong heard Zhu Ziliu's translation, he kept on calling out, "Have mercy Martial Uncle; have mercy!"

The Indian monk folded his arms and recited, "Amitoufu." He closed his eyes and went into deep thought. Silence filled the room; no one dared to make a noise.

After a while, the Indian monk opened his eyes and said, "When Master Yang sucked the poison from my Martial Grandsons, the poison from the 'Soul Freezing Needles' should have killed you. But Master Yang has survived until now. The date for the Passion Flower's poison to activate has passed, yet you are still alive. Could it be that the poisons are fighting each other and allowed Master Yang to reap his rewards for his deeds?"

Zhu Ziliu nodded his head and after translating, Yang Guo too felt that this was a reasonable explanation.

The Indian monk continued, "People say what comes around goes around, Master Yang has saved the lives of others while risking his own, if this saying is true, an antidote will surely exist."

After hearing Zhu Ziliu's translation, Wu Santong leapt with joy and said, "I implore Martial Uncle to come up with an antidote as soon as possible."

The Indian monk said, "I need to visit the Passionless valley."

Yang Guo and the others were shocked. The journey to Passionless Valley was not a short one, getting there and getting back will take a long time.

The Indian monk said, "I need to see the Passionless Valley with my own eyes and test the poison before I can make an antidote. Before I return, Master Yang must refrain from sentimental thoughts; otherwise, the pain will get stronger and stronger each time. If you damage your life line then there will be no return."

Before Yang Guo could reply, Wu Santong said loudly, "Apprentice brother, let's go to the Passionless Valley together and force that old hag to hand over the antidote."

After being poisoned by Huo Dou, Zhu Ziliu was able to receive the antidote thanks to Yang Guo; he had wanted to repay him a long time and said, "Yes, we'll escort Martial Uncle and whether we'll take the antidote by force or whether Martial Uncle can make one himself, we'll get the antidote one way or the other."

The apprentice brothers spoke spiritedly but the Indian monk was looking at Yang Guo with worry on his brows.

End of Chapter 23.

Chapter 24 - Turbulent Emotions

Translated by Noodles



Yang Guo sat on the floor without any strength to retaliate, he was just holding his arm up across his chest to protect himself but there was no sign of pleading for mercy in his eyes. Guo Fu bit down on her teeth and increasing the strength in her hand, she chopped down with her sword.

Though Yang Guo saw that the Indian monk had a glint in his eye, his lips seemed to have a sorrowful expression and from that, he knew that it would be extremely difficult to cleanse his body of the poison. By now, the monk had finished his examination and so, Yang Guo smiled at him and said, "Reverend, please be honest."

The Indian monk said, "The suffering from the Passion Flower is different to that of other poisons. The poison becomes one with sentiment and thus suffering goes straight to the heart. From what I can tell, the roots of love are deep in you; separating the poison from it will be very difficult. Even if we manage to get the other half of the antidote, you may not fully recover. But if you can sever your roots then there will be no need for any antidote at all. Going to the Passionless Valley is something that we feel must be done, whether you can recover will depend on you only."

Yang Guo thought, "You want me to stop loving Gu Gu? What's the point of living then? You might as well just leave me be and let me die." His mouth gratefully replied, "Thank you for the advice Reverend." He had wanted to tell Wu Santong and the others not to go to Passionless Valley but he knew that these people value the code of brotherhood strongly and would not listen to him. Talking to them would just be a waste of his efforts.

Wu Santong smiled, "Brother Yang, take care and rest peacefully. We'll leave first thing in the morning and come back as soon as possible. When you've recovered, we'll have a drink at your and Miss Guo's wedding."

This took Yang Guo aback, but he knew that this matter was complicated and he would not be able to clear it up in a short period of time, so he just agreed. After seeing the door close behind the three as they left, Yang Guo closed his eyes once again and rested.

Again, he slept for hours. By the time he woke up, dawn had broken and the sounds of birds chirping could be heard. Yang Guo had not eaten for days and by now was starving; he saw four dishes by the side of the bed and took a few slices of the cakes that were there. After eating two slices, the door suddenly made a noise and after a creak opened lightly.

The red candle that was by the bedside was now about an inch long and was still alight. Yang Guo could see that the person who had entered was wearing a pale red gown and had an angry expression on their face; it was Guo Fu.

Yang Guo froze before saying, "Miss Guo, it's early."

Guo Fu replied with a 'humph'. Without saying a word, she sat down on a chair in front of the bed with her eyebrows raised, and her angry eyes stared at Yang Guo. A long time passed and still, she did not make a sound.

Yang Guo was made uncomfortable by this stare and smiled, "Has Uncle Guo told you to come here to tell me something?"

She replied, "No!"

After being spoken to twice like this, the Yang Guo of a few days back would have just turned his back and ignored her. He saw that there was something bothering her but he

couldn't tell why she was here so early in the morning so he asked again, "Is Auntie Guo okay after giving birth?"

Guo Fu's face seemed to become even more frosty and she replied coldly, "My mother's health is none of your concern."

Apart from Xiao Longnu, Yang Guo would never back down from anyone, after being treated like this, Yang Guo could no longer suppress his pride and thought, "So what if your father is Hero Guo and your mother is Chief Huang?" He replied with a snort of his own.

Guo Fu said, "What are you snorting at?"

Yang Guo ignored her and snorted again.

Guo Fu said loudly, "I said what are you snorting at?"

Yang Guo was amused by this and thought, "Looks like in the end, the little girl can't keep her composure, I just snorted twice and she's already agitated." He said, "I'm feeling unwell, snorting like this makes my body feel a bit better."

Guo Fu said angrily, "Always making things up, what a liar, you really are a despicable person."

After being insulted by her, Yang Guo suddenly thought of something, "Could it be that she knows about the things I'd said to the Wu brothers to stop them fighting?" Though he saw that she was angry, her beauty made him pity her. He was born with a flirtatious nature and he couldn't stop himself from smiling, "Miss Guo, are you offended by what I said to the Wu brothers?"

Guo Fu lowered her voice and said, "What did you say to them? Tell me with your own mouth."

Yang Guo smiled, "I did it for their own good; I stopped those brothers from fighting each other to the end and prevented

grief for their father. Uncle Wu told you this, didn't he?"

Guo Fu said, "As soon as Uncle Wu saw me, he began to congratulate me and started to praise you to high heaven. How...how can I let you dirty my chaste name as you please?" By now, her voice was starting to break and tears flowed down her cheeks.

Yang Guo lowered his head and didn't say a word; he was extremely regretful as to what he said that night, he'd let his tongue move too fast when he was talking to the Wu brothers. The more he said, the more arrogant the words became; he did not consider that he had sullied Guo Fu's name. It was his words that had caused this trouble; it would not be easy for him to repair it.

When Guo Fu saw that he had lowered his head and stayed silent, she was even angrier and cried out, "Uncle Wu said that big and little brother Wu couldn't beat you and so were forced by you to never see me again, is that true?"

Yang Guo sighed to himself thinking, "Wu Santong doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut, why did he have to tell her all this?" He could deny no longer and could only nod his head, saying, "I know I shouldn't have said all those lies but there was no ill intent behind my words; please forgive me."

Guo Fu wiped away her tears and said with anger, "Uncle Wu said that once you've recovered from your illness, he wants to...wants to drink at our wedding, why did you agree?"

Yang Guo thought, "Oh no! So he also told her about what I said last night as well." He could only argue, "I was still feeling a bit woozy then, I did not hear Uncle Wu's words properly."

Guo Fu could tell he was lying and said loudly, "You said that my mother taught you martial arts in secret and had picked

you out to be her son-in-law, is this true?"

Yang Guo blushed at her questions and was feeling embarrassed, he thought, "Joking with Miss Guo will just lead to her insulting me a bit more. I'm not a gentleman so it doesn't really matter much, but lying about Auntie Guo teaching me martial arts is a completely different matter altogether. I can't let Auntie Guo know about this." He said quickly, "Miss Guo, this again was due to me speaking without thinking. I implore you, ignore it and don't let your parents know about the matter."

Guo Fu laughed coldly, "Since you are afraid of my father, why do you still make up lies to insult my mother?"

Yang Guo quickly said, "I had no intention of insulting Auntie Guo; at that time all I was concerned about was making the Wu brothers forget about you, I was speaking without thinking..."

Guo Fu grew up with the two brothers and had feelings for both of them; when she found out that Yang Guo had lied to the Wu brothers to get them to forget about her and never see her again, how could she control her anger? She asked loudly, "I'll sort this out later. Where's my sister? Where did you take her?"

Yang Guo said, "Oh yes, please get Uncle Guo, that's what I wanted to speak to him about."

Guo Fu said, "My father has left the city to look for my sister. You... you despicable person, you actually wanted to exchange my sister for your antidote. So it's like that is it, your life is worth something unlike my sister's."

Yang Guo had been ashamed of himself concerning this matter, but now on hearing her bring up the matter about the baby, he felt he had nothing to be ashamed of and said

clearly, “My mission was to rescue your sister and bring her back to your parents. No thoughts of exchanging her for my antidote entered the mind of Yang Guo.”

Guo Fu said, “So where’s my sister then? Where is she?”

Yang Guo said, “Li Mochou has her and I’m ashamed of myself for not being able to rescue her. As soon as my strength returns and if I’m still alive, I will immediately go search for her.”

Guo Fu laughed coldly, “Li Mochou is your Martial Uncle isn’t she? You two had been hiding together in a cave, hadn’t you?”

Yang Guo said “That’s right, she is my Martial Uncle but my Master and she have never gotten along with each other.”

Guo Fu said, “Never gotten along with each other? So why did she listen to your request and take my sister away to exchange for the antidote?”

Yang Guo sat up and said angrily, “Miss Guo, watch your reckless words, I Yang Guo may not be a person of great worth but how would I even contemplate such thoughts?”

Guo Fu said, “Well said, this ‘contemplate such thoughts’! This came from your own Master, could it be a lie?”

Yang Guo said, “What did my Master say?”

Guo Fu stood up and pointed her finger at Yang Guo’s nose before saying with anger on her face, “Your Master told Uncle Zhu that you and Li Mochou were in that cave in that valley, she asked Uncle Zhu to take the red horse to you so you can race to the Passionless Valley with my sister...”

Yang Guo interrupted, “Yes, my Master did have this thought; she wanted me to take your sister there and get the antidote

first then doing something about the matter afterwards. But this was just one of the ideas that came up, and none would result in harm to your sister...”

Guo Fu butted in, “Within a day of being born, you handed her over to a cold blooded murderer, and yet you talk about not harming my sister. You scoundrel! When you were younger and all alone as an orphan, how did my parents treat you? If they hadn’t taken you to Peach Blossom Island and taken care of you, where would you be now? Who knew that you’d repay kindness with vengeance; you conspired with the Mongols and while my parents were unwell, you took the opportunity to steal my sister away...” Her insults were becoming more and more vicious, how could Yang Guo argue back? His body was weak after being poisoned again and as his breathing became agitated; he fainted and fell back onto the bed with a thud.

After a long while, Yang Guo came around. Guo Fu stared at him coldly and said, “I never would have guessed you still knew what shame was. You knew that this was your intention; you can’t face living with yourself can you?” Her expression was icy and cold, her words were as sharp as a blade.

Yang Guo let out a long sigh and said, “If I really had this thought then why didn’t I take your sister to Passionless Valley?”

Guo Fu said, “It would be difficult for you to travel in your condition so you asked your Martial Uncle for help. Luckily, it seemed fate had other ideas; I overheard your Master’s and Uncle Zhu’s conversation and I immediately hid the red horse away. Let’s see how you and your Master’s evil plan will work now...”

Yang Guo said, “Fine, say whatever you want, there’s no point in me arguing. Where’s my Master? Where is she?”

Guo Fu's face became a little red and said, "Like Master like pupil, your Master is not a nice person as well."

Yang Guo was furious and sat up, saying, "You can shout and insult me all you like, I'll let it go in respect for your parents. How dare you insult my Master?"

Guo Fu said, "Bah! What about your Master? Who told her to say those words?"

Yang Guo thought, "Gu Gu is an innocent person and does not show the emotions of the human world; how could she provoke her with words?" He scoffed and said, "It's probably your warped little mind twisting the words of my Master."

Guo Fu had not wanted to reveal what Xiao Longnu had said to her but after being aggravated by him, she could not control her anger and said, "She said, 'Miss Guo, Guo'er is a person with a pure and good heart, he has suffered and been lonely all his life, and she must take care of him.' She then said, 'You two are... are a match made in heaven! Tell him to forget me, I will not be offended.' She then gave me a sword and said it was called the Lady Sword; it's a match with... with your Gentleman Sword. If this isn't rubbish then what is?" She was angry and embarrassed as she said this and her voice did not carry the sincere and mournful tone that Xiao Longnu had said these words with.

Each time he listened to a sentence, Yang Guo felt as if his heart was being rammed violently, his mind was full of confusion, and he didn't understand how Xiao Longnu could say something like this. After a while, he noticed that Guo Fu had finished and slowly raised his head. His eyes flashed as he shouted, "You liar, why would my Master say something like that? Where's the Lady sword? If you can't show it to me then you are a liar!"

Guo Fu gave a cold laugh and turned her wrist and removed a sword from her back that was black; it was the Lady Sword from the Passionless Valley.

Yang Guo was filled with disappointment and blurted out, "Who wants to be a match with you? This sword belongs to my Master, you stole it from her. You stole it from her!"

Guo Fu had always been a proud girl. Her parents gave her a little leeway and the Wu brothers let her have her way no matter what, how could she take these harsh words? She only decided to pass on Xiao Longnu's words because Yang Guo had provoked her and left her with no choice. Who knew that he would come up with such a reply? And now the words said seemed to suggest that it was she that made this whole thing up and it was she who wanted to marry him while he plainly refused. With such anger, her hand held the sword and was about to chop down with it but a thought came into her mind, "Since he respects his Master so much, let me tell him something that will drive him mad."

She was filled with anger and she did not even give a thought about the possible terrible consequences that would result from her words. A swooshing sound was heard as she sheathed the half exposed Lady Sword and sat down on a chair, laughing as she did so. She said, "Your Master is beautiful and her martial arts are strong, she is indeed a rare breed but there's just one thing that's not proper about her."

Yang Guo said, "What?"

Guo Fu replied, "It's just a pity that she does not act in a respectable manner and has been sneaking around to meet up with those Quanzhen Taoists."

Yang Guo angrily replied, "My Master has a feud with the Quanzhen sect, why would she be meeting up with them in secret."

Guo Fu gave a cold laugh and said, "When I said that she was 'sneaking around to meet them', I said the polite version. There are some things that would be inappropriate for a girl to say."

Yang Guo was becoming more and more furious as he listened, he shouted loudly, "My Master is pure and chaste; if you say another lie I'll tear your mouth off."

Guo Fu had an icy look in her eyes as she said coldly, "That's right, she was able to do it but I'm unable to say it. What a nice pure and chaste girl, going around being intimate with a rotten Taoist."

Yang Guo's face became green and he shouted, "What did you say?"

Guo Fu said, "I heard it with my own ears, don't tell me I'm wrong. Two Quanzhen Taoists came to pay their respects to my father but they turned up just when the city was in a mess, my parents were unwell and couldn't see them so I had to take care of the guests..."

Yang Guo shouted angrily, "Then what?"

Guo Fu saw that he was furious, his eyes were red and his forehead was tensed up, her plan was working and she continued, "One of the Taoists was called Zhao Zhijing, the other called Yin Zhiping, heard of them?"

Yang Guo said, "Then?"

Guo Fu gave a dry laugh and said, "I instructed my servants to prepare quarters for them and didn't take notice of them. But in the middle of the night, a Beggar Clan member came to tell me that those two Taoists had drawn swords and were fighting each other in their room..."

Yang Guo snorted as he knew that the two have always been at arms with each other, fighting each other in their room wasn't anything out of the ordinary."

Guo Fu continued, "I was curious so I quietly went to their window and looked in. By then, the two had sheathed their swords but they were still arguing. The one named Zhao said that the one named Yin and your Master did this and that and the one named Yin did not deny it, he was just angry with him for being so loud..."

Yang Guo suddenly flung his blanket off and sat up on the bed, he shouted, "What this and that?"

Guo Fu's face blushed; she looked a little embarrassed and said, "How would I know? Don't tell me its something good. Your precious Master knows what she's done." She said this with a derisive tone.

Yang Guo was angry and agitated, his emotions were in turmoil and he swung his hand out and slapped Guo Fu on the face. In a blaze of fury, his slap came out with great force and knocked Guo Fu into a daze, her face was red and swollen, if it weren't for the fact that Yang Guo was still not at full strength, this slap would have knocked her teeth out.

When has Guo Fu ever suffered such an insult? In anger, she unsheathed the Lady Sword from her waist, and went for Yang Guo's neck.

After slapping Guo Fu, he thought, "I've insulted Uncle and Auntie Guo's precious daughter. This girl is the princess of this city, even if Uncle and Auntie forgive me, how can I stay?"

He stretched out his leg to put on his shoes and saw Guo Fu's sword coming towards him, he gave a cold laugh and pulled

his left arm inwards and shot out his right hand, then with some light movements, he snatched the Lady Sword away.

Failing with two strokes in succession, Guo Fu's anger rose further. She saw that there was a sword by the head of the bed and grabbed it. Unsheathing the sword, she chopped at Yang Guo's head. Yang Guo saw a glimmer of light coming towards him and raised the Lady Sword across him to block the attack but after being unconscious for seven days, he had no strength to back up his movements. After raising the Lady Sword up to his chest, his arms felt limp and weak and he could raise it no further. Guo Fu's sword came in across and after a light clanging sound as the two swords collided, the Lady Sword fell out of his hand.

Guo Fu was furious about the slap that she had received, she thought, "You've brought harm to my sister you despicable person, I'll take your life today to avenge my sister. My parents will not blame me for this." She saw him sitting on the floor without any strength to retaliate, he was just holding his arm up across his chest to protect himself but there was no sign of pleading for mercy in his eyes. Guo Fu clenched her teeth and increasing the strength in her hand, she chopped down with her sword.

Previously:

That day when Xiao Longnu was looking for Yang Guo and Jinlun Fawang on the red horse, she had headed in the wrong direction. The horse galloped over ten li in one go and by the time she reined in the horse to go back, she had lost them completely. She was very anxious since the more time that passed, the more at risk Yang Guo's life would be. She rode around within thirty to forty li of Xiangyang searching for him.

The red horse was fast but the valley was well hidden and it was not until after midnight that she heard the cries of Wu

Santong. Heading in the direction of the cries, she soon came across the sounds of the clashing blades of the Wu brothers and then the sound of Yang Guo's voice. She was delighted that she had found him but was afraid that he had come across some strong foes so she decided to hide and help him in secret. She tied the red horse to a tree and quietly moved behind the rocky outcrop and watched Yang Guo face his foes.

There was no need for her to be anxious after she took a look but what she heard shocked her: Yang Guo was declaring that he and Guo Fu had been engaged long ago and calling her his fiancée. He was referring to Guo Jing and Huang Rong as his in-laws; she heard how Guo Jing and Huang Rong had picked him to be their son-in-law and secretly transmitted martial arts to him. She also saw how he lost his temper at the Wu brothers, saying they were not allowed to see Guo Fu. Every word of his struck out at her heart like lightning; she was confused and felt that her whole universe had changed within the blink of an eye. If it was anyone else who saw Yang Guo's actions changed suddenly like this, they would become suspicious and would ask him to explain everything afterwards. But Xiao Longnu's mind was as clear as a crystal, untouched by earthly dust; she did not know the lies and tricks of humankind. Yang Guo's tongue was silky smooth and talked rubbish to others; but to Xiao Longnu, he had never told a single lie and because of this that Xiao Longnu had never doubted his words. As she saw the Wu brothers losing, she pitied herself and let out a sigh. When Yang Guo heard the sigh and called out 'GuGu', she did not reply and hid further away. Yang Guo thought that it was Li Mochou who sighed and it was he who was mistaken so he did not give it much thought.

Leading the red horse, Xiao Longnu walked around without aim trying to think but she did not know what to do. She was now over twenty years of age but she had spent her whole

life in the tomb. She did not know a thing about the world; her relative experience was akin to that of a newborn baby. She thought, "Since Guo'er is going to marry Miss Guo; that means he won't be able to marry me. It's no wonder the Guo couple would not allow Guo'er and me to get married. Guo'er has kept this from me because he didn't want me to be sad, ah, he's still thinking of me." Her thoughts continued, "He failed to kill Hero Guo on many occasions to avenge his father and it was all because of Miss Guo. It appears that his love for Miss Guo runs very deep as well. If I go to give him the red horse now, he may begin to think about my good points again. This might disrupt their wedding in the future. It's better for me to return to the ancient tomb alone, this outside world is making me mad."

She pondered for a while and made her decision, even though her heart was in great pain, she was still thinking about saving Yang Guo. So she rode the red horse through the night back to Xiangyang and handed the horse over to Zhu Ziliu so he could deliver the red horse to Yang Guo in the valley.

At this time, though the attackers of Xiangyang had left long ago, Guo Jing and Huang Rong had yet to recover and the city was in chaos. The able Zhu Ziliu along with Lu Youjiao worked together on the important task of looking after the security of the city. Right in the middle of all this, Xiao Longnu walked up to him with red horse and asked him to take it to Yang Guo, saying that she wants Yang Guo to get to the Passionless Valley as soon as possible. She said to use the baby daughter of Guo Jing in exchange for the antidote; leaving Zhu Ziliu confused. He tried to ask her to explain but Xiao Longnu's mind was in turmoil and she did not want to speak much. She just said to get there as fast as possible; any delay may put Yang Guo's life at risk.

She ignored Guo Fu who was standing next to Zhu Ziliu and thought, "Your sister will be fine for a few days in the Passionless Valley, this is about the life of your fiancée, you yourself will naturally do all you can." As soon as she thought of Yang Guo, her heart filled with pain, before she could explain herself clearly tears rolled from her eyes. She ran to her room; lying on her bed, she sobbed despondently.

Zhu Ziliu did not know about anything related to this matter so how would he know what Xiao Longnu was talking about? But the words 'to get there as fast as possible, any delay may put Yang Guo's life at risk' was startling. All he could do was to go to the valley and then act accordingly. By the time he was ready to make his way to the valley, the red horse was nowhere to be seen. When he asked one of the soldiers, he said that Miss Guo had taken it away. Zhu Ziliu wanted to find her but she had hidden away. Zhu Ziliu sighed to himself and thought that all these young girls are unfathomable, without saying anything or explaining themselves, they just do what they want without thinking.

He was worried about the safety of Yang Guo so he found another fast horse and took a few Beggar Clan members with him. Following Xiao Longnu's directions they found the valley only to see Yang Guo and the Wu brothers lying on the ground with Wu Santong sitting on the ground meditating. The three lying on the ground were breathing shallowly, the words 'to get there as fast as possible, any delay may put Yang Guo's life at risk' were indeed true. He immediately took Yang Guo back to Xiangyang and his recently arrived Martial Uncle Indian Monk immediately tended to Yang Guo.

After crying on her bed for a while, Xiao Longnu was getting more and more depressed as she pondered her situation. She wasn't able to stop her tears. This crying left her sleeves completely soaked. She went to take a handkerchief from her waist to wipe away her tears when her fingertips touched the

Lady Sword. She thought, "It'll be worthwhile to go and give this sword to Miss Guo so they'll have a matching pair of swords."

She was deeply in love with Yang Guo, so no matter what it was, as long as something will benefit Yang Guo, she will go and do it without any qualms. She got off the bed and without wiping away the traces of her tears and went to see Guo Fu.

It was deep into the night now; Guo Fu was of course in bed. Xiao Longnu did not wait for any servants to call her, opening the window, she leapt into the room and woke Guo Fu up. She then said "You two are a match made in heaven!" etc, the words that Guo Fu passed onto Yang Guo. She handed the Lady Sword to Guo Fu and went to leave the room.

Guo Fu did not know what she was talking about and said, "What are you saying? I didn't understand a thing."

Xiao Longnu did not reply and leaped out of the window. Guo Fu stuck her head out of the window and called out, "Please come back Miss Long." However, Xiao Longnu did not turn back.

With her head lowered, Xiao Longnu made her way to the garden. A rose bush's fragrance floated about and it reminded her of the time on Mount Zhongnan when she and Yang Guo were practicing the Jade Maiden's Manual between the flower thickets. She wanted to go back to way things were when they were living together as Master and disciple yet there was no way it could happen.

In her daze, a voice came from the room to her left saying, "It's always Xiao Longnu this, Xiao Longnu that, can you stop saying that name for just one day?"

Xiao Longnu was shocked, "Who's always talking about me?" She stopped her footsteps and listened. Another person let out a dry laugh before saying, "So you can do it but I can't say it?"

The first person replied, "We are in someone else's home; with all these ears and eyes about, what would happen to the name of the Quanzhen sect if someone overhears?"

The other person laughed and said, "Oh, so you still remember about Quanzhen's name? That night by the rose bushes on Mount Zhongnan, that wonderful feeling... ha-ha." As he got to this point, he just continued laughing and did not say anything else.

Xiao Longnu was even more shocked when she heard this, her suspicions were roused and she thought, "Could it be that when Guo'er and I were unclothed, we were seen by those two Taoists?" From the sounds of the voices, she could tell it was Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping so she moved quietly to the window and lowered her body as she listened. By now, the two's voices had become quieter but Xiao Longnu was quite close to them and could still hear everything clearly.

A frustrated Yin Zhiping said, "Martial Brother Zhao, you torture me day and night, what exactly do you want?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "You know what I want."

Yin Zhiping said, "What do you want me to do? I've already agreed, all I wanted was for you stop going on about this yet you are getting worse. Do you want me to die in front of you?"

Zhao Zhijing gave a cold laugh and said, "I don't know, I just can't help myself, I've got to say it."

Yin Zhiping suddenly raised his voice a little and said, "You really think I don't know? You're just envious of me, envious

of brief moment of bliss.” These two sentences were very strange. Zhao Zhijing did not reply, he seemed to want to laugh but could not.

After a long while, Yin Zhiping mumbled, “Yes, that night within the rose bushes, her accupoints were sealed by the Western Poison Ouyang Feng, she wasn’t able to move and I was able to fulfill my dream. I’m not going to deny it. If I didn’t tell you, you wouldn’t know about it, right? After I told you, you torment me non stop... yet, yet I do not regret it, no, not one single bit...” By now, his voice had become soft; it was as if he was talking in his dreams.

As Xiao Longnu heard this, her heart dropped and her mind seemed to run amok with noise. “Could it be that it was him, it wasn’t my beloved Guo’er? No, it wasn’t him, it can’t be him, he’s lying, and it must be Guo’er.”

She heard Zhao Zhijing continue in a cold tone, “Yes, of course you wouldn’t regret your actions. You didn’t have to tell me about this but you couldn’t keep your joy to yourself, you had to tell someone. When I started to remind you day and night about it, why did you become afraid to hear what I had to say?” Suddenly, a thudding noise on the wall was heard; it was Yin Zhiping banging his head against the wall. He said, “Fine say it, tell everyone, tell everyone in the world, I don’t care... no, no, apprentice brother Zhao, I’ll agree to whatever you want, just stop bringing this up.”

In the space of a night, Xiao Longnu had heard two heart shattering pieces of news; she stood outside the window in a dazed state, although she heard what they were saying, she was for the time being, unable to grasp the meaning behind their words.

Zhao Zhijing chuckled a few times and said, “As practicing Taoists, we need to keep a clear mind, a slip in our thoughts will lead to evil. The reason I keep on mentioning Xiao

Longnu is so that you will soon begin to hate and detest that name. I'm just helping you to adhere to the Taoist teachings."

Yin Zhiping said quietly, "She's a celestial being, how can I hate and detest her?" Suddenly he raised his voice and said, "Don't try to paint a pretty picture of what you are doing; do you think I'm blind to your ill intentions? One, you are jealous of me and two, you hate Yang Guo, you want to reveal this to everyone so that the two of them will have to live with this for the rest of their lives."

When Xiao Longnu heard the name 'Yang Guo', her heart skipped a beat. Quietly she repeated, "Yang Guo, Yang Guo." As she said these words, she was filled with a tender feeling and hoped that the two would keep on talking about Yang Guo. As long as someone mentions his name, she would be happy.

She listened on and now heard it was Zhao Zhijing's turn to raise his voice. He said with hate, "I won't rest until I teach that bastard a good lesson, humph, it's just that..."

Yin Zhiping said, "It's just that his martial arts are too high, neither you nor I are a match for him, right?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "That's not definite, what's so special about his evil sect's unorthodox martial arts? Once he's in my hands... ha-ha! Our Quanzhen sect's martial arts are the orthodox way, why should we be afraid of that scum? Apprentice brother Yin, just you watch, I'm not going to let him die easily. I'll break an arm here or a leg there; I'll make him wish that he was dead. How wonderful it would be if that Xiao Longnu were there to watch him suffer."

Xiao Longnu trembled as she heard this; if it was at any other place and time, she would have flown through the window and killed the two with one strike long ago. But now, her

despair had completely overwhelmed her; her body felt as if it was no longer under her own control.

She heard Yin Zhiping laugh coldly, "You can believe what you want. Our sect's orthodox arts may not be able to compete with their so called unorthodox martial arts."

Zhao Zhijing shouted, "You dog, you Quanzhen traitor! You even praise that Xiao Longnu's martial arts to high heaven!"

Yin Zhiping has been under this torrent of abuse long enough and could take it no longer, he shouted, "Why are you insulting me? You must know when you are pushing your limits!"

Zhao Zhijing knew that his opponent could do nothing to him. If this matter were leaked back amongst the sect, the previous sect leader Uncle Ma and the current leader Uncle Qiu will surely sentence him to death. That was why he had been handing out insults to him day and night. Yin Zhiping indeed did not retaliate. Now, he could tell that Yin was actually showing signs of rebelling. If he didn't make sure that he was in complete control, it would be difficult for his great plan to succeed, so he took a step forward and sent out a palm.

Yin Zhiping had not thought that he would actually resort to violence; he lowered his head quickly but the palm struck him heavily on the back of his neck, almost sending him to the floor. Enraged, he unsheathed his sword and thrust it forward. Zhao Zhijing moved his body out of the way and laughed, "Oh, so you've actually got the gall to raise your sword against me." He unsheathed his own sword and replied with a stroke of his own.

Yin Zhiping lowered his voice and said, "I'm going to die sooner or later under this constant torment of yours anyway, I might as well get it over with and let you kill me today." He

hurried his sword strokes and pressed his opponent. He was Qiu Chuji's strongest student, so he and Zhao Zhijing's martial arts both had their strong points. They both learned the same stances so once a fight started between the two, it would be difficult to tell who was going to be the winner. But Yin Zhiping had made up his mind. All he wanted was to take his opponent down with him while Zhao Zhijing had something else planned and wasn't going to take his life. Twenty or thirty stances later, Zhao Zhijing had been forced into one of the corners of the room and was losing.

The two's struggle had been reported by a Beggar Clan member to Guo Fu. Guo Fu dressed hurriedly and rushed to the scene to see Xiao Longnu standing outside. She called out, "Miss Long!"

Xiao Longnu's mind was somewhere else and she did not hear her.

Guo Fu was curious and so decided not to enter immediately. She too stood outside the window only to hear Zhao Zhijing coming out with derisive comments between his sword strokes. Every single comment related to Xiao Longnu.

When Guo Fu heard their words becoming more and more inappropriate: she decided to move away from the window. When she turned her head to move away, she caught a glimpse of a disorientated Xiao Longnu. It appeared that she did not take offence at what the two were saying; Guo Fu became extremely curious and quietly asked, "Is what they're saying true?"

Xiao Longnu nodded her head and said, "I don't know, maybe... maybe its true."

Feelings of condescension towards Xiao Longnu gathered inside Guo Fu and she left with a snort and did not turn back.

During the fight, Yin and Zhao both heard someone talking outside their room; after a clashing of weapons, the two separated and leapt back and both asked at the same time, "Who's there?"

Xiao Longnu said slowly, "Me."

Yin Zhiping trembled all over and asked with a shaking voice, "Who's me?"

Xiao Longnu replied, "Xiao Longnu!"

Once those three words came out, not only did Yin Zhiping freeze, Zhao Zhijing did so as well. That day at the Heroes' Feast of Da Xingguan, just one stance of hers allowed her to place a palm on his chest; the resulting injury was serious and it took him days to completely recover. There was no way he could defend himself against her. He could never have guessed that Xiao Longnu would be in Xiangyang as well; all the insults that he had just said were most likely heard by her. He was scared witless and was thinking, "How am I going to get out alive?"

Yin Zhiping was shocked as well but he was not thinking about how to escape, instead, he stretched out his hand and pushed open the window. Beside the flower bushes stood a silent, somber girl in white; it was the person who had filled his thoughts during the day and his dreams at night, the most enchanting girl in the world, Xiao Longnu!

Yin Zhiping replied in disbelief, "It's you?"

Xiao Longnu replied, "Yes, it's me. What you two said just now, is it true?"

Yin Zhiping nodded his head, "Yes! Just kill me!" He turned his sword towards her and handed it to her through the window.

Xiao Longnu's eyes lit up, her sorrow had reached its peak, her anger had met its limit, she felt that even if she killed a thousand people, or even ten thousand, she would no longer be the pure and chaste girl she once was. She could no longer love Yang Guo as deeply as she did before. When she saw the sword through the window, she did not take it and just looked at the two of them with uncertainty. She really could not decide on what to do.

Zhao Zhijing saw his chance had come, the girl seemed lost in her mind right now, if he doesn't take this chance to escape, when could he? He grabbed Yin Zhiping's arm and said with a snicker, "Let's go, let's go now, it looks like she can't bear to kill you!" He pulled hard and staggered out of the door. Yin Zhiping's mind was completely elsewhere, his body put up no resistance and he followed. Zhao Zhijing utilized his lightness kung fu and ran. Yin Zhiping had allowed himself to be pulled by him but after a few li, he himself started to use his own lightness kung fu. Both of them had begun practicing martial arts before Guo Jing had started. As soon as they put effort into it, they soon arrived at the gates in the eastern part of the city.

There were a few Beggar Clan members patrolling the area by the gates. The leader of the group recognized the two and knew they were eminent members of the Quanzhen sect. When it came to status, they were Guo Jing's peers. When he heard Zhao Zhijing say that they had to leave the city due to urgent business, he immediately allowed the gates to be opened. The gates were opened just wide enough for one person to exit and the two of them rushed out of the city at once. The Beggar Clan member praised, "Excellent lightness kung fu!" Just as he was about to close the gates, a white blur passed his eyes, it seemed that someone else had left the city. In shock, he said, "What?" The person was long gone. As he went to take a look from the gates, the dawn was just breaking, he could only see within sixty or seventy

feet, so how could he see who was there? He turned around to ask the others but no one saw anything. He narrowed his eyes and cursed, "Must have been a ghost!" He had been working tirelessly the past few days; it must have been his eyes playing tricks on him.

Yin and Zhao did not dare stop and only after running a few li from the city did they slow their steps. Zhao Zhijing used his sleeve to wipe the sweat from his forehead and called out, "Damn, that was close!" He turned around and looked back. His knees went limp and he nearly fell to the ground. What he saw, about a hundred feet behind them, was a girl in white, looking at them fixated. If it wasn't Xiao Longnu, who else could it be?

Zhao Zhijing was frightened at what he saw, he let out a 'no'. He had thought that they had left her behind long ago, but who knew that she was following behind them without making a sound; he himself did not notice it. He immediately grabbed Yin Zhiping's arm and ran.

He ran over one hundred feet in one breath but when he turned his head back once again, Xiao Longnu was still in sight, following closely behind them with a gap of around thirty or forty feet between them. Zhao Zhijing did not know what to do; he just lowered his head and ran with all his might. He did not dare to keep on checking whether Xiao Longnu was there or not because each time he did, his heart would suffer a shock and his legs became weaker as a result. He said, "Apprentice brother Yin, she could kill us right here right now if she wanted to, she must be up to something."

Yin Zhiping asked in confusion, "Up to something?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "From what I can tell, it looks like she wants to capture us and then reveal what you did in front of the world's heroes. This will ruin the reputation of the Quanzhen sect forever."

Yin Zhiping's heart skipped a beat, he no longer cared about his life, if Xiao Longnu wanted to kill him, he would not retaliate. He had been in the tutelage of Qiu Chuji since he was young and he loved his teacher; he couldn't let the reputation of the world renowned Quanzhen sect be tarnished by his hands. As he thought about this, his spine broke out in a cold sweat. He increased his efforts and ran shoulder to shoulder with Zhao Zhijing.

The two picked pathless grounds to run through. Sometimes, they would take a peek back but still, Xiao Longnu would still be there, just a few zhangs (1 zhang=3.3 meters / 10+ feet) away from them at all times. The Ancient Tomb's lightness kung fu is unmatched in the world; following the two would not take much effort but she really did not know what she wanted to do. All she could do was to keep the two within her sight.

The two of them had already been frightened and confused when they first saw Xiao Longnu, but after seeing her follow them like a shadow, they couldn't help themselves from conjuring up worse and worse scenarios as to what Xiao Longnu was planning for them. They became even more frightened. From dawn to noon, and from noon to the afternoon, running ten or so hours like this non-stop was something the two could not keep up even if the two had profound internal energy. They were out of breath and struggling and were now a lot slower than before. It was deep into the day and the air was hot and the two were soaked in sweat. After a while, the two were hungry and thirsty. They soon came to a brook and thought, "Even if I get captured, I can't do anything about it." They threw themselves down beside the brook and drank.

Xiao Longnu strolled casually to the brook and she too took a few mouthfuls of water. In the crystal clear running water of the brook was an image of a girl in white, a picture of beauty,

an image of the Ling Bo Goddess. Xiao Longnu's heart felt empty and she forgot about her state of mind for the moment and plucked a flower from the brook's bank. She placed it into her hair above her ear and stared at the reflection in the water, her mind a blank.

The two men were drinking and glancing over at her at the same time. Seeing that it appeared that she was preoccupied by something else and looked as if she had completely forgotten about her intentions, the two signaled to each other with their eyes and quietly got up. They silently made their way behind Xiao Longnu and moved away slowly. After looking back a few times to see her still standing by the brook, the two quickly sped up their steps and ran. Not long after, they came to a main road.

The two of them thought that this time, they'd finally managed to escape her; but Yin Zhiping took a glance over his shoulder and saw otherwise. Xiao Longnu was still following them.

Yin Zhiping's face became grey and called out, "Alas, it's no use! Apprentice brother Zhao; just let her do what she wants!" He stopped running.

Zhao Zhijing was furious and shouted, "You deserve to die; why should I die with you?" He pulled his arm to take him with him but Yin Zhiping did not want to run anymore. Zhao Zhijing was frightened and angry at the same time; he raised his palm and struck his face.

Yin Zhiping said angrily, "Hitting me again?"

Xiao Longnu felt that it was extremely odd when she saw the two of them suddenly start to fight once again.

Right at this time, two horses came galloping towards them. The riders were Mongolian dispatchers. A thought came into

Zhao Zhijing's head and he quietly said, "Snatch the horses! We'll pretend to fight but don't let Xiao Longnu know what we are going to do." He then chopped forward with a palm. Yin Zhiping raised his arm to block and sent out a palm of his own. Zhao Zhijing took a few steps back and the two gradually moved towards the centre of the road. With the road blocked, the Mongolians reigned in their horses and shouted. Yin and Zhao suddenly leapt up and pulled the Mongolians to the ground. They then mounted the horses and galloped north.

Both these horses were top class steeds and they galloped with great speed. When the two turned back to see that Xiao Longnu was no longer behind them, they finally managed a sigh of relief. After traveling over thirty li (15km / 9+ miles) or so, they reached a three-forked road.

Zhao Zhijing said, "She saw us head north, we'll change directions and head east instead." He pulled his reigns to the right and they headed along the easterly road. By nightfall, they had reached a small town.

After running all day, the two were extremely tired and hungry. They immediately found a restaurant and ordered a plate of beef and a few jin (grams) of pancakes.

Zhao Zhijing sat down and calmed himself. But fear still lingered in his heart as he recalled the day's events. Xiao Longnu had been following them all day yet why had she yet to make a move on them? Yin Zhiping's face was grey as ash, his head was lowered and it seemed that his mind drifted away. The beef and pancakes soon arrived but just as they were picking up the chopsticks to eat, sounds of horses neighing and people shouting arose from outside the restaurant.

Someone shouted, "Who do those horses belong to? Why are they here?" There was a Mongolian accent behind those

words.

Zhao Zhijing stood up and went to the entrance. He saw a Mongolian Sergeant with a group of seven or eight soldiers pointing at the horses that Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping had ridden. The waiter at the restaurant was frightened and bowed to the Mongolian as he said, "Sir...Sir!"

Zhao Zhijing's anger had been building up all day after being chased by Xiao Longnu, he longed for a release to his tension; when he saw the Mongolians, he immediately went up to them and shouted, "The horses belong to me! What about it?"

The Sergeant said, "Where did you get them from?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "They're mine! What is it to you?"

By this time, all the land to the north of Xiangyang had fallen into Mongolian hands, all the Han were being oppressed by the Mongolians. Who would dare raise their voice to a Mongolian like this? The Mongolian saw that Zhao Zhijing looked a bit shifty and he had a sword at his waist, he was suspicious of him and said, "Did you buy them or steal them?"

Zhao Zhijing shouted, "What are you talking about? I reared these horses myself."

The Sergeant signaled with his hand and ordered, "Get him!" Seven or eight armed Mongolians encircled them.

Zhao Zhijing placed his hand on his sword handle and shouted, "What's your problem?"

The Mongolian Sergeant laughed coldly and said, "Horse thief! You've really got guts, these horses belong to the Mongolian army, are you going to admit now?" He then went up to the horses and moved their tails to the side to reveal a

Mongolian brand. All Mongolian horses had a brand on them to distinguish which camp they belong to. Zhao Zhijing stole these horses from some Mongolians, how would he know about this? When he saw the mark he became silent but continued to argue, "Who said they belong to the Mongolian army? I like to mark my horses, is that a crime?"

The Sergeant was furious; throughout his travels to the south he had never met such a brazen fellow. He took a step forward and reached out to grab Zhao Zhijing by his clothing. Zhao Zhijing bent his left arm and grabbed the Mongolian's wrist. Then he sent out his right palm and grabbed the Mongolian from behind before lifting him up and swinging him around his head three times before throwing him. The Sergeant was tossed away and landed in a porcelain shop. Non-stop sounds of smashing were heard as shelves of porcelain plates and bowls came crashing down. The sharp debris sliced up the Mongolian Sergeant and he was bleeding all over. He was unable to get up amongst the debris. The other soldiers went to help him; some moved the shelves and debris away while others helped him up. They no longer cared about trying to capture the horse thief.

Zhao Zhijing laughed out loud and walked back inside the restaurant to continue his meal. However, all the towns shops had closed and were boarded up as a result of the clash and all the customers that were in the restaurant had long ago cleared out. Everyone thought that with the Mongolians' malicious nature, surely they would be back to wash the town in blood. Zhao Zhijing had a few more bites of his food when the owner of the restaurant came up to him and suddenly dropped to the floor and started to bow to him. Zhao Zhijing knew that owner was afraid of the trouble that he would bring so he stood up and laughed, "Don't worry, we've eaten enough, we'll go immediately."

The owner's face became even greyer with fright and continued to bow to him.

Yin Zhiping said, "He's afraid that once we've left, the Mongolians will be back for us." He had always been a thoughtful and a strong man; it was only because of his mad love for Xiao Longnu that led him to his actions. His method of approach to everyday problems surpassed Zhao Zhijing in everyway and it was because of this that Ma Yu, Qiu Chuji and the others wanted to pass on the sect's leadership to him. He suddenly had a thought and said, "Bring me the best food and wine, we'll take responsibility for what we've done, why are you afraid?" The owner picked himself up and agreed compliantly before giving out orders to bring them food and wine.

The Mongolian Sergeant was injured pretty badly and had to be carried to his horse.

Zhao Zhijing laughed, "Brother Yin, after what we've been through today, we've really got to let off some steam once we're back."

Yin Zhiping gave a grunt and looked on as the Mongolians left. After steadying their nerves, everyone in the restaurant brought food and wine to them and filled up a table.

The two of them ate for a while when suddenly Yin Zhiping got up and raised his palm, sending the waiter who was serving him to the floor. The owner was alarmed and quickly walked forward and smiled, "This idiot doesn't know what he's doing, please don't get mad sir..." Before he finished, Yin Zhiping had kicked out with his left leg and lightly kicked him to the floor.

Zhao Zhijing thought he had lost it and called, "Brother Yin... you..."

Yin Zhiping flipped a table and sent bowls and plates smashing to the floor before immediately sending another two waiters to the floor. He then sealed everyone's accupoints before bringing his hands together and said, "When the Mongolians come and see you in this state, they won't vent their anger on you, do you understand? You should add a few injuries here and there as well." He then unsealed everyone's accupoints.

They suddenly understood and thought it was a great plan. They then started to beat each other up and tear each other's clothes, eyes were blackened and noses were bruised. Not long after, the sounds of hoofs from many galloping horses could be heard on the street's pavement. Everyone in the restaurant fell to the floor and cried out, "No, please stop!" "Mercy...have mercy!" "Please sir, I beg you!"

The horses did indeed stop outside the restaurant. Four Mongolian soldiers entered and were followed by a tall skinny Tibetan monk and a short dark man. This dark man had both his legs removed and was supporting himself with crutches.

When the soldiers saw the state of the restaurant they frowned and shouted, "Hurry up and bring us some food, we're in a rush."

The owner was taken aback by this and thought, "So these guys are from another group. What am I going to do when those other soldiers get back?" Just as he was hesitating, some of the soldiers struck at his head with their horse whips. The owner took the blows and complied but struggled to get up. One of the other waiters served and set places for them.

The Tibetan monk was Jinlun Fawang; the short dark man was Nimoxing. That day, after both of them had fallen victim to the 'Soul Freezing Needles', the two of them struggled outside the cave and fell off a cliff. Luckily, the sides of the

cliff had a large tree growing from it and Fawang managed to grab onto it just in time. Nimoxing was in a dazed state by now but he still clutched onto Fawang. Fawang took a look at his surroundings before he gathered his strength in his left arm and pushed; the two of them fell down towards the bushes at the bottom of the cliff. They rolled down a steep hill for around a hundred feet, only stopping once they'd reached the bottom of the valley. The two of them were scratched all over by thorns.

Fawang flipped over and used his minor grappling techniques on Nimoxing's arm and shouted, "Are you going to release me or not?"

In his dazed state, Nimoxing had no more strength to resist Fawang's pull; his left arm loosened but his right arm was still clutching onto the back of Fawang.

Fawang laughed coldly, "Your legs have contracted a lethal poison, why aren't you trying to save yourself and instead still trying to struggle with me?"

These two sentences made Nimoxing look down at his legs. His lower legs had swollen up badly, if he didn't do something about it soon, his life would be in danger. He clenched his teeth and took out the Iron Snake weapon from his waist and cut his lower legs off. Blood poured out copiously and he passed out. Fawang admired this steely behavior and now that he was a cripple and no longer a threat to him, he decided to help him. He sealed his knees' 'Crooked Spring' accupoints and his thigh's 'Five Li' accupoints to stop the bleeding. He then took out some medicine for external wounds and tore off Nimoxing's outer garment to bandage his legs.

A lot of Indian martial artists have practiced pain resisting arts such as sleeping on a bed of nails or sitting on a seat of knives. Nimoxing was well versed in such arts and as soon as

his wounds stopped bleeding he awoke and sat up saying; “Good, since you’ve saved me, we’ll forget all our past feuds.”

Fawang showed a bitter smile, “Though you’ve lost your legs, the poison in your body has been cleansed, but I’m still in danger.” So he sat down with his legs folded and circulated his chi, slowly forcing out the poison from his foot. It took him an exhausting two hours to force just a minute amount of the poison out.

The two of them rested in the remote valley for a few days. Fawang used his advanced internal energy to force the rest of the poison out and Nimoxing’s wounds no longer bled. Nimoxing made two crutches from some tree branches and the two made their way out of the valley. They soon came across a group of Mongolian soldiers and they made their way back to Khubilai’s camp. On the way back, they came across the same town that Yin and Zhao were in.

When Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping saw Fawang, they looked at each other in shock. They both were present at the Heroes’ Gathering at Da Xingguan and saw Fawang demonstrate his amazing martial arts. Both remembered when his disciples Da’erba and Huo Dou attacked the Chongyang Palace years ago; even some of the Quanzhen Masters found them difficult to contend with. They were filled with fear of this encounter. The two signaled to each other with their eyes and wanted to slip away.

That day at Da Xingguan there were hundreds or thousands of heroes attending the gathering, Zhao and Yin may have recognized Fawang but Fawang did not recognize them. Though Fawang saw that the restaurant was in a rough state, but since it was during a time of war, this wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. This fruitless attack on Xiangyang that ended with defeat was not going to be his greatest moment

in front of Khubilai. All he was thinking about at the moment was how to cover it up; he didn't care about the Taoists who were eating their meal.

Just at this time, there was a commotion outside the restaurant, and group of Mongolian soldiers came bursting in. As soon as they saw Yin and Zhao, they all roared and went forward to capture them. Yin Zhiping saw that Fawang was sitting near the door, if they dashed out past him, most probably he would intervene so he said quietly, "Exit through the backdoor!" He pushed a table and bowls and plates, causing a sudden noise as they crashed to the floor. The two of them leapt back and ran towards the backdoor.

Just as he was about to make it to the backyard, Yin Zhiping glanced over at Fawang and saw him holding a cup. Thinking to himself, "He's ignoring what was going on in the restaurant." He was delighted and thought, "He's not going to interfere." Suddenly, a black blur came at him; the short Western regions person had come and was waving his left hand, striking out at the heads of Yin and Zhao with his crutch. Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing had never seen this person before, but seeing his swift movements and powerful attacks, they immediately lowered their shoulders and dodged to the side.

Hitting thin air, Nimoxing cried out 'Oh', these two Taoists weren't weaklings and he was slightly surprised. He used his left crutch as a support and then attacked with his right crutch, blocking the Taoists path. The two of them unsheathed their swords and attacked from both sides, trying to force him back and make a path for an escape.

Though Nimoxing's martial arts were stronger than that of Yin and Zhao, he had lost his legs only just recently and had yet to fully recover. Fighting with his crutches against the two would require at least one crutch to remain on the

ground at all times. A few stances later, he could no longer keep it up. Fawang walked forward slowly and saw Zhao Zhijing's sword going for Nimoxing's chest. Nimoxing raised his crutch to block the attack and as he did so, Yin Zhiping went for his right side. This stance was extremely vicious, Nimoxing had to abandon his crutch and push back if he wanted to avoid it. Fawang took a stride forward and met with Nimoxing's flying body; Fawang supported him with his left arm and then placed his right hand on Nimoxing's arm. Nimoxing's crutch and Zhao Zhijing's sword had yet to separate at this point. Fawang transferred his internal energy through the crutch. Zhao Zhijing felt his arm shaking violently and half his upper body began to grow hot, a 'dang' sound was heard as he dropped his sword.

Nimoxing's internal energy was lacking but his changes in stance were extremely swift. As soon as he saw Zhao Zhijing's sword fall from his hands, he immediately swung his crutch towards Yin Zhiping and trapped his sword. Fawang touched Nimoxing's arm once again. Yin Zhiping saw what had happened to Zhao Zhijing previously so he immediately circulated his internal energy to counter the attack. Fawang's internal energy had both softness and hardness within, after a 'kala' sound, the sword broke, leaving Yin Zhiping with a broken sword in his hand. Fawang lowered Nimoxing to the ground lightly and then stretched out his hands, placing them on the shoulders of the two. He smiled, "Why come to arms with strangers? With your martial arts, you two must be first class fighters of the central plains, why don't we sit down and have a chat?"

There didn't seem to be any malicious intent in his movements but once his hands touched them, the two could not move. All they felt was a force like a thousand jin (500kg / 1kg=2.2lbs) pressing down on their shoulders. All they could do was try to circulate their internal energy to resist the force; how could they even reply? If they opened their

mouths, their internal energy would disperse and their bones from their shoulder to their waist would surely be crushed.

The soldiers who rushed in had by now completely surrounded them. The leader of the pack was a Noyan and he recognized Fawang, who was the First Protector of Mongolia and commanded great respect from Khubilai. He immediately went up to Fawang and bowed, "Your eminence, these two Taoists stole our horses and beat up our soldiers, thank you for your eminence's help..." Before he finished, he glanced over at Yin Zhiping a few times and suddenly asked, "Is this the person Yin Zhiping?"

Yin Zhiping nodded but he did not recognize this man.

Fawang loosened his grip on the two and reduced the force he was exerting and thought, "These two Taoists are only forty years of age or so yet their internal energy is so pure."

The Mongolian Noyan said, "Does Master Yin not recognize me? Nineteen years ago, we were eating roast lamb in the desert, I'm Sa Duo."

Yin Zhiping looked at him carefully and said with delight, "Oh, yes, that's right! I didn't recognize you with that beard!"

Sa Duo smiled, "I've ridden thousands of li (1 li = 0.5km) all over the lands; all my hair has gone white yet you haven't changed much. No wonder Genghis Khan claimed practicing Taoists are immortal." He turned to Fawang and said, "Your eminence, this Taoist has visited the Western regions in the past, he was a guest of Genghis Khan, it could be said that he's one of us." Fawang nodded and released his hands from their shoulders.

Years ago, Genghis Khan had invited Qiu Chuji to Western regions to see him, hoping he could learn the secrets of immortality. Qiu Chuji traveled thousands of li and took

nineteen disciples with him. Yin Zhiping was his senior student so he of course was within the group. Genghis Khan sent two hundred men to accompany Qiu Chuji and his disciples. Sa Duo was just a lowly soldier at that time and he was within that group; that is why he was able to recognize Yin Zhiping. He had fought for over twenty years and his deeds were rewarded with a promotion to the position of Noyan. He was delighted with this unexpected meeting with Yin Zhiping. He had great respect for Yin Zhiping and laughed off what happened with the horses. Sa Duo asked him about the well being of Qiu Chuji and the others that were on the expedition, and as he talked the past, his pride became visible.

Fawang had also heard about Qiu Chuji before and knew that he was Quanzhen's best fighter. He saw that Yin Zhiping's and Zhao Zhijing's martial arts weren't bad and thought that the reputation of the Quanzhen is deserved. We were lucky that he was able to strike first and take the initiative, otherwise, had a fight really broken out, it would take him at least twenty or thirty stances to beat them.

Suddenly there was a blur at the door and a girl in white entered. Fawang, Nimoxing, Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing were all alarmed to see that this girl was Xiao Longnu. Only Nimoxing had no fear of her and said, "The Passionless Valley's bride, greetings!"

Xiao Longnu nodded slightly and then sat down in the corner at a small table. She ignored everyone and quietly ordered some mushroom noodles from a waiter.

The faces of Yin and Zhao were white one minute and green the next; both of them were agitated. Fawang was afraid that Yang Guo would soon arrive; there was nothing that he feared in the world except those two's 'Pure Heart of Jade Maiden' swordplay. The three of them were occupied with

their thoughts and ate without saying a word. Yin and Zhao were full a long time ago but if they suddenly went quiet, the others would be suspicious of them, so they ate without stopping so as to occupy their mouths.

Sa Duo however was in a joyous mood, he asked, "Master Yin, have you ever seen our Fourth Prince?"

Yin Zhiping shook his head.

Sa Dou continued, "Khubilai is the Fourth Prince son of the Fourth Prince Tou Lei. He is wise and compassionate and he has the respect of everyone in the camp. I was just on my way to report to him; if you two have nothing to do, why not come along and meet him?"

Yin Zhiping shook his head with other things on his mind. Zhao Zhijing suddenly had a thought and asked, "Reverend, are you going to see the Fourth Prince as well?"

Fawang said, "Yes! The prince is a real man of the world, you two must meet him."

Zhao Zhijing said with joy, "Good, we'll go with you and Sa Dou." He patted Yin Zhiping's leg beneath the table and made a signal with his eyes to him.

Sa Duo said with delight "Good...very good!"

Yin Zhiping's intelligence is normally higher than that of Zhao Zhijing but as soon as he saw Xiao Longnu, he had drifted off into his own world. Only after a long while did he get Zhao Zhijing's plan. He wanted to rely on Fawang's protection to escape from Xiao Longnu.

Everyone quickly finished their meals and all left at the same time, making their way on horseback. Fawang was relieved to see that Yang Guo was still nowhere to be seen and thought, "The Quanzhen sect is one of the central plains largest sects,

if I can enlist their help to aid Mongolia, it would be a great achievement. I at least have something to report back to his Highness tomorrow.” He then tried to convey his intent of enlisting them through his words to the Taoists.

The sky was now getting dark, after riding for a while, the sounds of hoofs could be heard from behind them. They looked back and saw Xiao Longnu following slowly behind them on a donkey.

Fawang was alarmed and thought, “She can’t beat me by herself so why is she being so brash and following us? Could it be that Yang Guo is following along in secret as well?” He had just met Yin and Zhao and did not want to lose any face in front of them so he pretended that he did not know that Xiao Longnu was following them.

The group rode for half a night before they reached a forest. Sa Duo ordered his men to take rest. About a hundred feet away, Xiao Longnu too had gotten off her donkey and sat down in the forest. The more secretive her actions were, the harder Fawang concentrated; he did not dare to make a rash move. Zhao Zhijing remembered that Nimoxing had greeted Xiao Longnu, but did not know what ties Fawang had with her. He dare not look at her. After resting for an hour, everyone got on their horses once again and after they left the forest, the sounds of hoofs could again be heard as Xiao Longnu followed once again.

Day had broken and still, Xiao Longnu was following them with a distance of about a hundred feet between them.

By now they had reached an open plain. Fawang looked all around and saw that there were no signs of anyone else. Evil intent stirred in him as he thought, “I have been invincible all my life, yet as soon as I stepped onto the central plains, I was defeated by those kids Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu’s twin swordplay. She’s following me non-stop and must be up to

something. Why don't I attack out of the blue and kill her? Even if she has help, they'll be too late. Once this girl dies, no one in the world can threaten me." He had made his mind up and just as he was about to reign in his horse the sound of bells ringing could be heard in front of them. A dust cloud could be seen a few li in front of them as horses galloped towards them.

Fawang regretted his missed opportunity, "If I knew that her help would arrive now, I would have killed her long ago."

Suddenly, Sa Duo cried out, "Oh! That's strange."

Fawang saw that a group of four horses were riding towards them and the first horse on the right was carrying a flag. On the flag pole were seven different types of white wool fluttering in the wind; it was Khubilai's banner yet from afar, there appeared to be no rider on the horse.

Sa Duo called out, "His Highness is here!" He rode forwards and about a distance of half a li from the horses, he got off and stood in a respectful stance.

Fawang thought, "Since his Highness is here, it would not be appropriate to kill the girl now." If Khubilai saw him fight a girl on her own, Khubilai would look down upon him. He rode forward slowly and saw that in the group of four horses sat a man in midair. The man had white hair, a white beard with a big smile on his face; it was none other than Zhou Botong.

From afar Zhou Botong called out, "Good, good, the big monk is here and the dark shortie is here, we meet again. Oh, and that young girl is here as well."

Fawang was curious; this person was full of tricks but how was he able to sit in midair? Once the horses got closer, he was able to see what was happening. The horses were

holding a makeshift net made from ropes on their backs and he was sitting on the net.

Zhou Botong had always kept away from the Chongyang Palace and very rarely saw the Quanzhen Masters; because of this, Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing did not recognize him. Though they have heard from the Masters that they have a Grand Martial Uncle who was a free wanderer, they had not heard from him for a long time and thought probably he must have passed away. The thought that this could be him had never entered their minds. Years ago at that great battle at the Smokey Rain Pavilion the place was covered with fog and no one could see anything. Zhou Botong was there; although Yin Zhiping had heard of him, he did not see him.

Fawang frowned; this person's martial arts are extremely high, it would be best not to get mixed up with him. He asked, "Is his Highness behind you?"

Zhou Botong pointed behind him and laughed, "About thirty or forty li back is his tent. Hey monk, a word of advice, I don't think it's the best time to see him right now."

Fawang said, "Why?"

Zhou Botong said, "Right now, he's pissed off. If you go see him now, you'll probably lose your bald head."

Fawang said angrily, "Rubbish! Why would his Highness be angry?"

Zhou Botong pointed to the flag and laughed, "I stole his Highness' flag, why shouldn't he be angry?"

Fawang was shocked and asked, "Why did you steal it?"

Zhou Botong said, "Do you know Guo Jing?"

Fawang nodded and said, "So?

Zhou Botong said, "He's my sworn brother. I haven't seen him in years; I miss him a lot so I decided to go see him. He's fighting the Mongols at Xiangyang at the moment so I went and stole the Mongol's royal banner to give it to him as a gift."

Fawang was shocked and thought this was terrible; they are unable to break Xiangyang down and now, the royal banner has been stolen. This would bring great disgrace to the Mongols; he must come up with a way to get the banner back at all costs.

Zhou Botong shouted and the horses rushed forward, galloping like the wind in a westerly direction before making a circle and returning. The banner fluttered in the wind. Zhou Botong stood up with four reigns in his hands as he rode across the open plains, he looked like a great General.

He looked extremely pleased with himself and as he got close to them, he shouted and the horses immediately stopped. His hands must be extremely powerful to be able to control the four horses as he pleased.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Hey monk, how're my riding skills?"

Fawang gave a thumbs up and praised, "Brilliant, absolutely brilliant!" In his mind, he was trying to come up with a way to get the flag back.

Zhou Botong waved his left hand and laughed, "Big monk, little girl, the Old Urchin's going!"

When Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing heard the 'Old Urchin', they both yelled out, "Grand Martial Uncle?" They both leapt off their horses.

Yin Zhiping said, "Is this Senior Zhou of the Quanzhen sect?"

Zhou Botong's eyes rolled around and said, "Hmm, what's this? You better start your kowtows."

The two of them were about to greet him but when they heard his words, they were shocked and were afraid that they were mistaken.

Zhou Botong asked, "Who is your Master?"

Yin Zhiping replied respectfully, "Zhao Zhijing is the disciple of the Jade Sun Elder Wang; I am the disciple of the Eternal Spring Elder Qiu."

Zhou Botong said, "Hmm, seems like each generation is getting worse and worse, and it looks like you two are bad characters." Suddenly he kicked out with both his legs and his shoes went flying forward towards them.

Yin Zhiping saw that the shoe was coming at him quite slowly without much force; even if it struck him in the face it wouldn't hurt, he dare not lose his manners and kept bowing. But Zhao Zhijing stretched out his hand to catch the shoe. But who knew that when they arrived within three feet of them, the shoes suddenly curled back. Zhao Zhijing grabbed empty air as the left shoe turned right and the right shoe turned left. The shoes circled back and crossed each other and went back to Zhou Botong. Zhou Botong stretched out his feet and the shoes slipped on.

Though this was just a trick, without extremely profound internal energy, it would be impossible to kick the shoes with the right weight and force like this. Jinlun Fawang and Nimoxing had seen him throw some spearheads in Khubilai's tent that dropped midway in their flight. The shoes were kicked off with the same type of skill except that an extra back force was added. That was why they weren't shocked when they saw this. But when Zhao Zhijing stretched out his hand and missed, he was shocked. With his martial arts, even

the most lethal projectile would be plucked out of the air by him yet he wasn't able to catch this slow shoe. He no longer had any doubts and did as Yin Zhiping did and bowed, saying, "Disciple Zhao Zhijing greets great Martial Uncle."

Zhou Botong laughed, "Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi's eyes must be bad; none of their disciples are up to it. Just forget it, who wants kowtows from you?" He roared, "Onwards!" The four horses galloped forward.

Fawang leapt off his horse and blurred towards the horses' path. He called out, "Wait!" Each of his palms was pressed onto one horse each. The horses were advancing forward at this time but this press by Fawang actually made them move two steps back.

Zhou Botong was furious and shouted, "Big monk, do you want a fight? The Old Urchin hasn't found a worthy opponent for years; my fists are getting a bit itchy. Come now, let's have a few rounds." He loved martial arts and in recent years, his martial arts have been getting better and better; finding a worthy opponent was an extremely difficult task. He knew Fawang's martial arts were of a high standard, someone worthy to exchange stances with, so he got off his horse ready to fight.

Fawang waved his hand and said, "I never fight with shameless scoundrels. Fight if you want, I won't."

Zhou Botong was angry and said, "You dare call me a shameless scoundrel?"

Fawang said, "You knew that I wasn't at the camp so you went and stole the banner, wouldn't you call that shameless? You knew that you weren't a match for me so you waited until you were sure that I wasn't there before you sneakily stole the flag. Ha-ha, Zhou Botong, looks like you don't have any pride."

Zhou Botong said, "Fine, we'll know whether I'm a match for you after we've had a fight."

Fawang shook his head and said, "I said I don't fight with shameless scoundrels, you can't force me to fight. My knuckles are very proud, once they hit any shameless scoundrels, the knuckles would be covered with a stench that'll hang around for three years and six months."

Zhou Botong shouted, "What do you want to do?"

Fawang said, "Hand the banner back to me and then come back later tonight to steal it again while I'll guard it. No matter what method you use, if you are able to steal it again, I'll give my respects to you as a great hero."

Zhou Botong could never resist challenges and the harder it was, the greater the urge to do it. He immediately shot the flag back to Fawang and said, "Catch, I'll be back for it tonight."

Fawang stretched out his hand and caught the flag pole only to realize the great force behind the throw, he quickly circulated his internal energy to resist but in the end, he still had to take two steps back before he steadied himself.

The horses had been pressing forward but were held back by Fawang; now, Fawang's hold on them loosened. All the horses suddenly leapt forward at least twenty feet and galloped ahead. Everyone watched as Zhou Botong and the horses raced away further and further into the distance until they were small dots.

Fawang's mind was occupied for a while before he passed the flag over to Sa Duo and said, "Let's make a move."

Fawang knew that Zhou Botong's actions were hard to fathom, how was he going to win? He thought for a while on the horseback but couldn't come up with anything. By

chance, he looked around and saw Yin and Zhao were speaking quietly to each other and were constantly looking back at Xiao Longnu with fear on their faces. He thought, "Could it be that she has come for them?" So he decided to investigate and said, "Brother Yin, do you know Miss Long?"

Yin Zhiping's face changed and he replied, "Hmm." Fawang knew that there more to this so he continued, "You two have offended her and now she's looking for you to get her own back, right? That girl is extremely powerful; to offend her is not a good idea." He had no idea what was going on but from the fearful look on the two's faces, he made a guess, tested the two, and managed to get the right answer straight away.

Zhao Zhijing took this opportunity to reply, "She has offended you as well; that day at the 'Heroes' gathering she beat you, you must avenge what she did to you."

Fawang scoffed, "You know as well?"

Zhao Zhijing replied, "Everyone in the world of Wulin knows about this."

Fawang thought, "This Taoist is not so simple. I want him to help me defeat my enemy yet he's trying to use me to help him escape his predicament." He continued, "These two men are not your average men, if I just leave it out in the open, things will go a lot easier." So he said, "That Miss Long wants to kill you but you can't beat her so you seek my protection, right?"

Zhao Zhijing replied furiously, "Do I look like someone who needs to rely on others to save myself? Besides, the good Reverend here may not be able to beat her."

Fawang was shocked by his proud reply and thought, "Could my assumptions be wrong?" He could not tell what the two were thinking so he smiled, "Her twin swordplay with Yang

Guo is indeed extremely powerful. But she's alone right now; it would be extremely easy for me to kill her."

Zhao Zhijing shook his head, "I'm afraid it's not as easy as it sounds. Everyone in the Jianghu world says that Jinlun Fawang was defeated by Xiao Longnu."

Fawang laughed, "I have meditated for years, so how could your words anger me?" From what Zhao Zhijing said, he knew that Zhao Zhijing was hoping that he would defeat Xiao Longnu for him. Before Zhou Botong arrived, he had planned on killing Xiao Longnu but, with the bet he made with Zhou Botong, he had a use for the two. If he killed Xiao Longnu, he no longer had any leverage over the two, so he cupped his hands and said, "Since it is so, I will make my way. After you've sorted out the matter with Xiao Longnu, please come and visit his Highness' camp." He pulled his reigns and rode forward.

Zhao Zhijing was getting anxious, he knew that as soon as Fawang leaves, Xiao Longnu would catch up with them and torture them. As he thought about the suffering that he had from the Jade Bees on Mount Zhongnan he couldn't stop himself from worrying. It appeared that this Tibetan monk possessed not only terrific martial arts but also a calculating mind that exceeded his own. Seeing Fawang ride ahead, he quickly caught up and called out, "Reverend, please wait! I am not familiar with the roads here; I will be indebted forever if Reverend would trouble himself to enlighten me."

When Fawang heard 'indebted forever', he smiled and thought, "It looks like it's the one named Zhao that has offended Miss Long, that's why he is so afraid, and it looks like it has nothing to do with the one named Yin." He said, "Fine, but I might need to trouble you later on."

Zhao Zhijing said quickly, "No matter what the Reverend requests, I will follow the order."

He and Fawang rode together and as they did so, Fawang asked about the situation at Quanzhen and Zhao Zhijing told all. Yin Zhiping followed behind in a daze.

Fawang said, "Oh, so Elder Ma no longer runs the sect because of old age. I hear that the current leader Elder Qiu is getting on as well."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Yes, Martial Uncle Qiu is already seventy years of age."

Fawang said, "So after Elder Qiu hands over the leadership, Elder Wang would be the leader." These words struck out at the thoughts of Zhao Zhijing, his face changed slightly and said, "My Master is also of an old age. In recent years, the Masters have been studying the ways of life; the matters of the sect are passed on mostly to my apprentice brother Yin."

Fawang saw that as he said this he had a slightly angry expression on his face and said quietly, "From what I see, though your apprentice brother Yin's martial arts are good, they are not as good as yours and when it comes to intelligence, yours is far superior. The important task of sect leader should fall to you."

These words had been hidden away in Zhao Zhijing's mind for seven or eight years now but he had never said it publicly. Hearing these words from Fawang, his anger was even more telling. By appointing Yin Zhiping as the head disciple of the third generation, the Quanzhen Masters are indicating they want him to be the next sect leader. At first, Zhao Zhijing was just jealous and couldn't accept it, but since he has managed to find a way to blackmail him he has been pondering ways to snatch the sect's leadership from him. Yin Zhiping's raping of Xiao Longnu broke major rules of the Quanzhen sect; if the Masters found out his life would be at risk. But Zhao Zhijing well knew that he was a reckless man and had never pleased the Quanzhen Masters. He did not get along with most of his

apprentice brothers so even if Yin Zhiping's name and reputation is tarnished, the title of sect leader would not fall to him. This is the reason why he had kept it to himself all this time.

Having figured out his thoughts, Fawang thought to himself, "If I help him get the sect's leadership, he will follow my orders completely. The Quanzhen sect has great influence and has followers everywhere; if I can enlist them to our side, it will greatly aid his Highness' task of invading the south. This would be a great achievement, probably even more so than killing Guo Jing." Fawang looked back and saw that Xiao Longnu was standing about a li away and was not advancing further. He thought, "With her there, those two Taoists will definitely fall for the bait."

Everyone entered the royal tent and Khubilai was in a bad temper over losing his royal flag. The royal flag is the army's lead, in a battle, the thousands and thousands of soldiers follow the flag's actions and it is an extremely important object. Losing the flag like this without anyone knowing what happened was like losing an important battle. Khubilai's mood changed when he saw Fawang enter the tent with the flag in his hand and quickly went up to greet him.

Khubilai had both knowledge and valor in abundance and had followed his ancestor Genghis Khan. When he heard Fawang introduce Yin and Zhao as Taoists from Quanzhen, he immediately welcomed them with open arms showing he appreciated great people. He forgot about the incident with the flag and immediately ordered a banquet for them. Yin Zhiping was not concentrating and was thinking only about Xiao Longnu. Zhao Zhijing had always respected people of importance, when he saw how Khubilai treated him, he was out of this world with delight.

Khubilai did not mention the failure to assassinate Guo Jing and instead kept on mentioning how loyal Nimoxing was. Because of his legs, he was invited to head the banquet. Khubilai and he drank with each other. Nimoxing was extremely touched and thought that no matter what Khubilai needed, he would do so without any qualms.

After the banquet, Fawang accompanied Yin and Zhao to their tent. Yin Zhiping's mind was tired and he went to sleep. Fawang said, "Brother Zhao, we have some idle time, let's take a walk."

From faraway, Zhao Zhijing saw Xiao Longnu sitting underneath a tree with her donkey tied to it. His face changed at the sight of her. Fawang pretended he did not see her and asked more about the situation at Quanzhen.

In Northern Song, there originally was only one Taoist sect; Zheng Yi had originated in Sanxi's Mountain of Dragons and Tigers, headed by Zhang Tianshi. After the invasion by the Jurchens, the Song moved south and in Hubei, three new Taoist sects emerged; Quanzhen, Dadao and Taiyi. The Quanzhen was the most successful and its members were heroic and came to the aid of the needy. During this time, the northern areas were in chaos, the citizens were suffering; they saw that there was no hope from the royal court and everyone saw the Quanzhen sect as their saviors. At that time, someone said, "The Central Plains are shifting, the Southern Song are weak. All the heroes of the world must join if they wish to defend the land. The Founder Chongyang, the Eternal Spring Elder Qiu, models to all, their unique sect's conduct influences all men of promise, bringing peace to the nation. It is the way of the heavens to have leaders like these." And so on. North of the great river during this time, the power of the Beggar Clan and the Quanzhen sect were sometimes greater than that of the authorities.

Zhao Zhijing saw that Fawang was treating him with great respect and was touched by this, whatever Fawang asked, he answered, telling him where the sect's influence lay and where its strongholds were.

The two talked and walked at the same time and soon reached a place where they were alone. Fawang sighed and said, "Reverend Zhao, for your sect to be what it is today is no mean feat. Please forgive me; I must say that Elders Ma, Qiu and Wang do not know what they are doing in this matter. How can they elect brother Yin as the next sect leader?"

Recently, Zhao Zhijing had been thinking about how he was going to wait until Yin was the sect leader and until all the Quanzhen Masters passed away before forcing Yin to hand over the leadership. But he was an impatient man, even if this was going to succeed, it would take years before it would happen. This reminder made him sigh and he looked at Xiao Longnu once again.

Fawang said, "I will take care of the matter concerning Miss Long, and there is no need to worry. The most important matter right now is to make sure the leadership of your sect does not fall into the wrong hands."

Zhao Zhijing became excited and said, "If Reverend can enlighten me on this matter then I will follow and be your aide for life."

Fawang raised his eyebrows and said clearly, "A gentleman's word is a promise; you cannot take back your word."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Of course."

Fawang said, "Fine, I'll guarantee you that you'll be the sect leader within half a year."

Zhao Zhijing was delighted to hear this, but he knew that it would be difficult to achieve this and still had some doubts.

Fawang said, "You don't believe me?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "I do, I do. The good Reverend is full of wisdom, he must have a plan."

Fawang said, "I have no ties with your sect; whoever becomes the sect leader is of no importance. But for some reason, when I saw you it was like seeing an old friend, I had to intervene."

Zhao Zhijing was excited and did not know what the best way was to express his thanks.

Fawang said, "The first step is that we must gain a strong supporter for you within the sect. Whose position is the highest within the sect?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "That is of course Grand Martial Uncle Zhou who we met today."

Fawang said, "Correct. If he agrees to support you, brother Yin would most likely have no chance."

Zhao Zhijing said with joy, "Yes, Martial Uncle Ma, Martial Uncle Qiu and my Master all have to call him Martial Uncle. Whatever he says must be respected. But what ingenious plan would you use to persuade Great Martial Uncle Zhou to support me."

Fawang said, "I made a bet with Zhou Botong today about stealing the royal flag. Do you think he's going to come?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "Of course he'll come."

Fawang said, "The flag will not be hoisted on the flag pole tonight, and we'll hide it in a secret place. The camp has thousands of tents, even if Zhou Botong has the ability to

move heaven and earth, there is no way he'll be able to find the flag in one night."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Yes!" But he was thinking, "This isn't the most honorable thing to do."

Fawang said, "You must be thinking, this isn't an honorable thing to do. But I'm just thinking of you." Zhao Zhijing looked at him and didn't understand what he meant.

Fawang patted his shoulder lightly and said, "I'll tell you where I hid the flag and then you'll go and tell Zhou Botong where the flag is and let him find it, how wonderful would that be?"

Zhao Zhijing said, "Yes, yes, that will definitely please Great Martial Uncle Zhou." But then he said, "But won't that mean you've lost the bet?"

Fawang said, "For friends, men like us can ignore a defeat here or there, what's so important about that?"

Zhao Zhijing was extremely touched by this and said, "I do not know how to express my thanks."

Fawang smiled, "Once you've got the support of Zhou Botong, with my help you'll be able to elect yourself as sect leader." He then pointed to the left and said, "Let's take a look over there."

About a li away from the camp were some small hills, in a short while they reached one of the hills. Fawang said, "We'll find a cave and hide the flag there." The first two hills they came across were open and bare without any caves there. On the third hill they found that it was covered with woodlands and there was cave after cave.

Fawang said, "This looks like the best place."

Between two large trees he saw a cave with a well-hidden entrance that was not easy to spot at a glance, he said, "Remember this place, I'll place the flag in there. Later on tonight, bring Zhou Botong here."

Zhao Zhijing kept on saying yes, he was filled with delight. He looked hard and long at the two trees thinking with these two trees as a marker, he will definitely remember the right cave. The two returned to the camp and did not mention this again.

After supper, Zhao Zhijing kept talking to Yin Zhiping. Yin Zhiping just stared and sometimes said a word here or there, not really replying. The sky was getting dark and the gong for the first hour sounded. Zhao Zhijing slipped away from the camp and sat beside a sandy hill. He saw the patrols and how heavily guarded the camp was and thought, "It really would be difficult to take just one step into this camp. Yet Great Martial Uncle Zhou came and went as he pleased when he took the flag; his abilities are unimaginable."

The sky above him was now dark blue, like a Mongolian tent that covered the plains. The stars were twinkling in the sky and the stars of the dipper were especially bright. He thought, "If Fawang's words are true, three months from now I'll be the leader of the Quanzhen sect; its three thousand branches and eighty thousand disciples will be under my command, ha-ha. Then it would be so easy to take the life of that punk Yang Guo." The more he thought about it, the more arrogant he became. He stood up and looked into the distance and made out that Xiao Longnu was still sitting underneath that same tree. He thought, "That Miss Long's beauty really is unmatched, even I feel something, no wonder apprentice brother Yin is so crazy about her. But how can those who want to achieve greatness let things like women get in the way?"

Just as he was feeling pleased with himself, he suddenly saw a black shadow coming from the west. The shadow was darting about within the camp and soon reached the flagpole. The person had a broad gown and large sleeves, his white beard was fluttering in the wind; Zhou Botong had arrived.

End of Chapter 24.

Chapter 25 - Domestic Strife, Foreign Aggression

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The spiders immediately set to work, climbing up, moving east, dropping low, and approaching west, hanging suspended, until they were able to create a network of webs in just a very short time. Xiao Long Nu and Zhou Bo Tong watched with interest as the spiders spun the web, yet it never occurred to either one of them to stop their progress. Only when the web reached about ten feet in diameter, covering the entire mouth of the cave, and the red-green venomous spiders start to crawl around did they look troubled.

Zhou Botong raised his head, searching the top of the flag pole, but finding no flag there, he could not help being startled. He'd thought that Jinlun Fawang would be hiding somewhere below, waiting to ambush him, then seize the opportunity to route him completely.

It was a smooth plan but not even ten thousand guesses could prepare him for this: the flag was not there. He looked around. The camp was filled with numerous tents. Yet, he must try to find it before leaving.

Zhao Zhijing was about to move forward to greet him but he changed his mind. He thought, "If I go and tell him now, he'll be suspicious. I must first let him look everywhere and when he doesn't succeed, he can't help feeling dejected. At that time, I'll go out and tell him where the flag is. Only then will he be able to show his gratitude towards me."

He crouched behind a tent to watch the motionless Zhou Botong only to see his body shoot upwards towards the top of the flag pole. He leapt several chi (1chi≈11in) high and used one hand to brace himself against the pole. Then he used his other hand to quickly pull himself up until he reached the top.

Zhao Zhijing was secretly astonished. Grand Martial Uncle Zhou must be almost a hundred years old. Even if he

practiced the Taoist doctrines, he still should not be able to avoid the slowing effects of old age. Yet, he is still as agile as a youth. So the stories in Wulin are really true.

Once up there, Zhou Botong scanned the whole camp, seeing several flags fluttering in the wind but none of them was the royal flag. He raised his head and shouted: "Jinlun Fawang, where is the royal flag?"

This angry yell was carried far and wide, its faint echoes bouncing off the cordillera to the West. Fawang had already reported the matter to Huo Bi Lie (Khubilai) so even though the whole army heard his shout, they remained silent.

Zhou Botong warned: "Fawang, if you still don't reply, I might have to scold you." There was still no response.

Zhou Botong scolded: "Jinlun Fawang, you rotten dog, you call yourself a hero? You're worse than a turtle that refuses to come out of its shell!"

From the East, someone suddenly called out: "Mischievous Old Urchin, if you want to steal the Prince's flag, it's right here."

Zhou Botong quickly rushed down the pole, shouting: "Where?" But after shouting, that person was silent. Zhou Botong searched countless tents but did not know where to start.

Farther away, the person shouted: "The royal flag is right here! The royal flag is right here!"

Zhou Botong dashed towards that sound but that person's voice was softer now, growing fainter and fainter. Zhou Botong only took a few steps, but the voice was already fading in and out like gossamer until finally it stopped. In reality, he did not know how far the voice was from camp.

Zhou Botong called out angrily: "Fawang, you rascal, are you playing hide-and-seek with me? Do you want me to burn down this whole camp so you'll come out?"

Zhao Zhijing thought, "If he sets the camp on fire, that can't be good. He hurried forward and said in a low voice: "Grand Martial Uncle Zhou, don't light a fire."

Grand Martial Uncle Zhou said: "Taoist priest, it's you! Why can't I light a fire?"

Zhao Zhijing quickly lied: "They intentionally want you to light a fire because the whole camp is filled with black powder. When you ignite it, the whole place could explode."

Zhou Botong was shocked. "It's a clever trick but also mean and cruel."

Zhao Zhijing was relieved to see that he believed him. He added: "I secretly inquired around and found out about this clever trick. I was afraid that you did not know about it so I had to tell you."

Grand Martial Uncle Zhou said: "Mmm, your intentions are good. If you hadn't told me, this Mischievous Old Urchin could have been killed."

Zhao Zhijing replied: "I also took a great risk by finding out where the royal flag is. Grand Martial Uncle Zhou, please come along with me."

But Zhou Botong suddenly said: "Don't tell me, don't tell me! If I can't find it, then I must admit defeat." The bet to find the flag was an amusing game. But if Zhao Zhijing gave him directions, he would feel bad even if he won because this kind of game required stealth.

Zhao Zhijing felt anxious. Then suddenly, he remembered, "He is known as the Mischievous Old Urchin, his mood is not

ordinary. I must tempt him first so he can get hooked." He said: "Grand Martial Uncle, I also want to steal the flag. Let's have a race to see who finds it first."

After saying that, he quickly rushed towards the hills. When he got there, he turned to find Zhou Botong following behind. He then darted to the third hill, pondering aloud: "They said that it's in a cave between two elm trees but where are these two elm trees?"

He rushed around the place but actually did not approach the cave where Fawang hidden the flag. Suddenly, he heard Zhou Botong exclaim; "I found it first!" He was standing between the two elm trees.

Zhao Zhijing smirked, thinking, "He stole the Prince's flag. He'll surely favor me now. What's more, I stopped him from setting the camp on fire. He thinks I saved his life. Everything is going exactly as Fawang planned. Satisfied, he started to step inside the cave. Suddenly, he heard a loud shout, the sound extremely sharp. Zhou Botong cried out: "Poisonous snake...Poisonous snake!"

Shocked, Zhao Zhijing quickly withdrew his foot that was already inside the cave. He asked: "Grand Martial Uncle! There's a poisonous snake inside the cave?"

Grand Martial Uncle Zhou replied: "It's not a snake... it's not a snake..." The voice was already getting weaker.

Zhao Zhijing anxiously gathered some twigs and lit them, using it as a torch so he could see inside the cave. He saw Zhou Botong on the ground, his left hand still clutching the flag. He was brandishing it as though trying to keep him away.

Zhao Zhijing asked: "Grand Martial Uncle, are you all right?"

Zhou Botong replied: "I have been poisoned...venom...venom...was bitten..." But before he could finish his statement, his hand had gradually grown limp.

Zhao Zhijing had seen him enter the cave but despite his high kung fu, he was still seriously injured. That was why he did not want to rush in without knowing what kind of fierce poison it was that afflicted him. What's more, the flag that Zhou Botong was clutching was not the same color as the king's flag. He thought, Fawang had connived with me to trick him into entering the cave but it was really his intention to harm him by poisoning him.

He was extremely vexed. He wanted to flee. So, without even bothering to see what it was that harmed Zhou Botong or what kind of poison it was, he just turned around and ran away.

The fire from the torch that he dropped on the way out was beginning to die out. Halfway out, he was stopped by someone who was holding out a hand to him. That person spoke softly: "Are you always this disrespectful to your seniors?"

The voice was distinctly stern but also as pure and as clear as jade. In the darkness, he saw the lithe form of a woman dressed in flowing white clothes. She was none other than Xiao Longnu. The light from the dying torch shone on her, revealing a beautiful face. Though delicate-looking, the face actually bore an angry expression. Zhao Zhijing was taken aback and rendered speechless. He was not expecting her and now that she was here, all he wanted was to run away. But, he could not even take a single step.

In truth, Xiao Longnu had been observing Zhao Zhijing from a distance, watching his every action. When he made Zhou Botong chase him towards the hills, Xiao Longnu followed as well. Zhou Botong knew this but did not pay attention to it.

Zhao Zhijing, on the other hand, was completely unaware. Xiao Longnu bent down and picked up the torch, using it to illuminate Zhou Botong's prostrate form. His face was shadowed and green-like in its pallor.

From her bosom, she casually took out her golden silk glove and slipped it on before lifting his arm to inspect him. She was shocked to see three spiders, their fangs firmly attached to Zhou Botong's finger. The spiders looked extremely strange. Their bodies had alternating red and green stripes that were so bright one could get mesmerized watching them. She knew that venomous animals were usually bright in color. The brighter their color the more lethal was their venom. These three spiders were still firmly biting onto Zhou Botong's finger. If she tried to capture them, they would evade her grasp. Finally, she raised her right hand and sent three "Jade Bee Needles" into the air, killing the three spiders immediately.

When sending the "Jade Bee Needles" towards them, she had used just the right amount of force to kill the spiders without injuring Zhou Botong.

This species of spider was called "Cai Xue Zhu" (Multicolored Snow Spider) and they only lived in the snowy mountains of Tibet. Their venom was one of the three most deadly poisons in the world. Jinlun Fawang had brought them with him from the West, intending to use them against famous poison experts in the Central Plains.

That time he tried to kill Guo Jing in Xiangyang, he had not thought of using the venomous Multicolored Snow Spiders. After he was hit by Li Mochou's Bing Po Zhen Zheng (Soul Freezing Silver Needle), he angrily returned to the encampment and took the spiders out of their golden case. He hoped that he would meet Li Mochou again and then have her feel their venom. Thus, it was just Zhou Botong's

misfortune to make the bet with him about stealing the flag. After making the deal with Zhao Zhijing, he placed the venomous spiders on the flag and hid it inside the cave.

Once the Snow-Colored Spiders saw flesh and blood, they would immediately leap on it and bite. They were attracted to blood and once someone was bitten, they could never escape. Their venom was so lethal that no one, not even Fawang, knew the antidote. He himself was not willing to keep the spiders too close to his body, afraid of getting bitten. Such a disaster he could ill-afford.

Xiao Longnu's Jade Bee Needles also came from highly venomous insects; the Jade Bees of Mount Zhongnan. Although the lethality of their venom was inferior to that of the Multicolored Snow Spider, the needles managed to enter their bodies, forcing them to produce anti-venom.

The venomous spiders were still biting into their prey when they were hit. Because they were still in the process of producing anti-venom and also sending out their own venom to their prey, they could not fight off the venom from the needles. However, right before they died, their bodily fluids spurted out of their mouths, sending the anti-venom into Zhou Botong's blood stream.

It was extremely fortunate that Xiao Longnu had rushed in to save him and saw the venomous spiders. Not daring to touch them, she instead launched three needles and luckily hit them, thus managing to discover the antidote to the world's most lethal venom.

Xiao Longnu watched the three Multicolored Snow Spider's lifeless forms on the ground, their bright red-green colors still managing to look fearsome. She also saw Zhou Botong lying motionless as though he was dead. In truth, she actually felt quite grateful to Zhou Botong. If not for him, Yang Guo would not have come to the Passionless Valley and she would have

been forced to marry Gongsun Zhi. His whole body was covered in a cold sweat and his breathing had grown irregular. Who would have thought he would die like this? In her heart, she was deeply moved. But all of a sudden, Zhou Botong's left hand began to move and she heard him say in a faint voice: "What was it that bit me with such...such fierceness?" He tried to get up but his body was too weak so that he fell back.

Xiao Longnu was overjoyed to find that he was not dead. She lifted the torch closer to his face and saw that the traces of the spider's venom were no longer there. Relieved, she asked: "You did not die?"

Zhou Botong chuckled: "Well, it doesn't look that way. I am right between half-death and half-life...ha-ha..." He wanted to laugh heartily but his hands and feet were still twitching and he was still unable to get up. His smile faded.

Laughter came from outside the cave. The sound was so strong that it resembled the ear-deafening sound of thunder rumbling. That person spoke: "Mischievous Old Urchin, have you stolen the royal flag? In today's wager, who won you or me?" The speaker was Jinlun Fawang.

Using her left hand, Xiao Longnu snuffed out the light. As long as she was wearing her gold silk glove, no sharp objects or raging fires could harm her. Zhou Botong replied: "Whether the Mischievous Old Man has lost in this game is not yet decided. But I'm afraid I've lost my life to you. Fawang, you rascal, what sort of poisonous spider is this, so evil and cruel?" When he spoke these words, his voice sounded soft and thin. Even though he was angry, he was far too weak. Still, his voice was as deep as Fawang's rumbling laughter.

Fawang was secretly amazed. He was bitten by my Cai Xue Zhu (Multicolored Snow Spider) but he didn't die. From his

voice, it is clear that his internal strength is profound, and is not below mine. Luckily, he fell for the trap, thus removing a powerful enemy. If he doesn't die soon, he'll only suffer for a short while.

Zhou Botong added: "Young Taoist Zhao Zhijing, you worked with this man to trick me. Go quickly to Qiu Chuji and ask him to kill you!"

Outside the cave, Zhao Zhijing hid behind Fawang, fearing for his life. He thought in terror, "How could I ask that of Martial Senior Qiu?"

Fawang laughingly said: "Taoist Priest Zhao is very good. Once I inform our prince of his great deed, he will refer him as an honorable teacher of the Quanzhen School." But, he thought; "If Zhou Botong dies, Taoist Priest Zhao won't have a way out. From this time on, he is under my control. His level of skill is ordinary. Zhou Botong acts like a crazy person, but Senior generations, like Qiu Chuji and so on, may honor him, but who would take his words seriously? How can the Quanzhen sect depend on the words of the Mischievous Old Urchin"?

Indignant, Zhou Botong let out a snort of contempt. Most of the venom in his body was gone but the Cai Xue Zhu was extremely venomous. Its effects wouldn't vanish that easily. Just as a tiny drop of it could kill several people, so could the slightest anger in Zhou Botong lead to a feeling of dizziness.

Xiao Longnu said: "Jinlun Fawang, you strike some, and then use this kind of venom to injure another. Is that a rule of your school? Quick, give us the antidote to cure Old Gentleman Zhou!"

Seeing Zhou Botong dazed, Fawang was relieved to find that the venom was working. He thought, "How could you depend on this little bit of a girl against me?"

He remembered what Zhao Zhijing said to him earlier in the day, that he was once defeated by her. Making up his mind to get her and show her exactly who was more powerful or stronger, he dashed into the cave, raising his left palm while his right hand moved as though to grab Xiao Longnu.

He said: "Here's the antidote. Take it." Xiao Longnu waved her right hand and a burst of soft tinkling could be heard. A golden bell attached to a silken belt flew out, heading towards his Qi Men Xue point.

Fawang thought, "If I still can't catch you today, how can I teach that Taoist priest Zhao not to laugh at me?" Swaying his body to avoid the golden bell, he reached into his vest to grasp two wheels, beating the two together to produce a loud sound that shook one's eardrums.

Maintaining her position, Xiao Longnu shifted slightly, aiming for his back where his Da Chui Xue point was. The change of moves was extremely fast; Fawang leapt back, exclaiming: "Your level of kung fu is rarely seen in women!"

The two of them fought inside the narrow passage and within the blink of an eye, they had already exchanged ten or so moves. When it came to power, Xiao Longnu was no match for Fawang, however, he was still worried about that day when he entered the cave in the hill and pricked his foot on a Bing Po Zhen Zheng (Soul Freezing Silver Needle), nearly costing him his life.

Although Xiao Longnu and Li Mochou came from the same school, Li Mochou was actually a level higher than her. Still, what he was worried about were the clever tricks that Li Mochou's master must have taught her as well. He was not only unwilling to get inside the cave and make the same mistake again, he also knew that there were poisonous spiders in there. One bite from them would mean sure death for him. So although he was anxious to capture her, he was

not bold enough to brave the danger. In the darkness, one could only hear the clang of metals as the lead and silver wheels met the golden bell; the sound almost resembling music made from small gongs.

Standing afar, Zhao Zhijing listened to the sounds of the two fighting while his heart beat wildly. Although it was not his intention to kill Zhou Botong, he knew that he could not escape the blame for his murder. In Wulin, no crime went unpunished. If Fawang killed Xiao Longnu, that would be good. But what if Xiao Longnu won? Even if she withdrew or ran away, the news would still spread. What should he do then? Grasping his sword, he started to pace, listening to the sound of the wheels and the golden bell grow louder as the sweat continued to stream from his body and soak his robes.

Even though Fawang's kung fu was higher than that of Xiao Longnu, his weapon was shorter than hers so he could not enter the cave. Eventually he found it difficult to gain the upper hand. After six or seven more moves, he still could not penetrate her defenses.

Xiao Longnu saw that Zhou Botong was once again motionless on the ground, close to death. Because she wanted to save him, she did not want the fight to last long. As the two of them fought in the darkness, her better vision gave her an advantage. She saw Fawang wield his wheel to the right before slanting and smashing down to create a crack. Immediately, she moved her silken belt to the right, aiming for him while at the same time, her left hand released ten Yu Feng Zhen (Jade Bee Needles), sending them shooting in his direction.

With very little distance between them, the Yu Feng (Jade Bee) needles shot out noiselessly so that Fawang did not realize it until they were only about a foot from his body. However, his wugong (martial arts) were no small matter and

in the face of danger, he hurriedly turned over his wheel to block the small golden bells of the coiling silken belt. Bracing himself with both feet he let out a loud shout at the same time. His body raised several zhang or so, allowing the ten or so Yu Feng needles to fly past the soles of his feet.

In his haste, he used a great amount of his force, raising both arms up as his body rose along with his silver and lead wheels, which were still successively blocking the small golden bells of the silken belt, sending them flying from his hands into midair. The wheels made a "wuwu" sound while the small golden bell let out a "ding-ding" noise as both shot straight up to about twenty feet from the ground.

Under the starlight, one could only see circles of gray and silver amidst the fiercely flying strip of belt above.

Xiao Longnu did not wait for him to fall back to the ground before she released another Yu Feng needle in his way. Fawang's body was still in midair and no matter how strong his wugong was, there was no way for him to deflect it. Although the distance between them this time was big, the circumstance was actually quite dire for him. However, when Fawang leapt he had anticipated that the enemy would certainly try to strike again so he immediately grabbed at his chest, using his external force to rip off two strips of cloth from his gown. As the gown tore into pieces, his laughter rang loud.

Just as the Yu Feng needles shot towards him, he waved the strips of cloth, allowing the tiny needles to pierce the cloth only. He gave another laugh as finally both his feet touched the ground, throwing away the strips of cloth as he did so. He then stretched out his hands to catch his two wheels as they fell from the air.

Twice, he was able to get away from danger, both made possible without using his wugong but his shrewd mind. At a

crucial moment, he escaped not only with his life but with Xiao Longnu's weapons as well. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he rushed up to the mouth of the cave and sneered: "Long Guniang (Miss Long), you still don't give up?"

He was afraid that Xiao Longnu might ambush him in the cave so he did not dare enter. However, Xiao Longnu did not know this so she hid herself near the entrance to the cave, silently clutching a single golden needle.

Fawang waited for a moment. Seeing nothing move, he formulated a plan. He held his two wheels in his right hand and used his left to pick up the two strips of cloth. He quickly tossed the wheels one after the other into the interior of the cave, using them to shield his feet from the poisoned needles on the ground while at the same time wielding the strips of cloth in the air, blocking his front. The two strips of cloth still bore the Yu Feng needles so they actually served as virulent weapons.

He laughed and said: "The wolf's fang cudgel! Long Guniang, why don't you test the severity of my wolf's fang?" But before he could even finish his sentence, he suddenly felt a tug in his hand. A half section of the cloth was unexpectedly grasped by Xiao Longnu! Ordinarily, she would not have so easily grabbed a wolf's fang cudgel with her bare hands but she was wearing her gold silk gloves, not even a wolf's fang could withstand it.

Taken by surprise, Fawang hurriedly applied strength to snatch it back but in between that space of an instant, Xiao Longnu already shot out the golden needles in her hand.

Fawang shouted in the dark, sensing the life-threatening situation. He then grabbed Zhou Botong's body which was lying on the ground and using his heel to raise him and use him as cover, following the stance of the "*Dao Cai Qi Xing Bu."

Afterwards, he hurriedly leapt out of the cave, glad to have escaped with his life. However, the life-and-death situation that he has just been through filled him with fear so that he only stopped when he was well away from the cave, gasping for breath.

Those twenty or so Yu Feng needles pierced Zhou Botong's body. Xiao Longnu gasped, thinking that he was dead. Also, his body was lying still, only serving to increase her guilt. But unexpectedly, Zhou Botong suddenly said: "Good pain, good pain! What in the world bit me?"

Although startled, Xiao Longnu was happy. She said: "Zhou Botong, you are not yet dead?" Knowing nothing about proper addresses, she spoke his name plainly.

Zhou Botong said: "Seems like I'm past death. Can it be that I'm alive again? I didn't know that once you're dead there is still enough life left."

Xiao Longnu replied: "You're not dead. That's good. That Fawang was frighteningly good. Not even once did I hit him." She then took out an iron stone (magnetic stone), using it to suck back the Yu Feng needles from his body.

Zhou Botong scolded: "Fawang, that thieving dog, he speaks nothing but lies, taking advantage of me because I'm dying, even using me to block the tiny needles..."

Xiao Longnu never stopped removing the needles and he also did not stop scolding that person. Xiao Longnu smiled faintly, saying: "Zhou Botong, those needles that pricked you are mine." At that moment, a sudden thought came to her, prompting her to ask: "My Yu Feng needles are steeped in bee venom, does your body feel bad?"

Zhou Botong replied: "I feel very comfortable. Prick me again."

Xiao Longnu thought that he was joking so she took out a tiny jade bottle from her chest, saying: "This bottle of Jade Bee honey is the antidote to my golden needles. If you drink it, then you'll be all right."

But Zhou Botong shook his head, saying repeatedly: "No, no! The pricks of your needles make me feel comfortable. It appears to counteract the venom of the spiders."

Xiao Longnu thought that Lao Wan Tong (Mischievous Old Urchin) was speaking nonsense again, but because he firmly refused to take it, she decided not to force him. Besides, it looked as though this strange old man's neigong (internal strength) was immeasurably deep; he was bitten by the venomous spiders and he did not die. Being hit by the Jade Bee needles was no hindrance.

In truth, the honeybees' sting, although extremely poisonous, could nevertheless treat various illnesses. The mysterious benefits of the Jade Bee included the cure for rheumatism and other such diseases that affected man. However, Xiao Longnu together with Zhou Botong were not familiar with medicine so they did not know that the Yu Feng needles could be used to combat poison with poison and the Cai Xue Zhu (Multicolored Snow Spider) poison was only one of many.

Fawang was listening to Zhou Botong's scolding words from outside the cave and was startled. He thought that this man scolding him must be an immortal god that could not be killed. If he really wanted to kill him, he must do so now while he was off his guard. Otherwise, the opportunity might not present itself again.

He advanced but before he could enter the cave's entrance, he paused. When he successively used both his silver and lead wheels to see if there was a trap waiting inside, he had also lost them and so now the only weapons he had in his

possession was Xiao Longnu's silken belt. He called out: "Long Guniang, I have your weapon with me!"

Then, with one shake, the silken belt unfolded and flew straight inside. His wugong had reached a level where he could wield any weapon without problem. So although Xiao Longnu's silken belt was weird, he thought he could use it like one would use a whip. But its ability was unexpected and not only that, he was able to use it even from where he was standing. He was not afraid anymore that the opponent would suddenly attack him with the golden needles.

With child-like innocence, Xiao Longnu rose to pick up the silver and lead wheels. She struck the two together and spoke: "Good, let's exchange weapons so we can start the fight." She stretched out her right arm but a quick pain she felt in her hand made her stop and refuse to push forward.

The lead wheel appeared small but it was actually made of very heavy metal. So when Xiao Longnu extended it, she was not prepared for its weight. She quickly pulled back and clutched the two wheels to her chest.

Fawang saw an advantage and quickly dashed forward, extending his hand to grab the wheels. Xiao Longnu took a step back as her left hand shot up as though to release the silver wheel. But it was only a feint move because she used this chance to release several Yu Feng needles in his direction.

These Jade Bee needles were the same ones she had extracted from Zhou Botong's body so they were no longer as poisonous. Still, they could be used as a weapon. Fawang was prepared, however. When he could not grab the silver wheel, he quickly leapt to the side, allowing the Yu Feng needles to shoot past him, hitting nothing but empty air.

Zhou Botong laughed, saying: "Great, let the bald thief come and then you hit him in the butt with your tiny needles!"

Xiao Longnu said: "Ai! I've used up all my Yu Feng needles!"

Dismayed, Zhou Botong scratched his head and said: "That's one annoying problem."

He had two personalities in him - one old, the other young - but he did not have the ability to balance the two, so whatever it was he thought or felt at the moment, he always said it without misgivings.

Jinlun Fawang had a scheming mind, but he was really unaware of Zhou Botong's or Xiao Longnu's personalities. Believing that no one under the heavens could outsmart him, he thought: "You said that you've used up all your Yu Feng needles. Why should I believe you? It's clear that you want me to believe that to entice me to lower my guard. That old ploy is not going to work on me." Thus, Xiao Longnu's frank speech instead caused Fawang to be even less daring, especially when only days ago in the cave in the hills, Yang Guo had tricked him. He did not want to suffer the same fate as Nimoxing and be crippled in both legs. He would rather wait twelve long hours than go through that.

One hour soon turned to two hours until finally the sky showed first light. Zhou Botong sat in a kneeling position, trying to circulate his chi in order to get rid of the poison still in his body. But the venom of the Cai Xue spiders was very strong. As he tried to move his chi, his chest suddenly tightened and he felt nauseous. There was no spot where he did not experience some problem. He had tried circulating his chi through different paths, but each try had the same result.

Finally, he sighed dejectedly and said: "Ai, Lao Wan Tong! You've tried it so many times its no longer amusing!"

Fawang was peeping in from outside, but since he did not wait and stay in his place for long, he did not know of the problem. He thought to himself: "This is not good. The old man is trying to practice nei gong!"

With this new development, he carefully took out a golden box from his bosom, removing the cover to reveal several crawling Cai Xue spiders inside. When exposed to the sun, the light made their variegated red and green colors brighter and even more eye-catching.

Next, Fawang took out a pair of rhinoceros horns and used them to catch the spiders between them and gently lifted them from the sticky web. Gently, he tossed the Cai Xue spiders towards the mouth of the cave where they stuck. He repeated his movements and threw the rest of the venomous spiders from the small box towards the cave. Their sticky web soon covered the entire cave's entrance. The spiders had been inside the small box for a very long time and they had not been fed so as soon as they were able to get out, they immediately set to work, climbing up, moving east, dropping low, and approaching west, hanging suspended, until they were able to create a network of webs in just a very short time.

Xiao Longnu and Zhou Botong watched with interest as the spiders spun the web, yet it never occurred to either one of them to stop their progress. Only when the web reached about ten feet in diameter, covering the entire mouth of the cave, and the red-green venomous spiders start to crawl around did they look troubled. Xiao Longnu said softly: "What a pity I don't have any more Yu Feng needles left. I could have used one to remove these nasty spiders."

Zhou Botong picked up a dried branch, intending to use it to remove the spider web when suddenly a huge butterfly came flitting near the mouth of the cave and ended up caught in

the spider web. The species originated from the Kunlun Mountains so when it struck the web, it had enough power in its body to attempt to struggle and escape. However, although the butterfly's body was huge, one touch of the spider silk and it went straight into paralysis.

Xiao Longnu realized this and quickly said: "Don't! The web is poisonous!" Alarmed, Zhou Botong leapt away and hastily flung the stick to the ground.

Indeed, when Fawang released the venomous spiders, he not only intended to use it to seal the cave, but he also hoped that they would use their hands to destroy it. One touch would cause the poison to seep into the skin and enter the body.

Sitting cross-legged again, Zhou Botong watched as the spiders crowded around the butterfly and started to eat it. He thought: "My internal flow is still unstable. It will be some time before I recover."

Xiao Longnu, on the other hand, was thinking: If he is going to remain inactive, how will Lao Wan Tong be able to move the poison up his body in order to remove it completely? So she asked: "How many days and nights will it take for you to recover your internal energy?"

Zhou Botong sighed and said: "I need one hundred days and one hundred evenings before I can manage it."

Xiao Longnu was surprised to hear this so she asked: "How are we going to survive?"

Zhou Botong chuckled, saying: "Even if that bald thief gives us food to eat, being trapped in this cave for several years is not fun."

Xiao Longnu replied: "He'll never give us food." She let out a sigh. "If it were Guo'Er with me in this cave, I wouldn't mind

spending a lifetime here."

"What makes you place Yang Guo above me?" Zhou Botong said indignantly. "Is he also stronger than me? You don't think I'm good company?"

Although his words made no sense, Xiao Longnu did not mind it. She only showed a cold smile and said: "Yang Guo knows the Quanzhen swordplay. Together, we can easily defeat this Buddhist priest and send him running away into the wilderness."

Zhou Botong snorted: "Humph, the Quanzhen swordplay is not that difficult to understand. Even I can use it. Will Yang Guo be able to beat me?"

"When we combine our swords together in a technique called *Yunu Suxin swordplay ['Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden'], it is important that his heart is filled with love for me and my heart is filled with love for him so we become united and are able to subdue the enemy."

When Zhou Botong heard her speak about the love between a man and a woman, he was filled with apprehension. He immediately waved his hand and said again and again: "Stop, stop - I don't love you! You also can't possibly love me. But I'm telling you it's much better that there's two of us in this cave. Years ago I was trapped in a cave in Tao Hua Island and had no one to accompany me. I was forced to fight with myself the whole time. But this time, it's entirely different because I have you. It's going to be fun!" With such happy thought, he could imagine being in that cave for a long time.

Xiao Longnu asked dubiously: "Fight with oneself? Is there such a method?" Pleased, Zhou Botong immediately launched into a discussion of the "Fen Xin Er Yong Zuo You Hu" [Mutual Hands Combat] method.

Xiao Longnu thought to herself: "If I could learn this method, then I could use the Quanzhen sword play with my left hand and the Yunu sword play with my right. With the two combined, I will be able to complete the Yunu Suxin sword play. But I'm afraid that I won't be able to learn this kung fu in just one evening. "This kung fu is difficult to learn," she told him.

Zhou Botong replied: "If you say it's difficult, then it will really be difficult. If you say it's easy, then it will be easy. There are people who spend their entire lifetime learning yet never understand a thing; while there are people who only need a few days to understand it. You've heard about those two kids, Guo Jing and Huang Rong, right?" Xiao Longnu nodded.

Zhou Botong continued: "Who do you think is more intelligent?"

Xiao Longnu answered: "Madame Guo is a thousand times cleverer. Guo'er told me once that there is no one in this generation who could surpass her intelligence and wisdom. Great Hero Guo is virtuous, but his level is actually ordinary."

Zhou Botong laughed. "What do you mean "ordinary"? Are you saying he's stupid? Tell me; am I intelligent, or stupid?"

Xiao Longnu smiled and said: "I look at you and although you're not young, you act silly. Sometimes, you say weird things and you act a little mad."

Zhou Botong clapped his hands, saying: "Ah, you're right. I once taught this Zuo You Hu method to Brother Guo Jing and it only took him a few days to learn it. Afterwards, he tried to teach the same lesson to his wife. You said that this child, Huang Rong is sharp and clever with a mind higher than that of a seventy-eight year old man, but she could not understand this kung fu. I thought that the little idiot Guo

Jing probably did not teach her properly, so Lao Wan Tong decided to come and teach her himself. I repeated the left hand and right strokes with her, but she still didn't understand how to combine the two together. It was then that I realized that some men may learn a method that other men would spend a lifetime learning, yet never understand. You see, intelligence is not the only measure of success."

Xiao Longnu said: "Don't tell me that when stupid people learn this kung fu, they can surpass even the smart ones. I can't believe it."

Zhou Botong grinned and said: "I look at you and see that your intelligence is more or less equal to that of young Huang Rong. Your wugong is not that far from hers either. Since you don't believe, why not try to draw a square on the ground with your left index finger and a circle with your right at the same time?"

Xiao Longnu followed his instructions and extended both her index fingers to the ground, making downward strokes to create the figures. However, it turned out that the square looked like a circle and the circle looked like a square.

Zhou Botong laughingly said: "See? I told you it's not easy."

Smiling faintly, Xiao Longnu emptied her mind before extending her index fingers again. This time, she was able to draw a perfect square and a perfect circle.

In his astonishment, Zhou Botong could only stammer: "You...you...you..." A moment passed before he could speak: "You studied this before?"

"Ah, I haven't," Xiao Longnu replied. "Besides, didn't you say this is difficult?"

Zhou Botong scratched the white hairs on his head and asked: "Then how did you know how to draw?"

Xiao Longnu said: "I don't know. I didn't think. I just held out my fingers and drew the figures."

As she said this, she wrote the three characters "lao wan tong" with her left hand and the three characters "xiao long nu" with her right. The two hand strokes were so neatly written they looked like the ones found in books and the handwriting was also very elegant.

Delighted, Zhou Botong declared: "This shows that you learned this method even when you were still in your mother's womb! This is so much better!"

Thereupon, he taught her how to attack with her left and defend with her right, strike with her right and block with her left. It was in Tao Hua Island that he first learned this strange kung fu that was unmatched under the heavens so when the old man spoke, she listened.

In truth, the essence of the Zuo You Hu technique was the four characters "Fin Xin Er Yong." Often, people with high intelligence have complicated thoughts and they always rushed from one thought to another. *During the Three Kingdoms period, Cao Zi wrote the Qi Bu Shi, which depicted the turbulence of Wu Dynasty. The poem could be likened to that of a person trying to learn the Zuo You Hu kung fu technique, only to have the turbulence that makes it impossible to learn occur inside the person's mind.

Xiao Longnu's kung fu was based on suppressing all emotions and desires. Even when she was only eight or nine years old she mastered her feelings, stopping them like one would water. After she fell madly in love with Yang Guo, however, the constant pain in her heart from thinking of him caused her kung fu to gradually decline. But now, this weird technique was introduced, unexpectedly helping her to recover.

After she resumed practicing the Gumu Pai nei gong, she was actually at the same level as Lin Chaoying when she was pining over her lost love. Their mind sets were the same for the most part so they had more or less the same capacity for understanding. As soon as Zhou Botong moved his finger, she understood his meaning quickly. But it was only because Zhou Botong, Guo Jing, and Xiao Longnu shared the same personality, innocence of heart, and that was why people like Huang Rong, Yang Guo, and Zhu Ziliu could not learn it.

Zhou Botong had yet to remove the poison from his body, but he continued to speak and draw with enthusiasm. Xiao Longnu, on the other hand, kept on nodding her head, but in her mind she was secretly trying to figure out how to use the Yunu sword play with her right hand and the Quanzhen sword play with her left. And so after several hours of playing this Chinese finger game with him, she finally grasped the idea.

"I understand completely," she spoke. To test it out, she moved her hands, making circular and thrusting motions with it.

Zhou Botong's jaw dropped. He could only shout: "Strange! Strange!"

Guarding the cave outside, Fawang and Zhao Zhijing heard the two of them muttering and laughing with each other so they pressed closer but they could only hear snatches of their conversation, not enough to make the meaning clear.

Xiao Longnu raised her head at that moment and saw them eavesdropping. She straightened and said, "We're getting out of here!"

Zhou Botong looked at her blankly, asking: "How exactly?"

"If we go out and catch that bald thief, we can force him to give you the antidote," Xiao Longnu replied.

Zhou Botong stroked his beard, saying, "You think you can beat him?"

As they spoke, they suddenly heard a buzzing sound. A honeybee got stuck to the spider web and tried to struggle. Earlier when the big butterfly touched the spider's silk, it immediately went into paralysis. This honeybee was small in size, but it seemed unaffected by the poison of the Cai Xue Spiders and even succeeded in splitting the web open.

The venomous spiders zealously eyed it from the side, but dared not go forward and tangle it within their silk. After a long while, the honeybee would weaken and only then would the venomous spiders attack it.

In the Ancient Tomb, Xiao Longnu kept swarms of Jade Bees as pets; being together with honeybees all year long there was no doubt her technique of controlling bees was very good. Moreover, she regarded all bees as friends. When this honeybee was in trouble, she could not stand it. Suddenly changing her mind, she said: "Although these venomous spiders are evil-looking, my bees won't necessarily be afraid of them."

She then took out the jade bottle from her bosom, opened the lid, and used her right hand to fan the air around it, allowing the fragrant aroma to spread and penetrate through the thick spider web.

Surprised, Zhou Botong asked: "What are you doing?"

"Do you want to see an amusing trick?" Xiao Longnu asked.

Zhou Botong was delighted, saying: "Wonderful!" Then, asked: "What trick is that?"

Xiao Longnu only smiled, not responding as she continued moving her palm.

This was the season when the wild flowers in the valley were in full bloom. Wherever the sweet scent of honey could be smelled, the numerous wild bees gathering honey rushed in that direction. When the wild bees rushed to the cave, they got tangled in the spider web, and immediately began to struggle. Some died after being bitten by the venomous spiders while others were able to sting a few spiders. Although the Cai Xue Spiders were considered among the world's most poisonous, too much bee venom in their bodies caused them to become stiff and gradually die.

Zhou Botong was ecstatic as he looked on, while outside the cave, Jinlun Fawang and Zhao Zhijing watched in helpless astonishment.

In the meantime, the Cai Xue Spiders still had the upper hand. Only three poisonous spiders were dead while about forty or so honeybees were killed. However, the wild bees continued to swarm. At first, there were only thirty of them, but fifty more came and got caught in the web. Afterwards, dozens more of them came, numbering up to a hundred so that the spider web covering the mouth of the cave soon began to fill up, and they were stinging the venomous spiders until they died.

Zhao Zhijing had experienced firsthand the honeybee's sting. Seeing them now, with his own eyes, he realized the circumstance were grave. Hastily, he dived into the bushes to avoid them.

Fawang, on the other hand, knew that the Cai Xue Spiders were rare. If they are annihilated, there would be none left who could do their job. Therefore, he and the venomous spiders shared a common hatred of this swarm of wild bees. However, he did not know that it was Xiao Longnu who

summoned them. All he thought about was how to force Zhou Botong and Xiao Longnu out of the cave and take their lives.

Young Xiao Longnu dipped a finger into the jade bottle and shot some honey towards Fawang, hitting him on both sides. He howled into the cave's entrance as several wild bees made an about-face and headed towards him.

Fawang was panic-stricken as he realized the dire situation he was in. He dashed forward quickly. Although the wild bees were fast, his lightness kungfu was faster so within moments, he was already ten or so feet away from them. His figure appeared like a wisp of black smoke, rushing further and further away. Failing to catch up, the wild bees merely scattered around.

Xiao Longnu stamped her foot again and again, saying repeatedly: "What a pity! What a pity!"

Zhou Botong asked: "What pity?"

"He ran away before I could snatch the antidote from him," Xiao Longnu replied.

Indeed, she planned to summon the honeybees so they could cover Fawang's flank, effectively trapping him within a sphere. However, these wild bees came from different nests and therefore came from different directions. Unlike the tamed Jade Bees of the Ancient Tomb, when she wanted them to pursue, sting the enemy, return, outflank him, or make a circle like in a battle formation, the wild bees were hopeless.

Zhou Botong, however, was full of admiration. He was the sort who liked games and when he played, his spirit usually improved. So when he clapped his hands with enthusiasm, he forgot all about the poison still in his body.

Xiao Longnu saw that due to the weight of the dead and dying bees the spider web had fallen; she leaped out and shouted, "Come!"

Zhou Botong followed, but he fell down as he was about to leap. "I ... I can't exert my strength!" he said. Suddenly his body shivered and his teeth chattered, like he was plunged into an ocean of ice. His lips turned white and his face turned blue, while his beard could not stop swaying.

Xiao Longnu was startled. "Zhou Botong! What happened?"

"Prick...prick me ... with your needle again," he said unevenly.

Xiao Lung Nu was surprised, "My needles are poisonous."

"Then ... the poison ... is good," the old man responded weakly.

Xiao Longnu remembered the battle between the spiders and wild bees; she thought, "Could it be that the bee's venom is the antidote to the spiders'?" She quickly picked several needles from the ground and pricked them into his arm. "Good! More! More!" Zhou Botong called out.

Xiao Longnu pricked him some more while keeping her eyes on him. She saw the effect of the spider's poison had faded from his face. After more than ten pricks, Zhou Botong stopped shivering. He sighed and said, "It is truly a poison against poison." He tried to exert his energy but it turned out the poison had not been completely neutralized.

Suddenly he slapped his knee and said, "Miss Long, your bee poison is not strong enough and they are no longer fresh."

"That case I am going to call some bees to sting you," she said with a smile.

“Thank you, thank you ...” the old man said, “Hurry up!”

Xiao Longnu then opened the jade bottle to lure a crowd of wild bees. Zhou Botong was grinning from ear to ear; he took off his clothes and let the bees sting him while he exerted his internal energy. First he sucked the bees’ venom to his [dan tian – pubic area, lower stomach] and then spread it out toward all his veins. In approximately the time needed to eat a bowl of rice the spider venom had been completely neutralized. The bee sting started to hurt him. “Enough! Enough!” he cried, putting on his clothes back, “More bee stings and I am dead.” Xiao Longnu smiled and drove the bees away.

She picked her [jin ling ruan so] white silk belt with golden bells from the ground and asked, “I am going to Mount Zhongnan. Are you coming?”

Zhou Botong shook his head, “I have an important matter to deal with. You go ahead.”

“Ah! I almost forget,” said Xiao Longnu. “You are going to Xiangyang to give Hero Guo a hand.” As soon as the word ‘Guo Da Xia’ came out of her mouth, Guo Fu came into her mind. From Guo Fu, she remembered Yang Guo. “Zhou Botong, if you see Yang Guo, please don’t let him know you have seen me,” she sadly said.

Zhou Botong mumbled some incoherent words, like he was thinking really hard. A moment later he looked up and asked, “What did you say?”

“Never mind,” she answered. “Farewell then.”

Zhou Botong was preoccupied; he simply nodded and waved his hand. Xiao Longnu turned around and started walking; but before reaching the plain she heard strange noises from Zhou Botong, similar to her own commands to the bees. She

thought it was peculiar and quietly walked back. Hiding behind a tree she saw Zhou Botong – with one hand holding a jade bottle, flailing his hand around and howling noisily. She groped into her pocket and sure enough, her jade honey bottle was gone. The funny thing was, after calling for a while only a handful of wild bees were flying around his jade bottle.

Xiao Longnu could not help chuckling. Coming out from behind the tree she called, “Zhou Botong! Let me teach you!”

Zhou Botong blushed, he was caught red handed with the jade bottle in his hand. He kicked the ground and leaped several meters and quickly ran downhill.

Xiao Longnu laughed heartily. This old man was really strange and interesting. But as the echo of her laughter was fading away, she began to feel lonely and miserable; and her tears flowed without inhibition. She had fought Jinlun Fawang, both with her strength and wisdom and then had the Old Urchin’s company for the rest of the night. Now that the friend and foe were gone, she felt utter loneliness, like an orphan without anybody to care.

In another moment she remembered Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping. Even if she cut their bodies into ten thousand pieces, would her hatred be alleviated? She could easily kill those two, but she thought what good would that be? She stood and stared blankly under a big elm tree for a half a day; then said to herself, “Let me find them first.”

She went down the hill and found her donkey grazing in the foothills. When she arrived at the road fork going to the Mongolian camp, she saw dust flying, flags fluttering, and heard the sound of hoofs moving south toward Xiangyang. Xiao Longnu hesitated, “How could I find those two priests amongst this mighty force?”

Suddenly she saw three horses and riders in the distance. They wore the yellow robe and Taoist hat. "Why three?" she wondered. She strained her eyes and could see Yin Zhiping rode in the back, with Zhao Zhijing and an unknown young Taoist priest in front of him. Xiao Longnu pulled her reins and followed with her donkey. Yin Zhiping heard the donkey and turned his head. His countenance paled.

"Martial Brother Zhao, who is that woman?" the young priest asked.

"Our archenemy," he answered, "Don't ask too much."

The young priest was startled. "The Scarlet Serpent Deity Li Mochou?" he asked, trembling with fear.

"No, but she is her martial sister," Zhijing explained.

The young priest was Qi Zhicheng, one of Qiu Chuji's disciples. He knew Li Mochou had fought with the Quanzhen's masters, and they were troubled by her. Naturally her martial sister would not be friendly toward the Quanzhen sect.

Zhao Zhijing anxiously whipped his horse and galloped away. Both Yin and Qi did not have any choice but to follow suit, leaving Xiao Longnu far behind. But the donkey had good stamina; it could not run fast, but it ran steadily. After about four or five li the horses panted and slowed down, and Xiao Longnu gradually caught up with them. Again Zhijing lifted his whip and struck his horse, but the horses' strength was already spent; they ran for while, and then slowly trotted.

"Martial Brother Zhao," Qi Zhicheng said, "Let us block the enemy to give Martial Brother Yin a chance to escape."

Zhao Zhijing's face turned green with anger. "You talk rubbish!" he snapped. "Aren't you afraid of death?"

“Martial Brother Yin bears the heavy burden of becoming our new Sect Leader [zhang jiao],” answered Qi Zhicheng. “We have the responsibility to protect him.” He was sent by Qiu Chuji to summon Yin Zhiping back to Chongyang Palace to be the new Sect Leader.

Zhijing snorted and ignored him. He thought, “You don’t know the height of the heaven, or the depth of the earth; yet you want to block her with your meager skill?”

Qi Zhicheng saw his angry face and did not dare to say anything. He held his reins to wait for Yin Zhiping; then he spoke to him in a low voice, “Martial Brother Yin, you bear a very heavy responsibility, you’d better go first.” Zhibing simply shook his head. “No need,” he said, “She can do anything she wants.”

Qi Zhicheng saw his calmness and could not help but admire him. “No wonder Master wants him to take over,” he thought. “Merely by his calmness, who among the third generation disciples can match him?” Actually, he did not know that Yin Zhiping at this time had no regard for his own safety. If Xiao Longnu wanted to kill him, he would stretch out his neck voluntarily. Zhao Zhijing saw those two were calm, but he was always thinking of ways of escaping. It was good that Xiao Longnu did not seem to plan to attack soon. Even so, he could not help but turn his head in anxiety every now and then.

The four of them proceeded north. By now they were already far away from the Mongolian troops. The wind still carried a muffled sound of horse hoofs and a faint sound of a military bugle, but the area they were traveling in was desolate. The houses were in ruin and the common people had left to avoid the enemy troops. Before that day Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing could still find a place to eat. But now, not even a house was left standing.

That evening the three of them spent the night in a house ruin without any windows or doors. Zhao Zhijing took a look outside, and saw Xiao Longnu sleeping on a piece of rope strung between two big trees. Qi Zhicheng also saw this amazing skill and was scared. Zhijing did not dare to close his eyes. He was ready to jump and dash out whenever any noise came from the trees. Yin Zhiping was the only one who slept soundly all through the night.

Early the next morning they continued their journey. Zhao Zhijing was tired; he rode his horse in silence. Qi Zhicheng and Yin Zhiping rode together, about two to three meters behind. Qi Zhicheng could not contain himself much longer and said, "Martial Brother Yin, I have seen both you and Martial Brother Zhao's martial art skills. Each of you has his own strengths and weaknesses, it really is difficult to compare. But speaking of character, there is no comparison between yours and his."

Yin Zhiping smiled wryly. He asked, "How long will Master and Martial Uncles live in seclusion?"

"Master said at least three months, but it could be as long as a year," Qi Zhicheng answered. "That was the reason he anxiously summoned Martial Brother Yin to take over."

Yin Zhiping was lost in thought. "Their skills are already very high, what kind of martial arts are they developing?" he thought aloud.

Qi Zhicheng answered in low voice, "I heard the five Masters want to develop something to defeat the Ancient Tomb Sect."

Yin Zhiping said, "Oh" and could not help but cast a glance toward Xiao Longnu.

In the year when Xiao Longnu turned 18, a large group of heretic martial artists gathered at Mount Zhongnan. Da'erba and Huo Du easily entered the Chongyang Temple and Huo Du was able to wound Hao Datong in a few stances. If Guo Jing had not arrived on time, Quanzhen School would have suffered a heavy blow. Nonetheless, the main hall of the Chongyang shrine was burned by Huo Du and his men. Since the time Master Chongyang's grandeur awed the realm, Quanzhen was known as the orthodox martial arts school. The Seven Masters of Quanzhen had deep and profound martial arts cultivation and retained Quanzhen's reputation. However, the martial arts of the Tibetan Lamaistic Sect proved to be powerful too and when Jinlun Fawang first came to China he shocked the realm with his impressive skills. On their return Hao Datong and Sun Bu'Er expressed their worries and added more frustration for Qiu Chuji and others. At the Heroes' Assembly at Dasheng Guan, Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo were able to repel Jinlun Fawang and his pupils. Hao Datong, Sun Bu'Er, Zhao Zhijing and Yin Zhiping saw the martial arts that were displayed by Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were excellent. Yang Guo was able to mock and overcome Zhao Zhijing without making actual movements in Guo Jing's study. Later on, Xiao Longnu heavily injured Zhao Zhijing within one stance. Although Sun Bu'Er was present, she could not clearly see the movements Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu made. It seemed the martial arts of the Quanzhen School were entirely useless when facing the Ancient Tomb School; this was another frightening thought. Afterwards, they heard that Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo defeated Jinlun Fawang with their combined swordplay; the entire Quanzhen School was shocked.

Only five of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen were still alive at this time, Tan Chuduan died a long time ago. Ma Yu had also passed away by now. Liu Chuxuan assumed leadership of Quanzhen for a short while before passing the leadership

onto Qiu Chuji. The five masters were old and their vigour was declining. There were no exceptional talents amongst the third and fourth generation. With the Mongolians trying to invade the south, the country was in peril. The Five Masters of Quanzhen would be able to deal with Jinlun Fawang should he lead his disciples against Quanzhen or the Ancient Tomb Sect should they try to extract vengeance upon Quanzhen. However, if they waited another ten years or so, by that time both internal and external calamity would hit the Quanzhen School. At that point the Quanzhen School would face definite defeat. That is why the Five Masters agreed to contemplate and create a new martial arts skill to protect the reputation of Quanzhen. This skill would not only protect the Quanzhen prestige but also protect the country and save the people. That is why they could be bothered by other duties, and that is why they summoned Yin Zhiping back to become acting leader of the Quanzhen School.

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Yin Zhiping and the others were heading northwest. Xiao Longnu followed them not too far behind. That day they entered Shanxi province. "Martial Brother Yin," said Zhicheng. "We are getting close to Chongyang Palace. Do you think this Miss Long would dare to pursue us?"

Yin Zhiping only mumbled, "Hmmm." He had no idea what her intentions were. He had pondered this in his heart for a while now. "Would she expose my evil conduct to the Quanzhen Five Masters? Will she attack mercilessly? Perhaps she was only going to the Ancient Tomb and took the same way. Also ... also ... she had shown mercy to me before, would she forgive me?" He couldn't help blushing, secretly ashamed at his foolish delusion. He had always regarded her as a deity. How could a mortal be compared to an immortal? Though he already showed disregard for his own life or

death, honor or disgrace; in reality his heart was filled with fear.

Several days later they arrived at the base of Mount Zhongnan. Qi Zhicheng took out a whistling arrow; and with his arm strength flung it into the sky. It shot up and made a loud whistling noise. Not too long after four priests wearing yellow Taoist hats descended the mountain. Bowing to Yin Zhiping in respect one of them said, "Reverend Chonghe, you're back. We have been waiting for a long time."

'Chonghe' was Yin Zhiping's religious title; but apart from his own disciples, nobody had called him by that title before. These four Taoist were the third generation disciples from various Masters; they were the same level as he was and one of them was even older than him. These four suddenly changed their way of addressing him, Yin Zhiping felt uncomfortable. He quickly dismounted his horse and reciprocate their bow and said modestly, "Four Martial Brothers are my seniors, your Younger Martial Brother is not worthy of such a title."

The oldest priest was Ma Yu's disciple. He said, "The five Martial Uncles have issued a decree that as soon as Reverend Chonghe arrives, he has to take the Interim Sect Leader position. The official inauguration will have to wait until the Fourth Uncle [that is, Qiu Chuji] finishes his meditation."

"How long have Master and four Martial Uncles been in seclusion?" Yin Zhiping asked.

"It has been 20 days," came the answer.

While they were still talking, there came a sweet sound of music from the mountain. Sixteen Taoist priests came near playing either the sheng or qing and arranged themselves on either side of the road. Another set of sixteen Taoist priests came. They carried in their hands some wooden musical

instruments, swords, earthen bowls, and other religious articles. They bowed toward Yin Zhiping and surrounded him, acting as human shields, and together they walked back up the mountain, unwittingly leaving Zhao Zhijing behind without paying any respect to him. He was angry and envious at the same time. "Just wait till the Sect Leader position falls into my hands, I want to see your face then," he said in his heart.

They arrived at the Chongyang Palace at dusk. There were more than five hundred Taoists arranged in the main hall all the way to the entrance outside the palace. Drums, cymbals and bells were struck simultaneously. The several hundreds Taoists austere bowed to welcome their Sect Leader.

Seeing this grand scene Yin Zhiping's spirits soared. Escorted by the sixteen most senior disciples he entered the Hall of the Three Pure Ones, he walked forward to respectfully kowtowed to the statues of the Taoist Three Pure Ones, Heavenly Deity Worthy of the Primordial Beginning, Heavenly Lord Worthy of the Numinous Treasure and Exalted Supreme Lord Lao. Then, they progressed to the rear hall to pay respects to the painting of Wang Chongyang, the founding grand master of the Quanzhen Sect. Yin Zhiping respectfully kowtowed to the painting. Then, he entered the third hall, this was the hall where the Seven Masters gathered to deliberate. Yin Zhiping kowtowed to the seven empty chairs that were in the hall. After that they returned to the main hall, the Hall of the Three Pure Ones.

Qiu Chuji's second disciple Li Zhichang took out the Sect Leader decree and read it out loud while Yin Zhiping knelt down, listening attentively. The decree assigned Yin Zhiping to take over the Interim Sect Leader position. Yin Zhiping was proud to accept this lofty position; but he was touched and ashamed at the same time. He stole a glance toward Zhao

Zhijing who stood to one side. Zhao had a smirk in his face, Yin Zhiping shuddered.

As soon as the decree was read Yin Zhiping stood up to express his humble acceptance. But before he could say anything, a priest suddenly barged in, loudly saying, "Reporting to the Reverend Sect Leader, you have a guest waiting outside!"

Yin Zhiping was startled; he did not expect Xiao Longnu would dare to confront him during that important ceremony. He did not know how to deal with it, and thought that since he could not run away, he might as well brace himself and face her. He simply said, "Please bring the guest in."

The priest bowed and turned around; and came back with two people. Not only Yin Zhiping, but the others were surprised as well. The guests were a Mongolian officer and another man he had met at Khubilai's camp in Hunan. The Mongolian high-level official spoke with a clear voice, "His Majesty the Emperor has made a decision to grant an Imperial Decree to the Sect Leader of the Quanzhen Sect." He walked toward the center of the main hall as he was speaking. Stopping at the center he produced a yellow satin scroll; unrolling the scroll with both hands he read out, "Imperial decree conferred to the Sect Leader of the Quanzhen Sect the special position to act as: shen sian yan dao da zong zhi. [lit. The deity/divine person to develop an excellent model of learning and integrity] He is to be the religious leader of the 'Great Way' [dao of Taoism] and to reveal the mystery of respectable and perfect mankind. To be in charge of various sects of Taoism ..."

Reading to this point he saw nobody kneeling down; he was annoyed and said, "Sect Leader, please kneel to accept the imperial decree."

Yin Zhiping moved forward and bowed in respect. "My Master Sect Leader Qiu Chuji is currently meditating in a closed room. I am the Interim Sect Leader. The Imperial Decree is not bestowed on me; how would I dare to accept it?" he said.

The Mongolian officer smiled and said, "His Majesty the Emperor has said that the Venerable Reverend Qiu – who was well respected by our Great Genghis Khan is old; His Majesty was not sure if he is still in this world. Therefore, His Majesty has bestowed this decree not to the Venerable Reverend Qiu but to the Sect Leader of the Quanzhen Sect. Whoever the Sect Leader is, he is worthy to accept this."

"This lowly priest does not have competency; how would he dare to accept?" Yin Zhiping insisted on refusing the decree.

The officer laughed and said, "Don't be bashful; quickly accept this order."

Yin reluctantly said, "This decree is unexpected, I can't accept it just like that. I respectfully ask Your Honor to take a rest and have some tea while I discuss this matter with my martial brothers."

The officer was not happy, but he could not do anything. He tucked the imperial decree away and said, "Very well. But I really do not know what you have to discuss."

Four priests on duty ushered the guests to the guest chamber and served tea.

In the meantime Yin Zhiping invited sixteen third generation disciples to convene in another room in the courtyard. "This is not a small matter, this junior does not dare to act without Martial Brothers' approval," he said, "I will respectfully listen to your valuable suggestions."

"The Mongolian Emperor has shown us kindness, it is just proper for us to gracefully accept it," Zhao Zhijing said.

“Obviously our Sect is getting more prosperous than ever so that the Mongolian Emperor does not dare to look down upon us.” He was speaking with self-satisfaction in his voice and could not hold in his happy laugh.

“No, I don’t agree!” Li Zhichang shook his head. “Mongolia invaded our country and cruelly massacred our people. How can we accept this decree?”

“Uncle Master Qiu himself had accepted Genghis Khan’s royal invitation and traveled thousands of miles to the west,” Zhao Zhijing countered. “Sect Leader Yin and you, Martial Brother Li, were among those who accompanied him on the journey. Having this precedent, why do we refuse the imperial decree now?”

“It’s different,” Li Zhichang said. “At that time Mongolia was at war with the Jin dynasty and had not invaded our country. They even formed an alliance with our great Song dynasty. How can you compare our present situation to those times?”

“You have a very dangerous opinion,” Zhao Zhijing threatened. “Mount Zhongnan is under Mongolian rule; our Chongyang Palace is within Mongolian territory. If we refuse the decree, wouldn’t that mean we are inviting a great disaster?”

Li Zhichang was offended. “Martial Brother Zhao’s opinion is not right,” he said.

“What do you mean ‘not right?’” Zhao Zhijing said harshly, “Would Martial Brother Li give us direction?”

“Give you direction, I do not dare,” Li Zhichang said. “But let me ask Martial Brother Zhao: what kind of person was Founder Reverend Chongyang? What kind of people are the Quanzhen Seven Masters?”

“Our Founder, Master and all Uncle Masters are religious people who held high position in our Sect,” Zhao Zhijing answered with consternation.

“They were also real men and woman with determined spirits; patriotic citizens who protect suffering people without regard to their own lives. They took up arms fighting the Jin who invaded us,” Li Zhichang added.

“Reverend Chongyang and the Quanzhen Seven Masters are honorable people who have shaken the river and lake region [Jianghu]. Who in the martial arts world doesn’t respect them?” Zhao Zhijing tried to change the subject.

“I am deeply touched by our predecessors,” Li Zhichang boldly said. “Without exception they were fearless people who resolved to save other people through oceans of water and fire. They taught us the meaning of bravery. Our bodies may perish, but our honor will have to stand.”

His speech had touched Yin Zhiping’s heart, as well as more than ten other Martial Brothers’. Zhao Zhijing, on the other hand, kept pushing his agenda. He sneered and said, “Is Martial Brother Li the only one who is fearless about death? Do other people fear death and covet life? Our founder had undertaken great difficulties in founding our Sect. Our Sect has reached a high point today; I wonder how much pain and suffering the Founder and Quanzhen Seven Masters have suffered? If Quanzhen Sect fell due to our inability, how would we face our Founder in the underworld? How would we be accountable to the Five Masters when they finish their meditation?”

His speech sounded reasonable and several martial brothers voiced their support. Zhao Zhijing was encouraged and continued, “The Jin dynasty was our archenemy. Now the Mongolians have destroyed their country, wouldn’t that make them our ally? In the past our Founder was defeated by the

Jin which resulted in him living in seclusion inside the Ancient Tomb. If he knew his enemy was defeated, wouldn't his soul in heaven be comforted?"

After hearing his comments praising the enemy, Wang Zhitan, another of Qiu Chuji's disciples said, "If after defeating the Jin the Mongolians formed an alliance with our Great Song and lived in peace with our people we certainly would treat them as brothers. However, the Mongolian armed forces have continued their large scale maneuvers to the south fiercely attacking Xiangyang. Our Great Song is in grave danger. You, I and all of us are people of the Great Song. How could we accept the enemy's decree?" He turned his head to Yin Zhiping and asked, "Martial Brother Sect Leader, if you accept this decree, you are a traitor of China; you will be condemned forever by our Quanzhen Sect. I, Wang Zhitan; even if the blood of my neck splashes to the ground, will not let you disgrace us." He spoke with a solemn voice and stern countenance.

Zhao Zhijing leaped up and smacked the table. "Martial Brother Wang!" he bellowed, "Do you want to resort to violence? How dare you insolently threaten the Reverend Sect Leader?"

"We stand on justice!" Wang Zhitan harshly shot back. "Fight if you want, do you think I am afraid?"

Both sides looked in each other's eyes, ready to draw their swords to fight. A grey haired Taoist priest quickly intervened, "Hold! The Martial Brothers don't have to fight. We can talk it over."

"What is Senior Martial Brother's opinion?" Wang Zhitan asked, eyes bulging out.

"My opinion," the senior priest said, "We ... we are devout people, we have to have mercy toward the people, and we

have to help them. If ... if we accept the Mongolian Emperor's Imperial Decree, we will be able to persuade the Mongolian rulers and the officers not to commit atrocities. Didn't Fourth Martial Uncle Qiu Chuji do the same and was able to save a multitude of lives?" Several of Zhao Zhijing's supporters echoed their agreement.

A terse and forceful Taoist priest shook his head. "The circumstances then and today are beyond comparison. Junior followed Master's journey to the west and had met Genghis Khan himself. I saw with my own eyes how the Mongolian troops destroyed cities and massacred their people, and committed great atrocities. If we accept this decree, it means we fall under Mongolian influence. Wouldn't that mean we are assisting a tyrant to do evil? We might be able to save ten or twenty lives, but as the Mongolian power rises, I wonder how many thousands or tens of thousands people will die." The short and stocky priest who said that was Song Defang, one of nineteen disciples who came with Qiu Chuji to the west.

Zhao Zhijing smirked and said, "You have seen Genghis Khan, so what? I have recently met the Mongolian Fourth Prince, Khubilai. The Prince treats skilled martial artists and scholars with utmost courtesy. He is generous and open-minded; how could someone like him be ruthless?"

"Incredible!" Wang Zhitan shouted, "You have received Khubilai's order to spy on us!"

Zhao Zhijing was enraged, "What did you say?"

Wang Zhitan snapped, "Those who conspire with the Mongolians are traitors to our country!"

Zhao Zhijing made a sudden leap and thrust a palm toward Wang Zhitan's head. But as he started to move, two palms

blocked his attack. They belonged to Qiu Chuji's other two disciples, one of them was Qi Zhicheng.

“Shame!” Zhao Zhijing was livid and loudly shouted, “The disciples of Uncle Master Qiu Chuji rely on numbers to bully others.”

Yin Zhiping immediately clapped his palms and loudly said, “Martial Brothers! Please sit quietly. Listen to what Junior has to say.”

The Sect Leader position granted the bearer an enormous authority. They immediately sat down and did not dare to disobey. “Good,” Zhao Zhijing said, “Let us listen to what our Sect Leader has to say. If he wants to accept the decree, then we accept it. If he wants to refuse it, then we follow. The Imperial Decree is his; it’s neither mine nor yours. Why fight?”

He thought he had Yin Zhiping in his hands. Yin Zhiping would not dare to oppose him. On the other hand, Li Zhichang, Wang Zhitan and the others have known Yin Zhiping for quite some time. They knew he was loyal and patriotic. They were sure he would not betray the country and die as a traitor. They thought it was wise to leave the matter in his hands and let him to adjudicate.

“Junior does not have the competency and skill to hold the Sect Leader position. It was with a humble and heavy heart I accepted this weighty responsibility,” Yin Zhiping slowly said. “Who could have known that I would have to face this difficult matter on my very first day?” He looked up and stared blankly at the ceiling. Sixteen third generation disciples fixed their gaze on their Sect Leader. The room was quiet. Nobody made any noise.

After a long while Yin Zhiping finally continued, “The Quanzhen Sect was founded by Grand Master Chongyang.

After him came honorable Master Ma Yu, followed by Uncle Master Liu Chuxuan and my Master Qiu Chuji who carried forward their legacy. Now Junior has to carry the burden. How could I dare to disobey the basic teachings of my honorable predecessors? Martial Brothers! At present the Mongolian troops attack the city of Xiangyang, invade our land, and massacre our people. If it were any of the four Masters, would they accept, or would they refuse?"

The group listened carefully to his word, they reflected on how the Grand Martial Master Chongyang, Masters Ma Yu, Liu Chuxuan, and Qiu Chuji would usually handle such affairs: Founding Grand Master Chongyang died a long time ago, none of the third generation disciples had ever met him. Master Ma Yu was kind and honest; he would handle any matter quietly without much fanfare. Master Liu Chuxuan had profound insight; the disciples could never easily discern his thoughts. Master Qiu Chuji was like a raging fire. He was loyal and patriotic. The disciples had deep impressions of him, and without prior agreement they answered almost in unison, "Sect Leader Qiu Chuji would refuse the decree!"

"The Sect Leader now is you, not Uncle Master Qiu!" Zhao Zhijing shouted disrespectfully.

"Junior's talent is ordinary. I do not dare to violate our Masters' teaching. Moreover, I have committed a great sin, deserving of harsh punishment." After saying this Yin Zhiping hung his head. Nobody but Zhao Zhijing knew what he was talking about. They thought he was simply being modest. But 'a great sin, deserving harsh punishment' was a little bit too hard, unclear, and had nothing to do with the matter at hand.

Zhao Zhijing snorted; standing up he asked, "So, you have made the decision to refuse, hmm?"

“My insignificant life is worthless,” Yin Zhiping mournfully said. “But I can’t disgrace the Quanzhen name.” He started talking in low voice, but as he spoke the later sentence his voice was actually getting ardent. “Presently the heroes of our country have united themselves to fight the invaders. The Quanzhen Sect is known as an orthodox school of the central plains. How would we face the heroes of this world if we fall under Mongolian feet?”

His speech was applauded by loud cheers from Li Zhichang, Song Defang, Wang Zhitan, Qi Zhicheng and many others. “The Martial Brother Sect Leader’s words are true,” they enthusiastically said.

Zhao Zhijing flicked his sleeve and furiously walked out of the room. He paused at the doorway, sneered and coldly said, “Martial Brother Sect Leader, your words were pleasant to the ear. Heh, heh ... I am sure you know the consequences you can expect.” Then he turned around and walked briskly out.

As soon as he left many Taoists spoke at once. They agreed that Yin Zhiping had made a wise decision and praised him accordingly but about four or five Zhao Zhijing supporters also left the room without saying anything.

Yin Zhiping’s agony was unspeakable. He retreated to his own chamber. He knew that Zhao Zhijing would not take this setback lightly; Zhao would certainly reveal his secret to the public. He realized that he had condemned himself to die by declaring his intention to refuse the decree. He had suffered great anxiety and fear for several months, and now that he knew he was going to die, his mind became clear and his spirit calmed. With a steady hand he bolted the door of his chamber from inside. With a wry smile on his face he unsheathed his long sword and lifted it toward his throat ...

Just before the sword touched his skin, someone suddenly leaped from behind a book shelf and a hand reached toward the sword. Yin Zhiping did not expect this, he was caught off guard. The long sword suddenly flew from his hand. Startled he quickly turned his head only to see Zhao Zhijing with the long sword in his hand.

As Zhao Zhijing flaunted the sword in his hand he smirked and said "You have ruined the Sect Leader's reputation and now you think you can easily settle the score by dying? Not that easy! Miss Long is standing guard outside the Chongyang Palace. You tell me how we should answer her if she decides to come."

"Good!" Yin Zhiping answered, "Then I will come outside and slit my own throat in her presence to apologize."

"Even if you killed yourself, this matter is not over," Zhao Zhijing said. "After they finish their meditation, the Five Masters would certainly decide to investigate. You have ruined Quanzhen Sect's reputation. Surely you will be condemned forever!"

Yin Zhiping's spirit was crushed. Suddenly a cold sweat poured down his face. He fell into a chair, holding his head with both hands and desperately muttered, "What do you want? Tell me, what do you want me to do? If death is inadequate, then what ...?"

He had spoken to his fellow disciples with confidence, but now that he was alone with Zhao Zhijing, he unexpectedly lost his will to fight.

"Very well," Zhao Zhijing smiled. "If you leave this matter to me, I guarantee I will help you take care of the Miss Long problem, while at the same time preserving the Sect's and your own reputation. Definitely you will not have any trouble in the future."

“Do you want me to accept the Imperial Decree?” asked Yin Zhiping anxiously.

“No! No! I don’t want you to accept the Imperial Decree,” Zhao Zhijing answered.

Yin Zhiping was relieved. “What then? Tell me quickly! I will certainly listen to you,” he anxiously asked.

After an hour, the bell in the hall sounded and everyone assembled there. Li Zhichang instructed all of Qiu Chuji’s disciples to conceal weapons under their gowns in case Yin Zhiping was coerced into submission by Zhao Zhijing and his supporters. The Taoists filled the hall; their faces grim and filled with anxiety.

Yin Zhiping stepped out slowly from the inner hall and his face was very pale. He stopped in the centre and said, “My fellow Taoist brothers, I have been commanded by Head Priest Qiu to assume the Sect Leader’s position, but unfortunately I have contracted a terminal illness which cannot be cured...” This came like a bolt from the blue and many Taoists involuntarily exclaimed, “Ah!” Yin Zhiping continued, “I cannot undertake such a heavy responsibility, and I hereby appoint Elder Wang’s most senior disciple Zhao Zhijing to assume the Sect Leader position!”

When he said this, the hall was filled with an unnatural silence which only lasted for a moment. Then Li Zhichang, Wang Zhitan, Song Defang and company opposed loudly, “Priest Qiu wanted Brother Yin Zhiping to become the Sect Leader, how can you pass it on to others?” “You’re supposed to be fine, how did you contract a terminal illness?” “There must be some huge conspiracy behind this; you must have fallen into a trap.” The Fourth Generation disciples did not dare speak loudly but they were all debating among themselves. The hall was thrown into confusion. Li Zhichang

and company glared at Zhao Zhijing but he looked indifferent to the matter and just folded his arms silently.

Yin Zhiping raised his hands and waited for everyone to become silent. He then said, "This is indeed very sudden, you're not at fault for your reactions. Our sect is facing a great disaster and I have committed a great sin - so great that even death cannot atone for it." When he said this, he grimaced and continued, "I have thought carefully and I found that only Brother Zhao Zhijing is capable enough to lead our sect through this crisis. Everyone must not look upon him with prejudice but assist him in bringing glory to our sect."

Li Zhichang said clearly, "It's human to err. As for your sin, just await the five elders return from their meditation and then report the matter to them. We really cannot acknowledge your abdication."

Yin Zhiping sighed, "Brother Li Zhichang, we've been friends for many years and are as close as brothers. Please just cooperate and don't make things difficult for me."

Li Zhichang was full of suspicions and saw that Yin Zhiping looked like he was seriously troubled and his speech had little conviction so he gave up arguing and hung his head in silence. Wang Zhitan said, "If you really wish to abdicate, you should still wait for the five elders to return and investigate carefully to prevent any foolish decisions."

Yin Zhiping sadly said, "This is too urgent to postpone."

Wang Zhitan said, "Even so, among our generation of brothers, there are many who surpass Brother Zhao in character and leadership abilities. Brother Li Zhichang is well-versed in the Tao while Brother Song Defang is able at handling other matters. Why, then, do you choose the unpopular Brother Zhao?"

Zhao Zhijing had a hot-tempered character and he tried very hard to restrain himself. Now he could not control himself and he laughed coldly, "Then what about the brave Brother Wang Zhitan?"

Wang Zhitan angrily said, "I'm not very capable and I cannot be compared to our fellow brothers. But compared to Brother Zhao, I'm superior." He laughed and stared at the ceiling; his manner was extremely arrogant. Wang Zhitan said loudly, "My martial arts and sword skills may not be superior to Brother Zhao's but at least I wouldn't be a traitor."

Zhao Zhijing lost his control and shouted, "If you have the guts then say it clearly, who's the traitor?" The exchange of words became more intense and heated.

Yin Zhiping said, "Please don't quarrel and listen to me." They stopped arguing but still glared at each other. Yin Zhiping said, "Our sect's constitution decrees that the position of the Sect Leader will be appointed by the previous Sect Leader and not nominated by the Taoist Brothers, is that right?" Everyone unanimously shouted, "Yes!" Yin Zhiping said, "I hereby appoint Zhao Zhijing to succeed me as the new Sect Leader. Do not oppose this. Brother Zhao, please come forward and listen to them." Zhao Zhijing proudly swaggered forward and bowed.

Wang Zhitan and Song Defang still wanted to speak but Li Zhichang held their sleeves and signaled to them with his eyes. They knew he was apt at handling matters and must have planned something so they remained silent. Li Zhichang whispered, "Zhao Zhijing must have some hold over Brother Yin rendering him incapable of any opposition. We must secretly investigate his devious plan then we can contend with him. Let's just obey Brother Yin for now. If we oppose him now, it may reflect badly on us." They nodded

their heads in agreement and acknowledged the Sect Leader's command.

The Quanzhen Sect experienced two change-of-command ceremonies in one day so, of course, many were surprised and found it hard to accept.

Once the ceremony was over, he stood at the centre and bade his own disciples to stand guard at his sides. He said, "Invite in the Mongol Khan's envoy." Wang Zhitan wanted to abuse him verbally when he heard this but Li Zhichang stopped him with his eye signals. Before long, four disciples escorted the Mongolian envoy and Xiaoxiang Zi into the hall.

Zhao Zhijing quickly rushed forward to welcome him and laughed, saying, "Please come in!" The envoy had already waited for a very long time and was getting impatient. Now he saw that Yin Zhiping was absent his face became blacker. One of the escorts knew what was bothering him and said, "Our Sect Leader's position is now undertaken by Master Zhao." The Mongol envoy was surprised and delighted and said, "Oh, I see! Congratulations!" He cupped his hands to salute him. Xiaoxiang Zi was standing two feet behind but his zombie-like face did not display any emotion.

Zhao Zhijing brought the envoy into the main hall and said, "Your Honor, please announce the Edict."

The envoy smiled and thought, "A person like you should have been made the Sect Leader originally and not that previous leader." He took out the Edict and opened it. Zhao Zhijing knelt on the floor and heard the envoy say, "Quanzhen Sect's Leader is hereby conferred..."

Li Zhichang and the others saw Zhao Zhijing kneel down and accept the edict respectfully and exchanged glances. They suddenly drew their swords from under their gowns and the flashes were seen throughout the hall. Wang Zhitan and

Song Defang rushed up and pointed their swords at Zhao Zhijing's back. Li Zhichang shouted, "Our sect's most important commandment is loyalty, we'll never surrender to the Mongolians. Zhao Zhijing betrayed our ancestors and abandoned our honour, he shall not remain as the sect's leader." Another four Taoists drew their swords and surrounded the envoy and Xiaoxiang Zi.

This sudden change of events was too abrupt. Although Zhao Zhijing knew Li Zhichang was very unhappy with him, he thought the power and prestige of the Sect Leader's position would prevent anyone from daring to rebel. He assumed that if he became the leader he would be the highest-ranking member of the sect and even the Five Elder Masters could not oppose his orders easily. He obviously never expected the others to take action against the Sect Leader. Now swords were pointed at his back; he was shocked and angry but he did not show it. He shouted, "You rebellious disciples! You dare to create trouble?"

Wang Zhitan shouted, "Traitor! If you move we'll make two holes right through you!"

Although Zhao Zhijing's skills were better than theirs, this was unexpected as he was attacked while kneeling down so he had no chance to retaliate. Zhao Zhijing had instructed about ten of his trusted supporters to bring weapons along with them. But Li Zhichang and company were Qiu Chuji's disciples who were well-respected in the sect and they acted swiftly and suddenly. Many of Zhao Zhijing's close supporters did not dare make a move. A few did try to draw their weapons but their accupoints were sealed the moment their arms moved. Among them were Zhang Zhiguang whose face was injured by Granny Sun, Jia Zhifan who once fought with Lu Wushuang and Zhao Zhijing's disciple Lu Qingdu.

Li Zhichang said to the envoy, "Mongolia is now at war with the Song Empire and we are citizens of the Song Empire. How can we accept a Mongolian edict? Please leave; when we meet on the battlefield we shall talk again." He said this with gusto and many Taoists in the hall cheered when they heard this.

The envoy flashed his sword and did not betray any emotions, laughing coldly, "You people have acted rashly today. You don't know what's good for you. The glory of the Quanzhen Sect shall be destroyed soon, what a pity."

Li Zhichang replied, "Our territories have been leveled by your armies; we are only a small sect, how can we withstand you? But if you don't leave soon, don't blame me for being impolite, I can't control myself much longer."

Xiaoxiang Zi sneered, "Impolite? How? I want to see it!" He stretched out his long arms and snatched Song Defang and Wang Zhitan's swords. Zhao Zhijing immediately jumped up and executed the "White Clouds Exiting the Cave" to defend his back and then he stood next to the envoy. Xiaoxiang Zi handed him one of the swords and slashed the other sword towards Li Zhichang. Li Zhichang raised his sword to parry but his hand became numb when his sword hit the other sword. He tried to use his internal strength to resist the sword but the two swords snapped.

Xiaoxiang Zi's strokes in snatching and deflecting swords were extremely fast and in the blink of an eye he raised his hands and threw out his palms, disarming four senior Quanzhen disciples. He carried out three strokes continuously and defeated seven Quanzhen experts. The several hundred people in the hall were shocked; they did not expect this zombie-faced man to be so highly-skilled.

Zhao Zhijing has never thought greatly of Wang Zhitan and Song Defang and now that he was trapped in a kneeling

position by them in front of so many people, he was furious and stabbed towards Wang Zhitan. This “Big River Heads East” move was one of Quanzhen’s most powerful and swiftest sword techniques. The sword sliced through the air and thrust towards Wang Zhitan’s abdomen.

Wang Zhitan quickly jumped back to evade the thrust. Zhao Zhijing’s sword moves were merciless and aimed to take his life and the tip of the sword followed within two feet of him. It seemed as though Wang Zhitan could no longer evade this blow and everyone looked at them stunned. Suddenly a sleeve flew out and wrapped around the sword. The sleeve was ripped apart but the sword was impeded and Wang Zhitan was able to jump to safety. Two swords were quickly stretched out to block Zhao Zhijing’s sword. The man with the torn sleeve was Yin Zhiping.

Zhao Zhijing was very angry and pointed at him, shouting, “You... you... How dare you do that?”

Yin Zhiping said, “Brother Zhao, you promised not to accept the Mongolian edict. That’s why I abdicated in your favour. How could you go back on your word in such a short time?”

Zhao Zhijing said, “You asked me, ‘Do you want me to accept the Mongolian edict?’ I said, ‘No, I’d never want you to accept the edict!’ How did I break my word? The one accepting the edict is me, not you.”

Yin Zhiping muttered, “So it’s like that, you’re despicable!”

Now Li Zhichang took a sword from one of his disciples and shouted, “My good Quanzhen brothers, we’ll still recognize Master Yin as our sect leader. Let’s arrest this traitor Zhao and punish him according to our Sect Leader’s ruling!” He charged up and fought with Zhao Zhijing. Wang Zhitan, Song Defang and five other Taoists quickly got into the ‘Big Dipper Formation’ and surrounded Xiaoxiang Zi. Although Xiaoxiang

Zi's martial arts were good, he could not comprehend the formation's changes and he saw seven people flying up and down in front of him and he became confused.

The envoy had already retreated into a corner when he saw that things were not going right. He quickly took out a horn and blew it. Two Taoists rushed up and snatched the horn and captured him. They were however a split second late and the horn had sounded out clearly.

Yin Zhiping knew he had summoned reinforcements and knew that danger was near. He was suddenly jolted into attention and commanded, "Brother Qi Zhicheng, watch this Mongolian official. Brother Yu Daoxian, Brother Wang Zhijin, take three brothers to help Brother Sun guard the Jade Cave at the back of the mountain to prevent any Mongol soldiers from distracting the Five Elder Masters from their meditation. Brother Chen Zhiyi, take six people to guard the front of the mountain. Fang Zhiqi, take six people to guard the left side of the mountain. Liu Daoning, take six people and guard the right side of the mountain."

The people guarding the left and right were all his fellow disciples under Qiu Chuji. Among the people sent to guard the Jade Cave, Yu Daoxian was Liu Chuxuan's disciple while Wang Zhijin was Hao Datong's disciple. Liu Chuxuan and Hao Datong were meditating inside the cave and these two disciples were upright and honest, so they would not allow harm to their masters. Yin Zhiping had made such careful arrangements in such a short time and he made sure there were trustworthy people guarding every strategic position. Everyone could support each other effectively. Even if a large body of troops attacked them, it would be hard for them to get through the defenses. Everyone saw that his eyes were keen and alert and his commands clear and forceful. His manner so imposing that none dared disobey him and all carried out the orders without question.

Suddenly they heard shouting and weapons clashing outside. A few Taoists were still moving to take their positions when there was a whistle and a few dozen people jumped over the wall. The troops from the east were led by Yin Kexi, the west by Nimoxing and the front by Ma Guangzuo; their troops were veterans who had been involved in the Khan's western expedition.

Khubilai had been attacking Xiangyang for many months and an illness broke out in the Mongolian army. This, coupled with their failure at the siege, caused the army to withdraw. The body of troops that Xiao Longnu saw speedily heading south previously was the last division to attack Xiangyang. Before the army withdrew Khubilai ordered his men to recruit capable men from the Central Plains. The Mongol Khan's edict to take over the Quanzhen Sect was part of Khubilai's plan. However, he knew the Quanzhen Sect was loyal and upright, so they may not submit. He ordered Jinlun Fawang to lead skilled Wulin fighters to wait near Mount Zhongnan. If the Quanzhen Sect rejected the edict, they would use force to bring it under their control.

Mount Zhongnan's security was usually very tight but in just one day they experienced two leadership changes and Chongyang Palace was thrown into chaos. Those who were supposed to guard the mountain were recalled to witness the change-of-command ceremony. Therefore it was only when Yin Kexi, Nimoxing and company got right up to the Chongyang Palace that they were discovered. Their sudden appearance caught the Quanzhen Sect unprepared and many of the defenders had not even left the hall. There were enemy soldiers in all directions and although the Taoists outnumbered the enemy forces, most of them were unarmed. Moreover they were surrounded and could only crowd into a small area. The commanding positions all lacked the manpower and it looked like they were going to be utterly defeated.

The Mongolian envoy who was held captive by Qi Zhicheng shouted, "Disciples of Quanzhen Sect, throw down your weapons and suffer your Sect Leader Zhao's punishment."

Yin Zhiping said, "Zhao Zhijing betrayed our founder and masters by surrendering to the enemy; he has committed a great sin and therefore is no longer our Sect Leader." Although he saw that the situation was highly unfavorable, he decided to put up a struggle and repel the enemy. Many of them fought barehanded and before long, there were more than ten dead bodies scattered around the hall. Yin Zhiping, Li Zhichang, Wang Zhitan, Song Defang and Qi Zhicheng and others were either injured, had lost their weapons, had their accupoints blocked or even killed. The rest were forced into a corner by Yin Kexi's troops and could not retaliate.

The envoy's rank was very high and even Yin Kexi, Xiaoxiang Zi and their soldiers had to obey him. He saw his side had gained a complete victory and said to Zhao Zhijing, "Master Zhao, I'll save you face. I won't report the Quanzhen Sect's rebellion to the Khan."

Zhao Zhijing bowed and thanked him profusely and suddenly remembered something. He quickly turned to Xiaoxiang Zi and whispered, "I need a big favour from you. My five masters are meditating at the back of the mountain. If they suddenly rush here, then... this..."

Xiaoxiang Zi dryly said, "So be it. I'll help you fight them."

Zhao Zhijing did not dare say anymore but was not satisfied. He worried, "Don't underestimate the Five Masters, if they really come here you won't defeat them so easily. If they really drive the Mongolians away, it'll be hard for me to keep my life."

The envoy said, "Master Zhao, you will first accept the imperial edict and then you will punish your rebellious

disciples.” Zhao Zhijing said, “Yes!” He knelt down to listen to the edict.

Yin Zhiping, Li Zhichang and the others had their hands and feet bound. When they heard the envoy read the edict and saw Zhao Zhijing kowtowing and thanking him, they became livid with anger. Song Defang sat next to Li Zhichang and whispered to him, “Brother Li untie my bonds. I’ll dash out and report the matter to the Five Masters.” Li Zhichang leaned back and circulated his internal strength and exerted it with his fingers. He managed to undo the bonds and whispered, “Please report calmly. Don’t shock the Five Masters – they are now cultivating their internal energy...” Song Defang nodded his head.

After reading the edict, Zhao Zhijing stood up and the envoy and Xiaoxiang Zi congratulated him.

Song Defang suddenly saw many people get up and surround Zhao Zhijing. He quickly got up and dashed behind the deities’ statues. Nimoxing shouted, “Stop right there!” He obviously did not care and ran off as fast as he could. Nimoxing’s legs were amputated so he could not give chase so he waved his hand, throwing out a snake-like dart. The dart hit Song Defang’s left leg. Nimoxing shouted, “Go down!” He slowed for a while but did not collapse. Instead he tolerated the pain and continued running. The Chongyang Palace was huge and complex; he turned a few times and the Mongolian troops lost him.

Song Defang got outside, extracted the dart, and bandaged his wound. He went to the medicine room and took a sword and ran to the back of the mountain. He came around a row of pine trees and got to the Jade Cave’s entrance. He groaned in dismay. There were several Mongol soldiers there lifting rocks to block the entrance. A tall, skinny monk stood there and beside him were two people directing the soldiers. He

immediately recognized the two people to be Da'erba and Hou Du and knew that their skills were not below that of Hao Datong's. The tall monk looked extraordinary and his martial arts appeared to be much better than the other two. The entrance was now almost eighty percent covered and he did not know if the Five Masters were still alive. He thought, "Master has treated me very well and today he is in trouble; I must sacrifice my life to save them, or my presence in the world will have been in vain."

He knew very well that by going up to stop them he would surely lose his life and would still be unable to help the Five Masters. However the Quanzhen Sect was having a great disaster so he would not save his own skin. He unsheathed his sword and rushed out from behind a tree. The sword flew through the air and thrust towards the tall monk. He wanted to kill off their leader, and if he succeeded he would throw the group into confusion.

Unfortunately the monk was none other than Jinlun Fawang. He had already questioned Zhao Zhijing about the situation at the Quanzhen Sect and headed straight to the Jade Cave on reaching the mountain. He knew that once he trapped the Five Masters, the third and fourth generation disciples would be powerless to resist.

Song Defang's sword was less than a foot away from Fawang's back and he seemed not to notice him, so he was secretly happy. Suddenly a golden light flashed and Fawang held out a round golden wheel and smashed his sword. Song Defang shouted in pain and the sword flew out of his hand. He was internally injured and threw up a pool of blood. He became giddy and vaguely heard people shouting around him but he did not know what had happened and fainted.

Fawang had also heard shouting from the hall but with Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the other experts there, he did not

think anything amiss and didn't pay any attention. He only told his men to cover the entrance quickly to prevent Qiu Chuji and the others from charging out and wasting his energy.

Once Song Defang left the hall, the situation changed again. The envoy said to Zhao Zhijing, "Master Zhao, the people who stirred up trouble were numerous; I think your position is not very secure."

Zhao Zhijing also knew the people were unhappy with him and would immediately turn on him once Xiaoxiang Zi and the others left. Since it had already come to this, he said loudly, "According to our sect's rules, those who disobey the Sect Leader should be punished?" The Taoists remained silent but they all thought, "You disobeyed the Sect Leader yourself." Zhao Zhijing repeated his question and stared at his disciple Lu Qingdu, wanting him to answer. Lu Qingdu said, "Execution in front of the Three Deities' statues."

Zhao Zhijing said, "Correct! Yin Zhiping, do you admit your offense?"

Yin Zhiping said, "No!"

Zhao Zhijing said, "OK! Bring him here!" Lu Qingdu pushed Yin Zhiping forward and stood in front of the statues. Zhao Zhijing also asked Li Zhichang, Wang Zhitan and the others, but everyone said, "No!" Among those captured however, were some who feared for their lives and had submitted, so Zhao Zhijing ordered their bonds to be untied. Altogether there were twenty-four people who did not submit and Wang Zhitan could not control his fiery temper and he cursed and swore.

Zhao Zhijing said, "You're so stubborn. Even though I, the Sect Leader, am merciful, I won't be able to spare you. Lu Qingdu, do you act on behalf of our founder!" Lu Qingdu

said, "Yes!" He raised his sword and killed Yu Daoxian who was first in the line.

Yu Daoxian was warm and kind and he had many friends in the Quanzhen Sect. When they saw Lu Qingdu execute him, they shouted in fury. What Song Defang and Fawang heard was their cries of protest. Yin Kexi waved his hand and several Mongolian soldiers blocked the Taoists.

When Lu Qingdu saw such fierce reaction, he was afraid. Zhao Zhijing said, "Quickly do it, why are you delaying?" Lu Qingdu said, "Yes!" He raised his sword and killed another two people. The fourth person in the queue was Yin Zhiping and just as Lu Qingdu raised his sword to stab his chest, a female voice coldly said, "Stop! Do not kill him."

Lu Qingdu turned around and saw a young lady in white. It was Xiao Longnu. She said, "Step aside! Let me kill him."

End of Chapter 25.

Chapter 26 - Divine Eagle's Heavy Sword

Translated by Hanky Panky, Athena, BeeDreamer & Lanny Lin



The clusters of swords hovering and fiercely swaying about amongst the three's weapons. Xiao Longnu was using the "Tight Encirclement Force" (Tian Luo Di Wang Shi), smoothly seizing a sword and lunging out several moves, then quickly retreating back from the enemy.

Xiao Longnu saw the Quanzhen Sect's group of Taoists riot, the Mongolian warriors raiding on a large scale, every dispute seemed from her viewpoint like a cloud of mist, she paid no attention to them. But seeing Lu Qingdu raise his sword to kill Yin Zhiping, how could she let someone try to kill him? Therefore, she immediately ran up front to block the attack.

When Zhao Zhijing saw Xiao Longnu suddenly advancing into the temple, he felt delighted: "Throughout the whole journey I've been chased by you without a moment's pause for breath; now, with so many experts around, you're literally searching for death, it truly is a gift from heaven!" He called out: "The demon girl is not a good person, seize her for me!" The Mongolian warriors didn't take notice of his orders; they didn't even lift a finger. Zhao Zhijing's two close followers heard their master's command, rushed forward, and tried to grab both her arms.

Before their hands reached her sleeve, the fight, from their perspective, was moving as fast as lightning, and then their wrists felt a burst of severe pain. In haste they leapt back. What had happened was that from her waist Xiao Longnu pulled out two swords. In the blink of an eye, their wrists were struck by the swords; the carpal bones were almost broken and the wrists were drenched with blood. The move was extremely quick; people did not have time to clearly see how she brought out the swords, attacked the two Taoists, wounded them and moved away. Those watching couldn't help but feel startled.

Lu Qingdu called out: "Great comrades let's attack together, our many hands will provide great strength. Who cares what that demon girl's origins are?" He thought that however skilful Xiao Longnu might be, she's merely a young woman; once everybody rushes forward, their victory is assured. The vanguard thrust their swords to pierce Xiao Longnu. Xiao Longnu's sharp swords vibrated, Lu Qingdu's left wrist, right wrist, left leg, and right leg had been struck by her sword, with a loud howl, he collapsed on the floor. The thrust of the two swords was even quicker than before; even experts such as Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi gazed at each other with pale faces. They'd previously seen her fight Gongsun Zhi at Passionless Valley. At that time her sword stances were fine and ingenious, but they were definitely not as unbelievable as they were now.

Xiao Longnu was taught how to separate her mind for two uses by Zhou Botong, the Left/Right Mutual Combat Technique; between her innate abilities and his teaching, her martial arts had multiplied. With Yang Guo forming the Dueling Sword Combination and using the 'Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Sword Technique', few have matched it under the heavens. Now, as one person, she can use two swords simultaneously, with outstanding power. Regardless of how two people's intentions are interlinked with each other, it's still inferior to one person's lightning-like alertness during battle. At this moment, although her sword method's energy and strength weren't as good as two people teaming up, her moves are faster in comparison by many times.

Throughout her lengthy trailing of Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing, she was depressed for days on end, not knowing what way to dispose of them. Within that moment that the Quanzhen Taoist's commander launched an attack, she took the opportunity to retaliate. Once she saw blood on the tip of her sword, she felt grief and indignation; suddenly she broke away from her attackers. Seeing her white garment drifting

about, like cold flickering light and both swords seeming like two silver snakes wandering inside the temple. Ding-dong, qiang-long sounds accompanied by comments of "Oh!", "This is bad" were heard. Instantly, the Quanzhen Taoists' swords dropped on the floor, everyone of them had felt the thrust of her swords on their wrists. Even more bizarre was that she used the same maneuver "Hoary Wrist Jade Bracelet", yet all that the Taoists saw was the flash of the sword brush past their eyes. Their wrists felt intense pain and they were left helpless. They had been easily disposed of with no chance to parry any of the strikes. This group of Taoists could have been killed effortlessly one by one.

After the Taoists were injured, they withdrew in deep shock. In front of the three statues were Yin Zhiping and a bunch of bound Taoists.

Xiao Longnu studied her Left/Right Mutual Combat Technique alone and practiced it a couple of times in the wilderness, but she'd never exchanged blows with anyone. Today she had the opportunity to try out these new techniques, and even she could not have dreamed of possessing such might; she was unexpectedly startled.

Realizing the situation wasn't fortuitous; Zhao Zhijing rapidly pulled a sword from his Taoist robe to protect himself, and at the same time retreated. Xiao Longnu was full of hatred towards him and as she moved in, both swords completely blocked the routes to his front and back. Zhao Zhijing brandished his sword in order to gain a path, but only the ding-dang sounds of swords clashing could be heard.

Yin Kexi said: "You won't succeed, get out of the way!" He had already obstructed Xiao Longnu's sword as he lashed out his Golden Dragon Whip. Xiao Longnu had injured 10 people one after another, up to this point, but one person was able to catch her single sword.

Xiao Longnu spoke: "Today I came here to seek my revenge against the Quanzhen Sect's Taoists, it does not involve others, stay out of the way."

Now Yin Kexi saw how her sword was chasing like wind and clouds, even he lost his nerve. But he was, after all, a first-class expert; he could not cower in fear because of someone's words. So he laughed and replied: "Among the Quanzhen Sect's Taoists the good and bad are intermingled; there are a dozen few who deserve to be killed, but who are those that offended you and deserve to die Miss?"

Xiao Longnu made an "ng" sound, and didn't pay further attention to him. Yin Kexi thought, "First I will establish a friendship with her so even if I'm no match for her, it won't result in death. If the situation is not right he would concede defeat. If other people know that we're acquainted with each other, they won't ridicule me for being cowardly". Consequently he laughingly called out: "Dragon Girl, don't waste any more time, your precious body is pure and healthy!" Xiao Longnu made another "ng" sound, her eyes did not move away from Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing, fearing that they might seize an opportunity to slip away. Yin Kexi uttered: "Don't dirty your hands on the deceitful Taoists, just point them out. Let me offer my services, and one by one they will be punished for Miss."

Xiao Longnu replied: "Good! Then kill him for me first." She pointed at Zhao Zhijing.

Yin Kexi thought: "This person has been imperially conferred by the Mongolian Da-Han, how can I kill him?" Then he laughed: "Immortal Zhao treats others very well, I'm afraid there's been some misunderstanding Miss. I'll tell him to come to Miss and apologize in front of you!"

Xiao Longnu's beautiful eyebrows slightly frowned. She thrust her left sword out, as fast as a bolt of lightning,

heading for Yin Kexi. Yin Kexi hurriedly raised his whip to ward it off. There was one sound of "Ah"; for standing behind was Zhao Zhijing who was stabbed in the shoulder. Xiaoxiang Zi and his class of experts couldn't tell how the thrust was made. They all assumed it was the right hand sword that was thrust out, twisting past Yin Kexi's body, and piercing the person hiding behind him.

Yin Kexi was deeply surprised, he thought, "This sword may not have hit me, but I was powerless to guard Zhao Zhijing, that is also a disgrace". His opponent's move was very fast, he just couldn't follow her twin sword's route and oncoming force; if he continued to fight her in this way he will definitely lose. The more he thought of this, the more cowardly he became; with a swing of the Golden Dragon Whip, he bellowed: "Miss Dragon Girl, please be merciful!" Xiao Longnu didn't care since she didn't regard him as an enemy, or a friend; without slowing her pace, she stepped twice to the left. Yin Kexi followed with one turn, still wanting to protect Zhao Zhijing, but suddenly heard moaning behind him. Slowly turning his head around, he saw Zhao Zhijing's robe sleeves had been neatly split into two parts by the point of her sword and blood came running from the wounds. How Xiao Longnu had pierced him, the other people were still completely baffled by it. Her rapid and skilful sword methods had reached a point where not only do her routes leave no trace, it's as if she can block one person and still injure her foe at will.

Zhao Zhijing has been consecutively pierced twice. Realizing that Yin Kexi's martial arts were average, he knew he could not count on him for protection. In imminent danger he took a deep breath and scurried over to the side of Xiaoxiang Zi. Xiao Longnu acted as though she never noticed it. She turned her body and with force, aimed her left hand sword at Yin Kexi, yet her right sword was directed at Nimoxing's chest. Whilst supporting himself with his left hand on his

crutch, Nimoxing's right hand used the steel snake to block. But then he heard Zhao Zhijing crying out loudly, followed by a 'qiang-long' sound, as his sword fell. His wrist has been poked by her sword yet again. That move was even more peculiar. It was obvious that Xiao Longnu was far beyond him. Somehow, while attacking two formidable fighters, she managed to find time to wound him again.

Xiaoxiang Zi grunted and said: "Miss Dragon Girl's sword techniques are not bad at all; I also want to challenge you." His left hand threw a palm from his side, but at that instant Zhao Zhijing felt a great force meeting his shoulder. He lost his footing, and flew several zhang (ten+feet) away. Fortunately his inner energy has considerable foundation; though his body may have been wounded three times, he was able to get up on his feet. Xiaoxiang Zi's palm force had not yet arrived and the cane attacked at the same moment.

Ma Guangzuo had long been good friends with Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu; his mind felt that this was far from right, and spoke loudly: "Three Wulin Masters ganging up on a young girl. Don't you want to save face?"

Once Xiaoxiang Zi and others heard this, their faces showed signs of anger. Throughout their lives they had paid no attention to such things as virtue or morality; however arrogance, pride, and dignity were still regarded as extremely important to their identity. To mention three people ganging up, why, they wouldn't even consider fighting such a young girl even one-on-one. But they knew, certainly, that relying on one person was impossible, since they wouldn't be able to resist her supernaturally unfathomable sword movements. They could only pretend not to have heard those demeaning comments made by Ma Guangzuo. They were thinking: "What a stupid fool! We're all handling the same affair here, and yet you help an outsider? When we're done I'll teach you a lesson." While their minds were filled with these thoughts,

before their eyes, the flash of the sword shone. Xiao Longnu had already made a move. The three fighters still couldn't follow the paths of her swords, so they leapt backwards together. They moved away a few zhangs, not wanting to get caught up with each other, all the while brandishing their weapons and protecting their body's vital parts.

Numerous Mongolian warriors led Yin Zhiping, Li Zhichang, Wang Zhitan and others near the temple wall. They all knew that the battle between the four was not to be taken lightly, all that was needed was for one person's weapon to be close to you; if you didn't die then you'd definitely sustain a serious injury.

Xiaoxiang Zi, Nimoxing and Yin Kexi all expected her to attack the other person first, so long as they're able to spot clues in her moves, then they will have chance of victory. The three fighters had the same intentions, consequently everyone of them executed unique skills, protecting their bodies without revealing vulnerable gaps, seeking a no win situation, in order to win. The three fighters, while attacking, adopted a defensive position together, this was a rare occasion in itself. But since their adversary is this strong, if they rush ahead and make an assault, the search for glory most likely would backfire on them.

Within the temple, Xiao Longnu's twin swords faced the floor, and she stood in the centre, while Xiaoxiang Zi and the other two placed themselves in an individual spot. Each one of them had a cold light shimmering about in front of them. Yin Kexi's Golden Whip flourished into a round yellow light; Nimoxing's Steel Snake illuminated strips of dark reflections; Xiaoxiang Zi's cane stirred into a grey screen, all blocking in front of them.

Xiao Longnu observed the three fighters one by one, thinking: "I have no enmity towards the three of you, and not

enough time to fight with you?" Noticing that Zhao Zhijing was dodging and sneaking away and just when he was about to step behind a statue, she brushed her white sleeves, and moved in. Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi separately dashed to the left and right, the steel snake and cane rushed in front of her, they had allied themselves. Their attack may not have been enough, but protecting themselves was their priority. Seeing that there were no loopholes to exploit, Xiao Longnu's twin swords did not immediately move outward. She saw that Zhao Zhijing was trying to escape through the back; she held her swords and darted forward two steps; however Nimoxing's and Xiaoxiang Zi's weapons whizzed like the wind blowing and she was unable to get past them. Xiao Longnu said: "Will you not let me pass?"

Xiaoxiang Zi thought: "A feud has not started between us yet, she might not massacre any of us. What would I benefit from this Quanzhen ringleader; why should I bother to make enemies with this strong girl?" He hesitated but did not answer.

Nimoxing replied: "We insist on not letting you past, what can a demon girl like you do about it? Why don't you try and get pass us?"

Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi both stared down at him and both thought: "We're stuck with not letting her past, but why must there be abusive remarks? Can it be that you alone can match her skills? You truly overrate yourself." But since they're uniting their efforts to ward off the enemy, it was not convenient to complain about each other.

They did not realize both legs of Nimoxing were removed because of Yang Guo's and Li Mochou's co-operation. He knew Yang Guo was Xiao Longnu's sweetheart, so his anger must be released on her; at that point he made a move, the

move was very different from the other two's, his intentions were to fight desperately to see who dies and who lives.

Xiao Longnu showed no anger at all, only knowing that in order to kill the two Taoists Yin and Zhao she must drive away the three experts in front of her. She coolly responded: "Since you're not going to let me get past, then forgive me!" Right after she finished her words, without warning her swords' light flashed by and a single noise was heard; and it spread itself into the distance without pausing. The noise hadn't yet subsided, but Xiao Longnu had already retreated back over ten feet returning to the centre of the temple. Xiaoxiang Zi's and Nimoxing's faces revealed no colour. The prolonged noise was formed by around forty continuous attacks in a greatly constricted amount of time. Within that moment, Xiao Longnu's two swords slashed out, cut, skimmed and chopped, and made forty moves. Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi were defending as tight as could be imagined, every one of her moves collided with the top of their weapons. To the bystander's ears, all that was heard were the recurring noises of the clashing weaponry and nothing was seen at all.

Her attacks were so fast that Xiaoxiang Zi and the others were even more panicked. When they were able to impede her sword slashes, they were totally dependant on their method of flourishing their weapons in such a way that nothing was going to get past them. They left barely a loophole to be seen. If they waited for her swords to extend completely, then both of them would have tasted the sharp blades. Xiao Longnu had admired their individual ways of defending closely and her swift range of assaults was to no avail. She paused for a slight moment, and drifted backward, but her eyes were still locked onto Xiaoxiang Zi. Then her two swords suddenly reversed their slashes and twelve rapid sounds of ding, ding, ding came so fast that even a skilled player of the lute's complex way of playing wouldn't have

that kind of speed. Yin Kexi's golden whip never rested and was busy blocking those twelve attacks right from the start.

After two periods of attacking and defending were finished, the four of them understood each other. Xiao Longnu was unfortunate not to have stronger inner energy and therefore her sword moves lacked the potency that's needed to disarm her opponents. Had she roughly similar inner energy to either of the three, their defense would've been breached long before. Xiao Longnu backtracked to the centre of the temple, and tried to conceive a plan to break past the enemy. She saw that the more they brandished their weapons the faster they became; where can she find the least bit of a weak point?

She thought: "Wielding weapons at this sort of tempo will lead to an excessive exhaustion of inner energy, surely then I won't last for long. I need to be patient and wait for a change; as the time drags on I will then be able to find a flaw. Even if Zhao Zhijing manages to escape, no matter where he goes I'll find him in the end." Thereupon her two swords trembled slightly, appearing as though she's going to attack or maybe not going to attack. She was storing up valuable energy ready to be unleashed. But she won't make the move yet and thus not leave her three opponents any small moments of relaxation. However, although Xiaoxiang Zi and his partner's inner energy was deep and profound, wielding weapons in such a way will make their physical energy drop below normal levels in a short time period. As Xiao Longnu saw no loophole to exploit, she quietly stood there with an elegant expression on her face, her mood severe. With her temperament, she had generally never been anxious before. Throughout her journey of following Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing for months she'd never even laid a hand on them. Now, if she had to wait for another day, why not? For 20 years she'd been quietly keeping watch over the Ancient

Tomb and learned a unique and unrivalled way of maintaining her patience.

Nimoxing noticed that she held her swords in a state of idleness, as self-assured as he was; he would not tolerate this any longer. Without warning he roared out like a lion, and wielded his metal snake and drove swiftly towards her. Once he was on the offence, the left side of his body revealed a weak point. Xiao Longnu's sword trembled, Nimoxing's crutch violently rammed out and then he jumped back. He felt a slight pain in his shoulder; glancing down he was surprised to see the cloth on his left shoulder had a tiny hole pierced through it, and blood seeping out of it. If Xiao Longnu hadn't also been concentrating on defending against his metal snake, his left arm would've been detached from his body.

Nimoxing racing to the attack had no merit in it and instead he received a wound. He may be angry but now did not have the nerve to hastily advance again. The three men deployed to three separate positions and brandished their weapons. Xiao Longnu, standing in the middle, did not pay any attention to them. Yin Kexi's single "10,000 Yellow Sand Whip Technique" repeated four times, and then something abruptly popped up in his mind. He called: "Brother Nimo, Brother Xiaoxiang let's take half a step forward." Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi weren't too sure of his intentions, but since he's the Western Region's greatest asset, with extensive knowledge and intelligence, they complied with his words and did move half a step. Yin Kexi at the same time stepped forward half a pace, and commanded: "Defending must be well-knit, it's crucial for the steps to be slow. Let's take another step." Nimoxing and Xiaoxiang Zi proceeded forward as requested.

The three weren't at all slack or sluggish in any way. After a while, they stepped out half a foot. At that point everyone could make out what was happening; the circle of the three

people surrounding Xiao Longnu was gradually shrinking, in the end they would force her into the centre. Although the three of them weren't confident about launching an assault, all of them continued to wield their weapons. They almost composed three impregnable fortresses progressively approaching the centre. The threatening defensive styles merged into a single mighty blitz, in which in its ferocity was incomparable. Everyone viewing this situation, especially the likes of the Mongolian soldiers, along with Zhao Zhijing and his fellow Taoists were secretly delighted. The other Taoists on the other hand were concerned for Xiao Longnu.

Xiao Longnu noticed them getting even closer and their weapons' movements still had no openings to exploit. Within a few moments, if she made an attack, their continued pressure forward would definitely crush her. So she attacked at once, her two swords in succession thrust out, with the sounds 'ding-ding' that were suddenly fast then suddenly slow. Every move met with the top of their weapons. She flashed out many sword thrusts persistently with every one of them blocked and returning back on her. The three of them moved up half a step once again. Xiao Longnu gradually felt alarmed and bewildered, as she backed away to the left side she tripped, and slightly staggered. Her sword techniques showed a great deal of weakness, if Xiaoxiang Zi and his crew had not been thinking of defending only, and had been confident enough to seize an opportunity, she would've been caught in an extremely deadly position.

The temple's floor was actually littered with many swords. The weapons belonged to the Quanzhen disciples and were abandoned on the floor after they were deprived from them earlier. A moment ago, Xiao Longnu's left foot trod on one of the sword handles that lay nearby, as a result her balance wasn't steady. Suddenly she recalled: "Others are competent enough to use two swords with two hands; since I've mastered the art of splitting the heart for two uses, then two

hands ought to wield four swords concurrently. I suppose it's improbable to attain a true degree of power using four swords, but perhaps it can be relied upon to confuse the enemy, and I can get a chance to escape." Almost immediately, her left hand that carried a single sword was swapped over to her right hand, she then stooped over and picked up two more swords. Both hands contained two swords now, and she began to wield her four swords at the same time.

Xiaoxiang Zi and others watched in disbelief and all thought: "This young girl's moves get stranger all the time. This truly is the first time I've ever seen someone use four swords together." But the three of them agreed on a plan to meet this contingency and settle with it. They weren't at all bothered about what sort of weird move or strange art she's going to use, they still thought only of defending and not attacking. They continued on pressing forward step by step.

Although Xiao Longnu's four swords used together was frightening when heard and observed, the power used with two swords is superior to using four swords. Normally she focused on a single sword during her training. The coordination of the Quanzhen Sword Technique and Jade Maiden Sword Technique in her right hand was flawless. Now the transition to using two swords with each hand was hardly effective, the movement's high level of proficiency was diminished. After several strokes, Xiaoxiang Zi and others realized her moves were somewhat slow. Each time she pushed out the swords, they had lost the immeasurable essence from before. Nimoxing's larynx created 'coo-coo' noises, and he waved his steel snake to signal his lunge forward. Yin Kexi urgently cried out: "What you're trying to do is useless, that's more like a plan for luring the foe." The warning jolted him and he thought "It's fortunate somebody else noticed really fast". Knowing how crafty the young girl was, once he attacked she would immediately respond with a

counterattack. Not only will their besieging formation break down instantly, his life is very likely to be taken away.

In reality Xiao Longnu was not luring her enemy on purpose, however Yin Kexi's information did make her think: "That dark short guy cannot keep himself calm, I must come up with a plan against him. He insists that I'm luring them into a trap; then I'll show him what luring is all about." Abruptly she raised her right hand and cast one sword vertically, she then followed up with a thrust using her right hand's sword, and her left hand cast a sword into the air. Xiaoxiang Zi and the rest were surprised, and unsure of what tricks she's playing, only seeing the two swords in midair had not yet descended. The other two swords that she carried were also tossed up into ceiling. This left her empty handed. Yin Kexi called out: "We must strictly defend with absolutely no intention to attack." He wasn't perceptive of Xiao Longnu's intentions, but he believed that providing they defend tightly and progressively press forward, then they'll surely have a chance of success. Their opponent may be barehanded, but they're not taking any chances to come out and attack.

Xiao Longnu bent over, without any hesitation both hands grabbed swords from the floor, and threw them one after another into midair. At the same time, they sunk down one by one. As she got a hold of them again, she threw them back up. Seeing those dozens of swords rise and fall, their cold lights glistening non-stop in the hall, it was very spectacular to watch. The Ancient Tomb Sect's martial arts foundation doesn't specialize in deep and profound inner energy, but rather relied on swift and rapid techniques to be victorious. That year when Xiao Longnu passed on martial arts to Yang Guo, he was required to block the escape of eighty sparrows with just his pair of hands. When this "Tight Encirclement Force" (Tian Luo Di Wang Shi) is used, then live sparrows could be impeded. Therefore the many swords flung and caught would be the same thing to her. Almost every

split second there was a weapon in her hands. Catching sight of Xiaoxiang Zi and his comrades stupefied looks, their minds were ruminating; is this young lady performing some sort of magic trick or circus juggling?

Without warning Xiao Longnu's left palm rose out and pushed up the handle of an idle sword. The sword traveled horizontally towards Yin Kexi at a fast pace. The tip of the sword ran into his golden dragon whip's glossy cover, and then it swiftly at unbelievable velocity deflected back but this time sprang towards Nimoxing. Nimoxing's metal snake was wielded with a sense of urgency, and repelled the sword back to hit Xiao Longnu. Right at this point, overhead there were two swords raining down, Xiao Longnu's two hands diverted the three swords and allocated them towards each of the three people.

In a flash, the clusters of swords weren't moving through the air, but rather hovering and fiercely swaying about amongst the three's weapons. The sword sent towards Nimoxing tilted and was vigorously shattered into two halves thanks to Nimoxing's metal snake. Xiao Longnu wore golden-threaded gloves and hit the tip of a sword, without a single wound being inflicted upon her. From her youth until now, she was very adept at the "Tight Encirclement Force" (Tian Luo Di Wang Shi); now, here in the hall, her advancing, retreating and avoiding skills were peerless under the heavens. Her eyes were sensitive and her moves fast, her spirit was crystal clear and the more she fought the faster she became. Her mind wasn't phased by any distractions, and didn't even think of whether she would win or lose in this fierce battle; or for that matter, who lives and who dies. At times smoothly seizing a sword and lunging out several moves, then quickly retreating back from the enemy. Previously with two swords, Xiaoxiang Zi and the others found it difficult to withstand her moves; now with so many swords arbitrarily tossed and thrust out they were more confused. With her as the nucleus,

the swords were flying out swiftly in all directions, how can it be possible for them to parry those attacks? Besides when the swords were knocked away by their weapons, they weren't in control as to where they headed or how powerful they were. Whether or not they would have to injure their companions, only heaven knew.

The act of Xiao Longnu throwing swords in the air was formerly used to confuse the enemy's eyes. But as the trend of events fluctuated, it exceeded her own expectations and conveniently became beneficial to her. In the midst of the weapons waving in the air, indistinctly could be heard of Yin Kexi's and Nimoxing's heavy breathing. Xiaoxiang Zi's cane, although wielded at a fast rate, seemed uneasy and weighed against his name "Xiao Xiang (Unrestrained)" and opposed its nature.

Suddenly Yin Kexi's right arm drooped downward and he cried out: "Crap!" As soon as three swords flew out, of all the places they could end up they eventually tangled up with his whip. His defense may have been tight but every one of these swords had been blocked by Xiaoxiang Zi's and Nimoxing's weapons. Three of them happened to arrive together and inexplicably ended up tangled in his whip. Yin Kexi used force and shook his whip to shed the three swords. But just as he was about to lift his whip, Xiao Longnu's sword flashed out and left Yin Kexi's wrist in severe pain, and he could not hold the whip any longer.

With the sound of 'chong-long', the golden dragon whip fell on the floor. Xiao Longnu's left palm struck out successively; seven or eight swords flew violently outwards and dispersed towards the three men. She moved both hands, catching a pair of swords; her body steadied and moved further out beyond Yin Kexi's reach. After Yin Kexi sustained the injury to his wrist, it left him deprived of a weapon. As a result his impregnable fortress like ring was eradicated in an instant.

Once his eyes caught a glimpse of her lightning quick twin swords, he hastily retreated out of the way. Xiao Longnu's lightness neigong was superior to any one of the three, raising her Qi, she directly surged to the back of the temple in pursuit of Zhao Zhijing.

Xiaoxiang Zi and the others weren't able to gather their weapons for a short while and had to wait until the many swords from above fell to the floor; until then they were unable to cease their defensive activity. Yin Kexi had a look of shame on his face and said: "Xiao Di's incompetence has lead to her escape!" They were supposed to work as business partners and without any sentiment but none there admired or respected the other. As they fought, each was thinking of ways to force the others to be convinced of their own qualities. But after experiencing such a soul-stirring ferocious battle, all three felt more like running away for their lives. In turn their hostility towards each other had been reduced substantially. Xiaoxiang Zi and Nimoxing both said: "We haven't blamed you Brother Yin..." Before they even finished their sentence, they suddenly heard the 'ding-dong' sounds of weapons clashing, faintly transmitted from the rear of the mountain.

Hearing the battle from the temple, Xiaoxiang Zi and others were terrified, but amongst the weapons crashing against each other outside was mixed the sound of Fawang's five wheels 'moaning'/whistling noise. Evidently Xiao Longnu and Fawang have started the action. All three of them thought: "With such a tough fighter available to act as the commanding general; if we fight by his side, we'll surely win." Yin Kexi retrieved his golden dragon whip, and bellowed: "After her comrades!" So they raced ahead to locate the racket. Xiaoxiang Zi raised his staff, and led a bunch of Mongolian soldiers to follow through. At this point everyone's archenemy was Xiao Longnu. They've never had any Quanzhen Taoists thoughts in their minds.

Yin Zhiping, Li Zhichang and others used this chance to untie each other's ropes right after the Mongolian soldiers left. One after another they collected their swords and followed outside.

Xiaoxiang Zi and others arrived near the rear of Chongyang Palace where Cave of the Jade Void was situated. They could only see the wheels whirling in action and the sword qi in horizontal and vertical motion. Jinlun Fawang's roar rumbled like the thunder. Xiao Longnu's clothes were white as snow. The two were separated at around 10 feet, enabling them to engage in a long distance battle. All five elements of metal: gold, silver, copper, iron and lead were melded into large wheels, were twirling in flight. The vibration created a humming disturbance in everyone's ears. Fawang's previous wheels were lost in a number of fierce battles and not recovered. After losing them he tried to supplement with replacements. The size and weight were more or less equivalents of his earlier ones, but unfortunately the melded decorative patterns were missing. All there was were his mantra. In the process of utilizing them, his proficiency was very high.

Yin Zhiping and Li Zhichang both saw the Cave of the Jade Void entrance blocked by a large rock. They weren't sure of their teacher's life and death situation. With deep anxiety, they hastened towards the cave entrance. With Da'erba's metal pestle and Huo Du's wielding of his steel fan, the groups of Taoists were repulsed in only several moves.

Wang Zhitan cried out: "Master...master, are you safe and sound in there?" Because of his apprehensive state, his voice carried a whimpering tone. Li Zhichang carefully thought: "On the basis of the five teachers' profound cultivation, how could they let people fight like this outside the cave without doing anything? Their practice must have reached a critical stage and cannot afford to divert their attention and come

out to deal with the foreign enemy. But with that call from Junior Wang, if they did happen to hear it, it will have thrown their minds into disorder." He hurriedly spoke out: "Junior Wang, do not call out anymore. The five teachers cannot be subjected to any form of disturbance." Wang Zhitan immediately realized his error, and helped a fallen Song Defang. He noticed his injuries weren't light and tried to think of a way to help him out.

Xiaoxiang Zi and others were onlookers to the battle between Fawang and Xiao Longnu. They understood that although he was defending more than he was attacking, he still managed to return one move. The five wheels powers were strangely fierce and did not allow Xiao Longnu to get an inch closer to him. This defensive style was way more efficient than that of the other three fighters. The three showed admiration topped with envy, all thought: "That monk being conferred as the Mongolian's No. 1 Guoshi (Protector) was no slander at all." The three fighters had thought of helping out Fawang as a team, but in this sort of situation, their selfishness got the better of them. They did not wish to aid him to a victory.

But little did they realize that although Jinlun Fawang's moves were fierce, in his heart he was actually complaining about his hardship repeatedly. Each of Xiao Longnu's sword thrusts were differentiated from each other but still coordinated into an ingenious and unsurpassed way of fighting. Her left sword aimed at his front while her right sword was selecting a surprise attack from the back at the same time. It was a message to him that he had neither a way to retreat nor a way for him to advance. Every path that she chose struck at several places with both her swords, warning him to pay attention to mistakes, as her moves are difficult to defend against. Had he not reached the stage in his life where his internal force and external force were at their peaks, his eyes sensitive and his moves fast, and with his many variations of hard and soft, his body would've been

hit by seventeen or eighteen sword strokes by now. All that was needed was a minor dip in his martial arts for that to happen. Actually, Xiao Longnu as one person delivering two types of sword techniques pales in comparison to her alliance with Yang Guo in terms of power, even though her moves were rapid. Not to mention that her real martial arts were a long way behind Fawang's. Even Xiaoxiang Zi and others were stronger than her. But then again, once she stepped forward, her moves were as fast as a bolt of lightning. No one had ever seen anything like it. This allowed her fears to escape from inside of her. Fawang suffered from the "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Swordplay" the moment it appeared again in front of his eyes; all he thought about was how to protect himself and how to slip away free from injury. Xiao Longnu gained the upper hand because of the way she beat him to the punch.

By the time they reached fifty or sixty moves, Fawang looked to be at risk, he withdrew his golden wheel to shield himself and wasn't confident enough to launch it again. After several more moves, this time the silver wheel was withdrawn to tighten his defense further. By the time, all five wheels were back with him, his fighting style was all-defensive just like Xiaoxiang Zi and others fought her before. The five wheels weight, size, colour and shape were all different from each other. Either it was sharp or more curved; they organized into five rings of light, which rolled all over the place around him.

Then suddenly one heard Xiao Longnu's delicate shout: "Let's do it!" This was followed by Fawang's low voiced roar, echoing repeatedly. They both leaped vertically, and their moves were picking up pace. Xiaoxiang Zi and others did not hear their shouts clearly, not knowing an adjustment had already taken place. If Jinlun Fawang used his wheel's fierce power to attack her head on, Xiao Longnu would struggle to withstand them. However since he was timid, he didn't show

the best of his qualities. Comparing his speed to Xiao Longnu, he's bound to be in a disadvantageous position.

Then suddenly, Nimoxing felt something on his face, as if a miniature hidden weapon had struck him. In a moment of shock he stroked the area of contact, but found no wound on his face; instead there was blood on his palm. His mind was dumbfounded for a while, but then he spotted a drop of blood flying towards Yin Kexi. Now he was well aware that one person was injured in the fierce battle. In a short while, Xiao Longnu's white garment was stained with over ten scattered splashes of blood. It was as if there were a few peach blossoms on a white silk fabric, which dazzled the eyes through its gay coloring. Nimoxing cheerfully spoke: "The demon girl has been injured!" Immediately after two flashes of the sword's reflection, Fawang quietly moaned. Xiaoxiang Zi coldly butted in: "No, it's the monk who got hurt!"

Xiaoxiang Zi's initial judgment was right, the blood from Fawang's injury sprayed over Xiao Longnu. He believed if Fawang was killed by her hands, then there's no way they can stop her. For that reason he called out: "Brother Yin, Brother Xiao, let's attack her together!" He wielded his metal snake and slowly pressed in behind Xiao Longnu. Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi also felt that they could not look on unconcerned, so they immediately split themselves left and right and approached them.

Fawang has been hit three times by her sword, but all were light injuries. But just when he's in grave danger, backup arrived. He felt a sense of relief, and saw Xiaoxiang Zi and the other two weren't at all opening up any sort of attack. They were rather using their weapons to protect themselves as they moved their positions to three sides steadily closing in on her. They knew that if the conflict is slightly prolonged, Xiao Longnu's hourglass will run out.

In front of the Cave of the Jade Void, the pine lined paths showcased a fierce battle between four Wulin stranger guests gathering round a silk clothed young girl. The group of Mongolian soldiers and Quanzhen Taoists were motionless with fear, their faces resembled dying embers. They've never encountered such a violent struggle before in their lives!

The ear-deafening bumping sound of 'peng' shook the earth. Gravel was tossed out and the air was full of mist and dust. The dozen big stone blocks collapsed to one side in front of Cave of the Jade Void. Five Taoists that were inside slowly stepped out, they were the five Quanzhen Masters Qiu Chuji, Liu Chuxuan and the rest.

Yin Zhiping, Li Zhichang and others were very happy and called out: "Master!" and rushed forward. Da'erba and Huo Du were shocked when they saw the explosive power that blew the entrance of the cave open; like it was blasted open with gunpowder. The two grabbed their weapons and rushed forward. Qiu Chuji and the other five masters moved aside a bit and then all of them raised their ten palms and pressed at the backs of those two. A firm press was delivered and the two were thrown four meters away.

Da'erba and Huo Du's martial arts were of the same level as Hao Datong, though they were not as powerful as Qiu Chuji or Wang Chuyi. But they could not be defeated within one stance by them either.

The Five Masters were in retreat contemplating in the YuXu Cave [Cave of the Jade Void] to create a way to counter the "Jade Maiden Sword" technique; they were pondering intensively day and night. They felt that the martial arts displayed by Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were the bane of the Quanzhen martial arts. It is impossible to surpass them with known stances; it was Qiu Chuji, who came up with an idea when he thought of the "Big Dipper Formation". He said, "We

cannot overcome them with stances and varieties, but if we combine our internal strength we can use power to make for variety."

Hence, the five intensively thought of a way to merge their internal energies to overcome an enemy; every stance would be generated by the merged power of the five of them. They know that there are no exceptional talents within the third and fourth generation; the only way to survive is to unite the large number of disciples. Within two months time, they finally created "The Seven Star Assembly". This technique was derived from the "Big Dipper Formation", although it is called "The Seven Star Assembly", it does not necessarily need seven persons to unite their internal strengths. Six, five, four or even three can perform this technique. When the Imperial Priest led the other warriors to seal the cave, the five masters were reaching the critical point of "The Seven Star Assembly" and could not be distracted. Even though they knew large numbers of foes have attacked, they had to ignore this for the time being. When they finally managed to merge their five internal energies perfectly, they blasted open the sealed cave. However, because of the urgent situation, this technique had only reached thirty or forty percent of its' level of attainment. Even so, Da'erba and Huo Du were unable to cope with it and the Five Masters were triumphant with one strike.

Qiu Chuji and others now turned around and were observing the battle between Xiao Longnu, the Imperial Priest and others. After observing for a few moments, they looked at each other and looked very sad and depressed. They thought: "In vain.....everything was in vain. We never thought that the martial arts of the Ancient Tomb School would be this magnificent. We can never defeat her in this lifetime."

The martial arts previously displayed by Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were the blueprints for their ponderings and contemplation. But the incredible, fantastic swordplay of Xiao Longnu was too awesome. They could not even see what those stances were, so how could they think of a way to counter it?

The Imperial Priest and the other Mongolian warriors had higher martial arts than the Five Masters of Quanzhen. It was practically impossible for the Quanzhen School to even produce someone like them now.

Qiu Chuji and others thought: "If our late Master were still alive he would surely be superior to them; our Martial Uncle Zhou is probably also one level higher than these four men in the field of martial arts. Yet, when facing the combined forces of these four fighters, chances are high that even he will suffer defeat."

The Five Masters were ashamed and depressed; they felt that Quanzhen was degrading with each generation. They could not carry on the legacy of their patriarch anymore. When faced with a great enemy it seems that the Quanzhen School has no leg to stand on anymore.

What they saw was that every move was brutal, every step made was critical. The more they watched the more worried they became and they weren't eager to inquire of their disciples the reasons for this unforeseen event taking place in front of them.

As the five people, Xiao Longnu and others, battled on, the circumstances were contrasting again. Every move Xiao Longnu made was an attack, whereas Fawang and others were still engaging in obstructing her every move. Counterattacks were few, but they were gradually closing in on her. Xiao Longnu's situation became even more disadvantageous. Several times when she tried to evacuate

the circle in order to slip away temporarily, her opponents' strict and concentrated defense was preventing it. Every move made brought her back well within the circle. She knew that with Jinlun Fawang as the driving force, it was useless to even try throwing her swords up in the air like before. Besides the two swords that she held, there weren't any other weapons available to her.

By herself in the main hall she injured Lu Qingdu, but by this point she had fought for close to two hours. Her physical strength was hanging on a thread, and the powerful enemies getting closer to her. Qiu Chuji and the others were lying in wait for her to one side. These five old Taoists were still very rare gems to find in the martial art world. Every corner was populated with enemies galore and she was only one person; she will definitely lose her life here at Chongyang Palace. Suddenly she remembered: "With me being brought to this predicament, what's the pity if I simply die here? But...but... at the brink of death, I dearly hope I can meet Guo'er at the same time. Where is he at this moment? He's bound to be getting intimate with Miss Guo, perhaps even already married to her. As a newly wed, why would he even think of a hopeless girl like me besieged from all sides? No it can't be, it can't be! Guo'er wouldn't be like that, even if he married Miss Guo, in no way would he forget about me. All I yearn for is to see him once again ..."

When she left Xiangyang and headed for the north, she'd made up her mind that she'll never meet Yang Guo ever again. But at this stage where she faced the final moments of life and death, she found it more and more difficult to stick to her vow. What was previously "Dividing Heart with Two Uses" is suddenly now "Heart Embraces Her Special One". Even though both her sword strike's activity was the same as before, her "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Manual" strength wasn't there. Fawang noticed a change in her sword style; he initially believed she intentionally showed weakness to

tempt them. But after several moves passed, it didn't seem so. So he immediately stepped further forward, his left hand's silver wheel guarded himself, whereas his right hand's golden wheel aimed for one of her swords to smash into.

Only hearing the sound of 'dong', Xiao Longnu's left hand's sword flew out of her hand and landed with a 'pak', it broke into two pieces. Fawang was just probing and it actually worked. This was far better than what he expected so without wasting any chances his right hand's golden wheel rammed out. This stunned Xiao Longnu and she quickly made an effort to suppress her perturbed mind. She brushed out three slashes. But since she was forced into using just a single sword, the martial arts difference between her and Fawang stretched further. Xiaoxiang Zi and his partners seeing the small advantages arising progressed forward with their own weapons.

Xiao Longnu revealing a grimacing smile and did not wish to continue the contest any longer. She caught a glimpse in the pine lined path a blooming rosebush nearby within thirty feet of her. The flowers were delicate and fragrant and seemed like they were about to fall. Suddenly she was reminded of the place where she was cut off by the rosebushes with Yang Guo while learning "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Manual". She thought: "Since I'll never see Guo'er again, then I'll think of him before I die." Her facial expression was gentle and soft as it is was absorbed into a moment of contentment.

Fawang and his teammates had surrounded her in all four directions; if they wanted to they could've finished her in one stroke. But suddenly they noticed a wave of abnormality highlighted on her face, appearing as though she had forgotten about defending herself from the enemy. All were astonished, and wondered whether she was up to those dirty old sorcery tricks again. Four different weapons wavered in

mid-air but didn't come down. But within that pause, Nimoxing's steel snake was the first to move forward.

Then all of a sudden beside him was the sound of wind souging; it appeared that someone had stretched out a sword to strike him. Nimoxing frantically got back his steel snake to obstruct the sword but hit nothing but empty air. Then he saw a person in motion, it was none other than Yin Zhiping who scrambled in front of Xiao Longnu. He was delivering his own sword to her. Xiao Longnu at this point seemed possessed as though nothing is within her sight, nor can she hear with her ear, and had already abandoned the matter of engaging in a hand-to-hand combat. Then she felt her left hand had been given a sword, and smoothly clung onto it.

The onlookers couldn't help but cry out in alarm after suddenly catching sight of Yin Zhiping entering the danger zone of the five top-notch fighters. For him, it was no different than if he were digging his own grave.

Fawang was acquainted with him, and did not wish to harm his life. So thereupon his left arm met his shoulder by force and pushed him away. His right hand's wheel swayed towards Xiao Longnu. Yin Zhiping was curious as to why she had no intentions to fight anymore. Desperately trying to think, his eyes understood that she'd be dead if this wheel grazed her. Without caring for his own safety he flung himself forward, and screamed: "Xiao Longnu, watch out!" Then used the back of his own body and obstinately blocked against Fawang's golden wheel.

Whenever Fawang's golden wheel swings out, its remarkable power alone could split rocks and slice mountains, what chance does Yin Zhiping have of withstanding that? So he immediately dove out of the way. After Xiao Longnu caught the sword given her by Yin Zhiping, she was as immovable as

before and she continued to firmly hold the sword erect whilst in a trance. Yin Zhiping flew out, and arrived on the sword's end, spearing through his chest. When Xiao Longnu came to her senses, a dawning realization swept across her mind and she was certain that he saved her life. Staring down at his back wounded by the wheel and his chest pierced by his own sword, and she knew both were mortal wounds. In a split second her all consuming hatred converted to compassion, and softly spoke: "Why did you do this?"

Yin Zhiping's life was near its last gasp; as soon as he heard the four words of 'Why did you do this?' couldn't hold back his wild joy. And said: "Long Guniang, I'm deeply...deeply sorry for what I've done to you; I could never amend with my selfless actions. Will...will you forgive me?"

Xiao Longnu stared blankly again, and recollected the time when she heard his conversation with Zhao Zhijing at the Guo's residence in Xiangyang. A thought just skimmed across her mind: "Guo'er had always been deeply affectionate with me, and even once swore that he would never be unfaithful to me. Then without notice he's made up his mind to marry Guo Guniang and abandoned me like nothing happened, and didn't give a second's care about the after-effects. He must've learned that I was once raped by this filthy scoundrel." Her heart was innocent, even when she followed the tracks of the two Taoists Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing; this notion never came up in her mind. Once she was abruptly reminded by Yin Zhiping, her mind's compassion immediately spiraled back into hatred. Her fury has in fact tenfold, clenching her teeth; her right hand's sword immediately drew on his chest and pushed forward. However in all her life she had never taken somebody's life. Although her bosom was filled with grief and indignation, the sword that was to be thrust through his chest never happened to everyone's surprise.

Qiu Chuji observing to one side saw his beloved pupil die a violent death. He was distressed as though a dagger struck through his heart; the incident happened faster than anyone could imagine, and he failed to reach him in time to rescue him. Xiao Longnu's first sword strike can be said to have been caused by Fawang. But the second sword strike was intentional. He didn't have the slightest knowledge of the tortuous details. During these six months he's been without rest, for the most part thinking of how to negate Xiao Longnu's maneuvers. In the recent month apart from this he had nothing else to think about. Xiao Longnu had been established as his own Quanzhen sect's archenemy, but he definitely could not believe Yin Zhiping was willing to sacrifice his life to save her. His eyes seeing her sword strike out again he immediately leapt in front. With his left hand's five fingers whisking her wrist and his right palm aimed squarely for her face. Qiu Chuji's martial arts occupied first place amongst the Quanzhen Seven Masters. The circumstances forced him to make that move, and his palm's might was very forceful.

That jerk did manage to pull Xiao Longnu's wrist, and the sword was instantly out of her grasp. Without waiting for the sword to drop on the ground, she reached out her hand and regained possession of it. Then she followed up with a lunge forward across to Qiu Chuji's chest. During this moment, Yin Zhiping shrieked in pain as he sank down on the ground with blood gushing out of his wounds. Xiao Longnu's left sword pointed towards Qiu Chuji's lower abdomen. Now that both her swords have combined harmoniously, its power has rapidly amplified. Qiu Chuji's martial arts maybe profound, but within three strokes, he was in a helter-skelter state. Wang Chuyi noticing the situation wasn't right, dashed forward to lend a hand, pushing Fawang and others to one side.

Jinlun Fawang and his motley crew felt surprised when they saw Xiao Longnu fight against the Quanzhen Five Masters, but knew that this change of events was beneficial for them. He thought it would be a good idea to watch them commit fratricide. All of them gave each other a wink, and backed off several paces. They were waiting for a real victor to emerge between Xiao Longnu and the Quanzhen Five masters, and then they'd step in to tidy up the final phase of the chess game.

As the top fighters come to blows, every move was mortal; nobody dared to risk any room for error. That's why even when Qiu Chuji and his peers were aware that the situation was odd they knew it would be hard to solve easily. But since the battle had commenced, where could they find the spare time to consider all of this? The Quanzhen Five masters were unarmed, when confronting Xiao Longnu's marvelous and improper methods of swordplay, the single month spent on initiating a skill called "Seven Star Rally" did not even have any chance of being put to good use. In a moment, Hao Datong and Liu Chuxuan both were harmed by her swords, but both persisted and guarded every martial brother's safety. Then 'zung' sound, Sun Bu'Er was struck by a sword.

Other Quanzhen disciples seeing how the masters were failing in a dangerous situation couldn't help but cry out in fear. Li Zhichang called out: "Quickly deliver them a weapon!" At this point, the "Five Master's Palm" wind whizzed through the air, leaving the disciples unable to get near them. They could only throw the swords one by one over to them. Xiao Longnu raced ahead and brandished her sword to push away the incoming weapons. Every sword arriving near them was knocked away. The advantage Xiao Longnu had of having a sword longer than their human arms meant the Five Masters were given no chance to grab a weapon. Suddenly the noise of 'ding-dang' was heard, Xiao Longnu's left hand collected another sword thrown in the battle, and

abruptly lobbed it backwards. Wang Chuyi couldn't prepare himself in time; the corner of his left eye was slashed by an outsider's sword. Out of the Five Quanzhen Descendants, four were injured; a conclusion as to who triumphed could be reached.

Jinlun Fawang laughed ecstatically, and called out: "My Taoist friends please step aside, let me take care of this Demon Girl!" Finishing those words he intervened. Xiaoxiang Zi, Nimoxing and Yin Kexi jointly attacked her as they wielded their weapons. It had escalated into a phase where nine experts are besieging a single Xiao Longnu.

As soon as Fawang got involved, Quanzhen Five Masters were instantly released from Xiao Longnu's twin swords coercion. Five of them called out loudly, and stood shoulder to shoulder. Either it's the right palm or the left palm, five streams of huge energies amalgamated into one that generated the "Seven Star Rally" attack. It maybe only "Five Star Rally" right now, but its' power is out of the ordinary. She tilted her body to evade the attack; the noise of 'peng' was heard. The dust on the ground flew upwards, the attack left Nimoxing somersaulting in the air as he fell.

After both his legs were cut off, he had to rely on his crutches for support; his lower-body wasn't stable enough to sustain the blow. At least when he was in imminent danger he managed to slip away from the direct force of the blow. He may have toppled over, but instantly got back up unscathed. With a few bawls of 'wa-wa', he raised his steel snake aimed down at Liu Chuxuan's head. In front of the Cave of the Jade Void the sounds of calls reverberated in all directions adding to the confusion.

Xiao Longnu seeing Nimoxing turn on the Quanzhen Five Masters stroked her white sleeves, and wanted to pull out of the circle. Jinlun Fawang hurried over to hinder the attacks,

and said: "Brother Nimo, it's more important to deal with the Demon Girl." Nimoxing who's preoccupied with the fight did not pay attention to the calls of Fawang. Prodding outward with his steel snake, the assaults were laid upon the various Quanzhen Taoists. Xiao Longnu's swords quickly thrust out at Fawang several times. Fawang felt the unbelievable speed from the oncoming force; giving him a hard time just to parry them, and had to withdraw a few steps.

Suddenly, Xiao Longnu gasped loudly, both cheeks lost color. With two sounds of 'qiang-long', both swords from her hands fell on the ground. Staring in blank amazement at the pine lined path's rosebush, she called: "Guo'er is that really you?"

At this juncture, Fawang's golden wheel had sliced her head-on; Quanzhen Five Master's "Seven Star Rally" pummeled her in the back. The attack was supposed to keep Nimoxing at bay, but the Indian short man had already suffered the bitter taste of the pile driver. So he had no second thoughts of matching it and evaded to the left. The attack was alternatively expended upon Xiao Longnu's garment.

She looked bewitched, and the reaction to evade wasn't there. Her vest had endured a palm, her chest struck by the wheel. Even with such a fragile body weathering these two tremendous converging forces, her eyes were nevertheless still fixed upon the external influence of the rosebush. At that moment, her heart was agitated and she turned her thoughts to her beloved, it seemed as though those two forces had not harmed her a bit.

The spectators felt in awe of her gaze, and all involuntarily turned their heads to see what was so strange about that rosebush. They noticed a human shadow fly out round the side of the pine lined field and sneak into the no-man's land between Fawang and the Quanzhen Five Masters. That person, darting past everyone, grabbed hold of Xiao Longnu

with his left arm and had already leaped out of the ring. Without wasting a moment, sat beside the rosebush, and rested her against his chest. This person was of course Yang Guo!

Xiao Longnu's face lighted up, tears flowing from her eyes: "Guo'er, it's you. This isn't a dream?"

Yang Guo nodded, kissing her cheek, his voice soft: "Not a dream. Am I not holding you right now?"

But then he saw her clothes stained with blood spots, alarmed. He worriedly asked: "Are you seriously injured?"

Xiao Longnu earlier received two vicious attacks. Upon seeing Yang Guo, she didn't feel her injury. Only now she felt the searing pain. She placed her arm around Yang Guo's neck, saying: "I... I..." Her body hurt so much she couldn't get the words out.

Yang Guo couldn't bear to see her in pain, his voice broke: "Gu Gu I've come too late!"

Xiao Longnu said: "No, it's good that you've come. In this life, I thought I wouldn't be able to see you again."

Suddenly she felt cold as if her soul was leaving the body. She hung on to Yang Guo's arms yet her hold was slowly dropping. She said: "Guo'er, hold me."

Yang Guo's left arm slightly tightened, pulling her to his chest. He was overwhelmed by hundreds of feelings, his tears slowly falling down to Xiao Longnu's face.

Xiao Longnu said: "Hold me, use both...both hands!" Suddenly she saw his right sleeve empty. Strange, she cried out: "Your right arm?"

Yang Guo forced a smile, his voice cracked: "I've worried you. Don't worry about me right now, close your eyes quickly, don't use up your energy."

Xiao Longnu said: "No! Your right arm? How come it's gone... how come?" Even though her own life was hanging by thread, she didn't care the slightest about herself; she was determined to find out why Yang Guo was missing an arm. This was because in her heart, Yang Guo's well-being was 100 times, 1000 times more important than hers.

It had been like this since the time they were together at Gu Mu [the Ancient Tomb]. Only then she didn't know it was love, nor did Yang Guo. They only thought that their mutual concern for each other's well-being was right between the master and the disciple. Since there were only two of them living at Gu Mu, if one didn't care for the other, who else would they care for? Actually this was a feeling between a young man and woman; before they even knew it, they were in love with each other. One day they learned that one could not regard the other's life as important as one's own, let alone 100 times, 1000 times more important without being in love. Every couple who was in love could think like this. However, only these two people with truly deep feelings and innate passions who found each other and fell in love could treasure the other party more than they did themselves.

As far as Xiao Longnu was concerned, Yang Guo's one arm was much more important than her own life or death and thus she persisted on asking. She stretched her hand and gently stroked his sleeve, not daring to touch it too hard. But really, there was no arm under the sleeve.

Suddenly, she no longer felt the severe pain in her body. This was because her mind was occupied by Yang Guo's pain, making her forget her own suffering. She softly said: "Poor Guo'er. Has it been very long? You aren't in pain now?"

Yang Guo shook his head, replying: "It doesn't hurt anymore. As long as I get to see your face and never part with you again, what's so important about missing an arm? My left arm can still hold you, can't it?"

Xiao Longnu let out a soft smile, deciding that Yang Guo was right. She lay down in his embrace. Even though he had only his left arm, she was content. She was facing death just before seeing him again. Right now it was very good, really very good.

Jinlun Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi, Quanzhen Five Masters, their numerous disciples, the numerous Mongolian soldiers ... nobody made a sound but looked dumbfounded at the young lovers. At a time like this, they all were thinking about fighting with them, yet nobody dared to start it. The world waited. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu no longer cared whether they lived or died. Having their love, what was so important about death?

Jinlun Fawang certainly was not afraid of the couple only astonished. He saw Xiao Longnu badly injured and Yang Guo having only one arm, and neither being able to withstand a fight again. However, the two people's affection for each other had an awe-inspiring and fearless effect, and was not something to be taken lightly.

Eventually, Xiao Longnu couldn't stay quiet, asking: "Your arm ... How did you lose your arm? Tell me quickly."

Yang Guo forced a bitter smile and said: "The arm was lost; naturally it got cut off by other people."

Xiao Longnu sadly looked at him. She hadn't thought that he wouldn't tell her who did it. That meant it didn't matter who. She again felt the rising pain in her chest. She knew her life wouldn't last much longer, lowering her voice: "Guo'er, I beg you one thing."

Yang Guo said: "Gu Gu, you've forgotten. At Gu Mu, I promised you, whatever you want me to do, I'll do it."

Xiao Longnu sighed quietly, saying: "That was a long, long time ago!"

"To me, forever is the same," replied Yang Guo.

Xiao Longnu smiled sadly and said: "I don't have long to live. You stay with me, until I die. Don't go accompany Guo.. Guo Fu Guniang [Miss Guo Fu]."

Yang Guo was sad yet angry, saying: "Gu Gu, of course I'll be with you. What does Guo Fu Guniang have to do with me? It was she who chopped off this arm of mine."

Xiao Longnu was alarmed, crying out: "What? It was her? Why was she so heartless?"

Is that... Is that why you don't like her?" Yang Guo said resentfully: "The two of us are very good together, why are you being suspicious? Except for one person, in my life I've never loved any girls. This Guo Fu Guniang, Hngg [expression of contempt]"

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That day Yang Guo and Guo Fu's quarrel escalated into a fight, Guo Fu's burning anger was hard to restrain. She grabbed hold of the 'Lady' sword and struck down at the top of his head. Yang Guo was poisoned and he hadn't fully recuperated yet, his four limbs had no energy to spare. Seeing the sword arrive, he was out of options and had to raise his right arm in front of his face. Guo Fu in furious vexation gave her all. The 'Lady' sword was as sharp as it gets and Yang Guo's right arm was silently cut off in a flash.

With that sword chopping down, Yang Guo's life changed. Yang Guo no doubt let out a fierce burst of anger; Guo Fu was

quivering with fear and knew she'd made a huge mistake that could never be made up. But after witnessing the blood well up like a fountain, she hadn't a clue as to what to do. A moment passed, suddenly the sound of 'wa' was released, she covered her face and wept whilst pushing open the door and rushing out. After a short period of nervous discomfort, Yang Guo promptly relaxed himself. And extended his left hand to seal his right shoulder's "Loyal Shoulder Point", he tore up a bed sheet and firmly tied up his shoulder to prevent the continuous flow of blood. Then he applied the Golden Wound Medicine to his wound, and thought: "I cannot stay here any longer, I must hurry and get out of the city." Slowly holding the wall he walked a few steps. Because he'd bled excessively, he almost fainted several times as his vision became more and more blurred.

At this moment, he heard the loud calls of Guo Jing: "Come on, come on, how is he? Has he stopped bleeding yet?" The sound of his speech was filled with anxiety. Yang Guo's mind at that time only encompassed these thoughts: "No way am I going to see Uncle Guo. I don't want to see him." So he took a deep breath, and sprinted out of the room.

He rushed outside the mansion's gates, pulled in a horse, mounted it and galloped to the city gate. The officers and men that supervised the city had seen him rescue Guo Jing at the top of the city wall once before, they had a great deal of respect for him. So they immediately opened the city gate for him and he dashed past on the horse.

During this period the Mongolian armed forces had decamped a hundred-odd Chinese miles (li) away. Yang Guo did not take the route of the main road. The horse was ridden through the desolated areas. He thought: "The time is up for the Passion Flower that's infected my body, but I'm still very much alive. Perhaps it's just like what the Indian Divine Monk said; after I sucked the poison of the "Soul Freezing Silver

Needles", the poison managed to counteract the other poison, which prolonged my life. But the poison has only subsided; sooner or later it's inevitable for it to break out again. With severe wounds, if I were to head off to Mount Zhongnan to look for GuGu, I definitely won't last very long. Could this be what fate has destined for me, and condemned me to die in such a strange place? He began to reminisce about his wretched orphaned life, other than those fond memories he had of being together with Xiao Longnu in Ancient Tomb; he rarely found any other specific moments of bliss. At this moment, the only close person he had has abandoned him and gone. Just when he's recovered – part of his body is disabled. Already half-dead, when his thoughts reached this point, he was hardly able to restrain his tears.

Yang Guo laid flat on the horse's back. In his wooziness, he didn't care where the horse would take him, as long as Guo Jing wouldn't be able to find him and he didn't bump into any of the Mongolian army. Soon, the horse came near the desolate valley where the Wu brothers had fought each other the night before.

It was dusk already. The long grasses in the valley were even taller than knee-highs. Silence swept the night. Yang Guo was quite sure that he was all alone now, so he lay down in the bushes and tried to get some sleep. By then he couldn't care less about his own safety, and didn't even bother to guard against poisonous snakes or wild animals. But the excruciating pain from his wound never stopped throughout the night. He could barely fall asleep.

The next morning when he opened his eyes and sat up, something suddenly caught his attention. Only inches from him lay two dead centipedes, bloodstains in their mouths, stiff as sticks, with red and black stripes all over their bodies, looking frightful even after they were dead. In shock, Yang Guo examined them more closely and found a big pool of

blood next to the centipedes. After a short ponder, he had it figured out. It turned out that the bleeding from his wound had created the pool of blood, and because of the strong toxin contained in his blood, the two poisonous centipedes had died.

A wry smile flashed across Yang Guo's lips as he murmured, "Who would have imagined that even poisonous centipedes couldn't stand my toxic blood." Anger, indignation, sorrow and bitterness swelled in his heart. He could no longer control his surging emotions. Raising his head high, he burst into mad laughter.

Three chirps came from the top of a peak and caught Yang Guo's attention. He looked up. It was the Divine Eagle, its head held high, standing on the very top of the peak. Even though it looked ferocious and hideous, there was something about it that made it look majestic and awe-inspiring.

Yang Guo was overjoyed as if he had just seen an old friend. "Brother Eagle, we have met again!" he shouted.

A long chirp echoed as the Divine Eagle darted down from the peak. It couldn't fly because of the heavy body and the two short wings, but it could run like a stallion. Within moments, it had arrived by Yang Guo. Having noticed that one of Yang Guo's arms was missing the eagle fixed its stare at Yang Guo.

"Brother Eagle, great misfortune has fallen upon me. That's why I've come to you for shelter," Yang Guo explained with a wry smile.

He couldn't tell whether the eagle understood him. It simply turned around and started walking. So he grabbed the reins of the horse and followed.

Only after several steps, the Divine Eagle suddenly turned its head back and smacked the belly of the horse with its left wing. Taking a couple of steps back, the horse neighed in pain and bucked up and down.

"I see," Yang Guo nodded. "Once I enter Brother Eagle's valley, there will be no need to leave again. Why bother keeping the horse?" Deep in his heart, he was already convinced that the eagle was really no less intelligent than a human being, so he let go of the reins and followed the Divine Eagle in big strides. Because of his severe wounds, he had to sit down to rest every little while, and the Divine Eagle would then hold its steps and wait for him.

After close to two hours of walking and with many rest stops along the way, the two of them arrived at the cave where the Demonic Swordsman, Dugu Seeking-A-Loss, had been buried.

Seeing the grave made out of rocks and stones, Yang Guo heaved a long sigh. All sorts of feelings welled up in his mind. "If this legendary master was able to roam the Martial World with no equal, his Kung Fu skills must have been extraordinary," Yang Guo thought to himself. "But he must have also been very eccentric and arrogant because of his unmatched talents and didn't get along with ordinary people. That was probably why he just passed away so quietly in such a desolate valley while no great stories or legends of him were told in the Martial World. And no sword art manuals or apprentices of his were left behind to pass down his invincible martial arts techniques. His life must have been very exciting and admirable, yet at the same time sad and gloomy. Even though the Divine Eagle is very intelligent, it is so unfortunate that it doesn't speak, otherwise it could have told a little about the Senior Master's life story."

He stared at the grave blankly, lost in thought. When he finally got hold of himself, the Divine Eagle had brought back

two wild rabbits from outside the cave. Yang Guo barbecued the rabbits and made a good meal out of them.

Days went by and the wounds started to heal gradually, and Yang Guo found himself on the path to recovery. Every time he thought of the Xiao Longnu, he would still feel pain from his chest, but it was far from the kind of unbearable pain he used to have. Yang Guo was the restless type. Having spent so many days in the desolate valley accompanied only by the Divine Eagle, he soon became very bored.

On this no particular day, the verdant hill at the back of the cave caught his attention. It was a beautiful day, so he decided to take on a random scenic walk. About half a mile into the walk, he found himself in front of a big cliff. The cliff towered straight into the sky almost like a huge screen. In the middle of the cliff, probably two hundred feet above the ground, a huge rock, about thirty or forty feet wide, stuck out from the cliff like a platform, and vaguely, he thought he could see words carved on the rock. Raising his head high, he stared up. Only after a long while was he able to tell what they were. Carved on the rock were two large characters: 'Sword Tomb'.

"Why would a sword have a tomb? Could Senior Master Dugu have somehow broken his favorite sword and decided to bury it here?" Yang Guo's curiosity started growing.

He walked next to the bottom of the cliff and looked around. The cliff wall was made out of bald rock. There wasn't even any grass or bush on the rock wall. There were no rock edges for grabbing or stepping on, which made him wonder how the Senior Master had been able to climb up the cliff.

He stared at the rock wall for a good while, and the more he stared at it, the bigger the urge to climb up he felt.

"He was also just a human being," he thought aloud. "How did he climb up so high? He's got to have some kind of tricks. If he had been able to climb up there using pure martial arts skills, then his skills had to be god like."

He stared at the rock wall again even more carefully. After a while he noticed something. On the rock wall, there were dozens of patches of moss, each patch several feet away from the other, going upwards in a straight line. An idea popped out. He leapt up and reached for the lowest patch of moss. Not to his surprise, a small hole emerged after he scrubbed out the dark soil. He figured that Dugu Seeking-A-Loss must have dug these holes with sharp blades. After so many years, dirt had accumulated in the holes and mosses had started to grow.

Having nothing else urgent to do, Yang Guo decided to check out this Sword Tomb. But having only one arm left certainly made climbing a more difficult task.

"If I can't climb up to the platform, then I can't. Who's going to laugh at me here?" he thought.

After tightening his waistband, he took a deep breath and leapt a few feet up, sticking his left foot in the first small hole. Then he leapt upward again, kicking his right foot toward the second patch of moss. The soft soil fell, and sure enough, there was another small hole on the rock wall just big enough for a foot.

His first attempt at climbing the cliff only lasted a little bit over one hundred feet before he ran out of breath, so he slid back down to the ground.

"I've already found over twenty stepping spots. The second attempt should be much easier," he told himself.

After some meditation at the bottom of the cliff, he gathered enough strength and finally climbed up to the rock platform. Although he only had one arm left, his Qing-Gong skills hadn't weakened a single bit. He couldn't help but feel some relief.

Next to the two large characters "Sword Tomb," there were two rows of words carved on the rock in smaller size:

"The Demonic Swordsman Dugu Seeking-A-Loss has become the invincible and unchallenged warrior under Heaven; he therefore buried his swords here. Alas, the heroes of the realm have laid down their arms, now my long sword is sharp as usual yet useless...the agony!"

A mixed feeling of shock and admiration welled up in Yang Guo's heart. He couldn't help but feel that this Senior Master's personality was very similar to his own. Both of them were lofty and defied the entire world. But he himself was certainly far from invincible and unchallenged. And now he only had one arm; even if he could survive this time, the chance of him becoming invincible would be very slim. He stared at the two rows of words for a while and then looked down. Rocks and stones formed a big pile in the shape of a tomb, its back facing the deep and broad valley. Putting aside the fact of how brilliant the Demonic Swordsman was, the sword tomb itself was impressive enough on its own. It was apparent that this Senior Master must have been outstanding in both his wits and his martial arts skills, and had high aspirations. He wished that he could have been born many years earlier so he'd have a chance to meet such a legendary master in person. Feeling thrilled, he shouted out loudly by the sword tomb in a long roar, and moments later, echoes rose in all directions. He suddenly remembered the kind of joy Huang Yaoshi had described to him: "To flick my robe on the zenith of the high peak and to wash my feet in the river thousands of miles long." At the current moment,

he could almost feel the same kind of lofty sentiments and aspirations. Although he really yearned to find out what kind of blade had been buried in the tomb, he felt afraid to offend the deceased master, so he gave up the thought and simply sat down, holding his knees in his arm, and breathed in against the wind. Soon, he felt as if his chest had been filled with pure energy and he could just ride the wind and glide in the air.

Several chirrups came from the bottom of the cliff. Yang Guo looked down and saw the Divine Eagle jumping its way up the cliff by hooking the small holes with its talons. Although the eagle had a heavy body, its leg and talon strength was simply amazing. Only moments later, the eagle had made its way up to the rock platform.

After taking a brief look around, the Divine Eagle nodded toward Yang Guo and chirped. The sounds of the chirps were quite different from the sound of its regular chirps.

"Brother Eagle, unfortunately I don't have the skills of Gongye Chang and can't understand anything you say. Otherwise you could have told me the entire life story of this Senior Master Dugu," Yang Guo said with a smile.

The Divine Eagle let out several more chirrups and then reached out with its talons. Grabbing onto some of the rocks on the sword tomb, it started moving them aside.

A thought suddenly popped into Yang Guo's head. "Senior Master Dugu had superior martial arts skills. Could he have left behind some kind of sword arts manual or manuscript?"

The Divine Eagle's talons kept moving and soon had moved away all the stones on top of the sword tomb, exposing three long swords lying side by side. Between the first sword and the second sword lay a long rock strip. The three long swords and the long rock strip lay neatly on a stone slab.

Yang Guo picked up the first sword on the left and saw two rows of small words carved on the slab stone underneath where the sword was placed.

"Fierce, aggressive and able to penetrate any obstacle, with it, I competed with the heroes of the Northern Plains during my teenage years."

Looking more carefully at the sword, he found it to be about four feet long. The blade flashed in the daylight. It was indeed a very sharp sword.

Laying the sword back in its original place, he then picked up the long rock strip. There were also two rows of small words underneath carved on the stone slab.

"Flexible Sword of the Purple Rose, I used it prior to the age of thirty. With it, I accidentally wounded a righteous man. A weapon of doom, I abandoned it in a deep valley."

"The sword is missing because he had abandoned it," Yang Guo thought. "I wonder how he ended up wounding a righteous man. Perhaps no one will ever get to know the story behind it."

After a short contemplation, he reached out to pick up the second sword. But only inches off the slab stone, the sword fell out of his grip and smacked back onto the slab stone. A loud clank echoed as sparks flashed everywhere. It gave Yang Guo a good shock.

Although the sword looked dark with nothing unusual, it turned out to be extremely heavy. The sword was only slightly longer than three feet, but it weighed at least one hundred and ten to one hundred and thirty pounds, several times heavier even than the heaviest saber or halberd used on the battlefield. He had not expected it to be this heavy when he picked it up. Caught by surprise, he had lost grip on

the sword. The second time he picked it up, knowing what to expect, he had a good grip on the sword. When prepared, something as heavy as one hundred and thirty pounds really wasn't hard for him at all. Taking a better look at the sword, he found both sides of the blade blunt, and the tip of the sword was more like a half circle.

"This sword is too heavy. How can someone wield a sword like this and still be able to control it well? Besides, the edges on both sides and the sword tip are all blunt. How strange!" he thought aloud.

Looking down on the stone slab underneath where the sword was, he also found two rows of small words.

"Heavy sword with blunt edges, simplicity brings superiority. Before I reached the age of forty, I used it to roam the entire world under Heaven."

Yang Guo murmured the words "heavy sword with blunt edges, simplicity brings superiority" repeatedly. He seemed to have comprehended part of the idea, but the idea was still very vague in his head. There were many styles of sword arts in the world, but regardless of style or school, each sword art always emphasized flexibility and speed. How should this heavy sword be used? He couldn't help imagining how the Senior Master had wielded the heavy sword and soon fell into a trance.

Only after a long while did Yang Guo lay the heavy sword down and reached out for the third sword. But this time something went wrong again. He had thought that this third sword must have been even heavier than the previous one, so when he reached out to pick up the sword, he made sure he had shifted enough strength to his left arm, but the sword turned out to be so light that he felt as if he had only picked up empty air. Casting a closer glance at it, he found a wooden sword in his hand. After the many years, part of the

sword body and the hilt were almost completely rotten. The words underneath said,

"After the age of forty, I no longer relied on weaponry. Bushes, trees, bamboo sticks or rocks, all could be my swords. From then on, I achieved great progress and slowly reached the realm of overcoming the sword without a sword."

Laying the wooden sword back to its original place respectfully, Yang Guo sighed in great admiration.

"The Senior Master's brilliant skills must have excelled way beyond my imagination," he murmured.

Thinking of the idea that there might be sword art manuals of some kind underneath the stone slab, he grabbed it and lifted it up. But there was nothing under except the hard surface of the rock platform. He couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed.

The Divine Eagle let out a loud chirp. Lowering its head, he picked the heavy sword up with his beak and then placed it in Yang Guo's hand. With another loud chirp, the eagle suddenly swung his left wing and smacked down towards Yang Guo's head. The swing was so fierce and powerful that Yang Guo could feel the strong wind generated by it long before the eagle's wing even came close to him. In a split second, Yang Guo felt as if he couldn't even breathe, and when he finally broke out from the brief shock, the Divine Eagle had held its wing still about one foot away from his head. Another two chirps came from the eagle.

"Brother Eagle, are you interested in checking out my Kung Fu skills?" Yang Guo grinned. "I've got nothing else to do. Fine, let's have some fun."

But it would be too hard to wield the over-one-hundred-pound heavy sword, so he put it down and picked up the first

sword. To his surprise, the Divine Eagle suddenly retracted its two wings and turned his head aside, paying no more attention to him, its face appeared covered with disdain.

Yang Guo immediately understood. "You want me to wield the heavy sword? But my Kung Fu skills are so ordinary. I am certain I would be no match for you, especially on top of this steep cliff, Brother Eagle. You've got to give me some leeway!" he said with a grin.

Picking the heavy sword back up, he gathered his inner energy around his lower stomach and shifted his strength to his left arm before thrusting the sword out slowly. The Divine Eagle didn't even turn around. Swinging its left wing backwards, the Divine Eagle attacked, its wing colliding with the heavy sword. Yang Guo felt a stream of vigorous force rushing toward him passing through the sword, so powerful that he almost ran out of breath. In a rush, he let out a roar and fought the force back with all his strength. The sword shook slightly between the two forces and suddenly all Yang Guo could see was complete darkness, and seconds later he fell unconscious.

Slowly, he regained consciousness, not knowing how much time had passed. Something incredibly bitter in his mouth immediately caught his attention, while, some kind of bitter juice kept dripping down his throat. He opened his eyes and saw the Divine Eagle placing a dark purple ball shaped thing into his mouth. This thing stunk like a rotten fish, but Yang Guo ate it anyway, thinking that since the Divine Eagle was extremely intelligent, this thing in its mouth had to be something good. With only a gentle bite, the skin of the ball shaped thing cracked open and immediately his mouth was filled with bitter juice.

The juice was extremely bitter and smelly and it tasted awful. Yang Guo really wanted to spit it all out, but he didn't want to

go against the Divine Eagle's good will and finally managed to swallow it. A few moments later, he tried to slightly control his inner energy flow, and to his surprise, he found his breathing smooth and fluent. He stood back up, and again, not only did he not feel tired or exhausted, but instead, he felt totally refreshed, no, it was even better than before.

Yang Guo was puzzled. Logically, when someone got knocked out with a strong blow, even if the person was lucky enough to not get injured seriously, he would at least feel soreness all over his body. Could that dark purple ball shaped thing be some kind of magical cure?

He bent over and picked the heavy sword up. It felt as if the sword had become slightly lighter than before. Right at that second, the Divine Eagle let out another loud chirp before striking with its wing again. This time Yang Guo dared not take on the blow directly and dodged to the side. The Divine Eagle took a step forward and struck again with both wings, fierce and powerful. Yang Guo knew that the eagle had no ill intentions toward him, but even though the eagle was extremely intelligent, it was still just an animal. With the kind of mighty power it possessed, when it attacked with its wings, it wouldn't really know when to stop or how to restrain its power. If he had gotten hit by the wing and fallen off the rock platform, it would surely kill him. Seeing the two wings striking toward him, he took two steps back in a hurry. By then, his left foot was already on the edge of the rock platform.

Who would have thought that the eagle would show no mercy? With a quick stretch, its sharp beak shot out toward Yang Guo's chest. Having no space to retreat back, Yang Guo had no choice but to block the attack with the sword. The peck landed squarely on the sword. A tremendous shock ran through Yang Guo's arm and he almost had to let go of the heavy sword. The Divine Eagle immediately followed with a

low sweep using its right wing and struck toward Yang Guo's ankles. Astonished, Yang Guo jumped up and leaped over the Divine Eagle's head, rushing toward the inside of the platform. In fear that the eagle would follow up its attacks, he waved the sword backward. A loud clank echoed as the sword collided with another peck from the eagle.

Having so narrowly escaped death, Yang Guo broke out in a cold sweat. "Brother Eagle," he shouted, "I am not Master Dugu!" Feeling achy and weak in the knees, he sat down. The Divine Eagle let out two low chirps and halted its attack.

Having blurted out the words "I am not Master Dugu" without thinking, Yang Guo suddenly thought of something. The eagle had been a long time companion of Senior Master Dugu. The way it had struck and moved about actually had matched loosely with martial arts principles. Perhaps when Senior Master Dugu sometimes became bored living in the desolate valley all by himself, he had treated the eagle as if it was a sparring partner of his. Senior Master Dugu had long ago passed away, along with all his superior martial arts techniques. But it might be possible to find some traces of this great Master's martial arts style and essence from the eagle. At that thought, he became pleased and stood up.

"Brother Eagle, watch out!" he shouted. "Here comes another sword move!" Pushing the heavy sword forward as fast as he could, he thrust it toward the Divine Eagle's chest.

The Divine Eagle blocked the sword with its left wing and then struck another heavy blow with its right wing. Its strength was simply too strong. Every time it swung its wings, the force it generated was on par with the kind of force generated by several first-class fighters hitting out with their palm strikes at the same time. Besides, the sword in Yang Guo's hand was simply too heavy for him to use any sword moves out of the "Quanzhen Sword Art" or "Jade

Maiden Sword Art". So for defense, all he could do was to dodge to the sides, and for offense, all he did was thrust the sword forward clumsily.

After a few moments into the fight, Yang Guo became tired and sat down to rest. As soon as he sat down, the Divine Eagle would step aside. The two of them played like this for well over two hours before they finally slid down from the platform and went back to the cave.

When Yang Guo woke up the next morning, the Divine Eagle had already placed three dark purple stinking balls by his side. After some careful examination, Yang Guo finally realized that these were animal gallbladders. He remembered that when he met the Divine Eagle the first time, it was feeding on poisonous snakes and also fought with a giant serpent. These must be snake gallbladders. He wondered if the gallbladder of a poisonous snake would also be venomous; but after he had eaten a gallbladder the day before, he had felt totally refreshed and rejuvenated, and had even more strength in him than before. Besides, there were already strong toxins from the Passion Flower and the "Souls Freezing Silver Needles" inside his body; he really couldn't care less. So in a few bites, he quickly swallowed the gallbladders, and then sat up to meditate. To his great surprise, many of the pressure points along his inner channels that he had a hard time sending inner energy flowing through before suddenly opened up, and the energy flow inside him became quite smooth and fluent. With great happiness, Yang Guo uttered a loud cry of joy. Usually, when someone was in the middle of cultivating his inner energy flow in a meditative state, it was critical for him to abstain from irrelevant thoughts, especially extreme joy or extreme grief. But this time his inner energy continued to flow smoothly around his body with no hitches or any blockage.

Jumping back onto his feet, Yang Guo picked up the heavy sword and stepped out of the cave for some more rounds of sword training. Having no more fear and worries, even though he still dodged a lot more than blocking, once in a while, he was actually able to organize some sneak attacks in between the fierce and powerful forces created by the Divine Eagle waving of its mighty wings.

This kind of training went on for several days, and gradually, he was able to wield the heavy sword with better control. It almost felt as if the heavy sword was no longer as heavy as the time he first wielded it. In the meantime, he also came to realize that all the sword arts he had learned before were too intricate with too many fancy techniques. He kept thinking about Dugu Seeking-A-Loss's words "heavy sword with blunt edges, simplicity brings superiority" on the slab stone. They had described a realm of sword art much more advanced compared to even the most ingenious sword techniques in the world. While sparring with the Divine Eagle, he concentrated on comprehending the movement of his sword, and what he started to realize was that the more ordinary a sword move is, the more difficult it was for an opponent to defend against it. For example, if he simply thrust out straight forward, as long as he had fierce and resourceful power to back it, the might of the thrust would be actually more powerful than the kind of sword arts like the "Jade Maiden Sword Art" that relied on fluctuating and unpredictable techniques. Even though he only had one arm, and after eating those snake gallbladders the Divine Eagle had brought to him, his arm had become much stronger than before.

One day while strolling about the valley, he discovered the bodies of three giant poisonous snakes on the ground. Their bellies had been ripped open and cuts from sharp talons left snake blood all over their bodies. By then, he was sure that the bitter things he had been eating were snake

gallbladders. The bodies of these poisonous snakes shined in a vaguely golden color. He had never seen any snakes like these before and had no idea what kind of snakes they were.

"I suppose the reason why the Divine Eagle has such tremendous strength is because it had eaten a lot of gallbladders of this strange species of snakes," he thought to himself.

After over months worth of sparring, with some hard effort, Yang Guo could actually take on the Divine Eagle's mighty force head to head now. Each of his thrusts had also become so powerful that they would whistle in the air. He couldn't help but feel very satisfied with himself. Since his skills in martial arts had advanced to a new level, the martial arts he learned before all seemed to be so insignificant. It was just like once one climbs to the top of Mount Tai, the whole world looked small and insignificant. But in another thought, he realized that without his previous foundation in martial arts training, he wouldn't have been able to advance to such a new level. After all, the Divine Eagle was just an animal that couldn't speak. It might be able to guide some, but it would never be able to explain things or provide advice. Besides, the Divine Eagle didn't really know any true martial arts skills. All it had was the god-given mighty strength plus the handful of moving and dodging techniques it had picked up while sparring with Dugu Seeking-A-Loss in the many years of companionship.

One morning, after Yang Guo got up, he found heavy rain pouring down from the dark cloud covered sky. "Brother Eagle, it's raining very hard. Are we still going to train today?" he asked the Divine Eagle. The eagle held Yang Guo's sleeve in its beak and pulled him toward the northeast. Then it let go of the sleeve and strode out. "Is there something strange again in the northeast?" Yang Guo

thought aloud. He grabbed the heavy sword and then followed in the rain.

A couple of miles into the journey, some vague but continuous rumbling sound came to Yang Guo's attention. And the further they walked, the louder the rumbling sound became. It was the sound of a waterfall.

"With such a pouring rain, I'd better watch out for mountain torrents," Yang Guo reminded himself.

After turning round a mountain gorge the sound of the waterfall suddenly became so much louder; it could almost deafen one's hearing. Between two peaks, the waterfall crashed down and poured into the creek below like a white dragon. With thunderous echoes, the swift currents rushed downward with mighty force. The many broken branches and rocks, carried by the currents, only took a split second to be flushed down the stream.

By then, the rain had become even heavier and Yang Guo had become soaking wet. A thin mist from the smashing waterfall surrounded everything, creating a magnificent view. But seeing the mighty force from the mountain torrent, Yang Guo couldn't help but feel a slight dread inside of him.

Holding Yang Guo's sleeve in its beak, the Divine Eagle dragged him toward the creek as if it wanted Yang Guo to jump in.

"Why do you want me to go down there? The stream is running very swiftly. I am afraid that I won't be able to hold myself steady," Yang Guo asked in surprise.

The Divine Eagle let go of Yang Guo's sleeve, and after a long and loud roar, it jumped into the creek and landed steadily on a huge rock in the middle of the creek. The eagle swung its left wing forward. A rock that had been carried down by

the rushing current was sent back up the stream by the swing. As soon as the rock came back down with the current again, it swung its wing once again, and sent the rock flying up the stream a second time. The eagle did the same thing five or six more times, and the rock never made it past the eagle. By the seventh time, the Divine Eagle gave it a good smack, which sent the rock flying out of the water and it landed on the bank. The Divine Eagle then leaped back onto the bank and stood next to Yang Guo.

Yang Guo understood. Demonic Swordsman Dugu Seeking-A-Loss must have come here often to train sword arts in the mountain torrent every time it rained. But he knew very well that he didn't yet possess such skills and strength. Feeling afraid, he hesitated.

Suddenly, the Divine Eagle extended its wing out and pushed Yang Guo on the arm. Since it was standing so close to Yang Guo, and the push caught Yang Guo by surprise, he lost his footing and fell into the stream.

In the rush, Yang Guo quickly used a technique called the "Thousand Pound Plummets" and landed on that huge rock the Divine Eagle had stood on. As soon as his feet entered the water, the great force from the swift current almost swept him off his feet. Yang Guo stumbled back and forth and had a hard time maintaining his balance.

"Senior Master Dugu is a human, I am also a human. If he could hold himself steady, why can't I?" Yang Guo thought to himself. So he took a deep breath and then concentrated all his attention on the effort to fight the force of the swift currents. That alone had exhausted all his strength. It was simply impossible for him to spare any strength to hit the rocks in the current with the heavy sword.

In the amount of time it took to burn a joss stick, Yang Guo had exhausted all his strength, so he jabbed his sword on the

rock, and with a push, leaped back on to the bank. Before he even had a moment to catch his breath, the Divine Eagle had already swung its wing toward him once again. Having been on his guard, he dodged the push swiftly. Quickly taking in a few deep breaths, he jumped back down into the creek himself, thinking, "This Eagle Brother is indeed a strict teacher and a forthcoming friend. He wouldn't cut me any slack in the training. He certainly has high expectations, and I, of course, want good improvement."

With this thought, he directed all his energy to the lower half of his body and held his footing steadily. As time went by, he gradually comprehended some techniques as to how to focus his energy and how to best utilize his strength. Even though the mountain torrent had grown larger and water had risen up to his waist, he was able to hold his own a little easier compared to the previous efforts. A few moments passed and by then water had risen up to his chest and soon up to his mouth.

"Even though I can hold my footing now, I don't think I'll just stand here and get drowned!" he thought. So he leapt back on to the bank.

Who had expected that the Divine Eagle had been waiting for this by the bank? Before his feet touched the ground, the eagle struck out with its wing. Yang Guo hurriedly blocked it using the heavy sword, but the striking force sent Yang Guo right back into the stream. With a splash, he fell back into the water.

When his feet touched the giant rock under the water, his entire body was under the surface. Water had filled his mouth as he was falling. Yang Guo knew that if he had spit the water out of his mouth, then his inner energy would shift upward, thus reducing the strength in his legs, so he held his breath and took a stable stance. A few moments later, he

pushed hard with his feet and leapt in the air. A stream of water darted out from his mouth. After taking a quick breath Yang Guo fell back down to the stream bottom. The turbulence and swift currents rumbled past above his head. He simply stayed still like a firm rock in midstream. Gradually his mind calmed down.

"Brother Eagle wanted me to stand in the middle of the mountain torrent, but if I don't hit the rocks in the current, for sure he would belittle me," Yang Guo thought.

He was a man of great pride and was always eager to excel. Even though the eagle was only an animal, he would still rather not lose face in front of it. So when he spotted the branches and rocks brought down by the current, he jabbed and stabbed and tried hard to push them back the way they had come from. In the water, the rocks had become lighter. The heavy sword also felt lighter and easier to control when he waved it around under water. He waved and swung and jabbed and thrust the sword until he was completely exhausted and begun to have a hard time holding his footing. Then he finally leapt back onto the bank.

He was quite afraid that the Divine Eagle would once again force him back into the stream. Without some rest, his tiring legs probably wouldn't be able to stand the forces from the mountain torrent. Not to his surprise, the Divine Eagle didn't want him back on the bank. As soon as it saw him leaping out of the water, the eagle struck out with its wing.

"Brother Eagle," Yang Guo shouted in complaint, "do you know you are killing me right now?"

He jumped back into the creek for a little while but simply could not stand the current any longer and had to leap back to the bank. Seeing the Divine Eagle's wing striking toward him, and not willing to sit down and give in, he had no other choices but to thrust the sword at the Divine Eagle. The two

of them soon exchanged three moves, and to his great surprise, the Divine Eagle was forced to take one step back.

"Excuse me!" Yang Guo shouted as he extended his arm and thrust forth the sword again. Sound of whistling echoed as the blade cut through thin air – this was something quite different from his past experience.

Seeing the tip of Yang Guo's sword approaching rapidly toward it, the Divine Eagle no longer dared to take it straight on and had to dodge aside.

Yang Guo knew that the half-day worth of training in the mountain torrents must have improved his strength tremendously. A mixed feeling of shock and joy swarmed in his heart. He couldn't help but question himself, "It should certainly take more than a couple of weeks to increase one's strength and power. How did I gain such great strength after wielding the sword underwater for a mere half-day?" He finally concluded that it had to be the gallbladders from the strange specie of snakes. Those gallbladders must have magical effects for increasing one's power and strength. That was why his strength and inner power had increased tremendously, and he had only noticed it when he released the strength accidentally in dangerous circumstances.

He sat by the creek and meditated for a while. His strength soon replenished. This time he jumped back into the creek for more training without being forced by the Divine Eagle. By the time he leapt back up the bank, the Divine Eagle was no longer waiting by the creek, leaving no clue as to where it had gone.

The rain had begun to slow down. Yang Guo figured that mountain torrents would have to be a lot smaller and weaker the next day. Since he didn't feel that tired, it would be better to train some more right now while the torrent still lasted. At that thought, he jumped back into the creek.

By the time he got back onto the bank the forth time, he found two snake gallbladders placed closed to the bank. Feeling utterly grateful for the Divine Eagle's caring, he ate them and then continued on with his training. Night came, and the mountain torrent had slowly become smaller and weaker.

That night he didn't sleep at all and kept on training in the creek. Gradually he began to realize many sword art principles such as piercing following the force, blocking against the force, slashing from the side, and chopping with a back swing. By then he finally understood: Wielding a sword this way, nothing would be strong enough to stand the force from the sword, and there would be no need for the sword to have a sharp blade. But without such a unique heavy sword, which was twenty or even thirty times heavier than a normal sword, this kind of sword art wouldn't have been effective. If it were just an ordinary blade, the force released from a gentle wrist snap would have shocked the blade into pieces.

The rain finally stopped, and the clear sky shone dimly in dark blue. Moonlight from a new moon illuminated the trees and the water in the creek, painting everything silver. Yang Guo watched the swift currents flushing down the steam path non-stop, his mind as clear as the sky. By then, he understood the principles behind the flow of currents and mastered the techniques with the heavy sword. He knew that he had learned the entire sword art of the heavy sword and there was no more to learn. Even if the Demonic Swordsman could have come back to life, all he could have taught would be the same. From now on as his inner energy grew, he would be able to use lighter swords, and eventually be able to wield a wooden sword like the heavy sword. But that could all be attributed to the advancement of his own abilities and skills. Regarding the sword art, this was as far as it would ever go.

Yang Guo paced back and forth along the bank. Raising his head high, he stared at the bright moon and soon was lost in thought. If Senior Master Dugu hadn't left him this heavy sword, or if there wasn't the Divine Eagle to guide him, and if he didn't eat those strange snakes' gallbladders and thus gain a tremendous amount of inner strength, then the entire world wouldn't have had the luxury of seeing this sword art once again. Dugu Seeking-A-Loss didn't have any help or references yet was able to comprehend such a pinnacle of sword arts all by himself. His cleverness must have been a hundred times better than mine.

Yang Guo's admiration and understanding of this past sword master kept growing as he imagined the Senior Master's demeanor in his mind. Suddenly, a thought popped into his head.

"If Gu Gu could see the great kung fu skills I possess now, she would be very happy for me for sure. Alas, where is she now? Is she also staring at the beautiful moon and thinking of me?" As soon as he thought of the Xiao Longnu, severe pain arose inside his chest.

"Even though I've comprehended the ultimate principles of the sword art," Yang Guo thought, "what good does it do if I stay here in the remote mountains all by myself? What if the poison from the Passion Flower suddenly activated tomorrow and killed me? Wouldn't this magnificent sword art get lost again for eternity?"

At this thought, aspirations arose again in his heart. "I shall follow Senior Master Dugu's footsteps and defeat all heroes under heaven with this sword art. Then I can die with no regrets," he spoke out this thought loudly.

Looking at what was left of his right arm, Yang Guo knitted his eyebrows into a straight line, and his hatred for Guo Fu,

the person who had mercilessly cut off his arm, swarmed his heart once more.

"This girl relied on the fact that her father is a legendary hero and her mother is the chief of the Beggar Clan. She has never respected me. When I was still a kid and lived in her home, she treated me with much disdain and disrespect. I was actually doing her a favor when I lied to the Wu brothers. If any one of the Wu brothers ended up dead because of her, wouldn't she be the one to blame for it? Humph! She took advantage of my severe illness and cut my arm off. If I don't settle the score with her one day, I am not a true man!"

He had always been one who took in kindness and grudges to his heart. He was without a forgiving heart. Before, right after his arm was cut off, he had no other choice but to hide in the remote valley and wait for the wound to heal. Now his wound had sealed and his Kung Fu skills had progressed dramatically, he could no longer hold in his urge for revenge. Having made up his mind, he immediately returned to the cave.

"Brother Eagle," he said to the Divine Eagle, "I'll never be able to repay the great kindness you've shown me. There are still several matters in the Martial World that I need to take care of. That's why I need to leave you temporarily. I'll be back here again once I've taken care of that business. If you don't mind, I need to borrow Senior Master Dugu's heavy sword for the trip."

He bowed down toward the Divine Eagle deeply and then knelt down in front of the stone grave of Dugu Seeking-A-Loss to salute before heading out of the valley. The Divine Eagle walked with him all the way to the entrance of the valley. After many affectionate hugs between the man and the eagle, Yang Guo bid his farewell and got on with his journey.

The big sword was indeed very heavy. If he tied it to his waistband, the waistband would break in no time. Yang Guo cut down three old vines from the bushes and made a rope out of them. Tying the heavy sword on his back, he ran using his Qing-Gong (lightness kung fu) and headed straight toward the city of Xiangyang.

He arrived outside the city as the time of day approached dawn. He understood that settling his business in broad daylight is not the wisest of decisions. Besides he's due one night's sleep, and his energy level will have plummeted. Uncle Guo and Aunt Guo were experts in the field of martial arts. At this point in time their health must be restored, a fierce struggle is guaranteed if by chance he was to confront the both of them. Therefore he ferreted out a thick patch of grass near a cemetery outside the city and slept there for many hours. Later he performed breathing exercises and inner strength cultivation; and gathered some wild fruit to serve as meal. He waited for the first watch of the night before he set foot below the city wall of Xiangyang.

Xiangyang's imposing wall was like a fortress. That day when Jinlun Fawang, Li Mochou and others leapt from the top of the city wall, they still required padding for their feet set up to prevent possible injuries. Right now, trying to climb from the wall base to the top is not going to be an easy task. Yang Guo had already thought about this and came up with a method during his time resting near the cemetery. Thinking: "I will never have enough time to learn Uncle Guo's kung fu of "Walking on Heaven's Staircase". What ever method Senior Dugu used to get up that cliff, I will capitalize on to climb up the wall of Xiangyang." He proceeded towards a secluded area near the east gate, luckily the troops that guarded near the top of the city wall made their inspection from afar, much to the convenience of Yang Guo. As he leapt up, he straightened out his heavy sword and spared no effort to drive it into the city wall. The heavy sword might be blunt,

but the ending force was unyieldingly strong. The city wall made use of extremely thick granite for its construction. Hearing the noise of 'peng', the wall was cracked open by the sword, which left a round niche. Yang Guo had never expected an effortless jab with the sword could have such power, and was pleasantly surprised about that. Next, whilst jumping up his left foot was placed in the cavity, he raised his sword and stabbed a hole into the wall just above his head. This time he didn't put a lot of power into it, just enough that he avoided alarming the garrison troops.

He helped himself up step by step until he was at the point where there're several zhangs left before he reaches the top. From here he displayed his "Gecko Crawling Wall Skill" to rise over the top of the wall and hid in a secret place. Inside the city wall were a series of stony steps that sloped down. Yang Guo waited until the troops walked away and sneaked down past them and dashed ahead straight to Guo's residence.

After taking nourishment from the snake gallbladders his inner energy rapidly increased. At the same time his body was more agile and his lightness kung fu was far greater than former days. But Guo Jing's martial arts were still very dangerous, there's a likely chance that the strength of his palms in the "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" series is unchallengeable. In addition, there were the mysterious and diverse set of the "Dog Beating Techniques" used by Huang Rong. He only knew about 60% to 70% of it so he couldn't be too careless. As he reached the outside of Guo residence, he quietly leapt over the wall and entered.

Bypassing the garden, he promptly glanced at the house where he originally stayed. He went up to its windows, listened, and found that no one was in there. He gently pushed open the door and entered.

In the darkness he noticed the bed curtains and other furniture were no different than when he left. All that was missing was the bed's pillow. He lowered his body and sat on the edge of the bed, reminiscing privately about how his healthy right arm was lost forever within this bed. A stroke of sickness and anger latched onto his heart.

He was blessed with pretty and charming looks; by nature he was also somewhat lustful and cheerful. He may be passionately devoted to Xiao Longnu and thinks of her constantly, but there were many young girls who couldn't help but pour out their affectionate feelings whenever they met him. Girls like Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang and Gongsun Lu'E either secretly had a crush on him or openly flirtatious in front of him. His hand lightly stroked the side of the bed, and he faced the inconsolable truth that he had become disabled. If he ever bumped into those love-stricken girls, he will no doubt be viewed as a ridiculous and pitiful soul in their eyes. His martial arts maybe fantastic, but he's still a mere freak that's shocking to behold. Thinking of all the ups and downs and viewing all the events that happened in his life, he couldn't help but quietly whisper: "It is only GuGu...it's GuGu alone whose feelings for me won't deteriorate. Even something as catastrophic as losing four limbs, it will be no different to her in the end."

Convinced now, he suddenly heard on his east side the muffled sounds of an argument between two people. He could make out the voices were in fact Guo Jing and Huang Rong. Yang Guo was curious about the cause and thereupon tiptoed to search for where it originated. He found the room where the Guo couple were situated and eavesdropped outside their window.

All that was heard was Huang Rong yelling with rage: "Those two have plainly carried Xiang'er away to Passionless Valley to exchange for the antidote. How could you still go on and

insist that Yang Guo is a good person? The child was just given birth two hours earlier and ended up in their hands. What chance does she have of surviving up to this point?" Those words dissolved into sobs.

Guo Jing said: "Guo'er is not that kind of person. Besides, time after time he's saved our lives. If Xiang'er's life could help him trade for his own life, then I'll gladly accept it." The sobs drowned out Huang Rong's words: "You could do that, but I won't..."

Then the sounds of a baby crying loudly interrupted the conversation in the room, the noise was loud and clear. Yang Guo wondered: "Did they somehow manage to snatch the baby girl back from the clutches of Li Mochou? Then why did she say: 'What chance does she have of surviving up to this point'?" Holding his breath he raised his head against the window sill and looked around. He saw a baby cuddled safely in Huang Rong's arms. It so happens that the baby was facing the window towards him, Yang Guo understood what he saw. He had a square-face with huge protruding ears, his skin was coarsely dark and covered with fine fuzz. He'd carried the female infant Guo Xiang for a long period of time, and remembered she was light skinned and petite with delicate features on her face. She's the complete opposite to this plump baby. Huang Rong's back faced the window, and quietly settled the baby down, and said: "It was nice when the siblings were together; you'd better find his sister and bring her back home." Yang Guo only now comprehended that, from her womb, she gave birth to twins. She first gave birth to the baby girl Guo Xiang, and afterwards there arrived a male child. The moment her son entered this world, Xiao Longnu had already carried her daughter away.

Guo Jing wandered slowly and aimlessly around the room then said: "Rong'er, you usually recognize main principles. As soon as it involves matters of our children you lose your

judgment. Can you not just put it to one side for the time being? At present the military affairs are in a state of urgency; how could I just leave Xiangyang and forget my responsibilities for an infant daughter?"

Huang Rong said: "I did say I wanted to look for her by myself, but you'll never permit me to leave. Are you actually going to let our child die for no reason?"

Guo Jing said: "You haven't recovered yet, how can you go?"

Huang Rong turned on him with rage: "A father not wanting his daughter? It's a hard lot being a mother, what do you expect me to do?"

Yang Guo had been together with them for many years on Peach Blossom Island, and remembered them as a loving couple. No major arguments were involved. Now that their faces grew red with anger, all words were equally matched. It seemed clear that they've quarreled over this matter on many occasions. Huang Rong cried and spoke at the same time, Guo Jing showed a taut face while randomly walked back and forth around the room.

After a while, Guo Jing said: "Even if she's brought back, you'll treat her in the same way as you did Fu'er, pampering her till she's spoiled, she may as well count for nothing!"

Huang Rong loudly exclaimed: "What have you got against our Fu'er? She loves our daughter dearly, she may have been bit too reckless, but the reasons were quite understandable. If it was me, and Yang Guo insisted on taking my daughter, I'd even chop off his left arm for good measure."

Guo Jing's face contorted with anger and he bellowed out: "Rong'er, what are you talking about?" Raising his hand he heavily slammed the top of the table, 'peng!', scraps of wood flew all over the place. A practically rock-solid red wooden

table was instantly broke in half by his strike. The baby boy was actually crying without knowing when to stop. When he heard the shout and the bang he automatically calmed down as a result of the fright he received.

Right at this moment, Yang Guo suddenly noticed a human silhouette below the window on the west side, also crouching down and quietly drawing back. Yang Guo thought: "So besides me, there's another eavesdropper outside the room, but who could it be?" So he tiptoed behind that person, and noticed that her figure was elegant, it's Guo Fu! The burning fury wasn't extinguished, Yang Guo thought: "Great! I've been looking for you!" Then behind him the light that radiated from inside was gone - the lamps were out.

Then he heard Huang Rong angrily speak: "Get out, stop frightening the baby!"

Yang Guo knew Guo Jing was about to come out, and his eyes would be able to locate Yang Guo very easily. So he shifted himself behind the rockery, and then quickly made his way outside Guo Fu's room. He launched himself high, and got himself on top of a tree, and concealed himself amongst the branches and leaves.

Within a moment, he saw Guo Fu return to her room. Then the voice of a woman said: "It's past the second period of night, sleep well Miss!" Guo Fu grunted: "I will sleep when I am actually asleep! Get out." The woman responded: "Very well." Then he saw a maidservant leave the area.

After quite a while, he saw Guo Fu faintly heave a long sigh of relief. Yang Guo thought: "What is that sigh meant for? You've taken away my arm from me; now it's your turn to lose an arm. But I'll take it easy on you because you're a woman, I won't harm you for the moment. If I did, it'll be just too easy. Such an act won't conform to the ideals of a real man." He paused in a moment of thought; he then came up with a

strategy: "Alright then, I'll call out loudly, to get Uncle Guo's attention. Once I've defeated him, I'll settle an old score with his daughter. As a man who's got a clear conscience, no one will ever jest at my actions." But then reconsidered again: "Uncle Guo's martial arts are extraordinary, am I really able to triumph over him? I don't think so! Will this mean I can't take my revenge?" Recalling the way he lost his arm, the blood boiled up inside of him and his heart hardened. Just when he's about to jump down from the tree, the sound of footsteps approached, and a person came striding his way.

He noticed the pace was stiff, the body was upright; it was none other than Guo Jing. He reached the outside of his daughter's room, and gently knocked on the door, saying: "Fu'er, are you asleep yet?"

Guo Fu arose and replied: "It's you father?" There was a hint of fear in her voice.

Yang Guo was surprised by this: "Is it possible that Uncle Guo knew I've arrived and so came to offer his daughter protection? Alright then! You'll be my first opponent! If I lose to you, my life is yours to take."

Guo Jing uttered an 'ng' sound. Guo Fu opened the door, raised her head and looked directly into her father's eyes, and immediately hung her head.

End Chapter 26.

Chapter 27 - Fighting Strength with Wisdom

Translated by BeeDreamer



Li Mochou was wary seeing Huang Rong meticulously wound thorn canes around the big trees surrounding Guo Xiang. Huang Rong's face was bearing a mocking smile so she got scared and shouted: "That's enough!"

Guo Jing walked through the door and went to sit in a chair in front of the bed, not saying a word. The two people have been tense and quiet for half the day. Finally, Guo Jing asked: "Where have you been all this time?"

Guo Fu said: "I...I've wounded Yang da ge (Big Brother Yang). I was afraid you'd punish me, so...so..."

Guo Jing said: "So you went out to avoid me for several days?" Guo Fu bit her lip, nodding. Guo Jing continued: "You were waiting for my anger to pass before coming back?"

Guo Fu nodded, suddenly throwing herself into his arms. She said: "Father, are you still mad at daughter?"

Guo Jing stroked her hair gently, lowering his voice: "I wasn't angry. I haven't been angry. I was only sad about you."

Guo Fu cried out: "Father!" and sobbed on his chest.

Guo Jing looked up and gazed out at the roof, not saying a word. He waited for her weeping to subside then said: "Yang Guo's grandfather Tie Xingong and your grandfather Xiao Tiangong were sworn brothers, so were his father and yours. You know that." Guo Fu made a low sound: "Hmm." Guo Jing then continued: "Even though this boy Yang Guo has always done things as he pleases, he has a heroic heart. He has so many times saved your father and mother's lives, and even yours. He is young in years but to our country and people, his contribution is not small. You should know that."

Guo Fu heard her father's tone getting more and more serious, even more afraid to continue. Guo Jing got up,

adding: "There is another matter you don't know about. Today I will tell you. Guo'er's father Yang Kang's conduct during those years wasn't very scrupulous. I was his sworn brother, yet I couldn't change him. He eventually died a tragic death at the Jiaying Wang Tie Qiang temple. Even though it wasn't your mother who took his life, his death was caused by her. Our Guo family and his Yang family heavily..."

Yang Guo [hidden outside] heard the words 'Died a tragic death at the Jiaying Wang Tie Qiang temple.' This was the first time he heard someone talking about his father's place of death. Filled with hatred in his heart, he was about to jump out ferociously but then Guo Jing continued: "I originally thought about betrothing you to him to make up for the hatred in my lifetime, who would have thought... who would have thought... alas!"

Guo Fu lifted her head, saying: "Father, he kidnapped my sister and said a lot of rubbish, slandering daughter. Father, even though his Yang family and ours go back a long way, that is not to say I have to let him bully me and not resist, does it?"

Guo Jing jumped up, shouting: "Apparently you cut off his arm, just how could he bully you? If he really wanted to, even if you had ten arms, he would have already cut them all off. Is that the sword handle?" Guo Fu, not daring to say anything more, took out the 'Lady' sword from under the pillow. Guo Jing reached out, his hand slightly shaking. The edge of the blade made a chilling sound. His voice trembled: "Fu'er, this must be done. Even though I'm being severe with you, in my heart I love you just the same as your mother." His voice turned gentle at the end of the speech.

Guo Fu let out a soft cry: "Daughter knows."

Guo Jing then said: "Good, stretch out your right arm. You cut off another's arm; I'll cut off yours just the same. Your father

has lived a righteous life and can't follow selfish instincts like shielding his own daughter."

Guo Fu knew perfectly well that this time for her father must be difficult, but she hadn't expected him to go as far as demanding her arm. Frightened, the color drained out of her face. She called out loudly: "Father!" Guo Jing paled, both eyes gazing at her.

Yang Guo hadn't expected Guo Jing to be this righteous. He considered the situation, heart beating fast, thinking: "Should I or should I not stop all this? Should I call out to spare Guo Guniang [Miss Guo]?" While still trying to make a decision, Guo Jing's long sword was raised. Then it cut down through the air, about to chop off Guo Fu's arm.

There suddenly came a shout. Someone jumped through the window in a swift movement. Even before the body arrived, a stick reached out, blocking Guo Jing's long sword. That person was of course Huang Rong.

She didn't say a word, sending out three successive hits, all Da Gou Bang Fa "Dog Beating Stick Technique" tricks. First, her beating stick technique was profound. Second, she caught Guo Jing by surprise, forcing him to move back two steps. Huang Rong called out: "Fu'er, why are you not running away?"

Guo Fu didn't have her mother's wits. Facing a crisis, she was scared frozen, unable to move. Huang Rong's left hand carried her baby while her right hand held the stick. She pushed her daughter's body out of the window straight onto the ground, crying out: "Quickly head back to Peach Blossom Island [Tao Hua Dao]. Ask Ke Gonggong [Grandpa Ke] to come plead with your father." At the same time, she wielded the bamboo stick, using Da Gou Bang Fa's "tangle" and "seal" tricks to block Guo Jing from following his daughter.

She called out: "Go quickly, Go quickly! Get the small red horse at the mansion's entrance."

From the beginning, Huang Rong had understood her husband's straight forward character, quite old-fashioned and extremely righteous. This time her daughter created a big disaster and then hid away for several days before coming home. In case her husband was still enraged, and had decided on a severe punishment, she had already arranged for someone to bring the red horse to the outside of the mansion's entrance, along with a saddle, clothes, and some silver coins. If he could be persuaded, she would let him beat their daughter to settle the matter. That would be extremely lucky. If not, Guo Fu had better be sent far away and, after a long while, come back to seek a reunion with her father.

The husband and wife quarreled. Moving towards his daughter's bedroom, Guo Jing's face was anguished, but in his heart he knew it was fortunate that his daughter's arm was saved. Huang Rong, relying on Wu Gong [martial arts] alone, wouldn't be able to stop her husband. But Guo Jing was disadvantaged by seeing his wife carrying the baby and was not able to get to Guo Fu before she rushed out into the garden outside the mansion's entrance.

Yang Guo was hiding in a tree, and watched what happened. While Guo Fu was coming out through the window, he only had to raise his sword to strike, how would she be able to get away? But then he thought about Guo Jing and Huang Rong's earth-shattering fight caused by him; he would be taking advantage of someone fleeing from danger, he just couldn't do it.

Then Huang Rong lashed out several repeated strikes, forcing Guo Jing to fall back a couple of steps. This time Guo Jing was leaning against the bed with nowhere to retreat. Huang Rong

suddenly called out "Take him" and tossed her baby to her husband. Guo Jing was alarmed, stretching his left hand to catch him. Huang Rong let down her bamboo staff, walking over to her husband. She pleaded: "Jing ge ge [Brother Jing], please spare Fu'er!"

Guo Jing shook his head, saying: "Rong'er, It's not that I don't love Fu'er. But she did this terrible thing. If I ignored it, how would it ever be settled? How would we apologize to Guo'er? Gods...his arm was cut off, with nobody to care for him. Whether he lives or he died by now we don't know. I...I really wouldn't mind cutting off my own arm..."

As Yang Guo heard Guo Jing's genuine words, he couldn't bear the heartache, his eyes turning red.

Huang Rong said: "Day after day we've searched for him and we haven't even seen his tracks. If something bad happened, there must have been a clue. Guo'er's Wu Gong [martial arts] are beginning to rival ours. Despite a serious injury, it wouldn't be a great obstacle."

Guo Jing said: "I hope so. I will go bring back Fu'er. We can't leave the matter like this."

Huang Rong smiled, saying: "She has already ridden the little red horse out of town. Why would you bother going after her?"

Guo Jing replied: "It's already past 3 AM; without Lu Da Ren's [Your Excellency Lu] or my command emblem, who would dare open the city gate at night?"

Huang Rong sighed, saying: "Good, I'll follow you then!" She reached out to take back her son Guo Polu.

Guo Jing handed the baby over, his face full of regret. He then said: "Rong'er, I'm so sorry. But after Fu'er has been

punished, even though handicapped, she will change as she won't have the advantage of..."

Huang Rong nodded: "That is so!" As her hands touched the baby swaddling cloth, they suddenly dropped down to Guo Jing's sides. She used her family's "Orchid Brushing Accupoints" (Lan Hua Fu Xue) skills to seal his pressure points, " Deep Pool Liquid Accupoint" (Yuan Ye Xue) on his left arm and "Capital Gate Accupoint" (Jing Men Xue) on his right arm at the same time. These two points were under Guo Jing's arms so that he couldn't use his Wu Gong [martial arts]. If she didn't use such a dirty tactic, how would she be able to seal his pressure points? When Huang Rong threw the baby to her husband, she had already planned all this. Tricked by his wife, Guo Jing collapsed painfully onto the bed, unable to move.

Huang Rong picked up the baby. She removed Guo Jing's shoes, socks, and outer clothing, placing him nicely in bed. She put a pillow under his head, making sure he could rest comfortably, and then took the command emblem from his waist. Guo Jing looked at her, his eyes wide open, yet had no way to resist. Huang Rong put the baby next to him, leaving the two gentlemen lying together, and then covered them both with a cotton blanket, saying: "Jing ge ge, today I am temporarily to blame. As soon as I've seen Fu'er out of city, I will come back to personally cook for you several dishes, kowtow to you three times, and admit my crime."

Having said that, Huang Rong lifted his body up, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Guo Jing had heard such a speech before, then realized that his wife, who was already a mother of three children, was being mischievous, and was not listening to her husband. He dumbfoundedly watched her pursing her lips and floating out of the door. Then he thought about his two sealed pressure points. She probably wouldn't come back to release him, so he quickly used his internal

energy to clear the pressure points. He wouldn't be able to catch up with his daughter anyhow. And for that matter, he didn't quite know whether to laugh or to cry.

Like most mothers Huang Rong was very concerned about her daughter's well-being since her daughter had to cover an arduous and dangerous journey (the more beautiful the daughter, the more hazardous the journey) to Peach Blossom Island (Tao Hua Dao). That's why, after leaving her husband and her baby, she went to her bedroom to fetch her ruan-wei-jia (Hedgehog protective suit), Peach Blossom Island's most treasured object, which she wrapped and clasped under her arm before chasing after her daughter, using her qing gong (lightness kung fu).

As she approached the Nan Men (Southgate) she watched from afar how Guo Fu on the red horse was bickering loudly with the garrison commander. The officer behaved very courteously but strictly. Without being shown a ling-pai (command emblem) he dared not open the city gate; a violation of this rule and he would be sentenced to death. Huang Rong thought: "This blockhead daughter of mine has been overprotected all her life; never being confronted with any problems, she doesn't try to solve difficulties using strategy, she can only shout angrily, which worsens the matter." Huang Rong hurriedly approached, held the ling-pai (which she had snatched from Guo Jing's waist belt) high and shouted: "This is the ling-pai of Honorable Lu! Please examine!"

As we know, the commanding general of Xiangyang was Lu Wende, although in practice it was Guo Jing who lead the city's defense; officially he was only a 'ke qing' (guest minister) who ordered on behalf of Lu.

Seeing Mrs. Guo with the ling-pai, the officer, smiling, immediately commanded the city gate to be opened. He

personally led his horse to Huang Rong and said: "Mrs. Guo, in case you need the horse of this junior officer, please take it".

"Fine, I'll borrow it." Huang Rong said leaping on the horse.

After leaving Xiangyang, mother and daughter rode side by side. Several times Huang Rong wanted to bid farewell and ride back to Xiangyang, but each time she postponed it. So she accompanied her daughter further and further.

At that time, the region encompassing hundreds of li north of Xiangyang was already occupied by the Mongolian soldiers. Most of the Chinese had moved out. But the region south of Xiangyang was still dense with people although they lived in fear.

After about twenty li, dawn was setting in, Huang Rong and her daughter arrived at a small town, its shops and restaurants beginning to open.

"Fu'er", the mother said, "Let's have some breakfast before I return to Xiangyang."

Guo Fu nodded with tears flowing down her cheeks. In her heart she already deeply regretted having cut off Yang Guo's arm in anger, causing her now to be caught in such a horrible mess.

They went into a restaurant and ordered cooked beef and rice cakes. In a short time the meal was served but because they were depressed they didn't have much of an appetite.

Huang Rong gave the wrapped up ruan-wei-jia with the advice to wear the protective vest later on when Guo Fu stayed in an inn. She gave advice and admonitions with Guo Fu listening and nodding several times, still weeping. Seeing her daughter in such a pitiful state Huang Rong actually felt

very reluctant and sorry to leave her, but her duty as wife and mother forced her to return to Xiangyang.

Suddenly, looking westwards she caught a glimpse of a basket filled with big red apples in a fruit shop. "Before I bid farewell to Fu'er I'll buy her some apples", she thought.

"Fu'er", she said rising, "You should force yourself to eat even though you don't have any appetite. In times of war you never know at what time you can get food again. Wait a moment; I'll buy you some fruit." She went out to approach the fruit shop.

After choosing ten scarlet apples, putting them in her bosom, Huang Rong groped in her pocket for money. Suddenly, a very loud woman's voice was heard: "Give me twenty catties of rice and one catty of salt. (1 catty = 1.1 pounds/ 500 grams) Put them all in this sack, please."

Huang Rong cast a glance. The person speaking was a Taoist priestess [dao gu] wearing a yellow robe, standing in front of the neighboring shop.

The Taoist priestess was holding a baby with her left hand and groping in her pocket for some money. The baby's clothes were made of lake green satin with a small dark red horse embroidery, an embroidery Huang Rong used to sew. As soon as she noticed that, her hand trembled and her heart pounded, the money in her hand fell into the basket. That baby must certainly be her own daughter Guo Xiang!

Huang Rong had never actually met Li Mochou before. But with one look she saw the fly whisk, the Taoist robe and she was able to deduct in an instant that this Taoist priestess was the infamous Scarlet Serpent Deity, Li Mochou.

At the time she gave birth to Guo Xiang, the Mongolian enemy was attacking and the situation was chaotic; she'd

had no chance to examine the baby's face. That's why, like being magnetized. she was drawn to look several times at the baby. Although the baby was still diminutive, it already showed signs of natural female beauty. With her cute features and ruddy complexion, she seemed well-fed and healthy looking. Huang Rong was pleasantly surprised, she almost shed tears. Polu, the baby she breast-fed herself, didn't look nearly that healthy.

After paying some silver, Li Mochou took the sack and left.

Huang Rong understood the urgency of the situation; without informing Guo Fu she gave chase. She thought: "This poisonous female is terribly cruel. Should I try to use brute force, she might harm Xiang'er."

After leaving the city, Li Mochou ran westwards. While following, Huang Rong thought: "Li Mochou is Guo'er's Martial Uncle. Although they don't have a good relationship, after Fu'er cut-off Guo'er's arm, we could say that the GuMu Pai (Ancient Tomb sect) and the Guo Family were bound in a feud. If this woman is going to meet Guo'er and Miss Long, I won't be a match against all three of them together. It's wiser to force a one-to-one fight with her now".

Li Mochou changed course to the South and entered the woods. Huang Rong accelerated, circling the woods and confronted the demoness. Seeing the sudden appearance of a beautiful woman, Li Mochou stopped short in surprise.

"If I'm not mistaken, I'm facing 'Chi-lian xian-zi' [Scarlet Serpent Deity] Taoist Elder Li", Huang Rong said with a smile. "I'm very pleased to meet you!"

Noticing the lithe and swift movements of the woman, the pale-yellow bamboo cane in her waist belt, Li Mochou at once put the sack down, she saluted smiling: "Junior has admired

Mrs. Guo's famous name for ages, I feel delighted to meet you now."

At that time in the martial realm, the most famous female martial experts were Huang Rong and Li Mochou. 'Qing-jing san-ren' [Sage of Tranquility] Sun Bu'Er was already famous before them but her wugong (martial arts) were inferior. Xiao Longnu was good enough wugong-wise but she was still too young and not experienced; she was barely known.

Both tigresses faced each other. One was the pampered daughter of the Eastern heretic Huang Yaoshi, wife of Da Xia (great hero) Guo Jing, Bang Zhu (clan chief) of Gai Bang (Beggar Clan), the other was the notorious cruel demoness armed with a fly whisk, "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" and "Five Poisons Divine Palm", three lethal skills which had caused much trembling and fear in the Jianghu realm.

It's the first time these two people have met, they scrutinized each other carefully, and each marveling about how unexpectedly beautiful the other was. But secretly each was on guard because surely each other's fame was based on real ability.

Mrs. Guo said with a smile: "Taoist Elder Li, junior has always revered you, don't be over polite".

Li Mochou answered: "Mrs. Guo is chief of the Beggar Clan and a leading personality in the martial realm, junior regrets not having met you much sooner."

After both sides exchanged the usual pleasantries, Huang Rong asked: "Elder Li, the baby you carry is very sweet and cute. Whose baby is it?" As she said that, Huang Rong had already thought of ways to get the baby back before they began the duel.

"This is very shaming for Gu Mu Pai" [Ancient Tomb Sect], the demoness answered. "Junior has not been able to guide my shi mei (younger apprentice sister) on the right path. This is Long shi mei's baby"

Huang Rong was surprised. She couldn't guess why Li Mochou was lying.

But the demoness wasn't deliberately lying. She did believe the baby was Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu's child. Because she was enraged that her shifu only taught the Jade Heart Manual to her shimei, she used this opportunity to mention her shimei's sins.

"I thought Miss Long a decent girl", Huang Rong said. "It's unbelievable such a thing has happened. Who's the father?"

"The father?" the demoness said. "Hmm...It's definitely shameful to mention! The father of this child is Yang Guo, my shimei's disciple." Huang Rong, who was usually good at faking, couldn't help reddening, and anger swelled up.

But she only changed colour briefly and instantly her expression returned to normal. She said: "That is deliberately creating trouble. But the baby is so cute. Elder Li, may I hug it?" She took an apple from her bosom and moved it to-and-fro in front of the baby. "Good child, your round face certainly resembles this apple."

After stealing Guo Xiang, Li Mochou hid herself in the woods and happily played everyday with the baby. Each morning she would milk the leopard to feed the baby. Li Mochou had committed abundant crimes, but basically she wasn't cruel at heart. Because of rejected love, she hated the world and its inhabitants, she turned cruel. Since meeting the cute and sweet Guo Xiang, her inborn mother instinct was awakened. Often in the deep of the night she would think about the baby. Deep in her heart she was uncertain that she would

agree, in case Xiao Longnu wanted to exchange the 'Jade Heart Manual' for the baby.

As Huang Rong wanted to hug the baby, like all mothers, who were always pleased if their babies were praised, she also was happy and was ready to give in.

Huang Rong's hands barely touched the baby's clothes, she couldn't hide the loving expression on her face, the radiant expression of a loving mother who had thought of her missing child day and night without knowing its fate and whereabouts. Now the child in question was at arms length. Li Mochou noticed the look and thought: "If she only wants to hug the baby, why that sudden change?" She hurriedly pulled back and leapt two zhangs backwards. She barely touched the ground as Huang Rong followed closing on her. Expecting an attack, Li Mochou heaved the sack at Huang Rong's face.

Huang Rong leapt to evade, causing the rice and salt to scatter on the ground. Li Mochou, whisk in the hand, said with a smile: "Mrs. Guo, do you intend to help Yang Guo get his child back?"

Huang Rong, reasoning the demoness to be suspicious already, now had decided to use force. She said smilingly: "I only want to hug that lovely child, you think too lowly of me."

Li Mochou said: "Guo Family's renowned name shook the martial realm, junior admired it greatly. Today I have seen the display of skills; the fame is really not an empty one. But junior has to deal with another matter and must leave." She was afraid that Guo Jing would appear, she turned and walked away.

Huang Rong leaped up and in midair drew her bamboo stick. The original "Dog beating Stick" was passed on to Lu Youjiao, the stick she had now was of the same length and weight but

of a light-yellow colour. In midair she aimed at an Accupoint on Li Mochou's back. Li Mochou angrily thought: "We don't have any enmity for each other. Today we've met for the first time, I've talked with due respect to you, why do you attack me without any reason at all?" She checked the stick with her whisk. Huang Rong attacked continuously with six or seven moves, forcing Li Mochou to the defensive. Li Mochou's wugong was actually slightly below Huang Rong's and further, she carried a baby, a few stances more and she was in great difficulty.

After several moves Li Mochou saw that Huang Rong didn't aim her attack at the baby, she thought: "Each time I fight carrying this baby seems to be an advantage." She said smilingly: "Mrs. Guo, the world is vast and there will be other occasions, why do you choose here and now to try my skills? Should you make a mistake, you will hurt this lovely child."

Huang Rong thought: "Doesn't she really know this baby is mine, or is she just pretending? I'll try her first." She said: "Thinking of this child, my first ten moves were not seriously executed, if you still want to carry that baby it's not my fault should she get hurt." With her stick she aimed at Li Mochou's right leg, the latter used her whisk to parry, before both weapons clashed Huang Rong already changed direction to the left chest. The attack threatened both Li Mochou and the baby. If it was successful, not only would Li Mochou be injured but the baby would lose its' life.

Using the stick, Huang Rong had natural control, the stick's end neared Guo Xiang's clothes and it seemed the baby couldn't be saved. But in reality Huang Rong had perfect control on the force and reach of the stick. Li Mochou, who was very worried, surely didn't know that, she hurriedly evaded to the right, unavoidably revealing a flaw, the stick touched her left shin. Nearly tripping she took two steps before regaining her balance again. She wielded the whisk in

front of her body for protection, turning around she said angrily: "Mrs. Guo, you are so famous; how can you be that cruel to a baby?"

Huang Rong, who saw Li Mochou wasn't pretending, felt great happiness and mused: "You want to protect my daughter; I'll frighten you a bit." With a faint smile she said: "Elder Li said this child is illegitimate, why should you want to keep it alive?" With that she launched a chain of attacks all aimed at Guo Xiang. Li Mochou hopped to the left and right frantically, holding the baby tightly. The baby, who now cried loudly, was feeling uncomfortable due to the jolting movements. Huang Rong said silently: "My clever child, don't be startled. To rescue you, mom is forced to do this." Although in her heart she felt pity, she launched several swift and lethal attacks in the direction of Guo Xiang. Li Mochou anxiously drew back several steps lifting the whisk in front of Guo Xiang to protect her and called out: "Mrs. Guo, what do you really want?"

Huang Rong said smilingly: "In this era, the martial realm only acknowledges Elder Li and junior as the outstanding female fighters. This time we met by chance, why not use this occasion to arrange a little try out between us?"

The attacks on Guo Xiang had angered Li Mochou; the challenge had angered her even more. She thought: "If your husband was here I will probably be afraid, but we are both females, do you think I fear you?" Immediately she humphed, saying: "Mrs. Guo intends to grant me a lesson; that is what junior always has hoped for."

Huang Rong: "If you carry a baby during the duel and I win, it won't satisfy either of us. Put it aside, and then we can move more freely."

Li Mochou thought: "Guo husband and wife are renowned for their righteousness, but judging her ferocity towards a mere

baby makes me believe that fame is much too exaggerated." She looked in all directions and saw in the East several big trees with a strip of thick grass beneath. She put the baby on the grass, patted it to sooth it, turned and invited Huang Rong to begin.

After ten stances Huang Rong realized that their wugong was about the same level. If she tried now to snatch Guo Xiang away and fight the demoness, then it was probable that Guo Xiang might get hurt. If she killed the demoness first, she wouldn't have any trouble at all. This female had committed all sorts of crimes, thinking of that, Huang Rong developed a killing intent. Li Mochou thought that her adversary would stop at nothing, seeing Huang Rong often glancing at the baby, she was worried that Huang Rong would carry out a sudden, fake attack and hurt the baby instead. That's why she positioned herself between Huang Rong and the baby.

During the fight Huang Rong had thought up seven or eight stratagems, each of them would dispatch Li Mochou but unavoidably also endangered Guo Xiang. She pondered: "Looks like this demoness truly cherishes Guo Xiang. If the baby is in her hands and I couldn't snatch it for a while, it wouldn't matter much, whereas if I take risks the baby could be endangered." Suddenly she had an idea: "Elder Li, our wugong doesn't differ much, a decision would take some time. If meanwhile a wild animal appears and devours the child, wouldn't it divert our concentration? The best way is to take that little bastard's life now, and then we could fight at ease." After saying that, she bent, picked up a pebble, and with her middle finger flicked it, whizzing in the direction of Guo Xiang.

She had used the unique Huang family skill "Divine Flicking Finger" (dan zhi shen tong). Li Mochou, who knew that lethal skill, hurriedly fended off the pebble with her whisk and

shouted: "What has this child done to you? Why do you repeatedly try to kill her?"

Huang Rong secretly thought this was funny, she actually flicked with a retracting force, as soon as the pebble was in the vicinity of Guo Xiang, it would fly back. Huang Rong smiled and said: "Elder Li, you certainly defend that child with all your might. People who don't know would certainly think it is...it is your..."

Li Mochou: "... is my child?" After saying that, she blushed.

Huang Rong said smilingly: "You are single, so naturally you can't have a child. I mean people would think it is your younger sister." Li Mochou humphed, thinking nothing of it. She didn't realize that the competitive Huang Rong also wouldn't want to lose even in a battle of insults. If Guo Xiang was Li Mochou's sister, then Guo Jing and Huang Rong would be Li Mochou's parents. That's Huang Rong's hidden revenge for Li Mochou's recent remark that Yang Guo was the father of Guo Xiang.

Li Mochou: "Let's start again!"

Huang Rong: "You are thinking about the child and can't concentrate, even if I win, it wouldn't be a fair win. I'll surround the child with thorn canes, so wild beasts can't come near her, and then we can both concentrate on the fight." Saying that, she took a golden knife from her waist to cut canes and wound them around the big trees surrounding Guo Xiang.

At first the demoness was wary but she observed that Huang Rong did it very meticulously and she thought: "In the Jianghu realm Mrs. Guo is praised as multi talented, she really lives up to that reputation." But seeing Huang Rong's face bearing a mocking smile she got scared again and shouted: "That's enough!"

Huang Rong: "If you say it's enough, that's all right with me. Elder Li, you've met my father, haven't you?"

Li Mochou: "Yes, I have."

Huang Rong: "Yang Guo told me you've composed a poem of four lines to ridicule my father, haven't you? It sounds like this:

'Peach Blossom Island's master,
Has numerous disciples,
Five against one,
The laughing stock of the Jianghu realm!'"

Li Mochou thought: "Stupid of me not to think about that. Now I understand that she hampers me because of those four lines." She retorted coldly: "That day it was five against one, wasn't it?"

Huang Rong: "Today it's one against one; we'll see who will be the laughing stock of the Jianghu realm."

Li Mochou: "Stop being arrogant! I've seen a lot of Peach Blossom Island's wugong (martial arts), it's mediocre at the most."

Huang Rong sneered: "Not to mention the Island's wugong, I think you can't even cope with the Island's non-wugong. If you don't believe me, just try to get that child back."

Li Mochou was startled: "Has she injured the child?" Hurriedly she jumped in the cane circle following its turns, hearing the baby cry she felt relieved, but after several turns she ended up out of the circle again. She was puzzled, trying to leap in again she was not careful enough, a thorn had ripped her Taoist robe. She didn't dare to be careless again, looking where to land her feet she suddenly saw Huang Rong standing in the middle of the circle bending down to hug the

child. She was shocked and immediately shouted: "Put the child down!" She deliberately tried and tried to bridge the circle to get in but ended on the outside again. The seven or eight big trees occupying an area of about several zhangs formed a maze. She saw Huang Rong putting the child down and dexterously leaping to the East and the West to leave the circle easily.

The 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' now remembered the fight against Yang Guo and Chen Ying with them using piled earth before the hut, preventing her from attacking them directly. Now Huang Rong probably also had used the "Eight Diagrams of the Nine Palaces Divine Method" (Jiu gong ba gua shen shu) of Tao Hua Island in arranging the cane circle. Li Mochou decided to beat the enemy first and rescue the child later. She leapt several zhangs away and was ready to fight again. When Huang Rong saw her adversary confused she secretly rejoiced but seeing Li Mochou's firm decision she also felt a kind of admiration. After successfully securing her daughter in a safe place, she attacked Li Mochou with the stance "To Push the Dog to Lower its Head" (an gou di tou). Li Mochou entangled the stick with the whisk and further attacked Huang Rong. Both had swiftly exchanged several stances.

Li Mochou changed her fighting tactics but her adversary's bamboo stick technique was really incomparable, with much effort she managed to resist about ten stances, this was already a rare feat in the martial realm. The bamboo stick was a light weapon and could by no means kill like a sharp weapon, but it managed to threaten all main 36 accupoints on the body. Li Mochou again managed to resist several stances; there was sweat on her forehead. Li Mochou put the whisk in front of her body to protect it then leapt backwards, saying: "Mrs. Guo, your Bamboo Stick Technique (zhu bang fa) is really superb, junior admits defeat. But junior has a question which needs an explanation."

Huang Rong: "Can't imagine what matter I'm able to explain to you!"

Li Mochou: "The bamboo stick technique is a unique skill of the Nine Fingered Divine Beggar, whereas Tao Hua Island's wugong is famous in the realm, why doesn't Mrs. Guo use your own family's wugong?"

Huang Rong thought: "This person is tricky; she isn't able to win against my stick and tries to provoke me." She said with a smile: "If Elder knows this stick method is Nine Fingered Divine Beggar's, then you also know what it's called?" Li Mochou humphed but didn't reply. Huang Rong sneered: "It's called 'if you meet a dog, flog it' stick method."

Li Mochou resigned. She didn't succeed in luring Huang Rong to use her palm instead of the stick; the enemy even mocked her, using her glib tongue. Inserting the whisk on her waist she said: "Beggars use to chant the lian-hua (begging) chant, their Bang Zhu is no exception." She strode to the nearest tree and sat on a branch.

That Li Mochou admitted defeat was what Huang Rong wanted. But the demoness didn't leave and Huang Rong could guess her intention very well, she would immediately attack as soon as Huang Rong tried to get the baby. With Huang Rong holding the baby and hampered by it, their skills would even out. So, with the baby practically in her hands, she couldn't bring it safely home without killing or injuring the demoness.

Suddenly Huang Rong moved, approaching Li Mochou with three steps to the left and four steps to the right. Those steps seemed common, but they bore the intricacies of the "Eight Diagrams" (Ba-gua), in whatever direction Li Mochou would try to flee, Huang Rong could still have blocked her path, that's the purpose of the movement. Huang Rong already threatened her left elbow with the stick.

Li Mochou parried with her palm and shouted: "After Chen Xuanfeng and Mei Chaofeng died, Huang Yaoshi truly has no disciples who have inherited his skills." What Li Mochou said not only ridiculed Huang Rong for using the 'foreign' "Dog Beating Stick" method but also to try to humiliate her father as well. Actually Huang Rong had inherited the Huang family's skill "Jade Flute Sword Method" (Yu xiao jian fa) with profound mastery, but using a sword and not a stick, she was unsure of winning against such a formidable adversary. She answered faintly smiling: "It is true that my father had unworthy disciples, they certainly can't be compared to pure and chaste apprentice sisters like Elder Li and Miss Long."

The demoness went sick with rage. Waving her sleeve, two "Soul Freezing Silver Needles" were shot, aiming at Huang Rong's lower abdomen. Although she was incomparably cruel and could kill without batting an eye, she was still a virgin. Hearing Huang Rong put her on par with her 'dishonored' apprentice sister, made her use her lethal poisoned needles.

Huang Rong, staying very close, never had a chance to dodge them. But having perfect command of the Dog Beating Stick method, she still could hurriedly fend them off with the stick. The needles flew about two inches past her face; she could faintly sniff their poisonous smell. She remembered her eagle whose foot was hit by such a needle and it took about six or seven months to cure. Meanwhile another pair of needles shot out.

Huang Rong hastily leapt up and ran towards the East, two needles whizzing near her ear. She thought: "This place is too near to Xiang'er; if she got struck by a random flying needle, it would be lethal for her." She rushed further, leaving the forest.

Li Mochou chased joyfully, she felt that with the exception of 'Da gau bang fa', her other skills were superior to that of Mrs.

Guo. She shouted: "Victory or defeat hasn't been decided, why do you run away?" Huang Rong stopped, faintly smiling.

Li Mochou said reproachingly: "Mrs. Guo, do you need the stick to keep my needles away?"

Huang Rong knew that as long as she used the stick, Li Mochou wouldn't accept her defeat. She inserted the stick on her waist and chuckled: "Li dao-zhang, I've long heard about your incomparable "Five Poisons Divine Palm" (Wu du shen zhang) and how it has killed numerous people, junior wants to try out that ominous palm."

Li Mochou was rather startled: "She is aware of my fierce (li hai) palm but wants to try it." She channeled her inner force to the palm and said: "I also want to try Tao Hua Island's "Luo Ying Divine Sword Palm" (luo ying shen jian zhang)." She moved her left palm to parry Huang Rong's palm, her right palm aiming for the shoulder. Both palms moved at the same time, but the right palm also ejected two needles aiming between Huang Rong's chest and belly. This striking and simultaneously ejecting needles stance had been developed by herself after leaving Gu Mu. The adversary who only guarded against the palms wouldn't think of being attacked with the needles at such a close distance. Many wuxia experts had been killed by this move of hers.

Huang Rong retracted her left palm to parry, her right hand moving about her bosom as if she herself wanted to pull out a hidden projectile (an qi) but it was already too late, the needles were already about five inches near her ribs, even someone with a much higher ability than her wouldn't avoid being hit. Li Mochou felt up surging joy as she saw the needles penetrating the cloth. "Oh!" Huang Rong cried bending, her right hand touching her stomach, her left palm striking Li Mochou's chest. That palm really came swiftly, Li Mochou cried: "Good! She dodged and struck with both

palms aiming at Huang Rong's chest. She knew the poison would instantly show its effect. So her stroke only was meant to shove Huang Rong a bit before she died of the poisoning. She saw Huang Rong's upper body only showing a slight reaction and she wondered how the poison could paralyze that quick. Her pair of palms soon touched the chest of her adversary; she felt some slight pain from being pricked. Hurriedly and in great surprise she leapt backwards, looking at her palms she saw two tiny holes, black blood oozing out, revealing she had been injured by her own needles. She was startled, angry and didn't understand how it could have happened. She saw Huang Rong taking two apples from her bosom with a smile, lifted them high, and showing a needle in each apple. Li Mochou now realized that Huang Rong hid the apples, didn't try to parry her stroke, put her hand in her bosom to hold the apples, receiving the needles and lured Li Mochou to strike the apples herself.

Li Mochou was not a stupid person, but in a duel of cunning today she had to admit defeat, she moved her hand to her bosom to take the antidote. But with a windy sound Huang Rong had attacked her face. Li Mochou hurriedly lifted her left hand to fend, suddenly Huang Rong's snow white palm opened, its five fingers, shaped gracefully like an orchid, threatened the xiao hai accupoint on her right elbow. She thought: "Is that the famous "Orchid Hand Strikes Accupoint" (lan hua fu xue shou)?" Her right hand, which had failed to take the antidote, was trying to grasp Huang Rong's hand. Huang Rong retracted her right hand, her left hand aiming at the que pen accupoint on the neck. She attacked using Luo ying palm alternately with orchid hand, her moves were not only swift and fierce but also utterly graceful. Li Mochou couldn't help thinking: "Today I have witnessed Tao Hua Island's divine techniques, it is really superb, and even if I was not poisoned I wouldn't be her match." She eagerly withdrew to take the antidote, but Huang Rong attacked

again, not giving her time for it. The "Soul Freezing Silver Needle" had severe poison on it, hadn't Li Mochou been used to it, she would already have broken down. But even so, as soon as the poison had reached the pit of her stomach, it would be hopeless for her. Huang Rong observed her face getting paler, her adversary got weaker and weaker, Huang Rong thought of the demoness killing the Wu brothers' mother, at last now she would succumb to her own poison, Huang Rong pressed steadily on, but also guarded herself, fearing a last counter attempt by her adversary.

Li Mochou felt a numbness creeping up her elbow, after several stances more the numbness had reached her armpit, her arm couldn't bend anymore. She called out: "Hold a minute!" Stepping aside she said: "Mrs. Guo, since I've killed many people, I hadn't expected to live this long. In martial arts and cunning I'm inferior to you; it's fitting to die by your hands. But I must be bold and beg something of you."

Huang Rong: "Beg for what?" She guessed the demoness was trying to use delaying tactics so she watched her hands carefully; she saw her arms sagging and she then listened to her adversary saying: "I don't have an affectionate relationship with my shi mei, but her child is adorably cute, I beseech you to show a forgiving heart and not to take her young life."

Huang Rong felt the Scarlet Serpent Deity spoke with sincerity, she was unable to suppress being moved. She thought: "This demoness' misdeeds heaped up like a mountain, who would have thought that in the time of approaching death she would show such a loving concern for my daughter." She answered: "The parents of this child are no ordinary people, if I let her live she would pose a great danger to me."

Li Mochou sighed and said with a failing voice: "I understand, but I'm still hoping you would be forgiving"

Huang Rong was very moved, but wanted to try her further, she approached and hit an accupoint before taking a bottle out, asking: "Is this the antidote?"

Li Mochou: "Yes!"

Huang Rong: "I can't forgive two people at the same time; should I forgive you, I have to kill the baby. If you yourself choose to die, I will save the baby."

Li Mochou was totally dumbfounded. Never did she dream of getting a second chance to live, but she was unable to ask Huang Rong to kill the child, whereas to sacrifice herself in order to save the child, she saw Huang Rong in front of her, waving a pill from the bottle, waiting for her reply. She trembled, stuttering: "I, I"

Huang Rong thought: "The fact alone that she is hesitating counts as a plus point for her. No matter what choice she makes, I must let her live. She has accumulated such a huge blood debt; there will certainly be someone in the future that will take revenge on her."

Thereupon she said smilingly: "Elder Li, many thanks to you for showing such a loving care for Xiang'er." Li Mochou, confused: "What?" Huang Rong chuckled: "The baby is surnamed Guo with the name Xiang, she is my and Guo Jing's daughter. Soon after her birth she fell into Miss Long hands, I don't know how you came to your misunderstanding. Because you have taken good care of her, then junior must thank you profusely."

Saying that, she bowed clasping her hands, then put a pill in Li Mochou's mouth, asking: "Is this enough?" Li Mochou answered sorrowfully: "I'm heavily poisoned, I need three

pills." Huang Rong answered: "Very well", gave her two more pills, then thought that the antidote could be of some use later on, so she put the bottle in her bosom, saying: "Your accupoints would unseal in three hours time."

Huang Rong returned to the forest and thought: "Fu'er would be impatiently waiting for me, but if she sees her sister she will be very happy." Entering the cane circle her body went cold like entering an icehouse. The cane circle looked no different but Guo Xiang was nowhere to be seen!. Huang Rong's heart beat madly, although usually very smart, she didn't know what to do.

After a while she calmed herself down and thought: "I must not worry, if a person took Xiang'er during my fight with Li Mochou, he can't be very far." She climbed up the highest tree to look off in the distance from that high place. The surrounding area of Xiangyang was flat; she saw nothing suspicious within a radius of several li. Huang Rong thought: "This person must still be in the near vicinity." Thereupon she looked carefully for traces around the cane circle but nothing was moved away. She pondered: "This cane maze is arranged according to Jiu Gong Ba Gua positions according to my own father's concept; except Tao Hua Island's [Peach Blossom Island] disciples nobody has an inkling of it. Even Jinlun Fawang (Golden Wheel Monk) with his broad knowledge couldn't solve its secrets. Has my father arrived?...Oh my god!"

She remembered her meeting with Jinlun Fawang several months ago, she had arranged a stone maze, she had explained to Yang Guo about the system, although he was not yet skilled in Jiu Gong Ba Gua, he wouldn't have difficulties solving this cane maze. Thinking of Yang Guo she couldn't help but be anxious: "Fu'er cut off his arm so he has a feud with the Guo family and now Xiang'er is in his hands; he doesn't have to kill her, he could just leave her in the

wilderness and she would certainly die." Thinking about the baby, she thought of her bad luck of being taken soon after she was born, she uncontrollably shed a tear. But being very experienced, she looked again very carefully for traces around the spot but couldn't find any. She mused: "Although his qing gong is extraordinary, he must have left traces here in the mud, or could he possibly fly?"

This guess of Huang Rong was correct. Guo Xiang was taken by Yang Guo and he got into the cane maze from the air!

That day Yang Guo observed how Huang Rong hit Guo Jing's accupoint and then followed her daughter out of town. Yang Guo also followed them from afar, thinking: "Aunt Guo, your daughter owes me an arm, if your husband doesn't succeed in cutting it off, let me do it. I can see you, you can't see me; if you want to save your daughter's arm, I think that won't be easy." Huang Rong and her daughter being preoccupied didn't realize they were being followed. The meeting with Li Mochou in the small town and the fight, all were observed by Yang Guo. As the fighters left the forest, he immediately jumped up a tree, bound the end of a cane to the tree, slid into the middle of the cane circle on the cane, clamped Guo Xiang's waist with his feet, then pulled his body up again into the tree. After landing on the ground again after several tree jumps, he returned to the small town. He saw Guo Fu on the street corner, holding the reins of the hong ma (red horse) waiting impatiently for her mother. Yang Guo leapt to sit astride the red horse. Guo Fu was startled, turning she saw that the unexpected rider was Yang Guo. She unsheathed her sword, her normal sword, not Xiao Longnu's "Lady Sword", which she didn't like using.

Yang Guo saw her face turning pale with a frightened look, if he had wanted to cut her arm off now it would be all too easy. Somehow in the last moment he moved his right shoulder, the empty sleeve wrapped around the sword and flung it

away. Guo Fu had let the sword go and it hit the corner of a wall. Yang Guo's left hand snatched the reins; clamping his legs to the horse's belly urged it to gallop away like the wind. Guo Fu slowly walked to pick up her sword; it was bent like a square.

To use soft material as a weapon was GuMu Pai's [Ancient Tomb's] unique wugong, Li Mochou used a whisk and Dragon girl used a silk belt. Yang Guo used his strong inner energy and the sleeve had struck like a steel whip. Yang Guo, holding Guo Xiang, sped the 'han xue bao ma' (precious horse with sweat like blood) soon leaving the small town a couple of li behind, that's why they couldn't be detected by Huang Rong from the tree top.

Yang Guo rode speedily; he saw the trees on the roadside flying away. He looked at Guo Xiang on his bosom, seeing her tender and delicate small face, he thought: "Uncle and Aunt Guo, your youngest daughter will always be mine, think of it as a kind of compensation for my lost arm. They would feel grieved and dejected, especially because they excel me." After a while he thought: "Why didn't I take revenge directly? Is it because Guo Fu is a beautiful young girl? If the one who cut off my arm was a male, would I also have forgiven him?" Thinking about it half a day he could only shake his head and smile wryly. He himself couldn't understand his unstable and unpredictable behavior.

After traveling two hundred li there gradually appeared houses with smoke coming from them. He got something to eat and Guo Xiang some goat milk. He decided to go to the Ancient Tomb looking for the Xiao Longnu. After several days he arrived at Mount Zhongnan. As the horse climbed the mountain and found the right path to the Ancient Tomb he pondered about past things.

The inscription 'Tomb of the Living Dead' still stood on the majestic tombstone. After Li Mochou's attack, the tomb had been sealed, if one wanted to enter, they had to use the secret entrance through the water. For him it wouldn't pose a problem but what about Guo Xiang? She would drown in the water. But the thought of soon meeting Xiao Longnu in the tomb greatly excited him. He took a pastry from his pocket, chewed a bit for Guo Xiang, and then he found a cave nearby. He put Guo Xiang in it and hid the cave mouth with thorny wood. Whether he met Xiao Longnu or not in the tomb, he planned to return and put the baby in a safer place.

Suddenly he heard the far away sound of weapons clashing coming from the direction of the Chongyang Palace. He was suspicious for a bit and then saw a buzzing silver wheel flying fiercely into the sky. That was Jinlun Fawang's weapon. Growing curious, he hurriedly followed the sound to the Chongyang Palace. During this time, Xiao Longnu was enduring Quanzhen Five Masters' "Gathering of the Big Dipper" (Qi Xing Ju Hui) and Jinlun Fawang's wheel strike, her body seriously injured. Had Yang Guo arrived earlier, he could have prevented the disaster. But how could things be as easy as one desired? Life was full of sorrow and joy, the difference between disaster and good fortune was often very small.

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Upon seeing Yang Guo, the Quanzhen Five Masters knew this mess was escalating. Qiu Chuji cried out: "My Chongyang Palace has been a respected place but today all of you are here to violate it. Why is that?"

Wang Chuyi was also furious, shouting: "Long Guniang [Miss Long], even though your Gu Mu sect and our Quanzhen sect share the same mountain ridge, we both stick to our own sides. What is the reason you are leading these foreign

people from the West, these evil miscreants, to kill many disciples of mine?"

Xiao Longnu, badly injured, thought, these people couldn't tell right from wrong, why bother arguing with them? Their many disciples witnessed how Yin Zhiping was pierced by her sword and how Zhao Zhijing was wounded but, in this time of trouble, nobody came forward to explain the truth.

Yang Guo gently stretched his left arm to support Xiao Longnu's waist, softly saying: "Gu Gu, let us go back to Gu Mu. Don't pay attention to these people!"

Xiao Longnu then asked: "Does your arm still hurt?"

Yang Guo shook his head, replying: "It's all fine."

Xiao Longnu continued: "Has the Passion Flower (Qing Hua) Poison in your body acted up again?"

Yang Guo replied: "A few times, but it's nothing to worry about."

After being slashed by Xiao Longnu, Zhao Zhijing went to hide, not daring to show his face. Seeing the Quanzhen Five Masters coming out, he realized that after a series of investigation, he would be expelled from his charge and also severely punished. Originally he was only of a short-tempered and narrow-minded nature, not really a traitorous and wicked person. Only he was considered the first at Wu Gong in the third generation disciples, yet the Zhang Jiao (leader of the generation) position fell to Yin Zhiping. His resentment festered, trapping him into his erroneous way of thinking. Quickly looking at the situation, disturbed and afraid of his five teachers, he grasped at the present opportunity. Suppose Jinlun Fawang and the Mongolian warriors wiped out the Quanzhen Five Masters, he would be able to escape forever. Also, he saw Yang Guo's right arm

missing and left arm holding Xiao Longnu, looking like his hands were bound, waiting for violent death. To the betraying disciple, Yang Guo was his most hated person, now he had a good opportunity, why would he let it pass? Glancing at Lu Qingdu who was nearby, he loudly shouted: "Treacherous disciple Yang Guo, your two masters are speaking to you. You don't kneel down and kowtow, how dare you to pay no attention?"

Yang Guo turned back, his eyes filled with hatred, and thought: "Gu Gu has already wounded one Quanzhen smelly priest. Today I'll temporarily pay no mind to you. I'll deal with you later." Sweeping his empty sleeve at the crowd disgustedly while supporting Xiao Longnu, they then moved forward.

Zhao Zhijing shouted: "Fight!" He and Lu Qingdu both pulled out their swords, attacking Yang Guo's right side. Although Zhao Zhijing had been wounded earlier, the damage was not severe. His sword was thrust towards Yang Guo's missing arm to stop him from fighting back but it was held down by a strong wind, which was actually caused by Yang Guo's cultivated internal energy.

Even though Qiu Chuji didn't particularly care for Yang Guo's arrogant ways of doing as he pleased, and not honoring traditions, he thought about Guo Jing's great trust and also his master-disciple bond with Yang Guo's father, Yang Kang. He shouted: "Zhijing put down your sword. Show mercy!"

On the other side Ma Guangzuo loudly cursed: "Old fart, aren't you ashamed? Stabbing a person's missing arm!" He and Yang Guo were very good friends. Seeing Yang Guo in danger, Ma Guangzuo rushed to help but he was a distance away so his help was too late.

There suddenly was a flashing gray shadow; Lu Qingdu's fat body flew up. He let out the Wah-Wah battle cry before a

crashing sound came as the fat body hit Nimoxing. Based on Nimoxing's Wu Gong, even though it took him by surprise, he shouldn't have been hit. Since both his legs had been removed, he used both hands to prop himself with a crutch, and was not able to push out to defend himself. He was hit immediately, and collapsed. While trying to support himself on the ground, Nimoxing's crutch hit Lu Qingdu in the back, knocking him out.

On this side Yang Guo's right foot stepped on Zhao Zhijing's long sword, Zhao Zhijing used his force to pull it out, his face turning bright red. Unexpectedly, the long sword wouldn't move an inch.

At the time both swords were thrusting towards him, Yang Guo's empty right sleeve fiercely brushed out, sending a rush of great force to throw Lu Qingdu to the ground. Zhao Zhijing, however, felt the sleeve abruptly sinking, caused by an "extremely heavy" body anchor. This forced the long sword down. Yang Guo stepped out with his foot, stepping on the blade of the sword. He had practiced his swordplay and anchoring technique in mountain streams and even strong current couldn't topple him. This time, when he put his foot down, it was like the weight of a mountain, how would Zhao Zhijing's force be able to pull away the sword?

Yang Guo coldly said: "Zhao Dao Shi [Priest Zhao], at the time I was with Guo Da Sha [the Chivalrous Guo] at Da Sheng Guan, you pronounced yourself my master. Today how would you be able to go on saying that? Considering that in the past I used to call you master, I'll let you off!" Saying that, without moving his right foot, the powerful force beneath it suddenly vanished without a trace.

Applying full force to pull back the sword that was suddenly released, Zhao Zhijing's hand was suddenly in the air. The sword snapped back, making a crashing sound as its handle

hit his chest hard. Undoubtedly, the sword handle struck him with his own force. With this strength, if used to hit an enemy, the enemy wouldn't be able to block and must use internal force to counter the strike. Now hitting himself involuntarily with no counter-force, Zhao Zhijing felt severe pain in his chest and coughed up blood. His vision went dark, his eyes rolled upwards and he collapsed.

Wang Chuyi and Liu Chuxuan pulled their swords out from their sheaths, dividing themselves left and right to attack Yang Guo. Suddenly, a shadow dashed out, knocking the two swords out of the way. This person was of course Nimoxing. Even though he did hit Lu Qingdu, throwing him onto the ground, his mind was hateful. It was originally Yang Guo who started his troubles. Whirling his crutch and leaping forward, his left crutch struck the two swords while the right one attacked Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu.

Knowing Nimoxing's Wu Gong by heart, Yang Guo would only use his empty sleeve but then was afraid that he wouldn't be able to subdue Nimoxing in one strike. By now Xiao Longnu's body was powerless, leaning feebly against Yan Guo's so his body slanted to the left while he was wielding his right empty sleeve. Rolling Xiao Longnu's delicate waist, he let her body lean on the right front of his chest. Then his left hand drew out the black heavy iron sword [Xuan Tie Zhong Jian] that he carried on his back. 'Pu' the sword hummed, sounding both deep and dull like a wooden stick beating leather. Nimoxing's right hand cracked and a shadow darted into the sky. It was actually his iron crutch fiercely flying upwards. This crutch was extremely heavy but unexpectedly flew up 20 feet high in the air and then dropped down behind Yu Xu Dong Shan [Cave of the Jade Void].

This was the first time Yang Guo used demonic Dugu Qiubai's [Du Gu seeking a loss] heavy sword on an enemy. Seeing it had such power, he couldn't help being secretly startled.

Nimoxing felt half his body in pain, his right arm uncontrollably shaking. But he had lived an incomparably brave life so, with a roar, using his remaining crutch, pushed up ten feet in the air and came down with the left iron crutch in his palm. Yang Guo thought since he had already tried the hard strength of the sword, he would now try the supple strength. The tip of the heavy sword trembled. With his internal energy pouring out, Nimoxing would be thrown 20 or 30 feet, it would be impossible not to injure muscles and bones. Seeing Xiao Longnu severely injured, Yang Guo was filled with bitterness in his heart, deciding this time he would strike with no mercy. But just when his arm was about to release his internal force, he saw Nimoxing's body in midair with both legs cut off, fiercely reminding him of his own missing arm. He couldn't help but think that they shared the same problem so he didn't wield his heavy sword up but pushed it down instead. The iron crutch pierced down, dust flew up, and half the crutch was stuck into the ground.

Nimoxing grasped the iron crutch, thinking to use force to pull it out but suddenly his right arm was pressed by the heavy sword. Unexpectedly his pressure point was sealed so he couldn't use any strength in the least. Yang Guo said: "Today I'll spare your life. Just hurry back to India." Nimoxing's face turned ashen. Perfectly still, he couldn't say a word.

Although Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi saw this turn of events, they didn't think Yang Guo could advance his skills in just months, thinking it had to be because Nimoxing's amputated legs were of no use. Yin Kexi rushed forward a few steps, pulling out the iron crutch and handed it over to Nimoxing. Having the crutch, Nimoxing used it to prop himself up, thinking to leap far away. Who would expect that his arm was numb and limp? As soon as he tried, he collapsed with a plop.

Xiaoxiang Zi always took pleasure in others' misfortunes. As long as other people were having bad luck, regardless of whether friend or foe, he found it joyful. He thought: "This Indian dwarf has always been arrogant, not submitting to me, this is at last over. Just now you rushed out to capture Yang Guo. That was precisely what gave him a good opportunity." Then he jumped out, shouting: "Baby Yang Guo, you've wronged our Prince several times, quickly come with father!"

Yang Guo thought: "Gu Gu is heavily injured. We must hurry to go and treat her. Right now surrounded by many powerful enemies, if I don't kill anyone, it will be hard to escape." In a low voice he asked Xiao Longnu: "Are you hurting very much?"

Xiao Longnu replied: "You are holding me, I... I am very happy."

Yang Guo lifted his head up, facing Xiaoxiang Zi, and said: "Fight!" He drew out the black iron sword from between his waist, the sword tip approximately two feet from his body. He held it out steadily. Xiaoxiang Zi saw this crude black sword with a blunt tip and no edge, appearing to be a dumb piece of iron. He thought: "Sure enough, this boy's swordplay is very fast and his agile movements fluctuate but, with this iron bar, his sword skills won't be of much use." He then said: "Shit" While saying that, he wielded his steel "Melancholy Rod" to hit the heavy sword.

Yang Guo's sword stayed motionless while he channeled his inner strength into it. Only a 'puff' sound could be heard as the sword and the iron rod clashed. The "Melancholy Rod" broke immediately, sending several pieces flying. Xiaoxiang Zi cried out: "Heavenly gods!" and then scrambled backwards. Yang Guo then stretched out his sword and struck left and right, breaking both of Xiaoxiang Zi's arms.

Yang Guo had repeatedly defeated opponents, Lu Qingdu, Zhao Zhijing and Nimoxing, creating sensation among the various people in front of the Cave of the Jade Void. But this time he didn't even move his body, nor lift his arm, but simply used internal energy to break Xiaoxiang Zi's weapon, these people were even more puzzled, looking at each other in disbelief, all thinking: "This person's martial skills were really unbelievable!"

Yin Kexi was a merchant from the Western region so he knew a treasure when he saw one. Seeing Yang Guo's heavy sword sending Nimoxing's iron crutch flying, he was already secretly startled, thinking: "A sword this powerful is really not common. The blade is deep black with a hint of red glow, is it possible that it was actually forged from black iron? This black iron is the world's most precious metal. Even an ounce is very difficult to find. By adding just a little to a common sword or spear, ordinary iron would become a sharp weapon. Where did he find that much of the black iron? Also, if the sword was indeed made from the black iron, how could it not weigh 40-50 catties [1 catty = 1.1 pounds/ 500 grams]? If so, how could Yang Guo be this agile?" Actually, this sword weighed 64 catties altogether. If it was not this heavy, even though Yang Guo's internal force was strong, he still wouldn't be able to send out such power. Now Yin Kexi saw Xiaoxiang Zi's "Melancholy Rod" scattering all over the place so he was even more convinced that this sword was a divine object. Yet he still acted nonchalant. He was in the jewelry businesses, once he saw a rare treasure; his heart would be filled with delighted greed. It didn't matter if he had to buy or cheat, to rob or steal; it just had to be quick. As soon as he saw Yang Guo's heavy sword, he was burning with greed. So he jumped out immediately, shaking his Jin Long whip to grab the sword.

Yang Guo had spent time with him in the Passionless Valley [Jue Qing Gu] and saw him always laughing politely and amicably so he didn't have any hostility towards Yin Kexi.

Then he saw the Jin Long whip coiling his way. This whip was heavily decorated with precious stones, diamonds and jades. He let the whip wrap around his sword and said: "Yin Xiong [Brother Yin], you and I have yet to celebrate with a drink, pull back the whip and make way. Looks like you've got quite a few jewels on your soft whip. If damaged, it would be a pity." Yin Kexi smiled and said: "Is that right?" and then applied force to snatch the sword. Yang Guo just stood still, not moving in the least.

This time Yin Kexi stood near, analyzing the situation. This sword was cast from black iron. Diamonds were the world's hardest object, and could cut anything without damaging themselves. But surprisingly the big diamond embedded at the tip of his whip couldn't scratch the black iron sword. His heart was on fire as he knew that his opponent's martial skills were ferocious. If not attacking him by surprise, it would be difficult to snatch the sword. So he said: "Yang Xiong [Brother Yang]'s Kung Fu is excellent. Congratulations! I admit defeat." While his mouth was saying these sweet words, he flicked his right wrist. Suddenly metal flashed. In his left hand was a dagger. His arm flew out fiercely to stab Xiao Longnu's chest.

He did this not because he wanted to injure Xiao Longnu. Only he knew that Yang Guo loved her and if he saw her in danger, he would have to save her life. By creating a diversion, he would be able to snatch the precious sword. Yang Guo saw the situation, alarmed. Yin Kexi shouted: "Let go of the sword!" and sent all his body strength to the right arm, pulling the whip to seize the sword.

Hearing "Let go of the sword," Yang Guo did as he was told, sending out the sword. The sword was long while the dagger was short. The heavy sword was between the three of them so the dagger couldn't reach Xiao Longnu's body. At that time, Yang Guo was desperate so he sent out the sword with

a force that was extremely fierce. Yin Kexi knew perfectly well that this sword was heavy so he had already braced himself against the force. However, he didn't expect the coming force to be this violent. Seeing that it was too late to escape, he summoned his internal energy while both hands pushed out. Then there came a crashing sound before he fell back five or six steps. He managed to stand firm and put on a smile on his face to cover his misery. Only in a short while he felt as if his internal organs had been turned inside out. He stood still, not daring to breathe or move even half a step, just like a stiff corpse.

Yang Guo walked over to him and extended his hand to retrieve his black iron sword [Xuan Tie Jian]. He lightly shook the sword, and then heard a "ding ding dong dong" sound. Under the bright sunlight, precious stones sparkled everywhere. These were the stones embedded in the Jin Long whip that had just broken into fragments.

Yang Guo called out: "Jinlun Fawang, do we settle our business today or wait for some other day?"

Jinlun Fawang saw him successively defeating the three big masters, Nimoxing, Xiaoxiang Zi, and Yin Kexi, injuring each opponent in only one move. How this young man's martial skills were so high was actually quite unconceivable. If he himself stepped forward to fight, even though he would not be defeated like the other three fighters, to seek victory would not be easy. At this moment all the heroes were gathering, if he walked away, how would he keep face? He thought: "Yang Guo has a missing arm. Even though his left hand is fierce, his right side is disadvantaged. I will just keep attacking his right side. He's worried about Xiao Longnu's injury. As time drags on, his mind must be restless." As a result, from his sleeve he took out the five wheels -- gold, silver, copper, steel, and lead. In his heart, he knew that this was really a moment of life or death, of honor or shame. He was not

careless in the least yet his expression remained casual like he had no cares. He strolled out, smiling: "Yang Xiong Di [Brother Yang], I congratulate you as we meet again. You've obtained this powerfully divine sword! This is quite a magical weapon. I only fear this old monk also can't handle it." He still didn't have a strategy to win so he used the situation to his benefit. He heavily praised this black iron sword, leading the crowd to think that this youngster was only lucky to obtain this God-sent weapon.

Xiao Longnu leaned against Yang Guo's chest, in her dazed state seeing Jinlun Fawang holding his wheels. She thought that, depending on Yang Guo's strength alone, he wouldn't be able to beat the enemy so she said in a low voice: "Guo'er, go find me a sword, we... we... together... together use Yu Nu Su Xin swordplay "Pure Heart of the Jade Maiden Swordplay" to get rid of him." Yang Guo felt pain in his heart, softly replied: "Gu Gu, you set your mind at ease. Guo'er alone can handle this." Xiao Longnu moved to the left to shield his body as much as possible, trying to keep him out of danger. Yang Guo felt both gratitude and joy so he said out loud: "Gu Gu, today we two will fight this devil crowd together. In this life, I have no regrets." and pointed his black iron sword straight out.

Fawang didn't dare to meet Yang Guo's force directly, he jumped backwards. Immediately there came a Wu-Wu sound from a spinning lead wheel Fawang tossed out. Yang Guo lifted his sword to cut it but the lead wheel flew past his body back to Fawang, unexpectedly untouched. Then there came a loud rumbling buzzing Wu-Wu, Weng-Weng sound and flashing gold and silver lights. The five wheels flew towards him from five different directions.

For fear that he would affect Xiao Longnu's injured condition, Yang Guo stood there motionless. Fawang's five wheels were only a deceptive attack, just to try out Yang Guo's actions.

The five wheels circled close to the two persons' bodies, flying back and forth repeatedly. He saw Yang Guo would certainly not lift his sword to pursue, then understood and was secretly delighted: "You don't dare to move your body, afraid that you would worsen Xiao Longnu's injured condition. The situation is bad and there is no way out. My Zong Yue Yuan attack "Vertical Jump from Distance" can not be defeated." The opponent has a missing arm and also had to protect the injured girl. According to Fawang's rank, there couldn't be a fight like this. However, he knew that a good opportunity of this kind was hard to come by. If Xiao Longnu recovered, the two persons combined couldn't be defeated. Even if Xiao Longnu was injured to near death and Yang Guo was distracted, he himself might not necessarily be able to beat Yang Guo. He only had today to take advantage of the situation and kill them once and for all so there would be no more trouble in the future. As to whether or not it would be fair, let's not pay much attention to it.

The crowd nearby also understood the circumstance and thought Fawang had stepped over the line. Ma Guangzuo loudly shouted: "Big Monk, are you a hero or a scum?"

Fawang appeared not to hear the comment. The five wheels were continuously thrown out and then came back, still circling around Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu. Then the wheels flew high and low, straight and slanting, making both soft and loud noises. The spectators were all bedazzled and anxious.

Suddenly Ma Guangzuo loudly cried out "Ohh". This was the slanting copper wheel flying by, curving fiercely and just passing the top of his head. The wheel cut a piece out of his scalp, which still had a chunk of hair. Blood dripped profusely to the ground. Ma Guangzuo held his head with both hands, cursing, but didn't dare rush out to fight.

Yang Guo knew Xiao Longnu was severely injured. The more they were delayed, the less time for treatment there was. Anxiety filled his heart. Fawang called out: "Be careful!" Suddenly the five wheels returned again, coming side by side about to strike the two people like five powerful waves. Yang Guo's whole body strength rushed to his left arm, the tip of his sword vibrating. 'dang' 'dang' 'dang' sounds echoed as the sword brushed away the gold, copper and steel wheels. Everyone was alarmed, dust flew up, and the silver wheel and the lead wheel were broken, dropping on the ground.

Fawang cried out loudly, flying upwards. His left hand pushed aside the steel wheel while grabbing the gold and copper wheels and he then ferociously smashed down for the top of Yang Guo's head. Yang Guo didn't ward him off but the black iron sword thrust out from his chest. The sword was long while the wheels were short. The wheels were yet to smash his head but the tip of his sword was already less than half a foot away from Fawang's chest. Fawang immediately retreated. His forward attack was no doubt very fast but the retreat was also fast. It was not so clear how he cross stepped, going left and then suddenly jumping back several feet. This was actually quite rare in the martial world. The spectators were dazzled, cheering the one they were rooting for. One cried out loudly: "Good!"

Yang Guo suddenly wielded the black iron sword to the back. Then came a sound, from behind and the copper wheel was chopped in half. And even before the copper wheel hit the ground, the sword whipped out horizontally and the two pieces turned into four. Although the blade of the black iron sword had no sharp point, he applied his internal energy to break the wheel. When the spectators saw Fawang's lightness Kung Fu, they shouted in appreciation. Now they saw the strange power of Yang Guo's divine sword, they all were startled, falling silent.

In just a short while, three out of five of Fawang's wheels were destroyed. Still he was not discouraged, brandishing his gold and steel wheels around without fear. Yang Guo stretched out his sword while Fawang sidestepped to evade Yang Guo's sword strikes. This time he didn't throw out his wheels. Even though he wouldn't be able to attack from afar, this was actually more powerful. When he saw Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu together, attacking on the left side and resisting on the right side, he jumped up high in the air and bore down with both wheels, sending out the Wu-Wu humming sound. Yang Guo's black iron sword did appear quite dull but no matter how Fawang changed his moves, he couldn't get within two or three steps of the couple. Forty or fifty moves passed, both Fawang's wheels returned again and were about to pound into Xiao Longnu. Yang Guo thrust out the black iron sword, and the soft clattering sound was heard as the two weapons met. Both Yang Guo and Fawang sent out their internal forces to their weapons. Both refused to budge and were now motionless in a deadlock situation.

Yang Guo could feel that the opponent's continuing waves of energy growing stronger and stronger, he was secretly alarmed: "This person's internal energy is surprisingly high." He also thought: "We're already matching internal forces and the full power of the black iron sword can't be lashed out. If this battle of internal forces goes on for a long time, the one with more profound energy would have the upper hand. If he moves his body forward further, I'll use the sleeve to strike him by surprise." As a result, his left arm was slowly pulled back. The two people were originally five feet or so apart. The distance was gradually reduced to five feet and then four and a half, from four and a half to four feet.

As Fawang's disciples Da'erba and Huo Du, who were constantly guarding their master's body nearby, saw that their master was gradually gaining the upper hand, they were delighted, moving forward several steps. While Da'erba

cared about his master's safety, he also hoped that his master would not injure his reincarnated "Da Shi Xiong" [big apprentice brother]. Huo Du on the other hand was secretly plotting against Yang Guo. He wielded his folding fan, appearing to be cooling himself, but he actually was waiting for an opportunity to launch his fan attack.

As Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi saw Huo Du's eyes glinting as he moved forward, they knew that he thought to help his master. The two persons looked at the situation and thought: "Even though Yang Guo has become our sect's enemy, real men are open and upright. Losing or winning depends on the original fight. How could Mount Zhongnan allow this scheming disciple to act?" They pulled out their long swords, stepping forward and at the same time sending Huo Du a warning stare. Priest Qiu and Priest Wang's beards and hair were all white but the two had practiced martial arts for a long time; their faces had a red glow. The two swords also emitted blue-green lights like a rainbow, showing their own chilling power. Intimidated, Huo Du dare not act rashly.

By now Yang Guo's left arm gradually shrank and he was already only three feet away from Fawang. He thought: "If this monk moves forward another half foot, my right sleeve will strike him. Although it may not be enough to take his life, it will knock him out." As Fawang saw his right shoulder slightly moving, he understood what Yang Guo meant to do, thought: "Even though your arm has been cut off, you still have the shirt sleeve. If applying internal force and sending it out, it will be the same as a sharp soft whip. I'll let you do this and deflect your strike. When you wield your sleeve, the strength in your left arm must lessen and then I'll take advantage of the situation by using my full force attack and as a result your body will be heavily injured."

Xiao Longnu leaned against Yang Guo's body in a perpetually dazed state. As Yang Guo was summoning his internal energy

and accelerating it, his body became hotter and hotter. Xiao Longnu felt his face emitting a steam so she opened her eyes, seeing the beads of sweat seeping out at the side of his forehead. She used her sleeve to gently wipe the sweat for him. Then she saw his serious expression, both eyes looking straight ahead so she followed his gaze and turned her head to look. She couldn't help being startled by Fawang's wide-open copper eyes in front of her. Seeing these two eyes with fierce glows, she shut her eyes quickly and then opened them again. Fawang's eyes were still near. Xiao Longnu was cuddling and leaning against her loved one. Having a pair of wicked eyes fixedly gazing at her was really disgusting. This time she didn't think that Fawang was fighting with Yang Guo. She only knew that this monk was a really evil person and also she was not willing to let him disturb her sweet time right now so she quickly dipped her hand into her bosom, took out a jade bee golden needle, and slowly extended her hand towards Fawang's left eye.

Aside from the fact that this golden needle had a virulent poison on it, any ordinary embroidery needle pricking an eyeball would blind that eye. This time Xiao Longnu only wanted to get rid of the big disgusting eyes, she didn't mean to shoot it out fiercely. With her severe injury, her stretched hand was soft and weak. Her hand was really very slow.

But Fawang and Yang Guo were in a deadlock situation. In this critical stage, one who moved even a little would be paying dearly. Xiao Longnu's golden needle slowly coming near, Fawang could not resist in the least bit. Seeing the golden needle moving closer, from two feet to one foot, from one foot to half a foot, Fawang cried out loudly, pushing both wheels out to the front while struggling to flit backwards. But after all, the overwhelming force from both weapons could not be unloaded so he just firmly stood there and then sat down on the ground. Da'erba and Huo Du called out "Master!" and rushed out to hold Fawang.

Yang Guo's sword then moved twice, splitting both gold and steel wheels in half. Then he moved forward two steps, wielding his sword to cut the top of Fawang's head. Fawang just breathed in, only feeling melancholy death coming. He was weary and did not have the strength to resist. Da'erba lifted his golden rod and Huo Du raised his steel fan, together blocking the black iron sword. But the strength of the sword blow was strangely fierce. Da'erba and Huo Du's knees felt weak, unable to stop the falling sword. They knelt down on the ground but still held their weapons, desperately shielding Fawang.

As the force from the black iron sword was growing stronger, Da'erba and Huo Du felt as if their backs were about to break, their body joints rumbling. Huo Du said: "Shi Ge (older apprentice brother), you hold on alone for a moment. Little brother will save the master first and will be back to help you." Originally the two people's combined force was already unable to resist the force. Now with only Da'erba, how could he block the power of the heavy sword? But he would give up his life to protect his master so he called out: "Good!" and furiously pushed his golden rod upwards.

The two of them were speaking in Tibetan, which Yang Guo could not understand. He only felt the increasing force from the golden rod and was about to apply more force to press down but then Huo Du jumped out.

Who would have thought that Huo Du didn't plan to save his master but only to seek his own retreat? He called out: "Shi Ge [Apprentice Brother], little brother will go back to Tibet and diligently practice martial skills. After ten years I will certainly look for this Yang boy and avenge you and master!" As he said that, he turned around and leapt away as if flying.

Da'erba was duped by his apprentice brother; he was unable to control his anger. He also remembered that Yang Guo was

his reincarnated big apprentice brother, how could he heartlessly wrong their master like this? He loudly said: "Da Shi Ge [Big Apprentice Brother], please spare little brother's life. Wait for me to save the master and search for that scum [heart of a wolf & lung of a dog] of a disciple so I could break him into ten thousand pieces. After that I'll voluntarily throw my life into Da Shi Ge [Big Apprentice Brother]'s hand. At that time you'll kill me or cut me, little brother won't even dare to frown."

Yang Guo listened to him mumbling a long speech, he naturally didn't understand. However, Huo Du narrowly escaped death but this person was loyal and did right by his master. He actually understood. Yang Guo saw that his expression was earnest and respected him as a true man who was not too smart. He also saw Xiao Longnu's tender eyes gazing at him. Suddenly his thought to kill and take revenge was dissipated, only feeling that it didn't matter if all the lifetime grudges were not resolved. He immediately lifted his black iron sword and said: "You are released!"

Da'erba got up, but only after a great effort. Strength escaped his whole body and he couldn't hold on to his golden rod. A 'tang' sound was heard as it dropped on the ground. He bent down and bowed to Yang Guo several times, thanking Yang Guo for not killing them. At this time, Fawang still sat motionless on the ground. Da'erba carried his master on his back and went down the mountain in big strides.

Yang Guo alone used his sword to defeat six Mongolian masters. The numerous warriors saw their six leading people either defeated or wounded, they dared not to attack. Instead they picked up Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi and quickly ran away, leaving no trace.

Ma Guangzuo, with his head still dripping blood, walked over to Yang Guo, waving fingers at him and saying: "Xiao Xiong

Di [Little Apprentice Brother], you are really good!" Yang Guo said: "Ma Da Ge [Big Brother Ma], these people you run around with are not a good kind. If you mix up with them, you will definitely suffer. It would be better to say goodbye to the Mongolian prince and go back to your native land!" Ma Guangzuo said: "You are right, Xiao Xiong Di [Little Apprentice Brother]." He looked at Xiao Longnu, seeing that although heavily injured, she was still full of grace and beauty. He struggled to find sweet words, asking: "When do you and the bride get married? I'm waiting to drink your celebration wine, is that good?" When he first met Xiao Longnu at the Passionless Valley, he saw her as a bride and from then on he always called her the bride.

Yang Guo forced a smile and shook his head. He then rounded up several hundred Taoist priests. Ma Guangzuo said: "Oh, there are still these many stinky priests to be taken care of. I'll help you." Yang Guo thought: "If fighting one on one, not even one of these priests is my rival. But if they together close in on me, circumstances will be terribly dangerous. It's not worthwhile to let him die in vain with me." So he said loudly: "You'd better be off quickly. I alone can handle this." Ma Guangzuo now understood, applauding: "Right, that's right! With all those big priests, not one could defeat you. What's with all these stinky little priests? Xiao Xiong Di [Little Apprentice Brother], the bride, I'm leaving!" Dragging his copper rod and laughing merrily, he turned and left, only the sound of his copper rod bumping stones could be heard on his way down the mountain. And the sound gradually quieted.

Yang Guo propped his heavy sword on the ground. His fight with Fawang had used up a lot of his internal energy. He pondered: "Jinlun Fawang, Xiaoxiang Zi and others all worried about one another so they fought with me one on one in the hope to get rid of each other and leaving only himself at the end. I was benefiting as a third party in a

dispute. Had those six people together attacked me, it would have been very difficult to withstand. Let alone the fact that I competed with internal energy with Jinlun Fawang. I was certainly going to lose but fortunately Gu Gu [Xiao Longnu] pulled out a golden needle so I could win by luck. These Quanzhen priests' minds and bodies fight as one, all obeying their five masters' commands. Although the Taoist group's martial skills can't match those of Fawang and others, numerous wills build a city. Their combined power really was much stronger than Fawang and the gang. Anyway, Gu Gu and I are already together here. We fight until we have no strength left, then we two will die together."

Qiu Chuji said in a clear voice: "Yang Guo, so your martial skills have reached this stage; our generation is much, much inferior. But our sect has several hundred people; do you think you can break through our blockade by yourself?"

Yang Guo looked out into the distance, seeing four swords glinting. Every seven priests formed a row, tightly encircling himself and Xiao Longnu. The priests using this "Seven Man Circle" martial skill all united their swords and formed a first-class defense. This time the force around him was an equivalent of having tens of sword masters surrounding them from all sides.

Yang Guo had earlier disregarded life and death so he snorted and moved forward one step. Seven priests were holding their swords out to block him. Yang Guo thrust his sword out and seven swords simultaneously dashed out to counterstrike. A 'qiang' sound was heard as the seven swords were all broken and the seven priests holding the rest of their broken swords were quickly leaping aside.

The power Yang Guo sent out from his sword was this incredible. Although Qiu Chuji and others had for a long time fought powerful enemies, they had never seen anything like

this. Wang Chuyi called out: "Xuan Ji "Jade Pearl" formation followed by Yao Guang "Moving Light Strike!" Yang Guo thought that he would pay no attention to the Quanzhen master's big and small orders and rely on the power of sword thrusts to rush outside. He was carrying Xiao Longnu and moving two steps forward, and then he saw another seven priests circling and blocking his way so he immediately wielded his sword. This seven- priest formation did not seek to counterstrike but the priests appeared like a curtain, crisscrossing and changing their positions. He swept past them; two of them cried out -- one had an injured waist, the other a broken leg -- they collapsed on the ground.

But this time fourteen long swords were pointed at Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu's backs, seven for Yang Guo and seven for Xiao Longnu. If Yang Guo turned back to strike, he would be able to knock down the fourteen swords but Xiao Longnu would also be injured. At his slight hesitation, another seven swords pointed at Xiao Longnu's right side. At this point, he couldn't even sacrifice himself and also didn't have a way to rescue Xiao Longnu.

Qiu Chuji lifted his hand and shouted: "Hold!" The lights emitting from the twenty-one long swords glittered. Every sword pointed a few inches away from the couple, then stayed very still. Qiu Chuji said: "Long Guniang [Miss Long], Yang Guo, our respective honored founders shared a long, long history. We, the Quanzhen sect, have today won by numbers, which was not a glorious thing, and Long Guniang [Miss Long] had already been severely wounded. Wrongs should be righted by untying the problem, not by making it more complicated. You two please go. No matter who did or didn't do something, let us wipe the slate clean today."

Yang Guo and Quanzhen sect's feud was already huge. In the early years, Sun Po Po [Grandma Sun] was killed by Hao Datong, who was remorseful and willing to give up his life to

make it right. This matter was also unresolved. Yang Guo came to Mount Zhongnan to search for Xiao Longnu and really didn't mean to battle with the Quanzhen sect. As he heard Qiu Chuji's speech, he was thinking: "Saving Gu Gu's life is important. If I fight with these little priests, regardless of victory or defeat, honor or disgrace, what good could come of it?" He was just about to say that he agreed, Xiao Longnu's eyes slowly scanning from left to right. In a low voice she asked: "Where's Yin Zhiping?"

Yin Zhiping's back was struck by a wheel and his chest was pierced by his sword. These were two fatal wounds, but he hadn't died yet. He was rescued by his apprentice brothers and taken to one side. His breathing was already heavy and his eyes were blurry. Then he heard a gentle voice asking: "Where's Yin Zhiping?" These four words were actually said lightly but to his ears they were like a thunder strike. Not knowing where he got the extra strength but he got up from the ground, waded through all the swords, and called out: "Long Guniang [Miss Long], I'm here!"

Xiao Longnu stared at him for a moment. Seeing his Taoist robe drenched with blood and his face ghostly pale, she couldn't help but feel her heart sinking. Her voice trembled: "Guo'er, this person has defiled me. Even if he recovers from his injuries, he still couldn't fight you. But he... but he gave up his life to save me... so you must not give him any more trouble. Such is my brutal fate." She decided that she had to say this. Even though it was in front of several hundred people, she spoke honestly out her grief.

Yin Zhiping heard her saying: "But he gave up his life to save me, you must not give him any more trouble. Such is my brutal fate." As these words went through his ears, he couldn't help feeling like his heart was being cut out. Out of his own dark desire, he had made a grave mistake. He revered her as if she was a goddess, yet he caused her a

lifetime of sadness. To die a hundred times over would still not be enough to redeem him. He cried out loudly: "Master, Four Martial Elders, this disciple's sin is atrocious. You and the others cannot bother Long Guniang [Miss Long] and Yang Guo." Having said that, he jumped up and plunged into the eight or nine long swords that the priests were holding in front of him. Many swords pierced through his body, killing him instantly.

This was an unforeseen incident. Many people had not anticipated it so they couldn't help crying out in alarm. The priests heard Xiao Longnu's words. Then they saw Yin Zhiping acknowledged the crime and committing suicide. It looked like he didn't adhere to the rule and despicably disgraced Xiao Longnu. The Quanzhen Five Masters were priests who strictly adhered to the Taoist rules. Thinking about the wrongs that were done, they all felt greatly ashamed. But when it came to an apology, they found it difficult to express.

Qiu Chuji glanced at his four apprentice brothers and then shouted: "Put down the swords!" Then only the 'qiang' sound could be heard. The priests had put their swords back into their sheaths, making a pathway.

End of Chapter 27.

Chapter 28 - Wedding Festivities

Translated by BeeDreamer



Xiao Longnu inserted the hairpin and put on the earrings and the jade bracelets on both wrists. Yang Guo had tears streaming down his face; he was overwhelmed by grief. He lifted the Phoenix crown up and walked over to put it on for her from behind. In the mirror, Xiao Longnu saw him lifting his sleeve to wipe away his tears. When he faced her again, his face appeared to be joyful.

Yang Guo wrapped his right empty sleeve around Xiao Longnu's waist to support her body and gently said: "Gu Gu, let's go!" Xiao Longnu gave him a sweet smile, softly saying: "This time I can die by your side. In my heart... in my heart I'm very happy." Then something came to her mind so she said: "Guo Da Xia [great hero Guo]'s daughter cut off your arm. She didn't mean you well. Later on who will take good care of you?" Her heart sank when she thought about this so she softly added: "You'll be lonely by yourself, you...won't have anyone to keep you company.."

Yang Guo saw her life about to extinguish, he was overwhelmed by grief. Suddenly he remembered something: "That day we were here at Mount Zhongnan, she asked me if I was willing to make her my wife. At that time I was so shocked I couldn't answer and that led to many miserable and catastrophic events afterwards. We don't have much time left; I have to let her know my heartfelt feelings." So he said it out loud: "What do I care if you are my master? What do I care about a reputation? We will just do as we please and damn people if they can't take it! In life or in death, neither of us will ever be sad again, nor will we be alone and lonely. From now on, you are not my master, you are not my Gu Gu [auntie], you are my wife!"

Xiao Longnu's heart was filled with joy. She gazed at his face and softly said: "Are you really speaking from your heart? Or are you just saying sweet words to make me happy?"

Yang Guo replied: "Of course this is what I feel in my heart. My arm got chopped off and you are feeling sorrier for me than I am for myself; when you come across any hardship, I feel just the same."

Xiao Longnu softly said: "That's right. In this world, except you and me caring for each other, there's no one else."

The several hundred Taoists at Chongyang Palace were students of spiritual ways who let go their previous lives to become priests. Suddenly hearing the two people speaking tender words of love and care, they found themselves in a difficult situation – the old priests were quite embarrassed while the young ones unavoidably felt their worldly desires stirred up. They looked at each other in dismay and some couldn't help blushing. The Sage of Tranquility Sun Bu'Er shouted: "You two get out of here quickly. Chongyang Palace is a holy place, you shouldn't be here talking improperly like this!"

Yang Guo turned a deaf ear and only gazed into Xiao Longnu's eyes. Then he said: "In those years the late master Chongyang and our Gu Mu sect's [the ancient tomb sect] Ancestor Grandma should have been married. We don't know what strange grudges broke them apart in the end. Today before him we'll bow to heaven and earth and become man and wife, letting our Ancestor Grandma vent her anger." He originally didn't think very highly of Wang Chongyang. But then he started learning from the work that Wang Chongyang left engraved at Gu Mu [the ancient tomb], and the more he practiced, the more he admired him. He even secretly felt like he was Wang Chongyang's successor in a way. Xiao Longnu let out a sigh and quietly said: "Guo'er, you are very good to me."

During those years Wang Chongyang and Lin Chaoying were deeply in love. Quanzhen's Five Masters all knew about it.

They respected their master for cutting all his emotional ties with a proverbial sword like a true hero; but when they thought about how the supreme martial arts master Lin Chaoying, whose beauty was unrivalled, locked herself up inside Gu Mu for the rest of her life, they all sighed. When Yang Guo brought up this matter, the young Taoists didn't understand while the old masters trembled in their hearts.

Sun Bu'Er shouted: "Our late master had great wisdom. He let go of the secular world and started our sect, cutting himself off from all worldly pains. How could an infant like you, who was born after his time, pry into his business? If you have the gall to be this outrageous and talk rubbish again, don't blame my heartless sword!" That day at the Da Sheng Guan heroes' banquet, Yang Guo rejected Sun Bu'Er's offered sword, embarrassing her at the scene. Even though she was a Taoist priestess, her mind was far less generous than Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and others. She was the revered elder of the Quanzhen sect and was insulted by a youngster of her disciples' generation; she naturally took it to heart. Also being a woman living and practicing Taoism with a group of male Taoists, she became even stricter. As she heard Yang Guo's declaration, determining to bow to heaven and earth [get married] before the sacred portrait of her sect's founding master, her rising anger became difficult to suppress. Now seeing the Yang-Long couple totally ignoring her words, her sword immediately came out of its sheath with a 'shua' sound.

Yang Guo gave her a cold look and thought: "You, old priestess, by yourself, are surely not my match. But if I fought with you, the rest of the Quanzhen sect couldn't just stand by. But I have to marry Gu Gu immediately. If we don't do it right now and leave the Chongyang Palace and if by chance her injuries don't heal, won't I be giving her grief at her end? You scolded me for 'being outrageous.' Humph, I, Yang Guo, will show you outrageous. I already said we would be married

before the portrait of Founding Master Chongyang and I will do as I said." He scanned the area and saw only half of the Taoists holding a sword in their hands. He then said: "Sun Dao Zhang [Taoist Elder Sun], you are set on forcing us to leave, is that it?"

Sun Bu'Er sternly said: "Leave now! From now on, the ties between the Quanzhen sect and Gu Mu sect are completely severed. There will be no more connection between us for all eternity and it is best we not meet again!"

Yang Guo let out a deep sigh and shook his head. Then he turned around, walking two steps towards the small trail that led to Gu Mu and slowly putting the sword back onto his back. His right sleeve flared out while he used his left arm to support Xiao Longnu. He secretly channeled air into his abdomen. Suddenly he lifted his head towards the sky and gave out a roar so loud that it shook the tree branches in the woods. Hearing this ear-shattering roar, the Taoists were startled.

And even before he finished his roar, he let go of Xiao Longnu and leapt backwards. In a flash, his left hand sealed both ' "Returning Orthodox" (Hui Zong) and "Sustaining Waterway" (Zhi Gou) points on Sun Bu'Er's right wrist. As Xiao Longnu's body, now without support, was about to collapse, Yang Guo quickly dragged Sun Bu'Er along with him to prop Xiao Longnu's body back up. His jumping back and forth was lightning fast, like the movement of a fleeing rabbit. Before any of the Taoists had a chance to blink their eyes, Sun Bu'Er had already fallen into Yang Guo's clutches and nothing could be done about it. Qiu Chuji and Sun Bu'Er had long fought powerful enemies. In the beginning, they were guarding themselves against Yang Guo's swift attack but then they saw him put away his weapon and head out towards the small trail to the outside, with his only arm supporting Xiao Longnu. Naturally, they concluded that he'd

decided to give up. They hadn't expected that he would use his roar to distract the enemy and that his actions -- using his left hand to support Xiao Longnu instead of his shirt sleeve and putting away the sword -- were actually a strategy designed to fool them so he could capture Sun Bu'Er. Numerous Taoists shouted and raised their swords. But as Sun Bu'Er was held captive, nobody dared to move forward to attack.

Yang Guo said in a low voice: "Sun Dao Zhang [Taoist Elder Sun], I have made a great social blunder. Please turn around and keep us company during the ritual." While still holding Sun Bu'Er's wrist, he slowly led Xiao Longnu to the back of the hall of the Chongyang Palace. The Taoists followed them, their faces filled with anger, yet they didn't know what else to do.

The three of them entered the hall through a side door and walked along the winding corridor until they arrived at the back of the hall. Yang Guo turned around and in a clear voice he said: "Everybody please stand outside. You may not enter the hall, not even one step. We've already decided that we would sacrifice our lives. If we fight, Sun Dao Zhang [Taoist Elder Sun] and the two of us will have the same fate."

Wang Chuyi quietly said: "Qiu Shi Ge [Apprentice Brother Qiu], how do we handle this?" Qiu Chuji then replied: "Nothing for the moment, we'll wait for the right opportunity. It looks like he wouldn't dare to harm Sun Shi Mei [Apprentice Sister Sun]." These Quanzhen masters had roamed the martial world for their entire lives, their names are renowned. They hadn't expected that in their sunset years they would be controlled by a mere boy. They were undoubtedly angry but also couldn't help chuckling.

Yang Guo pulled out a prayer mat for Sun Bu'Er to sit down on and then said: "Pardon!" while sealing the "Big Spine" (Da

Chui) and "Divine Hall" (Shen Tang) pressure points on her back, which left her unable to walk. As he saw the Taoists standing outside as they were told, not daring to enter, he helped Xiao Longnu stand in front of the portrait of Wang Chongyang, shoulder-to-shoulder with him.

Before their eyes was a portrait of a Taoist holding a long sword and showing a graceful disposition. He wouldn't be more than thirty years old. On the side of the portrait were three words "The Living Dead." The writing was sparse but the man in the middle of the painting exuded a heroic air, his elegance unparalleled. When Yang Guo came to learn martial skills at the Chongyang Palace as a boy, he was familiar with this painting, knowing that this was a portrait of the founding master. But now he remembered quite vividly that there was also a portrait of Wang Chongyang at Gu Mu. Even though this one was a front portrait and the one at Gu Mu was a back view, the art strokes were no different so he said: "This painting was also done by our Ancestor Grandma." Xiao Longnu nodded, giving him a sweet smile and softly saying: "The two of us get married before the portrait of Master Chongyang but the picture was drawn by our Ancestor Grandma, this is really very good."

With his foot, Yang Guo placed two prayer mats side by side in front of the portrait and then said in a loud voice: "Disciple Yang Guo and the disciple named Long are here to marry in front of Founding Master Chongyang. At this place the Taoists of the Quanzhen sect all bear witness." Having said that, he knelt down on a prayer mat but saw Xiao Longnu still standing, not kneeling down, so he said: "We are bowing to heaven and earth right now, you also have to kneel down!" Xiao Longnu hesitated, her eyes red and her tears flowing. Yang Guo softly asked: "What's wrong? You don't like us to get married at this place?"

Xiao Longnu's voice broke: "No, it's not that!" She paused and then said: "I'm not pure and I'm also dying. Why should you... Why should you have to be this good to me?" Having said this, tears flooded down her cheeks.

Yang Guo got up again and used his sleeve to wipe away her tears. He smiled and said: "Why do you still not understand my heart?" Xiao Longnu lifted her head to look at him and he softly continued: "I really wish we two could live to be 100 years old so I could take good care of you and return your love and affection. But if I can't, if God should only give us one day, then for one day we'd be man and wife. Even if for only a few hours, then for a few hours we'd also be man and wife." Xiao Longnu saw the sincere expression on his face and the infinite affection in his eyes, her heart fluttered, not quite knowing how to cherish him the way he deserved. Her sorrowful face slowly revealed a dimply smile, her tears stopped, and her expression was that of boundless joy. Then she gracefully knelt down on the prayer mat.

Yang Guo then also knelt down. The two people bowed down before the portrait and thought: "Even though our lives have been miserable, we have a time like this now - we are really most fortunate. Even if the pains of the past should cut our lives short, it wouldn't be something to worry about at all." Both of them exchanged a smile and, on the prayer mats, lowered their heads.

In a low voice Yang Guo spoke his vow: "Disciple Yang Guo and the Disciple named Long truly love each other and forever will not change. Throughout our lives, we will be husband and wife."

Xiao Longnu also said in the same tone: "May Master bless us. Throughout our lives, let us be husband and wife."

Sun Bu'Er was sitting on a prayer mat. Even though her body couldn't move, she clearly heard everything the two people

said. She looked at them and then understood. Even though the two people's action was preposterous, it actually stemmed from their guileless nature. She couldn't help thinking back to the days when she was young and newly married to Ma Yu. Originally she was very angry but by the time the Yang-Long couple stood up, the expression on her face had already turned gentle.

Yang Guo thought: "This time the two of us have become man and wife. Even if I am to die right way, I have no regrets." As his original worry about the Taoists breaking in to stop them vanished, he turned to Xiao Longnu and joked: "I am a rebellious disciple of the Quanzhen sect. Throughout the martial world, they all knew about it. Now you are also a rebellious disciple."

Xiao Longnu said: "That's right. My master ordered me neither to accept a male disciple, nor to get married but I didn't comply. The many disasters that have fallen upon us were actually to pay for our crimes."

Yang Guo brightly said: "One must rebel to the end. Master Wang and our Ancestor Grandma were heroes, one hundred times greater than us, but they didn't dare to get married. If the two of them in the afterworld know, they can't say we were afraid to do it!"

Then this time there was a 'ka la' violent sound coming from the roof, tiles flying about and the rafter breaking. The force was astonishing. The roof actually cracked by the weight of a gigantic bell, which was falling straight down on the top of Sun Bu'Er's head...

As Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were boldly bowing to heaven and earth in the hall, the old and young Taoists of the Quanzhen sect couldn't suppress their anger. Liu Chuxuan pondered for a while and then came up with a plan. He bent down and whispered it into the ears of the other three

masters, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi and Hao Datong. The three of them nodded again and again and then said something to a disciple at the door in a low voice. Taking advantage of the situation while the Yang-Long couple was kneeling down inside, they took down a heavy copper bell from in front of the hall, which weighed over a thousand catties. The four of them together would hold the bell, fly up to the top of the hall, and find the right location to smash it down with great force. The bell would make a big hole in the roof before falling down to where Sun Bu'Er was sitting below. With the four masters' martial skills, even though the bell was very heavy, it would drop down with less than inches of error, trapping Sun Bu'Er inside so Yang Guo couldn't harm her. As the many Taoists closed in on him, how would the two people be able to fight them off?

Seeing the gigantic bell dropping, Yang Guo instantly understood the ploy. He immediately drew out his black iron sword and sent out with it a thundering force. A 'dang' sound echoed as the sword tip made contact with the copper bell. Even though this bell weighed a thousand catties, the force from this sword was strangely fierce and hit the side of the bell. The bell was then bumped off course by a couple of feet. If dropped, Sun Bu'Er's body would be crushed beneath.

Liu Chuxuan and the other masters who were looking down through the hole at the top of the hall realized the situation and cried out in alarm, their hearts aching. Nobody could have expected that this boy's sword would have such a divine power. They now saw with their own eyes that Sun Bu'Er would be wretchedly crushed by the large bell, with flesh and blood splattering. Liu Chuxuan shut both eyes, not daring to look, but then heard Qiu Chuji calling out: "Many thanks for your mercy!" Liu Chuxuan then opened his eyes in surprise, only to see the large bell unexpectedly covering Sun Bu'Er's body. There was no trace of crushed limbs at the

side of the bell, and not even a part of her Taoist robe was seen.

As Yang Guo saw his sword pushing the bell off course, which would definitely violently kill Sun Bu'Er on the spot, he suddenly thought: "Today is our husband and wife's happy day, why bother taking someone's life? This old Taoist priestess only has a bad temperament and doesn't possess any real evil intent." Once thought, he acted. His right sleeve flared out, pushing the prayer mat that Sun Bu'Er was sitting on and sending her right under the bell.

The Liu-Qiu-Wang-Hao four masters at the top of the hall were pleasantly surprised and thought of Yang Guo as enemy no longer. But the numerous disciples below had earlier received their orders. As soon as the large bell was dropped, they were to rush in to attack. Also as they were outside, they didn't see that the bell's supposed location was changed. Only hearing a loud noise and seeing dust flying, they all cried out and ran into the hall to attack with their long swords.

Yang Guo then put his black iron sword back onto his back. He used his arm to carry Xiao Longnu and leapt out the back of the palace hall.

Qiu Chuji called out: "Disciples, be careful. You may not take these two people's lives!" His voice was loud. Even among the noisy battle cries of hundreds of people, each person still heard it clearly. The numerous disciples ran out the back of the hall, their voices echoed: "Capture the treacherous scoundrel!" "The scoundrel violated our founding master's painting, don't let him go!" "Quick... Quick, they went out the eastern side!" "The great master ordered, don't take their lives!"

Before Liu Chuxuan jumped to the top of the hall, he had ordered twenty-one strong men to hide in the courtyard at

the back of the palace hall. Yang Guo was just about to open the screen door when he saw the sword reflections in the courtyard, and knew there were men waiting to block them. He thought: "It would be better to leap out through the hole in the roof of the hall. Although there are four big masters there, those people actually won't dare kill me." He carried Xiao Longnu and quickly leapt back inside.

Xiao Longnu held on to Yang Guo's neck with both hands and softly said: "Anyway, we are now married. Our ultimate wish in this world has been granted. If we get out, it's wonderful but if we don't, it still doesn't matter."

Yang Guo said: "You are right!" Then his right leg flew up, following quickly by his left leg. A 'peng' 'peng' sound followed as two priests were kicked out of the hall. Unlike the Cave of the Jade Void area which was much wider, the palace hall was packed with the Taoist priests, who now blocked them with the "Big Dipper Formation" [Bei Dou Zhen Fa]. Yang Guo's left arm was carrying Xiao Longnu so he could only use his legs to injure the enemy and couldn't break out of the heavy encirclement. He darkly thought: "These dumb Taoist priests can't spread a complete formation. If only I had my arm free, how would you be able to stop the two of us?" Then another 'peng' sound was heard as a priest was kicked, his body flying out and crashing into two other priests.

In between this chaos, an old man with white beard and hair suddenly ran into the palace hall. Trailing behind him was a swarm of honeybees. It was the Old Urchin Zhou Botong. When he first arrived behind the palace hall, the disciples there didn't pay him any attention, but then the honeybees that followed him started to sting. These bees were not just any ordinary honeybees but indeed were the Jade Bees that Xiao Longnu kept and tamed at the Ancient Tomb. The Quanzhen Taoists who were stung immediately felt the itchy pain that was difficult to endure. Some couldn't bear it and

rolled down on the ground, crying out. This of course added another commotion to the situation.

Zhou Botong was originally on his way to Xiangyang city to help Guo Jing; but then he stole Xiao Longnu's Jade Bee honey. Afraid to run into her, he decided not to go to Xiangyang but instead came to Mount Zhongnan to find Zhao Zhijing and to investigate how come he dared to plot his Martial Grandpa's [Master of Masters] death. Along the way he played with the Jade Bee honey and mulled over ways to direct the bees. Playing with the common bees on the road was easy but once he reached Mount Zhongnan, suddenly it all became a disaster. The Jade Bees on the mountain sensed the smell of the Jade Bee honey, many of them buzzed out. Since the Jade Bees were used to Xiao Longnu's hand signals and whistles, Zhou Botong naturally couldn't direct them and also couldn't drive them away. And more than that, they wouldn't let him rest. The Old Urchin saw the situation was not very funny so he speedily ran to the Chongyang Palace, thinking to find a place to avoid the bees. It just so happened that there was also a commotion at the palace, and actually much noisier.

Seeing Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo in the palace hall, Zhou Botong was delightedly surprised. He quickly threw Xiao Longnu the Jade Bee honey and called out: "Can't soothe them anymore. I can't deal with these grandparents of bees. Good Guniang [good Miss] quickly come and save my life." Yang Guo's shirt sleeve flared out, catching the bottle. Xiao Longnu let out a small smile and stretched her hand out to take it.

By now the palace hall was filled with buzzing bees. Qiu Chuji and others jumped down to greet and kowtow to their Martial Uncle. Hao Datong shouted out: "Quickly go get torches!" Some of the many disciples were covering their

faces with shirt sleeves while others were wielding their sword to strike the bees. Several went to get torches as told.

Zhou Botong paid no attention to Qiu Chuji and others. The Jade Bees had stung him twice on his forehead, which was now swollen with two big lumps. Right now he only wanted to find a secure hiding place where a bee couldn't sneak in. Seeing a large bell on the floor, his heart was filled with delight. He quickly used his energy to lift it up, only to see that there was someone inside. He didn't even look to see who that was, saying: "Excuse me. Excuse me. Let me get in." He pushed Sun Bu'Er out and let himself in. Then he released his hands and a 'teng' sound was heard as the heavy bell fell back down. He was very pleased with himself and thought: "No matter how you thousands and thousands of bees pursue, you can't sting me, the Old Urchin, anymore!"

Yang Guo said in a low voice: "You direct the bees to form a swarm then we can break out of here." Xiao Longnu was now Yang Guo's wife. Hearing his words had an authoritative tone, she felt sweetly comfortable in her heart and thought: "This is good. At last, he doesn't think of me as his master anymore but really as his wife." So she immediately said "All right!" in a soft and obedient tone. Then she lifted the honey bottle, waved it a few times, and whistled repeatedly. The Jade Bees flew back to their keeper and formed a swarm but Xiao Longnu continuously waved her hand and whistled. The large swarm of Jade Bees broke into two rows, one making way in the front and the other guarding the back, so the Yang-Long couple could find their way out.

Qiu Chuji and others were pleasantly surprised by Zhou Botong's visit and found it very funny. Seeing that the Yang-Long couple had retreated to the back of the palace hall, they ordered their disciples not to pursue. Wang Chuyi unsealed Sun Bu'Er's pressure points while Qiu Chuji went

over to lift the large bell. Zhou Botong, hiding inside the bell, didn't know the situation outside. Suddenly he felt that someone outside was lifting it up, he cried out loudly: "Can't soothe them anymore!" His arms stretched out, pushing the side of the bell and shouting: "Come down!" Qiu Chuji couldn't match Zhou Botong's profound internal energy. A 'dang' sound was heard as the bell, which was already half a foot from the floor, came down once again. Qiu Chuji laughed and then said: "Zhou Shi Shu [Martial Uncle Zhou] is joking again. Come. We all will fight with him!"

So Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi, Liu Chuxuan and Hao Datong each held out a hand and pushed against the outside of the bell. Qiu Chuji shouted: "Lift!" Between the four great forces the bell was raised three feet from the floor but the underside of the bell was empty, not even a shadow inside, and nobody knew where Zhou Botong had disappeared to. The four people cried out 'Ah!' in surprise. Suddenly a shadow flashed and Zhou Botong was standing beside the bell, laughing his head off. This was because Zhou Botong had glued his hands and feet to the inside of the heavy bell so when it was lifted, people outside naturally couldn't see him.

Qiu Chuji and the others stepped forward to kowtow to him. Zhou Botong frantically waved his hand, calling out: "Enough, enough. No more kowtows, you good boys get up!" By now Qiu Chuji and the others already had white beards and hair but Zhou Botong still called them 'Good boys.'

Many people were about to start small talk when Zhou Botong caught a glimpse of Zhao Zhijing slyly sneaking off. He gave out a loud shout, jumped forward to hold him, and scolded: "You cow-nosed thief, still thinking to run away?" His left hand shot out towards the large bell and lifted it, two feet from the ground, while the right hand tossed Zhao Zhijing underneath. Then he let loose his left hand and the large bell came down, all the while repeatedly scolding: "Cow-nosed

thief, cow-nosed thief." At this time in the palace hall, except for him, everybody else was a Taoist. His loud scolding "Cow-nosed thief" was the same as scolding all Wang Chongyang's disciples and followers. Qiu Chuji and the others knew their Martial Uncle's temper and did not think to disobey. They couldn't help but smile at each other.

Wang Chuyi asked: "Shi Shu [Martial Uncle], what did Zhao Zhijing do to offend the Old Master? This disciple will definitely punish him heavily."

Zhou Botong said: "Hey, hey, this little cow-nosed thief led me to steal a flag that was put in a cave but before that he hid these very big colorful most deadly poisonous spiders there,. Luckily that small Miss, hmm, where's that small Miss? Where are all the bees?" He talked without order and Wang Chuyi couldn't quite understand yet but then saw him look around trying to find Xiao Longnu.

At this time ten disciples rushed in and reported that the Yang-Long couple had retreated to the Sacred Scripture Chamber on the back side of the mountain. The following disciples didn't dare to use torches to fight off the bees for fear that they might burn the Taoist scriptures. Qiu Chuji and others were startled. The Sacred Scripture Chamber was the Quanzhen Sect's sacred place as it stored the Taoist scriptures of the past dynasties and the work of Wang Chongyang and his seven disciples. There were several secret documents of the sect hidden there. If something happened, it would be a great loss. Qiu Chuji said: "We'll go and take a look. Yang Guo has shown mercy and spared Sun Shi Mei [Apprentice Sister Sun]. We could definitely turn an enemy into a friend."

Sun Bu'Er said: "You are right!" Then everybody rushed out to the Sacred Scripture Chamber at the back of the mountain.

At the door Wang Chuyi saw Zhao Zhijing trapped inside the bell, he thought: "Zhou Shi Shu's [Martial Uncle Zhou] affairs are quite silly. This matter might not necessarily be Zhao Zhijing's fault. We'll investigate this in details when we come back." For fear that there would be no air inside the bell and Zhao Zhijing would be suffocated to death, he used his energy to lift the bell up a few inches, kicked up a brick, and placed it under the bell. He left the crack a few inches wide so air could ventilate it and then went out to catch up with other people.

In front of the sacred scripture chamber, several hundred disciples were shouting loudly but nobody dared to go upstairs. In a loud and clear voice, Qiu Chuji called out: "The Yang-Long couple, we'll let bygones be bygones. How about we stop fighting and become friends?" He waited for a while and no sound from the chamber could be heard. Qiu Chuji said again: "Long Guniang [Miss Long] has been injured. Please come out and we'll try to treat the injury together. Our sect's disciples won't dare to be disrespectful to the two of you. Qiu Chuji roamed Jiang Hu for several decades and has never broken a promise to anyone." Half a day passed and there was still no sound.

Liu Chuxuan pondered the situation and said: "They are already gone!" Qiu Chuji asked: "How?" Liu Chuxuan said: "Look at the bees. They are flying scattered." He took a torch from one of the disciples and rushed inside the chamber.

Qiu Chuji and the others stepped into the chamber but only saw the four walls of books and not a single person. There was also that bottle of Jade Bee honey on the writing desk. As if he had found a treasure, Zhou Botong snatched it and put it away in his chest. Many people turned the chamber upside down but didn't find any books missing. They only saw a pile of books on the floor and the wooden chest that used to house them was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly Hao Datong

called out: "They left from here!" The people followed Hao Datong's voice to the window in the back of the chamber and saw a rope tied to a wooden pole, with its other end tied to a tree on the cliff on the opposite side. Between the Sacred Scripture Chamber and the cliff was a deep ravine, with no way to pass through it. They didn't expect that Yang Guo would actually have such lightness Kung Fu and could carry Xiao Longnu and also across the valley on a rope.

As Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu bowed to heaven and earth at the Chongyang Palace, everybody in the Quanzhen sect felt badly violated. But this time seeing how the two people had retreated, the Quanzhen Five Masters smiled at one another and actually turned soft in their hearts. Sun Bu'Er was originally the most resentful but at the palace hall she witnessed how the two of them were idealistic and sincere. On top of that, Yang Guo had spared her own life at a critical moment. She couldn't help feeling a loss and fell silent.

The Quanzhen five masters and Zhou Botong went back to the palace hall and inquired about the Mongolian Prince's imperial decrees, the fights of the two disciples Zhao and Yin, Xiao Longnu's sudden attack, and so on. They went over each report one by one. With tears in his eyes, Qiu Chuji said: "Zhibing's disgracing someone was truly abominable but he did defend our sect with loyalty and patriotism, pledging to fight to death rather than surrendering to the Mongols. That has great merit."

Wang Chuyi said: "Zhibing naturally had flaws but he also tried to uphold justice. We should still recognize him as a Zhang Jiao [Jiao chief]." Liu Chuxuan, Hao Datong, and others also agreed.

Qiu Chuji said again: "If it was not for Long Guniang [Miss Long] arriving in time to block the enemy, our sect would have been annihilated. Long Guniang is really our sect's

great benefactor. From now on we not only cannot be disrespectful to them as husband and wife, we would also have to repay the debt of gratitude. Ai, we did injure her, not knowing... not knowing..." Thinking about how Xiao Longnu was heavily injured, he deeply blamed himself.

Qiu Chuji and the others were busy investigating the past events and cleaning up damage while Zhou Botong didn't pay attention to these matters in the slightest, he was playing with that bottle of Jade Bee honey in his hand. Several times he thought about opening the bottle to tempt the bees but always feared the outcome, and of not being able to get away. At this time a disciple stepped in and reported that five disciples were stung by the Jade Bees and that their itchy pains were difficult to endure and so asked the master to help. Hao Datong thought about the year Sun Po Po (Grandma Sun) broke into the palace to give them the honey so he said: "Long Guniang [Miss Long] must have left this bottle of Jade Bee honey for us to treat the injured. Shi Shu [Martial Uncle], please give the Jade Bee honey to the five disciples, and let them take a little."

Zhou Botong stretched out both hands and his palms were empty. He said, "Don't know how but I suddenly can't find it." Hao Datong had obviously seen him playing with the bottle in his hand so it couldn't possibly be suddenly missing. He decided that Zhou Botong was not willing to hand it over but Zhou Botong was an elder so it was not very convenient to say much.

He couldn't help but feel awkward. Zhou Botong then gave his sleeves a brush and patted his body several times. He said, "I didn't hide it. Don't suspect me being so mean that I don't want to give it to you. Do you want me to take off all my clothes for you to take a good look?" Zhou Botong had always been naughty and only wanted to play, not distinguishing between big, small or urgent matters, and this

didn't change with old age. In his mind, these little cow noses [Taoists] were stung by the bees. At most they would be in immense pain for half a day so it was hardly a life or death worry.

This bottle of Jade Bee honey couldn't be given to anyone. Then he heard Hao Datong speaking so he passed the bottle up his shirt sleeve and let it slide down from his chest to his belly. He shrank his belly a bit so the bottle could go down his pants and from there the bottle slowly dropped to his foot and gently fell down to the floor. His internal energy was so profound that the muscles in his whole body could all be manipulated. That small bottle was sent to the floor and surprisingly didn't even make a sound.

Wang Chuyi thought, "Martial Uncle didn't want to hand over the bottle but only wanted to play with people. If I say something, there is no way I could change his mind. I should just take care of other business first and when his temper is improved, I will get the bottle from him. For now let's heavily punish the treacherous disciple Zhijing. If not for Zhao Zhibing's willingness to die rather than to surrender, wouldn't our sect's long-built reputation have already been destroyed by this treacherous disciple's hand?" Having thought this, he said out loud, "Hao Shi Di [Apprentice Brother Hao], it won't hurt if we postpone the matter of treating the injured. We must quickly deal with this treacherous disciple Zhijing first!"

The Quanzhen five masters were apprentice brothers for several decades so they all knew about Wang Chuyi's straight and unselfish character. Even though Zhijing was his Taoist disciple, he had committed an atrocious crime. Wang Chuyi wouldn't think to protect him. Everybody thought, "This perfidious disciple sold out his sect for personal glory and harmed his own sect brothers in the process. He cannot be forgiven."

Suddenly they heard a faint sound coming from under the bell, "Martial Grandpa Zhou, if you save my life, I'll give you the bee honey; otherwise I'll just eat it all before I die!" Zhou Botong was alarmed and quickly moved forward a step. Sure enough that bottle of Jade Bee honey was gone without a trace. Zhou Botong had earlier stood by the bell, with Zhao Zhijing beneath it. That small bottle happened to fall right in front of him. Upon hearing that Hao Datong couldn't get the Jade Bee honey from Zhou Botong, he immediately stretched out his hand through the crack and grabbed it.

Now he used this small bottle to bargain for his life. He himself knew that this attempt could be in vain but he was desperate and therefore must fight for his life to the bitter end. As Zhou Botong heard Zhao Zhijing's words, he was extremely worried and cried out, "Hey, hey, you definitely can't eat the bee honey. Wait, let's talk about it."

Zhao Zhijing then replied: "Then you must agree to save my life."

The Quanzhen five masters were startled, fearing that if this Martial Uncle were to agree to this demand, they wouldn't be able to punish Zhao Zhijing. Qiu Chuji hurriedly said, "Shi Shu [Martial Uncle], this person has committed a really heinous crime, we cannot spare him no matter what."

Zhou Botong crouched down on the ground and spoke into the bell, "Hey, hey, you definitely cannot eat the bee honey!"

Liu Chuxuan then added, "Shi Shu [Martial Uncle], pay him no mind! If you want the bee honey, it's really not difficult. Today we've already explained and settled the animosity with Long Guniang. We can now go to Gu Mu and ask her for several bottles. Long Guniang has already given you the first one so giving you another ten is really not a problem!"

Zhou Botong then shook his head and said, "Maybe not, maybe not!" In his mind he thought, "Do you think she gave me this bottle of the bee honey? It was me who stole it. She left the Sacred Scripture Chamber in a hurry so she didn't take it with her. If I asked her again to give me the honey, she might not agree. And even if she did agree, I'd still have to let you take it away to cure people, how would there be anything left for me in the end?"

Then he heard the gentle hum of five or six Jade Bees that flew into the hall from the courtyard through the hole in the roof. The hall doors were closed so the bees hit the window and couldn't find their way out. Zhou Botong came up with an idea and said, "Zhao Zhijing, I'm afraid what you took isn't the Jade Bee honey."

Zhao Zhijing hurriedly replied, "Yes, yes, it is. Why shouldn't it be?"

Zhou Botong then said, "Good, you open the bottle and let me smell it first. If it isn't the bee honey, there's no need to talk any more nonsense."

Zhao Zhijing quickly opened the bottle and said, "You smell it, isn't it the bee honey?"

Zhou Botong deeply inhaled the air and said, "Hmm, Hmm, it doesn't smell like it. Let me sniff again a few more times."

Zhao Zhijing clasped both hands tightly over the bottle for fear that Zhou Botong would lift the bell up and snatch it from him. At the same time he said, "You sniff this sweet scent, sniff this sweet scent!" The scent of the Jade Bee honey was incomparably sweet. As soon as the bottle was opened, the palace hall was filled with the strong fragrance.

Zhou Botong sneezed and laughed. He said, "I've got a cold and my nose is not very effective!" and at the same time

turned to Qiu Chuji, giving him a wink.

Zhao Zhijing also guessed right that Zhou Botong was using a delaying tactic so he said: "If you even touch the bell, I will eat all the bee honey." But by this time, several Jade Bees had already sensed the honey smell and flew to the bell.

Zhou Botong wielded his sleeves and shouted, "Go in and sting him!" The Jade Bees of course didn't listen to Zhou Botong but the scent coming out from beneath the bell was growing more and more intense. With zeng-zeng hums, they all buzzed in through the crack at the bottom of the bell.

The people then heard Zhao Zhijing's frantic shouts. With the poignant smell of the honey, a Jade Bee flew in and stung him, causing the bottle to drop and shatter. Zhou Botong went mad and shouted, "Stinky Cow nose [Taoist], why couldn't you hold the bottle firmly?" As he was about to go lift up the bell more Jade Bees from the courtyard crazily buzzed into the bell. Zhou Botong had suffered the Jade Bee stings so he didn't dare to get near. He saw numerous bees filling the large space inside the bell. Zhao Zhijing's body was covered with the sticky syrup and no matter how he moved his hands or his head, he couldn't avoid the bees and got stung who-know-how-many hundred times all over his body. The people heard him shouting out crazily for a moment and then came an eerie silence. He must have died from the great amount of poison.

Zhou Botong then grabbed Liu Chuxuan's robe and said: "Good, Chuxuan, now you go ask Long Guniang to give me many, many bottles of the bee honey." Liu Chuxuan frowned, feeling quite miserable. Earlier he tried to stop Zhou Botong from being rash and agreeing to Zhao Zhijing's demand so he spoke out quite carelessly. As a matter of fact, the Quanzhen Five Masters had used the "Big Dipper Formation" and all their combined forces to injure Xiao Longnu. It was

still not certain that she would ever recover, how could it be "animosity explained and settled" four words as he said? Right now Zhou Botong was holding his chest so he could only let out a painful smile and said: "Don't worry, Shi Shu [Martial Uncle], Chuxuan is leaving!" Then he turned towards the back of the mountain and walked to Gu Mu.

Qiu Chuji and others knew that this matter was indeed deadly. If Xiao Longnu was alright, everything would be fine. But if she died from the severe injury, nobody knew how many Quanzhen disciples would be killed by Yang Guo's hand. Everybody then said in one voice: "Let us all go together."

The woods outside Gu Mu was the area Wang Chongyang himself had forbidden his disciples to go, not even one step. Many people heeded their late master's instruction so they stopped at the edge of the woods. Qiu Chuji summoned air into his abdomen and clearly announced: "Yang Xiao Xia [Young Hero Yang], is Long Guniang's injury alright? Here we've got several wonder pills to treat the injury. Please come out and take them." Zhou Botong said in a low voice: "Yes, Yes! I want the bee honey. Come out and trade for them!" Half a day passed and still there was no reply. After Qiu Chuji used his energy to call the couple, the woods fell into a bleak silence. He looked into the woods but only saw the shady clouds circling around, all the tree branches above, and thorny bushes below.

Liu Chuxuan and Hao Datong walked along the edge of the woods but saw no sign of people passing through the area. It looked like Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu didn't come back to Gu Mu but went away from Mount Zhongnan. They felt both happy and worried at the same time and decided to return to the Chongyang Palace. The Quanzhen people were glad that the Yang-Long couple had gone far away but worried that if Xiao Longnu didn't recover, the sect would have big trouble

ahead. On the other hand, the Old Urchin Zhou Botong was worried that he wouldn't get the Jade Bee honey but also quite happy that he didn't have to meet Xiao Longnu and could avoid exposing his crime of stealing the bee honey in the first place.

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Even though the Quanzhen Five Masters had lived on Mount Zhongnan for several decades, they couldn't have guessed how Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu came back to Gu Mu.

Shielded by the Jade Bees, the Yang-Long couple rushed to the back of the courtyard and then saw a small building on the side of the mountain. Yang Guo knew it was the Sacred Scripture Chamber of the Chongyang Palace so he carried Xiao Longnu inside. They let out a gasp of air and then heard the sounds of many people shouting. Dozens of Taoists were pursuing them but they were afraid of the Jade Bees and dared not come too close.

Yang Guo settled Xiao Longnu in a chair, looked around, and contemplated the situation. Then he saw that in the back of the Sacred Scripture Chamber was a mountain creek which was 30 to 40 feet below. Even though the gorge was deep, the good thing was that it wasn't too wide. On the side of his body, he always carried a long rope for tying between two big trees to make a bed. Now he tied one end to a pillar of the Sacred Scripture Chamber and then leapt down while pulling the rope. He swam across the mountain stream and then straightened the rope. He then tied its other end to a big tree before using his lightness Kung Fu to walk on the rope back to the chamber.

When he was back at Xiao Longnu's side, he softly asked her, "Shall we go over there?"

Xiao Longnu said, "You said we should go there; then I'd go there with you."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "That is called 'Marry a chicken, act like a chicken; marry a dog, act like a dog!' [Chinese saying: A woman must follow and comply with her husband's wishes]. Then he paused and asked again, "In your heart, do you really want to go over there?" Xiao Longnu let out a gentle sigh and her facial expression changed. Yang Guo knew she most wanted to go home to Gu Mu but they could only get inside at great expense. While hesitating, they heard the shouting from outside the chamber and knew that they couldn't delay getting out of there much longer.

While he could read her mind, Xiao Longnu also understood him just as well. So she softly said, "I don't really have to go back to Gu Mu. You don't have to worry about me." Then she smiled, "As long as I can be with you, any place is just as good."

Yang Guo now thought, "This is her first wish after we got married and it might be her last wish in life as well. If I couldn't do this for her, how would I deserve to be her husband?" He looked in all directions. Hearing the sounds of people outside, his heart was in chaos. Then towards the west side of the chamber he caught a glimpse of a wooden trunk stacked on a bookshelf. His heart leapt and he said, "That's it!" He rushed there and saw that the trunk had a copper lock on it. He ripped it apart and opened the lid. The inside of the trunk was filled with books so he lifted up the trunk and turned it upside down, sending the books down on the floor. The trunk itself was made from Camphor wood about an inch thick and was very sturdy. Then he traced his hand along the shelves and found an oilcloth that was used to protect the precious books from rain leaks. He put two pieces of large oilcloth inside the trunk and then, with a rope, dropped the trunk down to the mountain creek below. He

came back to carry Xiao Longnu and said with a smile, "Let us go home."

Xiao Longnu was very happy and smiled back. She said, "Your ideas are really good."

Yang Guo was afraid that she would worry so to comfort her he said, "This sword is very powerful. If a mountain rock blocks the trunk under the water, the sword will cut it open. I'll go fast; you, inside the box, don't have to worry."

Xiao Longnu smiled and said; "Only one thing is not good."

Yang Guo was startled and said, "What is it?"

Xiao Longnu then replied, "I won't be able to see you for a while."

Down at the mountain creek, Yang Guo remembered that he left Guo Xiang in the cave so he said, "We'll bring Uncle Guo's girl with us too, what do you say?"

Xiao Longnu was stunned and so her voice trembled as she said, "Really? You've brought Hero Guo...Hero Guo's daughter?"

Yang Guo saw her changed expression, immediately realizing that she thought he'd brought Guo Fu with him. He bent down and gently kissed her face, softly saying, "It is that month-old baby. She can't cut off anyone's arm!" This time Xiao Longnu blushed profusely and hid her face in Yang Guo's embrace, not daring to lift up her head.

After a while, she softly said, "We'd better go bring her back to the tomb with us. On a wild mountain like this, leaving her for another while could cost her small life."

Yang Guo then thought about how they were delayed at the Chongyang Palace until now, not knowing how Guo Xiang

was doing in the cave. Frightened, he immediately put Xiao Longnu in the trunk, carried it on his shoulder, and rushed out. As they reached the front of the cave but still didn't hear any crying sound, he got even more worried. He pulled out the thorns that he earlier piled in front of the cave entrance and saw that Guo Xiang was sleeping comfortably, her cheeks still red like they were painted with rouge. The two were overjoyed. Xiao Longnu stretched out her hand and said "Let me carry her." Yang Guo put Guo Xiang in her embrace and then put the wooden trunk back on his shoulder again.

By this time all the Taoists were gathering at the Chongyang Palace so they didn't run into anybody along the way. Passing a pumpkin field, Yang Guo picked six or seven pumpkins that the Taoists grew. He put them in the trunk and laughingly said, "This will be enough for us to eat for a week." And after a short while, they reached the bank of the mountain creek. He lowered his head to kiss Xiao Longnu's cheek and gently closed the trunk lid. He then wrapped it tightly with the two pieces of oilcloth. After putting the trunk under water, he breathed in deeply and dove away with the trunk behind him.

He had trained his internal power in a wild mountain flood so diving to the bottom of this small mountain creek didn't strain him in the least. The bottom of the creek was rugged with high and low terrain. There were muddy rocks blocking the waterway so the wooden trunk couldn't easily pass through. Yang Guo used his sword to hack them apart and make way. Afraid that Xiao Longnu would be suffocated inside the trunk, he went as fast as he could. In only minutes, they emerged from water, arriving at the underground tunnel below Gu Mu.

He pulled off the oilcloth and opened the trunk lid. Xiao Longnu was in a dazed state as a result of her heavy injury. Guo Xiang let out a loud healthy cry. She had been feeding

on leopard's milk for over a month so she was actually very strong and healthy. Xiao Longnu smiled faintly and softly said, "We are finally home!" She couldn't support herself by this time so she closed her eyes. Yang Guo didn't lift her body up but took the whole wooden trunk back to the living quarter inside Gu Mu.

Inside, the tables and chairs were overturned and the beds were crooked. This was the result of that day's evil fight with Li Mochou and her disciple before they departed. Yang Guo looked at the stone chamber and the many things he'd used since he was small; his heart felt something beyond description, a mix of happiness and pain. He was expressionless for a moment. Suddenly he felt a drop of water on the back of his hand so he turned his head and saw Xiao Longnu, supporting herself with a chair, standing there with tears slowly flowing from her eyes.

Today the couple had started their family. They finally fulfilled their long time wish and returned home. From now to the afterlife, the bitterness, agony, and worry were all gone but deep down in their hearts they couldn't restrain their sorrow. The two people both knew that Xiao Longnu was seriously injured. With the injuries from both Fawang's golden wheel and the Quanzhen Five Masters' strike, how would her delicate body be able to endure?

In their young lives, the two people had always been lonely and miserable and never really experienced true happiness. Suddenly they came to realize their biggest wish and then immediately had to say good-bye!

Yang Guo stayed expressionless for a long time. Then he went into Sun Po Po [Grandma Sun]'s bedroom and arranged the bedding on the chilled jade bed. Then he helped Xiao Longnu up so she could rest comfortably. All the old food that was stored at Gu Mu had long ago spoiled but the Jade Bee

honey at the altar indeed could not go bad. He poured out half a cup of the syrup and mixed it with fresh water. He fed it to Xiao Longnu and baby Guo Xiang. Then he himself drank a bowl of it.

Then he thought, "I've got to lift up my spirits to make her happy. Even my heart is filled with grief and sorrow; I can't let it show on my face." Having thought that, he went to look for two of the thickest candles and wrapped them with red cloth. He put them on a table and said with a smile, "This is our wedding party!"

With the two red candles, the stone chamber immediately became festive. Xiao Longnu was sitting on the bed. When she saw her own body stained with blood and dirt, she said with a small smile, "I look terrible like this, how would I resemble a bride!" Then she suddenly remembered something and said, "Guo'er, could you please go to Ancestor Grandma's bedroom and bring me that gold work box?"

Even though Yang Guo had lived inside Gu Mu for several years, he never dared enter Lin Chaoying's room or played with her stuff. This time he heard Xiao Longnu speaking to him like this, he said with a laugh, "You have to be this polite when you talk to your husband." He walked over to the headboard of the bed where several boxes were stacked and lifted out the one at the bottom. This box was really not heavy and had no lock. The outside work was red and gold with an exquisite design.

Xiao Longnu said, "Sun Po Po [Grandma Sun] told me that stored in this box were Ancestor Grandma's wedding items. She didn't get married and so these things didn't get used."

"Hmm," Yang Guo groaned. He looked at this beautifully designed box but felt that amid happiness always was infinite misery. He put down the box on top of the chilled jade bed and opened the lid to see that lying inside were a pearl-

inlaid Phoenix crown, a red robe embroidered in gold and female clothing made from red satin. All the items were made from the best materials and even though they had been in the box for several decades, they still looked like new. Xiao Longnu said, "Take them out and let me take a look."

Yang Guo took each item out of the box. Underneath the clothing were a small vanity box inlaid with pearl and gold and a carved jade jewelry box. There was rouge powder and half a bottle of scented oil inside the vanity box. And as soon as the jewelry box was opened, the two of them were wide-eyed, seeing a pearl hairpin, jade bracelets, and gemmed earrings. All items were exquisite, flashing and sparkling. The Yang-Long couple had rarely seen gem stones before so they didn't know how precious these adorning items were. They only saw the elegant inlay work and beautiful design, indicating that these pieces had been created with the most painstaking efforts.

Xiao Longnu said with a smile, "Should I dress up as a bride?" Yang Guo then replied, "Today you are exhausted. You should rest first and tomorrow you can dress up." Xiao Longnu shook her head, saying, "No, today is the day we got married. I love being a bride. On that day at the Passionless Valley, that Gongsun person wanted to marry me, I didn't get dressed up!"

Yang Guo said with a laugh, "You called that getting married? That was the senile Gongsun's delusion!"

Xiao Longnu picked up the rouge and the honey water. She looked into the mirror, planning to dress up. In her entire life, this would be the first time she put cosmetic powder on her face. Her facial complexion was originally pale and really didn't need any cosmetics. But this time she was seriously injured and had no color left on her face. She lightly smeared rouge on both cheeks and it added to her beauty

tremendously. She paused for a while and then picked up a comb to work on her hair. Then she sighed and said, "I have to make a hair bun but I can't do it. Guo'er, can you do it?"

Yang Guo then said, "No, I can't either! Without it, you are even more beautiful."

Xiao Longnu said with a smile, "Really?" and laid down the comb. She inserted the hairpin and put on the earrings and the jade bracelets on both wrists. Under the red candlelight, her beauty was unparalleled. She was overjoyed as she turned around, wanting to hear praise from Yang Guo.

As soon as she turned her head, she saw Yang Guo's tears streaming down his face. He was overwhelmed by grief. Xiao Longnu gritted her teeth and pretended not to see him crying. With a smile she said, "Would you say I look good?"

With a choking sound, Yang Guo replied, "Most beautiful! Let me bring you the Phoenix crown!" He lifted the crown up and walked over to put it on for her from behind. In the mirror, Xiao Longnu saw him lifting his sleeve to wipe away his tears. When he faced her again, his face appeared to be joyful. He then said with a smile, "Later, should I call you 'Niang Zi'[Madame] or should I still call you 'Gu Gu'?"

In her heart, Xiao Longnu thought, "Why 'later'? Is that to say the two of us still have a 'later'?" But she put on her happiest expression and laughingly said, "Calling me Gu Gu again is definitely not good. As for calling me 'Madame,' that sounds like an old lady!"

Yang Guo then said, "What were you called when you were a child? Today you can let me hear it."

Xiao Longnu replied, "I don't have a childhood name. Master just called me Long'er."

Yang Guo said: "Alright, then you call me Guo'er and I will call you Long'er. The two of us are equal and no one gets the worst of it. Wait till we have a baby, we will say: hey, baby's father! And hey, baby's mother! And when the baby is grown and gets married.. .."

Hearing him talking nonsense like this, Xiao Longnu could no longer grit her teeth to smile. Finally, her resistance broke and she let out a sobbing sound. She bent down on the box and started crying. Yang Guo scrambled forward and brought her into his arm. He softly said, "Long'er, you are not well, I'm also not well. There's no need to pay attention to whatever will happen in the future. Today you are not dead. I'm also not dead. The two of us should be very happy now. Nobody is allowed to think about tomorrow." Xiao Longnu lifted her head and smiled with tears in her eyes. Then she nodded.

Yang Guo said, "Look at this beautiful dress with a Phoenix design, I'll help you put it on!" He supported her body and put on the dress embroidered in red and gold for her. Xiao Longnu's tears dried up and she repaired her rouge make-up while sitting by the red candles with a smile.

At this time baby Guo Xiang was sleeping by the head of the bed. Then she opened her small eyes with great curiosity. It seemed like in her tiny heart she felt that the dressed up Xiao Longnu was really very pretty.

Xiao Longnu said, "I've dressed up nicely. It's a pity there is no bridegroom's outfit in the trunk. You must feel slightly out of place."

Yang Guo then said "Let me take a look again. It seems like there are some more pretty items in there." As he said that, he moved various scattered items out of the trunk and put them on the bed. Xiao Longnu saw him taking out a gold flower so she stuck it into his hair. Yang Guo said with a smile, "Not bad, there is a little more." Then he looked at the

bottom of the trunk and found a pack of letters bound by a red ribbon. The ribbon color already faded and the envelopes were so old they turned deep yellow. Yang Guo picked them up and said, "There are letters in here."

Xiao Longnu said, "Let's see what kind of letters they are."

Yang Guo then untied the ribbon and saw that on the envelopes was written "To be opened only by Miss Lin Chaoying" and that there were the words 'Ji Ji' on the left corner. All the twenty letters were addressed in the same way. Yang Guo knew that Wang Chongyang's given name before becoming a Taoist was Wang 'Ji Ji' so he laughed and said, "These are love letters Founding Master Chongyang wrote to our Ancestor Grandma. Can we read them?"

Since childhood, Xiao Longnu had revered her Ancestor Grandma as if she was a divine being so she quickly said, "No, we cannot read!"

Still smiling, Yang Guo tied up the bunch of letters with the ribbon and said, "Old sister Sun and the others were so old-fashioned. Seeing us bowing to heaven and earth before Founding Master Chongyang's portrait, they all got upset and accused us of committing a blasphemy. I didn't believe for a minute that in those years Master Chongyang and our Ancestor Grandma didn't have a relationship. If we took these letters there for them to take a look, those old cow noses' reactions would be quite interesting." While saying that, he was looking at Xiao Longnu and couldn't help feeling sorry for Lin Chaoying. He thought, "Ancestor Grandma lived alone inside Gu Mu. She must have more than once tried on the wedding dress. The two of us are much luckier than she was."

Then Xiao Longnu said, "That's right, we are more fortunate than Ancestor Grandma. Why should you still be unhappy?"

Yang Guo said, "All right!" Suddenly he was startled and said with a laugh, "I didn't say it but you really could guess what I was thinking."

Xiao Longnu curved her lips into a smile and retorted, "If I didn't know what you were thinking, how would I deserve to be your wife?" Yang Guo sat down on the side of the bed and gently extended his left arm to hug her. In their hearts, the two of them were happy beyond words and hoped that a moment like this would last forever. They sat there in each other's embrace and, for a long time, nobody said a word.

After a while, they both eyed that bunch of letters. And when they looked at each other, they laughed with mischievous glints in their eyes. Knowing perfectly well that they shouldn't read their deceased master's personal letters but, of course, they couldn't bear the curiosity in their hearts.

Yang Guo said, "We'll just read one letter. Is that alright? We definitely won't read more." With a smile Xiao Longnu said, "I want to read too. So, okay, we'll just read one." Delighted, Yang Guo reached out to get the letters and untied the ribbon. Xiao Longnu added, "But if the letter is filled with heartaches, you don't have to read it out loud to me." Yang Guo paused slightly and then said, "All right!" But in his heart he knew that the relationship between the Wang-Lin couple didn't end well and was afraid that there would be more misery than happiness in the letters. In that case, it would be better not to read them. Then Xiao Longnu said, "You don't have to worry about it beforehand. Perhaps there are only convoluted speeches in there."

Yang Guo picked up the first letter and read, "Dear Ying Mei [Sister Ying]: The other day my division and the enemy crossed swords at the Hill of the Evil Storm. We were ambushed and suffered a small loss. Four hundred men.. .." As he read on, the letter was filled with the story of the

battles between his army and the Jin. He looked through several other letters, they all talked about military affairs and there was nothing on personal relationships.

Yang Guo sighed and said, "Founding Master Chongyang was indeed a real Han hero. His whole heart was devoted to defending the country and since this was the case, our Ancestor Grandma couldn't be blamed for being estranged." Xiao Longnu said, "No, Ancestor Grandma was very delighted to receive these letters." Puzzled, Yang Guo asked, "How do you know?" Xiao Longnu said, "Of course I don't know. I can only guess what went on inside her mind. You see, every single letter talked about how very urgent and difficult those battle situations were but master Chongyang, even in distress, still didn't forget to write to our Ancestor Grandma. Wouldn't you say she was always on his mind?" Yang Guo nodded and said, "Yes, it was indeed so." And then he picked up the letter again.

That letter described a desperate situation. Wang Chongyang's army was overwhelmed by many enemies and they were repeatedly defeated with little hope of support. At the end of the letter, he asked about Lin Chaoying's injured condition and even though he used only a few words, his deep concerns were quite evident. Yang Guo said, "Hmm, during those years our Ancestor Grandma was injured but later she was well again. Your wound condition can slowly heal too. After a year or so, you can be recovered."

Xiao Longnu weakly smiled. She herself knew that her injury this time was far from normal. If an injury this heavy could be cured, that would be like having an immortal walking the earth. But to say it out loud right now wouldn't help light up the situation. Even if Yang Guo's suggestion couldn't convince her, it would make him feel better. So she said, "Slow treatment is good. What's the rush? And these letters don't really talk about private matters, you can read on!"

Yang Guo read another letter, which was filled with words of grief and anger. It talked about the army's defeat and how Wang Chongyang had to risk everything to break out of a heavy encirclement. But even his retreat was a disaster with ultimate deaths and casualties; at the end of the letter he said he was going to gather troops again for another battle. From that point on every letter all talked about military defeats and setbacks. The Jin power at the North river was very strong and Wang Chongyang obviously already knew that the matters were gravely serious. The letter was full of desperate and disheartening messages.

Yang Guo said, "These letters are very depressing. Let's not read anymore! Eh, what's this?" Suddenly there was excitement in his voice and the hand that held the letter slightly trembled. He read aloud, "There, at the most northern and bitterly cold area, is a stone called Chilled Jade [Han Yu]. It can control all illnesses and cure incurable diseases and should help my sister [Lin Chaoying]. Long'er, do you think this...this is the Chilled Jade Bed?"

As Xiao Longnu saw the happy expression on his face, her voice shook, "You... You said the Chilled Jade Bed could heal my injury?" Yang Guo replied, "I don't know but Master Chongyang said so. It must have a basis. You see, the Chilled Jade Bed was provided by him, wasn't it? Our Ancestor Grandma slept on this bed, didn't she? And her severe injury finally healed, right?"

He hurriedly unfolded every letter to look for a way to treat injuries but, apart from that one letter, the two words "Chilled Jade" were not mentioned again anywhere. Yang Guo finally tied up the many letters with the ribbon and put them back in the box. Blankly, he pondered, "This Chilled Jade Bed is this strange. There must be a reason. But how do I find out a way to treat Long'er's injury? Hmm, let me figure out the way... let me figure out the way...."

Xiao Longnu smiled and asked, "You look lost in thought, what's on your mind?"

Yang Guo then replied, "I'm trying to figure out a way to use the Chilled Jade Bed to treat your injury. Do I grind the stone for you to take as medicine or do I use any medicine to complement it somehow?" If he didn't know that the Chilled Jade Bed could treat all injuries, that would be the end of story but now that he'd read the six words "control all illnesses, cure incurable diseases" and couldn't figure out how to use the Chilled Jade Bed, his heart was on fire. Dismally Xiao Longnu said, "Do you remember Sun Po Po? She took care of both our Ancestor Grandma and my master for many years. Still when she was injured by the Taoist named Hao, she... she died of a severe injury." Originally Yang Guo was full of hope. Now hearing her words, he felt as if he was suddenly drenched with cold water.

Xiao Longnu stretched out her hand to stroke his hair gently. With a gentle voice she said, "Guo'er, you don't have to worry so much about my injury. Why should you put yourself through agony again?"

Yang Guo was completely disheartened but after a while, he asked, "How did my Shi Zu [Martial Grandma -referring to her master] get injured?" Even though Yang Guo had lived at Gu Mu for many years, he actually never heard Xiao Longnu talk about how her master passed away.

Xiao Longnu said, "My master isolated herself inside Gu Mu and rarely went outside. Then there was this one year my Shi Jie [apprentice sister] went out and caused trouble. She fled back to Mount Zhongnan so my master had to leave the tomb to help. Then unexpectedly she fell into an enemy trap. Even though my master lost the fight, she could still bring back Shi Jie. That should have been the end of it. But then she bickered with that evil person. Nobody would have

expected that he would want a yard after getting an inch. Shortly after the fight, he was outside Gu Mu, issuing a challenge, and then broke into the tomb. My master couldn't fend him off and almost had to drop the dragon stone to die together with him inside. Fortunately, at a critical moment, she threw out a golden needle. That evil person was caught off guard and got hit. The itchy pain was difficult to bear and my master used that opportunity to strike his pressure points. Seeing him unable to move, she didn't expect that Shi Jie would sneak up to unseal the pressure points. In the end that evil person attacked her and that was when she got struck by his poison hand."

Yang Guo asked, "Who was that evil person? His martial skills were even above my Martial Grandma. He must have been a high master of her generation."

Xiao Longnu said, "Master didn't tell me. She said that my heart shouldn't be filled with any love or hate feelings and that if she told me who that evil person was, I wouldn't forget him and would later go seek revenge."

Yang Guo sighed and said, "Hmmm, Shi Zu [Martial Grandma] was really a good person!"

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "If master could see me today being married to a good son-in-law like this, she would be quite delighted."

With a laugh, Yang Guo said, "That might not be the case. She wouldn't let you marry anyone."

Xiao Longnu sighed, "My master was really the kindest. Even though at first she wouldn't allow it, afterwards, seeing my heart, she would have relented. She... she would certainly have liked you." Xiao Longnu was recalling her master's kindness and was lost in thought for a long time. Then she said, "After master was injured, she moved to another room

on the opposite side far away from the Chilled Jade Bed. She said our Gu Mu sect's martial style and cold air induced and subdued each other, therefore the Chilled Jade Bed wonderfully helped us practicing our martial skills. But after injury, we should not be exposed to the cold air."

Yang Guo made a "hmm" sound while pondering how internal energy circulated through vital organs. To use internal energy according to the Jade Maiden Manual, the pure Yin air would flow through body pulses, causing the inner body to be extremely cold and sending out heat steams to the outside of the body. When practicing, clothing had to be removed so the heat steams could be smoothly dispersed without any obstruction. And the internally injured could not use the cold air from the Chilled Jade Bed. He contemplated, "But what did Master Wang Chongyang mean by "control all illnesses, cure incurable diseases? This induce and subdue principle must be missing some important details." Then he saw Xiao Longnu's eyelids drooping, indicating that she was exhausted. He said, "You should rest, I'm sitting right here to keep you company."

Xiao Longnu quickly opened her eyes wide and said, "No, I'm not tired. Tonight, we won't sleep." With her heavy injury, she was afraid that once she slept, she wouldn't wake up again. Then she said, "You keep on talking to me. Hmm, are you tired?"

Yang Guo shook his head and said with a tiny smile, "You don't want to sleep then don't. Just close your eyes and keep your mind awake."

Xiao Longnu said, "All right!" She slowly closed her eyelids and said in a low voice, "My master once said, there was one thing that till the day she died she still couldn't figure out. Guo'er, you are very smart, you can think about it." Yang Guo said, "What is it?" Xiao Longnu then said, "Master hit that evil

person's pressure point but she didn't know why Shi Jie [Apprentice Sister] would help him unseal it." Yang Guo was deep in thought for a while and then felt Xiao Longnu's body resting against his. Her breaths were shallow. She already fell asleep.

Yang Guo gazed at her face, his heart filled with apprehension. Time passed. A candle flame flickered and then went out by itself.

He suddenly remembered a vertical couplet in a small room at the Peach Blossom Island:

"Silkworms will not stop spitting their threads until they die; the candle has burned to ashes when tears dry up."

Missing his wife, Huang Yaoshi wrote these two lines of a Tang poem and hung them outside the study where she used to embroider. At that time, Yang Guo saw them but paid no attention. He was just too young to understand. Now he slowly absorbed the true meaning of the lines and his heart was breaking. Suddenly before his eyes, another candle was flickering its last light. He thought, "These two candles are just like Long'er and I. One has burned out and the other is about to be extinguished."

He was deep in thought for a while and then heard Xiao Longnu quietly murmur, "I'm not going to die. Guo'er... I'm not going to die. The two of us will live for many, many, many years."

Yang Guo said, "That's right. You can't die. You'll slowly improve and then you'll be well. How does your chest feel?" Xiao Longnu didn't reply. She was just talking in her sleep.

Yang Guo stretched out his hand to brush her forehead but felt it was burning. He was both worried and sad. He thought, "Li Mochou did all kinds of evil things but she is now alive

and well. Long'er has never caused anyone harm. How come her life is cut short? Oh God, Oh God, you open your eyes but don't see?"

In his entire life, he was never a prisoner of fear and he always acted as he pleased. But right now, facing a hopeless situation, he couldn't do anything. He gently put Xiao Longnu's body to the side and knelt down on the ground. He secretly prayed, "So long as God has mercy and let her injured body recover, I will... I will..." To redeem Xiao Longnu's life, how would there be anything he was not willing to do?

While he was praying, Xiao Longnu suddenly said, "It was Ouyang Feng. Sun Po Po [Grandma Sun] said it was Ouyang Feng! Guo'er, Guo'er, where are you?" She called out in alarm and lifted her body up. Yang Guo quickly sat down by the bed, grabbed her hand, and said, "I'm here." In her sleep, Xiao Longnu felt her body without support so she immediately woke up. Seeing now that Yang Guo was still right by her and hadn't gone anywhere, she was greatly consoled.

Yang Guo said, "Don't worry. In this lifetime, I'll never leave you. And in the future, when we leave Gu Mu, I will never leave your side even for a bit."

Xiao Longnu said, "In the outside world, sure enough there are so many good places to go. But when we get outside, I'll still be afraid."

Yang Guo said, "Today we don't have to fear anything. We'll wait for a few months for your body to recover, and then we'll head south. I've heard that Lingnan [a place in South China] is warm like spring all year round. The flowers bloom and don't wither and the leaves always stay green. We'll put down our swords. We'll grow plants and raise small chickens and ducks. We'll live under the southern sun for the rest of

our lives and have many, many boys and girls. Do you think these are good ideas?"

Xiao Longnu daydreamed and gently said, "We'll put down our swords forever. That's wonderful! Nobody hurts us and we don't need to hurt others. We'll grow things on a farm and we'll keep chickens and ducks.. .. Oh, only if I don't die..."

For the moment, the two hearts flew to a far-away Southern place, which was blessed with spring breezes and morning sun. They could smell the rich flower fragrances and they could hear the sounds of small chickens clucking and ducks...

No longer being able to support her head, Xiao Longnu's mind was about to slip into a blur. But she was determined not to sleep so she said, "I don't want to sleep. You keep talking to me."

Yang Guo said, "Just now in your sleep you said something about Ouyang Feng. What was the matter?"

Xiao Longnu then said, "I said Ouyang Feng? What about him?"

Yang Guo added, "You also said Sun Po Po [Grandma Sun] decided that it was him."

As Xiao Longnu heard him saying that, she immediately recalled something and said, "Oh! Sun Po Po said the man who injured my master had to be West Poison Ouyang Feng. She said in the world there were only very few people who could have hurt my master. And Ouyang Feng was the only bad person among those people. Until her death, my master never said that evil person's name. Sun Po Po asked her 'Is it Ouyang Feng, is it Ouyang Feng?' but my master shook her head, smiled, and then passed away. Isn't that Ouyang Feng your adoptive father? His martial skills were really high; no wonder my master couldn't defeat him."

Yang Guo sighed and said, "My adoptive father has died. Martial Grandma and Sun Po Po have died. Master Chongyang and Ancestor Grandma have died. Hatred, love, and death were all written off by God. It was like my Martial Grandma could see the future so she was not willing to say my adoptive father's name..." But suddenly he shouted, "Oh...that must be it!"

Xiao Longnu asked, "What have you figured out?"

Yang Guo replied, "Li Mochou didn't unseal my adoptive father's pressure point that Martial Grandma hit. Actually, it was because Martial Grandma didn't hit the mark in the first place!"

Xiao Longnu said, "She didn't hit the mark? That was not possible. My master's accupoint sealing skill was really remarkable."

Yang Guo said, "My adoptive father had two of the world's strange martial skills. In his whole body, the vital energy could circulate against the normal flow. The opposite circulation shifted all his pressure points so sealing the pressure point actually meant missing the point."

Xiao Longnu said, "There is something that strange?"

Yang Guo said "Let me try it for you to see." Having said that, he flipped up-side down and used his hand to prop himself up on the floor, his head down and legs up in the air. Then he quickly spun himself, making a few rounds, and then breathed in a few times. Suddenly he jumped up and bumped his head into a pointed corner of the table in front of the bed. Xiao Longnu cried out, "Ai yo, be careful!" only to see the "Hundred Meetings" point [Bai Hui] on his head hit the corner of the stone table hard. This "Hundred Meetings" point was right on top of the brain, where the vertical line from the front to the back of the head and the horizontal line

from the left ear to the right ear intersect, and hence the name "hundred meetings point." This was a vital pressure point, which controlled all the veins. Doctors usually compared it to the North Star, as in the saying "Bai Hui [Hundred Meetings] is sky, Xuan Ji [Jade Pearl -chest] is man, and Yong Quan [Bubbling Spring -legs] is earth," which was to say that these "three big pressure points" were the most critical in a human body. Knowing this, Yang Guo bumped it right into a table corner and then turned around to stand erect. With a laugh he said, "You see, as the energy flew in the opposite direction, my Hundred Meetings point changed its position!" Xiao Longnu clucked her tongue in approval and said, "How very strange. And he came up with that!"

Hitting himself this time, even though Yang Guo didn't seal his pressure point, he used quite a bit of force and his brain couldn't help becoming confused. In his daze, he seemed to have figured out something important all of a sudden but couldn't quite say what it was. Xiao Longnu saw him looking dazed and disoriented so she said with a smile, "Dumb kid, a gentle demonstration would have been enough. Nobody told you to crash into the table so hard. Does it hurt?" Yang Guo didn't reply just waved his hand for her to stop talking. He concentrated on his thoughts but felt like there was a fuzzy shadow flashing in his brain, barring him from getting a clear picture. It seemed he needed to recall something from the past, yet it was also like he'd suddenly discovered something new. He wished he could have just taken it out from his brain, stopped that moving shadow, put that thought before his eyes and clearly look at it.

He thought for a while. Still he couldn't grasp the main points and couldn't give up thinking either. He grabbed his head. Quite vexed, he asked Xiao Longnu, "Long'er, I've figured out an extremely important matter but I don't know what. Do you know?" When a person got his thoughts mixed up like entangled threads and he himself didn't have a clue,

asking another person what he was thinking was quite ridiculous. But for the two of them who had lived together for a long time and understood each other very well, their guesses would be correct most of the times. Xiao Longnu said, "This is a very important matter?" Yang Guo replied, "Yes." Xiao Longnu asked, "Is it related to my injury? Delighted, Yang Guo said, "Good, very good! What matter is that? What have I figured out?"

With a chuckle, Xiao Longnu said, "You just talked about your adoptive father Ouyang Feng. You said he could direct vital energy to circulate in the opposite direction. Is this related to my injured condition? I'm not the person he injured..."

Yang Guo suddenly jumped up and shouted out loudly, "Got it!"

These two words "Got it!" were brightly loud. The doors of the stone chambers inside Gu Mu were not closed so each and every word spoken echoed back, "Got it, Got it..." Yang Guo grabbed Xiao Longnu's right arm and repeatedly cried out, "You could be saved! You could be saved! You could be saved!" He couldn't restrain his happiness; nor could he really find words to express it. Seeing him all excited, Xiao Longnu was infected with this joyous feeling. She sat up.

Yang Guo said, "Long'er, you listen to my words. Right now you are seriously injured so you can't use our sect's Jade Maiden skills. And this makes it difficult for you to recover from the injury. But if you can circulate your vital energy against the flow to heal yourself, the Chilled Jade Bed will precisely be a marvelous aid."

Xiao Longnu had yet to understand. She mumbled, "Vital energy against the flow... the Chilled Jade Bed..."

Happily, Yang Guo said, "Would you say this is fate? You've practiced the Jade Maiden skill, which was good enough. On

top of that we have the Chilled Jade Bed."

Xiao Longnu became confused so she said, "I still don't quite understand."

Yang Guo then explained, "The Jade Maiden skills follow the Yin energy but the reverse flow skills are pure Yang. When I talked about my adoptive father's reverse energy flow skills, I vaguely felt that your injured condition could be healed. Then I hit my head and, afterwards, recalled what Master Chongyang mentioned in his letter about the Chilled Jade. And it all became clear."

Xiao Longnu said, "So is that to say our Ancestor Grandma, who used the Chilled Jade Bed to treat her injury, could reverse the energy flow as well?"

Yang Guo said, "That's not likely. Our Ancestor Grandma would definitely not know this reverse energy flow technique. But I suspect that she was injured by the Yin's soft internal energy. Your injury, on the other hand, was caused by the opposite force of the hard Yang." Xiao Longnu smiled and nodded. Then with a joyful feeling, she put her mind at ease.

Yang Guo said, "We'd better not wait. Let us do it now." He then went into the firewood room and took out a bunch of firewood. He lit them up in the corner of the stone room. Then he taught Xiao Longnu the most basic elements of the reverse energy flow skills and helped her sit up on the Chilled Jade Bed. He sat by the fire. As he used his left hand to press against Xiao Longnu's right palm, he said, "I'll push this heat through each of your pressure points and you use your internal energy to circulate it against the normal flow. We'll do it one point at a time and when the heat comes back to the Chilled Jade Bed, your injured condition should improve a little bit." With a smile Xiao Longnu said, "Do I have to get down and spin myself just like you did?" Yang Guo said, "Nah, that's not necessary. Spinning is for shifting

pressure points. It's only good when fighting enemies. We are slowly healing your injury; sitting down here is just as good."

Xiao Longnu stretched her hand to hold his left palm and with a smile she said, "Come to think of it, that Guo Guniang wasn't too mean. She didn't cut off both of your arms." The two people had been through so many near death incidents that the matter of missing an arm became trivial. And Xiao Longnu was even joking about it. Yang Guo also laughed and retorted, "If both of my arms got cut off, I'd still have two feet. Only that using my soles to help you circulate the energy would be hilariously smelly and not quite elegant." Xiao Longnu scoffed and then silently recited the principle of reverse energy flow. After a while, she said, "I've got it!"

Yang Guo saw that the fire was burning too intense so he got up to slow it down. And just when they were about to begin circulating the energy, he suddenly called out, "Ai yo! I almost missed one important detail! Xiao Longnu said, "What is it?" Yang Guo pointed to Guo Xiang who was sleeping at the foot of the bed and said, "At a critical moment, if this little devil cries out, it will be quite a disaster!" Xiao Longnu then murmured, "Very dangerous!" When one was circulating and cultivating energy, the most evil taboo was a disturbed mind. Quite some time ago, Xiao Longnu and Yang Guo were practicing their Jade Maiden skills and were discovered by Yin Zhiping and Zhao Zhijing. Xiao Longnu's anger caused her to spit up blood and she almost died. In addition to that, at that time her body was normally healthy. Today she was heavily injured, how would she be able to withstand any bit of distraction?

Yang Guo mixed half a bowl of the bee honey, picked up Guo Xiang, and fed her before moving her to a distant stone chamber. He shut two doors between them so even if she cried out, they wouldn't hear her. Then he came back to stay by the chilled jade bed and said, "To clear the thirty six major

pressure points your body, I think at best it will take ten days and at worst about half a month. Originally it should have taken many, many days because it's hard to avoid distraction. But our Gu Mu is completely isolated from the outside world, making it the best place on earth for recovery. Even the most remote wild mountain or valley won't be as good because there will always be the sound of birds or the smell of flowers to disturb one's mind."

Xiao Longnu smiled and said, "My injury was caused by the Quanzhen Taoists but it was their founding master who gave us the tomb chamber and the Chilled Jade Bed for me to rest and recover in. So their merits and crimes actually cancelled out each other."

Then Yang Guo said, "What about that Jinlun Fawang? We can't let him get away with it."

Xiao Longnu sighed and said, "So long as I can live, what else do you have to be unhappy about?"

Yang Guo held her hand and said, "You are right. This time after you've recovered, we'll never fight with people again. God is so kind to us. Hmmm..."

Xiao Longnu gently said, "We'll go south to become farmers and we'll raise a lot of chickens and ducks..." As she was saying that, she felt the heat energy passing into her body. With a trembling heart, she used the reverse energy flow technique that Yang Guo taught her to circulate that energy.

This healing method of using the reverse energy flow technique and the Chilled Jade Bed to complement each other was really strange but the result was also very effective. Years ago, Reverend Yi Deng had used the "Divine One Yang Finger" to cure Huang Rong's injury by circulating energy and clearing all her pressure points in pretty much the same way. The difference was that using the One Yang

Finger to cure an illness ravenously consumed a lot of Reverend Yi Deng's internal energy but hence lead to a quick recovery. Yang Guo's method would take many days to see results. And more than that, for a non-martial person who was heavily injured, a master of the One Yang Finger would use his profound internal energy to help the injured circulate the Yang energy and thus bring him back to health. In Xiao Longnu's case, she didn't have a very deep internal energy foundation but she and Yang Guo were from the same sect, yet could use different techniques. Not even Ouyang Feng coming back from the grave or Huang Yaoshi arriving could create a harmony between the helper and the helped like this. And nor would they be able to help Xiao Longnu to reverse her energy flow without innumerable difficulties.

Three times a day, Yang Guo would go out to feed Guo Xiang with honey and boiled pumpkin. Other than that he rarely left Xiao Longnu's side. To clear major pressure points, sometimes it would take four or five hours during which their hands could not be separated. At the time Guo Jing was injured, Huang Rong spent seven days and seven nights helping him cure the injuries. Compared to Guo Jing's sturdy body, Xiao Longnu's was far more delicate and so her injury was many times more serious.

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That day at the outskirts of the woods, Huang Rong used her "Orchid Brushing Accupoint" skills to defeat Li Mochou. Then she looked everywhere but still couldn't find her baby Guo Xiang. She was filled with anxiety and sorrow. As she came out of the forest, she shouted at Li Mochou, "What kind of tricks did you use? Where did you hide my baby?"

Surprised, Li Mochou said, "Isn't the little girl tucked behind the thorn fence?"

Huang Rong was so worried that she almost broke down in tears. She shook her head and replied, "She's disappeared."

Li Mochou had been fostering Guo Xiang for many days and was quite attached to her. Suddenly hearing that she was missing, her heart skipped a beat. She quickly said, "Must be either Yang Guo or Jinlun Fawang."

Huang Rong then asked, "How do you know?"

Then Li Mochou told her about her fight with Yang Guo and Fawang over the baby outside the walls of Xiangyang. As she talked about the dangers, Huang Rong couldn't keep her indifferent appearance. Seeing Li Mochou's worried expression, Huang Rong was then convinced that she didn't know where Guo Xiang was and so she stretched out her hand to unseal the "Jade Pearl" pressure point [Xuan Ji] on her chest. With Huang Rong's technique, Li Mochou could move round but she wouldn't be able to hurt anyone for a twelve-hour period.

With a forced smile, Li Mochou straightened up her body and brushed away the dirt. She said, "If it was Yang Guo who took her, she wouldn't be harmed. I'm only afraid that Fawang snatched her." Huang Rong asked again, "Why is that?" Li Mochou replied, "Yang Guo was extremely good with the little baby girl. He quickly protected her from harm. That was why I blindly thought she was his daughter." Having realized what she just said, she suddenly shut up for fear that Huang Rong would get angry again.

But really Huang Rong's mind was occupied by another matter. She was thinking about how Yang Guo and Li Mochou battled with Jinlun Fawang to protect Guo Xiang, while she herself and Guo Fu wrongly accused him of abominable crimes, and how Guo Fu had cut off his arm. Deep down in her heart was a grim regret. She blamed herself, "Alas, Guo'er has saved Jing Ge Ge [Brother Jing]. He's saved me.

He's saved Fu'er. And this time he's saved Xiang'er... First impressions always stuck in my heart. I thought about his terribly evil father and then concluded that the son had to be like the father. I've never trusted him... Occasionally I treated him nicely and then I'd suspect him of doing something again. Rong'er... Rong'er... You've prided yourself on being intelligent. You've spoken of confidentiality and righteousness. You are really nothing like Jing Ge Ge [Brother Jing]."

Seeing tears brimming in her eyes, Li Mochou thought she was worried about her daughter's safety. So she urged, "Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo], your daughter is only a month old. She's gone through quite a catastrophe but not even a single hair on her head is damaged. She was born as pretty as a doll [jade snow]. Even a she-devil, who killed people without batting an eye like me, likes her very much. She must have been born with a lucky life... the life that will change misfortune into fortune. And for all that, you can be at peace. Let the two of us go look for her together."

Huang Rong wiped away the tears with her shirt sleeve and thought that what Li Mochou said was quite right. She also thought, "Honesty is the best way. Later on, I'll let people think badly of me but I won't think badly of people." Then she stretched out her hand to unseal Li Mochou's "Jade Pearl" point [Xuan Ji] again and said, "Li Dao Zhang [Sister Li] is willing to go find my daughter with me, I'm very grateful. But if you have an important matter to attend to, I can see you later."

Li Mochou said, "What important matter? The most important thing is to find this little baby. You wait a minute!" Having said that, she rushed to the big hole inside a big tree and untied a rope on a leopard's foot. Then she slapped its behind and said, "Off you go." That leopard let out a low roar and quickly disappeared into the long grass. Puzzled, Huang

Rong asked, "What did the leopard do?" With a laugh, Li Mochou said, "That was your daughter's 'wet-nurse'."

Huang Rong smiled faintly and the two people headed back into town. Then they saw Guo Fu standing at the road that led into town. She was waiting impatiently for her mother.

Seeing Huang Rong, Guo Fu jumped up with joy and called out, "Ma [Mother], little sister was..." She cut herself off in mid-sentence when she unexpectedly saw that standing behind her mother was Li Mochou and she couldn't help being frightened. She prepared herself to fight. In past times, she'd heard Wu Di Xiong [The Wu Brothers] say that Li Mochou killed their mother, so in her heart this was the most evil person on earth.

Huang Rong said, "Li Dao Zhang [Sister Li] is helping us search for your little sister. What did you say about your sister just now?"

Guo Fu replied, "Mei Mei [Sister] was kidnapped by Yang Guo. And he also snatched my little red horse. You look at this sword." Having said that, she raised a bent sword to show her mother and said, "He used his empty shirt sleeve to strike it. The sword hit the corner of a wall and it turned out like this."

Huang Rong and Li Mochou asked at the same time, "Using his shirt sleeve?"

Guo Fu replied, "Yes, it was really weird! Who would have thought he'd learned a devil Kung fu."

Huang Rong and Li Mochou looked at each other in amazement. The two of them naturally knew that a person with extremely profound internal energy could definitely turn silk into a stick, or use a soft material to strike a hard object. However, even if such a renowned and talented master could be found, he would still need thirty or forty years of practice

to reach that level. At a very young age, Yang Guo surprisingly had reached this high stage. And this was extremely rare. As Huang Rong heard that her daughter was taken by Yang Guo, she felt quite relieved. Li Mochou, on the other hand, thought to herself, "This boy's marvelous Kung Fu must be the result of learning from my master's Jade Heart Manual. Right now I have Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] with me. If I help her get her daughter back, she will help me snatch the manual. I'm the first disciple of the sect. Even though Shi Mei [Apprentice Sister] was Master's favorite, she'd already broken the sect's rule. How could I let the manual fall into a man's hand?" And with this thought, she felt herself quite righteous.

Huang Rong had tracked down Yang Guo's direction and said, "Fu'er, you don't have to go back to the Peach Blossom Island anymore. We'll go find Yang Da Ge [Big Brother Yang] together."

Guo Fu was very pleased, and said, "Okay, Okay!" But then when she thought that she would have to see Yang Guo, her face turned completely pale.

Huang Rong's face was grim and she said, "When you see him again; don't ask him if he's forgiven you. You have to sincerely take the blame and apologize."

In her heart, Guo Fu didn't want to submit so she said, "Why do I have to do it? Isn't he the one kidnapping Mei Mei [Sister]?"

Huang Rong simply rephrased Li Mochou's words and said, "If he really had an evil intention, do you think your sister would still live today? Also, if he didn't just hit your sword but rather aimed at your small head, don't you think right now this would be quite a pretty scene?"

Hearing her mother's words, Guo Fu still couldn't help but shiver inside. She secretly thought, "Is that to say he's really shown mercy?" But since she had been spoiled since she was little she still argued, "He's snatched my sister away; naturally he is on his way to the Passionless Valley!"

Huang Rong shook her head and said, "No, he would definitely go back to Mount Zhongnan."

Guo Fu pursed her lips and said, "Ma, you are actually helping him! If he really had a good intention, why wouldn't he bring Mei Mei back to us in Xiangyang? For what reason would he have to take her to Mount Zhongnan?"

Huang Rong sighed and said, "You and Yang Da Ge [Big Brother Yang] grew up together. For all that you still don't understand his character! He's always been arrogant and he's never taken kindly to insults. You cut off his arm. He could have taken your life but he didn't have the heart to. But for this matter, he also wouldn't back down. He took your sister away to make us worry. When time passes and his anger disappears, he'll just bring your sister back to us. Have you understood? You accused him of stealing your little sister so he simply did it to show you that he could!"

Huang Rong returned to the small restaurant that they just visited. She borrowed stationary and penned a short letter. Then she gave the store partner two silver coins for him to deliver the letter to Guo Jing in Xiangyang.

That man said, "Guo Da Xia [Hero Guo] protects our borders and keeps our mind at ease. He really is our people's Buddha. If we little people can help in anyway, we'll not hesitate." He was not willing to take the money. He picked up the letter and happily left. Guo Fu saw that many people revered her father like this; she was very pleased in her heart.

The three people bought mules and set out toward Mount Zhongnan. Guo Fu didn't like Li Mochou and they rarely talked on the way. When she bumped into Li Mochou by chance and couldn't avoid talking, her expression would turn cold. They started traveling in the morning and stopped at night to rest. The journey was smooth. But this afternoon, while the three of them rode in a line, they saw someone speeding her horse towards them.

End of Chapter 28.

Chapter 29 - Ultimate Disasters

Translated by Beedreamer



In the smoke Guo Fu was disoriented and about to faint. She was so frightened that she couldn't even cry out. Suddenly she heard someone's shouting from the east side, only to see a whirlwind that wrapped around a gray shadow coming towards her. Wherever the spinning wind passed through, the fire would split open into two sections. The shadow was of course Yang Guo.

Guo Fu called out, "It's my little red horse. It's my..." As she was saying that, the red horse rushed in front of them. Guo Fu leapt forward. The red horse recognized its master and didn't need for her to pull the reins. It fought to stop, raised its head, and neighed.

Guo Fu saw that mounting on the horse was a young girl dressed in black. When they met before, Guo Fu was fighting side by side with her against Li Mochou. This girl was indeed Wanyan Ping. Her hair was disheveled. Her face was greenish pale. And she looked extremely distressed. Seeing that, Guo Fu asked, "Wanyan Zi Zi [Elder Sister Wanyan], what's happened to you?"

Wanyan Ping pointed her finger to the path she just came from and said, "Quick... Quick..." Suddenly her body toppled, falling down from the horse.

Guo Fu cried out in alarm and reached out to support her. She turned to her mother and said, "Ma, this is elder sister Wanyan." While saying that, she gave Li Mochou a stare.

Huang Rong mused, "She raced the precious horse [Han Xie Yu] like this. Nobody in the world could catch up with her so of course she was not in danger. But when she pointed her finger to the North, she had a distressed look. She must be worried about other people. We must rush out to help them." So she told her daughter to help Wanyan Ping sit up on the

horse and also said, "This horse's feet are too swift. You can't rush ahead of me no matter what!" Guo Fu asked, "Why not?" Huang Rong quipped, "There's a great danger lying ahead. How have you not figured it out?" After saying that she gave Li Mochou a hand signal and the two galloped north.

After rushing for ten li, as expected they heard the faint sounds of weapons clashing from the other side of the mountain. Huang Rong and Li Mochou urged the mules to go around the mountain and then in the field before them they saw five people engaging in a wicked fight. Two of them were the Wu brothers. There were also a young man and a young woman Huang Rong did not recognize. The four of them were fighting against a middle-aged man and even though it was four against one, they were defending more than attacking. The Wu brothers were both wounded and the young man was fiercely brandishing his long sword against that middle-aged man's better moves. Lying down on the ground nearby was another person, Wu Santong, who was incessantly yelling and shouting.

Huang Rong saw that man's left hand holding a large flashing gold knife and his right hand wielding a thin, long, black sword. His sword moves were strangely fantastic and not something she'd seen before. If she herself didn't jump in, the Wu brothers would definitely be in imminent danger. So she said to Li Mochou, "Those two young men are my disciples."

Li Mochou let out a laugh and said, "Their mother was killed by me. How can it be that you don't know?" Li Mochou saw that the middle-aged man's martial skills were strangely high. She'd never heard that there was such a person in Jianghu and she was secretly quite astonished. Finally, she faintly smiled and said, "Let's fight!" Li Mochou pulled out her fly whisk while Huang Rong also held firm the bamboo stick in her hand. Then together the two of them approached

that man from left and right. Li Mochou's brush attacked his black sword while Huang Rong's bamboo cane tangled his gold knife.

This middle-aged man was of course the master of the Passionless Valley sect Gongsun Zhi. As he suddenly saw two middle-aged beautiful females coming to attack in pair, his heart shook. But then he heard Li Mochou shout, "One!" and her whisk flashed out. "Two!" she called out again. At first she and Huang Rong were secretly comparing their strength to see who would first beat this person but as she continuously counted to "ten", Gongsun Zhi was still attacking and defending. Then, with three stances, the young man's sword was thrust to the back of Gongsun Zhi. These sword stances were packed with fierce strength. Gongsun Zhi knew he'd eventually lose if he continued to fight so he didn't try to block them but instead jumped forward over ten feet. He looked at Huang Rong and Li Mochou and secretly thought, "Where did these two ferocious women come from? But oh, how beautiful they are!" Having thought that, he clashed his knife and sword, making a weng-weng sound, and then leapt up again.

Huang Rong and Li Mochou didn't dare to underestimate the enemy so they tightened up their guards. Gongsun Zhi turned his body around in midair and when he dropped to the ground, he got up again and rushed up the mountain. With a smile, Huang Rong and Li Mochou looked at each other and both thought, "This person had powerful martial skills and was also cunning. If fighting by myself, I'm afraid that I wouldn't be his match."

The Wu brothers pressed their wounds with their hands and moved forward to kowtow to their Shi Mu [Martial Mother]. Then they both stood up and angrily stared at Li Mochou. Huang Rong said, "You won't settle the old debt today. Your father's injury would be in the way, wouldn't it? Who are

these two people? Ai yo, wretched! Li Zi Zi [Elder Sister Li] come with me quickly!" She didn't even waste time getting on the mule but flew her body toward the road and rushed out. Li Mochou didn't get her meaning but still followed her. Then she asked, "What's the matter?" Huang Rong answered, "Fu'er, Fu'er will run right into this person!"

The two used their internal energy to pursue him but Gongsun Zhi was really fast. Only with a somewhat small delay, he'd already left them far behind.

Guo Fu was supporting Wanyan Ping with both hands. Both of them rode the red horse and slowly emerged from behind the mountain. Huang Rong saw them from a distance so she used her internal energy to call out, "Fu'er, be careful!" Her sound hadn't even faded when Gongsun Zhi quickly approached them and jumped up onto the horse's back. He stretched out his hand to hold Guo Fu still while pulling the reins to turn the horse's head around. Seeing that, Huang Rong puckered her lips to whistle and then rushed forward.

Gongsun Zhi was startled and thought, "How come today all my affairs went wrong like this? Can't I even befriend a domesticated animal?" Then he exerted his strength to rein in the horse. This force was not weak and so the red horse let out a long neigh and reared up. Thinking to flee southward, Gongsun Zhi forced the horse to turn around but instead it flitted about and kicked up its legs. And then it unexpectedly moved backwards step-by-step. Delighted, Huang Rong sped up. Gongsun Zhi saw that the red horse was incredibly stubborn and that Huang Rong and Li Mochou were closing in, he sheathed the weapons. Holding Guo Fu with his right hand and Wanyan Ping with his left, they got off the horse. Now Huang Rong and Li Mochou, with their lightness kung fu, were approaching fast and were only a short distance away.

Gongsun Zhi turned around and said with a smile, "If I squeeze my arms, will these two beautiful and delicate girls still live?"

Huang Rong asked, "Who are you, sir? You and I have never met. Why would you capture my daughter?"

With a smile Gongsun Zhi said, "This is your daughter? Are you really Wanyan Fu Ren [Madame Wanyan]?"

Huang Rong pointed at Guo Fu and said, "That one is my daughter!"

Gongsun Zhi looked at Guo Fu and turned to gaze at Huang Rong. With a grin he said, "Tsk...tsk...tsk, very beautiful. Mother and daughter are both beautiful, very beautiful!"

Although Huang Rong was furious, her daughter was in his hands. She had to be careful not to fight the enemy and harm her daughter in the process. Therefore she had used a delay tactic and reasoned with him. But suddenly she heard the two 'Sou...Sou' whishing sounds from behind. Two long arrows flew past her own left cheek and straight towards Gongsun Zhi. The arrows were fiercely fast and they made extremely loud sounds while cutting through the air. Upon hearing the sounds of the arrows, she was so happy she almost cried out, thinking it was surely her husband arriving. The martial masters in the central plains of China rarely learned arrow techniques. And even though Mongolian warriors' bow techniques were refined, without solid internal energy it was difficult to send an arrow very far. These two arrows were making such loud and solid sounds. Except for Guo Jing, she'd never seen any other person who could do it. But this arrow skill was actually still far from Guo Jing's level. By the time the arrows were halfway, Huang Rong realized that the shooter was not her husband.

Seeing the arrows zooming in, Gongsun Zhi opened his mouth and bit the tip of the first arrow and at the same time stepped aside, using the arrow shaft in his mouth to brush away the second one.

Huang Rong thought, "If it were Jing Ge Ge [Brother Jing] who shot those arrows, I bet using your mouth to catch an arrow like that would give you a hole in your throat." As she was about to move forward, she heard a series of 'Sou...Sou' whishing sounds again. Nine arrows flew in one by one, aiming at the area between Gongsun Zhi's eyebrows. And this time, in a tight situation, Gongsun Zhi had to put down the two girls and pull out his sword to block the arrows.

As Huang Rong and Li Mochou quickly rushed forward to rescue the two girls, they saw a flashing gray shadow rolling Guo Fu to the roadside. When that body turned over to get up, Gongsun Zhi, ignoring his gold knife, shot out his bare palm to strike the top of that person's head.

Lying on the ground, that person turned over his palm to block the attack. There came a clashing sound. Dust flew up all over the place. Gongsun Zhi then called out, "Good!" and sent out his second strike, with more strength this time. Seeing that it would be difficult for that person to block the attack, Huang Rong lashed out her "Dog Beating Stick", using the "seal" stance to intercept that palm strike. Gongsun Zhi saw himself surrounded by the enemies. He knew that he couldn't win today. So with a 'Ha-Ha' laugh, he backed up three steps and turned his body to walk away. He appeared to carry himself naturally, with martial grace. Huang Rong and the others didn't dare to pursue.

While still holding Guo Fu, the person stood up. Then he dropped his arms. Huang Rong saw that he had a tall body with broad biceps, with a long bow hanging from his waist. This was precisely that youth who fought with a sword earlier.

Also, naturally he was the one who shot out those eleven arrows. Even though Guo Fu fell into Gongsun Zhi's clutches just now, she wasn't injured at all and so she said, "Yelu Da Ge [Big Brother Yelu], many thanks for saving me." While saying that, she blushed prettily.

By this time Wu Xiuwen and a young girl caught up with them, leaving Wu Dunru to take care of his father. Normally, Wu Xiuwen should be the one introducing everybody but he was filled with rage and was viciously eyeing Li Mochou. He forgot everybody else at present. Huang Rong called him twice but he didn't even hear it. Li Mochou actually moved far away from them with her hands behind her back, watching the scenery. She of course didn't pay attention to these people.

Guo Fu pointed at the young man who had just rescued her and said to her mother, "Ma, this person is Yelu Qi, Yelu Da Ge [Big Brother Yelu]." Then she pointed at the tall young girl and said, "And this is Yelu Yan, Yelu Zi Zi [Elder Sister Yelu]." Huang Rong then praised them, "You two have quite wonderful kung fu!" The Yelu siblings together replied, "Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] praises us!" and moved forward to pay respect.

Huang Rong then asked, "It looks like you two use the Quanzhen sect's kung fu. May I ask which of the Quanzhen Seven Masters your master is?" She saw Yelu Qi's martial skills and, except for Yang Guo, couldn't think of any other fourth generation disciple of the Quanzhen sect. Yelu Yan said, "My brother taught me my martial skills." Huang Rong nodded and turned to look at Yelu Qi. Yelu Qi felt quite awkward and said, "Elder asked me a question, I really should give you a truthful answer. Only my master has forbidden me, the young generation, to mention his old name. Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo], please forgive me."

Huang Rong was startled and thought, "Would the Quanzhen Seven Masters come up with this strange rule? This young man's martial skills were quite excellent, why couldn't he say his master's name?" Having thought this out, she suddenly burst out into a laugh and bent over with hands on her belly. This matter was really extremely funny. Puzzled, Guo Fu asked, "Ma, what's so funny?" She heard her mother seriously asked Yelu Qi which sect he belonged to. And suddenly she breaks out laughing like this. She was afraid that Yelu Qi would be upset so, embarrassed, she asked again, "Ma, Yelu Da Ge [Brother Yelu] can't say it. That's okay. What's so funny?" Still laughing, Huang Rong didn't answer. Yelu Qi had a smiling expression on his face and said, "Seems like Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] guessed correctly." Guo Fu was at a loss. She turned her head to look at Yelu Yan and saw that she was also in the dark, not understanding what the two were laughing about.

Right now Wu Xiuwen was kneeling down to bandage Wanyan Ping's injury. Just now, while she was held hostage by Gongsun Zhi, she twisted her left ankle while escaping. Huang Rong asked, "Xiu'er how's your father's wound?" Wu Xiuwen replied, "Father was cut by that old Gongsun's sword. His left leg was injured but luckily the sword didn't damage his bone." Huang Rong nodded and walked over to lightly stroke the precious horse's mane. She gently said, "Horse, oh horse, our Guo family won't be able to repay you for your deep loyalty." Then she saw that Wu Xiuwen, with his rather strange expression, didn't speak to Guo Fu at all but took extremely good care of Wanyan Ping. But she didn't know whether he did this to show Guo Fu he was over her or he really was fond of this girl. She decided not to pursue the matter and said, "Let us go get your father."

Wu Santong was sitting on the ground. When he saw Huang Rong approaching, he called out, "Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo]!" and got up. He had a leg wound so his body was

swaying. Wu Dunru and Yelu Yan reached out to hold him at the same time. As their hands bumped, they looked at each other with a smile.

Huang Rong secretly laughed in her heart, "How nice, another couple! Just a few days ago, the brothers were willing to kill each other for Fu'er, not thinking about their blood ties. Now that the boys have met pretty girls, they've instantly turned around and forgotten all about their original feelings." Suddenly she thought about Guo Jing and her heart couldn't help but swell with pride. Jing Ge Ge [Brother Jing] always stayed true to her and never changed, be it in good or bad fortune. How would these youths be able to compare to him? Then she thought about Yang Guo. She felt that his relationship with Xiao Longnu was unseemly. But she also knew that he was smart about relationships and stayed faithful to his love both in life and in death. That was actually something to be revered and respected.

The Wu brothers and Guo Fu grew up together on Peach Blossom Island. Firstly, on the island there was no other girl of their age. Second, time made the hearts grow fonder. If the two brothers didn't fall in love with Guo Fu, that wouldn't make sense at all. Later on, they suddenly found out that Guo Fu didn't return their feelings; they were brokenhearted and said that they would live a life without joy forever. They had no way of knowing that a short while later they would meet Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping who they really should sympathize with. This time when the Wu brothers ran into Guo Fu, they secretly compared their sweethearts to her. The brothers felt that their loved ones were not only not inferior to Guo Fu but also even better. One thought, "Yelu Guniang [Miss Yelu] is open and kind. How could she be like you who are scheming and narrow-minded?" The other thought, "Wanyan Guniang is clearly sympathetic. She is also gentle and polite. How could she be like you who everyday makes people miserable?" The brothers had earlier vowed not to see

Guo Fu again but had now ran into her by accident and couldn't quite escape. They both thought, "Today I didn't intend to go looking for you so this can't be regarded as breaking a vow."

In Guo Fu's mind, she only thought about how she had been captured by Gongsun Zhi just now and how Yelu Qi had saved her. She stole a look at him several times and saw that he was tall and handsome. She couldn't help secretly thinking, "I met him for the first time last year and later forgot all about him. At that time I didn't know that his martial skills would be like this. Mother and he were laughing together. What were they laughing about?"

Huang Rong examined the sword wound on Wu Santong's leg. Fortunately, it wouldn't be a great obstacle. Then everybody shared their stories.

On the day that Wu Santong, Zhu Ziliu and the Martial Uncle Indian monk left for the Passionless Valley to seek the antidote for Yang Guo, just outside of Xiangyang, Wu Santong ran into his two sons. Startled and afraid that they would fight again, he quickly told Zhu Ziliu to accompany Martial Uncle on ahead. Then he rushed out to stop the Wu brothers and asked questions. As it turned out, the Wu brothers both followed their vow spoken to Yang Guo about not seeing Guo Fu again so they didn't want to stay in Xiangyang any longer. Wu Santong was reassured so he praised them, "Good boys, you've got guts!" He also said, "Yang Xiong Di [Brother Yang] risked his own life to save us. Now he is in trouble, how can we not try to help him? The three of us, father and sons, should go to the Passionless Valley together."

The Passionless Valley was like a paradise outside this world. Although Yang Guo had told them about its approximate location, it was actually not easy to find the entrance. The

three people went around in circle and took many paths but still they couldn't find the Valley entrance. The Indian monk and Zhu Ziliu had already fallen into the enemy's trap and been captured by the fishnets of Qiu Qianchi's disciples. Wu Santong and his sons tried many times to help them without success and almost fell into the gorge. With no choice but to retreat, they thought that they would go back to Xiangyang to find help. Unfortunately, they ran into Gongsun Zhi who said the three of them were trespassing and then attacked them. Wu Santong was not his match and was cut on the leg. Gongsun Zhi didn't really want the three people's lives and so he just forced them to leave quickly and told them never to come back.

By this time, the Yelu siblings and Wanyan Ping happened to ride into view. The three people and the Wu brothers used to fight together so they got off their horses and started talking about the old times. Gongsun Zhi was looking at them coldly from the side. He failed to marry Xiao Longnu and got kicked out of the sect by his wife so he was actually bored to death. Seeing that Wanyan Ping was young and beautiful, he couldn't curb his evil desires and suddenly snatched her away with him. This time, the Yelu siblings and the Wu brothers all immediately jumped in to fight. If Wu Santong hadn't been injured, it would be six people joining forces and they would have had a chance against Gongsun Zhi. However, his leg was wounded so Yelu Qi was the only strong fighter among them but they couldn't fend off Gongsun Zhi. It just so happened that the precious horse [Han Xie Yu] was running back by himself from Mount Zhongnan and heading towards Xiangyang. Wu Xiuwen grabbed him and let Wanyan Ping ride away; hoping that Gongsun Zhi would lose interest after the swan was gone. They didn't expect that Huang Rong and Li Mochou would rush into the scene like this.

Huang Rong listened to the stories and talked briefly about how Yang Guo got his arm chopped off and how he snatched

her young daughter. Wu Santong was greatly alarmed and quickly explained the root cause. He said, "Yang Xiong Di [Brother Yang] is brave and warm-hearted. Everything happened because, without thinking about himself, he saved these two animals of mine and didn't let them destroy themselves. Who would have thought that it would lead to these matters?" He thought about how Yang Guo got his arm chopped off, all because of his two sons. And the more he thought about it, the angrier he became. He suddenly pointed at the two sons and scolded them.

On the side, the Wu brothers, the Yelu siblings, and Wanyan Ping were all talking enthusiastically. A little while later, Guo Fu came in to join the discussion. The six people were of the same age and just went through a fierce battle together so with gusto they talked about how fierce and evil Gongsun Zhi was and how he finally fled into the wild. Suddenly they heard Wu Santong bellowed out a shout of outrage, "Wu Dunru, Wu Xiuwen, you two little animals, Yang Guo Xiong Di [Brother Yang Guo] was so good and kind to you but you caused him to lose his arm. You stop and think, how would our family Wu ever face him?" Both his face and ears turned red and the more he scolded, the fiercer he became. If not for his injured leg, he would have thrown himself out to strike them. The two brothers were baffled, not knowing how their father got so mad. Each of them stealthily looked at Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping. They felt that in front of beautiful ladies, having their father calling them 'animal this' and 'animal that' was a great loss of face. But if they were still fighting over Guo Fu like before, that would be distressing too. The two brothers looked at each other at their wits' end, not knowing what to do.

Huang Rong saw the situation to be quite awkward so she intercepted, "Wu Xiong Di [Brother Wu], don't be so upset. Yang Guo's losing an arm was all little sister's fault for not teaching my child better and letting her get away with being

spoiled. At that time, father Guo was also so mad that he wanted to chop off her arm." Wu Santong then gave out a loud shout, "That's right. Good! Her arm should be chopped off!" Guo Fu's eyes turned white with fear. She thought, "Did you just say 'her arm should be chopped off'?" If her mother weren't there, Guo Fu would have said something in protest.

Huang Rong said, "Wu Xiong [Brother Wu], we've talked clearly enough about how your children wronged Yang Guo. Right now we have two important matters ahead. First, we must find Yang Guo to discover his condition." Wu Santong agreed, "Very good...Very good." Huang Rong then continued, "The second important thing is that we have to go to the Passionless Valley to rescue Martial Uncle and Zhu Da Ge [Brother Zhu] and at the same time get the antidote for Yang Guo. But do you know anything about Zhu Da Ge's condition or whether or not his life is in danger?"

Wu Santong said, "My Martial Uncle and apprentice brother were trapped by the fish nets and imprisoned in a stone chamber (kiln). It seemed like that old woman still hasn't thought to harm them." Huang Rong nodded and said, "Hmm, in that case we go to find Yang Guo first and go with him to the Passionless Valley to save those people. And once the antidote is obtained, he can take it immediately to avoid any more delays, and hence more dangers." Wu Santong said, "That's right. But do we know where Yang Guo is right now?" Huang Rong pointed at the precious horse [Han Xie Yu] and said, "This horse was just borrowed by Yang Guo. If we follow the road that this horse came from, we can find out where he is." Wu Santong was delighted and said, "Today, if not for the wisdom of Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo], the old Wu here would have flown into a fit of rage and made matters worse." This time Guo Fu couldn't bear to be quiet so she chimed in, "Isn't that right?"

Huang Rong smiled faintly. She didn't say a word about seeking her younger daughter but all about getting Wu Santong to follow her. She mused, "If the Wu father and sons come with me, the other three young people will definitely tag along. Then there will be more people to help us. Isn't that wonderful?" She then turned to Yelu Qi and said, "If Yelu Xiao Ge [Little Brother Yelu] doesn't have any pressing matters to attend to, how about you come along with us just for fun?" Yelu Qi had not yet answered, but Yelu Yan clapped her hands, crying out, "Okay... Okay! Ge Ge [Brother], let's go with them!" Yelu Qi couldn't bear Guo Fu's gaze. Seeing that the glint in her eyes conveyed an encouraging message, he bowed and said, "If Elder Wu and Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] wouldn't mind, Junior could only benefit from your guidance. This is precisely my greatest wish." With a pleased expression on her face, Wanyan Ping also slowly nodded.

Huang Rong then said, "Look, we are a group of many people, we must have someone to give orders. Wu Xiong [Brother Wu], from now on everybody will listen to your commands and nobody can disobey." Wu Santong waved his hands and said, "We have in you a wonderful strategist who can match Zhuge, who would dare to give orders? Naturally, it has to be you in charge." With a smile Huang Rong said, "Really?" Wu Santong replied, "How can that be wrong?" Huang Rong laughed and said, "Giving orders to the juniors is quite easy. I'm only afraid that your old self wouldn't listen to me." Then in a loud voice Wu Santong said, "Nonsense. I won't do such a thing. If you tell me to jump in water and walk on fire, I won't say no in any circumstances." Huang Rong said, "In front of these many juniors, how could you say things you don't mean?" Wu Santong blushed and responded, "Even if there were no one else here, how could I fail to keep my word?"

Huang Rong said, "All right! This time we will go find Yang Guo, get the antidote, and rescue your Martial Uncle and

brother. We must work together. For any previous gratitude or grudges, we'll put them aside for the time being. Wu Xiong [Brother Wu], you, the Wu father and sons, cannot settle your debt with Li Mochou at this time. After we've accomplished our important mission, it will not be too late for shedding blood!" Wu Santong was startled. He hadn't thought that Huang Rong's spoken words would unexpectedly be meant for this matter as well. He and Li Mochou had wife-killing hatred to settle, how could he actually bear the rage in his heart? So he hesitated and didn't respond. With a gentle voice Huang Rong said, "Wu Xiong [Brother Wu], your leg has been injured. For a gentleman, revenge in ten years is still not too late. It won't hurt to wait a little while longer will it?" Wu Santong then replied, "Good, whatever you say, I'll do it."

Huang Rong raised her voice to call Li Mochou, "Li Zi Zi [Elder Sister Li], let's go!" They let the precious horse [Han Xie Yu] lead the way and the people followed. The red horse originally wanted to return to Xiangyang but had instead run into its master. Huang Rong was now walking in front of him and heading towards Mount Zhongnan.

Wu Santong and Wanyan Ping were injured so they couldn't just speed away. They all traveled a hundred li for each day and then stopped to rest. Li Mochou stayed clear of other people at night and hurried along with them at a distance during the day.

Traveling by day and resting by night, the six young men and women were having a good time chatting and laughing. And the further they went, the friendlier they became. When the Wu brothers originally were bickering over Guo Fu, their brotherhood ties were greatly strained. Now that each had his own love, the two brothers were on the best of terms. Wu Santong looked at them and his heart was greatly consoled. But also every time, he also thought, "That day, even if the two brothers weren't poisoned by Li Mochou, they could have

destroyed each other. I'd have been left with only one... I couldn't even call him a son. And today the two animals are surprisingly having a good time while Brother Yang has lost an arm. Alas, what can I really say? Only cutting off an arm from each of these two little animals and putting them on Brother Yang's body would make sense." As for the fact that Yang Guo would end up with three arms in that scenario, he hadn't actually thought about it.

And then one day they reached Mount Zhongnan. Huang Rong and Wu Santong led the group up to the Chongyang Palace to greet the Quanzhen five masters. Li Mochou stood at a distance and said, "I'll wait here then." Huang Rong knew Li Mochou and the Quanzhen sect had a grudge so she didn't press the matter and went up the path towards the Chongyang Palace.

Liu Chuxuan, Qiu Chuji and others were informed about their arrival so they quickly came out of the palace to welcome them. They entered the palace hall together and sat down at a provided place. As they were exchanging their greetings, they suddenly heard someone shouting loudly. Huang Rong was very delighted and called out, "Old Urchin, won't you come out and see who is here?"

Recently, Zhou Botong had been obsessively studying ways to command the Jade Bees. He was by nature intelligent and tenacious. But to everybody's surprise, he was happy with small successes and only wanted to play and have good times. Suddenly, he heard someone shouting. That was Huang Rong's voice. He was thrilled and so he said, "Aha... that is my brother's crafty and eccentric wife!" Then he made loud noises and rushed out from behind the hall.

Yelu Qi went forward and kowtowed. He said, "Shi Fu [Master], I pay you respect. May happiness be with you, Great Elder, forever." With a laugh Zhou Botong said,

"Enough, just get up! May happiness be with you little baby forever too!"

Hearing that, the people all found it strange. Nobody would have expected Yelu Qi to be Zhou Botong's disciple. This Old Urchin was madly crazy but his chosen disciple was a skilled gentleman. Together, they were nothing alike. Qiu Chuji and others saw that their Shi Shu [Martial Uncle] had accepted a disciple; they were all very happy and then busily congratulated him. And this time, Guo Fu understood what her mother and Yelu Qi were laughing about the other day. It was because her mother had guessed correctly that Zhou Botong was Yelu Qi's teacher.

Yelu Qi had met Zhou Botong twelve years ago. At that time he was still quite young so he and Zhou Botong played together quite nicely. Zhou Botong then accepted him as a disciple. Although Zhou Botong didn't teach him a lot of kung fu, Yelu Qi was talented and determined. He practiced his martial skills diligently and surprisingly became an outstanding character of the young generation. Sadly for him, Zhou Botong saw him growing up well-behaved and nothing like a small mischievous child. His heart was filled with regrets and therefore didn't allow Yelu Qi to call himself the Old Urchin's direct disciple. But by this point, Zhou Botong couldn't get rid of him either.

Amid all the excitement came sudden sounds of battle cries from below the mountain. The sect disciples reported that the enemy was gathering for an attack. The other day the Quanzhen sect refused to bow down to the Mongolian Prince's imperial decree and also killed many of them. Qiu Chuji and others knew that this matter couldn't easily be resolved and that the Mongolian army would sooner or later come back up the mountain. They also realized that the Quanzhen sect would not be able to fend off the Mongolian army so they had already arranged a plan to abandon the

palace and retreat to the West. By this time the Zhang Jiao [sect chief] position had already been assigned to a third generation disciple, Li Zhichang, but, facing this important matter, it was still left to the Quanzhen Five Masters to make decisions. Qiu Chuji turned to Huang Rong and said, "Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo], the Mongolian army has attacked! This is such an inopportune time. Please don't think badly of our hospitality."

Then everybody heard the deadly sounds of drum rolls and battle cries from below the mountain. Just now Huang Rong had come up the mountain from the southern side while the Mongolian army took the northern route. They had arrived roughly about the same time.

Zhou Botong said, "Are the enemies coming? How really wonderful! Come, we'll go make mincemeat out of them." Then he stretched out his hand to grab Yelu Qi's wrist and said, "You show the kung fu Shi Fu [Master] taught you to these several old sect brothers. I say you are not worse than the Quanzhen Seven Masters. Add you to them and we'll make the Quanzhen Eight Masters." In general, when small children had a beloved toy, they would want to show it off to people. If people liked it, then they'd become very happy. At first Zhou Botong had forbidden Yelu Qi to tell people who his master was because Yelu Qi lacked naughtiness and didn't in the least bit resemble the famous Old Urchin's skilled disciple. But today the master and the disciple met again and were delighted to see each other. Zhou Botong totally forgot the rule he himself set up before.

Qiu Chuji said, "Shi Shu [Martial Uncle], our sect has existed for many decades. It is the lifetime blood and sweat of my late master and can't be ruined in just one moment. Today the best plan is for everybody in our sect to retreat." Not waiting for Zhou Botong to voice his opinion, he gave orders, "Everybody carry all the things and go down the mountain

according to our planned course." The many disciples replied in one voice, carried the packages that had been prepared earlier, and rushed down the east and west sides of the mountain in rows. A few days earlier, the Quanzhen Five Masters and Li Zhichang had properly divided people, detailing who would dash to the front and who would guard the back, where they would meet, and how to communicate. Also, they'd many times rehearsed the plan and so there was no chaos at the last moment.

Huang Rong said, "Qiu Dao Zhang [Taoist Elder Qiu], in a situation like this a small mistake could lead to a disaster. Your honored sect has arranged everything in order, indicating a great ability. When you stage a comeback, your sect will be even more prosperous. This time we are here to look for Yang Guo so we will take our leave right now." Qiu Chuji said with surprise in his voice; "Yang Guo? Do you know if he's still here on the mountain?" With a faint smile Huang Rong replied, "We've got someone who knows his whereabouts."

Having said this, she heard the loud battle cries again from below the mountain. Huang Rong thought, "The Quanzhen sect has earlier made an arrangement. They can withdraw themselves. I came up the mountain to look for Yang Guo and get my daughter. Let's not get into the battle and delay our important matter." Immediately she bid farewell to Qiu Chuji and others, called out to those who came up the mountain with her, and rushed out to the back of the Chongyang Palace. Then she said to Li Mochou, "Li Zi Zi [Sister Li], please tell us how to get into the tomb."

Li Mochou asked, "How do you know he's inside Gu Mu? Huang Rong chuckled and said, "Even if Yang Guo isn't inside Gu Mu, the Jade Heart Manual definitely is." Li Mochou shivered and secretly thought, "This Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] is indeed deadly. How did she know about my concern?"

Li Mochou followed this group of people from Xiangyang to Zhongnan. Except for Huang Rong, nobody paid attention to her. Along the way, there was nothing interesting and, needless to say, the Wu father and sons were secretly waiting to set a deathtrap for her. In her mind, Huang Rong thought, "Even if she likes Xiang'er very much, she won't be willing to put herself in a great danger. There surely must be an important scheme." Having mulled over this, she remembered that Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu had used the "Jade Maiden Swordplay" to defeat Jinlun Fawang. Li Mochou obviously didn't know these skills of the sect, otherwise she'd have used it. How wouldn't she be interested? She was actually going to get the Jade Heart Manual but was afraid that the seven people would get inside Gu Mu before her and take it. Huang Rong put two and two together and guessed correctly what Li Mochou was thinking.

Li Mochou thought that since Huang Rong already knew her intention, she could just make it bluntly clear. She said, "I'll help you get back your daughter and you must help me get my sect's martial manual back. You are the Chief of the Beggar Clan and also a world-renowned heroine; you cannot say things you don't mean."

Huang Rong then said, "Yang Guo is the son of my husband Guo's deceased friend. He and I have some small misunderstandings, which will easily disappear when we see each other. If my daughter is really with him, he'll return her to me himself and there's no need to talk about baby snatching." Li Mochou retorted, "If that's the case, we'll go our own separate ways and say goodbye here." After saying that, she turned to walk away.

Huang Rong gave Wu Santong a meaningful glance. Wu Santong unsheathed his long sword and shouted, "Li Mochou, do you still think you can leave Mount Zhongnan alive today?"

Li Mochou thought that she herself was not even Huang Rong's match. Now adding the Wu father and sons, the Yelu siblings, and others, how would she be able to break her way out? Originally she had a clever plan but she ran into Huang Rong and surprisingly found her hands and feet tied, not being able to use all her sly tricks. So indifferently she said to Huang Rong, "Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] can cleverly change. Since Yang Guo is on the mountain, why are you still worried about not finding him? Why do you need me to lead the way?"

Huang Rong knew that Li Mochou had to be forced so she said, "Little sister actually doesn't have the ability to find the entrance to Gu Mu. However, even if Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu have secluded themselves inside the tomb, eventually they must come out to buy rice and cut firewood. If seven of us scatter around and wait patiently, surely we'll run into them some day." The meaning of this was that - if you were not willing to guide us, we'd immediately kill you. Finding Yang Guo a few days later was not that important.

Li Mochou thought about it. The opponents were really strong and secure. Right here on the flat land, she was overwhelmed by numbers. However, if she led these many people to the underground tomb, where she was familiar with the terrain, she could find a way to secretly kill them off one by one. So she said, "Today you won by numbers, I have nothing to say. Anyhow, I also want to find Yang Guo. Come with me!" She pushed aside prickly shrubs and walked inside the tree thickets.

Huang Rong and others followed her close behind, fearing that she would suddenly run away. She saw Li Mochou making her way through clusters of rocks. Many parts were obviously not passable, with zigzagging paths that led to a dead end. This terrain was all natural, with no human interference. So even though Huang Rong knew the "Five

Phrase Marvelous Gate" art, she couldn't use its logic to figure out the way. She thought, "There is a saying 'Wonderful workmanship exceeds nature.' In fact, how could human beings ever surpass the work of nature?"

They walked for a while and then arrived at the bank of a small creek. At this time they could still hear the sounds of the Mongolian battle cries but as they were deep in the woods, the shouting sounded as if it was coming from very far away.

For several years, Li Mochou had planned to steal the Jade Heart Manual. Last time, she left the tomb from the bottom of the creek; she nearly died because she didn't know how to swim very well. Later she practiced her water skills in a river to prepare for this. She stood by the creek and said, "The main entrance to Gu Mu has been shut. To open it, you must use years and years of work. We can dive into this creek to get to the back entrance. How many people will come with me?"

Guo Fu and the Wu Brothers grew up on Peach Blossom Island. In summer, they swam in the rough sea everyday so they were excellent in water. The three people said at the same time, "I'll come!" Wu Santong could also swim. Although not very well, he wasn't worried about this small creek and said, "I'll come too."

Huang Rong thought about how cruel and cold-blooded Li Mochou was. If she suddenly turned violent on them inside Gu Mu, Wu Santong and others wouldn't be able to defend themselves. She would have gone to watch over things herself but she just gave birth not long ago and was afraid to get sick from swimming in cold water. While hesitating, Yelu Qi said, "Guo Po Mu [Auntie Guo], you stay here to keep watch. I'll go along with Uncle Wu."

Huang Rong was delighted. This person was smart and skillful. His martial skills were also strong. With him going with the four people, she could put her mind at ease. She asked, "Do you have water skills?" Yelu Qi replied, "My swimming is not very good but I can manage diving." Huang Rong thought about something and asked, "Did you practice at the bottom of the ice?" Yelu Qi replied, "Yes, I did." Again Huang Rong asked, "Where did you practice it?" Yelu Qi explained, "When I was young, I lived with my father on the banks of the Gannan River for many years." Mongolia was bitterly cold. For most of the year, the Gannan River was covered in snow and ice. Among the Mongolian warriors, those extraordinarily strong would practice ice bottom diving by setting up a rule that the last one who got out on the ice surface would be the winner.

Seeing Li Mochou and others were ready and about to go down in the creek, Huang Rong didn't have time to say much. With a low voice, she said to Guo Fu, "People's hearts are difficult to measure. Be very careful!" She taught her daughter many times but this young girl was rash by nature. Repeated warnings were useless. Only by bumping herself against the wall many times, would she then learn a lesson.

The two girls, Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping, didn't know how to swim so they stayed ashore with Huang Rong. Li Mochou led the way. She dove in the water at a cave entrance in the creek. Yelu Qi followed her closely. Guo Fu and the Wu father and brothers trailed behind.

Li Mochou led Yelu Qi and others diving into the creek undercurrent. The path at the bottom was sometimes wide and other times narrow. The undercurrent was alternately fast and slow. The water depths also vary from very deep to the waist-level. They went underwater for a long time and then finally arrived at the tomb entrance. Li Mochou proceeded to go inside. The five people followed in a line and

all thought, "If not for her leading the way, who would have thought there would be another world under the creek bottom?" By this time, although they were out of water, it was pitch black inside. The five people held hands so nobody would get lost. They then followed Li Mochou on the winding path ahead.

They walked for quite a while but sensed that they were getting to higher and dryer ground. Suddenly they heard a crunching sound. It was Li Mochou pushing open a stone door. The five people went inside and heard Li Mochou say, "We are already inside Gu Mu. Let's take a little break. Then we'll go find Yang Guo." Since entering Gu Mu, Wu Santong and Yelu Qi had stayed right behind Li Mochou's back, guarding themselves against her trickery. They couldn't even see the five fingers on their hands and had to rely on their ears, listening to everything with great attention. Guo Fu and the Wu brothers wanted to come to show their great courage but now that their eyes couldn't see a thing, they couldn't help but feel the thumping of their hearts.

Even if they used their weapons and sent out poisoned needles, they might not be able to avoid hurting their own people. Yelu Qi thought that if they let her lash out her secret weapons at random, the five of them would definitely be injured or killed. The only way out was to go forward to attack and not to give her a chance to launch her poisoned needles. Guo Fu thought the same thing. The two of them moved at the same time and threw themselves in the direction from which Li Mochou was making a noise.

Nobody could have expected this. As Li Mochou finished saying those three sentences, she took the opportunity to move quietly to another door. Yelu Qi and Guo Fu jumped out and started fighting; trying to catch each other's wrists and elbows to stop the opponent from launching secret weapons. The two exchanged four stances before Guo Fu felt that

something didn't feel right and let out an "eh" sound. Both Yelu Qi's hands were grabbing her two wrists. He felt that the flesh and skin were smooth and could smell a whiff of sweet scent in the air. Then he heard Guo Fu's crying out and became startled.

Then they heard a crushing sound of a stone door moving. Yelu Qi and Wu Santong cried out, "Oh, no!" and rushed forward to the nearby door. But there came 'Sou''Sou' whishing sounds. Two silver needles were shot out their way. The two people sidestepped to avoid the needles while extending their hands to push the stone door. That door was already closed. Pushing against it was just like trying to move a mountain. No matter how hard they tried, it wouldn't move.

Yelu Qi reached his hand out to feel the stone door from all directions but there was neither an iron hoop nor a door handle. He followed the wall and went around the room. Then he found out that the size of this stone chamber was about twenty square feet. The four-side walls were made of rough thick stones. He drew out his long sword and knocked the stone door several times. The sounds were dull, indicating that the door was extremely heavy. This stone door could be opened from the inside and only needed to be pulled open but it was most difficult with no place to pull to begin with. Guo Fu hurriedly said, "What are we going to do? Wouldn't we suffocate to death in here?" Yelu Qi heard her voice sounding like she was about to cry so he comforted her and said, "Don't worry. Guo Fu Ren [Madame Guo] is waiting for us outside. She'll definite have a plan to help us." Then he started groping at the walls, trying to find a way out.

Having trapped Wu Santong and others inside the stone chamber, Li Mochou was extremely pleased and mused, "These people can't get out. Shi Mei [Apprentice Sister] and Yang Guo didn't know I could swim and thought I wouldn't be able to sneak back in from the secret route. But where are

they?" She knew perfectly well that, to make her wish come true, she couldn't make even a bit of noise. Otherwise if they began to fight, she was afraid that she wouldn't be able to defeat them. Therefore, she took off her shoes and only left her stockings on. She held the Soul Freezing needles in both hands and slowly moved forward step-by-step.

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For the past few days, Xiao Longnu had been sitting on the chilled jade bed and circulating her energy flow according to the reverse energy flow principles. One by one, they cleared the thirty six pressure points on her body. Right now the two were working on Xiao Longnu's "Middle Altar" point. This was on her chest and a couple of inches below the "Jade Hall" point. The ancient medical text called this the "Sea of Air" because it regulated air in a human body and, as a result, was the most critical pressure point. The two people were in full concentration and didn't dare to be careless. Xiao Longnu felt the three pressure points "Purple Palace", "Flowery Roof", and "Jade hall" below her neck fill with hot air. But whenever the air reached the "Middle Altar" point, it wouldn't pass through. She knew that if she could clear this "Middle Altar" point, her body injury would be healed. But she only had to wait and couldn't force it. Xiao Longnu by nature had never been an anxious type. Time in Gu Mu was slow. If today she couldn't clear this pressure point, why couldn't she wait until tomorrow? So she alternated between stopping and continuing and had no worries in the least.

Yang Guo, however, was really impatient. He only wanted Xiao Longnu to recover soon so he could set his mind at ease. But he also knew that the matter of energy transfer couldn't be rushed. Adding the fact that they were using the reverse energy flow technique, how could it not be twice as difficult? Then he felt Xiao Longnu's pulse on her wrist was suddenly strong and suddenly weak. Even though they were not

fluctuating, it was not really a bad sign. He then slowly transferred the energy, adding more strength to it this time.

In this depth of lonely silence, he suddenly heard a 'ta' sound. This sound was extremely light. If not for Yang Guo's concentrating on his breath and the blank state of his mind, he wouldn't have heard it. A long time passed. There came another 'ta' sound, about three feet closer this time.

Yang Guo thought this was strange but he was afraid that he'd divert Xiao Longnu's attention. If she was distracted in a critical moment like this, at the very least it would be very difficult for her injury to ever recover and at the very most she could be killed instantly. How could there be any small mistakes? So even though in his heart he felt something not quite right, he feigned ignorance. But only a short while later, there was another 'ta' sound moving three feet closer. This time he knew that someone had entered Gu Mu through the water route and that that person didn't dare to barge in but just slowly moved forward. After another while, there came two light crunching sounds and then it stopped. These crunching sounds came from someone pushing open the stone door very, very slowly. If Xiao Long could manage to clear her "Middle Altar" point before the enemy got too near, it would be wonderfully lucky; otherwise it would be extremely dangerous. By this time they had already passed the point of no return. Even if they wanted to stop pushing the energy, they could not.

Then he heard a light 'ta' sound again, indicating that that person had just come one step closer. Yang Guo's mind was frantic but he didn't know what to do. Suddenly he felt his palm shaking and the heat energy was forced back to him because Xiao Longnu was also frightened. He quickly drew a breath and then pushed his internal energy out to Xiao Longnu's palm. In a low voice he said, "The terrors within can't be smelt, nor can they be seen. It is really the truth."

When one practiced martial arts to a certain limit, there would often emerge illusions, like hearing thundering cries or feeling itchy pains. One just had to know these were illusions and pay no attention to them whatsoever to avoid fire deviation. By this time, Yang Guo heard the footsteps very clearly and knew that it wasn't just his own imagination. But Xiao Longnu was at a life or death critical moment so he had lied to her, saying that it was her mind tricking her and that no matter how fiercely evil it was, she had to ignore it and it would just disappear. As Xiao Longnu heard these words, she immediately calmed herself down.

At this time, while the sun outside was glowing red, it was actually dark like late night inside Gu Mu. Yang Guo heard every single footstep, every time several feet nearer. He thought about how in this world, except for themselves husband and wife, there were only Li Mochou and Hong Lingbo who knew about the secret path under water. So it had to be them, master and disciple, coming in. Based on Yang Guo's martial skills, there was nothing to fear. It was only that he had to wait, not knowing for certain when the attack was coming. With this slow encroaching, he couldn't help but feel uncertain and anxious, not knowing how to defend himself. The more the enemy came closer, the more he felt like his heart was on fire. Great dangers were approaching step by step. His hands were tied, waiting for death. Beads of sweat slowly seeped out on his forehead. He thought, "On that day Guo Fu cut my arm off, despite the pain, at least the sword strike was swift. Being forced to endure a slow blow like this was actually much worse."

After another while, Xiao Longnu also heard the sound quite clearly and knew in her heart that it was not just an illusion. As danger was nearing, she wanted to increase the tempo of her inner air, pushing to clear her "Middle Altar" point. But her mind was slightly disturbed, causing her energy flow to go forwards and backwards and almost back up from her

chest. And during this time, she heard light footsteps. Then suddenly from the door came 'sou...sou' whishing sounds of four Soul Freezing Needles being shot her way.

At this moment Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were no different than average people with no martial skills whatsoever. Luckily, the two of them were prepared. Hearing the poisoned needles shot their way, they dropped backwards at the same time, without separating their palms. The four needles swiftly passed the sides of their faces. Li Mochou still hadn't figured out that they were circulating energy to heal an injury so she was afraid that they would counter-attack. So she immediately leapt backwards after sending out the poisoned needles. If she hadn't been afraid and followed up with another four needles, it would have been difficult for the two people to avoid getting hit.

Li Mochou only vaguely saw the two people sitting side by side on the Chilled Jade Bed. Missing her first strike, she herself was now quite worried. Seeing that Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu didn't get up to fight back, she still didn't understand but instead stepped back to the nearby stone door. With a fly whisk in her hand, she coldly said, "The two of you have been well since we last met!"

Yang Guo asked, "What do you want?" Li Mochou retorted, "How is it you don't know what I want?" Yang Guo continued, "You want the Jade Heart Manual, is that it? We've secluded ourselves inside Gu Mu, staying away from the outside world. Just go and take it." Li Mochou didn't know if she should believe him or not so she said, "Bring it!"

This Jade Heart Manual was engraved on the wall in another stone chamber. Yang Guo thought, "I'll just tell her the truth. The manual was obscure. Let her learn it by slowly pondering over it. We only need some more time for Gu Gu to clear her "Middle Altar" point. At that point, how would killing her be

difficult?” But right now Xiao Longnu’s pulses were wildly fluctuating and so she was leaning on Yang Guo, not saying anything.

Li Mochou widened her eyes to observe the two people carefully. In a dark blur, she saw Xiao Longnu stretching her palms out against Yang Guo’s. Her thoughts moved and then she immediately understood, “Yang Guo’s arm injury was heavy. And this little person was helping him healing the wound with her internal energy. I’ve arrived at the crucial moment during the energy transfer. If I don’t kill them both today, how would I have such a good opportunity like this afterwards?” Even though her deduction was only half right, the fear in her heart immediately disappeared. She jumped up and, with the fly whisk, bore down on top of Xiao Longnu.

Feeling a whiff of strong wind coming down on her and stirring up her neat hair, Xiao Longnu closed her eyes for the coming death. But Yang Guo opened his mouth and blew a gust of energy towards Li Mochou’s face. At this time his whole body strength was channeled to help Xiao Longnu’s clearing her pressure point so the force of air sent out from his mouth was not very strong. But seeing Xiao Longnu in a dangerous situation, he had to blow out air to disturb the enemy.

Li Mochou knew perfectly well that Yang Guo was full of tricks. But as she felt the heat licking her face, she was startled and leapt backwards a foot. After being defeated by Huang Rong’s wisdom, she’d always been extra careful everywhere, not being rash in trying to hurt the enemy but protecting her own body first. But after leaping back, her face felt nothing unusual. She then shouted, “You want to die?”

With a laugh Yang Guo said, “The other day I loaned you a robe, have you come today to return it?” Li Mochou thought

about the time she fiercely fought with the blacksmith Feng Mofeng and the clothes on her body were burned by the red-hot huge iron hammer. If not for Yang Guo's robe covering her body, she would have been shamefully distressed. Reasonably speaking, today she couldn't take the two people's lives. But after another consideration, she changed her mind. A moment of soft feelings like this would cause her to forever worry about them afterwards. She straightened up her body and slapped out her left palm.

Even in the face of this calamity, Yang Guo still fought for wisdom. He thought about how earlier he and Xiao Longnu were joking. He once said if both his arms had been cut off, she would have had to hold the soles of his feet instead. Then he heard the sound of wind made by a palm as Li Mochou's "Five Poisons Divine Palm" arrived. He had no time to think it over so he immediately lowered his head and lifted his feet up. At the same time he kicked out both feet to get rid of the shoes. He shouted, "Long'er, grab my feet!" and then wielded his left palm. With a 'Pa' sound, his palm made contact with Li Mochou's. Originally he'd passed his whole body strength through Xiao Longnu and right now the energy level was suddenly dropping. He forced out the energy again while matching Li Mochou's palm. All this while, Xiao Longnu was holding his right foot.

As Li Mochou suddenly saw Yang Guo's strange posture, she couldn't help being startled. But then she remembered the other day Yang Guo was fighting her own "Three Without Three Without Hands" strikes and no matter how he tried, he couldn't beat them. So she immediately increased the palm strength, trying to finish off Yang Guo. Years ago, when she'd used this "Five Poisoned Divine Palm" to slaughter the entire Lu Family, the palm was already incredibly fierce. Now that she had cultivated strength over the years, it became most violent and evil. As Yang Guo sensed the heat passing

through his palm, he didn't resist. Instead he added his own strength and passed the energy on to Xiao Longnu's body.

As it turned out, Li Mochou and Yang Guo's combined strength was helping Xiao Longnu clear her pressure point. Li Mochou's strategic moves were quite inferior to the Yang-Long couple but speaking of cultivated energy, hers was far deeper than theirs. Suddenly receiving such strong energy, Xiao Longnu felt the energy push vigorously through her "Middle Altar" point and that heat filled up her abdomen. Her spirits lifted and she called out, "Wonderful, many thanks to Shi Zi [Apprentice Elder Sister]!" She let go of Yang Guo's right foot and leapt down from the Chilled Jade Bed.

Li Mochou was surprised. She thought Xiao Longnu was helping Yang Guo heal his injury. So she lashed out her palm strength, thinking to use this opportunity to shock Yang Guo's energy flow. She hadn't expected that she would be helping the enemy instead. Delighted, Yang Guo turned his body around and stood there barefoot. With a laugh he said, "If not for you rushing in to help, your Shi Mei [Apprentice Younger Sister] wouldn't have been able to clear her "Middle Altar" point this easily." Li Mochou hesitated and didn't answer. Suddenly Xiao Longnu let out an 'Ah' sound. Holding her chest, she dropped down on the Chilled Jade Bed. With a start Yang Guo asked, "What is it?" Xiao Longnu panted, "Her, her, her palm was poisonous."

By now Yang Guo also felt dizzy in his head and realized that when Li Mochou used her "Five Poisons Divine Palm," she sent out the poisons from her palm. By matching palms with her, not only had the poisons entered his body, they also passed on to Xiao Longnu's.

Yang Guo lifted his black iron sword and shouted, "Quickly take out the antidote!" and chopped down his sword. Li Mochou lifted her fly whisk to protect herself. And with a

clang, the fly whisk forged from fine steel broke into two pieces. With its supple strength, this fly whisk had defeated who-knows-how-many great heroes in the world. But now that it was chopped and broken like it'd never been before, she was frightened to the core and hurriedly leapt out of the stone chamber. Yang Guo lifted his sword to pursue and wielded out his left arm. He saw that Li Mochou couldn't hold herself against this sword. But all of a sudden the poisons in his body acted up and he saw stars before his eyes. His arm went limp and painful, with no strength left, with a 'Dang' sound, the black iron sword dropped down on the floor.

Li Mochou didn't dare to stop. She fled ten feet ahead and then eventually turned her head back, only to see Yang Guo was shaking violently with his hand against the wall. She thought, "This boy's martial skills are extremely strange. I'll wait for a bit for the poisons to bring him down. Then I'll approach."

Yang Guo's throat was dry and painful. His head felt swollen and aching. He immediately passed strength to his left arm and waited for Li Mochou to come forward. Just one strike would kill her and his palm was holding firm the handle of the black iron sword. Li Mochou became frightened again and didn't dare to approach recklessly. By her calculation, she'd stay where she couldn't be defeated. And she stood there, carefully observing any change.

Yang Guo thought that if it dragged on like this, the poisons in his and Xiao Longnu's body would become stronger. With this delay, the enemy would have the upper hand. So he took a deep breath and circulated his internal flow. When the dizziness stopped, he grasped the handle of the black iron sword and stood up. He extended his arm to hold Xiao Longnu's waist and bellowed, "Make way!" and went out in big strides. Seeing his confident air, Li Mochou didn't dare to stop him.

Yang Guo only wanted to get into another stone chamber and close the door so Li Mochou couldn't follow in. Xiao Longnu had already cleared her pressure points and, in another while, the two of them could force out the poisons in their bodies. This matter was actually a hundred times easier than clearing the pressure points. When Yang Guo was young and was poisoned by Li Mochou's needles, Ouyang Feng taught him how to expel the poisons. At present the two of them had internal energy like this so getting rid of the poisons was really not difficult.

Li Mochou also knew his intention. How could she allow the two people to begin driving out the poisons? She didn't dare to attack and only kept following them from a safe distance, always five feet away from Yang Guo. When Yang Guo stood there and waited for her to come. She also merely stood there motionless.

In his chest, the more Yang Guo's heart beat, the fiercer the poisons became. He felt as if his heart would spill out of his mouth and couldn't really support himself again. He unsteadily dashed into a stone chamber and put Xiao Longnu down on a tabletop. He propped himself against the table and loudly gasped for breath. He knew perfectly well that Li Mochou would follow shortly after but didn't pay attention. After a little while, he then realized that they'd arrived at the coffin chamber. And the table, that he was propping himself against and that he was just placed Xiao Longnu's body on, was really a stone coffin.

At the time Li Mochou was a disciple of the sect, she'd lived here at Gu Mu for quite a long time. And even though her knowledge of Gu Mu secret matters was inferior to the Yang-Long couple's, she could see clearly that there were five stone coffins in the chamber. At the bottom of one of the coffins was a door to the secret path, from where she came in.

She thought, "Are you thinking about escaping from here? This time it may not be so easy."

Of the three people, one was sitting; one was standing; and the other was leaning against another. At this time, only the sounds of Yang Guo's heavy breathings could be heard. Yang Guo's body swayed several times. And with a clanking sound, the black iron sword dropped to the floor. Then he tumbled down Xiao Longnu's body. His hand threw out something. A 'Pa' sound was heard as that thing flew into an empty coffin. He called out, "Li Mochou, I can't let this Jade Heart Manual fall into your hands. Aiyo..." With a long miserable cry, he became motionless."

There were five stone coffins in this chamber. Three of them contained the bodies of Lin Chaoying, her disciple, and Sun Po Po [Grandma Sun]. The other two were actually empty. Of these two, one was a door to the secret passage and its lid was left two feet open so people could come in and go out. The other coffin's lid was left open just a little. As Li Mochou saw Yang Guo throw the "Jade Heart Manual" in this empty coffin, she was pleasantly surprised. But she was still afraid that it would be a trick. Another while passed and he was still motionless. So she bent down to feel his cheek. It was icy cold, meaning he was already dead. With a loud 'Ha-Ha' she said, "Little rascal, even with all your wickedness you also have failed today!" Then she stretched out her hand into the coffin to get the manual.

But Yang Guo had thrown the "manual" into the other end of the coffin. Li Mochou's fly whisk had earlier been broken; otherwise she could have used it to sweep it out. She used her arm to grope at it twice but still couldn't grab it. So she shrank her body and got into the empty stone coffin through this foot-wide opening. She crawled inside the stone coffin to the other end and finally grabbed the "manual." Her hand

then felt something not very wonderful. The manual appeared to be a shoe.

And by this time, Yang Guo lifted his body up. His left arm dashed out to the front, using the tip of the black iron sword to push the coffin lid. He sent out a ferocious force and the coffin lid was perfectly closed, trapping Li Mochou inside the coffin!

From the beginning, Li Mochou didn't know that the "Jade Heart Manual" was actually carved on the ceiling of a stone chamber and always thought it was a book. Yang Guo pretended to cry out in misery, throwing himself on Xiao Longnu's body. At the same time, he quickly took off his shoe and threw it into the empty coffin. A soft object landing on a stone sounded just like it was a book. After throwing in the shoe, he immediately reversed his energy flow and turned himself stiff like he was dead. In fact, even if he'd died of poisons, his body wouldn't have turned icy cold in the blink of an eye like this. When a man's pulse stopped, it would actually take at least half an hour for his whole body to lose all the heat. Li Mochou was so happy that she lost her power of observation. This plan of his was extremely dangerous. If Li Mochou didn't care if he'd actually died or not and struck his head with her "Five Poisons Divine Palm" to guarantee his death, his playing dead would unavoidably change into real death. But he was in a desperate situation so he took a desperate measure, hoping for some luck. To his surprise, it was actually a success.

To push a coffin lid, Yang Guo passed the strength to his left arm and then used his heavy sword to lift it up. Then he shouted, "Up!" and the other empty coffin was raised. A thundering 'Peng' sound followed and the coffin crushed down on top of the first coffin. This coffin and lid together weighed six hundred catties at least. Adding the bamboo top on the lid, it was extremely secure, with a perfect seam. Even

if Li Mochou's martial skills were high, there was no way she could get out in any case.

After being poisoned, Yang Guo's heart was beating fast and his head was hurting. But as they were facing a great enemy, he couldn't allow himself to be dizzy and entirely relied on his fierce determination to sustain himself. Having used the sword twice to push the coffins, his mind was tired and his strength depleted. He flung down the black iron sword and struggled to walk over to Xiao Longnu's side. Using the method of Ouyang Feng, he first drove out most of the poisons in his body. Then he reached out his hand to match Xiao Longnu's and helped her get rid of the poisons.

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Guo Fu, Yelu Qi, and the others were trapped in the stone chamber. These people entered the secret passage from the bottom of the creek and the fire kits they carried inside were all soaked and hence difficult to catch fire. They groped around in darkness. How could they possibly find a way out? The five people were at their wits' end so they just sat there idly on the floor.

Wu Santong was incessantly cursing Li Mochou's treacherously evil trick. Guo Fu, who was already extremely anxious, heard Wu Santong's non-stop scolding and became agitated. She couldn't bear to keep her mouth shut and so she said, "Wu Bobo [Uncle Wu], you knew before that Li Mochou was treacherous and evil, how come you didn't guard against her? What use is cursing when the damage is done?" Wu Santong was startled and couldn't say anything in response.

Since the Wu brothers had met Guo Fu again, each was sick at heart. While with the Yelu siblings and Wanyan Ping, everybody was having a good time together but they didn't really have a chance to talk to Guo Fu directly. This time Wu

Xiuwen heard her snapping at his father. He couldn't bear it and said, "We came to Gu Mu to help your little sister and unfortunately met with a disaster. Everybody is about to perish together and you still let out your lady's temper..." He was about to continue but then Wu Dunru called out, "Di di! [younger brother!]" This time Wu Xiuwen shut up. He spoke out of irritation. But after the words were uttered, he even greatly surprised himself. He'd always complied with Guo Fu's every wish and in no way would dare to cross her in the slightest. Who would have thought that today he would unexpectedly rebuke her in a severe tone like this?

Guo Fu was also startled. She was going to back talk but couldn't think of anything to say. She thought about how she would definitely die a sad death inside Gu Mu and from now on wouldn't be able to see her parents again. Her heart was aching. In the darkness nobody could see anything so she let out a whimpering cry. Hearing her crying, Wu Xiuwen felt sorry and said, "Okay, what I said was wrong. I apologize." Guo Fu sobbed, "What good is an apology?" and cried even harder. She pulled up a piece of cloth that was by her hand to blow her nose. Then she realized that she was leaning against someone's leg and the cloth she used to wipe her nose was shockingly that person's gown.

Guo Fu was alarmed and hurriedly sat up. She heard Wu Santong and his sons speaking and knew that the three people weren't by her side. That left only Yelu Qi who had been keeping silent. So the person naturally was him. Her face reddened and she babbled, "I..."

Yelu Qi suddenly said, "Listen, what is that sound?" The four people tilted their heads to listen but couldn't hear anything. Yelu Qi said, "Hmm, it is a baby crying. Guo Guniang [Miss Guo] that must be your little sister." This sound traveled through a stone wall and was particularly feeble. If not for his cultivated internal strength that heightened his aural senses,

he wouldn't have been able to hear it. As he got up and walked a few steps, the crying sound immediately weakened. He figured out, "Since the baby's cry can pass through, this stone chamber must have a ventilation space." Immediately he concentrated on listening, trying to identify where the cry came from.

He walked a few steps to the west, the crying sound slightly weakened. He turned back to the east, the crying was louder. Then he dashed towards the northeast and heard the sound quite clearly. So he walked to the northeast corner and extended his sword to hit the stone wall lightly. The 'kong-kong-kong' sounds were slightly different as if the wall there was especially thin. He sheathed his sword and used both palms to push out against the stones but nothing moved. He took a deep breath and sent his strength to both palms, using the "stick" technique. The strength was sent out, making a crashing sound. That stone chunk was indeed drawn out by the strength of his palm and fell on the ground.

Guo Fu and the others were pleasantly surprised. They cheered out loud in one voice and scrambled forwards to pull out three chunks of stone. This time a body could pass through and the people got out one by one. Following the sound, they entered a small stone chamber. In the darkness, Guo Fu heard that baby crying out extremely loudly and stretched her hand out to hug her immediately.

This baby was of course Guo Xiang. As Yang Guo was helping Xiao Longnu to clear her pressure points and also fighting with Li Mochou, he missed the baby's feeding time, causing her to cry out fiercely. Guo Fu did all she could to coax the baby, both patting and rocking her. But Guo Xiang, with someone holding her, cried even harder. Guo Fu ran out of patience and gave her to Wu Santong. She said, "Wu Bobo [Uncle Wu], please take a look what's wrong with her."

Yelu Qi traced his hand on a table and found a candle, along with a knife and flint. He immediately lit the candle. These people had been in the gloomy darkness for a very long time. Now there was light. They were all overjoyed and cried out in delight.

Wu Santong actually had sons. Hearing Guo Xiang crying like this, he knew that she was hungry. On the table, he saw the fine bee honey water and a small wood-carved spoon so he scooped up the honey water to feed her. As it passed through her mouth, Guo Xiang stopped crying as expected. Yelu Qi laughed and said, "If not for little Miss Guo's crying out from hunger, I'm afraid we'd all have died in that stone chamber."

Wu Santong bitterly said, "We'd better go find Li Mochou." Then each person broke off the legs of the table and chairs and lit the fire to make torches to be used on their way. At every corner, Wu Dunru used his sword tip to make a mark for fear that they would get lost on their way back.

As the five people entered a room, there was also another room. They raised their torches to search for Li Mochou's traces and saw that this ancient tomb was gigantic, with winding corridors and great many rooms. All were endlessly amazed. Nobody could have expected that a magnificent construction like this would be hidden above a small mountain creek. Then they entered Xiao Longnu's bed chamber and saw several "Soul Freezing Needles" lying on the floor. Guo Fu wrapped her hand with a piece of cloth and picked up two needles. She said, "This time I will return these poisoned needles to the evil witch."

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As Yang Guo used his internal energy to help Xiao Longnu expel the poisons, he saw dark liquid slowly seeping out from the five fingertips on her left hand. It would take a while to remove all the poison. Suddenly he heard the sound of

footsteps coming from the corridor. There were five people coming in total. Yang Guo was secretly startled and thought that the enemy always came to attack at every critical moment. Li Mochou alone had been difficult enough. How would he deal with five people? Xiao Longnu had just cleared her pressure points and her internal energy was weak. If the poisons weren't driven out immediately, they were bound to enter her pressure points and spread out. Suddenly he saw lights flashing from the distance. Those five people were moving closer. Yang Guo then reached out his arm to carry Xiao Longnu and then jumped onto the empty coffin that was on top of Li Mochou. He pushed open the coffin lid with his palm.

The two people were hiding in the coffin when Yelu Qi and the others came in. Seeing that there were five coffins in the room, the five people became startled, faintly feeling that this was too big a coincidence and a bad omen. Guo Fu couldn't bear it and said, "Hmmp, there are five of us here and there are five coffins!"

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu inside the stone coffin heard Guo Fu's voice. Puzzled, they thought, "How come she's here?" Yang Guo's left hand had never left Xiao Longnu's palm, still forcing out the poisons. He heard that Guo Fu was among the five people. Even though surprised, he was relieved, thinking that she wouldn't dare to take advantage of someone in a precarious situation. So he said nothing and kept concentrating on sending out his energy to expel the poisons.

Yelu Qi already heard the breathing sound from the stone coffin and thought it was Li Mochou who hid in there with a devious trick. This time he wouldn't be fooled again and so he immediately made a hand signal, calling the four people to surround the coffin. Guo Fu noticed that the coffin lid and the coffin itself were not aligned and she could see the hem

of a gown through the crack. She concluded that it was Li Mochou hiding in there. She laughed and thought, "I'm going to pay you back in your own coin!" She used her energy to push the coffin lid with her left palm and then fiercely shot out the two "Soul Freezing Needles".

These two needles were sent out at close range. Also, there was no room in the coffin to move aside. The Yang Long couple cried out in surprise, "Ayo!" One needle hit Yang Guo's right leg while the other struck Xiao Longnu's left shoulder.

Having sent out the needles, Guo Fu was very pleased with herself. But then she actually heard the surprised cries from a man and a woman inside the coffin. Her heart jumped and she also let out an 'Ayo' cry. Yelu Qi kicked out his left leg. There came a crashing sound while the coffin lid fell down on the floor. Trembling, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu stood up. Under the torch lights, the two people's faces were pale as they sadly looked at each other.

Guo Fu didn't know that this time she herself had created a bigger disaster than cutting off Yang Guo's arm and only felt slightly sorry. She said apologetically, "Yang Da ge [Big Brother Yang], Long Zi Zi [Elder Sister Long], little sister didn't know it was you two and accidentally shot out the needles. Luckily, my mother has the antidote to this poison. Years ago, my pet eagles were injured by Li Mochou's needles and it was mother who cured them. Why were you hiding inside the coffin? Who would have thought it was the two of you?"

She thought about how she herself had cut off Yang Guo's arm and how he'd bent her sword. She figured that they were about even. Let alone the fact that her mother had already scolded her vehemently for this. She mused, "I didn't come to blame you. That should be enough." She'd always had the upper hand since childhood. Others looked up to her parents

and always gave in to her. Therefore, she only thought about herself and didn't take other people into consideration. Speaking in retrospect, the Yang-Long couple was not supposed to be hiding in the coffin and therefore gave her a fright. She would not have thought that at the time Xiao Longnu was hit by the silver needle, the poisons inside her body had just stopped flowing out. Suddenly she was violently hit like this, the poisons from the "Five Poisons Divine Palm" all flew backwards, entering the major pressure points on her whole body. This time even if there were a divine pill of immortality, there wouldn't have been a way to save her. Li Mochou's silver needle inflicted no more than a flesh wound and, with a proper treatment, one could be cured. However, the poisons inside her were severe beyond reason.

Xiao Longnu was still for a moment but then she felt as if her chest was empty like there was nothing inside and her heart went missing. Then she turned her head to look at Yang Guo and saw in his eyes heartache, a combination of grief and indignation. His whole body was trembling. He looked as if the lifetime of sadness and abuse all came out at this time. Xiao Longnu couldn't bear to see him bitter and miserable like this so she gently said, "Guo'er, our destiny is like this. Let's not resent other people. Don't be so bitter." She then stretched out her hand to pull out the silver needle from his leg and then later the other poisoned needle from her shoulder. Unlike the "Five Poisons Divine Palm" that Li Mochou had created herself, the "Soul Freezing Needles" were passed on by her ancestor master and so she carried the antidote with her. She gave Yang Guo one grain and she herself took another. Filled with immense hatred, Yang Guo made a sound and spat out the antidote onto the ground.

Guo Fu angrily said, "Ayo, very big of you. Is this to say I came here to harm you on purpose? I did apologize and that should be enough. What's with the temper? They were only

two small needles. What's a big deal?" Wu Santong saw the sad expression on Yang Guo's face gradually concealed and replaced by a rising anger. He also saw him picking up the shiny big black sword from the ground. Knowing something was not right, he quickly went forward and coaxed, "Yang Xiong di [Brother Yang], please don't be upset. The five of us were trapped inside a stone chamber by Li Mochou and escaped with great difficulty. Guo Guniang [Miss Guo] was rash, mistaking.. .."

Guo Fu butted in, "What? Was I rash? You yourself also thought it was Li Mochou. If not, why haven't you said something?" Wu Santong eyed Yang Guo and then looked at Guo Fu, not knowing how to appease them.

Xiao Longnu took out another grain of antidote and in a low voice she said, "Guo'er, take the antidote. Don't you listen to my words anymore?" Hearing Xiao Longnu's gentle urge, Yang Guo opened his mouth and swallowed. He thought about how the two of them wrestled with life and death with difficulty for the last few days and how finally it was all for nothing. He couldn't bear it any longer and suddenly knelt down to loudly cry on the stone coffin.

Wu Santong and the others looked at one another in blank dismay. All were thinking that he had always been extremely strong and full of spirit. How come today, after being hit by just a small needle, he was weeping so bitterly like this?

Xiao Longnu reached out her hand to stroke Yang Guo's hair and said, "Guo'er, you tell them to go. I don't like them in here." The plain sentence "I don't like them in here" contained all her hatred and resentment.

Yang Guo stood up. His eyes began with Guo Fu and then scanned the people one by one. Even though he was extremely angry and hateful, he eventually realized that Guo Fu's launching the silver needles was an inadvertent mistake.

Except blaming her for being rash, he couldn't say she was wrong. Let alone the fact that even if he used the sword to split her open, he still wouldn't be able to save Xiao Longnu's life. He picked up his sword with rage in his eyes. Suddenly he raised his black iron heavy sword and there came a thundering sound and flying sparks. Surprisingly he only chopped the stone coffin they were hiding in earlier into two sections. This strike was executed not only out of male strength, but also out of bottomless grief and indignation.

Seeing his strike to be this incredibly powerful, Guo Fu and the others couldn't help becoming startled. They saw with their own eyes how thick and heavy the coffin was. It was chiseled from granite. To break it into two pieces, a stone mason using a big axe to cut it for half a day still wouldn't be able to do it. If Yang Guo had used a large mountain-cutting axe or a thick machete, it might have been conceivable. But long swords were originally light and quick weapons, which were treasured for their sharp blades. If colliding with a solid stone like this, they would immediately snap. Who would have thought that this sword could cut through a stone like it was clay. As soon as the blade dropped, the coffin broke.

Yang Guo saw the five people looking at each other in alarm. He then fiercely bellowed, "What did you come here for?" Wu Santong answered, "Yang Xiong di [Brother Yang], we followed Guo Fu ren [Madame Guo] to come look for you."

Yang Guo angrily retorted, "You came here to bring back her daughter, didn't you? To get this little baby, you were willing to kill my dear wife."

Wu Santong was startled and said, "Kill your dear wife? Ah, that is Long Guniang [Miss Long]." Then he noticed that Xiao Longnu was wearing a bridal gown and immediately understood. He quickly said, "Your wife was hit by a poisoned

needle. Guo Fu ren [Madame Guo]'s got the antidote. She is just outside."

Yang Guo made a spitting sound and shouted, "You people came in to cause ruckus like this, the poisons in her body turned to attack all her major pressure points. What would Guo Fu ren [Madame Guo] do? Does she have the skill to bring back the dead?"

Wu Santong owed Yang Guo for saving his sons and therefore was extremely respectful of him. Although hearing him lashing out an accusation like this, he didn't think to be defiant in the least bit. He only mumbled, "The poisons turned to attack all her major pressure points. This is not good."

From the side, Guo Fu was getting mad. She heard Yang Guo speaking disrespectfully of her mother and flew into a rage. She shouted, "What has my mother done to you? At the time you were young, you were homeless. Wasn't it my mother who sheltered you? She fed you. You... Hmmph.. Instead, you turned out to be ungrateful and stole my little sister." By this time, she already knew that even though her sister fell into Yang Guo's hand, he had no evil intention. But as she was in a verbal fight with him, she didn't think about what could or couldn't be said and brought up this issue.

Yang Guo sneered and said, "Right, today I am ungrateful. You said I stole this child. I'll take her and never return her. How will you catch me?" Guo Fu tightened her left arm and firmly held her little sister. With her right arm, she raised the torch high to block the front part of her body.

Wu Santong anxiously said, "Yang Xiong di [Brother Yang], your wife has been poisoned. We must soon detoxify the poisons..."

Yang Guo bitterly responded, “Wu Xiong [Brother Wu], it’s useless.” Suddenly he let out a long, loud roar and sent out his right sleeve. Guo Fu and the others all sensed a gust of wind blowing their way and their faces felt burning hot and painful like being scraped by a blade. The five torches were blown out and so the place immediately turned pitch black. They gave out a loud ‘Ayo!’ cry. Yelu Qi was afraid that Yang Guo would hurt her so he jumped forward, only to hear Guo Xiang’s wailing from outside of the stone chamber. They were all alarmed. The wailing sound was already 20 or 30 feet away. They were moving fast, just like spirits.

Guo Fu cried out, “He snatched my little sister.” Wu Santong called out, “Yang Xiong di [Brother Yang]... Long Guniang [Miss Long]! Yang Xiong di...Long Guniang!” But there was no one to answer him. They had no light and in the darkness couldn’t see what was going on.

Yelu Qi said, “We must get out of here quickly. Don’t let him close us in here.”

Wu Santong indignantly said, “Yang Xiong di [Brother Yang] was very kind and very righteous, why did he do this?”

Guo Fu retorted, “His being kind and righteous... We should go quickly. What are we waiting here for?” Having said those few words, she suddenly heard two ‘ka-ka’ sounds from inside a stone coffin. And since the sounds were muffled by the coffin lid, they appeared really melancholy.

“There’s a ghost!” Guo Fu screamed, pulling Yelu Qi’s arm which was nearby. Wu Santong and the others clearly heard that the sounds came from inside the coffin as if a corpse was scrambling to get out. In the darkness, everybody was absolutely terrified.

Yelu Qi said to Wu Santong in a low voice, “Wu Shushu [Uncle Wu], you stay here. I’ll go over there. If a corpse

comes out, we'll use our four palms to beat him to pulp. Then he grasped Guo Fu by her wrist and pulled her to stand behind his body for fear that the ghost would harm people.

Then they heard a sudden sound of something flying out of the coffin. Wu Santong and Yelu Qi had earlier prepared to send out their energy. As they heard the whooshing sound, they lashed out their strikes. When the two people's hands made contact with that thing, they together cried out, "Wretched!" What they actually hit was a chunk of long stone, which was laid in the coffin as a stone pillow. The two people used their whole strength in the attack. As that stone chunk was fiercely hit, it dropped onto the stone coffin and smashed it into flying fragments. The stone pillow itself split into several pieces. At the same time, there was another whooshing sound of something flying past them. Wu Santong and Yelu Qi were about to raise their palms to attack again but that thing had already floated away from them. They heard a 'hei-hei' cold laugh and then immediately came a bleak silence.

"Li Mochou!" Wu Santong said with a start. Guo Fu cried out, "No that was the corpse! How would Li Mochou be inside the coffin?" Yelu Qi let out a groan with his mouth hanging open. He didn't believe that there were ghosts in the world but to think that it was Li Mochou was actually quite unreasonable. Obviously she and he came in together while Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu had actually been inside Gu Mu for many days. How could she be right under the Yang Long couple's coffin? Wu Santong said, "Then where has Li Mochou gone to?" Yelu Qi said, "Everything inside the tomb is becoming weird. Let us get out of here first." Guo Fu asked, "What should we do about my little sister?" Wu Santong then said, "We ran into a dead end but your mother will surely have a great plan. Let's go out and ask her what to do."

So the people searched for the way out and returned to the mountain creek. From under the water, all they saw was red. The woods on both sides of the creek had caught fire and hot steam was attacking them. Horrified, Guo Fu called out, “Ma, Ma!” but didn’t hear any reply. Suddenly on the bank a big burning tree toppled down. Yelu Qi pulled her up and quickly jumped upstream, just in time to dodge the danger. It was deep winter at this time of year and all the plants were dried out and withering. So the mountain became a sea of fire. Even though the five people were soaked in the middle of the creek, the big fires were encroaching and their faces felt boiling hot.

Wu Santong said, “The Mongolian army must have been attacking the Chongyang Palace. They suffered defeat and then set fire to the mountain to vent their anger.

Guo Fu worriedly cried out: “Ma...Ma! Where are you?” Suddenly on the left side of the creek she saw a woman’s figure skipping around to avoid the flames. “Ma, Ma! She cried out in delight and jumped up from the water to rush ahead. “Be careful!” Wu Santong called out after her and there suddenly came chaotic ‘ka-la’ sounds. Two big trees fell down, blocking his view.

Guo Fu rushed through the smoke and fire. At this time she was still in the water. First she thought about her mother. Second, she just came out of the darkness inside Gu Mu and into the sudden brightness. Her eyes couldn’t adjust and so she couldn’t see things very clearly. As she got closer, she then realized that the back side of that figure didn’t seem right. She became nervous. And when that person turned her body around it was, unexpectedly, Li Mochou.

Earlier Li Mochou was trapped under the stone coffin by Yang Guo and had no way to get out. But afterwards Yang Guo struck the top coffin out of anger, causing the coffin lid below

to also crack. She therefore escaped death by throwing out the stone pillow and leaping out after it.

Even though she was confined inside the coffin for less than an hour, she got a taste of what it was like being suffocated to death inside a coffin, which was truly the most painful and miserable situation. During this short period of time, she clenched her jaws, detesting every living person in the world. She thought to herself, "After I die, I must become an evil spirit. I will kill Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Wu Santong, Huang Rong.. .." Not discriminating who it was, all she wanted was to kill everybody. Although she could escape by luck later, the hatred in her heart was actually not lightened. Suddenly seeing Guo Fu, she let out a smile and gently said, "Guo Guniang [Miss Guo], it's you. The fires are burning with such ferocity. You must be careful."

Guo Fu saw her friendly expression and was quite relieved. So she asked, "Did you see my mother?" Li Mochou moved a few steps closer and pointed to the left. She said, "She went that way, didn't she?" Guo Fu looked towards the direction she just pointed. Li Mochou suddenly closed in and reached out to seal a pressure point below her waist. With a laugh she said, "Don't worry. Your mother will come to look for you." She saw that the fires were nearing from all directions. If she was delayed again, her own life would be in danger. She jumped up and took off towards the west. Guo Fu was left paralyzed on the ground, only hearing the chilling sound of Li Mochou's singing from behind the violent flames. She sang, "I ask the world. What is this love that makes people live and die for?"

The singing gradually faded away and the wind suddenly blew a thick plume of smoke, enveloping Guo Fu. She couldn't move her limbs and so, choking in the smoke, she coughed loudly. The Wu father and sons and Yelu Qi were standing midstream, with burning ashes falling on their heads. Between the small creek and Guo Fu was a raging fire

twenty feet high. They knew perfectly well that Guo Fu was in imminent danger but if they were to go in and rescue her, they would only accompany her in death and so they couldn't come up with a plan to save her.

In the smoke Guo Fu was disoriented and about to faint. She was so frightened that she couldn't even cry out. Suddenly she heard someone's shouting from the east side so she turned her head, only to see a whirlwind that wrapped around a gray shadow coming towards her. Wherever the spinning wind passed through, the fire would split open into two sections. That whirlwind reached her in just a short while. The shadow inside was of course Yang Guo. Guo Fu originally thought it was someone coming to rescue her and was delighted. But then she clearly saw that it was actually Yang Guo. Even though it was broiling hot outside, in her heart she felt as if she was drenched with cold water. She thought to herself, "I'm about to die and now he had to come to ridicule and humiliate me." After all she was the daughter of Guo Jing and Huang Rong so she just viciously stared at Yang Guo and surprisingly was not afraid in the least bit.

Yang Guo rushed to her side and thrust out his sword. It was placed at the area below her waist. "Be careful!" He shouted and wielded out his left arm. With his vigorous internal energy sending through the black iron sword, Guo Fu felt like she was riding a cloud while flying away in midair. She went over ten big trees that were burning and sending flames into the sky. And then with a splash, she fell into the creek. Yelu Qi quickly rushed forward to support her and unseal her pressure point. Guo Fu was confused and disoriented. And after a while, she was weeping like a baby.

When Yang Guo first brought Xiao Longnu and Guo Xiang out of the tomb they saw the Mongolian soldiers setting fire to the mountain. The Yang-Long couple had spent a great many years together among these big trees and flowers. Suddenly

seeing the fires, they felt great pain and regret. But the army was big and powerful and they had no way to fight them. Yang Guo didn't know how long Xiao Longnu would last after the poisons had entered her major pressure points so he found a small cave covered with thatches to hide in temporarily.

A short while passed. From the distance they saw Guo Fu hurt by Li Mochou and the raging fires were about to burn her body. Yang Guo said, "Long'er, this girl not only harmed me, but also had hurt you. Today, she's finally getting what she deserves."

With a bright glow in her eyes, Xiao Longnu gazed at him and asked in bewilderment, "Guo'er, are you saying you aren't going to save her?"

Yang Guo bitterly replied, "She's hurt us like this and yet I'm not killing her with my own hand. I'm already doing right by her parents."

With a sigh Xiao Longnu said, "We are unfortunate. That is our sad fate. If we could make other people happy, wouldn't that be wonderful?"

Despite Yang Guo's saying all these things, when seeing that the big fires were about to reach Guo Fu, he eventually couldn't bear it and harshly said, "Great! Our fate is sad. Everybody else's is fine!" Then he soaked the long gown on his body and strapped on the black iron sword. He quickly conjured up his internal energy and from the sword created a whirlwind that blew away the raging fires. Then he sent Guo Fu out of danger. After that he returned to Xiao Longnu's side. The hair on his head and his gown were all singed by the fire. His pants were on fire and even though he quickly put it out, the burned areas on his legs already had countless blisters.

Xiao Longnu was carrying Guo Xiang and they retreated to the thatches they were hiding in earlier. While she stretched out her hand to tidy Yang Guo's hair and clothes, she felt that she had married such a heroic husband. She couldn't restrain the pride in her heart. Standing in between the strong winds and the roaring flames, she leaned on Yang Guo and her face revealed a peaceful and joyous expression. Yang Guo focused his eyes on her, only to see that the big flames were bringing red to her cheeks, multiplying her delicate beauty and so he placed his arm around her waist. During this slice of time, the two people conveniently forgot all the sufferings and sorrows in the world.

Two people were standing on a high place. The Wu father and sons, Guo Fu and Yelu Qi five people, who were standing in the middle of the creek to avoid the fires, looked up and saw the married couple, with floating clothes and solemn postures. They looked just like deities among mortals. Guo Fu had always looked down on Yang Guo but this time she suddenly felt inferior.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu stood there for a moment. Xiao Longnu gazed at the blazing fires on the mountain. She sighed and said, "This place is being burned to the ground. It will take a long time for the flowers, plants, and trees to grow back. Do you think in the future this will ever be a beautiful scene again?"

Yang Guo didn't want her to feel bad about these things so with a smile he said, "We are newly wed. The Mongolian army set fires to congratulate us. How would they not use tons and tons of flowers as candles? Xiao Longnu giggled. Yang Guo then said, "Let's go rest in that cave. How do you feel?" Xiao Longnu replied, "I'm still okay." Then, side by side, the two people walked off towards the back side of the mountain.

Wu Santong suddenly remembered something. He raised his voice and called out, "Yang Xiong di [Brother Yang], my master and Zhu Shi di [Apprentice Brother Zhu] have been trapped in the Passionless Valley [Jue Qing Gu]. Are you going to go and rescue them?"

Yang Guo was startled and didn't reply. He spoke to himself, "How am I involved in these many things?" He was deep in thought but for a while his feet didn't stop. They walked to the back side of the mountain where it was all rocky and nothing grew. Although Xiao Longnu's poisons were severe, they were yet to act up. Her pressure points had earlier been cleared so her martial skills were gradually coming back. With Guo Xiang in her arms, she walked quickly along the way. After walking for half an hour, the two people were already far away from the Chongyang Palace. When they turned their heads to look back, the big fires were burning so intensely that half the sky was glowing red.

The north wind was blowing more and more heavily. It was so cold that Guo Xiang's small face became red like an apple. Xiao Longnu said, "We must go look for something to eat. The child is both cold and hungry. I'm afraid that she won't be able to stand it."

Yang Guo then said, "I was really foolish. I don't know why I snatched the baby and caused us an unnecessary burden."

Xiao Longnu bent down to kiss Guo Xiang's face and said, "This little sister is very lovable. Don't you like her?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "What's so special about other people's children? Of course except we make one ourselves."

Xiao Longnu's face turned red. Yang Guo's words touched a mother's instinct deep in her heart. She thought to herself, "Only if I could give you a child... Alas, how would I have such a good fortune?"

For fear that she would be sad; Yang Guo didn't dare to look her in the eyes. Instead, he lifted his head to check the weather and then saw that the northwest sky was low and heavy as if it would crush down any minute. He said, "Looks like today it will snow heavily. We'd better stay overnight in someone's home." When they were evading the fires, they walked down the back side of the mountain to a remote and uncultivated no-road area that was filled with scattered rock piles and thorny bushes. They climbed up to the high ground and looked in all directions. Unexpectedly there was no smoke from a house within a ten li radius. Yang Guo said, "The snow definitely won't be light. If we get snowed in on the mountain, that could be pretty bad. Let's push a little harder. Today we must get off the mountain."

Then Xiao Longnu asked, "Do you think Uncle Wu and Guo Guniang [Miss Guo] will run into the Mongolian army? And could the Taoist priests from the Quanzhen sect get away with their lives?" While saying this, she was genuinely concerned about these people.

Yang Guo said, "Your conscience is really too good. These people have wronged you and yet you still don't forget all about them. No wonder years ago your master realized that your conscience was too good. Afraid that you'd be miserable later on, she had you practice cutting off all emotions and desires, not involving yourself in all matters. Yet you've been caring for me, wasting your over ten years practice. You are also concerned about everybody."

Xiao Longnu faintly smiled and said, "Is that so? I've made your life miserable. In bitterness there is sweetness. My worst fear is that you wouldn't want me to be concerned about you."

Yang Guo said, "That's right. The more bitter... the sweeter. It's much better than no pain and no gain. I can be madly crazy but can't stand too many quiet and peaceful days."

Xiao Longnu giggled and said, "Didn't you say we'd go south to farm, raise some chickens, and enjoy the sun?"

Yang Guo sighed and said, "I only hope we can always be like this."

They walked for another several li and then the empty sky was filled with flying snow. At the beginning it was quite light but then the north wind gradually picked up and the more it snowed the heavier it became. The two people knew they couldn't set their minds at ease until after the blizzard; they used their lightness skills to rush ahead.

Xiao Longnu suddenly asked, "Guo'er, where do you think my shi zi [Apprentice Sister] has gone to?"

Yang Guo responded, "You are still worried about her. We didn't kill her this time and don't know... and don't know..." He originally was going to say "and don't know if we will be able to when we run into her again" but he was afraid that he'd give Xiao Longnu grief so he decided not to say it.

Xiao Longnu said, "Shi zi [Apprentice sister] is actually a very pitiful person."

Yang Guo said, "She isn't willing to be pitiful alone but is determined to make everybody in the world miserable like herself."

While they were saying this, the sky became even gloomier. But as they came around the corner of the mountain, they suddenly saw a tiny little wooden house between two big pine trees. Several inches of thick white snow were accumulated on its roof.

Yang Guo said in delight, "Great. Let us stop here tonight." They rushed forward but noticed that the door was left ajar, with no trail of footprints in the snow outside the house. In a clear voice he said, "We passers-by are out here in the snow. May we stay overnight at your place?" A while passed and there was no reply from inside the house.

Yang Guo pushed the door open and saw that there was no one inside. All the tables and benches were covered in dust, indicating that no one had occupied this place for a long time. He then called Xiao Longnu to enter the house. She shut the door and started a fire. A spear was hung on a wooden wall and there was a rabbit snare in one corner of the room. It looked like this place was a temporary hunting shack. In another room there was a bed, with several already tattered wolf skins piled on top. Yang Guo picked up the spear and went out to hunt a deer. He was successful and when he came back, he skinned and dressed it. He used the snow to scrub it clean and then roasted it over the fire.

During this time it snowed even harder outside. But the fire was burning bright inside the house, making it warm like spring. Xiao Longnu chewed the deer meat before feeding it to Guo Xiang. While flipping the meat back and forth over the fire, Yang Guo looked at the two of them with a smile.

The fire was gently crackling. The room was filled with the smell of roasted meat. The small shack on the wild mountain was indeed a warm and deliciously smelling world.

End of Chapter 29.

Chapter 30 - Strange Encounters

Translated by BeeDreamer



Zhou Botong grabbed Xiao Longnu with one arm and put her on the trunk. Ci'en was concentrating on rushing forwards for fear that Xiao Longnu would catch up with him, and so he was the only person who didn't know that there was another person behind him. Sitting on the trunk, Xiao Long Nu was both secure and comfortable, just like riding a horse.

Once again, this quiet and peaceful moment didn't last very long. Just a little while after Guo Xiang fell asleep, from the east came the distant crunching sounds of someone walking on the snow in quick steps. Yang Guo stood up and gazed out from the east side window. Then he saw two old men walking side by side on the snowy ground. One was fat, and the other was thin. And with their ragged clothes, they looked just like people from the Beggar Clan. Stranded in the snow, they had to be looking for a place to rest their feet. Yang Guo didn't want to meet any people at this time and specially detested those from Wulin [the martial world]. He turned around and said, "There are people outside. You should go lay in the bedroom, pretending to be sick." Xiao Longnu picked up Guo Xiang and went into the bedroom to lie down in bed as suggested. Then she pulled up a tattered wolf skin from the edge of the bed to cover her body.

Yang Guo scooped up some firewood ash and wiped it all over his face and neck. He pulled the hat lower over his face and hid his black iron sword inside a room. Then he heard the two people coming close and knocking on the door. He randomly smeared deer grease on his gown to make him look like a hunter and then went to open the door.

That fat old beggar said, "The snow is coming down heavily in the mountains. It is really miserable out here. May we ask the gentleman to let us beggars stay in your house tonight?"

Yang Guo replied, "We are just a hunting family. How could senior call me a gentleman? You may stay here for the night." That fat old beggar then thanked him profusely. Yang Guo recalled how he once displayed himself at a heroes meeting and didn't want to be recognized by them. So he ripped two strips of meat from the roasted deer leg, handed them to the two people, and said, "There are so many things to do to survive in the snow. I've got to get up early tomorrow to catch a fox. I'm afraid I can't keep you two company." The fat old beggar replied, "Please do as you please, little gentleman."

Then in a coarse tone Yang Guo said, "Old wife, how's your cough?" Xiao Longnu replied, "It's the weather change. My chest hurts." While saying that, she let out a loud cough and her hand gently shook Guo Xiang to wake her up. The sound of a coughing woman was mixed with that of a crying baby and so the three of them really presented a perfect picture of a hunting household.

Yang Guo walked into the bedroom and banged the door shut after him. He lay down in bed next to Xiao Longnu and thought to himself, "This fat beggar looks familiar. Where have I seen him before?" But he couldn't remember.

The fat and thin beggars thought that Yang Guo really was a poor hunter living on a wild mountain and didn't suspect anything. While eating the deer leg, they started talking. The thin beggar said, "Today Mount Zhongnan was blasted to the sky. That was well done." With a laugh the fat beggar added, "The Mongolian Royal Army is attacking from east to west and defeating all their enemies under the sky. Wiping out those little Quanzhen Taoists was as easy as crushing an ant nest." The thin beggar said, "But just recently Jinlun Fawang suffered quite a loss. That was difficult enough." The fat beggar laughingly said, "That's even better. It will let the prince know that he must depend on the Chinese to conquer

the beautiful homeland of China. Using only the Mongolians and the Western warriors isn't enough." The thin beggar then said, "Peng Zhang Lao [Elder Peng], when this business of establishing the Southern Beggar Clan is all done, how is the Mongolian emperor going to reward you?"

Having heard this, Yang Guo suddenly remembered something. He'd seen this old fat beggar at the Dashengguan hero banquet but at that time the beggar was dressed in Mongolian attire with a fur coat, and he was whispering advice to Jinlun Fawang. It was this person. So he thought to himself, "These two fellows are actually the country's traitors. I will just quickly get rid of them to avoid causing any disturbance here."

This fat old beggar was precisely one of the four big elders of the Beggar Clan, Peng Zhang Lao [Elder Peng], who had earlier fallen in with the Mongols. Yang Guo heard him continue, "The emperor will bestow on me the position of 'Chief General of the Southern Province' but, you know, they say 'Beg for three years and the emperor still might not see it.' We are members of the Beggar Clan. Why would we want to become a Government Official?" But while saying this, his tone actually revealed a fervent desire for the position.

The thin beggar said, "Let me congratulate you in advance." Peng Zhang Lao chuckled and said, "Your accomplishments during these many years are not lacking. Naturally, your own reward won't be small either."

That thin beggar said, "I don't wish to become a public official. You've promised to teach me the great 'Soul Absorbing Technique'. When will you pass it on to me?"

Peng Zhang Lao replied, "Wait until the Southern Beggar Clan is established and I become the chief of the clan. Both of us will have a lot of free time. Then I will definitely pass it on to you."

The thin beggar said, "By then you'll be the Chief of the Southern Beggar Clan and also the Mongolian Chief General of the Southern Province. You would only be even busier. How would you have any free time?"

With a laugh Peng Zhang Lao said, "Lao di [Old little brother], is that to say you still don't trust your big brother?" That thin beggar said nothing and snorted, showing that he didn't believe him.

Yang Guo thought to himself, "There's only one Beggar Clan in the world and it's never been divided into northern and southern sects. His planning to set up this Southern Beggar Clan must be a devious scheme to help the Mongols."

The thin beggar continued, "Peng Zhang Lao [Elder Peng], you've promised someone something. Sooner or later you've got to do it. You seniors keep putting things off, disappointing other people."

Peng Zhang Lao blandly asked, "What would you do then?"

The thin beggar retorted, "What would I do? My martial skills are low. My courage is small. I don't have any great skills. But I've been accompanying you, helping you deceive numerous sect brothers. Later on when Chief Huang and Chief Lu come to investigate, I think I'll tremble with fear and spill everything to wash my hands from this mud."

Yang Guo thought, "The thin beggar doesn't want to live. How could he dare say such thing? That Peng Zhang Lao has a lofty aspiration and an evil and cold-blooded nature. You're really both venomous and foolish."

Peng Zhang Lao let out a 'ha-ha' laugh and said, "We'll discuss this in time. You don't have to worry."

The thin beggar didn't say a word. But after a while he said, "One tiny deer leg is not filling. I'll go out and get more

food.” While saying that he took down the spear from the wall and pushed the door open.

Yang Guo looked through a crack in the wall and saw that as soon as that thin beggar went out the door, Peng Zhang Lao straightened up his body, drawing out a short knife and hiding it behind the door. He then heard the sounds of footsteps moving towards the west and disappearing out of the door. With a chuckle Yang Guo told Xiao Longnu, “This pair of beggars are about to kill each other, saving us a lot of trouble. That fat beggar is very dangerous. That thin one is definitely not his match.”

Xiao Longnu said, “It’ll be best if the two of them don’t come back. This house is quite peaceful. I don’t want people to come and disturb us.”

“True,” said Yang Guo. Suddenly he lowered his voice, “I hear the sounds of footsteps.” They then heard someone making a detour around the mountain side and come back behind the house.

With a faint smile Yang Guo said, “That thin old man’s come back for a sneak attack.” He pushed the window open and gently leapt out. Then he saw the thin beggar crouching down to peep through a crack in the wall. He didn’t see a trace of Peng Zhang Lao, as if that beggar hadn’t yet come up with a plan. Yang Guo walked up behind the thin man and said with a laugh, “Hey!”

Taken by surprise, the thin beggar snapped his head back, thinking that it was Peng Zhang Lao sneaking up behind him. His face looked alarmed and terrified. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid.” Yang Guo said and reached out to press the three pressure points -- on his chest, below his ribs, and on his leg. Then he moved the thin beggar to the front door. Before his eyes was a vast field of white deep snow. The child in him sprang up and so he called out, “Long’er, come quickly and

help me build a snowman." He scooped up the white snow on the ground and started piling it onto that thin beggar's body. Xiao Longnu came out of the house to help. Merrily, the two of them worked on the snowman and a short while later that beggar was thoroughly covered with the white snow. Except the pair of eyeballs that could still move, the thin beggar turned into an extremely fat and heavy snowman.

With a laugh Yang Guo said, "This thin decrepit old man's become both fat and white in a flash." Xiao Longnu giggled and said, "And that other fat and white old man... what would you change him into?" Yang Guo had yet to reply when he heard the sounds of footsteps from the distance. He lowered his voice, "That fat old beggar's back. Let's hide." The two people returned to the house and shut the door. Xiao Longnu shook Guo Xiang, making her cry. At the same time she coaxed, "Hush, hush, don't cry." In her whole life, she'd never pretended to do anything but this situation was so strange that she didn't even think about it. She saw that Yang Guo was having fun so she just played along with him.

As Peng Zhang Lao returned, he examined footprints on the snow. He saw the thin old beggar's footprints going out and coming back again, showing that he was planning an ambush from the left side of the house. He followed the footprints to the back of the house and then came out to the front again. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were about to open the door but then saw his short body bending over to peep into the house through the window, his right hand firmly holding a knife, and his whole body alert.

The thin old beggar was freezing to the bone. He saw that Peng Zhang Lao [Elder Peng] was unsuspectingly standing right in front of him. If only he could move his hand, he would have been able to strike him dead. But the three pressure points on his body had been sealed, making him unable to move.

Peng Zhang Lao saw that there was nobody in the house and thought it was really strange. He pushed open the door, expecting the thin beggar to come out. But suddenly he heard the sounds of footsteps coming from the distance. Peng Zhang Lao's expression changed, and he went to hide behind the door panel, waiting for the thin beggar to return.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were puzzled. That thin beggar had become a snowman. How could there be people coming? While hesitating, they heard that it was two people and knew that they had guests again. Peng Zhang Lao's hearing was far inferior to theirs. As the two people were approaching, he looked alarmed.

Then someone from outside the house said, "Amitufo, we needy monks are stuck here in the mountain snow. May we ask the patrons to let us stay here overnight?" Peng Zhang Lao turned his body around and saw two old monks standing in the snow. One had long white eyebrows, with a benign face. The other was a small-built man with a gray beard, dressed in black. And even in this cold winter month, the two people were wearing thin clothes.

Peng Zhang Lao was still in a trance when Yang Guo came out of the room and said, "Please come in. Why are you two still standing in the doorway?" By this time Peng Zhang Lao saw the snowman. And after some observation, he eventually recognized the thin beggar. Seeing this strange transformation, he was greatly surprised and turned around to look at Yang Guo. But Yang Guo looked to be normal, as if he didn't know anything about it at all.

After having invited the two old monks in Yang Guo thought: "It looks like these two old monks aren't just ordinary people; especially that wicked looking monk dressed in black. With that strange glow in his eyes, I'm afraid he'll turn out to be like this Peng Zhang Lao." Then he said, "Big monks, you've

stopped to rest here. We are poor mountain people and can't provide beds for you to sleep in. Do the two of you eat game?"

The white-eye browed monk put his two palms together (he shi) joining ten fingers to pay respect) and said, "That's wrong. That's wrong. We've brought our own food. We dare not burden our patrons."

Yang Guo said, "That's good." Then he came back into the bedroom and whispered into Xiao Longnu's ear, "The two old monks looked to be very powerful masters."

Xiao Longnu frowned and said in a low voice, "There are really many evil people in the world. Deep in the mountain like this, people still won't leave us alone in peace."

Yang Guo bent down to look through a crack in the wall and saw that the white-eye browed monk took out four lumps of fried noodles from his rucksack. He gave two of them to the monk dressed in black and slowly ate the other two. Yang Guo thought, "The white-eye browed monk looks kind and composed, really like an esteemed monk. But there are just so many evil people who look good on the outside. Isn't this Peng Zhang Lao always laughing and looking very friendly? Still, how come that monk in black looks murderously evil like that?"

While contemplating this, he suddenly heard two 'lang-lang' sounds. That monk in black took out black shiny iron objects out of his robe. Peng Zhang Lao who was originally sitting on a bench immediately jumped up and drew out his knife. The monk in black paid him no attention. Instead, he chained his own feet with one of those black objects, which turned out to be an iron manacle, and did the same thing to both of his hands. Yang Guo and Peng Zhang Lao were stunned, unable to figure out why he shackled his own hands and feet. But

having seen this, they could somewhat let down their guard against him.

The face of that white-eye browed monk was filled with concern. He asked in a low voice, "It's acting up again?"

The monk in black replied, "On the way here I didn't feel very well. I'm afraid that it'll happen again." Suddenly he knelt down on the floor, putting his two palms together and pleading, "May Lord Buddha show mercy." Having said that, he crouched down and stayed motionless in a kneeling position. After a while, he started to shiver and gasp for air, making wheezing noises. Then he unexpectedly let out a bull-like roar, so loud that it shook the wooden walls and sent the snow on the rooftop down to the ground.

Peng Zhang Lao was so frightened that his heart was thumping wildly. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu also gaped at each other in astonishment, not knowing what this monk was doing. Judging from the roar, his body had to be in great distress. Although Yang Guo had been feeling hostility towards him from the beginning, this time he actually couldn't help pity the man. He mused, "I don't know what strange disease has struck him. Why hasn't that white-eyebrowed monk done something about it?"

After a while, the roar from that monk in black slowed, as if he was becoming out of breath. The white-eyebrowed monk soothingly said, "What should not be done will be done; what should be done will be rejected; repent from burning anger and hatred; from now on start anew..." These few sentences were spoken gently. But even amid the loud roar, one could still hear them very clearly.

Yang Guo was alarmed and thought, "This old monk's internal energy was so profound. Who in the world would be able to match him?" Then he heard the white-eyebrowed monk continue the Buddhist verse, "He who repents for his crime

will not be sad but become peaceful. He who repents for his misdeeds will not do evil.”

After the verse was recited, the monk in black stopped panting. He thought dully and croaked, “He who repents for his crime will not be sad... Shifu [master], I know full well I have done all sorts of things, all of them evil and full of hatred. I couldn’t control myself. I was thinking about ‘He who repents for his misdeeds will not do evil.’ But in my heart I couldn’t find peace. How could that be good?”

The white-eyebrowed monk replied, “Being able to repent for past sins is really difficult. We humans are not saints. Who has never erred? Only to know that we...”

As Yang Guo heard this, he vividly remembered something, “Guo Bobo [Uncle Guo] named me ‘Guo,’ meaning to change. He said it came from ‘knowing that we can change is the greatest virtue.’ Can it be that this old monk is a saint, coming today to change me?”

That monk in black said, “My evil is really difficult to expel. Ten years ago, even after I’d already followed master for a long time, I still injured three people. Today, it’s as if my blood is boiling, and it’s been very difficult to control myself. I’m afraid that I’m going to commit a hideous crime. I beg for master’s mercy. Please cut off both of my hands.”

The white-eyebrowed monk replied, “Good, very good! I could chop off your hands for you. But for all the evil thoughts in your heart, you’d have to eliminate them yourself. If your evil thoughts don’t go away, how would my cutting off all your hands and feet help?”

The monk in black shook violently and suddenly choked in tears. He said, “Shifu [master] has enlightened me. But all this time I haven’t been able to get rid of my evil thoughts.”

The white-eyebrowed monk let out a deep sigh and said, "Although you know what's right and wrong, your heart is filled with hatred. When you don't know how to love, evil thoughts are always difficult to eliminate. Let me tell you a Buddhist tale of a mother deer." The monk in black replied, "I'm listening." Then he sat down cross-legged. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu on the other side of the wall were also listening in silence.

The white-eyebrowed monk said, "A long time ago, there were a mother deer and two small fawns. The mother deer was careless and was captured by a hunter, who wanted to kill her. The mother deer kowtowed to him and begged, 'I just gave birth to two fawns. They are young and innocent, and do not know how to find water and grass. May I ask you for some time so I can teach them to find food for themselves? After that, I'll come back to die.' The hunter wouldn't listen. But after the mother deer begged and begged (with her sad doe eyes), he was moved and then let her go."

"The mother deer searched for her two babies. Then she lowered her head and cried, licking her children's bodies. In her heart was a mixture of happiness and sadness. She told the two fawns, 'A love relationship is predestined. Meetings have to end, and we rarely have much time. Today I'm your mother. I'm afraid I can't protect myself. Life and death are everywhere. And danger came too early.' The two fawns were small and didn't understand her meaning. And so the mother deer pointed them to a beautiful place with water and grass, tears flowing from her eyes. Then she said, 'Our time has ended. I fell into a hunter's hand by accident and was about to be killed. I begged the hunter so I could come back to see you, and today I'll die. I pity you, having to be motherless so young and living by yourself.'"

Having heard this, Xiao Longnu recalled how her own life would also be cut short. She thought about these few

sentences -- 'Life and death are everywhere, and danger came too early' and 'I pity you, having to be motherless so young and living by yourself.' She couldn't bear it, and tears were flowing from her eyes. Yang Guo knew perfectly well that the white-eyebrowed monk was only telling a Buddhist tale but the tale of the mother deer and her children was very sad, and so he also was moved.

The white-eyebrowed monk continued the story, "Having finished saying this, the mother deer left her two fawns. The two of them cried, weeping in sorrow and following her closely behind. The babies were small and couldn't run fast but they scrambled, tumbling down and getting up, to follow their mother, not willing to let her go. The mother deer paused. She turned around and said, 'Babies! You can't come along. If the hunter sees you, we mother and babies will all be finished. I'm ready to die, only fearing that you two are still weak. Nothing is permanent in the world. Everybody has to leave. I am ill-fated, causing you to lose your mother when you are still small.' And then she fled to the hunter. The two fawns didn't fear the hunter's arrows and arrived after her."

The hunter saw that the mother deer was trustworthy, giving up her life to keep her words, and that her determination surpassed that of humans. Besides, he saw that the three deer were not willing to leave one another. He felt pity and decided not to kill her. The three of them shouted out in happiness, thanking the hunter. The hunter then told this story to the king, and the whole nation applauded and stopped evil killings."

The monk in black listened to this story, tears streaming down his face. He said, "The deer were righteous. The mother deer was compassionate, and her offspring were filial. In no way can I compare to them."

The white-eyebrowed monk said, "If there is compassion, any killing intention will disappear." While saying this, he looked at Peng Zhang Lao who was nearby, as if he was also explaining all this to him. The monk in black responded, "True!" The white-eyebrowed monk continued, "If one wants to make amends that also is virtuous. It's better than repenting and doing nothing. From today on, we should do good deeds." Then he let out a small sigh, "Even I, in my life, have done many bad things." Having said this, he shut his eyes and was deep in thought.

Even though the monk in black understood his master's teaching, he was still troubled, finding it difficult to control himself. He lifted his head, only to see that Elder Peng was staring at him with a cat-like smile, his eyes looking as if they were shining lights. The monk in black was startled, feeling like he'd seen such a person somewhere before. He felt very uncomfortable with this meaningful look, and so he immediately turned his head away to avoid the gaze. But after a short while, he couldn't bear it and turned back to meet those eyes.

With a smile Elder Peng said, "The snow has been coming down hard, don't you think?"

The monk in black replied, "Yes, it's been coming down hard."

Elder Peng then said, "Come. Let's go look at the snow." Having said this, he pushed the door open. The monk in black repeated, "Good, let's go look at the snow." Then he got up to go stand side by side with Elder Peng at the door. At this time even though Yang Guo was behind the wall, he could sense that Elder Peng's eyes were really strange and ominous.

Elder Peng said, "What your master said is right. Murder is wrong in any case. But the power in your body is overflowing.

If you don't let it out, your heart feels very difficult. Is that right?" In a daze, the monk in black replied, "It's true!" Elder Peng said, "You might as well strike this snow man. Hit him, and you won't sin." The monk in black looked at the snowman and lifted both arms, eager to try. By now the two monks had been here for about half an hour, and the thin beggar's body was thoroughly covered with white snow, even his eyes couldn't be seen. Elder Peng urged, "Use your palms. Hit this snowman. Hit...Hit...Hit!" His words were soft, filled with encouragement. The monk in black channeled energy to his arms and said, "Good, I'll hit!"

The white-eyebrowed monk lifted his head and let out a long sigh. In a low voice he said, "Where there is a murderous intention, there is sin."

But then he heard a crashing sound. The monk in black shot out both of his palms, sending the white snow flying. The thin beggar's body was struck, his pressure points unsealed, and so he let out a loud miserable 'ah' cry, which echoed into the distance. Xiao Longnu softly cried out, her hands grabbing Yang Guo's.

The monk in black was shocked. He yelled, "There was someone in the snow!" The white-eyebrowed monk quickly came out and bent down to examine the body. The thin beggar was struck by the extremely powerful palms of the monk in black, and thus he was killed violently. The monk in black was all confused and became dully still.

Elder Peng acted like he was frightened and said, "This person was really strange. Why did he hide in the snow? Eh, why was he holding a knife?" Elder Peng had used his "Soul Absorbing Technique", urging the monk in black to kill the thin beggar. He was very pleased with himself. Still, he couldn't help being puzzled and thought to himself, "Surprisingly this servant had endurance, hiding very still in

the snow. Could it be that the snow was blocking his ears and so he didn't hear me urging that man to hit him?"

With a dull look in his eyes the monk in black could only cry out, "Master!" The white-eyebrowed monk said, "Such a pity. It wasn't you who killed this person, yet it was you who did it." The monk in black crouched down on the snow and his voice trembled, "I don't understand." The white-eyebrowed monk said, "You only knew that this was a snowman so you didn't mean to hurt people. But your palms were wickedly powerful, without restraint. How can it be said that you didn't have murderous intentions?" The monk in black said, "I certainly had murderous intentions."

The white-eyebrowed monk looked at Elder Peng with a long steady gaze. His eyes were gentle, yet filled with grief. Simply with just this look, Elder Peng's great 'Soul Absorbing' spell vanished. The monk in black suddenly cried out, "You are one of the Beggar Clan's elders. It now came to my mind!" The cat-like smile on Elder Peng's face disappeared in an instant. He frowned and shrewdly said, "And you are Iron Palms Chief Qiu. How did you become a monk?"

This monk in black was precisely Iron Palms Qiu Qianren. Years ago, on Mount Hua, he suddenly regretted all that he'd done and became a monk under Reverend Yideng's tutelage. And this white-eyebrowed, old monk was Reverend Yideng, who was in the same league as Wang Chongyang, Huang Yaoshi, Ouyang Feng, and Hong Qigong. Qiu Qianren shaved his head and became a monk named Ci'en, following a Buddhist's path and diligently mending his ways. But he'd done many despicable things in the past, making it very difficult to eliminate the monster in his heart. Facing the many temptations in the world, he couldn't resist hurting people. And so he'd made a pair of strong manacles so that whenever his mind became troubled, he could shackle his hands and feet, keeping his evilness in check. At this time

Reverend Yideng, who usually secluded himself in Hunan, had received a letter asking for help from his disciple Zhu Ziliu. So he and Ci'en were now on their way to the Passionless Valley. Nobody could have expected that they would run into Elder Peng on this remote mountain. Ci'en actually had no intention to hurt people.

In over ten years since becoming a monk, although Ci'en had violated some rules, this was actually the first time he had taken someone's life. His mind was greatly disturbed, feeling that over ten years of his Buddhist study was all for nothing. He gave Elder Peng a vicious stare, with raging fire in his eyes.

Reverend Yideng knew that this was a critical moment. If one used force to stop him from getting into a fight, his evilness would multiply. Like a bursting flood, once released, there would be no redemption. Having thought this, he only looked at Ci'en with kindness, hoping that his evil thoughts would just melt away when he came to his senses. He kindly stood by him and gently chanted, "Amitufo, Amitufo!" He repeated this several times until Ci'en stopped staring at Elder Peng and came back to sit in the house, breathing heavily.

Elder Peng had known earlier that Qiu Qianren's martial skills were weighty but he didn't recognize Reverend Yideng. Seeing the snow-white eyebrows, he mistook Reverend Yideng for a weak monk on the verge of death and paid him no attention. He only thought to use his 'Soul Absorbing' skill to control Qiu Qianren and achieve his goal. Who would have thought that as soon as Reverend Yideng looked at him, he felt as if his heart was crushed by a thousand-catty weight, he was not able to use his magical skill. By this time he'd almost wet his pants. He wanted to flee but this Qiu Qianren was also nicknamed "Iron Palms Floating on Water." His lightness skills were strange; he didn't even leave footprints

on the snow. It looked like he wouldn't be able to escape so he only hoped that Qiu Qianren would listen to the words of the white-eyebrowed monk, who was persuading Qiu Qianren not to harm him. He shrank himself in the corner of the room, frightened. And as Ci'en's pants grew heavier, his heart also thumped wildly.

Yang Guo had listened to Yideng telling the three-deer story. Now he thought about how no living things could escape death. Even though that thin beggar was wicked and deserved to be damned, his sudden encounter with this disaster was actually quite shocking. And more than that, he saw that Ci'en's palm strength was strangely fierce. Who was this monk with such powerful martial skills?

Then he heard Ci'en panting for air and loudly crying out, "Master, I was born an evil person. Heaven wouldn't let me repent. Although I didn't mean to kill people, I finally couldn't avoid taking somebody's life. I'm not a monk anymore!"

Yideng said, "Sin, sin! Let me tell you another Buddhist tale." Ci'en rudely retorted, "Why should I still listen to your Buddhist tale? You've been deceiving me for more than ten years. I don't believe you anymore." With two 'ge-la' 'ge-la' sounds, the chains on his hands and feet snapped. Yideng gently said, "Ci'en, what's done is done. You don't have to get angry."

Ci'en stood up. Facing Yideng, he shook his head. Then he turned his body around and struck Elder Peng's chest with both palms. With a loud crashing sound, Elder Peng collided with a wall and flew out into open space. After having been struck by these 'Iron Palms', his muscles and bones shattered. Even if he had ten lives, he would still be dead.

Hearing this loud crash, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu jumped in fright and, side by side, came out of the room. They saw

Ci'en raising his hands up high, with his eyes shining with murderous lights. He loudly shouted, "What are you looking at? Once started, I might as well go all the way. Today this old man will start killing." Having said this, he channeled energy to his arms and was about to use his 'Iron Palms' again.

Reverend Yideng walked to the door entrance, shielding Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu's bodies. He sat down cross-legged and recited Buddhist verses. Then he said, "You haven't gone too far on the wrong path. You can still return. Ci'en, do you really want to sink beyond redemption?"

Ci'en's face turned blue and then red. His mind was extremely chaotic, with good and evil battling it out. Today his mind had been troubled since they encountered the snow, and it was also stirred up by the "Soul Absorbing Skill". More than that, he'd killed two people, making it very difficult to control himself. One minute Reverend Yideng was his gracious master who had been helping him, and the next he actually became his biggest personal enemy.

For a moment he stood there stiffly. Then his evil thoughts became stronger and stronger. Suddenly he gave a loud shout and attacked Reverend Yideng with his palm. Reverend Yideng brought his hand up to his chest, his body slightly swaying, as he blocked that palm strike. Ci'en angrily said, "You surely won't be able to defeat me!" Then his left palm struck again. Reverend Yideng raised his hand, yet he didn't counterstrike. Ci'en shouted, "Aren't you clever? You don't hit back. Then you'll die in vain. Don't blame me!"

Even though his mind was disturbed, his words actually made sense. His 'Iron Palms' and Reverend Yideng's "One Yang Finger" both claimed victories in battles, and years ago they were ranked equal in the martial world. Yideng's Buddhist study was the basis of their master-disciple relationship. But speaking of martial skills, even if Yideng

used the “One Yang Finger” against the ‘Iron Palms’ skill it actually would be somewhat inferior. In a one-way attack, using his whole strength to counterstrike, he might only win by a small margin, but as time went by, Yideng would eventually be killed or severely injured. Bravely, Yideng was willing to sacrifice himself, and received Ci’en’s palm strikes without hitting back. He only hoped that Ci’en would realize his mistakes and repent. This act of not using force against force was actually a battle between good and evil.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu witnessed how each of Ci’en’s ‘Iron Palms’ was like an axe striking Reverend Yideng. Coming to the fourteenth strike, Yideng let out a ‘wa’ sound and coughed up blood. Startled, Ci’en said, “Aren't you going to fight back?” Yideng gently responded, “Why should I fight back? What good is it if I win? What good is it if you win? We must fight with ourselves, restrain ourselves!” Ci’en was confused, muttering, “Must fight with ourselves, and restrain ourselves!”

Reverend Yideng’s words were like thunder rumbling in Yang Guo’s mind. He thought to himself, “Must fight our own nature, and must restrain our foolish thoughts. It’s certainly much more difficult than defeating powerful enemies. The words of this esteemed monk are really the truth.” He saw that Ci’en’s palms pause slightly in midair but, with a shout, they eventually struck down again. Yideng’s body shook, and he threw up another pool of blood, staining his white beard and monk’s robe.

Having seen Yideng’s defense techniques and endurance, Yang Guo knew that his martial skills were in no way inferior to those of the monk in black. But this was a one-sided attack, and even a body of iron and stone could eventually be destroyed. Now, he already admired Yideng to no end, knowing full well that he wanted to sacrifice himself to change that evil person. Anyway, he couldn’t bear to see

Reverend Yideng perish like this. He thought about how he himself, if using only palm strength, wouldn't be able to block the 'Iron Palms' of that monk in black. He turned around to grab his black iron sword and wielded it, shielding Yideng's body. He waited for Ci'en to strike with his 'Iron Palms' again and then thrusts forward his sword. The wind stirred up by the black iron sword clashed with the palm wind. Their bodies trembled.

Ci'en let out a surprised sound. Never would he expect that there would be a young hunter with such marvelous martial skills living on a wild mountain. Reverend Yideng also looked at Yang Guo in great surprise.

Ci'en sharply shouted, "Who are you? What are you doing?"

Yang Guo said, "The great reverend has given you great advice, how come you don't realize that? Not listening to the precious words is bad enough, but you have to be hateful and harm him. How would you not be worse than an animal acting like this?"

Ci'en furiously shouted, "Are you from the Beggar Clan too? Do you want to accompany that evil elder of the clan?"

Yang Guo laughed and said, "Those two people were the scum of the Beggar Clan. Your getting rid of those evil people was actually a good deed. Why must you beat yourself over it?"

Ci'en was startled, mumbling to himself, "Getting rid of those evil people was actually a good deed... Getting rid of those evil people was actually a good deed..."

Yang Guo had been behind the wall listening to their master-disciple verbal exchange, and so he understood Ci'en's concerns, knowing that remorse caused him to hate and stirred up his evil thoughts. He continued, "Those people

were traitorous disciples of the Beggar Clan, like a wolf hiding in our homeland of China. Your killing two such people was really a great thing. If they hadn't been killed, I don't know how many of our fellow Buddhists might have had to die. Lord Buddha is merciful but, meeting with such demons, how could benevolence still be used to expel evil spirits?"

Yang Guo's knowledge of Buddhist doctrines was very shallow but to Ci'en's ears what he said actually made sense. He slowly put down his hands but then he changed his mind, vividly recalling that in the past he himself had allied with the Jin, helping them invade the great Song country. And so it was like Yang Guo was actually derogating him. He suddenly raised his palm to hack down at Yang Guo and said, "Little animal, what nonsense are you jabbering?"

This palm was fast and furious. Yang Guo was busy trying to persuade him with words and didn't expect Ci'en to suddenly launch an attack. By the time the wind from his palm arrived, it was too dangerous to counterstrike with his own force. And so he went along with that palm strength, his body leaping backward. There came two crashing sounds as he crashed into a wooden wall, and his body was thrown out of the house. Reverend Yideng was startled and thought to himself, "Would this young man have to die like this? It looked like his martial skills were good! Alas, how would I be able to save his life?" His mind was greatly troubled.

The fire in the room was suddenly blown out by a gust of wind rushing through that hole in the wall. Yang Guo came in with the wind, his sword pointing at Ci'en. He shouted, "Good, today you and I will fight." Ci'en shot out his left palm, aiming to strike Yang Guo's sword tip with his palm strength. But Yang Guo's swordplay was really a testimony of Dugu Qiubai's ingenuity. Even though their ages were far apart, he shouldn't have been able to match this old master. With his sword practice under the mountain streams, the

snake gallbladders that boosted his energy, and the Divine Eagle's help, Yang Guo's sword skills were very similar to those of the unparalleled Demonic Sword Master of the past era. As Ci'en's palm arrived, Yang Guo's sword tip was only nudged a few inches aside, and it was still pointing at Ci'en's left arm. Horrified, Ci'en dodged to the right to escape the sword and quickly sent out another palm strike. With the two people's marvelous skills, the palms and the sword were battling violently.

Yideng watched the fight in wonder. This youth was only twenty years old or so but surprisingly, could fight a draw with master Qiu's 'Iron Palms'. His own knowledge was vast, yet he couldn't recognize where Yang Guo's martial skills came from. Also, his heavy sword was marvelously strange. Then he turned his head back and saw Xiao Longnu with a baby in her arms, standing by the door. She appeared a beautiful woman, with an elegant look. Surprisingly she didn't seem to be frightened by the two people's wicked fight at all. He thought to himself, "This young lady isn't a common character either." But then he noticed a dark cloud between her eyebrows and couldn't help letting out an 'ayo' cry. Xiao Longnu faintly smiled and thought, "You've figured it out."

By now the fight between the two people, a sword and two palms became even fiercer. Yang Guo had the advantage of using a weapon but Ci'en had one more arm, and so they were about even. There came a loud crashing sound as a wooden plank was shaken loose. More cracking sounds were heard as a post also snapped. This wooden house was small and not very sturdy. Really, it was no place for the two great masters to fight a battle. Wherever the sword edge and the palm wind went, the wooden boards on the four walls would all fly in chaos. Finally they heard another loud cracking sound as another post snapped, causing the whole house to collapse. With Guo Xiang in her arms, Xiao Longnu dove out

through the window. Yideng guarded their back, using his gown sleeves to brush away the flying debris.

In the howling wind and blowing snow, the two people's wicked fight continued on. In over ten years, Ci'en had never got into a fight like this. He gave out a loud cry, his Iron Palms flitting and flying everywhere. Over a hundred moves passed, but his opponent's sword strength was even more powerful. With his declining years, he'd gradually lose the fight. Yang Guo thrust his sword straight out. Seeing Ci'en dodging the blow, he quickly swept his sword around, and the fierce wind sent the snow swirling. Blinded by the snow, Ci'en quickly lifted his hand to wipe it off. Suddenly the black iron sword made contact with his right shoulder, and he felt as if his body was crushed by a thousand-catty weight. Not being able to keep his balance, he tumbled down with Yang Guo's sword tip on his chest. Although the sword was blunt, its force was strangely fierce. With its tip pressing against his breast bone, he could only breathe out but couldn't breathe in enough air.

At this time the word 'die' flashed in the mind of Ci'en. Since the time he'd learned his marvelous martial skills, he'd roamed Jianghu, only knowing how to kill and injure others. Extremely rarely had he run into any setbacks. He'd been defeated by Zhou Botong, and he'd run away to the Western region. Later on he'd depended on clever tricks to get away from the Old Urchin. This time death was nearing as it never had before. He thought that death itself wasn't a big thing but he felt that if his life was cut short like this, he wouldn't be able to make amends for all sorts of evil things he'd done in the past. Reverend Yideng's thousands and thousands of words couldn't get through to him but Yang Guo's one sword made him realize that, "Killing brings misery. I only knew how to kill people. Being killed like this is actually miserable."

Having seen Yang Guo defeating Ci'en, Reverend Yideng thought to himself, "Such a young hero is really very rare." Then he stepped forward and touched the sword blade with his finger. Heat shot through Yang Guo's left arm, and his black iron sword was immediately brushed aside.

Ci'en stood up and then threw himself down on the ground. He cried out, "Master, I deserve to die a terrible death. I deserve to die a terrible death!" With a faint smile, Yideng patted him on the back and said, "Change is not easy. Why haven't you thanked this young hero for the lesson?"

Yang Guo had earlier suspected that this old monk was Reverend Yideng. Having seen this monk brushing aside his sword blade with one finger, he thought that this 'One Yang Finger' and Island Master Huang's 'Divine Flicking Finger' were equally exquisite, and there was no third person in the world who could match their finger strength. He immediately kowtowed and said, "Disciple Yang Guo pays respect to Reverend." He saw Ci'en kneeling down before him so he quickly said, "Senior, please don't do that. I'm younger than you. Just now I've offended you enough." Then he pointed at Xiao Longnu and said, "This is my wife, named Long. Quickly come kowtow to the Reverend." With Guo Xiang in her arms, Xiao Longnu stepped forward to greet him.

Ci'en said, "Master, just now I'd gone mad. Is your injury very severe?" Yideng chuckled and asked, "Do you feel better now?" Ci'en felt sorry to no end, not knowing what to say.

The four people sat down on a collapsed post. Yang Guo recounted how he met Wu Santong, Zhu Ziliu and Diancang Yuyin. He also talked about how he got poisoned in the Passionless Valley, and how the Indian monk and Zhu Ziliu went there to seek the antidote for him and then got trapped.

Yideng said, "That's why my disciple has gone to the Passionless Valley. But do you know how this monk Ci'en is

related to the mistress of the valley?”

He'd heard Elder Peng calling Ci'en "Iron Palms Chief Qiu" so he said, "Reverend Ci'en was born with the last name Qiu. Could it be possible that he was the Iron Palms Chief Qiu?"

Ci'en slowly nodded.

Yang Guo continued, "In that case, the mistress of the Passionless Valley must be your younger sister."

Ci'en responded, "Indeed. Was she well?"

Yang Guo didn't quite know how to answer the question. Qiu Qianchi's husband had destroyed all the tendons in her four limbs, leaving her a cripple. He really couldn't bring himself to say the word 'well.'

Ci'en saw Yang Guo hesitate so he said, "That sister of mine always did as she pleased. I wouldn't be too surprised if she ran into trouble."

Yang Guo then said, "Her limbs were disabled but her body was actually very healthy."

With a sigh Ci'en said, "Many years have passed. We've all grown old. Alas, she and her two brothers..." Having said this, he was lost in thought, recalling old memories.

Yideng knew that Ci'en had yet to let go and that his close brush with death only interrupted the stream of evil thoughts. But really the roots of evil were still there. If stirred up by strong emotions, Ci'en would unavoidably go crazy again. He didn't know how much longer he could live and help Ci'en. He could only let it all depend on fate.

Seeing Yideng look at Ci'en with pity in his eyes, Yang Guo suddenly thought to himself, "Reverend Yideng's martial skills were definitely not inferior to his disciple's. Yet, he

wouldn't return the attacks. There must be a reason. I'm afraid my jumping out to fight like that would make the matter worse."

So he quickly said, "Reverend, I, young disciple, acted on the spur of the moment. Please let me know if just now I was rash, and made a mistake."

Yideng replied, "The human mind is hard to fathom. If he'd killed me, he couldn't have awakened like this. He would have sunk to the bottomless pit. You saved my life and brought him back to his senses. How could it be a mistake? I feel it was all for the better."

Then he turned to Xiao Longnu and asked, "How did you get poisoned, young lady?"

Having heard that, Yang Guo felt a ray of hope shining down on him. He quickly said, "We were circulating energy to heal her injury, and it was at that time that the poisons got into her body. Could you help her?" He then knelt down on the ground on both knees.

Yideng helped him up and asked, "How did she circulate her inner energy? Why is her energy flowing in the opposite direction?"

Yang Guo replied, "She used the reverse energy flow technique, along with the Chilled Jade Bed and my help."

Yideng heard his explanation and couldn't help clucking his tongue in approval. He said, "That Ouyang brother was really a strange person. This reverse energy flow technique is quite unconceivable."

He reached out to check Xiao Longnu's pulse. Then his face turned sorrowful. For a long while he didn't say a word.

Yang Guo looked at him nervously, hoping he would say "curable." Xiao Longnu's eyes were always on Yang Guo. She herself hadn't expected to live this long. Seeing a melancholy expression on his face, she slowly said, "Fate determines life and death. How could we have it all as we wish? Guo'er, grief can hurt you. Don't worry too much."

This was the first time Xiao Longnu spoke since Yideng's arrival. Her words were spoken gently and calmly, showing that she understood life and death. Yideng couldn't help becoming puzzled. He didn't know that since childhood Xiao Longnu had been taught to have a clear mind and little emotion. This lady was young and fatally poisoned. He'd thought that she'd be extremely saddened. Who would have thought that her speech was that of someone who had deep religious knowledge? He thought to himself, "This young husband and wife are really the world's perfect couple. The husband has such kungfu. The wife understands life and death. This is really rare. In my entire life, I've only seen one couple -- Guo Jing and Huang Rong-- that can compare to them. My own disciples don't even come close. Alas, her poisons are so severe. After my injury, I can't use my "One Yang Finger" to help her."

With a slight hesitation, he said, "You two are young but your achievements are really not common. May this old monk speak frankly..."

Having heard this, Yang Guo's heart sank, his hands turning ice-cold.

Then Yideng continued, "The young madam's poison condition is very severe. If I wasn't injured, I could use my "One Yang Finger" to temporarily stop the poisons so we could go search for the antidote. But today... luckily your energy foundation is strong. I have this medicine that can

save you for seven days. Then let us go to the Passionless Valley together to look for my disciple.”

Yang Guo jumped up and cried out. “Good! This Indian monk is known for his knowledge of poisons. He must have a way to save my wife.”

Yideng said, “If my disciple can find a cure that is natural. In the world some children die shortly after birth. Young lady here has had a chance to get married, that is fortunate.”

Having said this far, he recalled that years ago Zhou Botong and Concubine Liu had a child but because of his own jealousy and hatred, he was not willing to save him. And that child eventually died. And it was actually Ci’en who'd injured him.

Yang Guo looked at Yideng with wide, shocked eyes. He thought to himself, “We still don’t know if Long’er can be cured. Yet, you haven’t said a word of comfort.”

Xiao Longnu made a faint smile and said, “What Reverend said is true.”

She looked out at the heavy snow and weakly said, “These snowflakes are so white and so beautiful. But after the sun comes out, each and every one of them will vanish, without a trace. Next winter there will be a lot of snowflakes again, but they will never be like this year’s snow.”

Yideng nodded and turned his head to look at Ci’en. He asked, “Do you understand?”

Ci’en nodded and thought -- when the sun came out, the snow would disappear, and it snowed in winter. What was so complicated about these simple facts?

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu had always been close. They understood even the vaguest thought in the other person’s

mind. But now that she was conversing with Yideng, he was left aside. It was as if she and Yideng shared the same thoughts, and he himself was an outsider. This had never happened since he fell in love with her, and he was now perplexed.

Yideng took out an egg from his chest and gave it to Xiao Longnu. He said, "Do you know which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

This was an age-old conundrum which nobody could ever solve. Yang Guo thought to himself, "At a time of life and death like this, why are you asking such a question?"

Xiao Longnu accepted the egg. It was actually a porcelain egg but its color looked as if it wasn't. She paused a little and then clearly understood. She answered, "The egg hatches a chicken. The chicken lays an egg. Where there is life, there must be death."

She gently crushed the egg shell, and a pill tumbled out. It was a golden and perfectly round ball like an egg yolk. Yideng said, "Eat it, quickly."

Knowing that this medicine was precious, Xiao Longnu put it in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

Early next morning, it was still snowing. Yang Guo thought that the Passionless Valley was quite a distance away. Although Reverend Yideng's pill gave them seven extra days, they had to go as fast as they possibly could, with not even a bit of delay. He asked Yideng, "Reverend, how's your injury?"

Yideng's injury was really heavy but he wanted to save his apprentice brother, Zhu Ziliu and Xiao Longnu and knew that all were urgent matters. His gown sleeves flared out as he said, "It's not a problem."

He drew in air and sprang forward, covering over ten feet in one leap. The three people followed.

After taking the pill, Xiao Longnu felt a surge of warmth in her abdomen and her strength returning. With her lightness skills, she caught up with Reverend Yideng in no time. Ci'en was startled. This timid young lady actually had quite an awesome kungfu. Suddenly his competitive spirit rose. His feet became swift as he gave chase. One person was a Gu Mu disciple of with unparalleled lightness skills. The other was a renowned master nicknamed 'Iron Palms Floating on Water.' In a flash the two people had covered twenty, thirty feet, quickly becoming two gray spots on the snow. Yang Guo was afraid that Ci'en would suddenly become evil and hurt Xiao Longnu so he went after them to protect her. His lightness skills were inferior to those of the two people but his inner energy was solid, and his feet were strong. At the beginning, he was a great distance away from them. Less than half an hour later, the two people's shadows became clearer.

Suddenly he heard Reverend Yideng laughing from behind him. Yideng said, "Young gentleman's inner energy is so profound. This really is rare. May I ask who your master is?"

Yang Guo slowed down to move side by side with him. He replied, "My wife taught me my martial skills."

Yideng asked in wonder, "Is she as good as you?"

Yang Guo said, "For these past few months, my inner energy has somehow kept increasing. I myself don't understand why."

Yideng asked, "Is it possible that you've taken some kind of medicine that boosts inner energy? Perhaps shaped ginsengs or millennium mushrooms?"

Yang Guo shook his head and said, "I had dozens of snake gallbladders. Since then, my strength has skyrocketed. Do you think they are related?"

Yideng said, "Snake gallbladders? Snake gallbladders can cure rheumatism. They have nothing to do with inner strength."

Yang Guo said, "These gallbladders were from very strange poisonous snakes. Their scales glittered like gold, and their heads were crested. The shape was really weird."

Yideng paused for a bit and suddenly said, "Ah, they are the 'pu-si-qu' snakes, mentioned in a Buddhist record. They said these snakes lived underground, moved like a wind, and were extremely difficult to catch."

Yang Guo said, "A big eagle caught them for me."

"That really is the strangest thing in the world." Yideng exclaimed.

While the two people talked, their feet didn't slow down at all. After a while, they were nearing Xiao Longnu and Ci'en. Yideng and Yang Guo exchanged a smile. Even though their lightness skills were inferior to those of Xiao Longnu and Ci'en, speed declined with increasing distance, and it was then up to their inner energy. By this time, because her inner energy was inferior, Xiao Longnu had already dropped some ten feet behind Ci'en. And as soon as they rounded the mountain, Yang Guo pointed ahead and said, "Eh, how come there are three people?"

It looked like someone was closely trailing Xiao Longnu. Yang Guo took a look and sensed that this person's lightness skills were not less than those of Xiao Longnu and Ci'en. On his back he was carrying something that looked like a trunk yet his feet were still swift, and he was always twenty or thirty

feet behind Xiao Longnu. Yideng was also puzzled. Surprisingly there was another skilled master on this wild mountain. Last night he ran into this pair of young and elegant couple. Today he saw this person, obviously an old man.

Not long after being overtaken by Ci'en, the distance between Ci'en and Xiao Longnu widened. She heard the sounds of footsteps from behind and thought it was Yang Guo. She said, "Guo'er, that monk's lightness skills are incredible. I can't beat him. You go try."

The person laughed and said, "Come sit on this trunk and gather your strength. You don't have to fear that old monk."

Hearing the words, Xiao Longnu was puzzled. She turned her head back and saw a man with a white beard and hair. It was the Old Urchin Zhou Botong.

With a laugh, he pointed at the trunk he'd been carrying on his back and said, "Come ... come ... come!"

In this trunk was the stuff that had been in the Sacred Scripture Chamber of the Chongyang Palace and looked like it was filled with the Quanzhen sect's Taoist scrolls. Zhou Botong had brought it with him on his back. Xiao Longnu faintly smiled but said nothing. Zhou Botong suddenly dashed forward. He grabbed her with one arm and put her on the trunk. His body movements were so fast and his hand technique was so strange that Xiao Longnu couldn't even resist. While carrying the wooden trunk, he couldn't help thinking, "The Quanzhen sect is known throughout the world as an orthodox martial school. The Taoists at the Chongyang Palace couldn't defeat me. It must be because they hadn't learned the essence of their sect's martial skills."

By now Yang Guo and Yideng had recognized Zhou Botong. Ci'en was concentrating on rushing forwards for fear that

Xiao Longnu would catch up with him, and so he was the only person who didn't know that there was another person behind him.

Zhou Botong followed him in big strides and said, "Another half an hour, he'll slow down."

With a smile Xiao Longnu asked, "How do you know?"

Zhou Botong said, "I've fought with him, pursuing him from Zhongyuan [China] to the Western region and from the Western region back to Zhongyuan. After running around for tens of thousands of li, how could I not know?"

Sitting on the trunk, Xiao Longnu was both secure and comfortable, just like riding a horse. She softly asked, "Old Urchin, why are you helping me?"

Zhou Botong replied, "You are quite likeable, not like that crafty and strange Huang Rong. I stole your bee honey, and you are not mad."

They ran for another half an hour. And just like Zhou Botong had predicted, Ci'en started to slow down. Zhou Botong said, "You are off!"

He shrugged his shoulders, sending Xiao Longnu out over ten feet. Energy was sent to her feet, and she ran forwards. In just a moment she caught up with Ci'en and giggled. Startled, Ci'en sped up. But the two people's lightness skills were about the same level. One person had just had a long rest while the other had been running non-stop. The more they ran the further the distance between them. Ci'en had no way to catch up.

In his whole life, Ci'en had two of martial skills that no one in the world could compare but, in just one day and one night, his 'Iron Palms' was defeated by Yang Guo and his lightness skills were outmatched by Xiao Longnu's. He couldn't help

becoming depressed. Sensing that his legs were about to give out, he thought to himself in alarm, "I can't even defeat a young girl, can it be that my death is near?"

Last night he had his evil spell. After injuring his master, he had become restless. Just now he'd used all his strength in a lightness kungfu competition with Xiao Longnu and still lost. Even though his mind was troubled, he felt like all things in the world no longer made sense.

Observing them from behind, Yang Guo clearly understood. Seeing that Zhou Botong had secretly helped Xiao Longnu defeating Ci'en, his interest was piqued. He sped up to walk side by side with him and laughingly said, "Senior Zhou, many thanks."

Zhou Botong said, "Haven't seen this Qiu Qianren for a long time. The older he is, the crazier. How come he's shaved his head and become a monk?"

Yang Guo said, "He's now Reverend Yideng's disciple, don't you know?"

Having said this, he pointed to the back. Zhou Botong was horrified, crying out, "Emperor Duan is here too?"

He turned his head back and saw Yideng from a distance. He said, "I've got to run."

Then he immediately fled into the woods. Yang Guo didn't know who 'Emperor Duan' was. He only saw the trees and bushes moving. Zhou Botong had disappeared without a trace. Yang Guo thought to himself, "This person is so strange. There aren't many like him in the world."

As soon as Zhou Botong ran away, Yideng quickly stepped forward. Seeing that Ci'en looked withered and broken and all his earlier bravado had vanished, Yideng said, "With all your victories, how come you haven't figured this out?"

Disheartened, Ci'en didn't say a word.

Yideng continued, "You were blinded by your desires. With your strong martial skills, if not for your lust to win, how could you not know there was another person behind?"

The four of them traveled with haste, and the next five days flew by quickly. On the morning of the sixth day, Yideng's injury worsened, and he could barely support himself. Yang Guo said, "Reverend, please take a rest for a moment. Let your body recover. The Passionless Valley isn't very far from here. We, husband and wife, will hurry into the Valley with Reverend Ci'en and we'll rescue the Divine Monk and Uncle Zhu too."

Yideng faintly smiled and said, "I can't put my mind at ease."

He paused and then continued, "It's dangerous in the valley. I'd better come along."

Ci'en said, "I'll carry you." Having said that he put Yideng on his back and marched forward in big strides.

They arrived at the valley entrance in the afternoon. Yang Guo turned to Ci'en and said, "Should we let them know we are here so your sister can come out to greet you?"

Ci'en was nervous and had yet to reply. Suddenly he heard the faint sounds of clashing weapons. Ci'en thought about his sister and was afraid that she would be fighting with Wu Santong and the others. No matter who was injured, it would be quite bad. He said, "We must rush to stop them."

With his lightness kungfu he sped up. He was not fully familiar with the roads to the valley, and Yang Guo pointed in one direction.

The four of them rushed forward only to see seven or eight people in green holding their weapons, defending

themselves just outside the woods. They heard the sounds of clashing weapons but couldn't see who the people in green were actually fighting with.

Seeing that there were more enemies coming, the valley disciples in green gave out a shout and charged forward. But as soon as they got closer and recognized Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu, they halted. The leading disciple walked over and raised his sword to greet them. He said, "Have you already accomplished our chief mother's task?"

But Yang Guo asked, "Who are the people fighting in the woods?"

That disciple in green did not reply. Instead, he narrowed his eyes, not knowing whether Yang Guo had come with a good or bad intention.

With a faint smile Yang Guo said, "I (little brother) didn't come here to cause harm. Is Madame Gongsun well? Is Miss Gongsun all right?"

That disciple's hostility was somewhat resolved. He said, "Bless you. Chief mother and Miss Gongsun are well." Then he asked, "Who are these two monks?" Did they come with the four women?"

Yang Guo said, "What four women?"

That disciple replied, "They were actually two groups of two, barging in here. Chief mother ordered us to stop them but they wouldn't listen. Both groups went into the Passion Flower field. But as soon as the two groups saw each other, they started fighting."

Hearing him mention 'Passion Flower field,' Yang Guo was startled, not knowing which four women he was talking about. If they were Huang Rong, Guo Fu, Wanyan Ping, and Yelu Yan, how could they be fighting? So he said, "May I ask

you to lead me there? If I (little brother) know them, I may be able to break up the fight before going with them to greet the Chief.”

That disciple thought that the four women had already been detained anyway and that if he let Yang Guo see them, it would only show him the power of the Passionless Valley. So he led the four people into the woods, where they saw the two groups of women fighting.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were secretly alarmed. The four women were standing on a narrow strip of lawn about twenty feet long, encircled with row upon row of Passion Flowers. No matter from which direction they tried to come out, there would be seventy or eighty feet of Passion Flowers blocking them. And no matter how powerful their kungfu was, they still wouldn't be able to escape. Even a halfway jump would still be very difficult.

Xiao Longnu cried out, “It's my martial sister!”

To the south they saw two women, Li Mochou and her disciple Hong Lingbo. The two of them were using long swords because Li Mochou's fly whisk had been broken at Gu Mu.

They were fighting with another two women. One was holding the Willow Leaf saber, the other wielding a flute. The two girl's movements were swift and elegant, showing that their martial skills were not weak. Still, they couldn't match Li Mochou.

Yang Guo was alarmed and thought, “Aren't those the Cheng-Lu cousins?”

Now, Hong Lingbo slanted her body to attack. The young lady in yellow turned her head halfway backwards, and the one in purple dress also turned her body sideways. These girls were Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang.

The four people's fighting on a lawn this size was like holding a martial arts contest in a very small arena. The terrain was limited, not allowing for trivial mistakes. As if they were tied hand and feet, the four people couldn't unleash the power of their kungfu. It was fortunate that Li Mochou wasn't used to her new sword and that, with her former ties with Lu Wushuang, Hong Lingbo didn't really have a murderous intention. And so, even though the Cheng-Lu cousins were much inferior, they could still hold their own against their opponents.

Yang Guo asked the disciple in green, "How did the four people get in there to fight in the first place?"

The disciple in green was very pleased with himself and proudly replied, "This was Chief Gongsun's creation. We led them into this Passion Flower field and then piled up the flowers, blocking the entrance. How would they come out?"

Yang Guo quickly asked, "Have they been poisoned?"

"Looks like they haven't but it won't take long," replied that man in green.

Yang Guo thought to himself, "With your martial skills alone, how could you force Li Mochou into the Passion Flower field? Oh, you must have used your sect's evil fishnet. If the Cheng-Lu girls get poisoned, there won't be any antidote in the world to cure them."

And so, he immediately raised his voice, "Sister Cheng, Sister Lu, I'm right here. The flowers around you are deadly poisonous. You must be careful absolutely."

Li Mochou had noticed earlier that the Passion Flowers looked strange. On top of that, those disciples in green had used the flowers to block their way out, so she knew there had to be a reason. After entering the Passion Flower field, she warned

Hong Lingbo to be very careful and keep away from the Passion Flowers. Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang were both skilled and clever, how could they not see the danger? The four people had originally thought there were some kinds of traps or poisoned arrows hidden in the flower shrubs. Now that they heard Yang Guo's words, they dreaded the flowers around them even more. They all inched closer towards the center of the lawn, their bodies colliding. The fight became even more vicious.

Hearing Yang Guo calling them, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang were delighted. They wanted to rush out to see him but the enemies were vicious, not allowing them to withdraw. Li Mochou actually wanted to kill the two girls so she could use their bodies as stepping stones to escape from the Passion Flower field. When she saw Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu, she was frightened. Luckily, they were separated by the Passion Flowers and so Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu couldn't come in to help the two girls. She fiercely shouted, "Lingbo, if you still don't fight with all your strength, you yourself will die in here."

"Yes, Master!" Hong Lingbo quickly replied, adding more strength to her sword and driving it towards Cheng Ying.

Cheng Ying raised her flute to block the strike but Li Mochou's long sword flew towards her throat. Lu Wushuang lunged forwards, raising her saber. Li Mochou sneered, blocking the saber with her long sword. Her left leg then flew up, kicking Lu Wushuang's wrist and sending her Willow Leaf saber into a Passion Flower shrub. Suddenly lights flashed. Li Mochou swung her sword three times at Cheng Ying. Unable to withstand the force, Cheng Ying had to move backwards. At this point, if she fell back one more step, her left foot would land on a flower shrub.

Lu Wushuang cried out in alarm, "Sister (cousin), you can't move back any further."

With a cold laugh Li Mochou said, "You can't move back any further. Then let's move forward." Having said that, she allowed Cheng Ying one step forward. Cheng Ying knew full well that Li Mochou didn't mean well but she herself was dangerously cornered. She had no choice but to move forwards.

Li Mochou sneered and said, "Really very brave!" Her long sword vibrated. Silver lights flashed, and her sword tip reached the upper part of Cheng Ying's body.

Yang Guo was observing them from outside and understood that Li Mochou was using one of Gu Mu's vicious sword techniques called "Cold Moon Attack". If one didn't understand the intricacies of the stances, he was likely to deplete his energy guarding the upper body and leaving his abdomen vulnerable. Seeing that Cheng Ying was busy protecting her chest, he quickly picked up a pebble from the ground, placing it between his thumb and middle finger. Then, with a whishing sound, the pebble was shot out fiercely, straight towards Li Mochou's eyes. Li Mochou's sword had already moved downwards and was only a few inches away from Cheng Ying's abdomen. Suddenly seeing a pebble flying her way, she had to let the enemy off and swung her sword back to hit the pebble.

What Yang Guo just displayed was Huang Yaoshi's "Divine Flicking Finger" skill. But his cultivated energy hadn't reached its peak so he could only use this technique to divert the enemy, forcing her to be on the defensive. If it were Huang Yaoshi himself flicking the pebble, he would have knocked Li Mochou's sword loose, and it would have been almost impossible to miss the target at this range. It was fortunate that he taught Yang Guo this technique because it

came back to save the life of his own disciple. But even so, Yang Guo and Cheng Ying were already drenched in a cold sweat.

Cheng Ying had just narrowly escaped death, color draining from her white and tender cheeks. Li Mochou knew that she was still in shock, and so she shouted, "Here I come again!" The long sword vibrated as she used the "Cold Moon Attack" technique once again. Cheng Ying was clever, knowing that the upper body attack was a fake and the middle body strike was real, and so she immediately protected her abdomen. Who would have thought that Li Mochou would slyly change her stance? While her sword tip pointed at Cheng Ying's abdomen, she dashed forwards, stretching out her left hand to seal the 'Jade Hall' point on Cheng Ying's chest. Then her left leg swept out to kick Lu Wushuang and at the same time the tip of her foot struck the 'Sun' point on the side of Cheng Ying's knee. These few stances were incredibly fast, sending both Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang to the ground. Yang Guo definitely couldn't help them both.

Li Mochou then grabbed Cheng Ying's back and threw her out with force. She did the same to Lu Wushuang and shouted, "Lingbo, step on their bodies..."

Before she could finish saying that, Yang Guo jumped in to grab Cheng Ying and moved forwards. Even though the accupoints on her chest and leg had been sealed, she could use her free arms to grasp Lu Wushuang.

She cried out, "Brother Yang, you..."

She had always had deep feelings for Yang Guo. And now she saw him jumping into the Passion Flower field, giving up his life to save hers, she was all overwhelmed.

Having grabbed the two girls, Yang Guo leapt back out and gently put them on the ground. With her stiff legs, Cheng

Ying couldn't stand by herself. Xiao Longnu unsealed her pressure points. Then the three girls all looked at Yang Guo. His pants were ripped by the poisonous thorns, blood dripping from his thighs and calf's. Nobody knew how much poison had entered his body.

While Cheng Ying wept, Lu Wushuang said, "You... you... didn't have to save me. Who told you to do this?"

With a bright smile Yang Guo said, "I've already got the passion flower poison in my body, a little more makes no difference."

But everybody knew that the amount of poison in his body really made a big difference. He only said this to comfort the three girls in front of him.

Cheng Ying looked at Yang Guo's empty right sleeve with tears in her eyes. Lu Wushuang said, "Sha Dan (Dumb Egg), your... your right arm? How did you lose it?"

Seeing that the two girls were extremely worried about Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu immediately thought of them as very good friends. With a smile she said, "He's not dumb, why do you call him dumb egg?"

Lu Wushuang let out an 'ah' sound and apologetically said, "I used to call him that. It's hard to change."

She looked at Cheng Ying and asked, "And this sister is?"

Yang Guo replied, "This is..."

Cheng Ying quickly said, "This sister's name must be Xiao Longnu."

"Right. I should have known, seeing how angelic she is." Lu Wushuang said.

With the knowledge that Yang Guo only had Xiao Longnu on his mind, the two Cheng-Lu girls had been jealous. Now that they actually met Xiao Longnu, they couldn't help feeling inferior. Both thought to themselves, "How can I ever compare to her?"

Lu Wushuang asked, "Brother Yang, what's happened to your arm? Has the wound healed?"

"It's already healed. Someone cut it off," replied Yang Guo.

Lu Wushuang asked angrily, "Which evil villain did it? That person must have used a low and despicable trick. Was it that wretched witch?"

Suddenly a cold voice from behind said, "You defame people behind their back. Isn't that lower and more despicable?"

Lu Wushuang was startled. She turned head back and saw a beautiful young girl. It was Guo Fu with a sword in her hand, looking enraged. Standing by her were several men and women.

Lu Wushuang was puzzled. She said, "I didn't scold you. I was scolding the evil person who cut off Brother Yang's arm."

With a 'shua' sound, Guo Fu pulled her sword halfway from its sheath. She said, "His arm was cut off by me. I've already apologized, and my parents have already punished me. Now you people are scolding me behind my back..." Having said this, her eyes turned red. She felt she was wronged by these people.

Days ago Wu Santong, Guo Fu, Yelu Qi, and the Wu brothers hid from the mountain fires in the creek. They waited for the fires to die down and then got out of the water to meet with Huang Rong, Wanyan Ping and Yelu Yan. They then all came to the Passionless Valley. The group arrived here long before Yang Guo and the others but they were searching the areas

around the valley, trying to find the Indian monk and Zhu Ziliu, without any success. That's why they were delayed. As for Li Mochou, her disciple, and the Cheng-Lu cousins, they were led into the valley by Zhou Botong.

Huang Rong, Wu Santong and the others quickly went to greet Reverend Yideng, and they all exchanged greetings. Although Cheng Ying had never met Huang Rong before, she knew this martial sister by reputation and greatly admired her. She immediately went over and kowtowed with utmost respect. She called out, "Martial sister!"

Knowing from Yang Guo that years ago her father had accepted another female disciple, now she found out that it was this extremely beautiful girl. As Huang Rong asked about her father and learned that he was strong and healthy, she was delighted.

The disciples in green had been watching them from the edge of the woods. Now seeing that the enemies from outside all gathered, making a noisy commotion, they didn't dare to block them. Instead, they ran back to report the matter to Qiu Qianchi.

Guo Fu and Lu Wushuang glared at each other angrily, with mutual hatred. As Guo Fu heard her mother order her to greet Cheng Ying, she was not pleased at all. She had to force herself to say 'Martial Uncle'."

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were standing in each other's arms on the other side. Yang Guo looked at Guo Xiang in Xiao Longnu's arms and said, "Long'er, let's give the little girl back to her mother."

Xiao Longnu lifted up Guo Xiang and kissed her on the cheek. Then she walked over to hand the little girl back to Huang Rong. She said, "Madame Guo, your child."

Huang Rong thanked her and took the little girl. From the time the girl was born until now, this was the first time Huang Rong had her child firmly in her hands. There were no words that could describe her happiness and joy.

Yang Guo turned to Guo Fu and clearly said, “Miss Guo, your little sister is well. I didn’t use her to trade for the antidote to save my life.”

Guo Fu retorted angrily, “My mother is here. Of course, you don’t dare to. But if you didn’t have such intention, what did you bring my sister here for?”

In this situation, Yang Guo in the former days would have quarreled with her. But his encounters with life and death during these past few months had changed him. Paying no attention to her, he only let out a dry laugh and walked away with Xiao Longnu.

Lu Wushuang looked at Guo Xiang and said to Cheng Ying, “Is this your martial sister’s little girl? I hope she won’t grow up to be evil and vicious.”

It was impossible for Guo Fu to not understand that the words were meant to attack her, and so she retorted, “What business of yours is it if my sister becomes evil and vicious? What are you trying to say?”

Lu Wushuang said, “I didn’t speak to you. Everybody has the right to deal with evil and vicious people. How could it not be my business?” Lu Wushuang only had Yang Guo on her mind. Having seen that Yang Guo’s arm was chopped off, she and Cheng Ying were very angry. But she couldn’t control her temper like her cousin did. Even though it was in front of many people, she still had to let it show.

Guo Fu was furious. Grabbing her sword, she shouted, “You cripple...”

Huang Rong yelled, “Fu’er, don’t be rude!”

At this time, they all heard a loud ‘ah’ cry from the distance. They turned their heads back towards the Passion Flower field and saw Li Mochou hoisting Hong Lingbo’s body high up in the air. The sound they heard just now was Hong Lingbo’s cry. While people had been busy arguing, they forgot all about Li Mochou and her disciple who were stuck in the sea of flowers. Startled, Lu Wushuang cried out, “Rats. Master is using her disciple as a stepping stone. Quick, we have to find a way to help...”

While the people outside were staring in confusion, Li Mochou suddenly threw Hong Lingbo out. As the body fell into the Passion Flower shrubs, Li Mochou sprang up, her left foot stepping on Hong Lingbo’s chest. She then jumped up again with both legs high in the air, and her right hand grabbing and hurling Hong Lingbo out one more time. Again, she descended on top of her disciple’s body.

She used this “Strength Borrowing” tactic twice, expecting to fall outside the flower shrubs on her third jump. Afraid that Huang Rong would be waiting to block her, she flew out again in the opposite direction, away from the group of people. But this time as her body shot up, Hong Lingbo suddenly gave out a loud cry and leapt up with her, grasping Li Mochou’s left leg. Losing her momentum, Li Mochou started to sink. Then her right leg shot out, kicking Hong Lingbo in the chest with a ‘peng’ sound. This kick was lethal, destroying Hong Lingbo’s internal organs and killing her instantly. Somehow, Hong Lingbo’s hands were still gripping Li Mochou’s leg, and the two of them plunged down together, falling into the flower shrubs just two feet short of the edge of the flower bed. When Li Mochou landed she received an unimaginable amount of poison which surged into her body.

Everybody was shocked speechless, staring wide-eyed at this sadly horrifying development. Lu Wushuang thought about how her martial sister used to take care of her. Grief-stricken, she wept loudly and cried out, "Martial sister, martial sister!"

Yang Guo remembered how years ago he'd played tricks on Hong Lingbo. He couldn't help feeling heavyhearted.

Li Mochou bent down to pry away Hong Lingbo's hands and saw that her open eyes were filled with hatred. She thought to herself, "I've been poisoned by the Passion Flowers. The antidote surely must be here in the valley." As she was about to walk around the piles of flowers and be on her way, she suddenly heard Huang Rong calling out, "Sister Li, please come over here. I have a few words to say to you." Li Mochou was surprised, and with a slight hesitation, she moved forwards twenty or thirty feet. "What?" She asked. She secretly hoped that Huang Rong would give her the antidote, or at least tell her how to find it.

"You didn't need to kill your disciple to leave the flower thicket," said Huang Rong.

Li Mochou reached for her sword and coldly said, "Are you trying to teach me?"

With a faint smile Huang Rong replied, "I wouldn't dare to. I'm only going to tell you one thing. You should have used your long sword to dig up the soil and wrapped it with your outer gown, making two very large balls. And if you had thrown them into the flower thicket, wouldn't they have made good stepping stones? Not only could you have gotten out safely, you wouldn't have had to hurt anyone."

Li Mochou's face color changed from white to red and then red to white. She was struck by enormous grief. What Huang Rong had just explained was really not difficult, but because she was anxious, she couldn't figure it out. Instead, she had

just killed the only person in the world that mattered and actually fallen to her own doom. She couldn't help saying bitterly, "No matter, it's already too late."

Huang Rong said, "Yes. It's way too late. Really, whether or not you are poisoned by the Passion Flowers makes no difference."

Li Mochou stared fixedly at her, not understanding the meaning of her words.

Huang Rong added, "You've already been poisoned by your own foolish, unrestrained passion. You hurt people, and so you hurt yourself. As of now..." Huang Rong sighed. "It is way too late."

Li Mochou turned arrogant. She said in a stern voice, "It was I who gave my disciple her life. Had it not been for me taking care of her since childhood, she wouldn't have lived until today. I gave her life. I then gave her death. It was only fair."

Huang Rong said, "Parents give life to their own children. Yet, they have no right to kill them. Who are you to think that you do?"

Wu Xiuwen held out his sword and shouted, "Li Mochou, today you'll pay for your innumerable crimes. There's no need for more talking. We'll fight."

Then the six of them – Wu Xiuwen, Wu Dunru, Wu Santong, Yelu Qi, Yelu Yan, and Guo Fu – arranged themselves in two lines and marched forward.

Armed with a saber and a flute, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang moved a couple of steps forward. Lu Wushuang said, "You slaughtered my whole family, today your one life is way too cheap. Worse, you had to be so evil, killing Sister Hong. Your death won't even cover it."

Guo Fu turned to Lu Wushuang and said with a sneer, "You've got such a good master!"

Lu Wushuang returned the stare and said, "Even if someone with a big backer, does evil things, she should die just the same! You don't need to look to this demoness for an example!"

As Li Mochou heard Lu Wushuang mention "a backer," something came to her mind. She raised her voice and called out, "Little martial sister, have you completely forgotten our martial ties?"

She had roamed Jianghu all her life and never paid attention to anyone. This time she was asking Xiao Longnu for help. It could only mean that she had realized how grave her situation was. Besides, after killing Hong Lingbo, she felt a pang of guilt, her mind became disturbed.

Xiao Longnu didn't know how to reply but Yang Guo retorted, "You treacherously killed your own disciple; how could you mention any martial ties?"

"So be it!" Li Mochou said with a sigh. Swinging her long sword, she said, "You all come at once. The more people the better."

The Wu brothers pulled out their swords. On the left side Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang both lunged forwards. Wu Santong, Yelu Qi and the others also held their weapons at the ready. Having seen the way she despicably killed Hong Lingbo just now, everybody was extremely hate filled and disgusted. Even Reverend Yideng thought that if Li Mochou was allowed to live, she would only murder more people. But the 'ding dang' sounds of clashing weapons went on. Li Mochou's martial skills were high and she disrupted the many people's offense in a flash.

Suddenly Li Mochou's left hand flew out. She shouted, "Projectiles!"

Knowing that her "Soul Freezing Needles" were deadly, all of them all froze stiff, only to see her body spring up and fall into the Passion Flower thicket. They couldn't help crying out in alarm. Li Mochou did this because she already had the poison in her body and she thought that if she got pricked again, it wouldn't be much worse. Even Huang Rong and Yang Guo hadn't expected this. They all saw her return through the flower thicket and then went straight into the woods.

Wu Xiuwen said, "We pursue!"

Brandishing his long sword, he made a detour and followed Li Mochou into the woods from the east side. But the pathways in the woods were winding, with sharp turns. Only twenty or thirty feet in there, he ran into a three-way junction. While still hesitating, he suddenly saw five girls dressed in green coming out. The one in front was holding a flower in her hand, and the other four trailing behind wore long swords at their waists.

The girl in front asked, "The Valley Chief requests your presence. Would you please come with us?"

Yang Guo saw her from afar so he called out, "Miss Gongsun, it's us."

That girl was of course Gongsun Lu'E. Upon hearing Yang Guo's voice, she lost her composure and quickly stepped forwards. Happily she said, "Big Brother Yang, have you accomplished your big task? Let's quickly go see my mother."

"Miss Gongsun, let me introduce you to these several elders," said Yang Guo.

He first introduced her to Reverend Yideng, and then Ci'en and Huang Rong.

Gongsun Lu'E did not know that the monk in black in front of her was her own uncle, and so she walked over to pay him respect without much thought. But then she heard Yang Guo address Huang Rong as Madame Guo. She knew that this person was her mother's personal enemy. Not only had Yang Guo not killed her, he led her into the valley. Greatly suspicious, she moved a couple of steps backwards, refusing to greet her. She said, "My mother invites everybody for tea in the main hall."

She thought to herself that she'd better do as her mother had ordered, so she led the many people to the main hall.

In the hall, Qiu Qianchi was sitting in a chair. She said, "This old woman's limbs are disabled. I can't get up to welcome you. Please accept my apology."

Ci'en remembered his little sister. At the time she married Gongsun Zhi, she was a fledgling girl of eighteen, full of tenderness and grace. Nobody could have imagined that she would turn into an old, bald, wrinkled, ugly woman like this. He thought of the past and felt at a loss.

Yideng saw the strange gleam in his eyes and couldn't help being worried. In his life, the only worry he had left was this disciple who still couldn't wake up and turn a new leaf. This was because Ci'en's kungfu was profound. Years ago, he was an unmatched master in the martial realm, and so his deep attachment to the past made change even more difficult. Over the past ten years, he'd lived in seclusion on a remote mountain and had calmed down. But this time when he stepped back into Jianghu, he ran into things that reminded him of the past. There was a saying that "He, who never encounters desires, will have a peaceful heart." And so, when running into things that triggered a worldly desire, his mind

would become disturbed, how would Ci'en be able to control himself? Yideng had brought Ci'en with him to the Passionless Valley this time because he wanted to help his martial brother and Zhu Ziliu. But it was also very hard on Ci'en because his mind was greatly afflicted.

Because Yang Guo didn't return to the Passionless Valley in time, Qiu Qianchi had thought that he had already died from the poison. Suddenly seeing him still alive and well, standing before her, she was puzzled. She asked, "You are not dead yet?"

"I've taken an antidote. Your flower poison is now gone." Yang Guo said with a laugh.

Qiu Qianchi made a surprised sound. She thought to herself, "Surprisingly, there is an antidote that can detoxify the Passion Flower Poison. How strange..."

But suddenly she figured it out. With a sneer she said, "What kind of lie is this? If there really was an antidote, why would that Indian monk and that Zhu person have come here?"

Yang Guo said, "Senior Qiu, where did you imprison the Indian monk and Senior Zhu? I (junior) am already here. Please let them go!"

With a sneer Qiu Qianchi said, "To tie a tiger is easy; to let it go is hard!"

These words of hers actually made sense. All her four limbs were disabled, and so she could only rely on her sect's fishnets to capture the Indian monk and Zhu Ziliu. If released, the Indian monk would be all right because he didn't know kungfu but Zhu Ziliu would definitely retaliate. None of the disciples of the Passionless Valley was his match.

Yang Guo thought that if she saw her elder brother, their blood ties would make things friendlier. And so, he said with

a faint smile, "Senior Qiu, please look at us carefully. Who did I bring back here? I'm sure you'll be delighted."

For decades Qiu Qianchi hadn't seen her brother. Although she knew that he had become a monk, in her mind she only remembered him as a victorious and courageous youth. How would she be able to recognize this old monk? Hearing from her daughter that Huang Rong, her own personal enemy, had arrived, her eyes scanned the faces of many people and finally came to stop on Huang Rong.

Clenching her teeth, Qiu Qianchi said, "You are Huang Rong. My elder brother died at your hand."

Yang Guo was startled. His original intention was to have the brother and sister meet. Instead, she recognized her archenemy. He quickly said, "Senior Qiu, we'll put that on abeyance for now. Won't you take a look again to see who else is here?"

Qiu Qianchi shouted, "You mean Guo Jing is here too? How wonderful... how wonderful!"

Then she looked at Wu Santong and Yelu Qi. One was too old, the other too young, looking not quite right. Frustrated, she searched for Guo Jing among the many people. Then her eyes met with those of Ci'en. They exchanged a stare, finally recognizing each other.

Ci'en jumped forward and cried out, "Third sister!"

Qiu Qianchi also gave out a loud cry, "Second brother!"

The two of them had countless things to say to each other, yet at this time they couldn't think of anything to say.

A while passed, and then Qiu Qianchi asked, "Second brother, how did you become a monk?"

Ci'en asked back, "Third sister, how did your limbs become disabled?"

"It was that villain Gongsun Zhi who did it," replied Qiu Qianchi.

Ci'en said in alarm, "Gongsun Zhi? It was your husband? Where is he right now?"

Qiu Qianchi said bitterly, "Why do you still call him 'my husband'? The traitor has a wolf's heart and dog's lungs. He plotted against me."

Unable to suppress his anger, Ci'en cried out, "Where did the villain go? I'll tear him to shreds, and make it up to you."

Qiu Qianchi coldly said, "Although I was the subject of an evil plan, luckily I could escape death. Our big brother, on the other hand, was already murdered."

Ci'en said darkly, "Right!"

Qiu Qianchi gathered her chi and ferociously shouted, "Your body is skilled and able, and why are you not avenging our big brother's death? Where is your brotherly loyalty?"

Startled, Ci'en muttered, "Avenging our big brother's death? Avenging our big brother's death?"

Qiu Qianchi bellowed, "That evil Huang Rong is right in front of you. You kill her first and then go look for Guo Jing."

Ci'en gazed at Huang Rong, with a strange gleam in his eyes.

Yideng slowly stepped forwards and softly said, "Ci'en, how can a monk have murderous thoughts? The fact is that your brother brought about his own death, you can't blame other people."

Ci'en nodded and was lost in thought. After a while, he said in a low voice, "What my master said is right. Third sister, we can't avenge his death."

Qiu Qianchi gave Yideng a stare and snarled, "This old monk is spouting nonsense. Second brother, our Qiu family has been brave and heroic. Our big brother was killed. If you don't avenge his death, how can you still call yourself a heroic true man?"

Having heard that, Ci'en's mind became chaotic. He muttered, "How can I still call myself a heroic true man?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "Right! Years go you roamed Jianghu. The name "Iron Palms Floating on Water" was famous and prestigious. Who would have thought that, in old age, you'd turn into a coward who is afraid of death? Qiu Qianren, I'm telling you now. If you don't avenge our big brother's death, do not call me your sister!"

Seeing her become fiercer and fiercer, everyone thought, "This bald old woman is quite lethal."

Years ago, Huang Rong was struck by Qiu Qianren's palm. Luckily Reverend Yideng came to her rescue, and so she narrowly escaped death. Naturally she knew him well. As soon as she saw him, she'd already thought about pulling out her horse whip.

Again, Guo Fu couldn't bear it and shouted, "My mother doesn't want to stoop to your level. Who's afraid of you old woman? If you continue to egg people on, I'm going to have to be impolite."

Huang Rong was about to tell Guo Fu to stop but then she figured, "That Qiu Qianren must be urged by his sister to act. Fu'er's attack may actually help divert his attention."

Noticing that her mother didn't try to stop her, Guo Fu carried on, "We are your guests. Yet, you are not treating us accordingly. Actually, you are rude, how would you call yourself a hero?"

Qiu Qianchi gave her a cold stare and said, "You are Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter, aren't you?"

Guo Fu replied, "Correct, and if you want to fight, you have to do it yourself. Your brother has already become a monk. How could he ever kill anybody again?"

Qiu Qianchi muttered, "You are Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter. You are Guo Jing and Huang Rong's..."

She didn't say the word 'daughter' again. Instead, with a 'hu' sound, an iron date stone was suddenly spat out from her mouth, violently coming towards Guo Fu. Her words 'You are Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter' were followed by 'You are Guo Jing and Huang Rong's...' Everybody naturally thought she was going to say 'daughter.' None could have thought that in the blink of an eye she would shoot a projectile from her mouth. This sudden date stone kungfu of hers was really ingenious. It even blinded the right eye of Gongsun Zhi, who was a remarkable kungfu master. Guo Fu definitely didn't stand a chance. She didn't even have the time to think about dodging the projectile. [Note: Since the last visit to the Passionless Valley, Qiu Qianchi must have had iron date stones made by someone in the valley to increase her 'fire power'.]

Among all these people, only Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu knew that Qiu Qianchi had such strange kungfu. While Xiao Longnu didn't think she would harm people, Yang Guo had been paying close attention, his eyes never leaving her face. Seeing that her lips were not about to say the word 'daughter, he plunged forwards, pulling out the long sword from Guo Fu's waist and swung it. A dang sound echoed as

the iron date stone hit the blade. The sword immediately broke into two pieces before falling on the floor.

In one voice, many people cried out in alarm. Huang Rong and Guo Fu were startled, the color draining from their faces.

Huang Rong mused, "I was guarding against her vicious attack but never would I have expected that she could shoot out a ferocious projectile like this without even moving her body, limbs, or neck."

The iron date stone broke the sword, showing that it was shot out with great force. Everybody understood and thought, "If not for Yang Guo's interfering, would Miss Guo still be alive? And his movement was so swift that it was really shocking."

Qiu Qianchi stared at Yang Guo in disbelief. She hadn't expected him to have the nerve to help Guo Fu. She coldly said, "Today you were poisoned again by the Passion Flower. The poison doesn't manifest itself now but it will, in less than three days. In the whole world there is only my half-pill here that can save your life. Don't you believe that?"

At the time Yang Guo jumped in to save Guo Fu, everything happened so fast that he didn't even think of this matter. As Qiu Qianchi brought it up now, he couldn't help feeling discouraged.

Stepping forward, he gave her a bow and said, "Senior Qiu, I (junior) haven't done anything to you. If you give me the pill, I'll forever be grateful."

Qiu Qianchi replied, "Never! Although it's true that I have today because of you, this old Qiu has revenge to exact and gratitude can't be taken into account. You promised me you'd go bring me Guo Jing and Huang Rong's heads. Then I'd grant you the antidote. Who would think that not only did

you not keep your promise, you just saved my personal enemy. What else is there to say?"

Seeing that the matter was escalating, Gongsun Lu'E said, "Mother, my uncle's death has nothing to do with Big Brother Yang. You... please bestow mercy."

Qiu Qianchi said, "I'll only give this half pill to my son-in-law. I'm not going to give it to anybody else."

Having heard this, Gongsun Lu'E blushed furiously in shame and anxiety.

Yang Guo had saved Guo Fu's life. By this time, she realized that Yang Guo was truly benevolent and really didn't intend to trade her little sister for the antidote. She thought about how she had repeatedly hurt him but he always returned her viciousness with kindness. In a loud voice she said, "Big Brother Yang, I (little sister) have wronged you. Please forgive me."

But for some unknown reason, old grudges are hard to let go. As soon as she apologized, she thought, "You saved me because you wanted to show off your ability. You wanted me to submit to you and feel grateful to you. You wanted to show me that even though you had only one arm, you were still much stronger than me with two arms. Humph, isn't that just great?"

Yang Guo let out a faint sigh, which was actually quite bitter and with no humor. He thought to himself, "How very easy for you to admit that you were wrong. You don't even know how much suffering you brought on me and Long'er."

Then he saw that Qiu Qianchi was giving him a fixed stare. Obviously, if he didn't agree to marry her daughter, she would never give him that half pill to save his life. Again, he

refused to compromise and made things awkward for Gongsun Lu'E and Xiao Longnu.

He brightly said, "I'm already married to Long'er. Even I, Yang Guo, am doomed to die, how can I shirk my responsibilities?" Having said this, he turned around, taking Xiao Longnu by hand. While walking to the hall entrance, he thought to himself, "Let them squabble in the hall. I'd better go rescue the Indian monk and Uncle Zhu."

With a sneer Qiu Qianchi said, "Good, good! You yourself volunteered to die; this has nothing to do with me."

She turned her head back towards Ci'en and said, "Second brother, I've heard that Huang Rong is Chief of the Beggar Clan. We, "Iron Palm Clan", don't dare to offend her."

Ci'en said, "Iron Palm Clan? It's already been disbanded. How could there still be such a clan?"

Qiu Qianchi said, "No wonder, no wonder. You don't want to fight. You've become a coward..."

Qiu Qianchi was still talking but Gongsun Lu'E no longer listened to her. Watching Yang Guo step out of the hall, she suddenly dashed forwards. She cried out, "Yang Guo, you heartless scoundrel, I must have been blind."

Yang Guo paused in his steps, wondering why this girl, who had always been courteous, was acting out of character. Could it be because she heard that he and Long'er were married and became enraged? He felt a slight regret, and so he turned his back and said, "Miss Gongsun..."

Gongsun Lu'E scolded, "Crafty thief, it's easy to come into the valley but hard to get out..." But although she was berating him, her facial expression was actually warm and gentle, her eyes conveying a hidden message. Yang Guo knew that there had to be a reason.

In a loud voice he said, "What is it? You say this small Passionless Valley is hard to get out of?" He was facing the main hall. Qiu Qianchi saw him very clearly and therefore didn't see anything strange.

Lu'E scolded, "I wish I could split you in half. I would rip out your heart so I can see..." She suddenly opened her mouth and, with a puff of air, a date stone was spat out, flying towards Yang Guo's face.

Yang Guo caught it with his hand. He sneered, "Just let me leave quickly and I won't hurt you. You think your little skill could stop me?"

Gongsun Lu'E gave him another meaningful glance and let him leave. Suddenly she covered her face with both hands and cried out, "Mother, he... he's a big bully!" She fled back into the main hall. Her loved one was gone. He had married another girl. This sadness was actually not false.

Seeing tears stream down her face, Qiu Qianchi shouted, "E'er, what's wrong with you? That boy's life won't last very long." Lu'E crouched down at her mother's knee and her sobs continued.

Everybody in the hall was deceived by this performance. There was only Huang Rong who secretly thought it to be funny. She mused, "She pretended to be mad at Yang Guo so her mother wouldn't be suspicious and later she could steal the antidote. Who would have thought that this boy Yang Guo would leave a trail of broken hearts behind him everywhere he went. All these beautiful girls pine for him." Having thought this, she gave Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang a glance.

After catching that date stone, Yang Guo walked out very quickly. Lu'E's words were very strange, and he still couldn't figure out her intention. Xiao Longnu saw the expression on

Lu'E's face and knew that her tirade was pretended. She asked, "Guo'er, she pretended to be mad at you. Was it because she was trying to fool her mother so she could steal the antidote?"

Yang Guo replied "It would seem so."

As soon as the two people rounded a curve in the path and saw that they were alone, Yang Guo raised his hand and looked at the date stone in his palm. It was actually an olive seed, with tiny stitches in the middle. Yang Guo squeezed it with his fingers, breaking it in half. The middle of the seed was actually hollow, with a thin sheet of paper hidden in there.

With a smile Xiao Longnu said, "This girl told you a riddle. She actually meant this when she said ...split you in half. I would rip out your heart so I can see..."

Yang Guo unfolded the thin paper, and the two of them bent their heads to look at the words. The paper read, "Mother hid the half pill in a secret place. I will plan to steal it for you. The Indian monk and senior Zhu are confined in 'the fire room'. " (kiln) Next to the characters was a map showing a winding path that ended at 'the fire room.'

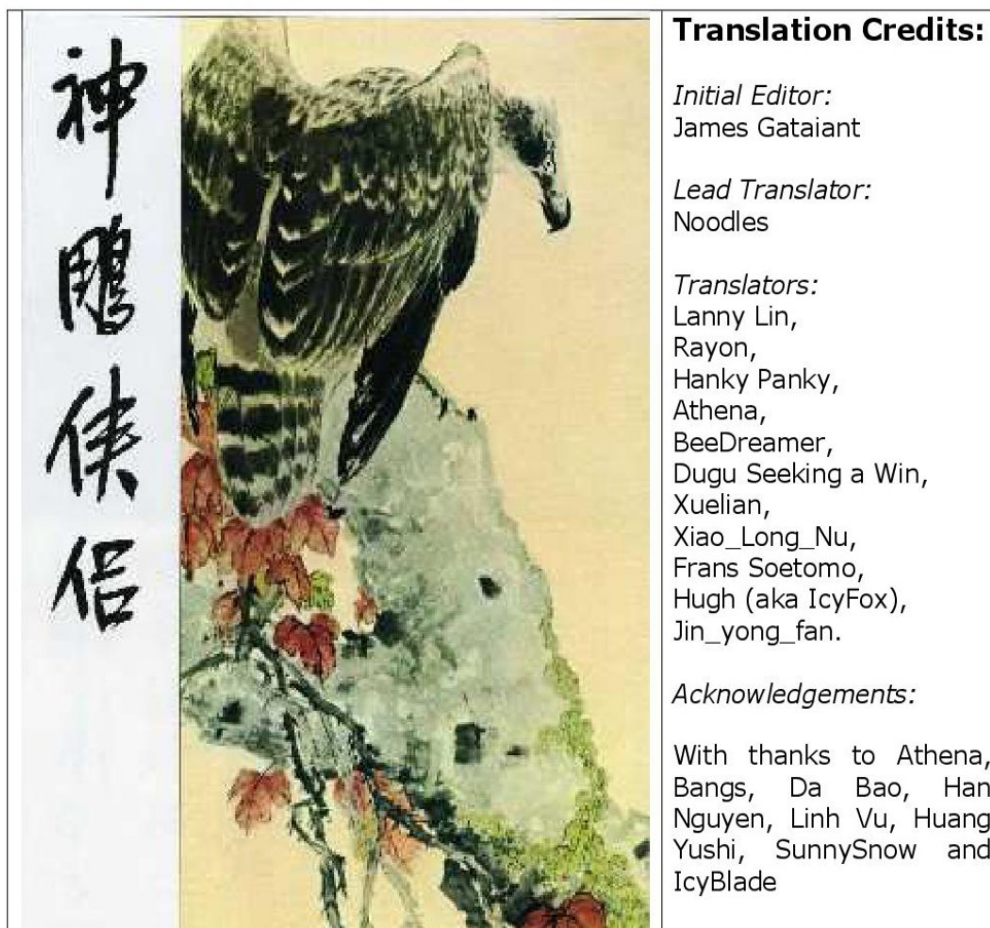
Yang Guo said in delight, "Let us go quickly. It's good that no one is here to stop us right now."

End of Chapter 30.

Shen Diao Xia Lu

(Divine Eagle, Gallant Knights)

by Jin Yong



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 31 – The Other Half of the Antidote](#)

[Chapter 32 – What is Love](#)

[Chapter 33 – Tales in the Night](#)

[Chapter 34 – Settling a Dispute](#)

[Chapter 35 – The Three Golden Needles](#)

[Chapter 36 – The Birthday Celebration](#)

[Chapter 37 – Gratitudes and Grudges Over Three Generations](#)

[Chapter 38 – Life and Death Are Boundless](#)

[Chapter 39 – Battle of Xiangyang](#)

[Chapter 40 – The Summit of Hua Shan](#)

Chapter 31 - The Other Half of the Antidote

Translated by Bee Dreamer, xuelian & xiao_long_nu



With a "po" sound, the third date stone left Qiu Qianchi mouth. This time, it went for Huang Rong's throat. Huang Rong had promised not to block and not to avoid. She slightly bent both of her knees, waiting for the date stones to fly to her lips. With all her effort, she pushed the 'Zhen Qi' out of her mouth.

Surrounded by the mountains, the floor of the Passionless Valley was vast, occupying about thirty thousand acres of land, with winding paths, towering hills, and deep ravines. But Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu used their lightness kungfu to follow the path on the map, and they arrived at their destination in just a short while. In front of them they saw several big elm trees, seventy or eighty-feet high, providing a shade for a brick and pottery kiln below. The map showed that the Indian monk and Zhu Ziliu were imprisoned here.

Yang Guo turned to Xiao Longnu and said, "You wait here. I'll go in and take a look. With charcoal and ash in there, it must be very dirty." As he bent over to step into the kiln, he was hit by a heat wave.

"Who is there?" A voice shouted.

Yang Guo said, "I've got the chief's order. I'm coming to get the prisoners."

That person emerged from behind the brick wall and asked, "What?" Seeing Yang Guo, he was startled and said, "You... You..."

Yang Guo saw that he was a valley disciple dressed in green so he said, "The chief has ordered me to come get the monk and the man surnamed Zhu."

That disciple knew that Yang Guo had saved his master's life, that she'd announced in front of everybody that Yang Guo

was her intended son-in-law, and that he and Lu'E were on the best terms. This person would one day become the Valley Chief, and so he didn't dare to offend Yang Guo.

He said, "But... what about the chief's command sign?"

Yang Guo ignored him and said, "Let me come in and take a look." That disciple complied and turned back into the kiln.

Inside the brick walls, the heat was even more intense. Two lowly laborers were raking charcoal. Although it was bitterly cold at this time of year, the two people were actually bare-chested, each wearing short pants to cover his lower body. Still they were sweating profusely. The disciple in green pushed aside a big stone, revealing an opening. Yang Guo went inside and saw that it was actually a stone chamber of ten feet square. Zhu Ziliu sat there with his face to the wall, using his index finger to draw pictures. His arm rose and fell as if he was very pleased with himself. The Indian monk was actually lying on the floor, and it was hard to tell if he was still alive. Yang Guo called out, "Uncle Zhu, how are you?"

Zhu Ziliu turned his head back. He laughed and said, "A friend has come to visit from afar; how could I not be fine?" Yang Guo had to admire him. He was stranded here for a long time but still kept calm as if everything was normal. Even in crisis, he could still be mirthful. He himself was far, far inferior to him in this regards.

"Is the Divine Monk sleeping?" He asked. Having said this, his heart was beating wildly because Xiao Longnu's life depended on this Divine Indian Monk.

Zhu Ziliu didn't reply. Only after a while he let out a gentle sigh and said, "My Martial Uncle can usually withstand heat and cold much better than I can, but this time..."

It sounded like the Indian monk's condition was critical. Frightened, Yang Guo didn't bother to say any more words. He turned his head to the disciple in green. He ordered, "Unlock the door. Let them out."

The disciple in green said in surprise, "What about the lock? The chief's got the key. If she ordered you to free people, how come she didn't give you the key?"

Impatient, Yang Guo shouted, "Make way!" He lifted his black iron sword and struck down, making a big hole in the stone wall with a 'ka' sound. That disciple let out an 'ah' cry and froze with fright. Yang Guo swung his sword a few more times and that five-inch window became wide enough for a person to pass through.

Zhu Ziliu cried out, "Brother Yang, I congratulate you on your great skills!"

He bent over to pick up the Indian monk, passing him through that hole. As Yang Guo took him, he could feel that the Indian monk's arm was warm. His heart jumped. But then he saw that the Indian monk's eyes were shut tight. He thought to himself, "Aiyo, even a dead body is warm in this fire room." He quickly stretched his hand to feel the Indian monk's breath and realized he was still breathing faintly.

Zhu Ziliu jumped out from that hole in the wall. He said, "Martial uncle has passed out. Hope it's not a great obstacle."

Yang Guo blushed. He thought to himself, "Shame on you!" He thought about how he himself didn't really care about the Indian monk's well being but more about how to save his own wife. He asked, "Did he pass out from heat exhaustion? Let's quickly go outside to get some air." Then he carried him out. Seeing the three people, Xiao Longnu was delighted.

Yang Guo said, "Let's find some cold water to sprinkle on Reverend's face."

"No, Martial uncle was poisoned by the Passion Flowers." Zhu Ziliu said.

Yang Guo was startled. He asked, "Is the poison severe?"

Zhu Ziliu replied, "I think not. It was he who poisoned himself."

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were puzzled. In one voice, they exclaimed, "What?"

With a sigh Zhu Ziliu said, "Uncle said that these Passion Flowers were already extinct in India. He didn't know how it had been spread. He said that if it got out of hand, it would be a great disaster. Years ago, people and livestock in India had been poisoned and died because of these flowers. Martial uncle had thoroughly researched poison techniques but this Passion Flower poison was really strange. He came to the valley this time, knowing that the Divine Pill (Passionless Pill) could only help one person. He wanted to find out what could detoxify the poison to help people on a large scale. He used his body to test the poison so he would understand its nature and be able to find the antidote."

Yang Guo was half amazed and half in awe. He said, "Buddha said – if I don't go to hell who will? Reverend is trying to save people, not hesitating to face a disaster. People really have to respect him."

Zhu Ziliu said, "In an ancient tale, Shen Nong tried a hundred kinds of herbs to save people. If it was the wrong herb, his face would turn blue. This Martial Uncle of mine must have had this story in mind."

Yang Guo nodded and said, "Right. Do you know when he will regain consciousness?"

"After he poisoned himself, he said if his calculation was not wrong, he would wake up after three days and three nights," said Zhu Ziliu.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu looked at each other. They both thought, "He'll be in a coma for three days and three nights. It means the poison is very severe. Fortunately this Passion Flower poison affects people differently. If one has a passionate heart, the poison will act up very fiercely. This monk has a steady heart. He's much better than an average person."

Xiao Longnu said, "You two were in the kiln, how did you find Passion Flowers?"

Zhu Ziliu replied, "After we were put in the fire room, there was a girl who often came to visit..."

Xiao Longnu said, "Was she a tall girl with fair complexion and a small mole on one corner of her mouth?"

"Yes," said Zhu Ziliu.

Xiao Longnu smiled at Yang Guo. Then she said to Zhu Ziliu, "That was the Valley Chief's daughter Miss Lu'E. She heard that you two had come to help Yang Guo so she was fond of you. Although she didn't dare to release you, she'd get you whatever you wanted."

Zhu Ziliu said, "Correct. Martial uncle asked her for a branch of the Passion Flowers and I asked her to send my message asking for help. She complied. In the kiln, everyday there would be a time the fires blasted. She would pour water on them to reduce the intensity, making it bearable for us. I often asked her who she was but she never answered. I didn't know she was the Valley Chief's daughter."

"She gave us the directions to come here," said Xiao Longnu.

Yang Guo said, "Great Reverend Yideng is here too."

Zhu Ziliu was delighted. He said, "Oh, let's go."

Yang Guo frowned and said, "Monk Ci'en is also here. I'm afraid there might be a little trouble."

Zhu Ziliu was puzzled. He said, "Brother Ci'en is also here. How can it not be good? When brother and sister meet, Chief Qiu will have no choice but consider this kinship."

Even though he became Reverend Yideng's disciple before Ci'en, in Jianghu Ci'en's kungfu was actually at the same level as that of Reverend Yideng. And so, Diancang, Yuyin and Zhu Ziliu highly respected him, treating him as 'Martial Elder Brother.' Zhu Ziliu had asked Lu'E to send his help message, hoping that Ci'en would come, and the two sides would be reconciled. Now that Yang Guo mentioned trouble, he couldn't quite understand.

Yang Guo briefly told him about Ci'en's mental instability and how Qiu Qianchi was trying to stir up his emotions.

Zhu Ziliu said, "Madame Guo is also here in the valley. That's really the best. Her wisdom is second to none. My master is here to control the situation. Also, Brother Yang's kungfu has reached this improved stage. There shouldn't be any problem. I'm only worried about my Martial Uncle."

Yang Guo also felt that the Indian monk's safety was the first priority. He said, "We could find a place to stay, and wait for Reverend to regain consciousness. The three of us can protect him."

Zhu Ziliu hesitated. He asked, "Where should we go?" He pondered for a long time, feeling that this Passionless Valley was dangerous everywhere. Then he figured out and said, "We wait right here."

Yang Guo was startled but then he understood. With a smile he said, "Uncle Zhu's idea is wonderful. This place seems bad but it actually is the best place in the valley. We just have to stop those valley disciples from leaking our secret."

Zhu Ziliu stretched out his finger. With a laugh he said, "That's easy."

He picked up the Indian monk and said, "We'll rest here in the kiln. May I ask Brother Yang and Mrs. to go help my master?"

Yang Guo remembered that Reverend Yideng's injury had not recovered and that Ci'en had been swaying back and forth between good and evil. If he stayed here to guard the Indian monk, it would be rather selfish and he wouldn't feel comfortable. Seeing Zhu Ziliu carry the Indian monk back into the kiln, he and Xiao Longnu returned to the path they'd just come from.

The two people passed by the Passion Flower thicket. It was bitter cold at this time. Undoubtedly soon there would be no flowers, and the leaves would fall, leaving only ugly bare branches, full of sharp thorns.

Suddenly Yang Guo thought of Li Mochou. He said, "No doubt this thing called passion is sometimes extremely beautiful but other times extremely ugly. Like your martial sister, spring flowers wither quickly but their thorns can still kill people."

Xiao Longnu said, "I hope the Divine Monk can find the antidote to this flower poison. Not only will it cure you, my martial sister can also be saved."

But Yang Guo actually hoped that the Indian monk would regain consciousness and that the Indian monk would first treat the poisons in Xiao Longnu's body. If he didn't wake up

and just passed away, what then? Looking at his wife, his heart was filled with infinite tender feelings. Suddenly, he was hit by a flash of pain in his chest. He knew that because he'd saved the Cheng-Lu cousins, the poison in his body was even more severe. Afraid that he would worry Xiao Longnu, he turned his head to look at the bare branches, appearing to be happy and not paying attention to life and death matters.

By now there was another scene in the main hall of the Passionless Valley. Qiu Qianchi was urging her brother to act. The more she talked, the more ferocious her words became. Reverend Yideng didn't say a word, leaving Ci'en to make a decision for himself. Ci'en looked at his sister. He looked at his master. Then he looked at Huang Rong. One was his blood sister. Another was the master who had changed him. And the third caused his brother's death. His mind fluctuated between kindness and hatred. Good and evil were battling. How would he decide? His entire life from childhood to old age flashed in his brain. Sometimes tears glistened in his eyes, other times a smile came to the corners of his mouth. His heart was aflame for this was fiercer than any battle he'd ever fought in.

Lu Wushuang noticed that Yang Guo had left the hall for a long time and still not returned. Ci'en's state of mind had nothing to do with her whatsoever. She gently tugged at Cheng Ying's gown sleeve and quietly slipped out of the hall. Cheng Ying followed her out. "Where did Sha Dan (Dumb Egg) go?" Lu Wushuang asked.

Cheng Ying didn't reply. She only said, "He's been poisoned and we don't know how bad his condition is."

Lu Wushuang said, "Hmm." She was also worried. In a low-spirited voice, she said, "I really didn't expect this. He and his master finally..."

Cheng Ying said in the same tone, "Miss Long is really beautiful, and she's really good. Only such a person can be a match for Big Brother Yang."

Lu Wushuang said, "How do you know she's a good person? You haven't really talked to her."

Suddenly she heard a cold voice from behind, "Her foot is not lame. Naturally she's good."

Lu Wushuang drew out her Willow Leaf saber, turning her body around. That voice, of course, came from Guo Fu.

Seeing her unsheathed saber, Guo Fu quickly pulled out a long sword from Yelu Qi's waist. She returned the angry glare and shouted, "You want to fight me?"

With a merry laugh Lu Wushuang said, "How come you don't use your own sword?" Her foot had been crippled since childhood, and it was her sore spot. Other people never mentioned this in front of her. Since Guo Fu ridiculed her 'lame foot,' she was enraged, and so she sarcastically brought up the broken sword issue.

Guo Fu barked, "I'm going to use someone else's sword to give you a kungfu lesson."

Having said that, the long sword struck, and the 'weng-weng' sounds echoed.

Lu Wushuang said, "How rude. The Guo family's child doesn't respect her senior. Good, today I'll teach you the difference between good and bad."

"Bah, how can you be my senior?" Guo Fu said.

With a laugh Lu Wushuang said, "My cousin is your Martial Uncle. If you won't call me Gu Gu (paternal aunt) you should

call me Ah-yi (maternal aunt). You can ask my cousin!" Then she pointed at Cheng Ying.

By her mother's order, Guo Fu had to call Cheng Ying 'Martial Uncle.' But deep down, she was still not convinced that her strange grandfather had accepted such a person as a disciple. She thought that she and Cheng Ying were about the same age so Cheng Ying's kungfu shouldn't be very good. She looked at Lu Wushuang and said, "Who knows if she's a real or fake disciple? My grandpa is world famous. There are many shameless people pretending to be his disciples."

Although Cheng Ying's natural disposition was gentle, hearing this she couldn't help getting angry. But her whole heart right now was fixed on Yang Guo, and so she had no intention of bickering with people. She said, "Cousin, let's go... go find Big Brother Yang."

Lu Wushuang nodded. She turned to Guo Fu and said, "Did you hear that? Did she or did she not call me her cousin? Hero Guo and Chief Huang Rong are world famous. I don't know how many shameless people pretend to be their daughter!" Then with a 'hei-hei' cold laugh, she turned to leave.

Guo Fu was slow. She thought, "Who pretends to be my parents' daughter?" But then it dawned on her, "Aiyo! She called me a bastard, saying that I'm not my parents' daughter." Now that she understood the meaning, how could she bear it? She jumped up and thrust her sword towards Lu Wushuang's back.

Hearing the sound of Guo Fu's sword cutting through the air, Lu Wushuang turned and blocked the strike with her saber. With a 'dang' sound, slight pains shot through their arms.

Guo Fu shouted, "Did you call me a bastard?"

The long sword struck again and again. Lu Wushuang blocked the sword left and right. She sneered, "Hero Guo is a righteous hero. Chief Huang is truly the daughter of the Chief of Peach Blossom Island. Their characters are remarkable..."

Guo Fu said, "Who doesn't know that? There is no need to praise my parents to please me." She really thought that Lu Wushuang had sincerely praised her parents, and so her sword slowed down.

But Lu Wushuang continued "You? You cut off Big Brother Yang's arm. You couldn't tell right from wrong, hurting a good person. How could such behavior be anything similar to that of the Guo couple? Makes people wonder."

"Wonder, about what?" Guo Fu asked.

Lu Wushuang darkly said, "You think about it."

Yelu Qi was standing on the side of the scene. He knew that Guo Fu's intelligence was far inferior to Lu Wushuang. If this verbal spat went on, Guo Fu wouldn't be able to stand it. He said, "Miss Guo, let's not talk to her any more."

He could see that Guo Fu's kungfu was more advanced than Lu Wushuang's. If she couldn't win an argument, she would resort to a real fight. Who would have thought that Guo Fu would be blind with rage and not understand his intention? She said, "Don't meddle. I'm asking her to explain what she said."

Lu Wushuang gave Yelu Qi a stare. She said, "A dog that bites visitors will give you trouble in the future."

Yelu Qi blushed, knowing that Lu Wushuang had already figured out his feelings towards Guo Fu. What she meant was that Guo Fu was so irrational that she would give him infinite trouble in the future.

Seeing Yelu Qi blush, Guo Fu was greatly suspicious. She questioned, "You suspect that I'm not my parents' daughter as well?"

Yelu Qi quickly said, "No, no. Let's go. Don't pay attention to her."

Lu Wushuang butted in, "Naturally, he is suspicious. Otherwise, why does he want you to leave so quickly?"

Guo Fu's face reddened, and she pressed her hand on the sword.

Yelu Qi could only advise, "Miss Lu's words are mean and cutting. If you want to test her kungfu, just do it. There's no need to talk."

Lu Wushuang said, "He said you've got a dumb mouth. Talking too much will only reveal what a fool you are."

Guo Fu had feelings for Yelu Qi, and so she was worried that he wouldn't like her. Although other people were talking nonsense, when it involved her loved one, she had to think about it. As she thought about what Lu Wushuang said, she feared that Yelu Qi would really think badly of her. Her parents had doted on her since she was little, and the Wu brothers -- her childhood friends -- had always obeyed her. Except for her occasional quarrels with Yang Guo, she'd never had an argument like this. Today she ran into a ferocious opponent, who outpaced and outwitted her no matter what she said. Realizing that talking would result in more damage, she scolded, "If I don't cripple your other foot today, my name is not Guo." Having said that, her sword moved like the wind, flying towards Lu Wushuang.

Lu Wushuang said, "No need to cripple my foot. Your real name is not Guo anyway. Maybe your name is Zhang or Li." Lu Wushuang carried on calling her a 'bastard.' While they

were exchanging these verbal attacks, the saber and the sword clashed, and the battle became more intense.

The Guo couple had taught their daughter the best of kungfu. Guo Fu was taught all the basics but it was difficult to master the skills in a short period of time. When it came to martial proclivity, Guo Fu had a stronger resemblance to her father and very little in common with her mother. And so, even though her foundation of orthodox kungfu was good, she still needed to refine her skills before she could use any lethal kungfu. Even so, Lu Wushuang wasn't her match. Besides, her retreat wasn't very agile because of a crippled foot. Guo Fu was burning with rage and she kept on attacking. Sword lights flashed as she was trying to stab Lu Wushuang's right leg.

Cheng Ying was watching them fight, her brows creasing with worry. She thought, "Although my cousin's name-calling isn't nice, this Guo girl is too rude and too unreasonable. No wonder Yang Guo's right arm was cut off by her. If they continue to fight, my cousin's right leg will be difficult to save."

She saw Lu Wushuang constantly retreating. Suddenly she heard the 'chi' sound as Lu Wushuang's skirt was ripped open. She let out a soft cry, "Aiyo!"

Lu Wushuang stumbled back, her face pale. Guo Fu quickly took a couple of steps forward and brought her sword around in a horizontal swipe, slashing Lu Wushuang's leg. Seeing that Guo Fu had already won but still kept on attacking and that Lu Wushuang was dangerously cornered, Cheng Ying stepped in gently, using both hands to block Guo Fu.

She said, "Miss Guo, please go light on her."

Guo Fu lifted her sword. Seeing blood on the blade, she knew that Lu Wushuang had already been injured. She pointed her

sword proudly at Lu Wushuang and said, "My lesson today will teach you not to spout nonsense again."

The sword wound on Lu Wushuang's leg was aching. She angrily said, "Are you going to use your sword to stop people from talking?" She knew that Guo Fu basked in her parents' glory, so she pretended to say that Guo Fu was not Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter.

Guo Fu shouted, "What did they say?" She moved forward a step, with the tip of her sword straight towards Lu Wushuang's chest.

Cheng Ying stepped in between them. Seeing the long sword arrive, she used three fingers to hold the blade and gently pushed it aside. She persuaded, "Cousin, Miss Guo, we are in the middle of danger here. Let's stop this senseless fight."

Her sword was brushed aside by Cheng Ying's bare hand. Guo Fu was half-startled and half-angry. She shouted, "Are you helping her? Good, good, good. Even two on one, I'm not afraid. Draw out your weapon!" After she said that, she pointed her long sword at Cheng Ying's waist preparing to thrust. She waited calmly for her to pull out the jade flute from her waist.

With a faint smile Cheng Ying said, "I just asked you two not to fight, how can I fight you myself? Brother Yelu, please come and talk to Miss Guo."

"Yes. Miss Guo, we are in the enemy territory. We've got to be careful everywhere we go." Yelu Qi said.

Guo Fu quickly said, "Good. You don't help me. Instead, you help an outsider." Seeing that Cheng Ying was a girl of beauty and grace, she suddenly thought to herself, "Is he interested in her?"

Yelu Qi had no clue what she was thinking. He continued, "That monk Ci'en looked quite strange. Let's go back to the hall and watch him."

Lu Wushuang heard Guo Fu's words and saw the look on her face. She understood what Guo Fu was worried about. She said, "Compared to you, my cousin is prettier. Her behavior is gentler. And she had better kungfu. You've got to be very, very careful."

These four sentences pierced Guo Fu's heart. Nervously she asked, "Careful about what?"

Lu Wushuang sneered, "Even if I were an idiot, I would still prefer my cousin. You are rude and vicious, what's so good about you?"

These words were so obvious, how could Guo Fu stand them? Her long sword flew out, swerving around Cheng Ying and flying towards Lu Wushuang.

This move of hers was called the 'Jade Stance Guiding Silver Arrow,' which was one of Huang Rong's family techniques. The blade was swung in an arc and would strike the side of the target. The move appeared to be without haste but the damage zone was wide. Only one with higher sword skills would be able to block such a blow; otherwise, it was extremely difficult to escape.

Cheng Ying frowned. She thought to herself, "Why is this girl using her fiercest stance? My cousin only offends you with words. She isn't your most hateful enemy. Why are you acting like you mean to kill a murderer?"

Fortunately, Huang Yaoshi had earlier taught her this sword stance. And so, she sent energy to her fingers, waiting for Guo Fu's sword swing. Then with a clang, the long sword shot to the ground.

The technique Cheng Ying had just used was called 'Divine Flicking Finger.' But it came out strong only because Cheng Ying had understood Guo Fu's technique and waited to strike when the power in Guo Fu's sword dropped. Otherwise, since the two people's martial skills were about the same level, Cheng Ying wouldn't have been able to disarm Guo Fu with her fingers. Cheng Ying used her left foot to step on the long sword and the jade flute in her hand pointed at Guo Fu's pressure point on her waist.

In a flash Cheng Ying had knocked Guo Fu's sword out of her hand, stepped on it, and threatened Guo Fu's pressure point. Guo Fu was in an extremely awkward situation. If she bent down to snatch the sword, the pressure point on her waist would be exposed. But if she jumped backwards, her long sword would of course be taken. Although her kungfu was not weak, she lacked battle experiences. At the moment, she was blushing profusely, not knowing what to do.

Yelu Qi shouted, "Hey, girl. Why did you step on my weapon?"

Then he leaned forward to grab the jade flute. Cheng Ying retracted her arm, and then she turned around to leave, pulling Lu Wushuang along with her.

Guo Fu snatched the long sword back. She called out, "Slow down, let's see who the better person is."

Lu Wushuang turned her head back and said, "Still want to..."

Cheng Ying grabbed her arm, dragging her cousin along. The two people were already twenty or thirty feet away from them, and so Lu Wushuang didn't get to finish her sentence.

Yelu Qi said, "Miss Guo, she was just lucky with that move. Actually, the two of you are equals."

Guo Fu bitterly said, "Right. I was swinging my sword in an arc. Before I could hit her, she took advantage of the moment the strength on my sword was void. I didn't expect someone who looked quite refined to be sly like that."

"Hmm." Yelu Qi made a sound. He was a straight person. Not wanting to falsely flatter her, he said, "Miss Cheng's kungfu isn't weak. If you fight with her another time, you can't underestimate her as an opponent."

Hearing him commend Cheng Ying, Guo Fu frowned darkly. She couldn't bear it and so she said, "Did you say her kungfu was good?"

Yelu Qi replied, "Yes."

Guo Fu angrily said, "Then don't mind me. Just go, be with her." As she said that she turned around.

Yelu Qi said, "I advised you not to underestimate the opponent. I asked you to be careful. Am I helping you, or am I helping her?" Now that Yelu Qi had explained that he wanted her to protect herself, Guo Fu couldn't help but smile.

Yelu Qi continued, "Didn't I help you get the sword back? Why are you still blaming me?"

Guo Fu turned her head back and said, "I'm not. I'm not. I'm not blaming you!" A happy smile filled her face. Yelu Qi was delighted but suddenly he heard repeated roars from inside the hall, accompanied by the interminable sounds of metal clanking.

Guo Fu cried out, "Aiyo, let's go quickly and take a look."

Originally, while listening to Qiu Qianchi ramble on about decades-ago events she did not realizing that a crisis was looming, the more she listened, the more annoyed she became. So she slipped out of the hall and ran into the

Cheng-Lu cousins and fought with them. Now that she heard the strange sounds, her thoughts were on her mother. She rushed back into the hall.

In the middle of the hall Reverend Yideng sat cross-legged, holding a string of Buddhist rosary beads in his hands and reciting Buddhist sutras. He had a gentle look on his face. Monk Ci'en paced back and forth in the hall and often let out a roar, which sounded incredibly wicked. His hands were shackled, but the chain that linked the two cuffs had already been broken. When the two parts struck against each other, a clanking sound echoed in the hall. Qiu Qianchi also sat in the hall, her complexion pale. She was already ugly but at this time she looked fearsome. Huang Rong and Wu Santong were standing in a corner of the hall, intensely watching Ci'en.

Ci'en had been pacing around in a fit of insanity, and beads of sweat dripped profusely from his forehead. White steam emitted from the top of his head, looking like white clouds. These clouds were growing denser. And the more he paced, the faster he became. Reverend Yideng suddenly used his inner energy to shout, "Ci'en, Ci'en, distinguish between good and evil. Have you meditated today?"

Ci'en turned dull, his body swaying. He threw himself on the floor.

Qiu Qianchi shouted, "E'er, quickly go help your uncle up."

Gongsun Lu'E did as told. Ci'en opened his eyes and saw Lu'E's face. In his daze, Lu'E's beautiful face, with long eyebrows and thin lips, looked very much like his sister when she was young. He cried out, "Third sister, where am I?"

Lu'E said, "Uncle, I'm Lu'E."

Ci'en muttered, "Uncle... who is your uncle? Who are you talking about?"

Qiu Qianchi shouted, "Second brother, she's your third sister's daughter. She wanted to meet her first uncle."

Ci'en was startled. He said, "My big brother? You can't meet him. He's already fallen to death from the Iron Palms summit. His body was all gone." Then he jumped up. He looked at Huang Rong and shouted, "Huang Rong, you killed my big brother, you'll pay for it!"

Arriving back in the hall, Guo Fu had stayed by her mother's side, carrying her younger sister in her arms. Now that she saw Ci'en pointing his finger at her mother and scolding her, she couldn't stand it. And so, she stepped forward and said, "Monk, if you are rude again, this young girl won't stand for it."

Qiu Qianchi sneered, "This young girl is fearless..."

Ci'en asked, "Who are you?"

"Hero Guo is my father and Chief Huang is my mother," replied Guo Fu.

Ci'en asked, "And the baby you are holding?"

Guo Fu said, "She's my little sister."

In a severe tone Ci'en said, "Humph, surprisingly Guo Jing and Huang Rong have two children."

Hearing a strange tone in his voice, Huang Rong shouted, "Fu'er, get back here, quickly!"

Guo Fu saw that Ci'en was acting like a madman. After all this talking, he still hadn't begun fighting. She thought he was afraid of her mother so she didn't fear him. Instead, she moved a couple of steps forward. With a laugh she said, "If

there's revenge to extract, just get on with it. If not, don't open your mouth!"

Ci'en shouted, "I will extract my revenge!"

His voice ripped through the air like a clap of thunder, and all the teacups were making 'dang-dang' rattling sounds. Guo Fu couldn't move her hands and feet. She only saw his left and right hands coming at her with the force of a mountain being cast into the sea. She wanted to escape, but how could there be enough time?

As if by prior arrangement, Huang Rong, Wu Santong, and Yelu Qi jumped up into the air at the same time. The three people all noticed that even though Ci'en's right hand was fierce, his left palm was far more lethal. So they all aimed at his left palm, and the four palms clashed with a 'peng' sound.

Ci'en let out a 'hei' sound and stood still but the three people fell back several steps. With the lowest skills, Yelu Qi was knocked back the furthest, and next to him was Huang Rong. Before she could steady herself, she saw that her daughter Guo Xiang had already been snatched by Ci'en. Guo Fu just stood there dumbly too frightened to escape.

Huang Rong was alarmed. She thought, "Was Fu'er hurt by that palm strike?" Immediately she jumped up and out, her left hand pulling Guo Fu back. She wielded the "Dog Beating Stick" with her right hand, using the 'seal' trick. Although Ci'en's palms were fierce, he couldn't hurt her this time. Guo Fu was actually not injured but she was confused. Now that she leaned against her mother's body, she could let out an 'ah' cry.

As the battle began, the Wu brothers, Yelu Yan, and Wanyan Ping unsheathed their weapons. Qiu Qianchi signaled the many valley disciples to scatter, waiting for her order to besiege them. Only Reverend Yideng was still sitting cross-

legged in the center of the hall as if he didn't see all these things. He was reciting Buddhist sutras. His voice was not loud, but very clear.

Ci'en lifted Guo Xiang. He shouted, "This is Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter. I'll kill this girl first, and then I'll kill Huang Rong!"

Qiu Qianchi said in delight, "Good second brother! You are really the world-famous "Iron Palms Floating on Water", Chief Qiu!"

In this situation, Huang Rong and the others couldn't defeat Ci'en in battle without anybody getting hurt; they didn't even have a way to save the baby from this mad man.

In a loud voice Guo Fu suddenly shouted, "Yang Guo, big brother Yang, quickly come and save my little sister."

When facing a disaster, Yang Guo had always come out of nowhere to save her. Seeing that nobody could do anything at this time, she naturally hoped that Yang Guo would come to her rescue again. But at the moment Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were enjoying their time together. The two people walked slowly hand in hand, watching the sunset. How could they know about this urgent situation in the hall?

Ci'en used his right hand to hold Guo Xiang high above his head and brought his left palm on guard.

He sneered, "Yang Guo? Who's Yang Guo? Now even if East Heretic, West Venom, South Emperor, North Beggar, and Central Divinity all came at once, they could only kill me, Qiu Qianren, but they wouldn't be able to save this baby."

Yideng slowly lifted his head and saw blood lust and murderous intent in Ci'en's eyes. He said, "You want to seek revenge on people, people will then come and take revenge on you. What good can come of it?"

Ci'en shouted, "If they dare, come!" Now dusk had begun to fall, and the evening light entered the hall. Despair showed in everyone's eyes, while his face looked absolutely terrifying.

Suddenly Huang Rong let out a 'ha-ha' laugh, her voice alternating between high and low pitches, like a lunatic. The people couldn't help being frightened.

Guo Fu cried out "Ma!"

Wu Santong and Yelu Qi called out in one voice "Madame Guo!" Their hearts were thumping wildly, thinking that she'd gone insane because the enemy had her daughter. She tossed her "Dog Beating Stick" to the floor, moving a couple of steps forward. Her laugh sounded mournful and shrill.

"Ma!" Guo Fu called out and tried to grab her arm. Huang Rong brushed Guo Fu aside with her right hand and jumped towards Ci'en with a miserable cry.

Even Qiu Qianchi hadn't expected this. She stared at Huang Rong in disbelief.

Huang Rong stretched out both hands and gave Ci'en an evil stare. She cried out, "Quickly kill this child. Hit her hard. You can't spare her."

Color left Ci'en's face. He held Guo Xiang close to his chest and said, "You... you... who are you?"

Huang Rong laughed crazily, her arms flinging out. Although Ci'en's left palm was on guard, he didn't dare to strike. He sidestepped and asked again, "Who are you?"

Huang Rong sadly replied, "Have you completely forgotten? One evening in the Dali Imperial Palace, you held a small child like this in your hand. Right, it was... it was.. You injured him badly and he eventually died. I am this child's mother.

Kill this child quickly. Kill this child quickly. What are you waiting for?"

Ci'en listened to her, and his whole body trembled. Events of decades-ago flashed in his mind.

Years ago, he'd injured Dali Imperial Concubine Liu's child, hoping that the South Emperor would use years of cultivated inner energy to treat the child's injury. But Emperor Duan had been cruel enough to let the child meet a violent death. Afterwards Concubine Liu and Ci'en had run into each other twice and she fought like a mad tiger, willing to die together with him. Although Ci'en's kungfu was superior, he actually didn't dare to fight her; instead he fled into the wasteland. Huang Rong had twice met Yinggu, on the Black Dragon beach and at the top of Mount Hua and seen her insane smile. She'd known that this was Ci'en's biggest worry. And so, seeing Ci'en holding Guo Xiang in his arms but unable to harm her, she'd told him to kill Guo Xiang. Wu Santong, Qiu Qianchi, Yelu Qi and the others all thought that she'd gone totally insane. Only Reverend Yideng secretly admired Huang Rong for her great wisdom and courage. He thought to himself that a strong man wouldn't have the gall to come up with such a scheme and say "Kill the child quickly." When Ci'en was frighteningly violent like this, if he hit Guo Xiang even lightly, how could she not die a sudden death?

Ci'en looked at Huang Rong and Yideng. Then his eyes turned to the child in his hand. A surge of pain and regret suddenly hit him, and he sobbed, "He was dead! He was dead! The child was alive and well, and I killed him."

He stepped towards Huang Rong and handed Guo Xiang to her. He said, "I killed this small baby. Please beat me to death!"

Overjoyed, Huang Rong reached out to take Guo Xiang. But then Yideng shouted, "Revenge breeds revenge; when will it

stop? Your hand holds a murderous blade. When will you throw it away?"

Ci'en was startled, and Guo Xiang fell from his hand.

Huang Rong didn't wait for Guo Xiang to fall to the floor, her right foot flew out. She kicked the child, sending her out in the air. At the same time, she laughed crazily and said, "You killed the child. Good. Good. This is wonderful."

Her kick looked as if it was fierce but when her foot touched Guo Xiang's waist, it actually stopped her from falling and gently sent her out again into the air. She knew that this was an extremely critical moment. If she bent down to pick up her daughter, perhaps Ci'en would change his mind.

Guo Xiang flew through the air towards Yelu Qi. He caught her and saw that her black eyes were sparkling, and that her little mouth was about to let out a big cry. She was indeed unharmed. He was first startled and then understood that Huang Rong, knowing that Guo Fu was rash, sent him her daughter. So, he covered the child's mouth with his palm and shouted, "Aiyo, the child was killed by the monk."

Ci'en's face was deathly pale. All of a sudden he was awakened. He put his hands together and bowed to Yideng. He said, "Great monk, many thanks for saving me!"

Yideng bowed back and said, "Congratulations, great monk. You've found the right path!" The two monks exchanged a smile. Ci'en ran out.

Qiu Qianchi quickly called out, "Second Brother, Second Brother, you come back!"

Ci'en turned his head back and said, "You call me to come back; I'm now asking you to come back too." Having said that his gown sleeves flared out, and he floated out of the hall.

With a joyful expression on his face Yideng said, "Good, good, good!" Then he retreated to a corner of the hall. He lowered his head, his eyebrows drooping, and said no more.

Huang Rong fixed her hair and got Guo Xiang back from Yelu Qi. Seeing that her mother was normal and her little sister was all right, Guo Fu was pleasantly surprised. She threw herself into her mother's arms and said, "Ma, I thought you really went insane!"

Huang Rong walked over to Yideng and kowtowed. She said, "I (niece) had no other way but to mention that past affair. Reverend, please forgive me."

With a faint smile Yideng replied, "Rong'er, Rong'er, you are really the female Zhuge!"

In the hall, Wu Santong was the only person who knew about the past events. Others were looking perplexed at one another.

After this unexpected turn of events, Qiu Qianchi saw her brother going out the screened door. She thought about how she wouldn't see him again and couldn't help becoming heavy-hearted. His words "You call me to come back, I'm now asking to you come back too" sounded like advice, urging her to control herself, repent and be salvaged. She secretly felt a pang of regret but her regret disappeared in a flash. All of a sudden, she proudly said, "Everybody, please wait here, I'm afraid this old woman can't keep you company."

Huang Rong said, "Hold on a minute! We've come here today to ask for the Passionless Pill..."

Qiu Qianchi nodded at her numerous disciples and they all responded with a war cry. Each entrance was blocked by four disciples in green, with an adorned fishnet in their hands.

Four maids lifted Qiu Qianchi's chair and retreated to the inner hall.

Seeing the power of the fishnets, Huang Rong, Wu Santong, Yelu Qi, and the others were secretly alarmed. They thought, "These fishnets are deadly, how can we break out of the trap?"

While they were hesitating, both the front door and the back door of the hall were being pulled shut, and the disciples in green all squeezed out. The Wu Brothers struck one of the doors with their swords. With a 'peng' sound, their double swords were caught in the crack of the door and immediately snapped. It seemed that these doors were cast from metal after all.

In a low voice Huang Rong said, "No need to be frightened! Even if we aren't allowed to leave the hall, we can still think of a way to defeat those fishnets and get the antidote to help Yang Guo."

Gongsun Lu'E followed her mother into the inner hall. She asked, "Ma, what should we do?"

Seeing that her brother had abruptly departed and that skilled enemies were gathering, Qiu Qianchi knew she had a big problem. But the murderer of her brother had arrived; no matter who tried to persuade her, she would never yield. With a slight hesitation she said, "Go take a look. What are Yang Guo and those three girls doing?" This was actually what Lu'E had wanted to do. She nodded in compliance and left for the kiln.

As she was halfway to the kiln, she heard voices ahead of her. It was Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu talking. It seemed that they said something about 'Miss Gongsun.' By this time, the sky had become totally dark, and Lu'E hid herself in a willow grove nearby. She thought, "What are they talking about?"

She gingerly stepped forward, approaching them without making a sound. She saw Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu standing side by side.

Yang Guo said, "You said these matters revolved around Miss Gongsun. That's absolutely right. If the Divine Monk wakes up, all past animosity is buried, and all the poisons are expelled, won't that be wonderful? Aiyo!"

Lu'E jumped as Yang Guo let out a sudden cry, not knowing what had just happened to him. She was worried and couldn't help poking her head out to look around. In the darkness, she saw Yang Guo fall to the ground.

Xiao Longnu hoarsely said, "The Passion Flower poison is acting up again?"

"Mmm...aah..." Yang Guo could only let out a groan.

This pain was very difficult to endure. Lu'E pitied him and thought to herself, "He's already taken half of the Passionless pill. He needs the other half to get rid of the poisons, and he can only get this other half from mother."

After a while, Yang Guo got up and let out a long gasp.

Xiao Longnu said, "Your seizures are getting more and more frequent, and every time more severe than the last one. The Divine Monk still has to regain consciousness before he can find the antidote. Even then, there may not necessarily... there may not necessarily... You must be in a lot of pain." She'd wanted to say "there may not necessarily be enough time" but she changed her last sentence.

With a bitter smile Yang Guo said, "This old Madame Gongsun is extremely stubborn. She's hidden the antidote. Unless she wants to give it to me herself, even if we kill everybody in the valley and hold a knife against her neck, she still won't give it up."

“But I actually have a method,” said Xiao Longnu.

Yang Guo could guess what she was thinking and so he said, “Long’er, don’t say it. We...husband and wife, sincerely love each other. If we can grow old together, naturally we’ll thank heaven and earth. If something bad happens, its fate. No third person may come between the two of us.”

Xiao Longnu sobbed, “That Gongsun girl... She looks like a very good person. She will listen to me.”

Lu’E’s heart shook, understanding that Xiao Longnu was urging Yang Guo to marry her to save his own life. But then she heard Yang Guo’s reply.

In a resonant voice he said, “Miss Gongsun is a naturally good person. There are really quite a few good girls, aren’t there? Miss Cheng Ying and Miss Lu Wushuang were also the kind of girls who love deeply. But your heart and mine are one, how can we let other people intervene? You think, if there was a man who could get rid of the poisons in your body and he wanted you to give up your body, would you or would you not agree to it?”

“I’m a female. That would be unthinkable,” replied Xiao Longnu.

With a chuckle Yang Guo said, “To others, men are superior to women. To Yang Guo, it’s the other way around...” As he was saying this, he suddenly heard a sound coming from a dense thicket. Yang Guo asked, “Who is it?”

Lu’E thought she’d been spotted and was about to reply. Suddenly she heard a female voice, “Dumb egg, it’s me!”

Then she saw Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying step out from behind a thicket. And so, she used this opportunity to move back quietly. Her mind was in turmoil.

She thought, "Aside from comparing myself to Miss Long, look at Miss Cheng and Miss Lu's beauty, kungfu, and past friendship with Yang Guo, how can I ever match them?"

When she met Yang Guo, she couldn't help falling in love with him. She'd known that he was serious about Xiao Longnu but, deep in her heart, she still hoped that he could take two wives. Now that she'd heard his words, she realized that all her hopes were in vain. She'd been sad since she was little but today she was completely disheartened. She made up her mind that she no longer wanted to live, and then she walked away westward. Low-spirited, she walked aimlessly. She didn't know where she was. There was only a voice in her head, "I don't want to live anymore. I don't want to live anymore."

She didn't know how long she'd been walking when, suddenly, she heard voices coming from behind some mountain rocks. She pulled herself together feeling slightly startled. She'd been wandering about aimlessly, and to her own surprise she'd arrived on the west side of the valley where very few people frequented. She looked up and saw a mountain peak rising towards the sky. This was the most dangerous zone of the Passionless Peak.

On this mountain ledge, she could see the three letters 'Broken Heart Cliff' that someone had carved on the cliff ages ago, and twenty or thirty feet in front of her was a slippery and barren ledge where not even a blade of grass was seen. The place was enveloped by a blanket of fog all year long, and the wind here was so violent that even a bird would find it difficult to perch on this cliff top. Beyond and below was an abyss of shadows that no one could see the bottom of. The area surrounding the 'Broken Heart Cliff' was quiet and beautiful because the terrain was so rugged and dangerous. Slippery rocks made it very easy to fall into the abyss below. The valley dwellers stayed clear of this area, and even those

disciples in green with their kungfu wouldn't dare to come here. This being the case, she didn't know whose voices she was hearing.

Originally Gongsun Lu'E was resigned to die but at this moment she became curious. She hid herself behind a rock pile and listened. Her heart jumped as she learned that it was her father talking. Although her father had wronged her mother and had been ruthless with her, she was still his daughter. She'd been worried about him since her mother blinded one of his eyes with a date stone and banished him from the Passionless Valley. Hearing the familiar voice, she now knew that he hadn't left the valley. Instead, he'd come to this remote place to hide. She was secretly happy.

Then she heard him talk, "You've been beaten black and blue, and I actually lost my eye. It's all because of that small thief Yang Guo. Not only do we have a common enemy, we share the same problem." After saying that he smiled, but the other person didn't reply. Lu'E felt this was quite strange. Who was her father talking to? His tone was faintly frivolous, was that person a female?

Then Gongsun Zhi continued, "We ran into each other at this rarely-frequented place. We were thousands of li apart, yet we met as if by predestination. It must be fate."

That female let out a 'pei' sound in contempt. She angrily said, "I've been thoroughly injured by the Passion Flowers. Yet, you made light of it and mock me with such laughable nonsense."

Lu'E thought to herself, "Oh, it's Li Mochou who just broke into the valley today."

Then she heard Gongsun Zhi quickly say, "No, no. Why would I make light of it? Naturally I will do all I can. Your body is in pain, so is my heart."

The person Gongsun Zhi was talking to was of course Li Mochou. Her whole body was pricked by the Passion Flowers, and so the poison in her body was not small. Luckily she was filled with anger and hatred towards heaven and earth, not the sentiments between man and woman, and so her body wasn't in that much pain. But she knew that the poison was deadly. While urgently searching for the antidote, she wandered about aimlessly on the crisscrossing paths inside the valley and unexpectedly arrived at this Broken Heart Cliff. Gongsun Zhi had actually been here for a long time, hiding from all the valley people and waiting for the right moment to kill Qiu Qianchi and reclaim his Valley Chief position.

The two of them had once fought so they both knew each other's skills. After they met, they thought, "I'm having trouble in this valley, I could use some help." By this short exchange of words, they were actually trying to strike a bargain.

Since the death of his beloved Rou'er years ago, Gongsun Zhi had been concentrating on his kungfu practice and ignoring beautiful females. But then he failed to marry Xiao Longnu. His long-suppressed lust gushed out like a broken dam, out of control. With his status, his attempt to abduct Wanyan Ping was considered extremely low in Jianghu. Now that he'd run into Li Mochou and saw her beauty, he thought, "After I kill that evil woman Qiu Qianchi, I'd better marry this woman. With her kungfu, she's exactly my match."

What he didn't know was that Li Mochou was extremely vicious and without mercy and that the cause of her evil was none other than this 'passion.' At the moment, Gongsun Zhi's words had become bolder and bolder, how could she not be enraged? But she wanted the antidote, so she had no choice but to feign interest, offering a perfunctory reply.

Gongsun Zhi said, "I'm the original chief of the valley. There's no second person in the world who knows how to make the antidote to this flower poison. But the manufacturing process is time-consuming, and you won't have enough time for that. Luckily, there's one pill left in the valley, in that evil woman's hand. Let us go get rid of her, then everything will be yours."

His last sentence had a double meaning. It actually meant that not only would she get the antidote, she would also become the mistress of the Passionless Valley. That Gongsun Zhi was the only person in the world who knew how to make the antidote was not a lie. Passion Flowers had grown in this valley for a long time, and Gongsun Zhi's ancestors had taken many lives, experimenting to get the right antidote. These passionless flowers stopped outsiders from entering the valley so of course they didn't get rid of them. Anyhow, the antidote formula was only handed down from father to son so it wouldn't fall into the hands of other people.

Even Qiu Qianchi only knew that the pills they had were left by the previous generation and that the antidote formula had already been lost. But what Gongsun Zhi actually didn't know was that Qiu Qianchi only had half a pill left.

Li Mochou hesitated and said, "Since it is so, aren't you making an empty promise? Your wife has the antidote but you and she have become enemies. Even though killing her isn't that hard, how will you actually get the antidote?"

Gongsun Zhi hesitated to reply. After a while he said, "Taoist Li, you and I have met by fate. Even if I die I have no regrets."

Li Mochou blandly said, "You flatter me."

Gongsun Zhi said, "I've got a plan. I can capture that evil person and force her to give up the pill. But I hope you can promise me one thing."

Li Mochou said in agitation, "I've roamed Jianghu all my life. I come and go as I please and no one can ever force me to do anything. If you are willing to give me the antidote, do it. If not, just drop it. How can it be that I, Li Mochou, would ever beg for my life?"

Although Gongsun Zhi's kungfu was strong, he'd been secluded in the valley his entire life. As a result, he didn't know about Jianghu's most ferocious characters. He only knew a little about decades-ago names that Qiu Qianchi had mentioned. Over the past ten years, the name Scarlet Serpent Deity Li Mochou had shaken Jianghu, and there was no one in the martial world who didn't know that. Although Li Mochou did look like a peach, her heart was that of a serpent. Gongsun Zhi actually didn't know any of this. As he heard her arrogant words, he was very pleased.

He quickly said, "You misunderstood my meaning. I only hoped you would do something for me. How could it be that I was forcing you? To snatch the antidote, we have to kill my daughter. If I said something inappropriate, please don't be offended." Gongsun Lu'E was hiding behind a big rock. Hearing 'we have to kill my daughter,' she couldn't help but tremble.

Li Mochou was also taken aback. "The antidote is in your daughter's hands?"

"No," replied Gongsun Zhi. "I'll tell you the truth! That evil woman is excessively stubborn and violent. The antidote must be hidden in an extremely concealed place and we cannot possibly force her to hand it over. We can only resort to trickery, it's the only way."

"That sounds correct," said Li Mochou, nodding in agreement.

“That wretch is heartless to everyone and there are no limits to her viciousness. However she does care for her daughter and her alone. We can use this to our advantage. I’ll trick Lu’E so you can capture her and toss her into the flower thickets, then that evil woman will have no choice but to retrieve the Passionless Pill to save her daughter. We’ll seize this opportunity to snatch it – there’s no reason why we’ll fail. It’s a pity there’s only one Passionless Pill in the world, and since it’s going to you, my daughter’s life cannot be saved.”

“We don’t actually have to use real Passion Flowers to prick your daughter. We just need to put on an act and make her seem like she’s poisoned – this way, we get the pill and your daughter stays safe.”

Gongsun Zhi sighed. “That wretch is extremely shrewd. If my daughter was merely poisoned by something else, it will not go unnoticed.” His voice became constrained towards the end and he choked, as if he was really becoming emotional.

Li Mochou said, “How can I let your daughter be harmed in exchange for my life? It seems also that you are reluctant to part with her. Let’s drop this matter.”

Gongsun Zhi said hurriedly; “No...no! Although I hate to part with her, it would be worse to part with you.”

Li Mochou remained silent, admitting as much that there really was no other way.

“Let’s wait here,” said Gongsun Zhi. “I’ll call her out when it’s past midnight. Clever she might be, but she would never guess that her father has got something up his sleeve.”

Gongsun Lu’E heard every sentence that had just transpired between the two, and the more she dwelled on it the more she was afraid. When Gongsun Zhi dropped her and Yang Guo into the alligator pit that day, she knew her father cared

naught of their father-daughter relationship. But that day's events could be explained as a rash fit of anger. This day, he had actually plotted and schemed to end his daughter's life in order to please a woman he had just met. His heartlessness and cruelty truly exceeded that of the most savage beasts.

Gongsun Lu'E had originally lost her will to live, but when she heard them plotting her murder, she instinctively wanted to try and escape. It was a good thing that the area had plenty of hills and dense forests, making hiding places aplenty. And so she lightly took one step back, and after a few moments, took another step back. In this manner, she retreated tens of feet before finally turning around to flee.

After an hour's journey, she was far from Passionless Valley. Knowing her father would come for her soon, she didn't even dare to return to her bedroom. She sat perched on a rock, desolate. The cold wind pierced her flesh and the pale moon shone mercilessly down. There was nothing left in this world that she longed for, and she mumbled to herself, "I didn't want to go on living anyway. Why did you still devise this plot to kill me, father? If you want to kill me, come along and kill me. It's very strange, why did I escape?"

Suddenly, a notion struck her like a bolt of lightning: Father is vicious, but his scheme is brilliant. Since I'm going to commit suicide anyway, I might as well use his scheme to trick the Pill from mother and save Brother Yang. Then you, husband and wife, will have me to thank for your reunion – me, the ill-fated girl who cared for him with all her heart. At this thought, her heart was filled with a mixture of gladness and sorrow, but nevertheless she found her energy once again. She glanced at her surroundings to ascertain her location. Then, she rose and walked towards her mother's bedroom.

When she passed by the Passionless Flowers, she severed two flower stalks. Holding them in her hands, she walked to her mother's bedroom door and called in a low voice, "Mother, are you asleep?"

Qiu Qianchi answered from her room, "E'er, what is it?"

Lu'E cried, "Mother, mother! I've been pricked by the Passion Flowers." As she spoke, she embraced the flower stalks and pushed down forcefully onto her chest.

The hundreds and thousands of little thorns sank into her flesh all at once. Since her childhood she had been repeatedly warned against getting pricked by the flowers. Because she did not have the capacity for such risks then, she suffered no serious injury despite being pricked occasionally. But as she grew up, the warnings from people around her became sterner. After more than 10 years of cautiously avoiding this object – to think that now, she was actually pricking herself on purpose! The pain in her heart grew a level deeper and she grits her teeth, calling again and again, "Mother!"

Shocked to hear that something was wrong with her, Qiu Qianchi anxiously ordered the maidservants to open the door and help Lu'E inside. Lu'E exclaimed, "I have the Passion Flower thorns in my body, you can't come near me." The color drained from the two maidservants' faces and they opened the room door wide, allowing Lu'E to walk in herself. How would they dare to touch her body?

Upon seeing her daughter's shivering body with a face as pale as death, and with two Passion Flower stalks hanging from her chest, Qiu Qianchi asked hurriedly, "What happened to you? What happened?"

Lu'E cried, "Its father...Its father!" Afraid of her mother's suffocating gaze, she lowered her head, not daring to make

eye contact.

Qiu Qianchi said furiously, "And you still call him 'father'? What did that old thief do?"

"He... he..."

"Lift up your head and let me see you."

Lu'E obeyed and met her mother's frightening eyes. She shivered and said, "He... he was speaking secretively with the pretty Taoist priestess on Duan Chang Cliff... the priestess that came to the Valley today. I hid behind a rock to hear what they were saying..." Up till now, Lu'E had been speaking the truth. But after this point she would have to spin a lie, and afraid her mother would notice something unusual, she lowered her head.

Qiu Qianchi pressed, "What did the two of them say?"

Lu'E said, "They spoke of being together in illness, and something about being extraordinarily fated. They... they kept calling you 'wretch' and 'evil woman', and I couldn't stomach it..." At this, she started weeping.

Grinding her teeth, Qiu Qianchi said, "Don't cry...don't cry! What happened next?"

"I accidentally moved from my position, and they realized my presence. That priestess... that priestess then pushed me into the flower thickets."

Sensing hesitation in her tone, Qiu Qianchi said, "No, you're lying! What really happened? Don't even think of hiding it from me."

Lu'E broke out in cold sweat. "I didn't lie to you, this... aren't these Passion Flowers?"

"There was something wrong with your intonation," said Qiu Qianchi. "You have been like this since young, unable to tell lies of any sort. How would I, as your mother, not know this?"

An idea came to Lu'E and she said, "Mother, I was lying, it was actually father who pushed me into the thickets. He was angry at me for following you and helping you, saying that I only wanted mother and not father. He... he was trying his utmost to please that pretty Taoist priestess."

Qiu Qianchi hated her husband to the core and Lu'E's words struck precisely at her heart's threshold, suiting her perfectly. Immediately she had no further doubts and took Lu'E's lies to be true. She hurriedly held her daughter's hand and said gently, "Lu'E, don't be afraid, your mother will deal with that old thief. There was always going to be a time where we finally vented this hatred in our hearts." She then ordered the maidservants to bring her a pair of scissors and tweezers. First she removed the stalks from Lu'E's chest, and then used the tweezers to extract the broken thorns.

Choking with grief, Lu'E said, "Mother, I don't think I'll survive this time round."

"Don't worry, we still have one half of the Passionless Pill," said Qiu Qianchi. "Luckily we didn't waste it on that heartless scoundrel Yang Guo. After taking the half Pill, you still won't be totally rid of the poison but if you be good and stay by mother, completely ignoring all worthless men, or even completely shutting them out from your thoughts, then you'll definitely be safe." Qiu Qianchi had bitterly endured her husband's torture, and then Yang Guo refused to become her son-in-law. She hated all the world's men with a vengeance, and there would be nothing better than if her daughter remained unmarried all her life.

Lu'E frowned in silence. Qiu Qianchi asked, "Where's that old thief and the Taoist priestess? Where are they?"

Lu'E replied, "I struggled up from the flower thickets and didn't dare look back. They're probably still there."

Qiu Qianchi thought to herself: "Now that the old thief has found a powerful helper, he will definitely return to claim back the Valley. The disciples here are all probably his followers. In a confrontation, they would undoubtedly help the old thief. Either that or they will just sit on the fence, not helping any side, but they will definitely not oppose him. All my limbs are crippled and I can only use my date stone skill. If fired at an unprepared opponent, its power is extremely great. But that old thief will be on his guard and I will probably not be able to withstand his attacks. If he uses the tablet to attack, then I will be left with no devices. What, then, should I do?" Qiu Qianchi's eyes flickered as she remained silent, deep in thought.

Thinking that her mother was now deliberating if her words were truth or fallacy, she was terrified that more questions would be asked and the truth exposed, eventually. Her own pain and suffering was secondary, but if she failed to get the Passionless Pill, Yang Guo would never be rid of the poison. The moment Yang Guo flitted into her mind, a huge pain seized her chest and she let out a cry. Qiu Qianchi reached out and caressed her daughter's hair, saying, "Let's go and retrieve the Passionless Pill." With two claps of her hand, the maidservants carried her chair out of the room.

Ever since Yang Guo left the valley previously, Lu'E had always wanted to know where her mother had hidden the half Passionless Pill. She had heard her mother mention before that the pill must never be hidden near her, or anyone could kill her and obtain it through a simple search. Lu'E thought to herself that since her mother was disabled and required people to carry her around, the pill couldn't possibly be hidden in some place of extremely great height. Hiding it in the mountain caves or secluded valleys was also out of the

question, so it should be hidden within the manor. But Lu'E had spent the last ten days or so searching the Pill Room, the Sword Room, the garden and the bedrooms, but there was no sign of it anywhere. Presently, the maidservants carried Qiu Qianchi towards the Great Hall, and this came as a big surprise. The Hall was where everyone frequented and it was the hardest place to conceal an object. Furthermore, strong opponents seeking the Passionless Pill were now congregated in the Great Hall itself. Could it be that the Pill had been there all along for anyone's taking?

The metal doors of the Great Hall had been firmly shut and the disciples were guarding it with their knives and fishnets. Upon seeing Qiu Qianchi's arrival, the disciples went forward and saluted. The head disciple bowed and said, "The enemies have not made any move and seem to be helplessly waiting for death."

Qiu Qianchi retorted with a "humph", thinking: "What of a frog in the well, not knowing the vastness of earth and sky. These are no ordinary people who have come with ill intentions. How could they be ones to helplessly wait for death?" Aloud, she commanded, "Open the door!" Two disciples opened the metal door while another eight flanked Qiu Qianchi, guarding her with two fishnets. Together, they moved into the Hall.

Yideng, Huang Rong, Wu Santong and Yelu Qi were all sitting in one corner of the Hall. After Qiu Qianchi's maidservants lowered her chair onto the floor, she said, "All here except Huang Rong and her two daughters are free to leave without hindrance. I will not pursue your crime of intruding into the Valley, so please take your leave immediately."

Huang Rong smiled and said, "Valley-Owner Qiu, a misfortune looms over your head and still you do not know

enough to flee. Instead you come here and exaggerate your importance. It makes one's teeth go cold."

Qiu Qianchi's heart chilled at this, thinking: "How does she know a misfortune looms? Could it be that she knows the old thief has returned?" She said coolly, "Whether it is a blessing or misfortune, retribution will reveal. This old lady is a cripple with handicapped limbs, what else can I be afraid of?"

Of course, Huang Rong knew nothing of Gongsun Zhi's return. But one's countenance speaks everything: she noticed that there was a furrow in Qiu Qianchi's brow and could tell that something weighed heavily on her mind. This was a contrast to the arrogant and ruthless expression she wore when exiting the Hall. Huang Rong conjectured that something must have cropped up in the Valley and so, said a few words to verify. Qiu Qianchi's defensive response told her that she was most probably right.

"Valley-Owner Qiu, your elder brother slipped and fell into the depths of the valley himself, and was definitely not harmed by junior. If you still bear a grudge over this matter then junior will not try to avoid death, but you must first hand over the antidote to cure Yang Guo's poison," said Huang Rong. "If I do die, all my friends here will bear no grudge against you for it and will even help you fend off this pending misfortune and fight the internal enemy. Do you accept this bargain?"

Huang Rong's offer seemed extremely advantageous to Qiu Qianchi, seeing as the latter, being a cripple, could only rely on her powerful date stone skill to inflict any kind of harm. Mentioning the words 'internal enemy' also struck Qiu Qianchi's biggest worry.

Qiu Qianchi thought to herself: "Isn't this too good to be true?" Aloud, she said: "You are Leader of the Beggar Clan, so I assume you will hold true to your words. Should I strike you

with three of my date stones, you will not dodge or use any weapon to deflect them?”

Before Huang Rong could even reply, Guo Fu butted in, “My mother just said she will not avoid it, but she never said she wouldn’t use a weapon to deflect it.”

Huang Rong smiled and said, “If Valley-Owner Qiu wants to vent her heart’s hatred, then junior will certainly not use any weapons to deflect.”

“Mother! How can this do?” cried Guo Fu. Her long sword had earlier been broken by the date stone’s strike, and she knew its power was incomparable. Her mother was after all made of flesh and blood, how could she survive without avoiding or deflecting?

But Huang Rong thought: “The Guo family owes Guo’er a huge debt. Now that he has contracted this deadly poison, we must obtain the antidote no matter what. Her date stone skill is one of the deadliest projectile arts in the world, if I let her hit me with three stones it is indeed dangerous. Just a slight moment of carelessness will cost me my life, but how would she be willing to hand over the antidote otherwise?”

Huang Rong had chosen her words wisely, making sure that Qiu Qianchi’s every need was met. The intention was to lessen her bitterness and worry. In her moment of anxiety they would help her fend off her enemy, and to lessen her bitterness she would be free to injure Huang Rong in the only way she could. Even Qiu Qianchi herself would not be able to think a more advantageous offer than this. But Qiu Qianchi suspected it was too good to be true. She said hoarsely: “You are my mortal enemy, yet here you are, willing to take three date stones from me. What scheme are you hiding? What ill intentions do you have?”

Huang Rong went forward and said in a low voice, "There are many pairs of eyes and ears in this place, most of which harbor ill intentions towards you. I'm going to whisper a few things in your ear."

Qiu Qianchi swept a glance at all the disciples and thought: "Amongst them are many of the old thief's followers. Indeed I should be careful." She nodded.

Huang Rong went near and whispered, "Your enemy will be attacking soon. Isn't junior in a precarious situation as well? Let us quickly bury this hatchet and, no matter if junior lives or dies everyone can fight side-by-side and resist the enemy. Furthermore I am indebted to Yang Guo; I must obtain the Passionless Pill for him even if it costs me my life. If one does not know how to repay kindness, would he be any different to any beast on this earth?" Ending her sentence, she took three steps back and concentrated her gaze on Qiu Qianchi.

At the words 'if one does not know how to repay kindness, would he be different to any beast', Qiu Qianchi gave a start, thinking: "If it wasn't for that fellow Yang Guo who saved me, I'd still be all alone in that underground cave, suffering in silence." But this thought came and went as fast as lightning and her heart hardened once more. She said icily: "Your pretty words do nothing to change my iron heart. Come, come! Take three of my date stones!"

Huang Rong flung her sleeve and said, "Then I'll put my life on the line and take three of your iron date stones." As she spoke she moved backwards, stopping in the middle of the Hall about thirty feet from Qiu Qianchi. "Please fire your date stones!"

Though Wu Santong knew that Huang Rong was always full of wit and ideas, everyone was witness to the power of Qiu Qianchi's date stone skill. Now, seeing Huang Rong standing there barehanded, all their hearts beat anxiously. Guo Fu was

even more worried and walked over to Huang Rong, tugging at her sleeve. "Mother," she whispered. "Let's find a place, I'll give you the Hedgehog Armor so you can put it on, then we don't have to be afraid of that old hag's deadly projectiles."

Huang Rong slid. "What's the point if I use the Hedgehog Armor to block the date stones? Wait and see your mother's method."

At this moment, Qiu Qianchi said: "Everyone else move..." before the word 'aside' left her mouth, a date stone had already been fired at Huang Rong's abdomen. Though it was just a tiny date stone, it sliced through the air so violently that the sound of its speed sounded like a shrill flute. With a high-pitched cry, Huang Rong bent over, clutching her stomach.

Guo Fu, Wu Santong and the others were horrified and before they could go over to help her up, the 'flute' sounded again – the second date stone had been fired, this time at Huang Rong's chest. Again, with a loud cry, Huang Rong swayed and moved unsteadily backwards, looking like she was about to fall.

Qiu Qianchi saw that Huang Rong was indeed true to her word, making no attempt to dodge. The two date stones had already struck the essential points of her body. With that same kind of compelling force, the iron date stones could break even a rock, what more of human flesh? But Huang Rong had sustained two date stones without falling, obviously hanging on despite the pain to receive the third date stone. Secretly astounded, Qiu Qianchi thought to her self: "At first I thought this woman looked too delicate to possess any real substance as Leader of the Beggar Clan. But now it seems like she is indeed a formidable pugilist!"

At the thought of Huang Rong's imminent death after receiving two date stones, she couldn't help but feel pleased.

With a “po” sound, the third date stone left her mouth. This time, it went for Huang Rong’s throat. With the stone penetrating the throat, her brother’s killer would definitely die on the spot.

When Huang Rong said that she would take three hits of her date stones, she had yet to think of any good ideas, knowing that she could only do so in exchange for the Pill. She would then die and repay her debt to Yang Guo. But after having a quiet chat with Qiu Qianchi, she had a notion which invoked many thoughts in her brain, a plan struck her mind. Huang Rong had secretly picked up Guo Fu’s sword. It had been broken earlier by the fired date stones. She had it hidden in her sleeve. When the dates were fired later, she could bend her elbow and use the broken sword’s handle to deflect the stone. But the impact of the date stones and the sword would cause a metallic sound, so she had shouted two times to cover the sounds. This clever move had indeed perfectly prevented Qiu Qianchi from suspecting anything.

Huang Rong had deliberately faked being injured severely as these could both reduce the anger of Qiu Qianchi and save her face for being the master of the valley. The third date stone was aimed to hit her throat, so Huang Rong could not raise her sleeve, and block it with the hidden sword handle. If she did, Qiu Qianchi would then be able to see through the ruse. This would expose her breaking of the covenant of not blocking and not avoiding. In the situation now, she could only accept the risk. She slightly bent both of her elbows, waiting for the date stone to fly to her lips. Her chest had already been filled with 'Zhen Qi', and when she opened her mouth, with all her effort, she pushed the 'Zhen Qi' out of her mouth. It was all because she knew where the date stones would come that caused her to be so flexible. She used her 'Zhen Qi' against Qiu Qianchi's as her's was near but Qiu Qianchi's was far. She could then take great advantage of this situation and reduce the speed of the date stones. One

thing she did not know was, that in the past, Qiu Qianchi had been living in a cave alone. Though her limbs were disabled, she had practiced spitting date stones everyday and all the time not wondering about other things.

Huang Rong, on the other hand, had gong li that was not as deep and profound as Qiu Qianchi's. She still had to take care of the matters of the Beggar Clan, protecting Xiangyang, giving birth to children and teaching her disciples. How could she compare with Qiu Qianchi? Thus, when her 'Zhen Qi' was released, the date stone's speed was only reduced a little, as it was not comparable to the force and power of the flying date stone.

Huang Rong was shocked when she noticed this, but the date stone was already in front of her lips. She had no other ideas and so she opened her mouth and bit at the date stone as hard as possible. The force of the iron date stone shook her teeth terribly and created awful pain in her gums. She was staggered and stepped back two steps. The date stone had really forced her back this time. But, fortunately for her fast thinking in such a short time and the two quick back steps she took, her front teeth were saved or else they would have broken off immediately after the hit. Though they were saved from breaking off, the impact had her gums bleeding.

The people standing around shouted in shock together, and surrounded her. Huang Rong raised her head and spit out the date stone and it stuck in one of the wooden planks of the roof. She frowned and said, "Qiu Valley Master, sister has taken your three date stone hits, my life will not last long. I only hope you will not break your promise and give me the pill." Qiu Qianchi saw that she could even stop her swift flying date stone by biting it, and was a little shocked as well, but she could not understand why the first two date stones did not cause her to fall down though they were shot into her body with great force. She glanced at Gongsun Lu'E, and

thought, 'My daughter has been poisoned by the Passion Flower. Even if he becomes my son-in-law, how could I still give the remaining half Passionless Pill to him..?' But just now she had agreed, in front of everyone, that she would give Huang Rong the pill. She could not deny it. She had a plan suddenly and spoke, "Guo Madam, though both of us are women, we do what we promise, it is always this way. You have voluntarily taken my three date stones; such bravery is very rare now in this world. I admire you very much, and so the pill I will surely give you. If I am in trouble, I do wish everyone here could lend me a helping hand."

Guo Fu really thought her mother had taken the three date stones without trickery, and shouted, "If my mother is injured heavily, everyone here would have already fought with their lives against you." She turned her head towards Huang Rong and said, "Ma...where did the old woman's date stones hit you?"

Huang Rong did not answer her daughter's question, but spoke to Qiu Qianchi instead, "My daughter speaks nonsense. Valley Master need not take it seriously. Sister had always spoken and done what she says and will voluntarily help Valley Master force the enemy to retreat if you could give me the pill." Wu Santong and the others had heard Huang Rong speak with clear and bright voice and plenty of air in her lungs. They were slowly feeling relieved when she didn't seem to be injured at all. Qiu Qianchi had also noticed it too. She was very shocked and confused deep in her heart, and thought, "She has such great martial arts that makes it even more difficult for me to break the promise. I can only lie to her." She nodded and spoke, "I would thank you first then." And turned her head towards her daughter and said, "Come over here Lu'E, I have something to say."

Huang Rong had faced so many people who were cunning and unfaithful in her life. She had already noticed there was

something amiss when Qiu Qianchi's eyes blinked non stop. She knew that Qiu Qianchi would not easily give up the pill, but she could not think of any trickery to use yet. She only heard Qiu Qianchi say, "Go ahead in front of me and flip over the fifth tile." Gongsun Lu'E was both shocked and amazed, 'Could it be that the Passionless Pill is hidden under the tile..?' Once Huang Rong heard what she said, she was astonished and praised her in her heart for being so cautious and clever. "This Passionless Pill is so precious that there are many who wanted to have it. It is really ingenious of her to keep it in such an unthinkable place. The pill kept under the tile must really be the real one. She could not possibly have thought that she could be left in such a situation as now, and keep a fake pill under the tile." If Qiu Qianchi was to order her servants to go any medicine room or pharmacy to get the pill, Huang Rong would have wondered if the pill was the real one or a fake one. But now, when she saw Gongsun Lu'E following her mother's orders to flip the tile over, she had fewer worries.

Gongsun Lu'E counted to the fifth tile and pried it up with the small dagger from her waist. She saw dust and ashes under the tile, which was nothing unusual. Qiu Qianchi then spoke, "The hidden secret under the tile cannot be known by others, Lu'E, come over here."

Huang Rong knew that Qiu Qianchi had some cunning thoughts, deliberately acted as though she was seriously injured. She bent herself down slowly so Qiu Qianchi would suspect nothing about her yet. Then, she tilted her ear slightly towards them, trying to eavesdrop on their words. She gave full attention toward them but to no avail. She could only hear "the Passionless Pill is under the green tile" these seven words. This information was not much of a use, as she already knew that the pill was underneath the tile. Qiu Qianchi's voice gradually softened, and thus she was not able to hear another word. She took a look back at Gongsun

Lu'E but there was only a slight frown on her face. She was also nodding in reply.

Huang Rong was already in a frantic state, as she knew that the situation was aggravating but had no way to deal with it. Suddenly, she heard Reverend Yideng speak, "Rong'er, come over here so I can see your wounds..." Huang Rong turned her head to face Reverend Yideng. Seeing Reverend Yideng sitting in a corner of the room, and realizing he had caring look, she thought, "If he feels my wrist, he will know I was actually not injured." Thus, she walked over and stuck out her hand. Reverend Yideng stretched three fingers and placed them on her wrist, mumbling, "Amitufo (the Buddhist word)...the old granny said... Amitufo...there are two bottles under the tile... Amitufo, Amitufo...in the East side is the real pill...Amitufo...in the West side is the fake pill...tells her daughter to take the fake pill, which is on the west... Amitufo... you take the real pill... Amitufo..."

When Reverend Yideng mumbled the Buddhist words, his voice was bright and clear, but when he told her the hidden information, he lowered his voice into a whisper. Huang Rong had only to hear him say, "the old granny said", these four words, and she immediately understood and knew Reverend Yideng's tremendously powerful internal energy made his eyes and ears much better than a normal human. The Buddhist religion is said to have "eyes that can see heaven", and "ears that can hear heaven". It is said in the Buddhist scripture that people with such skills, could hear six different types of sounds in the world without being confused. This type of saying is over exaggerated and is, of course, not believable. But when someone with deep and profound internal energy, a pure and simple heart, has exceptionally incredible ears, which could hear what a normal human could not. This is not strange but rather to be expected.

Though Qiu Qianchi had whispered to her daughter, Reverend Yideng, who sat a few feet away, could hear every single word clearly. He knew that the pill's ingenuity is linked to Yang Guo's life, and so informed Huang Rong about it. The Buddhist religion had always cared about other people's lives.

Huang Rong waited for Reverend Yideng to finish his Buddhist words, and so asked, "Can my injury be healed?" "Can the date stones shoot all at once?" Every sentence she asked, had just nicely covered up Reverend Yideng's hidden speech, such as "in the East side is the real pill", "in the West side is the fake pill". Qiu Qianchi glanced at both of them for a while, but seeing that Huang Rong had a worried look on her face, asking non-stop about her injuries and Reverend Yideng's continuously repeating "Amitufo", she fell for the trick, not knowing that her treacherous plan was discovered.

After listening to her mother's words, Lu'E nodded, bent down and reached into the soil under the tile and felt. There were indeed two bottles; her heart turned sour and thought secretly, 'Dear Yang Guo dear Yang Guo, today I risk my life to get the real pill for you. Of this bitter effort, you will never know, will you?' Immediately, she touched the East bottle and took it out saying, "Mother, the Passionless Pill is here!" She stretched her hand deep under the tile, and was the only one who knew it was the bottle which contained the real pill. Both Qiu Qianchi and Huang Rong thought that it was the one from the West side.

The physical appearance of the two bottles was the same; the pills in the two bottles looked alike too. If Qiu Qianchi did not stick out her tongue to try the pill herself, she would not be able to tell whether it's real or fake. She saw Gongsun Lu'E take out a bottle and thought, "At first, I was still suspecting that this daughter would steal the pill from me to help her lover, but now she had also gotten the Passionless

Flower's poison. She will now be thinking to save herself." Qiu Qianchi was born to be very cunning, evil, harsh and ungrateful. She would never believe anyone on Earth to be willing to sacrifice their life to save others and so said, "We will do what we promised, and I will give the pill to Guo madam..." Lu'E walked towards Huang Rong with both her hands carrying the bottle.

Huang Rong bowed towards Qiu Qianchi in the traditional way and replied, "Thank you for the sincere offer." But she thought in the other way, 'Now I know where the real pill is, could I not easily steal it..?'

Just as she stretched out her hand to receive the bottle, a man suddenly crashed through the roof, making a big hole. That man dropped down and immediately snatched away the bottle which was in Gongsun Lu'E's hands.

Gongsun Lu'E hollered, "Father!" Huang Rong saw that Gongsun Lu'E's face turned pale all of a sudden, and was very anxious. She couldn't stop from feeling astonished, "The bottle Gongsun Zhi took was obviously the fake one, but why is she so worried..?" At this moment, the main room's door suddenly got blasted off with a huge sound, shaking the whole room and causing every red candle's flame to flicker non-stop. The light in the room glowed brightly, followed by a loud sound. The main door split in two, and the door flew off. A man and three women walked in. The man was Yang Guo; the others were Xiao Longnu, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang.

Gongsun Lu'E saw Yang Guo coming in, shouted with a lost voice, "Brother Yang....." Running towards him, but she felt it was inappropriate and stopped after two steps. She also restrained the sentence she wanted to say. Huang Rong had been noticing Gongsun Lu'E, and saw her eyes revealing deep love towards Yang Guo when she glanced at him. There was also infinite worry in her eyes.

Huang Rong suddenly realized, “Rong’er, Rong’er. How come you don’t understand the girl’s heart even though you have been a mother for so long? Though her mother ordered her to give me the fake pill, she was totally obsessed with Yang Guo, and the pill she tried to give me was the real one. Gongsun Zhi had snatched away the miracle pill, why would she not worry?”

End of Chapter 31 .

Chapter 32 - What is Love

Translation by Xiao_Long_Nu & Frans Soetomo



Yang Guo looked across the ravine at the Heart-Breaking Cliff. In the whitish mist, he could almost see the indistinct figure of a woman in white with a red flower in the hair by one of her temples. The woman seemed to move swiftly as she engaged Gongsun Zhi in an intense battle with the pair of swords in her hands.

When Huang Rong, Yideng, Guo Fu and the other were trapped in the main hall, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu were sitting side by side near the flower bushes, chatting. Not too long afterward, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang arrived. Xiao Longnu saw that Cheng Ying was warm and elegant; she felt a sense of attraction toward her. Immediately she took Cheng Ying's hand and they talked. At the same time, Lu Wushuang told Yang Guo about the fight between Guo Fu and her, how she made her confused and at a loss for words and how Cheng Ying made her lose her sword and lose the moment. After meeting both Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang again, Yang Guo once again felt a little guilty and sorry that he couldn't repay their love for him. Aware that Lu Wushuang apparently knew that Xiao Longnu was now his wife, she was still comfortable in front of Xiao Longnu. Cheng Ying was talking with Xiao Longnu quietly, he was greatly relieved.

The four of them sat on a rock, Xiao Longnu was talking to Cheng Ying and Yang Guo was chatting with Lu Wushuang. Xiao Longnu and Cheng Ying's characters were quieter, and they had fewer things to talk about. Yang Guo and Lu Wushuang were talking non-stop and cracking many jokes, calling each other names like "Dumb Egg" (Sha Dan) and "Wifey". All of a sudden, Cheng Ying spoke out cutting off their speech, "Yang Da Ge [Big Brother], you have Yang Da Sao [Big Sister-in-law] here, so you'll have to change your words when addressing my cousin..." She was laughing while she was talking.

Yang Guo let out a soft cry, “ah”, and stretched out his hand to cover his mouth. In the mean time, Lu Wushuang suddenly felt embarrassed. Her face reddened immediately. Cheng Ying thought silently, “They were only joking and the words contained no serious meaning. I shouldn’t have said it, and now it has made things uncomfortable...” She immediately spoke, “Yang Da Ge, you’ve got the Passionless Poison in your body, how are you feeling now?” Yang Guo replied, “I’m alright. Auntie Guo is very clever and full of ideas. I believe she can get me the miracle pill. I’m only worried about my wife’s injury...” He was pointing towards Xiao Longnu with one finger.

Both Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang were shocked and asked, “What? Yang Da Sao is also injured? We had no idea.” Xiao Longnu smiled slightly and said, “It’s actually nothing. I used my internal energy to stop the poison from spreading. I have been fine these past few days.” Lu Wushuang replied, “What poison is it? Is it the ‘Passionless Poison’ again?” Xiao Longnu said, “No it isn’t, it is my senior sister’s ‘Soul Freezing Needles’.” Lu Wushuang replied, “Of course it’s that disgusting Li Mochou again. Dumb....Big Brother Yang; didn’t you see her ‘Five Poison Secrets’ book? Though the ‘Soul Freezing Needle’ maybe strong, it isn’t difficult to neutralize.”

Yang Guo just sighed softly. Sorrowfully he said, “The poison has infected her blood stream and her internal organs; it is impossible to neutralize it with any ordinary antidote.” Then he proceeded to tell them how Guo Fu – unintentionally – launched the ‘Soul Freezing Needle’ while his wife was trying to cure herself by reversing her blood flow.

Lu Wushuang angrily struck the stone she was sitting on; she was very angry. “Guo Fu really did not follow in her parents’ footsteps; she is ignorant of the laws of heaven. Cousin, we can’t just sit here doing nothing. I don’t care if her parents are chivalrous heroes of the world, I am not afraid of them.”

"We can't really blame her," Xiao Longnu commented. "The situation was entirely different than when she chopped off Guo'er's arm."

"Yang Da Sao," Cheng Ying stated, "My Shifu said that with a strong internal energy we can momentarily halt the spread of the poison; however, the longer the poison resides in our bodies, the worse the end condition will be. Therefore, we will have to get rid of it as soon as possible."

Xiao Longnu only uttered a "Hmm" sound, but Yang Guo thought, "When the Divine Indian Monk wakes up, whether or not he can neutralize the poison, is really hard to say." He did not want to upset Xiao Longnu, so he did not say what he was thinking, he simply said, "I wonder how Auntie Guo and Reverend Yideng are dealing with that mad monk; we'd better go and take a look."

Immediately they sought the way to the main hall. While they are still dozens of zhangs [a zhang is approximately 10 feet/3 meters] away, they saw a dark shadow flashing upward, whom they recognized as Gongsun Zhi. Then a very loud crashing was heard; Gongsun Zhi was smashing a hole in the hall's rooftop and jumping down.

Yang Guo did not dare follow Gongsun Zhi's way of entering the hall via the rooftop since he was wary of the enemy's nets. He destroyed the stone door with his heavy iron sword instead.

When Gongsun Zhi entered the hall and saw Huang Rong and the other skilled martial artists, he was not afraid. He thought, "If I can't fight them, I can always run away, can't I?" He was about to rush outside when suddenly Yang Guo entered the hall by smashing the door. He was startled. He kicked his feet to the ground and leaped up to get out of the hall the same way he entered. His goal that particular moment was to get the antidote [Passionless Pill] for Li

Mochou. Killing Qiu Qianchi and taking back the Passionless Valley could wait another day.

Just as Gongsun Zhi leaped up, Huang Rong followed with the 'Dog Beating Stick' in her hand; using the 'chan' [entangle] technique she entangled Gongsun Zhi's leg. "Old thief!" Qiu Qianchi shouted, and launched an iron date stone [zao he ding] toward Gongsun Zhi's waist. When he was leaping up vertically he had anticipated this attack, so he swung his saber and knocked the projectile down while maintaining his speed going up. But then his ears heard another sound, the second shot was coming his way. His golden saber was still extended; there was not enough time to pull it back. In the meantime Huang Rong's dog beating stick had already entangled his leg and hit his thigh. He could not let the stone hit his abdomen, so he twisted his body frantically and bent his knees trying to elude it.

To everybody's surprise, Qiu Qianchi launched the stone in a very extraordinary way. Everybody could see that those two date stones were directed at Gongsun Zhi. Who would have thought that about half a foot away from Gongsun Zhi, the second date stone suddenly changed course, made a small circle in the air, and ... flew toward Huang Rong! Not even in her wildest dreams could Huang Rong have predicted what had happened. Frantically she moved her dog-beating stick and tried to knock the nail down, but the force carried by that iron date stone nail was too great; Huang Rong's body shook, her arm and hand hurt. With a 'clank' sound the dog-beating stick fell onto the ground and Huang Rong followed after it.

Because of the interruption, Gongsun Zhi was also forced to come back down. He landed next to Huang Rong and immediately swung his saber horizontally toward her. Yang Guo swung his black sword and a strong gust of wind attacked Gongsun Zhi. Yang Guo's attack was so fierce that

Gongsun Zhi's saber was pushed back about three feet. Gongsun Zhi felt the force carried by that sword was earth shattering, in his heart he was frightened no end that Yang Guo - who had lost one arm - had made a tremendous improvement in just one short month.

At that time Lu'E was standing in between her father and mother. She used to be afraid of her father, not daring to speak even half a word; but ever since she overheard her father and Li Mochou's conversation at Broken Heart Cliff, that her father would rather sacrifice his own daughter's life for some woman he barely knew, she experienced a change of heart. She challenged her father, "Father, you crippled Mother's limbs and threw her down into an underground cave. Such viciousness was indeed very rare. Tonight at the Broken Heart Cliff, you discussed something with Li Mochou. May your daughter know what is it about?"

Gongsun Zhi's heart turned cold, he was not aware, that in that secluded place, somebody would have heard their conversation. Even though he was cruel he was still deeply embarrassed, considering his evil plan to harm his own daughter. Now that his daughter confronted him publicly his face paled, "Wh...What? I didn't say anything ..." he stammered.

Lu'E wryly said, "You mean to kill your own daughter for the sake of a woman who is a stranger to our family. I am your daughter. If you want me dead, I certainly would not rebel against you. But Mother has promised to give the Passionless Pill in your hand to somebody else. Please, give that pill back to me." She moved two steps forward and held her hand out to him.

Gongsun Zhi hastily put the porcelain bottle inside his pocket and with a cold laugh said, "One of you betrayed her own husband, while the other rebelled against her father.

Both are wicked. I don't want to deal with you just now. Wait for my revenge." Brandishing his sword and saber so that they made a buzzing sound, he walked out the hall with big strides.

After listening to Lu'E, although Yang Guo did not understand the whole story, he lifted his black sword blocking Gongsun Zhi's way. He turned his head toward Lu'E and asked, "Miss Gongsun, I would like to ask you a question."

Hearing his voice Gongsun Lu'E was overwhelmed with self-pity, she thought, "I would sacrifice my life to give you the antidote, yet I can't let you know that. Several years from now your house will be full of your children and grandchildren and you will soon forget this ill-fated wretched woman. Why would I cause you a life-long regret over this matter?" She lowered her head and asked, "Brother Yang, I am waiting for your question."

"You said your father wants to harm you for a stranger, who is that woman? And would you enlighten me on what happened?" Yang Guo asked.

"That woman was Li Mochou. What happened was ..." She hesitated a little bit, and then said, "Even though my father means me harm, he is still my father. I do not want to tell ... "

"Lu'E, speak up! Tell us!" growled her mother. "He had the courage to do evil, why would you be afraid to unmask him?"

The young lady just shook her head and said with a sad voice, "Brother Yang, half of the pill is inside the bottle in Father's hand. I ... I am an unfilial daughter." Speaking to this point she could not contain herself anymore, "Ma!" she called, as she ran toward her mother and hid her face in her bosom.

When she said 'I am an unfilial daughter' Qiu Qianchi thought she was referring to defying her father, but actually she meant she was defying her mother's instructions. The hall was full of people, but Huang Rong was the only one understood her true meaning.

Since they were surrounded by the enemy Gongsun Zhi had tried to find a way to escape, "Luckily in this critical moment that crazy old hag wounded Madame Guo with her date stone; while they are trying to harm each other, I will have an opportunity to get out of here," he thought. Laughing hard he shouted, "Good! My sweet child! You and your mother just stay on your guard over there. Let us destroy these scoundrels who dare to enter our Passionless Valley." Brandishing his sword and saber he attacked Huang Rong.

Huang Rong's right arm was still hurting; she could not hold the dog-beating stick yet, so she had no choice but to lean sideways to avoid the attack. Guo Fu lifted the sword in her hand trying to protect her mother. Gongsun Zhi's black sword thrust toward Guo Fu's throat; Guo Fu parried with her sword. "Watch out!" cried Huang Rong. With a 'clang' sound the girl's sword was cut in two. Gongsun Zhi's sword kept going! Guo Fu froze! Her heart was almost jumping out of her throat; she was incapable of doing anything.

"Fend off with your right arm!" cried Lu Wushuang from the side.

In that crucial moment, as the black sword almost pierced her throat, Guo Fu raised her right arm without thinking ...

Everybody eyes were wide open. Suddenly Cheng Ying's voice was heard, "Cousin! How could you ..." Miss Cheng knew that her cousin said that because she held a grudge against Guo Fu who chopped off Yang Guo's right arm. Cheng Ying was also extremely grieved that Yang Guo lost his arm; she had cried her heart out silently and of course she also

hated Guo Fu for acting so rashly. But she realized it was an unfortunate accident; she definitely had never thought of chopping off her arm to retaliate. Therefore, hearing Lu Wushuang, she moved forward trying to block, but that black sword had already pierced Miss Guo's right arm.

"Rrrrrrip!" Guo Fu's clothes were slashed open and she staggered backward; but strangely her arm was unharmed, showing not even a drop of blood. Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang were startled. Gongsun Zi and Qiu Qianchi were shocked. Stabilizing herself Guo Fu exclaimed, "Thank you Big Sister! How did you know ..." Miss Guo was not the smartest kid in the world and she thanked Lu Wushuang for "saving" her life.

Yang Guo quickly interrupted her, "This old scoundrel, Gongsun Zhi, does not know your special skill." He knew Huang Rong had soft-hedgehog armor, which was not penetrable by even the sharpest sword or saber. When Guo Fu's arm was not even scratched, she immediately realized it was because of the soft-hedgehog armor; thus she was asking, "How did you know ..." she was going to say, "...that I'm wearing the soft-hedgehog armor?" Yang Guo thought it was fortunate that Gongsun Zhi's sharp sword was not able to injure her and that shocked Gongsun Zhi, but it wouldn't serve any good purpose for him to know the whole story. Yang Guo said, "This lady is the daughter of Great Hero Guo and Clan Leader Huang, the granddaughter of the Peach Blossom Island Master Huang Yaoshi; she inherited a very special skill which makes her body impenetrable by any weapon. How could your rusty sword hurt her?"

"Hmm! I was being lenient with her. Do you think I could not take her life?" Gongsun Zhi mockingly swung his sword back and forth, making a buzzing noise.

Guo Fu was furious by his condescending remark. "He would not be able to hurt me because of this protective vest. If I attack fiercely, I will gain the upper hand," she thought, and then said, "Brother Xiuwen, let me lend your sword. This devious old man does not believe in Peach Blossom Island's superior martial arts. Let me introduce them to him."

Xiuwen gave his sword to the young lady, who then brandished it and shouted arrogantly, "Devious old man Gongsun! Let's fight again!"

Just by seeing her move Gongsun Zhi could see her meager abilities. "Alright, please give me a lesson or two!" He snarled and hacked with his saber. Guo Fu leaned sideways eluding that attack and thrust her sword at the same time. She was shocked to see the black sword in front of her face. "Not good!" Guo Fu said in her heart, "I have the soft-hedgehog armor on me, but this sword does not have any protection, if hit by his sword, it would certainly be cut in two." Therefore, she held her thrust and jumped backward. Gongsun Zhi then moved his two weapons to his right hand, while his bare left hand attacked her. Guo Fu was thrilled, "Go ahead and hit my soft-hedgehog armor and injure yourself," she thought. But she also realized that if she took the full force of his hand head on, her internal organs would be injured as well. She then slanted her body slightly to neutralize 70% of his force and waited for his hand to hit her. Surprisingly, Gongsun Zhi leaped backward just before touching her clothes and cried, "Good little girl! You attack me stealthily!" He staggered and almost fell down.

Guo Fu was bewildered, "I didn't attack you stealthily!" but then she thought, "Could it be that the soft-hedgehog armor is so incredible that he is injured even before touching it?"

How would she know Gongsun Zhi was just pretending? His goal was achieved, he had the pill and now he just wanted to

dart out and give the pill to Li Mochou. He did not have any time to vie for supremacy with a little kid like Guo Fu. He realized that among these intruders: Yang Guo and Huang Rong were the strongest and that long eyebrowed monk, who was sitting meditating quietly, certainly was not an easy rival. He wanted to use the opportunity, while everybody thought Guo Fu was winning, to sneak out through the back door.

Lu'E, however, had kept her eyes on her father. She immediately made her move. "Father, hold on!" At that moment two date stones flew, Qiu Qianchi was afraid she might injure her daughter, so she aimed toward Gongsun Zhi's head. He quickly ducked and the stones barely missed Lu'E's temple before they hit the wall.

"Get out of the way!" he barked, and lunged toward his daughter.

The young woman held her ground and said, "Give me back the pill ..." But before she could finish, her hand was grabbed and she was held in front of his chest as a shield. He snapped, "Wicked woman! If you want me to die, then let the two of us die together." By that time Qiu Qianchi had already launched two more stones. She was shocked, but fortunately managed to move her head a little so that the stones flew and missed Lu'E's body.

What she did not anticipate was that the stones hit two of the valley disciples. One was hit on the head, the other on the chest. They died instantly. Gongsun Zhi was delighted with this turn of events. In his effort to take the valley back, he would need not only Li Mochou's help, but his disciples' as well.

Without wasting a single moment he shouted, "You wicked woman! You dare to kill my disciples! I will hold you responsible!" But because of this incident, he was held back

and Yang Guo already stood in front of him. “Mr. Gongsun... not so fast, we need to talk about these many problems first.”

Gongsun Zhi; still holding Lu'E high above his head, smirked, “You dare to block me?” With his left foot as an axis he made one turn, then, with his right foot, he made another one. With these two turns he had moved within four feet of Yang Guo. Yang Guo was afraid that Lu'E would be hurt, so he leaped sideways.

Gongsun Lu'E was held in her father's hands immobilized; when Gongsun Zhi made the circles, she could see that Yang Guo leaped back to avoid hurting her; she was deeply touched and her heart was greatly consoled, “He did not try to get the pill for my sake. I can die peacefully.” She could not move her limbs, but she could turn her head. A moment later she closed her eyes and sighed, “Yang Lang, Yang Lang! [Translator note: “Lang” could also mean “Dear Husband” – Lu'E regarded Yang Guo as her husband.]” She then stretched her beautiful neck toward her father's black sword!

“Aiyo!” Yang Guo called out and rushed forward, trying to help, but he was too late! He stood still like he was in a daze. Two streams of tears flowed down his cheeks. A lovely young woman with a heart as big as the sky, had lost her life at her own father's hand.

Gongsun Zhi was also startled, his heart turn sour, but his ears heard loud and angry scream from across the hall. Suddenly three more iron date stones flew like a flash. Gongsun Zhi threw his daughter's body to intercept them. Three date stones pierced her lifeless body. Everybody screamed and shouted angrily at his viciousness; after Lu'E died he still had the heartlessness to mutilate her body. They unsheathed their weapons and surrounded him.

“My disciples!” cried Gongsun Zhi, “By forming an alliance with these intruders this wicked woman planned to

annihilate everybody in this valley! Come! Let us capture them with the net formation!”

Since they were young, these disciples had always regarded Gongsun Zhi as their benevolent leader. When this cruel man was wounded and driven out of the valley, they had to follow Qiu Qianchi, albeit unwillingly. Now they heard his commanding tone, and, having witnessed earlier the death of two of their own by the old woman’s stones, without thinking they lifted the nets and started to surround the enemy from every direction.

Each net was about twenty feet square, full of sharp blades. The people in the hall were not weak in terms of martial arts, yet they did not know how to deal with this net formation. If the nets ever caught them, their body would have at least ten additional holes in it. The nets were getting closer to them, including Qiu Qianchi who loudly shouted, “My disciples, don’t listen to that old scoundrel’s nonsense; everybody listen to me! Back off!” But the disciples turned a deaf ear on her; they followed Gongsun Zhi’s command obediently.

“‘Kun wang’ [earth net], move to the front, ‘kan wang’ [pit net], diagonally to the left, ‘zhen wang’ [shock net], turn to the right!” Quickly those nets moved to those positions making the circle smaller and smaller.

Huang Rong took some steel needles from her pocket and raised her hand to shoot at the eight green clothed disciples on the west. The distance was close, the steel needles were numerous, at least five or six disciples would be injured, she thought. But they lifted the net up and with “ding, ding” sound all the needles, as well as Qiu Qianchi’s stones were stuck to the nets. “Not good!” cried Huang Rong, “Fu’er, lift your sword, protect your head! Hack those nets down!”

Heeding her mother's instruction, Guo Fu jumped to the northeast. Four valley disciples moved to block her. She managed to parry several blades; either with her sword or her protective vest, but those four disciples spread out and tried to capture her just like fishermen catching fish.

Since Yang Guo was standing close to Gongsun Zhi, he was actually outside the net formation. But then eight valley disciple turned to the left and move to the right surrounding him. Yang Guo realized the situation was critical he leaped toward Guo Fu, exerted his internal energy to his heavy sword and hacked down the net. It broke with a loud noise, and its bearers -four disciples, fell down to the floor. Wu Santong and Yelu Qi immediately pounced and beat them to near death. Yang Guo hacked twice and two more net formations went down. With three hacks he destroyed three nets. If we consider the net material, we should know that they are very tough and ductile. The fact that Yang Guo was able to tear them down demonstrated his magnificent internal energy and his amazing black steel heavy sword. The valley disciples were shocked! They scrambled away in fear.

"Five nets...Attack!" again Gongsun Zhi shouted his command, "This kid has lost his strength."

Yang Guo was nervous. He wasn't sure he could hack five nets down at once. He quickly made his move before the enemy did. With one more hack, another net went down. Just as Yang Guo was about to make another move, a loud voice was heard outside, "Where'd you go?"

He was startled. A moment later a yellow shadow darted inside. Everybody was surprised to see it was none other than the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' Li Mochou, who upon entering the hall, stood arrogantly wielding her sword.

Before anybody could react, another shadow darted inside whose body was covered with blood and whose hair was in disarray. It was Zhu Ziliu! He pounced on Li Mochou with his bare hands, left finger and right palm; and even though she was armed, she ran around trying to elude his attack. It was because he attacked as a mad man, without any regard to his own safety. They were both martial arts experts, and in a flash they had already run around the hall six or seven times.

Yang Guo was confused, “Li Mochou is not inferior to Zhu Ziliu; how could she be afraid like that? What about the Divine Indian Monk?” Those two actually possessed almost the same level of martial skills, but in term of lightness kungfu, Li Mochou was a step superior. Therefore, Zhu Ziliu was not able to catch up, plus he was bleeding profusely.

Wu Santong, Dunru and Xiuwen leaped together to block the demoness. “Martial Brother!” cried Zhu Ziliu. “That wicked woman has killed Martial Uncle! Your younger brother ... I ...”... he couldn’t finish, his body swayed and he fell to the floor.

That was indeed a heavy blow to everyone present. Reverend Yideng had a very high level of spiritual strength, not to mention his profound internal energy, he was a very composed monk. But this news made him stand up and he cried, “Ah!” To Yang Guo, the news was more like thunderbolt from a bright and clear sky. He almost blacked-out. He then cast a glance toward his wife, who at that very same moment was looking at him. Two pairs of eyes met. They felt like they were falling down a very dark and cold hole in the ground. Xiao Longnu uttered a soft cry and rushed toward her husband, and leaned her body against his, breathing heavily.

After a while Yang Guo composed himself, threw his heavy sword away, and walked listlessly outside, holding his wife’s hand.

What had happened? How did the Indian Monk fall victim to the demoness? In his effort to cure poison induced illness, the Divine Indian Monk had tested many-many types of poison on his own body. Quite naturally, his body developed immunity to poisons. When pricking himself with the Passionless Flower thorns, he predicted that he would be unconscious for three whole days and nights. It turned out that he had regained his consciousness on the second night. As he opened his eyes he said, "Ziliu, this Passionless Flower is not as lethal as I thought it would be. I am confident that I can neutralize it."

Ziliu was ecstatic and immediately told his Martial Uncle that Reverend Yideng, Yang Guo, and the others had arrived in the valley. He also mentioned that it was Yang Guo himself who smashed the kiln door where they were being kept prisoner.

"The sooner we can neutralize the poison, the better. Let's not waste another second," having said that the Indian Monk immediately walked outside and headed directly to the flower bushes. He looked down and started searching for the herbs he thought would be the antidote to the poison. It is a natural phenomenon that the poison and the antidote would usually co-exist in the same place.

Unbeknownst to them, Li Mochou was still hiding behind the rocks scattered throughout that area. Seeing the Monk, she launched her "Soul Freezing Needle" at him. The Indian Monk did not possess any martial arts skill so when the needle hit him in the chest, he died instantly.

Hearing the unusual noise, Zhu Ziliu knew something was amiss. He saw Li Mochou and immediately rushed toward his Martial Uncle without regard to his own safety. Li Mochou launched another needle his way. Since Ziliu was not armed, he used his long sleeve to parry the attack but left his back

defenseless at the same time. The demoness slashed with her sword and made an inch-deep wound on his right shoulder.

He quickly exerted his internal energy to his fingertip and attacked the demoness' waist. He knew if he backed off, the demoness would not let him off easily. Ziliu was starting to get anxious because he did not hear anything from his Martial Uncle's direction, while the 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' attacked him relentlessly. "Uncle... Uncle!" he called, but the Monk did not respond.

The demoness sneered, "If you want his answer, you will have to meet him ... in hell!" Li Mochou expected him to lose his concentration. In battle between experts, the outcome is more often that not decided by who lost one's concentration first. Who knew that Ziliu not only did not lose his, but became fiercer, like he was possessed ...

Under the starry sky Li Mochou could see his unusually bright eyes as he attacked her like there is no tomorrow. The place where they were was so quiet, nobody was around, no sound was heard; but perhaps remembering her own sins, she became nervous and started to feel afraid. Because of that, she increased her attacks, which forced Ziliu to back off a bit, and using the opportunity, she leaped back and ran away. Ziliu immediately checked his Uncle's wrist and did not find any pulse. The Indian Monk was beyond help. With extreme grief and anger he leaped toward the demoness and started chasing her.

Gongsun Zhi was ecstatic when he saw Li Mochou. "Sister Li! Over here!" he started toward her.

Even though she was injured, Huang Rong did not lose her wit. She saw Gongsun Zhi acting weird and immediately knew what he was up to. "Guo'er!" she cried, "Don't let those two get close to each other!"

Yang Guo ignored her, he just smiled bitterly. The death of the Indian Monk had broken his heart, and he no longer cared who would get the half-pill.

Yelu Qi saw all this, and he made a swift decision. He picked one end of a net. The one destroyed by the heavy sword. "Wu Brothers!" he shouted, "Help me hold the other end!" Wu Dunru, Wanyan Ping and Yelu Yan quickly complied, and together they moved and blocked Gongsun Zhi who was trying to approach Li Mochou.

The overall situation was very chaotic. Qiu Qianchi used that opportunity to repeatedly launch her stones. Five or six Passionless Valley disciples fell down, dead. The net formation was completely destroyed and Gongsun Zhi's minions scrambled out.

Angrily Gongsun Zhi hacked Yelu Yan with his golden saber. Cheng Ying jumped in and attacked the enemy's hand with her flute. Gongsun Zhi quickly retracted his saber and thrust his black sword toward Cheng Ying. Seeing her cousin in danger, Lu Wushuang quickly came to her rescue and hacked repeatedly with her willow-leaf saber.

Because of this hindrance, Gongsun Zhi's intention to ally himself with Li Mochou was foiled. He could not give her the pill. Moreover, Qiu Qianchi kept launching her stones toward him. After a few stances he started to get nervous and decided to get out as quickly as he could, and join Li Mochou later. "Sister Li!" he shouted, "Let's get out of here! I'll meet you at you-know-where." As soon as opportunity arrived, they ran past Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu who at the time were still holding hands, walking slowly out of the hall. They seemed oblivious to what happened around them.

"Sister Long, block Gongsun Zhi!" Huang Rong called, "The Passionless Pill is in his hand."

Xiao Longnu was startled, "After the Divine Monk's death, Guo'er's life depends on the pill," she thought. She let go Yang Guo's hand and chased him.

"Long'er, let him go!" Yang Guo called out.

"Why?" she asked, but did not stop. Yang Guo was forced to follow. Gongsun Zhi and Li Mochou took their own separate ways; one ran to northeast, the other to northwest. Xiao Longnu, Yang Guo, Cheng Ying and Wushuang ran after Gongsun Zhi; while Wu Santong, his two sons, Zhu Ziliu and Wanyan Ping followed Li Mochou. Yelu Qi, his sister and Guo Fu kept Reverend Yideng and Huang Rong company, while guarding against Qiu Qianchi's actions.

In the Wu Santong's party, Zhu Ziliu had the highest martial art skill but he had already suffered heavy injuries, so he gave up after running a little while. Wu Santong and his sons stopped to check on his condition, which caused them to lose track of the demoness.

"If that wicked woman could elude us, we really do not have any face to see Martial Uncle," sighed Zhu Ziliu bitterly. They tried beating the bushes and other places, but Li Mochou had vanished from sight. "Gongsun Zhi has already arranged a meeting place for them," mused Zhu Ziliu again, "We don't know where it would be, but if we just follow Gongsun Zhi, we'll eventually find her. He needs to give that pill to her anyway."

"You are right," Wu Santong said, "Let's find Gongsun Zhi." So, utilizing their lightness kungfu they changed course to northwest.

Sure enough, not too long after they heard battle sounds. They quickened their pace, but the noise they heard was kind of peculiar; sometimes seemed like it was just around the corner, other times it came from afar. They kept going in

circles until the dawn broke, but never found the source of the noise. At daybreak they arrived on a path sloping upward. Suddenly they heard a loud and hair-raising laugh. They stopped and lifted their gaze upward. There, across a ravine, perched on a hill, stood a man laughing maniacally. It was Gongsun Zhi. There was a deep ravine below him, and a very high mountain peak above.

Seeing Gongsun Zhi's madness – real or pretend, Zhu Ziliu was worried, "If he slips, his body will be totally smashed in the abyss below. His death is well-deserved, but he would take the Passionless Pill down with him." He quickly ran ahead and after making a turn he found Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang standing on the verge of the ravine looking up at Gongsun Zhi.

Xiao Longnu approached Zhu Ziliu and softly asked, "Uncle Zhu, can you think of something to force him down?" Zhu Ziliu looked around and found out that between the mountain peak and the place where they stood there was a natural long rock bridge that looked like a tree log, only less than one foot wide. The rock bridge, as well as the stones around the bridge, were covered with moss, which make them slippery. There was no way they could force him down. He had to be tricked into coming down on his own. But Gongsun Zhi was so shrewd. What kind of trick could they use?

Wu Santong remembered his indebtedness for Yang Guo's great kindness. The fact that his two sons were alive and live in harmony with each other was because of Yang Guo's sacrifice. He decided right then and there to repay this debt and, rolling his sleeves up, immediately said, "Let me drag him down here." But before he could move a shadow flashed ahead of him. It was Cheng Ying. "Let me do it!" And she already stepped onto the rock. She was quick, Yang Guo was even quicker. She felt somebody tug her sleeve and she was

pulled back. "Little Sister, how much am I worth that you make a sacrifice like that?" she heard Yang Guo whisper into her ear. She blushed and was speechless.

Suddenly Xiao Longnu's voice was heard, "Let me borrow your swords." With a fluid motion she pulled Dunru's and Wanyan Ping's swords. Such a beautiful move! Before they even realized what had happened, the young woman was already perched on the rock.

Gongsun Zhi was shocked to see her bravery; he quickly jumped back to the other end of the bridge. Wielding his sword in front of him he snickered, "Do you really want to die?"

Holding her two swords, Xiao Longnu quietly prayed, "Please God, bless me. Let me die after I get the pill back." She looked at Gongsun Zhi and softly spoke, "Mr. Gongsun, you have saved my life, yet because of me, you have suffered a lot of misery. I ... my heart ached for you. I do not want to fight you."

"So, what do you want?" he asked.

"I want to beg you to give me the Passionless Pill to save my husband's life," she answered, "I know you have no use for the pill, but I will forever be indebted to you if you just give it to me."

While they were still speaking, Yang Guo shouted, "Long'er! Get back here! What's that half-pill for? It won't save both our lives."

Looking at her standing atop the rock, her dress fluttered in the wind, and her stunningly beautiful countenance, Gongsun Zhi was mesmerized; how could Li Mochou be compared to her? Suddenly an evil thought came to his mind. "That kid is your husband?" he asked.

“Yes, we are married.”

“Well, if you grant me a request, I will immediately give this pill to you,” Gongsun Zhi continued.

By the look of his eyes, Xiao Longnu knew what he was about to say. She shook her head and said, “I am already married, I can’t marry you. Mr. Gongsun, I know you loved me very much. However, I have already given my heart to someone else. With a deep regret I cannot accept your love.”

Gongsun Zhi’s countenance changed. “Go away!” he barked, “If not, I won’t hold myself back any longer.”

“If we fight, wouldn’t that be very sad?” Xiao Longnu said sadly. She was not pretending, she really was remembering Gongsun Zhi’s kindness.

Gongsun Zhi made an “hmp” sound and put a really evil smile on his lips. “I want to see that Yang Guo kid screaming and rolling around on the ground dying miserably,” he said, “I want to see a faithful wife wearing mourning clothes.”

“Long’er! Come back!” Yang Guo kept shouting, “Come back! Don’t waste your breath talking to that lowly creature.” He would have come and dragged his wife away if he could find a place to put his feet down.

The young madam smiled sadly. “Listen!” she said, “He’s calling me. He called because he loves me. He’d rather die of the poison than see me hurt by you.”

Gongsun Zhi’s mind was reeling. He wanted very much to make Xiao Longnu his hostage. However, they would both fall into the ravine below if the young wife put up any struggle at all. On the other hand, if he did not capture her, how could he save his own life? He looked at his enemies, and among them, Yang Guo was the only one he was afraid of. But he was relieved to see the young man did not wield his heavy

sword. In his mind, unarmed, Yang Guo would not be able to block him. His best bet right now would be to attack Xiao Longnu, try to capture her, or at least push her back far enough for him to escape. Having thought this over, he barked, "Will you or won't you move back?" and thrust his sword simultaneously. Xiao Longnu's left sword parried this attack while her right sword counterattacked. A series of metallic sounds echoed throughout the valley.

After learning the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique from Zhou Botong, Xiao Longnu's swords skills were more than doubled. Even though she was poisoned and her level of energy was weakened somewhat, Gongsun Zhi's black-sword and golden-saber technique still was no match for her 'Jade Maiden Swords Technique'. His technique, though carrying seemingly infinite variations, still resulted in a saber remaining a saber, and a sword always a sword. She moved her pair of swords so fast, that her body was surrounded by the flashing of the swords. Gongsun Zhi felt like he was caught in a rainstorm. Swords everywhere ... He sighed and regretted his decision, "I wouldn't have attacked her in the first place if I had known her true skill." Luckily for him, the "Jade Maiden Swords" was not created with murderous intent, plus Xiao Longnu did not have any intentions to kill him; therefore, he was able to hold his ground for the time being.

In the meantime, Reverend Yideng, Huang Rong, Guo Fu, Yelu Qi and Yelu Yan had also arrived. Together they witnessed this spectacular battle with their hearts pounding.

"Eh, you go help her," Guo Fu told Yelu Qi, "Elder Sister Long can't win by herself."

Yelu Qi only shook his head, "There is no place I can set my foot on."

In spite of her weaknesses and spoiled nature, Guo Fu's natural character was not evil. She became stressed when she saw Xiao Longnu's dire situation and remembered her own experience battling the old man's high martial arts skills. Yelu Qi was not wrong. But Guo Fu insisted, this time to her mother, "Mother! Please help Sister Long." She did not realize that even without her prompting everybody was willing to help. Everyone was just as anxious as she was, and of course they would've helped if it were at all possible.

They saw Gongsun Zhi's golden saber and black sword repeatedly making some killer moves, while Xiao Longnu's double-swords moved gracefully, seemingly without any strength. It gave the impression that she was losing to Gongsun Zhi's vicious attacks. Only Yideng, Yang Guo, Huang Rong and Zhu Ziliu knew Xiao Longnu was actually gaining the upper hand. However, they were fighting ferociously on a slippery cliff; if they lost their footing they would surely fall to their deaths. Therefore, each move carried a life or death risk. They saw two shadows dancing around; one surrounded by a golden aura, the other wrapped by a black one. Everybody held their breath, with cold sweat on their palms and foreheads.

After observing for some time, Huang Rong noticed that Xiao Longnu was utilizing the 'Mutual Hands Combat' technique, which as far as she knew, was mastered only by Zhou Botong and her own husband, Guo Jing. She then concluded that Madame Yang had received the Old Urchin's tutelage. Yet more time passed. She witnessed Gongsun Zhi's high level of martial arts and Xiao Longnu's disadvantage because of the poison in her body. Her swordsmanship was a level higher than Gongsun Zhi's, however; she was not able to gain an upper hand even after hundreds of stances.

Huang Rong's intelligent mind started to cook something up. "Guo'er," she said, "let's help Sister Long. We create a

disruption for that disgusting man. You disparage him, while I encourage him. He'll lose his concentration."

Yang Guo was delighted and silently praised his smart Auntie Guo.

"Mr. Gongsun, I have killed Qiu Qianchi!" shouted Huang Rong.

Gongsun Zhi heard that, his heart was shaken, half believing, half doubting.

"Gongsun Zhi!" cried Yang Guo, "Li Mochou said that she would beat you to death if you don't give her the pill!"

"No, no!" Huang Rong countered, "Li Mochou did say that she would marry you as soon as you cure her."

"Well, yes! But we won't allow that to happen," Yang Guo continued, "We will capture you and throw you to the Passionless Flower field, so that you too will enjoy the thorns' exotic sensation."

"No, don't be so cruel," said Huang Rong. "Mr. Gongsun, don't you worry. Let's forget this enmity. I want to be your friend."

"How could you befriend this scoundrel!" howled Yang Guo. "Gongsun Zhi. I've heard that you killed your maidservant, Rou'er. I think she has become a ghost and wants revenge. Ah! Look! Behind you! Watch out! The ghost is going to attack!"

This ramble between Yang Guo and Huang Rong had shown some results. Of course Xiao Longnu also heard them, but it has nothing to do with her, and by nature – and her upbringing in the Ancient Tomb – she was always very composed. She had also learned to divide her own mind. She started to gain an upper hand. Gongsun Zhi had been busy

eluding left and right, his situation got precarious; this exchange between Huang Rong and Yang Guo made him nervous. He shouted, "What nonsense are you talking about? Shut up!"

"Hey, Gongsun Zhi!" shouted Yang Guo, "Who's that behind you? Eek! It's a young woman, her hair disheveled, her tongue stick-out, her face full of blood! Ah! She comes near you ... She ... is going to choke you!" Suddenly, he yelled with a loud voice, "Yes! Rou'er! Strangle Gongsun Zhi!"

Gongsun Zhi knew they were just trying to break his concentration. Nevertheless, he remembered his many crimes, and without even realizing it, he looked back. At that very same moment Xiao Longnu's sword flashed diagonally, the point of the sword vibrated and stabbed his left wrist. His saber fell from his grip. Under beautiful rays of dawn that golden saber glittered down into the ravine. It was some time later that a very distant splash was heard, like there was water at the bottom. Wu Santong, Zhu Ziliu and the others looked at each other with amazement; the time it took for the saber to fall indicated that the ravine was very, very deep!

Losing his saber, Gongsun Zhi could not defend himself much longer, let alone make any attacks. To him Xiao Longnu's left sword and right sword seemed like four swords. Not long afterward, she managed to disarm him of his black sword as well. With the right sword pointing toward his chest, the left toward his stomach she plainly said, "Mr. Gongsun, just give me the pill. I won't kill you."

The old man was pale. "What about the others?" he asked.

"They won't hurt you," she gave her promise.

He had no choice; he did not want to die, why would he care about Li Mochou anyway? So he took the bottle from his pocket and handed it to her. Still pointing her left sword at

his abdomen, Xiao Longnu took the bottle with mixed emotions. "I won't live much longer, but Guo'er's life is spared," she said in her heart. Then she leaped back from the rock bridge.

Wu Santong, Zhu Ziliu and the others were not unaware of this young madam's level of martial arts; however, even in their wildest dreams they could not believe Xiao Longnu was able to use two different sword stances at the same time. Of course they heard such skill existed. It was told that in the Jianghu world, only Zhou Botong and Guo Jing have mastered the skill. But ... nobody had ever seen it, therefore they were rather skeptical about it. Now they have seen it with their own eyes and knew what they heard was true. Yelu brother and sister, Wu brothers, Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang and Guo Fu of the younger generation saw that Xiao Longnu's age was not much different than theirs, yet her martial arts were incredibly higher than theirs; they could not help but admired her as their senior.

As she landed on the ground, her clothes fluttered in the wind, and she walked gracefully toward Yang Guo. She looked like a deity, an angel descending from above. Without prompting everybody cheered!

Yang Guo rushed forward, while the others also crowded around them. Xiao Longnu opened the bottle and took the half pill out. "Guo'er," she said, laughing softly, "I think this is the real thing."

"Real?" Yang Guo was indifferent. "Long'er, how are you feeling? Why is your face pale? Try concentrating your breathing."

His wife laughed emotionlessly. She had started to feel uneasiness and heaviness because of blocked energy in her chest as soon as she finished her battle with Gongsun Zhi. She had tried circulating her 'qi', but failed. She was dizzy

and was about to throw up. She understood very well that this was the symptom of the poison getting worse. She just did not care anymore because she had the Passionless Pill in her hand. To her, Yang Guo's life was a lot more precious than her own; so she just smiled and did not respond.

Yang Guo held his wife's hand and was shocked to find it colder than ice. "Long'er!" he said, his heart thumping heavily. "How ... what do you feel?"

"I'm OK. Just swallow this pill," she answered calmly.

Yang Guo looked at his wife's face with wide eyes. "No, I don't want it," he said. His voice trembled. "Half a Passionless Pill will not save both our lives. Long'er ... ah, Long'er! Do you think if you died I would want to live alone?" Suddenly he took away the half-pill from his wife's hand and ... threw it down into the 'bottomless' gorge. That half-pill – the only thing in the whole wide world that can save his life – flew down into the abyss.

What had happened was beyond everybody's expectations, they gasped in shock! Xiao Longnu could feel his deep and profound love toward her, she was sad yet grateful. She was no longer able to maintain her consciousness and fainted in her husband's arm.

Guo Fu, Wu Brothers, Wanyan Ping and Yelu Yan were baffled since they did not know the whole story; they all talked at the same time among themselves. Suddenly Wu Santong shouted, "Li Mochou! Don't ever think you will live a day longer!" And then he ran towards the left. Everybody turned their head and saw Gongsun Zhi was running to the west toward Li Mochou, who was standing on top of a small hill. They were getting closer, while Wu Santong and the others were still quite a long way away.

Just before Gongsun Zhi reached her, a hearty laugh could be heard behind the hill, and a healthy looking old man appeared. He carried a big wooden box on his back. That old man had white hair and beard, and it was none other than Zhou Botong.

“Old Urchin!” called Huang Rong, “Chase that yellow-robed Taoist priestess over here!”

“Wonderful! Watch what the Old Urchin can do!” he answered, opening his wooden box and waving his arm. A swarm of bees came out of the box and flew toward Li Mochou. Turned out that when the Mongolian soldiers burned down Mount Zhongnan, the Quanzhen disciples retreated while saving their books and other temple’s articles. He on the other hand, was busy collecting the Jade Bees and put them into this wooden box. Even though he was childish and loved to fool around, he was very smart. After a while, with the help of a jar of honey from Xiao Longnu, he figured out how to control the bees.

Seeing the grey bees, Gongsun Zhi was frightened. He turned around and ran toward the valley. Li Mochou was also shocked. There were bees behind her and enemies in front of her. She decided to run to the east. Wu Brothers, Cheng Ying, Wushuang, and the others quickly surround her with weapons unsheathed. “Shifu,” Yelu Qi called, “pull your bees back!”

Zhou Botong repeatedly shouted his commands to pull his bees back; but in the commotion the Jade Bees did not respond and kept going after the demoness. Wu Santong was afraid his archenemy would escape again, he ran toward her ignoring the bees’ attack.

While everybody was chasing Li Mochou, Yang Guo stayed where he was, still holding his wife tightly. He whispered into her ears, “Long’er ... Long’er ...” Slowly Xiao Longnu opened

her eyes. She heard the Jade Bees humming seemingly so distant. She thought she was dreaming and was inside the Ancient Tomb. Her countenance brightened a little and she whispered back, "Are we home ...?"

A short while later, she regained full consciousness and became fully aware of what was happening around her. She whistled and softly shouted her commands. Hearing their master the Jade Bees gathered above Li Mochou's head. "Shi jie [elder martial sister]," she said, "now it has come to this, aren't you going to repent of all your past crimes?"

Li Mochou's face was sheet-white. "Where's the pill?" she inquired. Her martial sister sadly smiled, "Inside that bottomless abyss." She continued, "Why did you kill that Divine Monk? If he were alive, not only he would save Guo'er's life and mine, but yours as well."

She was shocked! Her martial sister had never lied. She would never have imagined that using just one of her own "Soul Freezing Needles" would eventually kill her.

In the meantime, Wu Santong and his two sons, Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang, and the others had formed a tight formation around her; while Zhou Botong was still busy shouting his commands. "Elder Zhou," Xiao Longnu called, "you have to whistle this way." She then gave him some examples, which were imitated by the Old Urchin. Thousands of bees immediately gathered around him and then entered the box. The old man was so delighted. "Miss Long, thank you ... thank you ..."

Observing this old man, Reverend Yideng smiled and called, "Brother Botong, it's been a long time. You look as if you did not age at all."

Zhou Botong was surprised. He quickly closed the bee box and said, "You are well, I am too. Everybody's well." He

swung the box to his shoulder and ran away without saying anything else.

Of those Li Mochou saw around her; Huang Rong, Yang Guo or Xiao Longnu alone would be enough to defeat her, let alone being surrounded on every side like this. She started to realize that she would not come out of this alive. She became desperate. She looked around and said, "Huh-huh! You consider yourself as heroes. Huh-huh! Today you will win by sheer numbers. Martial Sister! I am a disciple of the Ancient Tomb. I can't let myself be killed by an outsider. Come! You do it." She then reversed her own sword so that its blade pointed to her own chest.

Xiao Longnu shook her head, "Why would I want to kill you?" she asked.

"Li Mochou!" snapped Wu Santong. "Let me ask you this: what did you do to Lu Zhanyuan and He Yuanjun's bodies?"

The demoness trembled. "I burned them," she said menacingly. "I spread their ashes: one on the peak of Mount Hua, the other on Eastern Sea, so that they won't see each other for eternity." Her cruelty made everybody's heart pound.

"Sister Long has a benevolent heart, she won't kill you," said Lu Wushuang. "But my whole family died by your hand, not a single dog or chicken was left; only I survived. I want revenge this very day. Cousin, come!"

"My mother died by your hands," the Wu brothers continued. "Other people can show mercy to you, but my brother and I will never forgive you."

Li Mochou was indifferent, "During my life I have killed countless people; if everybody came for revenge, how many lives have I to compensate? Considering the thousands of

hatreds and tens of thousands of injustices, I have nothing more than just this one life.”

Lu Wushuang and Wu Xiuwen called out, “It’s too cheap for you!” One using a saber and the other a sword they stepped forward simultaneously.

Li Mochou exerted her energy to her sword and “Crack!” that sword was broken into two pieces. She smirked, held her hands behind her back, totally ignoring their attack.

Suddenly at that moment heavy smoke and fire appeared to the east. “Aiyo!” cried Huang Rong, “The compound is on fire!”

“Let’s postpone killing her, saving Martial Uncle’s body is more important,” said Zhu Ziliu. He leaped toward Li Mochou, and sealed three of her accupoints with his famous “Yang Solitary Finger” to prevent the priestess from escaping.

“Miss Gongsun’s body too!” cried Cheng Ying.

“Right!” answered the others. They ran toward the Valley Master Hall. The Wu Brothers dragged Li Mochou along. Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Huang Rong and Reverend Yideng were not far behind. They walked slowly because of the injuries. About a quarter of kilometer away from the valley complex, they began to feel the heat. People were shouting and screaming and buildings were collapsing.

“That Gongsun Zhi is really cruel,” Wu Santong said, “Miss Long should’ve killed him!”

“I don’t think it was him who’s burning this place down,” commented Zhu Ziliu. “If I am not mistaken, this is that old granny’s doing.”

“Why Qiu Qianchi?” asked Santong, “Isn’t the Passionless Valley hers?”

“Well, the valley disciples have rebelled against her. Even if we killed Gongsun Zhi, she would not be able to live here any longer,” Zhu Ziliu explained. “I think that granny is just narrow-minded ...” He did not continue and exerted his energy, quickly running to the kiln. Fortunately the kiln was a little bit away from the main complex. Hastily Zhu Ziliu lifted his Martial Uncle’s body away. The Monk’s countenance was still smiling, like he’d found something delightful just before he died.

Wu Santong shed some tears. “Martial Uncle died without suffering.”

Zhu Ziliu hesitated, “Martial Uncle was killed when he was searching for the Passionless Flower antidote,” he explained.

In the mean time, Huang Rong and her company arrived. Hearing Zhu Ziliu’s explanation, she immediately examined the Indian Monk’s body, but she could not find anything. She searched all the pockets in his clothes... nothing. “Did your Martial Uncle say anything to you?” she asked.

“No,” answered Zhu Ziliu. “When Martial Uncle and I came out of this kiln, we never thought danger was lurking.”

Huang Rong fixed her gaze on the Indian Monk’s smiling face and a thought flashed into her mind. She stooped and looked at the Divine Monk’s hands. Her heart was pounding, for she saw between his right thumb and index finger some dark-purplish grass-like herbs. Slowly she pried open his fingers and took the grass away. “What kind of grass is this?” she mused. Zhu Ziliu only shook his head. Huang Rong smelled it. The grass had an awful smell, she almost threw-up.

“Madame Guo, careful!” said Yideng, “That is ‘Intestine Severing’ grass. It’s very poisonous.” Huang Rong stared blankly. She lost hope.

At that moment the Wu brothers along with Li Mochou arrived. Upon hearing that the grass was very dangerous, Xiuwen said to Huang Rong, "Shiniang [martial female master - Shifu's wife], let's give that grass to this demoness."

"Shan zai! Shan zai! [lit. good, peace] Young man, don't be so cruel," Yideng rebuked him.

"Grand Martial Master," said Xiuwen, "Are we supposed to show mercy to an evil person like this woman?"

By now the fire had reached the trees and bushes around the kiln.

"The fire comes from the east, let us retreat to that hilly area to the north, and talk this matter over," Huang Rong gave her command. Everybody complied and as they arrived there, the buildings around the kiln had started to burn.

Although Li Mochou's accupoints were sealed, she was still able to walk, but without her internal energy. Secretly cursing her bad luck she tried to unseal herself. She thought she would try to escape when the enemy was not looking. Unexpectedly, her chest and stomach hurt like hell as soon as she did that, "Ah!" she screamed in agony. What happened was that she had depressed the poison using her internal energy before. However, when her accupoints were sealed, her energy was also neutralized. Now that she tried to circulate her energy, the poison was flowing alongside and attacked her inner organs.

Her eyes saw stars floating around; she was writhing in agony and almost lost consciousness. Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu walked toward her, but what she saw was a young couple, a handsome man and a lovely young woman and right in front of her they suddenly turned into Lu Zhanyuan and He Yuanjun. She leaped and screamed, "Zhanyuan! You are so cruel! You still have a face to see me?" Because she

was thinking about love, the poison in her body became more active than ever. She was in so much pain that her body writhed, her face contorted and white as a sheet of paper. She looked so frightening. Everybody stepped back a few steps seeing her behaving like a mad woman.

Li Mochou had always been a proud woman; never in her life did she ask any favor from anybody. But with her dying breath she cried incessantly, "Oohh... ah! Help! Ohh ... somebody help me, please ..." Her voice was truly heartrending.

"The only one who could help you was my Martial Uncle," Zhu Ziliu answered and pointed to the Indian Monk's body. "Why did you kill him?"

"Yes! I killed him!" the demoness gritted her teeth and screamed, "I've killed all kinds of people, good people, bad people, I killed them all! I want to die! Why are you still alive? I want you to die with me!" Her body swayed, her breathing shortened, and suddenly she lunged toward Wu Dunru's sword.

For many-many years Wu Dunru had dreamed of stabbing the demoness with his very own sword. However, at that moment he was taken aback, and pulled his sword away unwittingly. Li Mochou missed the sword; she fell down to the ground and her body rolled away toward the blazing flames in the valley below.

Everybody shouted! In a flash her clothes were like a giant torch, blazing with fire. She struggled and eventually managed to stand up in the middle of the flames.

Xiao Longnu, remembering their sisterhood, was the only one compassionate toward her. She immediately cried, "Sister, get out of there!" But Li Mochou did not budge, it seemed like she was not even feeling the intense heat. It was a

terrifying scene ... everybody's eyes were wide open. Suddenly, from her mouth came a heartrending voice; she was singing ...!

*O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?
To all corners, in pair we fly... braving summer and winter, by
and by...*

*Union is bliss, parting is woe, agony is boundless, for a
lovelorn soul, sweetheart...*

Give me word, trail of clouds drifting forward...

*And mountains capped with snow, whither shall my
lonesome shadow go? [Noodle's translation]*

Her voice was getting weaker and weaker, until it finally faded away amidst the raging fire ...

[Her song, Liu Bo – flowing waves – was the one she used to sing with Lu Zhanyuan, when they were still together. She also sang it with tears flowing down her cheeks when Yang Guo and Cheng Ying were playing and singing this song – see Chapter 15]

Xiao Longnu could not hold her tears back any longer. She sobbed uncontrollably in Yang Guo's single arm. Nobody was exempt from feeling sadness creeping into his or her heart. The 'Scarlet Serpent Deity' finally paid for her sins with a well-deserved death; however, they could not help but feel pity for her. She was actually a weak and blind woman; weakened and blinded by love.

Wu Santong and his two sons, Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying had a very deep animosity toward her, and had always wanted their revenge. But now that she was dead, they did not feel a single bit of joy in their hearts. Huang Rong remembered how the demoness – despite of her evil and cruel character – had taken care of her little Guo Xiang with love and kindness for many-many days. She then lifted the baby up, put her little hands together, and waved them

toward the blazing fire as a gesture of final respect toward the ill-fated woman.

Yang Guo looked at the fire then turned his gaze toward the Valley Master Hall. He sighed ceaselessly. He had rushed from the Broken Heart Cliff toward the building complex to save Lu'E's body from the fire. Yet now he saw the whole complex was burned down almost to the ground. He felt a deep sense of loss. He remembered both women, Lu'E and Li Mochou. One was an angel, the other a demon. Both died and became ashes because of love. Without even realizing it, tears started flowing down his cheeks.

While Yang Guo was still staring blankly into the fire, a long, loud and terrifying laugh was heard, coming from the top of the hill to their northeast. That voice was supported by a high level of internal energy. "Qiu Qianchi!" Yang Guo was startled. "How did she climb that hill?"

Xiao Longnu's heart stirred. "Let's ask her if she has another Passionless Pill in her hand," she said.

"Long'er...ah Long'er! Are you still dreaming?" her husband said with bitter smile.

Huang Rong, Wu Santong, Zhu Ziliu and the others heard what Xiao Longnu said; they thought, "What's wrong in asking her? If we can get the pill, Yang Guo needs to be compelled to take it; we can't let him deliberately destroy the pill and die." Almost everybody had the same thought, as a matter of fact, several of them immediately said, "Let's go and take a look." Wu Santong and his sons, Yelu Qi, Wanyan Ping and the others rushed toward the hill. Yang Guo sighed and shook his head. "Only if you can find a divine pill to save both husband and wife's lives ..."

Cheng Ying, who all this time stood quietly beside him, suddenly said, "Yang Da Ge, you should not belittle

everybody's loving concern toward you. We love you. Let us go together." As we all know, Cheng Ying had always loved Yang Guo, and treated him with nothing but kindness. Yang Guo was not unaware of that fact. Even though he had already given his heart to another, he had always regarded Cheng Ying with nothing but respect and brotherly love. The young miss had never asked him for anything until now. How could he refuse? Therefore, he nodded his head and said, "Very well, let us see what evil scheme that old hag on top of that hill has."

Quickly they climbed the hill toward Qiu Qianchi. Very soon Yang Guo could see that it was the hill where the old granny, together with Lu'E and himself had escaped from the underground cave. The trees and everything around were still the same, but the golden-hearted lady was no longer here. He sighed and was deeply saddened.

Within about a 'li' they could see from afar that Qiu Qianchi was sitting on a chair on the hilltop. She was laughing with a creepy voice, and kept looking off in the distance. She looked and behaved like a mad woman. "I think she's gone crazy," said Wushuang.

"Don't get too close," said Huang Rong, "That woman is so cruel that we have to be on our guard against her evil schemes. In my opinion she is not crazy."

Everybody stopped. They were wary of the old granny's iron date stones. Carefully Huang Rong approached her, but before she said anything, somebody appeared from behind a big rock. He was wearing a blue robe, and was none other than Gongsun Zhi himself. Laughing menacingly he took his robe off, and with his profound internal energy, made the robe hard and stiff like a stick. Huang Rong and the others were impressed with this internal energy demonstration. "Wicked woman," he cursed, "You have destroyed everything

I had, and everything my ancestors had owned, with a torch. I will not show any mercy to you!" And he ran toward her.

With a swish sound Qiu Qianchi launched a stone, stopping Gongsun Zhi's attack. From the top of that hill the stone could reach far and it also created a violent wind gust. Gongsun Zhi parried with his robe. The stone penetrated several layers of cloth, but did not hurt him at all. Gongsun Zhi was able to neutralize her "hard" energy with his "soft". He was initially not sure if he could withstand her stone, but in his anger toward the granny who burned down everything he had, he was determined to kill her. Besides, he knew that as soon as the intruders intervened, he wouldn't be able to even get near her. Therefore, he was delighted to find that his energy was sufficient to counter Qiu Qianchi's.

Shouting a terrifying cry he leaped towards her.

"Help!" cried Qiu Qianchi, her eyes wide open.

"Mother... That granny's going to die!" said Guo Fu, her heart pounding.

"I don't understand," Huang Rong said, her eyes never leaving those two people, "She is not crazy, but why did she act like it? Was it to lure Gongsun Zhi here?"

In the mean time two more swishing sounds were heard, Qiu Qianchi launched two date stones in close succession. Gongsun Zhi again used his robe while leaping forward. Suddenly, he vanished from sight in a blink of the eyes. The granny opened her mouth to laugh.

That laugh only sent out two "Ha .. ha ..." when suddenly a long robe appeared from below. Like a snake it wrapped itself around the leg of the chair Qiu Qianchi was sitting on. A fraction of a second later that chair flew down into the opening, taking Qiu Qianchi with it. Qiu Qianchi's laughter

turned into a terrifying cry intermingled with Gongsun Zhi's cry of horror. Then everything fell silent ...

Everyone witnessed and heard everything, but nobody knew what had really happened; except Yang Guo. He sighed and softly said, "Revenge! Revenge!" Quickly, Huang Rong and the others climbed to the hilltop. There they saw four female bodies lying around near a big hole in the ground. Looking down, all they could see was darkness.

In her desire to seek revenge, Qiu Qianchi had become more cruel and evil than ever. After burning the building complex, she commanded four slave girls to carry her to that hilltop, to the underground cave mouth, where she and her daughter were rescued by Yang Guo. She commanded the girls to cover the hole with tree branches and leaves. Afterwards, she cruelly murdered them with her iron date stones. Then she pretended to be crazy to lure Gongsun Zhi. Her cry for help when Gongsun Zhi first attacked was part of her ploy to lure him closer.

Gongsun Zhi had forgotten the cave entrance; hence he fell into her trap. In his last struggle to save his own life, he threw his robe up, with the hope that he could use the chair as an anchor to pull himself out of the hole. Unfortunately, the chair – with Qiu Qianchi on it, fell down into the cave because his pull was too strong. So it happened that, husband and wife became archenemies, and died together on the same day, on the same hour, smashed together inside that underground cave.

Yang Guo then told the rest what he knew about their life story. Everybody sighed and could not help but feel sorry for them. Cheng Ying along with Yelu Qi and his sister dug a big hole and buried the bodies of the four slave girls.

The fire was still raging down in the valley, and the whole building complex was destroyed. There were no other

buildings around for them to rest in. Besides, after witnessing so many deaths that day, nobody wanted to stay around much longer.

"Brother Yang has not found cure for his injury, we have to find another doctor promptly," Zhu Ziliu said. Several others voiced their agreement.

"No," said Huang Rong. "We cannot leave today."

"What is your suggestion then, Madame Guo?" asked Zhu Ziliu.

Huang Rong knitted her eyebrows, "I receive an injury from Qiu Qianchi's date stone, and it hurts badly right now," she answered. "Could we stay overnight here, please? We will leave tomorrow first thing in the morning. What do you say?"

Of course nobody objected. They spread out and searched for some caves or anywhere suitable to stay overnight.

Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu walked hand in hand going down the hill, but before they got too far, they heard Huang Rong call, "Sister Long, could you come over here, please? I have something to discuss with you." Having said this she put Guo Xiang in Guo Fu's care and walked toward Xiao Longnu.

Holding Xiao Longnu's hand she turned her head toward Yang Guo and smiled, "Guo'er, don't you worry. She has become your wife, and I certainly will not try to persuade her to leave you."

Yang Guo smiled but didn't say anything. He couldn't help wondering in his heart, "What does Auntie Guo want to talk about?" He saw Huang Rong holding Xiao Longnu's hand, walking toward a big tree and then they both sat down underneath it. Yang Guo felt a little bit of uneasiness, but he felt it was not proper for him to sneak in and eavesdrop on

them. "Long'er has never concealed anything from me, why would I worry she wouldn't tell me about it?" he thought.

"Sister Long," Huang Rong began. "My spoiled brat daughter has caused you and Guo'er many miseries. I feel really bad."

Xiao Longnu just smiled and said, "Oh, it's alright." But in her heart she was thinking, "Her single Soul Freezing Needle is taking both of our lives, what good is your apology?"

Seeing her dark expression Huang Rong felt even worse. She did not enter the Ancient Tomb, hence did not know the whole story. She remembered how Wu Santong and Yang Guo himself had suffered injury from the needles, yet they fully recovered. She did not know that Xiao Longnu was poisoned when she was reversing her blood flow; hence, Guo Fu's needle was a death sentence for her.

"There is one thing I do not understand about Yang Guo, and I want to ask your explanation," she inquired further. "By risking your own life you had succeeded in getting the pill back from Gongsun Zhi. Why was Yang Guo not willing to take it? Why throw it down the ravine instead? Why? I really don't understand."

Xiao Longnu sighed slightly, said in her heart, "I am about to die and Guo'er's love for me is very deep, how could he live alone? But things have come this far and I don't want to create more trouble." She only said, "Yang Guo has a strong character."

"Guo'er's heart is full of love," said Huang Rong, "Could it be that because Miss Gongsun sacrificed her life for the pill, Yang Guo did not have the heart to take it? Thus he is willing to sacrifice his own life to repay her love. Sister, that action shows his benevolent character, deserving our highest respect. However, we cannot make the dead live again. On

the other hand, his stubbornness in refusing any antidote would negate Miss Gongsun's sacrifice."

Xiao Longnu nodded her head.

Huang Rong paused for a moment, and then continued, "You have risked your life battling Gongsun Zhi on the stone bridge above the Broken Heart Cliff. That was also an act of ultimate sacrifice. Yang Guo will listen to nobody but you alone. Therefore, my Sister, please talk with him and persuade him for his own good."

Xiao Longnu could not hold her tears any longer; they flowed down her lovely cheeks. "If only he were willing to listen to me ... but even then, where can we find another Passionless Pill?" she said, sobbing.

"There are no more Passionless Pills in this whole wide world," Huang Rong said, "but I believe there is another antidote to neutralize the poison in him. What I feel is most difficult is to get him to take it."

Xiao Longnu was surprised and delighted at the same time. "Is that so?" she stood up and asked, "Is ... is there another antidote?"

Huang Rong pulled her hand, "Please sit down." She groped her pocket and took the purplish grass out. "This is the 'Severed Intestine Grass' [duan chang cao] that was in the Divine Indian Monk's hand when he died. According to Brother Zhu, he was searching for the antidote when that needle took his life. As you also witnessed, Sister, even though he was dead, his countenance showed a satisfied smile. My only conclusion is that he was satisfied because he found this grass, which is the antidote to the Passionless Flower. According to my Master - the Venerable Hong Qigong - inside a snake's lair always exist some kind of plant, which is the antidote of that particular snake's venom. This fact also

holds true for other kinds of poisons as well. Natural Law, it is how nature governs itself. This grass indeed grew underneath the Passionless Flower. We only knew that this grass is poisonous; however, after pondering for a while, I realize that this grass is the antidote to the flower. Poison against poison. One poison neutralizes the other.”

Xiao Longnu listened to her explanation and repeatedly nodded her head in agreement.

Huang Rong continued, “Taking this poisonous grass indeed poses a great risk; but we don’t have any other alternative right now, we need to take this risk. In my opinion, I am 90% confident that this medicine will be effective.” She knew that Huang Rong was very intelligent, and listening to her confidence, she could not help but feel her own confidence grow as well. Besides, as Huang Rong said, they did not have any other alternative anyway. After witnessing Li Mochou’s suffering caused by the Passion Flower she felt that for Yang Guo to die from the grass’ poison would be preferable to dying of the flower’s poison. Therefore, after a moment or two careful consideration, she made up her mind and said confidently, “Very well. Let me persuade him to take the grass.”

Huang Rong immediately reached in her pocket and took out several handfuls of grass and gave it to Xiao Longnu. “I picked these grasses along the way, and I believe these handfuls would be sufficient,” she said. “You will have to tell him to try a few strands of grass first, while protecting his internal organs with his energy. If it works, then he can take more later.”

Xiao Longnu then put the grass into her pocket and stood up, then knelt down in front of Huang Rong. “Guo’er ... he ... he’s an orphan and has nobody to look after him. He has suffered a lot,” she was choked up ... “He is rash and often

times does whatever his heart desires ... I beg Madame Guo to look after him."

Huang Rong quickly lifted her up. "Guo'er is under your loving care, and I trust you are a hundred times better than me in this matter," she was emotional as well, "After Xiangyang is saved from the Mongols, we shall go together to the Peach Blossom Island and have some good times together."

As intelligent as she was, Madame Guo did not have any clue as to why Xiao Longnu had asked her the favor. Xiao Longnu expected she would die any moment and had asked Huang Rong to take care of Yang Guo.

While his wife was having a conversation with Huang Rong, Yang Guo waited patiently. Now that he saw his wife stand up and walk away, he immediately came to her. "Guo'er," said Xiao Longnu, smiling sweetly, "our days are numbered. Let us not be burdened with other's business and just be together, you and I... Would you accompany me looking around this place?"

"Good!" Yang Guo replied, "I was just going to propose the same thing." Holding hands they left the crowd and walked slowly down a quiet path..

They hadn't walked too far when they saw a young couple having a quiet talk under a tree. It was Wu Dunru and Yelu Yan. Yang Guo smiled and turned the other way. Again, they hadn't walked too far when suddenly somebody ran out of the bushes ahead, laughing merrily, with somebody behind, chasing her. It was Wanyan Ping, being chased by Wu Xiuwen. "I want to know where you are going!" cried the young man. Seeing Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu, Wanyan Ping blushed. "Brother Yang, Sister Long," she greeted them sheepishly. Then she ran toward the forest to their left. Xiuwen was not too far behind.

“O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?” Yang Guo softly murmured. He was silent for a minute before continuing, “Those two brothers were fighting to the death to win Miss Guo’s attention. Only a short time later they love someone else already. There are people in this world who could love only one person – for life. Yet there are others like Gongsun Zhi and Qiu Qianchi who turned love into hatred. Ay! ‘O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?’ this is a very deep question and worthy to be pondered.” Xiao Longnu was silent. She put her head down, quietly walked along, like she was thinking very hard.

They arrived at a foothill a little while later. Looking up they could see the sun was low on the mountain top. Its red rays illuminating purple clouds in the blue sky. The evening mist starting to cover up the mountain peaks. It was a beautiful evening beyond words. They were convinced that they would not be together much longer; they were reluctant to part with this beautiful scenery.

“Guo’er,” Xiao Longnu suddenly broke the silence, “didn’t you say that after we are dead, our spirits will go to the underworld? Is it true there is a Yan Luowang [king of the underworld]?”

“I do hope so,” answered Yang Guo. “Even if the underworld was a sea of blades, boiling oil, or other kind torture, I would rather the underworld exist, than having our souls separated for eternity.”

“That’s true,” said his wife, “I do too; hope that there is an underworld somewhere. People say that on the way there an old granny meets the departing spirit and gives that spirit a bowl of water that makes the spirit forget everything mortal. As for me, I would refuse to drink that water. Guo’er, you have to promise me that you won’t forget my love forever.”

Xiao Longnu was raised and trained by the Ancient Tomb Sect, where she learned how to suppress all emotions. Therefore, while her heart was broken, she was able to speak with a steady voice. Yang Guo, on the other hand, could not hold back his tears any longer. He quickly walked away, turned his head from his wife and wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

Xiao Longnu sighed. "Ah! How can we mortals know anything about the underworld matters?" she said, "But if I were given any choice, I would rather live forever with you Guo'er, look! That flower is very pretty."

Yang Guo turned his head to where his wife was pointing, and he saw a beautiful red flower. It was so big, bigger than a rice bowl. The flower was swaying from the soft early evening breeze. It looked like a peony [mu dan] yet different; it looked similar to the type called 'Chinese Peony' [shao yao] yet different. "This flower is truly rare; it is still winter, but it blooms so brightly. If I were to give this flower a name, I would name it 'Dragon Lady Flower' [Longnu Hua]." He stooped down, picked the stem of the flower, and slipped it into his wife's hair.

"Thank you, for giving me a beautiful flower, and for giving the flower a beautiful name," Xiao Longnu smiled. After walking a little bit longer they sat down on a grassy hill, resting. "Guo'er, do you still remember everything you promised when I took you as my disciple?" asked the young madam.

"Why wouldn't I?" he answered.

"Well, do you remember taking an oath to always obey what I command as long as you live?" she continued, "Whatever I say, you cannot disobey. But I have become your wife now. Tell me, do I have to obey you, or will you forever obey me because I was your master and teacher? What do you think?"

"I will always obey you," promised Yang Guo. "Teacher's word has to be obeyed. Wife's word even more, I cannot disobey."

"Hmm!" said his wife, "It's good to know you remembered."

They sat shoulder-to-shoulder, leaning against each other, enjoying the beautiful dusk scenery around them. From a distance they heard Wu Santong calling them for dinner. They looked at each other and smiled. Who would want to eat while enjoying this breathtakingly wonderful time?

Eventually, the sun set, and the moon slowly rose. Night was falling. They were tired, and unwittingly fell asleep.

Yang Guo stirred and opened his eyes around midnight. The weather had turned cold. Half-asleep he asked his wife, "Long'er, are you cold?" He stretched out his arm, wanting to embrace her. With a sudden jolt he felt like his blood was drained completely from his body, because his hand only grabbed a handful of dirt! He leaped up instantly. His wife was nowhere to be seen! He looked everywhere, but all he could see were mountaintops and trees, gleaming under the silver light of the moon. He stretched his neck, trying to listen; but all he could hear was a gentle breeze, carrying soft chirping and buzzing of the little critters. Where could Xiao Longnu be? His heart was pounding very hard! He exerted his internal energy, ran to the hilltop and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Long'er! Long'er!"

Frantically he dashed to another hilltop. "Long'er! Long'er!" His voice echoed throughout the valley. "Long'er! Long'er ...!" but Xiao Longnu did not answer. Yang Guo's heart turned cold, "Where could she go? She slept next to me; it is impossible for an enemy to capture her, or even a beast to harm her without my knowing."

His cry had awakened Yideng, Huang Rong, Zhu Ziliu and the others. Knowing what happened, immediately they spread

out around the valley, trying to find the young madam; while their hearts were puzzled. Xiao Longnu was nowhere to be seen, even after searching high and low.

Yang Guo was running around like crazy. A moment later they gathered together again. Yang Guo also stopped running, he thought, "She must have left of her own will, otherwise I would certainly know; but why? I believe Mrs. Guo had something to do with it. She once ran away from me and went to the Passionless Valley because of her." Because of this thought his blood boiled and he exploded, "Auntie Guo! What exactly did you say to her this afternoon?"

Huang Rong herself was confounded; she did not have any idea why Xiao Longnu would suddenly disappear. She saw Yang Guo's veins showing on his face and neck, and realized how critical this moment was. "I only advised her to persuade you to take the 'Severed Intestine Grass' to neutralize the poison inside your body," she explained patiently.

"Since her life cannot be saved, do you really think I would want to live alone?" Yang Guo screamed.

"Don't you worry," said his auntie soothingly, "Miss Long possesses a very high level of martial arts. It is unthinkable that something bad has happened to her that she could not overcome. Why did you say 'her life cannot be saved'?"

In his unbearable grief Yang Guo lost his temper and snapped, "Huh! This is all your precious daughter's doing. She struck her with a 'Soul Freezing Needle' while she was reversing her blood flow, so that the lethal poison attacked her internal organs. My wife is not a deity, how could she endure that?"

How would Huang Rong know what had happened? Her daughter indeed told her that she had accidentally injured the Yang - Long couple with a Soul Freezing Needle'; but

those two were from the Ancient Tomb Sect, the same sect Li Mochou was from. Certainly they must have the antidote. Yes, they would be hurt momentarily, but she did not think the poison would threaten their lives. Yang Guo's answer was like a thunderbolt from a blue sky. Her countenance was sheet-white. Now she understood, "So it turns out Guo'er was adamant about not taking the pill because he would rather die than live alone. But where could Xiao Longnu go?" She looked up towards the hill where Gongsun Zhi and Qiu Qianchi met their tragic ends. She shuddered involuntarily.

Yang Guo had kept his gaze on Huang Rong and understood why she shuddered. He was shocked and angry beyond any reasoning. "You knew it! You knew she is beyond help and persuaded her to kill herself to save my life, didn't you?" he screamed. "You think you are doing me a big favor, but ... but ... I HATE YOU!!!" His chest tightened, he fainted and collapsed to the ground. Reverend Yideng immediately gave him a massage and after a moment he regained his consciousness.

"I only persuaded her to save your life," said Huang Rong, "I have never told anybody to commit suicide. Whether you believe me or you don't, it's up to you."

Everybody was looking at each other, they did not know what to say or do. "Let us go to that hilltop and take a look," Huang Rong said. Everybody left at once. But the hole on that hilltop was deep and so dark, they could not see anything.

"I think we'd better make a rope for me to go down into the cave to investigate," Cheng Ying broke the silence. "Perhaps ... perhaps ... Sister-in-law slipped ..."

Huang Rong sighed. "Very well, let's find out."

They immediately unsheathed their weapons and gathered tree bark, which was then braided into a long rope. They worked hard and around dawn, more than a hundred zhangs [a zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3 meters] of rope was ready. Several of the youngsters immediately offered to go down first. "Let me go first," said Yang Guo.

Everybody looked at Huang Rong for approval. Mrs. Guo thought hard. She was sure that if she said 'no', Yang Guo would insist on going anyway; but if she said 'yes' and – God forbid – Xiao Longnu were found inside, Yang Guo would certainly not be willing to come back up. While she hesitated, Cheng Ying once again offered a solution, "Brother Yang, let me go. Don't you trust me?"

Other than his wife, Cheng Ying was the only person Yang Guo loved and respected. Besides, he felt weak from excessive grief anyway, so he just nodded his agreement.

Wu Santong and his sons, along with Yelu Qi slowly lowered Miss Cheng into the opening. The cave entrance was located on or near the hilltop, so we can safely conclude that the depth of the cave is approximately the same as the height of the hill itself. Therefore, when they had almost run out of rope, Cheng Ying finally reached the bottom.

Everybody stood around the hole without making any sound; intently looking at the hole, waiting for some word from Cheng Ying. It was a suspenseful moment, as it seemed like Cheng Ying stayed in the cave for a long time.

Huang Rong and Zhu Ziliu exchanged a glance; they both had a similar thought, "If Xiao Longnu is really dead inside, Yang Guo would surely jump into the hole. We must not let him do so."

Yang Guo caught sight of their exchange, he thought, "If I really want to die, I can do that quietly, no need to involve all

of you; unlike that foolish couple earlier."

Suddenly the rope in Wu Santong's hands moved. "Quick! Pull!" Guo Fu and the Wu Brothers shouted almost simultaneously. Quickly they helped pulling the rope. Even before she reached the top, Cheng Ying had shouted at top of her lungs, "Not here! Sister-in-law is not here!"

Everybody was so relieved that they sighed almost simultaneously. A little later Cheng Ying reached the top and immediately said, "I have looked every where, every corner of the cave. Nothing was there except Gongsun Zhi and Qiu Qianchi's bodies."

Zhu Ziliu spoke in a low and somewhat muffled voice: "We have looked everywhere, so I think Miss Long has already left the valley."

Suddenly, Lu Wushuang said, "There is another place where we have not gone to look. Perhaps she is trying to fish that Passionless Pill out..."

Yang Guo's heart skipped a beat. Before Lu Wushuang could finish speaking, he dashed towards the Broken Heart Cliff. As he ran, he shouted: "Long'er, Long'er!" When he got to the edge of the cliff, he looked into the deep ravine below. All he saw was a vast sheet of grayish mist, how could anyone be seen in there?

He thought, "Long'er's thoughts are simple and pure. If she had any problems, she would have certainly not kept them from me." Then, he recalled the words that Xiao Longnu had uttered earlier, "She had asked me only to remember forever the vow that she had asked of me. I would naturally never go against her wishes, so why was there even a need to speak of it? But she did not even ask anything of me in the first place."

Lifting his head, he said in a soft voice: "Long'er, Long'er, where exactly have you gone? What are the words that you want me to obey?" Looking across the ravine at the Broken Heart Cliff, he could almost imagine the indistinct figure of a woman in white with a red flower in the hair by one of her temples. The woman seemed to move swiftly as she engaged Gongsun Zhi in an intense battle with the pair of swords in her hands.

"Long'er!" called Yang Guo. Then, pulling himself together, he realized that Xiao Longnu was not there. All he saw were floating sheets of whitish mist ... but that red flower was indeed at the bottom of the opposite cliff.

Struck by the oddity of the discovery, he thought, "When Long'er fought Gongsun Zhi in that place yesterday, the flower was certainly not there. The whole area is nothing but rock that does not encourage even the growth of grass or trees; how can there be any flowers? If I say that the wind blew the flower there; that would be too much of a coincidence."

Exerting his internal energy he leaped toward the cliff and crossed the stone bridge. His chest tightened! That flower was the one he slipped into his wife's hair just a few hours ago. He was sure of it, since one side of the flower was a bit flattened.

Yang Guo bent down and picked the flower up. Underneath it he found a paper package, which he hastily opened. Inside he found a few strands of purple grass, the "Severed Intestine Grass". His heart was beating fast. He looked at the paper, but he found nothing, not even a single stroke of a character was to be seen.

Suddenly he heard Lu Wushuang shout, "Brother Yang, what are you doing?"

He turned his head and his gaze was caught by two lines of characters carved by a sword on the cliff's wall. It read, "Sixteen years from now we will meet here. The love between husband and wife is profoundly great. Do not break your promise." Underneath was carved in smaller characters, "Xiao Longnu addresses my husband Yang-Lang. Please treasure this and I beg that you fulfill this reunion."

Yang Guo stared at those characters like he was losing his mind. His head felt dizzy. He really could not decipher what it meant. Unanswerable questions kept floating around in his mind. "She wants me to meet her here in sixteen years; then where did she go? She is heavily poisoned, she might not survive another ten days or even half a year; how can she wait sixteen years? She knows I threw the Passionless Pill away, why did she ask me to wait sixteen years?" The more he thought, the more his mind was confused; he staggered a few times and almost fell down.

The others stood on the opposite side of the cliff and saw his dazed and confused condition; they were afraid he might make a wrong step and fall down into the bottomless abyss below. But the stone bridge was so narrow that only one person could stand on it. Yang Guo's martial arts were so profound that if someone went to him and he acted up they would certainly die together. Huang Rong frowned and turning to Cheng Ying she said, "Shimei [Younger Martial Sister], go talk to him. I think he will listen to you."

"Very well, I will go to him," she responded, leaping onto the rock, and walking slowly toward Yang Guo.

Hearing footsteps coming near Yang Guo snapped, "Go away!" He turned his head with fire in his eyes.

"Yang Da Ge, it's me," the young miss said softly. "I just want to help you find Yang Da Sao, nothing else." Yang Guo stared hard at her sad face. Slowly his countenance softened.

“Is this red flower left by Sister-in-law?” asked Cheng Ying, approaching him.

“Yes,” he said, “She wants me to wait sixteen years...Why sixteen years?”

Cheng Ying read the message. She was perplexed. “Madame Guo is very intelligent, nothing can get past her,” she said, “Why don’t we ask her what she thinks. I am sure she can solve this puzzle.”

“That’s right,” said Yang Guo, “Be careful! That stone is slippery.”

They immediately walked back down and told everything they knew to Huang Rong.

She was silent for a moment, frowning deeply. Suddenly her eyes lit. Clapping her hands she exclaimed, “Guo’er, Congratulations, congratulations!”

Yang Guo was flabbergasted. He was shocked but a bit thrilled at the same time, “What ... Why ... What for?” He stammered.

“Congratulations! How can I not congratulate you!” his auntie was laughing ecstatically. “Sister Long has met the ‘Divine Nun of the South Sea’ [nan hai zhen ni]. This is a very extraordinary destiny.”

Yang Guo’s face looked puzzled: “Divine Nun of the South Sea? Who’s that?”

“Nan Hai Shen Ni is a divine Buddhist nun with a very high level of martial arts,” she explained, “Just how high her skill is, nobody can tell. Because she seldom comes to the mainland, almost nobody in the Central Plains knew her big name. My father met her and was taught a very high-level

fist technique. That was sixteen, thirty-two ... yes, it was thirty-two years ago."

"Thirty-two years ago?" Yang Guo repeated absent-mindedly.

"Yes," she continued, "I think the 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' is almost a hundred years old now. According to my father, she always visits the mainland once every sixteen years. Woe to the evil men who crosses her path. She has a benevolent heart and is always ready to help anybody in need. I am sure Miss Long has met her, was taken as her disciple, and was taken back to the South Sea."

"Sixteen years ... sixteen ... Reverend, is there such person?" Yang Guo turned to Yideng. His voice was hoarse.

Yideng was about to answer with an "hmm" when Huang Rong quickly cut him off. "The 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' excels in martial arts, but her character is a bit weird. Reverend, have you ever met her?"

"The old monk is unfortunate, he has not met her," he answered, shaking his head.

Huang Rong sighed. "Ah, that Senior is really ignorant," she said, "to separate a young couple like that...and for sixteen years! Sister Long already possesses a level high martial art. After sixteen years, wouldn't her husband looked like chicken compared to her?" Then she burst out in laughter.

"No, Auntie Guo, I don't think that was what she had in mind," countered Yang Guo.

"What then?" asked the aunt? Without further ado Yang Guo reminded her, that Guo Fu unintentionally struck her with a "Soul Freezing Needle" while his wife was reversing her blood flow to cure her injury. That caused the poison to attack her internal organs. "If what you said is true, I think the Shen Ni is trying to cure her within that sixteen years period." He

sighed, "You know, before this new development, I thought Long'er's condition was terminal."

"That spoiled brat of mine truly has caused you two too many troubles," said Mrs. Guo. "I think you are right. That poison has resided inside Sister Long's body for too long. Even if she was given a miracle cure, she would certainly need a long time to recover fully. Guo'er, let us hope that Sister Long will recover sooner, and that the 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' will release her sooner too."

Yang Guo was lost in thought with a heart full of questions. It was hard to believe his auntie, yet the Xiao Longnu's letter seemed to corroborate her argument. If she killed herself, why would she say sixteen years? Suddenly he turned his gaze toward Huang Rong and asked, "Auntie Guo, how do you know Nan Hai Shen Ni took Long'er away? Why didn't Long'er say so in the message, so that I wouldn't worry?"

"I came to that conclusion because of the words 'sixteen years later'," she explained. "I know this for a fact, that the 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' visits the mainland only once every sixteen years. Nobody else has that peculiar habit. Reverend, have you known anybody else with that custom?"

"No," he answered.

"Father said that the Shen Ni does not like to be mentioned," Mrs. Guo continued, "so it's understandable if Sister Long did not mention her name in the message. My only concern is that I am not sure the 'Severed Intestine Grass' will save your life. If ... Ay! ... if sixteen years pass and Sister Long comes back and she cannot see you, it is very possible that ... that she would not want to live any longer."

Yang Guo shed some more tears. He could see clearly in his mind a shadow of things to come. He saw a white shadow; it

was his wife, comeback to meet him sixteen years from now. He then saw his wife was grieving because he was no more.

A gentle breeze blew and Yang Guo shivered. "Auntie Guo," he said, "I think I'd better go to the South Sea to find her. Do you know where the Shen Ni lives?"

"Guo'er, don't be silly," rebuked his auntie softly, "The 'Great Wisdom Island' [da zhi dao] where the Shen Ni lives has never been visited by strangers. Woe to the man who visits the island uninvited. My Father received her tutelage, but even Father has never set foot on this island. Now that she's taken Sister Long under her wing, I am confident that someday you two will meet again. What is sixteen years anyway? It will pass in the blink of an eye. Why do you have to rush?"

Yang Guo looked intently at Huang Rong's face and asked, "Auntie Guo, are you telling me the truth?"

"You go and examine that message," she countered, "If that message was not written by Sister Long, you can say whatever you want."

"It was indeed written by Long'er herself." Yang Guo said, "Every time she writes the character 'Yang', she always add a short stroke on the right. Nobody writes it like that."

"Very good, then," said his auntie, clapping her hands. "Honestly, I wasn't sure myself. I thought it was too much of a coincidence. I thought it was Brother Zhu's doing trying to comfort you."

Yang Guo was lost in thought again, his eyes stared hard at the Broken Heart Cliff. "Very well," he finally said, "I will take the 'Severed Intestine Grass'. If it fails, I hope sixteen years from now Auntie will tell my poor wife everything." He turned to Zhu Ziliu and asked, "Uncle Zhu, how do I take the grass?"

Zhu Ziliu only knew the 'Severed Intestine Grass' was a poisonous plant. He had no idea on how that poison would neutralize other poisons. Therefore, he turned to Yideng and asked, "Shifu, I think we need your insight on this matter."

Extending his right hand forefinger, Yideng quickly sealed four of Yang Guo's accupoints: the 'shao hai' [lit. lesser sea], 'tong li' [lit. open inside], 'shen men' [lit. divine gate], and 'shao chong' [lit. little highway]. These four accupoints can be classified as the basic positive passages of the 'shou shao yang xin jing' [elementary positive heart manual(?)]. Yang Guo felt a warm feeling flowing from these accupoints toward his chest, and loosened the tightness in his breast. "The Passionless Poison mostly attacks the organs closely linked to the feelings or emotions," Yideng explained, "The 'Severed Intestine Grass' poison would most likely attack your heart as well. Therefore, I sealed your four accupoints to protect your heart. Go ahead, take some strands."

Yang Guo bowed to express his gratitude.

Yideng sighed, "If my Martial Brother were here, he would know how to take it properly, so that we would not have to make a wild guess."

When the Divine Indian Monk was killed by Li Mochou, Yang Guo thought Xiao Longnu was beyond hope, so he desired to die; but now he was determined to live for at least sixteen years longer. He put the grass into his mouth and started to chew, then swallowed it. The 'Severed Intestine Grass' was very bitter, but he endured it. He thought of how miserable Xiao Longnu would be if, sixteen years from now, she came back and did not see him. He quickly sat down and exerted his internal energy to protect his heart, liver, and other sensitive organs.

After not too long, he started to feel his stomach growling, followed by excruciating pain like he had swallowed

thousands of needles. The name 'Severed Intestine' was not an empty name. He endured the pain, gritting his teeth. After another moment or two, the pain surged through his entire body, to his hands and feet, but his heart felt quite comfortable. This demonstrated the excellence of the 'Solitary Yang Finger' of Reverend Yideng. An hour or so later, the pain was concentrated back in his stomach, and he threw up some blood. The blood glittered and looked redder than regular blood.

"Ah!" seeing him vomiting blood, Cheng Ying, Wushuang, and the others were shocked! Only Reverend Yideng looked delighted. "Shi di... [Younger Martial Brother]! Shi di!" he said softly, "even after your death you were still able to save your fellow man."

Yang Guo leaped up and declared with a voice full of emotion, "Today my life has been saved by the Divine Indian Monk, Reverend Yideng, and Auntie Guo."

"Is the poison completely eradicated from your body?" asked Wushuang gleefully.

"How could it be that quick?" he answered. "But now that we know the grass works, I will take a couple of strands every day until the poison is completely gone."

"But how would you know when your body is clean?" inquired Miss Lu further, "I mean, if the poison is completely neutralized and you continue taking the grass, wouldn't the grass poison you?"

"I can tell," he answered, "if the Passion Flower poison is still here and I ... I ... I think about love, my chest will hurt."

Guo Fu had been listening the whole time and suddenly quipped, "Yang Da Ge is thinking about Yang Da Sao, not you!" When she parried Gongsun Zhi's sword with her right

arm earlier, she was heeding Lu Wushuang's advice. At first she thought Wushuang was being nice to her; but afterwards realized Lu Wushuang did not know about the soft-hedgehog armor. Lu Wushuang must have wanted her to lose her right arm just as she'd chopped off Yang Guo's right arm. She'd kept her anger pent up for a long time and now she could not restrain herself.

"Fu'er! Shut up!" her mother rebuked harshly.

Hearing her, Lu Wushuang's face was flushed with anger, but Guo Fu wasn't finished yet, she continued, "Sixteen years from now, Sister-in-law will come back. Don't you get any weird ideas."

Wushuang unsheathed her willow-leaf-saber. "Wicked woman!" she snapped, pointing her saber to Guo Fu, "If not for you, Yang Da Ge wouldn't have to be separated from Yang Da Sao for sixteen years. Do you have the slightest idea how badly you have hurt Yang Da Ge?"

Guo Fu was about to counter when Huang Rong rebuked her with anger in her voice; "Fu'er! If you can't behave, go to the Peach Blossom Island. I'll forbid you to come back to Xiangyang." Guo Fu did not dare to open her mouth, but she still looked at Wushuang menacingly.

Yang Guo heaved a sigh and sorrowfully said, "It was an accident. Miss Guo did not intentionally want to hurt Long'er. Sister Lu, I forbid you to raise this incident again."

Hearing Yang Guo used the term "Sister Lu" to address her, while he called Guo Fu "Miss Guo", thus differentiating a good friend from an acquaintance, Wushuang was very pleased and sheathed her saber.

"Yang Shao Xia [Young Hero Yang] has eaten the 'Severed Intestine Grass'; but he did not experienced any bad side

effects. That proved the grass was indeed the antidote to the Passionless Flower's poison," Yideng said. "In my opinion, however, I think it will be better for Mr. Yang not to take the grass continually. Wait another seven days or so, and then you can have the second dose, even then, you should reduce the amount a little bit."

"Thank you for your priceless advice, Reverend." Yang Guo said, bowing.

The sun was already high in the sky. Huang Rong said, "We've been gone from Xiangyang for a while, and have not heard any news on the war situation. My mind keeps wandering back there, so I think we'd better go back today. Guo'er, I think you'd better come along, your Uncle Guo was really worried about you."

"Let me stay here and ... and wait for Long'er," he answered.

"You want to wait here sixteen years?" Guo Fu asked in disbelief.

"I don't know. I just feel like there is nowhere better," he answered.

"Very well then," decided Huang Rong, "It's all right if you want to wait here ten days to half a month. But if Sister Long does not come back, you'd better come to Xiangyang."

Yang Guo cast his glance toward the cliff but did not say anything.

Everybody bade Yang Guo farewell. Only Lu Wushuang seemed reluctant to leave. Of course Guo Fu saw that, and she could not help making a comment, "Hey, Lu Wushuang, do you want to stay here to accompany Brother Yang?"

Miss Lu blushed. "None of your business!" she snapped.

Suddenly Cheng Ying said, "Brother Yang has not fully recovered yet. Let Cousin and I stay here to accompany him for a few days."

Huang Rong knew, as sweet and gentle as she looked, in reality her younger martial sister had a very strong character. If her own daughter messed things up, she would not keep her peace. She looked sternly at Guo Fu, signaling her not to say another word. "Guo'er, I think it is a great idea to have Martial Sister and Miss Lu taking care of you," she said, "However, as soon as you are cured, I do hope you will come to Xiangyang, where my husband and I will wait for the three of you."

Yang Guo, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang stood on the hill side, watching Yideng, Huang Rong and the others slowly fading away from their sight; disappearing among the trees. In the mean time, the fire that had been raging all night long had slowly died away.

"Sisters," said Yang Guo suddenly, "I would like to suggest something. I do hope you won't get offended."

"Who has ever been offended by you?" Wushuang asked.

Yang Guo smiled sadly, his voice trembling, "We have known each other for some time now; we love each other and we have even faced danger together. When I was a young boy I lived alone, with neither brothers nor sisters. My heart's desire is that we become sworn brother and sisters. What do you think?"

Cheng Ying was touched. She was sensitive and knew exactly what Yang Guo was thinking. She knew Yang Guo loved Xiao Longnu with all his heart. He had made that suggestion because he had to wait sixteen years, and because they would have to live together for several days. He wanted to avoid anything that could cause embarrassment or would

make them uncomfortable. Lu Wushuang put her head down, tears flowing from her eyes. "I would have never dreamed of being your sworn sister," she said softly. "We will be proud and honored to have a big brother like you."

After saying that, she walked toward a Passionless Flower nearby and picked three strands of the 'Severed Intestine Grass'. "Others become sworn brothers and sisters with incense sticks, here we use grass instead." She tried to make a joke and sound cheerful, but toward the end, her voice was hoarse. Before Yang Guo could respond, she immediately kneeled down on the ground. Yang Guo and Cheng Ying quickly knelt at either side of Miss Lu, and, just like the regular ceremony of becoming sworn brothers and sisters; they kowtowed eight times, and then bowed to each other in respect.

"Second Sister, Third Sister, what I hate most in this world is the Passionless Flower," Yang Guo said. "If that flower ever spreads outside this valley, it would be a real disaster for mankind. Therefore, let us make an oath to completely wipe out the Passionless Flower from the face of the earth. What do you think?"

"Your desire Big Brother is a very noble one," said Cheng Ying. "I am sure the Goddess of Mercy will bless you so that you will meet Sister-in-law much earlier."

Hearing his sister's words, Yang Guo's spirits rose. Immediately they went to the building complex ruins, trying to find some tools like machete or axe to cut down the poisonous flowers. They had to work very slowly. Not only there were lots of shrubs to cut, but if not careful, they would get pricked by the thorns. They finished cutting the shrubs after toiling for six whole days. Then they walked around the whole valley, making sure not a single shrub was spared. It

was because of their hard work that the world was free of the Passionless Flowers.

Early morning the next day, Wushuang took some more 'Severed Intestine Grass', went to her sworn brother and said, "Big Brother, it's time for you to take another dose of the grass."

After his first experience seven days ago, Yang Guo was not hesitant. Although the 'Severed Intestine Grass' was poisonous, it was effective against the poison in his body. He immediately sat down on the ground, exerted his internal energy to protect his heart and liver, and quickly ate the grass. This time the pain was not so severe. After about an hour or so he threw up some blood and the pain lessened almost immediately.

He stood up, stretched his arms and legs, and saw Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang's joyful countenance. "I am so lucky to have two very loving sworn sisters." he said to himself. "One is more than enough, now I have two. How can I repay their kindness?" He looked down, thinking hard. Then he thought, "Second Sister has had an excellent Master, and I am sure someday she will be an excellent martial artist. Not so with Third Sister."

Having had that thought, he said to Wushuang, "Third Sister, your master and mine were martial sisters. That makes us people of the same sect. The highest level of the Ancient Tomb Sect's martial arts was written in the 'Jade Maiden Manual'. Li Mochou's lifelong desire was to get hold of this manual, fortunately she did not get her wish right up to the day she died. While we have the opportunity, I'd like to teach you one or two arts from our sect. What do you say?"

Lu Wushuang was delighted, "Thank you Big Brother," she said. "Next time Guo Fu and I meet, she will not dare to pick a fight with me."

Yang Guo smiled faintly and immediately taught the theory of 'Jade Maiden Manual' to his sister, beginning from the elementary to the advanced. "You have to memorize the theory first, and later on ask Second Sister's help when it comes to training," explained the big brother. "This quiet Passionless Valley is a very suitable place to learn martial arts."

For a few days Wushuang used all her waking moments to memorize the theory. Since her background was also from the Ancient Tomb Sect, she did not have any difficulty understanding the elementary lessons. Very soon however, she arrived at the more difficult part of the lesson and started to have some trouble understanding the theory. Yang Guo advised her to just memorize the theory blindly; she would eventually understand the whole lesson. So Wushuang spent almost the whole month memorizing the entire 'Jade Maiden Manual'. In the mean time Yang Guo ate the 'Severed Intestine Grass' every seven days and his pain gradually lessened.

One morning, as usual Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang prepared their breakfast, and then waited for Yang Guo to come. After waiting for quite a while, Yang Guo did not come. They went to their big brother's cave, only to find some characters written on the ground at the cave's entrance. It said, "To part for a while, to be together forever. Brotherly love shines like the sun and the moon."

Both girls were shocked. "He ... finally he left us," Lu Wushuang said, running toward a hill and looked around. Cheng Ying followed not too far behind. All they could see were clouds on the mountain peaks. Miss Lu's heart was broken. She asked, with an uneven voice, "Second Sister ... where ... where did he go? Can we ... can we see him again?"

“Third Sister,” her older sister replied, “Do you see those clouds? They gathered together, then were blown away by the wind, to be gathered again somewhere else. We are just like those clouds. Now we gather, then we part. Why is your heart troubled?” Even though her mouth said those words, her heart was also full of sorrow.

Yang Guo had remained on the Broken Heart Cliff for about over a month and imparted the ‘Jade Maiden Manual’ to Lu Wushuang. During all this time, he did not find any more clues or news about the whereabouts of Xiao Longnu and knew that it would be no use to wait any longer. He gathered a bunch of the ‘Severed Intestine Grass’ and then left a parting a message in the sand before leaving the cliff. However, he had still not given up hope of seeing Xiao Longnu again, so he returned to mount Zhongnan and went back into the Ancient Tomb. But after seeing that the wedding garments were left untouched and were lying on the bed and floor, his heart was broken once again.

He left the mountain and roamed Jianghu for a few months. One day, he found himself near the city of Xiangyang. The burned wastelands that the Mongols had left was showing signs of human activity and it appeared that in the past months the Mongols were once again heading south.

He missed Guo Jing, but he did not want to see Guo Fu and thought to himself, “It’s been a long time since I parted with Brother Eagle, why don’t I go visit him?” He then made his way to the wild valley.

As he neared the home of Sword Demon Dugu Qiubai [Dugu Seeking-A-Loss], he gave a long whistle. He walked and whistled at the same time and not long after, he heard chirrup calls from the base of the mountain. He raised his head and saw the Divine Eagle below a large tree with a wolf in its claws. When the Divine Eagle saw Yang Guo, it released

the wolf and made its way to him. After managing to keep its life after facing the jaws of death, the wolf darted straight into the bushes without turning back.

Yang Guo hugged the eagle; both man and beast were extremely happy. They made their way back to the cave. In just a few months, Yang Guo had found himself slipping from life to death and from death back to life again, grief and joy both came and went, the trials and tribulations he had gone through, countless. It was a pity that the eagle could not speak; otherwise Yang Guo could tell it all the things that have been on his mind.

He stayed in the valley with the eagle as his companion for months. One day out of boredom, he made his way to the cliff where Dugu Qiubai buried his swords. He made his way to the top of the cliff and looked at the words underneath the decayed wooden sword:

“After the age of forty, I no longer relied on weaponry. Even bushes, trees, bamboo sticks or rocks can all be my sword. From then on, I achieved great progress and slowly reached the realm of overcoming the sword without a sword.”

Yang Guo thought to himself, “With the heavy iron sword, it can be said that I had no match under heaven’s skies; but from senior Dugu’s words, it appears that the wooden sword can defeat the heavy iron sword, and finally, no sword can defeat the wooden sword. Since Long’er said that we will only be able to see each other again in sixteen years time, with all these years to come, I might as well study the ways to defeat the heavy iron sword with the wooden sword and how to overcome a sword without a sword.”

He broke a branch and formed a sword with it and pondered, “The heavy iron sword is around seventy jin in weight, there are only two possibilities on how to overcome it with such a light and fragile wooden sword. One is through ingenuity of

the sword strokes, using speed to overcome the slow; the other is through overbearing internal energy, using strength to subdue the weak.”

From that day on, he trained his internal energy hard night and day and studied the art of the sword. Every time it rained; he went to the mountain torrents to fight the water in order to increase the power in his sword strokes.

Summer ended and autumn arrived, autumn went and winter came. Though Yang Guo trained with dedication, he made little progress with his internal energy and sword arts. However, he knew that his level of martial arts was already very high; to gain any sort of improvement from such a state was, in reality, a hard task to accomplish, so he wasn't troubled by it.

One day, it started to snow. The Divine Eagle called out with joy and leapt into the open. It spread its wings and created a strong gust of wind, blowing the snow away. Yang Guo had a thought, “There are no mountain torrents in the winter; practicing in the snow is a great alternative.”

He watched on as the gusts of wind created by the eagle became stronger and stronger; though the snow was heavy, not a flake landed on its body.

Yang Guo's interests were stirred. He picked up the wooden sword and he too went out into the snow. He used his sword with his left hand and swung his right sleeve at the same time. Whenever flakes of snow got close, either the wind from the wooden sword or the force from his right sleeve would repel it. He continued for a half a day and felt that the power in both his sword and sleeve seemed to have made some improvements.

It snowed for three days and Yang Guo practiced in the snow each day. On the afternoon of the third day, the snow

became even heavier. Yang Guo was in the middle of concentrating on attacking the snow when suddenly, the Divine Eagle swept its wings at him. Yang Guo was not prepared for this and was almost tripped by this attack. He leaped up urgently to avoid this attack but as soon as he did this, he felt coolness on his forehead, two flakes of snow had landed on it. He immediately understood, "That day on top of the cliff, Brother Eagle used its wings to fight me and helped me to make great improvements in my sword arts; today he is helping me to train my sword skills once again." He then extended his sword and thrust forward, a 'crack' sound was heard as the sword met the eagle's wings; the sword broke. The Divine Eagle did not continue its attack and instead it straightened up and chirruped with an impression of blame.

Yang Guo thought, "The only way to fight against your frightening strength with a wooden sword is to dodge, evade and wait for a chance to attack from afar." He made another wooden sword and once again, fought with the Divine Eagle in the snow. This time, he managed ten stances before the sword broke.

Training as hard as this without stop, Yang Guo felt that the Divine Eagle was like a strict teacher and showed no signs of letting up; he was touched by this but he was also ashamed of himself, "If I don't manage to learn the wooden sword, won't I have let down Brother Eagle's good intentions? Anyway, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, how can I let it slip away?"

From then on, he thought about how to increase his internal energy, about how to evade and how to strike out with the sword even in his dreams. He trained rigorously and as a result, his thoughts of Xiao Longnu did not engulf his mind as it had in the previous months. The poison from the Passion Flower had now been cleansed from his body, his internal

energy had improved, he was in prime shape and he no longer had the haggard and distressed look of old.

It was now the anniversary of his parting with Xiao Longnu. Yang Guo said, "Brother Eagle, I want to visit the Passionless Valley; I'm going to have to leave you for a while." He then picked up his wooden sword and made his way out of the valley. The Divine Eagle followed. When they reached the fork in the road, Yang Guo bowed to the Divine Eagle and made his way on the road to the north. But to his surprise, the Divine Eagle tugged at his clothes and pulled him towards the south.

Yang Guo said, "Brother Eagle, I have something to do in the north, let us part now." But the eagle kept on pulling him south. Yang Guo was curious, "Brother Eagle has been very understanding; why is he being so stubborn now?" He could not get through to it with words and could only follow the Divine Eagle south. When the Divine Eagle saw that Yang Guo was following, it let go of Yang Guo's clothes: but as soon as Yang Guo turned around and tried to go north, it got hold of his clothes once again.

Yang Guo thought, "Brother Eagle is a divine creature, it must have a reason for wanting me to go to the south with him, I might as well go." He dropped his thoughts of returning to Passionless Valley and followed the eagle to the southeast.

After traveling over ten li, Yang Guo suddenly had a thought, "Could it be that Brother Eagle is leading me to the South Sea to allow me to see Long'er?" As soon as this thought finished, he was filled with excitement and started to take greater strides as he followed the Divine Eagle. Within a month, they had reached the coast of the South Sea.

He stood on a rock and gazed into the sea. He watched the waves of the sea as all manners of emotions filled his mind. After a while, he heard the thunderous sounds of the tides

that went on without stop. After spending part of his childhood on the Peach Blossom Island, he knew that the tides of the sea always kept its cycle; it would come at the first and seventh hour of the day. The sun was in the sky and it appeared that it was the time for the turn of the tide. The tide was getting louder and louder, sounding like the hoofs of ten thousand horses. The tide made a white line as it surged towards the coast; the force shown by the tide was greater than the hue and cries of thunder and lightning. Yang Guo could not believe that there existed such a force and after seeing this display, he couldn't stop his face from changing expression.

In the blink of an eye, the waves had reached him and were about to engulf him. Yang Guo leaped backwards, but suddenly he felt a great force pushing him from behind. It was the Divine Eagle using its wings to hit him. He was in midair and had no control over where he was going. With a splash he landed in the foamy waves. He felt a salty taste in his mouth as he swallowed two mouthfuls of seawater.

It was an extremely dangerous situation but luckily for him, he had spent a long time training in the mountain torrents and he immediately used the 'Thousand Pound Plummet', steadying himself on the rocks below the sea's surface. The bottom of the sea was a lot calmer than the turbulent waves on top. He gathered his thoughts and immediately knew what was happening, "Brother Eagle has led me here because he wants me to train my sword arts in the waves of the sea." He lifted his legs and leapt up to the surface of the sea and into the fierce winds, meeting the first of the waves head on. He pushed against the water with his left arm and leapt above the waves before quickly drawing a deep breath and returning to the bottom of the sea.

He repeated this until the tide calmed; by then he was so exhausted that his face had turned white. When the tide

came again that night, he took the wooden sword with him and leapt into the waves to again train his sword skills. However, unlike the mountain torrents where all he had to contend with was the force of the water heading in one direction, the forces of the waves came from everywhere; whenever he could not take it any longer, he would dive down to the sea bed to avoid the waves.

From then on, he trained twice a day and within a month, he felt his internal energy had made great improvements. When he used the wooden sword on dry land, he was able to produce a faint sound that sounded like sound of the tide. Whenever the Divine Eagle sparred with him, it started to avoid the sword and did not dare to meet it with its wings.

One day, Yang Guo was getting deeply engrossed in the sparring sessions and slashed the wooden sword with all his might. The Divine Eagle called out and leapt to the side. Yang Guo could not withdraw the force of his sword in time and it struck a tree. The wooden sword broke but the tree was cut in two.

Yang Guo held the broken sword's handle and thought, "This wooden sword is light and fragile, but it was still able to cut a tree; this is because of the internal energy in my hand. If in the future the tree breaks and the sword does not then I won't be too far off the divine skill of Senior Dugu."

Spring went and autumn came, the months flowed by. He trained his sword arts in the sea's waves night and day, whatever the weather. The sound produced by the wooden sword was getting louder and louder to the point where it was able to produce great volume of noise. After a few months, the sound from the wooden sword got quieter and quieter until no more noise came from it. Another few months passed and the sword produced sound again. This process of going from soft to loud and loud to soft repeated itself seven

times. Eventually, he was able to produce whatever sound he desired, loud or soft. By the time he reached this stage, he counted on his fingers and realized he had been by the sea for six years.

By this time, when Yang Guo trained in the sea's waves with the wooden sword in his hand, the wind generated by his sword could repel the waves and the Divine Eagle, with its frightening strength, could last not more than three stances of the wooden sword. At this point, he realized what the Sword Demon Dugu Qiubai must have felt all those years ago, "With a sword art such as this, who, on this earth, can stand up to it? No wonder Senior Dugu felt lonely and buried his sword away in the deep valley." He then thought, "If Brother Eagle hadn't witnessed how Senior Dugu trained his sword skills, how would I have been able to obtain such a divine skill? I call him Brother Eagle but in reality he is my kind master. When it comes to age, I don't know how old he is, I'm afraid that I could even call it Grandfather Eagle or Grandmaster Eagle."

During his training by the sea, Yang Guo would often ask the passengers on passing boats about a 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' [Nan Hai Shen Ni]. He has asked thousands of sailors and passengers but there was nothing. He knew that seeing Xiao Longnu before the sixteen years was up was going to be a near impossible task.

One dark, windy and rainy day, something stirred in Yang Guo's heart, he placed the wooden sword at his waist and covered himself with his tattered gown. The man and eagle made their way west and from then on, made their way back into Central Plains and roamed the southern region [Jiangnan].

End of Chapter 32.

Chapter 33 - Tales in the Night

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox)



As the three siblings of Guo Fu, Guo Xiang and Guo Polu sat warming themselves by the fire in an inn at the Fengling Ferry Crossing, they heard the other guests talking about the various gallant and righteous acts of the Eagle Hero. By and by, Guo Xiang's thoughts turned to distant things, and she began to harbor the hope of meeting this Great Eagle Hero.

The Song Emperor Li Zong celebrated the start of the year, the ninth year after Mengke (or Meng-ge) became the Mongolian Khan. In the early February spring on the tumultuous north bank of the Yellow River's Fenglingdu area, the donkeys and the horses called out mixed with the sounds of people and carts. The weather was cold then warm, the Yellow River had just thawed, but the north wind blew on this day and it started snowing, freezing the river's water. The water surface did not permit the movement of boats while the carts could not travel on the ice, forcing many visitors heading south to be stranded in the Fenglingdu area. They would be unable to continue their journeys. Although the Fenglingdu area has several inns, travelers arrived from the north continuously and in less than half a day, the inns were already fully occupied and the travelers who arrived later had no place to stay.

In the town the biggest inn was the "An Du Old Inn", occupying a location supposedly bringing good luck. In this inn the guest-quarters were spacious, all travelers who could not find any accommodations came here, and therefore the inn was particularly crowded. The innkeeper tried his best to arrange matters and so each room was packed with three to four individuals. Around twenty people who were waiting to get a room had to sit in a circle in the great hall. The inn assistants moved the furniture and lighted a fire. Outside, the north wind howled, the cold wind together with the snow managed to enter through a crack in a door, causing the fire to flicker continuously. It looked like the many visitors still

would not be able to continue their journey the next day and they were full of worries.

The sky became darker, the snow got heavier and heavier. Suddenly horses' hoofs were heard. Three riders anxiously rushed up and stopped at the inn entrance. In the hall an old guest frowned, saying, "Yet another visitor has come."

A female voice said, "Innkeeper, prepare two good spacious and clean rooms."

The innkeeper greeted her with a smile and said, "Sorry, the inn is already fully occupied. I really cannot prepare rooms for you."

That female said, "OK, then one room will do."

The innkeeper said, "Really sorry, honored guest, but the inn must also please others and now visitors really have filled the inn's rooms."

That female swung her horse whip, making a "Pa!" sound and scolded, "Rubbish! You run the inn, but will not prepare rooms, what kind of inn is this? Can't you ask someone to give way? I'll pay you more." After saying that, she then rushed into the hall.

The crowd saw this female figure become clearer and she looked around 30 years old, with a peach colored cheeks, elegant appearance and wearing an expensive blue colored fur-lined coat. The neckband revealed smooth skin; all the clothing looked quite expensive. Behind this young woman was a male and female of around fifteen or sixteen years old. The male had thick eyebrows and big eyes, and had a straightforward facial expression. The female was lively looking, elegant and beautiful. The two youths wore light green satin fur-lined coats. Around the young girl's neck hung a string of pearls, with each one around the size of a

small finger nail and showing a light halo. The many guests saw these three people's imposing manner and although they had chatted all day they stopped talking and stared silently at the three people.

The inn assistant bowed with a smile, saying, "Madam, look, these guests cannot find any accommodations. If you three do not mind the discomfort, I will let everybody occupy this space and keep warm by the fire, comfortably passing the night. If the river melts tomorrow, you can cross the river."

The young woman got impatient, but it looked like this was reality, so she frowned wordlessly. A middle-aged woman sitting near the fire said, "Madam, sit here, keep warm by the fire, get rid of the cold air then talk about this again." The beautiful woman said: "Good, many thanks to you." A male guest to the side of that middle-aged woman hurriedly moved away, giving up his place.

The three people sat down, and soon the inn assistant delivered their meals. The food was sumptuous, with chicken and pork, and a big pot of wine. That beautiful young woman's alcohol capacity was very good, having drunk bowl after bowl. The youth and the refined young girl also accompanied her in drinking; the three of them addressed each other as brother and sister. The youth looked older than the refined girl, but called her "elder sister".

The people sat in a circle around the fire, listening to the wind whistling outside, none feeling sleepy at the moment.

A man with a Shanxi accent said, "This weather really is unfavorable; it changes rapidly. God doesn't allow man to have even one good day."

A short person with a Hubei accent said, "You can't blame Heaven and Earth; we have in here a fire to keep warm, food to eat, what else do you want? If you have lived in the

besieged city of Xiangyang, even the world's most bitter places will seem a cozy nest."

That beautiful young woman upon hearing "besieged city of Xiangyang", exchanged glances with her brother and sister.

A visitor with a Guangdong accent asked, "Excuse me, elderly friend, that besieged city of Xiangyang - how is life there?"

The Hubei visitor said, "The Mongolians' cruelty, of which all of you know, need not be mentioned. The year the Mongolians' 100,000-strong army attacked Xiangyang fiercely, the garrison was controlled by Governor Lu, a stupid and incompetent person. Fortunately the heroic couple Mr. and Mrs. Guo bravely repelled the enemy forces..." The young woman, upon hearing "heroic couple Mr. and Mrs. Guo", started paying attention. Listening to that Hubei visitor continue, "Xiangyang City's hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians also defended the city with their lives and none cowered from their duty. A small-time merchant like me, though only able to move earth and stones, also helped to defend the city. This old arrow scar on my face was caused by a Mongolian's arrow." The people looked at his face simultaneously, saw that under his left eye there really was a teacup-size arrow scar and could not help but respect him.

That Guangdong guest said, "Our great Song has much land and many people; if everybody acts like the old friend here, even if the Mongolians were ten times fiercer, they couldn't conquer our lands."

The Hubei man said, "Yes. Look, the Mongolian army has been attacking Xiangyang for more than ten years, but can't take the city, while other cities fall easily. I heard dozens of countries in the western region got destroyed by the Mongolians, while our Xiangyang, throughout, stood erect like a mountain. The Mongolian prince Khubilai Khan

personally directed the combat, but also could not overcome our Xiangyang people." After saying that, he greatly felt satisfied.

The Guangdong guest said: "The common people will fight the Mongolians with their lives; if the Mongolians come to Guangdong, our Guangdong men will also fight them with all our might."

The Hubei man said, "Even if we don't go all out with the Mongolians, we will still die. The Mongolians cannot take Xiangyang, so they seized the Han people outside the city, tied them up next to each other and beheaded them near the city. Even some four or five year-old or six or seven year-old children were tied up, then pulled by horses in circles under the city wall, and usually in less than half a circle, the children would die. We could hear the children crying loudly from the top of the city wall, and it hurts the heart greatly. The Mongolians use such cruel methods, trying to frighten us into surrendering, but the more vicious they are, the harder we defend the city. That year all of Xiangyang's grain was eaten, the water supply used up, we even had to drink the water condensed on tree bark, but the Mongolians could never force their way in. Afterwards the Mongolians gave up and withdrew the army."

The Guangdong man said, "After more than ten years fighting, if Xiangyang didn't persevere unyieldingly, I fear half of the great Song Empire would have already disappeared."

Many people asked about Xiangyang's defense situation, and the Hubei man talked dramatically, praising Guo Jing and Huang Rong like deities, so the people called out their approval unceasingly.

A visitor with a Sichuan accent suddenly sighed, "Actually good officials who can defend a city are numerous, but the

Imperial Court is treacherous, often allowing disloyal subjects to enjoy riches and honor, while the loyal ministers die unjustly. The previous dynasty's General Yue need not be mentioned. For instance, our Sichuan has several loyal ministers who were killed by the Imperial Court."

The Hubei man said, "Who were they? I must ask." The Sichuan man said, "The Mongolians attacked Sichuan for more than 10 years and we all depended on Marshal Yu to defend us. The entire Sichuan population treated him like a living Buddha. Who knew that the Emperor believed the words of his disloyal subject Ding Daquan who said Marshal Yu was too powerful and dangerous. The emperor bestowed poisoned wine upon him and compelled him to commit suicide; replacing him with an incompetent and deceitful jerk as Marshal. Then when the Mongolians attacked again, the northern Sichuan province could not defend itself. The soldiers were Marshal Yu's former subordinates, so everyone fought to the death. But the new Marshal could only polish up his superiors so as soon as we went to war, he deployed the troops hopelessly and naturally we could not defend ourselves. Ding Daquan and Chen Dafang, the deceitful duo, both shielded that useless Marshal, and instead maligned the brave and unyielding General Wang Weizhong. They accused him of collaborating with the enemy, resulting in his entire family in Beijing being captured and General Wang beheaded." Saying this, his voice had a sobbing note, and many people sighed simultaneously.

The Guangdong visitor said indignantly, "Our country's affairs are all thrown into disarray by these disloyal subjects. I heard the Imperial Court has three dogs, so this disloyal subject Ding Daquan must be one of them."

A fair youth was listening silently, but he said, "Correct, the Imperial Court's disloyal subjects Ding Daquan, Chen Dafang and Hu Dachang are the top three dogs. The Linan people

added a dot to their 'Da' character, changing them to Ding Qianquan, Chen Quanfang and Hu Quanchang." (Playing with the Chinese characters) Hearing this, the group of people laughed heartily.

The Sichuan man said, "From your voice, you must be from the capital Linan."

The youth said, "Exactly."

The Sichuan man said, "Then have you heard of the matter concerning General Wang Weizhong's punishment?"

The youth said, "I saw with my own eyes. Before dying General Wang's manner did not change and he fiercely shouted that Ding Daquan and Chen Dafang will bring disaster on the nation and the people. But moreover there is also a different matter." The numerous people asked, "What different matter?"

The youth said, "General Wang's death was caused by Chen Dafang's plotting. When General Wang was tied up and he was being moved to the execution ground, he shouted loudly in the street, saying that he will definitely voice his grievances to the Jade Emperor (the Emperor of Heaven). The third day after General Wang's death, that Chen Dafang was killed in his own home; his severed head was actually displayed above the Linan east gate's bell tower, suspended on a long bamboo pole. Neither apes nor monkeys could reach this place, let alone a person; if it wasn't the Jade Emperor, then who could have done it?" Many people expressed admiration. The youth said, "This matter is known throughout Linan and was not made up by me. If you people go to Linan, you will know as soon as you ask."

The Sichuan man said, "This brother's story is indeed good. However the one who killed Chen Dafang, certainly wasn't a deity or god, but actually was a great hero."

The youth shook his head and said, "That Chen Dafang was a high official in the Imperial Court and had many soldiers. He was guarded closely; how could the average man kill him? Also, to hang this disloyal subject's severed head above the bell tower, one must have wings; only then can one have that ability."

The Sichuan man said, "A chivalrous hero with such extraordinary abilities must still exist in the world after all. But if I didn't witness this myself, I might also find it unbelievable."

The youth curiously asked, "You saw how he hung up Chen Dafang's severed head on the high bamboo pole with your own eyes? How did you see that?"

The Sichuan man hesitated for a while and said, "General Wang Weizhong has a son; when General Wang was arrested the son escaped outside Linan. The Imperial Court's disloyal subjects wanted to nip the problem in the bud, so they sent the army to pursue and capture him. General Wang's son was also a military officer; although he has some martial arts, he actually was overwhelmed by sheer numbers and knew that he was about to be caught. But a savior came and empty-handedly thrashed dozens of soldiers soundly. Young General Wang then told his savior how his father fought bravely for the country but was framed by the disloyal subjects. That chivalrous hero rushed the same night to Linan, wanting to rescue General Wang, but was late by two days and General Wang was already dead. That chivalrous hero swelled with anger and that very evening he severed Chen Dafang's head. Although that bell tower is out of reach of apes and monkeys, that chivalrous hero had only to jump gently and reached it in one attempt."

The Guangdong man asked, "Who is this hero? What's his appearance like?"

The Sichuan man said, "I did not know this hero's name, I only saw that he was short a right arm, his facial expression...his facial expression was also very unusual. He rode a horse and led another horse with a huge strange-looking bird riding on it..." He had not finished talking when a man with a straightforward facial expression loudly said, "Correct! This must be the world-famous 'Eagle Hero'!"

The Sichuan person asked, "He is called the 'Eagle Hero'?"

The other man said, "This chivalrous hero valiantly upholds justice, defends the good against evil, but is never willing to reveal his name. Our friends in Jianghu (the pugilistic world) always see him and a queer bird together, so they gave him the nickname the "Chivalrous Eagle Hero" (Shen Diao Da Xia). He said he was not fit to be called a "Chivalrous Hero" (da xia), so they only called him the "Eagle Hero". But based on his actions, what's wrong with calling him "Chivalrous Hero"? If he isn't a hero, then who is?"

The beautiful young woman suddenly said, "You are a chivalrous hero, I am also a chivalrous hero, humph, there are rather too many chivalrous heroes."

That Sichuan person imposingly said, "Madam said that? Although I don't understand Jianghu matters, the Eagle Hero rushed Linan from Jiangxi for four consecutive days and nights, without sleeping or resting, in order to save the life of General Wang. He didn't even know General Wang, but because of the General's utter loyalty in serving the country and being framed by the disloyal traitor, he acted boldly without regard for his own safety. He braved much danger to seek justice for General Wang's orphan, so should you call him a chivalrous hero?"

The young woman made a 'humph' sound and was about to argue, but the refined young girl beside her said, "Elder sister, judging from what this gentleman did, of course one

should call him a "Chivalrous Hero". Her words were clear; upon hearing this, nobody else could say anything as pleasant to hear.

The young woman said, "What do you know?" Turning her head to that Sichuan man, she said, "How do you know it so well? Is this not hearsay? In Jianghu news, around 90% is not accurate."

That Sichuan person hesitated for a while before saying, "My surname is Wang; General Wang Weizhong was my father. My life was saved by the Eagle Hero. I am a fugitive and the Imperial Court has issued a warrant for my arrest, and wants my head. But this involves my savior's reputation, so I do not dare fear death and keep this matter from coming to light."

The people were shocked to hear him say that. The Guangdong man curled his thumb upwards, saying "Young General Wang, you are a good man. Anyone who dares to inform the government authorities of your whereabouts may have a white knife entering him, a red knife coming out." Many people loudly praised this. The beautiful woman heard him say this and could not argue.

The refined young girl looked at the flickering fire and was lost in thought, gently mumbling, "Eagle Hero, Eagle Hero... .." Turning her head to young General Wang, she said, "Uncle Wang, the Eagle Hero has such excellent martial arts, how could he lose an arm?" The beautiful woman's face changed greatly, the lips moved slightly, wanting to speak, but she controlled the impulse.

Young General Wang shook his head saying, "I didn't even get to ask his name, how could I ask about his life story?"

The beautiful young woman made a 'humph' sound, saying "Of course you don't know."

The Linan youth said, "The Eagle Hero killed the traitor which young General Wang witnessed with his own eyes, then naturally it was not the deities who did it. But that traitor Ding Daquan's face turned green in one night, so it must be due to heaven's punishment."

The Guangdong man said, "How did his face turn green in one night? This is really strange."

The Linan youth said, "Formerly the people of Linan called Ding Daquan as Ding Qianquan, but now he is called 'Ding Qingpi' (Ding Green Skin). His originally fair skin suddenly turned green in a night, and it didn't go away. All the wise doctors were not able to treat him. I heard the Emperor also once asked about it but that disloyal official said that he wholeheartedly served the Emperor and his anxiety over national affairs caused him to lose much sleep, so his complexion turned green. But in Linan everyone said this deceitful scoundrel brings disasters on the nation and the people, so the Jade Emperor turned his face green."

The Guangdong man smiled shaking his head, saying, "Indeed this is very strange."

The man with the straightforward face suddenly laughed loudly, patted his leg and called out, "This was also the work of the Eagle Hero, heh-heh, this makes me happy." People quickly asked, "What, the Eagle Hero did this too?" That guy only laughed and said, "Ha-ha, this is funny." The Guangdong guest desired to know the details and ordered the servant to bring two cattles of wine and invited that guy to drink.

He drank a big bowl of wine and was satisfied and happy, loudly saying, "This matter is not a cock and bull story; I also have a bit of credit. That evening the Eagle Hero suddenly arrived in Linan; he called me to lead some followers and we tied up the Linan Qian Tang Xian Yamen (Something like a District Court) officers, removed their clothes and let us play

the roles of the officers. Everybody was pleasantly surprised, as we did not know why the Eagle Hero gave such instructions, but we wanted to play along and so we acted accordingly. Soon the Eagle Hero arrived at the Qian Tang Xian Yamen, he put on the magistrate's costume, sat the hall, banged the wooden block and shouted, 'Bring that scum Ding Daquan here!'" Saying this, his saliva splattered and he drank a big mouthful of wine.

The Guangdong guest said, "Friend what did you work as in Linan at that time?"

The man returned his gaze and said, "What job? I drank a lot, ate a lot, had much money but I was a businessman without capital." (Hinting he was involved in shady activities.) The Guangdong visitor was startled and did not dare ask again.

The man also said, "At that time when I heard ' Ding Daquan ', I got a shock, carefully thinking 'The dog Ding Daquan is currently the Prime Minister, how did the Eagle Hero bring him here?' The Eagle Hero hit the wooden block again, and then two burly men actually brought a man dressed in official court dress before him. A year earlier Ding Daquan went to a Taoist temple to burn incense and obtain blessings and I saw him outside the temple. Now when I looked again, it was really Ding Daquan. His whole body trembled, not knowing whether to kneel or not. Our brothers kicked his knees, he fell over and knelt down, ha-ha, the Eagle Hero asked, 'Ding Daquan, are you aware of the charges against you?' Ding Daquan said 'I don't know.' The Eagle Hero shouted, 'You engage in corrupt practices for your own personal gain, caused the deaths of loyal men, cruelly harm the common people, collaborate with the enemy who invade the country; all these are heinous crimes - quickly, confess now!' Ding Daquan said, 'Who are you? You insult the Prime Minister; do you not know the law?' The Eagle Hero said, 'Do YOU not know the law? Officers, hit him forty times then we shall talk

again!' Everybody already hated this scum, so this time we hit doubly hard, but we only hit this scoundrel several times before he begged for mercy again and again. The Eagle Hero asked several questions and he answered willingly, not daring to act stubbornly. The Eagle Hero brought a pen and paper and demanded he write a confession. He hesitated slightly so the Eagle Hero commanded us to hit his buttocks and slap his mouth."

The refined young girl smiled and said quietly, "Interesting!"

The man drank another huge mouthful of wine, saying with a smile, "Yes. This is very interesting. That Ding Daquan had never been hit before so he had no choice but to write the confession, but he suffered from the beatings so he wrote extremely slowly. The Eagle Hero had to urge him on repeatedly but he was not willing to write any faster. Soon the Sun rose, outside the Yamen the sounds of people got louder, and a large troop of soldiers arrived, probably because the matter had leaked out. The Eagle Hero got angry and shouted, 'Behead him!' and cast a glance at me. I knew the Eagle Hero would not easily take someone's life, so I drew out my broad sword and brushed Ding Daquan's neck, then when I chopped the sword down, I turned it in midair, chopping his neck with the flat of the sword. But this scared the living daylights out of Ding Daquan, causing his complexion to turn green suddenly and he fainted. The Eagle Hero laughed heartily, calling us to put back the Yamen's officer's clothes and sneak off through the side door and return home. Afterwards he went out to the soldiers and so we never fought with them, and everybody withdrew safely. I heard the following day the Eagle Hero personally sneaked into the Imperial Palace, and handed Ding Daquan's confession to the Emperor. But we do not know how, but that Ding Daquan managed to sweet talk the Emperor into believing him and allowing him to continue as Prime Minister."

Young General Wang sighed, "If the Emperor was not stupid, then disloyal subjects could not do evil. When Qin Hui was gone, Han Tuo Zhou came; when Han Tuo Zhou has gone, Shi Miyuan came; now Shi Miyuan has gone, Ding Daquan comes. We saw Jia Sidao in power and saw how this brought disaster upon the nation and the people. Oh, since the disloyal subjects are numerous, our great Song Empire may not last long."

The other man said, "Only if we ask the Eagle Hero to be Prime Minister can we repel the Mongolians and restore peace throughout the country."

The beautiful woman said, "Humph is he qualified to be the Prime Minister?"

The man got angry, "If he's not are you?"

The young woman became furious and shouted, "Who the hell are you; how dare you be impolite to me?"

The guy picked an iron rod from the fire; she grabbed a few sticks of firewood and struck his rod. The guy's arm trembled and he felt half his body go numb so he let go of the hot rod, which fell onto the floor causing sparks from the fire to fly and scorch strands of his beard. People called out in alarm. Although the man is hot-tempered, he tasted her martial arts, suffered a loss and did not dare act rashly. He only stroked his burnt beard, not even wanting to drink the wine anymore.

The refined young girl said, "Others have been talking about the Eagle Hero and it was all going fine, why do you not like to hear it?" Turning her head to the man she gave a sweet smile, saying "Uncle, please do not be offended." That man was originally filled with anger, but seeing her sweet smile, his anger dissipated immediately and his large mouth also smiled; he wanted to say something polite but did not know what to say.

The young girl said, "Uncle, how did you get to know the Eagle Hero?" The man looked at the young woman, hesitated and did not speak. The young girl said, "Just agree not to offend my elder sister and that will do. How old is the Eagle Hero? Are his looks good?" She did not wait for the man to reply and turned her head to the woman saying, "Elder sister, I wonder how his Divine Eagle compares with our pair of eagles?"

The young woman said, "Compare with our pair of eagles? In all this world, which eagle or eagles can hold a candle to our pair of eagles?"

The young girl said, "Not necessarily true. Father often said, 'A person who studies military theories must know that superior parties always exist and so one cannot be complacent.' If that applies to humans, then it applies to our eagles too, so more magnificent birds should exist."

The young woman said "At your young age, what do you understand? When we went out, our parents told you to listen to me, have you not remembered?"

The young girl said with a smile, "That also depends on whether what you say is right. Younger brother am I right or is elder sister right?"

The youth next to her is big and sturdy, but actually looked very naive, so he hesitated for a while then said, "I don't know. Father said we should listen to elder sister, and told you not to talk back to elder sister."

The young woman looked very pleased and said, "Isn't that so?"

The young girl saw that her younger brother was helping her elder sister, but she was not angry and said with a smile, "You don't understand anything either." Turning her head to the

straightforward man she said, "Uncle, continue the Eagle Hero's story, please."

The man said, "OK, since the lady wants to hear, I shall speak; although I, whose surname is Song, have poor skills, I am an honest man. What I say is true and definitely doesn't contain half a word of lies, if the lady does not believe me, then there's no need to listen."

The young girl took the wine pot and poured out a bowl of wine for him, then said with a smile, "Why would I not believe you? Come on, quickly start talking!" She also called out, "Waiter, bring ten catties of wine again and cut 20 catties of beef, my elder sister requests all of you to drink merrily and drive out the cold air." The servant repeatedly agreed and relayed the order. The many travelers smiled from ear to ear, expressing their gratitude with one voice. Before long, three waiters brought the wine and meat.

The young woman calmly said "Even if I wanted to provide a treat, I would not invite people who utter rubbish. Waiter, the bill for the wine and meat money should not be charged to my account."

The servant gawked, looked from the young woman to the young girl, not knowing what to do. The young girl took off a golden hairpin from her hair and gave it to the servant, saying, "This hairpin is made of real gold, it's worth several taels (a unit of currency) of silver. Take it away and exchange it for money. And bring another ten catties of wine and 20 catties of mutton."

The young woman got angry, "Younger sister, must you be spiteful with me? Even a pearl on this hairpin alone is worth more than 100 taels of silver; you bothered and begged Uncle Zhu for it, but now you casually use it to treat people to a drink. When you return to Xiangyang, if Mother asks about it how will you answer?"

The young girl stuck out her tongue and said with a smile, "I shall say it fell on the road, and I could not find it."

The woman said "I will not lie for you."

The young girl used her chopsticks to grasp a piece of beef and put it in her mouth. She then said, "After all, we have already eaten, how can I take it back now? Everybody, please eat, there is no need to be polite."

The people saw the two arguing and all found it interesting, but they liked the young girl's naïve character, so even those who did not drink carried the liquor bowls to those who drank the wine, helping the young girl secretly. The young woman spitefully closed her eyes and used her hands to cover her ears.

The young girl said with a smile, "Uncle Song, my elder sister is sleeping, it's OK if you speak loudly; you won't wake her." The young woman opened her eyes widely, getting angry, "When did I sleep?" The young girl then said, "That's even better, even if we talk loudly we won't disturb you."

The young woman said loudly, "Xiang'er, let me tell you, if you anger me, I will not allow you to follow us around tomorrow." The young girl said, "It's alright, I can travel together with Younger brother." The woman said "Younger brother will come with me." The young girl said, "Younger brother, say, who will you follow?"

The youth was caught in a fix, if he helped his big sister, his other sister would be upset, if he helped his other sister, his big sister would be angry, so he said, "Mother said, the three of us must always travel together and not be separated."

The young woman stared at her younger sister and snapped, "If I had known that you would become so disobedient, I

would not have been anxious to find you back when you got kidnapped by the thugs when you were small."

The young girl heard her say that, causing her heart to soften, so she hugged the young woman's shoulders, begging, "Good elder sister, please don't be angry, it's my fault." The young woman was angry and paid no attention to her. The young girl then said, "If you don't smile, I will tickle you." That young woman turned her head away instead. The young girl suddenly extended her right hand and poked at the young woman's armpit from behind. The young woman did not counter the move but swept her left hand backwards. The young girl used her left hand to block and her right hand continued to move forwards. The young woman sank her right elbow slightly, pressing down on her sister's arm. The young girl then circled her palm and avoided the elbow, executing the graceful move beautifully. In that short moment, the two people exchanged seven or eight moves, all originating from the ingenious "Subtle Hand Arresting Technique". Although the young girl did not manage to tickle her elder sister's armpit, the young woman also could not catch her sister's arm.

Suddenly a person in a corner softly said, "Good skills!" Both sisters stopped and looked at that corner and saw a person curled up into a ball, the head buried between the knees sleeping soundly. The sisters sat on a pile of firewood looking at him resting in such a position without moving at all. The other people were unable to see his face, so it looked like this comment was not made by him.

The youth said, "Big sister, elder sister, Father warned us not to reveal our martial arts casually."

The young girl smiled, "Young old man, you are right." She turned her head to the straightforward man and said, "Uncle

Song, sorry, we sisters were busy arguing and forgot to listen to your story, please continue."

The man named Song said, "I'm not spinning a yarn, this is the absolute truth and nothing but the truth."

The young girl said, "Uncle Song, what you say is naturally true."

The man drank the wine, saying with a smile, "I've consumed much of the lady's wine and meat, how can I not tell all? If I had not lost all my money last night due to three confounded dice, I would really repay the lady. You keep addressing me as Uncle, how can I disappoint you? How did I get to know the Eagle Hero? It was similar to young General Wang; it was also the Eagle Hero who saved my life. But this time he actually didn't use his Wugong (martial arts), he used money to buy my life back." The young girl said with a smile, "Well, this is curious; he used money to buy your life? Eh, how much is it worth?"

That man laughed aloud and said, "My worthless body actually cost more than beef and pork because the Eagle Hero unexpectedly forked out 2,000 taels of silver for it. More than five years ago, I tried to uphold justice in Shandong and I killed a crook. Since murder carries the death penalty, I was sentenced to death so there was nothing for me to say. Who knew several days later, the Licheng county magistrate interrogated the local evil tyrant and later brought me forward for a torture session accusing me of crimes that local tyrant committed, murder, extortion, rape; all the blame was pushed onto me and the tyrant was acquitted. Afterwards the Prison Warden told me that the tyrant bribed the County Magistrate with 1,000 taels of silver, so the County Magistrate transferred all his capital charges to me. A capital offence is punished with death; ten capital offences were also punished with death, so I was made a scapegoat. When I

heard such injustice, I shouted loudly in my cell, scolding the corrupt official, but what use was that?"

"After several days, the corrupt official called for a retrial and that local tyrant was also kneeling next to me. I shouted, 'You corrupted dog, you accepted bribes and distorted justice, you will not have a peaceful death!' That corrupt official grinned, 'Song Wu, you do not have to speak thus, I investigated closely and found that you were sentenced unjustly. That crook was not killed by you but by this tyrant!' After saying that, he ordered the Yamen attendants to hit him hard, and used the bamboo torture method (something like squeezing the fingers between bamboo sticks) on him, forcing him to confess that he killed that crook and pushed the blame on me. I wasn't able to figure this out; that crook was obviously killed by me, how could this charge be transferred to someone else?"

The young girl heard this and smiled, saying, "This magistrate must be really blind."

Song Wu said, "He was definitely not blind; when I got home, my mother told me after I was sentenced to death, my mother bitterly wept daily on the street. One day she happened to meet the Eagle Hero passing through who asked her what was wrong. The Eagle Hero asked around and discovered the truth; he said he had a matter at hand and didn't have the time to find this corrupt official to settle the score, so he gave my mother 2,000 taels of silver to buy my life. After three months, everyone in the town said the County Magistrate, late one night, was robbed of 4,000 taels of silver and got into a fit of anger. He was so mad he coughed up blood ever since. I knew this surely must be the Eagle Hero's doing, so I didn't dare continue living there and moved to Jiangnan. After more than a year, some people told me, a great master with a missing arm was by the seashore with a big queer bird and he was looking blankly into the sea,

and had been doing so for the past few days. I hastily hurried up to him and kowtowed to him as an expression of gratitude."

The young woman suddenly said, "Thank him for what? He paid 2,000 taels of silver but stole 4,000 taels of silver; so he made a profit of 2,000 taels of silver. How could this Yang scum do business in such an unscrupulous manner?" The young girl said, "Yang? The Eagle Hero is named Yang?" The young woman said, "I don't know, I didn't say his name is Yang." The young girl said, "I clearly heard you say so." The woman said, "Surely you heard wrongly."

The young girl said, "OK. I won't argue with you. Even if the Eagle Hero gained 2,000 taels of silver, it must also have been used for helping the poor and needy people. He is a generous and chivalrous hero, how would he use the money for his own personal gain?" Many people cheered with one voice, all saying, "The lady is right!"

The young girl asked, "Uncle Song, why did the Eagle Hero stare at the sea? Is he waiting for someone?" Song Wu shook his head, "I don't know, I didn't dare to ask about this."

The young girl took up two pieces of firewood and threw them into the fire, looking at the dark flame turn bright red, gently saying, "Although Eagle Hero is ever eager to help the distressed; perhaps he actually has a problem of his own? Otherwise why does he always stare at the sea?"

A middle-aged woman sitting in a western corner suddenly said, "I have a younger female cousin who has seen the Eagle Hero before. She also once saw the Eagle Hero blankly looking at the sea with a strange expression, and so she personally asked him about it. The Eagle Hero replied, 'My beloved wife is at the other end of the sea, so we can't meet.'" The people all said "Ohh" at the same time.

The refined young girl said, "So he has a wife, why did she end up at the other end of the sea? He has such excellent abilities, why doesn't he cross the sea to look for her?"

The middle-aged woman said, "My younger female cousin also asked him that. He said, "The Sea is so vast, I don't know how we can meet."

The young girl gently sighed, "I expected that such a character would have such a personality, so it's actually true." She also asked, "Is your younger female cousin very pretty? In her heart she secretly likes the Eagle Hero, is it not so?"

The beautiful young woman shouted clearly, "Younger sister, are you fantasizing again?"

The middle-aged woman said, "My younger female cousin may be considered to be beautiful. The Eagle Hero killed her father in order to save her mother. Whether or not my younger female cousin secretly liked the Eagle Hero, nobody knows. She has since married an honest farmer. The Eagle Hero gave her a great sum of money and now her life is pretty good."

The young girl said, "The Eagle Hero killed her father in order to save her mother? How strange!"

The beautiful woman said "This person has a very strange temperament, when he's good he saves lives, when he's wicked he murders people. Yes, he was like that since he was young."

That young girl curiously asked "He was like that since he was young? How do you know?"

The woman said, "I just know."

The young girl persistently asked about the matter but the young woman refused to say. The young girl said, "Fine, since you won't say, then I don't want to hear. Even if you did say, I may not believe you." She turned her head to the middle-aged woman and said, "Madam, please tell me about your younger female cousin's story."

The woman said, "Alright. My younger female cousin and I have an age gap of seventeen years, and her mother is my aunt..." The young girl said with a smile, "And her father is your uncle." That woman replied with a smile, "Oh, I'm droning non-stop again, causing the lady to be impatient. My uncle is from Henan; in that year the Mongolians invaded our lands and captured my uncle to work as a slave. My aunt led my cousin, begging for food along the way, and went to Shandong from Henan. Then they went to Shanxi from Shandong, looking for my uncle's whereabouts."

Young General Wang sighed, "Traveling thousands of li to find her husband; that is really rare."

The woman said, "But because my aunt and my cousin's appearance is good, traveling on the road is doubly hard. The two of them spread their faces with black mud to prevent evil men from seeing colour and coming up with ideas..." (Meaning lusting after them...as if you didn't know!)

The young girl said, "Seeing colour and coming up with ideas?" Half of the people sitting around the fire started laughing.

The beautiful young woman hurriedly said, "Younger sister, if you don't understand then don't talk nonsense, you're a big lady, and people will laugh at you."

The young girl muttered, "I don't understand, that's why I ask; if I understood, why would I ask?"

The middle-aged woman smiled and said, "These are awful words, if the lady doesn't understand it's better for her. Mmm, my aunt and cousin searched for four years and heaven helped them; they finally found my uncle in Hubei, serving as a Mongolian official's slave. This official is very evil. When my aunt saw my uncle, he had just massaged the Mongolian official's left leg. My aunt was extremely grieved and begged the Mongolian official to allow him to return home. The Mongolian official was not willing to agree, saying he bought this lackey for 100 taels of silver, so unless my aunt has 500 taels of silver to redeem his freedom, the official would rather kill him than set him free. My aunt didn't even have 50 taels of silver, how could she find 500 taels of silver? She thought for a long time, finally deciding not to be concerned about face and so she and her daughter sold their flesh..."

Again the young lady did not understand, but her previous question caused much laughter, so now she did not dare to ask again, and continued to listen to the woman. The woman said, "After several years like this, the mother and daughter only had a little savings, but to raise 500 taels of silver, was easier said than done. Fortunately their clients knew about their plight, so they often paid more than necessary. The mother and daughter suffered great humiliation, and on this New Year's Eve, they finally raised the 500 taels of silver. They went to the Mongolian official's residence, thinking that the whole family can finally be reunited and have a happy new year."

The young girl heard this and was happy for the mother and daughter. Then she heard the woman say, "That Mongolian official received the 500 taels of silver, and then called my uncle to come out, letting the family meet. My uncle's family kowtowed (kneel and bow) to that Mongolian official and bade him farewell. Who knew that when the Mongolian official saw my cousin, he suddenly had evil intentions,

saying, 'Good, you are here to redeem this slave, nothing could be better, now hand over 500 taels of silver!' My aunt was shocked, she had already given the Mongolian official 500 taels of silver, and how could she hand over the money again? The Mongolian official's face changed, shouting, 'I am a high Mongolian official, would I cheat for my slave's money?' My aunt was afraid and sad, so she immediately cried loudly in the main hall, and then that Mongolian official said, "Fine. Today is New Year's Eve, I shall show mercy and let your family be reunited, but I fear when this lackey is gone he will not return, so you must leave your girl behind. 'My aunt knew he harbored evil intentions; how would she be willing to comply? That Mongolian official shouted for his attendants who then threw my uncle and aunt out of his office."

"My aunt wasn't willing to give up her daughter and shouted in front of the Mongolian official's office. The common people knew perfectly well that she has been wronged, but Hubei was not part of the great Song territory. Mongolian soldiers killed the Han people like trampling on ants, so who dared to say a word about fairness? But my uncle said, 'Since the Mongolian official has taken a liking for our girl, that is a fortune others cannot have, so why do you cry?' He actually behaved like a slave since he has been a lackey for a long time. He then asked where that 500 taels of silver came from. In the beginning my aunt was not willing to say, but was questioned persistently and she finally said it. My uncle got angry, saying my aunt had ruined his reputation by not following the traditional woman's ethics. He became depressed, then did such a despicable act as to write a divorce paper immediately and has since divorced my aunt." The people sighed with one voice; all saying her aunt really has had such an unfortunate life.

The middle-aged woman said, "My aunt toiled through untold hardships for seven or eight years but reached such a

wretched state that she did not want to live. Then she went to the woods and loosened her belt to hang herself. But heaven is just and fair; just then the Eagle Hero passed by and rescued her. He found out the whole story and his face flushed with anger. That very evening he entered into the Mongolian official's office and saw the Mongolian official trying to coerce my cousin and my uncle unexpectedly urging my cousin to submit. He was saying that since she has been in that kind of job all these years, she isn't a decent girl anymore and didn't have to respect her chastity. The Eagle Hero killed my uncle with one punch and gripped that Mongolian official and threw him into the Huaihe River, thus saving my cousin. He said my aunt sold her flesh to save her husband so she deserved much more respect than the common chaste ladies. He also said the people he hates most are ungrateful people, so he would never spare people like my uncle."

The young girl heard this and started to day-dream, casually lifting the wine bowl and drank a big mouthful then gently said, "So many of you were able to meet the Eagle Hero, but I do not have such luck. If I can just see him once and listen to him to say a few words, I...I would be overjoyed."

The young woman loudly said, "This person's martial arts are good, but compared with Father, he is way behind. A young girl like you doesn't know anything. When others exaggerate such matters; you immediately proclaim how great this person is. Actually you have seen this person, and he also carried you before."

The young girl blushed and said, "You are my elder sister, yet you speak so frivolously, who would believe you?"

The woman said "If you don't believe it that's up to you. That, whatever, Eagle Hero is named Yang Guo, and lived on our

Peach Blossom Island (Tao Hua Dao) in his childhood. His arm was ... Eh...Mmm... he carried you the day you were born."

This beautiful young woman is Guo Fu, the young girl is her younger sister Guo Xiang and the youth is Guo Xiang's twin brother Guo Polu. More than ten years ago, Guo Fu had married Yelu Qi and now Guo Xiang and Guo Polu have also grown up. The three of them were carrying out an assignment for their parents which was: to proceed to Jinyang and invite Quanzhen's senior priest Qiu Chuji, styled Chang Chunji (Everlasting Spring), to preside over the heroes' congress in Xiangyang. On this day the three siblings were on their way to Jinyang, but they were held up here as the cold had frozen Fenglingdu's part of the Yellow River mouth, so they listened to the many people talk throughout the night.

Guo Xiang's face had a happy expression and she mumbled to herself, "He carried me the day I was born..." She turned her head to Guo Fu and said, "Elder sister, the Eagle Hero really lived in our Peach Blossom Island (Tao Hua Dao) in his childhood? How is it I've never heard our parents mention this before?"

Guo Fu said "What do you know? Our parents have never mentioned many things to you before."

Actually Yang Guo losing his arm and Xiao Longnu getting poisoned were all caused by Guo Fu acting rashly. Whenever this matter was mentioned, Guo Jing would get very angry. Although his daughter had gotten married, he would still scold her fiercely, not giving any face to his daughter or son-in-law. Therefore everyone in the Guo family stopped talking about this matter, so Guo Xiang and Guo Polu never heard of Yang Guo's affairs.

Guo Xiang said "Since he and our family have such deep ties, why hasn't he visited us? Hey, he must surely be attending

the "Heroes Congress" on the fifteenth of March in Xiangyang."

Guo Fu said, "This person does things strangely and has such an arrogant character, most probably he won't come."

Guo Xiang said, "Elder sister, it would be good if we think of how to deliver an invitation to him." Turning her head to Song Wu, she said, "Uncle Song Wu, can you think of a way to forward a letter to the Eagle Hero?"

Song Wu shook his head saying, "The Eagle Hero wanders around the country, not having any definite destination. If he has any matters requiring our assistance, he would just pass the word down. If we try to look for him, even a lifetime may not be enough."

Guo Xiang was very disappointed. She'd listened to the various people talking about how Yang Guo saved Wang Weizhong's only child, executed Chen Dafang, interrogated Ding Daquan, redeemed Song Wu, killed the father to save the mother and all sorts of chivalrous and magnanimous acts and could not help but daydream. Listening to her elder sister say he carried her when she was young, her heart was on fire and she wished she would be able to see him once. But then she heard he would most probably not participate in the "Heroes Congress" and could not help but sigh, saying, "At the "Heroes" meeting not everyone would necessarily be a hero, but a genuine hero who is so outstanding actually may not go."

Suddenly a "Po" sound was heard and a person from the corner somersaulted and stood up. It was actually the person who was rolled into a ball and sleeping soundly. The people heard the rumbling sound, caused by that person speaking. He said, "If the lady wants to meet the Eagle Hero it's not difficult; tonight I shall take you to see him." When the people heard him they were startled, and then when they

saw his appearance, they were even more surprised. His height was less than four feet, his body was really skinny, but his head was huge. His arms were long, hands and feet were big, larger than the ordinary person's. In fact, even if they were on an ordinary person they wouldn't fit. All this on his small body, it was very weird.

Guo Xiang was filled with great happiness and said, "Excellent, but I am unknown to the Eagle Hero, rashly seeking an audience may trespass on his patience; I don't know if he will see me."

The dwarf loudly said, "If you do not see him today, I fear you may never see him in future."

Guo Xiang curiously asked, "Why?"

Guo Fu stood up, saying to the dwarf, "What is your great name?"

The dwarf laughed coldly, "I am such an ugly person; how can there be another on this Earth? Since you don't know, go home and ask your father and mother."

At this time, a distant voice slowly and softly said, "In Xishan are a group of ghosts; he is the ninth out of ten and his is called Big Head Ghost! (Da Tou Gui) If you don't find out now, then when will you?" This voice was rather incoherent, worn out and had a ghostly tone, but everybody heard every word clearly.

That big headed dwarf was shocked, made a loud noise and a "Peng" sound was heard, the flames became dark and the dwarf disappeared without a trace. The people were startled, and saw the front door had a large hole, made by the dwarf when he exited. Breaking down a door was not unheard of, but this person dashing through a door was really uncommon.

Guo Polu said, "Big sister, this dwarf has such good skills!" Guo Fu had followed her parents for a long time, and saw much of the pugilistic world, but their parents never mentioned this dwarf before, so she was struck dumb for quite a while.

But Guo Xiang said, "Among Father's teachers, the Jiangnan Seven Freaks, there was a short guy named Grandpa Ma Wangshen. Third brother, you called him a dwarf, if Father knew he might not be too happy. You should call him Senior." Guo Jing never forgot the Jiangnan Seven Freaks' kindness, and was very respectful towards them and treated any blind person or dwarf kindly, teaching the children to do that too.

Before Guo Polu could reply, a "Hu" sound was suddenly heard and the big headed dwarf stood in front of him, with wind and snow blowing in through the broken door, causing sparks from the fire to fly about. Guo Fu feared that the dwarf would injure her brother and sister so she rushed forward and blocked him from Guo Xiang and Guo Polu.

The dwarf poked his big head towards the side of Guo Fu's waist and said to Guo Xiang, "Young lady, if you want to see the Eagle Hero, follow me."

Guo Xiang said, "Alright! Elder sister, Younger brother, let's go together."

Guo Fu said, "What's so good to see about the Eagle Hero? Don't go. We don't even know this person well."

Guo Xiang said, "I'll just go for a while and return, you guys wait here for me."

Song Wu suddenly stood up and said, "Lady, do not go. This person is... .. is one of the... .. Ghosts of Xishan...If you go... .. something unfortunate might happen to you."

The dwarf grinned cunningly, saying, "You know the Xishan Ghosts? You know we are bad people?" His left palm suddenly struck out, hitting Song Wu on his shoulder. A "peng" sound was heard, Song Wu flew backwards and hit the wall and immediately fainted.

Guo Fu got angry and loudly said, "Sir, please leave! My younger sister is naive, how could she go along with you and create trouble in the middle of the night?" She turned her head and fiercely shouted at her younger sister, "Stop this foolishness. You are not going!"

At this moment, that distant voice was heard again, saying, "The ninth of the ten Xishan Ghosts, Big Head Ghost, our spirits are restless, we have been waiting for a long time!" This voice sounded a li away, yet seemed very close, causing much confusion and everybody to be terrified.

Guo Xiang made up her mind resolutely, "Tonight, even if I meet evil spirits and ghosts, I must still meet the Eagle Hero." She said, "Senior, please lead me there!" Upon saying that, her legs made a leap and she dashed through the broken door.

Guo Fu anxiously called, "What are you doing?" She put out her hand to grab her younger sister's arm but missed, so she leaped quickly, and pursued her through the door.

Who knew that when her body was about to pass through the door, the hole swiftly disappeared; Guo Fu immediately stopped her body in midair. Her dash was blocked and she had to land her feet onto the floor, her toes less than one foot from the door. She looked carefully, nearly calling out in alarm. Actually, the dwarf was using his body to block the door, the distance between them was only several inches and the tip of his nose nearly bumped into her chest; how would she not be startled? She hurriedly leapt back when a gust of cold wind blew at her body and the big headed dwarf was

gone. Guo Fu called loudly, "Younger sister, come back!" She leapt out, only hearing a distant rumbling laughter, but Guo Xiang's shadow was nowhere to be seen.

The dwarf made Guo Fu retreat in fear, he'd turned around and leapt into the snow saying: "Good! The lady is very courageous." Holding Guo Xiang's hand, he jumped forward. He utilized a rather uncommon qing gong (lightness skill), like a big frog, jumping forward continuously, and although he was short, each leap covered a great distance.

Guo Xiang's wrist was being pulled by him and she felt like a metal circlet was round her wrist and it felt rather painful. Her heart was thumping madly and she did not know where this dwarf would take her. Since childhood Guo Jing and Huang Rong taught her martial arts personally, so her wugong (martial arts) had quite a strong foundation, but she found it difficult to keep pace with the dwarf's leaps. Later on she was actually being dragged by him, forcing them to jump and land together.

After jumping like this for a little while, someone behind a mountain suddenly said, "Big Head Ghost, why are you so late? Ha-ha, you even brought a beautiful girl along!" The dwarf said, "She is Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter, she wanted to meet the Eagle Hero, so I then led her here." That person gawked, saying, "Guo Jing and Huang Rong's daughter?" Another person behind the mountain eerily said, "Hurry up, let's get going!" The voice became distorted, and dozens of horses appeared from behind the mountain ridge.

The heavy snow still did not stop, and the white snow created a shiny reflection. Guo Xiang saw nine strange people mounted on the horses, but most of the horses had no riders. The dwarf pulled two horses forwards and gave the reins of one to Guo Xiang with himself mounting another horse,

shouting, "Let's move!" He whistled, and the horses neighed and galloped towards the northwest.

When Guo Xiang looked at the nine people, she saw two females, one of whom was a senile appearing old woman while the other was dressed in scarlet from head to toe. She looked like she was on fire and appeared to be even more glaring in the snow's reflection. The other seven people's appearances could not be seen clearly. Guo Xiang thought carefully, "From what I heard, the Xishan Ghosts consist of ten people. At present there are exactly ten people, so this group of people must be the Xishan Ghosts. Uncle Song Wu only warned me about getting into trouble with them and that person knocked him out with one palm; this really looks ominous. They said they will take me to meet the Eagle Hero, so they shouldn't be deceiving me. They must already be acquainted with the Eagle Hero, so they can't be that evil."

In a short while they'd already covered ten li, then the first person made a "de er" sound and the horses stopped at once. He led the horse up a small hill and then turned around. Guo Xiang saw his appearance and found it startling yet funny - this person was also a dwarf, his upper body was less than two feet, but his beard was actually three feet long, hanging over the horse. His face had wrinkles, his double eyebrows tightly knit and his face was filled with worry.

She heard him say, "From here to Mapingyi is less than 3 li. The Jianghu (pugilistic world) people say that the Eagle Hero's martial arts are superb, we must discuss this in advance and not spoil the Xishan Ghosts' reputation."

The old woman said, "Then we request Eldest brother to issue an order."

The long bearded man said, "Should we fight with him on chariots or surround him?"

Guo Xiang was shocked and thought, "From his tone, they must be enemies of the Eagle Hero."

The old man said, "What are the Eagle Hero's abilities like? Seventh brother, please explain clearly."

A burly man with a body like an iron tower said, "Although I have seen him, I never fought with him, I saw... I saw... that he has some sort of demonic aura."

The red clothed woman said, "Seventh brother, how did you become enemies with the Eagle Hero? Now is the time to explain clearly so that before everybody starts fighting, we would know what's going on. You always stammer and stutter and you usually fail to reveal the whole truth."

The man got angry, saying, "We Xishan Ghosts will live and die together; since this person dares to come forward to find us, do we cower away?"

A tall and skinny person with a gloomy voice said, "Who said anything about cowering away? But even if Ninth sister didn't ask, I would ask. We have not offended him. Why did he want to expel the Xishan Ghost from Xishan?"

The man got angry and said, "Everybody, look, he cut off my ears. If you won't help me get back at him, what kind of good brothers and sisters are you?" As he said this he took off his felt hat. Under the bright reflection of the snow, everyone plainly saw his head missing both ears. The Xishan Ghosts got angry and started cursing and swearing with thunderous rage, all wanting to fight the Eagle Hero to the death.

The red clothed woman said, "Seventh brother, why did he cut off your ears? What offense did you commit? You were harassing decent women again, is it not so?"

A person with a laughing face got angry and said, "Even if Seventh brother harasses decent women; other people have

no right to interfere." This person was born with a really unusual face; although he was angry, the smile on his face did not disappear. Guo Xiang looked carefully and saw that the corners of his mouth curled upwards with both eyes squinting, so even if he was sobbing sadly, it would seem like he was smiling from ear to ear.

The man said, "No, no! On that day my wife and four concubines were quarrelling over some small matter and things were about to turn violent. This, so called, Eagle Hero passed by and saw this; he was such a busybody and unexpectedly persuaded my wives to stop. My third wife had no shame and smiled at him..."

The red clothed woman said, "Ah ha, I know, Seventh brother got jealous and forbade her to smile."

The man said, "Get jealous? I don't need other people to poke their noses into my affairs. I punched my concubine's three front teeth and told the broken-armed scum to scram."

When Guo Xiang heard this she could not bear it and said, "He gave you well-intentioned advice, why did you speak so impolitely? You were wrong there." The ten people turned their heads to look at her and could not believe this young girl dared to act so boldly.

The man got really angry and shouted, "Little twit, how do you dare to tell me what to do! Fifth brother, is this cutie your girl?"

The big headed dwarf said, "She wants to see the Eagle Hero so I brought her along to take a look, I don't care about other matters."

The man said, "Good, then I shall teach her a lesson." He raised his horse whip and lashed down towards Guo Xiang's head with a "pa" sound.

Guo Xiang lifted her whip and blocked, the two whips struck each other and interlocked together. The man used his arm to seize the whip and Guo Xiang felt a great force vigorously tugging her whip. She could not hold on any longer and released her whip, causing her palms to be scratched with searing pain. The guy took back his whip, raised it and wanted to lash down again, but the old man shouted, "Seventh brother, it's getting late, let's hurry, why do you lower yourself and fight with a child?" The man's whip was in midair, but he did not strike.

That long-sleeved old man sneered, "The Xishan Ghosts are not afraid of the sky and the earth, even Guo Jing and Huang Rong's reputation does not scare us. Little girl, if you talk again, I will butcher you immediately." He leaned forward, saying, "Seventh brother, a true man will get up again if he falls, my long beard was cut off by my enemy several years ago. How were your ears sheared off?"

The man then said, "I told the Eagle Hero to get lost, so he smiled, turned around and walked away. It's all my third concubine's fault, she cried out, saying she was forced to marry me and at that time she was not willing. Now she was bullied by my first wife. She added that after I married her, I also married a fourth concubine and did not have a conscience. That Eagle Hero turned around; his expression changed greatly and asked, 'Is this woman speaking the truth?' I said, 'So what if it is? So what if it's not? My nickname is Fairy Ghost and I kill without blinking, do you know that?' He said calmly, 'If you like her, why did you marry someone else after you married her? If you do not like her, why did you marry her at all?' I laughed loudly and said, 'At first I liked her, now I'm tired of her. It's common for a man to have three wives and four concubines. I even want to marry another four.' He said, 'You heartless creatures are far too many, how can the world's females live in peace?' Suddenly he stepped forward, drew out a dagger from my

waist and sliced off my ears. Then he pointed the dagger at my chest, shouting, 'I'll dig your heart and liver out to take a look, what colour are they?' "

Guo Xiang became delighted, could not bear it and wanted to cheer, but she saw the Xishan Ghosts' fierce and strange expressions and swallowed the "Good!" she wanted to shout.

The man continued, "Then my concubines knelt down to beg for mercy, they even cried loudly, saying they would rather be killed than me, because if I died, they must commit suicide to accompany the husband, damn, this is really disgusting. Hey, I have really lost face! I angrily shouted, 'Hurry, just kill me! The Xishan Ghosts will come and haunt you!' He wrinkled his eyebrows and said to my wives, 'Why do you still plead for such a heartless scum?' My five wives only kowtowed. He asked my third concubine, 'You said you were forced to marry him against your will. If I kill him won't it be good?' My concubine said, 'At that time I wasn't willing, later on I changed my mind. Please don't kill him.' I got angry, saying, 'Just kill me, there are nine more of us.' He said, 'OK! I won't kill you today. The Xishan Ghosts... so what? On the night at the end of this month, I shall wait at the Horses' Plains for you. Call all your ghosts together to find me. If you do not dare, the Xishan Ghosts must leave Xishan forever and never come back.' "

After they heard him say that, they did not speak for quite a while. Then the old woman said, "What weapons does he use? What school is his Wugong (martial arts) from?"

The man said, "He only has a left arm and he does not carry any weapons. Wugong...I couldn't tell."

The woman said, "Eldest brother, this person subdued seventh brother in one stroke, he must be extremely swift and agile and his Wugong must be quite unorthodox. We rely on numbers to win, you take the lead, and I and fifth brother

will help from the side, three against one, and butcher him straightaway. Do not allow him to use his skills."

The long-sleeved old man lowered his head and pondered for a while, and then he raised his head and said, "This Eagle Hero has a good reputation. Over these ten years many people have been defeated by him, he must have some astonishing skills. Today's fight is no small matter. I and Second sister will launch a sudden frontal attack, Third and Fourth brother will get close to him then attack his lower body, Fifth and Sixth brother will attack from behind, Seventh and Eighth brother will use long weapons to strike his flank, confusing him, Ninth sister will throw concealed projectiles, Tenth brother will discharge poison gas. Since the Xishan Ghosts have sworn brotherhood, the ten of us have never attacked simultaneously, today is the first time, if we can't butcher him, let us all turn into real ghosts!"

The big headed dwarf said, "Eldest brother, if ten of us attack a single person, we won't win honorably; if word of this is spread, all the Jianghu heroes will despise us."

The old woman said, "We shall butcher the Eagle Hero tonight. Apart from this girl, who else knows about this matter?" Once she said this she raised her arm.

The big headed dwarf waved his left sleeve and blocked her from Guo Xiang. Then he took out a fine needle from her sleeve and said, "Elder sister, I brought her along, please don't take her life." He turned to Guo Xiang and said, "Young lady, you want to meet the Eagle Hero, you cannot mention this matter to anyone, otherwise you should go back quickly now."

Guo Xiang was alarmed, afraid and also angry, thinking, "This old woman has such vicious moves; if not for the short uncle saving me, I could have died from her silent needles without a doubt." So she said, "Alright I will not speak of it."

But she continued, "You have ten brothers, does he have a single helper?"

The big headed dwarf laughed loudly and said, "The Eagle Hero only appeared in Jianghu around ten years ago, but we never heard that he has any assistants. He has this big bird which is unable to speak to accompany him." He then raised the horse's reins, loudly shouting, "Let's go!" The ten people galloped and the dwarf said to Guo Xiang, "Later, when we start fighting, you must not leave my side." Guo Xiang nodded, she knew that the Xishan Ghosts were quite cruel and merciless, but this big headed dwarf is looking after her. He prevented his companion from harming her, but his ways were rough; although he spoke in a low voice, the other nine people heard him.

Guo Xiang rode along with the other people. She saw the Xishan Ghosts all had unique skills; no matter how strong the Eagle Hero's wugong might be, how could he fight ten people alone? She thought, "If father and mother were here it would be good, they wouldn't stand by and do nothing."

Just at this time, several tiger roars could be heard in the dark forest in front of them and the horses gave a startled neigh, some standing motionless, some trying to escape. The skinny man waved his horse whip and was the first to rush into the woods.

The old woman scolded, "You lousy animals, you even fear a small cat eating you up?" The group charged forwards and entered the woods. They moved round ten feet when suddenly a person in front fiercely shouted, "Who are these brave people who dare to enter the Beastly Mountain Village at night without permission?"

The Xishan Ghosts stopped their horses, seeing only a person standing on the path, a brave tiger squatting next to him. The horses heard the tiger growling and were alarmed. The

long-sleeved old man put his hands together to greet that person, immediately saying, "The Xishan Ghosts entered this place without informing you, pardon our rudeness."

That person said, "Oh, the Xishan Ghosts? You must be the Long Sleeve Ghost?"

The old man said, "Precisely. We have an important matter at hand and we are rushing to the Horses' Plains, when we return we will apologize for this." He knew this character was not very affable but at this moment they needed all their strength to deal with the Eagle Hero, so he hoped not to complicate matters and spoke very politely.

That person said, "Gentlemen, please wait." He raised his voice and called, "Eldest brother, it's the Xishan Ghosts going to the Horses' Plains; they said they will apologize when they return." The ghosts heard this and were disgruntled, thinking, "We said we would return and apologize, but those are only polite words. Would the Xishan Ghosts really bow down to this person?" The Xishan Ghosts all had outstanding skills, before they became sworn brothers they had already gotten through many troubles, creating much havoc in Shanxi in recent years. The people of Wulin (martial arts world) all dreaded them. Now the ten people are assembled together and if they had no prior appointment with the Eagle Hero on that night, they would beat this person good and proper just based on his words alone.

They heard a screeching voice deep in the forest saying, "Apologizes are not needed, let them go around the forest."

When they heard this they got angry immediately. The skinny person with the bamboo staff sneered, "The Xishan Ghosts never take detours!" He raised the horse's reins and charged straight towards the person standing on the path.

That person raised his left hand and two tigers near him threw themselves forward immediately, causing the skinny man's horse to be frightened and rear up. The skinny man's riding skills were really good; he bent down on the saddle, both hands holding a short spear, fiercely thrusting at the two tigers. The tiger on his left leapt aside while the tiger on the right scratched the horse's belly with its claws; but that tiger gave a roar because it was injured by the spear. The skinny man jumped onto the ground, shouting, "Watch my weapons!" He thrust the spears forth, one high one low, displaying the "Double Dragon Fu Yuan Skill", but he did not advance forward.

The person coldly said, "You injured my family's watch-cat, now whether you take the detour or not is not up to you. Wu Changgui (Uncommon Ghost), leave your spears behind!"

When Wu Changgui found that the person knew his nickname, he said, "Who are you, sir? The Beastly Mountain Village was supposed to be in Western Liang, why has it moved to Southern Jin? If you want me to leave my spears, that's very easy to do."

The person said, "If our Beastly Mountain Village wants to move, must we report to the Xishan Ghosts? We were tired of living in Western Liang so we moved to Southern Jin to play. My eldest brother, by telling you to take a detour, was being extremely polite. My third brother is sick and doesn't like outsiders harassing us, do you understand?" When he said this, he suddenly stretched his left hand out and grabbed Wu Changgui's right spear near the edge.

Wu Changgui never expected him to move so fast, so he thrust his left spear forward and increased his right hand's strength.

The person extended his right hand and grabbed Wu Changgui's left spear as well. The two people had great

strength, and no one let go of the weapons. A "pa" sound was made and the two spears snapped.

The Xishan Ghosts shrugged and the long-sleeved old man said, "Sir are you the Eight-Handed Monkey Immortal Shi? Is the Golden Claw Lion King ill? At this moment we have a matter at hand, tomorrow at this time, we shall meet here again."

The masters of the Beastly Mountain Village are five brothers, the eldest being White Forehead Mountain Lord Shi Bowei, the second Caring Eyesight Sage Shi Zhongmeng, the third Golden Claw Lion King Shi Shugang, the fourth Immortal Of Giant Strength Shi Jiqiang, the youngest Eight-Handed Monkey Immortal Shi Mengjie was the one present here. The five brothers inherited the animals from their ancestors. These five people all live unusually and they not only have superb taming skills, they also learned martial arts from the animals' movements. The brothers had these beasts as companions since childhood, taking the beasts as their masters and learning martial skills. Shi Shugang entered the mountains when he was twenty years old and met an outstanding person, learning advanced internal strength techniques from him. He then went home and taught his brothers. The five people raised many wild animals and improved their wugong tremendously. The Beastly Mountain Village's reputation gradually became known in Jianghu and the Wulin people called them "Tiger, Leopard, Lion, Elephant and Monkey". When the Long Sleeve Ghost heard Shi Shugang was sick, he was relieved; he thought no matter how good the Shi brothers were, the Xishan Ghosts would not be afraid. Now that the central pillar of the "Tiger, Leopard, Lion, Elephant and Monkey" Lion King was sick, it would definitely not be a problem to handle them, so he proposed a duel the next evening.

Eight-Handed Monkey Immortal Shi Mengjie said, "Tomorrow night we shall wait outside the forest for you at 11 p.m." Saying that he put his hands together to salute and shot the broken spear heads into a tree next to the Long Sleeve Ghost.

The Long Sleeve Ghost was startled, thinking, "Why does he not allow us to cut through the forest? What do the Shi brothers have in this forest?" He also put his hands together and saluted, "The Xishan Ghosts bid farewell!" He nudged the horse with his legs and moved forwards. Shi Mengjie said loudly, "Hold! My eldest brother told you to take a detour, didn't you hear?"

The Long Sleeve Ghost pulled the reins and was about to reply when he heard people in the northeast and northwest of the woods laughing loudly at the same time, then a thick cloud of smoke appeared. A person called out, "What the heck are you doing in the woods? You can't hide it from our group of ghosts." Another person said, "You are just meeting your ancestors." (Making puns with the Chinese words.) Actually the eighth and tenth ghost had sneaked behind Shi Mengjie and set a fire while he was talking to the Long Sleeve Ghost.

The flame leapt upwards, and then he heard the two ghosts' voices call out in alarm as they wildly dashed back to the group, breathless, their facial expressions bearing great fear. The Long Sleeve Ghost shouted, "What?" One of them said, "Tigers, tigers! 100, 200 of them..."

When Shi Mengjie saw the fire in the forest he got really angry, shouting, "Eldest brother, second brother, this is important, let them go; we can easily find them later."

Suddenly everyone saw a blurred figure; a dog-like creature squirmed through the woods and dashed away in the blink of an eye. It was pretty small, had four long legs, a snow white

coat, had a black tail, looked like a dog yet looked like a cat. Shi Mengjie called loudly: "The "Nine-Tailed Fox has emerged!" and started pursuing it, his face looking anxious and panic-stricken.

A fierce voice was heard from the back of the woods, sounding like a lion's or a tiger's roar, yet sounding like someone shouting loudly. When Guo Xiang heard this shout a chill went down her spine. When this sound died down, a hundred beasts roared from all directions, including lions, tigers, leopards, wolves, elephants, monkeys and orangutans... For a while it was not very clear, and then with a thundering rumble the wild animals rushed out from the forest. Then someone said, "Eldest brother head towards the northeast, second brother go towards the northwest, fourth brother hurry to the southwest... "This voice and the howl were similar.

However Guo Xiang only saw several shadows flashing around, leaving the forest. She knew perfectly well there was danger, but her curiosity took over and she hurriedly chased after them out of the woods. The Big Head Ghost called out, "Miss Guo, don't wander about!" He then pursued her.

Guo Xiang left the woods and saw a strange sight; five people leading a group of wild animals each, moving rapidly in five directions on the snowy plain. These wild animals were all well-trained, not fighting among each other, forming packs, running in an orderly way. Guo Xiang was frightened but also thought this was amusing. The five groups of animals got closer and formed a big circle.

Suddenly a white flash appeared - that dog-like animal squeezed out of the encirclement, zooming in front of Guo Xiang, really moving like lightning. Guo Xiang was startled and bent down to catch it with her hand, but that small animal had already dashed several feet away. It stood still,

suddenly turning its head to look at Guo Xiang with its fiery red eyes, looking like two embers in the dark.

The Shi brothers called out, "The Nine-Tailed Fox! It's over there!" The groups of animals rushed forward together like a moving mountain.

Guo Xiang rode towards the side to avoid them, but when the horse saw so many wild animals, it got frightened. Its legs became weak, then its legs bent and it knelt down on the ground. Guo Xiang was shocked thinking, "The group of beasts are rushing towards me; they are going to trample me into minced meat!" She leapt away from the horse and dashed off. She still smelled the animals but the groups of beasts rushed by her like the torrents of a river and were far away before long.

By now all the Xishan Ghosts had also gotten out of the forest. The Long Sleeve Ghost said, "No matter how strong the Shi brothers' Wugong is, we are not afraid, but these many animals are not easy to deal with. Tonight we won't provoke them so that we'll still have our strength to deal with the Eagle Hero. Everybody, let's go!"

The old woman said, "Good, tonight after we kill the Eagle Hero we will burn the lions and roast the tigers tomorrow!" She then raised the reins and started to gallop around the forest.

The fierce roars of the lions and tigers were heard again, the groups of beasts were returning on separate paths. But this time the roars didn't sound so vicious and the animals were not running very fast. The Long Sleeve Ghost suddenly turned green and called out, "Oh no, hurry, let's go!" But the wild animals were growling in all directions and soon they were surrounded by the group of beasts. The Long Sleeve Ghost whistled and the ten people leapt off the horses,

standing in five positions, each drawing their weapons, silently waiting for the enemy to arrive.

The Big Head Ghost softly said, "Young Lady, leave quickly, you shouldn't risk your life here."

Guo Xiang said, "Where's the Eagle Hero? You agreed to take me to him."

The Big Head Ghost frowned, "Have you not seen all these wicked beasts?"

Guo Xiang said, "You should try to reason with the animals' masters, saying you and the Eagle Hero have an appointment, and you shouldn't delay much longer."

The Big Head Ghost said, "Humph, the Xishan Ghosts never reason with anyone."

While saying that, the Shi brothers had led the wild animals back. The five people were all wearing animal skins, standing forty to fifty feet away from the Xishan Ghosts. The fifth brother Shi Mengjie said, "The Beastly Mountain Village and the Xishan Ghosts have no bad blood, why did you set the forest on fire and scare away the Nine-Tailed Fox?"

Guo Xiang heard him say this with deep anger and thought, "That small animal may be cute, but it's nothing great, why should they kick up such a big fuss? It obviously has only one tail, how could it be called the Nine-Tailed Fox?"

The red-clothed female said, "As for today's matter, the fault lies with the Shi brothers. This Beastly Mountain Village has been at Ganliang for a long time and suddenly it moved to Shanxi. Now you don't allow people to pass through on the main road in the middle of the night. With such actions how could you blame others?"

The White Forehead Mountain Lord Shi Bowei shouted, "Since it has come to this stage, what more can be said? The Xishan Ghosts shall not live." Loudly roaring, he charged unarmed to the Long Sleeve Ghost, his palms imitating tigers' claws, causing wind to be generated before his palms arrived; even a fierce tiger could not compare to its ferocity.

The Long Sleeve Ghost slipped aside, moving back towards the left. He shouted and swept a long pointed weapon towards Shi Bowei. Shi Bowei stretched his claws out, grasping the end weapon, which was a thick steel rod. Before his palm held firmly, he felt heat shoot through his palms and he hurriedly let it go, the left palm executed an advanced stance to avoid the steel rod. If he were not quick enough his chest would have been pierced by the rod. Shi Bowei was startled, "The Xishan Ghosts' reputation has risen in recent years, so they actually live up to it." He did not dare to be careless and drew his weapon with a "chia lang lang" sound - it was pair of double hooks. The right hook weighed 18 catties while the left hook weighed 17 catties; it was a fierce and sharp weapon, with the hooks giving off yellow light. He then fought fiercely with the steel rod.

Now Shi Zhongmeng grasped the rod, fighting one-on-two, sparring with Cui Ming Ghost's knife and Shang Meng Ghost's chain spear. Shi Jiqiang and the old woman grappled along a long rope; although his strength was great, it was useless against the old woman's soft sleeve. He roared again and again, exhibiting his giant's strength, but was unable to utilize it. Shi Mengjie's foe was the copper hammer-wielding Big Head Ghost. Shi Mengjie's pen stances were complex and strange, so the Big Head Ghost found it hard to defend himself, and then the red clothed woman raised her knife and went forward to help him. On the snowy ground, the ten people were divided into four groups fighting viciously under the heavy snow, unable to decide victory or defeat.

The Xishan Ghosts still had six people not in action yet while the opponents only had the Lion King standing by. They saw him leaning on a lion's body, sickly and without any strength. In this battle the Xishan ghosts fought with numbers, showing the potential for victory, but the Shi brothers only had to whistle and the group of beasts would attack, causing the Xishan Ghosts to go from victory to defeat.

Guo Xiang saw the group of beasts surrounding them and was afraid, she also remembered she wanted see the Eagle Hero, so she said, "Uncle Big Head Ghost, stop fighting, you have more people, even if you win it wouldn't be honorable. You offended them, just apologize!" But who would bother about her?

Ten people fought violently for a long time. The Long Sleeve Ghost and Shi Bowei were on par. The old woman's long rope moved flexibly and had many changes within, forming big and small circles; if Shi Jiqiang lost his focus, he would have been hanged by her rope. Luckily his broadsword made big moves with great ferocity, so the old woman could not afford to be careless. The Big Head Ghost and the Clever Ghost were hard and soft respectively, complementing one another, but Shi Mengjie's moves were quick yet strange, as the saying goes a quick hit counters three slow. The three people were fighting in circles, but Shi Mengjie did not lose the upper hand yet. The Big Head Ghost roared like rumbling thunder while the Clever Ghost chatted in a gloomy tone, dividing the enemy's attention. Shi Mengjie turned a deaf ear to them and just concentrated on their battle.

On this side the Cui Ming Ghost and the Shang Men Ghost actually could not withstand Shi Zhongmeng's silver rod. His silver rod was short and hollow, and used strange moves. The three people were fighting near the border of the forest. The Shang Men Ghost thrust his spear forward; Shi Zhongmeng aimed his rod at him and thrust directly at the spear, causing

the spear to go right through into the hollow rod. The Shang Men Ghost was greatly startled but he was not willing to let go of his weapon. The Tao Zhai Ghost leapt up to help them, swinging his slab towards Shi Zhongmeng's silver rod. Shi Zhongmeng drew his rod back and retreated, allowing the Shang Men Ghost to regain his weapon. The Tao Zhai Ghost's weapon resembled an iron block and it was actually an accounts book cast in iron. The book had five pages and each page could be flipped about, its edges sharper than knives and it made a strange and sharp weapon.

The Xishan Ghosts originally had their respective surnames, but ever since the "Xishan Ghosts" became known, they discarded their real names and used "Ghost" as their nicknames. The ten people all had unusual and strange appearances so the ten brothers said, "The Jianghu heroes call us ghosts, so we shall see if the people are good or the ghosts are fierce?" That Tao Zhai Ghost made himself that iron book because he avenged any minor wrongs, never willing to let off anyone who offends him even slightly. So the martial arts world nicknamed him the "Tao Zhai Ghost (Debt Collecting Ghost)". He was very pleased with this nickname and cast an iron accounts book, carving the names of those who offended him on the iron pages, and then writing off those names after he has settled the debt.

The silver rod was a unique weapon, but the iron accounts book was actually more unusual, with five iron sheets attacking together, making "dang dang" noise. The Cui Ming, Shang Men and Tao Zhai Ghosts fought Shi Zhongmeng together, gradually gaining an advantage.

Guo Xiang stood at the side, watching the group of ghosts and the Shi brothers fighting non-stop, thinking that their appointment with the Eagle Hero was long overdue. She feared that he'd left after waiting impatiently. She became

more and more anxious, but was incapable of stopping the fight.

The hundreds of beasts lay around them, forming a tight circle. The Xishan Ghosts looked around them and saw the bright glitter of eyes everywhere in the darkness and knew that even if they killed all the Shi brothers, it would be difficult to get out of the animals' siege. The old woman wanted to use her rope and tie down Shi Jiqiang to force the Shi brothers to recall their animals, making a pathway for their exit. But Shi Jiqiang's martial arts were at the same level as hers, how easy could that be? The Laughing Ghost called out, "Second sister, let me help you." He drew his weapon from his waist and threw himself towards Shi Jiqiang.

Shi Jiqiang was fighting ferociously when he saw the Laughing Ghost jumping forward, but it suited him and he said, "Great!" He brought his bronze weapon fiercely down on that ghost's head. The Laughing Ghost leaned aside blocking with his two whips, but the whips snapped with a "Pu" sound. The Laughing Ghost was greatly startled and quickly rolled away. "Peng!" The bronze weapon struck the ground. The Laughing Ghost dipped his hand into his clothes and grasped some poisonous powder. Standing up immediately he flung it towards Shi Jiqiang. Shi Jiqiang suddenly saw a red mist and was hit by it, losing his footing, falling immediately. The old woman cast her rope and lassoed his legs.

Shi Bowei, Shi Zhongmeng and Shi Mengjie saw their brother fall and were startled and angry. If he was captured, they could not rescue him. Guo Xiang called out, "What are you doing? You used trickery to hurt him, what kind of man are you?" She was not helping any party, but when she saw the Laughing Ghost using such a dirty move, she could not bear it and criticized him.

At this time a sudden low roar was heard, the Lion King Shi Shugang stood up slowly, growling lowly, "Put down my fourth brother!"

Shi Jiqiang had passed out. The old woman used her long rope to tie his hands up as well, but was wary of his great strength, fearing that he would suddenly awaken and snap her rope, so she blocked his accupoint and said, "Get your animals to move away then we will release him!" She saw Shi Shugang's dull eyes and sallow face, walking unsteadily; he was obviously seriously sick, so she paid no attention to him.

Guo Xiang saw Shi Shugang slowly walking towards the ghosts, hands and feet unsteady, meeting the enemy in spite of his illness, just like a real man, so she quickly said, "Hey, you're sick, don't fight." Shi Shugang nodded to her and said, "Thanks." But he did not stop and continued towards Shi Jiqiang. The Laughing Ghost exchanged glances with the old woman (Hanging Ghost) and they stood forward together, wanting to snare him as well.

They threw themselves onto Shi Shugang, stretching out their hands when Shi Shugang growled fiercely; his left hand smacking the Hanging Ghost's head, his right hand tugging the Laughing Ghost's back and the two people felt a great strength suddenly pressing down on them. Their legs gave way and they nearly fell down, so they hurriedly leaped away. Fortunately for them Shi Shugang did not pursue them. Two people looked at each other in amazement and broke out in a cold sweat, not expecting this sick person to be so strong.

Shi Shugang bent down to clear his brother's accupoint. He pulled gently and snapped the Hanging Ghost's rope in several places. But Shi Jiqiang was poisoned and did not awake. Shi Shugang frowned and shouted, "Hand over the

antidote!" The Laughing Ghost said, "You recall your animals, then I give up the antidote."

Shi Shugang snorted and walked shakily to the Laughing Ghost. The Laughing Ghost did not dare take him head-on and stepped aside quickly. Shi Shugang was sick and could not chase after him, but continued to walk weakly to him. The four ghosts watching from the side jumped up while the Laughing Ghost also turned around to fight. Shi Shugang struck out with his palm slowly, but his palm strength was really great. The five ghosts encircled him, punching here and chopping there, but did not dare get closer to him. The Laughing Ghost feared that he would poison his own brothers, so he did not release the poison gas.

Guo Xiang thought, "This man lost to dirty tricks, it's really pitiful!" She grabbed some snow and rubbed on Shi Jiqiang's forehead, and then she put a snowball in his mouth. The poison gas effects were not long-lasting and Shi Jiqiang's body was tough, he felt cold, and slowly awoke. He saw Guo Xiang still picking up snow for him and said, "Many thanks, young lady!" He rolled and stood up, rubbed his eyes and saw the five ghosts besieging Shi Shugang, so he loudly called out, "Third brother step aside!" He stretched out his hand and twisted the Laughing Ghost's neck.

Shi Bowei's hooks and the Long Sleeve Ghost's steel rod were clashing rapidly, and then he saw Shi Jiqiang awake, he felt very happy and cheered loudly. The beasts lying by the side heard this cheer and all stood up immediately, waiting to pounce. Shi Bowei cheered again and the beasts followed with their roars. The Xishan Ghosts have had many battle experiences, but this time they could not help but tremble in fear. Before the beastly roars died away the animals charged towards the Xishan Ghosts.

Guo Xiang shouted "Ah!", and her face turned pale. Shi Shugang stretched out his hand and shoved a tiger pouncing on Guo Xiang away; he took off his skin hat and placed it on Guo Xiang's head. The animals have been trained for a long time, as soon as they saw her put on the skin hat; they left her alone and turned their attention to the ten ghosts. Tigers, wolves, leopards, apes and lions all bit and scratched at the ten ghosts. The Xishan Ghosts furiously killed seven or eight beasts, but the Shi brothers attacked from the side and the beasts kept coming and coming, becoming too many to handle. The ten people were all injured, their clothes tattered and dripping with blood, they were about to lose their lives and could not escape from the animals' clutches.

Guo Xiang saw three lions surrounding the Big Head Ghost, his bronze hammer had fallen to the ground, his right arm trapped in a lion's mouth, relying entirely on his left palm to block the lions. Guo Xiang remembered him defending her before and saw him so distressed, she could not help it and without hesitation, she took off the skin hat and immediately placed it on his head. But his head was too big for the hat, so it looked extremely funny as it kept bouncing around his head. When the Shi brothers trained their animals, they specially made the skin hats for the animals to differentiate between friend and foe, so when they saw the Big Head Ghost put on the hat, they moved away immediately. But now four leopards surrounded Guo Xiang.

Shi Shugang was now trying to snatch away the Long Sleeve Ghost's steel rod to prevent him from injuring too many animals when he heard Guo Xiang calling for help, he turned his head to look and was startled, they were too far apart and he could not go to her rescue. But strangely, the four leopards did not attack Guo Xiang; they only sniffed and walked around her, being very friendly to her. Guo Xiang was shocked speechless, but the four leopards were not harming her. She remembered her mother and sister once told her

that she drank leopard's milk when young, so these four leopards must have mistaken her for one of their own. She was pleasantly surprised and bent down to hug the leopards' necks while they licked her hands and cheeks. Guo Xiang felt somewhat itchy and started laughing. Since the Shi brothers started training their animals, they had never seen something like this before and were all greatly surprised.

The Big Head Ghost managed to avoid any trouble with the skin hat, but he saw his brothers and sisters all in a dire situation and did not want to get away alone. Although the Xishan Ghosts were not honorable and usually did heretical things, their loyalty towards one another was very deep, so he grasped the hat immediately and threw it to the red clothed woman, saying, "Ninth sister, you quickly escape." She caught the hat and threw it towards the Long Sleeve Ghost and called out, "Eldest brother, you leave first, just avenge us in future." But he threw the hat to the Laughing Ghost and said, "Tenth brother, it's never too late for revenge, I won't live any much longer anyway." The ten people were actually unwilling to use this life-saving device.

The Laughing Ghost was tying down five wolves and did not throw the hat. However wolves were extremely savage, when they smelled blood, they ignored the hat on the Laughing Ghost and did not want to give up their meal. The Laughing Ghost cursed loudly, but his face was still carrying a happy expression. Then out of nowhere a person with a clear and cold voice said, "The Xishan Ghosts do not keep their word, they made me wait for half a night. So here they are fooling around with animals!"

Guo Xiang felt very happy, saying in her heart, "The Eagle Hero is here!" She lifted her head and saw a person sitting on a big tree's branch with a large headed and magnificently ugly eagle. This person wore a long grey gown, his right sleeve stuffed in his waistband, showing his missing arm. She

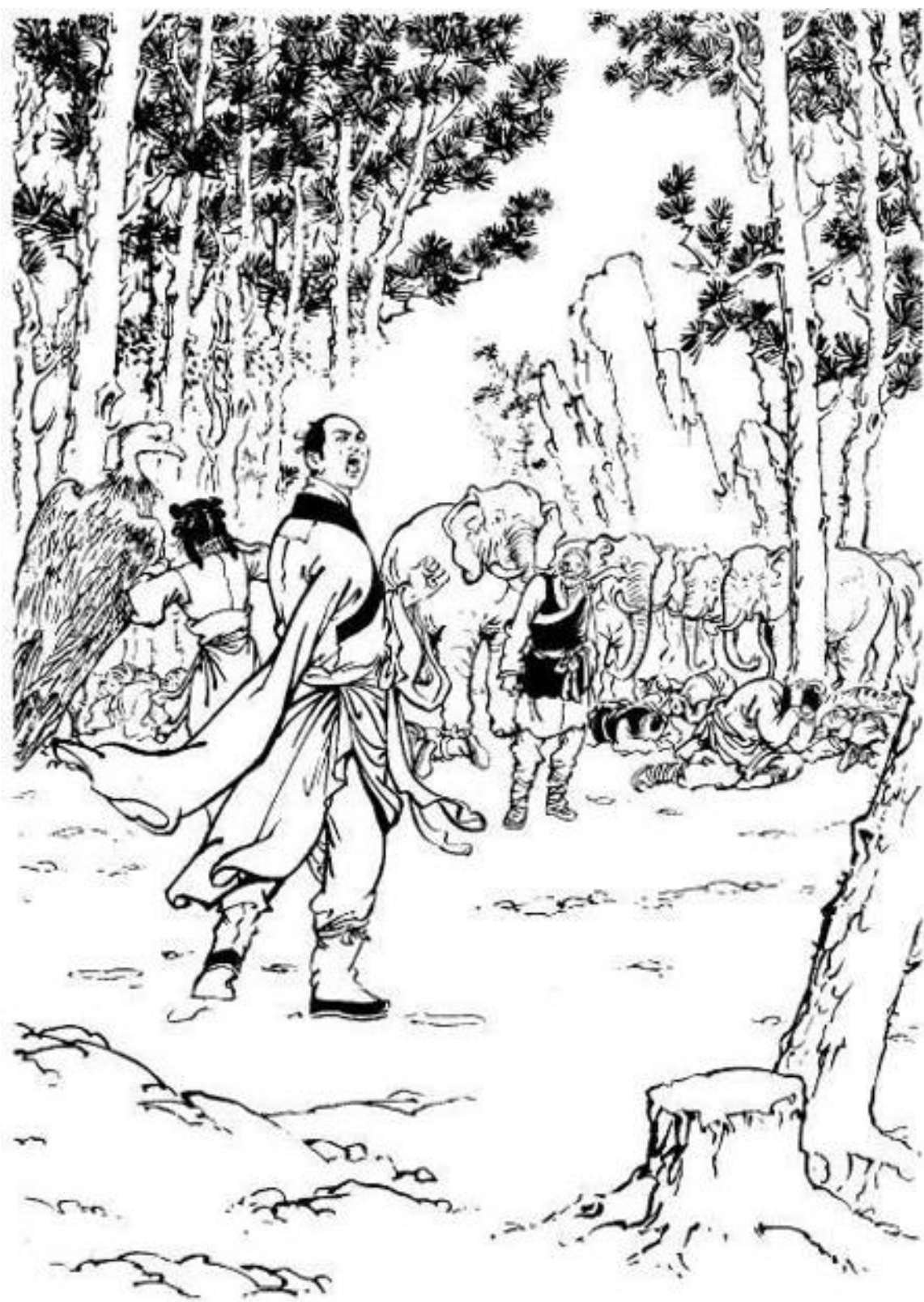
looked at his face and could not help but feel her goose bumps rising; she saw a sallow complexion and a grotesque face, not looking like a live person. He looked like a zombie. The Xishan Ghosts all looked strange and weird, but definitely were not as ugly as he was.

Before Guo Xiang saw him, her young girl's heart imagined him to be like a suave Confucian scholar, outstandingly handsome, but when she saw him now, she was greatly disappointed and thought, "So there is such an ugly person in the world!" She could not bear it and looked at him again and saw his pupils glinting, exuding a heroic aura. When the eyes flashed across and gazed at her face, as if they sensed something slightly strange. Guo Xiang felt her heart racing and could not help but lower her head, slowly finding the Eagle Hero not to be so ugly anymore.

End of Chapter 33.

Chapter 34 - Settling a Dispute

Translated by Jin_Yong_Fan & Frans Soetomo



Yang Guo opened his mouth and roared to the sky. It was like a tiger or dragon's roar. Guo Xiang's heartbeat sped up and she could barely stand up. Yang Guo's dragon roar seemed like it would never end. The animals started to fall down one by one; the Xishan Ghosts and the Shi Brothers also fell down; leaving only the elephants and two people barely standing up. They were Shi Shu Gang and Guo Xiang.

Above them was none other than Yang Guo. During these sixteen years his heart ached and yearned for Xiao Longnu. He wandered around with his eagle and did many heroic deeds, earning him the title 'Eagle Hero'. He knew that he was young and handsome and had attracted lots of girls already. Miss Gongsun sacrificed herself for him, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang loved him dearly. So he often wore Huang Yaoshi's human skin mask, to conceal his real looks. This night he had an appointment with the Xishan Ghosts; but after waiting for half a night without seeing any of them, he went looking and arrived at the forest.

The Xishan Ghosts were holding tight to their dear lives in the battle against the beasts. Upon hearing Yang Guo's voice they were desperate. With one more formidable enemy they lost all hope of ever escaping alive. They thought, "It's over. It's over. This might possibly be our last battle."

"You others are the Beastly Mountain Villagers, the Shi brothers?" Yang Guo called, "Can you hold your palms and listen to me for a second."

Shi Bowei said, "Our surname is indeed 'Shi'. Who are you, Sir?" He paused a moment and said, "Ah! I believe you are the Eagle Hero?"

Yang Guo said, "You are correct. I am the Eagle Hero. Quickly call off your beasts or else the Xishan Ghosts will turn into real ghosts."

Shi Bowei said, "Everybody will turn into real ghosts."

Yang Guo said, "The Xishan Ghosts have an appointment with me. If they do die, who will speak to me?"

Shi Bowei heard him say all this and gave out a cold laugh. Yang Guo said, "You know I am the Eagle Hero, why aren't you listening to me?"

Shi Bowei said, "So what if you are the Eagle Hero. If you have any skills, come down here and pull the animals back yourself."

Yang Guo said, "OK. Brother Eagle, let's get down." One man and one eagle leapt from the tree.

Shaking out his sleeve, he jumped down with the eagle. Several beasts immediately pounced at them as soon as their feet touched the ground. The eagle waved its wings left and right. The wolves and other smaller animals were pushed back by the gust of wind alone. The bigger animals were knocked down or pushed back staggering with each hit. Suddenly a very big lion and a very big tiger leaped at them with loud roars. The eagle again parried the attack with its formidable wings. The lion and the tiger were knocked over down. The eagle's left wing struck the tiger's head and it died instantly. This incident frightened the other animals away.

Shi Bowei was furious. With all his fingers open like a claw he leaped and tried to grab Yang Guo's chest. Yang Guo only smiled, then moved his body a little bit and shook his empty sleeve. "Smack!" the sleeve hit Shi Bowei's hands as if hit by a saber. Bowei cried out in pain.

Walking slowly Shi Shugang tried to push Yang Guo with both his hands. "Good!" cried Yang Guo, parrying the attack with his left hand. He only exerted 30% of his energy. After training against the waves of the tide for many years, Yang Guo's strength was formidable. He could push a big tree down, let alone a mere flesh and blood human.

Shi Shugang had received some lessons on internal energy and thus had strong internal energy. Even so, when Yang Guo's hand touched his, he could not help but stagger back. He tried with all his might to hold his ground.

“Watch out!” shouted Yang Guo, while pushing him back. Shi Shugang’s vision darkened and he knew he was going to die.

“Ah! You’re sick?” suddenly hearing Yang Guo’s voice. Immediately he felt the enormous power pushing him back vanish and Shi Shugang was spared. He was startled and stared at the Eagle Hero blankly.

Looking at him, Shi Bowei, Shi Zhongmeng, Shi Jiqiang and Shi Mengjie thought that their brother was heavily injured. Roaring loudly they attacked Yang Guo in unison.

In a flash Yang Guo leaped and grabbed a tiger by the neck, which he then used as his weapon to parry the four brothers’ attack.

As we remember, Yang Guo had used the heavy black-steel sword; weight about 70 catties, even before he trained against the tide’s waves. The tiger was only a little over 100 catties. Thus he easily lifted and used the tiger as a weapon against its own masters. The tiger clawed and bit frantically.

Guo Xiang watched this incident from the sideline. She was delighted; laughing and clapping she shouted, “Good! Eagle Hero, good! Shi Brothers, you’d better surrender now.”

Yang Guo looked at the girl out of the corner of his eye, wondering in his heart, “Who is this girl? She plays with leopards, yet does not take the Shi Brothers’ side.”

In the meantime, Shi Shugang tried to circulate his ‘chi’, and finding nothing amiss, he understood the Eagle Hero had shown him mercy. He thought, “Based on our true skills, even if the five of us go together, we would not be his match.” Looking at his brothers he shouted, “Brothers, stop! We have to know our limits.”

Hearing his shout, Shi Zhongmeng who was thrusting his silver pipe immediately pulled his weapon back. But the ‘Immortal of Giant Strength’ Shi Jiqiang, the reckless one of the family, didn’t listen; he thought, “What limits? Let him eat my staff first, and

then we talk.” He kept attacking Yang Guo’s head with his “Elephant Opening a Mountain” stance. This attack mimicked how an elephant used its trunk. His copper staff was shaped like an elephant trunk; small in front, bigger and a little curved toward the back. His force was a mixture of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’; no less than 1000 jins strong.

Yang Guo did not budge. He threw his tiger away, flipped his hand, and caught the end of the staff. He smiled and said, “OK let’s have a duel and see who is stronger.”

Shi Jiqiang used all his strength to push down. His ‘Elephant Trunk Staff’ was above Yang Guo’s head but no matter how much force Shi Jiqiang used the staff would not go down.

Shi Shugang said, “Fourth brother, don’t be rude.”

Shi Jiqiang tried to retreat and pull his staff away but it wouldn’t budge. Shi Jiqiang tried to pull back three times but still couldn’t retrieve his staff. Yang Guo thought, “He has a powerful strength; if I don’t overcome him with my strength this man will not give in.”

So Yang Guo used his full strength, his left hand came up and grabbed the middle of the staff. The force was focused towards the middle of the staff trying to force Shi Jiqiang to release it. But Shi Jiqiang did not let go forcing the staff to bend upwards.

Yang Guo shouted out, “Good!” He used his strength and internal energy and caused the staff to bend down. But Shi Jiqiang still refused to let go.

“Crack!” the staff broke in half. Shi Jiqiang’s palms were both bleeding, but he still held the half staff in his hands. Yang Guo saw Shi Jiqiang’s tenacity and thought it was amusing and started laughing. He picked up the other half of the staff and threw it to the ground. It struck the earth and went deep until it was completely buried.

He looked around and saw the Shi brothers, Shi Shugang, Shi Mengjie and the others were trying to calm down and control all

the beasts. But because they had smelled blood; the beasts were out of control. Yang Guo signaled to Guo Xiang to plug her ears. Guo Xiang did not understand but still listened and did what she was told. She saw Yang Guo opened his mouth and he roared to the sky. It was like a tiger or dragon's roar.

Even though Guo Xiang had plugged her ears, she could still hear the roar. Her heartbeat sped up and she could barely stand up. But luckily she had practiced the purest form of internal energy with her father Guo Jing and her mother Huang Rong ever since she was little. So even though she was young, her internal energy was better than an average martial artists and she didn't fall down but only staggered a few times.

Yang Guo's dragon roar seemed like it would never end. Everybody's face changed color. The animals started to fall down one by one, leaving only the elephants still standing. Slowly one by one the Xishan Ghosts fell down. Next the Shi Brothers also fell down; leaving only two people barely standing up. They were Shi Shugang and Guo Xiang. Yang Guo was amazed and impressed that this sick man, Shi Shugang, was able to stay standing. He knew that if he continued he would hurt Shi Shugang even more.

So he waved his sleeve and his dragon roar stopped. The eagle looked proudly at Yang Guo. Only then did everybody and the beasts slowly stand up. The wolves and other small animals had not awakened yet; their bodies still scattered about on the snow. The larger animals did not wait for the Shi Brothers' command, they tucked their tails between their legs and scampered away deep into the woods, not even daring to look back. The Shi Brothers and Xishan Ghosts have never met such opponent in their entire lives. They just stared at Yang Guo and could not utter a single word. Yang Guo said, "Shi Brothers, I apologize for the disturbance. I have an appointment with Xishan Ghosts; but since you had started fighting, I had to intervene. After taking care of this small problem, I will let you continue your fight and I promise not to be on anybody's side." He turned his body around

and continued, "Well? Are you going to fight me one on one, or are all of you going to fight me together?"

The one supposed to answer his question would be the Fairy Ghost, the burly man with a body like an iron tower, whose ears were cut off by the Eagle Hero. But since he was still dazed from the roar, he couldn't say anything. The Long Beard Ghost then moved a step forward. He clasped his fists in respect, bowing to the ground and said, "Eagle Hero, your skill and ours are like heaven and earth apart. We, the Xishan Ghosts, do not dare to fight you. Our lives have been saved by you. In the future, if Great Hero (Da Xia) ever has any need of our services, even if we have to go through water or fire, we will comply. If Da Xia wants us to leave Shanxi, we will not stay another second."

As soon as he saw the Long Beard Ghost, Yang Guo was suspicious. And now, after hearing his voice, he asked straight away, "Are you not the one surnamed Fan with a given name Yiweng?"

The Long Beard Ghost was indeed Fan Yiweng, the first disciple of Gongsun Zhi, master of the Passionless Valley. After Yang Guo spared his life at the Valley, he had run away and hidden himself. About ten years later he re-entered the Jianghu world and with his level of martial arts, he managed to attain the first position of the Xishan Ghosts. During the battle at the 'Broken Heart Cliff' Yang Guo's arm had not yet been chopped off by Guo Fu. Besides, Yang Guo was wearing a mask now, so he did not recognize him. Hearing the question, he bowed and answered, "This lowly one is indeed Fan Yiweng. What is your command, Great Hero?"

Yang Guo smiled and lifted his hand. "Don't use such humility. If you want my command, I will say it: Do not move away from Xishan. Fairy Ghost, you'd better let your four concubines go!"

"Very well," said the Fairy Ghost. He was silent for a moment and then continued, "If they don't want to go, I'll beat them with a stick."

Yang Guo was taken aback. He recalled what happened that day, how this Ghost's wife and four concubines knelt down and begged him for mercy. He laughed and said, "No! You can't beat them. If they want to leave, just let them leave; but if they want to stay with you ..." he heaved a sigh. "An outsider certainly cannot interfere. Uh, did you say you were going to take four more concubines to make yours exactly eight?"

The Fairy Ghost blushed. "Because of my concubines the Eagle Hero has had some trouble and my brothers and sisters were almost harmed," he embarrassedly said. "Even if I want to do that, Big Brother certainly wouldn't let me." Everybody laughed hearing his response.

"Very well, this business is settled," said Yang Guo. "Now you can continue your fight." He moved aside and together with his eagle they were ready to be the spectators of the Shi Brothers versus the Xishan Ghost's battle.

Fan Yiweng moved a few steps forward and said to Shi Bowei, "The Xishan Ghosts have met an ill-fated event today, and we are hurting; therefore, we'll have to ask for your leave. However, may we know where your Beastly Mountain Village will be: in Shanxi or Liangzhou? The reason I asked, is so that we can pay a visit in the future."

Shi Bowei understood the threat very well, he said, "We will wait for your visit in Liangzhou. But if ... if ... my third brother can't be saved because of this, you don't have to come to Liangzhou; the four of us will certainly pay you a visit wherever you are."

Fan Yiweng was shocked. "What have we to do with Third Brother's illness?" he wondered.

Shi Bowei's face turned red and he shouted, "My Third Brother..." Shi Shugang sighed, "Eldest Brother, never mind. The Xishan Ghosts' actions were unintentional; it is your younger brother's fate. We don't have to add unnecessary enmity."

Shi Bowei struggled to control himself and said, "Fine!" He lifted one hand toward Fan Yiweng and said, "The green hill will not

change; the green water always flows; we will meet again.” He turned to Yang Guo and said, “Eagle Hero, even if we train for another 30 years we are still not your match. We admit defeat. We will never dare to cross your path again.”

Yang Guo laughed, “There’s no need for that.”

Fan Yiweng was feeling uncomfortable with what had been said and asked, “Eldest Brother Shi, please wait. The Third Brother Shi said we unintentionally did something wrong. What did we do besides entering your territory without authorization? We, the Xishan Ghosts are not afraid to lose our heads; we are certainly not afraid to kowtow to apologize to you.”

Shi Bowei had seen that when they were under the animal’s attack they were throwing the fur hat to each other. Each one of them certainly did not fear death. They were also the kind of people who knew right from wrong. So mournfully he said, “You frightened off the ‘Nine-Tailed Spirit Fox’ [jiu wei ling hu] which my Third Brother needs for treatment of his internal injury. Even if we kill you a thousand times, or even ten thousand times, what good would that be?” Fan Yiweng was shocked; he recalled how the Shi Brothers were leading a large pack of animals to pursue that little fox and wondered why the fox was so important to them.

The Killer Ghost said, “What’s the use of this little fox? Mmm ... since it is important to the Third Brother’s well-being, let us join forces and capture that small fox. Wouldn’t it be great?”

Shi Jiqiang shouted, “What do you mean ‘great’? If you can catch that fox I will kowtow to you a hundred times, no, a thousand times!” He was getting emotional.

Fan Yiweng thought, “The Shi Brothers are animal experts without equal in the world. If THEY say it is difficult, what chance would other people have?” Thinking this he involuntarily cast a glance at Yang Guo.

Guo Xiang could not contain herself any longer. “Why do you keep talking? Why don’t you ask the Eagle Hero for help?” she

interjected.

Shi Zhongmeng's heart was stirred; he thought, "This Eagle Hero is highly skilled, maybe he really can help us." But he said, "What do you know? Unless 'da luojin xian' [the Great Golden Immortal surnamed Luo - I think he is one of Taoist deities] comes down to earth, who else would be able to catch that animal?" Yang Guo knew he deliberately provoked him; so he simply smiled.

Guo Xiang said, "What's so special about the fox? Would the Second Shi Uncle care to explain?"

Shi Zhongmeng sighed and said, "Toward the end of the year before last my Third Brother defended against injustice in Liangzhou, but the enemy was playing dirty. My Third Brother was not careful and was severely injured ..."

Guo Xiang said, "The Third Uncle Shi's skills are good. Who's capable of hurting him?"

Shi Shugang said, "You're flattering me. My skill is like the faint glow of a firefly compared to the sun. What you just said, I am afraid The Eagle Hero would laugh to my face."

Guo Xiang cast a glance at Yang Guo and said, "Him? He is different. I am talking about other people here."

Shi Zhongmeng said, "It was a Mongolian Prince called Hou Du. I heard he is the disciple of Jinlun Fawang."

Yang Guo softly sighed, "It was he. No wonder."

Guo Xiang said, "Eagle Hero, please punish this Mongolian Prince severely for Third Uncle Shi's sake."

Shi Zhongmeng said, "We do not dare to bother the Eagle Hero. As soon as the Third Brother's injury is cured, we will find him and fight him fair and square. I am sure we won't be defeated. Only my Third Brother's internal injury will need a long time to heal; additionally, he will need to drink the blood of the fox for treatment."

"So that's the story," Guo Xiang and the Xishan Ghosts murmured.

Shi Zhongmeng said, "The 'jiu wei ling hu' is a rare animal; extremely skittish. We, five brothers have spent almost a year trying to track it down. This fox's habitat is also in unusual places, like a big marsh located about thirty li [about 15 km] northwest."

The Killer Ghost asked, "Big marsh? Is it the Black Dragon Marsh?"

Shi Zhongmeng said, "Precisely. You have lived in the Jinnan area for a long time, naturally you know that place. This Black Dragon Marsh's surrounding area is covered with sludge for a few li around it; no man or beast is able to live there. It's been a very big effort on our part to simply lure one to this forest."

The Killer Ghost said, "Oh, no wonder you wouldn't allow us to enter the forest."

Shi Zhongmeng continued, "We Shi Brothers are newcomers to this area, naturally we can't act impolitely. But this is an urgent matter; we did not have any other choice. That fox can run very fast, you have seen it with your own eyes. We led the animals to surround this forest and had actually hoped we would catch it. Unexpectedly you lighted a fire in the forest that our animals were afraid of, and, using that opportunity, the fox escaped. We are ashamed that even with all our might we weren't able to catch that animal. Once the fox went back to its lair I doubt if we will ever be able to lure it out again. In the meantime my Third Brother's injury is not getting better. We are running out of time. That was the reason we acted unreasonably." He then looked at Yang Guo imploringly.

Fan Yiweng said, "We are partly responsible for this mishap. But may I know, how did you lure the fox in the first place? Why can't we repeat it?"

Shi Zhongmeng said, "The fox is a very suspicious animal; it was extremely difficult to lure it out. We have sacrificed more than a

thousand roosters. We put a roasted chicken every day a few feet apart. Only after about two months did its suspicions gradually subside and we slowly led it to this forest. After this incident, I doubt it would ever fall into our trap again, even in ten years."

Fan Yiweng nodded, saying, "That is so. But what if we try to capture it in its lair?"

"The Black Dragon Marsh is surrounded by several li of more than ten foot deep sludge. Nothing can step on it, not even a boat or light wooden raft will float. The fox's body is light, its feet wide and thick, plus it is agile so it can run on the surface," Shi Zhongmeng explained.

Guo Xiang suddenly remembered her family's pair of eagles which she and her siblings used to ride in the air. The Divine Eagle is bigger than theirs, capable of carrying two people; hence she said, "Eagle Hero, if you are willing to help, I have a way."

Yang Guo smiled and said, "The Shi Brothers are animal experts, yet they were not able to catch it, even if I am willing what could I do?"

Shi Zhongmeng heard willingness in his voice. This was a matter of life and death for his brother, so without hesitation he bent his knees and knelt down on the snow in front of Yang Guo and asked, "Eagle Hero, my younger brother's fate is in your hand. Please help us." Shi Bowei, Shi Jiqiang and Shi Mengjie also knelt down.

Yang Guo quickly lifted them up and said, "I do not dare." Then he turned to Guo Xiang, "You said if I am willing then you have a way. I will listen to your respected opinion."

Guo Xiang said, "You can ride on the Divine Eagle and fly over the marsh."

Yang Guo laughed heartily, saying, "Ha-ha-ha, my Brother Eagle is different from other birds; his body is too heavy, he can't fly. His strong wings can sweep tigers or leopards away, but they

won't help him soar." Still, he turned his head to the Shi Brothers and said, "Even though I am useless, I will try my best to help. I beg your forgiveness if I am inadequate."

The Shi Brothers were very happy. They knew this well-known hero's reputation; he would do what he promised to do. And if he couldn't do it, nobody could. Shi Bowei and his brothers kowtowed and said, "Then we invite the Eagle Hero and the Xishan Ghosts to draw up a plan together at our place."

Fan Yiweng said, "This trouble was started by our brother. We will listen to you."

Shi Bowei said, "We don't dare accuse him. At least we made a few friends out of this." The Xishan Ghosts and Shi Brothers did not have any enmity to begin with; now that they have agreed on something, each uttered polite words and their enmity was quickly forgotten.

Yang Guo, however, disagreed. "Brothers, let me go directly to the Black Dragon Marsh. No matter if I succeed or fail, I will come and pay my respects to you within five days." The Xishan Ghosts and the Shi Brothers knew he usually handled matters alone; so even though they wanted to come they did not dare to propose otherwise. Yang Guo lifted his arm in respect and turned around, heading north.

Guo Xiang thought, "I came to see the Eagle Hero and I've seen him now. Although he looks ugly, his skills are astonishing and he likes to help those in need; he's a real hero. So if I am looking for a 'Da Xia', I have found one." She was curious to see how he would catch the fox so she quietly followed him.

The Big Head Ghost was about to call her, but changed his mind at the last moment. "She came to see the Eagle Hero; perhaps she has something to say to him," he thought. The Shi Brothers did not know Guo Xiang to begin with, so they did not say anything either.

Guo Xiang was following about ten feet behind Yang Guo. However, Yang Guo and the eagle moved faster and faster like a

speeding horse; a moment later Guo Xiang was far behind. All she could see was Yang Guo's sleeve floating in the wind; the distance between them was getting greater and greater. Guo Xiang used her family's lightness skill with all her might but very soon all she could see was two spots on the horizon. She anxiously cried, "Hey, wait for me!" She lost her concentration and fell onto the snowy ground. She was upset and started to cry.

Suddenly she heard a gentle voice saying, "Why are you crying? Who bullied you?"

Guo Xiang looked up and saw that it was Yang Guo. She did not know how he could get back that fast. She was both surprised and happy, but also embarrassed. She searched for her handkerchief to dry her tears but it was gone. She thought it fell to the ground because she was running frantically.

Yang Guo groped in his sleeve pocket and produced a handkerchief which he held between his thumb and index finger and asked with a smile, "Are you looking for this?" Guo Xiang saw that it was her own embroidered flower handkerchief so she said, "It is you who bully me."

"How did I bully you?" Yang Guo asked.

"You took my handkerchief away, didn't you bully me?" Guo Xiang answered.

Yang Guo laughed, "You dropped it yourself and I was kind enough to pick it up for you. How could you say I took it away?"

Guo Xiang also laughed, "I was behind you, so how could you have picked it up? Obviously you took it from me." Actually Yang Guo was aware that Guo Xiang was following them. He wanted to test her skills; so he intentionally ran faster. He thought this young girl's martial arts seemed to come from a famous expert. After she fell he was afraid she might be injured, so he took a detour around her and saw a handkerchief several feet behind, so he picked it up.

Yang Guo smiled, "What's your name? Who's your master? Why are you following me?"

Guo Xiang countered, "What's your great name? You tell me first then I'll tell you."

Yang Guo had been unwilling to even reveal his face for the past decade, so obviously he was not going to tell a stranger his name. He said, "Young lady, you're a strange one. If you won't say it, then never mind. Here's your handkerchief." He waved his hand slightly and the handkerchief spread out and flew steadily to Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang found it fun and took it, saying, "Eagle Hero, what skill is this? Can you teach me?"

Yang Guo saw that she was young and innocent and his repulsive mask did not scare her, so he thought, "I must scare her a bit." He suddenly said sharply, "You're very daring. Why aren't you afraid of me? I'm going to hurt you now." He stepped forward and raised his hand as if about to strike.

Guo Xiang was shocked but recovered quickly and laughed, "I'm not afraid. If you really want to hurt me, would you say it first? The Eagle Hero is chivalrous and valiant, why would you want to hurt a little girl like me?"

For someone past caring about worldly affairs, even if a great man praised him sincerely, he would not care. Although he was not desperate to be praised, when he heard Guo Xiang earnestly complimenting him, he smiled, "You don't know me, and how do you know I won't harm you?"

Guo Xiang said, "Although I don't know you, I heard a lot about your great deeds at Fenglingdu last night. I said to myself, 'I must definitely meet such a great hero.' So I followed the Big Head Ghost here to find you."

Yang Guo shook his head, "I'm no hero. After you've seen me you'll know that my fame is exaggerated."

Guo Xiang quickly said, "No, no! If you're not a hero... then who is?" After she said this she realized she said something wrong – it implied her father was not on the same level as he was. So she said, "Of course there're several great heroes apart from you, but you're definitely one of them."

Yang Guo thought, "You're just a teenager, how can you know about the great men of the time?" He smiled, "So who are those heroes?"

Guo Xiang felt that his tone was quite dismissive of her statement, so she said, "OK, I'll say it. But if I'm right, you'll take me to catch that "Nine-Tailed Fox", OK?"

Yang Guo said, "OK. Name me a few."

Guo Xiang said, "OK. There's one hero who defends Xiangyang and repels the Mongol invaders with all his might to protect the people. Is that a great hero?"

Yang Guo held up his thumb and said, "Correct! Hero Guo Jing can be counted."

Guo Xiang continued, "There's also a female hero who protects the people, defends the country, is really intelligent and predicts like the Gods. Is she a great hero?"

Yang Guo said, "You mean Madam Guo – Chief Huang? Hmm... she can be considered a great hero too."

Guo Xiang said, "There's also an old hero who's a master of the Five Elements and the Divine Flicking Finger and is a great prodigy. Is he considered a great hero?"

Yang Guo said, "This must be Island Master Huang, a senior in the Wulin community. I've always respected him."

Guo Xiang saw that he knew the three people she mentioned so she was quite pleased with herself. She said, "Then there's yet another, he commands the Beggars' Sect, kills the mighty enemy, serves the country and the people, and toils laboriously. Is he considered a great hero?"

Yang Guo said, "Are you referring to Chief Lu Youjiao? Although his martial arts are not that fantastic and he never accomplished much, but based on you saying he 'kills the mighty enemy, serves the country and the people', he can be counted as a great hero too."

Guo Xiang thought, "You're so great yourself and your standards are so high; if I continue then you may not agree. Moreover after Father, Mother, Grandfather and Uncle Lu, I can't think of anyone else."

Yang Guo saw her hesitating and thought, "Uncle Guo, Aunt Guo, Island Master Huang and Chief Lu are all very well-known heroes. It's nothing strange for this young lady to mention them." He said, "If you can name one more correctly, I'll take you to the Black Dragon Marsh to catch the "Nine-Tailed Fox"."

Guo Xiang wanted to mention her brother-in-law Yelu Qi but felt that although his martial arts were high, he did not qualify to be a 'great hero' yet. Her martial brothers Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen were even worse candidates. She was greatly troubled when she suddenly thought of something and said, "OK, here's one more: he helps people in trouble, protects the weak and is widely praised - the Eagle Hero! Whether he is to be considered a great hero is for you to decide."

Yang Guo said, "Young lady, your words are very amusing."

Guo Xiang said, "So are you taking me to the Black Dragon Marsh?"

Yang Guo laughed, "Since you called me a great hero, how can a great hero disappoint the young lady? Let's go."

Guo Xiang was overjoyed and stretched out her hand and held his left hand. She was friendly with the heroes in Xiangyang since young and they treated her like their goddaughter, hence she did not pay attention to the proper behavior between males and females. In her excitement, she did not treat Yang Guo as a stranger.

Yang Guo, feeling his hand being held by her, felt that it was soft and smooth. He was at a loss as to what to do because if he withdrew his hand, it might have seemed rude. He glanced at her and saw her hopping and skipping with joy written all over her face and without any other thoughts, so he smiled and pointed north, saying, "The Black Dragon Marsh is over there; it's not very far from here." As he pointed, he managed to take his hand away from Guo Xiang's hold discreetly. Yang Guo was a great flirt when young but after separating from Xiao Longnu, he restrained himself. He paid great attention to the proper behavior between males and females for the past 10 years while roaming Jianghu. Although he saw that Guo Xiang was sweet and innocent, he was still careful with his behavior and did not even dare to touch her hand.

Guo Xiang did not bother about that but walked shoulder-to-shoulder with him. After walking a few steps, she saw that although the Divine Eagle was ugly, it looked proud and majestic, so she stretched out her hand to pat its wings. She'd played with a pair of white eagles since young and patting the eagles' wings as a game. However the Divine Eagle spread its wings and pushed her aside with an "Aak". Guo Xiang was shocked and exclaimed, "Ah!"

Yang Guo laughed, "Brother Eagle, relax! Why treat this young lady so coldly?" Guo Xiang stuck out her tongue at it and walked to Yang Guo's right, not daring to go near the eagle. She did not know that while her eagles were pets Yang Guo's eagle was sort of his master as well as his friend. Considering its age, it was an elder, so its status was different.

So the two people and the eagle headed towards the Black Dragon Marsh. They found it quite easily as there was no plants or trees for 7 or 8 li. The Black Dragon Marsh was originally a large lake, but the water source dried eventually and it was clogged with slit year after year. As a result, the place became a desolate marsh. With only a bit of effort, Yang Guo and Guo Xiang made it to the marsh. They looked around and saw a heavy cloud of mist with only dried bushes scattered around the vast

marsh. The “Nine-Tailed Fox”, should be hiding somewhere around here.

Yang Guo took a twig and threw it into the marsh. At first the twig settled on the snow, but then it sank slowly and steadily without stopping. Soon there was not a trace of the twig. Guo Xiang exclaimed, “The twig is so light and yet it sank, so how can we walk on it?” She stared at Yang Guo and wondered what clever tricks he was thinking of.

Yang Guo broke off two yew branches which were a few feet long and tied them to his feet. He said, “Let me try it and see if this works.” He bent forward and jumped onto the snow, skiing quickly on the surface. He skied left and right without pausing and turned several times on the frozen marsh before returning to his original location.

Guo Xiang laughed, “Great skills!”

Yang Guo saw the glint of admiration in her eyes and knew she was really eager to trap the fox, but she did not have great lightness skills so he laughed, “I promised to take you to the Black Dragon Marsh to catch that “Nine-Tailed Fox”, are you afraid?”

Guo Xiang sighed gently and said, “I don’t have skills such as yours; even if I were very brave it’d be useless.”

Yang Guo smiled without a word and broke off another two branches. He then gave them to Guo Xiang and said, “Tie them to your feet.”

Guo Xiang was surprised and delighted and immediately tied the branches as instructed. Yang Guo said, “Bend forward and remember not to exert any strength with your feet.” He grabbed her arm and shouted, “Fear not!” Guo Xiang was dragged by him and she found herself skiing on the snow. She panicked at first, but after a few meters she felt herself floating like the wind and she repeatedly shouted, “This is so much fun!”

After skiing for some time, Yang Guo suddenly shouted, "Oh!" Guo Xiang asked, "What?" She lost her concentration and her left foot sank into the snow. The mud splashed onto her leg and she exclaimed in surprise. Yang Guo lifted her out and said, "Remember, always move continuously and you must not stop suddenly."

Guo Xiang said, "OK. What do you see? Is it the 'Nine-Tailed Fox'?"

Yang Guo said, "No! It seems like someone is living in the middle of the marsh."

Guo Xiang curiously asked, "How can someone live here?"

Yang Guo said, "I don't know that either. But the plants and trees here are arranged into some sort of formation; definitely man-made."

They were getting closer to the formation and Guo Xiang looked carefully, saying, "Correct, Wood at the east, Fire in the south, Earth at the centre but it's not Water at the North but Metal."

She had heard her mother talk of the 'Changes of the Five Elements' since young so she managed to pick up some of it. Her character was quite different to her sister Guo Fu – she was frank but not uncouth and she was much more intelligent than her sister. Huang Rong always said, "If your grandfather ever saw you, he would really like you a lot." Huang Yaoshi was very well-versed in medicine, astrology, the arts and warfare. Guo Xiang was very much like her grandfather but she was distracted easily, so her martial arts improvement was slow. She was always day-dreaming, did as she pleased and her conduct was usually extraordinary, causing Guo Jing and Huang Rong a lot of headaches. Hence her nickname at home was "Little Eastern Heretic". For example on this occasion she followed the Big Head Ghost whom she did not know to look for the Eagle Hero, and now she followed another stranger, the Eagle Hero, to catch the fox. She boldly did as she wanted and was different from the Huang Rong and Guo Fu of years ago.

When Yang Guo heard that she knew how the formation was arranged, he was quite surprised and asked, "How did you know? Who taught you?"

Guo Xiang laughed, "I saw that in some books, I don't even know if it's correct. But from what I see there's nothing extraordinary about this formation, so it can't be some expert living in there."

Yang Guo nodded, "That a person can survive in such an inhospitable place is strange." So he said loudly, "My friend in the Black Dragon Marsh, you have guests." After waiting a while, there was still no response. Yang Guo repeated his words but still received no response. Yang Guo said: "Looks as though someone made this formation, but the person doesn't live here. Let's go over and take a look." He skied several meters ahead and went right up to the formation.

Guo Xiang suddenly felt as though she had set foot on solid ground. Yang Guo finished his examination and laughed, "There's nothing weird about this. There's an island in the middle of the marsh." As he said this, there was a sudden movement in the snow and two little foxes came out from behind a bush. It was a pair of "Nine-Tailed Foxes" and one headed northeast while the other headed southwest, both running very fast.

Yang Guo shouted, "Stay here and don't move." He turned and chased the fox heading northeast. Now that he didn't have to look after Guo Xiang, he was able to utilize his full skills and ski on the snow swiftly as a bird. However the fox was extremely fast and agile too and it turned, and then dashed in front of Guo Xiang. Suddenly, as the wind blew, Yang Guo threw out his sleeve and almost caught the fox but it was too agile and somersaulted in midair, causing Yang Guo's sleeve to miss only by a few inches. Guo Xiang exclaimed, "What a pity!"

The man and the fox dashed through the snow with lightning speed and Guo Xiang was filled with excitement and could not stop cheering Yang Guo, shouting, "Eagle Hero! Faster! Little fox, you can't escape, just surrender!" The other fox zigzagged around, sometimes moving close to Yang Guo. Yang Guo knew it

was there to distract him so he did not bother with it and only concentrated on the first fox, wanting to tire it out. Although the fox was small, its stamina was excellent and showed no signs of fatigue after dashing around for so long.

Yang Guo increased his pace and the other fox ran alongside its companion in an attempt to save it. He scolded, "You little animal, do you think I can't catch you?" He swiftly bent down and grabbed a ball of snow and squashed it until it was like a stone. He shot the snowball out and hit the fox in the head, causing it to fall down and roll over. Yang Guo did not want to kill it, so he threw the snowball very lightly. The fox rolled several times and stood up again, quickly dashing into a clump of bushes, not daring to come out again.

If Yang Guo hit it again, he could catch the fox, but he purposely wanted to compete with it, saying, "Little fox, if I hit you hard with a snowball, you won't die in peace. I'm an upright man and if I can't catch up with you, I'll let you off." He took a deep breath and launched himself forward, sliding on the snow and got right up to the fox. The fox was shocked and tried to escape to the right. Yang Guo was prepared for that and shot out his sleeve, hitting the fox. He then grabbed its head with his left hand. He felt proud of himself and laughed heartily.

When he stopped laughing, he saw that the fox was motionless and appeared to be dead. Yang Guo thought, "Oh no! My sleeve must have hit it too hard. These foxes are very delicate, I wonder if the dead fox's blood can be used to treat the third Shi." He took the fox and skied to Guo Xiang, saying, "This fox is dead, I'm afraid it's of no use to us, let's go catch the live one." He dropped the fox onto the ground, and as he was afraid it was pretending to be dead, he flung his sleeve out to catch it back if it moved. But the fox remained motionless and seemed to be really dead.

Guo Xiang said, "The fox was cute when alive, maybe it dropped dead from fatigue." She took a branch and said, "I'll go chase the other fox here. You wait here." She walked a few steps forward and hit the bushes with the branch.

When she hit the bushes, she wanted to hit again but could not lift the branch up. It seemed like the branch was being bitten by some animal. She exclaimed in surprise and tugged harder, but she lost her grip and the branch was dragged into the bushes.

With a strange sound a person emerged from behind the bushes; it was an old woman with white hair and dressed in black. She stared at Guo Xiang fiercely and raised the branch to hit her. Guo Xiang was shocked and immediately jumped back, retreating behind Yang Guo.

At this time the 'dead' fox sprang up and jumped into the old woman's embrace and stared at Yang Guo with its beady eyes. It was feigning death after all.

When Yang Guo saw this, he was angry yet amused. He thought, "Today I lost to a small animal; seems like it belongs to the old woman. I don't know who she is and I've never heard about such a person in Jianghu. It might be a problem if I insist on taking the fox." He lifted his hand and said, "I have offended you, Elder, please forgive me."

The old woman stared at the branches on their feet and appeared surprised. However she quickly masked it and waved her hand, saying, "This old woman lives in seclusion and doesn't entertain any guests. Go away!" Her pitch was sharp and thin and her brows showed traces of an unfriendly aura.

Yang Guo saw that her appearance was intimidating but her brows and eyes were delicate, so it seemed she must have been beautiful when young. He really could not figure out who this could be and said politely, "I have a friend who has suffered some internal injuries. I need the blood of the "Nine-Tailed Fox" to treat him. I hope you will be generous and save a life. My friends and I will be very grateful to you."

The old woman faced the sky and laughed, "Ha-ha ha-ha heh heh." She did not stop for a while and her laughter was filled with hatred. Finally she said, "He has suffered internal injuries, so you

need to save him. Wonderful! Why did no one want to save my son when he was severely injured?"

Yang Guo was shocked and said, "What injuries did Elder's son suffer? Can we still save him in time?"

The old woman laughed again. She said, "In time? He died several decades ago and has already turned to ashes, what are you talking about?"

Yang Guo knew she was thinking about her past, so he did not say much. He only said, "Our visit here to request this fox is really inappropriate, if elder has any orders I shall carry them out if they're within my capacity."

The old woman cast a gaze at him and said, "I live here alone and have no kith or kin – only these foxes as companions. If you take them away, it's no problem, but you must leave this girl here to accompany me for ten years."

Yang Guo frowned but before he could answer, he heard Guo Xiang say, "This place is only stinking mud and firewood, it's no fun here. I don't want to live here. If you're bored here, then you may come to my home. My parents will definitely welcome you and you can live with us for ten or twenty years. Isn't that better?"

The old woman angrily said, "Who do you think your parents are? How can they invite me?" Guo Xiang was very broad-minded and if anyone was rude to her, she would just laugh it off, so she hardly got angry. The woman seriously offended Guo Jing and Huang Rong and if Guo Fu had heard this, she would have flown into a rage immediately. Guo Xiang however just smiled and stuck out her tongue at Yang Guo.

Yang Guo felt this young lady was very familiar and did not wish to bring her trouble. He nodded to her and faced the old woman, saying, "Elder's invitation to this girl is indeed generous and is a rare opportunity for her but without her parents' permission, she can't decide for herself..."

The old woman said sharply, "Who are her parents? What are you to her?" Yang Guo found these questions hard to answer.

Guo Xiang immediately said, "My parents are villagers, even if I tell you, you wouldn't know them. Him...He's my... brother!" She looked at Yang Guo.

At this time Yang Guo was also starring at her and they made eye contact. Although Yang Guo was wearing a mask and his face looked dead and zombie-like, his eyes radiated a warm and protective aura. Guo Xiang felt her heart tremble and thought, "If I only had such an older brother, he'd definitely look after me. He won't be like my sister who nags and scolds all the time, grumbling about this and nitpicking at that." As she thought of this, her face showed signs of respect.

Yang Guo said, "Yeah, my sister is young and ignorant, so I took her out to see the world..." Guo Xiang was initially afraid that Yang Guo would not acknowledge her as his sister but when she heard this, she was extremely delighted. She heard him continue, "She saw that this "Nine-Tailed Fox" looked so majestic and knew it must be some exalted elder who owns it so she has come with me on this visit. She is really fortunate to meet you."

The old woman laughed coldly, "What's the use of talking such rubbish? The way you chased my fox - is that showing respect for an elder? Quickly go and don't come back!" She waved both palms and thrust one palm at Yang Guo and the other at Guo Xiang. The three of them were standing about a meter apart and although they were out of range of her palms, Guo Xiang felt a cold wind suddenly rush towards her. Yang Guo waved his sleeve and completely dissipated the wind blowing towards Guo Xiang and did not even bother about the wind blowing towards him.

In the beginning, the old woman was not afraid of them and only wanted to chase them out of the Black Dragon Marsh, so she only used 50% of her strength. But when she saw that it did not affect them in the least bit, she was shocked and angry. She increased her strength and struck out with two palms again, not worrying if she took their lives. Once Guo Xiang felt the wind coming, she

felt the chill immediately, but Yang Guo waved his sleeve and dissipated the wind again. She knew they were competing internal strength and she saw that the old woman's expression was terrible while Yang Guo looked calm as he had the upper hand.

The old woman quickly ducked and stepped away, then suddenly lashed out with a strange move, hitting Yang Guo squarely in the chest with a thud. She immediately retreated and did not wait for Yang Guo to retaliate, and was several meters away in a moment. Guo Xiang was shocked and pulled his arm, asking, "Are... are you injured?" The old woman said sharply, "You've been struck by my 'Yin Frost Arrow Palm', you won't live to tomorrow. You brought this upon yourself, so don't blame anyone else."

Yang Guo's martial arts had far surpassed this old woman's martial arts even fifteen years ago. Now that he had reached such a high level of internal and external martial arts mastery, the old woman's "Yin Frost Arrow Palm" did not hurt him. However he had no feud with her and he also wanted her precious pet. He did not want to be rude and thus did not retaliate for three palm strikes.

The old woman had trained her "Yin Frost Arrow Palm" for the past two decades and one palm stroke could smash seventeen bricks at once. The shattered pieces did not fly everywhere, showing that her palm strikes were fierce and concentrated. She thought when Yang Guo was hit, he would collapse from his injuries but he smiled as if nothing happened. She thought, "This kid is still stubborn even on the verge of death." She said, "While you're not dead yet, quickly take this girl and leave, don't die in my Black Dragon Marsh."

Yang Guo lifted his head and said clearly, "Elder lives in seclusion and is very knowledgeable." He laughed loudly and clearly, his voice robust and vigorous, showing his profound internal strength.

When the woman heard this, she realized that he was not even slightly injured and her face darkened. It was only now that she

knew he had actually allowed three moves and she was far from his match. She did not wait for him to finish and carried her fox while whistling for the other. The other came out from the bushes and jumped into her embrace. The old woman said sharply, "Martial arts expert, I admire you. But if you want to snatch this old woman's foxes, never! If you step one foot closer I'll strangle them and you can return empty-handed."

Yang Guo heard that her words were resolute and saw that her character was stubborn and unyielding, he hesitated. If he suddenly charged forward and sealed her accupoints before snatching a fox, it looked like she might die from anger. This way, even if he saved Shi Shugang's life, it would be at the expense of another innocent life.

At this time, they heard a voice from behind. "Amitufo." Then the voice said, "Old monk Yideng wishes to see you, Yinggu, please meet me."

Guo Xiang saw that there was no one around her and was very curious. The voice seemed to come from close by but there was nowhere anyone could conceal himself in the surroundings. Where could this person be? She had once heard from her mother that Reverend Yideng was a highly-skilled elder. He had once saved her mother's life and he was also the master of Wu Santong who was the father of the Wu brothers. She had never met him before, so when someone suddenly called himself Yideng, she was surprised and happy.

When Yang Guo heard Yideng's voice, he was very delighted too. He knew that Yideng was now using the "Voice Transmitting Over 1000 Li" skill. Of course Yideng was not literally 1000 li away, but if there was no mountain in the way, someone with high martial arts could project his voice over several li and yet sound very near. The higher the internal energy, the gentler the voice would sound. Yang Guo only heard these two sentences and was full of admiration and admitted to himself that this monk's internal energy was so profound and refined that the monk was superior to him. He then thought, "So this old woman is Yinggu. I wonder

what Yideng wants to see her for. Maybe with his intervention I can get the fox."

The old woman living in the Black Dragon Marsh was indeed Yinggu. Years ago when Yideng was the King of Dali, Yinggu was one of his concubines. She had an affair with Zhou Botong and had a son by him. Later Qiu Qianren used his Iron Palms to injure their son severely but King Duan (Yideng) refused to save the child and he died. Following that King Duan became a monk and took on the name of Yideng. When Yinggu could not kill Qiu Qianren on Mount Hua, she chased Zhou Botong for some time before touring Jianghu and finally settling down in the Black Dragon Marsh. By this time Yideng had been outside the marsh for seven days and transmitted his voice to seek permission to visit her everyday. However Yinggu remembered how he totally refused to save her son many years ago and her hatred had still not diminished, so she refused to see him.

Yang Guo saw Yinggu retreat a few steps and sit on a pile of firewood. Her eyes were filled with hatred. After a while, they heard Yideng again, saying, "Old monk Yideng has come from a thousand li away, Yinggu, please grant us permission to visit." Yinggu just played with her foxes and ignored him. Yang Guo thought, "Yideng's martial arts far surpass hers, so she can't stop him from coming, so why does he beg her to see him?" They heard Yideng repeat the words once more, then they did not hear him again.

Guo Xiang said, "Brother, this Reverend Yideng must be some great man, can we go see him?"

Yang Guo said, "Yes! I want to see him too." Then they saw Yinggu stand up and cast her fierce gaze at them and felt uncomfortable. He grabbed Guo Xiang's hand and said, "Let's go!" They skied away together.

Guo Xiang was pulled for several feet by Yang Guo. Then she asked, "Brother, where's Reverend Yideng? When I heard him speak, it's as though he's right beside me."

Yang Guo heard her call him “Brother” twice and her voice was gentle and sweet, his heart shivered and thought, “I must never let her get entangled in the web of love. This girl is young and naïve and inexperienced, so it’s best we split up soon before there’s any trouble.” But they could not stop in such a desolate place and he could not let go of her hand now. Guo Xiang asked, “I’m asking you, didn’t you hear?”

Yang Guo said, “Reverend Yideng is in the northwest and is several li away from here. He can speak from far as though he’s nearby using the “Voice Transmitting Over 1000 Li” skill.”

Guo Xiang happily asked, “You know it too? Can you teach me? When we’re a thousand li apart I can use this skill to communicate with you, won’t that be great?”

Yang Guo laughed, “Although this is the “Voice Transmitting Over 1000 Li” skill, if you can only project your voice over several li, it would indeed be considered excellent. If you want to reach Reverend Yideng’s level, even with your intelligence you’ll only have mastered it when you have white hair.”

Guo Xiang heard that he was praising her for being intelligent, she was overjoyed and said, “How am I intelligent? If I were only 10% as intelligent as my mother, I’d be satisfied.”

Yang Guo’s heart trembled and he saw that her brows resembled Huang Rong’s, so he thought, “Among all the people I’ve met in my life, whether male or female, when it comes to intelligence none can compare to Aunt Guo. Could she really be Uncle and Aunt Guo’s daughter?” But he laughed nonchalantly and thought, “Is there really such a wonderful thing? If she’s really their daughter, Uncle Guo would never let her come out and wander around like this.” He asked, “Who’s your mother?”

Although Guo Xiang said that her parents were great heroes, now she was shy to admit that she was Guo Jing and Huang Rong’s daughter, so she laughed, “My mother is my mother. You wouldn’t know her anyway. Brother, between you and Yideng, whose skills are better?”

Yang Guo was almost a middle-aged man now and he'd experienced the agony of separation from Xiao Longnu, so his proud nature had waned with age. He said, "Reverend Yideng is a famous character in Wulin and his name is as well-known as the Peach Blossom Island. He was the Southern King among the Five Greats, how can I be compared to him?"

Guo Xiang said, "If you were born several decades earlier, then there would be Six Greats: East Heretic, West Poison, North Beggar, Central Divinity and the Eagle Hero. Ah, there's also Hero Guo and Madam Guo. So there would be Eight Greats."

Yang Guo could not help it anymore and asked, "You've met Hero Guo and Madam Guo before?"

Guo Xiang said, "Of course, they like me a lot. Do you know them personally? After we finish this business, we'll meet them together, OK?"

Yang Guo had already forgotten the incident in which Guo Fu hacked off his arm, but he could not stop hating Guo Fu for poisoning Xiao Longnu and causing their sixteen-year separation. He blandly said, "Next year, I might visit Hero Guo and Madam Guo, but I must meet my wife first, then I'll go with her." When he mentioned Xiao Longnu, he was extremely excited inside.

Guo Xiang suddenly felt his palm become hot and asked, "Your wife must be really beautiful and highly-skilled."

Yang Guo sighed, "There's no one else as beautiful as her on Earth. Hmm, I think she has already far surpassed me in terms of martial arts."

Guo Xiang was full of admiration and said, "Brother, you must take me to meet your wife. Can you promise me that?"

Yang Guo laughed, "Why not? She'll definitely like you a lot. When the time comes you can call me 'Brother'."

Guo Xiang was surprised and asked; "Why not now?" She stopped and her foot sank into the mud again. Yang Guo pulled

her out and skied another few meters. Then they saw a man standing some distance away in the snow. His white beard was flowing freely and he was wearing a loose grey robe. It was indeed Yideng. Yang Guo said in a clear voice, "Disciple Yang Guo greets the Reverend." He dragged Guo Xiang and ran up to him.

He bent his knees as soon as he came near the Reverend.

The place where Yideng stood was beyond the Black Dragon Marsh. Yideng was also very happy and quickly pulled the young man up. "Brother Yang," he said, "How have you been? I am delighted to see your skill has improved thus far."

As soon as he stood up, Yang Guo saw another monk lying on the ground behind the Reverend. The monk's face was sheet white and his eyes were closed; he looked like a corpse. After looking at him for a moment he recognized the monk as Ci'en. He was surprised and asked "What happened to Reverend Ci'en?"

Yideng heaved a heavy sigh. "He has been injured by an enemy and my efforts to help him were in vain," he said.

Yang Guo quickly checked Ci'en's pulse and found it was very weak. He knew that Ci'en would have been dead if he did not possess profound internal energy. "Reverend Ci'en has a very high level of martial arts. Your disciple is puzzled as to how could he be injured that badly?"

"For a long time he and I lived a secluded life in Hunan province," explained Yideng. "A while ago we heard that, because they were not successful in taking over Xiangyang, the Mongolians had turned their attention to the south. They attacked Da Li with the intention of using it as a stepping stone to attack the central plains from both north and south. Because he saw my concern about the safety of my homeland, Ci'en went out to investigate. Unexpectedly he met an enemy and was engaged in a battle for one whole day and night. As a result he suffered a heavy injury."

Yang Guo stomped his feet. With a sigh he said "Jinlun Fawang has come back to the central plains," he said.

"Big Brother, how did you know the enemy was Jinlun Fawang? Reverend Yideng did not say it was him," asked Guo Xiang.

"I guessed it was Jinlun Fawang because the Reverend said they were battling each other for one whole day and night," he answered. "From what the Reverend said, Ci'en was not injured by some kind of trickery and the number of people who can do that is only a handful. Among those people, Jinlun Fawang is the only one."

"Big Brother," Guo Xiang said, "Please find that man and avenge Senior Monk."

At that moment Ci'en slowly opened his eyes. He looked at Guo Xiang and shook his head. "What is it? You don't want revenge?" asked the girl. "Ha! You worry that Big Brother will lose?"

"Little Miss has guessed incorrectly," Yideng said. "My disciple has committed many crimes in the past. He had repented of his past sins and done so many good deeds to repay those sins. There is only one thing disturbing his heart. Without resolution he will die with regrets. He doesn't want revenge; he doesn't want his enemy's demise. All he wants is someone's forgiveness. Then he will close his eyes in peace."

"Does he want the forgiveness of that granny who lives in the middle of the marsh?" asked the girl. "That granny is so hardhearted. She won't easily forgive you if you offended her."

Yideng again heaved a heavy sigh. "That's true," he said. "We have camped out here for seven whole days and nights. She still has not responded!"

Yang Guo was surprised. He suddenly remembered the granny mentioned something about her child, whom she said was injured but nobody was willing to help. "Is this about the death of a child?" he asked.

Yideng slightly shivered. "So Brother Yang knows," he said.

"Disciple does not know the details," said Yang Guo. "I said that because the granny mentioned it." He proceeded by narrating the reason for his visit to the Black Dragon Marsh and his conversation with the granny.

"She was my wife, her name is Yinggu," said Yideng softly. "She has a very strong character ..." he sighed "If this situation persists, Ci'en won't be able to hold on."

Yang Guo sighed and sadly said, "Who has never done anything wrong? Whenever somebody repents, all could be forgotten. Yinggu is rather shortsighted."

Seeing Ci'en was nearing his end, Yang Guo's valiant character was stirred. "Reverend, by ignoring my meager ability, I would like to force her to come out," he said. "Will you allow me?"

Yideng thought for a moment, "Ci'en and I have come this far to ask Yinggu's forgiveness. We can't force her, but we have been here a long time without meeting her and looks like our effort will be in vain. If this Yang Guo has any ideas, we might as well try them. Worst case is we still cannot meet her." So finally he said, "If Brother Yang could persuade her to come out, I would be delighted. But in your efforts, I wish for you not to cause any trouble and worsen this already deep hatred."

Yang Guo nodded and took a handkerchief and tore it into four pieces. He put two pieces in Ci'en's ears and gave the other two to Guo Xiang; signaling her to put them in her ears. Guo Xiang understood and immediately did as she was told.

Yang Guo then exerted his internal energy and gathered his 'chi' in his 'dan tian'. [The 'dan tian' is somewhat below the navel and between the kidneys. It's somewhere in the centre of the cross-section of the body. All the 'chi' arises from this central point].

He bowed in front of Yideng and said, "Disciple will show off my lack of ability, I hope Reverend won't laugh at me."

Yideng clasped his hands and said, "Not many people in this world can match Brother Yang's skill. This old monk has long

wanted to see it.”

Yang Guo put his hand on his waist, looked up, and he shouted loud and long. The shout was loud and sharp, slowly becoming unbearable. It was like earth shattering thunderbolts. Even though her ears were stopped, Guo Xiang’s heart pounded and her face paled. Not too long after there came a sound like the waves of the tide, continuously crashing onto the shore. One after another, the next one was louder than the previous one.

“Big Brother, stop! I can’t take it any longer!” shouted Guo Xiang. But her cries were overcome by Yang Guo’s cry so that she could not even hear her own voice. She felt like her spirit was snatched out and her body was swaying. At that time she suddenly felt Yideng holding her hand and out of his hand came a warm energy flowing into her body. Guo Xiang understood Yideng was helping her with his profound internal energy. Therefore, she quickly exerted her own energy and calmed her perturbed heart. A moment later her heart was steadied and her mind cleared.

After the time needed to eat a bowl of rice Yang Guo’s voice had not weakened. On the contrary, the intensity was increased. Yideng was very impressed, because he had not achieved that level when he was Yang Guo’s age.

In the time it took to light a joss stick a black shadow came out of the Black Dragon Marsh; immediately Yang Guo shook his sleeve and stopped the roar.

“Emperor Duan,” a voice was heard. “You are too much! You forced me to come out. What do you want?”

“It wasn’t me. It was Brother Yang’s voice,” said Yideng.

While still speaking the shadow kept coming near and when it stopped, all could see that it was Yinggu.

She looked puzzled. “Is that true, that there is someone besides Emperor Duan who possesses internal energy that profound?” she asked in her heart. “Even though he is wearing a mask, I can

tell from his hair that he is only thirty-something. It's amazing for him to reach this level."

She was forced to come out of her lair by the loud roar. She realized that if she refused, the roar would get louder and she will be heavily injured, possibly her nervous system ruined. So even though she was irritated, she had to comply. Little did she know that the roar came out of Yang Guo's throat.

After calming herself she turned to Yang Guo and coldly said, "Take my fox. I admit defeat. But I want you to leave immediately." She lifted the fox by the scruff of its neck and gave it to Yang Guo.

"Hold a moment," Yang Guo said. "The fox can wait. Reverend Yideng wants to talk to you. Please listen to him."

Yinggu looked coldly at Yideng. "Very well, I await the Emperor's decree."

"Let bygones be bygones," said Yideng. "Why do you still use that term? Yinggu, do you know him?" He pointed to Ci'en who was still lying on the ground.

Ci'en was wearing a monk's robe. His face had changed much from the Mount Hua [Huashan] Sword Meet of 30 years ago. Yinggu looked at him for a minute and then said, "How would I know this monk?"

"Who hurt your son then?" Yideng asked.

The granny's body shuddered, her fair countenance turned red, and from red it turned back to white. "That scoundrel Qiu Qianren," she answered. "Even if he's turned into dirt I will still remember him."

"It has been decades yet you have not rid your heartache." Yideng sighed. "This man is none other than Qiu Qianren. You don't recognize his face any longer, but your heart is still full of hatred."

Yinggu leaped and stretched her fingers like claws, she was going to pierce Ci'en's breast. Before her hands reached their target, she looked at him again. That face only slightly resembled the Qiu Qianren that she knew. He was lying motionless, no different than a corpse. "If he really is Qiu Qianren, why did he want to see me?" she asked doubtfully.

"He is indeed Qiu Qianren," explained Yideng. "He repented his great and many sins, shaved his head and became my disciple. His Buddhist name is Ci'en."

The granny snorted. "Great sinners always think they can redeem their sins by becoming a monk," she said.

"You are wrong," said Yideng patiently. "Sin is sin. By becoming a monk he is still a sinner. But he is heavily injured and is dying. He remembered his sin toward you in the past. He knew he injured your child and his heart is troubled; if he doesn't see you, he won't die peacefully. Therefore, enduring his pain, we have come from thousands of li away to ask for your forgiveness."

The granny looked at Ci'en for a long time. Her eyes shone with unleashed hatred. Guo Xiang was really frightened. Slowly the granny lifted her hands up to hit Ci'en. Even though Guo Xiang was scared, her valiant heart prevailed. "Stop it!" she shouted. "He is heavily injured. It's not proper for you to hit him."

Yinggu coldly laughed. "Not proper?" she asked. "He murdered my child and made me suffer for tens of years. Right now - even though it is a bit late, I have a chance for revenge. Not proper? What do you mean 'not proper'?"

"He has repented and regretted his sins," said the girl. "Why do you insist?"

Yinggu looked up and laughed maniacally. "Child, don't talk rubbish!" she snapped. "What would you do if he killed your child?"

"I ... I ... I don't have a child," Guo Xiang stammered.

The granny made a noise with her nose. "What if he killed your husband, your lover ... your big brother? What would you do?" she asked again.

Guo Xiang blushed. "You talk rubbish," she said, "Where did my husband or my lover come from?"

Yinggu was seething with anger. She ignored the girl and lifted her hands again to hit her archenemy's head. Suddenly Ci'en sighed and opened his eyes. A smile formed on his lips. "Thank you Yinggu, for helping me."

The granny was stunned, her hands stopped mid-air. "Help you what?" she barked. But then she realized Ci'en's intention. She now knew that the monk was dying, he wanted it finished by her hands. 'An eye for an eye'... He would pay his old debt.

Yinggu then coldly laughed. "Hmm! How could you die that easy?" she said. "Now I don't want to kill you, yet I don't want to forgive you either!" That word left her mouth with such a cruelty that all who heard her shivered.

Yang Guo was certain that, as a monk, Reverend Yideng would not use force against his ex-concubine who was mad with anger. Guo Xiang was still too young to be regarded by the granny. He was the only one who could do something, anything. He thought for a moment and then said, "Senior Yinggu, I do not know the details of your enmity toward Ci'en. But I can tell from your words that you are a little bit too involved. Therefore, whether I want it or not, I'll have to intervene."

Yinggu was startled and looked at Yang Guo with flame in her eyes. She recalled her three failed attacks, and she recalled his magnificent roar. She realized her skill was not on par with the Eagle Hero, who, judging from his words, would resort to force against her. She also remembered her suffering. From anger she turned sad, and then sobbed uncontrollably.

Yang Guo and Guo Xiang, even Yideng, were perplexed; they didn't understand why the granny cried. A little while later she said, still sobbing: "You! You wanted to see me and I ignored you,

but you used force against me. But that person is not willing to see me and none of you care about it."

"Who?" asked Guo Xiang quickly, "Who doesn't want to see Senior? We can help you."

"You can only bully women," said Yinggu. "But you are afraid to meet a highly skilled pugilist."

"I am indeed useless," said the girl. "But with Reverend Yideng and Big Brother here, we are not afraid of anything."

After thinking for a while, Yinggu stood up. "If you can bring him to see and talk to me, I will do whatever you want me to do," she said. "You want a fox, you want me to make peace with Qiu Qianren, whatever."

"Big Brother," Guo Xiang turned to Yang Guo. "What do you think?"

"Whom do you want to see? Why is it so difficult?" asked Yang Guo.

"Ask him," said the granny, pointing to Reverend Yideng.

For an instant Guo Xiang thought the granny was blushing. She was surprised and asked in her heart, "She is this old, yet she is still shy?"

Realizing Yang Guo and Guo Xiang were looking at him, Reverend Yideng softly said, "It was the Old Urchin, Brother Zhou Botong."

"The Old Urchin?" Yang Guo asked. He was delighted. "I know the old man well. Very well, I will try to find him."

"My name is Yinggu," the granny said. "You have to tell him up front that the person who wants to see him is me. If not, he will run away as soon as he sees me; and if that happens, don't ever think of finding him again. If you succeed, I will do whatever you want me to."

Yideng was shaking his head. Yang Guo saw that, and realized what he'd got himself into. He guessed that there must be an unusual affair between Yinggu and the Old Urchin that made the old man unwilling to see her. But he also knew that Zhou Botong was capricious and loved to play. Yang Guo hoped to somehow trick him. And so he asked, "Where is the Old Urchin? Does Senior know?"

"If you walk for about two hundred li (around 100km) north, you will arrive at a valley. It's called the 'Hundred-Flower Valley' [bai hua gu]," explained the granny. "He hid himself in the valley, spending his days keeping bees."

Hearing the words 'keeping bees' Xiao Longnu immediately came into Yang Guo's mind. He remembered that sixteen years ago Zhou Botong had learned how to keep the Jade Bees from his wife. Because of this thought tears welled up in his eyes. "Very well," he said. "Junior will try to find him. Please wait here." Having said that he asked a clearer direction to the valley and immediately set foot. Guo Xiang followed behind him.

"You'd better stay here," whispered Yang Guo. "That grandpa has a very high martial arts skill, and he is kindhearted too. You can use this opportunity to ask him for a lesson or two. I believe you will gain tremendous advantage for the rest of your life."

"No, I want to come with you to see Zhou Botong," said the girl.

Yang Guo frowned. "Ah, you are wasting a golden opportunity," he said, regret in his voice.

"After we see Zhou Botong, I can go home alone if you have to go someplace else," said Guo Xiang, "But for now, let me come with you."

Yang Guo was touched. "Ah! If only I had a little sister like her, I wouldn't feel so lonely roaming Jianghu," he said in his heart. He smiled and said, "You didn't have any sleep last night. Aren't you tired?"

"I am, but I still want to come," she answered.

“Very well,” said Yang Guo, grabbing her hand. Utilizing their lightness kungfu they ran to the north.

With Yang Guo pulling her along, Guo Xiang felt she could run faster without using too much energy. “If only I could run this fast without your help,” she said, laughing.

“Your kungfu base is excellent. If you keep training, you will reach this level someday,” said Yang Guo. Suddenly he looked up and shouted. The girl was startled, but then she understood. He was calling his bird. “Brother Eagle,” Yang Guo said, “We need to go north for some business. You’d better come along.” Whether the bird understood his words or not he chirped and followed behind them.

About one li later the eagle ran faster and even with Yang Guo pulling her, Guo Xiang could not keep up. The eagle lost its patience. He bent his knees to make his body shorter. Yang Guo chuckled and said, “Brother Eagle wants to carry you. Say ‘thank you’ to him.”

Guo Xiang did not dare to be disrespectful toward the Divine Eagle. She bowed in reverence and then mounted the bird’s back. The eagle immediately stretched his legs and ran like the wind; Guo Xiang felt like the trees along the way, were dancing past them. Yang Guo exerted his energy and ran alongside them. He talked and told Guo Xiang what he knew about the places they were passing. The girl was ecstatic! She had never experience this much fun. She wished in her heart the eagle would not run too fast so that she could enjoy the ride longer.

About midday they had run for two hundred li. By following Yinggu’s direction they entered a path way between two hills. Beyond this path they found a very beautiful valley. It was beautiful because it was full of colorful flowers. They slowed down and walked leisurely. In between the flower bushes they could see ponds with water clear as the sky. They felt like the place was out of this world.

Guo Xiang clapped her hands and exclaimed, "The Old Urchin is so lucky. How could he find a place this beautiful? Big Brother, how could this place be so pretty?"

"This place is facing south, so the mountains act as a barrier to the cold north wind," explained Yang Guo. "Besides, I think there are sulfur or other mineral springs underground, and that is why the ground is warmer so spring comes early. While other places are still covered with snow, the flowers are already blooming here."

Guo Xiang slid down from the eagle's back and said, "Brother Eagle, many thanks to you." Then she walked side-by-side with Yang Guo entering the valley. After a few turns they saw a couple of stone walls on each side of the path, with three pine trees in between, forming two natural gates. As soon as they came near the gates, they heard buzzing sounds and saw thousands of Jade Bees flying around amidst the trees and flowers.

Yang Guo knew Zhou Botong must be around, so he called, "Old Urchin! Your younger brother Yang Guo and little sister have come to visit you and play."

If we look at the proper level, Yang Guo was actually three levels below the old man. He should have called 'Great Grand Martial Master', but he knew that the old man did not care much about 'propriety' and might not like to be called 'Great Grand Martial Master'; therefore, he called him 'Old Urchin'.

A moment later an old man came out from one of the gates. Yang Guo was startled. He had not seen Zhou Botong for more than ten years. He thought he would see an old man with white hair and beard. Contrary to his thought, Zhou Botong's face had not changed a bit, and his hair and beard had more black than white. In short, Yang Guo saw a younger Zhou Botong!

As soon as he saw Yang Guo, the old man laughed heartily. "Brother Yang, what business do you have with me? Aha! You are wearing a mask to scare me off?" Having said that his hand moved toward Yang Guo's left side to snatch his mask. Yang Guo

lifted up his right shoulder a little bit and slanted his head to the left. Zhou Botong's attack fell to an empty space. The old man was surprised, but he laughed and shouted, "Little Brother! Good! You are really good! I did not reach your level when I was your age."

In that short encounter both experts had exchanged their skills. Zhou Botong's snatch, while it looked like an ordinary snatch, had actually blocked Yang Guo's movement. Even if he were to leap back, he shouldn't be able to elude that attack. If it were not Yang Guo, the opponent would parry the attack with another attack. But Yang Guo had used a more sophisticated move. When he lifted his right shoulder up, his right sleeve made a move like it was going to attack Zhou Botong's chest. As an expert Zhou Botong could see the move and readied himself to fend off the attack. Because his concentration was now split, his snatching power was reduced so Yang Guo was able to neutralize Zhou's snatching by merely slanting his head a little bit. Guo Xiang was inexperienced; she could not see the exchange between these two experts. But she was delighted to hear the old man praising her big brother. "Grandpa Zhou," she said, "Tell me, is your skill higher now than when you were younger, or the other way around?"

"When I was young, my hairs were white, but now my hairs are black," he answered, grinning. "Of course my skill is much higher now than when I was younger."

"If you can't beat my big brother now, how you could beat him then?" said the girl.

Zhou Botong was not offended, he laughed and said, "Little girl, don't speak rubbish!" Suddenly his hands flew toward Guo Xiang's back and waist. He lifted her up to the air, spun her around, threw her up in the air, held her back and slowly put her back on the ground.

His mischievousness had angered the Divine Eagle. Suddenly the eagle swept at Zhou Botong with its wings. Zhou Botong saw the wings' attack and said to himself: "Let me try this winged beast's

strength.” He exerted his energy and fended off with both hands. Crash! Two formidable forces collided. The old man was still standing and the eagle’s wings passed his side. The eagle was about to attack again when Yang Guo suddenly shouted, “Brother Eagle, don’t be rude! We are in the presence of a highly skilled senior.”

The eagle halted his attack and stood proudly still. “His strength is indeed formidable, no wonder he is so arrogant,” said the Old Urchin, laughing heartily.

“Brother Eagle is more than a hundred years old. He is much older than you are,” said Yang Guo. “Uh, Old Urchin, how did you become young again and your hairs turned black?”

The old man laughed heartily. “My hairs and beard have their own will; I cannot control them,” he said. “From black they turned white, and now turned back to black again.”

Guo Xiang giggled hearing his foolhardy answer. “Old Urchin, I think you are going to turn to a young boy,” she said. “After you shrink to a young boy then people will pat your head and call you ‘little brother’. It will be fun!”

Hearing that the old man was worried and he stood staring blankly. Actually, there were a couple of real reasons behind this change of hair color. First, he was always happy, his body was healthy, and his internal energy was profound. Second, he ate a lot of energy-booster foods like Poria mushroom filaments [Fu Ling], Jade Bee’s honey, and the like. But probably the main reason was simply because his body was different from average people; even though his age was close to a hundred, he was not getting weaker, but on the contrary, he was getting stronger.

Listening to their conversation Yang Guo had an idea. “Brother Zhou,” he said. “If you agree to see someone, I guarantee you won’t get smaller.”

“Who...Who?” he asked hastily.

"Before I tell you, you have to promise me one thing," Yang Guo answered, "You have to promise you won't run away as soon as I mention this person's name."

The Old Urchin Zhou Botong was capricious and naïve, but he was not stupid. If he were, how could he reach such a high level in the martial realms? Therefore, as soon as he heard what Yang Guo said, he deduced correctly. "In this whole wide world there are two people I do not dare to see," he said. "The first one is Emperor Duan; the other is Concubine Yinggu. Other than these two, I am not afraid of anybody else."

"Looks like I'll have to provoke him," Yang Guo thought. So he said, "You do not dare to see them because you were defeated at their hands."

"No, it's not like that," the old man contradicted. "Old Urchin sinned against them; that was why I don't have face to see them."

Yang Guo was surprised. Now he understood why the old man acted like he did. Yang Guo tried approaching from a different direction. "They are in grave danger and their lives are threatened," he said. "Do you have the heart not to do anything?"

Zhou Botong was shocked. He loved and respected Yideng and Yinggu very much. If they were in trouble, he wouldn't hesitate to help up to the point of sacrificing his own life. However, he saw Guo Xiang was smiling, and her countenance did not show any sorrow. He realized Yang Guo's trick and laughed heartily. "Are you trying to trick me?" he asked. "Emperor Duan has a very high level of martial arts. How could he be in grave danger? Even if he is facing a formidable enemy and he lost, do you think I could win?"

Yang Guo didn't know what to do. "All right, let me just tell you the truth," he said. "Yinggu has been thinking about you, she wants to see you and talk with you."

The old man's face changed abruptly. "Brother Yang!" he snapped. "If you mention that name one more time, you'll have to leave "bai hua gu". Don't blame me if I don't make an exception."

Even though he had been through a lot of things, Yang Guo was still a proud man. He waved his sleeve and with a loud voice said, "Brother Zhou, I don't think you'll easily achieve your desire to drive me out of this valley."

"Huh! Huh! Do you want to fight with me?" asked the old man.

"Yes, I want to ask a lesson or two from you," he answered. "Let us make a bet: if I lose, I will leave this valley without further ado. But if you lose, you'll have to see Yinggu."

"No! Can't be!" shouted the Old Urchin. "First, how could I lose to a kid? Second, if I did, I still don't want to see Concubine Liu."

"Aren't you ashamed?" asked Yang Guo irritated. "If you win, you are free not to see her, but if you lose, you still don't want to see her, what kind of bet is that?"

"Just shut your mouth up!" snapped the old man. "I don't want to see her, I am not going too. Protect yourself!"

This time the Eagle Hero was really dumbfounded. He could not be persuaded, he could not be forced. If they really fight, Yang Guo didn't have any confidence of victory. He stood there blankly, uncertain of what to do.

As we know, Zhou Botong was crazy about martial arts. Even when he lived alone at the "Hundred-Flower Valley" he trained everyday. He always wanted to find a sparring partner; however, with his high level of martial arts, where could he find a suitable match? Therefore, seeing Yang Guo was willing to spar with him, he was itchy to start the fight. Without wasting a single moment Zhou Botong cried, "Watch out!" and started the fight with his "Vacant Fist". Yang Guo parried with a palm but felt there was something wrong with the power of the fist; it seemed as if it wasn't there. He considered using soft palms as a response but

decided against it, as it would be too risky so he used hard palms even though it wouldn't match. He used the palm techniques that he developed over the years against the tide's waves. Three stances later, flower petals were flying around everywhere and after another three, branches from trees fell. At first Yang Guo was worried that Zhou would not be able to take his fierce and overbearing palm because of his advanced age. He withdrew the power from his palm as soon as he sent it out, but after six stances, Yang Guo knew Zhou's internal energy was very profound and so did not hold anything back. The "Vacant Fist's" ingenuity was above the martial arts that he was using.

"Good! You are very good!" shouted Zhou Botong. "This is a match I have always wanted."

The perimeter of their forces was getting larger as the fight progressed, which forced Guo Xiang to step back. The eagle stayed close to Yang Guo, protecting its breast with its left wing while the right wing was a little bit open. The eagle understood the fierceness of this match and it never took its piercing gaze from Yang Guo, ready to step in if Yang Guo had any trouble.

After a while, Zhou had used all seventy-two stances of his "Vacant Fist". He had the advantage of better technique but his internal energy could not compare with the overbearing and boundless force of Yang Guo. With eyes open wide Guo Xiang watched these two people exchanging blows. She knew they weren't fighting as enemies; still, a fight between two highly skilled martial artists was very unpredictable. The slightest mistake could mean death. Cold sweat poured out of her body.

After seeing his "Vacant Fist" could do nothing to Yang Guo, he secretly praised him and then suddenly changed stances and used his left-right technique to fight. His left and right hands used different fist techniques, so that suddenly, Yang Guo was fighting against two Zhou Botongs.

Yang Guo was already at a disadvantage when it was one hand versus two, now it became even more so. One time, when Xiao Longnu fought Jinlun Fawang, she had just learned the "Dividing

Ones Mind" skill from Zhou. When the couple met again, Yang Guo had lost his right arm. Xiao Longnu was afraid she might make him sad, so she did not say anything about the technique. Yang Guo was slightly alarmed and could only increase the power in his palm and used his sleeve to take some of the attacks.

As somebody who had trained in martial arts since she was little, Guo Xiang did not understand the fist techniques being exchanged, but she could see who had gained the upper hand and who was having difficulty. She was flustered. Then Guo Xiang remembered her father's lesson on the 'Dividing Ones Mind" skill, which he demonstrated before Guo Polu and herself. She saw what Zhou Botong was doing and it looked to her he was using her father's skill. She wasn't sure whether her father learned the skill from this old man, or the other way around. Anyway, she saw an opportunity to give Yang Guo a hand, so she shouted, "Old Urchin! Stop! Not fair! Big Brother does not want to fight you anymore!"

Surprised, Zhou Botong leaped back. "Why not fair?" he snapped. "You stole that skill from my father and used it against Big Brother," she answered. "Aren't you ashamed?"

After hearing the young girl called Yang Gou 'Big Brother' naturally Zhou Botong thought she was Yang Guo's younger sibling. And because he did not know Yang Guo's father, he only laughed and said, "This skill was my own invention. How could you say I stole it from your father?"

"Fine," said the young Miss. "Even if what you said was true, you still used two arms, while Big Brother only has one. Is that fair? If my Big Brother had two arms, you would've been beaten a long time ago."

"What you said is true," the old man confessed. "But I am sure that even if he had two arms; he still could not use this skill of mine." Then he laughed jovially.

Guo Xiang grunted. "Shame on you!" she mocked, "You just said that because you know Big Brother's arm cannot re-grow. If you

are a valiant man (ying xiong), you wouldn't take any advantage of your opponent's disability."

"Fine... In that case I am going to use only a one fist technique," said the old man.

Guo Xiang stuck out her tongue. "Still shame on you, still unfair, because you use two arms against Big Brother's one," she snickered.

"Darn it!" shouted the old man, annoyed. "What should I do then? Shall I ask a woman to chop off one of my arms?"

Guo Xiang was startled, "Which woman had chopped off Big Brother's arm?" she wondered in her heart. Then she smiled and said, "It's OK then. You don't have to chop off your arm. It would be fair if you just tie up one arm and fight Big Brother using only the other one."

The Old Urchin laughed a big laugh. He thought that this way of fighting would be fun. Besides, he thought that he wouldn't necessarily lose even if he is using a single arm. So he placed his right hand in his belt prepared to fight. He said, "Come now! This way you will not regret it even if you lose."

When Zhou Botong and Guo Xiang were having their debate, Yang Guo didn't say anything. He was never afraid others would mock him because of his disability. On the contrary, he was proud because with only one arm he could beat anybody. Therefore, he was slightly miffed when he saw Zhou Botong do this because he felt he was looking down on him. "Old Urchin!" he said, "By doing that you are looking down on me. Aren't you thinking that a one-armed Yang Guo couldn't beat you? Huh! If I lose, I would immediately ..." Lashing his anger out, he was going to say that he would immediately kill himself right then and there. But suddenly he remembered his upcoming rendezvous with Xiao Longnu. He stopped before finishing his sentence.

Guo Xiang regretted her words. She was childishly thinking that she was doing Yang Guo some good. She did not remember that Yang Guo was a Chivalrous Hero (Da Xia), therefore, he would not

want anybody to look down on him. Quickly she approached Yang Guo and said, "Big Brother, my mistake ..." and then she came to the old man and took his arm out of the belt. She said, "Old Urchin, with his single arm Big Brother will defeat you. If you don't believe me, go ahead and try."

Without waiting for his answer, Yang Guo leaped and chopped out a left palm. Zhou replied with a left fist and didn't use his right arm. He felt it was unfair to use both arms.

Twenty stances passed. Yang Guo was upset since even with one arm the Old Urchin was not easy to defeat. The 'yang'ness [from yin-yang: yin - soft, cold, yang - hard, hot] in Zhou's fist and palms gradually surfaced. This type of energy was opposite to Zhou Botong's 'yin' energy of the "Vacant Fist" technique. Yang Guo noticed the change and suddenly recognized the "Demon Subduing Fist" of the "Nine Yin Manual" in the tomb. Yang Guo shouted, "What's so special about the 'Demon Subduing Fist'? Use two hands and take my 'Melancholic Sad Palms [An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang]."

Zhou was shocked; one, Yang Guo actually knew what technique he was using and two, what in the world was 'An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang'? Zhou was knowledgeable in the martial arts from the various sects of the world but he had never heard of this martial art before. He looked at Yang Guo and saw him with his arm bent, his eyes seemingly far away. His legs seemed to float and his front was completely open - his form contradicted martial arts norms. Zhou went forward to test him out and threw a fist towards Yang Guo's stomach.

He was afraid that he would hurt his opponent so he only put thirty percent power in his fist. Just as his fist was about to make contact, Yang Guo's stomach and chest contracted and then extended outwards. Zhou leapt back in shock - skilled fighters contracting their bodies to avoid attacks was fairly normal but he has never seen someone use their chest and stomach to actually attack someone. He was utterly surprised and shouted, "Uh, what kind of technique was that?"

"This was An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang's thirteenth stance, 'Muscles Jumping with the Frightened Heart' [Xin Jing Rou Tiao]," came the answer.

"Huh? I've never...never heard of such technique before," he said.

"Of course you haven't," said Yang Guo, "I developed this 'An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang' myself. This technique has seventeen stances."

As we remember, after being separated from Xiao Longnu at the 'Broken Heart Cliff', with the eagle's encouragement, he trained against the tide's waves. Apart from gradually strengthening his internal energy, he practiced no new martial arts. He couldn't forget his wife and as time passed, he was more and more depressed from loneliness. One day while walking by the sea, out of boredom he started to throw a few fists and kicks about. By now, his internal energy was at a very high level - anything he threw out contained great power. One of his light palms landed on a turtle's back and smashed its shell. From then on, he developed a complete set of palm techniques that were completely different from conventional martial arts. The palms relied on internal energy and not on complicated fist techniques.

Yang Guo had learned various first class martial arts from several experts since his childhood. From the Quanzhen, he learned the purest nei-gong techniques. From Xiao Longnu, he learned the "Jade Maiden Sword and Palm" techniques. From the manual inscribed on the Ancient Tomb's walls, he learned the "Nine Yin Manual". From his adopted father, Ouyang Feng, he inherited the 'Toad Stance' and the 'Reversing Blood Flow' techniques. From Hong Qigong he got the 'Dog Beating Stick', from Huang Yaoshi he received the "Divine Flicking Finger" and "Jade Flute Swordplay". Except for the "Solitary Yang Finger" from the Southern Emperor, it could be said that he had mastered the specialty of the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity. By analyzing and combining these various techniques, it was not too difficult for him to create a brand new fist technique.

Because he had one arm, he did not try to achieve victory with variations in stances but instead he deliberately chose to go against martial arts norms. Also, the names of this palm technique came from a line in one of Jiang Yan's works (a poet of the Southern Dynasties). This was the first time that the palms have met such a strong opponent as Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong became even more excited when he heard this was a palm that Yang Guo had invented himself and said, "Good! I want to see this brand new technique." He continued to fight – with one hand. Yang Guo faced the sky as if he didn't even notice that Zhou was there and arched a palm towards his face and then downwards. The palm's power dispersed all around.

Zhou knew that there was no way to avoid the palm's power and sent out his palm to meet it. The palms collided and Zhou wobbled; he felt his chest tighten – his martial arts were not weaker than his opponent's but palm for palm, he could not compete with Yang Guo's heavy and overbearing palm. "Good!" he praised, "What was that stance?"

"It was 'Causing One to Worry' or 'Overbearing Sadness' [Gei Ren Yau Tien]." Yang Guo called out, "Watch out! The next stance is 'Out of Nothing Came Something' [Wu Zhong Sheng You]."

The Old Urchin laughed heartily, "Interesting! Very interesting!" he shouted, "Kid, how did you come up with those weird names?"

Yang Guo hung his arm down in a completely unprepared form. As soon as Zhou's fist came near him, Yang Guo suddenly moved everything; his left palm, right sleeve, kicks, head, butt, even his chest, back, stomach and waist attacked – they all contained a level of energy capable of injuring an opponent.

Zhou could never predict a move such as this. In a flash, over ten different stances came at him at once. 'Out of Nothing' was one stance but it contained tens of variations within. Even someone with martial arts as high as Zhou's, he was forced to step back. In this situation, he couldn't help but also use his right arm to fend off the attack. He had to use all his efforts to block this attack,

counterattacking never came into the equation. Nevertheless, he managed to block all the attacks and quickly leapt back in case of some more weird moves.

“Old Master Zhou!” cried Guo Xiang, “Two arms are not enough! You need three!” The old man laughed heartily and repeatedly nodded his head as a very high compliment to Yang Guo.

Yang Guo was impressed that Zhou was able to block all these profound sudden attacks and called out the next stance, “Watch this next stance: ‘Dragging Mud with Water’ [Tuo Ni Dai Shui].”

Both the old man and the young girl cheered, “Very nice! That sounds very nice!” he shouted.

“Don’t you praise me just yet. Take this one!” Yang Guo countered. His right sleeve flowed like water and his left palm slid out heavily like flowing mud and sand.

Zhou recalled something that his apprentice brother Wong Zhongyang told him about Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi had a palm technique he invented called the ‘Palms of the Five Elements’, the five elements were contained within the palms. Right now, Yang Guo’s right sleeve was like North’s water and his left palm was like Central’s earth, light and swift along with heavy and fierce. Zhou did not dare delay and immediately used the ‘Vacant Fist’ with his left hand and the ‘Demon Subduing Fist’ with his right; light against light, heavy against heavy. After the two attacks came together, they both shouted and moved back a couple of steps.

After those four stances, they both had great respect for each other. Yang Guo stood and stared blankly for a moment. He understood that Zhou was the strongest opponent his palms had ever met and if there was going to be a victor; an internal energy competition would be needed. If they did that, there was a possibility that one or maybe both of them would be heavily injured or even die – something he was not prepared to do after what happened to Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng. Why would he do something like that to such a benevolent man as Zhou

Botong? He swallowed his pride and bowed to him saying, "Senior Zhou, I admit defeat." He then turned to Guo Xiang and said, "Little Sister, we failed to invite Senior Zhou. Let us leave!"

"Hold it! Hold it!" shouted the old man. "Didn't you say the 'An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang' has seventeen stances? You've just used four of them, what about the other thirteen?"

"There is no enmity between us," said Yang Guo. "Why should we fight to death? Junior admits defeat."

Zhou Botong shook his head, "Not right! Not right!" he said, "You have not lost yet, and I haven't won. Don't ever think of leaving this valley before you show me all the palms."

Yang Guo chuckled, "Senior, you act strange. I was trying to invite you to come with us, and now that I failed, I just want to leave. Why would you hold me here?"

Zhou Botong – who was crazy about martial arts, was baffled. "Good Brother," he begged, "How could I guess the thirteen stances of the 'An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang'? I hope you'll have pity on this old man. Please show me, I am willing to trade with any skill of your fancy."

An idea clicked on Yang Guo's head. "It's not difficult to learn my technique," he said, "I don't want anything in return; as long as you come with us to see Yinggu."

The old man wrinkled his eyebrows and said, "I won't see her even if you chop off my head."

"In that case, let me bid you farewell," said Yang Guo, turning his body around.

Suddenly Zhou leaped to block Yang Guo's path and threw out a fist. "Good Brother, please show me just one more stance," he begged. Yang Guo defended using Quanzhen martial arts. Zhou changed his fist techniques but Yang Guo kept to using Quanzhen palm techniques and Nine Yin martial arts to defend.

The 'Nine Yin Manual' contained all kinds of martial arts techniques; therefore, it was more than enough for Yang Guo to defend himself. If Yang Guo wanted to defeat Zhou Botong, it would be no easy task; but now that he's just concentrating on defending, Zhou was not able to do anything to him. No matter what kind of ruses or tricks that Zhou tried, Yang Guo did not fall for any of them. He did not use any new stances of his "Melancholic Sad Palms" but he repeated the four stances of his 'Melancholic Sad Palms' that he had previously used with different variations to agitate Zhou Botong even more.

The two fought for almost an hour. Zhou Botong was an old man, his vigor had been depleted and his internal energy was no longer the same as it was at the start of the fight. He knew now it would be difficult to get Yang Guo to use a new palm from his 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang' so he leapt back and begged Yang Guo, "All right! All right! I will kowtow eight times and take you as my master. Master Yang, disciple Zhou Botong kowtows to you!" And he really kowtowed to Yang Guo!

Yang Guo chuckled again, "How could I be your master? Nevertheless, it's suitable for me to tell you the names of the rest of the stances."

"Good! Aw ...! You are so nice," said the old man, ecstatic.

"Big Brother, don't tell him unless he is willing to come with us," said Guo Xiang.

Yang Guo smiled, "It's OK. He will only hear the names."

"Right! What's the problem if I only hear the names?" said the old man hastily.

Yang Guo went over to a big tree and sat underneath it. "Brother Zhou, hear this: the other stances are 'Wandering The Valley Of Emptiness' [Pai Huai Kong Gu], 'Strong Desire Weak Strength' [Li Bu Cong Xin] 'Good For Nothing' [Xing Shi Zou Rou] 'Disturbing Oneself - Confused Fool' [Yong Ren Zi Rao] 'Walking Upside Down - Perverse Action' [Dao Xing Ni Shi]..."

Listening to this Guo Xiang was howling with laughter while rolling around holding her stomach; but Zhou Botong listened attentively. Yang Guo paused and smiled seeing Guo Xiang's behavior, then continued, "'Restless Thought' [Fei Qin Wang Shi], 'A Lone Form Is A Mere Shadow' [Gu Xing Zhi Ying] 'Drink To Swallow One's Hatred – Cherishes Hatred Suppresses Sobs' [Yin Hen Tun Sheng] 'Six Disturbed Spirits/Ghosts' [Liu Shen Bu An] 'Entering A Dead End' [Qiong Tu Mo Lu], 'Face Without Feeling' [Mian Wu Ren Se], 'Longing For Emptiness' [Xiang Ru Fei Fei], 'Stupid As A Wooden Chicken [Dai Ru Mu Ji]."

The old man only scratched his head and grinned. After acting bewildered for a while he finally said, "Strange ...! Wonderful ...! Take "Face Without Feeling" for instance, how would you use that to defeat an enemy?"

"That stance contains not only one but numerous variations," explained Yang Guo. "Somebody who uses the stance has to be able to change his countenance, from upset to happy. The opponent will be affected by that change. We look sad, he would be sad, we look happy, he would follow. This one stance can defeat the enemy by manipulating their emotions."

"Is that stance based on the "Soul Altering Spell" from the 'Nine Yin Manual'?" asked Zhou Botong.

"That's right," answered Yang Guo.

"What about 'Walking Upside Down'?" asked the Old Urchin.

Yang Guo immediately turned upside down and threw a punch. "This is one of the thirty seven variations of the stance."

Zhou Botong nodded his head. "I know," he said, "This is from Ouyang Feng."

"Right again," Yang Guo leaped back up, "but in my stance there are 'bends among the straights', the 'bends' and 'straights' work together."

"What does it mean?" asked the old man.

“That is a secret, I can’t tell you.”

The old man opened his mouth, but then closed it again without saying anything. He knew, begging wouldn’t do him any good. He scratched his head and looked so disappointed.

Seeing him like that, Guo Xiang’s heart melted. She approached him and softly said, “Senior Zhou, why don’t you want to see Yinggu? I bet Big Brother would be willing to teach you his skill.”

Zhou Botong sadly sighed. “About Yinggu, it was due to my own foolishness when I was young,” he said. “It is an embarrassing story.”

“Why would you be embarrassed?” asked the young miss. “If you have something in your heart, better to talk it out than keep it to yourself. Every time I’ve done something wrong, I always admit it to my parents. True, they would scold me, but then that would it. If I lied, even though I did not get any scolding, I felt depressed. This time I disobeyed them by coming here without their permission. My mother will scold me for sure, but I will tell her the truth.”

This young girl’s honest words touched the old man’s heart. He glanced at Yang Guo and softly said, “Very well, I will tell you what I did. Only please do not laugh in my face!”

“Who would mock you?” said Guo Xiang. She held the old man’s arm, leaned on him and continued, “You can always tell the story like it happened to other people, or you could pretend it was an ancient lore. Afterward, I will also tell you my mischief.”

Zhou Botong looked at her innocent face, smiled and asked, “You have done mischief?”

“You think I can’t be naughty?” Guo Xiang countered.

“Well then,” Zhou Botong said, “Let me hear what you did first.”

“I have done much mischief. Let’s see ... a soldier was on guard duty one night on the city wall; and he fell asleep. Father had him arrested and was going to have him beheaded the next

morning. I saw him and my heart melted. I quietly let him go around midnight, and told him to run away as fast as he can. Father was furious. He found out it was my doing and he beat me up. Another time I saw a poor peasant girl looking longingly at my mother's golden bracelet. I stole it and gave it to that poor girl. Afterward Mother looked for it everywhere but could not find it. I laughed secretly, but did not say anything. Finally I told her the truth. She was not mad at me, but my elder sister insisted that I get the bracelet back from the girl."

Zhou Botong sighed heavily, "What you did is incomparable to what I've done." Then, with embarrassment in his voice, he told how in his youth he tagged along his martial brother Wang Chongyang visiting the Emperor Duan. He told them how Concubine Liu had learned martial arts from him; how he secretly made love to her; how the Concubine had always wanted to see him but he kept avoiding her, and how - because of anger the Emperor abdicated his throne and became a monk.

Guo Xiang and Yang Guo listened attentively. After the old man finished, timidly she asked, "Besides Concubine Liu, did the Emperor have any other wives or concubines?"

"Even though he was incomparable to the Song Emperor, he had three palaces, six courtyards and dozens of other women: his queen and other concubines," he answered.

"There! You see?" said the girl, "Emperor Duan had many other women, but you, you didn't have a single woman. Therefore, as a friend, he could give Concubine Liu to you."

Yang Guo nodded his head and thought, "This girl does not adhere strictly to common etiquette and tradition. Truly she is a girl after my own heart."

"At that time Emperor Duan said the same thing," the old man said. "But I know that he loved Concubine Liu very much. Because of this scandal he became a monk. This proves how deeply I have offended him."

Listening to this, Yang Guo intervened, "Reverend Yideng became a monk because he thought he sinned against you and not because you sinned against him. Don't you know that?"

"What did he do?" Zhou Botong wondered.

"Well, there was a man who injured your son and he refused to help him," Yang Guo answered.

For all these long years Zhou Botong had never known that Yinggu bore him a son. "My ... my son?" he stammered.

"I don't know the details," answered Yang Guo, "I heard this from Reverend Yideng." He immediately narrated what he heard at the Black Dragon Marsh.

Zhou Botong was spellbound. He stood silently, recalling how Yinggu had suffered for many-many years. A feeling of love, compassion and guilt slowly crept into his heart.

Yang Guo noticed this old man's behavior; he said in his heart, "This Senior is a compassionate man. His character is almost the same as mine. For a man like this, how could I withhold the seventeen stances of 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang'?" Having had this thought he then said, "Senior Zhou, let me show you the entire 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang'. I beg you to give me some pointers." And then he demonstrated all the stances of 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang' except the 'Face Without Feeling', because he was wearing a mask. As a highly skilled martial artist - plus a profound knowledge of the "Nine Yin Manual", Zhou Botong was immediately able to understand the stances. The only two he had some difficulty with were "Dead Man Walking" and "Entering a Dead End". Yang Guo explained several times, but he still could not grasp the essence of the stances. "Senior Zhou," Yang Guo finally said, "I was separated from my wife fifteen years ago. Day and night I kept thinking about her. In agony I created these two stances. Senior is a carefree man; you have never known suffering in your life. No wonder you cannot grasp the essence of the stances."

“Ah! How did you get separated from your wife?” the old man was surprised. “She was beautiful and kind hearted. No wonder you cannot forget her.”

Yang Guo did not want to mention Guo Fu, so he told him how his wife was gravely injured, and was taken by the ‘Divine Nun of the South Sea’ as her disciple, and how he had to wait for sixteen years before they could see each other again. He also mentioned how he prayed everyday for his wife’s safety. Finally he said, “I just want to see her one more time. Afterward, I don’t care if I will have to die. I will die a satisfied man.”

Listening to Yang Guo, Guo Xiang was saddened and tears flowed down her cheeks. “Oh God, let them see each other again,” she said with a trembling voice.

Since his separation from his wife, this was the first time somebody had prayed for him earnestly. He was so touched and vowed not to forget her kindness. He heaved a sigh and bowed to Zhou Botong. “Senior Zhou, I bid you farewell.” He took Guo Xiang’s hand and left.

After only a few steps Guo Xiang looked back and said, “Senior Zhou, did you see that? Big Brother is thinking about his wife all the time. Yinggu is the same. She is thinking about you. Do you have the heart not to see her?”

Zhou Botong was startled and his countenance paled.

“Little Sister, let it go,” Yang Guo whispered. “Everybody has their own thoughts; we have no right to tell him what to do.” Slowly they left the “Hundred Flower Valley”. Their hearts were heavy.

“Big Brother,” Guo Xiang asked, “Are you going to be sad if I ask you about your wife?”

“No,” he answered, “We are going to see each other in a few months.”

“How did you meet her?” asked Guo Xiang.

Yang Guo then told her his life story. How as an orphan he was bullied by the Quanzhen priests, how he ran away to the Ancient Tomb and met Xiao Longnu, and how after several years of living together they fell in love with each other, and finally how they got separated at the 'Broken Heart Cliff'.

Guo Xiang was listening with a sad heart. After Yang Guo finished his story, she said earnestly, "I pray to Heaven that you will meet her safely."

"Thank you, thank you very much!" Yang Guo said. "I will not forget your prayer. I will let my wife know about your loving kindness toward us."

"Every year, right on my birthday, Mother will pray to Heaven for our safety," Guo Xiang continued. "That day she always tells me to make three wishes. Oftentimes I could not figure out what to wish even after thinking about it for half a day. But this year, I already know what to wish. I will wish that Big Brother will meet your lovely wife much earlier."

"And the other two wishes?" asked Yang Guo.

Guo Xiang laughed, "That's a secret. I cannot tell you."

A moment later they heard somebody calling behind them, "Brother Yang, wait! Brother Yang, wait for me!" It was Zhou Botong.

Yang Guo was overjoyed! Quickly he turned his head and saw the old man coming to them with blinding speed. "Brother Yang!" he shouted, "I carefully thought it out. Take me to see Yinggu."

"Now, that is the proper thing to do," Guo Xiang was so touched. "You don't have any idea how great her suffering was."

"After you left, I kept thinking about what Brother Yang said," explained the old man. "I won't be able to sleep for the rest of my life unless I see her. I have an important question I'd like to ask her."

Zhou Botong wanted to continue the journey overnight if it were up to him. But Guo Xiang was too tired, so he reluctantly agreed to stop and rest underneath a big tree. Very early the next morning they started walking again. They arrived at the Black Dragon Marsh before noon.

Seeing that Yang Guo was successful in bringing Zhou Botong along, Yideng and Yinggu's delight was indescribable. From afar Zhou Botong had already shouted his question, "Yinggu, how many cowlicks were there on our son's head?"

Yinggu was surprised. Not in her wildest dream did she think that Zhou's first question would be a seemingly meaningless one like that. But she answered anyway, "Two."

"Aha! Same as me!" cried the old man. "That kid must be very smart." He paused a moment and then regretfully said, "Too bad he died!"

Yinggu was happy and sad at the same time, she sobbed uncontrollably. The old man playfully punched her on the waist and said, "There, don't cry, don't cry ..." He turned his head toward Yideng and said, "Emperor Duan, I seduced your wife, and you did not help my child. It's a draw. Nobody owes anybody anything. Let us forget the past."

"This is the man who injured your son," Yideng said, pointing toward Ci'en. "You can kill him."

"Yinggu, go ahead!" said Zhou Botong.

The old granny looked at Ci'en intently and then softly said, "If not for him, I might not have seen you for the rest of my life. Besides, we cannot raise the dead. With the joy I experience today, I am willing to forgive and forget what had happened!"

"Right ... that's right," said Zhou Botong. "Very well, let us forgive him."

In his half conscious state, Ci'en was still able to comprehend what was happening around him. He was so relieved. He turned

his eyes toward Yideng and weakly said, "Thank you Shifu for perfecting me." Then to Yang Guo he said, "Thank you benevolent master for toiling on my behalf." Upon saying that he closed his eyes and gave up his ghost, smiling.

Reverend Yideng immediately said a prayer and bowed, "Ci'en ... Ci'en ..." he said hoarsely. "Officially we are master and disciple, but in reality you are my friend. For many, many years we have lived together and you always wanted to redeem your sins. Today you go to that eternal place. My heart is saddened, but I am happy." Then with Yang Guo and Guo Xiang's help he dug the earth and buried the monk.

Yang Guo stood in front of the grave, staring blankly. He recalled the time when they were a newly wed couple, how Xiao Longnu and he met Ci'en at the hut on the snow covered mountain, and how Ci'en was lashing out in his sickness. But now, one of the experts in the Jianghu world was laid beneath the earth. He could not help but feel very sad.

A moment later Yinggu took the two foxes from her robe. "Master Yang," she said, "I don't have anything to repay your kindness. Please take these two animals."

Yang Guo took one and said, "Thank you. I think one is enough."

Suddenly Yideng said, "Master Yang, you take both of them, but don't kill them. Just slit their knees. From each fox, alternately, take one small cup of blood everyday. After taking two cups, no matter how bad your friend's injury is, he will certainly recover."

Yinggu and Yang Guo were thrilled. "It will be great that we don't have to take their lives," Yang Guo said. And then he took both animals and bade Reverend Yideng, Zhou Botong and Yinggu goodbye.

"After you are done, just let them go," said the granny, "They'll know the way home."

Suddenly Zhou Botong said, "Emperor Duan, Yinggu, I invite you to take a rest for a few days in the Hundred-Flower Valley. Brother

Yang, after your friend is cured you and little sister have to stop by and we'll have a good time together."

"If everything goes as planned, I will certainly come and visit you three seniors," he answered, paid his respects and left.

The foxes' eyes were looking at Yinggu, they whimpered softly as though begging for mercy. Yinggu shouted, "Master Yang won't take your lives, what are you afraid of?" Guo Xiang stretched out her hand, put on a comforting smile, and stroked the foxes' heads.

End of Chapter 34.

Chapter 35 - The Three Golden Needles

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox)



Guo Xiang said, "I've never even seen your face, how can I claim that I know you? This is not a small matter." Yang Guo said, "Fine!" He reached up to his face and tore the mask off. Guo Xiang saw a suave and handsome face, with sword-like eyebrows and bright and sparkling eyes, but he was slightly pale, and rather slender.

Yang Guo brought about the reunion of Zhou Botong and Yinggu, allowing Ci'en to die peacefully and managed to obtain the Nine-tailed Fox. Through his efforts he performed three good deeds in a row and was very happy and he went back to the Beastly Mountain Village with Guo Xiang and the Divine Eagle.

The Shi brothers saw Yang Guo carrying two foxes in his arm and were very happy and grateful, immediately slitting a fox's leg to draw its blood. Shi Shugang consumed the blood and exercised his internal energy to recuperate.

That night the Beastly Mountain Village threw a banquet and invited Yang Guo to be the guest-of-honour, serving him dozens of exotic dishes like bears' paws which outsiders could never have the chance to taste. They also took out a big plate and piled it up with delicious food for the Divine Eagle to eat. The Shi brothers and the Xishan Ghosts never mentioned their gratitude to Yang Guo as they had already promised themselves in their minds, that since Yang Guo spared their lives, should he have any problems they would gladly give up their lives to help him. During the banquet they talked loudly, discussing the latest news in Jianghu.

Ever since Guo Xiang met Yang Guo, she was extremely delighted, but now she did not utter a single word, silently listening to their conversations. Yang Guo occasionally glanced at her and saw that her face was troubled, but he assured himself that it was because they had just rushed

about continuously for the past few days, so it was natural that she was tired. He never expected Guo Xiang to be troubled over their impending departure after such a short meeting and hence was feeling depressed.

After drinking a few bowls of wine an ape outside suddenly screeched loudly, and caused many other apes to shriek as well. The Shi brothers' faces became rather grave. Shi Mengjie said, "Brother Yang, Xishan guests, please remain seated, I'll go check it out." He then hurriedly ran outside.

They all knew a strong foe must have come to their forest, but seeing the many martial experts gathered here, they need not be afraid even if the foe is very highly skilled. The Fairy Ghost said, "It'd be best if it's that Prince Hou Du that's here, we can all fight him together to help Third Brother Shi get back at him."

Before he finished saying, they heard Shi Mengjie say, "Who is this visiting our village in the middle of the night? Please stop there." Then a female voice was heard, saying "Is there a big-headed shortie around here? I want to ask him where on Earth he has taken my sister."

When Guo Xiang heard it was her sister who was here, she was shocked and happy; but when she saw Yang Guo's penetrating gaze and strange expression, she felt strange and swallowed back the "Sister!" she wanted to call out.

Then they heard Shi Mengjie angrily say, "You are a rude woman, why are you not answering my question and instead causing a commotion here?"

Guo Fu shouted, "Out of my way!" There then came the clash of weapons as the two began to fight with Guo Fu trying to force her way in and Shi Mengjie trying to keep her out. Yang Guo had last seen Guo Fu at the Passionless Valley (Jue Qing Gu) more than 10 years ago; now, as he heard her again, he

felt a hundred emotions surge through him. Then the clashing sounds of weapons got further and further away as Shi Mengjie managed to draw her away.

The Big Head Ghost said, "She's heading in my direction. I'll go meet her." He then dashed out of the hall, followed by Shi Jiqiang and Feng Yiweng.

Guo Xiang stood up and said, "Big Brother, my sister is here to find me, I've got to go."

Yang Guo was shocked and said, "That... that is your sister?"

Guo Xiang said, "Yeah. I wanted to meet the Eagle Hero, so that big headed Uncle brought me here. I... am very happy..." She did not finish saying this and lowered her head and quickly stepped outside.

Yang Guo saw a tear drop fall into the wine cup and thought, "So she was the baby, she has grown so big now. She came to find me in the middle of the night, she must have a problem, but why doesn't she mention it? She looks kind of troubled, I must not ignore it." He swiftly moved out of the hall and chased her. She was about to enter the forest so he strode several large steps and caught up with her, saying, "Little Sister, if you have any problems, just say it."

Guo Xiang smiled, "No, nothing. I'm OK." The pale moonlight was shining on her fair and refined face and Yang Guo saw clearly the tear drops in her eyes, so he soothingly said, "So you are Hero Guo and Madam Guo's youngest daughter. Did your sister bully you?" He thought since Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very capable and their name was well-known throughout the Central Plains, they should have no difficulty solving her problems. Most probably it was Guo Fu being overbearing, obnoxious and bullying her little sister.

Guo Xiang laughed, "Even if my sister bullies me, I'm not afraid of her. If she scolds me, I argue with her, and anyway she wouldn't dare lay her hands on me."

Yang Guo said, "Then why did you come to find me? Tell me."

Guo Xiang said, "At Fenglingdu I heard the people talk of your heroic deeds. I was full of admiration and wanted to meet you; I've got no other intentions. Tonight during the banquet I remembered the phrase 'tian xia mei bu san de yan xi' (there's no meeting without a parting) and my heart became heavy. Who knew that before the banquet is over I... already have to go." Her voice was now cracking.

Yang Guo's heart quivered, remembering that on the very day she was born he carried her and fought fiercely with the Golden-Wheel Monk (Jinlun Fawang) and Li Mochou. Then he remembered how he and Li Mochou caught the leopard to feed her with milk. Then he took her into the Ancient Tomb and took care of her for a while. He never expected that when he met her again, she would already be a graceful young lady. As he reminisced about the past, he could not help but feel strongly about the matter.

After a while, Guo Xiang said, "Big Brother, I have to go now! I need to trouble you for a favour."

Yang Guo said, "Just say it."

Guo Xiang said, "When will you and your wife be reunited?"

Yang Guo said, "The start of winter this year."

Guo Xiang said, "When you meet her, please send a message to Xiangyang and let me share your joy."

Yang Guo was very grateful and thought that, although this lady and Guo Fu have the same mother, their characters were worlds apart. He asked, "How are your parents?"

Guo Xiang replied, "They're fine." She suddenly thought of a wish and said, "Big Brother, when you meet your wife, please come to Xiangyang and visit me, OK? My parents and you are the heroes of the times; they will surely want to see you."

Yang Guo said, "When the time comes we shall see. Little Sister, about our meeting – please do not mention it to your sister... hmm... don't mention it to your parents either."

Guo Xiang was curious and asked, "Why?" Then she remembered that when the people were talking about the Eagle Hero at Fenglingdu her sister slighted him, so perhaps they may have some grudges, so she said, "OK I won't say anything." Guo Xiang smiled sweetly and said, "You treat me very well. Sister often tells people that she's Hero Guo and Madam Guo's daughter, I feel embarrassed for her. Although our parents are famous, we don't have to keep on saying it all the time. But if I say the Eagle Hero is my big brother, my sister can't imitate me."

Yang Guo smiled, "Why do you look up to me so highly?" He paused for a while then said, "You're sixteen years old this year. September... October... 22nd... 23rd... 24th... Your birthday is on the 24th of the tenth month, right?"

Guo Xiang was very surprised and exclaimed "Ah!" then said, "Yes, how did you know?"

Yang Guo did not answer and continued, "You were born in Xiangyang, so your given name is 'Xiang', right?"

Guo Xiang said, "So you know everything, yet you pretended not to know me. The day I was born you carried me, true?"

Yang Guo began day-dreaming and did not answer her, he lowered his head and mumbled, "16 years ago, on the 24th of the tenth month, we were fighting with Fawang (Golden-wheel Monk), and Long'er was holding that baby..."

Guo Xiang did not understand what he was talking about, but she heard the fight in the forest becoming more intense and feared her sister would injure Shi Mengjie, so she said, "Big Brother, I really have to go now."

Yang Guo was still mumbling, "On the 24th of the tenth month, time flies, it's almost 16 years already." Suddenly he woke up and said, "Ah... you're going... on the 24th of the tenth month this year you're going to burn joss-sticks to ask for three wishes." He remembered she said that when she asked for her wishes, she would pray for him and Xiao Longnu's reunion.

Guo Xiang said, "Big Brother, if in future I request three wishes from you, will you agree?"

Yang Guo said, "I will definitely try my best to fulfill your wishes." He took out a small box from his bosom and flipped open the lid. Then he took out three golden needles which Xiao Longnu used as projectiles and gave them to Guo Xiang, saying, "When I see these needles, it's like seeing you. If you can't meet me, get someone to send the needles here and I'll carry out your requests."

Guo Xiang said, "Thanks very much!" She took the needles and said, "I'll say my first wish now." She then returned a needle to Yang Guo and said, "I want you to take this mask off and let me see you with my own eyes."

Yang Guo laughed and said, "This is really too easy. It's just that I don't want my old acquaintances to recognize me so I put this mask on. You use one needle so casually, won't it be a waste?"

Guo Xiang said, "I've never even seen your face, how can I claim that I know you? This is not a small matter."

Yang Guo said, "Fine!" He reached up to his face and lifted the mask off.

Guo Xiang saw a suave and handsome face, with sword-like eyebrows and bright and sparkling eyes, but he was slightly pale and rather slender. Yang Guo saw her closely examining his face and smiled, "What?"

Guo Xiang felt her face go red. She softly said, "Nothing." But she was thinking, "I never knew you would be so good-looking."

Guo Xiang pulled herself together and returned another needle to Yang Guo, saying, "I'll tell you my second wish."

Yang Guo smiled, "Telling me a few years from now will make no difference, young lady, and you're having childish wishes." He did not stretch out his hand to receive the needle.

Guo Xiang stuck the needle in his shirt and said, "My second wish is that on the 24th of the tenth month, which is my birthday, I want you to come down to Xiangyang to have a chat with me."

This wish required more effort to complete, but was still rather childish. Yang Guo said, "I promise, it's not so difficult. But I will only meet you alone; I won't see your parents or your sister."

Guo Xiang smiled, "That's alright with me." Her smooth white hand clutched the third needle and waved it in the moonlight and said, "My third wish is..."

Yang Guo shook his head, thinking, "Do I, Yang Guo, grant wishes so easily? This young lady is naïve and treats this as a game."

He saw her face had turned red and she laughed, "I can't think of the third wish now. I'll tell you some other day." She then rushed into the forest calling, "Sister, sister!"

Guo Xiang ran towards the clashing sounds and she saw Guo Fu fighting fiercely with Shi Mengjie and the Big Head Ghost, while Feng Yiweng and Shi Jiqiang were watching the fight with their weapons at the ready. Guo Xiang shouted, "Sister, I'm here, and these are good friends."

Guo Fu's training had her parents' guidance in martial arts, while her husband, Yelu Qi, was a highly skilled expert. In the past few years her skills had improved greatly. But she was inattentive and impatient, so she did not train hard. Although her parents and husband were well-known experts, her wugong was only slightly above average. She found it difficult with the two's continuous onslaught and was becoming listless. Then suddenly she heard her sister calling out, so she shouted, "Sister, come here."

Shi Mengjie heard Guo Xiang call Yang Guo "Big Brother", and now Guo Fu called her "sister", he was surprised and thought, "Can it be that this woman is the Eagle Hero's wife or sister?" He had just sent out a blow that he quickly withdrew and leapt backwards.

Guo Fu clearly knew her opponent had given way to her, but she was angry and she thrust her sword forward fiercely and slashed Shi Mengjie's chest. The Big Head Ghost was shocked and shouted, "Hey, what..." Guo Fu made turned the sword with a bright flash and the Big Head Ghost's back suffered a long slit. She felt proud of herself and said, "Now you know my great prowess!"

Guo Xiang shouted, "Sister, I said these are friends!" Guo Fu angrily said, "Quickly follow me back! Who could be friends with these scoundrels?" Shi Mengjie's chest injury was not

light. He staggered a few steps backwards and collapsed onto the ground.

Guo Xiang hurried forward and bent down to raise him up, asking, "Uncle Shi, how are you?" Shi Mengjie's chest was bleeding profusely, staining her dress. Guo Xiang quickly tore off a strip of cloth from her dress and dressed his wound.

Guo Fu held her sword and stood aside, nagging, "Hurry up, let's go! I'll go back and tell Father and Mother and we'll see if they beat you!"

Guo Xiang angrily said, "You rashly injured people. I'll tell Father and Mother as well!" Shi Mengjie saw her face turning red with fury and tears forming in her eyes so he said, "Lady, please don't worry. I won't die from it." Shi Jiqiang held the horn to his mouth and breathed heavily, but he could not decide if he should fight all out with Guo Fu or attend to his brother's injuries.

Suddenly Guo Fu screamed "Ah!" Two fierce tigers appeared out of the blue silently, then, as she turned away to evade them, she saw two lions squatting in front of her, and four leopards waiting by the side. It was Shi Zhongmeng who had led the animals here and surrounded her. Guo Fu became white as sheet and almost fainted.

Then from within the forest someone shouted, "Fifth brother, how are your wounds?" Shi Mengjie said, "I'm still fine." Then that person said, "The Eagle Hero has instructed us to allow these two ladies to leave." Shi Jiqiang made a few whistles and the animals turned around and disappeared into the darkness.

Guo Xiang said, "Uncle Shi, I apologize on behalf of my sister."

Shi Mengjie's wound was hurting badly, so he laughed bitterly and said, "Because of the Eagle Hero's intervention, even if your sister killed me it would be nothing."

Guo Xiang anxiously asked, "Your injuries... are really not serious?"

Guo Fu grabbed her hand and said, "Are you still not coming?" She pulled her hard and dragged her out of the forest.

When the Shi brothers and Xishan Ghosts saw the sisters leave they all came out together to check Shi Mengjie and the Big Head Ghost's injuries. They started talking and all said Guo Fu was in the wrong. But they did not know what her relationship was with the Eagle Hero, so they did not dare be rude to her. Shi Jiqiang furiously said, "That young lady is such a nice girl, but her sister is so overbearing. Fifth brother clearly gave way to her and she knew it, yet she did such a despicable thing. If the sword had pierced two inches deeper, how could he survive?" The Big Head Ghost said, "Let's ask the Eagle Hero about this woman. At Fenglingdu she kept defaming the Eagle Hero, so I guess he wouldn't protect her."

Someone stepped out from behind a big tree, saying, "Thank God Brother Shi's injuries are not serious. That woman has always been rash. My right arm was actually cut off by her." That person was Yang Guo. When they heard this, they felt very angry and could only stare at him wordlessly. They all wanted to know more, but dare not ask.

Guo Fu dragged her sister all the way to Fenglingdu. By that time the ice on the Huang He (Yellow River) had already melted, so they crossed the river and headed back to Xiangyang. All along the way Guo Fu nagged like an old woman, continuously chiding Guo Xiang, telling her not to mix with such uncouth people. Guo Xiang pretended to be

deaf and largely ignored her, but she could not stop talking about the Eagle Hero.

When they reached Xiangyang, Guo Fu handed over the 'Everlasting Spring Priest', Qiu Chuji's letter to her parents. The letter said that he was old and sick in bed, so he has sent the Quanzhen Sect's new leader Li Zhichang together with the top Quanzhen disciples to help. After this was done, the first thing Guo Fu said was, "Father, Mother, sister was disobedient along the way and caused a lot of trouble." Guo Jing was shocked and asked about the matter. Guo Fu then told of how, at Fenglingdu, Guo Xiang followed someone they did not know and went missing for two days and nights, exaggerating the events as she went along.

At that time Guo Jing was handling some urgent military matters and was quite worried about the situation, so when he heard what Guo Fu said, he got very angry and asked, "Xiang'er, your sister is right, isn't she?"

Guo Xiang laughed happily, saying, "Sister is making a mountain out of a molehill; I went with a friend to see what's going on, what's the big fuss about that!"

Guo Jing frowned and said, "What friend? What's the name?"

Guo Xiang stuck out her tongue and said, "Ah, I never asked his name, but his nickname is 'Big Head Ghost'."

Guo Fu said, "He's one of the so called Xishan Ghosts."

Guo Jing had heard of the Xishan Ghosts, and although they did not commit any evil acts, they were not gentlemen either. When he heard of his daughter's mixing with such people, he got even angrier. But he remained silent, only making a "Hey" sound and saying no more. Huang Rong however rebuked Guo Xiang sternly.

That night Guo Jing organized a family feast and arranged the seating plan for Guo Fu and Guo Polu, but left Guo Xiang out. Yelu Qi tried to persuade his father and mother-in-law otherwise. Guo Jing said, "If that girl is not firmly taken in hand, it will only harm her. Xiang'er has been strange since she was small, causing me to worry about her. Since you're her brother-in-law, you should worry for her too." Yelu Qi did not dare say more.

The Guo couple had spoiled Guo Fu too much, thus allowing her to create so much trouble. So now they were stricter with Guo Xiang and Guo Polu. Guo Polu was quiet and serious, just like his father, but Guo Xiang usually agreed on the outside, yet she was usually dissatisfied on the inside. That night she heard the maid say that Master and Mistress organized a family feast but intentionally did not invite her. Guo Xiang got angry and went on hunger strike and starved for two whole days. On the third day, Huang Rong's heart softened and without informing Guo Jing she personally cooked several dishes and cajoled her daughter, finally making her smile. Huang Rong's cooking skills were the best in the world; even though she had not cooked for a long time she was still able to cook delicious food for Guo Xiang. But in doing so all the effort to discipline her had gone right down the drain.

The Mongols had conquered Dali and sent the troops north; another division headed south, planning on meeting at Xiangyang. They aimed to destroy the Song Dynasty in one fell swoop. The Mongols had been planning this campaign for many years, and the north division was led by the Great Khan's brother Khubilai. The south division was led by the Great Khan Mengke himself, together with all their valiant and capable generals. The large number of troops involved was unprecedented in Mongol history. The troops looked grand and unyielding, showing the Mongols' might.

Before the Mongols arrived, Xiangyang was already in a state of shock. However, the useless Song Premier Ding Daquan was a traitor and dismissed this matter totally. Xiangyang dispatched numerous urgent messages, but the traitorous premier just said, "The Mongolians have been attacking Xiangyang for many decades and have never succeeded; they just may go back empty-handed this time as well. This is just a small matter; why should we bother ourselves with it?"

When the Mongols' south division conquered Dali, Guo Jing immediately knew the urgency of this matter and sent letters to all the heroes in Jianghu, inviting them to meet at Xiangyang to assist with the defense. The Mongol troops were swift and deadly and were able to conquer Dali in just a short time. The King of Dali, the great-grandson of Yideng, was young and ignorant and he had only ruled for two years when Dali was conquered. He was rescued in the final hour by Zhu Ziliu, Wu Santong and the Fisherman.

The Mongolian troops were steadily advancing closer and closer. The Heroes' Summit was scheduled for the 15th of the tenth month and was to last 10 days. Today was the 13th, two days away from the meet, and all the heroes from all over Jianghu had gathered at Xiangyang. Guo Jing and Huang Rong were concentrating on military affairs and gave the responsibility of welcoming the guests to Lu Youjiao and Yelu Qi, with the Wu brothers and their wives Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping to assist them.

On this day Zhu Ziliu, the Fisherman, Wu Santong, Quanzhen Sect's leader Li Zhichang and his fellow sect disciples, the Beggar Clan elders with the seventh and eighth grade members, Lu Guanying and Cheng Yaojia had all arrived... Xiangyang was now filled with many well known martial experts. Many old heroes who rarely appeared in Jianghu were also present. This time the Heroes' Summit may decide the fate of Xiangyang. They also respected the Guo couple,

so all of them rushed to Xiangyang upon receiving the invitation. This Meet was grander than the one at Dasheng many years ago.

That night, Guo Jing had a private banquet with his old friends, inviting more than 10 people to dine with him, including Zhu Ziliu and Wu Santong. They drank past the third watch but the Beggar Clan Chief still did not turn up. They thought he must have been busy with the Beggar Clan affairs and so did not find anything amiss. They ate and drank, discussing Jianghu events of the past 10 years. Yelu Qi, Guo Fu and the Wu brothers group had a table to themselves and they chatted animatedly.

Suddenly an eighth grade member of the Beggar Clan burst in and whispered something to Huang Rong. Huang Rong's face became grave and she stood up, saying loudly, "What?" The people were shocked and all turned to stare at her. Huang Rong said, "There are no outsiders here. Just say it. How did this happen?" They saw tears well up in her eyes as she spoke, so it must be something terrible. Then the beggar said, "This afternoon Clan Leader Lu took two seventh grade sect members to patrol outside the city but they didn't return. I could not let the matter rest and went to investigate. We went to the Yang Tai Fu Temple down the hill and found Clan Leader Lu's corpse there..." The group gave a cry of "Ah!" when they heard this.

The beggar's voice cracked as he said this, he knew Lu Youjiao's martial arts were not excellent, but he was responsible and caring and had earned the respect of the beggars. The beggar continued, "The two seventh grade members are not dead yet. They said the three of them were ambushed by the Mongolian prince Hou Du who killed the Clan Leader. The two seventh grade members fought with him and were severely injured by his palms."

Guo Jing was so angered his face turned white and only said, "Hou Du!" He thought that if he had known this would happen, he would not have spared him at Chongyang Palace years ago.

Huang Rong said, "Did Hou Du leave any message?"

The beggar said, "I dare not say."

Huang Rong said, "Why not? He wants Guo Jing and Huang Rong to surrender to the Mongols, or they will end up like Lu Youjiao, right?"

The beggar said, "The Chief is brilliant. The scoundrel Hou Du said exactly that." According to tradition, Huang Rong was no longer the Beggar Clan leader, but the beggars all still addressed her as "Chief".

Huang Rong frowned and said, "Lu Youjiao's "Dog Beating Stick" has been taken by Hou Du, right?" The beggar said, "Yes."

The guests all left the banquet and went to see Lu Youjiao's body. They observed a steel fan's mark on Lu Youjiao's back and a rib bone was broken. This showed that Hou Du had snuck up and attacked with his fan from behind, then killed him with his palm. The people all felt deeply grieved when they saw this.

At that time thousands of beggars in Jianghu were gathered in Xiangyang. When they heard that Lu Youjiao had been killed, the city fell into a gloomy silence.

Guo Xiang was on good terms with Lu Youjiao, often pulling him out into the wilderness to drink wine and chat about Jianghu affairs. The two usually chatting for half a day, and were very friendly. The Yang Tai Fu Temple was not far from Xiangyang, so Guo Xiang and Lu Youjiao often went there. When she heard her dear old friend was killed there she was

greatly hurt and aggrieved, so she took a pot of wine and went to the temple like she usually did.

Late that night, Guo Xiang put down two cups and filled them with wine, saying, "Uncle Lu, half a month ago, when we were merrily chatting here, who knew such a hero would meet such a tragic end? Let me offer you a toast." She took up a cup and poured the wine onto the ground in a sweeping motion, remembering their past friendship. She felt overwhelmed by sadness and tears welled up in her eyes. She said, "Uncle Lu, rest peacefully." She held the other cup forward with both hands and then drank the wine.

Her tolerance for liquor was not very good, but she was open-minded and friendly with the heroes of Jianghu and often drank with them. When she drank two cups of wine she felt giddy and slightly hot.

In the darkness a shadow suddenly flashed past and she thought it must be Lu Youjiao's spirit who had come and said, "Is that Uncle Lu? Please come here." Although her heart was beating rapidly, she still wanted to meet Lu Youjiao's spirit. However a female voice was heard saying, "Why are you fooling around here in the middle of the night? Mother wants you to go back quickly." The person came into the temple in a flash – it was Guo Fu.

Guo Xiang was very disappointed and said, "I'm waiting here for Uncle Lu's spirit. Now you come barging in like this, how would he show up? Sister, you return first, I'll be following you shortly."

Guo Fu said, "Stop talking rubbish. You're just imagining things. Why would Lu Youjiao's spirit want to see you?"

Guo Xiang said, "He was very friendly with me, moreover I promised to share my private thoughts with him. I said I

would tell him on my birthday. Who knew he couldn't be here." She became depressed as she said this.

Guo Fu said, "Mother saw that you had disappeared and predicted you'd be here. You monkey, you're getting naughtier, but you can't escape from Mother's palm. Mother is angry with you for being so daring – who knows, that Hou Du might be lurking around here somewhere; won't that be dangerous?"

Guo Xiang sighed and said, "I was thinking about Uncle Lu and forgot about the danger. Good sister, please accompany me for a while, maybe Uncle Lu's spirit might still come and see me. But you shouldn't talk, lest you scare him away."

Guo Fu had never really respected Lu Youjiao and felt that he became the Beggar Clan Leader all due to her mother's grooming and recommendations. She thought that even if his spirit came, she would not be afraid. She also knew her sister's character – since she wanted to wait there, unless if their parents personally came to stop her, she would not budge no matter what Guo Fu said. So she sat down and sighed, "Sister, you're getting older, yet you are still so childish. You're sixteen this year; in two or three years you'll be getting married. Please don't tell me, that even when you move into your in-laws' place, you'll still act so crazily?"

Guo Xiang said, "What's the difference? After you married brother-in-law, you are still as carefree as a single woman."

Guo Fu said, "Hey! How can others compare to your brother-in-law? He's a hero of the times and is very broad-minded, he wouldn't restrict my movements. He's talented in martial arts and literature. Among the younger generation, who can compare to him? If your future husband is half as good as him, Father and Mother will be very satisfied."

Guo Xiang knew she was so boastful and said, "Brother-in-law is of course talented, but I don't believe there's none in this world who can compare to him." She felt proud of herself as she said that. Guo Xiang said, "I know someone who's ten times better than brother-in-law."

Guo Fu got angry, saying, "Who? Tell me."

Guo Xiang said, "Why must I say it? It's good enough for me to know."

Guo Fu laughed coldly, asking, "Is it Brother Zhu? Wang Jianming?" She named a few young heroes.

Guo Xiang kept shaking her head, saying, "They can't even compete with brother-in-law, how can they be ten times better?"

Guo Fu said, "Unless you're talking about Grandfather, Father, Mother, and Uncle Zhu, they are older heroes."

Guo Xiang said, "No! The person I mentioned is younger than brother-in-law, and he's more handsome and his martial arts are very much better. The difference is as great as night and day, you can't even compare them..." As she said this, Guo Fu continuously spit, "Pui...pui...pui...pui..."

Guo Xiang ignored her and continued, "If you don't believe me that's up to you. He has a good character. If anyone is in trouble, he'd lend a hand whether he knows them or not." She lifted her head and started day-dreaming.

Guo Fu angrily said, "You're just making things up. Lu Youjiao's dead, now the Beggar Clan doesn't have a leader. Mother said that, since so many heroes are here for the Heroes' Meet, there will be a martial arts contest to pick a highly-skilled expert to lead the Beggar Clan and prevent it from splitting up into the Dirty Faction and Clean Faction again. You said this man is so powerful, tell him to spar with

your brother-in-law and see who will be the next Beggar Clan Leader.”

Guo Xiang laughed, “He doesn’t want to be the Beggar Clan Leader.”

Guo Fu scolded, “You dare to look down on the Leader’s status? Elder Hong was the leader, Mother was the leader; you dare to look down on Elder Hong and Mother?”

Guo Xiang said, “When did I say I looked down on the Leader? You knew Uncle Lu and I were good friends.”

Guo Fu said, “OK! Tell your grand hero to spar with your brother-in-law, and then we shall clearly see who the hero is and who the useless bum is.”

Guo Xiang said, “Sister, you always talk unreasonably. When did I say brother-in-law was a useless bum? If he’s one, then that makes you an animal. We have the same mother, so I’d be ashamed too.”

Guo Fu heard this and did not know whether to laugh or flare up, so she stood up and said, “I don’t have the energy to talk nonsense with you. If you still won’t come back, I’ll get a scolding too.”

Guo Xiang had a razor-sharp tongue and liked to argue with her sister, so she said, “Even though you’re married, Father and Mother dote on you the most. Who will have the guts to scold you if you are the wife of the next Clan Leader?”

Guo Fu heard her sister address her as the ‘wife of the next Clan Leader’, she became smug and said, “There are so many heroes here and he’s not the Leader yet; don’t say such things, you’ll only make people laugh.”

Guo Xiang woke up from her day-dream and saw that the pale moon was almost full. Then she sighed and said, “It

looks like Uncle Lu's spirit won't be coming. Sister, why the hurry to choose a new Leader? Why can't we mourn Uncle Lu a little longer?"

Guo Fu said, "You're being childish again. The Beggar Clan is the number one sect in Jianghu, how can it go without a leader even for a day?"

Guo Xiang said, "Which day did Mother say the Leader would be chosen?"

Guo Fu said, "The Heroes' Summit will start on the 15th, the most important issue is to discuss how to allocate all the heroes in Jianghu to resist the Mongolians. This should take about five to nine days, so the new leader should be chosen on the 23rd or 24th."

Guo Xiang exclaimed, "Ah."

Guo Fu asked, "What?"

Guo Xiang said, "Nothing. The 24th just happens to be my birthday. Everyone will be busy preparing for this Meet, so Mother won't be celebrating my birthday for me."

Guo Fu laughed, "Ha-ha, you're a little baby, what significance is your birthday? How can you put it on the same level as the Leader's selection? People would laugh their teeth out. Ah, there can only be one such person like you on this Earth, remembering such trivial matters."

Guo Xiang's face turned red, saying, "Father may not remember, but Mother will surely remember. You say it's a small matter, but I think otherwise. I'm going to be 16, you know?"

Guo Fu laughed even louder and needled her, "On that day all the heroes will congratulate our Miss Guo on her sixteenth

birthday. She's no longer a baby, she's a lady now! Ha...ha...ha!"

Guo Xiang shook her head and said, "Others might not care, but there will be at least one hero who will remember my birthday. He promised that he will come to see me." She felt very happy as she said this.

Guo Fu said, "What hero? Ah, is he the one who is superior to your brother-in-law? Let me tell you - Number 1, there's no such person, you're just fantasizing; Number 2, even if there's such a person, he must have many things to do, how would he have the time to celebrate your birthday? If he's attending the Heroes' Summit, then he will come to Xiangyang."

Guo Xiang heard this and was almost moved to tears. She stamped her feet and said, "He promised, he promised. He won't attend the Heroes' Summit; he won't vie to be the Leader."

Guo Fu said, "If he's not a hero, our parents would not invite him. Even if he comes, he may not be fit to attend."

Guo Xiang took out her handkerchief to dab her tears and said, "If that's the case, I won't attend the Heroes' Summit either, nor will I even look in at the Leader's selection."

Guo Fu coldly laughed, "Ah, Miss Guo's not attending the Heroes' Feast, all the grandeur is gone. Where's the glory of being the new Leader? Face it, nobody would miss you."

Guo Xiang covered her ears and dashed out of the temple.

Suddenly a black shadow flashed across and stood silently at the temple's entrance, blocking it. Guo Xiang was shocked and leapt back to prevent herself from running into him. The tall person stood under the moon light, exhibiting his dark face, but his upper body was rather short. Looking closely,

she noticed that he had two legs missing, his arms supporting his body with six-foot long crutches. His pants were very long, dangling on the ground, making him look like a giant.

Guo Fu was shocked and said, "You're Nimoxing?"

That person was indeed Nimoxing. This time the Khan was commanding the campaign himself, so all the brave warriors followed him north from Dali. The warriors all tried to prove themselves to win glory for their names. Although Nimoxing's legs were gone, he did not lose his martial skills; in fact he trained harder and he was better than before he lost his legs. The Mongols were still a hundred li from Xiangyang, but some warriors were sent ahead to Xiangyang to scout first, so Nimoxing reached Xiangyang earlier. On this night he was wandering around the temple and he overheard the Guo sisters' conversation. Then he got very excited, thinking that since Guo Jing was leading Xiangyang's defense, if he captured the Guo sisters he could force him to surrender or at least demoralize him and thus contribute greatly to the Mongol war effort. He heard that Guo Fu knew him, so he said, "Miss Guo is very sharp, I've not seen you for so many years and you have grown even more pretty. Don't cause any trouble, just be good and follow me!"

Guo Fu was shocked and angry. She knew his martial arts were very high, even if she and Guo Xiang attacked him together, they would still lose, so she could not help but glare at Guo Xiang, thinking, "It's entirely your fault, how are we going to get out of this mess?"

Guo Xiang asked Nimoxing, "Why are your two pant legs so strange? Were your legs very long before you lost them?"

Nimoxing snorted and ignored her, telling Guo Fu, "You two walk in front. Don't try any tricks!" He treated them as his prisoners as he said that.

Guo Xiang said, "You're talking very strangely. Where do you want to take us in the middle of the night?"

Nimoxing angrily said, "Little girl, just shut up and follow me." He was afraid that there might be strong opponents from Xiangyang coming to help, so he wanted to leave quickly.

Guo Fu whispered, "Sister, this black guy is a Mongolian warrior and his martial arts are great; you attack his right while I attack his left." She drew out her sword and thrust towards Nimoxing's waist.

Guo Xiang did not bring any weapons out of the city and thought that since he had lost his legs and was using his crutches to fight, how could he fight her sister? So she said, "Sister, this person is pitiful, don't hurt him!"

As she said this, Nimoxing braced his left crutch on the ground and defended himself with his right crutch. Then he struck Guo Fu's sword, causing sparks to fly and Guo Fu's sword to fly out of her hand. She felt her hand go numb and her chest was hurting. Then she used a special stance to follow the sword and retrieve it with her left hand. Striking forward with the 'Sword of the Yue Maiden' [Chao Nu Jian Fa] as she fought with Nimoxing. This 'Chao Nu Jian Fa' was taught to Guo Jing by Han Xiaoying of the Jiangnan Seven Freaks. Guo Jing taught this skill to his two daughters out of gratitude to her. This sword skill was smooth and contained subtle changes and was a powerful skill. If Guo Jing executed this skill, it would be strong and powerful and would not be overcome easily, but Guo Fu was not very strong; although the strokes were good, they were not good enough to defend against Nimoxing's crutches.

Guo Xiang saw how Nimoxing was using his crutches. The left and right crutches were swapping roles intermittently and were very swift. The crutches were long as well, so her sister

was losing to his fierce attacks. She then became more anxious. Guo Fu felt the pressure from his crutches getting stronger and stronger, hitting her sword with great force, causing her strokes to be unsteady. Guo Xiang was worried about her sister but was unarmed so she sent out her palms and struck towards Nimoxing.

Nimoxing shouted and poked his left crutch on the ground and leapt into the air, attacking with both crutches at great speed. The crutches hit Guo Xiang in the shoulder and Guo Fu in the chest. Guo Xiang stumbled and retreated several steps. Guo Fu was hit quite hard and could not withstand the pain and she sat down heavily. Nimoxing was feeling proud of himself and swaggered towards Guo Fu, laughing coldly, "I told you to be good and follow me..."

Guo Fu jumped up and said, "Let's escape from the back of the temple!"

Nimoxing was shocked. He had obviously hit her "Shen Cang" (Hiding Deity) Accupoint, how could she still move? He did not know about Guo Fu's soft armour and thought she must have learned some great skills from the Guo family that prevented her accupoint from being sealed. Actually, Guo Fu's accupoint was not sealed, but she was injured by that strike and could not use her sword. Guo Xiang then unleashed the 'Descending Hero's Palm Skill' [Luo Ying Zhang Fa] to protect her sister and shouted, "Sister, you go first!"

Nimoxing raised his left crutch and sent it towards Guo Xiang, stopping three inches in front of her nose, but the wind generated was so great that her face hurt. He shouted, "Don't move!"

Guo Xiang angrily said, "At first I pitied you, but you're such an evil person!"

Nimoxing laughed, "Little girl, if you don't suffer you won't know my strength." His crutch hit the ground, his face was fierce and ugly, he opened his mouth, exposing his white teeth and charged forwards screaming like he wanted to bite someone.

Suddenly someone behind said, "Don't be afraid! Use secret projectiles on him."

This was a dangerous moment and Guo Xiang did not care who that was and felt around her body and urgently said, "I don't have any." She saw Nimoxing getting closer and was at her wits' end and tried to use a palm stance called the 'Flower Spreading Stance' [Shan Hua Shi] to protect herself. She out stretched her palms and felt a breeze suddenly blow across them; then her hands trembled slightly and two thin golden bangles flew out, striking Nimoxing's crutches.

Although the sound made on impact was not very loud, Nimoxing knew he could not withstand it and his crutches flew backwards, hitting the wall, causing dust and mud to fly on impact. Nimoxing lost his crutches and fell down. He hit his back on the ground and then jumped up, screaming angrily and struck his palms out, sending his whole body forwards with his palms aiming at Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang did not think and reacted by taking a hair pin out of her hair and tried to hit Nimoxing, then she felt the breeze behind her again and sent the pin flying forward. Nimoxing suddenly saw the pin flying towards him and quickly tried to use both hands to block, then he cried, "Strange!" and fell onto the ground, unmoving.

Guo Xiang feared that he was up to no good, so she jumped to Guo Fu and said, "Sister, let's go!"

The two sisters were standing next to a deity's statue in the temple and saw that Nimoxing did not move at all, so Guo Fu

said, "Did he suddenly have a stroke and die?" She raised her voice and said, "Nimoxing, what are you doing?" She thought that since he'd lost his crutches, it would not be convenient for him to move, so she was not afraid and advanced to him. She saw his eyes staring blankly upwards, his face without colour and his mouth wide open; he was dead.

Guo Fu was very surprised and lit the candles in the temple, wanting to investigate further when she heard someone outside the temple saying, "Fu, Second Sister, are you in the temple?" It was Yelu Qi. Guo Fu happily said, "Brother Qi, come quickly. Strange... this is strange!"

When Guo Fu went to find her sister and did not return for quite some time, Yelu Qi, remembering that Lu Youjiao was ambushed and killed and the enemy was just outside Xiangyang, got worried and went to find the two sisters. He brought two sixth grade Beggar Clan members and hurried there only to find Nimoxing dead on the ground, and he was shocked. He knew this short person's martial arts were good; even he could not handle this person himself, so he was surprised that his wife had killed Nimoxing. He took the candle from Guo Fu's hand and looked closely.

He saw two holes in Nimoxing's palms and a hair pin stuck in the Shen Ting (Deity's Hall) Accupoint. This pin hit with great force but did not break and instead was able to penetrate this highly-skilled expert's palms and kill him. Such a powerful skill like that is unthinkable. He turned to Guo Fu and said, "Is Grandfather here (referring to Huang Yaoshi), quickly lead me to greet him."

Guo Fu curiously said, "Who said Grandfather was here?"

Yelu Qi said, "It's not Grandfather?" He swept the place with his eyes and said excitedly, "So it must be Master." He looked around but could not find Zhou Botong. He knew his master was mischievous, so he must have hid himself to scare them.

He went out of the temple and jumped onto the roof, but he saw no one.

Guo Fu said, "Hey! Why are you saying such silly things? What Grandfather, what master?"

Yelu Qi then came down and asked how they met Nimoxing and how he met his end. Guo Fu told him, but she completely could not explain how her sister's hair pin could kill him. Yelu Qi said, "Some powerful hero must be helping Sister secretly. The only people I know with such martial arts are Father-in-law, Grandfather, Master, Reverend Yideng and the Golden Wheel Monk (Jinlun Fawang). Fawang is the Mongolian Guo Shi (Spiritual Leader), he wouldn't kill Nimoxing, while Reverend Yideng won't kill anyone, so I thought since it's not Grandfather; it must be Master. Sister, who do you think helped you?"

After Guo Xiang's hair pin killed Nimoxing, she immediately turned around but saw no one, and kept repeating "Don't be afraid! Use secret projectiles on him," to herself. She thought the voice familiar. She wondered if it could be Yang Guo. But as she thought of him, she said to herself, "That's impossible! It must be because I was thinking of him, and I mistook that voice for his." Yelu Qi saw that she seemed to be day-dreaming and might not have heard him.

Guo Fu saw that her sister's eyes were red and tears were streaming down her face and she was looking lost. Guo Fu thought she must be in a shock and held her hand, asking, "Sister, what's up with you?"

Guo Xiang trembled and her face turned red, saying, "Nothing."

Guo Fu said, "Brother-in-law was asking you who saved you just now, didn't you hear?"

Guo Xiang said, "Who saved me? It must be him! Who else would have such excellent skills?"

Guo Fu asked, "Him? Who's he? Is he the special hero you were talking about?"

Guo Xiang felt her heart beating heavily and quickly said, "No, no! I'm talking about Uncle Lu's spirit." Guo Fu spat "Pui" and threw down her hand. Guo Xiang said, "I didn't even see a shadow just now, it must be Uncle Lu secretly helping me. You know we were good friends when he was still alive."

Guo Fu half-believed what she said and was wondering if Lu Youjiao's spirit refused to go away. But if it was not a spirit, how could a person kill someone without even showing himself?

Yelu Qi took up Nimoxing's crutches and sighed, "This level of martial arts really commands admiration." Guo Fu and Guo Xiang looked carefully, observing that both crutches had a golden bangle lodged deep into them, as though they were made that way. This person actually used his internal energy (nei gong) to hit Nimoxing's crutches out of his hands, so it was no wonder Yelu Qi praised him like that.

Guo Fu said, "Let's bring them to Mother, she should know who did this."

The two beggars carried the body, the crutches and followed Yelu Qi and the two sisters back into the city. Guo Jing and Huang Rong heard Guo Fu's narration and thought about the matter, causing them to be shocked.

Guo Xiang thought she would surely be scolded by her parents for getting into such trouble again. However Guo Jing liked his daughter's deep loyalty so he consoled her instead. Huang Rong saw that he was not angry so she hugged her

and comforted her. She saw Nimoxing's body and crutches and said to Guo Jing, "Brother Jing, who do you think it is?"

Guo Jing shook his head and said, "This internal energy is so fierce and powerful, from what I know, only two people are capable of it."

Huang Rong said, "But Master Hong Qigong passed away long ago and it is not you." She asked for the details but could not think of an explanation.

After taking Guo Fu and Guo Xiang back to their rooms to rest, she said, "Brother Jing, our second lady has hidden something from us, do you know that?" Guo Jing curiously asked, "Hiding what?" Huang Rong said, "Ever since she returned from sending the Heroes' Summit invitations, she has been day-dreaming alone. Tonight she was speaking even more strangely." Guo Jing said, "She has suffered a shock, so she's not thinking clearly."

Huang Rong said, "No. Sometimes she would be shy, sometimes she would smile to herself, and this is obviously not symptoms of suffering a shock. She actually has a joy in her heart which she can't say." Guo Jing said, "When a child suddenly fights an expert, she would be shocked and happy, there's nothing strange about that." Huang Rong smiled and thought, "Regarding matters concerning a girl's heart, you didn't understand when you were young, now that you're old, what do you know?" They changed the topic, discussing strategies to defeat the enemy, how to welcome the guests to the Heroes' Summit, how to arrange the seating etc. before resting.

Huang Rong lay on her bed and thought of Guo Xiang's affairs and found it hard to sleep, so she thought, "This girl met with much hardship and troubles when she was born, I'm worried her life may be rather troubled. She has fortunately lived the past 16 years peacefully; don't tell me she will meet

with some serious disaster now?" She thought about the strong enemy's imminent attack and the impending hardships for the people. If she had some prior intelligence, it would greatly aid them. Yet her daughter has been very strange since birth. If she did not want to say something, she would not say it no matter how her parents coerced or scolded her. Instead her face would turn red but she would not reveal a single word. Her parents found it funny yet still got angry.

The more Huang Rong thought of it, the more worried she was, so she stood up and went to the city wall, ordering the guards to open the gate and she went to the Yang Tai Temple.

The sky was cloudy, hiding the Moon and the stars. Huang Rong took a white candle and used her qing gong (lightness skill) to ascend Mount Xian. Suddenly, she heard voices dozens of meters away near "Dropping Tears Tablet". She crouched down and crept forward and hid behind a tree several meters away, not moving any closer.

Someone said, "Brother Sun, the Benefactor told us to wait behind the Dropping Tears Tablet, but why does this place have such a unique name?"

The one named Sun said, "The Benefactor must have had some problematic affairs of the heart. So whenever he sees any place named Duan Chang (Severed Intestine), You Chou (Worries) or Duo Lei (Dropping Tears), he remembers them easily."

The first person said, "With the Benefactor's great skills, he should be able to solve any problem, but whenever I see his expression or hear his tone of voice, it seems like he has indeed some unhappy problems. I think he actually named this place Dropping Tears Tablet himself."

The one named Sun said, "No. I've always heard Master Guo'er Shu say that during the Three Kingdoms Period, Xiangyang belonged to the Wei Kingdom. The general in charge, Yang Hu, had great merit in administrating the city and protecting the people. He used to tour this mountain. When he was dead the people remembered his contributions and built the Yang Tai Temple on this mountain and made this tablet to remember him. When the people remembered what he had done for them, they would be moved to tears, so this place is called the 'Dropping Tears Tablet'. Brother Chen, someone who has done as much as Grand Elder Yang is really a great man."

The one named Chen said, "The Benefactor has done many heroic deeds and helped countless people around the world. If he were the general of Xiangyang, he may even be better than Yang Hu."

The one named Sun smiled, "Xiangyang's Hero Guo is defending the people and does many heroic deeds, so he must be on the same level as Grand Elder Yang and the Benefactor."

Huang Rong heard them praise her husband and was secretly pleased, but thought, "Who is the Benefactor they're referring to? Is he the one who secretly helped Xiang-Er?"

Then Mr. Sun said, "Long ago we were the Benefactor's enemies, then the Benefactor saved our lives; the Benefactor's kind personality of treating his enemies as his friends might be comparable with Grand Elder Yang Hu. About that story during the Three Kingdoms Period, that master also mentioned that when Yang Hu was protecting Xiangyang, the enemy opposing him was General Lu Xun's son Lu Kang of the Wu Kingdom. Yang Hu sent troops into Wu territory to fight the enemy, whenever he harvested the people's rice for his military provisions he would compensate

them. When Lu Kang was sick, Yang Hu sent medicine to him and Lu Kang took it without any suspicions. His lieutenants advised him to be careful, but he said, "Someone like Uncle Yang ("Zhen De Mu Pang Huan Xi Pang") did not resort to despicable tactics. Uncle Yang is Yang Hu. His character was above question and the enemy respected him. When he died, even the Wu Kingdom Generals mourned him. The way he treated others really made him deserve to be a hero."

(Some background information: the three countries of the Three Kingdom Period were Wu, Shu and Wei. Wei was controlled by Cao Cao and Wu by Sun Quan. When Shu's Liu Bei attacked Wu in retaliation for the killing of Guan Yu, Lu Xun defended Wu. He managed to destroy Liu Bei's 700,000 strong army with his 50,000 troops. Liu Bei did not listen to his advisor Zhuge Liang's advice. This Zhuge Liang of Xiangyang was mentioned in earlier chapters by Guo Jing.)

Mr. Chen kept sighing as he touched the stone tablet, then after a while he said, "The Benefactor told us to meet here, is it also to admire Grand Elder Yang's character?"

Mr. Sun said, "I heard the Benefactor mention before that when Yang Hu was alive there was a sentence that he always remembered."

Mr. Chen asked, "What was that? Say it slowly, I must memorize this. If the Benefactor admired it, this sentence must be something great."

Mr. Sun said, "After Lu Kang died, the Lord of the Wu Kingdom said that Yang Hu treated the Wu Kingdom sincerely and saved many Wu Kingdom citizens, but he was serving the traitors of the Imperial Court, so Yang Hu sighed, 'Tian Xia Bu Ru Yi Si, Shi Chang Ju Qi Ba' (easy matters are often complicated). The Benefactor praised these words."

Mr. Chen never expected it to be such a sentence and was slightly disappointed and sighed, then suddenly said loudly, "Brother Sun, Yang Hu – this name sounds the same..."

Mr. Sun said, "Hush! Someone's here."

Huang Rong was slightly surprised, and then she heard someone running round the mountain. Then she thought, "Sounds the same as 'Yang Hu' but uses different characters? Could it be 'Yang Guo'? No, no way. Even if Guo'er's martial arts have improved, it can't have reached such an unimaginable level. This person couldn't be saying that it sounds the same but uses different characters."

After a short while, the person ascending the mountain clapped lightly thrice and Mr. Sun returned three claps. That person walked to the Dropping Tears Tablet and said, "Brothers Sun and Chen, the Benefactor tells you not to wait for him; here are two invitations from the Benefactor, please help him deliver them. Brother Sun, this invitation is for Old Master Zhao of Henan's Xingyang Mansion on Crows Mountain; Brother Chen, this invitation is for the deaf-mute Head Camel of Hu Nan's Changde Mansion. Please tell them that they are requested to meet here within ten days." Mr. Chen and Mr. Sun respectfully agreed, they took the invitations and placed them in their inner pockets.

When Huang Rong heard this, she was greatly surprised. Old Master Zhao of Xingyang was working for the Imperial Court, his Thirty-two Long Punches and Eighteen Rod Stances were the special skills of his family and were passed from generation to generation within his family. He was a nobleman and never bothered about Jianghu affairs. The Head Camel of Crows Mountain was a famous elder in Wulin, his martial arts were very good, but because he was a deaf-mute, he seldom mixed with outsiders. For this Heroes' Summit at Xiangyang, Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew these

two people liked seclusion and would not attend the meet, but they still respected their reputation and sent them invitations. Obviously they replied and declined. Could it be that this so-called 'Benefactor' has such a great influence on them and is able to draw them out of seclusion and hurry them here based on his invitation alone?

Then Huang Rong thought again, "The Heroes Meet would start tomorrow and this person is summoning all the experts in Jianghu to Xiangyang, what is his motive? Could he actually be helping the Mongols? That'd be unfavorable for us." Then she felt that although Old Master Zhao and Deaf-Mute Head Camel were loners, they were not traitors. This 'Benefactor' secretly helped Xiang'er kill Nimoxing, so he must not be one of them.

As she was talking to herself, she heard the three people talking softly but she could not hear clearly as she was too far away, then she heard Mr. Chen say, "Benefactor has never entrusted us with such an important assignment, this assignment will... it would be a grand event... our present..." She missed several words in between. Mr. Sun said, "OK! Let's do it. Rest assured we will not mess up the Benefactor's plans." When he said that, the three people descended the mountain.

Huang Rong could not guess the origin of that 'Benefactor' but she did not want to blow things up by capturing the three people to ask about the matter. When they were gone far, she went into the temple and looked around but did not see anything amiss. When the enemy attacked the area, all the worshippers and caretakers at the temple fled into the city so there was no one there. When she went back, it was already dawn.

When she was near the city's west gate, two horses charged along the road and she had to leap aside to avoid them. She

saw two big and strong men riding the horses. The two horses went to the intersection and separated, with one heading west and the other heading south. She heard one of them say, "You must remember to tell Fat Zhang that he must bring the musical instruments and the show's costumes himself. And don't forget to bring decorations experts." The other laughed, "Don't nag at me, if you're late by one day in inviting Master Chuan Chai, even if the Benefactor forgives you, we won't." The first man laughed, "Hey, that's alright. If I'm late by one day, cut off my head to feed the pigs." The two men saluted each other and rode off.

As Huang Rong entered the city, she mumbled to herself, "I heard Fat Zhang is a tyrant, even chivalrous outlaws respected him, and how could this 'Benefactor' get him here with one word? They talked about flags and drums, what could they be used for?" Suddenly she thought of something and said, "Yes, yes! It must be so."

She went into the Government Office and asked Guo Jing, "Brother Jing, did we miss out any invitations?"

Guo Jing curiously said, "How could we have missed anything? We checked for many days, it couldn't have happened."

Huang Rong said, "I think so too; we must have offended a great hero who's not that famous, so he sent invitations to those who obviously won't come. From the way it looks, it must be a great man who's dissatisfied with us, so he also wants to host another Heroes' Summit to compete with us."

Guo Jing happily said, "This hero has the same motives as us, nothing could be better. We will invite him to chair the Heroes' Summit and get him to command the heroes to defend against the Mongolians; it's alright for the both of us to listen to him."

Huang Rong frowned and said, "But from what I hear of him, he might not be here to defend the city. He sent invitations to Xingyang's Old Master Zhao, Deaf-Mute Head Camel of Crows Mountain and Hankou's Fat Zhang and others."

Guo Jing was surprised and happy; he clapped and said, "If this man can invite such great people here, Xiangyang would be strengthened. Rong'er, we must definitely meet such a man."

Huang Rong became quiet. She knew that the beggars from Jiangnan would arrive soon, so Guo Jing and Huang Rong went forth to welcome them. On that day heroes from all around Jianghu arrived and Huang Rong was so busy entertaining the guests that she almost had no time to breathe and of course forgot the events of the previous night.

The next day was the banquet for the 'Heroes' Summit, and the heroes sat around four hundred-odd tables, with Xiangyang's Commander General Lu Wende and Defense Official General Wang Jian offering toasts to the heroes. The people in the banquet hall talked about the Mongols' cruelty and how they invaded Song territory and killed its citizens. All the heroes expressed their indignation and their will to fight the invaders. That night everyone unanimously elected Guo Jing to chair the Meet and they swore to kill the invaders.

Guo Xiang and her sister argued at the temple the other night and she said she would not attend the 'Heroes' Summit. Of course she was absent and was instead dining in her own room alone. She told the servant, "Sister is attending the 'Heroes' Summit while I'm here comfortably drinking wine. She may not be as happy as I am." Guo Jing and Huang Rong were occupied with strategies to defeat the enemy, how could they care about what their daughter was doing? Guo Jing did not even know her whereabouts nor bother to find

out. Huang Rong asked around but knew her daughter's strange character so she could only laugh.

Many of the heroes present had great capacity for liquor and felt that the wine was excellent, their spirits were boosted and they displayed their martial skills. Huang Rong missed her daughter and told Guo Fu, "Go get your sister here to join in the fun. This kind of grand occasion occurs only once in a lifetime."

Guo Fu said, "No way am I going. Sister is unhappy now and is waiting for any opportunity to argue with me, I'm not going to bang my head against the wall."

Guo Polu said, "I'll get her here." He hurriedly left and walked towards her room.

After a short while Guo Polu returned alone; before he could say anything Guo Fu said, "Didn't I say she wouldn't come?"

Huang Rong saw her son's face was devoid of colour and asked, "What did she say?"

Guo Polu said, "She said she's hosting a mini 'Heroes' Summit in her room, so she won't be attending the major 'Heroes' Summit."

Huang Rong smiled, "Only your sister can think of such crazy things, leave her alone."

Guo Polu said, "But she has guests. Five males and two females are drinking inside Sister's room."

Huang Rong frowned and thought that this girl was getting more and more out of hand. How could a young girl invite men to her room to dine? Her 'Little Eastern Heretic' nickname was indeed fully deserved, but today there were many guests so she could not be punished and spoil the atmosphere. So she told Guo Fu, "Your brother is young and

doesn't know how to entertain guests, you go. Invite your sister's friends to the banquet as well, so that we can get to know each other."

Guo Fu was curious to find out what sort of guests her sister had. She knew her sister did not bother about what was proper between males and females and enjoyed making friends with all kinds of people. She thought these people must be thugs or similar characters. When she heard her mother instruct her to do so, she immediately got up and went to Guo Xiang's room.

As she stood near the door, she heard Guo Xiang say, "Little Wooden Head, tell the kitchen to send another two pots of wine." 'Little Wooden Head' was a maid and Guo Xiang had given her the unusual nickname. The maid acknowledged the order. Then she heard Guo Xiang say again, "Tell the kitchen to cook another two goats' legs and 20 jin of beef." The maid replied affirmatively and exited the room. Then from the room came a rough voice saying, "Miss Guo is frank and straightforward, too bad I, Ren Chuzi, didn't know that before or I'd have been friends with you long ago." Guo Xiang laughed, "Becoming friends now is not too late."

Guo Fu frowned and looked through the window slit. She saw a short table in her sister's room and there were many wine cups on the table. The eight people were sitting on the floor and drinking merrily. There was a fat man facing her with his shirt exposing half his chest, showing his thick and black chest hair. On his left was a scholar with neat clothes and he was fanning himself lightly with his fan, appearing to be refined. His fan had a drawing of a ghost sticking out its tongue. On his left was a woman of about forty years old with a delicate face, but her face had around ten sword scars. Sitting opposite her was a tall and skinny camel-like man with a shiny golden head-dress and his mouth was biting into half a chicken and eating joyously. There were three whose

backs were facing the window, so Guo Fu could not see their faces. She saw that two of them were white haired men while the other was a black-clad priestess. Guo Xiang was sitting in between them and her face was red like an apple, her eyes showed signs of her consuming liquor and she was talking merrily. Guo Fu thought they were so happy here, if she invited them to the banquet they looked like they would not go.

Then one of the white-haired men stood up and said, "Today's feast is almost over, on this lady's birthday, we shall come and drink again. This old man has a small gift; it might make the lady laugh." As he said that he took out a box and placed it on the table. The other old man said, "Bai Chaoxian, what are you giving her, let me see." He then flipped open the box and could not help but draw in his breath sharply, saying, "Ah, this is a thousand-year-old snow Ginseng, did you get it from the bottom of the river?" He placed it in his palm.

Guo Fu saw him holding a foot-long snowy white Ginseng, with its 'head', 'body' 'hands' and 'feet' all in place and showing a slight trace of red, indicating that it was a rare and exclusive Ginseng root.

The people all praised it and that old man was very proud; then he said, "This snow Ginseng can cure terminal diseases, neutralize hundreds of poisons; it's even said to be able to resurrect a person. This lady will live to be a hundred, so she doesn't have to use it. But on her 100th birthday, she just may need to take it so she can live for another 100 years." The people all clapped and praised him.

The fat Ren Chuzi took out a money box from his bosom and laughed, "This is a small toy, and hopefully it can amuse the lady." He opened the box and took out two metal-cast monks of around seven inches tall and activated a mechanism,

causing the monks to exchange punches and kicks. The people all laughed as they watched this. The monks displayed strokes from Shaolin's Luo Han boxing, and exchanged dozens of moves before stopping, then standing at attention, which was the style of highly-skilled Shaolin monks.

The people all stopped laughing when they saw this and their faces changed colour. The scar-faced woman said, "Ren Chuzi, don't bring trouble to Miss Guo! This is the metal Luo Han from the Shaolin Temple, how could you steal them?"

Ren Chuzi laughed, "Heh-heh, even if I'm not afraid of the sky or the Earth, I wouldn't dare steal anything from the Shaolin Temple. This was given to me by Reverend Wuse of the Shaolin Temple's Luo Han Hall. The elder said when this lady celebrates her birthday, quickly go down to Xiangyang to wish her a happy birthday. Eh, this is my gift." He took off the inner lid from the box and took out a black jade bangle.

The black bangle looked dull and nothing special. Ren Chuzi then drew a thick-backed ghost-headed knife from his waist and chopped down on the bangle. The knife hit the bangle with a 'dang' sound and flew upwards, not even leaving a scratch on the bangle. The people all cheered, then the scholar, priestess, Head Camel and the woman all presented their gifts to Guo Xiang, all highlighting how unique their gifts were. Guo Xiang smiled happily as she received the gifts.

Guo Fu was more and more curious and surprised, so she headed back to the banquet hall and told everything to Huang Rong.

When Huang Rong heard this, she was even more surprised than Guo Fu, so she waved to Zhu Ziliu and the three people went to Guo Xiang's room. Huang Rong told her daughter to repeat the story. Zhu Ziliu was equally surprised and said,

“Ren Chuzi and Bai Chaoxian actually came to Xiangyang? That black-robed priestess should be the Merciless Killer Priestess Shenyang. The scholar’s fan has a drawing of a ghost, hmm; he should be the Turning Wheel King Zhang Yimang.” As he said this, Huang Rong nodded her head. Zhu Ziliu kept shaking his head instead, saying, “There’s nothing much to this. Miss Guo has never gone beyond 10 li of Xiangyang except for once recently, how could she get to know such strange people? Moreover, I heard Shaolin Temple’s Reverend Wuse has not shown his face in recent years; even eminent people of Wulin who visit the Shaolin Temple don’t get to see him. Why would he come to Xiangyang to wish a girl happy birthday? Hmm, maybe she just wants to fool around with her sister by coming up with this.”

Huang Rong said lowly, “But we seldom mention people like Priestess Shenyang and Zhang Yimang, so even if Xiang’er knew, she couldn’t have thought of this.”

Zhu Ziliu said, “Then it must be true. Let’s go take a look and meet them. Since they’re her friends, they wouldn’t have any bad intentions by coming to Xiangyang.”

Huang Rong said, “I think so too, but people like Priestess Shenyang and Turning Wheel King Zhang Yimang are hard to classify as good or bad. Although this is not a big problem, it is enough to cause a headache. Here we are defending against the enemy and now we’re not sure how to deal with these weird people...”

Suddenly someone outside the window laughed, saying, “Madam Guo, this group of people are visiting Xiangyang only to convey our birthday wishes, we have no other intentions, why the headache? When the last few words were heard, the voice was already far away. Huang Rong, Zhu Ziliu and Guo Fu went to the window together and saw black

shadows flashing out and disappearing behind the wall. Guo Fu wanted to give chase but was held back by Huang Rong, who said, "Don't bother; you can't catch up with them!" Then they saw a white fan hanging from a tree branch outside.

That fan was up in the tree about four yards away, Guo Fu knew she couldn't reach it and called, "Mother!" Huang Rong nodded her head, and lightly leapt forwards and grabbed a branch with her left hand, then flipped around and grabbed another branch with her right hand. She caught the fan and lightly jumped to the ground.

The three people went back indoors and under the candle light, saw the drawing of a ghost sticking out its tongue with a silly grin and both hands clutched together. On the side were several words, "Wishing Miss Guo many happy returns and living to a ripe old age." Huang Rong flipped over the fan and the words said, "Black-robed priestess Shenyong, Bai Chaoxian, Jiu Sisen, Dog-meat Head Camel, Han Wugou and Zhang Yimang greet Hero Guo and Madam Guo. We celebrated your daughter's birthday without permission, we apologize for the offence."

Zhu Ziliu was an expert in calligraphy, so he praised, "Good, good calligraphy!"

Huang Rong said, "Let's go see Xiang'er."

Zhu Ziliu was already quite old and was not suspicious of the girl so they all went into Guo Xiang's room. They saw Little Wooden Head and another servant clearing the dishes. Guo Xiang said, "Uncle Zhu, Mother, Sister, look at the birthday gifts my guests have given me."

When Huang Rong and Zhu Ziliu saw the snow Ginseng, twin iron Luo Han statues, black jade bangle and the other presents, they both praised and marveled at them. Guo Xiang activated the mechanism and the two Luo Han statues

started to spar, which made her feel really proud. Huang Rong watched the Luo Han perform the Luo Han Boxing. When they had finished she gently asked, “Xiang’er, what’s going on? Tell Mother.”

Guo Xiang laughed and said, “A few new friends knew my birthday is approaching, so they gave me these amusing things.”

Huang Rong asked, “How did you get to know these people?”

Guo Xiang said, “I got to know them only today. I was alone in the room drinking wine, when Sister Han Wugou stood outside the window and asked, ‘Little lady, we’d like to come in and drink with you, alright?’ I said, ‘Nothing could be better, please come in!’ All of them jumped in through the window then said that on the 24th itself they would come and celebrate my birthday. How do they know my birthday? Mother, they are yours and Father’s friends, right? Or why else would they give me such wonderful things?”

Huang Rong said, “Your Father and I don’t know them. You met some strange friends by appointment, true?”

Guo Xiang laughed, “I don’t have any strange friends, unless it’s Brother-in-law.”

Guo Fu angrily said, “Rubbish! How can your brother-in-law be a strange man?”

Guo Xiang stuck out her tongue and laughed, “After he married you, how can he not be strange?” Guo Fu stretched out her hand to hit her but Guo Xiang laughed and evaded to the side.

Huang Rong said, “You two stop it. Xiang’er, let me ask you, did the Turning Wheel King, Bai Chaoxian (Hundred Plants Deity) and the others say anything about attending the ‘Heroes’ Summit?”

Guo Xiang said, "No, but they said they admire and respect Father."

She asked a few more questions and felt that Guo Xiang was not hiding anything so she said, "OK! Go to sleep." Then she, Zhu Ziliu and Guo Fu went out.

Guo Xiang ran to the door and said, "Mother, this snow Ginseng seems to be rather useful, you take half and Father can take the other half."

Huang Rong said, "But this was given to you as a birthday present!"

Guo Xiang said, "After I was born I didn't do anything much, but you have suffered." Huang Rong did not want to reject her daughter's filial wishes so she took the Ginseng and thought back to Guo Xiang's hardships when she was born and sighed.

The 'Heroes' Feast had dispersed happily and Guo Jing returned to his room. He told his wife about the heroes' determination to drive out the enemy and expressed his joy. Huang Rong then told him about Priestess Shenyang, Bai Chaoxian etc. visiting Guo Xiang.

Guo Jing was surprised, saying, "There's such a thing?" Then he looked at the snow Ginseng and knew that it was a rare and precious gift.

Huang Rong laughed, "Looks like our precious lady's influence far surpasses her parents'." Guo Jing remained silent and bowed his head, thinking about the people she mentioned.

Huang Rong said, "Brother Jing, maybe we should host the Beggar Clan Leader's Selection earlier and not postpone Guo Xiang's birthday. If those people actually come, we might not

be able to deal with them while we're busy with the Leader's Selection."

Guo Jing said, "I have another idea. Let's hold it on her birthday itself instead. Then if they actually turn up we can invite them to battle the enemy with us, won't that be great?"

Huang Rong frowned and said, "I'm afraid they're only using Guo Xiang's birthday as an excuse to come, but are actually coming here to cause trouble. Just think what could their relationship with Xiang'er be? Could they be here just to celebrate her birthday? 'A big tree will catch more wind'; there might be many people in Wulin who're not willing to let you be the Chancellor of Wulin."

Guo Jing stood up and laughed, saying, "Rong'er, when it comes to fighting the enemy, the more people the better. Someone else being the Chancellor of Wulin, it would still be the same. Moreover, evil cannot triumph over good; if they're really here to create trouble, we'll entertain them. Your "Dog Beating" skill and my "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms" have not seen action for several years but they may not be rusty yet."

Huang Rong saw that he was in good spirits so she laughed, "OK! We'll do as you say. You take this Snow Ginseng; I think it's worth three to five years of training."

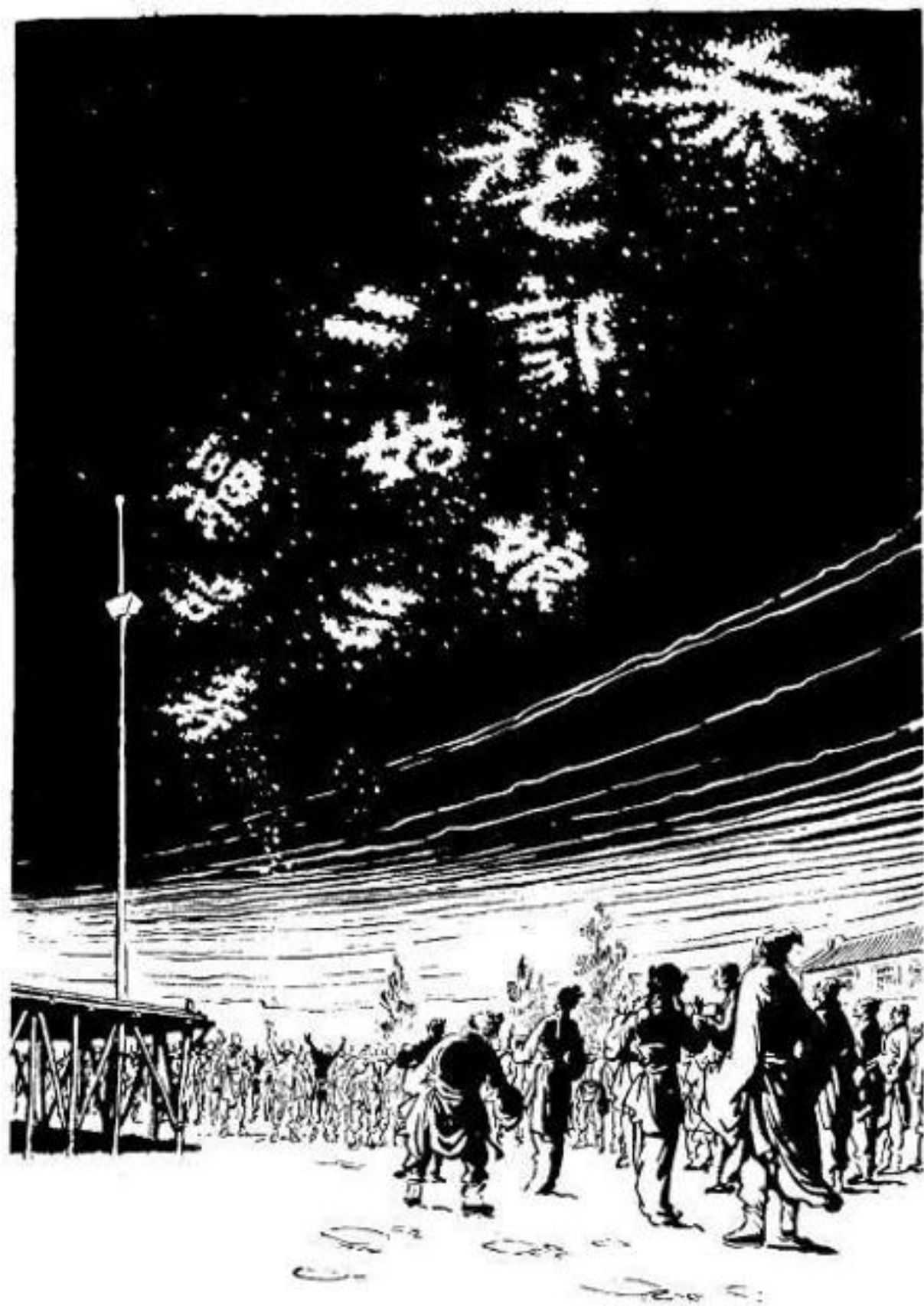
Guo Jing said, "No! You've had three children; your internal strength is weakened, so you should take it."

The husband and wife were very loving and kept pushing the Ginseng to each other for half a day. Guo Jing finally said, "There will be fierce and brutal battles in the coming days and many of our friends will be injured. This snow Ginseng can save many lives, so let's keep it for then."

End of Chapter 35.

Chapter 36 - The Birthday Celebration

Translated by Frans Soetomo



The Ghosts released the fireworks one by one, and they formed a string of characters that read, "Wishing the Second Miss Guo prosperity and longevity!" Each character had its own color and they stayed afloat for quite some time. Everybody cheered.

The following day was the beginning of the Heroes' Summit. Guo Xiang had decided not to join the feast, so Huang Rong had instructed their kitchen workers to prepare some food for her to have her own feast. Guo Fu had been musing for several days on the possibilities as to how her husband would win the Beggar Clan Chief position, so her sister's special feast was very far from her mind.

The Heroes' Summit continued for the next several days. Among other things, they discussed plans on how to unite the valiant and patriotic men and women across the country; plans on how to disrupt the Mongolian troop's swift movements, and plans on how to reinforce Xiangyang's defenses. Everything was properly discussed. The attendees were itching to fight the enemy; they were impatient to slaughter the arriving enemy troops. Guo Jing was happy to see the group's boldness even though he was aware of the strength of the Mongolian army for a long time; definitely not the match for these several thousands Jianghu people. Hence he could not avoid feeling anxious.

The Summit was concluded on the twenty-fourth of the third month, with a very satisfactory result. Just before the closing ceremony, everybody agreed to have the Beggar Clan Chief's election around noon that very same day. And so it was, right after lunch, everybody headed toward the field used for military exercises on the west side. Upon arrival, they all saw a huge stage located right in the middle of the field. On and around the stage nothing was set, not a single chair. This was

in accordance to the Beggar Clan rules and regulations, no matter how big or how small a meeting was, beggars could not lose their identity by sitting on chairs. Toward the south of the stage there were hundreds of chairs prepared for 'outsiders'.

Before one o'clock there were more than two thousand Clan members sitting around the stage. They were the higher level members of the clan. The lowest grade was the fourth. According to the Clan bylaws, these two thousand some members were under the direction of four elders.

There were originally four Elders of the Beggar Clan, namely Elder Lu, Elder Jian, Elder Liang and Elder Peng. Lu Youjiao was promoted to be the Clan Leader, but met a tragic end just recently. Elder Peng had become a traitor and was killed by the Monk Ci'en. Elder Jian had died due to his old age and ailments. Therefore, Elder Liang held the highest position in the Clan. He had three eighth grade disciples as the newly appointed Elders assisting him.

The beggars ushered thousands of valiant men and women from the Heroes' Summit to the chairs. Yelu Qi and his wife Guo Fu, Wu Dunru and his wife Yelu Yan, Wu Xiuwen and his wife Wanyan Ping and the other younger generation sat towards the back. They had trained hard for more than ten years and had achieved significant improvements; they secretly wondered if they would have any opportunity to show off their skills in front of the several thousands heroes that day.

Guo Polu was sitting next to his eldest sister, watching this magnificent setting with awe. He whispered, "Second Sister is so weird. Why doesn't she come and attend this meeting?"

"What's inside that 'Little Eastern Heretic's' mind, nobody can guess," Guo Fu snickered.

In not too long, an eighth grade disciple toward the east side stood up and blew a giant shell horn, “whooh ... whooh ... whooooo ...!” It was the signal that the appointed time had come (it was between one and three in the afternoon).

While the sound of the horn was fading away, Huang Rong leaped on stage and bowed in all directions. She then began her oration with a loud and clear voice. “Today is the big meeting day of our clan. On behalf of the Beggar Clan, I would like to extend our gratitude and respect to all Seniors and Heroes who have made the effort to join us here.” She then bowed one more time, and the guests reciprocated.

“Our beloved leader, the late Chief Lu, was a wise and patriotic man, who devoted his life to the clan and our nation,” Huang Rong continued. “Unfortunately, he was cowardly attacked and killed by that scoundrel Hou Du at the Yang Tai Fu Temple over the hill yonder. This is an un-avenged deep resentment, not mentioning great disgrace to our Clan ...”

These words created loud response from the Beggar Clan members. They remembered Lu Youjiao’s benevolent heart, his impartiality and his patriotism. They were very saddened by his death. Some were sobbing loudly, while the others cursed Hou Du uncontrollably.

After the commotion subsided, Huang Rong continued, “By keeping in mind that the Mongols might attack any moment, we have made the decision not to put our Clan’s need above that of our country. Therefore, we will hold the thought of revenge until a more appropriate time, and we will discuss this matter at length after we defeat the enemies.”

This statement was met by the unanimous approval of the beggars.

“With Chief Lu’s untimely death comes another more pressing matter,” Huang Rong said, “our Clan member’s number in the tens of thousands, scattered across the country. They cannot be left leaderless. Therefore, we have to elect a new Clan Chief, today. We need someone wise and benevolent, who knows martial arts as well as literature, and who will have the love and respect of our entire clan. As to how we are going to elect such leader, Little sister will have to ask Elder Liang to give us further instructions.”

In another moment Elder Liang stood ready on stage. His hair was silvery-white, but his body still erect and his movements fluid. This Elder was welcomed with loud cheering and applause from the audience. In this gathering of about four or five thousands attendees, the applause resembled the rumble of thunder in the middle of the day.

Elder Liang cupped his fists to thank the people for the applause and after it subsided he said, “Former Chief Huang is exceptionally intelligent. What she just said would not be incorrect. She was just being modest by asking the four elders plus the eight eighth grade members to decide on how to elect the new chief. What ability do we, twelve smelly beggars, have in such an important matter?”

Elder Liang paused for a few seconds. The field was quiet. Everybody was straining their ears to hear what this Elder had to say.

After sending his penetrating gaze across the field, Elder Liang continued, “In our humble opinion, even though the beggars are good for nothing, we do have a great number of members scattered throughout the country. As Former Chief Huang has mentioned, we cannot afford to be without a leader. We need a leader who is wise, benevolent and highly skilled in martial arts and literature. We believe with all of our hearts, that leaders like Former Chief Hong Qigong and

Former Chief Huang are one in a million. Leaders like the late Chief Lu, who was loved by all of us. These are not easy to duplicate. Therefore, after a long and careful deliberation, we came to conclusion that the best course to take is to ask Former Chief Huang to get her feet wet and again lead our Clan.” Speaking to this point he paused again because the audience burst out in cheers and applause, even louder than the previous one. The audience thought, “A talented person of Huang Rong’s caliber is not easy to find in the world, let alone within the Beggar Clan.”

Elder Liang waited for the applause to subside; then he continued “If she refuses, then we’ll have to ask again and again. Unfortunately for us, we have a bigger problem threatening our country. The Mongolian armies are attacking Xiangyang and, as a devoted wife as well as a patriot, Former Chief Huang has to stand by the side of Chivalrous Hero Guo (Guo Da Xia) to defeat the enemy and defend our country. This is a formidable task to bear. Thus, if we bother Former Chief Huang with all the nitty-gritty business of the Beggar Clan, wouldn’t the people across the nation curse us stinky beggars until our deaths? And so, after careful consideration, we have made our final decision: Elect a new Chief.”

Elder Liang’s oration was received with nods across the field; the audience thought, “The Beggar Clan truly knows how to place important matters above their own; no wonder they’ve enjoyed the respect of the Jianghu people for hundreds of years.”

“As of now, inside our clan, we do not have someone capable of bearing the burden, and Former Chief Huang herself can not divide her attention for us,” Elder Liang resumed, “The only way we could think of was to invite someone outside our Clan to lead us. This special provision has happened before at the Mount Jun Summit, when we elected Former Chief Huang as our new Chief. As you are all aware, Former Chief

Huang was not a member of our Clan. Needless to say, I was not alone in voicing our discontent and that resulted in a battle. What was the outcome? Ha-ha...! We were beaten and could not help but be subdued by her. Very fortunate for us, since once Former Chief Huang took the lead, our Beggar Clan has developed into a great Clan like the one you all see today. I remember...I can still see it clear as day...how at the Mount Jun Summit Former Chief Huang was still in her teens. By using a mere stick she beat us four Elders into submission. Ha! Now THAT was what I call a hero!" [the word 'hero' here is Ying Xiong - valiant person, not Xia of Da Xia]

Listening to him, everyone's eyes turned involuntarily to Huang Rong. There were a number among the beggars who had attended the Mount Jun Summit. Their hearts were beating faster, as they saw in their minds what happened there when they were still very young.

"At today's meeting we have the valiant people of the Jianghu world in attendance," Elder Liang continued, "Any one of these valiant people deserves to be our leader. However, with so many valiant people around, we do not know how to pick one. Therefore, again after careful consideration, we twelve smelly beggars, decided on an election method that's less than perfect. The method is this: We would like the heroes to show their skills on this stage. Who's strong and who's weak, will be evident to all."

His speech was received with a soft murmur from the audience in every direction. Elder Liang continued, "But I want to stress one very important point. In today's match, as soon as somebody is touched by an opponent, the match has to stop. If anybody is heavily injured or even dies here, we cannot bear the heavy responsibility. If any of you has any grudge against anybody else, we would ask that you do not try to solve the grudge on this stage. If you ignore this

warning, then our Clan does not have any choice but to act accordingly.”

Having said this, he again sent his piercing gaze across the field. Elder Liang thought it was necessary to issue this warning, because if blood were involved in the election process, and valiant people fight violently with each other, then Guo Jing and Huang Rong’s effort to unite the country would be in vain. Elder Liang implied that whoever took any advantage to commit murder would be attacked by all the Beggar Clan’s members.

The valiant people in attendance today were aware that the Beggar Clan Chief election would be exciting; listening to Elder Liang’s speech they began to assess their own abilities. The Seniors, like clan or sect leaders, and those who had a high reputations in the Jianghu world, obviously did not want to fight over the Chief position. They had too many things at stake; not only the shame of defeat, but their reputation as well. Only those forty years and younger were excited and wanted to try. But since there were so many other valiant people around, plus the fact they had to win over the hearts of tens of thousands of beggars, nobody was bold enough to step up. They thought that to compete early meant they had to defeat more people.

After waiting some time, there were still no takers, then Elder Liang shouted, “Except for some Seniors and Heroes who live in seclusion, I can safely say that all the valiant people under the sky are gathered here. Whoever is willing to honor our Clan is welcome to give us a lesson or two. Our own Beggar Clan disciples who think they have some ability are also welcome to step up.”

After repeating his invitation several times there came a loud shout; “I am coming!” A shadow was seen jumping on to the stage. The audience was startled. This man was huge, like a

giant, maybe over 300 jins; the stage swayed a little bit when he landed. Without showing any respect he put his hands on his hips and said with a loud voice, "I am the Thousand-Jin-Giant, Tong Dahai. I don't want to be Clan Chief, but who ever want to fight let them come."

Everybody laughed. They thought they would enjoy a funny show from this silly giant.

"Brother Tong," said Elder Liang, smiling, "This stage is not a sparring ring. If Brother does not wish to become our Chief, then I would ask that you leave."

Tong Dahai shook his big head, "This is obviously a sparring ring, who said it is not? If you don't want a fight, why did you invite people up here?" Before Elder Liang had a chance to respond, he quickly said, "All right. Why don't you fight me?" Having said this he immediately thrust his fist toward Elder Liang's face.

Elder Liang leaped back, still smiling, "Brother Tong, I am an old man. How could I face your huge fist?"

The giant laughed heartily. With a delighted look on his face he said, "You go away ..." but before he could finish his sentence, a shadow flashed by, and on that stage stood a beggar with ragged clothes.

That beggar was around thirty years of age and had six bags on his back. He was one of Elder Liang's own grand martial disciples. He was also a rash man that could not contain himself upon seeing Tong Dahai being disrespectful toward his Grand Martial Master. "Brother Tong, you are not worthy to fight my Grand Martial Master," he said, "Let me accompany you for three stances."

"Nothing better than that!" the giant shouted, and without asking the beggar's name, he thrust his fist toward the

beggar's chest, "Watch out!"

The beggar turned his back and "smack!" that fist hit the sack on his back.

Tong Dahai felt his fist was hitting something soft and slippery. "What's inside your bag?" he asked.

The beggar snickered. "What's a beggar's usual catch?" he asked in response.

Tong Dahai was shocked. "Snake ...!" he cried.

"Yes, it's a snake!" the beggar answered.

Tong Dahai was half disgusted and half furious. He sent another fist toward the beggar's face. But the beggar was quick. In a flash he leaped high into the air and did a somersault and again turned his back toward the giant.

Tong Dahai was afraid the snake would bite him, or perhaps his fist would hit the snake's fangs; his movements became awkward since he was trying to avoid hitting the beggar's back. He delivered a right foot kick instead. The beggar knew the giant was afraid and he wanted to have some fun. While rolling himself on the stage, he quickly took his backpack and placed it on his calf. Actually the snake inside his bag was tame, and it had no venomous teeth, but Tong Dahai did not know this. He was getting anxious because his attacks gave him no desirable results. Suddenly the beggar's right hand grabbed his chest. "Wu Zixu lifts high the Thousand-Jin-Giant [play of words: 'wu zi' means 'five kids']," he said, and lifted the giant's body high in the air.

Because the 'zi gong' [purple palace] accupoint on his chest was sealed, Tong Dahai was helpless, and the audience burst into laughter.

“Let him go! Don’t be rude!” barked Elder Liang, but he could not help laughing too.

“All right,” the beggar complied. He let the giant go, and jumping down from the stage, he vanished amongst the crowd.

Tong Dahai’s face was purple with rage; he was embarrassed and angry at the same time. “Stinky beggar!” he cursed, “Come! Let’s fight again with weapons. What good is running away like that? Stinky Beggar! Sickly Beggar!” The beggars just laughed, and nobody paid him any attention.

Suddenly, another shadow leaped in, and when his left foot reached the stage, he staggered like he was going to fall down.

Tong Dahai was reckless, but not wicked. He shouted, “Watch out!” and immediately moved forward to hold the man. It turned out that the man was only pretending. He wanted to show off in front of all the valiant people. He quickly grabbed the giant’s hand, and pushed with the ‘The Heavenly King Falling Down’ move [dao die jin gang]. Tong Dahai’s body was thrown to the ground. The audience looked at that neatly dressed, long eye-browed handsome young man, who was none other than Wu Xiuwen, Guo Jing’s disciple.

Guo Jing – who sat on the front row, was irritated with Wu Xiuwen’s behavior; his countenance changed. And he was not alone. But before he could do anything, shouts were heard from east and west of the stage: “Good martial arts! Let me accept a lesson or two from you!” “What did you do?” “You repaid kindness with rudeness.” Three men had jumped on stage.

At that time, Wu Xiuwen could be regarded as a first class fighter among the younger generation. Not only had he received tutelage from Guo Jing and Huang Rong, but also

the Solitary Yang Finger from his own father and martial uncles. Seeing three men on stage, he was delighted. "Let me beat them once and for all," he thought.

He didn't want those three to take turns fighting him, so without saying anything he attacked all three of them. Those three had just landed their feet on the stage, and were attacked before they could get a firm footing. No wonder they wavered and could not defend themselves. Xiuwen didn't give them a chance. Quick as a flash his fists flew around so that those three felt like they were under a heavy rain of fists. They tried to retaliate, but ended up hitting each other. The audience was surprised and impressed. "Guo Da Xia is really a hero without peer," they thought, "his disciple is so fierce."

Those three counter-attacked again and again, but still could not get out from under Wu Xiuwen's fists.

Wanyan Ping saw her husband had the upper hand and could not help but feel so proud.

"Of course those three dummies are not Brother Xiuwen's match," said Guo Fu. "Why did he go on stage and waste his energy for nothing? When someone with a really high skill shows up later, wouldn't it be difficult for him to beat them?"

Wanyan Ping was gentle by nature; she only smiled and ignored Guo Fu. Yelu Yan, on the other hand, was more straightforward. She was the sister of Yelu Qi, thus the sister-in-law of Guo Fu. Hearing Guo Fu's remark -she understood very well what it meant- she could not hold her peace any longer. "This situation actually fits you very well," she snickered. "Young Wu beats several people, and when somebody beats him, Dunru will go next and beat some more. And finally my brother will go and beat the rest of the competitors. Then Sister-in-law can be Mrs. Clan Chief with little effort."

Guo Fu blushed. "There are so many valiant people here, and they all want to be Clan Chief," she said with embarrassment in her voice, "how could you say 'with little effort?'"

"Actually, my brother does not even have to go on stage," Yelu Yan continued.

"Why so?" Guo Fu was curious.

"Didn't you hear Elder Liang?" her sister-in-law asked. "When the Beggar Clan Mount Jun Summit was held, Mistress was only in her teens. Wielding only a bamboo stick she subdued everybody and became the Clan leader. They say 'the apple fell not far from the tree'; Sister-in-law, I think you'd better go on stage. I believe you have a better chance than my brother to be the Beggar Clan Chief."

"Such a sharp tongue! You dare to mock me! Good!" Guo Fu shouted, attacking her sister-in-law's armpit. Yelu Yan leaped backward. "Clan Chief! Help!" she called out, laughing hard. "Mrs. Clan Chief wants to kill me!"

By this time Guo Fu, Xiuwen and Dunru were already over thirty years of age, and Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping had children. But they still liked to fool around like kids.

In the meantime, Huang Rong – who sat next to Guo Jing, was always alert. She kept looking around the field, to see if any strangers had sneaked in. She had instructed several Beggar Clan members to guard the area and report to her immediately if they saw anything out of ordinary. She was still worried that Shenyang Shitay, Han Wugou, Zhang Yimang and the others would show up and create a disruption. But till the end of eighth hour entering the ninth hour [i.e. around 3-4 o'clock in the afternoon] everything was still under control.

“Why would those weirdoes gather in Xiangyang?” she asked herself. “Something should have been happening by now. It’s beyond me that they would come over just to wish Xiang’er a happy birthday.” She lowered her head and sighed. Her intelligence could not penetrate this mystery.

Another time she lifted her head and watched the match on the stage. Xiuwen had defeated two competitors, and looked like the third would not hold him much longer. “Today the valiant people of the world are competing for the Clan Chief position,” she thought, “I wonder who will hold this prestigious position?”

Of course the same question had been hovering in everybody’s mind.

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Except ... in the Chinese peony pavilion [shao yao ting] behind the Guo’s Family Mansion, there was somebody who did not show the slightest interest in what was happening on the field. She sat alone daydreaming, with many questions in her heart. “That day I gave him one golden needle and specifically asked him to see me today. Today is my sixteenth birthday. That day, he gave me his promise. Why doesn’t he show up?”

She was sitting on a porch, leaning against a doorpost. The sun slowly crept to the west. “It’s already afternoon. Even if he comes, we will meet for only half a day at most,” she said softly to herself.

She looked at the flowerbeds, while her little fingers held the last golden needle. She sighed and with an almost inaudible voice said again, “I can ask him one last favor ... ah...! I think he has already forgotten me. He doesn’t even remember his promise for today. What other favor I could ask?” Another moment later she had another thought, “It’s impossible. He

wouldn't forget his promise. He is a chivalrous hero (Da Xia) of the world, and he must always keep his word. Just wait ... he'll be here." With this thought, her face turned pink and the fingers that hold the golden needle were shaking a little bit.

She sighed again. One thought kept coming back. "Even though he is a chivalrous hero, and he always keeps his word, I am only a young girl," she thought, heart beating faster. "If he made a promise to Father, he would not fail to keep his word. But to me, I am only the 'Young Eastern Heretic' (Xiao Dong Xia) Guo Xiang. What am I worth in his eyes? Only a young girl! It's very possible that when he remembered his promise, he would only laugh and said: Ah! Don't bother!"

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While Guo Xiang was busy thinking in the Chinese peony pavilion, Huang Rong, on the field, could not keep her second daughter off her mind. "According to Brother Jing, there were only two persons in this whole wide world who had the internal energy high enough to help Fu'er and Xiang'er back at the Yang Tai Fu temple," she thought. "If not the Benevolent Master Hong Qigong, then it must be Brother Jing himself. The fact is, the Benevolent Master had passed away, and Brother Jing didn't do it. Who could it be that invited those strange characters to wish Xiang'er a happy birthday? Old Urchin Zhou Botong loves to fool around, but even he could not make this meticulous plan. Reverend Yideng? Not likely; he is a monk. Western Poison Ouyang Feng and Monk Ci'en Qiu Qianren both have passed away. Could it be ... Father?"

Huang Rong had not seen her father for more than ten years. Huang Yaoshi was like a wandering cloud or a wild crane, roaming Jianghu; nobody knew his whereabouts. She thought the peculiarity of this mystery went well with her father's

character. For a long time the name, Huang Yaoshi, had been well known in the Jianghu world, and people called him the 'Eastern Heretic'. His peculiar way of thinking went very well with those weird people. So if the 'Old Heretic Huang' asked, they would certainly oblige.

Having this thought, Huang Rong's heart beat faster and her countenance brightened. True, it was not appropriate for a grandfather to make jokes with his granddaughter. But Huang Yaoshi did not follow 'appropriateness', the custom and regulations of the day. He was like a heavenly dragon that was out of this world. Huang Rong was his daughter, but even she could not predict what he would do. Could it be that this grandfather had invited guests to congratulate his granddaughter? She held this train of thought and asked Guo Fu. "When she returned from those two days of being missing at Fenglingdu, did she mention Grandfather's name?"

"No. Sister has never even seen Grandfather."

"Think hard," urged her mother. "She left Fenglingdu and went with Xishan Ghosts, did your sister ever mention anybody else?"

"No," she answered, shaking her head.

Of course Guo Fu knew that her sister went to see Yang Guo. It was all right with her mother, but if her father ever heard that name, he would turn sour and wouldn't talk to her for two or three days. Therefore, while Guo Xiang herself didn't mention Yang Guo, Guo Fu certainly was not willing to look for trouble.

Huang Rong saw her daughter's countenance change and she knew Guo Fu was hiding something from her. "This is not a simple matter," she said. "If you know anything, you'd better tell me."

Guo Fu did not dare to hold back anymore. "That day we heard people were talking about the Eagle Hero, which is Yang ... Yang ... Yang Guo," she said. "After listening to their stories, Sister insisted she wanted to see him."

Huang Rong was startled. "Did Xiang'er meet him?" she asked.

"Of course not," came the answer. "If she did, she wouldn't stop bragging about it."

"Guo'er ... Guo'er ..." mumbled Huang Rong softly. "Is it him?" She turned to her daughter and continued, "Fu'er, what do you think? Was it him who killed Nimoxing at the Yang Tai Fu Temple?"

"How could it be him?" Guo Fu answered, "How could Yang ... Yang Da Ge [big brother Yang] have this kind of martial art?"

"What did you and your sister talk about in the Yang Tai Fu Temple? Tell me all, don't skip anything," Huang Rong said.

"It was nothing important," Guo Fu said, "Mei zi [little sister] loves to bicker with me." And then she narrated how her little sister didn't want to attend the Heroes Summit, didn't want to see the Beggar Clan Chief election, and how she told her that a very handsome hero would visit her on her birthday. Finally, she laughed and said, "Her friends did indeed come to visit. But they are monks, priestesses, grandpas and grandmas. Where is that handsome hero?"

Now Huang Rong was convinced that the handsome hero could not be anybody else but Yang Guo. She thought Guo Xiang and Yang Guo had made an appointment to meet at the Yang Tai Fu Temple, but that plan was foiled by Guo Fu. Then, to vent his anger Yang Guo had invited several Jianghu characters to wish Guo Xiang a happy birthday. "But ... why would he spend so much time and energy just for a kid like

Xiang'er?" she asked herself. Suddenly she remembered Guo Xiang's extraordinary behavior. She remembered how Guo Xiang liked to daydream, talked to herself, and her countenance turned pink for no reason. Huang Rong shuddered involuntarily. Her heart pounding, she thought, "We are doomed! Yang Guo hates me because I caused his father's death; he hates Fu'er who chopped off his arm, he hates Fu'er even more for striking Xiao Longnu with a poison needle. Xiao Longnu promised to meet him sixteen years later, and now it is sixteen years later. Aiyo! Yang Guo is coming to exact his revenge."

Once the thought 'Yang Guo is coming to exact his revenge' came into her mind, cold sweat trickled down her spine. She knew Yang Guo's behavior was completely unpredictable; his love for Xiao Longnu was very deep. If he had waited sorrowfully for sixteen years and Xiao Longnu did not show up, he might unleash his anger and frustrations at the Guo family. After sixteen years it would not be enough just to kill Guo Fu; he must have another evil scheme in his mind. "Could it be that Guo Xiang was his target? Making her fall in love with him, then crushing her heart so she would suffer for the rest of her life? Well, with Yang Guo's personality, that was very possible." Once she finished her train of thought, she came to a conclusion: Yang Guo killed Nimoxing to save Guo Xiang's life, then he sent several strange characters to wish her a happy birthday; his intention was to win her heart.

"But ... something is not right!" her brain clicked again. "Today is Xiang'er's sixteenth birthday. It was several months after Xiang'er was born that he parted with Xiao Longnu in the Passionless Valley. If he wanted to exact revenge, he would've waited for a full sixteen years, just like his wife had promised him ... Although this sixteen-year appointment is questionable, that message was obviously her own handwriting. Who can tell if the two of them, husband and wife, will or will not see each other again? But my father ...

and the 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' [Nan Hai Shen Ni] ...” The longer she thought, the more muddled her mind became. “Ah! Whatever happens, Xiang’er should not be allowed to see him,” she thought. “Xiang’er is just a child, she is too naïve for man’s wickedness.”

Suddenly an “Aiyo!” was heard from the stage. Huang Rong turned her gaze there and she saw Xiuwen’s palm strength had sent a fat monk down from the stage. She approached her husband and whispered, “You wait here. I am going to see Xiang’er.”

“Isn’t Xiang’er here?” asked her husband.

“I will bring her here,” she answered. “That child is a little weird.”

Guo Jing looked at his wife with smile on his face. Wasn’t his wife also a weird child? He remembered the very first time they met, when Huang Rong was dressed like a beggar boy.

Seeing his smile, Huang Rong also smiled, and briskly walked back to her mansion. As upset as she was, seeing her husband’s smile and his broad shoulders – like he was strong enough to carry the burden of the whole world, Huang Rong suddenly felt better.

Arriving at Guo Xiang’s room, she did not find her daughter there; and was told by a maid that the Second Miss went out to the flower garden and said that she was not to be disturbed.

Huang Rong was shocked. “Xiang’er did not want to see the election, I am sure she’s made another appointment with Yang Guo,” she thought. She then turned her steps toward her own room, to get her own steel needle projectiles, slipped a dagger on her waist, and fetched her short stick. Only then did she go to the flower garden. She understood very well

that Yang Guo now wouldn't be the same as the Yang Guo of the past. He was already a formidable opponent then and she would not dare to be careless. She did not take the brick-covered path, but walked stealthily around the decorative stones and rocks scattered throughout the garden. Nearing the pavilion she could hear her daughter's sigh.

She went closer still and hid herself behind a big rock. A moment later she heard her daughter's voice, "Why isn't he here yet?"

Huang Rong was relieved. "Turns out he is not here yet. I can still prevent them from meeting," she thought.

"Every birthday Mother always tell me to make three wishes," she heard Guo Xiang was talking to herself. "Good thing there is nobody around; I can talk to Heaven."

Huang Rong was about to step out, but hearing her last sentence she stayed in her hiding place. "Even though I'm her mother, I can't predict what is in her heart," she thought, "let me hear what she has to say."

A moment later Guo Xiang said, "God of Heaven, my first wish is that Father and Mother will be successful in leading the army and the multitude of valiant people to defeat the Mongolian invaders, so that the people of Xiangyang will live in peace and prosperity."

Huang Rong exhaled softly. "Even though I call her weird, this child has a benevolent heart," she praised her in her heart.

"My second wish is that Father and Mother are granted good health and longevity, that they may live to a hundred years," the young miss continued. "I wish that everything will happen just like they have wanted."

Guo Xiang was born to her parents when they were facing a great danger. Huang Rong's heart pounded every time she recalled that incident. Thus, without her realizing it, her love toward Guo Xiang was not as strong as toward Guo Fu. But now, hearing the little girl's wish, she was very touched and tears welled up in her eyes.

The young miss paused a moment before she continued, "My third wish is for the Eagle Hero Yang Guo ..."

Huang Rong was startled. She had thought that the third wish must've had something to do with Yang Guo, but hearing his name, she was still startled. "... that he might meet his wife, Xiao Longnu, a lot sooner, and let them live happily forever," finished Guo Xiang.

This third wish floored Huang Rong. She originally thought Yang Guo had deceived her daughter with all kind of lies. Who would have known that her daughter knew everything about his marriage to Xiao Longnu and what had happened to them afterward. But a moment later another thought entered her mind and she became worried again. "Damn it, Yang Guo is so shrewd!" she moaned. "By showing her that he had never forgotten his wife, he earned Xiang'er's highest respect. Right! If after meeting me Brother Jing had ignored Princess Hua Zheng, I would've looked down on him."

And so, because Huang Rong regarded this matter from all possible directions; she became fearful of Yang Guo molesting her daughter. She started to breathe heavily; her own mind had driven her to distraction.

Suddenly an unusual noise was heard above the wall, followed by someone jumping down to the ground. His body was short and small, but his head was big. His figure, as well as his face looked ridiculously strange.

But Guo Xiang leaped with joy upon seeing this dwarf. "Uncle Big Head Ghost!" she greeted him with delight, "Is ... is he coming?"

That man indeed was the Big Head Ghost. He walked to the pavilion and made obeisance to Guo Xiang. "Aiyo!" cried the young Miss, "Uncle Big Head Ghost, don't you honor me like that."

"Miss, don't call me 'Uncle Big Head Ghost'," he said, "just call me 'Big Head Ghost'. The Eagle Hero has instructed me to let Miss know ..."

"He isn't able to come?" cut in Guo Xiang, desperation in her voice, while tears welled up in her eyes, "He gave me his promise ..."

"No, not at all," answered Big Head Ghost, repeatedly shaking his big head.

"Why not?" asked Guo Xiang. "Didn't you know, he did give his promise to me?" Tears almost flowed down her cheeks.

"Miss, I did not say that the Eagle Hero did not give you his promise, or that he is not able to come," explained the Ghost.

"Just look at you," Guo Xiang sulked, "You are talking gibberish, not this, not that ..."

The Big Head Ghost showed a faint smile, "The Eagle Hero said that since he had to prepare three gifts for your birthday, he will be a little bit late."

Guo Xiang was pouting, "Too many people bringing me birthday gifts; I have everything already. Please tell Big Brother not to bother me with any other gifts."

The Big Head Ghost shook his head. "Among those three gifts, the first one is ready; while the second one has to be

prepared by him personally, with some of our friends. It is very possible that it is ready as we speak."

Guo Xiang sighed. "Actually, I prefer not to receive any gifts, as long as he comes quickly," she said softly.

"About the third gift, the Eagle Hero said that Miss needs to go to the field where the election is being held. You need to receive the gift straight from his hand," the Big Head Ghost continued. "Now that it's almost that time, I think you'd better go."

Guo Xiang sighed again, and then laughing she said, "I have told Big Sister I don't want to see the Chief's Election. But since Big Brother says to go, I have no choice. Very well, let's go together."

The Big Head Ghost nodded his big head and then he whistled. Suddenly a dark shadow jumped over the wall from outside, it was none other than the Divine Eagle itself. As soon as Guo Xiang saw it, she immediately went over and tried to hug its neck like they were a pair of long-lost friends. But the Eagle moved back two steps and stood straight arrogantly, turning its head and only looking at Guo Xiang with the corner of its eyes. The little Miss was amused, she laughed, "Brother Eagle is so proud. You are ignoring me, but I want to hug you." She jumped forward and tried to hug it again. This time the Eagle did not avoid her and let its neck be hugged tightly; but its attitude was like a father's resignation over a mischievous loveable daughter. "Brother Eagle," Guo Xiang said, "Let us go together. I will give you some delicious food. Do you like to drink wine?"

The Big Head Ghost clapped his hands. "Good! The Divine Eagle loves to drink wine," he said.

And so two people and one Eagle ran toward the field. Entering the area the gathered heroes expressed their

admiration by clucking their tongues at seeing the eagle's huge body and its strange appearance.

Guo Xiang invited the Big Head Ghost and the Eagle to sit on the ground not too far from the stage. The Beggar Clan disciples who acted as the hosts immediately came and asked the Big Head Ghost's name.

"I don't have a name and I know nothing! Miss Guo brought me here, I follow her!" he answered coldly.

Huang Rong followed not too far behind, she thought, "Yang Guo is going to appear on the field; that means he's made a thorough plan; we might have a big fight later."

At that time both Wu brothers, Dunru and Xiuwen, had been beaten. Zhu Ziliu's martial nephew, as well as three of the Fisherman's [Si Shui Yu Yin's] disciples, four eighth grade and six seventh grade Beggar Clan's disciples, had gone on stage, to defeat and be defeated by their opponents. Right now Yelu Qi was on the stage. He had defeated three opponents, using Zhou Botong's 72-stance "Vacant Fist" technique, and now was fighting a forty something year old man.

This man's name was Lan Tianhe, a Miao [an ethnic group] from Guizhou. When he was young, Tianhe went gathering herbs in the mountainous area of Sichuan province. There he slipped and fell down a ravine, and was rescued by a skilled martial artist. He then learned from his rescuer the external type of martial arts [wai-gong, as opposed to nei-gong]; as a result, his fists created a loud noise. Yelu Qi's kungfu on the other hand did not create any noise at all; his hands and feet floating silently with fierce attacks interspersed in between. Their match was very impressive.

The opponents had exchanged stances for quite some time. The several hundred spectators who wanted to go on the

stage were ashamed by their own inferiority and thought, "Luckily I wasn't rash enough to go on stage; otherwise I am just going to make a scene with my inadequacy. Even if I trained hard for ten more years I won't necessarily be able to defeat either of these two combatants."

Lan Tianhe's strong and forceful attacks required a lot of energy; he felt he was getting tired. Yelu Qi, on the other hand, kept his attacks steady, not getting too fierce, but also not slacking off. He knew there were more tough contenders out there. He wanted to conserve his energy.

After fighting for quite some time Lan Tianhe became impatient; he had roamed the southwest area for over twenty years and nobody was able to withstand more than thirty stances of his attacks. Unexpectedly that day, in front of thousands of heroes, he met his match. Gradually he increased his strength and very soon the two had exchanged twenty more stances.

Lan Tianhe saw an opening in his opponent's defense, "Got you!" he shouted. He used one of his trick stances, 'Nine Demons Seize a Star' [jiu gui zhai xing]. His fist went straight toward Yelu Qi's chest.

Yelu Qi's right palm made a sweeping motion, his hands intersecting, and parried the opponent's fist. They stood motionless for a few seconds. The fight turned into an inner strength contest. Then Lan Tianhe's expression changed; he staggered backward then cupped his fists to his opponent and said, "I concede!" He proceeded to the edge of the stage and loudly said, "Mr. Yelu has a benevolent heart; he didn't want to take my life, for which I am very grateful!" He took a deep breath, shook his head and leaped down from the stage.

Yelu Qi also cupped his hands and said, "I have the same admiration for Lan Xiong [Brother Lan]."

When Lan Tianhe's fist met with Yelu Qi's palm, immediately he sent his inner strength out he felt like his force was hitting water; it felt empty yet not empty, it felt solid yet not solid; and he felt his energy being sucked in. Then he felt his opponent's force entering his hand, flowing to his chest through his arm, and attacking his 'dan tian' like bowls of boiling water. Stunned and feeling like he was going to explode, he nervously tried to pull his fist back, but it was stuck as though glued to his opponent's palm, even after he pulled it back about half a foot. He then remembered his master's instructions that with his "Wind and Thunder" technique he could roam Jianghu, but he had to be very careful fighting against a nei-gong martial artist; as soon as the opponent's energy entered his 'dan tian' he would die violently. As soon as this thought entered his mind he closed his eyes, ready to die. But suddenly his fist was free; the heat in his 'dan tian' was also slowly dispersed. He circulated his 'qi' and did not feel any injury within; then he knew his opponent had shown mercy and spared his life. He felt ashamed and willingly admitted defeat to the public.

When the two fought the long fight on stage everybody could see Lan Tianhe's overwhelming palm strength; it was both swift and fierce. But Yelu Qi unexpectedly defeated him with an invisible force. Nobody knew what exactly happened, but after his victory nobody dared to challenge him on stage.

As Guo Jing and Huang Rong's son-in-law, Yelu Qi had close ties with the Beggar Clan. The four elders and twelve eighth grade disciples all agreed to elect him as the Clan Chief. Yelu Qi was Zhou Botong's disciple, hence all Quanzhen disciples present were his juniors. Because other people regarded Guo Jing, husband and wife, and the Quanzhen Sect with respect, nobody was really keen on challenging him. Several other people who did not realize their own lower skills had come onstage but he defeated them one by one.

Seeing her husband had gone this far, Guo Fu's delight was unspeakable. But then she saw the Eagle and the dwarf with a big head she met at Fenglingdu were sitting next to Guo Xiang; she was startled. When Guo Xiang made her entrance to the field along with the Big Head Ghost and the eagle Yelu Qi's fight with Lan Tianhe was very intense so that Guo Fu's attention was focused on the stage. Although the eagle was impressive, she completely missed their entrance.

Now that a strong opponent had been defeated she wondered, when did her little sister tell her about coming to the field? She was secretly startled, "Not good! Yang Guo's title is Divine Eagle Big Hero [shen diao da xia]; could it be that this big and ugly bird is his Divine Eagle [shen diao]? The bird is here, chances are that Yang Guo is close by. He is going to be the Clan Chief ... He is going to be the Clan Chief ...!"

From a mood of delight, this young mistress became upset. She recalled the incident when Yang Guo bent her sword just using his empty sleeve. She thought, "Brother Qi is good, but he is no match for this one-armed freak. It looks like he is my Black Star (opposing opposite) always appearing at critical moments like this ...!" She looked around in all directions, but not even his shadow could be seen.

The sky was getting darker; Yelu Qi had defeated seven opponents. After waiting for quite some time and since no one appeared to challenge, Elder Liang went up and announced loud and clear, "Master Yelu is intelligent and chivalrous. We all admire him; the whole Beggar Clan supports his election to the Clan Chief position ..."

Immediately the beggars around the stage applauded and cheered.

"I wonder if there is another valiant hero to challenge him?" Elder Liang continued. Three times he repeated himself, but

got no takers.

Guo Fu was elated. She thought, “Yang Guo is not coming, he’s lost his chance. If he shows up, even by a moment after Brother Qi is inaugurated as the Clan Chief, he would be too late to mess things up.”

The thought had not even left her mind when suddenly they heard two horses galloping fast approaching the field. It seemed like it was a very urgent matter.

“Ah! He is coming after all!” Guo Fu was shocked.

Two horses dashed onto the field and their riders were two gray-robed spies Guo Jing had sent to scout the enemy’s movements. Even though Guo Jing was watching the election contest, his heart was never far from thinking about military matters. As soon as he saw these riders he thought, “Ah! They are coming after all!”

Guo Jing and Guo Fu, father and daughter thought the same ‘coming after all’ but the daughter meant Yang Guo, while her father meant the Mongolian troops, their enemy.

The two riders stopped their horses several ‘zhangs’ [several meters] from the stage, and immediately paid respects to Guo Jing.

Without waiting for them to open their mouths, Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at their faces, trying to guess what the news would be; but they did not see worried faces. They looked so calm, more on the happy side, like they were bearing unexpectedly good news.

“Please be informed Hero Guo,” said one of them, “the Mongolian troops’ left wing has arrived at Xinye. They are one thousand men strong.”

Guo Jing was shocked, secretly thought, "They are that quick!"

"Also the right wing has arrived at Dengzhou, another one thousand men strong," the second spy reported.

Guo Jing uttered a 'Hmm' and silently thought, "The enemy from the north divided their troops into two flanks, and they moved very fast. Truly a sharp strategy." Both Xinye and Dengzhou were only 100 li (50km / 31 miles) or so from Xiangyang. From those cities to Xiangyang, the terrain was flat, with no rivers or mountains on the way. They could reach Xiangyang in just one day.

"Something has happened there. Something strange but pleasant to us," continued the second spy. "The troops at Dengzhou, all one thousand of them, have been killed, including all the officers ..."

"Is that so?" Guo Jing was more amazed.

"That was what I witnessed," the first spy confirmed. "The one thousand strong troops at Xinye have become ghosts, everybody died. The most peculiar thing was they all lost their left ears!"

"The same thing happened at Dengzhou," added the second spy, "they also lost their left ears."

Guo Jing exchanged a look with his wife. They were both surprised and pleased. The enemy was tens of thousands strong, two thousand dead would not make a dent. But the way they died could crush their spirit. Only which troops or who had destroyed the enemy's two flanking troops?

"What about the defense troops at Xinye and Dengzhou?" Guo Jing asked.

“They were still inside their cities,” came the answer, “We don’t think they were even aware that the enemy’s troops were decimated outside their cities.”

“Now go and give the report to General Lu,” commanded Huang Rong, “I am sure he will be pleased and will give you some reward.”

The two spies nodded and happily retreated.

Huang Rong immediately went on stage and made the announcement, which was received with loud cheering and applause by their entire army.

“The Beggar Clan has just elected a new chief, this is a very pleasing news,” said Huang Rong, “but this news is even more pleasing! Elder Liang, please prepare a feast, we will make a celebration!”

A feast had indeed been prepared; therefore, they were able to move swiftly. Everybody was high in spirits, even Dunru and the others who were defeated during their matches. The Beggar Clan party did not allow tables and chairs, so they just sat on bamboo mats laid out scattered across the field. Although humble, the food and wine were sumptuous.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong were repeatedly congratulated. People thought it was their doing. No matter how they denied it, nobody believed them.

“Brother Jing, this is so strange,” said Huang Rong to her husband, “we’ll just ignore them and see what happens.”

Madam Guo then sent eight smart beggars to run to Xinye and Dengzhou to investigate further.

In the meantime, Guo Xiang was still sitting with the Big Head Ghost and the eagle. Nobody dared to come close to them.

"I wonder why Big Brother has not come yet?" Guo Xiang asked.

"He said he will come, he'll come," answered the Big Head Ghost. He was just finishing speaking when he suddenly said, "There! Did you hear that? What's that noise?"

Guo Xiang strained her ears. From a distance she could hear animal noises, loud roars of lions and tigers, loud cries of big monkeys, and the heavy footsteps of elephants.

"The Shi Brothers are here!" Guo Xiang was delighted.

Not too long afterwards everybody could see the beasts. They were shocked and unsheathed their weapons. Panicked voices were heard everywhere, "Where did they come from? Ah! Lions! Tigers! Watch out! Wolves! Leopards...!"

Guo Jing stayed calm. "Go to the city and summon two thousand archers!" he commanded Xiuwen.

"Yes," Xiuwen complied and was just about to move when suddenly a loud voice was heard, "The Shi Brothers from the Beastly Mountain Village are here to carry out the Eagle Hero's instructions to wish Miss Guo Xiang a very happy birthday!"

That voice did not come out of one, but from five mouths. The Shi brothers did not have a high level of internal energy, but by combining their voices, they could be heard from afar.

Even though he heard them; Huang Rong still thought that being prepared wouldn't hurt anything. She signaled Xiuwen to proceed. The Shi Brothers' intent was not yet clear.

Xiuwen worked fast. In no time he arranged the archers to defend the field in a horseshoe formation. These archers were under Guo Jing's coaching. As we remember, Guo Jing himself was a Jebek (master archer – see LOCH). This was also one

reason why Xiangyang could defend itself from the Mongolian troops for dozens of years. The archers were not inferior to the Mongolian archers who were well known throughout the world.

As soon as the archers were in formation, a big man appeared. He wore a tiger fur robe, and was accompanied by a hundred large tigers. It was the White Forehead Mountain Lord Shi Bowei. His tigers immediately sat around him in an orderly fashion.

Following him were Caring Eyesight Sage Shi Zhongmeng with his hundred leopards, Golden Claw Lion King Shi Shugang with his hundred male lions, Immortal of Giant Strength Shi Jiqiang with his hundred big elephants, and Eight Handed Monkey Immortal Shi Mengjie with his hundred big monkeys. These five groups of animals then sat around their masters in neat formations. As well-trained as they were, the animals could not be kept quiet. They kept making loud and frightening noises, which made the hearts of the people of Xiangyang tremble.

Each one of the Shi Brothers brought a leather pouch. They approached Guo Xiang and bowed, "We wish you a very happy birthday, good health and longevity!"

Guo Xiang stood up and reciprocated, "Thank you, Shi Uncles! Third Uncle Shi, is your injury healed? Fifth Uncle Shi, how about the sword wound on your chest?"

Shi Shugang and Shi Mengjie were touched, "Many thanks Miss for showing your concern, we are healed."

Shi Bowei pointed to the five pouches. "These are the first presents from the Eagle Hero to Miss Guo," he said.

"I really cannot accept it!" said Guo Xiang, giggling. "What are those? Oh, I know! Yours must be a tiger cub, and his is a

leopard cub! Am I right? That would be fun!”

“No!” Shi Bowei smiled, “These are the fruits of the great effort of seven hundred Jianghu friends under the leadership of the Eagle Hero!” Then he opened his pouch.

Guo Xiang stretched her neck to see the content, she was startled, “Ears! Human ears...!”

“That’s right!” answered Shi Bowei, “These five pouches contain a total of two thousand Mongolian soldiers’ ears!”

Guo Xiang was dumbfounded, “This many ears, I ... What should I do with all these ears?” she asked.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong had heard everything; they stood up and came near Shi Bowei to see the ears. There in front of them was the proof of what their spies had told them. They were surprised and delighted at the same time.

“Brother Shi,” Huang Rong addressed Shi Bowei, “It turns out the Mongolian troops at Xinye and Dengzhou were destroyed by hero ... Eagle Hero’s troop. Is that right?”

Before answering the Shi Brothers quickly knelt down and paid their respects to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, which Guo Jing and Huang Rong quickly reciprocated. Shi Bowei explained, “The Eagle Hero said that Miss Guo Xiang is in Xiangyang, and today is her sixteenth birthday. The Mongolian barbarians are going to attack, endangering the Second Miss Guo; therefore, they have to be killed. He regrets the fact that the enemy numbers are so great that we cannot destroy them all. However, he has led a number of valiant people to destroy two thousand members of their front line companies.”

“Where is the Eagle Hero at this moment?” asked Guo Jing. “I want to see him and convey the gratitude of the entire Xiangyang population.”

Guo Jing had been so busy defending Xiangyang and training his troops for dozens of years that he had not roamed Jianghu. Therefore, he was not aware that the Eagle Hero was none other than his Yang Guo.

“We apologize on his behalf,” said Shi Bowei, “because the Eagle Hero has been busy preparing some presents for Miss Guo these past few days. He did not have a chance to pay a visit to Great Hero Guo and Madame.”

Shi Bowei had just finished when a whistle was heard from a distance; then a voice was heard, “The Xishan Ghosts have received the Eagle Hero’s instructions to wish Miss Guo a happy birthday, and to deliver this present ...!”

That voice was not loud, but sharp. It sounded like the voice came and went, but every word was clear.

“Guo Jing waits.” Guo Jing quickly answered. He knew that since the first present was so valuable, he did not dare to be inattentive. He used his internal energy, so his voice traveled far. He stood erect alongside his wife and waited.

“Can you guess who this Eagle Hero is?” Huang Rong whispered.

“I don’t know,” answered her husband.

“It’s Yang Guo!”

Guo Jing looked up in surprise; but in the end he was ecstatic. “Wonderful! Just wonderful!” he exclaimed. “He has rendered his country a great service; this is the merit of our great Song Dynasty.”

“Can you guess what this second present will be?” Huang Rong asked again.

Her husband only smiled. "Guo'er is so smart; you are the only one who is his match." he answered, "Only you could guess."

"But this time I really don't have any idea," said Huang Rong, shaking her head, but in her heart she said, "Yang Guo has done a great service to Xiangyang, but he keeps saying that all are for Xiang'er; his hatred toward us, husband and wife, and Fu'er, has not diminished."

In a moment the Long Beard Ghost appeared on the field, leading the other eight ghosts. They immediately paid their respect to Guo Jing and his wife. Only then did they approach Guo Xiang and said, "Wishing you health and unbounded happiness! The Eagle Hero instructed us to deliver the second present!"

"Thank you, thank you!" said Guo Xiang. She saw the Xishan Ghosts all carried boxes, big boxes and small boxes.

Guo Jing was afraid the contents were some kind of ears or noses or other human parts, so quickly he said, "If the contents are not good to behold, I ask you not to open them."

The Big Head Ghost laughed. "These are very good things to behold!" he said. Fan Yiweng then opened the lid and picked up what looked like a fireworks rocket. He lit that thing and it shot up, and exploded high in the air and amidst the colorful rain of light appeared a letter 'Gong' [respectful].

Guo Xiang was so happy that she jumped around and clapped her hands while saying: "Good...Very good!"

The Hangman Ghost [Diao Si Gui] also ignited a rocket and that made the letter 'zhu' [best wishes]. Then, one by one, the rest of the ghosts ignited their rockets, forming a string of characters which read, 'gong zhu guo er gu niang duo fu duo shou' [respectfully wishing the Second Miss Guo prosperity

and longevity]; ten big characters. Each character had its own color and they stayed afloat for quite some time. The gathered heroes clapped and cheered. The fireworks were made by Hankou's well known Huang Yipao, an unrivalled fireworks artist.

Guo Jing smiled, he was also very happy. He thought, "My daughter loves fireworks so much. Good thing Yang Guo could find a very skilled artist to make them."

The fireworks were just about to disperse when a few li to the north another firework was shot, then another one much further to the north.

"These fireworks work like a beacon," Huang Rong thought, "this way somebody could deliver a message a few hundred li in just a short moment. I wonder what Yang Guo prepared for the second present. I doubt it is just fireworks to make Xiang'er happy."

Madam Guo immediately instructed the Beggar Clan to prepare some additional bamboo mats for the Shi Brothers and the Xishan Ghosts.

While the feast was still underway, thunderous noises came from way up north, one explosion after another. The noise was muffled because it was so far away.

Upon hearing that noise, the Shi Brothers and the Xishan Ghosts jumped up and down, ecstatically exclaimed, "Success...Success!" Nobody in Xiangyang knew what they were exclaiming about.

The Big Head Ghost pointed to the north and kept shouting, "Wonderful! Wonderful!"

Because it was already dark, everybody could see the light of fires showing in the north.

"The city of Nanyang is on fire!" Huang Rong suddenly exclaimed. Guo Jing realized what had happened, he slapped his thigh, "That's right! It is Nanyang!"

"I beg your explanation," said Huang Rong to Fan Yiweng.

"That is the second present from the Eagle Hero to Miss Guo;" came the answer. "We set the two-hundred-thousand strong Mongolian army's logistics on fire."

Huang Rong had guessed correctly, but still they were surprised and ecstatic. In their effort to destroy Xiangyang, the Mongolians had built the city of Nanyang as its logistics center. They had built barns and grown fields of grass for several years. Tons of rice, wheat, water and hay were gathered from all over the Mongolian territories and sent to Nanyang. There was a saying, 'A great troop movement is always preceded by provisions and grass.' Rice and wheat were the soldiers' food while grass was for the horses. The Mongolians rely heavily on their cavalry; therefore, food and hay were indispensable to the army's movements. Guo Jing had tried on several occasions to send specially trained teams to destroy it, but they never succeeded in doing so, since the city was heavily guarded. Unexpectedly Yang Guo had succeeded in putting that city to the flame!

Guo Jing gazed to the north looking at the fire, anxiety began creeping into his heart, "Will they be able to retreat without any harm? Shall we join them and render any help we can?" Guo Jing asked Fan Yiweng.

"Hero Guo did not ask about the results, but asked about the safety of the people, he has such a benevolent heart," thought Yiweng. Then he explained, "Thank you for Hero's concern. Everything was carefully planned by the Eagle Hero. The team consists of Shengyin Shitai, Ren Chuzi, Zhang Yimang, Bai Caoxian and the others; more than 300 people

total. Even though the Mongolian troop is strong, there is no way they can harm us.”

Like he was just waking up from a deep sleep, Guo Jing said to Huang Rong, “You heard that? Guo’er has gathered so many valiant people to render this great service. If not for these highly skilled heroes, how could two thousand soldiers be decimated in such a short period of time?”

Fan Yiweng explained further, “Our spies reported that the Mongolians planned to attack Xiangyang with fire power; they have approximately ten thousand ‘jin’s [a ‘jin’ is approximately 0.5kg or 1lb] of gunpowder in store in Nanyang. We just followed their lead. We made thorough preparations. As soon as the team saw our fireworks signal, we moved together. According to our plan, first we destroy the explosives, and then set the supply of food and hay on fire. Let the Mongolian army and their horses die of hunger!”

Guo Jing and Huang Rong looked at each other. They were very impressed and alarmed at the same time. They both had followed Genghis Khan’s invasion to the west [for those of you who have not read the novel, it happened toward the last chapters of LOCH See note 1], where the Mongolians destroyed city walls with cannon and explosives. It was like a volcano’s eruption. The reason the Mongolians had not used explosives at Xiangyang before was because of the scarcity of the explosives. But now that the Mongolian Khan, Mengke himself led the attack, they brought the cannons along. Good thing Yang Guo had made this pre-emptive attack; otherwise Xiangyang’s city walls would be destroyed very easily.

Both Guo Jing and Huang Rong were having the same thought, “The decimation of two thousand troops with their left ears missing could crush the enemy’s spirit, but the smashed Nanyang storage base could cause the enemy to

retreat.” Therefore, the Guo couple heartily thanked the Shi Brothers and the Xishan Ghosts.

Shi Bowei and Fan Yiweng both said, “The Xiao ren [little/lowly people] are only following the Eagle Hero’s instructions; our contribution is so minuscule, how can it be worth mentioning?”

During this time they could still hear the sporadic explosions from the north. But since Nanyang was quite a distance away, the noise was muffled. Then, a big and loud explosion was heard. The earth shook.

“There! That must be the main explosives warehouse!” said Fan Yiweng delightedly.

Guo Jing immediately summoned the two Wu Brothers. “Take two thousand men with you, and attack Nanyang,” he gave his command. “But don’t be reckless. If they are still intact, hold off, but if they are disorganized, attack with arrows!” The two brothers complied and immediately executed his command.

These two victories had followed one after another and the people on the field cheered and applauded, offering toasts to each other; everybody praised the Eagle Hero’s unmatched accomplishments. Everyone that is, except Guo Fu ...

She thought her husband was to be the focus of the festivities since he had defeated countless opponents and was elected Chief of the Beggar Clan. Who knew that Yang Guo – without even showing up, had stolen his and her thunder? Of course she was happy with the decimation of two thousand Mongolian front line companies and the annihilation of Nanyang’s provision and explosive storage facilities, but she didn’t get to be the center of attention. Didn’t the Shi Brothers and Fan Yiweng say that the victories were birthday presents for her little sister, Guo Xiang?

"I understand now!" she was fuming, "I chopped off his arm so he bears a grudge against me. So he purposely made me lose face!" From feeling discontent, she became enraged.

Elder Liang shared the same bamboo mat with Yelu Qi and Guo Fu. He saw everybody's countenance was bright, except Guo Fu's. After pondering a while, he figured out the reason. Then he laughed and said, "Ah, this old man is so absent-minded. Because of these joyful victories I have neglected the important business right in front of my eyes!" He jumped on stage and said with a loud voice, "Valiant people! Twice tonight the Mongolian troops have been beaten. We are all very happy; but right here, right now, we have another thing that should double our happiness. Master Yelu had shown his exquisite skills and we all admire him. Master Yelu had been elected our Chief. Now I want to confirm this: is there any of you who still want to challenge our decision? Is there any Beggar Clan disciple who is having a second thought?"

His question was repeated three times. Nobody said anything. Therefore, he continued, "Master Yelu, please come on stage!"

Yelu Qi accepted his bidding. He clasped his hands together in respect, and bowed to everybody. He was just going to open his mouth to make a 'lack of character, lack of ability' modest acceptance speech when suddenly a voice was heard from underneath the stage, "Wait a moment! Xiao Ren [lowly people] wants to ask a thing or two of Master Yelu!"

Yelu Qi looked up in surprise. He heard the voice came from the Beggar group. He said, "I don't dare, Please! Speak up!"

That man stood up, and with a loud voice said, "Master Yelu, your respected father was the Prime Minister of Mongolia, your own brother was a high official in the Mongolian administration. It is true that they both have passed away, but we - the Beggar Clan, have always had enmities with the

Mongolians. With your obscure background, I wonder if it would be proper for you to be our Chief?"

Hearing this, Yelu Qi was irritated. He said, "My benevolent father, the late Yelu Chucai was poisoned by the Queen Mother of Mongolia. My brother, the late Yelu Qin, was executed by the Mongolian Khan! Wouldn't that make me the sworn enemy of the Mongolians?"

"Even so," said the Beggar Clan disciple, "Your father's death is still a mystery. Nobody knows for sure whether he was poisoned. Your brother committed a crime against the monarch, he deserved the capital punishment. You can place your vengeance on hold, that's fine with me; but how about our own resentment ...?"

Listening to someone offending her husband, Guo Fu was enraged. "Who are you?" she asked harshly, "You dare to speak nonsense here! If you have any guts, come up here on stage!"

That beggar laughed mockingly. "Good! Good!" he repeatedly said, "The new Chief hasn't been inaugurated yet, and the Mrs. Chief has shown her fearsomeness!"

As soon as he finished, he leaped to the stage. His movement was so swift that many missed seeing it. They were astonished and wondered in their hearts, "Who is this man? He is highly skilled."

Several thousand pairs of eyes turned their gaze toward this beggar. He was wearing an oversized black raggedy robe. His right hand held an iron stick with a diameter as big as a wine cup. His hair was unkempt, his countenance yellow and dry. He had pockmarks all over his face. He bore five bags on his back; hence he was a fifth grade disciple of the Beggar Clan. There were not many good-looking men among the Beggar Clan disciples, but this man was very, very ugly. As soon as

he appeared, people recognized him as He Shiwo. He was known as a quiet man, who did not like to socialize with his peers and used to follow the crowd without question. He had worked hard, was very loyal to the clan and in ten years he managed to attain the fifth grade. His martial skills were low and he did not demonstrate any other knowledge so that nobody had paid any special attention to him. Everybody thought that fifth grade was too good for him and he would not be able to advance any higher. Who would have thought this ordinary beggar would dare to open his mouth, or even jump on stage to challenge Yelu Qi. "Where did he steal his skill from?" some people thought.

He Shiwo was nobody special, but because of his ugliness, whoever saw him would have a hard time forgetting that face. Thus Yelu Qi also recognized him. He bowed to the beggar and said, "I wonder what instruction Brother He would give to me?"

"Instruct you I do not dare," answered He Shiwo coldly, "But there are two things that I do not understand. Therefore, I came on stage to beg your explanation."

"What are those two things?" asked Yelu Qi.

"First," said He Shiwo, "it is our custom that every Chief of the Beggar Clan will have the 'Dog Beating Stick' as the symbol of his authority. Today Master Yelu has been elected Chief. I wonder where that 'Dog Beating Stick' is? This lowly beggar would like to see it."

His question stirred the hearts of the Beggar Clan disciples, "That was a very good question," they thought.

Yelu Qi answered, "Chief Lu met his death at a criminal's hands; the 'Dog Beating Stick' was also snatched away at that time. This is a disgrace to our Clan. Therefore, it is our collective responsibility to get the Stick back."

“The second thing the Xiao Ren [little/ lowly people] do not understand,” continued He Shiwo, “is about Chief Lu’s death. Have we exacted our revenge yet?”

“Chief Lu was murdered by Hou Dou, everybody knows that,” answered Yelu Qi. “We are all enraged by his atrocity. Unfortunately, we have searched everywhere and so far have not found any trace of that scoundrel Hou Du. This is our collective task, we will keep looking for him, even to the ends of the earth, and exact our revenge on behalf of our beloved Chief Lu!”

He Shiwo coldly laughed and said, “First, the ‘Dog Beating Stick’ is still missing! Second, the assassin of the late Chief Lu has not been found! This business need to be taken care of. Yet someone is actually thinking of becoming the new Chief. Don’t you think that is a rash decision?”

Many people were shocked! Yelu Qi’s face was flushed with anger; he was at a loss for words.

“Brother He, you have spoken reasonably,” Elder Liang intervened. “However, our disciples are numerous and scattered across the country. They cannot be left leaderless. Besides, the task of finding the Stick and the criminal is easier said than done. There must be someone who would spearhead the project. That was the reason why we worked hard to elect the new Chief.”

He Shiwo shook his head. “Elder Liang, I strongly disagree!” he said, “What you said was wrong! You put the cart before the horses!”

Elder Liang was the leading Elder of the Beggar Clan. With the death of Chief Lu, he was the highest-ranking officer in the Clan. The fact that a fifth grade disciple dared to talk like that to him made him furious.

“What’s wrong with what I just said?” he asked.

“In this disciple’s opinion,” He Shiwo said, still very bold, “whoever manages to take the Dog Beating Stick back, and whoever can kill Hou Dou to avenge our Chief, he should be the new Chief! Right now we elected a new Chief only based on his martial arts skills; but what happens if Hou Dou comes here and defeats Yelu Qi; will we elect him our new Chief?”

His words were so reasonable that the beggars were exchanging looks with each other. But Guo Fu was upset and shouted from below the stage, “Rubbish! How could Hou Dou defeat him?”

He Shiwo snickered, he said, “Master Yelu is indeed highly skilled, but that does not mean that he is invincible! This lowly beggar only has five bags on my back, but I doubt if he can defeat me.”

Guo Fu was fuming mad hearing his blatant challenge, she shouted, “Brother Qi! You’d better give this rascal disciple a lesson!”

He Shiwo coldly said, “The internal affair of the Beggar Clan are always taken care of by the Clan Chief and four Elders; Madame Clan Chief has never had any role in the decision making process. Not to mention Master Yelu has not been inaugurated yet; but even if he had, Madame Yelu still has no right to denounce a disciple in public like that. Am I right?”

Guo Fu’s face was turning red. “You ... you ...” she stuttered.

He Shiwo ignored her; he looked at Elder Liang and asked, “Elder Liang, if this disciple can defeat Master Yelu, would I be the new Chief? Or do you think we should wait until after somebody gets the Stick back and kills the criminal?”

Elder Liang was getting angrier hearing him getting bolder than ever. “I don’t care who it is, if he cannot defeat all

contenders, he cannot be the Chief. Later on, if he cannot get the Stick back and cannot kill the enemy, he would regret being the Chief! Master Yelu is no exception. After he is inaugurated as the new Chief, he cannot shirk from these two responsibilities. If he cannot defeat you, Brother He, how could he become the new Chief?"

Hearing this, He Shiwo immediately said, "Elder Liang has spoken reasonably. Now this lowly beggar wants to take a lesson or two from Master Yelu. Only then can we talk about getting the Stick back and killing the criminal!"

From the tone of his voice, sounded like He Shiwo was 90% confident he would win.

Yelu Qi was a patient man, but upon hearing He Shiwo, he couldn't help but feel offended. But he still maintained his composure and said, "Younger Brother is indeed not worthy to accept this heavy responsibility. Therefore, if Older Brother He would like to teach me a thing or two, I will humbly accept."

"Good! Good!" said He Shiwo coldly. He planted his own stick on the stage floor, and thrust his fist at Yelu Qi. His attack did not seem to carry a lot of strength, but his fist created a gust of wind that Elder Liang – who was standing about two meters away, felt his face suddenly hot and hurting. This made him leap to the edge of the stage.

Yelu Qi did not hesitate, his left hand made a turn and neutralized the attack, while his right hand counter attacked with the 'Concealed Deep as if Empty' move[shen cang ruo xu], a stance from his 72-stance "Vacant Fist Technique". Two people moved their fists and feet, engaged in a fierce battle on the stage.

It was almost 'xu shi' [about 7-9pm]. It was a moonless and starless night. The audience could see everything clearly,

because there were dozens of big torches lighting all sides of the stage.

Huang Rong kept her eyes open, but she was amazed that after more than ten stances Yelu Qi did not show any signs that he had gained the upper hand. Also, as hard as she tried, she could not recognize which school He Shiwo belonged to. She could tell though, that He Shiwo had trained for at least forty years.

“For these last eleven or twelve years I have seen the list of the Beggar Clan disciples,” she thought, “and He Shiwo has steadily climbed up in rank. Funny thing is I’ve never heard anybody mentioning his martial arts. Who knew that in reality he possesses such high skills? I believe he did not accidentally learn this skill. Could it be that he has hidden his true skill just to wait for a time like this?”

The match was fierce. They had exchanged more than fifty stances, and Yelu Qi was starting to feel alarmed. No matter what stances he used against his opponent, He Shiwo could parry very well. It turned out this beggar is the toughest opponent he had fought so far. He Shiwo on the other hand, was not highly offensive, and seemed like he wanted to conserve his energy and waited for something to happen.

Yelu Qi had fought several opponents today, but with the exception of Lan Tianhe, the rest were ordinary martial artists. He did not have to use too much effort to defeat them. Thus he was very surprised to see He Shiwo’s agility. Seemed like He Shiwo was floating around indefinitely, and launching his sudden attacks that carried a strong gust of wind.

Yelu Qi was Zhou Botong’s head disciple. True, he had not mastered his Master’s “Dividing the Mind” skill, but he had mastered about 80 to 90% of the Quanzhen Sect’s martial arts. It could be said that he could be regarded as one of the

top level martial artists. Under the bright fire light around the stage, both he and his opponent moved very fast and their match was rather enjoyable to watch.

“Brother Jing, can you guess He Shiwo’s school of martial arts?” Huang Rong finally asked her husband.

“Up to this very second he has not shown his true skill,” answered Guo Jing. “I think he is trying to hide his origin. Just wait another seventy or eighty stances. By then Qi’er will gain the upper hand. If he does not give up, he will be forced to show his true skill.”

The match was picking up speed. Both opponents attacked and counterattacked, both still showed their agility. In a short time they have exchanged forty or fifty stances. Very soon they would reach the seventieth stance, then the eightieth. Guo Jing’s prediction was accurate; Yelu Qi was beginning to control his opponent’s moves.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong kept their eyes open. If He Shiwo kept hiding his true skill and fighting with mixed-up techniques, he would certainly suffer a loss.

Yelu Qi could also see his opponent’s predicament. Gradually but carefully he increased his strength. He stayed calm and did not want to make any reckless moves.

Suddenly He Shiwo changed his tactics; he swung his long sleeve out then immediately pulled it back. As a result, the dozens of torches around the stage were extinguished. The stage became pitch dark. While nobody could see anything, they heard both Yelu Qi and He Shiwo’s surprised shouts, and then they heard somebody thrown down from the stage. All the while He Shiwo was heard laughing maniacally.

Nothing else was heard except He Shiwo’s laugh. Everyone was shocked. A moment later Elder Liang came to his senses

and barked a command, "Light up the torches!" Immediately several beggars complied.

When the light was back, it was seen that it was Yelu Qi who stood on the ground. He had a bleeding wound on his left cheek, the size of a wine cup; while He Shiwo stretched out his left arm and coldly said, "Good protective vest! Good protective vest!" His palm was bleeding.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong exchanged another glance. They realized that because Guo Fu loved her husband, she had loaned him her soft hedgehog armor [ruan wei jia]. Therefore, when He Shiwo hit Yelu Qi, he hit the vest instead and his palm was injured by the thorns. Still, nobody knew how Yelu Qi got injured and fell off the stage.

What had happened was, at a critical time, He Shiwo had used his 'big wind sleeve' [da feng xiu] technique to extinguish the torches. Yelu Qi was startled when the stage suddenly darkened, but he still remembered to protect himself by striking first. But again he was surprised because his hand touched something cold, a metal weapon. He realized now that He Shiwo had planned to use a dirty trick in the darkness. Yelu Qi knew he was in danger, but he was not afraid. He kept going with his 'Great Capturing' [da qin na shou] technique, trying to snatch his opponent's weapon with the intention of showing it off to the audience. With the 'Skilled Hand in all Directions' [qiao shou ba da] he managed to get within two feet of He Shiwo. His right hand grabbed the weapon while his left hand hit his opponent's face, forcing He Shiwo to let go of his weapon.

In the dark He Shiwo eluded the attack to his face by turning his head and had no choice but to let go of his weapon. While Yelu Qi was pulling the weapon, he felt a sting on his cheek and at the same time his chest was hit hard, which made him stagger and fall from the stage. The weapon had a secret

equipment inside. As soon as it was grabbed, it was separated into two parts. The first part stayed in Yelu Qi's hand, while the second part flew back and hit Yelu Qi on the cheek, making a half-inch deep wound so that his cheekbone was visible. Fortunately it did not hit any vital organs, and fortunately he was wearing the protective vest so that his opponent was also injured.

Guo Fu was shocked and enraged; she leaped to her husband, trying to protect him.

Elder Liang was facing a dilemma. On one hand he knew He Shiwo had used a dirty trick, on the other hand, nobody knew what exactly happened, hence nobody could prove it. Both parties were injured, but Yelu Qi was thrown from the stage, so he could be considered the loser.

Guo Fu could not accept it. "He used a dirty trick!" she angrily shouted, "Brother Qi, go up there and fight him!"

Yelu Qi shook his head. "Even so, he still won," he said. "Even if we used honest techniques, I am not confident enough of victory against him."

Huang Rong signaled her son-in-law to come close so she could see what was inside Yelu Qi's hand. It was a piece of steel, about five-inches long and looked like a fan's spine. She could not remember who in the Jianghu world used that kind of weapon.

While everybody was still quiet from shock, He Shiwo raised his yellow and swollen ugly face, and was heard saying, "Even though this lowly beggar has defeated Master Yelu, I still do not dare to accept the Chief's position. I want to wait until the stick is back and the enemy Hou Dou has been killed."

His speech was received with loud cheers by the Beggar Clan's disciples. Although his victory was questionable, he had demonstrated his high martial arts. After listening to his speech a lot of beggars lifted up their cups to toast him.

He Shiwo then stood on the edge of the stage and cupped his fists to the audience. "Is there any hero out there who would like to teach me a lesson or two?" he challenged.

He was just saying the word 'stage' when Shi Bowei loudly shouted, "Ah!" followed by his army of animals. Suddenly the beasts – which were sitting neatly in formation, leaped up and loudly roared. A single lion or tiger's roar is loud; imagine all five hundreds animals roaring at the same time. The earth shook, wine cups and rice bowl turned upside down, everybody was aghast.

Amidst the loud noise, the Xishan Ghosts and Shi Brothers, fifteen people, leaped toward the stage, unsheathed their weapons and surrounded the stage. Suddenly eight people, each holding high a torch, were seen entering the field and coming straight toward the stage. Somebody said loud and clear, "The Eagle Hero wishes the Second Miss Guo a happy birthday! We deliver the third present."

They moved fast, like they were flying above the ground; a demonstration of a very high lightness kung fu. In no time they had come close to Guo Xiang. Four of them then stretched out their arms, presenting Guo Xiang with a big sack. It seemed the present was inside the sack.

Then these eight people cupped their fists to her and introduced themselves. Everybody who heard their names was surprised. They were not ordinary people. The first was an old Buddhist monk, none other than the Abbot of Mount Wutai's Foguang Monastery, Reverend Tanhua. He was the peer of the Shaolin's Abbot, Zen Master Tianming. The others were old Marquis Zhao and the Deaf and Mute Dhuta,

Qingling Zi, the leader of the Kunlun School, etc. All of them were seniors of the martial arts realm.

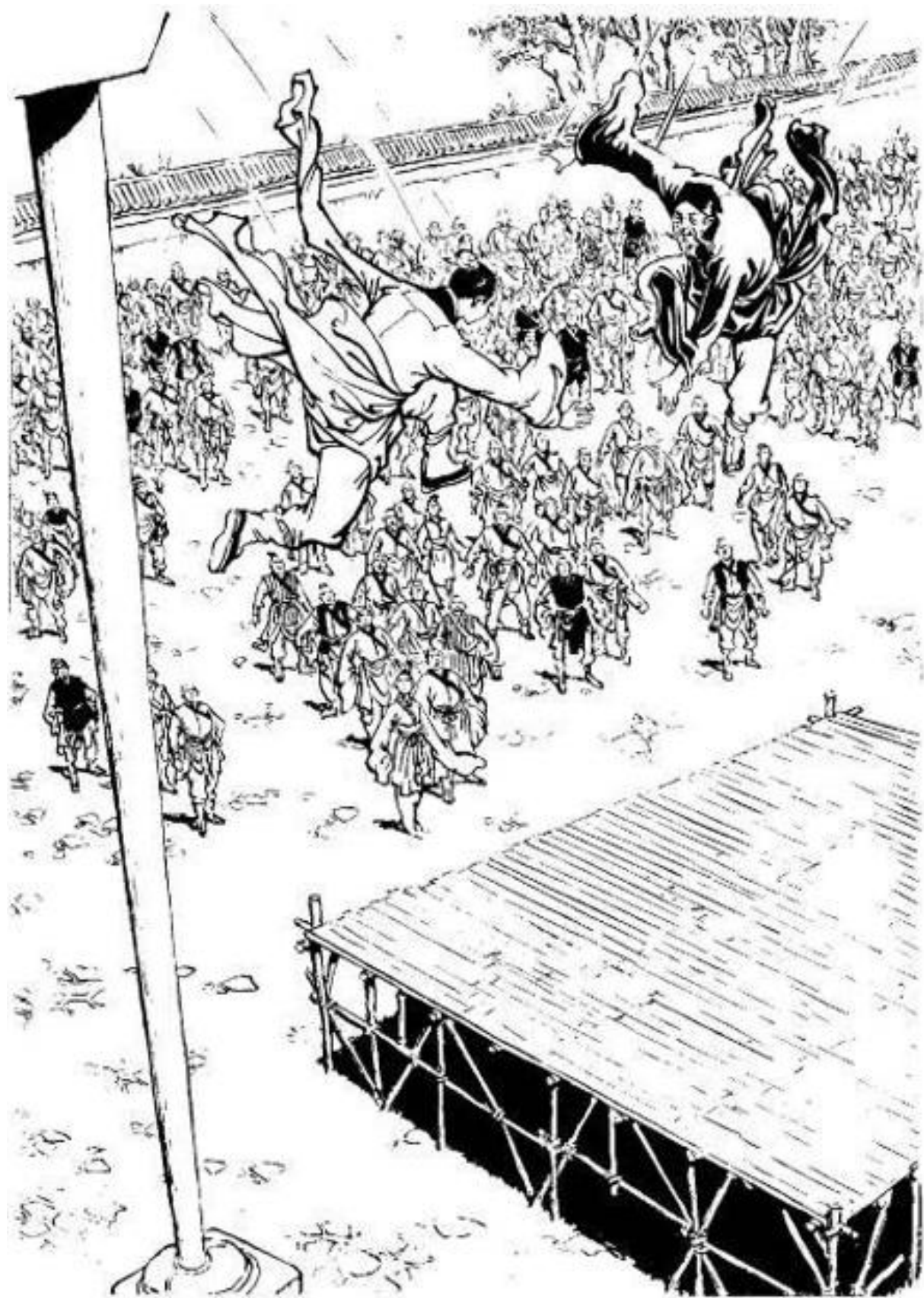
Guo Xiang did not seem to care about the background of all these people. She returned their greeting and laughing sweetly she asked, "I have bothered you all, Uncles! Thank you! What kind of toy is that?"

The four people holding the sack gave a strong tug and the sack was ripped into four pieces. A bald headed monk rolled out of the sack.

End of Chapter 36.

Chapter 37 - Gratitudes and Grudges Over Three Generations

Translated by Hugh (aka IcyFox) with excerpts by Athena



Under the moonlight, the two people descended gracefully, with their clothes floating in the wind. One was wearing a refined green robe while the other was a one-armed man wearing a blue shirt. It was indeed Yang Guo and Huang Yao Shi. Huang Yao Shi took Yang Guo's hand and the two people landed on the stage.

The monk's shoulder hit the ground then he stood up, appearing to be very agile. His face was red with fury and he shouted some words that seemed unintelligible. Guo Jing and Huang Rong knew he was the Golden Wheel Monk's (Jinlun Fawang) second disciple Da'erba and did not know how Master Tan Hua and Old Master Zhao captured him.

Guo Xiang thought there would be some amusing toy in the sack but saw a rough-looking monk instead, so she was somewhat disappointed and said, "I don't like this monk that Big Brother has given me. Where is he? Why is he still not here?"

One of those who came to deliver the third present had spent some time in Tibet and understood Tibetan, so he whispered a few words to Da'erba. His face changed and he stared at He Shiwo. The man, Qingling Zi (Green Spirit Sage), said a few more words in Tibetan to him, then handed Da'erba his golden rod which had been taken away when he was captured by the eight experts.

Da'erba raised his rod with a shout and jumped onto the stage.

The man laughed and told Guo Xiang, "Miss Guo, this monk can do magic tricks, the Eagle Hero told me to conjure a few tricks for you." Guo Xiang was happy and clapped her hands, saying, "Oh OK, I was starting to wonder why Big Brother spent such a great effort to bring the monk here."

Da'erba shouted a few grunts at He Shiwo. He Shiwo said, "What the hell are you yelling about? I don't understand the words that are coming out of your mouth!" Da'erba stepped forward fiercely and smashed the rod towards his head. He Shiwo quickly avoided the blow. Da'erba spun his rod and attacked swiftly. He Shiwo was fighting single-handedly and was pushed back by Da'erba's heavy assault.

The Beggar Clan members saw this monk was so fierce and his face full of hatred so they quickly rushed forward. Elder Liang said, "Big Monk, don't cause any trouble here. He's the future Beggar Clan leader." But Da'erba ignored him and kept on spinning his rod, causing golden flashes and gusts of wind together with heavy crashing sounds.

Several Beggar Clan members could not control themselves and jumped towards the stage, attempting to stop the fight. However the eight experts, Shi brothers and Xishan Ghosts surrounded the stage and prevented anyone from accessing the stage. Although the Beggar Clan had many people, they were held back and could not get onto the stage. Amidst the confusion Qingling Zi turned around, went up on the stage and took away He Shiwo's metal staff. He Shiwo was shocked and tried to snatch it back but was blocked by Da'erba's rod and could not advance a single step.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong could not guess why Yang Guo sent these people here to create trouble, but since the first two presents he gave Guo Xiang were beneficial to Xiangyang, they guessed this third present would not mean any harm. The Guo couple stood aside and watched silently.

Although Yelu Qi was beaten by He Shiwo, he was eager to continue his mother-in-law's great service to the Beggar Clan, so when he saw He Shiwo panicking under Da'erba's attacks, he shouted, "Brother He, don't panic, I'm going to help you!" He jumped towards the stage. A person shouted

fiercely, "Nobody's allowed on the stage!" Then the person blocked his way. Yelu Qi stretched his hand out to grab him but that person caught his hand instead with a strange move and such great internal strength that he could not move. Yelu Qi was shocked and saw that it was the third of the Shi brothers Shi Shugang. Yelu Qi exchanged a few moves but still could not force him to retreat, so he thought, "This person is a small fry and under the Eagle Hero's command, yet he is so remarkable. Because the Eagle Hero is able to command all these experts, he must be a really great man." Qingling Zi raised the iron staff and shouted, "Ladies and gentlemen, please take a look at this." He chopped down on the rod's middle with his hand and the rod broke - it was actually hollow. He pulled one end off and took out a bright green bamboo rod.

The Beggar Clan members were momentarily stunned and speechless, then all cried out together, "The leader's "Dog Beating Stick"!" The Shi Brothers and other experts stepped aside. Everyone was wondering, "Why was the "Dog Beating Stick" concealed in the iron staff? How did He Shiwo get his hands on it? Why did he not reveal it?"

The people were all waiting for Qingling Zi to explain everything but he wordlessly stepped down from the stage and handed the "Dog Beating Stick" respectfully with both hands to Guo Xiang. Guo Xiang saw the rod and thought about Lu Youjiao and became sad; she received the rod then handed it to Huang Rong. Da'erba's rod moves became more intense and He Shiwo had to evade the dangerous stances with his agility. When the Beggar Clan members saw the "Dog Beating Stick", they knew the experts must have a good reason for bringing Da'erba here to deal with He Shiwo, so none of them pushed their way up on stage.

In less than ten moves, He Shiwo looked like he would die under the golden rod, then Huang Rong suddenly thought,

“He Shiwo used a weapon to hurt Qi’er, so the weapon must be concealed in his sleeve. Yet at this critical juncture, why doesn’t he use his weapon?” Da’erba swept his rod on the stage and He Shiwo leapt up and evaded it. Da’erba flipped his rod and brought it upwards. He Shiwo was in midair and could not evade this attack. Suddenly a clash of weapons was heard and He Shiwo leaped aside with a short weapon in his hand. Da’erba was seething with anger and cursed him and increased the intensity of his rod attacks. However, with a weapon in He Shiwo’s hand, his martial skills increased and his strokes became masterful. Although his weapon was short, he was able to fend off Da’erba. Zhu Ziliu saw this and suddenly remembered something, saying, “Madam Guo, I know who he is. But I still don’t understand something.”

Huang Rong laughed, “That it was pasted on with glue, honey and flour.” Yelu Qi, Guo Fu and Guo Xiang were standing next to Huang Rong and heard their conversation but did not understand what on Earth they were talking about.

Guo Fu asked, “Uncle Zhu, who did you say was who?”

Zhu Ziliu said, “I’m talking about the He Shiwo who injured your husband.”

Guo Fu said, “What? He’s not He Shiwo? Then who is he?”

Zhu Ziliu said, “Look carefully, what weapon is he using?”

Guo Fu stared for a while then said, “This short weapon is less than a foot, and it’s not sharp like those pens used to seal accupoints.”

Huang Rong said, “Think carefully. He’d rather not use his weapon and risk discovery, thus putting his life on the line fighting the monk. Why doesn’t he use his weapon? Why did he extinguish the torches before using his weapon?”

Guo Fu said, "This person is sly and crafty, what's wrong with that?"

Guo Xiang said, "He knows someone in the crowd will recognize his weapon techniques, so he doesn't want to reveal it."

Zhu Ziliu praised, "Ah ha, Miss Guo is indeed clever."

Guo Fu heard him praise her sister and was not happy so she said, "What about not revealing the truth? Isn't he standing on the stage? Everyone can see that."

Guo Xiang thought about what her mother just said and replied, "Ah, his ugly face is actually a disguise made of flour. This face is really repulsive, after glancing once I don't want to see it anymore."

Huang Rong said, "The more repulsive he disguises himself, the more he can conceal his identity because no one wants to stare at an ugly face for long. If there are any changes to his disguise no one would notice them. Ah, it's really not easy keeping up such a disguise for so many years."

Zhu Ziliu said, "His face may be false, but his decades worth of martial arts can't be faked."

Guo Fu said, "If this He Shiwo is fake, then who's he? Sister, since you're so clever, tell us who he is."

Guo Xiang said, "I'm not that clever, so I don't know."

Zhu Ziliu smiled, "Elder Miss Guo has seen him before, and at that time the younger Miss Guo wasn't even born yet. Seventeen years ago, at the Da Sheng 'Heroes' Meet, someone exchanged a few hundred moves with me, who was that?"

Guo Fu said, "Hou Du? No, it can't be him. He uses a fan. Although this weapon looks like it, this weapon only has the skeleton but not the surface."

Zhu Ziliu said, "I fought such an intense battle with him before, it was the only time in my life I experienced such great danger, how could I possibly forget his stances? If he isn't Hou Du then I must be blind."

Guo Fu looked at He Shiwo again and saw that he was agile and his strokes lethal. It really appeared to be like the Hou Du at the 'Heroes' Meet years ago, but she still had many doubts. She asked, "If he's really Hou Du, then this monk is his martial brother, can it be he doesn't recognize him so that's why they're fighting?"

Huang Rong said, "It's precisely because he recognizes him that they're fighting. That year at Chongyang Palace, Yang Guo used his sword to pin down Da'erba and Hou Du. Hou Du didn't want to risk his life so he deserted Da'erba and his master. He ran away. This incident was witnessed by the whole the Quanzhen Sect, you must have heard of that too."

Guo Fu said, "Hmmm, no wonder Da'erba hates him so much."

When Guo Xiang heard "Yang Guo used his sword to pin down Da'erba and Hou Du" she thought of how great he was and was awe-struck.

Guo Fu asked, "Why did he become a beggar? How did the "Dog Beating Stick" end up with him?"

Huang Rong said, "Isn't that easy? Hou Du betrayed his master, so he's afraid his master and martial brother will find him, hence he disguised his face and joined the Beggar Clan. Without revealing who he is, he slowly rose to be a 5th grade member over the past 10-over years. Since no one in the

Beggar Clan was suspicious of him, Fawang wasn't able to find him. But this scoundrel wouldn't be content with hiding here all his life so he was waiting for an opportunity to do something big. When Leader Lu was patrolling outside the city, he waited there and ambushed him, revealing his identity and a message for the beggars to bring back, which was to tell everyone Leader Lu was killed by Hou Du. After he snatched the "Dog Beating Stick", he hid it inside his hollow metal staff. When the Beggar Clan elected a leader, he could raise the matter of finding the "Dog Beating Stick". Since the Stick is a very significant icon of the Beggar Clan, who can oppose him? Ah, this scoundrel Hou Du is a really brilliant schemer to think of this plan."

Zhu Ziliu laughed, "But with you around Madam Guo, he can't hide anything from us."

Huang Rong didn't laugh and said, "Hou Du hid himself in the Beggar Clan without revealing his identity and was able to fool me. But by trying to vie for the Beggar Clan Leader's position, he's really looking down on me."

Zhu Ziliu said, "Yang Guo is really wonderful; he actually was able to discover Hou Du's scheme, recover the "Dog Beating Stick", reveal his identity and give the younger Miss Guo this present. He's very capable."

Guo Fu said, "Humph, he happened to find out, there's nothing great about that."

Guo Xiang thought, "That day Big Brother was outside the Yang Tai Fu Temple and saw me mourning Uncle Lu. He knew I was great pals with Uncle Lu so he put in a lot of effort to help me avenge him; this present is no small thing, his efforts..." Then she suddenly thought of something and said, "Although Hou Du became an ugly beggar in the Beggar Clan, he still uses his true identity to cause trouble outside. Third Uncle Shi of the Shi brothers was injured by him before

and must have wanted to settle this matter with him and so tracked him down.”

Huang Rong said, “Correct. Hou Du leaves a trail behind in Jianghu time and again, but no one would expect the Beggar Clan’s He Shiwo and Hou Du to be the same person. ‘He Shiwo’, look at his fake name – he regards himself as his own master. When someone thinks too highly of himself, he will inevitably fail one day.”

Guo Fu said, “Mother, then why does this He Shiwo say he wants to kill Hou Du? Isn’t that silly?”

Huang Rong said, “This is just a sham to remove any doubts.”

Guo Fu said, “Since Yang... Brother Yang already knew He Shiwo is Hou Du, he should have said it long ago and not allowed him to injure Brother Qi.”

Huang Rong laughed, “Yang Guo is not God; how would he know that Qi’er would get injured?”

Guo Xiang said, “But Sister is a Goddess, so she let Brother-in-law don the Soft Armour.” Guo Fu glared at her, but she felt kind of proud inside.

As they were talking, the fight between Da’erba and Hou Du got even fiercer. The two had the same master so they were familiar with each other’s martial arts – Da’erba was superior in strength but Hou Du was superior in agility. After another hundred moves, there was still no clear victor. Suddenly Da’erba shouted and threw his 50-jin rod towards Hou Du and it flew swiftly and fiercely. Hou Du was shocked as he has never seen Da’erba use such a move before. He thought, “He has not won after so long, has he gone crazy?” and quickly jumped aside. Da’erba rushed up and hit the rod with his palms and it changed directions, following closely behind Hou Du. Hou Du was greatly surprised, then he realized that

Da'erba had followed their master for over 10 years and must have learned some advanced martial arts. This rod move was derived from Fawang's Five-Wheel techniques and when Hou Du saw the ferocity of the rod coming towards him and knew he could not take the blow. He slid away, causing the rod to miss his head by two inches.

Da'erba was spinning the rod even more rapidly, causing the torches to flicker under the great gusts of wind. Hou Du was jumping around on the darkly-lit stage and was in danger many times. The spectators all stared at this violent battle and could not take their eyes off it. Da'erba threw the rod eighteen times then he shouted, using both hands to shoot his rod like an arrow. Hou Du could not evade this and the rod hit him squarely in the chest with a bang. He slowly collapsed onto the stage and remained motionless.

Da'erba took his rod and called out thrice, and then he sat down in front of Hou Du and mumbled the "Reincarnation Chant". Then he jumped off the stage and presented his weapon to Qingling Zi. Qingling Zi did not accept the weapon but said, "Congratulations. You have rid your sect of a scum. The Eagle Hero will spare you and wants you to return to Tibet, and never set foot in the Central Plains again." Da'erba said, "Thanks to the Eagle Hero. I shall follow his instructions." He bowed and went off.

Guo Fu saw Hou Du lying motionlessly on the stage with his hideous face and could not believe it was fake, so she drew her sword and jumped onto the stage, saying, "Let's see what this traitor really looks like." She then used her sword's tip to poke his nose.

Suddenly Hou Du shouted and leapt up, forcefully striking his palms downwards. Actually after being hit by the golden rod, he was fatally injured but he did not die immediately. He purposely remained motionless, waiting for Da'erba to come

forward and examine him so that he could execute a fatal move and cause Da'erba to die with him. However Da'erba just chanted some prayers and left immediately. Then Guo Fu came forward instead. Hou Du pretended to come back to life and stunned her to reduce her resistance. Her Soft Armour was with Yelu Qi so it seemed death was imminent. Guo Jing, Huang Rong and Yelu Qi jumped onto the stage but it seemed too late...

Then two 'peng' sounds were heard and two projectiles flew through the air side by side and pierced Hou Du's chest. The projectiles were small and seemed like pebbles but the force behind them was mighty. Hou Du leaned back and collapsed backwards, throwing up a pool of blood. He was dead. The people were shocked and looked in the direction where the projectiles had come from but only saw the pale moon and the starry night. The night was still and the projectiles seemed to have been launched from on top one of the two flag poles erected in front of the stage.

When Huang Rong heard the projectiles hurtling through the air, she knew that apart from her father's 'Divine Flicking Finger' [Dan Zi Shen Tong], no one else had this skill. The two flag poles were more than ten yards apart, how could the projectiles come from the two flag poles at the same time? Surprised, she did not think clearly, so she said, "Father, is that you?"

An old voice from atop one of the flag poles laughed, "My friend Yang Guo, let's go down!" The voice atop the other flag pole replied, "Yes!" and the two people jumped down together.

Huang Yaoshi taught Yang Guo the Divine Flicking Finger to counter Li Mochou years ago. Under the moonlight, the two people descended gracefully, with their clothes floating in the wind. One was wearing a refined green robe while the

other was a one-armed man wearing a blue shirt. It was indeed Yang Guo and Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi took Yang Guo's hand and the two people landed on the stage. The people thought they were witnessing the Celestial Generals descending from the heavens.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong quickly jumped up on the stage and bowed to Huang Yaoshi. Then Yang Guo bowed to Guo Jing and Huang Rong, saying, "Nephew Yang Guo kowtows to Uncle and Aunt Guo."

Guo Jing quickly raised him and laughed, "Guo'er, your three presents, ah, are really... really..." He was very grateful and could not find any words to express his gratitude.

Guo Fu was afraid her father wanted her to thank Yang Guo for saving her life so she quickly said to Huang Yaoshi, "Grandfather, fortunately you used your "Divine Flicking Finger" and saved me from that scoundrel's palms."

Yang Guo jumped off the stage and walked over to Guo Xiang, laughing, "Sister, I'm late."

Guo Xiang felt her heart beating rapidly and her face turned red so she softly said, "You spent so much effort to get me the three presents, it was really... really a lot of trouble."

Yang Guo smiled, "It was nothing. Since it's your birthday we merely added to the fun." He then waved his hand.

The Big Head Ghost said, "Bring everything up." Then several people also repeated, "Bring everything up." The message was then relayed outside.

After a while a group of people came in with lanterns, baskets and planks. They then put the planks together and started nailing, forming a wooden stage. More and more people came in but they moved in an orderly way and worked silently.

When the people saw Yang Guo's presents they all respected and admired him deeply. They also thought he brought those people here for some major purpose. However, before long the stage was completed and some people started drumming and donning opera costumes and performing "The Eight Immortals Celebrate a Birthday". Following that several people entered from the west and started singing "Man Chuang Hu", a song from the story of Guo Ziyi celebrating his birthday with his seven sons and eight sons-in-law. At the same time some people lit firecrackers and some did conjuring tricks, turning the whole event into a grand celebration. The performers were famous troupes from Henan and Huguang. Everyone was in a festive mood and were dancing and cheering all over the field. By this time the Shi brothers had quietly left with their animals and the Xishan Ghosts, Qingling Zi and the group of experts followed suit.

Guo Xiang saw that Yang Guo had arranged the matter down to the last detail and she was moved to tears, remaining speechless for a while.

Guo Fu remembered their conversation at the Yang Tai Fu Temple, and now a young hero actually came to celebrate her birthday; she was secretly seething with anger. She just took Huang Yaoshi's arm and bombarded him with questions, pretending she did not see anything.

Guo Jing felt the way Yang Guo celebrated his daughter's birthday was making a mountain out of a mole-hill but he was broadminded. Moreover, Yang Guo helped Xiangyang and the Beggar Clan accomplish three great feats in one day so Guo Jing just let him do whatever he wanted, only shaking his head with a smile.

Huang Rong asked her father, "Father, did you arrange with Guo'er to hide on top of the flag poles?"

Huang Yaoshi laughed, "No, no! One day I was at a lake admiring the moon when I heard some people whispering that some "Eagle Hero" would be visiting Xiangyang and that his martial arts were excellent and his character strange. I was worried he wanted to harm my good daughter and son-in-law so I came here secretly. So this Eagle Hero is Yang Guo. If I'd known earlier I needn't have worried so much."

Huang Rong knew her father liked to roam Jianghu but was always thinking of her, so she laughed, "Father, don't go away again, let us be reunited."

Huang Yaoshi did not answer and waved to Guo Xiang, laughing, "Little girl, come over here and let Grandfather take a look at you." Guo Xiang had never met him before so she quickly stepped forward to bow to him. Huang Yaoshi took her hand and closely examined her face, saying sadly, "What a great resemblance." Huang Rong knew he was thinking of his late wife, so he was saying that Guo Xiang looked like her grandmother. She was afraid to stir his emotions so she did not say anything.

Guo Fu laughed, "Of course! You're the Old Eastern Heretic and she's the Little Eastern Heretic..."

Guo Jing scolded, "Fu'er, you have no respect for your grandfather!" Huang Yaoshi was however delighted and said, "Xiang'er, are you the 'Little Eastern Heretic'?" Guo Xiang blushed and said, "At first it was only Sister who called me that, later on everyone called me that."

At this time the four Elders of the Beggar Clan crowded around Yang Guo and thanked him profusely, thinking, "He's rendered such a great service to Xiangyang, recovered the "Dog Beating Stick", exposed Hou Du's devious plan, avenged Leader Lu. If he's willing to be the next Leader that would be splendid." Elder Liang said, "Hero Yang, our late leader passed away tragically..."

Yang Guo had already guessed what they were up to and quickly interrupted, "Master Yelu is proficient in both martial arts and literature, he's heroic and compassionate and he is a great friend of mine. If he becomes the new Leader, he will be able to continue the great legacy of Leaders Hong, Huang and Lu."

Huang Yaoshi briefly asked about Guo Xiang's martial arts and turned his head to get Yang Guo over to talk to him. When he turned around, he saw Yang Guo already walking out of the place so he said, "My friend Yang Guo, I'm off too!" He waved his sleeves and in the blink of an eye he had caught up with Yang Guo. The two of them swiftly disappeared into the darkness.

Huang Rong had something urgent to tell her Father but because there were too many people around it was not convenient to speak. Who would have thought he would suddenly leave, she was shocked and quickly gave chase.

However Huang Yaoshi and Yang Guo moved extremely fast and Huang Rong could not catch up. Huang Rong said, "Father, Guo'er, how about leaving after a few days?" Huang Yaoshi's distant voice said, "We both have wild characters and are uncomfortable with restrictions, just let us be." The last few words seemed to be almost a hundred meters away. Huang Rong, secretly groaning since she could not catch up, had to go back. Back at the field, drumming noises filled the night.

The four Elders of the Beggar Clan held a discussion. Firstly, before Hou Du came and messed things up, Yelu Qi had already been elected the Leader. Secondly, the Beggar Clan owed great debt of gratitude to Yang Guo, so since even he nominated Yelu Qi, then the affair was settled. The four Elders informed Huang Rong and ascended the stage and proclaimed Yelu Qi the new Beggar Clan Leader.

The Beggar Clan members all carried out their tradition and spat on Yelu Qi. They then clapped and cheered.

Guo Xiang noticed that this time Yang Guo only said a few words to her and left shortly after meeting her. She felt rather disappointed inside, and then she saw her sister standing next to Yelu Qi and receiving congratulations from the Beggar Clan members. She felt even worse so she turned around and headed home. She had not gone a few steps when Huang Rong caught up with her and held her hand, gently saying, "Xiang'er, what is it? Are you unhappy?" Guo Xiang said, "No, I'm extremely delighted." After saying this she lowered her head and tears welled up in her eyes, and then fell to the ground. Huang Rong could not understand her daughter's heart so she mentioned some interesting stories to make her happy.

The two people slowly went home. Huang Rong accompanied her back to her room and asked, "Xiang'er, are you tired?"

Guo Xiang said, "I'm alright. Mother, you've been up all night, you should rest."

Huang Rong pulled her close and sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the bed and fondled her hair, saying, "Xiang'er, I've never mentioned the matter of your brother Yang Guo to you before. This is a long story, so if you're not tired, I'll tell it to you." That caught Guo Xiang's attention and she said, "Mother, tell me."

Huang Rong said, "I should start from his grandfather." Then she told her how Guo Xiaotian and Yang Tiexin became sworn brothers, how they swore their children even before birth, how Yang Kang acknowledged the enemy as his father and lost his life, why Yang Guo lived on Peach Blossom Island when young, why Guo Fu chopped off his arm and how he and Xiao Longnu separated at the Passionless Valley. She told the entire story to her.

Huang Rong then sighed and said, "At first I was suspicious of him and was afraid nothing good would come out of you knowing him. Ah, in terms of trusting people I'm way behind your father. Your brother Yang Guo did three great things tonight so instead of being evil, he's far from it. We really owe him a debt of gratitude."

Guo Xiang curiously asked, "Mother, why would he be evil?"

Huang Rong said, "At first I thought wrongly, I thought he bore a deep hatred for our Guo family and wanted to take revenge on you."

Guo Xiang shook her head, "How could that be? If he wanted to kill me it would be all too easy. At Feng Lingdu, all he needed was his little finger to kill me."

Huang Rong said, "You're still young. You don't know about all these things yet. If he wanted you to suffer and make us worried and depressed, it would be ten times more terrible than killing a person. Ah, there's no need to say more, now I know he won't. But I'm still worried over something."

Guo Xiang said, "Mother, what's there to worry about? I think brother Yang won't take past matters to heart. He will be reunited with Sister-in-law soon and he'd be so happy he'd forget everything."

Huang Rong said, "That's exactly what I'm worried about; he may not get to see Xiao Longnu."

Guo Xiang was shocked and said, "What? How could that be? Brother Yang personally told me Sister-in-law was badly injured and was taken away by the Divine Nun of the South Sea [Nan Hai Shen Ni] for treatment and arranged to meet again 16 years later. The couple has deep feelings for each other, why wouldn't they meet after waiting for so long?"

Huang Rong frowned and only said, "Hmmmmmm." Guo Xiang said, "Brother Yang told me she carved several words on the 'Broken Heart Cliff' which said, 'sixteen years later, meet at this place, the love between (us) husband and wife is profoundly deep, never fail this promise' Could the words be false?"

Huang Rong said, "The words are genuine, but I'm afraid Xiao Longnu loved Yang Guo too much so he won't be able to see her again."

Guo Xiang did not know what in Heaven's name Huang Rong was talking about and stared at her expectantly. Huang Rong said, "sixteen years ago, your Brother Yang and his wife were seriously injured; Brother Yang's injuries could be treated while Xiao Longnu's poison attacked her major accupoints. He saw that she wouldn't likely survive and didn't want to accept treatment." When she said this, her voice became soft and gentle and continued, "Ah, you're still young, you won't understand."

Guo Xiang was lost in thought for a while then said, "Mother, if I were Sister-in-law, I'd pretend I'm alright and let him take the medicine to recover."

Huang Rong was surprised; she had never expected her daughter to be so thoughtful of others at such a young age, so she said, "Correct, I'm afraid Xiao Longnu did just that and left Yang Guo. She earnestly said 'the love between (us) husband and wife is profoundly deep, never fail this promise' and said 'please treasure this, beg that you fulfill this reunion'. When I saw 'please treasure this', I guessed Xiao Longnu disappeared suddenly to make your Brother Yang patiently and quietly wait for her for sixteen years. Ah, she thought after sixteen years, your Brother Yang would slowly forget her. Although he'd be disappointed, he wouldn't want to commit suicide."

Guo Xiang said, "Then what about the Divine Nun of the South Sea?" Huang Rong said, "I made that up. There's really no such person." Guo Xiang was shocked and stammered, "No... no such person?"

Huang Rong said, "That day at the Passionless Valley, I saw Yang Guo was so miserable that I could not help but make something up to console him and make him wait for the past sixteen years. I said the Divine Nun of the South Sea lived on Wisdom Island, but actually there's no such island. I also said she taught your grandfather some palm strokes to reduce his suspicions. This Yang Guo is so intelligent, if I didn't make it sound realistic, how would he believe me? If he didn't, then Xiao Longnu's efforts would be wasted."

Guo Xiang said, "So you're saying Sister-in-law is already dead? This whole thing was just to fool him?"

Huang Rong quickly said, "No, no! Maybe Xiao Longnu is still alive and will meet him when the time comes; if so that'd be wonderful. She's the only disciple of the Ancient Tomb Sect, the founder Lin Chaoying was extremely knowledgeable and had profound martial arts and internal energy, so she might have left some incredible skill for Xiao Longnu to use to save her life."

Guo Xiang thought for a while then said, "Yeah, I think so too, Sister-in-law is such a kind person and Brother Yang loves her so much, she wouldn't die so easily. But if he doesn't get to meet her, won't he go crazy?"

Huang Rong said, "Today, when your grandfather came, I was thinking of asking him to cover up for us, but I was unable to do so."

Guo Xiang became worried and said, "Now Brother Yang and Grandfather are together, he'd surely ask about the Divine Nun of the South Sea. Grandfather doesn't know what's

going on and he'd surely let the cat out of the bag. That'll be terrible."

Huang Rong said, "If Xiao Longnu could be reunited with him, which would require a lot of luck, then everything would be fine. But if he doesn't get to see Xiao Longnu, then I really don't know what he'd do. He'd hate me deeply for lying to him and making him wait in loneliness for sixteen years."

Guo Xiang said, "Mother, don't worry, it was for his own good. You saved his life."

Huang Rong said, "Besides the deep friendship of the Guo and Yang families for the past three generations, Guo'er himself has saved your father, mother and sister numerous times. Today he did so much for Xiangyang, we are truly grateful and we can never repay him. Ah, Guo'er has been lonely almost all his life. He's already past thirty but the only happy moments he had only made up a few days."

Guo Xiang thought, "If Brother really can't meet Sister-in-law, he might really go crazy."

Huang Rong said, "Your Brother Yang is of good character, but he has gone through much hardship when young so he's rather eccentric, but his conduct is extraordinary."

Guo Xiang tried to smile and said, "He, Grandfather and I are all heretic people."

Huang Rong said, "Correct, he's a good man but he has a heretic aura. If Xiao Longnu has unfortunately passed away, you must never ever meet him again."

Guo Xiang never expected Huang Rong to say that so she quickly asked, "Why...Why not?"

Huang Rong held her hand and said, "If they get to meet, of course you can roam around with them or visit their home.

Even if you follow them to the edge of the world I wouldn't be worried. But if he doesn't get to meet her; Xiang'er, you don't know him well enough, if he goes crazy he's capable of anything."

Guo Xiang said, "Mother, if he doesn't see her, he'd be sad and depressed, so we should console him."

Huang Rong shook her head, saying, "He doesn't listen to others."

Guo Xiang thought for a while then said, "Mother, after sixteen years, do you think he would commit suicide in his sorrow?"

Huang Rong was quiet for a long while then replied, "I can guess what most people are thinking but I couldn't read your Brother Yang's thoughts since he was young. It's precisely because I can't guess what he'd do that I won't allow you to meet again; unless of course he's reunited with Xiao Longnu. Then that's a different story." Guo Xiang was lost in thought and did not respond.

Huang Rong said, "Xiang'er, Mother is doing this for your own good. If you don't listen to me, it might be too late when you regret it." She saw her daughter frowning and her eyes turn red, so she said gently, "Xiang'er, let me tell you something else. It's about your Brother Yang's father Yang Kang." So she then talked about how Yang Tiexin took Mu Nianci as his god daughter and how she sparred to find a husband, how she gave birth to Yang Guo and finally how she died of depression. Then she said, "Sister Mu Nianci's character and beauty were flawless, such a good girl is hard to come by, but she was tormented by her affairs of the heart and suffered such a sad fate."

Guo Xiang said, "Mother, she didn't have any choice. She loved Uncle Yang, so no matter what he did she still loved

him.”

Huang Rong stared at her and thought, “She’s so young, how does she know so much?” She saw that she was exhausted and her eyes could hardly stay open so she helped her get out of her clothes and tucked her into bed, saying, “Quickly close your eyes! I’ll watch you sleep then leave.” Guo Xiang closed her eyes and since she had not slept for the whole night she was really tired so she sank into a deep sleep soon after.

Huang Rong looked at her sweet and refined face she thought, “Among my three children, I worry about you the most. But among the three of you, I really can’t say who I pity the most.” She then returned to her room and slept.

The next evening, the Wu brothers sent back fast horses with the report that all the supplies at Nanyang had been destroyed; the gun powder had exploded and killed many Mongolian soldiers. After the loss, the Mongolians had withdrawn 100 li (50 km) and did not stir from their camp. When Xiangyang heard this message, everyone cheered with joy and kept talking about the Eagle Hero. Some exaggerated the story and made Yang Guo seem like a deity and excitedly talked about how he exterminated the vanguard forces and burned Nanyang. All of them talked as if they saw everything with their own eyes.

That night the Guo couple was invited by Lu Wenhuan to discuss the military situation so they reached home very late. The next morning Yelu Qi, Guo Fu and Guo Polu went to pay their respects but after a long while, Guo Xiang still had not turned up. Huang Rong got worried and instructed a maid to check her room to see if she’s ill. After a while, the maid came back with Guo Xiang’s maid saying, “The lady did not go to bed last night.”

Huang Rong was shocked and asked, "Then why didn't you say so last night?" Guo Xiang's maid Xiao Bangtou said, "Madam returned very late last night, so I didn't dare disturb you; I thought the lady would return after a while, I didn't know she'd still be missing until now."

Huang Rong quickly went to Guo Xiang's room and saw that she had not taken any spare clothes, weapons or money and was very curious. Then she saw a white slip of paper half-concealed under her pillow. Huang Rong knew something was wrong and she groaned inwardly then she picked up the slip of paper which said:

"Dear Father and Mother,
I'm going to convince Brother Yang not to commit suicide.
When I've done that, I'll return immediately.
Signed,
Xiang."

Huang Rong stood there motionless and thought, "This kid is really naïve. Given Yang Guo's character, apart from Xiao Longnu, he listens to no one. If he did, he wouldn't be Yang Guo." She wanted to quickly find her daughter but the Mongolians were slowly closing in on Xiangyang on two fronts and they could attack any time, so she could not attend to her daughter's private affairs. After discussing it with Guo Jing, she wrote several letters to some capable Beggar Clan members who would split up to look for Guo Xiang and bring her back.

That day after Guo Xiang heard her mother's stories, she had several nightmares shortly after falling asleep, dreaming that Yang Guo slit his throat with a sword, then dreaming that Yang Guo jumped off a high cliff and ended up in a bloody mess. After that she awoke in cold sweat so she sat up and thought carefully, "Brother gave me three golden needles and promised to do three things for me. I have one left, so I'll use it to get him not to commit suicide. He's a hero and won't

go back on his words, so I must find him.” So she left a short note and set off immediately.

However she hadn’t the slightest idea where Yang Guo and Huang Yaoshi could have gone so she walked rather aimlessly for around 30 li (15km) and became famished, so she tried to look for a food stall. But all the people around the city had fled even before the Mongolians had arrived so the whole place was lifeless like a ghost town. Guo Xiang had never gone out alone before, so she never expected to get into this mess. She sat down on a stone and folded her arms, becoming frustrated.

After sitting down for a while, she thought, “Since there’s no food stalls, I’ll pick some wild fruits.” She walked around but there was not even a single fruit tree for a few li. Just as she felt helpless, she suddenly heard a horse galloping. When the horse past her, she saw a tall and skinny yellow-robed monk mounted on the horse. The horse was very swift and was gone in the blink of an eye. But after going a few dozen meters, the horse turned around and returned. The horse stopped in front of Guo Xiang and the monk asked, “Lady, who’re you? Why are you here alone?”

Guo Xiang saw his piercing eyes and she shuddered. At the Black Dragon Marsh she met Reverend Yideng, so she thought, “Reverend Yideng is kind and benevolent; this monk should also be a good person.” She answered, “I’m named Guo, and I’m looking for someone.”

The monk asked, “Who?”

Guo Xiang shook her head and smiled, “You’re such a busybody, and I’m not talking to you.”

The monk said, “What does that person look like, maybe I’ve met him before and can tell you where he is.”

Guo Xiang thought this was not a bad idea and said, "You might not know him. He's a one-armed young man. He might be with a large eagle or he might be alone." That monk was actually Jinlun Fawang (Golden Wheel Monk) and he realized she was talking about Yang Guo. His heart missed a beat but he appeared normal, saying, "Ah, you're looking for someone named Yang Guo, right?"

Guo Xiang was delighted and said, "Yeah, you know him?"

Fawang laughed, "How would I not know him? He's my friend. We knew each other even before you were born."

Guo Xiang blushed slightly, then asked: "Big monk, what is your religious name?"

Fawang said, "I'm Zhu Mu Lang Ma." Zhu Mu Lang Ma (Chomolungma/Mount Everest) is the tallest mountain in Tibet and it's peak reached the clouds, so Fawang was trying to say his martial arts were unmatched in the world.

Guo Xiang said, "What a long and messy name."

Fawang said, "It's Zhu Mu Lang Ma."

Guo Xiang said, "OK, Reverend Zhu Mu Lang Ma, where is my brother?"

Fawang said, "Your brother?"

Guo Xiang said, "Yeah, Yang Guo."

Fawang said, "You call Yang Guo your brother? But you're Guo, right?"

Guo Xiang said, "We're sworn siblings, he lived in my home when he was young."

Fawang said, "I also have a sworn brother, we've known each other for many years, his martial arts are excellent and he is

very well-known, his name is Guo Jing, do you know him?"

Guo Xiang thought, "I sneaked out, if he's one of Father's friends he might want to take me home, so I'd better not tell him." So she said, "You're talking about Hero Guo? He's an elder in my family. You want to meet him?"

Fawang was clever and alert, how could he miss Guo Xiang's change in expression? He sighed, "He's my savior, we've not met for more than twenty years, and then I heard a rumour that he had passed away. I'm very sad, so I came here to pay my respects. Ah, heaven must be blind to make a hero's life so short." When he said this, tears started to fall. His internal strength is very strong and he can control his entire body's functions, so he could cry at will.

Guo Xiang saw him crying tragically, although she knew her father was not dead, she was still concerned about her father and her feelings were affected by him, so she said, "Big monk, don't worry, Hero Guo isn't dead."

Fawang said, "You're talking nonsense. He's really dead. What does a girl like you know?"

Guo Xiang said, "I just came out from Xiangyang, of course I'd know. I just saw Hero Guo yesterday."

Fawang faced the sky, laughing, "Ah, you're Hero Guo's daughter." Then he shook his head and said, "No, no, his daughter is Guo Fu, I know her too, she's around thirty-five this year, she's not as young as you."

Guo Xiang couldn't resist and said, "She's my elder sister. I'm Guo Xiang."

Fawang was delighted and thought, "I'm really in luck today. Such an opportunity is hard to come by." Then he said, "Oh OK, so Hero Guo's not dead."

Guo Xiang saw his happy expression and thought he was happy about her father, so she thought he was a nice person and said, "Of course he's not dead. If my father died, I'd die crying over him."

Fawang said, "OK, OK, I believe you. I'm not going to Xiangyang just yet. Please help me tell Hero Guo and Chief Huang that I send my regards to them."

However Guo Xiang was persistent in asking about Yang Guo, so as he was leaving she stopped him as he mounted the horse.

Guo Xiang said, "Hey big monk, why are you so unreasonable?"

Fawang said, "How so?"

Guo Xiang said, "I told you about my father yet you did not tell me anything about Yang Guo. So where is he?"

Fawang said, "Ah, yesterday at the valley north of Nanyang he was training his sword strokes. He might not have left yet, you can go find him."

Guo Xiang frowned, saying, "There're many valleys. Which is it? Please tell me clearly."

Fawang thought for a while then said, "OK! I'm going north anyway, so I'll take you there."

Guo Xiang said, "Thanks a lot."

Fawang took his horse over and said, "Miss, please ride the horse, I'll walk."

Guo Xiang said, "That's not such a good idea."

Fawang laughed, "This horse has four legs but it might not run faster than my two legs."

Guo Xiang was about to mount the horse then she said, "Oh yes, I'm very hungry, do you have anything to eat?" Fawang took a bag from his back and Guo Xiang ate two biscuits from it, then she rode the horse.

Fawang flipped his sleeves and followed behind. Guo Xiang thought about what he said so she took the reins and said, "Big monk, I'll be waiting for you out front." Before she finished speaking, the horse started galloping and charged forward.

This horse was very swift and Guo Xiang felt the wind in her face and saw the trees flash past her. She turned her head around and laughed, "Big monk, can you catch up?" Then she was slightly surprised as there was no trace of him behind. Then suddenly his voice came from the forest in front, saying, "Miss Guo, my horse is not very fast, you must whip it harder."

Guo Xiang was extremely curious, wondering how he had gotten in front. When the horse caught up, she saw the monk taking huge strides forward. Guo Xiang whipped the horse and it moved faster, but it always remained several meters behind, not able to catch up. By this time they had already reached the main road north of Xiangyang. The horse was kicking up a lot of dust while Fawang did not stir any sand or dirt and moved like the wind.

Guo Xiang was in awe of him and thought, "If he didn't have this level of martial arts he wouldn't be worthy of Father's sworn brotherhood." She respectfully said, "Big Monk, you're an elder, you should ride the horse, I'll follow slowly behind." Fawang laughed, "Why should we waste time? Don't you want to find your brother sooner?" By this time the horse was losing its speed and was lagging further behind Fawang.

Now two horses appeared up in front in the distance. Fawang said, "Let's capture those two horses and ride them

alternately so that we can move faster.” After a while the horses came closer and Fawang stretched out his hands, saying, “Get down and walk!”

The horses were shocked and neighed, stopping immediately. The riders however had good riding skills and did not fall from the horses. One of them angrily said, “Who’re you? Do you want to die?” He lashed out with his whip.

Guo Xiang happily said, “Big Head Ghost, Long Beard Ghost, don’t fight, we’re all friends!” The two riders were the Big Head Ghost and Long Beard Ghost of the Xishan Ghosts.

Then Fawang grabbed the whip and tried to seize it. However although the Big Head Ghost was small-sized, he had great strength and the whip was made of tough leather, so it did not snap even under Fawang’s force of a few hundred jin. Fawang said, “Not bad!” and increased his strength, pulling the Big Head Ghost off his horse.

The Big Head Ghost got angry and threw down his whip and charged forward, wanting to fight with Fawang. The Long Beard Ghost said, “Brother, wait!” Then he said, “Miss Guo, why are you together with the Golden Wheel Monk?” Many years ago Yang Guo had gone to the Passionless Valley with Fawang, so the Long Beard Ghost (Fan Yiweng) recognized him.

Guo Xiang laughed, “You’re mistaken, he’s Reverend Zhu Mu Lang Ma, a good friend of my father. The Golden Wheel Monk is my father’s enemy, so how could this be?”

Fan Yiweng asked, “Where did you meet him?”

Guo Xiang said, “I bumped into him not long ago. He said my father is dead, isn’t that silly? He wants to bring me to see Big Brother now.”

The Big Head Ghost said, "Quickly get over here. This monk is a bad person."

Guo Xiang became doubtful and asked, "Is he fooling me?"

The Big Head Ghost said, "The Eagle Hero is in the south, why is he taking you north?"

Fawang smiled and said, "These two midgets are talking garbage." He suddenly brought up his palms and struck them on the head.

For the past decade, Fawang had been training his "Dragon/Elephant Moving Skill" (Long Xiang Ban Lao Gong) and he had reached an unprecedented level in this fearsome skill. The "Dragon/Elephant Moving Skill" has thirteen levels; the first being very easy and even an idiot could master it within two years with some guidance. The second is more difficult than the first and requires about three to four years. The third level is even more difficult than the second and needs seven to eight years. So the difficulty level increases exponentially for each new level. For the fifth level alone, it usually requires more than thirty years to master. This profound skill was created by some obscure monk but no one has actually passed the tenth level. This skill is so profound that it is nearly impossible to complete all thirteen levels unless one could live to a thousand years old. The creator himself only mastered it to the eighth level and could make no more progress as he had reached a dangerous obstacle which he could not overcome. During the Northern Song Dynasty, a monk who mastered the ninth level trained without rest and managed to reach the tenth level, but in his excitement he lost control (what some might call a 'fire deviation') and became insane, dancing crazily for seven days and nights before severing his arteries and dying.

This Golden Wheel Monk, however, is a prodigy and through his hard work and intelligence, he managed to break through

the obstacle at the ninth level and reached the tenth level. This is an unprecedented achievement and no one will likely reach this level again. According to the description of the “Dragon/Elephant Moving Skill”, each palm thrust out is equivalent to the force generated by ten dragons and ten elephants. He knew he might not be able to reach the next level but he felt he did not have any opponents under the sky so he thought it was unnecessary to master the eleventh level. That year when he was defeated by Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu’s swords, it was the biggest defeat and insult in his whole life, so he trained relentlessly and now when the Khan is preparing to invade the south, he took this opportunity to come south and seek the Yang-Long couple for a re-match, hoping to avenge his bitter defeat.

Now when he struck out with his palms, the Big Head Ghost was struck on his arm and it broke immediately with a snap. Following that he was struck on his forehead and his brain was smashed in without even a sound and he died instantly. Fan Yiweng’s skills were high and when he saw that the palm attacking him was lethal, he used the “Tuo Tian Stance” to block this palm, however it was too strong for him and he felt as though a thousand-jin force had smashed his back, so he saw everything turn black and he collapsed.

Guo Xiang was extremely taken aback and shouted, “They’re my friends! Why did you hit them?”

Fan Yiweng spat out a pool of blood and used his last ounce of strength to get up and pounce on Fawang’s leg, yelling, “Miss, get the hell out of here!” Fawang grabbed his back, wanting to lift him up and smash him down but Fan Yiweng risked his life to protect Guo Xiang, so he grabbed onto Fawang’s leg for all he was worth. Although Fawang was incredibly strong, he could not get rid of him.

Guo Xiang was stunned and furious and immediately knew this monk was a evil man but she did not want to desert Fan Yiweng and escape alone. She placed her hands on her waist and coldly said, "Devil monk, how dare you commit this evil? Let him go, I'll follow you." Fan Yiweng yelled, "Just go! Don't care about..." Before he could say "me" he was dead.

Fawang lifted his body and cast it aside, laughing; "If you want to escape why not use the horse?" Guo Xiang had never hated anyone her whole life, even when Hou Du ambushed and killed Lu Youjiao she just grieved for him but did not hate Hou Du. But now when she saw Fawang being so cruel and brutal she could not help it but hate him and with hatred in her eyes she stared at him. Fawang said, "Miss, aren't you afraid of me?"

Guo Xiang said, "Scared...Of what? If you want to kill me just do it now!"

Fawang stuck out his thumb and said, "Good. A very brave girl, just like her father."

Guo Xiang gazed at him with rage in her eyes and wanted to burry her friends but she did not have any tools so she just carried the bodies and placed them on Fan Yiweng's horse and kicked the horse, saying, "Horse, please take them home." The horse galloped away.

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That night when Yang Guo and Huang Yaoshi left Xiangyang, they used their Qing gong and ran ten li south; before morning they were near Yicheng. They came to a tea house, ordered some dishes and started eating. Huang Yaoshi told him that Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang had been living in their hometown Jiaying in seclusion with Sha Gu for company. He wanted to take them and roam Jianghu to ease

their worries but they did not want to. Yang Guo sadly gave a sigh and reproached himself inwardly.

They drank two cups of wine. Yang Guo said, "Island Master Huang, for these past ten years, I've been looking for you to consult you over a matter."

Huang Yaoshi laughed, "I'm always on the move without a fixed destination, so it was hard for you to find me. But what would you like to ask?" Yang Guo was about to reply when he heard foot steps on the stairs and saw three people coming up.

When Yang Guo and Huang Yaoshi heard the foot steps, they knew the three people's martial arts were strong and recognized two of them after a glance. One was Xiaoxiang Zi, the other was Yin Kexi, but he did not recognize the third person who had a dark complexion. Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi had seen Yang Guo too and they stood rooted for a moment, then quickly turned around, wanting to get downstairs.

Yang Guo raised his eyebrows and laughed: "We haven't seen each other for a while! Why in such a hurry?"

Yin Kexi raised his hands and greeted him with a smile: "How is everything with you, master Yang?"

Xiaoxiang Zi was still angry about the fact that Yang Guo broke his arm at Mount Zhongnan sixteen years ago. Although his internal strength had increased a lot, he knew he was no match for Yang Guo. He did not bother to look at Yang Guo again and turned around and started to descend the stairs.

The man with the dark face was another famous warrior of Khubilai's; together with Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi they were here to scout the vicinity. When he saw that Xiaoxiang Zi looking angry, he loudly said: "Brother Xiaoxiang, wait! If

there is a rogue disturbing our mood let me deal with him." He walked over and tried to use his big hand to toss Yang Guo out of the first floor window.

Yang Guo saw that his palm was coloured purple and knew he was trained in the "Poisonous Sand Palms", he thought: "Why don't I use these three men as an excuse to ask Old Master Huang about the Divine Nun of the South Sea?" He saw that the man's hand was about to touch his shoulder, he put up his palm and slapped the man on the cheek. Huang Yaoshi was shocked: "How very fast!" Just by seeing that slap, he knew that Yang Guo had invented his own style and this style was unique. He heard another two slaps, Xiaoxiang Zi was slapped on his left and right cheek. Yang Guo spared Yin Kexi because he had shown some courtesy.

Huang Yaoshi laughed: "Young brother Yang, your newly invented style is most sophisticated. I would like to see the entire set so as to please my eyes."

Yang Guo said: "I was just about to ask Old Master Huang for some pointers." His body rocked about and he was now displaying his "Melancholic Sad Palms", his long sleeve whisked around and his left palm was pushing forward. Suddenly he used the stance "Entangled by the Web of Love" and following he added the technique, "Hesitating on Returning to the Empty Valley", with these two stances he curled Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the other warrior in his waves of palm energy. The three of them were trapped as though in a tidal force and were swaying back and forth; they were totally submissive to Yang Guo's palm. They were nearly unable to stand upright, let alone trying to break free. In a few moments they were at the mercy of Yang Guo. Huang Yaoshi was holding a cup and sighed: "The ancients were drinking wine while reading the Han History Analects; today I am drinking wine and beholding your martial arts. This kind of lofty skill has surpassed the ancients."

Yang Guo said loudly: "Old Master, please give me a few pointers." He waved his palm and Xiaoxiang Zi was pushed towards Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi did not dare to be leisurely; he pushed out with his left hand and returned Xiaoxiang back to him. He saw that the black-faced warrior was coming towards him now. He first sipped some wine before using his palm to repel that man back too. Yang Guo carefully examined his stances and saw that although his internal power was strong but his techniques were not extraordinarily exquisite. He thought: "If I don't go all out, I cannot force him to display the martial arts of the Divine Nun of the South Sea." He accumulated his energy in his pubic region and increased energy to his palms. That way Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the black-faced warrior were pushed to Huang Yaoshi faster and faster.

After returning a few palms Huang Yaoshi felt that the three men came crashing towards him like tidal waves, the second wave fiercer than the first wave. He thought: "This child's palms become stronger with every stance; he is really one outstanding martial arts master."

At this point the black-faced warrior soared through the sky, his feet first and head back. He was headed towards the face of Huang Yaoshi who tilted his palm to discharge the coming energy force, his right hand trembled a bit and some wine splattered out of the cup. Following were Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi who were soaring through the air now; one was directly flying towards him the other diagonally. Huang Yaoshi called out: "Good!" he put down his cup and used his right palm to retaliate.

Yang Guo and Huang Yaoshi were now several zhang (1 zhang is about 4 meters) apart from each other, and were exchanging palms with each other. Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the black-faced warrior became, as it were, rubber balls or other toys at the hands of Yang and Huang. They were

entirely in their control and were sent soaring back and forth. Only after displaying half of his “Melancholic Sad Palms”, the “Changing Peach” and “Descending Flower Palms” of Huang Yaoshi were paling in comparison now. When he saw that Yin Kexi was soaring towards him and he figured that his palm energy was not able to resist it. He flicked his finger and a soft splang sound could be heard, a light and delicate energy burst out and countered the energy blast of Yang Guo. He flicked his finger three times and three groups of splangs could be heard; Xiaoxiang Zi, Yin Kexi and the black-faced warrior had fallen on the floor and fainted. His “Divine Flicking Finger” and the “Melancholic Sad Palms” of Yang Guo were evenly well-matched. Neither one was the winner or the loser.

Both of them laughed heartily and sat down at their table again, they were pouring wine and drinking again. Huang Yaoshi said: “Young brother Yang, the power of your newly created palm stances is very forceful. In the entire realm only the “Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms” of my son-in-law, Guo Jing can be compared to it. My “Changing Peach” and “Descending Flower Palms” are one level inferior.”

Yang Guo thanked him repeatedly, then said, “I learned your two great skills “Divine Flicking Finger” and “Jade Flute Swordplay” years ago and when I created this palm skill, I derived some of the essence from your skills. I heard you were once taught by the Divine Nun of the South Sea and learned a palm skill, I would humbly request Elder to display it as an eye-opener for me.”

Huang Yaoshi curiously asked, “Divine Nun of the South Sea? Who’s that? I’ve never heard of such a person.”

Yang Guo’s face turned pale. He stood up and stuttered, “What?! There’s no... no such person as the Divine Nun of the South Sea?”

Huang Yaoshi saw his face change colour and was shocked so he said, "Could it be a young hero who has risen in recent years? This old man is rather ignorant, I've never heard of her."

Yang Guo stood there speechless but his heart was beating wildly, thinking, "Aunt Guo clearly told me Long'er was saved by the Divine Nun of the South Sea, so this whole thing is a lie, this whole thing is a sham to fool me!" He faced the sky and let off a roar which shuddered the whole building, then tears fell to the floor.

Huang Yaoshi said, "If you have any troubles you could tell me, maybe this old man can help you."

Yang Guo said with a trembling voice, "My heart is in a great turmoil. Please pardon me." He waved his sleeve and dashed down the stairs, causing some of the planks to break under his force.

Huang Yaoshi wondered what on Earth was going on and mumbled, "Divine Nun of the South Sea? Who could that be?"

Yang Guo increased his speed and rushed around madly, not eating or sleeping for several days, just charging around like a typhoon. It was only when he became half-dead from fatigue that he thought of Xiao Longnu, not even daring to imagine if he would meet her again. In less than a day he had reached the banks of a large river. Finally he could not take it anymore and just boarded the nearest boat he saw, handed two taels of silver to the boatman and went to sleep without even asking where it was heading.

The boat headed east on the choppy river and stopped every few days to trade goods; it was a trading boat. Yang Guo's heart was still in disarray and did not care where the boat was taking him to; drinking by day and sighing by night,

passing several days in that fashion. The boatman received his money and thought he was just an aimless wanderer and did not bother him.

Then one day a trader on board said the boat was nearing Jiaxing and Lin An. When Yang Guo heard 'Jiaxing', he was surprised, thinking, "My father's death was brought about by Huang Rong years ago at the Iron Spear Temple in Jiaxing and his body was eaten by the crows, but what happened to his bones? I must be a filial son and bury his remains properly." He then got off the boat.

At that time it was the start of winter, and although Jiangnan was not as cold as the north, it was still snowing heavily. Yang Guo put on a cape and started walking. In three days he reached Jiaxing. When he reached there it was evening and he went to a restaurant and ordered some dishes, then asked where the Iron Spear Temple was. He then went out into the snow and went straight there. It was still snowing and the north wind did not show any signs of slackening.

Under the snow's reflection, he saw that this temple has been abandoned for many years and no one tended to its repairs. The door was rotting away and it creaked open when pushed gently. He entered the temple and saw a statue in a bad shape and the place was filled with cobwebs. There was no one around. More than thirty years ago his father died here and he had never seen his father, which made him even sadder.

He looked around the temple and hoped he could find any traces his father had left behind although so many years had passed. He went to the back of the temple and found a grave and a tombstone between two large trees and the tombstone was covered in snow. He brushed the snow away with his sleeve and read the inscription. When he read it he became very angry. It read, "Unfilial Disciple Yang Kang's Grave" and

the sub-heading read, "Inscribed by his Useless Teacher Qiu Chuji".

Yang Guo was furious thinking, "This old priest Qiu Chuji was really heartless; even after my father is dead he wouldn't leave him alone. How was my father unfilial? Humph, what's the bloody use of being filial to that old Cow-nose? If I don't go to the Quanzhen Sect and kill those people, my anger will never subside." He lifted his palm and wanted to smash the tombstone.

Before he could strike, he heard footsteps moving fast outside the temple which sounded strange – they sounded like martial arts experts yet sounded like animals. Yang Guo became curious so he did not strike, then he heard the footsteps heading towards the temple. He quickly got back inside and hid behind the statue, trying to see who it was.

The footsteps came right up to the temple but stopped at the entrance, probably fearing an enemy lying in ambush inside. After a while, they stepped in. Yang Guo peeked at them then almost laughed. He saw four men enter the temple; the four men had their left legs broken, their hands holding a stick and their right legs were clapped in chains; their footsteps made such strange noises because they had to move their feet together.

The leader of the group had a bald and shiny head and only half a left arm. The second person had a lump on his forehead and his left arm stopped at the elbow. The third person was small-sized while the fourth was a huge monk. The four of them looked rather old and were obviously disabled. Yang Guo wondered, "What is their background? Why do they stick together like that and never leave each other?" The leader took out his flint and lit a fire, and then he found a candle and lit it. Yang Guo then saw clearly that apart from the leader, the other three had no eyes in their

eye sockets, then he realized, "So these three people depend on the first person to lead the way."

The bald man held the candle and looked around the temple. The four of them moved like crabs, one following the other and the distance between them was never less than three feet. Yang Guo had concealed himself well. Moreover, these people were disabled and only one of them could see, so they did not find him although their ears were sharp and their movements rather agile. The bald man said, "That old man Ke didn't reveal our whereabouts or invite helpers to lie in ambush here."

The third man said, "Correct, he promised not to inform on us. These people are valiant and always keep their word of honour."

The four people sat on the floor together. The second man said, "Shi Ge (Martial Brother), do you think this old man Ke will really come?"

The first man said, "It's quite hard to say, but I think he won't come. Who's so stupid as to come and seek death?"

The third man said, "But this old man Ke was the head of the Jiangnan Seven Freaks. That year he made a bet with that scoundrel priest Qiu and so he went all the way to Mongolia to teach Guo Jing martial arts. This matter is well-known in Jianghu. Everyone says the Jiangnan Seven Freaks never went back on their word. It's because of this that we released him."

Yang Guo heard every word clearly from behind the statue and thought, "So they're waiting for Elder Ke." Then he heard the second man say, "I say he'll definitely come. Brother Peng, why don't we make a bet to see who..." Before he finished talking, they heard footsteps out in the snow which were heavy and light alternately - someone was using a

walking staff. Yang Guo knew Ke Zhen'E when he was on Peach Blossom Island, so he knew it was him immediately. The skinny man laughed, "Brother Hou, that old man Ke is here, you still want to bet?" The man with the lump said, "You scoundrel, are you really not afraid of death?"

A few tapping sounds were heard and the Flying Bat Ke Zhen'E walked in and said, "Ke Zhen'E has kept his word and has come. These are the "Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills", altogether there are twelve of them, which makes it three for each of you." He threw a small bottle over to the bald man. He said happily, "Many thanks." and caught it. Ke Zhen'E said, "This old man has completed his business and is here to die." He was standing erect proudly in front of them and his beard was floating in the wind.

The man with the lump said, "Shi Ge, he brought us the "Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills" which can treat our internal injuries, moreover we don't have any deep feud with him, let's just let him go."

The skinny man laughed, "Hey, Brother Hou, don't let the tiger escape back into the wild. Your kindness may cause us to die a horrible death. Although he hasn't revealed our secret, how can we be sure he'd never do it?" He shouted, "Let's act together!" The four people rushed over and surrounded Ke Zhen'E.

The old man said hoarsely, "More than thirty years ago, all of us witnessed Yang Kang's tragic death here, who knew it would happen to you too; this is retribution."

Ke Zhen'E smashed his walking staff on the floor and said angrily, "That Yang Kang acknowledged a scoundrel as his step-father and betrayed his country for wealth; he was a despicable animal. I, Ke Zhen'E, am a true man who has never let down the sky or the Earth, how can you compare that traitor with me, the Flying Bat? You know you can kill me

but you cannot insult me (Ke Sha Bu Ke Ru - A rather common phrase at that time)!"

The skinny man sneered, "You're about to die and you still try to be a hero!" Three of them shot out their palms together and aimed at his head. Ke Zhen'E knew he was not their match and just stood there, not attempting any retaliation or defense.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew over them and a 'peng' sound was heard, causing the dust to fly. The four of them knew something was wrong and felt as if they did not hit any flesh. That bald man understood what was going on but Ke Zhen'E had suddenly disappeared and in his position was the statue. The statue's head was smashed and fell into pieces under the four people's combined force.

The bald man was shocked. He turned around and saw a thirty-something year old man with a furious face holding Ke Zhen'E's neck and lifting him high into the air, shouting, "Why did you insult my father?"

Ke Zhen'E asked, "Who're you?"

Yang Guo said, "I'm Yang Guo and Yang Kang was my father. When I was young you didn't treat me badly but why do you slander my late father behind my back?"

Ke Zhen'E coldly said, "There are many men in history, some leave a good reputation for a hundred generations, while some leave behind a stinking name. How can you silence everyone?"

Yang Guo saw that he was very stubborn and became more furious and threw him down hard onto the floor, shouting, "So you're saying my father was despicable and shameless?"

The bald man saw that Yang Guo's martial arts were superb since he could swap a person with a statue without even him

knowing. He knew he was not his match and lightly tugged at the chain, wanting the group to sneak out of the temple. Yang Guo darted forward and blocked the exit, saying, "No one's getting out of here alive without giving me an explanation." The four people yelled and threw out a palm each towards him. Yang Guo said, "Good!" He also shot out his left palm and the force of a tornado smashed onto them, causing them to lose their balance and fall backwards, hitting the statue and smashing it. The second man's skills were the weakest and his lump hit right smack into the statue, causing him to black out immediately.

Yang Guo said, "Who are you people? Why are you chained together in this strange manner? And why do you want to meet Ke Zhen'E here?" After being hit by Yang Guo's palm, his chest became congested and his organs seemed to turn upside down, so he sat quietly for a while trying to circulate his chi before talking slowly.

This bald man was Sha Tongtian, the second man was his martial brother the Three Headed Serpent Hou Tonghai, the third man was the Thousand Hand Killer Peng Lianhu, the fourth was the Big Handprint Lama Ling Zi. More than 30 years ago, the Old Urchin Zhou Botong captured them and handed them to Qiu Chuji and Wang Chuyi who imprisoned them in Chongyang Palace, wanting them to repent before releasing them. But their evil characters were hard to change and they tried many ways and means to escape but were recaptured each time. On their third attempt, Hou Tonghai, Peng Lianhu and Ling Zi killed several of the Quanzhen disciples who were their wardens. The Quanzhen Taoists punished them by breaking their legs and blinding them. Since only Sha Tongtian had killed no one, he was not blinded. Then sixteen years ago the Mongolians overran Chongyang Palace and they managed to escape. However, since three of them were blind, they had to rely on Sha Tongtian to lead the way, but they were afraid that he would

desert them, they had chained themselves up in this manner. At that time Yang Guo only spent a short time at Chongyang Palace and was not in his master's and fellow disciples' good books. He had never been allowed to go near their cell; therefore he had never seen them and did not know their backgrounds.

When they escaped from Chongyang Palace the four of them were disabled so they could not fight the Quanzhen disciples. Although the Quanzhen's base had been destroyed, their strength in Jianghu had not diminished. They came to Jiangnan and lived in a deserted village, passing sixteen years uneventfully. But one day they came out and saw Ke Zhen'E passing along on a small road. Sha Tongtian was afraid he had come for them so they went to confront him. Ke Zhen'E's skills were no match for the four people and he was subdued almost immediately. After interrogating him, they found he was attending to some other matters. Although the four of them had no feud with him, they were afraid he would leak out their secret so they wanted to kill him.

Ke Zhen'E swore that he would make a trip to Jiaying to attend to a matter then he would return to seek death, promising that if they let him off for the time being he would obtain the "Nine Flower Jade Dew Pills" from Peach Blossom Island to return the favour. After their legs were broken, they would ache and hurt whenever it rained. When they heard he would bring them such an effective treatment, they made him swear an oath not to reveal their whereabouts and not to get help to fight them and finally to meet at the Iron Spear Temple.

When Sha Tongtian finished his story, he said, "Hero Yang, when your father was still alive we were guests in his palace. We never did anything against him until he passed away. We hope that you consider our good ties with him and let us off." Many years ago these four people were outstanding people in

Jianghu; even if they were threatened by swords and axes they would never be willing to show any weakness. After being disabled and suffering many years of hardship, they discarded their pride and begged Yang Guo for mercy.

Yang Guo snorted and did not bother with them. Facing Ke Zhen'E he said, "So you went to see Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang? What was it about?"

Ke Zhen'E faced the sky and laughed, "Yang Guo ah Yang Guo, you're really ignorant."

Yang Guo angrily said, "In what way?"

Ke Zhen'E said, "At this stage, I already ignore my old life; even when I was in my prime I have never been intimidated by anyone. No matter how good your martial arts are, you can only frighten people who're afraid of death. The Jiangnan Seven Freaks never submit under interrogation."

Yang Guo saw that his manner was imposing and gallant and he respected him. He said, "Elder Ke, I'm at fault, pardon me. I was offended because you insulted my father. Elder Ke's name is well-known throughout the world; I have admired you since young and do not dare offend you."

Ke Zhen'E said, "This is more like it. I heard your character is good and you contributed greatly to Xiangyang, so I regard you as an outstanding person. If you were like your father, by just talking to me you would have insulted me."

Yang Guo's anger erupted again and he shouted, "What on Earth had my father done? Tell me clearly." Among all the people Yang Guo knew, there were many who knew about his father but no one wanted to tell him the whole story in order not to offend him. Even if he asked, they just picked some unrelated details and told him those.

Ke Zhen'E bore a deep grudge against his father and he also did not have any regard for his own life, so he did not care if Yang Guo was offended or not. He told Yang Guo the whole story of Guo Jing and Yang Kang and mentioned how Yang Kang collaborated with Ouyang Feng to kill five of the Jiangnan Seven Freaks. He finally told how he died after striking Huang Rong here in this very temple. Then he said, "These people witnessed everything that happened that night. Sha Tongtian, Peng Lianhu, tell us, have I spoken the truth?"

The six people had smashed the statue and shouted loudly, frightening the crows on the roof of the temple. They circled in the air and cawed continuously. Sha Tongtian sighed, "That night there were so many crows as well... My hand was scratched by the elder Master Yang, if not for Brother Peng's quick reaction of cutting off my arm, how could I still be alive today?" Peng Lianhu said, "Old man Ke is more or less correct, but Hero Yang's father treated us with courtesy and he was really... really outstanding and talented." [Some background information: In 'The Legend of the Eagle Shooting Heroes', Yang Kang struck the spot on Huang Rong's Soft Armour which had Ouyang Feng's poison on it. As a result he eventually died from the poison; when he scratched Sha Tongtian the poison was spread to him, so his arm had to be amputated.]

Yang Guo held his head with both hands in grief and indignation – he never expected his father to be such an evil traitor. No matter how great he had become, it was hard to erase his father's bad name. The six people sat there silently while the crows continued cawing.

After a long time, Ke Zhen'E said, "Master Yang, you have contributed greatly at Xiangyang; no matter how many wrongdoings your father committed, you have already made

up for him. Even in the Underworld he would be proud of you.”

Yang Guo thought back to his relationship with the Guo couple and remembered how Huang Rong did not trust him. Many of the misunderstandings in the past resulted from this. But without his father how would he be here? Still, many of his problems originated from his father, so he gave a long sigh and asked Ke Zhen'E, “Elder Ke, how are Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang?”

Ke Zhen'E said, “They heard about how you burned the supplies at Nanyang and how you annihilated the Mongolian vanguard, so they were delighted. They asked every detail about you and also asked if you had news of Xiao Longnu. They really miss you a lot, but it's a pity I don't know much myself.”

Yang Guo said, “I've not seen my two sworn sisters for sixteen years.” Suddenly he turned around and told Sha Tongtian, “Elder Ke has promised to give his life to you, he is a man of honour and never goes back on his word. Now you can act. If you gang up on him you can win by numbers and kill him. But if you do that I will kill you dogs to avenge him.”

They sat wordlessly for a while. Then Peng Lianhu said, “The four of us are really foolish and we offended old Hero Ke; we beg you two great men to forgive us.”

Yang Guo said, “Then remember that now it is you who must keep your word and do not dare kill Elder Ke.”

Peng Lianhu said, “Yes, yes. Old Hero Ke is a man of honor, we really admire him.”

Yang Guo said, “Then leave quickly. Don't cause me trouble again.” The four men bowed together and left the temple. Yang Guo saved Ke Zhen'E's life as well as defended his

honor, so he was really grateful. The two men kicked away the broken pieces of the statue and sat down.

Ke Zhen'E said, "Actually I came to Jiaying because of the younger Miss Guo."

Yang Guo was slightly surprised, asking, "What happened to her?"

Ke Zhen'E sighed but smiled, "Each of Guo Jing's daughters are mischievous in their own way, which really causes a lot of headaches. No one knows why that girl Guo Xiang left Xiangyang without saying a word and no one knows where she is. Her father, in his anxiety, sent out people to find her whereabouts, but so far she can not be traced. Some of them actually came to Peach Blossom Island to look for her. But why would such an active young girl come to Peach Blossom Island to keep this blind old man company? I also became worried and came here to help find her."

Yang Guo said, "So have you got any news?"

Ke Zhen'E said, "Yesterday I was at Linan and I heard two Mongols saying that Hero Guo's daughter had been captured and imprisoned in the Mongolian Camp..."

Yang Guo exclaimed, "Ah! Is this true?"

Ke Zhen'E said, "The two Mongolian armies have come to attack Xiangyang, yet the Imperial Court's officials still think they can make peace. These two Mongols must be here to fool our officials, so their ranks must be very high. I lived with the Mongolians for many years and although I'm blind my ears are very sharp so I heard it very clearly."

Yang Guo said, "So this is true?"

Ke Zhen'E said, "Yes! I originally wanted to send poison to those two Mongolians, but reporting the matter to Xiangyang

is more urgent so I didn't want to be stuck with this problem. Unfortunately I met those four criminals along the way. I don't really care when I die but the news concerning Guo Xiang must be reported. I requested several days' grace and came to Jiaxing to relay the news to Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang. After receiving the news they went north immediately, and so I came to seek death. I never expected that I would keep my promise while those four scum didn't, Ha-ha-ha!"

Yang Guo remained quiet for some time before asking, "Elder Ke, did you happen to overhear where Miss Guo is held? Is her life in danger?"

Ke Zhen'E said, "They didn't mention it; from what I heard it seems like those two Mongols aren't too sure themselves."

Yang Guo said, "This is really urgent, I must rush there and conduct a rescue operation. Elder Ke, please take your time."

Ke Zhen'E heard from the Beggar Clan members who came to Peach Blossom Island to look for Guo Xiang and talk about Yang Guo's great deeds at Xiangyang, so he knew that he was exceptionally capable. He said, "With you going, I don't have to worry."

Yang Guo said, "Elder Ke, I'd like to ask for a favour – please help honor my father and erect a new tombstone which says, 'My Father Lord Yang Kang's Grave, by his unfilial son Yang Guo'."

Ke Zhen'E was surprised then he realized what he wanted, saying, "Absolutely right! Although you're unfilial, being unfilial has far surpassed others being filial. I'll definitely do it."

Yang Guo went back to Jiaxing and bought three good horses and set off towards the north immediately. Throughout the

entire journey he kept switching horses to prevent any delays and he reached the Mongolian camp the same day.

The Mongolian Khan was trying to capture Xiangyang but they had suffered two great defeats without knowing why. Furthermore their supplies at Nanyang were burned completely and they lost many soldiers. Their morale was low and they did not know the real situation of the Song soldiers. So they camped in the north of Nanyang and did not stir. Their flags were all over the place and their weapons were displayed for all to see. Yang Guo swept across the camp with his eyes and saw tent after tent, seemingly unending.

Yang Guo waited for nightfall and snuck into the camp to scout around. He only saw that their weapons were neatly arranged and the whole camp was in order; this would be really serious for the Song army. Yang Guo knew there were many great fighters in the camp and he could not fight them all so he was careful not to reveal himself. After sneaking around for half a night he still could not find out where Guo Xiang was held. He managed to capture an advisor who spoke Mandarin and interrogated him, but the advisor claimed he had not even heard of the matter at all.

Yang Guo was still worried and he examined the camp for a few days. Finally he determined that she was not in the camp and thought, "It looks like Uncle Guo has already rescued her or perhaps those two Mongol officials had just heard some rumors." Then after checking the dates he found that it was nearing his reunion with Xiao Longnu, so he hurriedly headed towards the Passionless Valley.

End of Chapter 37.

Chapter 38 - Life and Death Are Boundless

Translated by Frans Soetomo with excerpt by Athena



小龍
參萬千
務泰

Suddenly he jumped up and ran toward the Heartbreaking Cliff. He stood in front of the carved letters, and loudly shouted, "This is your own handwriting. Why didn't you keep your promise?" His voice was very loud, it echoed on the surrounding mountains, "Why didn't you keep your promise? Why didn't you keep your promise?...you keep your promise?...keep your promise?"

When Guo Xiang saw Jinlun Fawang ruthlessly kill the Long Beard Ghost and the Big Head Ghost her heart was filled with sorrow; yet she knew it would be impossible to get away from his vicious hands, so she said, "Quickly kill me, what are you waiting for?"

Fawang laughed, "Killing a cute girl like you is too easy. But I have killed two men, and that's enough for today. I'll deal with you after a few days. For now just follow me." Guo Xiang knew fighting him would be futile, she thought she'd better follow him and wait for a good opportunity to escape. So she just made faces at him, stuck her tongue out and unhurriedly mounted the horse.

Fawang was very pleased, he silently thought, "The Emperor wanted to have Guo Jing's life at all costs, but has never been able to succeed. Today I caught Guo Jing's beloved daughter; he could be forced to surrender. If Guo Jing is not willing to surrender, we will just torture the girl below the city wall; that way Guo Jing's mind will be disturbed so that Xiangyang's defenses will be weakened."

That evening they stopped by an empty house along their way. The people had left the area early on; all the villages were desolate. They were fortunate to find a house with its four walls intact. Jinlun Fawang gave his dried biscuits to Guo Xiang, and then let the girl sleep inside a room while he sat meditating in the main hall.

Guo Xiang was tossing and turning; how could she sleep well? Around midnight she heard Fawang's snore, she took a peek and saw him sitting against the wall. She was delighted. Carefully she opened the window and snuck out. She then tore her robe into four pieces, with which she wrapped her horse's hoofs. Then she walked her horse carefully away. After about half a 'li' (about $\frac{1}{4}$ km) she did not see Fawang following, so she mounted the horse and galloped to the northwest. She thought that when Fawang awoke; he would think Guo Xiang was running south, back to Xiangyang. The horse ran for about an hour then slowed down because of fatigue. She often looked back, still no Fawang in sight. She kept moving for about fifty or sixty li, and only then did she feel relieved.

Guo Xiang arrived at a little pathway going up a small hill. She followed that path going higher and higher. The path was turning in front of her, when, out of the blue, she heard somebody snoring very loudly like the rumble of thunder. She saw somebody was sleeping across the path in front of her and she almost fell off the horse's back! It was Jinlun Fawang, with his baldhead and yellow robe. She turned her horse around and galloped downhill as fast as her horse could carry her, this time toward the southeast. She looked back and saw Fawang was still sleeping soundly.

A moment later she got to a small forest, with a lot of trees. Again, she was shocked! A man was hanging by his feet from a tree branch. Who else if not Jinlun Fawang? By now she was enraged. Jinlun Fawang was looking at her and laughed mockingly.

"If you want to capture me, just do it! Why would you play a crazy game like this?" she said. She charged her horse toward him, and suddenly swung her whip toward the monk's face. Her horse leaped forward at the same time so that they passed the monk. Then she tried to pull her whip back, but

she felt a strong force pulling her in the opposite direction; her body was lifted up from the saddle. When the whip was lashing toward Fawang, the monk opened his mouth and bit it, he then pulled the whip and Guo Xiang was pulled towards him.

Airborne, Guo Xiang did not panic; she saw Fawang stoop to snatch her, and deliberately let go of the whip so that she fell down. Fawang was shocked, he thought she was too weak to hold on to the whip and that's why she fell. Immediately he jumped down and readied himself to catch her. "Watch out!" he said.

"Aiyo!" Guo Xiang pretended to be hurt. Her body was only two feet away from the monk. Suddenly she exerted her energy and threw both hands toward the monk's chest in rapid succession. 'Bang! Bang!' Fawang fell down and looked to her like he'd fainted. Even though Fawang's skill was high, he had not expected Guo Xiang would launch a sneak attack like that.

Guo Xiang was delighted; it was better than what she had expected. Quickly she lifted up a big rock to smash his baldhead. But she had never killed anybody in her life before. True, this monk had killed two of her friends, but still she did not have a heart to kill him. Finally she put the stone down, and thrust her fingers out to seal Fawang's accupoints: 'heavenly support' [tian ding] on his neck, and 'body pillar' [shen zhu] on his back. Then she sealed 'divine grace' [shen feng] on his chest, 'crystal cold abyss' [qing leng yuan] on his arm, 'windy city' [feng shi] on his leg and few others. In one breath her hands moved rapidly, sealing a total of thirteen accupoints. She was not satisfied yet. She lifted four heavy stones, of about a dozen jins each, and placed them on top of Fawang's body.

“Wicked man...Oh, wicked man!” she said, “Today your Miss does not want to kill you, but remember that you should repent and not hurt anybody anymore.” Then she mounted her horse ready to leave.

Jinlun Fawang suddenly opened up his eyes, looked at her and laughed, “Little Miss, you have a very kind heart,” he said, “This old monk likes you very much!”

While he was still talking, the four stones on his body suddenly flew up and fell crashing down with a loud noise, while the monk himself leaped up. Somehow he managed to unseal his own thirteen accupoints. Guo Xiang was so startled that she froze.

Fawang indeed was hit by Guo Xiang, but he wasn't injured. The martial arts level between them was like heaven and earth. Fawang only pretended to fall down and faint. He was curious as to what Guo Xiang would do to him. He let his accupoints be sealed and even let Guo Xiang place big stones on his body. He thought, “This child has a kind heart, much better than my two disciples. She is perfect.” Right then and there he decided to take Guo Xiang as his disciple.

Jinlun Fawang had three disciples. His first disciple was well versed in martial arts and literature. He was very talented and Fawang had intended to make him his successor. It's a pity he died very young. His second disciple, Da'erba, was naïve and simple; his talent was just average. His third disciple was Prince Hou Dou; he had an ill character and moreover, he betrayed his master and martial brother. Fawang was disappointed. He had reached the pinnacle of martial arts. He was a monk, therefore, no children. The only way he could pass on his skill was by taking on disciples. If not, in a hundred years, wouldn't his exquisite martial arts vanish? Therefore, seeing Guo Xiang was talented and kind hearted, he immediately made a decision to take her as his

successor. He did not care if Guo Xiang was his enemy's daughter. Wasn't she still young and innocent? He was certain that eventually he would be able to shape her character. Because of this thought he gave up his original plan of torturing Guo Xiang and disturbing Guo Jing's mind.

Guo Xiang stared at the monk. His eyes rolled, his mouth shut. She dismounted her horse and came near him.

"Old Monk," she said, "your skill is very high, it's a pity you have a wicked heart."

"If you admire my skill," said the monk, laughing, "take me as your master. I'll teach you everything I know."

"Pfft!" Guo Xiang snickered, "Why would I learn a Monk's skill? I don't want to be a nun!"

Fawang laughed. "How could learning my skills make you a nun?" he said, "You have sealed my accupoints, I unsealed them myself. You put stones on me, those stones flew up. You have run away riding a horse, but I could sleep in front of your horse! Don't you think all those skills are worth learning?"

Guo Xiang knew the monk was highly skilled, but she also knew he was ruthless. How could she take him as her master? Besides, she was busy looking for Yang Guo. She didn't want to waste any time chitchatting with the monk. So she shook her head.

"Even if you have a higher skill, I still don't want to take a wicked man like you as my master!" she honestly said.

"Uh, how would you know I am a wicked man?" asked Fawang.

"You easily killed the Long Beard Ghost and Big Head Ghost! They were not even your enemies, why did you kill them?"

Fawang laughed. "Don't take me wrong!" he said, "I was just helping you to get a horse. They were the ones who attacked me first! Didn't you see? If my skill was low, wouldn't I be dead at their hands? A monk has to have a benevolent heart; he would not kill if the situation were not pressing ..."

"Hmm!" Guo Xiang snickered. She didn't want to believe him. "What kind a person are you? If you were a good person, you would let me go."

"Didn't I let you go?" the monk countered. "You had a horse and you were free to go to the east or west. I was just sleeping on the road! I didn't even touch you!"

"If that's the case, then let me go looking for Brother Yang. Don't you say another word!" she said.

"Oh, I can't do that!" Fawang shook his head. "You have to take me as your master; you'll have to be under my tutelage for twenty years. After that, you are free to look for anybody you wish."

Guo Xiang was upset. "Old Monk, you don't have any manners! I don't want to take you as my master! Why do you force me?"

"You are the one who doesn't have any manners!" said the monk. "Where in the world could you find a highly skilled master like me? Although other people begged and kowtowed to me three hundred times, I did not take them as disciples. On the other hand, you have found a very good opportunity, a once in a thousand years opportunity, but you refused it. Aren't you the eccentric one?"

"Shameless! You are shameless!" Guo Xiang stuck her tongue out and put her fingers on her cheeks. "Who said you are a highly skilled master? You can't even overcome me, a teenage girl. What's wrong with you? Can you defeat my

father and mother? Can you defeat my grandfather, the Old Master Huang? Let's not talk about father or mother or grandfather, you can't even defeat my Brother Yang Guo! Huh!"

"Who said that?" shouted Fawang. "Who said I couldn't defeat that kid Yang Guo?"

"Everybody in the world did!" answered Guo Xiang. "Just a few days ago we had a Heroes Summit at Xiangyang. Everybody said that even three Jinlun Fawangs could not possibly defeat the one-armed Eagle Hero Yang Guo!"

Actually, Guo Xiang was just rambling on to provoke Fawang's anger. The Heroes Summit only discussed the defense of Xiangyang and strategies to fight the Mongolians. Even if someone did actually mention Fawang and Yang Guo, how would she know? She wasn't even in attendance. But her words were right on Fawang's sore spot; the fact was, that more than ten years ago, Fawang was defeated by Yang Guo. Therefore, Fawang was livid!

"If Yang Guo were here," he said loud and angry, "I would give him a lesson in the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique'. I want him to suffer very badly, so that the world will know who is better, Yang Guo or me."

"You know Yang Guo is not here, therefore you dare to boast!" said Guo Xiang, provokingly. "Do you have the guts to find him and fight? Your skill, the 'Snake and Pig Clumsy Technique'... "

"That's the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique'!" Fawang cut her off. He was so upset his 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique' became 'Snake and Pig Clumsy Technique' ... Of course he was furious.

"If you can beat Brother Yang Guo, then it is 'Dragon and Elephant'," said Guo Xiang. "Otherwise, if you are beaten in just one stance, you are no more than 'Snake and Pig'! If you can defeat Brother Yang Guo, you won't have to force me, I will come and beg you to be my master ... Only I know for sure that you are afraid to go and find Brother Yang. So let's not waste our breath here! I am sure you will run with your tail between your legs as soon as you see even his shadow!"

Fawang was not stupid. He knew the girl was just trying to inflame his anger, but he was a proud man. The only disgrace in his life was his defeat by Yang Guo. Now that he had mastered the tenth level of the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique', fighting Yang Guo was at the top of his list. Therefore, hearing Guo Xiang, he said with confidence, "When I told you I knew where he was, I was just deceiving you. Too bad I don't know his whereabouts. If I did, I would certainly find him. I will beat him and make him kowtow to me begging for mercy!"

Guo Xiang clapped her hands, she laughed mockingly. "O monk, a liar monk!" she shouted. "You are boasting yourself as a valiant man with unmatched in skills; but as soon as you see Yang Guo come from the east, you will certainly run to the west!"

"Pei!" Fawang spat, seething with anger.

"Even though I have no idea where Brother Yang Guo is right now, I do know where he will be in about a month," said Guo Xiang.

"Where will he be?" asked Fawang.

"Why would I tell you? You are scared of him anyway! Forget it! It will only cause nightmares and your heart will be troubled."

Fawang was so angry that he gnashed his teeth. "Tell me ... tell me!" he barked.

"He is going to the Passionless Valley!" Guo Xiang explained. "He is going to the Broken Heart Cliff! He will meet with Xiao Longnu, his wife. One Yang Guo will scare the hell out of you; if he is with Xiao Longnu ... hey ... hey ... Ah old monk, why do you want to go to the Broken Heart Cliff just to be beaten to death?"

For more than ten years Fawang had trained his new skill, the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique'. He wanted to test this new skill against the 'Jade Maiden Sword Technique' of the Yang-Long couple. He felt that his training was complete, at least enough to fight the couple. He had sworn not to set his foot on the central plains again if he could not defeat the couple. Therefore, Guo Xiang's speech was again on target. Out of anger he laughed.

"All right, fine. Let us leave for the Passionless Valley right now," he said, "but what if I can defeat both Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu?"

"If you really are any good, why wouldn't I take you as my master?" countered the girl. "Only thing is, the Passionless Valley is so remote and difficult to find ..."

"Don't you worry!" laughed Fawang. "I know that place, I've been there. It's still early; you follow me to the camp. I have some business to attend to. I'll take you to the Passionless Valley afterward."

Hearing this, Guo Xiang was relieved. She thought, "I was afraid you wouldn't want to go. Now that you want to, why should I be worried? O monk, you may be arrogant, you may be highly skilled, but just wait till you meet Brother Yang!" Thus she followed the monk to the Mongolian camp without hesitation.

Fawang was determined to take Guo Xiang as his disciple; he wanted her to inherit all his skills. And since he had to win her heart first, he treated Guo Xiang with utmost courtesy and respect. It is difficult to find a good master in the martial world; but it is equally difficult to find a talented disciple. Along the way Fawang found out that Guo Xiang was really smart and talented, therefore, he was more and more delighted.

Guo Xiang often chided him for killing the Long Beard Ghost and the Big Head Ghost; but Fawang wasn't unhappy, on the contrary, he praised her for having a benevolent heart, unlike his own ruthless Hou Dou.

Fawang took Guo Xiang to the Mongolian camp, the one where Khubilai - the Emperor's cousin, was. It was the southern camp; while the one Yang Guo investigated was the northern one - where the Mengke Khan was. The two officials who were overheard by Ke Zhen'E spoke in general term, while Ke Zhen'E himself was not aware that there were two different camps. Thus Yang Guo's search was in vain.

Actually Fawang and Guo Xiang left for the Passionless Valley not too long after Yang Guo, but because Yang Guo was in haste, the distance between them was more than a hundred li. This made Yang Guo arrive at the Passionless Valley a few days earlier than they did.

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In Xiangyang, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were so worried about their daughter. They have dispatched dozens of Beggar Clan disciples to try to find her. They came back in a few days with a unanimous report: no trace of Guo Xiang.

After about ten days, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang arrived in Xiangyang. They brought news from Ke Zhen'E that Guo Xiang was captured and brought to the Mongolian camp. Guo

Jing and Huang Rong were very shocked! That night Huang Rong and Cheng Ying went to the enemy's camp. But just like Yang Guo, they did not find anything. On the third night they were sighted; which resulted in a battle with the Mongolian officers. They were surrounded by more than forty soldiers, but with their swords' help, they would escape and get back home to Xiangyang.

Huang Rong was baffled. She believed Guo Xiang was not inside the Mongolian camp. But since there was no other news, she became more worried than ever. She discussed this situation with Guo Jing. They decided since there was no sign of Mongolian troop movement yet, that Huang Rong should go and search for Guo Xiang. She would take their two white eagles, with the intention of using them as couriers later on.

Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying immediately expressed their intentions of coming along with Huang Rong. She quickly agreed, since they would be valuable helpers. They came out of Xiangyang, went around the enemy's camp, and went northwest. Their destination was Fenglingdu. Huang Rong thought, "This time Xiang'er's intention is to find Yang Guo, and since they first met around a ferry crossing in Tongguan, perhaps we will find some clues around that place."

This journey took place in the winter. They proceeded slowly because they needed to ask people along the way about Guo Xiang. It was already toward the end of the second month when they finally arrived at Fenglingdu; the ice had already melted. There again they asked lots of people that might have seen Guo Xiang: the peddlers, cart drivers, restaurant workers, and anybody who would possibly see somebody fitting Guo Xiang's description. But so far the result was negative.

"Shi Jie (older martial sister), don't you worry," Cheng Ying tried to console Huang Rong. "Xiang'er is a very lucky girl.

Just remember the day she was born; she was fought over by Jinlun Fawang and Li Mochou, both were the epitome of evil. Didn't somebody say that if someone survives a grave danger, one would be lucky all one's life? She was in grave danger then, and she survived. So I believe she will survive now."

Huang Rong sighed, but didn't say anything.

The three of them left Fenglingdu and headed out of town. The sun was shining, the weather was getting warmer, and they could feel the southerly breeze. Spring was coming. Cheng Ying was trying to entertain Huang Rong. She pointed to a flower bush and said, "Shi Jie, here in the north the spring comes much later. Just look at these peach blossom buds. Aren't they already blooming on the Peach Blossom Island? I think they may even have sprouted some fruits already." She picked a peach blossom, played with it and softly singing, "I ask the flower, but I have no answer. Why do flowers fall? Why do they bloom? A third part for the spring, the other third float on the water, and the rest fall back to the earth ..."

Huang Rong gazed at Miss Cheng. She was beautiful, just like Huang Rong always remembered her. She recalled how Cheng Ying lived a quiet life and couldn't help but feeling sad for her. She was still daydreaming when suddenly her ears caught a buzzing noise. It was a big honey bee. It flew around the peach blossom in Cheng Ying's hand, and then landed on another flower, gathering nectar. That bee was gray and bigger than average bees. Suddenly a thought flashed in her mind.

"This bee looks like Xiao Longnu's Jade Bees. How come it is here?" she asked no one in particular.

"You are right," said Wushuang. "Let us follow this bee. See where the beehive is ..."

That bee flew around the flower bushes, and finally flew toward the northwest. The three of them used their lightness kungfu to follow. The bee flew and landed on some other flowers along the way. Not too long afterwards they saw two other bees. Near dusk they arrived at a very beautiful valley. The trees were green and the mountains looked purple. It was a captivating scene. Toward the hillside there hung seven or eight beehives made of wood. Those three bees flew into one of the hives.

On the other side of the hill they saw three thatched huts. There were two small foxes playing around in front of the house, their eyes gazed toward the visitors. About that time the middle door swung open, and out came an old man with a very healthy countenance, his face so fresh like that of a young boy.

Seeing this old man, Huang Rong was thrilled. "Old Urchin, look who's here! Look here!"

That old man was indeed Zhou Botong. He lifted his head, laughing heartily and started running toward Huang Rong. But after only a few steps he stopped abruptly. He blushed, turned around and ran fast to the house; 'bang!' he slammed the door shut!

Huang Rong was surprised; she had no idea why he behaved peculiarly. She came to the door and banged it. "Old Urchin... Old Urchin!" she called, "There are guests coming from afar, why are you hiding?" Huang Rong kept banging the door, but Botong shouted, "No! I am not going to open the door!"

"Are you sure?" Huang Rong chuckled. "I am going to light a fire, I am going to burn your dog house down to ashes!"

Huang Rong was just shutting her mouth up when suddenly the door on the left opened, out came a smiling monk who

said, "To this remote hill and quiet forest came honorable guests. The old monk welcomes you!"

Huang Rong turned around and saw Reverend Yideng was smiling sweetly, his hands clasped in respect. Quickly she came over and bowed to him.

"Ah, turns out the Venerable Monk and Old Urchin are neighbors!" she said, chuckling. "It really is beyond my expectations! But why did Old Urchin close his door and refuse to welcome his guests?"

Reverend Yideng laughed. "Don't mind him!" he said, "Please come into my hut, I will serve you tea."

Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang came and paid their respects, expressing their gratitude they went inside the Reverend's hut.

Yideng immediately served them tea. Huang Rong asked of his well-being since the last time they met.

"Madam Guo, can you guess who lives in the other hut?" he asked, smiling.

Huang Rong thought for a moment. She wondered why the Old Urchin's behavior was so strange. Then she laughed and recited this poem, 'In the deepest of dawn's cold, when the green spring grass ripples, standing face to face taking a bath wearing red clothes.' Good! Very good!" The 'In the deepest of dawn's cold' was part of 'si zhang ji' [four looms/weaving machines] poem written by Concubine Liu Yinggu many years ago.

Reverend Yideng laughed heartily. His heart was free; he did not concern himself with past matters. He clapped his hands and said, "Madam Guo is very smart, I did not expect you to guess correctly!" And then he walked to the door and called,

“Yinggu, Yinggu, come over here, come meet our old friends!”

A moment later, Yinggu came over with a wooden tray in her hands, full with green fruits and honey.

Huang Rong and her company quickly bowed in respect, and then the five of them sat and talked happily. Didn't old acquaintances gather together?

Huang Rong was very happy. For a long, long time, the three were involved with love, hatred and revenge. But now Zhou Botong, Reverend Yideng and Yinggu had set aside their differences, opened their hearts and made peace with each other. They spent their sunset years living together in this beautiful valley, the 'Hundred-Flower Valley' [wan hua gu]. They became beekeepers, did some gardening, and even worked a rice field. But the Old Urchin was embarrassed, that was the reason he hid himself. Still, he could not resist listening to their conversation. He eavesdropped from his room. He heard Huang Rong's narration of the Heroes Summit at Xiangyang, the festivities, everything, until she came to the part where Prince Hou Dou's disguise was uncovered. She deliberately changed the subject and continued. Zhou Botong could not resist hearing everything. He opened his door and came barging in.

“And then what?” he asked impatiently, “Did Hou Dou run away?”

They laughed. The conversation became more and more animated!

That night the guests slept in Yinggu's hut. The next morning Huang Rong woke up early and went outside; she saw Zhou Botong was dancing around like crazy, a big bee in his hand.

“Hey, Old Urchin, what are you doing?” Huang Rong asked, chuckling. “You look extremely happy.”

“Hey, Little Huang Rong, my skill is getting better by the day,” came the answer, “Will you or won’t you admire me?”

Huang Rong knew this old man very well; his two traits were: first, he loved to fool around; second, he was crazy about martial arts. After living alone in this remote area for more than ten years, it could be that he had improved his martial arts considerably, or it could be that he had invented some new and weird stances. She remembered his ‘Mutual Hands Combat technique’, ‘Dividing One’s Mind’, ‘Left Hand Fighting the Right Hand.’ Hence she was laughing before she even answered his question.

“If you are talking about martial arts, I have always admired you since I was a child,” she said. [Zhou Botong was held captive on Peach Blossom Island when Huang Rong was a baby,- see LOCH] “I admit inferiority. Why did you even mention it? I wonder what new and wonderful stances you have invented these past few years?”

But Botong shook his head. “Oh no... No!” he declined, “It was little Yang Guo who is crazy about martial arts these past few years. He has invented the ‘Melancholy Sad Palms’ [An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang], which put me to shame. Therefore, let’s not talk about martial arts.”

Secretly, Huang Rong was very impressed. “This kid Yang Guo is amazing,” she thought, “First it was Guo Xiang, a mere child. Now it is the Old Urchin, a veteran. Everybody praises him. I wonder what kind of kung fu “An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang” is?” Then she asked, “Well, you just said that your skill is getting better by the day. What kind of skill is that?”

Zhou Botong lifted up his hand – with the bee in it, high in the air. He looked so proud.

“This is my skill: keeping bees!” he said.

“Those bees were given to you by Xiao Longnu. What’s so special about it?” Huang Rong asked.

“This is the amazing part,” said the Old Urchin. “The Jade Bees given to me by Xiao Longnu were valuable creatures. After I took care of them, they become even more valuable, very rare, and second to none! This is amazing! How could Xiao Longnu be compared to me?”

Huang Rong laughed a big laugh! “Oh Old Urchin, you have become more shameless than ever!” she said. “This time you blew your own horn really loud. Your ego is unrivalled, very rare indeed! Now, THAT is second to none!”

Zhou Botong was not angry, he even chuckled. “Oh Little Huang Rong, let me ask you this: Human beings are the most intelligent creature; we can tattoo our own body, making pictures of dragons, tigers, or leopards. We can even tattoo a whole book, ‘Peace and Security under the Heaven’ [tian xia tai ping]. However, other than human beings; among the birds or the beasts or the bugs, are there any tattoos?”

“Yes, there are,” answered Huang Rong. “Tigers have stripes, leopards have spots, butterflies and snakes could be decorated with beautiful patterns.”

“But answer this,” continued Botong, “on the bugs, have you ever seen characters?”

“Are you talking about natural bugs?” Huang Rong asked. “If so, then the answer is no.”

“Good! Now let me show you this!” And he stretched his arm toward Huang Rong.

Huang Rong looked at the bee carefully. She saw that on the bee’s wings there were indeed characters! She looked closer,

wanted to know what they said. There were three characters on the right wing, 'Qing Valley's bottom' [Qing Gu Di] and another set of three characters on the left wing, 'I am at Jue' [Wo Cay Jue]. The characters were the size of a grain of rice, yet they were very clear. They looked like they were made with needles.

Huang Rong was amazed, she muttered, "Qing Gu Di, Wo Cay Jue, Qing Gu Di, Wo Cay Jue ... This obviously was not natural, someone must have written it. Considering the Old Urchin's character, he would not have a patience to write these letters ... A moment later she said, "You said this is very rare, second to none. But I am sure you have asked Yinggu to tattoo these six characters! How could you fool me?"

Zhou Botong blushed. "You go and ask Yinggu!" he challenged. "You ask if it was she who tattooed the bee!"

"Don't you think she will conspire with you and lie to me?" Huang Rong asked. "If you said the sun rises from the west, she would certainly say the same thing."

"That's a fact!" said the Old Urchin, "The sun indeed rises from the west. Who said it was from the east?" Even though he said that, his face turned redder. He was embarrassed, shy, and irritated at the same time. He let the bee go and grabbed Huang Rong's hand.

"Come! Come! Come!" he said, "I will let you see it with your own eyes."

He pulled Huang Rong to the side of the hill where a beehive was hung, separated from the other beehives. He stretched his arm into the beehive and caught two bees.

"Now, see this!" he said, showing the Jade Bees to her.

Huang Rong strained her eyes. She found both bees had the three-character sets on their wings. The characters also read, 'Qing Gu Di' on the right wing and 'Wo Cay Jue' on the left wing. She was more amazed. "This is really peculiar," she thought. "I need to get to the bottom of this ..." So she said, "Old Urchin, please catch a few more bees for me!"

Zhou Botong caught four bees, two had characters just like the other, and the other two didn't have any. He showed them to Huang Rong who was silent and did not say that Yinggu tattooed the bees again.

"Now, what else do you have to say?" he asked, laughing heartily. "Today you see the Old Urchin's amazing skill!"

Huang Rong did not reply, she kept murmuring, "Qing Gu Di, Wo Cay Jue, Qing Gu Di, Wo Cay Jue ..." She was still pondering the sentence when suddenly a thought came to her mind, "Ah, it is: 'I am at the bottom of Passionless [Jue Qing] Valley' [Wo Cay Jue Qing Gu Di]. Who is at the bottom of the Passionless Valley? Could it be Xiang'er?" Her heart was beating faster. She turned her head to look at Zhou Botong, and said, "Old Urchin, these Jade Bees were not yours. They flew in from somewhere else!"

Again the Old Urchin blushed. "Ah, this is weird!" he shouted, "How did you know that?"

"Why wouldn't I know?" answered Huang Rong. "These few bees have been flying in for some time now."

"Actually, they have been flying here for a few years," said Botong, "but I never suspected it and never examined their wings. It was just a few months ago that I found out about it."

"Is that true it has been a few years?" Huang Rong asked, thinking hard.

"That's correct! Why would I lie to you?"

Huang Rong was quiet while she walked back to the house. She wanted to see Reverend Yideng, Yinggu, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang to discuss these extraordinary bees, which she believed must have come from the Passionless Valley. They agreed that something unusual must have been happening in that valley. Because she was continually thinking about her daughter, she asked Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang to accompany her to the valley.

“We have nothing to do here, let us go together,” Reverend Yideng said. “Your daughter and I met the other day. She was really sweet. The Old Monk likes her very much.”

“Thank you,” said Huang Rong, who was saddened by his remark. She thought, “Looks like Reverend Yideng thinks Xiang’er is in trouble, maybe grave danger; if not, I don’t think he would be willing to leave this peaceful and quiet place to go with us.”

Zhou Botong loved action; how could he be left behind? He offered to come along and even persuaded Yinggu to come too.

Huang Rong was comforted. She had three more highly skilled companions. With six people, she believed not many things or enemies would hinder their endeavor to find Guo Xiang. Even if she faced a formidable enemy, Huang Rong believed they would be able to help her.

And so six people and two eagles started the journey to the Passionless Valley.

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In the meantime, Yang Guo realized the appointed meeting time Xiao Longnu had promised him was drawing near. He didn’t dare slow down; he made the trip day and night, only stopping for meals and short rests along the way. He arrived

at the Passionless Valley on the second day of the third month. He was five days early from his sixteen-year appointment with Xiao Longnu.

The Passionless Valley was quiet; nobody was around. The magnificent building complex built by the Gongsun family, was reduced to ruins. In the sixteen years since they parted Yang Guo had visited the valley several times. He used to stay for a few days, wishing the Nan Hai Shen Ni would show mercy and let Xiao Longnu meet him earlier. Every time he came it was with enthusiasm; he left the valley dejected.

Now he saw the forest was thick, but the hills were empty, without any trace of Xiao Longnu. He immediately went to the Broken Heart Cliff, crossed the stone bridge to the message carved by Xiao Longnu's sword on the stone. He lovingly traced the letters with his fingers, and cleaned out the moss at the same time. Afterward he would slowly read the letter, 'Xiao Longnu addresses my husband Yang-lang, please treasure this, and begs that you fulfill this reunion'. His heart was shaken.

For a whole day he kept looking at the characters. That night, he spent the night sleeping on a rope tied between two trees. The next day he looked around the valley where the Passionless Flowers used to be. He and Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang had destroyed them. The flowers were completely gone; instead, he found out that the flower, which he named Dragon Lady Flower [Long Nu Hua], had spread to other places. He picked a bouquet of these flowers and placed them in front of the characters at the Broken Heart Cliff.

He spent the next few days pacing around. He hadn't even slept during the last two days. Today was the seventh day of the third month. He stayed close to the Broken Heart Cliff, and never left even a half-step. He waited from morning till noon, from noon till late afternoon. Every time a breeze

came, or a flower or a leaf fell down, his heart jumped. He would leap up and look everywhere. Where was Xiao Longnu?

Ever since he talked to Huang Yaoshi, Yang Guo had realized that the 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' [Nan Hai Shen Ni] of the 'Great Wisdom Island' [Da Zhi Dao] existed only in Huang Rong's imagination. However, looking at the letter his hope was rekindled. He recognized his wife's handwriting, and he was hoping Xiao Longnu would eventually show up.

The sun was slowly sinking beyond the mountains in the west. Yang Guo's heart was sinking too. When the sun was half-way down the mountain, he cried. He quickly ran toward higher ground. There he saw the full circle of the sun, and he felt relieved. When the sun was completely set, the day would be over ...

Though Yang Guo had climbed to the highest peak, the sun still slowly moved downward, looking like it was being swallowed by the earth. After a while he couldn't see anything but the empty world and the cold breeze that came with the night. He stood silently for about an hour. Afterward the moon slowly rose until it was high above him. He still stood there, unmoving ... like a carved stone statue. Slowly the night was spent but Xiao Longnu was still nowhere to be seen.

Very soon it was dawn. The sun rose again. Another day had begun. The birds were starting to sing, the gentle morning breeze brought the sweet fragrance of the flowers around him. It was a beautiful spring morning. But Yang Guo was oblivious, his heart frozen. He heard a voice in his head, "You fool! She passed away sixteen years ago. She knew she was injured beyond help. She knew you wouldn't want to live alone. So she killed herself and tricked you into waiting for

sixteen years. You stupid fool, she loved you dearly; how would you not know her intention all this time?"

Like a dead man, Yang Guo slowly walked down the peak. He had not had any food nor drink for more than 24 hours. His mouth was dry. He went to a small creek, kneeled down to drink some water. When he saw his reflection in the water, he saw the hair on the side of his head had turned white. He was only thirty-six years old, at the prime of his years. It was untimely for him to have white hair. He also saw his face was dirty. He almost couldn't recognize himself. He pulled away three strands of his hair; two of the three had turned white.

Yang Guo was very miserable. A poem came into his mind, 'For ten years life and death are boundless, immeasurable, unforgettable. Lonely graves a thousand li apart, unspeakable desolation. Unfulfilled desire to meet, slowly turns to dust. The hair on the temples white as frost.' It was the lamentation of Su Dongpo. Yang Guo spent most of his life learning martial arts; his literary skill was limited. Occasionally he would stop by a small wine shop in Jiangnan where he saw this poem hanging on the wall. He felt this poem carried a deep feeling similar to his own; so oftentimes he would read it aloud and unintentionally memorized the poem. He said in his heart, "He thought a ten-year separation was boundless, I have been parted with Long'er for sixteen years. He still had his lonely grave, he knew where his beloved wife's bones were buried; yet I don't even know where my wife's bones are buried." And then his mind drifted to the second half of that poem, the part where the writer remembered his deceased wife in his dreams at night, 'In a quiet night a dream came flooding back. A small window of a country home, showing beautiful hair adornments. Face to face yet invisible, only a thousand drops of tears! Year after year dealing with a broken heart. Bright moonlit night, on a small hill nearby.' He couldn't help but drowning in sorrows. "I ... I have not slept for three whole days and nights ...

certainly not a single dream would come to me,” he said to himself.

Suddenly he jumped up and ran toward the Broken Heart Cliff. He stood in front of the carved letters, and loudly shouted, “Sixteen years later, meet at this place, the love between husband and wife is profoundly deep, never fail this promise.’ Xiao Longnu! Xiao Longnu! This is your own handwriting. Why didn’t you keep your promise?”

His voice was very loud, like a lion or a tiger’s roar; it echoed from the surrounding mountains, “Why didn’t you keep your promise? Why didn’t you keep your promise?...you keep your promise?...keep your promise?”

Yang Guo had always had a strong character, but this time he was deeply downhearted.

“If Long’Er died sixteen years ago, my life this past sixteen years was in vain,” he thought. He looked into the gorge below the Broken Heart Cliff. A thick fog always covered the bottom all year long. He was never able to penetrate the fog to see the bottom of the gorge. When he threw the half-pill away it took a while for the pill to reach the bottom. He lifted up his head and called very loudly, so that the Dragon Lady Flowers around him were blown away. Then he softly said, “You disappeared without any trace. I have looked for you everywhere, yet there is no sign of you. I just realized it today, that you must have jumped down into this bottomless gorge! You have been there for sixteen years, weren’t you afraid you would be lonely?”

Like a vision he could see clearly in his mind: Xiao Longnu – her white dress gently swaying in the wind, came near him. Then he heard her voice seemingly from below him, “Yang-lang, Yang-lang, let not your heart be sad. Don’t be sad ...!” (Yang-lang means my dear husband.)

Suddenly, Yang Guo jumped down into the bottomless gorge
...

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Guo Xiang followed Jinlun Fawang to the Passionless Valley. Their minds and emotions were a world apart. Fawang was a strange man. When he hated someone, he would be like venomous snake or scorpion; but when he liked someone, he could be extremely loving and kind. He was determined to take the girl as his disciple, his successor; therefore, he tended to every single one of her needs. He treated her like Guo Xiang was his most beloved daughter. But Guo Xiang maintained an aloofness towards him. She continually reminded him how the Long Beard Ghost and the Big Head Ghost died by his hands. She was being difficult with Fawang. Fawang was a highly respected man even when he was still in Tibet; moreover, he held the Fawang [Imperial Priest] position of the Mongolian Empire now. Even Khubilai – the fourth prince, had always showed the utmost respect for him. Guo Xiang was only a teenage girl, but she kept making derogatory remarks to him. Didn't she mention that he was inferior to Yang Guo, and that he killed people too easily? Fawang was confounded; he didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

Finally, they arrived at the Passionless Valley one day. They were startled by a distant cry, "Why didn't you keep your promise?" That was Yang Guo's cry of anguish, anger, desperation, and suffering.

Guo Xiang strained her ears. She thought the voice came from all directions. She was shocked!

"That was Brother Yang!" she shouted. "That was Brother Yang! Let's go and see!" And she leaped forward, running toward the cliff.

Jinlun Fawang followed not too far behind. He perked up. Didn't the girl say that he would face his archenemy? From his backpack he took out his five wheels: golden, silver, copper, iron and lead. He held them tight. Yes, he had mastered the tenth level of the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique', but he also remembered that in the past sixteen years, Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu certainly had not wasted their time. Therefore, he did not dare to underestimate them.

When Guo Xiang arrived at the Broken Heart Cliff, she saw Yang Guo standing still with red flowers twirling around him. She was afraid of the gorge. She realized her own level of martial arts and did not dare to come closer. All she could do was call, "Brother Yang, here I am!"

Yang Guo did not respond, he didn't even seem to hear her. Guo Xiang was confused; she thought the man looked so extraordinary.

"Brother Yang!" she called again. "I still have one of your golden needles! Listen to me, you cannot commit suicide ..."

Having said that she ran toward the bridge. But just as she was halfway there, she suddenly saw Yang Guo jump down into the gorge! She was really shocked! Whether it was from her intention to help, or out of her love toward him, she kicked the ground and also jumped down into the gorge ...

Jinlun Fawang was about seven or eight 'zhang's [about 21 to 24 meters] behind her. He saw something amiss; he exerted his energy to his feet and flew like an arrow toward her. He wanted to grab her. However, he was still one step behind the girl. Guo Xiang's body had already plummeted down into the bottomless gorge. Fawang was a truly skilled martial artist, and he had guts! Without hesitation he moved swiftly with the 'Hanging a Golden Hook' technique [dao gua jin gou], leaped forward and reached. It was an extremely

dangerous move, because he could be falling down the gorge as well. He managed to grab the end of Guo Xiang's robe, but it ripped and the girl's body kept falling down into the mist below ...

"Ah ...!" he sighed. His hand still holding tight a piece of Guo Xiang's clothes, his eyes stared blankly into the bottomless gorge. He stood there for quite a while until his ears heard someone's calling, "Hey, Bald Monk! What are you doing up there?" He turned his body around to see who was calling him.

There on the hill in front of him stood six people. The one in front was an old man, but had a ruddy face. He was Zhou Botong. Next to him were three ladies, one of whom he knew as Huang Rong. The other two were Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang. Behind them were an elderly couple, one old monk with white hair and beard; the other was a lady in black. He didn't know either Reverend Yideng or Yinggu. But he was a third part scared because he remembered Zhou Botong and recalled his high skill. He also knew Huang Rong's level of martial arts. She was the Eastern Heretic's daughter and the Northern Beggar's disciple. He knew his martial arts were comparable to these Central Plains' experts, yet he was saddened by Guo Xiang's death. He didn't have any keenness to fight. Thus he only said, "Miss Guo Xiang has fallen into this gorge ..."

Hearing him, the six were very shocked, especially Huang Rong. "Is...is it true?" she asked, her voice quivered.

"Why would I lie to you?" answered Jinlun Fawang. "Isn't this a piece of her clothing?" Then he waved the piece of cloth in his hand.

Huang Rong stared hard, and she recognized her daughter's clothes. Her body was trembling, her mouth tightly shut.

Zhou Botong was raging mad. “Stinky Monk!” he barked, “Why did you kill her? Oh, you are so ruthless!”

“It wasn’t me,” Fawang answered meekly.

“Why would somebody jump down into the gorge without any reason?” shouted Botong. “You must have pushed her! Or you made her jump!”

Fawang shook his head. “No, I didn’t do either,” he countered, “I wanted to take her as my disciple, I wanted to make her my successor! Why would I do her any harm ...?”

“Phooey!” Botong spat. “That was a really nice old fart! Her grandfather is the Old Master Huang! Her father is Guo Jing! Her mother is this little Huang Rong! Which of these three is not superior to you, Stinky Monk? Why in the world would she take you as her master and inherit your stinky skills? Even if I, the Old Urchin, have mastered only some ‘Three Legged Cat’ techniques, those techniques are far superior to your junk copper and rusty iron wheels!”

They were quite a distance apart, but the old man’s spit had reached Fawang, forcing him to elude it. That spit shot past like a bullet. Fawang was very impressed.

Botong was delighted with Fawang’s silence. He shouted again, “Didn’t she refuse to take you as her master? Weren’t you determined to take her as your disciple? Yes or no?”

Fawang nodded his head. How could he answer otherwise?

“There! You see?” Botong shouted again, “You pushed her into the gorge!”

Fawang was startled, and then he heaved a sigh. “I didn’t push her,” he said, “I don’t even know why she wanted to kill herself ...”

Huang Rong meanwhile, was able to calm herself. She gritted her teeth, lifted up her staff and ran toward Jinlun Fawang. She surrounded the monk with 'sealing' techniques. Her staff floated around Fawang's body, surrounding him from every direction. Huang Rong was driven by anger at her daughter's death, her attacks were deadly.

Although Fawang's martial arts skill was higher than Huang Rong's, the stick technique was exquisite; he did not dare to parry the attacks head-on. Moreover, Botong was standing by, ready to assist Huang Rong. To make matters worse, they were fighting on very narrow ground. Fawang stepped about three feet back, then he kicked his left foot and with a loud whistling sound he jumped over Huang Rong's head.

Huang Rong attacked upward, but her stick was parried by Fawang's silver wheel. Both weapons collided with a loud noise. After taking a deep breath Huang Rong turned around only to see Zhou Botong had started to fight the monk.

Fawang put his wheels back into his bag. It was because Zhou Botong was barehanded. As a sect leader, he must maintain his pride. The opponent was barehanded; he couldn't wield a weapon.

Huang Rong ran back and as soon as he was within reach, she thrust her stick for another attack.

After mastering the tenth level of the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity', this would be the first time Fawang had an opportunity to test out this new skill against other experts. He saw Zhou Botong raise his fists and attack, so he too raised his fists wanting to fight Zhou Botong's fists head on. Before they actually exchanged blows, Zhou Botong could hear a series of light popping sounds coming from Fawang's hands.

Zhou Botong was startled and did not dare to receive the blow straight on. Zhou Botong bent his elbow a bit and used his 'Vacant Fists' skill.

The blow by Fawang had as much power as 1000 jin-(1 jin is 1/2 kilogram/1lb). One could not say it was comparable to the strength of dragons or elephants but it was impossible for mere flesh and bone to receive such a blow. But when he intercepted the fist of Zhou Botong, it felt empty and vacant like there was no strength in it at all. He was somewhat shocked and used his left palm to strike out again.

Zhou Botong felt that his opponent's power was incredible; he had never experienced something like this before. Zhou Botong loved martial arts and whenever he met someone who had a special skill he would challenge that individual to a duel. He had encountered numerous martial artists in his life; but even he had never heard of, or seen, such strong power as released by Fawang. He did not know what skill Fawang used, so he used his seventy-two stance 'Vacant Fists' to battle him. He used void to intercept solid and nothingness to block solidity. By doing so, he rendered the awesome power of Fawang useless; but it was also impossible for him to wound his adversary.

Fawang had attacked with several stances now, yet it seems his stances could not even tickle his opponent. He became frustrated that his dexterity, which he trained for many years, had not helped him to gain the upper hand.

At this point he noticed a whooshing wind from behind; it was Huang Rong who used her bamboo stick to attack his 'ling tai' [soul platform] accupoint. He raised his hand to block that attack and with one blow he had broken the bamboo stick into two halves. The remaining energy released by that blow sent the dust flying upwards and grit to surge around.

Huang Rong was stunned and leapt aside, she thought, "This awful monk was quite formidable sixteen years ago, but now he seems to be even more powerful. That palm of his was both strange and incredible, what kind of martial arts could that be?"

Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang saw that Huang Rong was in an unfavorable situation, they both attacked Fawang from two sides. One was using a jade flute and the other a sword. Huang Rong called out, "Be careful!" As soon as she finished, there were two cracking sounds. Both flute and sword were broken.

Fawang was saddened by the tragic death of Guo Xiang; he had no intentions of harming anyone else now. He yelled, "Out of my way!" And he did not pursue Lu Wushuang and Cheng Ying.

Suddenly a black figure appeared and Yinggu was standing next to him and had started to attack him; Fawang moved out his palm wanting to strike her on the waist. Yinggu's martial arts skill was inferior to Huang Rong's, but she was trained in the 'Loach Maneuvers' [ni qiu gong]; therefore, she was very good at evading and dodging. When she noticed an incredible force coming towards her, she made two turns and three shuns and cleverly avoided that blow. Fawang did not know that her martial arts had not yet reached the level of a first rate martial arts expert, but somehow she strangely managed to avoid two of his fist attacks. He was quite shocked to see this; furthermore he felt that his incredible skill was unable to overcome the two opponents now. He was becoming frightened and did not want to engage in any further combat. He quickly moved away from Yinggu. Yinggu had put in everything she had to evade those two blows and was happy to see Fawang turning away from her. She did not dare attack again. Zhou Botong yelled, "Don't run!" and he gave chase.

Fawang was about to turn around to parry any attack that came his way; but then he heard a light sound coming towards him. A luxuriant but gentle energy force was surging towards his face. Reverend Yideng had used his renowned "Solitary Yang Finger" to block Jinlun Fawang. Fawang had not considered this monk to be an expert; little did he realize that the energy released from his index finger was that powerful. Reverend Yideng's level of the "Solitary Yang Finger" had reached the level of ultimate proficiency and perfection, the divine energy released was pure, gentle but also abundant and forceful; impossible to block.

Fawang was shocked and moved aside to avoid that blast; he immediately returned with a palm attack. Reverend Yideng saw that his palm was extremely fierce and aggressive and did not dare to block it; he glided away a few steps.

One was an enlightened, eminent Buddhist monk from the south; the other was an extraordinary Buddhist virtuoso from the west; each had just exchanged one stance and did not dare to underestimate his adversary.

Zhou Botong enjoyed his one-on-one duel with the Fawang, but when Reverend Yideng joined the battle he felt it was uninteresting. So he stood aside and observed the battle.

At first there was only one meter or so in between Reverend Yideng and Fawang; but soon, after dodging palm blasts and evading finger fire, the gap between them gradually became wider. They were now standing about four meters apart from each other and used their internal strengths to battle each other from afar.

Huang Rong was observing from the side and saw that the condensation emitted from Reverend Yideng's head was becoming denser and denser. She knew that he kept gathering his internal power and feared that, because of his old age, he would not be able to withstand Fawang.

She was devastated by the death of her beloved daughter and wished to step in and help but knew the two of them were battling each other with internal energy and could not intervene now. She did not know what to do at this point, and then she suddenly heard her eagles shrieking. She whistled to them and pointed at Fawang.

The pair of white eagles called loudly and dove towards the head of Fawang. If it was the Divine Eagle of Yang Guo, Fawang might be a bit afraid. Even though these two white eagles were grand, they were still ordinary birds, Fawang was not afraid of mere birds. He was still battling Reverend Yideng with everything he had and could not divert his attention to something else. Suddenly a pair of white eagles dove towards him; he could only use his left palm to strike out at the eagles. Two forceful palm energies surged towards the eagles. The eagles could not cope with such force and immediately flew up higher. Nonetheless because of this diversion Reverend Yideng immediately gained the upper hand. Fawang struck out a few times with his left palm bringing the battle to a draw again.

The eagles heard the repeated commands from Huang Rong, but their enemy's power was too strong and could only resort to creating a diversion. They would cry out loudly and make diving attacks at Fawang, but when they were a few centimeters away from him they would withdraw the attacks. They could avoid his palms but they could not injure him. They only managed to disturb the concentration of Fawang.

When experts are in battle, their concentration must be at its peak. That was the only way their internal strengths could be fully utilized. The palm energies released by Fawang were superior to Reverend Yideng's but when it came to self cultivation he was very much inferior to the Reverend. Furthermore he was intensely saddened by the loss of Guo

Xiang, which affected his state of mind and now the eagles kept pestering him adding more frustration to his spirits.

Because of his frustration, his palm energies were affected. Reverend Yideng smiled and made a step forward. Huang Rong saw Reverend Yideng advancing; she raised her voice and called out, "Guo Jing, Yang Guo! You're here too? Let us capture him together!"

Guo Jing was her husband; she would never call out his full name, but her intention was to frighten Fawang. If she called out 'Brother Jing', Fawang would probably think 'Who is that?' And the effect of her trick would not be so effective.

Her trick worked and Fawang panicked when he heard the names Guo Jing and Yang Guo; he thought, "Those two experts are here too. I will not live to see another day."

At this point, Reverend Yideng made half a step forward again. In mid-air the eagles saw an advantage and the female eagle screeched and dove towards the face of Fawang. Her claws were aimed for his eyes. Fawang cursed, "Hellish bird!" and raised his left palm to hit the eagle.

The female eagle broke off her attack when she was about four meters away from Fawang, it was only meant to be another diversion. The male eagle silently came in from the side and when Fawang noticed, his right claw had almost grabbed his baldhead. Fawang was both angry and shocked; he whisked his palm hitting the eagle on its breast. By this time the male eagle had seized Fawang's Buddhist hat and was flying away. The whisked palm of Fawang was incredible and the eagle could not withstand it. The male eagle made somersault in mid-air and fell into the deep gorge.

Huang Rong, Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang and Yinggu called out with shock.

Zhou Botong became angry and yelled, "Damn monk! The Old Urchin will disregard Wulin traditions today and fight you too." He raised his fist and attacked Fawang from the back.

The female eagle heard the shriek of the male eagle and did not see it flying up from the gorge; she too dove towards the chasm and did not fly back up immediately.

Fawang was attacked from both sides and was afraid now. Although he had high martial arts skills, how could he withstand the combined attacks of two great martial arts masters? He lost his appetite for the fight and took out his golden and silver wheels to block the 'Solitary Yang Finger' and 'Vacant Fists'. He leaned to the left and leapt up towards the left and he gained access to the plains area of the valley. Zhou Botong yelled and gave chase.

Fawang had gone through a lot to escape and was running as fast as possible; he knew if he was detained by Zhou Botong, he would have to fight at least another few hundred stances to determine a victor. Furthermore, if the old monk took advantage of the situation, he would surely perish here in this valley. Ahead was a thick forest and he was running towards it, when suddenly a light sound was heading towards him; it was a small stone.

He was still a hundred paces or so away from the forest, but he did not know who shot that little stone towards him. The energy was incredible, although it was only a small stone the whooshing sound emitted by it was very loud. It was aimed directly at his face. Fawang raised his silver wheel and blocked the stone. It broke into dozens small pieces and scattered around; but two of them hit him on the face. He was not injured, but he certainly felt the pain.

He thought, "That small rock was shot from afar and shook my wheel. This person's internal strength is not inferior to the

Old Urchin and the old monk, how is it possible that another such expert exists?"

While he was stunned for a minute, an old man in a long green robe walked out of the forest. He looked very suave and distinguished. Zhou Botong was happy to see him and shouted, "Old Heretic Huang! This damn monk is responsible for the death of your granddaughter. Let us capture him together."

The distinguished old man was the Master of the Peach Blossom Island, Huang Yaoshi. After he and Yang Guo went their separate ways he decided to wander around in the north. One particular day he saw the two white eagles at a small village; he knew either his daughter or grandchildren were around. So he decided to follow them, but he did not wish to be seen by his daughter and followed them from afar. When he saw that both Reverend Yideng and Zhou Botong could not defeat this monk, he was quite surprised. He thought that this monk was a worthy adversary and decided to intervene as well.

Jinlun Fawang struck his wheels together creating a loud 'dang' sound, similar to the cry of a dragon. He said, "I take it you are the Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi?"

Huang Yaoshi nodded and said, "Yes, I am, Reverend. What can I do for you?"

Fawang said, "Even back in Tibet we have heard that only the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity were all-powerful in the Central Plains. It pleases me to see that you live up to your reputation. I would like to ask where the other four great masters are."

Huang Yaoshi replied, "The Central Divinity, Northern Beggar and Western Poison have passed away many years ago. This

Reverend Yideng here is the Southern Emperor and Brother Zhou is the younger martial arts brother of the Central Divinity."

Zhou Botong came fast. He said, "If my martial arts brother was still alive, would you be able to withstand even ten of his stances?"

Reverend Yideng also came fast. Together with the Eastern Heretic, they formed a triangle surrounding Fawang. Fawang looked at Yideng; then at Botong; and finally at the Eastern Heretic. He sighed and threw his five wheels to the ground.

"If it were a one-on-one combat, I wouldn't budge a single inch to any one of you," he said wryly.

"You are right!" answered Zhou Botong, "But right now we are not having a competition on top of Mount Hua to fight over the title 'The Number One Valiant Man under the Heaven'! Who would want to fight you one-on-one? Hey, Stinky Monk, you have done too many wicked deeds. You decide your own fate!"

"I have seen two out of the top five experts of the central plains," said Fawang. "If I could die by your hands, I would not have any regrets. Only my highest skill: the 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique' will not have an heir. I am the last one ..."

Having finished his speech he lifted up his hand to smash his own head.

Zhou Botong was startled to hear the name 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique', without hesitation he jumped forward and blocked the monk's hand. "Hold on!" he shouted.

"I, the old monk, can be killed, but not insulted!" said Fawang valiantly. "What do you want?"

“You regret the ‘Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique’ would not have any heirs,” he said, “Why don’t you teach it to me, then you kill yourself afterward. That way it wouldn’t be lost, would it?”

Before Fawang answered, they heard flapping wings followed by the female eagle flying up from the gorge, her mate on her back. Both birds were wet, which indicated water at the bottom of the chasm; maybe a well or a creek. The male eagle’s feathers were in disarray, but he was still breathing. His claws still held tightly Jinlun Fawang’s Buddhist cap.

As soon as the female eagle placed her mate on the ground, she flew back into the gorge. After a while she reappeared with Guo Xiang on her back.

Huang Rong was shocked, but happy. “Xiang’er! Xiang’er!” she called, and ran toward the bird. She took Guo Xiang off the bird’s back.

Fawang stood astounded to see Guo Xiang was all right. Zhou Botong still held his hand, but he had also seen what the female eagle had done. He looked at Reverend Yideng on his right and Huang Yaoshi on his left, made faces to them and winked.

Eastern Heretic and Southern Emperor saw his expression and immediately moved in unison. As a result, Fawang’s right side and left breast were struck by their powerful fingers. It didn’t matter if Fawang was a tough man, because his attackers were experts. One was ‘Divine Flicking Finger’ [Tan Zi Shen Tong] expert, while the other was ‘Solitary Yang Finger’ [Yi Yang Zi] expert. The Mongolian monk uttered an ‘unh’ sound and staggered. Zhou Botong added a punch to the ‘zhi yang’ [positive end] accupoint on his back, he laughed and said, “Go down!” Fawang’s knees gave out and he fell, sitting down on the ground.

The three experts saw this and were secretly impressed. "This monk is really strong, he was hit three times, yet he did not collapse to the ground, he only sat down ..."

Afterward the three of them came to Guo Xiang. They were trying to comfort her.

"Mother, he's down there ..." said the girl to her mother, "He's down there ... go help him, please ..." Guo Xiang only managed to utter those words before she fainted. Yideng immediately checked her pulse. "She is all right!" he said, "She is just in shock." Then he slowly massaged the girl's wrist. Not too long after, Guo Xiang slowly regained her consciousness.

"Where is Big Brother?" she asked. "Is he up here?"

"Is Yang Guo in the gorge below?" asked Huang Rong. Guo Xiang nodded. "He is!" she said, lowering her head; and then added in her heart, "If he is not down there, why would I jump down?"

"Is there any water down there?" Huang Rong asked again, seeing her daughter's wet clothes. Guo Xiang nodded her head, and then closed her eyes. She was still too weak to say anything, only her finger pointed to the gorge.

"Yang Guo is down there, only the eagle can help him," said Huang Rong. Then she whistled, calling her bird, but strangely after she had whistled several times the bird did not respond. Huang Rong felt strange; the birds have always obeyed her commands for dozens of years. Why didn't it respond this time? It had never happened before. Once again she whistled, loud and long.

Suddenly the bird flew up high into the clouds. She flew in circles emanating a sad cry. And then she dove down very

fast. Huang Rong was shocked. "Not good!" she cried in her heart. Then she called, "Hey, Eagle!"

Her calling was in vain; the bird continued diving down and smashed onto a mountain rock. Her head was smashed, her wings broken, she died instantly.

Everybody was stunned. They ran toward the birds only to find the male eagle's body was cold; he too was dead. No wonder his mate was disconsolate and wanted to die too. They all uttered a long sad sigh.

Huang Rong was the most upset; those two birds were her companions since she and the birds were young. She shed tears involuntarily.

Observing all this, Li Mochou's song echoed in Lu Wushuang's mind:

*'O mortals, what is love? That binds beyond life on earth?
To all corners, in pair we fly... braving summer and winter, by
and by...
Union is bliss, parting is woe, agony is boundless, for a
lovelorn soul, sweetheart...
Give me word, trail of clouds drifting forward...
And mountains capped with snow, whither shall my
lonesome shadow go?'*

When she was a young girl, Lu Wushuang followed her master – Li Mochou, everywhere. Oftentimes, in the dead of the night, when she thought she was dreaming, she heard her master sing this song. She did not know the true meaning of love then, but now she saw it with her own eyes. She thought, "If the female eagle were still alive, she would be flying alone through the clouds and over snow-capped mountains. She was alone, her shadow solitary; how could she live any longer?" Without her realizing it, tears welled up her eyes.

“Shi Fu, Shi Jie,” said Cheng Ying. “Brother Yang is inside the gorge below, how can we rescue him?”

Huang Rong wiped her tears. “Xiang’er, tell me the exact condition of the gorge’s bottom,” she asked, “What was happening to you?”

Guo Xiang was already feeling better. “As soon as I plummeted down into the gorge, I hit the water at the bottom,” she answered, “I was shocked and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls. I don’t know how, but I was immediately pushed back up to the surface. And then Big Brother, Yang Da Ge, pulled my hair, he lifted me up ...”

Hearing this Huang Rong was relieved. “Was there a big rock or something else where you could set your feet on?” she asked.

“There was a big tree right next to the water.”

“Hmm ...” said her mother. “Why did you fall down?”

“That was also the first question Brother Yang asked me when he pulled me up,” answered the girl. “I took my golden needle out, I gave it to him and I said, ‘I come to ask you to take care of yourself, don’t be shortsighted’. He looked at me without blinking. Not too long after the male eagle fell into the water, followed by his mate. The female eagle took her mate up, then she came back to rescue me. Brother Yang told me to go up, he didn’t say anything else. He lifted me up on the eagle’s back. Mother, tell the bird to go back down and rescue Brother Yang ...”

Huang Rong didn’t want to tell her daughter that the birds were dead. She took off her coat and wrapped it around her daughter’s body.

“I believe Yang Guo is not in grave danger right now,” she said, turning to her companions, “Let us make a long rope to

rescue him.”

That was a great idea. Everybody scattered to gather tree bark and braided it into a rope.

All except for Jinlun Fawang – whose accupoints were sealed, and Guo Xiang – who was too tired, worked hard. Cheng Ying, Lu Wushuang and Yinggu braided, while Yideng, Zhou Botong, Huang Yaoshi and Huang Rong gathered tree bark. They were not skilled at making rope; therefore, when the sky darkened all they had was a little over a hundred ‘zhang’s [around 300 meters] of rope.

Even though she felt the rope was not long enough, Cheng Ying put it into the gorge anyway. She tied one end to a rock and the other end to a tree stump and threw the rock into the gorge. The rope slid down, penetrating the thick fog below and vanished from their sight.

These seven people worked hard all night long without taking any rest. The next morning Guo Xiang was strong enough to help. Huang Rong asked her how she got captured by Fawang to help pass the time.

The rope was getting longer and longer. They did not hear anything from Yang Guo down below. Huang Yaoshi was restless; he took out his jade flute and played a song. The sound of the flute echoed and flowed down into the gorge. Usually, as soon as Yang Guo heard the flute, he would whistle in response. When the song ended the gorge was still quiet, still no response, and only a thin mist rising up.

Huang Rong thought hard. She chopped a piece of wood, and carved this letter: “Are you all right? Please respond.” Then she threw the wood into the ravine.

They waited some more, still nothing ... They looked at each other with anxiety in their eyes.

“Even though this gorge is deep, I believe our rope has reached its bottom,” said Cheng Ying. “Let me go down and take a look.”

“Let me!” Zhou Botong did not wait for an answer. Immediately he grabbed the end of the rope and climbed down, agile as a monkey, and disappeared into the fog below. About an hour later he reappeared, his hair and beard was covered with moss. He shook his head.

“Not a single shadow or footprint was there, let alone Yang Guo? No ‘niu guo’ [a live ox], no ‘ma guo’ [a live horse] either [play on words: ‘guo’ of ‘Yang Guo’ also means ‘live’],” he said. They looked at Guo Xiang and were perplexed.

Guo Xiang was almost crying, “I am sure Brother Yang was down there, where could he go?” said the girl. “He was sitting next to the big tree by the water.”

Cheng Ying didn’t say anything; she grabbed the rope and start climbing down. Lu Wushuang followed suit. And then Yinggu, Zhou Botong, Huang Yaoshi and Yideng did the same. They were worried about Yang Guo, but they were also curious.

“You have not recovered Xiang’er, don’t come down,” Huang Rong counseled her daughter. “Don’t make your mother worry about you. If your Brother Yang is down there, we certainly will rescue him, won’t we?”

Guo Xiang was anxious, but she agreed with her mother. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Huang Rong looked at Jinlun Fawang, she thought, “He has been sealed for more than twelve hours. He is highly skilled, perhaps he has managed to unseal some of his accupoints ...” Thus she came to him and sealed some more of his accupoints: ‘ling tai’ [soul platform] on his back, ‘ju que’

[gigantic imperial city] just below his chest, 'qing ling yuan' [clear and cold abyss] on his two arms. Only then did she slide down the rope.

Huang Rong held the rope loosely and let her body fall down fast; then tightened her grip to slow her fall. She did that several times and a short while later arrived at the bottom, and sure enough, she saw a body of water like a pond or a spring. Huang Yaoshi and the others were standing on the shore. She looked around but there was no Yang Guo. On her left she saw several big trees, where about thirty beehives were hung. The Jade Bees were flying around.

"Brother Zhou, could you catch a bee for us to look at, please?" she said to the Old Urchin. "Let's see if it has characters on its wings." Botong complied, he caught a bee. "No characters here," he said.

Huang Rong looked around. All she could see were rock walls a few hundred meters high. There was no way out. There were only those few peculiar looking trees; she didn't know what kind of trees they were. She looked up, and all she could see was thick fog covering the gorge, she couldn't even see the sun. She was thinking hard when suddenly Botong shouted, "Here! This one has characters on it."

Madam Guo quickly looked, and sure enough, she saw the same letters on this one, 'I am at the Passionless Valley's bottom'. This made her think some more, she believed the answer must be in the water below. Among the seven people, her water skill was the best. She made up her mind. She tucked her clothes up, took a 'Nine Flower Jade Dew Pill', put it in her mouth to repel any venomous bugs or snake bites, and jumped into the water.

The deeper Huang Rong dived, the colder the water temperature was. She felt the cold creeping into her bones. She opened her eyes underwater, but all she could see was

the deep bluish green water. The water felt like ice. She was puzzled, but determined to continue her investigation. She went to the surface for another deep breath, and dived again. She went further this time, and she felt a strong buoyancy force pushing her back up. The deeper she went, the stronger the force was. She exerted her energy but it was no use, she could not reach the bottom no matter what. Except for the cold temperature, the water did not show anything special anyway. Therefore, she went back to the surface in defeat.

All could see she was cold; her lips were blue and her hair white from the frost. They were astonished. Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang promptly gathered sticks and lit a fire for Huang Rong to warm herself up.

In the meantime Guo Xiang was waiting above, she thought very hard, “Why wouldn’t Brother Yang come up? Did my grandfather and mother persuade him to come? What was the real reason he tried to kill himself? Was it because Xiao Longnu had passed away and they wouldn’t see each other anymore?”

While she was lost in thought, she heard Jinlun Fawang groaned, “Aiyo! Aiyo!” “You asked for it!” said Guo Xiang, “Who told you to kill so easily? Hmm...”

Jinlun Fawang did not reply, but he kept making groaning noises while his eyes looking at her begging for mercy. By nature Guo Xiang was kindhearted. She couldn’t take it anymore. “Are you really sick?” she asked.

“Your mother has sealed [ling tai] accupoint on my back and [ju que] below my chest. Those sealed accupoints made me suffer like a million ants were biting me,” the monk answered, “It is not only so painful but itchy as well. Why didn’t your mother seal my ‘shan zhong’ [heart center] and ‘yu zhen’ [jade pillow] accupoints?”

Guo Xiang was startled. She understood from learning with her mother, that [shan zhong] and [yu zhen] were two of the vital accupoints. A little injury on these two could cause death.

“My mother does not wish for your death,” she said. “You do not thank her, but keep whining incessantly!”

Jinlun Fawang showed a proud look. “If she sealed my [shan zhong] and [yu zhen], she would make my back and chest numb,” he said, “She would cause me less pain. I have trained to this high level; I wouldn’t be injured that easily. Could it be that she really wishes for my death?”

Guo Xiang did not believe him. “Don’t you lie to me!” She countered. “Mother said that if [shan zhong] and [yu zhen] were sealed, you would certainly die! You are only experiencing itchiness and a bit of pain. Take heart. My mother and the others will be here shortly.”

Jinlun Fawang did not respond. “Miss Guo,” a little later he asked, “How would you say my treatment of you was along the way?”

“Not a single complaint,” answered Guo Xiang. “But you have killed the Long Beard Ghost and the Big Head Ghost. You have also caused the death of my two eagles. Even if your treatment of me was a lot better, I still cannot accept what you have done.”

“Very well!” shouted the monk, “An eye for an eye! You kill me to avenge the death of your friends and your birds! But remember that I have treated you well along the way; how would you repay me for that?”

“You tell me how I can repay you.”

“You have to seal my [shan zhong] and [yu zhen],” answered the monk. “That way you would lessen my suffering. That

way you repay my kindness.”

Guo Xiang shook her head. “You want me to kill you?” she asked, “I will not do that.”

“But I am a man as tough as a mountain!” Fawang insisted, “Even if you seal those accupoints, I will not easily die. Later when your mother is here, I will beg for her mercy. Do you really think I’d like to die?”

Seeing his pitiful condition, Guo Xiang pondered his words. “Very well,” she thought, “I will lessen his suffering.” Then she sealed his [shan zhong] and [yu zhen] accupoints. Fawang immediately felt relieved. “Yes! I feel better,” he said. “Please hit harder.” Guo Xiang complied, she hit harder.

Fawang’s eyebrows twitched, he smiled. He did not show any sign of injury, but his countenance changed from red to white, and from white back to red again.

“OK, please hit even harder now,” he again said. Guo Xiang complied; she hit harder utilizing the technique her parents taught her.

“Good!” finally Fawang shouted. “My chest is not tight anymore! You see, I am not dead, am I?”

Guo Xiang was astonished. “Let me hit your [yu zhen] one more time!” she said. She’d gently hit him then, but she hit him really hard this time.

“Thank you! Thank you!” said Fawang. He immediately closed his eyes. A little while later he suddenly leaped up and said with a loud voice, “OK, let’s go!”

Miss Guo was flabbergasted. “You ... you ...” she stammered.

Fawang’s left hand flew out and grabbed the girl’s arm. “Let’s go!” he said. “Jinlun Fawang’s skill is without equal under the

heavens. How could I not know all about this rudimentary skill?" As soon as he finished talking, he immediately walked forward, dragging Guo Xiang along.

"Liar! Liar!" Guo Xiang shouted; she regretted her actions and thought, "My knowledge is so shallow, I don't even know this rudimentary technique existed." How would she know the 'tui jing zhuan mai, yi gong huan xue' [transferring blood flow passage, exchanging accupoints position] was not rudimentary at all? Fawang had trained himself in this difficult technique since the time he was still in Tibet. It was not superior to Ouyang Feng's technique in which he was able to reverse the blood flow in his whole body; but it was not less strange or less difficult to master. When Guo Xiang hit his [shan zhong] and [yu zhen] accupoints, he secretly transferred that energy to unseal the other accupoints.

They were only a few meters away when Fawang suddenly had an evil thought. He saw the end of the rope tied to a tree stump. He thought that if he cut the rope, Zhou Botong, Yideng, Huang Yaoshi, Huang Rong and the others would die in the gorge, since they would have no other way of coming back up. Therefore, he kicked the ground and leaped toward the tree and grabbed the rope, ready to sever it.

Guo Xiang saw his movement; she was shocked. She knew what he was up to. She could not stay silent. Her arm was still held in the monk's hand. When her other hand was within reach of the monk's body, she made her move and hit his 'yuan ye' [deep pool liquid] accupoint beneath his ribs.

Jinlun Fawang had underestimated the girl and now he had to suffer the consequence. That hit was right on target. He was stunned and immediately felt half of his body stiffened, his strength gone.

With one pull Guo Xiang was able to free herself. She went behind him and threatened, "I am going to push you down

smelly monk! I hope you'll die!"

Fawang was shocked, but he didn't show it. He laughed a big laugh. He secretly exerted his internal energy to unseal his accupoint. He said, "How could you hurt me with your meager skill?"

Guo Xiang did not know that her hit actually sealed Fawang's accupoint and that Fawang's body was stiff. If she pushed, he would certainly fall down. But she was afraid to repeat her past mistake, that if she touched his body one more time the monk would be able to free himself. Didn't she hit the monk and in the end Fawang was free? Therefore, instead of pushing him, she jumped down and got away from him. She ran toward the chasm and shouted, "I'd rather die with my mother!" She was going to jump down into the gorge.

Jinlun Fawang was extremely shocked. He breathed in and out deeply, and eventually his sealed accupoint was clear. Abandoning the rope he quickly jumped after the girl.

Guo Xiang kept running between big rocks and among the trees. If she were out on a plain, Fawang would certainly catch up with only two leaps. Right now the monk had to play her game. There were a lot of old trees and big rocks scattered around the Broken Heart Cliff. By running around like this Guo Xiang was able to elude him. It was like they were playing tag. Fawang leaped over the trees and with 'Wild Duck Descends the Plain [yan luo ping sha] techniques he was able to grab Guo Xiang's arm once again.

Guo Xiang was shocked; she thought she could get away from him. She struggled in vain; but then she opened her mouth and shouted at the top of her lungs, "Mother!"

Fawang quickly covered her mouth with his free hand. Meanwhile a voice was heard from a distance, it was Lu Wushuang, "Uh, where did little Guo Xiang go?"

"Pity, pity ..." Fawang's heart turned cold. "I have wasted too much time." He regretted the fact he failed to cut the rope; he was forced to seal the girl's mute accupoint and took her away as quickly as he could run. He was so confused that he couldn't think straight. He only heard Lu Wushuang's voice. If he attacked her, how could Wushuang fight him? It was just that he had suffered a bitter defeat from Zhou Botong, Reverend Yideng and Huang Yaoshi; so when he heard someone was coming he thought everybody had arrived.

Huang Rong and the rest were still at the gorge's bottom. They could not find any footprint or traces of blood, in case Yang Guo was injured. Finally they decided to go back up and discuss this matter later. Lu Wushuang was the first to go, followed by Cheng Ying and Yinggu. When Huang Rong showed up, she was startled to hear them calling her daughter, "Little Guo Xiang! Little Guo Xiang! Where are you?" The women were puzzled at seeing neither Guo Xiang nor Jinlun Fawang.

Huang Rong climbed a tall tree to get a good look around. In the meantime Huang Yaoshi together with Reverend Yideng and Zhou Botong arrived. They were perplexed and anxious. They looked around the valley, but could not find anything.

When they reached the valley's entrance, they saw one of Guo Xiang's shoes.

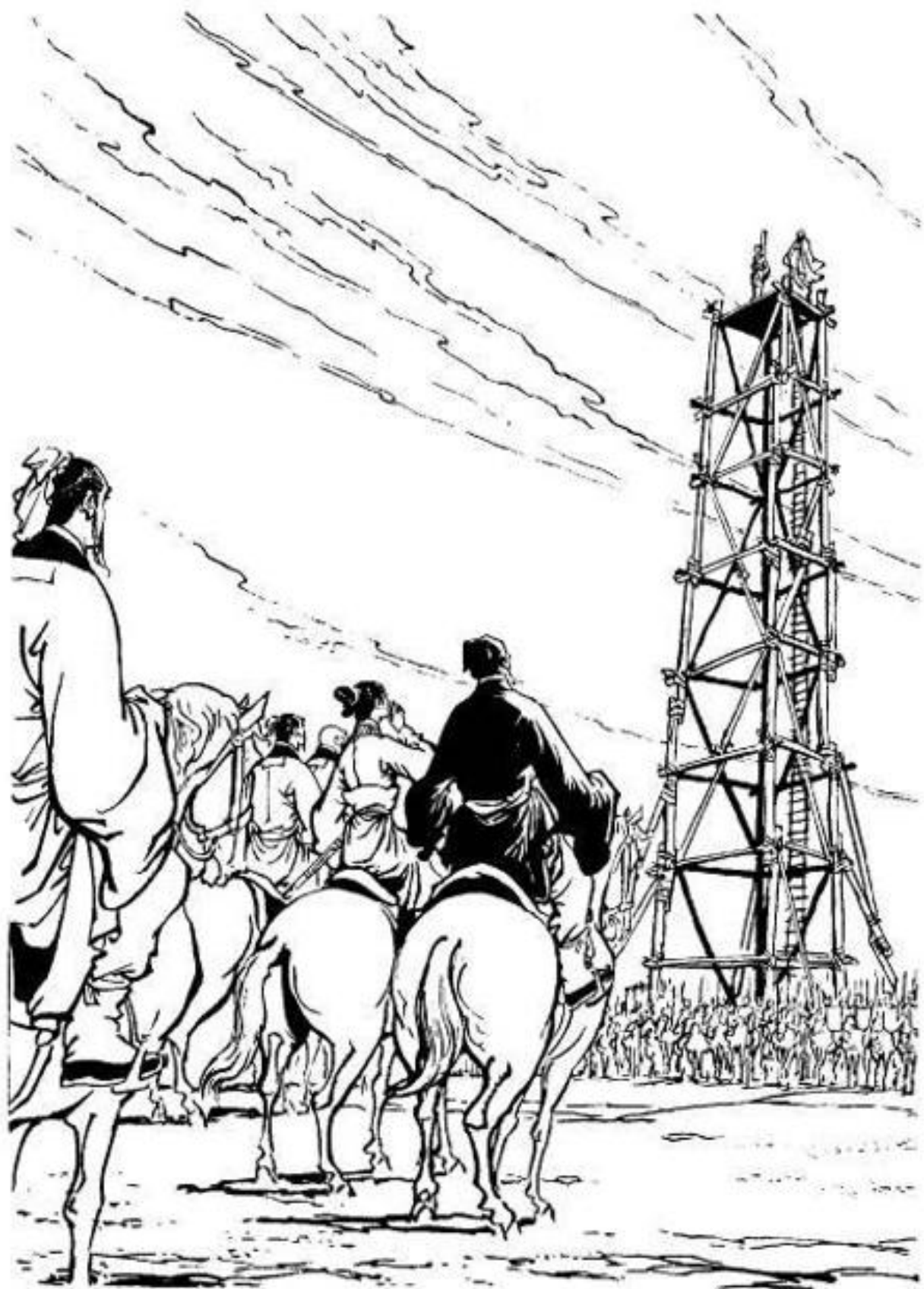
"Shi Jie, don't you worry," Chen Ying said, "Fawang must have taken Guo Xiang along with him to the south. Guo Xiang left her shoe behind to give us clue. She's just as smart as her mother."

Huang Rong believed Cheng Ying was right. She was relieved since Guo Xiang would not be in any immediate danger. Didn't Fawang want to take Guo Xiang as his disciple, to inherit his 'Dragon and Elephant Wisdom Dexterity Technique'?

End of Chapter 38.

Chapter 39 - Battle of Xiangyang

Translated by IcyFox, Sunnysnow & Athena



Galloping towards the high platform, the group came to a stop outside the range of the enemy archers. Two people could be seen standing on the platform. One, dressed in a yellow monk's robe, was none other than Jinlun Fawang. The other, a young girl who was tied to a wooden pole, was Guo Xiang.

The group proceeded south and inquired about Fawang (Golden Wheel Monk) and Guo Xiang along the way. Soon news came from everywhere saying the North and South Mongolian Armies are besieging Xiangyang, engaging the Song soldiers at the foot of the city several times, with both sides suffering many losses. The situation there was grave and urgent. Huang Rong was worried and said, "The Mongols are attacking Xiangyang, we must get there fast. Let's ignore Xiang'er's safety temporarily." The group agreed unanimously.

The elders Huang Yaoshi, Yideng and Zhou Botong did not bother about worldly affairs, but Xiangyang's fate was extremely important, besides everyone was putting in their best to defend it, so they could not ignore the situation.

They did not meet any delays on their journey and so they reached the outskirts of Xiangyang in a day. They found the battle trumpets sounding continuously and the flags waving, the swords were like a forest and horses were running frantically about. The city was like a speck in the desert as the Mongol Armies surrounded it. When they saw this, they were shocked and dismayed. Huang Rong said, "The enemy is mighty. We must wait till evening before attempting to get in." They then hid in the nearby forest and apart from Zhou Botong who was smiling mischievously, the rest looked grim.

At the second watch, Huang Rong led the way and charged through the enemy camps. Although their martial arts were

powerful, the Mongol camps were vast, one coming after the other. They were only halfway through when the patrols spotted them. The soldiers sounded the alarm and three hundred squads surrounded them. The rest of the camps, however, did not stir and were still calm.

Zhou Botong grabbed two long spears and tried to open a way out while Huang Yaoshi and Yideng held a shield each guarding the rear and blocking the troops. The four women were in the middle and the group pushed their way out anxiously. They were still in the camp and so the enemy did not fire arrows at them for fear of hitting their own horses and losing a valuable war asset. However when they reached the open plains the archers fired relentlessly, causing Zhou Botong, Yideng and the others, to have a hard time fending them off. The seven people moved and fought at the same time but the enemy troop numbers became larger and larger, with dozens of spears piercing towards them. Zhou Botong, Huang Yaoshi and the rest unleashed their mighty palm power and smashed many spears and killed many soldiers. But the Mongols were much superior in numbers and they fought fiercely, forcing the group into a dangerous situation.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Old Heretic Huang, looks like our three old lives are going to be lost here, but you must think of a way to get these four beauties safely out of here." Yinggu spat, "What rubbish! How can an old woman like me be a beauty? If we are to die, we die together; let's just save these three beauties."

Huang Rong was secretly shocked, "The Old Urchin looks like he's not afraid of the earth or the sky and never says a serious word. Today we're heavily surrounded and he thinks of sacrificing his life, it looks like this situation is indeed dire!" The enemy gathered together like ants from all directions and apart from fighting to the last man, she also could not think of any way out.

After charging through several more camps Huang Rong saw two large black tents on the left and since she had accompanied Genghis Khan on his western expedition, she knew the tents were used to store the grain. She snatched a torch and dashed to the tents. The soldiers shouted and chased her. She ran forwards quickly and darted into a tent, and set everything on fire. Soon the tents were ablaze and she rushed out and rejoined her party.

The tents contained many flammable objects and the fire caused many small explosions within. Zhou Botong found this interesting and threw his spear aside and snatched two torches and ran around setting everything in sight on fire. He unwittingly set a stable on fire causing the horses to neigh unceasingly, throwing the camp into chaos.

Guo Jing heard some confusion in the camp to the west of the city and he rushed to the city wall. He saw a few people rushing out from a burning camp and knew they were creating trouble for the enemy so he quickly dispatched the Wu brothers with two thousand men to meet the party.

The Wu brothers had not gone a mile when they saw Huang Yaoshi supporting Lu Wushuang and Yideng supporting Zhou Botong. The seven people rode on five horses galloping quickly. The Wu brothers did not go forward to attack the enemy but ordered the men to get into formation, holding the enemy back. They then ordered the flank to come forward and support the party while everyone retreated back into the city.

Guo Jing was waiting at the top of the city wall and saw it was his father-in-law, wife, Reverend Yideng, Zhou Botong and company. He was delighted and quickly went forth to receive them. He saw that Lu Wushuang had been hit by an arrow in the waist; three arrows were lodged in Zhou Botong's back and his eyebrows were scorched by fire. The

two people were badly injured. Cheng Ying and Yinggu also suffered arrow wounds but their condition was not so serious. Yideng and Huang Yaoshi had deep medical knowledge but when they examined Zhou Botong and Lu Wushuang, they frowned and remained silent.

Zhou Botong laughed, "Emperor Duan, don't fret, this Old Urchin won't die so easily. You should spend more effort treating that beauty Lu Wushuang." He had always made monkey faces at Huang Yaoshi but he respected Yideng and was perhaps even fearful of him. Yideng had become a monk many years ago but Zhou Botong still addressed him as 'Emperor Duan'. Huang Yaoshi and Yideng saw that he had a high tolerance to pain so they smiled and stopped worrying. Lu Wushuang, however, was still unconscious.

The following day at the crack of dawn the war drums were sounded and battle chants shouted. The Mongolians had attacked. The Xiangyang troops acted according to Governor Lu Wenhuan and the Defense General's orders and defended the four city gates. Guo Jing and Huang Rong ascended the city walls and saw that the Mongol troops were spread across the mountains and plains, seemingly endless. The Mongol armies had attacked Xiangyang many times, but this time the campaign involved the largest military force ever. Fortunately Guo Jing had spent some time in the Mongol armed forces before and was well-versed in their techniques of capturing a city, so he was well-prepared. No matter how the enemy deployed their archers, firearms, battering rams or scaling ladders, the troops were positioned in such a way that they could counter them all. By sundown the Mongols had already lost 1000 troops but they continued to fight fiercely.

Apart from the myriads of soldiers (1 myriad = ten thousand) in Xiangyang, the population amounted to one-hundred thousand. Everyone knew that once this city fell all would be

lost. So everybody resolutely defended the city; even the old and weak carried the stones and rocks used to repel the enemy. The city resounded with the fighting sounds and the arrows flew overhead like locusts.

Guo Jing wielded a long sword and commanded the troops at the top of the city wall with Huang Rong by his side. The sky was red with the sunset and the scenery was a sight to behold. However at the foot of the city the enemy soldiers swarmed forward and their faces could be seen. Guo Jing stood his ground at the top exuding a heroic aura and his heart was filled with the deep and sincere love for his wife. On this day the mighty enemy was pounding the city and it was uncertain if they could be driven back again. Huang Rong thought, "Brother Jing and I have been married for 30 years; most of our time was spent in this city. The two of us have been defending against the enemy for so long, even if all our blood is splashed on this wall it would not be in vain." She looked at Guo Jing and noticed that his hair had turned a shade whiter and she thought, "Every time the enemy attacks, Brother Jing will have a few dozen more strands of white hair."

Suddenly they heard the Mongols call out together, "May Your Majesty live ten thousand years!" The voices resonated throughout the area. A large banner was hoisted and a metal chariot with a green umbrella came forward together with a large entourage. It was the Great Khan Mengke himself coming to lead the battle.

The Mongols saw that their Khan was here personally and their morale was raised by leaps and bounds. The red flag was waved and the soldiers at the foot of the city split into formations of twenty thousand men attacking the north gate. These troops were the Khan's personal guards and were very highly trained and they were fresh and without battle fatigue. They all wanted to prove themselves to the Khan.

Several hundred scaling ladders were placed against the city walls and the troops ascended like ants.

Guo Jing waved his arms, shouting, "Brothers, today we shall let the Khan see the might of the heroes of Great Song!" His shout was generated by his chi and everyone could hear him clearly amidst the din. The Song troops had battled for a day and were getting tired, but when they heard Guo Jing shouting, their weary senses were jerked into attention and they thought, "The Mongols have oppressed us long enough, today we shall show their Khan what we're made of!" Everyone gave their best to the life and death battle.

The Mongol soldiers' bodies were piling higher at the foot of the city wall and the troops at the back became mad with rage, stepping on the bodies to assault the city. The Khan's attendants rode back and forth to relay the orders and deployed troops forward. Dusk was approaching and thousands of torches were lit, throwing so much light that it seemed like day.

When Governor Lu Wenhuan saw this situation, he saw that the city could hardly be defended. He timidly ran up to Guo Jing and Huang Rong stammering, "Hero... Hero Guo, we can't defend anymore, let's... let's leave the city and retreat south!"

Guo Jing sternly said, "How can the Governor say that? Xiangyang exists and we exist; Xiangyang falls and we fall!"

Huang Rong saw that the situation was precarious and if Lu Wenhuan suddenly gave the order to retreat, the troops would be thrown into confusion and Xiangyang would be overrun. She shouted, "If you dare to say anything about retreating I'll bore three holes through your body!" Lu Wenhuan's guards came up to block her but she swept across with her leg and the guards fell backwards.

Guo Jing shouted, "Let's go up and repulse the enemy together! If we don't fight to the death, how can we consider ourselves true men?" The soldiers all respected Guo Jing; hearing him shout with determination, they agreed and grabbed their weapons, sprinting to the edge of the walls to fight the oncoming enemy troops. General Wang Jian hollered, "We must defend the city tenaciously, the Mongols can't hold on any more!"

A Mongol officer shouted, "Everyone listen - The Khan has decreed that the first man up the city wall shall be the Lord of Xiangyang!" The Mongol troops cheered and the whole body of soldiers rushed forward without regard for their lives. Meanwhile an officer came forward with a red flag bearing the decree. Guo Jing grabbed a metal bow and shot an arrow which flashed through the air. The officer was hit and he immediately fell off his horse. The Mongolians called out in surprise and their morale was deflated. Before long, another battalion arrived at the foot of the city.

Yelu Qi took a long spear and ran to Guo Jing, saying, "Father-and Mother-in-law, the Mongolians are still not withdrawing, I would like to get out of the city and engage them."

Guo Jing said, "Yes! Take four thousand soldiers with you. But be careful." Yelu Qi turned around and descended from the wall. Before long the battle drums were sounded and Yelu Qi together with one thousand Beggar Clan members and three thousand soldiers charged out of the city in full battle gear.

At the north gate the Mongol troops were in a desperate situation; when they saw the oncoming Song troops charging towards them, they fled immediately. Yelu Qi's regiment pursued them. Suddenly the Mongolian troops fired three canon shots and twenty thousand soldiers surged forward and surrounded Yelu Qi's four thousand troops.

The three thousand soldiers had good training and good martial arts and were very brave. Together with the one thousand Beggar Clan members, they were not intimidated even though they were surrounded. Guo Jing, Huang Rong, Lu Wenhuan and Wang Jian were watching the ongoing battle below but saw that the Song battalion's formation was still orderly even though they were fighting one against five. In the darkness the weapons flashed under the torches' light and it seemed like a hundred thousand silver ants dancing. It was a bloody battle!

The Mongol armies were now using twenty thousand troops to hold down Yelu Qi's four thousand troops and another ten thousand soldiers to scale the city wall.

Guo Jing saw that Yelu Qi's troops were trapped outside the city and the Mongolians were sending even more reinforcements. Then he ordered the Wu brothers to leave a gap and allow the Mongolians to get onto the city walls. The thousands of Mongol soldiers at the foot of the city thought that they had broken the defenses and they cheered.

Lu Wenhuan's face turned pale and he trembled uncontrollably. He was saying, "Hero Guo, How... how... how can this be good? We should... should..."

Guo Jing did not reply and saw that about five thousand troops had already ascended the city wall then he waved his black command flag. The drums sounded and Zhu Ziliu and Wu Santong suddenly appeared and ambushed the enemy, closing the gap and stopping the enemy's invasion. The five thousand soldiers were trapped inside the city.

At this time some of the Song soldiers were trapped outside the city while the Mongol soldiers were trapped inside. Fierce fighting was still going on at the east, west and south gates and the soldiers were shouting unceasingly.

The Khan was sitting atop a small hill directing the battle himself, and beside him were more than two hundred battle drums, producing deafening noise. A man could hardly hear himself over the din. The dead and the injured were lying everywhere and the blood covered the armour and weapons. The Khan had experienced many battles and conquered many lands even into Europe; many armies flee on sighting his armies. This time, however, he witnessed a crushing setback and he was surprised, thinking, "Everyone says the Southerners are weak and useless, but these people are no weaker than my armies!"

It was the third watch now and the moon and stars were shining brightly, illuminating the Earth. All was calm and still except the thousands of people fighting to the death for this city.

They fought late into the night and the losses on both sides were heavy and victory was still undecided. The Song soldiers occupied an advantageous position while the Mongols were superior in manpower.

Suddenly the soldiers at the front called out and a squad of Song soldiers charged out and rushed to the small hill. The Khan's personal guards all fired a volley of arrows to hinder them. Mengke looked down and saw a Song general carrying two spears and riding a large horse moving swiftly on the battlefield and could not be blocked. The arrows flew towards him like torrents of rain but he blocked all of them. Mengke waved his left hand and the drumming stopped. He asked around, "This person is so brave and fierce, who is he?"

A white-haired general said, "Your Majesty, that person is Guo Jing. Years ago Genghis Khan made him the Golden Knife Prince Consort (Jing Dao Fu Ma) and he greatly contributed to the western campaign."

Mengke called out in dismay. “Ah, so it’s him! He really lives up to his reputation!”

Mengke’s generals, hearing him praise Guo Jing so highly, were angered. Four of them yelled out, grabbed their weapons and charged towards him.

Guo Jing saw that these four people were tall and their horses large. Two of them wore white head gear and the other two wore red head gear. Their voices were like rumbling thunder and their horses were swiftly closing in on him. He raised a spear and chopped down, cutting the saber of one of the generals into two and pierced him in the chest with the other spear. Another two thrust out their spears and tried to block Guo Jing’s spears. The last general thrust his Snake Spear towards Guo Jing’s abdomen. All four of them were using long weapons and he could not turn in time to face the last spear, so he released his spears and avoided the spear thrust at his abdomen. He then grabbed the other two generals’ spears and snatched them away like a bolt of lightning. The two generals were well known warriors of the Mongolian armies but how could they resist Guo Jing’s extraordinary strength? They felt their arms go numb and Guo Jing quickly turned the spears around and thrust them towards their chests. The spears could not penetrate the strong armour but the blow caused them to cough up blood and fall from their horses.

*The white head-gear is the rank insignia of a regimental (the thousand men) commander while the red head-gear is the rank insignia of a battalion (one thousand men) commander.

The last general was very brave and although he saw his three comrades die, he still attacked with his spear. Guo Jing avoided his thrust again and smashed down heavily on his helmet, crushing his skull.

Everyone saw Guo Jing kill four brave generals within a few seconds and became frightened. Even though they were in

front of the Khan's chariot, they did not dare step forward to fight him; they could only fire arrows hoping to ward him off. Guo Jing's horse galloped up the small hill but hundreds of spears formed a wall in front of the Khan so he could not get closer. Suddenly his horse was struck by two arrows and collapsed; the Mongol soldiers cheered and swarmed forward.

However Guo Jing leaped up and pierced a company commander (Bai Fu Zhang) and jumped onto his horse. He swept his spear about forcefully and killed more than ten guards.

He dashed about wildly and the soldiers around him fled. He could kill at will amidst the hundreds of troops and the Mongol soldiers could not handle him. Mengke frowned and commanded, "Whoever kills Guo Jing will be rewarded with ten thousand taels of gold and a triple promotion!"

Guo Jing saw that the situation was dangerous and he realized he could not reach the Khan. He killed a few more troops nearby and quickly shot an arrow towards Mengke. Although the arrow was not shot with great strength, it flashed through the air like a lightning bolt and flew straight towards Mengke. The guards were stunned and two company commanders quickly used their bodies to shield the Khan. The arrow sliced right through the first and lodged in the second's chest. The two of them were stuck together but they did not fall.

When Mengke saw this, his face turned pale. His guards surrounded him and they retreated down the hill.

At this time many Mongol soldiers shouted. A body of Song soldiers charged out and the leader wielded two metal oars and swung them around fiercely; it was the Fisherman (the Secret Fisherman from Si Shui 'si shui yu yin'). Huang Rong saw that Guo Jing was not doing well and was worried. She sent the Fisherman together with 2,000 men as

reinforcements. The Mongols saw their Khan retreating, causing their battle formation to crumble.

Huang Rong saw everything clearly and commanded, "Everybody, yell that the Khan is dead!" The soldiers cheered, "The Khan is dead! The Khan is dead!" The Xiangyang troops had fought with the Mongolians for many years so had picked up some Mongolian words; now they were shouting and yelling in Mongolian.

When the Mongol troops heard this, they turned around and saw their Khan's Banner Party retreating hastily. They thought their Khan really was dead, so they discarded their weapons and quickly ran off.

Huang Rong ordered the soldiers to pursue them and opened the north gate. Thirty thousand soldiers charged out of the city. Yelu Qi's four thousand men had decreased to half and the remainder chased the enemy together. The Mongol troops, however, were well-trained and withdrew in a swift and orderly fashion, so the Song troops could not catch up. But the five thousand Mongol soldiers trapped in Xiangyang could not escape and were all killed.

When the enemy had gone, it was already morning. This battle was fought for a whole 24 hours and the sand was stained with blood. The bodies piled up into small mountains. Damaged weapons, broken flags and dead horses littered the battlefield.

The casualty rate was forty thousand for the Mongolians and around twenty-three thousand for the defenders of Xiangyang. This is the worst defeat the Mongolians suffered since the beginning of the southern campaign.

Although the defenders of Xiangyang managed to drive away the enemy forces, Xiangyang was filled with mourning;

mothers crying over their sons and wives crying over their husbands.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong did not rest immediately but went to survey the four gates to console and praise the soldiers. They then went to visit Zhou Botong and Lu Wushuang and found that they had largely recovered. Zhou Botong could not tolerate being in bed for too long and he was already pacing around restlessly. When Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw this they laughed. Finally they went back home for a good day's sleep.

The next morning, Guo Jing went to the government office to discuss the military situation with Lu Wenhuan. Suddenly a soldier reported that a Mongolian legion (ten thousand men) was heading towards the north gate. Lu Wenhuan was shocked, "What... they have just left... why are they back? This... this can't be happening!"

Guo Jing immediately went up to the city wall to take a look. The enemy stopped several li (1li/0.5 km) away and did not attack. One thousand workers, after some time, put together a ten storey high wooden tower.

By now Huang Yaoshi, Huang Rong, Yideng, Zhu Ziliu and company were observing the enemy and saw them building a tower. They could not figure out what they were up to. Zhu Ziliu said, "If they're building this tower to spy on the city it's too far out to see anything from there. Moreover, if we fire flaming arrows, the tower will be destroyed, what use is that?" Huang Rong frowned and thought deeply but could not come up with any reasonable explanation. The people around her were equally puzzled. Zhu Ziliu continued, "Could it be that they can't defeat us so they're building some sort of prayer tower? Or are they trying to perform some witchcraft?"

Guo Jing said, "I was in the Mongolian armed forces for a long time, yet I've never seen anything like that before."

As they were talking, they saw the workers digging a deep and broad moat around the tower and used the mud dug out to form some sort of wall. Huang Yaoshi said angrily, "Xiangyang is the hometown of Zhuge Liang. The Mongolians dare to try some silly tricks here; they're really looking down on us."

Then the horns blew and the drums sounded. The legion came up and took up positions on the left of the tower. Then another legion came forward and took up positions on the right. Finally another two legions took up positions at the front and back of the tower respectively. Altogether there were 40,000 soldiers surrounding the tower. The formation spread over a few li and footmen, cavalry, archers and infantry formed up together, looking like a metal wall around the tower.

A trumpet was blown and the drumming stopped; the soldiers were silent and two horses came up to the foot of the tower. The riders got off and went up the tower together. It was some distance away and they could not be seen clearly, but it looked like a male and female.

The people were still wondering what was going on when Huang Rong suddenly screamed and fainted, falling backwards. The people quickly revived her and asked together, "What? What?" Huang Rong's face was deathly pale and she trembled as she said, "It's Xiang'er...it's Xiang'er." Everyone was stunned.

Zhu Ziliu asked, "Madam Guo, what did you see?" Huang Rong said, "I didn't see her face clearly but by intuition I deduced that it must be her. The Mongolians can't take this city so they came up with this evil plan. This... this is totally

despicable... terrible!" Huang Yaoshi and Zhu Ziliu heard this and were speechless; their faces turned pale with anger.

Guo Jing arrived and he asked, "How on Earth did Xiang'er end up there? And how are the Mongolians despicable?"

Huang Rong finally got up and said, "Brother Jing, Xiang'er was unfortunately captured by the Mongolians. They built this tower and filled the base with dry grass and forced Xiang'er up the tower. They're trying to force you to surrender. If you don't they will burn her alive to wrench our hearts and destroy our resolve so that we can't defend the city properly."

Guo Jing was shocked and furious and asked, "How the hell was Xiang'er captured?"

Huang Rong said, "We were busy fighting the enemy for the past several days, so I didn't tell you about this in case you lost your concentration." She then narrated how Guo Xiang was captured by the Golden Wheel Monk (Jinlun Fawang) and how Yang Guo went missing at the bottom of the gorge in Passionless Valley.

After she finished, Guo Jing frowned and said, "Rong'er, it was wrong of you to do that. Without determining if Guo'er is dead or alive how could you just leave the valley like that?" Guo Jing had always respected his wife and never scolded her in front of others, but this time he spoke sternly to her in front of everyone, causing her to blush.

Yideng said, "Madam Guo was suffering an intense chill and could have died from hypothermia. We believed Yang Guo was not there. Besides the young lady had been captured so we quickly gave chase. You can't blame Madam Guo."

Guo Jing did not dare to argue with Yideng and only said sternly, "This girl Guo Xiang has always caused a lot of

trouble. If anything happened to Guo'er how could we be at ease? Just let the Mongolians burn her."

Huang Rong did not say anything but descended from the city wall. The people were all discussing how they could rescue Guo Xiang when they suddenly saw the city gate left open and a single horse galloping north. The rider was of course Huang Rong. Everyone was shocked and Guo Jing, Huang Yaoshi, Yideng and company mounted their horses and gave chase.

They galloped near the tower and stopped out of range of the archers. They saw a young pretty girl tied to a wooden pole at the top of the tower. It was indeed Guo Xiang.

Although Guo Jing said she always created trouble, but she was, after all, his daughter; how could he not be anxious? He said loudly, "Xiang'er, don't worry, Father and Mother are coming to rescue you!" His internal strength was very solid and his voice was clearly heard at the top of the tower. Guo Xiang was already getting dizzy from the hot sun but when she heard her father's voice, she happily shouted, "Father, Mother!"

Fawang laughed, "Hero Guo, if you want me to release her it's very easy. But do you have the courage?"

Guo Jing had always been calm and steady; he was even calmer in precarious situations and was not angered by what Fawang said. He said, "Fawang, if you have a problem, just tell me."

Fawang said, "If you have the benevolence of a parent, come up here with your hands bound and exchange yourself for your daughter." He knew Guo Jing had a high sense of public duty and would not lose Xiangyang for his daughter, so he purposely said this to provoke him into walking into the trap.

But Guo Jing did not fall for it and said, "If it's me you want, why create trouble for my daughter? Since the Mongols fear me, how can I let you kill me so easily?"

Fawang laughed coldly, "Everyone says Hero Guo's martial arts are very outstanding and his bravery is unmatched; but he's actually a coward who's afraid of death." His attempt to provoke him might have worked on others, but Guo Jing just smiled.

However Wu Santong and the Fisherman were provoked by Fawang and they waved their metal hammer and metal ores respectively and surged forward. The Mongol archers were already poised to strike and were only waiting for them to get closer to shoot them down. Reverend Yideng saw that this was not good and jumped off his horse and somersaulted, landing in front of their horses. He waved his sleeves and obstructed the horses, saying, "Go back!" The two had gone forth only because of a burst of anger, but they knew that there would be no return once they went forward. When they saw their master blocking them, they retreated immediately. The Mongols saw this old monk catch up with the horses and could not help but cheer.

Fawang said, "Your daughter is beautiful and intelligent, I like her very much. I want to take her as my disciple and pass down all my skills to her. But the Khan ordered her to be burned alive if you don't surrender. You'll be sad and I'll feel that it's such a pity, please consider this carefully."

Guo Jing snorted but saw about forty soldiers standing at the foot of the tower with fire torches who would immediately set the tower ablaze on Fawang's command. The forty thousand soldiers guarded the tower tightly, how could anyone penetrate their formation? Even if they got through, the soldiers could just set the tower on fire, then, could they rescue Guo Xiang on time?

Guo Jing was with the Mongolian armed forces for a long time so he knew how cruel the Mongolians could be. When they conquered a city, they could kill hundreds of thousands of women and children in a day. Burning Guo Xiang alive was like killing an ant to them. He raised his head and saw that his daughter was thin and pale and was greatly distressed. He shouted, "Xiang'er, you're a good girl of Great Song, don't be afraid. If Father and Mother can't save you today, we'll kill this bald bastard to avenge you! Understand?" Guo Xiang cried and nodded, saying, "Father, Mother, I'm not afraid!"

Guo Jing said, "This is my good daughter!" He took out a metal bow and shot three arrows simultaneously, hitting three soldiers at the top of the tower and the arrows went right through them. They screamed and fell to the ground. Guo Jing's archery skills were taught by the legendary Mongolian General Jebe [Zhe-be] and he'd practiced for many years. He was standing out of range of the Mongolian archers yet he managed to hit the 3 men on the tower. The Mongol troops yelled and quickly raised their shields to protect themselves. Guo Jing said, "Let's go!" He turned the horse around and went back to the city.

They got back up to the city wall. Huang Rong blankly stared at the tower and her heart was beating rapidly.

Yideng said, "Their formation is solid, if we want to save Xiang'er we must first break and destroy the formation of the forty thousand men."

Huang Yaoshi said, "Exactly." He thought for a while then said, "Let's use the "Twenty-eight Star Formation" and battle them."

Huang Rong hung her head and said, "Even if we win, they will set the tower alight, what do we do then?"

Guo Jing said, "We'll try our best. Whether Xiang'er lives or dies we'll leave it to fate. Father-in-law, how do we use the "Twenty-eight Star Formation"?"

Huang Yaoshi laughed, "The formation's changes are complicated. When I saw the "Big Dipper Formation" of the Quanzhen Sect, I thought deeply and came up with this formation to counter their "Big Dipper Formation"."

Yideng said, "Old Heretic Huang is a master of the Five Elements so I think this "Twenty-eight Star Formation" must be incredible."

Huang Yaoshi said, "My formation was originally intended for a fight consisting of only a few dozen Wulin fighters. I never expected to use it in a battle involving thousands of men. But apart from a few changes, it can be used roughly as is. Unfortunately we lost the two eagles." Yideng said, "Let's hope for the best."

Huang Yaoshi said, "If the eagles had not been killed by that bald bastard, we could send them in to rescue Xiang'er by air when the formation is in action. This "Twenty-eight Star Formation" follows the changes of the Five Elements and we need five skilled fighters to head this formation. We already have suitable people for the north, south, east and central. But Zhou Botong is injured so he can't fill the last position. If only Yang Guo were here. His martial arts are not below Ouyang Feng's, but where can we find him now? This last position is really giving me a headache."

Guo Jing looked at the tower then looked far out into the north. His heart flew to the Passionless Valley, and muttered, "I'm worried about Guo'er, I don't even know if he's alive."

On that day Yang Guo was totally heartbroken and thought he would never see Xiao Longnu again and so he jumped down into the gorge, wanting to smash himself up and end it all. However after falling for some time there was a splash and he found himself in a deep lake. He had fallen from a great height and so he sank deeply into the water. Suddenly he noticed a light in front of him which looked like an underwater cave. He wanted to look closely at it but the water's buoyant pressure was too high and he rose back to the surface. At this time Guo Xiang also fell into the lake.

Yang Guo did not hesitate and immediately dragged Guo Xiang to the surface and pulled her to the bank and asked, "Sister, how did you fall down here?"

Guo Xiang said, "I saw you jump down and so I followed suit."

Yang Guo shook his head saying, "Nonsense! Are you not afraid of death?"

Guo Xiang laughed, "If you're not afraid, neither am I."

Yang Guo's heart trembled and he thought, "Don't tell me that at such a young age she already has deep feelings for me?" He shivered slightly.

She then took out the last needle saying, "Brother Yang, on that day when you gave me the three golden needles, you said I could ask for a wish for every needle and you would promise to do it. Today I'm telling you my third wish: Whether or not you get to meet Sister-in-law, you will not commit suicide." She then placed the needle on his palm.

Yang Guo looked at the needle and said, "You came all the way from Xiangyang just to ask for this?"

Guo Xiang was delighted and said, "Yup. You're a man of your word. You won't break your promise to me."

Yang Guo sighed. He had just gone from life to death, then from death back to life. No matter how strong his will to die, he would not repeatedly attempt suicide. He examined Guo Xiang and saw that she was shivering and her teeth were chattering. Her face was void of colour. He picked some dried leaves and wanted to start a fire but their flints were wet and rendered useless, so he said, "Sister, circulate your internal energy to get rid of the cold so you won't get a chill."

Guo Xiang was still worried and asked, "So you promise not to attempt suicide again?" Yang Guo said, "I promise!" Guo Xiang was overjoyed and said, "Let's circulate our energy together."

They sat down together and circulated their chi. Yang Guo had practiced his internal energy on the "Chilled Jade Bed" when he was young and did not fear the cold so he placed his palm on Guo Xiang's back and sent a stream of 'yang' chi to her. Before long Guo Xiang felt warm and stopped shivering.

When she was well-rested, Yang Guo asked how she ended up here in the Passionless Valley. Guo Xiang told him. Yang Guo angrily said, "That Fawang is so ruthless, when we get out of here I'm going to beat him to a pulp." Then they saw a large white eagle crashing down into the lake, appearing to be severely injured. Guo Xiang was surprised and said, "That's my family's eagle." Then another eagle flew down and landed near them after previously retrieving its injured mate and Yang Guo placed Guo Xiang on its back. He thought the eagle would be back to pick him up so he waited for some time but it did not show up. Little did he know that the eagle was dead.

Yang Guo looked around and saw a few bee hives on a large tree. The bees were larger than normal and were of the same species that Xiao Longnu reared back at the Ancient Tomb.

Yang Guo exclaimed in surprise and stood rooted to the ground. He then went over to examine the hives closely. He saw that they were man-made and the workmanship looked like Xiao Longnu's doing.

He thought, "Could Long'er have lived here after she jumped down?" He paced around the bank and felt that the gorge was like the bottom of a deep well. The place hardly received any sunlight.

He walked around and found that some of the trees had much of their bark stripped off and then he saw some flowers and stones arranged neatly. He suddenly became happy and worried at the same time. His heart beat rapidly as he felt that Xiao Longnu must have lived here before but after sixteen years he did not know what might have happened to her. He had never believed in divine intervention but now he was consumed with anxiety and knelt down and prayed, "O' Heaven, please let me meet Long'er again."

After praying, he looked around again but did not find any more traces of her. He sat under a tree and thought, "Even if Long'er is dead there would surely be some remains left behind, unless they have sunk to the bottom of the lake." He then remembered the light beneath the lake's surface and wanted to explore it, so he jumped into the lake.

He shouted, "I must get to the bottom of this. I'll never give up until I find out what happened to her." He dived into the lake and it got colder as he went deeper. Soon the water was icy-cold. Yang Guo did not mind the cold but the buoyant pressure was too high and he could not dive any deeper. He was now out of breath so he surfaced and grabbed a large stone and tried again.

This time he sank rapidly and saw the light again. He quickly swam towards it and strangely felt a swift current sweeping him into a cave. He threw the stone aside and found that the

cave floor was going upwards. Soon he broke the surface with a splash. He saw brilliant sunlight and the fragrance of flowers filled his nose. It was like another world. He looked around and saw beautiful flowers and bright green grass - it was as if he entered a large garden. However the place was still and quiet and there was no one around. He got out of the water and saw a thatched hut several meters away.

He dashed forwards but slowed down after a few steps and thought, "What if I don't find out anything here?" His heart sank and feared that his last hope would soon be dashed. He stopped outside the hut and listened carefully but there seemed to be no one inside. He only heard the bees buzzing.

After a while he plucked up his courage and trembled, saying, "I've come for a visit. Please pardon my intrusion." He repeated this but there was still no response. He lightly pushed open the door and it creaked open.

Stepping in, he looked around and was stunned. The furniture was simple but the house was sparkling clean. There was only a table and chair but its arrangement was very familiar, exactly the same as the arrangement in the Ancient Tomb. He did not examine the place and naturally turned left and he saw a small room. After passing the small room, he found himself looking into a bigger room. In the room the bed, table and chair also had exactly the same arrangement as in the Ancient Tomb. The only difference was that the furniture in the Ancient Tomb was made of stone while the furniture here is made of wood.

On the left was a bed which looked like the "Cold Jade Bed" he'd practiced his Internal Strength on. In the middle, a long rope was suspended through the room like the one he used to practice his Qing Gong (Lightness Skill). Near the window was a small stool which was like the one where he learned to read and write. On the left was a rough wooden cabinet;

when he opened it he saw children's clothes made of tree bark which was exactly of the same design Xiao Longnu made for him years ago. He walked into the room and touched the bed. The tears had already welled up in his eyes but now he could not hold them back and the tears rolled down his cheeks and fell onto the bed.

Suddenly he felt a smooth hand lightly stroking his hair, gently asking, "Guo'er, what's making you unhappy?"

The tone and the manner his hair was stroked was similar to how Xiao Longnu cajoled him when he was young. Yang Guo jerked around and saw a fair and extremely beautiful girl standing gracefully in front of him. She looked exactly the same as the Xiao Longnu he thought of daily and missed terribly for the past sixteen years.

The two of them stared at each other then exclaimed "Ah!" and embraced each other tightly. It seemed so real yet it seemed like a dream.

After a long while Yang Guo finally broke the silence. He said, "Long'er, you've not changed a single bit. But I have aged." Xiao Longnu stared at him and said, "No, it's just that my Guo'er has grown up."

Xiao Longnu was slightly older than Yang Guo by a few years but she lived in the Ancient Tomb since young and learned internal strength techniques from her master, which required her to purge her emotions. Yang Guo however more readily expressed his emotions, so at their wedding the two already looked about the same age.

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The "Jade Maiden Skill's" cultivating techniques from the Ancient Tomb sect concentrates on the essential rules of the "Twelve Nothingness and Twelve Plentifulness" which support

each other. The 'Twelve Nothingness' refers to the restrictions regarding thought, love, desires, matters, words, laughter, worries, fun, happiness, anger, good and evil. The 'Twelve Nothingness' will inevitably become part of one's life. The 'Twelve Plentifulness' states: that if one thinks too much, the concentration will be disrupted. If one loves too much, the energy will break down. If one desires too much, one will lose one's knowledge. If one has too many matters at hand, one will look weary in appearance. If one talks too much, it will affect one's breathing. If one laughs too much, one will strain one's organs. If one worries too much, it will affect one's nerves. If one plays too much, it will affect one's ideas. If one is too happy, it will result in complacency and trouble. If one is too angry, it will affect one's pulse. If one experiences too much good, one will despair. If one experiences too much evil, one will invite chaos. If one does not rid the 'Twelve Plentifulness', one would not reach enlightenment.

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Xiao Longnu had practiced this skill since young and had no happiness or worries, so she was even more emotionless than the founder Lin Chaoying. Once Yang Guo entered the Ancient Tomb things changed and as they got closer she found it harder to follow the 'less speech', 'less action', 'less happiness' and 'less worries' rules. After their marriage they were separated for sixteen years. Yang Guo traveled around and roamed Jianghu and missed her terribly. Xiao Longnu, on the other hand, was forced to live in this deserted valley and could not totally avoid thinking of him. She found herself practicing these principles again to combat her boredom. When they finally met again it appeared as though Yang Guo was older than her.

Xiao Longnu had not spoken for the past sixteen years and now when she started speaking again she was not very fluent. So they did not speak and just stared at each other

smiling. Yang Guo could not contain his excitement any longer and took her hand and ran out of the hut, saying, "Long'er, I'm extremely happy." He jumped up into a big tree and somersaulted several times.

In his excitement he forgot everything and somersaulted just like he did when he was young in the Ancient Tomb. He never thought about this before and never expected to do something like this as a middle-aged man. The only difference was that his qing gong (lightness skill) was excellent and he could somersault effortlessly. Xiao Longnu laughed heartily and cast all the 'less laughter' and 'less happiness' into the wind.

Xiao Longnu took out a handkerchief. Yang Guo finished somersaulting and walked to her grinning. Xiao Longnu would always wipe his sweat with a handkerchief; but now his face was not flushed and he was not breathless, of course he was not sweating. But she wiped his forehead all the same.

Yang Guo took the handkerchief and saw that it was made of tree bark and was rather rough and thought she'd had an uncomfortable life here and was very regretful. He stroked her hair gently and said, "Long'er, you have suffered much these past sixteen years."

Xiao Longnu sighed and said, "If I hadn't grown up in the Ancient Tomb, the past sixteen years would not have been easy for me."

They sat shoulder to shoulder beside a stone and talked about past events. Yang Guo asked her every single detail. As Xiao Longnu talked for a while, her speech became more fluent; then she slowly narrated her story of the past sixteen years.

That day when Yang Guo threw the half-pill down in the gorge Xiao Longnu knew he did not want to be left alone since her condition was supposedly fatal. That night she thought carefully and decided to die first and kill off his thoughts of suicide so that he would neutralize the "Passionless Poison". She was afraid that if she left traces of her suicide it would only hasten his suicide. She thought for half a night and then she finally went to the Broken Heart Cliff and carved the words. She purposely made a sixteen-year long appointment and then she jumped into the gorge. At that time she thought that if Yang Guo's life could be saved, after sixteen years he would have forgotten her and dispelled his thoughts of suicide.

When she said this, Yang Guo sighed, saying, "Why did you think of sixteen years? If you said eight years wouldn't we have been reunited eight years ago?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I'm aware of your deep feelings for me and eight years would be too short to ease your feelings. Ah, I didn't expect that even after sixteen years you would still jump down."

Yang Guo laughed, "That's the advantage of having such profound feelings. If I got over you and only cried at the Broken Heart Cliff then went off, I would never see you again."

Xiao Longnu said, "This is fate." Both of them came back from death to life and were finally reunited, so they were very thankful for their good fortune.

They felt sad for a while. Yang Guo then asked, "Then what happened after you jumped down?"

Xiao Longnu said, "I was swept unconscious into the cave and carried to this place, so I lived here. This place is devoid of animals but there were plenty of fish in the lake and fruits

on the trees but there was no cloth so I had to use tree bark to make clothes.”

Yang Guo said, “When you were struck by the “Soul Freezing Needles” and the poison entered your major accupoints, your condition was near-fatal. How did you get well down here?” Yang Guo looked carefully at her and saw her snow-white face had no traces of blood and the black cloud between her eyes had disappeared.

Xiao Longnu said, “After I lived here for several days the poison took effect and my whole body was on fire and I almost could not take it, but I remembered that on our wedding night you taught me how to reverse my chi flow on the “Chilled Jade Bed”. It couldn’t neutralize the poison but could relieve the symptoms. The water here is icy cold and the chill could penetrate the bones, so I got back into the water and stayed for a while and found that the effects were amazing. Thereafter I often went to the lake’s bank and looked up, hoping to get some news from you. One day a few Jade Bees flew down to the lake. They were left behind by the Old Urchin (Zhou Botong). I treated them like friends and built a few nests for them. Soon they multiplied. I consumed the Jade Bees’ honey and the white fish in the lake and found my discomfort decreasing. So the Jade Bees’ honey and the white fish have anti-poison properties and when consumed as food would increase the time interval between the poison’s reactions. At first it reacted twice a day, then once every few days, then once every few months, then for the past five or six years it never reacted again, so I guess I’m cured now.”

Yang Guo happily said, “So good will be rewarded with good. That year if you hadn’t given the Jade Bees to the Old Urchin he wouldn’t have brought them here and you wouldn’t have been saved.”

Xiao Longnu said, "When I got better, I missed you but the cliff walls were several hundred meters high and were straight and sheer, how could I get up? So I used the thorns on the flowers and tattooed the words 'I'm at the bottom of Passionless Valley' on the bees' wings. I tattooed several thousand bees but I got no response so I feared that I would never see you again."

Yang Guo slapped his leg and said, "I'm too careless. Every time I came to the Passionless Valley I always saw the bees but I never caught one to examine it or I could have kept you from a few years of misery."

Xiao Longnu laughed, "This is just a plan I used because I couldn't think of anything else. Actually who would think a bee would have words on its wings? The words are also so small; even if a hundred of them flew past your eyes you wouldn't notice the words. I was just hoping that a bee might get trapped in a spider's web and then you would see the words. When you saw them you would remember our relationship and rescue me." What she did not know was that the words were discovered by Zhou Botong, who did nothing, and the meaning was deciphered by Huang Rong when she saw them.

They chatted for half a day and Xiao Longnu went back into the hut to grill a big fish. The lake's water was very cold and the white fish were smallish but tasty and filling. Yang Guo ate the fish and felt some warmth in his stomach, making it very comfortable. He then told her what he did for the past sixteen years. He roamed Jianghu and did many heroic deeds so his life was more action-packed than Xiao Longnu's who lived in the lonely valley. Xiao Longnu never bothered about all the action and was contented with just looking at Yang Guo. So she smiled and listened to his exciting adventures and forgot everything he said soon after. Yang Guo however was very inquisitive and asked everything, including how she

caught the fish and built the hut and showed great interest in every detail, making it seem like the small valley was actually more interesting than the whole world. The two of them talked throughout the night and into the next morning before sleeping. They woke up in the afternoon and Yang Guo said, "Long'er, should we stay here until we're old or should we go back to the wonderful world?"

Xiao Longnu would have preferred to live here peacefully with Yang Guo but she knew he liked noise and excitement. Although she loved him deeply she was reluctant to leave this place so she said, "Let's go up and take a look, if things are bad out there we can always come back, but... but it'd be difficult to get up."

They dived back into the lake, through the cave and went back to the bank. They saw a long rope going all the way up and many random footprints by the bank. There was even a makeshift fireplace which had not died out. Yang Guo said, "Ah, some people came to look for us but couldn't get past the lake." He walked around and saw some words carved on a large tree which said, "Yideng, Yaoshi, Botong, Yinggu, Rong, Ying and Wushuang couldn't find Yang Guo so we went back."

Yang Guo was touched and said, "They've not forgotten me." Xiao Longnu said, "No one would forget you." Yang Guo said, "Although they came here, they did not fall into the lake with great speed and hence couldn't go deep enough to see the underwater cave. If I also came down with a rope, I wouldn't have been able to find you either." Xiao Longnu said, "I already said all this coincidence is due to fate." Yang Guo shook his head and laughed, "This is called 'With sincerity, one can cut rocks or gold'."

He tugged the rope to test it and it felt firmly attached, so he said, "Let me go up first to see if that Fawang is still there."

But he remembered that Reverend Yideng, Island Master Huang and Zhou Botong were all present so Fawang must be miles away by now. Then he asked, "Do you still have any martial skills? If you can't climb, I can carry you up." Xiao Longnu smiled, "Although I didn't improve even slightly for the past sixteen years, I still retain much of my old skills." Yang Guo laughed. He grabbed the rope and jumped, moving several meters a second. Xiao Longnu followed suit and they got out in no time.

They stood side-by-side at the Broken Heart Cliff and looked at the words carved into the rock face by Xiao Longnu years ago; it seemed like a lifetime ago to them. They looked at each other and giggled with joy and forgot all their troubles of sixteen years ago.

Yang Guo plucked a Dragon Girl Flower and placed it in her hair and the color contrasted with her face beautifully. He could not decide if the flower added vibrancy to her or she added beauty to the flower.

oOo

Huang Yaoshi was explaining the "Twenty-eight Star Formation" at the top of Xiangyang's city wall for the battle with Fawang. Guo Jing found Lu Wenhuan and requested him to give the order for Huang Yaoshi to take command of the soldiers. At this time many of the heroes who attended the 'Heroes' Meet had already left, but there were still many able people in the city.

Huang Yaoshi said, "The Mongolians are using 40,000 soldiers to surround the tower. If we use more soldiers to defeat them it wouldn't require much skill. So we'll also use forty thousand soldiers. In Sun Zi's Art of War, using surrounding the enemy when you outnumber him ten to one is no big deal, but it needs some skill to surround the enemy one on one." He stood on the command post and said, "This

“Twenty-eight Star Formation” follows the Five Elements.” He waved the command flag and briefed them. Then he said, “The changes are complex and you can’t be familiar with this in a single day. So for this battle we must appoint five skilled martial arts experts familiar with the Five Elements to command the five divisions. Everyone is to obey their commands to carry out the formation.” They all waited eagerly.

Huang Yaoshi said, “The central division represents Earth and it shall be commanded by Guo Jing with eight thousand troops. Its mission is to rescue Guo Xiang and not to battle the enemy. All the soldiers are to carry a bag of sand on their backs to put out the fire if necessary.” Guo Jing received the order and stood aside.

Huang Yaoshi continued, “The south division represents Fire and it shall be commanded by Reverend Yideng with eight thousand troops. One thousand men will escort the commander and the other seven thousand will be split into 7 battalions commanded by Zhu Ziliu, Wu Santong, The Fisherman, the Wu brothers, Yelu Yan and Wanyan Ping.” Reverend Yideng accepted the command.

Huang Yaoshi continued, “The north division represents Water and it shall be commanded by Huang Rong with eight thousand troops. One thousand men will escort the commander and the other seven thousand will be split into seven battalions commanded by Yelu Qi, Elder Liang, Guo Fu and other senior Beggar Clan members.” Huang Rong accepted the command. This division was made up mainly of Beggar Clan members and all were tried and valiant veterans.

Huang Yaoshi then said, “The east division represents Wood and it shall be commanded by me, Old Heretic Huang, and there shall also be eight thousand men under me. All my

disciples are dead with the exception of Cheng Ying and Sha Gu, but they are not present.” So he appointed six heroes who had attended the ‘Heroes’ Meet to command the battalions in his division. He said, “The east division shall also be divided into eight battalions of one thousand men each and 1 battalion will escort me.”

Finally he appointed the west division’s commander, saying, “This division shall be commanded by Quanzhen Sect Leader Li Zhichang...” As he said this, everyone felt that in terms of martial arts, this division’s commander had the weakest martial arts among the five divisions. Suddenly someone shouted, “Old Heretic Huang, how could you ignore me?” Everyone turned around and saw Zhou Botong. Huang Yaoshi said, “Brother Zhou, you’re injured, you shouldn’t exert yourself, I originally wanted to appoint you to this position but...”

Zhou Botong said, “It’s such a minor injury; it’s not important. I’ll take it. Zhi Chang, you dare to vie with me?” Li Zhichang bowed and said, “I do not.” Zhou Botong laughed, “Good, I knew you wouldn’t dare.” He then took the command token from Li Zhichang. Huang Yaoshi just said, “Brother Zhou, be careful. You shall take eight thousand troops and one thousand of them shall be under Yinggu to escort you. The other seven battalions shall be commanded by Li Zhichang and other third Generation Quanzhen disciples. Your division represents Metal.”

After appointing the commanders he ordered the sergeant-major to prepare the weapons and equipment. He then waved his command flag and the forty thousand men got into formation. He shouted, “Legend has it that “Twenty-eight Celestial Generals” subdued the Demons long, long ago. Although we are not some Heavenly Army, we shall repel the invaders and protect our land from the Mongolians or we

shall die trying!" Everyone cheered like thunder and the five divisions left the city in all directions.

The west division marched out and each soldier carried a wooden pole on his back and they attacked the tower. One thousand of them carried shields and warded off the arrows while the remaining seven thousand threw down their poles and quickly built a structure which followed Huang Yaoshi's diagram based on the Five Elements and Eight Trigrams. Soon they blockaded off the eastern side of the tower.

The west division was made up mainly of Quanzhen disciples and they were familiar with the Dipper Formation, so their swords flashed like lightning and they formed groups of seven and platoons of forty-nine darting left and right, causing the Mongolians to see blurry images and could only fend them off with arrows.

The north division roared in and Huang Rong, together with the Beggars' Clan members, brought hoses with them and they sprayed poison onto the Mongol troops. The poison caused severe pain and corroded the skin. The Mongols could not take it and retreated south.

The south division appeared through a great cloud of smoke and the 8,000 troops led by Yideng attacked with fire. The soldiers had some sort of fire thrower which spewed out flames at the enemy soldiers. The Mongol troops saw that things were really going wrong and were pushed towards the centre. Guo Jing and his eight thousand troops moved forward gradually and when they saw the Mongol soldiers thrown into confusion, they charged straight to the tower.

Suddenly an alarm was sounded and many heads popped up from the ground. The Mongols were also well-versed in warfare and they also placed more than ten thousand troops in ambush. Guo Jing saw this and knew it was a trap. The Mongol troops were already in chaos under the onslaught of

the “Twenty-eight Star Formation” and the Song troops were about to reach their objective; but now they could not advance.

The drums rolled like the rumbling thunder and the Song troops were engaged in a bitter fight with the Mongol troops. The soldiers protecting the tower were some of the best archers and their arrows descended like rain and hindered the advance of Guo Jing’s central division. Huang Yaoshi waved his flag and changed the formation; now it was Fire against Wood and Metal against Water.

The “Twenty-eight Star Formation” followed the principles of the Five Elements. The south division’s Yideng attacked the centre, Guo Jing’s central division attacked the west, Zhou Botong and the Quanzhen Sect attacked the north, Huang Rong and the Beggars’ Sect attacked the east and Huang Yaoshi’s division attacked the south. The formation’s status now was: Fire and Earth, Earth and Metal, Metal and Water, Water and Wood, Wood and Fire. The Song regiment only had forty thousand men but the formation was ingenious and the division commanders were highly skilled fighters. Moreover the Song soldiers were all grateful towards Guo Jing and Huang Rong, so they risked their lives to save his daughter. Even though the Mongolians outnumbered them almost two to one, the Mongolians could not fend them off.

They fought for a long time and Huang Yaoshi waved his flag again. One division withdrew to the central position, Guo Jing’s division attacked north again, Yideng’s division returned south, one division went west and another attacked the east. The formation changed and now the status was: Wood against Earth, Earth against Water, Water against Fire, Fire against Metal, and Metal against Wood.

The principles of the Five Elements seem mysterious but was actually discovered when the ancient Chinese people studied

the changes in the environment. The principles were derived from the Tao of the Yin and Yang, religious worship, medicine and mathematics etc. all depended on these. This was said to be unique in the whole world. The Mongols were brave and fierce warriors and their fighting skills were excellent. But their knowledge of such matters was rather shallow; how could they be a match for someone like Huang Yaoshi? After a few changes, the soldiers guarding the tower became very confused as they saw groups of Song troops moving back and forth and they did not know how to deal with them.

Fawang was watching the battle from atop the tower and was shocked. A long time ago even Huang Rong's "Stone Formation" gave him many difficulties. With Huang Yaoshi being ten times more knowledgeable than Huang Rong, how could he understand what was going on? The "Twenty-eight Star Formation" completely awed him and he saw that the casualties on his side were increasing rapidly. Guo Jing's division was getting closer to the tower every second. Although he had Guo Xiang in his power, he was reluctant to burn her alive. He glanced at her and saw that although she was tied up, her head was raised proudly and she showed no fear. Fawang said, "Little Guo Xiang, get your father to surrender quickly. I'll count from one to ten; if they don't surrender I'll order the tower to be set on fire."

Guo Xiang said, "If you love to count you can count to ten thousand for all I care."

Fawang angrily said, "You really think I won't burn you alive?"

Guo Xiang coldly said, "I just think you're pathetic."

Fawang shouted, "How?"

Guo Xiang said, "You can't beat my father and mother, you can't beat my grandfather, you can't beat Reverend Yideng,

you can't beat Zhou Botong and you can't beat my brother Yang Guo. All you're capable of is to tie me up here. I'm just a small fry in Xiangyang, so I don't deserve such despicable behavior. Fawang let me give you a piece of advice."

Fawang gritted his teeth and asked, "What?"

Guo Xiang said, "What use has a person like you got on Earth? Just jump off the tower and go to hell!" Guo Xiang was already past caring about life and death. She had a razor-sharp tongue and she had never lost an argument.

Fawang exploded with rage and screamed, "Guo Jing listen well! If you don't surrender I'll burn the tower!"

Guo Jing said, "Do you think I am the sort who will surrender?"

Huang Yaoshi shouted in Mongolian, "Jinlun Fawang, you're too stupid to beat this enemy. You can only bully small girls and you are not brave enough to fight us with real weapons. How can such a stupid and cowardly man be considered a hero? You were captured by us at the Passionless Valley and you kowtowed to Guo Xiang eighteen times and begged her to release you. You're an ungrateful bastard and you still dare to call yourself the First Protector of Mongolia?"

The part about kowtowing to Guo Xiang was rubbish. Huang Yaoshi was crafty and brilliant and got Huang Rong to translate all the stuff he just said before the battle and he quickly memorized everything. Now he said it with his chi and everyone heard this clearly through the din and Fawang did not know how to argue. The Mongolians always respected their warriors and despised cowards; now they heard what Huang Yaoshi said, they looked up at the tower with contempt. The two armies were fighting intensely when the Mongolians heard that their commander was such a

despicable man, and their morale fell. The Song troops were all brave and valiant and now had an advantage.

Fawang saw that something was wrong and shouted, "Guo Jing, listen. I'm going to count from one to ten. When I shout '10', your daughter will burn! 1... 2... 3... 4..." He paused slightly after every number and hoped that Guo Jing could not take it and be greatly distressed if he did not surrender.

Guo Jing, Huang Yaoshi, Yideng and Zhou Botong's divisions heard Fawang counting from the top of the tower. They saw a few hundred soldiers bearing torches at the foot of the tower, only waiting for the command to set everything alight. Everyone was getting anxious and charged toward the tower for all they were worth. But there were a few thousand archers firing arrows from the tower which severely impeded their advance. Under the rain of arrows, people like the Fisherman, Elder Liang and Wu Xiuwen were injured and some third Generation Quanzhen disciples were killed together with dozens of Beggar Clan members. The Song soldiers killed were beyond counting.

Before the battle Huang Rong told Guo Fu to take off the Soft Armour and give it to her grandfather. She expected a tough battle and did not want her father to get hurt in the process of saving Guo Xiang. Huang Yaoshi accepted it but secretly took it off and tricked Zhou Botong into putting it on. So although Zhou Botong was hit by many arrows he was not injured and he found this amusing. He went charging forward and attacked the archers with his palms, causing them to back off.

Then Fawang shouted, "... 8... 9... 10! Good, burn the tower!" In an instant the base of the tower was engulfed in flames and the thick smoke rose into the air. Guo Jing's eight thousand soldiers all had bags of sand on their backs but they could not get near the tower.

Huang Rong saw the thick black smoke and her face turned white. She waved her flag randomly and disorderly. Yelu Qi went forward to support her and said, "Mother-in-law, go behind the formation and rest, I'll save Sister Xiang even if it costs me my life."

At this time a thunderous roar came from afar. Many Mongolian soldiers from behind the formation appeared and attacked Xiangyang from two sides. "Long live the Khan!" The Mongol Khan was personally commanding the assault and the Mongol troops swarmed towards the city.

Guo Jing was carrying a spear and shield and had already advanced within a hundred feet of the tower. The Mongolian archers were unable to hold him off any longer and he looked like he would ascend the tower at any moment. Suddenly he heard a disturbance at the rear of the formation and thought, "Oh no, we've been tricked! The city has many soldiers but no able commanders, this is bad!"

When Guo Jing and Huang Yaoshi planned the battle they made sure the city was fully prepared for any sneak attack. But the Mongol soldiers at the tower were exceptionally tough and the Khan ignored the battle at the tower and attacked Xiangyang with his entire army. Guo Jing thought, "Saving the city is more important than saving my daughter!" He said loudly, "Father-in-law, let's not worry about Xiang'er, we must go back and attack the enemy."

Huang Yaoshi looked back and saw the smoke rising higher and Fawang walking down the tower, leaving Guo Xiang alone at the top. He decided that he could not sacrifice the whole city for Guo Xiang and sighed, "So be it!" He waved his command flag and the troops headed back to the city.

Guo Xiang, tied on top of the tower, saw that her parents and grandfather would be unable to save her. The heat was getting more intense. She knew the fire was spreading

quickly and she would be burned to death soon. She was rather fearful at first, but then she calmed down and looked at the beautiful scenery, thinking, "It's such a fun world, but I'm going to die soon. I wonder where Brother Yang is. Has he come up from the valley yet?"

She thought back to her meeting with Yang Guo and felt her life was not a waste. She was in grave danger but she did not bother about the battle at the foot of the tower. Suddenly there was roar from afar and it sounded like soldiers being killed by the thousands.

Guo Xiang was surprised because the roar was similar to Yang Guo's roar which made wild animals cower. She turned her head and saw the Mongol troops on the west and north falling and rolling away from two people. The soldiers were being swept aside with a force comparable to huge waves. Between the two people was a large eagle and it spread its wings generating a typhoon and the arrows fell harmlessly to the ground on contacting its wings. This bird was fierce and majestic and it was of course Yang Guo's Divine Eagle.

Guo Xiang was overjoyed and saw that one of the two people wore a green hat and yellow shirt and was definitely Yang Guo. The other was a beautiful lady who wore a white gown which floated in the wind. The two wielded long swords and the swords flashed together gracefully. They followed behind the eagle and charged to the tower. Guo Xiang shouted, "Big brother is this Xiao Longnu?"

The lady was obviously Xiao Longnu, but he was too far and did not hear Guo Xiang talking to him. The Divine Eagle cleared the path and deflected the arrows effortlessly; its wings were like iron but it was still slightly injured. The Mongol troops had never seen such a fierce and powerful animal before and tried to stab it but were struck by Yang Guo and Xiao Longnu's swords and they fell away.

Yang Guo shouted, "Sister, don't be afraid, I'll save you." He saw the lower half of the tower on fire and jumped lightly, reaching the ladder and he quickly climbed up. Suddenly a strong wind generated by a palm struck downwards – it was Fawang.

Yang Guo sheathed his sword and used his palm to intercept the blow from Fawang. When the two huge forces collided, both of them rocked about and the wooden ladder trembled like it was going to break. Both were shocked and both praised his opponent: "I haven't seen him for sixteen years, I never imagined his internal strength would have increased this much."

Yang Guo saw that the situation was dire and would not allow him to compete with palm strength at the ladder again. He drew his sword again and attacked Fawang's legs. Fawang was standing above and if he used his wheels to fight he would have to bend over and that would put him at a disadvantage. Furthermore his wheels were shorter than the sword, so he turned around and decided to go back up to the platform again. Yang Guo raised his sword and attacked him ferociously from behind; every stance was swift as lightning. Fawang did not turn around but used his ears to determine where the attacks came from. He used a wheel to block every stance; it was as though he had eyes on the back of his head. Yang Guo praised him, "Damn monk; very impressive!"

Fawang was standing on top of the platform and immediately retaliated with one wheel. Yang Guo avoided it and counter-attacked with his sword. He dived towards Fawang in the air. Fawang used his golden wheel to block him and his silver wheel was about to strike the blade.

Just a moment ago they exchanged one stance and Yang Guo felt that the palm energy of Fawang was solid, robust and strong. He had never encountered such power amongst his

former adversaries. He was surprised by this. He had trained in the waves of the ocean and was capable of withstanding the strong forces of the tide's waves. Sixteen years ago Fawang was no match for him; but today, after exchanging one blow, he was almost unable to withstand that blast.

Seeing that the wheels were about to make contact with his blade, he did not retract his sword. He wanted to test the internal strength of Fawang. The wheels and sword collided with a loud clang. The huge powers collided with each other and Yang Guo's sword broke in two while the wheels flew out of Fawang's hands. The wheels fell to the ground smashing three Mongolian archers. Yang Guo was shocked and thought, "For sixteen years I have not used the heavy iron sword; I see that I am too overconfident today."

In order to perform the "Jade Maiden Swordplay", Yang Guo could not use his heavy iron sword; therefore he used an ordinary sword instead. When his blade made contact with the wheels of the Fawang it broke immediately.

After exchanging one blow both leapt aside and their arms felt numb. Then Fawang took out his iron and bronze wheels and attacked again. Yang Guo did not have any other weapon, so he generated his strength to his right sleeve and whisked out. He also used his left palm to attack Fawang.

Guo Xiang shouted, "Old monk, I told you before. You're no match for him! If you're really that powerful, why do you have to use your weapons? Can't you fight him empty-handed? You're a disgrace!" Fawang grunted and did not answer but increased the power and speed of his stances.

Huang Yaoshi, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were leading their troops back to defend Xiangyang, but when they saw Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu and the Divine Eagle fighting their way towards the platform, they had hopes again of saving Guo Xiang.

Huang Yaoshi waved his command flag and ordered four thousand soldiers from the east, south, west, north and central divisions forming a total of twenty thousand soldiers to return and attack the invading Mongolian troops. The remaining soldiers were to assist Yang Guo in saving Guo Xiang. Although the Song troops were outnumbered their spirits were raised when they saw Yang Guo on the platform. Each fought one against ten and the Mongolian archers kept shooting their arrows and held their ground firmly. Each time the Song soldiers advanced forward they were soon pushed back by the uncountable arrows.

The battle at the gates of Xiangyang was also at its' peak. Governor Lu Wenhuan was too afraid to lead the armies; he wore his armour and hid in the government office with his two beloved concubines. He was trembling madly and kept stammering, "Merciful Avalokitesvara... please protect m...m...my entire family...Merci... merciful Avalokitesvara..." His two concubines were patting his chest and wiping away his saliva.

The scouts came and reported, "Another ten thousand enemy soldiers have reinforced the attacking troops at the east gate... At the north gate the enemy troops have put up the ladders..."

Lu Wenhuan rolled his eyes with fear and kept asking, "Is Master Guo back yet? Haven't the Mongolians retreated yet?"

By this time Yang Guo, using one arm, had fought more than two hundred stances with Fawang. Both of their martial arts were quite different from each other and the battle kept intensifying. The entire platform was shaken by their wheels and palm. The smoke coming from the bottom of the platform also thickened and soon a black cloud covered the platform. Although Yang Guo was not using a weapon he was not at a disadvantage. Fawang felt the platform shaking lightly and

knew that the fire had started to consume one of the support pillars of the platform. It would only be a question of time before the platform collapsed and then he, Yang Guo and Guo Xiang would all die together. Also he saw that the techniques of Yang Guo were quite marvelous and feared that after another hundred stances or so he would be defeated by Yang Guo. In this dire situation he attacked Yang Guo's right shoulder with his iron wheel and when Yang Guo was about to avoid that wheel he threw his bronze wheel towards Guo Xiang's face. Since she was tied to a pole, it was impossible for her to dodge that wheel.

Yang Guo was horrified and leapt towards Guo Xiang and used his sleeve to whisk the bronze wheel away. However, when two experts fought, it was unwise to be distracted and Yang Guo's attention was on Guo Xiang, leaving himself unguarded. Fawang struck out with his iron wheel the sharp edges were aimed at Yang Guo's left leg. In mid-air Yang Guo frantically kicked Fawang's wrist with his right leg. Fawang twisted his wheel around and Yang Guo could not avoid it and his right leg was cut. Blood immediately flowed from his wound and his injury was not slight. Guo Xiang called out in fear and Fawang took out his lead wheel. With two wheels in his hands he attacked Guo Xiang again from the top and bottom. He knew, that although Yang Guo was injured, he could not overcome him at the moment. So he deliberately launched a fake attack on Guo Xiang and by doing so Yang Guo would try to protect her with all his might. In a few moments Yang Guo was in a dangerous position and could only defend and no longer attack.

Guo Xiang shouted, "Don't bother about me now! Just kill this old monk to avenge me!" Yang Guo called out in pain, as his right shoulder was cut again by a wheel.

Xiao Longnu and the Divine Eagle were standing on the ground together with Zhou Botong and they prevented the

archers from shooting arrows at Guo Xiang. Her attention was entirely focused on Yang Guo, even while she was killing those soldiers. When she saw him drenched in blood her heart skipped a beat. It was like her soul left her body; the ladder was consumed by the fire and there was no way for her to go up and help. Her mind went blank and she just raised her sword and was unaware of where she was and what she was doing there.

Whenever Yang Guo was faced with a great, powerful adversary he would use his "Melancholic Sad Palms" to defeat his opponent. This style was linked to his emotional state, but now he was newly reunited with Xiao Longnu and his heart was filled with bliss and happiness. There was not a trace of melancholy or sadness any longer. He was now faced with a dangerous situation and was using this very style. But somehow the influence of melancholy and longing was gone; every move and every stance he made was the same as in the past but the power of it was greatly diminished.

Guo Jing and Huang Rong saw Yang Guo's battle against Fawang and saw him being injured; unfortunately they could not rush over to help him. Huang Rong suddenly thought of something and took Yelu Qi's sword and gave it to Guo Jing. She said loudly, "Shoot it over to Guo'er." Guo Jing took the sword and used two iron bows and placed the sword in between. He aimed and shot the sword towards Yang Guo. A bright flash seared through the sky and a loud whooshing sound was heard.

Yang Guo heard the whooshing sound and used his right sleeve to curl around the sword and immediately used his left hand to wield it. He thrust the sword through the two wheels of Fawang. Fawang twisted his wheels and the sword was broken again. Everyone saw what happened and was stunned.

Yang Guo knew it was in vain; he could not rescue Guo Xiang by himself. He would probably die here as well. He looked tragically at Xiao Longnu and said, "Long'er, farewell. Take care..." At this moment Fawang used his iron wheel to advance forward, wanting to strike Yang Guo on the skull. Yang Guo had given up all hope; he casually whisked his sleeve and struck out his palm and it smashed Fawang directly on the shoulder.

Zhou Botong who was standing below shouted, "Good! That's one very impressive 'Entangled by the Web of Love'." Yang Guo was stunned for a moment and then he realized he was feeling lost and hopeless and he unintentionally used the stance "Entangled by the Web of Love". The heart is the most important factor of this style - it commands the arm and the arm commands the palm. That day, in the "Hundred Flowers Valley", Zhou Botong did not feel sadness and melancholy and therefore he could not grasp the essence behind this style. When Yang Guo was reunited with Xiao Longnu, this style lost its essence. When Yang Guo faced death and parting with Xiao Longnu the sorrow and melancholy suddenly surged forth in his heart and immediately boosted the power of the "Melancholic Sad Palms".

Fawang was about to be victorious when, suddenly, he was hit on the shoulder. His chest hurt greatly and he trembled. He was furious and surprised and instantly attacked again.

Yang Guo backed away and retaliated with "In A State Of Disunity", "Irrational Direction", "The Settled Cessation" and another move quickly followed these three attacks. It was the "The Meaningless Wanderer". This stance was a kick, but it was a most elusive attack. Fawang could only vaguely see a leg; it was there, but it was not. He could not avoid this kick and he suffered a heavy blow to his chest. He coughed up blood and fell. Both armies yelled, the Song yelled with joy and the Mongolians called out in surprise.

Note: Here we present the original and the third [final?] edition versions of the end of Yang Guo and Jinlun Fawang's battle.

1st / 2nd Edition:

By now the tower was crumbling and Yang Guo knew he had no time to untie Guo Xiang, so he quickly smashed the pole she was tied to and carrying everything – girl, pole and all – jumped off the tower. The Divine Eagle jumped up and they landed on its back. They landed safely only just in time. The tower came crashing down.

Fawang was kicked off the platform and was injured but not fatally. He swallowed his pain and rolled away, wanting to get up. Suddenly someone laughed and jumped onto his back. He was pinned to the ground and it seemed like a thousand needles pierced through him. It was Zhou Botong and his Soft Armour was like a porcupine. Fawang was severely injured and he could not move. The tower collapsed and, as Zhou Botong leapt away, a huge beam struck Fawang on his back.

Huang Rong saw that her daughter had escaped death and was filled with emotions. She was very grateful towards Yang Guo and was willing to die for him. She quickly ran forward and cut the ropes. Guo Jing, Yideng, Huang Yaoshi and Yelu Qi were all greatly impressed.

3rd Edition Ending:

The platform shook greatly now and was about to collapse. If it collapsed entirely now Guo Xiang was bound to die. Suddenly, Fawang found his benevolence again and he leapt up and cut the ropes tying Guo Xiang using his iron wheel. He took her in his arms and said to her, "Call me Master one more time." Guo Xiang looked up and saw tears in his eyes. She called loudly, "Master!"

Fawang shouted, "Yang Guo, catch her!"

Yang Guo saw Fawang throwing Guo Xiang to him and used his sleeve to catch her and his left arm to support her. He jumped down with her. The Divine Eagle spread its' wings and leaped up; although it could not fly it could leap about 3 or 4 meters into the air. Guo Xiang and Yang Guo landed on the back of the eagle and were descended on it. At this time the platform was collapsing and the Eagle could not deal with the weight of two persons and fell down. Yang Guo gently pushed Guo Xiang aside and said, "Watch out!"

Guo Xiang performed the technique "The Flying Swallow Circling Away" and touched down. Seeing she was close to being safe, Huang Rong screamed, "Dodge! Faster!"

A heavy burning beam came crashing down towards her. Guo Xiang was shocked and fell down. Huang Rong and Yang Guo wanted to rush over to rescue her but they were too far away. Furthermore, they were blocked by Mongolian soldiers. Seeing that it was too late Huang Rong fainted.

Guo Xiang had her hands on the ground and wanted to leap away again, but she was trapped by the fiery beam. Her clothes were on fire too and the smoke was choking her. She closed her eyes and awaited death. Suddenly she heard someone landing next to her; she opened her eyes and saw Fawang. He was kneeling down on one knee and using his hands to lift the heavy, burning beam. He generated a large force from his "Dragon Elephant Wisdom Dexterity" and hurled the beam away.

Although the beam was very heavy his "Dragon Elephant Wisdom Dexterity" was awesome and he generated every bit of his remaining incredible internal strength. The beam flew into the sky like a red blazing dragon. Both Song and Mongol soldiers looked up. The Mongolian soldiers ran away fearing that the beam would land on them. A gap appeared in their

formation and Yang Guo helped Huang Rong up and dashed forward.

Guo Xiang escaped from death and was helping Fawang up. She was calling, "Master, Master!"

Fawang opened his eyes and said, "Good, good! I have finally managed to convince you..." He coughed up blood and could not finish talking. His blood splattered on Guo Xiang's clothes and she saw pieces of the platform falling down on them. She tried her best to lift Fawang and move him to safety. Yang Guo saw that she could not lift Fawang and helped her to drag him away from the falling debris. Fawang kept coughing up blood and looked at Guo Xiang; he smiled and closed his eyes for the final time. Guo Xiang embraced his body and was devastated, she cried, "Master, Master!"

Yang Guo saw Fawang sacrificing his own life to save Guo Xiang. In doing so, Fawang earned his respect and he bowed to the body.

Huang Rong saw her beloved daughter safe again, she hugged her and tears of joy flowed freely. She was most thankful toward Yang Guo and Fawang. Guo Jing, Huang Yaoshi and Reverend Yideng were also touched by the actions of Fawang and were also very grateful to him.

End of Excerpts

The Mongol soldiers saw that their commander was dead and they were thrown into great chaos. The five divisions attacked them again and this time they were totally defeated.

Guo Jing waved and shouted, "Let's go back and save Xiangyang, then kill their Khan!" The Song army cheered and turned around and charged towards the Mongol troops attacking the city.

Xiao Longnu tore off some cloth and dressed Yang Guo's wound. Her hands were trembling and she could not speak. Yang Guo smiled, "You suffered more from your worries than I from the fight."

The Song troops gave a thunderous yell and formed up into five divisions again and attacked the Mongol army. Yang Guo saw that the enemy was orderly and unyielding and they outnumbered the Song army many times. Although the Song army attacked them like mighty waves, they still could not move the enemy.

Yang Guo shouted, "The scum of a Khan isn't dead yet and the enemy isn't defeated yet. Let's fight again. Are you tired?" He spoke the last few words gently and softly. Xiao Longnu just smiled and said, "You say go then we'll go."

Then they heard a young girl say, "Sister-in-law, you're ravishing." It was Guo Xiang.

Xiao Longnu turned around and laughed, "Sister thanks you for praying for our reunion. Your brother praised you and dragged me to Xiangyang to meet you."

Guo Xiang sighed, "Only you are worthy of him."

Xiao Longnu took her hand and was very friendly to her. Xiao Longnu was usually cold and indifferent to everyone, but since Yang Guo heaped praise on Guo Xiang and told how she jumped off the cliff to make him promise not to commit suicide, Xiao Longnu treated her differently.

Yang Guo ran past some stray horses and said, "I'll cut a way through. Let's go together!" He hopped onto the horse and rode off. Xiao Longnu and Guo Xiang took a horse each and followed behind. The three of them galloped south and saw several hundred Mongol soldiers setting up the ladders at the south gate and climbing up like ants.

The three of them got onto a small hill and looked around and saw a few thousand Mongol troops surrounding Yelu Qi and his three hundred men. The Mongolians used long spears and chopped down on Yelu Qi's cavalry. Guo Fu led a company and attempted to rescue him but was blocked by two thousand Mongol troops. The couple longed for each other from afar but could not meet. Guo Fu saw that her husband's troops were decreasing rapidly and her heart sank as she knew that once surrounded by a large army, even a highly skilled martial artist could do nothing.

Yang Guo said, "Guo Fu, if you kowtow to me three times I will rescue your husband." Because of Guo Fu's proud, overbearing and obnoxious behavior, she would rather die than kowtow to him and admit his superiority. But now, seeing that her husband was in grave danger, she did not hesitate and immediately got off her horse and fell to her knees, knocking her head on the ground.

Yang Guo was shocked and quickly dragged her up. He regretted saying that and said, "I'm just teasing you, don't mind me. Brother Yelu and I are close friends, how can I ignore his plight?" He jumped from the hill and gathered as many horses as he could and formed them up in two rows. He mounted a horse and held all the reins in one hand, yelling and charging into the enemy's formation.

Yang Guo's two rows of horses followed the "Multiple Horse Formation" originated in the Song army. However the horses were not trained in this and did not move in a straight path and followed Yang Guo only because he held on to the reins tightly. They galloped through the formation and Yang Guo utilized his advanced qing gong (lightness skill) and was jumping back and forth on the horses' backs. The Mongols had never seen such an awesome riding skill before and their lack of reaction allowed Yang Guo to pass through their

formation without resistance. Yang Guo grabbed a large banner and fastened it on one of the saddles.

The Mongol soldiers shouted and tried to block him but Yang Guo swept the banner and knocked three officers down from their horses. He saw that Yelu Qi was just a few meters away and shouted, "Brother Yelu, jump up!" He thrust out the banner and Yelu Qi jumped, landing on the banner. He mounted a horse and the two of them broke out of the encirclement together.

Yelu Qi panted and said, "Brother Yang, thanks for saving me, but my subordinates are still trapped and I don't want to desert them." Yang Guo was moved and said, "You go grab a big banner too." Then he set both banners on fire. Yelu Qi said, "Brilliant!" He went forward and snatched a banner and lit it against Yang Guo's banner. They shouted and charged into the enemy lines, waving the flaming banners about.

The two flaming banners flying around struck fear in the enemy troops. All those who went forward to stop them suffered serious burns. The tide was turning and the Mongol troops had no choice but to retreat. Yelu Qi's battalion had only about seventy people left and they all charged together, finally managing to break out of the encirclement. Yelu Qi assembled the remnants of his soldiers and took them up a mountain to rest.

Guo Fu went up to Yang Guo and bowed lowly to him, saying, "Brother Yang, I've caused trouble for you my whole life but you're open-minded and magnanimous. You returned my resentment with benevolence, saving..." Her voice became hoarse and she could not continue. Yang Guo had saved her life several times in the past and knew she owed him a debt of gratitude. But she had always loathed him, thinking that he was always eager to show off his martial arts and did not really intend to save her. Only now, when he saved her

husband, she felt truly grateful and realized her past mistakes.

Yang Guo hastily returned the bow and said, "Sister Fu, we grew up together, although we quarreled a lot, we've always been as close as siblings. If you no longer hate me or despise me I will be very happy."

Guo Fu was stunned and the past events flashed past in her mind. She thought, "Do I really hate him? The Wu brothers were always trying to gain my favour but he never bothered about me. If he had treated me better I would have been willing to die for him. Why did I hate him without any reason for so many years? Is it because I always think of him and miss him but he'd never paid any attention to me?"

For the past twenty years, even she did not understand her own heart and always treated him like her enemy. Deep in her heart she actually had deep feelings for him. But Yang Guo could not understand her; even she could not understand herself.

Now her hate was gone she suddenly realized that she was actually very concerned about him. She thought, "When he charged into the enemy formation to save Brother Qi, who did I worry for more? I really cannot say." At this time the clash of the ongoing fierce battle could be heard and she suddenly understood herself, "When he gave Sister Xiang such great presents on her birthday, why did I hate him to the bones? Guo Fu, ah Guo Fu, you're jealous of your own little sister! He treated Sister Xiang so well but didn't even acknowledge your presence."

While she was lost in thought about this, her anger flared up again and she stared hard at Yang Guo and Guo Xiang. Then she woke up, thinking, "Why do I still care about all this? I'm a married woman now and Brother Qi treats me so well!" She gave a long sigh. Although she did not lack for anything

since she was young, deep in her heart she felt a strange void. She always got whatever she wanted but could never get what she really desired most. In her whole life she did not know why she was always so hot-tempered and why she was always sulking when everyone was happy.

Guo Fu's face flushed red and then paled white as she thought about her heart's affairs. However Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Guo Xiang and Yelu Qi were all observing the ongoing battle at Xiangyang. The front line soldiers had already scaled the city wall. Guo Jing and Huang Yaoshi's army attacked their flank heavily but the Mongol army was too large and their formation remained intact. The Khan directed all his forces to attack the city and the defenders inside were getting more disorderly and could not hold the enemy much longer. Guo Xiang anxiously cried, "Brother, what do we do? What do we do?"

Yang Guo thought, "I'm fortunate enough to see Long'er again and Heaven has been very kind to me. Even if I die today I wouldn't regret it. Dying for one's country is the greatest honour for a true hero." He became alert and said, "Brother Yelu, let's fight the enemy again." Yelu Qi said, "Nothing could be better." Xiao Longnu and Guo Xiang also said, "Let's go!" Yang Guo said, "OK! I'll lead and you will wield long spears and follow behind." Yelu Qi relayed the command to his company and everyone grabbed a few spears.

Yang Guo took a spear and jumped onto a horse, galloping off with the Divine Eagle running at his side and using its wings to deflect any incoming arrows. Xiao Longnu, Yelu Qi, Guo Fu and Guo Xiang followed closely behind. Yang Guo dashed straight to the Khan's banner. Yelu Qi was shocked and thought since the Khan was personally commanding the attack, all his elite guards must be there protecting him. There were only about a hundred Song soldiers with them -

this was suicide. Then he remembered his life was saved by Yang Guo and he would follow him to the ends of the Earth.

This company moved extremely fast and reached Xiangyang city in the blink of an eye. Mengke's (The Khan) guards saw Yang Guo coming swiftly and fiercely towards them and so they sent two hundred men ahead to stop him. Yang Guo threw his spear and it pierced right through a company commander's chest. He took a spear from Yelu Qi and killed the other company commander. The Mongol guards panicked and Yang Guo tore through their formation. All the soldiers were alarmed and held their weapons tightly and swarmed forward to block him. He threw a spear at every man he saw and killed them instantly. His left arm's superhuman strength was developed when he trained against the mighty waves of the sea. The spears he threw could pierce rocks; obviously it could fly through flesh and blood. Every throw of his was aimed at an officer and he threw seventeen spears, all penetrating the officers' armour and killing them.

This sudden attack was like a bolt from the blue and the legions of Mongol troops at the foot of Xiangyang city could not stop him. He shot right through their formation and came right up to the Khan himself.

Mengke's guards dashed forward to block him, disregarding their own lives. A body of armored guards rushed together and formed a wall in front of the Khan. Yang Guo reached out to take a spear from Yelu Qi but he grabbed thin air. The spear had been knocked away by some Mongol warrior. The Khan's face turned as white as sheet and he immediately rode off. Yang Guo shouted, stepped up on the horse's back, then threw himself forward. Some Mongol soldiers thrust their spears toward him desperately, but Yang Guo somersaulted in mid-air and used his internal strength to snatch all their spears away.

The Khan saw the situation was very dangerous and quickly whipped his horse and galloped away. The horse he was riding was hand-picked from the best horses of the Mongolian stables and was swift as a dragon and could fly like the wind. It was nicknamed the 'Flying Cloud Horse' and was superior to Guo Jing's 'Sweating Blood Horse'. The horse flew on the plains and Yang Guo, using his qing gong, tried to chase him. The Mongol troops behind hurriedly pursued Yang Guo.

All the soldiers, on both sides, saw this and everyone just stopped fighting to watch what would happen next.

Yang Guo saw the Khan riding away and was happy, thinking he could catch up with him. However this 'Flying Cloud Horse' was extremely fast and seemed to be gliding along on the plains. Yang Guo was getting more anxious as the Khan got further away from him. He quickly bent down to pick up a spear and threw it at the Khan.

The spear flew like a meteor and everyone held their breath in anticipation. The horse galloped even faster and just as the spear was about to hit the Khan it lost its propulsive force and stuck into the ground. The Song army cursed while the Mongol army cheered.

Now Guo Jing, Huang Rong, Huang Yaoshi, Zhou Botong and the others were too far away and could only stare in desperation. The Mongol army had tens of thousands of troops but they could only cheer the Khan on as they could not catch up with his horse.

Mengke looked back and saw Yang Guo getting further and further behind him and was less worried and quickly rode towards a legion. The legion cheered and came forward to welcome him. If he reached them, even with Yang Guo's skills he would be no match for an entire legion.

Yang Guo was starting to despair when he suddenly thought, "The spear is too heavy and can't go that far, why not use a stone?" He leaned over and picked up two stones and shot them out forcefully with his internal strength. The stones cut through the air like bullets and they hit the horse on the back. The horse neighed in pain and reared up, throwing its rider into the air.

Although Mengke (Meng-ge) was the emperor of the Mongolians, he had ridden horses and trained in archery since he was young, just like Genghis Khan and his father. He conquered the European territories on horse-back. Though he was thrown into the air, he did not panic and steadied himself back on the horse. He grabbed a bow and hooked his legs firmly onto the horse. He then turned his body and shot an arrow at Yang Guo.

Yang Guo ducked and quickly picked up a larger stone and shot it out with all his strength. The stone flew like a missile, ripped through the Khan and emerged from his chest, shattering on impact. The Khan's organs were crushed and he fell off his horse dead.

The Mongol army saw their Khan fall from the horse and they were stunned. Guo Jing immediately gave the command to counter-attack and all the Song troops rushed out from the city. The Song troops formed up in the "Twenty-eight Star Formation" again and attacked the Mongol army. The Mongol army was now in total chaos and they fled without their weapons and trampled one another trying to retreat. The countless Mongol dead lay scattered throughout the plains and the remnants scurried north.

Guo Jing and the Song army pursued them, then suddenly they saw a Mongol army appear in the west and its formation was orderly. The main banner bore the insignia of Khubilai. Both Guo Jing and Khubilai knew something was wrong. Guo

Jing knew the fleeing soldiers could not have re-grouped so fast, while Khubilai knew something had happened to the Khan's army. Khubilai quickly ordered a withdrawal. Guo Jing and the Song army pursued them for 30 li but could not catch up. Moreover Lu Wenhuan had sent his officials to summon Guo Jing back to the city. The Song army withdrew as well.

Ever since the Mongols opened the campaign with the Song Empire, they had never suffered such a disastrous defeat – they even lost their Khan in the battle. The Khan did not appoint an heir before his death and all the generals vied for the Khan's position. Khubilai ordered his army back north. He then battled his brothers for the position. Finally, Khubilai emerged as the victor in the civil war and became Khubilai Khan. However after the civil war the Mongols did not have the resources to launch another invasion on the Song Empire. Xiangyang would be safe from the Mongolians until they launched another campaign thirteen years later.

Guo Jing led the army back to Xiangyang and Lu Wenhuan was waiting at the city gate with the remaining soldiers, welcoming the return of the victors. The citizens of Xiangyang also came out to welcome them with wine.

Guo Jing took Yang Guo's hand and raised a cup of good wine and offered a toast to him, saying, "Guo'er, you did such a great thing today; from now everyone shall revere and respect you."

Yang Guo was touched and finally said something he had wanted to say for the past 20 years: "Uncle Guo, my accomplishments today are all due to your guidance."

The two heroes said no more and drank the wine, thinking there was nothing more they could desire.

They entered the city together and the citizens welcomed them with thunderous applause. Yang Guo thought, "More than twenty years ago, Guo Jing took my hand and brought me to Zhongnan Shan (Mount Zhongnan) and sent me to the Chongyang Palace to learn martial arts. He was completely sincere and honest towards me, yet I rebelled against my teacher and created a lot of trouble! If I hadn't corrected myself, how would I be what I am today?" He was extremely satisfied with himself.

The city was in a joyous mood even though many had lost their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons; but because of them their victory was complete.

Night fell and a large banquet was thrown for the heroes. Lu Wenhuan wanted Yang Guo to be the Guest-of-Honour but he refused flatly. Everyone pushed each other for a long time and they finally persuaded Yideng to be the Guest-of-Honour. Seated next to him was Zhou Botong, followed by Huang Yaoshi, Guo Jing, Huang Rong, Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu and Yelu Qi. Lu Wenhuan thought, "Island Master Huang is Hero Guo's father-in-law but that old monk Yideng's appearance is not remarkable while that old man Zhou is crazy and silly, how can either of them be the Guest-of-Honour?" However everyone was overjoyed and ignored him.

All the generals and officials took turns offering toasts to Guo Jing and Yang Guo and praised them as heroes of the highest order.

Guo Jing then thought of his master's kindness and said, "If not for Quanzhen's Priest Qiu's righteousness and my seven masters who went to Mongolia to teach me martial arts, and not to forget Master Hong, how would I be so highly-skilled today? But as we indulge in wine today, all my masters with the exception of Master Ke are already dead." Everyone felt rather sad. Guo Jing continued, "Now we have won the day, I

would like to ascend Mount Hua (Hua Shan) tomorrow and visit my master's grave." Yang Guo said, "Uncle Guo, I was thinking of this too; why don't we all go together?" Yideng, Huang Yaoshi and Zhou Botong all missed their old friend and so they agreed.

The banquet lasted late into the night before ending.

End of Chapter 39.

Chapter 40 - The Summit of Hua Shan

Translated by Frans Soetomo, edited by IcyFox, addition from the first edition by Frans, additional translation corrections by Athena



With a clear voice Yang Guo said, "We are having a great time gathering in this beautiful evening. We shall chat over a cup of wine when we meet again. Let us part here." He waved his sleeve, held Xiao Longnu's hand and walked down the mountain together with the Divine Eagle.

Early the next morning Guo Jing and the others quietly left Xiangyang through the north gate for Mount Hua (Hua Shan). They avoided the troops and the people's festive farewell. They walked slowly since Zhou Botong, Lu Wushuang, the Wu Brothers and the Fisherman (Secret Fisherman from Si Shui 'si shui yu yin') still had not recovered from their injuries. They covered only about 10 li everyday.

By the time they arrived at Mount Hua, those who were injured had recovered. Yang Guo showed them Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng's graves, which were side by side. Huang Rong had purchased chicken, vegetables and other supplies. She lit a fire and prepared the food just as Hong Qigong liked it, as a memorial to him. Immediately they performed the ritual ceremony.

Guo Jing did not want to show respect toward Ouyang Feng's grave. He still remembered how his five masters died by the Western Poison's hands. True, it had been decades ago, but he could not forget it. Yang Guo was different. Together with Xiao Longnu they knelt in front of Ouyang's grave. Zhou Botong only clasped his fists in front of the grave and said, "Old Poison, Old Poison! You committed countless crimes in your lifetime. And after you died, your grave is right next to the Old Beggar's. I'd say you are very lucky! Today everybody else is kneeling in front of the Old Beggar, except these two kids. If you knew this, you would probably regret your ruthlessness!"

Everybody was amused to hear the Old Urchin's (Lao Wan Tong) jabbering.

They were about to eat dinner after the ceremony when suddenly they heard distant sounds of weapons clashing and people cursing. Zhou Botong was always ready to have fun. He was the first to run toward the battle sound. The others followed behind.

After a couple of bends the path led them to a plateau. There they saw about thirty or forty people battling each other. Some were short, some were tall, some were old, some were young, and there were priests, monks, men and women. They did not pay any attention to the newcomers. Perhaps they thought these newcomers were tourists or pilgrims.

"Ladies and Gentlemen hold on a moment!" a big burly man shouted. "Fighting chaotically like this will not determine who will be the 'Number One Valiant Hero under Heaven'. Let us take turns fighting. Whoever wins last shall hold the title."

"That's right!" said a priest with long whiskers. "There were Sword Meets on Mount Hua in the past. Why don't we do the same? Let us see who will win." That proposition was unanimously accepted.

"All right, who will go first?" Several people stepped forward.

Botong and the others looked on. They did not know who these people were.

When the first Swords Meet on Mount Hua was held, Guo Jing was not even born yet. The Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity were fighting for the 'Nine Yin Manual'. In the end the Central Divinity won the title of 'Number One Valiant Hero under Heaven'.

The second Swords Meet on Mount Hua was held twenty years later. Wang Chongyang, the Central Divinity had passed away by then. Eastern Heretic, Western Poison and Northern Beggar, Zhou Botong, Qiu Qianren and Guo Jing all attended. This time there was no clear winner. Who would have guessed that after decades there would be a third Swords Meet on Mount Hua, with unknown people as contestants? Therefore, Huang Yaoshi and the others were bewildered. Could the saying be true: "The later waves of the Chongjiang River always push the previous ones? The newer generation is competent to gain victory over the older one." Could it be that they, Huang Yaoshi and the others, were like 'a frog at the bottom of the well' and were ignorant of 'heaven above a heaven', 'people above the others'?

They saw six people fight in three pairs. As soon as they fought, Huang Yaoshi and the others began laughing; even the composed Reverend Yideng smiled. We don't need to compare them with the experts; they were far inferior even to Guo Fu or Guo Xiang.

Hearing the laugh, the six people stopped the fight, leaped back and somebody barked, "You're a reckless bunch! Your masters are having a contest here, and you are laughing? Go away, we may show mercy to you!"

Yang Guo laughed and whistled loudly. His voice echoed throughout the valley. Those people were shocked, and they were frightened to death. They threw away their weapons, and then they scrambled away.

"Ladies and Gentlemen ... Please!" Yang Guo shouted.

The people looked up, screamed and ran away. Somebody shouted indistinctly, "Go! Go away quickly! That was the Eagle Hero!" A moment later the plateau was empty. Cheng Ying, Guo Fu and the others chuckled.

“There are useless people out there, but I couldn’t have dreamed they would dare hold a Swords Meet on Mount Hua,” Huang Yaoshi sighed.

“There were Five Experts,” said Zhou Botong. “With the death of Western Poison, Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity, who could take their places?”

Five Experts Zhou Botong referred to were: Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Southern Emperor, Northern Beggar and Central Divinity. Among them only Eastern Heretic Huang Yaoshi and Southern Emperor Reverend Yideng were left.

Huang Rong chuckled, she said, “Reverend Yideng and my father have always improved their skills. Therefore, they were among the Five Experts then, they should be now. Frankly speaking, my husband has inherited Northern Beggar’s skills; he is one of the Experts. Guo’Er is young, but his martial arts are extraordinary. He is unmatched in his generation, plus he is Ouyang Feng’s adopted son. Therefore, he deserves to be one of the Experts so he inherits Western Poison’s title.”

Hearing her Zhou Botong shook his head. “No, no it’s not right!” he said.

“Why not?” Huang Rong asked.

“Because Western Poison was venomous, while this kid Yang Guo is not! We dare not call him ‘Western Poison’?”

“Well, Brother Jing is not a beggar!” Huang Rong laughed, “While Reverend Yideng is not an emperor anymore. I think we’d better modify their titles a little bit. Father is the Eastern Heretic. It is a trademark; no modification is necessary. Reverend Yideng has become a monk; let us call him the Southern Monk. Now, about Guo’Er, I’d like to propose a title, ‘Passionate Hero’. How’s that sound?”

Huang Yaoshi was the first to say: The “Eastern Heretic” and “Western Passionate Hero, the old and young. Yes! This is a good title.”

“Pardon me,” said Yang Guo, “I am too young, I do not dare to be compared with the Seniors ...”

“Ha-ha... Little Brother!” said Huang Yaoshi. “You are wrong! You are called ‘Passionate Hero, why can’t we act it out for a moment? Besides, your name, your skills, don’t they exceed those of the Old Urchin?”

Huang Yaoshi understood Huang Rong’s intention. She did not mention the Old Urchin’s name to provoke him. Yang Guo also understood the father and daughter’s intention. He exchanged glances with Xiao Longnu; they both laughed. He thought, “These words ‘Passionate Hero’ is so appropriate ...”

“Southern Monk and Western Passionate Hero have been settled. How about the Northern Beggar?” asked Botong.

“I propose the word ‘Hero’, hence the Northern Hero,” said Zhu Ziliu. “The valiant people of this era call Brother Guo Jing as Great Hero Guo [Guo Da Xia]. He did a great service for his country. He has defended Xiangyang for decades; he protects the people and secured the peace. His valor is superior to Zhu Qi or Guo Gai of yesteryear. I believe it is very appropriate to call him the ‘Northern Hero’.”

“Agreed!” Reverend Yideng, Wu Santong and the others voiced their support.

“Eastern Heretic and Western Passionate Hero, Southern Monk and Northern Hero, we have four experts,” said Huang Yaoshi, “What about the Central? Who deserves to hold the title?” He cast a glance at Botong, but he continued, “Madam Yang is the only heir of the Ancient Tomb Sect [Gu Mu Bai]. I reckon it is appropriate for her to hold the title! When she

was still alive, Heroine Lin Chaoying roamed Jianghu; even Wang Chongyang held her in the highest regard. Who does not know the “Jade Maiden Swordplay” from the Ancient Tomb Sect? If Heroine Lin Chaoying attended the Swords Meet at Mount Hua, not only the titles of the ‘Five Experts’ would have changed, but the title ‘Number One Valiant Person under the Heaven’ would be hers. Yang Guo’s skill was acquired from his wife. If the disciple is one of the experts, can we question the master? Therefore, Madam Yang deserves to hold the Central position in place of the Central Divinity!”

Xiao Longnu laughed. “I really don’t deserve it,” she said.

“If not, Huang Rong should be one of the experts,” Huang Yaoshi continued. “She is still inferior in terms of martial arts skill, but she is intelligent and smart. Wasn’t there a saying: ‘brain over brawn’?”

“Good, good!” Botong clapped his hands. “What is Eastern Heretic? What is Great Hero Guo? I am not happy with all those names. This little girl Huang Rong is different. She is so smart. I, the Old Urchin, got a headache whenever I dealt with her. My limbs are weak, I cannot move! She should become one of the Five Experts; nobody deserves it more!”

Hearing him, everybody was amazed and impressed. They knew Zhou Botong liked to fool around but he had a big heart. Others deliberately did not mention his name to provoke him. Who knew he was really naïve? He did not have any intentions to boss anybody about; he did not desire fame.

“Old Urchin, you are great!” said Huang Yaoshi. “For me fame is nothing. For Reverend Yideng, it is emptiness. You are not like that. Your heart is free. You are superior to us all. Because we have already had Eastern Heretic and Western Passionate

Hero, Southern Monk and Northern Hero, you should hold the Central position, you are the Central Urchin!"

Huang Yaoshi's speech was applauded by loud cheering and clapping. Everybody was happy; the Five Experts had been decided. They scattered around Mount Hua sightseeing.

Yang Guo pointed to the Jade Maiden Peak. "Our sword technique is called "Jade Maiden Swordplay". We cannot miss a visit to the peak," he said to Xiao Longnu.

"That's true," answered his wife. Holding hands they climbed to the peak.

On the peak there was a small temple with a statue of a horse next to it. It was the Jade Maiden Temple. Inside the temple was a big rock - its center was hollow. It contained clear water. Yang Guo had climbed Mount Hua before, and Hong Qigong had explained to him the points of interest on the mountain. He pointed to the rock and told Xiao Longnu, "This is the water basin of the Jade Maiden. This clear water never dries up." Xiao Longnu nodded. "Let us go to the hall to pay our respect to the Jade Maiden," she said.

Yang Guo complied. They went to the hall. There was a statue of a very beautiful woman. She looked so dignified. What amazed them was that the face of the statue bore a close resemblance to the picture of Lin Chaoying inside the Ancient Tomb.

"Could it be that the Jade Maiden is actually our Grand Martial Master?" asked the wife.

"Very possible," answered Yang Guo. "Grand Martial Master Lin liked to wander around. She helped many people. It could be that some people remembered her kindness and built this temple."

“That’s right. If it was a Jade Maiden temple, how could there be a horse statue here? Looks like Grand Martial Master roamed around riding a horse.”

The two of them then knelt in front of the altar. They prayed silently for protection and happiness as husband and wife.

They heard footsteps coming near from outside. They turned their heads and saw Guo Xiang.

“Little Sister, let us look around together!” Yang Guo was delighted. “Oh yes!” answered Guo Xiang.

Xiao Longnu held her hand and together they left the hall. They followed a stone corridor and climbed to a big cave. Guo Xiang looked inside; she felt cold breeze coming from the cave and she shivered. The cave was like a deep well; one could not see its bottom. It was different from the gorge at the Passionless Valley, which was covered by heavy fog so that nobody could see the bottom. This cave was almost vertical as far as the eye could see and made people looking down feel very nervous.

“Be careful,” Xiao Longnu warned her, holding her hand.

“I heard the water from this cave flows to the Yellow River [Huang He],” said Yang Guo. “It is one of the eight Water Palaces in China. During the Tang Dynasty there was a drought in northern China. The Emperor Tang Xuan Zong wrote a letter to Heaven, asking for rain. He threw the letter down into this cave.”

“From here flowing to the Yellow River, how peculiar!” said Guo Xiang.

“Well, it was a legend!” Yang Guo chuckled. “Nobody has ever gone down into this cave. Who could prove it?”

“When the Emperor Tang Zong threw his jade board letter, did Concubine Yang stand next to him?” asked Guo Xiang. “Did it really rain?”

Yang Guo laughed. “How can I answer your question?” he said, “Whether it rained or not, that was the Heaven’s decision. Even an emperor could not force its will ...”

Guo Xiang looked at the cave, she softly said, “That’s true, even an emperor could not have everything his heart desires ...”

Yang Guo was amazed to hear her say that. “This girl is still young, but she is mature,” he thought. “I must try to make her happy.” He was going to open his mouth when suddenly Xiao Longnu said, “Ah, who’s that coming our way?” She pointed her finger.

Yang Guo turned around. Below the steps there were two people stealthily creeping nearer. Xiao Longnu’s eyes were really sharp; she could see them in the dim light of dusk.

“Their skills are not bad,” said Yang Guo softly, “Judging from their movements, they must have some ulterior motive. Let’s hide and see what’s going on.”

Xiao Longnu and Guo Xiang complied. They hid behind a big rock next to a big tree. Not too long after they could hear footsteps approaching. It was evening and the moon had risen.

Guo Xiang stood next to Xiao Longnu. She did not care about those two men, she looked at Yang Guo and thought in her heart, “If only I could be like this forever. Being with Big Brother and Sister Long, I would desire nothing else ...” She wanted the time to stand still ...

Xiao Longnu inadvertently looked toward her direction and she saw tears welling up in her eyes; she was puzzled. She

thought, "This is strange, what is she thinking about? I'll talk with my husband later and see what we can do to make her happy."

Meanwhile those two men had reached the peak, where they hid themselves behind a big rock. After some time one of them said, "Brother Xiaoxiang, Mount Hua has so many thick forests where we can hide. I think even though that bald donkey [derogatory term for Buddhist monks] is good, he won't be able to find us here. Let's just stay here for a few days, and then we can go farther west."

Yang Guo could not see the speaker, but he guessed it was Yin Kexi and his companion must be Xiaoxiang Zi. Yang Guo thought, "Among the martial arts experts in the Mongolian camp, Jinlun Fawang and Nimoxing have died. Da'erba and Ma Guangzuo were not that bad. Only Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi were left. I have shown them mercy, but looks like they didn't repent. I wonder what they are up to?"

"Don't be happy yet, Brother Yin," said Xiaoxiang Zi, his voice eerie. "If the baldheaded donkey can not find us, he might guard the mountain's entrance. If we are not careful, he will certainly find us ..."

"Brother Xiaoxiang is right. What is your thought?"

"There are so many temples scattered around this mountain. I think we'd better find the most remote one. No matter if the priests are Taoists or Buddhists, we kill them, we take over their temple and then we stay there. That bald donkey will not wait for us forever. Maybe months or years, but in the end he'll have to leave."

"Great idea Brother Xiaoxiang!" said Yin Kexi, his voice loud from excitement.

"Hush!" Xiaoxiang Zi reminded him.

“Uh, I was too excited,” said Yin Kexi apologetically. Then the two of them talked in low voice that Yang Guo wasn’t able to hear.

“I wonder who the monk is,” Yang Guo thought. “These two are experts, yet they are afraid of him. Actually, other than Island Master Huang, Reverend Yideng, Uncle Guo and their peers, these two are already unmatched. Why would someone want to capture them? No, I can’t let them go. Didn’t they say they are going to kill people and take over their temple?”

At that time Guo Fu was calling from a distance, “Brother Yang, Sister-in-law! Sister Xiang! Come and have dinner!” She repeated her calls a couple more times.

Yang Guo turned to his wife and Guo Xiang, signaling them not to make any noise.

After a while Guo Fu was gone. But from the mountain they heard a shout, “Book thief! Show yourself!” That voice was loud and powerful. It was a sign of strong internal energy. Yang Guo was astonished, the voice was not inferior to his. He wondered, “How come there is an expert I do not know?”

By moving his body a little bit, Yang Guo was able to see the source of the voice. He saw a grey shadow running lightning fast toward the hill where they were. Very soon he could see that the shadow was actually two people: a grey-robed monk holding a youngster’s hand.

Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi had already hidden themselves amongst the tall grasses. They did not dare to breathe.

Yang Guo kept staring, he thought, “In terms of lightness kungfu, he is not superior to Long’er or me, but he is able to carry someone on this difficult path. His strength is

comparable to Reverend Yideng and Uncle Guo. How come I've never heard of him?"

Very soon the monk arrived at the top. His eyes gazed around him, but he didn't see Yin Kexi or Xiaoxiang Zi. A moment later he dragged the youngster west.

"Hey, Reverend!" Guo Xiang suddenly shouted, she could not contain herself. "Reverend, those two people are here!" She was just shutting her mouth when three projectiles flew her way! They were two 'flying awls' and a 'nail of death'.

Yang Guo's eyes were sharp and he was quick. He waved his sleeve and caught all three projectiles.

Guo Xiang's internal energy was not too strong; the monk could not hear her. They moved further away. "Big Brother, please go after them!" she said.

Yang Guo did not answer, but he spoke softly, like he was reciting a poem, "If it is meant to be, a distance of a thousand li does not hinder; if it isn't meant to be, standing face to face yet cannot meet."

His voice reached far. The monk stopped abruptly, turned his head and said, "Thank you Expert for showing the way!"

Yang Guo responded with similar voice, "Searching until iron shoes wear out yet do not meet; once you see it, it is right in front of your eyes."

The monk was delighted, pulling along the youngster they came back.

Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi were very shocked to hear Yang Guo's voice. They looked at each other and leaped toward the east, running away.

Yang Guo saw them starting to move while the monk was still a distance away. The monk would certainly miss these two criminals no matter how fast he could run. He quickly flicked one of Xiaoxiang Zi's awls toward them. He didn't want to take their lives; hence the awl was flying in front of them, to block their way.

The two were shocked; their faces were hot just from the wind of the projectile. They turned around and ran to the north. Yang Guo flicked again, and another projectile flew in front of them, forcing them to turn around once more. By that time the monk had arrived.

Seeing their escape route was blocked, both Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi unsheathed their weapons. They stood shoulder to shoulder. One was wielding a golden dragon whip, the other a wolf-fang staff. Yin Kexi's jeweled whip was destroyed by Yang Guo at Chongyang Palace; this new whip of his – although inlaid with gold, was inferior to the old one.

The monk looked around. He didn't see the man who gave him directions. Ignoring those two, he clasped his fists to the air and said, "Little Monk Jueyuan from the Shaolin Temple thanks the Benevolent Sir!"

Yang Guo did not answer immediately. He looked intently at the monk. The monk stood straight, his countenance fresh and ruddy. If it wasn't for the fact that he was baldheaded and wearing a monk's robe, he would have looked like a scholar. Compared to him, Huang Yaoshi looked more arrogant and wild, like a scholarly hermit. Zhu Ziliu had a more regal and sophisticated look, like a prime minister. He was about fifty years of age; therefore, Yang Guo did not dare to be disrespectful. He quickly came out and returned the greeting, "Junior Yang Guo pays his respects." Yang Guo thought in his heart, "The Abbot of the Shaolin Temple, the Head of the Damo Hall, I know them all. Their level is not as

high as his, how come I've never heard them mentioning his name?"

The monk again paid his respects. He was so polite and scholarly. "It's an honor for little Monk to make the acquaintance of Benevolent Master Yang!" he said, and then he bade the youngster, "Quickly pay your respects to Benevolent Master Yang!"

The youngster complied; he knelt in front of Yang Guo. Quickly Yang Guo stood him up. In the meantime Xiao Longnu and Guo Xiang had come out. Jueyuan also paid them his respects, which they reciprocated.

Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi were still standing alert, ready to fight, but they were thinking about escaping too. They knew they were no match for these people. Jueyuan alone had frightened them.

Yang Guo said, "About six years ago I was fortunate to receive an invitation from the Shaolin's Abbot Tianming. I visited Mount Shao Shi and made acquaintance with the Venerable Wuxiang from the Damo Hall and a number of other monks. I gained a lot of knowledge because of that. Wuse from the Luo Han Hall befriended me as well. It seems like the monk was not in the temple at the time, and I was not fortunate enough to make your acquaintance."

By that time the name Eagle Hero was very well known, yet Jueyuan seemed oblivious of him. He said, "Oh, it seems like Benevolent Sir knows Martial Uncle Tianming and both Martial Brothers Wuxiang and Wuse and the others. Little Monk abides in the library and has never left the temple even for a single step. My position is very low; I do not dare to meet any honorable guests, including you, Benefactor Sir ..."

Yang Guo was amazed and he thought, "It is true that in this wide world there are many experts. Monk Jueyuan's skill is

very high, yet he hides himself away. It is very possible the people of Shaolin are not aware of his skill; if so, my good friend Wuse would have mentioned him ...”

Meanwhile Huang Yaoshi and the others had arrived; they heard Yang Guo and Jueyuan’s shouts earlier and believed something must’ve happened on the peak. Yang Guo immediately introduced everybody to Jueyuan. Strangely, even though Huang Yaoshi, Reverend Yideng, Zhou Botong, Guo Jing and Huang Rong were very well known, he didn’t seem to recognize their names. He simply paid his respects and told the youngster to do the same. Huang Yaoshi and the others automatically noticed the Reverend’s grandeur from the way he moved and talked and couldn’t help but feel deep respect toward him.

Only after all these formalities did Jueyuan turn to Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi. He clasped his fists in respect and said, “Little Monk in is charge of the library. I would be responsible for and even punished if even a sheet of paper is lost. Therefore, I respectfully request you two gentlemen to return the books you borrowed. I will be very grateful to you two.”

Hearing this Yang Guo realized that Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi had stolen books from the Shaolin Monastery’s library. Only he did not know what kind of book would make Jueyuan pursue the thieves this far. Also, he was amazed that Jueyuan was very courteous toward the thieves.

Laughing, Yin Kexi said, “Venerable Monk, you are wrong! We are so grateful that you helped us while we were so unfortunate. How could we repay your kindness by borrowing books from you? We regret that you have made a long journey to find us here. Besides, we are not disciples of Buddhism, why would we borrow some scriptures?”

Yin Kexi was a merchant specializing in jewels; he was very eloquent, hence his words were very reasonable. But Yang

Guo knew he must be lying. Both he and Xiaoxiang Zi were criminals. Also, the books they stole must not be any ordinary books. The books must be either a palm techniques or swords play manual. Yang Guo thought talking is a waste of time; it would be best to immobilize them, and then search their bodies. But Jueyuan was very courteous. He turned to Huang Yaoshi and the others and said, "Little Monk is going to lay the case in front of you, please adjudicate for us."

Guo Xiang was straightforward and impatient, she loudly said, "Elder Monk, these two were hiding here and planning to kill people and take over their temple. They intend to hide themselves from you. Why would they be so afraid if they were innocent?"

"Mercy, mercy," Jueyuan said. "Benefactor Sirs, you two must repent if indeed you were having that thought."

Huang Yaoshi and the rest were amused. This Monk was very naïve. Why would he talk like that to criminals? On the other hand, Yin Kexi was relieved since Jueyuan obviously did not want to resort to violence; he still had hopes of escaping.

Jueyuan continued, "That day little Monk was inspecting the books in the library. I heard a commotion on the hill behind the temple. I could hear people fighting and some were crying for help. Therefore, I went out to see. There I saw these two gentlemen lying on the ground, being beaten by four Mongolian officers; they were dying. I couldn't stay silent. I asked those four officers to let them go, and then I took them to my room. Now Benevolent Sirs, did I say anything untrue?"

"No, it was indeed the truth," answered Yin Kexi. "We are very grateful to the Reverend."

"Hmm!" Yang Guo intervened, "With your skills, forty or even four hundred Mongolian officers would not be able to harm

you, let alone only four! You were deceiving Reverend Jueyuan!"

Jueyuan ignored Yang Guo and continued, "After a day of recuperation they said that they were bored and wanted to borrow something to read. This little Monk thinks that proselytizing is an honorable thing. These two gentlemen showed interest in Buddhism; therefore, little Monk loaned them several books. When I was meditating one evening, these two gentlemen took away four volumes of the Nijia Jing scripture being read by my disciple Junbao. They took the books without permission. That was an improper thing to do. Therefore, little Monk would respectfully ask the Benevolent Sirs to return the books."

Listening to the monk, Reverend Yideng and Zhu Ziliu were amazed, and then they speculated. Yideng was a monk and he had read all kind of books. Zhu Ziliu was a scholar and because of his association with his master, he was also familiar with different kinds of scriptures. They thought, "These two stole some books from the Shaolin Monastery. I thought they must be some kind of martial arts manual; who knew they only stole the Nijia Jing. The books were brought by Master Damo to the east. The content was the fundamental teachings of Buddha, which he preached in Sri Lanka. There is no relation to martial arts whatsoever. Why would these two steal them? These books have been around for a while; there are no secrets within them. Why would Jueyuan waste his time chasing these two? I think there is more to it than what meets the eye ..."

Jueyuan continued, "These four volumes of Nijia Jing were brought by Master Damo from the west. They were written in Sanskrit. I am sure Benevolent Sirs are not able to read them, but for us, they were our treasures."

Only then did the others understand that Jueyuan was talking about the original Sutra, the one Bodhidharma wrote in India. No wonder the books were very important.

Yin Kexi laughed, he said, "That gave us a stronger reason not to borrow the books. We do not read Sanskrit. Even if we wanted to sell the books, just how much would we gain? Other than devout Buddhists and monks, nobody wants them anyway!"

Everybody was dissatisfied listening to this man's sharp tongue, they started to get angry. Jueyuan, on the other hand, was very calm and patient. He continued, "The Nijia Jing had four different Chinese translations, but only three are left. The first one was translated by Guna-bhadra during the Liu family Song dynasty; it was named the Nijia Jing ["Guna-bhadra Lankavatara sutra]." It consisted of four volumes, also known as the Four Volumes of Lankavatara Sutra. It was similar to the Damo [Bodhidharma] taught version of the scripture and they could be compared with each other. The second one was translated by Bodhiruci during the Wei dynasty, named "Enlightened Lankavatara Sutra", it consisted of ten volumes. It was later also known as the Ten Volumes of Lankavatara Sutra. The third one was translated by Siksaananda during the Tang dynasty, named the "Mahayana Lankavatara Sutra", it consisted of seven volumes, it was later also known as the Seven Nijia Jing [Seven Volumes of Lankavatara Sutra], this was also the last translation. The final translation is also the clearest and most easily understood version, it is widely spread. I have a copy of it with me now. I am very happy to see that both benefactors are interested in Buddhism; I would be pleased to give you these scriptures. If you're also interested in the other translations of the Nijia Jing [Lankavatara Sutra], it is not impossible to obtain copies for you."

Jueyuan groped his pocket and brought out a copy of the Seven Nijia Jing. He gave them to his disciple, who in turn presented them to Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi.

“Jueyuan is so naïve yet so exceptional. No wonder these two scoundrels were able to steal the books under his care,” Yang Guo thought.

Suddenly the youngster opened his mouth, “Shifu, these two criminals did not have good intentions, they only want the treasured book! I don’t believe they have any interest in our religion.”

Everybody was surprised hearing this youngster’s voice. He was only a boy, yet his voice was loud and clear like a bell. They looked at him and saw his extraordinary features. He had a narrow forehead, slim neck, broad chest, round eyes, and big ears. His skin was ruddy. He looked about twelve or thirteen years of age, but acted like an adult.

“Little Brother, what is your great surname and given name?” asked Yang Guo.

“The little Monk’s disciple is surnamed Zhang and given name Junbao,” Jueyuan answered on his disciple’s behalf. “He has helped me in the library since he was really young, sweeping the floor and watering the plants. He calls me Master, but he has not shaved his head, since he is a layman disciple.”

Yang Guo was impressed, he praised, “An excellent Master will produce an excellent disciple. The Venerable Monk’s disciple is an extraordinary one.”

“It’s not ‘excellent Master’, it’s just that this boy has a flawless talent,” said Jueyuan humbly. “It’s a pity little Monk does not know anything. I am afraid I will not do him any good. Junbao, you are very fortunate to meet such experts

today. You have to ask for advice. Remember the saying that goes like 'listening to a master's words is more precious than reading books for ten years'."

"That's right," answered Junbao, while he thought in his heart, "Right now the most important thing is getting the books back. I can ask advice later ..." He kept this thought to himself, and did not say anything.

Zhou Botong could not contain himself any longer after listening to Jueyuan's gentle words.

"Hey Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi!" he said, scolding those two. "You can deceive Elder Monk, but you cannot deceive me, the Old Urchin! Do you know who the Five Experts of today are?"

"I do not know," answered Yin Kexi. "Please enlighten me."

"Good!" said Botong proudly. "Stand straight and listen! They are the Eastern Heretic, Western Passionate, Southern Monk, Northern Hero and Central Urchin! The first and foremost is the Central Urchin! I say you stole those books, and therefore, you are the thieves! If you were not the thieves, then those books must be in your possession somehow! You have to present those books to this monk! If you hesitate, watch out, I am going to cut off one of your ears!"

Having said that, the Old Urchin moved forward, his arms open wide. He wanted to carry out his threat.

Xiaoxiang Zi and Yin Kexi frowned. They knew the Old Urchin's skill; they also knew he would do what he said he would. While they are contemplating what to do, Jueyuan opened his mouth again, "Benevolent Master Zhou, you are wrong! There are rules for everything. On the matter of the Nijia Jing scriptures, if they said they borrowed them, then

they borrowed them. If not, then they didn't borrow them. But if they did borrow and did not admit it, then we can say they broke the rules."

Botong heartily laughed. "You see?" he said, "Elder Monk is remarkable! I'm helping him to get his books back, yet he helps them to speak! What kind of rule is that? Elder Monk, I want to say something! I want to make sure they stole the books. If they didn't, I'll take them back to Mount Shaoshi for them to steal the books. Either they did or did not steal, but they still are the thieves!"

Botong spoke unreasonably, but Jueyuan nodded his head. "Benevolent Master Zhou, now you are talking!" he said. "Only let us not use the word 'steal', let's just say that they 'took without permission'. These two gentlemen had the desire to borrow; yet they did not have the permission. They have taken the books without permission."

Listening to this discussion, everybody smiled in amusement. They talked without logic. Yang Guo could not contain his anger. He stood up in front of Zhou Botong, facing Yin Kexi and Xiaoxiang Zi. "You have assisted a tyrant committing atrocities!" he said, "You have betrayed our country by being allies with the Mongolians! You deserve death for this crime! We have Reverend Yideng and Venerable Jueyuan here. These two monks won't let me beat you to death. Therefore, I am going to give you two choices. First, you return the books you stole and never set foot on the central plains again. Second, each of you will receive one blow from me. Whether you live or you die, let your fate decide!"

The two looked at each other. They did not dare to give an answer. They knew the fierceness of this man surnamed Yang. They realized they would not be able to take even one of his blows. Yin Kexi thought, "Only this one day...if I can survive this day, I can train myself and take revenge later on ...

Seems to me that amongst this bunch the monk is the easiest one to talk to. I'd better try him." He said, "Great Hero Yang [Yang Da Xia], let's sort out the business between you and I later. In terms of martial arts skills, you are way superior to me; I do not dare to offend you. But about the books, let us talk to Monk Jueyuan. You don't have any business in it; do you, Yang Da Xia?"

Before Yang Guo could answer, Jueyuan had already nodded his head repeatedly. "That's true!" he said, "This Benevolent Sir had spoken reasonably."

Yang Guo could only shake his head. He grinned and turned to Zhang Junbao. He saw the youngster's eyes were shining; it looked like he wanted to attack. Therefore, Yang Guo winked at him, encouraging him to go. Yang Guo then positioned himself behind the boy.

Zhang Junbao understood his signal; he moved toward Yin Kexi and harshly said, "Benevolent Mister Yin, I was reading the book that day. You sneaked up on me, sealed my accupoints and disabled me; then you stole the four-volume Nijia Jing scripture. Is that true?"

Yin Kexi shook his head. "If I wanted to borrow the book, I would ask you," he denied, "I believed little Master would not deny me. Why would I seal your accupoints?"

Jueyuan nodded. "Yes, yes, that's true," he said.

"Both of you said you did not borrow the book, do you mind if I search your body?" Junbao asked.

"Body search is not proper," said Jueyuan, "But this business is complicated. Benevolent Sirs, do you have a better idea on how you can remove my suspicions?"

Yin Kexi was about to deny further when Yang Guo suddenly said, "Venerable Monk Jueyuan, I believe these two would not

have any interest in the teachings of Buddha! Monk Jueyuan, is there anything special in those books?"

Jueyuan was silent for a while, he was thinking hard. But then he answered with a deep voice, "As a monk I cannot tell lies. Since Benevolent Master Yang has asked, little Monk has to give you the truth. Inside the Nijia Jing scripture there is another book written by Master Damo himself. That book is the 'Nine Yang Manual' [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing]."

Everybody was stunned. In the past, the 'Nine Yin Manual' [Jiu Yin Zhen Jing] had caused people to fight to the death; blood had been shed. It was at the Mount Hua Sword Meet that Wang Zhongyang won the right to that book. But Wang Zhongyang was a man of honor; he was not greedy. He won the book but did not take advantage of its contents at that time. He later read the book out of curiosity. He divided it into two parts. He wanted to avoid further bloodshed due to people fighting over it. But still, the book created more disasters. For instance, Huang Yaoshi had to expel his disciples, Zhou Botong was kept captive on the Peach Blossom Island, Ouyang Feng went crazy, and, indirectly, Emperor Duan became a monk.

Actually, besides the 'Nine Yin Manual' Master Damo had written another book, which was the 'Nine Yang Manual'. This book had the same value as the 'Nine Yin Manual'; as a matter of fact, these two books complement each other. Only the name of the 'Nine Yang Manual' was not as widely known as the 'Nine Yin Manual'. It was the first time that everybody heard this book mentioned. No wonder Huang Yaoshi and the others were astonished and amazed.

Jueyuan ignored these astonished people and continued his explanation, "Little Monk is in charge of the library. It is my duty to inspect every single book of the library's collection. The 'Nine Yang Manual' is different from any other book. It

contains lessons to make our body healthy and strong, like 'Replacing Muscles Cleaning the Marrow'. I have mastered the lessons for many-many years, and true enough, I have never been sick. I have taught Junbao the rudimentary lessons from the 'Nine Yang Manual' for the last several years. Even though it was Master Damo's original work, it was not as valuable as the Nijia Jing, which contains great teachings. Benevolent Sirs do not read Sanskrit; the book is useless to you. You'd better return it to me."

Yang Guo was puzzled. He didn't understand what the Monk was saying. He thought, "Lessons on health? This is very peculiar. The Monk is also very remarkable. If I didn't know better, I would say the Monk is just acting. I wonder why Venerable Wuxiang and Wuse - who literally lived together with this Monk for decades, are not aware there is an expert of this caliber in their midst." Reverend Yideng on the other hand, recognized that Jueyuan has reached perfection, that was the reason he could act so naïvely.

Yin Kexi patted his body. "I don't have anything on me, how could I have the book?" he said loudly. "I don't either!" Xiaoxiang Zi said, shaking his clothes.

"Let me see!" Junbao suddenly shouted. His body flew toward Yin Kexi. He grabbed his chest.

Yin Kexi turned his left arm around, eluding the attack. His right arm pushed Junbao's shoulder. It looked like his movement was light, but it resulted in Junbao's body collapsing to the ground.

"Aha! That was incorrect, Junbao!" cried Jueyuan, "You have to be patient. Your strength concentrated like a mountain. You will see whether he can push you down or not ..."

Zhang Junbao leaped up. "That's right, Shifu!" he said. Then he leaped toward Yin Kexi again.

Everybody else had lost their patience, but they were delighted hearing Jueyuan's advice. They thought, "This gentle monk could encourage his disciple to fight after all ..."

Yin Kexi repeated his former moves; he eluded the attack and then pushed out. But this time Junbao only staggered and did not collapse to the ground like before. Yin Kexi was astonished, he was afraid of Zhou Botong, Guo Jing and Yang Guo and their peers; who would have thought that he was not even able to overcome the boy? He was anxious and pushed harder.

Zhang Junbao held his ground. But Yin Kexi's force abruptly disappeared and he fell down, face to the ground. Yin Kexi quickly straightened up and laughed, "Little Master, you shouldn't have kneeled to me." Of course he was mocking him.

Junbao's face flushed. He came to his master and said, "I failed, Shifu."

Jueyuan scratched his head. "He purposely made an 'emptiness'," he said. "He uses nothingness to defeat something. When you are exerting your energy, you must use it freely, don't mind your opponent's force's direction. You see that mountain peak over there?" He pointed to a mountain peak to the west. "It has stood strong from thousands of years ago until today. Storms came from the west, rains from the east, it didn't budge, but it did not purposely challenge the force of the nature either."

Junbao was smart, he understood easily. He nodded. "Very well Shifu. I understand," he said. "Let me try again." After having said that, he slowly walked toward Yin Kexi.

Yang Guo kept his gaze on the youngster. He saw him leap forward before, and now he was walking slowly. Yang Guo knew it must be the principle taken from the 'Nine Yang

Manual'. So the book not only taught how to keep one's body healthy, but also how to defeat an opponent.

When he was about four feet away from Yin Kexi, Junbao stretched out his arms to hold Yin's hand. Yin Kexi laughed. He put forth his left arm as bait, and his right hand punched the boy's chest. He had no intention to hurt him, so his punch was not frontal; it was slanted toward the boy's side. He only wanted the boy to experience a little bit of pain and to learn a lesson.

Zhang Junbao did not elude the attack. In a flash his chest was hit. "Shifu, I can hold it!" he said.

Yin Kexi was shocked. His fist hit its target, yet he felt the boy's body imparting an opposing force, which made his punch bounce back. Fortunately he was skilled. He quickly neutralized the force. His left hand moved toward the boy's shoulder. He wanted to grab and lift and toss the boy away. When he lifted, the boy did not budge. He was shocked and amazed, and finally anxious. Several times he changed his tactics. Junbao only swayed back and forth, left and right, but he could not make him fall down. He kept throwing punches, and out of embarrassment said, "Little Master, I am not fighting with you! A valiant man would use diplomacy, not brute force. You go away, let us talk as decent people do."

Each one of Yin Kexi's punches was stronger than the previous one, but Junbao did not budge. His body kept imparting opposing forces. The harder he was hit, the stronger the opposing force was. After a while Junbao cried, "Ah, Shifu, he hit me hard! I feel pain! Shifu, help me!"

Yin Kexi said, "I won't hit you if you don't hit me first. Elder Master, if you want to hit me just do so. If you show mercy to me, I won't dare to retaliate."

Jueyuan shook his head. "What Benevolent Master Yin said was true!" he said, "You don't need to use brute force ... No, I can't help you. You have to overcome your own problem. You have to know which one is empty which one is not. Everything is either empty or full. Remember what I said, your body must be like a drum, with nothing inside. Don't put in too much, don't put in too little, and don't let it break."

Junbao understood. He had been with Jueyuan since he was only six or seven years old, and his master had bestowed the 'Nine Yang Manual' on him. He readied himself. Now he only felt a little bit of pain, not as severe as before.

With a man of his skill, Yin Kexi could hurt the boy severely. But there were Yang Guo, Xiao Longnu, Zhou Botong, Guo Jing and the others standing nearby. He was afraid of them, thus he did not dare to kill or harm the boy. He could not knock the boy down, but the boy could not touch him either; so the two kept fighting.

Yang Guo and the others were amused. Xiaoxiang Zi frowned, he was perplexed and anxious. Guo Xiang also had lost her patience. "Little Brother, hit him!" she urged, "Why do you let him beat you without you retaliating?"

"No! Don't!" Jueyuan cried, "Don't be anxious, and don't be angry! Don't hit, don't curse!"

"You hit him!" Guo Xiang encouraged, "If you can't, I'll help you!"

"Thank you, Miss!" said Junbao. He hit Yin Kexi's chest.

"What a sin! What a sin!" cried Jueyuan shaking his head, "Your mind is no longer clear like a bright mirror stopping the water flow ..."

Junbao fought as one who had never learned martial arts before, he just threw punches randomly; how could he injure

the opponent? Yin Kexi heartily laughed, but actually he was distressed. He had been well known in the Jianghu world for dozens of years; nobody had the audacity to mock him. Who would have thought that he had to suffer humiliation by fighting with a young boy? The worse part was: he was not able to do anything ... Even if Junbao's punches were not hard, he eventually felt the pain.

Yin Kexi was anxious. His attacks were in vain. He wanted to kill the boy, but he was afraid of the others. He kept throwing punches, but the boy stood his ground. He was screaming with pain until Jueyuan repeatedly implored, "Benevolent Master Yin, please don't kill my disciple; he is a very smart boy. He is bothering you because of the lost books; the treasured scriptures of our Sect. If the Abbot finds out, we will be severely punished. Little Monk implores you ..." While to Junbao he said, "Junbao, remember your lessons. Use your brain, not your brawn. Follow the opponent's movements, be flexible. Put your mind where he hits you ..."

"That's right!" Junbao loudly answered. Afterward, he did not scream anymore. Where Yin Kexi's attack was, his mind was there. No more pain. Again Yin Kexi was puzzled. "Watch out, I will hit your head!" he threatened.

Junbao lifted his hand in anticipation, but he was tricked. Yin Kexi did not hit his head, but kicked with left leg so that the boy fell rolling to the ground. He kept rolling and came near Yang Guo.

"Benevolent Master Yin, why did you lie?" Jueyuan rebuked. "You said you were going to hit his head, you told him to watch out, but you kicked instead. You used trickery to deceive others."

Huang Yaoshi and the others were very amused. In battle, emptiness is full, fullness is empty. One must use any trick that is unpredictable to the opponent.

Junbao was displeased. He rubbed the kicked part of his body and said, "I won't stop until I search you!" He strode toward Yin Kexi.

Yang Guo stretched his arm to hold the boy. "Little Brother, wait a moment!" he said. Junbao was startled; he turned his head. He felt numbness from Yang Guo's grip.

Yang Guo whispered, "All you did was let him hit you without hitting him back. You can't do that. Let me teach you a move. And then you hit him and see what happens." He then flicked his empty right sleeve in front to Junbao's face while thrusting his left hand to the youngster's chest. About half a foot away he suddenly changed direction to the boy's waist. He whispered again, "Your Master was right, he said 'put your mind where the opponent hits'. It is the same thing with your punch. Put your mind where your punch goes. As your Master said, use your brain, not your brawn."

Junbao was delighted; he followed Yang Guo's direction. He moved toward Yin Kexi, lifted his right arm toward Yin Kexi's face while thrusting his left hand toward Yin's chest. Yin Kexi lifted his hand to parry. Junbao could see the opponent's movement; he suddenly moved his hand toward Yin's ribs.

Yin Kexi had experienced the youngster's punch before; it was not too hard. He also saw Yang Guo was giving the boy some pointers. He did not pay too much attention since he thought what harm could come from the kid's hundred or two hundred punches anyway? But he was wrong. When the punch hit his ribs he felt an excruciating pain so that his body bent over. He almost screamed. Of course he was surprised, but also livid. He saw Junbao was going to repeat his attack. He waved his right hand toward Yin's face and thrust his left hand toward Yin's chest. Yin Kexi was already familiar with this move. He parried the thrust. Junbao was

thrown toward, and hit, a rock so that his forehead was bleeding.

The youngster did not utter any words. He quickly wiped the blood away and walked toward Yang Guo. Kneeling in front of Yang Guo he said, "Benevolent Master Yang, please teach me another one."

Yang Guo nodded. He knew Yin Kexi was paying attention now, so he whispered, "This time I teach you three moves. In the first, your left and right hands are interchangeable. It will look like you will use your left, but in actuality it will be your right. When you thrust your right, actually it will be your left."

Junbao nodded. Yang Guo taught him the stance 'Repelling the Heart Pressing the Stomach' [tui xin zhi fu]. The boy memorized it well.

"And now the second move," Yang Guo continued. "This time left is left and right is right." He taught him the stance 'To Extend in All Directions, Four Pass Through, Eight Reached' [si tong ba da li]. Junbao went through it in his head twice and he would remember it forever.

"The third move is 'Who Killed the Deer' [lu si shui shou]. It involves front and rear exchange, it is more complex than the others, so you can't make mistake. You don't understand accupoints sealing technique, that's fine. I will mark his back. If you press that, you will be able to control him." While talking Yang Guo also moved his finger to give an example, he said, "Remember, this move relies on footwork. Understand it?"

"Yes," Junbao nodded and walked toward Yin Kexi.

Yin Kexi had watched Yang Guo carefully; he said in his heart, "These three stances are good. They are difficult to counter if

they came from Yang Guo himself, but he taught that kid in front of my eyes. Did he think Yin Kexi is as stupid as an ox or a wooden horse? Ah Yang Guo, you underestimate me too much!”

Because he was filled with anger, Yin Kexi did not think straight. As soon as Junbao came in front of him, he immediately attacked the boy’s shoulder. His punch was right on target.

Junbao remembered Yang Guo’s instructions, he let the attack come, he didn’t even dodge it, he only gritted his teeth. Yin Kexi hit using five parts of his strength; his objective was to frighten the kid. Junbao screamed in pain, his shoulder made a popping sound; but he ignored it and attacked with the first move.

Yin Kexi had watched Yang Guo’s instructions; he had thought of ways to fend off the attack, but he did not hear Yang Guo’s words. He thought he would punch the kid to the ground as he did before.

But Junbao’s attack was beyond his expectation: he parried the boy’s right hand punch with his left, but the attack was a fake one; while his right hand also grabbed in vain. Suddenly his stomach was hit very hard and he began to sweat profusely.

“Brother Yang that was a well executed “Repelling the Heart Pressing the Stomach”!” Zhou Botong praised while laughing heartily.

Yin Kexi was stunned, but Junbao had already attacked him with the second stance, “To Extend in All Directions”, which could be interpreted as the punch would come from all directions. He still felt pain when the boy flashed in front of his eyes. He thought this attack would be similar to the previous one; from left to right and vice versa; therefore, he

counterattacked by moving to the left; half defense, half counterattack. But again he was tricked.

Junbao was able to execute his stance well. Both his hands hit Yin's shoulder, chest and back. He moved nimbly, his hands fast; it was a pity his inner strength was still weak. Yin Kexi did not feel excessive pain, but he was frantically fending off the punches and dodging here and there.

Jueyuan watched his predicament and shouted, "Benevolent Master Yin, you are wrong! You must remember that there is no definite meaning of front and rear, left and right. Who lags behind will actually gain the initiative; and who initiates the attack will be under the opponent's power."

Yang Guo was impressed. "This Monk is right," he thought. "He happens to know very well the essence of martial arts. His words were very valuable. I originally thought he only let his disciple fight; but he also gives valuable instructions. Yin Kexi had achieved a high level of martial arts, but I doubt he would grasp this lesson even if he were given five more years to ponder it."

He was right; Yin Kexi did not realize the meaning behind Jueyuan's words. He thought the monk was just mocking him to disturb his concentration.

"Hey donkey head [derogatory name for monk], don't talk rubbish!" he snapped. "Oh, ouch ... ouch!"

He screamed in pain because his left thigh had been kicked by Zhang Junbao. He was enraged and lifted both his hands; he intended to attack at the top of his strength. He ignored Junbao's attack and all he wanted was to vent his anger.

Junbao was nervous to see his fierce countenance; his hair and whiskers stood up. Junbao called out. He was about to leap back when he heard his master say, "Junbao, our

strength against his! Quick, quick! Take rigidity from flexibility. Borrowing strength with 'Four Taels Against a Thousand Jin' [si liang bo qian jin]!"

Jueyuan was teaching the essence of Jiu Yang Zhen Jing; unfortunately it was too late. No matter how smart Junbao was, he could not grasp it in a short moment. Because of his anxiety, Junbao could not breathe. He could see Yin Kexi was really angry and was going to kill him.

At that critical moment he heard the swishing noise of a small stone flying toward Yin Kexi. The stone was really small, yet it made Yin Kexi clench his teeth and move a step backward. It was Yang Guo who helped Junbao. He had picked a couple of flowers, squeezed them in his hand and made a small flower ball. He then flicked the small stone with "Divine Flicking Finger" and immediately flicked the flower ball right after that.

Yin Kexi was trying to avoid the stone by moving backward, but the flower ball which came later hit his [da zhui xue] accupoint on his back accurately. The ball did not hit hard, but it left a flower juice mark on his clothes.

Junbao was saved from danger. He leaped to the west, but did not run away. On the contrary, he continued his attack with Yang Guo's "Who Killed the Deer".

Yin Kexi hesitated. He had experienced several punches from this youngster, "On the first move the left and right were interchangeable, the second move they were straight; I wonder what the third move will be?" Yang Guo was ingenious, he developed that move based on the old saying, 'qin shi qi lu, tian xia gong zhu zhi' [lit. Qin (Dynasty) lost its deer, everybody was chasing after it]; how could Yin anticipate the move?

No matter how hard Yin Kexi tried to keep up he got behind. Junbao moved fast, flashing to the left and right, and in no time he was behind Yin's back. At that time the moon was already high in the sky. Junbao could see the thumb-size flower juice mark. Without wasting any time he hit the mark. He thought, "Benevolent Master Yang is so good, without my being able to see it, he has given me the promised mark ..."

Yin Kexi did not move quickly enough, before he realized it his back had been hit by Junbao's finger. This [da zhui xue] is the meeting point of three arteries. He felt a sudden numbness and he collapsed to the ground.

Except for Xiaoxiang Zi, everybody cheered! They praised, "A very nice "Who Killed the Deer"."

"Excuse me!" Junbao said and searched his fallen opponent's body. Unfortunately he did not find the sutra book he was looking for. He turned his eyes to Xiaoxiang Zi.

Xiaoxiang Zi was not stupid. He understood the boy's intention. His skill level was almost the same as Yin Kexi's. Therefore, if Yin Kexi has fallen, he would not gain victory either. Without waiting he brushed his long robe and said, "I don't have the books you are looking for. Farewell!" He paid no attention to Yin Kexi and immediately leaped southward to escape.

Unexpectedly Jueyuan flicked his sleeve; his body flew past him blocking Xiaoxiang Zi's way. Xiaoxiang Zi was fast, Jueyuan was even faster. Without further ado Xiaoxiang Zi attacked the monk's chest. He exerted his whole energy toward his both hands.

"Watch out!" Yang Guo, Zhou Botong, Reverend Yideng and Guo Jing cried simultaneously. They knew the fierceness of this blow. While they were still shouting, a loud crash was

heard. The monk's chest was squarely hit by the 'book thief'. They groaned inwardly, "Damn!"

Even though his attack hit the monk's chest, Xiaoxiang Zi was the one who suffered from this blow. He flew away like a kite without a string; his body flew several meters and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

Jueyuan did not have any martial arts, but he has mastered the 'Nine Yang Manual'. His body could be controlled at will. He did not dodge Xiaoxiang Zi's attack, but his body reacted to external force naturally. A soft blow would produce a softer reaction, and a hard blow would produce an even harder reaction. Xiaoxiang Zi's blow was very forceful; therefore, the reaction force was also enormous. Xiaoxiang's strength bounced back and he injured himself severely.

The spectators were pleasantly surprised; they secretly praised this monk's profound internal energy. But Jueyuan was dumbfounded, he softly murmured, "Amitaba Buddha, Amitaba Buddha." Zhang Junbao immediately leaped over and searched his body. As with Yin Kexi, he did not find any books. He stood still in bewilderment.

"I overheard their conversation. I am sure they stole the books," Yang Guo said, "I wonder where they hid them."

"Let us torture them and force their confession," Wu Xiuwen proposed.

"Please, please ..." Jueyuan said, "don't ..."

"I believe they won't confess even if we chop one off their arms or legs," Huang Rong quipped. She knew very well these two's characters.

While everybody was at loss as to what to do next, they heard a monkey's cry from the western peak. They turned their head and saw the Divine Eagle chasing a dark green

ape. The ape was big, but it was no match for the Eagle. The ape frantically ran and shrieked incessantly.

“Brother Eagle, have mercy on the monkey, let him go,” Guo Xiang ran toward the Eagle.

The Eagle understood, it stopped and stood still.

Yin Kexi woke up and stood. He helped Xiaoxiang Zi to stand; then beckoned to the ape. The ape rushed to his side; it seemed like it had been tamed by them. They leaned against the ape and limping, walked away down the mountain. Yang Guo and the others felt pity and let them go.

Guo Xiang saw Junbao’s forehead was still bleeding; she took her handkerchief out and dressed the wound. Junbao was very grateful; he was about to open his mouth to express his gratitude when he saw tears welling up in Guo Xiang’s eyes. He did not know why the Miss was heartbroken.

At that moment he heard Yang Guo’s clear voice, “We had a great time gathering on this beautiful evening. We shall chat over a cup of wine when we meet again. Let us part here.” He waved his sleeve, held Xiao Longnu’s hand and walked down the mountain together with the Divine Eagle.

The moon was bright like it was day, a cool breeze stirred the leaves, the night birds chirped cheerfully but Guo Xiang could not hold back her tears and the tear drops fell to the ground.

So it is said:

“The autumn wind is clear and bright,
the fallen leaves clump together,
the birds go south for the winter.
When can they meet again;
that time is hard to decide.”

[The end of the entire book. The narration of Guo Xiang, Zhang Junbao, Jueyuan, the Nine Yang Manual, and others' accomplishment will be continued in the 'Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber'.]

THE END

The Heaven Sword and the Dragon Sabre

Jin Yong

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 - Pondering on the Gentleman Far Far Away](#)

[Chapter 2 - At the top of Mount WuDang the Pines and Cypresses are grown](#)

[Chapter 3 - Refined for a Hundred Years the Precious Saber Creates a Mysterious Light](#)

[Chapter 4 - Among the Misfortune and Disorder, the Characters Showed the Way](#)

[Chapter 5 - Plum Flower Decoration on the Pure White Arm](#)

[Chapter 6 - Floating Northward in the Endless Sea](#)

[Chapter 7 - Who Sent the Ice Boat to This Heavenly Village](#)

[Chapter 8 - The Journey Home after Ten Years](#)

[Chapter 9 - Eternal Delight as the Seven Heroes Reunited](#)

[Chapter 10 - Hundred Years Celebration Brings Heartbreak](#)

Chapter 1 - Pondering on the Gentleman Far Far Away

Translated by Athena



She heard that the music was mixed by the singing of birds and it seemed that the birds were singing along. Guo Xiang thought: "According to mother there is a song called "Empty Mountain and Songs of Birds." But this song was lost for many ages, is it possible this is that song?"

*The vast and mighty tour through Spring,
is every year's winter yearning.
The season of the pear blossom is nearing.*

The white jade brocade is without wrinkles and smells fragrantly and is mesmerizing.

*Snow is piling up on jade trees and jade petals.
The quiet night is deep.*

*The floating brightness is concealed through the clouds.
A cold steep is enough to melt the moon.
A dark silver fog illuminates heaven and earth.*

Her simple, natural but enchanting appearances mesmerizes me.

Even greater were her will and spirit.

She is like a bloom that exceeds other beautiful and fragrant flowers.

Her noble spirit is clear and pure, her immortal ability lies high.

She returns to the Jade palace and I can only see her from afar.

The author of this poem, Free from Mediocrity, is a famous martial arts expert from the southern Song dynasty. The name of this expert was Qiu Chu Ji, also known as the Everlasting One. He is one of the 7 Masters of QuanZhen, and one of the most outstanding disciples of the QuanZhen School. Qiu Chuji wrote this poem after he met Xiao LongNu for the first time. She was a neighbour of Qiu for many years.

At this time Qiu Chuji already passed away, and Xiao LongNu is the wife of the famous Condor Hero Yang Guo. Another girl was reciting this poem softly, in HeNan province and on Mount ShaoShi. This young girl was about 18, 19 years old and was wearing a cream yellow robe, she was riding on a mule and was proceeding up the mountain pass. She was thinking: "Only someone like sister Long is fit for him." "Him" of course refers to Yang Guo.

After some time she softly recited: "Union is bliss, parting is woe, Agony is boundless for a lovelorn. Sweet heart, give me word....

Trails of clouds drifting forward, Amid mountains cupped with snow, Whither shall my lonesome shadow go?"

This girl carried a short sword and looked travel stained. She is a beautiful young girl who is supposed to be happy and untroubled but somehow, she looks unhappy, melancholic.

Her name is Guo Xiang, is the second daughter of the Great Hero Guo Jing and the famous Huang Rong. Her nickname is Little Eastern Heretic. With her mule and sword she has traveled a lot, her purpose was to forget her worries but her travelling only increased her sorrow.

Mount ShaoShi of HeNan province were a set of large stone steps, these steps were constructed under the order of Emperor GaoZong of the Tang dynasty. It looked very impressive as Guo Xiang proceeded up the mountain. Before long she could see the monastery.

She stared at the roof for a moment and and thought: "The ShaoLin Monastery is said to be the origin of martial arts, but why aren't there any ShaoLin experts among the 5 Greats? Is it because the ShaoLin experts knew there weren't a match

for the other experts and were afraid to disgrace ShaoLin and refused to go? Or was it because the monks had evolved beyond earthly matters and didn't want to scramble for power and fame.

After a while she saw a large stone tablet, half of it was gone and the characters were unclear, Guo Xiang was thinking: "How come characters carved into stone can fade away through time, but my feelings carved in my heart become more and more stronger as time goes by."

This tablet was bestowed by Emperor TaiZong of the Tang dynasty. He praised the ShaoLin monks for helping him suppress the rebellions. The tablet states the military credits of the ShaoLin monks for helping Emperor TaiZong defeat the rebel general Wang ShiChong, of which 13 monks were most famous. Only one monk became a general and the other 12 didn't want to become officials and Emperor TaiZong bestowed 12 purple kasayas. Guo Xiang was thinking: "During the Sui and Tang Dynasty, the ShaoLin Monastery was already very famous for its martial arts, and now after a few hundred years they must be even more formidable."

When Guo Xiang parted with Yang Guo and Xiao LongNu at Mount Hua 3 years ago. She lost all contact with them and missed them a lot. So she told her parents that she wanted to roam a bit but in fact, she wanted to hear some news about Yang Guo. She doesn't want to actually meet them, she is very content if she can hear something about them. However, they seem to have disappeared entirely, Guo Xiang has traveled from north to south and from west to east. She practically traveled through China but still there was no news on Yang Guo.

She remembered that Yang Guo asked reverend WuSe to bring her a present on her 16th birthday. WuSe was a friend

of Yang Guo and instructed someone to deliver Guo Xiang a present. Although she has never met him, she wants to know if he has any news about Yang Guo.

She was pensive for some time till she heard some metallic noise and a voice chanting Buddhist scriptures: "Through love worry will arise. Through love fear will arise. If you can free yourself from love, all worries and fear will be gone."

When Guo Xiang heard this, she was completely dazzled. And softly repeated those words. The metallic noise and the chanting were becoming distant.

Guo Xiang said: "I must ask him, how I can free myself from love and how my worries and fear will disappear." She tied her mule to a tree and chased after the sound. Guo Xiang caught with the monk and was shocked to see the monk carrying two large iron buckets and he was chained on his hands, feet, and neck, causing him to produce a metallic sound as he walked. The buckets were filled with water and it showed that the monk must possess extraordinary strength.

Guo Xiang spoke to the monk: "I have a few questions, please stop for awhile."

The monk turned around and both Guo Xiang and the monk were surprised to see each other. The monk was JueYuan. 3 years ago Guo Xiang met him on Mount Hua. Guo Xiang also knew that this monk was really pedantic, but had extremely powerful internal energy not inferior to any top martial arts expert of this time. She spoke to him: "Oh, it is you reverend JueYuan. What happened to you?" JueYuan smiled and nodded but didn't speak. He turned around and walked away again. Guo Xiang said: "It's me, Guo Xiang. Don't you recognize me anymore?"

Jue Yuan turned his head and smiled and nodded but didn't stop. Guo Xiang asked: "Who chained you? Why do they torture you?" Jue Yuan raised his left hand and shook his hand in admonition, meaning do not ask.

Guo Xiang wouldn't let this matter rest until she got to the bottom of this. And wanted to run in front of JueYuan but was not successful. Although JueYuan was carrying 2 large buckets of water he was still very quick. Guo Xiang was amused and leapt up and wanted to grab one of the buckets, but she missed by an inch.

Guo Xiang said: "You have very impressive abilities, but I must catch up with you."

JueYuan continued to walk and the metallic noise sounded rather melodic. Guo Xiang was having difficulty keeping up and she was really impressed: "Both my father and mother praised this monk for his superior martial arts, at that time I wasn't totally convinced, but now I know they were right."

After awhile, JueYuan walked to the back of a small house and emptied the buckets of water in an old well. Guo Xiang asked: "What are you doing? Why are you emptying the water in this well?" JueYuan remained calm and shook his head. Guo Xiang thought she understood now and smiled: "You're learning some sort of powerful martial arts, aren't you?" JueYuan shook his head again. Guo Xiang was feeling a bit angry now and said: "I just heard you chanting, you're not dumb, why won't you answer me?" JueYuan put his palms together and looked apologetic and carried the buckets and walked away again.

Guo Xiang looked into the well and couldn't find anything strange about it and stared at JueYuan's back and felt puzzled.

She gave chase for awhile but soon she felt tired and rested on a rock. She was admiring the scenery and felt very fresh afterwards. Guo Xiang was thinking: "I wonder where the pupil of this monk is. The pupil will probably tell me what is going here."

She started going down again and wanted to find Zhang JunBao, the pupil of JueYuan. She walked for awhile and soon she heard that metallic sound again, Jue Yuan came up again and Guo Xiang quickly hid and thought: "I'll spy on him and see what he is up to."

The metallic sound was becoming clearer and she saw JueYuan reading a book. She silently approached him and called out: "What are you reading?"

JueYuan was startled and cried out: "You gave me a scare, it's only you." Guo Xiang smiled: "You're not pretending to be a dumb anymore." JueYuan looked slightly afraid and looked to the left and right and shook his hand.

Guo Xiang asked: "What is wrong?"

Before JueYuan could answer, 2 monks in grey robes appeared out of the woods. One was very tall, the other one short. The tall monk sternly said to JueYuan: "JueYuan, you broke the rules by talking to an outsider and furthermore to a young girl. Come with us to see the elder of the Disciplinary Hall."

JueYuan looked crestfallen and nodded and started walking behind those 2 monks. Guo Xiang was angry and annoyed and sternly reproached: "What kind of rule forbids people from talking? I know this reverend and if I want to talk to him, it's no concern to you."

The tall monk gave her an arrogant look and said: "For more than thousand years, the ShaoLin Monastery doesn't allow women to enter. I suggest that Miss would leave before you get yourself in trouble."

Guo Xiang became even more angry and said: "So what about women? Aren't women humans? And why do you pester reverend JueYuan? How come he is chained and you forbid him to talk to anyone?"

The monk coldly replied: "These are the rules of our monastery, no one has the right to question, not even the emperor. Miss, needn't bother."

Guo Xiang angrily said: "Reverend JueYuan is an honest good person, you're bullying him because he's a nice man. Where are reverend TianMing, the monks WuSe and WuXiang?"

The 2 monks were shocked. Reverend TianMing is the abbot of ShaoLin, WuSe is the elder of the LuoHan Hall and WuXiang is the elder of the DaMo Hall. The 3 of them are very respected, all the monks address them as 'old abbot, elder of the LuoHan Hall or elder of the DaMo Hall.'

No one has dared to call out their names, and today these 2 monks hear this young girl calling out their names and creating a scene.

These 2 monks are the pupils of the elder of the Disciplinary Hall, and received orders to keep an eye on JueYuan. But now they see Guo Xiang interfering, the tall monk yelled: "If you don't leave now, we will not be friendly."

Guo Xiang said: "Should I be afraid of you? Hurry up and free JueYuan of his chains or else I will go to old monk TianMing."

The short monk became angry now and saw Guo Xiangs' sword. He said: "Leave your weapon behind and we will not take actions against you. Leave now!"

Guo Xiang removed her sword and held them in her hands and scoffed: "Alright then, I will comply."

The short monk grew up in the ShaoLin monastery and heard his seniors say that ShaoLin was the origin of all martial arts and no matter how respected or how skilled, martial arts experts never carried weapons to the ShaoLin monastery. Although this young girl didn't actually reach the monastery but she was already on ShaoLin premises. He thought this young girl was afraid and presented her sword so he reached out to grab the sword. However, when his fingers touched the scabbard his felt a painful tingling, like being struck by lightning. He felt a strong force coming from the sword and pushing him backward. He couldn't maintain his stand and fell down. As he was standing on a slope he soon rolled down a few metres. With some difficulty, he could stop himself from rolling anymore.

The tall monk was shocked and angry and yelled out: "Of all the nerves! How dare you come to ShaoLin to wreak havoc!" He turned his body and advanced one step in front and his right fist aimed at Guo Xiang. His left hand was put on the back of the fist causing two palms striking down. This was the 28th technique of "Dashing ShaoLin" namely "Turning Over Split"

Guo Xiang held on to her sword and pressed down her sword with scabbard and all to the monks' shoulder. The monk held on to the sword.

JueYuan was very frantic and called out: "Stop! Don't fight!"

The monk tried to pull the sword over, suddenly he felt a shock through his palm and both arms felt numb he cried: "No!" Guo Xiang swept her left leg and kicked him down the slope. He was somewhat more injured than the other monk, his face was bleeding.

Guo Xiang was thinking: "I came to ShaoLin to find some information on brother Yang, but now I'm engaged in a fight for no apparent reason."

She saw JueYuan looking sad, she pulled out her sword and cut the chains. JueYuan was screaming: "No, you musn't!" for a few times. Guo Xiang cut three chains and said: "Those 2 wicked monks will go back for reinforcements. We must go now, where is your little disciple?" JueYuan kept shaking his hands. Suddenly a voice came from behind saying: "Thank you for caring Miss Guo, I'm right here."

Guo Xiang turned around and saw a 16, 17 year old man standing there. He had thick eyebrows and big eyes and was very tall. But still looked very young. She met him 3 years ago at Mount Hua, he was Zhang JunBao. He was taller this time compared to three years ago but he very much looked the same. Guo Xiang was very pleased and said: "Those nasty monks were bullying your teacher, we must go now." JueYuan laughed wryly and shook his head and suggested that Guo Xiang should quickly leave now before trouble comes.

Guo Xiang knows that there were an uncountable amount of ShaoLin experts that were superior to her, but seeing this situation she couldn't leave this matter alone and she was worried that ShaoLin experts would stop them. So she pulled JueYuan in one hand and the other Zhang JunBao and told them: "Hurry up, we'll discuss everything when we leave this

place." But the two of them just stood still.

At this time 7, 8 monks with wooden rods came up the slope and yelled: "Who is that audacious girl? How dare she come to ShaoLin and behave atrociously!" Zhang JunBao called out: "Please don't be rude, this is....."

Guo Xiang hurriedly said: "Don't say my name." She knew that she created a big scene today and perhaps this might even escalate so she didn't want to drag her parents into this. She added: "Let's go the other way! Don't mention my parents' name.

But another 7, 8 monks came towards them. Guo Xiang saw that they were surrounded and raised her elegant eyebrows and said to JueYuan and Zhang: "The both of you are so fussy, you lack a hero spirit! Do you want to leave now?" Zhang JunBao said: "Master, Miss Guo has only good intentions..."

At this point 4 monks came up the slope, although they didn't carry weapons but judging their body posture they were experts.

Guo Xiang knew that using force would be futile so she just stood still and waited to see what would happen.

The first monk walked up and spoke to Guo Xiang: "The elder of the LuoHan Hall ordered that the intruder was to lay down her weapon and was to be taken to the YiWei pavilion for questioning."

Guo Xiang scoffed: "The monks of ShaoLin have mastered the air of government officials. All of you speak a bureaucratic tone! I'm wondering whether you're officials to the Song emperor or officials to the Mongolian emperor?"

At this time, the entire northern territories of China were in hands of the Mongolians, the ShaoLin monastery fell under Mongolian jurisdiction. However, the Mongolians were busy deploying their troops so they had no time to control any temples, monasteries. Everything in ShaoLin remained the same.

The monk felt embarrassed by Guo Xiang's remarks and his face turned red and he felt that giving orders to outsiders was not very appropriate. He put his palms together and said: "May I inquire what business you have here, Benefactress. Would you please lay down your weapon and go to the YiWei pavilion where tea will be served and we have some questions we would like to ask."

Guo Xiang heard his tone became a bit more friendly and thought this would be a good chance to stop and said: "I don't care if you let me enter or not. It's not like ShaoLin has any treasure and I'm not willing to benefit from it." She turns to Zhang JunBao and quietly asked: "Are coming or not?" Zhang JunBao shook his head and looked at his teacher saying his place is here. Guo Xiang loudly said: "Alright then, I will not interfere. I'm off," and started walking down the slope. The first monk moved away but 2 other monks blocked her. And said: "Lay down you sword!" Guo Xiang raised her eyebrows and put her hand on the hilt. The first monk explained: "We don't want to keep your weapon, we will return it when you leave Mount ShaoShi. This is our rule, please forgive us."

Guo Xiang heard his tone was polite and thought: "If I don't leave my sword, there is bound to be a fight and alone I'm no match for these monks. But if I leave my sword, I will disgrace my parents, brother Yang, sister Long and my grandfather."

She was still thinking, and suddenly a figure appeared in front of her and shouted: "You come here with a weapon, injured 2 of our disciples. What's the meaning of this?" And he formed a claw and grabbed Guo Xiang's sword. If this monk didn't use force, Guo Xiang would surely hand over her sword after some consideration. She isn't like her elder sister Guo Fu. Although she is straightforward, she is not rash. Seeing this disadvantage, she would have complied and discussed this matter with her parents and Huang YaoShi and come back for an explanation. But now this monk used force, how can she watch her sword being grabbed away?

The monk's grip was firm and he held on to the scabbard. He wanted to quickly disarm her. Because it would not be proper for a monk to be pulling and pushing with a pretty young girl. Guo Xiang couldn't hold on to the scabbard and pulled out her sword. The monk used his right hand to seize the scabbard but his 2 fingers on his left hand were cut off.

The other monks were angry when they saw their martial arts brother wounded and picked up their wooden rods, cudgels and attacked. Guo Xiang knew that she had no choice but to fight now and used "Descending Flower Swordsmanship" to defend herself.

The Descending Flower Swordsmanship was derived from Huang YaoShi's Divine Descending Flower Sword Palms. Although this swordsmanship is not as refined and excellent as the "Jade Flute Swordsmanship", it was still a special technique from the Peach Blossom Island. The monks saw green flashes surging, the sword dancing, making it seem like flowers descending. In a few moments, 2 monks were injured. But other monks took their places and soon Guo Xiang was completely surrounded. She would've been overwhelmed if not for the fact that the monks were benevolent and not willing to harm her life. All their stances

were to immobilize her and not to kill her, so they would lecture her and escort her away from here. Also, all the monks saw that this young girl had learnt superior martial arts and they thought that she must be either the daughter of famous martial arts experts or at least the disciple of a skilled martial arts expert. So they didn't want to make any enemies, so every stance was rather limited. Some monks went to notify the elder of the LuoHan Hall.

In the heat of the battle, an old tall monk came and observed the fight with a smile on his face. Two monks approached him and told him something.

Guo Xiang was panting and her swordsmanship was becoming disorderly and she yelled out: "What origin of martial arts? 10 monks surrounding one person, what a way to win?"

That old monk was the elder of the LuoHan Hall, reverend WuSe, when he heard this he said: "Stand back everyone!"

All the monks jumped away. Reverend WuSe asked: "What is your name, Miss? And who is your father and teacher? What business do you have here at ShaoLin?"

Guo Xiang was thinking: "I can't tell him my name. And I cannot reveal my reason in front of so many people. If my parents and brother Yang found out the mess I created they will be upset, the best thing to do is sneak away." She answered: "I can't tell you my name, I just came here to enjoy the scenery. I never guessed that the ShaoLin Monastery was even stricter than the imperial palace, with no reason your weapon will be confiscated. I would like to ask, did I enter the monastery? When Master DaMo taught ShaoLin martial arts he just wanted the monks to improve their conditions and concentrate on their meditation through

martial arts. But when ShaoLin became more and more famous, and their martial arts kept improving, now the ShaoLin monks rely on martial arts to flaunt their superiority. Well you can have my sword, and if you don't kill me, everyone in the realm of martial arts will know what happened today."

Guo Xiang is famous for being clever and fluent, this entire matter was actually her fault but with those words she rendered reverend WuSe speechless. She thought: "I don't want anyone to know about this, and it seems that ShaoLin doesn't want the outside world to know about this incident either. A group of 10 monks attacking a young girl will not do their reputation any good."

She threw her sword on the ground and started walking away. Reverend WuSe walked up and used his sleeve to pick the sword and said: "Miss, I will return your sword and see you off respectfully."

Guo Xiang smiled sweetly and said: "It seems that you're very reasonable. That's more like it. That's the style a martial arts expert should have."

Seeming that she won, Guo Xiang just praised this old monk and reached out to get her sword back. When she wanted to pull back, she noticed it didn't move an inch. She used strength 3 times but in vain, and she said: "You're deliberately displaying your martial arts." Suddenly her left hand curled up and softly wanted to brush against WuSe's two left cheek acupoints, namely 'TianDing and JuGu.' WuSe moved away and released his grip. Guo Xiang quickly seized her sword.

WuSe said: "Very impressive "Whisking Acupoint Orchid Hand." May I ask how you address the lord of the Peach

Blossom Island?"

Guo Xiang laughed: "The lord of the Peach Blossom Island? I call him old Eastern Heretic."

Huang YaoShi is her maternal grandfather. He is a strange, eccentric man and he calls his granddaughter little Eastern Heretic and Guo Xiang calls him old Eastern Heretic. Huang YaoShi is not angry when he hears it and he is even happy when he hears it.

WuSe was a robber in his early years. Although he has studied Zen for many years and has profound Buddhist knowledge, he still is very straightforward, otherwise, he couldn't be friends with Yang Guo. Seeing that this little girl is not willing to tell him, he wants to test her and find out. He smiled and said: "Young Miss, if you can withstand 10 of my stances, I can guess your school."

Guo Xiang asked: "What if you cannot?"

WuSe laughed and said: "Well if you can withstand 10 of my stances, I will have to listen to you."

Guo Xiang pointed at JueYuan and said: "I met this reverend JueYuan some years ago and I want to plead on his behalf. If I can withstand 10 of your stances you have to promise not to give him anymore trouble."

WuSe was surprised, he knew that JueYuan was very pedantic and stayed in the Library and watched over the scriptures and never met any outsiders. How did he meet this young girl? WuSe said: "We never did give him any trouble. He is sitting out his punishment, that is not giving him trouble."

Guo Xiang pouted and scoffed: "It seems to me that you just

want to go back on your word."

WuSe clapped his hands and said: "Very well, if I lose I will carry 3108 buckets of water for JueYuan. Watch out, here I come."

Guo Xiang was thinking when she spoke to him: "This old monk seems to be a true expert. If he starts to attack first, I will have to try my best to defend myself and will reveal my parents' martial arts. The best thing to do is for me to attack first and try to gain the upperhand." When she heard him say "Watch out, here I come." she didn't give him time to attack first and raised her sword and aimed for his chest. This was a technique from the "Descending Flower Swordsmanship" namely "Thousands and Myriads of Purple and Red."

The tip of the sword kept moving, not revealing to the opponent where the sword was aiming for.

Guo Xiang yelled out: "The second stance!" the short sword turned around and came from bottom to top, this was called the "Celestial Gentry Topping Apart" which was a QuanZhen technique.

WuSe said: "Good, QuanZhen sword technique."

Guo Xiang said: "Not necessarily." Her short sword stabbed into the air and saw WuSe using an attack as a defense and using his fingers to grab her wrist. She was a bit afraid: "This old monk is very formidable, he can attack bare-handed under such a dangerous technique."

Seeing his fingers were coming closer, her sword dazzled a few times and used a technique from the "Dog Beating Stick", namely "Mean Hound Blocking the Road." And this stance belonged to the Sealing Formula.

Guo Xiang was close friends with the deceased leader of the Beggars Association Lu Youjiao, they occasionally drank wine and played mora together. Sometimes Lu would demonstrate his martial arts, although the "Dog Beating Stick" is only permitted to be used and learnt by the leader of the Beggars Association, Guo Xiang could learn a few stances from Lu. Furthermore, her mother Huang Rong and her brother-in-law were leaders of the Beggars Association. So she has seen this style a lot and could trick people into believing that she knew this style although she didn't know the exact secret of it.

WuSe's fingers just reached her wrist but he saw a bright light shining and the blade was coming towards his fingers in an excellently beautiful way. Almost cutting off his five fingers, but luckily his martial arts were high and he could avoid the attack by pacing back 2 steps. But his left sleeve was split. WuSe looked terrified and cold sweat was breaking out.

Guo Xiang was very amused and smiled: "What sword style is this?" In fact this wasn't a sword technique, she just used a stance from the "Dog Beating Stick" and used it as a sword stance. Because this style was magnificent, even Guo Xiang couldn't completely learn it, it was still capable to scare off this martial arts expert of ShaoLin.

Guo Xiang thought: "If I learnt a few more stances from the "Dog Beating Stick" I could easily defeat this old monk.

She didn't give WuSe time to catch his breath and advanced forward. Her sword was slightly raised and she floated towards him. Her posture looked like a floating fairy, the blade was pointing at WuSe's legs. This was called "A Small Orchard for Chrysanthemum" which belonged to the Jade

Maiden Swordsmanship. Guo Xiang learnt this technique from Xiao LongNu.

The Jade Swordsmanship was created by Lin ChaoYing, this style was not only swift and fierce but also refined, elegant and beautiful. All the monks never saw something that beautiful, they were all surprised and pleased. Because ShaoLin sword styles were firm and fierce, for example, LuoHan and DaMo Swordsmanship. This Jade Maiden Swordsmanship was hardly known throughout the world of martial arts, the essence of it is the opposite of ShaoLin styles but when it comes to superiority of the stances, it is not above ShaoLin Swordsmanship.

But this technique was absolutely beautiful and celestial.

Even in Buddhist scriptures it is mentioned: "When the appearances are gracious and charming, when the manner is solemn, gentle and elegant. And behavior proper and gratifying. The watcher will not be bored."

Reverend WuSe was impressed by such a magnificent stance and hoped to see it more clearly so he moved away and waited till Guo Xiang attacked again.

Guo Xiang's technique now was changing directions a few times from east to west and from west to east. Zhang JunBao was mesmerized by it and was surprised to recognize this stance as "Extend in all Directions." 3 years ago Yang Guo taught Zhang JunBao this technique and Guo Xiang was there to see it and now is using it. This was originally a palm technique, now she used it as a sword stance, the power of this stance was not that powerful anymore but it was a very strange sword stance and WuSe was a bit frightened by it.

They reached the fifth stance now, and WuSe didn't have any

idea who she was. In his younger years, he roamed the world and gained a lot of martial arts experience and insight. And now he is the elder of the LuoHan Hall for more than 10 years and has examined all styles of different schools and compared to ShaoLin martial arts. So he was always very confident to recognize the martial arts of any expert within a few stances.

His limit with Guo Xiang of 10 stances was already a very big margin. He never guessed that the parents, relatives, friends of Guo Xiang were all top martial arts experts and she learnt a few stances of each and every one of them, causing WuSe to be confused. WuSe now thought: "The only way for me now is to attack with strength, forcing to use her own martial arts to defend herself. If not, I cannot even guess her school after a hundred stances."

He turned around and used "Double Piercing Hands" and 2 fists aimed for Guo Xiang. She saw that his attack was fierce and didn't dare to block it and twisted her body and glided away from that attack. She remembered when Ying Gu fought against Yang Guo, Ying Gu used this style.

WuSe praised: "Good movement! Try another stance."

His left hand curled up like a flower, bending his left elbow in front of his chest and this was another ShaoLin fist stance.

This stance completely sealed Guo Xiang. She turned around her sword and use the sword as her finger and displayed the "Yi Yang Finger". She learnt this technique from her martial arts brother, Wu XiuWen. And she aimed for 3 of WuSe's acupoint of his wrist. Although she only learned the mere basics of "Yi Yang Finger" this technique of sealing 3 acupoints in one go was one of the key points of "Yi Yang Finger."

Reverend YiDeng's Yi Yang Finger was renowned through the world. WuSe recognized it and quickly changed stance.

However if WuSe didn't change technique, and let Guo Xiang touch his 3 acupoints he would have known that her "Yi Yang Finger" was far from perfect.

But in a fight he wasn't willing to risk his reputation and name for it. Guo Xiang smiled sweetly and said: "You recognize a powerful technique when you see it."

WuSe grunted and used a stance called "Single Phoenix Glaring At the Sun". With this stance WuSe used both hands to knock out Guo Xiangs' sword.

She knew that he wouldn't really harm her but was still frightened and used Zhou BoTong's Kong Ming Fist to counter it. This Kong Ming Fist was quite new to the martial arts realm so WuSe didn't recognize it and turned to another stance namely "Siding to the 7 Stars Flower." One of his palms was up the other down and pressed down on Guo Xiang. If she didn't use internal energy to block it, her hands would be snapped.

Guo Xiang thought: "Do you really want to break my hands?" And used an Iron Palm technique to block this attack. She learned this stance from Wu XiuWen's wife, WanYan Ping. This stance was created by the famous Qiu QianRen and this palm technique was known to be number one for being violent and fierce.

WuSe was shocked to see a young girl using the Iron Palm technique and quickly withdrew his attack. First of all, he didn't want to harm her, second, he was quite afraid for the Iron Palm technique.

Guo Xiang smiled sweetly: "This is the tenth stance, guess what school I belong to?"

And attacked WuSe with a simple ShaoLin Fist called "The Sea of Bitterness has no Bounds." This stance belonged to the LuoHan fist style and WuSe was both angry and amused to see this. And he quickly used another stance to block it and lift her up. This was called "Carry the Mountain and Leap over the Ocean."

But when he did that he realised: "I'm only wanted to win her and cannot recognize her school. She used 10 different stances, what can I say. I surely can't say she belongs to ShaoLin."

Guo Xiang was yelling: "Let me go!" and something dropped out of her clothes. Guo Xiang yelled again: "Let me go, you old monk."

WuSe was an enlightened monk, he believe all creatures were the same. He made no differences in men and women, he even treated animals with care. He said: "I'm old enough to be your grandfather. What are you afraid of?"

He gently flicked his arm and Guo Xiang landed a few metres further.

He was about to admit defeat, when he saw 2 small dark iron figures of 2 Arhats and picked them up.

Guo Xiang asked him: "Well, do you admit defeat?"

WuSe looked very pleased and said: "Why should I admit defeat? Your father is the great hero Guo Jing, your mother is the heroine Huang Rong. Your grandfather is Lord Huang of

the Peach Blossom Island. You're second Miss Guo Xiang. Your father learnt martial arts from the 7 Eccentrics of Jiang Nan, Peach Blossom Island, Northern Beggar and the QuanZhen School. No wonder Miss Guo has such profound knowledge of martial arts."

Guo Xiang was stunned: "This old monk is very formidable, I used 10 different stances but he was still able to know who I was."

WuSe smiled and said: "Miss Guo, I recognized you from these 2 Arhat statues, how is brother Yang?"

Guo Xiang was shocked for a moment and said: "You must be reverend WuSe. You gave me these 2 Arhats as a present to me. The reason I came here was to find out some news of brother Yang and sister Long."

WuSe said: "Many years ago, Master Yang came to our monastery and stayed for a few days. And when he left for XiangYang he asked me to help him. But I don't know where he is now."

It seems that both Guo Xiang and WuSe didn't know where Yang Guo was.

Guo Xiang was stunned for a moment and said: "Not even you know where he is now. I wonder who does know."

Guo Xiang thanked him for his present.

These 2 Arhats were made by a carpenter monk of ShaoLin. These 2 Arhats could display a set of LuoHan fist if you activate the mechanism. That's why Guo Xiang knew that ShaoLin fist.

WuSe laughed and said: "Because of the rules of our monastery I cannot invite you stay, however I will walk you down. Please forgive us."

Guo Xiang was pensive and said: "It doesn't matter, I asked what I came for anyway."

WuSe said: "As for my Buddhist brother JueYuan I will explain later. You know what, we will find a good inn and talk these things over by a good meal and some wine." Reverend WuSe was highly respected by the ShaoLin monks, and they were all puzzled to see him being so respectful towards a young girl.

Guo Xiang said: "No need for that, I'm sorry that injured a few reverends. Please forgive me for being rash. I will leave now and I hope to see you again."

WuSe laughed and said: "I'm adamant, I will see you off. I'm sorry I couldn't attend your 16th birthday that year. After burning down the supplies and the gunpowder of the Mongolian army I left without going to XiangYang.

Guo Xiang knew he had good intentions, and like his straightforward manner and was very eager to make friends with him and said: "Good."

After the 2 of them walked for awhile and passed the Yi Wei pavilion. They heard a footsteps behind them when they turned around to look they saw Zhang JunBao. Guo Xiang smiled and said: "Brother Zhang, did you come to see me off too?"

Zhang JunBao blushed and said: "Yes."

Suddenly another monk ran towards WuSe looking rather

hectic. WuSe frowned his eyebrows and said: "Why are you so frantic?" That monk went to WuSe and said something very quietly. WuSe's face changed and said: "Really?"

The monk said: "The abbot asked master WuSe to return now and to discuss matter."

Guo Xiang saw that WuSe looked worried and told him: "If you have something to do now, feel free to go back. Real friends don't need all those formalities, we can always eat and drink another time."

WuSe looked pleased and said: "No wonder Master Yang speaks highly of you. You're a true heroine, today you've made a friend."

Guo Xiang smiled and said: "You're already friends with brother Yang. That makes you my friend too."

The two parted and WuSe went back.

Guo Xiang continued to walk down, Zhang JunBao didn't dare to walk next to her and kept 5 steps in between them.

Guo Xiang asked: "Why do they punish your teacher?"

Zhang JunBao said: "The rules of the monastery are very strict, if the monks break them they have to be punished."

Guo Xiang asked: "What did your teacher do wrong, he's a very nice man."

Zhang sighed: "It is all because of the Ni Jia Scripture that was lost."

Guo Xiang said: "You mean the scripture that was stolen by

Xiao XiangZi and Yin KeXing."

Zhang said: "Yes, that day at Mount Hua, I searched them and found nothing even with the help of Master Yang. After we left the mountain we couldn't find them anymore. We returned to the monastery and reported it to the abbot. Because that scripture was written by Master DaMo, the elder of the Disciplinary Hall blamed my teacher for not paying better attention to the scriptures and heavily punished him."

Guo Xiang sighed: "This is blaming it on someone else. Why should reverend JueYuan be punished for it. Because of this they ordered your teacher to fill that well and forbade him to speak."

Zhang said: "This is an old punishment of ShaoLin. According to the elders, this punishment can also be seen as good form of self-cultivation."

Guo Xiang laughed: "It seems I'm a busybody." Zhang quickly said: "We will always remember Miss Guo's help and intentions."

Guo Xiang sighed and thought: "But someone has completely forgotten about me."

After awhile they reached the place where Guo Xiang tied her mule and she said: "Brother Zhang, you needn't see me off anymore." Zhang JunBao looked reluctant to part and didn't know what to say to Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang took out her 2 Arhats and gave them to Zhang JunBao: "Here take it."

Zhang JunBao didn't take it and said: "I...I.."

Guo Xiang said: "I'm giving it to you, so take it." Zhang JunBao said: "I.....I...."

Guo Xiang put them in his hands and mounted the mule.

Suddenly someone called out: "Miss Guo, please wait."

It was reverend WuSe, Guo Xiang thought: " This old monk was too formal."

WuSe reached Guo Xiang in a few moments and told Zhang JunBao: "Return to the monastery, don't stroll about."

Zhang JunBao said yes and stared at Guo Xiang for short while and quickly left.

WuSe waited till he was gone and took out a note and said: "Miss Guo, do you know who wrote this note?"

Guo Xiang took the note and read it:

"ShaoLin martial arts have been proclaimed to be invincible throughout China for many years. Ten days from now, The 3 Saints of KunLun will see all ShaoLin skills."

The handwriting was very strong. Guo Xiang asked: "Who are these "The 3 Saints of KunLun," they sound very arrogant."

WuSe said: "You don't know them?" Guo Xiang shook her head and said: "No, I don't know them. I have not heard my parents mention this name before."

WuSe said: "That's the strange thing about it." Guo Xiang asked: "What is strange?"

WuSe said: "Miss Guo, we are now friends and I will be honest

with you. Do you know who brought this note?" Guo Xiang answered: "Probably a messenger from The 3 Saints of KunLun."

WuSe said: "If it was, I'm not that surprised. ShaoLin has been the leading martial arts school in WuLin for hundreds of years. So many martial arts experts come here to challenge us, but we always treat our guests with courtesy. And we try to avoid fighting as much as possible, because if we battled every expert who came here for a fight, we wouldn't have time for our cultivation."

Guo Xiang nodded and said: "That's true."

WuSe said: "However, when the experts are here, and if we don't show them some special ability they will not be impressed. The LuoHan Hall is there to welcome these guests with this special treatment."

Guo Xiang laughed and said: "So you're just here for the fights." WuSe smiled with a wry: "Normally WuLin persons, the disciples of the LuoHan Hall can deal with them, I don't need to fight them personally. But today when I saw that Miss Guo's martial arts were out of the ordinary I decided to see for myself."

Guo Xiang smiled: "You have a very high opinion of me."

WuSe said: "Look at me, we're digressing. To tell you the truth, we found this note in the LuoHan Hall in the hands of the Dragon-Subduing Arhat." Guo Xiang was surprised and asked: "Who put it there?" WuSe shook his head and said: "We don't know. There are hundreds of ShaoLin monks in the monastery, if someone sneaked in, someone must have noticed that. And there are 8 disciples standing guard in the LuoHan Hall every day. Someone just found the note and

quickly reported it to the abbot. Everyone found it strange and that's why I was called back so urgently."

Guo Xiang now understood what he was getting it and said: "You think I'm in league with The 3 Saints of KunLun. I'm creating a diversion here while those 3 fellows enter the LuoHan Hall and leave the note."

WuSe said: "After meeting you I found it impossible you would do something like that. But it was very coincidental that with your appearance a note is left behind in the LuoHan Hall. That's why the abbot and my martial arts brother WuXiang wrongly suspected you were involved in this."

Guo Xiang said: "I don't know them, what are you afraid of? Ten days later if they dare to come, just accept the challenge."

WuSe said: "Afraid, of course we're not afraid. I'm reassured now that they are not your friends."

Guo Xiang knew WuSe's intentions were good, he was afraid that The 3 Saints were friends of hers and was afraid that in a fight they might damage their friendship. She said: "If they come here and courteously want to examine martial arts with you that's not a problem. Otherwise, just teach them a lesson. Also the tone of the note was very arrogant, 'see all ShaoLin skills'. Do they really want to see the 72 skills of ShaoLin?"

Suddenly she thought of something and said: "Couldn't it be that there is a traitor amongst you and secretly put the note there?" WuSe said: "We thought of this too, but that was impossible. Because the Arhat statue's hand was almost 10 metres tall. If someone was to jump up there, his art of levitation should be superb. If there was a traitor he wouldn't

have such good martial arts."

Guo Xiang was very puzzled by this entire incident and was very interested to know the outcome of this duel. But she knew she would miss out on this fight because ShaoLin didn't allow women to enter.

WuSe saw she was pensive and thought that she was thinking of a plan to help them and said: "ShaoLin has overcome many obstacles in these 1000 years and is still standing. If "The 3 Saints of KunLun" really want to pick a fight, we will try our best to battle them. Miss Guo, in less than a month, you'll hear whether these "3 Saints of KunLun" have defeated ShaoLin or not."

At this point, he looked very energetic and brave.

Guo Xiang smiled and said: "Don't forget about your cultivation? In less than a month I will await your good news."

She mounted her mule again and smiled to WuSe.

And then she rode off thinking of a plan not to miss out on this battle.

After thinking for awhile: "Perhaps these "3 Saints of KunLun" are just some ordinary WuLin people. And will be easily defeated by the ShaoLin monks, if they only had half the skills of my mother, father, grandfather or brother Yang, this fight will be very interesting."

When she thought of Yang Guo she became melancholic again. These 3 years of searching were in vain. The tomb on Mount ZhongNan was empty, no news in the Valley of No Love, The FengLing Ferry was deserted too. She thought:

"What do I do when I find him? It will only increase my feelings for him and bring extra frustration. He left for a faraway place, that was also good for me. Although I know everything I do is in vain, it can't stop me from thinking about him and trying to find him."

She rode her mule and wandered a bit on Mount ShaoShi and was feeling melancholic.

She heard music sounds, she was surprised to hear someone playing the zither. She learnt the arts of zither, chess, literature and painting from her mother. Although she learnt only the basics, she is intelligent enough to give her own unique perspective on matters. Frequently, she discussed these arts with her mother. She tied her mule to a tree and walked towards the music.

She heard the music was mixed by the singing of birds and it seemed that the birds were singing along. Guo Xiang thought: "According to mother there is a song called "Empty Mountain and Songs of Birds." But this song was lost for many ages, is it possible this is that song?"

The music became more and more interesting. Guo Xiang was surprised and thought: "This man can lure birds with his music, this song must be "A Hundred Birds Admiring the Phoenix." And thought if her grandfather was here, both of them could play this song together. Because Huang YaoShi's flute was unequalled at this time.

The music became softer and the birds flew away and suddenly the music stopped. The man sighed and said he couldn't find a soulmate and drew his sword and started carving on the ground.

Guo Xiang thought: "This man is both well versed in artistic

fields and martial arts, let's see how his swordsmanship is."

She saw that this man was drawing a chessboard with his sword and started playing chess (Go) with himself.

Guo Xiang thought: "This man is lonely too and can't find a soulmate either, so he's playing chess with himself."

After awhile she saw that the man trapped himself in the western side of the chessboard and leaving the central open.

Guo Xiang couldn't help herself and spoke: "Why do you take the western borders? While the central plains are open."

The man saw what he did and took the central plains causing a draw. The man laughed and said: "Good, good!" and continued to play and realised that someone was present. He tossed his sword away and said: "Thank you for your help. May I ask who helped me?"

Guo Xiang saw that he had a long face and dark eyes and was quite skinny. He was about 30 years old. She walked towards him and smiled: "I was very much enchanted by your music, Sir. And when I saw that you're losing to yourself I couldn't help pointing out. Please forgive me for my bluntness."

The man was surprised to see a young girl and when he heard her talking about his music, he was very happy and said: "Miss, is a musician too? Would you please play a piece for me?"

Guo Xiang smiled and said: "My mother taught me some basics, compared to your divine music I'm very bad. But since I heard your song it's only natural that I return a song back. But you musn't laugh."

The man said: "I wouldn't dare."

And handed the zither to Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang saw that this zither was an antique. She started to play the zither and her playing was not very spectacular but the man was very happy and surprised.

The song was about a hermit and he lived alone on a mountain and felt lonely. Because he didn't have a soulmate he looked sickly but his aspirations will always be very high.

The man heard his feelings in the music of Guo Xiang and was very grateful and when the music stopped, he just stared into the blank.

Guo Xiang gently put the zither on the ground and turned around and left again. Reciting the poem that matched this song:

*Note: I didn't translate the poems, songs in this part. It will take me too much time. Sorry! I found them on another website. They are not my work.

A gentleman is exploring the mountainside
Close to a stream, all alone
Although he is forlorn, although he is unaware
But he is wise, and will never change
And this piece is the gentleman's song:

The day is so short, a hundred years is so long
The earth is so wide, one hundred incarnations approaches
the Tao
An angel releases the reins, one half is as white as snow
The Creator meets the Jade Lady laughing, I wish for the

dragon's embrace

Turning towards Phu Tang, to buy good wine at Bac Bau
Inviting the dragon to riches which I scorn,
That throughout the year beautify only the being.

Guo Xiang roamed the realm for three years now, and encountered many strange incidents. So she forgot all about the man who played the zither and chess. Another 2 days, The 3 Saints of KunLun will challenge ShaoLin. She was thinking of a way to sneak in and watch but couldn't think of anything. She thought: "My mother can think of 18 plans in a blink of an eye. I'm just too stupid and I can't even think of one plan. Never mind, I'll just go to ShaoLin and perhaps they are too busy fighting of the intruders that they forget to stop me from entering."

She ate some rations for the journey and proceeded to ShaoLin. After riding for some time, she saw 3 horses riding towards her. And in short while they passed her and were headed towards ShaoLin. The riders were all men in their fifties and were green robes and weapons hung to the saddles.

Guo Xiang thought: "These 3 men are martial artists and they are carrying weapons. They must be The 3 Saints of KunLun. If I don't hurry up, I'll miss out on a good fight."

She gave her mule a clap and he quickly pursued them. The 3 riders whipped their horses to increase speed. One of the old man turned back and gave a strange look.

Guo Xiang's mule gave chase for a short distance. The 3 horses were out of sight. The mule looked exhausted. Guo Xiang scolded: "Lazy animal! Normally you never listen to me and keep running about. When I need you to run, you can't keep up." She pulled the mule to a small stone pavilion and

gave the mule to rest. After awhile the three riders came back. Guo Xiang was surprised and thought: "Could it be that they are really that useless and were defeated in one blow?"

The three riders dismounted, Guo Xiang looked at them and saw that one of them had a cinnabar coloured face. The other had a really red face and looked very friendly. The third one was very tall and skinny and looked very pale, but in his paleness there was a touch of green.

These 3 old men looked very normal except for their strange skin complexion. She was very fascinated and asked: "Could I ask you whether you went to the ShaoLin Monastery or not? Why did you return when you just when up there?" The pale-looking man gave her a stern look, like scolding her for asking questions.

The red-faced man smiled and said: "How did you know we are headed for the monastery?" Guo Xiang said: "If you go up there, you'll go to the ShaoLin Monastery."

The red-faced man nodded and said: "That's true, and Miss where are you going?" Guo Xiang said: "You're going to ShaoLin, and I'm going too."

The pale-faced man said: "ShaoLin doesn't allow women to enter and carrying weapons is also forbidden." He sounded very arrogant, and because of his height he looked over Guo Xiang's head ignoring her completely.

Guo Xiang was annoyed and said: "Well you're carrying weapons too. Or aren't those weapons?"

The pale-faced man coldly said: "How can you compare yourself with us?"

Guo Xiang scoffed: "What about the 3 of you? Are The 3 Saints of KunLun fighting with the old monks of ShaoLin yet? Who won and who lost?"

The 3 old men's faces changed. The red-faced man asked: "Little Miss, how do you know about this incident with The 3 Saints of KunLun?" Guo Xiang said: "Of course I know."

The pale-faced man walked up and sternly said: "What's your name? Whose disciple are you? And what is your business here at ShaoLin?"

Guo Xiang raised her pretty face and said: "Never you mind."

The pale-faced man was hot-tempered and raised his hand to slap her. But he realised that if he did that, he will be bullying a young girl. He swiftly advanced towards Guo Xiang and seized her sword.

Guo Xiang was taken off guard, this never happened before in her life. To be frank, with her martial arts and experience she was not fit to roam the realm on her own. But everyone respected Guo Jing and Huang Rong and knew she was their daughter and Yang Guo spread the word of her 16th birthday and all the unorthodox WuLin person knew her. Even if they dared not to give Guo Jing and Huang Rong face, they would surely respect Yang Guo. Furthermore, she was very pretty and straightforward, she treated everyone equally no matter what social status they had. Although the realm of martial arts was a dangerous place, she always came out fine and without any harm. She never suffered such humiliation in her life and knew she couldn't get her sword back. Because she was not their match yet, but to give up like this was very difficult to accept.

The pale-faced man held the sword between his index finger

and middle finger and coldly said: "I'll keep this sword for awhile. Seeing you have the audacity to be disrespectful towards me, it's clearly that your parents and teachers didn't teach you any manners. If you want them to come and reclaim the sword and I will tell them what happened and advise to pay more attention to you."

Guo Xiang was furious when she heard this, according to this man she was a wild girl with no manners, and thought: "Fine! Not only did you scold me, you also scolded my parents, grandfather. Do you really think you have invincible abilities and you can be that arrogant."

She held her temper and said: "What's your name?"

The pale-faced man grunted and said: "Let me teach you, you should say: Sirs, may I be so bold to ask you what your names are?"

Guo Xiang angrily said: "No, I will say it however I want. If you don't want to tell me, fine. It's not that I'm desperate to know. This sword isn't worth much, and you are bullying a young girl by stealing their possessions. I don't want it anymore."

She turned around and walked out the pavilion.

Suddenly the red-faced man blocked Guo Xiang and smiled: "Young girls shouldn't be that hot-tempered, when you get married you can't throw tantrums like that anymore. Let me tell you, we are 3 martial arts brothers, and we just arrived in China a few days. We're from the western borders of China."

Guo Xiang pouted: "I know that too, in China we don't recognize the 3 of you." The 3 men looked at each other and the red-faced man asked: "May I ask Miss, who your teacher

is?" Guo Xiang didn't want to reveal the names of her parents at ShaoLin originally. But now she was angry and told them: "My father's name is Guo Jing. And my mother is called Huang Rong. I don't have a teacher, I learnt a bit of martial arts from my parents."

The 3 old men looked at each other and the pale-face man softly said: "Guo Jing? Huang Rong? Of which school do they belong? Whose disciples are they?"

Guo Xiang was infuriated, because her parents were respected throughout the realm. Even ordinary people know them, let alone WuLin persons, the famous great hero Guo Jing was respected for guarding the city of XiangYang for many years.

But judging from their expressions, they are not pretending to be ignorant. She realised: "These 3 Saints of KunLun live on the western borders and rarely come to China. Otherwise, with their martial arts father and mother were bound to mention them to me. If they truly don't know my parents then it's not strange. It's very likely that they just study martial arts at Mount KunLun and forget all other matters."

When she realised this, her anger disappeared, she is not a girl to throw tantrums and said: "My name is Guo Xiang. Fine, I have told you everything you wanted to know. Sirs, may I be so bold to ask you what your names are?"

The red-faced man smiled: "That's a good girl, now you show respect to seniors."

He pointed to the yellow-faced man and said: "That's our eldest martial arts brother, his name Pan TianGeng, I'm the second martial arts brother and my name is Fang TianLao. This is my third martial arts brother and his name is Wei

TianWang. The 3 of us all belong to the Tian character generation."

Guo Xiang nodded and remembered their names and asked: "Are you going to the ShaoLin Monastery or not? Have you battle the monks there? And who is better?" Wei TianWang sternly asked her: "How did you know we're going to compete with the ShaoLin monks? Hardly anyone knows this and when did you know this? Tell us now!" He walked towards Guo Xiang made a fist and stared at Guo Xiang very viciously. Guo Xiang thought: "Do you really think you can intimidate me? Originally I wanted to tell you, but now I won't talk."

She gave him an indifferent eye and said coldly: "Your name is good, why don't you change it in to TianE ('born viciously')?"

Wei TianWang angrily shouted: "What?"

Guo Xiang said: "I never met a more vicious man like you, you grabbed my weapon and you're still this fierce. Are you the Deity of Ferociousness in reincarnation?"

Wei TianWang made a few strange noises like an animal and his chest swelled up and it looked like his hair and eyebrows raised too.

Fang TianLao said: "Third brother, don't get upset." and he pulled Guo Xiang back and he stood between the 2 of them.

Guo Xiang saw Wei TianWang and knew if he attacked, she would not be able to withstand it and was beginning to get a bit scared.

Wei TianWang pulled out the short sword of Guo Xiang and

used 2 fingers to hold it and used his internal strength to break it into 2 halves. He returned the broken half back into the scabbard and said: "Who wants your unworthy sword." Guo Xiang saw the powerful energy of his fingers and looked in awe.

Wei TianWang saw her expression and was very pleased and laughed heartily. This laughter was ear-piercing and shook the roof tiles of the pavilion.

Suddenly the roof cracked open and something fell down. Everyone was surprised at this and even Wei TianWang was even more surprised. He used his internal strength to make a laughing sound to tremble the tiles. But actually there was no tone of pleasure in his laughter. When he saw the roof cracking open he thought that without his own knowledge he reached a higher level in his cultivation of internal energy.

When he looked at that "thing" that dropped down he was shocked to see a man in a white robe holding a zither. He was just lying there, closing his eyes.

Guo Xiang was pleased to see him and said: "You're here too." This man was the man she met earlier.

The man jumped up when he heard Guo Xiang talking to him and said: "Miss, I was looking for you. I didn't know you were here."

Guo Xiang said: "Why are you looking for me?" That man said: "I forgot to ask you something, namely [Miss, may I ask what your name is?]."

Guo Xiang said: "How very formal, I can't stand that genteel and mournful way of talking." That man was stunned for a moment and laughed: "You're right, you're right. Those that

cling on to mere conventionalities and put on airs have no real abilities. Those men are only fit to fool ignorant peasants." after saying that he looked at Wei TianWang and scoffed.

Guo Xiang was very happy and thought this man was helping her.

Wei TianWang stared at him and his face became even more white and coldly asked: "May I know your name, Sir?"

That man ignored him and asked: "Miss, what's your name?"

Guo Xiang said: "My name is Guo Xiang."

That man clapped his hand and said: "Forgive me for not recognizing you, you're the famous Miss Guo. Your father is the great hero Master Guo Jing and your mother is the famous heroine Master Huang Rong. With the exception for ignorant peasants and idiots, everyone in the realm of martial arts knows them. The 2 of them are well-versed in both literary and martial arts, and are well-versed in sabre, swords, spears, halberds. Also renowned for their palm, fist techniques, internal energy, zither, chess, calligraphy, art, composing poems and songs. But there are clearly some foolish people who have never heard of them before."

Guo Xiang was quite amused and thought: "You're were listening at our conversation on the roof. It seems that you don't know my parents are. And my father being well-versed in literary fields is even more hilarious." She laughed and said: "Well, what's your name?"

The man answered: "My name is He ZuDao." Guo Xiang smiled and said: "He ZuDao! He Zu Dao Zai ('not worth mentioning')? A very modest name."

He ZuDao said: "Compared to Tian ('heaven') something or Di ('earth') something these arrogant bragging, overweening ignoramuses, my name isn't that appalling."

He ZuDao keeps mocking the 3 of them, they could keep their tempers under control because they knew this man wasn't an ordinary man. But He's remarks were getting even more insulting and Wei TianWang was the first to attack and raised his palm to strike He ZuDao. He ZuDao ducked his head and passed under Wei's arms. Wei TianWang felt a numbness in his left hand and saw that He seized the sword out of his hand. When Wei TianWang seized the sword, he was so swift that no one could see his movements, but He ZuDao did in a very floating and light manner.

Wei TianWang was shocked and he used his hands as claws to try to get the sword back. He aimed for He's shoulder. He avoided that claw. Pan TianGeng and Fang TianLao leapt out of the pavilion. Wei TianWang attacked with both hands, left hand with a fist, right hand palm stances causing a 'whooshing sound.' He ZuDao avoided Wei's 7, 8 stances, Wei couldn't even touch He's clothes. With one hand holding the sword, he could still avoid the attacker's violent attacks, with a small movement Wei TianWang's attacks were always in vain.

Guo Xiang, herself was not a real martial arts expert due to her young age. However, her friends and relatives are all top martial arts experts of this time so her insight is very profound on martial arts. When she saw that He ZuDao used balanced movements and very clever moves to avoid very violent attacks she knew his martial arts were of an entire different type and were very different from the martial arts found in China.

Wei TianWang used 20 stances already and still couldn't force his opponent to fight back, so he took a deep breath and his fist techniques changed and he attacked slowly now but the force of his fists increased. Guo Xiang felt his energy and stepped out of the pavilion.

At this point, He ZuDao didn't dare just to avoid these attacks and hung the sword at his belt and stood still and yelled: "You're not the only one skilled in tough martial arts." When Wei's 2 palms reached him He used his left hand to respond at this attack. Tough against tough, the 3 palms made a 'bamming' sound. Wei's body shook and he took 2 paces back. He ZuDao stood still.

Wei TianWang always believed that this skill of his was unequaled in the realm. But today he was unable to win and he himself was pushed back 2 paces. He wasn't ready to give up and took a deep breath and yelled out both palms pushed forward. He ZuDao yelled out too and returned a palm, shaking the broken roof.

Wei TianWang backed 4 paces, before he could stand still again. After 2 times of palm to palm attacks his hair was messy and he had bug-eyes now looking very eerie. He put his hands around his public region and took a few breaths causing his chest to swell up again. All his joints made a funny cracking sound and he walked towards He ZuDao.

He ZuDao didn't dare to be inattentive and readied himself to encounter him. Wei TianWang kept walking towards He and walked so close that they could feel each other's breath. At this point, one of Wei's palms aimed for He's face the other palm aimed for the lower abdomen. With this attack he hoped to divide the opponent's energy. This stance was very violent and fierce.

He ZuDao used his both palms to meet up with Wei's palms. He divided his energy into 2 sorts, Ying and Yang. Wei felt that the palm that aimed for his face was empty and hollow, the other palm felt it hit an iron brick wall. Wei TianWang knew this wasn't good and he felt an enormous energy coming towards him and pushing him out of the pavilion.

This sort of tough attacks, the weaker one will be injured and there was no way to avoid that. No matter whether Wei TianWang could stand still or fall down. His own energy was reflected back and He ZuDao's energy was added to it. Wei was surely to cough up blood. Pan TianGeng and Fang TianLao both yelled: "Now!" Both jumped up and grabbed Wei's arms and picked him up, and helped him avoid the enormous blow. Although Wei TianWang wasn't injured, his 5 internal organs felt like it was turned upside-down and all his joints seemed to be cracked. He couldn't breathe easily now and was panting.

Fang TianLao was angry and surprised to see his third martial arts brother wounded but remained smiling and said: "Your palm techniques are indeed very powerful, and are hardly equaled in the realm. My respects."

Guo Xiang thought: "When it comes to powerful palm techniques, who can match my father's 18 Dragon-Subduing Palms. You, The 3 Saints of KunLun, are just too ignorant. One of these days you'll meet a true hero of the central plains."

When she thought of this, she felt grieved again. Because she wished that the hero they would meet was Yang Guo and not her father Guo Jing.

Fang TianLao said: "This unworthy old man wants to try your swordsmanship."

He ZuDao said: "Brother Fang was very friendly towards Miss Guo. I don't blame you for anything and we needn't battle."

Guo Xiang was surprised and thought: "The reason why you taught Wei TianWang a lesson was that he was very rude to me?"

Fang TianLao drew his sword and used a finger to tick the tip of his sword. The sword made a humming sound. When Fang drew his sword, his smile disappeared. The sword pointed into the sky and this stance was called "An Immortal Giving Directions."

He ZuDao said: "If brother Fang really wants to battle I'll use the short sword of Miss Guo." He drew the broken sword, the sword originally was very short and after Wei TianWang broke it was even shorter. Furthermore, the tip was gone now and it didn't even resemble a dagger.

He ZuDao held the scabbard in his left hand and thrust the sword forward. This was a very fast maneuver, Fang TianLao saw a white flash and already He ZuDao attacked with 3 stances, because the sword He used was too short he couldn't wound Fang TianLao. But Fang was still frightened and thought: "Very fast 3 stances, most difficult to block. What kind of swordsmanship does he use? If he used an ordinary long sword I would be dead by now."

After He ZuDao attacked with 3 stances, he backed away and stood still. Fang TianLao displayed his sword techniques in half defending and half attacking. He ZuDao avoided the attacks and didn't counter attack. Suddenly he attacked with incredible speed again forcing Fang TianLao to be in a frantic rush. And He ZuDao jumped back again. Fang TianLao displayed his sword into a white light, and his movements were very swift.

Guo Xiang thought: "This old man's techniques are violent, fierce, ruthless and viscous. Similar to the palm techniques of Wei TianWang, but he's swifter and makes him more lethal....."

When she thought of here, she heard He ZuDao yell out: "Be careful!" After saying 'careful' his scabbard in his left hand was quick as lightning and encased Fangs' sword and his right hand sword pointed at the throat of Fang TianLao.

Fang TianLaos' sword was stuck in the scabbard and couldn't be used to block that stance. Seeing that sword was about to thrust through his throat, he let go of his sword and rolled away on the ground and avoided that lethal blow. Before Fang got up, Pan TianGeng seized the hilt of the sword and pulled it out of the scabbard. Both Guo Xiang and He ZuDao exclaimed: "Excellent movement!" This sickly looking old man didn't say a word, but it was evident his martial arts were above his two younger martial arts brothers.

He ZuDao said: "Sir, you have very good martial arts. My respects." He ZuDao turned his head to Guo Xiang and said: "Miss Guo, after hearing your enchanting performance earlier, I've composed another song. And I would like you to give me your opinion."

Guo Xiang asked: "What kind of song is it?" He ZuDao sat on the ground and started to prepare his zither.

Pan TianGeng said: "You've defeated my two martial arts brothers. I would like to compete with you."

He ZuDao shook his hands and said: "I have already competed and had no pleasure in it. I want to play a song for Miss Guo now. It's a new song, if you're interested you can

stay and listen if you don't understand you're welcome to leave." And started playing the zither.

Guo Xiang was amazed and pleased. Somehow He ZuDao composed this new song from the song she played earlier. Making it even more brilliant and interesting. The music was very mesmerizing.

The actual translation will have to wait for some time, or someone else already knows the translation. He/she is welcome to do that part.

At one point of this song, He ZuDao mentioned a "she" in his lyrics, Guo Xiang thought: "The "she" in his song, could it be me? The music was very touching, moving and was filled with admiration and love."

Realising that Guo Xiang blushed. Never in her life did she even hear such beautiful music.

Pan TianGeng and others didn't understand any of this. They don't know that He ZuDao was a rather arrogant man with a flair of a silly bookworm behavior.

After composing a new song he rushed over to play it for Guo Xiang. Furthermore, he composed it for her and he forgot everything else. But seeing him like this, Pan and the others thought he was looking down upon them and couldn't restrain their anger anymore.

Pan pointed the sword at He ZuDaos' shoulder and yelled: "Stand up, I want to battle you."

He ZuDao was entirely into the music and thought himself to be a proud scholar who was roaming about to enjoy the scenery. He vaguely saw a very gentle young girl standing on

a small island. No matter what stood in his way he had to reach her.....

Suddenly he felt a pain in his shoulder and raised his head to see Pan TianGeng pointing a sword against his shoulder and penetrating a bit of skin. He knew that if he didn't fight Pan would surely wound him. However, he didn't finish his song yet and felt that these Philistines were preventing him from finishing his song to Guo Xiang.

He ZuDao drew the broken sword of Guo Xiang in his left hand and blocked Pan TianGeng's attacks and used his right hand to play the zither.

He ZuDao displayed his special ability, one hand playing the zither and the other hand using a sword. He managed perfectly well with one hand playing the zither. He also used a puff of air to play another chord of the zither.

Pan TianGeng attacked rapidly with a few violent techniques, He ZuDao easily blocked them and his eyes were concentrated on the zither and was afraid his puff of air will disperse.

Pan TianGeng became angrier and angrier, his sword techniques were becoming fiercer and fiercer, but still He ZuDao easily warded them off.

Guo Xiang was listening to the music and didn't pay any attention to the attacks of Pan TianGeng. However, the sounds of the swords intersecting was disturbing the music. She softly clapped her hands and raised her eyebrows and said to Pan TianGeng: "Your techniques are not in unison, are you not familiar with music? If you listen carefully the sounds of the swords won't disrupt the music."

Pan TianGeng didn't pay any attention to her and saw that the enemy was sitting on the ground and was concentrated on the zither. And still he wasn't able to overcome He ZuDao, Pan became very anxious and his stances changed to rapid attacks and the clatter of the sounds were becoming very dense. This sound was the total opposite of the gentle soft music. He ZuDao raised his eyebrows and passed strength to his sword and the sword of Pan TianGeng made 'clank' sound and broke into two halves. However, one of the chords of the zither broke as well. Pan TianGeng looked very pale and didn't say a word and left the pavilion. The 3 martial arts brother mounted their horses and quickly rode up the mountain.

Guo Xiang was a bit surprised to see that and said: "These 3 men were defeated, how come they're still headed towards the ShaoLin Monastery? Do they really want to fight to the end?"

She turned to He ZuDao and saw him looking sad and was touching that broken chord and looked very unhappy. Guo Xiang thought: "Just a broken chord why so unhappy?" She picked up the zither and removed the broken chord and was tuning the zither again.

He ZuDao sighed: "After all these years of training, I still cannot focus properly. I used force in my left hand breaking his sword but also breaking that chord."

Now Guo Xiang understood and knew he was unhappy that his martial arts was still not perfect and smiled: "You want to fight with your left hand and play the zither with your right hand. This form of using your concentration of 2 matters is only known to three persons in the realm. You haven't reached that level yet, why worry so much about it."

He ZuDao asked: "Who are these three people?" Guo Xiang said: "The first one is "The Old Imp" Zhou BoTong, the second one is my father and the third one is Madame Yang, Xiao LongNu. Apart from these 3 people, even people with great martial arts like my grandfather the lord of the Peach Blossom Island, my mother and "the Condor Hero" Yang Guo are unable to that."

He ZuDao said: "It's hard to believe that there are so many astonishing people in the realm. You must introduce me to them."

Guo Xiang faintly said: "If you want to meet my father that is not difficult, as for the other two, I don't even know where to look." She saw He ZuDao looking disappointed she said: "You've defeated "The 3 Saints of KunLun" which is a amazing thing. Why fret over such a small incident like a broken chord."

He ZuDao was shocked and asked: "The 3 Saints of KunLun? What are you talking about? And how did you know?"

Guo Xiang smiled: "Those 3 old men came from the western borders, they must be "The 3 Saints of KunLun." They do have their unique abilities, but challenging ShaoLin is a bit too arrogant....."

She saw that He ZuDao was looking very strangely and asked: "What's so strange?"

He ZuDao softly said: "The 3 Saints of KunLun, The 3 Saints of KunLun, He ZuDao. That's me."

Guo Xiang was surprised and asked: "You're "The 3 Saints of KunLun"? Where are the other 2?"

He ZuDao said: "The 3 Saints of KunLun" is one person, there were never 3. I have established a small reputation in the western borders, and the local friends say that my chess, sword and zither skills are superb. Also they say I'm fit to be a saint in the zither, a saint if chess and a saint in swordsmanship. But I knew that the saint was not something that could easily be assumed. So I changed my name to He ZuDao ('not worth mentioning'). So when other people hear my name they won't think I'm an arrogant, overbearing man."

Guo Xiang smiled and clapped her hands: "Now I get it. I thought that "The 3 Saints of KunLun were 3 persons. But who were those 3 old men?"

He ZuDao answered: "They? Those were ShaoLin disciples."

Guo Xiang was even more confused and said: "So they belong to ShaoLin. Right, their martial arts were firm and strong. Indeed that red-faced man used "DaMo" swordsmanship and the sickly-looking man used "WeiTuo" Demon-Subduing Sword techniques. But there were a lot of changes and alterations to them I couldn't recognize them. Why did they come here?"

He ZuDao said: "This is not without reason. Last year Spring, I was at Mount KunLun, peak JingShen playing the zither. Suddenly I heard fighting noises and took a look and saw 2 men were struggling on the ground. Both were heavily injured but both were still wrestling with each other. I yelled at them to stop but they still continued and walked over to push them aside. When I did so, one of them fell down and died, the other was still breathing. I took him to my home and gave him some medicines, after half a day he was revived. But he was mortally wounded and no medicine could prolong his life anymore. Before he died he said his name

was Yin KeXi....."

Guo Xiang called out in surprise and asked: "Was the other man called Xiao XiangZi? He was very tall and skinny and his face looked like a corpse, right?"

He ZuDao was surprised and said: "Yes, how did you know?"

Guo Xiang said: "I saw them once, I never thought they 2 would fight each other to the death."

He ZuDao said: "That Yin KeXi said he did a life full wicked deeds, there was no use in feeling sorry for himself anymore. He said that he and Xiao XiangZi went to the ShaoLin Monastery and stole a manuscript, both of them were suspicious of each other. Both of them didn't trust each other and were afraid if the other one learnt the manuscript he would kill the other one and keep the manuscript for himself. Both ate at the same table, slept in the same bed and didn't leave the other out of sight. But, both were afraid that one would put in poison in the food or sneak up on him in the night and kill him. Both were extremely edgy and couldn't eat or rest properly, also, they were afraid that ShaoLin monks would catch up on them. So they went to the western borders and at Peak JingShen, both were extremely weary and knew if this continued both of them would be tired to death. So they fought it out there and then. According to Yin KeXi, Xiao XiangZi's martial arts was better than his and attacked first. Yin KeXi suffered a blow, but in the end, Yin KeXi gained the advantage. Then Yin realised that Xiao XiangZi was heavily injured at Mount Hua and hadn't recovered yet. If otherwise, they wouldn't have made it to Mount KunLun."

After Guo Xiang heard this story she thought of the situation Yin KeXi and Xiao XiangZi were in and became gloomy and

sighed: "Just because of a manuscript, this isn't worth it."

He ZuDao said: "After telling this, Yin KeXi was having difficulty breathing and begged me to go to the ShaoLin Monastery and tell a monk called JueYuan something about 'the manuscript is in the oil' ('Jing Zai You Zhong'). I found this sentence very strange and didn't understand what he meant with the manuscript in the oil. Just when I wanted to ask him what he meant, he fainted. I thought after he rested for awhile I will ask him again. But he never woke up again. I thought perhaps he hid the manuscript in an oilcloth, but I couldn't find anything in their clothes. Anyway, I have been entrusted to deliver a message so I decided to carry this mission out. Furthermore, I've never been to China before so I decided to tour around for some time and ended up here.

Guo Xiang asked: "Why did you leave a note at ShaoLin? And challenged the ShaoLin monks?"

He ZuDao smiled and said: "This is has to do with those 3 old men earlier. They are the ShaoLin disciples of the Western ShaoLin Monastery. According to the people there, they belong to the same "Tian" generation as the TianMing abbot of this ShaoLin. It seems that their patriarch had a disagreement with his martial arts brothers here and in a fury he left and founded the Western ShaoLin Monastery. Originally, the martial arts of ShaoLin came with Master DaMo of India to China and from China to the western regions. Which wasn't a strange thing. These 3 men heard of my reputation as "The 3 Saints of KunLun" and wanted to duel with me. On their way here, they kept boasting that ShaoLin martial arts were unequalled in the realm, I was permitted to be a saint in chess and the zither but not in swordsmanship. So I had to be the 2 saints instead of 3. And this happened before I met Yin KeXi so I thought I could finish 2 tasks in one go. I sent someone to notify those 3 old men to

meet me at the ShaoLin Monastery. Anyway, the 3 of them were travelling very fast and could catch up with me."

Guo Xiang laughed: "I guessed entirely wrong. I wonder what those 3 old men will say when they reach the ShaoLin Monastery."

He ZuDao said: "I don't have any grudges against ShaoLin so I left a note that I will come 10 days later. I did this because I wanted those 3 old men to arrive at ShaoLin and battle them. But now the duel is over, let us go to ShaoLin together and after I delivered the message we will leave again."

Guo Xiang frowned her eyebrows and said: "The rules of these monks are very strict, women may not enter."

He ZuDao said: "Pooh! What damn rules! We're just going to enter and what are they going to do about it? Kill us?"

Guo Xiang is a rather meddlesome girl, but after meeting reverend Wuse she has no bad feelings towards ShaoLin and shook her head and smiled: "I'll wait for you outside, you just enter and deliver the message. There's no need to create unnecessary trouble."

He ZuDao nodded and said: "Alright! I haven't finished playing my song for you after delivering the message I'll played once again for you."

End of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 - At the top of Mount WuDang the Pines and Cypresses are grown

(Translated by Athena)



The 18 disciples of the DaMo Hall stepped forward to seize Zhang JunBao. JueYuan didn't think anymore and turned a circle and the 2 iron buckets were rotating, causing the monks to back off. JueYuan threw the remaining water out of the buckets and placed Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao in the buckets. He whirled the buckets round and round like a pair of comet hammers. All the disciples of the DaMo Hall quickly moved away.

Guo Xiang and He ZuDao walked towards the ShaoLin Monastery, before long they reached the gates of ShaoLin and didn't see anyone.

He ZuDao said: "I'm not going in either, I'll just ask that monk to come out and deliver the message." He raised his voice and said: "He ZuDao of Mount KunLun pays a visit to the ShaoLin Monastery, I have something to say."

After he said that, they could hear 10 large bells ringing.

The door opened and 2 rows of grey-robed monks came out. In the left row there were 54 monks and on the right side there were also 54 monks. There were 108 monks, these were all disciples of the LuoHan Hall, filling up the positions of the 108 Arhats. After them, 18 monks came out wearing yellow kasayas. These monks looked a bit older than the disciples of the LuoHan Hall, they were the senior pupils of the DaMo Hall. After awhile 7 old monks came out wearing robes with big squares. These 7 monks all had wrinkles, the youngest was 70 odd years the eldest was about 90 years old. These were the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall. After them, Abbot TianMing came out, on his left reverend WuXiang head of the DaMo Hall and on the right reverend WuSe of the LuoHan Hall. Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao and Wei TianWang followed after the 3 elders.

In the end there were 70, 80 *common disciples of the ShaoLin Monastery.

(*These pupils are not monks, just ordinary people. For example, pupils like Xiao Feng, Chen YouLiang, etc. belong to this category)

That day He ZuDao sneaked into ShaoLin and left a note in the LuoHan Hall. This incident startled abbot TianMing, WuSe and WuXiang. Days later Pan, Fang and Wei said they would come to ShaoLin and duel, making all the monks very restless and vigilant. The Western ShaoLin was located far away from here and for many years the monks there didn't make any contact with the ShaoLin monks here. But all the monks knew that the patriarch of the Western ShaoLin Master GuWei was a powerful martial arts expert. So his disciples should be extraordinary people too. After hearing that Pan, Fang, and Wei didn't dare to look down upon "The 3 Saints of KunLun," and as the saying goes: "He who has come is surely strong or he'd never come along". The entire monastery was very vigilant and the abbot has ordered every disciple within a radius of 250 kilometers to return to the monastery and await orders.

In the beginning, everyone thought that "The 3 Saints of KunLun" were 3 people, but after hearing from Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao, and Wei TianWang they knew it was only 1 man. But concerning age and appearances, even Pan and the others weren't too sure. They only knew that he was proud of his skills in the zither, chess, and swordsmanship. Playing the zither and chess could slacken and leisure the heart and concentration that does no good to their Buddhist meditation. But martial arts experts who specialize in swordsmanship were very willing to duel with this arrogant man who called himself a "Saint of Swordsmanship".

Pan TianGeng and his 2 martial arts brothers felt very confident of themselves and thought this entire incident was their doing and hope to travel thousands of miles to finish it here. They wanted to defeat He ZuDao before he could reach the monastery . After that, they would have a duel with the monks of the monastery and the Western ShaoLin will be greater than the Northern ShaoLin Monastery. However, after the battle at the stone pavilion, He ZuDao only used half of his abilities and he could easily overcome Pan, Fang, and Wei.

After abbot TianMing heard of this, he knew that ShaoLin was facing an imminent danger. After careful analysis he realised that he, WuSe, and WuXiang were about the same level as Pan, Fang, and Wei. So he asked the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall to help out if necessary. However, no one knew how high the martial arts of the 7 elders were, and if they are strong enough to defeat He ZuDao if it really was necessary. These were all speculations of abbot TianMing, reverends WuSe and WuXiang.

When abbot TianMing saw He ZuDao and Guo Xiang he put his palms together and said: "This must be the saints of chess, swordsmanship and zither, Benefactor He. Forgive us for a late welcome."

He ZuDao returned respects and said: "My name is indeed He ZuDao, the nickname of 3 saints is not worth mentioning. I apologize for causing trouble at your monastery and I dare not deserve having all reverends coming to welcome me."

TianMing thought: "This arrogant scholar doesn't talk very arrogant. He seems to be around 30 years old, how could he easily defeat Pan and his martial arts brothers?"

TianMing said: "You're very kind benefactor He, please enter

our monastery for tea. However this benefactress....." He looked a bit awkward.

When He ZuDao heard that abbot TianMing wasn't going to allow Guo Xiang to enter, his arrogance was aroused and laughed: "Old abbot, I came here to deliver a message on behalf of someone. After doing that I'll leave, but the rules set by your monastery prohibiting women from entering is ludicrous. Frankly, I have problems with that rule. According to Buddhism, every life is equally precious, not making unnecessary distinctions between men and women."

Abbot TianMing is an enlightened priest, and is very broad-minded. TianMing smiled and said: "Thank you for pointing that out. We are a bit petty when it comes to that. Well, Miss Guo, please enter for tea too."

Guo Xiang smiled at He ZuDao and said: "You're very eloquent, with just a few words this old monk already gave in."

Abbot TianMing moved aside and made a gesture to welcome guests when suddenly an old and skinny monk to the left of TianMing stepped forward and said: "Just because of benefactor He's one sentence, ShaoLin should abolish an ancient custom, which isn't a bad thing, but we would like to see if the person who said those words have any real, impressive abilities. Or does he just clings on to a false reputation. I would like to ask benefactor He to reveal 1, 2 special abilities so all the monks can be convinced of your specialties, so we all know that we just abolished a thousand year old rule for a worthy purpose."

The old monk who said this was reverend WuXiang, head of the DaMo Hall. His voice was clear and loud showing that his internal strength was full and solid. When Pan TianGen, Fang

TianLao and Wei TianWang heard this, their facial expressions changed. The words of WuXiang clearly indicate he has no high opinion of these 3 Western ShaoLin disciples. He ZuDao defeating them didn't necessarily mean He ZuDao had any great abilities.

Guo Xiang saw reverend WuSe looking awkward and thought this old monk is a good man and a friend of Yang Guo. If He ZuDao really fought against the monks, and either party would lose, she would still feel bad about it. So she said to He ZuDao: "Brother He, I don't really have to enter the monastery. After you've delivered the message, we'll go."

Guo Xiang pointed at WuSe and said: "This reverend WuSe is a good friend of mine. I hope you can be friends too."

He ZuDao said: "Oh, I see." and turned to abbot TianMing and said: "Old abbot, there is a Master JueYuan here in the monastery. Who is it? I have been entrusted a message that I have to deliver to him."

Abbot TianMing softly said: "Master JueYuan?"

JueYuan's position is very low in the monastery. For many years he was just staying in the library and no one really paid any attention to him. Also, never did anyone call him [Master JueYuan] so that's why abbot TianMing didn't know who He ZuDao meant. After awhile, TianMing said: "Oh! The monk who lost the "Ni Jia Scriptures". Benefactor He, does this have to do with the lost of the "Ni Jia Scriptures."

He ZuDao shook his head and said: "I really don't know."

TianMing told a pupil: "Tell JueYuan to come out and meet our guests."

The disciple quickly left.

Reverend WuXiang said: "Benefactor He, is the saints of the zither, chess and swordsmanship. Ordinary people wouldn't dare to be called [saint]. Benefactor He must have extraordinary abilities in these 3 arts. Many days ago you left a note in the monastery telling us that you're were eager to display your martial arts. Today you have come and we are very eager to see your martial arts."

He ZuDao shook his head and said: "Miss Guo already said that both parties should not create any grudges."

WuXiang was really annoyed and thought: "You left a note challenging us, now you're saying you don't want to fight. In these 1000 years, who dared to look down upon ShaoLin like that? Furthermore, Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao and Wei TianWang were defeated at your hands. If word would get out that the head disciples of the ShaoLin School were defeated by you, your name the saint of swordsmanship will be even more famous in WuLin. Ordinary pupils are no match for him, I must challenge him personally."

WuXiang walked forward and said: "Exchanging views on martial arts doesn't necessarily mean creating grudges. Benefactor He, there is no reason to be humble."

Wuxiang turned to a disciple of the DaMo Hall and said: "Get a sword! We will see the swordsmanship of the famous [saint of swordsmanship]. And we will see if the word [saint] is the right word to name it."

The weapons of the monastery were already prepared, but were not brought out. That was to avoid people from saying ShaoLin monks were petty.

The disciple went back in and brought 7, 8 swords and went to He ZuDao and said: "Benefactor He, will you be using your own weapon or will you be using one of our swords?"

He ZuDao didn't answer and picked up a sharp rock from the ground and started carving lines in the tiles. He drew a chess board with that sharp rock. Every line was precise, accurate, and deeply carved into the stone tiles. He ZuDao just picked up a rock and drew this, this use and possession of internal energy was rare in the realm. He ZuDao laughed and said: "Dueling with swords might create unnecessary animosities between us. There is no way in competing music. If all you are interested, we could play chess."

This display of internal energy and drawing a chessboard with a small rock was amazing. TianMing, WuSe, WuXiang and the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall looked at each other and were stunned.

Abbot TianMing knew that this man's internal strength was very powerful and no one in the monastery was his match. The abbot was about to admit defeat when they heard a metallic sound walking towards them. It was JueYuan carrying two large metal buckets. Behind him was a young tall man. JueYuan put down the buckets and paid his respects to TianMing and said: "I await your orders, abbot."

TianMing said: "This benefactor He has something to tell you."

JueYuan turned around and didn't know who He ZuDao was. JueYuan said: "I am JueYuan. Benefactor He, can I help you?"

After He ZuDao finished drawing the chessboard, his interest for chess was awoken and asked: "The message can wait now. Who is interested in a game of chess?" He ZuDao didn't

want to show off his martial arts, but he was always very captivated by the arts of zither, chess and swordsmanship. If his interest was awoken he can forget everything around him. He ZuDao just wanted a monk to play chess with now and forgot entirely about fighting.

Abbot TianMing said: "Benefactor He's ability to draw a chessboard with a mere rock is amazing. Such magnificent ability is something I have never seen before. All the monks here are no match for you."

When JueYuan heard these words, he looked at the lines on the ground and realised that this He ZuDao came here to challenge the ShaoLin Monastery. JueYuan picked up the iron buckets and took a deep breath and focused all his internal strength to his feet and started walking towards the lines.

The chains bound to JueYuan's feet dragged over the lines and erasing it. When the monks saw that, everyone called: "Good!"

TianMing, WuSe and WuXiang were surprised and happy to see that this old and pedant monk had such powerful internal energy. They lived in the monastery all these years and never realised it before. TianMing knows that no matter how powerful the internal energy of one person is, he/she can never leave such deep prints in the ground. The reason why JueYuan could do this was that his iron buckets were filled with water so in total, there was 200 kilograms.

Before JueYuan could erase all the lines, He ZuDao spoke to him: "Very powerful internal energy, I don't have such powerful internal strength."

JueYuan felt his energy growing in his public region but his legs were getting tired. JueYuan stopped when he heard He

ZuDao talking to him and turned to him and said with a smile: "Is there a difference in white and black pieces?"

He ZuDao said: "Right! This game of chess cannot be played anymore, I lose. I will try your swordsmanship." He ZuDao drew his sword and aimed for his own chest and the hilt was facing the opponent. This was a very strange technique and looked like he was trying to kill himself. In all the sword stances in the world there was never such a strange technique.

JueYuan said: "I only how know to meditate and recite scriptures. My responsibility is to tidy the library. I've never learnt martial arts."

He ZuDao didn't believe him and scoffed. He ZuDao advanced forward, the tip of the sword was now aiming for JueYuan's chest. This technique was very fast and was practically unequalled by all sword techniques in the realm. This stance wasn't meant to aim for yourself but the position He ZuDao took was to generate his internal energy to the sword and lash out. However, JueYuan's internal energy was so powerful it was able to come and go as JueYuan pleases. JueYuan used one of the buckets to block this technique and the tip of the sword hit the iron bucket. The sword bent a bit and He ZuDao retrieved this technique and attacked again. JueYuan used the other bucket to block that stance.

He ZuDao thought: "No matter how high your martial arts is, these buckets are not easy to be handled. How can you block my stances? If you used your hands instead I would have slightly feared you."

He ZuDao used his index finger to point at the tip of the sword producing a buzzing sound. It was similar to a cry of a dragon.

He ZuDao called out: "Watch out, old monk!" With incredible speed He ZuDao launched 16 stances towards JueYuan.

However, JueYuan blocked all of them, these 16 techniques were called "The Swift Lightning Swordsmanship."

Everyone could see that JueYuan was in a frantic state, anyone knew now that JueYuan didn't know any martial arts at all.

These excellent sword techniques of He ZuDao were all blocked in a very silly way.

WuSe and WuXiang were very worried and called out: "Please spare him, benefactor He!"

Even Guo Xiang called out: "Don't harm him!"

He ZuDao put everything he knew in this battle but still couldn't overcome this monk.

He didn't believe this monk didn't know any martial arts. The reason why JueYuan could avoid being hit was that he had very powerful internal energy.

He ZuDao realised his swift techniques were in vain and yelled out. A light flash was aiming for JueYuan's abdomen.

JueYuan called out and used the 2 buckets to clip down the sword. He ZuDao wanted to pull the sword back but couldn't move an inch. Quickly, He ZuDao changed technique and released the sword and placed all his energy to his palms and attacked with his palms. He aimed for JueYuan's head.

At this point, JueYuan couldn't block that move anymore. The

situation was very dangerous. Zhang JunBao was very worried for his teacher, so Zhang leapt out and used the technique that Yang Guo taught him 3 years ago, namely "Extend in all Directions." Zhang hit He ZuDao on his left shoulder.

At this time, the internal energy of JueYuan was focused on the 2 buckets. The energy forced the water out in 2 spouts of water. When the energy of He ZuDao met with the spouts of water, the water was dispersed but also the energy of He ZuDao was gone. Both He ZuDao and JueYuan were wet.

He ZuDao was engaged in the fight with JueYuan and didn't pay any attention to the young Zhang JunBao. Little did He ZuDao realise that Zhang's palm technique and internal energy were very good and strong. He ZuDao was pushed away and could only stand still after 3 paces backwards.

JueYuan said: "Amitabha, Amitabha! Please let me go, benefactor He. Those few attacks were really frightening." JueYuan used his sleeve to wipe away the water on his face and quickly stepped aside.

He ZuDao angrily said: "The ShaoLin Monastery has indeed many extraordinary people. Even a little boy has such good martial arts. Youngster, let us fight, if you can withstand 10 of my stances I will never step foot again in China."

WuSe and WuXiang knew that Zhang JunBao was just a boy who cleaned the library and helped out JueYuan in his duties. Zhang never learnt any martial arts, he just accidentally hit He ZuDao just then. If they really fought, Zhang JunBao wouldn't last 1 stance.

WuXiang spoke: "Benefactor He, you're wrong. You are called "The 3 Saints of KunLun, your martial arts is unequalled

through the realm. How can you fight with a mere young cleaner? If you don't mind, let me accept that challenge."

He ZuDao shook his head and said: "Everyone saw that he just hit me, I cannot let that go unpunished. Watch out, lad!"

This palm technique was very fast and he stood very close to Zhang JunBao. WuSe, WuXiang and others wanted to help but were too late to do anything now.

Everyone was worried for Zhang JunBao. Zhang just stood there and his toes were turning to the left and his body turned fluently to the right, taking on the position of an archer. This time, his right hand and left hand were guarding his waist. His right fist attacked. This was a beginning of the ShaoLin fist style called: "The Flower Fist piercing through right."

This stance was absolutely excellent, this was a movement that should be made by a martial arts expert, not a young boy.

When He ZuDao suffered a blow to his shoulder he knew that this young boy's internal strength was superior to Pan TianGeng and others. But he was confident he could defeat Zhang JunBao within 10 stances. When he saw that attack made by Zhang he was quite impressed and said: "Excellent move!"

WuXiang thought of something and smiled to WuSe: "Congratulations, elder brother for having such a good disciple."

WuSe shook his head and said: "I didn't...." At this point, Zhang JunBao used another 3 stances to counter attack. All the movements were grand and energy generated was full

and fluent, not inferior to any ShaoLin martial artist.

TianMing, WuSe, WuXiang and the 7 elders of the Meditation Hall saw that Zhang JunBao's techniques were that spectacular. They were all stunned. WuXiang said: " The grandness of his stances is nothing compared to his energy....."

At this point, He ZuDao already used 6 stances and thought: "If I cannot defeat this young lad, everyone in WuLin will laugh at me for leaving a note to challenge ShaoLin."

Suddenly He ZuDao changed his movement and used a stance called: "The Floating Snow Flocks of Mount Tian."

His palms were incredibly fast, and it seemed like Zhang JunBao was surrounded by palms.

Zhang JunBao was never really instructed on martial arts by anyone, with the exception of Yang Guo 3 years ago. This is the first time he saw such strange and fast palm techniques and didn't know how to counter it. In a fit of anxiety, he used a ShaoLin stance called: "Two Circling Hands." Zhang JunBao raised his 2 hands above his face and stood there. This stance was very grand and majestic, no matter how, or where He ZuDao attacked, his attacks will always be met by these 2 hands.

The monks of the DaMo and LuoHan Hall were all calling out: "Good!" They were all impressed by Zhang JunBao's technique and praised him for using a simple ShaoLin stance to foil a heavy and complicated palm technique.

He ZuDao changed stance again and aimed a fist towards Zhang JunBao. Zhang returned the attack with a stance called: "The Flower leaning towards the 7 Stars."

Zhang's palm met with He's fist, there was a banging sound. He ZuDao's body shook and Zhang JunBao backed 5 paces. He ZuDao's face changed and said: "One more stance, try your best to deal with it."

Everyone remained silent, they knew that this final attack of He ZuDao was very powerful. They knew that He threw in everything to win at this point.

Again Zhang JunBao used: "The Flower leaning towards the 7 Stars."

This time there was no sound when fist and palm met. Both were generating internal energy. When it comes to all-round martial arts, He ZuDao would win with ease over Zhang JunBao. But when it comes to internal energy, Zhang learnt some parts of the "Jiu Yang" codex so his internal strength kept increasing and increasing. He ZuDao knew he couldn't defeat this young boy and leapt away and let Zhang JunBao's energy dash forward and used his right hand to push gently on Zhang's back causing him to fall over.

He ZuDao waved his hand and smiled wryly: "He ZuDao, He ZuDao. You're are too arrogant."

He ZuDao turned to abbot TianMing and said: "The martial arts of the ShaoLin Monastery are renowned for a thousand years. It is indeed amazing. Today I have seen enough, knowing that the good name of ShaoLin is well deserved."

He turned around and leapt forward a few metres, suddenly he turned around and said to JueYuan: "Reverend JueYuan, someone told me to deliver this message: The manuscript is in the oil/ [Jing Zai You Zhong]."

After saying that, he even leapt further away and his movements were incredibly fast, so fast that it was rare in the realm.

Zhang JuBao slowly struggled up, his face covered with sand. Although he was beaten by He ZuDao, He already admitted his defeat to ShaoLin.

Suddenly one of the old monks of the Meditation Hall spoke sharply and coldly: "Who taught this disciple martial arts?" Everyone felt uncomfortable after hearing this old monk talk.

Abbot TianMing, WuSe and WuXiang were all thinking about this too. They all looked at JueYuan and Zhang JunBao. JueYuan and Zhang just stood there not knowing what was going on now.

TianMing spoke: "JueYuan's internal strength is powerful but he never learnt any other forms of martial arts. Who taught this boy martial arts?"

The disciples of the DaMo and LuoHan Hall were all thinking, luckily today there was a young cleaner who come forward and warded off ShaoLin's disaster. The old abbot will surely reward him and the master who taught him martial arts.

The old monk of the Meditation Hall stood still and his eyebrows were raised. He looked like he was ready to kill someone. The old monk sharply asked Zhang JunBao again: "I'm going to ask you again. Who taught you this LuoHan fist style?"

Zhang JunBao took out the little iron Arhats Guo Xiang gave to him and said: "I just learnt a few stances from these little statues. No one taught me any martial arts."

The old monk stepped forward and slowly said in a threatening way: "Tell me one more time: Your LuoHan fist was NOT imparted by any master of the monastery. You learnt it by yourself."

Zhang JunBao was a bit startled but he also believed he didn't do anything wrong. Even though this old monk looked very stern, he wasn't afraid and said clearly: "I'm just responsible for keeping the library clean and tidy. I'm here to look after and help Master JueYuan. No other reverend in the monastery has taught me martial arts. I learnt this LuoHan fist by myself, I think I might have made a few mistakes in the stances. I hope old Master can give me some pointers."

The old monk's eyes looked like spitting fire and fiercely stared at Zhang JunBao for a ver long time and not moving.

JueYuan knew that this old monk was a senior of the monastery. He was one of the martial arts uncles of abbot TianMing. TianMing, himself, stood a generation higher than JueYuan, WuSe and WuXiang.

JueYuan didn't understand why this old monk was so angry and he saw that the old monk's eyes were filled with hate. Suddenly he realised something, he once read in a codex something that happened more than 70 years ago in the ShaoLin Monastery.

*More than 70 years ago, the abbot of the ShaoLin Monastery was reverend KuCheng. This abbot KuCheng stood 2 generations above abbot TianMing.

One year in Autumn, during a yearly contest held in the DaMo Hall, something disastrous happened. It was a tradition of ShaoLin to examine and evaluate the disciples' martial arts every year. This was done in the DaMo Hall, the abbot

and the 2 elders of the DaMo and LuoHan Hall would be the one to evaluate the disciples to see whether they had improved this year.

That year, the judge was the elder of the DaMo Hall reverend KuZhi and all the disciples were displaying their martial arts.

Suddenly a "TouTuo" entered and yelled out: "KuWei is full of nonsense and doesn't know the real essence of martial arts. He shouldn't even be the head of the DaMo Hall, this old monk is a complete disgrace!"

All the monks were surprised and saw that this "TouTuo" was a mere monk in charge of cooking meals for the ShaoLin disciples. All the monks scolded him and started telling him to be quiet.

Note: "TouTuo" is a Buddhist monk with hair, I believe. Somewhat like Fan Yao, try to remember the TVB 1986 Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre. In that series we see Fan Yao wearing a sort of Buddhist robe and having hair, right? Now that's a "TouTuo." Also, this "TouTuo" who I am mentioning now was a monk with a lowly position in the monastery. He and other similar monks were in charge of cleaning, preparing meals for the "real" ShaoLin disciples. These monks do not participate in studying martial arts or in meditation. They cannot be considered to be ShaoLin disciples. Also this "TouTuo" was called "HuoGong TouTuo" meaning the monk working in the kitchen.

This "HuoGong TouTuo" yelled: "The master is full of crap, the pupils are even more incompetent."

So he went to centre of the hall, and challenged all the ShaoLin disciples one after the other. They were all defeated easily within 3, 4 stances. It was the rule in the DaMo Hall to

be lenient in the battles. But this "HuoGong TouTuo" was very vicious, he defeated the 9 Head disciples of the DaMo Hall, all 9 of those pupils were heavily injured by him.

The elder KuZhi was angry and shocked and saw that this "HuoGong TouTuo" used ShaoLin martial arts, so it wasn't an expert from a different school who came here creating havoc. KuZhi asked him who taught him martial arts.

That "HuoGong TouTuo" said: "No one taught me, I learned it myself."

It seems that the monk who was in charge of the kitchen was a very bad-tempered monk. This monk would often beat up other monks and this monk learned some martial arts so he often hit them very hard.

"HuoGong TouTuo" was beaten up so severely in 3 years that he coughed up blood 3 times. In a fury, he started to secretly study martial arts. All the ShaoLin monks knew martial arts and it was easy for him to secretly observe and learn it. He made extraordinary, painstaking efforts and plus, he was very intelligent so in these 20 years he learned superior martial arts. However, he kept a low profile and performed his duties and even if the head of the kitchen would beat him up he didn't feel a thing anymore with his high internal energy. This "HuoGong TouTuo" also had a sinister and violent personality, he waited till he felt confident no one in the monastery was his match and wanted to show off his abilities in the annual contest. All these years of being beaten up made him hate all the monks in the monastery. So when he fought those monks, he didn't show any mercy.

When reverend KuZhi knew what he did, he scoffed and said: "Taking such trouble is worthy of my respect."

KuZhi stood up and challenged "HuoGong TouTuo" to a fight. Reverend KuZhi was a top martial arts expert from ShaoLin but he was already very old and HuoGong TouTuo was just middle-aged. Secondly, KuZhi was being lenient with his techniques and "HuoGong TouTuo" only used ferocious stances. So they were able to fight each other till 500 stances. At this point, Master KuZhi was gaining the upperhand and both used the same stance, namely "The Grand Intertwining Silk". 4 hands were entangled with each other. However, KuZhi's hands were placed on the death acupoints of HuoGong TouTuo's chest. If KuZhi was to release his energy, "HuoGong TouTuo" was surely to die. But reverend KuZhi admired and respected his ability to learn such powerful martial arts with no one teaching him, so he wanted to spare him. So KuZhi pushed his 2 hands forward and called out: "Turn back now!"

Unfortunately, "HuoGong TouTuo" misinterpreted and thought KuZhi used a technique called: "Eight Strikes of the Divine Palm." One of the special skills of ShaoLin that "HuoGong TouTuo" saw the disciples of the DaMo Hall using was this stance before using both hands to strike out and breaking a wooden beam. The energy released is formidable. Although the martial arts of "HuoGong TouTuo" was high, he never received any pointers from any experts and the martial arts of ShaoLin are deep and profound. He only secretly saw and observed some skills but he could never learn everything completely. The stance KuZhi used was "The Resolve Stance." But "HuoGong TouTuo" thought it was the 6th technique of the "Eighth Strikes of the Divine Palm" namely the "Heart Splitting Palm." He thought: "You want to take me life, don't you? Well, it's not going to be that easy." So flew towards KuZhi and his 2 fists were aiming for KuZhi's body.

The energy of the fists was incredibly powerful and violent, KuZhi was shocked and quickly raised his palms to block, but

it was too late. Everyone heard a cracking sound, the arm of KuZhi was broken, as well as 4 of his ribs. All the disciples rushed forward to help and they saw KuZhi looking deadly pale and couldn't talk anymore. His internal organs were all severely injured. When they looked up, "HuoGong TouTuo" was gone in the confusion. That same night, reverend KuZhi passed away, the entire monastery was mourning. Little did they expect that "HuoGong TouTuo" sneaked back in ShaoLin and killed the head of the kitchen and 5 other monks who used to bully him.

The entire ShaoLin Monastery was shocked and sent out various martial arts experts to track him down, but in vain.

After this incident, the senior elders of the monastery had an intense argument. And in a fury, the elder of the LuoHan Hall Master KuWei left the Northern ShaoLin Monastery and went to the Western Regions to found a Western ShaoLin Monastery.

Pan TianGeng, Fang TianLao and Wei TianWang are his descendants.

Also because of this, the ShaoLin Monastery was in a down period. The abbot set a new rule: no one was allowed to learn ShaoLin martial arts without a master teaching him. If not, in the worst case, this person will be put to death, and in lighter cases, the muscles and veins of his arms and legs will be snapped and this person will be come disabled for the rest of his life.

But in all these years no one ever learned anything without permission so this rule was forgotten by most monks.

This old monk of the Meditation Hall was the youngest disciple of Master KuZhi and the image of the death of his

teacher is still vividly in his memory. So this incident with Zhang JunBao stirred up his anger and hate.

JueYuan practically read all the manuscripts in the library and remembered these event. So JueYuan broke into cold sweat now and pleaded to the TianMing: "Old abbot, this cannot be blamed on JunBao....."

At this time, the elder of the DaMo Hall reverend WuXiang called: "All the disciples of the DaMo Hall go forward and seize that boy!" The 18 DaMo disciples surrounded Zhang JunBao, JueYuan, and even Guo Xiang. That old monk of the Meditation Hall sternly yelled: "Why don't the disciples of the LuoHan Hall go forward and seize that boy!"

All the 108 disciples said: "Yes!" and surrounded Zhang JunBao, JueYuan and Guo Xiang. There were 3 circles of disciples around them.

Note: This incident of ShaoLin with "HuoGong TouTuo" happened around the same time of the First Battle at Mount Hua. That's why there were no experts from ShaoLin in the 5 Great Experts. - The main reason, and also the most important reason, was of course none of the ShaoLin experts of that time came close to the levels the Huang YaoShi, OuYang Feng, Duang ZhiXing/ Master YiDeng, Hong QiGong and Wang ChongYang. And of course Qiu QianRen and Zhou BoTong. -Second reason, ShaoLin was starting to fall in the realm of martial arts, plus the incident with "HuoGong TouTuo" led to 2 factions in the monastery resulting from reverend KuWei leaving with his followers. -ShaoLin couldn't even protect their own martial arts from being secretly mastered by someone else. I don't think the abbot would have the face to try and to get the "Jiu Yin Zhen Jing." Arrogant people like OuYang Feng and Huang YaoShi would surely scoff and say something like: "ShaoLin can't even

protect their own manuscripts and now they want to get their hands on Jiu Yin Zhen Jing. Such audacity!"-The last reason should be why should ShaoLin try to get hold of Jiu Yin Zhen Jing. The martial arts of ShaoLin is deep and profound already. Why be greedy while many special ShaoLin skills are waiting to be mastered?

Zhang JunBao was in a frantic state, he believed that by defeating He ZuDao he broke the rules of the monastery.

JueYuan loved Zhang JunBao like a son and he also knew that if Zhang was captured, he will certainly be punished severely.

At this time, he heard WuXiang call out: "What are you waiting for, seize him!"

The 18 disciples of the DaMo Hall stepped forward to seize Zhang JunBao. JueYuan didn't think anymore and turned a circle and the 2 iron buckets were rotating, causing the monks to back off. JueYuan threw the remaining water out of the buckets and placed Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao in the buckets. He whirled the buckets round and round like a pair of comet hammers. All the disciples of the DaMo Hall quickly moved away.

JueYuan swiftly leapt away and carried the 2 buckets with Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao away. The monks gave chase, and after awhile they lost track of them. The rules are very strict of ShaoLin and the head of the DaMo Hall gave an order to seize Zhang JunBao, so even if the monks couldn't catch up they must still pursue them. After awhile, the monks with a level in the art of levitation were still chasing while the others were falling behind. In the end, only 5 monks were still running about, and they knew even if they caught up with them, they wouldn't be a match for JueYuan and Zhang JunBao.

So they didn't have an option but to return to ShaoLin.

JueYuan ran kilometers away from the monastery and he stopped when they were in the deep end of the forest. Although JueYuan's internal energy was powerful, this running away took a heavy toll on him. He was too weak now to even put down the buckets. Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao jumped out and lifted the buckets from his shoulders.

Zhang JunBao said: "Master, rest for awhile I will look for some food."

But he couldn't find anything else but some wild strawberries. The 3 of them ate some and rested.

Guo Xiang said to JueYuan: "Reverend JueYuan, all the monks of the ShaoLin Monastery are very weird. With the exception of you and reverend WuSe."

JueYuan only murmured something. Guo Xiang continued: "You and your pupil defeated that "3 Saints of KunLun" He ZuDao. They should be thanking you and now they want to capture brother Zhang. That's ridiculous!"

JueYuan sighed: "This cannot be entirely blamed on the old abbot and Buddhist brother WuXiang. ShaoLin has a rule....."

After saying that JueYuan started coughing and couldn't catch his breath.

Guo Xiang softly padded his back and said: "You're tired, you should rest now. We shall talk about this tomorrow."

JueYuan sighed: "Yes, I'm very tired."

Zhang JunBao made a small fire to dry his and Guo Xiang's clothes and the 3 of them slept under a tree.

In the middle of the night, Guo Xiang heard JueYuan murmuring. It sounded like he was reciting sutras. So she woke up and heard: "The strength of the opponent just reaches my skin and hair, my essence penetrate the opponents bones. Raise your 2 hands and let your energy flow fluently. The left is heavy, yet empty, the right flows ever away. But the right is heavy yet the left is empty....."

Guo Xiang thought: "This isn't a Buddhist sutra, and that final part was related to martial arts theory."

JueYuan continued: "Your "qi" is like a wheel, rotating through your entire body, if not your body will be dispersed and converse. This illness is caused by waist and leg....." Guo Xiang knew for sure that he was reciting martial art theories and thought: "Reverend JueYuan didn't learn martial arts but he read almost every scripture he could find. And 3 years ago he said that in the handwritten Lankavatara sutra of Master DaMo, there was another codex namely [Jiu Yang Zheng Jing]. He thought it's purpose was to stay healthy and strong and learnt the essence from it. Both he and his pupil didn't have someone to teach them, but somehow he reached the same level as the other top martial arts experts of the realm. I could remember clearly that when Xiao XiangZi struck him, Xiao XiangZi was injured himself. I doubt that even brother Yang and my father can do something like that. And today, they managed to defeat He ZuDao, thanks to [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing]. He must be reciting that [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] at the moment." She sat up and started paying attention and remained quiet, she was afraid to disturb him. She was memorizing every word JueYuan said and thought: "If it is [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing], it must be excellent and profound. I will memorize what he says and ask him tomorrow if he can

explain it."

JueYuan recited: "...First use your heart to enable your body. Start from other people, do not start yourself. The back of your body can now start from the heart. Because you remain the same and people start first. Let your opponent attack first, and follow his movements. If he doesn't move, you don't move. If he moves a bit you move too.

Guo Xiang thought: "This is wrong, my parents always taught me that in a battle you have to strike first before being struck. Reverend JueYuan is wrong here."

Guo Xiang was confused, she was always taught to strike first, be quicker than your opponent. And JueYuan's theory was the opposite of what she learned and she thought: "In a fight you cannot really stand still and let your opponent be leading the fight."

Because of this confusion she missed a part. She saw that Zhang JunBao sat there listening carefully. Guo Xiang thought: "No matter whether he's wrong or right. This old monk was able to injure Xiao XiangZi and defeat He ZuDao, I saw this myself. So his martial arts theories must be good."

For both theories something can be said. You can't say that what Guo Jing taught Guo Xiang was wrong. It depends on the level and the user. Jiu Yang is NOT superior to Jiu Yin.

JueYuan continued to recite and sometimes he would recite a piece from the Lankavatara sutra. [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] was written inside the Lankavatara sutra. JueYuan recited some parts in Indian causing Guo Xiang to be quite confused.

Fortunately, Guo Xiang was an very intelligent girl and still managed to memorize 20-30 percent of everything.

JueYuan continued to recite, his voice became lower and unclear. Guo Xiang said: "Rest for awhile, you've been exhausted."

But JueYuan continued to recite: "... Borrow your strength from your opponent, your "qi" must be drawn from your spine. How to draw "qi" from your spine? Your "qi" lowers, and bend your shoulders to the back concentrate on your waist. This "qi" will come from above and go down. Meaning the "qi" is unified. Unifying means taking in, opening means releasing. If you understand opening and unifying, you'll understand "ying" and "yang."

After reciting to this part, JueYuan's voice softly ended and it seemed he fell into a deep sleep.

It was becoming dawn, JueYuan was still sleeping and he had a smile on his face.

Zhang JunBao raised his head and saw a grey shadow appearing from the tree. This shadow wore a yellow kasaya. He was startled and said: "Who's there?"

A tall, skinny, old monk appeared, it was the head of the LuoHan Hall reverend WuSe.

Guo Xiang was startled and happy to see him and said: "Why do keep pursuing them? Must you really capture them and bring them back to ShaoLin?"

WuSe said: "I know the difference between right and wrong. If I'm really an upholder of ancient rules and traditions I would have captured them last night and wouldn't wait till now. Brother JueYuan, brother WuXiang is leading the disciples of the DaMo Hall to the east. Quickly, go to the

west!" JueYuan was still sitting and had his eyes closed.

Zhang JunBao walked up and said: "Master wake up. The elder of the LuoHan Hall is talking to you."

JueYuan was still sitting there, Zhang JunBao became frightened and touched his face. JueYuan was cold, he passed away some time ago. Zhang JunBao was devastated and cried: "Master, master!"

But JueYuan will never wake up again.

WuSe put his palms together and recited a Buddhist scripture and left.

Zhang JunBao was crying, and Guo Xiang was crying too. When the monks of ShaoLin die, it was a custom to cremate them. So Guo Xiang and Zhang JunBao collected some wood and cremated JueYuan's body.

Guo Xiang spoke to Zhang JunBao: "Brother Zhang, the ShaoLin monks will not easily let you off. You must be very careful. Our paths will now part, I hope to see again in the future."

Zhang JunBao was still crying and asked: "Miss Guo, where will you be going? Where shall I go?"

Guo Xiang felt sad after hearing his question: "I shall travel to the ends of the world if I have to. I, myself do not know where I'm going. Brother Zhang, you're still young and don't have any experience in WuLin matters. Furthermore, the ShaoLin monks are still looking for you."

She removed a golden bracelet from her wrist and gave it to Zhang JunBao and said: "Take this bracelet and go to

XiangYang to see my parents. They will treat you warmly. And if you're with my parents, those ShaoLin monks will think twice before trying to capture you."

Zhang JunBao was in tears and took the bracelet. Guo Xiang said: "Tell my parents that I'm alright and tell them not to worry.

My father likes heroic youngsters, if he sees that you're such a talented man he'll probably accept you as his pupil. My younger brother is a friendly, honest person, you will like him. But my older sister has a bad-temper, she'll scold anyone for the slightest matter and doesn't consider the feelings of other people. Just try to put up with her."

After saying that she left.

Zhang JunBao stood there and felt very lonely and thought, although the world was big there was no place for him to stay.

He stood in front of JueYuan's ashes for a very long time and then started walking away. After walking for a few metres he went back and carried his teacher's iron buckets away. In the middle of nowhere, this young, skinny man walks lonely to the west, ever so sad and lonesome.

After walking half a day, he reached the borders of the HeBei province. The city of XiangYang was not far from here and the ShaoLin monks were not be seen. This was due to reverend WuSe, he told the monks that Zhang JunBao was seen in the east so all the monks went to the east to look for him. So the farther Zhang JunBao traveled to the west, the bigger the distance he put between himself and his pursuers.

This afternoon, he reached a tall mountain. It was very green

and luxuriant, the forest was thick. And the mountain looked very majestic, on inquiry, this mountain was called WuDang.

Zhang JunBao rested on a rock nearby and saw a man and a woman walking by. They seemed to be local farmers, the 2 looked ever so intimate and it seemed that they were just newly-weds. The wife was murmuring something and she seemed to be scolding her husband. The husband lowered his head and didn't make a sound.

The wife said: "You're a grown man, why can't you support your own family? Why go to sister and brother-in-law? That scene was humiliating enough, wasn't it? We have hands and feet, we can support ourselves, even if we have to eat simple food. Just as long as we're happy and carefree."

The husband just nodded and hmmd.

The wife continued: "Besides death, there is nothing we should worry about. Do we really have to rely on others?"

The husband didn't dare to say anything back, his face was swelling up.

The words of the wife were getting through to Zhang JunBao and he thought that she was right. He stared at their backs and thought those words over and over again. Suddenly he saw the husband standing up straight and saying something. Both husband and wife laughed heartily, it seemed that the husband realised that he must take care of himself instead of relying on other people.

Zhang JunBao thought: "Miss Guo said her older sister was very bad-tempered and often scolded other people for no particular reason. She also told me to just put up with her. I'm a grown man, why should I put up with that kind of

attitude. If that husband and wife cling on to their self-respect, so should I, Zhang JunBao. Why do I have to put up with anyone's bad-temper?"

He made up his mind and carried the 2 buckets up and went up Mount WuDang. He found a cave and lived in it, living on water from springs and fruit from the forest. He started studying [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing].

Many years later, he realised something: "Master DaMo originated from India, even if he knew Chinese it would be very basic. The language of [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] is very deep and profound. It is definitely not written by foreigners. Probably some ShaoLin monk created this and used the name of Master DaMo. And this monk wrote [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] inside the Lankavatara sutra."

But this was just his deduction and he felt still somewhat puzzled by it. JueYuan taught Zhang JunBao [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] for some time, so he was able to remember 50, 60 percent of it. More than 10 years later, his internal strength reached a very high level, and he started to study Taoist manuscripts and scriptures. He managed to learn a lot from the cultivation of "qi" in these scriptures.

On one particular day, he looked up in the sky and some clouds and looked down and some the flowing water, Zhang JunBao seemed to have realised something. He went back to his cave and pondered on his discovery 7 days and 7 nights, finally he understood it completely and comprehended the martial arts theory that "gentleness can overcome fierceness." [Yi Rou Ke Gang]. He laughed to his heart's content.

This laughter produced a top martial arts master. He created a martial arts style based on Taoist theories and [Jiu Yang

Zhen Jing]. He founded the famous and glorious WuDang School.

Later when he roamed about, he saw 3 peaks reaching up into the sky. He changed his name to SanFeng and became China's martial arts mysterious master namely, Zhang SanFeng.

End of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 - Refined for a Hundred Years the Precious Saber Creates a Mysterious Light

(Translated by Meh)



When he arrives outside that room, he hears loud sound of fire, with three people standing besides a huge fireplace, with a huge saber in the middle. Those three people look to be about sixty, their faces filled with smoke. Even from afar, Yu DaiYan feels like he's burning from the fire. He can't believe that those people can stay that close. Yet despite the huge flames, that saber did not change its color to red, remaining black.

Flowers bloom, flowers wither. The young men in the martial world have become old. The young girls have begun to show their age with hair turning white.

It's has been over fifty years since the demise of the Sung dynasty.

On this third month of the new lunar year, a thirty-some year old man walks on the beach in the southern China. He wears a blue robe, a pair of grass shoes, walking quickly forward, as if in a hurry. Although surrounded by beautiful trees and flowers, he has no time to enjoy the scenery. Seeing that the sky is getting darker, he thinks, "Today is the 24th day of the third month. It's only fourteen days till 9th day of the fourth month. If I hurry, I can make it just in time for Master's ninetieth birthday."

This man is Yu DaiYan, the third disciple under the founder of Wu Dang, Zhang SanFeng. At the beginning of the year, Yu DaiYan was ordered to kill an evil, murderous outlaw. When that outlaw heard about this, he went into hiding. It took Yu DaiYan an extra two months just to find him. He then challenged the outlaw to a fight, and on the eleventh move, killed him with his Silence Illusory Saber. But by spending an extra two months, he now has to travel extra quickly to make it back in time for hiss master's birthday.

Now that he is close to the sea, he sees a wide, flat area sparkling on the beach, something he has never seen before. When he asked the locals, he chuckled after hearing the response. For these are nets used to capture seawater to make salt. Yu DaiYan thinks, "I have eaten salt for over thirty years, yet never knew how they're made."

As he continues on his journey, Yu DaiYan sees twelve people carrying some bags on their shoulders, walking quickly. From the look of things, they're all carrying salt. But this is more than two hundred pounds of salt each person's carrying. Since corrupt officials like to hoard salts, it's rare for commoners to be able to buy them through legitimate means. Salt smugglers are quite common in this area. Yu DaiYan thinks, "Wow, looks like salt smuggling is very important here. These people's kung fu skills are quite good." If it had been some other time, he would've wanted to take a closer look. But he can't possibly miss his master's birthday, so he ignores them. By nightfall he arrives at a small town, and settles down in the inn there.

After eating the dinner and finishes washing his feet, Yu DaiYan sees that those twelve salt smugglers also came into this inn. He ignores them, and begins to meditate using Wu Dang's inner power. After three repetitions, he lies down and falls asleep.

At midnight, Yu DaiYan suddenly hears much noise coming from outside. He immediately gets up, only to hear someone say, "Let's leave quietly. We don't want to wake up our neighbor." The rest of them open the door quietly and moves quickly outside. Yu DaiYan thinks, "They must be up to something bad to walk around at this hour. I can't ignore this. If I save some innocent people, then it would be ok even if I miss master's birthday," He wraps his saber in a cloth and jumps out the window.

With footsteps as his guide, Yu DaiYan follows secretly, utilizing his lightness kung fu. There is almost no moonlight, but he can still see those twelve people running quickly in the darkness. He thinks, "With their kung fu skills, these people can easily go rob rich land owners or officials. Why do they need to settle for salt smuggling? There's something fishy going on." With his great lightness kung fu, Yu DaiYan manages to follow the twelve people without a sound.

After following for about an hour, they arrived at a beach. Suddenly, he hears a croaked whisper, "Are the 'three water-dotted'* friends here?" The leader of the twelve men responds, "Yes. And you are?" Yu DaiYan ponders, "Who could these 'three water-dotted' people be?" He suddenly remembers, "Of course, it's the Sea Sand sect. These three characters are all begin with three water dots." Only to hear the croaked person say, "In my opinion, you're better off staying away from the Dragon Saber. The leader says, "Are you here for the Dragon Saber too?" His voice carries a tinge of disbelief. The croaked man starts to laugh sinisterly, but does not respond.

*Note: Three water dots is a term used to describe a particular left side of many Chinese characters. Usually characters with the three water dots have to do with water.

Yu DaiYan moved up to get a better view, only to see that it's a white-robed man blocking their path. Anyone who dares to wear white in the middle of the night must be extremely confident of his kung fu. That white-robed man laughs again, while the group leader yells, "Get out of our way. Unless you want to die..." Before he finished, a person suddenly yells out in pain, "Ahhhh!" and falls on the ground, dead. The white-robed man then quickly flies away.

Some members of the Sea Sand Sect want to chase after him, but they don't know which way he went. Yu DaiYan ponders, "This man's speed is incredible. He seemingly just used Shaolin's 'Golden Steel Claws', but I can't be sure in this darkness. From his voice, it seems like he's from the northwestern part of China. What is he doing here?" He then hears the leader say, "Put down fourth brother. We'll come back for him afterwards." The rest of the members then continue on their path.

Yu DaiYan jumps out and examines the body, seeing two small holes on the person's neck, made obviously by two fingers. He feels that there must be something important going on, and quickens his pace, following the Sea Sand Sect members.

After a while, those people begin to split up, surrounding a house. Yu DaiYan wonders, "Is that Dragon Saber they're talking about in this house?" He then sees the people outside begin to pour salt around the house, and thinks, "Why are they pouring salt around this place? Wait till I tell this to my brothers. I bet there's no way they'd believe me." But then he sees that these people pour salt in a very cautious manner, as if afraid that the salt will touch them. Yu DaiYan immediately realizes what is going on. There must be poison within the salt. He's not certain whether the people inside are good or bad, but figures that he needs to warn them regardless. In an instant, he flew towards the house.

There are many rooms in this house. But he sees that smoke is coming out of one of the rooms, so he figures that there must be someone there. When he arrives outside that room, he hears loud sound of fire, with three people standing besides a huge fireplace, with a huge saber in the middle. Those three people look to be about sixty, their faces filled with smoke. Even from afar, Yu DaiYan feels like he's burning

from the fire. He can't believe that those people can stay that close. Yet despite the huge flames, that sword did not change its color to red, remaining black.

At this moment, he hears a croaked voice, "How dare you to mess with a precious saber. Get away from it!" Yu DaiYan realizes that it's the white-robed man's voice. Those three people ignore the warning, and continue to work on the saber. Only to hear a chuckle coming from the roof as the white-robed man dashed in. He looks around forty, with a pale white face. He says in a cold voice, "Long White Elders, I don't blame you for trying to get the saber. But why try to destroy it with this fire?"

One of the three men walks up, picks up a shovel, and attacks the white-robed man. The white-robed man evades to the side, and then counters with fingers in a claw shape, dancing up and down with a huge force. Yu DaiYan sees that his moves look like it's from Shaolin on the surface, but is more aggressive and venomous, certainly not as righteous as Shaolin's kung fu.

After a while, that old man with the shovel yells, "Who are you? You should at least leave your name." The white-robed man chuckles again, his hands shot out, breaking the wrists of the old man. The second old man immediately grabs the saber out from the fire, while the third man shot takes out a dart, waiting for a chance to use it on the white-robed man. But the white-robed man is too fast.

At this time, one can see smoke coming out of the second old man's hands. It's obvious that his hand is burning; yet for some reason, he does not let go of the saber. As he runs out of the hut, the white-robed man yells, "Do you really think you can get away?" Raising his eyebrows a bit, he quickly flies over to the second old man, picks him up, and throws

him into the fire.

Yu DaiYan originally didn't plan on helping either side, but with someone's life in danger, he felt that he needed to help out. He jumps out of his hiding place and pushed the old man lightly while spinning in midair, then floated down to the floor. The Long White Elders and the white-robed man had long known that he was outside, but no one cared. So they can't help but feel an incredible shock when Yu DaiYan displayed such a skillful lightness kung fu. The white-robed man says, "Is this the famous 'Cloud Stairs'?" Yu DaiYan first feels a bit of shock that this man knows of his kung fu, but then feels happy, knowing that his Wu Dang kung fu is so famous. He says, "This plain kung fu is nothing to brag about. May I ask who you are?" That white-robed man says, "Very nice. Wu Dang's kung fu really is fairly decent."

Despite being a bit angry at his words, Yu DaiYang does not show it. Instead he says, "The power you displayed while killing that member of the Sea Sand Sect is quite amazing too. I can't even tell what kind it is." The white-robed man wonders, "He saw that? I wonder where he was hiding at the time. How come I didn't sense him?" He says, "Of course you couldn't tell. Not even your old man Zhang can figure it out."

Yu DaiYan felt greatly annoyed at this ridicule of his own master. But Wu Dang students are all taught to be calm and peaceful. He thinks, "This person is purposely trying to make me mad. There's no reason for Wu Dang to add another powerful enemy." He says, "There are thousands of kung fus in this world, both righteous ones and evil ones. Wu Dang's kung fu only came from one source. Your skills look like it's from Shaolin, but at the same time seems different." That white-robed man's expression changes a bit, as if flustered by this comment.

While they are talking, the second old man with the saber suddenly lashes out. Yu DaiYan quickly dodges the blow, while seeing the old man aimlessly slashes left and right, as if he has gone crazy. The white-robed man and the other two old men realize the power of the saber, and do not try to block him. As the old man runs out of the house, he suddenly trips, falling on the ground and begins to scream in agony.

The other two old men and the white-robed man immediately reaches out to grab the saber, but they all fell down once they reaches outside. The two old men start to roll around on the ground screaming, while the white-robed man simply flips up, and flies away.

Yu DaiYan wants to immediately go save those three people, but then remembers the scene of salt being spread. He realizes that the whole area has been poisoned. Looking around, he sees some stools. Quickly, he threw a couple outside, then jumps on to them. With some clothing wrapped around his hand, he quickly picks up the old man with the saber. Only to see over ten darts coming from the surrounding Sea Sand sect members.

Yu DaiYan bounces up from the stools, dodging the darts. He then flipped the stools forward with his feet, allowing him to step-by-step jump out of the salted area. Once outside, he immediately opens up his lightness kung fu to quickly run away from the Sea Sand sect members.

Yu DaiYan realizes that he must first get rid of the poison from this old man. So he quickly runs to the beach, and throws the old man into the water to cleanse him. Once cleansed, Yu DaiYan says, "Your life is no longer in danger. Since I have other businesses to take care of, I shall take leave of you." That old man asks, "Why don't you take my saber?" Yu DaiYan says, "Although that's a great saber, it's not mine.

Why should I take it?" That person says, "What are you up to? How are you going to torture me?" Yu DaiYan says, "I don't even know you. Why would I want to torture you? I just wanted to save you because your life was in danger." That old man doesn't believe him, instead yelling, "Just kill me and get it over with. But be warned that even as a ghost I will haunt you." Yu DaiYan simply smiles a bit, thinking that this old man must be a little crazy from the poison. Just as he's about to leave, a wave came from the sea, carrying the old man into the waters.

Yu DaiYan realizes that there are still poisons left in this old man's body. If he doesn't help him recover, this old man will die. Therefore he carried the old man, until they reached an empty building. Looking up, he sees that it's a temple, called 'Sea God Temple'. He put the old man by a statue. Then lights up a candle. When he looks at the old man again, he sees that the poison has spread all over the body. Yu DaiYan takes out a 'Heaven Heart Antidote' from his pocket and says, "Take this pill."

That old man says, "I'm not going to eat your poisoned pills." Despite his peaceful attitude, Yu DaiYan can't help but be angry at those remarks. He says, "Do you know who I am? Do you think a Wu Dang disciple would do such a thing as using poison? This pill is to help ease the poison in you. Although it might not cure the poison totally, it can at least prolong your life for three days. I suggest you give this saber to the Sea Sand Sect in return for its antidote."

That old man jumps up and yells, "I can't give up my Dragon Saber." Yu DaiYan says, "What's the use of this saber if you're going to die?" The old man responds, "I'd rather die than give up this saber." As he says this, he clutches the saber tightly, then swallows Yu DaiYan's pill.

His words raised Yu DaiYan's curiosity. He wants to ask just what's so great about this saber, but decided not to after he sees the obsessive, angry look on the old man's face. Feeling repulsed, Yu DaiYan stands up to leave. That old man yells, "Hold on! Where are you going?" Yu DaiYan smiles and says, "What's it to you?" and begins to leave.

The old man begins to cry after he walks a few steps. Yu DaiYan turns around and asks, "Why are you crying?" The old man says, "I spent so much effort just to obtain this saber, yet now I'm going to die. What's the use of this saber now?" Yu DaiYan let out a 'Humph', and says, "The only thing you can do now is to exchange the saber for the antidote." That old man cries, "But I don't want to. I don't want to." Yu DaiYan wants to laugh at his words, but can't do so. After a while, he says, "The whole point of learning martial arts is help the defenseless and defeat the evils of the world, setting a good example for the later generations. Precious sabers and swords are simply items. Hardly something worth your life." The old man says, " 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying*, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow!' Have you heard this phrase?"

*Note: The proper translation of the 'Dragon Saber' is the 'Dragon Slaying Saber'. However, I will use the more popular(and shorter :P) translation, 'Dragon Saber', that TVB came up.

Yu DaiYan chuckles and says, "Of course I've heard it. There are two more phrases after this, something like 'Power of heaven* not appear, Who can possibly compete?' That's just to describe an event many years ago, not really some saber." That old man asks, "What event?"

*Note: 'Power of heaven' here is used to described the name of the Heaven Sword. Actually, a proper description of those

two characters is 'reliance on heaven', but that wouldn't sound as good. The sword's is therefore more aptly translated as 'the sword that relies on the power of the heavens'. But for this translation, it will be shortened to Heaven Saber, just to match up with the name that TVB came up with.

Yu DaiYan says, "That's because the Legendary Condor Hero Yang Guo once killed the Mongol emperor, which greatly helped us Hans. So whenever Hero Yang asks of something, 'None dares to not listen'. The 'dragon' is here is obviously the emperor, 'dragon slaying' means to kill the emperor. Do you really think there are such things as dragons in this world?"

That old man smiles coldly, asking, "Do you know what weapon he used during that battle?" Yu DaiYan thinks for a moment, then responds, "I heard the master say that Hero Yang was missing an arm. So he normally doesn't carry any weapon." That old man asks, "So how did he kill the emperor?" Yu DaiYan says, "He used a pebble. Everyone knows that." The old man says with a smile, "In that case, where does this whole 'saber' thing come from?"

Yu DaiYan can't find the answer. After a while, he finally says, "Probably because it's made up by others. I mean, 'Little pebble dragon slaying' doesn't sound nearly as nice." That old man says, "You're just making it up. How about this, can you explain the meaning of 'Power of heaven not appear, Who can possibly compete'?" Yu DaiYan says, "I don't know. Perhaps it's to describe his wife. Maybe his wife's name is the 'power of heaven'. Or he might have meant Guo Jing, Hero Guo."

That old man says, "Really? I know you can't explain it. Let me tell you. 'Dragon Slaying' is a saber. It's this Dragon Saber I have. The 'Power of Heaven' is a sword, the Heaven Sword.

This poem means that whoever has the Dragon Saber can rule the world. As long as the Heaven Sword does not appear, no one can compete with the Dragon Saber.”

Yu DaiYan doesn’t know whether to believe or not, and says, “Let me look at it, and see just what’s so powerful about this saber.” That old man tightly clutches the Dragon Saber, says, “You think I’m a kid? Trying to take my saber, eh?” He just recovered a bit after taking the pill Yu DaiYan gave him. Yet by spending too much energy clutching the saber, he begins to have trouble breathing. Yu DaiYan chuckles, and says, “If you don’t want me to see it, then so be it. Besides, whom are you going to control anyway? Are you telling me that I’m going to listen to your orders because of this saber? You must be kidding. You were a normal person. But after listening to such a stupid rumor, you’ve now nearly lost your life. It’s obvious that this saber has no special powers.”

That old man stays silent for a while, then says, “Hey, let’s make a deal. You help save my life, and I’ll give you half of this saber’s powers.” Yu DaiYan laughs, and says, “Is that how you think of us Wu Dang sect? We don’t help others for any rewards. Besides, I don’t have the antidote to your poison. You still have to ask the Sea Sand sect for it.” That old man says, “I stole this saber from them. Why would they save me?” Yu DaiYan says, “If you give them back their saber, why would they care to kill you?”

That old man says, “Your kung fu is incredible. I’m sure you can steal some from them.” Yu DaiYan says, “First, I have something important to do, and don’t have time for such a thing. Besides, you stole their saber. So it’s your fault to begin with. Why should I help you steal the antidote? Old man, I suggest you hurry and go ask for the antidote now, before it’s too late.”

Seeing that he's about to leave, that old man says in a hurry, "Ok. Let me ask you something else. How did you feel when you carried me?" Yu DaiYan says, "I thought it was kind of strange. You look small and skinny, yet you seemingly weigh over two hundred pounds. But I'm not sure why."

That old man put down the Dragon Saber, and says, "Now lift me." Yu DaiYan picks him up, and feels like he's only lifting about eighty pounds of weight. He thinks, "Wow, this saber is over a hundred pounds. That is quite strange." After putting the old man back down again, he says, "This saber is pretty heavy."

The old man asks, "Is your surname Yu or Zhang?" Yu DaiYan says, "My name is Yu DaiYan. How do you know?" The old man says, "I know that First Hero Song is over forty years old. Your sixth and seventh brother Yin and Muo are still less than twenty. The rest of the four Wu Dang heroes all have surnames of Yu or Zhang. Everyone knows that. I'm grateful to meet the great Third Hero Yu today." Although he's fairly young, Yu DaiYan is quite experienced in the ways of the martial world. He knows that this old man only says such praises because he wants a favor. With a feeling of repulsiveness, he says, "And you are?" The old man says, "My name is De Cheng. Everyone calls me Hai Dong Qing." Hai Dong Qing is a type of eagle, famous for its viciousness and predatory skills. Yu DaiYan says, "Nice to meet you." Then proceeds to look up at the sky, trying to figure out the time.

The old man realizes that he needs to try some other trick for this person to help him. So he says, "You don't realize the meaning behind these words, they're..." When he says this, Yu DaiYan's expression suddenly changes changes. He immediately blows out the candle and whispers, "Someone's here."

De Cheng's inner power is not nearly as good as Yu DaiYan, so he did not notice anything. Only after a while does he hear footsteps coming from the front. He says, "Let's sneak out the back." Yu DaiYan says, "They have people in the back too. Besides, it's the Sea Sand Sect. This is your opportunity to exchange for the antidote." The old man clutches onto him tightly, yells, "Third Hero Yu, you can't leave me. You can't..."

At this time, someone kicked down the door as Yu DaiYan quickly hides behind a Buddha statue. When De Cheng let out a small 'ah' sound, tens of darts came out straight at him, prompting him to fall down. Only to hear more sounds of hidden weapons being released, all containing the poisoned salts. After a while, Yu DaiYan hears the roof shaking, as salt begins to pour down through the cracks. Realizing that the salts will eventually touch him, Yu DaiYan quickly smashes a hole into the Buddha next to him, and crawls into the hole.

Yu DaiYan then hears someone in the Sea Sand sect says, "There are no more sounds. They're probably all unconscious." Another person says, "That youngster's footsteps are very light. It's better to wait a while longer." "I'm just afraid that he may have escaped." Then someone yells loudly, "Get out of here and surrender."

At this moment Yu DaiYan hears many horses gallop on the outside. Then someone from outside yells, "The sun and moon's lights shine, the Eagle King spreads its wings." This made the Sea Sand sect quiet. After a while, someone yells, "It's the Heavenly Eagle sect. Let's get out of here." When he finishes, the galloping sounds stopped. Then someone whispers, "Too late."

Several people then enter the temple. One person asks, "Do you know who we are?" Several members of the Sea Sand Sect answers, "Yes. You are friends from the Heavenly Eagle

sect.” That person says, “This is Heaven City Branch’s Leader Li of our Heavenly Eagle sect. You’re lucky to see him today. Leader Li asks you where the Dragon Saber is. If you’re nice enough to answer correctly, he just might be kind enough to let you keep your life.” Only to hear a Sea Sand member points to De Cheng, and says, “He... he took it. We’re just about to take it back.”

That person from the Heavenly Eagle asks De Cheng, “Where is it?” De Cheng does not respond, instead simply falls to the ground.

That person from the Heavenly Eagle says, “Search him.” Yu DaiYan hears some people making ruffling noises, and then someone saying, “This person has nothing on him.” The leader of the Sea Sand group says, “But... but it really is him who stole the Dragon Saber. We...” Yu DaiYan wonders, “Wait a minute. Where did the Dragon Saber go? Didn’t De Cheng have it on him?”

This Branch Leader Li does not say anything, but his subordinate says, “If you want to stay alive, then tell the truth.” After a moment of silence, someone begins to yell, “You came right after we entered the temple. How could we have time to grab the saber beforehand? If you don’t believe us, then we’re going to die anyway. So we might as well go down fighting. You bunch of bullies, we...” He suddenly stops talking, obviously dead. Another person says, “I saw a middle-aged man with pretty good lightness kung fu with him. I bet that man has it, and escaped.” Branch Leader Li says, “Search them.” Yu DaiYan again hears ruffling sounds, and then hears Branch Leader Li says, “He’s probably right. Let’s go search for that man.”

Yu DaiYan wants to wait till the Sea Sand people left too before getting out. But after a long time, he still could not

hear any footsteps. He takes a peek outside, only to see the members of the Sea Sand sect standing still, as if their pressure points have been sealed.

He jumps out, takes a torch, and begins to examine their faces, only to see their faces gray and without life. He wonders, "Who are these Heavenly Eagle people anyway? How come I've never heard of them? They're obviously quite powerful, or these people won't be so afraid of them. Humph, they certainly deserve their fate." He then goes over and pushes the Hua Meng Point of one of the person to unseal his pressure point. Yet the person still remains still. Yu DaiYan then puts his finger by that person's nose, and realizes that this person's dead already. He thinks, "Wow. They could seal their Death points without making any sound. That is a very evil kung fu indeed." But seeing how these people are very powerful, and he's just by himself, Yu DaiYan knows that he can't fight them. He decides to report this to his master, and have him choose how to handle the Heavenly Eagle sect.

Seeing poisoned salt all around him, Yu DaiYan decides to burn this place and the surrounding area, so no innocents will be killed. As he went out, he sees a strange body. Yu DaiYan then picks it up to examine further. He finds that the body is very heavy. From a hole in the back, he pulls out the Dragon Saber. Apparently, De Cheng hid the Dragon Saber into one of the Sea Sand members before dying. The Heavenly Eagle sect people must not have noticed as they checked the bodies.

Yu DaiYan thinks, "This saber has caused many problems in the world. I really should give it to the master, so he can decide what to do with it." With a throw of his torch, he burns down the temple.

As the fire is burning, Yu DaiYan examines the saber closely.

He finds that the saber doesn't look like it's made of iron or gold, and can't figure out just what kind of metal it's made of. The fact that it can withstand so much heat is also quite strange. He thinks, "How can one use this sword in battle considering that it's so heavy?"

Yu DaiYan then wraps up the saber and puts it on the back of his shoulders, then continues on his journey. After an hour or so, he arrives at the edge of a river. Seeing a flicker of fire on the river from afar, he yells, "Can I get a ride across the river?" The person on the boat didn't seem to hear. So he yells again, this time with his inner power. The boat then quickly comes over. When it reaches the edge, someone on the boat yells, "Do you want to go across the river?" Yu DaiYan says happily, "Yes. Thank your." That fisherman says, "Then get on."

As he steps onto the boat, it immediately sinks down a bit. That fisherman asks with surprise, "What are you carrying that's so heavy?" Yu DaiYan says, "Oh, nothing. I'm just a heavy person, that's all."

When they reach the middle of the river, he suddenly sees a big boat coming over. An eagle flag appears in the front. Yu DaiYan immediately remembers the Heavenly Eagle sect, and begins to prepare himself for any danger.

Suddenly, the fisherman jumps into the water and quickly swims away. Yu DaiYan is left on his own, as the big ship rams into his small boat. Seeing that the boat is about to sink, Yu DaiYan jumps onto the big ship using his 'Cloud Stairs' lightness kung fu.

On the big ship, he looks around, seeing no one. An iron chain locks the door to the main cabin. He quickly breaks it down with his palm, and enters the cabin.

Only to hear someone inside say, "Third Hero Yu of Wu Dang. Great 'Cloud Stairs' and 'Mountain Cracking Palm' you just displayed. Leave your Dragon Saber with me, and I'll safely take you across the river." Yu DaiYan thinks, "How does he know who I am?" That person then says, "You must be wondering how I know your identity. It's quite easy, actually. Other than the top fighters of Wu Dang, no one can utilize those two moves with such gracefulness."

Yu DaiYan says, "Can I meet you? And what about your name?" That person says, "We Heavenly Eagle sect is neither friend nor foe of Wu Dang. No need for such pleasantries. Just leave your Dragon Saber here, and I'll take you across safely." Yu DaiYan says, "Is this saber yours?" That person says, "No. But whoever has it can control the martial world. Who wouldn't want it?" Yu DaiYan says, "If it's not yours, then there's no need for me to give it to you." That person then says something else. But Yu DaiYan can't hear. He steps a bit closer, asking, "What did you say?"

Suddenly, a large wave rocks the boat. As he's regaining his balance, Yu DaiYan felt as if being bitten by mosquitoes on the leg and chest. He does not take notice, instead says, "You have killed ruthlessly for this saber. I don't like your way of doing things." That person says, "We are always ruthless towards those who are evil, but we are kind towards those who are good. As long as Hero Yu leaves the Dragon Saber, I will give you the antidote for the 'Mosquito Needle'."

When he hears the words 'Mosquito Needle', Yu DaiYan immediately reaches for the places where he thought he was bitten by mosquitoes. He instantly feels weak and numb. Then Yu DaiYan realizes, "He tricked me to get closer to him, so he could have a chance to hit me with these needles. Looks like the only way to get the antidote is to grab him."

He takes a deep breath, and rushes forward.

His right palm shoots out, matching the palm of the other person. This palm contains all his power, and sent the other person backward. However, he also feels a bit of pain on his palm after that exchange. For his opponent once again deceives him, by coating his palm with a type of hidden weapon, one that poisoned Yu DaiYan as they matched palms. After coughing a bit, that person says, "Your power really is amazing. But my 'Seven Star Needle' is also quite deadly. Looks like it's a tie."

Yu DaiYan quickly takes a 'Heaven Heart Antidote', but realizes that this can only delay the effects of the poison. He then tries to attack the enemy with his saber, but his attacks were easily parried.

Then he heard that person say, "Do you want your life or the saber?" Yu DaiYan says, "Fine. I'll give it to you." And throws the saber down. That person happily picks up the saber and begins to examine it. Yu DaiYan says, "Now where's my antidote?" That person laughs, "You really are stupid. Why did you give me the saber before I gave you the antidote?" Yu DaiYan says, "A man should remain true to his words. You promised me the antidote." That person says, "When you had the saber, I was afraid of you. After all, even if you can't beat me, at least you may throw the saber away. But now that I have saber, why should I still care about you?"

Yu DaiYan feels much rage coming up from his chest, thinking that Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect has never had problems before, plus this person's kung fu is quite powerful in the martial world. Why would he not keep his word? Yu DaiYan normally is quite hard to trick. But in such an unusual place, after getting poisoned twice, his mind obviously did not work as well. After gathering himself, Yu DaiYan asks,

“May I ask your name?”

That person says, “I’m just a nobody in the Heavenly Eagle sect. If Wu Dang wants to take revenge, then obviously they should look for our leader. Besides, I Doubt Zhang SanFeng can figure out who killed you anyway.” Yu DaiYan could only feel as if his hands are being bitten by thousands of ants, thinks, “Even though I die today, I’ll take you with me.” With a scream, he rushes up and attacks with his right palm. That person instinctively tries to block with the Dragon Saber, but forgot that the saber is extremely heavy. Instead of blocking, it actually pulled down his body. In a few seconds, Yu DaiYan’s palm lands on his chest, pushing him into the water.

Yu DaiYan thinks, “Although you have obtained your precious saber, but now you’ve died along with it.” Suddenly, he sees a white rope thrown down into the water, grabbing the waist of that person. Only to see a skinny green-robed person on the edge of the ship, pulling on the rope. Unfortunately, by this time, the poison has taken over his body, and he passes out.

When Yu DaiYan regained consciousness, he sees a small flag in a vase by the side, the flag shows a small fish swimming against the current. He thinks, “This must be Lin An city’s Dragon Gate Escort Agency. What happened to me?” His mind is still muddy, so he does not try to think any more. He only feels as if someone’s carrying him on a stretcher, into the middle of a big hall. When he tried to move, he realizes that he can’t.

Only to hear two people converse, the first person in a booming voice, says, “You are?” The other person says, “Don’t bother asking. I just want to know if you’re going to take this delivery.” Yu DaiYan thinks, “This second voice has a high pitch. It’s seemingly that of a woman!”

The man with the booming voice says, "You think we don't have enough business here? If you won't give me your name, then you can take your business elsewhere." The person with the woman's voice says, "But the Dragon Gate Escort Agency is the only decent one around. I don't care for the others. However, if you can't make a decision, get your boss out here." The man with the booming voice says in an irritated voice, "I'm the boss. And right now, I have some other business to attend to. Please leave."

That person with the woman's voice says, "Oh... so you're Multi-Armed Bear Du Dajin..." After a pause, continues, "Escort Leader Du, nice to meet you. My surname is Yin." Du Dajin feels a little better with her praise, and says, "What do you need?" The customer named Yin says, "I need to first make sure that you can handle my delivery. Because it's very important."

Du Dajin says angrily, "I've delivered types of treasure in my twenty years here. Never have there been any problems." Yu DaiYan has also heard of this person, knows that he's a non-monk disciple of Shaolin. Du Dajin is proficient with both the fist and the saber, but he's most famous for his steel darts. He can simultaneously fire forty-nine darts at the same time, which is how he got the nickname 'Multi-Armed Bear'. It's just that Shaolin and Wu Dang are not really close, which is why they have not yet met each other.

The person named Yin says, "If it weren't for your fame, why would I come? I have a delivery for you to make, and it comes with three conditions."

Du Dajin says, "We don't accept any deliveries that require too much hassle. We don't accept any deliveries we don't know the background of. We don't accept any deliveries

that's worth less than fifty thousand taels of silver." He didn't listen to the customer's three conditions, and instead named three conditions of his own.

That person named Yin says, "I'm sorry. But by my delivery will require some hassle. Its background is also quite muddy. As for its worth, well, that's hard to say. Plus I also have three conditions. One, you must personally lead the escort. Two, you must take the package to the Xiang Yang city without any rest, so it will arrive in ten days. Three, should there be any problems, humph, I will kill every single person in your Dragon Gate Escort Agency."

Only to hear a loud 'Peng!' sound, which must be Du Dajin hitting the table, who yells, "Had you want to ridicule someone, you should not have picked my Dragon Gate Escort Agency. If it weren't for the fact that you look way too small and skinny, I would pummel you right here!"

The person named Yin chuckles, and then throws something heavy on the table, says, "This is two thousand taels of gold. It's the fee for this delivery." Yu DaiYan thinks in shock, "What? That's tens of thousands taels of silver. Normally it takes several years to make this much money for an escort agency." Only to hear Du Dajin breathing heavily, obviously staring at such amazing amount of wealth. After a while, he says, "Mr. Yin, what would you like us to escort?"

That person named Yin says, "First tell me if you're going to agree to my three conditions." Du Dajin says, "Since you are offering so much money, I'll risk my life this time to make sure it safely arrives. So where are the items you want to deliver?" That person named Yin says, "The package I want you to deliver is the gentleman on this stretcher." This really surprised Du Dajin and especially Yu DaiYan himself. Yu DaiYan can't help but yell, "Me...me...?" Yet for some reason,

no words can leave his mouth no matter how hard he tries. Only to hear Du Dajin say, "This... this person?"

That person named Yin says, "Correct. You can change horses and carriages along the way, but not the people escorting. In ten days, you must deliver this person to the master of Wu Dang, the Venerable Zhang SanFeng." Du Dajin says, "Wu Dang sect? The problem is, Shaolin and Wu Dang are not very... how can I say this..." That person named Yin says, "This person is gravely injured. So it's imperative that he's delivered as soon as possible. What's with the indecisiveness? Are you going to accept this deal or not?" Du Dajin says, "Fine. We'll accept it."

That person named Yin chuckles and says, "Good! Today's the 29th day of the third month. If he's not safely at Wu Dang Mountain by the 9th of next month, I'll make sure that no one in this escort agency will remain alive!" only to hear several 'swoosh' sounds, as several needles shot out, destroying all vases holding the agency's flags in all parts of the room. Even Du Dajin let out a shocking 'ahhh'. The person named Yin then yells, "Let's go", and leaves with the people carrying the stretcher.

After that person left, Du Dajin gathers himself and walks up to Yu DaiYan, asks, "Are you a member of the Wu Dang sect?" Yu DaiYan can't answer, but can see that this gentleman looks very muscular and strong, thinking his outer fighting skills must be quite formidable. Du Dajin asks again, "I never would've thought that this small, scholarly person has such incredible kung fu. Do you know which sect he belongs to?" Yu DaiYan closes his eyes and ignores him.

Du Dajin's name is quite sound, and his forte is with hidden weapons. Yet he couldn't possibly destroy tens of vases using paper-thin needles. Besides, he has never seen anything

quite so strange as someone giving two thousands taels of gold to deliver a live person. Du Dajin wraps up the gold and orders his servants to take Yu DaiYan to the guest room. He then gathers up his best men and prepares for the trip. By nightfall, they left the escort agency.

While in the carriage, Yu DaiYan thinks, "After wandering in the martial world for so many years, I've never cared much for escort agencies. Who would've thought that they would be the people in charge of my life right now?" He then thinks, "I wonder who this friend named Yin is. She sounds like a woman. That Du Dajin says she's very scholarly, yet her kung fu is certainly very good, and her way of doing things really is quite extraordinary. Too bad I didn't get to see her, or say thanks. If we ever meet again, I'll make sure to repay her kindness."

A row of horses quickly moves west. Other than leaders Du, Zhu, and Shi, everyone else is a young, energetic lad. They all picked the best horses, and changed them frequently on the road, just as their customer Yin ordered. When he left the escort agency, Du Dajin expected many people to block their paths. Yet for some reason, their trip was very smooth. In nine days, they're already at the bottom of the Wu Dang Mountain. Although it's been a long, arduous journey, everyone is glad that they're not going to miss the ten-day deadline.

Du Dajin says, "Brother Zhu, these past years the Wu Dang sect's name has become quite sound. Although still not as sound as us Shaolin, but quite famous nonetheless. Look at the steepness of the mountain. You know the saying that the environment makes the person. Perhaps they really are quite good." Sub-leader Zhu says, "But these rumors of their accomplishments aren't reliable. Besides, they've only been around for a few years. How can they possibly compete with

us Shaolin?" Sub-leader Shi says, "He's right. We've never really seen their kung fu. Compared to us, they're probably nothing."

After traveling some more, sub-leader Zhu asks, "What are we going to say to Zhang SanFeng when we see him?" Du Dajin says, "Although we're from a different sect, he is after all almost ninety. So it doesn't matter if we go up and kowtow a few times." As they're talking, Du Dajin wonders, "Who is this person inside? Is he a Wu Dang disciple, a friend of Wu Dang, or an enemy?"

While he's thinking, six people on horsebacks surrounded their group. Du Dajin thinks, "Could we possibly have problems now that we're under the Wu Dang Mountain?" He whispers to sub-leader Zhu, "Watch the main carriage." Then he went up to meet the strangers, says, "This is the Dragon Gate Escort Agency in the city of Lin An. Sorry we did not send a greeting beforehand."

Du Dajin sees that two of the people dressed as Taoists while the other four have on normal clothing. They all look very composed and gallant, with weapons attached to their sides. Du Dajin wonders, "Could this be six of the seven Wu Dang heroes?" He says, "May I ask who your names are?"

A person with a large birthmark on the face responds coldly, "What are you doing on Wu Dang Mountain?" Du Dajin says, "We're here to send a injured person to your master, Venerable Zhang SanFeng." That person asks, "Who is the injured person?" Du Dajin says, "I don't know. A person named Yin asked me to make this delivery. I know of nothing else. We don't ask our customers for their reasons." That person says, "A customer named Yin? What kind of person is he?" Du Dajin says, "He's a handsome and scholarly fellow, whose projectile weapon skills are incredible." That person

then asks, "So you've fought him?" Du Dajin says, "No. No. He just..." Before he could finish, a short person among the strangers cut him off, asks, "Where the Dragon Saber?"

Du Dajin says in bewilderment, "What Dragon Saber? Is it the mythical one everyone's talking about?" That short guy immediately goes up to the carriage and looks inside. Du Dajin looks at his lightness kung fu, thinking, "This resembles Shaolin's kung fu. Humph. Wu Dang claims that their kung fu skills are unique, but looks like they still cannot deviate from their Shaolin roots." Now that he's certain these are Wu Dang disciples, Du Dajin says, "Are you the famous Wu Dang heroes? Who is First Hero Song?" The man with the birthmark says, "Oh, you're too flattering."

The short man says, "His injury is severe. Let's get him back quickly." That man with the birthmark says to Du Dajin, "Thank you for escorting our friend here." Du Dajin says, "You are welcome." That person then says, "He needs to see our master quickly. We'll take it from here." Du Dajin says, "Sure. In that case, I'll give him to you." That person says, "Thank you." and throws a gold nugget at Du Dajin. "Just a little reward for you." As he says this, those six people left with the carriage.

Du Dajin looks at the nugget, and finds five fingerprints on it. He thinks, "Wow. These Wu Dang heroes really do possess some great kung fu. I bet only my martial uncles who knows the 'Golden Steel Finger' can make such a mark." Sub-leader Zhu says, "These Wu Dang people really are arrogant. We spent all this time coming here, and they don't even ask us to go up for a rest."

Du Dajin has the same feelings, except he didn't bother to say it. Instead he says, "Well, at least we save some time. Besides, it would be awkward for us Shaolin disciples to visit

Wu Dang. Let's just leave."

On their way back, Du Dajin feels more and more unsettled, seeing how the Wu Dang heroes didn't even bother to leave their name. But everyone else feels only joy, knowing that they just made a ton of money, since Du Dajin has always been extravagant when splitting their earnings.

As they continued on their journey, a person on a fast galloping horse suddenly passed them from behind. Du Dajin sees that it's a youngster of about twenty-one or twenty-two. He looks scholarly and charismatic, and as he passed said, "Thanks for letting me pass." When he left, Du Dajin asks, "Brother Zhu, who do you think this is?" Sub-leader Zhu says, "He came from Wu Dang Mountain, so he's probably a Wu Dang disciple. But he doesn't have any weapons, and looks to scrawny too to be a kung fu expert."

When he finished, that youngster suddenly came back, and asks, "May I ask a question?" Du Dajin says, "What do you need to know?" That youngster looks at the flag and says, "Are you the Dragon Gate Escort Agency?" Sub-leader Zhu says, "Yes!" That youngster says, "May I ask who everyone is? And how is your Head Leader Du?" Sub-leader Zhu says, "My surname is Zhu. What's your name? Are you a friend of our head leader?"

That youngster gets off the horse and steps forward a bit, says, "My name is Zhang CuiShan. I've heard of the famous Dragon Gate Escort Agency." When he said this, Du Dajin felt a huge shock, thinking how could the famous Fifth Hero Zhang be a young scholar? He says, "I am Du Dajin. So you are the person everyone calls 'Silver Hook and Iron Brush' Fifth Hero Zhang?" That youngster says with a smile, "I don't think I'm worthy of the 'hero' title. But since you're here at Wu Dang Mountain, how about going up for a visit. Today is

my master's ninetieth birthday. If you don't have anything important to do, we would appreciate your company."

Du Dajin sees that he's quite sincere, and wonders, "How come the Wu Dang heroes differ so much in terms of personality?" He gets down his horse and says, "If your brothers were as nice as you, we would already be at Wu Dang now." Zhang CuiShan says, "What? You say that you've met my brothers? Which ones?" Du Dajin thinks, "You really know how to put up an act." And says, "I saw all your other brothers today." Zhang CuiShan stutters for a moment, then asks, "You've also seen my third brother Yu?" Du Dajin says, "You mean Yu DaiYan? I don't know who's Yu DaiYan. I just saw the six of them together. So he must be there." Zhang CuiShan says, "Six people? Which six people?" Du Dajin says, "Your brothers won't give their names, so how would I know? Since you are the fifth hero, then they must be the rest of the seven heroes." Zhang CuiShan seems lost in thought, and asks, "Did you really see them?" Du Dajin says, "Of course. Everyone in my agency saw them." Zhang CuiShan says, "That doesn't make sense. Brother Song and the others are all preparing for master's birthday. Only I came down the mountain to find my third brother. So how could you have met them?"

Du Dajin says, "You mean, that person with a birthmark on his face isn't Hero Song?" Zhang CuiShan says, "None of my brothers have any birthmarks on his face."

Cold sweat rushes over Du Dajin. He says, "They said that they're the six heroes of Wu Dang. Two of them are even Taoists. So we..." Zhang CuiShan says, "Although our master is a Taoist, none of his students are. Did they really say that they're the Six Heroes of Wu Dang?" Du Dajin thinks back, and realizes that those people never did openly say who they are. After a pause, he says, "Looks like these people are up to

no good. We have to chase them down!" As he says this he quickly gets back on his horse, and start riding back towards Wu Dang Mountain. Zhang CuiShan rides alongside, and says, "It doesn't matter too much if they're simply masquerading as us. Why not just let them go?" Du DaJin says, "But what about that person? Someone asked me to escort this person to your Venerable Zhang SanFeng. These six people took him..." Zhang CuiShan says, "Who is this person you're talking about?"

Du DaJin told Zhang CuiShan what had happened as they galloped back. Zhang CuiShan then asks, "What's the wounded person's name? What about his look?" Du DaJin says, "I don't know his name, but he's around thirty." He then proceeds describe that person's face. Zhang CuiShan says shockingly, "This... this is my Third Brother Yu."

He then asks, "How did my third brother get injured? Who asked you to escort him here? Who's the enemy?" Du DaJin cannot answer these, and does not respond. Zhang CuiShan asks again, "What do those people who took away my third brother look like?" Sub-leader Shi then describes their looks. Zhang CuiShan says, "Thank you. I shall go on ahead."

After searching for hours, Zhang CuiShan sees a broken carriage on the side of the road. Turning around, he sees a person lying on the ground. With his heart beating fast, Zhang CuiShan races up next to the person, only to see that it's indeed Yu DaiYan. Happy and distressed at the same time, Zhang CuiShan quickly picks him up and touches his face. Feeling warmth, he let out a sigh of relief, and then yells, "Third brother, you... what happened... I'm your fifth brother... fifth brother!" He examines Yu DaiYan, only to see all his joints crushed, and blood pouring out. Obviously, whoever hurt him did so a short while ago.

While his first thoughts were rage and revenge, Zhang CuiShan then promptly remembers that Yu DaiYan's life is still in danger. He did not bring any medicine down the mountain, so he quickly put Yu DaiYan on his back and quickly runs up the mountain, using all his lightness kung fu ability.

Since today is their master's ninetieth birthday, the Wu Dang's main Purple Paradise Hall has been filled with an aura of happiness. The six disciples all gave their toast to Zhang SanFeng. The only problem was that they're missing Yu DaiYan. So at noon, Zhang CuiShan said to his master, "Let me go down the mountain to check up on him." Who would've thought that Zhang CuiShan would also disappear? It should've taken him at most a couple of hours to reach the old river before turning back. But it's now nightfall, yet still no sight of him.

The dinner in the hall has long been prepared, the candles almost half burnt. Everyone feels uncomfortable. Sixth disciple Yin LiTing and seventh disciple Muo ShengGu pace in and out of the hall. Zhang SanFeng is quite aware of these two missing disciples' temper. Yu DaiYan is calm and composed, and can always be counted on to accomplish a task. Zhang CuiShan is smart and quick-witted, and is decisive. So if they haven't come back yet, something important must have happened.

First disciple Song YuanQiao looks at the candles, and then says with a smile, "Master, third and fifth brother must have found some terrible things happening down the mountain. They know that the best gift to you is to do good deeds. That's why they're late." Zhang SanFeng says with a smile, "I remember you saved a widow from suicide back when I was eighty. But you know, if you kids have to wait ten years in between your good deeds, people might get a bit impatient." His five disciples laughed. Zhang SanFeng has always had a

casual relationship with his students, so they joke all the time.

Zhang SongXi then says, "But you're going to at least live till two hundred years old. So even if we just do one good deed per ten years, it's still going to be a lot." Muo ShengGu adds with a laugh, "I'm just afraid that we won't be able to keep up for that long..."

Before he could finish, Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou looked out the hall and yelled together, "Is that the third brother?" Zhang CuiShan says, "It's me!" Only to see him carrying a person on the back, running into the hall with sweat all over his face, yelling, "Master, third brother... someone attacked him..." As everyone looks in shock, Zhang CuiShan stumbled a bit, and falls unconscious.

Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou realize that Zhang CuiShan only fell down due to exhaustion, while Yu DaiYan's situation is much more dire. Together they pick him up, and check his vital signs. Zhang SanFeng's heart shook upon seeing his disciple injured, and then takes out 3 'Tiger Life Extending Pill' and put it in Yu DaiYan's mouth. But Yu Dai, in his unconscious state, could not swallow them. Zhang SanFeng then applies his inner power Yu DaiYan's Jia Che Point. After a while, Yu DaiYan's throat finally responds, and swallows the pills.

At this point, Zhang SongXi begins to massage the muscles on his neck, while Zhang SanFeng continues apply his chi to several different important pressure points on Yu DaiYan's body, trying to revive him.

After a while, Zhang CuiShan came about again, and asks, "Master, can you save third brother?" Zhang SanFeng only says, "Everyone eventually dies in this world..." Only to see a

servant come in, saying, "There are some people outside who wants to see you, master. They say they're from the Dragon Gate Escort Agency." Zhang CuiShan quickly stands up, his face filled with hatred, says, "It's them!" and quickly goes outside. Only to hear some sounds of weapons clashing outside, as Yin LiTing and Muo ShengGu quickly follows to help their fifth brother. They see Zhang CuiShan holding a burly man by the collar and then throws him down, yelling, "It's all this old guy's fault!"

Muo ShengGu, hearing that it's this old man who injured his third brother, begins to step up and give him a kick, but Song YuanQiao quickly stops him. Only to hear someone outside yelling, "Do you Wu Dang sect have any manners? I sincerely want to come and visit, yet you would treat us like this?" Song YuanQiao quickly goes up to Du DaJin and unseals his pressure points. Then he says, "Don't worry. Be a little patient, and we will sort out the truth." This sentence came out in a serious manner backed up by a great deal of inner power. Sub-leaders Zhu and Shi thought he's actually Zhang SanFeng, and became silent.

Song YuanQiao says, "Fifth brother. Tells what had happened. Don't be in a hurry, but be detailed." Zhang CuiShan stares at the Dragon Gate people a bit, and then proceeds to tell the story. Du DaJin then added what happened before he met Zhang CuiShan. Song YuanQiao can see that his kung fu is nowhere near the level of Yu DaiYan. That, plus his willingness to come to Wu Dang, pretty much dissolves him of any possible guilt. Du DaJin finally adds at the end, "Hero Song, I'm sorry that we weren't able to protect Hero Yu. But what do we do now with all the family members of my agency's employees?"

Despite concentrating on healing Yu DaiYan, Zhang SanFeng heard all of Du DaJin's words clearly, and says, "LianZhou,

you take ShengGu to Lin An and protect the Dragon Gate Escort Agency.” Yu LianZhou nods, thinking, “Master really is kind. Although it’s possible that this customer Yin maybe bluffing, it’s still not a good idea to leave so many employee’s relatives alone and vulnerable.”

Zhang CuiShan says, “Look at what this Du guy did to our third brother. Why would you help him out?” Song YuanQiao says, “How can you say that, fifth brother? Do you know why Head Leader Du came in the first place?” Zhang CuiShan says, “Obviously for the gold. Do you really think it’s because he cares for third brother?” When Du Dajin hears this, his face immediately turns red.

Song YuanQiao says, “Don’t be rude to our guests. You’re tired too. How about taking a rest!” Being the first brother, Song YuanQiao wields great amount of power within Wu Dang. All other brothers defers to him. So when Song YuanQiao told Zhang CuiShan to rest, Zhang CuiShan could only close his mouth. But still fearing for Yu DaiYan’s life, he did not go back to his room.

Song YuanQiao then says, “Second brother, hurry up and gather your stuff with seventh brother. You’ll leave tonight since this is urgent.” Yu LianZhou and Muo ShengGu quickly complied. Du Dajin, feeling warmth in his heart due to Wu Dang’s kindness, says to Zhang SanFeng, “Venerable Zhang. Thank you for your help. We won’t bother you any longer. Goodbye.”

Song YuanQiao says, “Wait. Since you are already here, how about staying for the night. We also have some things we need to clear up.” Although his voice is calm, it carries a very serious and ordering tone, prompting Du Dajin to agree.

Yu LianZhou and Muo ShengGu then said goodbye to

everyone, taking extra long with Yu DaiYan, knowing this might be the last time they would ever see him.

The hall suddenly became silent, with only Zhang SanFeng's methodic breathing providing any noise. After about an hour, Yu DaiYan suddenly yells loudly, shaking everyone in the room. Du Dajin sneaked a peek at Yu DaiYan, wondering whether this is a good or a bad scream.

Zhang SanFeng says, "SongXi, LiTing, take your third brother back to his room." Zhang SongXi and Yin LiTing promptly follow his order. When they came back out again, Yin LiTing asks, "Is he going to recover?" Zhang SanFeng takes a deep breath, and then says, "It will take a month before I can tell if he lives or dies. Even if he survives, he'll never... never be able to move again. His life is..." And proceeds to shake his head. Yin LiTing suddenly starts to cry, while Zhang CuiShan quickly gets to slap Du Dajin. This move came quick as lightning, and Du Dajin could not block in time before the palm slapped his cheek. As Zhang CuiShan tries to slap him again, Zhang SongXi quickly comes over and pushes the palm out of the way.

When Du Dajin backs off, something heavy drops out of his robe, falling onto the floor. It's a gold nugget. Zhang CuiShan says, "Humph, you greedy bastard. Giving away my third brother just for some gold..." Before he finished, he suddenly sees the fingerprints on the nugget, and asks, "Big brother, this... this is Shaolin's Golden Steel Finger." Song YuanQiao looks at it, and then gives it to Zhang SanFeng. Zhang SanFeng looks at it for a while, and then looks at Song YuanQiao for a moment silently.

Zhang CuiShan yells, "Master, this is Shaolin's Golden Steel Finger. No other kung fu in the world can possibly do this, right?" At this moment, Zhang SanFeng suddenly remembers

his childhood days with Jue Yuan, matching palms with He ZuDao, and chased out of Shaolin onto Wu Dang Mountain. He realizes that Zhang CuiShan is correct, that this is indeed Golden Steel Finger. No other Finger techniques can match this in terms of power. Although his own inner power is very high, he has never learnt such Hard techniques. As for other sects' Hard techniques, none can accomplish this. But should he confirm Zhang CuiShan's guess, his disciples would want revenge. That would be very undesirable.

Zhang CuiShan can see that he's correct from his master's look, and asks, "Is it possible that some extremely intelligent person invented a finger technique that can do this?" Zhang SanFeng says, "That's impossible. It took Shaolin hundreds of years to perfect this. I don't think anyone can invent it by himself." Song YuanQiao says, "In that case, we can confirm that third brother's joints were destroyed by Shaolin's Golden Steel Finger."

When Du Dajin hears that they think it's Shaolin who injured Yu DaiYan, he quickly gets up, wanting to say something, but did not say it. After a while, he says, "No... It can't be Shaolin. I've been studying there for over ten years, yet have never seen those six people." Song YuanQiao looks at him, and says, "Sixth brother, why don't you show our guest to his room. Get him some dinner. I'm sure he's hungry." Yin LiTing goes over to Du Dajin to send him out. Although Du Dajin wants to speak some more, he finally decides against it, and followed Yin LiTing.

After settling down Du Dajin, Yin LiTing goes back to Yu DaiYan's room, and cried again as he saw Yu DaiYan's pale, stiff face. When he came back out into the hall, he heard Zhang SanFeng say, "How venomous. SongXi. What do you suggest we do?"

Out of all his students, Zhang SongXi is the cleverest. He normally doesn't speak his mind much, but he is very good at analyzing. After Zhang CuiShan came back carrying Yu DaiYan, he felt much sadness, but at the same time started to investigate into this matter. Now that he heard his master ask, he says, "I believe this has nothing to do with Shaolin, but rather the Dragon Saber." Zhang CuiShan and Yin LiTing both let out an 'Ah', while Song YuanQiao says, "Fourth brother. I'm sure you've thought this out. Tell us your conclusion." Zhang SongXi says, "With third brother's mild temper, it's extremely unlikely that he made any enemy for no reason. That bandit he was suppose to kill was an outlaw. There's no reason why Shaolin would hurt him over that." Zhang SanFeng nods. Zhang SongXi continues, "Other than his joints, third brother was also poisoned back at Lin An city. If we want to find out exactly what had happened, we must first go to Lin An to investigate."

Zhang SanFeng nods again, says, "The poison he suffered is very unique. I still haven't found the right antidote. There are several tiny holes in his right palm and leg. Does anyone know who uses this type of hidden weapon?" Song YuanQiao says, "This is strange. If this person is good enough so that he can hit third brother with hidden weapons, why would they need poison on it?"

They all begin to think over this matter. After a while, they still could not find an answer, until Zhang SongXi says, "That man with the birthmark could've easily killed third brother, but instead simply paralyzed him. This obviously meant that he wanted to get some information from third brother. In my opinion, this information must have something to do with the Dragon Saber. Remember what Du Dajin said, that one of those six people yelled, 'Where's the Dragon Saber?'" Yin LiTing says, " 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to

not follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?' This phrase has been around for a hundred years, could it be that there really is a Dragon Saber?"

Zhang SanFeng says, "Not even for a hundred years, at most seventy to eighty. It did not exist when I was young."

Zhang CuiShan says, "Fourth brother's right. We need to go down to the south to find the killer."

Zhang SanFeng asks Song YuanQiao, "What's your opinion?" For the past few years, Zhang SanFeng has been letting Song YuanQiao manage most issues within the Wu Dang sect. So he wants Song YuanQiao to make the decision. Song YuanQiao says, "Master. Not only is this about third brother's revenge, but also the reputation of Wu Dang. If we don't settle this in the right fashion, we might cause some big problems."

Zhang SanFeng says, "Right! You and SongXi, LiTing will take my letter to Shaolin tomorrow and meet Abbot Kong Wen. Ask him how to handle the matter. Shaolin's very strict. He will know how to take care of this properly." Song YuanQiao, Zhang SongXi, and Yin LiTing nod together. Zhang SongXi thinks, "Sixth brother alone should be sufficient for this trip. There must be some other reason that master wants all three of us to go." Zhang SanFeng confirms this by adding, "I am a escapist from Shaolin. After all these years, I guess they must respect the fact that I'm quite old, and never bothered to come to Wu Dang to capture me. But there is still some friction between us. Which is why I want three of you to go, to show more respect."

Zhang SanFeng then turns to Zhang CuiShan and says, "CuiShan, you'll go down south tomorrow, and meet up with your second and sixth brother. There, listen to second

brother's orders." Zhang CuiShan nods. Zhang SanFeng then says, "Don't worry about drinking any wine tonight. A month later, we'll gather here again. If DaiYan won't recover, we can at least say goodbye to him." When he said to this part, he sighed deeply with a gloomy expression. Yin LiTing continues to wipe his tears as he cries. Zhang SanFeng then says, "Let's go to sleep."

Song YuanQiao says, "Master, third brother has been righteous his whole life. The lord will surely bless him, and... and..." He couldn't go on, knowing that more words would only sadden his master further. With tears coming out of his eyes, he follows his fellow brothers out, and back to his room.

End of Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 - Among the Misfortune and Disorder, the Characters Showed the Way

(Translated by Meh)



Only to see him write those words over and over, in many different ways, his strokes became longer and longer, his arm movement slower and slower, until they began to move with great ease, as if he were practicing martial arts. Zhang CuiShan, fixated on his master's movements, was amazed and joyous. His master had combined the twenty-four characters into a single, powerful martial arts style.

Filled with pain and frustration, with nowhere to vent, Zhang CuiShan tossed and turned on the bed for over two hours. He then quietly got up, and decided to beat up Du Dajin to vent his frustration. Afraid that his big brother and fourth brother may stop him, Zhang CuiShan stayed extra quiet as he walked through the hallway. As he entered the main hall, he saw a man with both hands behind his back, pacing back and forth continuously.

In the darkness, his eyes gazed upon a tall shadow figure, making heavy footsteps, and realized that it is the master. He stopped immediately, knowing his master would detect any further movement. Should the master then ask him why he is up, Zhang CuiShan would have to tell the truth.

Only to see Zhang SanFeng pace back and forth for a while, inspecting his surroundings, when suddenly he raised his right hand, and began to write characters in the air. Zhang SanFeng is as much a scholar as he is a martial arts master, and his students often sees him reciting poems and writing characters. So it's not unusual for him to do such a thing. Zhang CuiShan looked at the strokes he made in the air, realized the characters were 'Grief Disorder'. After repeatedly writing those two characters a few times, he followed up with the characters 'Tea Poison'. Then it suddenly dawned up on him, "Master's writing out the characters in the 'Grief-Disorder Writing Style'." Zhang CuiShan's received the

nickname of 'Silver Hook and Iron Brush', because he used a silver Tiger Hook with his left hand, and a Judge's Iron Brush with his right. After getting this nickname, he realized that scholars might snicker at him being fake scholar, so he began to study literature just as hard as his kung fu. Zhang SanFeng was indeed writing in 'Grief-Disorder Writing Style' created by Wang XiZhi*. By now his master's finger-brush did not lower back down or retract, did not return nor repeat, following exactly the intentions of the 'Grief-Disorder Notice'.

*Wang XiZhi is perhaps the most famous calligrapher in Chinese history. He's most famous for his cursive style of writing.

Zhang CuiShan had seen this style of writing two years ago. He remembered that its usage of the brush emphasized easy top-to-bottom strokes, words clear and strong but hard to pull up. Zhang CuiShan always preferred 'Orchid Pavilion Poem Sequential Writing Style', 'Seventeen Writing Style' and others that are more majestic and solemn in nature. At this moment, as he saw his master's finger writes in the midair, "Tired of obeisance: Incredible grief and disorder, the ancestor's graves one again tormented, difficult to bring back." Each stroke filled with an air of gloom and grief. He saw just how Wang XiZhi must've felt when he created this 'Grief-Disorder Writing Style'.

Wang XiZhi lived in the Eastern Jin* period. He was born to a prosperous family, but was not of Han origin. His family went southward to escape the chaos. During this chaotic time, his ancestor's graves were robbed, which really saddened his heart, and quite evident in his 'Misfortune-Disorder Writing Style'. Being a carefree youngster, how could Zhang CuiShan possibly understand the nature of this writing style? But his martial brother's terrible injury finally allowed him to comprehend the depth of 'Misfortune-Disorder Writing Style'.

*Eastern Jin is one of the countries that existed between the Three-Kingdoms era and China's reunification under the Sui Dynasty.

Zhang SanFeng repeated those words several times, sighed deeply, walked to the center of the room, paused for a moment, and then started to write again. This time, his strokes again looked different. Zhang CuiShan followed Zhang SanFeng's fingers, saw that the first character written was 'Martial', the second one 'World'. In succession, Zhang SanFeng wrote out twenty-four characters total, exactly the phrase they discussed earlier, 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?' Zhang CuiShan thought his master wrote them to better comprehend the meanings behind these words, and deduce the cause of Yu DaiYan's injury. But how did this event have to do with the Dragon Saber and Heaven Sword, the two supreme mythical weapons?

Only to see him write those words over and over, in many different ways, his strokes became longer and longer, his arm movement slower and slower, until they began to move with great ease, as if he were practicing martial arts. Zhang CuiShan, fixated on his master's movements, was amazed and joyous. His master had combined the twenty-four characters into a single, powerful martial arts style. Each character contained multiple moves, with even more variations. The characters 'Dragon' and 'Compete' contained numerous strokes, while the words 'Saber' and 'Under' have only a few, but the longer characters were not written in a hurry, nor the shorter characters crudely, the contracted strokes were just as striking, like a cankerworm unyielding, the vertical strokes were just as dangerous, like a cunning

rabbit escaping, the dots were written with ease, yet powerful and sturdy, the long slants seemed like the blowing wind, the dancing snow, the thick and heavy parts seem like a tiger's squat, an elephants footsteps*, only to see some strokes floating in midair, like the dancing of the snow, while others heavy as tiger's roar, moving as an elephant. Zhang CuiShan's eyes followed the movements thoroughly, and instinctively began to memorize them. These twenty-four characters contain two 'Not' and two 'Heaven'. Yet each one is written in a unique manner.

*Note: These are descriptions of various basic strokes that typically make up Chinese characters. If you have some understanding of them, you might be able to picture what Jin Yong wanted the readers to see.

In the recent years, Zhang SanFeng rarely taught kung fu anymore. Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou taught his final two disciples, Muo ShengGu and Yin LiTing. So despite being the fifth disciple, Zhang CuiShan really is the last person Zhang SanFeng had ever taught kung fu firsthand. Before, Zhang CuiShan's knowledge was limited, and rarely grasped the deep concepts behind much of the martial arts skills Zhang SanFeng demonstrated. But he had since come a long way with the experience of recent years, plus the fact that they shared the same feelings tonight, two hearts as one, meeting misfortune and felt anguish, encountering torment and whisked it away. Under these extraordinary circumstances, Zhang SanFeng changed these twenty-four characters into a type of martial arts. He obviously did not plan on it, just as it was pure coincidence that Zhang CuiShan would see him at this moment. The two of them, one watched while one practiced, immersed themselves into these words, forgetting the outside world.

Zhang SanFeng repeatedly wrote those words for over four

hours, until the moon had risen to the top of the sky. Swoosh, the right palm came straight down, just like the sparkle of a star or a sword, thus completing the final stroke of the last character 'compete'.

Zhang SanFeng then looked up into the sky, and said, "CuiShan, what do you think of my writing skills?"

Zhang CuiShan gasped in shock, as he did not expect his master to notice him without ever turning around. He promptly walked out of his hiding place, and said, "For your disciple to personally see master put on such an amazing display, words cannot even begin to describe my feelings. I'll go get the others so they can also learn it."

Zhang SanFeng shook his head, said, "I got caught up in the moment, which is why it looked so good. If you want me to repeat it again, I doubt I can write nearly as well. Besides, the other students don't know much about calligraphy. Even if they do see it, they would have a hard time comprehending." As he spoke, he walked out of the main hall.

Zhang CuiShan did not dare sleep, for fear of forgetting these intricate techniques, and immediately sat down in a meditating position. Each stroke each drag, each move each variation, silently recorded into his memory. Sometimes, he'd write out a few characters from the excitement. Even Zhang CuiShan himself could not remember how long it took him, but he finally recorded those twenty-four characters, and two-hundred-fifteen variations-there are 215 strokes within those 24 characters- into his memory.

He stood up, practiced once, and felt his body light and calm as the cloud, incredibly refreshed. When finished, he looked up, blinked a bit, only to see the sun high up in the western sky. Zhang CuiShan gathered himself, not believing that it's

past noon already, but finally realized that he had been practicing for more than half a day.

Zhang CuiShan wiped off the sweat on his face, and walked over to Yu DaiYan's room, only to see Zhang SanFeng healing Yu DaiYan with his inner power. Upon asking, Zhang CuiShan found out that Song YuanQiao, Zhang SongXi, and Yin LiTing had left in the morning. None of them said goodbye, as they didn't want to interfere with his meditation. The Dragon Gate Escort Agency's people also left. Although Zhang CuiShan's clothes were now soaked in sweat, Zhang CuiShan was in too much of a hurry to change them. He quickly grabbed his weapons and his normal change of clothing, took out some travel money, and returned to Yu DaiYan's room, said, "Master. Your disciple will be leaving." Zhang SanFeng nodded, smiled slightly.

Zhang CuiShan walked to the bedside, only to see Yu DaiYan's face gray-black, his whole body almost like a dead person. With pain in Zhang CuiShan's heart, he said, "Third brother, even if it cost me my life, I shall give you your revenge." He then kowtowed to his master three times, and left.

He rode his long-legged spotted horse down the Wu Dang Mountain. By the time he left Wu Dang, it was already pretty late in the afternoon. Night came after riding south for only about twenty miles. Just as he entered the roadside inn, dark clouds gathered in the sky, followed by pouring rain. This rain lasted throughout the evening. The next morning, he woke up to an extremely muggy room, with loud sounds of rain hitting the rooftop outside. Zhang CuiShan bought a hat from the innkeeper, and continued to ride despite the weather. Fortunately, his horse is a prized stallion, which kept its footing despite galloping on the incredibly slippery mud.

Upon reaching the edge of the Yellow River, he saw thick yellow river waves rolling heavily in the river, the current almost impossible for anyone to cross. He found out from the local residents that the water downstream had flood the riverbanks, and devastated the people there. As Zhang CuiShan entered the nearby town, only to see the flood victims seeking refuge in the town, everyone soaked in water.

As he traveled across town, Zhang CuiShan saw a row of riders in front, who just happened to be the people of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. He hurried up, went past them, and blocked their way.

Distressed upon seeing Zhang CuiShan, Du Dajin stuttered, "W... What do you need, Fifth Hero Zhang?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Have you seen the homeless people from the flooding?" Du Dajin didn't expect this question, paused, and then responded, "Why do you ask?" Zhang CuiShan smirked, said, "It's always right to do good deeds. How about donating some gold to the needy?" Du Dajin's face turned white, said, "People like us put our lives on the line when we work. How would we find the money to save the homeless?" Zhang CuiShan lowered his voice, said, "Why don't you take out the two thousand taels of gold, and donate them?" Du Dajin reached for his saber, asked, "Are you purposely looking for trouble today?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes. I'm going to get the money either way today."

Sub-leaders Zhu and Shi took out their weapons, and moved up next to Du Dajin. Meanwhile, Zhang CuiShan remained empty-handed, smirked, and then said, "Leader Du, you took your customer's money, but did you accomplish the task asked? Do you really have the nerve to keep the gold?"

Du Dajin said with a purple face, "But Hero Yu was sent to the Wu Dang Mountain alive, right? He was already injured when we took him in, and he's still not dead even now." Zhang CuiShan said angrily, "Do you really think you can weasel your way out of this? Were my third brother's joints broken before you escorted him?"

Before Du Dajin could respond, sub-leader Shi cut in, "Just say what you want us to do." Zhang CuiShan said, "I'm going to break every single bone in your arms and legs!" As he said this, he immediately flew forward. Sub-leader Shi quickly raised his staff to attack, while Zhang CuiShan's left hand swooshed down and across to the left, writing out his newly learnt kung fu's long-slant in the character 'Heaven'. Sub-leader Shi's staff fell out of his hand, and fell off the horse. Sub-leader Zhu wanted to retreat, but how could he be quick enough? Zhang CuiShan very naturally finished the character "Heaven" with the short-slant right, finger swept across sub-leader Zhu's waist, grabbed it, and threw him and his saddle a few meters away, in one smooth motion. For Sub-leader Zhu's foot were stuck so firmly into the stirrup, plus Zhang CuiShan's move was simply too powerful, that the saddle actually broke off the horse. With his feet firmly stuck in the stirrup, Sub-leader Zhu couldn't get up.

Shocked upon seeing such quick and smooth attacks, Du Dajin quickly got his horse to move forward. Zhang CuiShan turned around swiftly, gathered his energy, and shot out his left fist. This attack is the vertical stroke in the character 'Under', which hit Du Dajin flatly on the chest. Du Dajin's kung fu is much better than Zhu and Shi, and did not fall off the horse. With extreme anger, he reined in his horse, tried to get off his horse to fight, when suddenly he felt a surge of pain from his throat, and coughed up a gulp of blood. He staggered, took a deep breath, only to feel yet another cluster of hot blood, surging within. Although he tried to act

tough, his body could not hold up, both knees weakened, and fell down to the ground.

Three young sub-leaders and all the rest of the people could only watch in alarm, who dared step forward to help?

Zhang CuiShan originally planned to break their arms and legs, to help vent his frustration, but upon seeing the three agency leaders injured so deeply, especially Du Dajin, he now felt a little guilty. He never realized just how powerful this new 'Heaven and Dragon Kung Fu' really is. Zhang CuiShan said, "Listen up. Today I'll stop here. But you must promise to give all your money to the homeless, so they can rebuild their homes. Don't try to cheat. If I find out that you've kept any money for yourselves, I'll tear down your Dragon Gate Escort Agency, and kill every living, breathing person in it." That last sentence came from Du Dajin's story of what that customer Yin had said, so he conveniently used it.

Du Dajin tried to get up, only to feel his back in extreme pain, and began to cough up blood again. Sub-leaders Zhu and Shi only had some scratches, but neither dared fight Zhang CuiShan again. Sub-leader Shi said, "Fifth Hero Zhang, since we could not accomplish our task, we should return the money to our customer. Besides, the money is back at the agency. How can we use it to help these homeless?"

Zhang CuiShan said with a cold smile, "Do you think I'm a child? All your kung fu experts came on this delivery. There are only family members back at the agency. Would you really keep so much money with them?" He scanned around, and walked over to one of the carts. Zhang CuiShan raised his palm to hit the case, 'Bang, Bang, Bang', the case on the cart fell apart, as gold nuggets fell out.

The leaders' faces turned pale, as they wondered, "How did he know it was on that cart?" They didn't realize that although Zhang CuiShan is young, he's smart and experienced. He saw that this cart made the heaviest prints. And the three people guarding it did not try move at all when their leaders were attacked. Therefore, this case must contain some valuable items. After a cold laugh, Zhang CuiShan got up on his horse, and galloped away.

He felt very delighted, knowing the due to Du Dajin's fear for his relatives' safety, he would certainly give the money to the needy. As he continued riding, Zhang CuiShan repeated the variations of those twenty-four characters in his head. That night when he first saw this kung fu, he simply felt that it was mysterious and strange. Only when used in combat, did Zhang CuiShan realize its power. To him, learning a new, powerful kung fu felt ten times better than obtaining some priceless treasure. Finally, when he remembered Yu DaiYan's condition, Zhang CuiShan could not help but sigh in sadness.

He traveled for several days in the heavy rain. Even with his spotted horse's endurance, fatigue set in after a while. By the time he arrived in the Shan Xi province, his horse became a bit sick. Caring about the health of his horse, Zhang CuiShan traveled very slowly for quite some time. So it was already the thirtieth day of the fourth month when he arrived at the city of Lin An.

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He booked a room at the local inn, and wondered, "I've traveled way too slowly. I wonder if Du Dajin and his people had returned to the agency. Where could my second and seventh brother be? Also, considering my altercation with Du Dajin and the others, I don't think I can go to their agency

openly. I should instead go in secret tonight.”

After dinner, upon asking an inn worker, he found out that the location of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency lies by the bank of the West Lake. At the marketplace, he bought a new robe and the incredibly renowned fan of Hang Zhou. Afterwards he took a bath, brushed his hair, and changed his clothing, Zhang CuiShan looked into the mirror, only to see himself looking nothing like a kung fu expert, but rather a scholar. Zhang CuiShan held up a brush, thought he should write a poem on it, and spontaneously wrote out the Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber poem, each stroke naturally and elegantly. Looking at the fan again, he thought, “Wow! Even my writing skills have improved from learning this new kung fu. These words look excellent.” He folded the fan, walked outside, towards the West Lake.

Even before the end of the Southern Sung Dynasty, Lin An had fell under the control of the Mongolians. Due to its location as the capital of the Southern Sung Dynasty, the Mongolians were especially weary of its citizens, afraid that they may be too deeply in love with the old regime. Therefore, they established harsh, strict policies unto the citizens. That’s why most people have moved to other places. A hundred years ago, Lin An had been an incredibly prosperous place, but that was the old days.

As Zhang CuiShan walked down the road, he only saw broken-down houses, dusts in his eyes, as the former famous city of the Lower-Yangtze River region had turned into a almost a ghost town. Even though the sun had not yet set, all the residents had already closed their doors and windows, only to see Mongolian patrol soldiers marching on the street. Zhang CuiShan didn’t want unnecessary trouble, so he immediately hid in the alley upon hearing the sounds of the troops.

In the past, lanterns would light up the river at night, but now, only darkness covered the city, with no pedestrians in sight. Zhang CuiShan followed the inn worker's directions to the Dragon Gate Escort Agency.

The agency's is made up of five buildings, one linked behind another, its gate facing the West Lake, with a pair of stone lions decorating the entrance. Zhang CuiShan saw the large houses from afar, walked toward it slowly, only to see a boat docked at the lake outside. Two lanterns lit up the front of the boat, with a single person tasting wine under the candlelight. Zhang CuiShan thought, "This person is in an artistic mood." Only to see the lanterns outside the agency unlit, the large front doors shut tightly, probably meant that everyone inside is already asleep.

Zhang CuiShan walked to the main gate and thought, "Du DaJin said that someone carried third brother here a month ago. I wonder who was that?" While pondering, he suddenly heard deep sigh from behind him.

This sigh sounded like a ghost in the dark, silent night. Zhang CuiShan quickly turned, scanned the area, but other than the single person on the boat, there is no one else around. Zhang CuiShan felt uneasy, examined the person on the boat, only to see him wearing a green robe, scholarly dressed, just like himself. With the dim lighting, Zhang CuiShan could not see his face clearly, but his cheeks looked very pale white, as the lanterns shined on it, looked like the green waves on the lake itself. Lone boat in the freezing water, cold and dark, seemingly out of this world. That person sat quietly on the boat, and for a long, long time, other than the sleeves flying with the wind, there was no movement.

Zhang CuiShan originally wanted to sneak into the building, but changed his mind upon seeing the man on the boat, thinking that it's really not the righteous thing to do. So he went up to the door and knocked three times. In the silence of the night, the sound from these three knocks could be heard from far away. Yet for a long time, no one came to the door. Zhang CuiShan knocked on the door three more times, a bit louder this time, almost hurting his ears. Again he could hear no movement from inside. Not sure what's going on, he reach out with his hand and pushed the door, only to see it open without a sound, for it was not locked. Zhang CuiShan entered the courtyard and yelled, "Is your Escort Leader Du here?" As he spoke, he walked into the main hall.

The main hall is completely dark, without any candlelight. Suddenly, the main gate closed quickly behind him.

Zhang CuiShan hesitated a moment, turned around towards the gate, only to see it shut tightly, the lock now in place, meaning there's someone here with him. Zhang CuiShan smiled coldly, thought, "What's this all about?" Given the circumstances, he might as well enter the main hall.

So he stepped into the room, only to hear sounds of wind coming from all directions, as four people surrounded him. Zhang Cuishan jumped out of the harm's way. In the darkness, white light glittered, only to see weapons in each person's hand. He quickly moved to the left, towards the west side, as his right fist swept across, hitting the Sun Point of one of the attackers, stunning him instantly, followed by his left hand sweeping from top-right down to bottom-left, hitting another person's waist. These are the first two strokes of 'no'. Zhang CuiShan's left hand then swooshed down, as his right fist shot out and wrote the 'point', completing the whole 'no' character through these four strokes, knocking down all four attackers.

He doesn't exactly know who his attackers are, so Zhang CuiShan did not use much power, only about thirty percent or so. When the fourth person fell down, breaking a chair along the way, he yelled, "I can't believe you're so venomous. If you're a true man, then you should leave your name." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "If I'm truly venomous, do you think you'd be alive right now? My name is Zhang CuiShan." That person gasped, as if quite surprised. He said, "You really are Wu Dang's Fifth Hero... 'Silver Hook Iron Brush' Zhang CuiShan? You're not just pretending?"

Zhang CuiShan smiled, reached into his robe and took out his weapons. His left hand held the Silver Tiger Hook, and his right hand held the Judge's Iron Brush, as the two weapons scratched across one another, a few sparks appeared.

During this brief moment of light, Zhang CuiShan saw the four people wearing yellow monk robes lying in front of him, for these are monks. Of course, those monks also saw his appearance at this time. Two of the monks stared intently at him, their eyes filled with hatred. Bewildered, Zhang CuiShan asked, "May I have your names?"

Only to hear a monk yell, "Looks like we can't get our revenge today. Let's go!" As he spoke, the four monks got up, about to leave. But one of them suddenly fell down after walking a few steps, probably because Zhang CuiShan hurt him too deeply. Two monks returned to carry him.

Zhang CuiShan yelled out, "Could you wait up a moment? Revenge for what..." Before he could finish, the monks had jumped over the wall.

Zhang CuiShan felt that something's not right, but could not pinpoint the exact reason. Why would there be four monks

hiding in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency? Why did they ambush him? And what's with this whole 'revenge' deal? He thought, "Surely the residents here would know." He raised his voice and asked, "Is Escort Leader Du at home? Is Escort Leader Du at home?" In the empty hall, echoes reverberated from the walls, yet there is no response.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Surely not all of them slept so soundly, that no one heard me. Are they afraid of me, and simply hiding? Or perhaps they all left?" He lit up a match, only to see several candles on a nearby table. He then lit up a candle and walked into the rooms in the back. After only a few steps, Zhang CuiShan saw a woman lying on the floor motionless. He yelled out, "Big sister, what's going on?" That woman remained still. Zhang CuiShan put a hand under her shoulders and pulled her up, then moved the candle over her face, and gasped out loud.

Only to see this woman smiling, but her muscles tense, and had been dead for several hours. Zhang CuiShan thought she was dead when he touched her, but still felt odd that she'd die with a smile on her face. He stood up, only to see someone behind the left pillar. Walking over, he saw an old man dressed in servant clothing, also dead with a smile on his face.

Bewildered, Zhang CuiShan pulled out his silver hook and scanned the room with the candle. He found several tens of people dead both inside and outside all the houses, indeed the place is filled with corpses, with absolutely no one left alive. After traveling around the world for many years, Zhang CuiShan had already seen many tragedies, but never a massacre such as this one. His heart fluttered, only to see his own shadow shook on the wall. For his hands were wavering, shaking the candle with it, and naturally the shadow too.

Suddenly, he remembered something, "If you fail to make this delivery, I'll kill everyone in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency." Obviously, these people died because of Du Dajin's mistake, not able to adequately protect Yu DaiYan on the way to Wu Dang. He then thought, "That person obviously killed these people because of third brother. Which means he should be third brother's friend. But why would the third brother befriend such a vicious person? Besides, he's obviously much better than Du Dajin in terms of kung fu, so why didn't he escort third brother himself?" The more Zhang CuiShan thought, the more mysterious this whole deal became. He walked out the door to the west. With the candlelight, he saw two yellow-robed monks, backs against the wall, examining him.

Zhang CuiShan backed off a couple of steps, tightened the grip on his hook, and asked, "What do you want?" Only to see the two monks motionless, when suddenly, he realized that they're also dead. Zhang CuiShan gasped, yelled out loud. "Oh no. Revenge, revenge..." Didn't those monks say something like, "I can't believe you're so venomous. If you're a true man, give me your name." And also, "Looks like we can't get our revenge today." It appeared that he would be blamed for the deaths of these people. At that time when he's still in the dark about everything, Zhang CuiShan not only gave his name, but also showed his renowned silver hook and iron brush. But who exactly are those yellow-robed monks?

Zhang CuiShan suddenly realized that he finished off those four monks too quickly, and couldn't therefore figure out their kung fu. But from the exchange, he could feel those monks use a power-oriented, hard kung fu style. Du Dajin is a disciple of Shaolin, so these people are most likely Shaolin monks. But where are second and seventh brother? The master asked them to protect the people of the Dragon Gate

Escort Agency. Could the killer be so powerful that not even my second brother could handle him?

Zhang CuiShan realized that the escaped monks would say that he's the killer, and that Shaolin would eventually look for him. But Zhang CuiShan thought, "I can explain everything later, and the truth will come out one of these days. At that time, surely no killer could escape the search of both Wu Dang and Shaolin. It's more important for me to find second and seventh brother right now." He blew out the candle, walked to the side of the wall, and jumped out.

Before he landed, a sudden, loud, swoosh sound came, as a heavy weapon swept across at him, followed by a yell, "Lie down, Zhang CuiShan." While in midair, Zhang CuiShan could not adjust to evade the weapon, which came with great power. In this critical moment, he quickly tipped the weapon with his left hand, borrowed its force, and lifted himself back up on the wall. This move used several strokes of the character 'Martial'. As the saying goes, "The swallows rise from the water, the geese fly swiftly in the sky, facing danger control yourself, in the middle of danger soar away," to create a path of escape in the middle of a dangerous situation. In this life and death moment, he suddenly realized that this new kung fu could be hard as stone, yet also soft as feather, easily dissipating the opponent's powerful attack. His left foot lightly set on the edge of the wall, the Judge's Iron Brush now in his right hand. From that attack, Zhang CuiShan realized this opponent is very formidable.

The attacker was shocked that Zhang CuiShan could evade his attack so easily, couldn't help but let out a 'huh?' Then he yelled, "Humph, you're pretty good, kid."

Zhang CuiShan put his brush and hook in front of his chest, pointed then down in the 'Willing to Learn' position. This is

Wu Dang's signature pose as a sign of respect to elder opponents. Had Zhang CuiShan not learnt the new kung fu from his master, that last attack would have at least broken his shoulder. Yet even while incredibly angry, Zhang CuiShan did not forget his master's teachings, and leave out courtesy in the face of an opponent.

In the darkness he vaguely saw two yellow-robed monks on his left and right, each with a large, thick staff. The one on the left said, "Zhang CuiShan, the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang are fairly renowned in the martial world. Yet how could your ways be so vicious?"

As Zhang CuiShan hear the monk call him by his name, instead of 'Fifth Hero Zhang' or 'Mr. Zhang CuiShan', he felt a surge of anger, and responded in a cold manner, "You don't ask for explanation, nor seek the truth. Instead you hide in the darkness and sneak up on me. Is that what a hero is suppose to do? I have heard that Shaolin's kung fu is unparalleled, but didn't realize that their ability to sneak up on the enemy is also so amazing."

That monk let out a loud grunt, jumped up the wall and attacked at the same time with his staff. Even before the monk landed, Zhang CuiShan felt a strong wind coming from the point of the staff towards his chest, and quickly diverted the staff with his hook. The brush shot out, hitting the middle of the staff. That monk suddenly felt a strong shock coming from the staff, which prevented him from gaining balance on the wall, fell off. Zhang CuiShan only felt much numbness in both hands, thought, "This monk's strength is quite good." He asked, "May I ask for your name?"

The monk on the right said, "I am Yuan Yin. This is my martial brother Yuan Ye." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, so you are the Yuan generation at Shaolin. May I ask why you're here?"

Yuan Yin seemed to be gasping for breath when speaking, said, "This is a serious matter between us Wu Dang and Shaolin. Although we are of the younger generation, we still must intervene in this matter. I ask of you. Now that you've kill all the people in the Dragon Gate Protection Agency, in addition to two of my martial nephews. I want to ask, how Fifth Hero Zhang intends to solve this dilemma involving so many deaths." Despite the courteous nature of his tone, his words were very critical.

Zhang CuiShan said coldly, "I'm also trying to find out who killed these people. But since you're so sure that I did it, I ask you. Did you actually see me murder anyone?" Yuan Yin yelled, "Hui Feng. Why don't you have a chat with Hero Zhang?"

Four yellow-robed monks appeared from the forest, the same ones Zhang CuiShan knocked down earlier. That monk named Hui Feng stepped up and said, "Martial uncle. It's indeed him. He killed all the people in the agency, plus brothers Hui Tong and Hui Guang." Yuan Yin said, "You saw it with your own eyes?" Hui Feng said, "Yes. If the four of us hadn't escaped quickly enough, we would've also been dead." Yuan Yin said, "Monks cannot lie. Plus the reputations of Wu Dang and Shaolin are at stake here. Are you absolutely certain of what you saw?" Hui Feng got on his knees and said, "With the Holy Buddha above listening, every word I now say is the exact truth." Yuan Yin said, "Good. Now recall the exact events." When Zhang CuiShan heard this, he quickly jumped down the wall.

Yuan Ye thought that Zhang CuiShan wanted to kill Hui Feng, and quickly attacked him with a sweep of his staff. Zhang CuiShan lowered his head and easily dodged the attack, in a smooth motion, twisted around behind Hui Feng. Yuan Ye

originally planned on following up with another attack, but saw that he can no longer hurt Zhang CuiShan without first hurting Hui Feng. Yuan Ye retracted his staff and said, "What do you want?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "I just want to hear a bit more closely, hear exactly just how I killed all those people."

Seeing Zhang CuiShan behind him, Hui Feng knew that if he made any hasty moves, Zhang CuiShan could immediately kill him. Even his martial uncles won't be able to help him. But due to his anger towards, Hui Feng did not flinch, yelled, "A few days ago, martial uncle Yuan Xin received a letter from martial brother Du Dajin, north of the Yangtze river. He immediately sent Hui Tong and Hui Guang to help out. Then he sent me a note to also come here, with three fellow martial brothers. Upon entering, Brother Hui Guang said that the enemy might be here tonight, and that the four of us should guard outside. He also told us to not fall for any diversions." Yuan Yin said, "Then what? Keep going."

Hui Feng said, "Soon after dark, I heard Hui Tong fighting in the back hall, followed by a loud scream, as if he were gravely injured. By the time I got there, he's already dead... this bastard Zhang..."

He turned around and pointed his finger at Zhang CuiShan, almost touching his nose, yelling, "I saw you push Brother Hui Guang to the wall with your palm, killing him. I know I'm no match for you, so I simply watched through the window. Then eight people tried to escape, and you followed them outside, killed them all with your hands, not even letting go the old and the young. Afterwards, you left." Zhang CuiShan did not move at all. Even while Hui Feng's saliva fell on his face, he neither dodged nor retaliated. Afterwards, he said coldly, "Then what?"

Hui Feng continued, "After that, I discussed with my three brothers on what to do next. Everyone thought your kung fu was too powerful for us, so we should stay low for a moment. Who'd have thought that you'd come back again just then. We knew we couldn't beat you, but at that moment, we didn't think that that much. I asked for your name, didn't you say that you are Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan? At first I didn't believe you, thinking that the heroes of Wu Dang would not do such a thing. But when you showed your weapons, I had to believe you."

Zhang CuiShan said, "I admit that I did indeed give you my name, showed my weapons, and knocked the four of you down. But are absolutely certain that I'm the one who killed everyone in the escort agency?"

At this moment, Yuan Yin flew up, grabbed Hui Feng's body and pushed him into the distance. He said, "He already told you the whole event. So the renowned Fifth Hero Zhang could not try to hide the truth." He pushed Hui Feng aside so Zhang CuiShan could not try to kill this witness.

Hui Feng said to Zhang CuiShan, "Fine, I'll say it again. I personally saw you killed Hui Guang and Hui Tong, personally saw you killing the eight people in the escort agency." Zhang CuiShan said, "Did you see my face clearly? Was I wearing this same outfit?" As he spoke he took out a match, lighting up his face and body. Hui Feng stared at him with great disdain, said, "You were wearing this robe exactly. At that time, you had a fan in your left hand. Now you have it on your waist."

Zhang CuiShan felt his stomach boiling, not knowing why this monk would purposely say such a lie, walked up and stared into his face, yelled, "If you have the guts, say those

words again. Say that it's me who killed them all, not someone else!"

Hui Feng's eyes suddenly let out a strange expression. He pointed at Zhang CuiShan and said, "You... you're... you're not..." and instantly he fell down onto the ground. Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye quickly went up to look check his condition, only to see an expression of shock on Hui Feng's face, with no pulse in his body.

Yuan Yin yelled, "You... You killed him?" Zhang CuiShan also did not expect to see this turn of events. He quickly turned around, only to see a shadow running away among the trees. He yelled, "Stop!" and immediately flew toward the shadow. If he couldn't find the real killer at this moment, he'd be misunderstood as the killer.

Who'd have thought that while in midair, two swooshes of wind would come from behind, as two staffs caught up to him from left and right. At the same time, the two monks yelled, "Don't think you can get away, murderer!" Zhang CuiShan's brush and hook both swept down, writing the word 'Saber'[only two strokes to this character] in a backhanded manner. His hook bent around and trapped Yuan Ye's staff point, while his brush cast aside Yuan Yin's staff. Borrowing their power, he quickly flew over them to land on the roof behind them. Zhang CuiShan then tried to scan the area, but saw no person in sight.

Yuan Ye quickly jumped up to the roof for another attack. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "I need to find the killer. Don't get in my way!" Yuan Yin said in rage, "You... you killed him in front of my face, and yet try to deny it?" Zhang CuiShan flung Yuan Yin's staff to the side, preventing him from coming up.

Yuan Yin said, "Fifth Hero Zhang. We don't want to take your

life. You simply need to drop your weapons, come with us to the Shaolin, and let the abbot pass judgment on you.” Zhang CuiShan said angrily, “I can’t believe you’re actually ‘Yuan’ generation Shaolin experts. The real killer came and went without you even noticing.” Yuan Yin said, “Look, I can’t personally decide your fate for killing my fellow brothers. So please come with us to Shaolin.” Zhang CuiShan said coldly, “Urgh! I can’t believe the Yuan generation at Shaolin is filled with idiots. You can’t even see who the real killer is?” Yuan Yin said, “I’m sorry. You have too much blood on your hands. We can’t let you escape.”

Upon hearing Yuan Yin so adamantly pointing him as the killer, Zhang CuiShan became angrier and angrier. Not only did he have to argue with Yuan Yin, but he also must fight off Yuan Ye at the same time. In the heat of the battle, Zhang CuiShan said with a smirk, “You think you can actually capture me?”

Only to see Yuan Ye push his staff onto the ground, trying to borrow its force to get him up. Zhang CuiShan jumped at the same time. His lightness kung fu is far superior to Yuan Ye’s, attacked downward as he jumped. Yuan Ye tried to block his attack with the staff, but Zhang CuiShan’s hook suddenly changed directions in midair, followed by a tearing sound, as his hook sliced through Yuan Ye’s shoulder. Yuan let out a scream, fell to the ground. He only lived because Zhang CuiShan showed mercy, and not aim for Yuan Ye’s throat.

Yuan Yin quickly held up his brother and asked, “Are you alright?” Yuan Ye said, “I’m fine! You still talking and not attacking? Stop with the indecisiveness!” Yuan Yin sighed, then raised his staff to attack. Yuan Ye did not bother to wrap up his wound, instead immediately went back to fighting Zhang CuiShan. The dancing staffs carried the wind, both converged to attack as one. Zhang CuiShan knew the wrist

power of the two monks, in addition to the heaviness of their weapons. Should they be able to jump onto the wall, he would have great difficulty winning. So Zhang CuiShan played defensive, guarding his higher vantage point. Neither monks could jump up to the wall as a result. The 'Hui' generation monks have much lower kung fu, so despite seeing their martial uncles at a disadvantage, they had no way of helping.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "I really must go find the real killer quickly, no reason to get caught up in this misunderstanding." He retracted his hook and brush into defensive positions, holding off attack. Just as he's about to spring away, Zhang CuiShan heard a yell from behind, the voice thunderous, followed by a powerful force pushing towards him. Only to see a big-bodied monk jump up unto the roof, both his hands now reaching for Zhang CuiShan's weapons. Although Zhang CuiShan could not see his face in the darkness, he realized that this monk is using Shaolin's famous and powerful Tiger Claws. Yuan Ye yelled, "Thank goodness you're here, brother Yuan Xin. Don't let this murderer get away."

Zhang CuiShan had seldom met any formidable enemy in his lifetime, plus his martial arts recently increased a great deal with this new kung fu. When he saw this new monk attacking, he felt a strong hatred, and began to have the urge to duel with them. He put away his hook and brush, yelled, "Humph, do you think the three of you could beat me?" Just as Yuan Xin's left hand is nearly next to him, Zhang CuiShan retracted his right palm, swooped around and ripped apart a piece of Yuan Xin's robe. As Yuan Xin's claws touched his shoulder, Zhang CuiShan's left foot flew out, hitting Yuan Xin squarely on the kneecap.

Yuan Xin's knees are unusually sturdy, so he did not fell

down even after suffering such an injury. With a loud roar, his right claw came at Zhang CuiShan. At the same time, Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye's staffs also attacked from behind. Yuan Yin's voice might be croaked, seemingly ill, but his kung fu is the best of the three. A staff weighing at least thirty to forty pounds seemed light as a sword in his hands, very quick and flexible.

After meeting his match for the first time in life, Zhang CuiShan thought, "Wu Dang and Shaolin had been considered the two most powerful sects in the world recently, yet we never really had a chance to compete against each other. Today's a good opportunity to test against the powerful Shaolin martial arts." With that thought, he shot out his two palms, freely shifting among the two staffs and a pair of claws, cutting down, capturing, pointing and attacking. Even while fighting one on three, Zhang CuiShan gradually gained the upper hand.

Shaolin and Wu Dang sects both have their strengths and weaknesses. Zhang SanFeng is a seldom-seen genius when it comes to martial arts, but Wu Dang nonetheless lacked the thousands of years of experience Shaolin had. The difference is that, Zhang CuiShan is one of the best Wu Dang fighters, while the three monks are only second tier fighters in Shaolin. So as the fight went on, Zhang CuiShan became more and more energetic, his movements became swifter and faster. Suddenly, his right hand wrote out the long hook in the character 'Dragon', grabbing Yuan Ye's staff, and redirected it unto Yuan Yin's staff. With a loud collision sound, so loud everyone's ears vibrated. Both monks had incredible strength. Their strength, adding Zhang CuiShan's, caused such a powerful collision that blood came out of the two monks' mouths. As Yuan Xin came over to help, Zhang CuiShan quickly stepped to the side, held out his foot in front of Yuan Xin, and then gave him a shove on the back. With the

shove and his own natural forward movement, Yuan Xin immediately tripped to the ground.

Zhang CuiShan said coldly, "Want to take me to Shaolin? You'll have to practice a few more years first." Yuan Xin got up and yelled, "Murderer! Don't try to run away!" And with that the three monks began to come after Zhang CuiShan again. Zhang CuiShan thought, "They really are pesky, but I can't exactly kill them." So he took a deep breath and began to use his lightness kung fu to escape.

Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye both tried to chase him, but could not catch up, due to their inferior lightness kung fu. They can only yell, "Capture the murderer! Don't let him go!" while chasing along the banks. Zhang CuiShan laughed inside, thinking how can you people catch up to me? Suddenly he heard Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye both yell out "Ahhh!" while Yuan Yin let out a light groan, but also seemingly injured.

Zhang CuiShan turned his head around, only to see all three monks with their hands over their right eyes, as if hit by hidden weapons. Then Yuan Yin yelled, "Zhang CuiShan. If you got the guts, come back and blind my left eye too!"

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Were they blinded by someone? Who's helping me?" He then realized something, yelled, "Seventh brother, seventh brother. Where are you?" Among the seven Wu Dang heroes, Muo ShengGu's the best at hidden weapons. That's why Zhang CuiShan figured his seventh brother must be here.

But after several yells, no response came. Zhang CuiShan searched around several trees by the banks, but could not find even half a shadow.

Yuan Ye lost control after getting blinded, and wanted to keep

chase Zhang CuiShan. But Yuan Yin stopped him, knowing that doing so would be pointless. He said, "Brother Yuan Ye, we don't have to be in such a hurry to seek revenge. Even if we give up, do you think our elder reverends would let him go? Let's go seek the advice of the abbot. He'll help us."

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Zhang CuiShan felt a bit more comfortable, after seeing the Shaolin monks leave. But he still wondered, "Just who was the person that helped me?" He didn't want to stay by the lake much longer, and decided to hurry back to the inn. After quickly running for about thirty meters, he saw a bush rustling by the lake.

Since there's no wind right now, so someone must be hiding behind it. Zhang CuiShan walked closer, about to ask who's there, when suddenly a person shot out of the bush, attacked him with a saber, yelling, "Today, either you die or I die!"

Zhang CuiShan kicked his foot out, and quickly knocked the saber out of that person's hand, into the lake. Looking closely, he saw that this person is yet another monk, except his kung fu is quite mediocre. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "What are you doing here?" While speaking, he saw three other people lying behind the bush. Zhang CuiShan ignored the monk, and went over to examine the three people. He found that these three people are the three leaders of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency, Du, Shi, and Zhu.

Shocked, Zhang CuiShan yelled, "Leader Du, what... what happened..." Before he could finish, Du Dajin sprung up, grabbed Zhang CuiShan's collar with both hands, gritted his teeth, said, "Murderer. I just left three hundred taels of silver for myself, yet... yet you still won't let me go?" Zhang CuiShan said, "What are you talking about?" About to brush Du Dajin's hands away, only to see his lip spewing out blood. Zhang CuiShan asked, "Have you suffered internal injuries?"

Du Dajin yelled to that monk, "Martial brother. Remember. The murderer is Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan. Get away before he kills you too!" As he said this, he quickly shot forward, trying to head-butt Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan hurriedly twist around, got out of the way by pushing off on Du Dajin's arm, only to hear a loud thud, as Du Dajin fell onto the ground, ripping off a piece of Zhang CuiShan's clothing along the way. Despite his courage, Zhang CuiShan nonetheless felt very uneasy about tonight's events. Only to see Du Dajin's heartbeat stopped. Obviously, he was already seriously injured, or that push Zhang CuiShan gave could not have killed him.

That monk yelled in shock, "You... you just killed my martial brother..." He quickly turned around, and began to run away as fast as he can.

Zhang CuiShan shook his head, saw that sub-leaders Zhu and Shi's feet are in the water, already dead for some time. Looking at the three bodies, Zhang CuiShan felt much sadness. Although he hated them for making a grave mistake regarding Yu DaiYan, he hardly wanted to see them dead like this. Suddenly, he thought, "Du Dajin thought that I killed them because he left three hundred taels of gold for himself. I never knew anything about that. Besides, even if I did, I would hardly make a big deal out of it."

He reached into Du Dajin's sack, and indeed found several gold nuggets. At this moment, Zhang CuiShan felt that life really is fleeting. This escort leader spent his whole life traveling around, living under constant threat of death, just for some gold. Yet now, with gold right by his side, Du Dajin would no longer be able to enjoy them. He then thought about his great triumph over those Shaolin monks, but how

long can he enjoy this? After all, a hundred years later, he'd be no different from Du DaJin. Zhang CuiShan then sighed deeply.

Suddenly, the sound of zither came from the lake. Zhang CuiShan looked up, only to see a young scholar on a boat, the same one he saw in front of the escort agency earlier. He looked at the three bodies by his side, and at the boat closing in, thought that should the person see him like this, and alert the soldiers, there would be much unnecessary problems. Just as he's about to leave, that gentleman suddenly said, "If this friend likes to observe the night scenery of the lake, why not do so on my boat?" As he said this, Zhang CuiShan saw the boat rowing to the shore.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "If this person had been here all this time, he might have seen something that I missed. Perhaps I get some information from him." So he walked over to the shore, waited for the boat to come, and then stepped onto the head of the boat.

The scholar on the boat stood up, smiled, and gestured with his arm for Zhang CuiShan to sit down. Under the lantern light, Zhang CuiShan saw that this scholar's hands are whiter than snow, his face delicate and slender, eyebrows curly and nose straight, more handsome than any exquisite scholar he had ever seen. Zhang CuiShan immediately realized that this scholar is actually a beautiful young woman in disguise.

Wu Dang is very strict when it comes to women. So when Zhang CuiShan saw a lone lady on the boat, his face started to blush bright red. As he quickly got off the boat, Zhang CuiShan said, "I didn't know that you are a woman disguising as a man. Sorry to bother you."

That young woman did not respond. The boat then rowed

away, while the young woman kept playing her zither, singing, "Tonight wish for no more excitement, but there will be many more future nights, under the Six United Pagoda*, weeping willows and rowing boats. How those gentlemen, come to have fun on the water." As the boat disappeared into the darkness, so did the song and the sound of the zither.

*Note: I'm not sure too sure this is the right translation for the particular pagoda. Couldn't find the reason for its name from the encyclopedia, so I just translated word-by-word. Anyway, it's a big tourist attraction at the modern day Hang Zhou city.

Hearing such beautiful melody, after all that killing earlier, Zhang CuiShan could not help but just stand there in silence. Only after over an hour of stillness did he make his way back to the inn.

The next day, everyone found out about the mass murder at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. But with Zhang CuiShan's scholarly appearance, no one even thought he could be the culprit.

At around noon, he started to search for his brothers in the marketplace and at tourist spots. But there are no signs of them anywhere. At dusk, he suddenly remembered the young woman's song: "Tonight wish no more for excitement, but there will be many more future nights, under the Six United Pagoda, with weeping willows and rowing boats. How those gentlemen, come to sightsee." Zhang CuiShan thought, "As long as I act as a gentleman, it would be ok to see her. Sighs, if second and seventh brother were here, we could've gone together. Other than her, I really don't have any other leads."

After eating lunch, Zhang CuiShan began to walk towards the

Six United Pagoda by the QianTang River.

End of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 - Plum Flower Decoration on the Pure White Arm

(Translated by Meh)



Zhang CuiShan obviously couldn't stop asking now, yet he's too far from the boat to jump on it. So he grabbed two thick branches from a nearby willow tree and threw them onto the river. With the branches as his stepping-stones, Zhang CuiShan jumped onto the head of the boat.

By the time Zhang CuiShan reached the river, it's already dark. Only to see a boat with two bright lanterns on it, the same one he saw last night. Under the lantern lights a young woman sat on the edge, wearing a long, light-green robe, a lady's outfit.

Zhang CuiShan originally planned on asking her about the events last night, but somehow held back upon seeing her in a lady's dress. That young woman looked up in the sky and said, "Sitting on the edge of the boat, thinking of meeting a guest, the wind blows by, waking me up." Zhang CuiShan said, "My name is Zhang CuiShan. I have some questions. I hope you won't mind." That young woman said, "Then please come on the boat." Zhang CuiShan lightly sprung onto the head of the boat.

That young woman said, "Dark clouds hovered over last night's sky, and covered the moon. The weather's much nicer today, now that those clouds have dissipated." Her voice beautiful and clear, spoken while watching the sky, without looking at him even once. Zhang CuiShan said, "May I ask for the young lady's name?" That young woman suddenly turned her head around, her bright, stunning eyes shinned at him, but did not respond. Zhang CuiShan saw her indescribable beauty looking at him, and felt a bit awkward. Afraid to press further, he jumped back onto the land, and began to walk back.

After ten steps or so, his footsteps stopped. Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "Zhang CuiShan, oh Zhang CuiShan. What happened to you? How can a man like you, so experienced in the martial world, be afraid of a young girl?" He turned around, only to see that young woman's boat floated down the river, the jade lanterns lit up the river. Zhang CuiShan couldn't make up his mind, so he simply followed the boat by the river edge.

One on the river, one on land, traveling in parallel fashion. That young lady remained at the head of the boat, her head aimed towards the moon in the night sky.

After walking a while, Zhang CuiShan unconsciously looked in the direction of her eyes, only to see dark clouds gathering in the distance. These clouds quickly covered the moon. Soon, the wind began to blow, and sleek rain came down. There's only grassland by the lake, so Zhang CuiShan could not find any place to hide from the rain. Of course, he didn't care much for the rain anyway. The rainfall was not heavy, but enough to totally soak his body after a while. Only to see that young woman still sitting on the head of the boat, also totally soaked.

Zhang CuiShan yelled, "Young lady, you should enter the cabin to avoid the rain." That young woman immediately stood up and let out an 'Oh!' She quickly gathered herself, and then asked him, "Why are you not afraid of the rain?" As she spoke, she walked into the boat's cabin. After a while, she came out again, this time holding an umbrella, which she threw to him.

Zhang CuiShan grabbed the umbrella, saw that it was made out of oilpaper, and opened it. He saw rivers in the foreground and mountains in the background, covered with willow trees, obviously a scenery painting. Along with the

painting are seven characters, “No need to return simply due light wind and sleek rain*.” It’s not strange to see such paintings and writings on the umbrellas here in HangZhou, as it’s famous for such things. The painting came from a craftsman, so it carried a peculiar craftsman feel to it. What’s amazing is that a craftsman could paint in such an intricate and elegant way. The writing didn’t seem to live up to the standards of the painting, and looked like a rich young lady wrote it, yet at least the style carried a clear, beautiful, unworldly feel.

*Note: The seven characters themselves are ‘Xie2 Feng1 Xi4 Yu3 Bu4 Xu1 Gui1’. Translated literally ‘Tilted Wind Sleek Rain No Need Return’.

Zhang CuiShan did not slow down his steps as he examined the writing, and couldn’t see a ditch in his path. As his left foot came down, Zhang CuiShan felt it land in midair. Any normal person would’ve tripped and fell. But he quickly reacted, applied force to his right foot, jumped up, and landed on the other side of the ditch. Only to hear the young lady yell, “Great!” Zhang CuiShan turned around, saw that she has since put on a bamboo hat, and is standing there on the head of the boat. As her dress waved back and forth among the winds, she looked like a goddess from Heaven.

That young woman said, “Are the painting and writing worthy of Mr. Zhang’s eyes?” Zhang CuiShan never cared much for paintings, as he studied mainly on writings in his life. He said, “These words are written in the famous Mrs. Wei’s style. The characters separate but their meanings connect, the lines are short but their meanings are stretched, very charming with its rhyming.” That young woman felt very happy that Zhang CuiShan understood her writing style, and said, “Among the characters, I thought the character ‘No’ was the worst.” Zhang CuiShan examined that character, and

said, "This 'No' is quite naturally written, but it lacked any deep meaning, unlike the other characters, which leave an aftertaste in the reader's mind, making them hard to forget." That young woman said, "I understand now. I've always thought that this character somehow didn't belong, but couldn't spot the reason. Thank you for enlightening me."

Her boat continued to travel down the river, while Zhang CuiShan walked alongside it. The two people continued to talk about writing, until the sky became so dark they could no longer see each other. That young woman suddenly said, "Speaking with a scholar for just a short while beats reading books for ten years. Thank you for your help. Now let us part." She pulled up the sail, and the boat started to move faster with the aid of the wind. Zhang CuiShan stood as he watched the boat travel further and further away, and felt saddened, his mind in a void. Only to hear the young woman yell from far away, "My surname is Yin... should we meet again, I'll surely ask for more pointers..."

When Zhang CuiShan heard the words 'My surname is Yin', he suddenly remembered, "Wait a minute. Didn't Du DaJin say that a handsome scholar, whose surname is Yin, asked for them to deliver Third Brother Yu? Could he be this young lady in man's clothing?" Once he realized this, he forgot all about the tradition that man and woman should remain apart, and began to chase after the boat. Although the boat traveled very fast, it still could not beat out his lightning kung fu. Soon, he caught up with the boat and asked loudly, "Ms. Yin, do you know my third brother Yu DaiYan?"

That young woman turned around, but did not respond. Zhang CuiShan seemingly heard a sigh, but wasn't sure due to their distance.

So Zhang CuiShan added, "I have this suspicion in my mind,

which I hope you can help clear up.” That young woman said, “Do you really need to know?” Zhang CuiShan said, “Did you ask the Dragon Gate Escort Agency to take my third brother back to Wu Dang? If so, then I would surely repay your kindness.” That young woman said, “Sometimes, it’s so hard to distinguish generosity and cruelty.” Zhang CuiShan said, “My third brother was gravely wounded at the bottom of Wu Dang Mountain. Do you know about this?” That young woman said, “I was saddened too, and is really sorry.”

As they spoke, the wind picked up, and the boat sailed even faster. But Zhang CuiShan had no problem keeping up with the boat.

As they traveled further, the river became wider, the light wind and sleek rain turned into heavy wind and heavy rainstorm.

Zhang CuiShan asked, “Do you know who killed the people in the Dragon Gate Escort agency?” That young woman said, “I made it clear to Du Dajin for him to take good care of Third Hero Yu. Should there be any problems...” Zhang CuiShan said, “You said you’d kill everyone in his agency.” That young woman said, “That’s correct. He didn’t protect Third Hero Yu, so it’s his fault. You can’t blame others.”

Those words sent a chill down Zhang CuiShan’s spine, and he said, “So you’re saying that everyone... everyone was killed by...” that young woman said, “Killed by me!” Zhang CuiShan’s ears trembled. He couldn’t believe that this incredibly beautiful young woman could be such cold-blooded killer. After a while, he said, “What about those two Shaolin monks?” That young woman said, “Also killed by me. I originally didn’t want to bother with them, but they used poisoned darts on me first, so I didn’t have a choice.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Then... then why did they say that I was the

killer?" That young woman said, "Oh, I planned that."

Zhang CuiShan fumed, and yelled, "You planned for them to wrong me like that?" That young woman laughed, and said, "That's correct." Zhang CuiShan yelled angrily, "Surely we're not enemies. So why would you do that to me?"

That young woman waved her hand, and entered the cabin. Zhang CuiShan obviously couldn't stop asking now, yet he's too far from the boat to jump on it. So he grabbed two thick branches from a nearby willow tree and threw them onto the river. With the branches as his stepping-stones, Zhang CuiShan jumped onto the head of the boat. He then yelled, "How... how did you plan it?"

No sound came out from the dark cabin, so Zhang CuiShan planned to go in. But at the last moment he changed his mind, thinking, "It's rude to barge into a young lady's room like that." As he pondered about what to do, he saw a light appearing in the cabin, as a candle lit up.

That young woman said, "Please come in."

Zhang CuiShan organized his robe, closed the umbrella, and walked inside. He immediately froze as he saw a young scholar inside, wearing a green robe, holding a fan, his expression quite colorful. For that young woman had taken this time to change into man's clothing. At first glance, she looked quite like himself. Zhang CuiShan obviously needed no more words to answer his question. In dim conditions, anyone would mistake them to be the same person. No wonder Monk Hui Feng and Du Dajin were both so certain that he was the killer.

That young woman said, "Please sit, Fifth Hero Zhang." She then picked up the teapot and poured some tea into a cup.

Then she reached out to give him the cup. She said, "Sorry we don't have wine here. Let me use tea instead of wine to serve my honored guest."

After hearing such a mannerly speech, Zhang CuiShan could not find a way to release his anger. He finally said, "Thank you." That young woman saw his whole body soaked wet, and said, "I have some clothing in the cabin here. Do you need one? You can change in the back." Zhang CuiShan shook his head and said, "No need." He immediately applied some inner power, and a wave of chi exited his body, releasing much body heat. The water on his robe quickly evaporated. That young woman said, "I forgot that Wu Dang's inner power is one of the best in the martial world. It really was improper of me to ask you to change clothing." Zhang CuiShan asked, "Would you mind telling me which sect you belong to?"

That young woman immediately turned towards the window when she heard the question, her face filled with worry.

When Zhang CuiShan saw this, he stopped pressing further. But after a while, he couldn't help but ask again, "Who injured my third brother Yu? Can you tell me?" That young woman said, "Not only did they fool Du Dajin, they also fooled me. Actually, I should've realized that the seven heroes of Wu Dang would be very elegant and valiant, not crass and unmannerly."

Zhang CuiShan realized that she didn't answer the question, but when she said 'elegant and valiant', he felt his heart jumped, and his head a bit feverish. But he's still not sure what her words meant.

That young woman sighed, and then suddenly lifted up her left sleeve, revealing an arm as white as white-jade. Zhang

CuiShan quickly turned around to avoid her arm. That young woman said, "Do you recognize these hidden weapons?"

When Zhang CuiShan heard this, he finally turned around to look at her, only to see three needles on her left arm. Her arm's white as snow, but the area by the needles are black as ink. The tails of all three needles are shaped like plum flowers. Zhang CuiShan immediately stood up, and yelled in shock, "These are Shaolin's Plum Flower Darts. Why... why are they dark?" That woman said, "Exactly. These are Shaolin's Plum Flower Darts. They are poisoned."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Shaolin's a very reputable upright sect. Their darts would never have poisons on them. But other than Shaolin disciples, who else can use them? How long have you been poisoned? We need to remedy this immediately."

When that young woman saw the deep concern in his face, she said, "I've been poisoned for over twenty days now, but I have temporarily stopped them from spreading with some medicine. However, I can't pull them out either, since then the poison would spread."

Zhang CuiShan said, "But if you don't pull them out soon, your arm might... your arm might... be much harder to cure. It might leave a nasty mark." Actually, he wanted to say that the arm might become useless.

That young woman began shed some tears, and said faintly, "But I've done all I can... Last night I couldn't find the antidote from those monks... I can never use this arm again." As she spoke, she covered up her arm again.

Zhang CuiShan felt a surge of warmth in his chest, and said, "Ms. Yin, do you trust me? Although my inner power is

ordinary, I am still confident that I can cure your poison.” That young woman smiled innocently, and her cheeks turned pink, as if she’s incredibly happy. Yet she said, “Fifth Hero Zhang. I know you have many suspicions. If I don’t tell you everything, you might regret this decision later.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Saving people is what I’m suppose to do. Why would I regret it?”

That young woman said, “It’s already been over twenty days, so I won’t mind waiting a while longer. Here’s what happened. Once I gave Third Hero Yu to Du Dajin, I followed him from behind. There were quite a few people who wanted to take Third Hero Yu away, but I took care of them. Funny thing is, Du Dajin didn’t know any of this.” Zhang CuiShan said, “The disciples of Wu Dang will never forget your kindness, Ms. Yin.” That young woman said coldly, “Don’t thank me just yet. Soon, you’ll be hating me.” Zhang CuiShan doesn’t know what to make of that statement. That young woman continued, “I kept changing my clothing along the way, sometimes dressed as a farmer, sometimes a businessman, until I followed them to the bottom of the Wu Dang Mountain, where the incident occurred.” Zhang CuiShan bit his teeth and said, “You mean you saw those six beasts? Unfortunately, Du Dajin and his people do not know who they are.” That woman sighed again, and said, “Not only did I saw them, I also fought them. Unfortunately, I also could not tell you much about them either.” She picked up a cup of tea and drank some. Then she continued, “That day I saw these six people come down from the top of the mountain. Du Dajin kept calling them ‘Six Heroes of Wu Dang’, and those six people did not seem to mind. I watched from far away, and saw them take the carriage that carried Third Hero Yu. At first I was relieved to see him arrive safely, but after a while, I realized that things didn’t make sense. The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang treat each other as brothers. They should’ve all gone up to examine his injury, yet only one

person took a look, and without any expression too.”

Zhang CuiShan nodded and said, “Ms. Yin, you really are attentive. Your suspicions are right on the mark.”

That young woman said, “The more I thought about it, the more things didn’t add up. So I turned back and caught up to them, then asked for their names. These people’s eyes were quite sharp, and immediately saw that I was a woman. I shouted at them for pretending to be Wu Dang disciples, and then attacked them. A thirty-some year old skinny man came out to fight me, while a Taoist priest stayed by to back him up. The rest of them went away. This skinny man was quite formidable, and I could not defeat him after thirty or so exchanges. At this moment, that Taoist priest waved his left hand, and my left arm became numb. That skinny man said some indecent words, then tried to capture me. I had to fire off three darts of my own so I could escape.” As she said this, her face turned red. Probably that skinny man sought after her beauty and wanted to rape her.

Zhang CuiShan asked, “Did you say he fired the darts with his left hand? How could Shaolin accept a priest as a disciple?” That young woman said with a smile, “A Taoist has to shave his head to look like a monk, but a monk just needs to put on a Taoist hat to look like a Taoist priest.” Zhang CuiShan nodded. That young woman continued, “I couldn’t beat that skinny man, and that Taoist’s kung fu is even better. So I had to let them go.” Zhang CuiShan wanted to say something, but refrained to do so.

That young woman said, “I know you want to ask why I never went to Wu Dang to explain everything, right? But I couldn’t go to Wu Dang. If I could’ve, why would I ask an escort agency to do it for me? Besides, I overheard Du DaJin talking on my way back. Once I knew that the other Wu Dang heroes

have looked into this matter, I knew there was nothing I could do to help. Since I was also in a hurry to treat my poison, I left. What happened to Third Hero Yu anyway?"

Zhang CuiShan told her what happened afterwards. That young woman sighed, her eyelashes slightly flickered, and said, "Hopefully Third Hero Yu will get well, or... or..." Zhang CuiShan heard the sincerity in her voice, and was deeply moved. He said, "Thank you for your kindness." As he spoke his eyes became wet. That young woman shook her head and said, "When I came back, someone told me that these darts are Shaolin's unique Plum Flower Darts. Other than its own unique antidotes, the poison's incurable. The only place with Shaolin disciples here is the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. So I went there, seeking the antidote. However, they tried to ambush me as I entered."

Zhang CuiShan let out a 'huh' and said, "But didn't you say you purposely planned for them to think it was me?" That young woman blushed, lowered her head, and said softly, "I saw you bought this clothes at the store, and looked very... very dashing, so I went ahead and bought one too." Zhang CuiShan said, "That would explain it. It's just that they're not your mortal enemies, so you really shouldn't kill them all. That's just too cruel and merciless."

The young woman's face sank, and then spoke in a cold voice, "Are you trying to lecture me? Never in my nineteen years in life have I been lectured. I know Fifth Hero Zhang is righteous and kind. You don't have to degrade yourself into associating with people like myself. Please feel free to leave."

After getting scolded, Zhang CuiShan's face turned bright red. He quickly stood up and began to storm out the cabin, but then realized that he promised to cure her poison wound. So he said, "Please lift up your sleeves." That young woman

raised her eyebrows, and said, "Since you like to lecture me so much, I don't want you to cure me anymore." Zhang CuiShan said, "If you leave the wound like that, the poison will eventually spread. By that time, it will be very difficult to cure you."

That young woman said, "So what? If I die from this, it will be because of you." Zhang CuiShan asked with surprise, "What does this have to do with me?" That young woman said, "If I hadn't tried to sent your third brother back, then I would've never have met those six people. If I had decided not to interfere in that matter, I would've never been injured. Besides, had you gotten there sooner, and helped me fight them, how could they have injured me?"

While the last sentence was ludicrous, the previous statements were quite reasonable. Zhang CuiShan said, "You're right. I'll help you right now to repay your kindness." That young woman said, "So do you admit that you're wrong?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Wrong about what?" That young woman said, "You said that I was cruel and merciless. Of course you were wrong. Those monks and all those people in the escort agency deserved to die." Zhang CuiShan shook his head and said, "Although you've been poisoned, you can be cured. My third brother is gravely injured, but probably won't die. Even if we can't cure him, at least we should find the main culprit, instead of killing so many innocents."

That young woman said, "So you say that I killed the wrong people? Isn't it true that it's a Shaolin disciple who poisoned me? Isn't it true that the Dragon Gate Escort Agency is part of Shaolin?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Shaolin disciples fill the world. Are you going to kill all of them with a wound on your arm?"

The young woman couldn't win this argument. In anger, she

suddenly lifted up her right hand, and pressed it hard into her left arm, directly over her wounds. With this, her injury magnified.

Zhang CuiShan never in his dreams expected her to do such a thing, that she'd hurt herself over a single argument. Considering how she treated herself, it's hardly surprising that she didn't value the lives of others. He wanted to stop her, but was unfortunately too late. He gasped with surprise, "Why... did you have to do this?" Only to see black blood staining her sleeves. Zhang CuiShan realized that if he doesn't do something quick, her life would be in danger. He quickly grabbed her left hand with his left hand, and his right hand began to tear off her sleeve.

Suddenly, a voice came from behind him, "Hold it right there!" as that person attacked him from behind with a knife. Zhang CuiShan knew he was the boatman, but in this critical moment, he had no time for explanation. With a swift back kick, he kicked the boatmen back out the cabin.

That young woman said, "I don't want you help. My life and death doesn't concern you anyway." As she said this, she promptly slapped him on the cheek. She slapped at lightning speed, and since Zhang CuiShan had not anticipated her attack, he immediately let go of her hand.

That young woman composed herself and said, "Get out of my boat. I never want to see you again!" Zhang CuiShan, ashamed and angry by her slap, said, "Fine! I've never seen such an insolent girl in my life!" And he immediately turned around to leave. That young woman said coldly, "Never seen one before? Well, you saw one today."

Zhang CuiShan picked up a block of wood to help him get back to the banks. But at the last moment he thought, "If I

leave now, she's certainly going to die." With that in mind, he suppressed his anger and went back to the cabin, said, "I'll just forgive you for that slap. Roll up your sleeve quickly. Do you want to keep your life or not?"

That young woman said, "What does my life have to do with you?" Zhang CuiShan said, "I must repay you for sending my third brother back." That young woman said coldly, "Oh, you're just trying to repay a debt. Looks like if I hadn't sent back your third brother, you would've just watched me die."

Zhang CuiShan froze a second, and then said, "Not necessarily so." Only to see her body began to shake, signs of the poison spreading. He quickly said, "Hurry! Roll up your sleeves. Do you really have a death wish?" That young woman said while biting her teeth, "If you don't admit that you're wrong, then I won't let you help me." Her face was naturally pale, and under such conditions she looked so very fragile, arousing Zhang CuiShan's compassion.

He sighed, and then said, "Fine. Let's just say I was wrong. Those people all deserved to die." That young woman said, "Not good enough. What's with this whole 'let's just say I'm wrong' deal? And why did you sigh? Wrong is wrong. Say it with some conviction."

In this moment of life and death, Zhang CuiShan can't possibly fuss over such small details. So he yelled, "With the Heaven above and River below listening, I, Zhang CuiShan today wholeheartedly apologize to Yin... Yin..." As he said this, he stuttered. That young woman said, "Yin SuSu." Zhang CuiShan continued, "to Yin SuSu and seek her forgiveness."

Yin SuSu, delighted at his apology, smiled gleefully. Suddenly, her legs gave out on her, and fell back onto a

chair. Zhang CuiShan quickly took out a pill of 'Heaven's Heart Antidote' for her to swallow. Then he grabbed her arm and asked, "How do you feel?" Yin SuSu said, "My chest is burning up inside. Why did it take you so long to apologize? If I die, it will be all your fault."

In this circumstance, Zhang CuiShan could only sooth her with gentle words, "Everything's fine. Don't worry. Just relax your whole body, and don't try to use any energy. Pretend as if you're asleep." Yin SuSu glanced at him and said, "I'll just pretend as if I'm dead."

Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "My gosh, she's so unruly even at this moment. I can't imagine what kind of anguish her future husband would suffer in her hands." As he thought this, he found his heartbeat quickened, and his head feverish. Afraid that Yin SuSu might see through his thoughts, Zhang CuiShan glanced at her, only to see her cheeks bright red, with bashfulness mixed with frailty. When their eyes met, both quickly turned their eyes away.

Yin SuSu suddenly said quietly, "Fifth Brother Zhang, I was very rude, and even hit you. Please... please don't be offended."

When Zhang CuiShan heard her change from calling him 'Fifth Hero Zhang' to 'Fifth Brother Zhang', his heart began to beat quickly. After he took a deep breath, Zhang CuiShan composed himself, exerting his inner chi to his hands, which held Yin SuSu's arm around the poisoned darts.

After a while, thick steam came from the top of his head, signs that he's utilizing his full power. Yin SuSu was grateful in her heart, and knew that this is a critical juncture, refrained from speaking as to not break his concentration. Suddenly, a Plum Flower Dart from her arm shot out, and

black blood sprung out from the wound, turning into red blood a while later. The second dart quickly followed.

At this moment, he heard someone yell from outside, "Is Miss Yin here? Red Sparrow Branch Leader requests a presence." Zhang CuiShan needed to concentrate, and ignored him. He then heard the boatman yell, "There's a thug on the boat. Leader Chang, please come here quick!" The first voice yelled, "Thug, if you hurt a single hair on Miss Yin's head, you'll die a painful death." This person's voice boomed across the river, its sound carried a threatening tone.

Yin SuSu opened her eyes and smiled weakly towards Zhang CuiShan, as if to express an apology. Since her right hand hit her arm at the location of the third Plum Flower Dart, it sank deeper than the other two. Even after three attempts, Zhang CuiShan could not get it out. He then felt another boat nearing, and someone walking onto this boat. But with all his concentration on this last dart, Zhang CuiShan ignored all this.

That person came into the cabin, and saw Zhang CuiShan's hands holding tightly onto Yin SuSu's arm. Obviously he would not believe that Zhang CuiShan's actually trying to heal her. In his hastiness, that person's palm shot out at Zhang CuiShan's back, while yelling, "Still wouldn't release your hands, thug?"

Zhang CuiShan didn't have time to get away, so he simply took a deep breath, and with a loud pop, this palm hit squarely on his back. Zhang CuiShan knew the intricacies of Wu Dang inner power, so he simply stayed still, channeling the force of the blow through his body. Immediately, the third Plum Flower Dart popped out, landing on the floor nearby.

The person who hit Zhang CuiShan was about to follow up

with a second blow, but when he saw the dart he immediately stopped, said, "Miss Yin, Are you... are you injured?" When he saw black blood pouring out her arm, he realized that he mistook this gentleman's intentions, and felt guilty. Considering the power of his palm, he thought that Zhang CuiShan's life was probably in danger. So he quickly took out some medicine for Zhang CuiShan to take.

Zhang CuiShan shook his head, and once the blood pouring out turned to red, released his hands. He turned around and smiled, "That was one powerful blow." That person stood in shock. He thought of how he had killed so many powerful fighters with his palm. Yet this young gentleman could take the full brunt of his attack and act as if nothing happened. He said, "You... you..." He looked at Zhang CuiShan's face, and immediately went to grab his wrist and check his condition. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Why don't I play a joke on him?" Then proceeded to gather his chi and stopped his heartbeat. When that person checked his pulse and found none, he was simply appalled, not knowing what to think.

Zhang CuiShan took the handkerchief Yin SuSu just handed him, and used it to cover her wounds, then said, "Most of the poison had been flushed out. You should recover easily with the aid of common antidotes." Yin SuSu said, "Thank you." She then turned to that other person and said with a solemn expression, "Branch Leader Chang. Meet Fifth Hero Zhang of Wu Dang." That person fell back a step, bowed, and said, "Oh, so it's the fifth hero of the 'Seven Heroes of Wu Dang'. No wonder your inner power is so amazing. My name is Chang JinPeng. Sorry for my rudeness."

Zhang CuiShan looked at this fifty-some year old man, with tight muscles all over his body, looking very strong. He returned with a bow.

Chang JinPeng turned towards Yin SuSu and paid his respects. Yin SuSu nodded, but didn't seem to care much for this man. Only to hear Chang JinPeng say, "Branch Leader Bai had already contacted the Sea Sand Sect, the Huge Whale Clan, and the Divine Fist Sect. The meeting time for showing the saber is tomorrow morning on QianTang river's WangPan island. If my lady's not feeling well, I can send you back home to Lin An. Branch Leader Bai alone should suffice taking care of these people."

Yin SuSu said, "Humph... Sea Sand Sect, Huge Whale Clan, Divine Fist Sect... Is the head of the Divine Fish Sect Guo SanQuan going to be there too?" Chang JinPeng said, "I heard he personally led his twelve best students." Yin SuSu said, "Although he's quite famous, Guo SanQuan's ability is nowhere near that of Branch Leader Bai. Anyone else important that I should be aware of?" Chang JinPeng said, "I heard two young swordsman from the Kun Lun sect will be there. They said that they want to see the Dragon... Dragon..." He paused here for a moment, and glanced at Zhang CuiShan. Yin SuSu said coldly, "They want to see the Dragon Saber, right? Their hands might become itchy..." When Zhang CuiShan heard the words 'Dragon Saber', his ears perked up. Only to hear Yin SuSu continue, "We can't underestimate these Kun Lun swordsman. My injury's no big deal. Let me see, how about we also go to the meeting. Perhaps Branch Leader Bai could use our help." She turned around and said to Zhang CuiShan, "Fifth Hero Zhang. We should part now. I'll go ahead on Branch Leader Chang's boat. You can take my boat back to Lin An city. After all, there's no reason for Wu Dang to get into all this."

Zhang CuiShan said, "My third brother's injury is seemingly related to the Dragon Saber. Can Miss Yin fill me in on everything?" Yin SuSu said, "I don't know all the details either. Why don't you go back and ask your third brother?"

Zhang CuiShan saw that she wouldn't say, and decided against pressing further. He thought, "The people who hurt my third brother looked like they really wanted the Dragon Saber. From the tone of Branch Leader Chang, the Dragon Saber is in their hands. Should those people know about this, they'd surely come to this meeting." So he said, "Do you think that Taoist priest who fired these darts would also go to WangPan Mountain?"

Yin SuSu showed a slight grin, but did not answer his question. Instead she said, "If you really want to go to this ceremony, then let's go together." She then turned towards Chang JinPeng and said, "Branch Leader Chang. Please lead the way." Chang JinPeng answered, "Yes!" and retreated back out the cabin like servant in front of a master. Yin SuSu only nodded, but Zhang CuiShan respected this old man's martial arts ability. So he personally sent Chang JinPeng out the door.

Yin SuSu looked at the tear on Zhang CuiShan's clothes where Chang JinPeng had hit him. She said, "Take off your long robe. I'll stitch it up for you." Zhang CuiShan said, "No need!" Yin SuSu said, "You don't trust my sewing ability?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "I wouldn't dare." And then remained silent as he thought about all those deaths in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. He normally would have tried to kill anyone capable of such murder. Yet instead he saved this person's life instead. Although he saved her because of her kindness to his third brother, he still realized that good and evil should not mix. Once this deal at WangPan Island is over, he'll leave her immediately.

Yin SuSu saw the surly expression on Zhang CuiShan's face, and immediately what he's thinking. She said, "In addition to all those people in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency and those

two Shaolin monks, I also killed Monk Hui Feng.” Zhang CuiShan said, “I thought that was you, except I wasn’t sure how you did it.” Yin SuSu said, “That was hardly difficult to do. I simply stayed by the river and listened in on your conversation. When that Hui Feng monk saw that you weren’t me, I simply gave him a needle in the mouth. You kept on searching for me on the ground and on trees, but I was on the boat the whole time. So of course you couldn’t find me.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Which means that Shaolin would continue to think that I’m the killer. Miss Yin, you are certainly very smart, very cunning.” Yin SuSu ignored his cynical tone, and simply responded with a smile, “Thank you for your compliment!”

Zhang CuiShan became even angrier, and yelled, “Why did you try to frame me? Since when did I ever do anything to you?”

Yin SuSu said with a smile, “I didn’t purposely want to hurt you. But since Shaolin and Wu Dang are known as the two most powerful institutions in the martial world. I really would like to see who would win in a battle.”

After getting over the initial shock, Zhang CuiShan found himself feeling less hatred towards Yin SuSu, but more wary towards her. He thought, “Looks like there’s a huge plan here, much bigger than just trying to hurt me. If Wu Dang and Shaolin really were to fight each other, the martial world would be much less peaceful.”

Yin SuSu remained quite calm, and said, “May I see the designs on your fan?”

Before Zhang CuiShan could respond, they heard someone on Chang JinPeng’s boat yell, “Is this Huge Whale Clan’s boat? Who’s there?” Another voice responded, “This boat

carries the young leader of the Huge Whale Clan. We're here for the meeting on the WangPan Island." The man on Chang JinPeng's boat yell, "The Heavenly Eagle Sect's Miss Yin and Branch Leader Chang of the Red Sparrow Branch are here. Plus there's an honored guest. Please get back behind us." The other person yelled, "If your leader were here, we'd surely let you go first. But no one else is worthy."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Heavenly Eagle Sect? What kind of evil sect is that? How come I've never heard of them? They look to be quite formidable based on what I've seen. This sect must've been established only recently, and stayed mostly in the southern area. Which is why I've never met them." He opened the cabin window and looked outside, only to see a boat with a sculpture of whale carved to its head, and several curved sabers on its side, decorated as whale teeth. This boat had a huge mast, allowing it to sail much faster than Chang JinPeng and his boats.

Chang JinPeng yelled, "Young Leader Mai, Miss Yin's here. How could you not give face to her?" A yellow-robed young man stepped to the front of the whale-boat gave a cold laugh and said, "On land the Heavenly Eagle Sect rules supreme, but on water you think you can compete with us? Why should we give you face on the river?" Zhang CuiShan thought, "This river is so wide hundreds of boats can travel simultaneously. Why do they have to make other boats travel behind them? This Heavenly Eagle Sect really is odd."

By this time, the wind picked up, and the Huge Whale Clan's boat is now way ahead of them. Chang JinPeng let out a 'humph', and said, "Huge Whale Clan... Dragon Saber... also... Dragon Saber..." It's really hard to distinguish what he said with the huge wind and the distance between the boats.

When that Young Leader Mai heard him say 'Dragon Saber'

twice, he became very interested, and ordered his man to sail back towards Chang JinPeng's boat. Once nearly there, he asked, "Branch Leader Chang, what did you say?" Chang JinPeng said, "Young Leader Mai... our Branch Leader Bai... that Dragon Saber..." Zhang CuiShan thought, "That's odd. Why does he speak in fragments?"

Only to see the two boats moving closer and closer together, until they're only a few feet apart. Then suddenly, Chang JinPeng picked up an iron anchor on his boat and threw it onto the other boat, Amidst screaming from two sailors, the anchor swooped down onto the whale-boat.

Young Leader Mai yelled, "What are you doing?" Chang JinPeng didn't respond, instead picked up the second anchor on his boat and also threw it onto the whale-boat, killing three sailors in the process. Now the two boats are locked tightly together. Young Leader Mai tried to pick up the anchor to get it off the boat. Meanwhile, Chang JinPeng waved his right hand, and accompanied by the sound of chains, a dark green watermelon shot out, hitting the main cabin of the Huge Whale Clan's boat. Only then did Zhang CuiShan realize that this watermelon is Chang JinPeng's weapon. It seemed to be made out of steel, two of them total, connected by a long chain. Each one incredibly heavy, at least sixty to seventy pounds. Only someone with incredible strength can make them move with such ease.

After hearing a huge amount of noise, Zhang CuiShan saw that the watermelon had made a cut in the middle of the boat. While the sailors on the boat panicked, Chang JinPeng retracted his watermelon and then threw both onto the back end of the whale-boat. After a while, the boat began to split apart.

That young leader could only watch helplessly as his boat

broke apart.

He yelled some obscenities at Chang JinPeng, who retorted, "As long as Heavenly Eagle Sect's here, we also rule the water!" As he spoke he threw out his watermelons again, this time he made a hole at the bottom of the ship, causing water to begin flooding in.

Young Leader Mai jumped up from his boat towards Chang JinPeng's. Chang JinPeng waited till he's right in the middle of his jump before sending out a watermelon with his left hand. While in midair, this young leader could not hope to dodge the oncoming weapon. He immediately blacked out upon impact and fell back to his own boat.

By now, there are already several holes in the Huge Whale Clan's boat, and its sailors could only try to hold on for dear life. Without needing any orders from Branch Leader Chang, the sailors on his boat retracted their anchors and resumed sailing.

Zhang CuiShan was thoroughly impressed by Chang JinPeng, thinking, "Had my teacher not taught me the intricacies of borrowing force to release force, His attack on my back would've certainly killed me. Not only is this person's kung fu amazing, he's also devious and clever. Must be a powerful person among the evil sects." He turned back and looked at Yin SuSu, only to see her expression calm and ordinary, as if she didn't really care about any of this.

Although these sailors knew how to swim, it's still impossible for them to swim all the way to the side of the river. Many of them cried out for help. Chang JinPeng and Yin SuSu's boats did not bother to stop for any of them.

Zhang CuiShan looked out the window at the broken-down

boat. He felt sorry for these sailors, but knew that considering Chang JinPeng and Yin SuSu's merciless attitude, he could not persuade them to save those people.

Yin SuSu looked at his expression, smiled, and yelled out, "Branch Leader Chang. Our honored guest Fifth Hero Zhang wants to do a good deed. Why don't you save these people?" Zhang CuiShan could not believe that she would speak such words. Only to hear Chang JinPeng say, "I will carry out the request of our guest."

He then yelled, "Listen up people. Wu Dang's Fifth Hero Zhang wants to save your lives. If you value your life, swim towards our boats!" The Huge Whale Clan people immediately swam towards the boats, most of them made it.

Zhang CuiShan's heart warmed, and said happily, "Thank you!" Yin SuSu said coldly, "The Huge Whale Clan kill people like objects. None of them are compassionate people. Why did you want to save them?" Zhang CuiShan was taken aback. He knew that the Huge Whale Clan is one of the four most brutal water clans in the country. Yet for some reason, he actually tried to save them today. Only to hear Yin SuSu say, "Had I not saved them, I bet Fifth Hero Zhang would've scolded me, 'You are such a malicious young woman. I really regret having saved your life.'" Being told exactly what he had been thinking, Zhang CuiShan's face turned red. He said with a smile, "You're so cunning, how can I hope to argue over you? Saving those people will only help you atone for your bad deeds. It has nothing to do with me."

At this moment, the tide roared like thunder, shaking everyone's ears. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu could hardly hear each other in this situation. Zhang CuiShan looked out the window, and realized that those people in the Huge Whale Clan who hasn't been saved are likely all dead.

Yin SuSu walked over to the back room, closed the door, and came back out a bit later, this time in woman's clothing. She then made a gesture for him to take off his robe. Zhang CuiShan didn't want to refuse her, and did as he's told. He thought Yin SuSu wanted to mend his robe; instead she actually wanted him to put the robe she just taken off. Afterwards, Yin SuSu took the torn robe into the back room.

With nothing else to wear, Zhang CuiShan could only put on the robe Yin SuSu handed him. This robe is quite big, and he had no problem fitting in it. A faint fragrance came from the robe. Zhang CuiShan's mind shivered, and looked away from her. He simply sat in the cabin pretending to look at the paintings on the wall. But with the huge tide rocking the boat, plus so many worries in his mind, Zhang CuiShan could not enjoy anything at the moment. Yin SuSu did not speak with him either.

Suddenly the boat rocked hard again, even the candle was blown out. Zhang CuiShan thought, "It's bad image for Miss Yin if she and I continue to stay in a dark room like this together." So he opened the cabin door and sat outside, only to see the boatman desperately trying to hold the tiller, rowing the boat under these extreme conditions.

After about an hour, the tidal waves dissipated. A while later, they've arrived at WangPan Island.

The WangPan Island is located right at the mouth of river, where it flowed into the Eastern Sea. The island is filled with stone mountains, seemingly without residents. Two boats docked by the beach. Only to hear a horn blowing in the distance, to see two people waving flags on the beach. As the boat got closer, Zhang CuiShan saw that the two boats both have a large eagle on their flags.

An old man stood on the shore between the two boats. Only to hear him say, "Black Valiant Branch's Branch Leader Bai GuiShou welcomes Miss Yin." His words long but clear, although not too loud, managed to show his impressive inner power. When Yin SuSu's boat docked, he personally put up the plank. Yin SuSu asked Zhang CuiShan to go first, before she walked down to the shore to introduce them.

How nicely Yin SuSu treated Zhang CuiShan, who introduced him to be the fifth hero of Wu Dang, really startled Bai GuiShou. He said, "It really is a pleasure to meet one of the renowned heroes of Wu Dang." Zhang CuiShan returned with some courteous words.

Yin SuSu said with a chuckle, "Your words are so insincere. One's thinking, 'Darn, Wu Dang's also here. Yet another person who wants to steal the Dragon Saber.' The other's thinking, 'Man of an evil sect, I could care less about associating with the likes of you.' If you ask me, you really should just speak your minds."

Bai GuiShou laughed, while Zhang CuiShan said, "I did not mean any disrespect. Branch Leader Bai's kung fu is superb. I was amazed at your ability to stretch your sound across the water. I am only here with Miss Yin, not to take the Dragon Saber."

Yin SuSu's expression brightened considerably upon these words. Bai GuiShou knew of Yin SuSu's icy personality, and was quite shocked that she would warm up to Zhang CuiShan. So one could imagine just how important he is to her. That plus the fact that Zhang CuiShan complimented on his own kung fu lessened Bai GuiShou's enmity towards Zhang CuiShan. He said, "Miss Yin, Sea Sand Sect, Huge Whale Clan, and Divine Fist Sect's people are all here. Plus

two Kun Lun swordsmen came. These two kids are extremely arrogant, nowhere near as courteous as Fifth Hero Zhang...”

As he said to here, they heard someone yell from behind, “And just how courteous is it to speak foul of others behind the back?” Two men in long, green robes appeared, with swords on their back. Both looked like they were in their late twenties, with an expression as if they want to cause some trouble.

Bai GuiShou said with a smile, “Well, look who’s here. Come, let me introduce everyone.”

Those two started to complain, but stopped when they were captivated by Yin SuSu’s amazing beauty. One simply stared at her. The other turned away immediately after a glance, but kept her in the corner of his eyes.

Bai GuiShou pointed at the man staring at Yin SuSu and said, “This is Swordsman Gao ZeCheng.” Then he pointed to the other man and said, “This is Swordsman Jiang Tao. Both are prestigious members of the Kun Lun Sect. As this is their first visit to the central plains, I’m sure they can show us their incredible swordsmanship.”

His voice was filled with sarcasm and disdain. Zhang CuiShan thought these two people would have drawn their swords, or at least rebutted Bai GuiShou, immediately. Yet for some reason, neither did anything, as if they never heard those words. Then Zhang CuiShan looked at their expressions, and figured out that they were so enchanted by Yin SuSu that they forgot about everything else. Zhang CuiShan chuckled inside, thought, “I’ve always heard that Kun Lun’s a very prominent sect, and is famous for its incredible swordsmanship. Who’d have thought that its disciples would be so ill-disciplined?”

Bai GuiShou then added, "This is Wu Dang's Mr. Zhang CuiShan. This is Miss Yin. This is Branch Leader Chang JinPeng." He did not elaborate on these three people when he made the introduction. In fact, he even changed from calling Zhang CuiShan 'Fifth Hero Zhang' to 'Mr. Zhang', obviously to convey their closeness.

Yin SuSu, pleased at his words, turned to look at Zhang CuiShan with a bright smile.

Gao ZeCheng's jealousy immediately acted up, stared at Zhang CuiShan angrily, and said coldly, "Martial Brother Jiang, I thought I heard back in western regions that Wu Dang is one of the righteous sects in the central plains." Jiang Tao said, "I believe I heard that too." Gao ZeCheng said, "Guess the sayings weren't all that accurate." Jiang Tao said, "Really? Well, it wouldn't be all that surprising, considering these rumors tend to be wrong most of the time. What's this whole deal about Wu Dang anyway?" Gao ZeCheng said, "How could a disciple of a righteous sect mingle with the members of an evil sect? Guess he really likes to sink to their level." They didn't realize that Yin SuSu is also a member of the Heavenly Eagle Sect, and merely implied Bai GuiShou and Chang JinPeng when they said 'evil sect'.

After hearing these words, Zhang CuiShan immediately became angry. He wanted to rebut, yet stopped himself at the last moment. He thought that since his purpose was to look for Yu DaiYan's killers, there was no need to quarrel needlessly. Besides, the Heavenly Eagle Sect really does deserve the title of an 'evil sect', as Yin SuSu and Chang JinPeng both treat killing people like eating dinner. He certainly should try to associate as little as possible with them. Zhang CuiShan therefore smiled, and responded, "Like my two friends, I'm also just newly acquainted with the

Heavenly Eagle Sect.”

These words really shocked everyone. Bai GuiShou originally thought that Yin SuSu and him were long time friends. He'd never imagine they're newly acquaintances. Yin SuSu became angry immediately, as Zhang CuiShan's words showed blatant disrespect towards the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Gao and Jiang laughed in their minds, thinking, “What a coward. He must be afraid of our Kun Lun Sect.”

Bai GuiShou said, “Looks like everyone's here. We're only missing the young master of the Huge Whale Clan, but let's not wait on him. Everyone can relax for a while, as we'll gather at noon to show the saber.” Chang JinPeng said with a smile, “Young Master Mai's boat had some trouble, but Mr. Zhang helped him out. He's currently on my boat, and will make it to the ceremony.”

Zhang CuiShan saw that these two branch leaders had treated him with great respect, while Yin SuSu's gaze revealed much tenderness. But on further thought, he felt necessary to stay as far away from these people as possible. So he said, “I want to take a stroll alone.” Before anyone could respond, he turned around and started walking into a nearby forest.

Although he felt extremely angry at Yin SuSu's vicious behavior, there's always much warmth in his heart whenever he thought about her. He thought, “This Miss Yin's place in the Heavenly Eagle Sect is very high, but she's not the leader. These two branch leaders treated her like a princess. I wonder what position does she hold?” Then he thought some more, “The Heavenly Eagle Sect obviously want to show off the Dragon Saber, yet they only sent two branch leaders to guard against these other sects. Obviously they felt no need for extra security. Bai GuiShou's kung fu

looks to be even higher than Chang JinPeng. From this I can deduce that the Heavenly Eagle Sect is indeed a very powerful group. I really should know more about them, in case they ever become enemies with Wu Dang.”

As he was thinking, he began to hear weapons clashing in the distance. Out of curiosity, Zhang CuiShan walked towards the sound, only to see Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao practicing swords with each other in the distance, while Yin SuSu watched on the side. Zhang CuiShan thought, “Master always said that Kun Lun sword art is very unique. When he was young, he even fought against a famous Kun Lun Swordsman called the ‘Sword Saint’. It really is an amazing opportunity to see their sword art.” But it’s a big no-no to secretly watch others practice their kung fu, so although Zhang CuiShan really wish to keep watching, he turned away.

However, Yin SuSu had discovered him by now and yelled out, “Come here, Fifth Brother Zhang.” If Zhang CuiShan began to leave now, he’d look like he was peeking. So he had no choice but to walk towards her. Zhang CuiShan said to Yin SuSu, “Since they’re practicing swords, we really should go away as to not distract them.” Before Yin SuSu could respond, a streak of light shined, as Jiang Tao’s sword made a cut on Gao ZeCheng’s left arm, blood came out. Zhang CuiShan froze, thought that Jiang Tao only accidentally injured Gao ZeCheng. Yet Gao ZeCheng didn’t even let out a sound. He simply continued to fight, each sword attack deadlier than the previous one. Zhang CuiShan was shocked to see them actually fighting for real.

Yin SuSu said with a smile, “Looks like the older martial brother is worse than the younger one. Brother Jiang’s sword art is more exquisite.”

When Gao ZeCheng heard these words, he bit his teeth, his

fast sword stretched down at a slanted angle, using the move 'Hundred Meters of Blazing Wind', came slicing down from midair. Zhang CuiShan couldn't help but yell, "Great sword technique!" Jiang Tao immediately evaded, but Gao ZeCheng's just too experienced. In the middle of the technique, he immediately switched to a different technique. The sword tip trembled, piercing into Jiang Tao's left leg. Yin SuSu clapped her hands and said, "Wow, looks like the elder martial brother has a few tricks up his sleeves. Guess he's better after all." Jiang Tao said, "Don't be so sure." And used the technique 'Rain Poured on Flying Flowers'. This technique is very tricky. A real attack hides among seven or eight elegant deceptions to fool the enemy. But since Gao ZeCheng is very familiar with this technique, he was not fooled and blocked every attack. By now, both people are wounded. Although the wounds were not severe, one can still see blood spluttering out from the cuts. Their attacks became more and more ruthless, until near the end they seemingly wanted to take each other's lives. Yin SuSu kept on encouraging them, complimenting a bit on Gao ZeCheng, then a bit on Jiang Tao. The two martial brothers became fueled to the point where they fought as if their lives depended on it.

By now Zhang CuiShan realized that their fight was initiated by Yin SuSu, as revenge for their words against the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Although their techniques are intricate, Zhang CuiShan saw that the two martial brothers lacked experience and inner power. So their amazing sword art could only be exerted at about ten to twenty percent capacity.

Yin SuSu clapped her hands and smiled brightly, as if she's very happy. She said, "Fifth Brother Zhang, what do you think of their Kun Lun sword arts?" Before he could respond, she had turned her head around. When she saw the disgusted look on Zhang CuiShan's face, she added, "Actually, their

techniques are all crap. Let's go watch the scenery over there at the beach." Without waiting for his response, Yin SuSu grabbed Zhang CuiShan's hand and began to leave.

Zhang CuiShan's heart stirred as her soft hand gripped his own. Although he knew she was using him to further ridicule Gao and Jiang, he still could not bring himself to break himself apart, willingly followed her to the beach.

Yin SuSu stared into the distant sea, then suddenly said, "In the chapter 'Water in Autumn' of the book Zhuang Zi, there's a passage which says, 'All the waters in the world, none more than in the sea, thousands rivers flow here, not knowing when they could stop but not overflow.' But the sea is not proud. It says, 'I belong between the sky and the earth, just like small rocks and small plants are between the sky and the earth.' Zhuang Zi really is an incredible book. Its philosophies are so deep and so overwhelming."

Zhang CuiShan had been quite mad at her for inciting Gao and Jiang into fighting, but could not help but froze at these words. Zhuang Zi is a must-read for all Taoists. When Zhang CuiShan was at Wu Dang Mountain, Zhang SanFeng had used it often to explain philosophies to his students. He could not imagine this devilish lady could recite such words. After he regained his composure, Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes, 'walking a thousand miles, would not match its immensity, climb up a thousand steps, would not match its depth.' "

As Yin SuSu heard his quoted description of the sea from 'Water in Autumn', she saw a deep admiration on his face. She said, "Are you thinking of your master?"

Deeply shocked, Zhang CuiShan unknowingly reached out with his right hand and grabbed hers. He asked, "How do you know?" Years before, when he and his martial brothers were

reading this book, Yu DaiYan commented on this exact passage. He said at the time, "As we learn more and more, it appears as if we're moving backward. The more we learn, the more apart we seem to be from master. These words described master's bottomless, unparalleled martial arts perfectly." Both Song YuanQiao and Zhang CuiShan nodded in agreement. So when he recited those words just now, Zhang CuiShan immediately thought of his master Zhang SanFeng.

Yin SuSu said, "Based on your expression, you must be either thinking of your parents, or a Wu Dang elder. But other than Taoist Zhang SanFeng, who else on this world can be described as 'walking a thousand miles, would not match its immensity'?" Zhang CuiShan said happily, "You're really smart." But then quickly realized that it was not courteous to have grabbed her hands.

Yin SuSu said, "Just how good is your master's martial arts anyway? Can you tell me?" Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "It's not just martial arts. His knowledge is so broad and so deep that I can't even begin to describe." Yin SuSu smiled, said, "The scholar walks, the scholar moves faster, the scholar dashes, the scholar like a spirit flies into the distance, disappearing just as I look up." This quote was made by Yan Hui in Zhuang Zi to compliment his master, Confucius. After hearing her describe his master this way, especially as Zhang CuiShan himself felt this towards Zhang SanFeng, he said, "My master doesn't even have to fly. He simply needs to walk for me to fall behind."

With Yin SuSu's cleverness, plus her wish to get on Zhang CuiShan's good side, they had no trouble carrying on an excellent conversation. Sitting side by side on a large stone, the two forgot the outside world as they conversed.

After a while, loud footsteps came from faraway, followed by someone clearing his throat, and said, "Mr. Zhang, Miss Yin, it's noon now. Please follow me to the place where we'll hold the ceremony." Zhang CuiShan turned around, and saw Chang JinPeng standing ten paces behind them. Although his expression is in a very respectful manner, there's a slightly grin on his face, looking like an old man being happy to see a lovely young couple together. Although Yin SuSu had always viewed him as a subordinate, she still could not help but blush at this moment, and turn away. Zhang CuiShan's cheek turned red upon seeing them, even if he's sure of his own integrity.

Chang JinPeng turned around to lead them. Yin SuSu whispered to him, "Let me go first, so they won't see us together." Zhang CuiShan thought, "Since when did this young woman became so shy?" But he nodded anyway. Yin SuSu caught up with Chang JinPeng, asked, "What happened to those two Kun Lun idiots anyway?" Zhang CuiShan's thoughts were filled with mixed emotions as he watched them disappear into the trees. Then he followed them into the mountain valley.

Upon entering the valley, he saw a grassy plain filled with several tables. Other than an elegant table to the east, all others were filled. When Chang JinPeng saw him walking near, he yelled, "Here comes Wu Dang's Fifth Hero Zhang!" He spoke these words clearly and loudly, his voice vibrated between the mountains. After the introduction, Chang JinPeng and Bai GuiShou came up to greet him. Bai GuiShou said, "Branch Leader Bai GuiShou and Chang JinPeng, under Sect Leader Yin, welcome Fifth Hero Zhang to our ceremony."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Ah, so the their leader's surname really is 'Yin'!" He responded, "Thank your for welcoming me here." As he walked passed by the other tables, Zhang

CuiShan saw everyone staring at him strangely, but didn't thought much of it. He did not know that none of the other people here were so seriously greeted as he had been, with both branch leaders and all their sub-leaders welcoming him personally. For the other groups, only one or two sub-leaders had greeted them.

Bai GuiShou showed him to the table that wasn't taken, on the east side. This table only has one chair, but nonetheless the most elegant one. Zhang CuiShan looked around, and saw around six or seven people at each other table. Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao sat at the sixth table. Zhang CuiShan said, "I really don't deserve such a seat. Brother Bai, please move me somewhere else." Bai GuiShou said, "Wu Dang is one of the most highly respected institutions in the martial world. That plus Fifth Hero Zhang's fame, you're more than qualified for this seat." Zhang CuiShan remembered his master's lesson on modesty, thought, "If big brother or master were here, they could certainly sit here. But I certainly do not deserve it." So he once again refused the seat.

Gao ZeCheng gave Jiang Tao a glance. Then Jiang Tao picked up his chair and threw it at Zhang CuiShan's table, over five other tables. It landed perfectly in place, demonstrating his exquisite palm ability and inner power. Gao ZeCheng yelled, "Humph, 'most highly respected institution'? I wonder if Wu Dang's really worthy of the title. If you, Mr. Zhang, refuse to sit there, then let us brothers take your place." The two flew like the wind over to Zhang CuiShan's table, next to the chairs.

For you see, Yin SuSu had told them earlier that she wanted to learn some Kun Lun sword art. Both brothers immediately pulled out their swords and began to show her their sword techniques. At first, they simply wished to get the upper

hand and gain her favor. But with Yin SuSu adding fuel to fire with her words, the duel quickly got out of hand. Only when Yin SuSu left with Zhang CuiShan did the two realize that they had been duped. Obviously, the two were extremely angry, but neither could act up towards Yin SuSu. So they tried to take Zhang CuiShan's seat in an effort to make him fight them, then they can make him look bad here in public.

Chang JinPeng put up a hand to stop them, said, "Hold on!" Gao ZeCheng was about to object, when Zhang CuiShan said, "If the two honored guests wish to sit here, then go ahead. I'll switch seats with you!" As he spoke he began to walk towards the sixth table where the Kun Lun brothers were sitting. Yin SuSu suddenly waved her hand at him, yelled, "Fifth Brother Zhang, come here."

Zhang CuiShan wasn't sure what she wanted to say, so he went to her side. Yin SuSu pulled up a chair and put it by her seat, said, "Why don't you sit here?" Zhang CuiShan never imagined that she would say such a thing. Under the stares of others, he could not decide what to do. Agreeing would make it seem as if they have an intimate relationship, while refusing would make her look very bad. Yin SuSu whispered, "I need to speak to you about several matters." Zhang CuiShan saw a hint of begging in her gaze, softened his heart, and sat down on the chair. Yin SuSu, euphoric at his decision, poured a cup of wine for him to drink.

Although they managed to grab the main table, Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao now felt even angrier, but could not act up in public. Bai GuiShou swept some dust off the chairs and said with a smile, "If the Kun Lun guests wish to sit here, then be my guest. Please, sit!" As he spoke the people from the Heavenly Eagle Sect returned to their seats. Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao thought, "This worthless fellow is too scared to sit here. So obviously his Wu Dang sect is lesser

than our Kun Lun sect.” The two looked at each other, and sat down.

Only to hear a loud cracking noise, the chairs broke under them, and the two brothers stumbled to the ground, looking very awkward. But with their solid martial arts, the two quickly regained composure and got back up. Even so, everyone at the ceremony began to laugh wildly. Gao and Jiang realized that Bai GuiShou did something to the chair while dusting it. They both suddenly become conscious of just how powerful Bai GuiShou’s inner power was, much more powerful than either could’ve imagined.

Only to hear Bai GuiShou said coldly, “We all know that the Kun Lun martial arts is amazing. You don’t have to beat up on two chairs to prove it. Besides, everyone can do this simple chair-breaking kung fu anyway, right?” He waved his right hand and spoke to the ten sub-leaders under his command, “Why don’t you all try it out?”

Only to hear numerous cracking sounds, as ten chairs immediately broke apart. Those ten sub-leaders remained upright throughout the whole process, not moving a tiny bit while their chairs crumbled. Obviously this made them look much better than Gao and Jiang. Everyone here realized that Bai GuiShou was purposely making Gao and Jiang look bad. But the scene really was very entertaining, so they could not hold back their laughter.

Amidst the laughter, two sub-leaders each carried a large rock towards the main table, kicked away the scraps of the broken chairs. One said, “I’m sorry that our wooden chairs could not support the two honored guests. How about sitting on this rock instead?” These two people are renowned strongmen in the Heavenly Eagle Sect. So although their martial arts are plain, they still have the innate strength to

carry these two huge rocks, each no less than four hundred pounds. They walked in front of the two Kun Lun brothers, seeking to hand the rocks to them.

The exquisite Kun Lun sword skills, unfortunately, would not be of any help to Gao and Jiang when it comes to catching rocks. Gao ZeCheng yelled, "Put that down!" The two strongmen did not listen, instead they raised the rocks above their heads and yelled, "Take it!"

When they said this, Gao and Jiang immediately retreated a few steps. They were afraid that the two strongmen did not have enough strength, and might accidentally drop the rocks onto them. Although extremely angry, Gao and Jiang did not dare attack the two strongmen.

Bai GuiShou said, "If the two Kun Lun guests do not want to sit down, perhaps we should give these chairs to Mr. Zhang!"

Zhang CuiShan had been sitting by Yin SuSu, taking in her fragrance, feeling heavenly in his heart, without a care for the outside world. When Bai GuiShou yelled out his name, Zhang CuiShan quickly returned to reality, and thought, "I can't fall into this demonic trap, and be so closely associated with this evil sect's lady demon." So he immediately got up and walked over.

Although he had heard Chang JinPeng compliment Zhang CuiShan's ability, Bai GuiShou had never seen anything himself. At this moment, he wanted to try Zhang CuiShan out. So he gave the two strongmen a meaningful glance.

The two strongmen understood his intentions, walked over to Zhang CuiShan, and yelled together, "Be careful, Mr. Zhang. Please take it!" The two people bent their knees, then used their legs' power to help throw the rocks upward and forward,

aimed towards Zhang CuiShan.

When the crowd saw this, they unwittingly all stood up to look.

Bai GuiShou originally planned to simply test Zhang CuiShan's martial arts, and not out of malevolence. One reason is out of curiosity, as 'Wu Dang's Seven Heroes' are too famous in the martial world. Another is because Bai GuiShou could not believe the famous Zhang CuiShan is actually a scholarly looking person. Finally, he saw that the icy cold Yin SuSu, who don't seem to care for anyone, was extremely thoughtful and gentle towards this 'Fifth Hero Zhang'. This meant that Zhang CuiShan would likely be an important character for the Heavenly Eagle Sect later on. But now as he watched the two stones headed towards Zhang CuiShan, Bai GuiShou began to regret his decision. Being a renowned Wu Dang disciple, Zhang CuiShan could surely dodge the rocks, but doing so would make him look bad. Zhang CuiShan and surely Yin SuSu would both be extremely angry. He instantly made up his mind, that should something go wrong, he would immediately put the blame on the two sub-leaders. Better execute them than face the wrath of Miss Yin.

Zhang CuiShan was very shocked to see two rocks about to fall on top of him. He couldn't get out of the way, for then he'd look no better than the Gao and Jiang, making Wu Dang look bad. So without much thought, Zhang CuiShan called upon all his powers at this critical moment. His left hand wrote the right-hook in the character 'martial', redirecting the movement of the left rock. His right hand wrote the left-slant in the character 'saber', bringing along the right rock. The force of the two huge rocks falling down is quite enormous. Zhang CuiShan's strong point is certainly not his arm strength. So for him to even catch one rock would be

impossible. Fortunately, he has learnt the techniques Zhang SanFeng created from characters, which are some of the deepest martial arts philosophies in the world. The basis of Wu Dang's martial arts lies not with speed, nor with power. Rather, it is all about the intricacies of using force. If one can apply the right amount of power at the right time, he can 'move thousands of pounds using ounces of force'. Through years of learning and experience, Zhang CuiShan can use this concept readily. Borrowing the innate force of the throw, Zhang CuiShan easily redirected the directions of the two rocks directly upward.

As his long sleeves danced, the hands hidden inside the sleeves, from onlookers' view, seemingly had caught the rocks, only to hurl them up once again. The two rocks went up one after the other, then began to descent. Zhang CuiShan floated up, until he sat down upon the higher of the two rocks.

Only to hear a loud thud, as the bottom rock hit the ground, making a huge dent in the ground. Immediately afterwards, the top rock fell on top of the bottom one, with Zhang CuiShan sitting calmly on top. He said with a smile, "The two sub-leaders' strengths are astounding. You have my admiration."

Those two sub-leaders could only stare at him in silence, unable to get over the shock of what had happened.

For a while, the whole place remained silent. Then everyone started to applaud, which lasted for a long time.

Yin SuSu glanced at Bai GuiShou, her expression positively delightful. Bai GuiShou was thrilled that his 'mistake' now turned into a big favor for Miss Yin. He picked up a cup of wine, walked towards Zhang CuiShan's table and said, "I've

long heard of Fifth Hero Zhang's fame, but only today was I able to personally see your amazing kung fu. Here's a toast for you." As he spoke he drank the wine. Zhang CuiShan said, "You're too flattering!" and drank a cup of wine in turn.

Bai GuiShou walked to the middle of the gathering, yelled, "My sect has recently acquired a new saber, called the Dragon Saber. Some have said, 'Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow!'" He paused slightly here, his eyes swept through the entire field, letting the words sink in. Then he added, "Our Leader Yin originally planned for heroes everywhere to meet on Heavenly Eagle Mountain, so they can see our Dragon Saber. However, that would take too long to plan. We want some of our close friends to see the saber first, and spread the good word for us." He waved his hands, and eight disciples walked into a nearby cave.

Everyone looked at these eight disciples, thinking they went in to grab the saber. Instead, they came out carrying a huge iron pot. They used poles to lift the pot, as to avoid the giant fire burnt within. The eight disciples put the pot in the middle of the gathering. Everyone sitting immediately felt the warmth of the fire. After those eight people left, four more came, carrying a large iron anvil, while two others carried two heavy hammers.

Bai GuiShou said, "Branch Leader Chang, please show us the Dragon Saber!"

Chang JinPeng said, "As you wish!" He turned around and yelled, "Get me the saber!"

The two strongmen walked into the cave. When they reappeared, one carried a yellow package, while the other guarded him. That sub-leader handed the package to Chang

JinPeng, and retreated to his side. Chang JinPeng opened the package to reveal a single saber. Under the gaze of the audience, he unsheathed the saber, said, "This is the famous Dragon Saber. Watch closely!" He held the saber above his head, as if showing great respect.

Everyone here had long known about the Dragon Saber, but saw that this black saber looked quite plain. They all wondered whether this saber was real or not. Only to see Chang JinPeng give the saber to the strongman on the left, and said, "Test the hammer!"

That strongman grabbed the saber and put it on the anvil, the sharp edge facing up. The other strongman raised the iron hammer, brought it down upon the saber. Only to hear a soft scratching sound, the hammer split in half, one side stuck to the anvil, the other fell to the ground. Everyone gasped, stood up, and thought, "It's not incredibly rare to see precious swords cut through gold or jade. But to cut through an iron hammer like tofu, without making much of a sound, is simply unheard of.

Two people from the Huge Whale Clan and the Divine Fist Sect went up to examine the broken hammer, saw that the cut was clean and shiny, meaning that it was recently made.

That strongman grabbed another large hammer, and once again brought it down upon the saber, with the same result.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "I can't believe there exist a saber as sharp as this one."

Chang JinPeng grabbed the saber and with a seemingly light stroke cut the anvil in half. He then went to the nearby forest, and in a single swoop, used the saber to cut through eighteen trees. But oddly enough, none of the trees even

moved. Just as the crowd was wondering, Chang JinPeng pushed one of the trees slightly, and the top part came down. The saber did indeed sliced through all the trees. But since it was so sharp, and Chang JinPeng's slice was horizontal, the trunks did not fall down upon cut. Heavy wind came at this moment, the rest of the trees fell.

Chang JinPeng let out a hearty laugh, waved his hand, and threw the Dragon Saber into the iron pot.

Suddenly, loud cracking noises came from afar, as if someone else is also cutting down trees. Bai GuiShou and Chang JinPeng looked at each other, then stared into the distance, only to see the ships' masts all falling down one after another. Not knowing what's going on, each sect sent some people to the dock to see what's going on.

Only to hear loud noises continue, as if the boats were all sailing within a thunderstorm. One after the other, the boats sank. Everyone gathered froze, not knowing what to say. At first, they thought it was some trick by the Heavenly Eagle Sect. But once they saw the Heavenly Eagle Sect ships sinking, they felt something else is going on.

The sects sent a second group of people to check on things. Again, no one came back.

Bai GuiShou said to one of the sub-leader, "Go check it out." That sub-leader did as told. Bai GuiShou then turned to the audience, said with a smile, "Looks like there's something odd going on at the beach. Don't worry. Even if the boats are ruined, we can always make more. Come, let's drink!" Although everyone's uneasy about the situation, none wants to show weakness in front of others. So they all picked up their cups for a drink. Suddenly a loud scream came from afar.

Chang JinPeng and Bai GuiShou both realize that this was the scream of the sub-leader they sent out. Then, heavy footsteps could be heard, followed by the appearance of a heavily wounded man, indeed the sub-leader they sent out.

He held his hand over his eyes, as blood poured out the numerous heavy scratches on his body. He yelled, "Golden-Haired Lion King! Golden-Haired Lion King!" Bai GuiShou asked, "Did you say it's a lion?" He calmed down a bit hearing it was just an animal. That sub-leader said, "No! No! He was a person. He clawed to death all the people. He sank all the boats!" At this moment, his body fell to the ground, dead.

Bai GuiShou said, "Let me go see what happened." Chang JinPeng said, "I'll go with you." Bai GuiShou said, "You should stay and protect Miss Yin." He knew that the dead sub-leader's kung fu is quite formidable. Anyone capable of decapitating him like that must be very powerful. Chang JinPeng nodded and said, "Yes!"

Suddenly they heard a voice, "Golden-Haired Lion King is already here!" Everyone gasped, only to see a man appear from behind the trees. He was tall and massive, with yellow hair over his head, his eyes shined, in his hand is a three-meter long mace. The way he stood and looked gave off the aura of a war god from Heaven.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Golden-Haired Lion King? He must've gotten the nickname from his yellow hair. But who is he? Master never mentioned someone like him."

Bai GuiShou went up to him and asked, "May I have your name?" That person said, "My surname is 'Xie', given name is 'Xun'. I also have a nickname called 'Golden-Haired Lion

King’.” Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, thought, “This person looks very coarse, but his name is quite elegant. His nickname is much more fitting.” Hearing him very mannerly, Bai GuiShou said, “So it is Mr. Xie. I do not believe that we have met. So why did you come to this island and start killing people?”

Xie Xun smiled, showing bright white teeth. He looked around and said, “Why did everyone else come here?”

Bai GuiShou thought, “There’s no reason to hide the truth from him. Although his kung fu is formidable, he still can’t possibly defeat Chang JinPeng and myself combined, with the help of Fifth Hero Zhang and Miss Yin.” He said, “The Heavenly Eagle Sect recently acquired a precious saber. We simply asked our friends to come take a look.”

Xie Xun examined the saber currently lying inside the huge iron pot. Its ability to keep its natural color under so much heat certainly demonstrated the saber’s value. He began to walk towards the pot.

Chang JinPeng saw his intentions, blocked the way, yelled, “Stop!” Xie Xun chuckled, said, “What do you want?” Chang JinPeng said, “This saber belongs to the Heavenly Eagle Sect. You can certainly examine it, but you cannot take it.” Xie Xun said, “Did you make the sword? Or bought it?” Chang JinPeng could not respond. Xie Xun continued, “You also took it from someone else. So if I take it from you, it’s hardly unfair. So why can’t I do it?” As he spoke he went to grab the saber.

Chang JinPeng took out the watermelons from his waist, yelled, “Mr. Xie, if you don’t stop right now, I shall be obligated to use force.” Even as he spoke his warning, his watermelon had shot out. Xie Xun did not even turn around. He simply waved his mace behind him, blocked the

watermelon and redirected it back towards Chang JinPeng. Chang JinPeng gasped, quickly threw out his other watermelon to block the one headed towards him. Unfortunately, Xie Xun's power is just too strong. Upon impact, the second watermelons changed its directions too, and both now came back towards him. In an instant, they hit Chang JinPeng directly on the chest, killing him instantly.

This sudden change of events shocked Chang JinPeng's five sub-leaders. They immediately attacked Xie Xun. Xie Xun's left hand grabbed the Dragon Saber, and then tipped over the iron pot with his mace. The fallen pot immediately hit three sub-leaders. Then it began to roll on the ground, hitting the other two. Four sub-leaders died immediately, while the fifth caught fire, and rolled on the ground in extreme pain.

Everyone's gasped at what has happened. Zhang CuiShan had seen many powerful fighters in the martial world, but never someone of Xie Xun's caliber. He knew that he has no chance against Xie Xun. Even his big brother and second brother would not likely defeat him either. Other than his master, Zhang CuiShan could not think of a second person that is this man's match.

Only to see Xie Xun examine the saber, lightly flicked it with his fingers. He nodded, said, "Amazing, amazing saber!" He raised his head, looked at sheath besides Bai GuiShou, said, "Is this the Dragon Saber's sheath? Give it to me."

Bai GuiShou realized that in this situation, he's pretty much likely to be dead no matter what. If he handed Xie Xun the sheath, his fame would go down the drain, and will likely die a terrible death when the sect leader finds out. But of course, to disobey this man would mean certain death right now. So he said, "If want to kill me, just go ahead. Do you think I am afraid of death?"

Xie Xun let out a smile, said, "Oh, a tough guy! Looks like there are some characters in the Heavenly Eagle Sect." Suddenly he threw the Dragon Saber towards Bai GuiShou. With the Dragon Saber coming at him, Bai GuiShou wouldn't dare block it with a weapon, nor try to catch it. He quickly evaded to the side. In a flash, 'swoosh', the saber entered the sheath on the table. It continued to fly forward with the momentum, until Xie Xun grabbed the saber with one of the spikes on his mace, causing it to fly backward, until it entered his hand again. Everyone was astonished by this strange way of sheathing a saber.

Xie Xun looked left and right, said, "Is there anyone else who object to me taking this saber?" He asked this question twice, without getting a single response.

Suddenly, a person from the Sea Sand Sect table rose, said, "Elder Xie is famous throughout the world. Of course, this saber should belong to Elder Xie. None of us would dare object." Xie Xun said, "You are the chief helmsman of the Sea Sand Sect Yuan ChangBuo, right?" That person said, "Yes." He was both happy and terrified that Xie Xun knew his name.

Xie Xun said, "Do you know who my teacher was? Which sect I belong to?" Yuan ChangBuo stuttered, "Well... Elder Xie..." Actually, he knows nothing about Xie Xun. Xie Xun said coldly, "If you don't know anything about me, then why do you say that I am famous throughout the world? I absolutely abhor people like you. Get out here!" His last sentence roared like thunder in everyone's ears. Yuan ChangBuo, scared of his power, obediently got up and stepped forward with his head down.

Xie Xun said, "The martial arts of the Sea Sand Sect is mediocre, but specializes in harming people using poisonous

salt. Last year you killed Zhang DengYun's family in the town of Yu Tao. Just this last month you killed Sea Gate Sect's OYang Qin. Am I correct?" Yuan ChangBuo gasped, thought that considering how secretive these two cases were, how could Xie Xun have known about them? Xie Xun said, "Get your subordinate to bring out two large bowls of your salt. I want to see what it is." Everyone in the Sea Sand Sect carries poisonous salts with him. Yuan ChangBuo wouldn't dare disobey, so he could only ask his subordinates to bring out the salts, filling two large bowls.

Xie Xun picked up one bowl and smelled it, then said, "We'll each eat a bowl." He put the mace on the ground, picked up Yuan ChangBuo, held down his chin, and stuffed an entire bowl of the salt down his throat.

The deaths of the Zhang DengYuan family and OYang Qin were two unsolvable cases of the martial world in recent years. Both Zhang and OYang's reputations were quite good. No one knew that the Sea Sand Sect's Yuan ChangBuo killed them. Zhang CuiShan was actually happy to see him being force-fed poisonous salt.

Xie Xun picked up the other bowl, said, "I've always been a fair person. If you eat bowl, so will I." He opened his mouth and poured the whole bowl into his mouth.

No one expected this turn of events. Zhang CuiShan saw that although he's quite vicious, Xie Xun had quite a bit of righteousness in him. Besides, the people he's been killing were all terrible people anyway. Overall, Xie Xun left a favorable impression in Zhang CuiShan's mind. At this moment, Zhang CuiShan couldn't help but yell, "Elder Xie, this person deserves to die. You don't need to be fair with him." Xie Xun turned to look at him, asked, "Who are you?" Zhang CuiShan said, "I am Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan." Xie

Xun said, "Oh, Fifth Hero Zhang of Wu Dang. Are you also here to take the Dragon Saber?" Zhang CuiShan shook his head, said, "I came to look for more information regarding my third brother's injury. If you know something about this, please tell me."

Before Xie Xun could respond, Yuan ChangBuo screamed in pain, held his stomach tightly while rolling back and forth on the ground. After a while, he stopped struggling, and died. Zhang CuiShan quickly said, "Elder Xie. Hurry up and take an antidote."

Xie Xun said, "What's the need? Give me some wine!" The Heavenly Eagle Sect member responsible for taking care of guests quickly brought a bottle of wine over. Xie Xun said, "Is the Heavenly Eagle Sect this stingy? Give me a big bowl!" That person then brought a big bowl and courteously put it in front of Xie Xun, but thought, "Drinking wine right after being poisoned, are you afraid that you won't die quickly enough?"

Only to see Xie Xun chug the whole bowl down his throat. This bowl held at least twenty-some pounds of wine, yet he managed to drink it all up in one gulp. He patted his stomach, opened his mouth, and a streak of liquid came out, hitting Bai GuiShou's chest. Bai GuiShou felt like being hit by continuous streaks of iron pellets. Despite his high inner power, Bai GuiShou eventually began to falter, and then fell to the ground, unconscious.

Xie Xun then turned upward, as the wine shot up and came down like rain over the Huge Whale Clan's people. They all felt an unbearable odor coming from the water. Those without good inner power fainted. When the wine had entered Xie Xun's stomach, it cleansed the stomach of the poisonous salt, turning the wine into poisonous wine. Then

Xie Xun released it back out using his inner power, leaving very little in his stomach. Considering his inner power, this amount of poison could not hurt him at all.

The leader of the Huge Whale Clan, upon seeing Xie Xun mock his clan this way, stood up in anger. But then thought better of it, and sat back down.

Xie Xun said, "Clan Leader Mai, you plundered a seagoing ship this May, didn't you?" Mai Jing's face turned pale, said, "That's correct." Xie Xun said, "I know you are pirates. If you don't plunder ships, then there's no way for you to make a living. I don't blame you for that. But to throw tens of innocent passengers overboard, raping and killing seven women aboard the ship... don't you think that is way too cruel?" Mai Jing said, "Well... well... these are done by my subordinates. I... I didn't participate." Xie Xun said, "Your subordinates are a vicious lot, yet you do not discipline them. Isn't that just as bad as you yourself doing these deeds?"

Mai Jing thought of his situation, wished only for his own survival, took out his saber, said, "Cai Si, Hua QingShan, HaiMa HuLiu, I remembered that you three participated in that day's events!" In three flashes, he cut down three people. These blows came so quick those three people had no chance to retaliate, all died immediately.

Xie Xun said, "Good! Except it came too late, and against your own will. Had you killed these people at the time, I wouldn't be here to duel with you today. Leader Mai, what is your most accomplished martial art?"

Mai Jing thought, "I probably can't last even three exchanges if I fight him on land. But on water, he's no match against me. Even if I can't beat him, at least I can swim away. Or could he swim faster than me too?" He said, "I want to see

the elder's underwater kung fu."

Xie Xun said, "Fine, let's duel underwater." He walked a few steps, suddenly stopped, said, "Hold on. If I leave, these people here might escape!"

Everyone quivered, thought, "He's afraid that we'll escape? Does that mean he wants to kill us all?"

Mai Jing said in a hurry, "Actually, I'm no match for Elder Xie underwater either. I'll admit defeat." Xie Xun said, "Really? Well, that saves me some time. Go ahead and kill yourself and be done with all this." Mai Jing was taken aback, said, "But... but it's just a duel. There's no reason for the loser to commit suicide upon defeat..."

Xie Xun yelled, "Don't give me that crap! You think you're worthy of dueling me? I'm here to take your life. For people like us who practice martial arts, it's not a big deal for us to shed some blood. But I only kill people who knows kung fu, and despise those who oppress the weak, kill innocent civilians. I will not let anyone who have done these things get away."

When Zhang CuiShan heard this, he couldn't help but glance at Yin SuSu, thought that she did indeed kill many innocents at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. If Xie Xun knew about that, he would have to kill her too. Only to see Yin SuSu's face pure white, her lips shivering. Zhang CuiShan thought again, "If Xie Xun really tried to take her life, would I protect her? If I did, then I would surely die. Besides, she would deserve it, but... but... can I really stand and watch him kill everyone like this?"

Only to hear Xie Xun said, "Except I want you to die without regret, which is why I challenge you to your best martial arts

skills. If you know of any skill you can best me at, I'll let you go."

As he spoke, he grabbed two piles of dirt from the ground and mixed them with some wine, making two piles of mud. He said to Mai Jing, "Let's see how long you can last without breathing. Let both of us cover our noses and mouths with these mud. Whoever couldn't stand the lack of air first kills himself." Without even asking for Mai Jing's approval, he put one pile of mud over his nose and mouth, while slapping the other pile over Mai Jing's.

Although everyone thought this scene is pretty funny, no one could laugh out loud.

Mai Jing took a deep breath right before the mud covered him. Then he sat down in a meditating position, motionless. He's been catching fish under water since he was seven, and has amazing marine skills. Therefore, he was quite certain that there's no way he could lose this duel, waited peacefully on the ground.

Xie Xun, though, could not sit peacefully. He walked in front of the Divine Fist Sect's table, stared at its leader Guo SanQuan.

Guo SanQuan* felt very uneasy under Xie Xun's gaze. He stood up and said, "How are you, Elder Xie. I am Guo SanQuan."

*Note: 'San' means 'three' and 'Quan' means 'fist'.

Xie Xun could not speak, but held out his right hand, dipped it into some wine, then wrote three characters on the table." Guo SanQuan's face turned gray immediately, looking like he just saw a ghost. His disciples all looked at the words, saw them to be 'Cui Fei Yan'. His disciples thought, " 'Cui FeiYan'

is a woman's name. Why would the master be so afraid of these characters?"

Guo SanQuan himself obviously knew, for Cui FeiYan was the wife of a relative. He wasn't able to rape her, and killed her instead. He thought, "Looks like he's going to kill me too. I really should attack right now, while he couldn't breathe. This way, he's bound to lose to Mai Jing." He yelled, "I would like to challenge you to a duel." Before Xie Xun could respond, his fist shot up, aimed at Xie Xun's lower abdomen. The second fist immediately followed the first one. His 'three fist' name came from his amazing power in the fist. One fist can knock down a bull. Most martial artists could last at most three fists from him. He knew at the moment that he better hurry, for once Mai Jing could no longer hold out, Xie Xun would take off his pile of mud and be able to breathe again. Anyone who can't breathe while fighting would be at a severe disadvantage.

When he attacked twice, Xie Xun could block them, but with much less power than when he had fought Chang JinPeng. Guo SanQuan yelled, "The third fist is coming!" This third fist has a name, called 'One Sweep Across Thousands of Soldiers, One Blow to Knock Down Ten Thousand Horses'. It's his best technique. He had won many fights using this move.

By this time, Mai Jing's face had turned red, with sweat pouring down his head, obviously unable to hold out much longer. Young Leader Mai, seeing his father in such a critical condition and Xie Xun fighting elsewhere, came up with an idea. He grabbed a hairpin from a lady sect member, and tried to stick it into his father's mouth. Although it might hurt his father's lips, at least the hole made by the hairpin would ensure air going in.

At this moment, a pebble came in his direction, breaking the

hairpin into two pieces. The tip flew up, Young Leader Mai let out a loud scream, clutched his right eye, only to see blood coming down from his right eye, pierced by the hairpin tip.

Mai Jing raised his hands to wipe the mud off, but Xie Xun threw out two more pebbles, breaking the joints on his shoulders, preventing his arms to move.

At this exact moment, Guo SanQuan's third fist came directly at Xie Xun's lower abdomen. He thought Xie Xun would obviously try to evade, but for some reason Xie Xun did not move at all. The punch landed perfectly. But upon impact, Guo SanQuan realized that something was wrong, for that part of the body should've been very soft, while his fist felt like it hit a stone wall. But it was too late, as the impact reverberated back into his body, and he fell back, dead.

Xie Xun turned around, only to see Mai Jing now lay on the ground dead. He first wiped away the mud on Mai Jing's face, checked his breath, then wiped the mud off his own face. He faced the sky and yelled, "These two people had been terrorizing society for too long now. Considering that they were able to live till today, the punishment came too late." Then he quickly turned towards the two Kun Lun swordsmen, first at Gao ZeCheng, then at Jiang Tao, but did not speak for a long time.

Gao and Jiang's faces turned white, put their hands on their swords, stared back at Xie Xun. Zhang CuiShan knew that they are Xie Xun's next targets, stood up, and said, "Elder Xie, the people you had killed all deserved to die. But if you kill without justification, then what makes you so different from them?"

Xie Xun smirked, said, "What's the difference? My kung fu is excellent, their's are mediocre. The strong prevails over the

weak. That is the difference.” Zhang CuiShan said, “The difference between humans and animals is that we can tell the difference between right and wrong. If the strong always oppress the weak, then how are we different from animals?”

Xie Xun laughed out loud, said, “Do you think humans really knows right from wrong? Today, our Emperor is Mongolian. He can kill as many Hans as he wished. Are you going to discuss right and wrong with him? If the Mongolians want Han people’s children and property, they simply take them. If anyone resists, the Mongols kill him. Are you going to discuss right and wrong with them?”

Zhang CuiShan pondered for a moment, then said, “The Mongolians’ actions are no better than animals. That’s why all proud Hans detestat them, hoping that one day we shall drive them off our lands.”

Xie Xun said, “Before the Mongols came, we had Han emperors. Do you think they care about right and wrong? Yue Fei was a loyal court official, yet Sun GaoZong executed him. Qin Gui was a treacherous court official, yet he lived a prosperous life, enjoying unlimited riches.” Zhang CuiShan said, “The Southern Song’s emperor was indeed a terrible one, making use of wrong court officials, finally gave our land over to the Mongolians. His wrongdoings had terrible consequences. That’s why we must be righteous, to avoid regretful consequences.” Xie Xun said, “You’re right, the emperor was indeed terrible. However, most of the people these Mongolians killed were civilians. Tell me, what evils have these innocent civilians done to deserve such fate?” Zhang CuiShan paused.

Yin SuSu suddenly answered, “The civilians have no power to retaliate. So it’s quite normal that they’d be slaughtered.”

Zhang CuiShan said, "The reason we practice martial arts is to help those in need, defend the weak who can't protect themselves. Elder Xie's martial arts is unparalleled. If you use your skills for the good of the people, many will benefit."

Xie Xun said, "What's so good about being righteous? What's my benefit for doing righteous things?"

Zhang CuiShan paused. Since he was a child, Zhang CuiShan had been taught that one learns martial arts for righteousness. Yet he never really thought of the benefits of being righteous, only felt like it's just simply the right thing to do. After a while, he said, "Well, if you do good deeds, then you're on the side of justice. Doing good deeds will lead to good fortune. Doing bad deeds leads to bad fortune."

Xie Xun laughed wildly, said, "What a load of crap! Do you really believe that?"

Zhang CuiShan thought of Yu DaiYan. His third brother had only done righteous things in his life, yet for no reason at all, he was gravely injured. Even he himself now isn't so sure he believed these words. Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Sometimes its hard to understand the workings of Heaven. We can only try to be true to our hearts. Whether this results in good fortune or bad fortune, is not something we can control."

Xie Xun looked at him, said, "I've long heard that your teacher Zhang SanFeng's martial arts is unmatched in the world, but unfortunately never had the chance to meet him. You are one of his top disciples, yet you are so mediocre. Guess there's no reason to visit him after all."

Zhang CuiShan, fuming at these words that belittled his master, said angrily, "Do you think you're worthy to judge my

master's abilities? Your kung fu is extremely high, but still nowhere near my master's level."

Yin SuSu hurriedly pulled on the back of Zhang CuiShan's robe, telling him to bear with Xie Xun for the moment. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Life and death is not big of a deal, but I can't let down the Wu Dang name."

Oddly enough, Xie Xun did not become angry. He said calmly, "Zhang SanFeng started the Wu Dang Sect. So there must be something extraordinary about him. The philosophy of martial arts is unlimited and boundless. I wouldn't be surprised if he's much superior to myself. Perhaps one day I will visit Wu Dang just to meet him. Fifth Hero Zhang, what is your best kung fu? I'm quite interested to see."

End of Chapter 5.

Chapter 6 - Floating Northward in the Endless Sea

(Translated by Meh)



Zhang CuiShan took a deep breath, and jumped high into the air. His Wu Dang's lightness kung fu absorbed the best of each other sects. At this moment of life and death, he obviously used it to its full potential. As his body rose several meters into the air, Zhang CuiShan used the advanced 'Cloud Stairs', lightly tapped the side of the mountain, and shot up several more meters. The judge's brush on his right hand swiftly began to make strokes upon the stone surface.

Yin SuSu turned pale upon hearing Xie Xun's challenge towards Zhang CuiShan, after seeing Bai GuiShou, Chang JinPeng, Yuan ChangBuo, Mai Jing, Guo SanQuan, and others all died in Xie Xun's hands. Although Zhang CuiShan has incredible kung fu skills, he's still no match for Xie Xun. She said, "Elder Xie. Now that the Dragon Saber is in your hands, and everyone recognizes your superior kung fu, what else could you possibly want?"

Xie Xun said, "There's an old saying regarding this saber. Do you know about it?" Yin SuSu said, "Yes, I've heard about it." Xie Xun said, "It's been said that anyone who holds this saber will rule the land. But what exactly is the secret that makes it so powerful?" Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie is much more knowledgeable than I am. Please enlighten us." Xie Xun said, "I don't know either, which is why I need to find a peaceful place to find out." Yin SuSu said, "Oh really? Elder Xie's intelligence is unparalleled. If you can't even figure it out, then I'm sure no one else in the world could."

Xie Xun said, "Although I am arrogant, there are still many who are superior. For example, Shaolin's Reverend Kong Wen..." He paused here for a moment, a hint of regret appearing on his face, "... Shaolin's Reverends Kong Zhi and Kong Sheng, Wu Dang's Taoist Zhang SanFeng, the leaders of

E Mei and Kun Lun. All of them have unbelievable skills. Although the Qing Hai Sect lies far in the western regions, its kung fu is mysterious and exceptional. The Ming Sect's Left and Right Messengers... Awesome! Even your Heavenly Eagle Sect's Leader Yin, White-Browed Eagle King, is an exceptional talent. I doubt I could defeat him."

Yin SuSu stood up and said, "Thank you for your kind words."

Xie Xun said, "I want this saber, but so do others. Leader Yin made a mistake, for there is no one here who can match me in kung fu. He thought that Branch Leaders Bai and Chang were more than enough to handle the likes of the Sea Sand Sect or the Huge Whale Clan. But he never expected someone like me here..." Yin SuSu cut in, "It's not that Leader Yin made a mistake. Something important came up at the last moment, so he couldn't make it." Xie Xun said, "That makes more sense. Had Leader Yin been here, I would've never come. First, because I doubt I could defeat him. Second, because we used to be old friends, so it would look quite bad for me to take saber from him openly. Leader Yin had always been a calculative person. It would seriously hinder his image for this saber to fall into my hands." Yin SuSu, upon knowing that he was a friend of Leader Yin, decided to try to talk him out of challenging Zhang CuiShan, said, "It's really hard to figure out how people think, how the Heaven thinks. That's why the saying goes, 'Planning depends on man, While success depends on Heaven'. Elder Xie really is lucky that you can obtain the saber so easily. While others who might've spent countless hours calculating could not."

Xie Xun said, "After it came into existence, this saber had been in possession of countless people. Each died from owning the saber. Even though I have the saber today, what's there to guarantee that a more powerful person

wouldn't take it from me?"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, thought that there's something deeper behind Xie Xun's words. Zhang CuiShan thought once again of Yu DaiYan, who was injured only because of his relationships with the Dragon Saber. While he himself is now likely to die after simply viewing this saber.

Xie Xun sighed, said, "Both of you are knowledgeable in both philosophy and martial arts, look handsome and beautiful. If I killed you, it would be like shattering two priceless porcelains, a pity really. But I have to kill you two." Yin SuSu asked, "Why?"

Xie Xun said, "If there's anyone left alive on this island, soon everyone will know that I had obtained the Dragon Saber. By then, many will come to take the saber away from me. I'm certainly not invincible. How could I be sure that the saber won't be taken away? Forget others for a moment, just White-Browed Eagle King himself might possibly defeat me, not to mention all the other capable people in the Heavenly Eagle Sect who could help him." As he spoke, he shook his head, said, "Yin TianZheng's both outer and inner power strength and ferocity are unparalleled, and has my greatest admiration. To think, back in the days..." He sighed deeply, shook his head.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "So the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect is called Yin TianZheng." He said coldly, "Are you going to kill us all to prevent any witnesses?" Xie Xun said, "That's correct." Zhang CuiShan said, "Then why do you have to point out the crimes of those people before killing them?" Xie Xun laughed, said, "This is so you people can die without regret, so you can die a little happier." Zhang CuiShan said, "Looks like you're a kind person."

Xie Xun said, "Who in this world can escape death? What's so different from dying a few years earlier and a few years later? It's a shame that you two youngsters, Fifth Hero Zhang and Miss Yin, would die such an early death. But in the context of history, your deaths really would mean nothing. Even had Qin Gui not killed Yue Fei back then, would Yue Fei have survived till today? One person should only ask to die in a peaceful fashion. It's not easy for us martial artists to die without regrets. That's why I want to challenge everyone here to their most accomplished ability, so they can die fairly. You two are still young, so I'll give you a break. Choose any form of competition you like: weapons, fists, inner power, hidden weapons, lightness kung fu, underwater kung fu, whatever. I'll agree to anything."

Yin SuSu said, "Well, aren't you arrogant. Anything's ok?" From Xie Xun's words, she knew that there's no chance to escape. WangPan Island is isolated from everywhere else. With two Branch Leaders on hand, the Heavenly Eagle Sect would certainly not feel that reinforcements are needed. So although her words are sharp, her tone was quite uneasy.

Xie Xun thought, "Wait a minute. What if she proposes that we compete in embroidery? Or brushing hair or applying makeup? Then what do I do?" So he said, "Obviously it must be a martial arts competition. Or did you want to compete in eating and drinking? Actually, I'd probably win in those competitions too. Alas, I really don't want to kill a lovely young couple like yourselves."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu's faces both turned red upon hearing the words 'a lovely young couple'.

Yin SuSu's elegant expression turned to a frown, asked, "If you lose, will you commit suicide too?" Xie Xun said with a

smile, "How can I lose?" Yin SuSu said, "There's always a chance to lose in any competition. This Fifth Hero Zhang is a renowned disciple. He just might be better than you at something." Xie Xun said, "Even if he knows exquisite techniques, there's no way his inner power is close to mine."

While they conversed, Zhang CuiShan thought, "What should I choose to compete with him? Lightness Kung fu? My newly learnt fist form?" Suddenly he thought of something, and asked, "Elder Xie, if you force me to fight, then I shall agree to one. Should I lose, I will commit suicide immediately in front of Elder Xie. But what if we drew?"

Xie Xun said, "Then we compete in something else, until there is a winner." Zhang CuiShan said, "Fine. Should I win, I won't ask you to commit suicide, just to grant me a single request." Xie Xun said, "Agreed. Now state your rules."

Yin SuSu said with great concern, "What are you going to compete in? How sure are you of success?" Zhang CuiShan whispered, "Not sure. I can only try my best." Yin SuSu whispered, "If you lose, then lets try to escape."

Zhang CuiShan did not respond, thought, "Where can we escape now that the boats have all sunk?" He adjusted his robe and took out his Iron Judge's Brush. Xie Xun said, "I've heard that you are known as 'Iron Brush and Silver Hook Zhang CuiShan'. Where's your Silver Tiger Hook? Why not take it out."

Zhang CuiShan said, "I don't want to fight you, just compete in writing some words." As he spoke he walked over to a high mountain, with a smooth cliff. Zhang CuiShan took a deep breath, and jumped high into the air. His Wu Dang's lightness kung fu absorbed the best of each other sects. At this moment of life and death, he obviously used it to its full potential. As his body rose several meters into the air, Zhang

CuiShan used the advanced 'Cloud Stairs', lightly tapped the side of the mountain, and shot up several more meters. The judge's brush on his right hand swiftly began to make strokes upon the stone surface. Quickly, the word 'martial' appeared. After he finished, he began to drop down.

At this moment his left hand took out his silver hook, which quickly held on to the side of the cliff, allowing him to regain his balance. Then his right hand wrote out the word 'world'. Each word contained all of Zhang SanFeng's original ideas from that night, encompassing both hard and soft techniques. The words demonstrated some of the deepest martial arts philosophies of the Wu Dang style. Although the words aren't deeply etched due to Zhang CuiShan's shallow inner power, the speed and detail in which he wrote them are incredible.

When finished, Zhang CuiShan followed it with the word 'most', and 'venerable'. He began to write faster and faster, only to see dusts falling down the cliff, until twenty-four characters were etched onto cliff. This engraving really seemed like Li Bai's poem: "[Seriously, you don't REALLY think I can translate a non-butchered version of a poem by the most famous poet in China, do you? Now pretend that you've just read something very beautiful, very poetic, and very applicable to this situation. Use your imagination, folks! ^_^]"

When Zhang CuiShan finished writing the last character, 'compete', he pushed off on the cliffs with both the brush and the hook. With a flip in midair, landed by Yin SuSu's side.

Xie Xun kept on staring at the words, after a long, long moment of silence, he finally sighed, said, "I can't write that. I lost."

For you see, the way these twenty-four words were written involved ideas that only Zhang SanFeng thought up of. Each stroke contains a powerful technique. Even Zhang SanFeng himself, before the night he invented these techniques, would be hard pressed to duplicate Zhang CuiShan's work. Xie Xun obviously did not know the details regarding the origins of Zhang CuiShan's writing. He only thought that Zhang CuiShan wrote these exact words out of inspiration, upon seeing the Dragon Saber. Had Zhang CuiShan been forced to write any other words, he would not be able to create such a great piece of composition.

Yin SuSu clapped her hands loudly, yelled, "You lost, can't go back on your promise."

Xie Xun looked at Zhang CuiShan, said, "Fifth Hero Zhang's calligraphy really is one of a kind. I've never thought I'd see anything like this. You have my admiration. What do you demand?" Because of his promise, Xie Xun had to say this, but he obviously did not wish to in his heart.

Zhang CuiShan said, "When it comes to knowledge, I'm far inferior to Elder Xie. It would be hard for me to 'demand' something. But I do have a single request." Xie Xun said, "What is that?" Zhang CuiShan said, "You may take the Dragon Saber off the island, but leave everyone here alive. You may have everyone here swear that they do not reveal your secret."

Xie Xun said, "Do you think I'm that stupid? That I'd believe their stupid promises?" Yin SuSu said, "Since you lost, you have to do what he says. Or are you going back on your promise."

Xie Xun said, "So what if I don't deliver on my promise? What are you going to do?" But after thinking a while, he felt his

words sounded very unreasonable. So he said, "I'll spare you two's lives, but not the others." Zhang CuiShan said, "The swordsmen from Kun Lun are disciples of a righteous sect. You really should..." Xie Xun shook his head, said, "Who cares? Doesn't matter who they are. Hurry up and tear off two pieces of cloth from your clothing. Stuff them into your ears. Then cover your ears with your hands. If you value your life, do as I say now." He spoke the last few sentences in a whisper, as if afraid someone might hear him.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, not knowing what he planned on doing. But considering Xie Xun's serious tone, they both did as directed.

Suddenly they saw Xie Xun opened his mouth, as if yelling loud. Neither could hear what he's yelling, but they could feel the ground vibrate, only to see everyone else with their mouth open, as if screaming in pain. Their faces then turned pale, almost in torture. After a while, one behind another, they fell to the ground.

Gao and Jiang immediately went into a meditative position when they heard Xie Xun, trying to fight off the noise with inner power. Sweat came pouring down their heads quickly afterwards. Several times they tried to cover their ears, but failed each time. Until finally, they suddenly jumped up into the air, fell down, and stopped moving.

Xie Xun closed his mouth, made a gesture, so Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu took out the cloth in their ears. Xie Xun said, "These people are now all unconscious from my scream, but their lives won't be in danger. When they wake up, they'll become retarded and forget everything in their past. This way, they won't divulge my secret. Fifth Hero Zhang, I've granted you your request. I did not kill any of them."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "Although you did not take their lives, their situation is possibly worse than death." He absolutely despised the cruel manner in which Xie Xun did things. Looking at the people on the ground, he shuddered at the thought of what would happen to him should he had heard that roar.

Xie Xun's face remained expressionless, said, "Let's go!" Zhang CuiShan said, "Where to?" Xie Xun said, "Back home, of course! What else is there to do here?" Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other, both thought, "Looks like we'll have to be with this demon for another day. What else might happen during this time?"

Xie Xun led them over a mountain in the back of the island, until they saw a boat docked by the beach. Xie Xun walked to the boat, bowed, and said, "Please step up onto the boat." Yin SuSu smirked, said, "Well, since when did you turn into a gentleman?" Xie Xun said, "By coming onto my boat, you are my honored guests. Of course I should be courteous to you."

After getting on the boat, Xie Xun made a hand gesture, ordering the sailors to leave shore.

There are sixteen sailors, yet they all used hand gestures with each other, as if they're all mute. Yin SuSu said, "You are certainly something, to be able to find so many mute-deaf sailors."

Xie Xun said, "What's so hard about that? First I find some illiterate sailors. Then I shatter their hearing with a roar. Then feed them some drugs to make them mute."

Zhang CuiShan shuddered inside. Yin SuSu clapped her hands, and said with a smile, "That's a great idea. Since they're deaf-mute, they certainly could not divulge your

secrets. Too bad you need them to sail, or you'd probably blind them too, I bet." Zhang CuiShan looked at her, said in a lecturing tone, "Miss Yin. Why do a girl like you only think of ways to hurt people? This is a sad story. How could you laugh at it?" Yin SuSu stuck out her tongue at him, about to argue, but thought better of it upon seeing his expression. Xie Xun said calmly, "After I get back to the mainland, of course I'll blind them." Zhang CuiShan looked at the sailors, thought, "In a day you'll all be blind too."

The masts raised, the ship began to move. Zhang CuiShan said, "Elder Xie. Are you just going to leave these people here? How are they going to get back?" Xie Xun said, "Mr. Zhang. You are a pretty good guy. The only problem is that you're too mindful of other people's businesses. What's wrong with leaving these people here on their own?" Zhang CuiShan realized that it's impossible to talk any sense into this man, and decided to stop talking altogether. He thought, "Although most people on the island aren't good people, it's still a terrible fate that they've suffered. The elders of Kun Lun sect would surely look for their disciples now that they're going to die here. Unfortunately, yet more troubles in the martial world."

For the past years, the seven Wudang heroes had always gotten the upper hand in any confrontation they've faced. Who'd have thought that he, Zhang CuiShan, would be a prisoner here on this boat? Angry and dejected, he decided to calm down and meditate, ignoring Yin SuSu and Xie Xun.

After a while, he looked out the window into the sea, staring at golden the sun setting in the distance, a beautiful scene. Suddenly, he trembled, thought, "Wait, why is the sun setting to the back of the boat?" He turned around and asked Xie Xun, "The sailors are sailing in the wrong direction. We're going east." Xie Xun said, "I know. We're supposed to go

east.”

Yin SuSu said in shock, “But there is only water to the east. Where are we going?”

Xie Xun said, “Haven’t I been clear enough? After getting this saber, I want to seek a place to rest, to find the secret of the Dragon Saber, to know why it can rule over the martial world. In the central plains, there’s no way I can hide for very long before someone find out about my secret. Then I’d have to spend a ton of effort just fighting off those seeking the Dragon Saber. Besides, should those enemies be the likes of White-Browed Eagle King or Zhang SanFeng, I might lose the saber too. No... it’s much better to rest in a faraway island, where I can settle down.”

Yin SuSu said, “But you have to take us back first.” Xie Xun said with a smile, “Wouldn’t my secret be divulged upon your return?” Zhang CuiShan stood up and said loudly, “Then what do you want?” Xie Xun said, “Simple. I just want you two to live on the island with me.” Zhang CuiShan said, “What if you can’t even figure out the secret after eighteen years? Xie Xun said, “Then you’ll live with me for eighteen years. If I never figure it out, then you’ll live with me forever. You too are a perfect match for each other. How about becoming husband and wife on the island, and have kids? Heheh, now wouldn’t that be nice?” Zhang CuiShan yelled angrily, “Don’t you dare say that sort of thing!” He looked around, only to see Yin SuSu’s head lowered, her face incredibly red.

Zhang CuiShan shuddered, realized that if he spent any more time with Yin SuSu, he might not be able to control his emotions. Xie Xun’s a powerful opponent, his heart is yet another one. It really is best for him to leave this place as soon as possible. Suppressing his anger, Zhang CuiShan said,

“Elder Xie, you should know about my reputation. I am willing to make a solemn promise, that I will not divulge anything I saw and heard today.”

Xie Xun said, “I’ve heard of your reputation, that your words can be trusted. But I made a promise when I was twenty-eight. Look at my finger.” As he spoke he raised his left hand. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both saw that his pinky on the left hand has been cut off.

Xie Xun said, “That year, the person I respected, loved the most ruined me. He killed my whole family, my parents, wife, and kid. From that moment on, I promised to never trust a single person again. Today I am now forty-one. For the past thirteen years I’ve only been friends with wild animals. I trust animals, but not people. In these years I’ve killed more humans than animals.”

Zhang CuiShan shuddered, realized just why has no one heard of him despite his amazing kung fu. That event when he was twenty-eight must’ve devastated him. That’s why he has turned his hatred upon society. Zhang CuiShan originally only despised Xie Xun, but now he couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. After a while, he said, “Elder Xie. I take it you’ve already had your revenge.”

Xie Xun said, “No. The person who ruined me is superior at kung fu. I can’t beat him.” Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both gasped, said, “Better than you? Who is this person?” Xie Xun said, “Why should I speak of him? It only brings back painful memories. If it weren’t for revenge, why do I need to take this saber? To find out its secret? Mr. Zhang, I really like you. Otherwise, I would’ve never let you two lived in my usual temper. It’s certainly quite abnormal for me let you live a while longer. Hopefully it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Yin SuSu said, "What do you mean by 'a while longer'?" Xie Xun said, "When I understand the secrets within this saber and leave the island, that's the day I shall kill you. So the longer it takes for me to find the secret, the longer you two shall live." Yin SuSu let out a 'humph', said, "Actually, this saber is just a bit sharper than other weapons, and can withstand lots of heat. What secret could it possibly contain? I bet 'Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow' simply meant that it can break all other weapons into pieces."

Xie Xun sighed, said, "If what you're saying is true, then the three of us will live on the island forever." Suddenly his expression turned pale, as if he felt this just might be the case. Then he would have no chance at revenge.

Zhang CuiShan wanted to say some word to lessen his worry. Only to see Xie Xun blow out the candle, said, "Let's go to sleep." Followed by a long, deep sigh, which contained infinite pain, infinite despair, almost inhuman, as if wild beast sighing before its death.

The cold wind came into the cabin again and again. Yin SuSu did not wear much. After a while, she began to quiver. Zhang CuiShan whispered to her, "Miss Yin, are you cold?" Yin SuSu said, "I'm fine." Zhang CuiShan took off his robe and said, "Put this on." Yin SuSu was very grateful, said, "You don't have to. You're cold too." Zhang CuiShan said, "I'm not afraid of the cold." As he spoke he put the robe on Yin SuSu's hand. Yin SuSu took it and put it over her shoulder, still feeling the warmth of Zhang CuiShan's body on the robe. She felt very content in her heart, and couldn't help but smile brightly in the darkness.

Zhang CuiShan, on the other hand, was only thinking of ways to escape. After a long time, he felt that there's only one way

out, "We must kill Xie Xun to escape."

He listened closely at his surrounding, only to hear heavy breathing from Xie Xun mixed with the sounds of the ocean. He thought, "He had made a promise to not trust another person. So why can he sleep so soundly in the same room as us? Does he have a special sixth sense that guards him from sneak attacks? Either way, I must attack now. Otherwise, I'd have to waste my entire life on an island with him." He quietly moved towards Yin SuSu, so he could whisper in her ear. But Yin SuSu unexpectedly turned toward him at this exact moment. As a result, Zhang CuiShan's lips fell right on top of Yin SuSu's.

Zhang CuiShan was shocked, about to explain his rudeness, but didn't know where to start. Yin SuSu happily put her head on his shoulders, at the moment she only felt infinite warmth and kindness in her heart. Her only wish was for this boat to remain sailing on forever, as she would gladly remain in this exact moment for the next hundred years. Suddenly she heard Zhang CuiShan whisper by her ear, "I'm very sorry, Miss Yin." Yin SuSu's face had long been bright red, as if a big, red flower had grown on her face. She whispered back at him, "I'm very happy that you really like me." Although she's always been brash, and kills people without hesitation, Yin SuSu is still like any other girl when it comes to her first romance. Surprise, happiness, and confusion all mixed into her heart. If it weren't for the darkness, there was no way she would've said those words.

Zhang CuiShan was incredibly surprised. He never thought his apology would make her divulge her true feelings. Yin SuSu's dazzling beauty is rarely seen, and from the very beginning has had feelings for him. These eight words further showed exactly where her heart lies. Even though Zhang CuiShan is upright and straightforward, and never thought

about romance, his heart has nonetheless been moved at this moment. Only to feel her soft body resting on his shoulders, a faint fragrance entered his nose. He wanted to say something romantic towards Yin SuSu, but then suddenly remembered, "Zhang CuiShan. In a dangerous situation like this, how could you be so undisciplined? Have you forgot all about your master's teachings? Even if you love her, and she loves you, she's still born of an evil sect, and has done terrible things in her life. At least you should wait till you've met the master, and have him officially arrange a marriage for you. How can you do this sort of indecent deed in a dark room like this?" When Zhang CuiShan thought of this, he immediately straightened up, then whispered into Yin SuSu's ear, "We need to find a way to get this person under control, so we can escape."

Yin SuSu was originally in a daze, but quickly returned to reality, asked, "How?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "If we attack him in his sleep, it would be very dishonorable. In a moment, I'll wake him up and match palms with him. You can immediately release your silver needles from the side. Although it's not right to fight two-on-one, he's too powerful for either one of us. This is our only chance."

These words were spoken very softly. Plus, Zhang CuiShan had his mouth stuck tightly on Yin SuSu's ears when he spoke. Yet before Yin SuSu could respond, Xie Xun started to laugh, said, "If you had snuck up on me, even though it wouldn't have been successful, at least you had a tiny chance. Yet you just had to maintain your righteous image, and fight me openly. Well, you asked for it." When he finished his sentence, Xie Xun's body dashed towards Zhang CuiShan, his palm aimed at Zhang CuiShan's chest.

Zhang CuiShan had been gathering chi at the moment Xie Xun started to speak. By the time Xie Xun attacked, Zhang CuiShan matched his palm, using Wudang's 'Soft Palms' in return. As the palms touched, Zhang CuiShan felt his opponents' force came crushing down upon him like a mountain. Zhang CuiShan knew his opponents inner power is far superior to his own, and has long decided to concentrate only on defending.

Xie Xun's force came in three waves, only to feel that Zhang CuiShan's power is much weaker, but never declining, never exhausted. No matter how powerful his palm strike is, Zhang CuiShan somehow managed to block it. Xie Xun raised his left hand and attacked Zhang CuiShan's forehead. Zhang CuiShan blocked it with the technique 'Golden Support Beam'. Wudang's strength lies in its minuteness, vastly different from other sects'. So despite their huge difference in ability, Xie Xun could not finish off Zhang CuiShan in a short period of time.

Sweat poured down Zhang CuiShan's face, his strength nearly gone, thought, "Why haven't Miss Yin used her silver needles yet? Xie Xun is just concentrating on me right now. If she attacks him, then he'll have to release his palm to block the needles, at which time I could wound him with my palm.

Of course, Xie Xun thought of all this too. He originally planned to take out Zhang CuiShan with one swift blow. Unfortunately, he underestimated his opponent, for Zhang CuiShan's inner is much better than he imagined. As the two matched palms, both studied Yin SuSu's movements. Zhang CuiShan could not break off concentration to speak, but Xie Xun had no such problems, said, "Little girl. I suggest you don't try anything brash. For if I changed my palm into a fist, I can easily break all the bones in his body."

Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie, I'll simply promise that we shall follow your orders. Please let go of him." Xie Xun said, "Mr. Zhang, what do you think?" Zhang CuiShan couldn't speak, but he thought angrily, "Come on, release your silver needles. How could you not take advantage of an opportunity like this?" Yin SuSu said hastily, "Please release your palms, Elder Xie. If you hurt him, I'll fight you till my last breath." Actually, Xie Xun is quite afraid of Yin SuSu's needles. This cabin is quite small. The needles are tiny and move without sound. He really would have much trouble blocking them. He could kill Zhang CuiShan immediately, but doesn't really want to, thought, "This little girl must be afraid of me, which is why she hasn't made a move yet. If this continues, the result would be bad for everyone." So he said, "Then you make a promise on his behalf." Yin SuSu paused for a moment, then said, "Fifth Brother Zhang, I know we're no match for Elder Xie. Let's just follow him to his island for a year or two. With his intelligence, he's bound to figure out the Dragon Saber's secrets by then. I'll make the promise for you!"

Zhang CuiShan thought, "What stupid promise? Hurry up and fire the needles!" He hated the fact that he couldn't talk, nor make any gestures in the darkness. Besides, with his hands tied, Zhang CuiShan couldn't make any hand signals anyway.

Yin SuSu did not hear any response from Zhang CuiShan, so she said, "I, Yin SuSu, and Zhang CuiShan will remain with Elder Xie on his deserted island, until he finds the secrets to the Dragon Saber. Should we break the promise, we shall die under a saber or sword."

Xie Xun said with a smile, "What's so special about dying under a sword or saber for people like us?"

Yin SuSu gritted her teeth, said, "Fine, then let me die before the age of twenty!" Xie Xun let out a hearty laugh, and retracted his palms.

Yin SuSu quickly lit up a nearby candle, only to see Zhang CuiShan's face looking like gold paper, his breathing very subtle. She hastily grabbed a handkerchief from her pocket and began to wipe away the sweat off of Zhang CuiShan's face.

Xie Xun said with a smile, "Wow. Wu Dang disciples really are worthy of their fame."

Zhang CuiShan had been annoyed at Yin SuSu for not firing her needles, but as he saw her teary, worrisome face, Zhang CuiShan began to appreciate her genuine concern. He took a deep breath, about to say something to her, when suddenly he blacked out, only to seemingly hear Yin SuSu yelled, "Xie Xun, you've tired Fifth Brother Zhang to death. I'll kill you." But Xie Xun simply laughed her off.

Suddenly, Zhang CuiShan's body fell to the side, rolling on the ground for a moment, while hearing Xie Xun and Yin SuSu both scream at the same time. Amidst their screams, the massive wind howled, and huge waves began to bombard the boat continuously.

Zhang CuiShan's whole body shivered, his mouth drank a large amount of salt water. Originally semi-conscious, he's now fully awake. His first thought was, "Has the boat sunk?" He doesn't know how to swim, and immediately try to stand up. The deck below his feet suddenly tilted to the left, and a batch of seawater poured out the boat. Hearing the huge wind howling, Zhang CuiShan felt his whole body drenched with water. Before he realized exactly what had happened, Xie Xun yelled, "Zhang CuiShan, hurry to the back of the

boat and grab the helm!" This yell sounded like thunder. Even while in a this huge storm, his voice still carried a strange splendor. Zhang CuiShan did not think too deeply, immediately went to the back of the boat, only to see a black shadow flash before his eyes, as a sailor got washed off the boat, and into the sea.

Before Zhang CuiShan made it to the helm, another tidal wave struck, this one hit like a brick wall, severely shaking the boat. By this time Zhang CuiShan had gathered up all his ability, his two feet fixed tightly to the boat's surface, as if they were nailed to it. When the wave passed, he quickly darted towards the helm, holding the steering wheel.

Only to hear ka-cha-cha, ka-cha-cha sounds in the distance, as Xie Xun waved his mace, tearing down the front and the middle masts.

But even with just one mast in the rear, the boat still danced wildly in the sea. Xie Xun wants to roll up the back mast, but couldn't in this weather, as part of it has sunk into the water. Xie Xun yelled angrily, "Damnable Heaven, stupid wind!" Seeing the boat about to tip over, Xie Xun was forced to cut off the rear mast too.

Without the masts, the boat can no longer change directions, and can only travel to where the wind takes them.

Zhang CuiShan yelled loudly, "Miss Yin, where are you?" He yelled several times, without hearing any response. After a while, his yells contained crying. When suddenly, a hand held on to his knees.

By the time another wave had passed, that hand had grabbed his neck. A voice said, "Fifth Brother Zhang. Do you really care for me this much?" Indeed the voice of Yin SuSu.

Zhang CuiShan, joyous at her appearance, grabbed the helm with his right hand, Yin SuSu's body tightly with his left, said, "Thank goodness!" He thought happily, "Oh, she's still here. She didn't fall into the sea." At this moment when each wave could easily wash them into the sea, Zhang CuiShan suddenly realized that his concern for Yin SuSu outweighed even his own life.

Yin SuSu said, "Fifth Brother Zhang, let us die together." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes! SuSu, let us die together."

Under normal circumstances, there would be many apprehensions regarding them being together, like the fact that one's good and one's evil. So even if they were in love, it would not be nearly as close as they are right now. At this moment, in this dark, tumultuous environment, where each moment maybe their last, there is only unspeakable serenity in each person's heart. Despite the fatigue Zhang CuiShan suffered in his duel against Xie Xun, he has never felt more energetic now due to Yin SuSu's affection, and therefore could hold on to the helm tightly.

All the mute-deaf sailors had now been washed into the sea. Only Xie Xun and Zhang CuiShan's powerful martial arts kept them from having the same fate. Thankfully, the boat is incredibly sturdy, and kept together despite getting hit wave after wave.

In this type of weather, no one knows just which direction they're headed. Even if they did, it wouldn't have mattered, for they could not control the ship anyway.

Xie Xun walked to the rear of the ship, said, "Brother Zhang, that was great, now let me take over the helm. You two should go rest inside the ship.

Zhang CuiShan stood up, and was about to go into the cabin with Yin SuSu, when another wave hit. This one came very unexpectedly, and threw Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu overboard.

With the sea right below them, Zhang CuiShan instinctively grabbed Yin SuSu's wrist with his left hand. His only thought was, "To die with her under the sea, never to part again." Just as he grabbed Yin SuSu, a rope tied around his right hand, only to feel his whole body being pulled backward. For Xie Xun had noticed what had happened, and saved them by throwing out a rope. With two loud thuds, the two people landed back on the boat again. This escape from death was certainly quite unexpected. Even Xie Xun thought they were quite lucky. If he hadn't had a rope by him, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu would've been dead by now.

Zhang CuiShan carried Yin SuSu into the cabin, while the ship still floated among the huge waves, their fate yet very much unknown. But after going through that near-fatal situation, both people had stopped caring about life and death. Inside Zhang CuiShan's embrace, Yin SuSu said into Zhang CuiShan's ears, "Fifth Brother Zhang, should we live through this, I'll be with you forever." Zhang CuiShan's heart jumped, said, "I wanted to say the same thing. Whether in Heaven or Hell, on Earth or under the sea, we'll always be together." Two hearts as one, they actually began to appreciate this storm that brought them together.

In Xie Xun's mind, though, there's only extreme anger and complaint. No matter how strong his martial arts ability, he's still at the mercy of the wind and water. Only the Heavens can determine fate.

After about six hours of perpetual storm, the sky finally cleared, revealing bright stars above.

Zhang CuiShan walked to the rear end of the boat, said, "Elder Xie, thank you for saving our lives." Xie Xun said coldly, "Don't thank me just yet. Our lives are still at the mercy of this Damnable Heaven." Zhang CuiShan has never heard anyone put the word 'damnable' in front of 'Heaven'. He thought a person must be incredibly angry at the world to think such a thing. He then pondered, it looks as if they're going to float on this boundless sea forever, without really any chance of returning home. For this to happen just at the moment he and Yin SuSu fell in love, is like to have just tasted the finest wine in the world, only to have it snatched away. Hearing Xie Xun's use of 'Damnable Heaven', he finally could understand just what the phrase 'fate toys with humans'(common Chinese proverb) means.

Zhang CuiShan sighed, and then took over the helm. Xie Xun went to take a rest after working hard all night.

Yin SuSu sat by Zhang CuiShan's side, and looked at the stars in the night sky above. She found the North Star, and saw that the water is carrying them in that direction. She said, "Fifth brother, this boat is continuously moving north." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes! Hopefully it will go west too, so we can return to the mainland."

Yin SuSu was spellbound at the scenery for a while, before saying, "I wonder where we'll end up if this boat continues east." Zhang CuiShan said, "There's only water to the East. We don't have any water, so we can only last seven to eight days..." Yin SuSu, who had just experienced love, still felt like living in a dream, and didn't want to think about the negatives. She said, "I heard that there's a celestial mountain in the Eastern Sea. Immortal beings live on that mountain. Perhaps we'll sail to that mountain, meet gods and goddesses..." Then she pointed to the Silver River*, said,

“Perhaps we’ll sail right into the Silver River. When we get there, we’ll see the Cow Herder and the Lady Weaver meeting on the Magpie Bridge**.”

*Note: Chinese term for the Milky Way.

**Note: For those who don’t know, ‘The Legend of the Cow Herder and the Lady Weaver’(pinyin: Nuo2 Lang2 Zhi1 Nu3) is a very popular romantic folk tale. Here’s what I know about it, although I’m not sure how detailed or accurate I am:

**(Note, cont...) The Chinese Mythology is similar to Greek mythology, in that the gods live in a world of their own. In Chinese myth, the gods’ world is simply Heaven. An Emperor and an Empress rule the Heaven. They had seven daughters. One of them is the Lady Weaver (the star constellation Vega in the sky, or Lady Weaver star constellation for the Chinese). Lady Weaver one day decided to sneak down to the world of the mortals(aka Earth). She then fell in love with a cow herder. They got married and had two children together. However, the Empress found out about their relationship, and needless to say got really pissed. She went down to Earth to take back her insolent daughter. On their way back to Heaven, the cow herder chased after them, carrying their two children in two buckets, which he carried using a pole on his shoulder (The Cow Herder star constellation, not sure of its English name, is aptly three stars, a bright one in the middle, with two dimmer stars to its sides). To stop him from chasing, the Empress took out her hairpin, and made a cut through the sky, creating the Silver River(Milky Way). The cow herder could not get across the river, and could not therefore see Lady Weaver again.

**(Note, cont...) However, their tale deeply moved the magpies(magpies are a type of bird, which are suppose to be the bearer of good news in ancient Chinese superstitions). So

on the seventh day of the seventh month of each year, thousands of magpies would fly above the Silver River and make a bridge filled with birds. This way, the cow herder and Lady Weaver could meet on the bridge.

Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "We can give the boat to the Cow Herder, so if he wants to meet Lady Weaver, he can just take the boat over, instead of having to wait till the seventh day of the seventh month for the magpies." Yin SuSu said, "If we give the boat to the Cow Herder, then how are we going to meet?" Zhang CuiShan said, "In Heaven or Hell, on Earth or under the sea, we'll always be together. Since we're going to be together, then why would we need to cross the Silver River?" Yin SuSu smiled brightly, as if a flower bloomed on her face. She held Zhang CuiShan's hands, gently caressing it.

The two has thousands of romantic words to say to each other, but don't have to really say any at all. After a long, long time, Zhang CuiShan lowered his head, only to see tears flowing down Yin SuSu's eyes. He said in shock, "Why are you so sad?" Yin SuSu said softly, "On Earth, under water, I might be able to stay with you. But when we die, you will go to Heaven, and I... I... will go to Hell." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, that won't happen."

Yin SuSu sighed, said, "I know I've done too many evil things in this life. I've killed so many people that I've lost count." Zhang CuiShan shuddered, and realized that her vicious ways really makes her a flawed match for him. But because he's too in love with her, and they're most likely going to die soon in the middle of the sea, he did not think too much about it. He tried to calm her, "As long as you can correct your ways, everything will turn out fine." Yin SuSu did not say anything. After a while, she began to sing.

She sang with the tune of the 'The Hillside Sheep'.

"He and I, I and he, so worried about each other. Enemies, how could we become fated to love, by dying in front of the gates of Hell, letting the devil torture, getting beat by a mallet, boiled in a frying pan, ouch! [followed by some other words of torture , too lazy to translate...]"

Suddenly they heard Xie Xun yell in the cabin, "Great song. Miss Yin, that's much more to my liking than this fake gentleman here."

Yin SuSu said, "You and I are both evil people. Fate will certainly bring us misfortune."

Zhang CuiShan whispered, "If you ever have a misfortune, then I'll have the misfortune with you."

Yin SuSu yelled happily, "Fifth brother!" so happy could not add another word.

The next morning had clear skies, and Xie Xun used his mace to catch some fish. After starving for a couple of days, the three people didn't really care that the fishes were raw. There is no fresh water on the boat, so they drank fish blood for water.

The sea continued to carry them northward, facing the North Star each night. The Sun continued to rise on the right, and set on the east. Their directions did not change for over ten days.

The temperature became colder and colder. Due to their high inner powers, Xie Xun and Zhang CuiShan had no problems coping, but Yin SuSu's health began to deteriorate. Xie and Zhang both took off clothes for her to wear, but that still

didn't help. Seeing her faint smiles, trying to fight off the cold, Zhang CuiShan felt unspeakable pain in his heart. He thought that if they continued north, Yin SuSu would certainly die from the cold.

However, their luck finally came when the boat met a school of seals. Xie Xun killed several seals with his mace, and they then covered themselves in sealskin, so thick they felt like putting on a coat. They also ate the seal meat.

That night, Yin SuSu asked with a smile, "What's the best wild animal in the world?" The three of them answered together, "Seals!" At that moment, they heard a sound from the front of the boat, only to see a large chunk of ice hitting the side of the boat.

Their moods turned sullen upon seeing this. As they travel further and further north, the temperature would get colder and colder. Until the boat would likely freeze, which would be the day they die.

The next morning, they found chunks of ice. Xie Xun smiled bitterly, said, "I can't believe this. I tried to find the secrets to the Dragon Saber, and ended up turning into an iceman. What a joke."

He picked up the Dragon Saber, and said angrily, "To Hell with this saber!" He then tried to throw it away, but stopped at the last moment, sighed, and put the saber back into the cabin.

After four more days, the surface of the sea is now mostly covered with thick pieces of ice. The three of them decided to ignore their condition. But that night, they heard a thunderous noise, trembling the entire boat.

Xie Xun yelled, "Awesome! It's a big iceberg!"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu smiled bitterly, but still held on to each other tightly, only to feel cold water up to their legs, as the boat began to sink. They heard Xie Xun yell, "Jump up to the iceberg. Even living an extra day or so would be good. Humph, the Damnable Heaven wants me to die now, but I won't let him get his wish."

Zhang and Yin went to the head of the boat, only to see the moon's silver rays reflected off the iceberg, a very beautiful, but also terrifying, sight. Xie Xun is already sitting on the side of the iceberg, reached out with his mace, so Yin SuSu and Zhang CuiShan both could use it to get onto the iceberg.

The boat disappeared after a while.

Xie Xun put two sealskins on the ground, so they can sit on top of them. This iceberg looks like a small hill, about sixty meters long, thirty meters across, much more spacey than the boat. Xie Xun looked around, said, "This is actually not a bad place. I can stretch a bit here." As he spoke he got up and walked around. Although the iceberg is very slippery, Xie Xun's steps are as secure as they would be on normal ground.

The iceberg floated with the water, yet still towards the north. Xie Xun said with a smile, "Looks like this Damnable Heaven sent us a boat, so we can go to the North Pole to meet the North Pole's immortal old man." With the man she loves by her side, Yin SuSu seemed to be satisfied completely. Even had the sky fallen, she would still not have cared. Of the three people, only Zhang CuiShan worried about their situation.

The iceberg floated for another seven days. In the daytime,

the sunlight created a blinding light upon reflected off the iceberg, so they had trouble seeing. The three then decided to simply sleep during the day. Then they would catch fish and other animals at night. Oddly enough, the days became longer and longer as they sailed further north, until daytime lasted twenty-two hours. The night seemed to pass in an instant.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu's health became worse and worse, but Xie Xun seemed to be quite well. Each day, he would point to the sky and curse continuously at Heaven.

One day, while Zhang CuiShan's sleeping, he suddenly heard Yin SuSu screaming in his dream, "Let go of me, let go of me." Zhang CuiShan immediately woke up, only to see Xie Xun holding Yin SuSu's shoulders, his expression that of a wild animal. Zhang CuiShan had been worrying about Xie Xun's expressions lately, but never thought he'd try to hurt Yin SuSu. He said in a hurry, "Let go of her!"

Xie Xun said threateningly, "You bastard. You killed my wife. Fine, I'll kill your wife today, leaving you to live alone in this world." As he spoke his left hand began to choke Yin SuSu's throat. Yin SuSu let out an 'Ah' in response.

Zhang CuiShan said in shock, "I'm not your enemy. I didn't kill your wife. Elder Xie, please regain consciousness. I am Zhang CuiShan, not your enemy."

Xie Xun froze for a moment, yelled, "Who is this? Is she your wife?" Zhang CuiShan, seeing Xie Xun choking Yin SuSu, hastily said, "She's Miss Yin, Elder Xie. Not your enemy's wife."

Xie Xun yelled madly, "Who cares? My wife was killed, my mother was killed, I'm going to kill all the women in the

world!" As he spoke, his grip tightened, so Yin SuSu couldn't even let out a sound.

Zhang CuiShan realized that Xie Xun was mad, and couldn't be reasoned with. So he quickly gathered his energy, and shot out his palm towards Xie Xun's back. Xie Xun met the palm with his own. With the slippery surface, Zhang CuiShan fell onto the ground. Xie Xun's right foot came up, about to kick him on the waist. Zhang CuiShan quickly tapped the ground with his hand, and sprung his body back up. Xie Xun then took back his foot, and instead, his right palm came at Zhang CuiShan's forehead.

Yin SuSu turned around, and attacked with her left hand, aimed at Xie Xun's head. Xie Xun ignored her and concentrated on Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan matched his palm, only to find himself unable to gather up much chi from his body. As Yin SuSu hit Xie Xun on the forehead, she felt something very hard hitting her hand, and retracted her palm in pain. Xie Xun turned to look at her, his eyes bright red, as if there's fire burning within them. He tightened his grasp even more.

Just at this moment, light shined from the north side, many different strands of light, very suddenly in the darkness. First came purple lights, each strand darker and longer than the previous. Within the purple light carried golden light, blue light, green light, and red light. Xie Xun, in his surprise, gasped, and put down Yin SuSu. Zhang CuiShan felt that the force coming from Xie Xun gradually dissipated.

Xie Xun, with his hand behind his back, walked towards the light, and simply stared at it. Of course, the light they're seeing right now is the aurora borealis. But no one in China at that time had seen it.

CuiShan held Yin SuSu closely, their hearts beating rapidly.

Xie Xun, for the rest of the night, did not move, simply stared at the light. When daytime came, he regained his consciousness, and started to converse normally.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both thought, "No wonder he's so sad. His parents and wife were all killed. Wonder who the killer was?" Afraid that Xie Xun might go crazy again, they did not broach the subject with him.

Many days passed by, when Xie Xun started to act abnormally again with his curses, and his eyes turned red. Although they never talked about it, both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu were careful to guard against another attack.

One day, when the sun did not set at its usual time, Xie Xun yelled, "Damn it! Even the sun is trying to piss me off now. If I had a bow and arrow, I'd shoot you down this instant!" Suddenly he grabbed a piece of ice and threw it towards the sun. After traveling about sixty meters, the ice dropped into the water. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu thought, "Wow, what arm strength. I probably can't even throw half as far."

Xie Xun threw one piece of ice after another, until he threw about seventy pieces. He found that no matter how many he threw, the sun still remained too far for him to hit.

Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie, perhaps you should rest a while. Ignore the sun."

Xie Xun looked back at her, staring into her eyes. Yin SuSu was terrified, but forced a smile. Xie Xun suddenly screamed, jumped up and quickly grabbed her, yelling, "Choke you to death! Choke you to death! Why did you kill my mother, why kill my son?" Yin SuSu felt like an iron hoop gagged around

her neck, and this hoop became tighter and tighter.

Zhang CuiShan tried to pry Xie Xun's arm off of Yin SuSu, but could hardly move it. Seeing Yin SuSu about to die, Zhang CuiShan's attacked Xie Xun, hitting the 'Shen Dao Point' on Xie Xun's back. His fist felt like hitting a solid rock, while Xie Xun continued his grip on Yin SuSu. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "If you don't let go, I'm going to use weapons." When he saw Xie Xun ignoring him, Zhang CuiShan took out his Judge's Brush and pointed at Xie Xun's 'Xiao Hai Point' on his arm. Xie Xun retracted his right hand from Yin SuSu, and grabbed the brush with it, then threw the brush into the sea.

Feeling the grip loosening, Yin SuSu quickly spun out of his hold. Xie Xun's left hand reached for Zhang CuiShan's head, while his right hand tried to grab Yin SuSu's shoulder, tearing off a piece of Yin SuSu's seal coat. Zhang CuiShan knew that if he simply dodged Xie Xun's attacks, Yin SuSu would be caught. So instead of running away, he attacked Xie Xun, using the Soft Palm's 'Carefree Flying Flower'. Strangely, when his palm met Xie Xun's, he felt like being pulled in, unable to get free.

After controlling Zhang CuiShan, Xie Xun dragged him along while chasing Yin SuSu. Yin SuSu jumped away, but before she could get back to the ground, Xie Xun stomped on the ice with his foot, and several ice pellets flew out, all hitting her on the right leg. Yin SuSu let out a scream and fell down.

Xie Xun then sent out a huge force towards Zhang CuiShan, pushing him backward, flying. This push was so strong Zhang CuiShan landed by the edge of the iceberg. With a slip as he tried to regain his footing, Zhang CuiShan fell off the edge, into the sea.

End of Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 - Who Sent the Ice Boat to This Heavenly Village

(Translated by Meh)



Zhang CuiShan embraced Yin SuSu tightly as they rolled a few times on the ground, getting out of the way, only to hear loud sounds of ice cracking, as Xie Xun smashed his mace wildly on the icy surface surrounding him. He then put down the mace, raised a roughly hundred-pound ice over his head, paused a moment to hear their location, before hurling the ice towards Zhang and Yin's direction.

The silver hook in the left hand reached out, holding onto the ice mountain, then Zhang CuiShan sprung back up to the surface. He thought Yin SuSu must be in Xie Xun's hands by now. But instead, only to see Xie Xun's hands covered his eyes, yelling in pain, while Yin SuSu lied on ice.

Zhang CuiShan quickly picked her up. Yin SuSu whispered, "I... I hit his eyes..." Before she could finish, Xie Xun let out a roar, charged at them. Zhang CuiShan embraced Yin SuSu tightly as they rolled a few times on the ground, getting out of the way. Only to hear loud sounds of ice cracking, as Xie Xun smashed his mace wildly on the icy surface surrounding him. He then put down the mace, raised a roughly hundred-pound ice over his head, paused a moment to hear their location, before hurling the ice towards Zhang and Yin's direction.

Yin SuSu wanted to run away, but Zhang CuiShan held her still. The two of them hid in a depressed region of the iceberg, neither even dared to breath loudly. But after throwing and missing that block of ice, Xie Xun became motionless, as if trying to hear their location. Zhang CuiShan saw blood trickling down his eyes, knew that Yin SuSu at the last moment finally released her silver needles. And in his mad, unconscious state, Xie Xun was not able to block them in time, becoming a blind man. Yet his hearing is still just as great. Should they make even the slightest noise, Xie Xun

would find them. Thankfully, with the sounds of waves, wind, and ice hitting each on the sea, Xie Xun could not hear their breaths. Otherwise, they'd probably be dead by now.

After listening for a while, and still unable to locate them, Xie Xun felt the pain in his eyes. With the shock of only darkness meeting his gaze, in addition to his innate anger, Xie Xun suddenly let out a terrible scream, then began to thrash his surrounding area senselessly. He would pick up pieces of ice and throw them wildly in different directions. Only to hear 'ping, ping' sound endlessly. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu embraced each other tightly; so scared their faces became pure white. As the endless waves of ice came in their direction, both knew that even getting hit by one of them could mean instant death.

Xie Xun did this for about an hour, but to Zhang and Yin, it felt like years.

Realizing the futility of throwing ices, Xie Xun suddenly stopped, said, "Mr. Zhang, Miss Yin, I was temporarily a bit reckless, as insanity took over my mind. Sorry about the trouble I've caused. Please forgive me." He said these words in a courteous tone, as if returning to his original state.

But after their experience, neither Zhang nor Yin dared to respond. Xie Xun repeated his apology several times, and when he realized there would be no response, stood up. Xie Xun sighed, said, "I don't blame you for not forgiving me." As he spoke, he took a very deep breath. Zhang CuiShan suddenly realized something, for Xie Xun breathed the exact same way before he let out the howl on WangPan Island. Of course, his howling would not be affected by his blindness. In this critical moment, there's no time for them to cover their ears. So without thinking too carefully, Zhang CuiShan grabbed Yin SuSu and jumped down into the sea.

Before Yin SuSu knew what's going on, Xie Xun began to howl. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu drowned into the water, which also covered their ears. Zhang CuiShan's left hand grabbed onto the iceberg with his hook, while his right hand embraced Yin SuSu. Other than his left hand, all parts of their bodies remained underwater. Yet even so they could still feel the vibrations from Xie Xun's howl. The iceberg continued to travel northward, carrying them along. Zhang CuiShan was thankful that he used and lost his brush earlier. Had he lost his hook, even if Xie Xun's howl hadn't kill them, the sea would have.

After a while, the two people raised their mouths over the water surface to change air, as their ears remained underwater. Only after six such exchanges did Xie Xun stop howling. Since the howl used up much of Xie Xun's inner power, he felt tired, and sat down to regain his strength. Zhang CuiShan signaled Yin SuSu, and they climbed back up the iceberg quietly. Both people then ripped off some pieces of sealskin and covered their ears.

They're safe for now, but as long as they reside on the same iceberg as Xie Xun, any noise could mean the end. The two looked at each other with worry, and then gazed upon the western sky, where the sun still had not set. They didn't know that this is the effect from being near the North Pole. Zhang and Yin only felt like being near the edge of the world.

Yin SuSu, unable to withstand the cold water now soaked all over her cloths, shivered, her teeth made some noise as she uncontrollably gritted them. Upon hearing such noise, Xie Xun screamed, grabbed his mace and charged at them. Zhang and Yin were prepared, and quickly evaded, only to hear a loud 'Ping!', as the mace smashed down on the iceberg surface with at least six hundred pounds of force,

causing seven pieces of huge ice chunks to fly in all directions. Astonished at the sight, the two then saw Xie Xun sweep the mace in their direction. This mace is already over three meters in length. With this sweep, its power extended to over fifteen meters, forcing them backward. After retreating a just few steps, they've arrived at the iceberg's edge.

Yin SuSu gasped, but Zhang CuiShan grabbed her wrist, gathered his energy, and jumped into the water. While in midair, they heard loud crackling noises from behind, as several pieces of ice hit them in the back, causing much pain. At the time of his jump, Zhang CuiShan targeted a table-sized ice sheet near the iceberg. He took out his silver hook and grabbed on to it. When Xie Xun heard them splash into the sea, he knocked loose several pieces of ice to throw at them. But because of his blindness, plus the fact that Zhang and Yin moved away from their splash point quickly, Xie Xun could not hit them. After missing with the first ice block, he stopped throwing.

The ice sheet Zhang and Yin held onto traveled much faster than Xie Xun's iceberg. By nightfall, they've traveled so far away Xie Xun looked like a tiny speck.

It's quite lucky that the two of them managed to hold on to this ice sheet. However, they couldn't stay forever in this cold water. Thankfully, another iceberg appeared after a while. As the ice sheet floated next to it, Zhang and Yin quickly climbed up on top of this new iceberg.

Zhang CuiShan said, "I know people say that 'Heaven will always give humans a path out', but did it have to force so much suffering upon us first. How is your body?" Yin SuSu said, "Too bad we couldn't bring some of the seal meat. Are you injured?" They spoke some more, with neither able to

hear the other. Then both paused a moment, and hurriedly took out the sealskin from their ears. For while they were escaping, neither remembered to take out the sealskin.

After going through so much adversity together, their hearts became even closer. Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu. Let us simply die on this iceberg, so we'll never again part." Yin SuSu said, "I need to ask you something, but you can't lie to me. If we were still on the mainland, without having gone through this hardship together. If I were just as intent on being married to you, would you still want me?"

Zhang CuiShan hesitated a bit, said, "I think we wouldn't have been this close this quickly. Besides.... There would be lots of problems. Our sects are so different..." Yin SuSu sighed, said, "I feel the same way. That's why when you were matching palms with Xie Xun on the boat, I thought about firing my silver needles, but in the end did not."

Zhang CuiShan asked, "Oh yeah, why didn't you? I've always thought that you couldn't see clearly in the dark. That you were afraid to unintentionally hit me." Yin SuSu whispered, "That's not the reason. The reason is, had I injured him, and we ended up back on the mainland, you wouldn't want to be with me."

Zhang CuiShan felt his heart melting away, yelled, "SuSu!"

Yin SuSu said, "Perhaps you might blame me in your heart. But at that moment, I only wanted to be with you, go to a deserted island, where we can be with each other forever. Therefore, what Xie Xun proposed was my wish too." Zhang CuiShan never expected her love for him to be so strong. With much appreciation in his heart, Zhang CuiShan said soothingly, "I would never blame you. Instead, I thank you for being so good to me." Yin SuSu remained in his embrace, looked up into his eyes, said, "I don't blame Heaven at all for

sending us to this cold, hellish place, for instead I feel happy. I only hope this iceberg would never go south, for should we one day returned to the mainland, your master would hate me, and my dad might kill you...”

Zhang CuiShan said, “Your dad?” Yin SuSu said, “My dad is White-Browed Eagle King Yin TianZheng, the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect.” Zhang CuiShan said, “Oh, I see. Don’t worry. I told you I’d always be with you. No matter how mean your dad is, he’s not going to kill his son-in-law.” Yin SuSu’s eyes brightened, her cheeks turned red, said, “Oh, do you really mean that?”

Zhang CuiShan said, “Let us get married right now.”

The two of them then got on their knees. Zhang CuiShan said loudly, “With the Heaven above watching, Zhang CuiShan today will marry Yin SuSu. Share our blessings together, endure our hardships together, never to be apart.” Yin SuSu prayed sincerely, “Please let the Heaven bless us, so we can be couples for all lifetimes*.” She paused a bit, then added, “Should we ever return to the central plains, I will renounce my old ways, change for the better, and follow my husband to do only good, never to kill again. If I fail to do so, then banish me down to the depths of Hell.”

*Ancient Chinese believes in reincarnation. She simply meant that they would be husband and wife in every single incarnation in the future.

Zhang CuiShan, exhilarated at her promise, held her tightly in his arms. Despite being soaked in icy cold water, the two people’s hearts felt warm and dry, as if blown by spring wind.”

After a long time, the two of them realized that they have not

eaten for a long time. Zhang CuiShan looked over the edge with his silver hook, only to see fishes swim on the sea surface, and caught some. The fishes in this region are filled with fat to counter the cold weather, which made them extremely smelly, but also really reenergized the two. Sitting on this iceberg, Zhang and Yin knew there's no chance for them to return, but neither felt sad because of it. They were now no longer bothered by the long days and short nights, and stopped bother to count the days altogether.

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One day, Yin SuSu suddenly saw a stack of smoke from the north. Shocked, she yelled, "Fifth brother!" and pointed at the smoke as she spoke. Zhang CuiShan, happy and surprised, yelled, "Could there be people living there?"

Although the smoke looked big, it's still far away. Even after a day of travel, the smoke still seemed just as far. However, the smoke eventually grew bigger and bigger, until later on, they could see sparks of fire.

Yin SuSu asked, "What is that?" Zhang CuiShan shook his head, did not respond. Yin SuSu screamed, "Oh no, this is the end! This is... is the door to the underworld." Zhang CuiShan had also been alarmed for some time now, but he still tried to sooth her, said, "Perhaps someone's making the fire over there." Yin SuSu said, "Who can make a fire this big?"

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Since we're have no other choice, let's just see what the Heaven has in store for us. If Heaven doesn't want us to freeze to death, but rather burn to death, then we don't really have a choice."

Oddly enough, the iceberg headed exactly towards the direction of the stack of fire. Zhang and Yin didn't know the

reason, thought that they must have been fated to go there. In actuality, that stack of fire is a volcano. With the fire spurting out, the neighboring waters warmed up. Warm water flows south, so the southern cold water obviously moves north, towards the island to take its place.

After another day, the iceberg finally reached the bottom of the volcano, only to see the fire stack surrounded by green vegetation, for it's actually an island. Neither of them had ever seen a volcano, so they didn't know this island was created by the eruptions. The eastern side of the island had no vegetation, though, as it's the path where the lava traveled down to the water. This place is quite close to the North Pole, but due to the continuous volcanic activities, the island had weather similar to the Long White Mountain and the Black Dragon River regions*. Snow covered the upper mountain, but plants filled the lower parts. Pine and Cypress trees here are incredibly big, plus there are all sorts of strange flowers and tress, none seen on the mainland.

*Note: Those are the northeastern-most regions in China.

Yin SuSu stared for a while, then with both hands held Zhang CuiShan's neck, yelled, "Fifth brother, we're arrived at a celestial island!" Zhang CuiShan was also joyous, but could not find any words to say. He then saw a drove of spotted deer eating grass. Looking around, Zhang CuiShan could not find anything scary other than the fire stack.

But just as the iceberg neared the island, the warm water gave it a push backward, and it began to float away. Yin SuSu yelled in a hurry, "Oh no! We can't get on the celestial island now!" Zhang CuiShan realized that if they didn't get on this island now, they'd be washed away. He quickly chipped off a big block of ice, and then let it drop with them down into the water. After paddling with their hands for a while, they finally

reached land.

When the drove of deer saw them, they only stared, as if wondering whom these humans were, but certainly not afraid. Yin SuSu moved close, reached out and patted one of them on the back, said, "If there were some celestial cranes here, I'd say this would be the Celestial Region of the South Pole." Suddenly the ground under her shook, and she fell down. Zhang CuiShan yelled in shock, "SuSu!" As he tried to help her, he also felt his legs wobble, and unable to maintain his balance.

Only to hear a thunderous sound, the earth shook, for the volcano erupted some lava. After getting over the initial shock, and saw no other troubles, both people got up giddily. Due to their exhaustion, the two then slept for about eight hours.

When they woke up, the sun still had not set. Zhang CuiShan said, "Let's go look around, see if there are any people, or perhaps poisonous insects or wild beasts." Yin SuSu said, "Just look at how tame these deer are. Looks like this celestial island is quite peaceful." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "I hope that's the case. But if so, we should at least go pray to the celestial being here."

Even while on the iceberg, Yin SuSu kept her appearance nice, her clothing straight. Now on this island, she cared even more about appearances. So only after she straightened her dress, and then combed Zhang CuiShan's hair, did Yin SuSu care to explore. She held her sword. Zhang CuiShan lost his brush, so he grabbed a tree branch to replace it. The two of them used their lightness kung fu, ran for about 7 miles, from south to north, exhilarated to be in such an environment. On their way, other than passing by small hills and tall trees, they also saw strange grasses and flowers. Above the plants

flew many birds that they've never seen before, but seemed friendly.

They made a turn and went through a large forest, only to see a stone mountain on the island's northwestern corner. There is a cave on the mountain. Yin SuSu yelled, "This place is amazing!" and quickly ran over to the cave. Zhang CuiShan yelled, "Be careful!" Before he could finish, they heard a loud groan, as a white shadow flashed by them; a large white bear came rushing out the cave.

That bear's incredibly big, the size of a huge bull. Yin SuSu gasped in shock, and instantly retreated. The white bear stood up, raised his paws, then came slashing down on Yin SuSu. Yin SuSu raised her sword and attacked the bear's shoulder. Unfortunately, her body's too weak from the time on the sea, so despite striking the bear's shoulder directly, she could not pierce deep enough to cause a serious wound. Before she got off another strike, the bear came close and knocked her sword down. Zhang CuiShan quickly yelled, "SuSu, get out of the way!" as he ran up to join her. Then he swept the branch horizontally, hitting the bear on the left kneecap. Only to hear a loud crack, as the branch split in two, but broke the white bear's left leg too. After experiencing such an injury, the bear roared in pain, and came pounding on Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan jumped up several meters using the 'Cloud Stairs' lightness kung fu, and wrote the last stroke of 'compete'[a stroke that comes straight down before making a tiny hook left] with his hook. The silver hook dropped straight down from midair, piercing the bear's 'Sun Point'. After penetrating a few inches, that white bear began to howl in a deafening tone. It started to roll on the ground in pain, pulling the silver hook out of Zhang CuiShan's hand. After rolling for a while, it stopped struggling, fell dead.

Yin SuSu clapped her hands, said with a smile, "Great lightness kung fu, great hook technique!" Suddenly she heard Zhang CuiShan yell, "Jump over here, quickly!" Yin SuSu could hear the fear in his voice, and jumped toward Zhang CuiShan without hesitation. When she turned around, Yin SuSu couldn't help but scream in shock. For another white bear stood right behind her previous position, looking incredibly ferocious. With no weapons in his hand, Zhang CuiShan quickly pulled Yin SuSu up a tall pine tree. That bear kept circling under them, constantly roaring.

Zhang CuiShan broke off a small piece of branch, aimed towards the white bear's eye, and threw it down. When the branch hit its eye, the bear screamed in pain, and tried to climb up the tree in anger. Zhang CuiShan quickly grabbed Yin SuSu's sword, aimed exactly at the bear's head, gathered his energy, and nailed it down straight. The majority of the sword entered the bear's forehead, making it stutter, until finally the bear fell dead under the tree.

Zhang CuiShan said, "I wonder if there's another bear inside the cave." He picked up a few rocks and threw them inside the cave. With no response after a while, he walked inside the cave. Yin SuSu followed closely behind. The cave is wide and deep, very spacious. A streak of light came through in the middle, like a window. Bears' foods filled the cave. Animal carcasses, such as dead fishes, made the whole place very smelly. Yin SuSu pinched her nose, said, "This is a nice place, but too smelly." Zhang CuiShan said, "Well, we can clean the place up. Then after ten or twenty days, the smell would be gone."

Yin SuSu remembered that they'd be living here together forever, with endless months to enjoy ahead, until they die of old age. She felt delighted, but lonely at the same time.

Zhang CuiShan walked out the cave, broke several branches, and made a broom. He went back inside and cleaned the place, with Yin SuSu helping. After they cleaned the cave, the dirty smell remained. Yin SuSu said, "I wish we could get some water to wash this stuff off. Although there are lots of water in the sea, we don't have a bucket to carry it." Zhang CuiShan said, "I have an idea." He left the cave, went to an ice-covered region of the island, and grabbed some large chunks of ice. Then he put the ice chunks on the tallest rock in the cave. Yin SuSu yelled, "Wow, great idea!" The ice would slowly melt, and trickle out the cave as water.

Zhang CuiShan used this water to take a shower. Yin SuSu used her sword to cut the bears into small pieces. Despite being on a volcano, they're still near the North Pole. So the weather's quite cold. The bear meat would likely last for months without rotting. Yin SuSu sighed, said, "People really are greedy, never satisfied. Here I am, thinking how great it would if we could only light a fire, and cook these bear meats." Then she added, "I'm afraid that the ice chunks would melt too slowly, and the smell would never go away." Zhang CuiShan looked at the volcano, said, "Well, there's certainly fire here, but simply too big for us. I'm sure we can find a way to get it, though."

That night, after eating bear meat, the two slept on the tree. During their sleep, both felt like they're still on the iceberg, moving with the current. Actually, they only felt the wind blowing on the branches.

The next day, before she even opened her eyes, Yin SuSu said, "What an amazing fragrance!" She jumped off the tree, only to smell a lovely fragrance coming from the flowers nearby. Yin SuSu said happily, "It's so great that there are all these flowers in front of the cave."

Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu, don't be so thrilled yet. I need to tell you something." Upon seeing his serious expression, Yin SuSu paused a moment, then said, "What?" Zhang CuiShan said, "I found a way to get fire." Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Oh! You're so mean. I thought you were going to give me some bad news."

Zhang CuiShan said, "The flame on the fire mountain is so big it's nearly impossible to get close. We'd likely burn to death before reaching it. However, we can use tree barks to tie a long rope, and wait for it to dry. Then..." Yin SuSu cut in, "Great idea! Then we can tie a rock to the end, and throw it at the fire. Then the fire come towards us through the rope."

After eating raw meat for so long, the two were in quite a hurry to get the fire ready. They went to work immediately. After two days, they finally tied together a rope, over three hundred and thirty meters long. After leaving it in the sun for another day, they finally went up the volcano the fourth morning.

Although it looked close, they still had to travel over thirteen miles to get near the top. The temperature rose as they walked up. First they had to take off their seal coats, then more clothing, until they had only one layer on. Even so, they still could not withstand the heat. Both sweated uncontrollably, and their mouths dried up. But with no water or vegetation around, there's nothing they could do.

Zhang CuiShan, with the rope hanging on his back, saw that Yin SuSu's near exhaustion. Afraid for her health, he said, "You wait for me here. I'll go up alone." Yin SuSu said, "Don't speak to me like this again. The worst that can happen is that we'll never have fire. It's no big deal to eat raw meat the rest of our lives." Zhang CuiShan smiled slightly.

After walking another thousand meters or so, the two are almost totally exhausted. Even Zhang CuiShan's superior inner power could not help him withstand the heat. He said half-consciously, let's throw the rope here. If we still can't catch fire, then we'll... we'll..." Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Then we'll just be a wild couple who drink blood and eat raw meat..." and then her body swayed. She almost fell to the ground before grabbing onto Zhang CuiShan's shoulder. Zhang CuiShan picked up a rock from the ground, then tightened it to the rope. He gathered his energy, ran forward a few steps, and threw the rock with all his might.

Only to see the rock disappear in the distance, and the rope eventually straightened, falling down to the ground. The rock's landing spot is still way too far from any fire. After waiting for a long time, until the couple was about to explode from the heart, the rope still remained fireless. Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "I've heard ancient people used wood and stones to make fires. We can try those things. My way certainly doesn't work."

Yin SuSu said, "Even so, this rope is now quite dry. Let's go find some flint. Perhaps we can make a fire with the sword." Zhang CuiShan said, "You're right." And retracted the rope, then tore down a small piece. There are tons of flints here on the volcano. They took one piece and struck it with the sword. Sparks flew out immediately. After the tenth try, fire lit up the bark.

The two people embraced in joy. They took their bark, now a torch, happily back to the cave. Yin SuSu brought a stack of dry branches and grass to keep the fire going.

With a kindle of fire available, everything else, like cooking meat or warming up ice, came easily. The two hasn't eaten

any cooked food since getting on the boat. Both salivated as they watched the meat simmer on the fire.

That night in the warm bear cave, with streams of fragrance flowing, the fire flickering. For the first time since they married, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu enjoyed their first wedding night together.

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The next morning, Zhang CuiShan walked out the cave, looked into the distance, feeling amazingly refreshed. He suddenly noticed a large figure far away, standing by a rock on the beach.

This figure is none other than Xie Xun! Zhang CuiShan couldn't believe his eyes. After going through this ordeal with Yin SuSu, he had expected to live peacefully on this island. Who'd have thought that this monster would come too? In an instant, Zhang CuiShan froze. Only to see Xie Xun staggering toward the inner part of the island. After being blinded, he seemingly could no longer catch fish for food, and in lived in hunger until today. Xie Xun walked a few steps forward, tripped, and fell to the ground.

Zhang CuiShan returned to the cave. Yin SuSu said tenderly, "Fifth brother... you..." When she saw his serious expression, she held back the rest of the words. Zhang CuiShan said, "Xie Xun's here too!" Yin SuSu gasped in shock, whispered, "Did he see you?" But then remembered that Xie Xun's now blind. Her fear lessened somewhat, said, "Surely the two of us can defeat a blind person, right?" Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "He just fainted from hunger." Yin SuSu said, "Let's go take a look!" She tore off some clothing and put them into Zhang CuiShan and her own ears, then grabbed her sword and some silver needles. They went out the cave together.

When they've reached about twenty-five meters from Xie Xun, Zhang CuiShan said loudly, "Elder Xie, do you wish to eat some food?" Upon hearing a person's voice, Xie Xun let out an expression of joy. But once he realized that it was Zhang CuiShan speaking, the joy disappeared. After a long time, he finally nodded. Zhang CuiShan went back to the cave and took out a piece of cooked bear meat. He threw it towards Xie Xun, said, "Please catch it." Xie Xun heard the sound of the meat, quickly grabbed it with his hand, and began to eat.

Zhang CuiShan felt pity for Xie Xun, after seeing such a powerful and proud man weakened like this. Yin SuSu was thinking of something else entirely, "Fifth brother is just too kind-hearted. Wouldn't it be better to let him die of hunger? Saving him could very well bring trouble in the future. Perhaps we'll later both die in his hands." But then she remembered her promise to become a good person. So she did not speak her mind.

After eating half a piece of meat, Xie Xun fell asleep on the ground. Zhang CuiShan made a pile of fire by his side.

Xie Xun slept for a couple of hours before waking up. He asked, "What is this place? Zhang and Yin had been sitting by his side. When they saw him sitting up to speak, both unplugged their right ears so they could hear. Even so, they still kept their right hands near their ears, in case Xie Xun decided to howl. Zhang CuiShan said, "This is a deserted island near the North Pole.

Xie Xun nodded. In this instant, thousands of thoughts floated through his mind. After a while, he said, "If so, looks like we have no chance to go back, right?" Zhang CuiShan said, "That will depend on the will of the Heaven." Xie Xun

said angrily, "Don't give me that 'Heaven' crap. He searched around for the piece of meat, and began eating again. Then he asked, "What do you plan to do with me?"

Zhang CuiShan looked at Yin SuSu, as he wanted to hear her opinion. Yin SuSu made a gesture, which meant he could decide for them both.

Zhang CuiShan thought for a moment, then said, "Elder Xie, We husband and wife..." Xie Xun nodded, said, "Oh, you're married." Yin SuSu's face turned red, but looked very happy. She said, "Actually, we have to thank you as our matchmaker." Xie Xun let out a humph, said, "What are you going to do with me?" Zhang CuiShan said, "We're sorry to have blinded your eyes. But what's done is done. There's no way to turn back time. Since we're fated to come to this island, I doubt we'll ever see the mainland ever again. In that case, we'll take care of you for the rest of your life."

Xie Xun nodded, sighed, and said, "I guess there's no other choice." Zhang CuiShan said, "Due to our deep love for each other, we have agreed to live and die together. Should the elder ever become crazy again, and kills one of us, the other would surely not live alone in this world." Xie Xun said, "I know what you're trying to say. That should you two die, there's no way for me to live on this island alone, right?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Correct!" Xie Xun said, "If so, then why haven't you taken out the cloths in your left ears yet?"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu smiled at each other, and took out the cloth in their left ears too. Both thought, "Despite his lack of sight, this person's hearing is amazing, almost to the point where they could replace his eyes. Plus with his intelligence and knowledge, this person might not even need us if he weren't on this cold, strange island."

Zhang CuiShan asked Xie Xun to name this deserted island. Xie Xun said, "Since this island is covered in ice year-round, yet also has a never-ending supply of fire. Let's call it Fire-Ice Island."

From then on, the three of them settled peacefully on this Fire-Ice Island. There's another small cave about a thousand meters from the bear cave. Zhang and Yin cleaned it up for Xie Xun to live. They then caught fish and animals for food, burned pottery to make bowls, gathered soil to make a kitchen, and made all sort of crude items for everyday use.

Xie Xun never bothered to chat with them. He only held up that Dragon Saber, deep in thought. Sometimes Zhang and Yin would pity him, and advise him to stop trying to figure out its secrets. Xie Xun said, "You think I don't know that it's useless to find its secret, now that we're on this deserted island? But with nothing else to do, how else am I going to spent the days?" The couple found his words reasonable, and stopped trying to persuade him.

Soon, months passed. One day, the couple strolled up the northern part of the island, only to see a forest after walking about 6 miles. Zhang CuiShan wanted to explore the forest, but Yin SuSu was reluctant, said, "Who cares about all the strange creatures in the forest? Let's just go back."

Zhang CuiShan found this weird, wondered, "SuSu has always been the curious type. Yet lately, she has become quite lazy." Concerned for her health, he asked, "Are you ok? Is there something wrong?" Yin SuSu's face turned red, said timidly, "I'm ok." Zhang CuiShan found her expression unusual, and kept asking. Yin SuSu finally said, "Perhaps the Heavens thought we're too lonely, so he sent another person to live with us." Zhang CuiShan paused for a second, then felt like he's in Heaven. He yelled, "You have a child?" Yin

SuSu said in a hurry, "Don't speak so loudly. Someone might hear you." When she spoke this, Yin SuSu couldn't help but start laughing. In this desolate place, who could possibly hear them?

The weather changed. By now, the days became shorter and the nights longer, until there's only about four to five hours of daylight. The temperature also dropped. After becoming pregnant, Yin SuSu became more and more fatigued. Yet she still managed to cook, sew, and do other household chores.

Tonight marked the tenth month of her pregnancy. With the fire roaring in the cave, the couple chatted together. Yin SuSu said, "Do you think it's a boy or a girl?" Zhang CuiShan said, "A boy would look like me. A girl would look like you. Both would be great." Yin SuSu said, "No, I prefer a son. Why don't you give him a name?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Yeah..." But then he remained silent for a long time. Yin SuSu said, "Is there something wrong? You've been acting weird the past few days." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, it's nothing. Perhaps I'm a bit too happy knowing I'm going to be a father!"

Despite having just spoken a lighthearted comment, Zhang CuiShan's expression remained quite sullen. Yin SuSu said, "Fifth brother, keeping me in the dark would only make me worry more. There must be something wrong."

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Hopefully it's just my imagination. But Xie Xun's expression the past few days didn't look right." Yin SuSu gasped, said, "I also noticed. He's becoming more and more vicious, as if he's about to become insane again." Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "He must be frustrated at his inability to unlock the Dragon Saber's mystery." Yin SuSu cried, said, "Before, the worst that could

happen would be to die, but... but now..."

Zhang CuiShan held her in his embrace, said soothingly, "You're right. We must value our lives now, for our son. Should Xie Xun really get out of control, we would have to kill him. Due to his blindness, I'm sure we can defeat him somehow."

Yin SuSu had become much more compassionate since becoming pregnant. Before, she could easily kill tens of people without so much as blink. Now, she felt bad even when killing a wild animal. One day, when Zhang CuiShan caught a deer back to the cave, a fawn came back with him. Yin SuSu forced him to release the mother deer, said that she'd rather eat fruits than to leave the fawn motherless. So when Yin SuSu heard Zhang CuiShan spoke of killing Xie Xun, her body trembled.

Zhang CuiShan obviously felt this reaction, looked at her fondly, and said, "Hopefully, that won't be necessary. But we still must make guard against him." Yin SuSu said, "You're right. But how would we control him? Perhaps put some poison in his food... No, let's not do that. Perhaps we're just being too paranoid."

Zhang CuiShan said, "I have a plan. Tomorrow, we'll move to the inner area of the cave. I'll dig a deep hole by on the outer part of the cave, then put some mud and twigs over it." Yin SuSu said, "But you have to go hunt everyday. What if he caught you outside?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Don't worry. It's easy for me to escape by myself. Should he attack me, I'll just escape to a dangerous cliff or something. Without vision, Xie Xun cannot catch me."

The next morning, Zhang CuiShan began to dig his hole. Without an iron shovel, he had to rely on thick branches.

Obviously this makes the job much more tedious. But thanks to his great inner power, Zhang CuiShan managed to finish it in seven days, a ditch about 10 meters deep. He saw Xie Xun's expression becoming less and less stable each day, often swinging the Dragon Saber wildly. So Zhang CuiShan dug the hole a bit deeper, until it's now over sixteen meters deep. He prepared some sharp, wooden spikes to put on the bottom, and gathered some stones by the side. Should Xie Xun ever fall into the hole, Zhang CuiShan could use the stones to smash him.

This afternoon, Xie Xun came by the bear cave, and began to pace around outside. Zhang CuiShan didn't dare work at this time, afraid that Xie Xun would suspicious. He also didn't dare hunting today, only guard by the mouth of the cave, watching Xie Xun's movements. Only to hear Xie Xun curse endlessly. He cursed the Heaven, the Buddha, Avalokitesvara, the Emperor of Heaven, the Lord of the Underworld, past human emperors, like 'Yao-Shun-Yu-Shang*' and 'Qin Emperor-Tang Zong*'. And then scholars like Confucius and Meng Zi*, generals like Guan Yun* and Yue Fei*. Just about every single notable scholar or hero in the past, he cursed. Xie Xun's a very knowledgeable person. So Zhang CuiShan was actually quite amused by his rants on historical figures.

*Note: Yao, Shun, Yu, and Shang are four important emperors in the China's VERY early days. I think in the 'Zhou' era. Certainly before the Spring-Autumn era and the Warring-Nations era. 'Qin Emperor' here denotes Qin Shi Huang, the emperor who united China (and built the Great Wall). 'Tang Zong' denotes Tang Tai Zong, the second emperor of the Tang dynasty, Li ShiMin. Tang Tai Zong is Li ShiMin's imperial name. I'm sure everyone knows Confucius(look him up if you don't). Although I don't know much about Meng Zi, other than the fact that he's famous scholar. I think most people

know about Guan Yun, very famous person in the Three-Kingdoms era. Yue Fei is the famous general in the Southern Song dynasty. Anyone familiar with Jin Yong's "Eagle Shooting Hero" should know him.

Suddenly, Xie Xun began to curse the people in the martial world, making people like Shaolin's originator Da Muo, or Divine Fist Yue WuMu, sound worthless. But at least he's not cursing blindly. Xie Xun seemed to know the exact weaknesses of all the people and sects he cursed. Only to hear him curse the Tang dynasty fighters followed by the Sung dynasty fighters, ending with the greats of the Southern Sung, East Heretic, West Poison, South Emperor, North Beggar, and Central Theurgist. Followed by Guo Jing, Yang Guo, and finally Wu Dang's originator Zhang SanFeng.

Zhang CuiShan couldn't bare Xie Xun curse his master, and about to rebut, when Xie Xun suddenly yelled, "Humph, Zhang SanFeng is a piece of bad crap. His disciple Zhang CuiShan is a bigger piece of crap. Let me go strangle his wife to death first!" As he spoke, Xie Xun walked past Zhang CuiShan and into the cave.

Zhang CuiShan hurried inside, only to hear a crashing noise, as Xie Xun fell into the hole. Unfortunately, the spikes had not been put in yet, so Xie Xun was only startled, but not injured. Zhang CuiShan quickly picked up one of the branches he used to shovel dirt. When he reached the hole, Zhang CuiShan saw Xie Xun climbing back up. He immediately attacked Xie Xun with the branch. When Xie Xun heard the sound of the branch, his left hand reached out, grabbed the branch, and pulled it down. Zhang CuiShan could not hold on as the branch darted out of his hand. This pull was quite powerful, so the branch left Zhang CuiShan's palm filled with blood. Along with this pull, Xie Xun once again fell back down the hole.

Yin SuSu had been going into labor for over half a day now. It's just that with Xie Xun walking outside, she couldn't tell her husband, for it might break his concentration. But at this critical moment, she no longer cared for all that. Yin SuSu bit her teeth, got up, and threw her sword at Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan grabbed the sword, thought, "This person's kung fu is far superior to mine. Even if I attack him, he's bound to take the sword away from me." But then he realized, "His eyes are blind. The only reason he took my branch is because it made a sound."

Just as he understood this, Xie Xun let out a laugh, and began to climb up again. Zhang CuiShan saw exactly where he would climb up, pointed his sword down at Xie Xun's head, and did not move. Xie Xun climbed up with immense speed, going exactly towards the point of the sword, which gave no noise while remaining motionless. No matter how great Xie Xun's kung fu, he could not possibly detect the sword. Only to see the sword pierce into Xie Xun's head, who immediately let out a scream. When the sword entered about a centimeter into his head, Xie Xun quickly reacted, changing his direction in the opposite manner, immediately falling back into the hole. Had he been late by even a second, the sword would've killed him. However, even though his life is fine, the sword still made a serious wound. Blood poured down Xie Xun's face, as the sword stuck on top of his head.

Xie Xun took out the sword and tore out a piece of cloth to cover the wound. He knew that his wound is serious, but nonetheless did not care. Taking out his Dragon Saber to protect his head, Xie Xun tried for the third time to climb out. Zhang CuiShan tried to throw rocks at him, but Xie Xun cut them down with the Dragon Saber. With his saber shining

brightly, Xie Xun climbed out of the hole, began to walk towards Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan backed off step by step. He felt saddened, for today he will die with Yin SuSu, never to see his child born.

Xie Xun didn't want Zhang CuiShan or Yin SuSu to walk past him to leave the cave. For then, he'd have no way to catch them. So with the sword in his left hand and the Dragon Saber in his right, Xie Xun unleashed techniques that covered a lot of area, sealing a five-meter width besides him which no one could go past.

When suddenly, he heard a 'Waaaaahhhhh' sound, as the sound of a baby's cry came out of the inner cave. Xie Xun gasped in shock. He immediately stopped walking and froze, hearing the baby cry continuously.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu realized that they were going to die. So they forgot all about Xie Xun, and instead put all their attention on the newly born baby. The baby is a son, his arms and legs kept moving, while crying loudly. Zhang and Yin realized that once Xie Xun's saber came slicing down, both of them, plus the baby, would all immediately die. Neither spoke, their gaze on the baby. Both thanked fate for being so kind, allowing them to see their baby before death. Even a single extra moment right now, meant a single extra blessing to them. In this instant, the couple felt an unusual serenity, not thinking at all about their future. Obviously, both wanted the child to live on, but since this was impossible, they did not dare to hope.

Only to hear the baby cry continuously, when suddenly, Xie Xun's conscience reappeared, his madness dissipated. He suddenly remembered the moment his whole family was killed, for it was soon after his wife gave birth. His child died that day too. This baby's cry made him remember many

things in his past: The love between him and his wife, the brutality of his enemy, the innocent baby thrown by his enemy into the wall and turning into a bloody pulp, cutting off his own finger, trying to get revenge, only to fail each time, getting the Dragon saber, but unable to find its secret... He stood in a trance, sometimes smiling, sometimes biting his teeth.

Right before this moment, the three of them were in a life and death duel, but after the baby cried, all of them suddenly turned their attention to the baby.

Xie Xun suddenly asked, "Is the baby a boy or a girl?" Zhang CuiShan said, "He's a boy." Xie Xun said, "That's good. Have you cut the umbilical cord yet? Zhang CuiShan said, "Do I need to? Oh, yes, of course. I totally forgot."

Xie Xun turned the sword around, gave it to Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan took the sword and cut off the umbilical cord. Only then did he realize that Xie Xun was by his side, yet did not try to kill them. In fact, he looked very concerned, as if trying to help out.

Yin SuSu said weakly, "Let me hold him." Zhang CuiShan put the baby into her arms. Xie Xun then said, "Do you have some hot water to give the baby a bath?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, I can't believe this. I didn't prepare for anything. What an useless dad I am." He quickly got up to go prepare for some hot water. But after he took a step, Zhang CuiShan saw Xie Xun standing right next to the baby, and stopped in fear for his child. Xie Xun said, "Why don't you watch over the baby with your wife. I'll prepare the water. While speaking, he put the Dragon Saber back on his waist and walked out the cave. As he passed by the hole, Xie Xun simply jumped over it.

After a while, Xie Xun really did come back with a tub of hot water. Zhang CuiShan then gave the baby a bath. Hearing the baby's cry, Xie Xun asked, "Does the child look like his mom or dad?" Zhang CuiShan smiled, said, "More like his mom. Not too heavy, he has a melon-seed-shaped head." Xie Xun sighed, said quietly, "Hopefully, he'll have good luck when he grows up, and not endure too many hardships." Yin SuSu said, "Elder Xie, are you saying that the baby's appearance is unlucky?" Xie Xun said, "No. It's just that if the child looked like you, he'd be too handsome. I was just afraid that his good fortune is too thin. And when he enters society, will face much difficulty." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "Elder, you're thinking too far into the future. We're now at a deserted island by the North Pole. This child will live and die here. How can he possibly return to society?"

Yin SuSu said in a hurry, "No, No! We don't have to return, but do you really want our child to live here forever? When all three of us die, who will accompany him? After he grows up, how is he going to get married and have kids?" Yin SuSu had always been vicious while living under the Heavenly Eagle Sect's influence. But ever since she became married to Zhang CuiShan, Yin SuSu turned gentler and kinder. Now that she's a mother, her heart is only filled with love for her son, and only wished the best for him.

Zhang CuiShan looked at her, massaged her hair, thought, "We're thousands of miles from mainland. How can we possibly get back?" But he didn't want to hurt her feelings, and remained silent.

Xie Xun suddenly said, "Mrs. Zhang is right. The three of us don't really have any future. But there's no way we can let this child grow up and die here, never to enjoy the life of a normal person. Mrs. Zhang, the three of us should come up with a way to get this child back to mainland."

Yin SuSu was exhilarated, tried to get up. Zhang CuiShan quickly stopped her, said, "SuSu, what are you trying to do? You need to more rest." Yin SuSu said, "No, fifth brother. Let us kowtow to this elder, for his willingness to help our son."

Xie Xun shook his hand, said, "No need. Have you given this child a name yet?" Zhang CuiShan said, "No. Elder Xie, you're very knowledgeable. Perhaps you should name him!" Xie Xun said, "Ok. He needs to have a good name. Let me think..."

Yin SuSu thought, "It's so great that he actually loves this child. If he thought of the child as his own, then the child will be safe on this island. Even if Xie Xun gets mad, he still won't hurt his own son." So she said, "Elder Xie, I'd like to ask you, on behalf of the child, for a favor. I hope you'll agree to it." Xie Xun said, "What favor?"

Yin SuSu said, "That you accept this child as your godson! So as he grows up, he can treat you like his own father, and you can raise him as your son. Fifth brother, do you not think this is a good idea?" Zhang CuiShan knew the reasons for his wife's request, said, "That would be great! Elder Xie, please accept my wife's request."

Xie Xun said, "My own child was thrown to his death as a baby. Have you ever seen that?" Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu looked at each other. They thought that perhaps his insanity is settling back in. But considering his past, they didn't really blame him. Xie Xun then added, "If my son hadn't died, he'd be eighteen now. Had I taught him all my kung fu, humph, I doubt he'd be worse than your seven Wu Dang heroes." His voice carried both extreme pride and extreme sadness in that last sentence.

The three people stayed silent for a while, before Zhang CuiShan said, "Elder Xie, you really should accept him as your godson, and his surname will become 'Xie'." An expression of extreme joy skimmed through Xie Xun's face. He said, "Are you really willing to let his surname be 'Xie'? My son who passed away was called Xie Wuji." Zhang CuiShan said, "If you like, we'll call this child Xie Wuji."

In his joy, Xie Xun feared that Zhang CuiShan might take his words back, said, "If you gave your son to me, then what about you?" Zhang CuiShan said, "It doesn't matter what the child's surname is. We'll love him just the same. In the future, he'll be filial to his mother, father, and his godfather all equally. What do you think, SuSu?" Yin SuSu paused a moment, said, "I leave everything up to you. A child could only benefit from an extra person loving him."

Xie Xun bowed down, said, "I really wish to thank you. Let us clear all our past differences. Xie Xun had lost a son, but he now gained a son. When Xie Wuji becomes famous in the martial world, everyone would know that his father is Zhang CuiShan, his mother is Yin SuSu, and his godfather is 'Golden-Haired Lion King' Xie Xun."

Yin SuSu originally hesitated because she thought the name was bad luck, since the original Xie Wuji died as a child. But when she saw the joy on Xie Xun's face, she knew Xie Xun would treat this child as his own, a huge benefit to the child. For the happiness of her child, a mother can give up anything. So she held the baby in her arms, said, "Do you want to hold him?"

Xie Xun reached out his hand, and took the child from her arms. He was so happy he began to weep, and his arms quivered, said, "You... you should take him back. He might be too afraid of my look." Actually, how could a newly born child

know anything about looks? Nonetheless, he did this only because of concern for the child. Yin SuSu said with a smile, "You can hold him for as long as you like. When he grows up, you can take him all over the place to play."

Xie Xun said, "Great, great..." When he heard the child cry, Xie Xun said, "He's hungry. Why don't you feed him. I'll go outside." Actually, considering his blindness, Yin SuSu wouldn't have cared if he stayed. But oddly enough, he has turned into a courteous gentleman.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Elder Xie..." Xie Xun said, "Hold on. We're one family now. You can't consider me an elder now. How about this, the three of us become sworn brothers and sisters. This will be good to the child too." Zhang CuiShan said, "But you are so much superior to us in ability. We're not worthy." Xie Xun said, "Humph, how could you be so wishy-washy? Fifth brother, fifth sister, are you going to call me big brother or not?" Yin SuSu said with a smile, "I'll call you big brother first. If he still call you 'elder' afterwards, then I'd be his elder too." Zhang CuiShan said, "In that case, I shall consent to big brother's request." Yin SuSu said, "After a few days, when I could get up. We can formally go through the ritual of bonding by bowing to the Heaven."

Xie Xun said, "A true man would never go back on his words. Since we've already verbally agreed, what's the need to bow to Heaven?" As he spoke, he left the cave. Only to hear him laugh loudly and heartily in the open field. Since meeting him, this is the first time Zhang and Yin had ever seen him happy.

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From then on, the three of them concentrated on raising this child. Xie Xun was a hunter as a young man, which was the

reason for his 'Golden-Haired Lion King' nickname. His ability to catch wild animals is second to none. Zhang CuiShan showed him around the island, giving him descriptions to all the places. After a while, Xie Xun became familiar with the geography of the island. From then on, Xie Xun helped out a great deal when it came to hunting animals.

The next few years passed peacefully. The child never got sick, and grew to be quite sturdy. Among the three people, Xie Xun was the most fond of the child. Sometimes when the child became overly mischievous, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu would try to discipline him, but he would run behind Xie Xun for support. After a while, the child became reliant on Xie Xun to help him all the time. Zhang and Yin could only shake their head and laugh. They said that their big brother dote on his godson too much.

When Wuji turned four*, Yin SuSu taught him how to write. On his fifth birthday, Zhang CuiShan said, "Big brother. We can teach our child kung fu now. Why don't you teach him?" Xie Xun shook his head, said, "No. My kung fu is too difficult. He can't learn them yet at this age. You should teach him your Wu Dang's inner power. When he turns eight, I'll teach him my kung fu. After teaching him for two years, you can leave this island!"

*Note: In ancient China, a person's age starts at one when he's born. So Xie Wuji is only three years old in modern age-counting method. Take note of this, since otherwise you'll find that some conversations would otherwise not make sense.

Yin SuSu asked in surprise, "What do you mean? Are you saying we could return to mainland?"

Xie Xun said, "In this past few years, I've noticed the wind

pattern on this island. Every year when the nights are the longest, the northern wind blew. Usually it blows nonstop for at least thirty or forty days. We can make a small raft, and put on a sail. If the Damnable Heaven doesn't interfere, you just might make it back to mainland." Yin SuSu said, "Wait, are you saying that you won't go back with us?" Xie Xun said, "With my blindness, what's the point for me to return to the mainland?" Yin SuSu said, "If you don't go, then how can we let you stay here alone? Our son won't either. Without his godfather, who will love and care for him?" Xie Xun sighed, said, "I'm grateful that I can take care of him for ten years. This Damnable Heaven always likes to piss me off. If this kid stays with me for too long, the bad luck might rub off on him." Yin SuSu shuddered, but thought that Xie Xun simply blurted it out mindlessly, so she didn't really thought much of it.

Zhang CuiShan only taught his son fundamental inner powers. He thought that on this island, his child only needs to be strong, and won't be fighting anyone. Although Xie Xun spoke about returning to the mainland, he never brought it up afterwards. Looks like he didn't really mean that.

In the eighth year, Xie Xun really did make Wuji to learn kung fu with him. When he taught Wuji, Xie Xun did not ask for Zhang and Yin to remain by their side. The couple followed the martial world's rules, and stayed away during those times. They didn't really bother to check on Wuji's progress, since they trust Xie Xun would teach Wuji his best.

There's not much to do on the island. So days and months passed like flowing water. Another year went by quickly.

Ever since Wuji's birth, Xie Xun had something more important to occupy his time than the Dragon Saber. So he ignored it. One night, Zhang CuiShan couldn't sleep. So he

got out of bed to take a walk. He saw Xie Xun sitting on a rock under the moonlight, holding the Dragon Saber, deep in thought. Zhang CuiShan gasped, about to leave, when Xie Xun heard his footsteps. He said, "Fifth brother. It looks like this phrase 'Martial world's most venerable, Precious Saber Dragon Slaying' really is just an empty boast." Zhang CuiShan walked closer, said, "There are many rumors in the martial world. Considering big brother's intelligence, why would you be so keen on finding this saber's secret?" Xie Xun said, "You don't know the whole story. I heard the story of the Dragon Saber from the venerable Reverend Kong Jian of Shaolin."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh, Reverend Kong Jian. I heard he's Shaolin abbot's elder martial brother. He died a long time ago." Xie Xun nodded, said, "You're right. Kong Jian died, died in my hands." Zhang CuiShan was taken by surprise, as he remembered a saying in the martial world, "Shaolin's Divine Reverends, Jian-Wen-Zhi-Sheng", which referred to the four best martial artists in Shaolin, Kong Jian, Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and Kong Sheng. Later he heard that Kong Jian died of natural causes. Looks like Xie Xun killed him instead.

Xie Xun sighed, said, "Kong Jian is a very stubborn person. He simply let me hit him, without retaliating. After punching him thirteen times, I finally killed him."

Zhang CuiShan was quite stunned, thought, "Only the top fighters could withstand just one punch from big brother. Yet this reverend could withstand thirteen punches. His body must be harder than steel."

Only to see a mournful expression on Xie Xun's face, as if he really regretted something. Zhang CuiShan figured that there must be an important story behind it. For the past eight years, Zhang CuiShan had much affection for his big brother.

But within that affection hid a bit of fear. Afraid to bring up Xie Xun's sad past, Zhang CuiShan did not dare ask further.

Only to hear Xie Xun say, "There aren't many people in this world whom I respect. Although I've heard much of your master Zhang SanFeng, I've never had a chance to meet him. As for this Reverend Kong Jian, he's a very admirable person. His martial arts reputation is lower than his younger martial brothers Kong Zhi and Kong Sheng, but in my opinion, he's better than both."

Every time Zhang CuiShan heard Xie Xun speak about famous peoples of the world, Xie Xun either dismissed them, or cursed them. It's incredibly rare for him to ever compliment anyone. So Zhang CuiShan was quite surprised to hear Xie Xun speak so highly of Reverend Kong Jian. Zhang CuiShan said, "He must not travel around the world very much, which is why people don't know much about him."

Xie Xun looked into the sky, stared aimlessly, and as if speaking to himself, "Too bad, this venerable reverend allowed me to kill him with thirteen punches. Even though his kung fu is incredible, he's too stubborn. Had he fought me for real, I certainly would not have lived till today." Zhang CuiShan said, "Are you saying that the depth of his martial arts is more than your's?"

Xie Xun said, "I'm nothing compared to him. Not even close! It's the difference between night and day!" Both his voice and his expression showed his great respect for this man.

Zhang CuiShan was quite surprised, and didn't quite believe Xie Xun. He always thought that his master Zhang SanFeng's martial arts is unparalleled. But compared to Xie Xun, Zhang SanFeng is only somewhat better. If this Reverend Kong Jian

really is much superior to Xie Xun, then would he also surpass master Zhang SanFeng? But Zhang CuiShan knew that his big brother never exaggerates with his compliments.

Xie Xun seemed to have read his mind, said, "You don't believe me? Fine, go wake up Wuji. I want to tell a story to him." Zhang CuiShan didn't want to wake up a child in the middle of the night, especially for just a story. But since this is his big brother order, he couldn't disobey. Zhang CuiShan walked back to wake up his son. Wuji yelled 'Great!' when he heard that his godfather wanted to tell a story. This instantly woke up Yin SuSu. So the three of them went outside together.

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Xie Xun said, "Son, soon you'll return to the mainland..." Wuji asked, "What do you mean by 'return to the mainland'?"

Xie Xun held up his hand, telling Wuji to not interrupt him, and continued, "Should you somehow die in the sea, or end up elsewhere, then this will all be pointless. But should you end up back in mainland, I must tell you some things. There are many, many people in this world who are evil and devious. You should not trust anyone. For other than your parents, everyone could try to hurt you. Unfortunately, no one told me this when I was young. Actually, even if someone did, I wouldn't have believed him.

"At the age of ten, by simply a coincidence, I became the disciple of a person with powerful martial arts. My relationship with my master was like father and son. Fifth brother, at that time, my reverence for my master was no less than your reverence for yours. At the age of twenty-three, I finished my training and left. I went to the western regions, and met a bunch of pretty important people. Since we really

hit it off, they considered me on of their brothers. Fifth sister, your father White-Browed Eagle King met me at that time. Afterwards, I married and had a son. My family live happily.

“When I was twenty-eight, my master came by my house to stay for a while. I was absolutely thrilled. My family treated him as one of our own. When my master had some spare time, he gave me some pointers on kung fu. Who’d have thought that this renowned kung fu expert would be a wolf in sheep’s clothing? On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, after we had a lot of alcohol, he suddenly tried to rape my wife...”

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both gasped in disbelief, for it’s unheard of for a master to rape his disciple’s wife. It might be one of the most horrible deeds a person could possibly commit.

Xie Xun continued, “When my wife cried out for help, my father forced himself into the room. After getting caught in the act, my master killed my father, and then killed my mother. Then to my infant child Xie Wuji...”

When Wuji heard his name, he asked, “Xie Wuji?”

Zhang CuiShan scolded him, “Don’t interrupt! Just listen.” Xie Xun said, “Yes, that son of mine is also called Xie Wuji. My master grabbed him, and threw him down, turning him into a bloody pulp.”

Wuji couldn’t help but ask again, “Godfather, then can he still... still live?” Xie Xun shook his head, said, “No, No!” Yin SuSu shook her hands at her son, telling him to stop asking.

Xie Xun paused for a while, before continuing, “I froze upon reaching the scene. I didn’t know what to do. What should I

do in front of the man I respect most in life? Suddenly, he hit me right in the chest, and I just took it without really knowing what had happened. When I returned to consciousness, my master had disappeared. My house was filled with dead people, my father, mother, wife, son, brothers, sisters, and servants, thirteen people, all died in his hands. He must've thought I had died from his punch, and therefore left without killing me.

"Afterwards I was sick for a long time. When I recovered, I began to practice kung fu day and night. Three years later, I sought out my master for revenge. Unfortunately, he's way too powerful for me, and I couldn't beat him. But how could I simply let him get away with murdering my family? Therefore I began looking for different kung fu experts, hoping to dramatically improve my kung fu. Five years later, I felt I had gained enough, and sought out master again. Unfortunately, I lost again, as his kung fu remained much more powerful than mine. This time, he also seriously injured me in the process.

"After I recovered from my injuries, I received a . This road of fist technique is unusually powerful. Therefore, I began to practice the inner power for the 'Fists of Seven Damages'. Two years later, I succeeded, and thought that my kung fu should be first class now. Unless my master's kung fu skill had increased a great deal, there's no way he's my match. Who'd have thought that he disappeared? No matter how hard I tried, I still couldn't find him. I figured he must've been afraid of me, and hid in some remote village somewhere. But where to find him?

"In my rage, I began to commit crimes everywhere. Killing people, burning down houses, everything. Each time I commit a crime, I'd leave my master's name on the walls!"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both let out a surprising 'Oh!' Xie Xun said, "You know who my master is?" Yin SuSu nodded, said, "Yes, you are the disciple of 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun'."

For about two and a half years ago, many renowned members of the martial world were killed for no reason. Over thirty crimes were committed in half a year, and the murder site would always have the name 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun' written. The victims were all either the leaders of a sect, or an old, famous hero. Every crime involved whole families killed. Any one of these crimes would have been earth shattering in the martial world, much less over thirty of them. At the time, Zhang SanFeng sent all seven of his disciples to investigate, but none of them found any clues on the matter. Everyone thought that someone was trying to frame Cheng Kun. 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun's kung fu is incredible, but has a great reputation and tends to be a recluse. Besides, several of his friends were among the victims. So Cheng Kun couldn't possibly be the murderer. But to find the real killer, they still have to find Cheng Kun first. Who'd have thought that he disappeared all of a sudden? After a while, the cases all had to be laid to rest. Even though hundreds of people want to seek revenge, no one knew who did the crimes. If Xie Xun hadn't personally admitted to these crimes, Zhang CuiShan could never have figured it out.

Xie Xun said, "The reason I committed those crimes was make him reappear. Even if he stayed a coward, it's still much easier to have thousands of people look for him than just me." Yin SuSu said, "That was a great plan, except you had to kill so many poor, innocent people in the process."

Xie Xun said, "So? Are you saying that my family wasn't poor or innocent? You used to be different. I guess after marrying

fifth brother for nine years, you've also become so wishy-washy."

Yin SuSu glanced at her husband, smiled slightly, said, "Big brother, so what happened? Did you ever find Cheng Kun?" Xie Xun said, "No. But later, I saw Song YuanQiao at Luo Yang." Zhagn CuiShan gasped, said, "You mean my eldest martial brother?"

Xie Xun said, "That's right, the eldest of the Wu Dang Seven Heroes. After committing all these crimes, I already turned the martial world upside down. Yet my master 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun..." Wuji said, "Godfather, if he's such a bad person, then why do you still call him 'master'?"

Xie Xun laughed bitterly, said, "It has become a habit. Besides, he taught me the majority of my kung fu. And although he's a terrible person, I'm a not good person either. Perhaps he also gave me my viciousness. Since I learned both the good and the bad from him, I should still call him my master."

Zhang CuiShan thought, "After going through such hardships in life, big brother has stopped caring for morals in his resentment for society. Wuji will certainly remember these things, and it can negatively affect his future. I must remember to talk to him about it later."

Xie Xun continued, "When my master still did not appear, I thought I must commit an incredible crime to get people's attention. Shaolin and Wu Dang are considered the two most prominent organizations in the martial world, so I wanted to kill a famous person from one of these sects. That day in Luo Yang, I saw Song YangQiao kill an infamous local tyrant. His kung fu very formidable, so I decided to kill him."

When Zhang CuiShan heard this, his heart started to beat faster. Even though he knew his eldest martial brother did not die, the words still made him shudder. Xie Xun's kung fu is much superior to eldest martial brother. Besides, one was hidden, one was in the open. Had they really exchanged blows, eldest martial brother would've surely died. Yin SuSu also knew that Song YuanQiao did not die, said, "Big brother. Did your conscience act up? Had you really killed Eldest Hero Sung, this Fifth Hero Zhang would've surely fought you to the death, instead of becoming your sworn brother."

Xie Xun let out a humph, said, "What conscience? If it were today, because of fifth brother, I would surely not harm a Wu Dang member. But I didn't know fifth brother at all back then. At that time, even had fifth brother himself been there instead of Song YuanQiao, I'd still do the same thing."

Wuji asked, "Godfather, why would you want to kill my dad?" Xie Xun smiled, said, "I was just making an analogy. I don't really want to kill your dad." Wuji said, "Oh, I see now," and stopped worrying.

Xie Xun rubbed Wuji's head, said, "Although this Damnable Heaven always pissed me off, but at least he didn't let me kill Song YuanQiao. Or I would've never have become your father's sworn brother." He paused for a moment, then continued, "That night I ate dinner and meditated to gather my strength. I knew that as Zhang SanFeng's eldest disciple, his kung fu must be amazing. Should I let him get away somehow, everyone would know who was behind those crimes. Then my plan would be foiled, not to mention just about everyone in the martial world would want my head. My life wasn't a big deal, but I couldn't die before getting my revenge."

Zhang CuiShan asked, "So what happened between you and my eldest martial brother? Odd, he never brought this up with us."

Xie Xun said, "Song YuanQiao didn't know anything about this. He's probably never even heard the words 'Golden-Haired Lion King, Xie Xun'. Because I never attacked him."

Zhang CuiShan let out a sigh of relief, said, "Thank Heavens!" Yin SuSu said with a smile, "What are you thanking that Damnable Heaven for? You should really thank this Hero Xie instead." Zhang CuiShan and Wuji both started to laugh.

End of Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 - The Journey Home after Ten Years

(Translated by Meh)



Xie Xun grabbed the Dragon Saber, unsheathed it, and 'Swoosh!' cut the tree in half. Then came a loud crash, as the tree fell down. Xie Xun put back his saber, said, "Can you see the power of my 'Fists of Seven Damages' now?"

Xie Xun continued, "I still remember that night as if it were yesterday. I sat in my hotel room, circulating the inner chi in my body, and thought about the 'Fists of Seven Damages' in my head a few more times. Fifth brother, you've never seen my 'Fists of Seven Damages'. Do you wish to take a look?" Before Zhang CuiShan could answer, Yin SuSu cut in, "I'm sure it's without doubt an exquisite fist technique, unparalleled in power. Big brother, how come you didn't go kill Eldest Hero Sung that night?"

Xie Xun chuckled, said, "You're afraid that when I demonstrate, I might hurt your husband, right? Don't worry, if I can't release and retract my power at will, then what kind of 'Fists of Seven Damages' would it be?" As he spoke, Xie Xun stood up, and walked over to a large tree. Accompanied by a roar as loud as the thunder, he punched the tree on the trunk.

Considering Xie Xun's ability, he could at least make a hole in the trunk, if not break the tree outright. Who'd have thought that when Xie Xun retracted his palm, the tree remained perfectly fine. Not even a piece of tree bark fell off. Yin SuSu felt badly for Xie Xun, thought, "Looks like after living on the island for nine years, big brother's kung fu has deteriorated greatly. Well, it's hardly surprising. I've never seen him practice kung fu." But afraid that he'll be sad, she still applauded him.

Xie Xun said, "Fifth sister. Your applause didn't seem very sincere. You're thinking that my ability is not what it used to

be, right?" Yin SuSu said, "On this island, there's only the four of us. What's the need for kung fu?" Xie Xun asked, "Fifth brother, can you see the profoundness in my punch?" Zhang CuiShan said, "You performed this punch using great power. Yet not a single leaf vibrated upon impact. I'm not certain why this is so. Even had Wuji punched the tree, the leaves would have moved."

Wuji yelled, "Yes, I can do that!" He swiftly ran over to the tree and punched on the trunk. The leaves really did move around, causing their shadows to shiver under the moonlight.

Upon seeing the power of their son's punch, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu were both delighted. Both gazed upon Xie Xun, seeking his explanation.

Xie Xun said, "Three days later, the leaves will turn yellow and wither. Half a month later, the tree itself will shrivel up and die. My punch had broken the veins of the tree."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both were hesitant to believe him, but they knew Xie Xun to be a man of his words. So he must be right. Xie Xun grabbed the Dragon Saber, unsheathed it, and 'Swoosh!' cut the tree in half. Then came a loud crash, as the tree fell down. Xie Xun put back his saber, said, "Can you see the power of my 'Fists of Seven Damages' now?"

Zhang CuiShan and his family walked over to examine the inside of the tree, only to see most of the tree's water passageways wrecked: some bent, some shattered, some broken into pieces, some only semi-broken. Signs that this punch incorporated many different simultaneous forces. Zhang and Yin were both very impressed. Zhang CuiShan asked, "Big brother. This was an amazing demonstration."

Xie Xun couldn't help but respond in a proud manner, "This punch contained seven different types of force, some hard, some soft, some contain softness within hardness, some contain hardness within softness, some forces sweep across, some strike vertically, and some shrivel. An enemy might block the first force, but not the second one. If he blocked the second one, then how does he deal with the third force? That's where the name 'Fists of Seven Damages' came from, as one can damage the opponent in seven different ways. Fifth brother, remember that day when you matched palms with me? Had I used 'Fists of Seven Damages', you would've immediately lost." Zhang CuiShan said, "You're right."

Wuji wanted to ask his father why he matched palms with godfather, but Yin SuSu immediately shook her head at him, telling him not to inquire further. However, Wuji couldn't help but ask, "Godfather, can you teach me this 'Fists of Seven Damages'?" Xie Xun shook his head, said, "No!" Wuji was disappointed, and wanted to plead some more. Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Wuji, don't be silly. This kung fu is too difficult for you. Unless you have incredible inner power, how can you possibly learn it?" Wuji said, "I see. In that case, I'll first make sure to acquire superior inner power first, and then learn it."

Xie Xun shook his head, said, "Actually, there's no need to ever bother with this 'Fists of Seven Damages'! Everyone's body has two chi, yin and yang, plus 'Gold-Wood-Water-Fire-Dirt' five major regions. Your heart belongs to fire, lungs belong to gold, kidneys belongs to water, spleen belongs to dirt, and liver belongs to wood. Seven injuries to one person, or injuries to seven people. Unfortunately, every time you practice this Fists of Seven Damages, you will damage your own body. The 'seven damages' here means seven damages to your body first, then seven damages to your opponents. Had I not injured my veins while practicing 'Fist of Seven Damages', I would've never had problems with madness."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu now realized why despite being such an intelligent, powerful person, Xie Xun would lose his mind on occasions.

Xie Xun continued, “Had my inner power been really high, to the point of Reverend Kong Jian, or perhaps Wu Dang’s Taoist Zhang, I wouldn’t have hurt myself like this. Unfortunately, I was too keen on revenge in my youth. I stole a copy of the from the Kong Dong Sect. Upon getting the manual, I immediately began to practice hastily. I was in a hurry, in case my master would pass away before I complete my training. By the time I realized the side effects, it was already too late. I should’ve recognized something from the beginning. Why would the Kong Dong Sect have such a powerful fist manual, yet couldn’t dominate the martial world? In addition, I realized that the sound of the punches were thunderous and crisp, which was very useful. Fifth sister, do you know why I say this?”

Yin SuSu thought for a moment, then said, “Because its similar to your master’s kung fu?”

Xie Xun said, “You’re right. My master’s nickname is ‘Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation’. His palm carries wind and thunder, its power unimaginable. Once I find him, and use the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ on him, he would surely mistake it for the kung fu I learned from him. By the time he finds out, it would be too late. Fifth brother, don’t blame me for being so devious. Although my master looks coarse, he’s one of the most devious person you’ll ever find. If I don’t try to trick him, how could I get my revenge... sighs, so I’ve told you some of what happened afterwards, right? Anyway, I haven’t gotten to Reverend Kong Jian yet. That night I went over the inner power circulation for ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ three times, and jumped out the wall to look

for Song YuanQiao.

“In the middle of the jump, before I hit the ground, a person suddenly tapped my shoulder from the back. I was quite astonished, for I couldn’t imagine anyone capable of doing that without me noticing. Wuji, think about this for a moment. Had he used his full force to attack me, he could’ve at least seriously injured me. I reached with my hand to grab his arm, only to find nothing there. I then tried to turn around and punch him, but of course didn’t hit anything. So I turned back. Just at this moment, my shoulder was tapped once again from the back. At the same time, a person sighed, said, “ ‘The Sea of Misery is endless, turn around towards the shore.’”

Wuji found this pretty funny, and laughed. He said, “Godfather, is this person playing a game with you?” Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both knew that this must be Revered Kong Jian.

Xie Xun continued, “At that moment, I was scared stiff. It was obvious that he could kill me any time he wants to. He spoke ‘the sea of misery is endless, turn around towards the shore’ in a time to blink an eye. Yet he spoke it in a very coherent manner, so I heard every single word clearly, in addition to his merciful, compassionate tone. But at that time, I only felt anger. So I turned around quickly, only to see a white-robed monk standing about thirteen meters from me. As I turned, he was at most two or three feet away from me. Who’d have thought that after that tap, he immediately flew backward thirteen meters. I’ve never dreamed of speed and agility like that.

“At that moment I thought of only one thing, ‘He must be a ghost, someone I killed who’s haunting me now!’ For surely no living person could have this level of lightness kung fu.

Once I figured that he was a ghost, I became braver, yelled, "Look, I don't care if you're a phantom or a ghost. Your old man I am afraid of neither the Heaven nor the Underworld. So do you think a ghost can scare me?" That white-robed monk put his palms together, said, 'Mr. Xie, my name is Kong Jian.' When I heard the words 'Kong Jian', I recalled the saying 'Shaolin's Divine Reverends, Jian-Wen-Zhi-Sheng'. As the first among the four divine reverends, no wonder his kung fu is so formidable."

Zhang CuiShan remembered that this Reverend Kong Jian later died in his big brother's hands, and could help but feel uneasy.

Xie Xun continued, "So I asked, 'Are you Shaolin's Divine Reverend Kong Jian?' That white-robed monk answered, 'I don't deserve the title Divine Reverend. However, I am Shaolin's Kong Jian.' I said, 'We have never met before. Why do you toy with me so?' Kong Jian said, 'I do not dare toy with Mr. Xie. Mr, Xie, may I ask where are you going?' I said, 'Where I go is none of your business.' Kong Jian said, 'If I guessed correctly, you are trying to kill Wu Dang's Hero Song YuanQiao tonight, right?'

"I was surprised that he knew of my intentions. He added, 'You want to commit another crime, one that would shock the entire martial world, so 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun would appear, allowing you to avenge your family's death, right?' I couldn't believe he said my master's name, for I had never told anyone about my master murdering my family. Since this was a hideous crime, my master would surely not tell anyone either. So how could this reverend know?

"At that moment I shuddered, said, 'If reverend can point out my master's location, I will repay you in any way you wish.'

Kong Jian sighed, said, 'Cheng Kun's crime was indeed horrifying. Yet for revenge, you have killed so many people, done so many terrible deeds.' I wanted to say, 'Who asked for your opinion?' But then I remembered his kung fu skills, plus the fact that I needed to ask him for a favor. So I held my anger in check, said, 'I was forced to do these deeds, for Cheng Kun had gone into hiding. With the world so vast, how can I possibly find him?' Kong Jian nodded, said, 'I realize that your heart is filled with bitterness, and nowhere to release them. Hero Sung is the eldest disciple under Wu Dang's Taoist Zhang SanFeng. If you kill him, your crime will be too immense.' I said, 'That is just what I want. The bigger the crime, the more likely I can get Cheng Kun to reappear.'

"Kong Jian said, 'Mr. Xie, if you kill Hero Sung, Cheng Kun would indeed have to appear. Yet the Cheng Kun today is no longer the Cheng Kun of the past. Your kung fu is nowhere near his level. You can't possibly get your revenge.' I said, 'Cheng Kun's my master. Surely I can judge his kung fu better than you can.'

"Kong Jian shook his head, said, 'He has sought after another master, so his martial arts has grown immensely. Although you learned Kong Dong Sect's 'Fists of Seven Damages', you still can't hurt him.' I didn't know what to make of this person. I had never seen him before. Yet he seemed to know everything about me. I hesitated for a moment, then asked, 'How do you know about that?' He said, 'Cheng Kun told me.'"

At this moment, Zhang and Yin both gasped.

Xie Xun said, "You must've been quite surprised to hear this. When I heard it back then, I immediately jumped up, and yelled, 'But how did he know?' He said, 'For the past few years, he has been following you. Only he kept changing his

disguises, so you never recognized him.' I said, 'Are you kidding me? I can't recognize him? He can turn into dust, and I'd still recognize him.' He said, 'Mr. Xie, you are certainly a very perceptive person, but for the past years, you cared only for learning martial arts and revenge. You never tried to examine your surroundings. In addition, you were in the light, while he was in the dark. It's not that you can't recognize him, but rather you never attempted to recognize him.'

"What he said made a lot of sense. Besides, Reverend Kong Jian is a world-renowned reverend. He can't possibly lie to me. I said, 'If so, then how come he just didn't kill me?' Kong Jian said, 'He could have easily killed you had he wanted to. Mr. Xie, you have tried to fight him two times for revenge. Each time he defeated you. Why did he not kill you then? Besides, when you were stealing the , you matched palms with three of the 'Five Elders of Kong Dong'. Where were the other two elders? Had the other two elders also appeared, do you think you could have escaped?'

"That day after I injured three elders of Kong Dong, I found the other two also injured, which was quite strange. I thought that perhaps Kong Dong Sect had some sort of internal conflict, or another kung fu expert had helped me. So when I heard Reverend Kong Jian spoke of the matter, my mind stirred, said, 'Did Cheng Kun injure the other two elders?'"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu found the story more and more bizarre. Despite their experiences in the martial world, neither could figure this particular story out. Both thought Xie Xun was one of the impressive people they've ever seen. Yet his master Cheng Kun seemed even more impressive.

Yin SuSu said, "Big brother, did your master really injure the other two elders?"

Xie Xun said, "When I asked Kong Jian, he said, 'Did you see their injuries that night? What did their faces look like?' I thought about it for a while, then said, 'So they really were injured by my master.' That night, I saw the two elders lying on the floor, their faces filled with blood spots. From their appearance, they seemed to have used a powerful Yin-style inner power to attack someone, but an expert forced it back with the 'Art of Origination'. Other than having one's force repelled with 'Art of Origination', only a select few illnesses could provide the same symptoms. Yet that same morning, all five of them were perfectly healthy, so they certainly did not get ill. In the martial world, only my master and I know the 'Art of Origination'."

"Reverend Kong Jian nodded, sighed, said, 'Your master became mad after drinking too much, and unknowingly killed your family. Afterwards he felt incredibly guilty. That is why he did not kill you during those fights. But since you fought so wildly, he had no way to escape unless he injured you. Afterwards he followed you for a few years. You later encountered three major perils. Each time he helped you live through them.' I thought about it, and found that I did go through three life-and-death situations. Each time, my enemies miraculously retreated. Reverend Kong Jian continued, 'He knows that his crimes are too severe, and does not ask for your forgiveness. His only hope is that with time, your pain will lessen. Who knew that your thirst for revenge magnified instead, killing more and more people. Should you kill Hero Song YuanQiao, it would be impossible to clean up this whole mess.'

"I said, 'If so, then ask my master to come see me, so we can settle our differences.' Reverend Kong Jian said, 'Your master says that he has no face to see you. Besides, you are hardly his match anyway. So seeing him would be pointless.' I said,

'I know you are a venerable reverend. You should know about right and wrong. Are you telling me that I should simply forget the death of my family?' He said, 'I am also saddened by your misfortune. But your master did not willingly commit those crimes. Besides, he has since repented. On the account of your past master-disciple relationship, he hoped you would leave him be.' I became quite angry, said, 'If I cannot defeat him, then he can just go ahead and kill me. I would rather die than leave my family unavenged.'

"Reverend Kong Jian thought for a long time, then said, 'Mr. Xie, your master's kung fu is not what it used to be. Even though you've learned the 'Fists of Seven Damages', you are still not his match. If you do not believe me, then try hitting me a few times.' I said, 'I have no quarrel with you, why should I hit you? Although my kung fu is low, the 'Fist of Seven Damages' is nonetheless not easy to absorb.' He said, 'Mr. Xie, let us make a wager. Your master killed thirteen people in your family. Today you can hit me thirteen times. If you can injure me, I will get out of your way. Your master will then come out to see you. Otherwise, you must promise to let go of revenge.' I did not respond. His kung fu is amazing. If my 'Fists of Seven Damages' could not hurt him, then what about my revenge?

Reverend Kong Jian added, 'Let me be frank with you. Since I decided to concern myself in this matter, do you really think I can let you keep hurting others? If you go back to doing good deeds, and give up on vengeance, I can forgive for your past crimes. Otherwise, if you can seek revenge, what about the relatives of those you killed? Do they not deserve their vengeance too?'

"Upon hearing his voice becoming stern, I got quite annoyed, yelled, 'Fine, I will go ahead and give you thirteen punches! You can give up any time you want to. However, do not go

back on your promise. You better ask my master to come see me.' Reverend Kong Jian smiled, said, 'Please go on ahead!' His body was very short and thin, with white hair and white eyebrows, and a gentle, compassionate face. I didn't want to really hurt him. My first fist only used thirty percent of my power. Pang! The fist landed on his chest."

Wuji gasped, yelled, "Did you use the 'Fists of Seven Damages' that destroyed the tree?"

Xie Xun said, "No! I used my master's 'Lightning & Thunder Fist'. When my punch landed, his body lightly shook, and retreated a step. Realizing that this punch can make him back off, I figured the 'Fists of Seven Damages' would probably kill him in three punches. So I added a bit more power to my second punch. Again his body lightly shook, and retreated another step. My third punch incorporated seventy percent of my power. But once again, his body just light shook, and retreated a step. I was surprised, as I have more than doubled my power, yet his expression remained the same. Considering his thin body, my punches should at least break his bones. Yet I found no signs of a competing force to negate my punch. It's as if his body simply absorbed my power.

"I thought that to hurt him, I must use all my power. But if I used full power, he will likely die. Even though I've done many evil deeds, I respected his kindheartedness. So I said, 'Reverend, I cannot stand the fact that you do not return any blows. For taking three punches, I promise that I will not seek out Song YuanQiao.' He said, 'Then what about Cheng Kun?' I said, 'Nothing can change my mind on revenge. Only one of us can live.' I paused for a moment, then added, 'Out of respect for you, I will only look for Cheng Kun himself, and no longer hurt any innocents.'

“Reverend Kong Jian put his palms together, said, ‘That is great. I am glad that you feel this way. On behalf of the martial world, I thank you. It’s just that I really wish to resolve this issue. So please go ahead and finish the rest of your punches.’

“I realized that only by using the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ could I make my master appear. Thankfully, I can retract the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’ power at will. So I said, ‘I am sorry to offend you!’ and followed with my fourth punch. This time I used the ‘Fists of Seven Damages’. His chest tightened, and then he stepped forward.”

Wuji said, “That’s strange. How come he didn’t retreat like before?”

Zhang CuiShan said, “Did he use Shaolin’s Divine Art ‘Diamond Armor Invincible Body’?”

Xie Xun nodded, said, “Fifth brother, you really are knowledgeable. That’s correct. When this punch connected, I felt totally different from the previous three punches. This time, his body produced a protective counterforce, which sent a tremor all the way into my inner organs. I knew that he must’ve had no other choice, and had to use this divine art to protect from the Fists of Seven Damages. I have long heard that Shaolin’s ‘Diamond Armor Invincible Body’ is one of the five top divine arts in history. It certainly lived up to its reputation. Then I unleashed my fifth punch, purposely made it carry more soft-yin force. Once again he stepped forward, and I had to spend a long time neutralizing the counterforce from his body.”

Wuji said, “Godfather, this old monk promised not to fight back. So why did he still try to hurt you by countering your punches?”

Xie Xun rubbed his hair, said, "After my fifth punch, Reverend Kong Jian said, "I never expected the Fists of Seven Damages to be so powerful. If I don't use my inner power to counter your punches, I could not remain injury-free.' I said, 'I am already grateful that you have not tried to hit me.' Immediately afterwards, I sent out the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth punches in one swift motion. Reverend Kong Jian really is amazing. He countered each and every one of those punches, using just the right blend of yin and yang for his counter.

"Shocked at his ability, I yelled, 'Watch out!' and the tenth punch floated out lightly. He nodded, and before my punch reached his body, stepped forward two steps. At this moment, he actually gained the initiative."

Wuji obviously did not know the importance of these two steps. But Zhang CuiShan realized that when experts exchange blows, it is very difficult for one person to anticipate an opponent's attack before it comes out. The ability to do so, even for one move, could very well mean a victory. He nodded, said, "Incredible, incredible!"

Xie Xun continued, "I used all of my power in this tenth punch. Yet when he stepped up and shocked me, I had to back off a couple of steps. Although I couldn't see my own expression, one can easily imagine just how pale I was. Reverend Kong Jian sighed, said, 'Don't be too hasty with your eleventh punch. Recover your strength first.' Despite my combative nature, I had to follow his advice, for I really lacked the energy for another punch."

Zhang CuiShan and his family all worried for Xie Xun at this moment. Wuji suddenly said, "Godfather, I think you should just give up on the last three punches." Xie said, "Why?"

Wuji said, "This old monk is a really good person. You would feel guilty if you hurt him. If you end up hurting yourself, that would be bad too." Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu glanced at each other, surprised that their child could have such insight at his young age. Zhang CuiShan rejoiced at Wuji's compassionate nature, and his ability to comprehend good and evil.

Only to hear Xie Xun let out another sigh, said, "I can't believe that at the time, I didn't even have the sense of a child. My heart was filled with revenge, and would not give up until I find my master. I knew one of us would end up either dead or seriously injured, but it didn't matter at the time. Once I regained my energy, the eleventh punch shot out. This time he stepped up sideways, and met my punch with his waist. His eyebrows rose up, as if in quite a bit of pain. I knew his reason for this. It would hurt me too much should he counter at the chest. But the force exerted by his waist is much smaller, but this way, the force he had to absorb increased a great deal too.

"I froze for a moment, said, 'Considering my master's terrible sins, why do you insist on helping him?' Reverend Kong Jian adjusted his breathing, said with a bitter smile, 'I just want to take two more punches from you, and resolve this issue.' At this moment, a thought suddenly came to me, 'Looks like he can't speak when using Diamond Armor Invincible Body. Why don't I trick him into talking, and punch him at that time?' So I said, 'If I do manage hurt you in thirteen punches, would my master really come out?' He said, 'He personally told me that...' Before he finished speaking, I immediately punched his waist. This punch came very fast, and toward a low point on his body, so he won't have time to raise his protective divine art.

"Who'd have thought that his protection raises by the will of

the heart. When my punch landed, his protective armor had spread throughout his body. I felt my head spinning around, my organs splitting apart, and unwillingly retreated seven or eight steps. My retreat only stopped upon hitting a tree.

“At this moment of such utter defeat, my heart sank, said, ‘I give up. Looks like there is no way for me to get my revenge now. So what is the need for me to remain in this world?’ I raised my hand, aimed it on my forehead, about to push it down.” Yin SuSu yelled, “What an ingenious idea!” Zhang CuiShan asked, “Why so?” but then instantly understood, and said, “But, to do this to such a venerable reverend, isn’t that too cruel?” He also figured out that should Xie Xun tried to commit suicide, Kong Jian would obviously try to stop it. Xie Xun could take advantage of this, and attack right when Kong Jian is saving him. Zhang CuiShan’s cleverness does not take a backseat to his wife. He just never thinks about devious things, and therefore takes longer to realize such things.

Xie Xun said sadly, “I was indeed using his kindness against him. You both guessed correctly. But it was a dangerous gambit. If this palm came down too slowly, he would see through the ruse, and refuse to help me. I had only one punch left. How could I possibly break his invincible armor? If so, then I would simply have to forget all about vengeance. At that moment, I really did use all my palm power. Had he not interfered, I would have killed myself. Of course, I wanted to die anyway should revenge no longer be a possibility.

“When Reverend Kong Jian saw my abnormal actions, he yelled, ‘Hold on! There’s no need to...’ and flew toward me. His left hand reached out immediately to block my right palm. My left fist came out at the same moment. Pang! It hit him directly in the chest. He was indeed defenseless at the moment. I doubt he even gave applying the armor a passing

thought. How could he possibly withstand my punch like this? Immediately his inner organs crumbled, and he fell down onto the ground.

“After this punch, upon realization of his certain death, I suddenly found my conscience. I came to his side and began crying, yelled, ‘Reverend Kong Jian, I am such an ungrateful ingrate. I don’t deserve to be human!’”

Zhang CuiShan and his family sighed. They all felt that he was terribly wrong to kill the reverend in such a despicable manner.

Xie Xun said, “When Reverend Kong Jian saw me cry, he smiled, and try to calm me down, ‘Who on this world does not die? Why are you so sad? Your master will soon come. Try to compose yourself.’ With his reminder, I realized that I must prepare for my enemy instead of agonizing. So I immediately started to mediate, to recover my strength. Yet after a long time, my master still did not come. Surprised, I looked at Reverend Kong Jian.

“With what little life he had left, Reverend Kong Jian said, ‘I... I cannot believe that he... he failed to keep his promise... could someone have... have blocked his path?’ I yelled angrily, ‘You tricked me. You tricked me into killing you, for my master still haven’t came out to see me.’ He shook his head, said, ‘I did not trick you, but I have wronged you.’ In my rage, I wanted to keep yelling at him. But then I thought, ‘Why would he want to trick me into killing him? Plus, in response to killing him, he only tried to apologize.’ Feeling incredibly ashamed, I kneeled in front of him and said, ‘Reverend, if you have any wishes, I will carry them out for you.’ He smiled slightly, said, ‘Hopefully, whenever you wish to kill someone, please remember me.’

“This reverend not only have unparalleled martial arts ability,

but also great wisdom. He knew that I would not give up on revenge, and therefore did not bother to request it. He only wanted me think of him when I wish to kill. Fifth brother. Remember when we matched palms on the boat? The reason I didn't kill you was because I remembered Reverend Kong Jian."

Zhang CuiShan never imagined that Reverend Kong Jian saved his life. His respect for this reverend grew even more.

Xie Xun sighed again, said, "His heartbeat became slower and slower. I put my palm on his 'Ling Ti Pressure Point', began infusing my inner power to extend his life. He suddenly took a deep breath, and asked, 'Is your master still not here?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Then he is not going to come.' I said, 'Reverend. Be assured that I will never again kill anyone to make him appear. But even if I have to walk to the end of the world, I will find him.' He said, 'But, you are no match for him. Unless... unless...' At this point, his words became too soft to hear. I put my ear by his mouth, only to hear him say, 'Unless you can find the Dragon Saber, and find... find the secret inside...' At this moment, he stopped his breathing, and died."

Finally, Zhang and Yin knew why Xie Xun tried so hard to find the secret inside the saber. Why he's normally very courteous, but occasionally gets mad like a wild animal. Why he has such incredible kung fu, yet spends his days in sadness...

Xie Xun said, "Later, I found out the location of the Dragon Saber, and went to Wang Pan Island to take it. Fifth sister, your father was one of my dearest friends. We were the renowned Eagle King and Lion King. Later we became enemies, but that story is long and involves too many other people. I can't tell you about them. Before I took the saber,

my only wish was to find my master. Yet after obtaining the saber, my only fear was that my master might find me. That's why I had to find a deserted island, so I safely find the saber's secret. Afraid that you might reveal my secret, I had to take you along. Who'd have thought that ten years would pass in the blink of an eye, and I have yet to accomplish a single thing!"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Reverend Kong Jian might not have said everything he wanted before death. Perhaps he had something else in mind."

Xie Xun said, "I've thought of every single possibility. No matter how ludicrous. Yet nothing fit. I don't doubt that there's a huge secret within the saber. But I just could not find it."

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After this night's conversation, Xie Xun never touched the subject again. He also became stricter when teaching Wuji martial arts. Wuji is only nine at this moment. Despite his intelligence, there was no way Wuji could learn Xie Xun's powerful martial arts in such a short time. Xie Xun also taught him ways to exchange his pressure points, and how to break free a sealed pressure point. These are some of the deepest martial arts abilities in the world. Wuji didn't even know what pressure points are, plus he has almost no inner power. So how could he learn them? Even so, Xie Xun yelled at him and hit him for mistakes. And he showed no signs of letting up.

Yin SuSu felt dreadful upon seeing the marks on her son. She said to Xie Xun, "Big brother, your kung fu skills are too complicated. How can Wuji learn them all in such a short time? We have all the time in the world on this island. Don't

be so hasty." Xie Xun said, "I'm not teaching him. I'm just asking him to memorize everything." Yin SuSu said in surprise, "You mean, you haven't taught him any kung fu?" Xie Xun said, "It will take too long to teach him step by step. That's why I simply want him to memorize everything."

Yin SuSu didn't understand Xie Xun's reasoning, but trusted him to make the right decision. Whenever her son finished his lessons with injuries, she'd embrace him tenderly. Wuji seemed to be quite understanding of this matter. He said, "Mom, godfather only wanted the best for me. The stricter he is, the more I can remember."

Another several months passed like this. One morning, Xie Xun suddenly said, "Fifth brother, fifth sister, in another four months, the wind will start blowing south. Let's start building a raft now. Zhang CuiShan, happy and surprised, asked, "Do you think we can get back to the mainland this way?" Xie Xun said coldly, "That depends on what the Heaven thinks. As the saying goes, 'Planning depends on man, Success depends on Heaven'. Succeed, and you'll arrive at mainland. Fail, and you'll die in the sea."

There's no reason for him or Yin SuSu to go back. They lived happily here on the island. But Wuji needs to get married and have children. It would be a shame for him to grow old and die alone on this island. When Zhang CuiShan thought of Wuji's future, he happily began to make the raft. The trees on this island are mostly very old. Due to growing in such a cold climate, their trunks are incredibly hard and sturdy. Xie Xun and Zhang CuiShan cut down the wood, while Yin SuSu use animal skins to sew a sail. Wuji simply did odd jobs to help out.

Yin SuSu is hardly the spoiled little girl of ten years ago, but she never did have formal sewing training. So it was very

difficult for her to make this sail.

While processing the wood to make the raft, Xie Xun would always have Wuji stand by his side. This way, he could test Wuji's memorization. Of course, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu could no longer stay away, so they heard Xie Xun ask questions, while Wuji answers them. Xie Xun wanted Wuji to memorize all sorts of sword techniques, saber techniques and numerous other things. It's already strange that Xie Xun would teach martial arts in a 'scholarly fashion'. Yet he never even tried to explain anything, and taught like a terrible teacher, by simply making his students memorize everything without understanding. Yin SuSu felt sorry for her son. She thought that even a kung fu expert probably can't even memorize this much stuff. Besides, what's the use of memorizing the wording without demonstrations? Surely talking about martial arts isn't worth anything in a true battle. Even worse is that every time Wuji makes a mistake, Xie Xun would slap him on the face. Although Xie Xun didn't apply any inner power to his hand, the slaps would still leave a red mark for half a day.

After two and a half months, they managed to finish the base of the raft. Then they took another half a month to put on the mast. Finally, they began to start to store food and water for the trip. By now, the days were already quite short. Yet the wind still blew northward.

By now, Xie Xun stayed with Wuji every single moment, even forcing Wuji to sleep with him. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu could only bitterly smile at Xie Xun's mix of tenderness and sternness.

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One night, Zhang CuiShan woke up from his sleep, found the wind oddly different. He sat up, and realized that the wind

indeed now came from the north. Zhang CuiShan quickly woke up Yin SuSu, said happily, "Listen to the wind!" Before Yin SuSu could respond, they suddenly heard Xie Xun yelled outside, "The northern wind's blowing!" His voice was mixed with tears, which sounded very odd.

The next morning, Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu quickly gathered everything for the journey. Part of them didn't want to leave. After all, they had lived here for ten years. Zhang and Yin finished putting food and water on the boat by noon. They then pushed the raft into the sea. Wuji first jumped onboard, and Yin SuSu followed.

Zhang CuiShan grabbed Xie Xun's hand and said, "Big brother, the raft is about six feet from us. Let's jump on together!"

Xie Xun said, "Fifth brother, we shall part here. Please take good care of yourself."

Zhang CuiShan's heart jumped, as if someone had just punched him in the chest. He said, "You... you..." Xie Xun said, "You have a good heart, and should have a good life. But your views on good and evil are too idealistic, and therefore must be careful. Wuji is open-minded and tolerant, so I trust him to make good decisions when he grows up. Although fifth sister is a woman, she will never get the short end of the stick on things. Quite frankly, the person I fear for the most, is you." Zhang CuiShan felt shocked. He yelled, "Big brother, what are you saying? You're not going to... going to come with us?" Xie Xun said, "I said this a few years ago. Don't you remember?"

To Zhang CuiShan, these words felt like thunder roaring in his ears. He did remember Xie Xun's words about remaining on the island. At the time, neither he nor Yin SuSu thought

much of it. Afterwards, Xie Xun never repeated this sentiment. So these came as quite a shock to him. Zhang CuiShan said in a hurry, "Big brother, what's so great about staying on this island alone? Jump on the raft, quick!" As he spoke, Zhang CuiShan pulled on Xie Xun's hand. But Xie Xun remained at his spot firmly.

Zhang CuiShan yelled, "SuSu, Wuji, get back! Big brother said that he wouldn't go with us." Yin SuSu and Wuji both gasped, and jumped back to shore. Wuji said, "Godfather, why won't you go with us? If you don't go, then I won't go either."

Of course, Xie Xun didn't want to leave them. After parting, they certainly would not return. To live alone on this island is possibly worse than death. But after becoming a sworn brother to Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu, he cared more for them than himself. And he loved Wuji as his own son. However, after thinking thoroughly, he knew that he had to stay. There are too many enemies back in the mainland. Plus, it's quite possible that people knew that the Dragon Saber is in his hands now. Should he go back, just about everyone in the martial world would want his life. In the past, he would just shrug off the danger. But with both eyes blinded, he can't possibly hold off his enemies. Besides, Zhang and Yin would certainly not see him die alone, and might fight with him to the end. He concluded that they would probably not live for more than a year back in mainland. Of course, Xie Xun didn't care to share this. He would just go ahead and decided stay at the last moment.

When he heard Wuji's words, Xie Xun picked him up and said, "Wuji, you're a good kid. Listen to your godfather, ok? Your godfather's too old, and he is blind. I can live a carefree life here. But would feel uncomfortable living on the mainland." Wuji said, "Don't worry, I'll will take care of you

after we get back, and never leave your side. If you want to eat or drink, I'll bring them to you. So you can live the same life." Xie Xun shook his head, said, "No. I would still be happier here." Wuji said, "I'm happy here too. Mom, dad, let's just stay here, ok?"

Yin SuSu said, "Big brother, why are you so adamant on staying? If there's a problem, share it with us. But we can't let you stay alone."

Xie Xun thought, "Looks like it's impossible to reason with them into leaving. So what should I do?"

Zhang CuiShan suddenly said, "I know you're afraid of your enemies, right? We can just find an obscure place to settle down, so they won't find us. Actually, we can simply go to Wu Dang Mountain. No one would expect you to be there." Xie Xun said, "Humph. Although your big brother is useless, but at least he doesn't need your master's protection." Zhang CuiShan knew he spoke the wrong words, and hurried said, "Big brother's kung fu is my master's equal. Why would you need his protection? Besides, we can go anywhere. There are many places for us to settle."

Xie Xun said, "If you want me to find an obscure place to live, what could be more obscure than this island? Look, are you three going or not?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "If big brother won't leave, neither will we." Xie Xun sighed, said, "Fine. We'll all stay. You can wait till I die, and then leave." Zhang CuiShan said, "Alright. We've already lived here for ten years. And are certainly not in a hurry to leave."

Xie Xun yelled, "Are you certain that you'll leave after I die?" At this moment, the three of them saw Xie Xun's hand flashed, as he unsheathed the Dragon Saber, and sliced at

his own throat.

Zhang CuiShan yelled in shock, "Don't hurt Wuji!" He knew that he could not physically his brother from committing suicide. The only way to stop him is by this lie. Xie Xun immediately froze, put down his saber and yelled, "What?"

Zhang CuiShan realized that he can't change Xie Xun's mind, and said with tears, "If big brother's so adamant about it, then I will respect your wishes, and part." As he spoke, Zhang CuiShan knelt down and kowtowed several times. But Wuji yelled, "Godfather, if you don't go, then neither will I! If you can commit suicide, so can I. A man of his words does what he says. I can slash my own throat too."

Xie Xun yelled, "Little fool. Don't be ridiculous!" He instantly grabbed Wuji, and threw him onto the raft. Xie Xun then stepped up, and pushed both Yin SuSu and Zhang CuiShan onto the boat also. He yelled, "Fifth brother, fifth sister, Wuji! I wish you a safe journey. Hopefully, you will peacefully return to the mainland." Then he added, "Wuji, after you get back to the mainland, you must call yourself Zhang Wuji. Only keep the name 'Xie Wuji' in your heart, never to be spoken."

Wuji yelled as loud as he could, "Godfather, Godfather!"

Xie Xun raised his saber and said, "If you dare return to shore, our relationship ends immediately."

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu knew that their sworn brother's mind is set. They could therefore only wave goodbye. By this time, the wind had begun to carry them away from the island. They saw Xie Xun's body becoming smaller and smaller, until he disappeared into the distance. Only then did

the family of three turn around. Wuji rested in his mother's embrace, cried for a long time, before falling asleep.

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The raft drifted in the sea, where the northern wind continuously carried them southward. None of them knew exactly where they are, but since the sun kept rising from the left, sets on the right, the North Star always behind them, and the raft kept moving. They knew that the mainland is closer with each passing day. Afraid that they might run into icebergs, Zhang CuiShan had only a small portion of the sail up. Although this made the journey longer, but also made it much safer. They still rarely bump into icebergs, but always just a light graze, before slipping away. After they left the region of icebergs, the sails went up fully.

The wind direction never changed. And thankfully, they encountered no storms. Everyone was optimistic about reaching the mainland. Not wishing to make Wuji upset, Zhang and Yin never brought up Xie Xun.

Zhang CuiShan thought, "It's uncertain just how useful big brother's teachings are. So when Wuji returns, he still must enter the Wu Dang Sect." With nothing to do on the raft, Zhang CuiShan began to teach his son basic Wu Dang martial arts. He taught in a much more detailed manner than Xie Xun, and rudimentary Wu Dang martial arts are quite simple. Wuji learned them quickly. For much of the journey, father and son spent their time on the raft practicing techniques.

When Yin SuSu saw the wind continuously blowing southward, she couldn't help but say, "Big brother's knowledge of nature is also incredible. He certainly is a genius."

Wuji suddenly said, "If the wind blows southward half the year, and northward half the year, then we can go back to visit godfather next year." Zhang CuiShan said happily, "You are right. When you grow up, let's go back north together..."

Yin SuSu suddenly pointed southward and yelled, "What's that?" Only to see two black dots in the distance. Zhang CuiShan gasped. He said, "Could they be whales? If they ram into the raft, we're goners." Yin SuSu stared for a while, then said, "Not whales. I didn't see water coming out." The three of them stared at the dots intently. More than hours later, Zhang CuiShan suddenly yelled, "They're boats! Boats!" He immediately stood up, and did a cartwheel on the raft. After Wuji was born, Zhang CuiShan had never acted so silly like this. Wuji laughed out loud, and did two flips himself.

After another couple of hours, they saw the boats clearly. Yin SuSu's body suddenly trembled, and her face turned pale. Wuji asked, "Mother, what's going on?" Yin SuSu's mouth moved, but did not speak aloud. Zhang CuiShan grabbed her hand, his face filled with concern. Yin SuSu sighed and said, "What a coincidence, just when we came back." Zhang CuiShan asked, "What do you mean?" Yin SuSu said, "Look at that mast."

Zhang CuiShan looked at the ships closely. Only to see a large, black eagle drawn on the left ship's mast. He suddenly remembered the Heavenly Eagle Sect's flag on Wang Pan Island, and said, "Is it... the Heavenly Eagle Sect?" Yin SuSu whispered, "Yes. It's my dad's ship."

In this instant, thousands of thoughts passed through Zhang CuiShan's mind. "SuSu's father is the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect. This sect does so many evil deeds. What should I do upon seeing my father-in-law? What would my master

think of my marriage?" He felt Yin SuSu's hands shake, realized that she must also be pondering a lot things at this instant. He said, "SuSu, look at how old our son is already. 'In Heaven or Hell, never to part'. What are you afraid of?" Yin SuSu let out a long sigh, smiled, and whispered, "Hopefully there won't be any problems on my behalf. Just do what's best for Wuji."

Wuji has never seen a boat before. He stared at them curiosity, and didn't hear his parents' words.

As the raft drifted closer, they saw that the two boats are next to each other, as if they're together. Unless they changed their course, the raft would pass about thirty meters to the right of the boats.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Do you want hail them. Maybe we can find out about your dad." Yin SuSu said, "No. Let's get back to the mainland first. Then I'll take you and Wuji to see my dad." Zhang CuiShan said, "That's fine too." Suddenly, swords glittered on the boats, as four or five people were fighting. So he added, "There's fighting on the ships." Yin SuSu looked for a while, and was concerned. She said, "I wonder if my dad's there." Zhang CuiShan said, "Since we're here, we might as well take a look." He changed the raft's direction, so it now drifted towards the ships.

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The raft drifted very slowly, so it still took them a long time to get close.

Suddenly, someone on the Heavenly Eagle Sect's boat yelled, "We're just doing normal business here. Outsiders should mind their own business." Yin SuSu yelled, "Sun and Moon shines down, Heavenly Eagle spreads its wings, Holy

fire rises up, Brings blessings down to us. I am a Hall Leader. May I ask which branch is burning incense and lighting fire?" A man on the boat immediately said courteously, "On this boat are Heavenly City Hall's Leader Li, leading Green Dragon Branch's Leader Cheng and Divine Snake Branch's Leader Feng. Is the Heaven's Secret Hall's Leader Yin here?" Yin SuSu said, "I am Purple Secret Hall's leader."

The people on the boat became chaotic upon hearing these words. Soon, many people shouted, "Hey, Miss Yin's back, Miss Yin's back."

Although Zhang CuiShan married Yin SuSu for ten years, she had never talked about the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Only now did he realize that she is Purple Secret Hall's hall leader. Looks like a 'hall leader' is more powerful than a 'branch leader'. He already saw the abilities of branch leaders Bai and Chang, and knew their skills to be above Yin SuSu's. He figured that she's only hall leader because her father is the sect leader. Zhang CuiShan also reckoned that this 'Heavenly City Hall' Hall Leader Li must be a powerful person.

Only to hear an old voice say, "Looks like my sect leader's daughter have come back. Why don't we call a truce for now?" Another loud, crisp voice said, "Fine! Everyone stop fighting." The sounds of weapons clashing immediately stopped, and the combatants backed off. Zhang CuiShan thought that crisp voice sounded familiar. He yelled, "Are you Brother Yu LianZhou?" That person on the boat yelled, "I am indeed Yu LianZhou. Who... oh... you... you..."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Your little brother Zhang CuiShan!" The raft is still several tens of meters from the boats. But in his excitement, Zhang CuiShan picked up a wood from the raft, threw it into the water, and used it to jump onto the boat.

Yu LianZhou quickly came to greet him. After ten years of separation, with Zhang CuiShan's fate unknown, one could expect their exhilaration upon being reunited. Their four hands grasped each other. One yelled, "Second brother!" One yelled, "Fifth brother!" Their eyes filled with tears, as no more words could come out.

Meanwhile, the Heavenly Eagle Sect held their welcome celebration for Yin SuSu. Eight horns blew loudly in the back, while Hall Leader Li stood in the front. The two branch leaders, Feng and Cheng, stood directly behind him, with the others further back. They now prepared some boards to connect onto the raft, with several people holding on to them using long hooks. Yin SuSu and Wuji jumped onto the boat.

The Heavenly Eagle Sect divides into three inner halls and five outer branches. Each division has their own people. The three inner halls divide into Heaven's Secret, Purple Secret, and Heavenly City halls. The five outer branches divide into Green Dragon, White Tiger, Black Valiant, Red Sparrow, and Divine Serpent branches. Yin TianZheng's eldest son, Yin YeWang, heads the Heaven's Secret Hall. Yin SuSu heads the Purple Secret Hall. Yin TianZheng's little martial brother Li TianYuan heads the Heavenly City Hall.

Seeing Yin SuSu dressed in such strange clothing, holding a kid with her, Li TianYuan froze for a moment. Then a smile came to his face, as he said, "Thank heavens you've come back. You have no idea how worried your father had been these ten years."

Yin SuSu got on her knees and bowed, said, "Nice to see you, martial uncle." Then she said to Wuji, "Hurry and kowtow to your martial granduncle." Wuji quickly got on his knees and kowtowed several times. Meanwhile, his eyes stared at Li

TianYuan, quite curious to see all these people on the boat.

Yin SuSu got back up and said, "Martial uncle, this is your niece's son. He's called Wuji."

Li TianYuan stuttered a bit, and then started to laugh loudly, said, "Great! Great! Your father will be so delighted. Not only is his daughter back, but he also gained such a handsome little grandson."

Yin SuSu saw several dead people on the deck, and asked quietly, "Who are we fighting? What's the reason?" Li TianYuan said, "They are members of Wu Dang and Kun Lun sects." When Yin SuSu heard her husband yell 'Brother Yu', and then met up with someone on the other boat, she knew Wu Dang's involved. So she said, "Try to resolve this peacefully if possible."

Li TianYuan said, "Yes." Although he's the martial uncle, his rank is below Yin SuSu's. Hence, on official sect matters, Yin SuSu has power over him.

Only to hear Zhang CuiShan yell, "SuSu, Wuji, come see my martial brother." Yin SuSu grabbed Wuji's hand, and walked over to the other boat. Li TianYuan was afraid for her safety, and followed.

Only to see eight people on the other boat. A tall, skinny man of about forty is holding hands with Zhang CuiShan, showing a close relationship. Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu, this is second brother Yu I always tell you about. Second brother, this is your sister-in-law and your nephew Wuji." Yu LianZhou and Li TianYuan were incredibly shocked to hear these words. The Heavenly Eagle Sect and Wu Dang are in the midst of fighting, yet an important person from each sect is actually a couple. Not only that, they even have a child.

Yu LianZhou knew that it's impossible to tell the whole story at this time. So he went ahead and introduced everyone first.

He introduced a short, chubby Taoist with a yellow hat as Kun Lun's XiHua Zi. A middle-aged woman is XiHua Zi's martial sister, Wei SiNiang*. People in the martial world call her 'Lightning Madame' behind her back. Both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu had heard of these two people. The others are also expert swordsman from Kun Lun Sect, but not as famous as XiHua Zi and Wei SiNiang. Although XiHua Zi's fairly old, he seemed to lack manners. His first words were, "Fifth Hero Zhang, where's that bastard Xie Xun? You should know, right?"

Note* 'Si' means 'four'. 'Niang' means 'Madame', except it's not as formal. So SiNiang is not her given name.

Zhang CuiShan hasn't even set foot on the mainland, and already two huge dilemmas are presented to him. First, Wu Dang and the Heavenly Eagle Sect are enemies. Second, people are already asking about Xie Xun. He didn't know how to respond, and asked Yu LianZhou, "Second brother, what's going on here?"

When Zhang CuiShan didn't respond to his question, XiHua Zi became furious. He yelled, "Did you hear my question? Where's Xie Xun?" He ranks quite high in the Kun Lun Sect, and has very good kung fu. So XiHua Zi is used to ordering people around.

Two of Branch Leader Feng's men just died in XiHua Zi's hands. So he's already angry with XiHua Zi, said coldly, "Fifth Hero Zhang is my sect leader's son-in-law. You might want to watch your mouth when speaking." XiHua Zi yelled, "How could a demonic woman of an evil sect be married to a

member of a righteous sect? There must be something suspicious behind it.” Branch Leader Feng chuckled, said, “Sect Leader Yin already has a grandson, and yet you still spew this sort of crap?” XiHua Zi yelled, “This demonic woman...”

Wei SiNiang knew of Branch Leader Feng’s intentions. He wanted to separate the bond between Kun Lun and Wu Dang. At the same time, he also gets to please Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu. Things can only get worse should XiHua Zi keep talking. So she quickly cut in, “Martial brother, no need to waste time arguing. Let’s hear what Second Hero Yu has to say.”

Yu LianZhou looked at Zhang CuiShan, then at Yin SuSu. He didn’t know what to think either, and therefore said, “Let’s get into the cabin to discuss this matter. Also, we can use this time to heal the injured.”

On this boat, the Heavenly Eagle Sect is guest. And the highest ranked member of the Heavenly Eagle Sect is Yin SuSu. She entered the cabin first with Wuji, with Li TianYuan following.

When Branch Leader Feng entered the cabin, he felt a strong wind coming towards his waist. Branch Leader Feng is very experienced, knew immediately that XiHua Zi ambushed him. Instead of blocking, he simply dashed forward, while yelling, “Huh? Are you attacking me?” He evaded XiHua Zi’s ‘Triple Lunar Hand’, and with the yell turned all attention towards them.

Wei SiNiang glared at XiHua Zi, only to see his face all red. It was agreed that the Heavenly Eagle Sect members are guests on this boat. So XiHua Zi’s actions, especially as a member of a righteous sect, is quite shameful. Everyone sat

down in the cabin, separating into two groups, guests and hosts.

Yin SuSu is the head of the guests, and sat in the front with Wuji. On the host side, Yu LianZhou led the group. He asked Wei SiNiang to bring an extra chair, then said, "Fifth brother, sit here." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes" and sat down.

This separated Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu, and put them into two different camps.

For the past ten years, Yu DaiYan never left due to his injury. Zhang CuiShan disappeared, his fate unknown. Yet the remaining five heroes became even more famous. Although Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou are second-generation disciples, their position in the martial world rivals even the reverends at Shaolin. Therefore, out of respect for the Five Heroes of Wu Dang, the Kun Lun participants offered Yu LianZhou the front seat.

Yu LianZhou thought, "Looks like during the ten years fifth brother disappeared, he married Heavenly Eagle Sect's Leader Yin's daughter. I'm sure there are a lot of details involved. He might not want to disclose everything to the public." So he said, "Including Shaolin, Kun Lun, E Mei, Kong Dong, Wu Dang five major sects, Divine Fist, Five Winded Saber, and seven other minor sects, Sea Sand, Huge Whale, and five other clans, a total of twenty-one groups wanted to find the location of 'Golden-Haired Lion King' Xie Xun, Heavenly Eagle Sect's Miss Yin, and my own sect's martial brother Zhang CuiShan. We had some misunderstanding with the Heavenly Eagle Sect in the process, and ended up as enemies. This had been going on for ten years now..." He paused for a moment, then added, "Thankfully, Miss Yin and Brother Zhang both have appeared, so we can clear up our misunderstanding. However, it will take a long time to

discuss the details. So I propose that we return to land first. Let Miss Yin first see her sect leader, my martial brother see his master, and then have everyone meet to discuss things peacefully. Hopefully, we can then resolve this issue..."

XiHua Zi suddenly cut in, "Where is that bastard Xie Xun? We want the location of that bastard."

Zhang CuiShan felt uneasy after hearing about all these conflicts, knowing that he's partially responsible for them. He also didn't know how to respond to XiHua Zi's question. If he tells the truth, countless people will go to Fire-Ice Island for revenge. But to not say anything would bring about suspicions on his family. Yin SuSu suddenly said, "The vicious, murderous Xie Xun died nine years ago."

Yu LianZhou, XiHua Zi, Wei SiNiang, and everyone else all let out a gasp, "Xie Xun's dead?"

Yin SuSu said, "That day I was giving birth. Xie Xun's insanity acted up. Just as he was about to kill fifth brother and I, my son began to cry. This murderous, vicious Xie Xun developed a heart problem, and died."

Zhang CuiShan realized what Yin SuSu's trying to say. She didn't lie, as the 'vicious, murderous' Xie Xun did indeed 'die' that day. The 'good' Xie Xun remained.

XiHua Zi let out a humph. Since Yin SuSu's a demonic woman in his mind, her words could not be trusted. He asked loudly, "Fifth Hero Zhang, is Xie Xun really dead?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes, that murderous Xie Xun really did die that day."

Wuji heard the whole conversation and was quite upset.

Although he's very intelligent, Wuji doesn't know anything about the ways of the world. Xie Xun treated him like his own son, yet these people are cursing him, and even his own parents say that he's dead. Wuji couldn't help but cry out, "Godfather's not vicious. He's not dead." These words stunned everyone in the cabin.

In her rage, Yin SuSu slapped Wuji across the face, yelled, "Close your mouth!" Wuji cried, "Mom, why do you say that godfather's dead? Isn't he still alive?" He's only lived with three other people all his life, and had never touched upon the evils of the society. Even a boy of average intelligence, growing up in the martial world, would know that lying is normal, and not make such a huge blunder. Yin SuSu scolded, "When adults are talking, a child should not cut in. We are talking about that vicious, murderous Xie Xun, not your godfather." Wuji didn't understand, but stopped speaking nonetheless.

XiHua Zie laughed coldly, said, "Little brother, Xie Xun's your godfather, right? Where is he?"

Wuji saw the grave expressions on his parents' face, and knew that they are in a middle of an important discussion. When XiHua Zi asked his question, he shook his head, and said, "I won't tell you." The words "I won't tell you" further proved that Xie Xun is still alive.

XiHua Zi stared at Zhang CuiShan and said, "Fifth Hero Zhang, is this Miss Yin really your wife?" Zhang CuiShan didn't expect such question, and said, "Yes. She is my wife." XiHua Zia said, "Your wife injured two disciples of my Kun Lun Sect. They've now become half-dead, half-retarded people. How do we resolve this issue?"

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu both gasped. Yin SuSu yelled, "That is nonsense!" Zhang CuiShan said, "There must be

some misunderstanding here. My wife and I have been away from the mainland for ten years now. How could we have injured your sect's disciples? XiHua Zi said, "Then what about ten years ago? It's been ten years since Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao were injured." Yin SuSu said, "Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao?" XiHua Zi said, "Does Mrs. Zhang still remember them? Perhaps you've killed too many people in your life, and couldn't remember all of them." Yin SuSu said, "What happened to them? Why do you accuse me for their deaths?"

XiHua Zi let out a laugh, then said, "Accuse you? Ha! Although Gao and Jiang are now retarded, they still remember one thing, and could say one name, to tell us who injured them. That name is "Yin... Su... Su..." He said this in a very venomous tone, as if he'd kill Yin SuSu immediately if given the chance.

Branch Leader Feng suddenly cut in, "How can you, an old Taoist, speak the given name of my sect's hall leader? You don't even adhere to your own Taoist rules, yet still pretend to be some elder in the martial world? Brother Cheng, do you think there's anything more despicable than this?" Branch Leader Cheng said, "No. It's a shame that a righteous sect could teach such an undisciplined disciple."

XiHua Zi yelled madly, "Are you talking about me? You dare ridicule me?"

Branch Leader Feng didn't even bother to look at him. He said, "Brother Cheng, even if someone learns some simple sword techniques, he should still speak like a human, right?" Branch Leader Cheng said, "After the passing of Taoist Ling Bao, Kun Lun Sect has become worse and worse with each generation."

Taoist Ling Bao is XiHua Zi's martial grandfather, very respected in the martial world. XiHua Zi knew he needed to choose his answer carefully. Otherwise, he might end up saying that he's more respected than the venerable martial grandfather. XiHua Zi quickly stepped to the cabin entrance. Swoosh, his sword came out, and yelled, "Evil sect's demons. If you got the guts, come out and fight!"

Branch Leaders Feng and Cheng purposely enraged XiHua Zi to help out Yin SuSu. They thought that since Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu are now married, Wu Dang would surely no longer be their enemy. Even if they don't help the Heavenly Eagle Sect, Yu LianZhou and Zhang CuiShan would at least stay neutral. The Heavenly Eagle Sect can easily take care of these Kun Lun folks.

Wei SiNiang frowned. She also knew that there was no way the Kun Lun disciples here alone could defeat the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Besides, Zhang CuiShan could easily fight on the other side. She said, "Martial brother, don't be so rash. They are our guests. Let's follow Second Hero Yu's orders." She purposely brought up Yu LianZhou, thinking that considering Yu LianZhou's fame, he would certainly stay on their side. But XiHua Zi did not understand her intentions, and yelled, "Wu Dang and the Heavenly Eagle Sect are now relatives by marriage. He's on their side now, so why should I listen to him?"

Yu LianZhou rarely displays any expression on his face. And upon hearing XiHua Zi's word, he simply remained silent.

Wei SiNiang said in a hurry, "Martial brother, how can you say such a thing? Wu Dang and Kun Lun had been working together for the past ten years. Who doesn't respect and know the fame of Second Hero Yu? We can trust Wu Dang's Five Heroes to be objective." XiHua Zi let out a humph, said,

"I wouldn't be so sure!" Wei SiNiang screamed madly inside at XiHua Zi, for being such a fool. She said, "Martial brother. Why do you insist on offending the Wu Dang's Five Heroes? Don't blame me if master reprimand you for this." She kept on saying 'Wu Dang's Five Heroes', obviously excluding Zhang CuiShan. XiHua Zi really did stop yelling upon hearing about his master.

Yu LianZhou said calmly, "This issue concerns most of the major sects and clans in the martial world. Surely I cannot make a major decision alone. Since we've waited for ten years already, another year or two won't matter. I'll take my martial brother back to Wu Dang, so my master can decide on what to do."

XiHua Zi said with a smirk, "What a great defensive 'Close Off by Enveloping' by Second Hero Yu."

Yu LianZhou almost never gets mad. But this 'Lock Away by Enveloping' is a famous protective Wu Dang technique. To speak of it in such a manner meant ridiculing his master. But then Yu LianZhou thought, "I can't be too rash on handling this matter, or the results might be disastrous. No need to argue with this wild Taoist."

After speaking, XiHua Zi saw Yu LianZhou's eyes glowed like lightning for a moment, and shuddered. XiHua Zi thought, "My master and sect leader martial uncle are the two best fighters of Kun Lun. Yet the expression in their eyes could not match the deadliness of this person." Yu LianZhou's expression calmed, and said, "If brother XiHua has a good suggestion, I'd like to hear it." XiHua Zi turned to Wei SiNiang and said, "Martial sister, what do you think? Should we just forget about Gao and Jiang?"

Before Wei SiNiang could respond, sound of horn came from

outside. A Kun Lun disciple came in and said, "E Mei and Kong Dong sects are here." XiHua Zi and Wei SiNiang were overjoyed. Wei SiNiang said, "Second Hero Yu, why don't we hear what Kong Dong and E Mei has to say?" Yu LianZhou said, "Fine."

Li TianYuan and Branch Leader Cheng glanced at each other. Both frowned.

Zhang CuiShan became more troubled. He didn't mind E Mei too much, but Xie Xun is Kong Dong Sect's major enemy. He had once injured three elders of Kong Dong, plus stole their . No wonder Kong Dong Sect wanted Xie Xun's location."

Yin SuSu contemplated about the same things. She thought that everything would be easier had Wuji not interfered. But since Wuji had never lied before, and loved his godfather dearly, his reaction was perfectly normal. Upon seeing his red cheek from her slap, Yin SuSu felt bad for being so harsh. She embraced him in her arms. Wuji is still quite scared. He whispered into his mother's ear, "Mom, godfather's not dead, right?" Yin SuSu whispered into his ear, "Of course not. Your mother was lying to them. These are all bad people. They want to hurt your godfather." Wuji immediately realized what's going on. He glared at everyone in front of him, and thought, "Oh, so you are all bad people. You want to hurt my godfather."

From this day on, Zhang Wuji truly entered the martial world. He began to realize just how devious humans could be. He also knew that although his mother slapped him, the real culprits are these people in front of him. Living under the love of his family, he had never really understood the concept of a 'bad person'. Even though Xie Xun told him about Cheng Kun, the idea still never really registered in his mind until now, when he's actually facing one.

End of Chapter 8.

Chapter 9 - Eternal Delight as the Seven Heroes Reunited

(Translated by Meh)



At this moment, he felt the plank giving away below his feet, as it was cut in two. He tried to jump up, but as he was right in between two boats, there was nothing to hang on to. With only the deep, blue sea under him, Splash! XiHua Zi fell into the water.

After a long time, Kong Dong and E Mei each had six, seven people enter the cabin. They greeted Yu LianZhou, XiHua Zi, and Wei SiNiang. The Kong Dong group is headed by an old, skinny man. The E Mei group is headed by a middle-aged nun. These two groups were quite surprised to see the Heavenly Eagle Sect people here.

XiHua Zi said loudly, "Hello, venerable Jing Xu, Third Master Tang. Unfortunately, Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect have joined forces." That short, old man is called Tang WenLiang, one of the 'Five Elders of Kong Dong'. The middle-aged nun, Jing Xu, is E Mei fourth generation's eldest disciple. Both are renowned experts in the martial world. They couldn't believe what XiHua Zi just said. Jing Xu is a very careful person, knew about XiHua Zi's bad temper, and didn't say anything. However, Tang WenLiang's eyes immediately glared at Yu LianZhou. He said, "Is this true, Second Hero Yu?"

Before Yu LianZhou could respond, XiHua Zi cut in, "Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect are now relatives through marriage. Zhang CuiShan is Yin TianZheng's son-in-law..." Tang WenLiang said with surprise, "You've found the Zhang CuiShan who had disappeared for ten years now?"

Yu LianZhou pointed at Zhang CuiShan and said, "This is my fifth martial brother, Zhang CuiShan. Fifth brother, this is an elder of Kong Dong Sect, Third Master Tang WenLiang." XiHua Zi added, "Zhang CuiShan and his wife know 'Golden-Haired Lion King' Xie Xun's location. Yet instead of saying it, they

chose to make up a huge lie.”

Tang WenLiang’s turned incredibly angry upon hearing Xie Xun’s name, and yelled, “Where is he?” Zhang CuiShan said, “I must consult with my master on this matter first. So I’m sorry to withhold this information for now.” Tang WenLiang yelled furiously, “Where is this bastard Xie Xun? He killed my nephew. There’s no way I can coexist with him in the same world. Are you going to tell me his location or not?” He spoke in such a deafening voice, without a hint of courtesy.

Yin SuSu said coldly, “You’re just one of the older guys in the Kong Dong Sect. What right do you have to question Fifth Hero Zhang this way? Are you the Martial World’s most venerable? Are you the Head of Wu Dang, Taoist Zhang?”

In his rage, Tang WenLiang was about to attack Yin SuSu. But he held back at the last moment. Yin SuSu was simply a young woman. It would be very rude for an elder like him to attack her in such a manner. So he asked Zhang CuiShan, “Who is she?”

Zhang CuiShan said, “She is my wife.” XiHua Zi added, “And also the daughter of Heavenly Eagle Sect’s Leader Yin. Humph, just a wretched demonic lady of an evil sect.” ‘White-Browed Eagle King’ Yin TianZheng’s kung fu is quite incredible. No one who fought him had lasted more than ten exchanges. So when Tang WenLiang heard that she’s Yin TianZheng’s daughter, he hesitated to speak further, and said, “Good! Good! Absolutely marvelous!”

Jing Xu had been silent ever since entering the room. She chose to speak up at this moment, “Can Second Hero Yu tells us the story behind all this?” Yu LianZhou said, “This is indeed a long story, as it covered events over a ten-year period. How about this, Wu Dang will host a gathering at Wu

Chang city's Yellow Crane Restaurant. We will welcome all heroes who wish to attend. There, the entire story will be told, and we can resolve this issue. Is this ok with everyone here?" Jing Xu nodded, said, "This is fine with me."

Tang WenLiang said, "We can wait to hear the story three months later. But as for Xie Xun's location, I'd like to know now, Fifth Hero Zhang." Zhang CuiShan shook his head, said, "I'm afraid I cannot tell you right now." Although he didn't like the response, Tang WenLiang knew he couldn't offend Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sects. Besides, there's no way Zhang CuiShan can withhold the truth in three months. Without further words, he stood up, waved at his constituents, and said, "Let's meet in three months. Goodbye."

XiHua Zi said, "Third Master Tang, can we hitch a ride back on your boat?" Tang WenLiang said, "Sure." XiHua Zi said to Wei SiNiang, "Martial Sister, let's go!" He came here on the same boat as Yu LianZhou, so this act clearly showed enmity towards Wu Dang. Yu LianZhou did not make a comment, and courteously showed them off the boat. Then he said, "After reporting to our master, we shall send out invitation letters to everyone."

Yin SuSu suddenly said, "Taoist XiHua, I wish to ask you something." XiHua Zi turned his head, said, "What?" Yin SuSu said, "You said that I was a demonic woman of an evil sect. But how am I 'demonic' and 'evil'?" XiHua Zi froze for a moment, then said, "You're a devilish fox who belongs to an infamous evil sect. What's more to say? Otherwise, why would a righteous Fifth Hero Zhang fall for you?" Yin SuSu said, "Thank you for your explanation."

XiHua Zi was surprised that Yin SuSu did not try to rebut. Hearing no further words, he walked over to Kong Dong

Sect's boats on the plank.

Even though the boats are next to each other, it still takes a seven-meter plank to connect the two. By answering Yin SuSu's questions, XiHua Zi walked across last. Just as he walked toward the middle of the plank, sound of wind came from behind, followed by a scraping noise. Despite his temper, XiHua Zi's kung fu is quite formidable, and certainly very experienced. Thinking that someone attacked from behind, he quickly drew his sword. At this moment, he felt the plank giving away below his feet, as it was cut in two. He tried to jump up, but as he was right in between two boats, there was nothing to hang on to. With only the deep, blue sea under him, Splash! XiHua Zi fell into the water.

XiHua Zi didn't know how to swim, and immediately swallowed a large amount of water. His hands waved like mad, when suddenly the hands found a rope. In his joy, XiHua Zi held on to the rope tightly, only to feel a person pulling him up. XiHua Zi looked up, and saw that the person pulling him is actually Branch Leader Cheng, who looked at him in a smug expression.

Yin SuSu really despised XiHua Zi's rudeness, and made this trap for him. Branch Leader Feng's thirty-six flying daggers are renowned in the martial world. He's both fast and accurate. Each dagger was exquisitely made by the best blacksmiths with the best materials. Thin as a feather, astonishingly sharp, so should his opponent try to block with a weapon, that weapon usually breaks in half. When Branch Leader Feng used the dagger cut off the plank, it split apart easily. Branch Leader Cheng prepared a rope at the same time. After XiHua Zi had drunk some seawater, he pulled XiHua Zi up.

When Wei SiNiang, Tang WenLiang, and others saw XiHua Zi

drop into the sea, they knew it was a trap. But Branch Leader Feng was too quick, and they had all been looking the other way. So no one knew exactly what had happened.

As Branch Leader Cheng pulled him up, XiHua Zi held back his anger. He waited to get on the deck first to attack these people. However, after pulling him up a bit above the water, Branch Leader Cheng stopped. He yelled, "Old Taoist, don't move. I'm not all that strong. If you move and I can't hold on, I'd have to release the rope." XiHua Zi didn't want this person to throw himself back into the water again. So he held on to the rope tightly.

Branch Leader Cheng yelled, "Be careful!" He then swung the rope, XiHua Zi's body flew back over twenty meters, then this momentum was used to send him over to the other boat.

XiHua Zi let go of the rope, and landed on the boat's deck. He had just lost his sword to the sea, and was about to go berserk. Only to hear thunderous laughter coming from the Heavenly Eagle Sect's boat. XiHua Zi quickly grabbed Wei SiNiang's sword and was about to go duel with them. But then realized that the two boats are too far apart now. So other than cursing loudly, he couldn't do anything else.

Yu LianZhou saw exactly how Yin SuSu ridiculed XiHua Zi. He felt that this woman is quite cruel, not a good match for fifth brother, and then said, "Hall leaders Yin and Li. Please tell your sect leader that should he have time, we welcome him to the Yellow Crane Restaurant gathering. Now let us part. Fifth brother, are you coming with me to see master?" Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes."

Yin SuSu knew that Yu LianZhou wanted to separate her and Zhang CuiShan. She looked up at the sky, then down on the deck.

Zhang CuiShan knew what she meant, 'On Heaven or in Hell, never to part'. So he said, "Second brother, how about I take your sister-in-law and nephew to see our master. Then, with his permission, we would then go see my father-in-law. Is that alright?" Yu LianZhou hesitated, but knew that he can't truly separate this family of three, and nodded.

Joyous at his approval, Yin SuSu turned to Li TianYuan, said, "Martial uncle, please send these words to my dad. Tell him his daughter can't visit him right now. I will go back home as soon as I can."

Li TianYuan said, "That's fine, I'll wait surely wait for you. He then stood up, and waved goodbye to Yu LianZhou.

Yin SuSu asked, "How is my father's health?" Li TianYuan said, "Excellent! He's more energetic than ever." Yin SuSu then asked, "How is my brother?" Li TianYuan said, "Also excellent! His kung fu has accelerated greatly these past years. Not even this martial uncle is his match now. Pretty ashamed of myself, really." Yin SuSu smiled, and said, "Oh, you're just joking with me." Li TianYuan said seriously, "Actually, I'm not kidding. Even your father's said that his son would soon surpass himself. Don't you think that's amazing?" Yin SuSu said, "Oh, I can't believe you're gloating like this in front of outsiders. You're not afraid that Second Hero Yu would laugh at you?" Li TianYuan said with a smile, "Fifth Hero Zhang is now our leader's son-in-law. How could Second Hero Yu be an outsider?" As he spoke, Li TianYuan bowed with his fists together, and walked out the cabin.

Yu LianZhou felt quite annoyed upon hearing these last words. He raised his eyebrows, but did not speak.

After the people from the Heavenly Eagle Sect had left, Zhang CuiShan asked in a hurry, "Second brother, what happened to third brother afterwards? Did he...recover?" Yu LianZhou sighed, but did not respond for a long time. Zhang CuiShan waited in suspense. He kept examining Yu LianZhou, afraid that he'd say the word 'died'.

Yu LianZhou then said, "Third brother's still alive. But quite frankly, he's not much different from a dead person. His whole body's permanently crippled. There is no longer a Third Hero Yu in the martial world now."

Zhang CuiShan was happy that Yu DaiYan was alive, but cried at third brother's crippled condition. He then asked, "Have you found out who injured my third brother?"

Yu LianZhou didn't respond. Instead he turned toward Yin SuSu. His eyes glared like lightning, and asked, "Miss Yin, do you know who injured my third brother?" Yin SuSu shuddered and said, "I heard his joints were broken by Shaolin's Golden-Steel Finger." Yu LianZhou said, "That's correct. Do you know who did it?" Yin SuSu shook her head, said, "I don't know."

Yu LianZhou then ignored her, and said to Zhang CuiShan, "Fifth brother, Shaolin said that you killed everyone in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency, including servants and relatives. Plus you killed several Shaolin monks. Is this true?"

Zhang CuiShan said, "Well..." Yin SuSu cut in, "This doesn't concern him. I killed all of them."

Yu LianZhou glanced at her, with eyes full of hatred. But after an instant, his expression quickly returned to normal, then said, "I knew fifth brother would never kill mindlessly like that. Because of this matter, Shaolin came to Wu Dang Mountain three times. But since everyone knew fifth brother

disappeared, they can't really do anything. We kept saying that Shaolin injured third brother. They kept saying that fifth brother murdered all those people. Thankfully, the Shaolin Abbot Kong Wen is a cautious person, and quite respectful of our master. He told his disciples not to view us as enemies. So we never had any open conflicts with Shaolin these ten years."

Yin SuSu said, "This is all due to the mistakes of my younger days. But since I've already killed them, let's just not tell them the truth. They can't figure it out anyway."

Yu LianZhou showed an astonished expression, and glanced at Zhang CuiShan. He thought, "How could you marry a woman like this?"

Yin SuSu saw Yu LianZhou's cold expression toward her, including calling her 'Miss Yin' rather than 'sister-in-law'. Frustrated, she said, "I will take responsibility for my own actions. Don't worry, Wu Dang will not get dragged into this. If Shaolin wants revenge, then they can seek my Heavenly Eagle Sect."

Yu LianZhou said, "Nothing in the martial world is above the word 'reason'. Even if we're not dealing with the powerful Shaolin, but rather a lowly farmer, one still cannot be unreasonable."

If this had been ten years ago, Yin SuSu would've drawn her sword in anger. But she heard Zhang CuiShan say, "Second brother's words are quite right," and thought, "Do you think I really care about your righteous crap? I just don't want to burden my husband by arguing with you." She then grabbed Wuji's hands and walked out the deck, said, "Wuji, let me show you around this boat. You've never seen one, right?"

After his wife and son left the cabin, Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother, in the past ten years, I..." Yu LianZhou held up his hand, said, "Fifth brother, you and I closer than even blood brothers. No matter what you did, I will stand by your side. As for your wife, there's no need to explain everything. Just tell master everything when we return. Should he truly oppose this marriage, us seven brothers will get on our knees and beg him. After all, even your son's grown up now. Surely master would not separate you and your wife." Exhilarated at these words, Zhang CuiShan said, "Thank you, second brother."

Yu LianZhou is cold on the outside, but warm inside. Among the seven brothers, he is the most stern and jokes the least. Although the younger brothers respect him a great deal, they also fear him much more than their eldest martial brother, Song YuanQiao. In reality, Yu LianZhou's also incredibly caring of his brothers. When Zhang CuiShan disappeared, his heart was broken. But on the surface, he maintained the same, cold expression. Seeing his long, lost brother today is one of the happiest moments of his life. Yet he still carried that cold expression, and even scolded Yin SuSu. Only when alone with his brother, did Yu LianZhou speak his true feelings. He's mostly afraid of one thing, Yin SuSu's murder of those Shaolin disciples. Nonetheless, Yu LianZhou made a promise in his mind. He would protect fifth brother's family with his life.

Zhang CuiShan then asked, "Second brother, how did we become enemies with the Heavenly Eagle Sect? Did my wife and I cause the conflict?" Yu LianZhou did not respond, instead asked, "What exactly happened on Wang Pan Island?"

Zhang CuiShan told the whole story, from going to the Dragon Gate Escort Agency, till Xie Xun forced them out to

sea. Then Yu LianZhou inquired about Kun Lun's Gao ZeCheng and Jiang Tao.

Afterwards, Yu LianZhou pondered for a long time, before saying, "So that's what happened. If you hadn't come back, I doubt we'd ever find the truth." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes, my sworn brother... Sigh. Second brother, Xie Xun really isn't as terrible as everyone thinks. He only did so many bad things because of a terrible tragedy. Now, he is my sworn brother." Yu LianZhou nodded, thought, "This is another troubling issue."

Zhang CuiShan continued, "When my sworn brother howled, he turned everyone on the island insane. That way, no one could reveal his secret."

Yu LianZhou said, "Although Xie Xun's actions are very brutal, he is, undoubtedly, a very ingenious person. However, despite his careful planning, Xie Xun forgot one person." Zhang CuiShan asked, "Who?" Yu LianZhou said, "Bai GuiShou."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Heavenly Eagle Sect's Branch Leader Bai?" Yu LianZhou said, "That's correct. You said that his internal power was the best among the people there. He fainted when Xie Xun shot him with the poisonous wine. Had he been awake, I doubt he could've withstood the howl..."

Zhang CuiShan said, "So that's what happened. Bai GuiShou was still unconscious during the howl, so he kept his sanity. My sworn brother never realized this."

Yu LianZhou sighed, said, "It seemed that only Bai GuiShou was able to make it out of Wang Pan Island unscathed. Although Kun Lun inner power is quite strong, Gao and Jiang had only rudimentary knowledge of it. They have since

become mentally retarded. When others ask them who made them this way, Jiang Tao simply shook his head, while Gao ZeCheng kept repeating a single person's name, Yin SuSu." He paused a moment, then added, "Now I know that it's because he couldn't forget sister-in-law. Humph, the next time XiHua Zi utters such nonsense, I'll certainly give him a piece of my mind. Obviously it's the Kun Lun disciples who are unruly, yet he had to blame it on someone else."

Zhang CuiShan said, "If Bai GuiShou was fine, then he should've explained everything." Yu LianZhou said, "But he won't say anything. Do you know why?" Zhang CuiShan thought for a moment, realized the reason, and said, "That's right. The Heavenly Eagle Sect wants the Dragon Saber. They obviously don't want anyone else to know about this." Yu LianZhou said, "That's how the conflict started. Kun Lun Sect kept saying that Yin SuSu destroyed Gao and Jiang. We thought the Heavenly Eagle Sect killed you."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Did Bai GuiShou tell you that I went to Wang Pan Island too?" Yu LianZhou said, "No. He wouldn't say anything. Fourth brother, sixth brother, and I went to Wang Pan Island. We saw you wrote those twenty-four characters. That's how we knew you went to that ceremony. When we couldn't find you on the island, we asked Bai GuiShou. He didn't respond, and instead attacked us. I managed to injure him with my palm. Later on, Kun Lun Sect started sought the Heavenly Eagle Sect out, but lost pretty badly. Then things started to get more and more out of hand.

Zhang CuiShan was quite remorseful. He said, "I feel so awful, knowing my wife and I had caused so much problems in the martial world. After reporting to master, I'll personally apologize to each sect."

Yu LianZhou sighed, said, "Actually, it's just all a coincidence,

rather than your making. Remember that day ten years ago? When master asked seventh brother and I to go protect the Dragon Gate Escort Agency? On the way, we encountered an unjust situation. We just had to stop and take care of the matter. And in the process saved more than ten innocent lives. But by the time we got to Lin An, the murder at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency had already occurred. Actually, you and your wife only caused the hostilities between Wu Dang, Kun Lun against the Heavenly Eagle Sect. But since the Heavenly Eagle Sect wanted the Dragon Saber, they never brought up Xie Xun's name. So Sea Sand Sect, Huge Whale Clan, and Divine Fist Sect all believed that the Heavenly Eagle Sect killed their leaders. As a result, the Heavenly Eagle Sect developed quite a bad reputation."

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "Actually, the Dragon Saber is hardly anything remarkable. Why would my father-in-law sacrifice so much for it?"

Yu LianZhou said, "I had never seen your father-in-law. But I do respect his strong, fighting spirit, as he fought off waves of enemies."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Shaolin, E Mei, and these other sects did not go to the Wang Pan Island ceremony. How did Heavenly Eagle Sect offend them?" Yu LianZhou said, "This concerns your sworn brother Xie Xun. In order to get the Dragon Saber, the Heavenly Eagle Sect continuously sent ships out to sea, hoping to find Xie Xun. You can't contain a fire by wrapping it with paper. No matter how tight Bai GuiShou's lips, the secret eventually got out. Your sworn brother committed over thirty crimes using 'Lightning Fist of the Originating Formation' Cheng Kun's name. Countless people in the martial world want him dead. Do you know about this?"

Zhang CuiShan whispered, "They finally figured out that he did it." Yu LianZhou said, "Every time he commits a crime, he'd write 'The murderer is Lightning Fist of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun'. At that time, we all investigated into this matter, but couldn't find any leads. Things changed once people knew that Heavenly Eagle Sect is seeking Xie Xun. They remembered that Xie Xun is Cheng Kun's only disciple, and that Xie Xun despised his master. Obviously, the killer framing Cheng Kun is likely Xie Xun. Think about just how many people Xie Xun killed, and how many people it affects. Just the murder of Shaolin's Reverend Kong Jian alone, was enough to make him a very wanted person."

Zhang CuiShan sighed, said, "My sworn brother has changed his ways. But too much blood covers his hands... Second brother, I really don't know what to do."

Yu LianZhou said, "Wu Dang became the Heavenly Eagle Sect's enemy due to you. Kun Lun due to Gao and Jiang. Huge Whale Clan and others due to revenge for their leaders. In addition, countless groups and people, led by Shaolin, sought out the Heavenly Eagle Sect due to Xie Xun. In the past years, there had been five major battles, and countless minor skirmishes. The Heavenly Eagle Sect lost every single major battle, but still hung on despite everything. Your father-in-law has truly done a remarkable job. Of course, the major sects like Wu Dang and Shaolin did not attack with full force. One, we didn't want to act rashly before finding out the truth. Two, the Heavenly Eagle Sect didn't look to be the main culprit. This time, we got information that their Heavenly City Hall's Hall Leader Li headed out to sea, to look for Xie Xun. So we tried to follow them. But Hall Leader Li saw us, told us to leave. Kun Lun Sect then attacked them. Had you two not been here, both sides would've have suffered many more casualties."

Zhang CuiShan remained silent, while examined his second brother. Only to see his hair beginning to gray, and his face full of wrinkles. Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother, you've been through a lot this past ten years. After surviving through these years, I was finally able to see you. I... I..."

Yu LianZhou saw the tears on Zhang CuiShan's face, and said, "It's fantastic to have the seven brothers united again. After third brother got injured, and you disappeared, everyone renamed us 'Five Heroes of Wu Dang'. Now we can changed it back to seven heroes again..." He then thought of Yu DaiYan's crippled condition. Even though there are seven of them again, no longer can all seven roam the martial world together. Yu LianZhou's heart saddened upon this realization. o0o

After sailing southward for about ten days, they arrived at the mouth of the Yangtze River. They switched to riding a riverboat, and rode up the river.

Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu changed into robes, looked no less amazing than ten years before. Wuji wore a new shirt, and a new pair of pants. He looked very cute with two pigtailed tied on his head.

Yu LianZhou spent his whole life on martial arts, never married or have kids. So he was very fond of Wuji. But due to his aloofness, Yu LianZhou's face remained cold. However, Wuji knew this cold-faced uncle is quite nice to him. When he has spare time, Wuji would ask Yu LianZhou all sorts of questions. Grown up on a deserted island, Wuji knew almost nothing about the mainland, and found everything interesting. Yu LianZhou didn't find Wuji annoying, and often hold him up on the front of the boat, to observe the river scenery. Wuji would ask nine or ten questions, and he'd just

give a short answer to one.

This day the boat arrived at the foot of the Tong Guan Mountain, in the An Hwei province. At dusk, the boat docked at a nearby town. The boatmen left the boat to go buy food. Zhang CuiShan, Yin SuSu, and Yu LianZhou stayed on the boat to chat.

Wuji played by himself at the head of the boat. He saw an old beggar on the dock, sitting on the ground and playing with a snake. A green snake rested on his head, while a black snake danced on his hands. That black snake quickly jumped onto his head and slithered its way down the man's back. Wuji had never seen a snake on the Fire-Ice Island. So he found it very interesting. When that old beggar saw him, he smiled, and flicked his finger. That black snake suddenly jumped up, did a flip in midair, and dropped into the beggar's chest pocket. Wuji stared intently. That old beggar gestured at him, hinting that he has more tricks should Wuji get closer.

Wuji quickly jumped off the ship toward him. The old beggar took out a sack, opened it up, and said, "There's something really fun inside. You want to see?" Wuji said, "What's inside?" That old beggar said, "It's very interesting. Take a look and you'll see." Wuji put his head close to look, but still couldn't see anything. He moved even closer, when that old beggar suddenly flipped his hands, covering Wuji's head in the sack. Wuji let out an 'Ah', but the old man quickly covered his mouth. Afterwards, Wuji felt his whole body being lifted up.

Wuji's scream within the sack was hardly loud. But both Yu LianZhou and Zhang CuiShan heard him. They were quite far away, sitting inside the cabin. But upon the scream, they immediately rushed out to the front of the boat. Only to see the old beggar holding Wuji.

The two was about to jump off the boat, when that old beggar yelled, "If you value the child's life, then stay where you are." As he spoke, he tore off a piece of Wuji's shirt, and put that black snake next to Wuji's skin.

By now Yin SuSu also arrived. In a hurry to save Wuji, she immediately tried to throw the silver needles. But Yu LianZhou stopped her and said, "No!" He recognized that this black snake is called 'Shadow Star', a very famous breed of poisonous snake. The shinier its body, the more poisonous it is. This black snake shined brightly. Its mouth opened, aimed at Wuji's skin. Due the poison's potency, Wuji would die immediately if bitten. Even if the old man has the antidote, it would still be too late. Yu LianZhou's expression remained unchanged, and said, "May I ask. Why you are holding this child?"

That old beggar said, "Ask your boatman to immediately lift anchor, and move the boat out at least sixteen meters. Then we can talk." Yu LianZhou knew the old man was guarding against a rescue attempt. Should the boat leave shore, it would be much harder to rescue Wuji. But at this moment, he had no other choice. Yu LianZhou picked up the anchor-chain. With a light flip of the wrist, a sixty-some pound anchor came out of the water.

When the old beggar saw this scene, he was astonished at Yu LianZhou's inner power, and shuddered. Zhang CuiShan picked up the barge pole, pointed at the shore, and the boat backed away from the dock. That old beggar said, "Back off a little more!" Zhang CuiShan said calmly, "Isn't this more than sixteen meters?" That old beggar said, "After seeing Second Hero Yu's anchor-raising talent, I'd feel safer if you back off some more." Zhang CuiShan could only move the boat back some more.

Yu LianZhou said, "May I ask your name?" That old beggar said, "I'm a nobody in the Beggar's Clan. There's no need to clutter Second Hero Yu's ears with my name." Seeing six pouches on his chest, Yu LianZhou thought that this must be a six-pouch member within the Beggar's Clan. That's a fairly high rank. Why would he do something like this? Besides, the Beggar's Clan is a righteous clan, and its leader Shi HuoLong is quite renowned. This whole thing doesn't make sense.

Yin SuSu suddenly yelled, "Since when did Witch Mountain Clan join the Beggar's Clan? How come I didn't know?" That old beggar gasped, but didn't respond. Yin SuSu added, "Old Man He, what on earth are you doing? If you hurt a single hair on my son's body, I'll chop your Mei Shijian into tiny pieces!"

That old beggar trembled, said, "Miss Yin really has incredible vision, and recognize me. I am simply following Leader Mei's orders, to welcome your son." Yin SuSu said angrily, "Move the snake away! The nerve of you Witch Mountain Clan. You dare offend the Heavenly Eagle Sect?" Old Man He said, "I only wish an answer from Miss Yin, and will then immediately release your son afterwards." Yin SuSu said, "What's your question?"

Old Man He said, "Leader Mei's only son died in Xie Xun's hands. Something I'm sure you've heard. Leader Mei wishes to ask Fifth Hero Zhang and Miss Yin... sorry, my mistake. I should call you Mrs. Zhang. If the two can give the location of Xie Xun, everyone in my clan will thank you."

Yin SuSu's eyebrows rose up, then said, "We don't know the answer." Old Man He said, "Then I wish you could find the answer for me. In the meantime, we'll take good care of your son. When you've found Xie Xun's location, Leader Mei will

personally return your son.”

Seeing the snake slithering next to her son’s skin, Yin SuSu stirred. She wanted to give him the answer. But as she turned her head toward Zhang CuiShan, Yin SuSu saw her husband’s determined expression. After ten year of marriage, she knew that Zhang CuiShan values loyalty and honor above all else. Should she reveal Xie Xun’s location, and cause his death, their marriage could very well break apart. So at the last moment, Yin SuSu stopped herself.

Zhang CuiShan said loudly, “Fine. Then go ahead and take my son. Do I look like someone who would betray his friends? Surely you didn’t expect that from the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang.”

Old Man He froze. He figured that with Wuji in his hands, Zhang CuiShan and his wife would surely divulge Xie Xun’s location. Who’d have thought that Zhang CuiShan would not be moved at all? Unsure of his next move, Old Man He said, “Second Hero Yu, Xie Xun’s crimes can fill a whole mountain. I know Wu Dang Sect is righteous. Surely you could help me on this matter.”

Yu LianZhou said, “But first, w must seek our master’s advice. Then we plan to host a gathering at Wu Chang City’s Yellow Crane Restaurant. Leader Mai is welcome there. At this gathering, we will have an answer.”

The boat rested about twenty meters from shore. Plus Yu LianZhou said this in a natural voice, yet Old Man He could hear each word clearly. With deep respect for the man, Old Man He thought, “The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang certainly lives up to their incredible fame. How could my little Witch Mountain Clan possibly go against the likes of Wu Dang and the Heavenly Eagle Sect? Unfortunately, Leader Mei must

have his revenge.” So he bowed and said, “If so, then sorry for this inconvenience. I will take care of this child for now.”

Suddenly, Yin SuSu pushed a boatman from behind, and kicked another boatman. Both of them let out a yell, and fell into the water. Yin SuSu screamed, “Oww! Fifth brother, why did you hit me?” and started to shout and jump wildly. Yu LianZhou and Zhang CuiShan both stood there stunned, not knowing what to make of her behavior. Old Man He was even more surprised, as he stared intently from afar.

It only took an instant for Yu LianZhou to realize what’s going on. Seeing Old Man He watching Yin SuSu attentively, he quickly drew out his sword, and threw it out with his inner power. The sword flew across the air. It sliced the poisonous black snake into two, and even cut off the four fingers holding the snake. At the same moment, Zhang CuiShan grabbed onto a rope hung on the ship’s mast. Pushing off with his feet on the ship, Zhang CuiShan swung toward the shore. He arrived just a bit later than Yu LianZhou’s sword. Before landing, Zhang CuiShan shifted his upper body forward, and the left palm shot out, striking Old Man He back a few meters. At the same time, his right hand grabbed onto Wuji.

Old Man He lied on the ground, unable to get back up again.

The two boatmen in the water didn’t know why Yin SuSu was enraged. They were afraid to return. Yin SuSu chuckled and said, “You can come up now. Allow me to apologize. Here’s a tael of silver each.”

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They continued the journey up the river. Zhang CuiShan was in a hurry to see his master and fellow brothers. So he

wanted to switch to horses upon reaching An Qing city. But Yu LianZhou said, "Fifth brother. I think its better to stay on the boat. It might take longer, but it's certainly safer. After all, who in the martial world doesn't want your sworn brother's location?" Yin SuSu said, "Surely no one would dare block Second Hero Yu's path." Yu LianZhou said, "If we seven brothers were together, I would be confident. But with just fifth brother and myself, there are no guarantees. Besides, we don't want to stir things up even more." Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "You are right, second brother."

A few days later, they've arrived at the city of Wu Xue, in Hu Bei province. This night, the boatmen anchored the boat, and prepared for sleep. Yu LianZhou suddenly heard horses galloping by the shore. He looked out, only to see two riders turn around at the dock, heading back to the city. Yu LianZhou only saw the riders' backs, but could tell that both knew kung fu. He turned and said to Zhang CuiShan, "It's not safe to remain here. Let's leave immediately." Zhang CuiShan said, "Ok!" He deeply appreciated his second brother's suggestion. The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang all have incredible kung fu, and do only righteous deeds. Generally, only people run from them, and not the other way around. In recent years, Yu LianZhou's reputation had grown tremendously, exceeding even the likes of Kong Dong and Kun Lun leaders. He must really care for Zhang CuiShan's family to run from these riders.

Yu LianZhou went to the head boatman, gave him three taels of silver. Then asked him to set sail immediately. Although the boatmen are tired, three taels of silver is just way too much money to pass up. The boatmen immediately pulled up the anchor, and left the dock.

The moon shined brightly in the sky, while a gentle breeze blew through the boat. Wuji had gone to sleep already. Yu

LianZhou and the Zhang couple sat outside, enjoying the scenery.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Our master's about to have his one hundredth birthday. I'm so glad that I can see this momentous event." Yin SuSu said, "Too bad we're in such a hurry. Otherwise, we really should have prepared a present."

Yu LianZhou said, "Sister-in-law, do you know who's my master's favorite disciple?" Yin SuSu said, "His favorite disciple? Obviously you, second brother-in-law." Yu LianZhou said with a smile, "That's a pretty insincere statement. You knew the true answer, but purposely gave the wrong one. Among us seven brothers, the one master cares for the most, is your handsome husband." Yin SuSu heart warmed. She shook her head and said, "I don't believe you."

Yu LianZhou said, "We seven brothers each have our own strengths. Eldest brother has profound comprehension of the Book of Changes. He's humble and forward thinking. Third brother's is the best at accomplishing tasks. He never failed any job master gave him. Fourth brother is the cleverest. Sixth brother is a master of the sword. Seventh brother has been concentrating on hard techniques. Soon, he'd have the best combination of inner power and outer strength, soft and hard molded into one." Yin SuSu said, "What about you?" Yu LianZhou said, "My aptitude is too low, and therefore lack a strong point. You could say that I practice master's kung fu more meticulously than others." Yin SuSu smiled and said, "You have the best kung fu among the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang. But you're too modest to say it."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Among us, second brother always had been the best at kung fu. Ten years apart, now I'm even further behind second brother. After missing out on ten years of teachings, I'm definitely the lowest ranked among us

brothers.”

Yu LianZhou said, “But among us, only you are skilled at both kung fu and academics. Sister-in-law, I’ll let you in on a secret. Five years ago, at master’s ninety-fifth birthday, we held a banquet to celebrate. During the banquet, master suddenly frowned. He said, ‘Among my seven disciples, the one with the best comprehension, the only one who is knowledgeable in academics and in martial arts, is CuiShan. I had hoped that he would be the disciple to carry on my legacy. But alas, fate had decided otherwise. Five years of disappearance does not bode well for his fortune.’ You tell me, sister-in-law, does master like fifth brother the most?”

Yin SuSu’s face brightened like a flower. Zhang CuiShan felt deep gratitude, and tears came out of his eyes.

Yu LianZhou said, “So the best present for master, quite frankly, is the safe return of fifth brother.”

At this moment, they suddenly heard horses galloping on the shore. The sound went from east to west, quite loud in the silent night, a total of four horses. The three of them glanced at each other. They knew that these riders are likely seeking them out. Although they didn’t want trouble, none of them are scared of anyone. So they simply ignored these riders.

Yu LianZhou said, “When I came down the mountain this time, master was meditating in seclusion. Hopefully, he’ll be finished by the time we get back.” Yin SuSu said, “My father once told me, he only respected two people in life. One is Leader Yang of the Ming Sect. One is your master Taoist Zhang. My dad didn’t even respect the Shaolin’s four divine reverends all that much. Considering your master’s old age and unparalleled martial arts ability, why would he still need to meditate in seclusion? Is he trying to obtain eternal life?”

Yu LianZhou said, “No. Master’s studying martial arts.” Yin SuSu said in shock, “He’s martial arts ability is already unparalleled. What’s the point of further studying martial arts? Is there actually someone who’s his adversary?”

Yu LianZhou said, “Upon reaching ninety-five, master would meditate nine months out of the year. He once said, Wu Dang martial arts came mostly from a book called the . Unfortunately, master was too young, and didn’t know martial arts, when he learned it from martial grandfather Jue Yuan. Martial grandfather Jue Yuan also wasn’t purposely teaching him the scripture. He simply recited it by chance. Therefore, there’s always this gap within our school of martial arts. Supposedly, Originator Da Muo wrote this . But according to master, this is not likely the truth. First of all, the contents of this Holy Scripture are quite different from Shaolin’s martial arts style. It resembled Taoist philosophy instead. Also, this was written in Chinese, not in Sanskrit. All the words are situated on the borders of a Sanskrit-worded . Despite Originator Da Muo’s brilliance, he’s still from another country. It’s unlikely that he’s proficient in writing Chinese. Plus, for such an important martial art scripture, why would he write within another book, rather than on separate papers by itself.”

*Note: This is the same [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing] in Athena’s translation.

**Note: Sorry, I have no clue as to what this book is.

Zhang CuiShan nodded, asked, “So how did master explain all this?”

Yu LianZhou said, “Master doesn’t know the exact story either. He figured that a Shaolin monk wrote it, but penned under Originator Da Muo’s name. Master thought, if the he

memorized was not complete, why not try to create the rest? Therefore, he has spent much time developing a new type of martial arts philosophy, one different from all others in the world.”

Both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu sighed in admiration. Yu LianZhou said, “Reverend Jue Yuan recited this in front of three people. One is master, one is Shaolin’s Reverend Wu Se, one is a young woman. She is the founder of E Mei, Heroine Guo Xiang.” Yin SuSu said, “I’ve heard my father speak of her. He said that Heroine Guo is a very significant individual. Her father is Guo Jing, Hero Guo. Her mother was Huang Rong, former leader of the Beggar’s Clan. When the city of Xiang Yang fell to the Mongols, Hero Guo and his wife both died in the city’s defense.”

Yu LianZhou said, “You are correct. Master actually met Hero Guo and his wife at the peak of Mount Hua. Every time he brings up the couple, master would praise their heroism. He says that anyone who practices martial arts should look at them as role models.” Yu LianZhou paused for a moment, then continued, “Each of the three people learned the differently. Reverend Wu Se had the strongest martial arts among the three. As the daughter of Hero Guo and Clan Leader Huang, Heroine Guo had the richest martial arts background. Master knew basically no martial arts at the time. But for this reason, he learned the scripture in its purest form. Therefore, Shaolin, E Mei, and Wu Dang each gained ‘strong’, ‘rich’ and ‘pure’ aspects of the scripture, respectively. Each sect has its own strengths, but also weaknesses.”

Yin SuSu said, “This Reverend Jue Yuan must’ve had incredible martial arts skills.”

Yu LianZhou said, “No. Martial grandfather Jue Yuan did not

know kung fu. He was the librarian for Shaolin's library of scriptures. He absolutely loved book, and read every single one. He found by accident, and read it like any other scripture. As for the martial arts philosophies, he understood them, but just the inner power portion, not the techniques." Yu LianZhou then told the story of to the couple.

Zhang CuiShan had already heard the story from master. But Yin SuSu had not, and was quite fascinated. She said, "I didn't know E Mei and Wu Dang had such a relationship. Why didn't this Heroine Guo marry your Master Zhang?"

Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "Oh, don't be ridiculous."

Yu LianZhou said, "After parting under the Shao Bao Mountain, master and Heroine Guo never met again. Master said, Heroine Guo could not forget one person. He is the one who killed the Mongol Emperor outside Xiang Yang with a stone pellet, Condor Hero Yang Guo. Heroine Guo searched the whole world, but could not find Hero Yang. At the age of forty, she finally found enlightenment, gave up the search, and became a nun. Afterwards, she founded the E Mei Sect."

Yin SuSu gasped, and felt pity for Guo Xiang. She glanced at Zhang CuiShan, who glanced back the same time. They both thought, "In Heaven or in Hell, we shall never be apart. Our fate is certainly much better than this Heroine Guo."

Normally, Yu LianZhou would almost never speak. Yet after reuniting with Zhang CuiShan, he lightened up a great deal, even enjoying chats with the couple. After spending some days with Yin SuSu, he found that her nature is benign. It's her upbringing that made her so cruel and merciless. But after ten years of marriage with Zhang CuiShan, her temper had subsided a great deal. Yu LianZhou had changed his first impression of her. In fact, he admired her straightforward

tendencies, much more pleasant than those self-righteous, arrogant members of the righteous sects.

At this moment, sound of horses could be heard again. Zhang CuiShan ignored the noise, said, "Second brother, if the master welcomed Shaolin and E Mei elders to study the scripture with him, all three sects would benefit greatly."

Yu LianZhou said, "That would be a great idea. No wonder master said that you'd be the one who'd carry his legacy." Zhang CuiShan said, "Master only felt that way because I was not around. After all, the child away is the one parents think about the most. Not only is my ability worse than eldest or second brother, even sixth and seventh brother are much better than I am now."

Yu LianZhou shook his head and said, "You can't look at it that way. From a pure martial arts standpoint, I am better than you. But master always says, the world is so vast, the honor of Wu Dang itself is insignificant. The importance is to research into the depths of martial arts philosophies, and pass them down to future generations, so the righteous martial arts will overcome those of evil. In addition, we could unite practitioners throughout our land, drive out the Mongols, and reclaim our country. These are the reasons why we practice martial arts. To carry on our master's legacy, one must first have a good heart. Then have incredible comprehension skills. When it comes to heart, there's no different between us brothers. But in terms of comprehension, you are certainly the best." Zhang CuiShan shook his head, said, "I'm sure the master just said it at the spur of the moment. Surely I'm not worthy of such a praise."

Yu LianZhou smiled, and said, "Sister-in-law, go take care of Wuji. Don't let him get scared. Fifth brother and I will take care of the problems outside." Yin SuSu looked around, but

didn't find anything unordinary. As she hesitated, Yu LianZhou said, "Behind the bushes on the shore, there are weapons flashing. Which means someone's trying to ambush us. There should be enemy boats up ahead."

Yin SuSu did not notice anything, and thought that perhaps there's something wrong with Yu LianZhou's eyes.

When suddenly, Yu LianZhou spoke loudly, "Wu Dang's Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, are passing through this area. If friends would like to chat, feel free to come have a drink with us." When he finished speaking, sounds of paddling came from the reeds. Six small boats came at them. A sound-arrow shot out of one boat, and ten or so people on the shore began to move. They all wore black clothes, held different types of weapons, and covered their faces with masks.

Yin SuSu thought in awe, "Second brother-in-law really is amazing." With the enemy coming in, she hurriedly went inside the cabin, only to see Wuji already awake. Yin SuSu helped him put on some clothes, and whispered, "Don't be afraid, honey."

Yu LianZhou spoke again, "Who are you? Wu Dang's Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, says hello." Other than a single boatman paddling each ship, no one else even appeared, much less responded.

Yu LianZhou suddenly came to a realization. He yelled, "Oh no!" and immediately dived into the water. Having grown up near a river, his swimming skills are excellent. He immediately saw four people swimming underwater, each holding a sharp prick, as if wanting to make a hole to the ship.

Yu LianZhou waited till they were close, and quickly attacked

with both hands, sealing two enemies' pressure points. His leg shot out and hit the pressure point on the third enemy's waist. The fourth tried to swim away, but Yu LianZhou quickly grabbed his feet, and threw him up onto the boat. Realizing that with their pressure points sealed, the other three people would die underwater, Yu LianZhou threw them onto the boat too. That fourth person rolled once on the deck, and stood up. He then immediately attacked Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan saw that the attacker's kung fu is mediocre, didn't block, and simply grabbed his wrist with the left hand, then struck that person's pressure point on the chest with the left elbow. That man let out a light yell, and fell to the ground.

Yu LianZhou said, "There are some decent fighters on the shore. Enough talk, let's break through." Zhang CuiShan nodded, and ordered the boatmen to just keep going. When they sailed near the six small boats, Yu LianZhou picked up those four men, unsealed their pressure points, and threw them over to the other boats. Oddly enough, no one on the other boats made a sound. Even the people on the shore remained silent, as if they're all mute. The four men Yu LianZhou threw went into the cabin.

Just as their boat passed by the six opposing boats, one of their boatmen suddenly threw something with his hand. After hearing two 'ping' sounds, the wood on their boat started flying everywhere, and an explosion destroyed the rudder. The boat itself suddenly turned horizontally. That sailor had thrown two fish bombs, which fishers use to catch fish. However, the one he used had much more explosives than a typical one. So it could destroy parts of the boat.

Yu LianZhou remained calm, and quickly jumped to the neighboring boat. Confident of his abilities, Yu LianZhou went empty-handed.

The boatman did not react as he landed. Yu LianZhou yelled, "Who threw that fish bomb?" The boatman did not respond. Yu LianZhou walked into the cabin, and saw two men sitting inside. Neither reacted upon his entrance. Yu LianZhou grabbed one of them, yelled, "Where's your scoop to throw out water?" That person did not respond. Yu LianZhou didn't want to force him, and returned back out. He saw that the Zhang family had already made it to this boat.

Yu LianZhou snatched away the oar, and began to paddle this new boat. After a moment, Yin SuSu yelled, "They've scuttled the boat!" as they saw water seeping through the bottom. There was a hole on the bottom of the boat, which was covered by a cork. But now that the cork has been removed, water flooded in. Yu LianZhou jumped to the second boat, and saw a small pool of water on the deck. He turned around and said, "Fifth brother. Since they're forcing us to land, let's grant their wish!" Those six boats are perfectly positioned as stepping-stones, allowing them to easily jump to shore.

The remaining ten-plus hooded figures positioned in a semi-circle, surrounding them. The majority held long swords, but a few held double sabers, or whips, but no heavy weapons.

Yu LianZhou looked around, but didn't say anything.

The person in the middle gestured with his hand, and the crowd split apart. All of them bowed, their weapons facing the ground, opening a path. Yu LianZhou returned a bow, and walked through the opening. Just as he left, the people returned to their positions, surrounded the remaining three people.

Zhang CuiShan laughed, and said, "Oh, so you are all here for me. I'm quite honored that you've spent so much effort to

capture me.” That middle person thought for a moment, and the crowd opened up a path again. Zhang CuiShan said, “SuSu, you go first!”

Yin SuSu, carrying Wuji, began to walk out, when suddenly the sound of wind surrounded her, as five swords came right at Wuji. Yin SuSu retreated in shock. Those five people continued to pursue her, the sword tips continuously vibrated, but always near Wuji.

Yu LianZhou leapt forward, and flew toward the battle. His two hands quickly shot out four times, each time hitting one of the hooded person’s wrist. In a flash, their four swords flew up into the air. Yu LianZhou quickly followed the four strikes by grabbing the fifth person’s wrist, and sealed that hand’s pressure point. The hand he struck felt quite soft, like that of a woman, so he quickly let go. That person’s hand became numb, and immediately dropped the sword.

With no swords in their hands, all five hooded figures retreated. Two more sparkles appeared under the moonlight, as another two swords came at Yu LianZhou. The sword edges pointed horizontally, the tips slashed from left to right, both attackers used the technique ‘Calm Desert Sand’. But there’s not much force behind the technique, as if they didn’t want to hurt him.

Yu LianZhou thought, “Kun Lun Sword Art! These are from the Kun Lun Sect!” When the swords reached about a feet from his chest, his chest contracted, two arms swept down from above, striking the flat area of the two swords.

These two strikes applied Wu Dang’s inner power. Normally, this should result in both swords dropping from the hands. However, during the moment of contact, Yu LianZhou felt a soft force coming out of the sword, which neutralized part of

his power, and allowed the swords to remain in hand. But even so, Yu LianZhou's power still pushed back the two attackers. One couldn't maintain balance, and fell to the ground. The other let out a cry, and coughed out some blood.

This was the first time any of these people let out a sound. The cry sounded like a woman's voice.

The middle hooded person waved the left hand, and everyone retreated away. Most of these people looked quite lean, most likely women dressed in men's clothing. Yu LianZhou said, "Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, wish to apologize to 'Mr. Iron Zither', for causing all this trouble." Those hooded figures did not respond, but one of them chuckled ever so slightly, in a woman's voice.

Yin SuSu put down Wuji, grabbed his hand tightly, and said, "The majority of them should be women. Second brother-in-law, are they from the Kun Lun Sect?" Yu LianZhou said, "No, they are E Mei disciples." Zhang CuiShan asked in surprise, "Then why did you mention 'Mr. Iron Zither'?"

Yu LianZhou sighed, and said, "They covered their own faces, unwilling to speak a word. So they obviously wished to hide their identity. When the five swords attacked Wuji, they used Kun Lun Sect's 'Winter Plum Sword Formation'. The technique against me was 'Calm Desert Sand'. I played along, went ahead and apologized 'Mr. Iron Zither' He TaiChong."

Yin SuSu said, "But how do you know they're E Mei disciples? Did you recognize someone?"

Yu LianZhou said, "No. None of their martial arts abilities are deep. Probably two generations removed from E Mei's Master Mie Jue. Or perhaps some of her latest disciples. I don't know

any of them. However, they did indeed use E Mei's inner power to neutralize my two strikes against their swords. It's not hard to copy someone else's techniques. But you can't cover up your inner power."

Zhang CuiShan nodded, said, "When you struck their swords, they should've let go to avoid serious injuries. E Mei's inner power is quite powerful. However, they didn't have the ability to utilize it to full potential. Had second brother been fighting for real, both of them would've been dead by now. But E Mei and Wu Dang had always been on friendly terms."

Yu LianZhou said, "E Mei founder Heroine Guo helped out our master in his youth. For this reason, he always told us not to offend E Mei Sect, for old times sake. When I realized those two people were E Mei disciples, I tried to retract my inner power, but was too late. I didn't mean to hurt them, but nonetheless disobeyed master's orders."

Yin SuSu said, "Thankfully, you pretended that they're Kun Lun Sect. So you didn't officially offend the E Mei Sect."

The boat they were on kept sailing during this whole time. By now it's long gone. The six smaller boats have sunk. Its occupants all swam ashore. Yin SuSu said, "Are these also E Mei disciples?" Yu LianZhou whispered, "Most likely Lake Chao's Grain-Boat Clan." Yin SuSu looked at the five swords on the ground, and wanted to examine them. Yu LianZhou said, "Don't touch these weapons. If they have names on them, we'd have trouble claiming ignorance on the matter. Let's just leave now!" Yin SuSu nodded in agreement and said, "You're right." She grabbed Wuji's hand and walked towards the road.

After walking for a while, they saw three horses tied to a tree. Wuji yelled happily, "Horses! Horses!" Wuji had always

wanted to ride a horse since coming to the mainland. But because they kept traveling by boat, he never got the chance.

When the four got close to, they saw a note stuck to the tree. Zhang CuiShan took down the note, and read it, "Please accept these three horses, as an apology for inconveniencing you." The characters were written in charcoal, very delicately, in a lady's writing style. Yin SuSu said with a smile, "Looks like this E Mei lady wrote to Heroes of Wu Dang using a charcoal pencil for drawing eyebrows." Yu LianZhou said, "Well, they're certainly quite courteous." He untied the horses, and everyone got on. Wuji sat in front of his mother, feeling very excited.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Since everyone knows our movement anyway, we might as well ride horses. Yu LianZhou said, "You're right. There will surely be more troubles ahead. If we must fight, don't be too ruthless." He still felt quite uneasy for hurting those two E Mei disciples.

Yin SuSu felt ashamed, thought, "Second brother-in-law only used a bit too much force. He didn't even intend to hurt anyone. They only sustained injuries because they wouldn't let go of the swords. We really shouldn't let second brother-in-law get further involved in this matter." So she said, "Second brother-in-law. These people came for my family. If we encounter any trouble, my husband and I will take care of it. If we can't handle them, then we can ask you for help." Yu LianZhou said, "Do not treat me as an outsider. After all, we brothers live together and die together. Your problems are my problems."

Yin SuSu stopped discussing this matter, and asked, "If they knew you were with us, why did E Mei just send some younger disciples to block our way?" Yu LianZhou said, "They

probably didn't have time to gather the more powerful disciples."

Zhang CuiShan figured these disciples came because of Xie Xun, and said, "Looks like my sworn brother is also an enemy of E Mei. How come he never told me back on Fire-Ice Island?"

Yu LianZhou sighed, and said, "E Mei's a very strict sect, with mostly female disciples. Master Mie Jue doesn't let her female disciples wander around freely. So even we used to find it strange that E Mei would go against the Heavenly Eagle Sect. However, we recently found out the reason. One night, 'Golden Hammer' Fang Ping, Old Hero Fang of the Kai Feng City in He Nan province, was killed. The words 'The murderer is Lightning Fist of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun' were written on the wall." Yin SuSu asked, "Is Fang Ping a member of the E Mei Sect?" Yu LianZhou said, "No. But Master Mie Jue's surname was 'Fang' before becoming a nun. That Old Hero Fang was Master Mie Jue's brother." Both Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu gasped at the same time.

Wuji suddenly asked, "Second uncle, is that Old Hero Fang a good person or a bad person?" Yu LianZhou said, "I heard that he was a recluse, and spends his days farming and reading. So he should be a good person." Wuji said, "Oh, godfather really shouldn't be killing so recklessly." Yu LianZhou was overjoyed, reached out for Wuji's arms, and took him from Yin SuSu. He said, "Son, your second uncle's very happy for you, since you know to not kill recklessly. A person who dies cannot be resurrected. So even if your opponent is the most devious, vicious person in the world, you still shouldn't automatically kill him. Try giving people a chance to reform."

Wuji said, "Second uncle, can you do something for me?" Yu

LianZhou asked, "What?" Wu Ji said, "If they really do find godfather, can you tell them not to kill him? His eyes are now blind, and can't beat these people." Yu LianZhou thought for a moment, then said, "I don't have the power to do this. But I myself will promise not to kill him." Wuji did not speak further, but tears came down his eyes.

The next day, they've arrived at a town. After sleeping for a while in an inn, they continued in the afternoon. Sometimes Yin SuSu and Zhang CuiShan would ride together, so Wuji could get a taste for riding alone. As a child, Wuji forgets his worries quickly. After riding alone for a while, he quickly forgot about Xie Xun's problems.

Following a day of riding, they almost reached the city of An Lu. Suddenly, ten or so merchants hurried past them. When they saw Yu LianZhou, one quickly shook his hand and yelled, "Turn round quickly! Mongolian soldiers are killing and pillaging ahead." Another said to Yin SuSu, "You are one brave lady. But you really shouldn't let the soldiers see you." Yu LianZhou asked, "How many soldiers?" One merchant said, "Ten-plus. All looked really mean." He quickly ran away as he spoke.

The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang hated cruel Mongolian soldiers more than anything else. Zhang SanFeng is very strict about combat. Unless it's absolutely necessary, his disciples should never get into fights. However, if the opponents are Mongolian soldiers acting viciously, then they have the go-ahead to kill. For this reason, if the seven heroes see large contingents of soldiers, they'll simply hide. But if they meet only a few soldiers, then they'd eliminate the soldiers. So when Yu and Zhang heard that there are only ten or so soldiers, they immediately galloped ahead.

After riding for another mile, they heard loud cries ahead.

Zhang CuiShan went in front, and saw over ten soldiers holding spears and sabers, terrorizing a group of civilians. The ground is filled with blood, as seven or eight civilians were already dead on the ground. Only to see one soldier picking up a child of about three or four, and then kicked him into the air. When the child came down, another soldier kicked him up again, like kicking a bouncing ball. After a few kicks, the child's breathing stopped. Filled with rage, Zhang CuiShan flew off the horse. Before hitting the ground, his fist struck one of the soldiers, who instantly fell to the ground. At this time, another soldier came at him with a spear.

Wuji yelled, "Daddy, watch out!" Zhang CuiShan said, "Watch your dad beat up on Mongol soldiers." When the spear nearly reached him, Zhang CuiShan grabbed the spear tip, and pushed it backward into that soldier's chest. That soldier let out a loud scream, fell to the ground, seemingly dead.

Upon seeing Zhang CuiShan's actions, the other soldiers surrounded him. Yin SuSu got off the horse and quickly snatched one of the soldier's sabers. She immediately killed two soldiers with it. The other soldiers quickly realized that something's wrong, and began to run away. Yu LianZhou yelled, "Don't let them get away." He quickly went west to block four of the soldiers. Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu also split up to catch the remaining soldiers. All three knew that these soldiers' fighting abilities are very mediocre, not even Wuji's match. So they were comfortable leaving him alone.

Wuji jumped off the horse. He saw his parents and second uncle leap as if they're flying, clapped his hands and yelled, "Great! Great!" When suddenly, the soldier Zhang CuiShan knocked down with the spear sprung up. He quickly grabbed Wuji, jumped onto a horse, and began to gallop away.

Yu LianZhou and the Zhang couple gasped in shock. They quickly gave chase. Yu LianZhou leapt just two times before catching up to the horse. He jumped up again, and shot out with his left palm, aimed at that soldier's back. That soldier didn't even bother to turn around. His palm came out behind, matching Yu LianZhou's palm. Yu LianZhou sensed the opposing palm sending out an extremely powerful force, filled with incredibly icy yin-based inner power. Yu LianZhou felt like his whole body was frozen. He stuttered a bit, and retreated a few steps.

That soldier also couldn't handle Yu LianZhou's palm either, and fell off the horse. He then carried Wuji and ran forward. Applying lightness kung fu, he was already forty-some meters away in an instant.

When Zhang CuiShan caught up to Yu LianZhou, he saw a pale expression on his second brother. Knowing that he's seriously injured, Zhang CuiShan went over to help him.

Yin SuSu cared deeply for her child, and kept chasing. But that Mongolian soldier's lightness kung fu is much better than hers. He quickly disappeared into the distance. Even so, Yin SuSu still wouldn't give up. She only had one thought in mind, "Even if it costs me my life, I still must get my son back."

Yu LianZhou whispered, "Quick, get sister-in-law to stop chasing..." Zhang CuiShan raised his spear and killed the two soldiers besides them. He asked, "How's your injury?" Yu LianZhou said, "It's no big deal. First... first catch sister-in-law." Zhang CuiShan was afraid that there are more kung fu experts among the remaining soldiers. So he went around and killed all the soldiers first. Then he got on a horse to chase after Yin SuSu.

After a few miles, he finally saw Yin SuSu. But her steps are staggered, obviously from exhaustion. Zhang CuiShan picked her up onto the horse. Yin SuSu pointed forward, and cried in tears, "He's gone. I couldn't catch up, couldn't catch up." And then her eyes closed, and fainted.

Zhang CuiShan worried about Yu LianZhou, and thought, "I must first take care of second brother, then worry about Wuji." He turned his horse around, and returned to Yu LianZhou, only to see him meditating on the ground, readjusting his flow of chi.

Yin SuSu slowly regained consciousness, and immediately yelled, "Wuji! Wuji!" Yu LianZhou's face also slowly regained its color, opened his eyes, and said softly, "What amazing palm power!"

Upon hearing his second brother speak, Zhang CuiShan knew the injuries aren't life threatening. Zhang CuiShan calmed a bit, but still afraid to converse with Yu LianZhou. Yu LianZhou slowly got up, and said softly, "Is he gone?" Yin SuSu cried, "Second brother-in-law, what... what should we do?" Yu LianZhou said, "This person's kung fu is very good. He won't harm a little kid." Yin SuSu said, "But... but he kidnapped Wuji."

Yu LianZhou nodded, and put one hand on Zhang CuiShan's shoulder. After thinking for a while, he said, "I can't figure out the origin of his kung fu. Let's go ask master about it." Yin SuSu felt extremely irritated, said, "Second brother-in-law. We have to find a way to get back Wuji first. The kidnapper's origin doesn't matter right now." Yu LianZhou shook his head.

Zhang CuiShan said, "SuSu. Second brother's seriously wounded. That person's kung fu is also incredibly high. Even if we catch up, what can we do?" Yin SuSu said impatiently,

“So... so are we just going to give up?” Zhang CuiShan said, “Even if we don’t find him, he’s going to come to us.”

Yin SuSu is normally very intelligent, but the loss of her child really messed up her mind. But upon her husband’s words, she immediately understood everything. If that soldier could injure Yu LianZhou in one blow, he could easily kill her and her husband. But instead, the soldier simply kidnapped Wuji. Obviously, the soldier wants to know Xie Xun’s location. When Zhang CuiShan knocked him down with the spear, none of them cared to examine his appearance. Now that they thought back to it, that soldier looked like a typical Mongol soldier.

Zhang CuiShan sent his second brother onto the horse, and grabbed the horse’s leash. The three horses strolled forward. Upon reaching An Lu City, they rested at a small inn. After asking the worker to send in food, the three stayed in the room. They were afraid of meeting more soldiers and get into trouble.

After killing those soldiers on the road, they knew the government would retaliate by killing more innocent people. But at that moment, they could hardly ignore the situation. This is called ‘The cruel fate of a conquered nation, country rich and vast, yet people live in torment’.

Yu LianZhou kept circulating his chi, trying to heal his injury. Zhang CuiShan sat besides him. Yin SuSu leaned back on her chair, but could not sleep. At midnight, Yu LianZhou stood up, and walked around the room three times to loosen up. He said, “Fifth brother, other than master, I’ve never met such a powerful person.”

Yin SuSu only had her son in mind, and said, “He kidnapped Wuji, obviously to find sworn brother’s location. I wonder if

Wuji would say it.” Zhang CuiShan said, “If Wuji said it, would he still be our son?” Yin SuSu said, “Right! He absolutely would not say it.” Suddenly, she began to cry. Zhang CuiShan quickly asked, “What’s going on?” Yin SuSu choked with sobs, said, “If Wuji won’t answer, that monster... that monster would certainly beat him, perhaps they’d even use... use the torture chamber.”

Yu LianZhou sighed. Zhang CuiShan said, “If jade isn’t carved, it won’t turn into a tool. This might be a good experience for him.” Although he says this, Zhang CuiShan’s heart is filled with grief, and the hope that Wuji’s ok. But if Wuji is resting peacefully right now, then he must’ve told his godfather’s location. It’s much better for Wuji to be tortured than for him to be ungrateful and dishonorable. Zhang CuiShan thought, “Rather for him to be dead than live as a dishonorable person.” He glanced at his wife, only to see tear-filled face with a grief-stricken, pitiful expression. He shuddered and thought, “If that person came and pressured with Wuji’s life, perhaps SuSu might give in.” So He said, “Second brother, are you alright now?”

The two brothers grew up together. Through just a single question and expression, they could read each other’s thoughts. Yu LianZhou looked at the couple’s expressions, and realized Zhang CuiShan’s intention. He said, “I’m fine. Let’s leave tonight.”

Under the cover of darkness, the three traveled on the smaller roads. They weren’t afraid of that person coming to kill them, but rather he torture Wuji in front of them.

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But by traveling this way, they had no problems on the road. However, grief-stricken by the loss of her son, Yin SuSu

became ill. Zhang CuiShan hired two mule-carts to carry Yin SuSu and Yu LianZhou. He himself rode his horse on the side. They finally passed by the city of Xiang Yang, and stopped at an inn in the town of Tai Ping Dian to rest.

Zhang CuiShan took care of his second brother, and was about to return to his own room. When suddenly a man opened the door and came in. This person held a horsewhip in his hand, and looked like a cart-driver. He looked at Zhang and Yu, let out a snicker, and walked back out. Zhang CuiShan knew he's up to no good, and felt quite annoyed at his blatant disrespect. Just as that man released the door curtain to leave, Zhang CuiShan grabbed the curtain, applied his inner power, and sent it forward. The bottom of the curtain swung up, and hit that man squarely on the back, sent him flying before falling flat on his face.

That man got up and yelled, "Wu Dang punks. Don't be so smug. You're all about to die!" Despite talking this way, the man ran away as fast as he could. However, he must've been injured, for he kept staggering while running.

Yu LianZhou saw the whole event, but didn't say anything. At dusk, Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother, lets go!" Yu LianZhou said, "No. We stay tonight. Let's leave tomorrow." Zhang CuiShan paused for a second, then realized his brother's intentions. He said, "You're right. We're only two days away from the mountain. Even though the seven brothers are not together, we still cannot let down our sect's reputation. How can we hide from others at the bottom of Wu Dang Mountain?"

Yu LianZhou smiled lightly and said, "Since our tracks have already been exposed, I want to see just how we're about to die."

The two walked over to Zhang CuiShan's room, sat by the fire and meditated. That night, seven or eight people kept walking around their room, but none dared to go in. Yin SuSu slept through the entire night, not knowing what's going on. Zhang and Yu simply ignored the people.

The three of them left after finishing breakfast. Yu LianZhou told the driver to take off the cover on his cart, so he could see outside.

After traveling a few miles out the town, three riders caught up from behind, and followed the mule-carts. They kept about thirty meters back, and didn't try to get any closer. After a while, they found four riders in front. After the mule-carts passed them, these four riders joined with the previous three. A few miles later, four more riders caught up, with eleven total now. The cart-drivers began to panic, and whispered to Zhang CuiShan, "Sir, these people don't look right. Perhaps they're bandits. You should be careful." Zhang CuiShan nodded.

By noon, six more people joined up. These riders all looked different. Some dressed in expensive, silk robes, while others look like beggars. But all carried weapons. None of them spoke, so one can't tell their dialect. However, all of them are short and have dark skin. So they're likely from the south. By the afternoon, twenty-one riders had gathered behind them. Some of the more daring riders got as close as about ten meters, but wouldn't dare get closer. Yu LianZhou simply meditated in the cart, ignoring them.

By dusk, two riders came from the front. The first rider is an empty-handed old man. The second rider is a colorfully dressed married woman, holding a pair of sabers. The two horses stopped in the middle of the road, blocking their path.

Zhang CuiShan held down his anger, and said courteously, "Wu Dang's Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, says hello. May I ask the elder's name?" That old man said, "Where is Gold-Haired Lion King: Xie Xun? If you tell me, I will let you through." Zhang CuiShan said, "I cannot answer this question. Allow me to ask master for permission first."

That old man said, "With Second Yu's injured, you're only one person. Don't think you can defeat all of us." As he spoke, the old man took out a pair of judge's brushes. The tips of the brushes are in the shape of serpent heads.

Zhang CuiShan uses a judge's brush himself, so he's familiar with all of the famous brush users in the martial world. Upon seeing this serpent-like brush tip, he recalled that his master once said, there's a sect in the Gao Li* region who specializes in judge's brushes. Their brush tips are in the shape of serpent heads. They also use different moves and pressure point techniques compared to brush users in the central plains. Perhaps due to the serpent head tip, their techniques are quite vicious. The sect is called the 'Green Dragon Sect'. The most renowned member is someone with a surname of 'Quan'. But master did not know of his name. So Zhang CuiShan put together his fist and said, "Is elder a member of Gao Li's Green Dragon Sect? How do you refer to Elder Quan?"

*Note: Gao Li is in the present day Northeastern region of China. It was an independent country for a short while in history.

That old man froze, thought, "This person looks to be thirty-some years old. How could he know my background?" This old man is head of the Gao Li's Green Dragon Sect. His name is Quan JianNan. Sourthern Ling region's 'Three River Clan' leader requested his help, and even offered large amounts of

gifts. Quan JianNan has only been in the central plains for a short while, and had not fought. So he was very surprised when Zhang CuiShan pointed out his origin. and said, "I am Quan JianNan."

Zhang Cuishan said, "The Green Dragon Sect never associates with people in the central plains. What had Wu Dang done that angered Old Hero Quan? Please enlighten us." Quan JianNan said, "I have nothing against you. I also know about a Wu Dang Sect back in Gao Li. And that the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang are all righteous men. I just have one question, 'Where is Golden-Haired Lion King: Xie Xun?'"

Although these words didn't seem disrespectful, they showed clear hostile intentions. At the same time, Quan JianNan waved his judge's brush. The riders behind them quickly scattered, surrounding the carts. Their intentions are obvious. If Zhang CuiShan did not reveal Xie Xun's location, they will attack.

Zhang CuiShan said, "What if I don't want to say the location?" Quan JianNan said, "I know Fifth Hero Zhang's kung fu is formidable. Even though we have many people, I doubt we could keep you here. However, Second Hero Yu is injured, and your wife is ill. Given such an opportunity, we'll have to take advantage, and capture them. But you are free to leave."

Zhang CuiShan did not like his tone at all, and said, "Fine. If so, then let me see just how good Gao Li martial arts is. What if Elder Quan loses?"

Quan JianNan said, "If I lose, then everyone will attack at once. We're not going to use that stupid one-on-one rule here. If Wu Dang had more people, you can also try to win through numbers. Back when Sui YangDi*, Tang TaiZong*,

and Tang GaoZong* invaded Gao Li, didn't they also win through numbers with their large number of troops? Since the beginning of history, people had been using numbers to their advantage."

*Note: 'Sui YangDi' is the imperial name for Yang Guang, the infamous second(and last) emperor of the Sui Dynasty. Tang TaiZong and Tang GaoZong are the imperial names for Li ShiMin and Li Zhi, respectively. They are the second and the third emperor of the Tang Dynasty. These emperors ruled pretty much in succession, with Li ShiMin's father Li Yuan ruling in between them. However, Li Yuan ruled during much civil strife, which is probably why he didn't bother attacking Gao Li.

Zhang CuiShan knew he couldn't talk out of this situation. He figured that capturing Quan JianNan might get them to back off. So he got off the horse, and took out a silver tiger hook with his left hand, and an iron judge's brush with his right. Zhang CuiShan said, "After you." Zhang CuiShan's previous judge's brush fell into the sea. After returning, he bought a new one. Although it's not as good as the previous one, it was the best available.

Quan JianNan also came down the horse, and attacked. His right brush pointed gently, while his left brush still hasn't came out, as his body had already reached the opponent. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Today I'm fighting for my sworn brother. As his sworn brother and sworn sister, my wife and I can die for him. But this doesn't concern second brother at all. And he shouldn't get hurt because of this." As Quan JianNan's right brush nears, the hook came up to block, which used twenty percent of Zhang CuiShan's power. As the hook and brush met, Zhang CuiShan's body shook.

Quan JianNan thought happily, "The Three-River Clan kept

saying how powerful Wu Dang is. But this guy's nothing. They must've been exaggerating." He quickly followed up with his left brush. Zhang CuiShan had trouble blocking, but still hung on. Quan JianNan thought that should he defeat Fifth Hero Zhang, his fame would rise dramatically. With this thought, his brushes came even faster, each attack pointed at Zhang CuiShan's vital area.

Zhang CuiShan blocked tightly, while carefully examining his opponent's moves. Quan JianNan's moves looked light and flexible, but there's great power on the tip of the brush. The brush targets emphasized the lower body and the back, much different from brush users in the central plains. Upon further examination, his left brush attacked only the back's 'Ling Tai' or lower points, like 'Zhi Yang', 'Jin Sui', 'Zhong Shu', 'Ji Zhong', 'Xuan Shu', 'Ming Men', 'Yang Guan', 'Yao Yu', and 'Chang Chiang'. The right brush emphasized on attacking the opponent's legs, like 'Zi Wu Shu', 'Wei Dao', 'Huan Tiao', 'Feng Shi', 'Zhong Du', and the calf's 'Yang Ling' Point. Zhang CuiShan figured out that his left brush really only aimed at the several points along the 'Du Artery'. The right brush aimed at only the several points in the front of the leg and foot. Despite the complicated appearance, it's actually quite easy to counter. Zhang CuiShan thought, "Master once said, the Green Dragon Sect's point-sealing technique relied on its oddity. So despite its ferociousness, their technique is nothing to worry about. Looks like master's correct." After he understood his opponent's attack pattern, the silver hook and iron brush only protected the particular points that Quan JianNan aimed for, ignoring all other parts of the body.

Quan JianNan fought with more and more energy as the battle went on. Zhang CuiShan thought, "You dare come to the bottom of Wu Dang Mountain with such pedestrian skills?" Suddenly his silver hook came scooping down using

the hook in the character 'Dragon'. The hook slashed through Quan JianNan's right leg's 'Feng Shi' Point. Quan JianNan let out a scream, and fell down.

At this moment, Zhang CuiShan's brush came straight down, sealing ten pressure points on Quan JianNan's 'Du Artery', the same ten Quan JianNan aimed with his left brush during the fight. This brush came down fast as a shooting star, strong as a charging ox, fully immobilizing Quan JianNan. Quan JianNan sighed, and thought, "I give up. Even against a wooden sculpture, I wouldn't be able to attack ten points in one single move. I'm not even worthy to be his disciple."

Zahng CuiShan put his hook by Quan JianNan's throat, and yelled, "Everyone stand back! After escorting this elder to Wu Dang Mountain, I'll release him." He thought these people must be Quan JianNan's subordinates, and would listen.

But instead, that colorfully-dressed married woman yelled, "Everyone attack together. Break the carts." Zhang CuiShan yelled, "If anyone moves any closer, I'll kill this man!" That woman smirked and said, "Everyone just attack." The riders immediately charged, ignoring Quan JianNan's safety. This woman is one of the helmsmen of the Three-River Clan. They came here to capture Yu LianZhou and Yin SuSu, in order to get Xie Xun's location. Quan JianNan is just a guest helper. So they hardly cared for his safety.

Zhang CuiShan gasped, as he realized that even killing Quan JianNan would be useless. At this moment, six people had surrounded Yin SuSu's cart, and six more surrounded Yu LianZhou's cart. The rest gathered around the married woman. Just at this moment, Yu LianZhou suddenly yelled, "Sixth brother, come get rid of these people!"

Zhang CuiShan thought, "What's second brother doing?" When suddenly, he heard a yell in the distance, "Sure thing! Fifth brother, how are you? Your little brother really misses you." A shadow appeared from behind a nearby tree, with a sword in hand, coming closer. He is indeed the sixth hero Yin LiTing. Zhang CuiShan was simply overjoyed, and he yelled, "Sixth brother. Great to see you!"

Several people from the Three-River Clan went to block Yin LiTing's path, only to hear a continuous stream of 'ah' yells and 'ding ding' sounds. Each person's wrist was slashed by sword on the 'Divine Gate' Point. All of them immediately dropped their weapons. The 'Divine Gate' Point is located on the back wrist. Once struck, the hand immediately becomes numb, unable to exert any more pressure. Yin LiTing walked briskly towards the carts. When an enemy comes, he would wave his sword, and the opposing weapon would drop. That woman yelled, "You're Wu Dang's..." With two 'Dang Dang' sounds, her two sabers both left her hands.

Zhang CuiShan said ecstatically, "So master finally figured out the 'Thirteen Divine Gate Swords'." This 'Thirteen Divine Gate Swords' has a total of thirteen moves. Each one different from another, but all aimed at the opponent's 'Divine Gate' Point. When Zhang CuiShan left Wu Dang ten years ago, Zhang SanFeng had started to invent this sword art. He discussed with his disciples several times, but couldn't overcome several major problems. Now as Zhang CuiShan watched Yin LiTing use this sword art, no one in the Three-River Clan could block even one blow. Every single one of Yin LiTing's strike was incredibly exquisite. After only five or six blows, he had already dropped over ten people's weapons.

That woman yelled, "Let's get out of here!" The clan members immediately began to run away. Zhang CuiShan

unsealed Quan JianNan's pressure points and returned his brushes. Quan JianNan instantly ran away in a shameful expression.

Yin LiTing returned his sword to its sheath, and grabbed Zhang CuiShan's hands tightly. He said with joy, "Fifth brother. I missed you so much!" Zhang CuiShan said, "Sixth brother, you've grown taller." When they parted, Yin LiTing was only eighteen. After ten years, the young boy had grown into a mature adult. Zhang CuiShan held Yin LiTing's hand as he walked over to his wife.

Yin SuSu is still quite ill. So she could only smile lightly, and said faintly, "Sixth brother-in-law." Yin LiTing said with a smile, "So fifth sister-in-law also has a surname of 'Yin'. That's great. Not only are you my sister-in-law, but also my sister."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Second brother really is much better than me. You were hiding on that tree the whole time. He recognized you, but I never noticed."

Yin LiTing then spoke of why he came.

A while back, fourth hero Zhang SongXi went down the Wu Dang Mountain to buy some items for master's one-hundredth birthday. He saw two suspicious people walking around, and thought, "Considering Wu Dang's fame, why would anyone want to cause trouble in this area?" So he followed them to see what they're up to. Only then did Zhang SongXi know that Zhang CuiShan is back, and met up with Yu LianZhou. Both the 'Three-River Clan' and the 'Saber of Five Winds Sect' wanted to block their path, to ask for Xie Xun's location. Zhang SongXi ecstatically went back up the mountain. At the time, only Yin LiTing was there. The two split up to look for their brothers. They both thought, at the time, that their second and fifth brother could easily take

care of these people. But both were too impatient to meet up with their fifth brother. So they came down the mountain together. Neither knew about Yu LianZhou's injury, for those people did not bring it up. Zhang SongXi followed 'Saber of Five Winds Sect', while Yin LiTing followed 'Three-River Clan'.

Yu LianZhou said, "If it weren't for fourth brother, I don't know what would've happened today." Zhang CuiShan said shamefully, "I couldn't even protect second brother myself. After leaving for ten years, my martial arts ability had lagged too far behind." Yin LiTing said, "Don't be so hard on yourself. Even if I hadn't appeared, you still could've easily taken care of them. It's just that you couldn't protect second brother and fifth sister-in-law at the same time. Think about the techniques you used against that old man from Gao Li. Master never taught it to anyone else. Master will be overjoyed to see you back. He's bound to have lots and lots of stuff to teach you. Just hope you can remember them all. Hey, do you want me to teach you the 'Thirteen Divine Gate Swords'?"

Due to their bond, and being reunited after so much time apart, Yin LiTing is just dying to teach Zhang CuiShan everything he missed. As the two walked side by side, Yin LiTing talked endlessly, and kept making gestures to demonstrate various techniques.

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That night the four rested in an inn. Yin LiTing wanted to sleep next to Zhang CuiShan. Zhang CuiShan also really likes this sixth brother. Although Yin LiTing's already grown up, his personality still resembled the youngster ten years ago. Muo ShengGu might be the youngest of the seven brothers, but he matured at a very young age. So Yin LiTing actually has a weaker personality than his little brother. Zhang CuiShan's

age has always been close to Yin LiTing's, and had always taken extra care of his sixth brother.

Yu LianZhou chuckled, and said, "Fifth brother is already married. Do you think he's still the same person from ten years ago? Fifth brother, you came back just in time. After we're done with master's birthday celebration, we will be following up with sixth brother's wedding celebration." Zhang CuiShan clapped his hands and laughed, said, "Awesome! Awesome! Who's the lucky lady?" Yin LiTing's face turned bright red, but won't speak.

Yu LianZhou said, "She is the daughter of 'Golden Whip' Old Hero Ji in Han Yang City." Zhang CuiShan said with a smile, "Sixth brother, you need to stop acting like a kid now. It's no fun getting whacked by a golden whip." Yu LianZhou chuckled, said, "Miss Ji is actually a sword user. Thankfully, she was not among the hooded-women back at the river." Zhang CuiShan asked in surprise, "You mean Miss Ji is an E Mei disciple?" Yu LianZhou nodded, said, "Those E Mei disciples we met by the river had ordinary kung fu. So Miss Ji couldn't have been among them. Otherwise, if I offended sixth sister-in-law, while helping fifth sister-in-law, people might say I'm being unfair. This future sixth sister-in-law has great moral fiber, and excellent martial arts. She's a top disciple of a righteous sect, very suitable for sixth brother..."

When he got here, Yu LianZhou suddenly remembered that Yin SuSu is from an evil sect. Praising Miss Ji this way might hurt fifth brother's feelings. Just when he wanted to change the subject, someone came to the door and said, "Mr. Yu, several people want to see you. They said they're your friends." This was the voice of a worker at the inn.

Yu LianZhou asked, "Who are they?" The worker said, "There are six people total. They said they're from the 'Saber of Five

Winds Sect'." The three brothers were quite surprised. Zhang SongXi said he'd get rid of these people, so how did they manage to get here? Could something have happened to Zhang SongXi? Zhang CuiShan said, "Let me go out and see what's going on." Because of second brother's injuries, Zhang CuiShan didn't want to fight inside the room. Yu LianZhou said, "Let them come in."

A while later, five coarse men and a beautiful young married woman came in. Zhang CuiShan and Yin LiTing sat right next to Yu LianZhou, preparing for possible fighting. Yet these six people all had shameful expressions on their faces. None of them had any weapons. Hardly looking like they want to cause some trouble. The first man of about forty stepped up, bowed courteously with fists together, and said, "Are you Wu Dang's Second Hero Yu, Fifth Hero Zhang, and Sixth Hero Yin? I am a disciple of the Saber of Five Winds Sect, called Meng ZhengHong. Nice to meet you."

Yu, Zhang, and Yin returned bows, all surprised at his actions. Yu LianZhou said, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Meng. Everyone, please sit."

But Meng ZhengHong did not sit. He said, "My sect is located in the Shan Xi region. Although the sect is small, we nonetheless have heard of Wu Dang's reputation. Today, upon reaching the foot of Wu Dang Mountain, we really should go up to respects to Master Zhang. But we heard that he's already one hundred years old, and leads a quiet life. So we really shouldn't bother him. We wish you could send a message to him. Tell him that the disciples of the 'Saber of Five Winds Sect' send their greetings, hoping he would have forever-good health, and many blessings."

Yu LianZhou said, "You are too kind. Thank you for your thoughtful words."

Meng ZhengHong then said, "We really were foolish and ignorant, to even dare come offend Wu Dang. Thankfully, the Heroes of Wu Dang were benevolent, and actually helped us out in our time of need. I really am very thankful, and therefore came to first express my gratitude, then express my apology. Hoping you could forgive us." As he spoke he got on his knees.

Zhang CuiShan quickly picked him up, said, "Mr. Meng, you don't need to be so courteous."

Meng ZhengHong stuttered a bit, as he wanted to say something, but was afraid to. Yu LianZhou said, "Just speak what's on your mind, Mr. Meng." Meng ZhengHong said, "I wish for Second Hero Yu to say that Wu Dang forgives us. So we would have face to meet our master." Yu LianZhou said, "I take it you came to seek Golden-Haired Lion King: Xie Xun's location, right? What's your reason for doing so?" Meng ZhengHong said, "Xie Xun killed my elder brother."

Yu LianZhou's heart shook, said, "We really have our reasons for not giving this info. Hopefully you can understand. As for forgiveness, you don't have to ever speak of it again. When you see your master Old Master Wu, say that Second Yu, Fifth Zhang, and Sixth Yin send their greetings."

Meng ZhengHon said, "If so, then we shall go now. If Wu Dang ever needs help in the future, you can simply send us a letter. Although we are just a small sect, we would still help in any way we can." He then bowed again with the five other people, and left the room.

That young married woman suddenly got down on her knees and whispered, "Thanks to Wu Dang's help, I was able to keep my innocence. I'll never forget your kindness." The

three brothers didn't know what she's talking about, but felt it would be inappropriate to ask further on this subject. So they just said some modest words. That young woman kowtowed several times, and left.

Just moments after these people left, the door opened. A man flew in at lightning speed, and immediately hugged Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan said cheerfully, "Fourth brother!" The person who came in was indeed Zhang SongXi. Zhang CuiShan added, "Fourth brother. You really are amazing. Turning the 'Saber of Five Winds Sect' from enemy to friend. Zhang SongXi said with a smile, "It was just a coincidence. I can't really claim credit." He then explained how everything unfolded.

That young married woman's surname is Wu. She is the sect leader's second daughter. That Meng ZhengHong is her husband. The six of them came here to search for Xie Xun. On the way, they met up with the Three-River Clan, who said that Zhang CuiShan know of Xie Xun's location. That Wu lady was pampered since childhood. She proposed to capture Zhang CuiShan, and torture him into submission. Meng ZhengHong had always been afraid of his wife, but wouldn't agree with her this time. He said that Wu Dang's too powerful. They should instead ask politely. Should Wu Dang not acquiesce, they'll find some other way to get the information. That Wu lady said, "This is a once in a life time opportunity. Once Zhang CuiShan get back to Wu Dang, he'd be with his martial brothers, and be protected by Zhang SanFeng. How do we ask then?" The two then began to bicker. The other disciples were beneath them in seniority, and didn't dare interfere.

That Wu lady said, "You are such a coward. Look, we're trying

to avenge your brother here, not mine. Humph, you're not a man at all. Don't you have any courage? Even if that Zhang CuiShan tells you Xie Xun's location, I doubt you'll have the guts to find him. The biggest mistake of my life is getting married to a coward like you." Meng ZhengHong is used to giving in to his wife, and stopped talking. But he still won't follow his wife's plan: catching them using sleeping powder. In her frustration, that night when his husband fell asleep, the Wu lady secretly left.

She wanted to do the deed alone, and embarrass his husband in the process. Unfortunately for her, a helmsman of the Three-River Clan saw everything. Lusted at her beauty, he followed behind secretly. He tried to apply some of the sleeping powder on her. However, Zhang SongXi was following their movement this whole time. At the last second, he came out of hiding and beat up on that helmsman, before chasing him away. Zhang SongXi didn't say his own name, only mentioned that he was a Wu Dang disciple. The Wu lady was both surprised and embarrassed. She quickly went back and told her husband what happened. This way, Wu Dang turned into their savior. That's why the couple came to thank the three Wu Dang brothers. Zhang SongXi didn't want to further embarrass them, and therefore didn't appear until they had left.

Zhang CuiShan said, "It's not difficult to send these people away. But it's much more to master's taste that you turned them into friends."

Zhang SongXi said with a smile, "Ten years apart, and the first thing you do is to flatter me."

That night, the four brothers slept in the same room and chatted. Despite his cleverness, Zhang SongXi could not figure out the origins of the man who kidnapped Wuji either.

The next day, Zhang SongXi met Yin SuSu. The five of them traveled for a whole day before arriving at Wu Dang Mountain that night.

As he returned to his childhood home, Zhang CuiShan's first thought was to pay respects to his master. Then meet up with eldest brother, third brother, and seventh brother. Even though his son is missing and his wife is sick, Zhang CuiShan nonetheless felt more happiness and sadness.

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Upon reaching the mountaintop, they saw eight horses tied by the front door. These horses don't belong to Wu Dang. Zhang SongXi said, "There must be guests here. Let's not bother them, and use the side door instead." Zhang CuiShan held his wife and walked through the side door. When the priests and servants saw Zhang CuiShan back safely, they were all overjoyed. Zhang CuiShan really wanted to see his master. But the apprentice priest for Zhang SanFeng said that he's still meditating in seclusion. Zhang CuiShan paid his respect in front of Zhang SanFeng's meditation room. Then went to see Yu DaiYan.

The apprentice priest who served Yu DaiYan whispered, "Third Martial Uncle's asleep. Do you want to wake him up?" Zhang CuiShan shook his head, and walked into the room. Only to see Yu DaiYan sleeping soundly, with pale face and sunken cheeks. A righteous hero ten years ago, had turned into a sick man seemingly on his last breath. Zhang CuiShan watched for a while, and tears came down his eyes.

After a long time, he finally walked out, and asked the apprentice priest, "Where's your eldest and seventh martial uncles?" That apprentice priest said, "In the main hall."

Zhang CuiShan walked to the back room of the main hall to wait for them. After a long time, they still haven't appeared. Zhang CuiShan finally asked the servant sending the tea, "Who are the guests?" That servant said, "They seem to be in the escort agency business."

Yin LiTing wanted to be with his long lost brother, and soon joined Zhang CuiShan. When Zhang CuiShan asked him about those guests, Yin LiTing said, "All three are top agency leaders. 'Tiger Den Escort Agency' Leader Qi TianBiao from Jin Lian City, 'Rising Sun Escort Agency' Leader Yun He from Tai Yuan City, and the third is 'Sparrow Cloud Escort Agency' Leader Guan Jiujia from the capital city."

Zhang CuiShan said with surprise, "All three of them came? Ten years ago, these are the most renowned escort agencies in the country. And their leaders have the best martial arts among escort leaders. Is that still true today? Why are they here?" Yin LiTing said with a smile, "They probably lost some shipments on one of their escort trips. The person who took their shipments is too powerful. So they came to ask big brother for help. Fifth brother, big brother has been helping more and more people recently. Every time someone has an unsolvable problem in the martial world, he'd ask for big brother's help."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Big brother has a heart of Buddha. He never turns down anyone's request. I wonder if big brother looks older now?" Unable to further suppress his urge to see his big brother, Zhang CuiShan said, "Sixth brother, I'm going behind the screen to take a peek at him, ok?" He walked up and peeked into the main hall.

Only to see Song YuanQiao and Muo ShengGu sitting in two host seats. Song YuanQiao dressed as a priest, with a peaceful expression on his face. He looked similar to ten

years ago, except there are some gray hairs on the side, and he looked chubbier. Song YuanQiao is not a priest. But since his master is a priest, and Wu Dang is a place of worship, he tends to wear a priest robe on Wu Dang Mountain. Muo ShengGu had already grown into an adult. Although only twenty-some years old, he had grown a long beard, and looked even older than Zhang CuiShan.

Only to hear Muo ShengGu say loudly, “My big brother is a man of his words. Are you saying that you don’t trust his reputation?” Zhang CuiShan thought, “Seventh brother’s temper hasn’t changed at all. I wonder what he’s arguing about?” He turned and looked at the guest seats. Three people sat there, each about fifty years old. One looked very fiery. One is tall and skinny, looking composed. The third one looked terribly sick, his face seemingly a dry root. Only to hear the tall thin man say, “Of course we trust Hero Song’s words. But can you tell us when Fifth Hero Zhang would be back?”

Zhang CuiShan thought, “So they came for me. Probably seeking my sworn brother’s location.” Only to hear Muo ShengGu say, “We seven brothers might not have great abilities, but we are proud of our righteous deeds. We thank our friends in the martial world for giving us the ‘Seven Heroes of Wu Dang’ title. Although we don’t really deserve it...” Zhang CuiShan thought, “After ten years, seventh brother’s much better at talking now. When I left, he would take forever answering questions from strangers. Other than third brother and I, everyone else has improved dramatically.”

Muo ShengGu continued, “but we have indeed been bestowed this honor. Due to our master’s teachings, none of us dared make any mistake. Fifth Brother Zhang is one of my brothers. Among us, he has the best temper. If you keep

saying that he killed those people at the 'Dragon Gate Escort Agency', Humph, that's just nonsense." Zhang CuiShan shuddered, "So it's about the Dragon Gate Escort Agency again. Looks like they've heard about me coming back, and came to question me on the matter."

That fiery old man said, "No one questions the reputation of 'The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang'. Seventh Hero Muo, you didn't need to self-praise to tell us of your incredible fame."

Muo ShengGu frowned at his sarcastic remark, said, "What do you really want, Leader Qi? Just go ahead and say it."

That fiery man is indeed the leader of the 'Tiger Den Escort Agency', Qi TianBiao. Qi TianBiao said loudly, "The Seven Heroes of Wu Dang are men of their words. So did Shaolin Reverends lie? Shaolin monks personally saw Zhang CuiShan, Fifth 'Hero'... Zhang, killed every member of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency." He purposely emphasized the word 'hero', and said it in a mocking tone.

Yin LiTing was furious. Ridiculing his fifth brother is ten times more unbearable than mocking Yin LiTing himself. He was just about to go out and argue, when Zhang CuiShan pulled him back, and shook his head. Yin LiTing saw a painful expression on his face. He didn't know what to make of it, but thought, "Fifth brother's temper is so great. No wonder master always compliments him."

Muo ShengGu stood up, and said loudly, "First of all, my fifth brother is currently not here. But even if he were, my answer is still the same. Zhang CuiShan and I are brothers in life and death. His problems are my problems. You have to falsely accuse my fifth brother on this murder charge? Fine! Just put it all on me. If you want revenge, come to me. My fifth brother is not here, but Muo ShengGu is also Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang CuiShan is also Muo ShengGu. To be honest, my kung fu and intellect are both beneath my fifth brother. So you are quite lucky to meet me today.”

Qi TianBiao fumed, stood up and yelled, “Before coming to Wu Dang, many people laughed at me. They said that my kung fu was not worthy of challenging Wu Dang. But there’s no way we can simply forget what happened to Du Dajin and his people. After killing over Dragon Gate Escort Agency’s ninety-plus people, I’m sure Wu Dang won’t mind killing another Qi TianBiao. Looks like I will be dying on Wu Dang Mountain today. When we came up the mountain, out of respect for you, we carried no weapons. So I’ll seek my death under Seventh Hero Muo’s fists.” As he spoke, he walked to the center of the room.

Song YuanQiao had been quiet this whole time, but he stepped in at this moment, and held back Muo ShengGu. With a light smile, Song YuanQiao said, “Let’s look at the purpose of your visit. You came because you are certain that my fifth brother killed everyone in Lin An City’s Dragon Gate Escort Agency. Good news is, he will be back soon. Why don’t the three guests be a bit patient, wait till he’s actually back. Then wouldn’t the truth be revealed?”

That sick-looking old man, ‘Sparrow Cloud Escort Agency’ Leader Gong JiuGui, stood up and said, “Escort Leader Qi, please sit down. Since Fifth Zhang has still not returned, we can’t get a resolution. How about we first see Master Zhang, and ask his opinion. As the most esteemed individual in the martial world, surely he would be objective, and not just shield his own disciple.”

Despite his courteous tone, these words carried a threatening message. Muo ShengGu said, “Our master’s in seclusion right now for meditation. Besides, my big brother handles most of

the Wu Dang matters now anyway. Other than some of the most highly esteemed individuals of the martial world, my master would not greet any guest." In another words, he meant that the three escort leaders were not worthy of meeting their master.

That tall skinny man, Escort Leader Yun He, said, "Humph, what are the odds. So your master just happened to be meditating the same day we come, eh? Well, Master Zhang can meditate in seclusion whenever he wants. But does he think that by hiding, he can avoid the payment for the ninety-plus lives of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency?" Gong JiuGui realized that these words were too nasty, and quickly gestured for him to stop. But Muo ShengGu could not hold down his rage. He yelled, "Are you saying that my master's hiding from you?" Yun He smirked, but did not respond.

Despite his good temper, Song YuanQiao could not bear these people mocking his master. No one in over ten years had dared to mock Zhang SanFeng in front of the Wu Dang heroes. Song YuanQiao said calmly, "Since the three are guests, we dare not offend you. However, I must ask you to leave now!" And with these words he whisked his sleeve. A light wind left the sleeve. The three teacups by Qi TianBiao, Yun He, and Gong JiuGui were swept by the wind, and flew onto the tea table besides Song YuanQiao. The three cups flew up leisurely, and landed evenly. Not a single drop of tea came out in the process.

The three escort leaders, at the moment Song YuanQiao whisked his sleeve, felt a seemingly soft, but actually powerful force pushing into their chests. The force was so dominating they couldn't even breathe. The three immediately started to gather their inner chi in defense. But the soft wind came quickly, and left quickly, as they regained the ability to breathe again. The escort leaders were

incredibly shocked. They knew that had Song YuanQiao followed up with a whisk of his left sleeve, the second wave of wind would have reversed the chi-flow that they gathered. Even if they don't die from the reversed chi-flow, at least their inner power would be destroyed. From this one act, the three escort leaders realized that the soft-spoken eldest hero of Wu Dang has unbelievable martial arts.

In the back room, Zhang CuiShan thought about Yin SuSu's murder of Dragon Gate Escort Agency again. He felt very remorseful about the act. When he suddenly saw Song YuanQiao's whisk of the sleeve, Zhang CuiShan felt awed, and thought, "Wu Dang inner power really does grow quicker the more the practitioner trains. When my sworn brother wanted to kill big brother, big brother really had no chance. But today, even if my sworn brother weren't blind, his martial arts wouldn't be much better than big brother's, if at all. In another ten years, my big and second brother should surpass my sworn brother."

Only to hear Qi TianBiao say, "Thank you, Hero Song, for sparing our lives. Goodbye!" Song YuanQiao and Muo ShengGu sent them out the door. Qi TianBiao said, "No need see us out." Song YuanQiao said, "It's not often that such renowned escort leaders would visit Wu Dang. Why shouldn't we escort you out? In the future, I'll surely visit your agencies should I get the chance." Qi TianBiao said, "Oh, you are too kind." After Song YuanQiao showed off his martial prowess, his demeanor remained the same, with no arrogance. Qi TianBiao gained a lot more respect for this eldest Wu Dang hero, and had lost most of his urge for revenge.

At this moment, Qi TianBiao suddenly saw a short but gallant looking man walk in the front door. Song YuanQiao said, "Fourth brother, let me introduce you to these guests." He then introduced everyone.

Zhang SongXi said, "The three came just in time. I have some items you might wish to see." And he took out three small packets, and gave one to each person. Qi TianBiao asked, "What are these?" Zhang SongXi said, "This is not a good place to open them. You should look at the contents outside." The three Wu Dang brothers then escorted the guests out the door.

Immediately afterwards, Muo ShengGu asked impatiently, "Fourth brother, where's fifth brother? Did he not come back with you?" Zhang SongXi said, "Go back inside to see your fifth brother. Your big brother and I will wait for these three guests to return." Muo ShengGu yelled, "Fifth brother's inside? These three escort leaders are coming back? What do we do then?" In his haste to see Zhang CuiShan, Muo ShengGu didn't even wait for Zhang SongXi's explanation, and hurriedly inside.

Just as he went back to the main hall, the three escort leaders really did return. They immediately bowed to Zhang SongXi and Song YuanQiao, who quickly returned bows. Yun He said, "I finally know now that the Wu Dang heroes were my saviors. To think that I derided your Master Zhang... I feel incredibly ashamed." As he spoke, Yun He picked up his hands, and slapped himself on the face ten times, until his face is pure red. Song YuanQiao doesn't know what's going on, and quickly stopped him.

Zhang SongXi said, "Escort Leader Yun is a true loyalist of China. All patriotic Chinese wish to get rid of those Mongols, and return China to its rightful owner. Helping in this regards is what people like us should do. No need to say thanks."

Yun He said, "You saved my whole family, and everyone in my escort agency. To think that I had no clue these last five

years. I really hope you two can hit me a few times, to lessen my emotional embarrassment.”

Zhang SongXi said with a smile, “Don’t worry too much about the past. Out of respect for your actions, I’m sure even master would not mind those words you just said.” But even so, Yun He still felt uneasy.

Song YuanQiao doesn’t know what’s going on, and simply said a few courteous words. Qi TianBiao and Gong JiuGui also thanked profusely, but Zhang SongXi didn’t seem to care much for them. He only had kind words to say for Yun He. The three escort leaders insisted on paying respects to Zhang SanFeng. They each bowed in front of Zhang SanFeng’s meditation room. Then insisted to see Muo ShengGu to apologize. After more apologies and words of thanks, the three finally left.

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Afterwards, Zhang SongXi said, “Although they feel indebted to us, none of them spoke about the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. Looks like we still can’t resolve this issue.”

Song YuanQiao was about to ask what’s going on, when Zhang CuiShan came out from the back room. He yelled, “Big brother, I missed you so much.”

Song YuanQiao is a very mannerly person. So even though he’s meeting his long lost brother, and felt exuberant in his head, Song YuanQiao nonetheless simply bowed courteously, and said, “Fifth brother. You’ve finally come back.”

Before Zhang CuiShan could respond, Muo ShengGu asked impatiently, “Fifth brother. Didn’t you hear how rude those people are? You really do have a good temper. I would’ve

taught them a lesson.” Zhang CuiShan sighed, and said, “It’s a long story. After I tell you all, we really should try to seek an effective solution together.”

Yin LiTing said, “Don’t worry, fifth brother. The Dragon Gate Escort Agency failed in their duty to escort third brother safely back. Even if fifth brother really did kill them all, it would be because of your love for third brother, and so wouldn’t be that...”

Yu LianZhou yelled, “Sixth brother, are kind of nonsense are you speaking? If master hears these words, he’d lock you up for at least a month to repent. How can any of us kill a whole agency, including the elderly and the children?”

The other brothers all looked at Zhang CuiShan. All saw the solemn expression on his face. After a while, Zhang CuiShan said, “I didn’t kill anyone in the Dragon Gate Escort Agency. I didn’t forget master’s teachings.”

Song YuanQiao and his fellow brothers all breathed a sigh of relief. They didn’t really believe that Zhang CuiShan could do such a thing. But Shaolin was just so adamant about it, even said that they witnessed the whole event. And when the three escort leaders came to question him, Zhang CuiShan did not speak up and claim his innocence. So all the brothers felt some uneasiness. Only when Zhang CuiShan spoke these words did they finally put to rest these nagging thoughts. They all thought, “There must be some problematic details that will make this hard to resolve. But as long as he didn’t kill them, everything will eventually be ok.”

With this thought, Muo ShengGu asked why those three escort leaders returned. Zhang SongXi said, “Among these three leaders, Yun He’s character is the best. Using his fame, Yun He helped organized many people in his region to rise

against the Mongol government.” The other brothers immediately expressed their admiration for his actions.

Muo ShengGu said, “Never thought he’d some this type of a person. Hold your story until I come back...” As he spoke, Muo ShengGu quickly ran out the room.

Zhang SongXi stopped talking, and they asked Zhang CuiShan about Fire-Ice Island. When Zhang CuiShan spoke about the six months of mostly daylight, six months of mostly night, everyone gasped in astonishment. Zhang CuiShan said, “It’s hard to tell the directions on that island. The sun doesn’t exactly rise in the east.” He then talked about the different strange plants and animals on the island.

Muo ShengGu came back in the midst of his tale, said, “I went to apologize to Escort Leader Yun. Told him I respect him as an upright man.” Everyone knew this little brother’s straightforward temper, and had long figured that this was his reason for leaving.

Yin LiTing said, “Seventh brother. Fourth brother held off his tale for you. But fifth brother’s story about the Fire-Ice Island is even more exciting.” Muo ShengGu jumped up and said, “Really?” Zhang SongXi said, “Yun He had prepared everything in detail...” Muo ShengGu shook his hand, said, “Fourth brother. Terribly sorry, but can you hold on a moment...” Zhang CuiShan chuckled, and said, “Seventh brother doesn’t want to miss out on anything.” So he repeated his tale about the Fire-Ice Island. Afterwards, Muo ShengGu said, “Odd, so odd! Fourth brother, you can speak now.”

Zhang SongXi said, “Yun He prepared everything in detail. At the right moment, he’d start the rebellion. But a major participant was a traitor. Three days before the rebellion

would start, this traitor took the list of rebel names to the government.”

Muo ShengGu yelled, “Oh, no!”

Zhang SongXi said, “There was some coincidence involved. I had a beef with the mayor of his home city Tai Yuan. That night when I entered the mayor’s mansion, I saw that traitor and the mayor having a secret discussion. I heard their plan to give this info to the national government, and to put down the rebellion using troops. So I went into their room and killed both people. Then took the list of names and returned to Wu Dang. When they found the list of names missing, Yun He and his cohorts knew how terrible the consequences would be. Not only can they not start the rebellion now, but every person on that list would in grave danger. They wanted to send a message to all people involved, but the city gate was closed for the night already. The next morning, the city gate remained closed due to the mayor’s assassination. Yun He and his cohorts were sweating out the situation, as their crime would mean execution of their families, plus the families of their friends on the list. But as the days passed, everything remained fine. Since the police could not capture the assassin, this whole thing eventually passed away. When Yun He found out that the traitor died in the mayor’s mansion, he thought that someone helped him. But didn’t realize it was me.

Yin LiTing said, “I bet you gave him the list of names in that packet, right?” Zhang SongXi said, “That’s correct.”

Muo ShengGu said, “What about Gong JiuGui? How did you help him?”

Zhang SongXi said, “Gong JiuGui’s kung fu is certainly quite formidable, but his character’s not nearly as good as Yun He.

Six years ago, he escorted a shipment to the Yun Nan province. At the city of Kun Ming, he took an order of jewelry worth about six hundred thousand taels of silver. Which he needed to escort back to the capital city of Da Du. But he encountered a problem in the Jiang Xi Province. When passing by the city of Po Yang, three of the 'Four Brothers of Po Yang' attacked him, and took his jewelry. Not even Gong JiuGui's entire fortune comes close to the worth of these jewels. Besides, this failed delivery would surely destroy his reputation. After pondering for a while in the inn, he wanted to commit suicide.

“‘The Four Brothers of Po Yang’ are certainly not bandits. So why did they take these jewels? You see, the eldest brother got in trouble with the law, and landed on death row in prison. About to be executed, his three brothers tried twice to bust him out of prison. They failed both times, and the prison became even more closely guarded. Knowing that officials are corrupt, the three brothers wanted to bribe them using this jewelry, to lessen their big brother's crimes. I was moved by their friendship, and helped sneak their big brother out of prison. In return, I asked them to give Gong JiuGui his jewelry. Gong JiuGui might not be the greatest person in the world, but haven't really done anything bad in his life. He didn't befriend any officials in Da Du, nor ever oppress the poor. So I figured his life was worth saving. I told 'The Four Brothers of Po Yang' not to mention my name, just leave me the jewelry bag. So when I handed him the bag, Gong JiuGui understood what had happened.”

Yu LianZhou said, “You did the right thing, fourth brother.”

Muo ShengGu said, “Fourth brother, what did you give Qi TianBiao?” Zhang SongXi said, “I gave him nine ‘Soul-Splitting Centipede Darts’.” The five listeners all gasped. ‘Soul-Splitting Centipede Dart’ is very famous in the martial

world. It's the hidden weapon used by the rich aristocrat Wu YiMang.

Zhang SongXi said, "Thinking back, I was too reckless when I dealt with this situation. That day, while Qi TianBiao was escorting a shipment, he offended a disciple of Wu YiMang. The two fought, with Qi TianBiao seriously injuring that disciple with a punch. Qi TianBiao immediately realized that he's in trouble after landing this punch. So he quickly completed the shipment, and hurriedly back to his hometown Jin Ling, where he can ask several friends for help. But unfortunately, Wu YiMang caught him up at Luo Yang city, and challenged him to a duel at the city's western gate." Yin LiTing said, "Wu YiMang's kung fu is very good. Qi BiaoTing is not his match."

Zhang SongXi said, "You're right. Qi TianBiao knew this too. So he asked the Qiao brothers of Luo Yang to help him. The Qiao brothers agreed immediately, and said, 'You should know that with our kung fu ability, we are no match for Wu YiMang. So you just want us there for support. Don't worry, we will arrive on time.'"

Muo ShengGu said, "The Qiao brothers are hidden weapon experts. With their help, three against one, they might have a chance. But did Wu YiMang get any help?"

Zhang SongXi said, "No. But something happened to the Qiao brothers. The next morning, Qi TianBiao went to the Qiao brothers' house to discuss battle plans. But the servant said that the brothers had left town for an emergency. Qi TianBiao was furious. Several years before, Qi TianBiao helped the brothers out of a major dilemma. He didn't expect these brothers to sneak away during his moment of need. Knowing Wu YiMang's merciless ways, Qi TianBiao knew he would not survive this encounter. He wrote a will and gave it

to a subordinate. Then went to the west gate for the appointment.”

“Of course, I saw everything. So that day I disguised myself as a beggar, and sat under a tree outside the west gate. Wu YiMang and Qi TianBiao came one after the other. Soon after they started fighting, Wu YiMang used his ‘Soul-Splitting Centipede Dart’. Qi TianBiao knew he couldn’t evade it, and simply closed his eyes to wait for death. I swooped in at this moment, and caught the dart. Wu YiMang was shocked and furious. He asked if I were a member of the Beggar’s Clan. I just smiled in silence. He then fired eight more darts. I caught every single one. His darts really were quite powerful. But if I had used Wu Dang skills, catching them would still be easy. However, I didn’t want him to know who I am. So I pretended to have a crippled left leg and right arm. Then using only my left hand, I caught them all using Shaolin skills. The seventh dart was a really close call, as the tip narrowly missed my palm. Wu YiMang really did thought I was a Shaolin disciple, and asked which divine reverend was my master. I pretended to be a deaf-mute, and just muttered some nonsensical stuff. Knowing that he couldn’t defeat me, Wu YiMang went away angrily. He never left home after that event.”

Muo ShengGu shook his head and said, “Fourth brother, Wu YiMang might be a bad guy, but Qi TianBiao isn’t a good guy either. Why did you risk saving him?”

Zhang SongXi said, “I was just felt nosy at the time. Besides, I also didn’t know the prowess of Wu YiMang’s darts.”

Being a straightforward person, Muo ShengGu didn’t figure out Zhang SongXi’s reasoning. But Zhang CuiShan did so immediately. His fourth brother did all this to lessen the hatred for him, due to the Dragon Gate Escort Agency

murder. Zhang SongXi knew the importance of these three escort leaders. Should there ever be any problems with the escort agencies, these three people would surely represent them. So Zhang SongXi purposely helped them beforehand in case of an event like this. Despite looking like 'coincidences', Zhang SongXi must've spent countless hours waiting for these events to occur.

Zhang CuiShan said, "Fourth brother, you and I are closer than blood brothers. I won't need to say the word 'thanks' to you. This whole incident, unfortunately, was all caused by your fifth sister-in-law." Then he told what exactly happened at the Dragon Gate Escort Agency that night. At the end, he said, "Fourth brother, do you know how we should resolve this?"

Zhang SongXi thought for a while, then said, "I have to ask the master first. But we can't bring the dead back alive. Fifth sister-in-law has also changed her ways. A person who has corrected his mistakes should be given a second chance. Big brother, don't you think so too?"

Song YuanQiao hesitated a moment, due to the severity of a ninety-plus murder case. But Yu LianZhou nodded and said, "I agree!"

Yin LiTing was most afraid of second brother. He knew that big brother has a soft heart, and can be easily persuaded. But second brother is cold and objective, and might be too harsh on fifth sister-in-law. Yin LiTing didn't know that Yu LianZhou had already heard this story. He had long forgiven Yin SuSu. Seeing his second brother's nod, Yin LiTing said happily, "Yeah, if others ask. Fifth brother can just say that he wasn't the murderer, and nothing else. He wouldn't be lying this way either." Song YuanQiao said in a scolding tone, "How could fifth brother purposely hide the truth like that? This is

not an option.” Yin LiTing asked, “Then what do we do?”

Song YuanQiao said, “In my opinion, after master’s birthday. We should first find fifth brother’s son. Then we’ll have the gathering at the Yellow Crane Restaurant. After taking care of the Xie Xun issue, us six brothers, plus fifth sister-in-law, will go down to the south. Each of us will do ten good deeds within three years.” Zhang SongXi said, “Good idea. If we could save one or two hundred people, we can partially make up for these deaths.” Yu LianZhou said, “I like this idea. There’s no point in further punishing fifth sister-in-law. Even her death wouldn’t solve any problem.”

Zhang CuiShan was exhilarated at the solution. He said, “Let me tell SuSu.” He then told his wife what Song YuanQiao proposed, and that his brothers would look for Wuji after their master’s birthday.

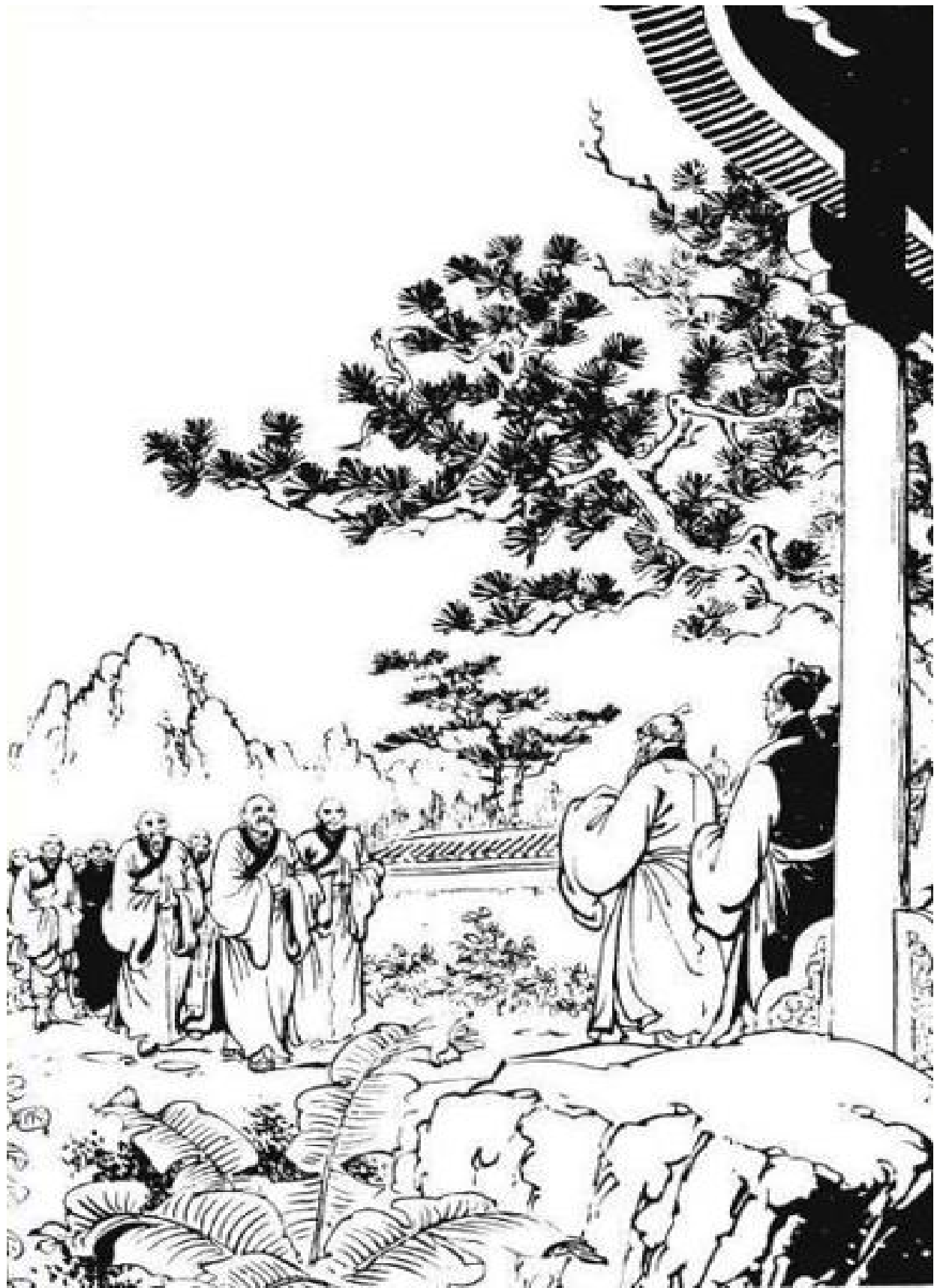
Yin SuSu’s illness was due to the loss of Wuji anyway. So these words settled her down a great deal. She thought that with the Six Heroes of Wu Dang’s abilities, they could surely find Wuji.

Zhang CuiShan then went to see Yu DaiYan. The brothers both felt joy and sadness as they reunited.

End of Chapter 9

Chapter 10 - Hundred Years Celebration Brings Heartbreak

(Translated by Faerie Queen and dgfds01)



The three monks Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were the figures that comprised the group known as the Four Divine Reverends of Shaolin. Aside from Reverend Kong Jian who has died, the other three Reverends has all arrived here today.

After the passage of a few days, it was already the eighth day of the fourth month. Tomorrow will be Zhang SanFeng's one hundredth year birthday and he knew that his disciples most definitely would have prepared a festive celebration. Because Yu DaiYan was crippled and Zhang CuiShan was missing, there would undoubtedly be lack amongst their celebration. Yet, in one's time, to be able to celebrate your one hundredth birthday was nevertheless considered as something special. Furthermore, during this period, he has also entered isolated meditation in order to study the practice of the "Tai Chi Skill" and had already fully comprehended its true essence. From now on, the sect of Wu Dang can fully exhibit its colours within the martial arts world, not being inferior to even the martial arts of Shaolin that was passed down from Northern India's DaMo. Therefore during the early dawn of that morning, Zhang SanFeng exited from his isolation.

A clear whistling sound was heard as his sleeve fluttered slightly and the two door boards opened up with an "ah" sound. The first thing that Zhang SanFeng saw wasn't anything or anybody else, but was rather the disciple he had thought and yearned for endlessly during the last ten years, Zhang CuiShan.

Zhang SanFeng closed his eyes, believing that his eyes must have played a trick on him. But Zhang CuiShan had already thrown himself into Zhang SanFeng's embrace, repeatedly crying out the words, "Master!" In the midst of his emotional

state, he had actually forgotten to kneel down and perform obeisance. Five joyful voices coming from Song YuanQiao and the others cried out together, "Congratulations master! Fifth brother has returned to us!"

Zhang SanFeng has lived a total of one hundred years and has seek enlightenment for more than eighty years now. The clarity of pure truth had long existed within the depths of his heart, for he has long ago forsaken all traces of longing or desire for the millions of material objects of the world. But the love he shared with his seven disciples was as genuine as that of a father and son, thus when he suddenly saw Zhang CuiShan reappear in front of him, he couldn't help himself from holding him tightly within his embrace. He was so overwhelmed with joy that tears emerged from his eyes.

The group of brothers all attended to their Master, serving him in his grooming and cleansing, bringing him a clean set of clothing. Zhang CuiShan did not dare to report any sort of news that would excite anger, and therefore only talked about the exotic adventures and rare entities of the Ice-Fire Island. Zhang SanFeng having heard that Zhang CuiShan had already married became even more joyful and asked, "Where is your wife now? Quickly bring her here to see me."

Zhang CuiShan knelt down on the floor and said, "Master, your worthless disciple has dared to take a wife without first gaining your permission." Zhang SanFeng stroked his beard and laughingly replied, "You were stranded on the Ice-Fire Island for ten years, unable to return home. Are you suppose to wait ten years and reported to me before you could take a wife? What a silly, silly assertion! Quickly get up, there is no need to admit to any wrong. Zhang SanFeng does not have such a old-fashioned disciple." Zhang CuiShan continued to kneel, refusing to get up, "But my wife is not of an orthodox background. She ... she is the daughter of Heavenly Eagle

sect's sect-leader."

Zhang SanFeng continues to stroke his beard and said with a laugh, "And what matter is that? As long as your wife's character is honest and her heart is good, then that is all that matters. Even if she is not a good person, having arrived here at our mountain, can we not slowly change and guide her towards good? So what if she is from the Heavenly Eagle sect? CuiShan, you have to understand that in life one should always take caution to never have a heart that is too restricted in breadth. You must never look down on others just because you reside in the position of the so-called orthodox sects. The two words of "good" and "evil" were originally hard to differentiate. A member of the orthodox sect when harbouring thoughts of impurity and immorality will be considered as a wicked villain, and similarly if a member from the evil sect harbours a heart that is completely directed towards goodness, then that person is a gentleman." Zhang CuiShan was overjoyed, for he never would have thought that the very burden which had weighted heavily upon his heart for the last ten years could be so easily resolved by just a few words from his master. A beaming smile immediately lighted up Zhang CuiShan's face as he stood up.

Zhang SanFeng continued to say, "Your father-in-law, sect-master Yin is a person whom I have wanted to make acquaintances with for very long now. I am truly respectful towards his powerful martial arts and the fact that he is a brave, forthright and extraordinary man. Although his character is somewhat extreme and his actions may be a bit peculiar, yet he is not a despicable scoundrel. We can certainly make friends with him." Song YuanQiao and the others thought to themselves, "Master really does treat fifth brother with profound love. He even went as far as extending his love towards all those under brother's roof, willing to

make acquaintances with a big demonic lord like his father-in-law." At this moment, a young Taoist apprentice came in and reported, "Heavenly Eagle sect's Sect-Master Yin has sent somebody here to deliver presents to Uncle Zhang."

Zhang SanFeng said with a smile, "Your father-in-law has sent you presents CuiSan, go out to receive your guests!" Zhang Cui Shan replied, "Yes."

Yin LiTing said, "I'm going with fifth brother." Zhang SongXi laughed and said, "But it's not Golden Whip Hero old master Jie who has sent the presents, why must you follow out with such haste?" Yin LiTing's face flushed a beet red while he continued to follow Zhang CuiShan outside.

Upon entering the main reception room, they saw two old men standing there dressed in the attire of a servant, with straight cloth hats. As soon as they saw Zhang CuiSan come out, they immediately rushed forward and knelt down together in an act of reverence while saying, "Young master, many blessings to you. We, your humble servants Yin WuFu, Yin WuLu bow down to you." Zhang CuiShan returned the greeting by raising his joined hands and saying, "Housekeepers, please do get up" while silently thinking to himself, "The names of these two servants are so strange. The typical servant is usually given a name that blesses the house by containing words along the lines of 'providence, well-being, blessings, opulence, longevity and happiness'. Why is it that these two people are called 'the un-blest', and the 'un-prosperous'?" Zhang CuiShan then subsequently noticed that on Yin WuFu's face was an extremely long scar left by a saber, stretching from the right corner of his forehead all the way downwards, passing over the tip of the nose and stopping at the far left corner of his lips. Yin WuLu's face on the other hand was filled with pockmarks. These two men looked to be more than fifty years old, their appearances

were extremely ugly and unpleasant.

Zhang CuiShan continued to say, "Are my father and mother-in-law well? I was originally planning to engage in a little preparation before your mistress and I immediately went to pay our respects to our honoured loved ones. But I never expected that father and mother would pay us a visit first, how can I be worthy of such generosity? The two of you must be extremely tired having travelled such a far distance, please take a seat and have a cup of tea." Yin WuFu and Yin WuLu did not dare to sit down, but only came forward and respectfully presented the checklist for the gifts while saying, "Our master and madam said to tell you that these are merely meagre and humble presents, we hope that young master can accept them with pleasure."

Zhang CuiShan said, "Thank you!" and opened the checklist of gifts. He was shocked to see that on the ten or so pieces of darkly coloured gold paper were listed a total of more than two hundred gifts. The first listed gift was "Exquisite jade lions - a pair," the second was "Emerald phoenix - a pair" and after the listings of an endless number of treasures was "High Grade Purple Wolf Drawing Brushes - one hundred pieces," "Imperial tributes, Tang dynasty ink - 20 slabs," "Xuan¹ paper made with Mulberry worm silk - a hundred sheets" "Top Quality Duan² Ink-Stones - 8 squares." Because the master of the Heavenly Eagle Sect heard that his honoured guest was well-versed in the art of writing, he thus sent over an extremely expensive pile of pens, ink, paper and ink stone. On top of that were clothes, shoes, crowns and belts. Yin WuFu turned around to exit the room, only to return with ten baggage carriers, every one of them carrying two loads balanced on a shoulder pole, which they placed to the sides of the room.

Zhang CuiShan was silently fretting to himself, "I grew up in a simple abode amongst the humble mountainous environment. What use do I have for these expensive gifts? Yet these gifts were bestowed by my father-in-law and brought here from afar, it would be too disrespectful if I don't accept it." Therefore he could only express words of gratitude and accept the gifts while saying "Your young mistress has contracted a slight illness through the arduous journey. Perhaps you can reside on the mountain for a few days before you see her?" Yin WuFu replied, "Master and madam are both extremely desirous to hear about young mistress, they commanded us to report back to them right away. If it is not too straining for young mistress, your humble servant I would like to request just one look at her and then we will retreat immediately."

Zhang CuiShan replied, "If that is the case, then please wait here for a moment" while he returned to his room and told his wife about the situation. Yin SuSu was extremely happy and briefly fixed her hair before going out to the smaller reception rooms to reunite with her two family members. While she asked about her father, mother and brother's well being, she also invited these two servants for a meal and some drinks. Afterwards, Yin WuFu and Yin WuLu asked their young master and mistress for the permission to leave.

Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "Father and mother-in-law sent us such generous gifts, I should really grant a hefty reward to these two people. Yet I'm afraid that even if I gathered together all the money on this mountain, its meagre sum would still be hardly worthy of a mention." Zhang CuiShan was by nature magnanimous and therefore does not take such matters to heart. With a laugh, he said instead, "Your young mistress has married a penniless master who can't afford to grant you any rewards. Housekeepers, please do excuse us." Yin WuFu replied, "Please do not say

such things young master. To have the opportunity to meet the fifth hero of Wu Dang is my greatest pleasure and is a honour worth much more than a reward of a thousand pounds of gold." Zhang CuiShan thought to himself, "This housekeeper expresses and enunciates his words with such poetic eloquence, he seems to be a person with an academic background." When they arrived at the median gates, Yin WuFu said, "Young master, please cease your steps here. We hope that you and young mistress will arrive to our home as soon as possible in order to lessen master and madam's longing. The whole sect will also be anticipating the day when they can be granted with a glimpse of your charisma." Zhang CuiShan laughed.

Yin WuLu said, "There is still one little thing that I need to report to you young master. When my brothers and I were delivering the presents to the mountain, we encountered three escorts gathered within an inn in the town of Xiang Yang. Amongst the conversation of these three men, there was mention of you." Zhang CuiShan said, "Oh? What did they say?" Yin WuLu said, "one man said, 'although we are much indebted to the seven heroes of Wu Dang, yet the seventy odd lives of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency cannot be forgotten just like that.' The three of them decided that since they themselves cannot participate in this incident, they therefore wanted to go to the KaiFeng City's Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions, Old hero Tan to stand out and dispute over this incident with you young master." Zhang Cui Shan nodded his head and did not say anything.

Yin WuFu reached inside his pockets and took out three small flags which he then presented to Zhang Cui Shan with both hands and said, "When your humble servants overheard that these three escorts were daring to dig up on the land governed by the Earth God³, this incident is already considered as the business of our Heavenly Eagle Sect."

As soon as he saw the three small flags, Zhang CuiShan could help but be taken back for he saw embroidered on one flag the head of a vivacious tiger, roaring fiercely towards the heavens while in a crouching position. It was obviously the flag that represented the “Crouching Tiger Escort Agency.” Embroidered on the second small flag was a white crane soaring through the clouds, which would naturally be the agency flag that symbolized the “JinYang Escort Agency” for the white crane amongst the white clouds symbolized the head escort Yun He⁴. As for the third small flag, there were nine swallows embroidered with gold thread, incorporating the word “Swallow” in “Cloud Swallow Escort Agency” and the “Nine” in their head escort Gong JiuJia’s⁵ name.

Zhang CuiShan asked with curiosity, “Why did you take their escort flags?” Yin WuFu replied, “Young master, you are the Heavenly Eagle sect’s honoured guest, who did Qi TianBiao and Gong JiuJia think they were? Especially since the seven heroes of Wu Dang has performed good deeds for them before, how dare they go to ask an old bloke such as the so-called “Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions” Tan RuiLai from the KaiFeng City to come and pester young master you? Is that not ridiculous? Therefore when we heard the three escorts’ offensive words of disrespect ...” Zhang CuiShan remarked, “Those words really can’t be considered as being particularly disrespectful.” Yin WuFu said, “Yes, but that is because young master you are so magnanimous and forgiving, such is something that others cannot compare with. But my brothers and I really could not restrain ourselves from taking care of those three escorts and seizing the escort flags of their agencies.”

Zhang CuiShan was greatly taken back as he thought about how people like Qi TianBiao were all lords that ruled over the

escort agencies of a region and who have long made a name for themselves within the martial arts world. Even though they can't be considered as great or ultimate figures of the martial arts world, yet they all had their own unique abilities. How can it be that the three servants of his father-in-law's household can calmly say with such ease that they have 'taken care of them'? However, even if Yin WuFu was just boasting for show, yet they were indeed able to obtain the three agencies' escort flags. Forget just taking it from right under their eyes, but even to steal it secretly would prove itself to be a hard task. Can it be that they used some kind of tranquilizing sedative or soporific incense at the inn to harm the three heads escorts? Thus he asked, "How were you able to obtain these three escort flags?"

Yin WuFu replied, "At that time, my second brother WuLu was the one who issued the challenge. We set up a time to meet with them at the Southern gates of Xiang Yang for a duel. It was the three of us up against the three of them. We've already stated before that if they lose, they must leave behind their escort flags and chop off one of their arms, while also promising to never step foot back into the Wu Bei Province for the rest of their lives." Zhang CuiShan was becoming increasingly perplexed as he listened, no longer did he dared to take the two servants in front of him lightly. He asked, "Then what happened?" Yin WuFu replied, "Nothing much. They just left behind their escort flags, severed their left arm and stated that they will not take one step back into the Wu Bei Province for the rest of their lives."

Zhang CuiShan was secretly frightened as he thought, "These Heavenly Eagle Sect members are much too vicious in their ways" while his eyebrows knotted together unconsciously. Yin WuLu said, "If young master you are displeased with your unworthy servants for issuing too light of a punishment, then we can immediately go after them to

finish the three of them off.” Zhang Cui Shan hurriedly insisted, “No! Not light at all. It’s severe enough already!” Yin WuFu said, “We also felt that because the purpose of our trip was to bring gifts to young master you, it is therefore a very wonderful and joyous event. If we killed any lives, it may ruin such a blessed event.” Zhang CuiShan said, “That’s right. How very thoughtful and considerate of you all. You just said that there were three of you who came, but where is that third person now?” Yin WuFu replied, “There is still another brother called Yin WuShou⁶. After we took care of the three escorts, we were worried that the Sacred Spear old fool Tan would finally hear of the news and would still dare to come forward and bother young master you, therefore Yin WuShou has gone to KaiFeng City. He asks your humble servant I to express his regards on his behalf.” After saying this, he knelt down to the floor and bowed.

Zhang CuiShan also gave a bow in return of the gesture and said, “That’s much too kind of him” while thinking to himself that this Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions Tan RuiLai’s name has always been well-known and respected for it has been almost forty years since he established a name for himself. Now because of him, Yin WuShou will go barging into the KaiFeng City. Regardless of whomever may be hurt, it will still cause him to be ridden with guilt. Thus he said, “I have long since heard the great name of the Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions, they say that old master Tan is a true gentleman. I would like to ask the two of you to please go to the KaiFeng City and to tell brother WuShou not to quarrel with old master Tan anymore incase the two sides get into an argument and subsequently start a fight, which I’m afraid will yield disasterous results.”

Yin WuLu smiled ever so faintly and said , “Young master, there’s no need to worry. That old fool Tan won’t dare to meddle with my youngest brother. When my brother tells him

not to stick his nose into this business, he will listen to his orders.” Zhang CuiShan murmured a “Really?” while silently asking himself how can this Sacred Spear Ruling Eight Directions Tan RuiLai possibly allow himself to be so easily bullied? Even if he may be an old man now, yet within the KaiFeng City, the Tan family has at least one or two dozen disciples who are highly skilled in martial arts, why would they be scared of a Yin WuShou? Yin WuFu could read the skeptical incredulity on Zhang CuiShan's face, therefore said, “The old bloke Tan was defeated by Yin WuShou twenty years ago, besides he also has some major discreditable information in our hands now. Please take care now young master.” The two of them then paid their final respects and departed.

Zhang CuiShan stood there clutching the three escort flags within his hands, debating for a moment. He originally wanted to send these two people to help him out in his search for Wuji's current whereabouts. But when he thought to how mentioning this incident to an outsider might prove to be unwise for although he did not place much importance on his own name, yet it would still no doubt affect his second brother's eminent reputation. Therefore he could only slowly tread back to his bedroom.

Yin SuSu was lying on the bed rereading through the checklist of presents, overwhelmed with gratitude at the love her parents had shown towards her. But when she thought to how at this moment, Wuji's whereabouts were still unknown, she was also overwhelmed with a burning heartache. When she saw her husband enter the room with an fretful expression, she immediately asked with alarm, “What's wrong?”

Zhang CuiShan asked, “What are the backgrounds of those three people WuFu, WuLu and WuShou?”

Yin SuSu has been married to her husband for ten years now, but because she knew that within his heart, there always existed discontent towards the Heavenly Eagle sect, she therefore purposely refrained from relating to him the details of her family and the sect's background. Similarly, Zhang CuiShan would never ask her. Now only when she heard her husband ask her himself, did she finally say, "Twenty years ago, these three people were actually great bandits that ruled over the Southwestern regions. But one time, they were surrounded by many powerful fighters all at once and knew that they were not going to be able to escape. At that time, my father happened to pass by and when he saw how in the midst of their hopeless battle, they still manage to uphold their integrity and refused to surrender, my father therefore lent out a helping hand and rescued them. The three of them originally had different surnames, so of course they weren't brothers. But in order to prove their gratefulness towards my father for saving their lives, they thus solemnly vowed that for their rest of their lives, they will act as his servant and will cast off their original names and change it to Yin WuFu, Yin WuLu and Yin WuShou instead. Ever since I was small, I would be very courteous towards them and dared not to treat or view them as real servants. My father told me that in terms of martial arts and fame, there probably would be few famed fighters of the martial arts world who could compete with them."

Zhang CuiShan nodded and said, "I see" before describing the incident of how they decapitated other people's right arm and seized another's escort flag. Yin SuSu's scowled and said, "Their intentions were originally good, but they don't understand that the disciples of the orthodox sects do things differently from the evil sects. CuiShan, I'm afraid that incident has caused you more trouble, I ... I really don't know what to do about this." After a sigh, she continued, "After we

find Wuji, I think we had better return to the Ice-Fire Island.” When she suddenly heard Yan LiTing call from outside the door, “Brother, come and flex your writing skills for us to write a pair of birthday celebratory phrases” he laughed before continuing, “Sister, don’t blame me for dragging brother away from you, but he is after all the ‘Iron Brush, Silver Hook.’”

That afternoon, the six brothers split up, supervising and giving commands to the culinary help, while the little Taoist apprentices cleaned around and decorated the whole Purple Paradise Hall. The celebratory words that Zhang CuiShan penned were also displayed within the main reception hall. Everywhere was filled with a celebratory atmosphere.

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During the early dawn of the next day, Song YuanQiao and his brothers all changed into a newly tailored set of clothing and were all just about to go and assist Yu DaiYan so that the seven of them could go to their master as a group to offer their birthday blessings, when suddenly an Taoist apprentice came in and presented a calling card. It was Song YuanQiao who took the invitation but Zhang SongXi’s eyes were quick and saw that written on the card were the words, “Ku Lun Sect students He TaiChong accompanied by his disciples wishes master Zhang longevity comparable with the mountains.” Zhang SongXi exclaimed with alarm, “The sect master of Kun Lun has personally come to celebrate master’s birthday? When did he arrive in the Central Plains?” Muo ShengGu asked, “Did Madam He come as well?” He TaiChong’s wife Ban ShuXian was his martial arts sister, and rumour has it that the level of her martial arts were not below the likes of the sect master. Zhang SongXi said, “Her name is not listed on the calling card.” Song YuanQiao said, “This guest is of great stature and importance, we should ask

master to personally receive him” as he hurriedly ran out to report to Zhang SanFeng.

Zhang SanFeng said, “I have heard that Mister Iron Zither very rarely comes to the Central Plains, I can’t believe that he would even be aware of this old man’s birthday.” He then quickly stepped outside while bringing his six disciples along with him. When they saw Mister Iron Zither He TaiChong, they found that he did not look to be of a particularly old age. Dressed in a yellow gown, there was a sort of celestial holiness to his appearance. His expression was peaceful while also not lacking the solemn dignity the sect master of a famous Orthodox sect should have. Behind him stood a group of eight disciples comprised of male and female, XiHua Zi and Wei SiNiang were also included within the group.

He TaiChong performed obeisance and expressed birthday blessings to Zhang SanFeng. Zhang San Feng continually expressed gratitude and raised his hands to form a representation of greeting in return. Song YuanQiao and his five brothers all knelt down and bowed their heads to the ground, while He Tai Chong also knelt and bowed in return while saying, “The fame of the six heroes of Wu Dang spreads through the universe, how can I be worthy of such a generous act of respect?”

Zhang SanFeng led He TaiChong and his disciples into the main reception hall, and just when the host and guests had the chance to sit down and have tea be served, a young Taoist apprentice came in with a calling card in hand, presenting it to Song YuanQiao. It announced that the Kong Tong 5 elders have all arrived together. During the present era's martial arts world, the sects Shaolin and Wu Dang had the most illustrious recognition. E-Mei followed after them, and then came Kong Tong. In terms of status and rank, the likes of the Kong Tong five elders were on the same level as

Song YuanQiao. But Zhang San Feng was extremely gracious by nature, thus he stood up and said, "The Kong Tong five elders have arrived. Brother He, please wait here for a short while this old priest goes out to receive the guests."

He TaiChong thought to himself, "To receive guests like the Kong Tong 5 elders, just sending out a disciple is good enough."

Not soon after, the Kong Tong elders entered accompanied by their disciples. After that, the Heavenly Fists School, Sea Salt Sect, Huge Whale Clan, Wu Shan Clan and many figures of eminence and importance from other schools and clans have also arrived on the mountain to express their blessings for the birthday. Song YuanQiao and his brothers had originally intended for this day to be a celebration between their master and his disciples, they never expected that so many guests would arrive as well. Each of the six disciples were all bustling around, receiving guests without a moment's chance to rest. What Zhang SanFeng disliked the most throughout his life were these unnecessary rites and customs, thus during his seventy, eighty and ninetieth birthday, he would purposely remind his disciples to not alarm outsiders. But ironically on his one hundredth birthday, the fundamental core of the marital arts world would be gathered together here. It eventually got to be that within the Purple Paradise Hall, there wasn't even enough chairs for the guests to sit in. Song YuanQiao could only send people to go outside to bring in some round rocks and closely packed them together amongst the hall. The sect masters and clan leaders of the various sects and clans were all afforded a chair, but their disciples could only sit on the rocks. All the teacups were used, and they could only resort to using rice bowls and meal bowls to serve the tea.

Zhang SongXi pulled Zhang CuiShan into the side rooms

before asking, "Brother, have you noticed anything?" Zhang CuiShan replied, "They've all planned beforehand to meet here. Although they were fully aware of what to expect, and confident about who they will see, yet some people would purposely feign surprised and end up making their masquerade all the more obvious." Zhang SongXi said, "That's right. They did not come with true intentions of celebrating master's birthday." Zhang CuiShan said, "Celebrating the birthday is just their excuse, when a planned interrogation comprises their true intentions." Zhang SongXi said, "But they're not trying to interrogate master. The case of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency will very unlikely have the power of bringing Mr. Iron Zither He TaiChong to here." Zhang CuiShan said, "Yes. These people are all here because of the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun."

Zhang SongXi laughed coldly and said, "It seems that they've grossly underestimated the Wu Dang disciples. Even if they wanted to intimidate us with sheer numbers, did they think that a Wu Dang disciple would sell out their own friend? Brother, even if this Xie Xun is indeed a malicious and unforgivable crook, he is nevertheless your sworn brother. His whereabouts most definitely cannot be revealed through your lips." Zhang CuiShan agreed, "You're absolutely right brother. But what should we do now?" Zhang SongXi pondered briefly before saying, "We could only be on our guards for now. As long as we brothers stick and stand by each other, our combined strengths can shatter through solid gold. What big waves and storms haven't the Seven Heroes of WuTang experienced? Why would we be afraid of them?"

Although Yu DaiYan was crippled, he was still considered as a part of the "Seven Heroes of Wu Tang," and behind the seven brothers, there still stood a grand Master Zhang SanFeng whose martial arts brilliancy can illuminate and astound the past and present, crowning and eclipsing over his

contemporaries. It was just that the two brothers were being considerate of the fact that their master has now reached the advanced age of a hundred, thus even though the situation in front of them right now was extremely complicated, yet all the brothers still hoped to handle everything by themselves. Naturally, they wouldn't want to have their master take action himself, yet they also wouldn't want him to worry. Zhang SongXi's words were an attempt at reassuring his martial arts brother, but within his heart he knew that today's problem would be a very complicated matter. To protect the sect's well-being today will truly prove to be very difficult challenge.

Back within the main reception hall, Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou and Yin LiTing were all accompanying the guests, engaging in light conversation. The three of them had already recognized that something was not right about the guests and were all estimating about the situation within their hearts.

In the midst of the conversations, another young apprentice came in and reported, "Disciples of the E-Mei sect, revered nun JingXuan along with five of her fellow martial art brothers and sisters have arrived to celebrate Grand Master's birthday." Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou both laughed at the same time while looking over at Yin LiTing. At that time Muo ShengGu was currently outside, accompanying the eight or nine guests into the direction of the reception hall. Zhang SongXi and Zhang CuiShan happened to be stepping out from the inner rooms right at that moment, and when they heard that the E-Mei disciples had arrived, they also grin slightly at Yin LiTing. Yin LiTing's face was beet red, while his motions betrayed his shyness. Zhang CuiShan grabbed his hand and said while laughing, "Come, come, come, let's go and welcome our guests."

As they both stepped out of the doors, they immediately saw this revered nun Jing Xuan was a nun already in her mid forties, built tall and sturdy, and possessing of a very commanding and arresting presence. Even though she was a female, yet she was taller than the average male by half a head. Amongst the five disciples standing behind her, there was a thin man in his mid thirties and two other nuns. Zhang CuiShan has already encountered revered nun Jing Xuan the other day on the boat amongst the sea. There were two other girls in their twenties, one's lips were pursed in a faint smile while the other girl had snow white skin and a long, slender body. This lovely girl's head was lowered while she fingered the corner of her clothing. This was of course the future wife to be of Yin LiTing, the daughter of the Golden Whip Ji family, Ji XiaoFu.

Zhang CuiShan approached and expressed greetings before accompanying the six guests inside. Yin LiTing was incredibly embarrassed and didn't even dare to take one glance into Ji XiaoFu's direction. When they approached the corridor, he observed that everyone had grouped together and were walking ahead of them therefore couldn't help himself from glancing over at Ji XiaoFu. During that time Ji XiaoFu's head was lowered, but just at that moment she also happened to look over at him, causing the eyes of both parties to meet. Ji XiaoFu's younger apprentice sister Bei JinYi gave out a loud cough, causing the two of them to be so embarrassed that they immediately whipped their heads back around, their faces flushed into a deep colour of red. Bei JinYi bursted out into a giggle and then said in a low voice, "Sister, that brother Yin is even shyer than you." Ji XiaoFu's body suddenly trembled a few times as her face turned into an ashen colour of grey, glistening tears were brimming in her eyes.

During all during this time, Zhang SongXi was assessing their

situation and calculating the dynamics between his sect and their enemies. When he saw the six disciples of the E-Mei sect come in, he felt somewhat relieved, as he thought to himself: "Miss Ji is sixth brother's future wife-to-be, if debating doesn't work out later and we do end up in a fight, the E-Mei sect may stand on our side to help us."

The various crowds of guests continued to arrive and time very quickly approached midday. There was absolutely no preparation within the Purple Paradise Hall beforehand, therefore what kind of banquet could they possibly arrange? The cook could only give each person a big bowl of white rice and arrange some simple vegetables and tofu on top. The six disciples of Wu Dang repeatedly expressed their apologies, but they've observed that while the guests were eating their rice, they kept repeatedly glancing towards the outer doors of the hall, as if they were expecting somebody.

Song YuanQiao and his brothers were carefully observing each person, and they noticed that each sect's sect master and each clan's clan leader were all retaining their dignity and status by not bringing any weapons along with them. But noises were emanating from the waist area of many of their disciples and clan members, very obviously a sign that they were carrying weapons on them. Only the disciples of the three sects E-Mei, Kun Lung and Kong Tong were empty handed. Song YuanQiao and all his brothers felt indignant anger within their hearts as they thought to themselves, "You all say that you are here to celebrate my master's birthday, but then why would you secretly conceal weapons?"

When they looked over the presents that everyone brought, they found that the majority of them were stuff that can be purchased at the last minute from the markets located at the foot of the mountain. Such things as birthday buns and birthday noodles were all that of which could be easily

bought in haste. Not only was it incredibly incongruous with the status of a martial arts Grand Master such as Zhang SanFeng, but it was similarly contradictory with regards to the reputation and illustriousness of the leaders and masters of each sect and clan.

Only the E-Mei sect presented a real present that was truly worthy of cherishing. Aside from the sixteen colours of valuable jade, there was also a large brocaded Taoist gown that had the word "Longevity" embroidered with gold thread one hundred times and in one hundred different styles of writing. It could be imagined the great deal of time that must have been spent in order to complete such a gown. Revered nun Jing Xuan explained to Zhang SanFeng, "This was completed by the combined efforts of ten female disciples of the E-Mei sect." Zhang SanFeng's heart was quite touched as he smiled and said, "E-Mei heroines' fists and sword skills have long been made famous throughout the world, and to have them bring this wonderful embroidered gown for this old man today is a huge honour indeed."

Zhang SongXi was closely observing everyone's expressions while thinking to himself, "What kind of powerful backup are they all waiting for? Coincidentally master does not enjoy festive celebrations and didn't invite Wu Dang's closest friends here ahead of time, otherwise we most definitely wouldn't be caught in such an circumstance today, where we are so greatly outnumbered and cut off from any assistance." His thoughts are based on the assertion that his master's acquaintances and friends have always spread throughout the world. The seven brothers have similarly performed many heroic deeds and charitable acts of kindness, forming many ties of goodwill. Had they been prepared ahead of time, they most definitely would have been able to invite a few dozen first rate fighters to come and attend today's birthday banquet.

Yu LianZhou who was standing by Zhang SongXi whispered, "We had originally intended to wait until after master's birthday before we distributed the Hero Invitations and conducted a Heroes Banquet at the WuChang⁷ town's Yellow Crane Restaurant. Can't believe that just this one error would cause the whole match to be controlled within the hands of others." He had already planned out everything within his head. He originally intended for Zhang Cui Shan to declare at the Hero's Banquet his justification of not betraying a friend. All members of the JiangHu world highly value and respect the notion of "righteousness," thus as long as Zhang CuiShan openly declare this as his reason, nobody could force him to take on the crime of being a unrighteous rogue. Even if there were those who wouldn't be willing to give up so easily, as long as there are a good number of first rate fighters that are true friends of the Wu Dang sect attending that banquet, then even if the situation is forced to the point of using martial arts to solve problems, the Wu Dang sect can at least not worry about losing. But who would have thought that the others would already have discerned this step and would actually use the excuse of celebrating a birthday to first gather together a sufficient number of helpers and charge up on the mountain to catch the unsuspecting and unprepared Wu Dang sect at a disadvantage?

Zhang SongXi whispered softly, "Since the situation has come to this point, the only choice we have is to fight to our deaths."

Amongst the seven heroes of Wu Dang, Zhang SongXi was the most astute and clever of them all. Whenever he came across a difficult or a tricky challenge, he would often be able to come up with a solution or plan to turn the tables around. Yu LianZhou secretly thought to himself, "If even fourth brother is at lost with what to do, I'm afraid that today the

blood of Wu Dang's six disciples will have to soak the earth of this mountain." If they were fighting one on one, amongst the guests today, there probably would be none who could compete with the six heroes of Wu Dang. But the situation right now on the mountaintop was not just a case of twenty against one, but was a thirty and forty against one sort of situation.

Zhang SongXi gave a light tug at the corner of Yu LianZhou's clothes, and the two of them went out to the quarters behind the reception hall. Once there, Zhang SongXi said, "In a moment, if all attempts at discussing and reasoning fails, we'll try to use words to pressure them into agreeing on an one on one fight with us. By using six matches to determine the winner, we will most definitely be residing in the undefeatable position. But they came with preparation and would have thought of this already, therefore they definitely won't agree to giving up after just six matches, it most likely will end up being a gang brawl sort of situation." Yu LianZhou nodded his head and said, "The first thing we must do is help our third brother to escape, we must not let him land into other people's hands to suffer through more torture. I will give this task to you. I'm afraid that our sister's health may not be very strong right now, tell fifth brother to invest all his attention on her. Other matters of countering the adversaries and defending against menaces can be left for the rest of us to chip in a little more work."

Zhang SongXi nodded his head and said, "Alright. That's what we will do then." He hesitated briefly before saying, "There may still be one measure we can take, it will be a dangerous step but we may pull through if we're lucky." Yu Lian Zhou said with jubilation, "Even if it is a dangerous step, we have no other choice. What brilliant plan do you have in mind Brother?" Zhang SongXi replied, "We can each mark a target opponent and once that person takes action, we will

each strike at our opponent by using just one stance, have them under our control. That way, they will all take caution and won't dare to pressure us through sheer force." Yu LianZhou debated for a while before saying, "If we can't capture them in one stance, the others will most definitely advance as backup help. But to be able to succeed with just one stance, I'm afraid ..." Zhang SongXi said, "Desperate times calls for desperate measures, I'm afraid that we have no choice but to be more vicious. Let us use the 'Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill'!" Yu LianZhou was taken back as he said, " 'Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill'? But today is master's birthday, wouldn't it be too cruel and deadly to use such a move?"

There was still actually a very powerful grappling technique within the Wu Dang sect that was called the "Tiger Claws." After Yu LianZhou became fully educated in this skill, he remain unsatisfied at how when the fighter clamps down, if their opponent's martial arts were advanced enough, they will be able to struggle free using their powerful energy reservoir. Therefore it will likely end up being a competition of inner energies. He thus purposely added variations to modify the "Tiger Claws" and finally created twenty new stances.

Before Zhang SanFeng accepted his disciples, he would closely examine and test into their character and morality while also discovering what their aptitude and talents were. Therefore after the seven disciples entered the sect, there was not one who hasn't been able to achieve greatness. Not only did they each inherit their sect's martial arts skills, but they were further able to modify and create new stances according to their own personal nature and character. It was originally not a surprising thing that Yu LianZhou would transform the stances of the "Tiger Claws." But after Zhang SanFeng watched him demonstrate these moves, he only

nodded his head and didn't input any further remarks.

When Yu LianZhou observed how his master didn't offer a single remark or comment, he knew that there most definitely must be some kind of problem with his stances. Therefore he concentrated his energies on examining and scrutinizing every move in hopes of further improving and advancing these stances. After a few months, when he once again demonstrated his revisions for his master, Zhang SanFeng was only heard to sigh and said, "LianZhou, these twelve stances of the Tigers claws are truly much more powerful than the ones that I taught you. But your every stance aims to attack one's vital points. No matter who sustains this stance, they may possibly suffer the misfortune of having their Yin forces damaged and their chances of procreation ended. Are the decent and respectable stances that I taught you not enough? Must one resort to ending another's chances of procreation with every strike?"

After Yu LianZhou heard this sermon from his master, even in the midst of the harsh cold weather, he couldn't refrain a cold sweat all from erupting all over his back. Fear struck his heart, and he immediately admitted to his mistake and begged for forgiveness.

After a few days, Zhang SanFeng called his seven disciples to him and explained this incident to them before saying, "These twelve stances that LianZhou created was a result of hard work and honourable intentions, and are truly worthy of being considered as a ultimate skill. To abolish it based on just my one command may nevertheless be a pity. You should all learn this skill from LianZhou, but take caution to never use this skill lightly. Do not use it in anything less than a life and death situation. I will add the two words "Destroying Procreation" after the words "Tiger Claws" in order to remind you all that this skill can end all chances others have at

procreation, thus running the danger of ending a whole family's lineage."

The seven disciples immediately expressed their gratitude for this lecture and Yu LianZhou then related this martial art skill to his six brothers. After the seven of them mastered this skill, they indeed obeyed their master's teachings and not one of them has used this skill even once. Even during such a critical juncture, when Zhang SongXi brought this up, Yu LianZhou still debated and and continue to hesitate.

Zhang SongXi said, "Once this 'Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill' grapples onto other's vital points, there is a chance that it will end their chances of procreation. Your brother I have a plan, we can choose only monks or Taoist priests as our opponents, or if not, then old men in their seventies and eighties will also be suitable." Yu LianZhou smiled faintly and said, "Brother, your vigilant thinking is not only nimble but also ingenious. Since monks and Taoists priests will not be having any children, to use this move on them is acceptable."

After the two brothers finished discussing their plans, the split up to inform Song YuanQiao and the other three brothers. Each one of them targeted a specific opponent and as soon as they hear a loud shout of "a-yo" from Zhang SongXi, the six of them would each use the "Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill" to capture their opponents. Yu LianZhou selected the oldest of the Kong Tong elders Guan Neng, while Zhang CuiShan chose Kun Lun's taoist priest XiHua Zi.

After the various guests finished their simple meal, the culinary workers took away the eating utensils. Zhang Song Xi then loudly said, "Honoured heroes and fellow friends, today is our master's hundredth year birthday. To be graced

by the presence of so many heroes today fills everyone in our sect with glory and honour. But please do forgive us for the bareness and inefficiency in our reception here today. Our master had originally planned to invite all our respected guests to WuChang town's Yellow Crane Restaurant for a festive gathering. During that date, we most certainly will make up for the discourtesy in our reception here today. My brother Zhang CuiShan has been separated from us for ten years now, and it was just today that he finally returned to us from afar. He has not even had the chance to explain in detail to my master all of which he has encountered and experienced within the last ten years. Besides, today is our master's big celebration, if we bother ourselves with discussing about the martial art world's various scores of gratitude and vengeance, duels and deaths, it may be a very untimely and inappropriate thing to do. Our honoured guests' pure intentions of offering birthday blessings will then turn into a purposely contrived plan of coming here to incite disharmony and create more trouble. Very seldom will all our honoured guests be gathered together here at Wu Dang, please allow me the honours of accompanying everyone for a tour around the mountain where we can appreciate the scenery."

This speech from him caused everyone to be at a loss for words. By stating ahead of time that today was a blessed day of celebration, if anybody mentioned Xie Xun and Dragon Gate Escort Agency's incident, then they are purposely and openly making enemies with the Wu Dang Sect.

These groups of people arrived on the mountain one after another, and aside from the E-Mei sect, they were all originally prepared to engage in a good battle in order to force out the whereabouts of the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun. But the Wu Dang sect's great fame was so authoritative and respected, nobody dared to make enemies with the Wu

Dang sect on their own. If these few hundred people all rushed forward as one group, they would of course have nothing to be worry about. But when requiring somebody to stand out by themselves to make the first move, nobody wanted to take on the role of the sacrificial lamb.

Everyone looked at each other in a moment of uncomfortable silence. Kun Lun sect's XiHua Zi stood up and shouted loudly, "Hero Zhang SongXi, there's no need to strike first with your words. We're all forthright people and there's no need to beat around the bush. We will be honest with you, the purpose of our visit to the mountain today is firstly to celebrate Master Zhang's birthday, but then we would also like to find out about the bandit Xie Xun's current whereabouts.

Muo ShengGu's simmering anger has been bottled up for most of the day. At this moment, he could no longer hold back anymore as he laughed coldly and said, "Oh really? So that's how it is, no wonder, no wonder!" XiHua Zi's pair of eyes flared up as he asked, "What do you mean by 'no wonder'?" Muo Sheng Gu replied, "I just heard a moment ago that you came to Wu Dang today for the celebration of my master's birthday, but than at the same time you would all secretly carry weapons on yourselves. That makes me wonder, did all of you bring your precious sabers and esteemed swords here today because you wanted to present it to my master as a birthday gift? It's only now that I understand what a priceless gift you're all delivering here." XiHua Zi smacked his hand against the table and then immediately undid his robe before loudly saying, "Hero Muo, take a good and close look. Don't learn to frame and slander other people's honour at such a young age. Where do you see any weapons on our bodies?"

Muo ShengGu laughed coldly and said, "Very good. There indeed aren't any," and he then extended two fingers to

lightly tug on the belt of the two people standing beside him. His movements were so quick, with just this one tug he was able to snap apart the belt on those two people. Immediately clanking and clanging sounds were heard sequentially as two short daggers fell to the ground, its dazzling glint catching everybody's eyes. With this, everyone's countenance underwent a great change while XiHua Zi roared out, "That's right. If Hero Zhang won't reveal to us Xie Xun's current whereabouts, then who knows? We may very well have to resort to our sabers and swords!"

Zhang SongXi was just about to loudly shout out the secret code "a-yo" in order to take advantage of striking out first when suddenly from outside the door drifted in a voice that said, "Amita Buddha." This Buddhist incantation very clearly transmitted into everybody's ear drums, ringing out loud and clear. Though it appeared to be coming from afar, yet when heard it also sounded as if it was spoken by somebody right beside you.

Zhang SanFeng smiled and said, "The Shaolin sect's Abbot Kong Wen has arrived, hurry out and receive him." The voice from outside was immediately heard to reply, "Shaolin's Abbot Kong Wen along with his fellow martial art brothers Kong Zhi, Kong Xing and sect disciples have come to wish Grand Master Zhang a thousand autumns of eternal happiness."

The three monks Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were the figures that comprised the group known as the Four Divine Reverends of Shaolin⁸. Aside from Reverend Kong Jian who has died, the other three Reverends has all arrived here today. In the midst of his shock, Zhang SongXi was unable to give that shout of "a-yo." Now that Shaolin's supreme martial artists have arrived here on Wu Dang, he knew then even if the six brothers can use the "Tiger Claws Destroying

Procreation Skill” to control Kun Lun and Kong Tong sect's key figures, it would still be useless.

Kun Lun sect's sect-master He TaiChong said, “I've long heard of the Shaolin Divine Reverends' great name. To have the chance of encountering all three here today certainly made this a worthy trip.” Another somewhat low and husky voice from outside the door was heard to say, “This must be Kun Lun's sect leader Mister He. It is a pleasure, a pleasure indeed. Grand Master Zhang, the three of us have arrived here much too late to celebrate your birthday, it truly is discourteous of us.” Zhang SanFeng replied, “The number of guests concentrated here on top of the Wu Dang mountain today are as vast as the clouds, this old man has only lived a hundred years of an unimportant life, how can I possibly bother the three Divine Reverends' to make such a trip?”

Through the generation of their internal energies, these four people were able to exchange words through the separation of several partitions, each conversing with the effortless ease akin to having a casual conversation with somebody standing right in front of them. The internal energies of E-Mei sect's revered nuns Jing Xuan and Jing Xu, Kong Tong's Guan Neng, Zong WeiXia, Tang WenLiang, Chang JingZhi and the likes' did not reach this level, thus naturally they could not join in on the conversation. The figures belonging to the rest of the sects and clans were even more astonished, while within their hearts they were simultaneously feeling shame at their inability to compare.

Zhang SanFeng brought his disciples along with him as they started to step outside in order to greet them, but immediately they saw the three Divine Reverends slowly walk into the reception hall, bringing in nine other monks along with them.

Abbot Kong Wen's white eyebrows drooped downwards to almost cover over his eyes, very much like a long browed LoHan. Kong Xing's body was robust and broad, while his expression was similarly forceful and quite commanding. As for Kong Zhi, his whole face was marked by sorrow, and even the corners of his mouth turned downwards. Song YuanQiao was secretly surprised, for he was well acquainted with the art of face reading. He thought to himself, "The typical person born with Reverend Kong Zhi's physiognomy would suffer such a fate that even if they don't have a short life span, they will at least experience unexpected calamities early in life. Why is it that he not only enjoys the pleasure of longevity, but will also end up being what all people of the martial arts world accept as a Grand Master? It seems that my knowledge in the art of face reading is still much too amateurish."

Even though Zhang SanFeng along with Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were all Grand Masters of the martial arts world, yet they have never encountered each other before. In terms of age, Zhang SanFeng was thirty to forty years older than the three Reverends. He originated from the Shaolin sect, and if using his master Jue Yuan as a measure to determine generational rank and hierarchy, then he would actually be two generations above the likes of Kong Wen. But since he never officially took the commandment to become a monk within Shaolin, and because he never officially learned any Shaolin martial arts from the monks, therefore they all treated each other in the manner of equals. But Song YuanQiao and his brothers were actually reduced a generation.

Zhang SanFeng welcomed Kong Wen into the reception hall. He TaiChong, revered nun Jing Xuan, Guan Neng and the likes all game forward to greet them, each offering their words of respect and admiration, bringing forth another

round of formal courtesies. Coincidentally, the Abbott Kong Wen was extremely humble and would join his palms to greet every junior in each clan and each pupil of every sect, offering a few formal words of greeting, bring forth a moment of cluttered confusion before a few hundred people could all be acknowledged.

The three Divine Reverends Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing all sat down and took a sip of green tea. Kong Wen then said, "Grand Master Zhang, in terms of age and generational ranking, this worthless monk is your junior. Today, aside from offering you birthday blessings, all other stuff should originally not be mentioned. But since this worthless monk shameless takes on the title of Shaolin's Head Abbot, there are therefore a few words which I must reveal to Grand Master Zhang with utmost honesty."

Zhang SanFeng has always been a resolute and frank person, thus he spoke with utmost honesty, "Divine Reverends, did you come here today because of my fifth ranking disciple Zhang CuiShan?" When Zhang CuiShan heard his master mention his name, he immediately stood up.

Kong Wen replied, "Yes indeed. We have two things that we have to ask Hero Zhang. The first thing concerns Hero Zhang murdering seventy-one lives of an agency belonging to a Shaolin disciple's Dragon Gate Escort Agency, and then further killing six Shaolin monks. All together, it comprises seventy-seven lives, how should this situation be handled? The second thing is, our older martial arts brother Reverend Kong Jian lived a life of beneficence and morality, though never competing with anyone for anything, yet in the end would die a terrible death under the murderer Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun's hands. It's rumoured that Hero Zhang you are aware of this bandit Xie's whereabouts, we ask you to please point us to the right direction."

Zhang CuiShan replied in a clear voice, "Abbot Kong Wen, the murdering of the seventy-seven lives of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency and Shaolin sect was not your respectful pupil's doing. I, Zhang Cui Shan have been disciplined and shaped by my honoured teacher. Though I may be a piece of untalented and incompetent material, yet I would never dare to tell a single lie. As for the identity of the person who took the lives of the seventy-seven people, your humble pupil is indeed aware of whom this person is, but I do not desire to reveal the truth. That is the first issue. As for the second issue, there is nobody of the world who was not saddened and desolate over the Reverend Kong Jian's untimely departure from the world. However, the Golden Mane Lion King and your young pupil I are sworn brothers. To be honest, your humble pupil I am aware of the current whereabouts of Xie Xun, but those of us in the martial arts world value and honour the word "Righteousness" more than anything. Zhang CuiShan's head can fall and my blood can spill, but I most definitely will not reveal my sworn brother's whereabouts. This incident has absolutely nothing to do with my revered teacher and my fellow sect members, anything and everything will be accounted for by Zhang CuiShan's solitary self. If everyone must insist on using death as a threat, then whether you choose to come forward for a kill or to administer a blow, then go ahead. In Zhang CuiShan's whole life, he has never done one thing that will disgrace or sully the honour of his sect and has never killed one undeserving person. But if everyone wants to force me to be unrighteous today, then I can only use death as my answer." These words of Zhang Cui Shan were spoken with boldness, his expression one of justified rectitude.

Kong Wen murmured a "Amita Buddha" while thinking to himself, "From his words, it really doesn't sound like he's lying. What should be done now?"

It was at this moment when from outside the long windows of the reception hall suddenly came a young child's voice that cried, "Father!"

There was a big thump in Zhang CuiShan's heart for this voice belonged to Wuji. He loudly responded, "Wuji! You've come back?" and immediately dashed outside while caught up in the midst of his bewildered joy. Wu Shan sect and Heavenly Fists Clan each had someone standing by the door of the reception hall. They only conjectured that Zhang CuiShan must be trying to escape therefore shouted out simultaneously, "Where do you think you're going?" and extended their hands to clamp down. Zhang CuiShan was filled with haste due to the extreme concern for his child, thus with a contraction of his two arms, caused the two people to fly back separately into the left and right directions for more than a few dozen feet due to the impacting shock. After rushing out beyond the long windows, he only saw a mass of emptiness and silence. Where is there even a trace of a person's shadow? He loudly cried, "Wuji, Wuji!" but no reply was heard.

The people within the reception hall have already rushed out, but when seeing that Zhang CuiShan hasn't escape, did not advance to capture him and only stood by a side watching over him.

Zhang CuiShan continued to cry, "Wuji, Wuji!" but was again met with no answer. By this time, Yin SuSu's health had already recovered a fair bit, therefore even from the back room she could faintly discern her husband crying "Wuji" and immediately bolted outside, crying in a trembling voice, "Did Wuji return?" Zhang Cui Shan replied, "I thought I heard his voice just a moment ago. But when I chased outside, there was nobody." Greatly disappointed, Yin SuSu murmured, "It

must your longing for our child that induced you to hear wrong.” For a while, Zhang Cui Shan was in a state of stupefied shock, but he then shook his head and said, “I heard him, I know I did.” He then hurriedly said, “Go back inside” for he worried that there would be further trouble if his wife interacted with the crowd of guests.

After he returned to the reception hall, he approached Kong Wen and bowed before saying, “In the midst of pining to be reunited with my little child, your unworthy student dared to be so discourteous, may Reverend Abbot you please forgive me.”

Kong Wen said, “Such is well, such is well. Hero Zhang, your fervent longing for your beloved son is so full of anguish, yet did you really think that all those people who were murdered by Xie Xun did not have a father, mother, wife and children as well?” His body was very small and skinny, but his every word was spoken with booming clarity, reverberating in the eardrums of all the people within the reception hall. Zhang CuiShan's heart was in a state of befuddlement grief and could find no words to respond.

Abbot Kong Wen then turned to Zhang SanFeng to say, “Grand Master Zhang, how do you suggest we should handle today's issues? I'd like to ask master you to please provide for us an answer.”

Zhang SanFeng said, “This young disciple of mine may not have many worthy merits, but he most definitely would not lie to his master, and I don't think he would dare to lie to the three divine reverends. The people of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency and your sect were not killed by him and as for Xie Xun's whereabouts, that is something he refuses to reveal.”

Kong Zhi said with a cold laugh, “But there was someone who

witnessed Hero Zhang CuiShan kill our sect's disciples with their very own eyes. So is it that Wu Dang disciples will never dare to offer dishonest words, while the Shaolin disciples will?" And with a wave of his left hand, three middle aged monks stepped out from behind him.

The three monks were each blind in their right eye. They were of course the monks who were blinded by Yin SuSu's silver needles at the riverside of LinAn City's XiHu, Yuan Xin, Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye.

These three monks followed Abbot Kong Wen and the others to the Wu Dang mountain, and were observed by Zhang CuiShan from the beginning. He knew within his heart that he must answer to the bloodbath by the riverside of the Xi Hu. As expected, the Abbot Kong Wen spoke not more than a few words and already brought out the three monks. Zhang CuiShan was put into a tough spot, for the person who committed the murders by the bank of the XiHu was indeed not him, yet the true culprit was now his wife. The love between the couple was deep and the faith they held towards each other was strong, how could they possibly not shield each other from harm? But now at this point and in this situation, how is one to protect the other?

Amongst the "Yuan" generation, Yuan Ye was the most hot-tempered. In accordance to his character, he would have struck out at Zhang CuiShan with all he's got the moment he saw him. But because his martial art uncles were all there, he was therefore forced to restrain himself. But at that time, it was his master who called him out, thus he immediately shouted, "Zhang CuiShan, at Lin An City's Xi Hu banks, you projected poisonous needles into the mouth of Hui Feng, taking his life. I saw that with my very own eyes, did you think I was framing you? The three of us were blinded in the right eye by your silver needles, did you still want to

confound us and lay blame on others?"

At this point, Zhang CuiShan could only argue point for point as he said, "Although we do use a pretty extensive range of weapons within the Wu Dang sect, yet they are all large sized projectiles along the likes of steel darts and sleeve arrows. My six fellow sect members and myself have been around in the martial arts world for quite a while now, but has there been anyone who's seen a Wu Dang disciple use any gold or silver needles type of weapons? As for acts such as coating poison onto the needles, that is a concept even more undeserving of my refute."

The ways and actions of the seven heroes of Wu Dang have always been honourable and upright, that was something everybody within the martial arts world knew. Therefore all the martial art fighters that were gathered together here on the mountain truly found the idea of Zhang CuiShan using poisonous needles to harm others hard to believe.

Yuan Ye shouted with anger, "Even at this point, you're still trying to deny it? That day when you used needles to kill Hui Feng, my martial arts older brother Yuan Yin and myself clearly witnessed and discerned everything clearly and without any further doubt. If it wasn't you, then who was it?" Zhang CuiShan replied, "Just because there was somebody in your sect who fell into harm and injury, that gives you right to come to our Wu Dang sect and request us to tell you who the culprit was that injured your sect members? Since when was such a rule established?" Zhang CuiShan's intellect was quick and his tongue was sharp, he was good with words and skilled in debating. In the midst of his anger, Yuan Ye's words were becoming increasingly nonsensical, causing what was originally a very justified incrimination to suddenly become akin to an unreasonable allegation.

Zhang SongXi immediately added, "Brother Yuan Ye, at present it's still not possible to ascertain who it was that wounded those Shaolin monks. However, our sect's Yu DaiYan was most definitely injured under the hands of Shaolin's Golden Steel Fingers. Everyone has come here at just the right time, we were just planning to inquire about who was the culprit that used the Golden Steel Fingers to injure my third brother?"

Yuan Ye's mouth gaped open and was completely tongue tied. He could only stutter out the words, "Not me."

Zhang SongXi gave out an icy laugh and said, "I know it wasn't you. I doubt that you would have that kind of power." After pausing a while, he continued, "If my third brother was perfectly healthy when he was exchanging stances with your revered sect's skilled fighters, then even if he was injured under the Golden Steel Fingers, he can only blame himself for being unable to excel in martial arts. Since in all types of battles and martial art exchanges, injuries and even deaths will likely occur, what else can he say? Can any guarantee be established before a fight that can warrant that a single strand of hair will not be harmed? But at that time, my brother was severely ill, he wasn't able to move even a single finger on his body. That Shaolin disciple used Golden Steel Finger to brutally cripple his arms and legs in order to force him to reveal the whereabouts of the Dragon Saber."

Having gotten to this point, he raised his voice to cry out, "You would think that Shaolin's martial arts eclipses over the whole martial arts world already, and they have also long been considered as the martial arts world's most venerable sect. Why must you still desire to possess the precious Dragon Saber in order to be satisfied? Besides, my third brother has only seen that Dragon Saber once, but the methods employed by your revered sect's disciples are really much too inhuman and atrocious. Within the martial arts

world, Yu DaiYan can still be considered as possessing of some respectful fame. Within his whole life, he has only committed heroic and righteous acts of charity, doing many good deeds for the martial arts world. Now, because of a Shaolin disciple, he's crippled for his whole life, causing him to spend these last ten years lying on his bed unable to get up. We were just planning to ask the three divine reverends, what does Shaolin plan to do about this?"

Because of Yu DaiYan's injuries and the deaths of the whole Dragon Gate Escort Agency, Shaolin and Wu Dang have already spent much time over these debates. But they were never able to come to a conclusion because of Zhang CuiShan's disappearance. Zhang SongXi purposely brought out this case again when he observed Kong Wen and Yuan Ye all speak with such forceful justification.

The Abbot Kong Wen said, "I have already gone over this before. The disciples within our sect have already been investigated and questioned over in detail already. Nobody from our sect harmed Hero Yu."

Zhang SongXi reached his hands into his pockets and brought out a golden nugget, the finger marks left on the gold nugget can be clearly seen. He loudly exclaimed, "As all heroes can see, the culprits responsible for my brother Yu's injuries is the Shaolin disciple who left these marks on the golden nugget. Aside from the Shaolin sect's Golden Steel Finger, which school and which sect can boast to have a martial art skill that can produce such a mark on gold?"

Yuan Yin and Yuan Ye were trying to incriminate Zhang CuiShan based solely on their words, but Zhang SongXi was able to produce material evidence which would of course be much more convincing than proof-less conjectures and empty words.

Kong Wen said, "May the Buddha have mercy. Aside from the three of us brothers, there are also three other elders within our sect who have been able to master this skill of the Golden Steel Fingers. But these three elders have not stepped out of Shaolin's doors for thirty or forty years now. How would they be able to harm Hero Yu?"

Muo ShengGu suddenly chimed in, "Revered abbot, you wouldn't believe my fifth brother's words because you insist that his defense was based solely on the testimonial of just his one person, but are the words of Revered abbot you not also based on just your sole defense?"

Abbot Kong Wen's character was quite gracious and even though he recognized the disrespect in Muo ShengGu's words, he was not angry and only said, "If Hero Muo you don't believe this old monk's words, then there's nothing I can do." Muo ShengGu said, "How could your humble pupil I possibly dare to not believe revered abbot's words? But things in life are often unpredictable and prone to change. What is right, wrong, true and false will often turn out to be contrary to one's expectations. You only insist that the fellow Shaolin monks were injured under my fifth brother's hands, and we also believe that my third brother must have been injured under the fingers of a skilled Shaolin fighter. But it may very well be that are still secret twists unbeknownst to us all. According to your unworthy pupil's views, these incidents still requires further examination and reconsideration in order to not disturb the harmony between the Shaolin and Wu Dang sects. If we handle things in a crass or crude manner, then one day when the truth is finally revealed, there will only be regrets." Kong Wen nodded his head and said, "Hero Muo's words are right indeed."

Kong Zhi shouted with severe anger, "But are we just going

to forget about the wrongful murder of our martial arts brother Kong Jian? Hero Zhang, we can put aside the death of the Dragon Gate Escort Agency for the time being. But today, if you are willing to reveal the whereabouts of the vicious bandit Xie Xun, then you better start revealing it because even if you are not willing to speak, we're still going to make you speak!"

Up to this moment, Yu LianZhou has been silent, but seeing that the situation has reached a deadlock, he said loudly, "If the Dragon Sabre was not in the hands of Xie Xun, would Reverend still be so concerned about capturing him?" He didn't say much, but just these two lines were already powerful enough, for he was outright reprimanding Kong Zhi as harbouring the unhonourable intentions of desiring to covet a precious treasure.

Kong Zhi was extremely enraged and with a slap, smashed his palm down upon the wooden table in front of him. With a bang, the table's four legs broke simultaneously as the table immediately shattered and the wooden splinters of the tabletop spewed everywhere. The immense force harboured within that palm was frightening. He roared with rage, "I've long heard that Grand Master Zhang's martial arts originated from Shaolin, but the word within the martial arts world has it that Master Zhang's martial arts excels beyond that of his originator. We've long been admirers even though we may not have been able to ascertain whether there is indeed truth in this rumour. Today, in the presence of the world's heroes, let us take this opportunity to boldly ask Grand Master Zhang to teach us a thing or two by exchanging a few stances with us!"

As soon as he said these words, all the fighters within the room were brought to an excited state of frenzy. It has now been seventy years since Zhang SanFeng made a name for

himself, but all the fighters who had the chance to combat with him have all died over time. There was not a single one of them left in this world who can testify to exactly how fathomless his martial arts were. Thus, even though there were all sorts of extraordinary and fantastic legends circulating within the martial arts world, nobody aside from his seven exclusive disciples had the chance to witness Zhang SanFeng's brilliance with their very own eyes. But Song YuanQiao and his brothers have stunned and dazzled the world with the celebrated name of the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang. If just the disciples can already be seen to have such powers, it would be hard to imagine much less describe what heights their master's abilities would reach.

When the people outside of the Shaolin and Wu Dang sect heard Kong Zhi publicly declare a challenge against Zhang SanFeng, there was not a single person who was not roused into a state of excitement. They were all thinking within their heads that this was certainly turning out to be a worthwhile trip now that they had the chance to witness with their very own eyes the power of the present era's number one martial artist.

Everyone's eyes immediately shot towards Zhang SanFeng's face, anticipating his response of whether or not he was going to give his consent. But he was only seen to smile faintly and did not reveal whether he was going to accept the challenge or not.

Kong Zhi continued, "Grand Master Zhang's martial art abilities crowns over his era, and since he is already undefeatable within the world, the three of us are of course not your match. But since the situation has been forced to this point, I'm afraid that the entanglements between our two sects cannot be resolve if we don't settle it through a martial arts competition. Since master you are two generations above us, it would be much too disrespectful if

we fought you one on one. Forgive us for daring to overestimate our capabilities, but we will combine the power between the three of us in order to challenge you Grand Master.”

Everyone was thinking within their hearts, “That's some gallant-sounding excuse to cover up your intentions of combating one with the power of three. Even if Zhang SanFeng's martial arts are indeed supreme, yet he is nevertheless an old man that has reached his one hundredth year, his stamina and energy must without a doubt be on the decline. He may not be able to withstand the combined attack of the three divine reverends of Shaolin.”

Yu LianZhou said, “Today is our master's hundredth year celebration, how could he possibly engage in any physical combat with his guests? ...” when everyone heard this, they all thought, “Wu Dang sect really is going to back out from accepting this challenge.” But unexpectedly, Yu LianZhou continued, “Besides, as reverend Kong Zhi has already said, my master and the three reverends are of different generational ranks, if he really did take action, wouldn't that make him guilty of the offense of picking on his juniors? But since Shaolin has stated their challenge, the seven disciples of Wu Dang will like a chance to learn from the twelve Shaolin monk's supreme martial arts.”

After these words were spoken, there was again another great rumble that went through the whole group of guests who had all started to discuss and analyze amongst each other. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing each had three disciples who accompanied them to the mountain today, bringing the total to twelve Shaolin monks. They all knew that Yu DaiYan was completely crippled and thus there were only six out of the seven Wu Dang disciples left. To fight twelve with six is a situation based upon a one against two ratio. Such terms as

delineated by Yu LianZhou really can be said to serve a self-elevating purpose for the status of the Wu Dang sect.

Yu LianZhou's move may seem to be a risky step, and in actuality it was indeed a move that he was forced into making. He was very aware that the Shaolin reverends' martial art skills were extremely powerful, and since their ages were older than him and his brothers, their cultivation would naturally be greater. If they fought one on one, his oldest brother Song YuanQiao would be able to break even with one of the reverends, but he himself was just recovering from his injuries and may not be able to withstand one of the reverends. As for the very last reverend, regardless of whether it is Zhang SongXi, Yin LiTing, or Muo ShengGu who fights that match, they most definitely will lose to the reverend. Although his terms of challenge were officially stating that the six brothers will combat against the twelve Shaolin fighters, but the other nine Shaolin disciples can be assumed to pose a very small threat. Therefore, though it seems that the Wu Dang sect was combating a larger crowd with a smaller group, in actuality it was really the Wu Dang six disciples who were combining their powers to fight the three divine reverends of Shaolin.

How could Kong Zhi possibly not understand the dynamics of such an arrangement? After scoffing with a “hmph” he then said, “Since Master Zhang won't grace us with the honour of exchanging a few stances, then let us three brothers attempt to learn a few things by facing off against three of the Wu Dang six heroes. We can determine the victor with three matches, the side who is able to win in two of the three matches will be the winner.”

Zhang SongXi said, “If reverend Kong Zhi really insists on fighting one on one, then that can also be done. But amongst the seven of us brothers, aside for my third brother Yu DaiYan who is unable to descend his bed after falling prey to the

deadly attacks of a Shaolin disciple, there is not one of us who dares to back out from a challenge. Therefore, let us then determine the winner through six matches, where each of the Wu Dang six disciples will face off with a Shaolin disciple, the side that can win four matches out of the six will be determined as the victor.”

Muo ShengGu loudly added, “Let's do it this way, if the Wu Dang sect loses, then my fifth brother Zhang will reveal the whereabouts of the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun to Shaolin sect's head abbot. But if Shaolin sect does kindly grant us the honour of winning, then we'd like to ask the three reverends along with all these guests who have come to here with the excuse of celebrating a birthday, but who are in actuality looking to stir up some trouble to please leave the mountain as a group!”

Zhang SongXi's suggestion of using a six against six method of combat can already be said to situate the Wu Dang sect in the undefeatable position. For his oldest brother and second brother's martial arts can be expected to be comparable with the three divine reverends of Shaolin. As for the rest of the Shaolin disciples, they most definitely will lose in the last three matches.

Kong Zhi shook his head while muttering, “That's not right, not right.” But at the same time, he couldn't openly admit to exactly what wasn't right about such a suggestion.

Zhang SongXi said, “When divine reverends issued a challenged to my master, you said that you wanted to fight one man using the power of three. But when we said that we will use six fighters to combat the twelve revered monks of Shaolin, reverend Kong Zhi will suddenly request to fight one on one. Fine, so we'll agree to fighting one on one, but now reverend you say that such an arrangement is not right. Why

don't we just do it this way then, let your unworthy pupil I fight against Shaolin's three divine reverends by myself, then everything would be absolutely perfect right? Let the three divine reverends obliterate your unworthy pupil, then that way Shaolin can be victorious and then wouldn't that be so gratifying?"

Greatly agitated, Kong Zhi's face changed colours while Kong Wen murmured a Buddhist mantra, "Amita Buddha!" Since Kong Xin arrived on the Wu Dang mountain, he has not said one word. But at this moment he suddenly said, "Brothers, since this young hero Zhang says he wants to fight the three of us by himself, then let us do that!" Because Kong Xin had practiced monasticism from an early age, therefore even though his martial arts were skilled, he was not at all acquainted with customs of the world and could not catch the sarcasm and mockery in Zhang SongXi's words.

Kong Wen said, "Hush up brother" as he turned around and said to Song YuanQiao, "We'll do this, let the six Shaolin monks face off against the six disciples of Wu Dang. We'll determine the winners with just one match." Song YuanQiao replied, "Not the six disciples of Wu Dang, but the seven disciples of Wu Dang."

Kong Wen was greatly taken back as he asked, "Is Master Zhang also planning to join the battle as well?"

Song YuanQiao replied, "Revered Abbot's conjectures are wrong. All fighters who have fought with my teacher have long since passed away, how can my teacher possibly act out again? However, although my third brother Yu is unable to move after being burdened by severe injuries, and while he also has no disciples, yet the seven of us brothers have always been as one body. Today, in such a confrontation that will concern life, death, glory and shame, how could he

possibly stand detached without lending out a helping hand? I'll ask him to hastily find somebody and to give them a few instructions and guidelines in order for this person to substitute for him and fight on his behalf. Wu Dang's seven disciples will fight the revered monks of Shaolin as a group, it matters not whether you decide to send out seven fighters or twelve fighters!"

Kong Wen paused briefly and thought, "Within the Wu Dang sect, aside for Zhang SanFeng and his seven disciples, there hasn't been mention of any other skilled fighters. He says they'll find a last minute substitution, but what use is that? If they ask another sect's disciple to fight, then that wouldn't be a battle of the Wu Dang sect versus the Shaolin sect. He most likely was just trying to preserve the famed glory of the 'Seven Heroes of Wu Dang' when he said these words." Therefore he gave a nod with his head and said, "Alright. Then the seven monks of Shaolin will battle Wu Dang's seven heroes."

Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi and the others immediately understood what purpose Song YuanQiao was trying to induce with his words.

Zhang SanFeng still had one set of martial art skill that was extremely worthy of pride, it was called "Zhen Wu's Seven Spheres Formation." The Wu Dang sect offered worship to the deity Zhen Wu⁹, and when Zhang SanFeng saw the pair of statuettes comprising of a snake and a tortoise that was always situated in front the statue of Zhen Wu, he thought to the SheShan¹⁰ and GuiShan¹¹ located at the juncture between the Changjiang¹² and the HanShui River Valleys¹³. When he thought over the agile lightness of a long snake contrasted with the lumbering heaviness of a tortoise, he also thought to how the diety Zhen Wu was able to place his

leg on the shell of a tortoise while his right leg rested on the body of a snake, thus capturing the essence of the most lithe and cumbersome objects' fundamental nature. He immediately took off that moment, journeying through the night to arrive at the Northern areas of the HanShui River Valleys to study the two She and Gui mountains. Through the undulating twists of the SheShan and the stately stableness of the GuiShan, he was able to create an incredibly brilliant and mystical martial art skill.

However, the She and Gui mountains were so majestic in their force, that it caused the martial arts inspired by the intensity of the mountains to be so profound and boundless, that it encompassed a vast field and became something of which could not be fully implemented through one person's power. Zhang SanFeng quietly stood by the river's bank and for three days abstained from drinking a single drop of water or consuming a tiny morsel of food. He concentrated all his energies into mulling over this skill, yet was still unable to solve this problem. But during the early dawn of the fourth morning, he watched the sun rise from the East to cast a million streaks of wavering golden slithers and flickering spots of sparkling illuminations on the face of the river. He was suddenly enlightened and after engaging in a hearty laugh, he returned to the Wu Dang mountain and brought his seven disciples to him in order to relate a martial art skill to each one of them.

These seven different forms of martial arts when executed separately is of course each an embodiment of brilliance and exquisiteness in their own right, but if two people combine their efforts, the brothers can support and facilitate each other by simultaneously fostering their attack while maintaining their defence, causing their power to be increased even further. If three people simultaneously executed their moves, their power would be double that of

the combined effort of two individuals. The power of four people would equal to that of eight first rate fighters while five people amounts to the force of sixteen fighters and six fighters will be equivalent to thirty-two fighters. By the time they can gather the efforts of seven fighters simultaneously, it would be analogous to having the collective force of sixty-four of the present era's first-rate fighters attacking all at once. Within the present era, the number of martial artists who can be classified as a first rate fighter was merely a small list comprised of twenty or thirty people, what are the chances of having the opportunity to gather together all these first rate fighters? Even if they could be gathered together, within these fighters there were the good and the evil, the compassionate and the malicious, how could they possibly co-operate together as a group?

Because this skill of Zhang SanFeng's was inspired by the tortoise and snake statues that stood by the foot of deity Zhen Wu, it was therefore titled as the "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation." At that time, he painstakingly pondered over the difficulty in making up for the vacancy in the west end while one watched over the east, which would simultaneously afford opponents with the chance of taking advantage of the exposed vacancy in the Southern and Northern ends. It was only later when he came up with the solution of directing his seven disciples to execute this skill as a group was he finally able to resolve this problem. Although he couldn't help but be a little disappointed over the fact that this "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation" could not be worked out in such a way so as to enable just one person to executed it, but when he thought to, "If this skill really can be executed through the power of just one person, then wouldn't that mean just one person's power would be enough to defeat the combined force of sixty-four first rate fighters? Is that not a much too absurd and arrogant idea?" and couldn't help himself from laughing while being at a

complete loss of words.

Since the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang have made their name within the martial arts world, there has not been an encounter in which they were not able to achieve the upper hand. Regardless of how powerful of an opponent they may be pitted up against, the most they would require would be just the combined efforts of two or three brothers in order to conquer and be victorious. This “Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation” has not been used even once. At the present moment, Song YuanQiao knew that they were faced with great adversaries, for nobody really knew exactly how powerful the three divine reverends of Shaolin were. Though he thinks that he may be able to equally tie one of them, these were nevertheless overconfident conjectures on his own part. It could very well be that he would be thoroughly defeated as soon as he struck out, which was why he was suddenly reminded of the treasured secret weapon of the Wu Dang sect, the never-been-used “Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation.”

When he heard Abbot Kong Wen agreeing to fight the seven heroes of Wu Dang with seven Shaolin disciples, he then said, “We’d like to ask our respected guests to please wait here for a moment while we went and asked our third brother to find a successor right away in order to comprise the correct number for the seven disciples of Wu Dang.” Then with a look at Yu LianZhou and the others, the six brothers all respectfully bowed to Zhang SanFeng and asking to be excused before retreating into the inner rooms.

Muo ShengGu was the first one to speak, “Eldest brother, let us use the ‘Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation’ today and show those Shaolin monks the capabilities of a Wu Dang disciple. But who should we ask to replace our third brother?” Song YuanQiao replied, “I think concerning this matter, we

should all come to a decision together. Let us not say anything right now. Each one of us will write a name on our palms and then we'll see what the general consensus is." Muo ShengGu said, "Alright!" and immediately took out a pen which he handed over to Song YuanQiao.

Song YuanQiao wrote a few words on his palm and then clenched together his fists before handing the pen over to Yu LianZhou. Everyone took turns writing and then revealed their answers simultaneously. Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou and Zhang SongXi all wrote the words "Fifth Sister." Zhang CuiShan wrote the two words "Zhuo Jing," whereas Yin LiTing's whole face had flushed a deep red while he refused to reveal his answer by tightly clenching together his fist. Muo ShengGu said, "Hey that's strange, what are you hiding?" and pried open his fist only to see that on his palm were written the words, "Miss Ji."

Zhang CuiShan was genuinely touched as he took Yin LiTing's hands and said, "Brother!" Everyone understood that Yin LiTing was being considerate of the fact that because Yin SuSu was just beginning to recover from her illness, it was thus not very suitable for her to engage in battle. Therefore he would rather ask Ji XiaoFu, his own future wife to participate in the battle instead. Muo ShengGu had originally wanted to tease him but Zhang CuiShan immediately shot him a look to prevent him. Song YuanQiao thus said, "Fifth brother, please go and ask sister to come out then."

Zhang CuiShan returned to his bedroom and brought out Yin SuSu before briefly outlining what the situation was like outside in the reception hall. Yin SuSu said, "The lives of the whole Dragon Gate Escort Agency, Hui Feng and the other Shaolin monks were all ended by me. But at that time, I still haven't met CuiShan yet. I don't want this incident to burden the Wu Dang sect anymore, let me go and tell them to go

and settle these scores with my father's Heavenly Eagle sect instead."

Zhang SongXi said, "Sister, why continue to differentiate between you and I at this point? Besides, I believe that though these people ascended the mountain today by using the Dragon Gate Escort Agency incident as their excuse, their true goal is to interrogate about Xie Xun. Similarly, their interrogation of Xie Xun for the purpose of revenge is again just another excuse, while getting their hands on the Dragon Saber comprises their true purpose." Muo ShengGu said, "Fourth brother's words are absolutely right. Their main desire is to covet the Dragon Saber, and regardless of what, they will try to force you to reveal the details of the treasured saber." Zhang CuiShan said, "Years ago, the Reverend Kong Jian told my brother Xie Xun that concealed within the Dragon Sabre was a martial arts manual that can render its practitioner invincibility and the ability to conquer and dominate the whole martial arts world. Since Kong Jian was aware of this secret, then Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing must also know as well."

Yin SuSu said, "If that is the case, I will follow eldest brother's every command. But your unworthy sister's martial arts are so lowly, how can I fully comprehend the brilliance of the 'Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation' in such a brief moment of time?"

Song YuanQiao replied, "In all honesty, by just combining the power of the six of us brothers to combat the seven Shaolin monks is already sufficient enough to secure our victory. But if sister you can participate on our third brother's behalf by acting as his successor, then I'm sure that he will be incredibly grateful."

The hearts of the six heroes of the Wu Dang all beated

together as one, and the purpose behind them asking Yin SuSu to participate in the battle was not for the sake of combating the adversaries, but rather it was for Yu DaiYan's sake. It should be understood that if the Six Heroes of Wu Dang combined their efforts to attack, the power of the "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation" would already be equivalent to the power of thirty two first rate fighters. Even if the three divine reverends did turn out to be very powerful, and even if there was some unknown first rate fighter amongst the disciples who accompanied them on this trip, yet even combining the power of all seven of them, it can be ascertained that there absolutely could be no way for them to turn out as being comparable to the combined power of thirty two first rate fighters. But ever since their master had taught them this "Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation," they never had the chance to use it. Today, they will clench victory with just one battle and defeat all three divine reverends of Shaolin, if Yu DaiYan cannot share this victorious glory, melancholy will most definitely fill his heart. Therefore Song YuanQiao and the others wanted Yin SuSu to learn the stances from Yu DaiYan and stand in as his substitution. That way, when the legend of this battle gets passed down amongst the martial arts world in the future, Yu DaiYan can still be considered as having partaken a role in this battle even if he didn't physically join in, and they will still be spoken of as the "Seven Heroes of Wu Dang."

The mutual understanding and genuine compassion that the brothers held towards each other were all discerned by Yin SuSu through just two three words, and therefore she said, "Alright, then I will ask our third brother to teach me. But my martial arts is much too inferior when compared to the rest of you, I just hope that I won't get in the way and end up being a burden later." Yin LiTing said, "Don't worry, that won't happen. As long as you remember the steps and directions of the formation, that would already be good enough. Even if

you happen to forget anything during the battle, we will all be there to remind you.”

Therefore, the seven of them all went over to Yu DaiYan’s bedroom. Since Zhang CuiShan returned home, he has already had a few talks with Yu DaiYan, but because Yin SuSu was ridden with illness, it was only until now did she finally have the chance to officially go see Yu DaiYan.

When Yu DaiYan saw the elegant exquisiteness of her beautiful face and observed the gentle grace in her manners, he became very happy for his brother. Then he was filled with a desolate heartache when he heard Song YuanQiao say that she wanted to act as his substitution to participate in the “Zhen Wu Seven Spheres Formation” which they will form in order to counter the three divine reverends of Shaolin. But he has been crippled for ten years now and have gotten used to many things. Therefore with a faint smile he said, “Sister, your third brother I don’t have anything good to give to you as a welcoming present. Now in this moment of haste, I can only relate to you the steps and directions of this formation. After the adversaries have retreated, I will explain to you in detail the variations and practicing methods to this formation.”

Yin SuSu replied with elated joy, “Thank you third brother.”

This was the first time that Yu DaiYan heard her open her mouth to speak, but when he suddenly heard her say the four words “Thank you third brother,” the facial muscles on his face began to contort and quiver uncontrollably while his two eyes stared blankly ahead, completely lost in thought. Zhang CuiShan asked with alarm, “Brother, are you not feeling well?” Yu DaiYan did not respond, but remained lost in a numbed, comatose state. There was a strange look in his eyes, an expression that communicated both pain and

hatred. It was as if he was suddenly reminded of one of the most hated experiences of his life.

When Zhang CuiShan turned around to look at his wife, he found that her expression had also changed suddenly as well, there was a mixture of horror and anxiety written all over her face.

Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou and the others looked at Yu DaiYan and then looked over at Yin SuSu, not understanding why the expression of these two people would suddenly become so strange. Everyone's heart was filled with a premonition that something terrible would happen. The room had suddenly become a mass of oppressing silence, so quiet that the heartbeat of each person could almost be heard.

Yu DanYan's breathing was heard to grow increasingly rapid, and a faint flush erupted over his pale cheeks. In a low voice he said, "Sister, please come over here and let me take a look at you." Yin SuSu's whole body was visibly shaking while she actually refused to approach Yu DaiYan. She only extended her arm to tightly cling onto her husband's arm instead.

After quite a while, Yu DaiYan sighed and said, "If you don't want to come over, that's fine as well. For I never did get to see your face that day anyways. Sister, can you please repeat these words after me, 'One, you must personally lead the escort. Two, you must take the package to the Xiang Yang city without any rest, so it will arrive in ten days. Three, should there be any problems, humph, I will kill every single person in your Dragon Gate Escort Agency.'"

When everyone heard him recite these words slowly, nobody could stop their bodies from breaking out into a cold sweat.

Yin SuSu ran forward a step and said, "Third brother, it truly

is remarkable of you to be able to recognize my voice. That day at Lin An City's Dragon Gate Escort Agency, the person who entrusted Du DaJin with the mission of bringing you back to Wu Dang mountain was your worthless sister I." Yu DaiYan said, "Thank you for your kindness sister." Yin SuSu continued, "Afterwards when the Dragon Gate Escort Agency fouled up along the journey, causing brother you to end up like this, it was also your sister I who went and completely annihilated their whole family, killing everyone including even the young and old." Yu DaiYan coldly asked, "For what reason did you treat me with such kindness?"

Yin SuSu's face was sombre as she gave a long sigh and said, "Third brother, since things have come to this stage, I can no longer conceal anything from you any longer. But I have to state ahead of time that in regards to this, CuiShan has been kept from the truth all along. I was afraid ... afraid that after he knows of the truth, he will never ... never care about me again."

Yu DaiYan quietly murmured, "Then you don't need to say anything. I've already become a useless cripple, there's no need to persist in chasing after the past. Why ruin the relationship between the two of you for someone like me? Now, all of you go! The six heroes of Wu Dang will combat the revered Shaolin monks, victory is at hand, do not let people think that the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang is merely an empty name."

Yu DaiYan's will was incredibly strong, and ever since he was injured, he has never moan or groaned with any form of bitterness. Originally, he couldn't even make any sounds for speech, and it was only through Zhang SanFeng's careful and skilled treatments of transferring the inner energy that he had cultivated throughout all these years into his body, was he finally able to gradually open his mouth for speech.

Yet he refused to mention a single word about what happened to him that day, and it was only today did anyone finally hear him utter these few indignant words of grief. After the brothers heard these words, there was not a single person whose blood was not boiling, while sounds of crying was furthermore heard to come from Yin LiTing.

Yin SuSu said, "Third brother, I know that you have already figured out the truth, but you're only refraining yourself from revealing it because you're taking into account of the love and friendship between CuiShan and you. It's true, that day on the waters of the QianTang River, the person who was hiding within the compartment of the boat and who used the Mosquito Needles to hurt you was your unworthy sister I ..."

Zhang CuiShan severely roared, "SuSu, was it really you? You ... you ... you didn't tell me this earlier!"

Yan SuSu replied, "The true culprit who injured your third brother was your very own wife. How could I possibly tell you that?" She whipped her head around again to face Yu DaiYan and said, "Third brother, afterwards, the person who concealed the Seven Stars Needles in their palms in order to wound you and cheat away the Dragon Saber in your possession was my very own brother Yin YeWang. Because there has never been any trouble or scores of vengeance between our Heavenly Eagle Sect and your Wu Dang Sect, and since we have already obtained the Dragon Saber and furthermore respect you as a venerable and tough man, we therefore asked the Dragon Gate Escort Agency to bring you back to the Wu Dang mountain. But the twists that suddenly appeared along the journey was not something we ever expected would happen."

Zhang CuiShan's whole body was shaking and fire seemed to be about to blaze out of his eyes. He pointed to Yin SuSu and

said, "You ... you really ruined me with a wicked lie."

Yu DaiYan was heard to suddenly give a loud scream while his whole body flipped off the bed boards. With a loud thump, he fainted while falling onto the ground. The four slabs of bed boards had broken simultaneously."

Yin SuSu took out her sword, rotated the handle around and handed it over Zhang CuiShan while saying, "CuiShan, we have been husband and wife for ten years now. To be sheltered by your compassion and be blessed by your profound love and genuine respect, I know that I can really die with no regrets now. Please kill me with one swipe of the sword in order to preserve the brotherly rightfulness between the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang."

Zhang CuiShan took hold of the sword and was just about to lurch forward to drive the blade through his wife's heart when in that brief flash, the last ten years all surfaced within his heart, all of the various attractive qualities such as her warm tenderness and devoted care, gentle affections and sweet sentiments. How could he possibly bring himself to pierce forward with that sword?

He remained in a state of dumbfounded shock for a moment, and then after suddenly giving out a loud scream, he dashed out of the room. Yin SuSu, Song YuanQiao and the others did not know where he wanted to go, so they all ran after him. They watched him tear out of the room and kneel on the floor in front of Zhang SanFeng, saying "Honoured master, your disciple I have made a terrible mistake, there's no possibly of it being rectified. I would only like to beg you of one thing."

Zhang SanFeng was not aware of what the situation was like, therefore said with a tender expression, "What is it? Just say it and there would be nothing your master would not do for

you.”

Zhang CuiShan knocked his head on the floor three times and said, “Thank you respected master, your disciple I have only one cherished son who has landed in the hands of evil villains. I would like to beg esteemed master you to rescue him out of the demons' lair and raise him into an adult.” He then stood up and ran forward a few steps before turning towards reverend Kong Zhi, Mr. Iron Zither He Tai Chong, Kong Dong Sect's Guan Neng, E-Mei Sect's revered nun Jing Xuan and the others, declaring in a loud and clear voice, “All crimes and sins are the doing of Zhang CuiShan's sole person only. A true man will always confront the consequences of their actions, today I'll give everyone a satisfying answer!” As he was saying these words, he lifted his long sword and drew it across his own neck. Bright red blood immediately gushed out as his life ended right there.

Zhang CuiShan's intentions of committing suicide was quite strong. He already predicted that his master and fellow brothers would act out to stop him the moment he drew his sword, therefore he purposely situated himself amongst the crowd of guests and stuck out immediately after he finished saying those two sentences.”

Zhang SanFeng, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi and Yi LiTing all screamed out while rushing forward at the same time. Banging sounds rang out consecutively as the body of six or seven people flew up into the air. These were all people of whom were surrounding Zhang CuiShan and whose bodies were all blown back by the force harboured within the palms of Zhang SanFeng and his disciples. But they were still too late. Zhang CuiShan's blade had already slitted through his throat, there was no possibility of salvaging the damage. Song YuanQiao, Muo ShengGu and Yin LiTing all came out slightly later, and of course would be even further away from

being able to stop Zhang CuiShan.

It was at this time when a young child's voice cried from outside the long window of the hall, "Papa! Papa!" These two cries seemed to be smothered, the mouth of this speaker was obviously being covered by someone else. With a sway of his body, Zhang SanFeng had already arrived outside the long window. All that was seen was a man dressed in the attire of a Mongolian war general, in his arms was a eight or nine year old boy. That boy's mouth was covered, but he was struggling to break free.

Zhang SanFeng's beloved disciple has just died a terrible death, and it was as if somebody has driven a knife into his heart. But due to his cultivation of nearly one hundred years, his thoughts still remained clear. He shouted in a low voice, "Get inside!" That man gave a tap with his left leg, and was just about to leap up onto the rooftops with the kid in his arms. But his shoulders immediately slumped while his whole body seemed to be suddenly held down by an incredible weight and he found that he couldn't even lift his two feet from the ground. What had happened was Zhang SanFeng had soundlessly approached the man and placed his left hand lightly on his shoulders. That man was incredibly petrified, for he knew that all Zhang SanFeng needed to do was expel some internal energy, and even if he doesn't die right away, he most definitely will be severely injured. Therefore, he could only follow his orders and enter into the reception hall.

That kid was indeed Zhang CuiShan's son, Zhang Wuji. His mouth was covered by that man, but from outside the long window he was able to witness very clearly how his father committed suicide with a slash of his sword. How could he possibly not be upset? He therefore broke free forcefully, and was finally able to release a loud scream.

Yin SuSu witnessed her husband commit suicide for her, but then suddenly she saw her son return without any harm. After her tremendous sorrow, followed great joy. She asked, "Child, did you tell them the whereabouts of your godfather?" Wuji held his head upright and said bravely, "Even if they kill me, I would not say a single word." Yin SuSu said, "That's a good boy, come and let me hold you."

Zhang SanFeng said, "Hand the child over to her." That man's whole body was controlled, and had no choice but to follow Zhang's orders and passed Wuji over to Yin SuSu.

Zhang Wuji fell into his mother's embrace crying, "Ma, why did they have to push my papa to commit suicide?" Yin SuSu said, "All these people here have come up onto the mountain because they wanted to force your father to kill himself." Wuji's little pair of eyes swept slowly from the left to the right once. Though he was young, but when everyone's eyes met up with his gaze, they couldn't help but feeling shaken within their hearts.

Yin SuSu said, "Wuji, you have to promise your mother one thing." Wuji said, "Ma, just say it." Yin SuSu said, "Don't rush to seek revenge, you have to be patient. But don't even let a single one of them go." When everyone heard these few cold words from her, they couldn't help but feel a cold chill brush across their back. Wuji was heard to cry, "Ma! I don't want revenge, I only want my papa to come back to life!"

Yin SuSu said tearfully, "When a person dies, there's no way of bring them back." Her body quivered ever so slightly as she said, "Child, since your papa has died, we may as well reveal your godfather's whereabouts to others." Wuji hurriedly said, "No, no we can't do that!"

Yin SuSu said, "Abbot Kong Wen, you are the only person whom I will reveal the secret to, please bring your ear closer." This move was out of everyone's expectations, and they were all surprised. Kong Wen said, "All is well, all is well! If only madam you were willing to reveal this earlier, fifth hero Zhang wouldn't have to die" and approached Yin SuSu, leaning his ear over.

Yin SuSu's lips moved a few times but was not heard to emit any sounds. Kong Wen asked, "What?" Yin SuSu said, "The Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun is hiding in ..." when she got to the words "hiding in" her voice became extremely muddled again, no audible sound was heard. Kong Wen asked again, "What?" Yin SuSu replied, "He is there, your Shaolin sect can go and find him yourselves."

Kong Wen frantically insisted, "I didn't hear anything" while he straightened his body and lifted his hands to scratch his head, a completely confused and lost expression on his face.

Yin SuSu laughed coldly and said, "I can only tell you that much. As long as you go there, you will most definitely find the Golden Mane Lion King Xie Xun."

She embraced Wuji and said in a low voice, "Child, when you grow up, you must take caution of woman tricking you. The more beautiful that woman is, the better of a manipulator she will be." She then pressed her lips against Wuji's ears and whispered in an extremely soft voice, "I didn't tell that monk anything, I was only lying to him ... look at ... what a great liar your mother is!" and after a bitter, anguished laugh, her arms fell to her side as her whole body slumped down to the floor. What was immediately seen was the dagger that was stuck in her chest. She had already stabbed herself with this dagger when she was embracing Wuji, but because Wuji's body was blocking her front, nobody was able to detect it.

Wuji threw himself onto his mother's body and screamed, "Mama, mama!" But Yin SuSu had driven that dagger into herself a long time ago and had been able to hold up for quite a while already. By this time, she had eventually stopped breathing. Wuji was incredibly devastated, but not only did he not sob and cry, he actually glared at Abbot Kong Wen while asking, "It was you who killed my mama wasn't it? Why did you kill my mama?"

Having witness a series of life's great tragedies all at once, even Kong Wen, the sect leader of the present era's most revered martial arts sect couldn't stop himself from feeling incredibly shaken. After being interrogated by Wuji like this, he couldn't help but back up a few steps while frantically saying, "No, it wasn't me. She ... she was the one who killed herself."

Tears were rolling around in Wuji's eyes, but he exerted all his strength to force back these tears, muttering, "I won't cry, I will not let myself cry, won't cry in front of all you bad people."

The Abbot Kong Wen cleared his throat softly and said, "Grand Master Zhang, we never expected that ... ai ... ai ... that it would end up like this. Since fifth hero Zhang and his spouse has already committed suicide, then we will no longer continue to interrogate about the past. We will retreat now." After saying these words, he pressed his palms together and bowed, while Zhang SanFeng returned a bow and said coolly, "Forgive us for not seeing you out." All the Shaolin monks got up together, turned around and prepared to leave.

Yin LiTing shouted with anger, "You all ... you all force my brother to kill himself ..." but then he immediately thought, "Brother killed himself because he felt that he had wronged

third brother, it really wasn't their fault." Therefore having just uttered half a sentence, he didn't continue to finish it and only threw himself onto Zhang CuiShan's corpse, wailing loudly.

All the guests felt unease in their hearts as they all approached Zhang SanFeng to express their intentions of departing, while they were all thinking within their hearts, "This time, the bad blood has gotten really thick. The Wu Dang sect most definitely will not easily let us off the hook this time. There will be trouble in the future." Song YuanQiao saw the guests out, accompanying them outside to the temple doors with reddened eyes. As soon as they stepped foot outside, he turned his head around, his tears already pouring down. Within the reception hall, all that could be heard was the sobbing from everyone in the Wu Dang sect.

E-Mei sect was the last group to leave. When Ji XiaoFu saw how devastated YinLiTing was, her eyes also reddened as she approached him and said softly: "Sixth brother, I'm leaving now. Take... Take good care of yourself." Yin Liting's tears obscured his vision, as he lifted his head up and chokingly asked: "Did you ... did you from E-Mei Sect also come here to cause trouble for my Fifth Brother?" Ji Xiaofu hurriedly replied: "No. Our Master only wanted to ask Brother Zhang to reveal Xie Xun's whereabouts." She paused, bit her lip till blood flowed and tremblingly said: "Sixth brother, I ... I have wronged you. Take care of yourself. I will only be able to make it up to you in the next life." Yin Liting felt that what she said was rather excessive. He replied: "This was not your fault. We won't blame you." Ji Xiaofu was very pale as she said: "It's... it's not about this..." She did not dare continue talking to Yin Liting, so she turned to Wuji and said: "Good boy, we... we will all take good care of you." She removed her gold necklace/neck-band and tried to put it on Wuji, saying softly: "This is for you..." Wuji jerked his head away and said: "I

don't want it!" Embarrassed and left with the necklace/neckband in her hand, Ji Xiaofu was stunned. The tear that had been welling up in her eyes finally rolled out. Jingxuan Shi-tai frowned and said: "Ji Shi-mei, why do you have so much to say to a child? Let's go!" Ji Xiaofu hurried after her.

Wuji had been holding back, waiting for Jingxuan, Ji Xiaofu and the others to leave, so that he could cry his heart out. But suddenly, he could not breathe and collapsed to the ground. Yu Lianzhou quickly picked him up and held him in his arms, thinking that he had fainted because of his distress and trying to hold back his tears. He massaged Wuji chest a few times and said: "Child, just cry it out." But Wuji did not wake up. His body was as cold as ice and his breathing was weak. Yu Lianzhou channeled his internal energy into him, but Wuji still did not wake up. Seeing that Wuji looked about to die as well, everyone paled.

Zhang Sanfeng pressed Wuji's Lingtai acupoint and transferred his internal energy to him. With Zhang Sanfeng's current internal energy cultivation, unless a person was on the brink of death, no matter how severe his injury was he would definitely improve once he received Zhang Sanfeng's internal energy. But when the internal energy entered Wuji's body, his face turned from white to green and from green to purple, and Wuji shaking uncontrollably. Zhang Sanfeng felt Wuji's forehead, which was as cold as a block of ice. Alarmed, Zhang Sanfeng felt the centre of Wuji's back under his shirt and discovered that it was blazing hot like a fire was burning, while the rest of his body was a bone-penetratingly cold. If Zhang Sanfeng internal energy had not reached such an unfathomable level, he would have shivered upon coming into contact with the cold. He said: "Yuanqiao, where is the Tartar soldier who was carrying the child? Go and find him." Yu Lianzhou, remembering how he had been injured by the Mongol soldier and knowing that his eldest martial brother

was not his match, hurriedly said: "I'll come as well." The two of them left the hall together. When Zhang Sanfeng dragged the Mongol soldier into the hall, Zhang Cuishan had already committed suicide. This was followed by Yin Susu also committing suicide. In the midst of their grief, no one paid any attention to the Mongol soldier and he had fled.

Zhang Sanfeng tore upon Wuji's shirt to reveal a clear dark green colour palm-print on his back. Zhang Sanfeng gently touched his back. The area of the palm-print was burning hot, while everywhere else was icy cold. Zhang Sanfeng's hand felt uncomfortable. This injury of Wuji's was very severe.

Before long, Song Yuanqiao and Yu Lianzhou returned to the hall. They reported: "There are no outsiders on the mountain." When they saw the strange palm-print on Wuji's back, they were both shocked. Zhang Sanfeng frowned and said: "I had always thought that since Taoist Priest Bai Sun (100 Damages/Injuries) died thirty years ago, the Xuan Ming Divine Palms have been lost from this world. How could it be that there is still someone who knows this martial art?" Song Yuanqiao said with shock: "This child has suffered under the Xuan Ming Divine Palm?" He was the oldest, thus he had heard of the Xuan Ming Divine Palms. Yu Lianzhou and the other had never even heard of the name.

Zhang Sanfeng sighed, he did not reply. Tears running down his face, he held Wuji in his arms. He looked at Zhang Cuishan's corpse and said: "Cuishan, Cuishan, you studied under my tutelage and entrusted me with your last wishes. But I can't even save your only beloved son. What's the point of me living to a hundred? What's the point of Wudang Sect's fame resonating throughout the world? It would be better if I were dead!" His disciples were shocked. Since they had become his disciples, Zhang Sanfeng was always easygoing

and carefree. They had never heard him say such words of all-consuming despair.

Yin Liting asked: "Master, is there ... is there no hope of saving this child?" Zhang Sanfeng picked up Wuji in both arms, paced back and forth in the hall, and said: "Unless ... unless my Master Jueyuan comes back to life and passes the complete 9 Yang manual to me." The hearts of his disciples sank. Zhang Sanfeng's words meant that there was no way of treating Wuji's injury. Everyone was silent. Yu Lianzhou said: "Master, when I fought with that man previously, the force of his palm was very uncommonly vicious. I was injured then, but have made a full recovery." Zhang Sanfeng replied: "That was all due to the fame of the 'Seven Heroes of Wudang'. If the Xuan Ming Diving Palms are used on an opponent with more powerful internal energy, the force of the palms will reflect back onto the user and injure him. If you meet this man in the future, you must be very very careful."

Yu Lianzhou said: "Yes.". He shivered as he thought: "So that man held back during the fight, fearing that I was more powerful than him. He did not release the full force of the Xuan Ming Divine Palms, otherwise chances are that I would be dead now. If I meet him in the future, he will no longer hold back." He then thought: "I suffered and was injured by his palm. Wuji is so young, I'm afraid ... I'm afraid ..."

Song Yuanqiao remarked: "From the brief glimpse I had of that man, he was around 50 years old with a high nose and deep-set eyes. He looks like he is from the Western Regions." Mo Shenggu asked: "Why did that man kidnap Wuji only to bring him to our mountain?"

Zhang Songxi said: "The man tried unsuccessfully to force Wuji to answer his questions. So he used the Xuan Ming Divine Palms to injure Wuji. He wanted Fifth Brother and his

wife to see Wuji suffer with their own eyes, and so, cannot help but reveal the Golden Hair Lion King's location to him."

Mo Shenggu said angrily: "This man is really daring. How dare he come to cause trouble on Wudang Mountain." Zhang Songxi replied dejectedly: "Weren't there many people who came to cause trouble on Wudang Mountain today? Plus that man had Wuji under his control. He anticipated that we would spare the rat to save the dishes (ie hesitate to take action for fear of hurting an innocent party) and wouldn't dare to hurt him." The six of them sat in silence in the hall for a long while.

Wuji suddenly opened his eyes and cried: "Dad, dad, it hurts. It's very painful." He clutched Zhang Sanfeng tightly, with his head resting on Zhang Sanfeng's chest. Yu Lianzhou said sternly: "Wuji, your father has died. You have to live and learn some great martial arts, so you can avenge your father's death." Wuji cried: "I don't want revenge! I don't want revenge! I want daddy and mummy to come back to life again. Second Uncle, let's just let all the bad people go, and concentrate on saving daddy and mummy."

When Zhang Sanfeng heard these words, he could not help his tears rolling down again. He said: "We can all only try our very best. How long he lives will depend on heaven's mercy." He turned to Zhang Cuishan's body and cried: "Cuishan, Cuishan! What an unfortunate child."

He carried Wuji to his own room, where he sealed 18 major acupoints on his body. Wuji stopped shivering after his acupoints were sealed. The green shade of his face grew darker and darker. Zhang Sanfeng knew that when the green shade became black, Wuji would stop breathing and die. He took off Wuji's shirt, undid his own Taoist robe, and pressed his chest onto Wuji's back. At this time, Song Yuanqiao and Yin Liting were outside arranging Zhang Cuishan and Yin

Susu's funeral. Yu Lianzhuo, Zhang Songzi and Mo Shenggu came to their Master's room. They knew that he was using the 'Pure Yang Boundless Energy' skill to transfer the cold poison from Wuji's body to his own. Zhang Sanfeng had never married. Even though he was a hundred years of age, he was a virgin. He had cultivated this skill for eighty years. Because of all this, he had reached the pinnacle of this skill. Yu Lianzhou and the others waited by his side. About an hour later (half a shichen), Zhang Sanfeng's face turned green and his fingers began to tremble. He opened his eyes and said: "Lianzhou, you take over. When you can't bear it anymore, let Songxi take over. You must not continue."

Yu Lianzhou replied: "Yes." He removed his robe and held Wuji in his arms. When his flesh made contact with Wuji's body, he began to shiver. It felt like he was holding a piece of ice to his chest. He said: "Seventh brother, go ask someone to bring in a charcoal brazier. The hotter it is, the better." Not long later, the fire was lit. But Yu Lianzhou still found the cold difficult to bear.

Zhang Sanfeng sat by the side and slowly circulated his internal energy through three channels. He channeled his 'Yin Yun Zi Qi (Dense/enshrouding Purple Qi)' from in dantian to force the cold poison out of his body little by little. When he stood up after all the cold energy had been expelled, he saw that Mo Shenggu was holding Wuji. Yu Lianzhou and Zhang Songxi were sitting by the side in complete meditative focus, expelling the cold poison from their bodies. Not long later, Mo Shenggu could endure it no longer. He ordered a novice priest to ask Song Yuanqiao and Yin Liting to take over. From this technique of using internal energy to treat injuries, it became clear whose internal energy was strong and whose was weak. Mo Shenggu could not even tolerate it for the time it took to have a cup of hot tea. Song Yuanqiao was able to endure for the time it took to burn two

incense sticks. When Yin Liting carried Wuji in his arms, he yelled loudly and his whole body shivered uncontrollably. Zhang Sanfeng ordered with alarm: "Give the child to me. Sit down, regulate your breathing and clear your mind of all thoughts." Yin Liting had been hit so hard by Zhang Cuishan's death that his mind and thoughts were in disarray. He had to calm his thoughts down before he could continue.

In this way, the six of them took turns over three days and three nights of relentless effort to reduce the cold poison in Wuji's body. Each person's turn gradually became longer and longer. After the fourth day, they could finally steal a few moments of sleep. After the eighth day, each person would spend four hours a day treating Wuji injury. They could then gradually recover their own strength.

At first, there was great progress in Wuji's condition. His body grew less cold, his spirits improved and he began to eat and drink. Everyone thought that he could be saved. But on the 36th day, Yu Lianzhou found that no matter how he tried to generate energy, he could not draw out a single bit of the cold poison in Wuji's body. But his body was still as cold as ice and the green tinge in his face remained. Yu Lianzhou assumed that his own strength was not sufficient, so he went to tell his Master about it. Zhang Sanfeng tried, but he too was unsuccessful. During the next five days, all six of them tried every method they could think of, with no success.

Wuji said: "Tai shifu (Grandmaster), my arms and legs are warm, but the top of my head, my chest and abdomen are growing colder and colder." Zhang Sanfeng was inwardly frightened, but he soothed him saying: "Your injury is now better. We won't need to hold you every day anymore. Just sleep on my bed for now." He then carried Wuji to his own bed to sleep.

Zhang Sanfeng and his disciples went out to the hall. He sighed: "The cold poison has seeped into the top of his head, his chest and his dantian (the area below the belly-button, where internal energy is stored). It cannot be drawn out with external strength. It looks like our hard work over these thirty-plus days has been in vain."

He brooded for a long while, thinking: "Outsiders can no longer help him draw out the cold poison from his body. If he cultivates the unparalleled internal energy technique in the '9 Yang Manual', he may then be able to use the Yang to disperse the Yin. But when my late Master Jueyuan imparted the Manual to me, I was unable to learn it fully. Even after meditating in seclusion the last few times and trying to work it out, I can only comprehend about 30 to 40 per cent of it. For now, I can only teach him to practice the skill. If he can live an extra day, let him have that extra day."

So he taught the techniques and the formula of the 9 Yang Manual to Wuji. The skill had many complicated variations and could not be taught all at once. He started by teaching Wuji the 'Da Zhou Tian Ban Yun' (Heaven transporting everywhere), to circulate the warm energy from the dantian to the ren, du and chong meridians through the 'Yin Xiang Wei Lu (Guide Yin Through the Back Door) Gate'. And after that, to divide the energy into two and channel it through the lower back to the 'Lu Lu (Windlass) Gate' located on both sides of the fourteenth spinal bone. From there, the energy would be directed to the 'Yu Zhen (Jade pillow) Gate' on the back, shoulders and neck. This was called 'Ni Yun Zhen Qi Tong San Guan' (transporting the energy in reverse through three gates). After that, the energy would be directed through the 'Bai Hui (Hundred Meetings)' acupoint at the top of the head, divided into five streams, and channeled through the whole body through the 'Shan Zhong' acupoint. The energy would then be divided into two again, before

coming back together in the dantian. After one complete cycle, there would be a sweet feeling in the body and the energy in the dantian would feel like incense smoke was curling upwards and circulating freely around.(Translator's note: I have no idea what Jin Yong is talking about here. Translation might not be accurate)

This was called 'Yin Yun Zi Qi (Dense/enshrouding Purple Qi)'. When the Yin Yun Zi Qi was practiced to a high level of achievement, the cold poison in the dantian would be expelled. There was no great difference between each school's internal energy principles, but each school's method of practice was different. The method taught by Zhang Sanfeng was extremely powerful and could be considered the best in the world. Zhang Wuji practiced this technique for two years, developing a significant amount of Purple Qi (Yin Yun Zi Qi) in his dantian. However, the cold poison in his body stuck firmly within his meridians and would not be dispersed. The green tinge in his face grew more noticeable each day. Each time the cold poison attacked, his suffering worsened.

During these two years, Zhang Sanfeng painstakingly watched over Wuji's internal energy cultivation. Song Yuanqiao and the others went in search of precious medicines, hundred year old ginseng, mature Chinese knotweed (*Polygonum multiflorum*), mountain Fuling (*Wolfiporia extensa*), and other types of rare herbs. Wuji consumed all of these, but the effect was like throwing a rock into the ocean. Everyone watched him become thinner and more sickly. Even though Wuji put on a brave and cheerful front, they all could not help but feel despondent, thinking that in the end, they would not be able to save Zhang Cuishan's only heir.

Wudang Sect were preoccupied with caring for Wuji, so they had no time to search out their enemies who had injured Yu

Daiyan and Wuji. During these two years, the Heavenly Eagle Sect Leader Yin Tianzheng had, a few times, sent people over to visit his grandson and deliver many valuable presents. However, the Wudang Heroes hated the Heavenly Eagle Sect for indirectly bringing disaster upon Yu Daiyan and Zhang Cuishan. Each time a representative from the Heavenly Eagle Sect arrived, the presents were rejected. On one occasion, Mo Shenggu even fiercely beat up one of the representatives. After that incident, Yin Tianzheng stopped sending people over.

During the Mid-Autumn festival, the Wudang Heroes and their Master got together for a celebration. Before the banquet could begin, Wuji suddenly became ill. His face turned green and the cold surged through his body. He did not want to ruin the festive atmosphere, so he gritted his teeth and endured the pain. But who could fail to see what was happening? Yin Liting took Wuji to his room, covered him with a blanket and lit a big fire. Zhang Sanfeng suddenly said: "Tomorrow I'll take Wuji to the Shaolin Temple in Songshan." Everyone understood what his intention was. In order to save Wuji's life, he had no other alternative but to humble himself and personally beg Shaolin's Abbot Kong Wen for help to fill the gaps in the 9 Yang Manual.

Two years ago on Wudang Mountain, Shaolin and Wudang fostered a deep enmity between them. Zhang Sanfeng was a senior master of already a hundred years of age. To now surrender his position of honour and go begging for help was a big disgrace for him. Everyone knew that from now onwards, Wudang would be unable to raise their heads with pride everytime they met Shaolin. But because of their love and relationship with Zhang Cuishan, they were willing to put aside their pride. E-Mei School too had a portion of the 9 Yang Manual, but their Headmaster (Zhang Men) Mie Jue Shi Tai's character was extremely strange. Zhang Sanfeng had

written a few letters to her and ordered Yin Liting to deliver them. However, Mie Jue Shi Tai did not even open the envelopes and merely sent them back. It looked like that apart from humbling themselves before Shaolin Sect, there was no other alternative.

If Song Yuanqiao led his martial brothers up to Shaolin to beg for help, that would be better for Wudang's face. But Reverend Kong Wen would never have revealed the secrets of their 9 Yang Manual to them. When everyone thought about how the mighty Wudang School would be humbled before Shaolin from now on, they all felt depressed. Instead of enjoying the banquet and the festivities, they simply drank a few cups of wine in melancholy before cleaning up.

Early the next day, Zhang Sanfeng and Wuji set out on their journey. His five disciples initially wanted to follow along, but Zhang Sanfeng said: "If so many of us go, Shaolin School is definitely going to become suspicious. It will better if only the two of us, one old and one young, go."

Zhang Sanfeng and Wuji mounted black horses and headed north. Shaolin and Wudang Schools were located quite close to each other. It only took a few days to travel from Wudang in Hubei to Shaolin in Henan. After Zhang Sanfeng and Wuji crossed the Han River, they arrived in Nanyang. They then traveled north to Ruzhou, then turned to the west and headed for Mt. Song. When they reached Mt Shaoshi (a mountain the Song Shan range, Shaolin is located at its foot), they tied their horses to a tree and continued on foot. Zhang Sanfeng reminisced about the past – how over eighty years ago, his Master Jueyuan ran away from Shaolin while carrying him and Guo Xiang inside a pair of buckets. With a heart heavy with regret, he held Wuji's hand and walked up the mountain slowly. He saw that the Five Peaks (of Mt Song) and the Pagoda Forest were unchanged, but Jueyuan, Guo Xiang and the rest had long passed away.

The two of them reached a pavilion and looked at Shaolin Temple. They saw two young monks talking and laughing while walking towards them. Zhang Sanfeng stopped them and asked: "Please report that Zhang Sanfeng of Wudang Mountain humbly requests a meeting with the Abbot."

The two monks were shocked when they heard Zhang Sanfeng's name. They looked at him to size him up. What they saw was a very tall man with a silver beard, a shiny red face, a kindly smile and wearing a filthy green Taoist robe. Zhang Sanfeng was carefree and never paid attention to his appearance. When he was a young man, some people in the Jianghu called him the "Scruffy Priest" behind his back. Others called him "Scruffy Zhang". Then later on, when Wudang's martial arts were great and its name famous, no one dared to call him such.

The two monks thought: "Zhang Sanfeng is the founding master of Wudang School. Wudang is on par with our Shaolin School. Could it be that he has come to make trouble and to fight?" They saw that he was accompanied with a skinny, green-faced boy of around eleven to twelve years old. Neither of them looked special and the monks could not see any power or prestige. One of the monks asked: "Are you really Wudang's Ven... Venerable (Zhang Zhen Ren - respectful form of address to a Taoist priest)?" Zhang Sanfeng laughed: "Yes I am, I wouldn't dare be an impersonator." Listening to him, the other monk felt that he did not have the bearing of the founding master of a school and disbelieved him even more. The monk asked: "You are really not joking?" Zhang Sanfeng laughed: "What is so special about Zhang Sanfeng? What is the use in impersonating him?" Half believing and half not believing him, the two monks quickly returned to the temple to report.

After quite a long time, the temple door opened and Abbot Kong Weng, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing came out. The three men were followed by about ten old monks in yellow robes. Zhang Sanfeng knew that these were the Damo Hall Elders, who may even be from a more senior generation than the Abbot. They stayed in the temple and studied martial arts, with not a care of the outside world. It was likely that they only accompanied the Abbot out when they heard that the Head of Wudang Sect, who was no ordinary person, had arrived.

Zhang Sanfeng left the pavilion, bowed and said: "How could I trouble the Abbot and all the Reverends to come out and welcome us?" Kong Wen and the others put their hands together and bowed Buddhist-style. Kong Wen said: "Venerable Zhang has come from a far, it is really beyond my expectations. What instructions do you have for me?" Zhang Sanfeng replied: "I have a request to make." Kong Wen said: "Please sit, please sit."

Zhang Sanfeng sat down in the pavilion and some monks served tea. Zhang Sanfeng could not help thinking with annoyance: "Regardless of anything, I am still the founding master of a Sect and your senior. Why am I not invited into the temple, but merely made to sit here halfway up the mountain? Let's not talk about me, it would not even be appropriate for them to treat any other guest in this manner." But he had an open-minded personality, so he did not take it to heart.

Kong Wen said: "Venerable Zhang, you have humbled yourself by coming to our mountain. By right we should invite you into the temple. But you left Shaolin Temple as a young man. You would know that our rules dictate that all disciples who forsake our Sect or are expelled are not permitted to enter the temple again. If they do, they will be subject to punishment." Zhang Sanfeng laughed and said:

“So that’s the reason. When I was young, all I did was attend to Reverend Jueyuan performing tasks like sweeping floors and making tea. Since I never shaved my head or entered into any master’s tutelage, I could not be considered a Shaolin disciple. Kong Zhi replied coldly: “But you nevertheless secretly learnt Shaolin martial arts.”

Anger surged through Zhang Sanfeng, but he thought: “Wudang’s martial arts are the product of my diligent work and study. But if Reverend Jueyuan had not taught me the ‘9 Yang Manual’ and Heroine Guo had not given me the Shaolin Iron Lohans (Arhats), the martial arts that came later would not have come into being. So it is not wrong to say that my martial arts originate from Shaolin.” So he calmed down and said: “It is regarding this matter that I came here today.”

Kong Wen and Kong Zhi glanced at each other, thinking: “Why did he come here? He can’t have good intentions. It is more likely than not that he is here over Zhang Cuishan’s death.” Kong Wen said: “Please elaborate.” Zhang Sanfeng replied: “Reverend Kong Zhi said that my martial arts originated from Shaolin. What he said is not wrong. At that time, I was Reverend Jueyuan’s attendant and learnt the 9 Yang Manual. But the Manual was too profound. As I was very young then, I was unable to learn it completely. This is one of my deepest regrets. When Reverend Jueyuan recited the Manual on that remote mountain, there were three fortunate people who heard him. One of E-Mei School’s founder Heroine Guo, one was your honourable school’s Reverend Wuse, and the last person was me. I was the youngest and had the least ability. I also had no martial arts foundation. So among the three sects, I probably absorbed the least.”

Kong Zhi said coldly: “That may not necessarily be the case. Venerable Zhang attended to Jueyuan when you were young. How could it be that he did not secretly pass on the skills to you? Wudang’s fame of today is all down to Jueyuan’s

efforts.” Jueyuan was three generations more senior than Kong Zhi. By right, Kong Zhi should have called him “Martial great-granduncle”. But after Jueyuan escaped from Shaolin, he was considered an expelled disciple of Shaolin and his name had been removed from the list of disciples. So in his anger, Kongzhi simply dispensed with manners. Zhang Sanfeng stood up and respectfully said: “I have never forgotten my late master’s debt of kindness to me.”

Among the Four Great Monks of Shaolin, Kong Jian was the most merciful, but unfortunately he passed away the earliest. Kong Wen was a person of deep thoughts, who did not openly display his emotions. Kong Xing was simple-minded and naïve, he did not pay attention to the affairs of the world. Kong Zhi was temperamental and narrow-minded. He had always felt that Zhang Sanfeng had stolen Shaolin’s martial arts. He could not help feeling angry that Wudang’s name was renown through the world. Furthermore, before Yin Susu died, she pretended to tell the whereabouts of Xie Sun to Kong Wen. This ‘Moving Disaster to Jiangdong’ scheme was very devious. During the last two years, Wulin fighters had incessantly come to Shaolin every two or three days to find out about Xie Xun’s location. Some of them came openly, others furtively and some pleaded, while others demanded. Kong Wen swore and insisted that he did not know where Xie Xun was. But that day in Wudang’s Zi Xiao Palace/Hall, hundreds of people from many sects had seen Yin Susu whisper in Kong Wen’s ear. No matter how Kong Wen tried to explain, nobody believed him. Because of this, battles were fought a few times each month, causing many injuries and deaths on both sides. When all things were considered, how could Shaolin lay the blame on anyone but Wudang? The monks had been suppressing their anger for the last two years. Beyond their expectations, Zhang Sanfeng turned up on their doorstep so they vented their anger and insulted him. Kong Zhi said: “Zhang Sanfeng has admitted stealing

martial arts from Shaolin Temple, it is a pity that there are no witnesses to hear it. Otherwise this would be spread through the wulin for everyone to know.”

Zhang Sanfeng said: “All the martial arts under heaven are from the same family. For hundreds and thousands of years, the strengths of some have been incorporated to offset the weakness of others (“take from the long to patch up the short”). We can no longer differentiate the true origins of each martial art. But Shaolin School has been recognized as the leader of the wulin for the last few hundred years. I came here today because I admire your noble school’s martial arts. Knowing I have not reached that level, I came to learn a few things from you, the various reverends.”

When Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and the others heard Zhang Sanfeng say “I can to learn a few things from you”, their expressions changed as they thought he was trying to challenge them to a fight. They thought this old priest had cultivated his skills for a hundred years, so his martial arts must be without measure. There was no one who was his match in the whole wide world, and he feared no one. Who knew what sort of peerless martial arts he had been practicing during the last two years? The three monks were momentarily silent.

Finally Kong Xing said: “Good Old Priest, so you want to test our abilities. I, Kong Xing, am not afraid of you. Shaolin has hundreds and thousands of monks. You may not necessarily be able to defeat us all.” Though he said he was “not afraid”, in his heart he was truly afraid. So he came up with this idea of attacking Zhang Sanfeng with hundreds and thousands of monks.

Zhang Sanfeng hastily clarified: “Please don’t misunderstand me. When I said learn a few things, I really meant that I came to ask for some pointers. I have been practicing the ‘9 Yang

Manual' that my late master passed on to me, but there are few things that I don't understand so I have not mastered it all. Shaolin has many monks who have reached a profound level of cultivation. If Shaolin is willing to teach me, you will have Zhang Sanfeng's eternal gratitude." As he said this, he stood up and made a deep bow."

These words of Zhang Sanfeng were far outside the expectations of the Shaolin monks. His martial arts were without equal, he was the founder of a school and had practiced and cultivated for ninety years. Among the denizens of the wulin in this era, there was no grander name. His status was so high that no one was his equal. The monks could never have imagined that Zhang Sanfeng would now come to Shaolin to beg for instruction. Kong Wen hurriedly bowed and said: "Venerable Zhang, you must be joking. We, your juniors, have shallow knowledge. We cannot measure up to the saying 'the stone of the mountain studies the jade' (this is a proverb that basically means "to remedy one's defects by learning from other's strenghts"; ie their level of learning is so low/inferior that they cannot measure up to that). How can we give you any pointers?"

Zhang Sanfeng knew that the whole matter appeared very strange. It would be difficult for the monks to understand and trust him, so he told them the whole story right from the beginning - how Wuji was injured by the Xuan Ming Divine Palms and how they had failed to purge the cold Yin poison from his body despite trying everything. He also spoke of how Wuji was Zhang Cuishan only beloved son, and that no matter what, he had to save Wuji's life. He said that the current situation was that apart from learning the complete '9 Yang Manual', there was no other way. He offered to relate the part of the 9 Yang Manual that he had learnt in exchange for Shaolin's part, in order to form a more complete whole.

After Kong Wen heard this, he pondered about it for a while. Then he replied: "Shaolin has 72 martial art skills, but in all our history, not a single Shaolin disciple has been able to master more than twelve. Though Venerable Zhang's knowledge is incomparable, there are far too many martial arts that have been passed on to us by our humble school's ancestors. It would be extremely difficult to even learn ten percent of it all. Venerable Zhang's suggestion of exchanging the 9 Yang Manual with us is very generous, but another skill is really surplus to our requirements." After a while, he added: "Wudang School's martial arts originate from Shaolin. If we exchange our skills today, in the future the ignorant denizens of the Jianghu will say that Shaolin has benefited from Venerable Zhang. As the head of Shaolin, I cannot allow that to happen."

Zhang Sanfeng's heart sank, thinking: "You are the head of the Wulin's number one school and the first of the Four Divine Monks. Yet, you are narrow-minded and only have the interests of your school at heart." But as someone who had come seeking a favour, he could not speak his mind. So he said: "You three are the divine monks of this era and merciful. This child is dying. I hope that you'll have the saving heart of Buddha and fulfill our request. I will be much obliged." But no matter how he tried to persuade them, the three monks politely declined.

Finally, Kong Wen said: "I can only act according to our rules, please do not take offense." He turned around and instructed a monk: "Tell the kitchen to prepare a vegetarian banquet. We will entertain Venerable Zhang here." The monk acquiesced and left. Zhang Sanfeng's face darkened. He raised his hand and said: "In that case, I have come here in vain. I do not dare partake in the feast. My apologies for bothering you, please do not take offence." He bowed, took Wuji's hand and departed.

End of Chapter 10.

Notes

[←1]

A commonly known 'brand' of paper – 'Xuan' should be in reference to a place.

[←2]

Like 'Xuan paper' was a brand of ink stones. 'Duan' should be in reference to a place.

[←3]

Just a phrase used to describe people who were messing around with a powerful force/person and not even realizing the consequences.

[←4]

'Yun' means 'Cloud' while 'He' means 'Crane.'

[←5]

The “Jiu” in “Gong JiuJia's” name means “Nine.”

[←6]

'Shou' means longevity.

[←7]

One of the three main towns in WuHan which is the capital of the HuBei province.

[←8]

Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing were the figures that comprised the group known as the Four Divine Reverends of Shaolin': The "Kong" that comprises the first character in the 4 Reverends names is the same character for "emptiness." While the four names of the Reverends ranks as "Jian, Wen, Zhi, Xing." "Jian" meaning "See," (Kong Jian was killed by XieXun more than ten years ago) "Wen" meaning "Hear," "Zhi" commonly means "Intellect," although along with the word "Xing" (meaning "Instincts") may possibly take on more profound meanings in Buddhist vocabulary.

[←9]

The 'Zhen Wu Da Di' is also called the 'Xuan Wu Da Di' or 'Xuan Tian Shang Di' which are sometimes translated as the 'Dark Lord of the North.' It was said that he was the eighty-second reincarnation of the highest deity in the Taoist pantheon 'Tai Shang Lao Jun' (or Supreme Master Lao/Supreme Patriarch of Taoism/Celestial Lord of Virtue who was born as 'Lao Zi' and credited with being the founder of Taoism). Born as a Crown Prince, he later left his kingdom to retreat to the Tai He mountain (which later became known as the Wu Dang mountain) to seek for enlightenment. After 42 years, he finally achieved immortality and transcended to the heavens. He was thus crowned by the Jade Emperor of the Heavens as the 'Tai Xuan' to rule over the Northern sphere. According to ancient Chinese astrological myths, the heavens were divided into 28 different houses of constellations ('Xiu'). These 28 different houses were further grouped into 4 groups (North, South, East West) and were assigned a specific animal 'form' (known as the 4 forms). The constellation group in the North was known as the 'Xuan Wu' ('Xuan' meaning black and referring to the snake, while 'Wu' refers to the shell of the tortoise). Thus Zhen Wu Da Di came to be known as the Xuan Wu Da Di. It was said that the Jade Heavenly Emperor later renamed the Tai He mountain to the Wu Dang mountain in honour of this deity ('Wu' from Xuan Wu, 'Dang' meaning 'managed'/'controlled' to indicate that this mountain was under the sole control of Xuan Wu).

[←10]

'She' means 'Snake' while 'Shan' refers to mountain. Also called the 'HuangHe Shan' (the Yellow Crane mountain). It Faces Gui Shan.

[←11]

'Gui' meaning turtle. Also known as the 'LuShan.'

[←12]

Also known as the Yangzte River.

[←13]

the greatest river branch of the Yangzte river.

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 11 - A woman whose tongue is sharp as spear](#)

[Chapter 12 - Needles and Prescriptions for Diseases Beyond Cure](#)

[Chapter 13 - No Regrets for Second Chances](#)

[Chapter 14 - Meeting Zhongshan Wolf* Along the Way](#)

[Chapter 15 -Strange Scheme and Secret Intrigue Like in a Dream](#)

[Chapter 16 - If All Failed, Consult the Nine Yang](#)

[Chapter 17 - Green Wing Appears and Vanishes with a Laugh](#)

[Chapter 18 - The Cold and Bright Ray of the Yitian Sword](#)

[Chapter 19 - Disaster Arose Within the Broken Impenetrable Fortress](#)

[Chapter 20 - Help From the Son To Fight the Enemies*](#)

Chapter 11 - A woman whose tongue is sharp as spear

(Translated by Meh and Huang Yushi*)

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An unshaven, burly man rowed the boat in an urgent manner. A little boy and a little girl sat with him on the boat. The boat behind them is bigger, with four lamas and seven or eight Mongolian officers on it. The officers all helped the sailors peddle the boat, allowing the boat to move much faster. The burly man's strength is also quite amazing, rowing the small boat at great speed. Nonetheless, due to superior manpower, the bigger boat kept gaining on the smaller boat. When they got close, the lamas and the officers picked up bows and began to shoot at the smaller boat.

(Translated by Meh)

Zhang SanFeng and Zhang Wuji walked down the Shao Bao Mountain. Realizing that Zhang Wuji's condition is terminal, Zhang SanFeng stopped talking about possible cures. He simply tried to help Zhang Wuji pass time by chatting with him. On this day, they reached the Han River. And the two took a boat across. The boat floated on the water, wavering gently back and forth. Like the boat, Zhang SanFeng's heart also wavered back and forth.

Zhang Wuji suddenly said, "Grand-master, don't be sad. When I die, I'll get to see mama and papa again." Zhang SanFeng said, "Don't say that. No matter what, your grand-master going to save you." Zhang Wuji said, "Actually, I really wished I could've learnt Shaolin's 'Art of Nine-Yang', so I can teach it to Third Uncle Yu." Zhang SanFeng asked, "Why?" Zhang Wuji said, "I had hoped that once Third Uncle Yu learnt both Wu Dang and Shaolin's 'Art of Nine-Yang', his injury could heal."

Zhang SanFeng sighed, and said, "Your Third Uncle's injuries are external. No amount of inner power can cure him." He then thought, "This child knows that he's about to die, yet he is not afraid of death. Instead, he thinks about the welfare of

others, a very kind indeed.” Just about to compliment him, Zhang SanFeng suddenly heard a booming voice, “Stop the ship immediately. Hand over the child, and I’ll spare your life. Otherwise, don’t blame me for being ruthless.” This voice came from far down the river, yet one can hear the words clearly. Obviously, this person has strong inner power.

Zhang SanFeng chuckled, thought, “Who would dare ask me to hand over the child?” Raising his head, only to see two boats getting near. Upon closer examination, an unshaven, burly man rowed the boat in an urgent manner. A little boy and a little girl sat with him on the boat. The boat behind them is bigger, with four lamas and seven or eight Mongolian officers on it. The officers all helped the sailors peddle the boat, allowing the boat to move much faster. The burly man’s strength is also quite amazing, rowing the small boat at great speed. Nonetheless, due to superior manpower, the bigger boat kept gaining on the smaller boat. When they got close, the lamas and the officers picked up bows and began to shoot at the smaller boat.

Zhang SanFeng thought, “Oh, so they wanted that burly man to hand over the child.” He despises Mongolians killing Hans very much, and instantly decided to help out this burly man. Only to see this man’s left hand continue to paddle, while his right hand raised the other paddle to knock down the oncoming arrows. Zhang SanFeng thought, “This man’s kung fu is quite formidable. How could I not help such a hero in trouble?” So he then said to his boatman, “Sir, let’s go help him.”

The boatman was scared out of his wits from watching the scene. He tried his best to stay away from the confrontation. So when the boatman heard Zhang SanFeng’s words, he said in shock, “Old... priest. You’re... kidding, right?” Realizing that they have no time to waste, Zhang SanFeng snatched

the paddles from the boatman, and began to row towards the other two boats. Suddenly, he heard a loud scream, as an arrow struck the back of the little boy on the small boat. The burly man then immediately lost his poise, as he hurriedly turned to look at the boy's wounds. At this moment, two arrows hit him on the shoulder and back. With the arrow wounds, the burly man could no longer hold on to the paddles, and they dropped into the water. The boat soon stopped. The bigger boat quickly caught up, as the officers and lamas jumped onto the smaller boat. That burly man did not surrender, however. Instead he fought them with all his energy.

Zhang SanFeng yelled, "Stop, filthy Mongols. I won't allow you to hurt anyone!" As his boat got close, Zhang SanFeng jumped into the air towards the burly man's boat.

Two officers shot arrows at him. But with a wave his sleeve, Zhang SanFeng easily whisked the arrows away. As he landed, Zhang SanFeng's left palm shot out. Two officers immediately fell down into the water. Upon seeing this, the other officers and lamas immediately froze from the shock. The head officer said, "Old priest, what do you want?"

Zhang SanFeng yelled, "Filthy Mongols! Trying to do more evil, hurting more civilians? Get out of here!" That officer said, "Do you know who he is? He is a remaining member of Yuan Province Devil Cult rebels, a wanted outlaw!"

Zhang SanFeng gasped upon hearing the words 'Yuan Province Devil Cult rebel'. He thought, "So this man is Zhou ZiWang's subordinate?" He turned and asked the burly man, "Is he speaking the truth?"

That burly man's whole body filled with blood, as his left hand clutched the little boy, and cried, "They... they killed

little master.” This sentence confirmed his identity.

Zhang SanFeng said in shock, “Is this Zhou ZiWang’s son?”

That burly man said, “That’s correct. I could not carry out my order, so what’s the need to keep on living?” He slowly put down the boy’s body, and then attacked an officer. But he’s already injured, plus the arrows are poisonous. So even before he could fully get up, he fell down onto the deck.

At this time, the little girl rushed towards a man’s body in the cabin, crying, “Papa! Papa!” Looking at the clothing on the body, Zhang SanFeng figured this man must be the boatman.

He thought, “If I had known the Devil Cult was involved, I wouldn’t have gotten interfered. But I can’t back out now.” So he said to the officer, “The boy’s already dead. The other man’s already seriously injured, and will die soon. Since you’ve already accomplished your task, you can surely leave!” That officer said, “No, I have to get their heads.” Zhang SanFeng said, “Why be so excessive?” That officer said, “Who are you, old priest? What gives you the right to intervene in this matter?” Zhang SanFeng chuckled, and said, “Who cares who I am? Everyone has the right to intervene in all matters.”

That officer gave his subordinates a gesture, and said, “What is your Taoist title? Which temple do you reside in?” Before Zhang SanFeng could respond, two other officers quickly raised their sabers, and attacked him. These two officers were already quite close to Zhang SanFeng. Plus, due to the small space of the boat, Zhang SanFeng had nowhere to evade.

But he quickly turned to the side, and with a quick twist of the body, dodged the sabers. His two palms quickly shot out, reaching the backs of the two officers, and yelled, “Get back

there!" As the palms connect, the two officers flew out, landing in the middle of the large boat they came from. Zhang SanFeng hasn't fought anyone in ages. But felt a bit unsatisfied simply beating up on these mediocre fighters.

That officer in charge gasped, and stuttered, "You... you... could you be...?" Zhang SanFeng swept his robe, and yelled, "This old priest only kills Mongols!" The lamas and officers immediately felt a strong wind bearing down hard on them, preventing them from breathing. After the wind passed, their faces all turned white. All of them then quickly returned to the large boat.

Zhang SanFeng took out a pill and put it in the burly man's mouth. Then he rowed the boat to his own. Just as he's about to help the burly man switch boats, he saw the burly man carry the boy's body in one hand, the little girl in the other, and stepped to the adjacent boat. Zhang SanFeng thought, "Despite heavy injuries, this man still cares for his little master. His loyalty is very admirable. Although I didn't mean to save him, this man is certainly worth saving." He then helped take out the arrows out of the burly man, and applied medicine to the wounds.

That little girl watched her father's body float away with his boat, and cried incessantly. The burly man said, "Those damn Mongols are really vicious. The first thing they did was to kill the boatman. If you hadn't gotten here in time, this girl would have likely died too."

Zhang SanFeng thought, "Right now, with Wuji having trouble moving, and this man being a wanted man. If we use the old river dock and seek lodgings there, I'd have trouble taking care of both people." He took out three taels of silver and gave them to the boatman, said, "Sir, can you row east to the Tai Ping area? We'll seek lodgings there." That

boatman was already in awe of Zhang SanFeng after watching him defeat those Mongols. So when Zhang SanFeng gave him so much money, he quickly complied, and began to row east.

That burly man got on his knees and kowtowed to Zhang SanFeng, said, "Thank you so much for saving my life. Chang YuChun [1] pays you his respect." Zhang SanFeng quickly helped him up, and said, "Hero Chang, you don't need to be so courteous." Upon touching Chang YuChun's hand, Zhang SanFeng found it to be icy cold. He asked in shock, "Is Hero Chang injured internally?" Chang YuChun said, "As I escorted little master down south, I fought against the Mongols four times. A lama managed to land two palm strikes on me, once on the chest and once on the back.

Zhang SanFeng checked his pulse, only to find it quite weak. He then opened Chang YuChun's clothing, saw a heavy mark left by a palm strike, meaning the injury is quite serious. Any other man would've not have been able to hold up for such a long time. But this man managed to travel all the way here, battling along the way. Only a true hero can do something like this. Zhang SanFeng quickly ordered Chang YuChun to stop speaking, and to rest in the cabin.

That little girl is around ten. Her feet are bare, and her clothing's tattered. Despite being a boatman's daughter, she was an incredible young beauty, as she sat there in tears. Zhang SanFeng asked her, "Little girl, what's your name?" That girl said, "My surname is Zhou. My name is Zhou ZhiRuo." Zhang SanFeng thought, "For a boatman's daughter, she does certainly have an elegant name." He asked, "Where is your home? Is there anyone else in your family? I'll have this boatman take you back home." Zhou ZhiRuo said in tears, "I live with my dad on the boat. I... I have no other relatives." Zhang SanFeng sighed, and

thought, "Looks like she's an orphan. What should I do about her?"

Chang YuChun said, "Old priest's kung fu is incredible. May I ask for your title?" Zhang SanFeng said, "I'm called Zhang SanFeng." Chang YuChun gasped loudly, sat up, and yelled, "So you are Wu Dang's venerable Priest Zhang. No wonder your martial arts is so incredible. I'm really lucky to have to have met such a divine priest today."

Zhang SanFeng said with a smile, "You're too flattering. I simply happened to have lived a few extra years. Certainly not worthy of being 'divine'. Hero Chang, please lie back down." Seeing Chang YuChun's straightforward and sincere demeanor, Zhang SanFeng found himself liking this man quite a lot. But due to Chang YuChun's Devil Cult roots, Zhang SanFeng did not wish to talk too much with him, and said, "Your injury's very serious. Don't talk if you don't have to."

Because of his experience, Zhang SanFeng tends to be quite unbiased towards both the righteous and the devilish sects. He even once told Zhang CuiShan "You must never look down on others just because you reside in the position of the so-called righteous sect. The two words of 'good' and 'evil' were originally hard to differentiate. A member of the orthodox sect when harboring thoughts of impurity and immorality will be considered as a wicked villain, and similarly if a member from the evil sect harbors a heart that is completely directed towards goodness, then that person is a gentleman." But after Zhang CuiShan's suicide, Zhang SanFeng has grieved much for the loss of his disciple, and felt great enmity towards the Heavenly Eagle Sect. Remembering his third disciple's crippled condition, his fifth disciple's death, both due to the Heavenly Eagle Sect, Zhang SanFeng couldn't help but feel extra painful in regards to the

word 'devil'.

That Zhou ZiWang is Elder Mi Le's disciple of Devil Cult, or "Ming Cult" [2] . Many years ago, he started a revolution in the Jiang Xi province, proclaiming himself Emperor, calling his dynasty 'Zhou'. It was soon destroyed by the Yuan troops, and Zhou ZiWang was executed. Although Elder Mi Le and the Heavenly Eagle Sect are different groups of people, they both originated from the Ming Cult. When Zhou ZiWang rebelled, Yin TianZheng also stirred up much trouble in the Zhe Jiang province. Zhang SanFeng rescued Chang YuChun today was only a spur of the moment decision, before asking about Chang YuChun's identity.

It was already dark when they arrived at the town. Zhang SanFeng bought four dishes from a restaurant, chicken, pork, fish, and vegetables, and they ate on the boat. Zhang SanFeng told Zhou ZhiRuo and Chang YuChun to go ahead and eat, while he would feed Zhang Wuji. Chang YuChun asked him why. Zhang SanFeng responded by saying that he had sealed Zhang Wuji's pressure points around the vital organs, to prevent the poison from getting in. In his depressed state, Zhang Wuji didn't want to eat. And when Zhang SanFeng tried to feed him, he would simply shake his head.

Zhou ZhiRuo took the bowl from Zhang SanFeng's hand, and said, "How about let me take care of this little friend, while you go ahead and eat?" Zhang Wuji said, "I don't need to eat. I'm already full." Zhou ZhiRuo said, "Little friend, if you don't eat, the old priest would be too unhappy to eat. If he won't eat, then wouldn't he be hungry?"

Zhang Wuji realized that she's right, and ate the food Zhou ZhiRuo put by his mouth. Zhou ZhiRuo carefully removed all the bones from the fish and chicken, and sweetened the

meat with the sauces. So they tasted very good. Zhang Wuji quickly finished a whole bowl of food.

Zhang SanFeng thought, "Considering his crippling illness, and that both his parents are dead, Wuji really should have a attentive girl to serve him."

Chang YuChun did not touch the meat dishes. Instead, he quickly finished the vegetable dish. Even with the injury, he ate four big bowls of rice. Zhang SanFeng urged him to eat some meat. Chang YuChun responded, "Venerable Zhang, I'm a devout Buddhist. I don't eat meat." Zhang SanFeng said, "Oh, that's right. I forgot." He immediately remembered, the Devil Cult has very strict rules, forbidding its members to eat meat. This has been true since the Tang Dynasty. Near the end of the Northern Sung Dynasty, the leader of the Ming Cult rebelled in the Zhe Dong province. At the time, the people called them 'Vegetarian Devil Honoring Cult'.

Because the two big rules of the Ming Cult are to never eat meat, and to always honor the Devil. Under attacks from the government and the martial world, the disciples of the Ming Cult began to hide their identities. So they always say they are devout Buddhists to cover their vegetarian ways.

Chang YuChun said, "Venerable Zhang, you saved my life, and already knows my background. So there's no need for me to hide it. I am indeed a member of the Ming Cult. The government thinks of us as rebels. The righteous sects look down upon us, thinking we're just a bunch of bandits, or that we're minions of the devil. But for you to save me, even knowing who I am, I really don't know how to repay for your kindness."

Zhang SanFeng knows about the origins of the Devil Cult. The God they worship is called 'Mu Ni'. But the worshipers

call him 'Honorable Brightness'. When the cult spread into the central plains in the Tang Dynasty, it was called 'Muo Ni Cult', and also 'Cult of the Illuminating Light'. Its worshippers called it the 'Ming Cult', but others call it the Devil Cult. Zhang SanFeng sighed, and said, "Hero Chang..."

Chang YuChun quickly cut in, "Venerable priest, you really don't need to call me a 'hero'. Just call me YuChun." Zhang SanFeng said, "Alright. YuChun, how old are you?" Chang YuChun said, "Twenty."

Zhang SanFeng said, "You're just becoming an adult. So although you've entered the Devil Cult, you haven't sunk in too deeply. You can still get out before it's too late. I have a few words that you may not like. Do you want to hear them?" Chang YuChun said, "Of course. I'd love to hear any advice from Venerable Zhang."

Zhang SanFeng said, "Good! I want you to leave the Devil Cult. If you like Wu Dang, I'll have my eldest student Song YuanQiao take you in as his disciple. This way, you can later walk the martial world with your head up, as no one will ever look down upon you again."

As the head of the Seven Heroes of Wu Dang, everyone knows the famous Song YuanQiao. Normally it's almost impossible for people to even see him. The seven Wu Dang heroes recently began to take in students. But they have very strict standards. Only the most upright youngsters with great potential are admitted. As a member of the Devil Cult, a cult most people frown upon, this really is a once in a lifetime opportunity for Chang YuChun.

Yet his response was, "I deeply thank you for your offer. But since I am already a member of the Ming Cult, I cannot ever leave." Zhang SanFeng tried to persuade him some more, but Chang YuChun would not waver.

Zhang SanFeng finally gave up, shook his head, and sighed. Then he said, "This girl..." Chang YuChun said, "Don't worry. This girl's father died because of me. I'm definitely going to take care of her." Zhang SanFeng said, "Alright. But you cannot let her enter your cult." Chang YuChun said, "I really don't know what we do that make us so despicable in your mind. But if you insist, I'll obey your wish."

Zhang SanFeng held Zhang Wuji in his arms, and said, "Then let us part now." He really doesn't want any more to do with the Devil Cult, and therefore left out the words 'See you later'.

Zhou ZhiRuo said to Zhang Wuji, "Little friend. You need to eat everyday, so the old priest won't worry about you." Zhang Wuji's tears came out, and said, "Thank you for your words. It's just that... I'll only be able to eat for just a while longer." Zhang SanFeng cleaned out Zhang Wuji's tears with his sleeve. Zhou ZhiRuo asked in shock, "What? You... You..." Zhang SanFeng said, "Little girl, you have a kind heart. I hope you'll later go on the route of righteousness, and not of evil."

Zhou ZhiRuo said, "Ok. But this little friend, why does he say that he can only eat for just a while longer?" Zhang SanFeng could not respond.

Chang YuChun said, "Venerable Zhang, considering your martial arts abilities, surely you can cure this little friend's poison, right?" Zhang SanFeng said, "Of course I can." But he then shook his left hand behind Zhang Wuji, pointing out that Zhang Wuji is beyond help, but doesn't want him to know it.

Upon seeing Zhang SanFeng shaking his hand, Chang

YuChun gasped. He said, "Due to the severity of my injuries, I was just about to go see a very distinguished doctor. How about I take this little friend with me?" Zhang SanFeng shook his head, said, "His cold poison has already entered the vital organs. It's not something normal medicine can cure. We only... only hope to slowly disperse the poison." Chang YuChun said, "But the doctor I'm talking about has the ability to bring back the dead."

Zhang SanFeng suddenly remembered a person, and asked, "Are you talking about the 'Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley'?"

Chang YuChun said, "That's right. So you know about Elder Hu too?"

Zhang SanFeng thought, "From my knowledge, this 'Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley', Hu QingNuo, does indeed have unparalleled medical skills. But he is member of the Devil Cult. Besides, he has a very strange temper. He'll do his best to cure any Devil Cult followers, and not ask for a single penny. Yet he will not treat anyone else, no matter how much money is offered. Therefore, he has another nickname, 'Rather See Death Than Help'. If so, it's really better for Wuji to die than to enter the Devil Cult."

Seeing the grave expression on Zhang SanFeng's face, Chang YuChun understood what he's thinking, and said, "Venerable Zhang, I know Elder Hu never treats outsiders. But since you saved my life, I'll do anything I can to make Elder Hu break the rule this one time." Zhang SanFeng said, "I know just how amazing this Doctor Hu's skills are. But unfortunately, this cold poison on Wuji's body is very unique..." Chang YuChun said, "But you can't cure him. The worst that can happen is that Elder Hu can't cure him either. If he's going to die regardless, what's the big deal?" Chang YuChun is a straightforward person, and therefore said what

he thought.

Zhang SanFeng pondered a bit, "He's right. Look like Wuji only has about another month to live. What is there to be afraid of?" Zhang SanFeng has always been a very sincere person, and normally never thinks about possible hidden motives. But Zhang Wuji is his disciple's only child. How could he give Wuji to a member of the Devil Cult? At this moment, he really doesn't know what to do.

Chang YuChun said, "I know Venerable Zhang doesn't want to go see Elder Hu. After all, how could a head of a righteous sect seek help from us evil cults? Besides, with Elder Hu's strange temper, he'd probably offend you. I guess the only way is for me to take Brother Zhang to Elder Hu. Then I'll come to Wu Dang Mountain to be your hostage. Should anything happen to Brother Zhang, you can go ahead and kill me."

Zhang SanFeng chuckled, thought, "Should anything really happen to Wuji, how would killing you help? Besides, how can I be sure you'll definitely come to Wu Dang?" But considering Wuji's condition, there really isn't any other possible cure. So Zhang SanFeng said, "If so, then please take care of Wuji. But I must make two things clear. Mr. Hu cannot force Wuji into your cult. And Wu Dang is not going to accept your gratitude on this matter." He knew that the Devil Cult is very devious and strange in its ways. Being associated with them could only lead to big problems. After all, isn't Zhang CuiShan's death a perfect example?

Chang YuChun said, "Venerable Zhang is really belittling my cult. But if you say so, I'll obey." Zhang SanFeng said, "Take good care of Wuji. Should he ever recover, take him back to Wu Dang. But there's no need to come to Wu Dang as a hostage." Chang YuChun said, "I'll do all I can to follow your

wishes.”

Zhang SanFeng said, “As for this little girl, I’ll take her back to Wu Dang Mountain.”

Chang YuChun then went to a large tree by the shore, and dug a hole with his saber. Then he took off all of Little Master Zhou’s clothes, before burying him in the ground, and paid his respects. Burying members naked is one of Ming Cult’s rules. Everyone enters the world naked, and should therefore leave the world the same way. Since Zhang SanFeng does not know this rule, he found the burial procedure quite repulsive and mysterious.

The next morning, Zhang SanFeng took Zhou ZhiRuo in his hands, and parted with Chang YuChun and Zhang Wuji. After the death of his parents, Zhang SanFeng was like a grandfather to Zhang Wuji. So Zhang Wuji couldn’t help but burst into tears as they parted. Zhang SanFeng said, “Wuji, when you’re healthy again, your Big Brother Chang will take you back to Wu Dang Mountain. Be a good boy. We’ll only be apart for a few months. Don’t be so sad.” Despite his words, Zhang Wuji’s tears did not stop.

Zhou ZhiRuo returned to the boat, took out a handkerchief from her sleeve, and began to wipe away his tears. She then smiled at him, put the handkerchief into his pocket, before returning to shore.

(Translated by Huang Yushi from the 2nd edition of the original Chinese text:)

Zhang Wuji followed his grand-teacher with his eyes as the old man walked westwards with Zhou Zhiruo. As the same time, the little girl kept turning back and waving until both of them disappeared behind a row of poplar and willow trees.

Suddenly, Zhang Wuji felt so lonely that he started to cry again.

"Brother Zhang, how old are you this year?" asked Chang Yuchun with frown. When the boy answered that he was already twelve, the man said, "I see. A twelve-year-old is no longer a child, so are you not ashamed to sob and cry like a baby? When I was twelve, I had already been beaten several hundred times, but never did I shed a single tear. A man sheds only blood, you know, not tears. If you continue to cry like a girl, I will have to hit you."

"I cried because I could not bear to part with Grand-teacher," said Zhang Wuji. "If someone hit me, I would not cry at all! Go ahead and hit me if you dare. I will return each of your punches with ten punches of my own someday."

Chang Yuchun was stunned. "Good for you!" he said with a hearty laugh. "Now that is what I call a man with integrity. Since you are so formidable, I will not to hit you."

"Why not?" asked Zhang Wuji. "After all, I cannot even move a single finger."

Chang Yuchun laughed again and replied, "If I hit you today, what am I going to do when you eventually learn martial arts from your grand-teacher? How would I be able to endure ten punches from the exquisite fist techniques of the Wudang School?"

A smile appeared on Zhang Wuji's face: This Brother Chang may look very ferocious, but he is not a bad man.

Hiring a riverboat, the two travelled all the way to Hankou before switching to a larger vessel and sailing east down the Great River. The Butterfly Valley where the Healing Sage Hu

Qingniu lived was located on the banks of Nüshan Lake in northern Anhui.

The Great River flowed in a south-easterly direction from Hankou to Jiujiang, before turning northwards into the province of Anhui. Two years earlier, Zhang Wuji had sailed up this very river on his way to Mount Wudang. He had his parents and Yu Lianzhou as companions then, so the journey had been filled fun and laughter. Now, his parents were both dead, and he was on a joyless trip to seek treatment with Chang Yuchun. The difference between the two were as stark as the sky above and the land below. But he did not dare to let his tears fall, fearing that Chang Yuchun would be angered again. By then, all the acupoints that Zhang Sanfeng had blocked earlier had returned to normality, so he could actually feel each excruciating attack of the toxins in his body. Yet, there was nothing that he could do, except to grit his teeth in endurance until his upper and lower lips were all cut and bruised. To make things worse, the bouts became more frequent and painful with each passing day.

When they reached the Gua Pier after Jiqing, Chang Yuchun and Zhang Wuji went ashore and travelled north in a hired carriage. Several days later, they arrived in the town of Mingguang, east of Fengyang. Chang Yuchun knew that his Uncle Hu did not like his secluded place of abode to be widely-known, so he sent the carriage away about twenty li (10 km) from Nüshan Lake. Then, carrying Zhang Wuji on his back, he tackled the final leg of the journey on foot.

He thought that these last twenty li would be covered in the blink of an eye, but he had travelled only one li (500 metres) when his nerves and bones started to ache terribly. His breathing became laboured and he found it very difficult to even walk. The internal injuries that he had sustained after being struck twice by the foreign monks were worse than he

had realised.

Feeling very apologetic, Zhang Wuji said, "Brother Chang, let me walk on my own. You had better not tire yourself out."

"I can cover a hundred li (50 km) in a single breath without feeling tired at all," Chang Yuchun snapped, "so how could those stupid monks stop me with two strikes of the palm?" Gathering up all his strength, he forced himself to march forward. Unfortunately, he was already too wounded to push himself in this manner, and the frustration that he felt just made things worse. After several zhang or so (1 zhang = 3.33 metres), he began to feel as if his limbs and bones were falling apart. Yet, he was not ready to admit defeat. He was also unwilling to put Zhang Wuji down or to sit and rest. So, he laboured on, a step at the time.

This, of course, made their progress terribly slow. By nightfall, they had not covered even half of the targeted distance. The rugged terrain only served to make the walk more difficult, but they trudged on until they reached some woods. Then, Chang Yuchun finally put Zhang Wuji down and collapsed spread-eagle on the ground. After a simple meal of sugared fruit and biscuits, Chang Yuchun rested for half a shichen (one hour) before voicing his desire to resume the journey. Zhang Wuji tried his best to persuade the man otherwise, suggesting that they could spend a peaceful night in the woods and set out the next morning instead. By and by, Chang Yuchun realised that it would probably be midnight by the time they reached Butterfly Valley. Hu Qingniu would certainly be very irritated by their visit at such an hour, so he gave in to his companion's suggestion to stay in the woods. They soon fell asleep leaning against a large tree.

At midnight, Zhang Wuji was jolted awake by another attack of the toxins in his body. He started to shiver and shake

badly, but he endured the pain in silence for fear of waking Chang Yuchun up. Just then, the sounds of clashing weapons drifted into the woods, followed by several voices that shouted, "Where are you going?" "Block the eastern route and force him into the woods!" "We cannot let this crooked baldy get away this time!" Footsteps sounded as several people ran towards the trees.

Waking up with a start, Chang Yuchun grabbed his sabre with his right hand and Zhang Wuji with his left. Then, he waited to see if he should fight or flee.

"I do not think that they have come for us," the boy whispered.

Nodding in agreement, Chang Yuchun peered through the trees and saw seven or eight people attacking an unarmed man from all sides. Although the man managed to fend his enemies off with a pair of swift palms, the group began closing in on him after a while.

By and by, a crescent moon appeared from behind the clouds and cast a silvery light on the scene. The man in the centre of the circle was a tall and thin monk in his forties who was dressed in a white robe. His attackers consisted of two grey-robed monks, two Taoists, two men in secular attire and two slim-built women. The grey-robed monks had a pole and a sabre between them, which they used with such power that leaves flew everywhere in the woods. One of the Taoists had a sword which glinted under the moonlight as he waved it about, while one of the men in secular attire -- a short and small-sized fellow with a pair of swords -- rolled back and forth on the ground, attacking the legs of the white-robed monk with Ditang swordplay, a technique that focused on the lower extremities of the body.

The two women had a sword each, through which they executed a series of very swift but fluid strokes. As the battle wore on, one of the women turned in such a way that part of her face was lit up by the moonlight. The sight almost had Zhang Wuji blurting out: "Auntie Ji!" Indeed, she was none other than Yin Liting's fiancée, Ji Xiaofu.

Initially, Zhang Wuji thought that it was very unfair for so many people to attack the monk at once, and hoped that the hapless victim would be able to free himself. However, after recognising one of the attackers as Ji Xiaofu, he decided that the white-robed monk was a bad man. After all, he was an enemy of the Auntie Ji who had comforted him on the day of his parents' suicide. Although Zhang Wuji did not accept the necklace that she had given him, he was nevertheless very grateful for her kind thoughts.

As the white-robed monk's strokes alternated by fast and slow, and real and false, Zhang Wuji quickly realised that he was actually a highly skilled pugilist. There were also too many variations to his techniques to be identified, especially when the movements were speeded up. As a result, Ji Xiaofu and her group could not gain the upperhand despite being larger in number and battling for a long time.

Suddenly, one of the men shouted, "Use the projectiles!"

The other man and one of the Taoists responded at once, leaping to the left and the right respectively before sending a flurry of pellets and flying daggers towards the white-robed monk. As the monk scrambled to deal with the weapons that fell like rain around him, the other Taoist -- a fellow with a long beard -- shouted, "Monk Peng, we do not want your life, so why are you fighting us with all your might? Just hand Bai Guishou over and we will part with a smile. Would that not be better for everyone?"

Chang Yuchun was shocked. "So this is Monk Peng?" he wondered in a whisper.

Zhang Wuji was surprised too, for he had heard his parents tell his Second Uncle Yu about the incident on Wangpan Island and the resulting inter-clan vendettas upon returning to China two years earlier. Therefore, he knew that Bai Guishou, the Leader of the Eagle Sect's Xuanwu Circle, was the only one who had left Wangpan Island with his mental faculties intact. In recent years, many clans and organisations had taken the Eagle Sect to task because they wanted Bai Guishou to reveal where Xie Xun was. Consequently, Zhang Wuji thought: Could this Monk Peng be a member of my mother's sect as well?

Just then, Monk Peng said in a loud voice, "Circle-Leader Bai has been grievously wounded by all of you and I have a friendship with him that goes back a long way. To tell you the truth, even if I did not know him at all, I would still not ignore a dying man."

"What dying man?" roared the Taoist with the long beard. "We do not want his life, for we just want to find out where a certain person is."

"Since you want to know where Xie Xun is, why do you not go and ask the abbot of the Shaolin Temple?" said Monk Peng.

One of the grey-robed monks stepped up and shouted, "That is but an evil ploy to shift blame to my Shaolin Temple by that witch from the Eagle Sect, Yin Susu. Who believes her?" Apparently, this monk was from the Shaolin School.

The mention of his mother's name filled Zhang Wuji with both pride and sorrow: Although my mother has passed away

for two years, she can still make all of you dizzy with trouble!

Suddenly, one of the Taoists shouted, "Everybody, get down!" As his companions fell on their faces, five flying daggers cut through the air towards Monk Peng's chest. These weapons could be avoided if the monk bent forward, fell on his face or leaned backwards at once, but his attackers had pre-empted his moves by positioning their weapons around him at ground-level. So how could he escape then?

As Zhang Wuji watched with bated breath, Monk Peng leapt into the air and the five flying daggers went by under his feet. The two grey-robed Shaolin monks and the Taoist with the long beard responded to this turn swiftly, slashing Monk Peng's legs with their pole, sabre and sword. Forced to strike back, the white-robed monk sent a palm into the head of one of the Shaolin monks before snatching his sabre and using it as a lever against the other monk's pole to push himself two zhang (6.66 metres) away from the fray.

The Shaolin monk who was struck on the head died at once. His angered companions set off in pursuit of Monk Peng, only to see his legs crumple beneath him in his haste to get away. As the group surrounded the white-robed monk once more, the remaining Shaolin monk shouted, "You killed my brother, so I am going to make you pay for it!"

"Wait!" said the Taoist with the long beard. "His legs have been struck my Scorpion-Tail Hook (Xie1 Wei3 Gou1), and he will soon die of poisoning."

Sure enough, Monk Peng's legs wobbled as he strove unsuccessfully to stand up.

Chang Yuchun thought: He is an important member of my Ming Sect, so I must rescue him! Although he was seriously

wounded himself, he was so bent on helping Monk Peng that he took a deep breath and stepped forward. Unfortunately, the breath and the step that he took affected his internal injuries so much that he almost fainted from excruciating pain. By then, Monk Peng had collapsed on the ground after managing to move another zhang (3.33 metres) away from his attackers. He looked as if he had died of poisoning. Opening his eyes despite the massive pain in his chest, Chang Yuchun saw that none of the seven dared to approach the body of the monk.

The Taoist with the long beard said, "Brother Xu, test him with two of your flying daggers."

The other Taoist responded by throwing a dagger each into Monk Peng's right shoulder and left leg. The white-robed monk did not move, indicating that he was indeed dead.

"What a pity! What a pity!" said the Taoist with the long beard. "He has died, but we do not know where he has hidden Bai Guishou!"

The group stepped forward for a closer look.

Suddenly, five swift smacks were heard, followed by the sight of five people falling away from the circle. Monk Peng was on his feet in a flash, but the daggers were still embedded in his shoulder and leg. It turned out that he had pretended to die in a bid to draw his enemies closer, so that he could catch them unaware with the lightning-fast 'Flying Clouds in the Great Wind' Palm Technique (Da⁴ Feng¹ Yun² Fei¹ Zhang³). He had gathered up all his strength in silence as he lay on the ground, so the five strikes were so strong that they left a palm-print each on the chests of the five male victims.

Ji Xiaofu and her older sister-at-arms, Ding Minjun, were

terribly shocked at this unexpected turn of events, but they managed to leapt away on time. When they looked at their five wounded companions, they found them throwing up mouthfuls of blood. The two men in secular attire even screamed in pain, for their bodies were not as strong as the other three.

The Taoist with the long beard said, "Ding-guniang, Ji-guniang, stab him quickly with your swords!"

Among the nine of them, one Shaolin monk was already dead, and Monk Peng and five others were seriously wounded. Thus, Ji Xiaofu and Ding Minjun were the only two left unharmed. Ding Minjun thought: Hmmph! Am I so poor in the sword that you must tell me how to use it? Then, she raised her weapon and slashed at Monk Peng's shin with a move called 'Splitting Metal with a Nominal Stroke' (Xu1 Shi4 Fen1 Jin1).

Monk Peng heaved a long sigh, closed his eyes and waited for death. Suddenly, a loud clang was heard, as if two weapons had come into contact with each other. Opening his eyes, Monk Peng saw that Ji Xiaofu had used her sword to deflect her sister's blade.

"Why?" asked Ding Minjun in surprise. "Elder Sister," answered Ji Xiaofu, "Monk Peng held his hands back in mercy, so we should not push him over the edge."

"What hands of mercy?" Ding Minjun retorted. "His hands had run out of strength!" Then, she turned to the monk and said, "Monk Peng, my sister is very kind to spare your life, so you should tell us where Bai Guishou is."

Monk Peng threw head back and roared with laughter. "Ding-guniang, you have really underestimated Peng Yingyu," he

said. "Zhang Cuishan, the Fifth Warrior of the Wudang School, would rather die of suicide than reveal his sworn brother's whereabouts. Although I am not as talented, I admire loyalty and courage of Zhang the Fifth enough to follow his example." Then, he threw up a mouthful of blood and sank to the ground.

Ding Minjun walked up and kicked him three times in the waist, so that he could not launch another stealth attack at them.

Peng Yingyu's words brought a surge of warmth and gratitude into Zhang Wuji's heart, and the boy suddenly felt as if he had found a close relative. After his father, Zhang Cuishan, committed suicide, members of renowned and upright organisations often spoke of the man in this manner: "He was an outstanding young warrior who took one wrong step and became involved with a heretical witch. As a result, he died in personal ruin and shame, and brought humiliation to the Wudang School." Zhang Wuji had never heard these exact words, of course, but he could gather as much from the conversations and attitudes of his grand-teacher and uncles. Besides being deeply grieved, they had blamed his mother for the terrible things that had happened. They had felt that everything about his father was good, except for the mistake he made in marrying his mother. No one had ever expressed admiration and respect for his father like Peng Yingyu just did.

Ding Minjun sneered and said, "Zhang Cuishan was blind to marry that heretical witch. This is what I call 'willing self-degradation', so what good is there to learn from it? His Wudang School ... " At this point, Ji Xiaofu tried to interrupt her sister, only to hear Ding Minjun say, "Do not worry. I will not include Yin the Sixth in this." Then, pointing her sword at Peng Yingyu's right eye, she added, "If you do not speak up, I

will poke your right eye out before doing the same to your left. Then, I will poke through your right ear and the left one. After that, I will slice your nose off, for I will not allow you to simply drop dead." The tip of her sword glinted barely half a cun (1.67 centimetres) away from Peng Yingyu's eye.

The stubborn monk opened his eyes wide in defiance and said in a calm voice, "I have heard that the Abbess Mie Jue of the E-mei School is cruel and ruthless in her ways, so her students should be no different. Since I have fallen into your hands, go ahead and show me E-mei's best techniques!"

Ding Minjun raised her eyebrows and screeched, "Crooked baldy, how dare you ridicule my school!" She pushed her sword forward and gouged out Peng Yingyu's right eye. Then, she placed the tip of the blade on his left eye-lid.

Peng Yingyu laughed as blood poured out of his blinded right eye. Then, he opened his good left eye as widely as he could and glared at Ding Minjun until goosebumps appeared all over her. "You are not from the Eagle Sect," the woman said, "so why are you giving your life up for Bai Guishou?"

"This is one of the principles of being a man," answered Peng Yingyu. "You would not understand it even if I told you."

Ding Minjun could see that Peng Yingyu had no strength left to fight back, but somehow, he still regarded her with much disdain. As a result, she pushed her sword into his left eye in a fit of anger, only to have Ji Xiaofu knock the blade away with a nimble stroke.

"Elder Sister," said the younger woman, "this monk is so stubborn that he will never say anything, regardless of what we do to him. Killing him will not serve our purposes either."

"He said that our teacher is cruel and ruthless in her ways," Ding Minjun replied, "so I am just showing him what 'cruel and ruthless' really means. Heretics like him can only bring harm to others, so having him killed is a good thing."

"He is also a tough man," Ji Xiaofu added. "Elder Sister, I think we should just let him go."

Ding Minjun burst into a fit. "One of these two brothers from Shaolin is dead, while the other is wounded," she said in a loud voice. "The two Taoists from Kunlun are badly injured, while the two brothers from the Haisha Clan are in an even worse condition. Is he not brutal enough? I will gouge out his left eye before continuing with the interrogation." As soon as the word 'interrogation' left her mouth, her sword moved towards Peng Yingyu's left eye.

Ji Xiaofu raised her sword and pushed her sister's blade away with another light and nimble move. "Elder Sister," she said, "this man has no strength left to resist. If word of how we treat him gets out into the realm of the rivers and lakes, the reputation of our E-mei School will be adversely affected."

"Stand aside, and do not intervene!" said Ding Minjun in a stern voice. When Ji Xiaofu persisted, the older woman said, "Since you acknowledge me as your Elder Sister, you must listen to what I say. Stop nagging me!"

"Yes!" Ji Xiaofu responded, prompting Ding Minjun to send her sword into Peng Yingyu's left eye again. This time, she increased the power of her move by three-tenths.

Somehow, Ji Xiaofu found herself being unable to accept her sister's action, so she raised her sword and deflected the other blade once more. The power in Ding Minjun's move caused the younger woman to use a heavier hand as well, so the two swords impacted in a flurry of sparks. As their arms

went numb, both women took two steps back.

"What exactly are you up to, protecting this evil monk time and again?" shouted Ding Minjun angrily.

"Elder Sister," answered Ji Xiaofu, "I would like to suggest that you stop torturing him in this manner. We should just take our time and ask him slowly where Bai Guishou is."

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "Do you think that I do not know what is in your heart? Ask yourself honestly: Why do you keep on declining the requests of Wudang's Yin the Sixth to complete the rites of marriage? And why did you run away from home after your father asked you to do the same?"

"What has my personal affairs to do with this matter?" asked Xi Jiaofu. "How could you link them together?"

"We know the truth in our hearts," answered Ding Minjun, "so I need not pull the scabs from your sores in front of all these outsiders. You may be in E-mei physically, but your heart is in the Evil Sect."

Ji Xiaofu turned white at once. "I respect you as my Elder Sister-at-Arms," she said with a trembling voice. "I have never offended you, so why are you humiliating me like this?"

"All right," Ding Minjun said, "if your heart is not in the Evil Sect, go ahead and poke out this monk's left eye."

Ji Xiaofu did not do as she was told. Instead, she said, "Ever since the E-mei School was founded by the Little Eastern Heretic, our Great-Grandteacher Guo, many of our school-mates have either chosen to be nuns or to remain unmarried all their lives. My reluctance to marry is nothing

extraordinary, so why must you push me into a corner?"

"Well, I am not taken in by your plea of innocence," Ding Minjun replied coldly. "If you do not stab him in the eye, I am going to spill the beans on your affairs."

"Elder Sister," said Xi Jiaofu in a gentle voice, "I hope that you will consider the bond of sisterhood that we share, and stop pushing me."

Ding Minjun laughed. "I am not asking you to do anything embarrassing," she said. "Our teacher instructed us to find out where the Golden-Maned Lion King is, and this monk here is the only lead that we have. But he was unwilling to reveal the truth and even harmed our companions. So it is only fair that I poke out his right eye, while you take out his left. Why are you still not doing it?"

Ji Xiaofu lowered her head and answered in quietly: "He showed us mercy earlier, so we should not turn around and drive him to his death. I am too soft-hearted to do this." She turned and put her sword back into its scabbard.

"You? Soft-hearted?" asked Ding Minjun with a sarcastic laugh. "Our teacher has often praised your ruthless swordplay techniques and tough character. In fact, she says that you take after her so much that she wants to pass her legacy on to you, so how can you be soft-hearted?"

It was then that the people around them finally understood the reason behind the two women's quarrel. Apparently, the leader of the E-mei School, Mie Jue, loved Ji Xiaofu so much that she had thoughts of making the young woman her heir. Jealous, Ding Minjun had eventually managed to obtain something that she could blackmail Ji Xiaofu with.

Zhang Wuji had been very grateful for the kindness that Ji Xiaofu had shown him, so he wished there and then that he could run out and give her spiteful sister a few tight slaps.

Then, Ding Minjun said, "Younger Sister Ji, let me ask you: When our teacher called all of us to the Golden Peak of Mount E-mei and taught us the 'Sword of Extermination' (Mie4 Jian4) and the 'Sword of Non-Compromise' (Jue2 Jian4) that she had developed, why did you not show up? Why did you cause our teacher to erupt with a massive fit of anger?"

"I was suddenly taken very ill in Ganzhou and could not move," answered Ji Xiaofu. "I have already reported this to our teacher, so why are you bringing it up now?"

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and replied, "You can keep the matter from our teacher, but you cannot keep it from me. I have something else to ask you, but if you poke this monk's eye out, I will keep my peace."

Ji Xiaofu lowered her head in silence as she mulled over her dilemma. Finally, she said, "Elder Sister, are you really not going to consider the bond that we share, growing up and learning martial arts in the same school?"

"Are you going to poke his eye out or not?" asked Ding Minjun in return.

"Do not worry, Elder Sister," said Ji Xiaofu. "Even if our teacher wants to pass her legacy to me, I will never dare to accept it."

"Right!" Ding Minjun retorted angrily. "So you are saying that I am jealous of you. How am I inferior to you, that you should make way for me? So ... are you going to poke his eye out or not?"

"Go ahead and punish me if I have done wrong," said Ji Xiaofu, "for I would never dare to resist. There are friends from other clans and organisations here, yet you are pushing me like this ... " Tears began to stream down her face.

Ding Minjun sneered and said, "Go ahead and act pitiful if you want to, because I know that you are cursing me in your heart. When you were in Ganzhou three or four years ago ... I cannot remember it too clearly, but you should be fully aware of the time it happened. Did you really have an illness? Well, I think you did 'have' something, but it was no illness. You had a baby!"

Ji Xiaofu turned and ran off at once, but Ding Minjun had already expected her to do so.

The older woman flew ahead, blocked her way with the sword and said, "I think that you had better poke Monk Peng's left eye out, or I will ask you who the baby's father is. I will also ask why a disciple of a renowned and upright clan like you would go and protect a crooked monk from the Evil Sect."

"Let ... let me go!" pleaded Ji Xiaofu in defeat.

But Ding Minjun did not relent. Placing the tip of her sword against the younger woman's chest, she asked loudly, "Where are you keeping the child? You are the fiancée of Wudang's Yin Liting, Yin the Sixth, so why did you have a child with someone else?"

These earth-shaking questions took everyone by surprise. Zhang Wuji was perplexed: This Auntie Ji is a good person, so how could she have done Uncle Yin wrong? He did not fully understand the affairs between men and women, of course, but even Chang Yuchun, Peng Yingyu, the long-bearded Taoist from Kunlun and the others were astonished by the

revelation.

Ji Xiaofu turned white and made a desperate dash for cover, but Ding Minjun stopped her with a deep and vicious slash on the right arm. Gritting her teeth against the pain, Ji Xiaofu pulled out her sword with her left hand and said, "Elder Sister, if you continue pushing me, I will have to let you down."

By then, Ding Minjun knew that the situation had reached the point of no return. She had exposed her sister's shameful secret, so the younger woman would definitely want to silence her. However, she was not as highly skilled in martial arts as Ji Xiaofu, so she had seized the first opportunity to injure her. Now that the woman herself had mentioned the use of force, Ding Minjun turned her sword in a move called 'The Moon Descends Upon the Western Mount' (Yue4 Luo4 Xi1 Shan1) and sent it into her sister's abdomen. Ji Xiaofu had no alternative but to respond the blade in her left hand.

The two sisters were well-versed in each other's swordplay techniques, so their closely-fought duel was marked with intense attacks and defences. Their wounded companions could neither stop them nor risk helping one at the expense of the other, so they found themselves staring in admiration at the women's skills: The E-mei School is indeed worthy of its position as one of the four largest learning centres of martial arts today, for its swordplay techniques are really as exquisite as they are reputed to be.

Ji Xiaofu's right arm bled more profusely as the duel wore on, so she became increasingly vicious in her strokes, hoping to drive Ding Minjun away and open up a route of escape for herself. However, she did not seem too successful in her efforts, for she was rather uncomfortable using the sword with her left hand. Furthermore, the massive loss of blood

had reduced her abilities by more than seven-tenths. On her part, Ding Minjun did not dare to go too close to Ji Xiaofu, preferring instead to keep her going and allow the eventual lack of blood to take its toll. Sure enough, the younger woman soon became so weak that her steps and strokes began to falter. Ding Minjun quickly seized the opportunity and stabbed Ji Xiaofu twice in the right shoulder, splattering her clothes with blood.

Suddenly, Peng Yingyu spoke up in a loud voice: "Ji-guniang, come over and gouge my left eye out. I am already very grateful for all that you have done." He knew that it was tremendously difficult for Ji Xiaofu to risk death in protecting an enemy. Furthermore, Ding Minjun had threatened her with the very thing that a woman treasured more than her own life -- the chastity of her name.

But it was already too late. Even if Ji Xiaofu really poked Peng Yingyu's eye out at that moment, Ding Minjun would still not allow her to leave. If she did not seize this opportunity to eliminate her younger sister-at-arms, she would have to face an endless stream of troublesome consequences in the future. As her strokes became more vicious, Peng Yingyu shouted, "Ding Minjun, you are absolutely shameless! It is no surprise that you are known as the Evil Wuyan Ding Minjun in the realm of the rivers and lakes, for your heart is indeed like the scorpion and the snake, and your looks are worse than Wuyan's."

Before the woman could take him to task for comparing her to the legendary Zhong Wuyan, who was known for the hideous disfiguration of her face, Peng Yingyu went on: "If every woman in the world is as ugly and as vomit-inducing as you are, all the men under the sun will want to become monks. With you, the Evil Wuyan, standing right in front of me all night, being a monk is not enough. I will have to be

totally blind as well!"

Although Ding Minjun was not a beauty, she was attractive in her own way. After all, she had a rather charming face that was very well taken care of. However, as a man who was very well-versed in the ways of the world, Peng Yingyu knew that every woman under the sun hated being told how ugly she was, regardless of whether it was the truth or not. Consequently, he had come up with the 'Evil Wuyan' nickname in a bid to draw Ding Minjun's attention to himself and allow Ji Xiaofu the opportunity to escape -- or at the very least, find a way to bandage her wounds.

Unfortunately, Ding Minjun had other thoughts: Once I kill Ji Xiaofu, the stinking monk will not be able to get away either. So, she ignored all his taunts.

"The Lady Warrior Ji is chaste as ice and pure as jade," Peng Yingyu added loudly. "Who does not know this fact? But that Evil Wuyan Ding Minjun insisted on proffering a love that was not reciprocated, dreaming of a relationship with Yin Liting of the Wudang School. When Yin Liting did not respond to your advances, you naturally thought of harming Lady Warrior Ji. Ha ha, your cheekbones are so high, your mouth is as big as a basin, your complexion is so yellow and your body is as thin as a length of bamboo. How can the handsome and easy-going Yin the Sixth be attracted to you? You did not even appraise yourself in the mirror, yet you went ahead and tried to catch his attention with all sorts of provocative glances ..."

Infuriated, Ding Minjun dashed over to Peng Yingyu and sent her sword towards his mouth.

To be honest, Ding Minjun's cheekbones were a little higher than usual and her mouth did not quite fit into the cherry-sized standard of that era. Her complexion was not as fair as she wanted it to be and her body was naturally slim. She was

often unhappy with these tiny blemishes, but they could only be spotted by others under close scrutiny. Yet, Peng Yingyu had been particularly observant to notice these flaws. So how could she remain composed after he announced her imperfections with added flavour and spice? Furthermore, she had never seen Yin Liting before, so when did she ever try to 'catch his attention with all sorts of provocative glances'?

Just as her sword was about to reach the monk, a man suddenly dashed out of the woods and got in front of Peng Yingyu. He was so fast that Ding Minjun could not pull her sword back on time. As the blade sank into the man's forehead, he swept a palm out and struck the woman on the chest. The force of the blow pushed Ding Minjun several steps back and caused her to throw up a mouthful of blood. By then, her sword had been stuck so firmly in the man's forehead that he was unlikely to live.

"Bai Guishou! Bai Guishou!" shouted the long-bearded Taoist from the Kunlun School. He scrambled excitedly to his feet and took a few wobbly steps before sinking back to the ground.

The man who had been killed was indeed the Leader of the Eagle Sect's Xuanwu Circle, Bai Guishou. After he had been seriously injured, he found out that Peng Yingyu had come under the combined attack of Shaolin, Kunlun, E-mei and Haisha in a bid to shield him. Consequently, he rushed to the scene and took the stab on behalf of his faithful and courageous friend. Known for his powerful palms, he had managed to strike Ding Minjun and break several of her ribs just before he died.

As Ji Xiaofu regained her composure, she tore a piece off from her clothing and bandaged the wound on her arm. Then, she

released the acupoints that had been blocked on Peng Yingyu's waist, before walking away in silence.

"Wait!" said the white-robed monk. "Ji-guniang, please accept a bow from Monk Peng." He bent over in gratitude, but Ji Xiaofu stepped aside, unwilling to receive his thanks.

Picking up the sword that the long-bearded Taoist had dropped on the ground, Peng Yingyu said, "This Ding Minjun uttered slanderous nonsense against your name, so she must not be allowed to live." As he sent the sword into the woman's throat, Ji Xiaofu deflected the blade with her sword.

"She is my older sister-at-arms," she said. "Although she has no affections for me, I cannot be unfaithful to her."

"The situation has reached the point of no return," said Peng Yingyu. "If she is not killed, she will cause you a lot of trouble in the days to come."

With tears streaming down her face, Ji Xiaofu replied, "I am the most unlucky and unfortunate woman under the sun, so I will have to accept my fate! Great Master Peng, do not harm my Elder Sister-at-Arms."

"Would I dare to dishonour the instruction of the Lady Warrior Ji?" the monk responded politely.

Then, Ji Xiaofu turned to Ding Minjun and said quietly, "Elder Sister, take care." Returning her sword to its scabbard, she walked out of the woods.

Peng Yingyu turned to the five injured men and said, "I have no grievances against any of you in the first place, so I really do not have to kill you. Unfortunately, you have heard the slander that this Ding woman spoke against the Lady Warrior

Ji. If word of this gets out into the realm of the rivers and lakes, how will the Lady Warrior Ji be able to face the public? Therefore, do not blame me for not allowing you to live, for the situation has left me with no alternatives." With that, he sent the sword forward five times, killing the two Taoists from the Kunlun School, the remaining monk from Shaolin and the two men from Haisha.

After that, he gave Ding Minjun a slash on the shoulder, scaring the woman out of her wits. Unable to fight back because of her injuries, she shouted, "Crooked baldy, do not torture me. Just stab me once and be done with it!"

Peng Yingyu laughed and said, "I do not dare to kill an ugly, yellow-skinned and wide-mouthed woman like you. If I did, you will go to Hell and give the evil ghosts there such a terrible fright that they will all escape into the world of men. You will also scare the King and Judge of Hades so badly that he will erupt in vomit and diarrhoea. Would that not be horrible?" He laughed three times and threw the sword on the ground. Then, he hugged Bai Guishou's body and wailed loudly before walking away.

Ding Minjun sat and breathed deeply for a long time. Then, she put her sword back into its scabbard and hobbled slowly out of the woods.

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Chang Yuchun and Zhang Wuji huddled in silence, seeing and hearing every single thing that transpired during the battle that had taken place so unexpectedly in the night. When Ding Minjun left, they finally heaved a sigh of relief.

Zhang Wuji spoke first: "Brother Chang, Auntie Ji is my Sixth Uncle Yin's fiancée. That Ding woman said that she ... she

had a baby with someone else. What do you think? Is it true or false?"

"She is spouting nonsense," answered Chang Yuchun. "Do not believe her."

"Right," said the boy in agreement. "When I see Sixth Uncle Yin, I will tell him about it and ask him to teach this Ding Minjun a good lesson. This will also help Auntie Ji to vent her anger."

"No, no!" said his companion at once. "Never ever mention this matter to your Sixth Uncle Yin. Do you understand? Once you mention it, things will become worse."

"Why?" asked the boy, totally puzzled by this unexpected word of caution.

"These statements are very unpleasant," answered the man, "so you do not need to repeat them to anyone else."

Zhang Wuji mumbled an "Mm!" in acknowledgement. After a while, he said, "Brother Chang, are you concerned that the matter is true?"

Chang Yuchun sighed and replied, "I really do not know."

At first light the next day, Chang Yuchun stood up, placed Zhang Wuji on his back and strode off once more. His strength had returned after the night's rest, so his movements were more nimble than the day before. After several li (1 li = 500 metres), they rounded a bend and came upon a main road.

Chang Yuchun was surprised: Uncle Hu lives in isolation in Butterfly Valley. The place is very remote, so why is there a

main road here? Did I take a wrong turn?

Just as he was about to look for a villager and ask for directions, hoofbeats sounded. Four Mongolian soldiers appeared on horseback, waving their sabres and shouting: "Walk quickly, walk quickly!" They rode right up to Chang Yuchun, waved their sabres menacingly and rode off again.

I have finally fallen into the mouth of the tiger again, the man thought, only to drag Brother Zhang along as well.

His injuries had left him without any ability to fight. He could not even defeat an ordinary Yuan soldier, so he had no alternative except to trudge forward. Soon, he noticed that many other people had appeared along the road, driven by the soldiers as if they were beasts. A glimmer of hope appeared in Chang Yuchun's heart: These barbarians seem to be oppressing the common people, so they may not necessarily be looking for me.

He walked along with the crowd until they arrived at a fork in the road, where a Mongolian army officer waited on horseback. There were sixty to seventy soldiers with him, each brandishing a huge sabre in his hand. The common people bowed at the officer as they passed by, while a Han-Chinese man demanded their surnames. A number of the people were let off with a kick or a slap each after they reported their surnames. When one man said that his surname was Zhang, a Yuan soldier seized him at once. Another man had a newly-bought vegetable knife in his basket, so he was stopped too.

Realising that something fishy was going on, Zhang Wuji whispered into his companion's ear: "Brother Chang, you had better fake a fall, roll into the long grass and leave your sabre there."

Chang Yuchun understood his purpose immediately, so he bent his knees, stumbled into the grass and discarded his sabre. Then, moaning and groaning in pain, he hobbled towards the army officer.

"Ruffian! Do you not know the rules?" the Han-Chinese man scolded. "Bow before the officer quickly!"

Recalling the horrible deaths that his former master, Zhou Ziwan, and his entire family had suffered under the sabres of the barbaric Mongolians, Chang Yuchun refused to do as he was told. His stubbornness caught the eye of the soldiers and one of them kicked him in the knee. The rebel lost his balance and sank to the ground.

"What is your surname?" asked the Han-Chinese man loudly.

Before Chang Yuchun could answer, Zhang Wuji said, "Our surname is Xie. He is my older brother."

The Yuan soldier gave the man a kick in the buttocks and said, "Get lost!"

As Chang Yuchun scrambled to his feet in anger, he swore a silent oath: If I do not chase these barbarians back to the northern deserts in my lifetime, I, Chang Yuchun, am not a man! Placing Zhang Wuji on his back once more, he headed north. But he had only gone a few steps when blood-curdling cries filled the air. Turning around, the two of them saw that the people whom the Yuan soldiers had seized earlier were dead, their heads separated from their bodies.

It turned out that the ruling government had been so brutal in its administration of the land that many rebels had risen among the common people. Consequently, the Mongolian ministers came up with the idea of having all the Han-

Chinese killed. It was an impossible dream, of course, so the Chief Advisor, Ba Yan, eventually issued a cruel order to have all the Han-Chinese with the surnames of Zhang, Wang, Liu, Li and Zhao killed. The Zhangs, Wangs, Lius and Lis were the most numerous among the Han-Chinese, while the Zhaos were seen as the descendants of the imperial family of the Song Dynasty. If people with these five surnames were wiped out, the power of the Han-Chinese would be greatly reduced. As time went by, the number of people with these five surnames who declared their loyalty to the Yuan Dynasty and became its officers increased. Eventually, someone among the Mongolian ministers advised the emperor to withdraw the order of slaughter. By then, the victims of this horrible decree were already beyond count.

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Chang Yuchun increased the pace of his walk and headed into the wilderness. He knew that Hu Qingniu's home was nearby, so he began looking out for it. By and by, the man and boy came upon vast stretches of red and purple flowers that filled the hills with a wonderful fragrance. Unfortunately, the earlier incident with the Mongolian soldiers was still so fresh in their minds that the beautiful scenery was entirely lost to them. After several turns and bends, they found themselves at the foot of a sheer cliff. They had reached a dead end.

Stumped, they soon noticed several butterflies flitting through a gap in the flowering shrubs. An idea popped into Zhang Wuji's head. "Since the place is called Butterfly Valley," he said, "perhaps we should just follow those butterflies and see where they lead us."

Chang Yuchun agreed.

Squeezing through the bushes, they found a tiny path. As they proceeded down the path, more butterflies appeared. These butterflies came in a variety of patterns and colours, including white, black and purple, but none of them seemed afraid of human beings. Dancing through the air, they even landed on Chang Yuchun and Zhang Wuji's heads, shoulders and hands. The two companions were comforted that they had entered Butterfly Valley at last.

"Please let me walk on my own!" said Zhang Wuji.

Chang Yuchun agreed and lowered him to the ground.

A little past noon, they came upon seven or eight huts on the bank of a clear stream. Flowers and plants grew in profusion around these huts. "We have arrived," Chang Yuchun declared. "These are the gardens where Uncle Hu grows his herbs and medicinal shrubs."

Walking over to the huts, he said in a loud but respectful voice: "Disciple Chang Yuchun greets Elder Uncle Hu."

A page emerged from one of the huts and said, "Please come in."

Chang Yuchun took Zhang Wuji's hand and followed the page indoors. A dignified-looking middle-aged man stood on one side of the hall, watching over another page who was fanning the flames under a boiling pot. The entire place smelt of medicine.

Chang Yuchun knelt before the man, bowed and said, "How do you do, Uncle Hu."

He must be the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley, Hu Qingniu, thought Zhang Wuji, so he clasped his fists in salute and

said, "Mr Hu."

Nodding at Chang Yuchun, Hu Qingniu replied, "I have heard about Zhou Ziwang. That is destiny, because the time of the barbarians is not over yet, and the day of our Sect's rise has not arrived." He reached for Chang Yuchun's wrist and felt his pulse. Then, he opened the man's shirt, took one look and said, "You have been struck by the foreign monks' Heart-Splitting Palm Technique. It is not really a big deal, but you used too much strength after being hit, so your heart is now seriously affected by a cold and deadly toxin. It will take quite a while to heal you of this." After that, he pointed to Zhang Wuji and asked, "Who is this child?"

"Uncle, his name is Zhang Wuji," answered Chang Yuchun. "He is the son of Wudang's Zhang the Fifth."

Hu Qingniu was taken aback. "He is from Wudang?" he asked angrily. "Why did you bring him here?"

Chang Yuchun quickly explained how he had been tasked to escort Zhou Ziwang's son to safety, and how Zhang Sanfeng had rescued him after he had been caught by Mongolian soldiers. "My life was saved by his grandteacher," the man went on, "so please make an exception and help this boy."

"Well, you were very generous to make such an offer," said Hu Qingniu sarcastically. "Hmmp! Zhang Sanfeng rescued you, not me. When have you ever seen me making an exception?"

Chang Yuchun fell on his knees and bowed several times. "Uncle, this brother's father would rather commit suicide than to betray a friend," he said. "He was a good man."

"A good man?" said Hu Qingniu with a cold laugh. "How

many good men are there under the sun? Can I heal them all? It would have been fine if he is not a member of the Wudang School. Why should someone from a renowned and upright organisation seek assistance from a heretic outsider like me?"

Nevertheless, Chang Yuchun persisted: "Brother Zhang's mother is the daughter of the White-Browed Eagle King, Sect-Leader Yin, so half of him can be considered a member of our Sect."

Feeling somewhat moved, Hu Qingniu nodded and said, "All right, get up. Being the maternal grandson of the Eagle Sect's White-Browed Yin does make things different." Walking over to Zhang Wuji, the physician explained in a warm and pleasant voice: "Child, I have always had the rule of not providing treatment to any member of the renowned and upright clans. Your mother is a member of our Sect, so I will not be breaking this rule if I treat you. Your maternal grandfather, the White-Browed Eagle King, was originally one of the Four Protector Kings of the Ming Sect. Due to some disagreements with the other brothers, he founded the Eagle Sect. However, he is not a traitor, for the Eagle Sect is considered a branch of the Ming Sect. You must promise me that you will join your maternal grandfather's organisation when you have recovered from your injuries, for you must no longer be a Wudang disciple."

Before Zhang Wuji could say anything, Chang Yuchun remarked, "No, Uncle. Mr Zhang Sanfeng has said that you cannot force the boy into our Sect. Furthermore, if he is indeed cured, his Wudang School will also not appreciate our kindness."

"Hmmpf! What is so great about Zhang Sanfeng?" Hu Qingniu roared in anger. "He despises us, so why must I work

for him? Child, what decision have you made?"

Zhang Wuji knew that the toxins in his body had entered all his internal organs and there was nothing his grandteacher could do about it despite the richness of his internal strength. His life now depended entirely on the willingness of this eccentric physician to treat him, but his grandteacher had warned him against joining the Evil Sect and placing himself in an inextricable web for the rest of his life. Although he did not understand how bad the Evil Sect was and why his grandteacher and uncles hated it to the core, he believed with all his heart that the grandteacher whom he respected greatly could not be wrong.

Therefore, he thought: I would rather die from his unwillingness to treat me, than to violate Grandteacher's instructions. So, he raised his voice and said, "Mr Hu, my mother was a Hall-Master in the Eagle Sect, so I think that there must be something good about the organisation. But I have promised my grandteacher not to enter the Evil Sect, so how can I go back on my word? I cannot help it if you refuse to treat me. If I were to cling on to life for fear of death and agree to your condition, the world would gain nothing but another untrustworthy and unfaithful man. What good would there be in that?"

So the little monster wants to talk and act like a great hero! Hu Qingniu sneered in his heart. I will just go ahead and refuse him, and watch him beg on his knees. Turning to Chang Yuchun, he said, "Since he is unwilling to enter our Sect, Yuchun, ask him to leave. How can there be people who die of illness within the doors of Hu Qingniu's abode?"

Chang Yuchun knew that this older uncle-at-arms of his was particularly stubborn, so there was no purpose in begging him for something that he had clearly refused. So, he turned

to Zhang Wuji and said, "Little Brother, although the members of the Ming Sect and the upright clans do not see eye-to-eye on many matters, our Sect has produced many heroes and outstanding men since the Tang Dynasty. Furthermore, your maternal grandfather and mother are the Leader and Hall-Master of the Eagle Sect respectively. Do agree to Uncle Hu's condition, and I will bear full responsibility for it before Mr Zhang."

Zhang Wuji stood up and replied, "Brother Chang, you have done your best, so my grandteacher will not blame you for anything." Then, he headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Chang Yuchun in surprise.

"If I die in Butterfly Valley, would the reputation of the 'Healing Sage' not be damaged?" the boy said in return.

Hu Qingniu laughed coldly and said, "The One who Ignores the Dying is renowned all over the world. Those who fall dead outside the 'cow-sheds' of Butterfly Valley are not limited to this child alone."

Turning a deaf ear to his uncle's words, Chang Yuchun dashed out, grabbed Zhang Wuji and brought him indoors again.

"Uncle Hu, are you absolutely unwilling to rescue him?" asked Chang Yuchun as he gasped for breath.

"You know that I am also called 'The One who Ignores the Dying'," said Hu Qingniu, "so why do you ask?"

"But you are willing to treat my injuries?" asked the man again. "That is right," answered his uncle.

"All right then!" said Chang Yuchun. "I have promised Mr Zhang to have this brother treated, so I cannot allow the upright clans to say that the members of the Ming Sect are untrustworthy. I do not want you to cure my injuries any longer. Please treat this brother instead. If we make this one-for-one exchange, you will lose nothing."

Hu Qingniu looked him in the eye and said in a serious voice: "You have been grievously wounded by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique. If I start your treatment at this very moment, you will recover completely. A delay of seven days will save your life, but not your martial arts abilities, while a delay of fourteen days will render your injuries totally incurable."

"This is the work of my uncle, the one who ignores the dying," said Chang Yuchun. "I will depart with no resentments."

Suddenly, Zhang Wuji shouted, "I do not want you to save me! I do not want you to save me!" Then, he turned to Chang Yuchun and added, "Brother Chang, do you think that Zhang Wuji is an unscrupulous scoundrel? You offer your life in exchange for mine, but a life gained in this manner is terribly meaningless to me."

Chang Yuchun did not argue further with him. Undoing his belt, he grabbed Zhang Wuji and tied him tightly to a chair. "If you do not release me, I will start cursing people!" the boy shouted. When Chang Yuchun ignored him, he hardened his heart and yelled: "The One who Ignores the Dying, Hu Qingniu, is really as stupid as a cow! He cannot be compared even to a beast!"

Surprisingly, the physician, whose name Qingniu meant Black Cow, was not angered. He just stared coldly at the upset boy.

"Uncle Hu, Brother Zhang, I take my leave," said Chang Yuchun. "I am going to look for another physician!"

"There are no able physicians in this province of Anhui," said Hu Qingniu coldly. "But you are unlikely to cross the borders Anhui within seven days anyway."

Laughing loudly, Chang Yuchun replied, "I have an uncle who ignores the dying, so it is only fair that you have a nephew who should suffer death!" Then, he strode out of the door.

"When did I agree to your one-for-one exchange?" asked Hu Qingniu in a loud voice. "I am not treating both of you!" He picked up a broken piece of pilose antler (lu4 rong2) from the table and threw it at an acupoint on Chang Yuchun's knee, causing him to crumple into a heap on the ground.

Then, Hu Qingniu untied Zhang Wuji, gripped both his wrists tightly and proceeded to throw him out of the door, so that the two hapless patients could live and perish together in due course.

"What are you doing?" Zhang Wuji shouted in fright. Just then, the toxins in his body rushed to his brain and knocked him out.

End of Chapter 11.

[1] Chang YuChun is an actual person in Chinese history. He is one of the top generals that helped brought Zhu YuanZhang(first emperor of the Ming dynasty) to power. Rumor has it that Zhu YuanZhang whacked him soon after becoming emperor. But 'officially', Chang YuChun died of natural causes.

[2] The character 'Ming' means bright, or illuminate.

Chapter 12 - Needles and Prescriptions for Diseases Beyond Cure

(Translated by Huang Yushi*)

*Courtesy of Wuxiapedia.com



Zhang Wuji was so unschooled in the practice of acupuncture that blood started spurting out of Chang Yuchun's Kai Yuan acupoint. Located in the abdomen, it was one of the vital points of the body. Thus, the sight of the gushing blood threw Zhang Wuji into a panic at once. Suddenly, someone laughed loudly behind him. The boy turned around and saw Hu Qingniu standing with his hands behind his back, watching his desperate attempts to stem the flow of the blood with a smirk on his face.

Holding Zhang Wuji's wrists, Hu Qingniu suddenly realised that the boy's pulse thumped in such an unusual manner that he could not help but pay closer attention to the strange and irregular beats. Could this child have been struck by the 'Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness' (Xuan² Ming² Shen² Zhang³)? he asked himself. But this technique has been lost for such a long time that there is no one left who knows how to use it. If it is not the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness, what is it? Yet, there is no technique that can produce a cold and deadly toxin as this. It is also very amazing that the child has not died, despite having been poisoned for a long time. Yes, that old Taoist Zhang Sanfeng must have used his rich internal strength to keep him alive. Now, with the toxins stuck in his internal organs, only the deities can save his life. He picked the boy up and put him back into the chair.

By and by, Zhang Wuji regained consciousness and saw Hu Qingniu seated opposite him, staring at the flames on the stove that he used to boil medicinal brews. On the other hand, Chang Yuchun was stretched out on the grass outside the door. Each occupied with his own thoughts, no one said anything to anyone else.

Having dedicated his entire life to the study of medicine and healing, Hu Qingniu could cure the most terrible of diseases

and ailments. As a result, he became known as the 'Sage of Healing', giving proof to the amazing extent of his skills and abilities. Yet, he had never seen the toxins that were created by the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness all his life, and a long-term survivor who had this deadly poison in his internal organs was even more unbelievable. Like the wine-lover who found an exquisite brew and the glutton who smelt the fragrance of meat, how could he pass up such an invaluable opportunity to display his prowess? After thinking for half a day, the eccentric physician, who had initially refused to treat Zhang Wuji, finally came up with a wonderful solution to his personal dilemma: First, I will cure him. Then, I will make him die.

However, it was easier said than done to have the toxins in the boy's internal organs expelled. After more than two shichen (four hours) of deep thought, Hu Qingniu finally took out twelve bronze slivers, gathered up his internal strength and began inserting the tiny pieces into twelve different acupoints on Zhang Wuji's body. These included the Zhong Ji (Zhong1 Ji2), Tian Tu (Tian1 Tu1) and Jian Jing (Jian1 Jing3) acupoints on his abdomen, neck and shoulder respectively. The Zhong Ji acupoint was located at the confluence of the three Yin Channels of the Foot (Zu2 San1 Yin1 Jing1) and the Channel of Ren (Ren4 Mai4), while the Tian Tu acupoint was located at the confluence of the Channels of Yinwei (Yin1 Wei1) and Ren. As for the Jian Jing acupoint, it was found at the confluence of the Hand Shaoyang Channel (Shou3 Shao4 Yang2 Jing1), the Foot Shaoyang Channel (Zu2 Shao4 Yang2 Jing1), the Foot Yangming Channel (Zu2 Yang2 Ming2 Jing1) and the Yangwei Channel (Yang2 Wei1 Mai4).

Consequently, the twelve bronze slivers served to block each one of the Twelve Regular Channels (Shi2 Er4 Jing1 Chang2 Mai4, or Zheng4 Jing1 Shi2 Er4 Mai4) and the Eight Extraordinary Channels (Qi2 Jing1 Ba1 Mai4) in the boy's

body. The five primary internal organs (a.k.a. Wu³ Zang⁴) -- the heart, lungs, spleen, liver and kidneys -- as well as the pericardium, were considered yin elements in traditional Chinese medical practice, while the six secondary organs (a.k.a. Liu⁴ Fu³) -- the stomach, large intestines, small intestines, gall bladder, urinary bladder and the Three Visceral Cavities (a.k.a. San³ Jiao¹) -- were considered yang elements. Together, these were known as the Twelve Regular Organs. The pulses of Ren, Du (Du¹), Chong (Chong¹), Dai (Dai⁴), Yinwei, Yangwei, Yinjiao (Yin¹ Jiao¹) and Yangjiao (Yang² Jiao¹) were neither Yin nor Yang in their movements, so they were known as the Eight Extraordinary Pulses(1).

The blocking of these Daily Organs and Extraordinary Pulses had the effect of containing the toxins in Zhang Wuji's body in their various locations. Then, Hu Qingniu burnt dried moxa leaves on the Yun Men (Yun² Men²) and Zhongfu (Zhong¹ Fu³) acupoints on the boy's shoulder, as well as the Tian Fu (Tian¹ Fu³), Xia Bai (Xia² Bai²), Chi Ze (Chi³ Ze²), Kong Zui (Kong³ Zui⁴), Lie Que (Lie⁴ Que¹), Jing Qu (Jing¹ Qu²), Da Yuan (Da⁴ Yuan¹), Yu Ji (Yu² Ji⁴) and Shao Shang (Shao⁴ Shang¹) acupoints along the entire length of his arm. These eleven acupoints were collectively known as the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung (Shou³ Tai⁴ Yin¹ Fei⁴ Jing¹), so the heat from the burning of the moxa leaves could remove some of the toxins there. For Zhang Wuji, the terrible discomfort caused this heat-based treatment was vastly different from the massive chills he suffered whenever he had a toxin attack. After the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung was done, the Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach (Zu² Yang² Ming² Wei⁴ Jing¹) and the Hand Jueyin Channel of the Pericardium (Shou³ Jue² Yin¹ Xin¹ Bao¹ Jing¹) were next

Hu Qingniu did not care whether the treatment caused Zhang Wuji any pain, and his use of the moxa leaves soon left dark burnt patches of skin all over the boy's body. On his

part, Zhang Wuji refused to show a single sign of weakness: You want to make me yell in pain, but I am not even going to make the slightest fuss. Therefore, he smiled and talked as if nothing was wrong, engaging Hu Qingniu in an animated discussion of the various acupoints and their locations. Although he knew next to nothing about medical practice, his godfather, Xie Xun, had taught him the various methods of blocking and releasing acupoints as well as the techniques of repositioning them. As a result, he knew exactly where each acupoint was. Such knowledge paled in comparison with the immense understanding of the renowned physician, of course, but since it touched a little on the principles of medicine, it served to get Zhang Wuji into Hu Qingniu's good books. Consequently, both of them chatted endlessly as the physician went about burning more moxa leaves on the boy's skin.

Zhang Wuji did not understand almost everything that the physician told him, yet he wanted to show the man that "my Wudang School knows all these things as well". So, every now and then, he would throw in a fallacy and argue his point, while Hu Qingniu took time to explain the error in detail. By and by, the physician realised that "this little fellow is just spouting nonsense in total ignorance", so all his explanations had been a waste of time and effort. Fortunately, Hu Qingniu did not have any companions in this remote valley, except for the two pages who helped him to cook, clean and make medicinal brews. As a result, he found himself cherishing the rambling discussion on acupoints that his young patient had come up with.

By the time Hu Qingniu was finished with the moxibustion of all the acupoints that were related to the Twelve Regular Organs, it was already dusk. The pages served a dinner of rice and vegetables on the table before taking a tray of food out to Chang Yuchun, who was still sprawled on the grass.

That night, Chang Yuchun slept outside, and Zhang Wuji did not bother make a single request of Hu Qingniu to let his hapless nephew in. Instead, he went out at bedtime and lay down to sleep beside Chang Yuchun in a silent indication of his willingness to share in the man's troubles. Hu Qingniu pretended not to see the goings-on, yet he could not help but be amazed by the boy's actions: This little fellow is indeed different from other children.

Early the next morning, Hu Qingniu started the moxibustion treatment on Zhang Wuji's Eight Extraordinary Channels, taking almost half the day before he was done. These stagnant pulses did not have the benefit of the free-flowing arteries and veins that coursed through Twelve Regular Organs, so it was a lot more difficult to expel the toxins that had found their way there. After that, Hu Qingniu prepared a prescription that used the reverse method of combatting the cold with something even colder. Consequently, Zhang Wuji shook and shivered for half a day after consuming the brew, before emerging with a marked improvement in his health.

Then, Hu Qingniu spent the later part of the day treating Zhang Wuji with acupuncture. The boy tried to provoke the physician into treating Chang Yuchun as well, but Hu Qingniu did not react much to his words, except to say, "My nickname, the 'Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley', is not entirely correct, for how can I call myself a 'Sage' in vain? I like it better if people refer to me as 'The One who Ignores the Dying'."

At that time, he happened to be pushing a needle into the Wu Shu (Wu3 Shu1) acupoint between Zhang Wuji's waist and thigh. This acupoint was located in the confluence of the Foot Shaoyang Channel and the Dai Channel, about one-and-a-half cun (5 cm) beside the urinary tract.

"The Dai Channel must be one of the strangest things in a person's body," said Zhang Wuji. "Mr Hu, do you know that there are people who do not have the Dai?"

"Rubbish!" answered Hu Qingniu. "How can a person not have the Dai?"

The boy was spouting nonsense, of course, but he went on, "There are many people under the sun, so any oddity is possible. Besides, I do not see much purpose in the existence of the Dai."

"Well, it is true that the Dai is more special than the other channels of the body," said Hu Qingniu, "but how can you say that it has no purpose? Mediocre physicians who do not understand its functions often prescribe the wrong treatments and medicines for it. I have written a book called 'A Discussion of the Dai Channel' (Dai⁴ Mai⁴ Lun⁴). Read it and you will understand why it exists." He disappeared into an inner room and emerged a moment later with a thin handwritten book with yellowing pages, which he passed to his young patient.

Zhang Wuji opened the first page and read: "The channels of the Twelve Regular Organs and the Eight Extraordinary Pulses run through the entire body, but the Dai Channel circulates only in the abdomen ... " The book went on to comment on the errors that physicians had made since ancient times: In 'The Functions of the Fourteen Channels' (Shi² Si⁴ Jing¹ Fa¹ Hui¹), the Dai was said to contain four acupoints, but in 'Successful Acupuncture' (Zhen¹ Jiu³ Da⁴ Cheng²), the Dai was described as having six acupoints. However, none were correct, for its acupoints numbered ten altogether. Two of these were so well-hidden that they were usually missed out.

Zhang Wuji did not understand many of the things he read in the book, but he realised that its contents and views were extraordinary. Consequently, he took the opportunity to discuss some of the errors that the ancient physicians had made.

Hu Qingniu was so pleased that he responded to all the boy's questions and remarks until he had finished inserting gold needles into each of the ten acupoints of the Dai Channel. After telling Zhang Wuji to take a rest, he added, "I have another book, 'The Manual of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for the Meridians(2)' (Zi3 Wu3 Zhen1 Jiu3 Jing1), which records all the painstaking research that I have done through the years." He went into the inner room again and came out with a hand-written tome so thick that it had to be separated into twelve smaller books.

All these years of living in isolation in the remote valley had turned Hu Qingniu in a very lonely man. Although he had a constant stream of patients, they were only interested in speaking praise for his unparalleled abilities as the healer of a million ailments. Unfortunately, he had already grown tired of hearing these words more than twenty years ago. As a physician, Hu Qingniu prided himself not in the exquisiteness of his abilities, but in the massive body of research, discoveries and techniques that he had accumulated in his lifetime. He knew that he had an extraordinary accomplishment in his hands, yet there was no one to share it with, except himself, the lonely inhabitant of a desolate valley. Therefore, when Zhang Wuji showed pleasure in reading the books that he had authored, Hu Qingniu felt as if he had found a friend who could understand his heart. Thus, he was more than happy to share his best work with this young patient who had no inkling what medicine and its practices were.

When Zhang Wuji opened the books, he found that each page was filled with characters as tiny as the head of a fly, detailing the acupoints, herbal prescriptions and methods of acupuncture for a mind-boggling array of diseases and ailments. A sudden thought entered his head: If I read on, perhaps I will find a way to heal Brother Chang's injuries. He picked up the ninth book, which was labelled 'The Pugilistic Arts', turned to the section on 'Treating Injuries Caused by Palm Techniques', and began his search. There were the Red-Sand Palm Technique (Hong² Sha¹ Zhang³), the Iron-Sand Palm Technique (Tie³ Sha¹ Zhang³), the Poison-Sand Palm Technique (Du² Sha¹ Zhang³), the Silken Palm Technique (Mian² Zhang³), the Mountain-Opening Palm Technique (Kai¹ Shan¹ Zhang³), the Tablet-Breaking Palm Technique (Po⁴ Bei¹ Zhang³) ... all sorts of palm-strike injuries were listed, together with detailed descriptions of their symptoms and treatments. After reading through 180 different varieties, the words 'Heart-Splitting Palm Technique' (Jie² Xin¹ Zhang³) popped up.

Overjoyed, Zhang Wuji studied the description under it carefully, only to find that there were more details about the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique itself than the method of treating the injuries that it caused. In fact, this was all there was: "Deal with the four acupoints of Zi Gong (Zi³ Gong¹), Zhong Ting (Zhong¹ Ting²), Guan Yuan (Guan¹ Yuan²) and Tian Chi (Tian¹ Chi²), and ignite a change in Yin, Yang and the Five Elements. Prescribe medication for the patient's joy, anger, worry, thought and fear, according to the five conditions of cold, hot, dry, wet and wind."

Traditional Chinese medical practice was not bound by a set of rigid rules, for treatments varied according to the condition of the patient. Therefore, the physician had to consider a list of criteria during treatment, including climate

(cold or hot), time (day or night), condition and location of the injury or illness (exposed, covered, internal or external), bodily functions (too much or too little), progress (beginning, middle or end), level of activity, gender, age ... Therefore, the difference between an able physician and a mediocre one was as great as the clouds and the mud. Zhang Wuji did not know all these, of course, but he read the treatment for the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique a few more times and committed it to memory. The last page of the section on 'Treating Injuries Caused by Palm Techniques' described the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness. Under the subtitle of 'Treatments', there was only one word: "None."

Zhang Wuji closed the book and put it carefully down on the table. "Mr Hu," he said, "this 'Manual of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for the Meridians' is so profound that I cannot understand much of what I have read. May I ask please: What does 'ignite a change in Yin, Yang and the Five Elements' mean?"

Hu Qingniu began his explanation, only to turn around in sudden realisation and say, "Are you asking me how Chang Yuchun's injuries can be healed? Ha-ha, I will talk about anything, except this."

Left with no alternatives, Zhang Wuji could only turn to the various medical books for answers. Fortunately, Hu Qingniu allowed him to read all the books he wanted. As a result, the boy became so engrossed in his search that he forgot to sleep and eat, reading not only the ten books that the physician had authored, but also other medical works such as 'The Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor' (Huang² Di⁴ Nei⁴ Jing¹), 'Hua Tuo's Diagrams of the Internal Systems' (Hua² Tuo² Nei⁴ Zhao¹ Tu²), 'Wang Shuhe's Manual of Arteries and Veins' (Wang² Shu¹ He² Mai⁴ Jing¹), 'Sun Simiao's Thousand-Gold Prescriptions' (Sun¹ Si¹ Miao³ Qian¹ Jin¹

Fang1), 'The Thousand-Gold Book of Medical Assistance' (Qian1 Jin1 Yi4) and 'Wang Tao's Secrets to External Treatments' (Wang2 Tao1 Wai4 Tai2 Mi4 Yao4). Whenever he came across passages that seemed to relate to the description of Chang Yuchun's treatment, he took time to study them carefully. Meanwhile, Hu Qingniu continued his treatment, using acupuncture and moxibustion twice a day, in the morning and in the afternoon, to remove the toxins in his body.

Several days passed by in this manner. Although Zhang Wuji had gone through many books and memorised numerous principles and prescriptions, he was too young and ill-educated to fully understand everything that he had read.

Then, the sixth day of his arrival in Butterfly Valley dawned. Hu Qingniu had told them that Chang Yuchun's injuries had to be treated within seven days, or he would lose all his martial arts abilities even if his life was saved. The man had been sprawled on the grass for six days and six nights ... and it suddenly started to rain. Yet, Hu Qingniu was as cold as ever, turning a blind eye to Chang Yuchun and the muddy puddle that had begun to take shape around him. Zhang Wuji became very angry, thinking: All the medical books that I have read, except those that you have written yourself, state that the physician must have a benevolent heart that seeks to bring benefit to mankind. What is the use of having all these skills when you ignore the dying? What sort of 'able physician' are you?

That night, the rain fell even heavier. As lightning flashed and thunder roared, Zhang Wuji gritted his teeth in determination and thought: I will have to give it a shot, even if it ends up making Brother Chang's injuries worse. He took eight gold needles from Hu Qingniu's cupboard, walked over to Chang Yuchun and said, "Brother Chang, I spent the past

few days reading as many of Mr Hu's medical books as I could. Although I do not understand everything, your treatment can no longer be delayed. Therefore, I am going to take a dangerous risk and try some acupuncture on you. If an unfortunate mishap occurs, I will not carry on living myself."

Chang Yuchun laughed and replied, "What are you talking about? Hurry up and poke me with the needles. If I survive, we can seize the opportunity to embarrass my Uncle Hu. If I die because of two or three needles, it would still be much better than suffering in this muddy puddle!"

Zhang Wuji's hands shook as he touched the Kai Yuan (Kai1 Yuan2) acupoint on Chang Yuchun's body and proceeded to push a thin gold needle into it. He had never practised acupuncture before, so he just copied what he had seen Hu Qingniu do in the past few days. Unfortunately, the physician's needles were so fine and pliable that they could not be used by anyone without a substantial level of internal strength. Unaware of this, Zhang Wuji exerted external strength on the needle, causing it bend without entering Chang Yuchun's flesh. The boy had no choice but to pull it out and try again. Acupuncture done right would never draw blood, but Zhang Wuji was so unschooled in its practice that blood started spurting out of Chang Yuchun's Kai Yuan acupoint. Located in the abdomen, it was one of the vital points of the body. Thus, the sight of the gushing blood threw Zhang Wuji into a panic at once.

Suddenly, someone laughed loudly behind him. The boy turned around and saw Hu Qingniu standing with his hands behind his back, watching his desperate attempts to stem the flow of the blood with a smirk on his face. Zhang Wuji said, "Mr Hu, Brother Chang's Kai Yuan acupoint is bleeding profusely. What should I do?"

"I know exactly what must be done," answered Hu Qingniu, "but why should I tell you?"

Lost of ideas, the boy replied, "We will make a one-for-one exchange right now. Please rescue Brother Chang quickly, and I will die before you in his place."

"I have said before that I will not treat him," said Hu Qingniu coldly, "so, I will not! I am only a man who ignores the dying, not the Ghost of Non-Permanence (Wu² Chang² Gui³) that drags people to their doom, so what benefit does your death give me? I will not rescue one Chang Yuchun even if ten Zhang Wuji die in his place."

Knowing that it was just a waste of precious time to argue with the stubborn physician, Zhang Wuji began looking for a solution. The gold needles were too soft for his use, but there were no other types of needles available. After a moment's thought, he broke a length of bamboo and used a small knife to whittle it down into several toothpick-like slivers. Then, he inserted the slivers into Chang Yuchun's Zi Gong, Zhong Ting, Guan Yuan and Tian Chi acupoints. Although these bamboo slivers were a lot stiffer than the gold needles, they were still pliable enough not to draw blood upon entry to the various acupoints. Moments later, Chang Yuchun threw up several large mouthfuls of dark-coloured blood.

Zhang Wuji did not know whether Chang Yuchun's reaction was caused by a worsening of his injuries, or the success of his bamboo "needles" in expelling the clots that had formed in the man's blood. Turning around, the boy found that Hu Qingniu still regarded him with disdain, but a hint of approval had also appeared on his scornful face. Finally assured that his treatment had not been wrong, he rushed indoors, looked up some medical books and wrote up a prescription for his patient. Although he had learnt from the

books that certain herbs could cure certain ailments, he did not have any idea what the dried rhizome of *Rehmannia* (sheng1 di4), the root of the Chinese *Thorowax* (chai2 hu2), *Achyranthes* root (niu2 xi1) and the gall of bear (xiong2 dan3) were. Yet, he turned to one of the pages and said as confidently as he could, "Please decoct a portion of medicinal soup according to this prescription."

The page took the prescription, showed it to Hu Qingniu and asked if it was all right to go ahead. The physician sneered and said, "What a joke! What a joke! Go ahead and make the soup. If he does not die drinking it, there will no longer be any dead people on earth."

Zhang Wuji grabbed the prescription immediately and reduced the amount of each herb used by half. Then, the page began decocting the medicine, until a single bowl of soup was produced. Bringing the thick and pungent brew to Chang Yuchun's mouth, Zhang Wuji held back his tears and said, "Brother Chang, I really do not know whether this bowl of medicine will do you good or harm ... "

"Wonderful, wonderful!" said Chang Yuchun with a laugh. "This is what I call 'the sightless physician curing the blind horse'." Closing his eyes, he threw his head back and gulped down every single drop in the bowl.

That night, Chang Yuchun felt as if a million knives were slicing through his abdomen. He also kept throwing up mouthfuls of blood. Zhang Wuji stayed by his side all night, braving thunder, lightning and rain to look after his friend. When morning finally arrived, the rain stopped. Chang Yuchun's vomiting became less frequent and the volume of blood that he threw up decreased. The colour of blood also changed gradually from dark to purple to red.

"Little Brother, your medicine did not kill me at all," said Chang Yuchun in delight. "In fact, I think my injuries are beginning to get better."

"My prescription worked?" asked Zhang Wuji, hardly daring to believe his eyes and ears.

Chang Yuchun laughed and said, "My late father must have known that something like this would happen, so he named me 'Chang Yuchun' - Frequent, Meet, Spring - so that I will frequently meet with great masters like you, who will put a miraculous spring back in my dying steps. But I must say that your prescription was rather heavy-handed. My stomach felt as if it was being pierced by dozens of knives after drinking the brew."

"Yes, yes," Zhang Wuji responded. "I guess I overdid it a bit."

It turned out that the dosage was not just a bit more than usual. In fact, it was several times higher than what was normally required. Furthermore, no adjuvants were used to make the medicine more friendly on the stomach, so the thick brew had set about working its terribly strong cure as soon as it was ingested. Although Zhang Wuji had found the correct herbs for his friend's injuries from Hu Qingniu's books, he did not have a single clue about the 'Master-Servant-Assistant-Messenger' principle that guided the use of herbs. If Chang Yuchun's body had not been unusually strong, he would have died from the concoction.

When Hu Qingniu came out of his hut after waking up and washing his face, he was shocked to see Chang Yuchun glowing with renewed health. One of them is intelligent and brave, while the other is unusually strong in body and spirit, he said to himself. Consequently, the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique have been cured.

After this success, Zhang Wuji immediately prepared a prescription of ginseng (ren2 shen1), pilose antlers (lu4 rong2), the tuber of the multiflower knotweed (shou3 wu1) and poria (fu2 ling2) to strengthen Chang Yuchun's body and assist in his recovery. After ten days or so of consuming the top-quality herbs that Hu Qingniu kept in his home, Chang Yuchun made so much progress that he eventually said to Zhang Wuji, "Little Brother, my injuries have healed completely, so there is no more reason for you to accompany me day and night. We will part here."

The life and death experiences of the past month had turned the boy and the man into friends who were ready to die for each other. Therefore, Zhang Wuji was very reluctant to part with Chang Yuchun. However, he knew that the man could not stay by his side all his life, so he tearfully agreed.

"Do not feel bad, Little Brother," said Chang Yuchun. "I will come back and visit you in three months. If the poison in your body is gone by then, I will take you to Mount Wudang, so that you can see your grandteacher again."

Then, he went into the hut, bowed before Hu Qingniu and said, "My injuries have been healed. Although it was Brother Zhang who treated me, he was nevertheless guided by your medical books, Uncle Hu. I have also consumed quite a bit of the expensive herbs and medicines that you possess."

Nodding in acknowledgement, Hu Qingniu replied, "That is nothing. You may have recovered from your injuries, but you have also lost forty years of life."

"What?" asked Chang Yuchun, for he did not understand the physician's remarks.

"Well," answered Hu Qingniu, "according to the condition of your body and mind, you should live beyond eighty years old. However, that little fellow used some erroneous medical prescriptions and faulty acupuncture techniques on you. As a result, you will ache all over whenever it rains. At about forty years of age, you will finally go and see the King of Hades."

Chang Yuchun laughed heartily. "A man lives to serve his country," he declared. "If I can establish a work of such merit, thirty years of life will suffice. Why then do I need forty? One can live to a hundred years old, but if he does not accomplish anything, his life is but a waste of food."

Hu Qingniu nodded again, but he did not say anything more. According to The Legend of Chang Yuchun in the Historical Annals of the Ming Dynasty, the man did eventually die of a sudden illness at the age of forty.

Zhang Wuji walked Chang Yuchun all the way out to the entrance of Butterfly Valley before both of them parted in tears. Then, the boy made a silent decision in his heart: My bumbling cures and treatments caused Brother Chang to lose forty years of life. Although he had suffered harm in my hands, could he also not enjoy benefits from them? I must find a way to restore him to his previous state of health.

Since then, Hu Qingniu treated Zhang Wuji with acupuncture and herbal concoctions on a daily basis, seeking to reduce and expel the deadly toxins in his body. Meanwhile, the boy continued to study the physician's books and memorise the principles behind the use of medicines and herbs. Whenever he came across something that he could not understand, he would ask the physician for help. His desire to learn pleased Hu Qingniu so much that he would explain everything in great detail. Sometimes, the boy's questions were so strange that they caused the man to look at things in ways that he

had never thought of before. Hu Qingniu had originally planned to have Zhang Wuji killed after his injuries were healed, but he soon felt the young man's death would take away the only person whom he could really talk to in the valley. Therefore, he found himself wishing that his companion would not recover as quickly as he had initially wanted him to.

Several months passed. One day, Hu Qingniu suddenly discovered that nothing happened when the Guan Chong (Guan1 Chong1) acupoint on Zhang Wuji's ring-finger was pricked by a needle. The Qing Leng Yuan (Qing1 Leng3 Yuan1) acupoint two cun (6.66 centimetres) above his elbow and the Si Zhu Kong (Si1 Zhu2 Kong1) acupoint in the cavity of his brow did not respond to the needles either. These three points were part of the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities. Named Upper, Middle and Lower respectively, these cavities were described as an amazing part of the body's internal organs in medical books. Despite painstaking thought and a variety of marvellous techniques, Hu Qingniu could not expel any of the toxins that had found its way into the boy's Visceral Cavities. As a result, he became so stressed out by the entire episode that he had ten grey hairs in as many days.

Deeply grateful for his efforts, Zhang Wuji said, "Mr Hu, you have already done your best. Everyone on earth must die someday, so this is just an indication that my time has come. You really do not have to ruin your own health for the sake of mine."

Hu Qingniu snorted in disdain and said, "You despise our Ming and Eagle Sects, so when have I made any efforts to save your life? But my failure to cure your illness will inevitably damage my reputation as the 'Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley'. Thus, I must ensure that you are healed

first. Then, I will have you killed."

A involuntary chill ran down the boy's spine, for he was aware that the physician would never overturn his own decision. "Since the toxins in my body are not dissipating, I will eventually die," he said. "So you need not lift a finger against me. Sigh, all the people under the sun seem to have only one wish -- that everyone else must die before they can be truly happy. Thus, they study the pugilistic arts just so that they could have everyone else killed."

To his surprise, Hu Qingniu kept silent. After gazing at the sky outside his door for a long time, he said in a quiet voice, "When I was young, I put all my heart into the study of medicine and aspired to bring hope and benefit to mankind, but I soon found out how wrong I had been when a man whom I had rescued turned around and hurt me badly. He was a young fellow who was poisoned by the venom of the golden silkworm in Guizhou's Miao Settlement. This particular venom was so potent that its victims were bound to suffer terribly painful deaths. After three sleepless days and nights of painstaking effort, I finally succeeded in curing him. Subsequently, we became sworn brothers, and I gave him the hand of my younger sister in marriage. But he eventually caused my sister's death. Do you know who he is? He is now the reputable leader of a renowned and upright clan!"

The pain and grief on Hu Qingniu's face began filling Zhang Wuji's heart with an unexpected compassion for him: So it was this tragic experience that turned him into a cold-hearted man who ignores the dying. "Who is this unfaithful ingrate with the heart of a wolf and the lungs of a dog?" he asked.

The physician gnashed his teeth in anger and answered, "He

... he is none other than the leader of the School of Mount Hua, Xianyu Tong."

"Why do you not take him to task over this matter?" asked Zhang Wuji again.

"I have looked him up thrice altogether," Hu Qingniu replied with a sigh, "but I came away defeated each time. In fact, I was almost killed in our last duel, for this man is very highly skilled in martial arts. He is also very intelligent and resourceful, so much so that he is known as 'The Shrewd Strategist' (Shen² Ji¹ Zi³). I am really not his match. Furthermore, as the leader of the School of Mount Hua, he has many subordinates at his beck and call. Our Ming Sect, on the other hand, has been torn apart by internal strife in recent years. All the top pugilists in our Sect have been battling one another, so there was no one who could help me then. Besides, I am too ashamed to beg others for assistance. I am afraid that this grievance will never be redressed. Sigh, my poor ill-fated sister ... our parents passed away when we were young, so both of us depended on each other ... " At this point, tears began welling up in his eyes.

He is actually not a cold, sour and heartless man, thought Zhang Wuji.

Suddenly, Hu Qingniu raised his voice and said, "You must never ever bring this matter up again. If so much as a single word leaks out, I will make you suffer between life and death for the rest of your days!"

The boy opened his mouth to retort, but before he could say anything, his heart softened. After all, the physician's tragic experiences were not beneath his own. "I will not say a thing," he agreed at last.

Hu Qingniu stroked the boy's hair, sighed and added, "Poor thing, poor thing!" Then, he turned and headed for the inner room.

After the unexpected failure to remove the toxins in the boy's Three Visceral Cavities and the long conversation about his past, Hu Qingniu's attitude towards Zhang Wuji changed. Although he made no further mention about his background and personal problems, the physician found himself developing a liking for his thoughtful young patient. He was indeed a good companion for the lonely inhabitant of the valley. Consequently, Hu Qingniu instructed Zhang Wuji daily on the Yin, the Yang and the Five Elements of medical practice as well as the methods and techniques of acupuncture, lessons which the boy devoured with all his heart. Armed with an amazing talent for medicine, Zhang Wuji made such laudable progress in the study of various books, including 'The Xiyao Manual of the Yellow Emperor' (Huang² Di⁴ Xia¹ Ma Jing¹), 'Xifangzi's Book of Acupuncture' (Xi¹ Fang¹ Zi³ Ming² Tang² Jiu³ Jing¹), 'Beneficial Prescriptions for Great Safety' (Tai⁴ Ping² Sheng⁴ Hui⁴ Fang¹), 'The Book of Acupuncture: Volumes 1 and 2' (Jiu⁴ Jia³ Yi⁴ Jing¹) and 'Sun Simiao's Thousand-Gold Prescriptions', that Hu Qingniu could not help but sigh and say, "With your intelligence and natural flair, and my knowledge and abilities as a teacher, you should be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the great physicians Hua Tuo and Bian Que before the age of twenty, but ... sigh, what a pity, what a pity."

He meant to say that the boy would be dead by the time he finished his studies in medicine, so what use was there in such a display of diligence and hard work? However, Zhang Wuji had a totally different purpose in his heart. He wanted to learn the best and the most effective medical techniques, so that he could help Chang Yuchun regain the health that he

had lost. In addition, he hoped that he would enable Yu Daiyan to walk without aid. These were the two greatest desires of his heart, so if he could accomplish them before his death, he would depart with no regrets.

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Life in the valley was peaceful and quiet, and the days and weeks passed with ease. When Zhang Wuji marked the second anniversary of his stay in Butterfly Valley, he was already fourteen years old. During these two years, Chang Yuchun visited him several times, with news about Zhang Sanfeng and the world outside. Apparently, the elderly Taoist was so happy to hear of the boy's progress that he instructed the boy to stay on in the valley until his recovery was complete. In addition, Zhang Sanfeng and his six disciples sent gifts of clothes and other necessities, but they could not visit the boy whom they missed dearly because of the difference in clan affiliations. Zhang Wuji missed his grandteacher and uncles too, and he almost rushed back to Mount Wudang to see them. As for the world outside the valley, the Mongolians' oppression of the Han-Chinese worsened by the day. The common people did not have enough to eat, and rising banditry gripped the land. At the same time, the feud between the upright clans and the Evil Sect worsened. Many people were injured and killed on both sides, deepening the vendettas between them.

Chang Yuchun stayed only for a few days during each visit, for he seemed to be very busy with the affairs of the Sect.

One night, after reading Wang Haogu's medical book entitled 'Matters that are Difficult to Ascertain' (Ci3 Shi4 Nan2 Zhi1), Zhang Wuji felt so tired that he went to bed without further thought. When he woke up the next day, his head hurt so badly that he thought he was coming down with a cold. As he

walked into the hall in search of some anti-cold medication, he noticed that the sun was shining from the west. Shocked that it was already past noon, he thought: I must be ill to sleep for such a long time. He quickly took his own pulse, but he found nothing irregular about it. Have I finally reached the end of my days? he asked himself.

Zhang Wuji went over to Hu Qingniu's room and found the door tightly shut. Coughing lightly to get the physician's attention, he heard the man say: "Wuji, I am not feeling well today. My throat hurts badly, so just continue reading on your own."

"Yes," the boy answered, before adding out of concern: "Sir, would you allow me to take a look at your throat, please?"

"That is not necessary," Hu Qingniu replied hoarsely. "I have looked at it with a mirror. It is nothing serious, so I have taken some powdered bezoar and rhinoceros horn (niu2 huang2 xi1 jiao3 san3)."

That evening, when one of the pages served Hu Qingniu dinner in his room, Zhang Wuji walked in and saw that the physician was lying in bed with a haggard-looking face.

"Get out quickly, all of you!" said Hu Qingniu with a wave of his hand. "Do you know what I have come down with? It is smallpox!"

Sure enough, there were little red dots all over his face and hands. Zhang Wuji knew that smallpox was a dangerous disease. A light attack would leave marks all over the face, but a serious one could very well cause death. Although Hu Qingniu was a very knowledgeable physician who could treat his own illnesses better than anyone else, Zhang Wuji found himself still feeling concerned about him.

"You must not enter my room again," Hu Qingniu went on. "All the bowls, chopsticks, cups and plates that I have used must be sterilised in boiling water. You and the pages must not mix these utensils with your own." After a moment's thought, he added, "Wuji, you had better leave Butterfly Valley and stay outside for half a month or so. I do not want to pass the smallpox on to you."

"No, that is not necessary," answered Zhang Wuji at once. "You are ill. If I go away now, who will take care of you? After all, I am a bit more knowledgeable about medicine than these two pages."

"I think that it is better for you to go away," said Hu Qingniu, but Zhang Wuji refused to be persuaded. Although the man had his idiosyncracies, a comfortable relationship had developed between the two of them in the past two years. Furthermore, it was unlike the boy's character to run away in the face of trouble. Therefore, Hu Qingniu finally relented and said, "All right. But you must not step into my room."

For the next three days, Zhang Wuji checked on Hu Qingniu once in the morning and once again in the evening. Although the physician sounded rather hoarse, he seemed to be quite alert. He also had a bigger appetite than usual, so his condition did not appear to be serious. In addition, Hu Qingniu made daily announcements of the herbs that he wanted to take, as well as their respective dosages. Then, the pages would set about decocting the various brews.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, Zhang Wuji sat down and began reading a chapter in 'The Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor', which was entitled 'A Great Discussion on the Management of the Four Forces' (Si⁴ Qi⁴ Tiao² Shen² Da⁴ Lun⁴). By and by, he came to a passage that said: "Since

ancient times, the sages have focused on the prevention rather than the healing of illnesses. They prefer to deal with troubles that have not erupted rather than problems that are already deep-set. Curing great illnesses that have done their damage and rectifying upheavals that have taken place are just like digging wells at the point of thirst and forging weapons at the point of battle -- already too late." Nodding in agreement, Zhang Wuji thought: These words are very true indeed, for it is really too late to dig a well when I am thirsty and forge a weapon just before I get into a fight. A chaotic country that experiences subsequent peace may have returned to its former stability, but its original power and strength would have suffered a massive depletion. Illnesses should also be treated before they break out, but Mr Hu's smallpox is an external ailment that cannot be treated before it occurs.

Then, he recalled a passage from a chapter in the same book that was known as 'A Great Discussion of the Responses of the Yin and the Yang' (Yin1 Yang2 Ying4 Xiang4 Da4 Lun4): "The physician begins by treating the skin, then the flesh, then the nerves, then the Six Secondary Organs and finally the Five Primary Organs. He who treats the Five Primary Organs is left with only half a chance for success." An able physician must begin treating an illness the moment its symptoms appear, said Zhang Wuji to himself. If he waits until the disease has eaten into the Five Primary Organs before taking action, his chances of success would have already fallen by half. As for people like me, whose internal systems are overrun by toxins, we are doomed nine times out of ten.

As he praised the wisdom of the ancient physicians and reminisced about life since his injuries, Zhang Wuji suddenly heard the sound of horses' hooves heading into the valley. A short while later, the riders came to a stop outside the huts.

A voice among them called out: "Friends from the martial arts circle seek an audience with the Sage of Healing, Mr Hu, requesting that he provides treatment for our ailments."

Stepping out for a look, Zhang Wuji saw a swarthy man standing in front of his hut. The man had the reins of three horses in one hand, two of which carried a blood-soaked man each. The swarthy man wore a huge bloody bandage on his head, while his right arm hung from his neck in a sling. All three of them appeared to be seriously wounded.

"You have come at a most unfortunate time," said Zhang Wuji. "Mr Hu is ill and bed-ridden, so he is unable to offer you his services. Please see another physician!"

"But we have ridden hundreds of li (1 li = 500 metres) with our lives hanging by a thread," said the swarthy man. "We can be saved only by the Sage of Healing."

"Mr Hu has been struck by a very serious case of smallpox," Zhang Wuji explained. "This is the truth, for I do not dare to deceive you."

"The three of us are gravely wounded," said the swarthy man again. "Unless we are treated by the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley himself, we are sure to die. Little Brother, please report to Mr Hu on our behalf and find out what his instructions are."

"In that case, may I enquire what your esteemed surnames and names are?" asked Zhang Wuji.

"Our worthless names deserve no mention," answered the swarthy man. "Please say that we are disciples School-Leader Xianyu from Mount Hua." His body shook and he threw up a large mouthful of blood.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. He knew that Xianyu Tong from the School of Mount Hua was a great enemy of Hu Qingniu, so he went over to the physician's door and called, "Sir, there are three seriously-injured men outside who seek your services. They say that they are disciples of School-Leader Xianyu from Mount Hua."

Hu Qingniu gasped in surprise before replying angrily: "I will not treat them! Chase them away at once!"

"Yes," answered the boy. Then, he returned to the wounded men and said, "Mr Hu is too ill to see anyone. Please forgive us."

The swarthy man frowned and opened his mouth to plead for help, but before he could say anything, a thin and small-sized fellow, who had been slumped on one of the horses, lifted his head and threw something into the hut. A golden light flashed past Zhang Wuji before coming to a stop on the table. "Take this golden flower and show it to 'The One who Ignores the Dying'," said the thin man. "Tell him that we have been hurt by the owner of the golden flower. Now, this person is about to come and cause him trouble as well. If 'The One who Ignores the Dying' can cure our ailments, the three of us will stay behind and help him to fight the enemy. Our pugilistic skills are not great, but three additional helpers are better than none."

Zhang Wuji found the thin man rather rude, unlike the swarthy fellow who was more polite. Walking over to the table, he saw that the golden flower was actually a type of projectile. Made entirely from yellow gold, it was exactly the same size and shape as a real plum blossom. The handiwork was so exquisite that the bloom even had pistils that were fashioned from platinum. Zhang Wuji reached to pick it up,

only to discover that the thin man had thrown it with so much force that it had become embedded in the table. As he prised it out with a pair of tweezers, he thought: This skinny fellow seems rather skilled in martial arts, but he ended up being hurt so badly by the owner of the golden flower. I had better tell Mr Hu that this formidable person is coming to cause trouble. Holding the little flower in his hand, he stood outside the physician's room and repeated what the thin man had told him.

"Show me the weapon," said Hu Qingniu.

Pushing the door open and gently sweeping the door-curtain aside, Zhang Wuji found the physician's room as dark as night. He knew that smallpox sufferers were afraid of wind and light, so it was only expected that the windows were all sealed up. Hu Qingniu had a piece of black cloth wrapped around his face, revealing only a pair of eyes. Zhang Wuji was shocked: I wonder how the blisters are under that cloth. Would they leave scars on his face?

"Put the golden flower on the table and leave quickly," Hu Qingniu said.

Zhang Wuji did as he was told and stepped out of the room. But before he could close the door, Hu Qingniu spoke again: "The lives and deaths of the three have absolutely nothing to do with me. They also need not worry whether I am dead or alive." The golden flower flew across the room, sliced through the door-curtain and landed on the floor with a thud. In the past two years, Zhang Wuji had never seen the physician practise any martial arts. Yet, this cultured man had turned out to be a highly skilled pugilist as well. Although he was ill, he had lost none of his pugilistic abilities.

The boy picked up the golden flower, returned it to the thin

man, shook his head and said, "Mr Hu is really very ill ... "

Suddenly, the sounds of hooves and wheels were heard. A horse-drawn carriage rolled into the valley.

As the carriage came to a stop outside the row of huts, Zhang Wuji saw that it was driven by a sallow-looking young man. The man lifted a bald elderly fellow out of the carriage and asked, "Is the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley, Mr Hu, at home? The Sacred Hands of the Buddhist Temple (Sheng⁴ Shou³ Qie² Lan²) Jian Jie of the Kongdong School has come from afar to seek treatment ... " Before he could say more, he collapsed, dragging the bald elderly man to the ground with him. By a stroke of coincidence, the two horses that had drawn the carriage fell as well, foaming in their mouths.

The condition of these two newcomers and their horses was sufficient proof that they had travelled a long way without rest, just so that they could seek treatment from Hu Qingniu. The mention of the 'Kongdong School' rekindled Zhang Wuji's memories of his parents' suicides on Mount Wudang two years earlier. The elders of Kongdong were among those who had forced the couple to their deaths, and although this particular bald man had not been present that day, he was probably not a good fellow. Yet, before Zhang Wuji could refuse his request and send him away, four or five more people entered the valley. Some of them had crutches, while others leaned on one another for support. They all looked as if they were also wounded.

Knitting his brows into a frown, the boy did not wait for the latest group to approach him. Instead, he announced in a loud voice: "Mr Hu has contracted smallpox. He cannot even help himself at this moment, so he is unable to treat your ailments. Please seek another physician as soon as possible, so that your treatments are not delayed."

When the latest group finally reached the row of huts, Zhang Wuji saw that it consisted of five men. Looking as pale as paper, without any visible wounds on their bodies or patches of blood on their clothes, the men had probably suffered internal injuries. Their leader, a tall and fat fellow, nodded at the bald Jian Jie and the thin man who threw the golden flower. Then, the three of them exchanged a bitter laugh.

They know one another! thought Zhang Wuji in surprise. His curiosity aroused, he asked: "Did all of you fall victim to the owner of the golden flower as well?"

"That is correct," answered the fat man. Then, the swarthy man, who had been the first to arrive, added, "What is your name, Little Brother? How are you related to Mr Hu?"

"I am Mr Hu's patient," Zhang Wuji replied. "When Mr Hu says that he will not treat you, he really means it. Thus, there is no purpose for you to continue hanging around here."

As they spoke, four more people arrived. Some came in carriages, while others rode horses, but all of them requested an audience with Hu Qingniu.

Zhang Wuji became even more puzzled: The Butterfly Valley is so remote that besides the members of the Evil Sect, very few people in the realm of the rivers and lakes know about its location. These fellows come from Kongdong and Mount Hua, so they are definitely not related to the Sect. How did all of them end up being injured at the same time? And how did all of them find their way here with such coincidence? Then, another thought entered his mind: Since the owner of the golden flower is such a formidable pugilist, it would not have been difficult for him to take these people's lives. But why

did he just wound them grievously?

Some of the wounded visitors continued to plead for help, while others remained totally quiet, but all fourteen of them flatly refused to leave. As evening fell around them, they crowded into one of the huts for shelter. When one of the pages served Zhang Wuji his dinner, the boy went ahead and ate it without bothering about the visitors. Then, he lit an oil lamp and resumed his reading. Turning a blind eye to the fourteen, he said to himself: Since I am learning Mr Hu's methods and techniques of treatment, I may as well copy him and ignore the dying too.

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Quiet settled on Butterfly Valley. Except for the occasional sound of Zhang Wuji turning a page of his book and the heavy breathing of the wounded visitors, no other noises were heard. Suddenly, light footfalls sounded along the path outside as two people walked slowly towards the row of huts.

A moment later, the clear, crisp voice of a girl cut through the stillness of the night: "Mother, there is a light in the house ahead. We have arrived." Her high pitch indicated that she was very young in age.

By and by, an older voice asked, "Child, are you tired?"

"No, I am not," the little girl replied. "Mother, you will not hurt after the physician cures your illness."

"Yes," answered the woman. "But I do not know if the physician is willing to treat me."

Zhang Wuji was taken aback: The woman's voice is very familiar! She sounds like Auntie Ji Xiaofu!

At that moment, the little girl spoke again: "The physician will definitely treat you. Mother, do not be afraid. Are you feeling better yet?"

"Just a little better," said the woman. "Sigh, my poor long-suffering child ... "

By then, Zhang Wuji had no more doubts. He rushed to the door of the hut and called out: "Auntie Ji, is that you? Are you wounded too?"

A woman dressed in blue came into view, holding a little girl by the hand. She was indeed the Lady Warrior Ji Xiaofu of the E-mei School. When she last saw Zhang Wuji on Mount Wudang, he was not even ten years old. Almost five years had passed since then, and the little boy had grown into a teenager. Thus, she could hardly recognise him.

"Auntie Ji, do you still remember me?" asked the boy again. "I am Zhang Wuji. We met once on Mount Wudang, when my parents passed away."

Ji Xiaofu gasped in shocked, for she had never expected to run into him in this isolated valley. Suddenly very conscious about her status as an unwed mother, she turned very red with shame. After all, Zhang Wuji was the nephew of her fiancé, Yin Liting. Although he was young, it was still very difficult for her to explain herself. Unfortunately, the emotional turmoil caused by this unexpected meeting was too much for her weakened body, so she collapsed.

Her daughter grabbed her arm at once, but what could a eight- or nine-year-old child do to stop the fall of an adult? As a result, both mother and child crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Zhang Wuji quickly propped Ji Xiaofu up by the shoulders and said, "Auntie Ji, please take a rest inside." Helping her indoors, he soon saw that her left shoulder and arm had been slashed several times. Blood was still seeping through the bandages that she had put over the wounds, and a light but persistent cough accompanied her throughout. By then, Zhang Wuji's abilities in treating illnesses had surpassed those of the so-called 'renowned physicians', so he could tell immediately from her coughs that her lungs had been hurt. "Auntie Ji, you hurt the Taiyin Channel of the Lung when you used your right palm against your opponent's hand," he said.

Then, he took seven gold needles out and inserted them through her clothes into the Yun Men acupoint on her shoulder, the Hua Gai (Hua2 Gai4) acupoint on her chest, the Chi Ze acupoint on her elbow and four other points along the Taiyin Channel of the Lung. His skills had improvedly vastly since the day he treated Chang Yuchun, for he had spent the past two years in diligent study under the tutelage of Hu Qingniu. While his ability to diagnose ailments and prescribe medication was still limited by experience, his skill in acupuncture had reached seven- or eight-tenths of the prowess of the Healing Sage.

Ji Xiaofu was somewhat apprehensive when she saw the gold needles, but Zhang Wuji was so fast with his hands that the needles entered her acupoints in the blink of an eye, granting immediate relief for the congestion in her chest. Startled but delighted, Ji Xiaofu said, "Dear child, I never expected to see you here, much less with this marvellous set of skills."

Years ago on Mount Wudang, Ji Xiaofu had witnessed the double-suicide of Zhang Cuishan and Yin Susu. Overcome with compassion for the little orphan that the couple left

behind, she had comforted the child and offered him her necklace of gold. However, Zhang Wuji had been so angry and upset that he had blamed all the visitors for his parents' deaths. Therefore, he had rejected Ji Xiaofu's gift and left her standing in embarrassment. As he grew older, he found out that his father and uncles had originally planned to join hands with the warriors of E-mei against their opponents. Thus, he finally learnt that the E-mei School was a friend, not a foe. As for Ji Xiaofu, he had often recalled her kindness towards him with a grateful heart.

More recently, Zhang Wuji and Chang Yuchun had seen how Ji Xiaofu had taken a great risk in rescuing Monk Peng (i.e. Peng Yingyu). Therefore, in his mind, this Auntie Ji was a very good person. He was too young to understand the details behind her being an unwed mother or judge whether she had done his Uncle Yin wrong, so he had not retained the information that he had heard in the woods that night. Unfortunately, Ji Xiaofu had been carrying a guilty conscience all this time, so she found this sudden meeting with someone who knew Yin Liting terribly embarrassing. She did not know that Zhang Wuji had heard everything about her from Ding Minjun two years earlier. Since he saw Ding Minjun as a wicked woman, the things that she had said were probably not as bad as she had made them out to be. Zhang Wuji turned his attention to the little girl beside Ji Xiaofu. Pretty as a picture, the girl stared curiously at him with a pair of big and dark eyes before whispering, "Mother, is this boy the physician?"

The word 'Mother' caused Ji Xiaofu to redden at once. But there was really nothing more that she could do to keep the matter under wraps. So, she replied awkwardly, "This is an older brother from the Zhang family. His father was a friend of mine." Then, she turned to Zhang Wuji and said, "She ... she is called 'Buhui'." After a pause, she added, "Her surname

is Yang ... Yang Buhui!"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "That is great. Little Sister, your name is very similar to mine. I am called Zhang Wuji - 'No Resentments' - while you are Yang Buhui - 'No Regrets'."

Seeing that Zhang Wuji did not react to her introduction of her daughter with shock or accusation, Ji Xiaofu heaved a silent sigh of relief. Then, she said to her daughter, "Elder Brother Wuji is very skilful. I do not hurt very much anymore."

Yang Buhui's lively eyes regarded Zhang Wuji for a moment. Then, she went forward, gave the boy a big hug and kissed him on the cheek. Besides her mother, she had never seen anyone else all her life. Therefore, she was very grateful that Zhang Wuji had reduced the pain and discomfort that her mother felt. Since she had always expressed joy and gratitude towards her mother by hugging and kissing her, she had done the same to the boy.

Ji Xiaofu smiled and said, "Bu-er, do not do that. Brother Wuji does not like it."

Yang Buhui opened her eyes wide in surprise, turned to Zhang Wuji and asked, "You do not like it? Why do you not want me to be nice to you?"

Laughing in amusement, the boy replied, "I like it. I want to be nice to you too." He leaned forward and gave her a gentle peck on the cheek.

Yang Buhui clapped her hands. "Little Physician," she said, "quickly make my mother completely well again and I will give you another kiss."

Zhang Wuji found the innocent and lively little girl very adorable. All his life, he had known only people who were old enough to be his uncles. Although he treated Chang Yuchun as a brother and vice-versa, the man was still eight years older than he. Other than Zhou Zhiruo whom he had met for barely a day, he had never had any friends of his age. Therefore, he could not help but say to himself: If I had such a cute little sister, I would take her out to play everyday. After all, at fourteen years old, he was still very much a child, but the rough circumstances of his childhood had not given him many opportunities for fun and play.

Then, Ji Xiaofu noticed that Jian Jie and the other wounded visitors had not received any treatment yet. Unwilling to jump the queue, she said, "They arrived earlier than I, so you had better attend to them first. I am already feeling much better."

"They came to seek treatment from Mr Hu but he is too ill to see them," answered Zhang Wuji. "Yet, they have refused to leave. Auntie Ji, I have lived here long enough to pick up some basic medical skills, so if you can trust me, I will take a look at your injuries. After all, you did not mention that you are seeking help from Mr Hu."

In fact, Ji Xiaofu had wanted to ask the Hu Qingniu for assistance, for she had been in the same boat as Jian Jie and the others. After they were wounded, someone had told them to come to Butterfly Valley for treatment. Now that Zhang Wuji had made the offer to treat her, she quickly realised that the 'One who Ignores the Dying' was living up to his name. Since the initial course of acupuncture had proven to be rather effective, she knew that Zhang Wuji's skills were far better than 'basic'. Thus, she said, "Thank you very much. Since the Great Master refuses to provide treatment, the Little Master can do it just the same."

Ushering the woman into a room, Zhang Wuji cut her sleeve away with a pair of scissors and found three sabre slashes on her arm. The bones in the arm were broken, with a spot in the upper arm where the pieces of bone had been smashed to smithereens. This terribly fragmented section was particularly difficult to fix, yet it was just a simple matter in the eyes of the disciple of the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley. Thus, Zhang Wuji began setting the bones in Ji Xiaofu's arm before applying a concoction that would aid in the healing of the open wounds on it. Then, he wrote up a prescription and instructed one of the pages to have the soup prepared. This being his maiden attempt at setting broken bones, his hands were rather clumsy. So, he struggled for a shichen (two hours) or so before everything was finally in place and bandaged. "Auntie Ji," he said, "please take a nap. When the anaesthetic wears off, the wounds are going to hurt quite badly."

"Thank you very much!" said Ji Xiaofu in gratitude.

After that, Zhang Wuji went off to get some dates and almonds for Yang Buhui, but by the time he returned, the tired little girl had already fallen asleep by her mother's side. He placed the snacks in her pocket and went out of the room.

The swarthy man from the School of Mount Hua stood up as soon as Zhang Wuji appeared. Bowing low before the boy, he said, "Young sir, since Mr Hu is ill, we have no alternative but to seek your assistance for our injuries. For this, we offer our utmost gratitude in advance."

Since he began his studies in medicine, Zhang Wuji had never provided treatment for anyone, except Chang Yuchun and Ji Xiaofu. Consequently, he was very tempted to try his skills out on these fourteen men who bore a variety of

internal injuries, broken limbs and other strange ailments. Then, remembering Hu Qingniu's words, he said, "This is Mr Hu's home and I am only a patient of his. How would I dare to make such a decision?"

Seeing that he did not make an outright refusal to provide treatment, the swarthy man decided to motivate the boy with a little praise. "The renowned physicians of the past were all old men in their fifties and sixties," he said, "so we did not realise that a young man like you could have such profound skills. This occurrence is so rare that we hope to experience your prowess."

The fat man, whose surname was Liang, added, "The fourteen of us have minor reputations in the realm of the rivers and lakes. If you cure our ailments, young sir, we will go out and publicise your abilities as a miraculous physician. Within a day, your name will be renowned across the land."

Young and inexperienced, Zhang Wuji did not really understand the ways of the world. Therefore, he could not help but feel pleased with the men's praises. "What benefit is there in being renowned across the land?" he said. "Since Mr Hu is unwilling to treat you, there is nothing I can do. But your injuries are really quite serious ... let me put it this way: I will help to reduce some of your pain and discomfort." With some multi-purpose ointment in hand, he began helping the wounded men.

But he was totally unprepared for what he found. Not only were the men's injuries different from one another, the injuries themselves were so strange and shocking that they were not even mentioned in the comprehensive books that Hu Qingniu had written. One of the men had been forced to swallow several dozen poisoned steel needles. Another man had his liver wounded by internal strength, but the Xing Jian

(Xing² Jian¹), Zhong Feng (Zhong¹ Feng¹), Yin Bao (Yin¹ Bao¹) and Wu Li (Wu³ Li³) acupoints that were needed to treat the liver had been slashed to bits with a sharp knife. Apparently, the perpetrator of these injuries had a profound knowledge of medicine as well, so he could ensure that his victims were not easily cured. Then, there was the man whose lungs were punctured with a long iron nail each. He coughed and threw up blood continuously. Another man had all the ribs on both sides of his body totally broken, but none of these broken bones punctured his heart or lungs. Yet another fellow had both his hands chopped off, but the perpetrator had taken time to connect the left hand on the right wrist, and vice-versa. Now, the switched limbs had begun to set. And there was the man who was blue, black and swollen all over. Apparently, he had been stung by twenty different poisonous insects and pests, including the centipede, the scorpion and the wasp.

Zhang Wuji had seen only six or seven of the fourteen men, but they were enough to bring a frown to his brow: Their injuries are so strange that I cannot even cure a single one of them. Why did the perpetrator rack his brains and come up with such terrible forms of torture? Suddenly, a thought hit him: The wounds on Auntie Ji's shoulder and arm are too common, so she must have suffered some strange internal injuries as well, for how could her case be different? He ran into the room and took Ji Xiaofu's pulse. Erratic and irregular, her pulse indicated that something had gone horribly wrong with her internal organs. Yet, he had no idea as to why and how it happened.

Zhang Wuji was not particularly concerned about the conditions of the fourteen men. After all, they included the people from the Kongdong School who had a hand in forcing his parents to their deaths, so they deserved every bit of their strange sentences. But Ji Xiaofu's injuries had to be

treated at all costs, so he walked over to Hu Qingniu's room and said, "Sir, are you asleep?"

"What is it?" asked the physician. "I do not care who it is outside, for I will not treat a single one of them."

"Yes," said Zhang Wuji. "But their injuries are very very strange." Then, he proceeded to describe everything that he had seen.

Hu Qingniu listened attentively from bed, sending the boy outside every now and then to clarify certain conditions that sounded vague. The process took almost an hour before the injuries of all fifteen people were completely described in gory detail. The physician punctuated the reports with numerous "Mmm, Mmm", as if he was thinking hard about them. Finally, he said, "Hmmpf! These strange injuries are nothing to me ..."

Suddenly, a voice behind Zhang Wuji said, "Mr Hu, the owner of the golden flower wants us to tell you this: 'You have called yourself the Sage of Healing in vain, for I do not think that you will be able to cure even one of these fifteen ailments.' Ha ha, sure enough, you are now holed up in your room, pretending to be ill."

Turning around, Zhang Wuji saw that the voice belonged to the bald old man from the Kongdong School, Jian Jie. Initially, the boy had thought that the old fellow was naturally bald, but he later discovered that his hair had fallen out after a corrosive poison was applied on his head. Furthermore, the poison had begun seeping through the scalp and the skull towards the brain. It would be just a matter of days before the man went completely mad. Meanwhile, his companions had secured his hands with iron chains, so that he could not scratch his terribly itchy scalp down to the bone.

Hu Qingniu was unfazed. "It does not matter to me whether I can cure you or not," he said calmly. "The point is that I will never treat your ailments. You have seven or eight days of life left, so if you hurry home now, you will still be able to see your family members, sons and daughters for the last time. After all, what benefit is there in nagging me?"

Tortured by the persistent itch on his scalp, Jian Jie knocked his head against the wall and rattled the chains on his hands. "Mr Hu," he growled in a breathless voice, "the owner of the golden flower will come for you sooner or later, and you will probably suffer a terrible death. If we join hands and fight together against this enemy, would it not be better than hiding in this room and waiting for your doom?"

"If you can defeat him, you would have had him killed a long time ago!" answered Hu Qingniu. "What is the use of having fifteen useless helpers?"

Jian Jie pleaded for a while, but Hu Qingniu did not pay him further attention. Finally, the frustrated man shouted: "All right, since either way leads to death, I will burn this dog's den down! We will enter with white sabres, and exit with red ones. After we dispatch this crooked physician, we will meet our ends!"

Just then, another man appeared. He was the swarthy fellow who had been throwing up blood. Pulling out a steel Moth-Antennae Spike (e2 mei2 gang1 ci4) and pressing it against Jian Jie's chest, he said coldly, "If you offend Elder Hu, I will be the first to take you to task. You want to enter with white sabres and exit with red ones? All right, I will let you experience it first."

Jian Jie was the better-skilled pugilist between the two, but

he could not fight back because of the chains around his hands. So he just opened his eyes wide and glared at his opponent.

Raising his voice, the swarthy man announced: "Elder Hu, I am Xue Gongyuan, a disciple of School-Leader Xianyu from Mount Hua. I would like to pay you my respects!" He knelt and kowtowed several times.

A glimmer of hope appeared in Jian Jie's heart: Since Hu Qingniu refuses to respond to force, this fellow's kowtows and gentle pleadings may just do the trick.

Then, Xue Gongyuan said, "It is our misfortune that you are ill, Elder Hu. But there is a little brother here whose knowledge of medicine is brilliant. Thus, we would like to request your permission for him to treat us. After all, there is no one else in the world who can cure our strange ailments, except for the disciple of the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley."

"This child is called Zhang Wuji," Hu Qingniu answered coldly. "He is a disciple of the Wudang School, the son of the Silver Hook and Iron Stroke Zhang Cuishan the Fifth, and the grand-disciple of Zhang Sanfeng. Hu Qingniu is a member of the Ming Sect, the scum of society that is despised by your renowned and upright clans. So what have I do to with a disciple of a great teacher like him? He came to me for help because he has been poisoned, but I have sworn that I will treat no one, except the members of the Ming Sect. This little fellow is unwilling to join my organisation, so how can I save his life?"

Half of Xue Gongyuan's hopes vanished into thin air. He had initially thought that Zhang Wuji was Hu Qingniu's disciple. Therefore, the physician would definitely provide the boy

with pointers if he ran into difficulties during the process of treatment. He had never expected that Zhang Wuji would turn out to be yet another hapless patient whose request for assistance had been flatly refused.

"So you want to hang around, eh?" Hu Qingniu went on. "Hmmpf, hmmpf, do you think that I will become kind-hearted all of sudden? Ask this little fellow how long he has been hanging around my place."

When Xue Gongyuan and Jian Jie turned to Zhang Wuji, they saw him hold up two fingers and gesture twice with them. "Twenty days?" asked Xue Gongyuan.

"Two years and two months to the day," answered Zhang Wuji.

Jian and Xue exchanged a glance and sighed.

"He can go ahead and stay here for another ten years," said Hu Qingniu, "but I still cannot save his life. In twelve months, the deadly toxins that have accumulated in his internal organs will begin their final work, and he will not live to see this day next year. I swore an oath before the Ming Lord years ago, hence I cannot provide treatment for anyone who is not a member of the Ming Sect, even if they are my own father, son and daughter."

As Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan began walking out in deep disappointment, Hu Qingniu suddenly said, "This teenager from the Wudang School knows a little about medicine. Although the knowledge of Wudang is far beneath our Ming Sect, it is not poor enough to kill anyone. Therefore, the Wudang School can go ahead and provide treatment, or turn away and ignore the dying. Its decision, however, has absolutely nothing to do with the Ming Sect and Hu Qingniu."

Xue Gongyuan was taken aback, for the physician sounded as if he wanted Zhang Wuji to treat their ailments. "Elder Hu," said the man quickly, "if this Young Hero Zhang is willing to save us, we will have hope once more."

"What has that got to do with me?" snapped Hu Qingniu. "Listen up, Wuji. You cannot practise medicine as you wish in the house of Hu Qingniu. But once you step out of my door, I can no longer control what you do."

Xue Gongyuan and Jian Jie glanced dumbly at each other, unsure of what the physician meant by his words.

Fortunately, Zhang Wuji was a lot smarter than they. Knowing what Hu Qingniu had in mind, he said to Xue and Jian, "Mr Hu is ill, so you should not disturb him more than necessary. Please come with me." When the three of them reached the hall, Zhang Wuji said, "Gentlemen, I am young and my knowledge is shallow. Your injuries are so strange that I do not have full confidence in curing them. If you can trust me, please allow me to do my best. As for the results, we will leave them in the hands of the Heavens."

By then, the men were so tortured by their injuries that they were willing to drink arsenic and poison for momentary relief. Therefore, they were absolutely delighted to hear Zhang Wuji's words.

"Mr Hu does not allow me to do anything in his house," the boy went on, "so that his reputation as the 'Sage of Healing' will not be damaged if anyone dies. Please step outside."

The men hesitated, for they knew that this fourteen- or fifteen-year-old lad was limited in knowledge and experience. If they remained in the house of the 'Sage of Healing', they

could still look to the renowned physician himself for assurance. But if they stepped outside, they might just end up suffering additional yet totally unnecessary pain in the bumbling hands of this young man.

Suddenly, Jian Jie exclaimed: "The itch on my scalp is killing me! Little Brother, please attend to me first." Dragging his chains noisily behind him, he walked out of the door.

After a moment's thought, Zhang Wuji went to the room where a variety medicinal ingredients were kept, and brought out ten different herbs and minerals, including Nanxing (nan2 xing1), Divaricate Saposchnikovia Root (fang2 feng1), Dahurian Angelica Root (bai2 zhi3), Gastrodia Tuber (tian1 ma2), Notopterygium (qiang1 huo2), Typhonium Tuber (bai2 fu4 zi3) and opicalcite (hua1 rui4 shi2). Then, he instructed one of the pages to crush the herbs and minerals in the mortar with some hot wine, before applying resulting paste on Jian Jie's bald pate.

The old man jumped up and yelled in pain when the paste touched his scalp, shouting, "Ouch! It hurts terribly! But this pain is a lot more comfortable than that horrible itch!" Walking around the grass with chattering teeth, he added, "Pain is wonderful! Damn, this pipsqueak is better than I thought. No ... Young Hero Zhang, I should really be thanking you for your help instead."

The fast and positive effect of Zhang Wuji's treatment on Jian Jie's itch caused the other men to rush forward with their respective needs. At that moment, one of them started rolling on the ground, holding on to his stomach and crying out in pain. It turned out that he had been forced to swallow more than thirty live leeches. Having survived the ingestion, the leeches had eventually attached themselves to the walls of their victim's stomach and intestines, sucking his blood for

all their worth. Zhang Wuji recalled a passage that he had read: Leeches disintegrate upon contact with honey. There was plenty of honey in Butterfly Valley, so he obtained a large bowl of it from one of the pages and instructed the man to consume the entire serving at once.

Then, he proceeded to the other men, attending diligently to each successive patient until daybreak. When Ji Xiaofu and her daughter woke up and went outside, they found that Zhang Wuji had been working so hard that he was drenched in perspiration. Ji Xiaofu offered her help immediately, bandaging open wounds and fetching medicines as required. On the other hand, little Yang Buhui ran around the valley, snacking on almonds and dates and chasing butterflies without a single care.

By the time Zhang Wuji had finished with the initial course of treatment for all fourteen men, it was already past noon. But their ailments were so strange and complex that it was insufficient to deal just only with the external symptoms and signs. Zhang Wuji went to his room to get some sleep, only to be jolted awake several hours later by loud cries of pain. He jumped up and went to check on his patients at once. A few of them seemed better, but many more had taken a turn for the worse. Lost for ideas, he went to tell Hu Qingniu what had happened so far.

"These fellows are not members of the Ming Sect," said the physician coldly. "Who cares if they are dead or alive?"

Then, Zhang Wuji had a flash of inspiration. "If there was a member of the Ming Sect who did not have any external injuries," he said, "but his face was swollen red and his abdomen was filled with blood clots, how would you deal with him?"

"If he was a member of the Ming Sect," answered Hu Qingniu, "I would give him a decoction of water, wine, pangolin scales (shan1 jia3), the end-roots of the Chinese Angelica (gui1 wei3), safflower (hong2 hua1), the dried rhizome of Rehmannia, Lingxian (ling2 xian1), Dragon's Blood (xue4 jie2, the resin of the Calamus Gum), Taoxian (tao2 xian1), rhubarb (da4 huang2), frankincense (ru3 xiang1) and myrrh (mo4 yao4), with some urine from boys under twelve (tong2 bian4). He will pass the blood clots out after that.

Zhang Wuji asked again: "What if someone filled the left and right ears of a Ming Sect member with lead and mercury respectively, before pouring raw lacquer into his eyes?"

"Who dares to do such a horrible thing to a member of the Ming Sect?" roared Hu Qingniu in anger.

"Yes, that person is terribly vicious," answered Zhang Wuji. "But I think that we should cure the ears and eyes of this Ming Sect member first, before asking him who his enemy is and where he can be found."

Hu Qingniu thought for a moment and said, "If the victim was a member of the Ming Sect, I would pour mercury into his left ear. The pieces of lead would dissolve in the mercury and flow out of the ear. Then, I would put a gold needle into the right ear and draw the mercury out bit by bit. As for the raw lacquer, a juice made from crabs might work."

Zhang Wuji went on in this manner, turning the ailments of his patients into injuries suffered by fictitious Ming Sect members, until Hu Qingniu had given him the answers to all fifteen problems. The physician knew what the boy was up to, of course, but he taught him all the same. Unfortunately, some of these injuries were so strange and complex that the suggested treatments did not work. Therefore, Hu Qingniu

had to put in additional effort and thought before the appropriate cures were found.

After five or six days, the patients began showing signs of improvement. As for Ji Xiaofu, her internal injury had been caused by poison. After Zhang Wuji had ascertained its roots, he had combatted it with a decoction of raw fossil fragments (sheng1 long2 gu3), perilla (su1 mu4), mole cricket (tu2 gou3), Troglodytes dung (wu3 ling2 zhi1), Caper Euphorbia seed (qian1 jin1 zi3) and powdered toad (ge2 fen3). Thus, when he checked on her pulse, he found that it had become rather steady, though it was still a little weak. Her injury had indeed begun to heal.

By then, the patients had built themselves a large canopy outside Hu Qingniu's row of huts, using it as a simple shelter from sun and rain as they recuperated on piles of straw and grass. Ji Xiaofu and her daughter had a tiny shed of their own several zhang (1 zhang = 3.33 metres) away, the result of a request by Zhang Wuji that the fourteen wounded men did not dare to decline. After all, the lives of these rough-and-tumble men who roamed the length and the breadth of the realm of the rivers and lakes were in the boy's hands.

Life had suddenly become rather busy for Zhang Wuji, but he had also learnt quite a few new techniques and prescriptions from Hu Qingniu. The experience had proven to be beneficial so far.

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One morning, Zhang Wuji discovered a slight darkening of the skin on Ji Xiaofu's brow, as if her internal injuries had recurred. He quickly took her pulse and asked her to provide some saliva for a test, eventually confirming that the poison in her body had returned. Zhang Wuji could not figure out

what had happened, so he went to ask Hu Qingniu for help. The physician sighed and told him what to do. Sure enough, the treatment worked immediately. Then, Jian Jie's scalp began to rot and give out a terribly foul smell. The fifteen patients had regained eight- or nine-tenths of their health in the past few days, yet in a single night, everyone had taken a turn for the worse.

Zhang Wuji did not understand how this happened, so he turned to Hu Qingniu for an opinion.

"All of them have suffered extraordinary injuries," said the physician. "If they could be easily healed, why would they need to come to Butterfly Valley and beg me for help?"

That night, the boy lay in bed and thought: It is common for injuries to recur, but it is way too strange for such a thing to happen to all fifteen people at the same time. Furthermore, their conditions seem to change again and again. The matter kept him awake until the third watch of the night (11.00 p.m. to 1.00 a.m.) had passed.

Suddenly, he heard the soft crushing of fallen leaves as someone walked quietly past his window. His curiosity aroused, Zhang Wuji made a hole in the paper covering of his window and peered outside. He saw a figure flash by, before disappearing behind a Chinese scholartree (huai² shu⁴). It looked like Hu Qingniu.

Why is Mr Hu not in bed? the boy asked himself. Has he recovered from smallpox?

But the physician's movements seemed to indicate an unwillingness to be seen by others. After a while, he crept towards the tiny shed that Ji Xiaofu and her daughter slept in.

Zhang Wuji's heart began to thump loudly as he thought: Has he gone to hurt Auntie Ji? I am not his match, but I cannot let this matter pass unheeded. Climbing out of the window, he followed Hu Qingniu as quietly as he could. Then, he saw the man sneak into Ji Xiaofu's shed. The shed had been put up haphazardly as a simple shelter against wind and rain, so it had no doors or walls to keep intruders out.

Zhang Wuji panicked and made his way quickly to the back of the shed. Crouching close to the ground, he saw Ji Xiaofu and her daughter sleeping soundly on a pile of straw. Meanwhile, Hu Qingniu took a medicinal pellet out of his shirt and put it into Ji Xiaofu's bowl of medicine before leaving as quietly as he had come. Zhang Wuji saw that the physician's face was still covered by the piece of black cloth. As he wondered whether the man had recovered from smallpox, a sudden and somewhat frightening realisation hit him: Mr Hu has been tampering secretly with the patients' medications during the night! That is why their injuries have not been healing.

Then, he saw Hu Qingniu entering the canopy where Jian Jie, Xue Gongyuan and the others slept, apparently to poison them as well. The physician did not re-appear for a long time, probably because each of the fourteen men required a different prescription. Zhang Wuji stepped quietly into Ji Xiaofu's shed and took a whiff of her bowl of medicine. It had originally contained a dose of Eight Immortals Soup (ba1 xian1 tang1), which she was supposed to drink first thing in the morning. Now, the decoction emitted a pungent smell. Just then, light footsteps sounded outside, indicating that the physician was returning to his room.

Putting the bowl down, Zhang Wuji called out softly: "Auntie Ji, Auntie Ji!"

As an accomplished pugilist, Ji Xiaofu's hearing and sight were very keen, so she would wake up at the slightest noise even when she was in a deep sleep. However, she was not aroused despite several calls from Zhang Wuji. The boy had to shake her on the shoulder seven or eight times before she finally opened her eyes and asked, "Who is it?"

"Auntie Ji, it is I, Wuji," he answered. "Your bowl of medicine has been poisoned, so you cannot drink it anymore. Pour it quietly into the river, and pretend that nothing is wrong. I will discuss the details with you tomorrow."

Ji Xiaofu nodded in agreement.

Then, fearing that Hu Qingniu might chance upon them, Zhang Wuji returned to his window and climbed back into his room.

After breakfast the next morning, Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui went butterfly-chasing, running further and further away from Hu Qingniu's huts and the wounded men's canopy. Ji Xiaofu knew what the boy was up to, so she quickly followed them. Having seen Zhang Wuji take Yang Buhui out to play for the past few days, no one bothered about the three of them going off on their own. When they reached a hill about a li (500 metres) away, Zhang Wuji sat down.

Ji Xiaofu turned to her daughter and said, "Bu-er, let us not chase butterflies anymore. Go and look for some wildflowers and make three crowns, one for each of us."

Beaming with delight, the little girl went off as she was told.

Zhang Wuji opened the discussion with a question: "Auntie Ji, what conflict does that Hu Qingniu have with you? Why does

he want to poison you?"

"I have never met Mr Hu," answered Ji Xiaofu, somewhat taken aback by the boy's train of thought. "I have never even seen his face to this day, so what conflict is there between us?" After a moment's pause, she added, "When Father and Teacher talk about Mr Hu, they mention only his unsurpassed abilities in medicine and refer to him as the best physician in the land. It is really a pity that he has chosen to walk in heretical ways as a member of the Ming Sect. My father and my teacher do not know him either. Why ... why does he want to poison me?"

Zhang Wuji proceeded to tell her how he had seen Hu Qingniu sneak into her shed to poison her the night before. Then, he said, "Your bowl of Eight Immortals Soup emitted the pungent smells of the venus-hair fern (tie3 xian4 cao3) and the Bone-Piercing Fungus (tou4 gu3 jun1). These two plants have certain medicinal properties but they are too poisonous to be used in heavy doses. They are also counteractive to the healing properties of the eight herbs in the Eight Immortals Soup. Although the dosages that had been used were insufficient to kill, they would have nevertheless prevented the complete recovery of your injuries."

"It is even more puzzling that the other fourteen men are also affected," Ji Xiaofu remarked. "Even if my father or the E-meì School had offended Mr Hu by accident, all these fellows could not have been involved as well. It is just too coincidental to be true."

Undaunted, the boy pressed on with his queries. "Auntie Ji, Butterfly Valley is very remote," he said. "How did you manage to find this place? Who is that 'owner of the golden flower' who hurt you?" After a slight pause, he added,

"Perhaps, I should not be asking you about these matters because they do not really concern me. But the entire episode has been so strange. Please do not be offended."

Ji Xiaofu turned red, for she understood the meaning behind Zhang Wuji's words -- he was concerned that his questions might be related to her being an unwed mother, hence answering them would put her in a very awkward position. Yet, she went ahead and gave him a reply: "You saved my life, so what else is there that I should keep from you? Furthermore, you treat Bu-er and me very well. You may be young, but you are also the only one in this entire world whom I can share the deepest difficulties of my heart with."

Wiping the tears in her eyes away with a handkerchief, she went on: "Since a misunderstanding with one of my elder sisters-at-arms two years ago, I have not dared to see my teacher or go home ... "

"Hmmp! That 'Evil Wuyan Ding Minjun' is horrible!" Zhang Wuji said at once. "Auntie, you do not have to be afraid of her."

Ji Xiaofu gasped in surprise. "Eh, how did you know about this?" she asked.

After the boy told her how he and Chang Yuchun had seen her rescuing Monk Peng in the woods, she sighed quietly and said, "I should never have done anything that I do not want others to know about! How could my actions have escaped the ears and the eyes of men?"

"Sixth Uncle Yin is a very good man," said Zhang Wuji. "But if you do not like him, what is wrong with not marrying him? When I see Uncle Yin, I will ask him not to insist on it any longer."

Ji Xiaofu could not help but smile miserably at the boy's naive and simple view. "Child, I did not intentionally set out to do your Sixth Uncle Yin wrong," she said gently. "I had no alternatives then, but ... but now, I have no regrets about it either ... " Then, she thought: This child's heart is like a blank piece of paper, so I had better not tell him about the intimate affairs between men and women. Besides, they do not seem to be related to the issue on hand.

Thus, she continued: "After falling out with Sister Ding, I did not return to E-mei again. Instead, I took Bu-er and went to Mount Shungeng, about three hundred li (150 km) west of Butterfly Valley, where we led carefree and peaceful lives among woodcutters and farmers for more than two years. Half a month ago, Bu-er and I went to town to buy cloth for some new clothes. There, I came upon a fresh chalk drawing of a small sword surrounded by rays of light in the corner of a wall. It was a coded call for disciples of the E-mei School. I became very frightened after seeing it, but I soon realised that it was not my fault for falling out with Sister Ding. I have also not done anything to deceive my teacher or betray my school. Therefore, I decided to answer the call, just in case it was left by a schoolmate in trouble. So, with Bu-er in hand, I followed the trail of drawings to Fengyang.

"Within Fengyang City itself, another drawing led us to the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant. There were already seven or eight members of the martial arts circle there, including Kongdong's Jian Jie as well as Mount Hua's Xue Gongyuan and his two brothers, but there were no E-mei disciples.

"I had met Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan before, so I quickly found out from them that they too had followed the coded drawings of their respective clans all the way to Fengyang. But no one knew what the call was really about.

"After waiting for a day, no other E-mei disciples arrived. Instead, a few more pugilists from other organisations appeared, including those from the Clan of the Exquisite Fists (Shen² Quan² Men²) and the Beggars' Gang (Gai⁴ Bang¹). They too said that they had come to the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant after seeing the coded drawings of their respective organisations. Several more people turned up on the second day for the same reason, but the sender of these calls did not appear. Doubts crept into our hearts: Have we all been tricked by the enemy?

"By then, fifteen people from nine different clans had responded to this strange gathering in the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant. The coded drawings differed from one organisation to another, of course, and each guarded its own closely. No one, except for the members of the clans themselves, knew what these marks meant. If this gathering was really a work of treachery, how could the enemy have known the secret symbols of nine different clans? Unwilling to put Bu-er at risk or see any of my schoolmates, I decided to go home. After all, it was clear that this was not a call for help.

"Just as I was about to leave the restaurant, loud tapping sounds were heard on the stairs, as if someone was coming up with the help of a pole or crutch. A series of coughs followed, and a silver-haired old woman with a hunched back came into view. She coughed painfully as she walked, supported by a young girl about twelve or thirteen years old. I moved aside at once, allowing the ill and elderly woman to come up the stairs first. Her young helper had a refined air and a pretty face. On the other hand, the old woman, with her bleached walking stick and plain clothes, looked like a poor peasant. Yet, she had a shiny rosary in her left hand. When I took a closer look, I realised that the beads of her

rosary were actually plum blossoms made from yellow gold ...
"

"So this old woman is the 'owner of the golden flower'?" asked Zhang Wuji in surprise.

"That is right!" answered Ji Xiaofu with a nod. "But who would have thought of such a thing at that moment?" Reaching into her pocket, she brought out a small plum blossom made of gold. It looked exactly like the one that Zhang Wuji had shown Hu Qingniu barely a week earlier.

The boy was amazed, for he had expected the 'owner of the golden flower' to be a horribly vicious and terribly formidable man. Yet, according to Ji Xiaofu's description, the enemy had turned out to be a sickly old woman.

Ji Xiaofu went on: "After the old woman reached the top of the stairs, she began to cough. The young girl said, 'Grandmother, perhaps you should take some medicine.' As the old woman nodded in agreement, the girl opened a small porcelain bottle and poured a medicinal pellet out. The old woman swallowed the pellet with much difficulty before saying a series of 'Amitabha!'. Then, with her eyes half-closed, she mumbled, 'Only fifteen ... mmm, ask them: Has anyone from the schools of Wudang and Kunlun arrived?'

"No one had paid her much attention when she first came up the stairs, so everyone was taken aback by her sudden remarks. A few of the men turned around at once, but they quickly dismissed what they had heard at the sight of this old and senile-looking peasant woman. The young girl raised her voice and said, 'Hey, my grandmother asks you: Has anyone from the schools of Wudang and Kunlun arrived?' Shocked, no one answered her. After a while, Kongdong's Jian Jie said, 'Young lady, what did you just say?' The girl answered with a question of her own: 'My grandmother asks: Why are the

disciples of Wudang and Kunlun not here?' 'Who are you?' asked Jian Jie again. Just then, the old woman bent over and began another series of coughs.

"Suddenly, a strong gust of wind came towards my chest. I did not know where it had come from, but it was incomparably fast. I quickly raised my palm to deflect it, only to have my chest block up with nausea. I sank to the floor and threw up several mouthfuls of blood. As I struggled to get a grip on things, I saw the old woman floating across the room, sending a palm to the right and a fist to the left amidst a series of coughs. Within moments, the other fourteen men were all struck down. These sudden, swift and strong movements left us with no opportunity to fight back, for we either had our acupoints blocked or our internal organs injured. Then, the old woman's left hand swept out and sent a gold blossom each into our arms. After that, she reached for the young girl, said 'Amitabha!' and hobbled down the stairs. It took quite a while before the tapping sounds of her walking stick and her coughs faded away."

At that moment, Yang Buhui returned with a floral crown that she had made. "Mother, this is for you," she said with a bright smile as she placed her handiwork on her mother's head.

Ji Xiaofu smiled appreciatively before continuing with her tale: "By then, all fifteen of us lay weak and limp on the floor of the restaurant. A few could still mumble and curse in anger, but some could hardly breathe ... "

"Mother, are you talking about that horrible old woman?" asked Yang Buhui suddenly. "Do not talk about her, please. She frightens me."

Comforting her daughter, Ji Xiaofu said, "Dear child, be good and go make another floral crown for Brother Wuji."

Yang Buhui turned to Zhang Wuji and asked, "What colour would you like?"

"Red," answered the boy. "And some white too. Make it as big as you can."

Stretching her arms out, the little girl asked again, "Like this?"

"Yes, like that," replied Zhang Wuji.

As she clapped her hands and skipped off, Yang Buhui said, "You had better wear it after I have finished."

Then, Ji Xiaofu resumed her story: "As I sat in a daze, the manager, winekeepers, cooks and other workers of the restaurant appeared, and dragged all of us off into the kitchen. Poor Bu-er wailed in fright and followed me as I was taken away. By and by, the manager looked up a written list, pointed to Jian Jie and said, 'Smear this ointment on his head.' A winekeeper carried the instruction out, using a pre-determined concoction. The manager referred to his list again, pointed to another fellow and said, 'Chop his right hand off, and connect it to his left arm.' Two cooks brought out a sharp cleaver and executed the order. I was fortunate to be spared of physical torture, but I was forced to consume a bowl of sweet liquid. I knew that the drink was poisonous, yet I did not have the ability to resist.

"After the fifteen of us had been handed our strange punishments, the manager said, 'You have been wounded seriously enough not to survive beyond half a month. But the owner of the golden flower says that she does not have any personal grudges against you. Thus, she has kindly provided you with a solution. You had better hurry to Butterfly Valley on the shores of Nüshan Lake and seek the help of the

Healing Sage Hu Qingniu. If he is willing to treat you, your lives will be spared, for there is no one else in this world who knows how to cure your injuries. But this Hu Qingniu is also known as 'The One who Ignores the Dying', for he will not help anyone who is not in dire straits. Tell Hu Qingniu that the owner of the golden flower will go and look for him soon, and ask him to make early preparations for his own funeral!' He concluded by giving us detailed directions to this place."

"Auntie Ji, does this mean that the manager, cooks and winekeepers of the Linhuai Pavilion-Restaurant are accomplices of the horrible old woman?" asked Zhang Wuji.

"I think they are her subordinates," answered Ji Xiaofu. "After all, the manager tortured us according to a list that was probably prepared by the wicked old woman herself. What I really do not understand is the reason behind her actions. If she had had any personal grievances against us, she could have had us killed with a mere finger. But if she wanted us to suffer intentionally by coming up with these terrible forms of torture, why then did she point us to Mr Hu for help? She has even declared that she will seek Mr Hu for revenge, so has she tormented us simply to test Mr Hu's medical skills?"

Zhang Wuji thought for a moment and said, "Since this Old Woman of the Golden Flower is on her way here to make trouble for Mr Hu, it would only be right for him to cure your injuries. Then, everyone could stand together against this formidable foe. If that was not the case, he would not have taught me how to treat your injuries after making such a strong refusal to provide these treatments himself. The methods that he imparted to me have proven to be very effective, so it is clear that he wants to rescue all of you in the first place. What I really find puzzling is his act of poisoning all of you sneakily in the middle of the night. Why would he want you straddling between life and death?"

They discussed this question for a long time, but no one could come up with a likely answer. By and by, Yang Buhui appeared with a huge floral crown and set it on Zhang Wuji's head.

Finally, the boy said, "Auntie Ji, you must not take any more medicine, except for those that are served personally by me. You must also keep a weapon by your side at night, just in case someone wants to harm you. But you cannot leave Butterfly Valley yet. You have to take a few more decoctions and wait until your internal injuries are completely healed before fleeing with Little Sister Buhui."

Ji Xiaofu nodded in agreement. "Child, Mr Hu's ways have proven to be quite unfathomable," she added. "Thus, it is not a good idea for you to stay on with him. Perhaps, we should leave together."

"I understand your concern," said Zhang Wuji, "but he has actually been rather nice to me. He had initially planned to have me killed after removing the toxins in my body, but his treatments have failed. Therefore, he does not need to have me dispatched. I know that it is best that we leave immediately, but there are a few more aspects about the treatment of your injuries that I do not understand. I must ask Mr Hu about them."

"He has already tried to poison me in secret," said Ji Xiaofu, "so he will probably teach you the wrong methods on purpose."

"That is not necessarily so," answered Zhang Wuji. "The methods that Mr Hu has taught me so far have proven to be very effective. Besides, I can tell the difference between right and wrong. That is why this entire situation is so strange. I

was initially unwilling to leave Mr Hu at the mercy of the Owner of the Golden Flower, but now, I see that he is just pretending to be ill."

o0o

That night, Zhang Wuji did not go to sleep. At the third watch (between 11.00 p.m. and 1.00 a.m.), Hu Qingniu came out of his room just as the boy had expected, and sneaked into Ji Xiaofu's shed to poison her. This went on for three days, but Ji Xiaofu did not take any of the poison that had been added to her medicine. Therefore, she progressed quickly towards full recovery. On the other hand, Jian Jie, Xue Gongyuan and the others alternated between recovery and deterioration. A few of the more bad-tempered men started to resent Zhang Wuji, saying that his medical skills were too poor. The boy paid them no attention, knowing that there was only one more night to go before he, Ji Xiaofu and her daughter would leave the place. Since the toxins in his own body could not be removed, he would not return to Mount Wudang and bring grief to his grandteacher and uncles. Instead, he would find a remote place and pass quietly away.

Just before going to bed, Zhang Wuji began to feel sad about leaving Butterfly Valley early the next morning: Although Hu Qingniu is an eccentric man, he has been rather nice to me. If he had not provided treatment for my injuries, how could I have survived to this day? He has also taught me much about medicine and its practices in the past two years.

Therefore, the boy found himself making his way to the physician's room to ask after him. Furthermore, he could not help but feel concerned that the Old Woman of the Golden Flower was on her way here to make trouble for the man. So, he asked, "Mr Hu, are you not bored of staying in Butterfly Valley? Why do you not go out and enjoy yourself for a bit?"

"I am ill, so how can I travel?" asked Hu Qingniu in return, somewhat surprised at the boy's questions.

"We can use a mule-drawn carriage," answered Zhang Wuji. "Just cover up the windows of the carriage with cloth, so that the wind does not enter. If you are willing to travel, I will accompany you."

Hu Qingniu sighed and said, "Child, you are very kind. Although the world is big, it is a pity that every place is the same as the next. How has your chest been in the past few days? Has a chill been rolling about in your lower abdomen?"

"The chill worsens from day to day," Zhang Wuji replied. "Since there is no cure for it, I have decided to let it run its course."

Hu Qingniu was quiet for a moment, before saying, "Let me give you a medical prescription that will save your life. Decoct the Chinese Angelica, the root of the thin-leaved milkwort, the dried rhizome of Rehmannia, the Double Teeth Pubescent Angelica and the Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root with pangolin scales during the second watch of the night (9.00 p.m. to 11.00 p.m.). The brew must then be drunk immediately."

Zhang Wuji was shocked, for the five herbs that the physician had prescribed had absolutely nothing to do with his condition. These herbs even counteracted one another. It was even more unbelievable to use pangolin scales as a supplement to increase the efficacy of the resulting decoction. Therefore, he asked, "Sir, what are the dosages that should be used?"

"The stronger the better," snapped Hu Qingniu angrily. "I

have already told you everything, so why are you still hanging around?"

The physician had always seen the boy as a student and friend whenever they talked about medical practices and herbs, so he had never shouted so rudely before. As a result, Zhang Wuji could not help but stomp angrily back to his room. I advised you in good faith to go on a trip so that you could avoid harm, he thought, but you scolded me instead. You even gave me a prescription that does not make sense! Do you think that I would fall for it?

As he lay in bed and went over what Hu Qingniu had said, a thought suddenly hit him: The Chinese Angelica, the root of the thin-leaved milkwort ... how can these herbs be used in the strongest dosages possible? Unless ... unless the Chinese Angelica -- 'Dang Gui' -- is actually meant to convey 'gaidang guiqu' -- that 'I should return home'?

Similar interpretations followed: The root of the thin-leaved milkwort is 'Yuan Zhi'; it should mean 'zhi zai yuanfang, gaofei yuanzou' or 'go as far away as possible'. The meanings of the dried rhizome of Rehmannia and the Double Teeth Pubescent Angelica cannot be any clearer, because 'Sheng Di' and 'Du Huo' mean 'the place where one will be alive' and 'live on alone' respectively. He is telling me that fleeing in this manner is the only way to survive the impending doom. What about the Divaricate Saposchnikovia Root or 'Fang Feng'? Yes, it means 'xu fang zoulou fengsheng' or 'take the necessary precautions to prevent this secret from leaking out'. As for using pangolin scales or 'Chuan Shan Jia' as a supplement during the second watch of the night and consuming the brew immediately after decoction, he is telling me 'chuanshan taozou' or 'escape through the mountains' during the second watch. I should not use the road that runs through the valley.

Hu Qingniu's erroneous prescription began to make a lot of sense. As Zhang Wuji leapt out of bed, he thought: Mr Hu must have known that something terrible is about to happen, so he has kindly told me to leave at once. But the enemy has not arrived. Why then is he using this riddle, instead of speaking plainly? What if I fail to crack the code? The second watch has passed, so I had better hurry up and go. He figured that the physician probably had his own reasons for staying behind, with marvellous plans for dealing with the enemy. Although Hu Qingniu had asked him to 'Fang Feng' and 'Du Huo', Zhang Wuji could not leave without taking his Auntie Ji and her daughter along.

Thus, he crept quietly out of his room and headed into Ji Xiaofu's shed. To his surprise, he found someone bent over the woman as she lay on a pile of straw. Dressed in a blue robe and square hat, with a piece of black cloth around his face, the intruder was none other than Hu Qingniu himself. Ten thousand questions entered the boy's mind at once.

The physician pressed Ji Xiaofu's cheeks with his left hand, forcing her mouth open, as he prepared to drop a medicinal pellet into it with his right. Zhang Wuji leapt out and said, "Mr Hu, you must not harm others ... "

The man released his grip and turned around in shock. Just then, Ji Xiaofu struck him hard on the back, sending him to the ground in a crumpled heap.

The piece of black cloth fell away, revealing a pair of trimmed eyebrows and a powdered face. The intruder was actually not Hu Qingniu, but a middle-aged woman instead.

End of Chapter 12.

Definitions, explanations and/or words generally left in their original form:

Those covered in earlier chapters, if any, are not repeated.

1. Pulses (mai4) = another word for 'Channels' when used to label the 'Eight Extraordinary' ones.

2. Meridians (zi3 wu3) = another word for 'Channels' (jing1 mai4).

Mini Facts and Figures

People, Places, Organisations, Martial Arts, Weapons, Objects ... and other details about Chapter 12 of Heavenly Sword, Dragon Slaying Sabre.

People

Chang Yuchun - member of the Ming Sect and nephew-at-arms of Hu Qingniu who took Zhang Wuji to Butterfly Valley for treatment. Seriously wounded by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Ding Minjun - member of the E-mei School and elder sister-at-arms of Ji Xiaofu. More information in Chapter 11.

Ghosts of Non-Permanence (Wu2 Chang2 Gui3) - supernatural beings from Hell who were believed to drag people their doom; consisted of the White Ghost of Non-Permanence (Bai2 Wu2 Chang2) and the Black Ghost of Non-Permanence (Hei1 Wu2 Chang2).

Hu Qingniu - renowned but eccentric and temperamental physician who lived as a recluse in Butterfly Valley. Dedicated his entire life to the study of medicine and healing; could cure the most terrible of diseases and ailments; hence, became known as the 'Sage of Healing' (Yi1 Xian1). Preferred to be known as 'The One who Ignores the Dying' (Jian4 Si3 Bu4 Jiu4). A very lonely man who had grown tired of hearing praise for his unparalleled abilities as the healer of a million ailments. Prided himself in the massive body of research, discoveries and techniques that he had

accumulated in his lifetime, and was more than happy to share his best work those who could understand his heart. Unable to match Xianyu Tong in martial arts.

Ji Xiaofu - a disciple of the E-mei School; the unwed mother of Yang Buhui.

Jian Jie - elderly man who was a disciple of the Kongdong School; also known as 'The Sacred Hands of the Buddhist Temple (Sheng⁴ Shou³ Qie² Lan²).

Monk Peng - a member of the Ming Sect. More information in Chapter 11.

One who Ignores the Dying, The - see Hu Qingniu.

Sacred Hands of the Buddhist Temple, The - see Jian Jie.

Sage of Healing, The - see Hu Qingniu.

Shrewd Strategist, The - see Xianyu Tong.

Xianyu Tong - leader of the School of Mount Hua; highly skilled in martial arts, very intelligent and resourceful. Also known as 'The Shrewd Strategist' (Shen² Ji¹ Zi³).

Xie Xun - godfather of Zhang Wuji; taught the boy various methods of blocking and releasing acupoints, as well as the techniques of repositioning them.

Xue Gongyuan - disciple of Xianyu Tong from the School of Mount Hua; a swarthy man.

Yang Buhui - eight- or nine-year-old daughter of Ji Xiaofu; pretty as a picture with a pair of big and dark eyes.

Yin Liting - Zhang Wuji's sixth uncle-at-arms; fiancé of Ji Xiaofu.

Yu Daiyan - Zhang Wuji's third uncle-at-arms whom he hopes could be helped to walk without aid. More information in earlier chapters.

Zhang Sanfeng - elderly Taoist who founded the Wudang School; grandteacher of Zhang Wuji. Rich in internal

strength. More information in earlier chapters.

Zhang Wuji - twelve-year-old boy seeking medical treatment from Hu Qingniu in Butterfly Valley. Only son of the late Zhang Cuishan ??? and Yin Susu ???. Had such an amazing talent for medicine that Hu Qingniu thought he could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the great physicians Hua Tuo ?? and Bian Que ?? before the age of twenty.

Zhou Zhiruo - nine- or ten-year-old girl whom Zhang Wuji met for barely a day before he went to Butterfly Valley. More information in Chapter 11.

Places

Butterfly Valley - secluded home of Hu Qingniu; located on the shores of Nüshan Lake in Anhui Province. More information in Chapter 11.

Mount Wudang - location of the Wudang School.

Organisations

E-mei School - martial arts school that was considered renowned and upright; disciples include Ji Xiaofu and Ding Minjun.

Eagle Sect - sect led by Zhang Wuji's maternal grandfather, Yin Tianzheng. More information in earlier chapters.

Evil Sect - a name for the Ming Sect that was given by the renowned and upright clans. More information in earlier chapters.

Kongdong School - martial arts school that was considered renowned and upright; disciples include Jian Jie.

Ming Sect - sect to which Hu Qingniu and Chang Yuchun belonged; torn apart by internal strife in recent years. More information in earlier chapters.

School of Mount Hua - martial arts school that was considered renowned and upright; led by Xianyu Tong.

Wudang School - martial arts school founded by Zhang Sanfeng; considered by Zhang Wuji as his school of origin.

Martial Arts

Heart-Splitting Palm Technique (Jie2 Xin1 Zhang3) - the palm technique through which Chang Yuchun is gravely wounded. More information is found in Chapter 11 of the novel text.

Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness (Xuan2 Ming2 Shen2 Zhang3) - the palm technique through which Zhang Wuji is gravely wounded; produces a terribly cold and deadly toxin. Thought to be lost for such a long time that there is no one left who knows how to use it. More information in earlier chapters.

Palm Techniques, Miscellaneous (only listed, not described/used):

Red-Sand Palm Technique (Hong2 Sha1 Zhang3)

Iron-Sand Palm Technique (Tie3 Sha1 Zhang3)

Poison-Sand Palm Technique (Du2 Sha1 Zhang3)

Silken Palm Technique (Mian2 Zhang3)

Mountain-Opening Palm Technique (Kai1 Shan1 Zhang3)

Tablet-Breaking Palm Technique (Po4 Bei1 Zhang3)

Weapons

Golden Flower, The - a type of projectile that was made entirely from yellow gold in exactly the same size and shape as a real plum blossom. The handiwork was so exquisite that the bloom even had pistils that were fashioned from platinum.

Moth-Antennae Spike (e2 mei2 gang1 ci4) - a fine and delicately-curved spike (or sometimes, blade) with two pointed ends.

Medicines, Medical Treatments and Bodily Matters

Acupoints mentioned (in alphabetical order):

Chi Ze (Chi3 Ze2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Da Yuan (Da4 Yuan1) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Guan Chong (Guan1 Chong1) - located on the ring-finger; part of the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities.

Guan Yuan (Guan1 Yuan2) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Hua Gai (Hua2 Gai4) - located on the chest; one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung. Used by Zhang Wuji in the initial treatment of Ji Xiaofu at Butterfly Valley.

Jian Jing (Jian1 Jing3) - in the abdomen; at the confluence of the three Yin Channels of the Foot and the Channel of Ren.

Jing Qu (Jing1 Qu2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Kai Yuan (Kai1 Yuan2) - located in the abdomen; one of the vital points of the body.

Kong Zui (Kong3 Zui4) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Lie Que (Lie4 Que1) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Qing Leng Yuan (Qing1 Leng3 Yuan1) - located two cun (6.66 cm) above the elbow; part of the Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities.

Shao Shang (Shao4 Shang1) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Si Zhu Kong (Si1 Zhu2 Kong1) - located in the cavity of the brow; part of the Hand

Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities.

Tian Chi (Tian1 Chi2) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Tian Fu (Tian1 Fu3) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Tian Tu (Tian1 Tu1) - in the neck; at the confluence of the Channels of Yinwei and Ren.

Wu Li (Wu3 Li3) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Wu Shu (Wu3 Shu1) - located in the confluence of the Foot Shaoyang Channel and the Dai Channel, about one-and-a-half cun (5 cm) beside the urinary tract.

Xia Bai (Xia2 Bai2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Xing Jian (Xing2 Jian1) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Yin Bao (Yin1 Bao1) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Yu Ji (Yu2 Ji4) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Yun Men (Yun2 Men2) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Zhong Feng (Zhong1 Feng1) - one of the acupoints needed for treating a liver wounded by internal strength.

Zhong Fu (Zhong1 Fu3) - one of the acupoints on the Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung.

Zhong Ji (Zhong1 Ji2) - in the shoulder; at the confluence of the Hand Shaoyang Channel, the Foot Shaoyang Channel, the Foot Yangming Channel and the Yangwei Channel (Yang2 Wei1 Mai4).

Zhong Ting (Zhong1 Ting2) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Zi Gong (Zi3 Gong1) - an acupoint needed in the treatment of the injuries caused by the Heart-Splitting Palm Technique.

Eight Extraordinary Channels, The (Qi2 Jing1 Ba1 Mai4) - These consist of the channels of Ren, Du, Chong, Dai, Yinwei, Yangwei, Yinjiao and Yangjiao. They differ from the Twelve Regular Channels in that they neither pertain to any organ, nor do they share an exterior-interior relationship between each other. Their main function is to regulate the circulation of energy (qi4) and blood in the Twelve Regular Channels. When the regular channels are satiated, excess qi and blood flow into the Eight Extraordinary Channels to be stored for later use.

Five Primary Internal Organs, The (Wu3 Zang4) - consist of the heart, lungs, spleen, liver and kidneys; considered together with the pericardium as yin elements in traditional Chinese medical practice.

Medical Books mentioned (in alphabetical order):

* A separate series of articles on the books listed below, except for those written by Hu Qingniu, will be made available soon.

Beneficial Prescriptions for Great Safety (Tai4 Ping2 Sheng4 Hui4 Fang1)

Book of Acupuncture (Jiu4 Jia3 Yi4 Jing1)

Discussion of the Dai Channel, A (Dai4 Mai4 Lun4) - written by Hu Qingniu to describe the Dai Channel and its functions, as well as to correct erroneous information in ancient medical texts, such as the Dai having ten acupoints altogether instead of four or six.

Functions of the Fourteen Channels, The (Shi2 Si4 Jing1 Fa1 Hui1)

Hua Tuo's Diagrams of the Internal Systems (Hua2 Tuo2 Nei4 Zhao1 Tu2)

Internal Classic of the Yellow Emperor, The (Huang² Di⁴ Nei⁴ Jing¹)

Manual of Acupuncture and Moxibustion for the Meridians, The (Zi³ Wu³ Zhen¹ Jiu³ Jing¹)- written by Hu Qingniu as a record of all the painstaking research that he had done on acupuncture and moxibustion through the years. Consisted of twelve separate volumes; the ninth volume provided information on the treatment of injuries caused by the pugilistic arts.

Matters that are Difficult to Ascertain (Ci³ Shi⁴ Nan² Zhi¹)

Successful Acupuncture (Zhen¹ Jiu³ Da⁴ Cheng²)

Sun Simiao's Thousand-Gold Prescriptions (Sun¹ Si¹ Miao³ Qian¹ Jin¹ Fang¹)

Thousand-Gold Book of Medical Assistance, The (Qian¹ Jin¹ Yi⁴)

Xifangzi's Book of Acupuncture (Xi¹ Fang¹ Zi³ Ming² Tang² Jiu³ Jing¹)

Wang Shuhe's Manual of Arteries and Veins (Wang² Shu¹ He² Mai⁴ Jing¹)

Wang Tao's Secrets to External Treatments (Wang² Tao¹ Wai⁴ Tai² Mi⁴ Yao⁴)

Xiama Manual of the Yellow Emperor, The (Huang² Di⁴ Xia¹ Ma¹ Jing¹)

Medicinal Flora, Fauna, Minerals and Preparations mentioned (in alphabetical order):

* A separate series of articles on the items listed below, except those marked 'fictitious', will be made available soon.

Achyranthes Root (niu² xi¹)

Bone-Piercing Fungus (tou⁴ gu³ jun¹) - fictitious.

Caper Euphorbia Seed (qian¹ jin¹ zi³)

Chinese Angelica (dang¹ gui¹)

Chinese Angelica End-Roots (gui1 wei3)
Chinese Thorowax Root (chai2 hu2)
Dahurian Angelica Root (bai2 zhi3)
Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root (fang2 feng1)
Dragon's Blood (xue4 jie2)
Double Teeth Pubescent Angelica (du2 huo2)
Frankincense (ru3 xiang1)
Gall of Bear (xiong2 dan3)
Gastrodia Tuber (tian1 ma2)
Ginseng (ren2 shen1)
Guiwei (gui1 wei3)
Lingxian (ling2 xian1)
Mole Cricket (tu2 gou3)
Multiflower Knotweed Tuber (shou3 wu1)
Myrrh (mo4 yao4)
Nanxing (nan2 xing1)
Notopterygium (qiang1 huo2)
Opificalcite (hua1 rui4 shi2)
Perilla (su1 mu4)
Pilose antlers (lu4 rong2)
Poria (fu2 ling2)
Powdered Bezoar and Rhinoceros Horn (niu2 huang2 xi1
jiao3 san3)
Powdered Toad (ge2 fen3)
Raw Fossil Fragments (sheng1 long gu3)
Rhizome of Rehmannia, Dried (sheng1 di4)
Rhubarb (da4 huang2)

Safflower (hong2 hua1)

Thin-leaved Milkwort Root (yuan3 zhi4)

Pangolin Scales (chuan1 shan1 jia3, shan1 jia3)

Taoxian (tao2 xian1)

Troglodytes (wu3 ling2 zhi4)

Typhonium Tuber (bai2 fu4 zi3)

Urine from Boys Under Twelve (tong2 bian4)

Venus-hair fern (tie3 xian4 cao3)

Prescriptions and Treatments mentioned:

For Chang Yuchun, after acupuncture, presumably to remove blood clots in his body - dried rhizome of Rehmannia, Chinese Thorowax root, Achyranthes root and the gall of bear. According to Hu Qingniu, the prescription contained errors that would eventually shorten Chang's life by forty years.

For Chang Yuchun, after the first prescription was consumed, to strengthen his body and assist in his recovery - ginseng, pilose antlers, the tuber of the multiflower knotweed and poria. According to Hu Qingniu, the prescription contained errors that would eventually shorten Chang's life by forty years.

For Jian Jie, to reduce the pain in his scalp - ten different herbs and minerals, including Nanxing, Divaricate Saposhnikovia Root, Dahurian Angelica Root, Gastrodia Tuber, Notopterygium, Typhonium Tuber and ophicalcite.

For one of the fourteen wounded men whose face was swollen red and abdomen was filled with blood clots - water, wine, pangolin scales, the end-roots of the Chinese Angelica, safflower, the dried rhizome of Rehmannia, Lingxian, Dragon's Blood, Taoxian, rhubarb, frankincense and myrrh, with some urine from boys under twelve . He would pass the blood clots out after that.

For one of the men who was forced to consume live leeches - Consume honey to disintegrate the leeches.

For one of the men who had his left and right ears filled with lead and mercury respectively, and raw lacquer poured into his eyes - Pour mercury into his left ear. The pieces of lead would dissolve in the mercury and flow out of the ear. Put a gold needle into the right ear and draw the mercury out bit by bit. As for the raw lacquer, a juice made from crabs might work.

For Ji Xiaofu's poisoning - a decoction of raw fossil fragments, perilla, mole cricket, Troglodytes dung, Caper Euphorbia seed and powdered toad.

Six Secondary Organs, The (Liu⁴ Fu³) - consist of stomach, large intestines, small intestines, gall bladder, urinary bladder and the Three Visceral Cavities (San³ Jiao¹); considered as yang elements in traditional Chinese medical practice.

Twelve Regular Channels, The (Shi² Er⁴ Jing¹ Chang² Mai⁴, or Zheng⁴ Jing¹ Shi² Er⁴ Mai⁴) - a general term for the three yin and three yang channels of the hand, and the three yin and three yang channels of the foot. Each channel is related to a specific internal organ, and shares an exterior-interior relationship with one another:

The Hand Taiyin Channel of the Lung (Shou³ Tai⁴ Yin¹ Fei⁴ Jing¹).

The Hand Shaoyin Channel of the Heart (Shou³ Shao⁴ Yin¹ Xin¹ Jing¹).

The Hand Jueyin Channel of the Pericardium (Shou³ Jue² Yin¹ Xin¹ Bao¹ Jing¹).

The Hand Taiyang Channel of the Small Intestine (Shou³ Tai⁴ Yang² Xiao³ Chang² Jing¹).

The Hand Shaoyang Channel of the Three Visceral Cavities (Shou³ Shao⁴ Yang² San¹ Jiao¹ Jing¹).

The Hand Yangming Channel of the Colon (Shou³ Yang² Ming² Da⁴ Chang² Jing¹).

The Foot Taiyin Channel of the Spleen (Zu² Tai⁴ Yin¹ Pi² Jing¹).

The Foot Shaoyin Channel of the Kidney (Zu³ Shao⁴ Yin¹ Shen⁴ Jing¹).

The Foot Jueyin Channel of the Liver (Zu³ Jue² Yin¹ Gan¹ Jing¹).

The Foot Taiyang Channel of the Urinary Bladder (Zu³ Tai⁴ Yang² Pang² Guang¹ Jing¹).

The Foot Shaoyang Channel of the Gall Bladder (Zu³ Shao⁴ Yang² Dan³ Jing¹).

The Foot Yangming Channel of the Stomach (Zu² Yang² Ming² Wei⁴ Jing¹).

Weights and Measures

1 chi = 1/3 metres (33.33 centimetres)

1 cun = 1/30 metres (3.33 centimetres)

1 jin = 500 grammes

1 li = 500 metres

1 liang = 0.1 jin = 50 grammes

1 qian = 0.1 liang = 5 grammes

1 qing = 100 mu = approximately 6.667 hectares

1 shichen = 2 hours

1 wen (1 copper-cash) = 0.01 liang = 0.5 grammes

1 zhang = 10/3 metres (3.33 metres)

Translation Notes

Chapter 12 of Heavenly Sword, Dragon-Slaying Sabre was translated by Huang Yushi with the same level of detail and comprehensiveness as Ode to Gallantry and Flying Fox of Snowy Mountain. The sheer volume of supplementary materials presented makes this a very time-consuming style; hence, it cannot be determined at this point in time whether

Yushi will continue to work on the remaining chapters of this novel.

Disclaimer

The information on traditional Chinese medicine, including but not limited to the acupoints, channels, prescriptions and medicinal flora/fauna listed in this document, is meant only to provide readers with a deeper appreciation for the extent of research and thought that Jin Yong put into the writing of Chapter 12 of Heavenly Sword, Dragon-Slaying Sabre. It should not be considered as medical advice. The authors and publishers of this document, including Huang Yushi, Linh Vu and wuxiapedia.com, disclaim all responsibility for any loss, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.

Chapter 13 - No Regrets for Second Chances

(Translated by Huang Yushi*, SmokeyTheBear and Qiu Shuyi)

*Courtesy of Wuxiapedia.com



The Old Woman of the Golden Flower walked over to him and reached for his wrist. After examining his pulse for a few moment, she said, "The Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness? Do you mean to say that this technique actually exists? Who struck you?"

"My attacker was disguised as a Mongolian army officer, so I do not know who he actually is," Zhang Wuji replied.

Zhang Wuji was shocked that the intruder was a woman. "Who ... who are you?" he asked as sternly as he could.

The woman did not answer him, for she had been wounded too badly by the palm technique of the E-Mei School to speak.

"Who are you?" Ji Xiaofu demanded. "Why have you harmed me time and again?"

The woman remained silent, so Ji Xiaofu pulled out her sword and placed its tip against her chest.

After a while, Zhang Wuji said, "I am going to check on Mr Hu." He was concerned that Hu Qingniu had fallen victim to the intruder too. After all, she was probably an accomplice of the Old Woman of the Golden Flower. Running over to the physician's room, he pushed the door open and shouted, "Sir, sir! Are you all right?" When no one answered him, panic set in. He quickly reached for the flint-and-steel on the table, lit a candle and saw that Hu Qingniu's blankets had been turned down. But he was not in bed or anywhere else in the room.

Zhang Wuji heaved a sigh of relief, for he had half expected to see the physician's corpse on the floor. He must have been taken away by the enemy, the boy thought. Just as he was about to dash off in pursuit, he heard heavy breathing

coming from under the bed. Bending over with the candle in hand, he found Hu Qingniu bound and gagged under the bed. Overjoyed, Zhang Wuji pulled the hapless man out immediately. He had not been able to call for help because his mouth had been stuffed with a huge walnut.

As soon as the walnut was removed from his mouth, Hu Qingniu asked, "Where is the woman?"

"She has been overpowered by Auntie Ji," answered Zhang Wuji as he began untying the physician. "She will not escape. Sir, you are not hurt, are you?"

"Do not worry about me," snapped Hu Qingniu. "Bring me the woman quickly, or it will be too late."

"Why?" asked the boy in surprise.

"Bring her to me quickly," said the physician again. "Wait, you had better take three 'Pills of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco' (Niu Huang Xue Jie Dan / Niu² Huang² Xue³ Jie² Dan¹) with you and get her to swallow them first. The pills are in the third drawer. Hurry!" Hu Qingniu seemed so anxious that he would have rushed out himself if he was not all tied up.

Zhang Wuji knew that these 'Pills of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco' were very effective detoxicants. Made by Hu Qingniu himself from a variety of medicinal fauna and flora, a single pill was sufficient to counter some of the deadliest poisons known to man. Therefore, the woman had probably ingested an unimaginably strong dose of poison to necessitate the use of three such pills.

Yet, he did not dare to dwell further on the issue, for Hu Qingniu was already beside himself with anxiety. Grabbing

the Pills of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, he ran to Ji Xiaofu's shed, turned to the woman whom they had captured and said, "Swallow them quickly!"

"Get lost!" snapped the woman at once. "Who needs sympathy from a little thief like you!" Apparently, she had identified the pills as detoxicants from their smell.

"Mr Hu wants you to take them!" said Zhang Wuji.

"Go away, go away!" said the woman again, her voice becoming weaker as her injuries took their toll.

Zhang Wuji could only guess that the woman had been struck by one of Hu Qingniu's poisoned darts while tying him up earlier. Thus, the physician probably wanted to keep her alive, so that he could interrogate her on the enemy's plans. Consequently, the boy forced the three pills into the woman's mouth and down her throat. Then, he turned to Ji Xiaofu and said, "Let us hand her over to Mr Hu, and hear what he has to say."

Ji Xiaofu immobilised the woman by striking her acupoints, before leading her to Hu Qingniu's room with Zhang Wuji's help.

As soon as the three of them appeared, the physician asked, "Has she taken the pills?"

"Yes," answered Zhang Wuji.

"Very good, very good!" said Hu Qingniu in relief, as the boy cut away the ropes around his hands and feet.

Free at last, Hu Qingniu scrambled over to the woman and began examining her. After turning her eyelids to check on

her blood, he took her pulse. "How ... how did you end up with these external injuries?" he gasped in shock. "Who hit you?" He sounded both anxious and sympathetic at the same time.

The woman pouted and replied, "Ask your good disciple!"

Hu Qingniu turned to Zhang Wuji and growled, "Did you hit her?"

"She was about to ...," the boy began to answer, only to feel two tight and resounding slaps landing on his face. Golden stars danced before the boy's eyes as he struggled against the dizzying effect of these powerful and unexpected slaps.

Meanwhile, Ji Xiaofu raised her sword protectively and shouted, "What are you doing?"

Hu Qingniu ignored the sharp and gleaming blade. Instead, he turned to the wounded intruder and asked, "How does your chest feel? Does your stomach hurt?" He was so warm and attentive that he seemed completely different from the cold and calculating 'One who Ignores the Dying'. Yet, the woman did not seem to care about his concern. Undaunted, the physician released her acupoints and massaged her limbs. Then, he administered several doses of medicine, taking great care as he fed them into her mouth. Finally, he picked her up, laid her in his bed and covered her with his blankets. Such warmth and gentleness was so unfit for the enemy, that Zhang Wuji began rubbing his swollen cheeks in an absent-minded manner as he tried to make sense of the baffling scene.

The expression on Hu Qingniu's face softened further, until affection and compassion could be clearly seen all over it. "You have other injuries in addition to the poisoning," he said

to the woman in a gentle voice. "If I heal you of all these ailments, can we call off the duel for the rest of our days?"

The woman smiled and answered, "These light injuries are nothing to worry about. But do you know what poison I took? If you can really heal me of it, I will submit to you. But I am afraid that the abilities of the Sage of Healing are not necessarily as great as the prowess of the Sage of Poisons." She concluded by eyeing the physician with a coquettish smile.

Although Zhang Wuji did not understand much about the intimate relationships that could occur between a man and a woman, he could tell from the scene that the physician and the woman had a great deal of affection for each other.

"I have already declared ten years ago that the Sage of Healing is less able than the Sage of Poisons, but you have refused to believe me," Hu Qingniu went on. "Sigh, there are many ways to fight this out, but how can you use your own body to prove your point? Now, I really hope with all my heart that the Sage of Healing is better than the Sage of Poisons, or I will not carry on living any longer."

The woman smiled again and said, "If I poison other people, you will pretend to be a mediocre physician and let me gain the upperhand. Hee hee, now that I have poisoned myself, you have no alternative but to do your very best."

Hu Qingniu sighed and stroked the woman's hair. "I am very worried about you," he said. "Please do not talk anymore, for you need to close your eyes and get some rest. But if you decide to harm yourself further by exercising your internal strength in secret, you are not being fair to me at all."

"Victory and defeat must naturally be decided in a manner

that is open and aboveboard," the woman responded with a smile. "I will not act in such a despicable way." She closed her eyes as she was told, but the smile remained on her lips.

As Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji reeled in disbelief over what they had seen and heard so far, Hu Qingniu turned to the boy, bowed deeply and said, "Little Brother, I offended you greatly in a moment of haste and emotion. Please forgive me."

Zhang Wuji shot an accusatory glance at the physician and snapped, "I really do not understand a single bit of what is going on! What exactly you are doing?"

To his surprise, Hu Qingniu raised his hand and slapped himself twice across his cheeks. "Little Brother," the man said, "I owe my life to you. But I was so worried about my wife's health that I ended up offending you just now."

"She ... she is your wife?" asked Zhang Wuji in surprise.

"Yes, she is," answered Hu Qingniu with a nod. "If you are still angry, please give me another two slaps, or I will have to kowtow before you in apology. Having my life rescued is no big deal, for it is more important that my wife is saved. Now, she owes her life you as well."

The physician had always been such a strict and dignified man that Zhang Wuji regarded him with a mixture of respect and fear. Therefore, his willingness to slap himself clearly indicated the sincerity of his apology. Furthermore, the woman was really his wife. As the anger in his heart dissipated, Zhang Wuji said, "I do not dare to accept your kowtows of apology, and I am not particularly bothered by the slaps that you gave me. But I really do not understand why things have turned out this way."

Inviting Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji to sit down, Hu Qingniu replied, "I guess the truth cannot be kept hidden any longer. My wife's surname is Wang, and her maiden name is Nangu. We were originally apprentices in the same school. Besides learning martial arts from our master, I chose to focus on the study of medicine, while she decided to pursue the study of poisons. She felt that the ultimate reason for learning martial arts was to kill others. Since the art of poisoning served the same purpose, the two skills complemented each other. Being well-versed in the art of poisoning could only multiply the effectiveness of one's pugilistic skills. On the other hand, the practice medicine cures illnesses and saves lives, opposing the goal of martial arts. I admired my wife's views, for her knowledge was ten times better than mine. However, I was so bent on doing good that nothing could change my mind. As a result of my folly and the reluctance to take her advice, I neglected her loving and painstaking efforts to help me see her point.

"Our differing pursuits did not affect the good relationship we had between us, so our master eventually arranged for us to be married. As time went by, we built reputations for ourselves in the realm of the rivers and lakes. I became known as the 'Sage of Healing', while my wife was referred to as the 'Sage of Poisons'. Her skill in the art of poisoning was beyond comparison, for she was the indigo that had come out of the blue, surpassing our master by leaps and bounds. Her nickname alone testified to the extent of her abilities. Thus, I can only blame myself for acting without sufficient thought and consideration in curing her victims on several occasions. I was even singing my own praises without realising that I was being undevoted and unfaithful to my beloved wife. Such disregard was so terrible that even the phrase 'wolf's heart and dog's lungs' was insufficient to describe it. Think about it: The victims of the Sage of Poisons

were saved by the Sage of Healing. Besides going against my beloved wife's intentions, did this also not indicate that the Sage of Healing was greater than the Sage of Poisons?"

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji shook their heads quietly in their hearts, for his train of thought sounded very incorrect.

Hu Qingniu went on: "She has always been gentle, submissive, loving and devoted to me. There is no one else like her in the entire world. Yet, I carried out my selfish acts time and again, belittling my wife and putting her down by healing her victims. Finally, I realised that I had hurt her too much, so I swore an oath never to provide treatment for anyone whom she had poisoned. As time went by, my reputation as the 'One who Ignores the Dying' was established.

"She forgave me after seeing that I could change my ways. A few years later, I ran into a case of poisoning so strange that it could only be the work of my wife. So I stepped back and refused to be involved with it. Unfortunately, the victim's condition was so unique that I lost my self-control after a few days and proceeded to cure him of his ailment.

"Somehow, my wife did not kick up a fuss about it. Instead, she said, 'All right! The Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley Hu Qingniu has indeed turned out to be a marvellous physician. But I, the Sage of Poisons Wang Nangu, absolutely refuse to submit to you. Let us both pit our skills against each other, and see whether the Sage of Healing is more brilliant, or the Sage of Poisons is more formidable.' I tried my best to apologise, but how could her anger be appeased so easily? Then, I found out that she had poisoned the man not because he was her enemy, but because she had discovered a new method of poisoning that might render the victim incurable. She had executed it on the man just to test the validity of her

findings, but I had ended up spoiling her experiment with a few misguided medical techniques and a stroke of sheer good luck. I did not even show the slightest regard for my beloved wife, so how could I still be considered a man?

"For many years after that incident, she concentrated on finding new techniques of poisoning, often sending me her victims for treatment. We went on pitting our skills against each other in this manner, until I began to fail in my work. There were two reasons for this: First, there were indeed some shortcomings in my abilities, and second, I was really unwilling to anger her further. Unfortunately, my wife became more angry than before. She accused me of belittling her, allowing her to gain the upperhand without giving my best in the competition between us. Subsequently, she left Butterfly Valley in a huff and refused to return.

"Although I did not act rashly again, I found too much enjoyment in healing ailments that I could not pass up any opportunity to deal with strange illnesses or weird poisons. I knew that my wife's victims would show up time and again among my patients, but she had become so good that I could not identify her work with certainty on a number of occasions. As a result, I ended up curing her victims again. Sigh, I should be named Hu Chunniu (Stupid Cow) instead of Hu Qingniu (Black Cow). I am very fortunate that a woman like Nangu would lower herself in marriage to me, but I did not know how to love her and care for her. Instead, I made her so upset that she walked out on me in favour of a life of wandering between the skies and the cliffs, suffering the hardships of being beaten by wind and frost. Furthermore, the hearts of the people in the realm of the rivers and lakes are deceitful. How then could I rest at ease, when a fragile woman like her is living alone amidst so many wicked people?"

As remorse appeared all over Hu Qingniu's face, Ji Xiaofu cast a glance at Wang Nangu and thought: This Mrs Hu is known as the 'Sage of Poisons', for who else is better than she when it comes to the art of poisoning? People would probably be thanking the Heavens and the Earth as soon as she sat still, so who would dare to touch her in return? It is really funny that Mr Hu fears his wife as if she is a tigress.

"Thus, I swore another oath," said the physician. "Henceforth, I will not provide treatment for anyone unless he or she is a member of our Ming Cult. I did this to prevent myself from unwittingly destroying Nangu's handiwork, for both my wife and I belong to the Cult. Therefore, she would never harm any of our brothers and sisters."

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji exchanged a glance: So this is the reason behind his refusal to provide treatment for anyone who is not a member of the Ming Cult.

Hu Qingniu resumed his tale: "Seven years ago, an elderly couple came to Butterfly Valley to seek treatment after falling victim to a terrible poison. Owners of Lingshe Island in the Eastern Sea, they were known by their nicknames as the Old Woman of the Golden Flower and the Old Man of the Silver Leaf. They took every care to adhere to the courtesies of making a visit, but the Old Woman ended up revealing her pugilistic prowess by accident. I was very shocked by the display. I did not dare to make an outright refusal to provide treatment, but how could I return to my old ways after recognising that those ways were wrong? Therefore, I took their pulses and said, 'Sir, you and your wife may be elderly, but your pulses move as if they belong to people in the prime of their lives. This is the first time that I have seen such an amazing condition, so credit should be given to your rich internal strength.' The Old Woman said, 'You are very brilliant.' Then, I said, 'Sir, your poison-wrought ailment is

different from your wife's. Your condition is incurable, but you will live for several more years to come. As for your wife, her poisoning is not serious, so she can treat herself with her internal strength.'

"Prodding further, I found that they had been poisoned by an old foreign monk(1) from the Western Regions, who was employed by the Mongolians. I was relieved that my wife was not involved, yet I was bound by my oath to provide treatment only for members of the Ming Cult. I could not make an exception for this couple. The Old Woman offered me a great reward, and asked me to save her husband's life. But I chose to ignore their request for the sake of my relationship with my wife. To my surprise, the elderly couple did not use any force against me, preferring to walk away in sadness. Before leaving, the Old Woman said, 'Ha ha, Ming Cult, Ming Cult ... so it is still all because of the Ming Cult!' I knew that my stand had made me many enemies, and would continue to do so for the rest of my life, but I could not allow outsiders to spoil my deep and loving relationship with my wife. Do you not think so?"

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji kept silent, unwilling to lend their support to his reason for ignoring the dying.

"Recently, my wife heard that the Old Man of the Silver Leaf had passed away," said Hu Qingniu. "As a result, the Old Woman of the Golden Flower is now on her way here to make trouble for me. My wife rushed back to stand with me against the enemy, but she found an outsider in our home. Thus, she used some medicine to knock Wuji out for one night."

Suddenly, the boy understood: I had slept all the way past noon because Mrs Hu had drugged me, and I actually thought that I was falling ill. The Sage of Poisons is formidable indeed, to work in such an undiscernable manner.

Hu Qingniu went on: "I was very happy that my wife had returned. She wanted me to pretend that I had been struck by smallpox, to avoid seeing anyone. Then, both of us stayed in the room, looking for ways and means to overcome the Old Woman of the Golden Flower. After all, she was so highly skilled that we would never be able to escape from her clutches. A few days later, Xue Gongyuan, Jian Jie, Ji-guniang and the other twelve patients arrived.

"Descriptions of your ailments told me immediately that the Old Woman of the Golden Flower wanted to test me, and see if I was really going to stick to my oath and treat no one, except for members of the Ming Cult. I enjoyed the challenge of medicine as much as life itself, so I could hardly control myself at the sight of one strange ailment. So you can just imagine how much these fifteen cases tugged at my heart. But I knew what the Old Woman was up to. As soon as I had any one of these patients cured, she would increase the torture that she had planned for me by a hundred times. Therefore, I had no choice but to stay quiet and ignore the itch in my hands, until Wuji asked me how these ailments could be healed. But I took great pains to declare that Wuji is a disciple of the Wudang Clan and that he had no relationship whatsoever with Hu Qingniu.

"Unfortunately, Nangu became upset when Wuji found success in my instructions. So, she started adding poison to the patients' food, drink and medicinal brews. This meant that she had resumed pitting her skills against mine. At the same time, she was also protecting me from the wrath of the Old Woman of the Golden Flower, for Wuji's success would probably be blamed on me. These fifteen patients were all highly skilled pugilists, so how could they not know what Nangu was doing? It turned out that she had knocked them out with drugs first, before proceeding with the main task of

poisoning them. Such prowess will probably be lost when Nangu is gone."

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji exchanged another glance, for they finally understood why the boy had to shake the sleeping woman so hard before waking her up several nights ago.

"Ji-guniang has been recovering well in the past few days," Hu Qingniu added, "so Nangu's poison has not been producing the desired effect. After some investigations, my wife realised that Wuji had uncovered her secret, so she decided to harm him as well. Sigh, it is easy to transform the physical face of our land, but it is difficult to change a man's natural disposition. At the end of the day, I am still not entirely devoted to my beloved wife. I was unwilling to be involved in the first place, but after Wuji advised me to take a trip and avoid the impending doom, my heart softened. As a result, I gave him a prescription with the Chinese angelica (dang gui / dang1 gui1), the dried rhizome of rehmannia (sheng di / sheng1 di4), the root of the narrow-leaved polygala (yuan zhi / yuan3 zhi4), the root of the Saposhnikovia divaricata (fang feng / fang2 feng1) and Angelica biserrata (du huo / du2 huo2). I could not speak plainly then because my wife was with me.

"But Nangu was very intelligent. She knew the properties of each herb well, so she could tell that the prescription was too strange to be true. After some thought, she broke the code. Then, she tied me up, swallowed some poison and said, 'Shige, we have been married for more than twenty years. The oceans can dry up and the stones can break down, but the love between us will never change. Yet, you have always despised my skills, for you have always been able to cure my victims, regardless of the poison I use. Now, I have taken a deadly poison myself. If you can heal me, I will submit to you for the rest of my life.' I was so shocked that I admitted

defeat at once, and begged her not to harm herself. But she gagged me with a huge walnut. You know what took place after that."

Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji looked at each other, feeling exasperated and tickled at the same time. After all, this couple was so eccentric in their ways that it would probably be very difficult to find another pair like them. It was not really a big deal that Hu Qingniu loved his wife so much that he gradually became fearful of her, but it was unimaginable that Wang Nangu would be so eager to put her husband down that she ended up poisoning herself to prove her point.

"Think about it," said Hu Qingniu. "What other alternatives do I have? If I succeed in healing her, I would just be declaring that my skills are better than hers. She will be very upset. But if I fail, she will die! Sigh! I wish the Old Woman of the Golden Flower would appear soon and kill me with a stroke of her walking stick. Then, Nangu would no longer have to fret over me. Furthermore, her skills have advanced so much in recent years that I cannot figure out what poison she has ingested. So I do not even know where and how to start treating her."

"Sir, can you really not tell what poison Shimu has taken?" asked Zhang Wuji.

"Your Shimu's skills have reached the point of perfection in recent years," answered the physician. "So I am likely to fail in my attempts to heal her. She has probably ingested a deadly poison made from three pests and three weeds, but I do not have a single clue as to how these six ingredients are combined." As he spoke, he used the index finger of his right hand to write a prescription on the surface of the table. Then, he waved a hand and said, "Please go out. If Nangu dies, I will not carry on living alone."

"Please take care of yourself and do encourage Shimu with kind words," said Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji in unison.

"What should I say to encourage her?" Hu Qingniu retorted in frustration. "It is all my fault!" He burst into loud sobs after that, prompting Ji Xiaofu and Zhang Wuji to leave the room at once.

With the two outsiders gone, Hu Qingniu struck several acupoints on his wife's back and waist. Then, he said, "Shimei, your husband is useless, for he is really unable to heal the poison wrought by the three pests and the three weeds. The only alternative left is to follow you in death, so that we can still be husband-and-wife in the afterlife." He put a hand into Wang Nangu's pocket and pulled a few small packets out. Opening one of these packets, he found that it contained a multi-coloured mixture of powders that were obtained from the grinding of three pests and three weeds.

Although Wang Nangu could not move, she could still speak. So, she said, "Shige, please ... do not take the poison ... " But Hu Qingniu turned a deaf ear to her pleas and poured the powder into his mouth. Mixing it with his saliva, he proceeded to swallow the poison.

"How can you take such a large dose at once?" cried Wang Nangu in shock. "That was enough to kill three people!"

Hu Qingniu smiled wanly and sat down on a chair beside the bed where his wife lay. Just then, he felt as if a million knives were slicing through his stomach. This was the work of the Gelsemium elegans (duan chang cao / duan4 chang2 cao3), the first of the six ingredients to take effect. The remaining two weeds and three pests would soon follow.

"Shige, there is a way to cure the poison," cried Wang Nangu.

"No ... I ... I do not believe ... I ... I am dying ...," Hu Qingniu replied as his body shook and his teeth chattered. "Take a combination of the Pill of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, and the Powder of 'Yulong-Suhe' quickly," said Wang Nangu again. "Then, use acupuncture to dissipate the poison."

"What ... purpose ... will ... it serve?" gasped Hu Qingniu in retort.

"I took only a little of the poison," answered Wang Nangu, "but you took too much. If you do not do anything now, it will be too late!"

"I have ... loved you ... with all my heart," said Hu Qingniu. "But you insisted ... on fighting with me. There is no more joy in living ... but ... when I die, everything will ... be ... over ... a-yo ... a-yo..." By then, the venom of the Pallas pit viper and the spider -- two of the three pests in the poisonous six-ingredient concoction -- had begun to attack the physician's heart and lungs. Hu Qingniu weakened until he lost consciousness altogether.

"Shige, Shige, it is all my fault!" Wang Nangu wailed loudly. "You must not die ... I will never pit my skills against yours again." Although they had fought each other for decades, the love between them had remained strong. Wang Nangu was not afraid of death, but she panicked when her husband decided to kill himself with the very same poison that she had taken. With her acupoints blocked, she could not do anything to rescue him.

Fortunately, Zhang Wuji heard her cries and rushed into the room. "Shimu, what must I do to save Shifu?" he asked, finally acknowledging himself as a student of Hu Qingniu.

Wang Nangu brightened up at once. "Give him a combination of the Pill of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, and the Powder of 'Yulong-Suhe' quickly," she answered. "Then, prick his Yong Quan and Jiu Wei acupoints with gold needles ... "

At that moment, a series of coughs sounded outside the door, appearing to be clearer than usual in the stillness of the night. Ji Xiaofu rushed into the room with a face as pale as a sheet of paper. "The Old Woman of the Golden Flower ... the Old Woman of the ...," she stammered in fright, but before she could finish her announcement, the door-curtain parted silently.

A crone with a hunched back appeared, with a young girl about twelve or thirteen years old by her side. The fearsome Old Woman of the Golden Flower had finally arrived.

Focusing her attention on Hu Qingniu, the Old Woman was taken aback to see him holding his stomach in pain. His face had darkened and his breathing was weak. In fact, he looked as if he was about to drop dead. "What is wrong with him?" she asked.

Before anyone could answer her, Hu Qingniu's legs stiffened. He was finally dead.

"Why did you punish yourself in this manner?" wailed Wang Nangu. "Why did you poison yourself to death?"

The Old Woman of the Golden Flower had travelled all the way to the Central Region from the Isle of the Gifted Snake for two purposes: to seek redress from the enemy who had caused the death of her husband, and to terrorise Hu Qingniu. Yet, she had not expected the physician to ingest a

deadly poison just before she showed up. As an expert on poisons herself, she could tell from the colour on the faces of Hu Qingniu and Wang Nangu that both of them had been so seriously poisoned that there was no longer a cure for either one of them. Since the physician had probably committed suicide in fear of the Old Woman herself, she quickly decided that the objective of her visit had been accomplished. "He has sinned, he has sinned!" she mumbled with a sigh as she walked out of the room with the young girl in tow.

Moments after leaving the hut, her coughs were heard coming from a distance of more than ten zhang (33.33 metres) away. The speed at which she moved was really beyond imagination. Feeling safe once more, Zhang Wuji placed a hand on Hu Qingniu's chest. His heart was still beating, but its pace had become very faint. The boy quickly fed the man a Pill of Bezoar and Daemonorops-draco, and a dose of the Powder of 'Yulong-Suhe'. Then, he pushed a gold needle each into his Yong Quan and Jiu Wei acupoints, before giving Wang Nangu the same course of treatment.

More than an hour later, Hu Qingniu regained consciousness. Wang Nangu was so happy that she burst into tears. "Little Brother, thank you so much for saving our lives," she said to Zhang Wuji between sobs. Then, she wrote up a prescription that would expel the remaining poison from their bodies.

Unfortunately, her skills at detoxification were not particularly brilliant, so her prescription could not remove the poison in its entirety. When Zhang Wuji took the prescription away for decoction, he quietly substituted some of its contents with what Hu Qingniu had written earlier on the surface of the table. However, Wang Nangu was never told about it.

"With the Old Woman of the Golden Flower thinking that Mr

Hu has poisoned himself to death, one big problem has been solved," Zhang Wuji declared. But the thought of the crone and the ghost-like manner in which she appeared and disappeared was still frightening enough to send shivers down his spine.

"People say that this Old Woman of the Golden Flower is very cautious in her ways," Wang Nangu remarked. "Although she has gone, she will return again to check on us. My husband and I must leave this place immediately. Little Brother, please erect two graves for us, with our names clearly inscribed on the gravestones."

Zhang Wuji agreed.

After Hu Qingniu and his wife had drunk their detoxifying decoctions, they packed the things hurriedly. Then, they sent the two pages back to their respective homes with ten liang (500 grams) of silver each. Finally, the couple hopped on to a mule-drawn carriage and vanished under the cover of night.

Zhang Wuji sent them all the way up to the entrance of Butterfly Valley. Having spent the past two years in each other's company, neither the boy nor the physician could bear to part with the other.

Hu Qingniu pulled out a handwritten book and said, "Wuji, all the things that I have learnt about medicine and its practices are recorded in this book. I have kept it hidden from you in the past, but now, I would like you to have it. I feel very bad for failing to expel the toxins of the Mystical Palm Technique of Profound Darkness (Xuan Ming Shen Zhang / Xuan² Ming² Shen² Zhang³) from your body, so I hope that you will eventually find a way to do so by studying this book."

Zhang Wuji accepted the gift with thanks.

Then, Wang Nangu said, "You saved our lives and enabled us to be reconciled with each other. Thus, I should pass all my knowledge and skills to you as well. But I have focused only on the methods of harming others with poison, so there is little purpose in your learning them. I hope that you will achieve complete recovery as soon as possible. As for your reward, I will have to make up for it in the days to come."

Zhang Wuji waited until the mule-drawn carriage had disappeared from sight before returning to the row of huts. Early the next morning, he built two graves beside the huts by piling earth and stones. Then, he left the valley to engage the services of a stonemason. The stonemason erected two gravestones: one inscribed with 'The grave of the Healing Sage of Butterfly Valley Hu Qingniu' and the other with 'The grave of Mrs Hu, nee Wang'.

Jian Jie and the others sighed when they saw the graves, for the story of Hu Qingniu being seriously ill had proven to be true.

With Wang Nangu gone, there was no one left to poison the patients in secret. Consequently, their injuries began to heal under Zhang Wuji's care. Less than ten days later, they took their leave with thanks. Ji Xiaofu and her daughter did not have anywhere to go to, so they decided to accompany Zhang Wuji for a few more days.

Notes:

In the 2nd edition, the culprit was a "mute medicant monk".

(Translated by SmokeyTheBear)

In these few days, Zhang Wuji spent all his effort reading the medical book that Hu Qingniu had written, and discovered that the contents were deep and profound, a worthy work of

the “Deity of Healing”. He only read it for about eight or nine days and his medical skills improved greatly, but as to the eradication of the “Yin” poison in his body, there wasn’t the slightest clue. He flipped through and read many pages, finally gave up hope, and thought, “If Hu Qingniu knew a method to cure me, how would he not do so? If he did not, how would the medical book have a method?” After thinking of this, he could not help feeling completely disheartened. He closed the book, walked outside the house, saw the two false graves, and thought, “Before a year passes, I will really be buried under the ground. What will my tombstone say?” While he was lost in thought, suddenly he heard a few coughs from behind, Zhang Wuji was surprised and turned his head, only to see the Golden Flower Granny holding the beautiful looking little girl, standing unsteadily a few ‘zhang’ away. (1 ‘zhang’=10 feet) The Golden Flower Granny asked, “Little one, who are you to Hu Qingniu? Why are you sighing here?” Zhang Wuji replied, “My body is afflicted with ‘Yin’ poison from the Xuanming Divine Palm.....” The Golden Flower Granny walked to him, held his wrist, and felt his pulse, exclaiming, “Xuanming Divine Palm? Such a skill really exists in this world? Who was the one who hit you?” Zhang Wuji replied, “That man assumed the guise of a Mongolian military officer, but I do not know who he actually is. I came to seek treatment from Mr. Hu, he said I was not one of the Ming Cult, he would not heal me. Now that he has died from ingesting poison, my illness cannot be cured, so I felt sad thinking about this.”

The Golden Flower Granny saw that he was handsome and refined, very likeable, yet was afflicted with this untreatable illness, then said, "A pity, a pity!" Three lines suddenly surged forth from Zhang Wuji's heart, "□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□?"*

*Explanation to follow

These three lines come from 'Zhuangzi'. Zhang Sanfeng practiced Taoism. Although his seven disciples were not priests, but they studied this Taoist-venerated book 'Zhuangzi Nanhua Jing' very thoroughly. When Zhang Wuji reached five years of age on Fire and Ice Island, Zhang Cuishan taught him to read and write. Though the lack of books limited them to writing on the ground, he was taught to memorise the 'Zhuangzi'. These four lines mean, "The span of life, how can it forced? How would I know, if wanting to live was a mistake? How would I know, if man's fear of death, was not like wandering outside during youth not knowing to return to his hometown? How would I know, if dead people would not regret previously seeking to live?" Zhuangzi's original meaning expounded that, life might not be bliss, death might not be suffering, life and death are actually no different, a living person is only "having a big dream", and after dying is "greatly awakened", and maybe after dying would feel that the previous time in life was stupid, why not die earlier? Just like after having a sad and terrifying nightmare, once awakened, would realise this annoying nightmare had simply went on for too long. Zhang Wuji was young and originally did not know these truths about life, but in these four years he had been between hovering between life and death, unavoidably experiencing the hidden meaning in Zhuangzi's words. Originally he did not believe Zhuangzi's words, but since his days were numbered, he hoped that after death there would be a wondrous change, making his days of struggling to live laughable. At this time, he heard the Golden Flower Granny's repeated "a pity", and laughed lightly, saying those three lines from the 'Zhuangzi' without thinking. The Golden Flower Granny asked, "What does that mean?" Zhang Wuji explained it once and the Golden Flower Granny was immediately stupefied.

*'Zhuangzi' is a book on Taoist philosophy written by an

author of the same name. Whenever quotes are used i.e. 'Zhuangzi' it refers to the book, and without quotes it refers to Zhuangzi the person/author. For more information, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi>

She thought of her deceased husband from these few lines. The two of them were husband and wife for ten years and were incomparably loving, once separated by 'yin' and 'yang' (i.e. life and death), no longer having a chance to meet, if one was to live on it was like wandering destitution in a foreign land. On the contrary death would be a return to native land, so when the enemy had poisoned her husband, Hu Qingniu's refusal to treat him was not necessarily a bad thing. "Native land? Native land? But after returning to the native land, would it really be better than the foreign land?"

However the little girl standing beside the Golden Flower Granny did not understand these few lines of Zhang Wuji's at all, not knowing why once the granny heard them, had become still as if she was crazy. Her pair of beautiful eyes looked at the granny, then looked at Zhang Wuji, shifting from the two's faces back and forth. Finally, the Golden Flower Granny took a breath, and said, "Matters of the nether realm, cannot be ascertained. Although death might not be frightening, but no mortal will not die, at the end of this life, it is difficult to escape that day. To be able to live one more day, is one day more!"

Zhang Wuji, having seen Ji Xiaofu and the fifteen others cruelly wounded by the Golden Flower Granny and also the dread of the Hu Qingniu couple towards her, did not even have the courage to run away. He thought that this Golden Flower Granny was an extremely brutal person, but on meeting her it seemed otherwise. That day he caught a glance of her under the light and did not get a clear look. At this moment he saw that she was clearly a kind and gentle

old granny. Although her face was hard and stiff, full of wrinkles and totally devoid of feeling, but her eyes were sparkling clear, with the liveliness of a young woman, and displayed warmth and kindness.

The Golden Flower Granny asked again, "Child, what is the respected name of your father?" Zhang Wuji answered, "My father's surname is Zhang, first name Cui second name Shan, a Wudang disciple." But he did not mention his father's suicide.

The Golden Flower Granny was shocked, and said, "You are the son of Wudang's Fifth Hero Zhang, does that mean that evil person who used 'Xuanming' Divine Palm to hurt you was for the whereabouts of the Golden-Mane Lion King and the Dragon-Slaying Sabre?" Zhang Wuji replied, "Correct, he inflicted all kinds of torture on me, but I would rather die than say it." The Golden Flower Granny said, "You really know it?" Zhang Wuji answered, "En, the Golden-Mane Lion King is my godfather, I absolutely would not reveal it." The Golden Flower Granny's left hand shot forth and captured his hands with her palm. Only to hear his joints making a "ge, ge" sound, Zhang Wuji's hands were so painful that he also fainted, he felt a bone-penetrating chill of cold 'qi' transmitted from his hands to his chest, this cold 'qi' was different from 'Xuanming' Divine Palm, but it had the same unbearable feeling. The Golden Flower Granny said gently, "Obedient child, good child, tell of Xie Xun's whereabouts, granny will cure your cold poison, and pass on a set of invincible martial arts to you." Zhang Wuji was in tears from the pain, fearlessly replying, "My parents would rather give up their lives, than reveal the location of a friend. Golden Flower Granny, you look upon me as one who would betray his parents?" The Golden Flower Granny smiled and replied, "Very good, very good! Your father? Is he here?" The transmission stopped and the iron-like fingers that gripped

his hands loosened. Zhang Wuji said loudly, "Why don't you pour mercury into my ears? Why not force me to swallow metal needles, swallow leeches? Four years ago when I was only a child, I was already unafraid of all kinds of torture from those evil people, now that I am grown up, could it be that I have degenerated?" The Golden Flower Granny laughed loudly "haha", and said, "You think you are an adult, not a child anymore, haha, haha....." She laughed a few times and released Zhang Wuji's hands, only to see that the wrists of his hands to his fingertips, had turned a purplish-black colour.

That little girl shot him a meaningful glance, and said, "Quickly thank Granny for her mercy in sparing your life." Zhang Wuji gave a "heng", saying, "If she killed me, maybe I would be a little happier, what is there to thank?" That little girl wrinkled her brows, replying angrily, "You are disobedient, I am going to ignore you!" Saying this she turned away, but surreptitiously peeped at him to see what he was doing. The Golden Flower Granny laughed loudly, "Ah Li, you were alone on the island, without a young companion, it must have been lonely!" Let us capture this little child and tell him to serve you, how about that? The only thing is he has the temper of a donkey, being too stubborn and not very obedient." That little girl's long eyebrows raised, she clapped and laughed, "Wonderful, let us capture him then! If he is disobedient, won't Granny think of a way to control him?" Zhang Wuji was hearing the two of them going back and forth, and became very anxious. If the Golden Flower Granny was to kill him on the spot, that would be fine, but if he were to be captured and brought to some island, to suffer the two's torture and be half-alive or half-dead, it would be more unbearable than anything else.

The Golden Flower Granny nodded, "Follow me, first we have to find someone, accomplish a task, then go back to Lingshe

(Spirit Snake) Island.” Zhang Wuji said, “You are not a good person, I will not accompany you.” The Golden Flower Granny smiled, “Our Lingshe Island has everything, things to eat and play, you have not even seen them before. Obedient child, come follow Granny.” Zhang Wuji suddenly turned around and ran away quickly, who knows as soon as he took a step, the Golden Flower Granny was in front of him again, and said gently, “Child, you will not be able to escape, come follow us obediently.” Zhang Wuji gritted his teeth and sent a fierce palm towards her, the Golden Flower Granny turned sideways and blew a breath towards his palm. Zhang Wuji’s palm had already been made black and swollen by her, now that this breath came it was like using a sharp knife to cut into a wound, being so painful that he leapt up.

All of a sudden a girl’s voice could be heard, “Brother Wuji, what are you playing? I’m coming as well.” It was precisely Yang Buhui that had come, followed by Ji Xiaofu who emerged from behind the trees and walked over. The mother and daughter duo had just strolled back from the field, unexpectedly seeing the Golden Flower Granny, Ji Xiaofu’s face paled. Finally gathering her courage, she said tremblingly, “Granny, you cannot trouble children?” The Golden Flower Granny stared fixedly at Ji Xiaofu, and laughed coldly, “You are not dead yet? This old granny’s affairs, need you to chatter about as well? Come over here to let me take a look, why have you not died to this day?”

Ji Xiaofu came from a martial family, was a high disciple of a famous school, and was originally very courageous, but now she took her daughter into consideration and did not dare to get into danger. Clutching her daughter’s hand she retreated a step instead, and said quietly, “Wuji, come over.”

Zhang Wuji felt like going over. That little girl Ah Li turned her palm over and caught the ‘San Yang Luo’ on his shoulder,

and said, "Hold it there! You are called Wuji, surnamed Zhang, you are Zhang Wuji, is that it?" Once this 'San Yang Luo' was clasped, half of Zhang Wuji's body immediately became numb and weak rendering him immobile. He was shocked and angry, and shouted, "Release me quickly!" Suddenly a crisp and clear female voice was heard, "Xiaofu, how can you be so useless? Go over if you want to!" Ji Xiaofu was shocked but happy, turned around and said, "Master!", but there was no trace of anyone behind her. She looked carefully, only then did she see a grey-robed nun slowly walking over from a distance away, precisely the headmaster of Emei, her master Mijue Shitai*. Following behind her were two disciples, one was her elder martial-sister Ding Minjun, one was her younger martial-sister Bei Jinyi. The Golden Flower Granny saw that she was so far away that even her face could not be seen clearly, yet her voice was transmitted to everyone's ears as though she was very close, which was sufficient proof of her profound internal energy. Mijue Shitai was very well-known, everyone in the martial world had heard of her, only that she rarely left the mountain and not many people had met her personally. As she came nearer, it could be seen that she was about forty-four to forty-five years of age and her features could be considered beautiful, but her two eyebrows arched downwards, her appearance was strange, and resembled the 'Lu Si' ghost from stage a little. Ji Xiaofu went to kneel down and kowtowed to her, and greeted quietly, "Master, you are well." Mijue Shitai replied, "You have not angered me to death, I can still be considered well." Ji Xiaofu continued kneeling and did not dare to get up. But hearing the cold laughs from Ding Minjun standing behind her master, as if she had said numerous bad things about herself to their master, she could not help breaking out in cold sweat. Mijue Shitai said icily, "This granny told you to go over and let her take a look as to why you have not died to this day. You go over and let her take a look."

*Shitai is a term of address used for senior nuns or priestesses. E.g. In Smiling Proud Wanderer the three senior Hengshan leaders are Shitai (senior Buddhist nuns), in Return of the Condor Heroes Priestess Shenying is also a Shitai (senior Taoist priestess).

Ji Xiaofu answered, "Yes." Standing up, she strode up to the Golden Flower Granny, and said in a clear voice, "Golden Flower Granny, my master is here. Your fierce and overbearing manner should be ended." The Golden Flower Granny coughed, stared fixedly at Mijue Shitai, nodded, and said, "En, you are the Emei headmaster, I hit your disciple, what will you do?" Mijue Shitai replied icily, "Well hit! If you like to hit her, hit her again, even if you kill her it is none of my business." Ji Xiaofu felt as if a knife had pierced her heart, and called out, "Master!" Two streams of warm tears flowed. She knew her master was always extremely protective of her disciples. When her disciples had crossed anyone, even if it went against her principles she would argue vehemently to protect them. Now that she said these words she clearly did not regard her as a disciple any longer. The Golden Flower Granny said, "I do not have any enmity with Emei, having hit her once, it is enough. Ah Li, let us leave!" Saying that she slowly turned away.

Ding Minjun did not know the Golden Flower Granny's background, only that she looked senile and sickly but dared to be so insolent towards her master. She became angry, stepped up quickly and obstructed her, exclaiming, "You did not apologise to my master and are thinking of leaving?" Saying that her right hand drew her sword, half-unsheathed, to intimidate the granny.

The Golden Flower Granny suddenly extended two fingers and gently pinched on her sword sheath, then released it quickly, laughing, "Scrap metal, can also be used to scare

people?” Ding Minjun became even angrier and wanted to unsheathe her sword. Unexpectedly her single pull was not able to pull out the sword. Ah Li laughed, “Scrap metal, it has become rusty!”

Ding Minjun tried again with all her might, but was still unable to pull it out. Only then did she know that the Golden Flower Granny’s seemingly causal pinch on her sword sheath before, had secretly utilised her internal energy to make an indent into the sword sheath, making it grip the blade of the sword firmly. Ding Minjun could not unsheathe it even if she wanted to but she was unwilling to leave it at that. Her face reddened and her expression was wretched.

Miejue Shitai walked up slowly, held the sword hilt with three fingers and shook gently. The sword sheath immediately cracked into two, freeing the sword blade. She said, “This sword is not any sharp or precious blade, but neither is it scrap metal. Golden Flower Granny, why do you not enjoy life on Lingshe Island, but come to the central plains to make trouble?”

The Golden Flower Granny saw the way that she used her three fingers to shake the sword and break the sheath. She felt a pang of fear, and said to herself, “This bothersome nun is renowned, she truly possesses some real skill.” All smiles, she said, “My husband passed away, I was alone on the island and felt bored. So I left and wandered around, to see if I could find any suitable monk or priest to be my companion.” She emphasised “monk or priest” to ridicule the other as being a nun, yet was also wandering about. Miejue Shitai’s pair of drooped eyebrows hung even lower, she raised the sword and said in a bleak voice, “Show your weapon!” Since coming under her tutelage, Ding Minjun, Ji Xiaofu and the others had never seen their master fight with anyone. Ji Xiaofu was especially concerned as she knew that

the Golden Flower Granny's martial arts were extraordinary and inscrutable. Zhang Wuji's shoulder was still being held by Ah Li and his upper body was becoming increasingly numb, he shouted, "Let go of me quickly! Why are you grabbing on to me?" Ah Li saw Ji Xiaofu at the side with the intention to step in. If she did not let him go, Ji Xiaofu would definitely come to intervene and by then she would have to release him anyway. Hence she exerted her strength and flung him away, releasing his shoulder, and said coldly, "Let us see whether you can escape?" The Golden Flower Granny gave a slight smile, and said, "Years ago Emei Sect's Guo Xiang Heroine Guo's sword skill was renowned throughout the land. It must have been extremely high, but I wonder how much of it has been passed down to the descendants?" Miejue Shitai replied strongly, "Even if only a fraction remains it is enough to annihilate the evil and unorthodox." The Golden Flower Granny stared fixedly on the tip of her opponent's sword unblinkingly. All of a sudden, she raised her walking staff and thrust it fiercely towards the sword. Miejue Shitai's sword quivered and stabbed towards her shoulder. Amidst her coughing, the Golden Flower Granny swept her staff across. Miejue Shitai followed her sword, moving behind her opponent in a flash. Before her steps ended her sword move had arrived. However the Golden Flower Granny did not turn around but instead twirled her walking staff and sent a backhand smash towards the sword blade. The two of them had exchanged three to four moves and were already praising each other's ability silently. An abrupt 'dang' sound was heard as the sword Miejue Shitai was wielding broke into two. When the sword and staff met the sword was broken by the impact of the walking staff. The onlookers were all shocked except for Ah Li. The Golden Flower Granny's walking staff was dark, yellowish and dirty. It appeared very ordinary and seemed to be neither gold nor iron. Yet it could shatter a sharp sword, so it must be the force of her profound and abundant internal energy.

However, when the Golden Flower Granny clashed weapons with Mijue Shitai she knew that the sword broke because of the sharpness of her weapon and not because her own internal energy had improved. Her walking staff was actually a special product of the seabed near Lingshe Island. It was called 'Gold Coral' and was made from a blend of various kinds of quality gold combined with coral, formed by undergoing thousands of years deep in the sea. It could shear metal like cutting tofu and strike rocks like hitting cotton. Any kind of sharp weapon would break immediately upon contact. Nevertheless the Golden Flower Granny did not press her attack. She only propped her staff against the ground and pat her chest, coughing. The three Emei disciples Ji Xiaofu, Ding Minjun and Bei Jinyi feared that their master was injured. In unison they rushed to Mijue Shitai's side to guard her.

(Translated by dgfds01)

Ah Li turned her palm and grabbed Zhang Wuji's wrist. Laughing, she said: "I said you won't be able to escape. Isn't that true?" This was totally unexpected. Before Zhang Wuji could break free, his meridians were obstructed and lost the strength in his body. This was the second time she had beaten him. Feeling both embarrassed and indignant, both angry and anxious, he kicked out at her waist with his right foot. Ah Li's fingers held firm and Zhang Wuji's foot had traveled no more than half a chi (about a foot) when it lost the strength to continue. He yelled angrily: "Are you going to let me go?" Ah Li laughed: "If I don't let you go, what can you do?" Zhang Wuji suddenly bent down and bit hard into her arm. Ah Li felt the pain and screamed: "Ai yo!" She loosened her right hand's grip while her left hand clawed at Zhang Wuji's face. Zhang Wuji jumped back quickly but he was too slow. Ah Li's fingers had scratched the right side of his face causing it to bleed. Ah Li's bitten right arm was bleeding even more. The pain was so great that she wanted to cry.

While the two children were fighting, Golden Flower Granny (Jinhua Popo) did not even glance at them. Mijue Shitai threw aside her broken sword and said: "This is my disciple's weapon, not suitable for fighting against top experts." So saying, she untied her knapsack and took out an antique long sword about four feet in length. Granny Golden Flower saw that a green-tinged aura was emitting from the scabbard. The sword had not yet been drawn but she could see it was something out of the ordinary. She then saw the words 'Yi Tian' (roughly translated as 'supporting heaven' but I'll stick with simply 'Heaven' to be consistent with the title) inlaid in gold on the scabbard. Shocked, she blurted out: "The Heaven Sword!" Mijue Shitai nodded her head and said: "Correct, this is the Heaven Sword. Granny Golden Flower's mind flashed to the well-known phrases resounding over the Wulin: "Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares to not follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?" She muttered repeatedly to herself: "So the Heaven Sword has fallen into Emei's hands."

Mijue Shitai shouted: "En garde!" Without removing the scabbard, she grasped the hilt and pointed the sword at Granny Golden Flower's chest. Granny Golden Flower flipped her staff round to meet her. Mijue Shitai's wrist moved slightly and the sword met the staff. With a light 'chi' sound, Granny Golden Flower's precious 'Gold Coral' staff was cut into two as easily as a piece of paper.

Granny Golden Flower was shaken. She thought: "The Heaven Sword has not even been drawn out of its scabbard, and yet it is already so formidable. It truly lives up to its reputation." She gazed at the sword and asked: "Mijue Shitai, please let me see what the sword looks like."

Miejue Shitai shook her head and said coldly: "Once this sword leaves its scabbard, it will not return without first tasting blood."

The two women stared at each other, neither speaking for a long while.

By this time, Granny Golden Flower knew that this nun's kungfu was not below hers. Miejue had not yet displayed her top skills but as the head of Emei, she would definitely be quite formidable. Added to that, she had in her hand the "Number 1 Sword under Heaven". Granny Golden Flower did not feel able to take her on. She coughed softly twice, then turned around, grabbed Ah Li's hand and walked away. Ah Li turned her head and shouted: "Zhang Wuji, Zhang Wuji!" Her voice grew softer and softer as the distance increased, until finally it could be heard no more.

Ding Minjun, Ji Xiaofu, and Bei Jinyi were overjoyed that their shifu had won and her powerful opponent had run away. Ding Minjun said: "Shifu, that old woman is no Mt Tai, is she? Yet she even dared to fight with you, she truly got what she deserved." Miejue Shitai said: "When you roam the jianghu in the future, if you ever hear her cough, make sure you run far away." Earlier when she struck out with her sword, it was backed with the power of her thirty years worth of cultivation of "Emei's 9 Yang Divine Skill". Even though she succeeded in breaking her opponent's staff, when her internal energy came into contact with Granny Golden Flower's body, it was as if it had fallen into a vast ocean and left no trace of itself behind. The force only managed to cause Granny's clothing to flap while her footing remained firm. Now that she thought about it, her heart shivered with fear. She thought that the Granny's inner power was strong and powerful while her body was strong and healthy, definitely not like that of an old lady in her twilight years. It was difficult to understand how

this could be so. Miejue Shitai raised her head to stare at the sky, then after a while she called: "Xiaofu, come here!" Without even glancing at her, she walked into the house. Ji Xiaofu and the other two followed her inside. Yang Buhui called out: "Mama!" and tried to go inside too.

Ji Xiaofu knew that her shifu had left Emei with the purpose of 'cleaning out the home' (i.e. dealing with a renegade disciple). Though she had previously been the object of love and attention, her shifu was very strict, so she really did not know how she would be dealt with. She told her daughter: "You should stay outside and play, don't come inside."

Zhang Wuji thought: "The Ding woman is really bad. She will definitely bad-mouth Auntie Ji in front of their shifu. I saw clearly what happened that night, she's venomous and cruel. If she talks rubbish now and confuses the truth, I will come out and help Auntie Ji." He quietly went to the back of the house, crouched under a window, held his breath and listened. But inside the house was totally silent, nobody was talking.

After a while, Miejue Shitai said: "Xiaofu, it is your story so you can tell me what happened." Ji Xiaofu choked out: "Shifu, I... I..." Miejue Shitai said: "Minjun, come and question her." Ding Minjun said: "Yes. Martial sister Ji, of our sect's forbidden practices, what is the third?" Ji Xiaofu replied: "Taking part in lewd and lecherous activities." Ding Minjun said: "Correct. What then, is the sixth?" Ji Xiaofu replied: "Turning your heart to outsiders, rebelling against sect and master." Again, Ding Minjun asked: "And how do we deal with people who break these rules?" Ji Xiaofu did not reply. Instead, she turned to Miejue Shitai, saying: "Shifu, there is something that I have difficulty saying. It is not as simple as what Martial Sister Ding is saying." Miejue Shitai said: "Alright, there are no outsiders here. Tell me

everything.”

Ji Xiaofu knew that this was a very important moment, she didn't dare conceal anything. She said: “Shifu, that year after we found out about the Heavenly Eagle Cult gathering at Wangpan Shan, you ordered me and 15 other martial sisters to leave the mountain and split up to look for the Golden-hair Lion King Xie Xun. I went west towards Sichuan. On the way, I met a middle-aged man dressed in white. He was around 40 years old. Everywhere I went, he followed. When I stayed at an inn, he stayed there as well. When I moved on, he moved on as well. At first I just ignored him. After that, I told him off because it was unseemly. That man talked like a madman, so I lost my patience, took out my sword and stabbed at him. He had no weapon but his kungfu was amazing. Within 3 moves, he had snatched the sword from my hand. I was frightened and tried to run away. He didn't chase me. Early morning the second day, I woke up in my inn room only to see my sword next to my pillow. I was greatly frightened. When I left the inn, that man started following me again. There was no point in me fighting him again, so I tried begging him. I said that we are neither related nor are we enemies, we don't know each other, plus men and women should remain apart, there is no point in you following me around. I also said, although my kungfu is not your match, you shouldn't provoke our Emei Sect.” Meijue Shitai ‘hmmphed’ as if she agreed. Ji Xiaofu continued: “That man laughed and laughed, then said: ‘Once a person's kungfu is split into different sects, it deteriorates a lot. If you are willing to follow me, you'll acquire a new set of eyes and ears. I'll teach you the greatest kungfu on earth.’”

Miejue Shitai has eccentric in nature. Her whole life had been devoted to martial arts to the exclusion of other matters (Note: I think there's a mistake in the online text I'm using, so this bit is a guess). On hearing what that man said, she

said: "You should have followed him to have a look and see what sort of weird skills he has." Ji Xiaofu blushed bright red and replied: "Shifu, he is a strange man, how could I follow him?" Miejue Shitai then came to her senses: "Ah, you're right! So you told him to get lost?" Ji Xiaofu said: "I tried time and time again to avoid him, but I just couldn't lose him. Ai, I was unfortunate to run into this, the consequence of my sins in my previous life..." As she said this, her voice grew softer and softer.

Miejue Shitai asked: "What happened after that?"

Ji Xiaofu answered softly: "I couldn't resist and lost my chastity to him. He had complete control over me, I couldn't even end my life. This went on for a few months. Then one day, an enemy suddenly came looking for him and I took this opportunity to escape. Not long later, I discovered that I was pregnant. I didn't dare tell you, Shifu, so I hid away and gave birth to my child in secret."

Miejue Shitai asked: "Are you telling me the truth?" Ji Xiaofu said: "I would never dare to lie to you, Shifu." Miejue Shitai gave a low hum and said: "My poor child. Ai, this matter really wasn't your fault!" When Ding Minjun heard her Shifu's sympathy, she could not help but glare fiercely at Ji Xiaofu. Miejue Shitai sighed and asked: "Then what are your plans now?" Ji Xiaofu tearfully answered: "The arrangements my family made for me to marry Wudang's Sixth Master have fallen apart. I beg Shifu to permit me to cut my hair and become a nun." Miejue Shitai shook her head: "That won't be good. Humph, what is the name of the evil man who harmed you?" Ji Xiaofu lowered her head and answered: "His... his surname is Yang, and his given name is Xiao." Miejue Shitai suddenly leapt up. She waved her sleeve and with a 'krack' sound, the table collapsed into two pieces. Zhang Wuji who was eavesdropping outside was greatly frightened. Even the

expressions of Ji Xiaofu, Ding Minjun and Bei Jinyi changed. Miejue Shitai yelled: "You said that he is Yang Xiao? The biggest demon of the Demon Cult, the man called the 'Left Emissary of Guang Ming' Yang Xiao?"

Ji Xiaofu replied: "He... he... is from the Ming Cult and seemed to hold some position within it." Miejue Shitai, with a furious expression on her face, said: "What Ming Cult? The Demon Cult is ferocious and inhuman, there are no evil deeds that they do not do. (Note: 'Ming' means 'bright' which implies good, as opposed to evil.) Where... where is he hiding now? Is he at Guang Ming Peak in the Kunlun Mountains? I'm going to look for him." Ji Xiaofu said: "He said he is the Ming Cult's..." Miejue Shitai shouted: "Demon Cult!" Ji Xiaofu said: "Yes. He said he is the Demon Cult's leader. Ordinarily, he would be at Guang Ming Peak but the last few years, there has been internal discord and fighting within the Cult. So he no longer lives on Guang Ming Peak to prevent people from thinking he wants to be the Cult Leader. He is now secretly living in Zuo Feng Summit of the Kunlun Mountains. This was something he only told me, no one else in the Jianghu knows about it. Since Shifu asked me, I dare not refuse to answer. Shifu, this man... is this man our sects's enemy?" Miejue Shitai answered: "Our enmity is as deep as the ocean! Your Eldest Martial Uncle Guhong Zi was angered to death by the great demon Yang Xiao."

Ji Xiaofu was very frightened, yet she couldn't help but feeling proud. Her Eldest Martial Uncle Guhong Zi was a top expert in the world but even he was angered to death by "him". She wanted to ask about the details but did not dare open her mouth.

Miejue Shitai lifted her face to the sky, with great hatred she muttered to herself: "Yang Xiao... for many years I had no idea of your whereabouts, now that you've fallen into my

hands...” She suddenly spun around and said: “Right, you lost your chastity to him, defended Monk Peng, offended your Martial Sister Ding, concealed the truth from me, and secretly gave birth to a child... I’ll forget about all this. I want you to do something for me, when you’ve rendered this great service come back to Emei. I will give you the robes, alms bowl and Yi Tian sword, and then make you my successor as the our Sect Leader.” These words shocked everyone. Ding Minjun’s jealousy and hatred burst forward. She was furious with their Shifu for not understanding right and wrong, and acting unreasonably.

Ji Xiaofu said: “Whatever Shifu orders, I will do my utmost to complete. But I have too many faults and my martial arts are not good, so I dare not even dream of accepting your legacy. Miejue Shitai said: “Come with me.” She pulled Ji Xiaofu’s wrist and flew out of the house to the hill on the left side of the valley. She only stopped when they reached a deserted spot. Zhang Wuji observed them from far away. He then saw Miejue Shitai stand at a tall vantage point and gaze round in all four directions, before pulling Ji Xiaofu to her side and speaking softly into her ear. Only then did he realise that what she was saying was a big secret. Not only was she afraid of eavesdroppers, but she also did not even want her two disciples, Ding and Bei, to hear what she said.

After hiding next to the house, Zhang Wuji did not dare reveal himself. From afar, he watched Miejue Shitai say something and Ji Xiaofu lower her head in thought before finally shaking her head firmly. He then saw Miejue Shitai lift up her right palm and struck down, only to stop halfway like she was giving Ji a last chance to change her mind. Zhang Wuji’s heart was beating rapidly. He thought that if this palm fell on her head, she would definitely die. He gazed intently at Ji Xiaofu without blinking an eye. He saw her drop to her knees and shake her head. Miejue Shitai’s palm fell squarely

on her forehead, Ji Xiaofu's body swayed and dropped to the ground. She writhed a little and then stopped moving.

Zhang Wuji was both frightened and grieved, he flattened himself in the grass behind the house, not daring to move a muscle. At this moment, Yang Buhui giggled a couple of times and threw herself onto his back. Laughing, she said: "I've caught you, I've caught you!" She had been running around in the fields and had seen Zhang Wuji hide among the grass. She thought he was planning hide-and-seek with her and rushed forward to catch him. Zhang Wuji grabbed her, covered her mouth with one hand and whispered into her ear: "Keep quiet, don't let the evil people find us." Seeing that his face was pale and his expression frightened, Yang Buhui was shocked. Mijue Shitai came down from the slope hurriedly and told Ding Minjun: "Go and kill her bastard child. Don't allow future disaster to take root." Ding Minjun had seen how her shifu had dealt violently with Ji Xiaofu. Though she was inwardly happy, she was also greatly surprised. Hearing her shifu's orders, she quickly borrowed Bei Jinyi's sword and went off to look for Yang Buhui.

Zhang Wuji hugged Yang Buhui and shrank further back into the long grass. He didn't even dare take a deep breath. Ding Minjun looked everyone but couldn't find a trace of the little girl. As she decided to do a thorough search, Mijue Shitai scolded: "Useless thing! You can't even find a little girl!" Bei Jinyi had always gotten along well with Ji Xiaofu. After seeing her die under their shifu's palm and now trying to kill her only child, she could not hold back any longer. She said: "I'll go see whether the child has run out of the valley." She knew her shifu was impatient by nature. Once they have gone out to search for the child unsuccessfully, she would not bother coming back to look. Though a little girl left alone in the world might not survive, Bei Jinyi could not bear the idea of seeing her stabbed by Ding Minjun's sword. Mijue Shitai

said: "Why didn't you say so earlier?" Glaring at Bei, she led the chase out of the valley, with Ding Minjun and Bei Jinyi following.

Yang Buhui still did not know that disaster had befallen her mother. Her eyes were open wide and round, darting around with a questioning look. Zhang Wuji placed his ear to the ground and listened. When he heard the three going further and further away, he jumped up, pulled Yang Buhui's hand and rushed up the slope. Yang Buhui laughed: "Brother Wuji, have the evil people gone? We're going up the mountain to play right?" Zhang Wuji did not answer. He only pulled her quickly to where Ji Xiaofu was. When Yang Buhui got closer and finally saw her mother lying on the ground, she was very frightened. She surged forward crying: "Mama, Mama!" and threw herself down next to her mother. Zhang Wuji tested her breath and found it to be extremely weak. He saw that her skull had been smashed by Meijue Shitai's palm. Even if Hu Qingniu arrived, it would be difficult to save her life. Ji Xiaofu opened her eyes slightly to see Zhang Wuji and her daughter. Her lips slightly moved as if she wanted to speak, but not a single sound came out. Two large tears flowed from her eyes. Zhang Wuji took out some golden needles and pushed them into her "Shen Ting", "Yin Tang" and "Cheng Qi" acupoints, reducing the pain in her head. Ji Xiaofu regained some strength and said softly: "I beg... beg you... to take her to her father.....I could not... could not harm her father....." Her left hand moved to her chest as if to retrieve some object but suddenly her head drooped and breathing stopped.

Yang Buhui hugged her mother's body, crying loudly she kept calling: "Mama, Mama, does it hurt a lot? Does it hurt a lot?" Ji Xiaofu gradually became cold, but she did not stop asking. She did not understand why her mother did not move at all, or why she did not answer her. Zhang Wuji already felt

great sorrow. Then when he thought about his parents tragic deaths, he too felt like howling. He could not stop tear from pouring from his eyes. The two of them cried for a while, then Zhang Wuji thought: "Before Auntie Ji died, she begged me to take Sister Buhui to her father. Erm, her father's name is Yang Xiao, he is the Ming Cult's Guang Ming Left Emissary, and he lives on Zuo Wang Summit in the Kunlun Mountains. I must take her there." He did not know that the Kunlun Mountains were tens of thousands of li to the west. How could two children make it all the way there? He had seen Ji Xiaofu reach towards her chest to retrieve something before her breath was cut short. Now he felt around her neck and found a silk cord hanging around her neck. From the cord hung a black pendant inlaid with a golden flame. Not knowing what it was, he just hung it around Yang Buhui's neck. Then he got an iron shovel out of the house and dug a grave to bury Ji Xiaofu's body. By this time, Yang Buhui had exhausted herself crying and had fallen into a deep sleep. When she woke up, Zhang Wuji told her that a mother had flown up to heaven and she will only come back down after a very long time.

After that, Zhang Wuji slapped a meal together for himself and Yang Buhui to eat. Exhausted, they both fell asleep on a couch. The next morning, he packed two small travel packs and the money that Hu Qingniu had given him, then took Yang Buhui to pay their respects in front of her mother's grave. That done, the two children left Butterfly Valley.

End of Chapter 13.

Chapter 14 - Meeting Zhongshan Wolf* Along the Way

(Translated by Efflix, IcyFox and Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The gold and silver blood snakes were leaning and snuggling on each other, looked very affectionate while crawling slowly to enter the Lingzhi Orchid paste circle. Zhang Wuji quickly placed one bamboo tube outside the circle's gap, while using the bamboo stick he gently pushed the tail of the silver-crowned blood snake. The snake moved in a lightning speed, immediately entered the tube.

The two people (Yang Buhui and Zhang Wuji) walked for half a day, only then did they finally leave the Butterfly Valley. Yang Buhui's feet were small and her legs were short and as a result couldn't walk any further. After resting for a while, they needed to hurry on the road again, repeatedly stopping and starting, so that on the first night they couldn't find a place to stay. They traveled until the sky was dark, but were still randomly travelling on the mountainside. The sounds of owls and wolves nearby made Yang Buhui start crying.

Zhang Wuji was also scared, so when he saw a cave next to the road, he pulled Yang Buhui inside the cave, hugging her and covering up her ears so that she couldn't hear the sounds of the animals. The two children, hungry and scared, suffered for an entire night. In the morning they were able to pick some wild fruit to eat and continued intermittently walking and resting.

Around noon, Yang Buhui suddenly cried out loud, pointing to a tree by the side of the road. When Zhang Wuji took a look, he saw two corpses hanging from a tree. Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui were so scared that they turned around and starting running. They weren't able to run more than ten paces when they tripped over a rock, falling down. Zhang Wuji bravely looked back, and this time was even more startled, blurting out "Mr. Hu!" The corpse hanging from the

tree was actually Hu Qingniu. The other corpse had long hair and was apparently a woman; from the appearance of her clothes, it seemed to be Hu Qingniu's wife Wang Nangu. The image of her long hair and corpse blowing in the wind created a dark, chilling air.

Zhang Wuji tried to stay calm and in good spirits, telling himself, "Don't be afraid, Don't be afraid!" He slowly started crawling toward the corpses, verifying that the corpses were Hu Qingniu and Wang Nangu. On each of their faces was something glittering - it turned out that each of them had a golden flower on their face. Zhang Wuji was disappointed, thinking, "so they weren't able to run away from Jing Hua Popo's poisonous hand after all" He saw that in the mountain gorge was a broken carriage and a mule that had drowned in the river. Zhang Wuji really started crying and decided to loosen the ropes, taking down the Hu couple's bodies from the tree.

All of a sudden, there was a "Clap!" sound; a book fell from Wang Nangu's body. Picking it up, he saw it was a handwritten book, titled "Wang Nangu's poison manual." When he flipped it open, he saw that the pages were filled with small print, detailing the toxicity of poisons and how to use them. Not only did it detail how to use poisonous medicine, but also poisonous weeds, snakes, centipedes, scorpions, spiders as well as other strange fish, insects, birds, flowers, fish and trees, leaving out nothing. He decided to keep it without much thought and put the Hu couple side by side, burying them with stones and dirt. He bowed down to the couple before grasping Yang Buhui's hand and continuing with their journey.

Shortly after they reached a large road, which then led them to a small town. Zhang Wuji wanted to buy some food to eat, but as he walked from house to house, they were all empty,

without even a single person. They had no choice but to continue their journey.

On the way, they noticed that the cornfields and rice fields were all dried up and desolate. Zhang Wuji was confused and worried, but he saw that Yang Buhui was able to not cry and keep walking which was already rather well-behaved, so what could he do? After a while, they saw next to the road were several corpses, with empty stomachs and sunken in cheeks – it was obvious at first glance that they had starved to death.

The more they walked the more they saw others like this. Zhang Wuji was scared out of his wits, thinking, "Is there really nothing to eat? Are we also going to starve here like this?"

In the evening, they reached a small forest and saw some white smoke emerging into the sky. Zhang Wuji was very happy - they had not seen anyone or any smoke since they had left the Butterfly Valley, so he quickly ran towards the white smoke.

After going near the smoke, they saw two men wearing ragged clothes circling a pot of boiling water, adding firewood under the pot. When the two men heard footsteps, they turned around. When they saw Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui, they burst out with big smiles and jumped up. One of them waved a hand, "Small kids, good, come over here, come over here quickly. Where are the adults that came with you? Where did they go?"

Zhang Wuji said: "There's only the two of us, no adults came with us." The two adults broke out into big smiles, while saying, "What luck, what luck!" Zhang Wuji was so hungry, so he took a look into the big pot to see what it was, only to

see grass in boiling water.

One of the men grabbed Yang Buhui in one hand, exclaiming, "This small lamb is so fat and tender! Tonight we can eat until we're full, how nice." The other man said, "Very good, we can eat the little boy tomorrow." Zhang Wuji was very surprised, exclaiming, "What are you doing? Let go of my sister!"

The man ignored him and proceeded to laugh and start to tear off Yang Buhui's clothes, reaching into his boots to take out a knife, saying "It's been a long time since I ate such a fat and tender lamb." He grabbed Yang Buhui to the side, apparently to slaughter her. The other man took a bowl and followed him, saying, "Wasting lamb blood is a pity, we can cook a bowl of lamb blood soup, the flavor's not bad."

Zhang Wuji was scared out of his wits, but he looked at them and it seemed that they really weren't joking. It really looked like they were about to slaughter Yang Buhui, so he yelled loudly, "You want to eat people? You aren't scared of harming heaven?"

The man holding the turkey bowl laughed and said, "Old man hasn't eaten a grain of rice for three months, if I don't eat a person, can I really eat a cow or lamb?"

For fear that Zhang Wuji would run away, he came over to grab Zhang Wuji's neck. Zhang Wuji dodged the man. With his left hand he pulled the man and with his right hand he hit the man's back.

He had learned martial arts from the Blond haired Lion King Xie Xun as well as his Wudang Palms from his parents. So even though these few years he had only learned medicine and had not practiced martial arts, he had good martial arts

habits and was able to exert good martial arts. He put forth this palm with great effort, and even someone studying martial arts for many years would've been unable to bear this palm, much less this ordinary village person. That man let out a "Hng!" before fainting and falling to the ground, unable to move.

Zhang Wuji immediately jumped up next to Yang Buhui. The other man exclaimed, "I'll kill you first", raising his knife and striking towards Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji used a move from Wudang Palms called "Wild Goose Wings"; his right foot flew, hitting the man in the wrist. The knife flew out of the man's hand. Zhang Wuji exerted another move called "Yuanyang lianhuan kick", following with another kick to the man's jaw. The man was in the process of opening his mouth to yell at him, but his jaws were forced shut by the kick, resulting in his biting his own tongue in half. Blood spurted out of his mouth and he fainted.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly went over to support Yang Buhui. At the same time, he heard the footsteps of others entering the forest. Yang Buhui was terrified when she heard the sounds of other people and hid herself in Zhang Wuji's arms. Zhang Wuji raised his head to take a look, but was calmed, shouting, "It's Mr. Jian, Mr. Xue."

Five people had entered the forest. One was KongDong's Jian Jie, and another was Huashan's Xue Gongyuan along with two of his martial brothers. All these people were healed by Zhang Wuji. The last person was an heroic looking approximately twenty year old youth with a broad forehead whom Zhang Wuji had never met before. Jian Jie made a "Heng!", saying, "Brother Zhang, you're here also? What happened to these two people?" As he was saying this, he

pointed to the two people on the ground.

Zhang Wuji indignantly told the story of what happened, ending with, "They even dared to eat people, aren't they outlaws?"

Jian Jie was staring at Yang Buhui, when all of a sudden saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth, so he licked his lips, saying, "Damn, for five days and five nights I haven't had a grain of rice in my stomach, only eating some tree bark and grass.....En, fine skin and meat, fatty and tender..."

Zhang Wuji saw that Jian Jie had a fire in his eyes, looking like a hungry wolf, with his mouth hanging wide open and his teeth gleaming. He really looked scary, so Zhang Wuji hugged Yang Buhui close to him. Xue Gongyuan asked, "Where is this girl's mother?"

Zhang Wuji thought in his heart: "If I say that Auntie died, they'll have even more evil thoughts." So he said, "Heroine Ji went out to buy some rice, she'll be back soon." Yang Buhui suddenly said, "No, My mom flew up to the sky!"

When Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan heard the two of them speaking, they knew Ji Xiaofu had already died. Xue Gongyuan laughed coldly, saying "Buying rice? If you find a grain of rice within these five hundred kilometers, you'll really have skills." Jian Jie shot a look at Xue Gongyuan, and the two suddenly jumped towards them. Jian Jie's two hands grabbed ahold of Zhang Wuji's shoulders. Xue Gongyuan's left hand covered Yang Buhui's mouth, and with his right hand he picked her up.

Zhang Wuji was startled and shouted, "What are you guys doing?" Jian Jie laughed and said, "In these thousand kilometers in Fengyang province, I've been so hungry I can't

stand it anymore. This girl isn't related to you, so we'll split a portion with you later." Zhang Wuji angrily insulted them: "You wrongly claim to be heroes, how can you bully a small orphan? If this gets out, how can you even claim to be human?"

Jian Jie flew into a rage, grabbed him with his left hand and hit him twice on the face, saying, "We'll kill you small beast along with her, we originally thought one small lamb might not've been enough."

Zhang Wuji had just taken care of the two villagers easily, but up against Kongdong's martial artists who had learned decades of martial arts, Zhang Wuji was easily captured and his struggles were in vain.

Xue Gongyuan's two martial brothers took some rope, tying up the two children. Zhang Wuji knew he would have no good luck today, and furiously regretted that he had saved these peoples' lives. People's hearts change quickly; who would know that these people would repay kindness with evil?

Jian Jie said, "Little beast, you healed this old man's head wound, so you've done some good for me, right? You must be hating me in your heart, right?" Zhang Wuji said: "Isn't this paying kindness with evil? I have no debts or business with you, if I didn't help you, how would you four have recovered from those strange diseases?"

Xue Gongyuan laughed and said, "Young man Zhang, after we were injured we've displayed this ugly attitude, we've even let you see it. If this becomes public, it'll be hard for us to live. Today we're starving, if we have no fresh meat in our stomachs, it'll also be hard for us to live. Why don't you save us to the end, save us one more time." Jian Jie was ferocious

and scary, but this Xue Gongyuan had a smiling appearance and was cunning and treacherous.

Zhang Wuji, seeing them couldn't help but feel his heart freeze in terror, and shouted loudly: "I'm in Wudang, this sister is part of Emei, if you harm us two, will the Five Heroes of Wudang and Mijue Shitai forgive you?"

Jian Jie was startled and made an "e" sound, feeling that there was some truth in his words - it was not a good idea to provoke Wudang and Emei. Xue Gongyuan laughed and said: "Here only the sky and ground will know, and you and I will know. Once you're in our stomachs, go grumble to Zhang SanFeng."

Jian Jie guffawed, saying: "I'm so hungry fire is about to come out of my stomach, even if you were my brother or son, I'd eat your skin and bones." He turned around and said to Xue Gongyuan's martial brothers: "Quickly bring some fire and cook some soup, what are you waiting for?" Those two got the pot; one of them went to the creek to get water, and the other went to start the fire.

Zhang Wuji said, "Mr. Xue, those two people are already dead, if you're hungry and want to eat people, wouldn't eating them be good?" Xue Gongyuan laughed and said, "These two men are just skin and bones, they're not only old and tough, but hard and stinky, who wouldn't eat tender lamb but eat old sheep instead?"

Zhang Wuji usually would have a brave attitude, if someone was going to hit or kill him, he wouldn't beg to be spared. However, when he was trapped by these evil men, about to be eaten alive, he couldn't help but offer up a few words to try to plead for his life. But Xue Gongyuan instead just jeered repeatedly, "Haha, Wudang's and Emei's disciples claim to

be the strongest and rule Jianghu, but today you're going to be eaten bite by bite. It would be really strange if Zhang Sanfeng or Old Nun Miejue knew about this and weren't angered to death."

Enraged, Zhang Wuji shouted, "Mr. Xue, if you have to eat people, then eat me. I just beg you to let this small sister go, then I can die with no regrets." Xue Gongyuan asked, "Why?" Zhang Wuji replied: "When her mother died, she trusted me to bring this little girl to her father. Today, if you eat just me, you will be full, tomorrow you can go buy some cows, lamb, or rice, please spare this little girl."

Jian Jie saw that he was able to fearlessly face danger at such a small age and with such a heroic and chivalrous air. He really thought this was something to be admired and couldn't help but be moved and hesitated, asking, "What should we do?" Xue Gongyuan replied, "Saving this small girl isn't a big deal. However, this may leak out; in the future, when Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou come to find us, Brother Jian should have certain methods to take care of them." Jian Jie nodded his head, saying, "What you said is also true. I'm a fool, never thinking of the future."

While saying these words, the other Huashan disciples returned with the pot of water and put it on the fire. Zhang Wuji knew the situation was urgent and shouted, "Little Sister Buhui, swear an oath to them that in the future you won't speak of today's events." Yang Buhui, confused, just cried out, "Can't eat you, can't eat you!" She didn't understand what Zhang Wuji was saying, but vaguely knew that he was sacrificing himself to protect her.

Meanwhile, the bold looking youth silently sat to the side, not speaking or moving. Jian Jie stared at him for a second, saying, "Xu Xiaoshe, if you want to eat lamb, you must also be willing to handle the lamb's body." In the region of Hao Si,

they called young men “xiaoshe.” That young man replied, “Yes!” He pulled out a small knife from his waist and said, “Killing pigs and cows are my specialty.” He clenched the knife in his teeth and carried Yang Buhui and Zhang Wuji in each hand toward the mountain creek.

Zhang Wuji protested loudly and tried to bite his arm but couldn’t reach it. Xu xiaoshe walked away for more than ten steps when Xue Gongyuan said, “Xu xiaoshe, slaughter them here!” Xu xiaoshe looked back and replied, “Slaughtering them in the creek is better, it’ll be cleaner there.” However, the knife was clenched in his teeth so his words were unclear, but his legs didn’t slow down at all. Xue Gongyuan said, “If I tell you to stay here, then you’ll stay here.” He had noticed that Xu xiashe looked kind of strange; he was worried that Xu xiaoshe would run away with the two kids to eat them by himself.

Xu xiaoshe whispered, “Quick, run away!” He put the two of them on the ground and stretched out his knife to cut the ropes that were binding them. Zhang Wuji said, “Thank you for your great kindness in saving our lives.” He grabbed Yang Buhui’s hand and pulled her up to run away. Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan both shouted and jumped up to chase them. Xu xiaoshe grabbed his knife to block them and shouted, “Stop!”

When Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan saw him with the knife guarding his chest heroically blocking them, they were startled. Jian Jie said, “What are you doing?” Xu xiaoshe said, “If we’re walking around Jiang Hu together, bullying the small and the weak, wouldn’t we be laughed at by all the heroes under the sky?” Xue Gongyuan indignantly replied, “Hunger is urgent, I would even eat my mother or the old and the young.” He waved a hand to his two martial brothers, “Hurry up, chase them!”

Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui couldn't run quickly, especially since he was carrying her. He was already rather small, so carrying her made him even slower. Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan each pulled out their weapons and attacked Mr. Xu. After fighting for a little bit, Jian Jie with a stroke of his knife managed to cut Xu xiaoshe's leg, causing it to drip wet with blood. Xu xiaoshe couldn't hold out any longer and suddenly lifted up his knife and threw it towards Xue Gongyuan. Xue Gongyuan ducked to the side, and Xu xiaoshe managed to rush out.

Xue Gongyuan and Jian Jie didn't chase him, instead going after Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. Mr. Xu from far away shouted, "Brother Zhang, don't be nervous, I'll go find helpers to help you," Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan worked together and managed to again capture Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. Jian Jie stared at Xue Gongyuan, shouting, "This person named Xu isn't a good person, why would you travel with him?"

Xue Gongyuan said, "This companion I randomly bumped into on the road, how would I know whether he's good or bad? He said his surname was Xu, named something like Xu Da. Don't listen to him, the sky's black already, where would he go to find help around here?" One of the Huashan disciples said, "Listening to his accent, he's native to this Fengyang Prefect, haha, even if he brought some country bumpkins here, we wouldn't be scared of them." Jian Jie laughed, "Fengyang's people are so hungry they can't even crawl. Let's quickly cook these two lambs into a delicious meal, it is right to eat a full meal."

This was the second time Zhang Wuji was captured; he was hit until his nose and mouth were blue and swollen and his clothes were torn. His possessions and money were all

scattered on the ground. He thought in his heart, "So this Mr. Xu's name was Xu Da, this man is a good friend, too bad my life is so short and can't be better friends with him." When he bowed his head down to the ground, he saw a handwritten yellow-papered book on the ground blowing in the wind. This was the Wang Nangu poison manual taken from Wang Nangu's body. His eyes followed the words on the page and noticed that "poisonous mushrooms" was written, with small words detailing the forms of poisonous mushrooms such as their odor, color, toxicity, antidotes, type after type. His heart was in turmoil, how could he take this into his head?

All of a sudden when he glanced to the left, he saw that about four or five feet away, under some rotten tree bark, were more than ten mushrooms with vivid colors. His heart jumped and he thought, "What type of mushroom is this? I don't know whether there's poison or not on it. The poison manual says that most poisonous mushrooms have vivid colors. If these poisonous mushrooms are toxic, there is hope to save Sister Buhui's life.

At this time he already wasn't thinking of his own life, as he already had the cold poison inside him that was difficult to expel. If he managed to run away with his life today, he would only live for a few months anyways, so he really only hoped to save Yang Buhui. He sat on the ground, slowly moving his feet and bottom and turned his body around, reaching out his hand to pick those mushrooms. At this time the sky already was black; everyone was ready for the fire to burn, so nobody really paid attention to him. Zhang Wuji suddenly turned his eyes to the direction that Xu Da had run, jumping up and down and shouting, "Brother Xu, you've brought people here, save us! Save us!"

Jian Jie and the others thought it was real, so the four of them grabbed their weapons and jumped up. Zhang Wuji took

advantage of the four of them looking for Xu Da and backed up two steps, putting the mushrooms into the iron pot. Jian Jie and the others didn't see anyone and started cursing, "Little bastard, even if you become crazy nobody's going to come help you." Xue Gongyuan said, "Prepare the knife, who wants to start?" Jian Jie said, "I'll kill the small girl, you kill that guy." As he was saying this he took his hand and grabbed Yang Buhui.

Zhang Wuji said, "Mr. Xue, my throat's really thirsty, can you give me some hot soup, that way when I die my ghost won't bother you. Xue Gongyuan said, "Alright, what's wrong with letting you drink some soup?" Xue Gongyuan scooped some hot soup into the bowl for him. Before the soup reached his mouth, Zhang Wuji loudly shouted, "How tasty! How tasty!" Indeed, once the mushrooms had been boiling in the pot, they released a fragrant smell. Xue Gongyuan had been hungry for a long time, so when he smelled the fragrant soup, he grabbed Zhang Wuji's soup and drank it into his stomach, licking his lips and saying, "Really fresh!"

Jian Jie reached out and grabbed the bowl and also drank a large mouthful, and once again drank another bowl. Xue Gongyuan and the other two Huashan disciples also drank two bowls, so that when the two bowls of hot soup were in their stomachs, they felt an unspeakable comfort. Jian Jie even took the mushrooms in the pot and ate them. Nobody even asked where the mushrooms were from. After Jian Jie ate the mushroom, he patted his stomach, laughing, "First eat some appetizers, then eat the lamb."

His left hand raised Yang Buhui behind him, and his right hand raised a knife. Zhang Wuji saw that after many people drank the mushroom soup there was no effect, so in his heart he thought that the mushrooms didn't have poison after all and could not help but feel bitter. Jian Jie took two steps

when all of a sudden, he shouted, "Aiyo!" His body faltered for a few moments before he fell on the ground, throwing Yang Buhua and the knife to the side. Xue Gongyuan was startled and asked, "Brother Jian, what happened?" He ran over to look down at his body. When he stooped down, he also couldn't stand up straight anymore and fell on Jian Jie's body. The other two Huashan disciples also were poisoned and died miserably.

Wuji shouted loudly, "Thank heaven and earth!" He rolled over to the knife and grasped the knife, cutting Yang Buhui's ropes. Yang Buhui's trembling hands also managed to cut Zhang Wuji's ropes after wounding his palms a few times. Having just escaped from death, the two of them were exceedingly happy and hugging each other. When Zhang Wuji went to see the four other people, he just saw that every person's face had turned black and that their muscles were warped. Their bodies were really scary and he thought, "That Wang Nangu's poison manual really is valuable, I'll keep it with me and resolve to really study it carefully."

Zhang Wuji carried Yang Buhui's hand and left the forest. They traveled along Yaomi road, when suddenly from the east they saw light from a torch. There were seven or eight people grasping their weapons and running quickly towards them. Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui hid in the underbrush.

When those people ran nearby, Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui saw that one of the people was Xuda. He was the one carrying a torch in his left hand, while in his right hand he was carrying a pike, shouting, "You wicked thieves that would harm the sky and eat people, quickly lay down your lives!" When they entered the forest, they saw the four of them dead on the ground and were startled. Xu Da shouted, "Brother Zhang, are you ok? We are here to save you!" Zhang Wuji shouted, "Big Brother Xu, your brother is here!" and

came out of the underbrush.

Xuda was very happy and hugged him, saying, "Brother Zhang, you have such a chivalrous character, not to mention among children, even among adults it's hard to find such a person. I was scared that you'd be harmed by those evil thieves, fortunately there's good news and the evil receive their punishment, this is a good judgment.

When they asked how Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan were poisoned, Zhang Wuji told them the story of cooking the mushrooms in the soup. Everyone praised him as clever. Xuda said, "These are all my good friends, they slaughtered a bull. A large fire is at Huang Jue Si Temple where the meat is being cooked. I went to find them and they all came. But if it weren't for Brother Zhang's cleverness, we still would've come too late." He introduced everyone to Zhang Wuji. On one side, a big eared guy was named Tang He, another heroic, exuberant one was named Deng Yu, a black faced, tall one was named Hua Yun; of two fair skinned brothers, the older one was named Wu Liang, and the younger was named Wu Zhen. The last one was a monk; his appearance was very ugly, with a protruding chin, resembling an iron shovel. Many scars and moles were on his face, and he had two sunken in eyes that were bright and unusually. Xuda said, "This person is Brother Zhu, his given name is Yuanzhang. He became a monk in Huang Juesi temple.

Hua Yun laughed and said, "He is an unconventional, happy monk, not one of those who loves to read Buddhist scriptures and worship Buddha, drinking wine and eating meat all day. When Yang Buhui saw Zhu Yuanzhang's ugly appearance, she felt afraid in her heart and hid behind Zhang Wuji. Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, "Even though this Buddhist monk eats meat, I don't eat people, so little sister doesn't need to be afraid." Tang He said, "The beef we've been

cooking in that pot should be ready now." Hua Yun said, "Let's go! Little sister, I'll carry you." He carried Yang Buhui on his back, walking with big steps. When Zhang Wuji saw this capable man was so happy and outgoing, he was also happy in his heart.

When they had walked around two and a half kilometers, they arrived at a temple. They walked inside the main hall and noticed the fragrant aroma of the roasting meat. Wu Liang said, "It's done, it's cooked!" Xuda said, "Brother Zhang, rest here, we'll get the meat ready."

Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui sat shoulder-to-shoulder on a cushion in the palace. Zhu Yuan Zhang, Xu Da, Tang He, Deng Yu and others moved quickly and brought out large pots and bowls of freshly-cooked beef. The brothers Wu Liang and Wu Zhen carried out a jug of fragrant wine and in a short while were singing and making merry in front of the Bodhisattva's statue.

Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui were already very hungry, so with the beef in their stomach, they were pleased beyond words. Hua Yun said, "Brother Xu, among all our Cult rules, we are not allowed to consume meat; this might be a little inappropriate."

Zhang Wuji was inwardly surprised, "So they are all members of the Ming Cult. The Cult rules only permit them to eat vegetarian dishes and to worship the demons, yet over here they are all merrily eating the meat."

Xu Da replied, "Our Cult's first rule is to 'Promote Kindness and Destroy Evil'; even though eating meat isn't a good thing, but it can't be totally avoided. Over here there isn't any rice or vegetables, so how can we just stare at the meat and starve to death?"

Deng Yu clapped his hands and said, "Brother Xu's words are insightful, eat! Eat!"

When they were eating and drinking, all of a sudden there was the sound of footsteps outside the door. Soon after, someone knocked on the door. Tang He jumped up and shouted, "Aiya! Zhang's household is outside searching for this cow!" The door was opened, and in came two servants, heroic looking with protruding chests and bellies. One person shouted, "Alright! Our house's big cow was actually stolen by you guys and eaten!" When he said this, he grabbed Zhu Yuanzhang. The other one said, "You lowly monk, today your entire club is here sharing the spoils, where can you run to? Tomorrow we'll send you to the mansion, and kill you by hitting you to death with a wooden board."

Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, "You're really speaking rubbish, how would you dare blame us for stealing that cow? Monks eat vegetables and pray to Buddha. If you're accusing me of eating meat, isn't this committing a great sin?" The heroic servant pointed to the meat inside of the plate, saying, "This isn't beef?"

Zhu Yuanzhang gave a signal with his eyes and laughed, "Who says this is beef?" The Wu Liang and Wu Zhen brothers walked up to the two servants and with a shout, grabbed the two men's arms. Zhu Yuanzhang took out a short dagger from his pocket and laughed, "Two brothers, I don't want to hide this from you, what we're eating isn't beef, but human meat. Today you've seen this, so we'll just have to eat you so you won't talk and leak this out. With a "chi" sound, one of the servant's clothes was torn and the knife produced a line of blood on his chest. The heroic servant was really startled, even begging, "Spare us, spare our lives!" Zhu Yuanzhang grabbed a piece of beef and stuffed into the two servant's mouths, saying, "Swallow it!"

The two of them even didn't dare to chew it and swallowed it into their stomachs. Zhu Yuanzhang laughed and said, "You can go out and tell your master we've stolen your cow, we can then cut open your stomachs and say, who're the ones that have eaten the beef, not even cleaning off the hair?" He flipped over the knife, dragging a line along their bellies. That person just felt a cold, icy knife on his stomach and was scared out of wits, screaming. The Wu brothers laughed, lifted up their legs and kicked the two out of the palace hall. Everyone was relieved and started eating quickly, laughing and insulting the two servants who had asked for their miserable experience. On normal days, the Zhang household would bully around the villagers. This time, they were so scared about their bellies being cut open, they surely wouldn't go out and tell them about everyone stealing the cow.

Zhang Wuji thought his actions were funny and admirable and pondered, "Despite this monk's ugly appearance, his behavior is upright and refreshing. His methods are really formidable." Zhu Yuanzhang had heard Xuda tell the story of how Zhang Wuji was willing to sacrifice himself to save Yang Buhui's life and was really fond of this chivalrous youth. He didn't treat him as a normal child, instead proposing a toast to him and treating him like a good friend. They drank until they were intoxicated, when Deng Yu said, "Us Han people have really endured the oppression of these barbarians, receiving an era of their dirty farts. Until today we haven't been able to have a good meal. If these days go on, how can we take it?" Hua Yun clapped his leg and said, "Half of the common people in Fengyang prefecture have died, really half of all the people under heaven have died of starvation, why don't we stake all of it and fight those Tartars?"

Xuda said with a clear voice, "Today people's lives have been

put on the same level as dogs and goats. This good little brother and sister nearly went into people's stomachs. Under the sky, who knows how many common people have become like cows and sheep? If upright men can't help all these people, living is really living in vain." Tang He also said, "Not bad, our luck was good today, we managed to find a cow to slaughter and eat, tomorrow we may not necessarily find one to steal. Everyone doesn't have enough clothes and food, do even upright men and heroes have to become thieves?"

As these people spoke they became more and more furious and began insulting the Tartars for inflicting suffering on them. Zhu Yuanzhang said, "We're randomly insulting these people here, but these insults aren't even going to hurt a hair on these Tartars. If we're really heroic, we should go to kill these Tartars!" Tang He, Deng Yu, Hua Yun, and the Wu brothers all yelled together, "Let's go!"

Xuda said, "Big Brother Zhu, you don't need to be this hard-working monk anymore. You're the oldest, we'll all listen to your words." Zhu Yuanzhang also didn't decline and said, "After today, we will live and die together, whether we have fortune or problems we will share it together." Everyone raised their bowl of wine together and drank it down, slamming their knives into the table with a heroic air. Yang Buhui looked at everyone, not understanding what they were saying and was inwardly scared.

Zhang Wuji thought, Zhang Sanfeng Tai Shifu warned me repeatedly not make friends with these people in the Mo Jiao. But Chang Yucun and Brother Xu are all within the Mo Jiao. They're far better than Jian Jie, Xue Gongyuan, these disciples in the righteous branch by tens of thousands of times. He always admired Zhang Sanfeng to the highest degree, but from his experience, he thought Zhang Sanfeng had some prejudice towards them in his heart. However, he

also thought that he shouldn't go against his Tai Shifu's wishes. Zhu Yuangzhang said, "Good Han people will do what they say, this time when we eat full is just the right time to do things. The Zhang household invited the Tartar officers and soldiers to dinner today, let's go capture and kill them. Hua Yun said, "Wonderful! " and grabbed his knife and stood up.

Xuda exclaimed, "Hold on a minute!" He went to the kitchen to get a basket and filled it with fourteen or fifteen pounds of beef to give to Zhang Wuji. He said, "Brother Zhang, your age is still small, you can't follow us to this shady business of rebelling and killing government officials. Us small group of people are so poor, without money on our bodies, so we must give this meat to you. If we luckily don't burn to death, we will see each other in the future and eat some beef together.

Zhang Wuji took the basket and replied, "I hope that you will perform a great service and wipe out these Tartars in order to let these common people under the sky have some food to eat." Zhu Yuangzhang, Xuda, Tanghe, Deng Yu all heard what he said and clapped and praised what he said, saying: "Brother Zhang, what you said is really correct, we hope that we will have some time together in the future."

As they said this they exited the temple, each carrying their weapons. Zhang Wuji thought in his heart, "They are going to go kill the Tartars, if I wasn't accompanying this little sister, I would also go with them. They only have seven people and are not the enemy's match. Zhang Yuan's house have Tartars who may follow them here to kill them so I can't really stay in this temple anymore. So he took his basket of beef and took Yang Buhui outside the temple. After traveling in the dark for four or five miles, suddenly they saw that to the north there was a red light rising to the sky and knew that Zhu Yuangzhang and Xuda were successful and had burnt

down Zhang Yuan's manor, making them very happy. At night the two of them slept on a mountain plain, and in the morning they proceeded westward. The two children endured wind, frost, hunger, and cold while walking along the road, making them exhausted. Fortunately Yang Buhui's parents were martial artists, so her own physique was healthy and strong so a small girl traveling for such a long distance was able to avoid sickness. On the way, she did have some colds, so Zhang Wuji picked some herbal medicine and was able to cure it. Every day they did have to rest, so they could only cover 20 or 30 miles in a day. After about fifteen or sixteen days, they reached Henan province.

There was not much difference between Henan and Anhui province - everywhere they went, there was famine and people were dying of starvation. Zhang Wuji made a bow and arrow and managed to shoot some birds and animals - one day they would be full, and another they would be hungry, slowly making their way east. Fortunately, they did not run into the Mongolian military, and they also did not run into any Jiang Hu people. As for those ordinary criminals with evil thoughts, how would they match up with Zhang Wuji? One day they ran into an old man and told him they wanted to go to the summit of Mt. Kunlun. This old man was startled and raised his eyebrows, saying, "Little brother, Kunlun Mountain is still about 108,000 li (a 'li' = 0.5 km) away, I heard that a Tang monk only went there to fetch some scriptures. You little kids aren't crazy are you? Where do you live? Quickly go back home!" When Zhang Wuji heard this, he could not help but feel disappointed, thinking, "Kunlun Mt. is so far, it's really impossible to go there, so the best thing to do is to go to Wudang to see Grandmaster first." But then he thought: "Someone trusted in me, even though the road is far, how can one stop in the middle? My own life is not long, if I can't send Sister Buhui before I die, I really can't be forgiven by Aunt Ji." So without saying anything else to the old man, he

pulled up Yang Buhui and continued their journey.

Later, after walking for more than twenty days, the two children's clothing were tattered, their appearances were wan and sallow. The thing that vexed Zhang Wuji most was that Yang Buhui constantly asked for her Mama. She would frequently cry for half a day because Mama did not fly back down from the sky. Zhang Wuji tried his best to distract her by telling her stories, by saying that their journey to the west this time was also to look for her Mama, by making faces and all kinds of things that would turn her tears into laughter.

One particular day they arrived at Zhumadian [a city in Henan]. It was the end of autumn, early winter. The new moon wind was blowing hard. Since the two children only had the clothes on their backs, they were shivering incessantly. Zhang Wuji took out his tattered outer garment and put it on Yang Buhui.

"Wuji Gege," Yang Buhui asked, "Aren't you cold?"

"I am not cold," Zhang Wuji replied, "I feel unbearably hot," while doing some jumping jacks to keep himself warm.

"You are so good to me!" Yang Buhui said, "I know you are cold, but you give your clothes to me." The little girl spoke like an adult, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel astonished.

Right that moment, they heard the sound of clashing weapons coming from the other side of the hill, followed by footsteps coming closer. A female voice called out, "Evil thief, you have been hit by my 'wei du sang men' nail [lit. feed the poison, mourning gate, loose translation: as soon as you are hit, you are at the death door]. The faster you run, the quicker the poison will flare-up!"

Zhang Wuji quickly pulled Yang Buhui to hide under the bush by the roadside. They saw a sturdy-looking man, about thirty some years of age, flying their way. Several 'zhang's behind him, a woman ran after him with a pair of sabers in her hand. The man staggered, his legs turned weak and he stumbled down on the ground.

The woman soon arrived by his side. "Finally, you will be dead under the Miss' hands!" she called out.

The man suddenly sprang up and struck her with his right palm. 'Bang!' the palm hit the woman's chest. The force behind the strike was very strong. The woman fell backwards the pair of sabers in her hands was flung far away.

The man reached to his back to pull the nail out. "Give me the antidote," he said hatefully.

The woman laughed coldly and said, "This time Shifu ordered us to pursue and capture you; he gave us the poisonous secret projectiles, but did not give us the antidote. Since I have fallen into your hands, I accept my fate, but do not even think that you can live either."

With the saber in his left hand on her throat, the man's right hand searched inside her pocket, and sure enough, there was no antidote. The man got very angry. He took the 'wei du sang men' nail and stabbed the woman shoulder with all his might. He roared, "Now you can taste your own 'wei du sang men' nail! You, Kunlun Pai ..." Before he finished speaking, the poison on his back flared up and he crumpled to the ground.

The woman struggled to crawl up; but 'wah!' after vomiting a mouthful of blood, she fell back down. She pulled the nail on her shoulder and tossed it to the ground. The man and the

woman both lied on the grass by the roadside. Their breathing was labored; they constantly gasped for air.

Ever since he treated Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan and almost died in their hands, Zhang Wuji was extremely wary towards the Wulin characters. This time, as he watched the drama unfold in front of him, he did not dare to come out.

After a while the man heaved a long sigh and said, "Today I, Su Xizhi, will lose my life at Zhumadian; yet I still do not know my offense against the Kunlun Pai. I will die with my eyes wide open. You have pursued me for a thousand 'li' and determined to kill me, in the end, what was that for? Miss Zhan, why don't you be nice and tell me!" There was no trace of hostility in his voice anymore.

The woman, Zhan Chun, knew her school's 'wei du sang men' nail was very fierce, so she realized that both of them were going to die together. She was completely disheartened and quietly said, "Who told you to peek when Shifu was training his sword technique? This technique, the 'Kun Lun Liang Yi Jian' [double-appearance sword], should be personally taught by him, the Senior, if anybody is caught looking without permission, even our own School's disciple must suffer punishment by his or her eyes being gouged; much less you, an outsider?"

"Ah," Su Xizhi exclaimed. "Damn it! Should die! Should die!" he cursed.

Zhan Chun angrily said, "Your death is imminent, you still cursed my Shifu?"

Su Xizhi said, "I want to curse him. What are you going to do? Isn't this injustice? I was just passing through Bai Niu Shan [White Ox Mountain], and accidentally saw that your

Shifu was practicing his sword. Because I was curious, I stopped and watched for a moment. Do you think that by watching for a moment I would be able to master this sword technique? If I have that kind of ability, how can you, a bunch of Kunlun disciples, possibly defeat me? Miss Zhan, let me tell you this: your Shifu, Tie Qin Xiansheng [Mister Iron 'Qin' – zither] is too narrow-minded. Not to mention that I did not learn even half a stance of the Kunlun Liang Yi Jian, even if I did, can you really say that I have committed a capital crime?"

Zhan Chun was silent. Inwardly she agreed that her master had made a big fuss over a minor issue. Just because he found out that Su Xizhi saw him launching the sword technique, he dispatched six disciples to pursue and kill him for thousands of 'li'. In the end, she was going to die together with this man. She believed at this moment this man had no reason to lie, so if he said that he did not steal the martial art technique, then she believed he was telling the truth.

Su Xizhi also said, "He gave you these Wei Du secret projectiles, but did not give you the antidote. Is there such custom within the Wulin world? Damn it ..."

In a soft voice Zhan Chun said, "Su Dage [big brother], Xiaomei [little sister – referring to self] has harmed you. Right now my heart is heavy with regret. It's good that I will accompany you to the other world. This is called fate. I only feel sorry for your family, your wife and children [Translator's note: the original Chinese text was much more polite; she called his wife 'Da Sao' (eldest sister-in-law), and the children 'gongzi' and 'xiaojie' (young master and young miss).] I really have no idea what I had done."

Su Xizhi sighed and said, "My woman died two years ago, leaving behind a boy and a girl to me, one is six years old,

the other is four. Tomorrow they will become orphans with no father and no mother.”

“Do you have any other family member?” Zhan Chun asked, “Anybody to look after the children?”

“Presently my sister-in-law is looking after them,” Su Xizhi said, “But she is rather short-tempered; oftentimes she is mean and unreasonable, I think she is a bit jealous of me. Ay! From now on these two babies will have to suffer a lot of pains.”

Zhan Chun said in a low voice, “It’s all my fault.”

Su Xizhi shook his head and said, “I can’t blame you on this. You have received your school’s strict order, and thus have no choice but to obey; it’s not like you have a personal enmity against me. In fact, after I got hit with your Wei Du secret projectile, I will certainly die; why should I strike you with my palm and use the secret projectile to injure you? Otherwise, I am saying this with all honesty: I know you have a good conscience, certainly you would be willing to look after my two cruel-fated children.”

Forcing a smile, Zhan Chun said, “I am the murderer who killed you, how can you say I have a good conscience?”

Su Xizhi said, “I really do not blame you, I do not blame you at all.”

Just now, the two of them were fighting a life and death battle, but as they realized they were going to die soon, they both were reluctant to leave the world of the living and their hearts were filled with nothing but kindness and goodwill.

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji thought, “Looks like these

man and woman are not bad people; besides, that surnamed Su still have two small children.” Remembering the hardship Yang Buhui and he suffered because they were orphans, he came out of his hiding place underneath the bushes and said, “Miss Zhan, do you know the kind of poison you have on your Wei Du nail?” To see a teenager and a little girl suddenly appear from the bushes, Su Xizhi and Zhan Cun had already felt strange. They were even more surprised to hear Zhang Wuji asking the question.

Zhang Wuji said, “I have a rudimentary knowledge of medicine. Gentleman and Lady have been poisoned, you might not be beyond help.”

Zhan Chun said, “What kind of poison, I may not know. But the wound is unbearably itchy. My Shifu said that after one got hit by this Sang Men nail, one will have only eight hours to live.”

Zhang Wuji said, “Let me have a look at the wound.”

Su and Zhan, two people noticed that he was young, his clothes were raggedy, his entire body was filthy; in short, he looked more like a beggar to them, what could he possibly know about treating poison wound?

In a rough voice Su Xizhi said, “Look, our lives are in danger. This is not a place for children to create trouble. Just go far away from me, alright?”

Zhang Wuji did not pay him any attention; he picked the Sang Men nail from the ground and sniffed it. He smelled a whiff of faint fragrance of flower. These days, whenever he had some time during their journey, he would flip the pages of Wang Nangu’s ‘Poison Manual’, to acquaintance himself with the fantastic oddities of every description of the poisons

and venoms around the world. As soon as he smelled this kind of aroma, he knew at once that the poison on the Sang Men nail was from the blue 'tuo luo' flower [*Datura stramonium*(?)]. The Poison Manual did say that the juice of this flower's original smell was stinky like dead fish. In itself, it was not poisonous, even if one to drink an entire bowl it would not bring the least bit of harm, but as soon as it is mixed with blood, it would turn into deadly poison, while its smell would turn fragrant.

"This is the poison from the 'tuo luo' flower," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhan Chun did not know what kind of poison was applied on the Sang Men nails, but she knew that there was indeed this kind of flower in her Shifu's flower garden. "Ah," she exclaimed in surprise, "How do you know?" The blue 'tuo luo' flower was a very rare poisonous flower; it originated from the western region, and had never been found in the central China.

Zhang Wuji nodded. "I know," he said. Taking Yang Buhui's hand, he said, "Let's go."

"Xiao Xiongdi [little brother]," Zhan Chun busily said, "If you know the treatment, please be kind and save our lives."

At first, Zhang Wuji was considering to help them, however, he suddenly remembered the evil expressions on Jian Jie and Xue Gongyuan's faces when they were about to eat them, he could not help but hesitate.

Su Xizhi said, "Xiao Xianggong [young master], I [orig. zaixia – the lowly or humble one] have eyes but failed to see an expert; please do not blame me."

“Alright,” Zhang Wuji said, “Let me have a try.” Taking some golden needles from his pocket, he pierced the ‘shan zhong xue’ [lit. sheep’s odor acupoint] on Zhan Chun’s chest, and the ‘que pen xue’ [empty basin acupoints] on her left and right shoulders, to stop the pain in her chest due to the palm injury she received earlier.

“This ‘tuo luo’ flower will become poisonous as soon as it meets the blood,” he said, “But it will not create any harm if it enters the stomach. The two of you need to suck each other’s wound first, until the blood is free of any coagulation.”

Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun were embarrassed and felt uncomfortable, but right now, their lives were more important, besides, there was no way they would be able to suck their own wounds. Therefore, left with no other choice, they sucked the poisonous blood from each other’s wound.

Zhang Wuji picked three kinds of herbal medicine by the hillside; he chewed it until it was mushy and then applied it on the two people’s wounds. “These three types of herbal medicine can temporarily stop the attack of the poison, but it is ineffective to drive the poison completely out of your systems,” he said, “We must go to the next town and look for a drugstore, and then I will mix the medicine to treat your poison.”

Originally, the wounds on Su and Zhan, two people, were unbearably itchy, but as soon as the herbal medicine was applied, they felt cool and comfortable, while at the same time their limbs were no longer numb and weak. At once they repeatedly expressed their gratitude.

Each one of them broke a tree branch to use it as a crutch, then helping each other, they slowly continued their journey

ahead. Zhan Chun asked Zhang Wuji's school and origin. Zhang Wuji did not want to explain the truth, he simply said that he understood medicine since his childhood.

After walking for more than two hours, they arrived at the town of Shahe [in Hebei province]. The four of them found an inn to rest. Zhang Wuji wrote a prescription and Su Xizhi had an inn-helper to get the medicine. By this time, the area west of Henan and Hebei had not suffered disaster; although the Mongolian government officers practiced unruly and tyrannical cruelty, they were not in the least different than any other places, the common people still had food to eat. The shops and inns in Shahe were open for business as usual. As soon as the inn-helper returned with the medicine, Zhang Wuji cooked it and fed it to Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun.

The four of them stayed in the inn for three days. Each day Zhang Wuji changed the prescription. He applied the medicine externally as well as internally. By the fourth day, the poison in Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun's bodies had been completely eradicated. The two of them profusely expressed their gratitude; they asked Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui's destination. Zhang Wuji mentioned the name of Zuo Wang Peak of the Kunlun Mountain.

"Su Dage," Zhan Chun said, "We owe our lives to this Xiao Xiongdi. However, my five Shixiong [martial brother] are still out there looking for you. This matter has not been brought to completion yet. What do you say you come with me going up Mount Kunlun?"

Su Xizhi was stunned. "Going up Mount Kunlun?" he asked.

"That's right," Zhan Chun said, "I will accompany you to pay a visit to my master. We will explain that you have not learned even half a stance of the Kunlun Liang Yi Jian. If we

do not resolve this matter with him, the Senior, you will face an endless disaster in the future.”

Su Xizhi was angry in his heart, he said, “You, Kunlun Pai, bully others too much. I just took one look and I nearly entered the gates of hell. Isn’t that enough?”

“Su Dage,” Zhan Chun said in gentle voice, “Please think about the difficulty Xiao Mei has to face. It’s not a problem for me to explain to my Shifu that you did not draw any advantage in sword technique from watching him; however, if my five Shixiong get hold of you and harm you, how would Xiao Mei feel?”

After going through life and death situation together for several days, their affection to each other grew. Listening to her gentle words full of tender feeling, Su Xizhi’s anger subsided at once. He also thought, “Kunlun Pai is strong in numbers; if they do not stop harassing me, eventually I will lose my life under their hands.”

Seeing him hesitate, Zhan Chun continued, “Please come with me first. Whatever important matter you need to attend, Xiao Mei will come with you and together we will deal with it after our visit to Mount Kunlun. What do you say?”

Su Xizhi was delighted. “Alright,” he said, “Let’s do it this way. Only I wonder whether Zun Shi [revered master] would trust me?”

Zhan Chun said, “Usually Shifu is very fond of me. If I earnestly ask him, I am sure he will not make things difficult for you. As soon as this matter is settled, Xiao Mei is thinking of visiting your young master and young miss, so that they will not be bullied by your sister-in-law.”

Hearing the way she talked, Su Xizhi knew the feeling between them was mutual; he was very happy. To Zhang Wuji he said, "Xiao Xiongdi, let us go up the Mount Kunlun together, so that we will keep each other company."

Zhan Chun said, "The Kunlun Mountains stretch for thousands of 'li'; I don't even know how many peaks there are. I don't know where that Zuo Wang Peak is, but if our Kunlun Pai is looking for a peak on Kunlun Mountains, I am sure we will find it."

The next day, Su Xizhi hired a large cart for Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui to ride, while Zhan Chun and he rode on horsebacks. When they arrived at the next bigger town, Zhan Chun bought several sets of clothes for Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. After they changed clothes, they were transformed into totally different persons. Su and Zhan two people cheered loudly as they saw the change in appearances on this pair of children; the boy looked so handsome and the girl so pretty. Until that day, these two children had been travelling a long and arduous journey; after having good meals, they gradually turned into a pair of healthy children.

They went farther and farther to the west, the weather also turned colder and colder. Fortunately, they had Su Xizhi and Zhan Chun looking after them, so they had a pleasant journey. When they reached the western region, Kunlun Pai's influence was strongly felt; there was even less obstruction. Only, the yellow sand assaulted their faces and the cold wind penetrated their bones, making the journey hard to endure. In less than a day they had arrived at the Mount Kunlun's San Sheng Ao [three-sage cavity/valley]. Everywhere they looked, there was green grass like a carpet, with fruit trees and flower bushes. Su Xizhi and Zhang Wuji had never imagined that there would be such a beautiful place like this in this desolate desert, they were delighted. Turned out the San

Sheng Ao was surrounded on all sides by skyscraping mountain peaks, which protect it from the cold winds.

Ever since 'Kunlun San Sheng' [Three Sages of Kunlun] He Zudao, the successive Sect Leaders had spent considerable effort and meticulous care to conserve and tidy up this valley in the next seventy, eighty years. They dispatched the disciples as far as Jiang Nan [general term referring to the area south of Yangtze River] on the east, and Tianzhu [Indian subcontinent] on the west, to collect rare flowers and extraordinary trees to be cultivated this valley.

Zhan Chun took the three of them to 'Tie Qin Ju' [Iron Zither Residence], where Tie Qin Xiansheng, He Taichong took his residence. As they entered the door, she saw that a crowd of her martial brothers and sisters were gathered inside with worried looks on their faces. They only nodded their acknowledgement to her without saying anything. Zhan Chun shivered inwardly, she wondered what had happened. Pulling a younger martial sister aside, she asked, "Is Shifu home?" The female disciple had not yet replied when they heard He Taichong roar in violent rage coming from the inner chamber, "What a useless bunch! A useless bunch! [orig. fan tong - 'rice bucket'] Everything I ask you to do, nothing is done properly. What use do I have of these worthless [orig. nong bao - wrap cloth of a boil or a wound] disciples?" followed by an earth-shattering noise of a table being slapped.

Zhan Chun turned toward Su Xizhi and said, "Shifu is having a fit of temper, we'd better not bump against the nail, let's come back tomorrow."

"Is that Chun'er?" suddenly He Taichong called out, "What are you doing whispering sneakily? Have you severed the head of that little thief surnamed Su?"

Zhan Chun's face changed; she scrambled toward the inner chamber, kneeled down and kowtowed. "Disciple pays her respects to Shifu," she said.

He Taichong said, "I sent you to do something for me. How was it? How is that little thief surnamed Su?"

"That man surnamed Su is outside," Zhan Chun replied, "He comes to kowtow and apologize to Shifu. He said he did not realize his offense; or else he would not have watched Shifu practice the sword technique. But our School's sword technique is most refined and subtle that as soon as he looked, he knew it was a brilliant sword move, unparalleled in the world. However, he did not have any luck that it was all an unfathomable mystery to him; in the end, he did not have the slightest comprehension."

She had followed her master for quite some time; she knew he was extremely proud of his own martial art skill. Therefore, she said that Su Xizhi highly commended their school's martial art. If her master was happy, then he might forgive Su Xizhi.

Normally, this conceited He Taichong would take things lightly, but today his mood was greatly agitated. "Humph," he snorted, "You dealt with this matter well! Confine that surnamed Su in the stone building behind the mountain. I'll punish him later."

Zhan Chun realized he was still in a fit of temper, so she did not dare to press further. "Yes!" she said; then she asked, "Are Shimu [master wives] all well? Let me pay my respects inside."

Altogether, He Taichong had five wives and concubines. The one he loved most was the youngest, the fifth concubine.

Zhan Chun was thinking that in order to seek forgiveness for Su Xizhi, she would need this 'Wu Shimu' [Fifth Master Wife] to speak on their behalf.

He Taichong's face suddenly turned sorrowful, he heaved a deep sigh and said, "It's alright for you to see 'Wu Gu' [fifth (paternal) aunt], she has been very sick. It's good that you returned this quick so that you can still see her face."

Zhan Chun was startled. "Wu Gu is not feeling well?" she asked, "I wonder what kind of sickness?"

He Taichong sighed again. "If we know the sickness, then we can help her. We have had seven, eight supposedly famous doctors to examine her, but they can't even tell what sickness she is suffering. Her whole body swells; a woman as beautiful as flower and jade, swollen ... Ay, I don't want to talk about it ..." He repeatedly shook his head, and then he continued, "I have this many disciples, but all are just a useless bunch. I told them to Changbai Shan [Mount Changbai, Jilin province] to look for thousand-year ginseng. They have been gone for two months, yet nobody returned. I told them to look for Xue Lian [snow lotus (*Saussurea involucreata*)], or other miracle drug, yet everybody returned empty handed."

Zhan Chun mused, "Changbai Shan is ten thousand 'li' away from this place, how can they promptly return? Even after reaching Changbai Shan, they might not necessarily find the thousand-old ginseng. As for Xue Lian or other miracle drug, which can bring the dead back to life, it's not likely that we can find it even if we look for it our entire lives, much less in a short time? How can there be such convenience?" She knew her master loved this young concubine as much as he loved his own life. Now that she had fallen seriously ill, no wonder he vented his anger to others.

He Taichong continued, "I transmitted my internal energy through her 'chi' passage, but it did not make the least bit of difference. Humph, humph, if Wu Gu's life cannot be saved, I am going to kill all useless physicians in the world."

"Let disciple come and visit her," Zhan Chun said.

"Fine, let me come with you," He Taichong said.

The master and disciple went together to the Fifth Aunt's chamber. As soon as Zhan Chun walked through the door, her nostrils were assaulted by strong odor of medicine. Upon opening the mosquito net, she saw the Fifth Aunt's face was swollen like Zhu Bajie [the pig-face character in the Journey to the West]; her eyes were buried deep underneath the swollen flesh that she almost could not open her eyes. Her breathing was so heavy that it sounded like the bellows a blacksmith. The Fifth Aunt was originally a beautiful woman; He Taichong would not be this infatuated with her otherwise. However, because of the illness she had turned into an ugly woman. Zhan Chun could not help but heave a deep sigh.

"Call those useless doctors to examine her again," He Taichong said. The old female servant who was attending to her needs complied and went out the room. Soon afterwards, they heard the clinking noise of iron chains as seven doctors walked in. The legs of these seven men were chained together. Their appearance looked haggard and their faces were pitiful.

These seven men were famous physicians from Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu regions. They were half-invited, half-kidnapped by He Taichong's disciples. But these seven famous doctors did not share the same opinion; some said she was bloated, some said she was possessed by evil spirit.

They all wrote prescriptions, but after taking the prescribed medicine, the Fifth Aunt's condition was no different than her condition on the first day.

In his rage, He Taichong had these seven famous physicians locked up, saying that if the Fifth Aunt was not cured, these seven useless doctors (by this time, the 'famous doctors' had turned into 'useless doctors') would accompany her to the grave. The seven doctors had used up their entire skill, but the Fifth Aunt's swelling was growing bigger and bigger. They knew their lives were at stake, but each time they did the examination together, these seven doctors were always arguing loudly with each other. Each one criticizing the other six, saying that the Fifth Aunt's worsened condition was because of the others' mistake, it had nothing to do with him.

This time was no different; as soon as they entered the room and examined her pulse, they started bickering with each other. He Taichong was anxious and enraged; he roared his curses that the seven famous or useless doctors' voices were drowned.

Zhan Chun's mind suddenly clicked. "Shifu," she said, "I brought a doctor from Henan. Although his age is young, his skill is somewhat superior to these doctors."

"Why didn't you say so?" He Taichong was delighted, "Quickly invite him, quickly invite him!"

Each time the famous doctor arrived, he always treated him with an utmost respect; but he would not be polite anymore as soon as the 'famous doctor' turned into a 'useless doctor'.

Zhan Chun quickly returned to the hall and took Zhang Wuji inside. As soon as Zhang Wuji saw He Taichong, he recognized him as one of the crowd who forced his parents to

their death on Mount Wudang a few years ago; he could not refrain from feeling hatred and resentment. However, it had been four, five years since then, that Zhang Wuji's face and stature had undergone huge changes. He Taichong did not recognize Zhang Wuji. He only saw a fourteen, maybe fifteen years old teenager, who did not kneel down and kowtow to him.

He Taichong's eyes narrowed; his face turned cold, and he no longer took any notice of Zhang Wuji. "Where is that doctor you were talking about?" he asked Zhan Chun.

"This Xiao Xiongdi is the doctor," Zhan Chun said, "He has an exquisite medical knowledge, I am sure his skill surpasses many famous doctors."

How could He Taichong believe her? "Nonsense, nonsense!" he said.

Zhan Chun said, "Disciple was hit by the blue 'tuo luo' flower poison, he was the one who cure me."

He Taichong was astonished, he thought, "Without our School's antidote, anybody who got hit by the blue 'tuo luo' flower poison would certainly die. If this kid can cure it, he must be some kind of freak." Looking up and down to size up Zhang Wuji, he asked, "Young man, do you really know how to treat illness?"

Recalling his parents' tragic death, actually Zhang Wuji hated He Taichong to his bones, however, by nature, it was difficult for him to hold a grudge, otherwise, he would not easily treat Jian Jie and the others, and he would not treat Zhan Chun of Kunlun Pai. As he heard He Taichong's rude question this time, although he was not happy, he still nodded his head.

When Zhang Wuji entered the room, he had already smelled strange odor. After a while, he felt the odor was sometimes growing stronger, another time the odor was dispersing. He felt the odor was very unusual. He walked toward the Fifth Aunt's bed and examined her face. He pressed the wrists of her both hands to check her pulse. Suddenly he took out a golden needle from his pocket and pricked it into her face which was swollen as big as a pumpkin.

He Taichong was shocked. "What are you doing?" he barked. As he lifted up his hand to grab Zhang Wuji, Zhang Wuji had already pulled the needle out, but there was no blood coming out from the Fifth Aunt's face. He Taichong's five fingers were less than half a foot from Zhang Wuji's back when he stopped. He saw that Zhang Wuji brought the needle to his nose and then nodded his head.

A ray of hope grew in He Taichong's heart. "Young ... Xiao Xiongdi," he said, "Can her illness be cured?" For a leader of a major sect to unexpectedly call Zhang Wuji 'Xiao Xiongdi' [little brother], he could be considered very polite.

Zhang Wuji did not answer. He crawled underneath the Fifth Aunt's bed for a while, and then he opened the bedroom window and looked at the flower garden outside. Suddenly he jumped out the window and took a stroll in the garden. He Taichong was very fond of the Fifth Aunt, so he had all kinds of rare flowers and plants grew outside her window. When he saw Zhang Wuji was acting strange, he felt as if his heart was frying in oil. He was hoping that Zhang Wuji would immediately write a prescription and cure the Fifth Aunt strange illness, but he was strolling leisurely in the flower garden instead; how could he not be angry? But when his hands and feet were bound without him able to do anything and suddenly he saw the light at the end of the tunnel, he

was forced to suppress his anger. Still, his face turned dark and his breathing was getting faster.

He observed that Zhang Wuji looked at the flowers and plants for a while and then he nodded his head as if he understood something. Upon returning to the room, Zhang Wuji said, "Her illness can be cured, but I don't want to cure her. Miss Zhan, I am leaving."

"Zhang Xiongdi," Zhan Chun said, "If you heal the Fifth Aunt, our Kunlun Pai, from top to bottom, will be greatly indebted to you. I must certainly ask you to heal her."

Pointing his finger to He Taichong, Zhang Wuji said, "This Tie Qin Xiansheng took part in forcing the death of my father and mother; why should I save his family's life?"

He Taichong was shocked. "Xiao Xiongdi," he asked, "What is your honorable surname? Who are your respected father and mother?"

"My surname is Zhang," Zhang Wuji replied, "My departed father was the fifth disciple of Wudang Pai."

He Taichong's heart turned cold. "Turns out he is Zhang Cuishan's son," he mused, "Wudang Pai is truly good; he learned from his family school, I guess his skill must be good." Immediately he sighed in grief and said, "Zhang Xiongdi, when your respected father was still alive, he and I [orig. 'zaixia' - under, the humble one] were good friends. When he committed suicide, I did not stop grieving over his death ..." In order to save his beloved concubine's life, he did not hesitate to flatter without any reservation.

Zhan Chun also helped her master propagating the lie, "After your father and mother died, Shifu wept bitterly several

times. He often told us, the disciples, that your respected father was his most cherished friend he had his entire life. Zhang Xiongdi, why didn't you tell me earlier? If I knew you are Zhang Wu Xia's [fifth hero] son, I would have treated you with more respect."

Zhang Wuji was half-believing and half-doubting, but since he did not easily hold any grudge, he said, "Madame has not contacted some strange disease; she is suffering from the snake venom of 'Jin Yin Xue She' [gold and silver blood snakes]."

"Jin Yin Xue She?" He Taichong and Zhan Chun exclaimed together.

"That's right," Zhang Wuji said, "I have never seen this kind of vipers myself, but Madame's cheeks are swollen, and when I pricked it with the golden needle, the needle smelled like the sandalwood fragrance. Mr. He, please take a look at Madame's feet, the tips of her ten toes may have tiny bite marks."

He Taichong busily tore open the cotton-wadded quilt covering the Fifth Aunt's body. When he examined her toes carefully, indeed he saw several purplish black bite marks on all her toes. The marks were as tiny as grains of rice; if he did not intentionally look for the marks, he would easily miss them.

As soon as He Taichong saw the marks, his confidence in Zhang Wuji's skill increased ten-folds. He said, "That's right, that's right, there are indeed bite marks on each toes. Xiao Xiongdi is very intelligent, very intelligent. Since Xiao Xiongdi knows the cause, you must also know how to treat it. After Concubine is healed, I will certainly reward you handsomely." Turning toward the seven physicians, he

sternly said, "What 'cold' or 'possessed by evil spirit', 'devoid of Yang' or 'lack of Yin'? Rubbish! How come you, seven rice buckets, cannot see the bite marks on her toes?" Although he was swearing and cursing, his tone was actually jubilant.

"Madame's illness is very peculiar," Zhang Wuji said, "It's not surprising that they do not know the cause. Please let them go home."

"Very well, very well!" He Taichong laughed, "Xiao Xiongdi honors us with your presence; if we keep these useless doctors in here, won't they annoy us to our deaths? Chun'er, give each of them one hundred 'liang' [tael], let them go home."

Narrowly escaped death, the seven physicians were overjoyed. They left in a hurry, for fear that Zhang Wuji's medical technique was not effective, then He Taichong would lock this 'little useless doctor' together with them, and would bury eight big and little 'useless doctors' together with the beloved concubine.

"Please ask the servant lady to move Madame's bed," Zhang Wuji ordered, "There is a hole underneath the bed from which the Jin Yin Xue snakes coming in and out of their lair."

He Taichong did not wait for the servant lady; grabbing the bed's leg with his right hand, he single-handedly pulled the bed away, along with the Madame on it. Sure enough, he saw a small hole underneath the bed. Unable to contain his delight and his anger, he called out, "Quickly get some sulfur and fire over here! Fumigate the vipers, cut them into thousand cuts and ten-thousand pieces!"

Zhang Wuji shook his hand. "Certainly not! Certainly not! Madame was hit by snake venom, she needs these two

snakes to heal. If you kill the snakes, Madame will never recover.”

“So be it,” He Taichong said, “What shall we do, then? Please advice.” Ever since his master died, it was the very first time he had uttered these two words ‘please advice’ again.

Zhang Wuji pointed toward the flower garden outside the window. “Mr. He,” he said, “Your honorable wife’s illness stems from those eight ‘ling zhi lan’ [lingzhi orchid] trees in that garden.”

“Is that what’s it called? Lingzhi Orchid?” He Taichong asked, “I did not know its name. A friend of mine knew my affection of flowers and plants, he brought those eight orchid trees from the western region for me. When the flowers bloom, they indeed emit sweet smelling fragrance, like that of sandalwood. The color of the petals is also extremely delicate and beautiful. I have never thought it is the source of the disaster.”

Zhang Wuji said, “According to the book, the root of the Lingzhi Orchid is ball-shaped, fiery red in color, with deadly poison inside. Why don’t we dig it out to see whether it is true?”

By this time, the other disciples had heard about the young doctor who was going to treat the Fifth Master-wife’s strange illness. The male disciples felt it was inappropriate for them to enter the room, so only Zhan Chun and the other female disciples, six in total, were standing on the side. Hearing Zhang Wuji’s order, two female disciples quickly fetched iron shovels and began digging around the root of one of the Lingzhi Orchid tree. As expected, they saw the fiery red ball-shaped root. The disciples heard Zhang Wuji when said that the root contained deadly poison; how could they dare to

touch it?

Zhang Wuji said, "Please dig all eight of the ball-shaped roots for me and place them in a clay pot. Put eight chicken eggs and a bowl of chicken blood, and mince everything into mush. Be careful in mixing the concoction, make sure nothing splashes onto your flesh."

Zhan Chun complied; she took two younger disciples to do his order. Zhang Wuji also wanted two bamboo tubes, about a foot long each, and a bamboo stick, which he set aside.

Soon afterwards, the Lingzhi Orchid's ball roots had been mashed into a thick paste. Zhang Wuji applied the paste on the floor, making a circle, but he left a gap about two 'cun' wide [1 cun is approximately 1 inch].

"Soon you will see an unusual thing; do not make any noise," Zhang Wuji said, "If the vipers are frightened, they will disappear without any trace. All of you must take licorice root and cotton; squeeze it into your nostrils."

Everybody followed his order at once. Zhang Wuji also stopped his nostrils then he took some kindling material and burned the Lingzhi Orchid's leaf he placed in front of the snake hole.

Less than the time to drink a cup of tea later, a little snake head appeared from the small hole. The snake's body was blood red. There was a golden crown-like flesh on its head. The snake slowly crawled out. Unexpectedly, this snake had four legs. Its length was approximately eight 'cun'. Behind this snake, there was another snake crawling out of the hole. The second snake was a little shorter, but it looked exactly like the first snake, except the crown on its head was silver in color.

Seeing these two strange snakes, He Taichong and the others held their breath; nobody dared to make any noise. It goes without saying that this kind of strange snake must be deadly venomous, but these people were martial art experts, they were not afraid of the snakes. However, if the snakes were scared away, the Madame's foul disease would be difficult to cure.

They saw the two snakes were extending their tongues to lick each other's back; they looked very affectionate, leaning and snuggling on each other, while crawling slowly to enter the Lingzhi Orchid paste circle.

Zhang Wuji quickly placed one bamboo tube outside the circle's gap, while using the bamboo stick he gently pushed the tail of the silver-crowned blood snake. The snake moved in a lightning speed; everybody only saw a flash of silver lightning and the snake had already entered the tube. The golden-crowned blood snake also wanted to follow in, but the bamboo tube was too small; it could contain only one snake. As the golden-crowned blood snake was unable to enter, it produced an anxious 'hu, hu' sound.

With the bamboo stick, Zhang Wuji pushed the other bamboo tube in front of the golden-crowned blood snake. The snake also entered the tube. Zhang Wuji quickly took a wooden cork and closed the bamboo tube opening.

From the time the pair of snakes came out of the hole, everybody had been nervously holding their breath in trepidation. When Zhang Wuji finally closed the bamboo tubes with wooden corks, these people exhaled together as if by prior agreement.

Zhang Wuji said, "Please take several buckets of hot water

and scrub the floor clean. We must not have any Lingzhi Orchid's poison remain in here."

The six female disciples rushed into the kitchen to boil some water. They returned a short while later and promptly washed the floor clean.

Zhang Wuji instructed them to shut the doors and windows tight, also for them to fetch some 'xiong huang' [realgar], 'ming fan' [potassium alum], 'dai huang' [Chinese rhubarb], 'gan cao' [licorice], and other drug ingredients, and ground them into powder, mixed with quicklime [Calcium Oxide]. He poured the mixture into the bamboo tube containing the silver-crowned blood snake. The snake immediately produced a 'hu hu' sound, which was immediately responded by the golden-crowned snake in the other bamboo tube. Zhang Wuji took the wooden cork out. The golden-crowned snake went out of the tube and crawled anxiously around the tube containing the silver-crowned snake. Suddenly it dashed toward the bed and disappeared underneath Fifth Aunt's cotton quilt.

"Ah!" He Taichong was extremely shocked. Zhang Wuji shook his hand, and then gently uncovered the cotton quilt. They saw that the golden-crowned snake was biting the middle toe of the Fifth Aunt's left foot.

Zhang Wuji's face lit up as he said in a low voice, "The Jin Yin Xue snakes' venom inside Madame's body is currently being sucked out by this snake."

About half the time needed to burn an incense stick later, the snake's body grew several times its original size; the golden crown on its head also grew brighter. Zhang Wuji partly opened the wooden cork containing the silver-crowned snake. The golden-crowned snake leaped down from the bed

and went to the bamboo tube. It spat the poisonous blood from its mouth to feed the silver snake.

"That's enough," Zhang Wuji said, "We'll draw the poison out twice daily, plus I am going to write a prescription to rapidly reduce the swelling, within ten days she will recover completely."

He Taichong was ecstatic. He invited Zhang Wuji into his study and said, "Xiao Xiongdi is extremely skillful. Would you advice me of what is going on?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "According to the book, this pair of golden-crowned and silver-crowned snakes occupies number 47 in the world in term of its toxicity, so their venom cannot be considered very fierce. However, there is one singular characteristic: they feed on poisons; 'pi shuang' [arsenic frost], 'he ding hong' [lit. red top of a crane], 'kong que dan' [peacock gall bladder], 'zhen jiu' [wine made of feathers of legendary bird], and so on, no exception. Lingzhi Orchid grew in the flower garden outside Madame's window. This Lingzhi Orchid's toxicity is truly fierce; it had unexpectedly drawn the pair of Jin Yin Xue snakes."

He Taichong nodded. "So that's how it is," he said.

Zhang Wuji said, "Jin Yin Xue snakes always live in pairs, male and female. Just now, I used realgar and other chemicals to burn the silver-crowned female snake. To save its mate, the male golden-crowned snake absorbed the poisonous blood from Madame's toe and feed it to her. Hereafter I am going to burn the male snake. The female snake will definitely drew some more poisonous blood. By repeating this procedure several times, the venom inside Madame's body can be totally eradicated."

Speaking to this point, he remembered something. "Why did the snakes bite Madame's toes in the first place?" he mused, "There must be another reason." After thinking for a while without finding any satisfactory answer, he dropped the matter out of his mind.

That very same day He Taichong held a banquet at the inner hall to entertain Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui. Zhang Wuji thought that since Yang Buhui was Ji Xiaofu's illegitimate daughter, he did not want to implicate Emei Pai's reputation; thereupon, when He Taichong inquired of her, he gave him a vague answer without further explanation.

A few days later, the swelling on the Fifth Aunt subsided, her spirit recovered, she was able to eat and drink. Zhang Wuji bid his farewell, but He Taichong earnestly asked him to stay, for fear that his beloved concubine's illness would return.

Toward the afternoon of the tenth day, the swelling on the Fifth Aunt had completely disappeared. The Fifth Aunt prepared an exquisite banquet complete with fine wine as her way of saying thanks to Zhang Wuji. She also invited Zhan Chun to accompany the guests.

Although the Fifth Aunt's countenance was still thin and pallid, her beauty had returned, making He Taichong utterly delighted. Seeing her master was in a very good mood, Zhan Chun implored him to take Su Xizhi as his disciple.

He Taichong roared in laughter. "Chun'er," he said, "Your 'removing-the-firewood-from-under-the-pot' ruse is very well executed. If I accepted this surnamed Su fellow, then I might pass on the 'Kunlun Liang Yi Jian' sword technique to him. In that case, what harm would it bring if he has previously peeked one time?"

"Shifu," Zhan Chun laughed, "If not because this surnamed Su fellow peeking your sword practice, disciple would not have left to pursue him, and thus would not come across Brother Zhang. No doubt that Shifu and Wu Gu's good fortune have always flooded the heavens, and that Brother Zhang's medical skill is brilliant; but come to think about it, this fellow surnamed Su also has a tiny bit of contribution."

The Fifth Aunt said to He Taichong, "You have received these many disciples, in the end, nobody was able to help you in your distress, except Miss Zhan who has rendered you a great service. Since Miss Zhan has her heart set on that fellow, I am sure he must have something good in him. Why don't you accept one more disciple? Who knows, perhaps in the future he will be your most capable disciple."

He Taichong had always listened to his most beloved concubine, thereupon he said, "Very well, I will accept him on one condition."

"What is it?" the Fifth Aunt asked.

With a straight face He Taichong said, "Upon entering my school, he must keep his mind on his lessons, he must not have any wishful thinking toward Chun'er, thinking about taking her as his wife, for example. I will strictly enforce this one condition."

Zhan Chun blushed and hang her head low. The Fifth Aunt giggled and said, "Aiyo, as the Shifu, you must set a good example. You yourself have three wives and four concubines, and yet you forbid your disciple to marry?"

He Taichong was only teasing Zhan Chun. He broke out in laughter and said, "Let's drink! Let's drink!"

A young maid came in, carrying a wooden tray in his hands, with a pot of wine on the tray. She came in front of the banquet table and poured wine for everybody. The wine was thick and rather sticky, golden yellow in color, its sweet aroma assailed their nostrils.

"Zhang Xiongdi," He Taichong said, "This wine is our mountain's famous product, it is fermented from the 'hu po mi li' [lit. amber honey pear] grown on the snowy peak. It is called 'hu po mi li jiu' [amber honey pear wine]. You won't find it outside this area. You should not drink only a little of it." While in his mind he pondered, "How can I swindle him into spilling out the Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden-mane lion king] Xie Xun's whereabouts? I must plan it carefully, cannot have the slightest bit of rashness."

Actually, Zhang Wuji was not a wine-drinker, but since the sweet aroma of the 'hu po mi li jiu' was flooding his brain, he took the cup with both hands. He had just brought the cup to his lips when the pair of Jin Yin Xue snakes he kept in his pocket was calling out, 'hu hu hu'. Zhang Wuji's mind was stirred. "We must not drink this wine," he called out.

Everybody was startled and put down the wine cups at once. From his pocket Zhang Wuji took the bamboo tubes out and released the golden-crowned blood snake. The snake crawled toward the wine cup and stretching out its neck, it sucked the wine dry. Zhang Wuji returned the snake into the bamboo tube, and then released the female silver-crowned blood snake to also drink a cup. This pair of snakes did not want to be separated from each other, so if only either the male or the female was released, they would not go far and were very tame. However, if both of them were released at the same time, not only it would be difficult to return them into the bamboo tubes, they might even bite.

The Fifth Aunt laughed and said, "Xiao Xiongdi, your pair of snakes can drink wine. They are so amusing."

Zhang Wuji said, "Could you have someone bring in a dog or a cat, please?"

"Yes," the young maid replied and turned around to leave the room.

Zhang Wuji said, "Would this Jiejie [elder sister] wait here and not go? Let someone else get the cat or the dog."

A short while later, a servant came in pulling a yellow dog. Zhang Wuji took the cup of wine in front of He Taichong and poured it into the yellow dog's mouth. The yellow dog barked sadly several times, and then died with blood flowing from all its seven orifices.

The Fifth Aunt was so frightened that her entire body trembled. "The wine is poisonous ... who ... who wants to kill us? Zhang Xiongdi, how did you know?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Jin Yin Xue snakes feed on poison. When they smelled the poison in the wine, they cried out happily."

He Taichong's face turned pale; he grabbed the young maid's wrist and said in low voice, "Who told you to deliver this poisonous wine to us?"

The young maid was shocked and scared out of her wits. In a trembling voice she stammered, "I ... I didn't know it was ... it was poisonous ... I took it from the kitchen ..."

"Whom did you meet on the way from the kitchen to this room?" He Taichong asked.

The young maid replied, "I saw Xing Fang at the corridor, she stopped me to talk to me, she opened the wine pot to smell its aroma."

He Taichong, the Fifth Aunt and Zhan Chun looked at each other with fear on their faces. Turned out that Xing Fang was the trusted maid of He Taichong's first wife.

"Mr. He," Zhang Wuji said, "I was reluctant to say it, although I have pondered about it in my heart. Think about it, why did this pair of Jin Yin Xue snakes bite Madame's toes in the first place, so that the snake venom entered into her system? Evidently, Madame has already been hit by a slow poison; her blood has already contained poison. This was what attracted the Jin Yin Xue snakes. I am afraid the person who poisoned Madame is the same person who put poison in our wine today."

He Taichong had not replied when suddenly the curtain on the doorway was opened and a shadow flashed by. Zhang Wuji felt a severe pain on the chest below his breasts as his acupoints were sealed.

A sharp voice said, "You are absolutely right, I was the one who put poison!"

They saw a middle-aged woman came in. She was big and tall in stature, the hair on her head was graying, her eyes revealed a strong character, there were wrinkles in between her eyebrows. The woman said to He Taichong, "I put centipede venom in the wine, what are you going to do?"

The Fifth Aunt's face showed fear; she stood up at once and respectfully bowed, "Taitai! [Madame]" she called out. Turned out this big and tall woman was He Taichong's first wife, Ban Shuxian, who was originally his older martial sister.

Seeing his wife burst into the room, He Taichong was silent, he only snorted once. Ban Shuxian said, "I am asking you: I put the poison in the wine. What are you going to do?"

He Taichong said, "You don't like this young man, that's fine with me. But you just did this without distinguishing right from wrong. Supposing the wine entered my belly, how can that be good?"

Ban Shuxian indignantly said, "There is no good person in here! If I can torment everybody to death, it is good for me."

She took the wine pot and shook it lightly. The wine splashed inside the pot; apparently, the pot was still almost full. She poured a cup of wine and placed it in front of He Taichong. "I was thinking of killing all five of you," she said, "But since this kid has discovered my plan, I am willing to spare four of you. I don't care who will drink this cup of wine. Lao Gui [old ghost], you decide." While saying that, 'shua!' she drew her sword.

Ban Shuxian was Kunlun Pai's most illustrious character. She was two years older than He Taichong, and she entered their school earlier, her martial art skill was not inferior to He Taichong. When he was young, He Taichong was a handsome man, so he won the favor of this older martial sister. Their master, Bai Luzi, died in a battle against a Ming Cult expert, and did not leave any will. As a result, the numerous disciples fought over the Sect Leader position, nobody was willing to yield to anybody else. Ban Shuxian threw her full support behind He Taichong. With their combined effort, their power increased greatly. Although the other martial brothers each desired a selfish gain, nobody was able to challenge them. In the end, He Taichong took over the Sect Leader position. Out of his indebtedness, he took this older martial

sister as his wife.

As they grew older, due to the difference in their ages, Ban Shuxian appeared to be more than ten years older to He Taichong. Using the pretext of not having a male offspring, He Taichong took a concubine. Because of her dozens of years of prestige and his own conscience - he knew he was at fault, He Taichong held this Shijie [older martial sister] in very high regard. However, although he was afraid of her, he kept taking concubine after concubine. Only, each time he took a new concubine, his fear toward his first wife also increased by 30%.

At this time, as he saw his wife put a poisoned wine in front of him, it had never occurred to him to disobey his wife's order. He thought, "Certainly I can't drink it. Wu Gu and Chun'er also cannot drink it. Zhang Wuji is the benefactor who saved our lives. Only this baby girl does not have any relation with us." Thereupon he stood up and handed the wine cup to Yang Buhui, saying, "Child, drink this cup of wine."

Yang Buhui was terrified; she had just witnessed how a large yellow dog drank a cup of poisoned wine and died violently; how could she dare to drink the wine? Crying, she said, "I don't want to drink, I don't want to drink."

He Taichong grabbed the clothes on her chest and was about to force her. Zhang Wuji coldly said, "Let me drink it."

He Taichong felt a pang of regret, but he did not open his mouth at all. Ban Shuxian was actually jealous and wanted to poison He Taichong's most beloved concubine, the Fifth Aunt. Her scheme was doing so well until Zhang Wuji suddenly appeared and thwarted her plan; therefore, she loathed this young man. With a cold voice she said, "You are a crafty

young man, perhaps you have taken the antidote. If you are going to drink, then one cup is not enough, you must drink the entire poisonous wine pot dry."

Zhang Wuji looked at He Taichong, hoping he would say something on his behalf, who would have thought that He Taichong was looking down and did not utter a single word. Zhan Chun and the Fifth Aunt did not dare to speak, for fear that as soon as they opened their mouth, Ban Shuxian might turn her anger to them, and then this almost full pot of poisonous wine would be poured into their own mouths.

Zhang Wuji's heart turned icy-cold, he said in his heart, "These several people's lives were saved by me, but now that I am facing a disaster, they indeed only watch with folded arms, they don't even utter half a word on my behalf."

"Miss Zhan," he said, "After I die, please take this little sister to Zuo Wang Peak where her father is. Would you do that?"

Zhan Chun looked at her master. He Taichong nodded. Thereupon Zhan Chun said, "Very well, I will take her there." However, in her heart she thought, "Kunlun Mountains spread out for thousands of 'li', how do I know where the Zuo Wang Peak is?"

Zhang Wuji could hear that she said those words half-heartedly, obviously she did not have the least bit of sincerity; he knew that these people were hypocritical bunch, so it would not do any good to speak further. With a cold laugh he said, "Kunlun Pai is one of the prestigious school in the Wulin world, turns out it is just like this. Mr. He, get the wine for me!"

He Taichong was indignant to hear him, so he thought the sooner he got rid of Zhang Wuji the better, his wife's anger

would be suppressed sooner, and thus she would not think of any other treacherous scheme to kill the Fifth Aunt. To him, it was a desperate situation; he had no time to worry about Xie Xun's whereabouts. Therefore, he fetched the almost full pot of poisonous wine and poured it into Zhang Wuji's mouth.

Yang Buhui hugged Zhang Wuji tight while wailing loudly.

Ban Shuxian laughed coldly and said, "Even if your medical skill is more exquisite, I am going to make sure that you will not be able to save yourself." Stretching out her hand, her fingers deftly sealed several acupoints on Zhang Wuji's shoulder, back, waist and sides. Using the end of her sword's hilt, she also sealed two major acupoints on He Taichong, Zhan Chun, the Fifth Aunt and Yang Buhui's bodies. She said, "I'll be back four hours later to release you." When she sealed their acupoints, He Taichong, Zhan Chun, and the others did not move; they did not even dare to evade.

Ban Shuxian turned toward the servants waiting on the side, "Out!" she said. She went out the room last and closed the door while laughing coldly all the way out.

As soon as the poisonous wine entered his stomach, Zhang Wuji felt excruciating pain deep inside his belly. When Ban Shuxian left the room, he thought, "Now that you left, I may not necessarily die." Suppressing the pain, he circulated his 'chi' using the technique taught by Xie Xun. First, he freed the sealed the acupoints on his body, and then he pulled several strands of his own hair and tickled his throat. 'Wah!' he vomited about 80, 90% of the poisonous wine inside his stomach.

He Taichong, Zhan Chun, and the others were utterly amazed seeing how he was able to move even after his acupoints were sealed. He Taichong wanted to reach out and stop him,

but unfortunately, his acupoints were also sealed by his own wife. His superior martial art skill was useless at this time, it only increased his anxiety.

Zhang Wuji was still hurting inside, but no matter how hard he tried, there was simply nothing else he could vomit out of his stomach. He thought the best course of action right now was to try to escape from this dangerous place and then find a way to repel the poison. Thereupon he reached out to unseal Yang Buhui's acupoints. To his surprise, however, Ban Shuxian's acupoint sealing technique was unique, Zhang Wuji was unable to unseal the acupoints. In this pressing moment, he had no time to try over various acupoint unsealing techniques, thereupon he carried her toward the window. Pushing the window pane outward, he looked around and after making sure there was nobody outside, he put Yang Buhui down outside the window.

If He Taichong used his internal energy [orig. 'zhen qi' - true/real 'chi'] to force the acupoints open, he might be able to do it within a little more than an hour; however, Zhang Wuji was about to escape. If he waited until his wife returned and inquired, he would be in trouble; not to mention this Wudang Pai kid was able to escape from Kunlun Pai's San Sheng Tang [three-saint hall] unarmed [orig. 'chi shou kong quan' - empty hand, empty fist]. If his ungrateful act and hypocritical deeds were spread out in Jianghu, how could he save his face as the grand master of a prestigious sect? No matter what, he simply must kill him. Therefore, he took a deep breath, ready to shout, to warn his wife.

Zhang Wuji had anticipated this, so he took a black pill from his pocket and stuffed it inside the Fifth Aunt's mouth, saying, "This is the 'jiu pi wan' [lit. turtle-dove arsenic pill]. After twenty-four hour, the Fifth Madame will die with broken intestines and split heart. I am going to put the antidote on a

big tree thirty 'li' from here. You will see the mark. Six hours later, Mr. He can send someone to fetch the medicine. If by any chance I am captured on my way out and am put to death, there will be one person accompanying me."

This abrupt turn of events took He Taichong by surprise; he hesitated a moment before saying in a low voice, "Xiao Xiongdi, although my San Sheng Tang is not a dragon pool or a tiger lair, I doubt two children like you will be able to break through."

Zhang Wuji knew he was not bluffing. He laughed coldly and said, "But the toxicity of the 'jiu pi wan' the Fifth Madame took, no one else can neutralize it other than I."

"Alright," He Taichong said, "You unseal my acupoints, I will personally escort you out."

He Taichong's sealed acupoints were 'feng chi' and 'jing men' ['wind reservoir' and 'capital (city) gate']. Zhang Wuji massaged his 'tian zhu', 'huan tiao', 'da zhui', 'shang qu' [lit. sky pillar, jumping the hoop, big spine, and crooked quotient], several acupoints for a moment, but it hardly gave him the desired effect. In their hearts, the two of them admired one another.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Their Kunlun Pai's acupoint sealing technique is truly good. Mr. Hu had taught me seven different acupoint unsealing techniques, but all are useless against the sealed acupoints on his body."

He Taichong thought, "Surprisingly this kid knows these many acupoint unsealing techniques, every technique is marvelous, truly deserving my admiration. Shijie [martial (older) sister] clearly sealed seven, eight of his acupoints, yet somehow she failed to control him? For the last several years

the name of Wudang Pai shook the Jianghu. This LaoDao [Ol' Taoist] Zhang Sanfeng' ability is unreachable. On the Mount Wudang that day, I was lucky I did not fight Wudang Pai. Otherwise, if they unleashed their anger, I would have fallen with head and face in the mud. He is only a small child, yet he is this good. The older and bigger ones must be ten times better than he is."

He did not know that Zhang Wuji learned acupoint sealing technique from Xie Xun and the acupoint unsealing technique from Hu Qingniu. Wudang Pai indeed gave him the solid foundation with its prestige that shook the Wulin world, however, these two special skills of Zhang Wuji's had nothing to do with Wudang Pai.

Seeing Zhang Wuji failed to unseal his acupoints, He Taichong had an idea, "Take that teapot and give me a mouthful of tea," he said.

Zhang Wuji did not know why he suddenly wanted to drink tea at a moment like this, but knowing that he cared too much about his beloved concubine's life, he believed He Taichong would not dare to do any trick against him. Thereupon he took the teapot and let him drink some tea.

He Taichong slowly sipped a mouthful of tea, but he did not swallow it. Aiming toward his own 'qing leng yuan' [lit. clear and cold abyss] on the crook of his elbow, he exerted his strength and blew a water dart. With 'chi, chi!' sound, the acupoint on his hand was immediately unsealed.

Upon his arrival at the San Sheng Tang, Zhang Wuji saw right away how He Taichong threw a fit of temper because of the Fifth Aunt's illness, that he was a man who fears his wife and pampers his concubine, that he was a weak and indecisive man. Right now, as he witnessed He Taichong's skill, he could

not restrain from being flabbergasted. "This Kunlun Pai Zhang Men's [Sect Leader] martial art skill is truly profound; I underestimated him before. Apparently, his skill level is not below those of Yu Er Shibo [second martial (older) uncle], Jin Hua Popo and Mijue Shitai. I thought he was a timid and careless. I forgot the fact that he is the Kunlun Pai Zhang Men, a position which not many people would be able to reach. If this water dart was shot to my face or my chest, I would have died instantly."

He Taichong turned his right hand several times and then he unsealed his own legs' acupoints. "Give the antidote first," he said, "Then I will escort you safely out the valley."

Zhang Wuji shook his head. He Taichong anxiously said, "I am the Kunlun Zhang Men, do you think I will break my promise to a child like you? Won't it be bad if the poison flares-up?"

Zhang Wuji said, "The poison will not flare-up."

"Alright," He Taichong sighed, "Let us go out quietly."

The two of them jumped out the window. He Taichong reached out and lightly brushed Yang Buhui's back with his fingers. Her acupoints were immediately unsealed; his hand was incomparably light and swift. Zhang Wuji was extremely impressed, and his face showed his deep respect. He Taichong understood his feelings, he smiled slightly. With each hand holding one child, he circled toward the flower garden behind the San Sheng Tang, and went out through the side door.

Altogether, there were nine entryways around the San Sheng Tang. Other than the side door of the rear garden, all the passages were winding around garden paths, and some lead

into various pavilions and halls. Zhang Wuji saw endless rows of rooms with countless doors. If He Taichong did not lead them, he knew he would be lost for sure. Even without any Kunlun disciple stopping them, they might not necessarily be able to escape out.

As soon as they left the San Sheng Tang, He Taichong grabbed Yang Buhui and carried her in his right arm while pulling Zhang Wuji with his left hand. Unleashing his 'qing gong', He Taichong took them toward the northwest. Taken by He Taichong, Zhang Wuji felt they were lightly floating on the ground; each jump covered a distance of more than a 'zhang' [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3 meters]. The wind sounded so loud in his ears; it was as if they were flying high up in the sky. His respect towards He Taichong and Kunlun Pai grew by several points.

Zhang Wuji realized that the poison in his stomach had not been completely eradicated, so he took two detoxifier pills from his pocket and felt relieved after the pills entered his belly.

While they were still rushing ahead, suddenly they heard a woman's voice calling, "He Taichong ... He Taichong ... stop ..." This voice was riding on the wind; it sounded very far, yet also sounded as if the speaker was right next to them. It was precisely Ban Shuxian's voice.

He Taichong hesitated, but in the end he stopped. He said with a sigh, "Xiao Xiongdi, the two of you better go quickly. She is my wife, I cannot escort you any further."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This man is actually very decent toward us." Thereupon he said, "Mr. He, you can return now. The pill I gave the Fifth Madame is not poison; it is not 'Jiu Pi Wan' at all, it is only 'sang bei wan' [mulberry tree shell pill]

to moist the throat and suppress coughing. A few days ago Buhui Meimei [younger sister] was coughing, so I made some for her. I still have several pills left and unavoidably I scared you."

He Taichong was stunned, angry, but also relieved. "So it really is not poison?" he roared.

"I was the one who brought the Fifth Madame back to life," Zhang Wuji said, "How could I poison her?"

In the meantime, Ban Shuxian did not stop calling, "He Taichong ... He Taichong ... Are you done running away?" Her voice was somewhat closer.

He Taichong took Zhang Wuji and Yang Buhui away because he was afraid his beloved concubine's poisoning might be incurable, but now he knew for certain that the Fifth Aunt was not poisoned at all. Turned out he had fallen under this kid's trick. His anger rose uncontrollably. 'Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!' four times on his ears left and right, Zhang Wuji's cheeks were swollen and blood dripping down from his mouth.

Zhang Wuji deeply regretted his own action, "I was muddle-headed. Why would I tell him the truth?" he mused, "Now Buhui Meimei and I will lose our lives."

Seeing He Taichong's fifth strike was about to arrive, hastily he launched the 'dao qi long' [riding a dragon upside-down] from the Wudang 'chang quan' [long fist] style, in which his palm met the approaching enemy. If this stance was launched by Yu Lianzhou or his peers, the raw power would be unlimited, but Zhang Wuji's mastery of this skill was only skin-deep, how could he possibly withstand Kunlun Pai Zhang Men's strike?

He Taichong slightly leaned sideways. 'Slap!' his palm hit Zhang Wuji's face above his right eye so that his eye was immediately swollen. Zhang Wuji had realized early on that his skill was too far below of his opponent. Since he could not even return a single stance from the opponent, he might as well hang down his hands and stand still, no longer trying to resist. But He Taichong did not give up just because Zhang Wuji did not fight back, he still struck Zhang Wuji one palm after another. Only he did not use internal energy at all, otherwise, one palm strike would be enough to kill him. Still, each palm strike had made Zhang Wuji dizzy and his vision blurred; the pain was unbearable.

While He Taichong was hitting enthusiastically, Ban Shuxian, taking two disciples along, had arrived, she coldly standing on the side.

Seeing Zhang Wuji not fighting back, Ban Shuxian thought it was not interesting. "Try hitting that baby girl," she said.

He Taichong's body turned sideways and 'Slap!' he struck Yang Buhui's ear. Yang Buhui was hurt and crying loudly.

Zhang Wuji was angry, "It's alright for you to hit me, why must you bully a little girl?"

He Taichong ignored him, he stretched out his palm to strike Yang Buhui again. Zhang Wuji jumped forward to hit He Taichong's chest with his head.

Ban Shuxian sneered and said, "A little boy like that still knows passion and righteousness, unlike an old fickle who completely lacks any sense of love and justice."

Listening to his wife mocking him, He Taichong's face

reddened. He grabbed the back of Zhang Wuji's neck and threw him out. "Little bastard!" he roared, "Go see your father and mother!" He was using his full power, aiming Zhang Wuji's skull toward a large rock on the side of the mountain. Zhang Wuji was unable, he flew swiftly and in an instant he would hit the rock, his brain would burst open.

Suddenly a strong force came in from the side, pulling Zhang Wuji aside and stood him up on the ground. Zhang Wuji was shaken badly, he stood unsteadily and narrowed his swollen eyes to look to the side. He saw about five feet away stood a middle-aged scholar wearing white coarse cotton long robe.

Ban Shuxian and He Taichong looked at each other in astonishment; they did not hear this scholar coming, and did not see from where he came. Supposing he had already been hiding behind the rock, based on their capability, why did these husband and wife not know his presence? Just now He Taichong was using a considerable force in throwing Zhang Wuji toward the rock, the momentum was at least five, six hundred catties, yet the scholar neutralized it, and stood Zhang Wuji on the side, with only a roll of his sleeve. Clearly his martial art skills were amazingly high.

They noticed the scholar was around forty years of age, his appearance was elegant, only his eyebrows were slightly sagging. There were noticeable wrinkles on the corners of his mouth, as if he had grown old before his age due to suffering. He did not speak nor did he move, his expression was apathetic, as if his mind was on some distant place, thinking about some other matters.

He Taichong coughed once and asked, "Who are you, Sire? Why are you meddling willfully, interfering Kunlun Pai's business?"

The scholar indifferently said, "So you are Tie Qin Xiansheng [Mr. Iron Zither] and Mrs. He? I'm [orig. zaixia - the humble one] Yang Xiao."

"Ah!" as soon as the two words 'Yang Xiao' came out of his mouth, He Taichong, Ban Shuxian and Zhang Wuji, three people, exclaimed together as if by prior agreement. The difference was: Zhang Wuji's exclamation was full of surprise and delight, while He Taichong, husband and wife, were shocked and angered.

'Shua, shua!' the two Kunlun Pai female disciples unsheathed their swords, reversed the sword hilts and gave the sword to their Shifu and Shimu [master and master wife]. He Taichong held the sword across to protect his abdomen, in the 'xue yong lan qiao' [snow covers the blue bridge] stance. Ban Shuxian held the sword with its tip slanting to the ground in the 'mu ye xiao xiao' [the rustling of trees and leaves] stance. These two stances were the most refined and mysterious within the Kunlun Pai sword techniques. The stances appeared light and casual, but behind each movement seven, eight swift and fierce follow-up movements were hidden.

The two people send their internal strength toward their right arms. With only a simple flick of their wrists, the swords in their hands would flash and they would be able to attack seven, eight vital points on their enemy's body. Facing a formidable enemy, the two of them were prepared to launch the skill they had learned for all their lives. However, Yang Xiao seemed oblivious to these people; he heard the delight in Zhang Wuji's voice and felt strange. He turned his glance toward Zhang Wuji, and saw his face was full of blood; his nose was swollen and his eyes blue from the beating he took from He Taichong earlier. He looked awful, but the happiness from the bottom of his heart overflowed to his unsightly face.

Zhang Wuji called out, "You, are you the Ming Cult's Left Emissary of Brightness, Yang Xiao Bobo [uncle, older than one's father]?"

Yang Xiao nodded, "How does a child like you know my name?" he asked.

Zhang Wuji pointed toward Yang Buhui and called out, "She is your daughter." Pulling Yang Buhui closer, he said, "Buhui Meimei, call him Papa, call him Papa! We finally found him!"

Yang Buhui looked at Yang Xiao with eyes opened wide. She was 90% unsure, but truth be told, she did not care whether he was her father or not. She only asked, "Where is Mama? Hasn't Mama flown down from the sky?"

Yang Xiao's heart was greatly shaken. He grabbed Zhang Wuji's shoulder and said, "Child, tell me clearly. She ... whose daughter is she? Who is her Mama?" His grab was too strong; Zhang Wuji's shoulder bone made a 'crack, crack' sound, the pain penetrated his heart.

Zhang Wuji was unwilling to show weakness and refused to cry of pain, but in the end an 'Ah!' cry still escaped from his mouth. "She is your daughter, her Mama was Emei Pai Heroine Ji Xiaofu," he said.

Yang Xiao's original complexion was pale, but this moment his face did not show any sign of pink at all. "She ... she has a daughter?" his voice was trembling, "She ... where is she?" Hastily he bent down to pick Yang Buhui up. After being struck twice by He Taichong, her cheeks were swollen big, but her features did remind him of Ji Xiaofu's beauty.

While Yang Xiao was about to inquire further, he suddenly

saw black silk thread hanging over her neck. He gently pulled the thread and saw at the end of the thread there was a piece of iron medallion. On the medallion there was a carving of blazing fire inlaid with gold. It was precisely the Ming Cult's 'tie yan ling' [iron flame symbol of authority] he gave Ji Xiaofu. His doubts were entirely gone. He embraced Yang Buhui tight and asked, "Where is your Mama? Where is your Mama?"

"Mama has flown to the sky," Yang Buhui replied, "I am looking for her. Did you see her?"

Yang Xiao realized she was too young to speak clearly, so he turned his questioning gaze toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji sighed. "Yang Bobo," he said, "Please don't be grieved. Ji Gugu [(paternal) aunt] was struck to death by her Shifu. At the point of death she ..."

"You're lying! You're lying!" Yang Xiao bawled. 'Crack!' Zhang Wuji's left arm was crushed by his grip. 'Thump! Thump!' Yang Xiao and Zhang Wuji fell down together. Yang Xiao's right hand was still holding his daughter tight.

He Taichong and Ban Shuxian looked at each other. They raised their swords; one was pointing to Yang Xiao's throat, the other to his forehead in between his eyebrows. Yang Xiao was the Ming Cult's expert fighter, his name was widely well-known. Ban Shuxian and He Taichong's master, Bai Luzi was killed by a Ming Cult person. Although the killer's name was unknown to them, most of Kunlun Pai people suspected it was Yang Xiao. As soon as Mr. and Mrs. He came across him by chance, they felt as if their hearts were soaked by a bucket of cold water as the hearts were beating faster. Who would have thought that Yang Xiao suddenly fainted? It truly was a heaven-sent opportunity, so they immediately take

control his vital points.

Ban Shuxian said, "Let's chop his arms first."

"Yes!" He Taichong replied.

At this time, Yang Xiao had not come around yet. Zhang Wuji's broken arm hurt like hell that his brow was wet with cold sweats, but his mind was still very clear. Realizing their critical situation, he stretched out his leg and lightly knocked the 'bai hui xue' [hundred-gathering acupoint] on top of Yang Xiao's head with his toes. 'Bai Hui' acupoint was connected directly to the brain; as soon as it was jolted, Yang Xiao regained his consciousness and opened his eyes at once. But he immediately felt the cold air of the sword pointing toward the center of his eyebrows, and saw a dark green shadow flash as another sword was hacking down on his left arm. It was too late for him to make any move, much less Ban Shuxian's sword was threatening his vital point; he simply could not move. Immediately he sent his internal energy to his left arm.

When He Taichong's sword cut his left arm, the blade suddenly slid to the side; the sword lost its power, as if it was cutting a slippery and resilient object. Yet the sleeve of Yang Xiao's white robe suddenly turned red. Obviously his arm was cut after all.

Right this moment, Yang Xiao's body suddenly stiffened and slipped more than a 'zhang' backward, just like if someone was tying a rope around his neck and pulling him with such an unbelievable speed. Ban Shuxian's sword was initially resting on his forehead. As Yang Xiao slipped backwards, the tip of the sword cut through from his forehead to his nose, mouth and chest, creating a long strip of bloody scar several 'fen' deep. [1 fen is approximately 1/3 of a centimeter or

about 1/8 of an inch].

It was a very risky move on Yang Xiao's part. Supposing Ban Shuxian's sword were half a 'cun' deeper [1 cun = 1 inch], Yang Xiao's chest and abdomen would be fatally cut. As he slipped away, immediately he stood stiffly up. These two movements were totally unpredictable. His knees were not bent, his waist did not buckle, he slipped out abruptly and stood up suddenly, as if his body was a mass of spring. The way his body stiffened strangely was no different from a living corpse.

As Yang Xiao stood up, his feet pushed down and 'Crack! Crack!' both swords of He Taichong and his wife were broken. Although his two kicks were sent out one after another, the speed was like lightning as if they were sent out at the same time. Based on He Taichong and Ban Shuxian's swordsmanship attainment, even if Yang Xiao martial art skill were stronger, he should not have been able to break the two people's swords just like that. Only his movements were so weird, plus he was seriously hurting when he suddenly escaped and launched a counterattack. He Taichong, husband and wife were so shocked that they pulled their sword a fraction of a second too late.

After breaking the swords, Yang Xiao kicked the two sword tips that they flew toward their two owners. He Taichong, husband and wife used their broken swords to block, but their palms were shaken and half of their bodies tingled. Although they managed to block the tips of the swords, the shock they experienced was not small. Hastily they retreated and jumped backward. One was standing on the northwest, the other on the southeast. Although they were holding half-broken swords in their hands, the 'Yang' sword pointed to the sky, the 'Yin' sword pointed to the earth. Two people with two swords combined and complemented each other. It was

precisely the Kunlun Pai's 'liang yi jian fa' [two appearances sword technique]. Although they were both scared, they still maintained a calm outward appearance, as steady and dignified as a mountain.

Kunlun Pai's 'liang yi jian fa' had enjoyed hundreds of years' reputation. It was one of world-famous sword techniques. He Taichong, husband and wife came from the same school, they had been practicing together since they both were very young, so their familiarity with this particular skill was matchless.

Yang Xiao had fought a number of great battles against the Kunlun Pai. He knew this sword technique was truly fierce. Although he was not afraid, he realized that he would not be able to defeat these two people in less than several hundred moves. This moment the only thing in his heart was Ji Xiaofu's death, how could he have any mood to fight? Let alone the cuts on his arm and face were not light, he would face an extreme danger if he let the wound bleed without an end. Thereupon he coldly said, "Kunlun Pai did not make any progress at all. I have to leave for the time being, but I will be back in the future to settle the score with worthy husband and wife."

His left hand was still holding Yang Buhui, his right hand reached out to pull Zhang Wuji. Without anybody saw him raise his foot or move his leg, he suddenly moved back more than a 'zhang'. With one turn of his body, he was already several 'zhang' away.

Mr. and Mrs. He looked at each other in astonishment; it was not easy for them to get rid of this big devil head, how could they dare to pursue?

Carrying two children along, in one breath Yang Xiao covered

a distance of several 'li' before he stopped suddenly. He asked Zhang Wuji, "What happened to Miss Ji Xiaofu?" He was running very fast, but was able to stop abruptly just like that, it was as if his body was nailed to the ground, he did not move even for half a 'fen'.

Zhang Wuji could not overcome the momentum, he was pulled forward and would have fallen if Yang Xiao did not pull him back. Hearing the question, he gasped for breath for a moment before answering, "Ji Gugu has died. Believe me or believe me not, it is entirely up to you. Why did you have to break my arm?"

A flash of regret appeared on Yang Xiao's face, but he kept asking, "She ... how did she die?" There was a hint of sobbing in his voice.

After drinking Ban Shuxian's poison, it had not been completely eradicated from his system although Zhang Wuji was able to vomit most of the poison and had also taken some anti-poison pills along the way. Presently he felt pain in his stomach again, so taking the golden-crowned blood snake, he let the snake bite his left hand index finger and suck the poison, while narrating in details how he came to know Ji Xiaofu, how he treated her injury, how he saw she was beaten to death by Miejue Shitai. By the time he finished his story, the golden-crowned blood snake had also finished sucking the poisonous blood from his body.

Yang Xiao asked him in detail what Ji Xiaofu had said at the point of her death. With tears streaming down his face he said. "That wicked nun Miejue was forcing her to harm me. If she agreed, not only she would render a great service to Emei Pai, she would also take over the Zhang Men position. Ay, Xiaofu, oh, Xiaofu, you would rather die than giving her your consent. Actually, you need only to pretend that you

agreed, then wouldn't we meet each other again? Then you would not have to lose your life under that wicked nun Mijue."

Zhang Wuji said, "Ji Gugu was a righteous person. She was not willing to scheme in secret and kill you surreptitiously but she was also unwilling to deceive her Shifu."

With a bitter laugh Yang Xiao said, "You knew Xiaofu well ... who would have guessed that her own Shifu could actually strike a vicious blow and took her life."

Zhang Wuji said, "I promised Ji Gugu that I will take Buhui Meimei to you ..."

Yang Xiao stiffened. "Buhui Meimei?" he asked. Turning his head, he asked Yang Buhui, "Child, my obedient treasure, what is your surname? And what is your given name?"

"My surname is Yang," Yang Buhui answered, "My name is Buhui [no regret]."

Yang Xiao looked up to the sky and let out a long whistle. His voice shook the forest in all directions that leaves were falling down like rain. When he finally stopped after a long time, he said, "You really are surnamed Yang. Buhui, Buhui. Good! Xiaofu, although I forced my desire on you, you had no regret."

Ji Xiaofu had told Zhang Wuji the sin and fate between the two people. This time he met Yang Xiao in person and found him to be handsome, natural and a bit unrestrained. Although he was somewhat older, he still could be considered as an elegant and graceful handsome man. Compared to his sixth uncle Yin Liting, who was still a bit childish, Zhang Wuji was afraid it would be easier for Yang

Xiao to make a woman fall upside down. Ji Xiaofu was disgraced by force, but in the end she fell in love with him; she must not be blamed. Although by this time Zhang Wuji was still too young to understand clearly, he had a vague thought about this kind of love-hate relationship.

The pain on Zhang Wuji's broken left arm was unbearable. Because for the time being he was not able to find herbal medicine to set broken bones and stop the pain, he had no alternative but to connect his broken bones first, then try to find some herbal medicine and apply it to his arm to reduce the swelling. He took two pieces of branch and used the tree bark to bind the branches onto his broken arm. Yang Xiao was amazed to see that young as he was, Zhang Wuji was able to mend the broken bones with only one hand with an absolute proficiency.

Finished binding his arm, Zhang Wuji said, "Yang Bobo, I have not failed Ji Gugu's trust. Buhui Meimei is safely in her Papa's hands. Let us part here."

Yang Xiao said, "From tens of thousands 'li' you have come to take my daughter to me. How can I not repay you? What is it that you want? All you need to do is open your mouth. In this world, the matters that are impossible for Yang Xiao achieve, the things that are unreachable to Yang Xiao, I am afraid are not too many."

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Yang Bobo, you look down on Ji Gugu too much. It was in vain that she died for you."

Yang Xiao's face was greatly changed. "What did you say?" he roared.

Zhang Wuji said, "It was because Ji Gugu did not look down on me that she entrusted her daughter to me to take to you. If I am doing this to seek reward, do you think I would be

worthy of her trust?" While in his heart he thought, "Along the way Buhui Meimei has encountered countless difficulties and I have had countless suffering for her. If I were greedy for benefit, unrighteous and unworthy disciple, how could you, father and daughter meet each other today?" It was just that he did not like to flaunt his own merit that he did not mention even a single word about the various hardships he endured along the way. As he finished speaking, he bowed with clasped hands and then turned around to leave.

"Wait!" Yang Xiao said, "You have done me a great kindness. Yang Xiao always repays gratitude and grudges. Come with me. Within a year I will pass on to you the world's rarest and fiercest martial art skills."

Zhang Wuji had seen it with his own eyes how he broke the swords of He Taichong, husband and wife; this kind of martial art skill was indeed rare to find its match in the Jianghu, so if he could learn only half a style from him, it would give him a tremendous advantage. However, he remembered Tai Shifu [grand master - referring to Zhang Sanfeng] repeatedly warned him not to associate himself with the Devil Cult people. Besides, even if Yang Xiao's martial art skills were higher, how could he surpass Tai Shifu? In addition to that, his own life would not be longer than half a year more; what would be the use even if he learned the unmatched martial art skill in the world? Thereupon he said, "Many thanks for Yang Bobo's offer, but 'wanbei' [younger generation - referring to self] is a Wudang disciple; I do not dare to learn other Sect's bright skill."

"Oh," Yang Xiao said, "Turns out you are Wudang Pai's disciple! In that case, Yin Liting ... Yin Liu Xia [sixth hero] ..."

Zhang Wuji said, "Yin Liu Xia is my Shishu [martial (younger) uncle]. Ever since my own father passed away, Yin Liushu's

treatment to me is no different than my own uncle. By accepting Ji Gugu's entrustment to take Buhui Meimei to Mount Kunlun, I cannot avoid ... cannot avoid feeling ashamed toward Yin Liushu."

As his gaze met with Zhang Wuji's, Yang Xiao felt ashamed. Waving his right hand, he said, "The Ol' Yang is deeply indebted to you. I am ashamed I cannot repay. Since that is the case, we will meet again someday." His shadow swayed, he was already several 'zhang' away.

Yang Buhui called out loudly, "Wuji Gege, Wuji Gege!" But Yang Xiao was unleashing his 'qing gong', in an instant he was very far, the 'Wuji Gege' cry gradually disappeared in the distant, until at last Yang Buhui's voice and her shadow vanished from his view.

End of Chapter 14.

*Note on the title:

A wolf had fallen into a hunter's trap. By chance, a village teacher passed by. The wolf asked the teacher to let him out. Out of compassion, the teacher took the wolf and put it into a sack to be brought home. Along the way, the wolf asked the teacher to let him out. Again, the teacher took him out of the sack and loosened the ropes. Then the wolf said, "I am starved, and I am going to eat you." The teacher said, "I saved you, and yet you are going to eat me? You are such an ungrateful creature." The wolf denied any wrong doing and thus they were engaged in a heated argument. It so happened that an old oak tree heard their arguments and agreed to be the judge. The tree said to the teacher, "You are such a weakling, how could you possibly help this fierce beast?" So the tree asked that the teacher and the wolf recreate what had happened. As soon as the wolf was inside the sack, the tree shouted, "Quickly tie the sack and kill the

wolf ...”

The story supposedly happened on Zhongshan, hence the term 'Zhongshan Wolf' is used to describe someone who repay kindness with evil.

Chapter 15 -Strange Scheme and Secret Intrigue Like in a Dream

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Thirty ferocious looking large dogs crouched on the ground. A young woman wearing genuine arctic fox fur coat was sitting on a chair. With a whip in her hand she barked her orders. A vicious dog leaped up suddenly and bit the throat of someone who was standing by the wall.

For tens of thousands 'li' Zhang Wuji had been travelling together with Yang Buhui, keeping each other company and relying on each other. Now that they suddenly parted, he felt sadness. However, thinking that at last he did not fail Ji Xiaofu by successfully delivering her daughter to Yang Xiao, he could not help feeling relieved and gratified. After standing still for half a day, he remembered that he might bump into He Taichong, Ban Shuxian, or other Kunlun Pai here, so he quickly walked down the valley.

After walking for more than ten days, his arm was gradually healing; however, wandering around Kunlun Mountains, he still could not find his way out of the mountain. One particular day, he walked for half a day and then stopped by a pile of rocks to take a rest. Suddenly from the northwesterly direction he heard sound of barking dogs. From the noise, he estimated there were about a dozen dogs or so. The sound of barking was getting closer, it seemed like the dogs were pursuing some wild animal. Amidst the barking dogs, there appeared a little monkey running for his life; there was a short arrow sticking out from the rear of the monkey's thigh. The monkey was still several 'zhang' away from Zhang Wuji when suddenly it fell tumbling down. Because of the arrow on its thigh it was unable to climb a tree. By this time its strength was gone that it could not even crawl back up.

Zhang Wuji came near the monkey and looked; the monkey looked back at him with fear, but its eyes also spoke to him, begging for pity. Zhang Wuji's heart was touched; he mused, "I am also running away from Kunlun Pai people, so we are in the same boat." Thereupon he gently lifted the monkey up and pulled the arrow out. Then he took some medicine from his pocket and applied it on the arrow wound.

Right this moment the barking of the dogs sounded very

near. Zhang Wuji quickly opened his robe and hid the monkey in his bosom. He heard loud and intense 'woof! woof! woof!' as a pack of about a dozen large hounds with sharp teeth surrounded him. The hounds smelled the monkey. They bare their fangs and brandish their claws threateningly, but did not dare to attack immediately.

Zhang Wuji was terrified to see these vicious dogs exposing their row after row of sharp white teeth. He knew that as soon as he let the monkey in his bosom out, the dogs would turn their attention to the monkey and would not give him any trouble. However, he had received instruction from his father since he was a child to take chivalry seriously; he did not want to fail even toward a wild animal. Immediately he leaped over the dogs and ran as fast as he could. The pack of dogs barked wildly and ran after him.

How could Zhang Wuji match the speed of the hounds? He only managed to run for about a dozen of 'zhang' when the pack of dogs overtook him. He felt a sudden pain on his leg as a vicious dog sank its teeth on him and would not let him go. Hastily he turned around and struck the dog's head with his palm. This palm strike carried his entire strength. The dog rolled down on the ground and then stopped moving altogether. The rest of the hounds attacked together. Zhang Wuji punched and kicked wildly with all his strength. However, his arm had not completely healed that he could not rotate his left hand; before long, a vicious dog bit his left hand and then the dogs pounced on him from all directions. His head, his face, his shoulders, practically his entire body was bitten by the dogs. While he was about to lose his consciousness out of shock and fear, he heard faint calls of a clear and tender voice of a woman. But the voice seemed to be very far away. His vision blackened and he passed out.

In his unconscious state, Zhang Wuji felt as if he was in the

middle of packs of jackals and wolves, tigers and leopards which were ready to devour him. He wanted to cry out for help, but no sound was coming out of his mouth. Suddenly he heard that someone was saying, "The critical situation has passed, perhaps he will live."

Zhang Wuji opened his eyes and saw a pale yellow light. He felt he was lying on a bed inside a small room, with a middle-aged man standing next to his bed.

"Da ... Dashu ... [big uncle, or more appropriately: honorable uncle] I ... how did I .." Zhang Wuji only managed to utter these words when he suddenly felt burning pains all over his body. Only then did he slowly remember that he was attacked and bitten by a pack of wild hounds.

"Xiaozi [boy, kid]," that man said, "Just consider yourself lucky you did not die. What is it? Are you hungry?"

"I ... where am I?" Zhang Wuji said. Because of severe pain all over his body, Zhang Wuji passed out again.

By the time he came around for the second time, the middle-aged man was no longer in the room. Zhang Wuji thought, "Definitely I won't live much longer, why do I have to experience this much torment?" Looking down his body, he saw his neck, his chest, arms and thighs were wrapped in cotton cloths, while a strong smell of medicine assailed his nostrils. Turned out someone was treating his wounds, but from the smell of the medicine, he knew the person applying the ointment had a rather shallow medical skill. He smelled almond, 'ma qian zi' [sorry, I don't know what it is], 'fang feng' [windproof], 'nan xing' [southern star], and various other herbs. These kind of herbs were effective to treat rabid dog bites, as it would draw out rabies pus from the wound; but the dogs biting him were not rabid at all, his wounds

were on his flesh and bones, without any poisoning. The medicine was not only ineffective, it would increase the pain.

Powerless to get up, he lay down until dawn. The middle-aged man came to check him up. Zhang Wuji said, "Dashu, thank you so much for saving me."

The man coldly said, "This is the 'Hong Mei Shan Zhuang' [Red Plum Villa]; it was our Miss who saved you. Are you hungry?" While saying that he went out and came back with a bowl of steaming hot porridge.

Zhang Wuji drank several mouthfuls, but his stomach was nauseous; his head was dizzy and he did not have the appetite to eat more.

He lay down for eight days before he was finally strong enough to get up. His legs felt weak without the least bit of strength. He knew it was because of excessive loss of blood, so it would take a while to recover.

The man came everyday to deliver his food and change his medication. Although his expression was rather bored, Zhang Wuji was still very appreciative toward him. Only, Zhang Wuji's mind was filled with unanswered questions, but he did not dare to ask too much because the man seemed uninterested to converse with him.

One day, the man returned with the same medication, 'fang feng', 'nan xing' and so on. Zhang Wuji could not help from saying, "Dashu, these medicines are not effective for my illness. Would you change it for me?"

The man turned to him with a condescending look. After staring at Zhang Wuji for half a day he said, "Laoye [old

master, grandmaster] personally wrote the prescription; how can he be wrong? You said the medicine is not effective, how could it revive you from the dead then? Really! Little kid is babbling nonsense. If our Laoye heard it, he might not be offended, but you really do not know good from bad." While saying that he spread the medicine on Zhang Wuji's wound. Zhang Wuji could only force a smile.

The man said, "I think your wound is so much better. Why don't you go see Laoye, Taitai [Madame], and Xiaojie [Miss] to kowtow and thank them for saving your life?"

"That is only appropriate," Zhang Wuji said, "Dashu, why don't you take me to see them?"

The man led Zhang Wuji out of the small room, walked through a long corridor, passed through two halls, and came to a warm chamber. It was the beginning of winter, but the Kunlun region had been very cold for quite some time. The room was as warm as the springtime. Zhang Wuji could not locate the furnace; he only saw the chamber was decorated extravagantly, with couches draped in brocade and soft pillows. In all his life Zhang Wuji had never seen such a splendid and cozy room as the one he was in. Looking at his own dirty clothes, he felt so out of place standing inside such a luxurious warm room; he could not help feeling ashamed at his own filth.

There was no one inside the warm room, but the man's expression was extremely respectful. Bowing, he said, "The boy who was bitten by the dog is well, he wants to kowtow to Laoye and Taitai to express his gratitude." After saying this, he stood silently with relaxed hands; he did not even dare to breathe loudly.

After what seemed like a long time, from behind the screen walked in a fifteen, sixteen year-old young woman. She cast

a sidelong glance toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Qiao Fu, what are you doing? Why did you bring him here? If the bugs and parasites from his body jump down, what are we going to do?"

"Yes, yes!" Qiao Fu replied.

Zhang Wuji had already been uncomfortable, this time his face blushed even redder. Other than the one on his back, he did not have any other change of clothes. Certainly his clothes were full with bedbugs and fleas by now. He thought that this Miss was not the least bit wrong.

He saw her face was oval like a goose egg, her black hair drooped over her shoulders. She was wearing some kind of fine silk or satin, which sparkled under the light. She wore a golden bracelet on her wrist. In short, he had never seen such a splendid and luxurious young lady. He mused, "When I was surrounded by the pack of dogs, I faintly heard a woman's voice shouting. That Qiao Fu Da Shu also said that it was his Miss who saved me. I ought to thank her." Thereupon he knelt down and kowtowed. "Thank you Miss for saving me," he said, "I will never dare to forget your kindness as long as I live."

The young girl was startled, and then she giggled. "Qiao Fu, Qiao Fu, what did you do? Did you fool this dumb kid?"

Qiao Fu laughed and said, "Xiao Feng Jiejie [older sister], this dumb kid kowtowed to you, you shouldn't accept it. The dumb kid has never seen beautiful face; he thought you are our Miss! But come to think about it, our home's maid is somewhat comparable to our honorable precious Miss [orig. 'qian jin' – thousand gold]."

Zhang Wuji was stunned, he stood up hastily. "It's bad!" he thought, "Turns out she is a maid, and I thought she was the

Miss.” His face turned red and white as he was extremely embarrassed.

Xiao Feng suppressed her laughter. She looked at Zhang Wuji to size him up. His face and upper body were still stained with blood; his wounds were still wrapped in cloth strips. Zhang Wuji was very self-conscious; he was aware of his filth and unsightly appearance, he wished the earth would open up and swallow him.

Xiao Feng lifted her sleeve to cover her nose while saying, “Laoye and Taitai are busy, you don’t need to kowtow. Let’s go to see Miss.” While saying that, she circled around Zhang Wuji at a distant and hurriedly led the way because she was afraid the bugs and fleas from Zhang Wuji’s body might jump onto hers.

Zhang Wuji followed behind Xiao Feng and Qiao Fu. Along the way he noticed the maids and servants were all wearing expensive looking clothes and jewelry. Of the chambers, halls and pavilions he passed there were not any that didn’t look exquisitely beautiful. Zhang Wuji spent the first ten years of his life on the Bing Huo Island [ice and fire]. For the next several years, he spent half his time on Mount Wudang, the other half in the Butterfly Valley. His food and drink and everyday life was very simple. He had never imagined that there were this kind of rich and luxury households in the world.

After walking for a while, they arrived outside a large pavilion. Zhang Wuji saw a sign above the door, which read 'ling ao ying' [spirit mastiff camp]. Xiao Feng walked into the pavilion. A moment later she came out and beckoned them to enter in. Qiao Fu then brought Zhang Wuji in.

As soon as he stepped in, Zhang Wuji was shocked, for he

saw more than thirty ferocious looking large dogs, arranged in three rows, crouching on the ground. A young woman wearing genuine arctic fox fur coat was sitting on a chair draped in tiger skin. There was a whip in her hand. She barked, "General Qian, throat!"

A vicious dog leaped up suddenly and bit the throat of someone who was standing by the wall. "Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji could not help but crying out as he saw this cruel scene. He saw the dog bit off a piece of flesh and then sat down and started to chew. When he calmed down, Zhang Wuji noticed that the person was actually a dummy made of leather. All its vital points were covered in chunks of meat.

The young woman barked again, "General Che Qi! Lower abdomen!" The second vicious dog leaped up and bit the dummy's lower abdomen.

To Zhang Wuji's surprise, these dogs were in training to follow orders to attack people. Their bites were highly accurate. To his shock, Zhang Wuji recognized these dogs as the pack of malicious hounds that wildly bit him at the mountain. Thinking back, he vaguely remembered that the shout which stopped the dogs was the voice of this young woman. At first he only knew that this Miss had saved his life, but now he realized that the many suffering he received was actually because of her. Anger arose to fill his chest; he thought, "That's it, that's it! She was in cahoots with the dogs. How can I deal with her? If I knew it earlier, I would rather die on that mountain than treating my injuries in her house." Ripping the bandages from his body, he threw strips of cloth to the ground then he turned around and walked away.

"Hey, hey!" Qiao Fu called out, "What are you doing? This is our Miss, why don't you kowtow to her?"

"Pei!" Zhang Wuji spat, "Thank her for what? The malicious dogs that injured me, don't they belong to her?"

The young woman turned her head. Seeing the extremely angry expression on Zhang Wuji's face, she showed a faint smile and beckoned him. "Xiao Xiongdi, come here," she called.

When Zhang Wuji saw her face, his heart suddenly went 'thump, thump, thump' continuously, because this young woman face was very captivating; it was so fair and smooth. In trying to fight his feelings, his ears were buzzing, his back turned cold and his limbs slightly trembled. He quickly hang his head low, he did not dare to look at her. His face, which was originally bloodless, suddenly turned deep red.

The young woman laughed. "Come here," she called again.

Zhang Wuji looked up. His eyes met her bright eyes which were like a vast expanse of water. His mind suddenly turned blurry; he slowly walked toward her against his own will.

"Xiao Xiongdi," the young woman said with a smile, "You are angry with me, aren't you?"

Zhang Wuji had suffered many pains under these dogs' teeth, how could he not be angry? But as he stood in front of her, he only felt that her breath smelled like orchid, her body emitted intermittent whiff of fragrance that he felt he was going to faint; how could he think about this word 'angry'? Shaking his head, he said, "I am not!"

The young woman said, "My surname is Zhu, given name Jiuzhen. How about you?"

"I am called Zhang Wuji," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Wuji, Wuji!" Zhu Jiuzhen said, "Hmm, it is a very elegant name. [Translator's note: Wuji means 'without a shame'] Xiao Xiongdi must have come from an aristocratic family. Mmm ... why don't you sit over there?" While saying that, she pointed to a low stool by her side.

Since the day he was born, Zhang Wuji had never seen such a beautiful woman that he was shaken to the core as if he was enchanted. If Zhu Jiuzhen told him to jump into a fiery pit, he would jump down without hesitation. Hearing her telling him to sit next to her, with unspeakable delight he immediately went and sat down reverently. It was beyond Xiao Feng and Qiao Fu's expectations to see their Miss showing favor toward this dirty and stinky kid.

Zhu Jiuzhen barked her order again, "General Zhe Chong! Chest!" One large dog leaped up to bite the dummy, but the meat on the chest of that dummy had been bitten by another dog; so that dog bit the meat on the side of the dummy's body and started to eat it.

Zhu Jiuzhen angrily said, "Greedy pig! You did not follow orders?" Raising the whip in her hand, 'Whack! Whack!' she lashed it twice.

The whip was full of thorns, as it lashed down, two long strips of bloodstains appeared on the back of the dog. But the dog was still unwilling to put the meat down, it growled menacingly instead.

"You are not following orders?" Zhu Jiuzhen barked. The whip lashed again, striking the dog so that it rolled around wildly with blood dripping from all around its body. Her whip technique was swift and ingenious, no matter where the dog

run, it could not escape from the whip. At last the dog spat out the meat and then kneeled on the ground, motionless, whining in low voice. Yet Zhu Jiuzhen did not stop lashing her whip until it was dying to its last breath, and then she said, "Qiao Fu, put medicine on it."

"Yes, Miss!" Qiao Fu replied, and took the wounded dog out of the hall and handed it over to the servant in charge of the dogs.

The rest of the dogs were all frightened to see this scene; no one dared to move. Zhu Jiuzhen sat back on her chair and barked her orders again, "General Ping Kou! Left leg! General Wei Yuan! Right arm! General Zheng Dong! Eye!" One by one the vicious dogs leaped bit according to the order, no one missed the target.

To Zhang Wuji's amazement, she had given these dozens of ferocious dogs names as generals, while she directed them all with ease and competence just like a marshall. Zhu Jiuzhen turned her head toward Zhang Wuji and said with a smile, "Did you see these animals? If I do not firmly beat them with the whip, how can they be obedient to me?"

Although this pack of dogs had inflicted enormous pain on him, seeing the dog was beaten to miserable condition, Zhang Wuji could not restrain from feeling sorrowful.

Seeing he did not respond, Zhu Jiuzhen laughed and said, "You said you are not mad at me, but you don't say something? How did you come to the western region? Where are your father and mother?"

Zhang Wuji thought that with his current miserable condition, if he mentioned the name of Tai Shifu and his parents' names, he would only bring disgrace to them;

thereupon he said, "My parents are dead. It was hard for me to survive in the Central Plains, so I wandered everywhere and ended up in here."

"I shot that monkey," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "Who told you to hide it in your bosom? You were so hungry that you wanted to eat monkey's meat, weren't you? You had not thought that you might be ripped to death by my dogs."

Zhang Wuji blushed; he repeatedly shook his head and said, "I was not thinking of eating the monkey."

With a captivating smile Zhu Jiuzhen said, "In front of me, you'd better not deny it." Suddenly she remembered something and asked, "What kind of martial art did you train? My General Zuo's skull shattered and it died. Your palm power is truly not bad."

Hearing that he had killed one of her pet dogs, Zhang Wuji apologetically said, "I was in panic and hit with all I had. When I was little, I learned two, three years of random punching and kicking with my father, it was not any martial art at all."

Zhu Jiuzhen nodded, then turned to Xiao Feng and said, "Take him to bath and give him some presentable clothes."

Xiao Feng pursed her lips, laughed and said, "Yes!" and took Zhang Wuji out.

Zhang Wuji was reluctant to part from Zhu Jiuzhen; as he reached the door, he could not help but turn his head to look at her one more time. Who would have thought that Zhu Jiuzhen was also looking at him? As he looked at her bright and beautiful eyes, she flashed him a sweet and captivating smile. Zhang Wuji blushed until he felt his entire body, from

the root of his hair to the end of his toes, turned red; as if his soul had just left him. He did not pay attention to the threshold, and thus he tripped and fell flat on his face, right on top of dog dung. His entire body was still covered with wounds; this fall had made him sore all over, but he did not dare to groan, he busily propped himself up and crawled away.

Xiao Feng giggled and said, "To see our Miss, everybody would be infatuated and head over heels in love with her. But you are still this young, you are also falling for her?" Zhang Wuji was really embarrassed, he rushed ahead of her.

After walking for a while, Xiao Feng laughed and said, "Are you going to take a bath and change your clothes in Taitai's room?"

Zhang Wuji halted his steps at once and looked up; he saw above the door ahead of them hung an embroidered golden banner. He had never been to this place before. It was then that he realized that in his confusion he had taken the wrong turn. That maid Xiao Feng was so sly that although she knew, she did not say anything, but waited until he went straight to the family room before opening up her mouth to mock him.

Zhang Wuji hang his reddened face down without saying anything. Xiao Feng said, "You call me 'Xiao Feng Jiejie' and earnestly ask me, then I'll take you out."

Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Feng Jiejie ..."

With her right hand index finger pointing to her own cheek Xiao Feng said with straight face, "Hmm, what do you want from me?"

"I am asking you to take me out," Zhang Wuji said.

"That's better," Xiao Feng laughed.

Taking him back to the small room, Xiao Feng said to Qiao Fu, "Miss said for him to take a bath and change his clothes with a clean one."

"Yes, yes!" Qiao Fu replied. He was full of respect. Apparently, although Xiao Feng was also but a servant, compared to the other servants and maids her position was somewhat higher. Five, six male servants immediately stepped in, calling her 'Xiao Feng Jiejie this' and 'Xiao Feng Jiejie that', flattering her to no end. Xiao Feng actually looked cold and indifferent. Suddenly she came to Zhang Wuji and bowed to him.

Zhang Wuji was flabbergasted. "You ... why?" he stammered.

Xiao Feng laughed and said, "Just now you kowtowed to me, right now I am returning the respect to you." Finished speaking, she disappeared into the inner chamber in a flash.

Qiao Fu told everybody else how Zhang Wuji thought Xiao Feng was their Miss, how he kowtowed to her, adding some spices to his story, describing Zhang Wuji's appearance as more ridiculous than it actually was so the hall was full with the crowd of servants' howl of laughter. Zhang Wuji entered the room with his head hung low, but he was not angry. His heart was filled with the memory of the Miss' laughter and anger, and each word she uttered.

After he took a bath, he saw Qiao Fu return with a set of dark green clothing, which he recognized as the servants' attire. Zhang Wuji was angry in his heart, "I am not your family's servant," he mused, "How do you expect me to wear this

kind of clothes?" He was about to wear his own worn out clothes when suddenly he noticed it was full of holes, exposing his skin and flesh. "If Miss wants to see me again and sees that I am still wearing this kind of dirty and worn out clothing, she will be unhappy," he thought, "Actually, what wrong with me being her servant and doing errands for her?" With this thought, he calmed down and changed into the servant clothes.

Contrary to his expectation, not only the Miss did not call him that day, for the next a dozen of days later, he did not even see Xiao Feng, let alone the Miss. Zhang Wuji often daydreamed with blank expression on his face, thinking the Miss' voice, her laugh and her face. He even felt that her appearance when she fiercely whipping the dogs was kind of flirtatious and lovely. He was thinking of going to the rear courtyard on his own. He would be satisfied just by looking at her from a distant, or hearing her voice when she was talking to someone else. But Qiao Fu had repeatedly warned him that if it was not their master who summoned them, they were not supposed to enter the gate. Otherwise, the vicious dogs would devour them. Remembering the ferociousness of the dogs, although he longed to see her, in the end he decided it was probably not a good idea to go to the rear courtyard.

More than a month had passed. Zhang Wuji's broken arm was healed as good as new. The wounds of the dogs' bite had also been healed, only there were some permanent teeth mark scars on his arms and legs. However, instead of feeling upset, a feeling of sweetness crept into his heart each time he remembered that these scars were from the Miss' pet dogs.

These days, the cold poison in his body still flared up once every few days. Each time it flared up, it was worse than the

last. One day the poison attacked him again. He lay down on the bed with the cotton quilt wrapped tightly around his body, while he was shivering badly. Qiao Fu came into the room. He was accustomed to see Zhang Wuji under the cold attack and did not think of anything unusual.

“Get plenty of rest,” he said, “Drink lots of hot preserved meat porridge! This is the new clothes Taitai [Madame] give to you for the New Year.” While saying that, he put a bundle on the table.

Zhang Wuji endured the poison attack all through the night before the cold gradually subsided. He got up and opened the bundle only to see a set of leather clothes. The lining was of snow-white sheepskin. He was delighted. The style of the leather clothes was still of the servant attire, apparently the Zhu family had regarded him as their servant.

Zhang Wuji had always had a warm nature and seldom lost his temper; he did not consider the clothes as an insult. He only thought, “It’s hard to imagine I have been here for more than a month. Very soon it will be the New Year. Mr. Hu said I would not live for more than a year. This New Year will be my last. I will be gone before the next New Year.”

As the year came to a close and the New Year’s Day approached, the bustling of activities in the rich family doubled. The servants were very busy painting the walls and the doors, and slaughtering pigs and sheep; all were in high spirits. Zhang Wuji helped Qiao Fu do some errands. He was hoping the New Year’s Day would arrive soon, thinking that when he kowtowed to wish Laoye, Taitai and Miss a happy new year, he would see Miss again. After seeing her one more time, he would quietly go away and die in some remote mountain area, so that he would not be an unnecessary burden for Qiao Fu and the other servants.

Amidst the noise of the firecrackers, the New Year's Day arrived. Zhang Wuji followed Qiao Fu toward the main hall to greet their masters for the New Year. He saw a pair of elegant and beautiful middle-aged man and woman sitting in the hall, while around seventy, eighty maids and servants kneeled down on the floor.

With a happy laugh the man and the woman said, "Everybody has worked hard!" While on the side, two housekeepers distributed money. Zhang Wuji also received two 'liang' [tael] of silver. He did not see the Miss and was very disappointed. Holding the money with a blank expression on his face, he suddenly heard a charming and flirtatious voice from the outside, "Biaoge [older male cousin], you come here early this year." It was precisely Zhu Jiuzhen's voice.

A male voice laughed and said, "Would I dare to come late to greet Jiujiu and Jiumu [maternal uncle and aunt, respectively] a happy new year?"

Zhang Wuji's face turned hot; he felt as if his heart was about to jump out of his chest, his palms were wet with perspiration. After hoping for two whole months this was the first time he heard Zhu Jiuzhen's voice again; how would he stop his soul from being shaken?

He heard another female voice saying, "Shige [older martial brother] rushed here early, I wonder if he wants to pay a New Year visit to our Elders, or if he wants to a New Year visit to Biaomei [younger female cousin]?"

Amidst the voices, three people stepped into the hall. The crowd of servants stepped aside one after another. Zhang Wuji absentmindedly stood motionless. It was not until Qiao Fu forcefully pulled him aside that he finally moved out of

the way.

Among the three people walked in, one was a young man. Zhu Jiuzhen walked on his left. She was wearing a scarlet sable coat, accentuating her tender and beautiful face, difficult to be described, difficult to be painted. On the other side of the young man was another young woman. Ever since Zhu Jiuzhen entered the hall, Zhang Wuji's eyes had never left her; he did not even care whether the young man and the other young woman were smart or were ugly, or whether they were wearing red or green. The two people kowtowed toward the masters, husband and wife. The hosts and the guests exchanged some words, but Zhang Wuji was oblivious to it all; he heard it but did not understand. In his eyes there was only Zhu Jiuzhen one person.

Actually Zhang Wuji was still too young, about male-female relationship, he only 'knew one but understand a half'. However, just like everybody else, it was the first time his lust was awakened by a young and good-looking woman that he was infatuated and head over heels like a fool; so it was hardly Zhang Wuji's natural disposition at all. Furthermore Zhu Jiuzhen was indeed dazzlingly beautiful, and he met her while he was in distress and she saved him; his admiration was hard to control. He only felt that as long as he could look at her once and hear her voice, then he would have an inexhaustible joy.

The masters, husband and wife, talked with three young people for a while. "Pa, Ma," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "I am going out to play with Biaoge and Qing Mei [younger sister Qing]!" Her voice carried a thirty-percent little spoiled girl's tone. The masters smiled and nodded.

Mrs. Zhu said with a laugh, "Take good care of Wu Jia Meizi [little sister of the Wu family], you, three teenagers, must

not quarrel among yourselves in this New Year's Day."

Zhu Jiuzhen laughed. "Ma," she said, "Why don't you tell Biaoge not to bully me?"

The three young people were talking and walking toward the rear courtyard. Without realizing it, Zhang Wuji followed from a distance. That day the servants had the freedom to do whatever they liked; some went out to play, some went out to gamble. By this time Zhang Wuji had seen clearly that the young man was quite handsome, his body was as beautiful as jade. Even in a cold day like this, he was only wearing thin yellow satin clothes; obviously his internal energy was not weak.

The other girl was wearing a black sable coat. Her figure was slender and graceful, her words and actions were refined. Speaking of grace and beauty, she was comparable to Zhu Jiuzhen, but in Zhang Wuji's eyes, she was nothing compared to the Miss he venerated as a goddess. All three of them were about seventeen, eighteen years of age.

The three of them were walking and talking and laughing toward the rear courtyard. "Zhen Jie [older sister Zhen]," the other girl said, "Have you trained your Yi Yang Zhi [solitary yang finger] skill to the second level? Would you demonstrate it to broaden Meizi's [younger sister] horizon?"

"Aiyo!" Zhu Jiuzhen said, "You don't want me to look good, do you? Even if I trained for ten more years, I would never surpass one stroke of your Wu family's 'lan hua xue shou' [orchid acupoint brushing technique]."

The young man said with a laugh, "The two of you need not to be modest. The great name of 'Xue Ling Shuang Shu' [Two Beauties of the Snowy Range] possesses an impressive

power and prestige.”

Zhu Jiuzhen said, “Being alone in my home, I blindly think through this, how can I surpass your rapid advancement, Shi Xiong Mei [martial (older) brother and (younger) sister], who can consult and discuss between the two of you? Today you came to see the stance, tomorrow you compare notes, doesn’t that mean ‘a thousand ‘li’ in one day’?”

The other girl could hear the vinegar [meaning ‘jealousy’] in her voice; she simply pursed her lips without saying anything, but in doing so, she tacitly agreed with what she was saying.

The young man was afraid Zhu Jiuzhen would get angry for real. “That’s not necessarily true,” he quickly said, “You have two Shifus, with Jiufu and Jiumu both teaching you, won’t you be stronger than we are?”

Zhu Jiuzhen angrily said, “What do you mean by ‘we’? Humph, of course you love your Shimei more than your Biaomei. Whenever I am playing with Qing Mei, you are always in her side.” While saying that, she turned her head away, no longer paid any attention to him.

Accompanied by a smile, the young man said, “I love my Biaomei, I also love my Shimei. My palm is part of my body, as much as the back of my hand, there is no difference between one and another. Biaomei, why don’t you take me to see those guard generals of yours? Certainly you have trained those generals to be fiercer and fiercer.”

“Alright!” Zhu Jiuzhen started to feel happy; she led them toward the Ling Ao Ying.

Zhang Wuji was following them from afar; he saw them

talking and laughing, but he did not hear a word they were saying. Presently he also followed them into the dogs' courtyard.

Turned out Zhu Jiuzhen was a descendant of Zhu Zhiliu. The girl surnamed Wu was Wu Qingying, she was Wu Santong's descendant from Wu Xiuwen's line. Wu Santong and Zhu Zhiliu were disciples of Yideng Dashi [Reverend 'One Lamp'], so their martial art skills came from the same source. But after more than a hundred years, each of the family developed their own variations. The two brothers Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen were under the tutelage of Da Xia [great hero] Guo Jing. Although they also learned the Yi Yang Zhi, their martial art style was closer to the 'hard' and 'fierce' way of Jiu Zhi Shen Gai [Nine-finger Divine Beggar] Hong Qigong.

The young man, Wei Bi, was Zhu Jiuzhen's [maternal] cousin. Not only he was handsome, his temperament was also gentle and easygoing, and thus both Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying's hearts were captivated and both secretly fell in love with him. The two girls, Zhu and Wu, were approximately of the same age, they were both beautiful and glamorous. Just like the spring orchid and the autumn chrysanthemum, each had her own strength; the martial art skills they inherited from their respective families were also comparable.

About two, three years ago, the Wulin community around the Kunlun region gave them the title 'Xue Ling Shuang Shu'. Ever since then, these two women had been competing against each other in secret. This situation had put Wei Bi on the hot seat; it was as if he had to choose between the bear paw and the fish, a very difficult choice indeed. Consequently, each time the three of them were together, although outwardly they were polite, the two girls

were actually fighting a battle of words, nobody was willing to yield to the other. Only Wu Qingying was more introvert and was not quite outspoken. Besides, Wei Bi and she were of the same school, everyday, day and night, they saw each other a lot; therefore, she had a distinct advantage over Zhu Jiuzhen.

Zhu Jiuzhen ordered the servant in charge of the vicious dogs to release them out. The dogs followed orders to the letter, not one missed its intended target. Wei Bi did not stop voicing his compliments. Zhu Jiuzhen was very proud of herself.

Wu Qingying pursed her lips and laughed. "Shige," she said, "I wonder which one will you be in the future, 'Guan Jun' [lit. head of the army, champion], or 'Piao Qi' [lit. rider of the white horse]?"

Wei Bi was taken aback. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

Wu Qingying said, "You are so obedient toward Zhen Jie [older sister Zhen], won't she bestow to you the title of 'General Guan Jun' or 'General Piao Qi'? Only, you must be very careful toward her whip."

Wei Bi blushed deep red; there was a slight sign of anger in between of his eyebrows. "Pei!" he spat, "Rubbish! Are you cursing me as a dog?"

Wu Qingying smiled and said, "The 'generals' are always by a beautiful woman's side, shaking their tails and begging for affection. They have a very amusing life. What's not to like?"

Zhu Jiuzhen was angry. "If he were a dog," she said, "What does that make his Shimei?"

Listening to this, Zhang Wuji could not stop laughing, 'Ha!' escaped from his mouth. He realized immediately of his rudeness, so he covered up his mouth quickly.

Wu Qingying felt anger was boiling inside her stomach, but she knew it was inappropriate to explode in front of Zhu Jiuzhen, so she stood up and said, "Zhen Jie, your mansion's servants are truly well-mannered. We are chatting here and this servile kid unexpectedly eavesdropping on the side, and still dares to laugh once or twice. Shige, I am going home first."

Zhu Jiuzhen suddenly remembered that Zhang Wuji was able to strike dead her 'General Zuo' with his palm; his strength was actually not small. She laughed and said, "Qing Mei, you do not need to be angry, and do not underestimate this little servant either. Although your Wu family's martial art is strong, if you are able to flatten this servile kid within three moves, I will truly submit to you."

"Humph," Wu Qingying said, "Does this kind of kid deserve me put forth my own hand to deal with? Zhen Jie, you belittle me too much."

Zhang Wuji was not able to stop from shouting, "Miss Wu, I also have a father and a mother; am I not a human? What do you think you are? Bodhisattva? A princess?"

Wu Qingying did not even look at him. "Shige," she turned toward Wei Bi, "You let me receive the insult this little servant hurled at me without helping me?"

Seeing her loveable and hurt expression, Wei Bi's heart had melted early on. Although he was impartial toward the 'Xue Ling Shuang Shu', he knew perfectly well that his Shifu's martial art skill was incomprehensively deep. The skill he

would expect to learn from him would be at most ten or twenty percent. If he wanted to master the peerless skill, there was no other way but to win his Shimei's favor. Thereupon he said to Zhu Jiuzhen, "Biaomei, this little servant's martial art skill is not bad, is it? Would you let me test him?"

Zhu Jiuzhen understood he was trying to help his martial sister, but she had another thought, "I don't know the origin of this servant kid surnamed Zhang. Perhaps it is not such a bad idea to let Biaoge compel him to reveal his foundation." Thereupon she said, "Alright. Let him receive instruction from the Wu family unique skill. Nothing could be better than that. This man, even I do not know which school's disciple he is."

Wei Be was surprised. "This servant kid's martial art skill did not come from your family?" he asked.

Toward Zhang Wuji Zhu Jiuzhen said, "Why don't you tell Shaoye [young master] who your Shifu is, and which school he belongs to?"

"You despise me too much," Zhang Wuji thought, "How can I mention my parents' schools, and thus dishonor Taishifu and my departed parents? Besides, I have never seriously practiced Wudang Pai's martial art." Thereupon he said, "My parents passed away when I was a child, I wandered the Jianghu in destitute. I do not know any martial art, I only received a little bit of instructions from my father when I was little."

"What was your father's name? Which school did he belong to?" Zhu Jiuzhen asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "I can't tell you," he said.

Wei Bi laughed. "With the three of us looking, can't we find it out ourselves?" he said. Slowly he walked to the center of the courtyard. "Kid," he said with a laugh, "Why don't you try taking three stances of mine?" While saying that, he turned toward Wu Qingying and gave her a wink. His meaning was clear, "Shimei, no need to get angry. I am going to beat this kid really bad to vent your anger."

For someone in love, each word and each action, a frown or a smile of the beloved's would not escape attention. Zhu Jiuzhen was no different. She understood clearly the meaning of Wei Bi's wink. Seeing Zhang Wuji was unwilling to concede, she beckoned to him, calling him to come over and then in a low voice whispered in his ear, "My Biao's martial art skill is very strong. You don't need to defeat him. As long as you can resist his three stances, you are giving me a lot of face." Finished speaking, she patted his shoulder to show her encouragement.

Zhang Wuji knew he was not Wei Bi's match. If he conceded, he would unavoidably invite trouble and humiliation on himself, and brought nothing more than delight in these people's hearts. But standing in front of Zhu Jiuzhen, his mind was chaotic. Hearing her soft voice and gentle words urging him, and smelling her perfume, how could he think clearly? His only thought was, "Miss orders me to fight. Even for a more difficult and dangerous task, I would risk my life to do it; what's the harm in receiving a few punches and kicks?" He absentmindedly walked toward Wei Bi and stood in front of him with a blank expression.

Wei Bi said with a laugh, "Kid, take this!" 'Slap! Slap!' he struck Zhang Wuji twice on his face.

These two slaps came so fast that when Zhang Wuji was

about to lift his hand to block, his face had already struck. His cheeks swelled with red palm marks on them.

Wei Bi knew Zhang Wuji did not receive any martial art instructions from the Zhu family, so he knew he had nothing to fear in term of causing Zhu Jiuzhen, as well as his uncle and aunt lose face. His strikes were without any reservation, only he did not use any internal energy; otherwise, Zhang Wuji's teeth would have fallen and his cheekbones broken, he would have fainted.

"Wuji, fight!" Zhu Jiuzhen called out.

As soon as he heard his Miss call, Zhang Wuji's spirit was aroused. With a grunt he punched straight forward. Wei Bi evaded sideways and praised him. "Good kid, you know what you are doing!" he said. Moving sideways, he jumped toward Zhang Wuji's back. Zhang Wuji hastily turned around, but like a lightning Wei Bi's hand reached out and grabbed his collar. Lifting his arm high, he laughed and said, "Go eat the dog's dung!" and threw Zhang Wuji hard to the ground.

Zhang Wuji learned martial arts from Xie Xun for several years, but first, he was still too young; second, Xie Xun only told him to memorize the theory and the stances, without giving him any real combat experience. Meeting a disciple from a prestigious family like Wei Bi, his hands and feet were bound and he was unable to launch any stance. As he was being thrown, he wanted to stretch out his hand to break the fall, but it was too late. 'Bang!' his forehead and nose heavily hit the ground and blood spread all over his face.

Wu Qingying clapped and cheered. Giggling sweetly she said, "Zhen Jie, is our Wu family martial art good enough for you?"

Zhu Jiuzhen was ashamed and angered at the same time. If she said the Wu family martial art was not good, she would unavoidably offend Wei Bi; but if she said it was good, she was unbearably angry toward Wu Qingying and did not give her any satisfaction. Without any better option, her face turned cold and she did not say anything.

Zhang Wuji crawled up and looked gingerly at Zhu Jiuzhen. Seeing her knitted eyebrows, he said in his heart, "Even if I have to die, I must not make Miss lose her face."

Wei Bei laughed and said, "This kid does not even know three-legged cat martial art, why do we have to talk about his school or sect?"

Zhang Wuji suddenly lunged forward, his leg flew toward Wei Bi's lower abdomen. "Aiyo!" Wei Bi called out with laughter. By moving slightly backward, he evaded this kick, right after, his left hand reached out and grabbed Zhang Wuji's right foot, which was still in the air, and flung it sideways. He was only using 30% of his power, but Zhang Wuji flew toward the wall like an arrow leaving its bow. In desperation Zhang Wuji kicked the ground to make his back face the wall. Although his skull escaped the disaster of shattering down, his back hurt so much that he felt as if all the bones in his body had been broken. He slid down along the wall and sat on the ground like a pile of mud; unable to crawl back up.

Although he was in severe pain, he was still concerned over Zhu Jiuzhen losing face; while he was still in dazed, he heard that she was saying, "This servant kid is totally useless. Let us go to the garden to play!" Obviously she was very angry.

Without knowing where the strength came from, Zhang Wuji

turned around, propping himself on the ground and pounced with a palm strike toward Wei Bi.

Wei Bi laughed aloud and stretched out his palm backward to block. 'Slap!' to his surprise, his body swayed, forcing him to take a step back. Turned out Zhang Wuji was using the 'Qi Xing Shou' [seven-star (or Big Dipper constellation) hand] from the 'Wudang Chang Quan' [Wudang Long Fist], which his father, Zhang Cuishan taught him during the voyage on the raft. Wudang Long Fist was Wudang's special skill. Although the fist was not strong, it carried a subtle variation. Wudang's martial art had always departed from the mainstream martial art study, the emphasis was to use softness to subdue hardness, using the weak to defeat the strong, injuring the enemy without using one's own strength; rather, it incited the enemy's strength toward himself. If the enemy was using a catty of force, then the reacting force was also one catty; if the enemy was using a hundred catties, then a hundred catties would return to him. It was like punching the wall. The heavier one punched, the heavier the reaction force he had to suffer.

In the past, when Jue Yuan Dashi [Reverend Jue Yuan] recited the 'Nine Yang Manual', he said, 'use one's own strength, strike only after the enemy has struck'. Later on, Zhang Sanfeng used this principle to govern the Wudang fist technique. If it was Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou or the other Wudang experts, they might add their own strength above the enemy's. Zhang Wuji's mastery of this skill was only superficial, yet in this punch he was unconsciously successful in inciting the opponent's force.

Wei Bi felt his hand was sore and numb, the 'chi' and blood in the pit of this stomach were shaken. Immediately he leaned sideways and sent out a fist toward Zhang Wuji's back. Zhang Wuji swept his palm backward to parry using

the stance 'yi tiao bian' ['the whip']. Seeing his marvelous palm technique, Wei Bi hurriedly evaded backwards, but his shoulder was still brushed by Zhang Wuji's three fingers. Although he was not hurt, Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying had naturally seen that he had lost this move.

Wei Bi was in the presence of his sweetheart, how could he concede? At first, when he was face to face with Zhang Wuji, seeing the opponent was a young boy, he looked at him condescendingly. He had no doubt that he would win martial-art-wise, but he wanted to toy with Zhang Wuji to win Wu Qingying's favor; and thus his fists and kicks only carried about 20, 30% of his strength. This time, as he suffered defeat twice in a row, he shouted, "Little demon, are you not afraid of death?" With a loud grunt his fist went straight to Zhang Wuji's chest.

His fist, which contained three layers of force, was from the 'Chang Jiang San Die Lang' [Yangtze River's three layers of waves]. If the opponent used all his strength to block the first layer of force, he would not anticipate the second layer of force would follow closely, followed by the violent third layer of force immediately surging up. Unless the opponent was a martial art master, he would certainly meet death or at least seriously wounded.

Seeing the severity of the opponent's move, Zhang Wuji was scared. Without enough time to think, he remembered that his father on the wooden raft in the middle of the ocean taught him a technique where both arms circled back and break the opponent's hand, called the 'jing lan' [cross-fence (like the symbol '#')]. This stance was very broad and deep; how could Zhang Wuji comprehend its essence? It was just that he was in such a desperate situation that he had used it without thinking.

Wei Bi was sending out his right hand punch straight toward Zhang Wuji's right arm. He felt as if the first layer of force of his own fist was entering the vast ocean, it vanished without a trace. While he was startled, 'crack!' the second layer of force bounced back and the bone of his right arm was jolted and it broke. Lucky for him he had not launched the third layer of force, otherwise, because Zhang Wuji did not understand the wondrous use of this 'jing lan' stance, both of them would suffer serious injury under this third layer of force.

Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying both cried out in alarm and rushed toward Wei Bi to look at his injury. "Not a problem," Wei Bi smiled bitterly, "I was just being careless."

Seeing the love of their lives was wounded, as if by prior agreement Zhu Jiuzhen and Wu Qingying both sent out their palms toward Zhang Wuji. As he succeeded in breaking Wei Bi's arm, Zhang Wuji was also being hit so he was almost thrown backward. Zhu and Wu, two girls' palms had arrived while his feet were still staggering. In his daze, Zhang Wuji failed to evade. One palm hit his chest, the other hit his shoulder. He instantly threw up a mouthful of blood. Yet in his heart his resentment was greater than his bodily pain; he thought, "I fought with all my might for you so that you won't lose face, but after I actually won you hit me!"

"Stop!" Wei Bi called out. Zhu and Wu, two girls halted their hands following his order. They saw him raise his left palm with an ashen face, and he struck Zhang Wuji again. Zhang Wuji hastily leaped sideways to evade.

"Biaoge!" Zhu Jiushen called out, "You are injured. Why should you lower yourself to the same level as this little servant? I was wrong. I should not have asked you to fight with him."

Based on her usually arrogant temperament, she would never ever bow her head to admit her own mistake to anybody. It was just that she saw her lover's arm was broken that she was frightened and felt sorry for him and thus she was willing to humble herself. Who would have thought that when Wei Bi heard her, he was even more enraged?

"Biaomei," he said with a cold laugh, "Your little servant's skill is superior, where were you wrong? It's just that I am not convinced yet." As he said that, he pushed Zhu Jiuzhen aside with his left arm, and then raised his fist to strike Zhang Wuji again.

Zhang Wuji was about to step backward to evade when Wu Qingying pushed his back gently with her palms, so that he could not step back. Wei Bi's fist hit Zhang Wuji squarely on the bridge of his nose and immediately blood started to flow down from his nose.

Wu Qingying was far more shrewd compared to Zhu Jiuzhen; she helped her martial brother in secret, without showing any sign, so that he did not lose face and felt appreciative towards her.

Zhu Jiuzhen saw it and thought, "You can help your Shige, do you think I cannot help my Biaoge?" Thereupon she also put forth her hand to attack Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji's martial art skill was far inferior to Wei Bi to begin with; now that Zhu and Wu, two girls, one was helping him in the open, the other was helping him surreptitiously, in a short moment Zhang Wuji had to suffer the three people's punches and kicks. In just seven, eight moves, he had vomited several mouthfuls of blood.

With the heart full of resentment, Zhang Wuji disregarded his own life and launched the 32 stances Wudang Long Fist one after another. Although his mastery was insufficient and each fist and each kick lacked power, the Wudang Long Fist was his family's special skill, so that after the time needed to drink a cup of tea later, he was still standing and not falling down.

Zhu Jiuzhen roared, "Where did this stinky kid come from? He dares to come to the Zhu and Wu manors with such unruly manners; he is truly impatient to give his life away."

Wei Bi raised up his left palm and hacked down in full force toward Zhang Wuji's left shoulder so that Zhang Wuji's body was pushed forward toward Wei Bi's other palm. Wei Bi's broken arm was getting more and more painful, so he was unwilling to prolong his fight with this lowly servant. His palm carried 100% of his strength. Zhang Wuji, unable to stop himself from fumbling forward, felt a strong gust of wind on his face and realized he was helpless to block, but he still tried to lift both arms to parry.

"Stop!" suddenly they all heard an imposing voice shout. A blue shadow flashed by, somebody flew from the side and fended off Wei Bi's palm. His movement seemed light, but surprisingly Wei Bi was unable to hold his ground and was forced to draw several steps backward and was about to fall sitting down on the ground. The man in blue robe moved extremely fast; he flew over Wei Bi's shoulder and reached out to steady him so that Wei Bi was able to stand.

"Father!" Zhu Jiuzhen called out.

"Zhu Bo Fu [paternal (older) uncle]!" Wu Qingying called out.

Wei Bi gasped for breath, and then called out, "Jiujiu [maternal uncle]!"

This man was indeed Zhu Jiuzhen's father, Zhu Changling. Wei Bi's broken arm injury was not a small matter, the servant in charge of the dogs in the Ling Ao Ying [spirit mastiff camp] rushed toward the main hall to inform their master. Zhu Changling hurriedly came and saw the three people were surrounding Zhang Wuji. After standing on the side to watch for a while, he saw that Wei Bi launched a killer strike, so he intercepted the attack to save Zhang Wuji's life.

Zhu Changling cast a sidelong glance toward his daughter and Wei and Wu, two people. His face was filled with rage. Suddenly he slapped his daughter's face with the back of his hand and roared, "Very good! Very good! The Zhu family descendants are making a good progress. I have such a sweet daughter, will I still have a face to see our ancestors in the nether world later on?"

Since her childhood, Zhu Jiuzhen had always been pampered by her parents; they had never even reprimanded her with harsh words, but today unexpectedly her father slapped her heavily in public. In that instant her head spun and she was at a loss about what to do. It was not until a moment later that she broke up crying.

"Stop it! Don't cry!" Zhu Changling sternly said. His voice was full of authority and power, shaking the dust on the beam that it rained down. Zhu Jiuzhen was so terrified that she stopped crying at once.

Zhu Changling said, "From generation to generation, our Zhu family has always been upholding chivalry. Your ancestor Ziliu Gong ['gong' is a general term to address a

male senior/elder] worked under the Yideng Dashi as the Prime Minister of the Dali kingdom. Later on he fought to defend Xiangyang, his name spread out throughout the world. Now, he could be called a hero, don't you think? Who would have thought that his descendants are unworthy? I, Zhu Changling, have this kind of daughter, three adults surrounding a child, wanting to take his life. Tell me, isn't that shameless? Isn't that shameless?" He was berating his daughter, but when Wei Bi and Wu Qingying heard him, it was as if each word was a stab of knife to their hearts that they felt so ashamed that it was a total loss of face for them.

Zhang Wuji was hurt all head to toe and almost fainted, but he gritted his teeth to stay standing. His mind was still clear, however, he was able to hear everything Zhu Changling had said. His admiration grew, and thinking in his heart, "Right and wrong is clearly distinguished, this is the sign of a true hero."

He saw Zhu Changling was so furious that the skin on his face looked sallow, his entire body trembled, his breathing fast. Wei Bi and the others, three people, hung their heads low, they did not dare to meet his eyes at all. Zhang Wuji also noticed that Zhu Jiuzhen's face was swollen big; it was obvious that her father's slap was indeed not light. She looked ashamed and scared at the same time, truly pitiful; she looked as if she wanted to cry, yet she did not dare to. Zhang Wuji bit his own lower lip and said, "Laoye, this does not concern Miss." He was startled by his own voice, for his voice was hoarse and almost inaudible. Turned out his throat was hit hard by Wei Bi earlier.

Zhu Changling continued, "This Xiao Xiongdi's [little brother] fists and kicks did not follow any specific method. It is obvious that he has never bowed to anybody and received proper martial art training. All the while he was relying on

brute force and bravery, staking everything to defend himself. He has made others admire him even more. The three of you have bullied someone who does not know martial art. Don't you remember anything your master and elders and your parents instructed?"

His words were harsh and his countenance stern; he had unexpectedly showed the least bit of leniency toward Wei Bi and Wu Qingying. Listening to him, Zhang Wuji was frightened and anxious instead. Zhu Changling also asked Zhang Wuji how he came to the manor, how he came to wear a servant's attire, while at the same time he also called someone to fetch medicine and some paste to mend broken bones to treat Wei Bi and Zhang Wuji's injuries.

Zhu Jiuzhen knew her father was furious and so she did not dare to conceal anything. She told him how Zhang Wuji protected the little monkey, how he was attacked by the pack of dogs, and how she rescued him and took him to the manor.

The more Zhu Changling heard, the deeper his frown was; when his daughter finished her narration, he sternly said, "Out of chivalry this Zhang Xiongdi protected the little monkey; that fact shows his heroism, yet you have unexpectedly treated him as a servant. If this matter is spread out later, the Jianghu warriors will all say that I, 'Jing Tian Yi Bi' [One Pen Shocking the Heavens] Zhu Changling, am a heartless, unjust disciple. You are raising these malicious dogs, I only knew that you love to play with them, and that's fine with me. Who would have thought that you dare to be reckless and use them to hurt others? If I don't kill you, this little girl, today, how can I, Zhu Changling still have a face to take part in the Wulin world?"

Realizing her father was really angry, Zhu Jiuzhen bent her knees and kowtowed on the ground. "Father," she said,

“Child will not dare anymore.”

Zhu Changling’s rage continued, Wei Bi and Wu Qingying also knelt down to beseech him. Zhang Wuji also opened his mouth, “Laoye ...”

Zhu Changling busily said, “Xiao Xiongdi, how could you call me ‘Laoye’ [old/senior master]? I am only several years older than you are. At most you can call me ‘Qian Bei’ [senior/older generation], that would be enough.”

“Yes, yes, Zhu Qian Bei,” Zhang Wuji said, “You cannot blame Miss over this matter; her actions were by no means intentional.”

“Look at that,” Zhu Changling said, “A young boy like him is very broad-minded and loving; how can the three of you rise above that? Today is the New Year’s Day, also Miss Wu is our guest, actually I should have not gotten angry, but this matter should not have happened at all. It was an act of cowardice, the act of the lowly characters of the ‘black way’, how could someone from the ‘chivalrous way’ like us do such thing? Since Xiao Xiongdi has interceded for you, you can all rise.”

Swallowing their shame, Wei Bi and the others, three people, stood up. Zhu Changling turned toward the servant who feeds the dogs and shouted, “Where are those malicious dogs? Take them here.” The servant complied and took the dogs out.

Zhu Jiuzhen saw the dark expression on her father’s face and wondered what he was about to do. “Father,” she called in low voice.

With a cold laugh Zhu Changling said, “You raised these

dogs to harm others. All right, tell them to bite me.”

Zhu Jiuzhen cried. “Father,” she was sobbing, “Daughter realizes her mistake.”

“Humph,” Zhu Changling sneered and walked toward the vicious dogs. ‘Slap! Slap! Slap! Slap!’ four times, the skulls of four big vicious dogs, as big and vicious as wolves, were shattered and they fell down on the ground.

The people were shocked and all were speechless. Zhu Changling punched and kicked, his palms hacked down and his fingers pierced, his body floated; a dark blue shadow circled around the courtyard, more than thirty vicious dogs were all killed without mercy. They could not even escape, let alone try to bite or attack. He was able to kill the dogs in one fell swoop, admittedly because the dogs were not under Zhu Jiuzhen’s order to attack, that is, the dogs were caught off guard; however, his action was as swift as the wind or lightning, his palm power was extremely fierce. Wei Bi, Wu Qingying and Zhang Wuji watched with their jaws dropped.

Then Zhu Changling carried Zhang Wuji lying in his arms to his own house to tend to his injuries. Before long, Mrs. Zhu and Zhu Jiuzhen came to take care of him with some medicinal soup.

After being bitten by the dogs, Zhang Wuji had lost a considerable amount of blood, his body was weakened. This time the injuries he suffered were not light, he was unconscious for several days. After his mind cleared up, he wrote his own prescription and asked the servant to prepare the medication and feed it to him, then his recovery was quicker. Seeing his divine-like medical ability, Zhu Changling was surprised and impressed.

Within these twenty-some days of recovering, Zhu Jiuzhen

often came to accompany Zhang Wuji by his bed, singing or guessing riddles, telling him stories, or simply chatting and joking, just like a big sister taking care of her ailing little brother, very attentive and considerate with meticulous care. After Zhang Wuji was strong enough to get up, Zhu Jiuzhen was still spending most of her days with Zhang Wuji. When it was time for her to train martial art with her father, she did not try to shun Zhang Wuji away; she always called him to watch on the side.

Zhu Changling had hinted twice that he had the intention of taking Zhang Wuji under his tutelage to inherit his entire martial art skill, but seeing a lack of response on Zhang Wuji's side, he no longer brought it up. But he still treated Zhang Wuji with kindness, not different than if he were one of his own disciples.

The Zhu family martial art was closely related to calligraphy. Zhu Jiuzhen was required to practice writing every day, and she always had Zhang Wuji accompany her studying the books. Ever since Zhang Wuji left the Bing Huo [ice and fire] Island and came to the Central Earth, he had always wandered alone in desperation, laden with grief and misery, when had he experienced this kind of peaceful and happy days?

In the blink of an eye it was already past the middle of the second month. This particular day Zhang Wuji and Zhu Jiuzhen were practicing their calligraphy in a little study room when Xiao Feng the maid came in and reported, "Miss, Yao Er Ye [second master Yao] has returned from the Central Plains."

Zhu Jiuzhen was very happy; she tossed the pen brush away and called out, "Good! I have been waiting for him for more than half a year, now he finally comes." Pulling Zhang Wuji's

hand along he said, "Wuji Di [little brother Wuji], come and take a look, I wonder what neat things Yao Ershu [second (younger) uncle] bought for me this time." Two people walked hand-in-hand toward the main hall.

"Who is Yao Ershu?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"He is my father's sworn brother," Zhu Jiuzhen replied, "He is known as 'Qian Li Zhui Feng' [pursuing the wind for thousand 'li'] Yao Qingquan. Last year my father asked him to deliver a gift to the Central Plains. I asked him to buy some rouge cosmetics and silk fabrics from Hangzhou, and embroidery needles and patterns from Suzhou, also some Huimo [Anhui ink, known for its quality] brush and ink. I wonder if he managed to buy everything." She explained further that the Zhu family manor was located in remote Kunlun mountain range of the western region, and that fine and delicate articles could not be bought within several thousand 'li' from where they were. Kunlun Mountain was tens of thousands 'li' away from the Central Earth, to make a round trip between two places would required two, three years; therefore, if anybody was going to the Central Plains, Zhu Jiuzhen would ask him to buy large quantities of goods.

As the two of them were near the hall, they were shocked to hear the sound of crying and weeping. Upon entering the hall, their shock was even greater, since they saw Zhu Changling and a tall and slim middle-aged man were kneeling on the floor, weeping. The man was wearing white mourning garment with a straw belt on his waist.

Zhu Jiuzhen went toward and man and called out, "Yao Ershu!"

With a loud wailing Zhu Changling called out, "Zhen'Er, Zhen'Er, our great benefactor, Zhang Wu Ye [fifth master

Zhang], Zhang ... Zhang Wu Ye ... he .. he ... he died!"

Zhu Jiuzhen was startled. "How can that be?" she asked, "Zhang En Gong [benefactor master (see also my note on 'Gong' earlier) ... has been missing for ten years. So he did not return safely?"

Sobbing, Yao Qingquan said, "We live remotely so we did not receive timely information. Turned out more than four years ago Zhang En Gong and Madame committed suicide together. I heard this news on the way at Shanxi, before I even went up Mount Wudang. Upon my arrival on the mountain, I met Song Da Xia and Yu Er Xia [first hero Song and second hero Yu, respectively]. Only then did I know the truth, ay ..."

The more Zhang Wuji listened; his shock grew until finally his doubts were gone. The one they referred to as 'the great benefactor, the fifth master Zhang' was his own father, Zhang Cuishan. Seeing that Zhu Changling and Yao Qingquan were crying bitterly while Zhu Jiuzhen was also weeping with tears coming down her face, Zhang Wuji was unable to bear the urge to step forward and reveal his real identity, but then he changed his mind, "All along I did not tell them my origin, if I reveal the truth now, it is most likely that Zhu Bofu [father's elder brother, general respectful term to address an older man] and Zhen Jie [older sister] would not believe me. Perhaps they would think that I am merely trying to buy their sympathy, and then they would look down on me."

Not too long afterwards, there came a loud noise of weeping from the inner courtyard. Mrs. Zhu, holding on to a maid's shoulder, walked into the hall, while repeatedly asking Yao Qingquan question after question. In his grief and indignation, Yao Qingquan forgot to pay his respects toward

the sworn sister-in-law. Immediately he narrated again how Zhang Cuishan committed suicide.

Zhang Wuji tried hard to suppress his emotions. He did not cry openly, but tears rained down on his face. Everybody in the hall was crying, so nobody paid him any attention.

Suddenly Zhu Changling raised his palm and 'crack!' he struck the octagonal table by his side that it broke in two. "Er Di [second (younger) brother]," he said, "Tell me clearly, who had forced En Gong and En Sao [benefactor sister-in-law] to their deaths on Mount Wudang?"

"As soon as I heard the information, I should have returned quickly to report this matter to Dage [big brother]," Yao Qingquan said, "But I thought investigating the enemies' names was more important. Turned out the people who went up Mount Wudang and forced En Gong to his death were under the leadership of the Shaolin Three Divine Monks, the number of people was indeed not a few. Xiao Di [little brother – referring to self] secretly investigated everywhere, and thus was delayed several days." Thereupon he named the people from Shaolin, Kongtong, Emei, and other 'Pai' [sect], and then Hai Sha [lit. sand of the ocean], Ju Jing [gigantic whale], Shen Quan [divine fist], Wu Shan [Mount Wu, located on the Changjiang River by the Three Gorges], and other 'Bang Hui' [clan and society], who had gone up Mount Wudang to coerce Zhang Cuishan, such as Abbot Kong Wen, Reverend Kong Zhi, He Taichong, Jing Xuan Shitai, Guan Neng, and many other names.

Zhu Changling grimly said, "Er Di, these people are among the best of the Wulin characters of the present age; we can't provoke even one of those people. However, Zhang Wu Ye's kindness on us was as heavy as the mountain; we must avenge his deep enmity even if our bodies were ground into

powder and our bones were broken into pieces.”

Wiping his tears, Yai Qingquan said, “Dage is right, we owe our two lives to Zhang Wu Ye. In any case we are able to live these dozen of years, so if we must lose our lives for Zhang Wu Ye’s sake, that is only appropriate. What Xiao Di regrets most is that I was not able to meet Zhang Wu Ye’s young master; otherwise I would be able to convey Dage’s good intention. It would be best if we can invite him here, then we can give him everything we have and take a good care of him the rest of his life.”

Mrs. Zhu prattled incessantly, asking in details about this Zhang Gongzi [young master]. Yao Qingquan only knew that he was seriously injured, but he did not know where he had gone to seek treatment. It seemed to be that this child was only eight, nine years old that year. Supposedly Zhang Sanfeng, Zhang Zhenren [lit. real/true person, a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] was going to pass his entire martial art skill on to him, so that in the future he could take over the Sect Leader position of Wudang Pai.

Zhu Changling, husband and wife immediately kneeled down to express their thanks to the Heaven and the Earth for the future Sect Leader Zhang.

Yao Qingquan said, "Dage asked me to deliver thousand-year-old king ginseng, snow lotus herb from Tianshan, jade lion paper weight, black gold dagger and other things for Zhang En Gong; Xiao Di has left everything on Mount Wudang, asking Song Da Xia to hand them over to Zhang Gongzi."

"That's the best arrangement, that is," Zhu Changling said. Turning toward his daughter he said, "Why don't you tell Zhang Xiongdi how our family received great kindness from

our benefactor?"

Zhu Jiuzhen took Zhang Wuji's hand and led him to her father's study room. She pointed toward a large scroll of painting hanging at the center of the wall and told Zhang Wuji to take a look. On the right margin of the painting there were seven characters: 'Picture of Zhang Gong Cuishan's Kindness'.

Zhang Wuji had never been to Zhu Changling's study before, this time, as he saw his father's revered name, his eyes were clouded with tears. The background of the painting was a vast wilderness. A handsome young warrior, with left hand holding a silver hook and right hand brandishing an iron brush, was fighting a fierce battle with five fearsome looking enemies. Zhang Wuji knew this warrior must be his father. Although the face was somewhat different, he could see the slight resemblance with his own face. There were two people lying on the ground, one was Zhu Changling, the other Yao Qingquan. There were two more people with severed heads. On the lower left corner there was a young mother, her expression was full of fear. She was Madame Zhu. She was carrying a baby girl in her arms. Zhang Wuji focused his eyes and saw a small black mole on the side of this baby's mouth, so she must be Zhu Jiuzhen.

The paper of this painting had turned light yellow; apparently it was an old painting, at least ten years old. Zhu Jiuzhen pointed her finger to the painting and explained to him. Turned out shortly after Zhu Jiuzhen was born, in order to avoid strong enemies, Zhu Changling took his entire family to the west. Unfortunately, the enemy still managed to overtake them on the way. Two of his younger martial brothers were killed, while Yao Qingquan and he were also overthrown. The enemies were just about to finish them off

when Zhang Cuishan happened to pass by. Out of chivalry he beat the enemies and drove them away, and thus had saved the lives of the entire family. A simple calculation would reveal that it must have happened before Zhang Cuishan went to the Bing Huo Island.

After Zhu Jiuzhen narrated this story, her expression turned sad. She said, "We live in such a remote area that we have just found out about Zhang En Gong's return from overseas last year. Father had made an oath that he would not tread his feet on the Central Plains even for one step; thereupon he imposed upon Yao Ershu to deliver the precious gifts to Mount Wudang and pay his respects, who would have thought ..." While she was still talking, a young servant of the study room came in and invited her to the mourning hall to pay her respects.

Zhu Jiuzhen hurriedly went out the room. After changing her clothes to a plain white gown, together with Zhang Wuji they went to the rear hall. There were two memorial tablets arranged in the hall. White candles were burning high. One of the memorial tablets bore this inscription: 'En Gong Zhang Daxia Hui Cuishan Zhi Lingwei' [the memorial tablet of benefactor Great Hero Zhang, revered name Cuishan]. The other one had 'Zhang Furen Yin Shi Zhi Lingwei' [the memorial tablet of Mrs. Zhang of the Yin family]. Zhu Changling, husband and wife, along with Yao Qingquan were kneeling on the floor, weeping with grief.

Zhang Wuji followed Zhu Jiuzhen, together they also kowtowed. Zhu Changling stroke his head and with a choking voice said, "Xiao Xiongdi, very good, very good. This Zhang Daxia was generous and big hearted, a remarkable man, truly unparalleled in the present age. Although you do not know him, he was not your relative or acquaintance, yet you pay your respects to him. It is very

appropriate."

Faced with this situation, Zhang Wuji had even less reason to confess that he was the Benefactor Zhang's child, thinking, "The rumor Yao Ershu heard was incorrect, he said I am no older than eight, nine years of age; if I confess now, it would be more difficult for them to believe."

"Dage," suddenly Yao Qingquan said, "About that Xie Ye [Master Xie] ..." Zhu Changling coughed and made an eye signal. Yao Qingquan immediately changed the subject, "What should we do about the thanksgiving sacrifice? Shall we hold a funeral for the Benefactor?"

"You take care of it!" Zhu Changling replied.

Zhang Wuji thought, "You were obviously saying 'Xie Ye'; how come suddenly changed into 'xie yi' [thanksgiving offering]? [Translator's note: the same 'Xie' (thank you) character, so in Chinese the two words did not differ too much.] Xie Ye, Xie Ye? Could he be talking about my Yifu [foster/adoptive father]?"

That night he remembered his departed father and mother, as well as his Yifu who was spending the rest of his life on the cold island of the extreme north. His mind was full of disquieting thoughts; how could he sleep soundly?

By the dawn the next day, he heard intermittent footsteps, while his nose caught a delicate fragrance, followed by Zhu Jiuzhen entering his room carrying a basin of water in her hands to wash his face with.

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Zhen Jie, what ... what are you doing?" he asked.

Zhu Jiuzhen said, "All the servants and maids have left

completely. What's wrong with me taking care of you?"

Zhang Wuji was even more surprised. "What ... what happened? Why did they leave?"

"My father told them to leave last night," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "He gave every one of them some money and sent them back to their homes. It is too dangerous in here." After a short pause she continued, "After you wash your face, Father wants to have a word with you."

Zhang Wuji quickly washed his face without taking too much care. Zhu Jiuzhen combed his hair, and then together they walked toward Zhu Changling's study. There were originally seventy, eighty servants in this big building complex, but now it looked cold and empty, not even one person was to be seen.

Seeing the two of them walk in, Zhu Changling said, "Zhang Xiongdi, I very much admire your chivalrous heart and heroic spirit. Actually, I wanted to keep you in my humble home for eight or ten years, but now that we are suddenly on the brink of an unforeseen incident, we must part. Zhang Xiongdi you must not have questions in your heart." While saying that, he presented a tray; on the tray there were twelve gold ingots and twelve silver ingots, plus a self-defense dagger. He said, "This is a small token just to remember your meeting with a simple-minded couple and their daughter, I ask Zhang Xiongdi to accept. If the old man can keep his life, we will meet again in the future ..." Speaking to this point, his voice broke, he sobbed and was unable to continue.

Zhang Wuji stepped aside to evade the gift. He boldly said, "Zhu Bobo [(older) paternal uncle], although your nephew is young and useless, he is not one who covets life and fears

death. As your family is facing imminent danger, there is no way nephew will go away on my own. Perhaps nephew cannot help Bofu and Jiejie in any way, but I will follow Bofu and Jiejie in life or death.

Zhu Changling urged him again and again, but Zhang Wuji's mind was set. "Ay!" finally Zhu Changling sighed and said, "You kid do not know danger. Alright, I will tell you the truth, but you must swear a heavy oath first, that you will not in any way divulge the secret to a second person, you also must not ask me too many questions."

Zhang Wuji kneeled down at once and with a loud and clear voice said, "The Emperor of Heaven above, the matter which Zhu Bobo will tell me, if I divulge it to other people, or ask him too many questions, let me die with random chops of knife, and bring ruin and shame upon myself."

Zhu Changling raised him up and then looked outside the door and the windows, followed by leaping up the roof. After ensuring there was no other people in all directions, he returned to the study room and said in low voice next to Zhang Wuji's ear, "What I am going to tell you, you are to remember it in your heart; you must not say anything to me, to guard against the wall with an ear." Zhang Wuji nodded.

In low voice Zhu Changling continued, "Yesterday Yao Er Di brought the news of Zhang En Gong's death, but he also brought someone home. This person is surnamed Xie, given name Xun, he is known as the Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden mane lion king] ..." Zhang Wuji was so shocked that his body trembled.

Zhu Changling continued, "This Xie Daxia and Zhang En Gong were sworn brothers, while he has tied many deep enmities with various schools and sects under the heavens.

Zhang En Gong, husband and wife committed suicide was because they were unwilling to disclose their sworn brother's whereabouts. Somehow Xie Daxia returned to the Central Earth and went into action to avenge Zhang En Gong's grievance. He has killed many enemies, but the enemy warriors are simply too many; in the end he suffered a serious injury. Yao Er Di is quick-witted; he rescued him and brought him here to escape, but we know the enemies will pursue in an instant. The adversaries are too numerous, we are absolutely helpless to withstand them. I am risking my life to repay the kindness; I determine to die together with Xie Daxia. But you have no relation whatsoever with him, why must you lose your life here? Zhang Xiongdi, I have told you everything, quickly leave! Once the enemies arrive, all jades and rocks will be burned; it will be too late to escape by then."

When Zhang Wuji heard this, his heart was burning with surprise and delight. He had never thought Yifu would come to this place. "Where is ..." he asked, but Zhu Changling's right hand quickly covered his mouth while he whispered in his ear, "Must not speak. The enemy's power is extensive; one careless word, we will jeopardize Xie Daxia's life. Have you forgotten your heavy oath just now?" Zhang Wuji nodded.

Zhu Changling said, "I have clearly told you everything. Zhang Xiongdi, although you are young, I have regarded you as a good friend and have taken you into my full confidence, concealing nothing. You must leave immediately."

Zhang Wuji said, "You have clearly explained everything to me, now I'm even more unwilling to leave."

Zhu Changling was deep in thought for a long time. Finally

he heaved a deep sigh and decisively said, "Alright! Here after we will live or die together, no need to say anything anymore. While we still have time, we must act quickly."

Immediately he took Zhu Jiuzhen and Zhang Wuji and went out the door. Mrs. Zhu and Yao Qingquan had been waiting outside the door, with several cloth bundles sitting next to them, as if they were ready to take a long journey. Zhang Wuji looked to the east and gazed to the west, but did not see any sign of his Yifu. Zhu Changling ignited a paper flint to light a torch, and then aimed the fire at a spot above the main gate. Instantly fire blazed high into the sky while the fire tongues reaching out everywhere. Turned out the several hundred houses in this large building complex was already soaked with petroleum. Tianshan and Kunlunshan mountain ranges of the western region were rich with natural resources; it was common to see oil bubbling up from the earth like a fountain, which the people took to make the fire to cook their meals.

The Zhu family village consisted of splendid large buildings spread over a wide area with somewhat connected interior, but with the help of the oil, the fire spread really fast. Zhang Wuji saw how quick the richly ornamented building engulfed in the raging flame; he felt very grateful in his heart. He thought, "This is Zhu Bobo's life savings, built with countless care, but when evening comes, everything will be reduced to ashes, and all for the sake of my father and Yifu. This kind of courageous and upright man is indeed very rare in the world."

That night, Zhu Changling, husband and wife, Zhu Jiuzhen and Zhang Wuji, four people slept in a cave. Zhu Changling's five trusted disciples, led by Yao Qingquan, stayed on guard duty outside the cave with weapons in their hands.

The fire was raging continuously to the end of the third day; fortunately the enemies had not arrived yet. By the evening of the third day, Zhu Changling took his wife and daughter, along with his disciples, Yao Qingquan and Zhang Wuji to go deeper into the cave, through dark long underground tunnel, toward several underground rooms with mountain rocks as their walls. The chambers were well stuffed with provisions: food and water, but it was rather hot and stuffy down there.

Zhu Jiuzhen noticed that Zhang Wuji kept wiping his face with his long sleeve. She smiled and asked, "Wuji Di [younger brother], can you guess why is it so hot in here? Do you know where we are?"

Zhang Wuji smelled strong burning odor and realized immediately, "Ah, we are underneath the original village."

"You are very smart," Zhu Jiuzhen laughed.

Zhang Wuji admired Zhu Changling's careful thinking even more. When the enemy's large-scale raid arrived, they would see the Zhu family village had been burnt down without a single tile left intact, so they would go to distant places to search, and would never have guessed that Xie Xun was actually hidden underneath the rubble. Zhang Wuji saw a closed iron door at the other end of the stone chamber, he surmised that his Yifu must be hidden inside. Although he was dying to see his Yifu and chat with him about what happened after they parted, he realized the danger they were still facing. Even Zhu Changling did not dare to talk with him, how could he act blindly without thinking? If he messed up this important matter, the loss of his own life was nothing, but he would also endanger the lives of his Yifu, as well as the entire Zhu family's, wouldn't he be responsible

for this grave offense?

After spending half a day underground, the heat gradually diminished, everybody unfolded their blankets and went to sleep. Suddenly they heard galloping hoof beats from a distant, which in a short while the noise sounded like it came directly above their heads. Someone with a gruff voice was heard saying, "This old thief Zhu Changling must be protecting that runaway Xie Xun, after them, quick!"

Although they were underground, everyone was able to hear clearly the noise above the ground. Turned out there was an iron tube from the underground chambers leading to the surface, transmitting the noise.

They heard random noise of hoof beats, which gradually went away. Altogether, there were a total of five groups of pursuing force coming and going one after another that night; people from Kunlun Pai, Kongtong Pai, and Ju Jing Bang ['great whale clan']. They could not hear the origin of the other two groups. Each group was at least seven, eight people, at most a dozen people. Their weapons made a resounding noise, their horses neighing noisily, they were all yelling and shouting evil words; the air was filled with violence that night.

Zhang Wuji thought, "If Yifu was not blind and seriously injured, would he be concerned over these tiny demons and little clowns like you?"

As the fifth group galloped away, Yao Qingquan picked up a wooden plug to cover the mouth of the iron pipe, so that the noise underground would not be accidentally heard by a passerby. But he was still speaking in a subdued voice. "I am going to check Xie Daxia's condition," he said. Zhu Changling nodded.

Yao Qingquan reached out and pulled a lever by the iron door to operate the secret mechanism, the iron door slowly opened. Carrying an oil lamp in his hand, he walked through the iron door. By this time Zhang Wuji was no longer able to endure patiently, he stood up and peeked over Yao Qingquan's back. He saw a big and tall man was lying on a couch facing in. To suddenly see his Yifus broad back, Zhang Wuji's eyes were brimming with tears of excitement.

He heard Yao Qingquan asked in a low voice, "Xie Daxia, do you feel a lot better now? Do you want to drink some water?"

Suddenly, a strong gust of wind blew out, the oil lamp in Yao Qingquan's hand went out immediately, followed by 'Bang!' Yao Qingquan was struck by Xie Xun's palm. He flew out of the iron door and fell heavily on the ground.

Xie Xun shouted, "Dogs of Shaolin Pai, Kunlun Pai, Kongtong Pai, come, come! Do you think Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun is afraid of you all?"

"Not good!" Zhu Changling called out, "Xie Daxia's mind is confused." Walking toward the door, he said, "Xie Daxia, we are your friends, not your enemies."

"What friends?" Xie Xun said with a cold laugh, "Are you deceiving me with sweet words?" He walked out the iron door in big strides and sent out his palm toward Zhu Changling's chest. This palm strike was so swift and fierce that the fire of the oil lamps around the room flickered continuously.

Zhu Changling did not dare to block head on, he circled around to evade. Xie Xun sent out a left punch toward his face. Zhu Changling had no choice but to parry by lifting up

his arm, his body shook and he retreated two steps backward.

Seeing this sudden turn of events, Zhang Wuji was frightened. Xie Xun's fist and palm were like a storm with incomparable speed and power. Zhu Changling did not dare to parry and withdrew repeatedly. Xie Xun's palm missed Zhu Changling and struck the rock wall nearby; debris of rock flew. If that palm had struck a human body, would he still be alive?

Xie Xun's long hair was draped on his shoulder, his eyes were like lightning, his face was full of bloodstains, his mouth continuously made 'huh, huh' noises, his palms were getting more and more violent. Mrs. Zhu and Zhu Jiuzhen were terrified, they huddled together at the corner of a wall.

Seeing Xie Xun's fist and palm arrive, Zhu Changling had no choice but shove a nearby wooden table to stop him. 'Bang! Bang!' Xie Xun punched twice and the table was smashed into smithereens.

Zhang Wuji was completely dumbfounded, his jaw dropped, because as he watched from the side, he saw that this 'Xie Xun' was definitely not his Yifu Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun. His Yifu had been blind for a long time, this man's eyes were flashing bright. He saw this man's palm struck again, while Zhu Changling's back was against the rock wall, unable to take another step backwards, but he still did not try to block. "Xie Da Xia," Zhu Changling called out, "I am not your enemy, I am not going to fight you back." The man ignored his plea completely, his palm was still striking toward Zhu Changling's chest.

Zhu Changling's face bore a pained expression. "Xie Da Xia," he called out, "Do you believe me now?"

“Dog thief,” that man shouted, “Eat my fist!” as he sent out a punch.

Zhu Changling spurted out a mouthful of blood. In a trembling voice he said, “You are my benefactor’s sworn brother; although you beat me to death, I will never fight you back.”

With a wild laugh that man said, “It’s best that you don’t fight back, it will be easier for me to kill you.” With a left punch followed by a right punch he struck Zhu Changling’s chest and abdomen.

“Ah!” with a miserable cry Zhu Changling’s crumpled body slid down to the ground. The big man showed no mercy and punched again. Zhang Wuji quickly stepped forward risking his life, he raised his arm to block. He felt that the power behind this punch was tremendous. As soon as he was shaken, he almost fainted. At that moment, forgetting about life and death he called out, “You are not Xie Xun, you are not ...”

The big man was furious. “What does a little rascal like you know?” He lifted his leg to kick him.

Zhang Wuji rolled sideways to avoid the kick, while shouting, “You pretend to be Jin Mao Shi Wang with evil intentions, you are a fake! A fake ...”

Zhu Changling had already been sitting wearily on the ground, but listening to Zhang Wuji’s cry, he struggled to crawl back up. Pointing his finger toward the big man he called out, “You ... you are not ... you deceived me ...” Suddenly he spurted another mouthful of blood, which shot toward that man’s face. He fumbled forward and while

falling, he struck to seal the 'shen feng xue' [divine grace acupoint] under that man's right breast.

Actually, after being wounded, Zhu Changling was not that man's match. But when he spurted blood and fell forward, he took the man by surprise and struck his vital acupoint using the special family skill 'Solitary Yang Finger'.

After sealing two other acupoints on that man's waist, Zhu Changling could not hold himself any longer and passed out on the ground. Zhu Jiuzhen and Zhang Wuji rushed forward and quickly held him up.

A moment later, Zhu Changling regained his consciousness and asked Zhang Wuji, "He ... he ..."

Zhang Wuji said, "Zhu Bobo, I cannot hide the truth from you anymore; the one you call benefactor was my father. Jin Mao Shi Wang is my Yifu. How could I fail to recognize him?"

Zhu Changling shook his head with a bitter smile; his face showed that he was not convinced the least bit. Zhang Wuji continued, "My Yifu is blind, this man's eyes can see well, that is the biggest flaw of his disguise. My Yifu became blind overseas, of course no outsider would know. This man came here in disguise, he would not know about my Yifu's blindness."

"Wuji Di," Zhu Jiuzhen happily said, "Are you really our family's great benefactor's son? That's very good, very good!"

Zhu Changling still was not convinced. Zhang Wuji had no choice but narrated briefly how he came to be in Kunlun region. Yao Qingquan implied his disbelief by asking him all kinds of questions about the Wudang Mountain; he also

asked him the circumstances around Zhang Cuishan, husband and wife's suicide. After Zhang Wuji gave all the correct answers, only then did he believe.

Zhu Changling still felt uncomfortable. "If this boy did not tell the truth and we offended Xie Da Xia, how can that be good?"

Yao Qingquan pulled out a dagger and placed it on that man's right eye, saying, "Friend, both of Jin Mao Shi Wang's eyes are damaged. If you want to pretend to be him, then you must copy him well. I am going to help you by taking out these things first. I, the one surnamed Yao, have been deceived really bad by you; if this little brother did not expose your lie, wouldn't I deliver my Zhu Dage's life for nothing?" While saying that, he thrust the dagger forward until the tip touched that man's eyelid. He asked again, "Who are you, anyway? Why do you pretend to be Jin Mao Shi Wang?"

"If you have guts, just stab your dagger and kill me," that man angrily said, "What kind of man do you think 'Kai Bei Shou' [hand splitting the stone] Hu Bao is? Do you think you can extort any confession from me?"

"Ah," Zhu Changling exclaimed, "Kai Bei Shou Hu Bao! You are from Kongtong Pai."

Hu Bao said loudly, "All schools and sects under the heavens know that Zhu Changling wants to avenge Zhang Cuishan. As the saying goes: strike first and gain the upper hand, strike later and suffer a calamity'."

Yao Qingquan roared, "You are so malicious!" His dagger went down to stab that man's heart. But Zhu Changling reached out with his left hand to grab his wrist, saying, "Er Di, wait. What if he really is Xie Daxia? Even if we have to

die ten thousand times, we still cannot redeem our wrong.”

Yai Qingquan said, “Zhang Xiongdi has told us clearly. Dage, if you are half-hearted [orig. ‘san xin er yi’ – three hearts two intentions] and do not make a decision, it will be difficult to us to escape present disaster.”

Zhu Changling shook his head, “I would rather we receive a thousand blades than make a mistake by injuring even a strand of hair of our benefactor’s sworn brother.”

“Zhu Bobo,” Zhang Wuji said, “This man definitely is not my Yifu. My Yifu is widely known as ‘Golden Mane Lion King’, his hair is yellow. This man’s hair is black.”

Zhu Changling was deep in thought for half a day. Finally he nodded. Taking along Zhang Wuji’s hand, he said, “Xiao Xiongdi, come with me.”

The two of them went out from the stone chambers. They left the cave and walked toward a valley behind the hillside and then sat side-by-side on a piece of boulder.

“Xiao Xiongdi,” Zhu Changling said, “If this man is not Xie Daxia, naturally we must kill him, but before we make our move, I must not have the least bit of doubt in my heart; don’t you think so?”

Zhang Wuji said, “You don’t want to make any mistake, that is only natural. But this man is definitely not my Yifu. Zhu Bobo, set your heart at ease.”

“Child,” Zhu Changling sighed, “When I was young, I fell into deceitful schemes of more than a few people. Today I did not want to fight back and I received a severe injury as a result; hence I knew that I have misjudged that man. One mistake

is enough, I cannot make another one. This is a significant responsibility. My death is not to be regretted, but whatever happens, I simply must protect Xie Daxia and your safety. Actually, I wanted to ask clearly Xie Daxia's whereabouts, so that my heart can be truly at ease, but I feel that this is an inappropriate matter to ask."

Zhang Wuji's heart was deeply touched. "Zhu Bobo," he said, "For the sake of my father and Yifu, you have destroyed a million of your family properties, you also went as far as receiving this serious injury personally, how can I not trust you? Even if you did not ask about my Yifu, I certainly must tell you everything."

Thereupon he told Zhu Changling how his parents and Xie Xun were carried by the current to the Bing Huo Island, how they lived there for ten years, and how the three of them finally returned on a wooden raft; one by one he told him everything. He learned most of these events from his parents' mouths, but he was able to narrate clearly. Zhu Changling repeatedly asked questions on things that were unclear, such as how Zhang Wuji learned martial art on the Bing Huo Island, how he brought Yang Buhui to the west, how he ran into a misfortune at the Kunlun San Sheng Ao [three-sage depression (of the earth)], until he understood everything clearly. Finding that Zhang Wuji's story was without any flaw, only then did he believe him completely.

With a long sigh of relief he looked up to the sky and said, "En Gong, oh, En Gong, I am asking your spirit in Heaven to clearly be my witness: Zhu Changling will exhaust everything he has to raise Wuji Xiongdi until he grows up and becomes an adult. Only powerful enemies lie in wait on all sides, while my martial art skill is meager, in all honesty I cannot necessarily bear this heavy burden. Therefore, I pray that En Gong will bless and protect." Finished speaking, he

kneeled down on the ground and kowtowed toward the heavens. Zhang Wuji was grieved, but also full of gratitude; he also kneeled down.

Zhu Changling stood up and said, "Now I don't have even half a part of doubt. Ay! Shaolin, Emei, Kunlun, Kongtong, which one of them does not have strength in number and superior martial art? Xiao Xiongdi, previously I was determined to risk my old life to fight the enemies one by one, to repay your honorable father's great kindness. But today, comforting an orphan is an important matter, revenge comes second. Only, the earth is so vast, where can we go to escape this disaster? They managed to find even a secluded place in a remote area like mine, where can we find a more secluded place?"

After pausing for a while he continued, "Xie Daxia lives alone on the Bing Huo Island with nobody to help him. I am thinking that for these past several years, his life must be really miserable. Ay, this great hero has such an esteemed friendship with benefactor and sister-in-law; if only I can see him just once, I will die a happy man."

Hearing him talk about how his Yifu had a harsh life, alone on the Bing Huo Island, Zhang Wuji was overwhelmed with sadness. Suddenly he had an idea and blurted, "Zhu Bobo, what do you say we go to the Bing Huo Island together? My days on that island were happy, but as soon as I arrived on the Central Earth, I saw and suffered, if not murder then shedding of blood, and thus I feel alarmed and anxious."

"Xiao Xiongdi," Zhu Changling said, "You really want to return to the Bing Huo Island, don't you?"

Zhang Wuji hesitated and did not answer; quietly thinking that he would not live too much longer anyway. Besides, the

voyage to the Bing Huo Island was difficult and dangerous, they might not necessarily reach their destination, and thus he should not endanger the lives of Zhu Changling and his family. The ocean was without mercy, just one slight mishap and their bodies would be buried underneath the giant billowing waves.

Zhu Changling held his hands and looked at his face, saying, "Xiao Xiongdi, you and I are not strangers to each other, any concern should be discussed openly. Do you or do you not want to return to the Bing Huo Island?" His voice was full of sincerity.

In Zhang Wuji's heart right this moment, he was tired and loathed the sinister hearts of the Jianghu people, his desire was that he would be able to see his Yifu's face one more time before he died. If only he could die in his Yifu's arms, he would ask nothing else in this life. He was unable to conceal his heart's content in front of Zhu Changling, thereupon he slowly nodded.

Zhu Changling did not waste any time by more talking; holding Zhang Wuji's hand, he took him back to the stone chamber, and said to Yao Qingquan, "That man is a traitor, no doubt about it."

Yao Qingquan nodded. With the dagger in his hand, he entered the cell. They heard Splitting Stone Hand Hu Bao's long and miserable cry, and then it stopped abruptly. Yao Qingquan walked out of the cell and closed the iron door, his dagger was dripping with fresh blood, which he casually wiped on the bottom of his boots.

Zhu Changling said, "That traitor could come here and be a mole among us, looks like our trail has been compromised; we can't stay here anymore." Immediately he led everybody

out of the stone chamber, out of the cave, and walked for more than twenty 'li', around two mountain peaks, toward a valley, and arrived at a cluster of four, five little huts by a giant tree.

It was dawn. After everybody entered the huts, Zhang Wuji noticed the plow, sickle and other farming tools in the room, as well as pots, pans and furnace, and plenty of all kinds of provisions. It appeared that to guard against his powerful enemies, Zhu Changling had prepared not a few of these safe houses. Due to his severe injury, Zhu Changling immediately laid down on a bed. Mrs. Zhu took out some long gowns made of hand-woven cloth, along with straw sandals, head scarves, and distributed everything to everybody. All of a sudden the rich family madam and miss were transformed into peasant women. Although they did not act or talk like peasants, as long as they did not come too close to outsiders, nobody would know their disguise.

They stayed in the farm house for several days. Zhu Changling treated his injury with legacy medicine from Yunnan so he enjoyed a quick recovery. Fortunately, no enemy came to pursue. With nothing to do, Zhang Wuji quietly observed everything happening around him. He saw Yao Qingquan went out every day to seek out information. Mrs. Zhu led the disciples to pack their luggage, obviously for the long journey ahead of them. Zhang Wuji knew that to repay kindness and escape the enemy, Zhu Changling had decided to bring his whole family overseas to the Bing Huo Island, and Zhang Wuji was delighted.

That night Zhang Wuji was lying on the bed, imagining that if he was lucky enough not to die and manage to reach the Bing Huo Island, he would be able to live together on the island with this elder sister Zhu Jiuzhen, whose beauty was like an immortal's. He blushed and felt his ears getting hot,

his heart was thumping madly. He also envisioned that when (older) uncle Zhu, (younger) uncle Yao meet with his foster-father, the three of them would become good friends; they would live a carefree life on the island for the rest of their lives. They would not have to be afraid that the Mongolians would massacre or push them around; they also do not need to worry about the powerful enemies of the Wulin world sneakily attacking them. If he could live that kind of life, he would not want anything else in the world. In his delight, he had forgotten about the cold poison in his body and that his own days were numbered. It was deep into the night, but he had not fallen asleep.

While he was half-asleep, suddenly he heard the door gently pushed open, someone entered his room. Zhang Wuji was slightly surprised because his nose smelled light and delicate fragrance, which was precisely the jasmine perfume Zhu Jiuzhen used daily on her clothes. Suddenly his face turned deep red, for some unknown reason he felt extremely shy.

Zhu Jiuzhen walked quietly to the bed and asked in a low voice, "Wuji Di, are you asleep?"

Zhang Wuji did not dare to answer, he closed his eyes tight, pretending to be asleep. A moment later, he felt warm fingers on his eyelids. Zhang Wuji was surprised but happy, shy but scared; he wished she would quickly get out of the room. In his heart, he held Zhu Jiuzhen with the highest respect; if he could only look into her eyes every day, he would be very satisfied. He did not have the slightest degree of dirty thoughts toward her at all; even the hope of taking her as his wife in the future had never entered his mind. This moment, to suddenly see her entering his room, how could he not lose his mind?

Suddenly a thought came into his mind, "Could Zhen Jie possibly have an important matter she needs to discuss with me in the middle of the night?" he mused. Right this moment, suddenly the 'shan zhong xue' [lit. sheep odor acupoint] in the pit of his stomach went numb, followed by 'jian zhen' [shoulder chaste(?)], 'shen zang' [divine storehouse], 'qu chi' [crooked reservoir], and 'huan tiao' [jump the hoop] acupoints were sealed one by one. He was totally taken by surprise, who would have thought that Zhu Jiuzhen came in the middle of the night to seal his acupoints?

In his disappointment he tried to reason, "Ah, perhaps Zhen Jie wanted to test my alertness although I was asleep? She'll come back tomorrow to unseal my acupoints and make fun of me. If I knew it earlier, I would have jumped and scared her as soon as she entered the room, so that tomorrow she wouldn't have anything to boast."

He saw that she quietly pushed the door open and flew out. "I'd better unseal my acupoints quickly and follow her," Zhang Wuji thought, "I will pretend to be a ghost to scare her. That should be fun." Immediately he used the acupoint unsealing technique he learned from Xie Xun. However, Zhu Jiuzhen's family legacy of 'Solitary Yang Finger' was not something to be trifled with; he had to spend the most part of an hour to release his sealed acupoints. It was because Zhu Jiuzhen did not have enough strength, and also because she did not want to awaken him, she had only used light force; otherwise, even if Zhang Wuji's acupoint unsealing techniques were more amazing, he would never be able to free himself.

When he was able to stand up, he hurriedly put his outer garment on and jumped out of the window, but it was quiet everywhere he looked, not a trace of Zhu Jiuzhen to be seen.

Standing in the darkness he was feeling rather dispirited, but suddenly he had another thought, "Zhen Jie is going to make fun of me for being useless; let her tease me if she want to, why should I fight over who wins who loses with her? I always try to win her favor daily, it is not easy; if I pursue her tonight, she may be angry with me instead." Having this thought, his heart immediately calmed down.

It was the beginning of spring, the air was filled with the light fragrance of wild flowers all around the valley. Since sleep had left him, he wandered aimlessly along a small creek. The snow on the hillside was beginning to melt; it trickled down into the creek below. Occasionally he would step on or kick small pieces of ice, creating clinking noises along the way. After walking for a while, he heard giggles coming from the woods to his left, it was Zhu Jiuzhen's voice.

Zhang Wuji was slightly startled, "Did Zhen Jie find me?" he mused. But then he heard that she was scolding in a low voice, "Biaoge, don't make a scene, or I will slap your big ears," followed by a male voice laughing gaily. Zhang Wuji did not need to hear more to know that it was of course Wei Bi.

Zhang Wuji's heart was so shaken that he almost cried; the sweet dream he had for the last half a day was completely shattered, but his mind was suddenly as bright as the snow: "Why would I think that Zhen Jie sealed my acupoints because she wanted to play a joke on me? She is afraid I might find out that she is seeing her cousin in the middle of the night." In that instant his hands went numb and his legs went weak. He also thought, "I am a homeless pauper; how can I be compared to Wei Xianggong in terms of literacy or martial art skill, manners or appearance? ['xianggong' is yet another way of saying 'mister' or 'young master']. Zhen Jie and he are related as cousins, they are a perfect match [orig.

'lang cai nu mao' - talented man, beautiful woman], truly a match made in heaven [orig. 'tian zao di she' - heaven built, the earth arranged]."

Once he accepted the fact, he gradually calmed down and sighed lightly. Suddenly he heard footsteps approaching, someone was coming from behind. Right this moment, Zhu Jiuzhen was still talking and laughing in a low voice with Wei Bi, while walking hand-in-hand toward him. Zhang Wuji did not want to be seen by them, so he hastily stepped behind a large tree to hide.

He heard the two sets of footsteps were approaching each other. Suddenly Zhu Jiuzhen called out, "Father! You ... you ..." her voice trembled, apparently she was very scared. Turned out the person coming from the other side was none other than Zhu Changling.

Seeing his daughter having a tryst in the middle of the night with his sister's son, Zhu Changling was really angry. "Humph," he snorted, "What are you doing here?"

Zhu Jiuzhen forced herself to act like she did not care, she said with a laugh, "Father, Biaoge and I have not seen each other for such a long time, today he happened to come by, we are just chatting."

"You, this little girl, are recklessly too bold," Zhu Changling said, "What if Wuji finds out ..."

"I lightly sealed five of his major acupoints," Zhu Jiuzhen cut him off, "He is sleeping soundly right now. I am going to release him as soon as I am back, I am sure he will not know anything."

Zhang Wuji said in his heart, "Zhu Bobo knew I like Zhen Jie. Because of my father's kindness to him, he does not want

me to be broken hearted and lose heart. Actually, although I like Zhen Jie, I do not have any other intentions. Zhu Bobo, you are very good to me."

He heard Zhu Changling say, "Even so, you must be very careful, don't let us fail at the last hurdle and raise his suspicions."

Zhu Jiuzhen said with a smile, "Child understands."

"Jiufu [(maternal) uncle], Zhen Mei [younger sister]," Wei Bi said, "I'd better return. I am afraid Shifu is waiting for me."

Zhu Jiuzhen did not want to part with him too soon, she said, "Let me walk you off."

"Alright," Zhu Changling said, "Let me go with you, I need to talk to your Shifu a little bit. This time we are going to Bing Huo Island, everybody must be fully prepared, we can't afford any mistakes." And then the three of them walked toward the west.

Zhang Wuji felt rather strange; he knew Wei Bi's master was called Wu Lie, which was Wu Qingying's father. Listening to Zhu Changling, it seemed like the Wu family, father and daughter, along with Wei Bi, will be going to the Bing Huo Island too; why didn't anybody tell him before? The more people knew about this matter, the greater the possibility that it would leak out; hopefully nothing would implicate his Yifu.

He pondered about this for half a day. Suddenly he recalled something: Zhu Changling had said, 'don't let us fail at the last hurdle and raise his suspicions'. Suspicion ... suspicion ... what suspicion? Thinking about this word 'suspicion', suddenly something else flashed through his mind as if

someone had just lighted a light in the darkness of his mind; the people in the painting 'Picture of Zhang Gong Cuishan's Kindness' all bore close resemblance to the real ones, but how come his father's oval face was painted as square? He looked a lot like his father, true, because as father and son, they shared many similar facial features; however, his father face was oval with pointy chin, not at all like Zhang Wuji's long face with square jaw. According to Zhu Changling, he drew the painting with his own hand more than ten years ago. Even if his painting technique was not good, he should not make such a blatant mistake that the face of his great benefactor was changed beyond recognition. The Zhang Cuishan in the painting was practically a grown up version of Zhang Wuji.

"Ah, there is one more thing," he mused, "Father's iron pen had a straight handle with sharp nib; it looked just like ordinary writing brush. That day, not long after we arrived on the main land, he bought a regular judge pen from a weapon maker. He said that in term of weight and length, the weapon was acceptable for him to use, even with an extra iron hand. It did not look too pleasing to the eye. Mama said that as soon as we were settled, he should go and have one cast to his specifications. Yet the weapon Father had in the painting was actually a regular judge pen with a cast iron in the shape of a hand. Zhu Bobo himself is an expert in using judge pen, how could he paint it incorrectly? How could he draw Father's judge pen wrong?"

Thinking to this point, a faint feeling of dread started to grow in his heart. In the deepest part of his heart, he knew the answer, but the answer was too frightening, so he did not dare to think it clearly, he only tried to console himself, "I must not let my imagination run wild; Zhu Bobo treats me this good, why should I suspect him blindly? I'd better go back and sleep, if they knew I wander around in the middle

of the night, I might put my own life in jeopardy." As soon as he thought about 'his life in jeopardy', he shivered involuntarily, although he did not know for sure why he should be afraid.

After standing on that place for half a day, he could not stop himself from walking toward the direction Zhu Changling, father and daughter, took. He saw a flicker of fire light like a star among the thick cluster of trees. Turned out there was another house in the middle of the woods. His heart was thumping wildly and immediately he stepped more lightly as he walked quietly toward the house. Arriving at the back of the house, he calmed himself down and peeked inside through a crack on the window. He saw Zhu Changling, father and daughter, and Wei Bi were sitting facing the window, talking with someone. There were two other people in the room, their backs were facing Zhang Wuji that he could not see their faces, but one of them was a woman, which obviously was one of the 'Two Beauties of the Snowy Range', Wu Qingying. The other was a big and tall man, listening to Zhu Changling talking about how they were going to disguise themselves as merchants and set sail from Shandong region. He did not say a single word, only nodded repeatedly.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Aren't I afraid over imaginary fears? Most likely this gentleman is the master of Wu family village, Wu Lie. He is a good friend of Zhu Bobo, so he is invited to come to the Bing Huo Island together. That is only natural, why should I make such a fuss over nothing?"

"Father," he heard Wu Qingying say, "What if we cannot find that small island in the boundless ocean, and then we cannot return home? What should we do, then?"

Zhang Wuji mused, "This gentleman is indeed the Village

Master Wu.”

He heard Wu Lie reply, “If you are scared, then you should stay home. It is the matter of this world, if we do not go through hardship and suffering, how can we achieve peace and happiness?”

“I was only asking,” Wu Qingying sulkily said, “Of course I will follow the lesson I’ve learned from you.”

Wu Lie laughed and said, “Actually, in this matter we are staking everything on a single throw of a dice. If we are lucky, we will get to the Bing Huo Island. Even if that Xie Xun’s martial art skill is higher, he is still only one person, much less he is blind. He is certainly not our match ...” Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji felt a cold air creeping up his back; he could not help but shiver. In the meantime, Wu Lie continued, “... how could we not take that Tulong Saber away from him? When that happens, the ‘ruling under the heavens, no one dares to disobey’, your Zhu Bobo and I together will become the ‘most revered in the Wulin world’. However, if our plan is not in accordance with the Heaven’s will [orig. ‘ren suan bu ru tian suan’ – man’s calculation is inferior to the Heaven’s calculation. I remember this saying has its origin from the Three Kingdoms, but I do not have the exact reference.], we will end up dead in the sea. Humph, who in the world would not eventually die?”

Wei Bi said, “I heard Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun’s martial art skill is outstanding. On Wangpan Mountain Island, his roar had shaken dozens of Jianghu’s skilled people that they lost their minds. Disciple thinks that as we arrive on the island, we need not fight him openly; just put poison in his food and drink. Let’s not say that he is blind, even if his eyes are well and he can see clearly, he would never guess that the people his foster son brought along would harm him.”

Zhu Changling nodded. "Bi'er's idea is marvelous," he said, "Only we, Zhu and Wu, two families, from generation to generation have always been upright and chivalrous prestigious martial art school; we have never used poison, even on our secret projectiles we have never put poison. In short, I do not know anything about which poison we should put in his food and drink without raising his suspicions."

Wei Bi said, "Yao Ershu goes to the Central Plains a lot, he should know. Ask him to buy some prepared poison."

Wu Lie turned around to pat Zhu Jiuzhen's shoulder, he said with a smile, "Zhen'er ..." As he turned his head around, Zhang Wuji was able to see his face and he was shocked! Turned out this man was the 'Hand Splitting Rock' Hu Bao who masqueraded as his Yifu, who struck Zhu Changling that he vomited some blood, who was killed by Yao Qingquan with a dagger. Zhang Wuji understood immediately, everything was a charade. In order to make the charade lifelike, the palm strike, the hit against the wall so that rock debris fall down, the smashing of the table, had to be performed by Wu Lie, whose martial art skill was very strong.

Wu Lie was saying to Zhu Jiuzhen with a laugh, "Speaking about which, you have an important role to play in this drama; you have to be affectionate toward that little rascal along the way until he has delivered Xie Xun's life. You must not reveal anything that would give our scheme away."

"Father," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "You must promise me one thing."

"What is it?" Zhu Changling asked.

"You want me to wait upon that little rascal," Zhu Jiuzhen said, "You don't know how much suffering I have to endure these last several days. From here until we get to the Bing Huo Island and kill Xie Xun, I don't know how many more hardships I have to bear. As soon as you take the Tulong Saber, I want to use it to kill that little rascal!"

Listening to such hateful and malicious talk, Zhang Wuji vision blackened and he almost fainted. Indistinctly he heard Zhu Changling say, "We are using this kind of trick to deceive him only to find out Jin Mao Shi Wang's whereabouts. Strictly speaking, we should not do this. This kid is not a bad kid. After we kill Xie Xun and get the Tulong Saber, pierce this kid's eyes blind, and leave him on the Bing Huo Island; that should be enough."

Wu Lie praised him, "Zhu Dage has a benevolent heart, he does not want to fail the family's chivalrous values."

Zhu Changling sighed, "This is like we are taking one step in chess, no feelings should be involved. Wu Erdi [second (younger) brother], when we are sailing, you must follow us from a distance. If you are too close, you might raise that kid's suspicion, but if you are too far, we might lose contact. You may have to take the trouble of selecting skilled sailors to man your boat."

"Yes," Wu Lie replied, "Zhu Dage's plan is truly thorough."

Zhang Wuji was confused. "I have never revealed my true identity, how could they find out?" he mused, "Hmm, perhaps when I staked everything to fight Wei Bi and Zhu and Wu girls, I used Wudang Pai's techniques. Zhu Bobo's experience is vast; perhaps he could instantly see my origin. He knew that my father and mother would rather die than revealing Yifu's whereabouts. Supposing he has used force,

he could not make me reveal the truth; therefore, he forged the painting, burned down his own residence, using the ruse of inflicting self-injury to move my heart. Without uttering a single sentence of request, I asked him to take me to the Bing Huo Island instead. Zhu Changling, oh Zhu Changling, your sinister plot is truly ruthless."

By this time Zhu Changling and Wu Lie were still discussing all kinds of preparations for their journey to the east. Zhang Wuji did not dare to listen further, he held his breath and quietly lifted his foot and quietly put it down. For every single step he had to listen and make sure there was nothing astir inside before he took the next step. He realized Zhu Changling and Wu Lie's martial art skills were very strong, as soon as he made a careless step, stepping on a dry twig, for instance, he would alert them at once. Hence, for the first thirty steps or so, he walked very slowly. It was not until he was more than ten 'zhang' away from the little hut did he quicken his pace.

In his panic he did not see where he was heading, he only thought that he must have walked toward the deepest part of the forest on the hillside. He climbed higher and higher, and faster and faster, until finally he ran like a madman. He did not dare to slow down or stop to catch his breath for more than two hours.

After running for half of the night, finally it was dawn. He noticed that he was inside a deep forest on a mountain range. He turned his head to see if Zhu Changling and the others pursued him or not, but as soon as he turned and looked, he cried out in desperation, because his feet made deep prints on the snow as far as he could see. The western regions were bitterly cold, although it was already the beginning of spring; the snow had not melted in between the mountain ridges. Running for his life in panic, with all his

strength he managed to climb the mountain ridge; who would have thought that he had left a very clear track of his whereabouts.

From where he was, Zhang Wuji could hear a faint howling of wolves ahead; it was sad and shrill, but also frightening. He walked toward the edge of a cliff and saw on the opposite hillside seven, eight large grey wolves looking up at him, baring their teeth and howling threateningly. Obviously the wolves wanted to eat their fill, but between them there was a bottomless canyon, perhaps tens of thousands 'zhang' deep, so the wolves would not be able to reach him. Turning his head again, his heart skipped a beat, for he saw on the hillside there were five dark shadows slowly creeping upward; they must be the people from the Zhu and Wu families. Presently they were still some distance away, it seemed like these five people did not walk too fast, but he knew that they were rushing like the wind that they would be able to catch up with him in less than two hours.

Zhang Wuji calmed himself down and made a decision, "I'd rather die by becoming food for the hungry wolves than fall into their hands and have to suffer torment from this group of evil people."

He thought about how stupid he was to hold Zhu Jiuzhen in the highest esteem, hidden away under her beauty was a heart as poisonous as a viper or a scorpion. In shame and grief he staggered to enter the dense forest.

The grass in the forest was as tall as his waist, although there was accumulation of snow, his trail could not be seen easily. After running for a while, his body and mind were overcome by weariness, plus the cold poison in his body suddenly flared up, his legs gave up that he was unable to move further. He crawled into a clump of long grass and

picked a sharp rock from the ground. He held the rock tight, thinking that as soon as Zhu Changling and the others find his hiding place, he would kill himself by striking the sharp rock on his 'taiyang xue' [sun acupoint, located on the temple].

Thinking back on everything he went through in the last two months in the Zhu family manor, his heartache grew. "Kongtong Pai, Huashan Pai, Kunlun Pai people repaid kindness with evil, I did not keep their wickedness in my heart. But toward Zhen Jie I had nothing but sincerity, yet in the end it comes to this ... Ay, what did Mama tell me before her death? How could I forget her warning?"

Just before she died, Zhang Wuji's mother had clearly whispered in his ear this warning, 'Child, when you grow up, you must be cautious of women tricking you. The more beautiful that woman is, the better of a manipulator she will be.' His eyes were brimming with tears as he vaguely recalled what happened that day. "Mama said those words with a dagger already thrust into her chest. She endured the severe pain just to warn me, but I did not keep the words she uttered through blood and tears in my heart. If I did not know the unsealing acupoint technique and by curious coincidence heard Zhu Changling's conspiracy, I would have fallen into their thorough scheme and would have brought them to the Bing Huo Island; then I would certainly bring harm to Yifu's life."

As his mind was made up, his brain became exceptionally clear; he was able to see the meaning behind Zhu Changling, father and daughter's actions. When Zhu Changling realized he was Zhang Cuishan's son, he went into action by killing the dogs and slapping his daughter, so that Zhang Wuji would believe that he was the kind of man who clearly distinguish right from wrong, a righteous man who

upheld chivalry. Although the setting of his large complex of elaborately decorated buildings in flame was something to be pitied, it was nothing compared the 'Wulin Zhi Zun' [the most revered in the Wulin world] Tulong Saber. Just from the quick-thinking and decisive way of handling matters, Zhu Changling was indeed worthy to be feared.

Zhang Wuji also thought, "When I was on the island, every day I have seen Yifu held the Saber in his hand, lost in thought. For ten years he was not able to penetrate the secret of the Saber. Although Yifu is intelligent, he is a straightforward man. This Zhu Changling's resourcefulness surpasses others. Speaking about the depth of his scheme, he is far above Yifu. Yifu cannot solve the mystery, but if the treasured Saber fell into Zhu Changling's hands, most likely he would succeed ..." Carefully thinking it over, all sorts of scenarios jumbled around in his head. Suddenly he heard footsteps. Zhu Changling and Wu Lie had entered the forest.

Wu Lie said, "That kid must be hiding in the forest, he won't run far ..."

Zhu Changling quickly cut him off, he said, "Ay, I wonder what did Zhen'er say that she offended Zhang Xiongdi. I am really worried over him; he is such a young boy, if he met a mishap on these snowy and icy mountain ridges, even if my body is ground to powder and my bones shattered, I would never forgive myself in front of Zhang En Gong."

These words were spoken with extreme anxiety, as if he deeply regretted himself. Zhang Wuji was completely horrified to hear him, he thought, "He has not given up hope; he still wants to deceive me with flowery speech."

He heard that Zhu and Wu, two men, were beating the bushes with three branches in their hands. Zhang Wuji

crouched even lower and did not dare to make the slightest move. Fortunately, that forest covered a very large area that although they beat the bushes for a while they still could not find him. Shortly afterwards, Wei Bi and the Two Beauties of the Snowy Range also arrived. The five of them searched the forest for half a day without finding anything. They grew tired and sat on rocks to rest. Actually, the place they were resting was less than three 'zhang' away from Zhang Wuji's hiding place; it was just that the grass in this forest was really tall that he was completely hidden from their sight.

Zhu Changling focused his attention and thought for a moment, suddenly he loudly shouted, "Zhen'er, how have you offended Wuji Xiongdi that he left in the middle of the night without telling us?"

Zhu Jiuzhen was startled. Zhu Changling busily signaled her with his eyes, but from his hiding place among the thick grass, Zhang Wuji actually was able to see this signal clearly.

Zhu Jiuzhen understood, she also replied in loud voice, "I was just joking with him, I sealed his acupoints, I did not know that Wuji Di will take it seriously." Finished speaking, she called out loudly, "Wuji Di, Wuji Di, quickly come out, Zhen Jie wants to apologize to you." Although her voice was loud, it still carried a flirtatious and seducing tone, coaxing Zhang Wuji to respond.

After calling for a moment without anything astir, suddenly she cried, "Father, don't hit me, don't hit me. I did not intentionally offend Wuji Di." Zhu Changling raised his palm and slapped his own thigh, making loud slapping noises, while his mouth was shouting angrily. Zhu Jiuzhen did not stop screaming miserably, as if she could not bear the pain of her father's beating. Wu Lie, Wei and Wu Qingying looked

from the side with smiles on their faces.

Zhang Wuji saw the drama performed by this pair of father and daughter, but hearing the noise, his heart was still sorrowful. He thought, "Luckily I can see your faces, otherwise, hearing her shrill screaming, although I know it is harmful to me, I would not be able to bear it and would have stepped forward."

Zhu family's father and daughter were certain that Zhang Wuji was hiding in this forest; one cursed angrily, the other cried pitifully, their voices grew more and more severe. Zhang Wuji covered his ears with his hands, but intermittently, the voice still penetrated his ears. Finally he could not bear it anymore, he leaped out and shouted, "Whatever trick you are playing, do you think you can still deceive me?"

Zhu Changling and the others, all five of them, cheered together, "He is here!"

Zhang Wuji called out, "Zhen Jie, how are you?" and then turned around and dashed like crazy into the woods. Zhu Changling and Wu Lie flew to pounce on him at once. Zhang Wuji had made up his mind to die, hence without hesitation he ran toward that tens of thousands 'zhang' deep canyon. Zhu Changling's 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was far superior to Zhang Wuji; as soon as Zhang Wuji rushed toward the nearby canyon, Zhu Changling had already very near behind him, reaching out to grab the clothes on his back.

Zhang Wuji felt a severe pain to the bones as the five fingers of Zhu Changling's right hand tightly held his back. By this time, however, his foot had already treaded on empty air; half of his body was already above the abyss. His left foot followed and his entire body was thrown rapidly forward.

Zhu Changling had never imagined that Zhang Wuji would throw himself over the cliff to commit suicide. Because he was holding Zhang Wuji's back, he was also pulled forward. Based on his dozens of years of martial art training, if he released his hand and immediately leaped backward, he would have preserved his life. However, he knew that as soon as he let his five fingers loose, he would forever lost the chance to get his hand on 'the most revered in the Wulin world', the treasured Tulong Saber. These past two months of painstaking planning and preparation, the burning of his vast magnificent dwelling complex to the ground, all would be wasted as soon as he let these five fingers loose.

In his hesitation, Zhang Wuji's fall did not slow down the least bit. 'Not good!' Zhu Changling called out, while reaching back with his left hand, trying to grab the hand of Wu Lie, who was running close behind him, but he missed by about a foot, yet he was still unwilling to let his grab on Zhang Wuji go. Two people fell together over the cliff, into the tens of thousands 'zhang' deep abyss below. They only heard Wu Lie, Zhu Jiuzhen and the others cry out in alarm above, but in a blink of an eye their voices were no longer heard.

The two of them fell straight down through the clouds and mist in the valley. In all his life, Zhu Changling had endured not just a few wind and waves; his mind stayed clear in this critical time. He felt the howling wind rushing past his ears as his body fell downward. Occasionally he would see tree branches extended from the wall of the cliff. He tried to reach out and grab these branches, but several times he missed by a few feet. Finally he succeeded, but the force of gravity on their bodies was simply too strong, the branch was unable to bear the load, 'crack!' the pine branch, as big as a human arm, snapped. But this slight slowing down was enough for Zhu Changling to swing his legs, using the move

'wu long jiao zhu' [black dragon entangles the pillar], and wrap them firmly around the trunk of the pine tree. Next, he swung Zhang Wuji and sat him on a branch. For fear that Zhang Wuji would leap down again, he kept holding on to Zhang Wuji's arm.

Seeing that in the end he was still unable to escape from Zhu Changling's grasp, Zhang Wuji was extremely disheartened. "Zhu Bobo," he bitterly said, "No matter how you would torture me, don't ever think that I would take you to look for my Yifu."

Zhu Changling heaved his own body up and steadied himself sitting on the branch. Looking up, he could no longer see Zhu Jiuzhen and the others; he did not even hear their shouts anymore. Although he was gutsy, recalling that he had just narrowly cheated death, he could not stop cold sweats from trickling down his forehead.

After calming himself down, he said with a smile, "Xiao Xiongdi, what are you talking about? I don't understand anything. Please don't let your imagination run wild."

"I have seen through your crafty scheme," Zhang Wuji said, "It is completely useless against me. If you force me to take you to the Bing Huo Island, I can randomly point to north, south, east or west; then everybody will die together in the ocean. Do you think I will not dare to do just that?"

Zhu Changling thought that he was telling the truth; right now there was no way he could argue with him face to face, his only hope was for another ingenious plan involving his daughter. He looked around to assess their situation. Climbing back up was certainly not an option. Looking down, he still cannot see the bottom, besides, even if he could reach the canyon ground, nine out of ten there would be no

way out. The only possibility was to slowly crawl along the sloping mountain wall.

“Xiao Xiongdi,” he said to Zhang Wuji, “You must not have any blind suspicion. I assure you, I simply will not compel you to find Xie Daxia. If I did, let ten thousand arrows penetrate this body of mine, and I the one surnamed Zhu die without a burial place.” His heavy oath was not empty words, because he thought that since Zhang Wuji had attempted suicide, he knew that it would be useless no matter how he compelled. His only hope was to entice him to willingly bring this matter up.

Hearing his oath, Zhang Wuji was somewhat relieved. Zhu Changling said, “We will have to slowly crawl up from here. You must not jump down, do you understand?”

“If you don’t compel me, why would I want to seek death?” Zhang Wuji replied.

Zhu Changling nodded. Taking out his short saber, he peeled the tree bark to make some rope. He tied one end of the rope to his waist and the other to Zhang Wuji’s. Going all fours on the ground, they crawled one step at a time along the snowy mountain slope toward the sunlight high above their heads. The cliff was steep to begin with, now that it was covered with ice and snow, it was extremely slippery. Twice had Zhang Wuji slipped and fell, both times Zhu Changling exerted his strength to pull him that he did not fall into the deep canyon below. But Zhang Wuji did not appreciate his efforts at all. “If you don’t have your eyes on the treasured Tulong Saber, would you still have the good intention of saving me?” he silently thought.

Two people crawled for half of the day; their elbows and knees were scraped and bruised bloody by the hard ice, until at last the cliff was not so steep. Two people were able

to stand; step by step they struggled onward. With great difficulty they walked around a sheer cliff that seemed like a large screen and without any shame Zhu Changling cried out in despair. As far as the eyes could see, there was boundless ocean of clouds around them, there was no way out, that place was like a high and flat stage with empty air on its three sides. The circumference of the stage was more than ten 'zhang', but it was hanging in the middle of the air, they could not go up, and could not go down either; it was truly a dead-end.

This large platform was covered with ice and snow; there was no vegetation, no wild animal. Contrary to expectation, Zhang Wuji was happy, he laughed and said, "Zhu Bobo, you have planned all this wholeheartedly, and yet we end up on this suspended-from-the-sky platform. If right at this moment someone offered the treasured Tulong Saber, what would you do with it?"

"Stop talking nonsense!" Zhu Changling shouted. He sat cross-legged and ate two mouthfuls of snow, thinking, "Although I am tired right now, I still have some energy left. If stay here one more day without eating anything, I am afraid it would be hard to escape from this trap." Thereupon he stood up and said, "There is no way out from this place, we must go back and find another way out."

"I actually think it is so fun in here," Zhang Wuji replied, "Why must we go back?"

Zhu Changling angrily said, "There is nothing to eat here, why stay?"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Isn't it better not to eat human's food? Then you can cultivate the way of the immortals."

Zhu Changling was enraged, but he knew that as soon as he used force, perhaps Zhang Wuji would jump over the cliff. "All right," he said, "You can stay here and rest for a moment. As soon as I find another way out, I'll be back here to get you. Don't go too near the cliff, you might fall down."

Zhang Wuji said, "What concern it is to you if I live or die, exist or perish? If you are still dreaming of me leading you to the Bing Huo Island, I suggest you let it go."

Zhu Changling did not answer; he went back to where they came from. When he arrived at the big pine tree, he took the path to the left. This side of the cliff was more dangerous, but without having to look after Zhang Wuji, he managed to move faster. After more than an hour of climbing, he reached the top of the cliff. Again he did not see any way out. Zhu Changling looked over the cliff and heaved a long sigh. After staring blankly to the emptiness for a long time, he dejectedly went back to the platform.

Without asking, Zhang Wuji could see from his expression that he failed to find a way out; he thought, "I was hit by the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang [black/mysterious and dark divine palm]. The cold poison is not easy to get rid of. I won't have too much time to live. No matter where I die, it's all the same to me. On the other hand, he has been blessed but failed to enjoy it in his vain attempt to become 'the most revered in the Wulin world', that unexpectedly he has to accompany me on this world of ice and snow, and die of starvation. It's a pity, it's a pity!"

At first Zhang Wuji detested Zhu Changling for his treacherous scheme, even after they fell over the cliff together and escaped dangers, he still made fun of him several times, but as now their hope of escaping alive had

been cut short and he saw Zhu Changling hung his head dispiritedly, Zhang Wuji began to feel pity on him instead. "Zhu Bobo," he warmly said, "You are already old, you have enjoyed all kinds of splendor and happiness, if you die now, what else do you have to regret? Don't be sad."

Zhu Changling had always yielded to Zhang Wuji because he had not given up yet; he still hoped that in the end he could swindle Zhang Wuji into leading them to the Bing Huo Island. But now as he saw his path to life had been cut and he was left in this desperate situation, all because of this kid, how could he suppress his resentment? He stared menacingly toward Zhang Wuji, with eyes spouting raging fire.

Seeing the abrupt change of Zhu Changling's expression, from that of a gentle and good-natured old man to a beast, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel very scared. He cried out in fear and ran away.

"Where can you run?" Zhu Changling roared, reaching out to grab Zhang Wuji's back. He was determined to torture him really bad, he wanted Zhang Wuji to experience the worst possible pain before he died.

Zhang Wuji ducked forward one step, and saw the dark shadow of what seemed to be a cave on the mountain wall to his left. Without thinking he jumped into the cave. 'Rip!' a piece of his pants was torn and his thigh was cut by Zhu Changling's claw. Zhang Wuji staggered along toward the inside of the cave. Suddenly 'bang!' his forehead bumped onto a mountain rock so hard that he saw stars dancing in front of his eyes. He knew that if Zhu Changling could tear his face to pieces right now he would use any savage method to torture him. Therefore, in his fear, he desperately struggled to enter further into the cave. He did not have the

luxury of considering that if he entered this dark hole, might be trapped inside and it would be more difficult for him to escape the enemy's poisonous hands. Fortunately, the deeper he went, the narrower the cave got. Crawling for more than ten 'zhang' later, he could barely push his way forward. Zhu Changling could no longer follow him. Zhang Wuji crawled several more 'zhang' forward and then he suddenly saw light ahead; he was delighted, he moved his hands and feet faster toward the light.

Zhu Changling was anxious and angry at the same time. "I won't hurt you," he called out, "Quickly come out!" But how could Zhang Wuji heed his call?

Zhu Changling exerted his internal energy into his palm and struck the rock wall. The mountain rock was incomparably solid, when the palm hit the rock, his hand was shaken and he felt severe pain in the center of his palm, while the rock wall was not damaged in any way whatsoever. He took his short saber out with the intention of digging the rock loose so that the passageway would be somewhat wider, but he only dug a few times when 'snap', his blue-steel short saber was broken into two.

Zhu Changling was furious. He sent his strength to his shoulder and squeezed his body through the opening. Sure enough, he advanced about a foot forward, but to move any further was totally out of question. The solid rock walls were crushing his chest and back, and to his shock, he could not breathe. If he did not want to die of suffocation, he had no choice but to withdraw. Unexpectedly, his body was stuck in between the solid rocks; he could neither move forward nor withdraw backward. He was so frightened that he felt his soul was leaving him. With his entire strength his arms pushed on the rock and his body was pushed about a foot back, but there was a burst of acute pain on his chest as one

of his ribs broke.

End of Chapter 15.

Chapter 16 - If All Failed, Consult the Nine Yang

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



He saw a large skin ulcer on the big white ape's belly, with a faint trace of pus and blood. The ulcer was no more than an inch in diameter, but the hard area around it was more than ten times larger. When he looked closer, he saw a more or less a rectangular bump on the abdomen. All four sides of the bump were sewn, apparently it was a human handiwork.

Zhang Wuji continued crawling through the passageway for several more 'zhang'. The light was growing brighter, until suddenly he was dazzled by the bright sunlight. He had to close his eyes to calm down for a while before opening his eyes again. To his surprise, in front of him was a jade-green valley with clusters of bright flower bushes; the flowers were red, the trees green, complementing each other to deliver this dazzling scenery. He shouted in glee and crawled out of the cave.

The mouth of the cave was actually about a 'zhang' above the ground [reminder: 1 zhang is approximately 10ft or 3m]. He lightly jumped down and landed on a layer of soft fine grass. His nose smelled the clear and quiet fragrance of flowers; his ears heard the chirping birds from the mountain pass, and he saw fresh fruits hanging from tree branches. Who would have thought that beyond the dark cave lay such a paradise like this?

Forgetting all his wounds and pain, he let his feet loose and ran forward. After about two 'li' [1 li is approximately 0.5km], another peak blocked the way. Looking at all directions, he noticed that this jade-green valley was surrounded by tall peaks; apparently there have never been any human in this place. The tip of the peaks on the four sides all were hidden behind the cloud, the cliff was very steep, it seemed like nobody would be able to climb it.

Zhang Wuji was delighted. He saw seven, eight mountain goats were grazing on the meadow, and the goats were not scared of him. On the trees there were dozens of monkeys playing around by leaping from branch to branch, apparently because tigers, leopards or other predators were heavier, they were not able to climb over the perilous peaks. He thought, "Laotianye [the Heaven] indeed treats me not so bad, he prepares for me this kind of fairyland as my burial

place.”

Strolling back to the mouth of the cave, he heard Zhu Changling shouting from the other end, “Xiao Xiongdi, come out! Aren’t you afraid of dying of suffocation in this cave?”

“It’s so fun in here!” Zhang Wuji replied with a laugh. He picked a fruit from a dwarf tree whose name he did not know. He held it in his hand and smelled its sweet fragrance. Taking a bite, he found out that the fruit was delicious beyond comparison. Peach would not be this crisp, apple would not be this fragrant, while pear would not be this creamy. He took one of the fruits and tossed it to the cave, while calling out, “Take this! Something delicious is coming your way!”

As the fruit went through the cave, it bumped several times on the rock wall so that by the time it reached Zhu Changling, it was already smashed and mushy. But when he took a bite and chewed it, his appetite was roused that he was hungrier than ever. “Xiao Xiongdi,” he called out, “Give me some more.”

“You are a man of wicked conscience,” Zhang Wuji called back, “You deserve to die of starvation. If you want more, then come and get it yourself.”

“My body is too big,” Zhu Changling replied, “I can’t go through the cave.”

Zhang Wuji laughed, “If you cut yourself in halves, won’t you be able to come here?” he said.

Zhu Changling realized his plot had failed and been exposed; Zhang Wuji wanted him to die of starvation to avenge his hatred. In the meantime, the pain on his chest

was worsening; he opened his mouth to shout curses, “Thief little rascal, can the fruits in this cave feed you for the rest of your life? I will die of starvation outside, but no more than three days you will also die of starvation.” Zhang Wuji ignored him, he took seven, eight more fruits and had his fill.

About half a day later, a sudden wisp of thick smoke puffed out of the mouth of the cave. Zhang Wuji was startled, but then he realized that Zhu Changling must have ignited pine branches outside the cave, supposing that he would force Zhang Wuji to come out by smoking him. He did not know that there was another world at the other end of the cave, so that it would be useless even if he burned a thousand or ten thousand piculs [1 picul = 100 catties, approximately 50 kg] of pine wood. But just for the fun of it, he pretended to cough loudly.

“Xiao Xiongdi,” Zhu Changling called out, “Come out! I promise not to harm you in any way.”

“Aahhhhh ...” Zhang Wuji cried out as if he was fainting, and then he left the cave.

Walking to the west for about two ‘li’, he saw a large waterfall falling heavily down from a cliff, which he thought must be from the melted snow. Under the sunlight the falling water looked like a giant jade dragon in all its magnificence. The water flowed into a clear dark-green pool, but the pool did not overflow, so there must be another way through which the water drained from the pool.

After enjoying the scenery for half a day, he looked down and saw his hands and feet were filthy with moss and mud, plus countless cuts and bruises from the thorns and coarse grass; thereupon he went to the edge of the pool, took out

his shoes and socks, and washed his feet in the pool water.

After washing for a while, suddenly 'splash!' a big white fish jumped from the water, it was about a foot long. Zhang Wuji quickly reached out to grab. He was able to touch the fish, but it slipped and fell back into the water. Zhang Wuji leaned over the pool edge to look down into the water. He saw about a dozen big white fish swimming back and forth in the dark green water. Catching fish was a skill he had learned since his childhood on the Bing Huo Island, thereupon he broke two stiff branches and sharpened one end. He then waited patiently by the edge of the pool. As soon as another fish jumped out of the water, he thrust the spear with all his strength and it pierced the fish body. He cheered, and then with the sharpened branch he cut the fish and cleaned its intestines. Gathering some dried wood, he took out his fire blade, flint and fire cloth to build a fire and roast the fish. Shortly the aroma floated everywhere. As soon as the fish was cooked, he enjoyed the smooth and tender, delicious roast fish. He could not remember ever eating this kind of tasty fish before. In just a short moment the big fish was cleaned to its bone.

The next day he caught another big white fish and roasted it. He thought, "Since I am not going to die soon, I'd better leave the fire on, otherwise the fire cloth will be used up quickly and then it will be troublesome." Thereupon he gathered the ashes and put the partly burned firewood inside to keep it burning. All household appliances on the Bing Huo Island were homemade, so living alone in the wilderness like this was not foreign to him. He made a pot from clay, and spread some straw as his bed.

Busily working until the evening, he remembered that Zhu Changling must be very hungry, thereupon he picked a big fresh fruit and tossed it through the cave. He was afraid if he

gave Zhu Changling some fish, his strength might increase and perhaps he would be able to break through the hole and give him trouble; therefore, he never gave him any roasted fish.

By the fourth day, Zhang Wuji was busy building a clay furnace when he heard some miserable cry of a monkey. It sounded so urgent that he rushed toward the noise. He saw that a little monkey was lying on the ground next to a cliff. One of the monkey's feet was crushed under a rock that it could not move. It seemed like the monkey lost its footing and fell from the steep cliff.

He lifted the rock and pulled the monkey up, but the monkey's right leg was broken. It cried out in pain. Zhang Wuji picked two straight branches as splint to connect the monkey's broken bone. Next he looked for some herbal medicine, which he chewed mushy and applied it to the wound. Although it was difficult to seek effective herbal medicine in this valley and the medicine he applied did not have any miraculous effect, the broken bones were healing well because of his bone-mending skill.

Unexpectedly, the little monkey was grateful and wanted to repay the kindness. The second day the monkey returned, bringing lots of fresh fruits for him. Ten days later, the broken leg was completely healed. Since Zhang Wuji did not have anything to do, he spent his days playing with the monkey. If not for the cold poison occasionally flaring up, his life in that secluded valley could be called carefree and happy. Sometimes he saw wild goats grazing by. He had a thought of catching one and roasting it over the fire, but seeing the goats were so tame, he did not have the heart to kill them. Fortunately he had enough fruits on the trees and fish in the pool, so he never lacked food.

A few days later, he succeeded in catching several snow birds, which enhanced his appetite greatly. In this way he already passed more than one month. One early morning, while he had not completely awakened, he suddenly felt a large hairy hand gently stroking him on the face. He was greatly startled and jumped up, only to see a large white ape squatting by his side, holding the little monkey, with which he used to play every day, in its arm. The little monkey was squeaking and chattering incessantly with its finger pointed toward the big ape's belly.

Zhang Wuji smelled a whiff of nasty odor, like rotten meat; he saw a faint trace of pus and blood on the white ape's belly, which looked like a large skin ulcer. He smiled and said, "Alright, alright! Turned out you are bringing a sick person to see the great doctor!"

The large white ape extended its left hand, with a 'pan tao' [from the dictionary: the peaches of immortality kept by Xi Wangmu] about the size of a fist, which it respectfully presented to Zhang Wuji. Seeing this bright red and plump 'pan tao', Zhang Wuji mused, "Mama told me a legend about the immortal goddess Wangmu of Kunlun Mountain, who held a 'pan tao' feast every year on her birthday, inviting other immortals. Xi Wangmu might not exist; but the fact that Kunlun Mountain indeed produces large 'pan tao' is certainly undeniable." With a laugh he said, "I normally do not take payment; even without 'xian tao' [immortal peach], I will still treat your sore."

He reached out to gently feel the white ape's belly and could not help but feel shocked. The white ape's malignant ulcer was no more than an inch in diameter, but the hard area around it was more than ten times larger. He had never read about this kind of malignant boil in the medical manual. Supposing this hard area was full with pus and was rotten,

then this boil might be incurable. He pressed his finger on the white ape's wrist to feel its pulse, but did not find anything to cause him any concern. Next he opened up the long hair covering the ape's abdomen to look at the ulcer again. He was more shocked, because there was more or less a rectangular bump on the abdomen. All four sides of the bump were sewn. Apparently it was a human handiwork, because no matter how intelligent apes and monkeys are, they had never learned how to use needle and thread.

Looking at the boil more carefully, he deduced that the bump was the culprit, it pressed on a blood vessel and stopped the blood from flowing that the flesh around it was gangrenous and became a long lasting boil. If he wished to treat the ulcer, he must remove whatever object sewn inside the ape's abdomen. Speaking about performing operation to treat injury, he had mastered the skill taught by Hu Qingniu, and thus it should be an easy and simple procedure. However, he did not have any knife or scissors with him, also no medication whatsoever. This might pose some problems.

After contemplating for a while, he picked a rock and threw it with all his might against another rock that it smashed into pieces. He chose one piece with a sharp edge and corner, with which he slowly cut the thread sewn on the white ape's belly. The white ape was very old and was intelligent, it knew Zhang Wuji was trying to treat its injury; therefore, although it felt severe pain on its abdomen, with a strong willpower it endured the pain and did not make even a single move.

After cutting the right and upper side of the stitches, Zhang Wuji made a slanting cut to the skin on the corner, which was healed a long time ago; he saw an oilcloth package hidden in the ape's belly. He felt even more strange; but he did not have time to open the package. He set it aside and

busily sewed the abdomen skin back. Since he had no needle and thread, he used the fishbone as the needle, piercing the skin one hole at a time, and then used tree bark as the thread, tying the small holes together. With great difficulty he finished mending the cut, and then he applied some herbal medicine on the wound. He was busy for more than half a day before everything was in order. Although the white ape was strong, by this time it lay on the ground, motionless.

Zhang Wuji washed of the bloodstain from his hands and the oilcloth, then he opened the package. Inside were four thin books of scriptures. Because the oil cloth was watertight, although the books were hidden inside the ape's abdomen for a long time, the pages were still intact without any sign of damage.

The pages were filled with curvy and squiggly characters, which Zhang Wuji did not recognize. Browsing up all four books, he found that these strange characters were used in all the books, but in between the lines he saw tiny Chinese characters, as small as a fly's head. After calming himself down, he started from the first line, and found that the content of the book was actually some secret instructions on cultivating and applying 'chi' and energy. He slowly read from top to bottom; suddenly his heart skipped a beat, for he read three lines with which he was very familiar. It was the 'Wudang Jiu Yang Gong' [Wudang's Nine Yang Energy] he learned from Tai Shifu [grand master, referring to Zhang Sanfeng] and his Yu Erbo [second (older) uncle Yu, referring to Yu Lianzhou], only the subsequent part was different.

Casually browsing through, after several pages he read another sentence of the 'Wudang Jiu Yang Gong', but all in all the theory differed greatly from the one taught by Tai Shifu and Yu Erbo. His heart was beating wild as he closed

the book and pondered deeply, “What manual is this? Why does it contain sentences of the ‘Wudang Jiu Yang Gong’? But why is it different from the one taught at our Wudang school? Furthermore, it seems like this manual is ten times more complete than ours?”

Thinking to this point, he remembered the story told by Tai Shifu when he was taking him to Shaolin Temple: Tai Shifu’s master was called Reverend Jueyuan, he mastered the ‘Jiu Yang Zhen Jing’ [nine ‘yang’ (positive, sun, male, etc.) real/true scripture, in this series it is commonly translated as ‘Nine Yang Manual’], which he recited from memory just before he passed away. Tai Shifu, Heroine Guo Xiang, and Reverend Wuse of Shaolin Pai, three people, each remember parts of it. As a result, Wudang, Emei and Shaolin, three Sects, enjoyed tremendous advancement in martial arts, and were regarded as equals in the past dozens of years, their names shook the Wulin world.

“Could it be that this is the stolen Nine Yang Manual?” he mused, “That’s right, Tai Shifu said that the Nine Yang Manual was written inside the ‘Lengjia Jing’ [Lankavatara Sutra]. These squiggly and curvy characters must be the Lankavatara Sutra in Sankrit. But why is it inside the ape’s belly?”

This four-volume book was indeed the Nine Yang Manual; as for why it was hidden inside the ape’s abdomen, no one in this generation knew. More than ninety years ago, Xiao Xiangzi and Yin Kexi stole the manual from the Shaolin Temple library, for which crime they were pursued by Reverend Jueyuan to the summit of Huashan [Mount Hua in Shaanxi] without any chance of escaping. It so happened that they had this dark grey ape with them, so they had an idea: they cut open the dark grey ape’s belly, and hid the manual inside. Later on, Jueyuan, Zhang Sanfeng, Yang Guo,

and the others searched Xiao Xiangzi and Yin Kexi's bodies thoroughly, but failed to find the manual, so that they let the two, along the dark grey ape, go down the mountain. [Author's note: please read 'Divine Eagle Gallant Knights'] And thus the Nine Yang Manual's whereabouts became the great mystery of the Wulin World for approximately a hundred years.

Later, Xiao Xiangzi and Yin Kexi took their dark grey ape and went to the far away Western Region. The two of them were suspicious of each other; each of them feared that when the other one had mastered the martial art of the Manual, he would kill him. Thereupon they kept their eyes on each other and neither dared to take the manual out from the ape's belly. Finally they arrived at the Jing Shen Peak of Kunlun Mountains; Yin and Xiao two people were plotting against each other. They fought until both of them sustained injuries. Thereafter this supreme manual of internal energy cultivation stayed hidden inside the dark grey ape's abdomen.

Actually, Xiao Xiangzi's martial art skill was slightly better than Yin Kexi's, but because he was hit by Reverend Jueyuan's fist on Mount Hua, his internal strength was shaken and he suffered serious injury; hence when he fought Yin Kexi later, he was killed instead of scoring a victory.

At the point of his death, Yin Kexi met 'Kunlun San Sheng' [Three Sages of Kunlun], He Zudao. Pricked by his own conscience, Yin Kexi asked He Zudao to go to Shaolin Temple and tell Reverend Jueyuan that the books were inside this ape's belly. However, by that time he was already delirious that his speech was incoherent; he said 'jing zai hou zhong' [scriptures inside the monkey], He Zudao heard it as 'jing zai you zhong' [scriptures inside the oil]. He Zudao did keep his

promise; he went to the distant Central Plains and conveyed the message 'jing zai you zhong' to Reverend Jueyuan. Jueyuan failed to comprehend the meaning of the message. Rather than talking about it, he stirred up a big disturbance instead. As a result, the Wulin world enjoyed the addition of Wudang and Emei, two Sects.

As for the dark grey ape, it was fortunate to have Kunlun Mountain's immortal peach as its diet; with the spiritual influence of the heavens and the earth, after more than ninety years it was still capable of jumping around as if flying. The dark grey and shiny long hair covering its entire body gradually turned snow-white that it turned into a white ape. It was just that the manual hidden inside its belly had caused a digestive system problem that from time to time it suffered stomach ache. Finally the malignant skin ulcer was developed on its belly, which lasted until today, when Zhang Wuji took the books out. Speaking of this white ape, it had entrusted its great misfortune to a trusted friend. This whole story was so complicated that even if there were someone with intelligence a hundred times better than Zhang Wuji in the world, he would definitely not able to deduce it.

Zhang Wuji was lost in thought for half a day. Realizing he would not be able to solve this riddle, he did not take the trouble to think about it further. He took the big 'pan tao' presented by the white ape and took a bite, enjoying the fresh sweetness of the juice slowly flowing into his throat. It was indisputably better than the nameless fruits he found in the valley.

Finished eating the 'pan tao', Zhang Wuji thought, "Tai Shifu once said that if I can practice the 'Jiu Yang Shen Gong' [nine 'yang' divine strength/power] of Shaolin, Wudang and Emei, three Sects, then I can drive the cold poison away

from my body. These three Sects' Jiu Yang Gong all came from the Nine Yang Manual. If this book is indeed the Nine Yang Manual and I practice according to it, then the end result will far exceed the result if I practice the three Sects' divine power separately. Since I have nothing to do in this valley, I'd better practice according to this book. Supposing my guess is wrong; that this book is actually useless, so much so that it is harmful to me, the worst that can happen to me is death anyway."

Without anything to weigh his heart down, he put the other three volumes of the manual on a dry place. He spread some straw over the books, and put three big rocks on top, for fear that the monkeys, being mischievous, would fight over the books and perhaps would tear the books apart into pieces. With the first volume in his hand, he started by reading it several times to commit its contents to his memory. Afterwards he would try to understand it and only then he would start practicing the first sentence. His thought was, 'Even if I succeeded in cultivating the divine strength from the book, and managed to repel the cold poison, I would still be imprisoned in this valley with steep peaks all around, could not get out forever. My days in this valley are long, if I can succeed today, good; if I must wait 'til tomorrow, it's also good. It doesn't make any difference. If I fail, I would have something to do to pass my boring days anyway.'

Strangely, with this win-or-lose-always-happy attitude, he made a surprisingly rapid progress. In only four short months, he succeeded to comprehend in detail the skill described in the first volume of the book, which he immediately trained accordingly.

Finished training the first volume, he did a quick calculation, and found that the date predicted by Hu Qingniu on which the cold poison would take his life had already come and gone. His body felt light and healthy, the 'zhen qi' [real 'chi']

flowed freely in his entire body, without any symptom of an illness. Previously, the cold poison would flare-up often; now, the interval between occasional attacks was more than a month. When the attack came, it was very light.

Not too long afterwards, he read a sentence in the second volume: 'Exhale according to the Nine Yang, hold in the mouth first, this book is called the Jiu Yang Zhen Jing'. [Translator's note: I am not sure about this part; any help will be appreciated.] Now he was convinced that this book was really the treasured texts which had always been in Tai Shifu's mind all these years. He was delighted and trained even more diligently. In addition, the white ape was grateful for his kindness in treating its illness that he had an endless supply of large 'pan tao', which was good to invigorate his body and lift his spirit.

When he was halfway through the second volume, the cold poison inside his body had been driven out completely. Every day, other than cultivating his energy, he played with the apes and monkeys. When he picked the fruits, he would always give half to Zhu Changling. Thus he lived without worry or concerns, free and easy. However, to Zhu Changling, who was still on that little piece of platform, a day dragged past like a year. When winter came, his world was covered in ice and snow; the cold wind penetrated his bones. The hardships he suffered were beyond description.

Zhang Wuji had acquired immunity to heat and cold after finishing the second volume. It was just that the further along he was, the more complicated and subtle the lesson got; his progress was not as rapid as before. He needed a whole year to finish the third volume; the final volume took him more than three years until he achieved a satisfactory result. He had been living in that quiet, secluded snowy valley for more than five years by now; he had grown from a

boy to a tall and well-built young man.

For the last year or two, whenever he felt like it, he would occasionally play with the apes and the monkeys by climbing up the rock wall and looking out into the distance. Based on his current skill, it would not be too difficult for him to climb over the peak and get out of the valley. However, each time he remembered that the world was full with treacherous and deceitful people, he could not help but shudder. He thought: why should he go outside to bring trouble to himself, just like a fish throwing itself into the net? Wouldn't it be better to live in this beautiful valley until he grew old and die?

One afternoon he browsed the four-volume book from head to tail all the way through. When he flipped the very last page, his heart was joyful but he felt a slight emptiness at the same time. He dug a hole, about three feet deep, on the mountain wall to the left of the cave. He wrapped the four-volume Nine Yang Manual, as well as Hu Qingniu's Medical Manual and Wang Nan'gu's Poison Manual, inside the oil cloth he took out from the white ape's belly, and buried the bundle in the hole. He then filled the hole with dirt, thinking, "I got the Manual from the white ape's belly; that was truly destiny, an enormous opportunity. I wonder if in a hundred or a thousand years it would be somebody else's destiny to come hither and find these three Manuals?" Picking up a sharp stone, he carved six large characters on the mountain wall, 'Zhang Wuji's Manuals Burial Place'.

When he was in training, he had something occupying his mind every day, so that he did not feel the slightest degree of loneliness. That day, after successfully completing his training, he felt hollowness in his heart. Moreover, with the newly acquired 'shen gong' [divine strength], his courage soared high. He mused, "If this time Zhu Bobo came to

harass me again, I would not be afraid of him. There is no harm in going out and talk to him.” Thereupon he bent down to crawl into the cave again.

When he entered the valley, he was a small fifteen-year old boy; going out, he was a grown up twenty-year old adult, who could not go through the narrow passage of the cave. Taking a deep breath, he utilized the ‘suo gu gong’ [shrinking bones skill], making the bones in his entire body crowded together, reducing the space between bone and bone. Gently and easily he slipped through the cave.

Zhu Changling was sleeping soundly, leaning against the rock wall, dreaming he was sitting in one of his family’s banquets, with maids and servants running around him, and friends and relatives fawn up to him; it was a happy and ego-boosting occasion for him. Suddenly someone tapped his shoulder; he woke up with a start, and saw the shadow of a big and tall man in front of him.

Zhu Changling leaped up, he was still half asleep. “You ... you ...” he called out.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “Zhu Bobo, it’s me, Zhang Wuji.”

Zhu Changling was startled and delighted, but angry and hateful as well. He stared at Zhang Wuji for a long time before saying, “You grew this tall. Hmm, why didn’t you come out to talk to me? No matter how I asked you, you have never paid me any attention.”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “I was afraid you would hurt me.”

Zhu Changling’s right hand suddenly reached out, using the

'qin na' [grab and capture, grappling] technique he grabbed Zhang Wuji's shoulder, while sternly said, "So you are not afraid now?" But he felt the palm of his hand boiling hot; he could not stop his arm from shaking and his hand slipped, while there was a dull pain at the pit of his stomach. In his shock he took three steps backwards and stared at Zhang Wuji with a blank expression on his face.

"You ... you ..." he asked, "What martial art is this?"

After completing the Nine Yang Manual training, it was the first time that Zhang Wuji had ever tried it out; he was pleasantly surprised at its formidable power. Zhu Changling was a first rate martial art master, yet he was still shaken by his 'shen gong' without he him needing to lift even one finger. Seeing Zhu Changling's miserable condition and his amazement, Zhang Wuji was very proud of himself. "So you think this martial art skill is useful?" he said with a laugh.

Zhu Changling's mind was still shaken. "What ... what martial art skill was that?" he asked again.

"It's Jiu Yang Shen Gong," Zhang Wuji replied.

Zhu Changling was stunned. "How did you train it?" he asked. Zhang Wuji did not hide anything. He told Zhu Changling how he treated a white ape's illness, how he found the manual inside the ape's belly, and how he practiced according to manual.

Listening to this story, Zhu Changling was jealous and resentful at the same time. He thought, "I had to suffer hardship beyond description for five years, alone on this peak, yet this kid actually trained an incomparably mysterious 'shen gong'." He did not remember that it was because his own heart's desire to harm others that they ended up this way; he also did not remember that Zhang

Wuji had supplied him with fruits these past five years, every day without fail, so that he could live until today. He only remembered that this kid was too lucky while he was too unlucky, and he felt it was so unfair. Anger rose in his heart, with a forced laughter he said, "Where is that Nine Yang Manual? Can you show it to me?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "There is no harm in letting you take a look. I don't think you will remember much in just a short time." Thereupon he said, "I buried it inside the cave, I'll bring it out tomorrow for you to see."

"You have grown this big," Zhu Changling said, "How can you go through the cave?"

"The cave is actually not too narrow," Zhang Wuji said, "If you make an effort to shrink your body and push, you can come through."

"Do you think that I can squeeze through?" Zhu Changling asked.

Zhang Wuji nodded and said, "We can try together tomorrow. The place inside the cave is spacious, nothing compared to staying on this tiny platform." He was thinking of using his power to press his shoulder, chest, buttocks, and the bones all around his body, and help him to go through the cave.

"Xiao Xiongdi," Zhu Changling laughed, "You are indeed a good man, a gentleman who does not recall old grievances. I have done you wrong, I wish for your forgiveness." While saying that, he bowed deeply with cupped fists.

Zhang Wuji hastily returned the propriety, saying, "Zhu Bobo does not need to be overly courteous. We'll think of a

way to get out of this place tomorrow.”

Zhu Changling was overjoyed. “Did you say we are going to leave this place?” he asked.

Zhang Wuji said, “If apes and monkeys can come in and out, we certainly can.”

“If that’s the case, why didn’t you leave?” Zhu Changling asked.

Showing a faint smile, Zhang Wuji said, “I didn’t want to go out for fear that people would bully me, but now I am not afraid anymore. I also want to see my Tai Shifu, along with all Shibo and Shishu [martial older and younger uncles, respectively].”

Zhu Changling laughed out loud, clapped his hands and said, “Very good, very good!” He took two steps backward, suddenly his shadow swayed, ‘Aiyo!’ he shouted, and fell over the cliff to the empty air below.

That his extreme joy suddenly turned into an unforeseen accident, had taken Zhang Wuji by surprise. He hurriedly leaned over the cliff and called out, “Zhu Bobo, are you all right?” He only heard two groans uttered in a low voice from underneath.

Zhang Wuji was delighted; he thought, “Fortunately he did not fall all the way down, but I am afraid he is injured.” Judging by the sound of the groans, Zhu Changling was only several ‘zhang’ away from him. When he looked closely, he saw by coincidence a pine tree grew just beneath the cliff. Zhu Changling’s body lay horizontally on the tree trunk, unmoving. Seeing this situation, Zhang Wuji was thinking of leaping down and carrying Zhu Changling back over the cliff. With his skill right now, it should not be too difficult.

Thereupon he took a deep breath and aiming for the tree trunk, which looked like an extended arm out the canyon wall, he jumped down lightly.

When his toes were still half a foot away from the tree trunk, suddenly the tree trunk dropped. He was hanging midair and did not have any place to set his foot on; although he had mastered the 'shen gong', he was only a human and not a bird; how could he fly back up to the cliff? It was as if a lightning suddenly illuminated his dark mind as he understood: "Turns out Zhu Changling is still employing a dirty trick to harm me. He had broken the branch and held it in his hand, waiting for me to set my foot on it, he let the tree branch drop down." But his understanding had come too late; his body fell straight down ...

Zhu Changling had lived on that tiny platform with circumference of less than several dozen 'zhang' for more than five years. He knew every grass every tree, every grain of sand and every rock on that platform by heart. He pretended to be falling over the cliff and feigned injury, knowing full well that Zhang Wuji would jump down to help. As expected, his treacherous plan prevailed; Zhang Wuji fell down the tens of thousands 'zhang' deep canyon.

Zhu Changling laughed out loud, thinking, "This kid will fall into pulp today, finally I can vent my five years worth of resentment!" With the help of a long cane by the pine tree, he leaped over the cliff back to the platform. He mused, "Last time I could not go through that cave, perhaps I was impatient and exerted too much strength that my rib was broken. This kid's stature is a lot bigger and taller than mine. If he could go through, I don't see any reason why I cannot. After I find the Nine Yang Manual, I'll find a way home from the other side. Someday when I have acquired the 'shen gong', I will be unequalled under the heavens, won't it be

wonderful? Ha ha ha ha ...!” The more he thought about it, the happier he was; he went into the cave at once.

Before long, he had crawled to the place where five years ago he broke a rib. His only thought was: ‘that kid is bigger than me, if he can go through, I certainly can too’. He did not think erroneously, however, he forgot one tiny little detail: Zhang Wuji had mastered the shrinking bone technique from the Jiu Yang Shen Gong.

Calming himself down, he squeezed into the narrow passage, inch by inch forward, and sure enough, he managed to advance about a ‘zhang’ further than five years ago. But from this point forward, no matter how he exerted his strength, it was simply impossible to advance even half an inch more. He realized that if he used brute force, he would only repeat the disaster he suffered five years ago; he would certainly break some more rib bones. Thereupon he calmed himself down and exhaled all air from his lungs. Sure enough, his body shrunk two more inches that he managed to squeeze three more feet forward. However, without any air in his lungs, soon he was suffocating; his heart beat felt like the beating of a drum, several times he felt he was going to faint. Knowing his condition was far from good, he had no choice but retreat before he could make another plan. He did not think, however, that when he moved forward, his feet propelled his body by kicking against the uneven surface of the mountain wall, but to go back, there was nothing he could use as a stepping stone. As he moved forward, his arms were in front of his head to reduce size of his shoulder. At this moment, his hands were tied by the rocks all around his head; he could not stretch the arms further, he could not use the least bit of strength in his hands.

He started to panic; thinking, “That kid is bigger than me;

he could go through, I can certainly go through, why am I stuck in here? This really does not make any sense!" But there are so many things in this world that do not make sense. This man, who possessed excellent literary and martial art skills, whose intelligence and resourcefulness could be considered first rank among the masters, hereafter stuck inside the narrow passageway of a remote mountain cave; unable to neither advance nor retreat.

Fallen under Zhu Changling's treacherous plan, Zhang Wuji fell straight down from the cliff, while continuously scolding himself, "Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, you are such a useless kid. You knew Zhu Changling's matchless craftiness, yet you still fell under his evil trick. You deserve to die, deserve to die!"

Although he scolded himself as deserving death, he was actually struggling furiously to stay alive. The 'chi' inside his body flowed, sending his strength upward, trying to slow down his fall, so that his body would not be smashed to powder and his bones broken to pieces. But he was in midair, swaying against emptiness, his body was beyond his control. Even when he exerted his whole power until not an ounce of strength left, he still felt the wind passing his ears had not diminished at all.

A short moment later, he felt the sting of the bright light reflected from the white snow below in his eyes. He knew he was at the critical moment between life and death, but he saw about a 'zhang' away there was a big pile of snow. He did not have time to distinguish whether that pile was really snow or a white rock; immediately he made three somersaults in the air, trying to land on that pile of snow. His body curved diagonally, his left foot pointed toward that pile of snow. 'Splosh!' his body sank into the pile of snow.

His more than five years training of Jiu Yang Shen Gong showed its formidable power; as he made contact with the pile of snow, his body reacted naturally and he bounced upwards. But the momentum from the ten thousand 'zhang' fall was simply too great. He felt a severe pain on his legs as the bones were broken.

Although his injury was severe, his mind was still clear; he saw firewood flying in the air, because the pile of snow was actually a farmer's pile of firewood and straw. "What a close call!" he groaned inwardly, "If under the snow was not a pile of firewood but a block of boulder, I, Zhang Wuji, would have lost my life." Sending his strength to his arms, he slowly crawled out of the pile of firewood, and rolled toward the snowy ground. Inspecting his own legs' injury, he took a deep breath and set his broken bones, while thinking, "I must lie down without moving for at least one month before I can walk again. That shouldn't be any problem because I can use my hands in place of my feet; but I cannot stay here and die of starvation." He thought further, "This pile of firewood must belong to a farmer family; there must be some people nearby."

He was about to call for help when suddenly he had a second thought, "There are too many evil people in this world. It's all right for me to lie alone on this snowy ground, recovering from my injury; but if I call and an evil person comes, I will be in big trouble." Thereupon he quietly lied down on the snowy ground, waiting for his broken bones to heal slowly.

And so he lied down like that for three days. His stomach rumbled from hunger, but he knew that especially at the beginning of the healing process, he must not move at all; he would be crippled for the rest of his life if the healing bones were not set straight. Consequently, he steeled

himself not to make the slightest move. Whenever he felt unbearable hunger, he would grab a handful of snow just to appease his hunger. In these three days he kept thinking, "From now on, I will have to be extra careful in every step I take. I must not fall under evil people's tricks. Otherwise I may not be as lucky as today and in the end may not avoid great calamity."

Toward the evening of the fourth day, he was lying down quietly while cultivating his internal energy. He felt his mind was clear and his body relaxed. Although the injury on his legs was heavy, it did not appear to hinder his training that he made some progress. Suddenly the quietness of the night was broken by the noise of barking dogs in the distant, which gradually came closer. Apparently, this pack of vicious dogs was pursuing some kind of wild animal. Zhang Wuji was startled. "Could the dogs be Zhu Jiuzhen Jijie's? Hmm, those vicious dogs have been killed by Zhu Bobo. But it's been a few years; she could have raised another pack of dogs."

Focusing his eyes, he looked toward the distant snowy ground, and saw that a man was running fast, pursued by three large howling dogs. The man was obviously dead-tired; he staggered along for several steps and then tumbled down to the ground, but because he was afraid of the sharp teeth and claws of the dogs, he struggled hard to stand up and desperately ran.

Zhang Wuji remembered his own sufferings he received from dogs attack a few years ago; he could not refrain the blood in his chest from boiling. He had the desire to render his help, unfortunately his legs were broken and he could not walk.

Suddenly he heard the miserable cry of that man as he fell

down and two vicious dogs climbed over his body and bit fiercely. "Vicious dogs, over here!" Zhang Wuji indignantly shouted.

When the dogs heard the call, they charged toward Zhang Wuji. Smelling that Zhang Wuji was not someone they knew, the dogs surrounded him while barking madly, before they finally pounced on him to bite him. Zhang Wuji stretched out his finger and flicked each dog on its nose. The three vicious dogs rolled down and died at once. Seeing that with only a gentle flick of his finger he killed the three dogs, Zhang Wuji could not help feeling startled by the formidable power of his Jiu Yang Shen Gong.

He heard that the sound of that man's groan was very weak. "Dage [big brother]," he asked, "Did the dogs bite you really bad?"

"I ... I ... can't hold on ... I ... I ..." that man said.

Zhang Wuji said, "My legs are broken, I can't walk. Can you come over here? Let me take a look at your wounds."

"Yes ... yes ..." the man replied. Huffing and puffing he struggled to crawl over. After crawling for a while, he stopped a moment, then crawled again toward Zhang Wuji, but when he was about a 'zhang' away from him, he suddenly cried out, 'Ah!' and then fell flat on the ground, he could not move any more. The two of them were quite some distance away from each other; one could not go over, the other could not come closer.

"Dage," Zhang Wuji asked, "Where exactly is your wound?"

The man replied, "I ... chest, belly ... the vicious dogs tore my stomach and pulled out my intestines."

Zhang Wuji was shocked. He knew that since that man's intestines had already out, he would not live. "Why did those vicious dogs chase you?" he asked.

The man replied, "I ... went out tonight to chase the wild boars away, so ... so they will not damage my crop. I saw Zhu Jia Da Xiaojie [eldest miss of Zhu family] and ... and a young master talking underneath a tree. I should have not come close ... I ... aiyo!" With a loud cry he died.

Although he did not finish, Zhang Wuji understood most of what he was about to say. It seemed like Zhu Jiuzhen and Wei Bi were having a rendezvous in the middle of the night, and met this peasant by accident, so Zhu Jiuzhen released her dogs to kill him. Zhang Wuji's anger arose, but suddenly he heard the sound of hoof beats, followed by several whistles. Apparently Zhu Jiuzhen was calling her dogs.

The hoof beats came closer, two riders coming over, fast. The riders were one man and one woman. The woman suddenly called out, "Ah! How come General Ping Xi and the others are all dead?" The voice belonged to none other than Zhu Jiuzhen. She still called her vicious dogs as generals, no different than before.

The man riding with her was indeed Wei Bi. He dismounted and said in astonishment, "Two people are dead in here!"

Zhang Wuji quietly decided on his course of action, "If they come to harm me, I have no choice but to act without leniency."

Zhu Jiuzhen looked at the peasant's corpse with the intestines spilled out; it was a terrifying sight. Zhang Wuji's clothes were tattered to the extreme, his hair was

disheveled, his face was covered with unkempt moustache and beard, he was lying down on the ground motionless, so she thought he must be dead, bitten by the dogs early on. She was eager to talk about feelings and love with Wei Bi, and thus she did not want to stay much longer.

“Biaoge, let’s go!” she said, “These two must be fighting with all they had and killed my three generals before their own deaths.” Pulling her reins, she galloped to the west.

Wei Bi felt there was something unusual in the death of these three dogs, but seeing Zhu Jiuzhen riding away, he felt it was inappropriate for him to stay and investigate carefully. Thereupon he mounted his horse and galloped away behind her.

Zhang Wuji could still hear Zhu Jiuzhen’s tender laughter coming from afar, he felt anger rise in his heart. Just a little over five years ago he adored her as a goddess. She only needed to lift her little finger, even if she wanted him to climb the mountain of blades or go down the boiling oil, he would do so without the least bit of hesitation. But seeing her again tonight, for some unknown reason, her charms on him had unexpectedly completely vanished.

Zhang Wuji thought that it was because of his mastery of the Nine Yin Manual, or perhaps because he had discovered her treacherous scheme toward him. He did not realize that most young men would experience this kind of blind infatuation stage of the first love, in which he would neglect sleep and food for the sake of a young girl that he would live and die for that particular girl. However, this kind of passionate infatuation comes quickly, also vanishes as quickly, someday his mind would clear up and he would laugh at his own former days' wallowing.

In the meantime, his stomach was growling with hunger. He was thinking of tearing off a dog leg and eating it, but he was afraid that Zhu Jiuzhen and Wei Bi would return and find out that he had not died yet, and he had eaten her general. In which case he would have committed a grave offense against her; he was not Wei Bi's match while his legs were broken.

Early in the morning the next day, he saw a bald eagle eyeing the dead people and dead dogs on the ground. The eagle wheeled several times in the air before finally diving down to feed. This eagle really deserved to die, because instead of going down on the dead man or the dead dogs, it flew straight toward Zhang Wuji's face. Zhang Wuji reached up and caught the eagle's neck. With a light pinch he killed the bird.

"It is truly a heaven-sent breakfast," he muttered happily. He plucked the feather, tore the eagle's leg, and took a big bite. Although it was raw, he ate it with gusto because he had been hungry for three days.

Before he finished the first eagle, the second eagle came down. And thus Zhang Wuji appeased his hunger with eagle meat, while lying down on the snowy ground waiting patiently for his broken bones to heal completely.

A few more days passed. Surprisingly, he did not see any humans wandering around in the wilderness. There were three dead dogs and one dead man by his side; fortunately it was the depth of the winter, the weather was bitter cold, so that the corpses did not decay. He was accustomed to spending his days alone, so he did not suffer from loneliness.

One afternoon, after circulating his internal energy for one round, he saw two bald eagles flying high in the sky. The

eagles circled around for a long time without daring to fly down. One eagle suddenly swooped down, fast, but when it was about three feet away from Zhang Wuji, it suddenly turned around and soared high to the sky. The movement was extremely swift and amazing. All of a sudden Zhang Wuji had an inspiration, "This movement can be used in martial art; attack when the enemy expects it the least, and when the attack fails, swiftly retreat far away."

In the past, although Jueyuan Dashi's entire body was filled with the divine energy, when he received attack from Xiao Xiangzi and He Zudao, his hands and feet moved randomly without any ability to resist. Zhang Sanfeng had to ask Yang Guo to teach him four stances first before he was able to fight Yin Kexi.

Zhang Wuji had learned martial arts ever since his childhood, so he had a far superior foundation compared to Jueyuan and Zhang Sanfeng. However, Xie Xun only taught him the theory of martial art, without the actual practical stance or style. Right now Zhang Wuji understood the painstaking effort of his foster father. Yifu's mastery of martial art was broad and profound; supposing he imparted his knowledge by step by step instructions, perhaps even twenty years would not be enough to teach Zhang Wuji everything he knew. Knowing that their time together was limited, he insisted that Zhang Wuji firmly remember all the key theories of the martial arts, so that he could comprehend it on his own later on.

The only martial art ZhangWuji really learned was the thirty-two stance Wudang Long Fist, which his father taught him on the wooden raft. He realized that from now on, other than continue cultivating the Jiu Yang Shen Gong until he reached perfection, he should try to integrate his excellent internal energy with the martial art theory Xie Xun passed

on to him. Thereupon every time he saw a flower blown by the wind or fell down to the earth, strange tree shape reaching out to the sky, as well as the movements of birds and beasts, the changing of the wind and cloud, he would often think about martial art movements.

This moment, he was hoping that the bald eagles would circle back and display their various movements. While he was deep in thought, suddenly he heard footsteps on the snowy ground from a distance. The steps were light and intermittent; the newcomer appeared to be a woman. Zhang Wuji turned his head and saw a woman carrying a bamboo basket, approaching him in quick steps.

When she saw bodies of people and dogs lying around on the snow, she exclaimed, "Ah!" and halted her steps in fright. Zhang Wuji focused his eyes and saw that she was a young girl, about seventeen, eighteen years of age. Her dress was simple; apparently she was a poor peasant girl. Her countenance was rather dark, she seemed to suffer some kind of skin disease, with bumps and indentations all over her face. In short, she was very ugly; only her eyes were bright, her posture was also slender and elegant.

She took a step closer and was slightly startled to see that Zhang Wuji was staring at her. "You ... you are not dead yet?" she asked.

"Maybe not," Zhang Wuji replied. Both the question and the answer did not make any sense; once both of them realized what they were saying, they could not help but laugh.

"Since you are not dead, why are you lying down here without moving?" she asked with a laugh, "You frightened me."

"I fell from the mountain and broke my legs," Zhang Wuji

replied, "I have no choice but to lie down in here."

"Was that man your companion?" the girl asked, "Why are there three dead dogs over here?"

"These three dogs were very vicious," Zhang Wuji said, "They bit this Dage to his death, but they also turned into dead dogs."

The girl said, "What can you do, lying in here? Are you hungry?"

"Naturally I am starving," Zhang Wuji said, "But I cannot move. I have to submit to the will of Heaven."

The girl smiled slightly. She took two wheat cakes from her basket and handed the cakes over to him.

"Thank you very much, Miss," Zhang Wuji said, but as he received the cakes, he did not immediately eat it.

"Are you afraid my cakes are poisonous?" the girl asked, "Why don't you eat it?"

In the last five years, other than occasional exchange through the cave with Zhu Changling, Zhang Wuji had never tasted anything else; furthermore, he had never spoken even half a word with another human being. This time he met this girl, although her appearance was ugly, her manner of speaking was actually quite charming; his heart was delighted. He said, "Because Miss gave me these cakes, I can't bear to eat it."

His words carried a somewhat teasing tone. He was always honest and frank; he had never smooth talked anybody, but in front of this girl, he felt comfortable and almost without

thinking had blurted those words.

When she heard it, the girl's countenance darkened. "Humph," she snorted.

Zhang Wuji immediately regretted his words; busily he took a big bite of the cake. But because he was in a hurry, the cake choked his throat, and he coughed it out.

The girl's anger turned into delight, "Thanks the Heaven and thanks the Earth," she said, "May you be choked to death! This ugly freak is not a good person, no wonder Laotianye [God, lit. old master of the sky] punished you. How come nobody else broke his dog-legs, and only you fell down and broke your bones?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "For five years I never cut my hair or shave my face, of course I look like an ugly freak. But you are not necessarily more beautiful than I am. We are the same ['ban jin ba liang' - half a pound eight ounces]. The eldest brother does not speak ill about the second brother." But of course he kept this thought to himself. With all seriousness he said, "I have been lying down in here for nine days. To see Miss passing through is such a blessing indeed. Now that Miss gave me these cakes, I thank you very much."

The girl pursed her lips, laughed and said, "I asked you: How come nobody else broke his dog-legs and only you fell down and broke your bones? If you do not answer, I am going to take the cakes back."

Listening to her peal of laughter and seeing the twinkle in her eyes, showing her mischievousness, Zhang Wuji's heart was shaken. "How come her eyes look very much like Mama?" he mused, "When Mama swindled the old monk of Shaolin Temple just before she died, her eyes also shone like

this." Thinking to this point, he could not stop tears from welling up in his eyes, and very soon the tears flowed down this face.

"Pei," the girl spat and said, "I won't take your cakes away. You don't need to cry. I didn't know you are such a useless fool."

"It's not that I am crying over your cake," Zhang Wuji said, "It's just that I am remembering a sad memory."

That girl had turned away and walked for two steps, but as she heard him, she turned her head and said, "What sad memory? A foolish-looking fellow like you also have a sad memory?"

Zhang Wuji sighed deeply and said, "I remember my Mama, my passed away Mama."

The girl guffawed and said, "Your Mama always gave you cake, didn't she?"

"Mama always gave me cakes to eat," Zhang Wuji said, "But I remember her because your smile looks like my Mama."

The girl angrily said, "You devil! So you said I am that old? That I am as old as your mother?" While saying that, she picked a piece of firewood and hit Zhang Wuji, twice.

If Zhang Wuji wanted to seize the firewood in her hand, it would be very easy, but he thought, "She does not know my Ma was young and pretty. She only knows that I look like an ugly freak; no wonder she is angry." So after she struck him twice, he said, "When she died, my Ma was very pretty."

With a serious face she said, "You make fun of me because I

am ugly, you don't want to live. I'll pull your leg!" She bent down, acting as if she was going to pull Zhang Wuji's leg.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; his broken legs were just beginning to heal. If she did indeed pull it, then all previous accomplishment would come to nothing. Hastily he grabbed a handful of snow. As soon as that girl's hand touched his leg, he would strike the acupoint in between her eyebrows to knock her unconscious on the spot.

Luckily that girl was only scaring him; looking at the great change of his face, she said, "Look at your frightened face! Who told you to make fun of me?"

Zhang Wuji said, "If I intentionally make fun of Miss, after my both legs are healed, let me fall again and break my legs three times that in the end I become a cripple."

The girl giggled and said, "Alright, so be it!" She sat on the ground next to him and said, "So your Ma was a pretty woman. How could you compare me with her? Do you think I am pretty?"

Zhang Wuji was speechless for a moment, then he said, "I don't know why, but for some reason I feel that you are somewhat similar to my Ma. Although you are not as pretty as my Ma, but I like looking at you."

The girl bent her middle finger and gently tapped his forehead twice with her knuckle. She said with a laugh, "Good boy, then call me Mama!" But as soon as these words came out of her mouth, she immediately realized its inappropriateness; thereupon she closed her mouth and turned her head the other way, yet she still could not stifle her laughter.

Looking at her expression, Zhang Wuji vaguely remembered when his Mama chatted with his Papa on the Bing Huo Island, her expression was very much like this. All of a sudden he felt that this ugly girl was simply elegant and charming; her manner was sweet, and that she was not ugly at all. He could not help but staring at her with a dreamy look on his face.

The girl turned her head around and saw the way he looked at her; she laughed and said, "Why do you like looking at me? Tell me."

Zhang Wuji stared blankly at her for half a day. He shook his head and said, "I don't know. I only feel that when I look at you, my heart feels safe and comfortable. I feel that you will treat me with nothing but goodness. You will not bully me, harm me!"

"Ha ha ..." the girl laughed, "You are dead wrong! In all my life, I like nothing better than harming others." Suddenly she raised the firewood in her hand and struck Zhang Wuji's broken legs twice, and then jumped up and walked away.

These two strikes happened to fall right on Zhang Wuji's broken bones. He was caught off guard and cried loudly in pain, "Aiyo!" But the girl only giggled and turned her head around to make a face at him.

Zhang Wuji kept his gaze on her as she gradually disappeared in the distance. The pain on his broken legs was unbearable. He mused, "Turns out all women love to harm others. The beautiful ones love to hurt people, the ugly ones also like to inflict pain on me."

That night in his sleep he dreamed about that young girl, also about his mother. Several times the images in his mind

blurred between that girl and his mother. He was unsure if the face in his dream was beautiful or ugly, he only knew that the eyes were clear and bright, and both were mischievous and charming at the same time as those eyes were gazing at him. His dream brought him to his childhood past, when his mother often teased him by deliberately stretching out her leg to trip him. And then when he stumbled and cried in pain, mother would hug him and kiss him, while did not stop saying, "Good child, don't cry, Mama loves you dearly!"

He woke up with a start; suddenly a thought flashed in his mind, a thought which he had never suspected before, "Why did Mama like to see others suffer? Yifu's eyes were blinded by her, Yu Sanbo [third (older) uncle] was crippled by her underlings, the entire family of Lin'An prefecture's Long Men [Dragon Gate] Escort Agency was also perished under her hands. In the end, was Mama a good person, or was she an evil person?"

After gazing the continuously twinkling stars high in the sky for a long, long time, he sighed and said to himself, "Doesn't matter if she was a good or evil person, she was my mother." In his heart he thought, "If Mama was still alive, I would love her with all my heart." Again his mind wandered toward that peasant girl. He was baffled as why without any reason she hit his broken legs. "I did not offend her at all, why did she want me to cry out in pain before she was happy? Could it be that she really loves hurting others?" He wished she would come again, but he was also afraid she would hurt him with different method.

As his hand gently stroked the half eaten cake by his side, he remembered that peasant girl's expression when she said, 'So your Ma was a pretty woman. How could you compare me with her? Do you think I am pretty?' He could

not stop himself from saying out loud, "You are pretty; I really love seeing you."

Indulging himself in this kind of fancy thought, he lay down for two more days, but that peasant girl did not come. Zhang Wuji started to think that she would never come again, who would have thought that toward the afternoon of the third day, the peasant girl appeared from behind the hillside, walking toward him with the bamboo basket in her hand.

"Ugly freak," she said with a laugh, "You have not died yet?"

Zhang Wuji also laughed. "Most of me have died of starvation, a little part of me is still alive," he said.

The peasant girl giggled and sat by his side. Suddenly she extended her foot and kicked his broken leg, asking, "Is this part dead or still alive?"

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried out, "Don't you have any conscience?"

"What conscience?" the girl replied, "What did you do to me that I should be good to you?"

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. He said, "Three days ago you hit me really bad, but I don't hate you. In fact, I have been thinking about you often these past two days."

The girl's face reddened, she was angry, but forced herself to bear it. "Who wants to be thought by you, an ugly freak?" she said, "Most likely you did not think good things about me. In your belly, you must be cursing me as ugly and evil girl."

"You are not ugly at all," Zhang Wuji said, "But why must

you hurt others first before you can be happy?"

With a chuckle the girl said, "If others do not suffer pain, how can I be happy?" She could see the disagreement in Zhang Wuji's expression, but she also noticed the half-eaten cake in his hand, which after three days he had not finished eating. She said, "You keep that cake until now? Won't it taste awful?"

Zhang Wuji said, "This cake was given by Miss, I hate to part with it." Three days ago, he said those words half-jokingly, but today he was very sincere.

The girl knew he was not talking empty words, her face blushed slightly. "I have fresh cake," she said, while taking many more food from the basket. Other than cakes, there were a roast chicken and a roast mutton leg.

Zhang Wuji was very happy. He had been eating raw eagle meat these days; it was dripping with blood, smelly, and tough. The roast chicken was delicious; it was still hot that it burned his hand somewhat, but in his mouth it was delicious beyond measure.

The girl watched his appetite while she chuckled and sat down, hugging her knees. "Ugly freak," she said, "You are eating happily, it's fun watching you eat. Apparently you are different; I don't have to hurt you for me to be happy."

"Others are happy, you are happy. Now that is the real happiness," Zhang Wuji said.

"Humph!" the girl sneered and said, "Let me tell you first: right now I am happy, so I won't hurt you. There will come a day when I am not happy. I can't say for sure; perhaps I will torture you until you are neither dead nor alive. At that time

you must not blame me."

Zhang Wuji shook his head, "Bad people have been torturing me since I was little until I am a grown up. The more I was tortured, the stronger I became."

With a cold laugh the girl said, "Don't be so sure of yourself. We'll see."

Zhang Wuji said, "In that case, as soon as my legs are healed, I am going to go far away from you. Even if you want to torture me, hurt me, you won't be able to find me."

The girl said, "Then I am going to cut your legs first, so you won't be able to leave me for the rest of your life."

Hearing her icy-cold voice, Zhang Wuji could not help but shiver. He believed that she was capable of doing whatever she said. Those words were certainly not an empty threat.

The girl stared at him for half a day. She sighed and then her expression changed suddenly, "Do you think you deserve it? Ugly freak! Do you think you deserve me cutting your dog legs?" She leaped up, grabbed the half-eaten roast chicken from Zhang Wuji's hand, the mutton leg, and the cakes, and tossed them all far away. Lastly, she also spat on Zhang Wuji's face.

In shock Zhang Wuji looked at her. He felt that she was not actually angry with him, nor did she hold him in contempt; yet her face revealed her deep misery. Apparently she bore an unspeakable burden in her heart. He wanted to comfort her, but in that instant he was not able to find any appropriate words to say.

Seeing the expression on his face, the peasant girl suddenly

shouted, "Ugly freak, what are you thinking?"

"Miss," Zhang Wuji said, "Why aren't you happy? Would you tell me?"

Listening to his gentle words, the girl could not throw a tantrum anymore. She dropped herself next to him, holding her head in his hands, and sobbed uncontrollably.

Looking at her shaking shoulders and her waist as delicate as a bee, Zhang Wuji felt sorry for her. "Miss," he said in low voice, "Who bullied you? Wait 'till my legs are healed, I am going to vent your anger for you."

The girl was sobbing continuously. After a while she said, "Nobody bullies me. It's just that I have been unfortunate ever since the day I was born. I always think of one person, and cannot forget him."

Zhang Wuji nodded and said, "He is a young man, isn't he? Was he cruel to you?"

"That's right," the girl replied, "He is very handsome, but also very arrogant. I wanted him to come with me and be with me forever, but he did not want to. That was all right, but why did he have to scold me, hit me, and even bite me bloody?"

Zhang Wuji angrily said, "This man is so rude and irrational. Miss, from now on, forget him."

The girl burst into tears and said, "But ... but I can't forget him. He ran far away; I have been looking for him everywhere without ever finding him."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This love affair between a man and a

woman is indeed difficult to resolve. Although this miss' appearance is somewhat lacking, but it is obvious that her love is genuine. Her temperament is rather strange, that is because of the grief in her heart, because of her deep disappointment. It's hard to imagine that that man's heart is this callous toward her!" In soft voice he said, "Miss, don't be sad. There are plenty of good men in this world, why do you have to worry about this man, who do not have any conscience?"

The girl heaved a deep sigh. Her eyes gazed toward a distant place, as if she was in a trance. Zhang Wuji knew that she would not be able to forget this boyfriend, the desire of her heart. He said, "That man scolded you, hit you; but the misery I suffered was actually ten times worse than Miss'."

"What is it?" the girl asked, "Have you been cheated by a beautiful girl?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "At first, she did not intentionally cheat on me; I was stupid, seeing her beauty, I was captivated by her. Actually, how could I deserve her? In my heart, I have never had any vain desire. But she and her father have arranged in secret a treacherous plan to inflict an unspeakable harm on me." While saying that, he pulled his sleeve to show the countless scars on his arm. "These teeth marks were from the bites of her vicious dogs," he said.

Seeing that many scars, the girl flew into a rage. "Was it that girl Zhu Jiuzhen who harmed you?" she asked.

"How do you know?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Everybody within the surrounding area of several hundred 'li' knows that that lowly girl loves to raise vicious dogs," the

girl replied.

Zhang Wuji nodded. "Yes, it was Miss Zhu," he said indifferently, "But these scars have been healed a long time, I no longer feel the pain. I am fortunate to be alive, I don't need to hate her anymore."

The girl stared at him for half a day, but she could not see any trace of anger, he looked at ease; she felt this was rather strange. "What's your name?" she asked, "Why are you here?"

Zhang Wuji mused, "All the way from the Central Earth, people keep asking me about Yifu's whereabouts. They threatened, swindled, committing all manners of crimes that I had to suffer countless sufferings. From now on, Zhang Wuji is dead, nobody in this world knows Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun's whereabouts. Supposing I meet with someone ten times more cunning than Zhu Changling, I won't have to worry about falling into his trap and unintentionally cause trouble to my Yifu." Thereupon he said, "I am called Ahniu [lit. cow/bull]."

The girl slightly smiled. "What's your surname?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji thought again, "I can't say Zhang, Yin, or Xie; those are all not good. 'Zhang' and 'Yin' combined sounds like 'Zeng'." Thereupon he said, "I ... My surname is Zeng. What is Miss' surname?"

The girl's body shook, she said, "I don't have any surname." After pausing for a moment, she slowly said, "My birth father did not want me; he would kill me if he sees me. How can I take Father's surname? My Mama was killed by me, I also cannot use her surname. I was born ugly. You can call me Miss Chou [lit. Ugly]."

Zhang Wuji was stunned. "You ... you killed your Mama?" he asked, "How can that be?"

The girl sighed and said, "It's a long story. Mama was my father's first wife. She had never given birth to any son or daughter; hence Father took Er Niang [Second Mother]. Er Niang gave birth to my two (older) brothers. Father doted on her very much. Later on Mama gave birth to me, her only daughter. Relying on Father's love, Er Niang had always bullied Mama. My two older brothers were also very bad; they helped their mother in bullying my Ma. My Ma could only cry in secret. Tell me, what should I do?"

"Your father should have been more neutral" Zhang Wuji replied.

The girl said, "Because Father constantly shielded Er Niang, I was unbearably angry. I took a blade and killed my Er Niang."

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed in shock. He always thought that people kill people in the Wulin world was nothing strange, but that this peasant girl unexpectedly could kill someone with a blade was beyond his expectation.

The girl continued, "Seeing I was in deep trouble, Mama told me to run away at once. But my two brothers pursued me to take me back. Because Mama was helpless to stop them, she slit her own throat to save me. Tell me, didn't Mama lose her life in my hands? When my father saw me, is it possible for him not to kill me?" When she said all these, her intonation was light, without the slightest degree of excitement.

Zhang Wuji, however, listened to her story with his heart thumping madly; he thought, "I am unfortunate that my

parents are dead, but Father and Mother loved each other and they loved me very much. Compared to this Miss' bitter experience, I am actually ten thousand times luckier than she." Thinking to this point, his sympathy for the girl grew. With a tender voice he said, "Have you left home for a long time? Have you been always alone out here?"

The girl nodded slightly. Zhang Wuji asked again, "Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know," the girl replied, "The world is very big, it doesn't matter if I go to the east or to the west. I will be all right as long as I don't bump into my father or brothers."

Zhang Wuji's heart burst with compassion because he felt they shared the same fate. He said, "Wait 'till my legs are healed, I will accompany you to look for that ... that Dage [big brother]. We'll ask him what he thinks about you."

"What if he scolds me or bites me again?" the girl asked.

"Humph," Zhang Wuji boldly said, "If he dares to harm a single strand of your hair, I will not rest until I deal with him."

The girl said, "What if he simply ignores me, will not speak even one word to me?"

Zhang Wuji was dumbfounded. He thought that he could not force a man to love a woman he did not have any affection to even if he possessed stronger martial art skills. After being silent for half a day, he said, "I will try my best."

Suddenly the girl bent over in laughter, as if she had just heard the funniest joke ever. "What's so funny?" Zhang Wuji asked.

“Ugly freak,” the girl said, “Who do you think you are? Will others listen to you? Besides, I have been looking for him everywhere and did not even see any sign of him. I don’t even know if he is dead or alive. You will do your best? What kind of ability do you have? Ha ha ha ha ...!”

Zhang Wuji was about to open his mouth, but because of her laughter, he blushed and closed his mouth immediately.

The girl saw him opening and closing his mouth, she stopped laughing and asked, “You are going to say something?”

“You laughed at me, I won’t tell you,” Zhang Wuji said.

“Humph,” the girl coldly said, “A laugh is a laugh. At worst I will laugh at you again. You won’t die because of my laughter, will you?”

In a loud voice Zhang Wuji said, “I have nothing but good intentions toward you, you should not laugh at me!”

The girl said, “I am asking you: what is it that you were going to say?”

Zhang Wuji said, “You are all alone, without friends or family. I am of the same fate. My father and mother have died; I have neither brothers nor sisters. I was going to say that if that wicked man still pays no attention to you, there is no harm in us traveling together as companions. I can accompany you and talk to you to relieve boredom. But since you said I am not fit, I might as well not say it.”

The girl said angrily, “You certainly are not fit! That wicked man is a hundred times more handsome than you; he is a

hundred times smarter than you. It is really bad luck that I hang around with you in here, engaging in idle conversation." While saying that, she madly kicked the mutton leg and the roast chicken lying on the snowy ground, and then she ran away while covering her face.

Being on the receiving end of such unreasonable fit of temper, Zhang Wuji did not get angry. He thought, "This Miss is truly pitiful. It's not surprising, considering she has been through many sufferings."

Suddenly the girl rushed back and fiercely said, "Ugly freak, you must be upset with me. You must be thinking that my own face is so ugly yet I am looking down on you. Am I right?"

"No, it's not that," Zhang Wuji shook his head, "Your face is not very good-looking, but as soon as I see you, I feel we can get along well. If you have not turned uglier and looked the same as before ..."

The girl suddenly cried out in alarm. "You ... did you say I do not look the same as I was before?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Compared to the last time we met, your face today looks somewhat more swollen, your skin also darkened somewhat. That is unnatural."

The girl was startled. "I ... I did not dare to look into the mirror these past few days," she said, "Did you say I am getting uglier?"

Zhang Wuji gently said, "For a person, the most important thing is good character. Who cares if one is beautiful or ugly? Mama told me that the more beautiful the women, the worse their conscience and the more they are capable of deceit. She told me to carefully guard against such women."

The girl was not interested in listening to whatever his Mama said. She pressed on, "I am asking you: when you saw me the last time, I was not this ugly, yes or no?"

Zhang Wuji knew that if he answered 'yes', than she would be unbearably heart-broken, therefore, he only stared at her with a blank expression on his face, his heart full of compassion.

Seeing his expression, the girl knew what his answer would be. She covered her face and cried. "Ugly freak, I hate you! I hate you!" she screamed and ran away madly. This time she did not turn back.

Zhang Wuji lay down for two more days. During the night, a wild wolf crawled near him, attracted by the smell. Zhang Wuji struck the wolf dead with his fist. Instead of feeding on Zhang Wuji, the wolf became his dinner instead.

Several days later, his broken legs had healed for the most part. In ten more days at most he would be able to walk again. He thought that henceforth the peasant girl would not come again. He regretted that he did not even ask her name. "How can her face turn uglier?" he mused, "This is indeed a mystery." After pondering this matter for half a day without finding any answer, he gave up and tried to get some sleep.

Around midnight, in his sleep, he heard the footsteps of several people walking on the snow. He woke up immediately and sat up, turning his head toward the direction of the noise. That night the new moon looked like an eyebrow. Under the soft moonlight, he saw that seven people walked in. The silhouette of the one in the front appeared graceful, apparently it belonged to that peasant

girl. When these seven people were near enough, he could see that it was indeed the girl with the ugly face. The other six people were walking in a fan formation behind her, as if they were guarding against her running away.

Zhang Wuji was greatly astonished. "Has she been captured by her father and brothers?" he wondered in his heart.

Before he finished this thought, the girl and the six people behind her had come near. As soon as Zhang Wuji looked, he was even more shocked. Turned out these six people were his old acquaintances; they were Wu Qingying, Wu Lie and Wei Bi on his left, and He Taichong and Ban Shuxian, husband and wife, on his right. The one on the extreme right was a middle-age woman. Her face looked somewhat familiar. Turned out she was Ding Minjun of the Emei Pai. "How did she know all these people?" he mused, "Could it be that she is one of the Wulin people who knows my real identity so she is taking all this people to capture me and force me to reveal Yifu's whereabouts?"

Thinking to this point, the suspicion in his heart was gone and anger rose in its place. "I have no enmity no grudges, but you come here to bring harm to me!" he mused. He thought further, "Presently I cannot move my legs. There is not a single weakness among these six people; the peasant girl's martial art may not be weak either. I'd better submit to them and agree to take them to look for my Yifu. When my legs are healed, I will deal with them one by one."

If it were five years ago, he would rather lose his life than submitting to the enemy. No matter how the enemy tortured or intimidated him, he would simply clench his teeth refusing to say anything. But now, first of all he was older, his mind was more open; second, after mastering the Nine Yang Manual, his confidence grew, he was able to deal with dangerous situations calmly. In the presence of powerful

enemies, he did not feel the least amount of fear. The only unexpected thing was that the peasant girl would betray him. In his resentment, he could not help but be grieved. He lied back down and used his arms as a pillow, no longer paying attention to these seven people.

The peasant girl stopped in front of him. She quietly looked at him for a long, long time before slowly turning around and walking away. Zhang Wuji could hear her sigh. The sound was extremely soft, but it was full of grief. He sneered in his heart, "I don't know what malicious intention you have in your heart, but since you already planned it, why fake compassion on me?"

He saw that Wei Bi was swinging the sword in his hand back and forth and he said with a cold laugh, "You said you want to see someone before you die. I thought it must some young man whose appearance was as handsome as Pan An; turns out it as an ugly freak. Ha ha ... funny! Very funny! The two of you are really a pair made in Heaven."

The peasant girl did not get angry. "That's right," she drily said, "I want to see him again before I die. I want to ask him clearly about one thing. After I know his answer, I will die with closed eyes."

Zhang Wuji was greatly astonished, he did not understand what these two people were talking about. The peasant girl said, "I have something I'd like to ask you. You must answer me honestly."

Zhang Wuji said, "Anything about me, I can answer truthfully; but if it is about another person, it may not be easy to tell you." He was guessing the peasant girl would ask him about Xie Xun's whereabouts. He had decided to yield to their wish for now, therefore, he stated his condition

first so that later on he would have some leeway in the negotiation.

"Why would I want to know other people's business?" the peasant girl said, "I am asking you: that day you said that both of us are all alone, without friends or family; therefore, you are willing to be my companion. Did you say that with a sincere heart?"

What Zhang Wuji heard was beyond his expectation. He sat up at once, and saw that her eyes showed the grief she bore in her heart. "I did. I was sincere," he said.

"You really do not mind my ugly appearance, and willing to stay together for a lifetime?" the peasant girl asked.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. He had never expected this 'staying together for a lifetime' in his heart, but he could not bear to see her forlorn look, as if she was about to cry; thereupon he said, "Ugly or not, pretty or not, I don't care at all. If you want me to accompany you, to talk and laugh together with you, as long as you don't mind me, of course I will be happy to do so. But if you are thinking of deceiving me ..."

"Then are you willing to marry me, to take me as your wife?" the peasant girl asked in a trembling voice.

Zhang Wuji's body shook, and he was speechless for half a day. "I ... I have never thought ... to take a wife ..." he mumbled.

He Taichong and the others, six people broke out in laughter. Wei Bi laughed and said, "Even an ugly bum don't want you. If we don't kill you, what good is it for you to continue living? You'd better hit your head against the rock and die."

Hearing the laughter of the six people and Wei Bi's mocking, Zhang Wuji was convinced that this peasant girl was not in cahoots with these people, and that Wei Bi and the others meant to kill her. The realization that the peasant girl really did not come to harm him, Zhang Wuji's heart grew warm. He saw her hanging her head, with tears dripping down her face, obviously her sorrow was unbearable, only he did not know whether she was sad because she was going to die soon, or because she was ugly, or was it because Wei Bi's mocking was like a blade cutting deep into her heart?

Zhang Wuji's heart was greatly moved, recalling that after his own parents' death, he himself was wandering about in desperate plight, and was the victim of countless others' bullying. This peasant girl was also alone and weak, she was a few years younger than him; she was also more unfortunate than he. Now that she came to him and asked that question, how could he let her broken-hearted to the point of shedding some tears, and suffer disgrace from others? Much less her question showed her sincere devotion to him. "In all my life, other than my parents, Yifu, Tai Shifu and all martial uncles, who else would show such loving care to me? If I treat her well, and she also treats me well, we are bound by a common destiny, what harm can that bring?"

He saw that her body trembled, she was about to go away. Immediately he reached out to grab her right hand. In a loud voice he said, "Miss, with all my heart I sincerely desire to marry you. I only hope you will not regard me unworthy."

As the girl heard this, her eyes immediately lit up, with a low voice she said, "Ahniu Gege, you are not lying to me, are you?"

"Of course not," Zhang Wuji said, "From now on, I will

cherish you with all my might, I will look after you. No matter how many people come to make things difficult for you, no matter how many fierce people come to bully you, I don't care if I'll have to lose my life, I will protect you. I want you to be happy, I want you to forget your past sufferings."

The peasant girl sat down on the ground, leaned against his body, and grabbed his other hand. "I am really happy that you are willing to treat me like that" she said with a tender voice. Closing her eyes, she said, "Please say those words again, let me hear it and remember each word in my heart. Tell me, how are you going to treat me?"

Zhang Wuji was also grateful to see her so happy. Holding her soft and silky smooth hands he said, "I want you to live in safety and joy, I want to make you forget all sorts of past suffering, I don't care how many people come to bully you, to give you trouble, I will protect you without any regard of my own life."

With a tender and sweet smile the peasant girl leaned on his chest and said with a gentle voice, "I asked you to come with me, but you not only refused, you hit me, scolded me, and bit me ... Now you told me those things, I am really happy."

As soon as Zhang Wuji heard her words, his heart turned cold. Turned out this peasant girl was talking with her eyes closed, she was imagining that he was the boyfriend of the past.

The peasant girl felt his body tremble; she opened her eyes and looked at him. Her expression changed suddenly; she looked disappointed and angry, but there was also a hint of regret and tender feelings. Calming herself down, she said, "Ahniu Gege, you are willing to take me as your wife; you did not turn your back to me even though I am an ugly

woman. I am very grateful. But several years ago I have given my heart to someone else. At that time he already had not paid me any attention. If he saw me now, he would not even cast me a glance. He is such a heartless and short-lived little rascal ..."

She was cursing that man as 'heartless and short-lived little rascal', yet her voice was full of longing and tender sentiments.

Wu Qingying coldly said, "He has agreed to marry you, and you two have spoken words of love to each other. Can we start now?"

The peasant girl slowly stood up and said to Zhang Wuji, "Ahniu Gege, I am going to die soon. But even if I live, I cannot marry you. I want you to know that I am very happy to hear what you have just told me. Please do not be angry with me. If you have some free time in the future, please remember me." Her voice was extremely tender and sweet.

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. He heard Ban Shuxian's hoarse voice say, "We have kept our words by letting you see this man. Now you must keep your words by telling us who the killer was."

"Alright!" the peasant girl said, "I know for sure that the killer had once hidden in his house." While saying that she pointed her finger to Wu Lie.

Wu Lie's countenance changed slightly. "Humph!" he shouted, "Nonsense!"

Wei Bi angrily said, "Tell us the truth quickly. You killed my Biaomei, who ordered you to do so?"

This time Zhang Wuji's shock was indeed not small. With a trembling voice he said, "Killed Zhu ... Miss Zhu Jiuzhen?"

Wei Bi turned his stare toward him; he asked fiercely, "You know Miss Zhu Jiuzhen?"

"The name of Two Beauties of the Snowy Range shook the heavens, who hasn't heard?" Zhang Wuji replied.

A faint smile appeared on the corner of Wu Qingying's mouth. "Hey!" she loudly called the peasant girl, "Are you or are you not going to tell us who sent you?"

The peasant girl said, "I was sent to kill Zhu Jiuzhen by Kunlun Pai's He Taichong, husband and wife, and Emei Pai's Mijue Shitai."

Wu Lie roared, "You attempt to sow dissension among us is in vain, what good is it for you?" With a loud shout his palm struck toward the peasant girl. This shout carried an impressive power, the palm also created a strong gust of wind causing the snowflakes rise on the ground that snow fluttered in the air.

The peasant girl moved sideways to evade, her movement was fantastic. Zhang Wuji's mind was chaotic, "She ... she is indeed a Wulin character. She killed Xue Jiuzhen, that must be because of me. I told her that I was deceived by Miss Zhu, and was bitten by the vicious dogs she raised. But I have never asked her to kill anybody. I only know that because she is ugly and has been through a misfortune in her family, her temperament turned strange. Who would have thought that she really is capable of killing people without a strong reason?"

Wei Bi and Wu Qingying, each with a sword in their hands,

attacked from left and right. The peasant girl dodged to the east and escaped to the west trying to evade Wu Lie's palm force. Suddenly her slender waist twisted, she turned toward Wu Qingying's side and slapped her on the face, while her left hand reached out and snatched the sword in her hand. Wu Lie and Wei Bi cursed and came together to her rescue. The sword in the peasant girl's hand shook and she called out, "Got you!" as she inflicted a short cut on Wu Qingying's face.

Wu Qingying cried out in fear and leaped backwards. Her injury was actually very light, but she cherished her appearance very much, so when she felt a slight pain on her face, she was frightened out of her wits.

Wu Lie swept his left palm, pressing down on the peasant girl. The peasant girl leaned sideways to dodge. 'Clang!' the sword in her hand crashed with Wei Bi's sword. Right this moment Wu Li's right index finger trembled and sealed the 'fu tu' [subduing rabbit] and 'feng shi' [windy city(?) - I am sure Jin Yong was not talking about Chicago?], two acupoints on the outer side of her left leg. The peasant girl uttered a soft groan as her leg gave up and she fell onto Zhang Wuji's body. She felt her body was comfortably warm, but she could not exert an ounce of strength or the least bit of 'chi', even trying to lift a finger felt like hoisting a thousand-catty load for her.

Wu Qingying raised her sword and hatefully said, "Ugly girl, I won't let you die a quick and painless death. I am going to cut your arms and legs first and I'll leave you here to feed the wolves." She swung her sword down to chop the peasant girl's right arm.

"Hold it!" Wu Lie said, while reaching out to grab his daughter's wrist and pushing her sword away. To the peasant

girl he said, "Tell us who sent you and I'll let you die a quick death. Otherwise, humph, humph! I'll say you won't enjoy rolling around on the snow without your limbs."

With a smile the peasant girl said, "Since you insist, I cannot hide the truth anymore. Miss Zhu Jiuzhen wanted to marry a man. Another pretty woman also wanted to marry this man. This other pretty Miss then gave me five hundred taels of silver, telling me to kill Zhu Jiuzhen. Actually, I should have kept this matter in the strictest confidence ..." Before she finished talking, Wu Qingying's pretty face had turned pale from anger; with a flick of her wrist the sword went straight toward the peasant girls' chest.

The peasant girl was good at observing people and evaluating their situations [orig. 'inspect appearance distinguish/recognize look'. Elif, can you think of a better translation?]; early on she had guessed the awkward situation among the three people, Wu Qingying, Wei Bi and Zhu Jiuzhen, correctly. Deliberately enraging Wu Qingying, her intention was precisely that she would stab her to death quickly. She saw a blue ray flashed and the sword had already arrived at her chest. Suddenly, something flew noiselessly and struck the sword. 'Whoosh!' the sword was knocked out and flew more than a dozen 'zhang' away before it fell on the ground.

In the darkness, nobody saw clearly how Wu Qingying's sword left her hand and flew away, but this kind of force, even if she intentionally wanted to throw it away, she might not have the ability to do so. It was obvious that the peasant girl had a powerful helper.

In their shock, the six people took several steps backward. They looked around, but there were only open spaces in all directions; there were no hills, trees or thick bushes in which

someone might be hiding. As far as their eyes could see, not even half a shadow of other people was to be seen. The six of them looked at each other in alarm and uncertainty.

“Qing’er,” in low voice Wu Lie said, “What happened?”

“Seemed like a very fierce secret projectile,” Wu Qingying replied, “It knocked my sword out of my hand.”

Wu Lie again looked around, but did not see any other people. “Humph,” he said, “Perhaps this slave girl played a trick on you.” But in his heart he felt strange, “She was definitely hit by my Yi Yang Zi [Solitary Yang Finger], how could she still have the strength to shake Qing’er’s sword away? This girl’s martial art is truly demonical.” He strode forward and struck the peasant girl’s left shoulder with his palm. He was using his entire strength with the intention to crush her shoulder bone, so that she would lose her martial art skill and thus give his daughter the opportunity to do to her as she wished.

It seemed that the peasant girl’s shoulder bone would be crushed soon, when suddenly she raised her left arm and met his palm with hers. ‘Crash!’ Wu Lie felt a burning sensation in his chest; the opponent’s palm felt like a raging storm, a torrential flood which was impossible to resist. “Ahh!” he cried out loudly as his body flew backwards, and ‘Bang!’ it hit the ground, hard. Fortunately his martial art skills were superb that as soon as his back touched the ground, he leaped back up. But blood was bubbling up in his chest and abdomen, his vision blackened and his head spun, so that he had just straightened up his body and regulated his breathing when his body swayed and in the end he tumbled down on the ground again.

Wei Bi and Wu Qingying were greatly shocked. They rushed

to prop him up, but suddenly He Taichong said, "Let him lie down for a while longer!"

Wu Qingying turned her head and angrily said, "What did you say?" In her heart she thought, "Father has just fallen under the enemy's attack yet you take delight in his misfortune and ridicule him?"

He Taichong said, "His 'chi' and blood bubbled up, he needs to calm down quietly."

Wei Bi understood immediately. "Yes!" he said, and gently laid his Shifu back to the ground.

He Taichong and Ban Shuxian looked at each other in great surprise. They had fought the peasant girl before, and although her stances and techniques were exquisite and her skill was above average, her internal energy was mediocre. When she exchanged palms with Wu Lie, it was obvious that the internal strength that jolted Wu Lie was extraordinarily strong. This had puzzled them to no end.

In her heart, the peasant girl was even more shocked. When her acupoints were sealed by Wu Lie, she fell into Zhang Wuji's bosom, completely unable to move. Very soon Wu Qingying's sword would have stabbed her, but suddenly something flew and shook the sword, while a stream of charcoal hot energy flowed through her leg, burst into her 'fu tu' and 'feng shi' acupoints and flushed the sealed acupoints open. Her body shook; lowering her head, she saw Zhang Wuji's hands were gripping both of her ankles, the stream of hot energy rushing into her body continuously via the 'xuan zhong' [hanging bell] acupoint.

This turn of events happened so quickly that before she had time to think about it, Wu Lie's palm had already come

down. Without thinking she raised her hand up, thinking that broken hand would be better than crushed shoulder bones. Who would have thought that as soon as two palms collided, Wu Lie was jolted more than a 'zhang' backwards by her own palm? She was startled and thought in her heart, "Could this ugly freak bum actually be a martial art master with immeasurably deep skill?"

He Taichong was wary; he did not dare to contend in palm strength with her. Unsheathing his sword, he said, "I want to receive instructions in sword technique from Miss."

The peasant girl laughed. "I don't have any sword!" she said. "Not a problem," Wei Bi said, "I'll lend you mine!" Raising his sword, he aimed the tip of the sword toward the girl's chest and exerting himself, he threw the sword away.

The peasant girl reached out and caught the sword in her hand. She laughed and said, "Your martial art skill is lacking too much, your thrust did not kill me!"

Being a leader of a Sect, He Taichong did not want to take advantage of a younger generation. "You may start," he said, "I will yield to you for three stances before I will attack!"

The peasant girl thrust her sword toward He Taichong's groin. He Taichong snorted in anger. "A junior is being impolite!" he said in low voice, while lifting his sword to block. But there was a 'Crack!' sound as both swords broke at the same time.

He Taichong's face changed greatly; his shadow swayed and he withdrew half a 'zhang' backwards.

"What a pity! What a pity!" the girl exclaimed inwardly.

Turned out Zhang Wuji transmitted his Jiu Yang Shen Gong to her body, but she did not know how to unleash the formidable power of Shen Gong's, which resulted in both swords being broken. If she was able to utilize the power to attack the enemy, only the enemy's sword would be broken, while the sword in her hand would stay intact.

Ban Shuzian was greatly astonished. "What happened?" she asked in a low voice.

He Taichong's arm was still numb and aching. "Demonical!" he said with a bitter smile.

Ban Shuxian drew her sword out. With a cold face she said, "I want to receive instructions."

The peasant girl spread out her hands, her meaning was clear: she did not have any sword. Ban Shuxian pointed towards Wu Qingying's sword, which was fallen on the ground about a dozen of 'zhang' away. "Take that sword!" she ordered.

The peasant girl did not dare to be away from Zhang Wuji's hands; she had no choice but lift the broken sword in her hand, she laughed and said, "This broken sword is all right!"

Ban Shuxian was angry. She mused, "This dead girl is too arrogant to despise me like this." She was not like He Taichong who maintained his position in every aspect as an older generation of high skill level; her sword circled around and pierced the peasant girl's neck. The peasant girl raised her broken sword to block, but Ban Shuxian's sword technique was light and agile to the extreme; the sword quickly cut down on the peasant girl's left shoulder. She quickly flipped her sword to fend off. Ban Shuxian again changed her sword to stab the right side of her body. Ban

Shuxian successively attacked eight times like a whirlwind, but all along she did not dare to meet the peasant girl's broken sword. She only displayed the exquisiteness of her swordsmanship without giving the opponent any opportunity to use her internal energy.

The peasant girl blocked to the left and parried to the right; soon she repeatedly fell into dangerous situations. Her swordsmanship was far inferior to Ban Shuxian to begin with, now that she only had a broken sword in her hand and did not dare to move her feet, she could only defend without any possibility of attacking.

Several stances later, the tip of Ban Shuxian's sword flashed and made a slash on the peasant girl's left arm. In Kunlun Pai's sword technique, once one gained the upper hand, one would not allow the enemy even half a chance to take a breather, and pressed on with follow-up stances to advance.

"Ah!" the peasant girl cried out as her shoulder was hit by the sword. "Hey!" she called out, "Aren't you going to help me? Are you going to just watch me being killed?"

Ban Shuxian took two steps back; holding the sword horizontally across her chest, she looked all around, but did not see anybody. Immediately her sword vibrated and the tip created cold plum flowers as she attacked the peasant girl again. The peasant girl frantically brandished her broken sword. After blocking three sword moves, the opponent's sword was getting amazingly fast, but her defense was also amazingly swift. It was a situation where the eyes must be clear and the hands must be quick, there was simply no leeway for miscalculations.

"Dead girl, your hand is quick!" Ban Shuxian praised.

The peasant girl did not want to be beaten; she cursed back, "Dead Granny, your hand is not slow either."

But Ban Shuxian's swordsmanship was from a major school with dozens of years of training. Her mouth was speaking while her hand did not slow down ever so slightly. On the other hand, the peasant girl was no more than seventeen, eighteen years of age; even if she was trained under a great master, how could she copy Ban Shuxian's calm and composed manner even in a fierce battle? As soon as she opened her mouth, her attention was slightly distracted and she felt pain on her wrist immediately as the broken sword in her hand flew away.

"Ah!" the peasant girl cried out in fear as the tip of Ban Shuxian's sword threatened the lower part of her side.

Ding Minjun had been watching from the side without doing anything. Now that she saw a small opening, because it was too late to draw her sword, she launched the stance 'tui chuang wang yue' [push out the window to look at the moon], in which both of her palms struck toward the peasant girl's back. Right this moment, Wu Qingying also leaped in, her leg flew to kick the peasant girl's right waist.

The peasant girl was so frightened that she felt her heart was about to jump out of her throat. Suddenly she felt her whole body was boiling as if she had fallen into a raging furnace. Without thinking she stretched out her finger to flick Ban Shuxian's sword. At the same moment her back was struck by the palms and her waist was kicked.

"Aiyo! Aiyo!" two miserable screams were heard. Ding Minjun and Wu Qingying were thrown backward, while the sword in Ban Shuxian's hand was reduced to a half-section broken sword.

Turned out when Zhang Wuji saw the desperate situation, he sent out his entire 'zhen qi' [real 'chi'] to the peasant girl's body in great speed. By this time, his cultivation of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong had reached about thirty, forty percent of perfection; his power was indeed not small. As a result, Ban Shuxian's sword, both of Ding Minjun's wrist bones, and Wu Qingying's right toes, were all broken.

He Taichong, Wu Lie, and Wei Bi were stupefied; they were momentarily at a loss. Ban Shuxian tossed the broken sword on the ground. "Let's go!" she bitterly said, "Haven't we disgraced ourselves enough?" while her eyes shot a fierce glare toward her husband. Her belly was full of resentment, which she wanted to vent on him.

"Yes!" He Taichong replied. Two people rushed away side by side. In a short moment they had already gone.

Kunlun Pai's 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was excellent; certainly it ranked among the top within the Wulin world. As far as how Ban Shuxian would vent her anger toward He Taichong as soon as they reached home, whether by punishing him by making him kneel in front of her sword, or by subjecting him to another strange Kunlun Pai sword stance, it was not for the outsiders to know.

With one hand supporting his Shifu and the other supporting his martial sister, Wei Bi walked slowly away. The three of them were afraid the peasant girl would pursue and attack them; yet they were unable to run away as fast as He Taichong, husband and wife did. Each step they took was laden with anxiety.

The bones on both of Ding Minjun's wrists were broken, but her feet were not injured. Gritting her teeth and bearing the

pain, she walked away alone.

Pleased with herself, the peasant girl laughed heartily. “Ugly freak! You ...” she said, but before she could finish, she passed out suddenly.

Turned out as soon as Zhang Wuji saw the six people took off their separate ways, he released her ankles. Immediately the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi [the true/real ‘chi’ from Nine Yang] filling her body dispersed that it was as if her body was drained and her limbs and her entire bones were without any strength.

Zhang Wuji was startled, but immediately realized what had happened. Both his thumbs lightly pressed the ‘si zhu kong’ [empty bamboo silk] acupoint on the ends of her eyebrows and transmit a little bit of ‘Shen Gong’.

The girl slowly regained her consciousness. When she opened her eyes, she realized she was lying on Zhang Wuji’s bosom while he was looking at her with a smile on his face; for some reason she felt very bashful. She leaped up immediately, and stared at him with a face that seemed like smiling yet she was not smiling. Suddenly she reached out toward his left ear and twisted it with all her strength.

“Ugly freak,” she scolded him, “You deceived me! You possess such a fierce martial art skill, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Aiyo!” Zhang Wuji cried out in pain, “What are you doing?”

The peasant girl laughed and said, “Who told you to deceive me?”

“When did I deceive you?” Zhang Wuji replied, “You did not

tell me you know martial arts, I did not tell you I know martial arts either."

"All right," the peasant girl said, "I'll forgive you this time, considering you have helped me big time just now, your merit compensates for your crime, I am not going to press charges. How's your leg? Can you walk?"

"Still cannot," Zhang Wuji replied.

The peasant girl sighed and said, "Finally good intentions are being repaid well. If I did not remember you and wanted to see you one more time, you would not help me." After pausing for a moment, she continued, "If I knew your martial art skill level is much stronger than mine, I would not have to kill that witch girl Zhu Jiuzhen."

Zhang Wuji's face darkened. "I did not ask you to kill her," he said.

"Aiyo, aiyo! Turns out you still have this beautiful lady in your heart," the peasant girl said, "My bad, I killed your sweetheart."

"Miss Zhu was not my sweetheart," Zhang Wuji replied, "Even if she were more beautiful, she had nothing to do with me."

"Well! That's strange," the peasant girl exclaimed in amazement, "She had harmed you this bad, yet you don't like it when I killed her to vent your anger?"

Zhang Wuji indifferently said, "There are too many people who have harmed me. If I want to kill each and every one of them to vent my anger, I would have gone on an endless killing spree. Besides, there were some people who

deliberately harmed me, but actually I feel sorry for them. Take Miss Zhu for example, she had always been scared and edgy every day, she was afraid her Biaoge [older male cousin] would not get along well with her, she was always anxious that he would take Miss Wu as his wife. This kind of person, do you think she would be happy?"

The peasant girl got angry. "Are you mocking me?" she said.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback, he did not expect that talking about Zhu Jiuzhen would offend the girl in front of him right now. "No, no," he busily said, "I was talking about how everybody has his or her own misfortunes. If others were unfair to you and you killed them, that is really not good."

The peasant girl laughed. "If you learned martial art not to kill people, then why did you learn it?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji hesitantly said, "After we mastered the martial art skill, when bad people mistreat us, we can resist them."

"My utmost admiration!" the peasant girl mocked, "Turns out you are such an upright gentleman, a very good man!"

Zhang Wuji looked at her with a blank expression on his face. He always felt that somehow this girl's demeanor seemed familiar, he felt somehow this girl was related to him.

The peasant girl closed her mouth and asked, "What are you looking at?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "My Mama often laughed at my Papa who was indiscriminately good toward others, saying that he was a soft-hearted scholar. When she said that, her tone and her manner was exactly the same as yours just now."

The peasant girl blushed. "Pei!" she spat, "You are mocking me again. You said I look like your Mama, then you yourself look like your Papa!" Although she was angry, her eyes were actually laughing.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly said, "The Heaven above, if I had the intention of mocking you, let me be condemned by the Heaven and the Earth."

"Talk is cheap," the peasant girl said, "Even if you did mock me, there is nothing serious about it. Why do you have to swear an oath?"

They had just talked to this point when suddenly there was a clear whistle coming from the northeast. The whistle was bright and long, obviously it was coming from a woman. The whistle was responded by someone nearby; apparently it was Ding Minjun who had not gone too far. Ding Minjun immediately stopped.

The peasant girl's countenance changed slightly; she said in a low voice, "Someone from Emei Pai is coming."

End of Chapter 16.

Chapter 17 - Green Wing Appears and Vanishes with a Laugh

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The peasant girl built a snow sled out of firewood, carried Zhang Wuji and sat him on the sled with his legs stretched out straight; and then she pulled the sled swiftly on the snow. Zhang Wuji saw her slender figure sway, her back looked graceful, her posture beautiful. Towing the sled like a breeze of wind flitting across the snowy ground, she sped along for about thirty, forty 'li'.

Zhang Wuji and the peasant girl turned their gaze toward the northeast. It was already dawn. They saw a green shadow walking on the snowy ground with steps as light as a feather. When the shadow was about a dozen of 'zhang' away, they could see clearly that it was a woman wearing a green robe. She talked with Ding Minjun for a while, and then turned her head toward Zhang Wuji and the peasant girl, before finally she walked towards them.

Her clothes fluttered in the wind, her movements were light and graceful, her steps were dainty, but in an instant she was already four, five 'zhang' away from the two people. They saw her style was simple yet elegant, her countenance beautiful, she could not be older than seventeen, eighteen years of age.

Zhang Wuji was amazed; listening to her whistle and looking at her movements, he would have thought that she was a lot older than Ding Minjun, but it turned out that she looked even younger than him. He noticed a short sword hanging on the young woman's slender waist, yet she did not draw her weapon but approached them barehanded.

Ding Minjun warned her, "Zhou Shimei [younger martial sister], this witch girl's martial art is very demonical."

The young woman nodded. With a refined and polite manner

she asked, “May I know your honorable surnames and great given names? For what reason did you injure my Shijie [older martial sister]?”

When she was near enough, Zhang Wuji thought she looked quite familiar. As soon as she spoke, he remembered immediately, “Turns out she is the Hanshui River boatman’s little girl, Miss Zhou Zhiruo. Tai Shifu took her up the Wudang Mountain, how did she become Emei School’s disciple?”

His heart warmed up; he wanted to ask her about his Taishifu, but then he changed his mind. “Zhang Wuji is dead. Right now I am a bum, the ugly freak Zeng Ahniu. If I am not able to control my emotions, I would only invite inexhaustible calamity in the future. I simply must not reveal my true identity to avoid bringing harm to Yifu, so that my Papa and Mama’s death would not be in vain.”

The peasant girl laughed coldly and said, “With the ‘pushing the window to look at the moon’ your honorable Shijie’s palms struck my back. She broke her own wrists because of that. How could you blame me? Go ahead and ask your honorable Shijie, did I attack her even for half a stance?”

Zhou Zhiruo flashed a questioning look at Ding Minjun. Ding Minjun angrily said, “Take these two to see Shifu, let the Senior punish them.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “If these two did not offend Shijie intentionally, in Xiao Mei’s [little sister – referring to self] opinion, it’s always better to let it go, turning an enemy into a friend.”

“What?” Ding Minjun angrily shouted, “Are you siding with the outsiders?”

Looking at Ding Minjun's expression, Zhang Wuji remembered one night a few years ago, when Monk PengYingyu was besieged by enemies in the forest, in which Ding Minjun showed hostility toward Ji Xiaofu. History repeated itself today. Ding Minjun again was forcing her will to her young martial sister. He could not help but secretly worry for Zhou Zhiruo. But Zhou Zhiruo was very respectful toward Ding Minjun.

"Xiao Mei will follow Shijie's instructions, will not dare to disobey," she said with a bow.

"Alright," Ding Minjun said, "Seize this stinky girl, break both of her hands."

"Yes," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "I am asking Shijie to help watch my back." Turning around toward the peasant girl, she said, "Please forgive Xiao Mei for being rude; I want to request Jiejie's [older sister] expert instructions."

The peasant girl said with a cold laugh, "Where did this wordy girl come from?" While in her heart she said, "Do you think I am afraid of this little girl?"

Without relying on Zhang Wuji's help, she sprang up and fast as a lightning launched three palm strikes in succession. Zhou Zhiruo leaned sideways and rushed forward, her left palm tried to capture the girl's hand. She had used an offensive strike as a defensive mechanism, her gambit was rather ingenious.

Although Zhang Wuji's internal energy was strong, his knowledge of movements in martial arts had not reached the level of complete comprehension. As he watched Zhou Zhiruo and the peasant girl fight a fast-paced battle; Zhou Zhiruo's 'mian zhang' [soft palm] from Emei Pai was agile

and swift, while the peasant girl's palm technique was weird and mysterious, he was very impressed, but also concerned about the two combatants. He did not care who would win; he only hoped that neither one of them would be injured.

The two women fought for more than twenty stances; each had fallen into dangerous situations several times. Suddenly the peasant girl called out, "Got you!" Her left palm hacked down on Zhou Zhiruo's shoulder.

'Rip!' Zhou Zhiruo flipped her hand and pulled the peasant girl's sleeve. Both of them leaped back immediately. Their faces were red.

"Good 'Qin Na' [grab and capture] technique!" the peasant girl shouted. She was about to jump back into the arena when she saw Zhou Zhiruo wrinkle her brows with her hand pressing her chest. She staggered two steps and swayed as if she was about to tumble.

Zhang Wuji could not stop from calling out, "You ... you ..." His face showed a very deep concern.

Seeing this man with long hair and long beard show deep concern toward her, Zhou Zhiruo was secretly astonished.

"Shimei, how are you?" Ding Minjun asked.

Placing her left hand on her martial sister's shoulder for support, Zhou Zhiruo shook her head. Ding Minjun had suffered pain from the peasant girl, she knew the peasant girl was very fierce. It was just that their Shifu often praised this young martial sister, saying that her perception was wonderfully deep, her progress was amazingly rapid. She would most likely play a very important role on the advancement of their Sect in the future. It was hard for Ding

Minjun to accept, therefore, she told her to give it a try, with the hope that she would also suffer some pain under the peasant girl's hands. Seeing her Shimei was able to fight the peasant girl for more than twenty stances without suffering any defeat, which exceeded her by a large margin, Ding Minjun was very jealous in her heart.

Feeling the hand leaning on her shoulder was without any strength, she knew her Shimei's injury was not light. Afraid that the peasant girl would attack, she said hastily, "Let's go!" Supporting each other, the two of them walked toward northeast.

The peasant girl noticed Zhang Wuji's expression. "Ugly freak," she said with a cold laugh, "Seeing a beautiful girl makes your soul fly to the heavens."

Zhang Wuji wanted to explain, but he thought, "I won't be able to explain this matter clearly without revealing my history. I might as well not say anything." Thereupon he said, "Whether she is beautiful or not, what does that have anything to do with me? I was concerned about you, I was afraid you might be injured."

"Are you telling me the truth?" the peasant girl asked.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Actually, I was concerned about both of you." He said, "Why would I lie to you? I am surprised that such a young girl from Emei Pai can possess such an excellent martial art skill."

"Fierce! Very fierce!" the peasant girl said.

Zhang Wuji turned his gaze toward Zhou Zhiruo's back, thinking that she came with light and graceful steps but left staggering. He remembered how on the boat on the Hanshui

River she helped feed him, gave him towel to wipe his tears. He wished her injury was not heavy.

Suddenly the peasant girl laughed coldly and said, "You don't have to be worried, she was never been injured. When I said 'fierce', I was not talking about her martial art skill, but she is such a young girl, yet her quick thinking and scheming ability is this fierce."

"She was not injured?" Zhang Wuji was surprised.

"That's right!" the peasant girl said, "When my palm hacked on her shoulder, her shoulder produced internal energy reaction, which diverted my palm. Turns out she has trained the Emei Jiu Yang Gong [Nine Yang energy/power], with which she shook my arm that it went slightly numb and painful. Where did her injury come from?"

Zhang Wuji was greatly delighted; he thought, "Could it be that she is highly favorable in Mijue Shitai's eyes that unexpectedly she passed on the Emei Pai treasured skill, Emei Jiu Yang Gong, to her?"

Suddenly the peasant girl heavily slapped Zhang Wuji's face with the back of her hand. Her action was so sudden that Zhang Wuji was caught off guard and his cheek turned red and swollen at once.

"You ... why did you do that?" he angrily asked.

The peasant girl hatefully said, "Seeing that beautiful girl, your soul fly to the heavens. I said she was not injured, why are you this happy?"

"I am happy for her, what does it do to you?" Zhang Wuji replied.

The peasant girl swung her palm again, but this time Zhang Wuji ducked that she missed. The peasant girl angrily said, "You said you are going to take me as your wife. It is still less than half a day and you already changed your mind as soon as you saw that pretty girl."

"You have said it early on that I am not fit to marry you," Zhang Wuji retorted, "You also said that your heart has already belonged to this boyfriend of yours, so you cannot marry me."

"That's right," the peasant girl said, "But you have promised me that you will treat me well for the rest of our lives, that you will take a good care of me."

"Of course I will keep my promise," Zhang Wuji said.

The peasant girl was angry. "If that's the case, why did you lose your soul as soon as you saw this good-looking young woman? That is very aggravating to those who look at you."

Zhang Wuji laughed. "I did not lose my soul," he said.

"I forbid you to like her," the peasant girl said, "I forbid you to even think of her."

"I've never said I liked her," Zhang Wuji said, "But why do you always have another in your heart, and never forget him?"

"I met him first," the peasant girl said, "If I know you first, then all my life I would be good to you only, and would not think about other people. This is called 'faithful unto death' [Confucian ban on widow remarrying]. The Heaven will not tolerate a double-minded person."

Zhang Wuji thought, "I knew Zhou family girl long before I met you." But it was inappropriate for him to say so, thereupon he said, "If you are good to me only, then I will be good to you only. If you remember another in your heart, I will also remember another in my heart."

The peasant girl was silent for half a day. Several times she seemed to open her mouth to speak, but each time she stopped. Suddenly tears started to flow from her eyes. She turned around so Zhang Wuji would not see her wiping her tears with her sleeve.

Zhang Wuji could not bear to see her crying. He grabbed her hand and said in a soft voice, "Why did we say these things without any reason at all? In a few more days my legs will be healed, and then the two of us will travel everywhere to have fun, won't that be great?"

The peasant girl turned her head; with an anxious look on her face she said, "Ahniu Gege, I want to ask you one thing, but you must not get angry."

"What is it?" Zhang Wuji asked, "As long as it is within my power, I will do it for you."

"You must promise me not to get angry first before I tell you," the peasant girl said.

"Alright, I won't," Zhang Wuji promised.

The peasant girl hesitated for a moment before saying, "With your mouth you said you won't get angry, but I also want you not to be angry in your heart."

"Alright, I also will not be angry in my heart," Zhang Wuji

said.

The peasant girl flipped her hands so that she was holding Zhang Wuji's hands now. "Ahniu Gege," she said, "The reason I travelled for tens of thousands 'li' from the Central Plains to this remote Western Region was to look for him. Before, I still heard news about him; but as soon as I arrived here, he vanished just like a stone sank in the ocean and I have never heard anything about him anymore. After your legs are healed, help me to find him, and afterwards I will accompany you roaming the mountains and playing on the rivers, will that be alright?"

Zhang Wuji could not restrain from feeling unhappy. "Humph," he snorted.

The peasant girl said, "You promised me not to get angry; aren't you angry right now?"

Feeling uncomfortable, Zhang Wuji said, "Alright, I'll help you find him."

The peasant girl was delighted. "Ahniu Gege," she said, "You are very kind." Looking toward the distant horizon, her heart was beating fast with the memory of 'him', she said quietly, "When we find him, he will know that I have been looking for him for such a long time that he won't be angry with me. I will do whatever he says, I will obey whatever he tells me to do."

Zhang Wuji said, "Tell me, what is so good about this boyfriend of yours that you always keep him in your mind like this?"

The peasant girl smiled slightly and said, "How can I explain how good he is? Ahniu Ge, do you think we will be able to find him? When he sees me, will he beat me, scold me?"

Seeing how childish her affection was, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel sorry for her. He said in a low voice, "I don't think so. He will not beat you or scold you."

The peasant girl's cherry lips quivered; tears welled up in her eyes. Also in a low voice she said, "That's true, he will love me and pity me that he won't beat me or scold me anymore."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This girl loves her boyfriend this much. If only there was someone in this world who loves me and misses me like her, I will be happy even if I have to suffer more hardships and pain." He turned his gaze to the pair of footprints Zhou Zhiruo and Ding Minjun left on the snow, thinking, "I wish Ding Minjun's footprints were mine; if I could walk side by side with Miss Zhou ..."

"Aiyo!" suddenly the peasant girl called out, "Let's go, quick! It will be too late if we tarry."

"What?" Zhang Wuji was awakened from his daydreaming.

The peasant girl said, "That Emei girl was not willing to fight with me so she feigned injury. But that Ding Minjun insisted on her to take us to see their Shifu. Mijue Shitai must be somewhere near. This old thief nun always loves to outdo others, how can she not come over?"

Zhang Wuji recalled how Mijue Shitai struck Ji Xiaofu to her death without showing any mercy; he could not help from shuddering. "This old nun is very fierce," he said in fright, "We are definitely not her match."

"Have you met her?" the peasant girl asked.

"She is the Emei Pai Zhangmen [Sect Leader], how can she

be an ordinary person?" Zhang Wuji replied, "I can't walk yet, you'd better run away quickly."

"Humph," the peasant girl was angry, "How can I abandon you and escape alone? You think my conscience is that bad?" Creasing her eyebrows, she thought hard for a moment. She took several pieces of stiff firewood from the pile and twisted the flexible ones as the ropes to build a snow sled. Carrying Zhang Wuji in her arms, she helped him sit on the sled with his legs stretched out straight; and then she pulled the sled toward the northwest direction.

Zhang Wuji only saw her slender figure sway, just like a lotus leaf blown by the early morning breeze; her back looked graceful, her posture beautiful. She towed the sled just like a breeze of wind flitting across the snowy ground.

She sped along without pausing for about thirty, forty 'li'. Zhang Wuji felt bad for her. "Hey, let's get some rest first!" he called out.

The peasant girl laughed. "Who do you called 'hey'?" she said, "Don't I have a name?"

"You don't want to tell me; what can I do?" Zhang Wuji replied, "You wanted me to call you Miss Chou, but I think you are attractive."

The peasant girl scoffed; she let out a mouthful of breath then halted her steps. Pushing a stray hair, she said, "Very well, there is no harm in telling you. I am called Zhu'er."

"Zhu'er, Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji said, "You are truly a precious pearl." [Translator's note: 'zhu' of 'spider' and 'pearl' sound the same in Chinese, and 'pearl' is a more common name for girls.]

“Pei!” the peasant girl spat, “Not ‘Zhu’ of pearl [zhen zhu], but ‘Zhu’ of spider [zhi zhu].”

Zhang Wuji was stunned. “Who would have used this ‘spider’ character as a name?” he mused.

“That’s my name,” Zhu’er said, “If you are scared, don’t call me.”

“Did your Papa give you that name?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“Humph,” Zhu’er said, “If my Papa gave me that name, do you think I would want it? It was my Ma. She trained me the ‘qian zhu wan du shou’ [hand of a thousand spiders ten-thousand posion], so she said for me to use that name.”

Hearing the five characters ‘qian zhu wan du shou’, Zhang Wuji shuddered inwardly.

“I have started training since I was a kid, yet I still have far to go,” Zhu’er said, “When I have mastered this skill, I will not have to fear this old thief nun Miejue. Do you want to see it?” While saying that, she took a glistening yellow gold case from her bosom. She opened the lid and showed two spiders, about the size of a thumb, squirming inside.

The spiders’ back were spotted with bright, multi-colored dots, dazzling the eye. Zhang Wuji immediately remembered that Wang Nan’gu’s Poison Manual did mention that the spotted spiders were the most poisonous insects; once a human was bitten, he would be beyond help. Zhang Wuji could not help but feel very scared.

Looking at his serious expression, Zhu’er laughed and said, “You know the benefit of my precious spiders. Just wait a moment.” As she said that, she leaped onto a large tree and

looked around. Then she leaped back down to the ground and said, "Let us go a little bit farther; we can leisurely talk about spiders later."

Pulling the sled along, she ran about seven, eight 'li' until they arrived at the edge of a canyon. She helped Zhang Wuji out of the sled and she put several large rocks in his place. Pulling the sled, she ran toward the canyon. When she got to the edge of the canyon, she abruptly halted her steps, while the sled continued its journey into the canyon below. The sled, along with the rocks on it, crashed into the canyon with a loud, resounding sound, which continued for a long time.

Zhang Wuji turned his head back and saw the firewood sled had left a pair of tracks, snaking on the snowy ground, as far as his eyes could see. Following the tracks with his eyes, he saw the tracks disappeared at the edge of the canyon. He thought, "This girl's thinking is so thorough. If Mijue Shitai followed us here, she would think that we fell into the snowy canyon below, and died with none of our bones survived."

Zhu'er stooped down and said, "Get on my back!"

"Are you going to carry me? You will be too tired," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhu'er rolled her eyes and said, "Do you think I won't know it if I am tired or not?"

Zhang Wuji did not dare to talk too much, he quietly got on her back and very lightly hugged her neck.

Zhu'er laughed and said, "Are you afraid you will choke me to death? Your hands and feet are very light; you are only tickling me to death."

Seeing she was so innocent and without any apprehension toward him, Zhang Wuji was delighted; he hugged her neck tighter. Zhu'er leaped up suddenly and brought him flying to a tree. The row of trees extended toward the west, so Zhu'er leaped from one tree to another, also heading west. Her stature was small and delicate; Zhang Wuji was big and tall, but her feet were nimble and did not show the least bit of being over-burdened.

After leaping about seventy, eighty trees, she jumped to a mountain wall and then leaped down to the ground. She gently lowered him to the ground, and said with a laugh, "We are going to build a cowshed in here. This is the perfect place."

"Cowshed?" Zhang Wuji wondered, "Why would we build a cowshed?"

"For the bull and the cow to stay, of course," Zhu'er laughed, "Aren't you called Ahniu?" [Translator's note: The 'niu' character of Ahniu means 'cow/bull'.]

"That's not necessary," Zhang Wuji said, "In four, five days, my broken legs will be healed completely. Actually, if I am forced to walk, I think I can manage without problem."

"Humph!" Zhu'er said, "Forced to walk? Right now you are already an ugly freak, if your cow legs are lame, will you look good?" While saying that, she took a strip of branch and swept the snow accumulated beside the mountain rock.

Hearing her say, 'Will you look good if your cow legs are lame?' Zhang Wuji suddenly realized that she had a deep concern toward him; he could not help his heart from being touched. He heard her humming a tune while pulling and breaking branches and twigs to build a canopy in between

two boulders, so that the thatched roof and the boulders formed a hut, an attractive little cabin which they could use to take shelter.

As soon as the hut was finished, Zhu'er scooped piles and piles of snow and spread the snow on the roof. Working hard for half a day, she got the hut completely hidden in snow that it was not visible from the outside. Only then did she stop, took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from her face.

"Wait here," she said, "I am going to find something to eat."

"I am not that hungry," Zhang Wuji said, "You are too tired. Why don't you take a short rest before going again?"

Zhu'er said, "If you want to treat me well, you must treat me really well. If you only sweet-talk me, what good would that bring?" Without waiting for an answer, she entered the woods in quick steps.

Staying on the mountain rock, Zhang Wuji recalled Zhu'er's tender voice and her graceful manners, which was the style of a refined woman. Her face might be ugly, but he remembered how just before her death, his mother had admonished him, 'The more beautiful that woman is, the better of a manipulator she will be. You must take more caution.' Zhu'er was not pretty, yet her treatment to him was fabulous; he had a mind of spending the rest of his life with her. However, her heart had already belonged to another man; she had no regard of him in her heart.

Zhang Wuji's heart was like a tidal wave as his mind raced in myriads of thoughts. Shortly afterwards Zhu'er returned with two snow birds. She built a fire and roasted the birds; it was tasty beyond comparison. Zhang Wuji ate one bird clean to its bone, but it was not enough for him. Zhu'er pursed her

lips and laughed then she pushed her two bird legs, which she saved earlier, to him. Actually, she saved the legs because it was her favorite part of the chicken.

Zhang Wuji was about to decline when Zhu'er angrily said, "If you want to eat, just eat. Whoever speaks to me with pretense, saying something without meaning it, I will stab three holes on his body with a knife."

Zhang Wuji did not dare to talk too much, he ate the two bird legs. Because his mouth was greasy, he picked up a handful of snow from the ground and wiped his face, then used his sleeve to dry it up. Zhu'er happened to turn her head and saw him wiping his face clean. She could not help from being startled and stared at him.

Zhang Wuji was embarrassed; "What is it?" he asked.

Zhu'er said, "How old are you?"

"Twenty one," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Hmm," Zhu'er said, "You are only three years older than I am. Why do you have such a long beard?"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "I lived alone in a remote valley deep in the mountains, I have never met anybody else, so I have never thought of shaving."

Zhu'er took out a knife with golden handle from her side and raised it to his face to shave him slowly. Zhang Wuji felt the blade was very sharp; everywhere the knife touched, hair immediately fell. Feeling her soft and tender palm and fingers, Zhang Wuji could not stop his heart from beating faster.

The knife slowly arrived at his neck. Zhu'er laughed and said, "If I exert a little bit more force, your throat will be cut and you'll become a ghost. Are you or are you not afraid?"

Zhang Wuji also laughed, "To die under Miss' jade-like hands, I will become a happy ghost."

Zhu'er flipped the knife and pressed hard on his throat with the back of the knife. "Then be a happy ghost!" she shouted.

Zhang Wuji was scared and wanted to jump, but her movement was swift, the knife was also very close. As he was about to jump, the blade had already slashed. He was powerless to resist, but the Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside his body reacted automatically and shook the knife sideways. It was then that he knew she was only using the back of the blade.

Zhu'er felt a jolt on her arm. "Aiyo!" she cried out, but then giggled immediately. "Are you happy?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji laughed and nodded his head. His natural disposition was rather serious, but in front of Zhu'er he somehow felt free and unrestrained. It was as if he had known her since childhood and they grew up together; he felt unexplainably at ease and even had an urge to joke around with her.

Finished with shaving him clean, Zhu'er stared at him for half a day. Suddenly she heaved a deep sigh.

"What is it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhu'er did not reply, she trimmed his hair a little bit, combed it, and tied the hair into a bun. She carved a hairpin from a tree branch and stuck it into his bun. After he was tidied up,

although his clothes were tattered and unsightly (as a matter of fact, the clothes were too short and a few sizes too small for him, as if they were stolen clothes), his countenance glowed; the ugly freak has turned into one handsome young man.

Zhu'er sighed again and said, "I have never thought you are such a handsome man."

Zhang Wuji knew she was disheartened by her own ugliness; thereupon he said, "I am not that handsome. Besides, among the beautiful things in this world, oftentimes there is some bad thing hidden inside. The peacocks are adorned with beautiful feathers, but their gallbladders are extremely poisonous. Manchurian cranes' crest are bright red, very pretty, who would have thought that it was the most lethal poison? Within the various snakes and insects, oftentimes the more beautiful it looks, the more venomous it is. Aren't those two spiders of yours beautiful? What good is it to have a handsome appearance? A good heart is more desirable."

Zhu'er sneered and said, "What good is it to have a good heart? Why don't you explain it to me?"

Zhang Wuji could not find the answer right away. After being silent for a while, he said, "A man with a good heart will not harm others."

"What good is it in not harming others?" Zhu'er pressed.

Zhang Wuji said, "If you don't harm others, you will have a peaceful heart, you will be calm and composed."

"I don't feel happy if I don't harm others," Zhu'er said, "If I can make others miserable beyond words, then my heart will be happy and peaceful, and then I will be calm and

composed."

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "You are forcing anarchy and robbing justice," he said.

With a cold laugh Zhu'er said, "If not for the purpose of harming others, why would I want to train this 'qian zhu wan du shou'? I have to endure vast and limitless pain and suffering, do you think it was all for fun?" While saying that, she sat cross-legged on the ground, and after circulating her internal energy for a while, she took the small golden case from her bosom, opened the lid, and stuck her two index fingers into the golden case.

The pair of colorful spiders inside the case crawled slowly toward her fingers and then the spiders bit the tip of her fingers separately. She took a deep breath, her arms slightly trembled as she used her internal energy to resist the poison. The colorful spiders fed on her blood, but in turn Zhu'er sucked the spiders' venom into her body by reversing her blood flow.

Zhang Wuji saw her face was solemn while at the same time a faint black layer appeared on the center of her eyebrows and both of her temples. She clenched her teeth to endure the pain with all her might. A moment later, beads of perspiration started to form on the tip of her nose.

Zhu'er trained this special skill for almost an hour, until the spiders were full with blood, with their belly bulged that they looked like a couple of furry balls; they dropped on their belly inside the case and fell asleep. Zhu'er continued circulating her internal energy for a good while. The blackness on her face gradually disappeared and the blood returned to her cheeks. When she exhaled, Zhang Wuji could smell that her breath was fragrant, but he felt dizzy immediately. Obviously

her breath contained a violent poison.

Zhu'er opened her eyes and smiled slightly. Zhang Wuji asked, "How do you train to reach perfection?"

Zhu'er said, "Each colorful spider must turn to black, and then from black turn to white, then the venom is exhausted and it will die, while the poison inside the spider is completely transferred into my fingers. I need at least a hundred spiders to reach small success. To really reach perfection, a thousand or two are not considered too many."

Hearing her saying so, Zhang Wuji could not restrain the hair on his back from standing up. "Where did you get these many spiders?" he asked.

"One way is to raise them, they can produce little spiders," Zhu'er replied, "Another way would be to catch them in their original habitat."

"There are so many different martial art skills in the world," Zhang Wuji exclaimed, "Why must you train this kind of poisonous skill? The spiders' venom is extremely violent; granted that you have a way to withstand it if it enters your body, but in the long run it won't give you any benefits."

With a cold laugh Zhu'er said, "No doubt there are many different martial art skills in the world, but which one school's skill is superior to this 'qian zhu wan du shou' in terms of fierceness? You may rely on your strong internal energy, but when I reach perfection, you may not necessarily be able to withstand one poke of my finger." While saying that, she concentrated her 'chi' into her finger, and then casually poked her finger into a tree by her side. Because her internal energy had not reached perfection, her finger only went half an inch deep into the tree.

Zhang Wuji asked again, "How did your Mama teach you this skill? Did she complete the training herself?"

Zhu'er's eyes suddenly shone with a malicious light; she hatefully said, "In training this 'qian zhu wan du shou', as long as one has consumed more than twenty spiders, the venom accumulated in one's body is already considerable, one's countenance will be deformed. If the training reaches a thousand spiders, one's face will be incomparably ugly. My Mama had almost reached a hundred spiders when she met my father. Because she was afraid her countenance would grow uglier and would make my father unhappy, she discarded the entire skill from her body. As a result, she turned into an ordinary woman who lacked the strength to even truss up a chicken. Although she turned back into a pretty woman, but receiving Er Niang [second mother] and my two older brothers' bullying and insults, unexpectedly she did not have the least bit of ability to fight back. In the end she still had to lose her life. Humph! What good is it to have a pretty face? My Ma was a very beautiful and extremely refined woman. Just because she did not bear a son, my father took a concubine ..."

Zhang Wuji's eyes swept over her face. "So ... it was because you train this skill ..." he said in a low voice.

"That's right," Zhu'er said, "It was because I train this skill that the poison turned my face to look like this. Humph, if that heartless man pays me no attention, just wait 'til I master the 'qian zhu wan du shou'. When I find him, if he does not have any woman by his side, then that's all right ..."

"You are not married to him," Zhang Wuji cut her off; "You also are not engaged to him, you're just ... you're just ..."

"Just say it straight out, what are you afraid of?" Zhu'er said, "You wanted to say that I am just indulging myself in unrequited love, didn't you? What if I am? Since I have already fallen in love with him, I cannot let another woman occupy his heart. If he is heartless and wishy-washy, I'll let him taste my 'qian zhu wan du shou'."

Zhang Wuji stifled a laugh, but he did not argue with her, realizing that she had a weird character; when she was good, she was really good, but when she was bad, she would not listen to reason at all. He also remembered that his Tai Shifu, Er Shibo [second martial (older) uncle] and the others would often tell him to avoid Wulin people of the heretical way. Apparently the 'qian zhu wan du shou' she trained was one of the most ruthless martial art skills of the heretical sect. Her mother must also be a top ranking demon of the heretical sect. Thinking to this point, he could not help but feel somewhat apprehensive toward her.

Zhu'er, however, did not realize the change in his mood; she was busy going in and out of their little hut. She picked a lot of wild flowers and arranged them inside the hut. Seeing the elegant taste with which she decorated the hut, Zhang Wuji knew that her good taste must have come from her natural instinct, it was the poison that caused her face to be ugly.

"Zhu'er," he said, "After my legs are healed, I am going to pick some herbal medicine to try to cure the poison swelling on your face."

When Zhu'er heard these words, her expression suddenly turned fearful. "No ... no ... don't," she said, "I have endured countless pain to reach today's level. Do you want to neutralize my 'qian zhu wan du shou' skill?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Perhaps we can think of a way to eliminate

the swelling of the poison on your face without any adverse effect to your skill."

"No way," Zhu'er said, "If there were a way, my Mama would have inherited the skill, how could she not know? In this world, other than the Divine Doctor Hu Qingniu of the Butterfly Valley, nobody else has this kind of astonishing ability. But he ... he has died many years ago." [Translator's note: the original was 'yi xian' - medicine/medical immortal. Previous chapters also use 'Sage of Healing'.]

"You know Hu Qingniu?" Zhang Wuji asked in astonishment.

Zhu'er stared at him and said, "What? Something strange? The name of Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley was known throughout the Jianghu, everybody knew him." She heaved a deep sigh and continued, "Even if he was still alive, he had the reputation as Seeing Death Without Helping, [orig. Jian Si Bu Jiu. Previous chapters also used 'The One who Ignores the Dying'.] what good is it to see him?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "She did not know that the Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley had passed on his entire skill to me. I'd better not mention it now, someday I'll think of a way to cure the poison swelling on her face, it will be a big pleasant surprise for her."

While they were talking, the sky turned dark. They leaned on mountain rocks inside the hut to catch some sleep. In the middle of the night, Zhang Wuji suddenly heard one or two sobbing noises in his sleep. He woke up with a start only to find Zhu'er crying. Zhang Wuji sat up immediately and reached out to gently pat her shoulder twice.

"Zhu'er," he said, trying to comfort her, "Don't be sad." Who would have thought that with his gentle words, Zhu'er cried even louder as she placed her head on his shoulder?

"Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji asked, "What is it? You are thinking about your Mama, aren't you?"

Zhu'er nodded. "Mama is dead!" she said in between sobs, "I am all alone. Nobody likes me, no one's good to me."

Zhang Wuji pulled his lapel and slowly wiped her tears. "I like you," he said in a gentle voice, "I am good to you."

"I don't want you to be good to me," Zhu'er said, "I only like one man, but he ignored me, beat me, scolded me, and he even bit me."

With a trembling voice Zhang Wuji said, "Why don't you forget this unfortunate young man? I'll marry you, I will treat you well for the rest of your life."

"No! No!" Zhu'er loudly said, "I won't forget him. If you tell me to forget him, I am going to ignore you forever."

Zhang Wuji was greatly embarrassed; fortunately it was very dark inside the hut that Zhu'er could not see his red and awkward expression. For a good while nobody said anything.

A long time afterwards, Zhu'er said, "Ahniu Gege, are you angry at me?"

"I am not angry at you," Zhang Wuji replied, "I am mad at myself, I shouldn't have said those words to you."

"No, no!" Zhu'er hastily said, "You said you wish to take me as your wife, you will treat me well for the rest of my life, I love to hear it. Can you say it one more time?"

Zhang Wuji indignantly said, "Since you cannot forget that

man, what else can I say?"

Zhu'er reached out to grab his hand. "Ahniu Gege," she said in a soft voice, "Please don't be angry. I offended you. My mistake. If you really take me as your wife, I might prick your eyes blind, I might kill you."

Zhang Wuji shuddered. "What did you say?" he asked in shock.

Zhu'er said, "If you are blind, you won't see my ugly face, you won't look at that Miss Zhou from Emei Pai. If you still cannot forget her, with one finger I will stab you dead, with one finger stab that Miss Zhou from Emei Pai dead, and with one finger stab myself dead." She said those strange words with ease, as if what she was going to do was in accordance with the heaven's law and the earth's principle.

Hearing her ruthless words, full of maliciousness, Zhang Wuji's heart skipped a beat. Right this moment, suddenly from a distant came an old voice, "In which matter did Miss Zhou of Emei Pai give you trouble?"

Zhu'er was startled, she leaped up and said in a low voice, "It's Mijue Shitai!"

Her voice was so low, but the person outside could still hear her. "That's right," she said sternly, "It is Mijue Shitai."

When the person outside spoke the first few words, the voice sounded from a far, but the second time she spoke, she was already outside the little hut.

Zhu'er knew their situation was far from good, but it was too late for her to pick Zhang Wuji up and hide; she had no choice but holding her breath without saying anything.

“Get out!” they heard the person outside said with a cold voice, “Do you think you can hide inside forever?”

Zhu'er opened the straw curtain and walked out holding Zhang Wuji's hand. She saw about two 'zhang' outside the hut stood an old nun with white hair and dreary face, she was none other than Emei Pai's Zhang Men [sect leader], Miejue Shitai. Behind her, about a dozen people, divided into three groups, came rushing in. As they arrived, they stood on either side of Miejue Shitai. Half of those people were nuns, the rest were men and women in civilian clothes. Ding Minjun and Zhou Zhiruo were among them. The male disciples stood at the back row. Miejue Shitai had never favored male disciples, Emei Pai male disciples had never learned the most advanced of their school's martial art, their status was somewhat lower than the female disciples.

Miejue Shitai coldly looked at Zhu'er to size her up without saying anything for half a day. With trepidation, Zhang Wuji was crouching behind Zhu'er. He had made up his mind that if Miejue Shitai attacked Zhu'er, he would do his utmost to help her, although he knew he was not Miejue Shitai's match. He heard Miejue Shitai humph and she turned toward Ding Minjun.

“Was it this baby girl?” she asked.

“Yes,” Ding Minjun replied respectfully.

Suddenly they heard ‘Crack! Crack!’ twice, Zhu'er uttered a muffled grunt, while she was thrown about three 'zhang' backward with broken wrists. She fainted on the snowy ground.

Zhang Wuji only saw a grey shadow flashed as with inhuman speed footwork Miejue Shitai dashed toward Zhu'er, with

inhuman speed hand technique she broke her wrist bones and threw her out, and again with inhuman speed footwork she returned to her previous position, and stood loftily like an ancient tree. She looked so ghostly yet also grand standing in the night breeze. Each one of her actions was nimble yet so clear. Zhang Wuji could see each movement clearly, yet her speed was unfathomable. He was so astonished by her speed that he was paralyzed in fear.

Miejue Shitai stared at Zhang Wuji with a piercing-heart-and-soul vision. "Get out!" she sternly said.

Zhou Zhiruo took a step forward. "Shifu," she reported, "This man's legs are broken; he cannot walk."

"Make two snow-sleds, take them go," Miejue Shitai said. The disciples complied at once.

The dozen or so male disciples with quick hands and feet built two sleds. Two female disciples carried Zhu'er, two male disciples carried Zhang Wuji. They put them on the sleds and pulled the sleds behind Miejue Shitai who had already sped to the west.

Zhang Wuji focused his attention, trying to hear or see if Zhu'er was astir. He did not know the severity of her injury. After travelling for about a 'li', he heard Zhu'er groan softly.

"Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji called out loudly, "How's your injury? Have you received an internal injury?"

"She broke my both my wrist bones," Zhu'er replied, "But my chest and abdomen seem to be fine."

"No internal injury, that's good," Zhang Wuji said, "Use your left elbow to bump your right arm three 'cun' five 'fen' [1 cun

is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is approximately 1/3 of a centimeter or a little over 1/8 of an inch] below the bend, and use your right elbow to bump your left three 'cun' five 'fen' below the bend. That should lessen your pain somewhat."

Before Zhu'er could respond, Miejue Shitai had already exclaimed, "Ah!" She turned her head toward Zhang Wuji, stared at him and said, "This kid is proficient in medical skill. What's your name?"

"Zaixia [lit. under/below, the humble one] surnamed Zeng, called Ahniu," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Who is your Shifu?" Miejue Shitai asked.

Zhang Wuji said, "My shifu was a nameless country doctor of a small town; Shitai would not know him even if I mentioned his name."

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, but no longer paid him any attention.

The party travelled straight until the dawn before they stopped to eat their rations. Zhou Zhiruo took out several cold steamed buns and gave them to Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er. As she gave the buns to Zhang Wuji, she looked up at his face for a second before turning her head away.

Zhang Wuji's heart was shaken; he could not bear it any longer. "Your kindness in feeding me on the Hanshui River boat, I will never dare to forget," he said softly.

Zhou Zhiruo's whole body trembled; she quickly turned around and looked at him. This time Zhang Wuji was clean-shaven. She looked at him for a while. "Ah," she suddenly

exclaimed with a pleasantly surprise expression. "You ... you ..." she stammered. Zhang Wuji knew she finally recognized him, he slowly nodded his head.

"The cold poison in your body, is it healed?" she quietly asked. Her voice was as soft as a mosquito that it was almost inaudible.

In the same soft voice Zhang Wuji replied, "It is healed."

Zhou Zhiruo's face blushed, and she walked away.

All this time, Zhu'er was behind Zhang Wuji. She saw Zhou Zhiruo could not contain her joy; her lips quivered, her face also appeared bashful, but her eyes brightened. Zhu'er waited until Zhou Zhiruo left before she asked Zhang Wuji, "What were the two of you talking about?"

Zhang Wuji's face reddened. "What? No ... nothing," he said. "Humph!" Zhu'er snorted, "Barefaced liar!"

They rested for about an hour and a half before continuing their journey in haste to the west, and continued in the same manner for three days. Apparently they had some important matter to attend to. Along the way, whether when travelling or resting, neither the male nor female disciples opened their mouths to talk, unless it was absolutely necessary; it was as if they were a bunch of mute people.

By this time Zhang Wuji's legs were already healed. He could walk if he wanted to, but he maintained his guise as a cripple. Every now and then he would fake a groan so Miejue Shitai would not guard against him. He was waiting for a good opportunity to help Zhu'er to escape. However, the terrain they had been travelling so far was a vast plain, before they could run too far, the pursuers would certainly

overtake them; therefore, he did not dare to act recklessly. He quietly mended Zhu'er's broken wrist; Mie jue Shitai only gave him a cold look, but did not interfere. During their stops in the day, or in their bivouacs at night, Zhang Wuji was dying to get a glimpse of Zhou Zhiruo, but she had never come close to him anymore.

After travelling for two more days, they arrived at the great desert in the afternoon. The snow on the ground had melted; the sleds were now being pulled over sand. Suddenly they heard horse hooves coming from the west. Mie jue Shitai signaled with her hand. The disciples immediately hid themselves behind sand dunes. Two disciples drew their daggers and placed the daggers on Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er's back. Their intention was clear: Emei Pai was ambushing of the enemy, as soon as Zhang Wuji or Zhu'er made any noise to warn the enemy, they would thrust the daggers forward and take their lives.

It seemed like the horses were galloping very fast, only they were still very far away that it took almost half a day before the horses came near. As soon as the riders saw footprints on the sand, they reined their horses at once. Emei Pai's senior disciple Jing Xuan Shitai waved her whisk; about a dozen disciples responded to her signal by leaping out from their ambush and surrounding the riders.

Zhang Wuji took a peek to see there were four riders altogether, all wearing white robes. The robes were embroidered with a red blazing flame. Realizing they were being ambushed, the four riders shouted, drew out their weapons, and charged toward the northeast trying to break the siege.

Jing Xuan shouted, "It's the Devil Cult's demons, don't let even one of them escape!"

Although Emei Pai had more people, they did not attack together. Two female disciples and two male disciples responded to Jing Xuan Shitai's order. They shouted their compliance and stepped forward to block the enemies. The four Devil Cult's people fought valiantly with curved sabers in their hands. But in the expedition to the western region this time, Emei Pai had sent their choice fighters; each one possessed strong martial art skill. After only about seven, eight stances, three of the Devil Cult people were killed by the swords and were thrown down from their horses. The remaining one was a lot stronger than his companions; he managed to chop and injure the Emei Pai male disciple's left shoulder and rushed through this opening to escape.

When he was several 'zhang' away, the third ranking Emei Pai disciple, Jing Xu Shitai called out, "Get down!" With a swift footwork she caught up with the man. Her whisk swept toward the man's left leg. The man brandished his saber to block. Jing Xu's whisk suddenly changed its course; 'Shua!' it struck the back of the man's head.

This move had hit the man's vital point, the whisk also carried a profound internal energy; the man immediately fell down from his horse. Surprisingly this man was extremely swift and fierce; even under such a severe injury, he still attempted to perish together with the enemy. Spreading out his arms, he threw himself on Jing Xu. Jing Xu leaned sideways to evade while her whisk lashed on the man's chest.

Right that moment, from the cage hanging on the neck of the last man's horse flew three white pigeons. "What devilish trick are you playing?" Jing Xuan called out. Her sleeve shook, three iron lotus seeds flew toward the three pigeons.

Two pigeons were shot down. The third iron lotus seed was shot down by a secret projectile launched by the white-robed man, who at this time was lying on the ground. The last white pigeon dashed toward the cloud. The numerous Emei Pai disciples immediately launched their secret projectiles, but none hit its target. They saw that the pigeon was flying toward northeast.

Jing Xuan waved her left hand. The male disciples immediately dragged the four white-robed men and stood them in front of her.

From the initial attack toward the enemy down to shooting the pigeons and capturing the men, Mijue Shitai only looked coldly with her hands behind her back. Zhang Wuji thought, "She dealt with Zhu'er personally, which showed that she held Zhu'er in considerably higher regard; perhaps it was because she shook Ding Minjun's wrists broken. If this old nun wanted to stop that white pigeon, all she needed to do was to lift her finger; what's the problem with that? But she seemed to intentionally ignore her numerous disciples' effort in dealing with the situation."

Zhang Wuji also recalled how Jing Xuan, along with Ji Xiaofu and the others, had come up the Mount Wudang to wish his Taishifu happy birthday. Clearly she was considered of the same rank as the various Sect Leaders of Kunlun, Kongtong, and other sects. By this time these Emei Pai's senior disciples had held quite a reputation within the Jianghu; any one of them was fully capable to assume sole responsibility in important matters. In dealing with several Devil Cult people, Mijue Shitai did not need to personally go into action. The fact that Jing Xuan and Jing Xu had personally put forth their hands showed that they had a high regard toward the enemy.

A female disciple picked up the two shot down pigeons. She

took a roll of paper out from the small tube tied on the white pigeon's leg and presented it to Jing Xuan. Jing Xuan unrolled the paper and read.

"Shifu," she said, "The enemy has found out our plan to besiege the Brightness Peak. This letter is an emergency call for help to the Heavenly Eagle Cult." She looked at the other roll of paper and said, "Exactly the same. Too bad the other pigeon escape from the net."

"Why do you feel bad?" Miejue Shitai coldly said, "Let the devils gather together. We'll wipe them out in one swoop. Won't it be a happy occasion? It will save us running around to the east and to the west looking for them."

"Yes," Jing Xuan said.

Hearing the words 'emergency call for help to the Heavenly Eagle Cult Heavenly Eagle Cult', Zhang Wuji was startled. "Isn't the Heavenly Eagle Cult Leader my 'wai gong' [maternal grandfather]?" he mused, "I wonder if he, the Senior, would come. Humph, this old nun is so arrogant; you may not necessarily be my Grandfather's match."

Originally, he wanted to find an opportunity to help Zhu'er escape, but with this turn of events, he wanted to continue watching the drama unfold, thereupon he did not want to leave just yet.

Jing Xuan sternly asked the four white-robed men, "Who else did you invite? How did you find out about the Six Major Sects' plan to besiege the Devil Cult?"

The four white-robed men laughed bitterly with their eyes to the sky, then suddenly they fell down to the ground, motionless. Two male disciples stooped down to take a look;

they saw the contorted smile on the four men's faces, it was obvious that they stopped breathing.

"Shijie [older martial sister]," they called out in fear, "They all dead!"

Jing Xuan indignantly said, "The witches took poison to kill themselves. The poison is very lethal, the reaction was this quick.

Jing Xu said, "Search them."

"Yes!" four male disciples complied. They were about to search the corpses' pockets when Zhou Zhiruo suddenly said, "Shixiong [martial brothers], be careful. There might be poisonous things hidden inside their pockets."

The four male disciples were startled; they drew out their weapons to search the pockets. They saw something was wriggling inside the pocket. Turned out in each pocket were hidden two extremely venomous snakes. If they had used their hands to search the pockets, they would have been bitten by the snakes. All disciples' faces changed; everybody cursed the Devil Cult disciples as poisonous and ruthless in their actions.

Miejue Shitai coldly said, "From the Central Earth we came to the west, today was the first time we dealt directly with the Devil Cult disciples. These four men were merely nameless pawns, but they were already this sinister. Can you imagine how we are going to deal with the leaders and the brains behind the Devil Cult? Humph, Jing Xu, you are not young anymore, but they way you handle matters is this careless, not as careful as Zhiruo."

Jing Xu's face reddened; she bowed down to accept the

reproach.

In his heart, Zhang Wuji was still pondering Jing Xuan's words earlier, 'Six Major Sects besiege the Devil Cult'. "Six Sects? Six Sects?" he mused, "I wonder if our Wudang Pai is one of those Sects?"

About the second hour that night, suddenly they heard the jingle of bells usually mounted on camel's heads. It sounded like there was a camel approaching from a distance. Everybody was actually asleep, but they were awakened at once. At first the sound of the camel came from the west heading to the south, but a short time later it sounded like the camel ran from south to north, but as soon as the sound arrived at the northwest direction, it immediately turned east, and then the sound appeared again from the northeast. In this way the sound came from east and west just like a ghost.

The people looked at each other in bewilderment. Everybody thought that no matter how fast the camel could run, it was impossible for it to be on the east at one time and suddenly on the west. From the sound of it, it was also unlikely that there were several people on the four directions who rang the bell one after another.

After a while, it sounded like the camel bell came toward them from a distance, the bell grew clearer and clearer. Suddenly the bell rang loudly from the southeast, as if the camel was a bird, which flew swiftly.

Coming to this great desert and hearing this kind of strange ringing bell, Emei Pai people were inwardly frightened. In clear voice Miejue Shitai said, "Which master is paying us a visit? Please come out to meet us. Won't it be highly improper, playing tricks like this?" Her voice travelled far.

After she spoke those words, the bell suddenly turned silent, as if the person ringing the bell was afraid of her and did not dare to play tricks anymore.

Nothing happened all day the next day, but by the second hour in the evening, the camel bell returned. Suddenly going afar, suddenly coming near, suddenly it was on the east, suddenly it moved to the west. Mijue Shitai repeated her reprimand, but this time the camel bell ignored her. Sometimes the sound was light, another time it was loud. Sometimes it sounded as if the camel galloped in anger towards them, but suddenly it walked away sadly from them. It just drove everybody nuts.

Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er looked at each other and smiled. Although they did not understand how the bell could make this kind of weird noise, they knew it must be the doings of a Devil Cult's master to disturb the Emei people and render them helpless. Zhang Wuji and Zhu'er found it amusing to see them at a loss like this.

Mijue Shitai waved her hand; the disciples lay back down to sleep, no longer paid any attention to the bell. The bell made a loud noise. Although it changed pattern a hundred times, the Emei people simply turned a deaf ear to the sound, apparently they were no longer interested in the bell. Suddenly the bell rang loudly on the north and then vanished. It seemed that Mijue Shitai's tactic 'seeing demon as not a demon, let the demon defeat itself' was somewhat effective.

By daybreak the next day, everybody was busy tidying up their clothes and blankets, preparing themselves for the journey ahead. Two male disciples suddenly cried out in alarm, because they saw somebody was lying next to them,

sleeping soundly. This person's body was covered from head to toe with a filthy blanket, not the least bit of his body was exposed; his buttocks curved upward, he was snoring loudly.

The rest of the Emei Pai people also jumped in fright. Last night numerous people took turns in night-watch duty, but how could nobody knew someone was coming and that he mingled with them? Miejue Shitai's martial art skill had reached such a level that even grass blown by the wind or a petal of a flower flying or a leaf falling would not escape her eyes and ears; but how could she not know there was an extra person in the midst of her disciples?

Everybody was startled and ashamed. Two disciples immediately drew their swords and walked toward the man. "Who is it? What trick are you playing?" they shouted.

The man was still snoring loudly, seemingly oblivious of everything around him. A male disciple used his sword to lift the blanket and saw an impressive-looking man wearing dark green robe over white long gown. The man was sleeping soundly with his face to the ground.

Jing Xu knew that since the man dared to come like this, he must have an extraordinary background. She took a step forward and said, "Who are you, Sire? What business do you have here?"

The man's snoring was getting louder, like the rumble of a thunder. Seeing the man was this rude, Jing Xu was enraged; she brandished her whisk. 'Shua!' the whisk lashed toward the man's buttocks which were sticking up. 'Whoosh!' suddenly the whisk somehow left Jing Xu's hand and flew vertically up for more than ten 'zhang' to the sky. Without realizing it, everybody looked up...

"Jing Xu, watch out!" Miejue Shitai called out. She had just closed her mouth when the man in dark green robe had already moved several 'zhang' away. His steps were so swift it looked like he was flying; he carried Jing Xu in his arms across his chest.

Jing Xuan and another senior female disciple, Su Mengqing, each with a sword in her hand, quickly pursued; but the man's movements were so fast they were almost fantastic, the pursuers definitely would not be able to catch up. Miejue Shitai let out a clear whistle, and then with the treasured Yitian Sword in her hand she also ran after them.

The Sect Leader of Emei indeed possessed an extraordinary skill. In the blink of an eye she had already passed Jing Xuan and Su Mengqing. A dark shadow flashed as the sword pierced toward the man's back. But the man was really fast, the sword missed him by almost a foot and thus he escaped unscathed. The fact that he was carrying Jing Xu did not have any adverse effect on his speed; he was not by any means slower than Miejue Shitai.

He did not run away, but ran in circles around the Emei people as if he intentionally wanted to show off his skill. Miejue Shitai repeatedly thrust her sword forward, but all along she failed to stab his body.

Suddenly they heard a 'Pat!' as Jing Xu's whisk fell back down on the ground. By this time, Jing Xuan and Su Mengqing had stopped pursuing. Everybody watched with baited breath as about a dozen 'zhang' away where the two masters were chasing each other. Although they were running on a desert ground, both people's feet were like flying that the sand did not fly upwards.

The Emei disciples noticed that in that man's arms, Jing Xu

did not move at all, as if she had already died; their hearts were scared. A lot of the Emei disciples had the desire to step forward to intercept, but remembered their Shifu's prestige, how could she lower her rank by asking her disciples for help? If the incident ever spread out, wouldn't they be the laughingstock of the heroes and warriors of the Jianghu? It was a highly suspenseful moment, but nobody dared to take any step forward. They only wished their Shifu would be one step faster than she would be able to stab that weird-looking man's back.

In the meantime, the man and Mijue Shitai had made three large circles around the people. If only Mijue Shitai were one step closer, her sword would injure the enemy. However, she was always one step too late. Although that man started first and Mijue Shitai managed to catch up with him, the man was carrying a person, which added his burden by more than a hundred catties. Therefore, in this 'qing gong' contest, although they could be considered even in terms of speed, Mijue Shitai was still one notch inferior to the man.

By the fourth circle, the man turned around abruptly and stretching out his arms, he threw Jing Xu over to Mijue Shitai. Mijue Shitai only felt a strong wind in front of her face as Jing Xu arrived with an irresistible force. Hastily she concentrated her 'chi' into her legs and with 'qian jin zhui' [thousand-catty fall] she gently caught Jing Xu.

The man let out a long laugh and said, "The Six Major Sects come to besiege the Brightness Peak. I am afraid it won't be that easy!" While saying that, he ran northward.

When he raced Mijue Shitai earlier, the sand underneath their feet was not stirred up at all, but this time the yellow sand rose high behind him, surging on to the north with an overwhelming power that it looked like a giant dragon,

several dozen 'zhang' long, which immediately blocked his shadow from view.

The Emei disciples rushed toward their Shifu only to see Mijue Shitai's face paled; she did not say anything.

"Jing Xu Shijie ..." suddenly Su Mengqing cried out in fear. Jing Xu's face looked like yellow wax, there was an open wound on her throat, apparently she had stopped breathing. The wound was covered in blood, but there were teeth marks around it; obviously she was bitten to her death by that strange man.

The female Emei disciples broke out in loud crying. "What do you cry for?" Mijue Shitai shouted, "Bury her." Everybody stopped crying at once and buried Jing Xu right there.

"Shifu," Jing Xuan respectfully asked, "Who was that demon? Let us remember him clearly in our hearts that we can avenge Shimei later."

Mijue Shitai coldly said, "This man sucks blood from the neck, he is ruthless and savage; he must be one of the Devil Cult's four kings, the 'Qing Yi Fu Wang' [green-winged bat king]. I have long heard that his 'qing gong' is unparalleled in the world; apparently his reputation is well-deserved, he defeated me by a large margin."

At first, Zhang Wuji hated Mijue Shitai for her ruthlessness, but now that he witnessed how in the face of huge changes she was able to maintain her composure, to keep her coldness as if nothing happened, as well as her ability to praise the enemy and not ashamed to admit her own shortcomings, which befit her status as a grandmaster of a prominent Sect, he could not restrain his respect toward her from growing.

Ding Minjun hatefully said, "He did not dare to fight Shifu; always ran away, what kind of hero is he?"

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted. 'Slap!' suddenly she slapped Ding Minjun's mouth while angrily said, "Shifu cannot overtake him, cannot save Jing Xu's life. He won. Victory or defeat is known to the world. Is hero or warrior a self-proclaimed title?"

Half of Ding Minjun's face immediately turned red and swollen. "I accept Shifu's lesson. Disciple knows her own fault," she respectfully said, while in her heart she said, "You cannot beat others and lost face, but vent your frustration on me. Just consider my bad luck!"

"Shifu," Jing Xuan said, "Could you please tell us more about this Qing Yi Fu Wang?"

Miejue Shitai waved her hand without answering Jing Xuan's question; she walked forward. As the rest of the disciples saw how their martial sister had bumped her head against the wall, nobody dared to say anything. They continued their journey in silence until evening, when they built a large fire and slept behind a sand dune.

Miejue Shitai sat motionless with her gaze fixed on the fire, she looked like a stone statue. Seeing their Shifu had not slept, nobody dared to sleep. In this way they waited for more than two hours. Suddenly Miejue Shitai thrust both of her palms forward, creating a blast of strong wind. 'Bang!' the bonfire died down at once.

Everybody was still sitting motionless. The cold moon cast its clear light on everybody's shoulders. Suddenly a sad feeling crept into Zhang Wuji's heart. "Will Emei Pai's awe-inspiring prestige collapse completely in this western region? Will they

suffer a total defeat from the enemy?" he mused. He also thought, "Whatever happens, I must save Miss Zhou, but the Devil Cult's people are this fierce, what can I do to save others?"

Suddenly he heard Miejue Shitai shout, "Kill the demon fire, extinguish the devil fire!" And then after a brief pause she continued slowly, "The Devil Cult regards the fire as sacred, reveres the fire as deity. After the death of their thirty-third generation Jiaozhu [Cult Leader] Yang Dingtian, the Devil Cult does not have any Jiaozhu. Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness, Four Great Hu Jiao Fa Wang, Five Wanderers, as well as the Five Flag Leaders of Gold, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth Flags, all covet this Jiaozhu position so much so that they fight and massacre each other, and thus the Devil Cult became weak. Although each of the upright major sects is prosperous, I believe it is not easy at all to seek the destruction of this demonical and heretical people if they are not in the midst of this internal strife."

[Translator's note: here I repeat my note in chapter 30: 'hu jiao fa wang' ('hu' – protect, 'jiao' – Cult, 'fa' – law, 'wang' – king) has been translated as 'Protector King' throughout this novel. I believe the more accurate translation should be 'Protector of the Cult, Law Enforcement King', or 'Judge'. The same 'fa wang' was translated 'imperial priest', as in Jin Lun Fa Wang, in Shen Diao Xia Lu – RoCH; in different story, it is also translated as 'Dharma King. I am going to keep using the term 'Protector King', interchangeably with 'fa wang' for the remainder of this novel; I just want the readers to know that the term carries a broader sense than simply 'Protector King.']

Zhang Wuji had heard the name 'Devil Cult' ever since he was little, but because his own mother was somehow related to the Devil Cult, each time he asked, his parents did not look

too happy. When he asked his Yifu, his Yifu would stare blankly as if he was entranced, then all of a sudden he would be thrown into a violent rage. For this reason, he had never known what the Devil Cult was. Later, when he was with Tai Shifu Zhang Sanfeng, who also abhorred the Devil Cult, whenever he brought it up, Tai Shifu would earnestly warn him, telling him to never, ever, mess with the Devil Cult people or make friends with them. However, Zhang Wuji then met Hu Qingniu, Wang Nan'gu, Chang Yuchun, Xu Da, Zhu Yuanzhang, and other warriors, which were all Devil Cult people. These people were generous, just and loyal; they might not necessarily evil. It was just that their actions were sometimes underhanded that to the outsiders they were often unfathomable. This moment, as he listened to Mijue Shitai talk about the Devil Cult, he perked up at once and listened attentively.

Mijue Shitai continued, "The Devil Cult's previous generations' Jiaozhu had always passed on the Sheng Huo Ling [lit. the order of the sacred fire] to the next generation as their token of authority. But to the thirty-first generation Jiaozhu, God rest his soul, the Sheng Huo Ling was somehow vanished without a trace. Hence the thirty-second and thirty-third generations Jiaozhu did not have this token of authority, and thus these two Jiaozhu led the Cult quite reluctantly. Yang Dingtian died suddenly. Nobody knows whether he was poisoned or fell under the enemy's plot, but he did not have enough time to appoint his successor. The number of highly-skilled devil-heads within the Devil Cult is truly not a few; there are at least five, six people who are qualified to be the Jiaozhu. You don't submit to me, I won't yield to you; and thus internally they are in a big chaos. Until today, they still do not have any Jiaozhu. The one we met today also wanted to be the Jiaozhu. He is one of the Devil Cult's Four Great Protector Kings, Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao." [Translator's note: The character 'Yi' of 'Qing Yi Fu

Wang' (green-winged bat king) refers to thin wings like those of dragonfly, not the wing of feathered birds. The title of the chapter "... with a laugh" refers to Wei Yixiao's name (Yi Xiao - one laugh).]

The disciples had never heard the name Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao before, they stayed silent.

Miejue Shitai continued, "This man has never set foot on the Central Plains; the way the Devil Cult's people handle matters is also extremely surreptitious. For this reason, although this man's martial art skill is strong, he does not have the least bit of fame in the Central Plains. But I am sure you all know about the Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king] Yin Tianzheng and Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun, two people, don't you?"

Zhang Wuji shivered inwardly. Zhu'er softly exclaimed in surprise, 'Ah!' Yin Tianzheng and Xie Xun's reputation was so widespread that nobody in the Wulin world could claim that they had never heard those names.

"Shifu," Jing Xuan asked, "Are those two also belong to the Devil Cult?"

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, "Of course they belong to the Devil Cult, what else? 'Mo Jiao Si Wang, Zi Bai Jin Qing' [The Devil Cult's Four Kings: Purple White Gold and Green], Zi Shan Long Wang [purple-robed dragon king], Bai Mei Ying Wang, Jin Mao Shi Wang and Qing Yi Fu Wang are the Devil Cult's four kings. The Green Wing is ranked the last, yet today all of you have seen his skill with your own eyes; you can imagine the skills of Zi Shan Long Wang, Bai Mei Ying Wang and Jin Mao Shi Wang. Jin Mao Shi Wang has gone insane and has done many despicable things. More than twenty years ago he suddenly went on killing the innocents

indiscriminately. Finally he disappeared and his whereabouts became Wulin world's big mystery. Yin Tianzheng failed to be the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu, in his anger he founded another Tian Ying Cult [Heavenly Eagle]. His sickness was that he craved to be a Jiaozhu. I know that since Yin Tianzheng has forsaken the Devil Cult, he became like water and fire with the Brightness Peak. Who would have thought that when the Brightness Peak is facing a calamity, they still ask the Heavenly Eagle Cult for help?"

Zhang Wuji's heart was in chaos; he had known early on that his foster father and (maternal) grandfather's conduct was heretical, which most of orthodox people would not tolerate; but he had never thought that those two people were actually the Devil Cult's Protector Kings.

While being busy with his thoughts, he did not hear what the Emei disciples were talking. A little while later he heard Mijue Shitai continue, "We, the Six Major Sects, are currently in a mission to destroy the Brightness Peak. We will prevail. Even if the demons and witches are united, what do we fear? It's just that during the battle, many will be injured or dead. No one must have a faint heart; we should not rely on luck. If fear overcomes our hearts, then we will degrade Emei Pai's power and prestige in the presence of our enemy." The disciples jumped to their feet at once. They bowed in compliance.

Mijue Shitai continued, "Whether one's martial art skill is strong or weak, it all depends on talent and destiny, we cannot force it at all. Before Jing Xu even had a chance to launch a stance, she had fallen under the enemy's scheme and died in the hands of that blood-sucking demon. Nobody can sneer at her. What is the purpose of training martial arts? Is it not to rob the rich and give it to the poor, to destroy the demons and devils? Today Jing Xu was the first to die. Who

knows? Perhaps the second one will be your own Shifu. Shaolin, Wudang, Emei, Kunlun, Kongtong and Huashan, the Six Major Sects' mission is to besiege and destroy the Devil Cult. We, the Emei Pai, have earlier disregarded good luck or bad luck, disaster or happiness ..."

In his heart Zhang Wuji thought, "Our Wudang is indeed among them." Deep in his heart he felt that his journey to the west this time would bring him to see countless wretched disasters, which eyes could not bear to see, and ears could not bear to hear. And thus he seriously considered taking Zhu'er to escape so that they would not have to witness the war and massacre among the Jianghu people.

In the meantime, Mijue Shitai said, "The proverb says it well: 'A thousand coffins go out the door, the home prospers. The children survive, the father dies first; and thus the descendants mourn their ancestors.' [Translator's note: this is a literal translation of the text. I am not sure about the background of this saying. Any help will be greatly appreciated.] Who in the world would not die? As long as we leave behind our successors, we can still prosper even though there are hundreds or thousands of deaths in the family. I am only afraid that you will all die and leave the old nun live alone." She paused for a moment before continuing, "Hey, hey, even if that happens, I will have no regrets. A hundred years ago, was it not that Emei Pai did not even exist? As long as every one of us is fighting with everything we have, wouldn't that be enough if Emei Pai had to meet its destruction?"

With boiling blood, the disciples' drew out their weapons and responded in loud voices, "Disciples vow to fight to the death; we will not co-exist with the people of demonic way."

Mijue Shitai laughed drily and said, "Very good! You may sit

down!"

Although the majority of Emei Pai disciples were weak women, Zhang Wuji had to admit that they possessed heroic spirits, which enable them to brave death without frowning. He thought that it was not by accident that Emei Pai was considered one of the Six Major Sects, and certainly not only because of their superiority in martial arts. Witnessing this scene, he was reminded of how Jing Ke went west to enter the Qin [Jing Ke was supposedly the would-be assassin of King Ying Zheng of Qin], with the sadness of 'the mournful wind rippled the cold water, the warrior departed on a one-way mission.'

Actually, these words should be spoken before they embarked on this mission, while they were still thinking that the Devil Cult was weakened by internal strife that it would be easily destroyed with just a raise of the hand. They had not anticipated that in the middle of disintegration, the demons of the Devil Cult were still able to join hands in resisting outsiders' invasion. Now that Qing Yi Fu Wang had made his move, the situation was substantially different.

Sure enough, Zhang Wuji heard Miejue Shitai say, "If Qing Yi Fu Wang could come, then Bai Mei Ying Wang and Jin Mao Shi Wang could also come. The possibility of Zi Shan Long Wang, the Five Wanderers, and the Five Flag Commanders to come is even greater. We, the Six Major Sects, originally thought that with our combined forces, we would be able to destroy Guangming Zuo Shi [the Left Emissary of the Brightness] Yang Xiao first, then sweep out the other demons one by one. Who would have thought that this time the prediction of Huashan Pai's Shen Ji Xiansheng [Mr. Divine Strategist], Xianyu Zhang Men's [Sect Leader Xianyu] is inaccurate? Hey, hey, he is totally off the mark."

Jing Xuan asked, "What kind of evil devil-head is that Zi Shan Long Wang?"

Miejue Shitai shook her head. "Zi Shan Long Wang's evil conduct is obscure; I myself only heard bits and pieces about him. I heard when this person failed to be the Jiaozhu, he immediately escaped to the distant overseas and no longer communicated with the Devil Cult. It would be best if he stays out of this. 'Mo Jiao Si Wang, Zi Bai Jin Qing'. This person is the chief among the Four Kings, needless to say, he is the most difficult to be dealt with. Other than Yang Xiao, the Devil Cult has another Emissary of the Brightness. From generation to generation, the Devil Cult has always had Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness, whose positions are above the Four Hu Jiao Fa Wang. Yang Xiao is the Guangming Zuo Shi [Left Emissary of the Brightness]; but the name of the Guangming You Shi [Right Emissary of the Brightness] is actually unknown to the people of the Wulin world. Kong Zhi Dashi [reverend] of Shaolin Pai and Song Yuanqiao, Song Daxia [great hero] of Wudang Pai, both are warriors with vast experience and knowledge, but even they did not know it. Yang Xiao is our enemy; in a frontal battle, victory or defeat will be decided by our martial art skill, which is fine with me. My main concern is if that Guangming You Shi suddenly launches a sneak attack."

The disciples were scared; without realizing it, they turned their heads around as if that Right Emissary of the Brightness or the Purple-robed Dragon King suddenly came and launched a sneak attack. Under the cold moonlight, everybody's face looked deathly pale.

Miejue Shitai indifferently said, "Yang Xiao killed your Gu Hongzi Shibo [martial (older) uncle], he also killed Ji Xiaofu. Wei Yixiao killed Jing Xu. Between Emei Pai and the Devil Cult there is an enmity as high as the heavens. Since our Sect was

founded by Guo Zushi [ancestor master], the Zhang Men position has always been held by a virgin woman. Not to mention that a man will not have any part in this position, even a woman, if she is married, cannot hold the Zhang Men position. However, today our Sect is facing a life and death, exist or perish situation; how can I adhere strictly to the norms? In this mission, whoever set a great merit will inherit my cassock and alms bowl, I don't care if it is a man or a married woman."

The disciples hang their heads in silence; they felt their Shifu was making an arrangement for things to do after her death, discussing the appointment of her successor, as if she knew that she would not return to the Central Earth alive. In everybody's hearts there was a third part of uncomfortable, mournful feeling.

Miejue Shitai let out a long, loud laughter, "Ha ha, ha ha ..." her voice travelled far into the distant over the great desert. The disciples looked at each other in a start; inwardly feeling scared. Miejue Shitai waved her sleeve and loudly said, "Everybody, sleep!"

As usual, Jing Xuan arranged the night watch.

"No need for night watch," Miejue Shitai said.

Jing Xuan was startled, but then she understood. If a master of Green-winged Bat King's caliber attacked in the middle of the night, how could the disciple find out? Night watch would be futile.

That evening the Emei Pai seemed relaxed outwardly, but very tense inwardly; they seemed to be scattered loose, but actually in a very tight formation, ready for any unanticipated matter.

End of Chapter 17.

Chapter 18 - The Cold and Bright Ray of the Yitian Sword

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly a bright ray flashed, the sword in Yin Liting's hand flew to the north, shooting toward the Taoist priest's back. The sword passed through his body and still flew forward. The Taoist priest's feet did not stop; he still ran at least two 'zhang' forward before finally he fell, dead.

The next day they continued their journey westward and did not stop for more than a hundred 'li'. It was around midday, the sun was shining brightly overhead, although it was the depth of the winter, they felt hot.

Continuing after the rest, suddenly they heard faint noises of weapons clashing and people shouting, coming from the northwest direction. Without waiting for Jing Xuan to give an order, everybody quickened their steps, rushing toward the noise. Shortly afterwards, they saw ahead that several people were dodging and attacking in a violent battle. When they were near, they saw three Taoist priests in white robes with weapons in their hands were surrounding a middle-aged man. The three Taoist priests' left sleeves were embroidered with red blazing flame; apparently they were Devil Cult disciples. The middle-aged man brandished a long sword, the sword's ray flickered; he fought the three Taoist priests intensely. With one against three, he did not show any sign of defeat.

Zhang Wuji's legs were already healed for some time, but he still pretended that he could not walk, so he stayed on the sled so that the Emei Pai people would not guard against him, while he waited for a good opportunity to take Zhu'er and escape. Right now, an Emei male disciple was standing in front of him, blocking his view that he had to lean over to see the four people fighting. He saw the middle-aged man's sword was getting faster and faster. Suddenly the man turned around and shouted. 'Shua!' his sword slashed one Devil Cult's Taoist priest's chest.

The Emei disciples cheered. Zhang Wuji could not restrain himself from calling out in surprise. The move was called 'shun shui tui zhou' [lit. push the boat along the current]; it was a unique skill from the Wudang's sword techniques, because the middle-aged man who launched the stance was

precisely Wudang Pai's Sixth Hero, Yin Liting.

The Emei disciples watched the battle from a distance and did not step out to help at all. As the other two Devil Cult Taoist priests saw one man down from their side, and the enemy had increased in number, their hearts sank. With a sudden whistle they ran separately, one to the north, the other to the south.

Yin Liting flew to pursue the Taoist priest running to the south. His feet were a lot faster; only seven, eight steps later, he had already reached the Taoist priest's back. The Taoist priest turned around and brandished his pair of sabers wildly; staking everything he had with the intention to take the enemy down with him.

The Emei Pai disciples realized it would be difficult for Yin Liting to chase two enemies at once; the Taoist priest who ran to the north's 'qing gong' was not bad either, he ran faster and faster. It appeared that even if Yin Liting managed to kill the Taoist priest who ran to the south, he would not be able to turn around to chase and kill the one running to the north. There was an enmity as deep as the ocean between Emei disciples and Devil Cult people; everybody looked at Jing Xuan, waiting for her to issue the order to block the escaping enemy. Most of the female disciples were good friends of Ji Xiaofu; they all thought that had it not been because of the crime of Devil Cult's villain, this Sixth Hero of Wudang would have been their Sect's in-law. This moment they all hoped to lend him a helping hand.

Jing Xuan was also hesitating; she thought that the Sixth Hero of Wudang held a prominent position within the Wulin world, if he did not ask for help and other people rashly put out their hands, it would be disrespectful for him. That was the reason she did not immediately issue the order to

intercept; she would rather the Taoist priest escape than offending the Wudang's Yin Liuxia [sixth hero].

Suddenly they all saw a bright ray flashed, the sword in Yin Liting's hand flew to the north. Swift like the wind, fast like a lightning, it shot toward the Taoist priest's back. The Taoist priest suddenly felt this incoming attack, but by the time he was about to evade, the sword had already penetrated his heart, through his body, and still flew forward. The Taoist priest's feet did not stop; he still ran at least two 'zhang' forward before finally he fell, dead. The sword was still flying for three more 'zhang' after going through the Taoist priest before it also fell to the ground. The blade flickered under the bright sunlight as the sword stuck straight up in the sand. Although it was only an object without a life or a mind of its own, the sword carried an awe-inspiring divine power.

Seeing this hair-raising scene, there was not a single person among the spectators who was not shaken to the core; they were speechless for half a day. When they remembered to turn their heads back, they saw the Taoist priest fighting Yin Liting was shaking and swaying just like a drunk. He threw his pair of sabers to the ground, and hands were grabbing wildly the empty air. Yin Liting simply ignored him; he walked toward the Emei Pai party. He had just walked for several steps when the Taoist priest uttered a stifled grunt and fell with his face upward, and stopped moving altogether. Nobody saw with what technique Yin Liting had struck him.

The Emei Pai disciples were loudly cheering and clapping. Even Mijue Shitai nodded her head before heaving a deep sigh. Perhaps with her sigh she was saying: Wudang Pai had this kind of excellent disciple, my Emei Pai did not have this accomplished disciple. But perhaps she was saying: Xiaofu was unfortunate not to be able to marry this man but fell

under the hands of a Devil Cult lecherous disciple. In Miejue Shitai's mind, Ji Xiaofu was killed by Yang Xiao, it was not her who struck her to death.

The call 'Liu Shishu' [sixth martial (younger) uncle] was already on Zhang Wuji's lips, but he swallowed it back. Among his martial uncles, Yin Liting was the one closest to his father, therefore, he also had always treated him with parental love. When he looked at this sixth uncle, whom he had not seen for nine years, he saw a face battered with wind and dust, the hair on his temples was graying out. Zhang Wuji presumed Ji Xiaofu's death had given him a tremendous blow.

As he saw a close relative after a long period of separation, Zhang Wuji's first urge was to rush forward and greet him, but finally he thought that in front of too many people, he could not blurt out the truth and should avoid provoking endless trouble later on. Although Zhou Zhiruo knew his real identity, he did not think she would reveal it to others.

Yin Liting bowed and saluted Miejue Shitai. "My humble Sect's Da Shixiong [first martial brother], leading a number of his martial brothers and the third generation disciples, thirty-two people altogether, have arrived at the frontline's canyon bank. Wanbei [younger generation - referring to self] is under Da Shixiong's order to welcome your honorable Sect," he said.

"Good," Miejue Shitai replied, "Wudang has arrived first. Have you had any contact with the demons?"

"We have battled the Devil Cult's Wood and Fire, two Flags, three times," Yin Liting said, "We have killed several demons, but Qi Shidi [seventh martial (younger) brother] Mo Shenggu suffers a light wound."

Miejue Shitai nodded. She knew that although Yin Liting spoke lightly, these three battles must be exceptionally fierce and heavy, such that with Wudang's five heroes' ability, they still failed to kill the Devil Cult's Flag Leaders and the Seventh Hero Mo Shenggu even sustained injury.

"Has your honorable Sect ascertained the strength of the Brightness Peak yet?" Miejue Shitai asked further.

Yin Liting said, "We heard the Heavenly Eagle Cult and other Devil Cult's branches carried a massive operation to support the Brightness Peak, yet some others say that Zi Shan Long Wang and Qing Yi Fu Wang have also arrived."

Miejue Shitai was startled. "Zi Shan Long Wang has also arrived?" she asked.

The two of them were talking while walking side by side, with the Emei disciples followed from a distance; they did not dare to listen to these two people's discussion. After talking for a while, Yin Liting raised his cupped fists to take his leave, as he needed to make contact with the Huashan Pai.

"Yin Liuxia," Jing Xuan called out, "You have been busy running around; you must be hungry. Would you eat some light refreshments before continuing your journey?"

Yin Liting was not shy, he said, "In that case I will bother you."

The Emei heroines immediately took out the provisions; some piled sand and built fire to cook noodles in an iron pot. Their meals were simple, but they were very attentive in entertaining Yin Liting; naturally it was for the deceased Ji

Xiaofu's sake. Yin Liting understood their intention; with moist eyes and choking voice he said, "Many thanks to you all, Shijie, Shimei."

Zhu'er had been waiting silently on the side, right now she suddenly said, "Yin Liuxia, may I inquire of you about somebody?"

With a bowl of noodle in his hand, Yin Liting turned his head around and said, "I wonder what the honored name of this Xiao Shimei is [little martial (younger) sister? And who is it you wish to inquire about? If I have the information, I will certainly share it with you." His manner was very cordial.

"I don't belong to the Emei Pai," Zhu'er said, "I am their prisoner."

At first Yin Liting thought she was Emei Pai's young disciple; hearing her said so, he could not help but be a bit surprised. But thinking that the girl was very frank, he asked pointedly, "Are you of the Devil Cult?"

"No," Zhu'er said, "I am a Devil Cult's enemy."

Yin Liting did not have time to ask her origin in details; to respect the host, he cast a questioning look at Jing Xuan.

Jing Xuan said, "What is it that you want to inquire of Yin Liuxia?"

Zhu'er said, "I want to inquire: is your honorable Shixiong, Zhang Cuishan, Zhang Wuxia [fifth hero Zhang] also come to the frontline's canyon bank?"

As soon as they heard this question, Yin Liting and Zhang Wuji were gob-smacked. "What do you want by inquiring

about my Wu Shige?" Yin Liting asked.

With a blushing face Zhu'er replied in a low voice, "I only want to know if his son, Zhang Wuji, also came with him."

Zhang Wuji was even more startled. "She knows my real identity," he thought, "and is going to expose it to everybody."

"Are you telling the truth?" Yin Liting asked.

"I am sincerely inquiring of the Yin Liuxia," Zhu'er said, "How could I dare to deceive you?"

"My Wu Shige has passed away more than ten years ago," Yin Liting said, "The tree by his grave has arched over it. Could it be that Miss does not know it?"

Zhu'er sprang up with a start. "Ah," she exclaimed, "Turns out Zhang Wuxia has already passed away. So ... he ... he has become an orphan early on."

"Does Miss know my nephew Wuji?" Yin Liting asked.

Zhu'er said, "Five years ago, I met him once at the Butterfly Valley's Divine Doctor Hu Qingniu's house. I don't know where he is right now."

Yin Liting said, "Receiving my Master's instruction, I also went to the Butterfly Valley to find him, but Hu Qingniu, husband and wife had been killed, while Wuji disappeared without a trace. Afterwards, I went around seeking him, without finding any information about him. Ay, who would have thought ... who would have thought ..." Speaking to this point, his expression turned sad, and he did not continue.

“What?” Zhu’er hastily said, “What bad news did you hear?”

Yin Liting stared at her. “Why are you so concerned about him, Miss?” he asked, “That nephew of mine, Wuji, did he have kindness with you, or enmity?”

Zhu’er turned her gaze to a distant place; she quietly said, “I wanted him to come with me to the Lingshe Island [spirit snake] ...”

“Lingshe Island?” Yin Liting cut her off, “What relation do you have with Jin Hua Popo [Golden Flower Granny] and Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf]?”

Zhu’er did not answer, she continued as if she was talking to herself, “... not only he was not willing, he hit me, scolded me, and bit my palm bloody ...” Her left hand gently stroke the back of her right hand, “... but ... but ... I am still thinking about him. I did not want to harm him, I wanted him to come to the Lingshe Island. Popo would teach him a martial art skill with which he could be healed of the cold poison of the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang [black/mysterious and dark/deep divine palm] in his body. Who would have thought that he was so vicious; he regarded other’s good intentions as bad ones.”

Zhang Wuji’s mind was in turmoil; it was the first time he knew: “Turns out Zhu’er is Ah Li who grabbed me in the Butterfly Valley. The boyfriend who is always in her mind is me.” Casting a sidelong glance, he saw her bumpy cheeks. Where did the beauty he saw on her face when they first met? But her eyes were like limpid autumn water; clear, pure and bright, just like he remembered it after all those years.

Miejue Shitai coldly said, “I hear her Shifu, Jin Hua Popo, also

have some enmity with the Devil Cult. But Jin Hua Popo is certainly not an upright person, and this is not a good time for us to start a feud with her. For now, let's just detain her."

"Hm, so that's how it is," Yin Liting said, "Miss, you had good intentions toward my nephew Wuji, it's a pity that he was so unfortunate. I came across Wu Zhuangzhu [village/manor master] Wu Lie of the Zhu and Wu combined manor recently. I learned that more than five years ago, Wuji lost his footings and fell into a ten-thousand 'zhang' deep ravine; his body and bones did not survive. Ay, the love between his father and I was like hand and foot; who would have thought that the Emperor of Heaven did not bless a well-doer, such that even his only flesh and blood ..." He had not finished speaking when with a thud Zhu'er fell backward as she lost consciousness.

Zhou Zhiruo quickly propped her up and massaged her chest for quite a while before Zhu'er regained consciousness. Zhang Wuji was extremely grieved seeing Yin Liting and Zhu'er heart-broken like this, yet he steeled himself to stay out of this matter. When he looked up, he saw that Zhou Zhiruo was staring at him with a questioning look, apparently she was wondering, "How come she does not recognize you?" Zhang Wuji realized that over the last several years, his stature and appearance had undergone huge changes. Zhou Zhiruo would not recognize him as well if he did not mention the Hanshui River boat affair first.

Biting her lips, Zhu'er asked, "Yin Liuxia, who harmed Zhang Wuji?"

"Nobody did," Yin Liting answered, "Wu Lie of the Zhu and Wu combined manor said that he personally witness Wuji lost his footing on his own and fell into the ravine. Wu Lie's sworn brother, 'One Pen Shaking the Heavens' Zhu

Changling also fell and died together with him." Zhu'er heaved a deep sigh and sat back down dejectedly.

"Miss, what is your honorable surname and great given name?" Yin Liting asked.

Zhu'er only shook her head in daze, as tears streaming down her face. Suddenly she threw herself on the sandy ground and cried miserably.

"Don't be sad, Miss," Yin Liting consoled her, "Even if my nephew Wuji had not fallen into that snowy canyon, the cold poison in his body would have flared up by now, it would still be difficult for him to escape calamity. Ay, he fell with a smashed body and shattered bones, that might not necessarily a bad fortune. It sure beats the heavy and endless torture of the cold poison in his body."

Miejue Shitai suddenly said, "It was better for this breed of sin Zhang Wuji to die early; otherwise he would just be a source of harm to mankind."

Zhu'er was angry. "Old Thief Nun," she roared, "What nonsense are you blabbering about?"

Hearing her unexpectedly dared to insult their venerated master, four or five the Emei disciples immediately drew their swords and pointed the tips to her back.

Zhu'er was not scared at all; she still shouted curses, "Old Thief Nun, Zhang Wuji's father was this Yin Liuxia's Shixiong [martial brother]; his chivalry and prestige spread all over the world. What's not good about him?"

Miejue Shitai laughed coldly without answering. Jing Xuan said, "Watch what you are saying. Zhang Wuji's father was

no doubt a disciple of an upright and prestigious school, but what about his mother? He was the son of a Devil Cult witch. If he was not a breed of sin, the source of harm to the mankind, then what is he?"

"Who was Zhang Wuji's mother?" Zhu'er asked, "Why did you say she was a Devil Cult witch?"

The Emei disciples broke into raucous laughter; only Zhou Zhiruo lowered her head and looked at the ground. Yin Liting looked quite awkward. Zhang Wuji's face was flushed with fury, his eyes red and brimming with tears; if he had not made up his mind to hide his true identity, he would have stood up and defended his mother.

Jing Xu was more honest and considerate; she explained to Zhu'er, "Zhang Wuxia's wife was Heavenly Devil Cult's Cult Leader, Yin Tianzheng's daughter; her name was Yin Susu ..."

"Ah," Zhu'er exclaimed; her countenance changed greatly.

Jing Xu added, "Because Zhang Wuxia took this witch as his wife, he brought ruin and shame upon himself and slashed his own throat on Mount Wudang. This matter was widely known all over the world. Could it be that Miss was not aware?"

"I ... I lived on the Lingshe Island, and have never heard anything about the Wulin world affairs of the Central Plains," Zhu'er said.

"Alright, then," Jing Xuan said, "You have offended my Shifu. Quickly apologize."

But Zhu'er still asked, "That Yin Susu, where is she?"

"She died together with Zhang Wuxia," Jing Xu replied.

Zhu'er's body trembled. "She ... she also died?" she asked.

"Do you know Yin Susu?" Jing Xuan wondered.

Right this moment they saw on the northeast horizon a blue flame shot up to the sky. "Aiyo!" Yin Liting said, "My nephew Qingshu is surrounded by the enemy." Turning around, he bowed to take his leave from Mijue Shitai then raised his cupped fists to everybody else and immediately dashed towards the direction of the blue flame.

Jing Xuan waved her hand; Emei disciples immediately followed. When they got near, they saw that three men were besieging a young man. The three men were wearing hats and dressed like servants, each one had a saber in his hand. The people only watched the fight for several stances and they were secretly shocked. Although these three men were dressed like servants, their movements were ruthless and fierce, not at all inferior to top ranking martial artists. It seemed like their martial art skills were a lot stronger than the three Taoist priests killed by Yin Liting. They were attacking the young man dressed in scholar attire in rotation; one by one they took turns in engaging the young scholar in close combat. The scholar had fallen into a greatly disadvantageous situation, but the sword in his hand still formed a tight defense.

By these four fiercely fighting men stood six men wearing yellow robes, their robes were embroidered with red blazing flame; obviously they were Devil Cult people. These six men stood out of the way and did not take part in the battle. As soon as they saw Yin Liting and the Emei disciples arrive, a stout man among the six called out, "Yin Jia Xiongdi [brothers of the Yin family], you have failed. Just run with

your tails between your legs, Laozi [old man or 'your father' (vulgar term), referring to self] will cover your back."

One of the men in servant attire angrily said, "Hou Tu [thick earth] Flag crawls the slowest. The one surnamed Yan, why don't you run away first?"

Jing Xuan coldly said, "Death is knocking on your door, and you are still squabbling among yourselves?"

"Shijie," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Who are those people?"

"Those wearing the servant attire are Yin Tianzheng's servants," Jing Xuan replied, "They are called Yin Wufu [without luck/prosperity], Yin Wulu [without good fortune], and Yin Wushou [without long life]."

Zhou Zhiruo was astonished. "Three servants, and yet they are this ... this good?" she asked.

"Originally they were famous big robbers of the underworld; they are not ordinary people at all," Jing Xuan replied, "Those in yellow robes are the Hou Tu Flag demons of the Devil Cult. Perhaps the stout one is Yan Yuan, the Flag Leader of the Hou Tu Flag. Shifu said that the five flag leaders of the Devil Cult clashed with the Heavenly Devil Cult over the Jiaozhu position; they don't get along with each other ..."

By this time the young scholar had repeatedly fallen into dangerous situations. With a 'Rip!' his left sleeve was cut by the saber in Yin Wushou's hand. Yin Liting let out a clear whistle, his sword went straight to Yin Wulu. Yin Wulu swept his saber horizontally across his chest to block. The saber and the sword collided. By this time, Yin Liting had already possessed abundant internal energy; it was not a small matter at all. 'Slap!' Yin Wulu's saber was shaken and bent,

it turned into a square tool.

Yin Wulu was shocked; he leaped three steps sideways. Suddenly Zhu'er leaped toward him, her right index finger stretched out and pierced the back of Yin Wulu's neck, and then she leaped back to her previous position at once. Yin Wulu's martial art skill was not superficial at all, but under Yin Liting's internal energy attack, the 'chi' and blood in his chest welled up. While he was still staggering, Zhu'er's finger pierced him. Immediately he doubled up in pain and only managed to let out a soft grunt while his body shivered incessantly.

Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou were shocked; abandoning their fight with the young scholar, they rushed toward Yin Wulu to support him. They saw his body was twisted; obviously his injury was very heavy. They turned their gaze toward Zhu'er and suddenly exclaimed, "It is San Xiaojie [third miss]."

"Humph," Zhu'er snorted, "You still recognize me?"

Everybody thought that these two men would certainly stake everything they got to fight Zhu'er; who would have thought that they picked Yin Wulu and without saying anything they rushed to the north.

This turn of events happened so suddenly that everybody was dumbstruck; they scratched their heads in confusion.

The stout man in yellow robe raised his left hand, in which there was a yellow flag. The other five men also waved their yellow flags. Although there were only six of them, the flags made noise just like a boar hunting party. They slowly retreated to the north with an imposing manner.

Seeing the strange flags, Emei disciples were taken aback.

Two male disciples shouted and pursued. Yin Liting's shadow swayed as he ran after them. He overtook them and cut their path. With arms straight to the front, he lightly pushed. The two men could not help but were pushed three steps back. Their faces immediately turned red.

Jing Xuan shouted, "Shidi [martial brothers], come back! Yin Liuxia's intention is good. This Hou Tu Flag must not be pursued."

Yin Liting said, "The day before yesterday Mo Qidi [seventh (younger) brother] and I chased the Lie Huo [raging inferno] Flag formation, and had to suffer a big defeat. Half of Mo Qidi's hair and eyebrows were burned." While saying that, he pulled his left sleeve up, showing a large red patch of burned skin. The two Emei male disciples could not help from feeling inwardly scared.

Miejue Shitai's cold and penetrating eyes swept Zhu'er's face. "Was that 'qian zhu wan du shou'?" she coldly asked.

"Not perfect yet," Zhu'er replied.

"What could you have done if it were perfect?" Miejue Shitai asked, "Why did you harm that man?"

"Too bad I couldn't pierce him to death on the spot," Zhu'er said.

"Why?" Miejue Shitai asked.

"It's my business," Zhu'er replied, "Why do you care?"

Miejue Shitai's body slightly moved to the side; she took the sword from Jing Xuan's hand. 'Ding!' Zhu'er busily leaped backward; her face turned paper white. Turned out in that

split second Miejue Shitai had chopped her right hand index finger. Her hand was so swift that nobody was able to see it clearly. Because her broken wrist had not completely healed, Zhu'er's hand was still weak; moreover, because her 'qian zhu wan du shou' had not been perfected yet, Zhu'er had put a refined steel cap on her finger before she made her move. Besides, the sword Miejue Shitai used was not Yitian Sword; therefore, to everybody's surprise, this sword unexpectedly failed to cut her finger.

Miejue Shitai tossed the sword back to Jing Xuan. "Humph," she snorted and said, "I'll let you go this time. Next time you use this kind of malicious martial art, make sure you don't fall into my hand." Since her attack to a junior did not hit its target, true to her higher status, she was not willing to make another move.

Yin Liting saw the vicious and malicious the martial art Zhu'er practiced, which was his school's big taboo. However, she had pierced Yin Wulu in her attempt to help his side; furthermore, he also saw her concern toward Zhang Wuji and how passionately she was devoted to him. In the end, he felt compassionate toward Zhu'er and did not want Miejue Shitai to injure her.

"Shishu [martial (younger) uncle]," he persuaded Miejue Shitai, "This child has learned the wrong kind of skill, we can slowly help her to learn from another great master. Hmm ... perhaps ... perhaps ..." He was thinking that it would be best if Miejue Shitai was willing to accept her as an Emei disciple; but he remembered how this young girl had just called her 'old thief nun'. Fortunately, he managed to stop in time and did not continue speaking. Beckoning to the young scholar to come over, he said, "Qingshu, quickly pay your respects to Shitai and to all Shibo and Shishu."

The scholar hurriedly took three steps forward and knelt in front of Mijue Shitai. When he bowed to Jing Xuan, everybody continually called out 'Do not dare' and all of them returned his salute. Zhang Sanfeng's age was close to a hundred years; in terms of seniority, he was actually more than one generation above Mijue Shitai. But because Yin Liting was engaged to Ji Xiaofu, he was considered one generation younger than Mijue Shitai. Supposing Zhang Sanfeng was considered of the same generation with the Emei Pai founder Guo Xiang then technically Mijue Shitai should call Yin Liting 'Shishu'. Fortunately, Wudang and Emei were two distinct schools and neither one considered the seniority of the other school as important, so they address each other based on their age, regardless of the generational seniority. Therefore, when the young scholar called them as 'Shibo' and 'Shishu' [martial uncles], Jing Xuan and the others modestly declined.

Everybody had just witnessed his battle against the three Yin brothers; his movements were deliberate, his techniques were refined and wonderful, clearly he was a disciple of a prestigious school. Furthermore, although he was at a disadvantage under the three martial art masters' attack, he still maintained his calm in resisting the enemy; he did not the least bit look panicked, which was not easy to do. Now that they met face to face, everybody could not help but secretly admire him. "What a handsome young man!" they thought. They could see that in his delicately handsome appearance, there was a third part of proud and imposing bearing, causing those who saw him to be impressed.

"This is my Da Shige's only son," Yin Liting said, "His name is Qingshu."

Jing Xuan said, "For the last several years, the name and chivalrous deeds of Yu Mian Meng Chang [Jade-faced Meng

Chang – emperor of the Later Shu kingdom, known for his aptitude in ruling the kingdom] is quite famous; the Jianghu people say that Song Shaoxia [young hero Song] is generous and vehement in upholding justice, always ready to deliver people from their distress. It is very fortunate to meet a revered model.” The crowd of Emei disciples murmured among themselves with the ‘he really lives up to his reputation’ look of admiration on their faces.

Zhu’er stood close to Zhang Wuji. “Ahniue Ge,” she said in low voice, “This man is a lot more handsome than you are.”

“Of course,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Do you need to mention it?”

“Are you jealous?” Zhu’er asked.

“Are you joking?” Zhang Wuji replied, “Why should I?”

“He is looking at your Miss Zhou,” Zhu’er said, “You are still not jealous?”

Zhang Wuji turned his attention to Song Qingshu, and sure enough, Song Qingshu was looking at Zhou Zhiruo; but Zhang Wuji did not care. After finding out that Zhu'er was indeed Ah Li whom he met at the Butterfly Valley that year, his heart was tumultuous. At that time Zhu'er was forcing him to come with her to the Lingshe Island, he had no choice but fiercely bite her hand because he could not free himself otherwise. Unexpectedly, she had never forgotten him all this time. He could not help but feeling very grateful.

"Qingshu," he heard Yin Liting said, "Let's go."

Song Qingshu said, "Kongtong Pai has made an appointment to meet with us in this area by noon today, but they have

not arrived yet until now; I am afraid they have met some set-back."

Yin Liting looked worried. "I am afraid so," he said.

"Yin Liushu," Song Qingshu said, "I think it is better for us to travel together with the Emei Pai seniors to the west."

"Very well," Yin Liting nodded.

Miejue Shitai and Jing Xuan and the rest all thought, "For the last several years, Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren no longer deals with day-to-day business, Song Yuanqiao is the acting Zhang Men [sect leader] of Wudang. It looks like the third generation Zhang Men position will fall into this Song Shaoxia's hand. Although Yin Liting is his Shishu, he heeds his advice."

Actually, they did not know that Yin Liting was always easy-going; not often would he pull his rank on others, he very seldom opposed whatever other people suggested.

After travelling for about forty, fifty 'li', they saw a tall sand dune ahead of them. Seeing Song Qingshu quickly climb the sand dune, Jing Xuan waved her left hand and two Emei disciples quickly followed. They did not want to be outdone by the Wudang Pai. As the three of them climbed over the sand dune, they cried out in alarm, because to the west of the sand dune there were about thirty bodies scattered on the sand.

Hearing the cry, everybody rushed to climb the sand dune. They noticed that all the corpses, young and old alike, if their skulls were not shattered, then their chests were smashed in; apparently they were all struck by a large blunt object.

Yin Liting had a vast experience; he said, “The Poyang [name of a city/county] Clan of Jiangxi has been wiped out by the Ju Mu [Gigantic Wood] Flag of the Devil Cult.”

Miejue Shitai frowned. “Why did the Poyang Clan come over here?” she asked, “Did your honorable Pai invite them?” She did not sound too happy. The prestigious schools of the Wulin world had always been discriminatory against the clans and societies [‘bang’ and ‘hui’]; Miejue Shitai did not want to mingle with them.

Yin Liting busily said, “We did not. But Poyang Clan’s Liu Bangzhu [Clan Leader] is a disciple of Kongtong Pai. They must have heard the Six Major Sects are besieging the Brightness Peak, and then volunteered to come and help their school.

“Humph,” Miejue Shitai snorted; no longer saying anything.

The disciples buried the bodies of the Poyang Clan people in the sand. They were about to continue their journey when suddenly the grave farthest to the west split open; from beneath the sand flew a person, who grabbed a male disciple and ran away. The rest of the people were so frightened that they were at a loss; about seven, eight Emei female disciples screamed. But they saw that Miejue Shitai, Yin Liting, Song Qingshu and Jing Xuan had already run after that person.

A short moment later everyone came to their senses; they realized now that the person jumping out of the grave must be Qing Yi Fu Wang of the Devil Cult. He must have put on Poyang Clan’s uniform, mixed himself among the corpses and stopped his breathing, pretended to be dead. The Emei disciples did not look carefully and had buried him in the

sand. His skill was strong, and he had a lot of guts; so he did not immediately make his presence known. Luckily the sand was loose, so he had no problem holding his breath for a while. When he felt he had fooled them enough, he suddenly broke out of the grave.

At first, Mijue Shitai and the other, four people, were running abreast; but after making a large half circle, the difference in their skill levels became apparent. Two people were now running ahead of the other two; Yin Liting and Mijue Shitai in the front, Song Qingshu and Jing Xuan on the rear. But Qing Yi Fu Wang's 'qing gong' was very strong; truly unparalleled in the world; even when he was carrying a man in his arms, how could Yin Liting and the others overtake him?

When they were about to circle the second time, Song Qingshu suddenly stopped and called out, "Zhao Lingzhu Shishu, Bei Jinyi Shishu, please outflank him from position 'li' [lit. leave/depart]; Ding Minjun Shishu, Li Mingxia Shishu, please cut him off from position 'zhen' [lit. shake/jolt; my dictionary also gives: symbolizing thunder in 'ba gua'] ..." He continuously shouted his order, instructing the more than thirty Emei disciples to occupy various positions according to Ba Gua [trigrams].

At that moment, the Emei people were like a dragon without a head; hearing the instructions he shouted with authority, everybody complied immediately. This way, Qing Yi Fu Wang was not able to circle freely; with a shrill laughter he tossed the man he had been carrying high to the sky, and then he sped away.

Mijue Shitai put out her hands to receive the disciple falling down, while Wei Yixiao's voice came across the sandy desert from afar, "Unexpectedly Emei Pai has this kind of skilled

man; Miejue Lao Ni [old nun] is truly amazing!" It was obvious that he was praising Song Qingshu.

When Miejue Shitai lowered her head to look at the disciple in her hands, she saw his throat was dripping with blood with two rows of teeth marks; he was definitely dead. Everybody stood around her; they were grieved beyond words.

After a long time, Yin Liting spoke up, "According to what I heard, each time this Qing Yi Fu Wang has to use his martial art, he has to suck fresh blood from a live human being. It looks like the rumor is not false. It's too bad for this Shidi [martial (younger) brother] ... ay ..."

Miejue Shitai was ashamed and furious at the same time. Ever since she assumed the Sect Leader position, Emei Pai had never received this kind of significant setback; two of her disciples died in succession, their blood being sucked by the enemy, yet she could not even see the enemy's appearance clearly.

After staring blankly for half a day, she turned her piercing gaze toward Song Qingshu and asked, "How do you know these many names of my disciples?"

"Jing Xuan Shishu introduced numerous Shishu to disciple," Song Qingshu replied.

"Hey, photographic memory! [orig. 'ru er bu wang' - enter the ears won't forget]" Miejue Shitai exclaimed, "Of course my Emei Pai does not have this kind of talent."

When they stopped for the night that evening, Song Qingshu respectfully came to Miejue Shitai. He bowed and said, "Qianbei [senior, older generation], 'wanbei' [junior,

younger generation] has a presumptuous request to ask."

"If you know it is presumptuous, why ask?" Miejue Shitai coldly replied.

"Yes," Song Qingshu respectfully replied. He bowed again and returned to sit next to Yin Liting.

Everybody heard he came to Miejue Shitai with a request, but when the request was declined, he did not talk too much; they were all curious: what was it that he wanted to ask? Finally Ding Minjun could not hold her patience.

"Song Xiongdi [brother]," she asked, "What is it that you want to ask my Shifu?"

Song Qingshu replied, "When my father taught 'wanbei' sword technique, he mentioned that among the sword experts of this age, our own school's Shizu [ancestor master] is number one; next to him is Emei Pai Zhang Men Miejue 'qianbei'. Father said, Wudang and Emei swordsmanship each has its own advantages and disadvantages. For example, our school's 'Shou Hui Wu Xian' [hand brandishes five-stringed instrument] is very similar to your honorable Sect's 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan' [light veil, small fan] with minor differences. But if the force on the sword's blade is increased, the move loses its liveliness and agility, unlike the 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan', which can maintain its free and unrestrained character." He was speaking and pulling out his sword at the same time, and then executed those two stances in succession; only when he launched the 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan', his movements were somewhat nondescript.

Ding Minjun laughed and said, "That's not right." Taking the sword from his hand, she demonstrated the stance for him and said, "My wrist is still in pain, I cannot exert my

strength, but the movement should be like that."

Song Qingshu gasped in admiration. He said, "Father always says that he is unfortunate never to see your revered master's swordsmanship. Today 'wanbei' can see Ding Shishu's 'Qing Luo Xiao Shan' stance, it truly is an eye opener for me. Wanbei was thinking of asking Shitai for some pointers to satisfy some doubts and suspicions in my heart. But wanbei is not your honorable Pai's disciple; thereupon I shouldn't have said anything."

Miejue Shitai was sitting some distance away, but she heard everything he said. Hearing that Song Yuanqiao ranked her as number two in the world in terms of swordsmanship, she was satisfied. Zhang Sanfeng was considered the 'tai shan bei dou' [as weighty as Mount Tai, as brilliant as the Big Dipper] in the martial art study of the present age; everybody admired him. She had never had any desire to surpass this grand master who was rarely seen, at present, as well as in the past. For a Wudang main disciple to unexpectedly regard her swordsmanship as the most refined aside from Zhang Sanfeng, she could not help but feel very proud of herself. Seeing Ding Minjun executed the stance with only thirty, forty percent proficiency, she was displeased; how could the Emei Pai sword technique whose prestige had shaken the world was just like this? She stood up and came near immediately; without saying anything she took the sword from Ding Minjun's hand. Lifting the sword so that it was level with her nose, she gently shook the sword that the blade made a buzzing noise. And then she moved the sword from right to left, again from left to right, the sword successively flashed nine times with an extraordinary speed, but each move was very clear. Seeing their master launched this amazing sword technique, the Emei disciple's hearts were pounding and their palms were wet with perspiration.

“Excellent sword technique! Excellent sword technique!” Yin Liting called loudly, “Wonderful!”

Song Qingshu watched with rapt attention while holding his breath; inwardly he was frightened. At first he commended Emei sword technique just to flatter Miejue Shitai; who would have thought that as she executed the technique, it was unimaginably subtle and amazing that he could not help but submit to her wholeheartedly. After that, with all sincerity Song Qingshu asked for advice. Whatever he asked, Miejue Shitai would answer without reservation, so that she passed on more knowledge to him than to her own disciples. Song Qingshu’s mastery of the martial art was already high, he was also intelligent so he asked all the right questions.

Emei disciples sat around these two people. They watched their Shifu fully demonstrate each one of the sword techniques, every single one was exquisite, strange and subtle, amazing to the extreme. There were some disciples who had been with their Shifu for a dozen of years yet had never seen Shifu demonstrate such divine skill.

Zhang Wuji and Zhu’er stood far outside the circle; they felt it was inappropriate for them to watch Emei’s sword technique demonstration without authorization. Suddenly Zhu’er said to Zhang Wuji, “Ahniu Ge, if I can learn ‘qing gong’ like Qing Yi Fu Wang, I will die satisfied.”

“Why would you want to learn that kind of heretical skill?” Zhang Wuji said, “Yin Liu ... Yin Liuxia said that each time this Wei Yixiao utilizes his martial art, he must drink human blood. Isn’t that demonical?”

“His martial art skill is good,” Zhu’er replied, “He managed to kill Emei Pai’s disciples. If his ‘qing gong’ was somewhat

lacking, that Old Nun and her companions would have caught him and killed him; only they would not suck his blood. The end result is the same; sucking blood or not, what's the difference? Upright prestigious school or heretical and demonic way, what's different?"

For a moment Zhang Wuji could not find a right answer. Suddenly he saw a bright flash of a sword flying straight up to the sky from amidst the people. Turned out Song Qingshu was sparring with Miejue Shitai. During the fifth stance, 'hei zhao ling hu' [spirit fox of the black marsh], she shook Song Qingshu's sword to the sky. This stance was created by Emei Pai's founder, Guo Xiang to commemorate her adventure with Yang Guo when they went to the black marsh to catch the spirit fox.

As everybody looked up at the sword, they saw a yellow flame shot to the sky on the northeast, about a dozen 'li' away. "Kongtong Pai meets the enemy," Yin Liting called out, "Let's go and help."

In this far away mission to the western region to besiege the Devil Cult this time, in order to conceal their operation, the Six Major Sects adopted a strategy of entering the enemy territory separately and then launch a converging attack from different directions. They had agreed on rockets in six different colors as their means of communicating with each other. Yellow rocket was Kongtong Pai's signal.

Everybody immediately rushed toward the direction of the flame. They heard loud noises of combat, the sound was getting increasingly wretched; often times they would hear one or two people crying out as they met their deaths. When they reached the place, they were greatly shocked, because what they saw was a large scale massacre, an orgy of bloodshed. Both sides had several hundred people in the

battle. Under the bright moon, the sabers and swords flicker as the combatants ignore death and overlook live in hard fighting.

As long as he lived, Zhang Wuji had never seen this kind of battle. He saw sabers and swords fly and dance in the air, blood spill and flesh cut open; truly it was a scene too horrible to endure. He did not wish for the Devil Cult to prevail, but also unwilling for Yin Liushu and his company to triumph over their opponent. One side was the Sect where his father came from, the other was his mother's; but both sides were in an impossible-to-coexist kind of fierce battle. Each time he saw somebody was killed, his heart was shaken, a burst of grief rose up.

Yin Liting observed the battle for a moment and then said, "The enemy consists of Rui Jin [acute/sharp metal], Hong Shui [flooding water] and Lie Huo [raging inferno], three Flags. Hmm, Kongtong Pai is here, Huashan Pai has also arrived, and so has Kunlun Pai. Our side's three Sects against the enemy's three Flags. Qingshu, let's go into the battle." He waved his sword to split the air, making a buzzing noise.

"Wait," Song Qingshu said, "Liushu, look on that side. There are still a large number of the enemy waiting for an opportunity to make their move."

Following the direction of his hand, Zhang Wuji saw that there were three groups of riders clumped together in neat formation toward the east, several dozen 'zhang' away from the battlefield. Each group had a hundred men. Currently, the three Sects against three Flags on the battlefield were evenly matched, but if these three companies of the Devil Cult entered the battle, Kongtong, Huashan and Kunlun, three Sects would inadvertently suffer a crushing defeat.

However, for an unknown reason, these three companies only held their reins without moving.

Miejue Shitai and Yin Liting were secretly alarmed. "Why don't those people make their move?" Yin Liting asked Song Qingshu.

Song Qingshu shook his head, "I can't think through," he said.

Zhu'er suddenly laughed coldly. "What is it you cannot think through?" she said, "Nothing is clearer than this."

Song Qingshu's face reddened, but he did not say anything. Miejue Shitai wanted to open her mouth to ask, but finally she held her peace. Yin Liting said, "Would Miss please give us directions?"

Zhu'er said, "Those three groups are from the Heavenly Eagle Cult. Although the Heavenly Eagle Cult branched out from the Devil Cult, they have never been in good terms with the Five-Element Flags. If your party managed to wipe out the Five-Element Flags, the Heavenly Eagle Cult will be inwardly joyful. Perhaps Yin Tianzheng then can work his way to the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu position."

Miejue Shitai instantly saw the light. Yin Liting said, "Thank you very much for your insight, Miss."

Miejue Shitai stared at Zhu'er. She nodded her head while thinking, "Jin Hua Popo's martial art skill is not weak. Who could have thought that this young disciple of hers is actually also quite good?"

By this time, the group of Emei disciples arrived one after another; they stood behind Miejue Shitai.

“Song Shaoxia,” Jing Xuan said, “Speaking about battle strategy, none of us could surpass your knowledge. Everybody will obey your command. We just want to kill the enemy. Please don’t be bashful.”

“Liushu, this ... this ...” Song Qingshu stammered, “How can nephew dare?”

“At a time like this you still pay particular attention to superficial politeness?” Miejue Shitai said, “Just issue your order.”

Song Qingshu saw the battle situation was urgent; fighting the Rui Jin Flag, Kunlun Pai seemed to have an upper hand, Huashan and Hong Shui seemed to be evenly matched, while Kongtong Pai seemed not able to hold with the Lie Huo Flag that surrounded them in the middle, slaughtering them left and right.

Song Qingshu said, “Let’s form three groups and charge down on Rui Jin Flag from three directions. Shitai with her team attack from the east, Liushu with his team attack from the west, Jing Xuan Shishu, wanbei and our team attack from the south ...”

Jing Xuan was perplexed. “Kunlun Pai is not in a dire situation at all,” she said, “I think Kongtong Pai’s situation is extremely critical.”

“Kunlun Pai is already holding the upper hand,” Song Qingshu explained, “With our additional great fighting power, we thunder in to kill; we can annihilate the Rui Jin Flag in one stroke. The other two Flags will then be wasted and will scatter into the wind. If we help Kongtong, we will be locked into a harsh battle. The Heavenly Eagle Cult will then reap the benefit just like a fisherman spreading his net.

Our effort will then be wasted."

Jing Xuan was truly won over with admiration. "Song Shaoxia has said it well," she said. She divided her martial brothers and sisters into three groups at once.

Zhu'er pulled Zhang Wuji's sled away. "Let us go," she said, "There is no advantage for us to stay in here." She then turned around and started to move.

Song Qingshu quickly moved to overtake them, he blocked them with his sword across his chest. "Miss, please stop," he called out.

"And why must I?" Zhu'er said.

"Miss' origin is dubious," Song Qingshu said, "I can't let you go this easily."

With a cold laugh Zhuer said, "So what if my origin is dubious? So what if it is not?"

Miejue Shitai's heart was burning with impatience; she could not wait to set aside the Buddhist commandment against taking life immediately and kill the Devil Cult people neat and clean. Listening to Zhu'er and Song Qingshu bickering with each other, her shadow swayed and she had already reached Zhu'er. Her hand quickly sealed three major acupoints on Zhu'er's back, waist and leg. Zhu'er's martial art skill and Miejue Shitai's differed too much; she was completely helpless against this attack. Her knees buckled and she fell down to the ground.

Miejue Shitai brandished her sword and shouted, "We are setting aside the commandment against taking life today; destroy the demons completely!" Along with Yin Liting and Jing Xuan, they charged toward the Rui Jin Flag from three

different directions.

Kunlun Pai disciples, led by He Taichong and Ban Shuxian, had already occupied the dominant position against the Rui Jin Flag. With Emei and Wudang now joining the battle, their power multiplied. Miejue Shitai's swordsmanship was swift and fierce beyond comparison; no one from the Ming Cult was able to hold her for more than three stances. Her big and tall figure was seen weaving through the enemies. Stabbing to the east and hacking to the west, in a very short time seven Ming Cult people lost their lives under her sword.

Realizing the dire circumstances, Zhuang Zheng, the Flag Leader of the Rui Jin Flag rushed to meet the enemy with his wolf-fang staff. Only then was Miejue Shitai's advance slightly obstructed. After exchanging about ten stances, Miejue Shitai unleashed the full power of Emei swordsmanship; her sword was growing faster and stronger. But Zhuang Zheng's martial art skill was highly refined; unexpectedly he was able to match her for a while.

By this time, Yin Liting, Jing Xuan, Song Qingshu, He Taichong, Ban Shuxian and their company had done major killing. Although the Rui Jin Flag did not lack highly skilled fighters under its banner, how could they resist the joined forces of Emei, Kunlun and Wudang, three Sects? Before long, the casualties on their side were disastrous.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' Zhuang Zheng struck his staff three times, forcing Miejue Shitai to take a step backward. These three strikes were immediately followed by another one as his staff went down, hard and fast, toward the top of her head. Miejue Shitai's sword moved slightly to the side and knocked the body of the staff, using the stance 'shun shui tui zhou' [push the boat with the current], forcing the wolf-fang staff to the side. To her surprise, as an important

character within the Ming Cult, Zhuang Zheng could be considered a first-class martial art expert in the Wulin world; his natural strength was amazingly powerful, his internal energy cultivation had also reached top level. As he felt an internal energy push on his wolf-fang staff, he shouted loudly and countered it with a brute and fierce force of his arm. 'Crack!' Miejue Shitai's sword broke into three sections.

When her weapon broke, Miejue Shitai's arm went numb, but she did not withdraw. Reaching to her back, she pulled the Yitian Sword. A cold and bright ray of light flashed and sparks flew as with the 'tie suo heng jiang' [iron lock across the river] she thrust the sword forward. Zhuang Zheng suddenly felt the wolf-fang staff in his hands got lighter, as the full-of-teeth head of the staff was cut down by the Yitian Sword, along with half of his own head, which was also truncated by this matchless sharp sword.

Seeing their Flag Leader has lost his life, the Rui Jin Flag people screamed hysterically and with bloodshot eyes they fought even more ruthlessly, completely disregarding their own lives, immediately killing several Kunlun and Emei disciples.

Someone from the Hong Shui Flag shouted, "Zhuang Qishi [Flag Leader Zhuang] has returned to Heaven for the sake of the Cult, Rui Jin and Lie Huo, two Flags to withdraw; Hong Shui Flag to cover our retreat."

The banner of the Lie Huo Flag changed; following the order, they withdrew to the west. But the Rui Jin Flag was fighting even more fiercely, nobody withdrew. The man from the Hong Shui Flag shouted again, "Tang Qishi [Flag Leader Tang] of Hong Shui Flag gives his order: the situation is unfavorable, Rui Jin Flag people to withdraw immediately. We will avenge Zhuang Qishi on a later date."

Several people from the Rui Jin Flag shouted together, "Hong Shui Flag, please withdraw, avenge our grievance in the future. Rui Jin Flag brethrens will live and die together with Zhuang Qishi."

The Hong Shui Flag suddenly raised a black banner. Someone with a thunderous voice called out, "Brothers of the Rui Jin Flag, the Hong Shui Flag will definitely avenge you."

The Rui Jin Flag only had about seventy men left; all in one voice called out, "Many thanks Tang Qishi!"

The Hong Shui Flag's banner turned over and they also withdrew to the west.

Seeing the orderliness of the enemy lineup, with about twenty people on the rear held some glittering cylinders, The people of Huashan and Kongtong, two schools did not dare to pursue they didn't know what kind of strange trick these contraptions were. Everybody turned their attention on the attack on the Rui Jin Flag.

By this time the battle outcome had been decided; Kunlun, Emei, Wudang, Huashan and Kongtong, five Sects surrounded the Ming Cult's Rui Jin Flag. Other than Wudang, which had only two people present, the other four Sects' people were all elite fighters. Since the Flag Leader was dead, the Rui Jin Flag was like a dragon without a head; naturally they were not a match of these martial art experts. But the people serving under the banner were very loyal, they all view death as a return home, and were determined to follow Zhuang Zheng in dying for the sake of the Cult.

After killing several more people, Yin Liting felt their victory

was inappropriate. In a loud voice he shouted, "Devil Cult demons, listen up: You have only one way out of the death's door. Throw your weapons at once, we will spare your lives."

The Vice Flag Leader laughed aloud and said, "You disregard our Ming Cult's people too much! Since Zhuang Dage [big brother] has died, would we wish to live?"

Yin Liting called out, "Friends of Kunlun, Emei, Huashan and Kongtong, everybody take ten steps back, let these demons surrender." One after another, everybody retreated.

Out of her hatred toward the Devil Cult, Miejue Shitai did not retreat, but brandished her sword wildly. Wherever the blade of the Yitian Sword reached, swords broke and sabers cut, limbs severed and heads flew. Seeing that their master did not withdraw, the Emei Pai disciples charged back into the battleground to join the slaughter. Now it was Emei Pai one sect against the Rui Jin Flag.

The Rui Jin Flag still had approximately sixty people, among which, around twenty men were martial art experts. Under the leadership of the Vice Flag Leader Wu Jingcao, they outnumbered the thirty some Emei disciples by two to one. Technically, they should gain the upper hand. However, the Yitian Sword in Miejue Shitai's hand was simply too sharp, her sword stances were also very fierce and swift; her dark green shadow appeared to be everywhere, sweeping everything in her path. Instantly seven, eight more people lost their lives under her sword.

Zhang Wuji could not bear to watch. "Let us go," he said to Zhu'er. Reaching out, he unsealed her acupoints. Who would have thought that after massaging her back and waist for awhile, Zhu'er still felt numb and aching because her acupoints were still sealed. Only then did they realize the

profoundness of Miejue Shitai's internal energy. She only touched lightly, yet her strength penetrated deep into the blood passages. Although Zhang Wuji possessed enough strength and knowledge to unseal the acupoints, he could not do that in such a short period of time.

Zhang Wuji sighed. When he turned his head, he saw all the weapons of the dozens of Rui Jin Flag people were broken. In one hand, these people were surrounded by the Kunlun, Huashan and Kongtong disciples, on the other hand, they were unwilling to run away; thereupon they fought Emei disciples with their bare hands.

Although Miejue Shitai abhorred the Devil Cult, with her status as the Sect Leader of a major sect, she did not want to use a weapon to massacre unarmed enemies. With an outstretched left hand finger, she floated everywhere like a passing cloud or flowing water. In a short moment, the various acupoints of fifty plus Rui Jin Flag people were sealed. They stood upright on the spot, unable to move at all.

Witnessing Miejue Shitai's superior skill like this, the spectators all cheered. It was now daybreak. Suddenly they realized that the Heavenly Eagle Cult's three groups of riders slowly closing in from the east, south and north directions. The riders stopped when they were about several dozen of 'zhang' away from these people. Apparently they assumed a wait-and-see attitude from some distance away and did not wish to challenge the enemy right away.

"Ahniu Ge," Zhu'er said, "Let's leave quickly. It would be a lot worse if we fall into the hands of the Heavenly Eagle Cult."

Zhang Wuji had an inexplicable affection toward the

Heavenly Eagle Cult in his heart. It was his mother's sect. When he thought about his mother, oftentimes he also thought, "Mother has died, I can't see her anymore; I wonder if I can see Waigong [maternal grandfather] and Jiujiu [maternal uncle]?" Now that the Heavenly Eagle Cult people were nearby, he wondered if his grandfather or his uncle was among them; therefore, he did not want to leave too soon.

Song Qingshu stepped forward to talk to Miejue Shitai. "Qianbei, we'd better execute the Rui Jin Flag before dealing with the Heavenly Eagle Cult, so that we will have one less thing to worry." Miejue Shitai nodded.

The early morning sun slowly rose from the east. Its hazy ray shone on Miejue Shitai's big and tall figure, leaving a long shadow on the ground. Within the imposing image she projected, there was a cold and lonely, yet frightening emotion. In her desire to break the Devil Cult's spirit, she did not want to kill them with a sword just like that.

In a stern voice she said, "Devil Cult people, listen up: whoever wants to live only needs to beg for mercy, then you'll be free to go."

Her words were met with silence. After half a day, a series of incessant ha-ha, hey-hey, hee-hee laughter was heard; the Ming Cult people broke out in laughter, the sound was loud and clear.

"What's so funny?" Miejue Shitai indignantly asked.

In a loud and clear voice the Rui Jin Flag's Vice Flag Leader Wu Jingcao responded, "We have made an oath to live and die together with Zhuang Dage. Just kill us quickly."

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, "Very well! You still want to be heroes and warriors in a time like this! You wish for a

quick and painless death? Not that easy!" Her sword vibrated lightly and immediately cut Wu Jingcao's right arm.

Wu Jingcao laughed out loud, his expression remained calm and composed. "The Ming Cult enforces justice on behalf of Heaven, provides relief to the people, there is no difference between life and death. Old Thief Nun wants us to kneel down and surrender, I suggest you get rid of that desire at the earliest opportunity."

Miejue Shitai was even more furious. 'Shua! Shua! Shua!' three times, she chopped the next three Cult disciples' arms. To the fifth man she asked, "Are you going to beg for mercy?"

"Eat your own stinky old nun dog fart!" the man cursed.

Jing Xuan stepped forward from the side and chopped that man's arm with her sword, while calling out, "Let disciple chop these demons!" She asked several men in succession, but none of the Ming Cult people was willing to surrender. Jing Xuan chopped until her hand grew tired.

"Shifu," she turned her head around, "These demons are so stubborn ..." Her intention was to ask for leniency from her master.

Miejue Shitai ignored her completely. "Chop everybody's right arm first," she said, "If they are still stubborn, chop their left arms!" Jing Xuan had no choice but chop several more people's arms.

Zhang Wuji was not able to keep patient much longer; he sprang up from the snow sled and stood in front of Jing Xuan. "Stop!" he called out. Jing Xuan was startled; she took a step backward.

In a loud voice Zhang Wuji said, "Such a cold-blooded cruelty, aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Everybody was astonished to see a young man with tattered clothes and unsightly appearance suddenly stepping forward boldly. And then they heard his stern but logical question to Jing Xuan, who was a famous senior master of a famous Sect, they could not help but feel intimidated by his imposing manner.

Jing Xuan let out a long laugh and said, "The demons of the heretic way deserve to be killed. What cruelty are you talking about?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Each one of these men upholds brotherhood and loyalty above everything else, they are not afraid of death, those are the qualities of real heroes and warriors; why do you call them demons of the heretic way?"

"Aren't they Devil Cult's disciples?" Jing Xuan retorted, "Isn't that of the heretical way? That Qing Yi Fu Wang sucks human blood, he killed my Shimei and Shidi. You saw it with your own eyes. If that is not demonic, then what do you call it?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "That Qing Yi Fu Wang killed two people, you have killed ten times more people. He used his teeth to kill, Zun Shi [revered master] used Yitian Sword to kill. They both killed people. What difference there is in good or evil way?"

Jing Xuan was furious. "Young fellow!" she shouted, "You actually dare to equate my Shifu with the heretic demon?" 'Whoosh!' her palm struck toward Zhang Wuji's face. Zhang Wuji hastily moved sideways to evade.

Jing Xuan was the most senior disciple of the Emei Pai, her martial art skill was taught directly by her master. This strike to his face was a fake one; as soon as Zhang Wuji moved sideways, her left leg flew out toward the pit of his stomach. 'Bang! Crack!' Jing Xuan's left leg broke and she was thrown away several 'zhang' backwards.

Turned out as soon as Zhang Wuji's chest was kicked, the Jiu Yang Shen Gong [the divine energy from Nine Yang] inside his body automatically reacted against the incoming force. His footwork was far inferior to Jing Xuan's, but the Jiu Yang Shen Gong was very powerful; the stronger the incoming force, the heavier the reaction force would be. Jing Xuan felt as if her kick was hitting her own body. Luckily she did not have any desire to take his life; this kick only contained about 50% of her strength, so that she did not suffer serious internal injury.

"I am really sorry," Zhang Wuji apologetically said. He rushed forward to help her up.

"Go away! Go away!" Jing Xuan angrily said.

"Yes!" Zhang Wuji replied. He had no choice but to back off. Two of Emei female disciples quickly came over to helped their First Martial Sister up.

Most of everyone watching knew Jing Xuan was the first or at least the second best martial art expert under Miejue Shitai. They were wondering why she was this useless; she was thrown several 'zhang' away by this raggedy youngster just in one stance? If they say that she had enjoyed false reputation, it did not seem so, because when battling the Rui Jin Flag just now, her swordsmanship was superb; indeed everybody had seen it. Could it be that they had misjudged

this raggedy and filthy young man that he actually had a peerless martial art skill?

Miejue Shitai also was secretly amazed. “Which school does this young man belong to?” she mused, “He has been my prisoner for many days, yet I have not paid attention to him. Turned out he is a master who did not show his true colors; he is actually a great character who did not boast his greatness. Even if I want to shake Jing Xuan like this, I am afraid I cannot; perhaps in this age only that old Taoist Zhang Sanfeng who has this kind of ability. But then he had to train for a hundred years before reaching this level.”

Miejue Shitai’s character was like ginger; the older she got, the spicier she became. Although she did not dare to belittle Zhang Wuji, actually she also did not have the least bit of fear in her heart. She looked at him from top to bottom to size him up.

At this time Zhang Wuji was already busy taking care of the Rui Jin Flag people’s bloody wounds. With top-ranked proficiency his hands sealed various acupoints on everyone so that the blood flowing from the cuts of arms was greatly reduced.

Among the spectators, there were not a few experts with similar acupoint sealing technique to treat injuries, but Zhang Wuji’s technique actually made everybody felt ashamed of their own inferiority. They did not even know what extraordinary technique Zhang Wuji was using.

The Vice Flag Leader Wu Jingcao said, “Thank you very much Shaoxia [young hero] for your kindness and loyalty. May I ask your honorable surname and great given name?”

“Zaixia [lit. under/below, the humble one] surnamed Zeng,

called Ahniu,” Zhang Wuji replied.

Miejue Shitai coldly said, “Come over here, young fellow; take my three sword stances.”

“I’m sorry, would Shitai wait a moment?” Zhang Wuji replied, “Helping people is more important.” He finished wrapping the wound from the cut arm of the last person before he finally turned around, cupped his fists and said, “Miejue Shitai, I am not your match, fighting with you, Senior, is even more beyond what I can think of. I only hope both sides will stop fighting and forget all grudges and grievances of the past.”

When he said ‘both sides will stop fighting’, his tone was very sincere. In his heart, the ‘two sides’ was equal to the memory of his departed parents. One side was the prestigious and upright schools, the side of his father’s Wudang Pai; the other was demonic and heretical way of his mother’s Heavenly Eagle Cult.

“Ha ha ...” Miejue Shitai laughed, “Just with a few words from a stinky kid you want us to stop fighting? What are you? The Most Revered in the Wulin World [wu lin zhi zun]?”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was moved. “May I ask what about the Most Revered in the Wulin World?” he asked.

Miejue Shitai replied, “He who has the Tulong Dao in his hand will still have to compete with my Yitian Sword to decide who is weak and who is strong, only then will he be the Most Revered in the Wulin World. By that time, it won’t be too late to give everybody orders.”

Hearing how their master ridiculed Zhang Wuji, the Emei Pai disciples laughed mockingly. There were people from the

other Sects who also laughed.

Based on his age and status, it was highly inappropriate for Zhang Wuji to say 'stop fighting'. Hearing everybody sneering at him, Zhang Wuji blushed to the root of his hair. But he still could not bear to stay silent. "Why did you kill so many people?" he asked, "Everybody has a father, mother, wife and children. You killed them, their children would turn into helpless orphans, receivers of others' bullying. You Senior are a follower of Buddha [orig. 'chu jia ren' - one who left home], please show mercy."

He spoke without authority, his manner was inappropriate, but he remembered his own life experience and spoke with sincerity. His words were passionate and earnest that those who heard him were moved. Mijue Shitai, however, remained wooden.

"Young fellow," she said in her cold voice, "Do I need you to lecture me? You are conceited because of your profound internal energy that you are blowing hot air in here. Very well, take my three palm strikes, and I will let these people go."

"I can't take even one palm strike from your disciple, how am I going to take three from Shitai?" Zhang Wuji said, "I do not dare to compete in martial art with you; I am only asking you to show mercy. Just consider yourself showing divine kindness to these people."

"Zeng Xianggong [young master]," in a loud voice Wu Jingcao called out, "No need to talk too much with this old thief nun. We would rather under die this old thief nun's hand than receive her fake benevolence."

With squinting eyes Mijue looked at Zhang Wuji and asked, "Who is your Shifu?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "Although Father and Yifu both taught me martial arts, but they are not my Shifu." Thereupon he said, "I don't have any Shifu."

Once these words came out of his mouth, everybody present was very surprised. At first when he shook Jing Xuan with one stance, they thought he must be a disciple of a master, in their hearts there were thirty percent suspicions; who would have thought that he said he did not have any master? Wulin people revered their masters the most. It was not uncommon for someone unwilling to reveal his master's surname and given name; but very rare would someone who had a master to say he did not have any master. If Zhang Wuji said he did not have any Shifu, then he truly did not have any Shifu.

Miejue Shitai did not want to talk too much. "Receive the first strike!" she said. Her right hand stretched out with a casual slapping motion.

Faced with this circumstance, Zhang Wuji did not have any choice but to fight. Not daring to be careless, he pushed both palms out, receiving her one palm with his both hands. Unexpectedly Miejue Shitai's palm went down and then from below his hands swiftly slipped through his palms like an extraordinary slippery small fish. 'Slap! The palm squarely hit Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji was startled. The Jiu Yang Shen Gong protecting his body automatically reacted to the opponent's palm strength. But just before these two whiffs of tremendously strong internal energy collided, Miejue Shitai's palm strength suddenly disappeared without a trace. Zhang Wuji was taken by surprise. When he looked up to see her face, suddenly he felt as if the pit of his stomach was hit by an

iron hammer. Zhang Wuji staggered and was thrown rolling around twice on the ground. 'Wah!' he spurted out a mouthful of blood, which looked like a pile of mud on the sandy ground.

Miejue Shitai's palm power switched between 'swallowing' and 'throwing up', changing indeterminately, sucking and diverting the enemy's force before sending out her own strength again. It was the most refined and subtle of the internal energy cultivation of the martial art study. The spectators with profound martial art knowledge understood the amazing technique this palm; they all could not stop from cheering.

Zhu'er was extremely worried; she rushed toward Zhang Wuji and reached out to help him up, but suddenly her knees went numb and she slipped to the ground. Turned out although Zhang Wuji had unsealed her acupoints, the blood had not flowed freely. Seeing he received injury, in her anxiety she rushed to help, but after a short moment her strength gave up and she fell down.

"Ahniu Ge, you ... you ..." she called out.

Zhang Wuji felt the blood in his chest bubbling over. Shaking his hand he said, "I am not dead." And then he slowly crawled back up.

In the meantime, Miejue Shitai ordered three of her disciples, "Chop all the demons' right arms, no exceptions."

"Yes!" the three female disciples responded and with naked swords in their hands they walked toward the Rui Jin Flag people.

Zhang Wuji hastily said, "You ... you said if I take your three

palm strikes you will let them go. I ... I have received one strike, there are still ... still two more.”

When Miejue Shitai’s palm struck Zhang Wuji, she could tell that his internal energy was very strong, and not at all of the demonic and heretical way; it was rather similar to her own energy cultivation. She also knew that although he was protecting the Devil Cult people, he was not a Devil Cult member.

“Young people should not meddle in other people’s business,” she said, “Upright and heretic should be distinguished clearly. In that one palm strike I only used thirty percent of my strength; do you know?”

Zhang Wuji knew that as a Sect Leader of a respectable sect, her words could not be empty; if she said she had used only thirty percent of her strength, then she must have used only thirty percent of her strength. But no matter how hard-to-resist the next two palm strikes would be, he could not consider his own life more important by looking helplessly while she was harming the Rui Jin Flag people. Thereupon he said, “Disregarding my own capability, Zaixia would like ... would like to receive Shitai’s two palm strikes.”

Wu Jingcao called loudly, “Zeng Xianggong, we deeply feel your kindness! You are a hero who upholds justice and loyalty, deserving everybody’s utmost admiration and gratitude. You must not receive the remaining two palm strikes.”

Seeing Zhu’er fell by Zhang Wuji’s side, Miejue Shitai was annoyed because she obstructed her hands and feet. Her left sleeve brushed away, she rolled Zhu’er inside the sleeve and threw her back. Zhou Zhiruo rushed one step forward to take her and gently laid her down on the ground.

Zhu'er anxiously said, "Zhou Jiejie [older sister], quickly urge him not to receive the other two palm strikes. If you say it, he would listen."

"Why would he listen to me?" Zhou Zhiruo wondered.

"In his heart, he likes you very much," Zhu'er said, "Don't you know it?"

Zhou Zhiruo blushed profusely. "Pei!" she spat, "How can there be such a thing?"

In a loud and clear voice Miejue Shitai said, "Since you insist on being the real man, the hero, it is you who seek your own death. You must not blame me." Raising her right hand, with a strong gust of wind it attacked straight to Zhang Wuji's chest.

This time Zhang Wuji did not dare to lift up his hand to block; he wanted to avoid her palm power by leaning sideways. Miejue Shitai bent her right arm and turned it around quickly. From a seemingly impossible angle, her palm shot straight forward. 'Slap!' It struck him squarely on his back. Like a bunch of straw Zhang Wuji flew horizontally in the air and fell down heavily on the ground. His body crumpled motionlessly in the sand, it looked like he had met a violent death.

In this palm strike, Miejue Shitai's technique was flawless and exquisite beyond comparison, the spectators should have cheered; but in their hearts, everybody was secretly admiring Zhang Wuji's chivalry. Seeing he met with an unfortunate incident, they all called out in alarm and sighed; unexpectedly, no one cheered.

"Zhou Jiejie," Zhu'er begged, "Please, look at his injury; is it

heavy?"

Zhou Zhiruo's heart was pounding. Hearing Zhu'er was asking earnestly, she wanted to step out and look at his injury; but everybody was staring at Zhang Wuji. How could she, an eighteen, nineteen years old young woman, dare to look at a young man's injury? Much less the injury was caused by her own master. Although it might not be considered a blatant rebellion against her school if she stepped out, she would inadvertently show great disrespect toward her Shifu. Therefore, she had taken a step, but she pulled back.

By this time the sky was bright with the morning sun. A moment later Zhang Wuji's back seemed to be moving. He struggled hard to sit up slowly, but when his elbow was about a foot from the ground, his strength was gone; he spurted another mouthful of blood and tumbled again to the ground. In his daze, all he wanted was to lie down quietly, but he remembered he still had to take another palm strike to save the Rui Jin Flag people's lives. He took a deep breath and finally was able to sit up, but his body was swaying, as if he was ready to fall back down any second.

Everybody else was holding their breath while watching him intently. There were several hundred people all around, but it was so quiet that a fallen needle would be clearly heard.

In this complete silence, Zhang Wuji suddenly recalled several lines from the Nine Yang Manual:

'He is strong, let him be strong,
The cool breeze brushes away the small hill;
He is rowdy, let him be rowdy,
The bright moon shines on the great river.'

He had recited these lines several times in the deep valley, but had never understood the meaning. This time he

suddenly understood: Miejue Shitai was strong and ruthless, fierce beyond compare; definitely not his match. But in light of the essence of the Nine Yang Manual, it appeared that regardless of how strong and fierce the enemy, regardless of how ferocious, to him it was no more than a cool breeze brushing away the hill or a bright moon illuminating a river. Although he could feel the cool breeze of the bright moon, it would not bring him any harm. But how? What should he do that he would not receive any harm?

The next lines in the Manual said,

'Let him be fierce, let him be ruthless,

a mouthful of 'zhen qi' [real/genuine 'chi'] is enough for me.'

Thinking to this point, his mind suddenly opened. He sat cross-legged and regulated his breathing according to the technique described in the Manual. Almost instantly he felt a warm and comfortable feeling in his 'dan tian' [pubic region], lively and strong; the 'zhen qi' flowed into his four limbs and the hundreds of bones in his body. He was finally able to unleash the formidable power of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong. Although his flesh wound was so heavy that he vomited fresh blood, the 'zhen qi' inside his body indeed did not suffer the least bit of damage.

Watching him circulating his 'chi' to treat his injury, Miejue Shitai could not restrain her astonishment. This young man indeed possessed some extraordinary skill. The first stance she used to strike Zhang Wuji was from the 'piao xue chuan yun zhang' [floating snow piercing the cloud palm technique]. The second palm strike was even fiercer, it was the third stance of the 'jie shou jiu shi' [nine style cutting hand; the word 'cut' here means 'cut (or truncate) into section' or 'cut to length', not 'slice' or 'chop' kind of cuts]. Both were the best features of the Emei Pai palm techniques.

In the first strike she used only thirty percent of her strength. In the second strike, she added the power to

seventy percent. She presumed that if he did not get killed violently on the spot, his muscles and bones would certainly be shattered that he would be paralyzed and would not be able to move anymore. Who would have thought that after lying down for half a day he was able to sit up? It was totally beyond her anticipation.

According to the Wulin world custom, Miejue Shitai was not required to wait for him to circulate his breathing to treat his injury. But she was a person of high status, she definitely must not take advantage of her opponent's precarious position, especially since her opponent was of the younger generation.

"Hey, the one surnamed Zeng!" Ding Minjun called loudly, "If you do not dare to take my Shifu's third palm strike, just roll away as far as you can. If you are treating your injury for a lifetime in here, shall we also wait for you for a lifetime in here?"

"Ding Shijie," Zhou Zhiruo softly said, "There is no harm in letting him rest for a moment longer."

"You ... are you protecting an outsider?" Ding Minjun angrily said, "Looking at this boy ..." She wanted to say, 'Looking at this boy to be a handsome one, you are having ideas in your mind.' But she immediately remembered there were not just a few notable warriors of the other major sects standing around, naturally she must not utter this kind of vulgar language; and thus she stopped just in time. However, how could everybody present not understand her implication? Although she did not finish her words, it was not any different than if she had said it out loud.

Zhou Zhiruo was ashamed and anxious at the same time. Her face paled from the anger rising in her breast, but she was not willing to bicker. "Xiao Mei is only concerned over our school and Shizun's [respected master] prestige," she

said drily, "I hope others will not spread a gossip."

"What gossip?" Ding Minjun was surprised.

Zhou Zhiruo said, "Our school's martial art is well known all over the world, Shifu is one of the very best Senior Masters of the present age; she will not lower herself to the level of this junior young fellow. It's just that he was outrageously arrogant that she went into action to teach him a lesson. Do you think she really want to take his life? Our Sect's chivalry is renowned for nearly a hundred years, Shizun's benevolence and chivalry is magnanimous, who does not look up to her in admiration? This youngster is just like a candle, how can he be compared to the glorious light of the sun and the moon? Even if we let him train for a hundred more years, he still would not be our Shizun's match. Much less letting him tending his injury for a bit longer; what difference will it make?"

Her speech had made all who heard inwardly nod their heads. Miejue Shitai's delight was even greater, thinking that this young disciple indeed understood the cardinal principle and had raised their Sect's prestige in the eyes of the masters of other Sects.

As soon as Zhang Wuji finished circulating his 'zhen qi' for one round, his spirit was lifted and his body refreshed. He heard everything Zhou Zhiruo had said, and was aware that she had done everything she could to protect him. Also, based on her words, Miejue Shitai would be inconvenienced to strike him with a murderous intent. His heart was flooded with gratitude. He stood up and said, "Shitai, 'wanbei' will put my life at your service by taking your last palm strike."

Seeing that his vigor immediately returned after only sitting cross-legged for a while, Miejue Shitai mused, "This kid's

internal energy is indeed very deep, it's magical." She said, "You may fight me back. Who told you to take the beating without retaliating?"

"With 'wanbei's tiny bit of coarse martial art skill, I cannot touch even half a 'fen' [1 fen is approximately 1/3 cm or a little over 1/8"] of the corner of Shitai's clothes, how could I think of retaliating?" Zhang Wuji replied.

Miejue Shitai said, "Since you already know it, then why don't you run away at the earliest opportunity? A young man with this kind of courageous spirit is hard to come by. Miejue Shitai's palm does not normally show mercy, but today I am willing to make exception for you."

Zhang Wuji bowed. "Many thanks, Qianbei," he said, "Will you also spare these big brothers of the Rui Jin Flag?"

Miejue Shitai's long eyebrows drooped down. With a cold laugh she said, "Do you know what my Buddhist title is?"

"Qianbei's honorable title consists of the character 'Mie' [extinguish or overthrow (a regime)] at the top and 'Jue' [extinct or vanish, completely] at the bottom," Zhang Wuji replied.

"It's good that you know it," Miejue Shitai said, "Demons and heretical disciples, I must 'extinguish' and 'cut short'; I simply cannot show mercy. Do you think the two characters 'Miejue' [wipe out/destroy] is an empty name?"

"That being the case," Zhang Wuji said, "Qianbei may send out your third palm strike."

Miejue Shitai cast him a sidelong glance. She had never seen a more tenacious youth in her entire life. She was usually cold-hearted, but this time she started to feel

affection toward this talented young man. She thought, "Once my third palm strike is launched, he would definitely die. Since he is not a master of the demonical way, it would be a pity if he loses his life in such a young age!" After hesitating for a moment, she made up her mind. The third palm strike would hit the vital acupoint above his 'dantian', she would transmit her internal energy to shake his 'dantian' to stop his breathing so that he would faint instantly. After executing the Rui Jin Flag demons, she would help awaken him.

Brushing her left sleeve, she was about to launch the third palm strike when suddenly she heard someone called out, "Miejue Shitai, hold your palm!"

These words were spoken with a shrill voice, as sharp as a needle piercing everybody's ears; it was extremely uncomfortable. They saw from the northwest corner came a man wearing white robe, waving a folding fan in his hand, walking through the crowd. His feet did not raise the sand at all; it was as if he was floating over the water. The left lapel of this man's white robe was embroidered with a tiny black eagle with its wings spread out like it was soaring in the sky.

As soon as they saw him, everybody knew this man must be a master of the Heavenly Eagle Cult. Turned out the uniform of the Heavenly Eagle Cult was similar to the Ming Cult's uniform, which was white robe. Only the Ming Cult's uniform was embroidered with a red flame, while the Heavenly Eagle Cult's uniform was embroidered with a black eagle.

The man walked to within three 'zhang' from Miejue Shitai. He cupped his fists and said with a laugh, "Shitai, please, this third palm strike, how about I take it instead?"

"Who are you?" Miejue Shitai asked.

The man replied, "Zaixia surnamed Yin, and is called Yewang."

Once the name 'Yin Yewang' was uttered, a commotion broke among the people. Yin Yewang's reputation was indeed loud and clear throughout the Jianghu for the last twenty years. A lot of Wulin people said that his martial art skill was very high; as a matter of fact, it did not differ too far from his father, the Bai Mei Ying Wang, Yin Tianzheng. He was the 'tang zhu' [hall leader] of the Heavenly Eagle Cult's 'tian wei tang' [Heaven's Secret Hall]; his authority was second only to the Cult Leader.

Miejue Shitai estimated this man was no more than forty some years of age, but his pair of eyes was like a cold lightning sweeping everybody around, his manner was imposing and intimidating. Truly he was not someone to be trifled with, especially since she had heard quite a bit about his reputation. Therefore, with a cold voice she said, "What is this kid to you that you want to take my palm strike on his behalf?"

In his heart, Zhang Wuji cried out, "He is my Jiujiu [maternal uncle], my Jiujiu! Could it be that he recognized me and has come for me?"

Yin Yewang laughed out loud and said, "I don't even know him. I only saw that he is young yet strong-willed, not at all like those hypocritical Wulin people, those disciples who always fish for compliment. I am pleased, and thus I want to receive instruction and see how good Shitai's skill is."

The last few words were not spoken politely, apparently he did not have too high of a consideration toward Miejue Shitai. But Miejue Shitai was not angry, she turned toward

Zhang Wuji and said, "Kid, if you still want to live for a few years longer, it is not too late for you to go away at this time."

"Wanbei does not dare to be greedy of live and forget loyalty," Zhang Wuji replied.

Miejue Shitai nodded. She turned back toward Yin Yewang. "This kid still owes me one palm strike. Our own account will be settled a (pen) stroke for a stroke. I will certainly not disappoint Sire."

"Hey, hey," Yin Yewang sneered, "Miejue Shitai, if you have the ability, kill this young man. If this young man loses his life, I guarantee all of you will die without any burial site." As soon as he finished speaking, he floated back through the crowd while shouted, "Get out!"

Suddenly from the sandy ground around them appeared innumerable heads; each one had a shield in front of his body, while their hands held drawn bows. Row after row of arrowheads were aimed at the Major Sects' people.

Turned out the Heavenly Eagle Cult people had dug a tunnel under the sand and surrounded those people. Because everybody's attention was focused on Miejue Shitai and Zhang Wuji exchanging palm strikes, nobody suspected anything. Song Qingshu and the others were experienced warriors; they were on guard against the Heavenly Eagle Cult's frontal attack. They did not anticipate the Heavenly Eagle Cult would take advantage of the soft sandy ground by excavating underground tunnel and occupying a strategic position, taking full advantage of the terrain around them.

Everyone's face changed; they saw that the arrowheads

emitted bluish rays under the bright sunlight, obviously the arrows were poisoned. As soon as Yin Yewang issued his order, it would be difficult for the upright sects' people to protect their own lives, other than a few masters with the highest martial art skill. Among the five Sects present, in term of seniority, prestige and age, Mijue Shitai was the most senior, therefore, everybody turned their eyes to her, waiting for her to issue an order.

Mijue Shitai was simply too obstinate; although she knew the situation was highly unfavorable for her side, she was completely unmoved. "Kid," she said to Zhang Wuji, "You'd better blame yourself for your fate." Suddenly her entire bones started to pop and crack, not at all unlike the noise of beans being pan-fried; as her right hand went straight toward Zhang Wuji's chest.

This palm strike was the pinnacle of Emei Pai's skill, it was called the 'fo guang pu zhao' [The Light of Buddha illuminates everything]. Any palm or sword technique always consists of an unbroken set of complementary stances. The technique could contain as many as several hundred stances, or as little as three or five styles. But whether it was three styles or five stances, in each style would hide several variations that one style could be executed in many stances, as many as a dozen stances. However, this 'fo guang pu zhao' only had one stance. Not only this one stance did not have further variations, once it was launched, whether it struck the chest or the back or the shoulder or the face, the style was plain, almost boring; it was always the same style. Its formidable power came from the Emei Pai's Jiu Yang Gong as its foundation. Once it was executed, the opponent would not be able to either block or evade.

At present, other than Mijue Shitai, no one else was able to

launch this stance. At first she only wanted to strike Zhang Wuji's 'dantian' to knock him out momentarily, but after Yin Yewang issued his threat, if she showed leniency, people would think that she did not show mercy, she only was afraid of death, and was kneeling in front of the enemy to surrender. Therefore, she had put all her strength into this one stance, without leaving any room to maneuver.

Seeing that her strike was preceded by popping and cracking of her bones, Zhang Wuji knew this palm strike was not a small matter. With the life and death would be decided in the next split seconds, how could Zhang Wuji dare to be negligent? In this instant he remembered the phrase from the Manual: 'Let him be fierce, let him be ruthless, a mouthful of 'zhen qi' is enough for me'. Without thinking about how he was going to fend off the attack at all, he took a deep breath and gathered a whiff of 'zhen qi' in his chest.

With a very loud 'Bang!' Miejue Shitai's palm struck Zhang Wuji's chest. All the spectators cried out in alarm, as they believed the entire bones in Zhang Wuji's body would be shattered to dust, or perhaps this earth-shattering force would break his body in two. Who would have thought that when the dust settled, they saw Zhang Wuji, with a shocked expression on his face, was still standing in one piece, while Miejue Shitai's face was as grey as a corpse while her palm trembled slightly.

What happened was: Miejue Shitai's stance, 'fo guang pu zhao' purely took Emei Jiu Yang Gong as its foundation, which originated from the real Jiu Yang Shen Gong, which Zhang Wuji trained. After listening to Jue Yuan reciting the Nine Yang Manual, Guo Xiang developed Emei Jiu Yang Gong based on fragments she managed to remember. As a result, the power of Emei Jiu Yang Gong of course cannot be mentioned on equal terms with the original Jiu Yang Shen

Gong. However, the power of these two internal energies were comparable, the essence was identical. When Emei Jiu Yang Gong met the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, it was like river and stream entering the ocean, or like milk dissolved into water, instantly disappeared without any trace.

Miejue Shitai's first palm strike, the Floating Snow Penetrating the Cloud, and the second strike, the Nine-Style Cutting Hand, were not based on Emei Jiu Yang Gong; therefore, when the palm hit Zhang Wuji, the strikes had caused him to be injured and to throw up blood. This reasoning was unknown to everybody present. Zhang Wuji admittedly did not have vast knowledge, but although Miejue Shitai possessed an extensive experience and knowledge, her thoughts were no more than that this kid's internal energy was so deep that she was not able to inflict any harm. Therefore, other than Miejue Shitai herself, the hundreds of people, inside and outside of the besiege, all believed that she was being lenient, or that she was taken by Zhang Wuji's unyielding character, or perhaps she was working for the benefits of all, unwilling to let the Five Major Sects suffer disastrous casualties under the Heavenly Eagle Cult's poisoned arrows. Some even went so far as assuming she was a coward who submitted under Yin Yewang's threat.

Zhang Wuji bowed and cupped his fists. "Many thanks Qianbei for holding your palm and showing mercy," he said.

"Humph," Miejue Shitai snorted, she was in a very awkward situation; if she struck again, she would clearly breach her own words that she would strike him three times, but if she dropped the case, she would suffer great embarrassment by yielding to the Heavenly Eagle Cult's will.

While she was still in a quandary, Yin Yewang had already laughed aloud and said, "Only an outstanding talent can

submit to circumstances. Miejue Shitai has proven herself to be a great master of the present age." To his people he ordered, "Withdraw the arrows!"

The Heavenly Eagle Cult people turned around abruptly and withdrew; like a wave row after row of shields and bows and arrows rolled away in a very neat formation. It appeared that Yin Yewang's troops were trained for battle; whether they are attacking or withdrawing, they followed certain rules.

Miejue Shitai's countenance darkened, yet she did not know what to say in her defense; would she say that in the last palm strike she was showing mercy? Everybody had clearly seen how with gentle strike she had inflicted serious injury to Zhang Wuji, twice in a row. But under Yin Yewang's threat, the third palm, which appeared to carry a tremendous force, did not injure Zhang Wuji in the least bit. No matter how hard she defended herself, nobody would believe her. Much less she was always an arrogant person; how could she ask everybody to believe her?

While staring maliciously at Zhang Wuji, she called in a loud and clear voice, "Yin Yewang, if you want to test my palm power, come over here."

Yin Yewang cupped his fists and said, "After receiving Shitai's compassion today, I do not dare to offend further. We will meet again someday soon."

Miejue Shitai waved her left sleeve; without saying anything she led her disciples to walk quickly westward. The people of Kunlun, Huashan and Kongtong Pai, as well as Yin Liting and Song Qingshu, followed behind them.

Zhu'er's legs were still paralyzed. "Ahniu Ge," she said anxiously, "Quickly take me away." But Zhang Wuji wanted

very much to speak a few words with Yin Yewang. "Wait a moment," he said, and he walked toward Yin Yewang.

"Qianbei has rendered a great assistance, 'wanbei' will never dare to forget," he said.

Yin Yewang pulled his hand and look at him from top to bottom, sizing him up. "You are surnamed Zheng?" he asked.

Zhang Wuji had the urge to throw himself into his bosom and call out, 'Jiujiu, Jiujiu!' But in the end he forced himself not to do that, although he could not stop his eyes from turning red. There was a saying, 'Seeing (maternal) uncle is like seeing one's mother.' Since his parents died, Yin Yewang was the first close family member he had seen in more than ten years, how could his heart not get excited?

Yin Yewang saw the affectionate look on his eyes, but he thought that Zhang Wuji was very grateful because he had saved his life, so he did not further think about this matter. His eyes turned toward Zhu'er, who was lying down on the ground. With a dry laugh he said, "Ah Li, are you all right?"

Zhu'er looked up; her eyes were brimming with hatred. Immediately she lowered her head and after a while she called out, "Father!"

As soon as she called, 'Father', Zhang Wuji was shocked. But his mind was churning fast, and very soon he understood everything. "Turns out Zhu'er is Jiujiu's daughter; in that case she is my Biaomei [maternal younger female cousin]. She has killed her second mother, and thus vexed her own mother to her death. She also said that her father would kill her if he sees her ... Oh, she used the 'qian zhu wan du shou' to pierce Yin Wulu, must be because these brothers, just like their masters, were not good toward these mother and

daughter. Although Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou hated her very much, they cannot fight with her, hence they only said a sentence, 'It is San Xiaojie' before taking Yin Wulu away."

Turning his head around toward Zhu'er, suddenly he remembered something else, "No wonder I always felt that her mannerism very much resembled my Mama, turns out she is my own blood relative; my Ma was her (paternal) aunt."

He heard Yin Yewang's cold laugh. "You still call me 'Father'? Humph, I know you have followed Jin Hua Popo and did not have any regard toward the Heavenly Eagle Cult. You are a hopeless kid, exactly like your Mama, train that 'qian zhu wan du shou'. Humph, look in the mirror, tell me, is there any ugly freak in my Yin family?"

At first Zhu'er was so frightened that her whole body trembled, but suddenly she turned her head and stared directly at her father's face, while in a loud and clear voice she said, "Father, if you did not raise the past matters, I wouldn't have raise them either. But since you mentioned it, I want to ask you: you were happily married with Mama, why did you take Er Niang [second mother]?"

"This ... this ..." Yin Yewang said, "Dead girl, which one among the men did not have three wives, four concubines? You are disobedient and unfilial; it's useless to debate with you today. You do not have any regard to Jin Hua Popo, Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf], or the Heavenly Eagle Cult." He waved his hand to his back and said to Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou, "Take this girl along. Let's go."

Zhang Wuji stretched out his arms to block. "Hold on!" he said, "Yin ... Yin Qianbei, why do you want to take her along?"

“This girl is my daughter,” Yin Yewang replied, “She killed her stepmother and vexed her own mother to death; she is more like a beast than a human being, how can I let her live in this world?”

Zhang Wuji said, “At that time Miss Yin was still very young, seeing her mother bullied by others, she was enraged and had made the mistake of taking matters into her own hands. I beseech Qianbei to remember the love between a father and his daughter and punish her leniently.”

Yin Yewang laughed with his face toward the sky. “Young fellow,” he said, “Who do you think you are that you always meddle with other people’s business? Why, you even want to interfere with my Yin family’s internal affair. Are you the ‘Most Revered in the Wulin World’?”

Zhang Wuji’s mind was stirred. He really wanted to shout, “I am your nephew, I am not an outsider.” But in the end he held his peace.

“Kid,” Yin Yewang laughed, “You are lucky that today your life was spared. But if you keep meddling into the Jianghu people’s business like this, even if you have ten little lives, that won’t be enough.” While saying that, he waved his left hand. Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou stepped forward to pick up Zhu’er then they followed Yin Yewang.

Zhang Wuji knew that falling into her father’s hand this time, Zhu’er would most likely not have the good fortune to keep her life. In his desperation, he pounced forward trying to snatch her away.

Yin Yewang frowned; like a lightning his hand reached out and grabbed Zhang Wuji’s chest and gently tossed him

away. Zhang Wuji's body refused to follow its master's order; like soaring into the clouds or sailing in the fog he flew out and 'Bang!' he fell heavily into the yellow sand. The Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside his body protected him that he did not sustain any injury; but falling into the sand, his eyes, ears, mouth and nose were full of sand that it was unbearably uncomfortable. Unwilling to give up, he crawled up trying to grab Zhu'er again.

"Kid," with a cold laugh Yin Yewang said, "I was being lenient the first time, don't force me to be impolite the second time."

Zhang Wuji earnestly begged, "She ... she is your own daughter. When she was little you carried her in your arms, you kissed her. Please spare her."

Yin Yewang's heart was touched, but when he turned his head to look at Zhu'er, he saw her bumpy face, and could not help feeling even more loathsome. "Get out of my way!" he shouted.

Zhang Wuji took a step closer instead, still trying to grab Zhu'er.

"Ahniu Ge," Zhu'er called out, "Don't mind me. I will always remember your kindness to me. Just go away, you are not my father's match."

Right this moment, suddenly someone in dark green robe flew out of the sandy ground. Stretching out both hands, he grabbed Yin Wufu and Yin Wushou by the back of their collars and brought his arms together, hard. The two men's heads bumped to each other and they fainted instantly. That man grabbed Zhu'er and carrying her in his arms, he swiftly ran away.

“Wei Fu Wang [bat king Wei],” Yin Yewang shouted angrily, “You also want to meddle in my business?”

Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao let out a loud and long laugh, while carrying Zhu'er speeding along forward. He was called 'Yixiao' [one laugh], but his laughter was continuous without pausing; why wasn't he called 'a hundred laugh' or 'a thousand laugh'?

Yin Yewang and Zhang Wuji anxiously pursued at the same time. This time Wei Yixiao no longer run in circles; he flew straight toward the southwest direction. His feet moved very fast, almost unthinkable. Yin Yewang's internal energy was deep; his 'qing gong' was also excellent. The 'zhen qi' circulated inside Zhang Wuji's body; he ran faster and faster. But Wei Yixiao's speed was even more difficult to be dealt with. When they started, he was only a few 'zhang' ahead, but not too long afterwards, he increased the distance to a dozen 'zhang', then twenty some 'zhang', thirty some 'zhang' ... until finally his shadow vanished in the horizon.

In his extreme anger Yin Yewang laughed. He was secretly amazed to notice that all along Zhang Wuji was able to run alongside him, without falling behind even for a half step. By this time he knew perfectly well that he would not be able to overtake Wei Yixiao, but he still wanted to test this youngster's legs' strength, so he increased his speed. Like an arrow leaving the string his body shot forward, but he still saw Zhang Wuji was able to keep up, still running side-by-side with him.

Suddenly he heard Zhang Wuji say, “Yin Qianbei, although this Qing Yi Fu Wang can run fast, he might not necessarily have the strength to run long distance. We might be able to catch up with him eventually.”

Yin Yewang was startled; he stopped his steps immediately, while thinking, "In unleashing my 'qing gong' like this, I have exhausted my life-long cultivated strength. I can't afford to make any mistake in regulating my breath, let alone to open my mouth to speak. This young man is able to speak, yet his feet did not slow down at all. What kind of skill is this?"

When he stopped suddenly, Zhang Wuji had already flown several 'zhang' forward. Hastily Zhang Wuji turned around and returned to Yin Yewang, ready to listen to his instruction.

"Zeng Xiongdi," Yin Yewang said, "Who is your Shifu?"

"No, no!" Zhang Wuji hastily said, "You must not call me 'Xiongdi' [brother], I am your 'wanbei' [younger generation], you, Senior, just call me 'Ahniu'. I do not have any Shifu."

A murderous intent grew in Yin Yewang's heart; he mused, "This kid's martial art skill is this weird, if I leave him alive, he might bring disaster later on. I'd better strike preemptively and kill him with a palm."

Right this moment, suddenly they heard several sharp noise of ocean conch horn from the distant; it was precisely the Heavenly Eagle Cult's emergency signal. Yin Yewang creased his eyebrows. "Must be Hong Shui and Lie Huo Flags blaming me for not helping Rui Jin Flag that they create trouble for us," he mused, "If I failed to kill this kid with one palm strike, I would not have time to engage him in a dogfight at this time. I'd better borrow somebody else's knife to kill him; I'll let him deliver his own life into Wei Yixiao's hands." Thereupon he said, "The Heavenly Eagle Cult is facing an enemy; I must return at once to render my assistance. You can go alone to find Wei Yixiao. This man is

ferocious and sinister, as soon as you meet him, you must strike first to gain the upper hand."

"My skill is so low and inadequate, how can I fight him?" Zhang Wuji said, "Who is your enemy?"

Yin Yewang inclined his ears to listen to the bugle call. "It is indeed the Ming Cult's Hong Shui, Lie Huo and Hou Tu, three Flags have arrived."

Zhang Wuji said, "Everybody belongs to the Ming Cult; why must you fight and kill each other like this?"

Yin Yewang's face sank as he said, "What does a child like you understand? Are you meddling in other people's business again?" Turning around, he rushed back to where he came from.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Zhu'er has fallen into the hands of the great demon Wei Yixiao; if he bites her on the throat and sucks her blood, how can she keep her life?" Having had this thought, his anxiety grew; he took a deep breath and unleashing his 'zhen qi', he dashed forward to give a chase.

Luckily, although Wei Yixiao's 'qing gong' was excellent, because he was carrying someone in his arms, he was not able to step on the sand without leaving any trace; he still left behind a set of his footprints on the desert sand. Zhang Wuji made up his mind, "If he stop to rest, I won't take a rest; if he stop to sleep, I won't sleep. Even if I have to run for three days and three nights, I will overtake him."

However, running for three days and nights under the hot sun on the yellow sand was truly easier said than done; he ran until dusk, and his mouth dried out and his lips parched, while his entire body was sweating like rain. But strangely,

his legs did not get weary. Bit by bit the Jiu Yang Shen Gong he cultivated for several years showed its effectiveness, the more he used his energy, his vigor grew more abundantly. He stopped by a spring to fill his stomach with water, and then continued following Wei Yixiao's tracks nonstop until midnight. He saw the moon was right in the middle of the sky. Suddenly a feeling of dread overcame Zhang Wuji; he was afraid that while he was running, Zhu'er's body, with her blood sucked dry, would suddenly appear in front of him.

Right this moment, he seemed to hear faint footsteps behind him. Quickly he turned around, but did not see anybody. Unwilling to be delayed, he continued running forward; but the footsteps appeared again behind him. Greatly puzzled, he turned around again; still he did not see anybody. Looking carefully on the desert ground, he saw three sets of tracks; one obviously belonged to Wei Yixiao, one belonged to him, but where did the third track come from? Turning his head again, he saw ahead of him there was only Wei Yixiao's track. In that case, someone was following him; no doubt about it. But why couldn't he see the person? Could it be that this person knew magic of making himself invisible?

Preoccupied with doubts, he continued running forward, and sure enough, the footsteps behind him reappeared. "Who's there?" Zhang Wuji called out.

"Who's there?" a voice behind him echoed.

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "Are you a human or a ghost?" he asked sternly.

"Are you a human or a ghost?" the voice echoed.

With a great speed Zhang Wuji turned around again. This time he saw a flash of shadow of the person behind him, so

he was convinced that someone with an exceptionally swift footwork did indeed follow behind him.

"Why are you following me?" he asked.

"Why am I following you?" that person replied.

Zhang Wuji laughed. "How do I know?" he said, "I was asking you."

"How do I know?" that person replied, "I was asking you."

Zhang Wuji knew this person probably did not have any malicious intention; he had been following him for a while, if he wanted to, it would be easy for him to make his move and send Zhang Wuji to his doom. Thereupon he said, "By what name are you called?"

"Can't say [Shuo Bude]," came the reply.

"Why can't you say it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"If I can't say it, then I can't say it; why should I explain to you the reason?" the man said, "By what name are you called?"

"I ... I am called Zeng Ahniu," Zhang Wuji replied.

"You are running wildly in the middle of the night; what are you doing?" the man asked.

Zhang Wuji knew this man must be one who loved to play trick on others. He said, "A friend of mine is captured by the Qing Yi Fu Wang, I am going to rescue her back."

"You cannot rescue her," the man said.

"Why not?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"The man said, "Qing Yi Fu Wang's martial art is stronger than yours; you cannot beat him."

"Even if I cannot beat him, I must fight him," Zhang Wuji said.

"Very good, you have the spirit," the man said, "Is your friend a young woman?"

"Correct," Zhang Wuji replied, "How do you know?"

"If it were not for a young woman, would a young man be willing to risk his life?" the man said, "Is she very beautiful?"

"Very ugly!" Zhang Wuji replied.

"How about you?" the man asked, "Are you ugly or not?"

"Come over here," Zhang Wuji replied, "You can see it for yourself."

"I don't want to see," the man said, "Does that young woman know martial arts?"

"She does," Zhang Wuji said, "She is the daughter of Yin Yewang Qianbei from the Heavenly Eagle Cult, and has learned martial art from Jin Hua Popo of the Lingshe Island."

"You don't need to pursue," the man said, "Once Wei Yixiao got hold of her, he will never let her go."

"Why is that?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Humph," the man snorted, "You are a fool, you can't use

your head. Who is Yin Yewang to Yin Tianzheng?"

"They are father and son," Zhang Wuji replied.

The man asked, "Bai Mei Ying Wang and Qing Yi Fu Wang, whose martial art skill is stronger?"

"I don't know," Zhang Wuji replied, "May I ask Qianbei, who is stronger?"

"Each one has his own strong point," the man said, "Whose influence is greater?"

"Ying Wang is the Heavenly Eagle Cult's Cult Leader," Zhang Wuji said, "I suppose his influence must be somewhat greater."

"That's right," the man said, "Consequently, by seizing Yin Tianzheng's granddaughter, Wei Yixiao can take advantage of her by use her as a leverage, he can force Yin Tianzheng to submit to him."

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "I am afraid that is impossible," he said, "Yin Yewang Qianbei is insistent in wanting to kill his own daughter."

"And why is that?" the man was puzzled.

Thereupon Zhang Wuji told him briefly how Zhu'er had killed her father's beloved concubine and had caused the death of her own mother.

When Zhang Wuji finished, the man clicked his tongue and said, "Amazing, truly amazing. She is a perfect material."

"What material?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

The man replied, "In such a young age she was able to kill her stepmother, indirectly killed her own mother, and has received training under Jin Hua Popo of the Lingshe Island. I think she is a treasure. Wei Yixiao must want to take her as his disciple."

Zhang Wuji was stunned. "How do you know?" he asked.

"Wei Yixiao is my good friend," the man replied, "Naturally I understand his temperament."

Zhang Wuji's mind went blank for a moment before he called out loudly, "It's bad!" and rushed forward. That man also ran closely behind him.

While still running, Zhang Wuji asked, "Why are you following me?"

"I am curious," the man replied, "I want to see some excitement. What are you going to do when you overtake Wei Yixiao?"

Zhang Wuji angrily said, "Zhu'er is already rather heretical. I must stop her from taking Wei Yixiao as her master. What would happen if she also learned to become a demon who sucks other people's blood?"

"Do you like Zhu'er that much?" the man asked, "Why do you care that much of her?"

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "I don't know if I like her or not; it's just that she ... she is a little bit like my mother."

"Hmm, so your Mama is also an ugly freak; it may be assumed that you are not too good-looking," the man said.

"My Mama was very good-looking," Zhang Wuji quickly said, "Don't talk nonsense!"

"What a pity, what a pity!" the man said.

"What do you mean, 'what a pity'?" Zhang Wuji asked.

The man replied, "You are young and have some guts. You are brave and upright, which is very good. It is too bad that very soon you will be a bloodless corpse."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred. "He is right," he mused, "Even if I can overtake Wei Yixiao, how can I save Zhu'er? Won't I simply deliver my own life in vain?"

"Qianbei," he said, "Will you help me?"

"No, I can't," the man replied, "First, Wei Yixiao is my friend. Second, I am also not his match."

"If Wei Yixiao is your friend, why didn't you advise him?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"Advice is useless," the man said, "Wei Yixiao himself does not want to suck people's blood, he has no choice, his suffering is indeed difficult to bear."

"He has no choice?" Zhang Wuji asked in bewilderment, "How can that be?"

"Wei Yixiao suffered a fire deviation when cultivating his internal energy," the man explained, "Henceforth, each time he uses his internal energy, he must drink human blood; otherwise his entire body would turn cold and he would freeze to death immediately."

Zhang Wuji thought for a moment and said, "Does that mean the three 'yin' arteries in his armpits are damaged?"

"Ah, how do you know?" the man was surprised.

"I was just guessing," Zhang Wuji said, "I don't know if it is correct?"

The man said, "Three times I climbed the Changbai Mountain to find a fire toad for him to treat his illness, but three times I failed. The first time I did see a fire toad, but I missed by about two 'zhang'. The second and third time, not even the shadow of a fire toad was to be seen. After the current crisis is resolved, I am going back to try again."

"I can go together with you," ZhangWuji said, "Is that alright?"

"Hmm," the man said, "Your internal energy is enough, but your 'qing gong' is lacking too much, simply not enough. We'll talk again when the time comes. Hey, tell me, why do you want to help me find a fire toad?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "If we can catch one, not only Wei Yixiao's illness will be cured, we can also help a lot of people, because then he would not have to suck other people's blood anymore. Uh, Qianbei, he has already run for such a long time, he has used up his internal energy. If he has no other choice, won't he be forced to suck Zhu'er's blood?"

The man was taken aback. "That might be true," he said, "Although he wanted to take Zhu'er as his disciple, when the cold attack came, his blood will be congealed into ice. If that happened, I am afraid even his own daughter ..."

The more Zhang Wuji thought about it, the more he was frightened; he ran madly as if his life depended on it.

Suddenly the man exclaimed, "Ah, what's that behind you?"

Zhang Wuji turned his head around to see, but suddenly all he could see was darkness as his entire body was encased in an enormous sack; followed by the sensation of his body lifted to the air. It seemed like he was captured inside a cloth sack, which was lifted up by that man. Quickly he stretched out his arms, trying to rip the cloth sack. Who would have thought that the sack was made of neither silk nor animal hide? It was exceptionally tough and durable. He groped around to feel the cloth; obviously it was a coarse homespun cloth, but he could not make even a crack on the seam.

The man tossed the sack on the ground, laughed out loud and said, "If you can drill out of my sack, I'll consider you an expert."

Zhang Wuji exerted his internal energy and pushed ferociously outward with both hands, but the sack simply followed his push without showing the least bit of cracking under the stress. He raised his right foot and kicked with all his might. 'Pop!' the sack only curved outward slightly. It did not matter whether he pull, push, roll, stretch; the sack simply followed his movements without giving way to his strength.

The man laughed and said, "Do you give up?"

"I give up!" Zhang Wuji said.

'Slap!' the man slapped the sack right on his buttocks and said with a laugh, "Kid, just stay inside my 'qian kun yi qi

dai' [lit. Heaven and earth (the universe) air pocket] nicely, don't move; I am taking you to a good place. If you open your mouth to speak and your presence is exposed, I might not be able to save you."

"Where are you taking me?" Zhang Wuji asked.

The man replied, "Since you have fallen into my 'Universe Air Pocket', if I want to take your poor life, do you think you can run away? As long as you don't move and don't make any noise, you will reap the benefits."

Zhang Wuji thought the man made a lot of sense; therefore, he did not struggle anymore.

The man added, "You can get into my cloth sack; that is your good fortune." Slinging the cloth sack over his shoulder, he dashed forward.

"What about Zhu'er?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"How do I know?" the man replied, "You talk too much and make a lot of noise, I am going to shake you out of my cloth sack."

Zhang Wuji thought, "If you really shake me out of this cloth sack, I could not ask for anything more." But his mouth did not dare to reply; he only felt that this man's feet were very fast.

After running for several hours, inside the sack Zhang Wuji started to feel hot, so he knew it was already daytime and the sack was heated by the sun. A moment later, he felt the man was walking on an upward slope; it seemed that they were going up the mountain.

They continued climbing the mountain for more than four hours. Zhang Wuji felt the nip of the cold air on his body; he mused, "Looks like we are climbing a very high mountain, the peak must be covered in snow, that's why it is this cold."

Suddenly he felt his body was flying in the air. He could not restrain from shouting in surprise. But before his shout vanished, he felt they were stopping; that man had landed on the ground. Zhang Wuji understood, the man must have had taken him on a jump just now. He assumed that they were on a dangerous precipice on a high mountain peak; the man jumped while carrying him on his back, the mountain rocks must be very slippery since they were covered with ice and snow. Supposing his foot slipped, wouldn't it mean both of them falling together and die with their bones shattered?

He was just thinking about these things when the man leaped again. He successively leaped several times; sometimes he jumped higher, sometimes lower, sometimes he jumped far, sometimes near. Although Zhang Wuji was inside the cloth sack and could not see the least bit of light, he knew the local terrain must be extremely steep.

End of Chapter 18.

Chapter 19 - Disaster Arose Within the Broken Impenetrable Fortress

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Yuan Zhen pulled a dagger and ferociously stabbed it onto the sack. But where the point of the dagger met the sack, the dagger simply sank into the sack and bounced back out without creating any damage. Yuan Zhen successively stabbed several times, how could the blade overcome the sack? His leg flew up and he kicked with all his might. The large sack rolled straight toward the door of the hall.

Zhang Wuji was brought by the man leaping high one more time. Suddenly he heard someone calling out from a distance, "Shuo Bude, why are you this late?"

The man carrying Zhang Wuji replied, "I had to take care of a small matter along the way. Has Wei Yixiao arrived?"

"I haven't seen him!" the man in the distance answered, "This is strange, even for him to come this late. Shuo Bude, have you seen him?" They were talking back and forth while the man walked closer.

Zhang Wuji was inwardly surprised. "Turns out this man's name is Shuo Bude [can't say]," he mused, "No wonder when I asked his name he said, 'Can't say'. Even when I asked him again why he can't say it, his answer was ' Shuo Bude is just Shuo Bude; why should I explain to you the reason?' How can someone have such a weird name?" He thought further, "It seems like he has an appointment with Wei Yixiao to meet in here. I wonder how is Zhu'er? He is a good friend of Wei Yixiao; I wonder how are they going to deal with me?"

He heard Shuo Bude say, "Tieguan Dao Xiong [Taoist brother 'Iron Hat'], let us go seek Wei Xiong [brother Wei]; I am afraid he met some kind of trouble."

Priest Tieguan said, "Qing Yi Fu Wang is astute and

intelligent, his martial art skill is superb, what kind of trouble might he meet?"

"I just feel something is not right," Shuo Bude replied.

Suddenly from the valley below a voice came, "Stinky monk Shuo Bude, old mixed-up hair [a derogatory term to call a Taoist priest] Tieguan, come here quick! We need your help! It's bad! It's too bad!"

Shuo Bude and Priest Tieguan were shocked. "It's Zhou Dian," they exclaimed together, "What might be so bad?"

Shuo Bude added, "Sounds like he is injured; why does his voice sound so weak?" Without waiting for Priest Tieguan's answer, he carried Zhang Wuji and leaped down the peak.

Priest Tieguan followed behind him. "Ah!" suddenly he said, "Zhou Dian is carrying someone on his back; who could it be? It's Wei Yixiao!"

"Zhou Dian, don't panic," Shuo Bude called, "We are coming to help you."

"Panic your Mama's fart!" Zhou Dian called back, "Why would I panic? The blood-sucking bat's old life is about to return to Heaven!"

Shuo Bude was startled, "What happened to Wei Xiong? What kind of injury does he suffer?" he asked, while quickening his pace.

Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji felt like he was mounting the clouds and riding on the mist; he could not help but saying in a low voice, "Qianbei, let me down for the time being, helping people is more important."

Shuo Bude suddenly lifted up the sack and tossed it in the air three times. Zhang Wuji was shocked; if Shuo Bude let his hands off, the sack would be thrown away, the consequences would be really hard to imagine. He heard Shuo Bude say in a calm and throaty voice, "Kid, let me tell you: I am the Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack (Buddhist) monk] Shuo Bude; the one behind us is the Tieguan Daoren Zhang Zhong. The one speaking down below is Zhou Dian. The three of us, plus the Leng Mian Xiansheng [Mr. Cold Face] Leng Qian and Peng Yingyu, Peng Heshang [monk Peng], we are the Ming Cult's Wu San Ren [Five Wanderers]. Do you know the Ming Cult?"

"I do," Zhang Wuji replied, "Turns out Dashi [reverend] is also Ming Cult member."

"Leng Qian and I do not kill people too often," Shou Bude continued, "But Tieguan Daoren, Zhou Dian, Peng Heshang, they usually kill people without batting their eyelids. If they knew you are hiding inside my 'Universe Air Pocket', they might pounce on you just for fun and then you'll become minced meat."

Zhang Wuji said, "I have never offended your honorable Cult, why ..."

Shuo Bude cut him off, "When Tieguan Daoren and the others kill people, do you think they would ask first whether you have offended them or not? From now on, if you still want to be alive, do not say even a single word from inside my sack. Do you understand?"

Zhang Wuji nodded.

"Why you don't answer me?" Shuo Bude asked.

"You told me not to say even a single word," Zhang Wuji replied.

Shuo Bude smiled. "It's good if you know that ..." he said, "Ah, what happened to Wei Xiong?" The last sentence was directed toward Zhou Dian.

Zhang Wuji heard Zhou Dian's hoarse and throaty voice, "He ... he ... the disaster has reached its peak."

"Hmm," Shuo Bude said, "Wei Xiong's chest is still a bit warm. Zhou Dian, was it you who helped him?"

"B**lsh*t," Zhou Dian said, "Do you think it was he who helped me?"

"Zhou Dian," Priest Tieguan said, "Are you injured?"

"I saw the blood-sucking bat was lying stiffly by the roadside," Zhou Dian replied, "He was so frozen that he was not even breathing. Contrary to my nature, I showed him the kindness of my heart and transferred my 'chi' to help him. Who would have thought that the cold poison inside the blood-sucking bat was so fierce that this is what happened."

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude said, "This time you indeed have done a good deed."

"What good deed or bad deed?" Zhou Dian said, "This blood-sucking bat is not only ruthless, he is also very strange. Usually I don't like to see his face, but this time he has done something very much to Zhou Dian's liking, so Zhou Dian decided to help him this time. Who would have thought that this blood-sucking bat is incorrigible? The cold poison inside his body attacked me instead and wanted to take Zhou Dian's old life."

Priest Tieguan was startled. "Your injury is that heavy?" he asked.

"Retribution, retribution," Zhou Dian said, "The blood-sucking bat and Zhou Dian have never done any good things in all our lives, and now by doing one good thing we brought disaster to our own lives." "What kind of good thing did Wei Xiong do?" Shuo Bude asked.

Zhou Dian replied, "Whenever he excites the poison inside his body, the cold poison flares up and he has to suck someone's blood to suppress the poison. There was clearly a baby girl by his side, but he would rather die than sucking her blood. Zhou Dian was surprised, so he said, 'Aiyo, not right! The blood-sucking bat is doing something against his nature. Zhou Dian better also do an act of sacrilege by trying to save him.'"

Hearing that Wei Yixiao did not suck Zhu'er's blood, Zhang Wuji's delight was not light. Shuo Bude slapped the sack with the back of his hand while asking, "Who is that baby girl?"

"That's what I asked the blood-sucking bat," Zhou Dian replied, "He said she is Bai Mei Lao Er's [Second Old White Brow] granddaughter. He said presently the Ming Cult is facing a disaster, everybody must be united in a concerted effort; therefore, he must never suck her blood."

Shuo Bude and Priest Tieguan applauded together. "That must be so," they said, "If White Eagle and Green Bat, two Kings join hands, the power of the Ming Cult will rise."

Shuo Bude took Wei Yixiao from Zhou Dian; he was shocked. "His body is ice-cold," he said, "What can we do?"

"That's right," Zhou Dian said, "I'll say it's too soon for the two of you to be happy. The blood-sucking bat's old life has 90% gone. One dead bat joins hands with the Bai Mei Ying Wang; what good does it bring to the Ming Cult?"

"You two wait here," Priest Tieguan said, "I am going down the mountain to find a living person and let Wei Xiong drink his fill of fresh human blood." Finished speaking, he stood up at once, ready to jump down the mountain.

"Wait!" Zhou Dian called out, "Mixed-up hair Tieguan, this place is so remote. By the time you find a living person, Wei Yixiao [one laugh] has already turned into Wei Buxiao [not laughing]. If a dead man can laugh, that is too scary. Shuo Bude, you'd better take the kid inside your cloth sack out, let Wei Xiong eat him."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Turns out they already knew I am hidden inside this cloth sack."

"That won't do!" Shuo Bude said, "This kid has shown great kindness toward our Cult. If Wei Xiong ate him, the Five-Element Flags would not let Wei Xiong keep his old life." Thereupon he briefly told them how Zhang Wuji had received three palm strikes from Miejue Shitai in order to save the remaining several dozens of Rui Jin Flag people. "Therefore," he concluded, "Do you think the Five-Element Flags would easily give this kid up?"

Priest Tieguan asked, "You are keeping this precious commodity inside your sack; are you going to use him to subdue the Five-Element Flags?"

"Can't say [Shuo Bude], can't say!" Shuo Bude said, "In short, currently our Cult is disintegrating and is in the face of a great catastrophe. The Heavenly Eagle Cult has come from

afar to render their assistance. Unfortunately they are fighting with the Five-Element Flags over an old account; each one was completely routed by the other. All of us must join hands if we want to avoid destruction. The kid inside my sack will be beneficial to the unity of our Cult's various factions and troops; I have no doubt about it." Speaking to this point, he reached out toward Wei Yixiao's back and stuck his palm on the 'Ling Tai' [spirit platform] acupoint, and sent out his 'chi' to help him resist the cold poison.

Zhou Dian sighed, "Shuo Bude," he said, "It is great that you want to sell your life for your friend, but please be careful for your own old life."

"Let me also help," Priest Tieguan said. He stretched out his right hand and joined his palm with Shuo Bude's left palm. Together two streams of internal energy burst into Wei Yixiao's body.

About the time needed to cook rice later, Wei Yixiao started to groan weakly and came to his senses, but his teeth were still chattering; it was obvious that the cold was extreme. With a shivering voice he said, "Zhou Dian, Tieguan Dao Xiong [Taoist brother], thank you for your help." He did not thank Shuo Bude, because the two of them were good friends; verbal gratitude would be superfluous instead.

Priest Tieguan's internal energy was deep, but against the cold poison inside the Wei Yixiao's body, he had to exert everything he had to overcome it that momentarily he was not able to speak. Shuo Bude was not any better.

Suddenly several notes of a 'qin' [zither] floated over from the eastern side of the peak, intermingled with a clear sound of a whistle. "Mr. Leng Mian and Peng Heshang have arrived," Zhou Dian said. Raising his voice, he called out, "Leng Mian

Xiansheng, Peng Heshang, somebody's injured. Roll over here quickly!"

From the other side the 'qin' responded with one clear note. Monk Peng asked, "Who ... is ... injured ...?" The voice came from quite a distant away; it echoed over the valley. Successively he asked several questions: "Who is injured? Is Shuo Bude all right? How about Tieguan Xiong [brother]? Zhou Dian, why is your voice lacking some 'chi'?" With each sentence he uttered, he got closer by several 'zhang', hence by the time he finished his strings of questions, he was close enough to them.

"Aiyo!" he said in shock, "It's Wei Yixiao!"

"You are always flustered," Zhou Dian said, "Always the first in the world to be anxious. Leng Mian Xiong, why don't you think of a way to help?" The last sentence was obviously directed toward Mr. Cold Face, Leng Qian.

"Hmm," Leng Qian grunted, but did not say anything. He knew Monk Peng would definitely ask for more details, so he could save himself some energy. And indeed, question after question did not stop gushing out of Monk Peng's mouth. Zhou Dian's explanation was a bit disorderly, but by the time he finished his story, Shuo Bude and Priest Tieguan were able to regulate their 'chi'. Monk Peng and Leng Qian also transferred their internal energy to separately help Wei Yixiao and Zhou Dian to overcome the cold poison.

After Wei Yixiao and Zhou Dian's vitalities are slightly recovered, Monk Peng said, "I came from the northeast direction, and learned that Shaolin Pai Zhang Men [Sect Leader] Kong Wen is personally leading Shidi [younger martial brother] Kong Zhi and Kong Xing, along with more than a hundred disciples of various generations, has just

arrived at the Brightness Peak to take part in the besieging of our Cult.”

“Due east,” Leng Qian said, “The Five Heroes of Wudang!” He always spoke succinctly; even if his head was cut, he would not want to say even half an extra word. He only said these six characters [‘zheng dong, wudang wu xia’], but his meaning was, ‘The Five Heroes of Wudang have arrived to attack from the east direction.’ As for who were the Five Heroes of Wudang, everybody knew they were Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, Yin Liting and Mo Shenggu; hence did not need to waste his breath to explain.

Monk Peng said, “The Six Sects are advancing separately to mount a join attack, gradually closing in on us. The Five-Element Flags have been engaged in a number of battles. The situation seems to be very disadvantageous to our side. In my opinion, we need to be at the Brightness Peak ahead of the enemy.”

“You are releasing your Mama’s smelly fart!” Zhou Dian angrily said, “That fellow Yang Xiao did not come to seek help from us, would the Wu San Ren come uninvited?”

“Zhou Dian,” Monk Peng said, “Suppose that the Six Major Sects succeed in breaking through the Brightness Peak and extinguish the Sacred Fire, can we still live as human beings? Of course Yang Xiao did offend the Wu San Ren, but we are helping to guard the Brightness Peak, absolutely not for Yang Xiao’s sake, but for the Ming Cult.”

“Peng Heshang is right,” Shuo Bude also expressed his opinion, “Although Yang Xiao was rude to us, protecting the Cult is more important than our personal grudges.”

“Fart, fart!” Zhou Dian cursed and swore, “Two bald donkeys

[derogatory term to call Buddhist monks] are farting together, the stench reeks out to the high heaven. Tieguan Daoren, Yang Xiao shattered your left shoulder in the past, don't you remember?"

Priest Tieguan was silent for half a day before answering, "Protecting the Cult against the enemy is a big matter. We will settle the account with Yang Xiao after the enemy is repelled. When that time arrives, with the Wu San Ren join hands, I am not afraid this fellow will refuse to bow his head."

"Humph," Zhou Dian snorted. "Leng Qian, what do you say?" he asked.

"We go together!" Leng Qian said.

"You also submit to Yang Xiao?" Zhou Dian mocked, "Don't you remember we made a heavy oath, saying that we, the Wu San Ren, from now on would leave our hands in our sleeves and would not pay any attention to the affair of the Ming Cult? Are you saying that our oath was merely a fart?"

"It was merely a fart!" Leng Qian said.

Zhou Dian was angry; he sprang up and said, "Everybody is farting! Mine is the only human's words."

Priest Tieguan said, "We still have time; let us hurry to the Brightness Peak!"

"Dian Xiong [brother Dian]," Monk Peng persuaded, "Because we were fighting over the Jiaozhu position in the past, we became enemies to each other. Yang Xiao is admittedly narrow-minded, but if we think carefully, the Wu San Ren are not without fault ..."

"Nonsense!" Zhou Dian was furious, "No one among the Wu San Ren was dreaming to become the Jiaozhu; what did we do wrong?"

Shuo Bude said, "Even if we fight for a year or a year and a half longer, we would still be unable to clear up our Cult's past argument of right and wrong. Zhou Dian, let me ask you this: are you or are you not a disciple of 'Ming Zun Huo Sheng' [The Bright Prophet of the Holy Fire]?"

"Do you have to even question that fact?" Zhou Dian said.

Shuo Bude said, "Today a great disaster is looming above our Cult's head; if we keep our hands inside our sleeves, after we die, do we have a face to see 'Ming Zun' and Yang Jiaozhu [Cult Leader Yang]? If you are scared of the Six Major Sects, you can stay here. We are going to the Brightness Peak to join the battle and die for our Cult. You may come later to bury our bones!"

Zhou Dian leaped up and struck Shuo Bude's face with his palm, while cursing, "Fart!"

'Slap!' Shuo Bude endured the heavy strike quietly. Slowly he opened his mouth and spat out several teeth; not a single word came out of his mouth. His cheek from white turned to red, from red turned dark scarlet and grew bigger.

Monk Peng and the others were stunned. Zhou Dian was even more shocked. Actually, Shuo Bude and Zhou Dian's martial art skills were almost on par with each other. When Zhou Dian casually sent out his palm, if he wanted to, he could parry or dodged; either way, Zhou Dian's palm would definitely not hit him. Who would have thought that he took the beating without doing anything? Consequently, his injury was not light.

Zhou Dian was filled with remorse. "Shuo Bude," he called out, "Hit me back! If you don't, you are not a human."

Shuo Bude smiled wryly and said, "My energy is reserved to fight the enemy. Why would I want to hit a friend?"

Zhou Dian was angry; he raised his palm and heavily struck his own face. 'Slap!' he also spat several teeth out.

Monk Peng was startled. "Zhou Dian," he said, "What are you doing?"

Zhou Dian angrily replied, "I shouldn't have struck Shuo Bude. I told him to hit me back, he did not want to, so I have to do it myself."

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude said, "You and I are like brothers. The four of us are going to risk our lives in a battle on the Brightness Peak, we might part forever. What harm does it bring to let you hit me with a palm?"

Zhou Dian's heart was deeply touched. He shouted with a cry in his voice, "I'm also going to the Brightness Peak. Yang Xiao's old debt, let me set aside for the time being."

Monk Peng was delighted. "Now that is a good brother!" he said.

Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji was able to hear everybody clearly. He thought, "These five men are highly skilled martial art experts; there is no doubt about it. What's hard to come by is their chivalrous brotherhood. There are not a few experts within the Ming Cult; is it possible that all of them are heretical and demonic?"

While he was still deep in thought, suddenly he felt he was being moved; so he knew Shuo Bude was taking him to the Brightness Peak. Ever since he learned that Zhu'er was all right, he was relieved; his only concern right now was the Six Major Sects of Wulin world besieging the Ming Cult; how was he going to bring this matter to conclusion? He also thought that when he got to the Brightness Peak, he would see his childhood friend, Yang Buhui. After she grew up, would she still remember him?

The party travelled for a day and a night. Once every several hours, Shuo Bude would untie the mouth of the sack to let Zhang Wuji had some fresh air before he would tightly tie the sack again. By afternoon the next day, Zhang Wuji suddenly felt the sack was being dragged over the rugged ground. At first he did not understand, but later when he slightly raised his head, his forehead bumped heavily into a rock that it hurt like hell. Now he realized that they were walking along a tunnel inside the mountain. The tunnel was unusually cold, the air was not moving freely. After walking for the more than an hour, they were out of the belly of the mountain. Then they walked along an ascending path. But before long, they entered another tunnel.

After going through five such tunnels, Zhang Wuji heard Zhou Dian call out, "Yang Xiao, the blood-sucking bat and the Wu San Ren are here to see you!"

Half a day later, came the reply from some distance ahead, "What a pleasant surprise Fu Wang and the Wu San Ren honor me with your presence. Yang Xiao did not welcome you from afar, for which offense I beg your forgiveness."

"What a hypocritical nonsense are you blabbering about?" Zhou Dian said, "In your belly you must be cursing the Wu San Ren's words were like a fart; we said that we would never go up the Brightness Peak, we would forever pay no attention

to the Ming Cult's affair, yet today we come for a visit uninvited."

"The Six Major Sects are besieging us from all sides, Xiaodi [little brother, referring to self] is unable to cope with it alone, and am very anxious," Yang Xiao replied, "That Fu Wang and the Wu San Ren are looking at Ming Zun's face and come to offer your help for the sake of loyalty, it is indeed our Cult's good fortune."

"It's good if you know that," Zhou Dian said.

Immediately Yang Xiao welcomed the Five Wanderers into the inner chamber, where a boy servant delivered tea and refreshments.

"Aaahhh!" suddenly the servant cried miserably. Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji was absolutely horrified for not knowing what happened. After quite a while, he heard Wei Yixiao say, "Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary Yang], I am sorry to harm your servant. Wei Yixiao will pay you back someday."

His voice was full of vigor; entirely different from when he was gasping for breath previously. Zhang Wuji shivered inwardly. "He sucked this servant's blood," he mused, "Now his cold poison is under control."

He heard Yang Xiao flatly say, "What's pay back or not pay back between us? That Fu Wang is willing to come to the Brightness Peak shows that you regard me in high esteem."

These seven people were the Ming Cult's top fighters, masters who are the sharpest-tip-of-the-weapon; although presently they were facing a powerful enemy, once they gathered together, their spirits rose. After food and drink, they discussed ideas on how to resist the enemy. Shuo Bude

placed the cloth sack next to his feet. Zhang Wuji was hungry and thirsty, but remembering Shuo Bude's warning, he did not dare to either move or make any noise.

After a lengthy discussion, Monk Peng said, "Guang Ming You Shi [the Right Emissary of the Brightness] and Zi Shan Long Wang [Purple-robe Dragon King] have gone missing; whether Jin Mao Shi Wang is alive or dead is also hard to foretell, so we might as well forget about them. The most unfortunate matter at the moment is that the enmity between the Five-Element Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Cult is getting deeper and deeper. During the most recent battle, both sides have suffered quite heavy casualties. If only the two of them can also go up the Brightness Peak and join forces to resist the enemy, not only siege of Six Major Sects, even twelve sects or eighteen sects, the Ming Cult would be able to counter soldiers with arms, water with earth wall."

Shuo Bude lightly kicked the cloth sack and said, "The kid inside this sack is somewhat related to the Heavenly Eagle Cult; recently, he also showed great kindness to the Five-Element Flags. Perhaps he will play an important role in the resolution of bilateral animosity in the future."

Wei Yixiao coldly said, "One more day the Jiaozhu position is undecided, one more day our Cult's dispute is not resolved. Even if he has ability as big as the sky, he will never resolve this hostility. Yang Zuo Shi, 'zaixia' [humble one] wants to ask you something: after the enemy is repelled, whom will you support to be our leader?"

Yang Xiao unenthusiastically said, "Whoever possesses the Sheng Huo Ling [command or decree of the holy fire] I will support to be our Jiaozhu. This has been our Cult's custom since the days of our ancestors; why did you ask me?"

Wei Yixiao said, "Sheng Huo Ling has been lost for nearly a hundred years; are you telling me that as long as Sheng Huo Ling is not found, the Ming Cult will not have a Jiaozhu? The Six Major Sects have the guts to besiege the Brightness Peak; they have complete disregard for our Cult. It is all because they know our Cult has lost our line of command, we are disintegrating internally."

"Wei Xiong is right," Shuo Bude said, "I, Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk], am not of the Yin faction, neither am I of the Wei faction; whoever become the Jiaozhu is fine with me, as long as there is a Jiaozhu. Even if we do not have a Jiaozhu, a Vice Jiaozhu is also fine. Without a clear chain of command, how can we thwart the intrusion of the enemy?"

Priest Tiguan said, "Shuo Bude's words attain my heart."

Yang Xiao's face changed. "Gentlemen," he said, "Do you come up the Brightness Peak to help me to fight the enemy, or to make things difficult for me?"

Zhou Dian laughed aloud. "Yang Xiao," he said, "Do you think I, Zhou Dian, do not know your real intention on why you do not want to elect a Jiaozhu? As long as the Ming Cult does not have a Jiaozhu, it will be you, the Left Emissary, who presides over the interim position. Humph, however, although your position is the highest, if others do not obey your order, then what good will it bring? Can you command the Five-Element Flag? Will the Four Great Hu Jiao Fa Wang submit to you? We, the Five Wanderers, are like floating clouds and wild cranes, don't even give a damn to some Guang Ming Zuo Shi!"

Yang Xiao stood up abruptly. In a cold voice he said, "Today the enemy is outside, ready to strike; Yang Xiao does not have time to engage gentlemen in a battle of words. If

gentlemen willingly watch with folded arms the Ming Cult's life or death, then please go down the Brightness Peak! As long as Yang Xiao does not die, I will return your visit one by one in the future."

"Yang Zuo Shi, you don't need to lose your temper," Monk Peng exhorted, "The Six Major Sects are besieging the Ming Cult. It is the duty of each and every one of the Cult disciple to defend our Cult. It is not your business alone."

With a cold laugh Yang Xiao said, "I am afraid there are people within our Cult who are hoping that Yang Xiao will be slain by the Six Major Sects, and thus they will be rid of the nail in their eyes."

"Whom are you referring to?" Zhou Dian asked.

Yang Xiao replied, "Every body knows his own heart; must I spell it out?"

"Are you talking about me?" Zhou Dian angrily asked.

Yang Xiao averted his gaze to someplace else; he was ignoring Zhou Dian completely. Monk Peng saw Zhou Dian's eyes radiated a different gleam; apparently he was ready to fight with Yang Xiao, he quickly urged, "There is an ancient saying: brothers fight each other, outsiders will drive their insult. Let us discuss further our plan to fight the enemy."

Yang Xiao said, "Yingyu Dashi [Reverend Yingyu] understands the important matter, your words are very true."

"Fine!" Zhou Dian shouted loudly, "Bald thief Peng understands the important matter, Zhou Dian only knows trivial matter?" He was just being mule-headed; he did not want to consider anything. Still shouting, he said, "I want this Jiaozhu position to be decided today. Zhou Dian nominates

Wei Yixiao as the Ming Cult Jiaozhu. The blood-sucking bat's martial art skill is superb, in terms of scheming he is shrewd. Nobody in our Cult is superior to him."

Actually, in normal times, Zhou Dian and Wei Yixiao had never been close friends; there were more ill will between them than there was goodwill. But he deliberately wanted to provoke Yang Xiao, so he pushed Wei Yixiao forward.

Yang Xiao laughed. "In my opinion," he said, "It would be best if the Jiaozhu position is held by Zhou Dian. Currently the Ming Cult is all split up in pieces. If we have Great Cult Leader Zhou to preside at the top, our Cult will be turned upside down. Now, that should be very interesting!" [Translator's note: This is one of those 'lost in translation' cases. Yang Xiao was playing with Zhou Dian's name: the character 'Dian' means 'top (of the head)' or 'apex'; but it also means 'fall forward, upside down, or jolt'.]

Zhou Dian was furious. "Your Mama's dog stinky fart!" he shouted. 'Whoosh!' his palm struck down on the crown of Yang Xiao's head.

A while ago, Zhou Dian's palm had caused many of Shuo Bude's teeth fall down; it was because Shuo Bude had no intention to evade. But how could Yang Xiao receive such treatment easily? More than ten years ago, because of a dispute over a Cult affair, Yang Xiao had a major argument with the Five Wanderers. At that time, the Five Wanderers made an oath not to go up the Brightness Peak again. When they broke their heavy oath by coming today, suspicions had started to grow inside Yang Xiao's heart. Seeing Zhou Dian suddenly make his move, he knew that the Five Wanderers had made an agreement with Wei Yixiao to come and conspire against him. Startled and angered, his right palm swept out to meet Zhou Dian's palm.

Wei Yixiao knew Yang Xiao's capability very well. After Zhou Dian was injured, his 'chi' had not recovered; he was definitely not Yang Xiao's match. Thereupon Wei Yixiao dashed ahead of him with swept palm to receive Yang Xiao's palm. The two palms collided, but surprisingly no noise was to be heard. Turned out although Yang Xiao had reasons to dislike Zhou Dian, he still remembered that both of them belonged to the same Cult; therefore, he was unwilling to harm his life. Consequently, his palm did not carry his full strength. However, Wei Yixiao's martial art skill was deep; as his stance 'han bing mian zhang' [cold ice soft palm] arrived, Yang Xiao's right arm was shaken, as he felt a burst of cold 'yin' energy penetrated his skin and flesh; hastily he exerted his internal energy to withstand. When the two men's internal energy collided, they were locked at a stalemate.

"The one surnamed Yang," Zhou Dian called out, "Eat my palm again!" Just now his first palm did not hit its target, now his second palm was aimed at Yang Xiao's chest.

"Zhou Dian, don't make a scene!" Shuo Bude called out.

Monk Peng also said, "Yang Zuo Shi, Wei Fu Wang, please hold your hands, don't harm our own people!" He stretched out his hand to divert Zhou Dian's palm. But Yang Xiao's body leaned sideways, his left palm already met and stuck on Zhou Dian's right palm.

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude called out, "You are two against one, what kind of hero are you?" Reaching out toward Zhou Dian's shoulder, he wanted to grab him and pull him back. But before his hand even touched Zhou Dian, he saw Zhou Dian's body slightly shiver as if he had already received internal injury. Shuo Bude was shocked. He knew very well the Left Emissary of the Brightness' divine power; he was their Cult's

top master. Shuo Bude was afraid that in that one palm strike, Yang Xiao had already injured Zhou Dian. He saw Zhou Dian's right palm was stuck onto Yang Xiao's left palm, as if he was not willing to withdraw his palm.

"Zhou Dian," Shuo Bude called out, "We are all brothers, why would you disregard your own old life?" He came closer to pull Zhou Dian's shoulder, while at the same time said, "Yang Zuo Shi, please be lenient with your palm." He was afraid Yang Xiao was unwilling to withdraw his palm strength and took that opportunity to attack him. To his surprise, as he pulled Zhou Dian's body, Zhou Dian swayed but could not move; while at the same time a burst of ice-cold 'chi' penetrated his palm and went straight toward the pit of his stomach.

Shuo Bude was even more shocked; thinking, "This is the special skill of Wei Xiong's school, the Cold Ice Soft Palm; how could Yang Xiao also train this skill?" Hastily he exerted his own internal energy to resist the attack. But the cold 'chi' was growing in intensity that in a short period of time Shuo Bude's jaws started to chatter from the unbearable cold.

Priest Tieguan and Peng Yingyu rushed forward; one protected Zhou Dian, the other protected Shuo Bude. With the combined energy of four men, the cold 'chi' was no longer unbearable. They only felt that the force transmitted from Yang Xiao's palm was sometimes light, sometimes heavy, something bursting something sluggish; it kept changing with infinite variation. The four men did not dare to withdraw their palms, for fear that as soon as their power slackened, Yang Xiao would sent out his power suddenly and then the four of them would either be dead or at least suffer serious injury.

"Yang Zuo Shi," Peng Yingyu called out, "We are facing

powerful enemy; how can you ... can you ... can you ...” His teeth chattered so much that he was unable to continue. He felt as if the blood in his entire body had frozen to ice. Turned out as soon as he opened his mouth to speak, the real ‘chi’ in his body stopped momentarily that he was unable to withstand the cold ‘chi’ coming in from his palm.

And so for the next time needed to drink a cup of tea later, Mr. Cold Face Leng Qian stood on the side watching. He noticed that the faces of Wei Yixiao and his four fellow Wanderers were tight, but Yang Xiao seemed to be at ease; he felt very strange. “Although Yang Xiao’s martial art skill is high,” he thought, “Compared to Wei Yixiao, he is about the same, he won’t necessarily be able to defeat him easily. With the addition of Shuo Bude and the others, four men, Yang Xiao is absolutely not their match. Why is it that with one against five, he still looks like he is so confident of victory? There must be something strange going on here ...”

Hanging his head, he pondered deeply, but failed to solve the puzzle immediately. He heard Zhou Dian call out, “Leng Mian devil, strike ... strike his back ... strike ...” But Leng Qian was unwilling to make his move before he has a clear understanding of what was happening. Right now, among the Five Wanderers, he was the only one who was not doing anything; they would depend solely on him to escape the danger and get away from distress. However, supposing he also stakes everything he had to battle Yang Xiao, although with the addition of one man their combined power would be increased quite a bit, they still could not ascertain their victory.

He saw that the faces of Zhou Dian and Peng Yingyu had turned blue; it looked like if this situation continued, the ‘yin’ poison would enter their internal organs, and then they would face endless disaster. Thereupon he took out from his

pocket five small sterling silver writing brushes and held them in his hand while he said, “Five brushes, strike your ‘qu chi’ [crooked reservoir], ‘ju gu’ [gigantic bone], ‘yang huo’ [positive orifice], ‘wu li’ [five interior(?)], ‘zhong du’ [middle capital].” These five acupoints were located on hands and feet, really were not fatal acupoints at all. He mentioned the target first, apparently so that Yang Xiao would know that he did not have any malicious intention, just wanted him to withdraw his palms.

Yang Xiao showed a faint smile, but did not take any notice of him. Leng Qian called out, “Forgive my offense!” With a tossing motion on his left hand and scattering motion on the right, five silver rays shot toward Yang Xiao.

Yang Xiao waited until the five silver brushes came near, then abruptly his left hand swept horizontally, pulling along Zhou Dian and the others, four people, using them as a shield in front of his body. Zhou Dian and Peng Yingyu uttered a stifled grunt as the five brushes separately landed on these two men’s bodies; Zhou Dian received two brushes, while Peng Yingyu was hit by three brushes. Luckily Leng Qian had no intention to hurt anybody; the force of his hands was very light, plus the pens did not actually hit the intended acupoints. Although they suffered flesh wound, they were not seriously harmed.

“It’s ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi!’ [‘qian kun’ – heaven and earth, yin and yang, the universe; ‘da’ – big/great; ‘nuo’ – to shift, to move; ‘yi’ – also to shift, to move, to change/alter/remove. The Great Shifting of the Universe]” in a low voice Peng Yingyu said.

As soon as Leng Qian heard the five characters ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi’, he understood immediately. ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi’ was the fiercest martial art skill, a Ming Cult’s legacy, passed on

from generation to the generation. The fundamental principle was not mysterious at all; it strove to stimulate one's own potential first, and then used it to lead and shift the opponent's force. But the variations within this principle were magical; it was almost unthinkable.

Ever since the death of the previous Cult Leader, Yang Dingtian, there was no one else within the Ming Cult who mastered this special skill, and thus none of the six men ever expected it. No wonder Yang Xiao did not seem to exert himself, since he simply directed Wei Yixiao's palm power to attack the four Wanderers, and conversely, used the four Wanderers' palm power to attack Wei Yixiao, while he leisurely positioned himself in between them, no more than drawing and transmitting both parties' internal energy, nothing more than 'parting the mountain to watch tigers fight'.

"Congratulations!" Leng Qian said, "No ill will, please stop fighting." He always spoke succinctly. With 'congratulations', he congratulated Yang Xiao on being successfully trained in the Ming Cult's long lost divine skill, the 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi'; by 'no ill will' he was saying that we, six people, going up the mountain this time without holding any ill will toward you, that we were sincere in our desire to help resisting the invaders; and by 'please stop fighting' he meant both sides should stop fighting and must not have any misunderstanding.

Yang Xiao was aware that in normal times Leng Qian had never uttered a single rubbish talk; and because he did not want to utter even one extraneous word, he had never told a lie. If he said, 'no ill will', then he truly did not have any evil intention. Moreover, when he made his move by shooting the five silver brushes, it was obvious that his intention was indeed to help his companions out of trouble, not to harm

anybody. Thereupon he laughed and said, "Wei Xiong, Four Wanderers, when I say 'one, two, three', everybody remove your palm power at the same time, so that nobody will get hurt!"

Seeing Wei Yixiao, Zhou Dian and the others nodded their heads, he slowly counted, "One, two, three!"

As the word 'three' left his mouth, Yang Xiao removed the divine skill 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi'; but suddenly he felt his back was cold. A burst of sharp finger power pierced the 'shen dao' [divine way] acupoint on his back. Yang Xiao was shocked. "Fu Wang is very sinister and ruthless," he thought, "To launch a sneak attack like this." But when he was about to counterattack by slapping backward, he saw that Wei Yixiao swayed and tumbled down. It seemed like he had also fallen under the enemy's sneak attack.

In all his life, Yang Xiao had seen countless big battles; although this turn of events had taken him by surprise, his mind stayed clear. Quickly he dashed forward to get away from the enemy's reach. Upon turning his head around, he saw Zhou Dian, Peng Yingyu, Priest Tieguan and Shuo Bude, four people, had also fallen on the ground, while Leng Qian was exchanging palm strikes with someone wearing ash grey cotton robe.

The man struck backhandedly, and Leng Qian uttered a grunt; his voice sounded like he was in pain. Yang Xiao took a deep breath and jumped forward with the intention of helping Leng Qian, but suddenly he felt a burst of ice-cold 'chi' flowed swiftly from his 'shen dao' acupoint to his torso, attacking his 'shen zhu' [body pillar], 'tao dao' [pottery channel], 'da zhui' [big spine], 'feng fu' [windy mansion], and various acupoints along the 'du mai' [supervise arteries] channel.

Yang Xiao knew his condition was far from good. The enemy was not only a martial art expert, but also a sinister and ruthless person; he was able to take the split-second window when Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the four Wanderers were withdrawing their strength and like a lightning he struck a surprise attack. Yang Xiao had no choice but to circulate his own real 'chi' to fight the cold. This cold 'chi' was completely different from Wei Yixiao's Cold Ice Soft Palm. Yang Xiao felt it was like a wisp of ice-cold thread, but wherever it reached, it turned the acupoint numb and itchy. If they were fighting face to face, Yang Xiao could use his internal energy to protect his body, and there was no way this kind of finger power would penetrate his internal defense. But since he had already fallen under the enemy's sneak attack, his only option was to launch a counterattack together with Leng Qian, trying to knock down the enemy then act accordingly.

Yang Xiao stepped forward with raised right palm, and was about to strike down when suddenly his entire body shivered violently from the cold and the strength he gathered in his palm disappeared without a trace.

By this time Leng Qian had exchanged more than twenty stances with that man, and it was obvious that he was not the man's match. Yang Xiao was very anxious. He saw Leng Qian kicked with his right foot. The man rushed one step forward and his finger hacked down on Leng Qian's arm. Leng Qian staggered and fell backward.

Yang Xiao was startled and angered; he gathered the remaining of internal energy in his entire body into his right elbow and struck the grey-robed man on the chest. The grey-robed man stuck out his left finger toward the 'xiao hai' [small ocean] acupoint on Yang Xiao's elbow. Immediately Yang Xiao felt his entire body went cold and numb, and was

not able to make another move, even for half a step. The grey-robed man laughed coldly and said, "The Guang Ming Zuo Shi indeed lives up to your reputation. After getting hit twice by my 'huan yin zhi' [fantasy/magical 'yin' finger], you can still stand."

Yang Xiao said, "Your finger-flicking technique is from Shaolin, but whatever is the 'huan yin zhi' internal strength? Humph, Shaolin Pai does not have this kind of sinister and ruthless martial art. Who are you?"

The grey-robed man laughed aloud and said, "Pin Seng [impoverished monk] Yuan Zhen, a disciple under the tutelage of my master, whose Buddhist title was 'Kong' at the top and 'Jian' at the bottom. Right now the Six Major Sects are besieging the Ming Cult. You die under a Shaolin disciple, your death is not in vain."

Yang Xiao said, "The Six Major Sects and our Ming Cult are enemies, real swords, real spears, we will fight to the death; that will be the deed of the real man, real hero. Kong Jian Shen Seng's [Divine Monk] kindness and chivalry was widely known throughout the world, who would have thought that among his disciples there is someone as despicable and shameless as you are ..." Speaking to this point, he was unable to stand anymore; his knees gave up and he fell sitting down on the ground.

Yuan Zhen laughed out loud and said, "To win by a surprise move is just fair in a war. It has been this way since the ancient times. I, Yuan Zhen, one man can flatten the Ming Cult's seven big masters. Aren't you going to accept the defeat?"

Yang Xiao shook his head and sighed. "How can you enter the Brightness Peak stealthily?" he asked, "How did you know

about this secret passage? If you are willing to reveal it, Yang Xiao will die with closed eyes." Yang Xiao knew that Yuan Zhen's sneak attack was successful, admittedly it was because his martial art skill was superior; but most importantly, it was because he knew the secret passages of the Brightness Peak, bypassing a dozens of Ming Cult's sentries along the way, and made his move stealthily [orig. shén bù zhī guī bù jué - deity (does) not know, ghost (does) not realize.], so that he was able to knock down seven masters of the Ming Cult in one move.

The Ming Cult had been operating from the Brightness Peak as their headquarters for hundreds of years, relying on dangerous precipice as their natural defense, enforced with metal ramparts and impassable moats. Who would have thought that disaster arose from the inside; it came so suddenly that there was not enough time to set up a defense? Indeed they had suffered a crushing defeat.

A phrase from the 'Lun Yu' [Analects of Confucius] suddenly came to Yang Xiao's mind: Kong Zi [Confucius] said, 'In his own territory there are divisions and downfalls, leavings and separations, and, with your help, he cannot preserve it. And yet he is planning these hostile movements within the state.- I am afraid that the sorrow of the Ji-sun family will not be on account of Zhuan-yu, but will be found within the screen of their own court.' [This is not my translation, I found it here: <http://classics.mit.edu//Confucius/analects.html> under Section 4, Part 16, edited to pinyin spellings.]

Yuan Zhen said with a laugh, "You, Devil Cult, always regarded the seven peaks and thirteen cliffs of the Brightness Peak as a natural defense. In our Shaolin monks' eyes, it is no more than a broad and open road, is it not? All of you have been hit by my 'huan yin zhi', I have no doubt that within three days, you will return to the Western

Paradise. In my visit to the Peak this time, Pin Seng has buried several dozen catties of gunpowder. I will extinguish the Devil Cult's devil fire. When the Heavenly Eagle Cult, the Five-Element Flags, and what have you, busily going up to rescue, 'ka-boom', the buried gunpowder will explode. Smoke will arise, fire will be out, from then on, you can consider the Devil Cult vanished without a trace. This is what it is called: The lone Shaolin monk extinguishes the Ming Cult, the seven demons of the Brightness Peak return to the Western Paradise."

Listening to this, Yang Xiao and the others could not help from feeling extremely anxious, knowing that this monk was capable of doing what he said he would do. The loss of their own lives was not to be regretted, but the Ming Cult, which had been passed on for thirty three generations, would perish under this Shaolin monk's hands.

In the meantime, Yuan Zhen was growing more and more complacent. "Within the Ming Cult, the masters are as numerous as the clouds. If you did not fight each other and disintegrate to pieces, how could there be any disastrous destruction? Just look at what happened today: if the seven of you were not in the middle of staking everything in palm power competition, how could Pin Seng quietly go up the Brightness Peak, and succeed in one strike? This is called: the Heaven regards sin yet still allow man to live, but the more sin committed, man must not live! Ha ha ha ... I can't believe the Ming Cult, with its awe-inspiring prestige in the former days, will end up like this after Yang Dingtian's death."

In the brink of great disaster of their own death, as well as the destruction of their Cult, as Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu, Zhou Dian, and the others heard his words, they recalled the incidents happened over the last twenty years, and were all

filled with deep regret. "This monk is right," they thought.

"Yang Xiao," with a loud voice Zhou Dian said, "I, Zhou Dian, really deserve to die! I was being unfair toward you. Although you are not too good, you being the Jiaozhu certainly beat us without any Jiaozhu at all, and so we won't be completely wiped out like this."

With a bitter laugh Yang Xiao replied, "What ability do I have to become the Jiaozhu? Everybody was in the wrong; we have made such a huge mess that in the netherworld we won't have a face to see the past generations' Jiaozhu."

Yuan Zhen laughed. "It is too late for you, gentlemen, to regret it now," he said. "When Yang Dingtian was the boss of the Devil Cult, he was insufferably arrogant. It's a pity he died early and could not witness the defeat of the Ming Cult with his own eyes."

"Fart!" Zhou Dian angrily said, "If Yang Jiaozhu were still alive, everybody would obey his orders! How can a bald thief like you launch a sneak attack like this?"

With a cold laugh Yuan Zhen said, "It doesn't matter if Yang Dingtian is dead or alive. I will always have a way to have his reputation swept away ..."

Suddenly a slap was heard, followed by a cry, "Ah!" Yuan Zhen's back was hit by Wei Yixiao's palm, while Wei Yixiao was also hit by Yuan Zhen's counterattack finger strike, right on the 'shan zhong' [lit. mutton smell] acupoint on his chest. Both of them staggered a few steps backward.

When Wei Yixiao was hit by Yuan Zhen's finger earlier, although his injury was heavy, his internal energy was, after all, a notch higher than the others. Only he did not

immediately strike back, but pretended to be knocked out instead. When Yuan Zhen was getting immensely pleased with himself and not in the least on guard, he leaped up and attacked. He had sent out his entire strength in this one palm strike. He was willing to die together with the enemy to save the Ming Cult from a calamity.

Although Yuan Zhen was fierce, the Green-winged Bat King was one of the Ming Cult's 'Hu Jiao Fa Wang', he shared the same honor with Yin Tianzheng and Xie Xun. When he struck with everything he had, how could it be considered a small matter? As soon as the power of 'Cold Ice Soft Palm' entered his body, Yuan Zhen felt his stomach turn upside down that he wanted to throw up. He tried to circulate his internal energy to steady himself, but he still felt the sky spun and the earth revolved that he felt he was about to fall down. He had no choice but sit cross-legged and circulate his 'chi' to resist the cold attack from the 'Cold Ice Soft Palm'.

As Wei Yixiao got hit by the 'Fantastical Yin Finger' twice in succession, he could not stand and fell backward and was not able to move. Immediately the hall became quiet as the eight martial art masters all received heavy injuries; nobody was able to make even half a step of movement.

Eight men exerted their internal energies, each was hoping he could restore his strength one step earlier than the enemy. If only one side was able to move, he could kill the other side. Everybody was anxious in his heart. They all knew it was the decisive moment for the survival or destruction of the Ming Cult, as well as the live or death of all eight people. If Yuan Zhen was able to move first, despite his heavy injury, he would be able to pick up a sword and murder these seven people one by one. If only one of the seven Ming Cult people was able to move first, he would be able to kill Yuan Zhen and thus save the Ming Cult.

There were seven people in Ming Cult's side, they should have the benefit of numbers; however, the Five Wanderers' power was comparably shallower than the rest. When they were hit by the 'Fantastical Yin Finger', their strength was gone; while Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, who possessed more profound internal strength were hit twice. Actually, it was not easy to differentiate the power of 'han bing mian zhang' and 'huan yin zhi'; however, Wei Yixiao sent his last palm strike when he had already suffered injury, while Yuan Zhen launched his attack when he had not been injured. It could be gathered from this fact that Yuan Zhen had a greater chance to make his move first.

Yang Xiao and the others were secretly distressed, but circulating internal energy to treat injury like this must not be forced the least bit; the more they were anxious and impatient, the greater the chance of something going terribly wrong. Each one of these people was an expert in internal energy cultivation; how could they not know this fact?

Leng Qian and the others vomited several times. They knew they would never be able to recover ahead of Yuan Zhen. They only hoped for one of Yang Xiao's subordinates at the Brightness Peak would come into the hall. As long as one Ming Cult disciple came in, - he did not have to know martial art - he could pick a wooden stick and gently knock Yuan Zhen and kill him. However, after waiting for a long time, there was not even half a noise could be heard outside the hall. It was close to midnight, the disciples at the Brightness Peak were either on their guard duties outside, or were sleeping in their quarters inside. Besides, without Yang Xiao's order, who would dare to barge into the hall? As for Yang Xiao's servants, ever since one of them was bitten by Wei Yixiao to death, they all scared out of their wits and had scattered away early on. Not to mention Yang Xiao did not

summon them, even if he did, they might not necessarily dare to step into the hall, to come to the presence of this blood-sucking Devil King.

Hidden inside the cloth sack, Zhang Wuji could not see anything, but when they spoke, he could hear every single word clearly. Right now the hall was quiet, but he knew that this silence was hiding an enormous murderous intention. After half a day, suddenly he heard Shuo Bude's voice was calling out, "Hey, little friend inside the cloth sack, you must save us."

"How do I save you?" Zhang Wuji asked.

The flow of 'chi' in Yuan Zhen's 'dan tian' was starting to clear up. To suddenly hear a voice came out of the cloth sack, his shock was not light. His real 'chi' was shaken and his body was trembling violently. Ever since he entered the hall, his attention was focused on dealing with Wei Yixiao, Yang Xiao, and the other masters; how could he find the time to leisurely observe anything unusual lying on the ground other than an ordinary cloth sack? To suddenly hear someone was talking, he could not restrain from sucking a mouthful of cold air while cried out inwardly, "I am finished!"

He heard Shuo Bude say, "The mouth of the cloth sack was bound by the 'qian chan bai jie' [a thousand wraps a hundred knots] technique. Other than myself, definitely nobody else would be able to untie it. But you can stand up."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, while standing inside the cloth sack.

"Xiao Xiongdi [little brother]," Shuo Bude said, "You were willing to give up your life to save the lives of several dozen Rui Jin Flag brethren, your righteousness, chivalry and noble

character deserves everybody's utmost admiration. Right now several of our people's lives also depend on you. Please go to that evil monk and kill him with a fist or a palm."

Zhang Wuji pondered deeply and did not answer for half a day.

Shuo Bude added, "This evil monk took advantage of our precarious position and launched a sneak attack. It was a despicable deed, you have heard it with your own ears. If you don't kill him, tens of thousands Ming Cult people, from top to bottom, will be wiped out completely by outsiders. If you kill him, you are performing a huge virtuous deed and chivalrous duty."

Zhang Wuji still hesitated and did not say anything.

Yuan Zhen said, "Right this moment I cannot move the least bit. If you kill me, won't you be the laughingstock of all heroes under the heavens?"

"Stinky bald thief," Zhou Dian angrily said, "Shaolin Pai calls themselves a righteous major sect; but you surreptitiously came up here and launched a sneak attack. Won't you be the laughingstock of all heroes under the heavens?"

Zhang Wuji had taken a step toward Yuan Zhen, but then he stopped and said, "Shuo Bude Dashi [reverend], your precious Cult's dispute [orig. shi fei qu zhi - right or wrong, crooked or straight] with the Six Major Sects, Xiao Ke [the young one] does not know; Xiao Ke is very willing to help you, gentlemen, but is unwilling to harm this Great Monk from the Shaolin Pai."

"Xiao Xiongdi," Peng Yingyu said, "You are somewhat ignorant. If you do not kill him now, when this monk's

strength is restored, he will definitely kill you as well.”

Yuan Zhen said with a laugh, “I have neither grudges nor enmity with this Xiao Shizu [young benefactor]; how can I kill him without any reason? Let alone this Xiao Shizu does not belong to the Devil Cult; apparently, out of ill intention Bu Dai Heshang captured him and took him up the mountain. You, the Devil Cult people, have never shrunk from any crime; what good might come out of this for him?”

Both sides were huffing and puffing, it was extremely difficult for them to talk, but they forced themselves to speak, trying to touch Zhang Wuji’s heart. Zhang Wuji was in quandary; he had personally heard how this Yuan Zhen monk launched a sneak attack, which was a cowardly act. But to go forward and strike him dead was also against his wish. Besides, once he made his move, he would be standing in the Ming Cult’s side forever and become the enemy of the Six Major Sects. His Tai Shifu [grand master], the Six Heroes of Wudang, Zhou Zhiruo, and the others would become his enemy.

He also thought, “The Ming Cult is recognized by the mainstream Wulin community as demonic and heretical, such as Wei Yixiao sucks people’s blood and Yifu indiscriminately killed the innocent. Really they have done too many things they should have not done. Tai Shifu has repeatedly warned me not to make friends with the Devil Cult people to avoid the disaster of lifelong suffering. Because my Father had involvement with the Devil Cult by marrying my Mother, he had to commit suicide on the top of Wudang Mountain. A warning example is close at hand, road to disaster is straight ahead. Much less this Yuan Zhen is Divine Monk Kong Jian’s disciple. Kong Jian Dashi willingly endured thirteen punches of ‘Qi Shang Quan’ [seven-injury fist] with the hope of restoring my Yifu, but the end result was he died under the fist. This kind of benevolence, justice and mercy is extremely hard to come by within the Wulin world even from the

ancient times; how can I harm his disciple?”

As he heard Shuo Bude urge again, Zhang Wuji said, “Shuo Bude Dashi, could you teach me a way so that I do not need to harm this Great Monk while he also cannot harm all of you? Xiao Ke will certainly do as instructed.”

Shuo Bude thought, “Looking at the current situation, it is a fight to the death between the two parties; how can there be a way to preserve both sides? If Yuan Zhen does not die, then we will perish.”

While he was still deep in thought, Peng Yingyu said, “Xiao Xiongdi, your benevolence is truly admirable. In that case please stretch out your finger and lightly push the ‘yu tang’ [jade hall] acupoint on Yuan Zhen’s chest. This way you will definitely not harm him, you will only prevent him to use his internal energy for several hours. We will send someone to take him down the mountain, we will not harm even a hair on his body. Do you know the location of the ‘yu tang’ acupoint?”

Zhang Wuji’s medical knowledge was deep, he knew that if the ‘yu tang’ acupoint was lightly sealed, the flow of real ‘chi’ from the ‘dantian’ upward would be temporarily blocked, but his health would not be affected. Thereupon he said, “I do.”

He heard Yuan Zhen say, “Xiao Shizhu must not act on their behalf. You seal my acupoint, no doubt it is not fatal, but as soon as their internal energy is restored, they are going to kill me at once. How are you going to prevent it?”

“Your Mama’s stinking dog’s fart!” Zhou Dian cursed, “We said we are not going to harm you, naturally we are not going to harm you. Do you think the words of Wu San Ren of the Ming Cult cannot be trusted?”

Zhang Wuji believed that Yang Xiao and the Five Wanderers were people who would not fail to keep their own words, but he was not certain about Wei Yixiao. Thereupon he asked, "Wei Qianbei, what do you say?"

With a trembling voice Wei Yixiao said, "I won't harm him for now. But the next time we meet, we will disregard our lives and fight ... fight to the ... the death." By the time he said the words 'fight to the death', his voice was getting extremely weak while he was gasping for breath.

"Then so be it," Zhang Wuji said, "Guangming Shizhe [The Emissary of the Brightness], Qing Yi Fu Wang, and Wu San Ren, seven gentlemen, each one is a hero and warrior of the present age, how can they break their own promise renege their own words? Yuan Zhen Dashi, please forgive 'wanbei's offense." While saying that, he walked toward Yuan Zhen.

Because he was inside the sack, he could only take about one foot at a time; therefore, it was a dozen steps later that he finally arrived in front of Yuan Zhen. This kind of big cloth sack creeping forward slowly was actually a funny scene, but this moment everybody's life was hanging on a thread; nobody found it amusing.

Listening to Yuan Zhen's breathing, Zhang Wuji knew when he was about two feet away from him, so he stopped and said, "Yuan Zhen Dashi, 'wanbei' is doing this for the benefit of both sides, you must not blame me." While saying that, he slowly raised his hand.

With a bitter laugh Yuan Zhen said, "At this moment my whole body can't move; I can only let you, 'xiao wan bei', to do whatever you want."

Ever since the Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley Hu Qingniu died, ZhangWuji's technique in acupoint identification was already incomparable in this present age. Yuan Zhen and he were separated by a cloth sack, but unexpectedly his stretched finger toward the 'yu tang' acupoint did not miss even a thousandths of a hair width. This 'yu tang' acupoint was located on the pit of the stomach, about one 'cun' six 'fen' [1 cun is approximately 1 inch, 1 fen is about 1/3 of a centimeter] below the 'zi gong' [purple palace] acupoint, and about one 'cun' six 'fen' above the 'shan zhong' [mutton smell] acupoint. It belonged to the 'ren mai' [lit. free, unrestrained blood passage]. This blood passage was not a fatal major acupoint, but it was located as such that the 'chi' passage must pass through. If this passage was blocked, the flow of 'chi' in the entire body would be obstructed.

"Aiyo!" suddenly Yang Xiao, Leng Qian, Shuo Bude shouted together, "Quickly withdraw your hand!"

Zhang Wuji felt the forefinger of his right hand shook; a gust of cold 'chi' burst through his hand and spread throughout his body just like a lightning strike, immediately his body turned cold. He heard Zhou Dian, Priest Tieguan, and the others shouted curses at the same time, "Stinky bald thief, dare to use such treachery!"

Zhang Wuji's entire body shivered violently. He understood that although that Yuan Zhen could not move away, he was still able to send all his strength to his finger, which he positioned in front of his 'yu tang' acupoint. Because Zhang Wuji was inside the sack, he did not see that Yuan Zhen unexpectedly could still execute this countermeasure. As Zhang Wuji's finger arrived, two fingertips bumped into each other, the power of Yuan Zhen's 'huan yin zhi' penetrated the cloth sack and went straight into his body.

In this situation of life and death, Yuan Zhen had used up his remaining strength on his finger. After the two fingers collided, his entire body was paralyzed and his countenance turned greenish pale that he looked like a corpse.

In the hall, there were originally eight men who were unable to move after receiving injuries. Now Zhang Wuji was added to their number. Zhou Dian was the one most irritated; although he was gasping for breath, he insisted on shouting curses at the Shaolin bald thief's shameless treachery. Yang Xiao and the others, however, thought that they could not blame Yuan Zhen. The enemy was threatening to seal his acupoint, he held out his hand in self-defense. He had done nothing improper.

Yuan Zhen's strength was completely depleted that he felt he was about to die. But secretly he was delighted, thinking this boy was still young, his power could not be too strong. After being hit by the 'huan yin zhi', he would certainly be dead in less than half a day, while in about two hours he would be able to slowly gather his dispersed real 'chi', and then he would be able to do anything he wanted.

The hall grew very quiet. After more than an hour later, the four candles illuminating the hall died out one after another. The hall became pitch black.

Yang Xiao and the others heard Yuan Zhen's intermittent breathing slowly evened up; it was heavy at first, but progressively getting longer. They knew the scattered real 'chi' in Yuan Zhen's body was slowly condensing, while whenever they tried to exert their own energy, a cold 'chi', like the ice-cold 'huan yin zhi', would burst into their 'dantian'. They could not help but shiver. Their despair grew, the anxiety was getting even more unbearable. They wished

for Yuan Zhen to recover quicker and quickly send out a palm strike to each of them so that they would die immediately, sparing them the seemingly endless torture of waiting anxiously.

Leng Qian, Zhou Dian and the others were content to just close their eyes waiting for death, simple and straightforward. Shuo Bude and Peng Yingyu, however, could not set their minds at ease. Of the Five Wanderers, Shuo Bude and Peng Yingyu were Buddhist monks [orig. 'chu jia ren' - those who leave their homes], but these two were also ones with the most ambition, the ones most care about the common people's suffering, the ones resolved to take the great undertaking. By this time the situation was already decided, they were certain they would lose their lives under the hands of Yuan Zhen. Everybody's lifelong magnificent aspiration would soon go down the drain.

"Peng Heshang," Shuo Bude mournfully said, "We have carefully laid a plan to drive the Mongolian Tatars away, who would have thought that in the end everything is wasted? Ay, to think that the calamity of millions of common people has reached its peak, yet they will still have to endure suffering for a longer time."

Zhang Wuji was generating hot 'chi' in his 'dantian' to fight the cold 'chi' of the 'huan yin zhi'. He clearly heard everything Shuo Bude said, and was unable to restrain from feeling strange. "He said they are planning on driving the Mongolian Tatars away?" he thought, "Could it be that the notoriously evil Devil Cult really have the good of common people in their minds?"

He heard Peng Yingyu reply, "Shuo Bude, I have already said that if we rely solely on our Ming Cult's strength, it is impossible for us to overtake the Mongolian Tatars. We have

to contact the world's heroes and warriors to join hands, only then we will succeed. In the past, your Shixiong [martial brother] Bang Hu and my Shidi [(younger) martial brother] Zhou Ziwang have raised arms in rebellion. The momentum was strong, but in the end they still utterly failed. Wasn't it because they did not involve the assistance of outsiders'?"

Zhou Dian loudly said, "Death is knocking on your door, yet you two, this pair of bald thieves, are still fighting a vague battle. One says he wants to rely mainly of the Ming Cult, the other says he wants to join hands with the major sects. To me, Zhou Dian, everything is nonsense! Merely a fart! Our Ming Cult is all split up in pieces, with our guts spilled all over the place; yet you still want to fart? Peng Heshang wants to get in touch with the orthodox major sects, it is an even louder fart, an extremely stinky fart. We are currently besieged by the Six Major Sects, and you want to communicate your fart with them?"

Priest Tieguan interrupted, "If Yang Jiaozhu was still alive, we would have beaten the Six Major Sects out of their wits, then we would not have to worry that they would not obey our command."

Zhou Dian laughed aloud and said, "The ox nose mixed-up hair [both are derogatory terms to call a Taoist priest] is releasing an even smellier ox fart! If Yang Jiaozhu were still alive, naturally everything would be alright; who wouldn't know it? You just talk too much ... aiyo ... aiyo!" As he opened his mouth to laugh, his 'chi' dispersed and the cold 'chi' of 'huan yin zhi' burst into his heart and lungs that he could not restrain from screaming in pain.

"Shut up!" Leng Qian said. As soon as he said those two words, everybody calmed down immediately.

Zhang Wuji's heart was still filled with disquieting thoughts: "Apparently there are many twists and turns surrounding this Ming Cult; they are obviously more than just a bunch of evildoers." Thereupon he said, "Shuo Bude Dashi, what exactly is your precious Cult's objective? Could you possibly reveal it to me?"

"Ha, you are not dead yet?" Shuo Bude said, "Xiao Xiongdi, with no reason whatsoever you deliver your life because of the Ming Cult, we feel very sorry. In any case you won't live past a few more hours, so I don't see any reason why I cannot tell you the secret of our Cult. Leng Mian Xianzheng, what do you say?"

"Tell!" Leng Qian said. Instead of saying, 'it's alright, you can tell him', six words, it was enough for him to say just one word, 'tell'.

"Xiao Xiongdi," Shuo Bude said, "Our Ming Cult originated from Persia. It entered the Central Earth during the Tang dynasty. At that time it was called 'Xian Jiao' [Zoroastrianism]. By imperial decree, Tang emperors allowed Guangming [brightness] Temples to be built everywhere as our Ming Cult's monasteries. Our Cult's creed is to do good and shun evil, that all living creatures are equal. Those who have silver and gold ought to share it with the poor. No meat no wine. We worship the Ming Zun [Brightness prophet]. The Ming Zun is actually the God of Fire, the virtuous deity. It was because corrupt government officials bullied our Cult, our Cult brethren were angered and often staged rebellions. From the Northern Song's Fang La, Fang Jiaozhu, I don't know how many times we have raised our arms."

Zhang Wuji had also heard about Fang La's reputation; he knew Fang La was named one of the Four Great Bandits of the Northern Song, sharing the same honor with Song Jian

[from the Water Margin], Wang Qing, and Tian Hu. Thereupon he asked, "So Fang La was your precious Cult's Jiaozhu?"

"That's right," Shuo Bude said, "In the years of 'Jian Yan' of the Southern Song, there was Wang Zongshi Jiaozhu at Xinzhou [Jiangxi], in the years of 'Shao Xing', Yu Wupo Jiaozhu raised arms at Quzhou [Zhejiang], during the 'Shao Ding' years of Emperor Li Zong, Zhang Sanqiang Jiaozhu staged a rebellion at Jiangxi and Guangdong regions. It was because our Cult often opposed the imperial authorities that the imperial government started to call us 'the Devil Cult' and strictly forbade our activities. To survive, inevitably our operations became surreptitious so we can evade the authorities' eyes and ears. In the meantime, the accumulated grievances between us and the orthodox major sects grew to the level similar to water and fire. Admittedly, within our own Cult there were unavoidably certain individuals who were not self-introspective, some evildoer disciples, who relying on their superb martial art skill to indiscriminately killed, raped and plundered the innocents. As a result, today our Cult's prestige within the Jianghu is declining ..."

Suddenly Yang Xiao interrupted in cold voice, "Shuo Bude, are you talking about me?"

Shuo Bude said, "My name is 'Shuo Bude' [can't say]; I won't say anything that is not supposed to be spoken. Whoever has done the deed, he understands. This is called 'the teeth chew the wontons, the stomach knows how many'."

"Humph," Yang Xiao snorted, but did not say anything.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji was startled by a realization: "Hey, how come I am not cold anymore?" When he was hit by Yuan Zhen's 'huan yin zhi', the cold was unbearable, but after a while, surprisingly the cold 'chi' completely vanished.

What actually happened was: he was hit by the 'yin' poison of the 'xuan ming shen zhang' [black/mysterious and deep divine palm], which lasted until he was seventeen when the poison was completely eradicated from his system. During the seven years, day in and day out his body was fighting the cold poison; thereupon his body developed a natural defense against the cold, just like blinking his eyes or breathing, which he instinctively does. Much less after he trained the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, although he had not reached perfection yet, the last hurdle had not been passed, the 'yang' 'chi' inside his body was quite abundant, so that without taking too much time, the 'yin' poison was completely driven out.

In the meantime, Shuo Bude continued, "Ever since our Great Song perished under the hands of Mongolian Tatars, the Ming Cult becomes the mortal enemy of the imperial government more and more, because our Cult has taken the duty to drive out the invaders. Only it's a pity that for the past few years the Ming Cult has become like a dragon without a head. Because the masters within the Cult are fighting over the Jiaozhu position, we have been constantly killing each other. In the end, some washed their hands and lived in seclusion; some founded another sect and became the Jiaozhu. After our Cult fell apart, the enmity with the prestigious schools and orthodox sects grew deeper, until finally we reached the situation we are in today. Yuan Zhen Heshang, did you hear even half a sentence of lie in what I just said?"

"Humph," Yuan Zhen said, "No lies, no lies! You all are in front of the death's door, why would you tell any lie?" While he said that, he slowly stood up and took a step forward.

"Ah!" Yang Xiao and the Five Wanderers cried out in alarm.

Although they all knew he was going to recover first, they did not expect his internal strength to be this profound that even after being hit by Qing Yi Fu Wang Wei Yixiao's 'cold ice soft palm', his recovery would be this quick. They watched his imposing stature; as his left foot took another step forward, his body was as steady as a rock.

Yang Xiao laughed coldly. "Kong Jian Shen Seng's distinguished disciple really is not to be trifled with, but you have not answered my question earlier. Could it be that there is some dubious affair in this matter that you cannot tell the truth?"

"Ha ... ha ..." Yuan Zhen laughed while taking another step forward. "You are not going to die with your eyes closed before knowing all the details, aren't you?" he said, "You asked me how I knew the secret passages in the Brightness Peak, how I could pass through the layer upon layer of natural stronghold, and stealthily [as before, the original was 'deity does not know, demon does not aware'] going up the mountain peak. Very well, I am going to tell you, gentlemen, the truth. It was your own precious Cult's Yang Dingtian Jiaozhu, husband and wife, who personally lead me up here."

Yang Xiao shivered involuntarily; he thought, "Based on his status, there is no way he would tell a lie; but how can there be such thing?"

Meanwhile, Zhou Dian had already cursed, "You are just releasing your eighteen generation ancestors' fart! This secret passage is the Brightness Peak's greatest secret, it is our Cult's sacred passageway. Although Yang Zuoshi [left emissary] is a Guangming Shizhe [emissary of the Brightnes], Wei Dage [big brother] is a Hu Jiao Fa Wang, they have never walked on that passage. Only the Cult Leader, one man, can use this secret passage. How could Yang

Jiaozhu take you, an outsider, into this secret passage?"

Yuan Zhen sighed and was lost in thought for half a day before quietly said, "Since you insist on getting to the bottom of this matter, I am going to tell you a secret that happened twenty-five years ago. You all are not going to go down the mountain alive anyway, so I am not worried that you would divulge this matter. Ay! Zhou Dian, you are right, this secret passage is the Ming Cult's sacred passageway, it was always only the Jiaozhu, one man, who can enter it. Anybody else entering it would be considered a sacrilege, punishable by the most severe punishment, without any possibility of pardon. However, Madame Yang Dingtian had entered it. Yang Dingtian had violated the religious law by personally sneaking his wife into this secret passage..."

(Zhou Dian cut him off by cussing, "Fart! A stinky dog's fart!" Peng Yingyu rebuked him harshly, "Zhou Dian, shut up!")

"In turn, Madame Yang also personally took me in ..."

(Zhou Dian cursed again, "Damn it! Pei! Pei!" he spat, "Nonsense!")

"... I am not a Ming Cult disciple; technically, I did not violate you Cult's law. Ay, even if I were a Ming Cult disciple, even if I committed a grave offense against the Cult, what should I be afraid of?" As he recounted these past events, surprisingly his voice sounded so forlorn.

"Why did Madame Yang take you into the secret passage?" Priest Tieguan asked.

"It was something that happened a long, long time ago," Yuan Zhen replied, "Today Lao Na [lit. old cassock, a term used by Buddhist monk to call himself] is an old man, over

seventy years of age ... but when I was young ... Alright, I will tell you everything. Do you gentlemen know who I am? Madame Yang was my Shimei [martial (younger) sister], before Lao Na left home, my secular surname was Cheng, my given name was Kun, I was none other than the 'Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou' ['hun yuan' - origin of the universe, 'pi li' - thunderbolt, 'shou' - hand]!"

As soon as these words came out of his mouth, no doubt Yang Xiao and the others were shocked beyond belief; Zhang Wuji, who was inside the cloth sack, was even more shocked that he cried out in alarm. The stories he heard from his Yifu that night on the Bing Huo Island immediately came back vividly to his mind; how his Yifu's master, Cheng Kun, had killed his entire family: parents, wife and son; how Yifu has excessively massacred Wulin people to force Cheng Kun to appear; and how he had wounded Divine Monk Kong Jian with his fist, but Cheng Kun had not fulfilled his promise to appear in the flesh ...

Zhang Wuji suddenly remembered, "Turned out at that time this evil Cheng Kun had bowed to Kong Jian Shen Seng as his master. Because Kong Jian Shen Seng wanted to resolve this debt of sin, he willingly took Yifu's thirteen 'Qi Shang Quan' [seven-injury fist] punches. Who would have thought that Cheng Kun also deceived his Shifu and had caused Kong Jian Shen Seng to die with unsatisfied regret?"

He thought further, "As a result, Yifu's insanity flared up and he killed the innocents indiscriminately that all Clans and Sects went up Mount Wudang together, forcing my Father and Mother to their deaths. All things considered, the main reason of all these affairs is Cheng Kun's mischief."

All of a sudden an incomparable anger flared in his breast; he felt his whole body was parched as if he was burning. This

'air pocket of the universe' of Shuo Bude was airtight. He had been stuffed inside the sack for a long time, the oxygen inside was depleted long ago. Because of his profound internal energy, Zhang Wuji was able to survive this long by breathing like a tortoise, i.e. he needed very little air. Now that his mind was suddenly agitated, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi [real 'chi' of Jiu Yang] in his 'dantian' was out of control and was about to burst out. Immediately he felt like he was inside a burning stove and was unable to restrain from groaning loudly.

"Xiao Xiongdi," Zhou Dian said sternly, "Everybody's life is in danger; everybody's distress is difficult to bear, but a real man will not show weakness by groaning loudly."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji responded, immediately he circulated his internal energy according to the Nine Yang Manual to blend his 'chi' evenly throughout his body. Usually, whenever he did this, his mind would calm down like still water, his spirit would transcend beyond the material world; however, as he circulated his energy this time, his four limbs and hundreds of bones felt unbearably painful, as if there were hundreds of small needles, all were burning red, simultaneously pricking his major acupoints all over his body.

During the several years he was training the Nine Yang Manual, although he had uncovered the mystery of the world's most excellent martial art study, he did not have any expert master to give him directions, he was merely groping in the dark. As a result, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi was accumulating in his body, but had not been put to use to break through the last major hurdle. He was fine as long as nothing triggering the 'zhen qi'. But Yuan Zhen's 'huan yin zhi' was the Wulin world's most poisonous 'yin' martial art. As soon as it entered Zhang Wuji's body, it was like the gunpowder being ignited. But because he was inside the

'qian kun yi qi' sack, the excited Jiu Yang Zhen Qi had nowhere to go, therefore, it came back and attacked his own body.

In this short period of time, he had experienced the most difficult and dangerous moment a warrior must go through in cultivating the internal energy. It was the moment where life or death, success or failure, were hanging on a thread. Of course Zhou Dian and the others did not know that at that particular time, Zhang Wuji was right at the critical juncture where the water met the fire, the dragon clashed with the tiger; they thought he was simply groaning in pain with his dying breath after being hit by Yuan Zhen's 'fantastical yin finger'.

While Zhang Wuji was struggling hard to resist the torment of the heating 'yang chi', every sentence Yuan Zhen spoke was transmitted clearly into his ears: "Shimei's family and mine have been friends for many generations. The two of us were engaged ever since we were very young. Who would have thought that Yang Dingtian was also secretly in love with my Shimei. When he took up the duty as the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu, his power rose until it shook the heavens. My Shimei's parents were admittedly greedy people who craved selfish gain, while Shimei herself did not have a strong character. Unexpectedly she married him, but their marriage was not necessarily a happy one. Sometimes she wanted to see me. Unavoidably, we must find an extremely secret place for our rendezvous.

Yang Dingtian always complied with everything Shimei wished for, he did not dare to disobey the least bit. When she wanted to look at the secret passage, although Yang Dingtian very much did not want to allow her, in the end he could not resist her persuasion and ended up taking her into the secret passage. From that time on, the secret passage of the

Brightness Peak, the most sacred ground of the Ming Cult for several hundred years, has become your Madame Jiaozhu's and my secret rendezvous place. Ha ... ha ... ha ... ha ... I have been coming and going through this secret passage more than a dozen times; is it any wonder that today I can easily go up the mountain?"

Listening to this narrative, Zhou Dian, Yang Xiao and the others were at a loss of words. Zhou Dian only started to curse, "Fa ..." but did not continue. Their breasts were filled with anger that they felt they were going to explode. They had never heard the Ming Cult being insulted as grave as this time. Moreover, today's destruction of the Ming Cult was all because this secret passage was breached. Although they were listening with anger as if their eyes were spouting fire, they all realized that Yuan Zhen did not tell a lie.

"What? Are you angry?" Yuan Zhen said, "Yang Dingtian was blatantly destroying my marriage. She was clearly my beloved wife; just because Yang Dingtian rose up to become the boss of the Devil Cult, he snatched my wife away just like that. My hatred toward the Devil Cult is such that I refuse to coexist with you under the same sky.

On the day Yang Dingtian married my Shimei, I came to offer my congratulations, but when I was drinking their wine of happiness, I swore a heavy oath in my heart: 'As long as there is one breath remaining in Cheng Kun's body, I will definitely kill Yang Dingtian and destroy the Devil Cult completely.' It has been more than forty years since I swore that oath, and today I see the great success of my effort. Ha ... ha ... I, Cheng Kun, have fulfilled my wish, now I can die with closed eyes."

Yang Xiao coldly said, "Thank you very much for clarifying a great suspicion in my heart. Yang Jiaozhu died suddenly but the cause of his death was unknown. Turns out he died under

your hands."

With a conviction in his voice Yuan Zhen said, "At that time Yang Dingtian's martial art skill was a lot higher than mine. Not to mention at that time, I am afraid even now my martial art skill still cannot surpass his skill of that time ..."

"And so you injured Yang Jiaozhu sneakily," Zhou Dian cut him off, "If not by poison, then it must be a sneak attack like this time."

Yuan Zhen sighed and shook his head. "No," he said, "My Shimei was afraid I would do just that. She warned me continually that if I killed Yang Dingtian, she would break all ties with me immediately. She said that by having a tryst with me she had already committed a serious offense against her husband, if on top of that I maliciously harm him, the Heaven would never forgive her. Yang Dingtian, ay, Yang Dingtian, he ... he died on his own account."

"Ah!" Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu and the others exclaimed simultaneously.

"If Yang Dingtian indeed died under my palms, I would have spared your Ming Cult ..." Yuan Zhen added. His voice trailed off as he recalled the events that happened several decades ago. In a slow and deep voice he continued, "That particular night, my Shimei and I were having our rendezvous in the secret passage. Suddenly we heard a very heavy breathing from the left, something that had never happened before. This passage was extremely secret, no outsider would be able to find its entrance; if it were a Ming Cult disciple, they would never dare to enter. When the two of us heard this sound of breathing, we were extremely shocked and quickly looked around to see what it was, only to see that Yang Dingtian was sitting inside a small room. There was a sheet of sheepskin in

his hands, his face was dark red like blood. When he saw us, he said, 'The two of you, very good, you have done to me very good indeed!' While saying this, his face suddenly turned pale, but this ashen face immediately vanished, turned into blood red. This turning from ashen to red happened quickly three times in the blink of an eye. Yang Zuo Shi, do you know this martial art skill?"

Yang Xiao replied, "That was our Cult's divine skill, the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi."

"Yang Xiao," Zhou Dian said, "You have also mastered it, haven't you?"

"How can I dare to say 'I have mastered it'?" Yang Xiao said, "In the past, just because Yang Jiaozhu regarded me with respect, he had passed on some shallow introductions of this divine skill. I trained it for more than ten years, but so far I only reach no higher than the second level. When I tried to continue, it was like the real 'chi' in my entire body was trying to burst out of my brain, no matter what I did, I simply could not control it. Yang Jiaozhu was able to change his countenance three times in a flash; that means he had reached the fourth level. He once said that among the Cult Leaders of previous generation, the eighth generation Jiaozhu possessed the highest martial art skill. It was said that he managed to master the fifth level of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. But on the same day that he mastered it, he died of a fire deviation. From that time on, no one has ever mastered the fourth level."

"That difficult?" Zhou Dian asked.

Priest Tieguan said, "If it is not that difficult, how can it be called the Ming Cult's protective divine skill?"

They were all masters within the Ming Cult; naturally they had heard about the divine skill Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi for a long time and had always been fascinated with it. Consequently, although they were presently in a precarious situation, they could not restrain from having a discussion about it.

“Yang Zuo Shi,” Peng Yingyu said, “When Yang Jiaozhu reached this fourth level, why did his countenance change?” Actually, he inquired this slightly out-of-topic subject for another profound reason; he knew that if Yuan Zhen took several more steps forward, he would strike everybody dead with his palms. Thereupon he strived to bring up past events to gain as much time as possible. As long as one among their Cult’s seven masters could recover in time and fight back, he could hold Yuan Zhen back momentarily. Even if he was not Yuan Zhen’s match, perhaps the situation would change to their advantage. Anyway, it would beat just sitting there waiting for their deaths.

How could Yang Xiao not understand his intention? Thereupon he said, “The main principle of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi divine skill is to shift the rigid and flexible, yin and yang, two ‘chi’ of the universe. When the countenance appears bluish pale and red during training, it is because the blood subsides, the real ‘chi’ changes shapes. It was said that when one reaches the sixth level, the entire body would turn abruptly from bluish pale to red and vice versa; but by the seventh level, the yin and yang blend harmoniously that there would not be any visible sign externally.”

Peng Yingyu was afraid Yuan Zhen would grow impatient, thereupon he asked him, “Yuan Zhen Dashi, in the end, how did our Yang Jiaozhu return to the Heaven?”

With a cold laugh Yuan Zhen said, “After all of you were hit

by my 'huan yin zhi', I can hear from the sound of your breathing and the way you circulate your 'chi' that, you will definitely not be able to restore your energy within four hours. You want to gain time, hoping that you would get out of trouble by your own 'chi'. Let me tell you, gentlemen, frankly: you won't have enough time. All of you are martial art masters; even if you receive a more serious injury, after circulating your internal energy this long, you should have felt improvement no matter how slight. But how come your body is growing stiffer and stiffer?"

Actually, Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu and the others had realized this fact early on, but they were not willing to lose heart as long as they still have one breath remaining.

They heard Yuan Zhen say, "When I saw Yang Dingtian's countenance changed irregularly, I could not help but panic. My Shimei knew his martial art skill was extremely high. Just one strike and he would have sent us to our death. She said, 'Dingtian, it is all my fault. Please let Cheng Shige [martial (older) brother] go down the mountain, whatever punishment you care to give, I am resigned to accept.' Hearing her words, Yang Dingtian shook his head and slowly said, 'I married your body, but I cannot marry your heart.' He stared hard at us; but suddenly two lines of blood flowed down from his eyes, his body stiffened and he no longer moved. Shimei was greatly shocked. 'Dingtian, Dingtian!' she called out, 'What happened?'"

Although his voice was not loud, Yuan Zhen uttered these words in the quietness of the night, plus everybody was still thinking about the terrifying situation of blood flowing down from Yang Dingtian's eyes, all of them were quite shaken.

Yuan Zhen continued, "She called out several times, but Yang Dingtian was still motionless. My Shimei gathered her

courage and stepped forward to pull his hand, but he was already stiff. When she felt his breathing, it turned out he had already died. I know in her heart she was exceedingly grieved, so I tried to console her, 'It seems that he was in the middle of training some kind of extremely difficult martial art and accidentally suffered fire deviation so that his real 'chi' was heavily reversed to such an extent as he was beyond help.'

My Shimei said, 'That's right, he was training the Ming Cult's timeless distinguished skill, the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. While in a critical juncture, he suddenly discovered you and I were having a private meeting in here. Although I did not personally kill him, he died because of me.' I was about to say something to comfort her and ease her burden when she suddenly pointed her finger somewhere behind me. 'Who's there?' she shouted. I hastily turned around but did not see even half a shadow of anybody else. When I turned back, I saw a dagger had already pierced the pit of her stomach; she had killed herself.

Hey, hey, Yang Dingtian said, 'I married your body, but I cannot marry your heart.' I had won Shimei's heart, but in the end I could not own her body. She was the only woman I ever loved and respected my whole life. If not for Yang Dingtian stirred up trouble, how could our blissful marriage end up in such a tragic way? If Yang Dingtian did not rise to become the Devil Cult's Cult Leader, my Shimei would have never agreed to marry someone who was more than twenty years her senior.

Yang Dingtian had died; there is nothing I can do to him. But the Devil Cult is still alive and running amuck in the world. At that time, pointing my finger toward the corpses of Yang Dingtian and my Shimei, two people, I said, 'I, Cheng Kun, swear to do everything I can to destroy the Ming Cult. The

day I successfully accomplish my oath, I will come here to your presence and cut my own throat to express my apologies.' Ha ha ... Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, you are going to die soon, I, Cheng Kun, also will not live much longer. It's just that my heart's desire is achieved; I will happily kill myself, so I am ten-thousand times better than you are. Over these years, for me, not a day passed by without contemplating a way to destroy the Devil Cult. Ay, I, Cheng Kun, have been unfortunate my whole life; my beloved wife was taken from me, and my only beloved disciple hated me to the bones ..."

Hearing Cheng Kun brought up Xie Xun, Zhang Wuji paid a closer attention. Only when he tried to concentrate, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in his body grew more abundantly, so that he felt as if his four limbs and hundreds of bones were swollen to the point that his body was about to burst; as if each strand of his hair was inflated several folds.

He heard Yun Zhen continue, "After going down the Brightness Peak, I returned to the Central Plains to seek my beloved disciple Xie Xun, whom I have not seen for many years. To my dismay, after talking to him, I have found out that he has become one of the Devil Cult's four great Hu Jiao Fa Wang. Although I visited the Brightness Peak often, my heart had always been on my Shimei, one person; I did not care about any of your shady businesses, my Shimei also had never said anything about the Cult's affairs. My disciple Xie Xun's position within the Devil Cult was quite high; but it was not before he mentioned it himself that I knew about it. With all his might he persuaded me to join the Devil Cult; he said something about joining forces with one heart, driving the barbarians away, my anger was not small. But I also realized that the Devil Cult has had long history and was deeply rooted; the number of masters within the Cult was also as abundant as the clouds. If I rely on my own strength, there was no chance I could destroy it completely. Let's not talk

about me, one person; even if the Wulin heroes and warriors under the heavens joined hands, we might not necessarily be able to destroy it completely. My only hope was to incite disharmony from within, let them massacre one another, let the Devil Cult destroy the Devil Cult."

Listening to this point, Yang Xiao and the others were unable to restrain their shock. Over the last several dozen of years, each one of them were completely in the dark, totally unaware that a major enemy was watching and waiting outside, with a deliberate plan to destroy the Ming Cult. Because of the dispute over the Cult Leader position, they failed to see the more sinister chaos waiting to happen. Yuan Zhen's words were like a stick striking their heads, waking them up to a violent realization.

In the meantime, Yuan Zhen continued, "Immediately I maintained my composure, I only said that this matter was such of a great substance that I must not be rash without giving it further consideration. Several days later, while pretending to be drunk, I tried to rape my disciple Xie Xun's wife. Seizing the opportunity, I killed his entire family: his parents, his wife and his son. I know that because of this, he would hate me to the bones and would definitely try to find me to seek revenge. If he could not find me, he was bound to commit outrageous acts recklessly. Ha ha ... nobody knows a disciple better than his master. This boy Xie Xun is good in every aspect; his literary and martial art skills were extraordinary. It's just that he was easily provoked to anger; he could not carefully reflect on cause and effects of everything ..."

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji could not suppress the anger in his heart much longer. He thought, "Turns out all these misfortunes befell on Yifu were the result of this old thief, Cheng Kun's secret plot. This old thief was not drunk; it

was part of his deliberate scheming."

Yuan Zhen was immensely proud of himself. "Xie Xun killed Jianghu warriors indiscriminately," he said, "In all places he left behind my name; he wanted to force me to come out. Ha ha ... how could I step forward bravely? If you don't want anyone to know, don't do it. Xie Xun gained innumerable enemies. Eventually these blood debts were put on the Ming Cult's account. Once in a while he got into dangerous situations while doing his killings and I secretly helped him. He was the blade with which I kill others; how could I let him be destroyed by others? You, the Devil Cult, faced enemies on the outside as numerous as the leaves on a tree, your own masters were fighting over the Jiaozhu position in the inside; your internal strife was endless, and thus step by step you fell into my plot.

Xie Xun failed to kill Song Yuanqiao. It was a regrettable matter, but he punched Shaolin's Divine Monk Kong Jian to his death, injured Kongtong Wu Lao [five elders] with his palm, and killed countless masters of various schools and sects on the Wang Pan Island. He even harmed the Heavenly Eagle Cult's 'tan zhu' [altar leader] of his old friend's Yin Tianzheng ... Good disciple, a very nice disciple indeed. I spared no effort in passing to him all excellent martial art skills. It truly was not in vain!"

"If that's the case," Yang Xiao coldly said, "Your Shifu Kong Jian Shen Seng also died under your treacherous plan."

Yuan Zhen laughed. "Do you think I was sincere when I bowed to Kong Jian? He received several kowtows from me for the price of his old life. I can't say he suffered any losses ... Ha ha ... ha ha ...!"

While Yuan Zhen roared in laughter, Zhang Wuji's anger

flared uncontrollably. His ears were buzzing and he passed out, but a short while later he regained consciousness. In all his life he had received countless bullying and humiliation, so he was able to take it indifferently. But he was thinking about his Yifu, who was a strong and bold warrior, who had unexpectedly fallen under Cheng Kun's treacherous plan to such an extent where his family perished and his own reputation destroyed, in the end his eyes were blinded and he lived all alone on a desolate island waiting for his death. It was such a deep enmity and great hatred; how could he not avenge him?

As his anger filled his breast, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in his entire body was aroused, the real 'chi' flowed out but could not leak outside the sack; the 'Universe Air Sack' started to inflate. However, Yang Xiao and the others were captivated by Yuan Zhen's story; nobody paid any attention to the inflating cloth sack.

"Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Peng Heshang, Zhou Dian," he heard Yuan Zhen said, "Don't you have anything else to say?"

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "Since it has come to this, what else can we say? Yuan Zhen Dashi, can you spare my daughter's life? Her mother was Ji Xiaofu of Emei Pai; she came from an upright family, she has not joined our Devil Cult."

"Rearing a tiger reaping a danger, pulling grass must be from its root!" Yuan said, while taking another step forward. His palm stretched out, slowly came down toward the crown of Yang Xiao's head.

Inside the cloth sack, Zhang Wuji heard the critical situation outside. He felt his entire body was burning. By listening to the sound to determine the position, he leaped in front of

Yuan Zhen; raising his left hand inside the sack, he blocked Yuan Zhen's palm with the back of his palm. In this one strike, Yuan Zhen was actually exerting himself, because his 'chi' had not completely recovered. As his strike was blocked by Zhang Wuji, he staggered and was pushed a step backward.

"Good kid! You ... you ..." he stammered. Steadying himself, he swept his palm forward, striking the cloth sack. The palm did not hit Zhang Wuji's body, but landed on the inflating sack and bounced back that he was pushed two steps back. Yuan Zhen was shocked, not knowing what had happened.

By this time Zhang Wuji's mouth was parched, his head was dizzy, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi inside his body expanded to the point that he felt he was about to explode. If the 'universe air sack' exploded first, then he would escape danger; otherwise, when the real 'chi' inside his body reached its critical point, his flesh and skin would split open and he would be burned like a black coal.

Seeing the weird cloth sack, Yuan Zhen immediately took two steps forward and launched another palm strike. As before, his palm bounced and he was pushed one step backward, but the cloth sack was also pushed back by his palm strength. Like a giant ball it rolled several times along the ground.

Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji was also tumbling down repeatedly. With the 'chi' filling his chest, he felt his torso was about to burst. He wanted to release the real 'chi' out of his body, but by this time the sack was simply too full; just to let out a breath was getting more and more difficult.

Yuan Zhen successively punched three times and kicked twice, but all his attacks bounced on the cloth sack full of real 'chi'. Inside the sack, Zhang Wuji had already fainted.

Fortunately all of Yuan Zhen's attacks landed on the sack; if his hands and feet had made direct contact with Zhang Wuji's body, with the overflowing real 'chi' in his body, Yuan Zhen would definitely suffer serious injury.

Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the others watched this strange occurrence in amazement, but they were also surprised that they were at a loss of what to do. This 'universe air sack' belonged to Shuo Bude, but even he did not understand why the sack was inflated like a ball. They did not even know whether Zhang Wuji was still alive inside the sack.

They saw Yuan Zhen pull a dagger from his waist and ferociously stab it onto the sack. But where the point of the dagger met the sack, the dagger simply sank into the sack and bounced back out without creating any damage. The sack was made of some strange material; it was neither silk nor leather, but of some kind of unusual and extremely rare material under the heavens. Also Yuan Zhen's dagger was not a treasured blade; although he stabbed several times, how could the blade overcome the sack?

Seeing his palms, feet and dagger were all ineffective, Yuan Zhen thought, "Why would I waste my time with this kid?" His leg flew up and he kicked with all his might. The large sack rolled straight toward the door of the hall.

By this time the cloth sack was fully inflated into a big ball. As soon as it hit the door, it bounced back with great speed toward Yuan Zhen. Realizing the sack was coming at him with a violent force, Yuan Zhen raised up his palms in front of his chest and pushed forward at the big ball with all his strength.

'Ka-boom!' The noise was like a thunder in a cloudless day, followed by shreds of cloth fluttered in the air as the 'qiankun yi qi dai', fully inflated with Zhang Wuji's Jiu Yang Zhen Qi,

exploded into pieces.

Yuan Zhen, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bude and the others felt an exceedingly burning hot air burst onto their bodies; next they saw a young man in tattered clothes standing in the middle of the hall, with a bewildered look on his face.

In that short time, Zhang Wuji had achieved the full potential of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong; water and fire flowed together, the dragon and the tiger converged. Because the sack was filled with abundant real 'chi', it was as if dozens of masters put forth their strengths and simultaneously massaged the several hundred acupoints on his body. The real 'chi' inside and outside of his body surged together to break the dozens of obstacles all over his blood passages. He felt an incomparable comfort as if a stream of mercury flowed along all his entire network of blood vessels. No one had ever met this kind of destiny, and now that the treasured sack was destroyed, no one would ever encounter such opportunity again.

Yuan Zhen saw that the young man from the sack was standing with a blank expression on his face as if he had lost his mind. Although he was severely wounded, if he did not seize this fleeting moment immediately, and if the enemy preceded him in taking the initiative, his life would be in danger indeed. Thereupon he rushed one step forward with an extended right-hand index finger, sending his 'huan yin zhi' internal strength straight toward the 'shan zhong' acupoint on Zhang Wuji's chest.

ZhangWuji swept his palm to parry. He had just completed his 'shen gong' [divine strength/power] cultivation, however, his martial art skill was still mediocre; he had not mastered the martial art skills previously taught by Xie Xun and his own father, how could he fight such an accomplished martial

art master like Yuan Zhen? In just one move, the 'yang chi' ['yang' reservoir] acupoint on his wrist was sealed by Yuan Zhen. Immediately a numbing cold burst into his body; he shivered and was pushed a step backward. But his body was still overflowing with real 'chi', which in a flash was also transferred to Yuan Zhen's body via his finger.

Two different types of energy collided; one yin the other yang, exact opposite to each other, but Zhang Wuji's internal energy came from Jiu Yang Shen Gong, the strength of his power far outweighed Yuan Zhen's. Yuan Zhen's finger heated up; he felt as if his internal energy dispersed all over his body. Moreover, he had already suffered a heavy injury, the level of his power was only one-tenth his normal strength. Realizing the situation was disadvantageous for him, he thought saving his own life was more important; thereupon he turned around and ran away.

"Cheng Kun, you big evil thief!" Zhang Wuji angrily cursed, "Leave your life behind!" Moving his feet, he ran after him out of the door. He saw a flash of Yuan Zhen's shadow as he entered another door. With anger filling his breast, Zhang Wuji rushed forward to pursue. But as soon as he exerted his strength, 'Bang!' his forehead heavily hit the doorframe.

What happened was: he did not know that after he had reached the full potential of his 'shen gong', a lifting of his hand, a kick of his foot, would be ten times more powerful than his usual strength. With just one big stride, he lost control and bumped his head on the doorframe.

Rubbing his slightly sore forehead, he mused, "Confound this demonic door; how come just one step took me this far?"

Busily he leaned sideways to enter the door, and saw that it was a small room. In his zeal to avenge his Yifu, he ran across

the room toward the door on the other end. Outside the room was a courtyard, the air was filled with the fragrance of flowers and plants in the middle of the courtyard. He saw light coming out from a window of the room on the western side of the courtyard. He leaped toward the room and pushed the door open. He saw a flash of grey shadow; Yuan Zhen was pulling a curtain open and ran in. Zhang Wuji followed after him; but as he pulled open the curtain, Yuan Zhen was nowhere to be seen.

Zhang Wuji focused his eyes to look around and could not help but was inwardly surprised. This room looked like a chamber belonging to a young lady of a greatly rich family. There was a dressing table standing next to the window, with a large red candle burning brightly on top of it, casting its light on a beautifully embroidered tapestry in the middle of the room, it looked imposingly rich and beautiful, not at all inferior to Zhu Jiuzhen's room.

On the other side was the bed, with a gauze mosquito net drooping over it. There was a pair of pink embroidered shoes in front of the bed; obviously there was a woman sleeping on the bed. The only door to this room that he could see was the one he entered in; the windows were tightly closed. He had clearly seen Yuan Zhen enter the room, how could he disappear without any trace in just a blink of an eye? Could it be that he mastered some kind of art of invisibility? Or perhaps despite his status as a 'chu jia ren' [lit. those who leave home] he was hiding inside a woman's bed?

Zhang Wuji was contemplating whether he should open the bed's curtain to search for the enemy when suddenly he heard intermittent sound of footsteps; somebody was coming. Quickly he dodged behind a piece of blanket draped by the western wall, right before two people walked in.

From behind the blanket, Zhang Wuji peeked out and saw two girls; one was wearing light yellow silk robe, her dress and adornment were luxurious. The other was a younger girl, wearing dark green cotton robe; looked like she was the young maid.

"Xiaojie [miss]," the young maid said in a raspy voice, "The night is deep, please have some rest."

The 'miss' turned around and slapped the young maid's face heavily with the back of her hand. The young maid staggered and fallback one step. The body of the 'miss' swayed and she turned around completely. Under the candlelight Zhang Wuji was able to see clearly her big round eyes, with deep black pupils, on a round-shaped face. She was none other than Yang Buhui, whom he escorted for tens of thousands 'li' all the way from the Central Plains to the remote Western Region.

It had been several years; she had grown a lot taller, but her mannerism did not change, particularly the downward curve at the corners of her mouth, which he recognized as her childhood feature, was more pronounced.

He heard she cursed the maid, "You told me to sleep, humph, the Six Major Sects are besieging the Brightness Peak, my Father and his colleagues have been discussing plans to fight the enemy all night and have not finished yet. He [orig. 'lao ren jia' - a polite term for an older person] has not slept, how can I sleep? It would be best if my Father is killed by the enemy, and then you can kill me; you would gain everything your heart desires." The young maid did not dare to defend herself, she simply helped her to sit down.

"Quickly get my sword!" Yang Buhui said.

The young maid walked toward the wall and took off the sword hanging on the wall. Her ankles were shackled with an iron chain, her wrists were also shackled with iron chain. Her left leg was limping, her back was arched like a humpback. When she had the sword in her hands and turned around, Zhang Wuji was even more startled; he saw her right eye was small, the left eye was big, her nose and the corners of her mouth were twisted. In short, her form was extremely unsightly. He thought, "This young lady's appearance is uglier than Zhu'er. But Zhu'er is ugly because the poison in her body had caused the bumps on her face; she can be cured completely. This young miss, however, has an inborn deformity."

Yang Buhui received the sword and said, "The enemy could be here any time, I want to patrol outside."

"I am coming with Miss," the young maid said, "If we meet the enemy, we can look after each other." Her voice was so raspy that it was hard to understand; she sounded more like an uncouth middle-aged man than a young girl.

"Who wants your fake good intention?" Yang Buhui said. Her left hand reached back and grabbed the pulse on the wrist of that young maid's right hand; the young maid was immediately paralyzed.

"Xiaojie," she said in a trembling voice, "You ... you ..."

"A large number of the enemy is here to besiege us," Yang Buhui said with a cold laugh, "We, father and daughter, are at the point of death. Most likely you, this little maid, were sent by the enemy to the Brightness Peak as a spy, are you not? How can we, father and daughter, let ourselves be tortured by you? Today I will kill you first!" While saying that, she flipped her sword to stab the young maid's neck.

When he saw the young maid was deformed, Zhang Wuji felt compassion toward her; now that he suddenly saw Yang Buhui's sword went straight to stab her, in this critical situation he did not have time to think, immediately he flew out and flicked the body of the sword with his finger. Yang Buhui was not able to hold her sword. 'Clink clank!' the sword fell to the floor. As soon as the sword left her right hand, her two fingers went straight toward Zhang Wuji's two eyes. It was actually a very common, mediocre stance called the 'shuang long qiang zhu' [a pair of dragons fight over a pearl], but since she had been under her father's tutelage for several years, the stance came out rather powerful. Zhang Wuji leaped backward to evade and blurted, "Buhui Meimei [younger sister], it's me!"

Yang Buhui was accustomed to him calling her 'Buhui Meimei', four characters; she was startled. "Wuji Gege [big brother]?" she asked. She only recognized the intonation of the call 'Buhui Meimei', but she did not recognize Zhang Wuji's appearance.

Immediately Zhang Wuji felt a pang of regret in his heart; but he could not deny again. "It's me!" he had no choice but answered in affirmative. "Buhui Meimei, how have you been these past several years?"

Yang Buhui looked at him intently, but when she saw a man in ragged clothes and filthy face, she was startled and felt uneasy. "You ... you ... really are Wuji Gege? How ... how did you get in here?" she asked.

"It was Shuo Bude who took me up the Brightness Peak," Zhang Wuji replied, "After that Yuan Zhen Heshang entered this room, he disappeared suddenly. Is there any other way out from here?"

"What Yuan Zhen Heshang?" Yang Buhui was confused, "Who entered this room?"

Zhang Wuji was anxious to chase after Yuan Zhen; he did not want to start explaining a long story. He simply said, "Your father is injured in the hall, you'd better take a look quickly."

Yang Buhui was shocked. "I'll go look at Father," she hastily said, but then suddenly with a great force her palm shot down on the top of the young maid's head.

"No, don't!" Zhang Wuji cried out in fear as he reached out to push her arm so that Yang Buhui's palm came down on empty air.

Twice Yang Buhui tried to kill that young maid, but both times Zhang Wuji intervened. "Wuji Gege," she said sternly, "Is this girl your companion?"

Zhang Wuji was baffled. "She is your maidservant," he said, "I met her just now, how can she be my companion?"

"If you do not know the real story, then do not meddle in other people's business," Yang Buhui said, "This maidservant is our family's big enemy. My Father put shackles on her hands and feet exactly to prevent her from harming me. Right now the enemy is coming to attack in large numbers, this maid is going to take this opportunity to strike back."

Zhang Wuji saw that this young maid was tender and pitiful; although her appearance was rather unusual, she did not look like a fiendish person. "Miss," he said, "Do you have any intention to take this opportunity to strike back?"

The young maid shook her head. "Certainly not," she said.

Zhang Wuji said, "Buhui Meimei, did you hear? She said 'Certainly no'. Please spare her!"

"Very well," Yang Buhui said, "Since you ask on her behalf, aiyo ..." suddenly her body leaned sideways and swayed, her legs shaky.

Zhang Wuji hastily reached out to support her, but suddenly he felt pain on the 'xuan shu' [hanging hinge/pivot] and 'zhong shu' [hub/center], two acupoints on his lower back, and he tumbled forward.

Turned out Yang Buhui did not like him keep stopping her; she lured him to come near, and then using the iron ring on her middle finger she struck his two major acupoints on his back to overthrow him, followed by her right hand slapped backhandedly toward the young maid's right-hand 'taiyang xue' [sun acupoint, on the temple]. But before the strike hit, Yang Buhui felt her 'dantian' fiery hot while her whole body went numb so that she did not have any choice but release the young maid's wrist in her hand. Her knees buckled and she fell down, sitting on the chair.

What happened was: when with her entire strength she struck Zhang Wuji's acupoints, although the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi had not completely protected his body since he had just mastered it, it automatically reacted against the external stimulation and heavily shook the arteries and veins in Yang Buhui's entire body.

The young maid picked the sword lying on the floor and said, "Xiaojie, you always suspect me of harming you. If I wanted to kill you right now, it would be as easy as blowing dust; but I do not have this kind of intention." Finished speaking, she returned the sword back to its sheath and hang it on the wall.

Zhang Wuji stood up and said, "Did you see that? I was right!" As soon as his acupoints were sealed, he used the real 'chi' inside his body to flush the obstructed blood vessels and very soon he was able to move again.

Yang Buhui looked at him helplessly, with a great astonishment in her heart. By this time the numbness in her hands and feet had vanished. Remembering her father's safety, she stood up and said, "How is my Father's injury? Wuji Gege, wait for me here, I will be back to see you. How have you been these past several years? I remembered you often ..." She kept talking while rushing out the room.

"Miss," Zhang Wuji asked the young maid, "That monk escaped to this room and suddenly disappeared. Do you know any other way out from here?"

"Do you really have to pursue him?" the young maid asked.

"This monk has offended the Heaven and defied reason," Zhang Wuji replied, "He has committed innumerable crimes. I ... I ... must pursue him even to the ends of the earth."

The young maid looked up to stare at his face. Zhang Wuji said, "Miss, if you know, please show me the way."

The young maid bit her lower lip and hesitated for a moment. "You have saved my life," she said in low voice, "All right, I'll take you." She blew the candle out and pulled Zhang Wuji's hand away.

End of Chapter 19.

Chapter 20 - Help From the Son To Fight the Enemies*

(Trsnslated by Meh)

Not sure if I got the title of the chapter correct. Really hard to figure out.



Xiao Zhao sat on the ground and began to sing again. When she sang about the 'In the end, you can't escape fate,' Zhang Wuji thought that in the past, he has never cared much for life and death. Before, his death would never affect anyone else. Yet today, he not only pulled in this innocent girl to die with him, but also would die not knowing what would happen to the Ming sect, to the safety of Yang Xiao and Yang BuHui, the revenge of his godfather. Unlike previous occasions, he really didn't want to simply die at this moment.

Zhang Wuji followed her a few steps, towards the bed. That little servant girl opened the curtains and got on the bed, still holding Zhang Wuji's hand. Zhang Wuji became shocked, thinking that although this servant girl is very ugly, she's still a girl. How can he be in the same bed with her? Besides, he needs to chase the enemy. So he took his hands off of hers. That servant girl said quietly, "The secret entrance is on the bed!" When he heard these words, he gathered himself, and forgot all about the fact that man and woman should be apart. As he saw her opened the covers and lied on the bed, he followed suit. The girl then pushed some sort of switch, the bed shook, and the two of them fell down. Although it was a drop of several meters, padding on the ground broke their fall. So he felt no pain. Only to hear a loud thud, as the bed reverted to its original position. He thought, "This entrance really is exquisite. Who would've thought that the entrance would be on the bed of the young lady's room?" He held the servant girl's hand and ran forward quickly, only to hear the chains on the servant girl's legs drag on the ground. He suddenly remembered, "This girl's legs are crippled, so how can she keep up?" He immediately stopped. That girl figured out what he was thinking, and said with a smile, "I was faking my cripple in front of master and the young lady." Zhang Wuji thought, "No wonder my mom told me that all women lie, even Sister Bu Hui sneaked up on

me today.” But with his mortal enemy ahead, he stopped thinking about it, and continued to run forward. They quickly reached the end of the path. Yet he could not see Yuan Zhen.

That servant girl said, “I’ve been here before. Although I’m sure there’s more to this path, I have never found the switch to open it.” Zhang Wuji held his hand out and searched around. He tried to push at different parts of cave walls, but couldn’t move them. That servant girl said, “I’ve tried tens of times. Never did find a secret switch. So where could that monk have gone?”

Zhang Wuji sighed, gathered his chi, pushing the left side of the wall, with no success. Then he pushed the right side, and saw the wall move a bit. He was ecstatic, and immediately gathered in two more breath of chi. This time he pushed open the door. This door is actually the best kind of secret door. There’s no hidden switch. But if you don’t have an amazing amount of inner strength, it’s impossible to open. Now that Zhang Wuji has learned the complete Jiu Yang Shen Gong*, his push utilized a tremendous amount of energy, so obviously the door opened. After opening the door a few inches, Zhang Wuji pushed out his palm into the opening, to prevent Yuan Zhen from sneaking up behind the door, then slid through the opening. A new long path opened up. As the two people ran forward, they felt the path going downward. After running for about 50 meters or so, they came upon a branch with seven paths. Just as Zhang Wuji wondered which way they should go, he heard a light cough from the left side. Although low and short, the sound was obvious when heard inside such a quiet place.

*Jiu Yang Shen Gong is the inner power kung fu Zhang Wuji learned from reading [Jiu Yang Zhen Jing].

Zhang Wuji said quietly, “This way!” Then followed the left-

most path, This path is very uneven, sometimes going up, sometimes going down, only to hear the clanking of the chains behind him. He turned around and said, "It's dangerous ahead, why don't you slow down as I go on ahead?" That servant girl said, "If there's danger, we'll face it together. What's there to be afraid of?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "Are you lying to me too?" but then kept going, following the left path every single time. The path suddenly became steeper and steeper, until it seemingly became a well. Suddenly, he felt a huge wind pushing from behind, immediately grabbed that girl's waist, then dashed quickly downward. Whether it's a bottomless pit down there or a hard wall, he never thought about it. Thankfully there was a room down there for them to fall into. Only to hear a loud thud, as dirt and pebbles landed on their face. Zhang Wuji gathered himself, and heard the servant girl say, "That was close. The old bastard hid to the side, then tried to kill us using a boulder." Zhang Wuji went to where the boulder got stuck to, and heard Yuan Zhen's voice from behind, "You little bastard, today you get to be buried alive here, but at least you have a girl to die with you. So consider yourself lucky. I don't care how much strength you have, do you really think you can push this boulder? If that's not enough, how about another one?" Only to hear another stone falling down, on top of the last one. Zhang Wuji tried to find any holes he might go through, but couldn't fit anything more than an arm. He gathered some chi and pushed, but while the stones shook, they didn't budge. With thousands of pounds of stone, not even his Jiu Yang Shen Gong can break through. Only to hear Yuan Zhen breathing heavily, asking, "Little boy... what's.... your... name...?" After he said 'name', he couldn't speak anymore.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Even if he wanted to save us, he can't now. No need to keep talking to him." He then started to walk

around, looking for other exits. The servant girl said, "I have some flint and tinder, but no torch to use it on." Zhang Wuji said, "No need for fire yet." He started to search around, finally finding a torch. He said happily, "I got it!" He found lots of dust on it, but doesn't know what it really is. Picking up the wood, he said, "Here, light the fire." The servant girl took out her things to light the torch, which caught fire extremely quickly, and sparks flew around. The two people were both shocked, and they began to smell something stinky. That servant girl said, "It's gunpowder!" Then raised the torch, looking closely at the contents of the nearby chest, filled with gunpowder. She chuckled quietly and said, "If we had lit the fire here, I bet even that old monk would've been blown up by now." Only to see Zhang Wuji staring intently at herself, his expression filled with surprise. So she said with a smile, "What's wrong with you?" Zhang Wuji sighed, "So you're... you're this beautiful?" That servant girl curled her lips with a smile, "Oops. I was so scared that I forgot to put on my ugly expression." As she said this, she stretched her body. It turns out that she wasn't a cripple, nor a hunchback, nor even ugly. In fact, she really is incredibly beautiful, except she's still a bit young, so she's not fully developed. Zhang Wuji asked, "Why do you pretend to be like that then?"

That servant girl said, "The young lady really hates me, but when she sees my ugly look, she becomes happy. If I don't act like this, she would've killed me a long time ago. Zhang Wuji asked, "Why does she want to kill you?" That servant girl said, "She kept thinking that I'm scheming to kill her and old master." Zhang Wuji shook his head, said, "She really worries too much. When you had the sword in your hand earlier, and she couldn't move, you didn't kill her. So from now on, she won't distrust you again." That servant girl said, "Young lady will only get more suspicious now that I've taken you here. But we don't even know if we can get out of here, so I won't worry about that for now." As she said this, she

held the torch high up into the air, scanning the area. Weapons filled this stone room. As they checked the area once more, they saw no signs of another path. Obviously, Yuan Zhen's cough is to lure them into this room.

The servant girl said, "Young master, my name is Xiao Zhao. I heard the young lady call you 'Brother Wuji', does this mean your name is Wuji?" Zhang Wuji said, "That's right. My surname is Zhang..." He then got an idea, and picked up a spear. He tested its weight, seeing that it's quite heavy, about 50 pounds. He said, "These gunpowder just might just save our lives. Let's see if they can crack the boulders." Xiao Zhao clapped her hands, "Great idea!" As she clapped, the chains on her wrists clanked together. Zhang Wuji said, "These chains are really bothersome. Let me take them off."

Xiao Zhao said alarmingly, "No! Master will be very mad." Zhang Wuji said, "Just tell him I broke the chain. I'm not scared of him at all." As he said this, he pulled on the chains. Those chains are only about the thickness of chopsticks, and Zhang Wuji applied at least four to five hundred pounds of force, yet the chains did not break. He took a deep breath, then applied more force, yet still couldn't break the chains. Xiao Zhao said, "These chains are very strange, even sharp swords and sabers can't break it. The key is in the young lady's possession." Zhang Wuji nodded, "If we get out of here, I'll ask her to unlock the chains for you." Xiao Zhao said, "I'm afraid she wouldn't consent." Zhang Wuji said, "She and I are very close friends, so she'll definitely listen to me." As he said this he picked up the spear again, walked over to the boulders, then stopped. When he did not hear Yuan Zhen's breathing, he stuck the spear into the crack, trying to make a little hole. He put a bunch of gunpowder into the hole, then used some gunpowder to make a path into the room.

He took the torch from Xiao Zhao, and she immediately put her hands over her ears. Zhang Wuji shielded her as he lit the gunpowder, and a huge explosion followed, prompting him to fall back two steps, but Xiao Zhao began to fall down. However, Zhang Wuji prepared for this, and held on to her waist tightly. The smoke filled the room. The torch blew out.

Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Zhao, are you alright?" Xiao Zhao coughed a few times, then said, "I... I'm fine." Zhang Wuji heard some stutter in her voice, and thought it was odd. He lit the torch again, and saw her eyes all red. So he asked, "What happened? Do you feel uncomfortable?" Xiao Zhao said, "Young master Zhang, you... you and I are just strangers, why are you so good to me?" Zhang Wuji found this question strange, and said, "Why do you say that?" Xiao Zhao said, "Why did you shield me? I'm just a worthless servant, you... your health is much more precious. There's no reason to do that."

Zhang Wuji chuckled, said, "What's so precious about me? You're just a little girl, of course I should protect you."

The smoke clear out a bit, so he walked over to the boulders, only to see them still there, with simply a small crack adding to the side. Zhang Wuji sighed. "Looks like we need repeat this at least seven or eight more times before we can get through. Yet there's only enough powder for two more blows. He started to randomly poke at the boulder with the spear. As he did this, he accidentally poked the side of the nearby wall, and some stone fell off. Surprised and happy, he immediately went and pushed down more blocks, revealing another path. While the gunpowder didn't break apart the boulders. It did soften the wall by it.

He entered the new path, and then asked Xiao Zhao to come through. This time, he held up the spear in front of him to

guard from Yuan Zhen. After walking a while, they came upon another stone door. Zhang Wuji gave the torch to Xiao Zhao and pushed open this one. The next room looks bigger. As he took the torch from Xiao Zhao again, he scanned the area, seeing two skeletons on the floor, a woman and a man.

Xiao Zhao became really scared, and held on to his side. Zhang Wuji raised the torch again and searched the area, said, "Looks like another dead end. I wonder if we'll ever find an exit." He started to poke the walls with his spear, but with no success. None of the walls are hollow.

He walked close to the two skeletons, saw that the woman held a dagger in her hand. The dagger apparently pierced into her body. He immediately remembered Yuan Zhen's story. Yuan Zhen and Lady Yang met secretly here, and Yang DingTian found out. In his anger, Yang DingTian got fire deviation and died. Lady Yang then followed her husband by committing suicide.

"Could this be the Yang couple?" he thought. As he walked up to the man, he saw the hand holding a piece of sheepskin. Zhang Wuji picked it up, looked at it, and saw that it's blank. But Xiao Zhao quickly took it from him, and her face started to be filled with happiness. She said, "Congratulations, this is the Ming sect's most powerful kung fu manual." As she spoke, she made a cut on her finger with Lady Yang's dagger, spreading her blood onto the skin. Slowly words appeared, the first line said, "The Ming sect Holy Fire manual, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi." Although Zhang Wuji accidentally found the powerful Ming sect kung fu manual, he felt no happiness. He thought, "This room has no food or water. If we don't leave, we'll last no more than seven to eight days. Since we're going to die here, no kung fu is useful." He stared at the skeletons again, wondering, "Why didn't Yuan Zhen take this manual? That's right, he probably felt bad about the whole

thing, and was too scared to visit the Yang couple. Of course, there's no way he would know that the sheepskin was the kung fu manual. Or he would've definitely taken it." Zhang Wuji then asked Xiao Zhao, "How do you know the secret of this sheepskin?" Xiao Zhao lowered her head, said, "I overheard the master speaking about it with the young lady, They're both members of the Ming sect, so they can't come down here to look for it." Zhang Wuji looked at the skeletons again, and said, "Let's bury them." So they put the bones together and gathered some dirt to cover them. As they did so, Xiao Zhao picked up something. "Young Master Zhang, there's a letter here." Zhang Wuji took the letter, and saw the words "To my wife" on it. He said, "Looks like Lady Yang killed herself before getting a chance to open the letter." He then put the letter back with their body, and was about to cover them with dirt. But Xiao Zhao said, "Wait, let's read it. Maybe it's something important left by old leader Yang."

Zhang Wuji said, "But that would be disrespectful to their bodies." Xiao Zhao said, "If he has something he wanted to do but couldn't, you can tell the young lady and master. So they can take care of it for Leader Yang." Zhang Wuji thought she's right. So he opened the letter and looked at the contents. "To my wife: After you have entered the Yang family, we have often been separated, as I have neglected you, I'm truly sorry, I hope you understand. But the thirty-second leader Yi left me in his will: when I have fully learnt Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, I will lead our troops to Persia to retrieve our Holy Fire Commandment. Although our sect originates from Persia, we are now deeply rooted here in China, and have been independent for over a hundred years. Today the Mongolians rule over our land, so we must fight them to the end, and disobey our orders from the Persian Ming sect. Once the Holy Fire Commandment enters our hand, we shall finally be able to break away from the Main sect." Zhang Wuji thought, "This old leader would disobey the main sect to

fight the Mongolians. He really is a great man.” With a feeling of admiration, he read on. “Today I finished the fourth level, but due to the event with Cheng Kun, I have fire deviated, unable to control my inner chi.” When Zhang Wuji read to here, he sighed lightly, “So Leader Yang knew about his wife and Cheng Kun’s meetings when writing this.” When he saw that Xiao Zhao wanted to ask, but was afraid, he explained the events between them. Xiao Zhao said, “I say it’s all Lady Yang’s fault. If she really loves Cheng Kun, she should’ve married him instead. But once married to Leader Yang, she should’ve stopped seeing Cheng Kun.” Zhang Wuji nodded, thought, “Although she is young, she is quite wise.” He then read on, “Today my life is near the end, and as I cannot complete Leader Yi’s will, I am a criminal of the Ming sect. My only hope is to give this letter to my wife, so she can gather the Left and Right Guard, the four Protector Lords, the head of the Five Colored Flags, so they can adhere to my will. ‘Whoever obtains the Holy Fire Commandment will become the thirty-fourth leader of the Ming sect. Anyone who disagrees will be executed immediately. The interim leader of the sect will be Xie Xun.” Zhang Wuji felt a surge in his body, and thought, “So he chose my godfather to be the next leader. My godfather is great at everything, and one of the most powerful person in the Ming sect. Unfortunately, Lady Yang did not have a chance to read this letter. Or the Ming sect would never have reached this stage of inner turmoil.” He was quite happy that Leader Yang was so appreciative of his godfather, but also felt sad at the same time. After a while, he continued to read on, “The [Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi] manual will be passed on to Xie Xun, so he can give it to the next leader. Brighten our sect, Do good deeds, Destroy evil, Uphold the righteous, spread our Holy Fire to all the people in the world. This, the new leader must adhere to.”

Zhang Wuji thought, “From the looks of this letter, the Ming sect is very righteous. So the six sects really should not be

causing trouble for the Ming sect.” Only to read further,

“ With my remaining powers, I will close off the remaining path to this room and die here with Cheng Kun. My wife can then escape with my map. Since only those who knows Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi has my energy, no one else can open this door at the ‘Wu Wang’ location. But anyone who later learns this can do so. Sincerely, Yang Ding Tian.” The last line was filled with small words, “Although my name is Ding(top) Tian(sky), I couldn’t learn much kung fu, nor could I brighten the sect, nor could I make my wife happy, I really am useless.”

On the back of the letter is a map, detailing every single door and passageway. Zhang Wuji became ecstatic, said, “So Leader Yang wanted to die with Cheng Kun here, except he couldn’t hold up long enough, dying first. But at least this means that we can now escape with this map.” He found his location on the map, then checked for the exit. Unfortunately, the only exit route is the one Yuan Zhen blocked. So it’s useless after all. Xiao Zhao said, “Don’t worry about it, young master. Maybe there’s another exit.” She took the map and examined closely, but couldn’t find anything else either. Zhang Wuji saw her disappointment, and said with a bitter smile, “Leader Yang mentioned that once one learns Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, he can open the stone door. Yet only Left Guard Yang has learnt this technique, and only a tiny bit at that. Even if he’s here, we’re still probably stuck. Besides, I have no clue where this ‘Wu Wan’ position is.”

Xiao Zhao said, “Wu Wan position? That’s one location within the ‘Fu Xi sixty-four Gua’*, Let’s see, it should...” As she said this, she walked to an area in the northwest corner, then said, “It should be here.”

*Note: I looked up the web for an hour on the explanation of this particular Gua. Suffice to say I got nothing useful. Honestly, I have no knowledge of Taoism. But it doesn’t really

matter too much.

Zhang Wuji said, "Really?" He picked up a big axe from the stack of weapons, went over to the area and wiped away the dust. A crease appeared, showing a door. He thought, "Although I don't know Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, I do know Jiu Yang Shen Gong. My power might be enough." So he gathered his chi and his fists shot out, pushing the door. After a long time, the door still showed no signs of movement. No matter where he positions his hands and feet, how he applied his chi, the door won't budge. After becoming sore from all the pushing, he finally stopped.

Xiao Zhao said, "Young master Zhang, you don't need to keep trying. Let me go get the rest of the gunpowder." Zhang Wuji said excitedly, "Oh, I forgot about that!" The two people put the remaining gunpowder next to the door, then let it explode. Although it blew a huge hole, it still did not penetrate the door. Zhang Wuji finally gave up, held on to Xiao Zhao's hand and said tenderly, "Xiao Zhao, it's all my fault. It's because of me that you're stuck here."

Xiao Zhao's bright eyes stared closely at Zhang Wuji, "Young master Zhang, you should be scolding me instead. If I didn't take you here, then... then you wouldn't..." She cried when she got here, and used her sleeves to wipe away her tears. After a while, she began to smile through her tears, "Since we can't leave anyway, let's not worry too much. How about I sing you a song?" Zhang Wuji really isn't in the mood to listen to a song, but he couldn't bear to say no. So he smiled and said, "Ok!" Xiao Zhao sat by his side, and began to sing.

"Things in the world are hard to describe through logic, life filled with unexpected, for nothing will keep one's interest very long, there's danger within good fortune, good fortune within danger." When Zhang Wuji heard the last phrase, he

couldn't help but think that this is how his life has been. He listened some more, hearing her soothing and clear voice. His worries became less and less, listening intently.

When Xiao Zhao was finished, Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Zhao, your song was great. Who wrote the lines to this song?" Xiao Zhao smiled, "You're just kidding. What's so great about my singing? I just heard some other people sing it, and then started singing myself. So not even I know who wrote it." Zhang Wuji then started to hum a bit himself. Xiao Zhao said, "Do you really like it, or just pretending?" Zhang Wuji laughed, "Of course I really like it. Why would I pretend?" Xiao Zhao said, "Really? Ok. I'll sing another piece." She began to sing again, "Put away your worries, don't be so bitter, even if you're beautiful today, you will still be old some day, life has always been like this, who cares for money and fame."

"In the end, you still can't escape fate. Like flowing water, what goes around comes around."

These words are very deep and felt like spoken from personal experience, very inappropriate for a young girl like Xiao Zhao. Obviously, she memorized it from listening to someone else. Although Zhang Wuji is still young, he has been through so much already in his life. He thought about the "In the end, you can't escape fate." In the past, he has never cared much for life and death. Before, his death would never affect anyone else. Yet today, he not only pulled in this innocent girl to die with him, but also would die not knowing what would happen to the Ming sect, to the safety of Yang Xiao and Yang BuHui, the revenge of his godfather. Unlike previous occasions, he really didn't want to simply die at this moment. So he stood up and tried the door again. Yet no matter how hard he tries, the door still won't budge.

It's at this time that Xiao Zhao cut open her own finger again, spreading her blood onto the sheepskin, then said, "Young master Zhang, why don't you try learning this? Perhaps you're a genius, and can therefore learn this in a short time." Zhang Wuji smiled, "The old Ming sect leaders were all some of the best martial artists in the world, yet they couldn't even learn this in a short time. How could I compare to them?"

Xiao Zhao sang in a low voice, "Learning a little bit means a little bit more knowledge. Even if it is useless, it doesn't hurt to try." Zhang Wuji chuckled, took the sheepskin from Xiao Zhao, and started reading. Only to see all the text contains information on utilizing one's chi, to make them flow easily within your body. So he followed it, and quickly finished the first level without any trouble. Then he saw the sheepskin said, "This first level requires at least seven years for experts, lesser people require fourteen years." Zhang Wuji felt strange, wondering how this can be so.

He followed by reading the second level, and felt his inner chi flow easily through his body. Then he felt as if icy particles shot out of his ten fingers, finishing the level. Yet on the parchment, it said, "Experts require seven years, lesser people require fourteen years. If you can't finish in twenty one years, you should give up, or risk fire deviation." Zhang Wuji, surprised and happy, began to learn level three. This time the words have begun to fade. Just as he was about to cut his finger, Xiao Zhao dropped her blood onto the sheepskin first. Zhang Wuji followed the directions and quickly finished level three and four. When Xiao Zhao saw that half of his face is bright red, while the other half is green, she felt scared. Yet she saw that he still has much energy, as if nothing's going on. Then when he was learning the fifth level, his faces sometimes turn red and sometimes green. When it turns green, his face becomes cold as ice. When it becomes red, sweat poured down his face.

Xiao Zhao took out a handkerchief, wanting to wipe some sweat off from him, but when it touched his forehead, she felt a shock, and thrown back, almost falling down. Zhang Wuji stood up and began to wipe his sweat with his sleeves, not really knowing what happened. He had completed level five of this kung fu. This Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi really is simply a cunning way of utilizing one's power. The basic theory lies in one's natural ability. Everyone has a huge amount of innate strength. However, most of the time, you'll never use it. Yet when there's an emergency, like when you're saving someone's life, a weak person maybe able to lift a thousand pounds. Zhang Wuji, after learning Jiu Yang Shen Gong, has more natural ability than anyone else in the world. It's just that he never received advice from experts, and therefore cannot utilize most of his abilities. This time as he learns Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, his innate power finally released.

This particular kung fu is very difficult to learn. A single mistake can lead to fire deviation. This is due to the inner power requirement for utilizing the technique. For if you ask a young child to lift a hundred pound hammer, he'll fail, end up hurting himself no matter how well he grabs and lifts it. But if you ask a weightlifter to do the same, he'll accomplish it easily. The idea is easy in theory, but does not work if you don't have the means. Every older leader of the Ming sect knows this, but they all felt that if they try hard enough, they would eventually succeed. This is why Zhang Wuji could learn the skill so fast, while many people smarter than he fails. Zhang Wuji simply had enough inner power, while the others do not. After learning level five, Zhang Wuji found himself very relaxed, as if he can do many things quickly and easily. He even forgot about the door, and concentrated on level six. Two hours later, he reached level seven. Level seven is many times more difficult than level six, prompting him to think a lot before learning. But it's a good thing he is an

expert in medicine, and can figure these things out. But after finishing the majority of the text, he found his blood began to boil, his heart pounding fast. He stopped for a while, and tried again. This time, the same thing happened. He never had experienced this before while practicing. So he skipped that sentence. The next one was fine. But he could not figure out the one after that. Overall, he had to skip nineteen sentences when finished the last level. Zhang Wuji rested for a while, then put that sheepskin on the stone, and kowtowed to it. He said, "Student Zhang Wuji accidentally found this secret manual, and learned it only because I seek to live, not because I want to steal your manual. When I leave, I will use my new power only to help the Ming sect, as to thank the former leaders of the Ming sect for saving my life." Xiao Zhao also kowtowed a few times, and said quietly, "Former leaders of the Ming sect, please protect young master Zhang in his effort to rebuild the Ming sect, returning it to the glory of the past." Zhang Wuji stood up and said, "I'm not a member of the Ming sect, and because of the promise to my martial grandfather, never will be. But after reading Leader Yang's will, I know that the Ming sect really is a righteous sect. So I will do my best to arbitrate their misunderstandings with the six sects." Xiao Zhao said, "You said you couldn't finish nineteen sentences, why don't you rest and try once more?" Zhang Wuji responded, "Although I missed nineteen sentences, and feel a bit empty, but why dwell on it? I have learned so much. There's no need to ask for more."

Xiao Zhao said, "Young master's right." She took the sheepskin, asked him to point out those nineteen sentences, and memorized them. Zhang Wuji laughed, "Why are you trying to remember these?" Xiao Zhao's face became red, and said, "It's nothing, I just thought that if even you can't learn it, then it must be extremely strange."

Who would've thought that since Zhang Wuji is never

greedy, he was able to avoid major problems. For you see, the original creator of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi only learned to level six. So he can only conjecture how one should practice level seven. The nineteen sentences that Zhang Wuji skipped just happened to be mistakes that person made while writing down level seven's directions. So had Zhang Wuji continued, he would've fire deviated, perhaps losing his life.

After the two of them finished burying the Yang couple, Zhang Wuji walked over to the stone door. Following the directions of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, he opened it with just one hand.

Xiao Zhao excitedly clapped her hands, praising Zhang Wuji's powers, her chain clanked together again. Zhang Wuji said, "Let me try breaking them apart again." Xiao Zhao said happily, "This time you'll definitely succeed!" Zhang Wuji held the chains between her hand, and pulled. Yet for some reason, the chains only became longer and longer, not breaking. Xiao Zhao yelled, "Wait, this isn't good. I'll be in even worse condition with a longer chain." Zhang Wuji said, "This chain really is strange." When he saw Xiao Zhao sigh, Zhang Wuji tried to make her feel better, said, "Don't worry. I promise I'll get you the key. If we can go through death together, how are some chains going to get in our way?" He wanted to find Yuan Zhen for revenge, but found that he still couldn't move those two boulders. So they left through the other door. As they got outside, both squinted their eyes, trying to adjust to the brightness. When they could see again, both saw sunlight reflecting off the snow on the ground. Xiao Zhao blew out the fire on the torch, then buried it inside the snow, and then said, "Thank you little torch. Thank you for shining the way for young master Zhang and myself. If it weren't for you, we'd be dead already."

Zhang Wuji laughed at her, but then immediately thought,

"There are so many devious people in this world, yet this little girl would even thank a torch. She must be a very kind person." So he smiled. With the snow reflecting the light onto her face, Xiao Zhao looked even more radiant, showing her great beauty. He couldn't help but say, "Wow. Xiao Zhao, you're so very pretty." Xiao Zhao said happily, "Young master Zhang, you're not lying to me, are you?" Zhang Wuji said, "Please don't pretend to be a hunchback and a cripple, I like you just like this." Xiao Zhao said, "If you tell me to be like this, I'll stay like this. Even if young lady kills me, I still won't pretend." Zhang Wuji said, "Oh, don't say that. Why would she kill you?" After looking at her some more, he found her skin especially white, her nose a bit taller, her eyes as blue as the sea. He said, "You're originally from Xi Yu*, aren't you? You have an unique attractiveness that the mid-plains girls don't have." Xiao Zhao said, "But I'd rather look like the girls from the mid-plains." As they walked further, Zhang Wuji saw some people lying on the ground to the north. Zhang Wuji said, "Let's go over there and take a look." He then held Xiao Zhao's hand and immediately started to run. Now that he has mastered the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, his whole body moves effortlessly. Making the impossible seemingly easy. Even while holding another person, his movement is still quick and agile. They soon arrived at the location of the bodies. Three has the clothes of the Ming sect, while one looked like a Shaolin monk. Zhang Wuji said with shock, "Oh no! We've been in the cave for so long. The six sects might have reached the mountain top now!" He touched the bodies, and realized that they've been dead for a while. So he started to run quickly, while holding on to Xiao Zhao. Zhang Wuji said, "I wonder what has happened to Mr. Yang and Sister BuHui?" He ran faster and faster, as if carrying Xiao Zhao in midair. On the way they saw many corpses. The majority are Ming sect members, but quite a few are also among the six major sects. Obviously, without the guidance of the likes of Yang Xiao and Wei YiXiao, the Ming sect had a

lot of trouble holding off the enemy. But since they would rather die than surrender, the six sects also suffered major casualties. He suddenly heard noise of weaponry, thinking that it's a good thing the battle hasn't reached the main hall.

*Xi Yu is the location of the Ming sect. It's in the western area of china. Not sure of the exact location, though.

As he kept going on, he heard two darts from behind, and someone yelled, "Who is it? Stop!" Zhang Wuji did not slow down, simply waved his sleeves to blow away the darts. Only then did he hear a scream. He stopped, turned around, and saw a monk on the ground, with two darts on his right shoulder. Zhang Wuji felt astonished, as he did not know that a wave of his arm could have so much power behind it. He hurried to the monk and apologized, "I'm sorry that I accidentally hurt you." And then took out the two darts.

Yet this monk suddenly struck out at him, his right foot struck at Zhang Wuji's left waist. Zhang Wuji didn't expect this, and couldn't dodge it. Yet for some reason that monk instead bounced away, hitting a tree behind him. His right foot broken, his mouth filled with blood. By now, the chi inside Zhang Wuji is even more fluid, so his defense power was much better than when Jing Xuan* kicked him That's why the monk's injury was much severe.

*This happened right before ZWJ took the three palms from Mie Jui. Jing Xuan is the top disciple of Mie Jui.

When Zhang Wuji saw this, he felt even worse. He tried to go up and apologize again, but that monk only looked at him venomously. Hearing more noise coming from afar, he stopped caring for the monk. Picking up Xiao Zhao, Zhang Wuji immediately darted to the location of the sound. After going through the front door, he passed two buildings, and

finally into a large square. The square is filled with people. The people on the west are less in numbers, and most are wounded. The people on the east are separated into six groups, with a lot more in numbers. Zhang Wuji saw the likes of Yang Xiao, Wei YiXiao, Monk Peng, and Shuo BuDe* all in the Ming group. From the looks of it, they still have trouble moving. Yang BuHui sat by her dad's side. In the middle of the square, two people are fighting. As everyone's attention is on the fight, no one them. Zhang Wuji got closer to see clearly. He saw that both combatants used bare fists, but their strikes carried the wind, power unimaginable. Obviously both people are two of the top fighters in the world. Those two people's body moved quickly, their strokes extremely fast. Then suddenly, the four palms struck each other, all movement stopped immediately in a flash. The spectators all yelled together, "Great!"

*For those who don't remember them, Wei YiXiao is the Green Bat King. Shou BuDe(Can't Say) is the person who carried ZWJ in his sack. Monk Peng is another member of the 'Wu San Ren',

Zhang Wuji was shocked when he saw the faces of the combatants. The short middle-aged man with a determined face is Wu Dang's fourth hero Zhang SongXi. His opponent is an old man, whose long brows look whiter than snow, his nose crooked, like an eagle's beak. Zhang Wuji thought, "Since when did the Ming sect have another person this powerful? Who is he?" Suddenly, he heard someone in the Hua Shan sect scream, "Old man white-brow, give up now, how can you be a match for the fourth hero of Wu Dang?" When Zhang Wuji heard the name 'old man white-brow', he immediately figured it out, "Oh, so he... he's my grandfather. White-browed Eagle King!" He wanted to go up and embrace him. But they're still matching inner strength as of right now. On one side you have one of the Ming sect's Four Great

Protection Lords, on the other you have one of Zhang SanFeng's top student. As the battle seemingly near the end, both sides started to hold their breath, concerned for their own side's fighter. This battle is not only a match between Wu Dang and the Ming sect, but the fighters' healths are at risk too. Only to see both people still as statues. Zhang SongXi knows that Yin TianZheng has twenty extra years of inner power cultivation, but he has the advantage of youth and a body in his prime. He didn't realize that Ying TianZheng is a prodigy at martial arts. Although he is quite old, his body still has the stamina of a youngster. Waves of chi strikes came continuously at Zhang SongXi. When Zhang Wuji first saw them, his reaction was pure joy. But that soon turned to worry. One is his grandfather. One is his dad's martial brother, who treated him like a son. When he was still suffering from Xuan Ming Palm, all the Wu Dang heroes took turns sacrificing their own inner power to prolong his life. No matter who dies, he would be deeply miserable.

Just as he was about to go break up the fight, both Yin TianZheng and Zhang SongXi yelled, the four palms broke apart, and each person retreated six to seven steps. Zhang SongXi said, "Elder Yin's power is simply amazing. You have my admiration." Ying TianZheng said, "Brother Zhang's inner power skill has no equal, I must say that mine is no match. You are the martial brother of my son-in-law. Do we really have to fight to the death here?" When Zhang Wuji heard him talk about his father, his head kept yelling, "Stop! Stop!" Zhang SongXi said, "I retreated one more step than you did, so I admit defeat." After bowing, he retreated to his group.

Suddenly another person came out from the Wu Dang sect. He pointed at Yin TianZheng, "Old man Ying, if you hadn't brought up my fifth brother, I would have let that slide. But my third and fifth brother were both injured because of your Heavenly Eagle sect. If I don't have my revenge here, I don't

think we would deserve our nickname of the 'Seven Wu Dang Heroes'." As he spoke, his sword came out. Under the bright sun the sword sparkled as he moved into the starting 'Wan Yue Chao Zong' position. This is the normal Wu Dang position when dueling against elders. Although Muo ShengGu is incredibly angry, he still did not lose his cool in front of the masses. Making sure he pays the proper respect to an elder. Yin TianZheng sighed, as his face showed much sadness. "After my daughter died, I stopped caring to use swords. But if I face your sword with bare fists, that would be too disrespectful." He pointed to a Ming member who uses the iron staff, "Can I borrow your staff for a moment?" That Ming member presented it to him with both hands. Yin TianZheng took the iron staff, and then use his hand to break it in two.

All the spectators 'wowed' at that action. No one thought that after so many fights, this old man still have such amazing strength. Muo ShengGu knows that he won't attack first, so his long sword rose, attacked with the stroke 'Hundred Bird Flying in the Wind'. Only to see the sword point move in different directions, suddenly changing into tens of sword point, aiming towards the opponents mid area. Although this stroke is very powerful, it's still a very respectful stroke. Yin TianZheng blocked with his left broken staff, and said, "You don't have to be so respectful." And followed by a counter with his right broken staff. After several moves, they saw that Muo ShengGu's swords strokes are incredibly elegant, agile, sometimes light, sometimes heavy, really is befitting of a major sect. Yin TianZheng's staff is already quite heavy, and his strokes look quite dumb and ordinary. But in the eyes of the experts, they see that his martial arts has reached an astonishingly high level. His steps are also quite slow and unmethodical. Muo ShengGu attacked from all directions, in just a few moments, he has unleashed over sixty lethal attacks.

After some time, Muo ShengGu's strokes became faster and faster. Kun Lun and Er Mei has long been known for their sword art, but they too were amazed at just how powerful Muo ShengGu's sword art is, thinking, "Wu Dang's fame really is quite deserving. Really glad to see it today." Yet no matter how hard he tries, Muo ShengGu still could not break through Yin TianZheng's blockade of two broken staffs. He thought, "This person had already fought three top fighters of Shaolin, plus he wasted much energy while matching palms with fourth brother He's already at a severe disadvantage. If I can't beat him now, where's the face for our sect?" He suddenly changed his sword form, as the long sword seemingly became a strand of silk, light as a feather, flowing effortlessly up and down. This is Wu Dang's seventy-two stroke 'Finger Spinning Soft Sword'. After twenty or so attacks, Yin TianZheng could no longer stand fairly still, and began to utilize his lightness kung fu, matching him speed for speed. Suddenly he saw Muo ShengGu's sword came aiming at his chest, yet in the middle, it suddenly changed directions, aiming towards his right shoulder. Yin TianZheng hurriedly tried to dodge this, yet for some reason, the sword bounced back to its original direction, striking YinTianZheng's left shoulder. Yin TianZheng's shot out his right hand, grabbed Muo ShengGu's wrist, twisted it, and grabbed his sword. His left hand then grabbed his 'Jian Zhen Point'. White-browed Eagle King's Eagle Claws is unrivaled in the martial world. If he simply applied a bit more pressure, Muo ShengGu's bones would crack, and forever be crippled. The other Wu Dang heroes wanted to go up and save him, but knew it's too late.

Yin TianZheng sighed, said, "Why bother..." and released his grip. His right hand took the sword out of his left shoulder, and blood came pouring out. He said, "You know, in my whole life, I have never been beaten in terms of techniques. Zhang SanFeng really is incredible!" He was commenting that he

could not block Wu Dang's 'Finger Spinning Soft Sword'. Muo ShengGu stared at the ground. Although he did deliver the first blow, he lost at the end. After a moment, he said, "Thank you for not taking my life." Yin TianZheng did not speak, returning the sword to him. Muo ShengGu had always been a prodigy at the sword art. He felt terrible that his sword was taken, and couldn't bring himself to accept it before backing down. Zhang Wuji ripped a piece of sleeve from his shirt, about to go treat his grandpa's injuries. But the top hero of the Wu Dang sect, Song YuanQiao, came out first and said, "I'll treat your injuries." He then took out some blood-stopping medicine, and covered up his wound. Heavenly Eagle sect and the Ming sect both saw his righteousness expression, knows that he wouldn't try to hurt Yin TianZheng in the process. Yin TianZheng said, "Thank you!" Zhang Wuji became ecstatic, thinking, "My uncle Song treated grandpa's wounds for not taking uncle Muo's life. I bet they'll stop fighting now." Who would've thought that after patching his wounds, Song YuanQiao backed off a bit and said, "I will now challenge you to another duel!" This really is something Zhang Wuji did not expect, and he immediately blurted out, "Hero Song. This is not fair that you're all fighting him one after the other!"

As he said this, everyone turned towards him. Other than a few, like the Er Mei sect, Yang Xiao, Song QingShu, Yin LiTing, and others, no one else knows who he is.

Song YuanQiao said, "This boy is correct. Although Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle sect are enemies, we're here to fight the Ming sect. So our differences can wait."

Yin TianZheng looked back to his group, seeing Wei YiXiao, Yang Xiao, and the others still heavily wounded, his own son unconscious. Other than himself, no one else can possibly put up a fight against Song YuanQiao. But after fighting five

times already, his energy has mostly been depleted. Besides, this shoulder wound really is quite severe.

Just as he was thinking these things, an old, short man came out from the Kong Dong sect. He said, "Since you've lost already, why don't you just surrender now? Reverend Kong Zhi, let's go burn the place!" Kong Zhi is the leader of the Shaolin group that came to fight the Ming sect. The others all look up to him for guidance.

Before Kong Zhi could respond, someone in the Hua Shan sect said, "Who cares whether they surrender or not? Just kill them all." Yin TianZheng tried to recover some strength, but he felt sharp pain on the shoulders. He knew that Song YuanQiao is the eldest disciple under Zhang SanFeng. Even at full strength, he's not sure if he can win. Yet with everyone else injured or dead, he's the only one who can put up any resistance. So his only choice is to fight to the end. Although he's not afraid of death, but to lose everything he's worked for is hard to take. Song YuanQiao then said, "Elder Yin, although Wu Dang and Heavenly Eagle Sect are enemies, that is not the purpose of this visit. We are here to fight the Ming sect. Since you have already left the Ming sect, you really don't have to be here. If you leave now, we won't stop you."

Everyone knows the story about Heavenly Eagle sect harming Yu DaiYan* to become the enemy of Wu Dang. So everyone was surprised to hear Song YuanQiao say these words. But they also know that Song YuanQiao is a righteous person, and doesn't want to take advantage of him." Yin TianZheng laughed, "I thank your kindness. But I am one of the Great Protection Lords of the Ming sect. How can I ignore the Ming sect when it's in trouble? I can only die defending today." As he said this he stepped up, his hands by his shoulders. Song YuanQiao said, "If that's the case, then I'm

sorry!” As he said this, his hands shot out, using the move ‘Qing Shou Shi’. This is Wu Dang’s opening palm move against elders, again to show respect. Yin TianZheng said, “No need.” And moved his hands in position to block. Although in order to facilitate this strike, Song YuanQiao needed to move up another step, but instead he did not move his feet. So this palm is still inches from Yin TianZheng’s body.

*Yu DaiYan is the third brother of Wu Dang, who was poisoned and sent back by Yin SuSu.

Yin TianZheng thought, “Could it be that his palm is so powerful it can hit through air?” He doesn’t want to take the chance, and used his chi onto his right palm to meet the opponent. But for some reason, Song YuanQiao’s palm did not carry any extra inner power with it. Just as he was wondering what’s going on, Song YuanQiao said, “My master heard your inner power cultivation is one of the best in the world. However, after battling so many people, it’s unfair for someone as fresh as me to fight you. So let’s just compete in techniques, not inner power.” As he said this, his foot shot out. Although it did not aim at the opponent, it’s still precise and quick, making it difficult to block had he used it for real. Yin TianZheng said, “Great!” He decided to use attack as defense. Trying to gain the initiative. Song YuanQiao dodged left and right before returning a palm. Although they’re not touching each other, they both know what the results of each strike and counters were.

The spectators include many top martial artists. They see that Song YuanQiao used soft to counter hard, his movement incredibly fast. Yin TianZheng’s style is pure power, yet he also kept up the speed. Only to see both attack and defend quickly. Although seemingly like two people practicing, they are actually in a very heated battle.

When Zhang Wuji first saw Yin TianZheng fought Zhang SongXi and Muo ShengGu, he cared too much for their safety to actually look at their fighting style. But now that there's no worry about anyone's lives, he can concentrate on their techniques. Yet the more he watched, the more he doesn't get it. "My grandfather and Uncle Song are two of the best fighters in the world, so are there so many flaws in their moves? If grandpa only aimed that last attack a bit left, he would've hit Uncle Song's chest. If Uncle Song had held back this attack a bit longer, he would've hit my grandpa's shoulders. Could it be that they're purposely holding back? But that doesn't seem to be the case." In actuality, both Yin TianZheng and Song YuanQiao are fighting with all their concentration. But after learning Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, his abilities have raised another notch. There are many flaws in Song and Yin's moves, but also none. The only reason Zhang Wuji thinks this way is because of Jiu Yang Shen Gong. His methods for beating the enemy might succeed, but certainly no better than the ones Yin and Song are using. Because no one else can use them. It's the same as a bird watching a lion fight a tiger, thinking why doesn't one just fly up and attack from above? Although lions and tigers are powerful, they still cannot fly. Zhang Wuji is hardly knowledgeable about these things, so he couldn't figure it out. Suddenly he saw Song YuanQiao's moves changed, his hands danced in the air, soft and without power. This is Wu Dang's 'Soft Palms'. Yin TianZheng still used his same palm style. One trying to counter soft, while the other trying to counter hard.

In the middle of the fight, Song YuanQiao attacked with his left hand, his right hand followed, but attacked faster. Then his left hand then reached around and caught up with the right hand. Yin TianZheng could not find a way to escape, so he shot out both of his palms forward. Their palms facing each other, and stopped moving. At this moment, there's

nothing to do but to match inner strength. Except their palms did not meet. Song YuanQiao smiled, putting down his arms, said, "Your palm really is quite magnificent. You have my admiration!" Yin TianZheng also took back his palms and said, "Wu Dang's palm art really is the best in the world." They agreed not to match inner powers, so they had to stop here. Wu Dang still has Yu LianZhou and Yin LiTing still available, but Yin TianZheng's face became red, sweat pouring down his body. Although it was not an inner power match, the opponent was too strong. So he had to waste a lot of strength anyway. At this moment, no matter which other Wu Dan hero comes forward, they would easily win, and become famous for defeating the White-browed Eagle King. Yin LiTing and Yu LianZhou looked at each other, both shook their head, thinking, "How can we possibly fight an injured person?"

Although they wouldn't step forward, it doesn't mean others would follow suit. A small man from Kong Dong stepped forward and said, "Let me play around with you a bit!" His voice full of disrespect.

Yin TianZheng thought, "Ordinarily, they're not even worth fighting me. But now the situation is different. Had I died in the hands of Wu Dang, it wouldn't have been too bad. But how can I let you Tan WenLiang achieve this fame?" Although he felt dizzy, he still gathered his strength to stand up. "Little guy, go ahead!" Tang WenLiang saw that his energy has been mostly depleted, that if he simply wait a bit longer, Yin TianZheng will probably collapse himself. So he quickly got behind Yin TianZheng, aiming towards the back of his heart. Yin TianZheng turned to block, but Tang WenLiang had already left his original spot, moving around like a monkey, not giving him a good target. After a while, Yin TianZheng's eyes saw only black, his mouth coughed some blood, and fell down. Tang WenLiang excitedly said, "Yin TianZheng, today

you'll die in my hands!" He jumped down to attack. Zhang Wuji saw what's going on, began to help, but then saw Yin TianZheng's right hand reached up, using a perfect technique against an attack from above, grabbed Tang WenLiang's arm. Followed by two ka-cha sounds, as his Eagle Claw broke Tang WenLiang's shoulders, followed by his two legs. Tang WenLiang fell to the ground, unable to get up. People all felt awe that he was able to do such a thing in such condition. Members of the Kong Dong sect all looked pale. Although they're close to Tang WenLiang, none dared to go up and retrieve him. After a while, a tall person from the Kong Dong sect came out, picked up a stone, and threw it at Yin TianZheng. This is Zong WeiXia, the second Kong Dong elder. He said, "Old man White-brow. Let's take care of some old business." This stone shot over and hit Yin TianZheng on the face, blood came out. Everyone became shocked, as no one thought it would actually hit him. But apparently, in his semi-conscious state, Yin TianZheng couldn't even see the stone coming, much less avoid it. At this moment, almost anyone could go up and kill him. But before Zong WeiXia can do anything, a person came out from the Wu Dang sect. This is the second Wu Dang hero Yu LianZhou. He said, "Brother Zong, he's already very injured. To kill him now is a terrible thing to do. Since he and us Wu Dang has some issues, why don't you leave him to me?" Zong WeiXia said, "What injury? He's faking it. Otherwise, how could he cripple my third brother?" I have to hit him three times for revenge." Yu LianZhou didn't want such a heroic person to die in such circumstances, and then thought of Zhang CuiShan and Yin SuSu, said, "Your Qi Shang Fist is world famous, how can he stand three blows?"

Zong WeiXia said, "Fine then. He crippled my brother. I'll just cripple him. Eye for an eye!" He saw disagreement on Yu LianZhou's face, then said, "Second hero Yu, we came here to take out evil. How can you protect them instead?" Yu

LianZhou sighed, said, "Fine then. But when we get back, let me test out your Qi Shang Fist." Zong WeiXia thought, "Why is he protecting this old man?" Although he's afraid of Wu Dang, he couldn't show it in front of the masses. So he laughed coldly, "Nothing in this world is above the word 'reason'. Although you're powerful, you still cannot use it to force others to agree with you."

Song YuanQiao said, "Second brother, let it go." Yu LianZhou said, "Great hero! Great man!" Then left. These words are obviously meant to praise Yin TianZheng. Zong WeiXia doesn't want to make enemies of Wu Dang, so he pretended to not hear it. Once Yu LianZhou left, he went towards Yin TianZheng.

Shaolin's Kong Zhi started yelling orders, "Kong Dong and Hua Shan people. Finish the remaining people. Wu Dang, search left for those in hiding. Er Mei go right and do the same. Kun Lun, get some fire and burn this place. Shaolin disciples, prepare to guide the dead on their journey." Everyone thought that after Yin TianZheng dies, they can go on destroying the place. And the plan will be a success. All the Ming sect members who weren't terribly injured raised their arms, ten fingers apart, holding them in front of their chest. They then followed Yang Xiao in saying the sacred Ming text, "Come to me, Oh holy fire, What joy is in life, what pain in death, for righteousness against evil, happiness and sadness, as we return to earth, hopefully the living, will receive happiness." Everyone chanted along, seemingly feel nothing about dying.

Yu LianZhou thought, "This must be their sacred chant before they die. That really is righteous of them. Actually, the Ming sect used to be filled with heroes. It's just that recently, many members have become evil." Zhang Wuji originally was afraid to appear in front of so many elders of the six sects.

But after Kong Zhi said those commands, and Zong WeiXia now walking towards Yin TianZheng, he can't possibly hold back. Without thinking, he jumped in front of Zong WeiXia, said, "Hold on! How can do this to such an injured person? You're not afraid that people will laugh?" He said these words loud and clear. Although everyone was intent on doing their duties, they all turned around when they heard this. When Zong WeiXia saw that it's a youngster with a dirty shirt talking, he ignored him, and tried to push him away. Zhang Wuji saw Zong WeiXia trying to push himself, so he lightly held out with his palm, after a 'peng' sound, Zong WeiXia fell back three steps. Tried to get his balance back, but this push really is too strong. So every time he desperately to regain his balance, he fails. So he had to retreat further a few steps before getting back up. By that time, he's already quite far from Zhang Wuji. His mind couldn't explain what happened, while the others wonder what he's doing. Even Zhang Wuji himself didn't realize how much power he had. Zong WeiXia thought for a moment, and then said to Yu LianZhou, "Hey, a man should be righteous. How can you harm me like that?" He thought it must be Yu LianZhou doing something sneaky, with his brothers probably. Otherwise, how can anyone have this much power? Yu LianZhou felt awkward, not knowing why he would make up something like that. Zong WeiXia stepped up and said, "Little kid. Who are you?" Zhang Wuji said, "My name is Zeng AhNuo." As he said this, he used his palm to shoot his chi into Yin TianZheng's body. Jiu Yang Zhen Chi is thick and pure, so Yin TianZheng was able to open his eyes after a few moments. He looked at this youngster, wondering who he is. Zhang Wuji simply smiled at him, and began to sent his chi even faster. After only a few moments, Yin TianZheng was able to stand up, and said, "Thank you, little friend!" Then he said, "Mr. Zong, your Qi Shang Fist is nothing, I'll take it right now!"

Zong WeiXia never thought Yin TianZheng could stand back

up again. Seeing that he's no longer at an advantage, plus afraid of his Eagle Claws, Zong WeiXia said, "If my Qi Shang Fist is indeed nothing, then let's match fists." He wanted to make Yin TianZheng stick to just fist, not claws. This way, he can win due to superior inner power. When Zhang Wuji heard him talk about Qi Shang Fist, he thought back to that night when his godfather told that story about killing Reverend Kong Jian, then later forced him to memorize the formula. When he couldn't memorize correctly, he even got scolded. But now, he has figured out the workings of this fist form. After all, no inner power in the world can match Jiu Yang Shen Gong. Plus, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi is made to point out how best to utilize one's power, combining all the intricacies of all the martial arts in the world. So knowing that means knowing all other martial arts. Which is why all the martial arts in the world are like open books to him. He then heard Yin TianZheng said, "Forget three fists, I can take thirty!" He then said to Kong Zhi, "Reverend Kong Zhi, I'm still alive. Are you going back on your promise?"

Kong Zhi waved his hand, said, "Everyone stop for a moment." Apparently, after Yin TianZheng found out what happened on the Brightness Peak, he had to trap Kong Zhi with words. Saying that they can't try to win by numbers. And proposed one-on-one match ups. But the remaining top level Ming fighters still could not handle their opponents. And in the end, only Yin TianZheng remained. Zhang Wuji realizes that although his grandfather is much better now, he still cannot utilize his inner chi. He's only matching palms with Zong WeiXia because he has to, in order to defend the sect. Therefore he said, "Elder Yin, I'll go take those fists for you. If I can't handle him, then you can go." Yin TianZheng realizes that this youngster's inner power is astonishing, much higher than himself even at full strength. But no matter how good he is, he still cannot fight every single person in the six major sects. So in the end, this youngster

will turn out just like himself, half dead. Although he is willing to die for the Ming sect, there's no reason for an outsider, especially someone so young and skillful, to do the same. He asked, "Which sect are you from, little friend? You're not a Ming sect member, are you?" Zhang Wuji said, "Although I am not a Ming sect member, nor a Heavenly Eagle sect member, I have always respected you. I am willing to help out." Yin TianZheng can't figure out what's going on, but just as he wants to ask more, Zong WeiXia said, "Here comes my first fist, old man."

Zhang Wuji said, "Elder Yin said you're not worthy of fighting him. You have to beat me first."

Zong WeiXia immediately became angry, said, "Who the hell do you think you are? Let me show you the power of my Qi Shang Fist." Zhang Wuji thought, "Only by bring up the plan of Yuan Zhen can we solve this misunderstanding. Otherwise, how can I possibly beat all these people? Besides, how can I possibly fight my martial uncles?" So he said, "I've long known the power of Kong Dong's Qi Shang Fist. After all, didn't Reverend Kong Jian die from your Qi Shang Fist?" This sentence startled the Shaolin sect. They knew that from looking at the body, Kong Jian did indeed die from the Qi Shang Fist. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and Kong Sheng discussed this for a long time, finally decided that no one in the Kong Dong sect has the power to kill someone who has learnt the 'Golden Invincible Body' skill. Later they found out that the Kong Dong elders were in the southeast area, while Kong Jian died in Luo Yang*. Other than the five Kong Dong elders, no one else can even come close to harming Kong Jian, so they let it go. Besides, there are the words 'Cheng Kun killed Kong Jian' nearby. So when they found out that it's Xie Xun who pretended to be Cheng Kun, it all became clear. Only now, when Zhang Wuji brought this up again, did they all become startled. Zong WeiXia said angrily, "Everyone knows that Xie

Xun is the killer. What does this have to do with us?” Zhang Wuji said, “Were you there to see this? Did you help him out?” Zong WeiXia thought, this little kid doesn’t look like a beggar, nor some farm kid, what’s he doing here? I bet it’s the Wu Dang people who sent him, trying to cause problems between Shaolin and us. I better be careful.” He said seriously, “Kong Jian died in Luo Yang. Us five elders were at Yun Nan* How can we have seen it?”

*Luo Yang was the capital of the Tang dynasty, and roughly in the central regions of China today. Yun Nan is a lot more to the south. Just felt like sharing some of the very miniscule knowledge I have of China’s history and geography.

Zhang Wuji said loudly, “That’s right! If you were at Yun Nan, then how do you know Xie Xun killed Kong Jian? Everyone knows that he died in the hands of the Qi Shang Fist. Xie Xun is not a member of the Kong Dong sect. How can you pin this crime on him?” Zhong WeiXia said, “Because the words ‘Cheng Kun killed Reverend Kong Jian’ appeared at the murder scene. Everyone knows that Xie Xun did all these crimes.”

Zhang Wuji thought, “My godfather never told me this. He felt only pain and regret for killing Kong Jian. How could he possibly write something like this?” He then laughed, said, “Everyone can write these words. I can say that you wrote those words. It’s easy to write words, but hard to learn Qi Shang Fist.” He then turned to Kong Zhi and said, “Reverend Kong Zhi, isn’t it true that Reverend Kong Jian was killed by Qi Shang Fist, and that Xie Xun was not a disciple of Kong Dong?”

Before he could respond, another monk came out, holding an iron staff in his hand. He yelled, “Little kid, which sect are you under? You think you’re worthy of talking to my teacher?

This just happens to be Yuan Yin. Back when Shaolin and the others went to Wu Dang to get Xie Xun's location, he's the one who said it was Zhang CuiShan who killed those Shaolin disciples. Zhang Wuji remembers this person, and his blood immediately began to boil. He kept thinking, "Zhang Wuji, oh Zhang Wuji. You're here to settle this misunderstanding, not to seek revenge. Otherwise, it can turn out really bad. You can settle this with Shaolin later." Although he knows what's the right decision, the tragic death of his parents keep appearing in his head. Sweat came down his face.

Yuan Yin then said, "If you aren't a Ming sect member, get out of here now. The Buddha is lenient. We won't stop you if you don't interfere." Zhang Wuji said, "Where's Reverend Yuan Zhen? Ask him to come out. I have some questions." Yuan Yin aid, "Brother Yuan Zhen? Why do you want him? Get out of the way. I don't have all day for rascals like you. Which sect are you under?" He saw the way Zhang Wuji pushed Zong WeiXia, knowing his teacher must be very good. Which is why he kept asking for his sect. Zhang Wuji said, "I'm not a Ming sect member. But I do know that someone purposely provoked the six major sects into fighting the Ming sect. I just want to settle this misunderstanding. Although I'm young, I do know the truth." After he said this, everyone in the six major sect began to laugh at him. With many people saying things like, "This kid's crazy. What's he blabbering about?" "Who does he think he is? Abbot of Sholin? Master Zhang of Wu Dang?" "Did he get the Dragon Saber in his dreams?" "Haha! Haha!" "He thinks we're all little kids. Oh man, my stomach hurts from the laughing!" Only Er Mei's Zhou ZhiRuo held her head low, not saying anything. Ever since she found out Zhang Wuji's identity, knowing he's the little boy she met on the boat, she has thought of him as an old friend. Later when he took her master's three palm strikes, saving those under the Golden Flag, she felt great admiration towards him. Now, seeing the crowd laughing, she

cannot but help feel bad and sympathetic.

Zhang Wuji did not back down, said, "Only when Yuan Zhen comes out can the truth be known." Even though he said this amidst all the laughter, everyone can still hear him clearly. Everyone in the six major sect immediately held back their laughter a bit, knowing that this youngster is not as simple as he seems, thinking, "How can someone so young have such amazing inner power?" When the laughter died down, Yuan Yin said, "You little punk, you knew Yuan Zhen brother is dead, yet you still asks for him? Why don't you ask for Wu Dang's Zhang CuiShan to come out too?"

Just as he said this, Kong Zhi immediately yelled, "Yuan Yin, be careful when you speak!" But Hua Shan, Kong Dong, and Kun Lun people have already started laughing again. Only Wu Dang remained still. Apparently, Yuan Yin, after Yin SuSu hit his eyes with her darts, still thinks Zhang CuiShan did it. And therefore felt deep hatred for him.

Zhang Wuji could not hold back his anger after hearing him ridicule father, yelled, "How dare you speak to Fifth Hero Zhang like that?" Yuan Yin laughed coldly, "He's just a lecherous fool, getting hooked by the beauty of an evil woman..." Zhang Wuji knows that he cannot harm anyone in order to stop this bloodshed, but how can he possibly hold back after that comment? He dashed forward, his left hand reached out and held up Yuan Yin at the back of his waist, his right hand reached out and took his staff. Yuan Yin could not fight back. But just at this time, two Shaolin disciples came out, their staffs aiming towards the left and right side of Zhang Wuji. Their moves aimed towards saving someone in the grasp of an enemy. These two disciples are Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye. Zhang Wuji held Yuan Yin in one hand, his staff with the right, jumped up, and kicked at the point of Yuan Xin and Yuan Ye's staffs. Only to hear two sounds, as Yuan Xin and

Yuan Ye both fell to the ground, their staffs bouncing back and hit them. Thankfully both of their inner powers are quite good, so they did not suffer internal injuries. Zhang Wuji twisted in midair, then gently floated down. Many people in the six sects immediately yelled, "Wu Dang's 'Cloud Stairs'!" Zhang Wuji learned Wu Dang's entrance fist form 'Wu Dang Long Fist' from his dad, martial grandfather, and fellow martial uncles. Although he had since seen many other skills, he's still most familiar with Wu Dang's kung fu. For the likes of Yu LianZhou and Zhong SongXi, it's not difficult to use 'Cloud Stairs' as well as Zhang Wuji. But for them to do so while holding another person is simply impossible.

By now, he's quite far from the Shaolin group. So the only way to reach him is through darts. But Zhang Wuji only needs to use Yuan Yin as a shield to borrow Shaolin's hand for killing him. Even with the likes of such experts as Kong Zhi and Kong Sheng, no one has any way to save him. Only to see Zhang Wuji's face filled with hatred as he raised the staff. Yet didn't bring it down. It's as if he has a hard decision to make. But then after a while, his expression calmed, and lowered the staff slowly. He thought, "If I kill just one person here, I will become the enemy of the six major sect, and can no longer be an arbitrator. This bloodshed will then continue. That's why I must endure, endure no matter what. This is what my parents would've wanted me to do." Once he thought this through, he put down Yuan Yin, said, "Reverend Yuan Yin, your eyes were not blinded by Fifth Hero Zhang, why do you hate him so? Besides, he had already committed suicide, so any grudge should've been settled at that point.

After his escape from death, Yuan Yin could only stare blankly at Zhang Wuji, unable to speak. When Zhang Wuji threw him his staff, he took it and returned to his group, thinking he really did go overboard with his hatred the past years. When the high reverends of Shaolin and the heroes of Wu Dang

heard this, they all nodded silently.

End of Chapter 20.

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 21 - Solving Problems, Resolving Disputes and Combating the 6 Forces](#)

[Chapter 22 - Placating the Crowd and Three Conditions](#)

[Chapter 23 - Intoxicating Lotus of the Green Willow Manor](#)

[Chapter 24 - Tai Chi - The Origin of Soft Subduing Hard](#)

[Chapter 25 - Lighting a blazing fire to burn the sky.](#)

[Chapter 26 - Self Deformation of a Handsome Jade Face](#)

[Chapter 27 - Soaring Down from a Hundred-foot Pagoda](#)

[Chapter 28 - Broken Kindness, Lost Friendship, Purple Robed King](#)

[Chapter 29 - The Hopes of Four Women on the Boat](#)

[Chapter 30 - East and West Will Always Be Divided like Enemies](#)

Chapter 21 - Solving Problems, Resolving Disputes and Combating the 6 Forces

(Translated by Faerie Queen and Meh)



By the time Zhang Wuji finished his last sentence "That won't be necessary", his body flew up and then began to spin, spinning four times quickly in midair, each time higher than the last, until he made a final flip, before landing soft as a feather down to the ground far away. The watchers could only stare in awe as they watched. If they hadn't seen it with their own eyes, no one would have believed that someone could possess such amazing lightness kung fu. Even the Green Bat King, who thought his own lightness kung fu was unparalleled, could only sigh in reverence.

Zong Wei Xia became secretly alarmed as he witnessed Zhang Wu Ji capture the heavy weighing Yuan Yin with such ease. But he was already situated in the middle of the battlefield, how could he possibly retreat now and thus reveal his weakness? Therefore, Zong Wei Xia shouts out loudly, "Hey! The one called Zeng! You came in here and insisted on sticking your nose into our business. Who sent you here, and whose orders are you acting on?" Zhang Wu Ji replies, "I act merely with the hope of seeing the 6 great sects being able to resolve their conflicts and make peace with the Ming sect. I am not ordered by anyone." Zong Wei Xia barks back, "Hmph! You expect us to shake hands and make peace with the demon sect?! It's absurd and impossible. The old bandit Yan promised to receive 3 more stances of my Fists of the Seven Damages, let me finish him first before I take care of you!" he rolls up his sleeves and prepares to fight.

Zhang Wu Ji immediately interrupts, "Elder Zong, you keep mentioning the Fists of the Seven Damages, but allow me to express my humble opinion elder – your current skill level of the Fists of the Seven Damages has still not been executed to an expertly stage yet. There are 5 elements within the human body – heart as governed by fire, lungs governed by gold, kidney by water, spleen by earth and liver by wood, in

addition to that, there are the two chi(s) – Ying and Yang. Once one practices the Fists of the Seven Damages, all 7 elements will be inflicted with damage. The foundation of this set of fists was inclined to be in such a way that with every level you advance in, your own internal organs will also have to subsequently withstand an extra level of damage. Hence you have to first inflict harm upon your own self before you can harm your enemy. However, elder Zong, the good news is that you have not been practicing this set of fists for very long, therefore you can still be saved.”

Listening to these words, Zong Wei Xia recognized that they were indeed the key points delineated within the manual’s central instructions for the Fists of the Seven Damages. The manual did repeatedly describe of these side-effects, warning the practitioner that if they were to attempt this set of fist, it must not be done so unless the reserve of their energy levels has reached the point of where it can course through the various acupoints of their body at will and be withdrawn with ease. If one has not reached this level yet, then they must caution to never practice this set of fists. However, this set of fists was the most famous and powerful martial art in the Kong Dong sect, therefore as soon as Zong Wei Xia reached a fairly stable reserve of internal energy he immediately started to practice this set of fists. He suddenly found the power within his punches to have increased significantly and once his appetite was wetted, it became very hard for him to restrain from continuing the practice. Hence all traces of the manual’s warning has long since been completely forgotten. Besides, all of the 5 elders in the Kong Dong sect practices this set of fists and since Zong Wei Xia himself resided in the second position, how could he possibly allow himself to be outdone? But upon hearing Zhang Wu Ji’s words at this moment, he became suddenly alarmed. Shocked, he asked, “How did you know all this?”

Zhang Wu Ji does not reply, but continues to say, “Elder Zong, I entreat you to massage the yun-men, cloud-gate energy point on your shoulder – are you feeling a faint throbbing pain? The yun-men energy point governs the lungs, which means that the connection to your lungs has been wounded. The qing-ling, jade-spirit energy point located on the upper half of your kidney will often give you a numbing ache that becomes unbearable – am I right? The qing-ling energy point is related to the heart, meaning the heart pulse has been damaged. The wu-li, five-mile energy point on your thigh will ache with pain every time the weather rains or clouds over. This is due to the fact that the wu-li point governs the liver, meaning your liver has suffered harm. The longer you continue this practice, the more increasingly severe these faint signs of bodily disorder will become. If you continue on for another 8 or 9 years, I’m afraid that you will cripple your whole body for life.”

As Zong Wei Xia concentrated on Zhang Wu Ji’s every word, bead after bead of sweat emanated from his forehead. Little did he know that many years ago, Xie Xun had related the whole essence and nature of the Fists of the Seven Damages to Zhang Wu Ji, thus enabling Zhang to be very well acquainted with the nature of this martial art skill. On top of that, Zhang is extremely well learned in the practice of medicine, thoroughly understanding the relationship between the various pulse points and the side effects that arises from their damage. Thus every word that he utters is dead on. Over the course of these few years, Zong Wei Xia has indeed been feeling faint traces of those side effects that Zhang Wu Ji mentioned. Due to the fact that his condition has not yet reached the state of which would give cause for any serious alarm, he has therefore always secretly harboured his illnesses and remained averse to the idea of seeking medication. But hearing Zhang Wu Ji list out one after the other, details of his physical condition so accurately,

he couldn't help but be alarmed to the point of undergoing a change of colour in his countenance. It is only after the duration of a very long pause before he is finally able to utter the words, "How ... how did you know this?"

Zhang Wu Ji smiles faintly and replies, "I happen to know a little about the laws of medicine. If elder you are willing to trust me, as soon as the situation here is resolved, I can think of ways to cure you of your present ailments. But I must remind you once more that practicing this skill will only bring upon harm, and will do you absolutely no good. You must not continue to practice it."

Zong Wei Xia forces himself to refute, "The Fists of the Seven Damages is the top martial art skill within the Kong Dong sect's establishment, how can it be as you say, harmful and unbeneficial? Back in the days, our sect's ancestor Mu Ling Zi established worldwide fame for himself solely from this set of fists. Not only did his great name spread to the four seas, but he also lived to be 91 years old! How can it be damaging to the body? Doesn't this prove that your words are a pile of rubbish?"

Zhang Wu Ji replies, "It can be imagined that the elder Mu Ling Zi must have achieved an extremely powerful reserve of inner energy, therefore he, of course can practice this skill. Not only will it do him no harm, it will actually work to strengthen his internal organic system. According to my humble opinion elder Zong, your level of inner energy has still not reached this level yet. If you continue to forcefully practice this skill, I'm afraid that in the end all will be to no avail, and your efforts will only result in uselessness."

Zong Wei Xia was a famous and important figure within the Kong Dong sect, therefore even though he recognizes that Zhang Wu Ji's words were not without its truthfulness, yet

having the most famous set of fist skill that helped to establish the name of his sect being criticized by this youngster in front of a big crowd of martial art fighters as being “useless,” how can he possibly not be angry? He shouts out loudly, “Who do you think you are? How dare you criticize my sect’s greatest martial arts skill? If you think that it is really to be looked upon so lightly, then why don’t you come out and try it yourself, see whether it really is so useless?” Zhang Wu Ji smiles ever so faintly and replies, “The Fists of the Seven Damages is most definitely a superbly complex and mystical skill. The essence of the fists lies in its embodiment of raw force that still maintains a degree of gentleness, a simultaneous energy of harmonious balance that still exerts forceful power. The seven different channels of execution are each distinct, it ebbs and flows with hundreds of variations. It really catches one’s opponent off guard and renders them defenceless.” Zong Wei Xia upon hearing Zhang Wu Ji relate with straightforward honesty the intricate relationships of the Fists of the Seven Damages, he could no longer help himself from breaking into faint signs of a smile while repeatedly nodding his head in agreement. Zhang Wu Ji continues, “I am just saying that if one’s inner energy reserve has not reached an adequate level, then practicing the fist skill will definitely cause more harm than good.”

Zhou Zhi Rou was standing behind a bunch of her shi jies as she observed Zhang Wu Ji. She mused at the fact that though Zhang embodied the faint traces of a young person’s charismatic spirit, he was at the same time forcing himself to appear as this worldly, well-learned old soul as he lectured solemnly and soberly. It was as if he was teaching a lesson to Zong Wei Xia, the second elder of the Kong Dong sect’s 5 elders – she couldn’t help but be amused by the ridiculous and comical nature of the whole situation. Yet at the same time, she couldn’t help but start to secretly worry for him.

Hearing the content of Zhang Wu Ji's words gradually becoming more and more offensive, the reckless and impulsive young disciples of the Kong Dong sect were almost unable to restrain themselves from shouting out insults. But when they looked over at Zong Wei Xia, they saw that he was harbouring a serious countenance as he devotes the utmost attention and concentration to this youngster's words. The young disciples can therefore only force back the insults that had already arrived at the tip of their tongues.

Zong Wei Xia asks, "So from what you are saying, my inner energy levels is still not advanced enough?" Zhang Wu Ji replies, "Whether elder's inner energy levels has progressed to an advance state yet, I dare not make any judgements rashly. But if during all this time that you have spent practicing the Fists of the Seven Damages, you are also simultaneously hurting your own body, then it is better to not practice ..."

Before he could continue, he suddenly heard an angry shout from behind him, "Brother, why waste your breath on this young rascal? If he dares to look down upon our sect's Fists of the Seven Damages, then let him withstand the taste of one of my fists!" With the termination of this person's voice, followed his fist. His movements were both fast and deadly, a force whooshed by to deliver a heavy fist that landed upon the ling tai, spirit-temple energy point of Zhang Wu Ji's back.

Although Zhang Wu Ji was very aware of the impending attack coming up from behind him, yet not only did he chose to completely ignore it, but he also continued to address Zong Wei Xia, "Elder Zong..."

Suddenly sounds of metal chains clanging against each other were heard, and a person rushed out from the crowd. A sweet

melodious voice cries out, "You're secretly attacking him behind his back?!" upon saying this, a set of hands joined by metal cuffs reaches out over the attacker's head. The voice belonged to Xiao Zhao. That person struck back with his left hands, thereby blocking off the metal chains and then very concretely landed a punch on Zhang Wu Ji's back. Although this punch landed dead on upon Zhang Wu Ji's ling tai acupoint, yet not only did Zhang Wu Ji seem to have not even registered the blow, but instead he turns toward Xiao Zhao and smiles gently, "Don't worry Xiao Zhao, this level of the Fists of the Seven Damages will not be of much use." Xiao Zhao breathes a sigh of relief, her snow white skin suddenly tinged with a red blush, as she says in a low voice, "I almost forgot that you have already practiced ..." upon saying this, immediately hushed up and backed away, returning to the crowds, dragging her metal chains along with her.

Zhang Wu Ji turns around and discovered that the attacker was an old man with a big head and skinny body. This man was the fourth elder of the Kong Dong sect's 5 elders - his name was Chang Jing Zhi. Although that one punch had clearly landed directly on Zhang Wu Ji's crucial pulse point, yet Zhang did not seem to have felt anything at all. Chang Jing Zhi was flabbergasted, as he blurted out the words, "You ... you've already mastered the 'Divine Art of Diamond Body Invulnerability,' then you are from the Shaolin sect?" Zhang Wu Ji replies, "I am not a Shaolin disciple ..." Chang Jing Zhi knew that all those who practiced this mystical skill of bodily-protection must depend upon the generation of a single breath of inner Qi. Once that person opens their mouth to speak, that breath of Qi will dissipate immediately. Therefore before Zhang Wu Ji can finish his sentence, Chang struck out once again, this time landing a fist upon Zhang Wu Ji's chest.

Zhang Wu Ji smiles and says, "I've already said that the Fists

of the Seven Damages is useless if one has not achieved an advanced level of inner energy, if you don't believe me, then please feel free to throw another punch at me." Chang Jing Zhi did not waste a single moment before striking out with the speed of the wind, throwing out one punch after another, as two consecutive punches landed on Zhang Wu Ji. In total, altogether of four punches were thrown, every one of them having most definitely landed on Zhang Wu Ji's body. Yet Zhang continues to smile easily as he receives them, as if he was oblivious to the pain. The four stances of heavy hand all embodied an obliterating force capable of smashing rocks and shattering tombs, yet they were all sustained by Zhang Wu Ji as if they were nothing more than the soft touch of a light breeze and the gentle caress of smooth silk.

Chang Jing Zhi has always been known as the "mountain-splitting single fist," and although the grandeur of this title may have been slightly exaggerated, yet the forcefulness of his punches cannot be denied. Among the older generation of martial art fighters, he has always remained a respected and well-known figure. There was not a single person on that scene who was not left in a state of utter astonishment and disbelief having witnessed with their own eyes how the four consecutive punches that Chang Jing Zhi executed all amounting to nothing more than a waste of energy. The Kun Lun sect and Kong Dong Sect have always been rivals, and although at this moment they were both cooperating with each other in their attempts to combat the Ming sect, yet in the hearts of both sides lies deep discontentment and contempt for the other sect. A voice coming from the Kun Lun sect mocks in an icy tone, "Oh, very good! A great 'mountain-splitting single fist' indeed!" Another person scoffs "And exactly what has those 4 punches been able to split?" It was a good thing that Chang Jing Zhi had such a dark complexion, for although his face has already flushed a deep red it was luckily not too noticeable under his dark skin.

Zong Wei Xia formed a fist with his two hands in accordance to the social etiquette of respectful courtesy, “Young hero Zeng, I am much impressed and amazed at your divine martial art skills. Can this old man ask you to engage in an exchange of 3 stances?” He knew that his Fists of the Seven Damages was at a much more advanced level compared to Chang Jing Zhi’s, therefore he figured that just because his brother fails, he himself may not necessarily lose to the opponent.

Zhang Wu Ji replies, “The Kong Dong sect’s Fists of the Seven Damages is without a doubt a superb skill IF it is practiced correctly, as it is most definitely a force that is capable of obliterating anything in its path. Even the great Shaolin monk Kong Jian who had been able to master the supreme skill of “Divine Art of Diamond Body Invulnerability” died under the Fists of the Seven Damages belonging to your sect. My martial art abilities can in no way be said to even come close to matching that of the great revered monk Kong Jian, how can I possibly be of match? But if elder you insist, I figure there is no harm in receiving 3 of your punches.” The meaning behind his words were clearly implying that though the Fists of the Seven Damages was originally powerful, yet based on the level you have achieved now, you are nowhere near the vicinity of causing any harm.

Zong Wei Xia had no time to care about what the hidden meanings behind Zhang Wu Ji’s words may have been, as he was already secretly generating a few consecutive breathes of inner Qi. Zong Wei Xia came forward a step, noises from the bones of his arm that were rattling against each other started to emanate from the force building up within him. A punch was thrown, and with force it impacted with Zhang Wu Ji’s chest. However, as Zong Wei Xia’s fist made contact with Zhang Wu Ji’s body, Zong Wei Xia immediately discovered

that there seemed to be a mysterious magnetic force surrounding Zhang's body that is momentarily locking Zong's arm in a fixed position. Much to his alarm, Zong Wei Xia felt that there was suddenly this very soft and warm energy that was entering him through the fist and was heading straight for his dan tien, the elixir field. In that region between his chest and stomach suddenly appeared an indescribable, yet extremely comfortable and harmonious feeling. Shocked from this mysterious phenomenon, Zong Wei Xia retracts his arm and again releases yet another punch in Zhang's direction, this time striking his lower stomach. Yet the reverberating power that resonates back towards him was extremely strong and forceful, he had to back up a step before he was able to find his balance. He again generated internally a few cycles of energy before once again stepping forward and extended his fist in a fierce punch.

At that moment, Chang Jing Zhi was situated right by Zhang Wu Ji. From Chang Jing Zhi's perspective, Zong Wei Xia seemed to him to have sustained internal injuries as his countenance was fluctuating between flashes of deep red to moments of deathly paleness. Therefore as Zong Wei Xia threw his third punch, Chang Jing Zhi was already prepared to follow Zong with his own fist. Zong Wei Xia struck Zhang Wu Ji on the chest, while Chang Jing Zhi simultaneously attacked Zhang from the back. The two fists impacted on separate parts of Zhang Wu Ji's body at the same time, and there can be no doubt that the force impacted upon his body was ferocious. Yet who could have expected those two extremely strong sources of energy to be mysteriously and completely dissipated within a brief instant? Chang and Zong's combined efforts seemed to have resulted to nothing more than a mere punch into empty space.

Chang Jing Zhi knew very well that he was acting from the

position of an elder, and the first time he snuck up and attacked Zhang Wu Ji from behind so as to catch him unawares was already an extremely frowned upon jiang hu taboo. However, at that time he can at least adamantly claim that Zhang Wu Ji's disrespectful words were tarnishing the reputation of Kong Dong sect's greatest skill, and thus blame his own actions on the momentary inability to control his temper. Yet this second time around, his sneak assault was undoubtedly the despicable act of a malicious scoundrel. He originally thought that by the combined forces generated from his brother and his own Fists of the Seven Damages, this youngster will definitely succumb to defeat under their fists. Chang knew that as long as he is able to kill the youngster, even if there surfaces any kind of gossip or talk from others afterwards, the fact remains that he has nevertheless eliminated a useless nobody for the 6 great sects and therefore could still be said to have established a heroic accomplishment. Yet strangely, as soon as his fist landed upon his opponent's body, the entirety of his forceful strength immediately dissipated into nothingness. Chang Jing Zhi was extremely puzzled, he racked his brains yet was still unable to come up with a single clue of how all this could have happened. He could only raise his left hand to his own head, scratching it in state of contemplation.

Zhang Wu Ji addresses Zong Wei Xia with a slight smile, "How are you feeling Elder?"

Zong Wei Xia bows to Zhang Wu Ji in an act of humble reverence, and with respectful esteem to Zhang Wu Ji he says, "Thank you hero Zeng for using your inner energies to heal my bodily afflictions. Young hero Zeng, it is obviously undeniable that your divine marital arts' proficiency is of an unfathomably deep level. Yet it is this act of repaying the injustice done upon you with an act of kindness and goodwill, this display of such greatness in character and

morality that causes me to be truly humbled by and gratuitous towards.”

As soon as these words were said, there was not a single person on the battlefield that was not completely astonished and baffled. Of course nobody was aware of the fact that when Zong Wei Xia attacked Zhang Wu Ji consecutively with three punches, Zhang Wu Ji used that opportunity to generate his 9 Yang Zhen Jing, thus delivering his energy into Zong Wei Xia’s body. Although the duration was brief, sweeping over Zong’s body in a short moment’s timeframe, yet the 9 Yang Zhen Jing’s energy was extremely substantial and solidly profound, and even from that brief experience Zong Wei Xia has already benefited quite a bit. He knew that had it not been for Chang Jing Zhi’s surreptitious attack on Zhang Wu Ji, the benefits that could be have been reaped by the third punch would have been much greater.

Zhang Wu Ji replies, “ ‘greatness in character and morality,’ these are kind words of which I am not worthy of. Elder Zong at this moment, your essential nerves and the eight veins have already experienced great agitation, the best thing for you to do right now would be to immediately bring your energies back into balance. It is only through this process can all the harmful toxins that have accumulated within your body from all these years of practicing the Fists of the Seven damages be gradually eradicated within two or three years.”

Zong Wei Xia finally recognized now that his body has indeed fallen ill, so he promptly formed his hands into a fist gesturing gratitude and said earnestly “Thank you, thank you!” and without wasting a moment’s time, he immediately moved back a step and sat down on the floor in order to start generating his Qi. Although Zong Wei Xia knew very well that this gesture was somewhat unsightly and causing him to lose all dignity of appearance, yet this was a life and death

situation and therefore he couldn't allow himself to be bothered or hindered by anything else right now.

Zhang Wu Ji bent down and started to reconnect Tang Wen Liang's broken ribs. He turned towards Chang Jing Zhi and commanded, "bring some Yang-Rejuvenating Five Dragons Paste to me." Chang Jing Zhi obediently took out the said paste and handed it over to Zhang Wu Ji. Zhang Wu Ji then requested, "will you please ask the Wu Tang sect to borrow a dosage of their Triple-Huang Wax tablets, and ask to borrow a bit of Hua Shan sect's Yu Zhen Powder" Chang Jing Zhi obediently followed Zhang Wu Ji's every word, gathering the necessary items and bringing them to Zhang Wu Ji. Zhang Wu Ji explains, "your sect's Yang-Rejuvenating Five-Dragons paste is composed of the Cao Wu (aconite) which is extremely effective, while the Wu Tang sect's Triple-Huang Wax tablets' ingredients of the three different kinds of Huang – Ma Huang (ephedra herba), Xiong Huang (realgar) and Teng Huang (Resina Garciniae), is also very beneficial. Add to this the Yu Zhen Powder, and as long as elder Tang gets plenty of rest in his recuperation, 2 months later his limbs will be functioning as well as before," as he was explaining this, Zhang Wu Ji was all the while applying the medicine to Tang Wen Liang's broken bones, finishing the treatment within a moment's time.

The various sects each had their own unique formula of therapeutic medicine, each one unique in their remedial nature and the outcome they affect. The details of the various sects' medicinal remedies were all clearly and explicitly recorded within Hu Qing Niu's medicine chronicles. Zhang Wu Ji figured that since the 6 major sects were flanking the Ming sect on Guang Ming Peak, they must have each brought along their own remedial medicine in preparation for battle. But the onlookers just became all the more puzzled, not only because Zhang Wu Ji's curative

abilities far excels that of any eminent and famed doctor, but they were even more flabbergasted by the fact that Zhang Wu Ji was able to accurately assess the therapeutic properties of the various medicines belong to each sect. Chang Jing Zhi approached Tang Wen Liang and helped him to his feet, before retreating with a distinct expression of embarrassment and shame. Tang Wen Liang suddenly shouted, "You! Zeng! Tang Wen Liang is extremely indebted to you for healing my injuries. You have my word - one day I will repay your charitable act. But the demon sect is our sect's sworn adversary. The Kong Dong sect will forever be enemies with the Ming sect, the various scores of vengeance and retribution is something that has long existed between us and is not something that can be resolved through a small favour done on me by you. You're trying to persuade us to settle our arguments, but we will not be persuaded. If you feel that I am being an ungrateful bastard who does not appreciate the good deed you have done for me, you can just break all my limbs again, but you can't persuade us to settle our scores with the demon sect."

Once these words were uttered, the same thought was running through everyone's mind, "Although they both belong to the Kong Dong sect, yet this Tang Wen Liang definitely has more integrity than that Chang Jing Zhi."

Zhang Wu Ji replied, "If Elder Tang indeed feels this way, then may I ask what I can do in order for you to listen to my words?"

Tang Wen Liang replies, "Show us your martial art skills. If Kong Dong sect's skill is indeed inferior to yours, then I have nothing to say."

Zhang Wu Ji replies, "The number of skilled fighters within the Kong Dong sect are as vast as the clouds, how can I

possibly compete with them? Forgive me for being bold and reckless, but today I am insisting on playing the role of the peacemaker so I'll give it a try. I can only give it my all, using my life as a gamble." He looks around him and sees that on the east end of the battlefield is an enormous pine tree that must have been taller than 30 feet. Its roots spanning out in all directions as it stands solidly rooted in the ground. Zhang Wu Ji walks over to the tree and speaks out in a loud and clear voice, "Once I happened to come upon the opportunity of learning a little bit of your sect's Fists of the Seven Damages. If I do anything incorrectly, I entreat you to please be tolerant of me." Everyone became very shocked upon hearing this, all in a state of disbelief and questioning, "How can it be that this young man will also know even the Kong Dong sect's Fists of the Seven Damages? From where could he have possibly learned this skill?" Zhang Wu Ji continues in a clear and steady voice, "The five central channels of energy balances Ying and Yang. Harm the heart, wound the lungs, and mutilate the liver and intestines. Viscera is shattered, energy recedes, will wanes. Once all three sectors of the stomach are reversed, along with the breath, the spirit flees away."

Although members belonging to the other sects did not take much interest in Zhang Wu Ji's words, however, the 5 elders of the Kong Dong sect were all shaken to the core upon hearing Zhang Wu Ji clearly and accurately recite these 4 stanzas of words that resembled neither poem nor song. What was just recited by Zhang Wu Ji was indeed the general indexical stanza for the Fists of the Seven Damages, and its composition has always remained a secret belonging to the Kong Dong sect that was not related to outsiders - how could it be that this youngster also knows how to recite it? At that moment how could they have possibly guessed that many years ago when Xie Xun stole the book containing the steps to the Fists of the Seven Damages, he had also related its

contents to Zhang Wu Ji?

Zhang Wu Ji while reciting in a clear voice walks forward and strikes out with a punch. The sound of a loud “boom” echoes out and a blur of jade green flashes by the eyes as the top half of the great pine tree is severed off, flying to a side and landing on the ground almost twenty feet away from its original spot. All that is left on the ground is the bottom half of the trunk that is now only around 4 feet tall, the area of disconnection was even and levelled out.

Chang Jing Zhi mumbles to himself, “that’s ... that’s not the Fists of the Seven Damages!” The theory behind the Fists of the Seven Damages requires the method of execution to embody both hard and soft elements – where within waves of solid force will also simultaneously exist traces of gentleness, as well as vice versa where soothing suppleness bears the presence of dynamic power. Although this act of severing a big tree into two parts was indeed an extremely powerful move that would call for amazement, yet the source of power derived to execute it is of an extremely solid and forceful kind of energy. Chang Jing Zhi approached the dislocated piece for a closer inspection and could he not stop his jaw from dropping into a gaping hole of disbelief. Jolted into a state of shock and astonishment, he was unable to close his mouth. Chang saw that the core of the tree was cleanly and completely severed, clearly indicating the work of one whose practice of the Fists of the Seven Damages has already reached the highest level.

In actuality, Zhang Wu Ji was intent upon using his power and ability to take control over the battle scene. Therefore, if he was to use the Fists of the Seven Damages to sever the core of the tree trunk, he must wait from 10 days to half a month for the core of the pine tree to dry and shrivel up before he could finish it off. Hence, as he delivered a blow

using the Fists of the Seven Damages, he also proceeded with an extremely strong and forceful Yang energy in order to break the tree into a clean half. Years ago on the ice-fire island, his yi fu Xie Xun also employed a similar method based on the same principle of first using the Fists of the Seven Damages to crack and shatter the internal core of the tree before immediately using the dragon sabre to cleanly slice through it.

All that was heard around him were the cheers, excitement and praises coming from all the sects. The energetic enthusiasm was gushing towards Zhang Wu Ji like tidal waves, lasting quite a while before finally quieting down.

Chang Jing Zhi exclaims "Outstanding! That was indeed a demonstration of the highest achievement of the Fists of the Seven Damages skill! I truly bow to you! But I have to ask you young hero Zeng, from where did you learn this set of fists?" Zhang Wu Ji smiles faintly and does not reply. Tang Wen Liang asks in a sharp tone, "Where is the Golden Mane Lion King right now? I entreat young hero Zeng to impart upon us his whereabouts." Tang has always been a perceptive and shrewd person, and has therefore vaguely deduced that Xie Xun must somehow be either related to, or associated with the youngster that is currently standing in front of him.

Zhang Wu Ji becomes alarmed and thinks to himself, "Darn it! Using the Fists of the Seven Damages has brought attention upon yi fu's presence. If I truthfully relate to them my relationship with yi fu it will only make me the enemy of the 6 great sects, and then my attempts at playing the role of the peacemaker will not succeed." He then proceeds to say, "Your sect is insisting that the ultimate figure responsible for the abduction of the manual for the Fists of the Seven Damages is the Golden Mane Lion King? That is wrong, very

wrong! That night on the Kong Dong Mountain in the midst of the fight within Qing Yang temple, there was one person in your sect who was injured by the Divine Art of Originating Formation, and hence red spots started to appear all over his whole body. The attacker that night was the one who is known to all as the 'Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation' – Cheng Kun.”

Years ago, when Xie Xun arrived on the Kong Dong mountain intent on stealing the fist manual, Cheng Kun purposely assisted him without his awareness in order that he may generate more enemies for the Ming sect. That night, Cheng Kun used the Divine Art of Originating Formation to injure the two elders Tang Wen Liang and Chang Jing Zhi. Xie Xun was not aware that Cheng Kun had secretly assisted him that night, and it was only later when Xie Xun encountered the monk Kong Jian who elucidated for him the truth, did he finally understand what happened. Zhang Wu Ji was thinking to himself that since Cheng Kun has spent a whole lifetime engaged in implementing nothing but evil deeds, purposely framing others for his own evil feats, he may as well give him his just desserts by retaliating in the style of Cheng Kun. Zhang Wu Ji felt that not only was he not lying, but he was also uncovering the truth.

Tang Wen Liang and Chang Jing Zhi had harboured suspicions in their hearts for more than 20 years. At this moment, being presented with an explanation from Zhang Wu Ji, the various incoherencies suddenly fell into place. Tang and Chang looked at each other for a moment, unable to say anything for a while. Zong Wei Xia inquires, “May I ask you hero Zeng, this Cheng Kun – where has he escaped to at this present moment?”

Zhang Wu Ji replies, “The Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun was fuelled by only one purpose, and

that was to create disorder between the 6 great sects and the Ming sect. He was later taken in under Shaolin's wing, and changed his name to Yuan Zhen. Last night, he sneaked into the Ming sect's inner forum and admitted to these crimes with his own mouth to the Ming sect's head leaders. At that time, Mr. Yang Xiao, Wei Bat-King, and the 5 wanderers were all listening. I swear that this is the unembellished truth. If there is a single false word, then I am even lower than a crowd of dogs and pigs, and when I die may it be that I will be tortured by millions of diabolical calamities and doomed to suffer in eternity, never be reborn again."

Having heard Zhang Wu Ji deliver these words with utmost sincerity and earnestness, the majority of people were struck with wonder and speculation. Only the Shaolin sect's various monks simultaneously erupted into loud shouts of protest.

(Continued by Meh)

Only to hear a person stepping up from the crowd, chanting Buddhist prayers. He wears a gray robe, his expression stern, and his left hand holds a string of beads. This is one of the three Mystical Reverends of Shaolin, Kong Sheng. He spoke as he entered the arena, "Mr. Zeng, why do you say such lies, ridiculing my Shaolin Temple? How can I possibly let you continue to say such profane words in front these heroes?" Zhang Wuji bowed and said, "Do not be angry, reverend. Please allow Yuan Zhen monk to step up, so the truth can be told." Reverend Kong Sheng said with a glum face, "Mr. Zeng keeps asking for my martial nephew Yuan Zhen. You are still quite a young man. Why do you have such a venomous heart?" Zhang Wuji said, "I simply would like for Monk Yuan Zhen to come out, so all the truths and lies will be sorted out. Why would this be venomous?" Kong Sheng said, "Martial nephew Yuan Zhen is my martial brother Kong Jian's last student. His devotion to the Buddha is very strong. Other

than coming with us to the Ming sect, he has never left the temple even once. How can he be the The Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation: Cheng Kun? Besides, martial nephew Yuan Zhen, in order to help us demolish the Devil sect, has already died. How can you say such things about him even in death?"

The words 'already died' resonate heavily into Zhang Wuji's ears. His face instantly turns white. Whatever else Kong Sheng might have later said, he did not hear. Zhang Wuji can only stutter, "He... he really died? No... no it can't be." Kong Sheng then points to a pile of monk bodies on the side, and yells loudly, "You can go see for yourself!" Zhang Wuji walks in front of the dead bodies, only to indeed find the body of Yuan Zhen. He checks for breathing, then the muscles for warmth. Based on the temperature, he has already been dead for quite a while. Zhang Wuji felt sadness and happiness in his own heart. He never thought that his godfather's mortal enemy now lies here dead. The blood in his chest boiled, as he could not hold back facing the sky and laugh, "Oh, you scoundrel. You have done so much evil in your life. Ha! Looks like even you have today's outcome today."

These thunderous laughs shook the mountain, trembling the minds of everyone there. Zhang Wuji turns around and asks, "Who killed Yuan Zhen?" Kong Sheng's face looks cold as ice, and does not respond. Yin TianZheng had already retreated to the side, but now he speaks up, "He and my son Yin YeWang matched palms. One person died and one person injured as a result." Zhang Wuji bows and says, "I see." He thought, "I bet after taking Wei YiXiao's Soft Ice Palm, Yuan Zhen became seriously injured. My uncle's power is also quite incredible. So that is how he died. I am really glad that it was my uncle who helped me achieve this revenge." He walks to Yin YeWang's side, checks his condition, and realizes

that the injuries are not life threatening. He said, "Thank you, elder!"

Kong Sheng became angrier and angrier as he watched on the side, exclaiming, "Little kid, get ready to die!" These words resonated loudly into the ears of everyone there. Zhang Wuji turns around and asks, "Why?" Kong Sheng said loudly, "You knew that martial nephew Yuan Zhen is dead. Yet you put all the blame on his shoulders. How can I let someone so malicious live? I will break the pillar not to kill today. Are you going to commit suicide, or do you want me to kill you?" Zhang Wuji thought, "The fact that the main culprit Yuan Zhen had died is originally a good thing. But now how can I show them the truth now?" Just as he is still thinking of a plan, Kong Sheng steps up and aims his right hand at Zhang Wuji's head. His hand is straight as a stick from the wrist to the fingers, sharp and crisp. Yin TianZheng yelled, "Be careful, it's Dragon Claws!"

Zhang Wuji's turns to the side, gently sidestepping the attack. When Kong Sheng could not grab him the first time, he tried again. This time, he's even quicker and more ferocious. Zhang Wuji again sidesteps his grab by evading to the left. Kong Sheng's third, fourth, and the fifth strikes immediately followed. In an instant, a gray-robed man became a gray dragon. The dragon shadow flies in the air, the dragon claws dances rapidly, pushing Zhang Wuji to the point where he can no longer move away. A quick 'swoosh' sound later, Zhang Wuji's body flew up, but Kong Sheng had already grabbed his right sleeves, pulling down. Five cuts appeared on Zhang Wuji's shoulder as blood pour out. The Shaolin monks immediately cheered on, but a lone girl screamed in shock. Zhang Wuji looked at the direction of the voice, only to see Xiao Zhao's expression extremely pale. She said, "Young master Zhang, you... you be careful." Zhang Wuji's heart felt a tingle of warmth, and thought, "This little

girl is really nice to me.” After succeeding with his previous move, Kong Sheng immediately followed it up with more, each with a great deal of energy. This type of kung fu is fast and furious. More powerful than anything Zhang Wuji has seen before. He can only try to dodge the oncoming blows.

As Kong Sheng attacks continuously with his Dragon Claws, Zhang Wuji continuously backs away. They kept facing each other, one moving forward, while the other one moving back. After nine consecutive misses by Kong Sheng, he’s still about a yard away from Zhang Wuji. Although he moves forward at lightning speed, Zhang Wuji always manage to back off at the same pace. While Zhang Wuji still has not countered any attacks, one can already see just who has the edge in lightness kung fu. One is moving forward, while the other is backpedaling. The difference in difficulty between the two is easy to see. Since he could not catch up, Kong Sheng’s power in the legs is obviously much worse. Had Zhang Wuji turned around to run, he could have easily left Kong Sheng long behind. Essentially, the reason Zhang Wuji didn’t turn around is so he can see Kong Sheng use his Dragon Claws. By the time he saw the thirty-seventh claw, he realized that it was move number eight, ‘Cloud Palm form’. Obviously, Zhang Wuji does not know its name. But he knows perfectly how one would execute such a move.

This Dragon Claws only has thirty-six moves. Its aim is to be fast and deadly, not concentrating on changing variations. Whenever Kong Sheng has met a formidable enemy, he has always gained the initiative by using this Dragon Claws. Never has he needed more than twelve moves to win the fights. From the thirteenth move on, he has practiced them, but never used them in battle. He can’t believe that he couldn’t win even after using all thirty-six moves. By his thirty-seventh move, he had to reuse his previous ones. Kong Sheng thought, “This kid only has great lightness kung fu

and great agility. That's why he can avoid my strikes. But if we truly stop and fight, I doubt he can handle twelve strikes of my Dragon Claws." Zhang Wuji by now had already figured out the workings of the Dragon Claw. He found no weaknesses, but Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi can create weaknesses from any type of forms. He thought, "At this time, I can easily kill him. But Shaolin has always held a great reputation, and this monk is one of the three most important people in Shaolin. If I beat him today, where is the face for Shaolin? Yet it's impossible to simply make him back down willingly. His kung fu, after all, is much better than the Kong Dong elders." Just as he's deciding on what to do, he heard Kong Sheng say, "Little kid, you're just trying to run away, not fighting!" Zhang Wuji said, "Fighting is..." Kong Sheng, knowing that Zhang Wuji's chi cannot flow efficiently while speaking, and takes advantage of the situation. 'Swoosh, Swoosh', two more strikes shot out. Zhang Wuji again floated away, as he continued his sentence, "...also fine. If I defeat you, reverend, what will you do?" He did not pause at all during this sentence. Had someone listened with his eyes closed, he might've thought that Zhang Wuji said it while sitting down. No one would believe that he spoke while dodging five attacks from Kong Sheng. Kong Sheng said, "If I lose to you in a true fight, you can feel free to kill me." Zhang Wuji said, "Oh, I certainly don't have that in mind! If I lose, obviously you can do what you wish with me. But should I win, I hope Shaolin will leave Brightness Peak today." Kong Sheng said, "My martial brother is the leader of our group. I do not have a say in the decision-making. Besides, I don't believe I can possibly lose to a kid like you."

Zhang Wuji suddenly got an idea, and says, "Shaolin Dragon Claws' thirty-two strokes have no weakness. It can really be considered the most powerful claw technique in the world. Except it seems that you are using the Dragon Claws a bit wrong." Kong Sheng said angrily, "Fine! If you can break my

Dragon Claws, I'll immediately go back to Shaolin, never to leave the door again!" Zhang Wuji said, "That won't be necessary!" The others there cheered loudly as they watched this conversation. Because during this conversation, the two fighters never did take a break in fighting. In fact, they moved faster and faster as the battle went on, yet the tones for their conversation remained clear and calm, showing no signs of breakage. By the time Zhang Wuji finished his last sentence "That won't be necessary", his body flew up and then began to spin, spinning four times quickly in midair, each time higher than the last, until he made a final flip, before landing soft as a feather down to the ground far away. The watchers could only stare in awe as they watched. If they hadn't seen it with their own eyes, no one would have believed that someone could possess such amazing lightness kung fu. Even the Green Bat King, who thought his own lightness kung fu is unparalleled, can only sigh in reverence. As Zhang Wuji landed, Kong Sheng also moved up to him, but didn't attack. He asks loudly, "Are we going to start now?" Zhang Wuji says, "Sure. After you." Kong Sheng says, "You're not going to back off?" Zhang Wuji smiled and says, "If I take another step back, I'll admit defeat."

Although the top fighters of the Ming sect are all too injured to move, their hearings are still fine. All of them gasped when they heard Zhang Wuji say this. They are all experienced in the martial world, and realize the power of Kong Sheng's Dragon Claws. To them, even trying to block one hit would be a difficult task. No matter how good Zhang Wuji is, he still would likely need more than a hundred moves before winning. How can he possibly not take a step back during this time? Only to hear Kong Sheng say, "That won't be necessary. If I win, I want to win fairly. If I lose, I want to lose willingly." When he finished, he yelled, "Look out!" Kong Sheng then feints with his left hand, while his right hand carries a strong wind from the other side, reaching for Zhang

Wuji's Bowl Lacking Point on his left shoulder. Zhang Wuji realizes, from the feint, that this is another 'Cloud Palm Form'. So he also feints with his left hand, while his right hand shot out to Kong Sheng's Bowl Lacking Point on his left shoulder. Both fighters use the same move, without any difference. Zhang Wuji moves second, but reaches his target first, gaining the initiative. While Kong Sheng's right hand is still a few inches away from Zhang Wuji's left shoulder, Zhang Wuji's five fingers has reached the opponent's Bowl Lacking Point. Kong Sheng only felt a little sting on his pressure point, as he lost all strength on his right hand. Yet Zhang Wuji did not apply any more power to his claws, instead pulling back his hand. After being stunned for a moment, Kong Sheng's both hands shot out, attacking with the 'Pearl Taking Form', aiming for Zhang Wuji's left and right Sun Point. Once again Zhang Wuji moved afterwards, and again, landed the attack first, grabbing both of Kong Sheng's Sun Point. The Sun Point is of paramount importance to a fighter. If reached, it would mean certainly defeat. Yet Zhang Wuji simply lightly touches the Sun Point. He then spins around, and changes into the Dragon Claws' seventeenth move 'Moon Catching Form', aiming Kong Sheng's Wind Manor Point at the back of his head.

Zhang Wuji had already stunned Kong Sheng by grabbing his Sun Point, but his usage of the 'Moon Catching Form' left Kong Sheng dumbfounded. Kong Sheng said, "How... how did you steal Shaolin's Dragon Claws?"

Zhang Wuji responds with a chuckle, "The martial arts under the Heavens are hardly all unique. It's only humans who forcibly divide them into different sects. How can you be sure that this Dragon Claws is unique to Shaolin?" But in his mind, Zhang Wuji realizes, "This Dragon Claws really is something. I bet it took Shaolin hundreds of years to refine it into the form today. It probably is unparalleled in the world. If I weren't

using Dragon Claws to fight him, I don't think I can win."

Kong Sheng lowers his head, trying to digest this strange information. When it comes to the Dragon Claws, not even his martial brothers can match him in terms of skill. So how can this youngster twice move after him, yet also twice landing the blow first? Plus, this youngster's accuracy, speed, and power are all incredible, as if he's been practicing for tens of years.

All the eyes in the crowds stared at him as he stood there in silence. The two moves were over in a blur. So other than the top-level fighters, no one knows just who won the exchange. But they do see that Zhang Wuji still carries a carefree expression, while Kong Sheng is agonizing in his thoughts.

Kong Sheng suddenly roars loudly, swiftly stepping up, his palms powerful as a thunderstorm, 'Wind Grasping Form', 'Shadow Catching Form', 'Zither Playing Form', 'Drum Beating Form', 'Carrying Form', 'Sham Striking Form', 'Evil Wrapping Form', 'Weakness Blocking Form', all eight moves one after another with lightning speed. Zhang Wuji, keeping his calm, begins grasping winds and catching shadows, playing zither and beating drums, carrying and striking shams, wrapping evil and blocking weaknesses, also making the same eight moves smoothly in a row, each time he goes second, but strikes first.

Kong Sheng's eight strikes came continuously, looking more like eight different variations of a single move, each with unparalleled speed. Who would've thought that Zhang Wuji is even faster? Every time he lands the blow first. Every time Kong Sheng makes a move, he has to take a step back. By the time he has retreated seven steps, he begins to use 'Evil Wrapping Form' and 'Weakness Blocking Form'. These are the last two moves of the Dragon Claws. Their appearance seems

to be filled with weaknesses, making the user look unsure of himself. Yet both of these forms are based on the principle of counterattacking. Every single weakness is a trap that allows for some very potent counterattacks. Although Dragon Claws is a Hard style of martial arts, it's last two moves changes to a very Soft style. Zhang Wuji takes another breath and steps up, also using the same final two forms, but immediately changed to a 'Cloud Palm Form' afterwards.

Kong Sheng thought ecstatically, "Ha! Finally fell into my trap." He sees Zhang Wuji's right arm entering the trap, unable to possibly retreat. Kong Sheng recoils his arms and then spun them from the top, striking down on Zhang Wuji's arms from above. He sees that this youngster is proficient in Shaolin kung fu. Afraid that he may be related to the temple, and knowing that Zhang Wuji had been lenient with him earlier, Kong Sheng did not try to take his life, only seeking to break his bones. Yet just before his attack landed, he felt a strong and warm inner power flowing into his chest, preventing his arms from going down further. At this time, Zhang Wuji's five fingers have already reached his body.

Immediately, Kong Sheng's heart sank. Tens of years of hard practice on this Dragon Claws, thinking it is unrivaled in the martial world, has now gone up in smoke. He nods and says, "Mr. Zeng's Dragon Claws are indeed much better than mine." His left hand then grabs his right hand, about to break them, when he felt numbness on his left wrist. Only to see Zhang Wuji applying some chi there, and says, "I simply used Shaolin's Dragon Claws to defeat you. What's the shame in that? Had I used any other type of kung fu, I could not have won today."

Kong Sheng, in his moment of failure, had wanted to break his own fingers, never to practice kung fu again. Yet when he heard this, he realizes that Zhang Wuji had been protecting

Shaolin's integrity this whole time. If Zhang Wuji hasn't done this, then Shaolin's history and place in the martial world could have gone down in flames today. After he thought this through, Kong Sheng could only feel gratitude for Zhang Wuji, and says, "Mr. Zeng's kindness is truly incredible. You have my total admiration." Zhang Wuji responds, "I'm sorry for striking an elder. Please accept my apologies." Kong Sheng chuckled, and says, "I can't believe this Dragon Claws can have such amazing power in your hands. Should you have time, please come to Shaolin so you can give some more pointers." Usually, this sort of sentence has a connotation of challenging someone to a fight. Yet Kong Sheng's tone did not carry any of that meaning. He really does deeply respect Zhang Wuji's kung fu.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly responds, "Oh, you are flattering me. Shaolin's martial arts are vast and deep, while mine is shallow and thin. Should we be fated to meet again, I would also like reverend you to share some advice with me." His words are also just as sincere.

Due to his lack of management skills, Kong Sheng doesn't hold any position of authority within the temple. But his reputation in Shaolin is extremely good. Everyone deeply respects his character and martial arts skills. So when Shaolin's people see that he admits to defeat so sincerely, they do not complain. Plus, seeing how Zhang Wuji did everything in his power to keep Shaolin from losing face, they all knew that Shaolin couldn't challenge him further today. Kong Zhi is the leader of this whole attack, and knows that the six sects cannot simply back down like this. Seeing the problem with the situation at hand, he gave a look to the Master of Hua Shan sect, XianYu Tong. Xian YuTong is the brain behind this attack on Brightness Peak. When he sees Kong Zhi asking for help, he immediately steps into the arena. Zhang Wuji sees a forty-some year old middle-aged scholar come up, handsome and charismatic, and begins to

like him a bit. Zhang Wuji asks, "What does the elder wish of me?" Before XianYu Tong could respond, Yin TianZheng says, "This is the Master of Hua Shan sect, XianYu Tong. Although his kung fu is average, he's very devious. You need to watch out." When Zhang Wuji heard the name, he thought, "Hey, this name sounds familiar. I wonder where I heard it before?" Only to see XianYu Tong walk up to a couple of yards in front of Zhang Wuji before stopping. He waves his hand and says, "After you, Mr. Zeng." Zhang Wuji also returns the favor, and adds, "After you, Master XianYu."

XianYu Tong says, "Young Hero Zeng's kung fu is simply marvelous, to be able to defeat the Kong Dong elders and even the Mystic Reverend Kong Sheng. I truly respect you. So may I ask, who is your teacher? Which sect did you come from?"

Zhang Wuji has to think of how to respond, so he remains silent.

XianYu Tong laughed, and then speaks loudly, "I wonder why Young Hero Zeng is so afraid to speak about your mentor? As a wise man once said, 'When you see someone worthy, you hold them in high regards, when you see someone not worthy...' When Zhang Wuji heard this, he immediately thought of 'See Death but Won't Help'*. He then remembered that five years ago in the Butterfly Valley, Hu QingNuo told him that XianYu Tong killed his sister. At that time, Zhang Wuji thought, "This XianYu Tong really is a terrible person. If he doesn't get bad luck later in life, then the gods really need their eyes re-examined." The words of that day came back to him, "A youngster got the Golden Bug Poison of the Miao tribe. He should've died from the poison, but I treated him for three days and three nights, using all my powers to cure him. We became sworn brothers afterward. Sighs. Who would've thought that he later killed my sister... My poor

sister... Ever since our parent's death, we had only each other for support." When Hu QingNuo said this, his face was so frail and miserable, making Zhang Wuji quite sad. Hu QingNuo then said that he later tried to seek revenge, but Hua Shan sect simply has too many powerful people, and XianYu Tong is too cunning. So Hu QingNuo almost died in his hands. When Zhang Wuji thought of all this, he raised his eyebrows, and his eyes brightened, staring at XianYu Tong. Zhang Wuji feels the need to teach this person a lesson, so he chuckled, and then said, "I was never poisoned at the Miao Tribe, nor did I kill the sister of my best friend, why would I have anything to hide?"

*This made a lot more sense in Chinese, since the two phrases are similar.

XianYu Tong is instantly shaken when he heard this, and cold sweat pours down his face. After Hu QingNuo saved his life, he and Hu QingNuo's sister Hu QingYang fell in love. He married Hu QingYang, and she became pregnant. But later XianYu Tong wanted to be the Master of Hua Shan, so he left behind Hu QingYang. Then he married the only daughter of the former Hua Shan Master, resulting in Hu QingYang committing suicide. This is a story that XianYu Tong kept secret for years now. Yet somehow this little kid found out about it. How could he not be shocked? XianYu Tong immediately begins to think, "Since this kid knows my secret, I must kill him. It would be disastrous for him to reveal this to the world." This prompted him to regain his intensity. XianYu Tong says, "If you won't reveal your teacher's name, I guess I'll have to test out your amazing skills then. Let's just have a friendly duel, so please don't hurt me too much." As he said this his left hand shot out at Zhang Wuji's head, yelling, "Let us start!" He obviously doesn't want to give Zhang Wuji a chance to say something else, which Zhang Wuji has figured out. He easily blocked off the oncoming blow and keeps

taking, “I know Hua Shan’s kung fu is great. So I don’t need to fight to test it out. But your ‘Repaying Kindness with Reprisal*’ skill is really quite unmatched, don’t you agree?”

*For the life of me I can’t think of the right English word for this. I think it’s a pretty simple word too. Or maybe not...

XianYu Tong immediately attacks again to prevent him from talking further, using a top move from the seventy-two road ‘Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art’. He closed his fan in his right hand, and held it like a snake’s head. His left hand uses a type of Eagle Claw move. The snake is used to pierce into the opponent, while the eagle grabs him. The two hands use two completely different types of techniques. This ‘Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art’ has been the top kung fu in the Hua Shan sect for over a hundred years, and can overwhelm the opponent by attacking together with great speed and accuracy.

Against normal people, this kung fu can easily mystify the enemy and prevent them from blocking properly. But Zhang Wuji easily figured out the intricacies after only a few moves. He knows that XianYu Tong’s skills are much worse than Kong Sheng’s, so he parried all the attacks quickly. Then he says, “Master YuXian, I have a question I need to ask. When you were poisoned that year, and were about to die. That person spent three days and three nights to cure you, and became your sworn brother. So why were you so cruel, killing his sister in return?”

XianYu Tong can’t answer his question, so he scolded, “Hu...” He wanted to say “Hu Shou Ba Dao*”, and then shoot down Zhang Wuji’s accusations with a false story. He is well known for his cunning in terms of word usage, so this comes easily to him. His main objective is to break Zhang Wuji’s concentration, so he can sneak in for a fatal blow. Because

after seeing the fight against Kong Sheng, he knows that he cannot win on kung fu ability alone.

*Hu Shou Ba Dao means bullsh_t.

Unfortunately, just as he said the word “Hu”, he felt a powerful palm strike, pushing in front of his chest, preventing him from finishing the sentence. In the meantime, he felt as if his lungs are being sucked out by the opponent’s palm power, and hurriedly gathered his inner chi for protection. Then he heard Zhang Wuji say, “That’s right, that’s right! You do remember that her surname is ‘Hu’. Why didn’t you finish saying her name? Ms. Hu suffered so much in your hands, so don’t you feel even the slightest guilt?” Trying to regain his breath, XianYu Tong quickly made three attacks, releasing the lock Zhang Wuji’s palm had on his chest. When he finally caught his breath again, XianYu Tong says, “You...” When he got here, he felt yet another wind of chi pressing into his chest, and his speech stopped. Zhang Wuji said, “A man should always admit to what he did. Right is right. Wrong is wrong. Why are you so indecisive? Didn’t the Butterfly Valley Mystic Doctor Hu QingNuo save your life? Didn’t you kill his sister?” He doesn’t know how Hu Qingang died, so he cannot give more details. But XianYu Tong thought that he knew everything, and his face became even paler.

The audience all knows that XianYu Tong is a master at arguing. So they’re all extremely surprised that he could not speak up against Zhang Wuji. Because of this, they all felt that Zhang Wuji must have been speaking the truth. Unfortunately for XianYu Tong, he could not plead his innocence with Zhang Wuji pressuring his lungs. The others only see Zhang Wuji’s fists dances in the air, easily parrying the attacks of XianYu Tong, then counterattack with his own fist. Not even the top fighters can see the weakness of his moves. Most members of the Hua Shan sect could only shake

their heads when they see their Master getting pummeled both physically and verbally. Although some felt that he must have some trick up his sleeves. Only to hear Zhang Wuji say loudly, "For us people in the martial world, it's important to repay kindness with kindness. Hu QingNuo is obviously a member of the Ming sect. You owe your life to the Ming sect, yet you come to attack it? He saved your life, yet you kill his relative? Where is your shame? How can you possibly be the Master of a whole sect?" XianYu Tong suddenly regained his breath again, and says, "Little bastard, stop your lies!" He then immediately pointed his fan in front of Zhang Wuji's face, and then opened it. Zhang Wuji suddenly smelled a faint scent, and he immediately became dizzy, faltering back a bit. Then he only felt the whole world spinning, and that gold stars were dancing in front of him... XianYu Tong yells, "Little bastard, let me show you the power of my 'Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art'." He quickly moves forward, five fingers reaching for Zhang Wuji's Yuan Yi Point. He figured that Zhang Wuji couldn't possibly block this move. Yet for some reason, it came up empty.

The Hua Shan disciples all yelled, "'Life and Death of Eagle and Snake Art' rules!" "Our master XianYu has mystical powers!" "Now you'll see some real kung fu!" Zhang Wuji chuckled, and blew his breath towards XianYu Tong's nose. XianYu Tong suddenly smelled a sweet scent, and became dizzy. He became so scared his soul almost popped out. Then he drops to his knees in front of Zhang Wuji, as if begging him for something. This caught everyone off guard. They all saw Zhang Wuji seemingly injured just a moment ago. Yet how could he make XianYu Tong drop to his knees in such a short time? Does he really know witchcraft or something? Zhang Wuji bents down and takes the fan, then yells, "Hua Shan is considered a righteous sect, so how can you have such an amazing poison skill. Look at this, everyone." He opened the fan lightly, and flipped around so everyone can

see both sides. He continues, "Who would've thought that this fan has a hidden trigger for poison!" As he speaks, he walks over to a flower tree, takes down a few flowers, and waves the fan in front of them. In an instant, the flowers all withered.

This shocked everyone, and they all thought, "What kind of poison is this? How can it be so powerful?" Only to hear XianYu Tong lie on the ground, screaming in pain like a pig to be slaughtered. Kung fu experts have a very high tolerance for pain. Under almost any circumstance, they would not yell pain in front of others. So his yells made the all the Hua Shan sect members turn pale. XianYu Tong then screams, "Hurry... hurry and kill me.... Just kill me..." Zhang Wuji says, "But I do have a way to cure you, except I don't know what kind of poison you used."

XianYu Tong screams, "This... this is golden bug poison... golden bug poison... hurry... kill me... Ah..."

The younger generations may not know about this poison, but the elders were shocked at these words. Some of the more righteous people begin to scold XianYu Tong. For the Golden Bug Poison is considered one of the deadliest poisons in the world, no taste and no smell. The poisoned person feels like being eaten by thousands of bugs, the result unimaginable. Even if you have godly powers, a person who doesn't know any kung fu can kill you in this state. Zhang Wuji then asks, "How did you poison yourself when you are the one who hid it in here?" XianYu Tong says, "I... don't know, I don't know..." As he says this, he started to roll on the floor, scratching everywhere. Zhang Wuji says, "You released the poison in your fan to attack me, but I used my inner power to force it back out. Do you have anything else to say?"

XianYu Tong says, "It's my fault... my fault..." He put his hands to his throat, wanting to commit suicide. But after getting poisoned, he has no strength in his hands. This poison is so powerful it forces you to live, and keeps your mind clear so you can feel the agony. Years ago, he tried to leave a Miao girl after toying with her. She then poisoned him with the golden bug poison. But she had hoped that he would change his mind, so she only used a small amount. XianYu Tong was able to escape, and stole some of her poison before he left. But soon afterwards, he fell unconscious. By coincidence, Hu QingNuo was collecting herbs in that area, saving him. Afterwards, XianYu Tong began to raise this type of bug so he can use it in his fan. Whenever he applies the proper inner power to the switch, the poison will come out. At first, when fighting Zhang Wuji, he couldn't apply any inner power. It's only at the end, when Zhang Wuji released his hold, that he used the poison.

Thankfully, Zhang Wuji's inner power is without equal. In the critical moment, he held his breath, then forced out the small amount of poison in his body with his chi. Had he had less inner strength, or didn't react fast enough, then it would be him on the ground rather than XianYu Tong. After reading Wang NanGu's Book of Poisons*, he knows just how powerful this golden bug poison is. So he quickly blocked off the circulation of the poison into his body. Zhang Wuji thought to himself, "I do have to save him, but I need him to confess his crimes first." So he says, "I can make the antidote, but you have to answer my questions first. If you lie, I'll just leave you here, letting you to endure seven days and seven nights of pain before dying."

* Wang NanGu is Hu QingNuo's wife. Zhang Wuji grabbed her book when he saw her corpse.

XianYu Tong, despite his pain, can still hear clearly. He

thought, "Back then, that Miao girl also said that I'll be in pain for seven days and seven nights. How can this little kid know this too?" But he still doesn't believe that Zhang Wuji can possibly cure his poison, and said, "You... can't cure me." Zhang Wuji closed the fan and pointed at his waist. "If I make a cut here, and apply the right medicine, then you'll be saved." XianYu Tong immediately responds, "You're... you're...right." Zhang Wuji then asks, "Have you done anything you felt guilty about in life?" XianYu Tong says, "N... no." Zhang Wuji says, "Fine, have it your way." XianYu Tong hurriedly added, "Wait... I'll say it." But after all, he is in front of his peers. So the words obviously have trouble coming out.

Suddenly, two people came out from the Hua Shan sect, one tall one short, both look around fifty, their hands holding large sabers. Walking in front of Zhang Wuji, the short old man says, "Mr. Zeng, you can kill us Hua Shan people, but you can't play around with us. It's not heroic to do such a thing to our Master XianYu." Zhang Wuji put together his fists and bowed, asking, "And your names are?" The short old man says, "You're not worthy of asking for my name." He bent down and about to carry XianYu Tong back, but Zhang Wuji quickly pushed him out of the way saying, "His body is filled with poison. If you even touch him, you'll be poisoned too. I suggest you be careful in the future." That short man froze for a second, and shuddered. Only to hear XianYu Tong scream, "Hurry and save me... save me... Bai Yuan... Brother Bai... I used this poison to kill him... but that's it...."

When he said this, everyone's face in the Hua Shan sect turned pale. The short man asked, "You killed Bai Yuan? This is the truth? Then why do you say the Ming sect killed him?" XianYu Tong screams, "Brother Bai... please don't do that..." "Brother Bai, I know you died a horrible death, but why did you blackmail me back then... You had to speak about Ms. Hu in front of the master. You know master would never forgive

me for that. I ... I had to silence you. Please... forgive me..." He then continued, "I killed you, so I had to blame it on the Ming sect. But.... But I burnt so much money for you, I took care of your wife, kids, and parents..." Although the sun shines brightly on the square, everyone's hearts were filled with coldness upon hearing this. The people in the Hua Shan sect who knew Bai Yuan were even more shocked. Zhang Wuji also didn't expect this response. He originally wanted XianYu Tong to speak about Lady Hu, not his own martial brother. But Zhang Wuji didn't know that since Hu QingYang committed suicide, XianYu Tong, with his playboy personality, never felt all that badly about it. But he did kill Bai Yuan with his own hand, and with the same poison that's in him now. So he felt like Bai Yuan's ghost has come seeking for revenge.

Zhang Wuji doesn't know who Bai Yuan is, but from XianYu Tong's words, he can tell that the blame was put on the Ming sect. Most likely this is the reason why the Hua Shan sect came to Brightness Peak today. So he yells in the Hua Shan direction, "Listen to me, people of Hua Shan. Your elder Bai was not killed by the Ming sect. Please do not take out your revenge on the wrong people."

That tall old man waved his sword up, about to bring it down on XianYu Tong. But Zhang Wuji lightly flicked his saber back with a finger, bouncing it back. That tall old man said, "This is a traitor of Hua Shan. How can we let him live?" Zhang Wuji says, "I promised that I'll cure him, so I will. You can do what you want with him later."

That short old man says, "Brother, he's right." He then swiftly kicked XianYu in the back, sending him flying, finally falling down in front of the Hua Shan group. Although XianYu Tong has many loyal disciples, none would dare catch him due to the poison.

That short old man says to Zhang Wuji, "We are the martial uncles of XianYu Tong. Today you have resolved a big problem within the Hua Shan sect. For this, we thank you!" Both of them then bowed, as Zhang Wuji quickly returned the favor, saying, "It's ok. It's ok." The short man then pulled out his saber and says loudly, "But you have ruined the reputation of the Hua Shan sect. For this, my brother and I will fight you to the death!" The tall man also says, "Yes, we shall fight you the death." Oddly enough, he's much taller and bigger, but he seemingly follows the shorter old man's orders. Zhang Wuji says, "Which sect hasn't had a bad apple in its history? Your reputation won't be affected by one person." The tall old man says, "You think so?" Zhang Wuji says, "Yes." The tall old man says, "Big brother, in that case, let's just forget about it." He makes it sounds like he respects Zhang Wuji, but in reality, he fears Zhang Wuji's ability. But the short old man says, "First we take care of outside enemies, then we take care of inside problems. If we don't kill him today, where's the face of our Hua Shan sect?" The tall man says, "Fine. Little kid, I hope you don't object to us fighting you two on one. If you do, then just admit defeat now." The short man raised his eyebrows, says, "Brother, what are you..." Zhang Wuji responds, "That's fine with me. If you two lose, then Hua Shan cannot further harass the Ming sect today." The tall man, ecstatic with the response, yelled, "If both of us fight you, then you can't possibly win. We have a special double saber art. Its power is unlimited, capable of sweeping thousands of enemies. So you're definitely going to lose. But of course, it's too late to take back your words now." Zhang Wuji says, "Of course I won't take back my words. So please be lenient with me, elders." The tall old man says, "My saber is never lenient. When we use this double saber technique, we become more and more powerful, until the power cannot be stopped. I can see that you're not a bad person, so I'm feeling a bit sad that you'll have to die." The short old man yelled, "Geez. Can you stop yapping for a

minute?" The tall old man says, "Sure, but I have to remind him, this double saber art is a reverse technique, different from normal techniques..." The short old man cuts in, "Shut up!" He turns towards Zhang Wuji and says, "I'm coming!" Followed by slashing his saber towards Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji blocked the blow with XianYu Tong's fan, which prompted the tall old man to say, "Hey, hey! We can't compete like this! This fan is too poisonous. We have to get rid of it before someone gets hurt."

Zhang Wuji responds, "You're right. This sort of thing shouldn't exist." So he pointed the fan to the ground and threw it deep into the ground, making a tiny hole in the process. This type of ability is something no one else can emulate, and prompted wows from the audience. The tall old man then states, "Now, go find yourself a weapon."

Zhang Wuji originally didn't plan on fighting. But with the current situation, he knew that he needed to show off in order to gain their respect. So he said, "What type of weapon would the elder wish for me to use?" The tall old man reached out and patted him on the shoulders, smiling, "You're a funny little kid. You even care to ask me which weapon to use?" Zhang Wuji knows that the pat was just for fun, and didn't think much of it. But the others were all shocked. They wondered, what if the tall old man decided to apply some inner power to the pat, or sealed his pressure point? Wouldn't Zhang Wuji lose immediately? They of course don't know that Zhang Wuji has Jiu Yang Shen Gong for protection. So none of those things would work. The tall old man laughed, "Since your kung fu is so good. I bet you can use all the eighteen standard weapons very well. And it would be too much to ask of you to fight bare-handed." Zhang Wuji smiled, "Actually, bare-handed is ok too." The tall old man looked around, trying to find the worst possible weapon for him. He suddenly saw some large rocks, and said,

"I'll let you use a nice, powerful weapon." As he spoke, he pointed to those rocks and started to laugh. These rocks have got to be two hundred to three hundred pounds. If you don't have a lot of strength, you can't even move one of them. How can anyone use one as a weapon? Besides, it's quite smooth, so there's no place to hold it.

The tall old man wanted to purposely gave Zhang Wuji a hard dilemma. So Zhang Wuji would back off, and they won't have to fight. However, Zhang Wuji smiled instead, and responds, "This is a strange weapon. Are you trying to test my strength?" As he spokem he walked over to the rock and lifted it with his left hand. He then yelled, "Let's start!" Immediately, he flew to where the two old men stood with the rock in hand. The audience could not help but stare in shock, even forgetting to cheer on. The tall old man yelled, "This... this is impossible!" The short old man realizes that today's opponent is much more powerful than anyone he has ever seen. Afer he calmed down and collected himself, the short old man yelled, "I'm coming!" Green light sparkled, as the saber advanced forward, aiming towards Zhang Wuji's right arm. The tall old man asked, "Brother, are we really going to fight?" The short old man said, "Of course." The saber slashed a semi-circle before changing directions, aiming for Zhang Wuji's left shoulder. Zhang Wuji moved away, only to see another green light, as the tall old man also began his attack. Zhang Wuji said, "Good move." Turned around and blocked with his rock, causing sparks to fly. In a smooth motion, Zhang Wuji then pushed the blocking rock forward, onto the tall old man. The tall old man stared in awe, saying, "You can use techniques with a rock?" The short old man then yelled, "Brother, watch out!" Then slashed the sword in a reverse manner, creating a crescent image, curving towards Zhang Wuji. The two old men continuously attack in synchronization, while Zhang Wuji gathers his Jiu Yang Shen Gong to roll the rock left and right. Although the

reverse double sabers' powers are great, this rock is simply too big. No matter what, they cannot strike past it. The tall old man then yelled, "Wait. You're getting too big of an advantage in terms of weaponry. This isn't fair." Zhang Wuji chuckled, saying, "In that case, I won't use it then." and threw the rock up into the air. As the two old men stared at the rock, Zhang Wuji quickly dashed forward and sealed their pressure points. So the two old men can only stare helplessly as the rock falls towards them.

The masses all let out a collect gasp. But at the last moment, Zhang Wuji came back and pushed the rock away. He then gently tapped the chest of the two old men, and said with a smile, "Sorry about that. It was just a little joke." The short old man's face turned gray, and sighed, "Forget it, forget it!" But the tall old man shook his head and said, "This doesn't count." Zhang Wuji said, "Why?" The tall old man said, "You only won because of your superior strength, not techniques." Zhang Wuji said, "Fine. Then let's play some more." The tall old man said, "Of course, but we have to switch it up a bit. Otherwise, if you keep getting all these advantages, it would be quite unfair for us, don't you think?" Zhang Wuji nodded, "Yes, of course."

Xiao Zhao had been watching intently on the side, but now stepped up, scraping her cheek with her hand, yelling, "Shame on you! Look at how long your beard is. And yet you keep saying about being at a disadvantage when the truth is the opposite?" The tall old man laughed, said, "What does a girl like you know? I've eaten more salt than you have rice. I've walked across more bridges than you have roads. Oh, be quiet, little kid." He then turned around and said to Zhang Wuji, "If you don't want to, we don't have to compete. After all, you didn't win or lose. Perhaps we can wait a few years before dueling again..." The short old man became increasingly annoyed at his martial brother. As a respected

elder, who could he say such unreasonable things to a youngster. So he cut in, "We admit defeat. We'll do what you say." Zhang Wuji said, "I simply wish for there to be peace between the Ming sect and the six major sects. That is all." The tall old man then cut in loudly, "What are you talking about? We haven't competed with the new method yet. Are you trying to back out of that now?" The short old man stopped talking. He knows that although his tall brother acts foolishly, his thick face just might save them this time. Although it's not righteous to do such a thing to a youngster, but at least if the plan succeeds, they won't look too bad.

Zhang Wuji said, "So what is the elder's suggestions?" The tall old man said, "We have a Reverse Double Saber Art. You've already seen it. But Kun Lun also has a Forward Double Sword Art, which is also exquisite. They match up perfectly with our sabers. Should we combine our strength, two forms turn to four, four turns to eight. A mixture of Ying and Yang..." When he said this, he shook his head and said, "Too powerful, too powerful! There's no way you can block it!" Zhang Wuji turned to the Kun Lun sect and said, "So who would like to come out from the Kun Lun sect?" The tall old man cut in and said, "Obviously, only the Iron Zither Couple are worthy of fighting with us. I just don't know if Master He has the courage." The members of the six sects all thought happily, "This old man really isn't stupid after all. He's seeking the help of the top two fighters of Kun Lun." He TaiChong and Ban ShuXian looked at each other. They don't know who these two old guys are, but since they're the martial uncles of XianYu Tong, they must be respected elders. Besides, since they don't live on the central plains, they don't know too many people anyway. The couple thought, "They can't beat this little kid, so want to drag us into it. This way, if we win, then can also save some face." Only to hear the tall old man say, "I'm not surprised that they won't come out. Although their Forward Double Sword Art is great, it's

still not quite as good as our Reverse Double Saber Art.” Ban ShuXian yelled angrily, “Who are you?” The tall old man said, “My surname is also He, Let’s go, Mrs. He.” His little joke prompted the crowd to start laughing*.

*I’m not too sure about the joke here. But his words are suppose to be very funny. So let’s just assume that it is.

Ban ShuXian has power in Kun Lun sect is near that of the master. Even He TaiChong has to defer to her sometimes. For years, she has acted like the queen on the Kun Lun Mountain. So how can she stand for this? Out comes the sword, aiming directly at the tall old man’s left arm. This all went in a blur. One moment, her hands are empty, the next, a sword appeared in her hands and is only inches away from the tall old man’s left shoulder. The tall old man quickly blocked turned his saber to block, ‘Dang’, the sword and the saber struck each other. Ban ShuXian used the ‘Plunder with the Golden Needle’ move, while the tall old man countered with the ‘No Plunder Will Succeed’, one goes forward, the other in reverse. The forms really are the exact opposites. As both fighters stepped back after the blow, they deeply became impressed with the other person. Both began to respect each other more. They thought, “These two techniques really do complement each other perfectly.” This is like a lonely person suddenly finding a friend. Ban ShuXian thought, “Their Reverse Saber really is something. If we fight together, our powers would grow exponentially. Besides, if they can’t beat this little kid, we might not either. Although it’s really terrible for four famous people like us to fight together, at least we can say that it’s the Hua Shan sect’s idea.” So she called out to He TaiChong, “Hey, come over here!” Although He TaiChong would never disobey his wife, he still has to act like a master of a sect in front of so many people. “Humph.” He called out to four servants. As one carried a sword, one carried an iron zither, the other two servants carried Buddha

symbols, the five of them walked out into the arena. The servant with the sword then handed it over to He TaiChong, who took it, and promptly called off the servants. Ban ShuXian said to He TaiChong, "Hua Shan's Reverse Double Saber Art isn't too bad. Let's go ahead and play around with this little kid. See just how powerful this combination can be." As she finished and turned around, Ban ShuXian suddenly said "Huh?" upon seeing Zhang Wuji. "You... you..." She has only been apart from Zhang Wuji for five years, so although he has grown up these years, she still can see the resemblance from their last encounter. Zhang Wuji said, "Do you really want to talk about the past? My name is Zeng AhNuo." Ban ShuXian realizes the meanings behind his words. If she reveals his identity, then he will reveal all those things her husband and her did to him in the past. So she said, "Young Hero Zeng's skills really have advanced quite a bit. I congratulate you. Let's see how well you've progressed." Zhang Wuji said, "I've long known the fame of the couple's mystical sword arts. I hope you'll be lenient on me." He TaiChong said, "What type of weapon would you use?" When Zhang Wuji saw him, he immediately thought of the poison-sucking snake, which died when he fell off the cliff. He also thought of that day when they went to Wu Dang and forced his parent to commit suicide. Then, he remembered when He TaiChong forced Yang BuHui and him to take the poison. Thankfully, Yang Xiao was luckily there to save him, or he would've died that day in the mountains. With all these things in mind, Zhang Wuji's temper flared, thinking, "Although I can't kill you today, He TaiChong, I am going to give you a thorough beating." He then flew towards a nearby plum tree, and took down a plum branch before floating down. He carried the branch towards the four people, and said, "I'll use this as my weapon to test out Hua Shan and Kun Lun's high arts." No one could believe what they just heard, thinking, "How can he possibly fight against swords and sabers with this little thing?" Zhang Wuji said, "I heard

father say that former master He ZuDao was the master of zither, chess, and sword, and was known as the Three Saints of Kun Lun. Too bad I was born so late, unable to meet this great gentleman.” Everyone can see that by praising the former master, he’s belittling the He couple. Suddenly, a person came out yelling, “Little twerp. Who do you think you are, speaking that way about my mentor and master-uncle.” Only to see a longhaired Taoist appear from the crowd, holding a sword aiming towards Zhang Wuji’s back. This attack is quite silent, and done while he’s talking. So despite the appearance of a warning, it’s really a sneak attack. Zhang Wuji did not turn around. Just as the sword is about to reach his shirt, Zhang Wuji’s left foot kicked to the right. By the time the foot came back down, the sword has been stuck between his foot and the ground. That Taoist tries to pull it out, but couldn’t. Zhang Wuji turned around, and saw that this was the person he met on the ship as a child, Xi HuaZi. Zhang Wuji remembered that this person has a bad temper, and repeatedly insulted his mother. His own temper flared, and asked, “You are Taoist Xi HuaZi?”

Xi HuaZi, whose face is now bright red, did not respond. He only kept on trying to pull out the sword with all his strength. Zhang Wuji suddenly released his foot while applied some chi to the sword point with his left foot. Since Xi HuaZi didn’t expect this, he immediately fell backward on his butt. Only to hear some ‘ding ding dang dang’, as his sword broke into pieces, leaving only the handle in his hand. He’s the student of Ban ShuXian, which is why he calls He TaiChong Master-Uncle. So when he saw his mentor’s face filled with rage, he knew he had disgraced her big time. Xi HuaZi hurriedly got up, and then said, “Little bastard...” Zhang Wuji originally planned on letting him go, but when he heard Xi HuaZi disparaging his parents with the word ‘bastard’, he could not hold down his anger. In a flash he swept the branch across Xi HuaZi’s chest, sealing three of his major pressure points.

Then he said to the two old men and the He couple, "Let's start!" Ban ShuXian whispered to Xi HuaZi, "Get out of here, you think you haven't disgraced me enough already?" Xi HuaZi said, "Yes!" But he still doesn't move. Ban ShuXian then yelled, "I told you to scram, did you not hear?" Xi HuaZi said, "Yes, mentor, yes!" Although his voice sounds respectful, he still did not move. Ban ShuXian thought, "How come he's not listening to me?" Although she saw Zhang Wuji touch him with the branch, she couldn't imagine that Zhang Wuji can seal pressure points through objects. So she pushed Xi HuaZi hard on the shoulders, and yelled, "Get out of here, stop disgracing yourself."

Xi HuaZi said, "Yes, I know, mentor." His body moved a bit, but his arms and legs didn't. At this point, The He couple realized that Zhang Wuji had sealed his pressure points somehow. He TaiChong walked over and tried to unseal him, but for unfortunately, his inner power isn't enough. Xi HuaZi still could not move. Zhang Wuji pointed to Yang BuHui, and said, "Five years ago, you sealed her pressure points, then made her drink down the poisoned wine. Today I'm simply returning the favor." When the masses heard this, they all looked at Yang BuHui, seeing only a young girl. Five years ago, she must've been a little kid. It really is quite terrible for a leader of a sect to do such a disgusting thing. Ban ShuXian saw that it isn't a good idea to keep this up, so she immediately raised her sword, and began to attack Zhang Wuji. The two Hua Shan elders and He TaiChong immediately followed.

Zhang Wuji moved in a blur, passing in between the sword and saber blows, his branch almost hitting He TaiChong's face. Then Zhang Wuji's left hand flicked the short old man's saber, while his branch aimed at He TaiChong's sword. He TaiChong thought that no matter how good he is, the branch could not possibly block my sword. But Zhang Wuji's turned

the branch sideways a bit, and skimmed the side of the sword. At this instant, Zhang applied inner power to the branch, shooting out a wave of chi that propelled the sword to the side, and incidentally hit the tall old man's saber.

The tall old man yelled, "What are you doing, helping the enemy, He TaiChong?" He TaiChong's face turned red, but he couldn't say that his sword went off course because of Zhang Wuji's inner power. So he snapped back, "That's ridiculous!" and then turned his attention back to Zhang Wuji.

As He TaiChong attacked, Ban ShuXian waited from behind to cut off any escape possibilities. The two old men also utilized their reverse double sword techniques at the same time. Although they are the opposite, the sword and saber forms still follow the 8 diagrams of the Book of Changes. So they can position themselves perfectly to complement each other. As the match went on, they only attacked faster and faster. Zhang Wuji knew that this would be a tough fight. And it proved correct as the formation gave him no weaknesses to exploit. Many times, he came close to losing. If he had a real weapon in hand, he might have blocked them. But unfortunately, his attitude is too peaceful, so he just used a plum branch. Suddenly he saw the short old man's saber coming straight at him. Just as Zhang Wuji dodged it, Ban ShuXian's sword came from his back, skimming the back of his leg before he got out of the way. At this time, He TaiChong's sword once again came straight at him, while the tall and short old men attacked from top and bottom. Thinking quickly, Zhang Wuji immediately sneaked behind Xi HuaZi, forcing Ban ShuXian and He TaiChong to withdraw their next attacks. Since he couldn't figure out a way to counter this sword formation, he could only spin around Xi HuaZi, using him as a shield against oncoming attacks. In his heart, he yelled, "Zhang Wuji, oh Zhang Wuji. You really should not have been so overconfident. As they say, the

arrogant is bound to lose. You really need to keep that in mind from now on. You just thought that there is indeed no inner power kung fu better than Jiu Yang Shen Gong. No kung fu technique more exquisite than Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. But there are always someone better than you." Laughter came from the viewers, as they see Xi HuaZi only could stare helplessly in the middle of the battle, with swords and sabers coming at him. Ban ShuXian especially felt angry, as many chances of killing Zhang Wuji were wasted because of Xi HuaZi. Then the tall old man said, "Mrs. He, if you won't kill him, I will." Ban ShuXian snickered, "I can't exactly control you, can I?" The tall old man then immediately aimed his saber at Xi HuaZi. Zhang Wuji thought, "Oh no. If he dies, then I would no longer have a shield. Plus, how can I let someone die for me?" So he waved his arm, and the wind carried by his sleeves guided the tall old man's saber away. At the same time, the short old man came from the back, his saber moving silently. Zhang Wuji immediately got out of the way, but then found that his Saber is still continuing in the same direction. So he turned back and shot out his palms towards the short old man, prompting him to stop the attack. Xi HuaZi, grateful that Zhang Wuji saved his life twice, thought, "If I live past today, I'll make sure to get back at these two old men." When He TaiChong and Ban ShuXian saw Zhang Wuji protecting their student, their thoughts weren't gratitude, but rather annoyance that Xi HuaZi is still around. Hence, their attacks became even more aggressive. Although it's nearly impossible for them to aim for Zhang Wuji in this situation, they can aim for Xi HuaZi instead, and use him as bait to make Zhang Wuji help out. Then they can take the opportunity to attack Zhang Wuji straight on. When E Mei, Wu Dang, and Shaolin saw their methods, they can only shake their heads and feeling ashamed. As the battle went on, Zhang Wuji thought, "If I can't beat them, then it's no big deal for me to die. But why drag down the innocent with me?" He pushed back the tall old man's attack and then

used his branch to unseal Xi HuaZi's pressure point. The short old man came from behind aiming for Xi HuaZi, but didn't realize that his pressure point has been unsealed. Suddenly, he felt a fist hitting his nose, and blood poured out. Although the short old man's kung fu is much better than Xi HuaZi's, this blow came unexpectedly. So he couldn't dodge. When the others saw this, they all started to laugh loudly. Ban ShuXian suppressed a laugh of her own, and ordered, "Xi HuaZi, get out of here!" Xi HuaZi said, "Yes. But I still owe that tall old man a punch." But as he tried to attack the tall old man, the short old man immediately delivered a palm blow to his chest, prompting him to retreat, blood came out of his mouth. He TaiChong then came over, grabbed the back of his robe, and threw him back out into the crowd.

The four fighters might be thoroughly pissed at each other, but with Xi HuaZi out of the way, their sword and saber combination can now execute flawlessly. Now the formation matched the strength of eight top fighters, their techniques unrivaled in variations and delicacy. For when the top kung fu theories of the central plains meets the top theories of the Xi Yu, one can see that the central plains kung fu theories are much more refined. It's just that the Hua Shan and Kun Lun experts can only utilize twenty to thirty percent of their true potential; otherwise Zhang Wuji would've long been dead.

Even so, Zhang Wuji could not break the formation, and can only try to keep himself alive. Every spectator watched with their hearts pounding, only to see sabers and swords flowing like the wind, sparkling under the sun. At this moment, Zhang Wuji can still easily escape with his vastly superior lightness kung fu. But then, what about the Ming sect? With that in mind, his only choice is to drag on the fight, hoping that they will eventually tire out. Unfortunately, he does not realize that these elders have some of the best inner powers in the world, making this an impossible task.

Although the four fighters are at a huge advantage, none of them look all that pleased. They are already losing tons of face considering their reputation. How can four elders not even bring down a youngster in over three hundred moves? Thankfully, Zhang Wuji had already defeated Kong Sheng. Otherwise, this fight would already be a huge disaster.

While watching the battle, elders of each sect talked quietly with their students, taking the opportunity to teach them valuable lessons.

End of Chapter 21.

Chapter 22 - Placating the Crowd and Three Conditions

(Translated by Meh and dgfds01)



When she saw just how pale he looks, her mind became filled with unspeakable agitation and fright. After a while, Zhang Wuji regained his senses. His only thought was, "As long as I'm alive, I can't let the six major sects destroy the Ming sect." With that in mind, he and got up and said, "Is there anyone else from E Mei or Wu Dang who wants to challenge me?"

(Meh)

*Note: It's quite possible that my translations in regarding the Book of Changes are off. I don't know anything about Taoist teachings, so I can only make literal translations. Quite frankly, I have no clue what JY's talking about here.

E Mei's Master Mie Jue said to her disciples, "This youngster's kung fu is very strange, but the four fighters of Kun Lun and Hua Shan have trapped him in terms of techniques. Our righteous kung fu of central plains are broad and deep, much better than the devilish Xi Yu kung fu. The two forms uses four people. The four people occupy eight locations. The front side has eight-times-eight-for-sixty-four moves. The reverse side also has eight-times-eight-for-sixty-four moves. When combined, you have sixty-four-squared, or four thousand and ninety-two different variations. This is simply unrivaled in the world."

Zhou ZhiRuo, ever since she saw Zhang Wuji on the stage, has been worrying for his well-being. As one of Mie Jue's favorite students, she has received much training in the realm of kung fu theory. So she began to ask loudly, "Master, although there are many variations in this front/reverse formation, it still does not deviate from the principle of Tai Chi dividing into Yin and Yang. In my opinion, the most important part of their formation lies with the positioning of their feet." She said this in a clear, crisp voice; even Zhang Wuji could hear her in the middle of the fight. He turned his head, seeing that its Zhou ZhiRuo talking, and immediately thought, "Why is she speaking so loudly? Is she trying to help me?"

Mie Jue said, "You're very observant to have figured out the intricacies of their formation." Zhou ZhiRuo started to talk to herself, "Yang divides up into Tai Yang, Shao Yang, Yin divides into Tai Yin, Shao Yin, Tai Yang is split into Gan and

Dui, Shao Yin is split into Li and Zhen, Shao Yang is split into Xun and Kan, Tai Yin is split into Gen and Kun. Gan is south, Kun is north, Li is east, Kan is west, Zhen is northeast, Dui is southeast, Xun is southwest, Gen is northwest. From Zhen to Gan we have the front side, from Xun to Kun is the reverse side.” Then she said to Mie Jue, “Master, just as you said: Heaven and Earth determines the location, the wind flows in between the mountains, thunder and wind complements, water and fire cancels, forming the eight divine positions. Numbers are forward, while knowledge goes backward. Kun Lun’s sword art is forward, so they obviously go from the Zhen position to the Gan position. The Hua Shan Saber art is reverse, so they obviously go from Xun to Kun. Right, master?” Mie Jue was delighted to hear her disciple point out the intricacies of the sword formation, nodded, and said, “Good girl. These years of teachings were not wasted on you.” She almost never gives praises, so these words are the biggest compliments she’ll ever make. But she did not notice that Zhou ZhiRuo’s voice was way too loud. After all, why did she need to speak up when talking to someone besides her? However, others around them did notice. Zhou ZhiRuo saw many eyes looking at her, so she simply pretended to be naïve and happy, clapping her hand saying, “Master. That’s right, that’s right! We E Mei sect’s Four Shape Circular Position encapsulates a square, combining Ying and Yang, with Yang outside the circle, and Yin inside the square, Circle symbolizes movement of heaven, while square symbolizes the stillness of the earth, seemingly even superior than theirs.” Mie Jue had always been arrogant, feeling that her E Mei Four Shape Fist is one of the best kung fu in the world. So these words really made her happy. With a smile, she said, “Although in theory this is true. But in practice, it still depends on the user’s knowledge.”

Zhang Wuji had learned some basic things about the Book of Changes when he was young. After Xiao Zhao’s help, he

then figured out the Wu Wan Position. Now with Zhou ZhiRuo's help, he realized the pattern behind the movements of the opponents. In an instant, he figured out many different ways to attack them. Each way would guarantee success.

Yet he thought again, "But should I do this right now? Mie Jue would probably blame Ms. Zhou if it seems that she has helped me. Mie Jue is very cruel, and might do terrible things to her. I can't possibly let her suffer because of me." So he continued to go on like before, not changing his fighting style, while examining the moves of his opponents. With Zhou ZhiRuo telling him the basics, the rest became easy for him.

But when Zhou ZhiRuo could not see any improvement, she became frustrated, and thought, "He's concentrating on his enemies, so how can he digest all the information I told him?" She again began to speak loudly again, "Master, I bet Mr. Iron Zither will next move to the Gui Mei position, right?" Before Mie Jue could reply, Ban ShuXian yelled, "Little girl from E Mei, who the hell is this kid to you? Why are you helping him? You know, it's not a good idea to mess with Kun Lun sect."

Zhou ZhiRuo's face immediately turned red, as Mie Jue yelled, "ZhiRuo, stop talking. It's not a good idea to mess with Kun Lun sect." Her tone made it obvious that she's protecting her student instead of scolding her. Zhang Wuji felt much warmth in his heart, thinking that if he kept on fighting like this, Zhou ZhiRuo would likely try other methods to help him. He started to laugh loudly and said, "I've already lost to E Mei, even got captured by Master Mie Jue. E Mei is certainly much better than you Kun Lun." He stepped left two steps and shot out his plum branch at the short old man. His timing and accuracy are just perfect,

following the concepts in the Book of Changes. The short old man felt a strong chi pushing from behind, and unwillingly changed his direction, instead aiming his saber towards Ban ShuXian. Ban ShuXian quickly tried to change her stance to block the attack. But at this time, she saw the tall old man coming to attack her. He TaiChong quickly came to the rescue, blocking the tall old man's saber. At this time, Zhang Wuji's palm shot out again, this time directing the short old man's saber towards He TaiChong. Deeply angered, Ban ShuXian quickly attacked the short old man with three sword strokes, causing him to back off and yell, "Don't fall into this little kid's trap!" He TaiChong realized this, and turned around to attack Zhang Wuji again. But with Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, Zhang Wuji turned him back the other way again, his sword cutting the side of the tall old man's arm. Screaming in pain, the tall old man counterattacked with his saber. The short old man screamed, "Brother, don't lose your temper. It's all because of that little kid, ouch..." Because Zhang Wuji had just turned away the sword of Ban ShuXian, prompting it to slash the back of the short old man. In an instant, both of the Hua Shan elders became hurt. The onlookers are gasped, not knowing what's going on. They only see that simply by using his palm and a branch, Zhang Wuji could divert all attacks towards him onto someone else. After some more rounds, they saw the He couple's sword and the two old men's sabers collide numerous times. Everyone sees what's happening, but no one knows how he's doing it. Only Yang Xiao, who knows some rudimentary Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, can understand some of theory. But even he wouldn't believe that Zhang Wuji actually knows Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi.

Ban ShuXian started giving out orders, trying to change their positions a bit, but Zhang Wuji had covered all eight positions, so that no matter what they do, their weapons still ended up pointing towards themselves. After a while, Ban ShuXian threw away her sword and began attacking with her

fists. The short old man saw this and thought, "Good idea. This kid knows some strange stuff, but he can't divert our weapons if we don't use any." He followed by throwing away his saber. But as he did this, he saw Zhang Wuji diverting He TaiChong to him. Ban ShuXian yelled, "Get rid of your sword!" He TaiChong immediately changed his form, throwing back his sword in the process. The tall old man also released his grip on his saber, but just as he did so, he found something in his hand again. For Zhang Wuji had simply returned his saber to him. The tall old man yelled, "I don't want it." And threw it behind him. Yet Zhang Wuji once again grabbed the saber, and once again returned it to him. This repeated numerous times before the tall old man simply gave up, and began to laugh. At this time, the other three people kept attacking Zhang Wuji with bare fists. Being some of the best fighters in their sects, their bare-handed fighting techniques are also quite formidable. But no matter how much they try, they just could not touch Zhang Wuji, who escaped their attacks over and over.

At this point, the four of them realizes that they're not going to win, and started to wonder about how they should retreat. The tall old man suddenly yelled, "Stupid kid, watch out for my hidden weapon!" A spit came out of his mouth aiming towards Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji turned sideways to dodge it, while the tall old man sneaked in from the other side; his saber came at Zhang Wuji. But he then had to quickly withdraw his saber midway as Zhang Wuji pushed Ban ShuXian in the way, who incidentally caught the spit in her face.

Ban ShuXian, deeply angered, tried to grab Zhang Wuji. The short old man waited behind to block off his escape. Both the tall old man and He TaiChong also attacked from other directions, thinking that this is time they'll finally get this kid. But then Zhang Wuji utilized his Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi,

both feet left the ground quickly and flipped smoothly in midair, landing far away. Only to see the four Hua Shan and Kun Lun experts ram into each other, before falling back and landing on the ground.

The tall old man got up and said, "Hey, little twerp, this isn't fighting. You're using witchcraft. What kind of hero does that?" The short old man realized that the longer they stay up here, the more embarrassing things will get, so he bowed to Zhang Wuji and said, "Your kung fu is incredible. I've never seen anything like it in my life. We admit defeat." Zhang Wuji also bowed back and said, "Actually, if the elders hadn't gone easy on me earlier, I would've already died under your sword formation." This is actually somewhat true, for Zhang Wuji would've never won without Zhou ZhiRuo's pointers. But the 'gone easy on me' was his own addition, in order to placate his opponents. The tall old man said, "Really? So you at least know that you didn't win very righteously." Zhang Wuji asked, "May I ask for your names?" The tall old man said, "My martial brother is Wei Zhen..." The short old man cut in, "Oh, shut up!" Then to Zhang Wuji, "We're just losers. What's the point to give our names?" As he said this, he returned to the Hua Shan group. The tall old man said, "What's the problem with losing? Why so worrisome?" and followed back. Zhang Wuji walked up to XianYu Tong, sealed two of his pressure points, and said, "Once today's events are over, I'll give you the antidote."

Suddenly, he felt a breeze in the back. In his shock, Zhang Wuji reflexively flew up, only to hear two very low sounds passing under him. As he twisted back, he saw Ban ShuXian and He TaiChong's swords stabbing into XianYu Tong's chest. This is a special Kun Lun technique, called 'No Sound No Form', used for night battles. Of course, it's also perfect for sneak attacks in the daytime. Unfortunately, they did not know that Zhang Wuji's Jiu Yang Shen Gong automatically

alarms Zhang Wuji of back attack, allowing him to get out of the way in time. After their miss, the He couple's thoughts were, "If we don't kill him today, how can we still have the face to live?" They turned around and attacked again, using only offensive moves, disregarding their own safety. After Zhang Wuji dodged a few attacks, he began to wonder just how to stop this couple. Then suddenly, he got an idea. He quickly reached down on the ground and grabbed some mud, rolling it into two balls. Then he went over to XianYu Tong and pretended to reach into his pocket. When the He couple caught up, he quickly turned around and applied a huge amount of chi to their chests, forcing both to open their mouths to breathe. In this instant, Zhang Wuji shot the mud balls into their mouths, and said, "This is Master XianYu's golden bug poison. If it hasn't already dissolved, you just might be able to force it back out with your inner power." He TaiChong and Ban ShuXian quickly sat down and began to gather their chi. But by that time, they realize that it's too late. The pill has already dissolved.

Just as the couple is wondering what they should do, Zhang Wuji said, "Don't worry. It won't take affect within twelve hours. Once I'm done here, I'll cure your poison. Just make sure you don't try to give me poisoned wine in the future." The He couple thanked him happily, even ignored his little sly remark.

At this time, Mie Jue came out from the crowd and said to Song YuanQiao, "Hero Song, looks like it's down to just us now. We E Mei sect are mainly females, so I leave the decision to you." Song YuanQiao said, "I have already matched palms with Master Yin, but could not win. Your swordsmanship is unparalleled. I'm sure you can beat this youngster." Mie Jue let out a cold laugh, pulled out the Heaven sword, and entered the arena. Wu Dang's Yu LianZhou had been watching Zhang Wuji carefully. He

realizes that although Mie Jue's swordsmanship is excellent, it's probably not likely any better than the combined forces of four Hua Shan and Kun Lun. Should she lose also, and for some reason Wu Dang also can't handle this kid, then this whole trip would be a total waste. So he stepped up and said, "Master Mie Jue, let us five brothers first try him out first. Then you can surely win." His intentions are clear. Wu Dang concentrates heavily on inner power. After matching inner power with five Wu Dang experts, Zhang Wuji can't possibly have any strength left to handle Mie Jue's sword.

Mie Jue realizes Yu LianZhou's meaning, but thought, "Why do we need your help? Besides, what's the honor in winning that way?" She has always been arrogant. Even though she saw Zhang Wuji defeat so many experts, she just figured that these people are useless fools. After all, wasn't she the one who captured him in the first place? Although he showed amazing inner power by absorbing her three palm strikes, but so what? With that in mind, Mie Jue said, "Please go back, Second Hero Yu. Once my Heaven Sword comes out, I cannot casually put it back in its sheath."

Upon hearing this, Yu LianZhou said "Yes" and retreated. Mie Jue held up her sword, pointing at Zhang Wuji. Countless Ming sect members had died under this Heaven sword. Many began murmur. Mie Jue gave a cold laugh, said, "What are you yapping about? After I finish off this kid, it will be your turn. Afraid that you won't die fast enough?" Yin TianZheng knows the sharpness of the Heaven sword, and asked, "Young Hero Zeng, which weapon would you use?" Zhang Wuji said, "Elder Yin, I don't have any weapons. How about you decide which one I should use."

Yin TianZheng took out a sword from his side, said, "I'll give you this White Rainbow Sword. Although it's not nearly as good as the Heaven Sword, it's still very powerful." As he

said this, he gave the sword to Zhang Wuji, who said, "Thank you, Elder Yin." Yin TianZheng said, "I have had this sword for many years, but have never used it. Humph, what's so heroic about winning due to a superior weapon? Today I'll die peacefully knowing this sword will draw the blood of this old nun." Zhang Wuji thought, "But I can't harm Mie Jue." He held up the White Rainbow Sword and turned around. Then said to Mie Jue, "My sword skills are very mediocre, and certainly not on par with yours. Why don't we just call a truce, and you let these people go?" Mie Jue said coldly, "You have to win my sword before making any requests." The Ming sect members began to yell, "Old hag, if you're really that good you should fight him with your bare hands." "What's so great about your swordsmanship? It's just the sword that's good." "Why don't you try using a regular sword? Then if you can survive three of Hero Zeng's moves, we'll consider you good." "Three moves? She can't even survive one!" Mie Jue simply ignored these remarks, yelling at Zhang Wuji, "Go ahead!"

Zhang Wuji has never learnt any sword techniques before, so he's lost at what to do. Suddenly, he remembered He TaiChong's sword techniques just a while back, and emulated him as he attacked. Mie Jue yelled, "Kun Lun's 'Mountain Cliff Breaking Cloud'!" The Heaven Sword also moved, but rather than blocking, it ignored Zhang Wuji's attack, aiming straight for the Zhang Wuji's vital points instead. This attack carried an unimaginable power which quickly bared down on Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji quickly got out of the way, faltering a bit and started to roll on the floor. Just as he was getting back up, he felt a powerful wind coming from behind. With a quick spring of the right foot, Zhang Wuji's body shot up vertically with great speed, getting out of the way. This was an escape no one had thought possible, just as the crowd was about to cheer, they see Mie Jue change her direction midway, and renewed her

attack upwards. Before he could land, the sword light had blocked off his path downward. Zhang Wuji can't change directions in midair, unable to escape. Under the sweep of the Heaven Sword, he nearly lost both of his legs. But at the critical juncture, he was able to turn his body and the pointed the White Rainbow Sword down, its tip meeting the tip of the Heaven Sword. Only to see the White Rainbow Sword bend a bit, before Zhang Wuji utilized the bounce to shoot back up.

Mie Jue would no let up, attacking three more times at Zhang Wuji. While in midair, Zhang Wuji can only block with his sword. 'Ding' the White Rainbow Sword broke. Zhang Wuji then shot out with his palm at Mie Jue's head. Mie Jue countered by trying to cut off the oncoming palm with her sword. But Zhang Wuji saw this perfectly, and flicked the Heaven Sword on its side while he backed off, landing on the ground a few yards out. Mie Jue felt a strong vibration coming from the sword, almost causing her to drop the sword. Only to see Zhang Wuji standing there blankly, holding his broken sword. This sequence of events really was beyond belief. In a few short moments, Mie Jue had unleashed eight attacks, each deadly accurate. Yet each dissipated before Zhang Wuji, who escaped near-death after each blow. The attacks were delicate and fine; the escapes were quick and clever. The spectators' hearts almost flew out from all the action. No one had ever seen anything like it. Attacking like gods in Heaven, while evading like ghosts in Hell. Just as lightning and thunder, even when over, they can still send chills down one's spine.

During the eight blows, Zhang Wuji was basically getting killed, while Mie Jue held all the initiative. But Zhang Wuji's flick at the last moment temporarily froze Mie Jue. Had he taken the opportunity to immediately strike, he would've won the battle by now. Unfortunately, Zhang Wuji lacked the

battle experience to realize this. However, Mie Jue understands the situation, so she said, "Get another weapon. Then we'll fight again." Zhang Wuji thought, "I broke my grandfather's precious sword in just a few moves. What other weapon can possibly block the Heaven Sword?" As he's pondering, Zhou Dian* said, "I have a very good saber. Go ahead and use it." Zhang Wuji said, "The Heaven Sword is way too powerful. I'm afraid of breaking your saber." Zhou Dian said, "Who cares? If you lose, we're all going to die anyway. What's the point of saving a weapon?" Zhang Wuji nodded in his mind, and went over to grab the saber. As he did this, Yang Xiao whispered, "Mr. Zhang, be aggressive. Don't let her take the initiative." Zhang Wuji froze a bit when he heard Yang Xiao call him 'Mr. Zhang'. But then realized that since Yang BuHui knows his identity, she obviously told this to her dad. Wei YiXiao also whispered, "Take advantage of your lightness kung fu. DO NOT slow down even for a moment." Zhang Wuji, happy to have received such great pointers, said, "Thank you for your advice." Had they not been injured, Wei YiXiao and Yang Xiao on par with Mie Jue in terms of kung fu. So they have no problems pointing out the best tactics against the Heaven Sword. Zhang Wuji took the saber and went back into the arena. He then said, "Master Mie Jue, I'm coming!" Immediately, Zhang Wuji utilized his lightness kung fu to get behind Mie Jue, before she can turn around, he quickly attacked twice.

Mie Jue dodged the blows, but when she tried to counter, she couldn't find Zhang Wuji. Even before he learnt Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, Zhang Wuji's lightness kung fu was superior to Mie Jue's. Now the difference is night and day. The crowd sees him stepping left, then stepping right, quick as lightning, practically spin circles around Mie Jue. Even Wei YiXiao can't help but be in awe. Yet no matter how fast he is, Zhang Wuji still had to keep a certain distance from Mie Jue,

not wanting to come in contact with the power of the Heaven Sword. Plus, he's hardly skilled at using weapons. So despite the obvious advantage, Zhang Wuji still could not win after several moves.

E Mei's disciples all realize that should this fight continue, their master would surely lose. Jing Xuan yelled, "Today we're here to root out the devil sect, not to compete in the kung fu. Let's all go up trap him, so that he can't keep playing hide-and-seek with our master." As she spoke, her sword came out. The E Mei disciples all rushed forward, circling around to surround Zhang Wuji and Mie Jue. Ding Minjun said to Zhou ZhiRuo coldly, "Sister Zhou, it's your choice whether you want to go up there or not." Zhou ZhiRuo, her face blushing, said angrily, "What's that comment for?"

At this moment, Zhang Wuji appeared in front of Ding Minjun. With a quick wave of his hand, he grabbed her sword and in a fluent motion sent it towards Mie Jue. Mie Jue quickly waved her sword to block the flying sword. But while breaking Ding Minjun's sword in two, her hand vibrated intensely due to the sheer force of Zhang Wuji's throw. Before Mie Jue could recover, more swords came at her, as Zhang Wuji kept grabbing and throwing her disciples' swords. Although only the best disciples followed Mie Jue on this trip, they still could not do anything while Zhang Wuji take their weapons.

After cutting down a few swords, Mie Jue felt extreme pain on her right arm. So she switched over to her left hand. Her swordsmanship is the same no matter which hand she uses. Only to see broken sword pieces dance in the air, as onlookers step back to avoid the shards. In just a few moments, all the E Mei disciples become empty-handed, with Zhou ZhiRuo being the lone exception.

Still thankful of her advice earlier, Zhang Wuji did not even try to approach her. But as a result, it made things worse by singling her out. Zhou ZhiRuo thought this might happen, so she was one of the first to attack. But Zhang Wuji's speed is simply way too fast for her. Besides, he purposely avoided her, preventing her from giving up her sword. Ding MinJun said in a cold voice, "Sister Zhou, he really does treat you differently." By this time, Zhang Wuji went back to concentrating on fighting Mie Jue, each sword stroke aiming directly at her vital points. Mie Jue, who while trying to dodge and block the oncoming assault, heard Ding MinJun's words clearly. She suddenly thought, "Why doesn't this kid take ZhiRuo's sword too? Could there really be something between them? I need to test this." So she immediately yelled, "ZhiRuo! Are you going against your master?" As she spoke, her sword quickly shot towards Zhou ZhiRuo's chest.

Zhou ZhiRuo didn't dare to raise her sword to block, and could only yell in shock, "Master, I..." When she said to here, Mie Jue's sword is nearly at her chest. Zhang Wuji does not know that Mie Jue was simply testing them. After having witnessed her personally kill Ji XiaoFu, Zhang Wuji could only assume the worst. So without thinking, he raced ahead of Mie Jue, picked up Zhou ZhiRuo by her waist, and flew several yards away.

Finally getting back the initiative, Mie Jue quickly turned her attention towards Zhang Wuji. Despite his amazing inner power, Zhang Wuji hasn't really learnt any lightness kung fu techniques. So he can't be like Wei YiXiao, keeping his speed even while carrying a person. Zhang Wuji felt a strong wind from behind, turned around and blocked with his saber. 'Dang' the saber broke as it crossed path with the Heaven Sword. Zhang Wuji quickly threw out the remaining half a saber at Mie Jue, hoping to slow her down a bit. This throw

utilized ninety percent of his powers, forcing Mie Jue to lower her head and dodge it. As the saber flew right over her head, Mie Jue felt a tinge of pain from the accompanying wind, temporarily paralyzing her. Zhang Wuji sees this chance, and quickly stepped up towards her, his palm shot out, and in a fluent motion snatched the Heaven Sword from her hand.

The wrist power involved in this sword-taking method had the backing of the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. Although her kung fu is high, Mie Jue still could not block such a powerful and accurate palm move. Zhang Wuji, even in triumph, did not let down his guard, pointing the Heaven Sword at Mie Jue's throat. Then he stepped back a few steps slowly, when suddenly Zhou ZhiRuo struggled against his hold, yelling, "Let me go!" Zhang Wuji said in shock, "Oh! Forgot!" His face pure red as she let her go, only to smell a faint flowery scent as her headband went by his nose. Zhang Wuji couldn't help but take a look at her, only to see her face a bit pale, looking very bashful. Although she tried to look mad, he could see in her eyes extreme joy and happiness. Mie Jue straightened herself. In silence, she looked at Zhou ZhiRuo, then at Zhang Wuji, her face whiter and whiter.

Zhang Wuji turned the sword around and said to Zhou ZhiRuo, "Ms. Zhou, please return this sword to your master." Zhou ZhiRuo looked at Mie Jue and saw her incredible anger. Thousands of thoughts entered her mind at that moment, "In this situation, with the way Mr. Zhang treats me, master must think that he and I are lovers. She'll surely throw me out of E Mei. What will I do? Although Mr. Zhang has treated me incredibly well, I never did plan on helping him fight against my own sect." Suddenly she heard Mie Jue bark out, "ZhiRuo! Kill him!"

Back when Zhang SanFeng took Zhou ZhiRuo back to Wu

Dang Mountain, he felt that it was awkward for her to stay there, since Wu Dang has no female disciples. So he took her to the E Mei sect. Zhou ZhiRuo is naturally intelligent. Plus, with her parents both dead, she concentrated solely on kung fu, and improved quickly, becoming one of Mie Jue's favorite disciple. For the past seven years, the words of Mie Jue are like Holy Scriptures to her. She has never harbored any thoughts of defiance. So when she heard her master telling her to kill Zhang Wuji, she did not even have to think. Taking the sword from Zhang Wuji's hand, and in one smooth motion quickly stabbing him. Zhang Wuji, never dreamed that she would possibly hurt him, did not make any attempt to dodge. In an instant, the sword has moved next to his chest. By the time he regained his senses, Zhang Wuji made a last second effort to get out of the way. But it was already too late. Zhou ZhiRuo only felt numbness in her wrist, thinking, "Am I really going to kill him?" In a state of semi-consciousness, she penetrated the sword through Zhang Wuji's right side of the chest. Zhou ZhiRuo let out a scream, pulling out the sword, only to see red blood gushing out of Zhang Wuji's chest, prompting everyone to gasp. Zhang Wuji blocked the wound with his hand, his body shaking, his face a strange expression, as if asking, "You really want to kill me?" Zhou ZhiRuo said, "I... I..." She wants to go over and check on him, but was too afraid, so instead she quickly turned around and ran out of the arena.

No one thought that her strike would succeed. Xiao Zhao's face turned white, rushed forward to hold up Zhang Wuji, yelling, "You... you..." Zhang Wuji said to Xiao Zhao, "Why... why do you want to kill me..." Luckily, the sword was a bit off to the side, and didn't penetrate Zhang Wuji's heart. But it did skim his lungs. When he finished talking, he began to have trouble breathing, and started cough loudly. In his condition, Zhang Wuji can't tell the difference between Xiao Zhao and Zhou ZhiRuo. Blood kept spilling out, turning Xiao

Zhao's clothing pure red. Every member of the audience, whether they are the Ming sect, Heavenly Eagle sect, or the six major sects, all became quiet. Everyone was moved deeply by the amazing kung fu and compassion Zhang Wuji showed during his bouts. When they saw the Heaven Sword penetrating his chest, all wondered whether this is a fatal blow or not. Xiao Zhao carefully put Zhang Wuji down on the ground, then yelled, "Who has the best medicine for wounds?" Shaolin's Kong Sheng quickly stepped up and took out a bottle from his robe, said, "This is Shaolin's best medicine for treating external wounds." He immediately opened Zhang Wuji's shirt and quickly applied the medicine on the deep cut. But unfortunately, the wound is too deep and blood kept spilling out. Kong Sheng muttered impatiently, "What should I do? What should I do?" The He couple also became agitated, thinking that if Zhang Wuji died, then they would die too. He TaiChong quickly walked over to Zhang Wuji's side and asked, "Can you tell me how to cure this poison?" Xiao Zhao yelled at him while crying, "Get out of here! If Young Master Zhang can't live, then everyone dies with him." He TaiChong ignored her and kept asking, "How do I cure the golden bug poison?" Kong Sheng said angrily, "If you don't leave now, I won't be held responsible for my actions." At this moment, Zhang Wuji regained a bit of consciousness, opened his eyes. He immediately sealed seven pressure points around the wound, greatly decreasing the blood spillage. Kong Sheng quickly applied more medicine to block the rest of the blood, while Xiao Zhao tore up some of her clothing to wrap him up. When she saw just how pale he looks, her mind became filled with unspeakable agitation and fright. After a while, Zhang Wuji regained his senses. His only thought was, "As long as I'm alive, I can't let the six major sects destroy the Ming sect." With that in mind, he and got up and said, "Is there anyone else from E Mei or Wu Dang who wants to challenge me?"

Mie Jue said, "E Mei has already lost today. If you don't die, we'll settle this later. Let's see what's Wu Dang can do now!" With Kong Dong, Shaolin, Kun Lun, Hua Shan, and E Mei all losing, Wu Dang is the only sect left who can challenge this youngster. Considering his injury, even second-rate fighters should have no problems with him. Any of the five Wu Dang heroes can easily beat him. Yet Wu Dang is famous for their 'Righteousness'. How can they fight such a wounded person? However, if Wu Dang won't challenge him, then won't this whole attack be in vain? Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi, Yin LiTing, and Muo ShengGu all looked at each other. No one can think of a good plan. Suddenly, they heard Song QingShu yell, "Dad, martial uncles, let me fight him." The five Wu Dang heroes realizes his intentions. Song QingShu is one generation lower, so he's much more appropriate for such a battle.

Yu LianZhou said, "No! It won't make much of a difference if you go instead of us." Zhang SongXi said, "Second brother, in my opinion, we should worry about the whole picture." Muo ShengGu said, "Reputations aren't really important. But to do such thing to such an injured youngster..." Not knowing what to do, they all looked at Song YuanQiao, deferring to him. Song YuanQiao saw Yin LiTing standing quietly on the side, knows that his fiancé lost her virginity and subsequently her life to Yang Xiao. He said, "If we don't destroy the Devil sect today, they'll only cause more suffering in the world. So we have no choice. QingShu, be careful."

Song QingShu bowed and said, "Yes." He walked over to Zhang Wuji and yelled, "Young Hero Zeng, if you aren't a member of the Ming sect, you can leave now. The six major sects are just here to destroy the Ming sect."

Zhang Wuji said, "Thank you for your kindness. But... I have decided to live and die with the Ming sect!" People from the Ming and Heavenly Eagle sect all began to yell, "Young Hero Zeng. We shall forever remember your incredible kindness today. At this point, you really don't need to keep fighting us." Yin TianZheng got up and said, "Mr. Song, let me try out your powerful Wu Dang kung fu." But just as he got up, he immediately felt numbness in his legs, and had to sit back down again. Song QingShu said, "In that case, I have no choice but to fight you. I'm sorry." Xiao Zhao quickly shielded in front of Zhang Wuji, and yelled, "Then you have to kill me first." Zhang Wuji said quietly, "Xiao Zhao, don't worry. He can't kill me." Xiao Zhao said, "But... but you're injured." Zhang Wuji said tenderly, "Xiao Zhao, why are you so kind to me?" Xiao Zhao said, "Because... because you're kind to me." Zhang Wuji stared at her for a moment and thought, "Even if I die today, at least I have a true friend who's good to me." Song QingShu yelled at Xiao Zhao, "Get out of here!" Zhang Wuji said, "Why are you so rude to this little girl?" Song QingShu grabbed Xiao Zhao's head and pushed her away, then said, "Devilish couple, how disgusting. Get up so we can fight!" Zhang Wuji said, "I heard that your father is a very honorable and righteous man. Yet you are so bullish. You're not worthy of me fighting standing up." In reality, he can't fight standing-up even if he wants to.

Yu LianZhou said, "QingShu. Simply seal his pressure point. Don't hurt him." Song QingShu responded, "Yes." Then he shot out his right hand aiming for Zhang Wuji's pressure point. Zhang Wuji didn't move, letting him hit his own 'Jian Zhen Point'. At the same moment, he gathered his inner power, pushing the fingers back out. It's almost as if Song QingShu just pointed his fingers at a pond of water, showing no effect. After gathering himself, his right foot flew out, heading towards Zhang Wuji's chest. This kick utilized much

of his energy. Although Yu LianZhou told him not to hurt this youngster, for some reason, he feels much hatred towards this youngster. This really isn't because he has an ill temper, but rather because of the caring and affectionate look on Zhou ZhiRuo's face for this youngster. Although she did stab him in the end, one can easily see the tremendous pain on her face while doing so.

After he saw Zhou ZhiRuo, Song QingShu's eyes rarely moved too far away from her. Although he couldn't watch her directly all the time, none of her expressions and actions escaped his vision. He thought, "After this stab, whether this youngster lives or dies, he will forever be entrenched in her heart." If he kills this youngster, Zhou ZhiRuo would certainly hate him. But how can he possibly pass up this only chance of killing him? Only to see Zhang Wuji's fingers calmly pushing the feet out of the way, causing it to slide harmlessly to the side. Song QingShu immediately regained his footing, and then kicked back with his left foot, once again diverted by Zhang Wuji's fingers.

After three exchanges, no one expected this kind of result. Song YuanQiao yelled, "QingShu, he has no strength left in his body. He's using your force against you."

Song QingShu immediately changed his tactics after hearing his dad's pointer. His strokes became soft and light, sometimes seemingly lack any sort of power. This is Wu Dang's 'Soft Palm'. The idea of redirecting the enemy's attacks is the basis for Wu Dang kung fu, and the 'Soft Palm' is the epitome of this sort of fighting style. However, there is still a limit to its softness, while Zhang Wuji has already mastered all seven levels of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. With his left hand holding the wound, Zhang Wuji blocked all attacks with his right hand, moving up and down in different rhythms as if playing a zither. Even after he finished using

all thirty-six moves of Soft Palms, Song QingShu still could not touch this youngster.

While in frustration, Song QingShu accidentally saw Zhou ZhiRuo, only to see her face filled with concern, causing him to feel even angrier, because the concern is not for him. After taking a deep breath, Song QingShu's left aimed towards Zhang Wuji's right cheek, while his right palm aimed straight for Zhang Wuji's 'Que Pan Point'. This move is called 'Flower Blooms Giving Fruit'. Although the name is pretty, the move is deadly. Two hands move at the same time with blazing speed, yet each hand attacks in a different way, combining two attacks in one. Song QingShu attacked with the force of a tornado and the speed of lightning, prompting the audience to gasp. Only to see his left hand hit his own right cheek, his right hand sealing his own 'Que Pan Point', as Zhang Wuji diverted both of his attacks back at him with Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. Feeling a sharp pain on his Que Pan Point, Song QingShu fell back, struggled on the ground, unable to get back up. Song YuanQiao immediately went up and quickly unsealed his pressure point.

Suddenly, Zhang Wuji opened his mouth, and big gulps of blood spilled out. Everyone looked at him with concern, thinking, "Although he fought off Song QingShu, he has used up all his remaining energy." They then looked over at the Wu Dang sect, wondering if they will send someone else or give up. Song YuanQiao said, "Wu Dang has done all it can today. The devil sect must be fated to live on. That's why a strange youngster appeared today to save them from destruction. How can we still be righteous if we still keep on fighting?" Yu LianZhou said, "Big brother is correct. We'll go back and seek the advice of our master. When this youngster has recovered from his injuries, Wu Dang will come back and challenge him again." Zhang SongXi and Muo ShengGu both then added, "Second brother is correct."

Suddenly, Yin LiTing stepped into the arena; his sword pointing at Zhang Wuji, yelling, "Mr. Zeng, I have no ill feelings towards you. So I won't kill you. But Yang Xiao is my biggest sworn enemy. I must kill him!" Zhang Wuji shook his head, saying, "As long as I'm alive, I won't let you kill anyone in the Ming sect." Yin LiTing said, "In that case, I will kill you!"

Zhang Wuji coughed up another gulp of blood. His head half-conscious, his heart serene, and whispered, "Sixth Uncle Yin, then go ahead and kill me!" When Yin LiTing heard the words 'Sixth Uncle Yin', he thought, "Wuji always called me by this name when he was young. This youngster..." He looked closely at Zhang Wuji's face. The more he looked, the more this face look like the child he remembered from nine years ago. So he asked, "You... are you Wuji?"

With no more energy left knowing he's near death, Zhang Wuji felt no more need to hide his identity, and whispered, "Sixth Uncle Yin, I... I think of you... often." Tears poured down Yin LiTing's face. He let go of his sword, rushed forward, and held Zhang Wuji in his arms, yelling, "You're Wuji, you're my fifth brother's son Zhang Wuji." Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi, and Muo ShengGu all immediately went up to Zhang Wuji upon hearing this, their face filled with extreme happiness. At this moment, nothing else in the world mattered to them.

With this yell, other than the He couple, Zhou ZhiRuo, Yang Xiao and a few others, everyone gasped. No one could believe that this youngster is actually Zhang CuiShan's son.

Yin LiTing sees that Zhang Wuji had already fainted, so he hurriedly took out a 'Heavenly Heart Protecting Pill' and put it in his mouth. After handing Zhang Wuji over to Yu LianZhou, he pulled out his sword, rushed in front of Yang

Xiao, and scolded, “Yang Xiao, you wicked bastard, I...I...” His throat became stuck, unable to keep yelling any further. The long sword shot out, aiming directly at Yang Xiao’s heart. Yang Xiao, unable to move, simply closed his eyes and smiled, waiting for his death. Suddenly, a young girl came from the side, blocking in front of Yang Xiao, yelling, “Don’t hurt my daddy!” Ying LiTing stopped. As he looks closely at this person, an “Ah” sound came out. His body turned cold as ice as he saw this girl. Tall and slender, eyes big and bright, she’s actually Ji XiaoFu! After Yin LiTing got engaged to Ji XiaoFu, he never could concentrate on practicing his kung fu, as his thoughts were always filled with images of his fiancé. When he later found out that Yang Xiao kidnapped her, raped her, and killed her, the pain in his heart could not be described in words. Now that she has appeared in front of him once again, he stumbled, and said with shock, “Sister XiaoFu, you... you haven’t...”

That young girl is of course Yang BuHui. She said, “My surname is Yang. Ji XiaoFu is my mom, she’s already dead.” Yin LiTing paused, then figured out what’s going on. He said, “Oh, you’re right. That was stupid of me! You should get out of the way. Today I’m here to seek revenge for your mother.”

Yang BuHui points to Mie Jue, “Fine. Uncle Yin, go kill this old nun then.” Yin LiTing asked, “W...Why?” Yang BuHui said, “Because my mom died under her palm.” Yin LiTing said, “Don’t be ridiculous! What does a child like you know?” Yang BuHui responded in a cold voice, “That day at the Butterfly Valley, old nun wanted my mom to come kill my dad. My mom refused, so the old nun killed her.” At the time of Ji XiaoFu’s death, Yang BuHui is still a little girl. So she obviously didn’t realize exactly what had happened. But as she grew up and recalled those events, she pieced everything together. Yin LiTing turned around and looked at Mie Jue, his face filled with puzzlement, asking, “Is... she...”

Ms. Ji really...”

Mie Jue responded in a crisp, loud voice, “She’s right. What use is there to let such a despicable student live? She and Yang Xiao loved each other. She would rather disobey me than to go kill him. Sixth Hero Yin, I only lied to save you some face. Humph, what’s the need to remember such a ****?” Yin LiTing’s face turned green, yelling, “I don’t believe you! I don’t believe you!” Mie Jue said, “Why don’t you ask this girl her name?” Yin LiTing turned towards Yang BuHui. Through his teary eyes he could only see Ji XiaoFu, but his ears heard clearly, “ My name is Yang BuHui*. My mom said that she never regretted what had happened.”

*Bu means ‘No’. Hui means ‘Regret’.

‘Dang’, Yin LiTing dropped his sword, turned around and ran down the mountain. Song YuanQiao and Yu LianZhou yelled, “Sixth brother, sixth brother!” But Yin LiTing did not respond. As he’s running, Yin LiTing suddenly tripped, but he quickly got back up and resumed running.

Everyone only felt sympathy as they watch Yin LiTing, for how could a person of his kung fu skills trip while running? The only reason would be if his mind is in a state of total disorder. At this time, Song YuanQiao, Yu LianZhou, Zhang SongXi, and Muo ShengGu all sat around Zhang Wuji, their palms pushing against four of Zhang Wuji’s major pressure points, trying to heal him with their inner power. Only to feel a great deal of energy in his body, sucking their strength into him at a rapid pace. If they keep this up, their inner powers would be totally gone in four hours. Yet with Zhang Wuji’s life hanging in the balance, they can’t release their palms. Suddenly, Zhang Wuji opened his eyes, and in an instant, Song YuanQiao and others felt their chi moving backwards, returning to them. Song YuanQiao yelled, “Don’t!

You need to rest.” The four brothers immediately released their palms, only to feel Zhang Wuji’s Jiu Yang chi rushing into their body, strengthening their inner powers. The four brothers couldn’t believe that even with his injury, Zhang Wuji can summon such great deal of inner power. Zhang Wuji said, “Eldest Uncle Song, Second Uncle Yu, Fourth Uncle Zhang, Seventh Uncle Muo, sorry about that. How is Martial Grandfather’s health?” Yu LianZhou said, “Master is doing well. Wuji, you... you’re so big...” Despite having thousands of words in his mind, no more words would come out. Only tears of joy flowed down their cheeks.

Delighted that that the youngster is his grandson, Yin TianZheng started to laugh out loud. But he could still could not muster the strength to get up.

Mie Jue waved her hands, as the E Mei disciples all followed her down the mountain. Zhou ZhiRuo followed her martial sisters slowly with her head down. After a few steps, she could not help but look back. Her gaze met that of Zhang Wuji’s, who was watching her leave. Zhou ZhiRuo’s face immediately turned red, her eyes seemingly saying, “I’m really sorry to have stabbed you so severely. Please take care of yourself.” Zhang Wuji seemingly realized her thoughts, and simply nodded. Zhou ZhiRuo’s face brightened up considerably, and with a big smile, left quickly with the rest of the E Mei sect.

Hua Shan and Kong Dong, taking their wounded, also followed down the mountain. He TaiChong came up to Zhang Wuji and said, “Little friend, congratulations on meeting your relatives...” Before he could continue, Zhang Wuji took out two common painkiller pills and said, “Here is the antidote.” He TaiChong took the pills, wondering if it really can cure his poison. Zhang Wuji added, “If I say it’s the antidote, then it really is the antidote.” Despite his low

voice, everyone can see how serious he is. Besides, even if he's lying, He TaiChong knows that he cannot force Zhang Wuji to do anything with the Wu Dang brothers around. He could only respond, "Thank you!" and swallowed the pill with Ban ShuXian. The Kun Lun sect then went down the mountain.

Yu LianZhou said, "Wuji, you cannot go down the mountain right now due to your injury, and we can't stay here either. But when you have time, please come to Wu Dang, if only so master can take a look at you." Zhang Wuji nodded with teary eyes. Although they have many questions, the Wu Dang brother did not ask any, for they do not want to further burden Zhang Wuji in his current state. Suddenly, they heard a Shaolin monk yelling, "Where's brother Yuan Zhen's body?" Muo ShengGu looked over at Shaolin's pile of bodies, and indeed could not see his body among the dead.

Yuan Yin yelled at the Ming sect, "Give us back brother Yuan Zhen's body!" Zhou Dian said with a smile, "Haha! Are you kidding me? If we don't even care to keep your live bodies, what the hell would we do with a dead one?" Shaolin realizes that he's right, and began searching around. But the body never showed up. They figured that some other sect must have taken it by mistake, and also began to head down the mountain. As Wu Dang sect started to leave, Zhang Wuji kowtowed to send them off. Song YuanQiao said, "Wuji, you are now the savior of the Ming sect. I hope you can guide them down the road of righteousness from now on." Zhang SongXi said, "Be careful. Make sure you guard against the sinister people." Zhang Wuji answered, "Yes."

When the six major sects all left, Yin TianZheng and Yang Xiao looked at each other, then said together, "Members of the Ming sect and the Heavenly Eagle sect express thanks to Hero Zhang for saving our lives!" In an instant, everyone got

on their knees and kowtowed on the ground. Zhang Wuji doesn't know what to do, seeing his elders and even his grandfather and uncle among the people bowing. He tried to return the bow, but reopened his wound while trying to do so, and fainted. Xiao Zhao quickly held him back up. Two uninjured Ming sect members came by with a stretcher, putting Zhang Wuji on it. Yang Xiao said, "Take him to my room and let him rest there."

Xiao Zhao followed Zhang Wuji as he's being taken away. As she walked by Yang BuHui, she heard Yang BuHui say coldly, "Xiao Zhao, you really are a great actress. I knew you were strange, but I never thought that an ugly girl like you is actually a great beauty." Xiao Zhao did not respond, only kept on walking. For the next few days, everyone on the Brightness Peak only focused on healing their wounds. After the last life-and-death battle, they all regretted the past years of inner turmoil. No one brought up any past differences, as everyone rested peacefully on Brightness Peak, healing their injuries.

(Continued by dgfds01)

Though Zhang Wuji's injuries were not light, Zhou Zhirou's sword had missed his heart and lungs by a few inches. With the aid of his completed Art of Nine Yang, after convalescing for seven or eight days, his wound gradually healed. Each day, Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bu De and others were carried into his room to visit him. They were very happy to see his condition improve day by day. After about eight days, Zhang Wuji could sit up. That night, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao visited him again. Zhang Wuji said: "You were both injured by the Xuan Yin Finger. How have you been feeling these last few days?" Both of them were suffering daily from cold, bone searing pain. Rather than getting better, the injuries had been getting worse. However, they did not want him to worry so they said: "There's been great improvement!" Zhang Wuji saw that

there was a shadow of black chi over their faces. Even their speech was weak and listless. He said: "My inner strenght is about sixty to seventy percent recovered. Let me try treating your injuries. " Yang Xiao hurriedly replied: "No, no! There's no need to rush. Hero Zhang should wait till you've completely recovered before treating us. How could we rest easy if you aggravate your injuries?" Wei Yixiao said: "A few days won't make a difference. The important thing is for Hero Zhang to rest and recover."

Zhang Wuji said: "My grandfather the Eagle King and my godfather the Lion King are from the same generation as you. You're both my seniors. I really cannot respond to you calling me 'hero'." Yang Xiao smiled and replied: "From now onwards we are your subordinates. We'll follow behind you and we won't even dare sit without your permission. How can we speak of being your seniors?" Zhang Wuji asked in surprise: "Uncle Yang, what do you mean?" Wei Yixiao said: "Hero Zhang, you're the only person worthy and capable of bearing the heavy burden of the Ming Cult Leader's position."

Zhang Wuji frantically waved both hands urgently saying: "That's impossible! That's Impossible!" At this instance, the sound of piercing whistles was heard from the east. This was Brightness Peak's warning signals. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao were shocked thinking: " Could it be that the six sects refused to admit defeat and are attacking again?" However, their facial expressions did not betray their thoughts. Yang Xiao said: "Was the ginseng you took yesterday good enough? Xiao Zhao, go get some more and prepare some more for Hero Zhang." Alarm whistles were now heard from the western and southern sides. Zhang Wuji said: "Are there enemies attacking?" Wei Yixiao said: "There's no lack of good fighters from our sect and the Heavenly Evil Sect. Hero Zhang, there's no need for you to worry. We can easily deal

with little bandits!" But just a moment later, the whistles could be heard from a lot nearer. The enemy was advancing very quickly, they were definitely more than mere bandits. Yang Xiao said: "I'll go out for a while to organise things. Brother Wei will stay here with Hero Zhang. Hehe, can it be that the Ming Cult is so easily pushed around?" Even though his injuries were so serious that he could not move, his speech was still heroic. Zhang Wuji pondered: "Shaolin and E-Mei are righteous sects. They will not break their word. The attackers are probably wicked, merciless people. All the top fighters on Brightness Peak are severely injured. In this last seven or eight days, not one has recovered. If they try to fight, they'll only be throwing their lives away in vain."

At that moment, urgent footsteps were heard outside the door. A man rushed in. His face was covered with blood and he had been stabbed in the chest with a knife. He yelled: "The enemies are attacking from three directionsthey're coming up the mountain.....our brothers fighting the enemy.....can't hold out....." Wei Yixiao asked: "Who are the enemies?" The man pointed outside and tried to reply. Instead, he fell face-down onto the ground, dying just like that. The whistling grew more incessant and frenzied, the danger of the situation was obvious. Suddenly, two more men rushed into the room. Yang Xiao saw that man in front was the deputy flag leader of the Flood Waters Flag. His whole body was covered with blood and his face as pale as death, but he still maintained his composure. Bowing slightly, he reported: "Hero Zhang, Left Emissary Yang, Protector King Wei, the people attacking us are from the Great Whale Clan, Sea Sand Sect, Divine Fist House." Yang Xiao frowned, hrmphed and said: "These little clowns even dare to attack us?" The Deputy Flag Leader replied: "The enemy is actually not very powerful. The problem is that most of our brothers are injured....." As he said this, the Five Wanderers - Leng Qian, the Iron Hat Priest Zhang Zhong,

Peng Yingyu, Shuo Bu De, Zhou Dian - were stretched in one by one. Zhou Dian yelled: "The Beggar's Clan, Three Family Clan and the Wushan Clan have taken the opportunity to attack us as well. As long as I, Zhou Dian, has a single breath left in my body I will never let it rest....." Before he finished, Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang limped in supported by crutches. Yin Tianzheng said: " Wuji my child, you just lie back and rest. Damm the Five Wind Sabre and Soul Breaking Spear sects! What can two little sects like this do to us?"

Among them, Yang Xiao was the highest ranking Ming Cult member, Yin Tianzheng was the leader of the Heavenly Eagle Sect while Peng Yingyu was the most resourceful. These three men had faced all sorts of calamities in their lives. Each time, they had managed to avert disaster with their abilities. But they could see no way out of the present situation - they were all severely injured with a large group of enemies at their doorstep. Even if the other clans and sects had not attacked, the Beggars Clan alone with its large numbers of able fighters would have been extremely difficult to deal with. By now, everyone secretly considered Zhang Wuji their sect leader. Together, they all turned to him hoping he had some plan to get them out of this predicament. During all this, all sorts of thoughts and ideas swirled through Zhang Wuji's mind. Though his kungfu was greater than Yang Xiao's, his grandfather, Wei Yixiao and the others, they were far ahead of him when it came to strategy and cunning. If they were unable to come up with a solution, there was no way he would be able to. He let out a groan. Suddenly, he thought of something and said: "Let's go hide in the secret tunnel. The enemy might not be able to find us. Even if they discovered the tunnel, they would have difficulty attacking down it." This was the best possible solution to him so he spoke excitedly. To his surprise, the others simply looked at each other. No one agreed with him. It was as if they all felt that it could not be done. Zhang Wuji said: "A true

man knows when to retreat and when to advance. Let's hide and recuperate first. When our injuries recover we'll come out and fight. There is no disgrace in that."

Yang Xiao said: "Hero Zhang's plan is brilliant." He turned to Xiao Zhao and said: "Xiao Zhao, help Hero Zhang into the secret tunnel." Zhang Wuji said: "Let's go together!" Yang Xiao said: "You go first, we'll follow later."

When he heard this, Zhang Wuji knew that they would not follow, it was just a ploy to get him to safety. He said clearly: "Seniors, though I'm not a member of your sect I have gone through dangers with you. It can be said I have a bond of life and death with you. How could I abandon you and cowardly hide away?"

Yang Xiao said: "There are some things Hero Zhang is unaware of. For generations, it has been a strict Ming Cult rule that apart from the sect leader, no Ming Cult member may enter the secret tunnel. The penalty for breaking the rule is death. Both you and Xiao Zhao are not Ming Cult members so you're exempted from the rule."

By now the sounds of fighting could be heard from all directions. The route up to Brightness Peak was steep and rugged. Many passes steel and rock gates blocking the way. Therefore, even though the Ming Cult's defenders were weak, the attackers had not had an easy time either. Added to that was the Ming Cult's awesome reputation - the attackers were cautious and did not dare rush forward. Nevertheless from the sounds of fighting, they were slowly making their way closer. Every now and then the screams were heard as exhausted Ming Cult defenders were slaughtered.

Zhang Wuji thought: "If we don't go now, within two hours the whole of Ming Cult will be killed." He immediately said:

"Can't we change the rule?" Yang Xiao shook his head darkly. Peng Yingyu suddenly said: "Everyone listen to me: Hero Zhang's kungfu is matchless and his character righteous. He's the great saviour of our sect. Let's set Hero Zhang up as our sect's thirty-fourth generation leader. If the leader orders our members to enter the secret tunnel, we'll be following his orders, not breaking the rule." Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao and the others had already intended to make Zhang Wuji the cult leader. Everyone agreed with Monk Peng's suggestion. Zhang Wuji anxiously waved his hand saying: "I'm very young and am neither noble nor capable. How could I dare shoulder such a heavy burden? Also, my grandteacher, Venerable Master Zhang, repeatedly told me never to enter the Ming Cult. I promised him I won't. I accept follow Reverend Peng's suggestion." Yin Tianzheng said: "I'm your grandfather and I order you to enter the Ming Cult. Even if your grandfather is not closer to you than your grandteacher, at the very least we are equal. My words cancels out his, it's like neither of us said anything. It's your own decision whether to enter the Ming Cult." Yin Yewang added: "Add your uncle to the equation as well - is that enough to tip the scales? It is said: to see a maternal uncle is to see mother. As your mother is no longer around, I take her place."

Zhang Wuji was saddened by his grandfather's and uncle's words. He said: "Sect Leader Yang left a will before he died. I brought it out with me from the secret tunnel. I had intended to give it to you once your injuries recovered. Sect Leader Yang's last wishes were that my godfather, the Golden Haired Lion King, temporarily assume the position of sect leader." Saying this, he drew out the will and handed it to Yang Xiao.

Peng Yingyu said: "Hero Zhang, a true man knows how to change plans according to the circumstances. The Golden

Golden Haired Lion King is your godfather, relationship wise he's just like your natural father. It is only natural that a son succeeds his father. Since the Golden Haired Lion King is not here, please follow the wishes of Sect Leader Yang and become our temporary sect leader." Everyone said: "He is right." Zhang Wuji was wrecked with anxiety hearing the sound of fighting get closer and closer. For a moment he had no idea what to do. He thought: "The most important thing is to save all these people. I'll worry about the rest later." So he said clearly: "Since you all value me so, if I refuse I'll be a great sinner towards the Ming Cult. Junior Zhang Wuji will temporarily assume the office of sect leader. Once the dangers of today have passed, please elect someone more worthy." Everyone broke out cheering at his words. Despite the fact that powerful enemies were approaching and impending danger looming, great joy was seen on everyone's face. Since the untimely death of the late sect leader Yang Dingtian, the Ming Cult had no leader to hold them together. They had fought among themselves, killing each other and splitting the once powerful and influential sect up. Some members had left to set up their own organisations while others had descended into evil and wickedness, further worsening the situation. Now that a strong leader had surfaced, how could they not be affected? Those who were able to move fell to their knees. Though Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang were Zhang Wuji's grandfather and uncles respectively, they were no exception. Zhang Wuji quickly kowtowed back and said: "Everyone please rise. Left Emissary Yang, please pass my orders: every member of our sect is to retreat down the secret tunnel."

Yang Xiao replied: "Yes! Your orders will be carried out. I have a suggestion - we should order the Raging Fire Flag to block the enemy with fire and burn down all buildings on Brightness Peak. The enemy will then think we've run away. What do you think?" Zhang Wuji said: "Your scheme is

brilliant. Left Emissary Yang, please pass the orders." Inwardly he thought: "This was the same plan that Zhu Changling used years ago. It was actually a good tactic, unfortunately he used it to deceive me." Yang Xiao's orders were passed - cult members were ordered to retreat, the Flood Water and Raging Fire Flags were ordered to form the rearguard. As the Heavenly Eagle Sect were guests, their members entered the secret tunnel first. They were followed by the Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder Gates; the ranking officers of Brightness Peak; the Gold, Wood and Earth Flags; the Five Wanderers and Wei Yixiao. Shortly after Zhang Wuji and Yang Xiao entered the tunnel, the members of the Water Flag went in. By now, the flames were lighting up the eastern and western sky. The fire burned brighter and brighter. Then the Fire Flag sprayed oil onto the flames, causing the fires to erupt even further. Though the attackers were numerous, none of them dared to approach the flames. Instead, they surrounded Brightness Peak blocking off the escape routes. The Fire Flag members went down the tunnel and shut the entrance. Not long after, the building above collapsed, covering the entrance to the secret tunnel with burning debris.

The raging fire burned for two days and two nights. Brightness Peak was the headquarters of the Ming Cult with a heritage stretching back hundreds of years. Everything, from the main reception hall to ordinary buildings, was burnt to the ground. When the fire subsided, the attackers found the remains of Ming Cult followers killed in battle among the debris, their bodies burnt beyond recognition. They assumed that the Ming Cult had refused to surrender, preferring to die instead. They assumed that Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the rest had all lost their lives in the fire. The Heavenly Eagle Sect and Ming Cult used the map of the tunnels to divide the area up into living spaces. The tunnel was deep underground so they felt neither the heat of the flames nor

head a sound from above. They had brought enough foodstuffs and water in to last them for two months. Each member of the Ming Cult and the Heavenly Eagle Sect maintained a respectful silence. They were all aware that the secret tunnel was a forbidden, sacred place. It was only by the sect leader's grace that they were able to take refuge there. Therefore, no one dared to wander around at will.

Yang Xiao and the other leaders gathered around Yang Dingtian's remains and listened to Zhang Wuji's story on how he came across Yang Dingtian's will and learnt Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. When he finished, he handed the kungfu manual over to Yang Xiao. Yang Xiao refused to accept it. He bowed and said: "The late Sect Leader Yang's will was clearly written: 'The Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual shall be given to Xie Xun for safe keeping. It shall then be passed on to the new sect leader.' It is more appropriate for you, as sect leader, to keep it." Everyone then turned to read Yang Dingtian's will. They sighed sadly when they finished, saying: "Sect Leader Yang was both brave and far-sighted. Yet it was his wife's infidelity caused him to suffer a fire deviaton and die. If only we had seen the will earlier, then we would not be in this situation today." Everyone thought of the tragic deaths of their comrades, they gritted their teeth in grief and cursed Cheng Kun. Yang Xiao said: "Though Cheng Kun was Mrs Yang's martial brother and the Golden Haired Lion King's master, we had never met him previously. But we have seen the result of his work. It turns out that for the last few decades, he has been trying to destroy our cult." Zhou Dian said: "Left Emissary Yang, Bat King Wei, you've both fallen into his trap, you can be considered supid." He had intended to attack Yin Tianzheng as well. However, he took Zhang Wuji's feelings into account and swallowed the words "White Browed Old Man". Yang Xiao's face turned red and he said: "At least heaven is just, that evil Cheng Kun died under Brother Yewang's palm." The

leader of the Fire Flag said with hatred: "With all his evil deeds, Cheng Kun got off easy to die like that." They discussed the matter a little while more before breaking up to sit down and treat their injuries. After seven or eight days in the secret tunnel, Zhang Wuji's sword wound was about ninety percent healed leaving a inch long scar. He began to treat the external wounds of the brothers. Though there was a huge shortage of medicines, he managed to heal everyone with his skills in acupuncture and acupressure. At first everyone only knew that their young sect leader's martial arts were unfathomable. They had never imagined that his medical skills were so amazing, that they even rivaled the skills of the "Divine Doctor of Butterfly Valley" Hu Qingniu.

After another few days, Zhang Wuji's wound was completely healed. He then used his Art of Nine Yang help Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the Five Wanderers force out the Xuan Yin Finger's cold poison. Within three days, they had completely recovered from their internal injuries and wanted to leave the secret tunnel and destroy the enemy. Zhang Wuji said: "You've just recovered from your injuries and your inner strength has not returned completely. Since you've already been patient for so long, waiting a few more days can't hurt." For the next few days, everyone worked hard preparing themselves. Those with mediocre kungfu sharpened sabres and swords and those with better kungfu practiced regulating their chi. The Ming Cult had suffered one humiliation after another since the six major sects besieged Brightness Peak. Now their frustration was boiling over, needing an outlet to be released.

One night, Yang Xiao explained the Ming Cult's creed, aim, and rules, their main power centres in different places, and the abilities and characters of their leaders to Zhang Wuji. They heard the sound of iron chains clanging as Xiao Zhao approached to serve them tea. Zhang Wuji said: "Left

Emissary Yang, this young lady has committed no offence. Please unlock the chains and release her!" Yang Xiao said: "I won't dare disobey sect leader's orders." He immediately called for Yang Buhui and told her: "Buhui, the sect leader wants you to unlock Xiao Zhao's chains." Yang Buhui said: "I left the key a drawer in my room." Zhang Wuji said: "That's not a problem. The key wouldn't have been burnt."

Yang Xiao waited until his daughter and Xiao Zhao had left before saying: "Sect leader, though Xiao Zhao is very young her behaviour is quite strange. We have to be cautious towards her." Zhang Wuji asked: "What are her origins?" Yang Xiao answered: "Half a year ago, I took Buhui on a trip down the mountain. We found her in the desert, crying over two dead bodies. We asked her what happened and she replied that they dead were her parents. Her parents had offended a government officer in the Central Plains and her family had been exiled to the Western Regions to work for the military. A few days before, unable to bear their treatment by the Mongol soldiers any longer, they had tried to escape. However, her parents succumbed to their injuries and exhaustion. I saw that she was a young girl all alone in the world. Though her face was ugly, from her speech she was not stupid. So I helped her bury her parents, then took her in as Buhui's maid." Zhang Wuji nodded his head thinking: "So both Xiao Zhao's parents have passed away. Her life is really tragic, no different from me." Yang Xiao continued: "Back in Brightness Peak, one day when I was teaching Buhui martial arts, Xiao Zhao was listening nearby. I was explaining the sixty-four Bagua positions. Buhui had not get grasped the idea when I saw Xiao Zhao's eyes look at the right position." Zhang Wuji said: "It's probably because she's very intelligent. That's why she understood the concept before Sister Buhui." Yang Xiao said: "That's what I thought at first, I was very happy. But when I considered it further, I became suspicious. I deliberately recited an

extremely difficult formula, something I had never taught Buhui. Then I recited some Bagua positions wrongly, only to see her frown slightly - she had noticed the mistakes. Since then I've kept this in mind, knowing that this little girl has been taught by a great master and probably has powerful kungfu. She must have been sent to Brightness Peak by someone to spy on us."

Zhang Wuji said: "It might be that her father was an expert of the Book of Changes and she learnt it from him." Yang Xiao said: "Sect leader please reflect: the literary knowledge of the Book of Changes is different from its application to martial arts. If Xiao Zhao had learnt it from her parents, then they must be top wulin experts. How could they have been killed by Mongol soldiers? At that time, I pretended I had not noticed anything. A few days later, I casually asked her about her parents' names and origins. She smoothly answered everything without revealing the slightest information. At that time I showed no reaction, all I did was warn Buhui to be careful with her. Then one day, I told a joke and Buhui laughed loudly. Xiao Zhao was nearby and she couldn't help laughing as well. She was standing behind Buhui and I, we could not see her. But it so happened that Buhui was playing with a dagger in her hand and her reflection was caught clearly in the dagger. She was no ugly girl! Her features were much more beautiful than Buhui's. But when I turned around, her face had reassumed its squinted eye and twisted mouth look." Zhang Wuji smiled saying: "To twist her face to look ugly all the time...that must be quite difficult." In his heart he thought: "Left Emmissary Yang is truly amazing. There's no Xiao Zhao could continually fool someone like him." Yang Xiao continued: "Even then I kept silent. Late that night, I quietly went to my daughter room to watch Xiao Zhao. I saw that girl leave Buhui's room. She went to the eastern side of the house looking for who-knows-what. She searched carefully in every room and

corner. Unable to bear it any longer, I revealed myself and questioned her - what was she looking for and who ordered her to spy on Brightness Peak. She calmly replied without panic that no one had sent her. She just enjoyed playing around and being inquisitive. I tried everything to threaten and persuade her but she told me nothing. I locked her up and starved her for seven days and seven nights. Even when she was fainting from starvation she wouldn't say anything. Finally, I locked her up in those iron chains. When she moves, the clanging sound follows so she can't stealthily harm Buhui. I didn't kill her because I wanted to find out her origins. Sect Leader, this girl is definitely a spy sent by some enemy. Based on her proficiency in Bagua positions, she's either from Kunlun or E'Mei Sect. But she's still a young girl, no great danger to us. Let her serve you. It is her good fortune that you're willing to show mercy on her."

Zhang Wuji stood up and laughingly said: "We've been cooped up in this underground prison for so long. Don't you think it's now time to go up and stretch our legs?" Yang Xiao asked happily: "Are we going out now?" Zhang Wuji answered: "Those who have yet to recover cannot fight. They don't have to contribute to our cause now. The rest can all go out. What do you think?" When Yang Xiao gave the order, the secret tunnel was filled with joyous cheering and bustling activity.

They had entered the tunnel through the entrance in Yan Buhui's room. Now they went out through the side entrance, coming out behind the mountain. Zhang Wuji pushed away the stone blocking the entrance, let everyone through, then pushed the stone back into place. The Earth Flag Leader Yan Yuan was the Ming Cult's strongest man. He experimentally tried to move the rock but it would not even budge. It was as if he was a dragonfly trying to move a stone pillar. His admiration for his young sect leader increased.

They did not want to alert the enemy so they came out of the secret tunnel silently. Not even a cough was heard. Zhang Wuji stood on top of a large rock. The moonlight shone down on them. To the west were the ranks of the Heavenly Eagle Sect: the three halls - Heaven's Secret, Purple Secret and Heaven's City - and the five branches - Divine Snake, Green Dragon, White Tiger, Crimson Sparrow and Black Valiant. They formed orderly rows, each with its own leader. On the east were the Ming Cult's Five Flags: Gold, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. The Flags were arranged in the Five Elements position with their leaders and deputy leaders at the head. In the middle were the Brightness Peak troops, the Four Gates under Yang Xiao's command - Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder - headed by their own leaders. The Heaven Gate was made out of Central Plains men, the Earth Gate out of Central Plains women, the Wind Gate out of members who had taken religious orders, and the Thunder Gate out of non-Chinese from the Western Regions. Though most of the Five Flags and Four Gates members had been wounded in last battle, they were all full of spirit and vigour. The Green Wing Bat King Wei Yixiao, Leng Qian and the rest of the Five Wanderers stood protectively behind Zhang Wuji. Everyone waited respectfully for the Sect Leader's orders. Zhang Wuji slowly said: "Enemies have invaded our territory. No matter how patient we are, we cannot tolerate this. However I don't want any needless killing and injuring. Keep this in mind. The Heavenly Eagle Sect will attack from the west under the command of Sect Leader Yin. The Five Elements Flags will attack from the east under the command of Wood Flag's Flag Leader Wen Cangsong. Left Emmisarry Yang will lead the Heaven and Earth Gates to attack the north. The Five Wanderers will lead the Wind and Thunder Gates to attack the south. Bat King Wei and I will direct the proceedings." Everyone bowed and accepted their orders.

Zhang Wuji waved his left hand and said softly: "Go!" The four divisions separated and surrounded Brightness Peak from the north, south, east and west. Zhang Wuji turned to Wei Yixiao and said: "Bat King, let us launch a surprise attack from the secret tunnel." Wei Yixiao said happily: "Great idea!" The two of them re-entered the secret tunnel and surfaced in Yang Buhui's room.

They had to push hard and expend a lot of energy before they could move the pile of gravel and burnt wood blocking the trapdoor. The first thing they smelt when they came out of the tunnel was the stench of burnt things. At that time, the Ming Cult troops were still a distance away. But their presence had already been discovered by the enemies still left on Brightness Peak, they called out warning their comrades. Zhang Wuji and Wei Yixiao smiled at each other, thinking: "All this fuss over nothing. Our victory is easily assured." They hid themselves behind a partially collapsed wall. In the moonlight, they could see people running back and forth. Not long later, Shuo Bu De and Zhou Dian arrived side-by-side from the south and launched themselves into the press of enemies. Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao and the Five Flags soon appeared. Yelling loudly, they threw themselves forward to attack, like a tiger pouncing on a flock of sheep. The enemies who had attacked Brightness Peak were the Beggars Clan, Wushan Clan, Sea Sand Clan and about ten other sects organisations. When they saw Brightness Peak razed to the ground, they thought they had won a great victory. So the Beggars Clan, Great Whale Clan and most of the other sects had left the mountain. There were only four groups still on Brightness Peak: the Divine Fist Clan, Three Rivers Clan, Wushan Clan and the Five Wind Sabres Clan. The Ming Cult's attack was very sudden. Though there were skilled fighters among the four clans, they were no match for the lights of Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng. In the time it took for rice to cook, a large number of them were dead or

injured.

Zhang Wuji came out and said clearly: "The Ming Cult's top fighters have gathered on Brightness Peak. Listen up everyone: there's no point fighting any longer. Throw your weapons down and surrender. We'll spare your lives and see you on your way down the mountain."

Many members of the four clans were dead or injured. The rest could see that it was pointless to keep fighting. One by one, they threw down their weapons and surrendered. Over the last ten days, the Wushan Clan had built a number of temporary shelters. Now the Wood Flag members started cutting down trees and building more thatched shelters. The female Earth Gate members busied themselves boiling water and preparing food.

The Ming Cult built a large fire and thanked the Holy Fire for its protection. The White Browed Eagle King Yin Tianzheng stood up and shouted: "All members of the Heavenly Eagle Sect listen: Our sect and Ming Cult have the same origins, we are really the same. Over twenty years ago, I had a disagreement with my Ming Cult comrades. So I left for the south-east and set up my own sect. Now the Ming Cult has recognised Hero Zhang as their leader, all the past differences have been forgotten. From this day on, the words 'Heavenly Eagle Sect' no longer exists on this earth. All of us are Ming Cult members, we'll all obey Sect Leader Zhang's orders. Anyone who disagrees can leave the mountain now!" The Heavenly Eagle Sect members cheered joyously, all saying: "The Heavenly Eagle Sect broke away from Ming Cult, now it's returning to its roots. It's a wonderful thing for all of us to enter the Ming Cult. Sect Leader Yin and Sect Leader Zhang are relatives, it makes no difference whose orders we obey." Yin Tianzheng shouted: "From today onwards, there is only Sect Leader Zhang. Anyone who calls

me 'Sect Leader Yin' is a rebel." Zhang Wuji saluted with his hands and said: "The Heavenly Eagle Sect's reunification with Ming Cult is a wonderful thing. The thing is, I only accepted the position as sect leader because of the urgent circumstances. Now that the enemies have been driven away, we should select a new sect leader. There are many great heros in the sect. I'm young and ignorant, how dare I continue as sect leader?" Zhou Dian yelled: "Sect leader, please think about us all. We, who've been fighting among ourselves for the posiion, have set accepted you as our leader. If you insist on declining the position, just appoint someone else as sect leader. Hrmph! No matter who it is, I, Zhou Dian, will be the first to reject him. Even if you choose me, I'll still reject it." Peng Yingyu said: "Sect leader, if you refuse to take up this burden, the Ming Cult will return to infighting and killing. When that happens, are we to beg you to save us again?"

Zhang Wuji thought: "What they say is true. In these circumstances, how can I just shake my sleeves and leave? But I neither know how to nor want to be a sect leader." He said clearly: "Since you value me so much, I won't dare refuse. However, I have three conditions. If you don't accept them, I would rather die than become sect leader." Everyone said: "We would not dare disobey sect leader's orders. No matter whether it's three conditions or thirty, we'll agree. Please state your conditions." Zhang Wuji said: "Our sect has been labelled heretical and evil. That is probably because others do not understand our religion. But because of our large numbers, it is difficult to pick out our bad members and some unworthy ones have harmed the innocent. This is my first condition: from now onwards, everyone, including myself, must strictly adhere to the rules of our religion. We must destroy the wicked and uphold the righteous. We have to support and love each other, steering our brothers away from the wrongful path." He turned to

Zhou Dian and said: "Cursing and arguing is fine, fighting is forbidden. I appoint Mr Leng Qian as Disciplinary Officer. Those who break the rules or fight with a brother will be severely punished. This includes myself, my grandfather, uncle and other elders." Everyone bowed and said: "That is how it should be." Leng Qian took a step forward and said: "I accept your orders!" He was a man of few words. By this he meant that he accepted the responsibility and would do his very best. Zhang Wuji said: "The second condition is more difficult. The enmity between our sect and the major sects of the Central Plains is great. Both parties have had their disciples, family members and dear friends killed and injured. From now on we will let matters rest and not seek them out for revenge." Everyone felt that this was not fair, no one spoke for some time.

Zhou Dian said: "What if they bother us again?" Zhang Wuji said: "We'll act according to the circumstances. If they force our hand, we'll have no to fight back." The Iron Hat Priest said: "Alright! After all, our lives were saved by Sect Leader. If he wants us to do this, we'll do it." Peng Yingyu said loudly: "Brothers:The Central Plains sects killed many of our people, but we also killed many of their people. If we get caught in a circle of killing and revenge, even more people will die. It's for our own good that Sect Leader orders us not to go looking for revenge." Everyone realised that he was right, so they agreed. Zhang Wuji was very happy. He cupped his fists and said: "Your open-heartedness is a blessing to the world." He then ordered the leaders of the Five Element Flags to release the Divine Fist Sect, Wushan Clan and the other prisoners, tell them of the Ming Cult's intentions to make peace with Central Plains sects, and escort them down the mountain.

Zhang Wuji said: "The third condition concerns the late sect leader Yang's will. His will said that whoever recovered the

Sacred Fire Scriptures will become Ming Cult's thirty-fourth sect leader. Until then, the Golden Hair Lion King Xie Xun is to take his place. We'll first set out for sea to bring Protector King Xie back, then think of a way to recover the Sacred Fire Scriptures. When that is done, you can have no more objections to me retiring." When everyone heard this, they couldn't help looking at each other thinking: "We've been a headless dragon for so many years. Now we finally have a wise, brave, benevolent and righteous hero as our sect leader. What if some incompetent disciple accidentally stumbles across the Sacred Fire Scriptures in the future? We can't make someone like that our sect leader." Yang Xiao said: "Sect Leader Yang's will was written over twenty years ago. The situation is very different now. We definitely have to bring the Golden Hair Lion King back and recover the Sacred Fire Scriptures. But we cannot accept some one else as sect leader." Zhang Wuji firmly stated that Yang Dingtian's wishes had to be followed. So the rest had to grudgingly agree. They all thought: "The Golden Hair Lion King probably died a long time ago. The Sacred Fire Scriptures have been lost for hundreds of years, they may never be found. Let's agree first, if things change in the future then we'll reason with him." Zhang Wuji had been thinking about these three conditions for the last 10 days. Now hearing everyone agree, he was extremely happy. He immediately ordered them to slaughter some cows and goats. Using the blood, he drank an oath with them. Zhang Wuji said: "The most important thing to do now is to go out to sea and find Protector King Xie. I have to go personally on this mission. Who else will go with me?" Everyone stood up and said: "We're willing to go out to sea with you." Zhang Wuji had just been thrust into this position. He knew he lacked the skills and capabilities to handle it. So he conferred quietly with Yang Xiao for a while. Then he said clearly: "We don't need many people to come with us to sea. Moreover, there are many other things to

attend to. Let's do it this way: Left Emmissary Yang, please remain on Brightness Peak with the Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder Gates to reconstruct our headquarters. The Five Flags will carry the news of our three conditions to the members in other places. Would grandfather and uncle please lead the Heavenly Eagle Flag to investigate if enemies intend to make trouble for us. Then seek out the whereabouts of the Right Emmissary and the Purple Robed Dragon King. Bat King Wei, please set out to inform the six major sects of our intentions to make peace. Even if we can't turn enenmity into friendship, at the very least we can stop fighting. This is a very difficult task. However, with yor great wisdom you'll definately be able to accomplish it. The Five Wanderers will accompany me out to sea to find Protector King Xie." As the sect leader, though his speech was humble and polite, every word was an order that cannot be disobeyed. Everyone accepted this tasks. Yang Buhui said: "Dad, I want to go sea to see the iceberg." Yang Xiao smiled and said: "You'll have to ask sect leader for permission. I have no authority to decide." Yang Buhui only kept silent. Zhang Wuji smiled, thinking of the time he brought her to the west. Along the way he had entertained her with stories about the polar bears, seals, strange fish and all sorts of other animals, now she wanted to see them for herself. He said: "Little sister Buhui, ocean travel is dangerous. If you're not afraid and Left Emmissary Yang is willing to let you go, then both of you can come with me." Yang Buhui clapped her hands and said: "I'm not afraid on anything. Dad, let's go with Big Brrother Wuji.....no, with Sect Leader!" Yang Xiao did not answer, he looked at Zhang Wuji waiting for his decision. Zhang Wuji said: "Alright then. I'll trouble Mr Leng to remain on Brightness Peak to temporarily assume command of the Four Gates." Leng Qian said: "Yes!" Zhou Dian clapped his hands and stamped his feet, yelling: "Wonderful, wonderful!" Shuo Bu De asked: "Brother Zhou, what's so wonderful?" Zhou Dian replied: "Sect leader thinks

so highly of Leng Qian, that's great for the Five Wanderer's image. Plus, who knows how long we'll be at sea, at least there'll be two extra people to talk to. If I want to argue with someone, there's always Left Emmissary Yang. Otherwise I'll have to talk to Leng Qian, and he's just like a wooden dummy." Everyone burst out laughing. Leng Qian did not get angry, neither did he laugh. He just acted like he had heard nothing.

They all ate their fill then separated to rest. Zhang Wuji wanted Yang Buhui to unlock Xiao Zhao's chains. However they could not find the key amidst all the debris. Xiao Zhao said indifferently: "I like the sound these chains make when I move. It's alright if I keep wearing them." Zhang Wuji reassured her: "Xiao Zhao, wait here at Brightness Peak. When I bring my godfather back, I'll borrow his Dragon Sabre to cut the chains off." Xiao Zhao shook her head without answering.

The next morning, Zhang Wuji lead his party to bid farewell to Leng Qian. Leng Qian said: "Sect leader, take care." Zhang Wuji said: "Mr Leng, your job at headquarters is a difficult one." Leng Qian turned to Zhou Dian and said: "Be careful, don't let strange fish eat you!" Zhou Dian grasped his hand feeling touched. The Five Wanderers were as close as brothers. Leng Qian rarely spoke so these few extra words showed that he was very worried that some strange fish would eat his brother in the middle of the ocean. Leng Qian and the Four Gates accompanied them to the foot of Brightness Peak, then they parted.

End of Chapter 22.

Chapter 23 - Intoxicating Lotus of the Green Willow Manor

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhang Wuji he said, "In order to save others, I have to play rough. I apologize for being inappropriate." Grabbing her left foot he tore away her shoe and sock. Zhao Min was both angry and scared. "Stinky boy, what are you doing?" she asked. Zhang Wuji did not answer. He grabbed her right foot and also took her shoe and sock away.

They continued their journey for more than a hundred 'li's before spending the night on the desert. Zhang Wuji slept until midnight, when suddenly he heard a faint 'dingdong, dingdong' of clear metallic noise coming from the west. His heart was stirred. Immediately he woke up and quietly went toward the incoming noise. Rushing ahead for about a 'li' he saw a shadow of a small person moving under the moonlight. He sped up his steps and called out, "Xiao Zhao, why are you following us?"

That shadow was indeed Xiao Zhao. As soon as she saw Zhang Wuji, "Wah!" she broke into tears and threw herself on his bosom; sobbing and crying without saying anything.

Zhang Wuji gently patted her shoulder and said, "Good child, don't cry, don't cry!"

Apparently Xiao Zhao had experienced much suffering and grievance; as she finally was able to vent it off, she cried even louder. "Wherever you go, I ... I will follow you."

Zhang Wuji thought, "This little girl's parents are dead; and Yang Zuoshi [Left Emissary Yang] father and daughter always suspect her, she is truly pitiful. Just because I treated her nicely she is quite attached to me." He said, "Very well, don't cry. I will take you to the sea with me."

Xiao Zhao was elated; she looked up. The dim and hazy moonlight shone on her simple and beautiful, yet elegant, small face like a layer of fine veil. The crystal clear tears had not been wiped out; yet her eyes shone with happiness just like the waves of the sea.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "Xiao Zhao, when you grow up, you will be very beautiful."

Xiao Zhao laughed, "How do you know?" she asked.

Before Zhang Wuji could answer they suddenly heard the noise of hoof beats toward northeast to them; a large group of riders galloped from the west heading to the east. It sounded like there were at least a hundred riders.

A short time later Wei Yixiao and Yang Xiao hurriedly came one after another. "Jiaozhu [Cult Leader]," they said, "A large group of riders speed along in the middle of the night, chances are they are the enemy of the cult."

Zhang Wuji told Xiao Zhao to join Peng Yingyu and the others, while he took Wei and Yang two people toward the noise of hoof beats to investigate.

When they got nearer, they saw a row of horse hoof prints on the sand. Wei Yixiao stooped down to take a look; he grabbed a handful of sand and said, "There is a bloodstain."

Zhang Wuji took the sand toward his nose and smelled fresh stench of blood. Following the print on the sand three people pursued for several 'li's. Suddenly Yang Xiao saw a half-broken blade on the sand to his left. He picked it up to take a closer look, and saw three characters engraved on the hilt, 'Feng Yuansheng'. He hesitated for a moment before saying, "This belonged to a member of Kongtong Sect.

Jiaozhu, I think Kongtong people prepared some horses in here to take them back to the Central Plains."

"It's been more than half a month since the battle of the Brightness Peak," Wei Yixiao said, "I wonder what craftiness they are up to by still being here?"

As they knew it was the Kongtong people, three people set

their hearts at peace. They returned to their camp and slept peacefully. Toward the afternoon of the fifth day they saw a group of pedestrians on the prairie ahead; most of them were Buddhist nuns wearing dark robes, along with some seven, eight men.

As they were getting closer to each other, one of the nuns called out with a sharp voice, "It's the evil thieves from the Devil Cult!" Everybody unsheathed their weapons and spread out in battle formation.

Zhang Wuji knew they were from the Emei Sect, but he had never met any one of them before. "Are 'Shitai's from the Emei Sect?" he asked in clear voice.

A small and wiry middle-aged nun stepped out and in stern voice said, "Evil thief from the Devil Cult, why do you ask? Come out here to receive your death."

"How must I address Shitai?" Zhang Wuji asked, "Why are you so angry?"

"Evil thief!" that nun roared, "Are you worthy to ask my name? Who are you?"

Wei Yixiao dashed toward the incoming group of people. He sealed two male disciples' acupoints. Grabbing the back of their collars he kicked the ground and flew some distance away. Leaving the two men on the ground he swiftly returned to his original position. His movements were as quick as a falcon snatching a rabbit; his speed was unbelievably fast. With a cold laugh he said, "This is the Number One Martial Artist of the present age, peerless under the heaven, unifying the Left and Right Brightness Emissaries under his command, leading the Four Cult Protector Kings, the Five Wanderers, the Five-Element Flags,

the Heaven, Earth, Wind and Thunder Gates; the Zhang Jiaozhu of Ming Cult. He drove away the Emei Sect down the mountain; he snatched away the Yitian sword from Mie Jue Shitai's hand. With his reputation, don't you think he is worthy to ask Shitai's illustrious name?"

The Emei Sect disciples were astonished at his words, but as they had seen Wei Yixiao's demonstration of such an unthinkable skill, nobody doubted what he said. After calming herself down the middle-aged nun asked, "Who are you, Sire?"

"My surname is Wei, my nickname is Green Winged Bat King," Wei Yixiao answered. The Emei disciples cried out in alarm; immediately four of them went to take a look at their two comrades. Wei Yixiao said, "We have received Zhang Jiaozhu's command: The Ming Cult and the Six Major Sects are to refrain from fighting each other, to forget faults and repair goodness. Your disciples are fortunate, Bat King Wei did not suck their blood."

After Zhang Wuji treated his injury with the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, not only had the cold poison of the Xuan Yin fingers been driven out, but the previously accumulated poison in his system had also been expelled for the most part; so that every time he exerted his internal strength he did not have to suck blood to resist the cold anymore.

Those four Emei disciples took their two comrades back to the group. They were still thinking on how to unseal their acupoints when they heard two swishing noise. Two small pebbles flew, splitting the air, toward two people's acupoints, unsealing them. It was Yang Xiao, using Divine Flicking Finger transmitting his 'zhi shi dian xue' [acupoint sealing technique by throwing rocks] skill.

The middle-aged nun had to admit that not only the opposite party was numerous, the two people who had just demonstrated their skills showed that their martial arts were much higher. If they had to fight, her group would inevitably suffer a big loss. Besides, she was not sure if the so-called 'refrain from fighting each other, to forget faults and repair goodness' was true or not; therefore, she said, "Pin ni [lit. impoverished nun] 'fa ming' [Buddhist name/title, not real name] is Jing Kong. Have you gentlemen seen my Shifu?"

"Honorable Master has left the Brightness Peak more than half a month ago," Zhang Wuji said, "I believe by this time they have reached the Yumen [Jade Gate] pass. You have come from the east; could it be that you missed each other?"

A thirty-something woman behind Jing Kong said, "Shijie [martial (older) sister], don't listen to his nonsense; there were three groups of us, each with flare signals, how can we miss them?"

Listening to her rudeness Zhou Dian wanted to teach her some lessons; he said, "It's so strange ..." But Zhang Wuji cut him off in low voice, "Mr. Zhou, don't lower yourself to the same level with her. They could not find their Shifu, naturally they are anxious."

Jing Kong's face showed suspicions. "Have our Master and comrades fallen into the Ming Cult's hand?" she asked, "As men of honor, shouldn't you tell us the truth?"

Zhou Dian laughed. "Let me be frank to you: the Emei Sect came and without considering their own strength, attacked the Brightness Peak, so everybody from Mie Jue Shitai down to her last disciple were captured and detained in the underwater prison. Let them ponder over their own faults for

eight years, ten years, then we'll talk about whether we should release them or not," he said.

Peng Yingyu quickly said, "Please don't mind Zhou Xiong's [Brother Zhou] joke; Mie Jue Shitai's divine energy is matchless, each of your fellow disciples' martial art is superior, how can they fall into Ming Cult's hand? Let us not talk any further; please return to Emei, I am sure you'll see each other then."

Jing Kong half believed half doubted; she could not make up her mind. Wei Yixiao said, "This Zhou Xiong loves to joke around. But do you think our Cult Leader would swindle juniors like you?"

The middle-aged woman said, "The Devil Cult is always crafty, deceitful and sly; how can we believe anything you said?"

Tang Yang, the Flag Leader of the Flooding Water Flag waved his left hand; immediately the Five Element Flags spread out to surround the Emei disciples. The Gigantic Wood on the east, the Raging Fire on the south, the Sharp Metal on the west, the Flooding Water on the north, the Thick Earth moving outside the encirclement, ready to respond.

In a loud voice Yin Tianzheng said, "Lao Fu [Old Man] is the White Browed Eagle King. I alone am enough to capture all of you juniors. The Ming Cult is showing mercy to you today; as younger generation you should think before you speak." He spoke with a thunderous voice, shaking the Emei disciples' ear drums so that their ears were ringing and their minds were troubled; making them difficult to concentrate. Looking at his white eyebrows and white beard and witnessing his divine power their hearts shivered in fear; everybody was dumbstruck in amazement.

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Please convey my respect to your honorable master; tell her the Ming Cult's Zhang Wuji wishes her well." Thereupon he led his people continue their journey to the east.

Tang Yang waited until Wei Yixiao, Yin Tianzheng and the other walked pass one by one before he waved his hand once again to recall the Five Element Flags. The Emei disciples watched this procession in awe; their hearts were filled with fear, their eyes followed Zhang Wuji and his entourage for a while, jaws dropped and speechless.

Peng Yingyu said, "Jiaozhu, I believe there is something fishy here. Mie Jue Shitai and the others have left to the east; I couldn't think of any reason why they miss their disciples. Every sect every organization has their own special symbol for communicating with each other; how can they miss each other's track?"

They continued their journey while discussing this strange occurrence. They thought it was unfathomable to think this many Emei disciples to suddenly vanish in the desert. Zhang Wuji was concerned over Zhou Zhiruo's safety and well-being; but he was uncomfortable to share his thoughts with other people.

One day, towards the evening, the Flag Leader of the Thick Earth Flag, Yan Yuan suddenly exclaimed, "There is something strange here!" Rushing ahead he carefully examined the shrubs on their left. He took an iron spade from one his comrades and started digging the earth. Not too long afterwards, a corpse was revealed. It had been decayed, its face was unrecognizable, but judging from the clothes, it was a Kunlun Sect disciple.

The Thick Earth Flag members immediately began excavating the earth around and very soon they dug a big hole. There were sixteen corpses lying around randomly inside the hole; all were Kunlun Sect disciples. If it were their own school, in no way would they be buried this carelessly; so it was obvious that they were buried by the enemy. Looking at these corpses, every single one of them had weapon-inflicted wounds. Zhang Wuji ordered the Thick Earth Flag to bury each corpse separately and properly. Everybody looked at each other; their minds were filled with the same question: "Who did this?"

After getting over their shock, Peng Yingyu said, "If this matter is not brought to light, these bad debts would certainly be heaped upon our heads."

In a clear voice Shuo Bude said, "Everybody, listen up! If we are facing blades and spears in a broad daylight war under our Jiaozhu's command, although I do not dare to say that we are invincible, but we wouldn't lose to other people in any way. However, a stab in the back is more difficult to guard against. Therefore, from now on we must guard against the enemy's poisonous plot in every drop of water we drink, every food we eat and at every accommodation we stay." The Cult complied in one voice.

Continuing their journey a little bit further, the setting sun appeared red like blood, very soon the sky would turn dark. They were just about to find a place to spend the night when they saw four bald condors circling the sky continuously toward the northeast. Suddenly a bald eagle dived down but flew back up immediately; some of its feathers fell and it cried out in pain. Apparently it was struck with something from below and it suffered an injury.

After Zhuang Zheng, the Flag Leader of the Sharp Metal Flag

died under the Yitian Sword, Zhang Wuji promoted the Flag Leader Deputy Wu Jincao to be the Flag Leader. Seeing the strange bald eagle Wu Jincao said, "Let me take a look." Leading two of his brethren he rushed ahead.

A moment later one of them came back and reported to Zhang Wuji, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: Yin Liu Xia [The Sixth Hero Yin] of Wudang Sect has fallen inside that valley."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Yin Liu Xia?" he asked, "Is he injured?"

"Apparently he is seriously injured," the man replied, "As soon as the Flag Leader Wu recognized Yin Liu Xia, he ordered subordinate to report to the Jiaozhu. Flag Leader Wu is going down the valley to rescue ..."

Zhang Wuji was extremely shocked; he rushed toward the valley without waiting for the man to finish his report. Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others followed behind. When they got near they saw a big sandy valley, more than a dozen of 'zhang's deep. Wu Jincao, with Yin Liting in his left arm, was stepping up and falling, strenuously trying to climb up the valley. Zhang Wuji slid down the valley wall; with one hand he grabbed Wu Jincao's right arm, with the other he examined Yin Liting's breath. He was slightly relieved to feeling a weak breath. Holding Yin Liting in his arms he leaped vertically several times and was out of the sandy valley then he laid Yin Liting down on the ground. As he calmed himself down and examined him, he was startled and his heart filled with grief and indignation. He found out that Yin Liting's knees, elbows, ankles, wrists, feet, fingers; in short, all joints on his four limbs were broken. And as Yin Liting was at the point of his death, unable to move, the enemy fed him some poison. It was truly an unheard amount of cruelty.

Yin Liting was still conscious; seeing Zhang Wuji, his face showed happiness and he spat out two small pebbles from his mouth. Apparently he was pushed down the sandy valley after he was injured, but due to his profound internal energy he did not die. The bald condors wanted to eat him, so he leaned his head sideways and bit some pebbles on the ground. With his strong internal energy he managed to shoot the pebbles up and thus had survived for several days with untold hardships.

Yang Xiao saw the four bald condors were still circling overhead; seemingly waiting for them to leave Yin Liting and then they would swoop down to feast on his corpse. Yang Xiao picked four small stones from the ground and 'swish, swish' flicked those stone up. Four bald condors successively fell on the ground, their heads were smashed by the stones.

Zhang Wuji gave Yin Liting a pill to stop the pain and protect his heart; then he thoroughly examined him. After finding more than twenty breaks on Yin Liting's four limbs, each and every one of them was crushed by heavy fingers' strength, Wuji was not able to continue the examination.

In a low voice Yin Liting said, "It's just like San Ge [third (older) brother]; Shaolin Sect ... 'jin gang zhi dao' [diamond finger blade. Chapter 3 has it as 'Golden Steel Finger'; 'jin gang' could also mean 'a very hard substance'. I am not sure why it has an extra 'blade' (?) character; I think it was a mistake, it should be 'strength/power' (?) character.] ... injured by finger strength." Zhang Wuji recalled his father telling him about how San Shibo [third martial (older) uncle] Yu Daiyan was injured; his joints were also crushed by Shaolin Sect's Diamond Finger 'Power'; and as a result he had been bedridden for more than twenty years. At that time his parents had not yet acquainted with each other.

Unexpectedly many years later one more of his shishu [martial (younger) brother] had fallen under the same Shaolin Sect's Diamond Finger. After calming himself down he said, "Liu Shu [sixth (younger) uncle], don't you worry. This matter has fallen into your nephew's hands. The criminal responsible for this will not escape justice. Which Shaolin Sect disciple did this, does Liu Shu know?"

Yin Liting shook his head. He had suffered untold hardship these past several days; he was already dead-tired. At this moment his heart was relieved, he could not hold any longer and passed out. Zhang Wuji remembered his own life; how his parents committed suicide for his San Shibo's sake. Today his Liu Shishu had fallen under similar circumstances. If he could not force Shaolin Sect to hand over the criminal responsible for this cruelty, how could he fulfill his duty toward his Yu and Yin uncles? How could he be worthy to see his departed parents? He knew that although Yin Liting was severely injured, his life was not in danger. Only his limbs would be difficult to heal; most likely he would end up sharing Yu Daiyan's fate.

Zhang Wuji's experience was limited; facing this unfortunate situation he had to calm himself and think carefully. With his hands behind his back he wandered off some distance away; finally he sat down on top of a small hill. Two thoughts were waging war inside his mind: "Shall I go to the Shaolin Temple and find the criminal to avenge Father, Mother, San Shibo and Liu Shishu? If Shaolin Sect is willing to admit honestly and hand over the criminal, naturally nothing can be better than that. Otherwise, should Ming Cult join hand with Wudang Sect to deal with Shaolin together? My brethren and I have already drunk blood and made an oath, not to seek enmity with various sects, clans and societies ['pai', 'bang' and 'hui']. But as soon as I take this matter personally, I might as well throw the oath out the window; how can I win everybody's heart? Once the disaster

gate is opened blood will be avenged, I don't know how many generations this bloodshed will continue, and how many heroes and warriors life will be sacrificed?"

In the meantime the sky had turned dark; the Ming Cult people built a fire and cooked their meals. Zhang Wuji was still sitting on the hill. He saw the bright moon rise, but he still could not make up his mind. He was deep in thought until almost midnight before he finally decided: "I'll go to Shaolin Temple and see Abbott Kong Wen; I'll explain everything and ask him to render justice." But then he thought again, "What if we reach deadlock? Must I fight? Then what will happen?" He heaved a deep sigh, stood up and thought, "I am young yet have to bear a heavy responsibility. Right from the start I face this extremely difficult situation. I wholeheartedly want to avert the war and the fighting; but this deep hatred is shoved into my face. I bear the heavy responsibility of the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, I can't get away from it; consequently I'll have to face endless and exhausting hardships! If only I am not the Cult Leader, wouldn't that be a lot better?"

As he returned to the fire he saw that everybody was very hungry but nobody dared to move their chopsticks to eat; they were standing up respectfully, waiting for him. Zhang Wuji felt very bad and busily said, "Next time you can go ahead and eat; you don't have to wait for me." He went over to see Yin Liting's condition. He saw Yang Buhui had already cleaned his wounds with hot water and was feeding him hot soup. Yin Liting was still in daze; suddenly he opened his eyes and stared at Yang Buhui and loudly said, "Xiaofu Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], I miss you so much, do you know it?"

Yang Buhui blushed; her face looked awkward. With her right hand holding the soup spoon she said in a low voice,

“Drink some more soup.”

“Promise me you won’t leave me forever,” Yin Liting said.

“All right! All right!” Yang Buhui replied, “Drink this soup first, we’ll talk later.” Yin Liting looked very happy; he opened his mouth and drank the soup.

The next day Zhang Wuji passed an order for everybody not to go their assigned destinations for the time being, but to go to Shaolin Temple at Mount Song [‘song shan’], to find out the whole story about Yin Liting’s injury first and to talk about other things later. Wei Yixiao, Zhou Dian and the others had seen the severity of Yin Liting’s injury, every one of them was enraged; hearing their Cult Leader’s order to seek justice at the Shaolin Temple they cheered loudly.

Yang Xiao had always felt regret and guilt toward Yin Liting over Ji Xiaofu’s affair; although his mouth did not say anything, in his heart he was determined to avenge him with all his might. He also quietly told his daughter to take a good care of Yin Liting and thus clearing his conscience.

From here on they did not meet any other strange events along their way. When Yin Liting awoke later, Zhang Wuji asked him again the circumstances surrounding his injury. It was still difficult for Yin Liting to speak, he said, “Shaolin Sect’s monks, five of them besieged me. They were using Shaolin martial arts, I can’t be wrong.”

That day they have entered the Yumen pass. They sold their camels and bought some horses so as not to raise any suspicions. They also changed their clothes and dressed up as traders. Some of them acquired mule carts and loaded them with leathers, goods, medicine, and other commodities. The next day early in the morning they left to get an early start along the Ganliang main road. The sun

was blazing like fire, the temperature was starting to rise.

After journeying for more than four hours they saw a row of about twenty willow trees ahead of them. They were very happy and urged their mounts to pick up speed since they wanted to take a rest under those trees. When they got closer they saw there were nine people sitting under the trees. Eight of them were big men dressed as hunters, with blades on their waists and bows and arrows on their shoulders. They also had five, six hunting falcons with them; the falcons looked fearsome with black feathers and sharp claws. The last man was a young gentleman, wearing a sapphire blue silk gown, lightly waving a folding fan in his hand. His appearance carried an elegant air around him.

Zhang Wuji turned around and dismounted his horse. He cast a glance toward that young gentleman; he noticed his facial features are delicate and exceptionally handsome. His dark eyes accentuated his white face, they were shining brightly. The folding fan in his hand had a white jade handle; the hand which waved the fan was as white as the fan handle. But everybody's attention was caught by that young gentleman's waist. They saw a golden hook, bound by a belt inlaid with precious stones; on this hook a long sword was hung. On the hilt of the sword was carved 'yi tian' two 'zhuan wen' characters [script character normally used on official seal]. The length and the shape of this sword were exactly like the one Mie Jue Shitai used to slaughter the Ming Cult people and the one Zhou Zhiruo used to stab Zhang Wuji that he almost died earlier.

The Ming Cult people were startled; as Zhou Dian was about to open his mouth to inquire when they heard from the east of the main road a disorder noise of hoof beats, a group of riders in a chaotic manner approached. They were a group of approximately fifty, sixty of Yuan soldiers, dragging along

over a hundred women tied in ropes. These women were mostly small in stature; how could they follow the horses? Some of them fell down to the ground, but the soldiers kept pulling the rope so that the women were dragged on the ground. All women were Han people; obviously they were common people who were held captive by the Yuan soldiers. Most of their clothes had been ripped apart; some were almost naked. They were crying and weeping; creating an extremely heart-wrenching noise. Some of the soldiers had wine bottles in their hands; it seemed like they were drunk. Some wielded whips and struck the women. These Mongolian soldiers spent most of their lives on the horseback, so their skill in using whip was excellent. Once the whip was lashed, a piece of the women's clothing was gone amidst the cheering and laughing of the soldiers.

The Mongolians had invaded China for almost a hundred years; they regarded the Han people lower than animals, only this kind of wantonly obscene and oppressive insult in broad daylight was actually extremely rare. The Ming Cult people's eyes narrowed into slits; they were waiting for Zhang Wuji to issue an order and they would charge to kill the soldiers and rescue the women. Suddenly that young gentleman said, "Wu Liupo, tell them to release these women and stop deliberately making such trouble!" His voice was clear and tender, sounded like a female's voice.

"Yes!" one of the men replied. He loosened one of the yellow horses tied on the willow tree, leaped up and landed on the horseback. He galloped forward while shouting, "Hey, you deliberately create trouble in broad daylight. Don't you have a superior to control you? Quickly release these women!"

From among the Yuan soldiers one rider that looked like an officer came out. A young girl in his arm, his slanting eyes bleary, he laughed and said, "You are really impatient to die,

sticking your nose into your master's business!"

That man coldly said, "You are officers and soldiers, yet you act like bandits and robbers, without any compassion toward common people. Just do as I say!"

The officer sized up the people underneath the willow trees; he was slightly surprised at the audacity of this man. He mused in his heart that when commoners see soldiers, they usually would try to avoid them while they are still far away; could it be that these people had eaten a leopard's gallbladder and a tiger's heart that they dare to mess up the soldiers' business? Sweeping his gaze he saw the young gentleman's hat was inlaid with two shining bright, longan fruit size pearls. His greed arose; he smiled broadly and said, "Rabbit master ['tu er xiang gong' - 'rabbit-like mister', I don't know how to translate this properly], come and follow your master! You will enjoy a lot of happiness!" Pressing his leg he urged his mount toward that young gentleman.

That young gentleman was initially indifferent; he did not show any anger looking at the Yuan soldiers' atrocity. Yet as he heard this officer's rudeness his handsome eyebrows slightly creased, he said, "Don't let a single one of them live."

As the word 'live' left his mouth, a 'swish' sound was heard, a feathered arrow shot out, creating a hole in the officer's chest. The arrow was released by a man standing next to the gentleman. His shooting technique was not only fast, but very strong as well; not in the least bit inferior to an expert of the Wulin world. How could a common hunter have this kind of ability?

'Swish, swish, swish!' Arrow after arrow was shot; all eight hunters shot with great accuracy, not a single arrow missed its target, one arrow killed one Yuan soldier. Although this

attack took the soldiers by surprise, they were all skilled in horseback riding and archery; with loud shouts they returned the attack by shooting arrows. The other seven hunters also mounted their horses and charged forward. Arrow after arrow, in a short moment they had killed about thirty Yuan soldiers. The rest of the soldiers understood their precarious situation; they whistled to each other, threw the women away, turned their horses around and ran away.

The eight hunters pressed their legs and their horses pursued with lightning speed. Eight arrows were shot and eight Yuan soldiers dropped down to the ground, dead. After about a 'li' the Mongolian soldiers were completely annihilated.

The young gentleman led his horse away, mounted it, and without turning his head he galloped away. It seemed like for him, giving order to kill more than fifty Mongolian soldiers was as ordinary as eating his rice; he did not even give it the slightest thought.

"Hey, hey!" Zhou Dian called out, "Wait! I want to ask you something!" The young gentleman did not pay him any attention; in a moment he and his eight hunters had gone far.

If Zhang Wuji, Wei Yixiao and the others really want to ask that young gentleman a question, they could use their 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] and overtake the speeding horses; but after witnessing those eight hunters' divine archery skill to annihilate the enemy they were impressed with their chivalry, their hearts were full of admiration, hence they felt it was inappropriate to press and offend those people. Everybody started to talk at once, but nobody knew these nine people's origin.

Yang Xiao said, "That young gentleman is obviously a female wearing male clothes. Those eight men dressed as hunters were very respectful toward her. Their archery skill was divinely marvelous, but it did not look like archery skill of the people of the Central Plains."

By this time Yang Buhui and the Thick Earth Flag members were busy consoling the women. It turned out that they were taken captive from the neighboring villages and small towns. Thereupon the Ming Cult people searched the Yuan soldiers' corpses and took any gold, silver and other valuables, and distributed it to the women and sent them home.

For the next several days the topic of discussion among the Ming Cult people was the nine people whose arrows obliterated the Yuan soldiers. They regretted the fact that they were unable to befriend those people. To Yang Xiao Zhou Dian said, "Yang Xiong [brother Yang], your daughter can be considered a beautiful woman, but I am afraid she falls short compared to that young lady dressed as a man."

"Right, right!" Yang Xiao replied, "If they were willing to join our Cult, those eight hunters' position would be above the Five Wanderers."

"Your mother's stinky fart! [this is one of those 'weird-to-english-speakers'-ears' stuff]" Zhou Dian was angry, "What's so special about horse-riding skill? Just call them to have a contest with Zhou Dian."

Yang Xiao hesitated a moment before replying, "Compared to Zhou Xiong [brother Zhou] they are slightly inferior, but talking about martial art skill, I think they are half a notch higher than Leng Qian Xiong [brother Leng Qian]."

The fact that among the Ming Cult's Five Wanderers it's a well known matter that Leng Qian's martial art skill was the highest. Yang Xiao and Zhou Dian were always at each other's throat. Although they no longer fought each other openly, Zhou Dian had never missed any opportunity to argue with Yang Xiao. This time hearing Yang Xiao said that the eight hunters' martial art was higher than Leng Qian's, in other words, he was looking down upon the Five Wanderers, Zhou Dian was angry. He was about to open his mouth to retort when Peng Yingyu laughed and said, "Zhou Xiong, again you fall into Left Emissary Yang's trap. He was deliberately making you angry!"

Zhou Dian laughed a big laugh and said, "I am not angry; how can he make me angry?" But not too long afterwards he started to mutter how Yang Xiao's riding skill was not so good. Everybody looked at each other and smiled.

Under daily medical care of Zhang Wuji, Yin Liting had begun to regain his consciousness. He said that when he left the Brightness Peak that day, his mind was so shaken that he was lost in the desert. He walked farther and farther away, groping his way on the yellow sand of the Gobi desert for eight, nine days. By the time he found the right direction he had lost contact with his Wudang martial art brothers. That day he unexpectedly ran into five Shaolin monks. Without saying anything these five monks suddenly attacked him. Their martial art skill was not weak; although Yin Liting managed to overthrow two of them, in the end he was still overwhelmed by sheer number and in the end had to suffer heavy injury. He said these five monks' martial art was definitely Shaolin's martial art, only he did not see them on the Brightness Peak; so they must be the reinforcement who came later. On why they attacked him violently, Yin Liting could not come with any plausible answer. One time or another Yin Liting had announced his name, so in no way

would the monks mistake him for someone else.

Along the way Yang Buhui was taking a careful care of Yin Liting. She knew her parents had offended him; but her own compassion also grew because of his pitiful condition. That particular evening they arrived at Yongdeng. They urged their horses because they wanted to reach Jiangchengzi to spend the night there. While walking they suddenly heard horses' hoofs; on the main road two riders were coming fast toward them. When they got within a dozen 'zhang's, suddenly the two riders stopped their mounts and leaped down. Holding the horses' reins they waited on the side of the road; their manners were really respectful. Those two riders were two of the eight hunters who annihilated the Yuan soldiers with their arrows earlier.

The Ming Cult people were delighted; one after another they dismounted their horses to greet the two hunters. The two hunters walked toward Zhang Wuji and bowed in respect. In a clear voice one of them said, "Our superior had long admired the Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu's heroism and chivalry, along with his heroes and warriors. Xiao ren [little/lowly people] have received our superior's order to invite all of you with sincerity and respect to take a rest at our village."

Zhang Wuji returned the respect and said, "We do not dare, we do not dare! I wonder how shall we address your superior?"

That man replied, "Our superior's surname is Zhao; but I do not dare to tell her name without her authorization." Everyone was pleased they openly admitted that the young gentleman was actually a woman in disguise; indicating the sincerity of the invitation.

Zhang Wuji said, "Ever since we saw your divine archery

skill, we have never cease to praise you every day; to be able to make friends with you is truly our good fortune. Only we do not want to impose.”

“You are all the heroes of this generation,” that man replied, “Our superior has admired you for a long time. Today you pass by our residence, how can it be that we do not offer you three cups of our insipid wine and chat with you to build friendship?”

Zhang Wuji wanted to know these warriors better, but he also wanted to inquire about the Yi Tian sword they saw earlier; therefore, he said, “If that’s the case, to refuse would be impolite; we’ll visit your village.”

The two hunters were delighted; they mounted their horses and led the way.

Less than a ‘li’ later two more riders came their way. They stopped some distance away and waited by the side of the road. They were also part of the ‘shen jian ba xiong’ [divine archer eight heroes]. Another ‘li’ later the last four members of the Divine Archer Eight Heroes also came to welcome them. The Ming Cult people were happy and feeling reassured in seeing the courtesy their host demonstrated.

Following a street made of green flagstones they arrived at the courtyard of a big manor. The manor was encircled by a small brook; the bank of the brook was full of green willow trees. To be able to see a Jiannan-like scenery in Gan Liang area, they felt refreshed.

The manor gate was wide open and a draw bridge was already lowered. The lady surnamed Zhao, still wearing a man’s clothes, stood at the gate, welcoming them. Miss Zhao stepped forward and saluted them. “The heroes and

warriors of the Ming Cult's visit to the Green Willow Manor today truly bring glory to us," she said in a clear voice, "Zhang Jiaozhu, please! Left Emissary Yang, please! Yin Lao Qianbei [old senior Yin], please! Bat King Wei, please! ..."

She called out the Ming Cult's people one by one. Not only did she know everybody's name without anybody announcing it to her, but she also knew their respective position; not a single one was missed. Everybody was astonished.

Zhou Dian could not help but asked, "Miss, how did you know our names? Could it be that you know divination?"

Miss Zhao smiled and said, "The Ming Cult's heroes are well-known in the Jianghu, who has not heard of them? In the recent battle of the Brightness Peak Zhang Jiaozhu, with his divine ability, has deterred the six major sects. This news has shaken the Wulin world. You are going east to the Central Plains; along the way I don't know how many Wulin friends will give you admiring receptions, how can this 'xiao nuzi' [lit. little/lowly woman] miss this opportunity?"

Everybody agreed with her and inwardly they were very pleased, but with their mouths they muttered some modest words. They turned toward the Divine Archer Eight Heroes, asking their names and martial art school. One big and tall man answered, "Subordinate is Zhao Yishang [lit. one injury]. This one is Qian Erbai [lit. two defeats]. This one is Sun Sanhui [lit. three destructions]. This one is Li Sicui [lit. four devastations]." Pointing to the other four men he continued, "That one is Zhou Wushu [lit. five loses]. That one is Wu Liupo [lit. six damages]. That one is Zheng Qimie [lit. seven extinguish], and the last one is Wang Bashuai [lit. eight feeble/weak]."

Hearing their names the Ming Cult people were dumbstruck.

They recognized the eight men's surnames were taken from the 'bai jia xing' [Book of Hundred Surnames], namely 'Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhou Wu Zheng Wang.' Not only it was very strange, but their given names were all unlucky. Take 'Wang Bashuai' for example; not even bandits and barbarians would think of such names. But in the Jianghu world it was not uncommon that some people changed their names to avoid calamity or enmity; so nobody asked any further.

Miss Zhao personally led the way, taking everybody to the main hall. They saw in the main hall hung a large wooden tablet with 'lu liu shan zhuang' [Green Willow Villa] four characters engraved on it. In the middle of the hall there was a banner with Zhao Mengxiao's poem:

The white rainbow [oxymoron, I know, but how do you
translate ? ? ?] stood up to fly,
Green serpent roared inside the box,
Murderous frost at the edge of the blade,
The round moon just about to reach its apex.
Sword can tear the dragon on the outer sky,
Sword can charge against the sun,
Sword can slit the demon's abdomen,
Sword can cut away the treacherous minister's head.
Hiding to ward off the demon's enchantment,
Do not frighten the consort.
Keep the sword to behead the scaly dragon,
Do not test it to strike the street dog.

At the end of the poem there was a small inscription, "Testing the precious Yitian Sword in the night, it was truly a treasured thing. I wrote the poem 'shuo jian' [lit. speaking about sword] in praise of it. Bianliang Zhao Min."

Zhang Wuji's calligraphy skill was not too good, but following the 'shu jiu zhen lian' [lit. vermillion nine real/true

practice] character principle [Translator's note: I am sure about this part], he was able to somewhat distinguish other people's penmanship. Looking at the strokes of this poem he saw charm and tenderness, revealing the poem came from a female hand; so it must be this Miss Zhao's handiwork. Other than medical book, he seldom read any other book; but the poem's meaning was certainly not obscure. As soon as he read it he understood its meaning. He thought, "Turned out she is from Bianliang [modern day Kaifeng, previous capital of the Northern Song], and has a single character 'Min' as her name." Thereupon he said, "Miss Zhao is well-versed in both literature and martial art [wen wu quan cai]; my utmost admiration. Turned out Miss belongs to the family of the former capital."

That Miss Zhao, Zhao Min smiled and said, "Zhang Jiaozhu's father was well-known as the 'yin gou tie hua' [Silver Hook Iron Stroke], a calligraphy expert. Zhang Jiaozhu received your educational background from your family, 'xiao nuzi' earnestly wants to see a poem from your hand."

Upon hearing this Zhang Wuji's face turned red; he lost his father when he was ten and had not learned penmanship from him. Afterwards he only learned medicine and martial art, so it could be said that his writing skill was superficial. "If Miss wants me to write," he said, "That is the same as requesting my death. My late father departed too early; I haven't learned anything from my father. I am really ashamed."

While they were talking the Manor servants had already served tea. They noticed that inside the sky blue porcelain cups there were green and tender Longjing [city in Jilin] tea leaves floating around. A delicate fragrant greeted their nostrils. The warriors felt strange; this place was separated thousands of 'li's from Jiangnan, how could there be fresh

Longjing tea leaves? In all aspects this Miss carried a mysterious aura around her.

Zhao Min was the first to take the cup with both hands and took a sip before inviting everybody else to do the same. She said, "You have journeyed far, our village is simple and slow, so please forgive our lack of hospitality. Everybody please follow me to have some refreshments." She stood up and led them passed a porch and a courtyard, toward a big garden. This garden was littered with unadorned mountain rocks and a plain creek pond in the middle; there were not too many flowers and plants, but the overall impression was elegance. Zhang Wuji did not have deep understanding of landscape architecture, but Yang Xiao silently nodded his head in approval. He thought the master of the garden was certainly not an uncouth person; inwardly he was full of admiration.

In the pavilion in the middle of the pond two banquet tables had already been prepared. Zhao Min invited Zhang Wuji and his entourage to take a seat. Zhao Yishang, Qian Erbai and the other Divine Archer Eight Heroes took the rest of the Ming Cult people to have their meals at another hall on the side. Yin Liting was unable to get up, so Yang Buhui attended to him in yet another room.

Zhao Min poured a big bowl of wine and took it in one gulp; she said, "This is the eighteen years old 'nu zhen chen' [old chaste maiden (or spinster)] wine from Shaoxing; please take a taste and tell me what you think?"

Although Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others truly believed that this Miss was a young generation chivalrous heroine, they were still very careful. They looked at the wine pot and the wine cups and did not see anything unusual; besides, Miss Zhao had taken the first cup, so they

chased their suspicion away and ate and drank with ease of mind.

Ming Cult originally had a religious rule so-called 'shi² cai⁴ shi⁴ mo²' [meat dish are a matter of the devil]; prohibiting them to consume alcohol and meat. But after their altar was moved to the Mount Kunlun this prohibition against alcohol and meat was removed. In the Western Region fresh vegetables were hard to come by; they were more expensive than meat. Plus the climate was bitter cold; without cattle and sheep fat it was difficult to fight the cold using internal energy alone.

Around the pavilion, on the bank of the pond, there were seven, eight flower trees; they looked like 'shui xian' [lit. water deity; narcissus?] but not as big. The flowers were white; the fragrance was light and elegant. So close to this refreshing fragrance, drinking the good wine, the gentle breeze carried the flower scent; the warriors' hearts were really carefree. That Miss Zhao was really cordial, she was very knowledgeable of stories and news of the Wulin world of the Central Plains; many of those were not known even to Yin Tianzheng father and son. Toward Shaolin, Emei, Kunlun, and the other sects' martial arts she did not say too much, but she placed the highest regards toward Zhang Sanfeng and the Wudang Seven Heroes. She also heaped praises toward Ming Cult's leaders' martial art. She was seemingly talking without giving it too much thought; but each praise and every admiration were right on target. The guests were delighted and full of admiration toward her; but when asked which martial art school she belongs to, Zhao Min only smiled without giving any answer, and then she changed the topic.

The wine had gone several rounds. Zhao Min always drank her cup dry. She was very open-minded. Every time a new

dish arrive, she always moved her chopsticks and be the first to eat the dish. Her face was starting to exude a reddish glow from the wine; she looked even more beautiful. A beautiful woman would either be refined and elegant, or tender and glamorous; but this Miss Zhao, in her extreme beauty she also carried a third part boldness, a third part heroic attitude, while maintained her elegance. Plus, she also carried an air of authority, which gained other people's respect and made them not dare to stare at her intently.

Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhao, our Ming Cult is most grateful for your hospitality. I have a question I'd like to ask, but I do not dare to utter it."

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhao Min replied, "Why are you acting like you are an outsider? Isn't there a saying in the Jianghu world, 'within four sides of the ocean, everybody is a brother'? If you do not think I am unworthy, just consider 'xiao mei' [little sister, she was referring to herself] your friend. Whatever it is you want to know, I will do my best to answer it."

Zhang Wuji said, "If that is the case, then I'd like to ask: where did Miss acquire this Yitian Sword from?"

Zhao Min showed a faint smile; she loosened the Yitian Sword from her waist and placed it on the table. "Ever since Xiao Mei met with all of you, your eyes have never left this sword. I wonder if you care to tell me the reason behind it."

Zhang Wuji replied, "Frankly, this sword originally belonged to Mie Jue Shitai, the Sect Leader of Emei Sect. The number of my brethrens from the Ming Cult who perished under this sword was not a few. Even I almost died from this sword's stab on my chest. That was the reason we pay a close attention to this sword."

“Zhang Jiaozhu’s divine ability is matchless,” Zhao Min said, “I heard by using ‘qian kun da nuo yi’ you were able to snatch this sword from Mie Jue Shitai’s hand. How could you be injured by this sword? I also heard the one injured Zhang Jiaoshu with this sword was a young female disciple of the Emei Sect; her martial art was only so-so. Xiao Mei really does not understand why it happened.” With raised eyebrows she looked at Zhang Wuji’s face intently; her mouth showed a faint smile, yet she was not smiling.

Zhang Wuji blushed profusely. “How did she know this clearly?” he thought. He said “the other side came too suddenly, I was not paying attention and let it slip.”

Zhao Min smiled and said, “That Zhou Zhiruo, Zhou Jiejie [older sister Zhou] is very beautiful, is she not?”

Zhang Wuji blushed even redder, “Miss is teasing me,” he said. He picked up the wine cup with both hands, trying to drink it in one gulp to hide his embarrassment, but unexpectedly his left hand slightly trembled and he spilled a few drops of wine on the sleeve of his clothes.

Zhao Min smiled and said, “Xiao Mei cannot bear the wine power, I am afraid if I drink some more I will breach the etiquette; I wouldn’t know the seriousness of what comes out of my mouth. I am going inside to change my clothes and will be back right away. Please all of you continue eating and drinking, no need to be polite.” She stood up, cupped her fists, turned around and went out of the pavilion, and disappeared beyond the willow and flower trees on the other side of the pond. The Yitian sword was left lying on the table, she did not take it with her. The Manor servants continuously served food and wine.

The Ming Cult people stopped eating. They waited for quite a long time but Zhao Min had not returned. Zhou Dian said, "She left her precious sword here, obviously she trusts us." While speaking he lifted up the sword with one hand. "Ah!" he suddenly exclaimed, "How come it is so light?" Grabbing the hilt he drew the sword from its sheathe. Everybody rose up from their seats in astonishment. Where is the Yitian sword, which could cut metal and slice jade, with its matchless sharpness? The sword in Zhou Dian's hand was just a wooden sword. Immediately everybody smelt a faint incense-like fragrance, and saw that the sword's blade was light yellow, for the sword was made of sandalwood.

For a moment Zhou Dian was at a loss; pushing the sword back to its sheathe he mumbled, "Yang ... Left Emissary Yang, this ... what kind of trick is this?" Although he loved to argue with Yang Xiao daily, but actually deep down in his heart he admired Yang Xiao's vast knowledge and experience. This time facing a mystery he could not help but asking Yang Xiao for direction.

Yang Xiao's face was serious, in a low voice he said, "Jiaozhu, I am 90% sure that this Miss Zhao harbors ill intention. This moment we are in danger, I think we'd better leave as soon as we can."

"Why would we be afraid of her?" Zhou Dian asked, "We are numerous. Even if she is making her move, do you think she can eradicate us completely?"

Yang Xiao said, "Since entering this Green Willow Manor everywhere I looked I felt something strange. It feels right yet not exactly right; it feels wrong yet not exactly wrong. I can't pinpoint what it is. Why should we stay in this place? We don't have any specific reason anyway."

“What the Left Emissary Yang said is right,” Zhang Wuji nodded his head, “We have had our meals; it’s time for us to leave.” Then he stood up.

Tie guan dao ren [the Iron Hat Taoist Priest] said, “What about the Yitian Sword? Aren’t you going to inquire, Jiaozhu?”

Peng Yingyu said, “In my humble opinion, this Miss Zhao has a suspicious intention; she won’t stop until she reached her goal. Even if we don’t look for her; she will definitely look for us.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “We have our own tasks to accomplish, there is no need to seek a new burden. We’ll wait for the enemy to exhaust himself; we’ll talk about it once we understand more.”

Everybody left the pavilion on the pond; returning to the main hall they told the servant to notify the lady that they were grateful for the feast and it was time for them to leave.

Zhao Min came out in a hurry; she was wearing a light yellow silk gown. She looked natural yet elegant; her glowing countenance was stunningly beautiful. “We have just met, why are you leaving?” she asked, “Is it because ‘xiao nuzi’s hospitality is too simple and slow?”

Zhang Wuji said, “We are very grateful over Miss’ hospitality, how could you say ‘simple and slow’? We have businesses to attend and cannot tarry too long. We’ll meet again someday and we’ll ask for more of your advice.”

The corner of Zhao Min’s mouth showed a faint smile, yet she was not smiling. She sent the guests off the village. The Divine Archers Eight Heroes stood on the either side of the

road, bowing respectfully to send the guests off. The Ming Cult people cupped their fists, and without saying anything sped away. As they left the Green Willow Manor on all directions they saw open field, with nobody in sight.

Zhou Dian loudly said, "This Miss Zhao does not necessarily harbor ill intentions to us. Perhaps she was just playing a joke to Jiaozhu with that wooden sword. Even if that little girl wants to create trouble, what could she do? Left Emissary Yang, this time you were wrong!"

Yang Xiao hesitated before answering, "Whatever it is, I can't say; but I feel uncomfortable."

Zhou Dian laughed and said, "After the battle of the Brightness Peak the famous Left Emissary Yang has turned into a coward ... Aiyo!" He swayed and fell from his horse.

Shuo Bude was the closest to him; he busily jumped down his horse to help Zhou Dian up. "Zhou Xiong [brother Zhou], what happened?" he asked.

Zhou Dian laughed and said, "No ... nothing. I guess I drank too much wine so I am dizzy now."

As the word 'dizzy' came out of his mouth, everybody looked at each other. Turned out as they sped away from the Green Willow Manor, everybody felt slight dizziness. Only they thought it was because of the wine, so they did not give it too much thought. But not only Zhou Dian's martial art skill was high, his drinking capacity was also strong; how could a few bowls of wine make him so dizzy that he fell down from his horse? Surely something was amiss.

Zhang Wuji looked up and tried to remember Wang Nangu's Book of Poison, which poison was colorless, tasteless and

odorless; but could make people dizzy. He could not think of anything. But he ate and drank the same dishes and the same wine, yet why did he not feel anything different? Suddenly something flashed in his mind like a lightning bolt; he remembered something and was extremely shocked. He shouted, "Everybody who ate at the pavilion on the pond, get down from your horses and sit down cross-legged; right now! Whatever happened, do not circulate your 'qi' [breathing, in term of internal energy cultivation]." He also issued an order, "Brothers of Five-Element Flags and Heavenly Eagle Flag, spread out to all directions and encircle the leaders. Whoever is trying to get near can be immediately killed!"

Hearing their Cult Leader issued a strict order everybody replied it loud voice. They stood up, unsheathing their weapons and moved into position. Zhang Wuji ordered, "Do not leave your position until I come back!"

The leaders were confused; they only felt slightly dizzy, certainly nothing else seemed unusual, why was the Cult Leader so alarmed? Zhang Wuji warned again, "No matter how uncomfortable you are, do not fight it with your inner strength; otherwise the poison will be difficult to neutralize."

The leaders were startled, "How can we be poisoned?"

Zhang Wuji's shadow swayed and in a blink of the eye he had already fled more than a dozen 'zhang's away. He felt horse would be too slow, so utilizing his 'qing gong' to the fullest he flew back to the Green Willow Manor.

He was very anxious, knowing the extent of the poison attack on Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng and the others. The poison would not flare-up in three quarters or an hour; but it was not like the 'xuan yin zhi' [black/mysterious finger,

Xuan Yin Finger in Chapter 22], in which the treatment could be delayed for a long time. If he could not find the antidote soon, these people's lives would be in danger.

He flew over these twenty 'li's or so in a short moment. As he arrived at the Manor gate, he flew up like an arrow. The gate guards did not even see anybody entering the Manor, only a blur of a shadow. Zhang Wuji went straight to the garden in the back, towards the pavilion in the middle of the pond. He saw a lady wearing a light green silk gown; her left hand holding a cup, a book in her right hand, sitting quietly, reading a book and drinking tea. It was none other than Zhao Min. This time she was wearing female clothing. Upon hearing the sound of Zhang Wuji's footsteps she turned her head around and gave a faint smile.

"Miss Zhao, I need some flowers and grass from you," Zhang Wuji said. Without waiting for her to reply, his left foot kicked and he jumped from the pond bank to the pavilion in the middle of the pond. His body floated above the water like a dragonfly; while with his hands he pulled the seven, eight narcissus-like flower trees. As he landed on the pavilion, he heard several 'swish, swish' sounds, several tiny secret projectiles flew toward his face.

Zhang Wuji flicked his right hand and rolled the secret projectiles inside his sleeve. His left sleeve brushed away toward Zhao Min; Zhao Min slanted sideways to evade, only to hear a whistling sound. The gust of wind from the sleeve blew away everything on the table: teapot, teacup, fruit dish and everything else flew across the pond and shattered into pieces as they struck the flower trees on the other side.

Zhang Wuji stood up straight; he examined at the flower trees in his hand, and saw that each tree had a deep purple long root, and on these roots grew small beads the size of

pearls, dark green like jadeite. He was delighted since he knew he had found the antidote; he put the roots in his pocket. "Thank you so much for the antidote, I am taking my leave now!" he said.

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Easy to come, but difficult to leave!" Tossing her book aside she drew a pair of paper-thin and frost-white daggers from the book; and thrust the daggers forward.

Zhang Wuji was concerned about Yin Tianzheng and the others' injuries, he was not willing to prolong the contact. His right sleeve brushed away and dozens of golden needles in his sleeve shot out toward her. Zhao Min evaded sideways and flew out of the pavilion. Her right foot stepped on the stairs and immediately she flew back in; dozens of golden needles fell into the water.

"Good movement!" Zhang Wuji praised. He saw her left hand in front of her body and her right hand behind, both daggers came slanting down on him. He thought, "This little girl's heart is so poisonous. If I did not know the Jiu Yang Shen Gong [the internal energy cultivated from the Nine Yang Manual] and did not read Wang Nangu's Book of Poison, today the Ming Cult would have fallen under her hand without knowing anything." Both of his hands reached out to grab her hands and snatch the daggers away.

Zhao Min's white wrist flipped suddenly, her pair of daggers swift as lightning slashed his fingers. Zhang Wuji did not exert his energy in this move, he was inwardly groaning. But his internal energy was profound, in reflex his fingers moved and although he failed in snatching the dagger away, he managed to strike the acupoints on her wrists. Once again she flicked her wrists and the daggers flew out from her hands. Zhang Wuji leaned his head sideways to evade.

‘Bang, bang!’ The daggers struck the pavilion’s wooden pillar with such a force that they stuck on the wood and vibrated continuously.

Zhang Wuji was stunned; speaking about martial art skill, she could not be compared to Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao and the others, but in term of alertness and quick-thinking, her reflex was very fast. Even though her daggers repeatedly missed their target, they would have been able to injure the opponent in the end. If early on he erroneously thought that he managed to disarm her and was not moving quick enough, then his life would have been gone by now. As the pair of daggers flew out of her hands, Zhao Min’s right wrist flipped again and she quickly snatched the wooden Yitian Sword from the table. She thrust the sword, still inside its sheath, toward Zhang Wuji’s waist, without drawing the sword out.

Using two of his left hand fingers Zhang Wuji attacked the ‘jian zhen xue’ [shoulder chaste acupoint] on her left shoulder. As Zhao Min leaned her head sideways to evade, his right hand stretched out, using a marvelous movement from ‘qian kun da nuo yi’ he snatched the wooden sword.

Zhao Min withdrew to the steps; she laughed softly and said, “Master Zhang, what kind of martial art was that? Was it ‘qian kun da nuo yi’ divine skill? I think there is nothing special about it.”

Zhang Wuji opened up his left palm; revealing a pearl head ornament still gently shaking. It was the head ornament Zhao Min wore on the side of her head. Zhao Min’s face changed slightly; Zhang Wuji was able to snatch the hair ornament on her temple without her feeling anything. If when taking the ornament he slightly touched the left hand ‘tai yang xue’ [sun acupoint] on her head, then her little life

would have been gone. But she was quick to think and she smiled. "If you like that pearl flower, then I'll gladly give it to you; you don't have to snatch it away from me," she said.

Zhang Wuji was slightly embarrassed by her words; his left hand waved, tossing the pearl ornament back to her. "I'll return it to you!" he said. Turning his body he was about to leave the pavilion.

Zhao Min held out her hand to take the head ornament. "Wait a minute!" she called out.

Zhang Wuji turned around. "Why did you steal two of the biggest pearls?" she said with a smile.

"You are talking nonsense, I don't have time to joke around with you," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhao Min lifted the head ornament high and with a stern voice said, "Look here, aren't two of the pearls missing?"

Zhang Wuji shot a glance and he noticed two golden threads without any pearl on them. He knew she must have had taken those pearls herself; she wanted to lure him to come back so that she could carry out some other dirty trick. "Humph," he snorted, ignoring her.

Zhao Min pressed the edge of the table with her hand and sternly said, "Zhang Wuji, I dare you to come within three steps of me."

Zhang Wuji was not fazed by her intimidation, he said, "It's up to you if you say that I am a coward who fears death." While talking he had already taken two steps down the stairs.

Seeing none of her tricks worked, Zhao Min's beautiful face changed; with a miserable voice she cried out, "It's over! It's over! I am defeated, how could I still have a face to see my Shifu?" Reaching back she pulled one of the dagger stuck on the pillar. "Zhang Jiaozhu," she called out, "Thank you for your help!"

Zhang Wuji turned his head around only to see a flash of white light; she thrust the dagger into her own chest. Zhang Wuji laughed coldly, "I won't fall ..." he had not finished whatever he wanted to say when he saw the dagger enter her chest. She cried out miserably and fell on the edge of the table.

To say that Zhang Wuji was extremely shocked would not be an overstatement; he did not expect her to be so hard-headed that she committed suicide just because she failed to overcome him. He thought that as long as the dagger did not strike her heart, he might still be able to save her. Hence he turned around to examine her wound.

He walked to within three steps of the table and was going to reach out to pull her shoulder when suddenly his foot stepped on empty air; his body dropped vertically down. While groaning inwardly he flicked both of his sleeves, so that his drop was slightly halted. In the meantime his palm struck the edge of the table. If his palm struck its target, then he could borrow the momentum to leap out from this trap. Who would have thought that Zhao Min's suicide was a fake; she had already anticipated his action. Sending her strength to her right palm she managed to block his palm from reaching the table.

This 'rabbit-rose-up-falcon-fall-down' exchange happened in a blink of the eye; by the time two palms met, Zhang Wuji's body had dropped half of his height. Flipping his hand over

he tried to grab four of Zhao Min's fingers. But her fingers were slippery, they immediately slipped away from his grab. Yet within this fraction of a second Zhang Wuji exerted his strength - taking the opportunity as their fingers touched- to reach out to grab Zhao Min's upper arm. Only the force of his falling down was too great; as soon as he pulled, the two of them fell together.

All of a sudden darkness enveloped them; they kept falling, but heard the slam of the trap door close above their heads. The trap was about four, five 'zhang's [about 12 - 15 meters or 40 - 50 feet]. As his feet touched the bottom immediately Zhang Wuji leaped up, using 'bi hu you qiang gong' [gecko roaming the wall skill] to the fullest he crawled along the trap wall to the top, trying to push the trap door open. His hand touched something icy cold; turned out the door was made of a giant iron panel, reinforced by some kind of contraption to hold it firmly on its place. Although he had the divine strength of 'qian kun da nuo yi', but his body was suspended in midair; he did not have a strong foundation, unlike if he were standing on the ground. As he pushed, the iron panel did not move even so slightly, while he fell back down to the bottom.

Zhao Min chuckled and said, "The door is reinforced with eight thick steel bars; you are pushing it from below. Although your strength is exceptional, how can you push it open?"

Zhang Wuji was mad at her treachery; ignoring her remarks he groped around the four walls, trying to find a way out. Unfortunately the walls were all icy cold and extremely smooth and hard.

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Master Zhang, your Gecko Roaming the Wall is excellent. These walls were made of

pure cast steel, they were polished and very slippery; not a single crack exists, yet you were able to crawl along the wall. Hee .. hee ... heh ... heh ...!"

Zhang Wuji angrily said, "You are with me in this trap together, what's so funny?" Suddenly he remembered, "This girl is very crafty. There must be a way out of this trap. I can't let her escape alone." He moved forward two steps and grabbed her hand.

Zhao Min was frightened. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Don't ever think of escaping alone," Zhang Wuji replied, "If you want to live, you should open the trap door quickly."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Why worry? We won't starve to death in here. If they cannot find me, they will let us out. The worse case is if my men think I am going out of the Manor; then that would be too bad."

"Is there any secret mechanism to get us out of this trap?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min laughed. "You don't look like an idiot, how come you asked such a stupid question?" she said, "This trap was not built to amuse ourselves. It was to trap an enemy inside; why would we provide a secret mechanism for the enemy to escape?"

Zhang Wuji thought what she said was reasonable. He asked, "There are people falling into the trap; how come nobody outside knows? Hurry up and call someone to open the door."

"All my men are on assignments outside. You saw a moment ago there was nobody else in the pavilion, did you not?"

Zhao Min said, "They will come back by this time tomorrow. Just be patient; take a rest for a moment. You have just had your meal; certainly you are not hungry, are you?"

Zhang Wuji was angry; he thought, "I have no problem staying for a while, but how can I save (Maternal) Grandfather and the others?" Thereupon tightening his grip with 20% of his strength he roared, "If you don't let me out, I am going to kill you first and talk later!"

Zhao Min smiled and replied, "If you kill me, then you can forget about getting out of this trap forever. Hey, men and women are not supposed to be intimate; why are you holding my hand?"

Hearing her words Zhang Wuji immediately released her hand and withdrew two steps; and then he sat down with his back against the wall. This steel trap's perimeter was only several feet; even when he tried to sit as far as possible from her, their distance could not be more than one step. He was anxious and angry at the same time. He could smell her breath, and the sweet fragrance of her perfume; he could not help but feeling agitated. Finally he stood up and angrily said, "Our Ming Cult people and you are not acquainted with each other; we did not have either resentment or enmity. Why did you deliberately plan to put us all to death?"

Zhao Min replied, "Things that you don't understand are too many; but since you asked, let me explain it to you. Do you know who I am?"

Zhang Wuji did not think it was a good idea; he wanted to know this young girl's origin and her true intentions, but if he had to wait for her to tell her story in its entirety, then Yin Tianzheng and the others might be dead because of the poison. Also, how would he know whether she would tell a lie

or not; if she fabricated a lie and told him a whole bunch of nonsense, then he would be stuck in that trap for a long time. His sole purpose right now was to force her to open up the trap door; therefore, he cut her off by saying, "I don't know who you are, and right now I don't have time to listen to your story. Are you or are you not going to call somebody to open the door for me?"

"I can't call anybody," Zhao Min replied, "Even if I shout as loud as possible down here, people above won't be able to hear. If you don't believe me, just give it a try."

Zhang Wuji was really angry; his left hand reached out and grabbed her arm. Zhao Min cried out in fear and tried to move her hands to fend off; but early on her acupoints had been sealed so she could not move. Zhang Wuji's left hand choked her throat; he said, "If I exert a little bit more strength, your life will be gone."

By now those two stood very close to each other; he could feel her hurried breathing, it smelt like orchid. Zhang Wuji looked up to give some distance away between his face and hers. Zhao Min suddenly broke up in tears; choking and sobbing she said, "You bully me, you bully me!"

Zhang Wuji did not expect this turn of events; he was startled. Releasing his left hand he said, "I don't want to bully you, I only want you to let me out."

Still crying Zhao Min said, "It's not that I don't want to. All right; I'll call!" Raising her voice she shouted, "Hey, hey! Come here! Open the door, I fall into the steel trap!" She called out for a while, but nothing astir overhead. Zhao Min said with a smile, "You see? It's useless."

Zhang Wuji's anger had reached the top; "Shameless! Crying and laughing. What kind of person are you?" he said.

“You are the shameless one!” Zhao Min shot back, “A big man like you bullying a weak girl like me.”

“You, a weak girl?” Zhang Wuji replied, “You are so crafty that even ten grown men are not your match.”

“Thank you for your praise, Zhang Da Jiaozhu [Big Cult Leader Zhang]!” Zhao Min laughed, “Little girl does not dare to accept.”

Zhang Wuji thought the situation was getting urgent; if he did not make a drastic move, the Ming Cult people would be annihilated. Gritting his teeth he reached out and with a scoff he tore a piece of Zhao Min’s skirt.

Zhao Min thought he suddenly had an evil intention; finally she was really scared. “You ... what are you doing?” she called out.

Zhang Wuji said, “If you decide to let me go, just nod your head.”

“Why?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji ignored her question. He spat his saliva on that piece of silk cloth to make it wet. “Please forgive me,” he said, “I don’t have any choice.” Immediately he sealed up her nose and mouth with that wet cloth.

Zhao Min could not breathe; a short moment later she felt her chest constricted, she felt utterly miserable. Unexpectedly she was so unyielding and did not want to nod her head at all; after a while her body slumped and she passed out.

Zhang Wuji took her wrist to examine her pulse; he felt her pulse to be weak. Immediately he took away the wet cloth covering her nose and mouth. After half a day Zhao Min slowly regained her consciousness; she moaned lightly.

“It didn’t feel good, did it?” Zhang Wuji asked, “Now, are you or are you not going to let me go?”

Zhao Min hatefully said, “Even if I have to faint a hundred times I still won’t let you go. You’d better just kill me.” Swiping her mouth with her hand she spat several times and said, “Your spittle! Pei! It stank to the high heaven!”

Seeing her hard-heartedness Zhang Wuji was temporarily at a loss. After remaining in this stalemate situation for some time, he was getting more anxious than ever. Finally he said, “In order to save everybody’s life I have to play rough. I apologize for being inappropriate.” Grabbing her left foot he tore away her shoe and sock.

Zhao Min was both angry and scared. “Stinky boy, what are you doing?” she asked.

Zhang Wuji did not answer. He grabbed her right foot and also took her shoe and sock away. With both hands extended he touched the ‘yong quan xue’ [bubbling spring acupoint] on the bottom of her feet; then he transmitted heat toward these acupoints using the Nine Yang Divine Energy.

This ‘yong quan xue’ was located at the center of the crook of the foot; it was the end of the ‘zu shao yin shen jing’ [foot’s ‘little yin’ kidney passage], thus it was very sensitive to the touch. Zhang Wuji was very proficient in medical science, hence his knowledge was profound. When children play, they used to tickle their friend’s foot; making their body tingled from the sensation. This time he transmitted

the warm Nine Yang Divine Energy into her ‘yong quan xue’; the sensation was a hundred times more difficult to bear than if she was tickled using feather or soft plume. At first Zhao Min could not help but broke up in laughter. She wanted to pull her foot away, but her acupoints were sealed; how could she move away? Later on she felt discomfort more painful than if she were cut with blade or flogged with a whip. She felt like millions of fleas were creeping and crawling in her internal organs; nipping and gnawing at her bone marrow and blood veins. Her voice became hoarse from laughing, and gradually her laughter turned into crying.

Zhang Wuji hardened his heart; he ignored her crying and continued his torture. Zhao Min felt like her heart nearly jumped out from her chest; she felt like the hairs on her body fell off from their roots because of the itch. “Stinky kid ... Thief ...” she cursed, “One day, I ... I will cut you ... to thousand pieces. All right, all right ... mercy ... have mercy on me ... Zhang ... Master Zhang ... Zhang Jiao ... Jiaozhu ... Boohooohoo ... boohooohoo ...”

“Are you or are you not going to let me go?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Sobbing Zhao Min replied, “I ... I’ll let you go. Stop ... stop it!”

At last Zhang Wuji let his hand go and said, “Please forgive my offense!” He rubbed her back and unsealed her acupoints.

Zhao Min gasped for breath before scolding him, “Thief, give me back my shoes and socks!”

Zhang Wuji took the sock and grabbed her left foot. When

he tortured her just a moment ago, he did not have any other thought in his mind; but now as soon as he touched her warm and soft foot his heart was beating faster. Zhao Min pulled her foot; she felt an unspeakable shyness so her face was blushing. Luckily in that darkness Wuji could not see her face. Silently she put her shoes and socks back on. A strange feeling crept into her heart; suddenly she wanted him to touch her foot again.

“Quick, hurry up!” suddenly she heard Zhang Wuji’s stern voice, “Let me go!”

Without saying anything Zhao Min stretched out her hand to trace a circle engraved on the steel wall, and then with the end of her dagger’s hilt she rapped the center of the circle seven, eight times; sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes long, sometimes short. As soon as she stopped a crashing noise was heard, a bright light came down as the trap door opened. The circle on the steel wall was actually connected to the outside by a narrow tube. The people outside immediately opened the door as she knocked the wall in a previously agreed pattern.

Zhang Wuji did not expect her to open the door as soon as she said so; he could not help but feel surprised. “Let’s go!” he said.

Zhao Min hung her head low; she stood on the side without making any noise. Zhang Wuji remembered she was only a young girl and he had repeatedly tortured her; he felt sorry. He bowed and said, “Miss Zhao, just now I did not have any other choice. Please accept my most sincere apology.”

Zhao Min turned her head toward the wall; her shoulder slightly trembled as if she was sobbing. She was very crafty and ruthless; when he was engaged in a fierce battle of wits with her, Zhang Wuji did not have any distracting thoughts.

But now he was overwhelmed with guilt; especially looking at her graceful and elegant, slender back, the skin on the back of her neck white as jade, her beautiful and fluffy hair. With pity and regret in his heart he said, "Miss Zhao, I am leaving. Old Zhang has offended you."

Zhao Min's back moved slightly, but she still was not willing to turn her head. Zhang Wuji did not dare to tarry much longer; using the 'bi hu you qiang gong' he crept upward. When he was about a 'zhang' away from the trap door, his right foot kicked the steel wall and he flew out of the trap, while sweeping his sleeve away to protect his head and face for fear somebody set up an ambush by the trap door. Before his feet even touched the ground he swept his gaze around, but did not see a single soul in the pavilion. Without wasting a single second he leaped over the outer wall and rushed along the trail towards the place where the Ming Cult leaders took a rest.

By this time the sun was setting behind the mountains; he had been delayed for more than an hour inside the trap, without knowing Yin Tianzheng and the others' condition. With an anxious heart he ran faster and not too long afterwards he was not too far away from his destination. His heart skipped a beat because he saw a large group of Mongolian cavalry charging forward; surrounding the Ming Cult people, shooting arrow after arrow.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Our Cult leaders are poisoned, nobody gives orders; how can we withstand the enemy's besieging?" He picked up speed and rushed forward.

When he got closer he heard a clear female voice from among the crowd calling out, "Sharp Metal Flag attack to the northeast, Flooding Water Flag outflank the southwest." It was Xiao Zhao's voice. Just as her voice trailed off, a group

of the Ming Cult people under a white flag came out, charging toward the northeast. Another group under a black flag outflanked toward the southwest. The Yuan soldiers divided themselves to engage the enemy. Suddenly the yellow flag of Thick Earth and the green flag of Gigantic Wood came out from among the Ming Cult people like a yellow dragon and a green dragon shoulder to shoulder attacking the enemy. The Yuan soldiers were thrown into confusion and were forced to retreat.

With several leaps Zhang Wuji arrived in front of the Ming Cult people. As they saw their Cult Leader came back, they burst out in cheers and their spirit was greatly aroused. Zhang Wuji saw Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Zhou Dian and the others, as well as the Five Elements Flags commanders and their second-in-commands, were still sitting cross-legged on the ground. Xiao Zhao, holding a small flag in her hand, was standing on a mound, commanding the Ming Cult people to defend against the enemy.

Actually, everybody in the Five Elements Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag was a warrior with excellent martial art skill; only their leaders were poisoned that they were in disorder. As soon as Xiao Zhao arranged the defense line according to the Eight Diagram the Yuan soldiers actually could not penetrate their defense for a long time.

“Master Zhang,” Xiao Zhao happily called out, “Come and assume the command.”

“I can’t,” Zhang Wuji replied, “You can command better. Let me kill some officers first.”

With ‘swish, swish’ sound several arrows came toward him. Zhang Wuji grabbed a lance from among the Ming Cult people and struck the incoming arrows one by one to the

ground. Raising his arm he hurled the lance like an arrow penetrating a 'bai fu zhang's [leader of a 100 men unit] chest, nailing him to the ground. The Yuan soldiers cried out in alarm and withdrew several dozens of steps.

Suddenly they heard a bugle sound; about a dozen riders came fast. Zhang Wuji saw the ones in the front were Zhao Min's Eight Divine Archers. He creased his brows and said in his heart, "These eight people's shooting skill is too strong. If they attack I am afraid the damage to my brethren will not be small. I'll have to attack first!" But he saw the leader of the Eight Divine Archers, Zhao Yishang, wave a short golden dragon-head staff and called out, "Master's order: withdraw troops immediately."

The commander of the Yuan troops, a 'qian fu zhang' [leader of a 1000 men unit], shouted some Mongolian words. The Yuan soldiers turned their horses around and galloped away. Qian Erbai dismounted his horse. Holding a tray in his hands he walked toward Zhang Wuji, bowed down and said, "My Master is asking Jiaozhu to accept this as a souvenir."

Zhang Wuji saw yellow brocade spread out on the tray; on the brocade was a small exquisitely carved golden case. He was not afraid of any crafty trick; holding out his hand he took the box. Qian Erbai bowed in respect, walked backward three steps, turned around to mount his horse and galloped away.

Zhang Wuji handed over the golden case to Xiao Zhao. He was very concerned over his people's condition that he did not care to look what was inside the case. Immediately he took the flower tree from his pocket and gave an order for someone to fetch some clear water. He crushed the deep purple root along with the dark green small beads and put them in the water. One by one he gave the concoction to Yin

Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, as well as to the Five Elements Flags commanders and their second-in-commands. Practically every one of the Ming Cult leaders who joined the banquet at the pavilion, except Zhang Wuji who was protected by the Nine Yang Divine Energy, was poisoned.

Yang Buhui accompanied Yin Liting outside the pavilion; Xiao Zhao and the rest of the Ming Cult people ate at the side reception hall. Everybody followed their Cult Leader's order; every dish was quietly tested with silver needles before they ate it; hence they were free from poisoning.

The antidote was very effective that in less than an hour the toxicity inside their bodies was neutralized; they no longer feeling dizzy, only they were still feeling very weak. Immediately they asked the whole story on how they got poisoned.

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "We were being very careful; the water, wine and the food did not have any poison. I am sure about it. How would I know that that Miss Zhao's evil mind was very cunning that she employed an unthinkable method? This kind of 'shui xian'-like flower is called 'zui xian ling fu' [drunken immortal phantom lotus]. It is extremely rare but in itself it is not poisonous. The fake Yitian sword was made of a 'qi ling xiang mu' [marvelous pangolin fragrant wood], which grows on the ocean floor. In itself it is also not poisonous. But if these two fragrances are mixed together, they become violently poisonous."

Zhou Dian slapped his thigh, "It was my bad; who told me to have an itchy hand and pull that Yitian sword out to take a look at it? Damn it!"

Zhang Wuji said, "She had already planned to harm us; even if Zhou Xiong did not pull it out, she would have sent

someone else to draw it out and poison us. It was unavoidable.”

“Come!” Zhou Dian said, “Let us burn that Green Willow Manor to the ground!”

He barely closed his mouth when in the distant they saw black smoke rose up to the sky, red flame flickered; the Green Willow Manor was on fire. They looked at each other, dumbstruck; everybody had the same thought, “This Miss Zhao has anticipated everything; she knew that as soon as the poison in our bodies is neutralized we will settle the debt by burning the manor, so she beat us by setting the manor on fire first. This person is young, she is also a girl, yet she is a formidable enemy.”

Zhou Dian slapped his thigh, “She burned the manor, so what? We can still catch up and kill them all.”

Yang Xiao said, “Since she had already burned the manor, she must have prepared everything. We may not necessarily be able to pursue them.”

“Yang Xiong,” Zhou Dian said, “Your martial art is not bad, but when it comes to scheming, you beat Zhou Dian by half a notch.”

Yang Xiao laughed and said, “I wouldn’t dare, I wouldn’t dare! Zhou Xiong’s strategic ability is divine; how can Little Brother match it?”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “You two don’t need to be modest. This time we do not suffer too much damage, except for thirteen, fourteen brothers who suffer some arrow wound; we should thank our lucky stars. Let’s continue our journey.”

Along the way they asked Zhang Wuji how he knew the cause of their poisoning. Zhang Wuji replied, "I remember in the Poison Manual there is an article: If the fragrance of the 'qi ling xiang mu' is mixed with that of some kind of lotus flower, the resulting mixture oftentimes can cause someone to become intoxicated for a few days. It can be neutralized by drinking the mixture of the beads of the flower with water. If the poison is not dispelled immediately, the toxicity will greatly damage the heart and the lung. This 'zui xian ling fu' is several times more severe than regular lotus. That was the reason I asked everybody not to circulate your internal energy. Otherwise the fragrance would have entered all passages and pulses, and then your life would be in danger."

Wei Yixiao said, "I am surprised that this little girl Xiao Zhao has rendered a great service today; if it wasn't for her bravely stepped forward in critical situation, our casualty would be very heavy."

Initially Yang Xiao believed that Xiao Zhao was the enemy's spy; but her actions that day could be considered a great service to the Ming Cult. It was so totally beyond his anticipation that for the time being he did not know what to think.

Along the way they tried to guess Zhao Min's origin, but nobody was able to offer a plausible explanation. Zhang Wuji did not tell anybody that they fell into the trap together, and that he touched her feet, ripped her skirt, and the circumstances surrounding that occasion. Although he felt that he did not do anything shameful, he still didn't feel comfortable talking about it in public.

That evening they decided to stop by an inn a little bit early.

The rest of the Ming Cult people went their separate ways to find temples and ancestral halls to spend the night. Xiao Zhao took some water to Zhang Wuji's room for him to wash his face.

"Xiao Zhao," Zhang Wuji said, "Today you have rendered a great service; you don't have to act as my servant anymore."

Xiao Zhao flashed one of her captivating smiles. "I am very happy to attend to your needs; what servant are you talking about?" After waiting for him to wash his hands and face; she took the golden case out and said, "I wonder what kind of poisonous bugs or secret projectiles are in this box?"

"Right," Zhang Wuji said, "We have to be very careful."

Placing the case on the table he pulled her away from it. Taking out a copper coin he tossed it away. 'Ding!' the coin hit the edge of the golden case and opened up its lid. Nothing strange happened. He came near to take a look. Inside the box was a pearl head ornament; it still vibrated lightly. It was precisely the head ornament he took from Zhao Min's temples, except the two big pearls, which Zhao Min said were missing, were back on their golden stems. Zhang Wuji was taken aback; he could not guess Zhao Min's real intention in doing this.

Xiao Zhao smiled and said, "Master, that Miss Zhao is very good to you, she sent somebody to deliver this precious pearl head ornament to you."

Zhang Wuji said, "I am a man, what am I supposed to do with this kind of girl's jewelry? Xiao Zhao, you can keep it."

Xiao Zhao shook her hand; she laughed and said, "How can

I? Others show their affection to you; how do I dare to take it?"

With three of his left hand fingers Zhang Wuji took the pearl ornament. "Catch!" he laughed, and tossed the ornament away. His strength was neither light nor heavy; the ornament landed on Xiao Zhao's hair without the golden pin scratching her skin.

Xiao Zhao reached up to take it away, but Zhang Wuji shook his hand and said, "Can't I give you some trinkets?"

Xiao Zhao's cheeks blushed; in a low voice she said, "Thank you very much, then. I am only afraid my Miss will be angry with me."

"What you did today was not a small matter," Zhang Wuji said, "How can the Left Emissary Yang, father and daughter, still suspect you?"

Xiao Zhao's heart was filled with joy; she said, "You have been gone for a long time, I was really worried; plus those Tartars came to attack. I don't know how, but suddenly I was swept by a great courage. If I think about it now, I was really scared. Master, can you talk to the Five Elements Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag brothers: asking them not to be offended by Xiao Zhao's boldness and unseemly behavior?"

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "They can't thank you enough, how can they blame you?"

Less than a day later they arrived within the Henan borders. By that time the world was in chaos; everywhere heroic and patriots raised their arms to fight the invaders. Mongolian officers and soldiers conducted an even stricter questioning and searching of insurgents. It was inconvenient for the

Ming Cult people to travel together as a large group, therefore, they traveled in smaller groups to the Mount Song [Song Shan] and regrouped at the foot of the mountain before they finally traveled together up the Shaoshi Peak.

The Gigantic Wood Flag Chief, Wen Cangsong, was sent ahead to deliver Zhang Wuji and the others' name cards to the Shaolin Temple. Zhang Wuji knew that this time they went up to the Shaolin Temple to ask for justice and although they did not want any fight, the end result would be difficult to tell. Supposing that the Shaolin monks did not want to talk but resort to violence instead, the Ming Cult could not balk at the challenge. Thereupon he passed on an order: while the leaders were entering the temple, the Five Elements Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag were to disperse around the temple and wait outside; as soon as they heard him whistle three times, they were to render their assistance. The flag leaders accepted the order and went their separate ways.

Not too long afterwards an old monk acting as the welcoming host went down the mountain accompanied by Wen Cangsong; he said, "The Temple Abbot and all elders are closing themselves in meditation; they cannot receive any guest."

The Ming Cult leaders' faces changed as they heard this. Zhou Dian indignantly said, "This is the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, personally came to the Shaolin Temple to pay a visit; the Senior Monks do not want to see him, don't you think this is a bit rude?"

That 'welcoming host' monk [Translator's note: I can't think of a single English word for this. Literally it means 'receiving guest'.] lowered his head with knitted eyebrows; his face full of anxiety, he said, "Can't see!"

Zhou Dian angrily stretched out his hand to grab his collar. Shuo Bude raised his arm to block, he said, "Zhou Xiong, don't be rude."

Peng Yingyu said, "Since the Abbot is in seclusion, then it will be the same if we can see Reverend Kong Zhi or Kong Xing."

That 'welcoming host' monk clasped his palms and said with an icy-cold voice, "Can't see!"

Peng Yingyu said again, "How about the Head of the Damo Hall or the Head of the Luohan Hall?"

That 'welcoming host' monk maintained his cold and indifferent look. "Can't see!" he said.

With a thundering voice Yin Tianzheng roared, "Bottom line: are you or are you not going to see us?" Both of his palms shot out with an earth-shattering force, 'bang!' he hit and broke a nearby pine tree into two; the top part, still with branches and leaves on it, collapsed to the ground, taking three crow nests with it.

The 'welcoming host' monk began to show fear on his face, he said, "You have come from afar, it is only proper for us to see you, but our elders are meditating in seclusion. Please come back later!" He bowed and clasped his palms, then turned around to leave.

Wei Yixiao's shadow flashed, blocking in front of the monk, he said, "I wonder how should we address Reverend?"

The 'welcoming host' monk said, "I can't say lowly monk's Buddhist name."

Wei Yixiao stretched out his hand and lightly slapped the monk's shoulder twice; he laughed and said, "Very good, very good! You repeatedly said 'Bu Jian' [Can't see] two words, turned out you are 'Bu Jian Da Shi' [Reverend 'Bu Jian' or Reverend Can't See], you are Kong Jian Shen Seng's [Divine Monk Kong Jian - the same 'Jian' character as 'Bu Jian'] martial brother. I wonder if the Yan Luo Wang [King of the Underworld] called you, 'Bu Jian Shen Seng', will you answer him?"

As the 'welcoming host' monk took the slap, a cold air flew from his shoulder to his chest; his body shook, his teeth chattered and his mouth made 'ge, ge' noises. Enduring all these he leaned sideways and slipped past Wei Yixiao; trembling and staggering all the way he ran back up the mountain.

"This fellow's internal strength is not Shaolin's," Wei Yixiao said.

Immediately Zhang Wuji recalled Yuan Zhen's internal strength, and admitted that Shaolin's internal strength was extraordinary. He said, "Bat King has slapped him twice with the 'han bing mian zhang' [cold-ice soft palm]; how can his grandmasters and his masters ignore it? Let us go up the mountain, I want to see if the senior monks truly do not want to see us."

Everybody knew a fierce fight would be unavoidable, Shaolin Sect was known as the Wulin world's 'tai shan bei dou' [Mount Tai and Big Dipper - meaning 'the ultimate']; over the last thousand of years it had enjoyed the reputation as the Undefeated Sect in the Jianghu. In the battle that would happen today finally they will see between the Ming Cult and the Shaolin Sect, which one was strong and which

one was weak. Everybody's spirit was boosted a hundred folds; picking up their speed they climbed up the mountain. They realized Shaolin Temple's martial art experts were as abundant as the cloud; so the intensity of the incoming big battle would not be a small matter.

Less than the time needed to drink tea later they had arrived at the pavilion in front of the temple. Zhang Wuji recalled how as a kid he followed his grandmaster going up this mountain and saw the Shaolin Sect's Three Divine Monks right here in this pavilion. Although it was only a few years, but back then he was a lone thin and sickly kid; while today he was the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, with all the honor and respect belonged to the position. He felt like the two visits were a world apart.

He saw that two of the pillars of the stone pavilion were broken; the stone table in the middle of the pavilion was turned upside down on the ground.

Shuo Bude laughed and said, "Shaolin Monks are brave and fierce; these two pillars are broken recently. It looks like they had a big fight only a few days ago and have not had any chance to fix it."

Zhou Dian said, "After winning the battle today, we can come back and tear this pavilion apart."

They waited at the pavilion, expecting a lot of martial art experts to come out of the temple; after exchanging pleasantries they were going to ask straightaway why Yin Liting fell under such a cruel hand. If the monks did not give them a satisfying answer, then they will resort to violence. Who would have thought that after waiting for half a day they did not see any movement from the temple. A moment later they saw that some people came out from the back of

the temple and were going toward the mountain, from the distant it looked like there were forty, fifty people.

“Humph,” Peng Yingyu said, “They are deploying people to set an ambush.”

“Let’s go into the temple!” Zhang Wuji said.

Immediately, with Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao on his left, Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang on his right, Tie Guan Daoren [Priest Tie Guan], Peng Yingyu, Zhou Dian and Shuo Bude, Four Wanderers behind him, Zhang Wuji entered the temple gate. Upon entering the ‘da xiong bao dian’ [great hero precious hall] they saw the sacrificial table in front of the image of Buddha was laying on its side, the incense burner fell and the ashes were scattered on the ground; but they couldn’t see anyone there.

Shuo Bude laughed coldly and said, “As the Shaolin Sect people saw us coming, they were panic-stricken and confused that they knocked the incense burner over. Funny, very funny!”

In a clear voice Zhang Wuji said, “Ming Cult’s Zhang Wuji, joined by Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, and the other Cult Leaders have come to pay a visit. We wish to see the Abbot.” His voice was not loud, but it was supported by abundant power that it echoed on the copper bell and the big drum hanging inside the hall, creating a buzzing noise throughout the hall.

Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the others looked at each other, thinking, “Jiaozhu’s internal energy is so profound, it truly is amazing. Even if Yang Jiaozhu [Cult Leader Yang] were still alive, his internal energy would still be inferior to this. It looks like in the incoming battle today our victory is

imminent.”

Zhang Wuji’s voice could be heard in the front and rear courtyards, and all over the Shaolin Temple; yet after waiting for half an afternoon nobody came out.

“Hey!” Zhou Dian shouted, “Shaolin Temple Monks! Brothers! Are you playing hide and seek? Are you pretending to be a new bride?” His voice was louder than Zhang Wuji’s, but the copper bell and the big drum were not buzzing.

They waited for a little bit longer; still nobody came out. Peng Yingyu said, “Suddenly I got a bad feeling about this temple; something is really wrong.”

Zhou Dian laughed and said, “You are a monk entering a temple; this is your appropriate place, what do you mean something is wrong?”

“Ah,” Tie Guan Daoren suddenly said, “Here is a piece of meditation stick cut by a blade.”

“Ah!” Shuo Bude exclaimed, “There is a blotch of blood here!”

Zhou Dian laughed, “They must have remembered the battle of the Brightness Peak,” he said, “Our Jiaozhu’s reputation has spread far and wide, Shaolin Temple hangs high the truce flag! You see, they were so panic-stricken that they ran away dropping everything, including their weapons.”

Tie Guan Daoren shook his head, “That’s not right!” he said.

“Why not?” Zhou Dian asked.

Tie Guan Daoren said, "What about this blood stain?"

Zhou Dian replied, "Most likely they cut themselves in fright ..." Speaking to this point he stopped, since he realized his idea was too far fetched. Right that moment a gust of wind blew, rising everybody's sleeve. "It's nice and cool!" Zhou Dian exclaimed. Suddenly they heard a loud crashing noise from the west, a big pine tree about a dozen 'zhang's away from them fell down.

The crowd was startled; immediately they jumped toward the collapsed tree. The tree grew on the southeast corner of the courtyard; there was nobody in the courtyard, so nobody knew how such a big tree fell down just by a puff of wind and in the process crashed half of the surrounding wall. They examined the broken part only to see the core of the tree to be already ruptured, clearly it was shaken by someone with profound skill; so the tree had already withered and dried up, and not fell down because of the wind just now.

They looked around their surrounding and one after another exclaimed, "Ah, it's strange!" "There was heavy fighting in here!" "So fierce, so many people were injured!" The courtyard was full of traces of intense fighting: there were blade marks and imprints of fists and palms on the green flagstones below, on the trunk and branches of the surrounding trees, and on the enclosing walls. They could also see bloodstains everywhere; obviously the battle was truly bloody. There were also deep footprints on the ground, a sign that the combatants were martial art experts who stake their whole internal energies.

Zhang Wuji said, "Quickly grab that 'welcoming host' monk, we need to ask him clearly."

Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bude and the others quickly dispersed to look, but the 'receiving guest' monk had disappeared without any trace. The Five Elements Flags also looked everywhere. A little over an hour later all the Flag leaders came back one after another with their report: nobody was found in the temple, but they saw traces of violent battle everywhere. Many of the halls and rooms had bloodstains in them, along with broken blades and other weapons, but not a single body was to be seen.

"Left Emissary Yang, what do you think?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"This battle happened two, three days ago," Yang Xiao replied, "Could it be that the entire Shaolin Sect is annihilated and not a single one survived?"

"Wasn't there a few dozens people went out the temple from the back just now?" Shuo Bude asked.

Yang Xiao replied, "Quite possibly they were the Shaolin Sect's enemy. They were left behind to take care of things in here; but as they saw our large group arrived they slipped away."

Peng Yingyu said, "Judging from the turn of events, I think you are right. That 'welcoming host' monk must be an impostor; it's a pity we could not capture him. But among the enemies of the Shaolin Sect, which one is this powerful? Could it be the Beggar Clan?"

Zhou Dian said, "The Beggar Clan is indeed big, and has a lot of martial art experts, but they don't have the ability to wipe out the entire Shaolin Temple that not a single survivor is left. Only our Ming Cult has this kind of ability; but we clearly did not do it, do we?"

“Zhou Dian, can you not spout nonsense?” Tie Guan Daoren said, “Our Cult obviously did not do it, do you think we don’t know?”

“Reporting to Jiaozhu,” Yan Yuan, the Flag Leader of the Thick Earth came to report, “It looks like the eighteen arhats in the Luohan Hall have been shifted, but there was no footprint around.”

The leaders knew that Yan Yuan and his Thick Earth Flag were experts in building and construction, so his suspicion must not be unfounded. “Let us take a look,” they said.

Upon entering the Luohan Hall, they saw quite a bit of blood splattered on the walls and broken blades and meditation sticks strewn on the floor.

“Yan Xiong,” Zhou Dian said, “What’s unusual about these eighteen arhats?”

“Each Luohan arhat was moved from their original position,” Yan Yuan replied, “At first I thought there was another door somewhere, but after carefully examining the wall, I did not see any secret passageway anywhere.”

Yang Xiao was deep in thought for half an afternoon before he finally said, “Let us push these arhats and take a look.”

Yan Yuan leaped toward the platform and pushed the long-eyebrowed arhat to the side, exposing the wall behind it, but there was nothing unusual there. Yang Xiao also leaped to the platform to take a closer look at that long-eyebrowed arhat. “Uh,” he suddenly exclaimed, “There is a character on the back of this arhat.” He turned the arhat around. To their astonishment, the crowd saw a ‘mie’ [extinguish] character

as big as a human's head.

The Luohan arhats were inlaid with gold, but by now a large 'mie' character was engraved on the glittering golden back with a sharp object. The engraving was about a 'cun' [an inch] deep that the clay inside was exposed. The engraving was new, obviously it was done not too long ago.

"What's the meaning of this 'mie' character?" Zhou Dian wondered, "Ah, right! It must be the Emei Sect attacked the Shaolin Temple; Mijue Shitai left this to demonstrate her power."

The group of heroes thought his idea was too unthinkable; they all shook their heads. While speaking they turned all the arhats around. Other than the Subduing Dragon Arhat on the extreme right and the Crouching Tiger Arhat on the extreme left, a large character was engraved on the back of every arhat. From right to left there were sixteen characters which read: 'First execute Shaolin then extinguish Wudang, only our Ming Cult is fit to rule the Wulin world!'

Yin Tianzheng, Tie Guan Daoren, Shuo Bude and the others called out together, "This is a treacherous plan to shift the blame!" They realized these sixteen characters were a threat to incite terror; they recalled how the Shaolin Temple's monks suffered an unexpected calamity, and the blame was put upon the Ming Cult's head. Everybody was anxious and grieved at the same time.

"Let us quickly scrape off these characters to avoid injustice toward us," Zhou Dian called out.

Yang Xiao said, "The enemy intention is obviously malicious; scraping off these sixteen characters may not be necessarily useful."

This time Zhou Dian felt what he said made a good sense, so he did not argue. "What should we do, then?" he asked.

Shuo Bude said, "This is actually evidence. If we can find the person who hatched this treacherous plan, we can take him here and confront him with these sixteen characters."

Yang Xiao nodded his agreement.

Peng Yingyu said, "Xiao Seng [little/lowly monk] still have a question, I need the Left Emissary Yang's enlightenment. The person who carved these sixteen characters obviously wanted to shift the blame to our Cult; placing the responsibility of Shaolin Sect's destruction on our head, so that the Wulin world's heroes would rally together to attack us. Then why did he turn these arhats to the wall? Why didn't they leave these large sixteen characters facing outward? If it wasn't because of Flag Leader Yan's attentiveness, nobody would know there are characters on the back of these Luohan arhats."

Yang Xiao was deep in thought. "Come to think about it," he said, "There must be someone else who turned these arhats back. Most likely there is someone helping our Cult in secret. We owe him a big debt of gratitude."

"Who is this person?" the crowd asked almost simultaneously, "How did Left Emissary Yang know?"

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "This is a complicated mystery, I cannot possibly know everything ..."

"Ah!" he has not finished his words when suddenly Zhang Wuji loudly exclaimed, "'First execute Shaolin, then extinguish Wudang,' I am afraid ... I am afraid Wudang is

facing a terrible disaster.”

“We must leave immediately to render our help,” Wei Yixiao said, “We might also find out which dog has done it all.”

“We can’t wait much longer,” Yin Tianzheng also said, “We must leave now. These bandits have already left one or two days ago.”

End of Chapter 23.

Chapter 24 - Tai Chi - The Origin of Soft Subduing Hard

(Translated by dgfds01)



Zhang Sanfeng picked the wooden sword, his right hand held the sword, his left hand in sword form, both hands made a loop and he slowly raised them. This opening form was followed by 'Encase the Moon with Three Rings', 'Biggest Star in the Big Dipper', 'Swallow Skims the Water', 'Left Block', 'Right Block' ... each form smoothly following the other.

Zhang Wuji wondered whether some misfortune had befallen his martial uncles on the way back from the Western Regions. Throughout the whole journey there had been no news of them. If any misfortune had delayed them on their way, the only people left on Wudang Mountain were his grandteacher and the third generation disciples. His third martial uncle Yu Daiyan was paralysed. If a formidable enemy attacked, how could they resist them? Thinking so, he felt anxious. He said clearly: "Elders and brothers, my late father was a Wudang disciple. I am greatly indebted to my grandteacher. Now that Wudang is facing great trouble, the earlier we get there the better. Bat King Wei will accompany me to first to lend aid. The rest of you should arrive in batches. I request that Left Messenger Yang and Grandpa arrange this. " After saying this, he cupped his hands and left. Wei Yixiao used his lightness kungfu and followed him. Before the crowd could say anything in agreement, the two of them were already outside Shaolin temple. Their lightness kungfu was really amazing, without equal in the world. The two of them did not dare risk even a short moment's delay. Without stopping they quickly covered ten li. Though Wei Yixiao did not fall behind, after some time he gradually found it difficult to keep up. Zhang Wuji thought: "Wudang Mountain is a long distance away, we can't keep this up without rest. Moreover there is a formidable enemy in front. We should save our energy for battle." He said to Wei Yixiao: "Let's buy a couple of horses from the next town to conserve our energy." Wei Yixiao had already considered this but he had brought the matter up. He said: "Sect Leader, buying horses will waste too much time."

Not long later, they met five or six horses approaching. Wei Yixiao jumped up, lifted up two riders and put them gently on the ground. He called out: "Sect Leader, mount up!" Zhang Wuji stopped in his tracks. In his heart he felt that

stealing horses like that was not the right thing to do. Wei Yixiao called out: "When dealing with important matters, don't be held back by trifling affairs. Why worry so much?" He lifted another two riders off their horses. It so happened that those people also knew some martial arts. Cursing, they drew their weapons to attack. While holding on to four horses, Wei Yixiao kicked their weapons out of their hands. One of them shouted: "Who are you robbers? What are your names!" Zhang Wuji felt it would be even worse if they got tangled up any further. So he leapt onto a horse's back and went with Wei Yixiao. Not daring to give chase, the horse owners could only curse. Zhang Wuji said: "Even though we have pressing matters to attend to, others may also have urgent matters. I don't feel comfortable doing this." Wei Yixiao laughed and said: "Sect Leader, this is small matter not worth mentioning. The way the Ming Cult handled affairs in the past... - now that is truly unscrupulous and illegal." So saying, he laughed loudly.

Zhang Wuji thought: "The Ming Cult is considered an evil sect. There is some truth that. However it can be hard to determine what is righteous and what is evil." He was the sect leader and yet he had difficulty making decisions. He was even undecided about a minor issue like the horses. Though his kungfu skills were of a high level, there are many matters in this world that cannot be settled with kungfu alone. He hoped to bring Xie Xun back soon, and pass this heavy burden on to him. Yet he was unwilling to simply take the easy way out. At this moment, he suddenly saw two people with silver rods in their hands blocking the road. Wei Yixiao shouted: "Get out of the way!" He waved the horse whip. One man blocked the whip with his staff, another man yelled and waved his left hand. Wei Yixiao's horse was startled and stood up on its hind legs. Four men dressed in black then came out from a grove. They looked like they were able fighters. Wei Yixiao yelled: "Sect leader go on, let

me deal with them.” Zhang Wuji saw that these people are trying to prevent reinforcements from reaching Wudang. Wudang Sect was in a very precarious and dangerous situation. He knew that Wei Yixiao's lightness kungfu and martial arts is amazing, he could handle these people. Even if he couldn't win he would be able to protect himself. Zhang Wuji squeezed both his legs to urge the horse forward. Two men in black used steel staffs to block the way. Zhang Wuji bent down, seized the staffs and threw them forward. The two men screamed as their legs were broken by the steel staffs and they fell to the ground. He saw that the four men fighting Wei Yixiao were not weak. He was worried that after he left more enemies will appear, so he helped Wei Yixiao deal with two of them.

Though Mt. Song and Mt. Wudang are in two different provinces - Henan and Hubei, one is in west Henan and the other in north Hubei. So the distance between them was not that great. After crossing the Ma Mountain, to the south was open country and the horse was able to travel quickly. At noon, he passed a small village. Zhang Wuji felt hungry so he stopped to buy some food. Suddenly he heard a horse scream behind him. He turned around and saw a knife stuck in a horse's stomach. A man quickly tried to hide.

Zhang Wuji jumped up and grabbed that person. Only to see it is another man dressed in black with the front of his clothes splashed with horse blood. Zhang Wuji yelled: “Whose orders are you following? Which sect do you belong to? Has your party reached Wudang Mountain?” That person did not answer despite being questioned a few times. Zhang Wuji did not dare delay any longer, thinking that that once he reached Wudang Mountain he would understand what was going on. He sealed the man's 'Da Tui' pressure point. The sealed pressure point would cause the man to suffer great pain for three days and three nights.

He then got onto his horse and continued his journey. Soon he reached the Three Palaces and crossed the Han River. While on a boat, he stared into the water thinking of the time Zhang Sanfeng and himself met Chang Yuchun and saved Zhou Zhiruo. Her beautiful image surfaced in his mind. After crossing the Han River, he headed south. By now night had already fallen. He continued for another two hours. It was a dark night. The horse was extremely exhausted and could not take it anymore. It collapsed to the ground. Zhang Wuji patted the horse's back saying: "Horsey, you're free to go now!" He utilised his lightness kungfu and was quickly on his way.

After traveling for eight hours, he heard the sound of hoofbeats - there was a group of people ahead. He quicken his pace and overtook them swiftly. Because of his speed and the darkness, no one noticed him. From their direction, they are heading for Wudang Mountain. The twenty or so people did not say a word, so he was unable to determine their intentions. But he could dimly see that each one carried weapons. There is no doubt that they are going to cause trouble for Wudang Sect. He thought: "I've managed to overtake them so Wudang Sect has not yet been attacked." After continuing for less than an hour, he met another group of people heading for Wudang Mountain. In total he ran into five groups. The biggest group consisted of about thirty people and the smallest about ten. After seeing the fifth group, he was even more anxious, thinking: "How many other groups have already gone up the mountain? Have they already clashed with people from my sect?" Though he was not a Wudang disciple, because of his father's background he considered Wudang his own sect. So thinking, he increased his speed. Not long later reached the mountain and started climbing. Fortunately he did not run into anymore enemies. Halfway up the mountain, he saw

someone hurrying upward. It was a monk and his lightness kungfu was amazing. Zhang Wuji followed him from a distance observing his actions.

He saw the monk go up the mountain. At the peak, someone shouted: "Which friend comes to Wudang at this time of the night?" As the sound died away, four people appeared, two Taoist priests and two laymen (non-priests). These were Wudang Sect's third and fourth generation disciples. The monk said: "Kong Xiang of Shaolin has an urgent matter to see Wudang's Master Zhang about." Zhang Wuji thought with surprise: "So he is a member of Shaolin's 'Kong' generation, the same generation as Abbot Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and Kong Xing. He actually took the trouble to come personally to Wudang Mountain to bring news."

One of the Wudang Taoist priests said: "Reverend, you have come from afar. Please come in and have some tea." And so saying he led the way. Kong Xiang gave his saber to a priest, not daring to bring his weapon in. Zhang Wuji saw the priest lead Kong Xiang into the Purple Paradise Hall. He squatted down outside the window. Only to hear Kong Xiang say loudly: "Please report to Master Zhang immediately. The situation is urgent; there is no time to lose!" The priest replied: "Reverend, you have come at the wrong time. My grandteacher has been meditating in seclusion for over a year. We haven't seen him in some time." Kong Xiang said: "In that case, can you please inform Eldest Hero Song." The priest replied: "My Eldest Martial Uncle, my Master and the other martial uncles have not returned from attacking the Ming Sect." When Zhang Wuji heard this he was shaken. So Song Yuanqiao and the rest had really run into trouble on the way back.

Kong Xiang sighed and said: "If that is so then Wu Dang and Shaolin are in the same boat. It would be difficult to escape

today's disaster." Not understanding what he meant, the priest said: "Senior Martial Brother Guxu Zi is in charge of our sect's general affairs. I will ask him to come and pay his respects to reverend." Kong Xiang asked: "Whose disciple is this Guxu Zi?" The priest answered: "He is Third Uncle Yu's disciple." Kong Xiang said: "Even though Third Hero Yu's arms and legs have been injured, his mind is still clear. Let me speak to him." The Taoist said: "Alright." He turned around and went inside.

Kong Xiang paced back and forth impatiently. From time to time, he tilted his head and listened intently, worrying that the enemy had arrived. Not long later, the priest hurriedly came out. He bowed and said: "Third Uncle Yu invites you in. He requests that the Reverend excuses him for being unable to come out and greet you." The priest's behaviour was now even more respectful than before. This was probably because on hearing that a Shaolin monk of the "Kong" generation, Yu Daiyan ordered him to be very polite. Kong Xiang nodded his head and went along with him to Yu Daiyan's room.

Zhang Wuji pondered: "Third Martial Uncle's four limbs are paralysed but his eyes and ears are still very sharp. If I listen outside his window, he might detect me." He walked towards Yu Daiyan's room but stopped outside. A short while later, the Taoist priest hurriedly came out of Yu Daiyan's room. He said in a low voice: "Qing Feng, Ming Yue! Come here." Two novice priests came up to him and called: "Martial Uncle!" The priest said: "Third Martial Uncle wants to come out. Get the carry chair ready." The two novices complied. Zhang Wuji had lived on Wudang Mountain for a few years. That priest was Yu Lianzhou's new disciple so he had never met him. However, he recognized Qing Feng and Ming Yue. He knew that when Yu Daiyan was carried on his chair by novices whenever he left the room. He watched the two go

to the wing where the carry chair was kept and silently followed them. He waited till the two entered the room before suddenly calling: "Qing Feng, Ming Yue, do you recognize me?" The two of them jumped in fright. Looking at Zhang Wuji, they thought he seemed vaguely familiar but they failed to recognize him. Zhang Wuji laughed, and said: "Have you forgotten me? I'm Little Martial Uncle Wuji." The two of them then remembered the past, and were very happy. They said: "Ah, Little Martial Uncle, you've come back! Have you recovered from your illness?" The three of them were around the same age and used to play together. Zhang Wuji said: "Qing Feng, let me pretend to be you and go carry Third Martial Uncle. Let's see whether he notices it's me." Qing Feng hesitated, saying: "That...that is not a very good idea!" Zhang Wuji said: "When Third Martial Uncle sees that I have recovered from my illness and returned, he'll be very happy. Why would he scold you?" Both of them knew that Zhang Sanfeng and the Wudang Six Heroes all love Zhang Wuji very much. His recovery and return to Wudang was a very happy thing. He only wanted to play a little joke to cheer Yu Daiyan up; there was no harm in it. Ming Yue laughed: "Let's do what Little Martial Uncle says!" While giggling, Qing Feng took off his Taoist robe and shoes, and exchanged them with Zhang Wuji. Ming Yue tied his hair in Taoist fashion. He now looked like a little novice priest.

Ming Yue said: "You want to impersonate Qing Feng but you don't look like him. We'll say that you are a newcomer and that Qing Feng broke his leg so you replaced him." Zhang Wuji laughed: "Good idea....." The priest outside the room scolded: "What are you two giggling about? Taking so long to get here." Zhang Wuji and Ming Yue stuck out their tongues and carried the chair into Yu Daiyan's room. The two of them lifted Yu Daiyan into the carry chair. Yu Daiyan had a solemn expression on his face and he paid no attention to who the novices who carried him were. He said: "Go to the small

compound at the back of the mountain to see grandteacher!" Ming Yue answered: "Yes!" He lifted the front end of the carry chair while Zhang Wuji lifted the back end. Yu Daiyan could only see Ming Yue's back; Zhang Wuji was hidden from his view. Kong Xiang went along with them but the priest did not dare follow without Yu Daiyan's orders. The small compound where Zhang Sanfeng meditated was deep in the bamboo forest at the back of the mountain. The forest is dense and dark - other than the sound of birds chirping, not the slightest sound could be heard. Ming Yue and Zhang Wuji carried Yu Daiyan to the front of a small compound and stopped. Yu Daiyan was about to call out when suddenly they heard Zhang Sanfeng say: "A eminent reverend from Shaolin comes to my humble residence. Please forgive this old Taoist for not coming out to welcome you." With a 'ya' sound, the bamboo door was shoved open and Zhang Sanfeng came out. Kong Xiang wore an astonished expression on his face, he was shocked that Zhang Sanfeng already knew he was a Shaolin monk. But then he assumed that the priest had already come to report. Yu Daiyan knew his Master's martial arts were growing more and more profound. By the sound of Kong Xiang's footsteps alone, he could tell which sect he belong to. Zhang Wuji could hide his presence from Zhang Sanfeng because his inner power was much grater that Kong Xiang's. He saw that though his grandteacher's face was glowing with health, his bread and eyebrows are completely white. He had aged quite a lot since their separation. He was both happy and grieved. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he hurriedly turned his head away.

Kong Xiang put his palms together and said: "Kong Xiang of Shaolin pays his respects to Master Zhang of Wudang." Zhang Sanfeng returned his salutations saying: "There's no need to be so polite. Please come in." The five of them entered the small compound. On the table was a teapot and

a teacup. There was a rush cushion on the floor and a wooden sword hanging on the wall. Other than that, the room was bare. Kong Xiang said: "Master Zhang, Shaolin Sect has suffered the greatest catastrophe in its history. The Demon Cult launched an unexpected sneak attack on us. From the abbot Kong Wen downwards, all have either died in battle or have been captured. I barely managed to escape. The Demon Cult is now heading for Wudang. Today the fate of the martial world rests in Master Zhang's hands." After saying this he cried. Zhang Wuji was shaken, he knew Shaolin had met with a tragedy, but he never imagined the whole sect was destroyed.

Though Zhang Sanfeng had been seeking enlightenment for a hundred years, this sudden sad news shocked him and he was momentarily speechless. Collecting himself, he said: "The Demon Sect is really savage. How did the Shaolin experts fall to the Demon Cult?" Kong Xiang replied: "Martial brothers Kong Zhi and Kong Xing and their disciples, together five main sects besieged Brightness Peak. The monks who stayed behind waited calmly everyday for good news. On that day, there was a report that they had returned from a great victory. Abbot Kong Wen was delighted with the news. Accompanied by the temple disciples, he went out to welcome them. We saw martial brothers Kong Zhi and Kong Xing leading the disciples who had gone along, returning to the temple. They had even captured several hundred prisoners. When they entered the main courtyard, the Abbot asked about details of the victory. Brother Kong Zhi gave yes, no answers. Brother Kong Xing stared at the ground and said: 'Brother look out, we have fallen into the enemies' hands. The prisoners are our captors...' At the moment of the Abbot's shock, the prisoners took out weapons and suddenly attacked. My sect's people were caught off guard. Also, the most skilled fighters went on the Western expedition, those who remained behind were weak fighters. The escape routes

from the courtyard blocked by the enemy. After a fierce fight, we were finally defeated. Brother Kong Xing died for our cause at the scene..." After saying up to here, he broke off sobbing. Zhang Sanfeng said sadly: "The Demon Sect is really ruthless. How can anyone be prepared for such an evil trick?" Only to see Kong Xiang open the yellow cloth bundle he had carried on his back. Inside was an oil-cloth. He opened the oil-cloth to reveal human head. The eyes were wide open and the face angry. It was one of the three Divine Reverends of Shaolin, Kong Xing. Zhang Sanfeng and Zhang Wuji both knew Kong Xing's appearance. As soon as they saw it, they could not help exclaiming in shock. Kong Xiang sobbed: "I risked my life to retrieve martial brother Kong Xing's body. Master Zhang, how do you think we should take revenge? " So saying he placed Kong Xing's head on the table, and prostrated himself on the ground. Zhang Sanfeng bowed back.

Zhang Wuji thought back to the fight on Brightness Peak. Divine Reverend Kong Xing was generous and heroic, a worthy great master of Shaolin. Now that he had suffered death in the hands of an evil person, his head and body separated, Zhang Wuji was sad.

Zhang Sanfeng saw that Kong Xiang knelt on the ground crying for a long time. He helped him up saying: "Brother Kong Xiang, Shaolin and Wudang are one family. This blood debt must not..." Just as he said that, there was a loud 'wham' sound as Kong Xiang's two hands hit him on the stomach.

This happened extremely suddenly. Though Zhang Sanfeng's martial arts were profound and amazing, he never expected that a top Shaolin expert who had come from far to bring news would attack him. At this moment, he even thought that Kong Xiang had lost his mind momentarily due

to grief, and imagined he was an enemy. The next moment he realized that this could not be. The palm used to hit him was Shaolin's "Diamond Prajna Palm". Kong Xiang had attacked with full force, using all his internal energy. His face was pale but there was a hint of a fierce smile.

Zhang Wuji, Yu Daiyan and Ming Yue were so shock they were rooted on the spot. Yu Daiyan was paralysed, so he could not help his Master. Zhang Wuji was young and inexperienced, he did not realize that Kong Xiang had struck a lethal blow. The two of them could only let out an exclamation. Only to see Zhang Sanfeng stretch out his left palm and tapped Kong Xiang lightly on the head. Though this tap was soft and gentle, it was as hard as iron. Kong Xiang's skull was smashed and he dropped dead to the ground without uttering a sound. Yu Daiyan said urgently: "Master, you..." As he said this, he stopped. He saw Zhang Sanfeng sit down with his eyes closed. White mist was coming out of his head. Suddenly he opened his mouth and coughed out fresh blood.

Zhang Wuji was shocked. He knew his grandteacher's injuries were not light. If the blood had been black or purple, with his unparalleled internal energy, he would be able to recover within 3 days. But the blood he coughed up was fresh and it spurted out. This meant he had suffered severe internal injuries. At this time, he wondered: "Should I reveal myself to help grandteacher?"

Just at this time, the sound of footsteps approaching could be heard, someone had arrived outside. From the hurried sound of the footsteps, the person was very anxious. But he did not dare rush in or make a sound. Yu Daiyan said: "Is that Ling Xu? What is the matter?" The welcoming priest Ling Xu said: "Third Martial Uncle, there is a big group of Demon Cult outside. They say they want to meet Grandmaster. They

swore with vulgar words, saying they want to annihilate Wudang Sect.....” Yu Daiyan shouted:“Shut up!” He was afraid Zhang Sanfeng would be distracted, causing his injuries become worse. Zhang Sanfeng slowly opened his eyes and said:“Shaolin's Diamond Prajna Palm is really powerful. Unless I have 3 months to take care of my injuries it'll be difficult to make a complete recovery.” Zhang Wuji thought:“It looks like Grandteacher's injuries are more serious than I thought.”

Only to hear Zhang Sanfeng say:“The Ming Cult is launching a large attack on us. Ai, I wonder if Yuanqiao, Lianzhou and the others are safe?Daiyan, what do you think we should do?” Yu Daiyan did not reply. He knows that except for his Master and himself, all the third and forth generation disciples remaining on the mountain had mediocre martial arts. Going out to fight would be the equivalent of suicide. The only thing to do would be to sacrifice his life facing the enemy to give his master a chance to escape and recover, and take revenge in the future. So he said:“Ling Xu, go and tell those people that I'm coming out to meet them. Let them wait in the Hall of Triple Clarity.” Ling Xu obeyed and left. Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan's master-disciple relationship was very old and they understood each other very well. Hearing this, Zhang Sanfeng understood his intentions. He said:“Daiyan,life of death, victory or defeat, these are unimportant things. But Wudang's martial arts legacy must not disappear just like that. During my meditation in the past eighteen months I have comprehended the essence of martial arts and created Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword. I'll teach it to you now.”

Yu Daiyan was stunned. He had been paralysed for such a long time, how could he learn martial arts? Moreover the enemies were already at their doorstep – there was no time to learn martial arts. He could only say:“Master!” Beyond

that he was speechless. Zhang Sanfeng laughed a little and said: "Since the founding of Wudang, we have done many good deeds. If there is any justice in the world we will not be destroyed like this. This Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword that I have created are completely different from all other kinds of martial arts. Stillness defeats movement, and that which moves first overcomes that which moves later. Your master is already more than a hundred years old. Even if I don't run into a powerful enemy, how much longer can I live? I am happy that I have created these martial arts at the twilight of my life. Yuanqiao, Lianzhou, Songxi, Liting and Shenggu are not here now. Except for Qingshu, there are no extraordinary talents among the third and fourth generation disciples. Moreover he is not here too. Daiyan, you are the one who can bear this heavy burden. It matters not that Wudang Sect is humiliated today. So long as Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword survive, Wudang Sect's name will live on for thousands of years." After saying this, his spirit lifted up heroically, the presence of powerful enemies no longer bothered him. Yu Daiyan obeyed, he understood his master wanted him to bear the enemies' insults. The main priority is to ensure Wudang's martial arts survive.

Zhang Sanfeng slowly stood up. He lowered both of his hands, with the back of his hands facing outwards and his fingers relaxed. His feet were slightly apart. He then raised his arms to chest height. His left hand faced upward in the Yin Palm position and the right hand in the Yang Palm position. He said: "This is the Taiji Fist opening stance." Then he demonstrated each form one by one, calling out their names: - Grasping the Sparrow's Tail, Single Whip, Lifting up the Hand, White Crane Spreads its Wings, Brushing the Knee and the Twisted Step, Playing the Pipa, Step Forward Deflect Parry and Punch, Apparent Closure, Crossing Hands, Carrying the Tiger Returning to the Mountain.....

*These are the actual names of Taijiquan forms.

Zhang Wuji watched attentively, not taking his eyes away. At first he thought his grandteacher was deliberately demonstrating the moves slowly so Yu Daiyan could see them clearly. But when he saw the seventh stance "Playing the Pipa (a Chinese musical instrument)"- the left hand embodying Yang and the right hand Yin, eyes fixed on the back of his left hand, both hands pushing slowly. This push was as heavy as a mountain but as light as a feather. Zhang Wuji finally understood: "This is about the slow beating the swift, about stillness overcoming movement. I never imagined such amazing martial arts to exist in this world." He could understand this because his martial arts foundation was very firm. The more he watched the more amazed he felt. Both of Zhang Sanfeng's hands moved in circular form. Each stroke encompassed Taiji's Yin and Yang. It was so incredible, like nothing ever seen in the world before. After a while, Zhang Sanfeng stopped. Even though he had just suffered severe internal injuries, he seemed stronger and more energetic going through the fist techniques. With his two hands holding the Taiji circle, he said "The essence of this fist technique is 16 words - 'Xu Ling Ding Jin, Han Xiong Ba Bei, Song Yao Chui Tun, Chen Jian Zhui Zhou' (*). Use intention not strength. The form and spirit become one. This is core of the fist technique." Then he went on explaining the details.

*Xu Ling Ding Jin-Empty the neck, let energy reach the crown

Han Xiong Ba Bei-Sink the chest, lift the back

Chen Jian Zhui Zhou-Sink the shoulders, drop the elbows

(From "The Way of Qigong" by Kenneth S. Cohen, thanks to dustbiter)

and Song Yao Chui Tun - Loose waist, bend at the buttocks.*

Yu Daiyan did not say a word and listened. He knew that

time was pressing, he did not have the leisure to ask questions. Although there were parts he did not understand completely, he memorized everything. In the event that any calamity should befall his master, he would still be able to pass the theory on. In the future there will be some intelligent and talented disciple who would be able to understand it. By contrast, Zhang Wuji could understand most of it. He could figure out Zhang Sanfeng's every word and each stance and was extremely happy. Zhang Sanfeng saw that Yu Daiyan looked confused. He asked: "How much do you understand?" Yu Daiyan said: "Your disciple is stupid. I can only understand 30-40 percent. But I have memorized each stance and all the theory." Zhang Sanfeng said: "It is difficult for you. If Lianzhou were here he would be able to understand about 50 percent. Ai, your fifth brother's comprehension was the greatest. It's a pity he died young. If I had 3 years to teach him, I would be able to pass my legacy on." Listening to him talk about his father, there was a sour feeling in Zhang Wuji's heart. Zhang Sanfeng said: "The key to this fist technique is its loose yet not loose, spread out yet not spread out, broken yet uninterrupted....." As he was talking, there was a yell: "That old Taoist Zhang Sanfeng is hiding. Let us kill all his disciples and grand-disciples." Another coarse and heroic voice said: "Great! First let us burn this place down. " Yet another person said: "Burning the old Taoist to death is letting him off easily. We should catch him, tie him up and parade him in front of every sect. Let everyone see how this Mount Tai and North Star is brought down."

Though the small compound was two li away from the main hall, everyone could hear those words clearly. The enemies must be showing off their internal energy, which was very powerful. Listening to these insults on his master, Yu Daiyan was furious and his eyes flared up. Zhang Sanfeng said: "Daiyan, why do you forget what I told you so easily? If

you can't bear some insults, how can you accomplish the important task? " Yu Daiyan said:"Yes, I accept your teachings." Zhang Sanfeng said:"Your whole body is paralysed so the enemy won't be wary against you. Whatever happens, you must not lose your temper and act rashly. This technique has been created with much sweat and blood. If it fails to be passed on, you will be the worst sinner of Wudang Sect." When Yu Daiyan heard this, he broke out in cold sweat. He knew the meaning behind his master's words - no matter what the enemies do to humiliate them, he must seek to preserve his life so the techniques can be passed on.

Zhang Sanfeng took out a pair of Lohan figurines and gave them to Yu Daiyan (I'm not sure how Yu Daiyan received them with his crippled hands) saying:"Kong Xiang said that Shaolin has been annihilated. We don't know if that is true. This person is a top expert from Shaolin and yet he has surrendered to the enemies. This means Shaolin must have suffered from some great danger. These Lohan figures were give to me by Heroine Guo Xiang a hundred years ago. In the future you should return them to Shaolin. Hopefully parts of Shaolin martial arts will be preserved through them." He then waved his sleeve and walked out the door.

Yu Daiyan said:"Carry me and follow Master" Ming Yue and Zhang Wuji lifted up the carry chair and followed behind Zhang Sanfeng. When the four of them arrived at the Hall of Triple Clarity, they saw there were about three to four hundred people there. Zhang Sanfeng walked to the centre and nodded a greeting but remained silent. Yu Daiyan said loudly:"This is my Master, the Venerable Master Zhang. Why did you come to Wudang Mountain?" Zhang Sanfeng's reputation had shaken the martial arts world, for a moment everyone looked at him. They only saw a man with tall stature with silver coloured hair and beard and wearing a

dirty grey Taoist robe, there was nothing special about him. Zhang Wuji saw that around half of the people present were wearing Ming Cult's clothes. Their ten leaders were wearing ordinary clothes, probably because they were too proud to impersonate other people. There were tall and short, monks and ordinary people, hundreds of people crowded into the hall. It was difficult to judge them based on their appearance. At this moment, suddenly someone called out: "Cult leader has arrived!" Immediately the hall fell into a respectful silence. The ten leaders and their followers rushed out to greet their leader. In just a short time, the hall was completely empty. Then footsteps signaled the return of those people. They halted outside the hall. Zhang Wuji looked through the door and was startled. He saw eight people carrying a yellow satin sedan chair and seven or eight bodyguards. They stopped at the entrance. The people carrying the sedan chair were the Eight Divine Archers from Green Willow Village.

Zhang Wuji was shaken. He rubbed both his hands on the dusty floor and then smeared the dust on his face. Ming Yue only thought that he was terrified seeing a powerful enemy arrive and so tried to hide his features. He too panicked and followed Zhang Wuji. In a flash, the two novice priests' faces were both grey, making it difficult to make out their features. The sedan chair's door opened and a young man got out. He was wearing a white robe embroidered with a blood red flame and carrying a fan. It was Zhao Min disguised as a man. Zhang Wuji thought: "So it is her who is behind all this, no wonder Shaolin was so utterly defeated." Only to see her enter the hall followed by around 10 people. A tall and powerfully-built man steps forward, bowed and said: "Reporting to Sect Leader, this is Wudang Sect's Zhang Sanfeng and that paralysed man should be his third disciple Yu Daiyan." Zhao Min nodded, took a few steps forward, folded her fan, cupped her hands and bowed to Zhang

Sanfeng, saying: "Ming Cult Leader, Junior Zhang Wuji, is fortunate to meet the North Star of the wulin today!" Zhang Wuji was furious. He scolded in his heart: "It's bad enough that you pretend to be the Ming Cult leader. How dare you use my name and come to trick my Grandteacher!" When Zhang Sanfeng heard the words "Zhang Wuji", he thought it was very strange: "How is it that the Demon Sect's leader such a young girl? And why does she have the same name as Wuji?" Nevertheless he returned her salutation and said: "I did not know that Sect Leader was coming so I didn't come out to greet you. I hope you'll forgive me!" Zhao Min said: "You flatter me!"

Ling Xu directed the novice priests to serve tea. Zhao Min sat down. Her subordinates stood a distance behind her, not daring to come within five feet of her for fear of offending her.

Zhang SanFeng had practiced Taosim for a hundred year, it had been a long time since anything affected him emotionally. However, he had a deep bond with his disciples. With the safety of Song Yuanqiao and the others unknown, he was extremely worried, so he immediately asked: "The disciples of this old Taoist overestimated their own abilities, they even dared to challenge top experts from your cult. To date, they've not returned. Would you be so kind as to inform me of their whereabouts?" Zhao Min laughed and said: "Eldest Hero Song, Second Hero Yu, Fourth Hero Zhang and Seventh Hero Mu have fallen into my cult's hands. All of them have suffered some injuries, but their lives are not in danger." Zhang SanFeng said: "Suffered some injuries? More likely they have been poisoned." Zhao Min laughed: "Master Zhang has great confidence in Wudang's kungfu. If you say they have been poisoned, then they are poisoned."

Zhang Sanfeng knew that his disciples were top-class

experts of their time. Even if they were outnumbered and defeated, at least a few would have made it back to report. Since all of them were captured, it was definitely because they had been poisoned. Zhao Min saw that he had guessed what happened, so she casually admitted it. Zhang Sanfeng then asked: "What about my disciple surnamed Yin?" Zhao Min sighed: "Sixth Hero Yin fell into Shaolin's ambush. His four limbs have been broken with Shaolin's Golden Silver Fingers. He won't die but he can no longer move!" From her expression, Zhang Sanfeng knew that this was not empty talk, he was deeply grieved. With a 'wa' sound, he coughed out a mouthful of blood. Zhao Min's followers behind her were delighted, they knew Kong Xiang's sneak attack must have been successful and this Wudang master had suffered a serious injury. Their only fear had been Zhang Sanfeng, now there was nothing left to worry about.

Zhao Min said: "Junior has some advice to give. Would you like to hear it Master Zhang?" Zhang Sanfeng replied: "Please speak up." Zhao Min said: "All land under heaven belongs to the Emperor, the Emperor and his ministers lead the country. The Mongol emperor's power stretches over the whole world. If Master Zhang chooses to serve, His Majesty will surely reward you and Wudang will be greatly honoured. Eldest Hero Song and the rest too will come to no harm." Zhang Sanfeng looked up to the ceiling and coldly said: "Though the Ming Cult has walked the unrighteous path and has committed all sorts of atrocities, you have always opposed the Mongols. When did you submit to the government? This old priest must be really isolated since I have heard nothing about this." Zhao Min said: "Leaving the darkness and embracing the light, it is the mark of a hero to follow the trend of the times. Shaolin's Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and the others have all submitted and pledged their loyalty to the government. My sect is just following the way the wind is blowing, what's so strange about that?"

Zhang Sanfeng's eyes flashed, he stared directly at Zhao Min and said: "The Yuan (ie Mongol dynasty) are brutal and do great harm to the common people. At present all the heroes of the world have risen up to drive out the barbarians and reclaim our land. It is the aspiration of every descendent of the Yellow Emperor (ie Chinese) to do so – that is the way the wind is truly blowing. Though I am a priest,I still understand the meaning of righteousness. Kong Wen and Kong Zhi are enlightened monks of our time, how could they bow to power? How can your words be so confused?"

Suddenly, a man came out from behind Zhao Min, yelling:"Stupid old monk, you don't know what you are talking about! Wudang Sect is about to be annihilated. Though you're not afraid of death, can it be that the hundred plus priests and disciples on this mountain are not?" This person's speech is full of vigour,with his tall stature and powerful build,he cut an intimidating figure. Zhang Sanfeng recited:"Since olden days, which man has lived and not died? I'll leave a loyalist name in history!*"

(*Translation from <http://www.chinapage.org/poet-e/wentian2e.html>).

This was two lines from a poem by Wen Tianxiang. At the time Wen Tianxiang died,Zhang Sanfeng was still very young. He deeply respected this heroic prime minister. Later on he regretted that at the time his martial arts were still undeveloped,otherwise he definitely would have risked his life to save him. Faced with this difficult situation, he naturally recited the poem. He paused for a moment then continued: "Actually Prime Minister Wen was somewhat obstinate. As for me, I'll just remain loyal,it doesn't matter what the history books say!" He looked at Yu Daiyan thinking:"And yet I hope that my Taichi Fist and Taichi Sword will managed to be passed on to future generations.

Wouldn't it be the same result as Prime Minister Wen taking into consideration his reputation after death? As long as I have a clear conscience, why worry whether my Taichi Fist can be passed to future generations or whether Wudang Sect survives!"

Zhao Min waved her left arm gently. That man bowed and retreated. She smiled faintly and said: "Since Master Zhang is so stubborn, there is no need to say anything else for now. Will you all please come with me!" So saying, she stood up. Four people standing behind her immediately surrounded Zhang Sanfeng. These four people are the powerfully built man, a man in rags, a skinny monk, and a bearded foreigner with blue eyes. Zhang Wuji saw from the way they moved that this four men were no pushovers. He was startled: "How is it that this Miss Zhao has such powerful fighters working for her?" He saw that if he refused to go along with her; the four of them will attack. Zhang Wuji thought: "The enemy are in large numbers, plus they are immoral and shameless people. They're not comparable to the six major sects which attacked Brightness Peak. It won't be easy for me to protect grandteacher and third martial uncle. Even if I defeat a number of them, they won't admit defeat and will definitely attack together. Still, the situation is such that I'll have to risk everything to do so. The best thing to do would be to capture Miss Zhao to force them to give in."

He was just about to step forward to deal with those four when a long laugh was heard from outside. A green man-shaped shadow darted into the hall. This man's movements were as stealthy as a ghost and as swift as lightning. In a flash, he was behind the powerfully built man, and launched a palm attack. The powerfully built man returned a palm without turning around, intending to compete strength. The man in green didn't wait for this move to be completed, his left hand had already tapped the foreigner's shoulder. The

foreigner swiftly dodged sideways and kicked at his lower abdomen. That man had already turned to attack the skinny monk while tilting his body to the side his left palm hit out at the person dressed in rags. In a split second, he had made four attacks, each against a top fighter. Though none of them found it's target, the speed of his techniques was truly beyond imagination. These four people knew they were facing a formidable opponent. Each leapt a few steps backwards, focusing the full attention on the battle.

That person in green ignored the enemy, bowed to Zhang Sanfeng and said: "Ming Cult's Sect Leader Zhang's subordinate, junior Wei Yixiao pays his respects to Master Zhang!" This man was really Wei Yixiao. After dealing with the enemies' obstructions, he had doubled his speed to catch up.

Zhang Sanfeng heard him refer to himself as "Ming Cult's Sect Leader Zhang's subordinate". So he assumed that he was part of Zhao Min's party, and suspected that the forcing of those four people to retreat was just a trick. He said coldly: "Mr. Wei doesn't have to be so polite. I have long heard that the Green Wing Bat King's lightness kungfu is without peer in the world. Now I see that you really live up to your reputation." Wei Yixiao was delighted. He rarely came to the central plains so he was not well known there. Who would have thought that Zhang Sanfeng knew of his lightness kungfu. Bowing, he said: "Venerable Zhang is the North Star of the martial arts community. It is a great honour for me to receive your praise."

He turned around, pointed at Zhao Min and said: "Miss Zhao, what is your purpose in impersonating the Ming Cult and ruining our reputation? Should a real man be so sly and crafty?" Zhao Min giggled: "I am not a man to begin with. So what if I'm sly and crafty - what can you do about it?" The

very first thing Wei Yixiao said was already a mistake. He was unable to come up with a reply. Instead he said: "What do you mean by "first attack Shaolin, then harass Wudang? If you have a enmity with Shaolin and Wudang, the Ming Cult shouldn't interfere. But as you use our name and impersonate us, I, Wei Yixiao cannot ignore it!"

All along, Zhang Sanfeng had not believed that the Ming Cult would surrender to the government after being mortal enemies for a hundred years. After hearing Wei Yixiao's words he understood, thinking: "So this girl is actually pretending to be someone she's not. Though the Demon Cult has a bad reputation, when it comes to major matters they are clear on what has to be done." Zhao Min turned to the powerfully built man and said: "Listen to him blow his own trumpet! Go and try out his skills." The man bowed and replied: "Yes!" Tightening his belt, he walked to the middle of the hall and said: "Bat King Wei, let me have the pleasure of seeing your Cold Ice Cotton Palm!"

Wei Yixiao was startled: "How does this guy know about my Cold Ice Cotton Palm? Since he knows that I have this skill and yet still challenges me, he can't be an easy opponent." He said: "May I know your name?" That man replied: "We are here impersonating Ming Cult, so you think we will reveal our real names? Bat King Wei, you are really stupid to ask this." The people behind Zhao Min burst into laughter. Wei Yixiao said coldly: "That's right, I was stupid to ask. You're simply a running dog of the government, a slave of the foreigners, it is better you don't tell us your real name in order not to disgrace your ancestors. " The man's face turned red and he struck out at Wei Yixiao's chest in anger.

Wei Yixiao dodged quickly and moving as fast as lightning, he stretched out his arm to poke the man's back. He did not use his Cold Ice Cotton Palm yet because he wanted to test

out his opponent's skills first. The man blocked with his left arm and counter-attacked. The man's palm strokes grew faster and more aggressive as the fight progressed. Though Wei Yixiao's internal injuries had been cured by Zhang Wuji, and he no longer has to drink blood to suppress the cold poison, nevertheless he only had had a short time to recover. Now faced with a powerful opponent, coupled with the fact he was fighting in front of the legendary Zhang Sanfeng, he did not dare get careless. So he started to use his Cold Ice Cotton Palm. Their palm strokes gradually slowed as they shifted to competing internal strength. Suddenly there was a yell and a greenish-black object shot through the door heading for that man. This object was larger than a rice sack - it is really odd that there such an enourmous weapon even existed. The man's right palm shot out hitting the object about ten feet away. As his hand made contact, he realised the object was soft yet he could not put a finger on what it was. But a scream was heard - it turned out that there was someone inside. This person has been hit by that man with full power and no mercy, how could his muscles not be smashed and his bones broken? The man was startled and froze in place for a moment. Noiselessly, Wei Yixiao moved up behind him and struck his Da Tui acupoint with his Cold Ice Cotton Palm. The man turned around angrily using his full strength to hit Wei Yixiao's head.

Wei YiXiao laughed and surprisingly he did not move. In the middle of his strike, the man's hand felt weak. Though he made contact with his opponent, the effect was like being gently stroked. Wei Yixiao knew that once the Cold Ice Cotton Palm energy enters the body, the person's strength will dissipate. Nevertheless, in a battle between expert fighters, to allow a powerful opponent to hit his head was an extremely daring thing to do. Therefore, all the spectators were astonished. In the event that the man had been able to

resist the Cold Ice Cotton Palm Wei Yixiao's skull would have been crushed. Wei Yixiao had been a strange person all his life. If there was anything other people are afraid of doing or would refuse to do, he would be more than happy to do it. He had taken advantage of that man's distraction to launch a sneak attack, which was underhand thing to do. Therefore, he daringly let the man hit his head as compensation.

The man dressed in rags tore open the sack and pulled a person out. His face was blood-red having met a violent death under the hand of that powerfully built man. This person is dressed in black and was a member of their party. Somehow he had been caught and imprisoned in the sack. The man in rags was furious, he yelled: "Who was it who cunningly....." Before he could finish, a white sack floated onto his head. He leapt backwards to avoid it, only to see a fat monk grinning at him. Cloth Sack Monk Shuo Bu De had arrived.

Since Shuo Bu De's Qian Kun Yi Qi Sack was thorn to shreds by Zhang Wuji on Guang Ming Peak he had no weapon. He could only quickly fashion a few cloth sacks to use. These were only ordinary sacks unlike the Qian Kun Yi Qi Sack with was impenetrable by swords and sabers. Though his lightness kungfu could not match Wei Yixiao, it was still quite good. Added to the fact that he faced no hindrance along the way, this meant he managed to catch up. Shuo Bu De saluted to Zhang Sanfeng and said: "Ming Cult's Sect Leader Zhang's subordinate, Wanderer Cloth Sack Monk Shuo Bu De pays his respects to Venerable Zhang." Zhang SanFeng returned his salute saying: "You must be tired from your long journey." Shuo Bu De said: "My humble cult's sect leader's subordinates the Emissary of Guang Ming, White Browed Eagle King, as well as the other four Wanderers, Five Flags Leaders and other forces have already arrived at WuDang. Master Zhang can just relax and watch the Ming

Cult deal with these shameless imposters.”

He was actually bluffing. Such a large group of Ming Cult's forces could not have arrived so quickly. But when Zhao Min heard it, she could not help frowning slightly while thinking: “Who would have thought that they could arrive so quickly? Who leaked our secret?” Unable to bear it any longer she asked: “Where is your Sect Leader Zhang? Ask him to come and see me.” So saying she turned to Wei Yixiao and looked him in the eye. Her gaze was questioning – asking him where his Sect Leader was. Wei Yixiao laughed and said: “Now you are no longer trying to impersonate us, right?” He too wondered: “Sect Leader has definitely arrived, but where is he right now?” Zhang Wuji was hidden behind Ming Yue, he knew Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bu De have yet to recognize him. He was relieved seeing that these two helpers have arrived. Zhao Min laughed coldly and said: “One venomous bat, one stinking monk, what can you do?”

Just as she said this, a long laugh was heard from the roof on the east of the building, asking: “Reverend Shuo Bu De, has Left Emissary Yang arrived?” This person's voice resonated loudly. The White Browed Eagle King Yin TianZheng had arrived. Shuo Bu De had not yet answered when Yang Xiao's laughter was heard from western roof. Only to hear him laughingly say: “Eagle King, you keep improving as you grow older. You reached here a step faster.” Yin TianZheng laughed: “No need to be so polite, we both arrived at the same time. It'll be splitting hairs to decide who's faster. I fear that you gave way to me for Sect Leader Zhang's sake.” Yang Xiao said: “Definitely not! I've given it my best shot but still failed to beat you.” Enroute to Wudang the two of them had decided to compete to see who was faster. Yin TianZheng's inner power was profound but Yang Xiao's steps were quicker. As a result they were neck to neck with each other from the start to finish. Laughing, both men jumped

down from the roof.

Zhang Sanfeng had long heard of Yin Tianzheng's reputation. Moreover he was Zhang Cuishan's father-in-law. Yang Xiao was also a famous person in the martial world. He took three steps forward, cupped his hands and said: "Zhang Sanfeng respectfully welcomes Brother Yin and Brother Yang." In his heart he wondered: "Yin Tianzheng is the Heavenly Eagle Sect's leader. Why did he say 'for Sect Leader Zhang's sake'?" Yin and Yang bowed to him. Yin Tianzheng said: "I've long heard of Master Zhang distinguished name, but never had the opportunity to meet you. Today, I am very fortunate to do so." Zhang Sanfeng said: "You are both great masters of the era. The arrival of you both has truly made this a great occasion."

Zhao Min saw that more and more Ming Sect experts were arriving and she became even angrier. Though Zhang Wuji had not showed up, she was worried about any schemes he might have put in place. It looked like it would be difficult for her carefully laid plans to succeed. But they had managed to seriously injure Zhang Sanfeng, there would not be another opportunity as good as this. If they did not wrap up matters at Wudang today, once his injuries recover he will be a thorn in their side. With her eyes sweeping around, she sneered: "It is said in the martial arts world that Wudang is a top righteous sect, but how can hearing stories beat seeing with our own eyes? In reality Wudang has ganged up with the Demon Cult. The Demon Cult has simply been lending a hand in all battles, Wudang' martial arts is really nothing worth talking about." Shuo Bu De said: "Miss Zhao, you're only a little girl. When Master Zhang shook the martial arts world, your grandfather probably wasn't even born yet. What does a little kid know?" The ten or so people behind Zhao Min stepped forward glaring at him. Shuo Bu De smiled: "Do you think my words are unfit to be said? My name is Shuo Bu De

(ie cannot to be said), but when I want to saw something I'll say it. What can you do about it?" The skinny monk yelled angrily: "My lady, let your subordinate deal with this big-mouthed monk!" Shuo Bu De called out: "Wonderful! Wonderful! You are an unruly monk, I am also a unruly monk. Let us compete with each other. If Master Zhang gives us some pointers, it'll be more beneficial than 10 years of our own dedicated practice." So saying, he pulled a cloth sack out. The onlookers saw him take out one sack after another, there seemed to be no limit to the number of sacks inside his robe.

Zhao Min shook her head slightly, saying: "Today we have come to seek pointers from Wudang. No matter which fighter from Wudang comes forward, we will gladly compete him. Let's see if Wudang's martial arts are really great or whether it's just an empty reputation. We can settle our differences with the Ming Cult another time. That little devil Zhang Wuji, I want to rip his flesh and peel off his skin to vent my anger." When Zhang Sanfeng heard this he was surprised: "Is Ming Cult's Leader really called Zhang Wuji? And why 'little devil'?" Shuo Bu De laughed and said: "Our Sect Leader Zhang is a young hero. Miss Zhao is just worried that since you're a few years younger than our Sect Leader Zhang, you won't be able to marry him. In my opinion, you're a perfect match....." Before he could finish his sentence, the followers behind Zhao Min yelled out angrily: "Total nonsense!" "Shut up!" "The unruly monk is farting rubbish!" Zhao Min blushed. Her appearance was gentle and delicate, really like a shy young girl. However, this side of her was only seen for a moment. In a split second, her expression turned frosty. Turning to Zhang Sanfeng she said: "Master Zhang, if you're not willing to fight, you only have to admit that Wudang has been deceiving the world all along. We will then clap our hands and leave. Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the rest will also be returned to you." At this

moment, the Iron Hat Priest Zhang Zhong and Yin Yewang arrived. Not long later, Zhou Dian and Peng Yingyu too arrived. The Ming Cult now has four more fighters to help them.

Zhao Min realized that if they fight, victory is not assured. The most worrying thing is what sort of scheme Zhang Wuji had hatched. Her gaze swept over the Ming Cult members, thinking: "Zhang Sanfeng is a threat to the government because of his reputation and prestige. He is the figure the martial arts community looks to, the Mount Tai and the North Star. As long as he remains the enemy of the government, they will continue to resist us. But then again, he's already an old man, how much longer can he live? There's no need to take his life today. All we need to do is to disgrace him and destroy Wudang Sect's reputation. Our mission will then be successfully accomplished." She said coldly: "Our purpose for visiting Wudang is to see if Master Zhang's martial arts are real or not. If we want to destroy the Ming Cult, we would have gone to Guang Ming Peak. There would have been no need to come to Mt Wudang to compete martial arts. Can it be that in this world only you Master Zhang who can decide on a winner? I have three servants - one of them has learnt some basic swords skills, another has some shallow inner power, and the last one has learnt some mediocre boxing. Ah Da, Ah Er and Ah San come out. If you defeat my three servants, I'll recognise that Wudang Sect's martial arts really live up to its name. Otherwise the wulin will form its own opinion, there's no need for me to say any more." So saying, she clapped her hands. Three men came out from behind her.

Ah Da was a dried up old man. In his hands was a long sword -this sword was the Heaven Sword. This man's body was slender, his face was set in a frown and full of wrinkles. His expression was one of a person who had just been defeated

in a fight or a person whose wife and children had recently died. Just looking at his face made the onlookers feel sad and want cry for him. Ah Er was fellow of short stature. His head was smooth and oily and totally bald, the Tai Yang pressure points on both sides were depressed to about half an inch deep. Ah San was a strong-looking man with the power of a tiger. His face, hands and neck were bulging muscle. His whole body was full of energy, just like it was about to explode outwards. There was a mole with long hairs growing out of it on his left cheek. Zhang SanFeng, Yin TianZheng, Yang Xiao and the others were startled on seeing these three people.

Zhou Dian said: "Miss Zhao, these three are top experts of the martial arts world. I, Zhou Dian, am not a match for them. How is it that they lower themselves to pretend to be your servants to play a joke on Master Zhang?" Zhao Min replied: "When did I say that they are to experts of the martial arts world? Do you know what their names are?" Zhou Dian paused, then laughed saying: "This is 'Revealing a Sword to the World' the Frowning Divine Gentleman and this is 'Qi Master of All Directions' Bald Heavenly King. As for the other one, the whole world knows he is, hehe..he is... 'Unrivalled Divine Fist' Honourable Elder of Great Strenght."

Zhao Min could not help laughing a little after hearing such rubbish. She said: "How can my cooks and menial servants be a divine gentleman, a heavenly king and an honorable elder? Master Zhang, you compete with Ah San first." Ah San took a step forward, cupped his fist and said: "Master Zhang, please!" He stamped his left foot. With a "kala" sound, three tiles broke. Breaking the tile his foot stepped on was nothing unusual. What was amazing was how the two tiles next to it also broke. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao glanced at each other, thinking: "What a powerful guy!" Ah

Da and Ah Er lowered their heads and retreated without a glance at the crowd. From the moment they entered the hall, these three only stood behind Zhao Min, their gaze lowered to the ground and with a humble expression on their faces. Because of this, nobody paid any attention to them. Unexpectedly, they are truly amazing experts. And yet when they retreated, they changed back into humble looking servants.

Ling Xu was worried about Zhang Sanfeng's injury. He could not take it anymore and shouted: "Can't you see that my grandteacher is injured? How...how can you..." As he said this, he started crying.

Yin Tianzheng thought: "So Master Zhang has been injured. Who was it who injured him? Even if he is not injured, at his age, how can he fight with this person? This person's martial arts are entirely of the hard style. Let me take Master Zhang's place." So he said in a clear voice: "With Master Zhang's position, how can he fight the younger generation? Wouldn't he be the laughing stock of the world?Hrmph, these slaves are not even worth of fighting with me." He knows Ah Da, Ah Er and Ah San are definitely no ordinary people, yet he deliberately tried to infuriate them to gain an advantage for himself. Zhao Min said: "Ah San, what did you do most recently? Tell them. Let's see if you aren't worthy to fight Wudang experts." She emphasized on the word "Wudang". Ah San said:"I didn't do anything much recently. I only fought with a Shaolin monk named Kong Xing defeated his Dragon Claws and cut of his head."

These words caused a sensation within the hall. The Ming Cult members had seen the Divine Monk Kong Xing fight with Zhang Wuji on Guang Ming peak. It was unimaginable that he had been killed by this person. He was definitely a match for Zhang Sanfeng. Yin Tianzheng said loudly: "Great!

You even killed Shaolin's Kong Xing, let me try out your skills." So saying he took two steps forward and took a stance with white eyebrows sticking out, exhibiting awesome power.

Ah San said: "White Browed Eagle King, you are from an evil and unorthodox background, I am also from an evil and unorthodox background. We cannot fight our own people. If you want to fight, we can choose another day to compete. Today my master orders me to try out Wudang's martial arts." He turned to Zhang Sanfeng and said: "Master Zhang, if you don't want to come forward, you only need to say so. We won't force you. Once Wudang Sect concedes defeat, there'll be no need to take your life." Zhang Sanfeng smiled faintly. Even though he was severely injured, using his newly created Taiji Fist's philosophy of 'emptiness overcoming fullness', he might not necessarily lose. The difficulty was that after defeating Ah San, he would then have to compete inner power with Ah Er. There was no way out of the situation, he could only focus on the present. He would have to defeat Ah San first then decide what to do.

He walked slowly to the centre of the hall. Turning to Yin Tianzheng he said: "I appreciate Brother Yin's good intentions. In the past few years I've created a new set of fist techniques called 'Taiji Fist'. I believe it is quite different from other forms of martial arts. This benefactor wants to verify that Wudang's martial arts are real. If Brother Yin defeats him, he won't be satisfied. Let me exchange a few stances with him and take the opportunity show you the result of my painstaking work over these years."

When Yin Tianzheng heard this he was happy and yet worried. Zhang Sanfeng spoke with full confidence in his Taiji Fist. He would not have spoken if he could not back up what he said. But he had just suffered a serious injury, even

if the fist technique was excellent, his inner power might be insufficient. Still, he merely cupped his fists and said: "Junior respectfully defers to Master Zhang's divine skill." On seeing Zhang Sanfeng unexpectedly come forward, fear struck Ah San's heart. But he turned his face and said: "Today I'll fight a battle of life or death with this old Taoist. Neither one of us will escape uninjured. This will shake the martial arts world." He immediately drew his breath while staring at Zhang Sanfeng's face. As he held his breath, the sound of bones cracking was heard from all over his body. Everyone was startled. They knew this meant he had achieved the highest level of orthodox Buddhist martial arts. It was the Defeating Demon Diamond Skill.

When Zhang Sanfeng saw this he was startled: "This is no ordinary person! I wonder if my Taiji Fist can defeat him." He slowly lifted up both hands in readiness to fight. Suddenly a disheveled and dirty-looking little novice priest came out from behind Yu Daiyan saying: "Grandteacher, this benefactor wants to witness our Wudang's fist skills. But there's no need for grandteacher to show him yourself. It'll be enough for this disciple to demonstrate a few stances for him." This dirty-faced novice was Zhang Wuji. Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao and the rest parted with him only a short time ago. So even though his appearance was now completely different, after hearing his voice they recognized him. The Ming Cult members were overjoyed on seeing their sect leader had been there all along. How could Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan even imagine this?

Zhang SanFeng could not see his face clearly, and so assumed he was Qing Feng. He said: "This benefactor uses Shaolin's Defeating Demon Diamond Skill, an extremely powerful external skill. He is probably a top expert of Western Shaolin. He'll simply crush you to pieces with one blow." Zhang Wuji's right hand pulled Zhang Sanfeng's

sleeve and his left hand gently held Zhang Sanfeng's right hand. He said: "Grandteacher, the Taiji Fist you taught me has never been used before, we don't know if it will work or not. This benefactor is a hard style expert. Let me try out our philosophy of softness overcoming hardness and using the void to resist the solid. Wouldn't that be great?" After saying this, he used his palms to transfer his Art of 9 Yang chi into Zhang Sanfeng's body. At that moment, Zhang Sanfeng felt that the chi emitting from his palms to be so powerful that it without comparison in the whole world. Though it was far from being as refined as his own, the chi was firmly grounded yet soft and was limitless. He started and stared into Zhang Wuji's face. Only to see that his eyes did not shine brightly but had a soft, crystal-like layer in them. This meant that his inner power had reached the ultimate level. Except for his master Reverend Jue Yuan and Hero Guo Jing and a few others, he has never seen the same in anybody else. Of the top experts of the era, except for himself, he can think of no other person who has achieved this stage. In this instant, he mind was plagued with doubts and questions. However, this youth's abundant inner power was being used to treat his injury, he had no evil intentions. So he made his decision. He smiled while saying: "I am feeble and muddle-headed. How can I have any great kungfu to teach you? If you want to learn from this benefactor's super-hard kungfu, that is fine. Be careful." Thinking that this young novice priest is a top expert from another sect sent to help out Wudang, his speech was humble and polite.

Zhang Wuji said: "Grandteacher, I am greatly indebted to you. Even if my body is smashed to powder, I'll not be able to repay my debt to Grandteacher and Martial Uncles. Even though we do not dare claim Wudang's kungfu is matchless, it will not necessarily lose to Western Shaolin. Martial Grandfather, don't worry." He spoke very earnestly, saying "Grandteacher" a few times. Even Zhang Sanfeng found it

strange: "Could it be that he is a Wudang disciple? Cultivating himself secretly just like my master Reverend Jue Yuan?" He slowly released Zhang Wuji's hand, retreated and sat down. Glancing at Yu Daiyan he saw that he was equally bewildered.

Ah San saw Zhang Sanfeng send out this little novice to fight, it was like regarding him with disdain. But if he killed this little novice in one blow, agitate the old Taoist and then only fight with him, there will be a higher chance of coming out victorious. So he just said: "Little kid, watch out!"

Zhang Wuji said: "This fist technique I've just learnt is the product of my grandteacher's sweat and blood. It's called 'Taiji Fist'. I'm only a beginner so I may not have fully comprehended its key points. I'm afraid I won't be able to defeat you within thirty stances. But that is because I'm not yet proficient at it, nothing to do with its inadequacies. This is something you must understand." Instead of getting angry, Ah San laughed, turned to Ah Dan and Ah Er and said: "Eldest Brother, Second Brother, this kid is really barking mad." Ah Er laughed heartily. Ah Da saw that this little novice priest was nobody to be trifled with. He said: "Third Brother, don't take your enemy lightly." Ah San took a step forward, and punched Zhang Wuji's chest with a yell. This move was as quick as lightning. Midway through his strike, his left fist struck out even more quickly, reaching there first, aimed at Zhang Wuji's face. The stance was quite unusual, a true rarity.

Zhang Sanfeng had demonstrated and explained his Taiji Fist about an hour ago. Since then, Zhang Wuji had pondered about and understood its principles. On seeing Ah San's left fist heading his way, he countered with the Taiji Fist stance "Grasping the Sparrow's Tail". With his right leg solid and his left leg empty, he used the "squeeze"

technique and stuck with him. His right palm reached his opponent's left wrist, released his energy at full power. Unable to take the force, Ah San retreated two steps to the side.

The watching crowd gasped in astonishment. With this "Grasping the Sparrow's Tail" stance, the world had seen Taiji Fist used in combat for the first time. Zhang Wuji already had the Art of 9 Yang and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, now he suddenly made use of Taiji Fist's "sticky" technique. Though he learnt the skill no longer than two hours ago, it appeared as if he has studied it all his life. Ah San felt as if his punch which carried with it the force of a hundred thousand catties had simply entered an ocean and disappeared without a trace. At the same time, the force of his punch was directed back at him. At first he was startled but amazement quickly turned to fury. His fist attacked very quickly, the speed was such that it looked like he had more than ten arms with ten fists attacking all at once. His attacks descended like hurricane and rain. The watchers all thought: "No wonder Kong Xing, despite his powerful martial arts, died under his hand." Everyone apart from Zhao Min and her followers were worried for Zhang Wuji's safety.

Zhang Wuji intentionally wanted to show off Wudang's power and prestige. So he did not use his own martial arts. Each stance he used was Zhang Sanfeng's Taiji Fist – Single Whip, Lifting up the Hand, White Crane Spreads Its Wings, Brushing the Knee and the Twisted Step. He executed the stance "Playing the Pipa", with the right pushing down and the left accepting. In this instance, he understood the essence of the Taiji Fist. His stance became just like the moving clouds and flowing water, natural and unrestrained. Ah San felt like he was completely enveloped by Zhang Wuji's hands. He was unable to flee or resist. He could only direct his energy to his back to receive this strike with hard

force. At the same he lashed out with his right fist, hoping that both of them would hit each other intending to take his enemy down with him. Unexpectedly, Zhang Wuji's hands formed a circle, like carrying the cosmos. From this came out a revolving force which was powerful any comparison, making Ah San spin round seven or eight times. Ah San has to use his "Thousand Catties Falling" skill to stop spinning. He was in a wretched state, his face red with embarrassment. The Ming Cult members applauded loudly.

Yang Xiao called out: "Wudang's Taiji Fist is so wonderful. It's a real eye-opener." Zhou Dian laughed: "Ah San, I advice you to change your name to 'Ah Zhuan' (Note: "Zhuan" means to spin/turn)!" Yin Yewang said: "There's nothing to be embarrassed about if you spin a few more circles. Didn't the ancients say of the Thirty-sixth Stratagem is 'spinning is the best strategy'?" (Note: this is a clever play on words by JY. The 36th Stratagem is "zhou wei shang ji - running away is the best option. Yin Yewang changed the word "? zhou" which means "run" to "? zhuan" which mean spin.) Shuo Bu De said: "Among the Heros of Mt Liang was Black Whirlwind. That whirlwind spun around too!" (Note: This is from Water Margin/Outlaws of the Marsh. The Black Whirlwind refers to Li Kui. I'm not familiar with the story, so don't ask me for details)

In his fury, Ah San's face changed from red to green. Yelling angrily, he threw himself forward in attack. His left hand switched between a fist to a palm and back again irregularly. His right hand used purely finger techniques - snatching and poking, hooking and digging, all five fingers extended like judge's brushes, like pressure point sealing pegs, like sabers and swords, like spears and lances, all extremely offensive moves. Zhang Wuji was not yet familiar with the Taiji Fist techniques. Faced with this barrage, he was unable to cope and his movements became erratic. Suddenly, part of his

sleeve was torn off. He could only utilise his lightness kungfu to dash out of the way. Faced with this strange finger technique he only thing he could do was dodge. Ah San yelled and chased him. There was no where for Zhang Wuji to escape his fingers combined with lightness kungfu. While dodging, Zhang Wuji thought: "If I keep running without fighting, wouldn't that be losing? Since I'm not yet proficient at Taiji Fist, I'll have to use Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi."

He turned around, both hands executed Taiji Fist's defensive stance "Wild Horse's Mane". His left hand unleashed Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi techniques. Ah San's right hand was moving to jab Zhang Wuji's shoulder. Instead, there was a sound of laughter as he ended up poking his own left arm. The pain was so great that he saw stars, he almost could not move his left arm. Yang Xiao saw that this was not a Taiji Fist stance so he hurriedly yelled: "Taiji Fist is really amazing!" Ah San shouted in pain and anger: "What Taiji Fist? That was sorcery!" He then attacked three times consecutively. Zhang Wuji jumped away, he saw Ah San stretch out his arm to jab him, he again used his Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. With a "tuo" sound, he redirected Ah San's two fingers straight into a pillar, embedding them deeply. Everyone was shocked and yet found it very funny.

Amidst the laughter, Yu Daiyan said in a harsh voice: "Stop! Is that Shaolin's Diamond Finger?" (Note: Diamond Finger = Golden Steel Finger in Meh's translation). Zhang Wuji jumped when he heard the words "Shaolin's Diamond Finger". He remembered that Yu Daiyan was injured by Shaolin's Diamond Finger. For the past twenty years, Wudang Sect had harbored a deep resentment towards Shaolin. It looked like the real perpetrator was this man. Only to hear Ah San say coldly: "So what if it is the Diamond Finger? It's your own fault for being so stubborn and not giving up the Dragon Sabre. How does it feel to be paralysed

for the last twenty years?" Yu Daiyan harshly said: "Thank you for revealing the truth today. So it is Western Shaolin who is responsible for maiming me. It's a pity...it's a pity about fifth brother." As he said these words, he choked with a sob.

Zhang Cuishan committed suicide because he could not face his martial brother after finding out that Yu Daiyan was injured by Yin Susu's silver needles. In actual fact, after Yu Daiyan was injured with the silver needles Yin Susu entrusted the Dragon Gate Escort Agency to send him back to Wudang. After a month's treatment, he would have recovered from the poison. Unfortunately, his four limbs were broken with the Diamond Fingers. If they had found this culprit at that time, Zhang Cuishan and his wife would not have died a tragic death. Yu Daiyan was filled with grief about his innocent martial brother's death while also hating his crippled condition. His heart was filled with hatred. When Zhang Wuji heard their words, he immediately understood what had happened. When he was young he heard his father say a 'Huo Gong Tou Tuo' of Shaolin Temple secretly learnt martial arts and killed the head of the Damo Hall Reverend Ku Zhi. The top Shaolin experts then had a huge argument. As a result, Reverend Ku Wei went to the Western Regions and set up Western Shaolin. It seemed that this person was a descendant of Ku Wei.

Zhang Sanfeng said: "This benefactor is excessively vicious. We never imagined that there is a person like you among Reverend Ku Wei's descendants." Ah San grinned ferociously and said: "What kind of thing is Ku Wei?"

When Zhang Sanfeng heard this, he struck with sudden realization. After Yu Daiyan had been injured by the Diamond Fingers, Wudang Sect sent people to ask Shaolin for an explanation. The Abbot of Shaolin resolutely denied

any involvement. They then suspected Western Shaolin. But after a few years of making enquiries, they got to know that Western Shaolin had now changed. All disciples only studied Buddhism and did not know martial arts. He knew that if Ah San was a Western Shaolin disciple, he would never curse the founder of his sect. So he said in a clear voice: “No wonder! This benefactor is Huo Gong Tou Tuo's (the kitchen worker monk – see Athena's translation of Chapter 2 for details) descendant. Not only did you learn his martial arts, but you also picked up his evil nature! Is Kong Xiang your martial brother?”

Ah San replied: “Right! He is my martial brother. His name is not Kong Xiang, but is Gang Xiang. Master Zhang, how does my Diamond Prajana Palm compare with your Wudang palm skills?” Yu Daiyan said harshly: “Not even close! His skull was crushed with one palm strike from my master. With his mediocre skills how dare he come up against my master! Death is really too light for him!”

Ah San let out a yell and rushed out to attack. Zhang Wuji used the “Apparent Closure” stance of the Taiji Fist to block him and said: “Ah San, give me the ‘Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment!’” So saying he stretched out his right hand. Ah San was shocked: “Our sect's bone healing medicine is such a closely kept secret that even our sect's ordinary disciples don't know about it. Where did this little novice priest hear about it?”

How could he know that Hu Qingniu's “Medical Classic”, stated that in the Western Regions there existed an external school of martial arts which branched out from Shaolin. Its techniques were extremely weird, no medicine can treat bones broken by it. The only exception was the school's “Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment. However, no one else knew how to make this ointment. Zhang Wuji only wanted to

test him by saying this. When he saw Ah San's expression change, he knew he had guessed correctly. He said clearly: "Give it to me!" He thought about his parent's deaths as well the suffering of his two martial uncles. Feeling great hatred, he had no desire to continue talking to him. Even though Ah San's martial arts were slightly inferior, when he executed the powerful Diamond Fingers, Zhang Wuji could only avoid his strokes but was unable to counter-attack. As long as he remained careful towards Zhang Wuji's weird techniques he should win this fight. He stepped forward and yelled: "Kowtow to me three times and I'll spare you, or else you'll end up like the one named Yu." Zhang Wuji wanted to wrest his "Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment" away from him. However, he had no idea how to deal with the Diamond Fingers. Though he could use Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to injure Ah San, he would still be unable to force him to hand over the ointment. Then Zhang Sanfeng said: "Child, come here!" Zhang Wuji replied: "Yes, Grandteacher." He walked over to stand in front of him.

Zhang SanFeng said: "Use intention not force. Taiji is circular and continuous, it does not break off. Take control of the situation and let your opponent break his own form. Each stance and each form is linked together like the Chang Jiang (ie Yangtze River), a never-ending torrent. " He realized that Zhang Wuji had understood the secret of Taiji. The problem was that his martial arts were too powerful so his stances contained distinct edges and corners rendering him unable to accomplish the Taiji Fist concept of "continuous circles". This was the crux of Taiji philosophy. Zhang Wuji's martial arts were profound, after hearing Zhang Sanfeng's words, he immediately understood. He envisioned the circular Taji Diagram (ie the famous Yin-Yang symbol) and the philosophy of Yin and Yang.

Ah San laughed coldly: "Isn't that too late to learn martial

arts now?" Zhang Wuji raised his eyebrows and said: "There's just enough time. Let me test out a few moves with you." As he said this he turned around, his right hand moving in a circular manner, sweeping at Ah San's face. This was Taiji Fist's "Tall Mounted Scout" stance. Ah San's five fingers came together, assuming the shape of a knife, chopping towards him. Zhang Wuji countered with the "Double Wind Piercing Ear" stance, his two hands formed a circle. He now understood and used the "continuous circles" concept that Zhang Sanfeng had taught him. He executed left circles and right circles, circles within circles, large circles, small circles, flat circles, vertical circles, perfect circles, slanting circles - each one a Taiji circle, surrounding Ah San and pushing him. Unable to withstand it, Ah San staggered around like a drunkard.

Suddenly, Ah San's five fingers shot out violently. Zhang Wuji used the "Cloud Hand" stance, right hand high and left hand low forming a circle surrounding his arm and applied the Art of Nine Yang power. With a "krak" sound, all the bones on Ah San's right arm were broken. The power of the Art of Nine Yang was really frightening. In one moment, Ah San's arm was broken in six or seven places. The Taiji Fist alone without the Art of Nine Yang was not capable of generating such power. Zhang Wuji hated his wickedness so he employed the "Cloud Hands" stance repetitively. Before the first circle was completed, the second circle began. With another "krak" sound, Ah San's left arm was broken. This was followed by more "krak" sounds as both his legs were also broken. In his whole life, Zhang Wuji has never been so vicious to his opponents. But this person caused his parent's deaths and his third and sixth uncles' suffering. If he had not wanted to obtain the "Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment" from Ah San, he would have taken his life.

Ah San screamed and fell to the ground. One of Zhao Min's

subordinates rushed out, picked him up and retreated. The spectators were totally astonished by Zhang Wuji's power. Even the Ming Cult experts forgot to applaud. The bald Ah Er then dashed forward, his right palm shot out towards Zhang Wuji's chest. Before the palm arrived, Zhang Wuji felt his breath constricted. He immediately used the "Slant Flying Form" to redirect the palm. Without a sound the bald old man landed firmly on the ground. With full concentration he launched one palm attack after another, each attack accompanied with incomparable inner power.

Zhang Wuji saw his palm strokes were of the same origin as Ah San's. From his age he is probably Ah San's older martial brother. Though he was not as quick and agile as Ah San, he was steadier. Zhang Wuji used Taiji Fist's "stick", "divert" and "push" forms intending push Ah Er off balance. Unexpectedly, this person's inner strength was extremely powerful, he himself ended up stumbling. Zhang Wuji thought: "Let me see whether your Western Shaolin's inner power is greater or my Art of Nine Yang is greater." Seeing a palm coming towards him, he used brute force to meet that palm directly. Both palms met with a thunderous clash, both their bodies swayed. Zhang Sanfeng inwardly yelled: "Not good! When fighting with brute force, the more powerful one will win. It's completely opposite to the principle of Taiji Fist. This baldie's inner power is very powerful, rarely seen in the martial arts world. The kid will suffer severe injuries under his palm." At this moment, the combatant's palms came crashing together a second time. Ah Er's body wobbled and he retreated one step while Zhang Wuji stood firm and steady.

At the pinnacle of both arts, the Art of Nine Yang and Shaolin internal energy were equal. But the founder of the "Diamond School" was a kitchen worker monk who learnt martial arts on the sly without proper instruction. It is possible to learn

external forms and weapons techniques by watching. However, inner power is practiced within the body. No matter how long a person watches, he will still be unable to see how energy is regulated and moved through the body. That is why it is possible to secretly learn external martial arts but impossible to learn internal arts. The Diamond School's external arts were extremely powerful, on par with orthodox Shaolin. However, their internal arts are very far behind. Ah Er was a unique member of the "Diamond School". Born with powerful strength, he took a different course from the rest and cultivated profound inner power. His achievements in this category have long surpassed that of his school's founder, the kitchen worker monk. Few people have managed to last more than three stances against him. Now while fighting hard against him, he was forced a step backwards by Zhang Wuji. He was both shocked and angry. He took a deep breath and used both palms to attack Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji called out: "Sixth Uncle Yin, watch me help you vent your anger." It turned out that Yin Liting, Yang Buhui and Xiao Zhao have already arrived at Wudang Mountain.

Zhang Wuji yelled and brought his right fist out. With a thunderous crash, the bald Ah Er retreated three steps, his eyes bulged out and blood gurgled within his chest. Zhang Wuji called: "Sixth Uncle Yin, was this baldie among your attackers?" Yin Liting said: "Yes! This person was the leader." Only to hear cracking sounds coming from the bones in Ah Er's body as he gathered his energy. Yu Daiyan knew Ah Er's inner strength was very powerful. By generating his energy like that, his palm force will be no trivial matter and extremely difficult to deal with. He yelled: "Attack while he is crossing the river!" His meaning was not to wait for Ah Er to finish gathering his strength but to attack first. Zhang Wuji replied: "Yes!" He took a step forward but did not strike. Ah Er raised his arms, and with earth-shattering force struck

out. Zhang Wuji inhaled and circulated his internal chi, his right palm swept out, received the attack, and redirected the force back to him. These two forces combined to become one. Ah Er yelled, his body was flung backwards right through the wall as if thrown by a catapult. The shocked onlookers turned pale. A man carried Ah Er through the hole in the wall and laid him on the ground. This person was short and fat, as round as a drum. His appearance was very comical. Yet, his movements were very agile. He was the Ming Cult's Earth Banner Chief Yan Yuan. Ah Er's arms, ribs and shoulder joints had been broken by his own hard energy. After putting Ah Er down, Yan Yuan turned to Zhang Wuji and bowed. He then excited through the hole in the wall looking like a fat mouse.

When Zhao Min saw that this little novice priest defeated two of her to experts, she had become suspicious. After seeing Yan Yuan bow to him, recognition dawned onto her. He secretly scolded herself: "I deserve to die! I thought I had arrived ahead of him. I never expected that he'll go as far as to pretend to be an apprentice priest, causing trouble here and spoiling my great plans." She immediately said gently: "Sect Leader Zhang, why do you lower yourself by disguising as a little apprentice priest? You keep saying grandteacher this and grandteacher that, yet you're not embarrassed."

Zhang Wuji saw that she had recognized him. So he said clearly: "My late father Cuishan was Grandteacher's fifth disciple. If I don't call him 'Grandteacher', what can I call him? What's there to be embarrassed about?" He turned around, faced Zhang Sanfeng, knelt down and kowtowed saying: "Zhang Wuji pays his respects to Grandteacher and Third Martial Uncle. Because of the urgent situation, I didn't have time to report to you. Please forgive me for deceiving you." Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan were filled with joyous

shock. Never in their wildest imagination did they think that this youngster was the same sickly child of many years ago. Zhang Sanfeng laughed loudly, stretched out his hand to help him up, saying: "Good boy, you didn't die. Cuishan has a descendant." The fact that Zhang Wuji's martial arts were so amazing was secondary. Believing that Zhang Wuji had died long ago, Zhang Sanfeng was happiest over the fact that he was still alive. His heart overflowed with joy. He turned to Yin Tianzheng and said: "Brother Yin, congratulations for having such a great grandson." Yin Tianzheng laughingly replied: "Master Zhang, congratulations on having such a wonderful grand-disciple."

Zhao Min cursed: "What wonderful grandson? What wonderful grand-disciple? Just two old men bringing up a cunning and sly little devil. Ah Da, go and try out his sword skills." The frown-faced Ah Da answered: "Yes!" With a brushing sound, he pulled out the Heaven Sword. Everyone stared at the gleaming sword radiating in power. Zhang Wuji said: "This sword belongs to E-Mei. How did it fall into your hands?" Zhao Min spat: "Little devil, what do you know? The old nun Mie Jue stole this sword from my family. The sword has simply been returned to its true owner. What has the Heaven Sword got to do with E-Mei Sect?" Zhang Wuji had no knowledge of the origins of the Heaven Sword. He was unable to answer her. So he immediately changed the subject: "Miss Zhao, please give me the 'Black Jade Fracture Healing Ointment'. Once my third and sixth martial uncles' broken limbs are healed, we can just let bygones be bygones" Zhao Min said: "Hrmph! Let bygones be bygones? Talk is cheap. Do you know where Shaolin's Kong Wen and Kong Zhi; Wudang's Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the rest are?" Zhang Wuji shook his head saying: "I don't know. Could you please tell me?"

Zhao Min laughed coldly: "Why should I tell you? Are you

going to repeat your disgraceful conduct in the Green Willow Manor prison?" As she said this she blushed. Thinking about the incident made her furious and yet bashful at the same time. Zhang Wuji blushed when heard her say "disgraceful conduct". That day, in order to save the Ming Cult fighters he had had no choice but to resort to such tactics - he had tickled the base of her foot with his hand. Actually he had had no inappropriate thoughts however, there was a barrier between men and women. This incident had to be kept a secret from the crowd - it would be a disaster if they assumed that he had violated a young girl. Instead of offering an explanation he said: "Miss Zhao, are you going to give me the 'Black Jade Bone Fracture Healing Ointment'?" Zhao Min laughed coldly and said: "I can easily give you the 'Black Jade Bone Fracture Healing Ointment'. If you do three things for me, I'll offer it up to you with both hands." Zhang Wuji asked: "What three things?" Zhao Min replied: "I haven't thought of them yet. When I think of them I'll tell you what to do." Zhang Wuji said: "That won't do. What if you ask me to commit suicide or become a pig or dog?" Zhao Min laughed: "I won't ask you to commit suicide. I also won't ask you to become a pig or a dog. Hehe... even if you're willing to you lack the ability." Zhang Wuji said: "You'll have to tell me what you want first. As long as it's not anything dishonourable and within my abilities, there can be no harm obliging you."

Zhao Min was just about to reply when she caught sight of an pearl ornament in Xiao Zhao's hair. It was none other than the hair ornament that she had given to Zhang Wuji. She couldn't help but become furious. She saw that Xiao Zhao was a beautiful girl with a sweet smile. Though she was still young , she was like a lotus flower in the glow of dawn, raising feelings of tender affection in people's hearts. Her heart was filled with even greater hatred. Gritting her teeth she said to Ah Da: "Go and cut off both his arms!" Ah

Da replied: "Yes!" He raised the Heaven Sword, took a step forward and said: "Sect Leader Zhang, my lady orders me to cut off both your arms."

Zhou Dian had been controlling himself for a long time. But now he was unable to bear it anymore. He cursed: "Your mother's farting crap! Why don't you cut your own arm off?" Ah Da's expression was one of worry and anxiety. He bitterly said: "You do have a point there." Zhou Dian was delighted. He said loudly: "Cut it off then." Ah Da said: "There's no need to rush." Zhang Wuji was quietly fretting. The Heaven Sword was extremely sharp, any weapon that collides with it will break. The only thing to do was to use Qian Jun Da Nuo Yi to snatch the sword from him. However, it was extremely risky to use his bare hands to do so. If his opponent's sword technique was unusual and he was unable to anticipate the moves he would be in trouble. No matter which part of his arm comes into contact with the sword edge, it will immediately be chopped off. He had no idea what to do. Suddenly Zhang Sanfeng said: "Wuji, you've already learned Taiji Fist, I also have a Taiji Sword skill. There's no harm in teaching it to you so you can use it to match swords with this benefactor." Zhang Wuji said joyfully: "Thank you Grandteacher." He turned to Ah Da and said: "Elder, I'm not familiar with swordsmanship. I'll have to ask my grandteacher for some pointers before crossing swords with you."

Ah Da was actually secretly afraid of Zhang Wuji. Despite the advantage of having the Heaven Sword, he could not be sure of victory. He was delighted to hear that Zhang Wuji was just about to learn swordsmanship. In his heart he felt that however wonderful the sword techniques were, Zhang Wuji would definitely be unfamiliar with it. Sword techniques required careful and diligent study. It would take at least ten to twenty years of dedicated practice before a person could proficiently use it in a fight. He nodded his

head and said: "Go and learn. I'll wait here for you. Is four hours enough?" Zhang Sanfeng said: "There's no need to go elsewhere. I'll teach him here, that way everything will be fresh in his mind. It'll take less than an hour." At these words, with the exception of Zhang Wuji, everyone was stunned. They could not believe their ears and thought: "No matter how profound and mysterious Wudang Sect's Taiji Sword Art is, an enemy watching him teach would be able to pick up and understand its intricacies. The skill will no longer be a secret." Ah Da said: "That's fine. I'll go outside and wait." He did not want to gain an advantage this way. Despite his position as a servant, he conducted himself as an eminent master of the martial arts world. Zhang Sanfeng said: "That won't be necessary. This is the first time this new sword skill of mine sees action. I've no idea whether it will be any use at all. You're a famous swordsman - I invite you to point out the flaws of this sword art." At this time Yang Xiao suddenly realized something. He said clearly: "So you're the 'Eight Arm Divine Swordsman' Fang Dongbai. You were once an elder of the Beggar Sect - how did you become a lowly servant?" The Ming Cult members listened with shock. Zhou Dian said: "Aren't you supposed to be dead? This...this...how is this possible?"

Ah Da sighed, lowered his head and said: "The old beggar is almost dead. Why bring up the past? I am no longer a Beggar Sect Elder." Those of the older generation know that Eight Arm Divine Swordsman Fang Dongbai was the head of the four elders of the Beggar Sect. He was famous throughout the martial arts world for his swordsmanship. He was so unusually fast with the sword that it seemed like he had seven or eight arms, this earned him his nickname. He was said to have died of a serious illness over ten years ago. At that time everyone thought it was a great pity. It was quite a shock to see that he was still among the living. Zhang Sanfeng said: "It is an immeasurable honour for the

Eight-Armed Divine Swordsman to give a few pointers. Wuji, do you have a sword?" Xiao Zhao stepped forward and presented the wooden Heaven Sword Zhang Wuji had taken from Zhao Min to him. Zhang Sanfeng picked it up and laughed: "A wooden sword? Isn't this used for drawing talismans and expelling demons?" He stood up with the sword in his left hand and his right hand forming sword forms. Both hands made a loop and he slowly raised them. This opening form was followed by "Encase the Moon with Three Rings", "Biggest Star in the Big Dipper", "Swallow Skims the Water", "Left Block", "Right Block"...each form smoothly following the other. At the fifty-third stance "The Compass" his hands simultaneously drew a circle followed by the fifty-fourth form "Grasping the Sword and Returning to the Beginning". Zhang Wuji did not try to remember each stance and form. Instead, he focused on the spirit of the unbroken, flowing sword. At the end of Zhang Sanfeng's demonstration, not a single person applauded. Everyone was thinking: "How can such a slow and gentle sword art be used to fight an enemy?" Then they thought: "Master Zhang must have deliberately slowed down for Zhang Wuji to learn."

Only to hear Zhang Sanfeng say: "Have you seen everything clearly?" Zhang Wuji answered: "Yes." Zhang Sanfeng asked: "Do you remember everything?" Zhang Wuji answered: "I've already forgotten a small portion." Zhang Sanfeng said: "Good. Think about it for a while." Zhang Wuji lowered his head in contemplation. After a while, Zhang Sanfeng asked: "What about now?" Zhang Wuji replied: "I've forgotten a large portion."

Zhou Dian yelled out: "Damm! He's forgetting more and more as time passes. Master Zhang, this sword art of yours is too profound. How can anyone remember it all after seeing it only once? Please demonstrate it once more for our sect

leader." Zhang Sanfeng smiled and said: "Alright, I'll demonstrate it once more." He picked up the sword and went through the moves again. After watching a few stances, the spectators were surprised. The stances in the second performance were completely different from the stances in the first. Zhou Dian yelled: "Damm, damm! This will make him even more confused." Zhang Sanfeng drew a full circle, then he asked: "Child, what about now?" Zhang Wuji replied: "I still haven't forgotten three stances." Zhang Sanfeng nodded his head, put down the sword and returned to his seat. Zhang Wuji paced slowly in a circle. He contemplated a while, then slowly turned a half-circle. He then lifted his head up and with a joyous expression, said: "I've completely forgotten it all, not a trace is left." Zhang Sanfeng said: "Not bad, not bad! You forgot it very quickly. You can now ask the Eight Armed Divine Swordsman to give you some pointers!" After saying this he gave the wooden sword to him. Zhang Wuji accepted it with a bow. He turned to Fang Dongbai and said: "Elder Fang please." Zhou Dian scratched his head, his heart heavy with worry. Fang Dongbai stepped forward and said: "Sorry for offending you!" His gleaming sword stabbed forward with a 'chi' sound. His internal strenght was not inferior to Ah Er's. The onlookers were shocked, thinking that even without the Heaven Sword, an ordinary sword wielded with such powerful inner strenght would be extremely destructive. The "Divine Swordsman" was really not an empty name.

Zhang Wuji drew a half-circle to counter, pushing his wooden sword against the flat of the Heaven Sword while channelling his inner strenght. The Heaven Sword was forced downwards. Fang Dongbai praised: "Great sword skills!" He turned his wrist and stabbed at his left arm. Zhang Wuji countered with a circular movement. With a clapping sound, the two swords met and both parties leapt backwards. Fang Dongbai's Heaven Sword vibrated with a

'weeiing' sound, it continued for sometime without stopping. One weapon was a precious sword and the other a wooden sword. Yet when they collided there was no difference between the two swords. With this stance Zhang Wuji used bluntness to defeat sharpness, displaying the essence of the Taiji Sword. What Zhang Sanfeng taught him was "sword intention", not "sword techniques". He had to forget all the stances completely in order to grasp the essence. During combat, intention directs the sword producing countless variations with no limits. However, if one or two techniques remained in the memory, they will restrain the mind and the sword skills will not be pure. Top experts like Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng vaguely understood the concept. Zhou Dian's lack of understanding was the cause of his anxiety. At this time the sounds of the battle echoed through the hall. Fang Dongbai's aggressive sword technique and deep internal strength utilised the sharp sword to produce extremely exquisite swordplay. Sword chi rippled through the hall unrestrained. The onlookers felt like they were caught in a snow-storm, the cold energy chilling them to the bone. Amid all this Zhang Wuji's sword drew one circle after another. Each stance, whether attacking or defending, within a circle. His mind was clear, using intention to guide the sword. The wooden sword seemed to give out thin threads, winding round and round the Heaven Sword. More and more of these threads appeared forming a ball around the Heaven Sword. After more than two hundred stances, Fang Dongbai's sword was becoming more sluggish. The sword in his hand felt heavier and heavier - five cattys, six cattys, seven cattys..... ten cattys, twenty cattys..... He thrust the sword but had no strength to back it up. The wooden sword forced it to spin a couple of circles.

The longer he fought, the more afraid Fang Dongbai became. After three hundred or more stances the two swords

had not clashed. Such a thing had never before happened in his whole life. It was as if his opponent had unfurled a gigantic net which was getting smaller and smaller. Fang Dongbai alternated between six or seven different sword styles. The variations were so complex that the spectators felt dizzy just watching him. Throughout the battle Zhang Wuji simply drew circles with the sword. With the exception of Zhang Sanfeng, none of the spectators could see which of his stances were offensive and which were defensive. This Taiji Sword was comprised of all sorts of circles. It was really made up of only one stance but there was no limit to its uses. A loud hiss was heard from Fang Dongbai. He thrust the Heaven Sword forward with every ounce of energy he had left, putting everything into this one strike.

Recognising the danger of the situation, Zhang Wuji used his sword to block. With great skill, Fang Dongbai adjusted his stance slightly. The Heaven Sword now attacked from the side. With a 'qing' sound, six inches of the wooden sword was cut off. The minor obstruction was not enough to hold back the Heaven Sword and it stabbed straight at Zhang Wuji's chest.

In shock, Zhang Wuji shot his left hand out and caught the sword between his index and middle fingers. At the same time, the broken wooden sword in his right hand chooped down on Fang Dongbai's right arm. Though it was a wooden sword, when backed with the power of the Art of 9 Yang it was no different from a steel blade. Fang Dongbai tried to pull his right arm back but Zhang Wuji's two fingers held onto the Heaven Sword with an iron-grip. In this circumstances, his only option was to let go of the Heaven Sword and jump away. Only to hear Zhang Wuji yell: "Let go!" Fang Dongbai gritted his teeth but held on to the sword. In a blink of an eye a 'pa' sound was heard. His arm, still holding on to the sword, was cut off by the wooden

sword. Fang Dongbai refused to let go of the sword because he wanted to protect it. He stretched out his left hand and snatched the falling right arm out of the air. Though the arm had left its body, its five fingers still held on firmly to the Heaven Sword. Zhang Wuji was stunned at this display of courage. He also felt regret. So he did not try to take the sword. Fang Dongbai walked in front of Zhao Min, bowed and said: "My lady, your servant is useless. I should be punished." Zhao Min completely ignored him. She said: "Today we'll give Sect Leader Zhang face and let Wudang Sect off." She waved her right hand saying: "Let's go!" Her subordinates carried Fang Dongbai, Ah Er and Ah San and left the hall. Zhang Wuji yelled: "Hold on! If you don't leave the Black Jade Bone Fracture Healing Ointment behind, don't even think about leaving Wudang Mountain." He jumped forward and made a grab for Zhao Min's shoulder. His hand was about a foot away from Zhao Min's shoulder when he felt palm wind heading towards the left and right side of his body. These palms were soundless and appeared out of no where. In shock, Zhang Wuji brought both his palms out. His right hand met the palm attacking on his right and his left hand met the palm attacking from the left. The four palms clashed at the same time. Only to feel a strange powerful energy. The palm force contained a matchless cold yin energy he knew well. It was no other than the "Xuan Ming Divine Palm" which tormented him in his youth. Startled, Zhang Wuji channelled his Art of 9 Yang chi. Suddenly, two palms hit him simultaneously on the left and right side of his body. With a grunt, Zhang Wuji was thrown backwards. He saw that his attackers were two tall and skinny old men. With one hand, they clashed palms with Zhang Wuji and while the other soundlessly struck his body. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao yelled in anger and rushed forward. The two old men struck out again. There was a crashing sound. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao retreated a few steps, their chests feeling constricted and cold energy

penetrating their bones. The bodies of the two old men swayed a little. The man on the right laughed coldly: "The famous names of Ming Sect are really nothing!" Turning around, they left protecting Zhao Min.

End of Chapter 24.

Chapter 25 - Lighting a blazing fire to burn the sky.

(Translated by Huang Rong and Foxs, editing by Han Solo and Eliza Bennet)



On the fifteenth of the eighth month, a huge bonfire was built in front of the altar in the middle of the Butterfly Valley. Zhang Wuji climbed on top of the altar to pledge to drive the Yuan invaders out, to do good and shun evil, and reaffirming the original Cult teaching. That day the fire in front of the altar was blazing high, the fragrance of the incense spread everywhere, the Ming Cult flourished far beyond in the time past.

(Huang Rong, edited by Han Solo)

Everyone was worried about Zhang Wuji's injury so they did not attend to the pursuit and instead effusively surrounded him. Wuji showed a faint smile, and gently swung his right hand downward once to demonstrate that he was not injured at all. As the Nine Yang Divine Art inside his body began to expel the Yin cold energy of the Xuan Ming Divine Palm [editors note: using Xuan Ming divine palm to match previous translations] from the body, white jets of steam starts to emit hastily and continuously out from the top of his head which now looked like a steamer. When he untied the coat, both sides of his body have a clear deep black palm mark imprinted on. Under the revolutions of the Nine Yang Divine Art, the color of the two palm marks changed from black to purple, from purple changed into ashen grey, until finally the two palm marks were all gone after around an hour. In the past, Wuji had spent several years yet unable to fully drive the poison of the Xuan Ming Divine Palm out of his body, this time, in only a short while it was eliminated easily and completely.

He stood up, said: "Although this event was very dangerous, but eventually we can recognize our enemy's appearances." When the Xuan Ming Elders clashed palms with Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, they had already been attacked by the Nine Yang Divine Art of Zhang Wuji, so the Yin poison in their palm power was less than two tenths of its normal self, but both Yang and Wei still had to sit in meditation and circulating their energy for over a half of the day in order to totally expel the Yin poison from their bodies. Zhang Wuji cared for his martial grandfather's wound, Zhang Sanfeng said: "The fireworker monk's internal cultivation technique was not good, even though his external technique was fierce, it was still far inferior to the Xuan Ming Divine Palm, my wound is not ominous."

At that time, the Sharp Metal Flag's General Flag Herald Wu Jingcao entered the hall and reported that all the intruding enemies had withdrawn from the Wudang mountain. Yu Daiyan ordered the Taoist who was tasked with managing guests to prepare a vegetarian feast in honour of the members of the Ming Cult. During the feast, Zhang Wuji turned toward Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan to report on what had happened to himself since the separation. Everybody exclaimed after hearing the story. Zhang Sanfeng said: "That year, in this Wudang temple, I clashed a palm with an old man, but during that time he disguised himself as a Mongolia military officer so I don't know which one he is in those two old men. It's really ashamed that up to now we still have not been able to know thoroughly about our enemy." Yang Xiao said: "I don't know what is the origin of that young girl surnamed Zhao that even elite fighters such as the Xuan Ming Elders are willing to accept her command." Everybody made many guesses but could not come to a conclusion on this matter.

Zhang Wuji said: "At the moment, there are two important tasks. The first one is obtaining the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste to well treat Yu third elder martial uncle's and Yu sixth martial uncle's injuries. The second one is finding out eldest martial uncle Song and his companions' whereabouts. The solutions to both matters is in the hands of that girl surnamed Zhao." Yu Daiyan said with a strained smile: "I've been disabled for twenty years so even if you really had miraculous pills and divine medicines, my injury would not be able to be cured. Rescuing the eldest brother and the sixth younger brother is more important." Zhang Wuji said: "We cannot delay anymore, Left Herald Yang, Bat King Wei and Shuo Bude you three please descend the mountain together with me to trace the enemy. The 5 General Flag Vice Heralds of the 5 Basic Element Flags, each to go to one of the five main schools including Emei,

Huashan, Kunlun, Kongtong and Fujian Southern Shaolin to contact and inquire about the news. Grandfather and uncle please proceed to Jiangnan to reorganize the members of the Heavenly Hawk Flag. Priest Tie Guan, mister Zhou, great monk Peng and the Five Basic Element General Flag Heralds temporarily stay on at the Wudang mountain and listen to the orders of my martial grandfather.”

During the feast, he casually gave the instructions. Yin Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and the others all stood up and bowed their bodies to accept the orders. Initially Zhang Sanfeng had doubted that such a young man as Zhang Wuji being could unite and command the hero group, but seeing Zhang Wuji giving orders which great heroes in wulin such as Yin Tianzheng obeyed without any hesitation, he felt overjoyed and thought to himself: “He can learn my Taiji fist, Taiji swordsmanship, that’s only because he has a good internal energy background and a strong perceptivity, although it’s hard to do so, that is still not really valuable. But as for he being able to control the great devils of the Ming cult, the Heavenly Hawk sect, lead them into the upright path, that’s really a big matter. Cuishan has a heir, Cuishan has a fine heir already. [Note: spoken with pride that Zhang Cui Shan had a fine heir]” Thinking as far as here, he couldn’t help stroking his beard and smiling. Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude the four people hastily finished their meal and then immediately said good-bye to Zhang Sanfeng and went down the mountain to search for Zhao Min’s track.

Yin Tianzheng and others send the four people off to the front of the mountain before returning. Yang Buhui was attached to his father and didn’t want to part from him so she accompanied them for another mile. Yang Xiao said: “Buhui, you go back and look after Yin sixth uncle carefully.” Yang Buhui responded: “Yes.” Her eyes darted towards Wuji,

suddenly she blushed and said in a tiny voice: "Elder brother Wuji, I have a few words to say with you." Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude the 3 people chuckled: "You two have been friends since childhood, certainly there're some personal affairs to speak to each other." They then sped up their footsteps and ran away for a far distance. Yang Buhui said: "Elder brother Wuji, come here." She pulled his arm to come to and sit down a big rock next to the mountain side. Zhang Wuji was secretly confused: "She and I have been acquainted since childhood, the friendship between us is not ordinary, this time we met again after a long separation, yet since then she have treated me coolly and stand-offishly. What does she have to talk to me now?" He only saw that although Yang Buhui had not begun to speak her face had reddened already, she bowed her head in silence, only after quite a long time did she say: "Elder brother Wuji, when my Mom was at the brink of death, she asked you to look after me, didn't she?" Zhang Wuji said: "Yes." Yang Buhui said: "You crossed tens of thousands of miles, accompanying me from the bank of the Huaihe river to the Western region and delivered me to my Dad's hands. On the way, you had to risk you life many times and suffer so many hardships. This great graciousness cannot be repaid by merely saying thanks, that kindness of you I've only put it deeply in my heart and from before up to now I've not raised anything about it at all." Zhang Wuji said: "Never mind. What good does that have to be raised? If I had not accompanied you to the Western region, I myself wouldn't have had those lucky encounters and if that's the case I'm afraid that at this moment I would have been dead due to the dispersion of the Xuan Ming poison already." Yang Buhui said: "No, no! You're humane, heroic and generous so every adverse thing that you met can change into good luck. Elder brother Wuji, I've been motherless since childhood, although my Dad love me there're some matters which I don't dare to talk to him about. You're the head of our cult, but in my heart, I still only

consider you as my older full brother. That day at the Brightness Peak, when I suddenly see you return, I was so happy that I was speechless. I felt embarrassed to say it out in front of you, are you angry with me?" Zhang Wuji replied: "No! Certainly no."

Zhang Wuji saw her back vanish behind a mountain side. His mind was puzzled, he didn't know how to deal with this matter. After standing in trance there for a while, he ran after the trio including Wei Yixiao. Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude found that there seemed to be traces of tears in the corners of his eyes, they couldn't help glancing at Yang Xiao and smiling faintly, meaning: "Congratulations! Left Herald Yang will soon become the father-in-law of Cult Leader." After the four people had descended the Wudang mountain, Yang Xiao said: "This Miss Zhao doesn't travel alone, there are many henchmen around her so it'll not be hard to find her whereabouts. Let us separate to give chases in the four directions East, West, South and North. At tomorrow's midday we will be gathering together in Gu Cheng town. What about your venerable opinion, Cult Leader?" Zhang Wuji said: "Very good, let's do just so. I'll go westward." Gu Cheng town was to the East of the Wudang mountain, going westward to search meant he'd have to go farther than the others would for a stretch of road. He went on: "The martial arts of the Xuan Ming Two Elders are extremely fierce, seeing them, you three should evade them if it 's possible and should not single-handedly engage in any fight with them." The trio accepted the commands. They immediately bowed and made their farewells to Zhang Wuji then left toward three different directions East, South and North to investigate. In the West, there were only mountain roads, Zhang Wuji applied his qing-gong (lightness skill) and ran fast. In more than two hours, he arrived in Shi Yan town. He stopped at a restaurant in the town to order a bowl of noodles. He asked the waiter whether there had been any

golden-brocade-covered palankeen going past here. The waiter replied: "Yes, there was! There were also three seriously injured people. They lied on three hammocks which were carried along with the palankeen. They have just gone toward Huang Long town in the West for less than an hour." Zhang Wuji was very pleased, he thought that the pace of these people was not fast, so in order to avoid revealing his own track, waiting until the evening to pursue them would not be late. He then found a quiet place to take a sleep and waited till the first watch of the night (1 a.m.) before going to Huang Long town.

Zhang Wuji reached the town when it was still earlier than the second watch (2 a.m.) of the night. He hid behind a corner of a wall and saw that the street was very quiet without any sound of anyone. But in a big hotel, there was still a dazzling brightness of lamps and torches. He jumped onto a nearby roof, after several leaps he arrived at the roof of a small house next to the hotel. Looking around, he saw a big cloth tent on a riverside ground. There were many people coming and going at the front and the back of the tent. Obviously it was guarded with strict security precautions. Zhang Wuji thought: "Is it possible that Miss Zhao is in that cloth tent? Her facial expression and her way of speaking are not different from those of the Han Chinese, but the way she acts is overbearing and extravagant to a certain extent." At that time, the Yuan dynasty had been dominating the Central Plain for a long time, Han tyrannical gentries also tried to immitate the prevailing customs of the Mongolian for honour so this was not strange. While he was pondering on how to approach the tent, unexpectedly, he heard some groans spreading from window of the hotel. He then changed his mind, jumped off the roof, tiptoed to a place under the window and looked inside the room. He only saw that there were three people lying on three beds, among them, there were two whose faces he couldn't see. The man

lying near the window was exactly A'San, he was moaning softly, his injuries were clearly in extreme agony, his two arms and two legs all were bound up with white plain cloth. Suddenly an idea flashed upon him, he thought: "His four limbs were all broken, he must have used the efficacious medicine of his own school, the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, to treat the injuries. If I don't snatch it right now, so when?" He broke open the window and jumped into the room. A man standing in the room called out in alarm and sent out a fist. Zhang Wuji used his left hand to grab that man's fist, his right hand extended and hit on the man's numb acupoint. He turned around and saw that the two people who were lying there were precisely A'Er and Eight-Armed Swordsman Fang Dongbai. The man whose acupoint had just been sealed wore a black gown, he was still holding two gold needles in his hands. Perhaps he had been acupunctureing the three injured to cut off the pain for them. On the table, was putting a black bottle, there were several pieces of mugwort next to the bottle. Zhang Wuji took up the bottle, pulled out its lid to smell, he only felt a rush of a hot and pungent odour to his nose. A'San called out: "Help! There's a medicine robber..." (NOTE: in the Chinese text: ???,??... - sorry, I don't know how to translate it well) Zhang Wuji moved his finger fast as wind to successively seal the mute acupoints of the 3 men. He ripped open the bandage on A'San's arm. Expectedly, he saw the arm was covered by a thin black layer of medicinal ointment. For fear that Zhao Min was devilish cunning and had intentionally put fake medicine in the bottle to entice him to come here by himself, he began to scrape the ointment of the sores of A'San and the bald A'Er onto the bandage. He thought that even if in the bottle was fake medicine, the paste taken from their sores couldn't be false. Hearing the sounds, the outside guards kicked the door open wide and fled into. Zhang Wuji didn't need to look at them, he gave each one a kick sending them out. In a short moment, the people in the

hotel had begun to scream noisily and gotten into a chaotic crowd. He had kicked six people out one after another but he had only scraped more than a half of the ointment on A'San's and the bald A'Er's sores. Thinking that it would possibly not be very wonderful if he tarried here more so that the Xuan Ming Two Elders would enter, he put the bottle and the bandage in his bosom then lifted the physician and threw him out of the window.

Only a big noise of crushing resounded, that physician was hit by a hard palm and felt on the ground. This was what Zhang Wuji expected, there were definitely elite fighters ambushing outside the window. Zhang Wuji took advantage of that moment to rush out. White light flashed in the dark when two sharp weapons thrust toward him. To the Great Universal Shifting Technique this was just a minor matter to deal with, applying the technique, he used his left hand to pull and his right hand to direct (NOTE: this sentence is ???????????? in the Chinese text, but I don't know how to translate it into English literally and smoothly, I'm so sorry), the sword on the left then stabbed at the man on the right and the spear on the right hit the man on the left. In chaotic sounds he had already run away. On the way back, Zhang Wuji felt very joyful thinking that even though this time he had not found out Zhao Min's origin yet, he had obtained the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, which was even much better. At this moment it was too late to go to Gu Cheng to meet the group of Yang Xiao, he returned to the Wudang mountain and ordered the Red Water Flag to send members to call them back. Hearing the news that Zhang Wuji had gotten the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, Zhang Sanfeng and the others all were very glad. Zhang Wuji examined the medicine he had scraped from the sores on A'San's body carefully, he also took out a bit of the ointment in the bottle to make a more detailed compare and confirmed that they were the same. The black bottle was

carved out of a big piece of jade. It was as black as lacquer, caused a feeling of warmth when touching and looked very antique. Even the bottle alone was an extremely precious treasure. No longer having a doubt, he ordered his subordinates to carry Yin Liting to Yu Daiyan's room, placing the two beds in parallel. Yang Buhui followed into the room. She didn't dare to look directly at Zhang Wuji's eyes, but her face showed a radiance and there was an extreme appreciation in her heart. Obviously, Zhang Wuji accompanying her to the Western region and drinking the cup of poisoned wine at He Taichong's residence on behalf of her, such much of kindness still couldn't compare to him urgently curing Yin Liting's injury.

Zhang Wuji said: "Third uncle, your former injury healed up, to treat you now, nephew will have to break off the bones of your arms and your legs then connect them back. I hope you'll try to bear this temporary pain." Yu Daiyan did not believe that he himself having been disabled for more than twenty years could be fully restored, but he thought even if the treatment failed, the worst of it would not be worse than the present condition, for the past twenty years he had not been caring for anything already anyway. He only thought: "Wuji has exerted himself to the utmost wholeheartedly wanting to make up for the faults of his parents, otherwise he'll never be able to put his mind at rest. There's nothing whatsoever considerable about my transitory pain." He then did not ask about anything, only smiled faintly, said: "No problem, you can do anything at your convenience." Zhang Wuji asked Yang Buhui to go out, took off all the clothes of Yu Daiyan, located all the breaks in his bones carefully, afterwards he sealed his comatose acupoint. He transferred his energy to his ten fingers, 'crack crack crack', the snaps resounded continuously, all the breaks which healed up in Yu Daiyan's bones were broken again. Although Yu Daiyan's acupoint had been sealed, the pain was still so great that it

awoke him up. Zhang Wuji's technique was fast as wind, irrespective of whether the bones were big or small, he broke them all, Then he immediately rejoined all the breaks accurately, applied the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste to the sores, bound them up, put them in wooden splints before giving acupuncture to relieve the pain.

To treat Yin Liting was much easier than to treat Yu Daiyan since when they had been in the Western region, Zhang Wuji had set all the broken bones of Yin Liting in place so at this time he only needed to apply the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste. After treating Yin Liting, he sent the very General Vice Heralds of the Five Element Flags to guard by turns in case the enemy would come to harass. In the afternoon of the same day, after finishing his lunch, Zhang Wuji took a quick nap in the cloud room to regain his strength after a weary night of scurrying. When he was in a dream, suddenly he heard light foot-steps approaching the entrance and woke up immediately. Xiao Zhao, who was guarding outside, asked in a low voice: "What's the matter? Cult Leader is resting." Yan Yuan, the General Flag Herald of the Thick Earth Flag, said under his breath: "Sixth Hero Yin has been in such pain that he has fainted three times, does Cult Leader..." Zhang Wuji did not wait till Yan Yuan finished the sentence, he stood up like a spring, rushed out of the room and accelerated his pace to Yu Daiyan's room. When he arrived, he only saw Yin Liting's 2 eyes have rolled upward, leaving only the whites, he had lost his unconsciousness already, Yang Buhui was so scared that her eyes filled with tears, she did not know what to do. Lying next to Yin Liting was Yu Daiyan, he was clenching his teeth with screeching noises. Obviously he was trying to endure the pain, only because his temper was unyielding that he did not let out any groan. Seeing that scene, Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised, he massaged several times on the acupoints Cheng Qi, Tai Yang, Tan Zhong... of Yin Liting,

resuscitating him, then asked Yu Daiyan: "Third uncle, the breaks in your bones are very painful, aren't they?" Yu Daiyan replied: "The breaks are painful, that's just plain, but even the six internal organs and the five innards are itchy unbearably... as if, as if there're tens of thousands of insects eating and digging higgledy-piggledy. Zhang Wuji could not be more worried, on hearing what Yu Daiyan had just said, he knew clearly that this was a condition of being poisoned seriously. He hastily asked Yin Liting: "How do you feel, sixth younger uncle?" Yin Liting raved: "Red, purple, blue, green, yellow, white, azure,... How beautiful, so many little balls hovering and moving back and forth... Really attractive... You see, you see..."

Zhang Wuji uttered a loud cry: "Ayo" and nearly passed out on the spot. He instantly thought of a passage in the Book of Poisons written by Wang Nangu that said: "The Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste, made by mixing up seven kinds of poisonous flower and seven kinds of poisonous insect. The victim of this poison first feels itchy in the internal organs as if he is being gnawed internally by seven kinds of insect, then he sees seven colors appearing in front of him which looks wonderful and fanciful as if there are seven kinds of flower flying flickeringly. The Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste is composed of seven kinds of insect and seven kinds of flower so its components vary with individuals and regions. It has a maximum of forty nine different ways of combination each of which has sixty three variants. Only the person who makes up the poison can know how to detoxify." Cold sweat streamed down from Zhang Wuji's forehead, he knew that he himself had fallen into Zhao Min's devilish trap. Not only had she intentionally put the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste in the black jade bottle but she had also applied this violent poison on the bodies of A'San and the bald A'Er regardless these two elite fighters' lives essentially aiming to lure him into her trap. Such a fiendish mind was

really unimaginable. He utterly repented and hastily untied all the splints and bandages on the bodies of Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting then used white liquor to clean the poisonous paste from their limbs. Yang Buhui saw his serious expression, she knew this important business had not been successful so she was no longer shy of anything and helped Zhang Wuji to clean Yin Liting's four limbs with liquor. However, the black had soaked through the skin, it could not be washed off no matter how hard they tried. Just like the case of lacquerers whose hands were dyed with colors, cleaning the black was not an overnight affair.

Zhang Wuji did not dare to use medicine rashly, he only picked out several kinds of pain-killer and tranquillizer for them to take. He walked to the outside room, feeling both alarmed and ashamed. His fortitude was exhausted and his knees could not help becoming weak. Suddenly he dropped down, bent on the floor of the palace and burst out crying. Yang Buhui was frightened, she could only call out: "Wuji ge-ge, Wuji ge-ge!" Zhang Wuji sobbed: "I myself killed third uncle and sixth younger uncle already." He only thought in his mind: "This Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste has at least one hundred ways of combination, who knows what seven kinds of insect and flower that she used are? To detoxicate this fierce poison is merely to use the principle of neutralizing poison by poison, so even if only one kind of poisonous insect or flower is guessed wrong and I use that remedy carelessly, third uncle and six younger uncle will die forthwith." At that moment, all of a sudden, he fully understood his father's thoughts when he had ended his life, that was once a serious mistake was unable to be saved, there would really be no way except committing suicide. Zhang Wuji sluggishly stood up. Yang Buhui asked: "Is there really no cure for this poison? Even reluctantly trying one time is also impossible?" Zhang Wuji shook his head. Yang Buhui said: "Alright." She looked calm and no longer showed

any sign of panic.

Zhang Wuji's mind was stirred up, he recalled the sentence which she had said before: "If his injury was too serious to be cured, I wouldn't be able to live too." He thought: "This time I kill not only 2 people but actually 3." When Zhang Wuji was at a loss, suddenly Wu Jingcao walked to the outside of the door and reported to him: "Cult Leader, that Miss Zhao is seeking a meet at the outside of the gate." Just on hearing that, Zhang Wuji felt so indignant that he could not restrain himself, he shouted out: "I'm just about to look for her." He drew out the long sword from Yang Buhui's waist, hold it in his hand then went out in big strides. Xiao Zhao took down the pearl hairpin on her hair, hand it to Zhang Wuji, said: "Mister, you give it back to Miss Zhao please." Zhang Wuji cast his eyes upon her, thought: "You really know my intention. The feud between me and that girl surnamed Zhao is deep as the ocean, I cannot keep anything of her." Holding the sword in one hand and the pearl hairpin in the other he walked out of the gate, only saw Zhao Min standing there alone, she was smiling. It was sundown by then, the Sun obliquely projected the blood-red rays of light on her cheeks, she looked incomparably beautiful. The Xuanming Two Elders stood behind her from more than ten zhang (33.33m), they were holding three excellent horses in their hands and staring into space.

Zhang Wuji moved his body, in a flash he was right in front of Zhao Min. He extended his left hand and grabbed both Zhao Min's wrists, his right hand pointed the tip of the sword at her chest. He shouted at her: "Give up the antidote, quick!" Zhao Min smiled: "You've bullied me once before, this time you also want to bully me again, don't you? I come here to inquire after you, yet you bear a glowering face, how can this be a proper way of welcoming guest?" Zhang Wuji said: "I need the antidote, if you don't hand it over, I... I'll

not want to live anymore, you don't think you'll be able to live as well." Zhao Min's cheeks slightly reddened, she spit in a soft voice and said: "Bah! How nice? You dying is your own business, how come it has anything to do with me that you want me do die together with you?" Zhang Wuji raised his voice: "Who's joking with you, huh? Hand over the antidote or else this day will be the day you and I die together." At that time both the hands of Zhao Min were being seized tightly by him, she felt he was tremulously all of a shake showing an extremely excited mood, she also felt a hard object in his hand, so she asked: "What are you holding in your hand?" Zhang Wuji said: "Your pearl hairpin. I give it back to you." He lifted his left hand to fix the hairpin onto her hair then immediately got hold of her two wrists again. His technique was fast as lightning performing the release and the grasp nearly at same time. Zhao Min said: "I gave it to you, why don't you want it?" Zhang Wuji said fretfully: "You've always played me up and caused me good miseries, I don't want to receive anything from you." Zhao Min said: "You don't wanna receive anything from me? Are you serious or just kidding? So why did you ask me to hand over the antidote as soon as you began to speak?" Previously, every time Zhang Wuji had argued with her, he had always gotten disadvantaged, this time he got stuck too. Thinking of Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting going to die before long, he felt deep grief in his heart and his eyes could not refrain from turning reddish, he almost let his tears roll down. No longer being able to bear up anymore, Zhang Wuji was about to implore her for the antidote but remembering that Zhao Min was such malignant, he did not want to show his feebleness in front of her.

At this time, Yang Xiao and others had known the news, they walked out of the gate together and saw that Zhao Min had been caught by Wuji and the Xuanming Two Elders were standing from a long distance as if they did not care for or

did not fear anything. Everybody then stood aside and observed calmly.

Zhao Min smiled and said: "You're the Leader of the Ming cult, your martial arts can shake the world, yet just encountering a bit of difficulty you wept 'wah wah wah' noisily like a child already. You just cried a short moment ago, right? That's just really shameful. Let me tell you. You were hit two stances of the Xuanming Divine Palm by the the Xuanming Two Elders so I come here to ask after your injury. But to my unexpected, just barely seeing my face, you already made a fuss about nothing but die and live stuff, why? Let go of me will you?" Zhang Wuji thought even if she wanted to take the opportunity to get away she would not be able to do so since as soon as her feet moved, he would immediately grab hold of her, so he set her hands free. Zhao Min raised one hand to adjust the pearl hairpin on her hair, she smiled and said: "You seem not to be injured at all, don't you?" Zhang Wuji said coldly: "Just the Xuanming Divine Palm alone not necessarily can injure me." Zhao Min said: "Then how about the Great Force Diamond Finger and the the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste?" These two sentences were like two big iron hammers striking hard on Zhang Wuji's chest. He said vexedly: "It's expectedly the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste." Zhao Min said in a stern voice: "Cult Leader Zhang, you want to get the Black Jade Break Connecting Paste, I can give you, you want to get the antidote for the Seven Insect Seven Flower Paste, I also can give you provided that you're willing to promise to meet my three matters, then I'll offer them up to you with pleasure. But if you use force to intimidate me, well, it's easy to kill me, but to obtain the antidote, that'll be hard and even harder in addition. And if you dare to torture me again, I'll only give you poison and fake medicine."

Zhang Wuji felt very jubilant and immediately showed

gladness in his expression, although his eyes were still being dewed with tears. He hastily said: "What three matters? Quick say, quick say." Zhao Min said with a smile: "Both crying and smiling at the same time, you're really shameless! I said to you earlier, I've not thought them out yet. When I think of them I'll let you know, as long as you promise me faithfully and don't break your words. I will not ask you to clutch the Moon in the sky, also not ask you to do the evil things which violate the chivalry ethics, not ask you to commit suicide as well, and of course not ask you to act as dogs or pigs either." Zhang Wuji thought: "On condition that those matters don't go against the chivalry ethics, no matter how hard they are I'll work myself to exhaustion to complete." He then said chivalrously: "Miss Zhao, if you kindly bestow the efficacious medicine so that I can cure my third uncle Yu and sixth younger uncle Yin, then no matter what you ask me to do, Zhang Wuji will never dare to refuse even if I'll have to jump into boiling water or walk on burning fire. Please yourself." Zhao Min stretched out one palm, said: "Good, let's applaud for the oath. I'll give you the antidote so that you can treat your third uncle and sixth younger uncle. Later on, if I ask you to do three things which don't offend the knightliness you will not be permitted to refuse and will have to try your best to fulfill them." Zhang Wuji said: "With respect, I obey your venerable words." He gently clashed palms with her three times. Zhao Min took down the hairpin from her head, said: "So now, do you want to accept my present?" In fear of her not giving the antidote, he did not dare to disobey her will and hastily received the pearl hairpin. Zhao Min said: "But I don't want you to pass it on to that pretty maidservant again." Zhang Wuji said: "Yes." Zhao Min took three steps backward, she smiled and said: "The antidote will be delivered to you immediately, Cult Leader Zhang, goodbye!" She brushed her sleeves, turned around and walked away. The Xuanming Two Elders then led the horses along. They helped her get on a horse to

leave first before following her. The clop-clop of hoofbeats resounded when the three horses descended the mountain.

When the trio including Zhao Min had just passed a mountain side, a man poked out from the canopy of a big tree on the left, he was Qian Er'bai of the Divine Arrow Eight Heroes and was holding an iron bow. He fixed an arrow on the bow and shouted: "With all due respect, my owner submits a letter to Cult Leader Zhang, please accept and read." Upon these words, a 'sou' sound was heard, the arrow had shot toward him. Zhang Wuji made a wave with his left hand to catch the arrow. He found that the arrow did not have the arrowhead and there was a letter tied to the end of it. Zhang Wuji untied the letter from the arrow to take a look, the envelope read 'Personally addressed to Cult Leader Zhang'. He opened the envelope and saw a flower-filigreed paper on which there were several lines written in the little standard script style (xiao kaishu - ???):

'The golden box has two compartments
one of which has contained the efficacious paste for long,
The pearl hairpin is hollow
which has the remedy for the poison inside
Those two things were offered to the gentleman long ago
why are you so exhausted and worried?
Though they are just tiny things
which are not worthy being taken into consideration
why did you give them to a maidservant?
why did you regard them just as dirt and dust?
They are not counted as my sincere wishes are they?'

(Foxs, edited by Eliza Bennet)

Zhang Wuji read this note three times; he was pleasantly surprised but also ashamed. Hastily he examined the pearl head ornament and tried to twist the pearls one by one. Finally he found one he could unscrew and remove

completely. The golden stem was hollow and inside it was a little white scroll. Zhang Wuji took out a golden needle from his pocket, the one he usually used for acupuncture, and fished the scroll out. The paper was very thin; on it the list of seven poisonous insects and seven poisonous flowers, plus the recipe of the antidote, were indeed written, everything was explained clearly one by one. Actually, Zhang Wuji only needed to know the seven insects and seven flowers, since he did not need other people's direction on how to detoxify it. He looked at the recipe and found it to be correct, so he knew Zhao Min was not trying to swindle him. Hastily he rushed to the inner courtyard and prepared the antidote. Sure enough, a little over two hours later Yu and Yin two people were in a much better condition, the itch inside their bodies stopped and the various colors they saw in their vision disappeared.

Zhang Wuji took out the golden case in which Zhao Min delivered the pearl head ornament. After examining it carefully he found the secret compartment on the box's wall, with black paste pressed in between. The paste smelled fragrant and cool. This time he did not dare to act recklessly, thereupon he caught a dog and broke its hind leg, then spread the paste on it. Early morning the next day that dog was running around without any sign of poisoning, and its broken leg was healed.

By the third day the poison inside Yu and Yin two people was completely eradicated; thereupon Zhang Wuji applied the 'hei yu duan xu gao' [black jade break connecting (or fracture healing) paste] on their four limbs. This time nothing strange happened. The 'hei yu duan xu gao' was marvelously effective; after about two months Yin Liting's hands could move freely. It looked like very soon not only he would be able to move his hands and feet, but also his martial art was not damaged too much. Too bad Yu Daiyan

had been disabled for too long, it would be difficult for him to fully recover. But looking at his condition right now, there was a great chance that within half a year he would be able to walk with crutches. He would still be handicapped, but he would be able to move around and not be crippled anymore.

Because Zhang Wuji was delayed on the Mount Wudang, he dispatched the Five-Element Flags to go down the mountain ahead of him. Upon their return they brought some rather disturbing news. Not a single one of the people from Emei, Huashan, Kongtong and Kunlun Sects who went to the Brightness Peak returned to their respective sect. The Jianghu world was shaken. Everybody said that the Devil Cult had annihilated all experts from the six major sects who went on the expedition to the western region, and then extinguished each sect separately one by one. The sudden-disappearing Shaolin monks had created an unprecedented wave in the Wulin world. Luckily each flag leader and his second-in-command carried the letter written by Zhang Sanfeng of Wudang Sect; they also did not reveal their true identities, otherwise they would be torn to pieces by each sect they visited.

All flag leaders and his second-in-commands also reported that by that time in Jianghu world every sect, clan and society, as well as expedition companies, robbers, pirates, harbor gangs, and so on were on the highest level of alert since they were afraid the Ming Cult would launch a large scale attack.

A few days later Yin Tianzheng and Yin Yewang father and son had also returned to Wudang, reporting that the completion of the reorganizing effort of the Heavenly Eagle Flag; it is now part of the Ming Cult. They also reported that the warriors of the southeast raised their arms to fight the Yuan invaders; the world was in great tumult. In the meantime the Yuan army was still too strong, furthermore

each rebellion was staged individually, without any contact with each other; therefore, they were easily crushed.

That same evening Zhang Sanfeng held a vegetarian banquet at the rear hall in honor of Yin Tianzheng father and son. During the banquet Yin Tianzheng narrated the cause of each defeat, and how in each insurrection the Ming Cult and the Heavenly Eagle Sect disciples always took part in it, and that many of them were captured or even killed by the Yuan soldiers; making an ultimate sacrifice in the process.

As the group of warriors listened to his narration, they all sighed in grief and anger. Yang Xiao said, "The people's suffering is already very deep. Their hearts are changed; they want to drive the Tartar and capture back our river and mountain ['he shan' - country or land]. When Yang Jiaozhu was still alive, day and night it was his sole concern. It's a pity that our Cult used to handle matters differently that for the last hundred of years we are always involved in feud against various Wulin sects of the Central Plains; making it difficult to join hands to fight the enemy. With the Heaven's blessing we now have Zhang Jiaozhu to handle the Cult's affairs, gradually solving our enmity with each sect. The time is ripe to work together and drive out the invaders."

"Yang Zuoshi," Zhou Dian said, "What you said was not wrong, but it was a pile of rubbish, it was like a fart."

Yang Xiao was not angry, "Then I am waiting for Zhou Xiong's advice," he said.

Zhou Dian replied, "The Jianghu people all say that our Cult has killed the experts of six major sects. Once they heard the word 'Ming Cult' their hatred is going deep into their bones and marrows. What do you mean by 'working together and drive out the invaders'? It was pleasant to the ears, but

how do we do it?”

“It’s true that we have a bad name,” Yang Xiao said, “But the truth will always be revealed in the end; moreover, we now have Zhang Zhenren [lit. true/real person – a respectable term to address a Taoist Priest] as our witness.”

Zhou Dian laughed, “Supposing that it was really us who killed Song Yuanqiao, Old Nun Mie Jue, He Taichong and the others, how would Zhang Zhenren know that he was not being deceived?”

Tieguan Daoren [Iron Hat Taoist Priest] reprimanded him harshly, “Zhou Dian, don’t talk nonsense in front of Zhang Zhenren and Jiaozhu!”

Zhou Dian stuck out his tongue but did not reply. Peng Yingyu said, “What Zhou Xiong said was not without reason. According to pinseng’s [lit. impoverished monk – he was referring to himself] opinion, we should hold a general assembly of the Ming Cult’s leaders, where we will make known Zhang Jiaozhu’s intention to repair our relation with the Wulin world’s various sects. At the same time, more people means broader horizon; we can discuss these matters and investigate Song Daxia [great hero Song], Mie Jue Shitai and the others’ whereabouts during the assembly.”

“If you want to find Song Daxia and the others’ whereabouts; that is very easy. I might say as easy as blowing off the dust on top of this table,” Zhou Dian said.

They were all surprised, “How?” they asked, “Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

With a smug expression on his face, Zhou Dian drank a cup of wine and said, “All we need is Jiaozhu to go and ask that Miss Zhao. I am 90% sure that we will understand

everything. I say if those people are not killed by Miss Zhao, then they must be captured by her.”

For the last two months, Wei Yixiao, Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyi, Shuo Bude and the others had separately gone down the mountain trying to find out Zhao Min’s origin and to track her trail; but since her appearance in front of Wudang and she shook hands with Zhang Wuji to seal their agreement, this person had disappeared without any trace. Even her many subordinates all had vanished without leaving the least bit of trace. They all speculated that she was related to the imperial government, but other than that they did not have any clue as where to seek her. This time hearing Zhou Dian speak they said, “Now you are talking rubbish! If we found that girl surnamed Zhao, wouldn’t we ask her ourselves?”

Zhou Dian said with a smile, “You certainly can’t find her; but Jiaozhu does not have to seek her to find her. Jiaozhu still owes her three things; do you think that fierce Miss will let him go so easily? Hey, hey! This girl is beautiful, but each time I think about her, all the hair on my body stands on its end; she causes me to shiver.”

Everybody could not help but smile, yet they understood the truth in what he said. Zhang Wuji sighed and said, “I only hope she would give me her three difficult problems quickly then I will do my best to do them and bring this matter to completion. Otherwise my thoughts will be in suspense all day long; not knowing what kind of strange trick she is performing. Anyway, about Peng Dashi’s [reverend, lit. grand master] suggestion earlier; our Cult will hold a general assembly of the leaders. This is quite feasible. What do all of you think?”

“It is,” they replied, “But it is better not on Mount Wudang.”

“Jiaozhu,” Yang Xiao said, “Where do you think is the best place?”

Zhang Wuji hesitated a moment before saying, “Being a humble Cult Leader today I always remember our own Cult’s two people’s benevolence. One is the Yi-xian [lit. medicine/medical immortal – Divine Doctor] of Butterfly Valley, Mr. Hu Qingniu; that Senior died under the Golden Flower Granny’s hand. The other is Chang Yuchun Dage [big brother]; I don’t know his whereabouts nowadays. I think, let’s hold our Cult’s general assembly on the Butterfly Valley in Huaibei.”

Zhou Dian clapped his hands and said, “Very good, very good! I bickered constantly with this ‘jian si bu jiu’ [seeing death without helping – previous translator used ‘rather see death than help’] in the past, but actually he was not a bad person, just a little bit eccentric. He employed different methods from Yang Zuoshi [Left Emissary Yang], but achieved equally wonderful results. He saw someone in danger and did nothing, in the end he died without anybody helping him; it was his retribution. I, Zhou Dian, want to go to his grave and bow to honor him.”

The rest of the group did not have any objection, they agreed upon the Midautumn Festival [‘zhong qiu’] in the eighth month, which was still a little over three months away; all leaders of the Ming Cult would hold their general assembly on the Butterfly Valley in Huaibei, the former residence of Hu Qingniu.

Early morning the next day all the Five-Element Flags and the Heavenly Eagle Flag went down Mount Wudang to convey their Cult Leader’s order: All cult leaders, from ‘xiang zhu’ [Translator note: I am not sure about this; I think this is

a supervisory position name within the Cult] and above to leave the business of the Cult to their assistants, and to be at the Huaibei's Butterfly Valley before the eighth month's Mid-autumn Festival, to pay their respect to the new Cult Leader.

By that time the Mid-autumn Festival was still some days away, and since Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting had not fully recovered from their injuries, Zhang Wuji was afraid their illness would recur and thus his efforts would be in vain; therefore, he decided to stay on Mount Wudang to look after Yu and Yin two people, while at the same time he leisurely asked Zhang Sanfeng to teach him more about Taiji Fist and Sword techniques. Wei Yixiao, Peng Yingyu, Shuo Bude and the others went down the mountain once again trying to track Zhao Min's whereabouts. Yang Xiao received the Cult Leader's order to stay at Wudang, but because of Ji Xiaofu's affair, he felt uncomfortable to meet Yin Liting; hence he stayed cooped up in his room reading books and did not go out even for a single step from his door unless it was important to do so.

And so two months have passed. About the seventh hour [between 11am - 1pm] one particular day Zhang Wuji visited Yang Xiao in his room; he wanted to consult Yang Xiao on the Butterfly Valley congress and to ask him about important matters surrounding their Cult. He was still young and lacking experience, suddenly thrown into the deep end of the pool; he oftentimes felt inadequate to bear this heavy responsibility. He was afraid he might do wrong an important matter and cause harm; while Yang Xiao had a deep knowledge of their Cult's affair. For that reason Zhang Wuji wanted Yang Xiao to be nearby so he could consult him anytime.

Two people discussed the congress at length. Zhang Wuji

casually took a book lying on top of Yang Xiao's table. On the cover these seven characters were written 'Ming Jiao Liu Chuan Zhong Tu Ji' [A record on the spread of Ming Cult to the Central Earth]; underneath, in smaller characters, 'Di Zi Guang Ming Zuo Shi Yang Xiao Gong Zhuan' [respectfully compiled by the Brightness disciple, Left Emissary Yang Xiao]. Zhang Wuji said, "Yang Zuoshi, you are skilled in both pen and sword ['wen wu quan cai'], truly you are our Cult's pillar."

"Many thanks for Jiaozhu's compliment," Yang Xiao said.

Zhang Wuji opened the book and saw in neat little characters an extensive documentation of everything about the Cult. The Ming Cult originated from Persia; it was originally called 'Mo Ni Jiao' [Manichaeism]. It entered the Central Earth during the first Yan Zai year of Empress Wu of the Tang Dynasty, when a Persian man presented the Ming Cult's 'san zong jing' [three-purpose scripture] to the court; since then the Chinese people started to practice this teaching. In the third year of Tang's master calendar, on the twenty ninth day of the sixth month the first Ming Cult temple was built in Luoyang, Chang'an, with the name of 'Da Yun Guang Ming Si' [Great Cloud Brightness Temple]. Later on, these kinds of temples were built in Taiyuan, Jingzhou, Yangzhou, Hongzhou, Yuezhou, and other strategic small cities. Toward the third Hui Chang year the imperial government issued an order to kill the Ming Cult disciples; at that time the Ming Cult influence was greatly diminished. Since then the Ming Cult became an underground religion, oppressed by subsequent dynasties. In order for the Ming Cult to survive, it had to resort to sly and secret behavior, that in the end the character 'mo' of the 'Mo Ni Jiao' was changed to 'mo' [devil]; hence the people started calling it the Devil Cult.

Reading to this part Zhang Wuji heaved a long sigh and said, "Yang Zuoshi, our Cult's original teaching was to shun evil and do good deeds, no different than Buddhism or Taoism. Why is it since the Tang Dynasty we have been the target of oppression even to the point of atrocious slaughters?"

Yang Xiao replied, "Although Buddhism aim for the restoration of human kind, once a monk leaves home he empties himself and doesn't pay any more attention toward worldly matters. Taoism is the same. Our Cult moves among the common people and peasants; if we see someone in suffering or deep poverty, regardless of who it is, our people will strive to help. The government officials always bully common people; when did you ever see they didn't? Where did you ever see they didn't? As soon as we know someone received unjust treatment from an officer, our Cult is bound to clash with that officer."

Zhang Wuji nodded his head, "Only when the royal government authorities stop bullying common people, local tyrant landlords do not dare to run amuck, when that time comes, our Cult will enjoy true prosperity," he said.

Yang Xiao slapped the table and with a loud voice said, "What Jiaozhu said was the key point of our Cult's purpose."

"Yang Zuoshi," Zhang Wuji asked, "Do you think that day will come?"

Yang Xiao was silent for half a day before answering, "I do hope that day will come. During the Song Dynasty, Fang La, our own Fang Jiaozhu, rose up to tell the government authorities not to bully the common people." He opened the book and pointed the record about Ming Cult's Cult Leader Fang La staging an earth-shaking rebellion on east Zhejiang.

As Zhang Wuji read that part, he lifted his eyes to gaze towards the distance. Closing the book he said, "A real man should be as strong as he was. Although Fang Jiaozhu sacrificed his life, we can say that in the end he had rendered a massive contribution to our cause." Two people were thinking of the same thing and their blood was boiling.

Yang Xiao continued, "Although our Cult is oppressed for the last several dynasties, we actually are still standing strong. During the fourth Shaoxing year of the Song Dynasty there was an officer by the name of Wang Juzheng who presented a report about our Cult to the Emperor. Jiaozhu, you can take a look at it." While saying that he turned the page containing Wang Juzheng's report.

Zhang Wuji read the report as follows: 'In two of Zhejiang prefectures there is a custom of worshipping the devil and eating only vegetables.' Before Fang La the ban against this custom was still lenient and it was not as widely spread. After Fang La, the ban was stricter, but the devil worshipping became more rampant ... Subordinate heard that this is how they operate: there are one or two crafty devil worshipper leaders in every town and village, these have the record of names of the villagers who pledge to join the devil society. All of the devil worshippers do not eat meat. If one of their members is in difficulty, their comrades would do all they can to help. Basically by not eating meat they live a frugal and simple life. By helping each other in the same society they promote camaraderie, which, in the end, also support their frugal and simple way of living ...'

Reading to this point Zhang Wuji said, "Although that Wang Juzheng was hostile toward our Cult, he was aware that our people live a frugal and simple life, and we love and help each other." He continued reading, '... Subordinate believes

the previous Emperor also admonished the people to live a simple life and to love and help each other. Living a frugal and simple life is an honorable way of life since the ancient times. It's a pity that today's government leaders cannot be good example for the people, so that the Devil Leaders are able to entice them into joining their society and blindly follow their teaching. Common people are simple and ignorant; by following the Devil's teaching and live the Devil's way, living a simple and frugal life, they confirm the Devil Leaders' words as trustworthy sayings and do not made the slightest effort to challenge them. Therefore, the stricter the ban, the more they expand'

Zhang Wuji stopped reading, turning his head to Yang Xiao he said, "Yang Zuoshi, 'the stricter the ban, the more they expand'; this is exactly the proof that our Cult is deeply loved by the people. May I borrow this book, so I can learn more about our Cult's previous saints' outstanding achievements and their wishes?"

"I was about to ask Jiaozhu to give me your opinion," Yang Xiao replied.

Zhang Wuji took the book and said, "Yu Sanbo's [third martial (older) uncle] and Yin Liushu's [sixth martial (younger) uncle] conditions have improved tremendously; we are leaving for the Butterfly Valley tomorrow. I have another matter I'd like to discuss with Yang Zuoshi; it is about Buhui Meizi [sister/beloved]."

Yang Xiao thought Zhang Wuji was about to propose, so he was overjoyed. "Buhui owes her life to Jiaozhu; we, father and daughter, would love to pay that debt of gratitude back as soon as we can. Jiaozhu only need to say it and we will certainly comply." Thereupon Zhang Wuji recounted the details of what Yang Buhui had told him that day to Yang

Xiao.

As Yang Xiao heard this, he was stunned and was at a loss for words. Only after a long time did he finally open his mouth, "That my daughter is loved by Yin Liuxia [Sixth Hero Yin], it is truly a fortunate matter. But their age difference is huge, plus they come from different generations, this ... this ..." After saying the word 'this' twice, he did not know how to continue.

Zhang Wuji said, "Yin Liushu is not even forty years of age yet; he is still in the prime of his life. It's true that Buhui Meizi calls him 'Shushu' [(younger) uncle], but they don't have actual blood relationship or even martial relationship. Those two are perfectly suited to each other. If this marriage arrangement can be consummated, then the past animosity can be dissolved; won't that be great?"

Yang Xiao was a very open-minded person. Because of Ji Xiaofu's affair, he felt ashamed each time he saw Yin Liting. He silently pondered the fact that since Buhui was already in love then if the marriage could be consummated, it would not only redeem his own past transgression, but it would also strengthen the alliance between the Ming Cult and the Wudang Sect. Thereupon he cupped his fists and said, "That Jiaozhu is willing to lend a hand in the successful conclusion of this matter shows your loving concern to us. Subordinate would like to express my gratitude in advance."

That very evening Zhang Wuji announced the good news. The group of warriors immediately offered their heartiest congratulations to Yin Liting. Yang Buhui was shy; she did not dare to come out from her room. At first Zhang Sanfeng and Yu Daiyan were quite surprised to hear this, but later on they were happy for Yin Liting.

When asked about the wedding date, Yin Liting replied, “By the time Da Shige [first martial brother] and the others are back and everybody is here, it won’t be too late to talk about the wedding.”

The next day Zhang Wuji, along with Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Yin Yewang, Tieguan Daoren, Zhou Dian, Xiao Zhao and the others, bid their farewells to Zhang Sanfeng and his disciples; they were leaving for Huaibei. Yang Buhui stayed behind on Mount Wudang to take care of Yin Liting. At that time the rule against men and women relationship was very strict, but they were Wulin people, so they did not adhere to this rule too strictly.

The Ming Cult people took their journey from dawn to dusk, heading towards northeast. Along the way they saw barren rice fields and the people had hunger written all over their faces. The coastal regions are usually rich and populous areas, but at that time the fields were dry and everywhere people died of starvation. The suffering of the common people had reached its peak. Seeing this disaster the Ming Cult people heaved a heavy sigh. They were aware that the brutal reign of the Mongolians on the Central Earth would not last too long. It was precisely the best opportunity for the warriors to take up their arms and fight the invaders.

One day they arrived at Jiepaiji; not too far from the Butterfly Valley. While they were walking suddenly they heard a deafening battle noise ahead; two opposing cavalries were engaged in a fierce battle. The Ming Cult people rushed their horses ahead. Passing through a forest they saw over a thousand Mongolian soldiers were attacking a fortified camp on a hill. Above the camp fluttered a big banner with a picture of red flame on it; it was the Ming Cult’s banner. The people defending the camp were smaller in number. It seemed like they were in a disadvantageous

situation, but they still fought unyieldingly.

The Mongolians' arrows came like rain. "Devil Cult rebels!" they shouted, "Quickly surrender!"

"Jiaozhu," Zhou Dian said, "Shall we?"

"All right!" Zhang Wuji said, "Kill the leaders first."

Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, Yin Yewang, Tieguan Daoren, Zhou Dian, five people answered his call; breaking into the enemy formation. Long swords waved and two Mongolian 'bai fu zhang' [leader of 100 men unit] fell down their horses; followed by their 'qian fu zhang' [leader of 1000 men unit] fell under Yin Yewang's blade. The Yuan soldiers were thrown into confusion as soon as their leader fell down

The people defending the camp cheered as they saw help coming their way. The camp gate opened and a big burly man dressed in black came out with a lance in his hand. He charged into the Yuan soldiers and they were scattered away; nobody dared to block his lance. That big man swung his lance, quick as lightning, and a Yuan soldier was stabbed and fell from his horse. The soldiers around him cried out in alarm and fled to all directions.

Seeing this man's impressive, almost deity-like power, Yang Xiao and the others praised him highly, "Truly a heroic commander!"

Actually Zhang Wuji had seen that man's face clearly; he was none other than his big brother, Chang Yuchun, whom he missed dearly. Only the battle was raging wild, he did not have the opportunity to greet him. The Ming Cult people attacked left and right, killing about five, six hundreds Yuan soldiers. The rest of the enemy did not dare to prolong the

battle, they scattered around and fled the battlefield.

Chang Yuchun lifted his lance horizontally and laughed. "Which brothers come to lend help? Old Chang is deeply grateful," he called out.

"Chang Dage," Zhang Wuji called out, "I miss you very much." Leaping toward him he grabbed Chang Yuchun's hands tightly.

Chang Yuchun bowed in respect and said, "Brother Jiaozhu, I am your Dage [big brother], but I also am your subordinate. My joy is unspeakable."

It turned out that Chang Yuchun was an officer under the Gigantic Wood Flag. He had learned Zhang Wuji's taking over the Cult Leader position and the circumstances surrounding it from the Flag Leader Wen Cangsong. He recently led a group of Cult brethren to wait for Zhang Wuji. Unfortunately they were attacked by the Yuan army. Knowing his group was inferior in number, he originally was about to pretend defeat to lure the enemy into the camp, and then he would crush them. Unexpectedly Zhang Wuji and his entourage arrived and lent their assistance. Taking advantage of this favorable situation he went out of the camp and made some killing. His position in the Ming Cult was not high; therefore, he immediately paid his respects to Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng and the others. The leaders knew he was their Cult Leader's sworn brother, so they did not dare to act condescendingly. They held out their hands to greet him and treated him with utmost respect. Chang Yuchun invited the leaders to enter the camp. He butchered some sheep and prepared a banquet for his guests. And then they talked about what happened after they were separated.

The Huainan and Huaibei area experienced drought for the past several years in a row; the common people's suffering was beyond description. Chang Yuchun did not expect to live; he gathered a band of brothers and they lived as robbers ['lu lin' – lit. green forest], plundering food, gold and silver and storing them in the stronghold. After accumulating enough, they distributed the goods to the poor people. Several times the Yuan army tried to attack, but they always failed.

They all spent the night inside the camp. The next day they, along with Chang Yuchun, went north. They thought since the Yuan soldiers were defeated, they would not dare to attack within these two, three months. Several days later they arrived at the Butterfly Valley. As the Ming Cult people who had arrived earlier heard their Cult Leader's arrival, they went out the valley to welcome him. In the meantime the Gigantic Wood Flag had built many thatched huts and wooden cabins as temporary residence of the leaders. Wei Yixiao, Peng Yingyu, Shou Bude and the others had already arrived earlier; they reported their failure to find Miss Zhao's whereabouts.

After receiving the Ming Cult leaders, Zhang Wuji prepared some offerings and went to the graves of Hu Qingniu, husband and wife, and Ji Xiaofu. He recalled the day he left the valley, he was sorrowful, frightened and in a very difficult situation. Today he returned in glorious splendor as the Cult Leader of a powerful cult; it felt like a whole world apart.

Three days later it was the fifteenth of the eighth month. A tall altar had been built in the middle of the Butterfly Valley. A huge bonfire was built in front of the altar. Zhang Wuji climbed on top of the altar to announce their pledge to put away their previous enmity with various sects of the Central

Plains and their desire to drive the Yuan invaders out. He also issued some religious rules; reaffirming their pledge to do good and shun evil, and thus following the original Cult teaching.

The Cult members immediately showed their obedience by lighting up the incense and they swore their pledge that they would not dare to disobey their Cult Leader's decree. Under the bright sun the fire in front of the altar was blazing high, the fragrance of the incense spread everywhere, the Ming Cult flourished far beyond in the time past. Seeing this prosperous situation, some older members remembered how for the last dozen of years the Ming Cult was split up and their destruction was imminent, they could not help but break down in tears.

Later in the afternoon a Ming Cult subordinate came to report, "Flooding Water Flag disciples, Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da and the others seek an audience with Jiaozhu."

Zhang Wuji was delighted; he personally went out of the gate to meet them. Zhu Yuanzhang and Xu Da were accompanied by Tang He, Deng Yu, Hua Yun, Wu Liang and Wu Zhen. They stood respectfully outside the gate. As they saw Zhang Wuji come out, they bowed in respect and said, "Greetings to Jiaozhu!"

Zhang Wuji often remembered how Xu Da had saved his life; he was very happy to see these people, he immediately returned the salute. Taking Zhu Yuanzhang in his left hand and Xu Da in his right, he took them inside and invited them to sit down. After apologizing to each other they took their seats. By then Zhu Yuanzhang had already returned to secular life, he was no longer dressed as a Buddhist monk. He said, "As your subordinates received Jiaozhu's order, we hurried along to the Butterfly Valley. We should have been

arrived a few days earlier, but on the way we met a completely baffling matter that your subordinates had to investigate; hence we missed the general assembly. We ask for Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

"I wonder what kind of baffling matter was that?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhu Yuanzhang said, "All of us were delighted when we received Jiaozhu's order on the first week of the sixth month; we brothers discussed what kind of gift we need to prepare to congratulate Jiaozhu. Huaibei is a poor place, there is nothing good in there; fortunately the assembly was still some times away, so we went to Shandong to try our luck. We were afraid the government authorities would recognize us; therefore, we disguised ourselves as mule cart drivers, your subordinate was the leader. One day we arrived at Guidefu in Henan, where were hired by some customers who wanted to go to Heze, Shandong. While we were traveling suddenly some people pursued us with blades and spears, very fierce and menacing. They chased away our customers and told us to drive other customers. Brother Hua wanted to deal with them right away, but Brother Xu signaled him with his eyes to look clearly into this matter before making any move first. Those people led us with our nine mule carts to a valley in the mountain. We saw there were already about a dozen other carts waiting, while on the ground sat some Buddhist monks."

"Buddhist monks?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"That's right," Zhu Yuanzhang replied, "Those monks hang their heads low, they looked so dejected. But among them there were some unusual looking people, some had their 'tai yang xue' [sun acupoint] bulging out of their temples, some were tall and powerfully built. Brother Xu quietly told me

that those monks were all martial art experts. Those fierce people ordered the monks to ride on the carts and then they led us all to the north. Subordinate believed something was wrong, so I quietly told everybody to be on their guards and not to reveal our true identity. Along the way we paid full attention to what those fierce people were saying, but those people were very secretive; they did not say anything in our presence. Afterwards Brother Wu Liang gathered up his courage and eavesdropped outside their window in the middle of the night. He did that for four, five nights in a row before he finally found out that those monks were actually from the Shaolin Temple of Mount Song in Henan.”

“Ah!” Although Zhang Wuji had partly guessed it, he still could not restrain himself from exclaiming.

Zhu Yuanzhang continued, “Brother Wu Liang heard one of those fierce people say, ‘Master’s strategy is truly divine, worthy of other people’s utmost admiration. Shaolin, Wudang, and the rest of the six major sects are in our hand. Who had ever achieved such result since the ancient time?’ Another man said, ‘I am not surprised. One arrow two eagles [killing two birds with one stone], the Devil Cult leaders will be implicated by this matter.’ We seven people pretended going to the bathroom and quietly discussed this matter. We all agreed that since by coincidence this matter concerning our Cult fell into our hands, then we must investigate carefully and submit a report to Jiaozhu.”

“You have done the right thing,” Zhang Wuji commented.

“We continued going north,” Zhu Yuanzhang said, “All the while we maintained our disguises as simple men. Brother Tang He and Brother Deng Yu pretended to bicker over five coins of silver; they fought awkwardly, like people who do not know martial art at all. Those fierce people clapped their

hands and laughed, and afterwards they did not pay us any attention anymore. We called them 'lao ye' [lit. old master] this and 'lao ye' that, flattering them by all kinds of crap. At one time Brother Wu Zhen was thinking of drugging them, diverting their attention and then saving those Shaolin monks; but then we thought it over, we did not know anything about what was going on, these ominous people were well-trained in martial arts. We were afraid we might disturb the grass and scare the snake, and harming an important matter by alerting the enemy; therefore, all along we did not dare to make our move.

When we arrived at the Hejian prefecture we met with six other big carts, also full of prisoners. They dressed as common civilians. During the meal I overheard a Shaolin monk greeted one of the newcomers, 'Song Daxia [great hero], you are here!'"

Zhang Wuji leaped up and hastily asked, "Did he say 'Song Daxia'? What did he look like?"

Zhu Yuanzhang replied, "His body was slim-built, he looked about fifty, sixty years of age, wearing a three-branch long beard. His face looked simple yet elegant."

Zhang Wuji knew it was indeed Song Yuanqiao. He was pleasantly surprised and asked further what the rest of those people looked like. Turned out Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, Mo Shenggu three people were also among those prisoners. "Are they injured? Are they shackled?" he asked.

"I did not see any shackle," Zhu Yuanzhang replied, "I also did not see any injury. They talked and ate just like any ordinary people, only they looked dispirited; also they walked swaying and staggering. As he was greeted by that Shaolin monk he only smiled bitterly but did not say

anything. The Shaolin monk was about to say something else, but one of the fierce people pulled him away. Thereafter our two groups were separated by about ten 'li's; we did not stop and eat together anymore; subordinate has never seen Song Daxia's group ever since. About the third day of the seventh month our group of Shaolin monks arrived at Dadou [lit. grand capital, present day Beijing]."

"Ah," Zhang Wuji exclaimed, "You went to Dadou, then they must have fallen into the treacherous hand of the royal government. And then what happened?"

Zhu Yuanzhang continued, "Those fierce people led us to take the Shaolin monks toward a big temple on the west side of the city. They also told us to spend the night in the temple."

"What temple was that?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"When we entered the temple, subordinate looked up at the sign above the gate, it was called Wan An Si [Temple of Ten-thousand Peace]," Zhu Yuanzhang answered, "But because of that one of the ominous people struck me with his horse whip. That night we brothers quietly discussed our situation. We believed these ominous people would kill us to shut our mouths up, so when the sky turned black we quietly escaped."

"It was very dangerous," Zhang Wuji said, "You were lucky those ominous people did not pursue you."

Tang He smiled and said, "Zhu Dage [Big Brother Zhu] has already anticipated that. Before leaving we captured seven mule cart drivers from the neighborhood and changed our clothes with theirs. Afterwards we killed them inside the temple. We mutilated their faces so that those ominous

people would not recognize them. We also killed the other mule cart drivers who came with us and we scattered money everywhere to make it look like two groups of people fought over money and killed each other, so that when those ominous people returned, they would not suspect anything."

Zhang Wuji was secretly shocked; he saw Xu Da's face showed he did not have the heart to do so, Deng Yu looked embarrassed, Tang He sounded very proud, but Zhu Yuanzhang was the only one who maintained his composure and did not show any emotion on his face, like nothing out of ordinary happened. Zhang Wuji thought, "This man is cruel and shrewd." He said, "Although Zhu Dage's idea was wonderful, but from now on we must not kill innocent people so easily."

It was their Cult Leader's order, so Zhu Yuanzhang and the others stood up at once. They bowed and said, "We will follow Jiaozhu's instruction." Thereafter when Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Deng Yu, Tang He and the others went out to battle, they always observed Zhang Wuji's order and did not dare to randomly kill innocent people. In the end they won the people's hearts and were able to accomplish a great undertaking.

Zhang Wuji said, "Zhu Dage, the seven of you managed to find out the whereabouts of Shaolin and Wudang two sects' masters; it was not a small merit. After arranging the strategy to fight the Yuan we will go to Dadou to rescue the two sects' masters."

After the official business was done, Zhang Wuji chatted with Xu Da and the others as friends. He recalled the time they stole and butchered an ox outside Zhang Yuan. They clapped their hands and laughed heartily.

That evening in the general assembly Zhang Wuji burned incense to proclaim their oath to fight a coordinated insurrection against the Yuan from various places. The Cult leaders echoed their determination to work together; their main target was to drive the Yuan army away little by little. The following was their strategy:

Cult Leader Zhang Wuji, assisted by the Brightness Left Emissary Yang Xiao and Green-winged Bat King Wei Yixiao held the 'zong tan' [lit. head/chief altar - central government] position, as the highest command for the entire Cult.

White-browed Eagle King Yin Tianzheng commanded the Heavenly Eagle Flag, making their movement in the Jiangnan area.

Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Tang He, Deng Yu, Hua Yun, Wu Liang, Wu Zhen, joined by Chang Yuchun's stronghold cavalry, plus Sun Deya's troops would raise their arms in Huaibei's Haozhou.

Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk] and Shuo Bude were in command of Han Shantong, Liu Futong, Du Zundao, Luo Wensu, Sheng Wenyu, Wang Xianzhong, Han Jiao'er and the others, to raise their arms at Yingchuan district of Henan.

Peng Yingyu led Xu Shuohui, Zou Puwang, Ming Wudeng to fight at Jiangxi's Ganzhou, Raozhou, Yuanzhou, Xinzhou and other districts.

Tie Guan Daoren [iron hat priest] led Bu Sanwang, Meng Haima and the others raised their arms at Xiangchu and Jingxiang districts.

Zhou Dian commanded Zhi Mali, Zhao Junyong and the

others raised their arms at Xuxiu and Fengpei districts.

Leng Qian was in charge of the Ming Cult member in the western region, cutting off any Mongolian reinforcement coming to the Central Plains from the western region.

The Five-Element Flags were under 'zong tan's command, to be dispatched as necessary as the reinforcement for those who needed it.

The people were 90% sure that this strategy came from Yang Xiao and Peng Yingyu's minds.

As Zhang Wuji finished outlining their strategy, the crowd broke into a thunderous applause. Zhang Wuji also said, "Logically, we cannot rely only on our own Cult's strength to shake nearly one hundred years of Yuan's occupation. We must make good contacts with the heroes and warriors; only by pooling our strength and resources together will we be able to achieve great merits. Presently almost half of the masters of the Wulin world of Central Plains are being captured by the royal government, 'zong tan' will think of a way to rescue them. Tomorrow all of the brothers will go your own way. Fight and kill the Tartars whenever you have the opportunity. 'Zong tan' will also head for Dadou for a rescue operation. We have met and enjoy this joyous fellowship today; I don't know when we are going to see each other again in the future. Brothers, you must show loyalty to each other, give the important matter a foremost place in your heart, don't fight with each other over power and profit, don't kill each other. If any injustice of this kind is found among you, 'zong tan' will not be lenient."

The crowd shouted their answer with one voice, "We won't dare to disobey Jiaozhu's order!" Their cheers and shouts echoed throughout the valley. Afterwards everybody sealed their oath by shedding their blood and burning the incense;

determined to hold fast to their just cause in live or death.

The moon was shining brightly as it was daytime. The Ming Cult leaders sat around the banquet tables, while the staff of 'zhong tan' served some vegetable-stuffed round cakes to everybody. The round cakes looked like the moon, hence they called it 'moon cake.' Later on a legend developed that the Chinese made a pact to kill the Tartars while eating moon cake during the Mid-autumn Festival ['ba yue xiong qiu - lit. mid-autumn of the eighth month]; it was because of the Ming Cult held their assembly that evening to decide the battle strategy.

Zhang Wuji also said, "Our Cult has always had a rule passed on from generation to generation, that we don't eat meat or drink wine. But presently there are famines everywhere; we can't always choose what we eat. Moreover, our primary objective today is to drive the Tartars out. If we don't eat meat or fish our strengths will wane and it will be difficult to fight. From now on I lift up this religious rule of not eating meat and drinking wine. We live in this world must put important matter first, eating and drinking rule is trivial matter." From that time on the Ming Cult people ate the moon cake with pork stuffing.

Next day early in the morning everybody bade Zhang Wuji goodbye. Although they were warriors and brave people, but thinking about the incoming bloody battle nobody knew who would survive and who would perish. Although they were confident that they would be successful, but among the attendees of the Butterfly Valley assembly, perhaps only half of them would live; inevitably they all left with heavy hearts.

While the ceremonial fire was still ablaze in the Butterfly Valley, suddenly someone sang in a clear voice,

*"Burn my wretched body, oh raging holy fire.
What joy is in life, what pain is in death?"*

*The rest of the crowd responded in one voice,
"Burn my wretched body, oh raging holy fire.
What joy is in life, what pain is in death?
To do good and shun evil, only for brightness' cause.
Whether it is a life of happiness or sadness,
Everybody will go back to the dust.
I pity the mankind, with their many suffering!
I pity the mankind, with their many suffering!"*

The last phrase of 'I pity the mankind, with their many suffering! I pity the mankind, with their many suffering!' echoed in the Butterfly Valley. With their clothes as white as snow, the warriors came to Zhang Wuji's presence one by one, bowing their heads and salute, raised their head back up, turned around and left without looking back. Remembering that in the ten or twenty years to come, these warriors, such as Xu Da, would shed their blood for the sake of the Central Plains, Zhang Wuji could not help his eyes brim in tears.

The sound of singing was getting farther and farther away; the warriors dispersed their own separate ways. In a few moments stillness went back to reign in the Butterfly Valley, which was bustling with noise and excitement for the last several days; only Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, and Zhu Yuanzhang with his company left. Zhang Wuji asked in details the Wan An Temple's location, as well as those ominous people's appearance.

"Zhu Dage," he said, "The world is in chaos, we cannot waste any time in this insurrection. You do not need to accompany me to Dadou; let us part here."

Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and the others said, "We wish Jiaozhu success. Subordinates will wait to hear the good news." Bidding their farewell to Zhang Wuji, they left the valley toward their assigned post.

"We also have to leave," Zhang Wuji said, "Xiao Zhao, you have shackles on your hands, you can't move easily, you better wait for me here."

Xiao Zhao agreed reluctantly, but with the pretense of sending them off she followed them going out of the valley. They had walked for three miles, she still followed them. Then three more miles, she still did not want to leave. "Xiao Zhao," Zhang Wuji said, "If you send us off farther, you might not recognize the way back."

"Master Zhang," Xiao Zhao said, "Are you going to see Miss Zhao in Dadou?"

"Can't say for sure, but I might," Zhang Wuji replied.

"If you see her, will you ask her a favor on my behalf?" Xiao Zhao asked.

"What do you want her to do?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

Xiao Zhao held out her arms and said, "I want to borrow the Yitian Sword from Miss Zhao to cut this iron chain, otherwise I will not be free for the rest of my life."

Zhang Wuji could not bear to see her pitiful expression, "I am afraid she won't let me borrow her precious sword, let alone let me bring it here," he said apologetically.

"Then ... then, why don't you take me along, ask her to borrow the sword just for a moment?" Xiao Zhao asked.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "You talked in circles, in the end you want to go with me to Dadou, don't you? Yang Zuoshi, do you think we can take her along?"

Yang Xiao knew from the way Zhang Wuji speak that he wanted to take her along; he said, "I don't think that's a problem; so there is someone to take care of Jiaozhu's clothes and serve him tea. Only your iron chain's 'clink, clink, clank, clank' will be conspicuous. Let's do it this way; she pretends to be ill, then she can ride in a carriage and not come out unless it's important."

Xiao Zhao was delighted, "Many thanks Master, many thanks Yang Zuoshi," she busily said; then she cast a glance toward Wei Yixiao and said, "Many thanks, Wei Fawang [lit. law king - I think another translator translated it as 'protector king', the same 'fawang' as Jinlun Fawang of ROCH]"

"What do you thank me for?" Wei Yixiao said, "You need to be careful, if my previous sickness recurs, I am going to suck your blood." While saying that he grinned widely, showing rows of white teeth; looking very strange.

Xiao Zhao knew he was only joking, but she could not help feeling scared; she withdrew three steps backward and said, "Don't ... don't scare me."

End of Chapter 25.

Chapter 26 - Self Deformation of a Handsome Jade Face

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



He Taichong was holding a wooden sword; its body was wrapped in cloth. Standing in front of him was a burly foreign monk. In his hand was a steel blade. One weapon was sharp, the other blunt. It was clearly no competition; it was so easy to see who was strong and who was weak.

Approaching the afternoon that day, three riders and one carriage were seen galloping toward the north and in less than a day they had entered Dadou [lit. grand capital], the Yuan Dynasty's capital. By this time the power of Mongolian cavalry had reached a hundred thousands 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5 km], making their borders vast and wide, matchless throughout the history. Dadou later on became Beijing. It is the city where the emperor resided, where countless smaller nations and tribes sent their envoys to pay tribute.

As Zhang Wuji and his company entered the city gate they saw that a lot of people were coming and going; many of those people had yellow hair and blue eyes. Four people went to the western side of the city to find an inn for them to spend the night. Acting as a rich merchant Yang Xiao asked for three of the best rooms. The inn attendant rushed back and forth to serve them. Yang Xiao asked him about the historical sites and scenic spots around the Dadou; after a while he casually asked about ancient temples or monasteries. The inn attendant mentioned Wan An Temple of the western city first, "This Wan An Temple is situated among a thick forest; it has three big copper Buddha idols. No matter where you are going in this world, you won't find the fourth one. You should have come to visit this temple. It's a pity you have come in an unfortunate time. For the past half a year the temple has been occupied by foreign western monks; common people do not dare to come anymore."

"Occupied by foreign monks, that shouldn't be a problem, should it?" Yang Xiao asked.

The attendant stuck his tongue, he looked left and right before lowering his voice and said, "It's not that I talk too much, but honorable guests have come to the capital, you

must be careful when talking. If they see people coming in, those foreign monks will beat or even kill as they please; if they see pretty women then they will grab and take them inside the temple. They are backed by the Emperor. Who dare to swat a fly on a tiger's head by coming to those foreign monks and confront them?"

The foreign monks were backed by the Mongolian power, plundering and rampaging, oppressing the Han people, Yang Xiao and the others had long been aware of it; but they did not expect these people would unscrupulously run amuck in the capital. Thereupon they did not talk with the inn attendant any longer.

After dinner that night they stayed in their respective rooms to cultivate their energy. Around the second hour [between 1 and 3 am] three people leaped from the window, heading west.

The Wan An temple was a big four-story building, with a thirteen floor pagoda behind it, which they could see in the distant. Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao launched their 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] to the fullest and in a short time they had arrived at the temple. Exchanging hand signals they circled to the left, with the intention of climbing up the pagoda to take a better look of the overall temple's situation from a higher position. Unexpectedly when they were still about twenty 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10 ft or 3.3 m] away from the pagoda they saw shadows of people on each floor of the pagoda, going back and forth, patrolling. It turned out that there were twenty, thirty people guarding the pagoda. As they saw this, three people were both startled and delighted at the same time, because if the pagoda was guarded this heavily, then Shaolin, Wudang, and other sects' people must be imprisoned here; hence saving them time to investigate further. Only the enemy's

guard was so heavy, their rescue effort would certainly not be easy. Much less since each one of Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, and the others had an outstanding level of martial art skill; yet they were still captured by the enemy, showing that the enemy was not only numerous, but their methods were undoubtedly fierce and cruel. Before coming to this Wan An Temple, three people had decided not to be rash and act recklessly; therefore, they quietly retreated.

Suddenly they saw a flicker of light on the sixth floor; about eight, nine people walked slowly with torches in their hands. The light moved from the sixth floor to the fifth, then from the fifth to the fourth, going down the pagoda. As they arrived at the first floor they went out the pagoda's main entrance, moving towards the back of the temple.

Yang Xiao waved his hand and slowly crept toward these people. On the rear courtyard of the temple there were old trees towering to the sky. Three people hid behind one of the trees; and as soon as the wind blew they moved several 'zhang's away to the next tree. These three people's 'qing gong' was very high, yet they only dare to move with the blowing wind and rustling leaves in fear of their movement to be detected by enemy.

Stepping stealthily they managed to move more than twenty 'zhang's. They saw around ten men wearing yellow robes, each with a weapon in his hand, escorting an old man wearing an oversized robe with wide sleeve. As that old man turned his head, Zhang Wuji could see clearly that the old man was the Kunlun Sect's Sect Leader, 'tie qin xian sheng' [Mister Iron Qin (a musical instrument)], He Taichong; Wuji could not help but shiver, "Even Mr. He is also here," he thought.

As they saw those people enter Wan An Temple's back door, three people waited for a moment. After looking around to make sure nobody else was watching, they also entered the back door quick as a flash. The temple was huge, with many rooms inside; some of the rooms looked similar to those in the Shaolin Temple. They saw bright light coming out through long windows of the main hall; and guessed this must be the room where He Taichong was detained. Three people moved swiftly toward this hall. Zhang Wuji crouched on the ground trying to take a peek inside the hall via a small crack on the long window. Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao stood on either side, guarding against any possible sneak attack. Although these three people were bold and highly skilled, they were entering a tiger's den at this moment, so their hearts were anxious.

The crack on the long window was very small so Zhang Wuji only managed to see the lower part of He Taichong's body; he could not see any other people inside the hall. He heard He Taichong roar angrily, "I have already fallen into your treacherous hand; just kill me or cut me off, but don't say another word. If you want me to take an oath to be the government's hunting falcon or dog, then dream on. Even if you talk for three or five more years, you are only wasting your words."

Zhang Wuji silently nodded his head, "Although this Mr. He is not an honorable gentleman, he stands firm in critical moment; he truly befits the character of a sect leader," he thought.

He heard a man in a cold voice say, "You are so stubborn, our Master won't force you. But do you know the custom here?"

"Even if you cut all my ten fingers I still won't surrender," He

Taichong said.

“Very well,” that man said, “Let me explain it to you once again. If you can defeat three of our people, we’ll immediately release you. If you lose, we’ll cut one more of your fingers and lock you up another month. Then we’ll ask you again whether you want to surrender.”

He Taichong replied, “I’ve already lost two fingers, so what if I lose another one? Come, take your sword out!”

That man laughed coldly, “By the time you lose all your fingers, although you surrender, we won’t want a trash. Give him a sword! Mokopas, you can try him first!”

Another hoarse voice replied, “Yes!”

Zhang Wuji sent his strength to the point of his finger and gently pushed the crack to make it wider. He saw that He Taichong was holding a wooden sword; its body was wrapped in cloth. It was a soft and blunt sword; could not possibly injure anybody. Standing in front of him was a burly foreign monk. In his hand was a steel blade, flickering its bluish ray under the light. One weapon was sharp, the other blunt. It was clearly no competition; it was so easy to see who was strong and who was weak. But He Taichong was not discouraged; he shook the wooden sword in his hand and said, “Please!”

‘Swish!’ his sword hacked down swiftly and fiercely, sending out a secret move from the Kunlun Sword technique. That foreign monk, Mokopas, was big and tall, but his movement was very agile; his blade flashed back and forth, aiming He Taichong’s vital points.

Zhang Wuji only need to watch several moves before he was

shocked, “How come Mr. He’s footwork is unstable, utterly discomfited, as if he doesn’t have any internal energy at all?” he thought.

He Taichong’s sword technique was exquisite, but without internal energy, he did not differ much from an average person; the swiftness and fierceness of his sword could not be unleashed to the fullest. Fortunately that foreign monk’s martial art skill was two levels beneath his, so although the monk launched several fierce attacks, He Taichong always managed to counterattack thanks to his wonderful moves.

After about fifty moves He Taichong shouted, “Gotcha!” His sword slashed to the east and turned back to the west, slanted to the rear and then back to the front, with a light ‘bang!’ the sword hit the monk’s armpit. If it was a real sword, also if his internal strength was not gone, then the sword would have already penetrated the monk’s flesh and bone.

“Back off, Mokopas!” that cold voice said, “Unwol, your turn!”

Zhang Wuji turned his attention to the owner of that cold voice. He saw a dark face, as if this person’s face was covered with a layer of black smoke, with graying grizzled beard; he was one of the Xuanming Two Elders. He stood with his hands behind his back, his eyes were partly open, as if he was indifferent to whatever was happening in front of him.

Moving his eyes forward Zhang Wuji saw a short stool covered with brocade, on which rested a pair of feet, wearing a pair of yellow satin shoes, with a pearl on the tip of each shoe. Zhang Wuji’s heart was beating faster, because he recognized these delicately beautiful feet with round

anklebones; this pair of feet belonged to Zhao Min, which he had grabbed in his hands in the Green Willow Manor. When they met at Mount Wudang, they faced each other as enemies. This time he saw this pair of delicate feet resting on a brocade stool, somehow his face turned red and his heart was beating fast. He saw Zhao Min's right foot tap the stool lightly, as if she was deeply engrossed in the martial art contest between He Taichong and Unwol.

After about the time needed to drink tea has passed, He Taichong shouted, "Gotcha!" Zhao Min raised her right foot as Unwol was defeated.

That black-faced Xuan Ming Elder said, "Unwol, back off. Helin Puhu, your turn."

Zhang Wuji heard that He Taichong's breathing was getting heavier; he knew that Mr. He must be extremely exhausted after he successively battled two people. A short moment later the fight began. Helin Puhu was using a long and big, heavy steel staff as his weapon. The gust of wind from his weapon filled the hall and the candles flickered, creating a dancing shadow like a cloud on Zhao Min's shoes. Suddenly a black shadow swept across the floor, a red candle on top of a small table on the right side of the hall was extinguished. 'Crack!' the wooden sword snapped. He Taichong heaved a long sigh and threw the sword on the floor. At last he lost the match after staking everything he got.

"Mister Iron Qin, do you surrender?" the Xuanming Elder asked.

He Taichong boldly replied, "I said I won't surrender. If I have my internal energy, how can this foreign monk be my match?"

The Xuanming Elder coldly said, "Cut his left ring finger; take him back to the pagoda."

Zhang Wuji turned his head toward Yang Xiao, and Yang Xiao shook his hand; his meaning was obvious: 'If we break into the hall to save people, then our own important matter will fail.' They heard the finger got cut, medicine applied to stop the bleeding, and the wound wrapped. He Taichong was really unyielding; he did not even utter a single grunt. The group of yellow robed men took the torch and took him back to the pagoda.

Zhang Wuji and the others shrunk back to hide behind the corner wall. Under the torch light they saw He Taichong's face was white as a sheet, his jaws were clenched, he looked really angry.

After the group walked far, a gentle and charming clear voice was heard in the hall, "Mr. Lu Zhang [lit. deer staff], Kunlun Sect's sword technique is really profound. In the stance with which he stabbed Mokopas, first he slashed to the left like this, and then turned to the right like this ..."

Zhang Wuji put his eyes back on the crack and saw that it was indeed Zhao Min. She was talking and walking toward the center of the hall, with a wooden sword in her hand, imitating He Taichong's movement earlier. The foreign monk Mokopas brandished his blade to block her sword.

That black-faced Xuanming Elder, which Zhao Min called 'Mr. Lu Zhang', short for 'Lu Zhangke', praised her, "Master's intelligence is matchless. This stance was absolutely correct."

Zhao Min practiced again and again, every time she hit Mokopas' armpit. The sword was a wooden one, but each

stab hit the same spot over and over again, causing quite a bit of pain. Mokopas turned all his attention to spar with her; he did not dare to complain or try to evade her stabs. She practiced this move until she mastered it, and then called Unwol and practiced the stance He Taichong used to defeat him earlier.

Zhang Wuji understood; it turned out Zhao Min imprisoned the experts from various sects here and drugged them to suppress their internal energy and force them to surrender to the royal government. Naturally these people would not surrender; so she ordered her people to fight with them, while she observed from the side. That way she could steal various sects' exquisite moves. Her intention was really evil; her scheme wicked, making other people's blood boil.

While she was sparring with Helin Puhu, toward the very last several stances Zhao Min hesitated and asked, "Mr. Lu Zhang, is it like this?"

Lu Zhangke hesitated without answering; he turned his head and asked, "He Xiongdi [lit. Brother Crane], did you see it clearly?"

From the left corner a voice replied, "Ku Dashi [lit. grand master 'bitter/painful' - Reverend Ku] must have seen it clearly."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Ku Dashi, I will have to bother you; please come here and give me directions."

From the right corner came a 'tou tuo' [Buddhist monk with hair]; his hair was so long that it draped over his shoulder like a cape. His stature was big and tall, his face was full of scars so that it was difficult to tell what his original face would look like. His hair and palm looked red, like he was a

middle-eastern man. Without saying anything he took the sword from Zhao Min's hand and 'swish, swish, swish, swish' he repeatedly swung it toward Helin Pohan, using Kunlun Sect's sword technique.

This so-called 'Ku Dashi', the Ku Toutuo, was using He Taichong's sword technique, also without internal energy; while Helin Pohan fought him with all his might. Toward the end his staff swept away with a strong gust of wind, extinguishing the red candle on the right hand side of the hall. He Taichong was not able to evade this move and thus was forced to parry the steel staff with his wooden sword; as a result his sword broke and he was defeated. But that Ku Toutuo's wooden sword turned around sharply; light as a feather it slid along the staff, like a swallow sweeping the water, following the staff's movement it slid upward to slice Helin Pohan's fingers which held the staff. Helin Pohan felt his palm went numb; he could not hold on to his staff. 'Clang!' it fell to the ground hitting the green brick tile making brick dust flew up.

Helin Pohan's face turned red; he knew that if the wooden sword was a real sharp one, his eight fingers would have been cut off. Bowing down he said, "My respect! I admit defeat," Then he stooped down to pick up his steel staff. Ku Toutuo held the wooden sword with both hands and gave it back to Zhao Min.

Zhao Min said with a smile, "Ku Dashi, that last move was really wonderful; was it also from the Kunlun Sect's sword technique?"

Ku Toutuo shook his head. Zhao Min continued, "No wonder He Taichong could not do it. Ku Dashi, can you teach me?"

Using his bare hand Ku Toutuo attacked Zhao Min's sword.

Sparring for the third time Ku Toutuo's hand moved lightning fast; his speed was unimaginable. Zhao Min could not match his speed; but although her sword was slower, her movement was similar to his, without the slightest amount of discrepancy. Ku Toutuo turned his body around, shot both of his hands out then stopped dead on his track.

"Good!" Zhang Wuji applauded silently, "That was brilliant!"

For a moment Zhao Min did not understand, leaning her head sideways she stared at Ku Toutuo's position. After thinking for a while she finally understood. "Ah, Ku Dashi, if you were holding a weapon, then the staff would break my arm," she said, "How do you counter it?"

Ku Toutuo made a movement of flipping his hand and grabbing the steel staff. His left foot flew up, his head raised up; he simultaneously snatched the enemy's staff and kicked. This movement looked clumsy, but actually it was a very skillful movement of martial art from outside the great wall.

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Good Shifu, quickly teach me." Her expression was tender and flattering.

Zhang Wuji's heart skipped a beat. He thought, "Your internal energy is not enough, you can't learn it. But the way she asked made it difficult for others to refuse."

Ku Toutuo made two hand signals; his meaning was obvious, 'You don't have enough internal energy, you can't learn this move.' Then he turned around and ignored her.

Zhang Wuji pondered in his heart, "Ku Toutuo's martial art is strong; I am afraid he is not below the Xuanming Elders. I don't know his internal energy level, but his movements

were exquisite. He is truly a formidable opponent. He keeps making hand signals, but did not speak a single word; could it be that he is mute? But he definitely is not deaf. Miss Zhao is very respectful to him; he is obviously a character with an extraordinary background.”

Seeing Ku Toutuo was not willing to teach her Zhao Min was not angry; she showed a faint smile and said, “Take Kongtong Sect’s Tang Wenliang here.”

Not too long afterwards Tang Wenliang was ushered into the hall. Again Lu Zhangke ordered three of his men to fight with him. Tang Wenliang was not willing to suffer defeat under a weapon, so with bare hands he fought against the enemy’s palms. He won the first two matches; but on the third match his opponent used internal energy. Tang Wenliang was not able to resist and he lost one of his fingers. Again Zhao Min practiced according to what she just saw while Lu Zhangke gave directions from the side.

It dawned on Zhang Wuji that Zhao Min realized her internal energy was insufficient and it was difficult to cultivate internal energy intensively; so she wanted to learn the martial arts of various sects’ sect leaders and experts. This method was not only more feasible, but by practicing the most exquisite of each skill she might be able to greatly make up of her own inadequacy.

After practicing the fist technique Zhao Min said, “Call the Old Nun Miejue!”

One of the yellow-robed men said, “The Old Nun Miejue has gone on a hunger strike for five days. She is still as stubborn as ever; not willing to take any order.”

“Starve her to death, then!” Zhao Min smiled, “Hey, call that

Emei Sect's young girl, Zhou Zhiruo." Her subordinate complied; he turned around and went out the hall.

Zhang Wuji remembered Zhou Zhiruo had cared for him attentively on the boat in Han River; he felt that he owed her a debt of gratitude. On the Brightness Peak Zhou Zhiruo also helped him by giving him pointers on positions, so that he was able to defeat the Huashan Sect and Kunlun Sect's Saber and Sword Combination Technique; later on she stabbed him with her sword, but it was because she was following her Shifu's strict order, so he did not hold it against her. Now that he heard Zhao Min's order to get her, his heart was shaken.

A short moment later the group of yellow-robed men came back, ushering Zhou Zhiruo into the hall. Zhang Wuji saw that she was as beautiful as he remembered her; only compared to at the Brightness Peak she was slightly thinner and paler. Although imprisoned by the enemy, she managed to maintain her composure as if she had already disregarded life and death.

As usual Lu Zhangke asked if she was willing to surrender or not. Zhou Zhiruo simply shook her head without saying anything. Lu Zhangke was about to send someone to fight with her when Zhao Min said, "Miss Zhou, you are very young, yet you are one of Emei Sect's martial art experts; that is truly something to be envious of. I heard you are Reverend Mie Jue's protégé and have mastered her profound swordsmanship, is that true?"

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "My Master's martial art is so broad and deep; let's just say that she [here the term used was 'lao ren jia' - Senior] has passed all her knowledge to me, I am [here the term used was 'xiao nu zi' - a little girl] young and my understanding is shallow, I fall far too short."

Zhao Min smiled, "The rule is as long as you can defeat three of our people, then we'll let you go, free and unharmed; we won't trouble you anymore. Why is your honorable master so proud that she disdains to compare martial art with us?" she asked.

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "My Master prefers death over disgrace. She is the Sect Leader of Emei; how could she ask for mercy from your subordinate? What you said was not wrong; my Master certainly look down upon contemptible, evil woman and lowly people. Of course she disdains fighting with you."

Surprisingly Zhao Min was not angry; she still smiled and asked, "How about you, Miss Zhou?"

"I am but a little girl, what do I have to say?" Zhou Zhiruo answered, "Whatever Shifu said, I follow."

"Your honorable master also forbade you to fight with us, didn't she?" Zhao Min asked, "Why is that?"

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "Although Emei Sect's sword technique is not the greatest technique there is, it is still the Central Plains' major sect's martial art; certainly we cannot allow some shameless barbarian captors to steal it." She spoke with a refined manner, but her words were sharp, in total disregard of other people's feeling.

Zhao Min was startled; she did not expect Miejue Shitai to correctly guess her true intention. She heard Zhou Zhiruo first said 'evil woman, lowly people', then she said, 'shameless barbarian'; she could not bear her anger. 'Swish!' the Yitian Sword appeared in her hand. "Your Shifu cursed us as shameless barbarians. Fine! Let me ask you this: this Yitian Sword is obviously my family's treasure; how could

the Emei steal it?”

Zhou Zhiruo indifferently said, “Yitian Sword and Tulong [slaying dragon] Saber have always been the Central Plain Wulin world’s precious weapons. I have never heard they have anything to do with a barbarian woman.”

Zhao Min’s face turned completely red; “Humph!” she angrily said, “I did not know your tongue is actually very sharp. So you are determined not to fight with us?” Zhou Zhiruo shook her head. Zhao Min said, “I always cut a finger of those other people who lost in the martial art match or simply refuse to fight. You, this little girl, must be very proud of your beautiful face; no wonder you are so arrogant. I am not going to cut your finger.” While saying that she pointed her finger toward Ku Toutuo and continued, “I am going to make you as this Reverend; I am going to add twenty, thirty sword marks on your face. I want to see if you are still arrogant.” She waved her left hand and immediately two of the yellow-robed men came forward to grab Zhou Zhiruo’s arms. Zhao Min smiled and said, “I want to turn your smart face into a honeycomb; and I don’t need Emei’s exquisite sword technique to do that. Do you think I can’t turn you into an ugly clown with my ‘three-legged cat’ skill?”

Tears started to well up Zhou Zhiruo’s eyes; her body started to tremble. She saw the tip of the Yitian Sword was only a few inches apart from her own cheeks. She knew as soon as this demon moved her hand, her face would look like that ugly and fearsome ‘toutuo’.

“Are you scared?” Zhao Min asked with a smile. Zhou Zhiruo did not dare to act strong anymore; she nodded her head. “Good!” Zhao Min said, “Do you surrender?”

“I won’t surrender!” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Just kill me!”

Zhao Min smiled and said, "I've never killed anybody; I only want to cut a little bit of your skin and flesh." A cold ray flashed; the sword in Zhao Min's hand slashed toward Zhou Zhiruo's face.

'Bang!' suddenly something was thrown from outside, hitting the Yitian Sword. At the same time the long window broke and someone flew into the hall; throwing the two yellow-robed men who held Zhou Zhiruo's arms outside. The person who broke the window and flew in turned his left arm around to protect Zhou Zhiruo, while at the same time stretched out his right arm to block Lu Zhangke's palm. 'Bang!' both people staggered two steps backward.

Everybody turned their eyes toward this person; he was none other than the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, Zhang Wuji. His entrance was so sudden like he descended from the sky; everybody was shocked. Even masters like the Xuanming Elders did not expect anything like this that they were caught off guard.

Lu Zhangke heard the window burst; immediately he rushed to the front of Zhao Min's body to protect her. He used all his strength to strike Zhang Wuji; but to his surprise his legs wobbled and he staggered back two steps. He was about to attack in anger when suddenly he felt an unbearable dry heat on his body, as if he was entering a hot furnace.

Zhou Zhiruo saw an impending doom in front of her eyes, but unexpectedly someone suddenly came to her rescue. Finding herself in Zhang Wuji's embrace, Zhou Zhiruo was conscious of his broad and solid chest and smelling a whiff of a strong male breath; she was pleasantly surprised. In an instant she felt her body weaken and she almost passed out. She did not know that Zhang Wuji had used the 'jiu yang

shen gong' [nine yang (positive) divine energy] to block Lu Zhangke's 'xuan ming shen zhang' [mysteriously dark/deep divine palm]; the pure 'qi' in his body came out. Zhou Zhiruo had never been this close to a male body before; moreover, this man was the one who was always in her mind day and night, even in her dreams. She felt an indescribable joy in her heart, so even though all around her the enemies threatened to cut her with a thousand blades and ten thousands swords she had nothing to worry, she had nothing to fear.

As soon as they saw their Cult Leader break in to rescue someone, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao followed quick as a flash and stood behind him on either side. At first the martial art experts under Zhao Min's command were thrown into confusion; but very soon they saw that only three enemies broke into the hall. The guards outside and inside the hall exchanged some whistles, confirming that there was no other enemy outside. Immediately they moved to guard all doors, waiting quietly for Zhao Min's order.

Zhao Min was neither alarmed nor afraid, she was not even angry; she only looked at Zhang Wuji with a startled look on her face. She turned her gaze toward the two pieces of bright golden objects on the corner of the hall. When she swung the Yitian Sword toward Zhou Zhiruo's face Zhang Wuji threw something to block the sword. Turned out that object was the golden case she gave him as a souvenir. The Yitian Sword was very sharp that it cut the golden case into two halves on contact. She stared at those two golden pieces for a long time before saying, "Do you hate this box so much that you want to break it?"

Zhang Wuji noticed her gaze was full of quiet resentment; not anger, but more sorrow because of desires being cut short. He was startled; apologetically and in a soft voice he

said, "I did not bring any secret projectile; in a hurry I reached into my pocket and took this box out. It was really unintentional. I hope Miss do not mind it."

Zhao Min's eyes shone, "Do you always carry this box with you?" she asked.

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied. Suddenly he realized Zhao Min's beautiful eyes were staring at him; while his left arm was still hugging Zhou Zhiruo. He blushed slightly then loosened up his arm.

Zhao Min sighed and said, "I didn't know Miss Zhou is your ... your good friend; otherwise I wouldn't treat her this way. Turned out you two are ..." She did not finish her words and turned her head away.

Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhou and I ... we are not ... it's only ... it's only ..." He said 'it's only' twice, but actually he did not know what to say.

Zhao Min turned her gaze back toward those two halves of the golden box on the floor; she did not say anything, but her eyes actually spoke a thousand words. Zhou Zhiruo's heart was stirred, "This female demon is very passionate toward him; could it be ..."

But Zhang Wuji actually did not share these two girls' sentiment; he only partially understood Zhao Min's dazed expression, but did not realize the profound meaning behind it. He thought Zhao Min gave him the pearl head ornament and the golden case with which he cured Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting, yet now he had broken the golden case; he felt he was being inappreciative toward others. Thereupon he walked to the corner of the hall, bent down to pick the two halves of the golden case and said, "I will find a skilled

craftsman to have it fixed.”

“Really?” Zhao Min happily asked.

Zhang Wuji nodded; but in his heart he thought, ‘You and I both command countless warriors, how can we be worried about such an insignificant silver and gold matter? Although this golden case is exquisite, it is not a rare treasure. The ‘hei yu duan xu gao’ [black jade break connecting (or fracture healing) paste] hidden inside the box has already taken out, then the box does not have much usefulness anymore; so what if it is broken? Putting them back together is also a minor matter; presently we have many important matters to deal, but you actually worry about this box; you are such a fussy little girl, who cares much about such a trivial matter. Such a typical woman.’ Immediately he put the golden box pieces into his pocket.

“Then off you go!” Zhao Min said.

Zhang Wuji thought Song Da Shibo [First Martial (older) Uncle] and the others had not been rescued yet; how could he leave just like that? But the enemy’s experts surrounded them like a cloud, while there only three people on his side; so speaking about rescue was easier said than done. “Miss Zhao,” he asked, “Why did you capture my Da Shibo and the others?”

Zhao Min smiled, “My intention is good; I want to advise them to be loyal to the royal government, then everybody will enjoy splendor, riches and honor together. Who would have thought that they are so stubborn and don’t want to listen. I have no choice but to slowly persuade them.”

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji snorted; turning around he returned to Zhou Zhiruo’s side. With the enemy all around him he

walked toward the box, picked it up and returned to his original position, all with calm and composed manners, as if there were nobody else there. He swept his cold gaze around and said, "Since that is the case, we'll take our leave then!" Taking Zhou Zhiruo's hand he turned around to leave.

Zhao Min hastily said, "You want to leave then just leave. But if you want to take Miss Zhou along without asking my permission; what kind of person do you think I am?"

"It is really inappropriate for me to do that," Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhao, will you release Miss Zhou and let her go with me?"

Zhao Min did not answer; she cast a meaningful glance toward the Xuanming Elders. He Biweng [lit. old man crane pen] moved forward one step. "Zhang Jiaozhu," he said, "You come and go as you like, you want to rescue others as you like; where do you think we should place our old faces? If you don't demonstrate some special skills, I am afraid we brothers will have difficulty submitting to you."

Zhang Wuji recognized He Biweng's voice; anger welled up his chest. He roared, "You captured me when I was small and made my life nearly gone. Today you still have a face to speak to me? Take this!" With a loud grunt he sent out a palm toward He Biweng.

Lu Zhangke had just suffered a defeat; he knew He Biweng's strength was not Zhang Wuji's match. Rushing forward he shot a palm toward him. Zhang Wuji's right palm was still moving toward He Biweng, his left palm moved underneath his right arm to block Lu Zhangke's palm. Pure internal energy met pure internal energy, there was not the slightest margin of error. Three people, four palms. As soon as they met, they all staggered back.

When they were at the Wudang Mountain the Xuanming Elders had exchanged palm strikes with Zhang Wuji and managed to land a couple of slaps on his body. This moment they wanted to repeat the same trick, also with two palms striking together. But that day Zhang Wuji had suffered defeat once; how could he let himself fall into the same trick? His elbows shrunk slightly launching the 'qian kun da nuo yi' technique; 'Clap!' He Biweng's left fist landed above Lu Zhangke's right palm. These two men's received the same instructions from their master; their palm techniques were similar, their strengths were also more or less the same. They both felt their arms go numb and were confused as how could they, martial brothers, strike each other? Although their martial art skills were high, they did not understand this profound mystery.

While those two men were startled and angry, Zhang Wuji's palms had arrived. Each of the Xuanming Elders launched their palms; one to counterattack, the other to block. They used a totally different move from the previous one, but Zhang Wuji still used the same technique to lead Lu Zhangke's left palm to strike above He Biweng's right palm. Zhang Wuji executed the 'qian kun da nuo yi' technique skillfully and with great precision that his attack arrived at an unthinkable condition.

While the Xuanming Elders were still stunned Zhang Wuji's third palm strike arrived; as if by prior agreement each of them lifted a palm to block. Three people's pure energy collided; the Xuanming Elders felt their opponent's 'yang' [positive] energy surge in, it was difficult to block. Zhang Wuji's palm technique was like the wind; he recalled his many years of sufferings when he was little and was struck by He Biweng's Xuanming Divine Palm. For that reason his palm strike was a little bit lenient toward Lu Zhangke, he did

not give any leeway to He Biweng.

Twenty or so palms later He Biweng's greenish face had turned completely red. Seeing the opponent's palm strike, he raised his left palm trying to fend it off, while his right palm is slanting down heavily. 'Slap! Slap!' He Biweng's palm fiercely hit Lu Zhangke's shoulder. In the end he still failed to fend off Zhang Wuji's palm, which hit him squarely on his chest. Luckily Zhang Wuji had never had any intention to take his life; thus he only used 30% of his strength. With a 'wah' noise He Biweng spurted a mouthful of blood. His face from red turned to purple, his body swayed; if Zhang Wuji took advantage of this situation and launched another palm strike, his life would be gone right there and then. Lu Zhangke's shoulder was also so painful that his face greatly changed and his lips bleed from his own biting.

The Xuanming Elders had always been Zhao Min's most capable subordinates; who would have thought that both of them were injured in under thirty moves? No wonder the rest of Zhao Min's warriors were flabbergasted; even Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao were astonished. They had seen it with their own eyes how on Wudang Mountain the Xuanming Elders had injured Zhang Wuji with their palms; surprisingly in just several months he had made a tremendous progress. But they also remembered that in these last several months while treating Yu Daiyan and Yi Liting's injuries on Mount Wudang, Zhang Wuji had also consulted Zhang Sanfeng on the subtle and profoundly deep study of the martial arts; finally he was able to combine the 'jiu yang shen gong' [nine 'yang' (positive) divine skill], 'qian kun da nuo yi' [great shifting of the universe], plus Wudang's 'tai ji chuan jian' [Taiji's fist and sword], three martial arts into one. They were secretly praising Zhang Sanfeng's divine knowledge, which could be called 'shen bu ke ce' [immeasurably deep],

four characters.

As the two Xuanming Elders were defeated, they howled and took their weapons out. In Lu Zhangke's hand there was a short stick with a forked head, resembling a pair of deer antlers. The body of the stick was dark; it was unclear what the stick was made of. He Biweng's hands were grasping a pair of pens; the tip of the pens was sharp, shaped like a crane's beak. The pens glistened with crystal-like rays. These two people had followed Zhao Min for quite a while, but even Zhao Min had never seen them using their weapons. As these three weapons were launched, one black shadow and two white lights were seen; surrounding Zhang Wuji in their midst.

Zhang Wuji did not bring any weapons with him; with only his bare hand and empty fist, his situation was quite disadvantageous. But he was not scared one bit. He determined to test his own martial art against these two powerful opponents; he wanted to see if he would be able to score victory barehanded.

The Xuanming Elders had always relied on their profound internal energy, the Xuanming Divine Palms was a lost art of the martial art world; yet as soon as they went into battle against Zhang Wuji's palms, his 'jiu yang shen gong' was actually so unfathomable that in dozens of palms they were defeated.

When using their weapons, these two people oftentimes scored victory because of their strange moves. Their names actually came from their weapons, 'lu jiao duan zhang' [deer antler short stick] and 'he zui shuang bi' [crane beak pair of pens]. Each of their moves was swift, fierce and very ruthless; rarely seen in the world.

With total concentration Zhang Wuji launched attacks and put up defenses among the weapons, but momentarily he had not yet understood his opponents' movements; so it would not be easy to score any victory. Luckily He Biweng was severely wounded and his movements were unavoidably sluggish.

In the meantime Zhao Min lightly clapped her hands three times and naked blades dazzled in the hall. Three men attacked Yang Xiao, four people attacked Wei Yixiao, and two pointed the tip of their weapons on Zhou Zhiruo's back. Yang Xiao snatched a sword and brandished it lightning fast, stabbing a man attacking his back. Wei Yixiao used his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] as his weapon and slapped two people with his 'xuan yin mian zhang' [dark cloud cotton palm]. But in reality the enemies were too many, for every man down, two came out to take his place; while Zhang Wuji was engaged in a fierce battle against the Xuanming Elders and was not able to lend them a hand. It would not be too difficult for the three of them to escape, but certainly it was almost impossible if they wanted to take Zhou Zhiruo along.

While they were anxious, suddenly Zhao Min shouted, "Everybody hold your hands!" Her voice was not too loud, but her subordinates obeyed her and immediately leaped backward.

Yang Xiao tossed his sword to the ground. Wei Yixiao had just snatched a blade from an enemy's hand; he turned it around and threw it back to its owner, while laughing a big laugh. Seeing someone was still holding a dagger on Zhou Zhiruo's back; Zhang Wuji could not help but feeling anxious and it showed on his face.

With a sad voice Zhou Zhiruo said, "Zhang Gongzi [young master, a respectful term to address a young man], please

leave. Xiao Nuzi [little/young girl] is deeply grateful of three gentlemen's kind intention."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Zhang Gongzi, I feel sad to destroy such a beautiful face like this. Surely she is your beloved?"

Zhang Wuji blushed; he said, "Miss Zhou and I have known each other since we were little. When I was a child I was hit by this man's ..." he pointed to He Biweng, "... Xuanming Divine Palm. The cold poison entered my body and made me difficult to move. I was lucky this Miss Zhou helped me eating and drinking. I do not dare to forget her kindness."

"So you were childhood friends," Zhao Min said, "You are thinking of making her the Devil Cult's Madame Cult Leader, aren't you?"

Zhang Wuji blushed even deeper. "The barbarians have not yet been extinguished, how can I think of raising a family?" he said.

Zhao Min's face darkened. "You surely want to destroy me very much, don't you?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "Until now I still do not know Miss' origin," he said, "Although our paths have crossed several times, every time it was Miss who seeks out Zhang Wuji; it wasn't the Old Zhang who looks for trouble with Miss. I will be deeply grateful if Miss is willing to let my martial uncles and the Wulin warriors from various sects go; I wouldn't dare to seek enmity with Miss. Moreover, Miss still has to tell me three matters, which I will strive to carry them out, in no way will I refuse your command."

Zhao Min could hear the sincerity in his voice, her face

brightened like a fresh flower just blossomed. She smiled and said, "Hey, you haven't forgotten that." Turning her head toward Zhou Zhiruo she said to Zhang Wuji, "This Miss Zhou is not your beloved, she is neither your martial sister, nor your fiancé; so if I want to destroy her face, it has nothing to do with you ..." She cast a sidelong glance; Lu Zhangke and He Biweng immediately raised their weapons in front of Zhou Zhiruo, while another man raised a sharp dagger toward her cheeks.

If Zhang Wuji wanted to save her, he would have to break the Xuanming Elders' defense line; which was not easy. Zhao Min coldly said, "Zhang Gongzi, you'd better tell me the truth."

All of a sudden Wei Yixiao held out his palms and spat some saliva on them. He rubbed his palms several times to the sole of his shoes, and laughed a big laugh. Nobody knew what kind of crafty trick he was about to perform; suddenly a green shadow flashed. Zhao Min felt her left and right cheeks were rubbed by a palm. She looked at Wei Yixiao and found him stood on his original position, but now in his hands were two daggers; it was not clear whom he snatched the daggers from. Zhao Min realized things were not good; she did not dare to rub her own cheeks, but took a handkerchief and wiped her face. She saw her handkerchief was black with some mud, and knew instantly that it was the dirt from Wei Yixiao's shoes plus his saliva. This thought made her sick that she almost threw up.

Wei Yixiao said, "Miss Zhao, whether you want to destroy Miss Zhou's face or not, it is up to you. You are cruel and merciless; I, the one with surname Wei, cannot stop you. Just know this: today you cut Miss Zhou's face once, the one surnamed Wei will double it; I will cut your face twice. You cut her face twice, I will cut yours four times. You break one

finger of hers, I will break two of yours.” Speaking to this point he struck the daggers in his hands to each other and continued, “What the one surnamed Wei wants to do, he can do it. ‘Qing Yi Fu Wang’ [The Green Winged Bat King] will do what he says. All my life I have never said an empty talk. You can guard against me for a year or a year and a half, but not for eight years, ten years. You can send your people to kill me, but I doubt they will be able to pursue me. I take my leave now!” When the word ‘now’ came out of his mouth, he had already disappeared.

‘Slap! Slap!’ two daggers flew and struck a pillar; followed by “Aiyo! Ah!” screams, two foreign monks in the hall slowly sat down. Somehow the swords in their hands were snatched by Wei Yixiao; while their acupoints were also sealed by him.

Wei Yixiao’s words were spoken lightly, but everybody knew it was not idle talk; they saw with their own eyes that Zhao Min white cheeks, which were red from rouge earlier, were smeared black by Wei Yixiao’s dirt. If he was holding knives in his hands, Zhao Min’s cheeks would have been destroyed. His movement to her and back was lightning fast; it was like a ghost or a demon’s movement; certainly no experts would be able to guard against him. Even Zhang Wuji felt ashamed of his own inferiority. In a long distance race Zhang Wuji would be able to win relying on his stronger internal energy, but moving in the courtyard or between the porch and the veranda nobody could match this person’s divine speed.

Zhang Wuji bowed and saluted. “Miss Zhao,” he said, “We have offended you today; we’ll take our leave now.” Taking Yang Xiao’s hand he turned around and went out the hall. He knew with Wei Yixiao’s threat Zhao Min would not dare to harm Zhou Zhiruo. Zhao Min looked at his back with mixed feelings: ashamed and angry; but she did not command her people to block their way.

Zhang Wuji and Yang Xiao returned to the inn; Wei Yixiao was already waiting for them there. Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Wei Fuwang [Bat King Wei], today you have given them a demonstration of your prowess, letting them know not to easily provoke the Ming Cult."

"It wasn't difficult to scare a little girl," Wei Yixiao said, "She can pretend to be fierce and wicked, but as she heard me wanting to destroy her face, I guarantee you she won't be able to sleep for three whole days and three whole nights."

Yang Xiao smiled and said, "She can't sleep; that's not good. It will make our effort to rescue people more difficult."

"Yang Zuoshi [Left Emissary Yang]," said Zhang Wuji, "Speaking of rescuing people, do you have any ingenious plan?"

Yang Xiao hesitated. "We are only three people, plus our presence is already known; it is truly a thorny problem," he said.

Zhang Wuji apologetically said, "When I saw Miss Zhou's dire situation I could not bear not to help. In the end I messed up an important matter."

"The way the turn of events went, nobody could bear not to help," Yang Xiao said, "Single-handedly Jiaozhu [Cult Leader] defeated the Xuanming Elders and that can crush the enemy's spirit big time; that was also very good. Moreover, now that they know we are here, they won't dare to treat Song Daxia [great hero Song] and the others too rudely."

Zhang Wuji remembered that his Song Dabo [first (older)

uncle], Yu Erbo [second (older) uncle] and the others were still in the enemy's hand; and then seeing how Zhao Min has treated He Taichong, Tang Wenliang and the others with disgrace, his heart burned with anxiety.

Three people discussed their course of action for half a day without reaching any conclusion; finally they went their separate rooms to rest.

Toward the dawn the following morning Zhang Wuji was still half dreaming when he heard a noise from the window; he woke up immediately and opened his eyes wide only to see the window slowly open. There was someone outside staring at him. He was startled. Lifting up the bed curtain he saw that person's face was filled with scars, he looked fearsomely ugly; it was none other than Ku Toutuo. Zhang Wuji was even more shocked; he immediately jumped out of bed, but Ku Toutuo's face was still at the window, staring blankly at him. It seemed like Ku Toutuo did not mean any harm to him. "Yang Zuoshi! Wei Fuwang!" Zhang Wuji called out.

Yang and Wei two people responded from the neighboring rooms. Zhang Wuji was slightly relieved. In the meantime Ku Toutuo's face disappeared from the window. Zhang Wuji hastily jumped out the window and saw Ku Toutuo go out the front gate in a hurry. By this time Yang and Wei two people had also caught up. Looking around to see there was no other enemy, three people moved their feet to pursue Ku Toutuo.

Ku Toutuo was waiting on a street corner. As he saw the three people approach, he turned around and went to the north. His strides were big, but he was not running. Three people exchanged hand signals and followed behind. By that time it was daybreak, not too many people were outside; so in a short moment they had reached the northern gate. Ku

Toutuo continued leading the way along a small pathway. About seven, eight 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5km] later they arrived at a small mound with rocks scattered around it. At last Ku Toutuo stopped and turned around; he waved his hands toward Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, asking them to step back, following which he cupped his fists in respect toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji returned the salute while thinking in his heart, "I wonder what is this Toutuo's intention in leading us here? There is nobody else here, if we fight, with one against three, he would surely lost. Judging by this, he doesn't seem to have an ill intention."

Before Zhang Wuji made his mind up, Ku Toutuo had already made a 'heh, heh' noise, then he attacked with his hands in the form of claws: tiger claw on his left hand, dragon claw on his right hand; all ten fingers in the shape of hooks, ferociously attacked Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji diverted the attack by a sweep of his left palm; he said, "Shangren [lit. upper/above person, a respectful term to address a Buddhist monk], what is your intention? Please make it clear; we can always fight later."

Ku Toutuo did not pay him any attention, as if he did not hear anything. His left hand tiger claw changed into an eagle claw, his right hand dragon claw changed into a tiger claw; one attacked the opponent's left shoulder, the other attacked the right abdomen. The attacks were very vicious.

"Do we really have to fight?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Ku Toutuo's eagle claw turned into a lion palm, his tiger claw turned into a crane beak; one struck the other pecked, in an ever-changing style. In a short three stances he had already

used six different styles.

Zhang Wuji did not dare to slack off; he immediately launched the 'Taiji Chuan' [taiji fist]. His body moved like the passing clouds or flowing water, fighting his opponent on that stone mound. He felt this Ku Toutuo's movements were very complicated; sometimes they were wide open and easily predicted, but just they turn surreptitiously strange as swift, like the martial art from a demonical unorthodox sect, casting a profound heretical, almost evil, air around him, but all along Zhang Wuji only used Taiji Chuan to fight him.

After about seventy, eighty stances later Ku Toutuo suddenly grunted and shot his fist straight forward. Zhang Wuji used the 'ru feng si bi' [Apparent Closure] to seal his fist power, followed by the move 'dan bian' [Single Whip] his left palm slapped Ku Toutuo's back; only he did not exert any internal energy, as soon as he touched his back, Zhang Wuji withdrew his palm.

Ku Toutuo knew Zhang Wuji was showing him mercy; he leaped backward and stared at Zhang Wuji for half a day. Suddenly he made a hand signal to Yang Xiao, indicating he wanted to borrow the long sword on Yang Xiao's waist. Yang Xiao loosened up the sword belt and presented the sword, complete with the sheath, with both hands to Ku Toutuo.

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "How can Yang Zuoshi lend a weapon to the enemy?" he thought.

Ku Toutuo drew the sword and made a hand signal, telling Zhang Wuji to borrow Wei Yixiao's sword. Zhang Wuji shook his head; he took the sword sheath from Ku Toutuo's left hand, and with a 'qing shou' [invitation] stance he used the sheath as a sword. With his left hand he pinched the tip of the sheath and positioned the sheath horizontally in front of

his chest.

Ku Toutuo swept the sword and stabbed diagonally down. Zhang Wuji had seen him teaching sword technique to Zhao Min, so he knew this man had a superb swordsmanship. At once he focused his attention to use the Taiji Sword he had learned for the past several months on Mount Wudang. He saw that the opponent's sword moved sometimes fast sometimes slow, with the blade seemingly everywhere; but Zhang Wuji was always able to block or divert the attack. Ku Toutuo withdrew immediately and re-attacked with new stances; yet not a single one of them was able to penetrate Zhang Wuji's defense.

Zhang Wuji silently praised him, "If I fought this man half a year ago, I certainly would not be his match in swordsmanship. Compared to that 'ba bi shen jian' [Eight-armed Divine Sword] Fang Dongbai this Ku Toutuo is a notch better." He started to feel fondness toward him and decided not to score victory too conspicuously.

Ku Toutuo brandished his sword like a 'luan pi feng' [tornado]; the blade of his sword glistened under the sun as if ten thousands metal snakes scurried around the opponent. Zhang Wuji looked clearly and then abruptly turned the sword sheath around. 'Shua!' the sword entered its sheath perfectly while both of his hands shot out and lightly touched Ku Toutuo's wrists. Smiling slightly Zhang Wuji leaped back. If he made any effort ever so slightly, he would have been able to seize the sword. This move to seize the sword was really dangerous; but it also demonstrated his excellent skill.

Before Zhang Wuji's feet landed on the ground Ku Toutuo dropped the sword and with a grunt sent out his palm forward. Zhang Wuji heard the gust of wind and knew that

this palm carried a lot of strength. It was truly not a small matter; obviously the opponent was testing his internal strength. He turned his right palm around and met the incoming palm head-on, while his left foot finally touched the ground.

In an instant Ku Toutuo's force flowed out like a stream. Zhang Wuji used the power of the seventh level of 'qian kun da nuo yi' to gradually dissipate the incoming force. Suddenly he shouted loudly and pushed back; it was like the dam on a mountain lake suddenly burst and the water flooded out with an earth shattering force. Zhang Wuji was actually returning Ku Toutuo's palm strength to its owner. It was the combination of ten opponent's palm strength into one; the world had never seen such force. If Ku Toutuo was hit, his wrist bone, arm bone, shoulder bone, and his ribs would be broken; blood would spurt out and he would have turned into a heap of shapeless pulp as he died a miserable death.

At this moment a pair of palms stuck to each other. It was impossible for Ku Toutuo to escape. Suddenly Zhang Wuji's left hand grabbed his chest and flung him up; Ku Toutuo's big body flew up. With a loud 'Bang!' the rocks behind him flew all over the place. Zhang Wuji's matchless palm strength had hit the rocks on that mound.

Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao, who were watching from the side, both cried out in alarm. They knew Ku Toutuo and their cult leader were staking it all in that internal energy competition. They thought it would take at least the time needed to drink tea for the match to reach its conclusion; who would have thought that the moment of life and death had arrived in just a short time. These two had a lot in their mind to say, but it was too late for them to open their mouths. Now that Ku Toutuo had landed on the ground, safe and sound, their

palms were wet with cold sweats.

As his feet touched the ground Ku Toutuo's hands made a sign like a blazing flame in front of his chest; he bowed to pay his respect to Zhang Wuji and said, "Xiao Ren [lit. little/lowly person] is 'guang ming you zhi' [Right Emissary of the Brightness] Fan Yao; I pay my respect to Jiaozhu [Cult Leader]. I thank Jiaozhu for sparing my life. Xiao Ren also asks forgiveness for my offensive behavior." He had never talked for more than ten years, so his intonation was rather unnatural.

Zhang Wuji was pleasantly surprised; not only this mute Ku Toutuo could talk, but he was also his own Cult's Right Emissary of the Brightness. It was truly beyond what he expected. He busily held out his hands to raise him up and said, "It turns out that you are our Cult's Fan Youshi [Right Emissary Fan]. I am extremely happy. We are family, so you don't have to be overly courteous."

Actually when they arrived at the rock mound, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao had already guessed with 30% certainty; only Fan Yao's appearance was greatly changed that they did not dare to say anything. When he displayed his martial art, they were 70, 80% sure; now that he mentioned his own name, they rushed forward held his hands tightly. Yang Xiao stared at his face for half a day with tears streaming down his face. "Fan Xiongdi [Brother Fan]," he said, "Gege [big brother] missed you very much."

Fan Yao hugged Yang Xiao and said, "Da Ge [big brother], we should be thankful for 'Ming Zun's [Translator's note: I don't know how to translate this properly. I am guessing that Fan Yao was referring to the Ming Cult founder (or prophet).] blessing and protection, that we have such a highly capable Jiaozhu, and that we brothers can see each other again."

“Xiongdi,” Yang Xiao said, “How did your appearance change like this?”

“If I didn’t deform my own face, how can I deceive that traitor, the ‘hun yuan pi li shou’ [Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation] Cheng Kun?” Fan Yao said.

As soon as they heard him, they realized that he intentionally destroyed his own face to get close to the enemy. Yang Xiao’s heart was moved. “Xiongdi,” he said, “You have suffered greatly.” In the past Yang Xiao and Fan Yao were known in Jianghu as the ‘Xiao Yao Er Xian’ [Xiao and Yao, two immortals]; because they both were outstandingly handsome men. Fan Yao had deliberately made his own face unbearably ugly; truly not many people could match his pain and suffering.

Wei Yixiao had never been close to Fan Yao; but this time he could not help but be deeply moved. He knelt down and saluted, “Fan Youshi,” he said, “Today Wei Yixiao truly submits to you.”

Fan Yao also knelt down to return his salute. Smiling he said, “Wei Fuwang’s ‘qing gong’ [lightness kungfu] is matchless in this world. Your divine skill is even better than in the past. Last night Ku Toutuo broadened his outlook.”

Yang Xiao looked around and said, “This place is not too far from the city; the enemy has ears and eyes everywhere. We’d better go farther up and talk on the mountain ahead.”

Four people ran for about ten ‘li’s and stop on the back of a small hill, where they were able to see for several ‘li’s around and thus did not have to worry anybody would hide and listen secretly, yet from a distant nobody would be able to

see them. They sat down and told each other what happened after they were separated.

That year Yang Dingtian suddenly disappeared without any trace; the Ming Cult's leaders fought with each other over the Cult Leader position. Nobody was willing to submit, so the Cult split up. Fan Yao still believed their Cult Leader had not passed away, so he wandered the Jianghu alone to look for his whereabouts. Several years passed and he had not found the slightest trail. Afterwards he thought that perhaps their Cult Leader was harmed by the Beggar Clan, so he secretly captured many Beggar Clan's important people and tortured them to force a confession; still he did not find any clue, while in the process he had killed many innocent Beggar Clan members.

Later on he heard the escalating sharp dispute among the Ming Cult leaders; some people even went everywhere looking for him, they wanted to appeal to him. Fan Yao had never wanted to be the Cult Leader; he was also not willing to be involved in this power struggle. Hence he went as far as possible for fear that his brethren would find him. Thereupon he grew a long beard and disguised himself as an elderly scholar; wandering everywhere, free and unrestrained.

One particular day he saw someone at a bustling street in Dadou; he recognized that person as Madame Cult Leader's martial brother Cheng Kun. He could not help to be secretly shocked. By that time there was a rumor in the Wulin world that many skilled pugilists were murdered, and there was always this message written on the adjacent wall: 'The killer is Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation Cheng Kun'. He wanted to investigate this case, but also wanted to inquire the Yang Jiaozhu's whereabouts to Cheng Kun; thereupon he followed Cheng Kun from a safe distance.

He saw Cheng Kun enter a restaurant, where two older men were waiting; they were the Xuanming Elders. Fan Yao knew Cheng Kun's martial art level was high, so he sat on a rather far away table, drinking wine. He could only hear those three people talking indistinctly, but the words 'must destroy the Brightness Peak' were heard clearly. Hearing his cult was in danger Fan Yao could not ignore it; he followed those three secretly and saw them entering the Ruyang [a place in Henan] 'wang fu' [lit. king mansion - governmental palace]. Later he found out that those two Xuanming Elders were martial art experts under the employment of the Prince of Ruyang.

The Prince of Ruyang, Khakan Timur, was a very high ranking officer in charge of the military forces. He was brave and resourceful; in fact, he was the most capable person of the imperial household. He was the one who dispatched troops to suppress the rebellion of Jiang Huai [Jiangsu and Anhui]. It can be said that the victory and defeat of the imperial army was the sole responsibility of this prince Khakan Timur.

Zhang Wuji and the others had heard his name for quite some time, by now hearing that Lu Zhangke and the others were his subordinates, they more or less could guess, but in the end they were still surprised.

"Who, then, is this Miss Zhao?" Yang Xiao asked.

"Da Ge, there is no harm for you to take a guess," Fan Yao answered.

"Is it possible that she is Khakan Timur's daughter?" Yang Xiao said.

“Pretty good!” Fan Yao clapped his hands, “One guess and right on target. This Ruyang Wangye [Prince, lit. king master] has one son and one daughter. His son is Kuku Timur; his daughter is this girl. Her Mongolian name is Minmin Timur something. Kuku Timur is Ruyang Wangye’s crown prince; he will succeed his father as the future Prince Ruyang. The daughter’s title is Shao Min Jun Zhu [‘jun zhu’ means a ruler of some region, or a princess. Translator’s note: I don’t know how to translate this ‘Shao Min’ name; I guess we’ll leave it as is: a name.]. These two children are good in martial arts and they both have good level of skill. They love to dress as Han people and they speak Han language. They even adopted Han names; the boy chose Wang Baobao, while the girl chose Zhao Min. These two characters ‘Zhao Min’ came from her title, Shao Min Jun Zhu.”

Wei Yixiao smiled and said, “These brother and sister are very strange; one uses Wang as his surname, the other Zhao. From our Han people’s perspective, it is very funny.”

Fan Yao said, “Actually, their surname is Timur. Their given names are in the front; this is the custom of the barbarians. Ruyang Wangye Khakan Timur also has a Han’s surname; which is Li.” Speaking to this point the four of them burst out in laughter.

[Author’s note: In the New Yuan History, 220th chapter, on the biography of Khakan Timur: ‘Khakan Timur was the ancestor of Kuokuotai, Zunaimantai, Fualuwen. He made Henan his home and thus was known as Shenqiu people. Later he changed his surname to Li.’ Although officially Kuku Timur was his crown prince, in reality he was Khakan Timur’s sister’s son. This little detail is not distinguished clearly in the novel.]

[Translator's note: I apologize for not able to find any reference on the above note; hence my translation might be inaccurate.]

Yang Xiao said, "This Miss Zhao's appearance and lifestyle is just like Han people, but the way she handles affairs was so fierce and ruthless, revealing her true barbarian origin."

Until that moment Zhang Wuji did not know Zhao Min's origin. Although he guessed she must be from the royal household, he had never expected that she was actually the daughter of Prince Ruyang who was the commander of the Yuan Dynasty's military forces. He had fought with her several times and each time he was somewhat overpowered. Although her martial art skill was not as good as his, when it comes to quick-thinking and resourcefulness, he was not her match.

Fan Yao continued, "Subordinate continued listening secretly and found out that Prince Ruyang had made up his mind to exterminate Jianghu's martial art exponents ['men, pai, bang, hui' – gate, sect, clan and society]. He had accepted Cheng Kun's scheme, in which the first step was to eliminate our Cult. I considered it carefully; our Cult was involved in endless internal strife, while the enemy was so strong, our destruction was imminent. The only way to prevent this is by entering the palace, learning Prince Ruyang's plot, and act accordingly. Other than that I could not think of anything else. What I found to be strange was that Cheng Kun is not only Madame Yang Jiaozhu's martial brother, but he is also Xie Shi Wang's [Lion King Xie] master; why did he hate our Cult so much? I thought about it but could not come up with a good answer. I thought he must be seeking riches and honor so that by exterminating our Cult he would render a meritorious service to the kingdom. There are not too many Cult brethren who know Cheng Kun, but I have met him

once, so he knew me. To prevent my plan from leaking out, I have to kill this man.”

You should,” Wei Yixiao commented.

“But this man is so sly, also his martial art is strong,” Fan Yao continued, “I have tried to kill him secretly three times but to no avail. The third time I managed to stab him with a sword, but I was hacked by his palm. It was really not easy for me to escape. I did not reveal my identity, but I suffered a severe injury, which took me more than a year to recover. By this time the Ruyang Palace conspiracy has ripened. I thought if I disguise myself I might be able to conceal my identity for a while. In the past the number of Jianghu people who knew me and Yang Xiong [brother Yang] as the ‘Xiao Yao Two Immortals’ were truly not a few. Over longer period of time I will surely give myself away. Thereupon clenching my teeth I destroyed my own face and disguised myself as a Toutuo. I used some medicine to dye my hair, and went to the Watzu kingdom of the Western Region.”

“Watzu kingdom?” Wei Yixiao wondered, “It is tens of thousands ‘li’s away; why did you go there?”

Fan Yao smiled, but before he could answer Yang Xiao clapped his hands and said, “That’s a marvelous idea! Wei Xiong, Fan Xiongdi went to Watzu kingdom looking for a chance to show his skill, so that the Mongolian nobility would surely notice. Prince of Ruyang was looking for warriors from all over the world, so if the ruler of Watzu wanted to please the Prince, he would send him to the palace to offer his service. This way Fan Xiongdi became a warrior from the Watzu kingdom. His face was changed, also he did not open his mouth. Even if Cheng Kun had divine skill, there is no way he would have recognized him.”

Wei Yixiao heaved a deep sigh and said, “Yang Jiaozhu

placed the Xiao Yao Er Xian above the four 'Fa Wang' [Protector King]; his vision was truly as bright as a torch. This kind of scheming, some Eagle King, Bat King, will never think about."

"Wei Xiong, that's enough of praising," Fan Yao said, "Just like Yang Zuoshi said, in Watzu I killed some lions and slaughtered some tigers, making a name for myself; for their honor, the local king sent me to the Ruyang Palace. But that Cheng Kun was not in the palace; I didn't know where he went."

Immediately Yang Xiao narrated briefly the enmity between Cheng Kun and the Ming Cult; how he sneaked into the Brightness Peak to attack, and how Zhang Wuji thwarted his treacherous plan, and how in the end he fought with Yin Yewang and finally died.

As Fan Yao listened to this story he was silent for half a day; he did not realize that there were so many twist and turns in this affair. He stood up and bowed respectfully toward Zhang Wuji, "Jiaozhu," he said, "Subordinate would like to ask for your forgiveness."

"Fan Youshi, there is no need to be modest," Zhang Wuji replied.

Fan Yao said, "When subordinate entered the Ruyang Palace, in order to win the King's heart, during a disturbance in the market place subordinate has killed three of our own Cult's 'xiang zhu' [a position within the Ming Cult; I am not sure how to translate this term properly], giving the impression that there was a deep enmity between myself and the Ming Cult."

Zhang Wuji was silent, he thought, "Killing a Cult brother is

one of our Cult's five big prohibitions; that was the reason why although Yang Zuoshi, Four 'Fa Wang's, Five-Element Flags and the others fought fiercely over the Cult Leader position, they had never killed a fellow Cult brother. Fan Youshi's transgression is really not light, but his primary motivation was to protect our Cult and not because of personal grudge, so I really cannot judge him guilty." He said, "Fan Youshi has suffered so much in protecting our Cult, I can't really blame you."

Fan Yao bowed and said, "Thank you for Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

Zhang Wuji silently thought, "A man as cruel as Fan Youshi is truly rare. He is capable of mutilating his own face with seventeen, eighteen cuts; then he killed several of our own Cult's innocent 'xiang zhu's, all without any guilty feeling. People calling the Ming Cult a heretical Devil Cult is not without reason. I wonder if, in the future, we can change this perverse and evil characteristic."

Although with his mouth Zhang Wuji said, 'I can't really blame you,' Fan Yao could see the unsatisfied look on his face. He held out his hand to draw Yang Xiao's sword, and with a swing of his left hand he cut off two of his right hand fingers.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; he snatched the sword from Fan Yao's hand and said, "Fan Youshi, you ... you ... why did you do this?"

Fan Yao replied, "Killing our own innocent Cult brothers is a grave offense. Fan Yao still has an unfinished important matter, so I can't kill myself yet. I cut my two fingers first then later on I'll cut my own head."

Zhang Wuji said, "I have already forgiven Fan Youshi's

mistake, why bother doing this? We should be more concerned over the important matter. Fan Youshi, don't raise this matter anymore." He quickly took out some cut wound medicine and applied it to his wound; he also tore up his own clothes and wrapped Fan Youshi's wound. He knew in his heart that this man was hard-hearted; although Zhang Wuji said he did not hold him accountable, he could see any sign in Fan Youshi's face that he would take Zhang Wuji's words by heart. He was capable of doing what he said, so there was a great possibility he would commit suicide in the future for his own crime. Zhang Wuji remembered how he had suffered this much for the sake of the Cult, his heart was moved. Suddenly he knelt down and said, "Fan Youshi, you have rendered a great service to the Cult; please accept my respect. If you harm yourself, that means you are saying to me that I am neither competent nor worthy to hold the Jiaozhu position. You stab yourself with a sword, I will stab myself twice. I am young and my knowledge is shallow; I don't understand much of our affair, I can't distinguish good from evil."

As they saw their Jiaozhu kneel down, Fan Yao, Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao quickly knelt down on the ground. With tears in his eyes Yang Xiao said, "Fan Xiongdi, please rest your case. Our Cult's prosperity and decline are in the hands of our Jiaozhu only. Jiaozhu has given you an order, you surely must not disobey it."

Fan Yao saluted and said, "Today subordinate has tested his sword and palm skill against Jiaozhu's, and I fell on my knees in full admiration. Ku Toutuo's personality is eccentric and unreasonable, I am asking for Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

Zhang Wuji held out his hands to stand him up. From that day forward a strong bond had formed between the two; no more misunderstandings happened.

Fan Yao continued his narration on what happened after he entered the Ruyang Palace. The Ruyang Prince, Khakan Timur, was very capable in commanding the military force. Unfortunately for him the royal government was dominated by corrupt ministers, plus the current emperor was a muddle-head, so chaos and confusion reigned everywhere in the kingdom; insurrections arose everywhere, forcing the Ruyang Prince to dispatch troop's expeditions to east and to the west, crushing innumerable rebellions. These insurrections had kept the Ruyang Prince busy for years and his plan of annihilating the Jianghu's sects, schools and clans was put on hold for the time being.

Several years passed; his children grew up. While his son Kuku Timur followed his steps commanding the troops, his daughter Minmin Timur gathered Mongolian warriors under her command, Western Region's warriors and foreign monks, to carry out a large scale attack against the sects, schools and clans. Cheng Kun secretly helped her engineer the plan; taking advantage of the six major sects' besiege of the Brightness Peak, Zhao Min sent a large quantities of her martial art masters in an attempt to extinguish the Ming Cult and the six major sects all at once.

The Green Willow Manor affairs and the subsequent events were part of this grand scheme. At that time Fan Yao's assignment was to protect the Ruyang Prince, hence he did not participate in the attack to the western region and he did not learn about the attack until much later. Fan Yao said that although he did not raise any suspicion in the Ruyang Palace, Zhao Min would not allow him to participate in the attack to the western region since he came from the western region. Perhaps it was also part of Cheng Kun's idea.

Zhao Min used the poison 'shi xiang ruan jin san' [ten-

fragrance muscle softener powder], offered by the foreign western region monk, to drug the masters of the six major sects who were just returning from the Brightness Peak, by poisoning their food. This poison had no color and no smell, so once it was mixed in the dishes, who could detect it? Once the drug worked, the muscles and bones in one's whole body would be weakened for a few days. Although they were able to move around as usual, they could not exert the least bit of internal energy; for that reason all the six major sects' masters who were involved in the Brightness Peak expedition were captured one by one within just one short month. It was when they tried to drug the third group Shaolin monks under Kong Xing's command that they were detected. A fierce battle followed, Kong Xing died under Ah San's hand; about a dozen or so others died under the hands of Xuanming Elders, Shen Jian Ba Xiong [Eight Divine Archers], as well as Ah Da, Ah Er, Ah San and the others. The rest were captured.

The next step was to raid the six major sects' bases; the first being the Shaolin Sect. The Shaolin Temple was heavily guarded, so it was not easy to mix the poison into their food. It was completely different from drugging the monks when they were spending the night in the inn while traveling. Therefore, they had to resort to different method. "'Jun zhu' [princess] was afraid their strength was not sufficient to fight the Shaolin Temple head-on, so they called for reinforcement from Dadou, which happened to be under my command. We arrived right on time to help capturing the Shaolin monks. Shaolin Sect is always rude to our Cult; so I was glad they undergo a little bit of suffering. Even if I have to kill several stinky monks, Ku Toutuo won't crease my brows. Jiaozhu, I believe you'll agree with me, ha ... ha ...!"

"Xiong di [brother]," Yang Xiao interrupted, "Were you the one who turned those Luohan statues around?"

Fan Yao said with a smile, "I saw 'Jun zhu' ordered her people to carve those sixteen characters on the back of the Luo Han statues; her intention was to shift the blame to our Cult. Later on I came back quietly and turned those statues back. Dage [big brother], you are very observant, you managed to find out about this matter. At that time did you guess it was 'Xiong di'?"

Yang Xiao said, "At that time we only know that there was a master helping our Cult in secret; how would I know that it was my old partner, good brother?" Four people broke up in laughter. Immediately Yang Xiao told Fan Yao briefly that the Ming Cult had ceased all enmity with the six major sects and joined hands to fight the Mongols together; for that reason they must rescue all the masters.

Fan Yao said, "The enemy is numerous, we are only four people; it will be difficult for us to accomplish this. The best way would be to get the antidote for 'shi xiang ruan jin san' and feed it to those stinky monks, stinky nuns and all those ox-noses; after their internal strength is recovered then we can make a surprised attack to those Tartars and then we can escape Dadou together."

The Ming Cult had never had any good relationship with Shaolin, Wudang and other orthodox sects, so in his speech Fan Yao did not have the slightest respect toward these six major sects. Yang Xiao tried to cast him some meaningful glances, but Fan Yao was oblivious to him. But actually Zhang Wuji did not mind at all; he clapped his hands and said, "That's great, Fan Youshi; but then how are we going to get the antidote for the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'?"

Fan Yao said, "Although 'Jun zhu' pays me a lot of respect, she has never discussed any important matter with me

because I've never opened my mouth. When she talked and the other person did not utter a single word, how could she not be disappointed? Moreover, I came from a small country in the western region, so she could not treat me as a trusted friend. Hence I don't know where the antidote for the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' is. But I do know that this matter is very important to her, so she would guard this secret carefully. If my guess is correct, the poison and the antidote are in the hands of the Xuanming Elders; one has the poison, the other has the antidote, and they swap those poison and antidote periodically."

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "This princess is so cunning that even a man might not necessarily be better than her. Doesn't she trust the Xuanming Elders?"

Fan Yao replied, "First, distrust is right; second, it is also safer this way. Take us, for example, we want to steal the antidote; but we don't know whether it is in Lu Zhangke's hand, or is it in He Biweng's hand? Moreover, I heard that between the poison and the antidote there is no distinct color or odor differences, so unless we are really familiar with it, we might end up stealing the poison when we want to steal the antidote. This 'shi xiang ruan jin san' also has another fierce characteristic; when one took the poison, one's muscles and bones would be weakened, but one's life would not be threatened in any way. However, if that same person took the poison for the second time, even only for a little bit, immediately his blood flow will reverse and there is no cure for it."

Wei Yixiao stuck out his tongue and said, "If that's so, then we must not steal the wrong antidote."

"That's true," Fan Yao said, "But I have an idea: we steal both the poison and the antidote from the Xuanming Elders

then we give it to some low level master from Huashan or Kongtong Sect. If he dies, then that one is the poison. Don't you think it is a good idea?"

Zhang Wuji realized he still had some heretical nature and did not put too much thought about other people's life. He laughed, "That's not good," he said, "What if after we painstakingly steal them, they are both poison?"

Yang Xiao slapped his thigh, "Jiaozhu is right," he said, "Last night we made such a commotion that perhaps 'Jun zhu' is scared and keep the antidote herself. I think we'd better investigate carefully who has the antidote then we'll talk about how to get it from him." He paused for a moment and then said, "Xiong di, what do those two Xuanming Elders like most?"

Fan Yao smiled and said, "Lu loves pretty face, He loves wine; what else do they like?"

"Jiaozhu," Yang Xiao asked Zhang Wuji, "Is there any drug that can make someone physically weak like the effect of the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'?"

Zhang Wuji thought for a moment and smiled, "To make someone weak and drowsy is certainly not difficult; only if you give it to a martial art expert, he would recover in less than an hour. To make something as fierce as the 'shi xiang ruan jin san', that I cannot do."

Yang Xiao smiled, "About an hour is enough," he said, "Subordinate has an idea, but I don't know whether it will work. I am asking Jiaozhu to give me your opinion. Although I said it is an idea, it might be just a worthless thought. Fan Xiongdi, you invite He Biweng to drink some wine; put the poison Jiaozhu make into it. Then Fan Xiongdi make up some

trouble, pretend that he is being poisoned by He Biweng with the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'; at that time we will find out who has the antidote. Then we can steal it and use it to rescue the others."

Zhang Wuji said, "This idea is feasible; only it depends on He Biweng's temperament. Fan Youshi, what do you think?"

Fan Yao contemplated this idea back and forth and thought that although this idea was simple, it was flawless; so he said, "I think Yang Dage's idea is feasible. That He Biweng is temperamental, but he is not as smart as Lu Zhangke. If the antidote is in his hand, I think I can still deal with him even though my martial art skill is inferior to him."

"What if the antidote is in Lu Zhangke's hand?" Yang Xiao asked.

Fan Yao knitted his brows and said, "Then it is a lot more complicated." He stood up and paced back and forth on that little hill. After a long time he clapped his hands and said, "I have a way; that Lu Zhangke is smarter than average men, if we try to trick him, he might see through our deception. We must get hold of his weakness and then blackmail him; of course he will consider the pros and the cons, but he will never realize our scheme. I know that this idea is risky; we might fail, but other than this I can't think of anything else."

"What kind of weakness does this old man have?" Yang Xiao asked, "He is an old man with a young heart; what weakness of his fall into Xiongdi's hand?"

"In the spring this year Ruyang Wangye took a concubine and he invited some of us to an informal dinner in his residence," Fan Yao said, "Wangye proudly talked about his beautiful concubine; he even ordered the new bride to come

out and serve us wine. I saw Lu Zhangke's lecherous eyes almost popped out of their sockets, while he swallowed his saliva; his heart was indeed burning with desire."

"Then what happened?" Wei Yixiao asked.

"Nothing," Fan Yao replied, "She is Wangye's beloved concubine; although he has guts as high as the sky he would not dare to indulge his wicked thought."

"Lecherous eyes can't be called some secret you can blackmail him with," Wei Yixiao said.

"I can't blackmail him over that matter," Fan Yao said, "But I am going to bother Wei Xiong [brother Wei]; with your 'qing gong' [lightness skill] you can go and steal Ruyang Wangye's beloved concubine and place her on Lu Zhangke's bed. I am 70, 80% sure that this old lecher won't be able to hold his desire forever. Even if he really is able to rein his horse before falling off the cliff, I will rush in. Although he has a hundred mouths he won't be able to wash himself clean, so he will be forced to hand the antidote over to me nicely."

Yang Xiao and Wei Yixiao laughed and clapped their hands, "This is a very nice ploy. Although he is as smart as the Devil, he will be framed for sure."

Zhang Wuji was annoyed and amused at the same time, thinking that he was the leader of this heretical and unorthodox bunch. But although their conduct was sly and no different than Zhao Min and her people; they were doing it for a good cause, not an evil one. So in a way it was completely different from Zhao Min. It could be said that they were using poison to combat poison. Having this thought he relaxed a little bit; smiling he said, "It's a pity

Ruyang Wangye's concubine's honor will be ruined."

Fan Yao replied with a smile, "I will rush into the room as soon as possible, so Lu Zhangke won't have a chance to molest her."

Immediately four people sat down to discuss their plan in detail; after acquiring the antidote, Fan Yao was to rush to the pagoda and distribute it to masters of Shaolin, Wudang, and the other sects. Zhang Wuji and Wei Yixiao would wait outside the temple. As soon as Fan Yao set off fire in the Wan An Temple, they would set the common people's homes around the temple on fire, so that the group of warriors could take advantage of this confusion to escape. Yang Xiao would buy some horses and prepare some carriages and wait outside the western city gate; the warriors would then use these horses and carriages to separately escape from the city, and to finally rendezvous at Changping.

Zhang Wuji objected to the idea of burning common people's homes; he would rather not to implicate the innocents. But Yang Xiao said, "Jiaozhu, the affair of this world is oftentimes difficult to predict. We are saving the warriors of the six major sects so that someday we will drive the Tartars away; that would certainly benefit millions of common people. Today we are forced to harm hundreds of homes, this is because we don't have any other alternative."

Once the plan was decided four people went back to the city separately to attend to their individual business. Yang Xiao went to buy some horses and hired some carriages. Zhang Wuji bought the ingredients and concocted some drugs. To conceal the taste, he added three types of spices so when it was mixed with the wine, it would produce a sweet smelling fragrance. Wei Yixiao went to the market and bought a big cloth sack. When the sky turned dark he went to the Ruyang

Palace and kidnapped the Prince's concubine.

Fan Yao and Xuanming Elders, along with other martial art experts, lived nearby the Wan An Temple complex to guard the major sects warriors. Zhao Min still lived at the palace; only on the evenings she wanted to learn martial art did she ride a carriage to go to the temple. Fan Yao took the drug back to the temple with a happy and grateful heart. He remembered how over the last twenty years or so the Ming Cult was in disunity, but today a new hope emerged; his many sufferings over the years were not in vain. Zhang Wuji was not only a martial art expert, but his heart was righteous as well, so others can easily put their trust in him. The only problem was that Zhang Wuji was not cruel and merciless enough; he was somewhat weak and fussy, otherwise he would be a perfect leader.

Fan Yao lived in the west building, while the Xuanming Elders stayed at the 'bao xiang jing she' [the most refined precious fragrance hall] of the rear courtyard. Normally he did not hang around those two elders too much for fear that they might be able to look through his disguise; that was the reason he chose a room far away from them. Now he had to invite He Biweng to drink wine, he did not have any idea how to do it. Casting his glance to the rear courtyard he saw the sun was setting in the sky; already the sun could not reach the lower half of the 13-level pagoda, while the light reflected from the glazed tiles on top of the pagoda were also gradually turning pale. He still did not know what to do. Slowly pacing back and forth along the rear courtyard with his hands behind his back, he suddenly caught a sweet fragrance of meat from the small building opposite the 'bao xiang jing she'; it was the building where Sun Sanhui and Li Sicui of the Eight Divine Archers lived.

Fan Yao's heart was stirred; he walked toward that building,

shoved the door open, and the strong meat smell greeted his nostrils. He saw Li Sicui was squatting on the floor, busily fanning the fire in a small brick stove, on which was a big earthenware pot. The fire was blazing hot; the strong smell of meat came out of that pot. Sun Sanhui was setting the bowls and chopsticks on the table. Obviously these two were about to have their dinner.

They were slightly startled as they saw Ku Toutuo push the door and come in; upon seeing his stern face they groaned inwardly. They had just killed a big yellow dog on the street; cut its limbs and quietly cooked the dog inside their room. Wan An Temple was a Buddhist temple, so cooking meat in the temple was a great trespass. If it was other people they might still get away from it, but Ku Toutuo was a Buddhist monk. If he was angered he might beat them up. Ku Toutuo's martial art skill was very high, these two people certainly were not his match; moreover, they were the ones who committed the crime, so if they were beaten, they got what they deserved. Thinking of this they were scared; but then they saw him walking to the stove, opened the lid, took a look and drew a deep breath, seemingly to say, 'Smells good, smells good!' Suddenly they saw him putting his hand into the pot, seemingly oblivious to the boiling soup, to fish out a slice of dog meat. Opening his mouth wide he put the meat entirely in his mouth; chewing it for a while and swallowed it. Then he licked his lips as if he was tremendously enjoying the meat.

Sun and Li two people were delighted, they busily said, "Ku Dashi [Reverend Ku], please sit down, please sit down! We didn't know you like to eat dog meat."

But Ku Toutuo did not want to take a seat; he squatted in front of the stove and picked another piece of dog meat and chewed it right there. Sun Sanhui wanted to win his heart,

so he presented a bowl of wine to him. Ku Toutuo took the bowl and drank a mouthful, but suddenly he spat it back out to the ground. He waved his left hand in front of his nose, as if he was saying that the wine was of inferior quality and not good to drink; and then he left the room in big strides.

Sun and Li two people were anxious to see him going out of the room, seemingly angry. But not too long afterwards they saw him back with a big wine gourd in his hand. "Right! Right!" they exclaimed delightfully, "Our wine is a low quality one; Ku Dashi has a good quality wine, nothing can be better than that!" They busily arranged the stool and the bowl, inviting Ku Toutuo to sit on the head of the table; they took a bowl full of dog meat and served it in front of him. Ku Toutuo's martial art skill was very high; among Zhao Min's subordinates he could be ranked near the top. Under normal circumstances the Eight Divine Archers would not curry favor with anybody, but today they had an opportunity to invite him eating dog meat, perhaps if his heart was happy he would impart to them one or two special skills, then they would reap the benefit for the rest of their lives.

Ku Toutuo pulled out the gourd's cork and poured three bowls full of wine. The wine was golden yellow in color and it was rather thick like diluted honey; as soon as it was poured, a sweet aroma greeted their nostrils. Sun and Li two people cheered, "Good wine! Good wine!"

Fan Yao silently mused, "I wonder if the Xuanming Elders are home; if they are out and not back yet, then what I am doing right now is useless." He took the wine bowl and held it above the pot on the stove; while the dog meat was boiling, the steam rose up and warmed up the wine, making the wine aroma stronger.

Sun and Li two people were drooling over the wine; they

were going to drink the wine cold, but Ku Toutuo signaled them not to do that, he told them to warm the wine before drinking it. Three people took turn warming their wine over the boiling soup; the aroma spread out everywhere. If He Biweng was not in the temple complex, then that was the end of it. Otherwise if he was around the courtyard would be impossible for him not to smell the wine and come over. And sure enough, the door of the 'bao xiang jing she' across the street opened up and He Biweng was shouting, "Good wine, good wine! Hey, hey!"

He was not shy; so he crossed the courtyard toward their door, he pushed it open and walked in. He was startled to see Ku Toutuo along with Sun and Li two people gathered around the stove, drinking wine and eat the dog meat, with the soup dripping everywhere. He Biweng laughed and said, "Ku Dashi, I didn't know you like eating and drinking too; we have the same taste."

Sun and Li two people busily stood up and said, "He Gong-gong [grandfather, respectful term toward someone older], quickly drink some wine, this is Ku Dashi's good wine, not everybody can drink it."

He Biweng sat opposite Ku Toutuo, it was as if they were having an eating and drinking competition; Sun and Li two people ended up became their servants, busily serving them meat and pouring them wine. Four people were all in high spirits, they ate and drank for half a day and were 60, 70% drunk. "Now I can make my move," Fan Yao thought.

After pouring wine on his own bowl until it was full, he laid the wine gourd horizontally on the table. Turned out his wine gourd's cork was hollow. He put the powder made by Zhang Wuji inside the cavity and wrapped the cork with two pieces of cloth. When the wine gourd stood upright, the powder did

not fall down, so what the four of them drank was ordinary good wine. But once the wine gourd was laid on its side, the wine would wet the cloth and diluted the powder, so now the wine became poisonous. The bottom of the wine gourd was round, so it did not matter whether it was standing upright or lying down on its side; besides, they had been drinking for a good long while, so nobody paid any attention. They were drunk and felt entirely carefree.

After He Biweng drank the bowl in front of him, Fan Yao pulled the cork and handed the gourd over to him. He Biweng poured a bowlful of wine for himself, and then he also poured some wine in Sun and Li's bowls. Because Ku Toutuo's bowl was still full, he did not pour any wine for him. Four people lifted the bowl to their mouth and 'glug, glug' they emptied their bowls. Other than Fan Yao, the three of them had drunk the poisoned wine.

Sun and Li two people's internal strength was not too deep; once the drug entered their system they immediately felt their limbs weaken and their bodies get sick. In a low voice Sun Sanhui said, "Si di [fourth brother], there is something wrong with my tummy."

"I ... I ... I think I am poisoned," Li Sicui also said. By this time He Biweng also felt something was wrong; he tried to circulate his internal strength, but failed. His expression changed drastically.

Fan Yao stood up; his face was full of anger, he grabbed He Biweng's collar and grunted some 'Heh, heh' noise, but did not say anything. Sun Sanhui was scared, "Ku Dashi, what is it?" he said. Fan Yao dipped his finger in the wine and wrote 'shi xiang ruan jin san' five characters on the table. Sun and Li two people knew that the Xuanming Elders were in charge of this poison, and so it seemed Ku Toutuo and the two of

them were being poisoned with this drug. They looked at each other and knelt down in front of He Biweng, "He Gong-gong," they pleaded, "We two brothers do not dare to offend you, Senior; please don't punish us too severely." Both of them thought that He Biweng was trying to attack Ku Toutuo, and they happened to be there, so they suffered as innocent bystanders; if He Biweng meant to harm them, he did not need to use any poison.

He Biweng was also greatly shocked; this month it was indeed his turn to be in charge of the 'shi xiang ruan jin san', which he hid inside his left crane-beak pen. This pair of weapons had never left his body even for a single step, so it would be impossible for anybody to steal it without his knowledge. But as luck would have it, he could not exert the least bit of internal energy, so without a doubt he must have been poisoned with the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'. Actually, although the drug Zhang Wuji made was also potent, but it was greatly inferior to the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'; the effect felt by the victim was not the same. But He Biweng only knew that the victim of 'shi xiang ruan jin san' would lose their ability to exert their internal energy, he had never taken the poison personally; therefore, although the difference was great, he was not able to distinguish between the two.

He saw Ku Toutuo look flustered and angry, while Sun and Li two people did not stop imploring him to have mercy; his doubt was gone, he said, "Ku Dashi, please don't be angry; we are brothers here, how could I have an ill intention to harm you? I am also poisoned; I feel weak all over my body. I don't know who is playing dirty trick on us. It's really strange."

Fan Yao dipped his finger in the wine again and wrote on the table, 'Quickly give us the antidote.'

He Biweng nodded and said, "That's right, we must take the antidote first, then we'll find and deal with the traitor who played this trick on us. But the antidote is in Lu Shige's [martial (older) brother] hand. Ku Dashi, please come with me."

Fan Yao was secretly delighted; he did not expect Yang Xiao's plan worked flawlessly, without too much trouble he found out where the antidote was. Holding up his left hand he grabbed He Biweng's wrist, deliberately making his steps falter. They crossed the courtyard together, walking toward the 'bao xiang jing she'.

He Biweng was secretly happy to see Fan Yao staggering, he thought, "This Ku Toutuo's martial art is supposedly very high, but he has never contended against us, two brothers. Looking at his flustered condition after being poisoned, it seems like his internal strength is way below ours."

Two people walked over the hall's gate. He Biweng's room was against the south wall, while Lu Zhangke lived in the room against the north wall. The door of the northern room was tightly closed. "Shige," He Biweng called out, "Are you home?"

Lu Zhangke answered from inside the room. He Biweng stretched out his hand to push the door open, but it was bolted. "Shige, hurry up and open the door," he called out, "This is important."

"What's so important?" Lu Zhangke asked, "I am busy training my martial art. Can you not disturb me?"

He Biweng and Lu Zhangke's martial arts came from the same school, their skill levels were almost equal. But first of

all Lu Zhangke entered their school earlier, secondly he was smarter, hence He Biweng had always been respectful to him. Hearing his annoyed tone, He Biweng did not dare to call again.

Fan Yao, on the other hand, could not wait any longer; if the drug's effect disappeared, his scheme would be exposed. Therefore, disregarding everything he pushed the door with his right shoulder, breaking the bolt and the door flew open. A shrill cry of female voice was heard. Lu Zhangke was standing in front of the bed; hearing the sound of the broken door he turned his head immediately. His expression was that of startling and embarrassment. Fan Yao saw lying on the bed was a woman, her body was wrapped inside a sheet of blanket, her head was the only part exposed, the blanket was tied up with a string of rope, just like a bedding roll. The woman's long hair spread outside the blanket, her face was white and beautiful. Fan Yao recognized her as the Ruyang Prince's new beloved concubine, Han Shi [lit. a maiden with surname of Han]; he said in his heart, "Wei Fuwang [Bat King Wei] is really good. He managed to enter the palace alone to kidnap Concubine Han and bring her over here."

Actually, although the Ruyang Palace was tightly guarded, but the warriors only concentrated on guarding the Prince, the Crown Prince and the Princess [original: Wangye (lit. master king), Shi zi (a royal son), and Jun zhu (princess)] three people; nobody had ever thought of someone kidnapping one of the numerous concubines around the palace. Besides, Wei Yi Xiao moved like lightning, he was quick and agile exceptionally; as soon as he entered the Palace he stealthily kidnapped Concubine Han and brought her out. It was actually a lot more difficult for him to enter Lu Zhangke's room. He waited for half a day before finally Lu Zhangke left his room to go to the bathroom. Like a ghost he sneaked in and put Concubine Han on the bed, and just as quick he left the room.

When Lu Zhangke returned he saw a woman was lying on his bed. He jumped out his room immediately; looking to four directions he did not see anybody, Wei Yixiao was already far away, other than some noise of eating and drinking from Sun and Li two people's room, he saw nothing unusual. Lu Zhangke felt strange, but maintaining his composure he returned to his room. When he looked at the woman, he was dumbstruck. That day when the Prince took a new concubine and invited his top-tier warriors for an informal dinner in his palace, Concubine Han served the wine. She was graceful and full of smiles. Although Lu Zhangke was not young anymore, he was unable to restrain his soul to be stolen by her. He was a lecherous man and all his life he had devastated countless women of respectable families. That day when he saw Concubine Han's beauty he sighed and regretted that he did not meet this kind of beautiful woman earlier. If he had seen her before she was taken by the Prince, he was certain she would not escape from his hand. He had oftentimes remembered her for many days to come; but afterwards he found a new lover and Concubine Han slowly faded from his memory.

To his complete surprise right at this moment Concubine Han was on his bed, as if she was dropped from heaven. He was pleasantly surprised. Thinking for a moment he guessed it must be his oldest disciple Wuwang Apu who knew his deepest desire and had secretly took Concubine Han away for him.

Lu Zhangke saw she was wrapped inside a blanket, the exposed skin of her neck was as white as snow. Faintly he could see her obviously naked shoulder, as if she was not wearing any clothes inside the blanket; his heart was thumping wildly with excitement. He quietly asked her how she came to this place; but after asking her several times,

Concubine Han still did not give him any answer. Finally Lu Zhangke guessed her acupoint must be sealed. He was about to reach out and unseal her acupoint when He Biweng and the others arrived at his door and then Ku Toutuo shoved the door open. It was an unexpected change and Lu Zhangke was in an extremely awkward situation. He meant to cover her up, but it was already too late. Now he thought that perhaps the Prince had discovered that his concubine was kidnapped and sent Ku Toutuo to arrest him. Things had come thus far, he had no choice but trying to escape. 'Shua!' his right hand unsheathed his deer antler staff, while his left hand grabbed Concubine Han with the intention of rushing out through the window.

"Shige," He Biweng was startled, "Quickly give me the antidote."

"What?" Lu Zhangke asked.

He Biweng answered, "I don't now how, but Xiao Di [little brother] and Ku Dashi are poisoned with the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'."

"What did you say?" Lu Zhangke asked again, and He Biweng repeated what he said. "Isn't the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' in your hand?" Lu Zhangke was confused.

"Xiao Di is also baffled," He Biweng said, "We, four people, were merrily eating and drinking, and suddenly we were all poisoned. Lu Shige, quickly take the antidote and give it to us."

Listening to this part Lu Zhangke's fear subsided. He returned Concubine Han to the bed, making sure that her head was facing inside. He Biweng knew his martial brother's lecherous nature, so seeing a woman inside his

room was not surprising at all. Moreover, He Biweng was so frightened of being poisoned that he did not pay any attention to what the woman looked like. Besides, he would not recognize her anyway. That day during the banquet at the Palace, when Concubine Han came out to serve the wine, she retreated right after greeting the guests. He Biweng only had his eyes on the wine; why would he care if that woman wearing pearl bracelet and jade necklace was beautiful or ugly?

Lu Zhangke said, “Ku Dashi, please come in and take a rest with He Xiong Di [brother He] here, I’ll go to get the antidote.” While speaking, he gently pushed them to lead them inside. Because of this, He Biweng faltered and nearly fell down. Fan Yao also staggered, pretending that his internal strength was gone. But his internal strength was actually very deep, so as soon as there was an external force, his internal strength reacted naturally. As Lu Zhangke pushed, he immediately knew his Shidi [martial (younger) brother] really lost his internal strength, while Ku Toutuo was only pretending.

Lu Zhangke was afraid he was mistaken, so he pushed them one more time. He Biweng and Ku Toutuo fell back together outside, but Lu Zhangke felt while one was devoid of strength, the other was stable and solid. Lu Zhangke maintained his composure; he smiled and said, “Ku Dashi, I am sorry.” While saying that he held out his hand as if he was going to help Ku Toutuo stand up, but actually he was going to grab the ‘hui zong’ [gathering ancestor] and ‘wai guan’ [outside passage] acupoints on Ku Toutuo’s wrist.

Fan Yao understood his intention and knew that his scheme was exposed. With a wave of his left hand he heavily hit the ‘hun men xue’ [soul gate acupoint] on He Biweng’s back, rendering him paralyzed for the next three quarters of an

hour. Fan Yao understood that he had to fight a martial art master; but he was not afraid of Lu Zhangke if it was a one-to-one fight. “Hey, hey,” he sneered and said, “Are you bored of your life? How dare you kidnap wangye’s beloved concubine?”

As he opened his mouth to speak, the Xuanming Elders were shocked. They had known Ku Toutuo for fifteen, sixteen years, yet they had never heard him say even a single word. For all they know, Ku Toutuo was mute since his birth. Although Lu Zhangke knew Ku Toutuo did not have good intentions towards him, he had never suspected this man to be able to speak. Come to think about it, Ku Toutuo had deliberately planned this deception, then without a doubt he meant to place Lu Zhangke in a more dangerous situation. He immediately said, “Turned out Ku Dashi is not mute at all. You have been concealing the truth for more than a dozen years; what is your intention?”

Fan Yao said, “Wangye knew your heart is not right, he ordered me to pretend to be mute and stay near you to keep watch over you.” There were actually many flaws in his argument, but the fact was Concubine Han was on Lu Zhangke’s bed, so even if he did not have any ill intention, it was hard for Lu Zhangke not to believe. Besides, he knew very well how the Ruyang Prince treated the masters under his command.

As Fan Yao said those words, Lu Zhangke felt his knees weakened. “Wangye ordered you to arrest me?” he said, “Hey, hey, although you are the Ku Dashi, master of martial art, you might not necessarily able to capture me, Lu Zhangke.” While saying that he raised his deer staff, ready to fight.

Fan Yao laughed a little bit and said, “Mr. Lu, although Ku

Toutuo's martial art skill is not superior to yours, but the difference is not much. If you want to defeat me, I am afraid you won't accomplish that within one or two thousand moves. It's not difficult for you to have three moves or two stances advantage over me, but if you are thinking of taking Concubine Han along and saving your martial brother, I don't think you, Lu Zhangke, have this kind of ability."

Lu Zhangke shot a look at his martial brother; he knew Ku Toutuo was not speaking an empty threat. His martial brother and he had been studying martial art together since their childhood all the way until they were both old, they had never been separated for even a day. Both did not have wife or children, all they had was each other; hence it would be very hard for him to escape alone and abandon his martial brother.

Fan Yao understood his heart was moved, he called out to Sun and Li two people, telling them to enter the room and then he said, "Mr. Lu, nobody knew about this matter yet. Ku Toutuo is willing to protect you."

Lu Zhangke was surprised; "Protect me?" he asked, "How?"

Without answering Fan Yao turned around and sealed Sun and Li two people's mute and paralyze acupoints; his movement was swift and accurate, forcing Lu Zhangke to silently sigh in admiration. Ku Toutuo said, "Certainly you won't tell anybody yourself, your Shidi won't intentionally make things difficult for you. Ku Toutuo was mute, and he will stay mute, can't speak a word. About these two brothers, Ku Toutuo can seal their death acupoints to close their mouths for good. I don't think that's a problem."

Sun and Li two people were greatly shocked; they both thought that they had nothing to do with this matter, they

were just having fun eating dog meat and drinking wine, yet it led them to this kind of big disaster. They wanted to implore, asking for mercy, but unfortunately they could not open their mouths.

Fan Yao pointed his finger to Concubine Han, "As for this concubine, the Old Monk has two ideas: the first is we wash our hands clean; take her along with Sun and Li two people to a deserted place and kill them with a blade. We'll report to Wangye that she and Li Sicui, this handsome little thief, are having an affair and are running away together. Ku Toutuo found out about them and in his anger he killed both of them on the spot. We can spare Sun Sanhui's life. The second idea is you take her away and hide her well. Whether later this matter leaks out or not, it will depend on your own ability."

Lu Zhangke could not help from turning his head to look at Concubine Han; he saw on her eyes she was pleading him to take the second idea. Seeing her natural beauty Lu Zhangke felt that it would be a great pity if she were to be killed by a sword; his heart was greatly moved. "Thank you so much for standing up for me," he said, "But since you are so thoughtful, there must be something you want from me. What is it?" He knew perfectly well Ku Toutuo would not help him without any compensation.

"It is an extremely easy matter," Fan Yao replied, "I have a deep friendship with the Sect Leader of Emei Sect Miejue Shitai. That young miss surnamed Zhou is the result of my relationship with that old nun. I am asking you to give me the antidote so that I can rescue these two people. I will take full responsibility in front of Junzhu. If in anyway I implicate you, let the family of Ku Toutuo and the Old Nun Miejue, the males become thieves and the females become prostitutes, let us die a violent death without any opportunity to

reincarnate forever.”

He thought that because of Lu Zhangke’s romantic nature, it would be easier to win his heart if Fan Yao raised the affair between a man and a woman. He also recalled Yang Xiao’s story about how many of his fellow Ming Cult brethrens had died under Miejue Shitai’s sword; hence he fabricated a fake story about a monk and a nun secret relationship. He was a heretical man to begin with, so his speech and conduct were not those of a gentleman. He did not mean it with his heart when he made a heavy oath of ‘the males become thieves and the females become prostitutes’ kind of punishment.

As Lu Zhangke listened, he broke into smile, as he thought that this old Toutuo was no different than he was; in order to save his old lover and his daughter he was willing to ask favor from other people. Although it was a risky venture , it was all worth it for the sake of a beautiful woman. As Ku Toutuo asked him a favor, Lu Zhangke felt relieved. He laughed and said, “So then kidnapping Wangye’s beloved concubine and brought her here is also Ku Dashi’s handiwork?”

Fan Yao replied, “This is an important matter, how can I request with an empty hand? Consider it my payment.”

Lu Zhangke was delighted, only he was afraid there was somebody outside, so he did not dare to laugh out loud. But suddenly he remembered something, “Then how could my Shidi got poisoned with the ‘shi xiang ruan jin san’? Where did it come from?” he asked.

“Isn’t that easy?” Fan Yao replied, “The poison is in your Shidi’s hand, and he is a drunkard. Once he drank a lot of wine, can’t Ku Toutuo steal it from him?”

“Very well!” all Lu Zhangke’s doubts were gone, he said, “Ku Dashi, let Xiongdi [brother] become friends with you. I will not sell you, I hope you won’t play such a dirty trick on me again.”

Fan Yao pointed at Concubine Han and smiled, “Next time if you have a dirty trick as beautiful as this, I am asking Mr. Lu to set up a trap, let Ku Toutuo enter it. The Old Monk will happily fall into it.”

Two people laughed together, but each one actually had his own thought. Lu Zhangke secretly calculated how to kill this evil Toutuo after this current trouble had passed. Fan Yao knew that although Lu Zhangke submitted to his wish right now, but what kind of people were the Xuanming Elders that they were willing to let this kind of defeat go unavenged? As soon as Lu Zhangke hid Concubine Han and unsealed He Biweng’s acupoint, he would look for him to settle the debt. But at that time the masters of the six major sects would have been rescued and Fan Yao would shake the dust from his buttocks and walked away.

Seeing Lu Zhangke was slow in taking out the antidote, Fan Yao thought that if he urged, then Lu Zhangke might deliberately make things difficult, so he sat down and said with a laugh, “Why don’t Lu Xiong unseal Concubine Han’s acupoint? Then we all can drink several cups together. Looking at beautiful face under the bright lamp light is a rare lucky occasion that you won’t necessarily experience it once in a lifetime.”

Lu Zhangke knew that there were a lot of people in the Wan An Temple complex; the longer Concubine Han stayed in his room, the more dangerous their situation would be. Therefore, immediately he took the deer antler staff and turned one of the antlers open. He took a cup and pour some

powder into it while saying, “Ku Dashi, Xiongdi concede defeat to your divine strategy; please take this antidote.”

Fan Yao shook his head, “Such a little antidote, what can I do with that?”

Lu Zhangke said, “Not to mention two people, this powder is enough to rescue six, seven people.”

“Don’t be stingy,” Fan Yao said, “What harm is it in giving me some more? To be brutally honest, you are so crafty that Ku Toutuo is afraid of your scheming.”

Seeing him wanted more of the antidote, Lu Zhangke suddenly stood up and said, “Ku Dashi, could it be that the people you want to rescue is not Mijue Shitai and your beloved daughter?”

Fan Yao was about to make some excuse when suddenly they heard footsteps on the courtyard; about seven, eight people rushed in. One of them was heard saying, “The footprints stop here. Could it be that Concubine Han is in the Wan An Temple area?”

Lu Zhangke’s expression changed; he pulled the cup back into his bosom, out of Ku Toutuo’s reach. He thought that Ku Toutuo had prepared an ambush; as soon as he took the antidote, he would make his move. Fan Yao waved his hand, telling him not to panic, then he took a blanket and covered up Concubine Han, including her head; he also pulled down the bed curtain.

“Mr. Lu, are you home?” one of the men on the courtyard called out. Fan Yao pointed to his own mouth, reminding Lu Zhangke that he was a mute, telling him to answer.

“What is it?” Lu Zhangke said in loud voice.

“One of the concubines from the palace is kidnapped,” that man replied, “We trace the bandit’s footprints and looks like he came to Wan An Temple.”

Lu Zhangke shot an angry look toward Fan Yao; his meaning was clear: ‘If you are not intentionally framing me, with your kind of skill, how could you leave a trail behind?’

Fan Yao grinned widely and smiled. He made some hand signals, telling him to send these men away; while in his heart he thought, “Wei Fuwang truly went all the way; he directed the track from the palace to this place.”

Lu Zhangke coldly laughed and said, “You don’t scatter and look around, but making disturbance here. What do you want?” Because of his high level of martial art skill, everybody was scared of him. That man answered indistinctly and did not dare to say anything else. He ordered his men to disperse and search the temple.

Lu Zhangke knew that with people all around the Wan An Temple searching for Concubine Han, to actually take Concubine Han out of the temple and bring her someplace else would not be easy even though they would not dare to search his room. He frowned and stared angrily at Ku Toutuo.

Suddenly Fan Yao got an idea, in a low voice he said, “Lu Xiong, there is a place within the Wan An Temple which can be used as a good hiding place for your beloved. We’ll wait for half a day then we’ll take her out; I don’t think that will be too late.”

Lu Zhangke angrily replied, “The safest place is in your own room.”

Fan Yao smiled and said, "With this kind of beautiful woman hiding in my room, the Old Toutuo's heart might be moved. Are you sure Lu Xiong won't be jealous?"

"Then what kind of place were you talking about?" Lu Zhangke asked.

Fan Yao pointed his finger toward the peak of the pagoda outside the window while showing a faint smile.

Lu Zhangke was smart; he understood immediately. Raising his thumb he praised, "Good idea!"

The pagoda was used as a prison for the martial art masters of the six major sects; it was under Lu Zhangke's first disciple Wuwang Apu's custody. Other people or other places could be under suspicion, but nobody would suspect the Prince's concubine was hidden in the most heavily guarded place of all: the prison.

"Right now there is nobody on the courtyard," Fan Yao said, "We must not tarry. Let's move." Raising the four corner of the blanket he wrapped Concubine Han inside, making it looked like a big bundle. With his right hand he lifted it up and gave it to Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke, however, thought that he was being swindled; he thought that as soon as he carried Concubine Han on his shoulder, Ku Toutuo would make a racket announcing it to everybody, then Lu Zhangke would be caught red-handed with the kidnapped person in his hand, at that time he would not be able to say anything. Having this thought his expression changed and he did not hold out his hand to receive the bundle.

Fan Yao understood his thought, he said, "Mustn't help someone half way. Sending off Buddha must send him off to Heaven. What harm is it in letting Ku Toutuo protecting you again? Who told me to ask a favor from you?" While saying that he carried the bundle on his back, pushed the door to go out and in a low voice said, "You walk ahead. If anybody stops us to inquire, just kill them."

Walking sideways Lu Zhangke went out the door; he still did not want to let Ku Toutuo walking behind him for fear of any sneak attack. Fan Yao reached back to close the door, then with Concubine Han on his back he walked toward the pagoda.

It was already late eleventh hour (between 7 - 9 pm); other than the pagoda guards, there was nobody else walking around the Temple. As the guards saw Lu Zhangke and Fan Yao they bowed to salute and respectfully moved aside to let them pass. As they arrived in front of the pagoda, someone had already informed Wuwang Apu, so that he was waiting on the door. "Shifu," he said, "I wish you, Senior, well. Are you going to take a walk in the pagoda?"

Lu Zhangke nodded his head; along with Fan Yao he was about to step into the pagoda when suddenly from the moon gate on the east side of the pagoda someone stepped out, it was none other than Zhao Min. Because he was guilty, Lu Zhangke was really shocked. He thought Zhao Min was personally leading her warriors to arrest him. He had no alternative but summon his courage and he stepped forward to pay his respect along with Ku Toutuo and Wuwang Apu.

The previous night Zhang Wuji made such a disturbance and Zhao Min did not know only three people from the Ming Cult came over. She feared they were dispatching a large scale raid; therefore, she personally came to the pagoda on

an inspection tour. Seeing Fan Yao, she smiled slightly and said, "Ku Dashi, I was looking for you." Fan Yao nodded, maintaining his composure. Zhao Min continued, "I want you to accompany me going to a certain place."

Fan Yao was inwardly groaning, "With great difficulty I lured Lu Zhangke into the pagoda; all I have to do is snatching the antidote and then this great endeavor will be brought into its successful completion. Who would have thought that this little girl pick this exact same time to look for me?" Frantically he tried to find an excuse, but could not come up with any good explanation; besides, he was a mute, so he was not supposed to say anything. Suddenly he had an idea, "I'll let Lu Zhangke think of something." Immediately he pointed toward the bundle on his back and shoved it toward Lu Zhangke. Lu Zhangke was taken aback; he inwardly scolded Ku Toutuo as being very malicious.

"Mister Lu," Zhao Min asked, "What is inside Ku Dashi's bundle?"

"Uh ... uh ... It's Ku Dashi's bedding," Lu Zhangke stammered.

"Bedding?" Zhao Min was surprised, "Why is Ku Dashi bringing his bedding along?" she asked. She chuckled and said, "Ku Dashi thinks I am too dumb that he is not willing to take me as his disciple; and now he has to carry his own bedding?"

Fan Yao shook his head; his right hand moved around as if he was making some hand signals, while in his heart he was thinking, "Let Lu Zhangke fabricates all kind of lies. I am a mute, I might as well take advantage of it."

Zhao Min could not understand his hand signals, so she

turned her gaze toward Lu Zhangke, waiting for him to explain. Lu Zhangke's quick mind got a sudden inspiration, he said, "It's like this: last night some sorcerers [Translator's note: the literal translation is 'devil head'] from the Devil Cult came and made some disturbance. Subordinate is afraid they might not give up easily. This ... this ... this is not confirmed yet, but they might come to the pagoda to rescue these people. For this reason Subordinate two martial brothers, along with Ku Dashi, decided to personally guard the pagoda so Junzhu's major plan will not be disturbed. This bedding is Ku Dashi's cotton quilt."

Zhao Min was very pleased; she smiled and said, "Actually I was going to ask Mr. Lu and Mr. He to personally guard the prisoners, but I was afraid I might be condescending toward people of your position, so I was uncomfortable in asking you. Now that the three of you are concerned about me, I couldn't ask any better. With Mr. Lu and Mr. He guarding in here, I am sure those 'devil head' won't be able to do anything; so I don't need to go up the pagoda to take a look. Ku Dashi, please come with me." While saying that she held out her hand to pull Fan Yao's hand.

Fan Yao had no choice; he thought that even if he exposed Lu Zhangke right now, first, it would not do him any good, second, Concubine Han was obviously on his own back. He might not necessarily be able to convince Zhao Min. Hence he handed over the big bundle to Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke held out his hands to receive the bundle and said, "Ku Dashi, I will be waiting for you on this pagoda."

"Shifu," Wuwang Apu said, "Let disciple carry the bedding."

"No need," Lu Zhangke laughed, "This is Ku Dashi's belonging, I want to win his heart, so I must carry this

bedding myself.”

Fan Yao grinned widely, he stretched out his hand to slap the bundle, right on Concubine Han’s buttocks. Luckily her mute acupoint was sealed; otherwise she would cry out in shock. But Lu Zhangke was scared out of his wits; his countenance paled. Without delay he bowed toward Zhao Min and carrying Concubine Han on his back he hurriedly entered the pagoda. His mind had already cooked up a plan; as soon as he entered the pagoda, he would wrap a cotton quilt inside the blanket. If Ku Toutuo told Zhao Min about him, he would deny any knowledge of Concubine Han.

End of Chapter 26.

Chapter 27 - Soaring Down from a Hundred-foot Pagoda

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



By this time the smoke and fire filled the air, it almost reached near the place where those masters were standing. If they did not jump soon, they would inevitably become barbequed meat. Yu Lianzhou thought that rather than being burned to death, he would rather plunge to death, he jumped from the Pagoda down to the ground.

Following Zhao Min, Fan Yao went out of the Wan An Temple complex. He was both anxious and feeling strange; did not know where Zhao Min would take him. Zhao Min pulled her cloak over her head, covering her beautiful hair. “Ku Dashi,” she quietly said, “We are going to look for that guy Zhang Wuji.”

Fan Yao was startled; he cast a sidelong glance to her but she averted his gaze. Her cheeks blushed; as if she was 70% shy and 30% happy. She did not look like she already knew about him. His heart was relieved. He recalled the situation of the previous night, when she met Zhang Wuji in the Wan An Temple; where they were facing each other as archenemies. As soon as the word ‘archenemies’ came into his mind, his heart was stirred. “Enemy?” he thought, “Could it be that Junzhu [Princess] fell in love secretly with my Jiaozhu [Cult Leader]?” But then another thought came into his mind, “Why does she want me to go with her? Why didn’t she take her trusted subordinates, the Xuanming Elders? Ah, right! It must be because I am mute, so I won’t leak her secret.” Having this thought he nodded his head, with a strange-looking smile on his face.

“What are you laughing at?” Zhao Min angrily asked.

Of course Fan Yao could not tell her what he thought was funny; thereupon he busily gesticulated, telling her that Ku Toutuo would do his best to protect the Princess, that he would accompany the Princess even going to the dragon’s pool or tiger’s cave. Zhao Min did not speak anymore; she quietly led the way, and very soon they had arrived at the gate of the inn where Zhang Wuji stayed.

Fan Yao was secretly surprised, “Junzhu is really resourceful, she knew exactly where Jiaozhu stays,” he thought, while following her entering the inn.

Zhao Min asked the innkeeper, "We are looking for a guest by the surname of Zeng." Turned out when he checked into the inn Zhang Wuji was using his fake name, Zeng Aniu. The innkeeper went inside to inform the guest.

Zhang Wuji was sitting in meditation, circulating his internal energy, waiting for the fire signal at the Wan An Temple to render his assistance; when suddenly he heard someone was looking for him. He felt strange, but he went out anyway. Arriving at the reception room he saw the visitors were Zhao Min and Fan Yao. "Not good!" he silently groaned, "Looks like Miss Zhao has exposed Fan Youshi's identity and now she is here to deal with me." He had no choice but step forward and cup his fists, "I didn't know Miss Zhao was here; please forgive me for not welcoming you," he said.

Zhao Min said, "It's not convenient to talk in here. What do you say we go to the small restaurant over there and have three cups of wine?"

"Very well," Zhang Wuji did not have any choice but to agree.

Zhao Min was still leading the way; she was the first to leave the inn. They walked past five shops before they finally arrived at a small restaurant. There were several tables made of rough wood planks scattered sparsely inside the restaurant, with wooden tubes of chopsticks on the tables. It was already late in the evening; there was no other guest inside the restaurant. Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji sat facing each other. Fan Yao made some hand signals, saying that he was going to drink some wine on the outer hall. Zhao Min nodded her head; she called the waiter and ordered a bowl of hot pot with three catties of fresh mutton, plus two catties of white wine.

Zhang Wuji's heart was full of suspicions; he thought she was a princess, yet she went to this dirty little restaurant to eat mutton soup with him. He wondered what kind of trick she was playing.

Zhao Min poured out two cups of wine. She took the cup in front of Zhang Wuji; drank it a little and said with a smile, "There is no poison in this wine; set your heart at peace and have a drink."

Zhang Wuji said, "Miss invites me here, I wonder what instructions do you have for me?"

"Please drink three cups, then we'll talk," Zhao Min replied, "I'll dry my cup first to honor you." She raised her cup and drank it dry.

Zhang Wuji also raised his cup. Under the light from the coal of the hot pot stove he faintly saw lipstick mark on the edge of the cup, while his nose caught a soft and sweet smelling fragrance. He did not know whether the fragrance came from the lipstick mark on his cup, or it was the perfume she was wearing. With a shaken heart he drank the wine.

"Please drink two more cups," Zhao Min said, "I know you are suspicious toward me, so I'll drink each cup first."

Zhang Wuji knew she was very shrewd; he certainly must set up his guard. Although she was unexpectedly willing to taste the wine in advance, he would still be braving a great danger. In the end he drank three cups anyway. He tried to feel if there was anything unusual, but he could not find any. Raising his head he saw a faint smile on her graceful face, the wine had made her cheeks blush a little bit; truly it was a tender and extremely beautiful face. Zhang Wuji did not

dare to look at her too long, hastily he turned his gaze somewhere else.

In a low voice Zhao Min said, “Zhang Gongzi [young master, a respectful term to address a young man], do you know who I am?” Zhang Wuji shook his head. Zhao Min said, “Let me tell you today. My father holds authority over the imperial armed force, the Ruyang Prince. I am a Mongolian girl, my real name is Minmin Temur. The Emperor granted me the title of Shao Min Junzhu. ‘Zhao Min’ two characters, is the name I chose to be my Han name.”

If Fan Yao did not tell him that morning, Zhang Wuji would have been shocked; but listening to her revealing her true identity without concealing anything was also beyond his expectations. Only he was not used to pretend, so he did not show an expression of great surprise.

“What?” Zhao Min was surprised, “So you have already found out?”

“No, I haven’t. How can I?” Zhang Wuji replied, “But I know that you are but a young girl yet you command that many Wulin masters, your position must be unusual.”

Zhao Min gently stroked the wine cup in her hand. She was silent for half a day. Lifting up the wine pot she poured two cups of wine and then slowly said, “Zhang Gongzi, I have a question I would like to ask you. Please answer me truthfully. If I killed that Miss Zhou of yours, what would you do?”

Zhang Wuji was startled. “Miss Zhou has never offended you; how could you kill her for no reason at all?” he asked.

“There are some people I don’t like, so I have them killed. Do you think I only kill those who offended me?” Zhao Min

replied, "Some people continuously offend me, yet I did not kill them. Take you, for example, how many times have you offended me?" While saying this, her eyes were smiling.

Zhang Wuji heaved a deep sigh and said, "Miss Zhao, I offended you because I did not have any other choice. You have given me the medicine I need to save my San Shibo [third martial (older) uncle] and Liu Shishu [sixth martial (younger) uncle]; for that I will be eternally grateful."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "I think a third part of you is muddleheaded. Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting received their injuries from my subordinates. You did not blame me, but thank me instead?"

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "My San Shibo was injured twenty years ago; at that time you haven't been born yet."

"Those people are my father's subordinates; therefore, they are also my subordinates. So what's the difference?" Zhao Min asked, "Anyway, don't divert the subject, I asked you: If I killed your Miss Zhou, what would you do? Would you kill me to avenge her?"

Zhang Wuji was silent for half a day before answering, "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Zhao Min pressed, "You just don't want to say it, do you?"

Zhang Wuji said, "My father and mother were forced to their death by some people. They are from Shaolin Pai, Huashan Pai, Kongtong Pai ['pai' = Sect] and the others. When I got older my reasoning also grew; but the more I think, the more I don't understand: Who was my parents' real killer? I should say it was not Kong Zhi Dashi [Reverend Kong Zhi], Tie Qin

Xiansheng [Mister Iron Qin], those people; I can't even say it was my (maternal) grandfather or my uncle; so much so that I can't say it was your subordinates, Ah Er, Ah San, the Xuanming Elders, and so on. All I can say is that it was fate; I have thought it over yet I could not come to the clear truth. Let's just say that those people were the killers; then I would kill them all one by one. What do I gain? My father and mother would not come back to life. Miss Zhao, these past several days I have been thinking: If everybody does not kill somebody else, live in harmony with each other, love each other as friends, won't that be good? I don't want to seek revenge by killing someone; I also hope others would not kill and harm other people."

He had had this thought for a long time, only he had not told Yang Xiao, he had not told Zhang Sanfeng, he had not told Yin Liting, yet suddenly in this small restaurant he told it to Zhao Min. Once it came out of his mouth, suddenly he felt weird.

Listening to him pouring out his heart Zhao Min paused to ponder, and then she said, "You are very kind-hearted. I can't do that. If someone killed my father or my brother, not only I would kill him and his whole family, I would also kill his relatives, his friends, everybody who is related to him. I will wipe them clean."

"Then surely I must stop you," Zhang Wuji said.

"Why?" Zhao Min asked, "Are you going to side with my enemy?"

"You kill one person, you will add one guilt to your life," Zhang Wuji said, "To the person you killed, after he died he won't know anything, so that was that. But how about his parents, his children, his brothers or sisters, his wife; won't

they feel unbearable grief? When you recall what you did in the future, your conscience will not be peaceful. My 'yi fu' [godfather] has killed many people. Although he has never said anything, I know he feels deep regrets in his heart."

Zhao Min did not say anything; she quietly pondered over what he said. Zhang Wuji asked, "Have you killed anybody?"

Zhao Min smiled and said, "I have not. But when I am older, I will kill a lot of people. My ancestor is Genghis Khan the Great Emperor, Tuolei, Badou, Xuliewu, Khubilai, those heroes. I regret that I was born female. If I were a man, hey, hey, I would certainly accomplish great undertakings." She poured out one more cup of wine, drank it, and said, "You have not answered my question."

"If you killed Miss Zhou, or anybody related to my subordinates, then I will no longer consider you as my friend; I will never see you again, nor will I speak to you," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhao Min laughed, "Then do you currently consider me as your friend?" she asked.

"If I hated you in my heart, then I would not sit together and drink some wine with you," Zhang Wuji said, "Ah! It is so difficult for me to hate anybody. All my life the person I hated most was that 'hun yuan pi li zhang' [Lightning Palms of the Originating Formation] Cheng Kun. [Translator's note: previously it was 'shou' (hand) instead of 'zhang' (palm); perhaps Jin Yong 'forgot'?] Yet now that he died, I feel sorry for him. I actually wish he did not die."

"If I die tomorrow, what would you think?" Zhao Min asked, "I bet you will say: Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth, my wicked and fiendish enemy has died; from this time on I will be spared of many troubles."

“No, no!” Zhang Wuji loudly said, “I am not looking forward to your dying; not in the least bit. Wei Fuwang [Bat King Wei] has scared you by threatening to cut your face several times. Later on when I think about it I am very anxious.”

With a captivating smile Zhao Min blushed and lowered her head.

“Miss Zhao,” Zhang Wuji said, “Please don’t make things difficult for us. Why don’t you release the six major sects’ masters; then we all can live happily as friends, won’t that be good?”

“Very good,” Zhao Min delightfully said, “That’s what I was hoping for. You are the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, your words carry a lot of weight. Go and talk to them, tell them to surrender to the royal government. Wait till my father becomes the Emperor, then he will grant rewards to everybody.”

Zhang Wuji slowly shook his head, “Our Han people all have a wish: to drive you, Mongolians, from invading our land,” he said.

Zhao Min abruptly stood up and said, “What? You dare to say such preposterous thing, defying your superior? Don’t you realize you are blatantly rebelling against the government?”

Zhang Wuji replied, “I am a rebel. Don’t tell me you realized it just now?”

Zhao Min fixed her gaze at him for a long time; the anger and shock on her face slowly dissipated, turning into tenderness and despair. Finally she sat back down and said,

"I have already known for a long time, but I want to hear it from your own mouth before I can believe it was absolutely true. You are really beyond any help." These words were spoken with intense bitter feeling.

Zhang Wuji's heart was soft to begin with; this time he could not bear to hear her grieving even more, he almost blurted, "I will listen and obey you." But this thought disappeared in a flash; he tried to control his mind, but could not find some comforting words.

Two people sat facing each other silently for a long time. Finally Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Zhao, it is late, let me walk you home."

"You don't want to accompany me much longer, do you?" Zhao Min asked.

"No!" Zhang Wuji frantically said, "If you want to sit here, drinking and talking, then I'll accompany you."

Zhao Min smiled slightly, then slowly said, "Sometimes I am thinking: if I am not a Mongolian girl, also not a Junzhu, but a common Han girl just like Miss Zhou, then perhaps you will treat me a lot better. Zhang Gongzi, what do you say: am I prettier, or Miss Zhou is prettier?"

Zhang Wuji had never expected this kind of question to ever come out of her mouth; but he remembered that after all, barbarian women were frank and did not guard their speech too much. Under the lamp light he saw her to be sweet and extremely pretty; he could not help but blurted, "Of course you are prettier."

Zhao Min reached out with her right hand to hold the back of Zhang Wuji's hand, her eyes showed happiness. "Zhang Gongzi," she said, "Would you like to see me often? If I invite

you from time to time to come over here and have a drink, would you come?"

As his hand was being touched by her soft and tender palm, Zhang Wuji's heart was thumping madly. Calming his heart down he said, "I can't stay here for too long. In a few days I am going to the south."

"What do you do in the south?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "Even if I don't tell you, you will be able to guess; if I do, I'll make you angry ..."

Zhao Min averted her gaze toward the round moon outside the window; she suddenly said, "You have made a promise to do three things for me. Have you forgotten your promise?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten," Zhang Wuji said, "As soon as Miss tells me, I will do my utmost to fulfill it."

Zhao Min turned her head back, looking straight at his face. She said, "Only now do I have my first request. I want you to accompany me to get that Tulong [Slaughtering Dragon] Saber."

Zhang Wuji had already guessed that her three requests would not be easy to do; but never in his life would he guess that the first request was already a very difficult matter to do. Zhao Min saw his distress look and said, "What? You are not willing? This request certainly does not violate the way of the chivalry; it is also not something you are unable to accomplish."

Zhang Wuji thought, "The Tulong Saber is in the hand of my Yifu; this fact is well-known in Jianghu [river and lake -

martial art world], I don't have to hide the truth from her." Thereupon he said, "The Tulong Saber belongs to my Yifu, 'Jin Mao Shi Wang' [Golden Mane Lion King], Xie Daxia [Great Hero Xie]. How can I betray my Yifu by taking his saber and give it to you?"

Zhao Min said, "I do not meant for you to steal or snatch or take it by deceit; I also do not want to own this saber. All I want is for you to tell me your Yifu's whereabouts, so I can borrow it and play with it for a couple of hours, and then I will return it to him right away. You are Yifu-yizi [foster-father, foster son]; don't tell me he won't allow you to borrow it even for a couple of hours? I want to take a look at it, not to swindle his possession; I won't use it to kill anybody, do you think I am violating the way of the chivalry?"

Zhang Wuji said, "Although this saber is talked-about in the martial world, but actually it doesn't have anything worth looking about it except it is very heavy and unexceptionally sharp."

"There is a saying," Zhao Min said, "'Wu lin zhi zun, bao dao tu long, hao ling tian xia, mo gan bu cong. Yi tian bu zhu, shei yu zheng feng?' [Martial world's most venerable, Prized saber dragon slaying, Controlling all under Heaven, None dares not to follow. Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete? – Meh's translation] The Yitian Sword is in my hand; I surely must see what this Tulong Saber looks like. If you are concerned, you can stay by my side while I am examining the Saber. With your current skill level, I should not be able swindle you in any way."

Zhang Wuji considered carefully, "My original plan was leaving immediately to fetch Yifu after rescuing the six major sects' masters, to ask him to hold the Jiaozhu position.

Miss Zhao promises to take a look at the Saber only for a couple of hours. I know it's hard to say whether she has some crafty trick under her sleeves, but if I guard by her side, she won't be able to seize the Saber. Only Yifu once said that the Tulong Saber holds a big martial art secret. Yifu has taken possession of this treasured Saber before his eyes were blinded, yet by his intelligence and wisdom he still could not penetrate the details of this secret. Given only a short couple of hours, how could this Miss Zhao uncover the secret? Besides, Yifu and I have not seen each other for more than ten years; perhaps on that isolated island he has succeeded in understanding the Saber's secret."

Seeing he was hesitating and not answering, Zhao Min laughed and said, "It's up to you if you are not willing. I can think of something else for you to do, and it surely will be much more difficult."

Zhang Wuji realized this woman was extremely cunning; if she presented another difficult problem, he might not be able to do it. Thereupon he busily said, "Very well, I agree to borrow the Tulong Saber for you. But let me get it clear: you can only borrow it for a couple of hours. If you change your mind and want to steal it, I will not let you go."

"That's right," Zhao Min laughed, "I can't use a saber, especially a heavy one. What's good it is for me? You are respectfully presenting the Saber to me so I will not dare to offend you. When are you going to leave?"

"Within these next several days," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Nothing could be better," Zhao Min said, "I am going to pack now. When it's time to leave, come and get me."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "Are you going to come?" he asked.

“Of course,” Zhao Min answered, “I heard your Yifu lives on an isolated island far away. If he is not willing to return to the mainland, will you take tens of thousands ‘li’s journey to bring the Saber to me, let me look at it for a couple of hours, then take another tens of thousands ‘li’s journey to return the Saber back to him, and then take tens of thousands ‘li’s journey again to go back home? There is no such logic in this world.”

Zhang Wuji remembered the dangerous great billows of the ‘Bei Hai’ [Northern Sea]; whether they would be able to find the ‘bing huo dao’ [Ice and Fire Island] in the vast and boundless ocean was still a great uncertainty. There was no guarantee if they would not meet any accident during the three times voyage back and forth to the island, so what she said was right. Moreover, his Yifu had lived on ‘bing huo dao’ for more than twenty years; he might not be willing to return to the mainland in his sunset years. “The wind and the waves on the ocean are merciless,” he said, “Are you sure you want to brave this danger?”

“If you can brave the danger, why can’t I?” Zhao Min replied.

With uncertainty in his voice Zhang Wuji asked, “Will your father let you go?”

Zhao Min replied, “Father has given me the authority to command the Jianghu warriors. For the last several years I have wandered to the east and journeyed to the west; Father has never forbidden me.”

Hearing the words ‘Father has given me the authority to command the Jianghu warriors’ Zhang Wuji’s heart was moved, “My journey to the ‘bing huo dao’ to fetch Yifu might take years or at least months,” he thought. “Supposing she

is executing the luring-the-tiger-to-leave-the-mountain trick, then she might launch a large scale attack on my Cult while I am gone. But if she goes with me, her subordinates might lose command and spare me unnecessary worries over those I leave behind." Thereupon he nodded and said, "Very well, I'll come and get you when it's time for us to leave."

He had not finished speaking when suddenly they saw bright red light from beyond the window, followed by a faint clamoring noise of commotion coming from a distance.

Zhao Min went to the window to take a look. "Aiyo!" she cried out in alarm, "The Wan An Temple Pagoda is on fire! Ku Dashi, Ku Dashi, come here, quick!" She called out several times, but Ku Toutuo did not answer. She went to the outer hall but Ku Toutuo was nowhere to be seen. She asked the waiter and was told that that Toutuo went away as soon as they arrived; he did not even sit down, and he had left for a long time. Zhao Min was astonished; suddenly she recalled his strange smile earlier and could not help blushing. She lowered her head and stole a glance toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji saw the fire was getting bigger by the minute; he was afraid his Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] and the others' internal strength had not recovered and they died inside the burning Pagoda. "Miss Zhao," he said, "I have to go!" Before finished speaking he had rushed out the restaurant.

"Wait!" Zhao Min called out, "I am coming too!" But by the time she reached the door, Zhang Wuji had disappeared.

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When Ku Toutuo was taken away by the Princess, Lu Zhangke decided to take Concubine Han into his disciple,

Wuwang Apu's room. The Wan An Temple Pagoda had a total of thirteen floors, so the total height was about thirteen 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10ft or 3.3m]. The top three floors were consecrated to house the image of Buddha, Buddhist literature, and other religious articles; nobody could stay in these floors. Wuwang Apu was in charge of guarding the Pagoda, so he occupied a room in the tenth floor; from which he could see all around and thus had a better control over the overall situation.

As he entered the room, Lu Zhangke told Wuwang Apu, "Go and guard outside the room, don't let anybody enter in." As Wuwang Apu went out the room Lu Zhangke immediately closed the door, untied the bundle to let Concubine Han out. Her beautiful face showed both shocked and hurt expression; her sad eyes were pleading. Lu Zhangke quietly said, "Now that you have arrived here, you don't have to be afraid. I will treat you well."

He did not want to unseal her acupoints yet, fearing she would cause a commotion. Thereupon he gently laid her down on Wuwang Apu's bed, pulled up a quilt to cover her up; and then took another cotton-quilt to replace the bundle and set it aside. With Concubine Han safely tucked in the bed Lu Zhangke started to attend to other businesses. He did not dare to stay inside the room for too long; he went out hurriedly, forbidding Wuwang Apu from entering the room or allowing others from doing so. He knew his main disciple had always regarded him with respect and fear, so it was unlikely for him to disobey his master's order.

Lu Zhangke thought, "I need Ku Toutuo to help me keeping the secret. If I want to win his favor, I must rescue his old lover and his daughter first. Luckily the Cult Leader of the Devil Cult made such disturbance last night, precisely over that girl by the surname of Zhou. I can always put the blame on him by saying the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu rescued Old Nun

Miejue and Miss Zhou. Truly the Heaven is on my side; Junzhu will not suspect anything. This little devil head's martial art is superior, Junzhu cannot blame us from failing to stop him."

All Emei Pai's female disciples were imprisoned on the seventh floor. Miejue Shitai, being a Sect Leader, was imprisoned alone inside a smaller room. Lu Zhangke ordered the guard to open the door and then walked in. He saw Miejue was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her eyes were closed in meditation. She had been on a hunger strike for several days, but although she looked thin and pale, her countenance still showed her proud and valiant character.

"Miejue Shitai, how are you?" Lu Zhangke greeted.

Slowly Miejue Shitai opened her eyes. "It's not good in here, what good are you talking about?" she asked. [Translator's note: It was a play on words: 'How are you?' in Chinese is 'ni3 hao3', with literal translation 'you good']

"You are so stubborn," Lu Zhangke said, "My master said keeping you alive is useless, I am ordered to send you to heaven."

Miejue Shitai had determined to die anyway, so she said, "Very well. Only I do not need to bother Sire to do it; just lend me a knife and I will do it myself. I only request Sire to bring my disciple Zhou Zhiruo, I have something I need to talk to her."

Lu Zhangke turned around and went out the room, ordering the guard to bring in Zhou Zhiruo; he thought, "The feeling between a mother and a daughter is really unusual; otherwise why didn't she ask for her other main disciples, but ask for her instead?"

Not long afterwards Zhou Zhiruo entered her master's room. "Mr. Lu," Miejue Shitai said, "Please wait outside, I only need to speak a little bit with her."

Zhou Zhiruo waited until Lu Zhangke left the room before she pushed backward to close the door, and then she threw herself at her master's bosom and wept. For all her life Miejue Shitai had been strong and firm; this time she was going to die, she could not restrain to be emotionally touched; she stroked Zhou Zhiruo's hair gently. Zhou Zhiruo knew her time to speak with her master was not long; immediately she narrated how Zhang Wuji came to rescue her the previous night. Miejue Shitai wrinkled her brows and was silent for half a day before she finally said, "Why did he only rescue you and did not rescue other people? That day on the Brightness Peak you stabbed him; why did he repay it by rescuing you?"

Zhou Zhiruo's cheeks blushed and she softly said, "I don't know."

"Humph," Miejue Shitai indignantly said, "That kid is so wicked. He is the leader of the Devil Cult; how can he have good intentions? I think he is setting a trap and he is luring you to enter in."

"He ... he is setting a trap?" Zhou Zhiruo wondered.

"We are the Devil Cult's archenemy," Miejue Shitai said, "I don't know how many devil disciples died under my Yitian Sword. The Devil Cult hates Emei Pai to their bones; how could they come over to rescue us? This surnamed Zhang's devil-head must have been looking at you and took a liking; he wanted you to fall into his snare. He ordered some people to capture us then he would deliberately rescue you to curry

your favor, so that from this time on you will always be grateful to him.”

“Shifu,” Zhou Zhiruo weakly said, “I think ... I think he was sincere.”

Miejue Shitai was very angry; in a loud voice she said, “You are just the same as that good-for-nothing Ji Xiaofu; captivated by Devil Cult’s disciples. If I had my internal energy, I’d strike you dead with my palm.”

Zhou Zhiruo was so scared that her whole body trembled. “Disciple does not dare,” she said.

In a stern voice Miejue Shitai said, “You really do not dare, or was that just sweet-talk to deceive your master?”

With tears in her eyes Zhou Zhiruo said, “Disciple simply does not dare to disobey ‘En shi’s [benevolent master] instruction.”

Miejue Shitai said, “Kneel on the floor. Make a heavy oath.”

Following her command, Zhou Zhiruo knelt down but she did not know what to say. Miejue Shitai said, “Say it like this: ‘Xiao Nuzi [lit. little/young woman – this is kind of hard to translate without losing the real meaning] Zhou Zhiruo make an oath against the Heaven: if in the future my heart adores Zhang Wuji, that evil Cult Leader of the Devil Cult, if I become husband and wife with him, let the bones of my departed parents bodies in the ground do not have peace; let my Shifu Miejue Shitai’s departing soul becomes restless spirit, haunting me night and day for the rest of my life; and if I give birth to sons and daughters with him, let my sons become slaves and my daughters prostitutes.”

Zhou Zhiruo was shocked; her natural disposition was meek and gentle. She had never thought of making such a sinister oath; not only cursing her dead parents and cursing her benevolent master, but cursing the children who had not even born yet. She saw her master's eyes were staring fiercely at her face with a malicious gleam. Suddenly she felt dizzy; yet she did not have any choice but repeating what her master said, word for word.

As she listened to this heavy oath Mijue Shitai's countenance softened. "All right, you can stand up," she warmly said.

Zhou Zhiruo's tears fell like rain; she stood up with a heavy and hurting heart. Mijue Shitai's face turned serious when she said, "Zhiruo, I did not deliberately force you; I am doing this for your own good. You are a young and naïve girl. Later on your Shifu wouldn't be able to look after you anymore. If you repeat your Ji Shijie's [martial (older) sister] mistake by treading on the road to disaster, your Shifu in the next world will not rest in peace. Moreover your Shifu is relying on you to carry the heavy responsibility of our Sect; you must not be careless." While saying that she took out the iron ring on her left index finger, stood up, and said, "Emei Pai's disciple Zhou Zhiruo, kneel down to receive my order."

Zhou Zhiruo was startled; she knelt down immediately.

Mijue Shitai lifted the iron ring high above her head and said, "The Third Generation Sect Leader of Emei Pai, 'Nu ni' [lit. female (Buddhist) nun] Mijue, hereby passes the Sect Leader position to the Fourth Generation 'nu di zi' [female disciple] Zhou Zhiruo."

After she was compelled by her master to make that heavy oath, Zhou Zhiruo's mind was still confused; now that

suddenly hearing the Sect Leader position was being passed on to her, she was so shocked that she did not know what to think.

Slowly, word by word, Miejue Shitai said, “Zhou Zhiruo, receive this iron ring of our Sect; held out your left hand.”

Still stupefied, Zhou Zhiruo held out her left hand, Miejue Shitai put the iron ring on her index finger. With a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, “Shifu [Master], disciple is young, I joined the sect not too long ago, how can I bear this heavy responsibility? You, Senior, must not be desperate; please don’t say such thing. Disciple really cannot ...” Speaking to this point, she hugged her master’s legs and cried.

Waiting outside, Lu Zhangke was already impatient for a while; hearing the weeping noise he banged the door and called out, “Hey! Are you done talking? Your talking days in the future are still long!”

Miejue Shitai shot back, “What kind of nonsense are you talking about?” To Zhou Zhiruo she said, “Do you dare to disobey your Shifu’s command?” Immediately she proceeded by telling Zhou Zhiruo the Sect Leader’s rules and regulations, wanting her to commit them in her memory.

Zhou Zhiruo could see through her master’s words; it was like she was leaving her death wish; Zhou Zhiruo was alarmed and scared. “Disciple cannot do this, disciple is not able ...”

In a stern voice Miejue Shitai said, “If you don’t do what I said, you are disobeying your Sect’s ancestors.” Noticing Zhou Zhiruo pitiful face and remembering about her impending departure from this world, she thought about how she was placing this heavy responsibility on this mild-

mannered, soft and weak female disciple's shoulder; Mijue Shitai was afraid her disciple would actually not be able to withstand this heavy load. But among the Emei disciples she was the one with the highest comprehension and the one most likely to reach the pinnacle of their martial arts and brighten their reputation. Other than her there was no other disciple worthy of this position. Mijue Shitai also realized that in the days to come this young disciple would inevitably experience innumerable difficulties and dangers; she could not help but feel heartbroken.

Mijue Shitai raised Zhou Zhiruo up and embraced her in her bosom; in a soft voice she said, "Zhiruo, I picked you to be the next Sect Leader instead of your numerous Shijies [martial (older) sisters], not because I am biased toward you. It was because the Emei Pai has always been dominated by women; the Sect Leader's martial art must be outstanding. Only then will we be able to stand among the heroes of the Wulin world."

"How can a disciple's martial art exceed those of numerous Shijies?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Mijue Shitai smiled and said, "Their accomplishment is limited; once they reach a certain level, it would be very difficult for them to make a good progress. This is the Heaven-given natural ability and no power on earth can change it. Right now you are inferior to your Shijies, but in the future your progress will be unlimited. Hmm, unlimited, truly unlimited. That's exactly what you will be."

Zhou Zhiruo was confused; she looked at her master with eyes full of questions. Mijue Shitai put her lips close to Zhou Zhiruo's ear and in a very low voice said, "Since you are now our Sect Leader, I am going to tell you our Sect's greatest secret. The founder of our Sect was Guo Nuxia

[Heroine Guo]; she was the youngest daughter of Daxia [great hero] Guo Jing. In those days Guo Daxia's name shook the world; all his life he was known to possess two kinds of special skills: the first one was military strategy, the second was martial art. Guo Daxia's wife was Huang Rong, Huang Nuxia; she was known as the most intelligent and quick-witted person. She had realized early on that the Yuan army's power was unstoppable; that in the end Xiangyang could not be defended. They, husband and wife, had made up their minds to sacrifice their lives for their country as a token of their patriotism and loyalty. But would they bring Guo Daxia's special skills down to the grave? Moreover, she had predicted correctly that although the Mongolians would occupy China for a moment, in the end the Han people would not be willing to live in slavery under the Tartars' rule; that there would be bloody battles on the Central Plains ['zhong yuan'] in the future. At that time the military strategy and the martial art would play a very significant role. For that reason she hired a very skilled craftsman to melt the black steel sword Yang Guo, Yang Daxia gave to our founder Guo Zushi [martial art ancestor], mixed it with refined gold from the western area, and forged it into the Tulong [slaughtering dragon] Saber and the Yitian [relying on Heaven] Sword."

Zhou Zhiruo had long ago heard about the names of Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword; but it was only now did she find out that this pair of Saber and Sword was forged by the mother of her own Sect's Founder, Guo Nuxia.

Miejue Shitai continued, "While these weapons were forged, Huang Nuxia and Guo Daxia two people toiled for a whole month writing the military strategy and the martial art manuals and hid them inside the weapons. The Tulong Saber held the military strategy manual. It was called 'tu long' with the wish that someday someone would obtain the military

strategy book, then drives out the Tartars and kills the Tartar Emperor. Among the martial art secrets concealed in the Yitian Sword, the most precious are the Nine Yin Manual and the Eighteen Dragon-subduing Palm Techniques, hoping that the later generation who study the martial arts from the Sword would enforce justice on behalf of Heaven and rid the people of evil.”

Zhou Zhiruo listened with eyes wide open; the more she listened, the more marveled she became. Meanwhile her master continued the story, “After Guo Daxia and his wife finished forging the Sword and the Saber, they gave the precious Saber to their son, Guo Gong Polu [Translator’s note: the word ‘gong’ here denotes respect or honor; there is no English equivalent to this way of addressing other people]; while the precious Sword was passed on to our Sect’s Guo Zushi. It goes without saying that Guo Zushi was taught martial arts by her parents, as Guo Gong Polu was also instructed in military strategy. But when the Xiang Yang’s city wall was broken, Guo Daxia husband and wife, as well as Guo Gong Polu died together as patriots. Guo Zushi’s character did not go very well with her father’s martial art style; for this reason our Sect’s martial art style differs from that of Guo Daxia of the past.”

After a short pause Miejue Shitai continued, “Over the last one hundred years the Wulin world was shaken repeatedly; these Saber and Sword have changed hands several times. The later generation only knows that the Tulong Saber is the Wulin world’s most venerable, and only the Yitian Sword is worthy to be its match; but why is it most venerable, nobody knows. Guo Gong Polu died for his country in his youth; he had no descendant not disciple, so only our Sect’s Guo Zushi alone knew the Saber and the Sword’s secret. Before her death, the Senior had spent considerable amount of effort to find the precious Tulong Saber, but she had not

succeeded. On her death bed she passed on this secret to my 'en shi' [benevolent master], Feng Ling Shitai. Upon receiving Zushi's commandment, my 'en shi' also looked for the Tulong Saber, but to no avail. In turn when she died she passed on this Sword and Guo Zushi's commandment to me.

It was not too long after I took over the Sect Leader position of our school when your Shibo [martial (older) uncle] Gu Hongzi made an appointment for a martial arts match with a young master from the Devil Cult. They agreed to fight one-on-one, not allowing anybody to receive help from anybody else. Your Shibo knew that although his opponent was young, his martial art skill was actually very profound. Thereupon he came to me to borrow the Yitian Sword."

As Zhou Zhiruo heard the phrase 'a young master from the Devil Cult' she could not help her heart thump madly, and her face involuntarily blushed; but she immediately remembered, "It was not him, I am afraid at that time he was not even born yet."

Meanwhile Miejue Shitai continued, "At that time I wanted to go along and help him, but your Shibo insisted that he wanted to keep the good faith; saying he stated clearly with that devil-head that no third-party participation was allowed; therefore, he was firm in not letting me go along. In that martial art match your Shibo's skill was certainly not below his opponent; but because the devil-head employed a dirty trick, in the end he managed to land a palm on your Shibo's chest and snatched away the Yitian Sword before it even came out of its sheathe."

"Ah!" Zhou Zhiruo exclaimed, remembering how Zhang Wuji snatched away the Sword from Miejue's hand on the Brightness Peak.

Her Shifu continued, "That devil-head laughed coldly several times and said 'What a big reputation Yitian Sword has! In my eyes it is no different that scrap copper and rusty iron!' Casually he threw the Sword to the ground and swaggered away. Your Shibo picked the Sword up and went back to the mountain to return it to me. Who would have thought that because of his proud character, the more he thought about the lost, the more he was grieved. He only managed to take a three-day journey when he caught an illness along the way and was not able to get up again. The Yitian Sword fell into the hands of the local authorities who in turn presented it to the royal government. Do you know who was this evil disciple of the Devil Cult who angered your Shibo Gu Hongzi to his death?"

"No ..." Zhou Zhiruo replied, "I wonder who that was?"

"It was he who later on harmed your Shijie Ji Xiaofu; that devil-head Yang Xiao!" Miejue Shitai replied.

Right at that moment Lu Zhangke banged the door and shouted, "Are you done talking? I can't wait much longer!"

"Don't be impatient," Miejue Shitai said, "We will be done very soon." Quietly to Zhou Zhiruo she said, "We don't have much time; we can't talk too much. This Yitian Sword was later on granted by the Tartar Emperor to the Ruyang Prince so I went to the Ruyang Palace to steal it back. It is so unfortunate that by an evil plot the Sword has fallen into the hand of the Devil Cult."

"No, it was that Miss Zhao who stole it," Zhou Zhiruo said.

Miejue Shitai stared at her and said, "This surnamed Zhao girl is obviously in cohort with that Cult Leader of the Devil Cult. Don't tell me that up to this point you still don't believe

your Shifu?”

In all honesty it was hard for Zhou Zhiruo to believe her; but she did not want to argue with her master. Mijue Shitai continued, “I have a strong reason why I want you to take over the Sect Leader position. This time I fall into the crafty villains’ hands, my reputation is falling down the drain; I do not want to get out of this Pagoda alive. That lecherous man surnamed Zhang has dirty thoughts toward you, but I believe he won’t harm your life. You may pretend to get close to him, and then seize the opportunity to take back the Yitian Sword. The Tulong Saber is in the hand of his foster father, that wicked bandit Xie Xun. This kid will not reveal Xie Xun’s whereabouts no matter what; but I know there is one person in this world who will be able to get this Saber.”

Zhou Zhiruo knew her Shifu was talking about her; she was startled and shy, and happy but scared at the same time.

Mie Jue Shitai said, “That person is you. I want you to use your beauty to obtain the treasured sword. I know this is not a very chivalrous thing to do, but for an important matter I don’t want to worry about little things. Just think about it: presently the Yitian Sword is in that surnamed Zhao girl, while the Tulong Saber is in that wicked bandit Xie Xun’s hand. Both have close relationship with him. If by any chance he acquires both the Sword and the Saber, and if by chance he obtains Guo Daxia’s military strategy and martial arts manual; then it will be catastrophic for the common people. I don’t know how many innocent people in the world will lost their lives, families will be broken, not to mention the great undertaking of driving out the Tartars will be more difficult to accomplish. Zhiruo, I know perfectly well that this matter is too difficult, in all honesty I don’t want you to bear it; but what is the purpose of us training martial arts all our lives? Zhiruo, I beseech you for the sake of the common

people in the world.” Speaking thus, she suddenly stood up, and then bent her knees and bowed in front of Zhou Zhiruo.

To say that Zhou Zhiruo was mildly shocked is certainly an understatement; she hastily knelt down and called out, “Shifu! Shifu! You ...”

“Quiet!” Miejue Shitai said, “Don’t let the wicked bandit outside hear. Do you agree? If you don’t, I won’t get up.”

Zhou Zhiruo was utterly confused; in just a short moment her Shifu had just asked of her three very difficult matters. The first was to make the heavy oath that she would not to fall in live with Zhang Wuji, the second was for her to take over the Sect Leader position; afterwards she wanted her to utilize her beauty to entice Zhang Wuji to obtain the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword. Each one of these three might take her ten years to decide. Based on her gentle and warm character, chances are she would not agree to any of them, much less she was given just a short time to accept. Her head was spinning and she passed out, losing her consciousness completely.

Suddenly feeling a sharp pain on her upper lip she opened her eyes and saw her Shifu was still kneeling in front of her. Crying she said, “Shifu, please get up.”

“Do you agree to my request, then?” Miejue Shitai asked.

Bursting into tears Zhou Zhiruo did not have any choice but nodding her head; she almost fainted again. Miejue Shitai grabbed her hands and in a low voice said, “After obtaining the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword, here is how you’ll get the secret inside: With one hand holding the Saber and the other the Sword, exert your internal energy and strike the Saber and the Sword to each other. Both the Sword and the

Saber will break simultaneously, and then take the secret scrolls from inside the Saber's body and the Sword's blade. This is the only way to take the secret out of those precious Sword and Saber, and to destroy them at the same time. Do you understand?" She spoke in low voice, but her tone was very urgent.

Zhou Zhiruo nodded her head. Miejue Shitai continued, "This is our Sect's greatest secret; ever since Guo Daxia husband and wife passed it on to our Sect's Guo Zushi, only the Sect Leaders of our school are aware of it. To think that the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword are weapons with matchless sharpness, let's just say that someone getting hold of these precious sword and saber at the same time; who would dare to strike the Sword and the Saber to each other and thus risking the destruction of these valuable weapons? After you obtain the military strategy book, go and find a good and honest warrior, a patriot who is undoubtedly loyal to the country; give the book to him, tell him to make an oath to drive the invaders away. Take the martial arts manual and train yourself in it. The Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palm is a pure positive, hard and ferocious technique; it is not suitable for you. You may learn the Nine Yin Manual. According to my 'en shi' [benevolent master], Guo Zushi said that the original Nine Yin Manual was so broad and deep that it would be impossible to master it in a short period of time. But Huang Nuxia had thought that obliterating the Tartar's fierce and ruthless government is an urgent matter; accomplishing it one day sooner means sparing the common people one less day of suffering. For that reason among the secrets inside the Yitian Sword she had written some chapters that can be learned intensively. However, after the important matter is accomplished, you must go back and revisit the prescribed path to strengthen your foundation. Those intensive courses can only be used temporarily. It was created from Huang Nuxia's profound

intelligence and wisdom to provide a quick fix. It is by no means a true matchless-under-the heaven's martial art method. You have to keep this firmly in your mind."

Zhou Zhiruo nodded her head absentmindedly. Miejue Shitai continued, "Our Sect has two greatest desires: the first is to drive out the Tartars and get our mountains and rivers back; the second is to make Emei Pai the leader in the martial arts world, surpassing Shaolin, Wudang, and the other schools, to become the Number One Sect in the Wulin world of the Central Plains [zhong yuan]. These two goals are very difficult to achieve; but now we have a way. As long as you comply with your Shifu's injunction, you can achieve it one by one. At that time your Shifu in the next world will be very grateful to you."

As she finished speaking Lu Zhangke again knocked on the door. "Come in!" Miejue Shitai said.

The door opened and to their surprise instead of Lu Zhangke it was Ku Toutuo who walked in. Miejue Shitai did not think differently; she thought these people were the jackals from the same lair anyway, so whoever came in did not make any difference. "Please take this child out," she said. She was not willing to commit suicide in Zhou Zhiruo's presence, to spare her from grieving.

Ku Toutuo came closer and in a low voice he said, "This is the antidote; take it quick. As soon as you hear commotion outside, everybody get out and join hands to kill the enemy."

Miejue Shitai was surprised. "Who are you, Sire?" she asked, "Why are you giving the antidote to me?"

"I am the Ming Cult's 'guang ming you shi' [Brightness Right

Emissary] Fan Yao,” Ku Toutuo replied, “I managed to steal the antidote and come here to rescue Shitai.”

“Devil Cult traitor!” Miejue Shitai was angry, “You still want to play joke on me!”

Fan Yao smiled and said, “All right! Let’s just say I am playing a joke on you. This is a poison to add the effectiveness of the poison in your system. Do you have the guts to take it? Once it goes into your belly, within a couple of hours your intestines will ruptured and you will die miserably.”

Without saying anything Miejue Shitai reached out into his hand, took the powder, and swallowed it.

“Shifu ... Shifu ...” Zhou Zhiruo called out in alarm.

“Quiet!” Fan Yao said, stretching out his other hand, “You must also take this poison.”

Zhou Zhiruo was shocked, but Fan Yao had already grabbed her cheeks and poured the powder in her mouth, followed by a cup of water; very soon the powder had entered her throat.

Miejue Shitai was shocked too; she thought with Zhou Zhiruo’s death her meticulously planned scheme would go down the drain. Disregarding her own safety she threw herself with an open palm toward Fan Yao. Unfortunately her internal energy was lost; although her palm technique was exquisite, but it was devoid of any strength. With only a light push Fan Yao sent her body flying to the wall.

Fan Yao laughed and said, “All Shaolin monks and all Wudang heroes have taken my poison. Whether our Ming Cult is good or evil, you’ll find out really soon.” With a big laugh he turned around, went out the room and slammed the door closed.

When Zhao Min took Fan Yao for a rendezvous with Zhang Wuji, his mind was still fully occupied by how to steal the antidote. As soon as Zhao Min told him to wait in the outer hall of that small restaurant, he left immediately, rushing toward the Wan An Temple, straight to the Pagoda. When he reached the tenth floor, he saw Wuwang Apu was standing on guard in front of his own room. As Wuwang Apu saw Fan Yao, he greeted him respectfully, "Ku Dashi."

Fan Yao nodded while laughing in his heart. "Good!" he thought, "The Old Lu disregards the honor of his own school; he is hiding inside, having a good time with Wangye's [Prince, lit. King Master] beloved concubine, while he orders his disciple to guard the door. I'd better rush in and seize the antidote while this old man is doing the Heaven-knows-what." Slanting his body sideways he slipped through Wuwang Apu's side and suddenly stretched out his finger, sealing the acupoint on Wuwang Apu's lower abdomen.

It would still be very difficult for him to avoid this attack even if he was completely alert not to mention Wuwang Apu was taken by surprise. Once his acupoint was sealed, his body went numb and he was paralyzed. Inwardly he was feeling very strange; when did he offend this mute Toutuo? Could it be that his 'Ku Dashi' greeting just a moment ago was not respectful enough?

Fan Yao shoved the door open and quick as lightning he plunged into the bed. Before his feet even touched the floor his palm had already struck toward someone on the bed. He fully realized the level of Lu Zhangke's martial art skill; if he failed to inflict serious injury with this one palm strike, then it would not be easy to determine victory or defeat in a life and death fight, hence he had exerted his whole strength in this one strike.

"Splat!" the quilt burst open; cotton fibers flew everywhere. Fan Yao opened the cotton-waded quilt and as he looked, he saw Concubine Han with blood coming out of her mouth and nose. She was as dead as a jade statue. But Lu Zhangke's shadow was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly Fan Yao got an idea; he turned around and went out the room. He pulled Wuwang Apu inside and stuffed him underneath the bed. He had just closed the door when he heard Lu Zhangke's angry voice outside, "Apu! Apu! How dare you leave your post?"

Turned out Lu Zhangke had been waiting outside Miejue Shitai for quite a while; he wondered how long these mother and daughter would fussily talk to each other. He did not dare to offend Ku Toutuo, so he did not dare to crash in. His heart wandered toward Concubine Han and he missed her already; thereupon he returned to Wuwang Apu's room, only to see that his always-obedient main disciple was unexpectedly not guarding outside the door. He was really angry. Shoving the door open he was relieved not to see anything unusual. Concubine Han was still lying on the bed facing inward, her body was still covered by the cotton quilt.

Lu Zhangke bolted the door behind him before turning around and smiled, "Pretty girl, I am going to unseal your acupoint, but you must not make any noise." While speaking he stretched out his hand toward the bedding, his finger aimed toward Concubine Han's spine. Suddenly a strong hand, with its five fingers as hard as a pair of iron pliers, grabbed the main artery on his wrist; at once his body weakened, not a bit of strength was left in his body. He saw from the cotton quilt a head covered in long hair came out; it was none other than Ku Toutuo.

With his right hand Fan Yao held tight Lu Zhangke's main artery, while at the same time his left hand moved like the

wind, sealing nineteen major acupoints all over Lu Zhangke's body. Lu Zhangke was paralyzed; he lay on the floor with his eyes full of anger. Fan Yao pointed his finger to him and said, "The Old Man here has never changed his surname, nor has he changed his name. I am the Ming Cult's Right Emissary of the Brightness; surnamed Fan, given name Yao. Today you have fallen into my hand. You are always proud of your peerless intelligence, but you are actually a stupid and useless man. If I kill you now, I am neither a hero nor a real man; therefore, I am going to spare your life. If you have the ability, look for Fan Yao to seek your revenge in the future."

He was not done yet; he stripped Lu Zhangke naked and lay him down next to Concubine Han's dead body, and then he covered both people, one dead the other alive, under the cotton quilt. Now at last he took the antler staff, unscrewed the tip of the antler to get the antidote; and then went to the prisoners' room one by one to distribute the antidote to Kong Wen Dashi, Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, and the others. In doing so he had spent a lot of time; especially since he had to explain everything to the prisoners again and again. Finally he reached Mijue Shitai's room, and when she did not believe it was the real antidote, he bluffed her by saying it was another poison. Fan Yao hated her for killing so many of his Ming Cult brethren, so if he could hurt her some, he was very pleased.

Finished distributing the antidote Fan Yao felt very pleased of himself, but suddenly he heard clamoring noise of people shouting outside the Pagoda; among those people He Biweng's voice was the loudest, "This Ku Toutuo is a spy, get him down here, quick!"

Fan Yao groaned inwardly, "This is bad, really bad!" he thought, "Who helped this fellow out?" Poking his head

outside he saw He Biweng leading a large number of warriors surrounding the Pagoda.

As they saw Ku Toutuo's head, Sun Sanhui and Li Sicui shot their arrows while cursing, "Wicked thief Toutuo, you harmed us really bad!"

Actually, when He Biweng and the other two's acupoints were sealed, they should not be able to get out of trouble for a while; moreover, they were hidden inside Lu Zhangke's room, so normally nobody would dare to rashly go in. Who would have thought that Ruyang Palace dispatched a lot of warriors everywhere, including to the Wan An Temple. When they failed to see the Prince's beloved concubine's track, someone remembered Lu Zhangke's lecherous nature. But these warriors were always afraid of him; although they suspected the missing of the Prince's beloved concubine was somewhat related to him, who would dare treading on a tiger's head by offending him? After contemplating for a long time, the captain of the guards, Captain Ha, finally made up his mind. He sent a low ranking soldier to knock on Lu Zhangke's door; he figured out that a person of his rank, although Lu Zhangke was angry, he would not stoop so low as to harm this lowly soldier.

The soldier knocked on the door several times, but nobody answered. Captain Ha clenched his teeth and ordered the soldier to just shove the door open and take a look. To their surprise they saw He Biweng, Sun Sanhui and Li Sicui were lying on the floor. By this time He Biweng had managed to circulate his internal energy, trying to unseal his acupoints. He had unsealed three, four passages; and then Captain Ha helped him unseal the rest. Very soon he was able to move about freely.

He Biweng's anger had reached the heaven; he inquired

about Lu Zhangke and Ku Toutuo's whereabouts and was told that they went to the Pagoda. Thereupon he led the warriors to surround the Pagoda and then shouted loudly, calling Ku Toutuo to go down and fight to the death.

Fan Yao was secretly alarmed, "Fight to the death then fight to the death, do you think the one surnamed Fan is scared of you?" he thought, "Only these stinky monks and old nun have not taken the antidote for too long; they will still need about one and a half hour to recover their internal strengths. This He Biweng has heard my conversation with Lu Zhangke; although I kill the old Lu, I still cannot close his mouth. What should I do?"

At a loss of what to do Fan Yao paced back and forth for a while. He Biweng called out again, "Deserve-to-die Toutuo, if you don't get down, I am going up!"

Fan Yao returned to the room to get Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han who were still bundled inside the cotton quilt; he brought them to the railings and lifted them high in the air. "Old He!" he called out, "If you come near the gate even for one step, I am going to throw this old lecher Lu down."

The warriors were carrying torches high in their hands, which made the surrounding area as bright as day; but the Pagoda was too tall that the light could not reach Fan Yao. However, in spite of the dim light they could still recognize Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han's faces.

He Biweng was greatly shocked. "Shige [martial (older) brother], Shige, are you all right?" he called out. After calling out several times without hearing Lu Zhangke's reply, he started to think that his Shige was killed by Ku Toutuo. "Thief Toutuo, you killed my Shige. I swear I won't

live on the same earth as you do.”

Fan Yao unsealed Lu Zhangke’s mute acupoint. Immediately Lu Zhangke shot some abusive words, “Thief Toutuo, you are the enemy’s spy! I am going to cut you into thousand pieces ...” Fan Yao let him shout curses for a while before sealing his mute acupoint again.

Seeing his martial brother did not die, He Biweng was somewhat relieved; he was afraid Ku Toutuo would really throw his martial brother down, so he did not dare to come near the gate.

This deadlock situation dragged for quite a while; He Biweng did not dare to rescue his martial brother, while Fan Yao only hoped to gain as much time as possible. Half an hour by half an hour passed by, Fan Yao stood by the railings and laughed loudly, calling out, “Old He, your Shixiong [martial brother] has such nerve that he dared to kidnap the Prince’s beloved concubine. I caught them red-handed and captured them on the spot. You are still thinking of protecting your Shixiong? Captain, Sire, quickly arrest this old man. These two martial brothers are staging a rebellion, committing a capital crime. If you arrest him, I am sure the Prince will heap you with rewards.”

Captain Ha cast a sidelong glance toward He Biweng; he wanted to take an action, but lack the courage to do so. He felt strange to suddenly see Ku Toutuo open his mouth and speak, but the evidence in front of his eyes was that Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han were wrapped together in one cotton quilt. Besides, he had already had some previous suspicions, so in his heart was 90% believed what Fan Yao said. “Ku Dashi, please get down,” he loudly called out, “Let us go together to the Prince and sort this thing out. The three of you are senior masters, Xiao Ren [lit. little/lowly

person] does not dare to offend any of you.”

Fan Yao was very bold and he thought that while he went to the Prince's palace to sort out right from wrong, the prisoners would have had enough time to recover from their poisoning. “Wonderful! Wonderful!” he called out immediately, “I am just about to go to Wangye to receive the reward. Captain, Sir! Please look after this Old Man He, don't ever let him escape!”

While he was still speaking suddenly they heard sound of hoof beats, a rider was coming fast toward the temple, straight to the Pagoda. The surrounding warriors immediately bowed to pay their respect, “Xiao Wangye! [Young Prince]” they greeted.

From the Pagoda looking down Fan Yao saw that the crown on this person's head glittered under the flame light. When he was dismounting from a big and tall white horse, Fan Yao noticed that that person was wearing an embroidered gown. He was none other than the Ruyang Prince's crown prince, Kuku Temur, whose Chinese name was Wang Baobao.

“Where is Concubine Han?” in stern voice Wang Baobao asked, “Fuwang [father king] is extremely angry; he ordered me to come over and investigate.”

Captain Ha stepped forward to give his report; he said that Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han did indeed in the temple and were currently in Ku Toutuo's hands. He Biweng hastily said, “Xiao Wangye, don't listen to this rubbish; that Toutuo is a spy, he frames my Shige ...”

Wang Baobao raised his eyebrows and called out, “All of you, get down here to talk!”

Fan Yao had been serving in the palace for a long time, he knew Wang Baobao was very astute and competent; he was not inferior to his father. Fan Yao might be able to deceive others, but it would be difficult to hide the truth from this young prince. If he went down, the young prince might be able to see through his scheme in just a few sentences. Then if the young prince ordered the warriors to besiege him, He Biweng alone would give him enough trouble, making it difficult to escape, not to mention rescuing the imprisoned heroes on the Pagoda. In loud voice he said, "Xiao Wangye, I have Lu Zhangke in my hand. His Shidi [martial (younger) brother] hates me to the bones. If I came down, he would surely kill me."

"Just get down quickly, Mr. He will not kill you," Wang Baobao said.

Fan Yao shook his head and shouted, "It is still safer for me to stay on this Pagoda. Xiao Wangye, for all my life Ku Toutuo has never spoken; today the circumstance has forced me to open my mouth. I am doing it all to repay Wangye's kindness to me. If you don't believe me, Ku Toutuo would rather jump into the ground to meet my death to show my loyalty to you."

Listening to him, Wang Baobao knew that 70, 80% of what he said was nonsense; so it was obvious that he was trying to stall. In a low voice Wang Baobao asked Captain Ha, "What conspiracy is he in? He is deliberately stalling. Is he waiting for someone to come?"

"Xiao Ren does not know ..." Captain Ha replied.

"Xiao Wangye," He Biweng cut him off, "This bandit Toutuo has stolen my Shige's antidote; he must be planning on rescuing the rebels imprisoned in the Pagoda."

Wang Baobao realized it immediately. "Ku Dashi," he called out, "I know your loyalty. Quickly get down here; I am going to heap rewards on you."

"My legs were kicked by Lu Zhangke earlier," Fan Yao said, "Both legs are broken. I must not move now. Xiao Wangye, please wait a moment, as soon as I can move, I'll come down immediately."

"Captain Ha," Wang Baobao barked his order, "Send some men to go up and carry Ku Dashi down."

"No, no," Fan Yao said, "As soon as I move, my two legs will be crippled."

This time Wang Baobao did not have any suspicion anymore. With his own eyes he saw Concubine Han and Lu Zhangke were wrapped together inside the cotton quilt. Even if there was nothing going on between the two, he was certain his father king would not want to have Concubine Han anymore. In a low voice he said, "Captain Ha, set the Pagoda on fire. Set your men around with their bows and arrows. Whoever jumps down from the Pagoda, shoot him dead."

Captain Ha complied; he passed the order around. His archers surrounded the Pagoda with bows and arrows, ready to shoot; while the other warriors spread around to gather firewood and grass to light up the fire.

He Biweng was shocked. "Xiao Wangye," he called out, "My Shige is up there."

Wang Baobao coldly said, "This Toutuo can't stay up there forever; as soon as the Pagoda is on fire, he will come down."

He Biweng called out, "What if he throw my Shige down?"

Xiao Wangye, please don't light the fire."

"Humph," Wang Baobao snorted, ignoring his plea.

A short moment later the warriors had gathered enough kindling material and they set the Pagoda on fire.

He Biweng had always enjoyed good reputation in the Wulin world; even when he entered the service in the Ruyang Palace he had always been highly revered. Unexpectedly today not only he had fallen into Ku Toutuo's sinister plot, he was also ignored by the Young Prince. Seeing his martial brother in grave danger he did not care anymore whether it was the 'Xiao Wangye' or the 'Da Wangye' [lit. old king master]. Raising his pair of crane-beak pens he charged toward the warriors who were lighting the fire. 'Bang, bang!' two warriors were thrown away.

Wang Baobao was very angry. "Mister He," he shouted, "Are you defying my command?"

"If you did not set the Pagoda on fire, I would not dare to defy your command," He Biweng replied.

"Set the fire!" Wang Baobao shouted. With a wave of his left hand five foreign monk wearing red robes jumped from behind his back; they snatched away the torches from the warriors' hands and tossed them to the firewood and grass on the base of the Pagoda. As soon as the kindling material was lit, the fire was raging wild.

He Biweng was very anxious. He snatched a spear from a warrior's hand and frantically beat the wood and grass, trying to extinguish the fire.

"Arrest him!" Wang Baobao shouted.

Those five foreign monks in red unsheathed their sabers and surround He Biweng immediately. He Biweng was very angry; he dropped the spear and snatched the saber of a foreign monk to his left. Eluding his hand the foreign monk flipped the saber over and hacked his shoulder. He Biweng moved sideways to elude, while from behind came a gust of saber wind; as a result two sabers struck each other.

There were a total of eighteen foreign monks with high level of martial art under Wang Baobao's command; they were known as the 'Shi Ba Jin Gang' [eighteen Buddha's warrior attendants], consisted of Five Sabers, Five Swords, Four Staves, and Four Cymbals. These five monks were the 'Five-Saber Buddha's Warriors'. Each one of them alone was far below He Biweng in term of martial art level; however, with five of them fighting together, they complement each other in defense and offense. Furthermore, He Biweng's martial art level was high, but Zhang Wuji struck him until he vomited some blood the previous day; his internal energy suffered serious damage. On top of everything right in front of his eyes the fire was raging wild, his martial brother was in a precarious condition; unavoidably he could not keep himself calm and steady. As a result, it was difficult for him to score a quick victory.

In the meantime, Wang Baobao's subordinates kept adding wood and grass to make the fire even bigger. The Pagoda was constructed of brick and wood. Very soon the first several lower floors were starting to burn. Fan Yao dropped Lu Zhangke and dashed toward the room in which the Wudang heroes were imprisoned. "The Tartars are burning the Pagoda," he called out, "Has everybody's internal energy recovered?" But Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the others were still sitting cross-legged, cultivating their internal energy in full concentration. Nobody replied; apparently they were at a critical moment of their recovery process.

Several guards came to attack him. Fan Yao struck and grabbed them one by one; throwing them to their death at the bottom of the Pagoda. The rest of the guards scrambled downstairs over the fire, trying to save themselves.

A moment later the fire had reached the fourth floor, where the people from Huashan Pai were being imprisoned. They did not have time to wait for the recovery of their internal energy; in this dangerous situation everybody fled to the fifth floor. But the fire kept creeping upward to the fifth floor, causing the Kongtong Pai people also ran to the sixth floor. Some were rather slow, resulting in their clothes to catch fire. Fan Yao was at a loss.

Suddenly he heard someone calling out, “Fan Yaoshi [Right Emissary Fan], catch!” It was Wei Yixiao’s voice.

Fan Yao was greatly delighted; looking toward the direction of the voice he saw Wei Yixiao was standing at the rooftop of a big building behind the Wan An Temple. Wei Yixiao swung his arms to throw a long rope toward Fan Yao and Fan Yao caught it.

“Tie it on the railings, we’ll make a rope bridge,” Wei Yixiao called out.

Fan Yao had just tied the rope to the railings when ‘swish!’ Zhao Yishang of the ‘Shen Jian Ba Xiong’ [Eight Divine Archers] shot an arrow and cut the rope. Simultaneously Fan Yao and Wei Yixiao opened their mouths to curse; they knew that if they want to build a rope bridge, they would have to get rid of these Eight Divine Archers.

“Shoot your granny,” Wei Yixiao cursed, “If that one does not drop his bow and arrow, the Old Man will butcher him first.”

While cursing he drew his sword and jumped down.

His feet were barely touching the ground when five foreign monks wearing dark green robes surrounded him with swords in their hands. They were the 'Five-Sword Buddha Warriors' from the 'Eighteen Buddha Warriors' under Wang Baobao's command. The swords in their hands glittered, their sword moves were strange; and they attacked Wei Yixiao together.

He Biweng brandished his pair of crane-beak pens, fighting a fierce battle. "Xiao Wangye," he loudly called out, "If you don't order your men to put off the fire, don't blame me for being impolite to you."

Wang Baobao did not pay any attention to him. Four foreign monks with long Buddhist staves in their hands stood around the Young Prince, guarding him from any possible sneak attack.

He Biweng's anxiety rose up; his double-pen suddenly moved in 'heng sao qian jun' [sweeping a thousand soldiers], forcing the three foreign monks in front of him to retreat two steps. He Biweng anxiously rushed toward the Pagoda. The five foreign monks ran after him. He Biweng's feet kicked the ground and he flew to the eaves of the first floor. Seeing the fire was raging wild, the five foreign monks did not pursue.

He Biweng jumped from floor to floor. When he reached the eaves of the fourth floor Fan Yao poked out his head from the seventh floor; lifting high Lu Zhangke's body he loudly called out, "Old He, stop! If you move one more step, I am going to throw the Old Lu down, let him become deer mince meat." [Translator's note: the 'Lu' of Lu Zhangke means 'deer']

He Biweng obediently did not dare to move again. “Ku Dashi,” he called out, “We, martial brothers, have never offended you in the past, we still don’t have any enmity against you today, why do you make things difficult for us? If you want to save your old sweetheart Mijue Shitai and your beloved daughter Miss Zhou, then rescue them. I will not stop you.”

After taking the antidote from Ku Toutuo, Mijue Shitai thought that she had taken a poison and would die soon; but then Zhou Zhiruo had also taken the poison. Her lifetime hopes were shattered; how would her heart not bitter? While she was grieving suddenly she heard commotion at the base of the Pagoda; she heard Ku Toutuo and He Biweng’s argument, then she also heard Wang Baobao issued an order to set the Pagoda on fire. She heard it all, one by one, clearly. She felt strange, “Could it be that this devil-like Toutuo is really rescuing us?”

She thought she might as well try, whether good or bad. Immediately she felt warm energy flowing up from her ‘dan tian’ [pubic region]; which was different from when she was still under the influence of the poison. She would rather starve herself to death than obeying Zhao Min’s order to get out to the mail hall and contend in martial arts, as a result, she had been fasting for six, seven days. Her stomach was completely empty; therefore, as the antidote entered her belly, it rapidly entered the blood and neutralized the poison in her system. Her recovery was faster than everybody else. Furthermore, her internal energy was profound; it was even higher than Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, He Taichong and the others, perhaps it was somewhat inferior only to the Abbott of Shaolin Pai, Kong Wen Shen-seng [divine monk].

As the effect of the ‘Ten Fragrance Muscle-weaken Powder’

was gradually dispersed by the antidote, her own internal energy was able to push the toxicity away. In less than an hour later her internal energy had been recovered 50, 60%. She was still cultivating her internal energy intensively when suddenly from outside came He Biweng's voice; each word was like an arrow piercing her ear, "...If you want to save your old sweetheart Miejue Shitai and your beloved daughter Miss Zhou, then rescue them. I will not stop you."

How could she not get angry hearing this 'Old Sweetheart' and the other nonsense? In big strides she walked out of her room toward the railings. "What nonsense are you blabbering about? Such a dirty mouth!" she shouted angrily.

He Biweng looked at her imploringly, "Lao Shitai [Old Shitai], please tell your old ... old friend to let my Shige down. I guarantee your family of three will be able to leave safely. Xuanming Elders always say one as one, two as two; in no way we will fail to keep our words."

"What family of three?" Miejue Shitai asked angrily.

Although he was in a precarious situation, Fan Yao could not help to laugh aloud. Feeling very proud of himself he said, "Lao Shitai, this old man said I was your old sweetheart, and that Miss Zhou was our daughter."

Miejue Shitai was really, really angry, that under the flickering light of the fire downstairs her face looked terrifying. "Old He," she roared, "Come up here! I want to exchange a hundred palms with you before we talk again."

If it was different time, when He Biweng was challenged to come up, he would come up; he was not scared of the Sect Leader of Emei. But this time his martial brother had fallen into the enemy's hand; he did not dare to act recklessly. "Ku

Toutuo," he called out, "It was you who said that; I certainly would not talk irresponsibly."

Miejue Shitai shifted her gaze toward Fan Yao and in stern voice she asked, "Did you say such thing?"

Fan Yao laughed heartily; he was about to take that opportunity to ridicule her when suddenly he heard loud shouts at the bottom of the Pagoda. He looked down and saw by the flames a shadow was dancing like a fluttering butterfly among the flowers. That shadow moved around the warriors and the foreign monks. 'Bang! Clank! Clank! Bang! Clank! Clank!' everywhere he went a weapon fell down to the ground. The Cult Leader Zhang Wuji had arrived.

Zhang Wuji attacked the five wielding-swords foreign monks who were surrounding Wei Yixiao; sending their swords flying high into the air. Wei Yixiao was delighted; like a flash of lightning he dashed toward Zhang Wuji. "I am going to set the Ruyang Palace on fire," he said in a low voice.

Zhang Wuji nodded; he understood his intention. They had only a few people on their side; if they failed to rescue the masters of the Six Major Sects in a short period of time, the enemy might send more reinforcement. With the Green-winged Bat King went to set the Ruyang Palace on fire, the enemy would be forced, first and foremost, to protect the Prince. It was an excellent 'luring the tiger out of the mountain' or 'removing firewood from under the pot' plan.

Wei Yixiao's dark green shadow flashed by and flew over the tall wall surrounding the Temple. Zhang Wuji looked around him to assess the situation. "Fan Youshi," he called out loudly, "How are you?"

"It's bad!" Fan Yao called back, "The escape route is

completely on fire; we are trapped here.”

By this time, fourteen out of the eighteen foreign monks under Wang Baobao’s command had spread out and surrounded Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji thought that to defeat the enemy he had to capture the leader first; thereupon he turned his attention to that young Tartar prince wearing a golden helmet. If he could capture him, then he could force the Prince to order his people to put off the fire and release the prisoners. Immediately he leaned sideways and slipped from among the foreign monks; he went straight to Wang Baobao fast and fluid like a fish swimming in the water.

Suddenly out of the blue a sword came from his left side, the blade carried a cold gust of wind; in a flash the sword tip was moving toward his chest. Hastily Zhang Wuji drew a step backward, only to hear a woman’s voice said, “Zhang Gongzi, this is my brother. Don’t hurt him.”

The sword in her hand moved in graceful and elegant way; the blade was colder than water. It was the Yitian sword; a sword as beautiful as a flower. The bearer was of course Zhao Min. She hastily followed Zhang Wuji, it was just that she was a bit slower.

Zhang Wuji said, “Please order your people to put out the fire and let the people go; otherwise I will not be polite toward the two of you.”

Zhao Min called out, “Shiba Jin Gang, this man’s martial art is high; all Jin Gang are to fight him together.”

Those eighteen foreign monks had just suffered under Zhang Wuji’s hand; they did not need their Junzhu [Princess] to remind them. They knew their opponent was fierce. ‘Bang! Bang!’ the eight copper cymbals in the Four-

Cymbal Buddha Warriors' hands crashed together. Eighteen foreign monks moved together in front of Wang Baobao and Zhao Min, separating them from Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji took a glance; he saw eighteen foreign monks walked in circle around him. Their footwork was strange, eighteen people formed a human wall; apparently their movement contained many changes. His interest was piqued; he wanted to see if he could break this 'Jin Gang Zhen' [Buddha Warrior Formation]. But right at that moment a loud bang was heard, one of the big pillars on the Pagoda broke and fell down. Turning his head around he saw the fire had reached the seventh floor. Amidst the blood-red flickering tongues of fire two people were engaged in an intense battle; they were Miejue Shitai and He Biweng.

Looking further up he saw the corridor by the railings of the tenth floor was full of people; they were the masters from Shaolin, Wudang, and the other Sects. Their martial arts were not recovered yet; but even if they were, the Pagoda was over ten 'zhang's tall [over 100 feet tall], even if their internal energy and qing gong [lightness skill] were not the slightest bit lost, they would certainly plunge to their deaths if they jumped down.

An idea came into Zhang Wuji's mind; he pondered over it for a moment, "I can't possibly break this Jin Gang Zhen in a short period of time. Even if I did, the other warriors are certainly going to attack me. It won't be easy to capture Miss Zhao's brother. Miejue Shitai has been fighting He Biweng all this time without showing any sign of defeat. It appears that her internal energy has already been restored. Then Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] and the others must also be recovered. Only the Pagoda is too high, they are unable to jump down."

As soon as his mind was made, he moved around the courtyard in lightning fast speed; his hands struck and snatched, slapped and grabbed the Eight Divine Archers and the warriors around the Pagoda. He either knocked down the bows and arrows from their hands, or sealed their acupoints. In a short moment there was no one standing with neither bow nor arrow around the Pagoda. "Seniors on the Pagoda!" he called out, "Please jump down! I will catch you down here."

The people on the Pagoda were stunned; they thought, 'This Pagoda was over ten 'zhang's tall, the force of their bodies falling down would be tremendous, although you have thousand catties strength, how could you catch us?' Immediately some people from Kongtong, Kunlun and some other Sects blurted out, "Surely we cannot jump down; don't listen to this kid! He wants to deceive us so that we will meet our cruel deaths."

Zhang Wuji saw the smoke and fire filled the air, it almost reached near the place where those masters were standing. If they did not jump soon, they would inevitably become barbecued meat. Raising his voice he shouted, "Yu Erbo [second martial (older) uncle], your kindness to me is like a mountain, do you think Xiao Zhi [little nephew] would deliberately harm you? Why don't you jump first?"

Yu Lianzhou trusted ZhangWuji completely; besides, he thought that although his martial art skill was stronger, he would still not be able to save himself. Therefore, rather than being burned to death, wouldn't it be better to plunge to death? "All right!" he called out, "I'll jump down!" Without hesitation he jumped from the Pagoda down to the ground.

Zhang Wuji's eyes followed his uncle closely; he waited until they were about five feet apart before his palm gently

patted his uncle's waist. In this one palm he had unleashed the ultimate power of the 'qian kun da nuo yi' [the great shifting and moving of the universe]; by absorbing and releasing energy he dispersed the falling down momentum from top to bottom to from left to right, and thus sending Yu Lianzhou flying horizontally several feet to the side. By that time his internal energy had been recovered 70, 80%; flipping his body midair he landed steadily on the ground. In one fluid motion his palm struck a Mongolian warrior that he spurted blood from his mouth.

"Da Shige [first martial (older) brother], Si Shidi! [fourth martial (younger) brother]," he loudly called out, "Jump down!"

The people on the Pagoda cheered as they saw Yu Lianzhou land safely on the ground. Out of his deep love toward his son, Song Yuanqiao wanted him to jump down first. "Qingshu," he said, "You jump down!"

Ever since they came out of their prisons, Song Qingshu had always been standing up next to Zhou Zhiruo. "Miss Zhou," he said, "Quickly jump down."

Zhou Zhiruo's internal strength had not been recovered yet; she was unable to help her master, yet she was unwilling to escape alone. Hearing Song Qingshu, she shook her head and said, "I am going to wait for Shifu!"

By this time He Taichong, Ban Shuxian, and the others had jumped down one after another; they were all intercepted by Zhang Wuji using the marvelous power of the 'qian kun da nuo yi' to the fullest; breaking the vertical force of the drop, turning it horizontally, delivering them all one by one from danger.

These people's internal energy had not been fully recovered

yet, but although their strength was only 50, 60% of their normal level, they had already given the foreign monks and the warriors a lot of trouble. Yu Lianzhou and the others snatched some weapons and they formed a fence around Zhang Wuji.

Wang Baobao's and Zhao Min's subordinates were trying to stop Zhang Wuji, but Yu Lianzhou, He Taichong, Ban Shuxian and the others blocked them. One more person jumped down from the Pagoda meant one more person was protecting Zhang Wuji. Ever since these people were being held captives by Zhao Min, they had suffered innumerable humiliations and a lot of them even lost their fingers. This time they were freed from their bondage, all of them were staking whatever they have, venting their anger. In a short moment the ground around the Pagoda was littered by more than twenty warriors' corpses.

Seeing the unfavorable situation, Wang Baobao issued an order, "Get my special archer force over here!"

Captain Ha was just turning his body around to carry out the Young Prince's order when he saw the sky toward the southeast corner was bright with fire. He was shocked and immediately called out, "Xiao Wangye, the Palace is on fire! We must hurry to save Wangye!"

Wang Baobao was concerned over his father's safety, he could not be bothered by catching or killing some rebelling thieves. "Meizi, [younger sister - term of endearment]" he hastily said, "I am going back to the Palace. You must be careful!" Without waiting for Zhao Min to answer he turned his horse around and galloped away to the exit.

As Wang Baobao left, the Eighteen Buddha Warriors followed; as did most of the palace guards. They saw the

Palace was on fire and thought that a large number of rebels had attacked the Palace, they were very anxious; nobody guessed it was a trick played by Wei Yixiao, one person.

Meanwhile Song Qingshu, Song Yuanqiao, Zhang Songxi, Mo Shenggu, and the others had jumped down from the Pagoda. Very soon the situation was reversed, the warriors were outnumbered. A little later Kong Wen Fang Zhang [Abbot Kong Wen], Kong Zhi Dashi [Reverend Kong Zhi], as well as the senior monks from the Damo Hall and Luohan Hall had also jumped down. Zhao Min's warriors lost any chance to gain victory.

Zhao Min thought that if they did not escape now, they would change from captors to captives. Therefore, immediately she issued an order, "Everybody, get out of Wan An Temple!" Turning toward Zhang Wuji she said, "At dusk tomorrow, I will be waiting for you to have some drinks. I hope you'll come."

Zhang Wuji was startled; but before he could answer Zhao Min flashed one of her captivating smiles, and hurriedly retreated toward the hall at the rear of the Wan An Temple.

He heard Fan Yao, still on top of the Pagoda, shouted loudly, "Miss Zhao, quickly jump! Your eyebrows are burned. You don't want to jump, do you want to be a beautiful-woman charcoal?"

"I want to be with Shifu!" Zhou Zhiruo replied.

In the meantime, Mijue Shitai was still in fierce battle against He Biweng. When the floor they were on was burned down, they jumped to the higher floor. Very soon they were fighting in the room at the corner of the tenth floor. Her internal energy had not 100% recovered, but from the beginning she had disregarded her life by concentrating all

her strength in offense without thinking about defense at all. On the other hand, He Biweng was first of all anxious over his martial brother's safety, so he could not focus his attention to the battle. Secondly, his previous injury from Zhang Wuji's palm had not been healed completely. Thirdly, he had just recovered from the poison administered by Fan Yao, plus his acupoints were sealed for quite a long time, his limbs were not as agile as at normal time. Therefore, the two of them fought for a long time without clear winner or loser.

Miejue Shitai heard her disciple's voice; "Zhiruo," she called out, "Quickly jump down! Don't mind me! This old thief has humiliated me too much, how can I let him live?"

He Biweng was groaning inwardly, he thought, "This old nun is disregarding her own life fighting me; while I must save my martial brother. Must I lose my life together with her in this hell hole?" He shouted loudly, "Miejue Shitai, it was Ku Toutuo who said that, what do I have to do with it?"

Miejue Shitai held her palm and turned around, "Stinky Toutuo, was it you who said all those crazy talk?" she asked Fan Yao.

Fan Yao was amused, he deliberately asked, "What crazy talk?" He wanted Miejue Shitai to say it with her own mouth, 'He said that I am your old sweetheart, and that Zhou Zhiruo is our daughter.' But how could she say such thing? However, hearing Fan Yao's answer, Miejue Shitai knew He Biweng was telling the truth. She was so angry that her body trembled.

As Miejue Shitai was turning her back toward him, suddenly a burst of black smoke rolled in; He Biweng saw this was a good opportunity to launch a sneak attack. Thereupon amidst the smoke he launched a palm strike toward Miejue

Shitai's back.

Zhou Zhiruo and Fan Yao saw it clearly; they shouted together, "Shifu, watch out!" "Old Nun, watch out!"

Miejue Shitai quickly struck her left palm backward to counterattack, but He Biweng's yin-yang palms had already arrived. Her left palm blocked He Biweng's left palm, but her back was struck by his right-hand Xuanming Shen Zhang [Xuanming Divine Palm]. This Xuanming Divine Palm was the exact same palm he exchanged with Zhang Sanfeng at Mount Wudang a few years back. Miejue Shitai staggered; she almost fell down.

Zhou Zhiruo was greatly shocked; she rushed ahead to support her Shifu. Fan Yao was very angry; "Wicked despicable coward!" he roared, "You are not worthy to live!" Lifting the cotton quilt containing Lu Zhangke and Concubine Han, he threw the bundle down.

He Biweng loved his martial brother very much; without thinking he jumped, trying to catch the bundle, but it was already too far outside the Pagoda that He Biweng only managed to grab the corner of it. Because of the weight, He Biweng was also dragged down.

Zhang Wuji was standing at the base of the Pagoda. Because of the smoke, he could not see clearly the battle high on the Pagoda. He saw a big object followed by a man was falling down. He did not know what the bundle was, but amidst the smoke he saw vaguely there was somebody inside the bundle. He could see clearly however, that the man was He Biweng. He realized this man had caused him endless suffering, even his parents' death was closely related to him. But in the end Zhang Wuji just could not bear to see him falling down to meet his cruel death. Immediately he flew up

and with both palms he struck the bundle and He Biweng, sending each one of them flying about three 'zhang's to the right and to the left.

He Biweng flipped his body midair and landed on the ground. "Really dangerous!" he inwardly called out in alarm. Never in his life would he expect Zhang Wuji to render good for evil by saving his life. As he turned his head around to look for his martial brother he was shocked. Turned out Zhang Wuji's palm strike had caused the bundle to burst open, throwing two naked bodies into a pile of burning wood. Lu Zhangke's acupoints were still sealed; he was unable to move that his beard and hair was burned immediately.

"Shige!" He Biweng called out in panic and rushed toward the fire.

As he landed on the fire, before his feet were steady, Yu Lianzhou had called out, "Eat my palm!" followed by a left palm strike toward He Biweng's shoulder.

He Biweng did not dare to block, he shrank his shoulder to evade. It seemed like Yu Lianzhou's palm had lost its momentum, but as He Biweng's shoulder shrunk, the palm followed and 'slap!' He Biweng was so much in pain that his forehead was drenched in cold sweats. Yet rescuing his martial brother was more important than ignoring the pain He Biweng hastily embraced Lu Zhangke and took him flying over the tall wall surrounding the temple.

At that moment a burning big pillar of the Pagoda fell down, crushing Concubine Han's body and in a short moment her body was caught on fire. The people on the ground shouted repeatedly, "Quickly jump down! Quickly jump down!"

Fan Yao fled to the east and leaped to the west to avoid the fire. As the main pillars burned down, the bricks and tiles from the Pagoda started to fall down like rain. The Pagoda was starting to sway, looked like it would collapse anytime.

In stern voice Miejue Shitai said, “Zhiruo, jump down!”

“Shifu, you jump first, then I’ll jump!” Zhou Zhiruo replied.

Miejue Shitai suddenly leaped and hacked Fan Yao’s left shoulder with her palm, while shouting, “The Devil Cult’s thief, I can’t let you go!”

Fan Yao let out a long laugh and jumped down. Zhang Wuji received him with a slap of his palm, let him gently landed on the ground.

“Fan Youshi,” Zhang Wuji praised him, “You have successfully accomplished a very difficult task!”

Fan Yao steadied his feet before answering, “If not because of Jiaozhu’s matchless skill, everybody would become roast pork on top of that Pagoda. Fan Yao’s way of handling affair was improper; what merit do I have?”

Miejue Shitai stretched out her arm to grab Zhou Zhiruo and take her jump down. When she was about a little over a ‘zhang’ away from the ground, she sent all her strength to her arms and threw Zhou Zhiruo several feet upward. That way she broke the momentum of Zhou Zhiruo’s fall that she only had about a ‘zhang’ to fall to the ground, while at the same time her own falling down momentum was actually strengthened.

Zhang Wuji dashed forward to pat her waist with the ‘qian kun da nuo yi’. Who would have thought that even in her death Miejue Shitai was not willing to receive any kindness

from the Ming Cult. Seeing Zhang Wuji's palm was about to reach her, she gathered all her remaining strength to launch an attack. Two palms collided. 'Bang!' Zhang Wuji's palm was shifted sideways. 'Crack!' Miejue Shitai crashed on the ground; her spine, as well as several bones on her body, broke immediately.

On the other hand, Zhang Wuji was hit really hard from her palm strength plus the falling down momentum; blood bubbled up in his chest and he staggered several steps backward. He did not understand because with this one palm attack Miejue Shitai obviously was trying to kill herself.

Zhou Zhiruo threw herself on top of her Shifu's body while crying out, "Shifu, Shifu!" The rest of the Emei disciples, both males and females, all gathered around their master's body in great confusion.

"Zhiruo," Miejue Shitai said, "From this day on, you are our school's Sect Leader. The things I want you to do, you won't disobey all ... all of them?"

Zhou Zhiruo cried and said, "Yes, Shifu, disciple does not dare to forget."

Miejue Shitai showed a faint smile and said, "Then, I can die with closed eyes ..."

Right away Zhang Wuji came forward to check on her pulse, but suddenly Miejue Shitai flipped her right hand and grabbed Zhang Wuji's wrist. In a stern voice she said, "Devil's Cult evil disciple, if you dare to violate my beloved pure disciple, even being a ghost I will not spare ..." The last 'you' word had not been uttered, she had already breathed her last; yet her grip was not loosened up, her five fingernails dug Zhang Wuji's flesh until he was bleeding.

Fan Yao called out, "Everybody, come follow me; we are going out from the western gate. If we tarry, that scoundrel king's cavalry would catch us here."

Carrying Mijue Shitai's lifeless body in his arms Zhang Wuji said in low voice, "Let's go!"

Zhou Zhiruo gently pried her master's fingers from Zhang Wuji's hand, she held out her hand to take her master's body, all the while she avoided Zhang Wuji's eyes; and then she quietly walked out of the temple.

By then the masters from Kunlun, Kongtong and Huashan had already swarmed out the temple. Only Shaolin Pai's Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two 'shen seng' [divine monks], did not lose their seniority demeanor; they came to Zhang Wuji with clasped palms to express their gratitude. And then they exchanged some modest greetings with Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and the others before finally they left the temple together.

Zhang Wuji had spent a lot of energy in using the 'qian kun da nuo yi' to rescue the masters from the Six Major Sects; his internal energy was depleted. Last of all he exchanged a palm with Mijue Shitai that he suffered a major internal injury; by now he was so weak that he could not walk. Mo Shenggu took him and carried him on his back. Zhang Wuji took that opportunity to silently cultivating his 'jiu yang shen gong' [the Nine Yang divine strength/energy] that at last his strength was recovered.

Meanwhile it was almost dawn; as the crowd of heroes reached the western gate, they dispersed and went out the city separately to avoid the gate guards. Several 'li's outside the city they met Yang Xiao who had already prepared

several large mule and horse carriages. He congratulated them on escaping the danger.

Kong Wen Dashi [Reverend Kong Wen] said, "If not for the Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu and gentlemen's help today, it is difficult to say what our Central Plains' [zhong yuan] Six Major Sects' fate would be, our gratitude of your kindness is unspeakable. Now about next step, how we are going to proceed, please Zhang Jiaozhu gives us instruction."

"My knowledge is shallow," Zhang Wuji answered, "I don't have any plan, so I invite Reverend Abbot of the Shaolin Pai to give us orders." But Reverend Kong Wen strongly refused.

Zhang Songxi said, "This place is not too far from the city. Today we have made an earth-shattering disturbance inside the Tartar's capital; how could that evil king let it go? As soon as the fire in the palace is extinguished, he would certainly dispatch a cavalry to pursue us. Let us leave this place first before deciding on our next action plan."

He Taichong said, "If that evil king sends a cavalry to pursue us, then that would be best. We can kill them all to vent our several days of built-up anger."

"Our internal strength is not completely recovered yet," Zhang Songxi said, "Killing the Tartars right now is not our priority; we'd better avoid them first."

"Zhang Sixia [fourth hero Zhang] is right," Reverend Kong Wen said, "We could kill many Tartars today, but our own casualty would not be small. We'd better withdraw for the time being." Certainly the words of Shaolin's Abbot carried a different weight. As soon as he opened his mouth, nobody dared to raise any objection anymore.

Reverend Kong Wen asked again, “Zhang Sixia, according to your respected opinion, where should we go to temporarily avoid the enemy?”

Zhang Songxi replied, “The Tartars would certainly expect us to go if not to the south, then to the southeast. We will go to the opposite direction; to the northwest. What do you think?”

Everybody was stunned; yet Yang Xiao actually clapped his hands and said, “Zhang Sixia’s plan is really marvelous. The people of the northwest is sparse, we can look for any uninhabited mountain and hide there for a while. The Tartars would not think of looking for us there.” The more the rest of them think, the more they realized Zhang Songxi’s plan was indeed marvelous. Thereupon they turned their carriages around and went northwest.

About fifty ‘li’s later the group of heroes stopped at a valley to take a rest and eat. Yang Xiao had already prepared dried provisions, dried meat and wine; nothing was lacking. They were talking about the rescue operation they had just undergone and they all agreed that Zhang Wuji and Fan Yao were in charge of the entire battle and the rescue operation.

On the side Zhou Zhiruo and the Emei disciples were cremating Mijue Shitai’s body. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Song Yuanqiao, Zhang Wuji, and the rest of them, one by one, offered their last respect. Mijue Shitai was a great hero; although her temperament was peculiar she had always upheld chivalry and justice. Her character was imposing; there was no one in the Wulin world who did not respect her. The Emei disciples cried and wept loudly, the rest of the people were also mournful.

In a loud and clear voice Reverend Kong Wen said, “The

dead cannot go back to live. The heroes of Emei must carry on the will Shitai had left behind; hence although Shitai died, she will also live. This time we fell under evil people's poisonous hands; everybody suffered a great defeat. Even our own Sect's Kong Xing Shidi [martial (younger) brother] had died under the Tartars' hands. This debt must be settled, but as how we are going to do this, we need to discuss it further."

Reverend Kong Zhi said, "Initially the Six Major Sects of the Central Plains and the Ming Cult are enemies to each other; but Zhang Jiaozhu has forgotten this animosity and lent a hand to rescue us. This way the enmity between us is to be forever eradicated. From now on we are of one heart and mind, driving the invaders together."

Everybody voiced their agreement at once. However, speaking of revenge, each sect's opinion differed with one another; it was difficult to reach decision. Finally Kong Wen said, "We cannot decide on this matter, let us take a rest for several days, and then separately go back to our places. Someday when we are ready to launch a large attack of vengeance, then we will slowly talk it over." Everybody nodded their heads in approval.

Zhang Wuji said, "Now that this important matter is done, I have some personal business I have to attend; I need to return to Dadou. Hereby I bid everybody farewell. Later on we will work hand in hand, fighting the Tartars to the death together."

Everybody raised their voices together, "We will work hand in hand, fighting the Tartars to the death together." Their shouts shook the sky, the valley reverberated with their cry; and then they send Zhang Wuji off to the mouth of the valley. Zhang Wuji raised his hands in salute and said

goodbye.

“Jiaozhu,” Yang Xiao said, “The heroes of the world look up on you; you have to take a really good care of yourself in everything.”

“Xiongdi [brother] will remember that,” Zhang Wuji said. Mounting his horse he galloped to the south.

End of Chapter 27.

Chapter 28 - Broken Kindness, Lost Friendship, Purple Robed King

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly a black light flashed, three weapons were cut down. Among the five people, four were cut off right on their chests, becoming eight pieces, which scattered to all directions, falling off the hill. Only Zheng Zhanglao survived with his right arm cut off, he fell on the ground. They saw Xie Xun's hand was holding a deep black saber, precisely what was known as 'the most revered in the Wulin world, the Tulong Saber.

When he was nearing the Dadou, Zhang Wuji thought that with the uproar at the Wan An Temple the previous night, a lot of the warriors working for the Prince of Ruyang would certainly recognize his face; hence it would be inconvenient for him to enter the city as he was. Thereupon he stopped by a farmer's house along the way to buy a set of old peasant clothes. He changed his clothes and wore a bamboo hat; he also blackened his face and hands using some soot and mud before he finally entered the city.

He returned toward the inn he was staying at the western side of the city, but did not enter the inn right away. He went around looking everywhere, and after ensuring that he saw nothing unusual he went into his room quick as a flash.

Xiao Zhao was sitting by the window; her hands were busy with needle and thread. She was startled to see someone enter the room; but her face broke into joyous smile just like a blooming flower in the spring after recognizing him. "Gongzi ye [young master], I thought it was a farmer breaking into the wrong room; turned out it was you," she said with a laugh.

Zhang Wuji also laughed. "What are you doing?" he asked, "Aren't you lonely?"

Xiao Zhao blushed; immediately she hid the clothes she was sewing behind her back. "I am learning to sew, but it is so bad," she said bashfully. Stuffing the clothes underneath her pillow, she rose up to pour some tea for Zhang Wuji. Seeing his black face she laughed and said, "Aren't you going to wash your face?"

"I put this on purpose," Zhang Wuji smiled, "I can't take it out yet." He took the teacup while pondering in his heart, "Miss Zhao wanted me to come with her fetching the Tulong

Saber. As a real man I have to live up to my promise; I can't break it. Besides, I also want to take Yifu [foster father] to return to the 'zhong tu' [mainland, lit. middle/central earth]. Yifu was afraid that he made too many enemies in the 'zhong yuan' [Central Plains]; now that he is blind, he won't be able to deal with them. But right now the warriors of the Wulin world are united to fight the invaders; certainly personal grudges can be resolved. As long as he is with me, nobody will be able to harm a single hair of his head. The wind and the waves of the ocean are dangerous; this child Xiao Zhao cannot come with us. Mmm, I got it. I can ask Miss Zhao to settle Xiao Zhao in the Palace; it is certainly a lot safer than any other places."

Seeing him suddenly smile, Xiao Zhao asked, "Gongzi, what are you thinking?"

"I am going to a far, far away place," Zhang Wuji said, "It is not safe to take you along. I am thinking of taking you to a place where you can stay temporarily."

Xiao Zhao's face changed. "Gongzi ye," she said, "I am going with you. Xiao Zhao must attend to your need everyday."

"This is for your own good," Zhang Wuji tried to persuade her; "The place I am going is too far and too dangerous. I don't know when I am coming back."

Xiao Zhao said, "Inside that cave on the Brightness Peak I had made a resolution; wherever you go, I am going with you. Only if you kill me then you can get rid of me. Am I that disgusting that you do not want to be with me?"

"No, no," Zhang Wuji said, "You know I like you very much, but I don't want you to brave an unnecessary danger. As

soon as I return, I'll immediately look for you."

Xiao Zhao shook her head, "As long as I am with you, I don't mind any danger. Gongzi, take me with you!"

Zhang Wuji grasped Xiao Zhao's hands and said, "Xiao Zhao, I am not going to lie to you; I have made a promise to Miss Zhao that I am going to accompany her overseas. On the ocean, the waves are so high that they reach the sky. I have to go since I don't have any choice, but for you, what good is it for you to brave this mighty danger?"

Xiao Zhao's face turned red, "You are going with Miss Zhao, I have more reasons to go with you." While saying this, she was so worried that tears welled up in her eyes.

"Why do you have more reasons to go with me?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"That Miss Zhao is so evil," Xiao Zhao said, "Nobody could guess what she is going to do to you. If I am with you, I can look after you."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, "Could it be that this young girl have a deep feeling toward me?" he thought in his heart. Hearing the sincerity in her words his heart welled up with gratitude. He smiled and said, "All right, I'll take you with me. But if you get seasick on the boat, you are not allowed to complain."

Xiao Zhao was very happy; she gave her promise repeatedly. She said, "If I make you mad and you are not happy with me, you can toss me to the sea to feed the fish!"

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "How can I bear to part with you?"

Although the two of them had known each other for quite a while, and sometimes had to share the same room due to the inconveniences of traveling, Xiao Zhao had always taken the position of a servant, and Zhang Wuji had never teased her or said anything inappropriate to her. Now that he blurted out, 'How can I bear to part with you?' he realized that he had made an indiscreet remark; he could not help blushing and turned his head around to look out the window, yet Xiao Zhao actually sighed and sat by the bed side.

"Why do you sigh?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"Actually, there are many people you cannot bear to part with," Xiao Zhao replied, "Emei Pai's Miss Zhou, Ruyang Palace's Junzhu Niang-niang [princess; 'niang-niang' can also mean 'empress']; I don't know how many more. How can you be concerned over a little girl like me?"

Zhang Wuji stood up in front of her and said, "Xiao Zhao, you are always good to me. Do you think I don't know it? Do you think I am such an ungrateful man that I do not know good from bad?" He said these things with a serious face, showing her his earnestness.

Xiao Zhao was shy and happy at the same time. Lowering her head she said, "I am not asking you to treat me in a special way. As long as you allow me to be with you forever; to be your servant, to take care of you, I will be satisfied. You haven't slept for the whole night, you must be very tired. Why don't you lie on the bed and take some rest?" While saying that she lifted the blanket from the bed to let him lie down; and then she returned to her seat by the window, resuming her sewing.

While closing his eyes Zhang Wuji could still hear the occasional clinking noise of the iron chain on her hand; he felt safe and peaceful. Not too long afterwards he fell sound asleep.

Zhang Wuji slept until dusk. He woke up and ate a bowl of noodles. "Xiao Zhao," he said, "Let me take you to see Miss Zhao, we can borrow her Yitian Sword to cut the iron shackle on your hands and feet."

Two people went out to the street. They saw Mongolian soldiers on horsebacks everywhere. It seemed like the security level was at its highest after the fire at the Ruyang Palace and the big trouble in the Wan An Temple the previous night. As two people heard the hoof beats, they shrank back and hid behind the corner of a house to avoid being seen by the soldiers. They arrived at the small wine shop without taking too much time.

Zhang Wuji took Xiao Zhao and entered in pushing the door open. He saw Zhao Min was drinking wine, she was sitting on the same table as on the previous night. As she saw them she stood up and smiled, "Zhang Gongzi is truly a trustworthy man," she said.

Zhang Wuji noticed her expression was as usual, as if last night's trouble had nothing to do with her at all; he mused, "This girl is truly extraordinary; I sent someone to kill her father's beloved concubine and released the masters of the Six Major Sects whom she painstakingly captured after a meticulous plan. She should be very angry, yet she looks like nothing happened. I wonder how she is going to vent up her anger."

He saw the table was already set with two sets of chopsticks and cups just like last night. He bowed slightly and took a

seat. Xiao Zhao stood a bit farther away, taking the position of a servant.

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Miss Zhao, about last night, I offended you a lot. Please forgive me."

Zhao Min said with a smile, "That Concubine Han of my father was bewitchingly enchanting. I was repugnant. My Mama praised you as a smart and competent man."

Zhang Wuji was stunned; her reaction was truly beyond his anticipation.

Zhao Min also said, "I am fine with you rescuing those people too. They were not willing to surrender anyway, so what the use of keeping them here? Now that you have rescued them, everybody must be very grateful to you. Currently in the Wulin world of the Central Plains nobody surpasses you in term of power and prestige. Zhang Gongzi, let me offer you a toast!" With a soft laugh she raised her cup.

Right at this moment the door was pushed open and someone came in; it was Fan Yao. He went to Zhang Wuji first to pay his respect; and then he turned toward Zhao Min and bowed respectfully to her. "Junzhu," he said, "Ku Toutuo is taking his leave from you."

Zhao Min ignored his greeting; "Ku Dashi," she said in a cold voice, "You have hidden the truth from me really good. This time Junzhu has stumbled big time."

Fan Yao stood straight up, he boldly said, "Ku Toutuo's surname is Fan, first name Yao; the Guangming Youshi [The Right Emissary of the Brightness] of the Ming Cult. Because the royal government is in enmity with the Ming Cult, I

entered the Ruyang Palace to spy on the enemy. I have received a lot of Junzhu's kindness; thereupon I come today to bid you farewell."

Zhao Min remained to be cold; she said, "If you want to go, just go. What's the purpose of this propriety?"

"A real man always handles matters in the open," Fan Yao said, "From this day on, I am Junzhu's enemy. If I do not let Junzhu know this, I am betraying Junzhu's kind treatment in the past."

Zhao Min turned toward Zhang Wuji and asked, "What is it that you have, that each one of your subordinates is willing to die for you?"

To which Zhang Wuji replied, "We are doing it for our country and our people, for chivalry, for loyalty and self-sacrifice. Fan Youshi and I did not know each other, yet we feel like old friends; we are devoted to each other, lifting high this 'yi4' [justice/righteousness] character."

Fan Yao laughed aloud and said, "Jiaozhu's words truly express what is in subordinate's heart. Jiaozhu, you have to be really careful; this Junzhu Niang-niang is young, but her heart is cruel and merciless, she is truly an extraordinary woman. You have too kind of a heart; you must never let her swindle you."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, "I will not dare to be careless."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Ku Dashi, thank you for your compliment."

Fan Yao turned around to leave the inn. When he walked pass Xiao Zhao, he suddenly stopped dead on his track. His

face showed a big shock, as if he suddenly saw a ghost or a demon. "You ... you ..." he stammered.

"What?" Xiao Zhao asked.

Fan Yao stared blankly at her for half a day before he finally said, "No ... it can't be ... I thought you are someone else." Heaving a deep sigh he pushed the door and left; his face looked so gloomy. "Looks alike, looks alike," he softly mumbled.

Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji looked at each other in bewilderment; they wondered to whom Xiao Zhao might look alike.

Suddenly they heard the sound of whistle in the distant; three long and two short whistles, sharp and shrill whistles. Zhang Wuji was startled; he remembered it was the signal of Emei Pai disciple whenever they were trying to contact their fellow martial brothers or sisters. In the Western Region he had met Miejue Shitai and the others, and he heard this exact same signal back then. "Why do the Emei Pai's disciples return to Dadou [lit. grand capital, the present day Beijing]? Could it be that they are dealing with some enemies?" he pondered in his heart.

"That is Emei Pai's signal," Zhao Min said, "Looks like they have an urgent matter. Let us go and take a look, shall we?"

Zhang Wuji was surprised, "How do you know?" he asked.

Zhao Min smiled and said, "In the Western Region I followed them for four days and four nights before I finally managed to capture Miejue Shitai. Why wouldn't I know?"

"All right, let us go and take a look," Zhang Wuji said, "Miss

Zhao, I have a favor I'd like to ask. Can I borrow your Yitian Sword for a moment?"

Zhao Min laughed. "I have not borrowed the Tulong Saber, you want to borrow the Yitian Sword first. You do have an astute business skill," she said. Loosening the precious sword from her waist she handed it over to him.

Zhang Wuji took the sword. Drawing the sword from its sheath he called, "Xiao Zhao, come over here."

Xiao Zhao walked over. Zhang Wuji brandished the Sword; with some light 'swish, swish, swish' sounds the iron chain on Xiao Zhao's hands and feet fell clanking down on the ground.

Xiao Zhao bowed down and said, "Many thanks Gongzi, many thanks Junzhu."

Zhao Min smiled. "What a beautiful young girl," she said, "Your Jiaozhu must be very fond of you."

Xiao Zhao blushed profusely; but her eyes sparkled with joy.

Zhang Wuji returned the sword into its sheathe and handed it back to Zhao Min. He heard the Emei Pai's signal sound was moving toward the northeast. "Let's go," he said.

Zhao Min fished out a silver coin from her pocket and threw it on the table; then she dashed out of the inn.

Zhang Wuji was afraid Xiao Zhao could not keep up; he pulled her hand with his right hand, while with his left he pushed her waist, keeping a distance between their bodies. They followed Zhao Min closely. But after only a dozen of 'zhang's or so, he felt Xiao Zhao's body was very light; her footsteps were also very fast. He felt strange, so he took

away the strength from his hands; yet Xiao Zhao was still able to run side-by-side with him, she did not show any sign of lagging behind at all. Zhang Wuji did not utilize his 'qing gong' [lightness skill] to the fullest, but his feet were moving very fast; yet to his surprise Xiao Zhao was able to match his speed.

In an instant Zhao Min had already crossed several desolate alleys and arrived at an empty yard enclosed in a partly collapsed wall. Zhang Wuji heard a faint noise of some women arguing inside the enclosure. Knowing that the Emei Pai's disciples were on the yard, he pulled Xiao Zhao's hand and took her crouching behind the wall, silently hiding in the darkness. He noticed long grass everywhere on the yard; it seemed like it was an abandoned garden. Zhao Min followed them hiding in the grass.

There was a broken down pavilion on the north corner of the garden; in this pavilion there were about twenty or so shadows of people sitting or standing. One female voice was heard, "You are our school's youngest disciple; based on either in knowledge or martial arts, you are still unworthy to be our Sect Leader ..."

Zhang Wuji recognized this voice as belonged to Ding Minjun. He crawled among the thick patch of long grass toward within a few 'zhang's of the pavilion to get a better view. That night the starlight was dim, all he could see was dark shadows. Focusing his attention, he could see there were male and female shadows in the pavilion; they were all Emei Pai's disciples. Other than Ding Minjun, it looked like the rest of Mijue Shitai's senior disciples were all present. To the left stood a slender woman with her dark green long skirt reaching the ground, it was Zhou Zhiruo. Hearing Ding Minjun talked nonstop with an excited voice, 'You said this, you said that ...' Zhou Zhiruo calmly said, "What Ding Shijie

[martial (older) sister] said was right; Xiao Mei [little/young sister] is the youngest disciple of our school. Whether in term of qualifications and records of service, martial arts, talent, or personal character, none is sufficient to qualify me as the Sect Leader. When Shifu assigned this heavy responsibility to me, Xiao Mei has repeatedly declined wholeheartedly; but Xian Shi [late/departed teacher] was severely adamant, telling Xiao Mei to make a heavy oath that I will not fail to follow Shifu's injunction."

Jing Xuan, a senior Emei disciple said, "Shifu was very wise; if she appointed Zhou Shimei [martial (younger) sister] to be our next Sect Leader, then she must have had a profound meaning. All of us have received Shifu's kindness. It is just proper for us to receive and obey her will by supporting Zhou Shimei with one heart, and thus brighten our Sect's martial arts' prestige."

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "Jing Xuan Shijie said that Shifu must have had a profound meaning; this 'profound meaning' was well-said. When we were on the Pagoda, as well as when we were on the ground, didn't we all hear Ku Toutuo and He Biweng shouting loudly? Who are Zhou Shimei's parents? Why did Shifu regard her with special fondness? Haven't you understood?"

Ku Toutuo did tell Lu Zhangke that Mijue Shitai was his old sweetheart, and that Zhou Zhiruo was their daughter. It was simply because he came from a heretical background; he meant those things as a joke, but unexpectedly He Biweng shouted it loud that everybody could hear it. They might not necessarily believe what they heard, but it was also difficult to avoid suspicions. This male-female relationship was a private matter, other people could choose to either believe or not believe, but Mijue Shitai did indeed treat Zhou Zhiruo with special attention, which was puzzling to the rest of the disciples. Therefore, this 'daughter' stuff was the most

logical explanation to them. Listening to Ding Minjun's argument, the disciples were silent.

With a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, "Ding Shijie, if you cannot accept Xiao Mei as the Sect Leader, just say so. You are talking nonsense, ruining Shifu's clean lifetime reputation, what did she do to deserve this? Xiao Mei's late father's surname was Zhou, he was a boatman along the Han Shui [River Han]; he did not know any martial arts at all. My late mother was from the Xue household, an aristocratic family from Xiangyang. After the City of Xiangyang fell down, they fled to the south to escape calamity, they lost their fortune and she finally married my late father. Over Wudang Pai's Zhang Zhenren's [lit. real/true man, a respectable term to address a Taoist priest] recommendation, Xiao Mei became Emei disciple. I have never met Shifu before then. You have received Shifu's great kindness. Today Xian Shi returned to the western sky [i.e. died], yet you dared to say such thing. This ... this ..." Speaking to this point her voice cracked and teardrops started to fall down her cheeks like rain, she was not able to continue.

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "You are only thinking of becoming our school's Sect Leader, you have not received our school's recognition, your position is not clear yet, but you have already flaunted your authority by accusing me. What 'ruining Shifu's lifetime clean reputation'? What 'accusing her of doing something to deserve anything'? You want to control me, don't you? Let me ask you this: if you have received Shifu's order to become the next Sect Leader, then you should go back to Emei soon. Shifu passed away, our school's affair is not only numerous, but complicated as well; every thing is in need of the Sect Leader's attention. But you, without consulting anybody else, suddenly returned to Dadou alone; may I ask why?"

Zhou Zhiruo said, "Xiao Mei has received an extremely urgent assignment from Shifu; which left me no choice but to return to Dadou."

"What assignment is that?" Ding Minjun asked, "Here we are all of the same school, there is no outsiders present. You may tell us clearly."

"It is our Sect's greatest secret," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Nobody else is privileged enough to hear it other than the Sect Leader."

"Humph, humph!" Ding Minjun sneered, "You keep pushing this 'Sect Leader' business but you can't deceive me. Let me ask you: our Sect's enmity with the Devil Cult is as deep as the ocean; many of our Sect's disciples died under the hands of the Devil Cult disciples, while the Devil Cult's disciples who died under Shifu's Yitian Sword is even more numerous. Shifu died because she was not willing to receive any kindness from that Devil Cult's Jiaozhu. That being the case, Shifu's body has not turned cold yet, why did you stealthily seek that pervert little thief surnamed Zhang of the Devil Cult, that Jiaozhu, the leader of the devils?"

Hearing the last few sentences Zhang Wuji's body shook; but then he felt a soft hand reaching out to his left cheek, gently traced his face down with two fingers. It was Zhao Min who was by his side, tracing her fingers on him to shame him. Zhang Wuji's face turned completely red; he thought, "Was Miss Zhou really looking for me?"

He heard Zhou Zhiruo stammer, "You ... you are talking nonsense ..."

"You still want to deny it?" Ding Minjun shouted, "You told

everybody to return to Emei first. We asked you why you must return to Dadou, and you gave us an indistinct answer; you were not willing to tell us. We felt something was not right, so we followed you behind. You asked your father Ku Toutuo of this pervert little thief's whereabouts. Do you think we don't know it? And then you went to that inn looking for that pervert little thief. Do you think we don't know it?"

Almost in every other sentence in her speech she mentioned 'pervert little thief' and although Zhang Wuji was not temperamental, he was very angry nonetheless. Before he could do anything, again Zhou Min blew a breath to his neck to tease him.

Ding Minjun continued, "It certainly is not other people's business to whom you like to speak, with whom you want to be intimate, but this pervert little thief surnamed Zhang is the archenemy of our Sect. Last night when we escaped from Dadou, why did you keep looking at him along the way? Wherever he went, your eyes had never left him. I did not make up this story; all our fellow martial brothers and sisters witnessed it with their own eyes. That day on the Brightness Peak, Xian Shi told you to stab him with your sword. Unexpectedly he neither dodged nor evaded, but he cast his alluring glance at you instead; you made eyes with him in response and gently pricked him just for show. With the Yitian Sword in your hand, why did he not die? Who would believe there isn't something fishy going on here?"

Zhou Zhiruo broke up in tears. "Who made eyes with him?" she sobbed, "Your vicious words are falsely accusing others."

Ding Minjun laughed coldly and said, "My words are vicious; but what about you? Aren't you afraid others may say ugly words of your unsightly conduct? Are your words pleasant to the ears? Humph, how did you ask that innkeeper a while

ago? ‘Mister Innkeeper, is there any guest by the surname Zhang in here? Mmm, he is about twenty, rather tall. Perhaps he did not use the surname Zhang, but some other family name?’”

She talked slowly with a sharp throaty voice, imitating Zhou Zhiruo’s slow intonation; with an exaggerated action imitating a demonic seductress, absolutely horrifying those who heard her. Zhang Wuji was very mad; he thought this Ding Minjun was Emei Pai’s most sly and nasty disciple. The gentle and soft-spoken Zhou Zhiruo was definitely not her match. But he could not come out to stand for her; because first of all it was Emei Pai’s internal affair, it was inappropriate for outsiders to butt in, second, he would only make Zhou Zhiruo’s situation more disadvantageous. In the end, he could only see Zhou Zhiruo was cornered without him able to render any help.

The majority of the Emei Pai disciples were originally submitting to their Shifu’s wish; they were ready to support Zhou Zhiruo as the new Sect Leader. But listening to Ding Minjun’s fiery argument, which was actually logical and reasonable, they thought, “Shifu’s hatred to the Devil Cult was so deep. Zhou Shimei and that Devil Cult’s Jiaozhu have nothing in common. Supposed she is selling our Sect to the Devil Cult, how can that be good?”

Ding Minjun continued, “Zhou Shimei, you entered Shifu’s school by Wudang’s Zhang Zhenren’s recommendation. That Devil Cult’s pervert little thief is Wudang’s Zhang Wuxia’s [Fifth Hero Zhang] son. Nobody knows the details to what kind of intricate plot you are scheming.” Raising her sharp voice again she said, “Martial brothers and sisters, even though Shifu left us her will that Zhou Shimei is to take over the Sect Leader position, surely she could not know that while her skeleton is not yet cold, this new Sect Leader

would look for the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu to nurture their personal relationship. This is a grave matter concerning the life or death, the prosperity or decline of our Sect. If Xian Shi were here tonight, she would definitely appoint another Sect Leader. Shifu's desire was certainly the bright future of our Sect, not its destruction under the Devil Cult's hands. In Xiao Mei's opinion, we must lift high Xian Shi's lifelong desire; we will respectfully ask Zhou Shimei to hand over the Iron Ring, the Sect Leadership's token of authority. And then we will nominate someone else with both ability and integrity, a senior martial sister whose martial art can be an example to our fellow disciples, to take the position of our school's Sect Leader."

As she finished her oration, some six, seven disciples voiced their agreement.

Zhou Zhiruo said, "I have received Xian Shi's order to take over this school's Sect Leader position; in no way I can hand over this Iron Ring. In all honesty, I did not want to become the Sect Leader; but I have made a heavy oath in front of her. I simply cannot ... simply cannot betray her trust." Her voice was so weak that some disciples could not hear clearly what she was saying. They could not restrain from inwardly shaking their heads.

In a stern voice Ding Minjun said, "This Iron Ring, you must hand it over, whether you want it or not! One of our school's strictest rules is prohibition against deceiving masters and ancestors; the other is strict abstention against immorality and shameless act. You have violated these two most important rules; how can you even be the disciple of our school?"

Zhao Min put her lips close to Zhang Wuji's ears and in a very low voice said, "Your Miss Zhou is done with! You call

me 'good elder sister', I will come out to her rescue."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he knew this girl was shrewd, certainly she could think of some way to get Zhou Zhiruo out of trouble. But she was a few years younger than he, so if he called her 'good elder sister', he thought it was just too corny. He hesitated and did not open his mouth.

"You want to call or not, it's up to you," Zhao Min said, "I'm leaving."

Zhang Wuji had no choice; he whispered on her ear, "Good elder sister!"

Zhao Min stifled her laughter. She was about to stand up and come out when the people in the pavilion had already cried out in alarm.

"Who's there?" Ding Minjun shouted, "Hiding in the dark eavesdropping to other people in here?"

From outside the wall came several coughing noises, a clear and crisp female voice was heard, "What are you, Emei Pai people, doing in the middle of the night, stealthily gathered in here?" The sound of flapping clothes swept by and there were two more people standing outside the pavilion.

These two people were facing the moon. Zhang Wuji was able to see clearly. One was a frail hunchback old lady, with a walking stick in her hand; it was none other than Jin Hua Popo [Golden Flower Granny]. The other was a young lady with a graceful figure, but her face was strangely ugly; it was Yin Yewang's daughter, Zhang Wuji's own cousin Zhu'Er [Spider Kid] Yin Li.

Zhu'Er was captured by Wei Yixiao the other day; but before

he reached the Brightness Peak the cold poison in his body flared-up. He did not want to suck her blood, so finally he collapsed to the ground. Afterwards he was rescued by Zhou Dian, but by the time he tried to find Zhu'Er, she was nowhere to be found. Ever since Zhang Wuji argued with her, he had never forgotten her. He was pleasantly surprised to unexpectedly see her here that he almost opened up his mouth to call her.

"Jin Hua Popo, what are you doing here?" Ding Minjun coldly asked.

"Where is your Shifu?" Jin Hua Popo asked her back.

"Xian Shi passed away yesterday," Ding Minjun said, "You have eavesdropped outside the wall for a while, why are you still pretending?"

"Ah, Miejue Shitai has passed away!" Jin Hua Popo exclaimed in a weak voice, "How did she die? Why didn't she wait for me? Ay, ay, what a pity, what a pity ..." Before finished speaking, she had already bent down and was coughing incessantly.

Zhu'Er gently patted her back. She sneered toward Ding Minjun and said, "Who eavesdrops on your conversations? Popo and I are simply passing by; we heard someone was mumbling nonstop. I recognized your voice, so we stopped by to take a look. Popo asked you, have you not heard? How did your Shifu die?"

Ding Minjun indignantly said, "What business is it of yours? Why do you expect me to answer you?"

Jin Hua Popo slowly exhaled, she calmly said, "In all my life dealing with other people, I only suffered defeat one time

under your Shifu's hands. It was not because her martial art was better than mine, but because the sharpness of the Yitian Sword. These past several years I have been wandering everywhere, trying to find a comparably sharp weapon so that I can challenge your Shifu once again. Finally my wandering to the end of the world has not been in vain; an old acquaintance has agreed to let me use a precious saber of his. I heard Emei Pai people were imprisoned at the Wan An Temple by the royal government. I had a thought of rescuing your Shifu, so that we can decide whose skill is better. Who would have thought that as I arrived today, the Wan An Temple has been reduced to rubble. Ay! This is fate; for the rest of her life Jin Hua Popo will not be able to wash away the shame of this defeat. Mijue Shitai, oh, Mijue Shitai, can't you wait just one and a half day later to die?"

Ding Minjun said, "If Shifu were still alive, you will certainly suffer another defeat. So you'd better not have any dream ..." Suddenly 'slap, slap, slap, slap' four times, loud and clear; Ding Minjun's head spun and she faltered, since Jin Hua Popo had slapped her on the face four times, left and right.

This old granny looked frail, as if she could not support her own weight; she was also coughing repeatedly, but who would have thought that her hand could move in an unbelievable speed with a very weird palm technique. These four palm strikes were so fast that Ding Minjun did not have the slightest idea they were coming, let alone try to evade them. She was separated about two 'zhang's [about 20 feet, close to 7m] away from Ding Minjun, yet she was able to slap her and go back to her original position like a ghost.

Ding Minjun was angry; she drew her sword and pointing it toward Jin Hua Popo she said, "Old beggar granny, are you

always this impatient?"

Jin Hua Popo ignored her insult, she also did not seem to see the sword in her hand, but slowly said, "How did your Shifu die?" Her voice was full of sorrow, as if she was completely discouraged.

The tip of Ding Minjun's sword was actually less than three feet away from Jin Hua Popo's chest, but in the end she did not have the courage to thrust it in. "Old beggar granny," she cursed, "Why do you expect me to answer you?"

Jin Hua Popo heaved a deep sigh and lamented, "Miejue Shitai, you were a hero; you can be considered as the Wulin world's outstanding character. It's a pity that you died. Don't you have any decent disciple to take over the Sect Leader position?"

Jing Xuan Shitai stepped forward; joining her palms in greeting she said, "Pin ni [lit. impoverished nun] Jing Xuan, paying my respect to Popo. Before her death Xian Shi had appointed Zhou Zhiruo, Zhou Shimei to take over the Sect Leadership position. Only in our Sect there are certain numbers of fellow disciples who have not submitted to that decision yet. Xian Shi has died; it would be difficult to fulfill Popo's wish. Since that is the case, what else can we say? Our school's Sect Leader has not been decided; we cannot make any appointment with Popo. But Emei is a great Sect of the Wulin world; in no way would we degrade Xian Shi's prestige. We will listen to whatever instruction Popo have; in the future our Sect Leader, according to the rule of the Wulin world, will deal with you. But if Popo, relying on your seniority, want to take an unfair advantage of us, although Emei Pai has just suffered a great calamity, we will fight with you until our blood is poured over this abandoned garden, until the very last of us die."

She was speaking boldly, yet without any trace of arrogance or submissiveness; making Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min applauding silently.

Jin Hua Popo's eyes flickered. "Turns out before she died, Zun Shi [lit. revered master] had appointed her successor, the new Sect Leader. That's wonderful! Which one? May I see her?" she said. Her manner of speaking was a lot more polite than when she talked with Ding Minjun.

Zhou Zhiruo stepped forward and saluted. "Popo, may you be blessed! Emei Pai's fourth generation Sect Leader Zhou Zhiruo wishes Popo well."

"Shameless!" Ding Minjun bellowed, "Proclaiming yourself as the Emei Pai's fourth generation Sect Leader."

Zhu'Er sneered. "This Zhou Jiejie [elder sister Zhou] is a good person; I have received her loving care in the western region. If she is not fit to become the Sect Leader, do you think you are? You dare to blubber your big mouth in front of Popo; you make me want to slap your ugly face!"

Ding Minjun was angry. 'Swish!' her sword stabbed toward Zhu'Er. Zhu'Er leaned sideways to evade, her palm struck toward Ding Minjun's face. Her movement was exactly the same as Jin Hua Popo's, but her speed was far inferior than Popo's. Ding Minjun ducked to avoid the strike, but her sword also missed its target.

Jin Hua Popo said with a smile, "Girl, I have taught you many, many times, but you have not mastered such an easy move. Watch carefully!" Her right palm moved, conveniently slapped Ding Minjun's left cheek. She flipped her palm and slapped her right cheek. Then her palm returned and

slapped her left cheek, flipped over and slapped her right cheek again. These four palm strikes were very distinct; everybody could see them clearly. But Ding Minjun felt as if her body was enveloped with a great power that her limbs were completely unmovable, so her cheeks were slapped four times without her having any strength to block or evade. Fortunately, Jin Hua Popo held up her strength that Ding Minjun did not suffer any serious injury.

Zhu'Er smiled and said, "Popo, I have mastered your palm technique, but I don't have the kind of power you do. Let me try again!"

Ding Minjun was still bound by Jin Hua Popo's internal strength; she saw Zhu'Er's palm was about to strike her face. In her fury she almost passed out. Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo moved sideways; stretching her left hand she blocked Zhu'Er's palm and said, "Jiejie [elder sister], hold on!" Turning her head toward Jin Hua Popo she said, "Popo, my Shijie Jing Xuan has said it clearly; although our martial art skills are not as exquisite as Popo's, we will not let ourselves to be bullied by others."

Jin Hua Popo smiled and said, "This surnamed Ding woman's mouth is too sharp; she kept on saying she won't submit to your leadership, yet you still stand up for her?"

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "The internal affair of our school is not any outsider's business. Xiao Nuzi [lit. young woman] has received Xian Shi's order. Although my skill is too shallow, I will not let any outsider to humiliate my fellow disciple."

Jin Hua Popo smiled. "Good, good, good!" she said 'good' three times, then broke up in coughing again. Zhu'Er immediately handed a pill to her. Jin Hua Popo took it, while gasping heavily. With a sudden movement both of her palms

reached out; one palm pressing Zhou Zhiruo's chest, the other pressing her back, so that all Zhou Zhiruo's fatal acupoints were covered by her palms. As soon as she pressed her palms, Zhou Zhiruo's life would be gone.

It was a very strange move. Although Zhou Zhiruo had not learned martial art for a long time, she had mastered about 30% of Mijue Shitai's skill, yet she was baffled and was rendered speechless by this strange move that held her in between the opponent's palms, she was shocked and scared, and it showed on her face.

"Miss Zhou," in a gloomy voice Jin Hua Popo said, "As the Sect Leader, your skill is really shoddy. I wonder if Zun Shi did really assign this heavy responsibility to a pampered pretty young girl like you. I'll say you are merely boasting."

Zhou Zhiruo made up her mind; she thought it in her heart, "If she exerted her strength right now, my arteries would be shaken and immediately broken, then I will die on the spot. But how can I degrade Shifu's power and prestige?" As soon as she remembered her Shifu, her courage escalated a hundred folds; lifting her right hand high she said, "This is Emei Pai's Iron Ring of the Sect Leader; Xian Shi has personally put it on my finger. How can it be a fake?"

Jin Hua Popo laughed; she said, "Just now your Shijie said that Emei is a major sect in the Wulin world. She was right, but relying on your meager skill, can you be the Wulin world great Sect's Sect Leader? I think you'd better be an obedient child and listen to what I have to say."

"Jin Hua Popo," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Although Xian Shi has already died, Emei Pai did not die with her. I have fallen under your hands, so if you want to kill me you can just kill me; but if you want to force me to submit to your desire, I

suggest you give up that idea. Our Sect was fallen into the royal government's sinister plot and we were imprisoned in the Pagoda; but did you see any of us surrender? Zhou Zhiruo is merely a young and feeble woman, yet I have accepted the heavy responsibility assigned to me. I know it is very difficult, so early on I have already disregarded my own life and death."

Zhang Wuji saw the vital acupoints on her back were threatened by Jin Hua Popo; her life was hanging on a thread of hair, yet she was stubbornly standing up. He was afraid that in her anger Jin Hua Popo would take her life. He realized the situation was desperate; he wanted to jump out to rescue her. Zhao Min had already guessed his intention; she grabbed his right arm while lightly shaking her head, meaning that he should not act recklessly.

They heard Jin Hua Popo laugh aloud and say, "Miejue Shitai did not make a wrong decision. This young Sect Leader's martial art skill is weak, but her character is actually very strong. Hmm, that's right, that's right, insufficient martial art can be learned, river and mountain can be changed, but character is difficult to be altered."

Actually, right at that moment Zhou Zhiruo was scared to death, only she remembered about how her Shifu just before her death had placed her great trust on her, so she summoned all her courage and stood unyieldingly upright.

The other Emei disciples were originally looking down upon Zhou Zhiruo, but at this moment they saw her disregarding personal dislike bravely stepping forward to protect Ding Minjun, and then she did not demean their school prestige at all even under a powerful enemy's threat, feelings of respect and admiration started to grow in their hearts.

Jing Xuan brandished her sword and let out some signal whistles; the Emei disciples moved at once, with weapons in their hands they dispersed surrounding the pavilion.

“What is it?” Jin Hua Popo smiled and asked.

Jing Xuan said, “Popo captures Emei’s Pai Leader, what do you want?”

Jin Hua Popo coughed several times and said, “You want to achieve victory by sheer numbers? Hey, hey, will ten times your number make any difference in Jin Hua Popo’s eyes?”

Abruptly she let Zhou Zhiruo go, and then her body swayed and dashed straight toward Jing Xuan. Her two fingers moved toward Jing Xuan’s eyes as if she wanted to dig her eyes out. Jing Xuan hastily waved her sword trying to chop her arm. Suddenly she heard a ‘hey’ noise, followed by a grunt; one of her Shimei standing close to her had fallen down. Turned out that when Jin Hua Popo faked an attack to Jing Xuan, her left foot actually kicked the acupoint on the waist of an Emei female disciple.

Her shadow dashed around the pavilion, her sleeves fluttered in the air, occasional coughs were heard, Emei disciples thrust their swords, but nobody was able to stab her; on the contrary, seven male and female disciples fell down because their acupoints were sealed. Her acupoint sealing technique was very strange; those who were hit were screaming from pain. In a short moment the garden was full of sad and shrill screams, rending the hearts of those who heard them.

Jin Hua Popo clapped her hands and returned to the pavilion. “Miss Zhou,” she said, “How is Jin Hua Popo’s martial art compared to your Emei Pai’s?”

“Our Sect’s martial art is certainly better than Popo’s,” Zhou Zhiruo replied, “You were defeated by my Xian Shi’s sword the other day; have you forgotten?”

Jin Hua Popo was furious, “The Old Nun Miejue was using a precious sword; that doesn’t count!” she said.

“Popo, let’s be honest,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “If Xian Shi and you fight barehanded, who do you think will win?”

Jin Hua Popo was silent for half a day before answering, “I don’t know. I came to Dadou today to find out between your Zun Shi and me, who’s weak and who’s strong. Ay! Miejue Shitai has died, Wulin world lost one of its martial art masters. Someone like her had never been seen in the past, and will never be seen in the future. Henceforth Emei Pai will become weak.”

Those seven disciples were still screaming and wailing, as if they were underlining Jin Hua Popo’s words. Jing Xuan and several other senior disciples tried hard to unseal their acupoints, but their efforts did not show any effect. It looked like they would have to be released by Jin Hua Popo herself.

Zhang Wuji had treated not just a few of Wulin world’s characters who were injured by Jin Hua Popo in the past. He knew this granny was very vicious, a person of her caliber was rare in the Jianghu. He was thinking of coming out and help, but after careful consideration he decided against it. He thought, “If I help Miss Zhou, I will offend Zhu’Er. This cousin of mine has been so good to me; moreover, she is my close relative. How can I favor one and discriminate against the other?”

In the meantime, Jin Hua Popo said, “Miss Zhou, do you

admit defeat?”

Zhou Zhiruo gathered up her courage and said, “Our Sect’s martial art is as deep as the ocean, it can’t be learned in a short time. We are still young. Right now we are inferior to Popo, but our progress in the future will be immeasurable.”

Jin Hua Popo laughed. “Wonderful, wonderful!” she said, “Since that’s the case, Jin Hua Popo is taking my leave now. Just wait until your progress is immeasurable then you can come back and unseal their acupoints.” While saying that she took Zhu’Er’s hand, and turned around to leave.

Zhou Zhiruo realized her fellow disciples were too much in pain; they might not be able to endure another hour and might die from their pain. “Popo, wait a minute!” she hastily said, “Please help my Shijie’s and Shixiong’s [martial (older) sisters and brothers].”

“You want me to help them? That’s easy,” Jin Hua Popo said, “From this day forward, wherever Jin Hua Popo or her disciples go, Emei disciples have to make yourselves scarce.”

Zhou Zhiruo thought, “I have just accepted the Sect Leader responsibility, already I have to face this strong enemy. If I agree to her condition, how can Emei Pai set our feet in the Wulin world? How can I let the demise of Emei Pai to be in my hand?”

Jin Hua Popo saw her hesitation; she laughed and said, “You don’t want Emei Pai’s prestige to fall; that’s fine. Just let me borrow the Yitian Sword then I will help your fellow disciples.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “Our Sect’s master and disciples all fell

into the royal government's evil plot and were held captives on that Pagoda. How can the Yitian Sword still be in our hands?"

Jin Hua Popo had already expected this answer, she knew her chance of borrowing the Sword was only one in ten thousands, yet hearing Zhou Zhiruo say so, her countenance showed disappointment nonetheless. Suddenly in a stern voice she said, "If you want to save Emei Pai's reputation, you cannot save your own life ..." Taking a pill from her bosom she said, "This is the 'duan chang lie xin' [breaking intestines, cracking the heart] poison. You take this, then I'll save your people."

Zhou Zhiruo remembered that her heart was already broken when she received her Shifu's injunction; she said in her heart, "Shifu told me to deceive Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang]; I can't do this. Rather than keep on living with this constant torture, death is a hundred times better; nothing matters anymore." With a trembling hand she took the poison.

"Zhou Shimei, don't eat that!" Jing Xuan shouted.

Zhang Wuji saw the situation was critical; he was ready to jump out and snatch the poison away. Zhao Min hissed into his ear, "Idiot! It's a fake; that is not a poison."

Zhang Wuji was stunned, but Zhou Zhiruo had already swallowed the pill. Jing Xuan and the others shouted and rushed toward Jin Hua Popo, ready to strike.

"Excellent, you have guts!" Jin Hua Popo said, "The poison won't kill you in an hour or two. Miss Zhou, come with me and nicely listen to me. If Lao Po [the old granny] is happy, she might give the antidote to you." Finished speaking she

walked around and slapped and kicked those Emei disciples. Immediately their pain stopped; so their screams stopped as well. Only their limbs were still weak that they would not be able to move for a while.

These people saw with their own eyes that Zhou Zhiruo took the poison to save their lives; they were overwhelmed with gratitude. "Thank you, Sect Leader!" one of them shouted.

Jin Hua Popo pulled Zhou Zhiruo's hand, "Good child," she tenderly said, "Come with me, Popo won't make things difficult for you."

Before she could reply, Zhou Zhiruo felt an enormous power pulling her body and she jumped forward against her own will.

"Zhou Shimei ..." Jing Xuan shouted and rushed forward, trying to block, but suddenly she felt a strong wind from her side, a finger almost touched her. It was Zhu'Er attacking her from the side. Jing Xuan used her left palm to block, but to her surprise Zhu'Er's move was a fake one. 'Slap!' Ding Minjun's face ate her palm. This 'zhi dong da xi' [aim to the east strike to the west] was indeed Jin Hua Popo's technique.

Zhu'Er chuckled and jumped over the wall.

"After them!" Zhang Wuji said. With one hand pulling Zhao Min along and the other carrying Xiao Zhao, he also jumped over the wall.

Jing Xuan and the others were startled to suddenly see three people coming out from the grass. They tried to pursue after them, but how could their 'qing gong' [lightness skill] be compared to Jin Hua Popo and Zhang Wuji? By the time they jumped over the wall, six people had already

disappeared into the darkness.

Zhang Wuji and the others pursued for a dozen of 'zhang's or so. Without slowing down the least bit Jin Hua Popo shouted, "I am surprised Emei Pai disciples have the courage to pursue Jin Hua Popo. Hey, hey, it's amazing!"

"Let our Sect Leader go!" Zhao Min shouted. Her body swayed and she flew several 'zhang's forward. The tip of her Yitian Sword threatening Jin Hua Popo's back. She was using the 'jin ding fu guang' [golden peak like a ray of light], one of Emei's sword techniques; which she learned from an Emei female disciple in the Wan An Temple. It could not be compared to Mie jue Shitai, but it was exquisite nonetheless.

As Jin Hua Popo heard the gust of wind behind her back, she let Zhou Zhiruo go and quickly turned around. Zhao Min flicked her wrist and launched another stance, 'qian feng jing xiu' [a thousand peaks compete to show their elegance].

Jin Hua Popo knew the sword in Zhao Min's hand was the Yitian Sword; she was alarmed yet happy. Stretching out her hand, she tried to snatch the sword away.

Several stances later Jin Hua Popo pressed in front of Zhao Min, her finger was just about to reach Zhao Min's wrist, which was holding the sword; unexpectedly Zhao Min turned her sword around with one of Kunlun Pai's sword techniques, the 'shen tuo jun zu' [divine camel with stallion's feet].

Jin Hua Popo saw Zhao Min was a young girl; she was holding the Yitian Sword, she was also using Emei's sword technique, therefore, she must be an Emei Pai disciple. In order to challenge Mie jue Shitai, Jin Hua Popo had extensively studied Emei's sword techniques for several years. After seeing Zhao Min's several stances, she knew her

internal strength was only mediocre; hence for the next several stances she thought she would understand and able to anticipate her attack. For that reason she pressed on with the intention of snatching the Yitian Sword away. Who would have thought that this young girl was able to launch a Kunlun Pai's sword technique? If she were not too engrossed with her preconception, Kunlun Pai's sword technique would never give her any trouble; it was just that she was taken completely by surprise. Although her martial art skill was high, she was unable to block and was forced to hastily roll back to evade the attack; only she was not fast enough that the end of her left sleeve was cut by the sword.

In her anger Jin Hua Popo pounced back. Zhao Min realized that her martial art skill was too far below her opponent; she did not dare to take the attack head on. Relying on the Yitian Sword she stabbed to the left and cut to the right, brandishing the sword to the east and striking to the west, at the same time keep changing her sword style; one time it was Kongtong, another time Huashan. She launched Kunlun's 'da mo fei sha' [great desert flying sand], followed by Shaolin Pai's 'jin zhen du jie' [crossing golden-lily's pond]. Each stance was the best feature of each Sect; each stance carried an enormous power; enhanced by the very sharp Yitian Sword, confounding Jin Hua Popo and rendering her helpless to press closer.

Zhu'Er was anxious; she loosened the sword from her waist and tossed it towards Jin Hua Popo. Meanwhile Zhao Min ferociously attacked for seven, eight stances. Toward the ninth stance Jin Hua Popo could not help but block using the sword. 'Crack!' her sword was cut into two.

Jin Hua Popo's countenance changed greatly, she rolled away and shouted, "Who are you?"

Zhao Min smiled and said, "Why didn't you pull out the Tulong Saber?"

Jin Hua Popo was angry, "If I had Tulong Saber in my hand, do you think you can stand eight, ten stances against me? Do you dare to try it?"

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Then go and get the Tulong Saber. I am fine with it. I'll be waiting for you at Dadou; we'll fight again when you have the Saber."

"Turn your head around," Jin Hua Popo said, "Let me take a look at your face."

Zhao Min turned her body sideways, stuck out her tongue, closed her left eye and opened her right one, twisted her face muscle; making a ghost face. Jin Hua Popo was very angry; she spat on the ground, tossed her broken sword away, and pulling Zhu'Er and Zhou Zhiruo along she left in big strides.

"Let us go after them," Zhang Wuji said.

"No need to worry," Zhao Min said, "You come with me. I guarantee your Miss Zhou's safety."

"What Tulong Saber were you talking about?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"In that deserted garden I heard that old granny say that she went all over the world, till the end of it, before she finally found an old acquaintance who'd let her borrow a precious weapon, with which she was going to fight Mijue Shitai's Yitian Sword," Zhao Min replied. She recited, "'Yi tian bu chu, shei yu zheng feng'? [Meh's translation: 'Power of heaven not appear, who can possibly compete?' Literal

translation: 'relying on heaven (the 'Yitian' of the 'Yitian Sword') does not appear, who can fight its (blade) edge?'] There is no weapon which can match the Yitian Sword but the Tulong Saber. Could it be that she acquired the Tulong Saber from your 'Yifu' [foster father] Xie Lao Qianbei [Old Senior Xie]? I used the Yitian Sword to attack her, with the intention of forcing her to pull the Saber out. Turns out she did not have the treasured Saber in her hand, and challenged me to fight her in the future. Apparently she knows the Tulong Saber's whereabouts; only she was unable to get it yet."

Zhang Wuji thought for a while. "This is strange," he said.

"My guess is she will go to the seaside," Zhao Min said, "She will go to the ocean to fetch the Saber. We must precede them; don't let the old malicious granny swindle blind but kindhearted Xie Lao Qianbei."

Hearing her last sentence, Zhang Wuji's blood bubbled up from his chest, "Yes, yes!" he hastily said. At first he agreed to go with Zhao Min to borrow the Tulong Saber just because as a real man his words must worth a thousand gold; he could not eat his own words. But this time, thinking of Jin Hua Popo was about to make things difficult for his 'yifu', he wished he had wings so that he could fly in a hurry and save his 'yifu'.

Immediately Zhao Min took two people to the Palace. She talked with the guard at the Palace gate without going inside. The guard repeatedly answered in affirmative, then turned around to enter the palace. In a relatively short moment he came back out, leading nine steeds along. He also carried a large bag of gold and silver. Zhao Min, with Zhang Wuji and Xiao Zhao, rode on three steeds, while leading the other six steeds behind. By alternating their

mounts, they sped up eastwards.

By early morning the next day, the nine steeds were so exhausted that they were unable even to stand. Zhao Min presented the golden medal of the Ruyang Prince, as the highest commander of the entire army, to the local government; they traded the nine steeds and continued their journey. By late evening that day they had arrived at the seaside.

Zhao Min rode the horse straight to the local government mansion. She ordered the magistrate to quickly prepare a strong ocean ship; complete with the helmsmen, the sailors, food and water, weapons and winter clothes. In addition, all ocean ships were to be moved immediately to the south; no other ships were to be moored within fifty 'li's [about 25 km] from that place. With Ruyang Prince's gold medal, how could a lower ranking county magistrate dare not to obey? Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji and Xiao Zhao waited leisurely inside the mansion, eating and drinking wine. Less than a day later the magistrate came back to report that everything was ready.

When three people went to the seaside to inspect, Zhao Min could not help but stomping her feet repeatedly, "Wasted effort!" she bellowed. Turned out by the beach anchored a really big ship with two decks; the decks of the bow, the port and the starboard were loaded with heavy canons. It was a Mongolian navy's battleship.

In those years the Mongolians were trying to send military expedition to Japan; hence they recruited a large number of boat makers. Unexpectedly a major hurricane had scattered the Mongolian navy, resulted in the expedition to the east was postponed indefinitely, but since then the extent of boat making had been declining.

Zhao Min was at her wit's end; she did not expect in order to curry her favor the county magistrate would prepare a battleship for her. By now the food, the water and the supplies had been prepared on board; the other boats had also obeyed the Ruyang Prince's gold medal, they had sailed dozens of 'li's southwards. With a bitter smile Zhao Min ordered the sailors to cover the canons with fishnets, she also had the boat loaded with several hundred catties of fresh fish, to give the impression that it was an old battleship, which was converted to a fishing boat.

Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji and Xiao Zhao three people changed into sailor attire. Using greasepaint they made their faces darker, and then glued some fake moustache and beards; they were not taking any chances. Afterwards they sat quietly in the boat, waiting for Jin Hua Popo's arrival.

This Zhao Min Junzhu's prediction was very accurate; sure enough, that very same evening a large carriage arrived by the seaside. Jin Hua Popo, along with Zhu'Er and Zhou Zhiruo, came looking for a boat. The sailors had received Zhao Min's instruction; they pretended to refuse by saying that the boat was a fishing boat converted from an old battleship, they only caught fish and not interested in taking passengers. It was not until Jin Hua Popo produced two ingots of gold did the captain reluctantly agree to take them aboard. Jin Hua Popo took Zhu'Er and Zhou Zhiruo on board and they set sail immediately, heading east.

On that vast boundless open sea the lone boat sailed to the southeast. During the two days of sailing, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min looked out their cabin window in the bottom deck. They noticed that during the day, the sun, and in the night, the moon, were both rising from the port side. Obviously the boat was sailing to the south. It was the beginning of winter, the boat had the full advantage of the north wind blowing

strong on its sail that they were traveling very fast.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min often had some discussions. “My ‘Yifu’ is on the ‘bing huo dao’ [ice and fire island] of the extreme north; if we want to find him, then we must sail to the north. Why are we going to the south instead?”

Each time Zhao Min always replied, “This Jin Hua Popo is certainly a strange woman. More over, right now the south wind has not arrived yet, there is no way we can sail to the north even if we want to.”

Toward noon on the third day, the captain came down to their cabin to give his report, he said Jin Hua Popo was very familiar of the sea condition around this place; she knew exactly where the sand bar, the reef, and the shallow waters were. She was even more knowledgeable than the captain was.

Zhang Wuji suddenly remembered, “Ah, right!” he exclaimed, “Could it be that she is returning to the ‘ling she dao’ [spirit snake island]?”

“What Ling She Island?” Zhao Min asked.

“The Ling She Island is Jin Hua Popo’s home,” Zhang Wuji said, “Her late husband was called the ‘yin ye xiansheng’ [Mister Silver Leaf]. Ling She, Jin Hua, Yin Ye [Spirit Snake, Golden Flower and Silver Leaf]; haven’t you heard?”

Zhao Min laughed mockingly and said, “You are only a few years older than I am, but seems like you are an expert in the Jianghu’s matters.”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “The heretical devilish Ming Cult certainly knows a lot more of Jianghu matters than

Junzhu Niang-niang.”

These two people were originally archenemies; the groups of warriors under their commands had been engaged in several tough battles. But after several days of living together in a ship's cabin in the middle of the sea, they were unable to restrain from chatting with each other amiably. Also, with Jin Hua Popo as their common enemy, one more day they were together, one more day the estrangement between them was shed away.

In order not to raise Jin Hua Popo's suspicions, the captain immediately went back to the upper deck right after giving out his report. Zhao Min laughed and said, “Da Jiaozhu [great cult leader], I wonder if it is bothersome for you to tell this friendless and unlearned young girl about the power and prestige of the Spirit Snake's Golden Flower and Silver Leaf that shook the Jianghu.”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “To my shame, I don't have the slightest idea Yin Ye Xiansheng is what kind of person; but Jin Hua Popo, I actually have had some encounters with her.” Thereupon he told her how he went to the Butterfly Valley and studied medicine under the ‘die gu yi xian’ [the Divine Doctor of the Butterfly Valley] Hu Qingniu, how some people from different sects were wounded by Jin Hua Popo until they were in between life and death, how they came to the Butterfly Valley for medical help, and how under Hu Qingniu's direction he cured them all. How Jin Hua Popo contended with Mijue Shitai in martial arts and was defeated, how in the end Hu Qingniu and Wang Nan'gu husband and wife died under Jin Hua Popo's hands. He told her all kinds of emotions surrounding the circumstances. He felt that although Hu Qingniu's character was rather peculiar, his treatment toward Zhang Wuji was not bad. Thinking about how those husband and wife's bodies hung

high on the tree, he was unable to restrain his eyes from turning red. The only thing he did not tell was how Zhu'Er grabbed his hand because she wanted to take him as her playmate on the Ling She Island; and how he bit her arm really bad. Why he omitted this part of the story, Zhang Wuji could not explain; perhaps he felt what he did was rather unsophisticated.

Throughout Zhao Min listened attentively without saying anything. Finally with a serious look on her face she said, "At first I only thought this old granny as a powerful martial art master, turned out she is involved in many gratitude and grudges. Listening to your story, it seems that this old granny is truly a formidable opponent, we must not be careless at all."

Zhang Wuji said with a smile, "Junzhu Niang-niang is well-versed in both pen and sword, under her command there are numerous warriors with marvelous and diverse ability. Dealing with a trivial Jin Hua Popo, she should be able to accomplish the task with ease."

Zhao Min also smiled and said, "Too bad in this boundless ocean I have no way to summon numerous warriors and foreign monks under my command."

Zhang Wuji said, "That chef who prepared our meals, the sailors who pull the sail, although they can't be considered Jianghu's top rank fighters, can't they be counted as the second rank warriors?"

Zhao Min was startled, then broke into chuckle while saying, "My admiration! Da Jiaozhu truly has a good pair of eyes; nothing can be concealed from you."

Turned out when she returned to the Palace to get the gold,

silver and the horses, she also left a secret message via the guard, dispatching a group of warriors under her command to rush to the seaside. They also rode on fast horses, only they arrived half a day later than Zhang Wuji. She had carefully picked the warriors who had not participated in the battle at the Wan An Temple; those who had not met Zhang Wuji before, to come over and guised themselves as kitchen helpers, sailors, et cetera. However, for people who practiced martial art, naturally their facial expression and bodily movement differed from average people; therefore, although they tried to conceal it carefully, Zhang Wuji only needed to take a single look and he had already found out their true identities.

Hearing him say that, Zhao Min mused on the fact that since he could see through their disguise, then Jin Hua Popo must have had seen it also; since she had a lot more experience, plus she was a wily old fox. Luckily they had more people on their side; Zhang Wuji's martial art was far superior. It would be fine whether Jin Hua Popo saw through the disguise or not. Either way, if they were to battle each other, Zhao Min did not have anything to fear from Jin Hua Popo plus Zhu'Er. And since Jin Hua Popo had most likely seen through their disguise then they did not have any reason to continue concealing their true identities.

These past several days, Zhang Wuji was most concerned over whether the poison pill Zhou Zhiruo took had broken out or not. Zhao Min understood his concern; as soon as she saw he wrinkled his brows, she sent someone to the upper cabin with the pretense of serving tea, while spying around on their enemies. Each time he returned, he would report that Miss Zhou looked just fine, without any poisoning symptoms. This happened several times; finally Zhang Wuji felt embarrassed. He sat quietly on the corner of the cabin; thinking about the snowy area of the western region, where Zhu'Er kept him company for several days. How He

Taichong, Wu Lie, Ding Minjun, and the others came and surrounded them, how in the presence of He Taichong and the others he was saying loudly, 'Miss, with all my heart I sincerely desire to marry you. I only hope you will not regard me unworthy.' How wholeheartedly he promised, 'From now on, I will cherish you with all my might, I will look after you. No matter how many people come to make things difficult for you, no matter how many fierce people come to bully you, I don't care if I'll have to lose my life, I will protect you. I want you to be happy, I want you to forget your past sufferings.' Thinking about these things he could not help but blush.

"Pei!" Zhao Min suddenly spat, "You are daydreaming about your Miss Zhou!"

"No, I am not!" Zhang Wuji denied.

"Humph," Zhao Min snorted, "Daydreaming is daydreaming. You are a real man, why would you lie?"

"Did I lie?" Zhang Wuji countered, "I am telling you: I was not thinking about Miss Zhou."

"If you were thinking about Ku Toutuo or Wei Yixiao, you won't have that kind of expression," Zhao Min said, "They are ugly and weird fellows; if you are thinking of them, would you have that kind of gentle and bashful expression on your face?"

Zhang Wuji smiled bashfully, "You are really good," he said, "You can tell whether other people were thinking about some pretty people or some ugly ones. But I am being honest with you, the person I was thinking about is not the least bit pretty."

Zhao Min could see the sincerity in his words; she showed a faint smile and did not pay him anymore attention. Although she was intelligent, she would never guess that the person he was thinking about was that ugly girl Zhu'Er who was inside the upper deck cabin of their boat.

Zhang Wuji recalled how in order to train the poisonous martial art, 'qian zhu wan du shou' [thousand spiders ten-thousand poisonous hands], Zhu'Er's face had become contorted and bumpy. That night at the deserted garden he thought that she looked even worse than in the past. Thinking to this point he could not restrain from heaving a deep sigh; remembering that the deeper she practiced this poisonous skill, the more her whole body and mind would be harmed. He also remembered when Yin Liting told her that Zhang Wuji had died falling down from the cliff; Zhu'Er had shown her true feeling by crying bitterly. Zhang Wuji was very grateful over that matter.

Ever since he arrived at the Brightness Peak, day in and day out he was either busy training martial arts or busy tending the Ming Cult affairs; when did he ever have time to sit down peacefully and think about his own concerns? Once in a while he would remember Zhu'Er, then he would ask Wei Yixiao to look for her, or ask Yang Xiao to dispatch some search and rescue team to look around the Peak; but all those times nobody found out her whereabouts. Now he rebuked himself deeply, "Zhu'Er has always been good to me, but why have I been so ignorant about her? Why haven't I given any thought to her these past several days?" Actually, since he took the Cult Leader position of the Ming Cult, all his personal affairs were totally out of his mind.

"What are you regretting?" Zhao Min suddenly asked.

Before Zhang Wuji could reply, they heard shouts from the

upper deck; followed by a sailor coming down to give his report, "We see land ahead. The Granny ordered us to pick up speed and come ashore."

Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji looked out from their window and saw that there was a big island several 'li's ahead with trees and lush green vegetation on it. There was a strange looking peak on the island; it was tall and towering straight above a forest of pine trees. The boat was sailing fast because of the favorable wind; they had arrived on shore in just a time needed to eat a bowl of rice.

On the eastern end of the island there was a rocky hill protruding into the sea, with no sandy beach on it. Although the battle ship was deep into the water due to its weight, it would be able to anchor right next to the shore. But before the anchor was down, they heard a ferocious shout coming from the hill; the shout was full of rage, with an overwhelming power in it.

Zhang Wuji was pleasantly surprised, since he recognized the voice; the shout belonged to his Yifu, the 'jin mao shi wang' [golden-mane lion king] Xie Xun. It had been more than ten years, but his Yifu's heroic air was still as he remembered it; how could he not feel extremely joyful? Without thinking how Xie Xun from the far north Bing Huo Island could be on that island, also without any regard if Jin Hua Popo would see through his disguise, he hurriedly stepped down the wooden plank and ran toward the hill from which the shout originated to take a look.

He saw four men with unsheathed weapons in their hands surrounding a tall and big man. That man was facing the enemies with an empty hand. He was none other than Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun.

Zhang Wuji took a quick glance and saw that although his Yifu was blind, although he was surrounded by four men, although he faced four weapons barehanded, he did not by any chance lose his imposing air. Zhang Wuji had never seen his Yifu fight an enemy before; now that he had the opportunity to witness several stances, he was very happy. "Jin Mao Shi Wang's prestige shook the world in the past; it certainly was not an empty reputation," he said to himself, "Yifu's martial art skill is above 'Qing Yi Fu Wang' [Green-Winged Bat King]; I'll say he is on par with (maternal) grandfather."

The four people's martial arts were certainly not bad either. From where he was, near the boat, looking to the hill, Zhang Wuji was not able to see their faces clearly; but he could see that they were wearing raggedy clothes with cloth sacks on their backs. Obviously, they were from the Beggar Clan. Three other men stood on the side, ready to join the battle.

Zhang Wuji heard someone was saying, "Hand over the Tulong Saber ... we'll spare your life ... precious saber in place of your life ..." The strong wind from the hill transmitted the voice intermittently, making him difficult to understand clearly what they were saying; but Zhang Wuji knew that these people were here to snatch the precious Tulong Saber.

He heard Xie Xun laugh a big laugh and say, "The Tulong Saber is in my possession. The Beggar Clan's stinky thieves; if you have the ability then get it from me." His hands and feet did not slow down the least bit when his mouth was speaking.

In a flash Jin Hua Popo had run ashore; amidst the coughing she said, "Beggar Clan's Heroes, welcome to the Ling She Island. You did not come and talk to Lao Po, but disturb the Ling She Island's honorable guest. What do you want?"

"This is indeed the Ling She Island," Zhang Wuji thought, "Listening to Jin Hua Popo, apparently Yifu is her invited guest. Yifu has said that in any event he won't be willing to leave Bing Huo Island and return to the Central Plains; how come on Jin Hua Popo's invitation he was willing to come? How could Jin Hua Popo find out Yifu's whereabouts?" Questions after questions grew in his heart.

Hearing the host had arrived, the four people on the hill wanted to subdue Xie Xun as quick as possible; they attacked more urgently. But in doing so, they had actually violated a major principle in the study of martial art. Xie Xun was blind, thus he depended on the wind generated by the weapons to distinguish the enemies' positions. The faster these four people moved their hands, the stronger the wind generated by their weapons.

Xie Xun let out a long laugh. 'Bang!' he hit one enemy squarely on his chest. That man let out a long miserable scream and fell straight down from the hill into the rocks below. His skull broke and his brain splattered everywhere.

One of the three people standing on the side shouted, "Back off!" With a light movement he stepped forward, his fist floating in the air with strength that was sometimes there and sometimes not there, making it hard for Xie Xun to distinguish the sound. Sure enough, it was not until the fist was only a few inches from him that he finally realized it. He hastily tried to block the attack; his movement was awkward, he was truly in a very difficult situation.

The three men who fought previously moved back quickly; while an old man who was standing on the side took over their place. This old man incorporated the same technique as the first man; his palm was also light. Several stances

later Xie Xun was forced to block to the east and evade to the west; he was in a really dangerous situation.

“Ji Zhanglao [Elder Ji], Zheng Zhanglao [Elder Zheng]!” Jin Hua Popo shouted, “Jin Mao Shi Wang is inconvenienced by his eyes; you are fighting him with this despicable method. You are enjoying a reputation as Jianghu’s heroes for nothing.” She was talking and walking to the hill at the same time, with the help of her walking stick.

She was walking in faltering steps, as if a mountain breeze would blow her off the hill; but actually she was moving very fast. Supported by the stick, it looked like she was riding the wind, floating forward; with several strikes of her stick she quickly reached the waist of the hill. Zhu’Er followed closely behind her, but just in a short moment she fell behind.

Zhang Wuji was concerned over his Yifu’s safety, he quickly ran up the hill. Zhao Min followed behind him. In a low voice she said, “With this Old Granny here, Shi Wang [Lion King] will not be in grave danger. Don’t do anything yet, you’d better hide your identity first.”

Zhang Wuji nodded and followed behind Zhu’Er. By now all he could see was Zhu’Er’s graceful and slender body. If he did not know Zhu’Er’s face, wouldn’t he think she was an extremely beautiful woman, not inferior to Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo, and Xiao Zhao, three girls? Once he had this thought, immediately he scolded himself, “Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, your Yifu is facing a grave danger, yet you are looking at a girl and seizing her up, whether she is a beautiful woman or not.”

In a short moment, the four of them had reached the peak of the hill. They saw that Xie Xun was keeping his hands close to his body, in a defensive position without even trying to

attack. Only when the enemy's fist or kick came near did he use a little bit of 'qin na' [grappling technique] to parry the attack. This way he was able to hold out against the enemy momentarily, but it would be difficult for him to score a victory.

Zhang Wuji stood underneath a cluster of pine trees. He saw his Yifu's face was full of wrinkles, and there were more white hair on his head; he looked a lot older than the last time they parted. Zhang Wuji guessed that for the past dozen of years he was living alone on that desolate island, he must have passed the days with difficulty. Zhang Wuji was grieved, he felt blood rushing up in his chest and could not help but feel a strong urge to fight the enemy for him. He stepped forward to get a closer look at the enemies. Zhao Min understood his intention; she lightly pinched his hand and shook her head.

"Ji Zhanglao," Jin Hua Popo said, "Your 'yin shan zhang da jiu shi' [lit. nine great style of 'yin' (negative, female, of 'yin and yang') mountain palm] is famous throughout the Jianghu; why are you stealthily changing it to 'mian zhang zhao shi' [lit. cotton palm style]? Zheng Zhanglao is even more unspeakable; you conceal the 'hui feng fu liu quan' [lit. returning wind brushing away the willow fist (technique)] inside the 'ba gua quan' [eight-diagram fist (technique)]. Of course Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] does not know that ... (cough, cough) ..."

Since Xie Xun could not see the enemies' style, he was at a great disadvantage over them. Moreover, Ji and Zheng two elders were extremely cunning; by deliberately concealing their style, Xie Xun was having trouble predicting their moves. As Jin Hua Popo exposed their trick, Xie Xun's confidence grew. He waited until Zheng Zhanglao was about to change his fist technique, suddenly he struck straight

ahead; his fist collided with Zheng Zhanglao's fist. Zheng Zhanglao staggered back two steps until he bumped into a tree stump. Ji Zhanglao thrust his palm from the side to protect his companion, forcing Xie Xun to stop from pursuing him.

Zhang Wuji turned his attention to the two Beggar Clan's Elders; Ji Zhanglao was short and plump, with a red face, reminding him of a village butcher. Zheng Zhanglao was tall and skinny, with an ashen look, a perfect picture of a beggar. Both men carried eight cloth sacks on their back. The other man standing afar looked about thirty years of age; he also wore a beggar clothes, but his clothes was neat and clean. Surprisingly he also carried eight cloth sacks on his back. For someone his age to achieve an eight-bag elder position of the Beggar Clan was extremely rare. Suddenly that man opened his mouth, "Jin Hua Popo, you said you were not going to help Xie Xun, but in the end you are helping him. Aren't you ashamed?"

Jin Hua Popo coldly said, "Are you also a Beggar Clan's Elder, Sire? Please forgive this Old Granny's faulty vision for not recognizing you."

"I joined the Beggar Clan not too long ago, no wonder Popo did not know," that man replied, "My surname is Chen, given name Youliang."

"Chen Youliang? Chen Youliang?" Jin Hua Popo muttered, "I have never heard that name."

Suddenly a cry was heard as Zheng Zhanglao's left arm was hit by Xie Xun. The three Beggar Clan disciples who were standing on the side immediately charged forward with their unsheathed weapons. These three's martial art skills were inferior to Ji and Zheng, two Elders; normally they would

only be in the Elders' way, but since Xie Xun became blind, he had never fought with anybody, so his battle experience was lacking. Today was the first time he fought powerful enemies. Amidst the sound of fists and kicks were the sounds of the weapons; these mixtures of noises made him difficult to distinguish the enemies' positions. In a moment his shoulder was hit by a fist.

Seeing the critical situation, Zhang Wuji was about to make his move, but Zhao Min said in a low voice, "Certainly Jin Hua Popo would help?" Zhang Wuji halted his steps; he looked at Jin Hua Popo, and saw that she was leaning on her stick with cold smile on her face, without giving any sign that she was going to help.

By that time Xie Xun's left leg was kicked heavily by Zheng Zhanglao. Xie Xun staggered, he nearly fell down. Zhang Wuji had already prepared seven small pebbles in his hand; by now he could not wait any longer, his right hand moved, the seven pebbles flew toward the five people surrounding Xie Xun. But before the pebbles hit their targets, a black light flashed; 'swish!' three weapons were cut down. Among the five people, four were cut off right on their chests, becoming eight pieces, which scattered to all directions, falling off the hill. Only Zheng Zhanglao survived with his right arm cut off, but his back was hit by the two pebbles Zhang Wuji shot; he fell on the ground. The four of the slain people's back were also hit by the pebbles, only the Saber cut them off first before the pebbles arrived. This time Zhang Wuji's action was actually unnecessary.

This incident happened so fast that everybody was startled. They saw Xie Xun's hand was holding a deep black saber, precisely what was known as 'wu lin zhi zun' [the most revered in the Wulin (martial art) world], the Tulong Saber [Dragon-slaying Saber]. He held the Saber horizontally

across his chest, standing on the peak of the hill, his power and prestige made people shiver, he looked just like a deity.

Zhang Wuji had seen this Saber since he was little, yet he had never expected its sharpness to have such an overwhelming power as demonstrated just now. Jin Hua Popo muttered, “'Wu lin zhi zun, bao dao tu long’! [the most revered in the Wulin world, precious saber slaying the dragon] ‘Wu lin zhi zun, bao dao tu long’!”

Losing his arm, Zheng Zhanglao screamed in pain just like a pig getting slaughtered. Chen Youliang pale faced, he said in a loud voice, “Xie Daxia’s [great hero Xie’s] martial art is unparalleled, my utmost admiration! I ask you to let this Zheng Zhanglao go down the hill. Let me trade my life with his. Xie Daxia, please make your move!”

His speech made everybody’s countenance change; they had not expected this person’s ‘yi qi’ [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood] to be this deep. Zhang Wuji could not help but feel quite respectful towards him.

“Chen Youliang,” Xie Xun said, “Hmm, you are a real man. Take this surnamed Zheng away, I will not make things difficult for you!”

“Let me thank Xie Daxia first for your graciousness in not killing us,” Chen Youliang said, “Only the Beggar Clan has five lives died under Xie Daxia’s hands. I am going to train for ten more years. If I achieve success, I am going to come again to settle this debt.”

Xie Xun thought that he only have to move one step forward and brandish his precious saber, then this man would not escape alive; yet under this extremely dangerous situation he still had the nerve to say that he would come back to

seek revenge in the future; he was a very brave man. Thereupon Xie Xun said, "If the Old Man is still alive ten years from now, I am going to wait for your instructions."

Chen Youliang cupped his fists toward Jin Hua Popo in salute and said, "Without permission the Beggar Clan has trespassed your island; herewith we apologize!" Carrying Zheng Zhanglao, he went down the hill in big strides.

Jin Hua Popo turned toward Zhang Wuji and coldly said, "You, this young fella, you are good at the acupoint striking technique. Why are you shooting seven pebbles? One was meant for Chen Youliang, the other was meant for me, wasn't it?"

Seeing she was able to see that he has prepared the seven pebbles, but was not able to see through his disguise, Zhang Wuji did not know how to reply; he only showed a faint smile.

"Young fella," Jin Hua Popo said sternly, "What is your honored name? Disguising yourself as a sailor, following Lao Po Zi [the Old Granny] around, what is your purpose? You dare to act craftily in front of Jin Hua Popo; are you bored of your life?"

Zhang Wuji was not used to tell lies; he was startled and could not answer. Zhao Min made her voice hoarse and answered, "We are from the 'ju jing bang' [gigantic whale clan], we make our living on the sea, doing business without any capital. Lao Popo [Old Granny] offered us a lot of gold, so what's wrong with giving you a ride? This brother saw the Beggar Clan was cheating and he wanted to lend a hand. His intention was good, but we did not expect Xie Daxia's martial art was this high; in the end we were only being meddlesome."

Although she imitated a male's voice, her voice was still unavoidably sharp; piercing the ears of those who heard her. Luckily her makeup was perfect; her face was yellowish and looked like an old man, Jin Hua Popo was not able to see the flaw.

"Many thanks!" Xie Xun waved his left hand and said, "Ay, Jin Mao Shi Wang is like a tiger fallen on the plains that he has to receive help from Ju Jing Bang. Leaving the Jianghu for twenty years, capable people have come forth in the Wulin world in large numbers; why should I come back?"

When speaking the last sentence, his voice was full of sorrow, as he sighed with depressing emotion. Just now when Zhang Wuji shot those seven pebbles, Xie Xun could hear clearly the strength behind the shot; strength like that was truly rare in the world. He was shocked that there was such an expert in the Wulin world. Also, in the battle today, the reason he escaped injury from besiege after fighting all night was entirely due to the Tulong Saber. Suddenly the memory of the Wangpan Island some twenty years ago where he faced a group of warrior was like a different lifetime to him.

"Xie San Ge [third (older) brother Xie]," Jin Hua Popo said, "I know you don't like other people meddling in your fight; that's why I did not lend you a hand. You are not offended, are you?"

Hearing her unexpectedly calling his Yifu 'San Ge', Zhang Wuji was astonished. He did not know his Yifu ranked third in seniority; because looking at Jin Hua Popo, he was certain that she was older than his Yifu.

"Why am I not surprised?" he heard Xie Xun replied, "You

were returning to the Central Plains this time, did you hear anything about that child of mine Wuji?"

Zhang Wuji was shocked; but he felt a soft palm was holding his hand tightly. He knew Zhao Min did not want him to step forward and expose himself. Just now he did not listen to her advice and rashly shot the pebbles to help; in the end he let their existence to be known. Only his concerns toward Xie Xun went to the extreme; he could not let Xie Xun being bullied by anybody. This time he felt it was all right to momentarily restrain himself.

"Nothing," Jin Hua Popo said.

Xie Xun heaved a deep sigh and was silent for a long time before he finally said, "Mrs. Han, we are brother and sister [Translator's note: the characters used here are 'xiong mei' - (older) brother, (younger) sister], you cannot deceive me, a blind man. Tell me, that child of mine, Wuji, is he still alive in this world?"

Jin Hua Popo hesitated without answering. Zhu'Er suddenly said, "Xie Daxia ..." Jin Hua Popo reached out with her left hand to grab her wrist and stared hard at her; Zhu'Er did not dare to continue.

"Miss Yin," Xie Xun said, "Tell me, tell me! Your Popo is deceiving me, is she not?"

Two streams of tears flowed down on Zhu'Er's cheeks. Jin Hua Popo lifted up her right hand and placed it on top of her head, so that as soon as Zhu'Er said something she did not wish she would exert her internal energy and take her life.

"Xie Daxia," Zhu'Er said, "My Popo did not deceive you. We went to the Central Plains this time, we did not hear any

news about Zhang Wuji.”

Hearing what she said, Jin Hua Popo took her right palm from Zhu’Er’s forehead, but she still grabbed her wrist tight.

“So what news did you hear?” Xie Xun asked, “What happened to the Ming Cult? What happened to our old acquaintances?”

“I don’t know,” Jin Hua Popo replied, “I did not inquire anything on the Jianghu matters. I was only looking for the Toutuo [Buddhist monk with hair] who killed my husband to settle the debt; and for Emei Pai’s Miejue Laoni [Old Nun Miejue], to avenge that sword duel defeat. As for other matters, Lao Po Zi does not care.”

Xie Xun indignantly said, “All right, Mrs. Han, that day on the Bing Huo Island, what did you say to me? You said my Zhang Wudi [fifth brother Zhang], husband and wife, were not willing to reveal my hiding place; they were forced to cut their own throats on the Wudang Mountain. That child of mine, Wuji, became an orphan with nobody to care for him; that he was wandering in the Jianghu, that everywhere he went he was bullied by others, that he was destitute and miserable beyond words. Did you not say that?”

“That’s right!” Jin Hua Popo said.

“You said that he was struck by the Xuanming Shen Zhang [mysterious and dark divine palm]; he endured the suffering day and night,” Xie Xun continued, “You said you met him at the Butterfly Valley, and that you wanted him to come with you to the Ling She Island , but he was not willing. Is that right?”

“That’s right!” Jin Hua Popo said, “If I lied to you, may the

Heaven punish me and the Earth extinguish me, may Jin Hua Popo becomes the lowest of low in the Jianghu, may my departed husband does not have peace in his grave."

Xie Xun nodded. "Miss Yin," he said, "What was it that you wanted to say?"

Zhu'Er replied, "I was going to say that at that time I urged him to come with us to the Ling She Island; he did not want to listen, and bit me instead. His teeth mark is still on the back of my hand; I am telling you the truth. I ... I am very concerned about him."

Suddenly Zhao Min tightened her hand, which was grabbing Zhang Wuji's palm; her eyes were staring at him with contempt, but also with a teasing look, as if she was saying, 'You lied to me! Turned out you knew this girl; not only that, there were many entanglements between the two of you.'

Zhang Wuji blushed; remembering how Zhu'Er had a strange fondness toward him, his heart was bittersweet. All of a sudden Zhao Min lifted up Zhang Wuji's hand toward her mouth and she bit the back of his hand really hard. As his hand was bleeding, the Jiu Yang Shen Gong [Nine Yang Divine Energy/Power] in Zhang Wuji's body automatically reacted. Zhao Min felt a shock on her mouth that the corner of her mouth was also bleeding. This short episode between the two of them happened noiselessly.

Zhang Wuji looked at Zhao Min with questioning eyes, wondering why in the world she suddenly bit him. But he saw her eyes were full of smiles, her face was blushing, beautiful as the springtime. Although she was wearing fake moustache above her lips, the moustache failed to cover her sweetness and beauty. Confusion filled his heart.

“Very well!” Xie Xun said, “Mrs. Han, it was because of my concern over my child Wuji that I took the tens of thousands of ‘li’s journey back from the Bing Huo Island to the Central Plains. You promised to find Wuji for me; why didn’t you keep your promise?”

Tears streaming down Zhang Wuji’s cheeks; it was only then did he found out that although his Yifu knew he had enemies everywhere, disregarding grave dangers he returned to the Central Plains, it was all because of him.

Jin Hua Popo said, “That day we reached an agreement; I will look for your Zhang Wuji, you will lend me the Tulong Saber. Xie San Ge, let me borrow your Saber, Lao Po Zi’s words are like mountain; I will find this youngster for you.”

Xie Xun shook his head. “Bring Wuji over here; naturally I’ll lend you the Saber.”

“You don’t trust me?” Jin Hua Popo coldly asked.

“The matters of the world are not easy to say,” Xie Xun replied, “Even close relatives like father and son or brother and sister sometimes are not trustworthy.”

Zhang Wuji knew he was referring to Cheng Kun in the past; he felt sorry for his Yifu.

“Then you are sure you won’t let me borrow the Saber in advance?” Jin Hua Popo asked.

“I let the Beggar Clan’s Chen Youliang go down the mountain,” Xie Xun said, “From now on there will be no more peaceful days on the Ling She Island. I don’t know how many enemies of mine of the Wulin world would come over to make things difficult for me. Jin Mao Shi Wang is not like

what he used to be; other than this Tulong Saber, I don't even have a staff to lean on. Hey ... hey ...” Suddenly he let out a cold laugh and said, “Mrs. Han, just now five people were surrounding me. Even that hero from the Ju Jing Bang was preparing seven pebbles in his hand. Are you sure you don't have any intention to harm me? You are hoping that I would die under the hands of the Beggar Clan, and then you can leisurely pick up the spoil. Xie Xun's eyes maybe blind, but his hear is not. Mrs. Han, let me ask you again, Xie Xun came to your Ling She Island in secret; how did the Beggar Clan find out my whereabouts?”

“I was just going to find out,” Jin Hua Popo said.

Xie Xun flicked a finger on the blade of the Tulong Saber then he put it inside his robe. “You are not willing to find my Wuji for me, that's fine,” he said, “Xie Xun only needs to re-enter the Jianghu and makes some earth-shattering disturbance.” Tilting up his head he let out a loud whistle; and then leaped up and ran from the west side of the hill. His steps were quick; he headed straight toward a mountain peak on the northern end of the island. There was a lone thatched hut on the mountain peak; apparently it was where he lived.

Jin Hua Popo waited until Xie Xun had gone far. She turned around and stared at Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min. “Get lost!” she barked.

Pulling Zhang Wuji's hand, Zhao Min immediately went down the mountain, returning to their boat.

“I want to see Yifu,” Zhang Wuji said.

“When your Yifu left, Jin Hua Popo stared at him viciously, didn't you see that?” Zhao Min asked.

"I am not afraid of her," Zhang Wuji replied.

"There are so many surreptitious matters on this island," Zhao Min said, "How could the Beggar Clan people come into this island? How did Jin Hua Popo know your Yifu's whereabouts? How could she find the Bing Huo Island? There are so many unanswered mysteries here. It's not difficult for you to kill Jin Hua Popo, but then we will never find out the answers to these questions."

"It's not that I want to kill Jin Hua Popo," Zhang Wuji said, "It's just that Yifu misses me so much; I must go and see him."

Zhao Min shook her head, "You haven't seen each other for more than a dozen years," she reasoned, "Why can't you wait one or two more days? Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang], let me tell you something: no doubt we must guard against Jin Hua Popo; but more importantly, we must guard against Chen Youliang."

"That Chen Youliang?" Zhang Wuji asked, "This man's 'yi qi' is very deep; he is a true gentleman."

"Do you really believe it in your heart? Or are you merely making fun of me?" Zhao Min asked.

"Why would I make fun of you?" Zhang Wuji wondered, "This man was willing to die in place of that Zheng Zhanlao; a man of his quality is truly rare."

Zhao Min stared at him for a moment and sighed. "Zhang Gongzi, oh, Zhang Gongzi," she said, "You are the Ming Cult's Cult Leader; you are commanding of I don't know how many fierce and wild warriors and heroes, executing I don't

know how many important matters, yet you are this gullible? How can that be?"

"I am gullible?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"This Chen Youliang was obviously swindling Xie Daxia," Zhao Min said, "You were witnessing it with your own eyes; how can you not see it?"

"He was swindling my Yifu?" Zhang Wuji jumped.

"Xie Daxia was wielding the Tulong Saber," Zhao Min said, "Four of the Beggar Clan's masters were killed. Even if Chen Youliang's martial art skill were higher, he might not necessarily be able to escape from the Tulong Saber's cut. In this situation, he could charge forward staking everything he got and die, or he could kneel down for mercy. But just think about it, Xie Daxia does not want anybody to know his whereabouts; even if Chen Youliang knocked his head three hundred times, he might not necessarily be able to gain pity from Xie Daxia's tender heart. Other than pretending to be someone with thick 'yi qi', do you think he would have a better way?"

While she was speaking, she took Zhang Wuji's hand and applied ointment on the bite-wound, and wrapped her own handkerchief over it.

Listening to her analysis of Chen Youliang's plight, Zhang Wuji thought she was right; but thinking back about Chen Youliang's heroic and vehement attitude, also his manner of speaking, Zhang Wuji could not detect any falseness; hence, he was still unconvinced.

"All right," Zhao Min said, "Let me ask you this: when that Chen Youliang was speaking to Xie Daxia, what were the

positions of his hands and his feet?”

When he was listening to Chen Youliang, Zhang Wuji only occasionally looked at his face, while the other times looked at his Yifu; he had not paid any attention to Chen Youliang’s hands and feet, but actually Chen Youliang’s posture was projected in his mind. If nobody mentioned this, he would not remember; this time hearing Zhao Min’s question, the scene came back in his brain. He said, “Mmm, Chen Youliang’s right hand was slightly raised, his left hand across the body; that was the ‘shi zi bo tu’ [the lion catches the rabbit]. What about his feet? Mmm, right! That was the ‘jiang mo ti dou shi’ [devil-subduing kicking style]. Both were part of Shaolin Pai’s fist techniques; nothing special about them. Could it be that he was asking a favor from Yifu, but actually he was going to launch a sneak attack? That can’t be right; these two styles are not very effective.”

Zhao Min coldly laughed, “Zhang Gongzi,” she said, “You really do not have any understanding about people’s hearts, do you? Even if that Chen Youliang wanted to stealthily attack Xie Daxia, do you think he has the ability? This person is so cunning, he is a first class smart person; he understands people very well. Supposed his feigned ‘yi qi’ did not work; Xie Daxia could see through his scheme and was not willing to let him go, then with his posture, whom would he kick with the ‘devil-subduing kick’? Whom would he catch with the ‘lion catches the rabbit’?”

Because Zhang Wuji had always thought people everywhere were kindhearted, he had never thought deeply about Chen Youliang’s scheme. Now that Zhao Min brought it up, his mind was churning. Cold sweats started to trickle down his back; with a trembling voice he said, “He ... he was going to kick Zheng Zhanglao who was lying on the ground; and he was going to grab Miss Yin.”

Zhao Min smiled sweetly. "That's right!" she said, "He was going to kick Zheng Zhanglao toward Xie Daxia. He would also grab that childhood sweetheart of yours, that Miss Yin whose hand you bit, and shove her toward Xie Daxia, with the hope that they would slow him down a little bit. Then he would use the opportunity to escape with his life. Even though Xie Daxia's ability is matchless and he was holding a precious saber in his hand, Chen Youliang still had a slim chance of escaping; other than that, he did not have any other choice. If it were me, I'd do the same. Up until now, I still have not found a better way. This man was able to think such a clever method in a short moment; he is truly amazing." She could not stop praising him.

The more Zhang Wuji thought, the more upset he became; he had never thought that people in this world could be that ruthless. Ever since he was little, he had experienced countless hardships, yet he had never seen anything of Chen Youliang's caliber. After half a day he said, "Miss Zhao, you were able to see through his intentions; I am afraid you are not inferior to him."

Zhao Min's countenance turned dark. "Are you ridiculing me?" she asked, "Let me tell you something: if you are afraid of my wicked scheming, then stay far away from me."

"That is not necessary," Zhang Wuji said with a smile, "You have already used a lot of deceit against me, I can guard against all of them."

Zhao Min showed a faint smile and said, "You can guard against my deceit? How come you don't know I applied some poison to the back of your hand?"

Zhang Wuji was startled; he did feel a bit of itch and numb, a rather unusual feeling. Hastily he tore the handkerchief

down and brought his hand to his nose. “Aiyo!” he could not help exclaiming. He knew it was the ‘qu fu xiao ji gao’ [flesh/muscle decomposer ointment], an external medication, which could erode rotting flesh from a wound. Although it was not a poison, applied to the bite-marks it would deepen the wound. This ointment actually carried a pungent smell, but Zhao Min had mixed some rouge in it; she also used her own handkerchief to wrap the wound, so the smell was somewhat obscured that Zhang Wuji was not able to detect it.

Zhang Wuji hurriedly ran to the stern to wash his wound with some fresh water. Zhao Min followed behind him; helping him washing the wound while laughing and giggling.

Zhang Wuji pushed her shoulder away and said angrily, “Stay away from me! What kind of joke is this? Do you think it didn’t hurt?”

Still giggling Zhao Min replied, “It is truly ‘the dog that bites Lu Dongbin’; you are unable to recognize other’s kindness. I was afraid you are in so much pain that I used this method.”

[Translator’s note: ‘the dog that bites Lu Dongbin’ is a Chinese proverb, which means an inability to recognize goodness and repay kindness with vice. Lu Dongbin was one of the Eight Immortals (ba xian) in Taoist legends.]

Zhang Wuji ignored her remark; he furiously went back to his cabin and closed his eyes.

Zhao Min followed in and called, “Zhang Gongzi!” Zhang Wuji pretended to be asleep. Zhao Min called him two more times, but Zhang Wuji simply snored even louder. Zhao Min sighed, “If I knew you would be like this, I would have spread

a real poison to take your dog's life then I wouldn't have to deal with you anymore."

Zhang Wuji opened his eyes and said, "How can I be the dog that bites Lu Dongbin; unable to recognize other's kindness? You tell me."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "If I tell you, then what are you going to do?"

"You are always able to present a strong argument on everything; naturally I can't argue with you," Zhang Wuji said.

"You haven't heard what I am going to say and you admit defeat already?" Zhao Min said with a smile, "You knew all along that my intention was good."

"Pei!" Zhang Wuji spat, "Good intention indeed! You bit my hand, but did not apologize. Fine! But why did you have to spread poison on my wound? I'd rather not receive your kindness."

"Hmm," Zhao Min said, "Let me ask you this: which one was deeper, my bite on you, or your bite on Miss Yin?"

Zhang Wuji blushed. "That ... that was a long time ago," he stammered, "Why do you have to bring it up?"

"I want to bring it up," Zhao Min insisted, "Just answer my question; don't talk in circles."

"Granted that my bite on Miss Yin was deeper," Zhang Wuji admitted, "But at that time she was grabbing me, while my martial art was inferior to her; no matter what I did, I could not shake her loose. As a child, my heart was anxious, and I just bit her. You are not a child; I did not grab you and want

you to come to the Ling She Island, did I?”

“That’s strange,” Zhao Min laughed, “So she grabbed you and wanted you to come to the Ling She Island, but you’d rather die than come with her. Presently nobody invited you to come, yet you willingly came without any fuss? After all, when people grow, their hearts also grow, everything changes.”

Zhang Wuji’s entire face turned red. “You are the one who wanted me to come!” he said with a smile.

Hearing this, Zhao Min’s face also turned red, but she felt an indescribable sweetness in her heart. It was as if Zhang Wuji was saying, ‘She wanted me to come, I’d rather die than come. You wanted me to come, I immediately came.’”

Two people looked at each other for half a day without saying anything then suddenly they averted their gaze from each other. Zhao Min lowered her head and said, “Very well, I’ll tell you: it was a very long time ago that you bit Miss Yin, yet she has never forgotten you. I heard the way she talked; I am afraid she won’t ever forget you for the rest of her life. The reason I bit you is so that you also won’t forget me for the rest of your life.”

Only upon hearing this last sentence did Zhang Wuji finally understand her profound meaning; his heart was moved and he was speechless.

“I saw the tooth marks on the back of her hand,” Zhao Min continued, “Your bite was very deep; I thought that you bit her really deep, her memory of you is also deep. I wanted to bite you really deep, but I did not have the heart to do so; but if I bit you lightly, I am afraid you will forget me in the future. I thought about it left and right, then decided to bite

you first, then spread the 'qu fu xiao ji gao'; so that those tooth marks will be deepened."

At first Zhang Wuji thought it was funny then he thought that although with this act she was indulging in fantasy, in the end it was a demonstration of her deep affection to him. He sighed and softly said, "I don't blame you. I was truly the dog that bites Lu Dongbin; I was unable to recognize your kindness. You are treating me this way, as such; there is no way I'm going to forget you."

Initially Zhao Min felt vulnerable after revealing her tender feelings, but after hearing his words her eyes flashed mischievously; she smiled and said, "You said, 'you were treating me this way'; are you saying that I treated you badly, or I treated you well? Zhang Gongzi, my bad treatments to you is actually numerous, but my good treatment is none."

Zhang Wuji said, "Later on your treatment to me will be somewhat better." Grabbing her hand, he brought it to his mouth. "I want to also bite you really bad, so you won't forget me for the rest of your life," he said with a laugh.

Zhao Min suddenly felt very bashful; she shook his hand and rushed out of the cabin. As she opened the cabin door, she almost bumped into Xiao Zhao. Zhao Min was startled. "Damn it!" she silently cursed, "If my conversation with him was heard by this girl, I would die of embarrassment." She could not help but blushing profusely while she ran to the upper deck.

Xiao Zhao came to Zhang Wuji and said, "Gongzi, I saw Jin Hua Popo and that ugly girl went that way; they were carrying a big sack together. I don't know what kind of crafty trick they are planning to do."

“Hmm,” Zhang Wuji mumbled. He realized his conversation with Zhao Min had turned intimate; to have Xiao Zhao suddenly appear, he was unavoidably ashamed. He stared blankly for a moment before finally asking, “Are they going toward that small mountain hut on the northern side of the island?”

“They are going north alright, but they are not going to the mountain,” Xiao Zhao replied, “It seemed like they were in a deep argument with each other. That Jin Hua Popo looked very angry.”

Zhang Wuji went to the stern. He saw Zhao Min was standing at the bow with her eyes gazing toward the ocean. She did not turn her body around. He heard the mighty waves of the sea pounding the hull of the boat. He felt that his heart was as tumultuous as those fluctuating waves; he tried with great difficulty to calm it down.

The sun gradually set toward the western horizon in what he felt like a very long time; the trees on the island turned darker and became a blur in his eyes. Finally Zhang Wuji returned to his cabin.

During supper that night he told Zhao Min and Xiao Zhao, “I am going to visit Yifu. It would be better for the two of you to stay and guard the boat, so that we won’t scare Jin Hua Popo away.”

“Then I think you’d better wait for another night watch,” Zhao Min said, “Wait till the sky turns really dark before you leave.”

“Yes,” Zhang Wuji replied. His heart was boiling with anxiety over his Yifu’s safety; this one night watch was indeed

unbearable to him.

With great difficulty he waited until he could not see anything anywhere he looked. Finally he stood up, smiled faintly at Zhao Min and Xiao Zhao then he walked toward to the cabin door.

“Zhang Gongzi,” Zhao Min called while loosening the Yitian Sword on her waist, “Take this sword for self defense.”

Zhang Wuji was startled; “You’d better keep it with you,” he said.

“No!” Zhao Min refused, “This time I am worried about you.”

Zhang Wuji smiled, “Why?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Zhao Min replied, “Jin Hua Popo’s surreptitious craftiness is unpredictable; Chen Youliang is a bag full of tricks. Also I don’t know whether your Yifu will be convinced that you are his ‘child Wuji’ ... Ay, this island is known as the ‘Spirit Snake’, perhaps there are highly venomous vipers everywhere; besides ...” Speaking to this point, she suddenly stopped.

“Besides what?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min raised her hand toward her mouth and made a biting motion. She giggled and her cheeks blushed. Zhang Wuji knew she meant to say his cousin, Miss Yin. He waved his hand and went out the cabin door.

“Catch!” Zhao Min called out, tossing the Yitian Sword to him.

Zhang Wuji caught the Sword; his heart was touched. “She

trusts me this much to the point of letting me borrow the Yitian Sword," he thought. He tied the Sword on his back and walked toward the mountain peak on the northern end of the island. Keeping in mind what Zhao Min said he always stepped on bald rocks fearing there were venomous snakes among the grass.

In about the time needed to drink a cup of tea, he reached the base of the mountain. He looked up and saw that the hut where his Yifu lived was completely dark, without any light. "Has Yifu gone to bed?" he thought. But then he remembered, "His eyes are blind; why would he need any light?" Right at that moment he faintly heard voices from the left-hand side of the mountain. Quickly he crouched down, turning his attention towards the direction of the sound, but by that time the voices were gone.

It was the beginning of the month and the north wind was blowing over the trees and bushes. Zhang Wuji moved quickly along the rustling noise of the blowing wind toward the source of the voices. Soon he heard Jin Hua Popo's low and throaty voice about four, five 'zhang's ahead, she said "Still don't want to do it? What are you waiting for?"

"Popo," Yin Li replied, "Why are you doing this, as if ... as if you don't care about the old friendship? Xie Daxia and you have known each other from dozens of years; he trusted you and thus agreed to leave the Bing Huo Island to return to the Central Plains."

"He trusted me?" Jin Hua Popo laughed coldly, "What a joke. If he did, why didn't he let me borrow the Saber? He returned to the Central Plains because of his 'yi zi' [adopted/foster child]; what does it have to do with me?"

In the darkness Zhang Wuji vaguely saw Jin Hua Popo's

hunched back. Suddenly he heard a 'clink' noise as she pounded a metal nail with a mountain rock in front of her. A moment later the same noise was heard again. Zhang Wuji felt very strange; but he was afraid he might be detected by these two women, so he did not dare to move forward to take a closer look.

He heard Yin Li say, "Popo, if you want to take his treasured weapon away then fight him with a saber or a spear; that won't be considered a hero's misdeed. If the present matter is known, how can you not be the laughingstock of the heroes and warriors of the world? Besides, that Miejue Shitai has already died; what use is the Tulong Saber to you?"

Jin Hua Popo was angry; she straightened up her back and said in a stern voice, "Little girl, who rescued your insignificant life from the hands of your father? Now that you are a grown up, you don't want to listen to Popo anymore! This Xie Xun is neither your friend nor your relative, why are you so adamant in protecting him? Give Popo a good reason." Although her tone was grim, but her voice was actually low; apparently she was afraid Xie Xun on the mountain peak might hear her. Actually, the distance between that place and the peak was very far, it was a slim chance Xie Xun might hear her as long as she did not shout using her internal energy.

'Clank, clank!' Yin Li threw the bag she was carrying on the ground, and then she moved three steps backwards.

"Well?" Jin Hua Popo sternly said, "Your wings have grown, and now you want to fly, don't you?"

Although watching from the darkness, Zhang Wuji could see her eyes shine with an intimidating power, like a cold piercing thunder.

“Popo,” Yin Li said, “It’s not that I dare to forget your great kindness in saving my life and teaching me martial arts. But Xie Daxia is his ... is his Yifu.”

Jin Hua Popo let out a hollow laugh. “Surprisingly there is such an idiot like this in the world,” she said, “That boy surnamed Zhang has fallen into a ten-thousand ‘zhang’s ravine in the Western Region. You have heard it with your own ears from Wu Lie and Wu Qingying. If you don’t believe me, just capture those people and torture their confessions out. They have told us clearly; don’t tell me you think they were lying? That boy surnamed Zhang’s skeleton has turned into ashes by this time, and you still cannot forget him?”

“Popo,” Yin Li said, “I cannot cast him aside from my heart. Perhaps, this is what you said about some ... some debt from the previous life.”

Jin Hua Popo heaved a sigh and said, “Let’s not talk about that boy was not willing to come with us to the Ling She Island; even if he agreed to marry you, he’s dead now. What are you going to do? Luckily he died early; if he did not die and see your appearance, how could he love you? You would helplessly see him fall in love with some other woman; how would you feel then?”

The tone of these last few sentences was greatly moderated. Yin Li was silent; obviously she could not give her any answer. Jin Hua Popo continued, “Let’s not talk about other women, even our captive, that Emei Pai’s Miss Zhou, is very pretty. If that boy surnamed Zhang saw her, his heart would have been stirred. Would you then kill Miss Zhou, or would you kill that boy? Hm, hm, if you didn’t practice this ‘hand of thousand spiders ten thousand poison’ [‘qian zhu wan du shou’], you were actually a beautiful woman; but now? There

is nothing we can do.”

“He has already died, my face has already been destroyed; what else can I say?” Yin Li said, “But Xie Daxia is his Yifu. Popo, we cannot hurt a single strand of his hair. Popo, I beseech you on this matter only; otherwise, I will listen to you.” While saying that, she bent her knees to kneel down.

Zhang Wuji was secretly astonished, “I became the new Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu and have already caused quite a stir in the Wulin; how come these two actually know nothing about it?” he thought, “Hmm, that’s right; it must be that they went to the far away Bing Huo Island to get my Yifu. The round trip journey took a really long time. This time they came back to Dadou without having any communication with anybody; no wonder they have not heard about me.”

Jin Hua Popo hesitated a moment before answering, “Very well, you stand up!”

“Many thanks, Popo!” Yin Li happily said.

“I promise you not to harm his life, but I must take the Tulong Saber from him ...” Jin Hua Popo said.

“But ...” Yin Li said.

“Don’t fuss and make Popo angry,” Jin Hua Popo cut her off. Her hand moved and a ‘clink’ noise was heard again.

Zhang Wuji saw Jin Hua Popo’s hands were moving swiftly; successive ‘clink, clink’ noises were heard nonstop, farther and farther away. Yin Li sat on a rock with her head in her hands, sobbing softly. Zhang Wuji was very appreciative seeing, unexpectedly, that she has such a deep feeling toward him.

A moment later Jin Hua Popo shouted from about ten 'zhang's away, "Bring them here!" Yin Li had no choice but to take the two sacks and bring them to Jin Hua Popo.

Zhang Wuji crept forward several feet and looked; he was greatly shocked for he saw steel spikes seven, eight inches long were planted on the ground, among the rocks, about two, three feet apart. The sharp points of the spikes were facing upward; they looked very sharp, flickering with dim rays. The more Zhang Wuji thought about it, the more he was shocked. Apparently Jin Hua Popo was going to fight the Golden Mane Lion King, but she was afraid she might not be his match. If she launched secret projectiles, Xie Xun would be able to hear and evade; but steel spikes scattered on the ground were without noise and without movement. All she needed to do was lure him into the trap; how would a blind man like him be able to withstand the spikes?

Zhang Wuji's anger flared up; he was about to reach out and pull the steel spikes and unmask her plot, but he changed his mind. "This wicked Popo calls my Yifu 'Xie San Ge'; in the past they must have had unusual friendship," he thought, "I'll wait till she fights Yifu face to face, then I'll expose her trick. Today the Heaven has led me, Zhang Wuji, to this place, so that Yifu may not suffer any harm." Thereupon he sat on a rock, hugging his knees, waiting quietly for what would happen.

Suddenly he heard a rustling noise amidst the blowing wind, like a falling leaf on a rock. He knew a martial art master with high 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was quietly coming near. Turning his head around he saw a shadow moving stealthily; it was no other than the Beggar Clan's Elder, Chen Youliang. He had a curved saber in his hand, with its blade wrapped in cloth to avoid it from reflecting any light. Zhang Wuji mused how accurate Zhao Min's prediction was;

this man was indeed not a good person.

“Xie San Ge!” Jin Hua Popo shouted, “There is a dog thief who is not afraid of death coming here looking for you!”

Zhang Wuji was startled, he thought Jin Hua Popo was very good; could it be that his presence had already been detected? Reasonably said, it would not be the case. He saw Chen Youliang was crouching among the tall grass, without daring to make any movement. Zhang Wuji crept carefully several more ‘zhang’s forward; he wanted to get as close as possible to his Yifu, to guard him against Jin Hua Popo’s deceit and to offer his assistance as quickly as possible.

Not too long afterwards, a shadow of a big and tall man appeared from the hut on the mountain peak. Xie Xun walked slowly down the hill, and stopped several ‘zhang’s away from Jin Hua Popo. All along he did not utter a single word.

“Hey, hey,” Jin Hua Popo said, “Xie San Ge, you are utterly suspicious toward an old acquaintance, yet you readily believed a total stranger. This fellow Chen Youliang, whom you let go today, has come looking for you.”

Xie Xun coldly replied, “An open spear is easy to avoid, a hidden sword is hard to guard against. All my life Xie Xun has often suffered under those people close to me. That Chen Youliang is looking for me; what does he want?”

“This kind of treacherous lowly man, why would we want to care about him?” Jin Hua Popo said, “This afternoon you spared his life; do you know what position did his hands and feet take? His hands were in the ‘shi zi bo tu’ [the lion catches the rabbit] position, while his feet were in the ‘jiang mo ti dou shi’ [devil-subduing kicking style]. Ha ha ha ha

...!" Her speaking voice was clear and crisp, pleasant to the ears; but her laughter was sad and shrill like those of a crying owl in the deep of the night.

Xie Xun was startled for he knew Jin Hua Popo was not lying. Because of his blindness, he had fallen into Chen Youliang's scheme. He wryly said, "It was not the first time I was taken advantage of by others. Lowly people like that are a dime a dozen in the Jianghu; I kill one more or one less, what difference does it make? Mrs. Han, you can be considered my good friend; you saw it, but chose to ignore it, and only now did you come and tell me. Are you trying to incite my anger?" Having finished speaking, he suddenly jumped toward Chen You Liang with an unbelievable speed.

Chen You Liang was shocked; he brandished his saber to hack. Xie Xun bent his left hand and snatched the saber away. 'Slap, slap, slap!' He successively slapped Chen Youliang's ears three times; then his right hand grabbed the back of his neck and lifted him up. "If I want to kill you now, it would be as easy as killing a chicken," he said, "But Xie Xun has given his words, letting you go and come back in ten years. If I see you again before that time on this island, I am going to take your dog's life away." Waving his hand, he threw Chen Youliang away.

Right away Chen Youliang's body flew toward the spikes on the ground. If he fell down to the ground, the spikes would certainly pierce his body; and then Jin Hua Popo's all-night effort would be wasted. Immediately Jin Hua Popo flew forward and hit Chen Youliang's waist with her walking stick, sending him off several more 'zhang's to the side.

"If you dare to tread your feet even for one step on my Ling She Island, I am going to kill a hundred of your Beggar Clan disciples," she shouted, "Jin Hua Popo has always been true

to her words. Today I'll let you enjoy one of my golden flowers ['jin hua'] first." With a wave of her left hand a golden light streaked by. 'Puff!' a golden flower pierced the 'jia che xue' [jawbone acupoint] on Chen Youliang's left cheek, rendering him unable to speak momentarily, so that her secret plan would not be revealed.

Pressing his left cheek with his hand, Chen Youliang scurried downhill. By this time Xie Xun was only several 'zhang's away from the spikes. Zhang Wuji was crouching behind him. Only Zhang Wuji's internal energy was much higher than Chen Youliang's; he was able to regulate his breathing in such a way that Xie Xun and Jin Hua Popo were not aware of his presence.

Jin Hua Popo turned around and praised, "Xie San Ge, your ears are as sharp as your eyes were. Hereafter you can arouse your heroic manner and wander unhindered in the Jianghu for twenty more years."

"I was not able to see the 'shi zi bo tu' and the 'jiang mo ti dou shi'," Xie Xun replied, "As long as I know what really happened to my child Wuji, I will die with my eyes closed. The blood debts Xie Xun bears on his body are as high as the mountain. I deserve to die a miserable death, why would I want to wander unhindered in the Jianghu?"

Jin Hua Popo laughed and said, "For a Ming Jiao Hu Jiao Fa Wang [The Protector King of the Ming Cult], killing several people is nothing. Xie San Ge, let me borrow your Tulong Saber." Xie Xun shook his head without saying anything.

Jin Hua Popo said again, "This place is no longer a secret; you can't stay here any longer. Let me find another safe place for you to stay for a few months. Lend me the Tulong Saber so I can defeat my archenemy from the Emei Pai; and

then I will seek Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang] with all my might. Based on my skill, finding Zhang Gongzi and bringing him to your presence should not be a difficult matter.” Again Xie Xun shook his head.

Jin Hua Popo continued, “Xie San Ge, do you still remember the ‘si da fa wang, zi bai jin qing’ [four great protector kings, purple white golden and (dark) green], these eight characters? Remember how the four of us were under Yang Jiaozhu’s [Cult Leader Yang] command, the ‘Ying Wang Yin Er Ge’ [Eagle King, Second (older) Brother Yin], ‘Fu Wang Wei Si Ge’ [Bat King, Fourth (older) Brother Wei], and the two of us, ran amuck in the world, nobody could stop us? Today our great aspirations have grown old; can you let your ‘zi shan lao mei zi’ [purple robe old (younger) sister] being bullied without you lending a hand?”

Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised, “Listening to her, is it possible that she is unexpectedly the chief of our Cult’s Four Protector Kings, the ‘zi shan long wang’ [Purple Robe Dragon King]? Could there be such a coincidence in the world? How can she call Wei Fu Wang [Bat King Wei] ‘si ge’ [fourth (older) brother]?”

He heard Xie Xun sigh and say, “Those are all past events; why do you raise them up? Old, we are all old!”

“Xie San Ge,” Jin Hua Popo said, “My old eyes are not blind yet; do you think I cannot see that in these last twenty years your martial art skill has advanced greatly? Why be so modest? In our whole lives we haven’t had too many good days. I’ll say before the Ming Jiao Si Da Fa Wang die, we have to join hands and attempt to achieve a great undertaking in the Jianghu.”

Xie Xun sighed said, “Yin Er Ge [second (older) brother Yin]

and Wei Si Di [fourth (younger) brother Wei] might not necessarily still alive today. Especially Wei Si Di; the cold poison in his body was difficult to eliminate. I am afraid he is no longer alive.”

Jin Hua Popo laughed and said, “This time you might be wrong. Let me tell you honestly, at this time Bai Mei Ying Wang [White-browed Eagle King] and Qing Yi Fu Wang [Green-winged Bat King] are both on the Brightness Peak.”

“They went back to the Brightness Peak?” Xie Xun wondered, “What are they doing?”

“This Ah Li has seen it with her own eyes,” Jin Hua Popo said, “Ah Li is Yin Er Ge’s granddaughter. She offended her father and he wanted to kill her. The first time it was I who saved her; the second time it was Wei Si Ge. Wei Si Ge was taking her to the Brightness Peak, but along the way I stole her away. Ah Li, tell Xie Gong-gong [grandfather, a respectful term to address a senior] how the six major sects besieged the Brightness Peak.”

Thereupon Yin Li narrated briefly what happened in the western region. Only she was taken away by Jin Hua Popo before reaching the Brightness Peak, so that she did not have any recollection of the later incidents.

The more Xie Xun listened to her, the more anxious he became, “What happened next? What happened next?” he asked repeatedly. In the end he got angry, “Mrs. Han,” he said, “Although you did not get along with our brethrens very well because of your marital issue, our Cult is in difficulty, how could you stand as a spectator? Yang Jiaozhu was your Yifu. Have you forgotten how he treated you? Look at Yin Er Ge and Wei Si Di, Wu San Ren [the five wanderers] and the Five-Element Flag; didn’t they all come to the

Brightness Peak to fight?”

Jin Hua Popo coldly said, “Without the Tulong Saber, I was defeated by Emei Pai’s Old Nun Mie jue. Even if I went to the Brightness Peak, I still didn’t have a face to fight her; then why should I have gone?”

The two of them were silently standing facing each other. After a while Xie Xun asked, “How did you find out where I was? You have always been unwilling to speak plainly. Was it the Wudang Pai people?”

“How would the Wudang Pai people know?” Jin Hua Popo said, “When pressed by people of various sects, Zhang Cuishan, husband and wife, would rather kill themselves than revealing your hiding place, naturally Wudang disciples did not know. All right, I am not going to conceal anything from you today: in the western region I met by accident someone by the name of Wu Lie. He is a descendant of Wu Santong, a disciple of Duan Family from Dali. Quite by chance I overheard him talking to his daughter; from which I deduced the subject of their conversation. Thereupon I tortured him to tell me everything.”

Xie Xun was silent for half a day before saying, “This man surnamed Wu has met my child Wuji, hasn’t he? I believe he deceived that child to reveal my secret.”

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji was really ashamed, remembering how he was cheated at the ‘Zhu Jia Zhuang [Zhu Family Village], how Zhu Zhang Ling and Zhu Jiu Zhen, father and daughter, had used deceit to obtain the secret from him. If his Yifu had suffered any harm because of him, he would never atone for that guilt even if he had to die ten thousand times. Although his Yifu was blind, his ability to see things through was like those of seeing people.

Xie Xun continued, "The Six Major Sects besieging the Ming Cult is not a small matter; what happened to our Cult next?"

Jin Hua Popo replied, "The rise or fall, prosperity or decline, of the Ming Cult has nothing to do with Lao Po Zi. In the past, everybody on the Brightness Peak made things difficult for me. You might not remember that, but Lao Po Zi will never forget it. At that time only Yang Jiaozhu and you, Xie San Ge, who were good to me; that also I will not forget."

"Ay, personal grudge is a small matter, protecting our Cult is important," Xie Xun said, "Mrs. Han, you are rather narrow-minded."

Jin Hua Popo was angry, "You are a real man, I am only a narrow minded, unethical woman. When I left the Cult, I swore that I would have nothing to do with the Ming Cult. How could that Hu Qingniu treat me as an outsider if this was not so? Why did he compel me to return to the Ming Cult before he would be willing to treat the poison from Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf]? I was the one who killed Hu Qingniu. Zi Shan Long Wang has violated the Ming Cult's major law. How can I have any relation with the Ming Cult?"

Xie Xun shook his head. "Mrs. Han," he said, "I understand what's in your heart. You want to borrow my Tulong Saber; you said you wanted to deal with the Emei Pai, but actually you want to deal with Yang Xiao and Fan Yao. You have never forgotten your desire to enter the Brightness Peak via the secret passage. That gives me even more reason not to lend the Saber to you."

Jin Hua Popo coughed several times. "Xie San Ge," she said, "How was your martial arts compared to mine in the past?"

“Four Great Protector Kings, each one has their own strengths and weaknesses,” Xie Xun replied.

“But now you have lost your eyes; how would you fare compared to Lao Po Zi?” Jin Hua Popo asked.

Xie Xun fearlessly said, “You want to take the Saber by force, don’t you? With the Tulong Saber in his hand, Xie Xun will overcome the loss of his eyes.” Exhaling a long breath he moved one step forward; the pupils of his blind eyes were aimed at Jin Hua Popo imposingly.

Yin Li was intimidated; she withdrew several steps backward. Jin Hua Popo, with her hunchback, was standing up supported by her walking stick; occasionally she would let out one or two coughs, as if as soon as Xie Xun stretched out his hand, the Saber would be able to chop her into two pieces. But she stood motionless, as if she completely ignored Xie Xun.

Zhang Wuji had seen her in action several times; her speed was truly unbelievable. Probably she was slightly inferior to Wei Yixiao, but her movement was very strange, like a demon or a ghost; totally unpredictable. This moment Xie Xun and she were facing each other; one was like a drawn sword or bent bow, ready to spring into action; the other was like an enlightened sage, totally calm and at ease in the face of danger.

Zhang Wuji thought that since her position was above his (maternal) grandfather, his Yifu and Wei Fu Wang, her martial art skill must be very high; he could not help but secretly feel anxious for Xie Xun.

The wind was howling, the sound of the waves of the sea were faintly heard; adding some chill in the air to this

already suspenseful situation. Two people stood less than a 'zhang' away facing each other, but neither one was willing to make the first move.

After a long time, Xie Xun suddenly said, "Mrs. Han, today you are forcing me to fight you, breaching the oath we made as the Four Protector Kings of the olden days, Xie Xun is really in pain."

"Xie San Ge," Jin Hua Popo said, "You are always soft-hearted; I can't believe those countless famous Wulin's heroes and warriors were killed single-handedly by you."

Xie Xun sighed, "I bore the enmity of my father, mother, wife and child; hence I disregarded everything," he said, "The one thing I regretted most was with thirteen strokes of 'qi shang quan' [seven injuries fist (technique)] I killed Shaolin Pai's Kong Jian Shen Seng [Divine Monk Kong Jian]."

Jin Hua Popo was awestruck. "Kong Jian Shen Seng really died under your hands?" she asked, "When did you learn that kind of fierce martial art skill?" At first she was confident her hands and feet would be able to deal with Xie Xun, but now she started to feel fear.

"Don't be afraid," Xie Xun said, "Kong Jian Shen Seng took the beating without retaliating. He wanted to use the vast and boundless Dharma to help me cross over from my evil way."

"Hmm," Jin Hua Popo said, "That sounds better. Lao Po Zi can't be compared to Kong Jian Shen Seng. If you used thirteen punches to kill him, you would only need nine, ten punches to handle Lao Po Zi."

Xie Xun took a step backwards, his tone suddenly turned

gentle, he said, "Mrs. Han, at the Brightness Peak you treated me well. As your big brother I was sick, while my wife was weak from giving birth and could not get up. You took care of me with full attention for more than a month. I will always appreciate that." Patting the grey cotton robe he was wearing he said, "I was overseas wearing beast's leather as clothes, you sewed me this outfit, which fits me well inside and outside, showing me that your brotherly love at the Brightness Peak has not changed. Please leave! From now on we are not going to see each other anymore. I only ask you to find information on that child Wuji's whereabouts and then bring him here to me; I will always be indebted to you."

Jin Hua Popo laughed bitterly and said, "You still remember this friendship from the past. Let me be frank to you; ever since Yin Ye Da Ge [big brother Silver Leaf] died, my heart had died with him. It's just that I still have some unresolved gratitude and grudges, so I cannot die just like that, and join Yin Ye Da Ge underground. Xie San Ge, although the people of the Brightness Peak are martial art experts and brilliant strategist, in your 'mei zi's [younger sister - term of endearment] eyes they are nothing. Only you, Xie San Ge, are special in my eyes. Do you know the reason?"

Xie Xun raised up his head and was silent for half a day before he finally shook his head and said, "Xie Xun has always been ordinary and mediocre, he certainly is not worthy of 'xian mei's [worthy (younger) sister] regard."

Jin Hua Popo walked over several steps toward a piece of boulder, and then she slowly sat down. "At the Brightness Peak in those days," she said, "Only Yang Jiaozhu and you, Xie San Ge, are special in my eyes. When I married Yin Ye Xiansheng, only the two of you did not resent my decision."

Xie Xun also sat down and said, "Although Han Da Ge [big

brother Han] was not a member of our Cult, he was a hero. Our brothers dissented to your marriage, they were rather a bit narrow-minded. Ay, they are under siege of the Six Major Sects, I wonder how they are doing?"

"Xie San Ge," Jin Hua Popo said, "You are overseas, but your heart is still in Zhong Tu [central earth]; you have never forgotten your brethren of old. A man's life is only a few decades, which will pass in a flash, why should you always think of others?"

By this time the two of them were only a few feet apart; hence they were able to hear each other's breathing. Xie Xun noticed that Jin Hua Popo would cough every other sentences; he asked, "You suffered lung injury from the frostbite at the 'bi shui han tan' [jade-green water, frozen pool]; from that day until now, you are not completely healed?"

"Each time the weather turns cold, my coughing always gets worse," Jin Hua Popo said, "Hmm, after coughing for dozens of years, I already became accustomed to it. Xie San Ge, I hear your breathing is uneven, is it the injury you suffered from training the 'qi shang quan'? You must take a good care of yourself."

"Many thanks for your attention, Xian Mei," Xie Xun said. Suddenly he raised his head up and called Yin Li, "Ah Li, come over here."

Yin Li came over and greeted him, "Xie Gong-gong."

Xie Xun said, "Use your entire strength and pierce me with your finger."

Yin Li was startled; "I do not dare," she said.

Xie Xun laughed, "Your 'qian zhu wan du shou' won't be able to hurt me, although you are using your entire strength. I simply want to test your skill," he said.

Yin Li still said, "Hai'er [lit. child] do not dare." And then she added, "Xie Gong-gong, since Popo and you are old friends, whatever problem we have right now, why can't we talk it over? We don't have to fight over it."

Xie Xun laughed bitterly, "Just pierce me with your finger," he said.

Yin Li did not have any choice; she wrapped a handkerchief around her right index finger then stabbed Xie Xun's shoulder with it. "Aiyo!" suddenly she called out and stumbled backwards; her body flew for more than a 'zhang' away. 'Bang!' she landed heavily on the ground. She felt as if the bones in her body were broken into pieces.

Jin Hua Popo maintained her composure; "Xie San Ge," she slowly said, "Your heart is so wicked. You are afraid I might have a helper, hence you get rid of her first."

Xie Xun was silent for half a day before saying, "This child is kind hearted. She pricked me with only 20, 30% of her strength, and she wrapped her finger with a handkerchief, so that the 'thousand spiders poison' did not harm me. Very good, very good. Otherwise, the 'thousand spiders poison' would come back and attack her heart; her life would be gone by now."

Listening to these words, Zhang Wuji's back broke into cold sweats; he thought his Yifu plainly stated that he was going to test Yin Li's strength, if she did indeed attack him with all her strength, wouldn't she die a violent death? The Ming Cult people were indeed cruel; even his kind Yifu was no

exception. He did not know Xie Xun and Jin Hua Popo had been friends for a long time; obviously they cared of each other. He thought after talking to each other amiably, they would certainly not hold ill feeling toward each other. But with an extra help for Jin Hua Popo, Xie Xun was greatly disadvantaged; hence he wanted to get rid of her preemptively.

“Ah Li,” Xie Xun asked, “Why are you so kind to me?”

“You ... you are his Yifu,” Yin Li said, “Besides ... besides, you came here for his sake. In this world you and I are the only people who remember him.”

“Ah,” Xie Xun said, “I did not expect you to be this kind to my child Wuji; I nearly took your life. You come over here.”

Yin Li struggled up and slowly walked to him. Xie Xun put his lips on her ear and said, “I am going to pass on to you an internal energy cultivation method, which I developed on the Bing Huo Island. It is the essence of my life-long martial art accomplishment.” Without waiting for Yin Li to reply, he recited the theory from top to bottom one time.

Yin Li could not comprehend it completely; she tried desperately to memorize it. Xie Xun was afraid she could not remember, so he recited it two more times. “Have you memorized it?” he asked.

“I have,” Yin Li replied.

“After you train it in five years, you will reap some benefit,” Xie Xun said. “Do you know why I pass this skill on to you?”

Yin Li suddenly cried and said, “I ... I know. But ... but I can’t.”

“What do you know? Why can’t you?” Xie Xun asked sternly. His left palm was on her hair, ready to strike if Yin Li’s answer did not satisfy him.

Covering her face with both hands, Yin Li said, “I know you want me to find Wuji and pass this skill on to him. I know that after I master this skill, you want me to protect Wuji, so that he won’t suffer under evil people’s cruel hands, but ... but ...” After saying two ‘buts’ she broke into a loud cry.

Xie Xun stood up and shouted, “But what? Has my child Wuji encountered any mishap?”

Yin Li threw herself on his bosom and wept. “He ... he has died six years ago in the ... in the western region, he fell down a valley and died.”

Xie Xun was trembling. “Are you ... are you ... serious?” he asked.

“I am,” Yin Li was still crying. “Those Wu Lie, father and daughter, saw it with their own eyes. Seven times did I prick both of them with the ‘qian zhu wan du shou’ and seven times I saved their lives again, until they were suffering in between life and death. They ... they could not tell me a lie.”

When Yin Li recounted Zhang Wuji’s death, Jin Hua Popo was going to stop her; but then she changed her mind, thinking that as Xie Xun heard his Yizi died, his mind would be troubled. True, in the coming fight he would be fiercer by 30%, but also he would be less cautious by 30%; thus increasing the chance he might fall into her steel spikes trap. Therefore, she only laughed coldly and did not say anything.

Xie Xun lifted up his head and let out a loud whistle, while tears stream down his cheeks. Seeing his Yifu and his cousin loved him this much, Zhang Wuji could not contain himself much longer. He was about to come out and make himself known, but suddenly Jin Hua Popo said, "Xie San Ge, since your Yizi, that Zhang Gongzi has already died, why would you hold on to that Tulong Saber? Please lend it to me."

Xie Xun hoarsely said, "You hid the truth from me really well. If you want to take the precious saber, you must take my life first." He gently pushed Yin Li to the side. With a hiss he used the lapel of his robe to wipe his tears, and then tore it and tossed it toward Jin Hua Popo. It was called 'ge pao duan yi' [lit. cutting off the robe, breaking friendship].

Zhang Wuji thought, "I'd better come out and tell them the truth, so that these two will not senselessly injure their 'yi qi' [friendship, code of brotherhood]" He had just finished thinking when suddenly he heard some light breathing noise from the tall grass toward his far left. The noise came from quite a distant away, plus it was very light; if not due to his extremely keen ears, Zhang Wuji would not be able to hear it. His heart was moved, "Could it be that Jin Hua Popo secretly prepared some helpers? I'd better not rashly come forward." In the meantime, he heard the gusts of wind from the Saber, as Xie Xun and Jin Hua Popo had started fighting each other.

Xie Xun brandished his precious saber around his body like a black dragon circling around him; sometimes fast, other times slow, with a divine variation. Jin Hua Popo was afraid of the Saber's sharpness; she kept moving in circles some distant away from him. Sometimes Xie Xun would deliberately open up a hole in his defense, trying to entice Jin Hua Popo to enter, but Jin Hua Popo did not buy his trick; she would wait for him to attack, then with extreme

ingenuity she would evade and launch a counterattack.

These two people knew their opponent's martial art very well; victory or defeat would not be easily determined within one or two hundreds moves. Xie Xun relied on the precious saber, while Jin Hua Popo took advantage of his blindness. Each of them was trying to exploit this slight advantage to gain victory. In a way they were having a contest of wits and not of internal energy.

'Swish, swish!' suddenly two yellow rays flashed by; Jin Hua Popo launched two of her 'jin hua' [golden flower]. Xie Xun turned the Tulong Saber around; both 'golden flowers' stuck to the Saber. Turned out the golden flowers were made of pure steel plated with gold; while the Tulong Saber was cast from some 'xuan tie' [black/mysterious iron] with some magnetic property, which attract any ferrous metal.

These golden flowers were the secret projectiles that brought fame to Jin Hua Popo's name, when released, the variation was endless; even if Xie Xun's eyes were not blind he would be hard pressed to evade them. Unexpectedly, this Tulong Saber was the bane of these secret projectiles. Jin Hua Popo moved swiftly to the left and to the right, successively launching eight more golden flowers; all of them stuck to the Tulong Saber.

It was a dark night, with neither the moon nor the stars in the sky; the golden flowers on the Saber looked like several hundreds of fireflies dancing around in the air. Suddenly Jin Hua Popo let out a cough and shot sixteen, seventeen golden flowers at once, so that if Xie Xun intercepted the ones on his east, he would not be able to evade the ones on his west. Xie Xun waved his sleeve and rolled in about seven, eight golden flowers; while intercepted the other eight or so golden flowers with his Tulong Saber.

“Mrs. Han,” he shouted, “Your title is ‘zi shan long wang’, which is a big taboo against this saber. If you have a prolonged contact with it, I am afraid it won’t be to your advantage.”

Jin Hua Popo shivered. For martial art practitioners who live their lives on the blades of the weapons; mostly they paid particular attention to taboos like this. She was known as the ‘long wang’ [dragon king], while the saber was named ‘tu long’ [slaughtering the dragon]; so it was a very unlucky combination. She forced a laughter and said, “Perhaps my ‘sha shi zhang’ [killing-the-lion staff] will kill the blind lion first.” Abruptly her staff shot out.

Xie Xun shrunk his shoulder to evade, but suddenly his foot stumbled. “Ah!” he cried, as the staff hit his left shoulder. Although the force had been dissipated for the most part, the hit was not light by any means.

Zhang Wuji was delighted, he cheered in his heart. He knew Xie Xun pretended he was not fast enough to dodge and thus took the hit; Zhang Wuji thought, “Yifu only needs to shoot the golden flowers in his sleeve, and then use the Tulong Saber in ‘qian shan wan shui’ [thousand mountains ten thousands rivers] to chop randomly. Jin Hua Popo will not dare to block the blade; she will be forced to move to the left. After two steps she won’t be able to move farther; at that time Yifu will use his internal energy to force the golden flowers on the Tulong Saber to shoot forward. Jin Hua Popo will be powerless to evade; most probably she will be seriously hurt.”

He had just finished thinking when yellow rays streaked out, Xie Xun did indeed broadcast the golden flowers rolled inside his sleeve; forcing Jin Hua Popo to withdraw to the

left. Zhang Wuji was watching the fight when suddenly he remembered something. "Aiyo, not good!" he thought, "Jin Hua Popo also has already calculated her steps."

By this time Zhang Wuji had acquired a universal knowledge of the martial art. When these two martial art masters attacked and blocked, not a single one of their movements was outside his anticipation. He saw Xie Xun's 'qian shan wan shui' was successful in forcing Jin Hua Popo to withdraw to the left. With a loud shout Xie Xun shot the dozen or so golden flowers on his precious saber; "Aiyo!" Jin Hua Popo cried out and staggered several steps backwards. Xie Xun was a man of his words; after 'ge pao duan yi' [breaking the friendship], he showed no mercy whatsoever. He leaped forward to pursue, brandishing his saber to strike Jin Hua Popo.

"Watch out!" suddenly he heard Yin Li shouted loudly, "There are sharp spikes underneath your feet!"

Xie Xun heard the shout, and was shocked; but it was too late for him to stop. Suddenly he heard a series of 'swish, swish' noise; more than a dozen golden flowers came his way. Jin Hua Popo was taking advantage as his body was midair and incapable to evade; she wanted to force him to land and thus tread on the sharp spikes.

Xie Xun had no alternative but brandish his saber to block the golden flowers. Suddenly a series of clinking noises were heard; his feet reached the ground, uninjured. He stooped down and groped around. He found out that there were seven, eight inches long of steel spikes planted among the rocks on the ground. He could feel the spikes were very sharp; but someone had already shot the four spikes that his feet were supposed to land on, with gravels, sending the spikes fly away from him. From the wind generated by the

gravels, Xie Xun could tell that the shooter was the youngster from the Gigantic Whale Clan who shot the seven pebbles to help him that afternoon. This man had been hiding nearby, but Xie Xun had not had the slightest idea; if not because of that man's help, he would have been seriously injured by now, and then Jin Hua Popo only needed to butcher what was left of him. Thinking about this possibility, he was unable to restrain cold sweat from trickling down his back.

These two people had both laid a trap to harm their opponent; Xie Xun's shoulder was hit by the staff, Jin Hua Popo was hit by two golden flowers from Xie Xun's saber. Although the injuries were not life-threatening, considering the strength of their opponents, both of them were nonetheless suffering considerable disadvantages.

Jin Hua Popo was coughing badly several times before turning toward the place Zhang Wuji was hiding, "Ju Jing Bang kid," she said, "You have repeatedly interfered with Lao Pozi's business. Quickly give me your name."

Zhang Wuji had not replied when suddenly he saw a yellow ray flashed by and Yin Li grunted as three golden flowers hit her on the vital points on her chest. Turned out Jin Hua Popo had realized that Zhang Wuji's martial art was superior, and if she wanted to punish Yin Li, he would try to thwart it; therefore, she faced and spoke to him, and when he was the least expecting it, she backhandedly shot out some golden flowers.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; he flew up and caught two golden flowers midair; and as soon as he landed, he embraced Yin Li in his bosom. Yin Li had not lost her consciousness; seeing a bearded man embracing her, she pushed out and struggled trying to get free, but when she exerted some strength, she

threw up some blood. Zhang Wuji realized immediately what was going on; he quickly pulled the fake beard and moustache, and wiped the makeup from his face, revealing his real face.

Yin Li was dazed; “Ah Niu Gege [big brother Ah Niu],” she called out, “Is it you?”

“It’s me!” Zhang Wuji smiled. Yin Li felt relieved and immediately passed out. Seeing her injury was serious, Zhang Wuji did not dare to pull away the golden flowers; he quickly sealed her ‘shen feng’ [divine grace], ‘ling xu’ [spirit grave], ‘bu lang’ [stepping porch], and other vital acupoints connected to the injury, to protect her main artery.

He heard Xie Xun say with a loud voice, “Sire has lent your hands twice to save me; Xie Xun is greatly indebted.”

With a choking voice Zhang Wuji said, “Yi ... Yi ... You don’t have to ...”

End of Chapter 28.

Chapter 29 - The Hopes of Four Women on the Boat

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Towards the afternoon, suddenly a strong wind came followed by a heavy rain. The small boat was blown southward by the wind. Xie Xun, Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao, four people removed their eight shoes and used them to scoop the rainwater accumulated on the boat to the sea.

At that moment, they heard two ‘ding-a-ling’ sounds coming from behind them, and very soon three people had arrived. Zhang Wuji took a glance and saw three people wearing wide robes; two of them were very tall, while the one on the left was a woman. They were approaching with their backs to the moon, so that he could not see their faces clearly; but their robes were embroidered with an image of flaming fire, so obviously they were Ming Cult disciples. Each person had their hands high in the air, with each hand holding a black, about two feet long, tablet. The one, which was the tallest, said in a clear and loud voice, “The Ming Cult’s Sheng Huo Ling [Decree of the Holy Fire] have arrived, Cult Protectors Dragon King and Lion King have not kneeled down, what are you waiting for?”

His accent was terrible; he sounded very stiff. Zhang Wuji was startled; he mused, “Yang Jiaozhu [Cult Leader Yang] did mention that our Cult’s Sheng Huo Ling has been lost since the time of our thirty-first generation Cult Leader, Shi Jiaozhu. How can it be in these three people’s hands? Is this the genuine Sheng Huo Ling? Are they really our Cult’s disciples?”

Jin Hua Popo said, “I have left the Cult a long time ago, so these four words ‘hu jiao long wang’ [cult protector dragon king] don’t mean anything to me. What is Sire’s honorable name? Is that Sheng Huo Ling the real one or a fake? Where did it come from?”

That man barked, “You have left the Cult; what are you prattling about?”

Jin Hua Popo coldly said, “In all her life Jin Hua Popo has never allowed others to slander her for even half a word; in the past, when Yang Jiaozhu was still alive, even he was 30% respectful toward me. What is your position in the Cult that

you dare to shout and bicker in my face?"

In a sudden movement, the three people's shadow swayed, and simultaneously three left hands moved to grab Jin Hua Popo. She brandished her walking stick, sweeping horizontally toward them. It was unclear how these people moved, but somehow their position changed and Jin Hua Popo's stick had struck empty air and three right hands reached out to the back of her neck; her body shook and she was thrown far away.

Based on Jin Hua Popo's martial art level, even if three highest-skilled martial art masters besieged her, they would not necessarily be able to throw her out in one move like that. But, not only the footwork of these three people in white robes was very strange, their coordination was also near perfection; they were just like one person with three heads and six arms.

"Wow!" Zhang Wuji could not stop from exclaiming. As those three people moved, he was able to see their features clearly; the tallest among them had pointy whiskers, his eyes were bluish green. The other man had blonde moustache and eagle nose. The woman's hair was black, just like the Chinese, but the pupils of her eyes were so pale that they were almost colorless. Her face was watermelon-seed shaped; she was around thirty years of age. Although her features were strange, she looked very beautiful.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Turn out these people are Middle-Easterners; no wonder their accents are so stiff, almost sounds like they are reciting a book."

In a loud and clear voice the man with the pointy whiskers said, "Seeing the Sheng Huo Ling is like seeing the Jiaozhu; Xie Xun, why haven't you knelt down?"

“Who are the three of you?” Xie Xun replied, “If you are Ming Cult disciples, then Xie Xun should know you. If you are not Ming Cult disciples, then Sheng Huo Ling has nothing to do with the three of you.”

“Where is the origin of the Ming Cult?” the pointy whisker asked.

“It came from Persia,” Xie Xun answered.

“Correct, correct!” the pointy whisker said, “I am the ‘Liuyun Shi’ [flowing/spreading (take your pick) cloud emissary] from the Persian Central Ming Cult. These other two are ‘Miaofeng Shi’ [wonderful wind emissary] and ‘Huiyue Shi’ [glorious moon emissary]. We come to the Central Earth [‘zhong tu’] from Persia on assignment from the Central Cult Leader.”

Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji were stunned. Zhang Wuji had read Yang Xiao’s book, the ‘Ming Jiao Liu Chuan Zhong Tu Ji’ [A record on the spread of Ming Cult to the Central Earth]; so he knew the Ming Cult came from Persia. He saw these three people were Persian Middle-Easterners, their martial arts were also this good; so they must be telling the truth.

He heard that blonde-moustache Miaofeng Shi say, “Our Jiaozhu received the news that the Central Earth’s Jiaozhu was missing and the disciples were killing each other, the Cult was declining quickly. He ordered Cloud, Wind and Moon, three Emissaries, to reorganize the Cult’s affairs. All Cult disciples, from the top to the bottom, must receive our commands without fail.”

Zhang Wuji was delighted, “The Central Cult Leader has sent his orders; nothing can be better than that,” he thought,

“Now I don’t have to bear this heavy responsibility with my superficial experience and cause harm on the important matter.”

He heard Xie Xun say, “Even though the Central Earth’s Ming Cult stemmed from Persia, we have become an independent faction for several hundred years; therefore, we are outside the Persian Central Cult’s jurisdiction. The three of you have come from afar to the Central Earth, Xie Xun is very pleased; as for kneeling down and so on, don’t you think it is rather unreasonable?”

The pointy whiskered Liuyun Shi struck the two pieces of black tablets in his hands to each other. ‘Clang!’ The noise was neither those of metals nor jade; it sounded very strange. He said, “This is the Central Earth’s Ming Cult’s Sheng Huo Ling; the former Jiaozhu surnamed Shi was unworthy; he lost it to the outsiders, and now we took it back. Seeing the Sheng Huo Ling is like seeing the Jiaozhu; Xie Xun still does not obey orders?”

When Xie Xun joined the Cult, Sheng Huo Ling had been lost quite a long time, so he had never seen it; but he had heard about its divine features, it was also frequently mentioned in the Ming Cult’s Holy Scripture. Therefore, listening to this unique sound, he knew that the Sheng Huo Ling in that person’s hand was the genuine one. Besides, those three were able to catch and throw Jin Hua Popo away with only one move, which ordinary people would not be able to do; his doubts were gone.

“Subordinate believes what Sire has said,” he said, “I wonder what instructions do you have for me?”

Liuyun Shi waved his left hand; together with Miaofeng Shi and Huiyue Shi they leaped together. In two jumps they

landed by Jin Hua Popo's side. Jin Hua Popo attacked them with some golden flowers; the three Emissaries dodged to the east and swayed to the west; the golden flowers fell to the ground. Huiyue Shi dashed forward with extended finger toward Jin Hua Popo's throat. Jin Hua Popo raised her walking stick to block, followed by a counterattack. Suddenly her body flew up, because her back was grabbed and lifted up by Liuyun Shi and Miaofeng Shi. Huiyue Shi immediately advanced three steps and her palms struck Jin Hua Popo's chest and abdomen three times. The palm strikes were not too heavy, but Jin Hua Popo was immobilized.

Zhang Wuji said in his heart, "These three's movements were not extraordinary, but the ingenuity of their coordination was matchless. Huiyue Shi attacked from the front to entice the enemy and the other two mysteriously come in and out to capture Jin Hua Popo. Strictly speaking, in term of martial art, each one of them is inferior to Jin Hua Popo. That woman's three palm strikes are not really sealing acupoint technique, but it was cunningly comparable to our Central Earth's sealing acupoint technique."

Liuyun Shi grabbed Jin Hua Popo with his left hand and tossed it toward Xie Xun. "Shi Wang [Lion King]," he said, "According to our Cult's law, once somebody enters our Cult, he cannot rebel and leave the Cult. This woman has left the Cult on her own accord; hence she is a traitor. Behead her."

Xie Xun was shocked; "The Central Earth Ming Cult does not have this law," he said.

Liuyun Shi coldly said, "From now on the Central Earth Ming Cult will receive the Persian Central Cult's orders. A traitor who leaves the Cult will bring disaster later on, if left alive. Quickly execute her."

Xie Xun fearlessly said, "The Four Kings of the Ming Cult are no different than sworn brothers and sister. Although she treated the Old Xie ruthlessly today, the Old Xie cannot retaliate cruelly. I cannot harm her."

Miaofeng Shi laughed loudly. "Chinese people are wishy-washy, with so many customs to be observed" he said, "How can you not kill a traitor? Where is the logic in that? What a load of crap!"

"The Old Xie can kill people without batting an eyelid," Xie Xun said, "But I have never killed my fellow Cult disciple."

Huiyue Shi said, "You don't want to kill her that means you are defying order. We will kill you first."

Xie Xun replied, "The three of you came to the Central Earth, and your first order of business is forcing Jin Mao Shi Wang to kill Zi Shan Long Wang, is it because you want to establish authority by intimidation?"

Huiyue Shi showed a faint smile. "Your eyes are blind, but your heart is not," she said, "Hurry up, do it!"

Xie Xun tilted his head up and let out a long laugh; his voice shook the mountain and valley. He loudly said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang has always been frank. Not to mention I won't kill friends and comrades, even if the Old Xie has a deep enmity toward someone, you have already captured and immobilized her; how can the Old Xie kill someone who is unable to fight back?"

Listening to his Yifu's heroic and frank speech, Zhang Wuji cheered inwardly; but he started to loath these Three Emissaries from the Persian Ming Cult.

He heard Miaofeng Shi said, "For the disciples of Ming Cult, seeing Sheng Huo Ling is the same as seeing the Jiaozhu. Do you dare to defy the Cult?"

Xie Xun boldly said, "The Old Xie has been blind for more than twenty years. Even if you place it in front of my eyes, I still cannot see it. What do you mean by 'seeing Sheng Huo Ling is the same as seeing the Jiaozhu'?"

Miaofeng Shi was angry. "Fine! Then have you made up your mind to rebel?"

"The Old Xie has never dared to rebel against the Cult," Xie Xun said, "But the Cult's teaching is to do good and shun evil; 'yi qi' is heavily emphasized. Xie Xun would rather lose his head than do this despicable thing."

Jin Hua Popo was paralyzed, but she heard everything Xie Xun said. Zhang Wuji realized his Yifu was about to face a life and death situation; he immediately laid Yin Li gently on the ground. He heard Liuyun Shi say, "Ming Cult disciples who refuse to follow the Sheng Huo Ling's order will be killed without mercy!"

"I am a Protector King of the Cult," Xie Xun shouted, "Even if Jiaozhu himself want to execute me, he would have to bow to the Heaven and the Earth, and to the Ming Zun [the Ming Cult prophet(?)] in front of the altar and state my crime clearly."

Miaofeng Shi chuckled and said, "The Ming Cult of Persia was fine, but once it arrived at the Central Earth, it has so many of these stinky customs!" All three Emissaries let out a whistle and together they charged forward.

Xie Xun brandished his Tulong Saber, forming a wall in front of his body. The Three Emissaries successively attacked

three times but failed to get close to him. Huiyue Shi managed to sneak in, the tablet in her left hand struck toward the top of Xie Xun's head. Xie Xun raised the Saber to block, 'Clang!' the noise was very strange. No other weapon could match the sharpness of the Tulong Saber; yet it failed to cut the Sheng Huo Ling.

In between strikes, Liuyun Shi rolled down toward the left and hit Xie Xun's leg with his fist. Xie Xun staggered. Right that moment Miaofeng Shi swept his tablet horizontally toward Xie Xun's back, suddenly he felt that his wrist was grabbed and the Sheng Huo Ling in his hand was snatched by someone else. In great surprise he turned around and saw a young man with the Sheng Huo Ling in his right hand.

With an unmatched speed and unbelievable agility Zhang Wuji had managed to jump in and snatch the tablet away. Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi were startled and angered; they attacked together from two sides. Zhang Wuji turned around and dodged to the left; unexpectedly, 'Slap!' his back was squarely hit by the tablet in Huiyue Shi's hand.

The Sheng Huo Ling was made of special material; it was extremely hard. As Zhang Wuji was hit, his vision turned black, he almost passed out. Luckily, the divine energy ['shen gong'] protecting his body was so profound that he managed to control his mind and he dashed three steps forward. The Persian Three Emissaries immediately rushed after him and surround him.

Zhang Wuji attacked Liuyun Shi with the tablet in his right hand, while his left hand swiftly reached out and grabbed the Sheng Huo Ling in Huiyue Shi's hand. Who would have thought that suddenly Huiyue Shi let her hand loose; the Sheng Huo Ling flew upward with the tail first. 'Slap!' it hit Zhang Wuji's wrist. Zhang Wuji felt all five fingers of his left

hand went numb; he had no choice but let the Sheng Huo Ling he just seized to fall down. Huiyue Shi deftly reached out and snatched it back.

Ever since Zhang Wuji learned the 'qian kun da nuo yi' plus receiving Zhang Sanfeng's instructions on the most refined secret of the Taiji Fist, he had been roaming around without any match. Unexpectedly now that he fought Huiyue Shi, a woman, he was hit repeatedly. On the second time, if not of his 'shen gong' reacted naturally to provide protection, his wrist would have been broken. He was wary and did not dare to attack; he stopped and focused his attention to see his opponents' moves more clearly.

The Persian Three Emissaries were also amazed that he was hit twice without sustaining any injury. Miaofeng Shi suddenly bent down and charged toward Zhang Wuji with his head as a battering ram. Using one-self's most important part to strike the enemy was actually a big violation of the martial art theory. Zhang Wuji did not budge from his position; he knew that a clumsy move like this bound to be followed by an exceptionally fierce stance. He waited until the head was only about one foot in front of his body before he finally moved one step backward.

Liuyun Shi suddenly leaped up; trying to land on top of Zhang Wuji's head. It was another weird move; attacking the enemy using one's buttock. Although there were countless strange moves within the martial art world, such a clumsy and seemingly useless stance had never been heard of. Without batting an eyelid, Zhang Wuji stepped sideways to evade. Suddenly he felt pain on his chest, as Miaofeng Shi struck him with his elbow. The 'jiu yang shen gong' [nine-yang divine energy] in Zhang Wuji's body reacted naturally, sending Miaofeng Shi stumbling three steps backward. He was just about to steady his feet when the residue of the

force compelled him to fall back three more steps.

The Persian Three Emissaries' countenances changed in consternation. Huiyue Shi swept the Sheng Huo Ling in her hands horizontally, while Liuyun Shi made three somersaults in the air. Zhang Wuji wondered what his intention was, but he knew he had better evade. He had just moved one step to the left when a white ray of light flashed, and his right shoulder was heavily hit by the Sheng Huo Ling in Liuyun Shi's hand.

It was indeed an unthinkable stance that Zhang Wuji did not the least bit anticipate. Liuyun Shi was obviously somersaulting in the air; how could he suddenly reach out with his Sheng Huo Ling and struck out his shoulder? Zhang Wuji was startled and did not dare to prolong contact. Besides, although his body was protected by the 'jiu yang shen gong', the strike on his shoulder was so heavy that he felt the pain to his bone and marrow. However, he fully realized that if he drew back, his Yifu's life would be difficult to protect. Therefore, he took a deep breath and clenching his teeth he leaped forward; his palm struck toward Liuyun Shi's chest.

At the same time, Liuyun Shi leaped forward and struck the Sheng Huo Ling in his hands to each other. 'Clang!' Zhang Wuji was still in the air; hearing the noise his mind was suddenly disturbed and he fell back down to the ground. He felt a shot of pain on his waist as Miaofeng Shi kicked him. 'Bang!' Miaofeng Shi stumbled backward from the 'jiu yang shen gong' reaction; while Huiyue Shi hit Zhang Wuji's right arm with her Sheng Huo Ling.

All this time Xie Xun was standing on the side, listening to the fight. He knew this young man from the Gigantic Whale Clan had already hit several times and was presently

exhausted. Xie Xun regretted his blindness that he was helpless to step forward and lend his hand. He was very anxious; if he was fighting alone, he would be able to distinguish the enemy's weapon, fist or kick by listening to the wind. But if he was fighting alongside a friend, how could he tell whether it was the friend's fist or kick, or it was the enemy's weapon? He could brandish his Tulong Saber; but wouldn't he be greatly distressed if he inadvertently hacked down his own friend?

"Shao Xia! [young hero]" he called out, "Please back off. This is the Ming Cult's business; it has nothing to do with you, Sire. Shao Xia has repeatedly helped me today; Xie Xun is deeply grateful."

Zhang Wuji shouted, "I ... I ... Go away quickly! Please listen to me, go away!"

Right away Liuyun Shi struck with his Sheng Huo Ling. Zhang Wuji parried with the Sheng Huo Ling in his hand. 'Clunk!' Two Sheng Huo Ling struck each other, the noise was unbearable, it sounded like a slaughtered animal or grating metals. Liuyun Shi could not hold his grip, his Sheng Huo Ling flew up. Zhang Wuji quickly leaped up trying to snatch it; but suddenly 'Rip!' a large portion of the clothes on his back was grabbed by Huiyue Shi. Her fingernails created several lines of claw cuts on Zhang Wuji's back. Zhang Wuji was in so much pain that his action was slowed down and Liuyun Shi managed to snatch the Sheng Huo Ling back.

The fight went on for several more stances. Zhang Wuji realized that in terms of strength, these three were far inferior to him, but their martial art was very strange, and their weapons were mysterious, almost magical. But it was their collaboration that was the most difficult to deal with; it

was like a formation, but not quite a formation, like choreographed movements, but not quite like it. It was mysterious and ruthless, beyond imagination. He knew that as long as he could strike one of them, he would win the battle. But whenever he attacked one, the other two would launch a converging attack to help their comrade. Zhang Wuji kept changing his style, but throughout he was unable to break these three people's defense; instead, he was hit twice by the Sheng Huo Ling. Luckily, for the Persian Three Emissaries, this was the first time their fists and kicks bounced back to hurt them each time they attacked; after a while they did not dare to make fists and kicks contact with him anymore.

With a loud shout Xie Xun leaped forward, holding the Tulong Saber in front of his chest. He came near Zhang Wuji and said, "Shao Xia, use this Saber!" while handing the Saber over to him.

Zhang Wuji thought that with this precious saber's invincible power, he might be able to repel the enemy; hence he took the Saber immediately. Xie Xun's right foot kicked down to jump backward, but within a split second his back was heavily hit by Miaofeng Shi's fist, he felt as if his internal organs inside his chest and belly were turned upside down. This fist was without a noise and without a trace; Xie Xun did not hear the least bit of wind.

Zhang Wuji brandished the Saber to hack Liuyun Shi. Liuyun Shi raised both of his Sheng Huo Ling, moved both of his hands, and the Sheng Huo Ling rode on the Tulong Saber. Zhang Wuji felt an intense vibration on his palm and the Tulong Saber almost fell off his hand. He was shocked and hastily added more internal strength to his hand.

It had always been easy for Liuyun Shi to use the Sheng Huo

Ling to seize his opponent's weapon; he had done it thousands of times without failing. This time unexpectedly he failed; he was greatly surprised. Huiyue Shi let out a shrill shout and the Sheng Huo Ling in her hands also rode on the Tulong Saber's blade. Four tablets pulled the Saber together, the force increased.

Zhang Wuji had received seven, eight injuries; although they were all minor, his internal energy had been greatly reduced. At this moment he felt half of his body was feverish, his right hand, which was grabbing the Saber, was trembling. He knew this Saber was his Yifu's lifeline. His Yifu had not found out the truth about him, yet surprisingly he was willing to lend the Saber away, demonstrating his heroic character. Supposing that Zhang Wuji lost the Saber in his hand, how would he still have the face to see his Yifu? Thereupon with a loud grunt he sent out his 'jiu yang shen gong' like a steady stream of energy attacking his enemies.

Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi's faces changed. Miaofeng Shi realized the disadvantageous situation, he moved the remaining Sheng Huo Ling in his hand to also ride on the Tulong Saber. Now Zhang Wuji had to resist three powerful pull on his Saber, yet he was able to hold his ground. He was secretly glad that he managed to snatch the Sheng Huo Ling away from Miaofeng Shi earlier; otherwise, he would be really hard-pressed to resist the six Sheng Huo Ling altogether at the same time.

By this time these four people had reached the stage where they were staking everything in this internal energy tug-of-war. Zhang Wuji thought that this internal energy duel was exactly what he was expecting, since his internal energy was a lot stronger.

For a moment four people stood motionless with each one

exerting his/her internal energy. Suddenly Zhang Wuji felt a shot of pain in his chest as if a very fine sharp needle was pricking his heart and lung. His grip loosened and the five Sheng Huo Ling pulled the Tulong Saber away. Facing this great change, he stayed calm; in one fluid motion he pulled the Yitian Sword from his waist and using the 'yuan zhuan ru yi' [lit. circle/sphere revolving harmoniously] from the Taiji Sword, he made some slanting circles, simultaneously sweeping the Persian Three Emissaries' lower abdomen.

When the Three Emissaries were about to leap back to evade, Zhang Wuji returned the Yitian Sword into its scabbard on his waist, while simultaneously reached out and snatched the Tulong Saber back. These four movements: loosing the Saber, pulling the Sword, returning the Sword, and snatching the Saber back, were executed swiftly, lightning fast; based on the seventh level of 'qian kun da nuo yi'.

"Ah!" the Persian Three Emissaries exclaimed in amazement. Their internal energy was not as strong as Zhang Wuji's; as soon as they opened their mouths, three Sheng Huo Ling were pulled away by the Tulong Saber. Three people quickly exerted their internal energy to pull back the Sheng Huo Ling; once again the four of them were locked in a stalemate situation.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji felt that pricking pain in his chest again. This time he had anticipated the attack, so that his grip on the precious saber was not loosened. These two attacks were tangible, he could feel it; but in reality they were formless attacks. A thread of cold air broke through his 'jiu yang shen gong' defense line, straight to his internal organs. He knew it was the Persian Three Emissaries' cold 'yin' internal energy, concentrated into a singular point and entered his body via the Sheng Huo Ling.

When a 'yin' type of energy attack a 'yang' one, it might not necessarily be able to penetrate the 'jiu yang shen gong' defense. However, his 'jiu yang shen gong' was protecting his whole body, while the 'yin' energy was concentrated like a thin silk thread, drilling through his defense system. It was difficult to guard against, as well as difficult to bear. For example, the elephant has great strength, yet even a woman or a small child will be able to prick its skin with a small embroidered needle. As the 'yin' energy entered the body, it would disperse immediately; but this prick could really cause the pain to enter the bones.

Huiyue Shi successively sent out two attacks of 'tou gu zhen' [bone penetrating needle] internal energy. She was astonished to see the opponent resisted her attacks seemingly without too much effort. Although Miaofeng Shi's left hand was free, his entire strength was actually concentrated to his right arm; so that his left hand was no different from if it was paralyzed.

Zhang Wuji realized that if this deadlock situation continued and while the enemy keep repeatedly sending this needle-like 'yin' energy attacks, he would not be able to hold on in the end; yet he did not have any real idea on how to get out of this situation. He heard Xie Xun's heavy breathing behind him, and realized he was walking step-by-step closer; apparently he meant to strike the enemy to help Zhang Wuji. However, by this time the four people's entire bodies were covered with their internal energy; if Xie Xun struck the enemy, it would be the same as striking Zhang Wuji, and therefore, he did not dare to act recklessly.

"This situation is dangerous," Zhang Wuji thought, "Getting Yifu away from this place is more important." Thereupon with a clear voice he said, "Xie Da Xia, although these

Persian Three Emissaries' martial art is marvelous, it is not difficult for me to escape alone. Would you please leave for the time being, after I'm done, I will return the precious saber to you."

The Persian Three Emissaries were even more alarmed to hear him open his mouth as if nothing happened, while in reality he was exerting his entire internal energy.

Xie Xun asked, "Shao Xia, what is your honored surname and great given name?"

Zhang Wuji thought that if he let himself known, out of his deep love toward him, his Yifu would certainly stake it all to fight the Persian Three Emissaries; hence, controlling his emotion he said, "My surname is Zeng, given name Ahniu. Xie Da Xia, you haven't left; could it be that you are afraid I might embezzle your treasured saber?"

Xie Xun laughed aloud and said, "Zeng Shao Xia [young hero Zeng], you don't need to incite me. You and I have the same guts; Xie Xun is very happy that in his sunset years he can have a friend like you. Zeng Shao Xia, I am going to use the 'qi shang quan' [seven-injury fist (technique)] to strike that woman. As I send out my strength, you can let the Tulong Saber go."

Zhang Wuji knew the fierceness of his Yifu's 'qi shang quan'. As long as he was willing to let the Tulong Saber go, one fist from his Yifu would send Huiyue Shi to her violent death. On the other hand, his Cult would develop a very deep enmity with the Persian Central Cult. Zhang Wuji had always been earnestly admonishing his brethrens to live in harmony with their fellow Cult disciples; if today without any reason he killed one of the Central Cult's emissaries, how could he continue to be the Cult Leader? Thereupon he hastily said,

“Hold on!”

Toward Liuyun Shi he said, “Let us hold our hands for a moment, I have something I’d like to say to the three of you.” Liuyun Shi nodded.

Zhang Wuji continued, “I have a close relationship with the Ming Cult. The three of you have the Sheng Huo Ling in your hands then you are our honored guests. Just now I offended you; for which I apologize. Let us pull our internal energy back together and stop fighting; what do you say?”

Liuyun Shi repeatedly nodded his head. Zhang Wuji was delighted; he pulled his strength back and pulled the Tulong Saber to the front of his chest. He felt the Persian Three Emissaries were also pulling their internal energy back; but suddenly a whiff of ‘yin’ energy – like a saber, like a sword, like a dagger, like a chisel, struck straight into the ‘yu tang xue’ [jade hall acupoint] on his chest.

This time, although the cold ‘yin’ energy was still formless and invisible, it felt like a steel blade’s stab. In an instant Zhang Wuji was suffocated, his body was paralyzed; several thoughts flashed in his mind, “After I die, it will be difficult for Yifu to escape their cruel hands. I can’t believe the Persian Central Cult’s emissaries do not give any thought to good faith. I wonder if my cousin Yin Li is going to live... What will happen to Miss Zhao and Miss Zhou? Xiao Zhao, ay, poor little child! What will happen to our Cult’s great undertaking of driving the Yuan away?” He saw that Liuyun Shi raised the Sheng Huo Ling in his right hand, ready to strike the top of his head. Zhang Wuji quickly circulated his internal energy, trying to attack the ‘yu tang xue’ on his chest, but he felt the energy flow was sluggish.

Suddenly a loud female voice was heard, “The Central Earth

Ming Cult battle force has arrived!” Liuyun Shi was startled, his hand halted in midair and did not strike down. A grey shadow flashed by, pulled the Yitian Sword on Zhang Wuji’s waist, and swept toward Liuyun Shi’s chest.

Although Zhang Wuji’s body was immobilized, he could see clearly that this person was Zhao Min. He was delighted, but his delight quickly turned into shock, because the stance she was using was Kunlun Pai’s deathly stance called the ‘yu sui kun gang’ [jade shattered over Kunlun (mountain) ridge]; it was the stance to kill the enemy without any regard of one self’s safety. Although Zhang Wuji did not know the name of this stance, he knew that by using this move plus the Yitian Sword’s sharpness, she would certainly inflict harm to Liuyun Shi, but it would also difficult for her to escape the enemy’s cruel hand.

Liuyun Shi could see immediately the fierceness of this sword attack. It would be difficult for him to save himself, let alone thinking of joining hands with the other Emissaries to launch a converging attack. In his desperation he raised his Sheng Huo Ling to block with all his might, followed by throwing himself on the ground and rolled away. ‘Bang!’ the Sheng Huo Ling managed to divert the Yitian Sword, but he felt a breeze of his left cheek. Without knowing whether he was dead or still alive he stood up and traced his cheek; he felt something wet and sticky, and extremely painful. Turned out the beard and whiskers on his left cheek, along with a piece of his skin, had been sliced by the Yitian Sword. If not because of the special material Sheng Huo Ling was made of, half of his skull would be sliced by this Yitian Sword strike.

When Zhang Wuji left to see Xie Xun, Zhao Min kept thinking that Jin Hua Popo was hiding a lot of craftiness; plus, Chen Youliang’s actions were suspicious. She was

anxious over his safety; therefore, she quietly followed behind. She knew her own 'qing gong' was inferior, hence if she came too close she would be discovered in no time. She stayed some distance away and did not come close until Zhang Wuji was fighting the Persian Three Emissaries.

When Zhang Wuji was engaged in internal energy duel against the Three Emissaries, she was delighted; thinking that although these three foreigners' martial art was weird, in term of internal energy, no way would they surpass Zhang Wuji's 'jiu yang shen gong'. When Zhang Wuji suddenly called out to hold their hands, Zhao Min was about to call him to be careful, but the enemy had already launched the 'yin feng dao' ['yin' wind saber] that Zhang Wuji was hurt and he fell down. In her anxiety she disregarded everything and dashed out, snatched the Yitian Sword and brandished it with Kunlun Pai's suicidal stance she saw in the Wan An Temple earlier.

Zhao Min succeeded in forcing Liuyun Shi away, but the Yitian Sword had bounced back and slashed her own hat, exposing a cluster of her beautiful hair. Her Sword made a slanted circle as she threw herself toward Miaofeng Shi, while her Yitian Sword followed behind.

This move was called the 'ren gui tong tu' [man and ghost travel together], a Kongtong Pai suicidal move, similar to Kunlun Pai's 'yu sui kun gang'; both were used as one was certain he or she would definitely lost, then his or her only hope would be to die together with the enemy. Shaolin and Emei, two Buddhist sects did not have this kind of desperate stances. Those who launched 'yu sui kun gang' and 'ren gui tong tu' were not trying to score a victory amidst a defeat, or to seek life amidst deaths; but they deliberately wounded themselves to perish together with the enemy. When the masters of Kunlun Pai and Kongtong Pai were imprisoned,

they were humiliated by being forced to contend in martial arts while their internal energy was gone. Because they knew it was impossible for them to score any victory, some hot-tempered masters had used these kinds of stances. Unfortunately, their strength was not enough and they failed in their attempts, giving Zhao Min the opportunity to memorize these stances, one-by-one, in her heart.

Seeing her coming his way in this violent manner, Miaofeng Shi was shocked; his body turned cold and he froze. Although his martial art skill was high, his courage was lacking. Seeing this kind of move, he was unable to parry; he was so intimidated that he stood as stiff as a corpse, with hands froze in the air, waiting for death. In the meantime, Zhao Min's body had already reached the Sheng Huo Ling in his hand; shaking out her Sword, she stabbed Miaofeng Shi's chest.

The principle of this stance was throwing one's body to the enemy's weapon first, and then, as the weapon, be it saber or sword, spear or axe, was still in one's body that the enemy's movement was temporarily delayed, one would stab one's sword. Even if the enemy's martial art skill were higher, they would not be able to escape.

Miaofeng Shi was scared to death to see this fierce attack. Fortunately, the weapon in his hand was the Sheng Huo Ling, which looked like an iron ruler, without any sharp edge. As Zhao Min's body landed on the weapon, she was unharmed. Her Sword had barely stabbed forward when her back was grabbed by Huiyue Shi. The Persian Three Emissaries' collaboration in fighting the enemy together was truly marvelous beyond imagination.

Zhao Min's two suicidal moves had thrown three martial art masters into confusion; until this time, Huiyue Shi only

managed to grab Zhao Min's back. Her grab seemed ordinary, but actually it was very accurate and swift like a meteor. Although Zhao Min's sword was also swift and fierce, it still failed to reach Miaofeng Shi's body in the end.

As Zhao Min felt her arm tighten, she knew something was amiss, she did not resist the pull, she let her body fall backwards at the same time turned her sword around and stabbed her own lower abdomen. This suicidal stance was even fiercer than the previous ones; it was a part of Wudang Pai's sword technique called the 'tian di tong sui' [heaven and earth live together]. Actually, it was not created by Zhang Sanfeng, but came from Yin Liting's painstaking effort; he meant to use it against Yang Xiao. Ever since Ji Xiaofu died, he could think nothing else but how to kill Yang Xiao to avenge her death; yet he realized his martial art skill was not Yang Xiao's match. Although his Shifu was the number one martial artist in the world, his own intelligence and perception was limited; his comprehension was only about 30, 40% of his Shifu's skill. In any case, after killing Yang Xiao he did not think to live anyway, hence on the Wudang mountain he painstakingly thought of several moves, which might enable him to kill the enemy while disregarding his own life.

Yin Liting trained his sword in secret. One time Zhang Sanfeng saw him. He sighed, knowing that whatever he said, Yin Liting could not be persuaded. Thereafter he named this stance 'tian di tong shou', meaning that after someone dies, the spirit becomes immortal, it will live for tens of thousand springs (season). Hence, in actuality, it was a solemn and stirring sword move to take away the shell in which that spirit resides.

Yin Liting's senior disciple was trying to use this stance at the Wan An Temple; luckily Fan Yao saved him. Zhao Min saw

it and this time she used it. This move could be used to kill an enemy who was grabbing one from behind. The sharp sword penetrated one's lower abdomen, straight through to the enemy's lower abdomen; how would Huiyue Shi escape? If Miaofeng Shi was not scared out of his wits and Liuyun Shi was standing close by, then the two of them might be able to save her, since Huiyue Shi and her partners had been working together long enough that they developed an alertness as if they were one person.

They saw the Yitian Sword was about to pierce Zhao Min and Huiyue Shi's lower abdomen. Right at this crucial moment Zhang Wuji succeeded in breaking through his sealed acupoint. Quickly he reached out to seize the Yitian Sword. Zhao Min struggled to free herself from Huiyue Shi's grab. Moving very fast she took the Sheng Huo Ling from Zhang Wuji's hand and threw it far away. 'Swish!' it fell among the sharp steel spikes Jin Hua Popo spread on the ground earlier.

To the Persian Three Emissaries, this Sheng Huo Ling was as important as their lives. Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi disregarded Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min as their enemy; they did not even give any thought to Miaofeng Shi's safety, they jumped toward the steel spike formation to look for the Sheng Huo Ling.

Rushing forward for only a 'zhang' or so, they reached the steel spikes. "Ah!" Huiyue Shi screamed, as she treaded on one of the steel spikes.

It was a moonless night with wind blowing hard, the grass was knee-deep; they could not see the steel spikes and the Sheng Huo Ling. They were forced to get down and pull the spikes while groping around for the Sheng Huo Ling. At that moment Miaofeng Shi called out in alarm, as if he had just awaken from a dream, and leaped forward to follow his

comrades.

In order to save Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min had used these three stances much like a rabbit fighting a falcon; certainly without even give it a thought in advance. Now that the excitement subsided, the more she thought about it, the more she was afraid. "Wah!" she broke into a cry and threw herself in Zhang Wuji's bosom.

Zhang Wuji embraced her with a heart full of gratitude, but he realized that as soon as the Persian Three Emissaries found the Sheng Huo Ling, they would turn around against them. "Let's go quickly!" he hastily said. He turned to return the Tulong Saber to Xie Xun. Carrying the severely wounded Yin Li, he said, "Xie Da Xia, let us temporarily escape from them."

"Right," Xie Xun replied. Stooping down he unsealed Jin Hua Popo's acupoints.

Zhang Wuji thought that after narrowly escaped death, Jin Hua Popo would certainly forget her enmity towards Xie Xun. Four people went down the hill for several 'zhang's when Zhang Wuji thought that although Yin Li was his own cousin, yet a man and a woman should not be too close to each other; thereupon he handed her over so Jin Hua Popo could carry her.

Zhao Min was leading the way, followed by Jin Hua Popo and Xie Xun. Zhang Wuji was the last, to protect them against the enemy. Looking back he saw the Persian Three Emissaries were still stooping down, searching among the long thick patch of grass. Zhang Wuji recalled the thrill of his defeat just now, and his heart shivered in fear; plus he was not sure if Yin Li would survive this severe injury.

While he was still deep in thought, suddenly he heard Xie Xun's angry shout and saw him sending his fist toward Jin Hua Popo's back. Jin Hua Popo reached back to parry, while simultaneously throwing Yin Li to the ground. Zhang Wuji was shocked and flew forward.

"Mrs. Han," Xie Xun barked, "Why do you want to kill Miss Yin?"

Jin Hua Popo laughed coldly, "Whether you killed me or not, that's your business. Whether I want to kill her or not, that's my business. Why do you care anyway?"

"Since I am here," Zhang Wuji said, "I won't let you harm anybody on your whim."

"Haven't you meddled enough in other people business for today, Sire?" Jin Hua Popo asked.

"That's not necessarily your business," Zhang Wuji said, "The Persian Three Emissaries will pursue us here in an instant and you still will not go?"

Jin Hua Popo snorted and ran westward. Suddenly she shot three golden flowers backhandedly toward the back of Yin Li's head. Zhang Wuji stretched out his hand and flicked his fingers. 'Swish, swish, swish!' the sound of golden flowers split the air, flying back toward Jin Hua Popo, stronger than arrows shot from a crossbow.

Jin Hua Popo had already seen his face clearly when Zhang Wuji held Yin Li for the first time and wiped out the beards pasted on his lips. Since realizing this young man's internal energy was surprisingly very profound, she did not dare to reach out and catch; hastily she ducked down to dodge. The three golden flowers swept past her robe and tore away

three big strips of clothes on her back. She was so frightened that her heart was jumping madly; she scurried away without even looking back.

Zhang Wuji reached out to carry Yin Li. Suddenly he heard Zhao Min moan in pain while bending her waist and pressed both hands on her lower abdomen. Hastily he went forward and asked, "What is it?" But then he saw that her hands were full of blood, which was still seeping out from her fingers. Turned out the 'tian di tong shou' had stabbed her abdomen after all.

Zhang Wuji was very shocked and busily asked, "Is the injury deep?"

Right at that moment they heard Miaofeng Shi cheered, "I found it! I found it!"

"Don't mind me!" Zhao Min urged, "Go! Just go!" Zhang Wuji reached out to carry her and rushed downhill.

"To the ship! We escape to the sea!" Zhao Min said.

"Right!" Zhang Wuji responded. With one hand carried Yin Li and the other hand Zhao Min, he sped downhill.

Xie Xun followed close behind; he was secretly astonished, "This youngster is amazing; carrying two adults yet still able to run this fast."

Zhang Wuji was so anxious that he felt his heart go numb. Even if only one of these two girls in his hands would die of her wounds, he would hate himself for the rest of his life. Luckily their bodies were still warm and did not gradually turn cold.

As the Persian Three Emissaries found the Sheng Huo Ling, they rushed to pursue, but these three's 'qing gong' was definitely inferior to Zhang Wuji. It was even greatly inferior compared to Xie Xun's. As Zhang Wuji was nearing the ship, he loudly called out, "Shao Min Junzhu's order: Raise the sail and weigh the anchor, prepare to sail immediately!"

So when he and Xie Xun stepped their feet on the deck, the ship was ready to sail. But the captain must hear from Zhao Min personally; he went forward to ask for instruction.

Zhao Min had lost a lot of blood. With a weak voice she said, "Hear ... hear Zhang Gongzi's order ... do it ..."

The captain immediately complied, the ship set sail that when the Persian Three Emissaries reached the shore, the ship had already sailed dozens of 'zhang's away from the island.

Zhang Wuji laid down both Zhao Min and Yin Li side by side in the cabin. Xiao Zhao helped him take off their clothes to reveal the wounds. Zhang Wuji assessed these two women's conditions; he saw the sword wound on Zhao Min's abdomen was approximately half a 'cun' [1 cun is about 1 inch] deep. Although she was bleeding profusely, her life was not in danger. All of the three golden flowers on Yin Li's chest had hit her vital points; apparently Jin Hua Popo did not attack her half-heartedly. Whether her life could be saved remained very difficult to say. He applied some medicine and wrapped their injuries.

Yin Li remained unconscious, while tears streaming down Zhao Min's face. Zhang Wuji asked how she felt; she merely clenched her teeth without giving an answer.

"Zeng Shao Xia," Xie Xun said, "Old Xie has left the matters

of the world; this time unexpectedly returning to the Central Earth, and still can make an acquaintance with a friend with such a deep 'yi qi', I am happy beyond believe."

Zhang Wuji led him to sit on a chair in the middle of the cabin. He knelt and bowed down, crying, "Yifu, child Wuji is unfilial; has not been able to meet you sooner, causing Yifu to suffer extreme hardships."

"You ..." Xie Xun was shocked, "What did you say?"

"I am your child Wuji," Zhang Wuji said.

But how could Xie Xun believe? "You ... what did you say?" he asked.

"The fist technique starts with a focused attention, intention precedes strength, only then victory will be achieved ..." Zhang Wuji gushed non-stop, reciting the theories Xie Xun passed on to him on the Bing Huo Island just before they bade each other good-bye.

After he recited about twenty sentences or so, Xie Xun was surprised and happy; he grabbed Zhang Wuji's arms and said, "You ... you are really my child Wuji?"

Zhang Wuji stood up and embraced Xie Xun tightly, while trying to control his emotions. Thereupon he narrated in brief important points of what had happened since they parted omitting the fact that he was the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. He did not want his Yifu to observe the Cult protocol and did obeisance to him instead.

Xie Xun felt as if he was in a dream; but this time he could not help but believe. "Lao Tian Ye [Heaven, God] has eyes, Lao Tian Ye has eyes!" he repeatedly said.

Suddenly they heard the sailor on watch shouted from the stern, "The enemy ship pursues!"

Zhang Wuji rushed toward the deck and saw on a distant a large ship riding on the wind with five sails open, coming fast toward them. In the dark night he could not see the ship's hull, but the five large white sails were clearly visible. Zhang Wuji looked for a while; he noticed that the enemy's ship was lighter; they were closing the gap rapidly. He was anxious and was at a loss. If it was only the Persian Three Emissaries, then he could fight them inside the cabin. Because of the space limitation, they might not be easily collaborating with one another. Thereupon he moved Zhao Min and Yin Li to the side, took the two big anchors on the deck, and placed them on the middle of the cabin as a barrier, forcing the Persian Three Emissaries to fight one on one.

As he finished the preparation, suddenly a loud explosion was heard; their ship violently leaned sideways, followed by the seawater rise up to the sky and splash into the cabin.

"The enemy ship fires their cannon! The enemy ship fires their cannon!" the sailor on the stern loudly called out. Luckily the cannon missed its target and landed on the water.

Zhao Min beckoned Zhang Wuji and in a low voice said, "We also have cannon!"

Zhang Wuji remembered and immediately rushed to the main deck, ordering the sailors to take away the covers of the cannon and load it with gunpowder and iron cannonball. They lighted the fuse and 'Bang!' the cannonball flew out. These sailors were Zhao Min's warriors in disguise; their

martial art skills were not weak, however they knew nothing about artillery or naval battle; the cannonball landed in between two enemy ships. Column of water rose up several 'zhang's to the sky, but the enemy's ships were not even swayed. Fortunately, as the enemy saw that they also have guns, they did not dare to get too close.

Not too long afterwards, the enemy ship fired another round. This time it hit the bow and immediately their ship caught fire. Zhang Wuji busily directed the sailors to draw water to fight the fire. Suddenly he saw the fire had reached one of the upper deck's cabins. With both hands carried two buckets of water, he kicked the cabin door open and splashed the water to extinguish the fire. Amidst the smoke he saw a woman lying on the bed. It was Zhou Zhiruo. She was completely soaked.

Zhang Wuji dropped the buckets and rushed in. "Miss Zhou," he hastily asked, "Are you all right?"

Zhou Zhiruo's head and face was wet; she looked really miserable. She was extremely stunned to suddenly see Zhang Wuji appear. She tried to move her hands, 'clink, clank, clink'. It turned out her hands and feet were shackled in iron chain by Jin Hua Popo. Zhang Wuji rushed to the lower deck cabin to fetch the Yitian Sword and cut away the shackles.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "You ... how come you are here?"

Before Zhang Wuji could reply, the hull suddenly shook violently. Zhou Zhiruo's legs were still weak and she fell into Zhang Wuji's bosom. Zhang Wuji busily reached out to help her up. By the flame light from outside the window Zhang Wuji saw on her pale face two streaks of blush; embellished by little drops of water, she looked so beautiful and elegant,

just like narcissus in the morning dew.

Zhang Wuji calmed himself down and said, "Let us go to the lower deck cabin."

Two people barely went out the door when they felt the ship was spinning. Turned out the enemy's cannon just now had not only hit the rudder and smashed it, but killed the helmsman and threw him down the sea as well.

The captain was anxious, he personally loaded the cannon, with the hope of sinking the enemy ship. He kept pouring gunpowder down the gun barrel and packed it solid with an iron rod. Turning around the cannon's mouth, he lighted the fuse. 'Bang!' Suddenly the air around them turned red as the explosion shook the sky, pieces of steel and iron flew everywhere. The cannon exploded and killed the captain and the sailors standing nearby; their flesh and blood scattered everywhere. It was because the captain wanted to utilize the full power of the cannon that he put several times the amount of gunpowder than necessary, so that the cannon exploded instead.

Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo had just stepped onto the deck when they saw the ship was on fire; they withdrew immediately. Looking around Zhang Wuji saw a small boat tied on the port side of the ship. "Miss Zhou," he called out, "Jump to that boat ..."

By this time Xiao Zhao, carrying Yin Li, and Xie Xun, carrying Zhao Min, emerged from the lower deck cabin. Turned out the explosion had made a crack on the hull of the ship and the seawater welled up quickly. Zhang Wuji led Xie Xun and Xiao Zhao to the boat. He cut the rope with his sword and 'splash!' the boat fell onto the sea below.

Zhang Wuji jumped out and lightly landed on the boat. He took the pair of oars and started rowing with all his might. By this time, the fire was blazing wild, painting the surface of the sea to a bright red. Zhang Wuji thought he must take the boat as far away as possible from this circle of light. If the Persian Three Emissaries did not see the small boat, they would think that everybody perished in the sea and will no longer pursue them. Xie Xun followed his example by taking out a plank and rowing furiously.

The small boat sailed swiftly on the waves; in a short moment they were outside the circle of light. They heard a series of explosions as the gunpowder on the ship was detonated. The Persian ship did not dare to come close; they stopped to observe afar from quite a distance.

Some of Zhao Min's warriors possessed good water skills; they dove into the sea and swam toward the enemy ship, crying for help. But the Persians shot them with arrows and they died in the sea.

Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun did not dare to slack off. If the Three Emissaries overtook them on land, they would still be able to fight to the death. But now they were in the middle of the boundless ocean; if the enemy ship fired their canon, even if they missed the small boat by several 'zhang's, the wave would surge and the small boat would capsize. Fortunately, these two's internal energy was very profound that they were not exhausted although they rowed for half a night.

Black clouds filled the sky towards dawn and all around them was gray drizzle of thick fog. Zhang Wuji happily said, "If this thick fog stays for half a day, then the enemy will not be able to find us in any way." But towards the afternoon, suddenly a strong wind came followed by a heavy rain.

The small boat was blown southward by the wind. It was the depth of wintertime. Everybody's clothes were soaked. Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun had profound internal energy, so they were all right. But blown by the north wind, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao could not restrain their teeth from chattering. Unfortunately, there was nothing on that small boat; nobody could come up with any ideas. Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun had stopped rowing for a while; right now four people removed their eight shoes and used them to scoop the rainwater accumulated on the boat to the sea.

Xie Xun was very happy to finally meet Zhang Wuji; although the present situation of their plight was dangerous, he did not seem to care. He cursed the sky and shouted at the sea, and was busy talking and laughing in the rain. Xiao Zhao was also carefree; she happily accompanied Xie Xun chitchatting. Only Zhou Zhiruo was silent; occasionally her eyes would meet Zhang Wuji's, and she would immediately turn her head around to avoid his gaze.

"Wuji," Xie Xun said, "In the past, while your parents and I were riding on a boat together, we met a violent storm along the way; it was worse than today. Afterwards we were marooned on an iceberg and we had seals as our food. But that time the south wind was blowing, so we were floating to the North Pole's world of ice and snow. Today the north wind is blowing. Could it be that 'Lao Tian Ye' [God, or Heaven] think Xie Xun is not pleasing to the eyes, that He wants to send me to the South Pole's palace of old immortals for another twenty years? Ha ha ha ha ...!"

After laughing for a moment he said, "That time your parents were one man and one woman, a talented young man and a beautiful young woman; it was a match made in Heaven. Now you have four beautiful girls with you; what

can we do? Ha ha ha ha ...!”

Zhou Zhiruo blushed and lowered her head; while Xiao Zhao remained calm and said, “Xie Laoyezi [old master Xie], I am Gongziye’s [master] servant; of course I don’t count.”

Although Zhao Min’s injury was not light, she was conscious the whole time; “Xie Laoyezi,” she suddenly said, “If you keep talking nonsense, as soon as I am well, we’ll see if I don’t slap your ears really good.”

Xie Xun stuck out his tongue and said with a smile, “This girl is actually very mean.” Suddenly the smile disappeared from his face; he hesitated a moment before saying, “Hmm, last night you launched three suicidal moves. The first one was Kunlun Pai’s ‘yu sui kun gang’, the second one was Kongtong Pai’s ‘ren gui tong tu’, and the third one ... what was it? The old man is uncouth and unlearned, could not hear it.”

Zhao Min was secretly shocked. “No wonder Jin Mao Shi Wang’s name shook the world in the past; his conducts in Jianghu were earth-shattering,” she thought, “His eyes are blind, yet he was able to guess correctly the two stances I was using. He truly lives up to his reputation.”

“The third move was Wudang Pai’s ‘tian di tong shou’,” she said, “Apparently it was developed only recently, no wonder Laoyezi does not know.” She said that with a really respectful expression.

Xie Xun sighed, “You did your utmost to save Wuji; that was really good,” he said, “But why did you risk your own life? Why risked your life?”

Zhao Min started to say, “He ... he ...” but then she stopped, as if she was mulling over whether she should continue or not. Finally she could not refrain from sobbing; she said, “He

... Who told him to show such affection? ... Hugging ... Hugging Miss Yin. I don't want to live!" Finished speaking, her tears were already rolling down like rain.

Hearing her publicly revealing her deepest feelings unexpectedly, four people were startled; they did not remember Zhao Min was a Mongolian girl who loves when she wants to love, and who hates when she wants to hate. Certainly she was not wishy-washy; unlike the Central Earth's women who were strongly influenced by Confucianism's custom and regulations. Besides, they were all on a small boat in the middle of the ocean, the heavy rain drenched their heads, their small boat could capsize anytime and they would all perish. At the time when they hovered between life and death, it was even more unnecessary to be scrupulous.

Listening to Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji could not help but feel touched. "Miss Zhao is originally my archenemy," he thought, "This time my primary intention was to see Yifu when we were going out to the sea together. Who would have thought that she would have these deep feelings toward me?" Unable to restrain his emotions, he reached out to hold her hand, put his lips next to her ear and whispered softly, "No matter what, next time you can't do it again."

As Zhao Min blurted out her feelings, she had almost immediately had already regretted it; thinking that if a girl from an honorable family did not stop this kind of talk from coming out, how could he not look down on her? Suddenly hearing him admonish her lovingly, she was surprised and happy, bashful and loving at the same time. She felt an unspeakable sweetness in her heart and felt that last night's risking her life three times, and the suffering of drifting on the ocean today, everything, were not in vain.

The heavy rain started to subside and gradually stopped, but the fog was coming back and actually getting thicker and thicker. Suddenly a swishing noise was heard as a large fish, more than 30 catties, leaped up from the sea. Xie Xun's right hand stretched out and stabbed his five fingers into the fish's belly, taking the fish into the boat. Everybody cheered. Xiao Zhao took out her sword to cut open its belly and scrape the scales; and then cut it to pieces. They were all hungry, so although the raw fish was smelly, they forced themselves to eat a few slices. Xie Xun ate eagerly; he had lived on a desolated island for more than twenty years, and had survived on all kinds of food, how could he care about eating raw fish? Besides, the fish was fresh; after chewing for some times and being used to the fresh fish smell, the meat brought out its raw sweet flavor.

The waves gradually subsided. After eating, they all closed their eyes to get some rest. They had been fighting violently for the whole day and whole night the previous day, they were not only physically, but emotionally exhausted as well. Although Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were not engaged in battle physically, the excitement and frights they experienced were not small. The ocean gently rocked the small boat like a cradle; the six people on the boat fell asleep one after another.

They were sound asleep for almost six hours. As an old man, Xie Xun was the first one to wake up. He heard the sound of five young people breathing blended with the sound of the wave and the wind. Since Zhao Min and Yin Li were injured, their breathings were short and quick. Zhou Zhiruo's breathing was light and long. Zhang Wuji's inhales and exhales sounded like they were broken yet continuous, without any distinct separation. Xie Xun was secretly astonished, "This child internal energy is very profound," he thought, "I won't be able to achieve this level in all my life."

Xiao Zhao's breathing was sometimes fast, sometimes slow, a sign of a very special school's internal energy cultivation method. Xie Xun frowned as he remembered something, "This is strange," he mused, "Could it be that this child is ..."

Suddenly his thought was interrupted by Yin Li's loud shout, "Zhang Wuji, you little kid, why don't you come with me to Ling She Island?"

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were awakened by her shout. She said again, "I live alone on the Island, and quite lonely ... why are you not willing to come and accompany me? I miss you so much, you ... you are in the afterworld, do you know that?"

Zhang Wuji put his hand on her forehead and felt it was burning hot; he knew her severe wound had caused her a fever, making her sprouting nonsense. Although his medical skill was exquisite, there was nothing on the small boat, not even a blade of grass, so he was helpless. He tore away a piece of his clothes and soaked it in the water, then pressed it on her forehead.

Yin Li continued to ramble; suddenly she shouted, "Father, you ... don't kill mother, don't kill mother! I was the one who killed 'Er Niang' [second madame or second mother], you'd better kill me; it had nothing to do with mother ... Mother is dead, mother is dead! I killed my mother! Boo hoo hoo ..." She cried miserably.

"Zhu'Er, Zhu'Er, wake up," Zhang Wuji said in a gentle voice, "Your father is not here, you don't have to be afraid."

"Father is not good, I am not afraid of him!" Yin Li indignantly said, "Why did he marry 'Er Niang', 'San Niang'?"

[third madame or third mother]? Is not one wife enough for one man? Father, you have two hearts and three minds; delight in the new, discard the old. You've married someone yet marry another, hurting my mother really bad, hurting me really bad! You are not my Father, you are a heartless man, a greatly wicked man!"

Zhang Wuji was shocked and alarmed; his face turned blue and his lips white. Turned out he had just had a good dream; he dreamt that he married Zhao Min, and also married Zhou Zhiruo. Yin Li's face had changed, she was beautiful; he also married her and Xiao Zhao. Whatever idea he did not dare to think during the day had manifested itself in a dream when he was sleeping. He felt that these four girls were all good, and he could not bear to part with any of them. Hence when he comforted Yin Li, his mind was still vaguely remembering the sweetness that the dream brings.

This time listening to Yin Li scolding her father, he recalled how in the past she had told him that because she could not accept her mother being cheated, she killed her father's beloved concubine, so that his uncle, Yin Yewang wanted to kill his own daughter. This tragic incident had affected Yin Yewang greatly that to comfort his own feeling he took several more wives and concubines.

Zhang Wuji looked at Zhao Min, and could not help but look at Zhou Zhiruo as well, remembering his dream, he was deeply ashamed. He heard Yin Li mumbling in her sleep, but suddenly she implored urgently, "Wuji, please come with me, I am asking you. You've bitten the back of my hand really bad, but I don't hate you the least bit. I will take care of you as long as I live, to be close to you, to regard you as my master. Don't hate me because my face is ugly; if you want it, I'd rather lose my martial art, I'll discard the poison from the thousand spiders, so my face will come back to

when you first saw me ...”

She spoke these last few sentences with a very tender and gentle voice, totally different from the strong-willed and short-tempered, eccentric cousin Zhang Wuji had always known; that gentle and tender feeling also grew in his heart. He heard her continue, “Wuji, I went everywhere looking for you, I went to the end of the earth without hearing anything about you, and then in the western region I heard you have died, falling off a cliff; made me want to stop living. In the western region I met a guy named Zeng Ahniu; his martial art skill was very high, he was also very good to me; he wanted to take me as his wife.”

Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao knew that Zhang Wuji often used the name Zeng Ahniu, they all turned their eyes to him. Zhang Wuji blushed profusely; he felt very awkward to be under these three girls attentive gaze. He really wished he could just jump into the sea and did not come back up until Yin Li regained her consciousness.

He heard Yin Li mumbled and said, “That Ahniu Gege [big brother Ahniu] said to me, ‘Miss, with all my heart I sincerely desire to marry you. I only hope you will not regard me unworthy.’ He said, ‘From now on, I will cherish you with all my might, I will look after you. No matter how many people come to make things difficult for you, no matter how many fierce people come to bully you, I don’t care if I’ll have to lose my life, I will protect you. I want you to be happy, I want you to forget your past sufferings.’ Wuji, that Ahniu Gege’s character is a lot better than yours; his martial art skill is also stronger than that Emei Pai’s Miejue Shitai. But my heart belongs to you, this heartless and short-lived little rascal, hence I cannot come with him. You have died young then I will be your widow for the rest of my life. Wuji, tell me, isn’t Ah Li good to you? You ignored me in the past, don’t

you regret it now?"

At first Zhang Wuji was very embarrassed when she repeated what he said to her, but the more he listened to her, the more his heart was touched. He could not control his tears from flowing down his cheeks.

By now the thick fog had already been dissipated, the crescent moon illuminated the boat. Yin Li was leaning on her side, so that her graceful figure was clearly seen. She softly said, "Wuji, in the afterworld, aren't you lonely? Don't you miss me? I am going with Popo to the northern sea's Bing Huo Island to find your Yifu, and then I am going to the Wudang Mountain to offer sacrifice on your parents' graves. Afterwards I am going to the snowy peak in the western region where you died and I'll jump down to accompany you. But I must wait for Popo's a hundred years [meaning: a lifetime, till she died]; I cannot accompany you yet, leaving her to suffer in this world alone. Popo treated me very well, if she did not save me, I would have been killed by Father early on. For your Yifu's sake I have betrayed Popo; she must hate me very much, but I still have to be good to her. Wuji, don't you think so?"

She talked as if she was discussing something face to face with Zhang Wuji. In her heart, Zhang Wuji had become a ghost from another world. The way she spoke soft and gentle words to the dead, plus the moonlight shining on the ocean, a quiet night, lone boat were all making those who were listening feel a sudden chill creep in their hearts.

Yin Li kept rambling to the east and to the west, which did not make any sense whatsoever; sometimes she called out in alarm, sometimes shouted in anger, each word was a manifestation of inexhaustible anxiety in her heart. She called out and shouted randomly like that for a while, finally

her voice softened, and slowly she fell into a deep sleep.

The other five people on the boat were silent as they were busy with their own thoughts. The only audible noise was the sound of the waves gently striking the hull of their little boat. Under the gentle wind and the bright moon, they felt that the life's miseries from tens of thousands days ago still exist today, and will be forever.

In between thoughts, they suddenly heard a very faint gentle singing float above the water, 'In the end, this body will be difficult to escape from that day. Out of a hundred years span of life, those who reach seventy are already sparse. Years of misery pass like torrential flood of the river.' [Translator's note: I am not a poet, and this passage is very difficult to translate. I welcome any correction.] It was Yin Li who softly sang the song in her sleep.

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold; he remembered inside the secret passage of the Brightness Peak, when their exit was completely stopped by Cheng Kun that they were unable to get out, Xiao Zhao had also sung this tune. Almost without thinking he turned to look at Xiao Zhao. Under the moonlight he saw that Xiao Zhao was looking at him with a blank expression her face.

End of Chapter 29.

Chapter 30 - East and West Will Always Be Divided like Enemies

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Recalling that year on the Brightness Peak, by the Bluish Green Cold Pool, with lavender gown like a flower and sword brighter than snow, Taj-kis had upset countless heroes and warriors' hearts.

After singing that song, Yin Li continued singing another tune. This time the song was unspeakably weird, the melody was totally different from songs of the Central Earth. If one listened closely, they would be able to discern the words, which were also similar to the song Xiao Zhao used to sing, 'Coming like the running water, departing like the wind; wonder where it came from, and where it will end!'

She sang these two songs over and over again, while her voice getting softer and softer, until finally her voice was drowned by the noise of the wind and the waves. Everybody pondered how life and death was not eternal; one came into this world lightly, just like the flowing water of the river, without knowing where it came from. It does not matter if you are a hero or a warrior, death is inevitable in the end, coming out of this world also lightly, just like the blowing wind, without knowing where it would go. Zhang Wuji felt that Zhao Min's delicate fingers in his hand were as cold as ice, and they slightly trembled.

Xie Xun suddenly said, "This is a Persian song; Mrs. Han must have taught her. One evening twenty years ago, I heard this song at the Brightness Peak. Ay, I can't believe Mrs. Han could be that heartless to hurt this child with a cruel hand."

"Laoye Zi," Zhao Min asked, "How did Mrs. Han know about a Persian song? Was it a Ming Cult's song?"

Xie Xun replied, "Ming Cult's origin is from Persia, so this Persian song is somewhat related to the Ming Cult; but it is not a Ming Cult song. This song was written by the most famous Persian poet Omar Khayyam more than two hundred years ago; it was said that every Persian could sing this song. When I heard Mrs. Han sing this song, I was touched; thereupon I asked her the story behind this song, and she

told me everything:

There was a great Persian philosopher by the name of Imam Mowaffaq Nishapuri; among his disciples, there were three outstanding students: Omar Khayyam, who was a master in literature studies, Nizam-ul-Mulk, who was an expert in political studies, and Hassan-i-Sabah, who excelled in martial arts. These three were good friends and bound themselves in an oath, to face fortune and adversity together, and not to forget each other in riches and honor.

Later on because of his accomplishment, Nizam-al-Mulk became Vizier to the Seljukid Empire. His two old friends came to seek shelter. Nizam entreated the Shah, and Hassan was granted an official position. Omar was not willing to be a government official; he only asked for annual provision so that he could research and study astronomy, almanac and mathematics, also to drink wine and write poems in peace. Nizam generously granted each of his friends' requests.

Unexpectedly, Hassan was ambitious; he was unwilling to be someone else's subordinate for long and thus staged a rebellion. His attempt was foiled and he fled to a mountain. Later on he became the chief of a sect whose prestige shook the world. This sect specifically took murder as their service, and was called the Hashhashin Sect. During the Crusades, whenever someone in the western region mentioned the name of The Old Man of the Mountain, Hassan, no hearts would be exempt from shaking in fear. Many of the western region's rulers lost their lives under the innumerable assassins under The Old Man of the Mountain.

Mrs. Han told me that in the far west [i.e. Europe] there is one great nation called England. This country's King Edward has offended The Old Man of the Mountain, so he dispatched a band of assassins. The King was wounded by a poisoned

blade. Luckily, the Queen sacrificed herself to save her husband by sucking the poison from his wound. As a result, the King survived.

In spite of the kindness he received in the former days, Hassan dispatched his men to assassinate the Vizier, Nizam-al-Mulk. At the point of his death, the Vizier uttered Omar Khayyam's verse; these two lines 'Coming like the running water, departing like the wind; wonder where it came from, and where it will end.'

Mrs. Han also told me that afterwards, the martial art from The Old Man of the Mountain's Sect was practiced by the people of the Persian Ming Cult. The Persian Three Emissaries' martial art was odd in a strange way; I suppose it stemmed from The Old Man of the Mountain's martial art."

"Laoye Zi," Zhao Min said, "This Mrs. Han's character is similar to that of The Old Man of the Mountain; you treated her with utmost kindness, yet she plotted to harm you."

Xie Xun sighed, "It is common for people to repay kindness with evil; what's so strange about that?" he said.

Zhao Min lowered her head and was silent for half a day before saying, "Mrs. Han was the chief of the Ming Cult's Four Kings, but her martial art skill is not necessarily superior to Laoye Zi. Last night, why didn't she use the deathly stances of 'qian zhu wan du shou' [hand of thousand spiders ten thousands poisons] when she fought with the Persian Three Emissaries?"

"Qian zhu wan du shou?" Xie Xun asked, "Mrs. Han does not know that skill. She is a woman of an outstanding beauty, and she cherishes her appearance more than her life; how could she be willing to practice this kind of skill?"

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo were startled; they thought Jin Hua Popo was ugly. Looking at her present appearance, even if she was thirty, forty years younger, it would be very difficult for them to say that she possessed an outstanding beauty. Her nose was crooked and her lips thick; her face was oval-shaped, her ears as big as a pair of fans. Certainly these features would not change over time.

Zhao Min laughed and said, “Laoye Zi, I’ll say Jin Hua Popo’s beauty is nowhere near ‘outstanding.’”

“What?” Xie Xun said, “Zi Shan Long Wang’s [purple-robed dragon king] beauty is similar to deities’. Twenty some years ago she was the Wulin World’s Number One Beauty. Granted that she is advanced in years now, but her gracefulness in the past should still be there ... Ay, too bad I cannot see her anymore.”

Listening to him speaking seriously, Zhao Min had a vague feeling that something was wrong; this ugly, hunched back and sickly woman was the Wulin World’s Number One Beauty? Nobody would buy that. “Laoye Zi,” she asked, “Your name shook the Jianghu, your martial art skill is high, so nobody would doubt you. Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king] founded a cult. He managed to stand equally with the six major sects, and even fought valiantly against them for over twenty years. Qing Yi Fu Wang [green-winged bat king] comes and goes like a ghost. That day at the Wan An Temple he threatened to destroy my face; hereafter if I think about it, I am still shivering in fear. On the other hand Jin Hua Popo to have a position above the other three is rather unsuitable although her martial art skill is also high and quite resourceful. I wonder why?”

Xie Xun replied, “That was because Yin Er Ge [Second (older

Brother Yin], Wei Si Di [Fourth (younger) Brother Wei) and I, three people were willing to yield to her.”

“Why?” Zhao Min asked. Suddenly she chuckled and said, “Because she was the most beautiful woman in the world, three great heroes were willing to submit under her skirt?” She was a Mongolian woman, who did not confine herself to senior-junior propriety; whatever came into her mind, she would unscrupulously blurt it out as a joke toward Xie Xun.

Surprisingly, Xie Xun was not angered. He sighed and said, “Do you think only three people who willingly submitted under her skirt? If I say there were a hundred people inside and outside the Cult who hoped to attain Taj-kis’ favor, I am afraid that number is still too few.”

“Taj-kis?” Zhao Min wondered, “Is that Mrs. Han? How come her name is so strange?”

“She is a Persian,” Xie Xun said, “That is a Persian name.”

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo were stunned; “She is a Persian?” they asked almost simultaneously.

“Can’t you all see?” Xie Xun was surprised, “She was born of a mixed marriage between a Chinese and a Persian. Her hair and eyes are black, but her nose is high and her eyes deep; her skin is as white as snow; greatly different from the women of the Central Plains. It is so easy to distinguish.”

“No, no!” Zhao Min said, “Her nose is low, her eyes are like a pair of slits on her face; completely different from your description. Zhang Gongzi, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “Could it be that she is like Ku Toutuo, deliberately destroying her own face?”

“Who is Ku Toutuo?” Xie Xun asked.

“He is the Ming Cult’s Guang Ming You Shi [right emissary of the brightness], Fan Yao,” Zhang Wuji replied. Thereupon he briefly told him how Fan Yao had destroyed his face and entered the Ruyang Palace as a spy.

Xie Xun sighed, “This act by Fan Xiong [brother Fan], done in pain and suffering, was a great merit to our Cult; not everybody is capable of doing that. Ay, part of it was also because of Mrs. Han’s affair.”

“Laoye Zi,” Zhao Min said, “Please don’t keep us in suspense. Why don’t you tell us everything from beginning to the end?”

“Hmm,” Xie Xun raised his head up and was lost in thought for half a day before he slowly said, “Twenty some years ago, the Ming Cult was quite prosperous under Yang Jiaozhu’s leadership. One particular day three Persian foreigners suddenly appeared at the Brightness Peak, to deliver the personal letter of the Persian Central Cult’s Jiaozhu addressed to Yang Jiaozhu. The letter said that the Persian Central Cult had a Jing Shan Shizhe [lit. clean and virtuous emissary], who was Chinese. He had lived in Persia for a long time; joined the Ming Cult, and rendered quite a few meritorious services. He married a Persian woman and had a daughter. This Jing Shan Shizhe passed away a year ago. On his deathbed he remembered his native land and wished his daughter be sent to China. The Central Cult’s Jiaozhu honored his wish and thus dispatched some people to escort his daughter to the Brightness Peak; hoping that the Central Earth’s Ming Cult would look after her.

Yang Jiaozhu readily agreed and invited the daughter to

come in. As that young woman entered the main hall, immediately it was as if the hall was filled with a glorious light; nothing could describe her glaring beauty. As she knelt down to pay her respects toward Yang Jiaozhu, there wasn't any one who was not shaken among everybody in that hall, including the Left and Right Brightness Emissaries, the three Protector Kings, the Five Wanderers and the Five-Element Flags.

The three Persian escorts only stayed at the Brightness Peak overnight; they took their leave the very next day. Since then, this glamorous Persian girl, Taj-kis lived at the Brightness Peak."

"Laoye Zi," Zhao Min said with a laugh, "At that time you were also mesmerized by this glamorous Persian woman, were you not? Come on, don't be shy; admit it honestly."

"No!" Xie Xun shook his head, "At that time I was a newlywed; I loved my wife dearly, and she was pregnant. How could I think about another woman?"

"Oy," Zhai Min muttered, silently scolding herself for making an indiscreet remark. She knew that Xie Xun's wife and son were killed by Cheng Kun. This time she inadvertently brought it up, she knew she would unavoidably bring grief to Xie Xun's heart; hastily she said, "That's right, that's right! No wonder Mrs. Han said that when she married Yin Ye Xian Sheng [Mr. Silver Leaf], everybody on the Brightness Peak opposed her, except Yang Jiaozhu and you, who treated her very well. I bet Jiaozhu's wife was not only beautiful, but also an expert in martial arts, so she won over her husband's heart."

"Yang Jiaozhu was generous, brave and chivalrous," Xie Xun said, "Taj-kis' age was appropriate to be his daughter.

Besides, the Persian Central Cult has entrusted her to him, so Yang Jiaozhu always treated her with utmost respect; definitely he did not have any inappropriate thoughts against her. Mrs. Jiaozhu was my Shifu's shimei [martial (younger) sister], she was my Shigu [martial aunt]. Yang Jiaozhu loved his wife very much."

Cheng Kun had killed his entire family; Xie Xun bore a long and deep hatred toward him but when mentioning Cheng Kun's name, Xie Xun said it lightly, as if he was mentioning other people's name.

Zhao Min asked, "I heard when he was young, Ku Toutuo Fan Yao was a very handsome man. Did he fall in love with Taj-kis?"

Xie Xun nodded; "It was love at first sight," he said, "Later on it became a kind of infatuation written-in-his-heart and engraved-on-his-bone. In fact, I am afraid I seldom find a man whose heart was not moved by Taj-kis' beauty. But the Ming Cult' religious law is strict; everybody maintained self-control and propriety. In the end, only bachelors dared to show their admiration toward Taj-kis. Who would have thought that Taj-kis's heart was as cold as ice; she was also a no-nonsense, unpretentious kind of person. Whoever revealed even a slight cordiality toward her would receive her harsh reprove; to the point of humiliating him so that he would fall from his honored position. My Shigu, Madame Jiaozhu, wanted to be the matchmaker between her and Fan Yao. Taj-kis flatly declined. Later on, she went as far as swore publicly, with a sword horizontally across her body, saying that she would never get married, and that she would rather die if anybody forced her. Because of this, everybody's heart also turned cold towards her.

One day about half a year later, somebody from Ling She

Island came to the Brightness Peak. He said his surname was Han, given name Qianye [lit. thousand leaves], a son of Yang Jiaozhu's enemy of the former days. He came to avenge his father. Admittedly, nobody thought this youngster surnamed Han's appearance was astonishing. Seeing his surprising boldness in coming to the Brightness Peak to challenge Yang Jiaozhu, everybody burst out in laughter. But Yang Jiaozhu's expression was serious; he received him as an honored guest and prepared a banquet to welcome him.

After the feast, Yang Jiaozhu explained to the brethrens how in the past due to a misunderstanding he had seriously injured this lad's father using the 'da jiu tian shou' [great nine heavenly hands] that his father fell on his knees and was unable to stand back up. At that time the father said that he was going to avenge this enmity; only realizing his martial art skill would not advance anymore, he promised that he would send his son or his daughter.

Yang Jiaozhu said that whomever he would send, whether a son or a daughter, Yang Jiaozhu would yield to him or her for three stances. That man replied that he would not expect Yang Jiaozhu to yield, but he would ask that if they were to have a martial art duel, to have his son or daughter choose the method on how they would fight. At that time Yang Jiaozhu gave his consent.

A dozen or so years had passed; Yang Jiaozhu had already set this matter aside from his mind. Who would have thought that the man surnamed Han did indeed send his son to seek revenge. Everybody thought that it would be well if he did not come; but once he came, nothing good would happen to him ['shan zhe bu lai, lai zhe bu shan']. This man dared to come alone to the Brightness Peak, he must have had an astonishing skill. But Yang Jiaozhu's martial art skill was very high; it could be said that nobody in this present

age could be compared to him. Other than Wudang Pai's Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren [lit. real/true man, a term of respect to address a Taoist priest], nobody would be able to take his one stance or half a form. How old could this man surnamed Han be? Yang Jiaozhu did not have anything to be worried about even if he was three times or five times his age. We were anxious only over how they were going to have their duel.

Chapter 30 – Part 3 On the next day, in front of everybody Han Qianye first explained the agreement of the past, cornering Yang Jiaozhu so that he could not deny his promise, and then he presented his request. To everybody's surprise, he wanted to fight against Yang Jiaozhu inside the 'bi shui han tan' [bluish green water cold pool] on the Brightness Peak to decide victory or defeat.

As he said that, everybody was shocked. The water of 'bi shui han tan' was really cold, penetrating the bones. Even in the heat of the summer nobody dared to enter in, much less in the middle of the winter?

Although Yang Jiaozhu's martial art skill was high, his water skill was only so-so. If he went into the 'bi shui han tan', , he would be frozen to death, or drown to his death inside the water without even contending in martial arts. At that moment, all warriors and heroes in the Sheng Huo Ting [holy fire hall] opened their mouths to denounce the young man."

"That was a very difficult dilemma," Zhang Wuji said, "Once a word left a real man's mouth, four horses would not be able to chase it. Yang Jiaozhu had made a promise to that man surnamed Han that he would let his son or daughter to pick the way they would fight. That Han Qianye Lao Qianbei [senior, older generation] picked water battle; reasonably speaking, Yang Jiaozhu could not refuse."

Zhao Min reached out to the back of his hand and pinched it lightly; she laughed and said, "That's right! Once a word left a real man's mouth, four horses would not be able to chase it. What kind of man was the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu? How could he swallow back his words, break his own promise to the world? Once he gave his consent regarding other people's matters, then he should fulfill his promise."

She was saying that to Zhang Wuji, reminding him about the oath of honor between them; but of course Xie Xun did not know that. "That's exactly so," he said, "That day Han Qianye clearly said, 'I am going up the Brightness Peak alone, I am not hoping to go down this mountain alive. The heroes and warriors can simply kill me; nobody in the Jianghu will find out. I am only a nameless lowly character. What difference does it make if there is one less of me? If you want to kill me, go ahead.' When everybody heard what he said, they could not say anything anymore."

Yang Jiaozhu was silent for half a day before he finally said, 'Han Xiongdi [Brother Han], I have made an agreement with your honorable father. A hero must be frank; I already lost this duel. I am going to comply with whatever you have in mind.'

Han Qianye flipped his wrist and produced a brilliantly gleaming dagger; he pointed the dagger to his own chest and said, 'This dagger is Xianfu's [late/departed father] legacy; I am only asking Yang Jiaozhu to kowtow three times to this dagger.'

As the warriors heard him, there wasn't anybody who was not angered; how could a Ming Cult's Cult Leader take this humiliation? But Yang Jiaozhu has admitted defeat; according to the Jianghu custom, he had no choice but

comply with the opponent's wishes.

The situation was clear; Han Qianye came staking everything he got, as soon as Yang Jiaozhu kowtowed three times, he would immediately thrust the dagger into his own chest to avoid being killed by the warriors of the Ming Cult.

In that instant, the main hall was awfully quiet. The Brightness Left and Right Emissaries, Xiao Yao Er Xian [Xiao and Yao, two immortals], White-browed Eagle King Yin Er Ge [second (older) brother], Peng Yingyu Heshang [Buddhist monk], and the others are all excellent strategists, but facing this difficult problem, they were at their wits' end. It was obvious to them that Han Qianye intended to humiliate Yang Jiaozhu the same way his father was forced to fall on his knees; and then he would kill himself.

In this critical moment, Taj-kis suddenly stepped forward and said to Yang Jiaozhu, 'Father, he is a good and filial son; but don't you also have a good and filial daughter? This Master Han is seeking revenge on behalf of his father, so it is only appropriate if your daughter fight him on your behalf. The older generation dealt with the older generation, the younger generation deals with the younger generation; no confusion in generational gap here.'

Everybody was surprised, 'Why did she call Yang Jiaozhu 'tie-tie' [dad, father]?' But straight away they understood, 'She is pretending to be his daughter to help him out of this distress.' They also thought, 'Looking at her pretty and delicate features, does she know martial arts? Even if she does, her skill is certainly not too high, so to have a water battle in the 'bi shui han tan' is even more out of question.'

Yang Jiaozhu has not replied, Han Qianye has already laughed coldly and said, 'It's certainly all right if Miss wants

to fight on behalf of your father; but if Miss loses, I am still going to insist that Yang Jiaozhu kowtow three times toward my Xianfu's dagger.' He has noticed that Taj-kis was a pretty and delicate girl, of course he did not consider her a threat to him.

Taj-kis replied, 'What if Sire loses?'

Han Qianye said, 'You want to kill me or chop me, it's entirely up to you.'

'Good!' Taj-kis replied, 'Let us go to the 'bi shui han tan' then.' As she said that, she had already preceded him walking toward the pool.

Yang Jiaozhu hastily waved his hand, 'No,' he said, 'This matter does not have anything to do with you.'

'Father,' Taj-kis replied, 'Don't you worry.' And she respectfully knelt down to him. It was as if with this kneeling down, she acknowledged Yang Jiaozhu as her Yifu. Yang Jiaozhu saw that she had high confidence; other than that, he did not have any other idea. Hence, he was obliged to listen to her proposition.

Immediately everybody went to the 'bi shui han tan' on the northern side of the mountain. By that time the northern wind was blowing intensely, as we arrived by the pool side, the cold air attacked us furiously. Those whose internal energy was somewhat lower had already felt discomfort. The water in the pool had turned into ice for quite a while, below the surface the water looked deep blue, we could not see the bottom.

Yang Jiaozhu did not want Taj-kis to risk her life for him, he boldly said, 'Dear Daughter, I accept your good intention,

but let me fulfill Han Xiong's wish.' As he said that, he took off his outer garment, and with a single dagger in his hand he was ready to jump in; this time he had made up his mind not to back off.

Taj-kis smiled and said, 'Father, your daughter grew up by the sea; since I was little my water skill has been very good.' Immediately she unsheathed her sword and leaped to the middle of the pool. Standing on the ice she turned her sword to make a circle about two feet in diameter. With her left foot she treaded on the ice, 'crack!' the round ice broke and she jumped into the water."

At that moment a gust of sea breeze from the north brushed their clothing. Xie Xun continued his narration, "Each time I recalled the scene by the 'bi shui han tan' that day, it always seems like yesterday to me. Taj-kis was wearing a lavender gown. Standing on the ice that day, she looked like the 'ling bo xian zi' [Immortal/Deity/Goddess Ling Bo]. Silently and instantly she disappeared into the water below; the crowd of warriors was amazed.

As Han Qianye watched the way she entered the water, the haughty expression on his face disappeared. He followed, jumping into the pool with the dagger in his hand.

The pool was dark green; nobody could see the battle raging underneath the surface from above the water, but the water was bubbling continuously.

After a while the bubbling gradually ceased. But before long the water started to bubble again. The Ming Cult warriors were extremely anxious. Those two had been in the water for a long time, how could they survive underwater for that long?

A moment later a wisp of dark red blood appeared on the green deep water. Everybody was even more anxious, not knowing if Taj-kis was injured. Suddenly 'splash!' Han Qianye jumped out from the water, gasping for breath, panting heavily.

Seeing him jumping out first, everybody was shocked; they surged forward and asked, 'Where is Taj-kis? What happened to her?' But then they saw that his hands were empty, his dagger was actually stuck on his right chest, while there was a long scar on each of his cheeks.

While everybody was still in shock, Taj-kis flew up from the water like a flying fish, with her sword in front of her body as a shield. She made a flip in the air and lightly landed on the ice. The warriors broke into loud cheers. Yang Jiaozhu went forward to grab her hand; he was speechless from extreme delight. Nobody would guess that this cute and tender girl possessed such magnificent water skill.

Taj-kis looked at Han Qianye and said, 'Father, this man's water skill is not bad. Taking into account that he was a filial son seeking revenge for his father, could his rudeness toward Jiaozhu be forgiven?' Naturally, Yang Jiaozhu granted her request; he ordered Shen Yi [Divine Doctor] Hu Qingniu to treat his injury.

That very evening there was a huge banquet on the Brightness Peak; everybody agreed that Taj-kis has rendered a great service to the Ming Cult. If not for her stepping out to take the matter over, Yang Jiaozhu's reputation would go down the drain. Immediately a position in the Cult was arranged. Madame Yang bestowed to her the title 'Zi Shan Long Wang', and given her the same authority as the Eagle King, Lion King and Bat King. We, the other three kings, were most willing to let her hold the chief position among the four

kings; since her great merit that day easily surpassed the other three kings' merits of the past. Afterwards the three 'hu jiao fa wang' and she, four brothers and sister, agreed on how to address each other; hence she called me 'Xie San Ge' ever since.

[Translator's note: 'hu jiao fa wang' ('hu' - protect, 'jiao' - Cult, 'fa' - law, 'wang' - king) has been translated as 'Protector King' throughout this novel. I believe the more accurate translation should be 'Protector of the Cult, Law Enforcement King', or 'Judge'. (The same 'fa wang' was translated 'imperial priest', as in Jin Lun Fa Wang, in Shen Diao Xia Lu - RoCH) I am going to keep using the term 'Protector King', interchangeably with 'fa wang' for the remainder of this novel; I want the readers to be informed that the term carries a broader sense than simply 'Protector King.')

The battle of 'bi shui han tan' has brought another repercussion beyond anybody's anticipation. Han Qianye was defeated in the battle, but somehow he won Taj-kis' heart. I don't know whether it was because she visited him on his sick bed everyday, or love grew out of pity, or passion out of regret; but when Han Qianye recovered, suddenly Taj-kis reported to Jiaozhu that she wanted to marry this man.

As we heard this news, some were grieving because their hopes were shattered, some deeply resented it; because this Han Qianye had forced our Jiaozhu to be under an extremely difficult situation. How could our own 'hu jiao fa wang' marry this man? Some of the more temperamental brethrens spoke insultingly to her face.

Taj-kis was adamant. Holding a sword in her hand, she stood at the hall entrance and loudly said, 'From this day forward, Han Qianye is my husband. Whoever insults Han-lang [a

term of endearment for 'husband'], will have to face Zi Shan Long Wang's sword!' Seeing this turn of event, everybody could only disperse bitterly.

On the day she wedded Han Qianye, most of our brethrens did not come to drink the celebratory wine. Only Yang Jiaozhu and I, who were appreciative for what she did, strived to help her and mediate for her, so that she could have a safe marriage, not lacking anything.

When Han Qianye wanted to enter the Ming Cult, the opposition from the brethrens was too strong; it was also inconvenient for Yang Jiaozhu to disregard the public opinion.

Not too long afterwards, Yang Jiaozhu husband and wife suddenly disappeared together. The Brightness Peak was in panic. Everybody went everywhere to track them down. One evening Guangming You Shi Fan Yao unexpectedly saw Mrs. Han Taj-kis come out of the secret passage."

Zhang Wuji's heart was moved. "She came out of the secret passage?" he asked.

"That's right," Xie Xun replied, "The Ming Cult's law is very strict; other than Jiaozhu, nobody is allowed to enter the secret passage. Fan Yao was shocked and angered; immediately he asked and reproached her. Mrs. Han said, 'I have committed a grave offense to our Cult; you want to kill me or chop me, it's entirely at your convenience.'

That very evening we had a general assembly. Mrs. Han kept repeating those words. When asked for what reason she entered the secret passage, she said she was not willing to tell lies, but she was also unwilling to tell the truth. When asked where Yang Jiaozhu had gone; she said she did not

know. As for the matter of her entering the secret passage, she said she alone had done it, she alone was responsible; there was no need to say too much.

According to our law, she either had to kill herself or cut off one of her limbs; but first of all, Fan Yao had not forgotten his feelings of the past, he did his utmost to cover up for her, secondly, I also pleaded on her behalf. Finally, the general assembly agreed to punish her by confining her for ten years, so that she could consider her crime. Who would have thought that Mrs. Han said, 'Yang Jiaozhu is not here, nobody can punish me.'"

"Yifu," Zhang Wuji asked, "Why did Mrs. Han enter the secret passage?"

"That's a long story," Xie Xun replied, "In the Ming Cult, only I alone know the reason. At that time everybody suspected it had something to do with the missing Yang Jiaozhu, husband and wife; but I am convinced it wasn't related with that matter in any way.

In the Holy Fire Hall of the Brightness Peak that day, there was a strong argument among the warriors, and it resulted in Mrs. Han leaving the Cult, saying that from that day on, she would have nothing to do with the Ming Cult of the Central Earth. She was the very first person to ever leave the Ming Cult. That very day Han Qianye and she left the peak and disappeared without any trace.

Thereafter the Cult brethrens went around everywhere to find Jiaozhu without any result. A few years later the internal strife over the Jiaozhu position got worse. Bai Mei Yin Er Ge also left the peak and founded the Heavenly Eagle Cult ['tian ying jiao']. I persuaded and pleaded with him, but he would not listen. Because of that, he and I became enemies.

More than twenty years ago, by the Wangpan Mountain the Heavenly Eagle Cult showed off the Saber to flaunt their power and prestige. Jin Mao Shi Wang hurriedly appeared on that gathering. First, to snatch the Tulong Saber away; second, to vent my anger over the dispute of the former days. I intentionally wanted to give Yin Er Ge a hard time; to let him know that after leaving the Ming Cult, he might not be able to accomplish anything great. Ay! When I think about it now, I was rather carried away by my feelings and went too far!”

He heaved a long sigh, as if he was unleashing the inexhaustibly bitter feelings of the past and mourning over the countless disturbances in the Jianghu; during which the others were silent for half a day.

“Laoye Zi,” Zhao Min said, “Afterwards, the names of Jin Hua Yin Ye [golden flower silver leaf] shook the Jianghu. Why was it that nobody from the Ming Cult recognized their true identities? That Yin Ye Xiansheng [Mr. Silver Leaf] must be Han Qianye; how did he get killed by poison?”

“I am not clear on that matter myself,” Xie Xun said, “When they, husband and wife, roamed the Jianghu, they always avoid Ming Cult people.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “Jin Hua Popo has always avoided the Ming Cult. When the Six Major Sects besieged the Ming Cult, she did not go up to lend a hand even though she was in the vicinity of the Peak.”

Zhao Min pondered over it and said, “But Zi Shan Long Wang was the beauty of her era; how did she become that ugly? Her face did not show any sign of damage.”

Xie Xun said, "I guess she is using some clever trick to change her appearance. In all her life, Mrs. Han has always been a peculiar person, but actually she endures an unspeakable suffering in her heart. She has always avoided the Persian Central Cult's people's pursue, but who would have thought she is still unable to escape in the end."

"Why is the Persian Central Cult looking for her?" Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min asked simultaneously.

"This is Mrs. Han's biggest secret," Xie Xun replied, "Actually, I should not say it, but I am hoping that you would return to the Ling She Island to save her; so I'll have to tell you this."

"Return to the Ling She Island?" Zhao Min wondered, "Do you think we can overcome those Persian Three Emissaries?"

Xie Xun did not answer directly, but he told this story instead: "For several hundred years, the Ming Cult of the Central Earth has always had a man as our Jiaozhu; but the Persian Central Cult's Jiaozhu has always been a woman, not only that, but the woman must be a virgin. The Holy Scripture of the Central Cult clearly stipulated that the virgin maiden is necessary to maintain the Ming Cult's sacred purity. Right after each Jiaozhu takes office, three maidens, called the 'sheng nu' [holy maiden] are appointed from among the Cult's high-level officials. After these three holy maidens take an oath, they are sent out to do good deeds and render meritorious service to the Ming Cult. As the current Jiaozhu pass away, the elders of the Cult convene to evaluate the three holy maiden's merit; the holy maiden who renders the greatest merits then designated to be the new Jiaozhu. But if there is any holy maiden who loses her chastity, she will be punished by getting burned alive; even if she runs away to the ends of the earth, the

Cult will dispatch people to pursue her, in order to maintain the purity of the sacred teaching ...”

As he spoke to this point, Zhao Min interjected, “Is that Mrs. Han one of the three holy maidens of the Central Cult?”

“Correct!” Xie Xun nodded his head, “I was already aware of it even before Fan Yao found out she came out of the secret passage. Mrs. Han considered me as a friend; therefore, she told me everything. During the battle with Han Qianye inside the ‘bi shui han tan’, they had some physical contacts, her feeling started to grow. Later on, they reassured each other by his sick bed, and she knew that she was committing a great sin. She was aware that there will come a day when the Central Cult will dispatch someone to find her. She was hoping to render a great service to the Central Cult as retribution of her crime. Thereupon she entered the secret passage stealthily to find the ‘qian kun dai nuo yi’ manual. The Central Cult had lost this manual for a long time; the only copy left belonged to the Central Earth Ming Cult. As a matter of fact, the real reason the Central Cult sent her to the Brightness Peak was to find this manual.”

“Ah,” Zhang Wuji exclaimed. He vaguely felt something was wrong, but after thinking for a while he still could not figure it out.

In the meantime, Xie Xun continued, “Mrs. Han had entered the secret passage several times, but could not find the manual. As I learned about it I gave her a serious warning that this matter was a grave offense to the Cult’s law, which would not be easily forgiven ...”

“Ah, I know!” Zhao Min interrupted again, “Mrs. Han left the Cult because she wanted to enter the secret passage. Since

she is not a member of the Central Earth Ming Cult, then the restriction did not apply to her.”

“Miss Zhao is so smart,” Xie Xun said, “But the Brightness Peak is our headquarters, how could we allow outsiders to come and go as they wish? At that time I’ve also guessed her intention, so after Mrs. Han left the mountain, I personally guarded the secret passage entrance. Mrs. Han did indeed come up the mountain three times, each time she met me; finally, she gave up.”

Xie Xun thought deeply for a moment, then he asked, “Those Persian Three Emissaries’ clothing, in what way they are different from what they have in the Central Earth Ming Cult?”

Zhang Wuji replied, “They all wear white robes with blazing flame embroidered on the corners ... Hmm, there was a black strip on their white robes; that is the only small difference.”

“That’s it!” Xie Xun slapped the edge of the boat and exclaimed, “The Central Cult Jiaozhu has passed away. The people of the west use black as their mourning clothes. White robes with black lining, those are their mourning garments. They are going to elect a new Jiaozhu, that’s why they came tens of thousands ‘li’s to the faraway Central Earth to find Mrs. Han’s whereabouts.”

Zhang Wuji said, “Since Mrs. Han came from Persia, she must be familiar with the Persian Three Emissaries’ weird martial arts. How come in less than a stance she was captured by them?”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “You idiot; Mrs. Han is in disguise, of course she could not reveal that she knew the Persian Emissary’s martial art. From what I understood, supposing Xie Laoye Zi had listened to their order and killed

her, Mrs. Han would certainly find a way to escape.”

Xie Xun shook his head, “She is not willing to reveal her own identity, that part is correct. But if you think that she was capable of escaping after her acupoint was sealed by the Persian Three Emissaries, that might not necessarily be true. In anyway, she would rather be killed by my blade than suffer the pain of being burned alive.”

“I always think the Central Earth Ming Cult is a malicious cult,” Zhao Min said, “Who would have thought that the Persian Ming Cult is even more evil. Why would they want a virgin to be their Jiaozhu? Why would they burn the holy maiden who lost her chastity?”

“Miss talked nonsense,” Xie Xun rebuked her, “Each Cult and Sect will have their own customs and ceremonial regulations, handed down from generation to generation. Buddhist monks and nuns cannot marry, cannot eat meat, isn’t that custom and ceremonial regulation? What is malicious or evil?”

Suddenly they heard a ‘clack, clack, clack’ noise, Yin Li’s teeth chattered from cold. Zhang Wuji quickly touched her forehead and felt his hand was burning hot; a sign that she was suffering from a severe fever. “Yifu,” he said, “Your child also would like to return to the Ling She Island. Miss Yin’s condition is very serious, I must find some herbs to treat her. We must strive to save Mrs. Han, we must also save Miss Yin.”

“That’s right,” Xie Xun replied, “This Miss Yin loves you this much; how can we not save her? Miss Zhou, Miss Zhao, what do you think?”

“Miss Yin’s injury is serious,” Zhao Min said, “Mine is not a

problem. Other than returning to the Ling She Island, what else can we do?"

Zhao Zhiruo unenthusiastically said, "Laoye Zi says we should return then we must return."

Zhang Wuji said, "We have to wait for the fog to clear up and then we can look at the stars to find our bearing. Yifu, that Liuyun Shi was somersaulting in the air, but he was able to hurt me with his Sheng Huo Ling. How did he do that?"

Immediately the two of them discussed the Persian Three Emissaries' martial arts. Zhao Min also possessed a vast knowledge of martial arts, so occasionally she was able to offer some opinion. But after deliberating for half a day, they still could not figure out the essence of the coordinated movements of the three people.

The fog on the ocean lasted until dawn. Zhang Wuji said, "We came from the north toward the southeast; hence we need to row toward the northwest."

Zhang Wuji, Xie Xun, Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao took turn rowing the boat. It was not easy to handle that small boat braving the big waves against the strong northerly wind. Fortunately, Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun possessed profound internal energy; Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were not weak either. They considered rowing the boat as martial art training.

For several days, the lone boat headed northwest slowly but surely. Xie Xun had been frowning all this time, as he was thinking deeply about the Persian Three Emissaries' strange martial art. Other than asking Zhang Wuji a few questions, he did not say anything else.

Toward the evening of the sixth day, suddenly Xie Xun carefully interviewed Zhou Zhiruo about the martial art of Emei Pai, which Zhou Zhiruo answered matter-of-factly. Two people exchanged questions and answers until very late at night.

Xie Xun's expression showed some disappointment as he said, "Shaolin, Wudang, Emei, three Sects' martial art was somewhat related to the 'Jiu Yang Zhen Jing' [Nine Yang Manual]; similar to what Wuji has learned, all based on the 'yang gang' [positive and hard/firm]. If only Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren [lit. real/true person, a respectable term to address a Taoist Priest] was here, then his extensive martial art skill encompassing 'yang gang' and 'yin rou' [negative and soft/flexible] could join hands with Wuji; so yin and yang complement each other, then we can defeat the Persian Three Emissaries. But distant water cannot extinguish a nearby fire; if Mrs. Han has already fallen into the hands of the Persian Three Emissaries, what use is my good idea?"

"Laoye Zi," Zhou Zhiruo suddenly asked, "I heard a hundred years ago in the Wulin world there exist some experts who were proficient in the Jiu Yin Zhen Jing [Nine Yin Manual]; is that true?"

On Mount Wudang, Zhang Wuji had heard his Da Shifu [great master] mentioned the name Nine Yin Manual; so he knew that the founder of the Emei Pai, Guo Xiang Nuxia's [heroine] father, Guo Jing, and the 'Shen Diao Daxia' [Divine Eagle Great Hero] Yang Guo, both had mastered the martial arts from the Nine Yin Manual. But the skill contained in the Manual was very difficult; so that although Guo Xiang was Guo Jing's own daughter, she still had not learned it. Listening to Zhou Zhiruo's question he thought, "Could it be that the Emei Pai's founder has handed down parts of the

skill contained in the Nine Yin Manual?”

Xie Xun replied, “People of old did say such thing, but nobody knows the fact. Based on what I heard from the seniors, if we had someone who masters this martial art join hands with Wuji, then they would be able to defeat the Persian Three Emissaries.”

“Hmm,” Zhou Zhiruo mumbled and no longer asked any questions.

“Miss Zhou,” Zhao Min asked, “Do any of your Emei Pai people know this martial art?”

Zhou Zhiruo replied, “If Emei Pai knew this divine skill, Xian Shi [late/departed master] would not lose her life at the Wan An Temple.”

Miejue Shitai passed away because of Zhao Min, so Zhao Zhiruo hated her to the bone. Although they were on the same boat through the wind and the rain, she had not talked to her even one sentence. This time Zhao Min asked her directly, she contradicted her immediately. Zhou Zhiruo was gentle by nature; her remark to Zhao Min was already the most rude she had talked to anybody in her entire life. Zhao Min was not angry; she simply smiled.

During this entire conversation, Zhang Wuji did not stop rowing the boat. Suddenly he looked at the distant and called out, “Look! Look! There is fire over there!”

Everybody followed his gaze and indeed they saw flashing light of fire on the horizon toward their northwest. Although Xie Xun was not able to see, he was as excited as everybody else; he took the wooden oar and helped to row the boat with all his strength.

That blazing fire looked near, but actually it was dozens of 'li's away on the surface of the ocean; both men had to row for most of the day before they got close to it. Zhang Wuji saw the fire was actually on a mountainous island, which was precisely the Ling She Island. "We have arrived!" he said.

"Aiyo!" suddenly Xie Xun exclaimed, "Why is the Ling She Island on fire? Did they burn Mrs. Han?"

'Thud' suddenly Xiao Zhao fell down on the boat.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; he leaped to help her up, but her eyes were tightly closed, looked like she passed out. He busily massaged her acupoint to wake her up. "Xiao Zhao," he called out, "What happened to you?"

With tears on her eyes Xiao Zhao said, "I heard somebody is being burned alive, I ... I ... I'm very scared."

"That was just Xie Laoye's guess," Zhang Wuji consoled her, "It might not be true. Besides, even if Mrs. Han has fallen into their hands, if we rush, we might still be able to catch up and save her."

Xiao Zhao grabbed his hand and earnestly said, "Gongzi, please, you have to save Mrs. Han's life."

"All of us will do our best," Zhang Wuji replied. He went back to the stern, picked up the oar, and exerting his strength, he rowed even faster.

Xiao Zhao also picked up an oar, and although her hands were trembling, she also furiously paddled the boat.

“Zhang Gongzi,” suddenly Zhao Min said, “There are two things that I don’t understand; I’ve been giving it a thought for a long time, but still cannot figure it out. I wonder if you could enlighten me.”

Hearing her suddenly being polite to him, Zhang Wuji felt strange. “What is it?” he asked.

Zhao Min said, “That day outside the Green Willow Manor, I dispatched people to attack your grandfather, Yang Xiao, and the others; but this Miss Xiao Zhao had actually defended against the troops. I know that under a capable general there are no weak soldiers, but still, under the Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu there is actually a little servant girl with this kind of ability, I found it really strange ... ”

“What Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu?” Xie Xun interrupted.

“Laoye Zi,” Zhao Min laughed, “Let me tell you now: the young master, your foster child, is the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. You are actually his subordinate.”

Xie Xun was half believing and half doubting; he was at a loss of words. Thereupon Zhao Min told him briefly how Zhang Wuji had taken over the Cult Leader position; but she did not know too much about the details. Xie Xun then asked Zhang Wuji directly, and he did not have any choice but telling him the truth, about his involvement when the Six Major Sects besieged the Brightness Peak, and how he found the ‘Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi’ manual inside the secret passage.

In his utmost delight Xie Xun stood up, then knelt down on the small boat’s deck; “Subordinate Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun pays his respect to Jiaozhu,” he said.

Zhang Wuji hastily also knelt down to return his respect. "Yifu," he said, "Please don't be overly courteous. Yang Jiaozhu had left an order for Yifu to take the interim Jiaozhu position. It is very hard for your child to bear this heavy responsibility. With the Heaven's blessing Yifu has returned, safe and sound; it is truly our Cult's good fortune. As soon as we reached the Central Earth, I am going to ask Yifu to take over the Jiaozhu position."

Xie Xun sadly said, "Your Yifu has returned, but his eyes are blind. So you cannot actually say 'safe and sound'. How can a blind man take the leadership of the Ming Cult? Miss Zhao, didn't you say you have two things you do not understand?"

"I want to ask Miss Xiao Zhao," Zhao Min said, "Who taught you the 'qi men ba gua' [strange/wonderful gate, eight trigrams] and 'yin yang wu xing' [yin and yang, five elements] techniques? You are very young, how did you know all those extraordinary skills?"

Xiao Zhao replied, "They are my family heritage. It is not worth Junzhu Niang-niang's [Princess] attention."

"Who is your honorable father?" Zhao Min asked further, "The daughter is this good, your father and mother must be world famous masters."

"My father has buried his name and lives in seclusion," Xiao Zhao replied, "Why did Junzhu bother to ask? Could it be that you are going to cut my fingers to force me to show you my martial art?" She was young, but surprisingly did not show the slightest degree of submission toward Zhao Min. By bringing up the finger cutting affair, it was obvious that she was trying to incite Zhou Zhiruo's anger; pulling her to her side to face a common enemy.

Zhao Min simply smiled; she turned her head toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Zhang Gongzi, that night we met at the small inn in Dadou for the second time, Ku Toutuo Fan Yao came to take his leave from me. When he saw Miss Xiao Zhao, he said two sentences; what were those?"

Zhang Wuji had already forgotten this matter; now that she brought it up, he had to think for a moment before answering, "Ku Dashi [Reverend Ku] seemed to say that Xiao Zhao's appearance looks very much like someone he knew."

"Correct!" Zhao Min said, "Can you guess to whom did Ku Dashi think Miss Xiao Zhao look like?"

"How can I guess?" Zhang Wuji said.

Throughout this discussion, the small boat was approaching the Ling She Island. They that saw a row of ships were moored on the west of the Island; there was a large red blazing fire painted on each one of their main sails, there was also a black ribbon hanging from each sail. Zhang Wuji wrinkled his eyebrows and said, "The Persian Central Cult dispatches their armada; the number of people coming in must be a lot."

Zhao Min said, "Let us take this boat to the back of the island and land on a secluded place. Don't let them see us yet."

"Yes!" Zhang Wuji nodded his head.

He was only rowing for three, four 'zhang's when suddenly from one of the ships came a bugle sound, 'whoo, whoo ...' followed by 'bang, bang' two explosions, as two cannonballs were fired away. One fell to the left of the small boat, the other to its right side, creating two water columns. The small

boat was shaken and nearly turned over.

Someone called out from the ship, "Quickly row the boat over here; if you don't obey, we are going to fire again."

Zhang Wuji silently groaned, knowing that with these two salvos the enemy deliberately demonstrated their ability to shoot accurately; if they could hit two sides of the boat, then with the distance so close, they would easily hit the boat. Once the boat capsized, none of the six people onboard would survive. He had no choice but slowly row the boat toward the ship while the three cannons from the big ship slowly turned, following them around.

When the small boat reached the ship, a rope ladder was let down. Zhang Wuji said, "Let us go up and try to seize the ship."

Xie Xun groped around for the ladder and he was the first to go up. Without saying anything Zhou Zhiruo stooped down to pick Yin Li up, and then climbed to the ship, followed Xiao Zhao. Carrying Zhao Min in his arm, Zhang Wuji was the last to go aboard the ship.

They saw the people on the ship were all blonde haired with blue eyes, their statures tall, they were Persian foreigners; but Liuyun Shi and the other two were actually not among them. One of them, who spoke Chinese, asked, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Zhao Min replied, "We are shipwrecked; and are looking for help."

That Persian was half believing and half doubting; he turned his head around and spoke several sentences in Persian toward someone sitting on a chair on the deck, who seemed

to be their leader. That leader mumbled some instructions. Suddenly Xiao Zhao jumped and sent out a palm strike toward that leader. The leader was startled; he dodged sideways, grabbed the chair, and smashed it toward Xiao Zhao.

Zhang Wuji was taken by surprise; not anticipating Xiao Zhao to make her move this soon. He moved three feet sideways and stretched out his fingers to strike the leader's acupoint. The several dozen Persian sailors aboard were immediately thrown into confusion; they unsheathed their weapons and surrounded them. Although these people knew martial art, their skills were far below those of the Cloud and Wind emissaries.

Supporting Yin Li with his right hand, Zhang Wuji's left hand struck to the east and slapped to the west. Xie Xun unsheathed his Tulong Saber; Zhou Zhiruo brandished her sword; together with Xiao Zhao whose movements were quick, in a short period of time they struck down dozens of Persians. More than ten people fell down on the deck, either died or seriously injured by the blades; about seven, eight people fell down to the sea below, while the rest of them were immobilized because their acupoints were sealed.

Instantly the sea was full with people shouting and bugle sounding, as the other Persian ships moved to surround them, with the people on board ready to attack. Zhang Wuji picked up the leader and jumped to the ship's side. "Don't you dare come over, or I'll hack this man to his death," he shouted loud and clear.

The people on the other ships shouted and yelled. Zhang Wuji did not understand what they were saying, but seeing that nobody jumped to their ship, he believed the man he captured must be someone in a high position, so that the

enemy hesitated and did not dare to attack rashly. Zhang Wuji jumped back down to the deck.

He barely laid that leader down when he suddenly heard a swishing noise from behind, as a weapon was coming down on his back. Quickly he evaded sideways and kicked back; only to feel that his foot had struck a Sheng Huo Ling, while from the left another Sheng Huo Ling swept horizontally. Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, resenting the fact that the Wind, Cloud, and Moon Emissaries have arrived this quickly. "Everybody, retreat back to the cabin," he shouted, while lifting up the leader in his hands to parry the Sheng Huo Ling.

Huiyue Shi hastily pulled her attack back, but because of this abrupt movement, her lower body was exposed; Zhang Wuji swept with his leg and almost hit her calf. Liuyun Shi and Miaofeng Shi attacked together from the sides, forcing Zhang Wuji to withdraw his kick.

Toward the ninth stance, the Sheng Huo Ling in Miaofeng Shi's left hand slamming down diagonally in a very weird move; looked like he was aiming Zhang Wuji's lower abdomen. Zhang Wuji lowered the Persian leader's body. Although Miaofeng Shi's stance was very strange, Zhang Wuji's reaction was extremely ingenious. 'Slap!' the Sheng Huo Ling squarely hit that Persian on his left cheek.

The Three Emissaries cried out in alarm simultaneously; their countenance changed and they leaped back at the same time. After talking in Persian among themselves, suddenly they bowed toward the Persian in Zhang Wuji's hand, with a very respectful expression; and then they retreated.

Suddenly the bugle sounded again as one big ship slowly

came near. On the bow of this ship were twelve embroidered golden banners, while underneath the banners twelve chairs were set covered in tiger skins. One of the chairs was empty, while the other eleven were occupied. That big ship stopped some distance away and dropped its anchor.

Zhao Min noticed that the empty chair was the sixth one; a thought came to her mind. "The man we captured is dressed similar to those eleven people on that ship; looks like among their twelve leaders, he ranks number six."

"Twelve big leaders?" Xie Xun asked, "Hmm, the Central Cult's twelve 'bao shu wang' [lit. kings of treasured/precious tree] have come to the Central Earth. This is no small matter."

"What are the twelve 'bao shu wang'?" Zhao Min asked.

"Under the Jiaozhu of the Persian Central Cult," replied Xie Xun, "are the twelve grandmasters of the Scripture; they are called the Twelve Precious Tree Kings. Their position is similar to the Four Protector Kings of the Central Earth's Ming Cult. These twelve kings are: the first Dasheng [great holiness], the second 'zhi hui' [wisdom or knowledge], the third Changsheng' [eternal victory], the fourth Zhanghuo' [palm of fire], the fifth Qinxiu [diligent cultivation], the sixth Pingdeng [equality], the seventh Xinxin' [faith], the eighth Zhen'e [suppressing evil], the ninth Zhengzhi [integrity], the tenth Gongde' [virtue], the eleventh Qixin [single mindedness], the twelfth Juming [entire brightness]. However, these twelve Precious Tree Kings are only experts in Scriptures and doctrines, great teachers of religious law; I heard they are not experts in martial art. This man is the sixth; so he must be the Pingdeng Bao Shu Wang."

Zhang Wuji sat down by the main mast, laying down the

Pingdeng Wang on his knees. This man held a high position within the Persian Central Cult; hence, Zhang Wuji was thinking of using him a hostage to escape later on, therefore, he must take a good care of him. Looking down, Zhang Wuji saw that man's left cheek was swollen very badly; fortunately it was not life-threatening. Thinking about the fierceness of Miaofeng Shi's strike, he felt strange; hastily he exerted his strength and felt some reaction from this man's internal energy.

Meanwhile Zhou Zhiruo and Xiao Zhao were cleaning up the deck; they moved the corpses to the rear cabin and laid down those who were still alive neatly in rows on the deck.

They saw that they were surrounded by more than ten Persian ships, with each ship's cannon aimed at their ship, while the deck next to the fender was full of Persian people; their blades flickered under the bright torchlights. The ships were jam-packed with these people, it was difficult even to estimate how many people were there. Zhang Wuji was secretly anxious; without even considering the fact that the cannons on each ship were capable of bombarding their ship, if these thousands of people attacked together, he would be hard-pressed to defend himself even if he had three heads and six arms. He might be able to escape relying on his own martial art skill; but how about his companions? Moreover, Yin Li and Zhao Min were injured, making their situation more dangerous.

He heard a Persian speak in Chinese with a loud voice, "Jin Mao Shi Wang, listen! Our Twelve Precious Tree Kings of the Central Cult are here. You have committed a crime against the Central Cult, the Precious Tree Kings are being lenient and willing to pardon you. Quickly release the Cult member on your ship, we will allow you to sail away safely."

Xie Xun laughed. "The Old Xie is not a three-year old child; do you think we don't know that your cannons will fire on us as soon as we released the hostages?" he said.

That Persian was indignant. "If you don't release our people, do you think we cannot shoot you?"

Xie Xun hesitated for a moment before answering, "I have three conditions; if you agree, we will then respectfully send these Cult people ashore."

"What condition?" that man asked.

"First," Xie Xun replied, "From now on, the Central Cult and the Central Earth Ming Cult are to respect each other, no more interfering with each other's affairs."

"Hmm, and the second?" that man said.

"Release Taj-kis," Xie Xun said, "Send her over to our boat. Pardon her for losing her chastity, and do not look for her again, ever."

"Not on your life," that man angrily said, "Taj-kis has violated a major law of the Central Cult; she must be burned alive as a punishment. What does that have to do with your Central Earth Ming Cult, anyway? What is the third condition?"

"You have not agreed to the second one, why talk about the third one?" Xie Xun said.

"All right!" that man replied, "Let's just say we agree to the second condition; then there is no problem in hearing the third one, isn't there?"

"The third condition?" Xie Xun said, "That's the easiest one.

Send a small boat to follow us. After we sail for fifty 'li's, and we are sure that you are not pursuing us, then we'll release the hostages to the small boat. You are free to pick them up."

That man angrily shouted, "Hu shou jiu dao! Hu shou jiu dao!"

Xie Xun and the others were puzzled, not understanding what he said. Zhao Min laughed and said, "This man learned how to speak Chinese, but he learned it sloppily. He must have thought one degree higher than 'nonsense' must be 'absurd'." [Translator's note: 'hu shuo ba dao' (????) means 'rubbish, nonsense', where the single character ? - 'ba' means 'eight'. The man increased the number eight to number nine, ? - 'jiu'.]

Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji thought they could not blame his logic; they could not help bursting into laughter even though they were currently under a dire circumstance.

As that man increased the 'degree of rubbishness' and Xie Xun and the others were laughing, the Precious Three King who was sitting at the end of the row, called Juming Bao Shu Wang, was angry. Letting out a loud whistle, he jumped toward the enemy's ship. The eleventh king, Qixin Bao Shu Wang, followed behind him.

Zhang Wuji stepped forward, his left palm struck toward Qixin Bao Shu Wang's chest. To his surprise, Qixin Wang did not parry, but stretching out his left hand to grab the top of Zhang Wuji's head. Zhang Wuji thought that surely his palm would reach the enemy's body first; who would have thought that from the side Ju Ming Wang's both palms came charging in, blocking his palm, while at the same time Qixin Wang's fingers almost touched his skull. Zhang Wuji evaded

by moving one step forward. He realized now that these two people's collaboration was as tight as one person with four arms and four legs.

The three people had exchanged seven, eight stances in a flash. Zhang Wuji was inwardly worried; the collaborations of these two were somewhat inferior compared to the Wind and Cloud, three emissaries, but their martial art was very strange nonetheless. The essence of their martial art was clearly similar to the 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi', but as their attack arrived, it carried an unpredictable variation within, making it very difficult for Zhang Wuji to fight with confidence. Speaking about swiftness and fierceness, however, their stances were actually not as good as the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi by a long shot. These two men were fighting as they were mad; occasionally they would launch what seemed to be a stance from the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, but before striking the target, they would suddenly act as if they were losing their minds and kicked and hit randomly, but surprisingly their attack was very difficult to block. Their collaboration was very tight, it wasn't any different from the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries.

Zhang Wuji resisted with a lot of effort and only managed to fight them evenly; it was not until twenty, thirty stances later that he slowly started to gain an upper hand. It was at this moment that the Wind and Cloud, Three Emissaries, howled in one voice and jumped to their ship, toward the Pingdeng Wang, with the intention of snatching him back to redeem their guilt of striking him earlier.

Xie Xun heaved the Ping Deng Wang and brandished him around, making a large circle around him. This time, how could the Wind and Cloud, Three Emissaries, dare to act rashly? They hastened to the left and dodged to the right, while trying to find a hole to launch their attack.

Suddenly Juming Wang grunted and tumbled down. Zhang Wuji reached down trying to grab him, but Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi's pair of tablets came to block, while Miaofeng Shi scooped Juming Wang to bring him back to their own ship.

Qixin Wang and Cloud and Moon Emissaries were forced to face Zhang Wuji together; their coordination was not as when they were fighting with their own respective partners. After several more stances, they knew it was hard to score a victory. Three people successively let out a whistle and retreated to their ship.

After calming himself down, Zhang Wuji said, "These people definitely knew the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; but somehow their techniques are different, making it difficult for me to deal with."

"Our Cult's Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi originated from Persia," Xie Xun said, "But after they passed it on to us several hundred years ago, they lost their own copy. So what they preserved, according to Taj-kis, was only some shallow and superficial knowledge. For that reason, they sent Taj-kis to the Brightness Peak to get the manual back."

"Their martial art foundation really is superficial, so their knowledge is indeed only skin deep," Zhang Wuji said, "But the way they use it was truly ingenious. Obviously, they knew something significant that was the key to their skill, which I have not penetrated through. Hmm, in the seventh level of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, there are some passages I have not mastered yet; could it be the key?" While saying that, he sat down on the deck with his head between his hands, thinking hard. Xie Xun and the others did not dare to make any noise, for fear they would disturb his train of thought.

“Aiyo,” suddenly Xiao Zhao called out in alarm. Zhang Wuji looked up only to see Wind and Cloud, Three Emissaries, was taking someone to the presence of the eleven Precious Tree Kings. That person was a hunchback, with a walking stick in her hand; she was none other than Jin Hua Popo.

Zhihui Bao Shu Wang who was sitting on the second chair shouted her some questions. Jin Hua Popo leaned her head sideways and shouted back, “What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

Zhihui Wang sneered; he stood up and reached out with his left hand, pulling the entire white hair from Jin Hua Popo’s head, exposing a clump of silky hair as black as crow. Jin Hua Popo turned her head sideways, trying to hide her face. But Zhihui Wang’s right hand reached out suddenly to peel a layer of skin from her face.

Zhang Wuji and the others could see clearly that what Zhihui Wang peeled was a human skin mask. Instantly Jin Hua Popo turned into a very beautiful woman, with creamy white skin, almond shaped eyes, and cheeks like peach. Her countenance was glowing; her beauty was truly indescribable.

As Taj-kis’ true appearance was exposed, she might as well throw away the walking stick, and she stood there smiling bitterly. Zhihui Wang asked her some questions again, and she replied in Persian. As those two people exchanged words, the countenances of the eleven Precious Tree Kings were getting more and more serious.

“Miss Xiao Zhao,” suddenly Zhao Min asked, “What are they talking about?”

With tears in her eyes Xiao Zhao said, “You are so smart, you knew everything; why didn’t you prevent Xie Laoye Zi from talking?”

Zhao Min was puzzled, “Prevent him from talking what?” she asked.

Xiao Zhao replied, “Initially, they did not know who Jin Hua Popo was. Later on, they found out that she is the Zi Shan Long Wang; but they had never guessed that Zi Shan Long Wang is the Holy Maiden Taj-kis. Popo had made a great effort in concealing her identity from them. Xie Laoye Zi’s second condition was for them to release Sheng Nu Taj-kis; although his intention was good, he inadvertently revealed her secret to Zhihui Bao Shu Wang. Xie Laoyezi’s eyes cannot see, of course he did not know that Jin Hua Popo’s appearance was radically changed that nobody would recognize her. Miss Zhao, you can see everything clearly, could it be that you haven’t thought about it?”

In reality, when listening to Xie Xun’s story on the little boat, Zhao Min had early on guessed correctly that Jin Hua Popo was the Persian Ming Cult’s Holy Maiden Taj-kis, but she had never guessed that in the eyes of the Persian leaders, her true identity was by no means uncovered. She was about to open her mouth to retort back, but noticing that Xiao Zhao was speaking miserably, she vaguely guessed that Xiao Zhao must have had some unusual relationship with Jin Hua Popo. She did not have the heart to speak harshly and only said, “Xiao Zhao Meizi [(younger) sister, term of endearment], I certainly have not thought about it. If I had an ill-intention to harm Jin Hua Popo, let me die a horrible death.”

Xie Xun was even more remorseful; he did not say anything. But he had made a decision in his heart that even if he had

to lose his life, he would save Taj-kis from danger.

Sobbing, Xiao Zhao said, "They blame Jin Hua Popo, saying that she got married and committed apostasy against the Cult, they ... they are going to burn her to death."

"Xiao Zhao," Zhang Wuji said, "Please don't worry, as soon as there is an opportunity, I am going to go over and save Jin Hua Popo." He was accustomed to call her 'Popo', but if he looked at Zi Shan Long Wang right now, even though she was middle-aged, but her gracefulness and beauty was not inferior to Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo, and the others; she even looked like Xiao Zhao's elder sister.

"No, no," Xiao Zhao said, "You cannot fight Eleven Bao Shu Wang, plus the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries; don't deliver your life in vain. Right now they are discussing how they are going to take the Pingdeng Wang back."

"Humph!" Zhao Min hatefully said, "Even if they take Pingdeng Wang back, his face has already imprinted with these lines of characters; he will look so ugly."

"What imprinted characters?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"That yellow bearded emissary's Sheng Huo Ling struck his left cheek ..." Zhao Min said, "Ah, Xiao Zhao!" suddenly she remembered something. "Xiao Zhao Meizi," she asked, "Do you know Persian characters?"

"I do," Xiao Zhao replied.

"Come here and look," Zhao Min said, "What is written on Pingdeng Wang's face?"

Xiao Zhao came near Pingdeng Wang and leaned over his

head; she saw his left cheek was swollen badly and three lines of Persian characters were imprinted on it. Turned out each one of the Sheng Huo Ling was engraved with characters. Miaofeng Shi had accidentally struck Pingdeng Wang, and the characters on the Sheng Huo Ling were transferred to his flesh. Only, the part where Sheng Huo Ling met the flesh was no more than two 'cun's wide and three 'cun's long [1 cun is approximately 1 inch (2.5 cm)], so the inscription was incomplete.

Xiao Zhao had followed Zhang Wuji into the secret passage of the Brightness Peak, and had memorized the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual; although Zhang Wuji had never forbidden her, she had never trained it, but she knew the theory of this martial art by heart. When Zhang Wuji encountered a difficulty during training of the seventh level and he was forced to skip several lines, Xiao Zhao had memorized those lines well. Presently, looking at the characters on Pingdeng Wang's face, she could not help from blurting out, "This is Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory!"

"Did you say Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"No, it's not," Xiao Zhao said, "At first, I thought it was it, but it's not. Translated into Chinese, those lines mean: 'reacting to the left is actually to the front, to the right is actually to the rear; three voids, seven solids, something exists out of nothing ...' something, 'the heaven square, the earth round ...' and the next line is unreadable."

Listening to these dozen or so characters, Zhang Wuji felt as if among the black clouds in the sky suddenly he saw a flash of lightning; but after the lightning passed, the sky was still dark. Nevertheless, this flash of lightning gave him hope, that in the midst of a five-'li' dense fog he could see a

glimpse of a way out. His mouth muttered, "Reacting to the left is actually to the front, to the right is actually to the rear ..." He tried hard to integrate these cryptic lines with the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory he already mastered. Several times did he think he see the connection, each time it appeared right but actually was wrong; in the end everything was still dark to him.

"Gongzi, watch out!" suddenly he heard Xiao Zhao calling out, "They are issuing an order: the Three Win and Cloud Emissaries are to attack you, Qinxiu Wang, Zhen'E Wang, and Gongde Wang, three kings are to take Pingdeng Wang back."

Xie Xun heaved the Pingdeng Wang and held him across his chest, while tossing the Tulong Dao to Zhang Wuji and said, "Just chop them up with this Saber."

Zhao Min also took the Yitian Sword and handed it over to Zhou Zhiruo. This time they were on the same boat sharing the same fate; fighting a common enemy together was more important than their differences.

Zhang Wuji took the Tulong Saber, and absentmindedly inserted the Saber to his waist, while his mouth was still mumbling, "Three voids, seven solids, something exists out of nothing ..."

"Idiot!" Zhao Min anxiously said, "This is not the time to ponder some martial art theory; quickly prepare yourself to face the enemy."

Before she finished speaking, Qinxiu, Zhen'E, and Gongde, three kings had already jumped over with their palms extended to attack Xie Xun. They were afraid to injure Pingdeng Wang, hence they did not dare to use weapons.

They were hoping that by attacking with their palms and fists, they might have a chance of snatching him back as soon as one man managed to get hold of Pingdeng Wang's body.

Zhou Zhiruo was standing by next to Xie Xun; each time the situation was critical, she would hack down her sword to Pingdeng Wang; forcing Qinxu Wang, Zhen'E Wang, and Gongde Wang, diverting their attack toward Zhou Zhiruo to prevent her sword from harming Pingdeng Wang.

On the other battlefield, Zhang Wuji was fighting the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries. These four people fought cautiously; each side had suffered some hard beating from their opponents, nobody dared to be careless. After fighting for several stances, Huiyue Shi's tablet came down to strike; according to basic martial art principle, this move should strike Zhang Wuji's left shoulder. Who would have thought that the Sheng Huo Ling changed its course halfway; it made a very strange turn and 'slap!' it hit the back of Zhang Wuji's neck.

Zhang Wuji felt a burst of severe pain, but it was as if his mind was as bright as snow. "Reacting to the left is actually to the front, to the right is actually to the rear, that's right, that's right!" he shouted excitedly. In this short period of time, he suddenly realized that the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries' martial art was based on the first level of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; only the Sheng Huo Ling was inscribed with the marvelous, almost fantastic, variations on the usage of these stances. His mind was churning, and straightaway he understood the four lines of secret Xiao Zhao uttered earlier. Only he had not been able to penetrate the secret of 'the heaven square, the earth round' part. He thought he had to take a look at the inscription on the Sheng Huo Ling to thoroughly understand the essence of the

Persian martial art.

Suddenly he let out a clear whistle and his pair of hands, using the 'three voids, seven solids', reached out to grab two Sheng Huo Ling from Huiyue Shi's hands; while with 'something exists out of nothing' he took away the two Sheng Huo Ling from Liuyun Shi's hands. While the two of them were still in shock, Zhang Wuji had put the four Sheng Huo Ling into his bosom, and then separately grabbed them by the back of their necks and threw them back into their ship.

Amidst the shouting yelling of the Persians, Miaofeng Shi turned his body around trying to escape. By this time Zhang Wuji had understood clearly the basic principle of his opponents' martial art. His comprehension of the details was somewhat limited, but Miaofeng Shi's martial art had lost its mystery in his eyes. Once his right hand reached out, he grabbed Miaofeng Shi's left foot and pulled him back from midair. With one hand on the Sheng Huo Ling in Miaofeng Shi's hand, Zhang Wuji lifted up Miaofeng Shi's body and smashed him toward the top of Zhen'E Wang's head with the other hand.

The three kings were shocked; making hand signals to each other, they hurriedly leaped back to their ship. Zhang Wuji sealed Miaofeng Shi's acupoint and threw him down near his foot.

This victory of his came so quickly that in a blink of an eye from being under-handed he suddenly gained an upper hand. Zhao Min and the others were no less surprised and they all asked him how he did it.

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "We might still be in trouble if not of mistakes arising out of chance that Pingdeng Wang

suffered this mishap. Xiao Zhao, translate the inscriptions on these six Sheng Huo Ling for me; quick, quick!”

They looked at the Sheng Huo Ling, and noticed that they were neither made of metal nor jade, but of very hard substance. The size of six of them varied, some were big, some were small, some were long and some were short. The surface seemed translucent, but also seemed opaque. There seemed to be a faint image of blazing fire dancing around inside the tablet, but actually it was a reflection of the ambient light on the tablets, on which color fluctuated. Each one of the Sheng Huo Ling was inscribed with a lot of Persian characters; to translate them would take a lot of time, not to mention Zhang Wuji would have to interpret their very profound meaning. But he realized that if he wanted them to survive this current situation, then he had to understand the essence of the Persian sect’s martial art.

“Miss Zhou,” he said toward Zhou Zhiruo, “Please place your Yitian Sword on Pingdeng Wang’s neck. Yifu, please place your Tulong Saber on Miaofeng Shi’s neck. We have to buy as much time as possible.” Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo nodded their compliance.

Xiao Zhao took the six Sheng Huo Ling, and picked the shortest one, an unremarkable blackish green tablet with the least characters inscribed on it, and she started translating it. Zhang Wuji listened attentively, but he did not understand even a single sentence. He pondered deeply but still could not make any sense of what he heard, and could not help but feeling very anxious.

“Xiao Zhao Meizi,” Zhao Min said, “Why don’t you read the Sheng Huoling that struck Pingdeng Wang.”

Her words had reminded Xiao Zhao; she busily checked the

inscriptions on the other tablets, and found it to be the second longest. She translated it immediately, and this time Zhang Wuji could actually understand 70, 80% of it. Once she was finished, she took the longest one and translated it. Zhang Wuji only heard several sentences when he happily said, "Xiao Zhao, these six Sheng Huo Ling, the longer ones contain the shallowest sentences. The one you just read was the rudimentary theory of their martial art."

Actually, the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling were cast by the Persian 'Shan Zhong Lao Ren' [the Old Man of the Mountain], in which he engraved the essence of his lifetime martial art achievement. These six Sheng Huo Ling entered the Central Earth at the same time as the Manichaeism, and they became the symbol of authority of the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. After a long time, nobody within the Ming Cult of the Central Earth understood Persian writing. Decades ago, the Sheng Huo Ling was stolen by the Beggar Clan. It went through many hands before finally acquired by a Persian merchant, and found its way to the Persian Ming Cult.

The Persian Central Cult diligently studied the writing for dozens of years, and as a result, the leaders of the Cult had enjoyed a tremendous advancement in their martial art skills. However, the martial art contained in these tablets were too broad and deep, so that even Dasheng Bao Shu Wang who was the first among the kings only managed to master 30, 40% of the entire skill set.

As for the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual, it was originally the Ming Cult's 'hu jiao shen gong' [divine skill to protect the cult]; but due to its extraordinary features, it was not a skill an average person would be able to master. The Persian Ming Cult stipulated that its Cult Leader must be a virgin maiden, and for hundreds of years, the position was held by

women with mediocre skill; therefore, the transfer of the manual to the successive generation was very limited, while the Central Earth Ming Cult still preserved the manual in its entirety. The Persian Ming Cult only mastered less than 10% of the original Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. By combining it with the 20, 30% of the Sheng Huo Ling's martial art, they developed a set of strange stances, forming a brand new branch of martial art skill.

Zhang Wuji sat cross-legged on the bow, while Xiao Zhao translated the inscriptions on the Sheng Huo Ling line by line. Actually, the martial art contained in these Sheng Huo Ling was very exquisite, but by mastering one set of skill well, it would be easier to learn ten thousand sets of skill; as all kinds of skills, although they use different and unique approach, are basically developed to reach a common goal. Zhang Wuji had already possessed a profound knowledge of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, as well as the principle of Wudang Pai's Taijiquan. Although the martial art of Sheng Huo Ling was strange, even greatly broad and profound, it was nothing more than another unorthodox sect's martial art, which had not attained the pinnacle of its perfection yet; after all, it was still far inferior to the aforementioned three martial art skills.

After Xiao Zhao finished translating the six Sheng Huo Ling, Zhang Wuji felt that he only remembered 70, 80% of it, and understood only 50, 60%; nevertheless, he was confident that he had understood thoroughly the martial art of the Precious Tree Kings and the Wind and Cloud Three Emissaries.

Time slowly passed. Forgetting everything else, Zhang Wuji wholeheartedly pondered over the martial art he had just learned; but Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo, who observed the enemy's movement, were getting more and more anxious.

They saw Taj-kis' hands and feet were shackled, while the eleven Precious Tree Kings convened in private; then the eleven kings took off their long robes and changed into soft armors, while the people around them presented eleven strange-looking weapons. They saw the ships around them were full of Persians with their bows drawn and the arrows were aimed at them. They saw around a dozen Persians with hatchets in their hands plunge into the water, waiting for their chiefs' command to sink their ship. Suddenly they heard Dasheng Bao Shu Wang, who was sitting among the kings shout; from all the ships the drums thundered and the bugles sounded.

Zhang Wuji was startled; he raised his head and saw the eleven Precious Tree Kings, each one wearing glittering metal armor and holding weapon in their hands, were jumping toward his ship. Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo held their Saber and Sword tight, placing them on Pingdeng Wang and Miaofeng Shi's necks. The eleven kings noticed this and as they jumped to the bow, they did not dare to press further. They formed a half moon formation and gazed intently, waiting for an opportunity to make their move.

In Zhou Zhiruo and Zhao Min's eyes, these eleven kings looked so mean and ferocious, plus they were tall in stature; they were rather afraid.

Zhihui Wang spoke in Chinese, "Thou better release my fellow Cult member quickly, we will spare thy lives. They people are like pigs or dogs in us eyes; why do thou need to place thy blades on they people's necks? If thou dare, go ahead and kill they people. There are thousands of people like them people in the Persian Holy Cult. What regret do we people have if thou kill one or two of they people?"

"Thou don't have to talk big to deceive we people," Zhao

Min said, "We people know that they two people are the Pingdeng Bao Shu Wang and Miaofeng Shi. They people's positions in thy Ming Cult are quite high. Thou said that they people are just like pigs or dogs in thy eyes then thou have made a mistake, a big heap mistake!"

That Zhihui Wang's Chinese was a 'textbook' Chinese, the terms they used for 'thou' and 'they people' were nondescript. Zhao Min had cleverly imitated his intonation and terminology. Although they were in a dangerous situation, Xie Xun and the others could not restrain from smiling.

Zhihui Wang frowned and said, "In our people's Holy Cult, there are three hundred sixty Bao Shu Wang, Pingdeng Wang holds the three hundred and fifty-ninth position. We people have one thousand two hundreds emissaries, this Miaofeng Shi's martial art is just so-so, he is totally useless. Thou quickly kill they people then!" "Very good, very good!" Zhao Min said, "Friends with saber and sword in your hand, quickly kill these useless people!"

"Accepting order!" Xie Xun said. Lifting up his Saber, he drew a deep breath and hacked down toward Pingdeng Wang's skull.

Everybody shouted in alarm; but the Tulong Saber swept gently and swiftly less than half an inch pass Pingdeng Wang's head, cutting a clump of his hair, which was blown by the sea breeze, vanishing into the air. Xie Xun moved his arm, slicing to the left and to the right, seemingly cutting Pingdeng Wang's arms; but in the last moment he flicked his wrist slightly and cut Pingdeng Wang's sleeves instead.

These three moves were executed fiercely, yet accurately. It was extremely difficult even for people with seeing eyes, let

alone for a blind man.

Narrowly missing death, Pingdeng Wang was so scared that he almost passed out several times. The other eleven Precious Tree kings and the Wind and Cloud three emissaries were dumbstruck; their mouths were wide open but their tongues were tied.

“Now thou have seen the Central Earth Ming Cult’s martial art,” Zhao Min said, “This Jin Mao Shi Wang ranks three thousand five hundred and ninth in the Central Earth Ming Cult. If thou want to rely on numbers to achieve victory, then the Central Earth Ming Cult will come to Persia to seek revenge in the future. We will wipe out thy central altar, and thou will certainly not able to resist. I suggest thou make peace with we people.”

Zhihui Wang knew Zhao Min was bluffing, but he did not know how to answer her. Suddenly Dasheng Bao Shu Wang spoke. Xiao Zhao called out, “Zhang Gongzi, they are going to sink our ship.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart turned cold; he realized his side did not possess excellent water skill. Once the ship sunk, they would certainly be captured by the enemy. His shadow flashed and he had arrived in front of Dasheng Wang.

“What are thou doing?” Zhihui Wang shouted. From both sides Gongde Wang and Zhanghuo Wang, one was using a whip, the other a hammer, struck together.

By this time Zhang Wuji had already understood Persian Sect’s martial art; without even trying to evade, both of his hands reached out and grabbed the kings’ throats. ‘Clang!’ Gongde Wang’s iron whip and Zhanghuo Wang’s octagonal hammer struck each other. Sparks flew everywhere. Zhang

Wuji sealed both men's acupoints on their throats to immobilize them and dragged them away.

In this confusion Zhang Wuji kicked his feet left and right; two kicks made the blades in Qixin Wang and Zhen'E Wang's hands fly away, two more kicks made Qinxu Wang and Juming Wang fly into the water. Suddenly he saw a tall and skinny Precious Tree King pounce on him with a pair of daggers in his hand, stabbing Zhang Wuji's chest. Zhang Wuji's foot flew up and kicked his wrist. That man overlapped his hands and stabbed Zhang Wuji's lower abdomen. This change was so quick that Zhang Wuji was forced to hurriedly leap back to evade.

Turned out this man was Changsheng [eternal victory] Wang, who possessed the highest martial art skill among the twelve kings of the Persian Central Cult. After sealing Gongde Wang and Zhanghuo Wang's acupoints, Zhang Wuji quickly threw them into the cabin, and then turned his body around to fight Changsheng Wang's pair of daggers.

Although this man was numbered among the twelve kings, his martial art skill was strong, greatly different from the rest of the kings. Zhang Wuji attacked for three stances and defended for another three stances, he advanced three steps and retreated three steps. He inwardly praised, "A Persian with an excellent skill!"

After gaining an understanding of the martial art theory from the Sheng Huo Ling, Zhang Wuji did not have time to practice. Now that he met a powerful enemy, he had to think and fight Changsheng Wang at the same time. For the first dozen or so stances, he defended himself relying on his profound internal energy and the ingenuity of his moves, thus he managed to fight evenly with a narrow margin. After the twentieth stance, he was getting more and more

comfortable in utilizing the secret from the Sheng Huo Ling on top of the martial art from the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi.

Changseng Wang earned his title 'Eternal Victory' because in his entire life he had never met any worthy opponent. This time he felt like his hands and feet were bound by the enemy, which he had never experienced before; naturally he was astonished, but also scared.

After thirty stances, Zhang Wuji made a step forward and suddenly sat on the deck, while grabbing Changsheng Wang's calves. This strange move was an extremely profound move recorded on the Sheng Huo Ling. Although Changseng Wang knew about it, he had never dared to use it.

As Zhang Wuji grabbed the enemy, his ten fingers moved and sealed the 'zhong dou' [central capital] and 'zhu bin' [building guest] acupoints on Changseng Wang's calves, using the acupoint sealing technique of the Central Earth martial art. Changseng Wang felt the lower half of his body went numb and difficult to move; he heaved a deep sigh and let his hands caught by the enemy.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji felt a fondness in his heart toward this man's ability. "Thy martial art skill is excellent, I want to save your reputation. Quickly return to your ship," he said, while releasing his captive. Changsheng Wang was grateful and ashamed at the same time, he leaped back to his ship.

Dasheng Wang saw Changsheng Wang's bitter defeat, also saw how Gongde Wang and Zhanghuo Wang fell into the enemy's hands, he realized that if the enemy's ship sank, Pingdeng Wang and the other three kings would also perish with them. He shouted his command, calling everyone to return to their ship.

Zhao Min loudly called out, "Quickly release Taj-kis and agree to Jin Mao Shi Wang's three requests!"

The remaining kings quietly discussed their situation. Zhihui Wang said, "Complying with thy requests is not a big deal. But this young master's martial art is obviously our Persian Sect's skill, where did he learn it from? We demand an explanation."

Stifling her laugh, Zhao Min maintained a solemn face and said, "Thou art naïve and lack of understanding, boastful and wishy-washy. This young master is our Cult Emissary's eighth disciple. His seven martial brothers will arrive soon. By that time, if the seven of them are upset, then it will be extremely awful for thou. Woe is thou ..."

Although Zhuhui Wang was intelligent, Chinese language is difficult and profound; he only understood around 60, 70% from what Zhao Min said, but he was certain she was blowing her horn. He hesitated a moment before saying, "Very well! Send Taj-kis over to their ship."

Two Persian cult members took Taj-kis to the bow of Zhang Wuji's ship. Zhou Zhiruo raised her sword. 'Ding, ding!' immediately the shackles on Taj-kis' hands and feet were cut off. Seeing the sharpness of the Sword, those two Persians were scared to death; they hastily leaped back to their ship.

"Thou may set sail immediately, return to the Central Earth," Zhihui Wang said, "We will send a small boat to follow behind thy ship."

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "The Central Earth Ming Cult came from Persia, thou and us are like brothers. Today we had a misunderstanding. I respectfully wish thou

do not keep this in thy mind. I invite you to visit the Brightness Peak in the future, we will drink wine and have a pleasant chat together. For the offenses of today, herewith Xiongdi [brother] apologize.”

Zhihui Wang laughed out loud and said, “Thy martial art skill is excellent, you’ve won our utmost admiration. For those who learn some kind of skill, isn’t it a delight to train it to perfection? A friend comes visit from afar, isn’t it a delight to the host? Even if they are upset, shouldn’t they be delighted?”

Zhang Wuji and the others were surprised to hear him quoting Kongzi [Confucius], showing that he was an educated man, he was able to respond accurately to Zhao Min’s remarks earlier. They all laughed.

Zhao Min said, “What you say is very good; you are truly a distinguished Persian, a true rarity! I wish you all a prosperous and long life, blessed with abundance and kept from calamities, free of sickness until the day you die.”

Zhihui Wang understood the four character ‘prosperous and long life’ [duo1 fu2 duo1 shou4], so he believed the rest were also good wishes for him. He smiled and mumbled, “Many thanks, many thanks!”

Zhang Wuji realized that although Zhao Min was speaking amiably, she could turn vicious and hurl some cunning and provocative speeches. Right now they were among tigers and wolves, the night was still young and the dreams many; hence the earlier they get out of danger the better. Immediately he pulled the anchor and turned the rudder, he hoisted the sail and slowly drove the ship away.

All around them the Persians aboard their ships watched

how Zhang Wuji weigh the anchor and hoist the sail, a job for dozen of sailors, alone; a demonstration of an astonishing strength. They burst out in cheers. Someone tossed the mooring rope of a small boat, which Zhang Wuji caught and tied to the rear mast. The big ship towed the small boat, gradually they sailed away. There were two people on the small boat, a man and a woman; they were none other than Liuyun Shi and Huiyue Shi.

Zhang Wuji manned the rudder and steered the ship westward, he saw that the Persian ships did not pursue. Quickly they sailed away for several 'li's, until the ships by the Ling She Island looked no more than one inch big, yet they were still unmoving, so finally he felt relieved. He asked Xiao Zhao to handle the rudder, while he went into the cabin to check on Yin Li's condition.

Yin Li was still in a blurry condition, half-asleep and half-awake. Although she did not seem to improve, but her sickness did not get worse either. Zhang Wuji thought that in this big Persian ship, there must be some medicine around.

Taj-kis was standing on the bow with her eyes gazed into the ocean. She heard Zhang Wuji walk on the deck, but she did not turn her head. Zhang Wuji saw her from behind, and had to admit that her figure looked beautiful and elegant; her beautiful hair floated in the wind, the back of her neck as white as the white jade. Xie Xun said she was the Wulin world's most beautiful woman in the past, it was certainly not an empty word. He imagined her standing by the bank of the Bi Shui Han Tan, with her purple gown as beautiful as a flower, her sword as brilliant as the snow; he wondered how many heroes and warriors's hearts had fallen because of her.

Sailing until the evening, they had left Ling She Island approximately a hundred 'li's behind. Looking to the east they did not see a single sail on the surface of the ocean; obviously the Persian Central Cult did not dare to pursue them under their threat.

"Yifu," Zhang Wuji said, "Can we release them now?"

"Very well!" Xie Xun replied, "Even if they want to pursue, they won't overtake us."

Zhang Wuji unsealed Pingdeng, Gongde, Zhanghuo, three kings, and Miaofeng Shi's acupoints, while apologizing to them repeatedly. He took them to the stern and helped them to leap into the small boat.

Miaofeng Shi said, "We are responsible for these six Sheng Huo Ling; losing them is not a small offense. Please return them to us."

Xie Xun said, "Sheng Huo Ling is the Central Earth Ming Cult's token of authority; today it returned to its rightful owner, how can we let you take it away?"

Miaofeng Shi talked incessantly, insistent that the tablets be returned to him. Zhang Wuji thought he must subdue Miaofeng Shi's heart today to avoid more trouble in the future. He said, "If we return these tablets to you, your ability is still too low. I am afraid you won't be able to defend them. Rather than letting some strangers snatch them away, don't you think it would be better if the Ming Cult has them?"

"How can some strangers casually snatch them away?" Miaofeng Shi asked.

"If you don't believe me, then let us try," Zhang Wuji said,

handing over the six Sheng Huo Ling tablets to him.

Miaofeng Shi was delighted; he had barely uttered, “Many thanks!” when Zhang Wuji hooked with his left hand and pulled with his right, taking the six tablets back.

Miaofeng Shi was surprised and angrily said, “I was not even ready, that one did not count.”

Zhang Wuji smiled, “All right, there is no harm in trying again,” he said, handing the Sheng Huo Ling back to him.

Miaofeng Shi put the four tablets of Sheng Huo Ling into his bosom first, and then held the two tablets in his hands tightly. Seeing Zhang Wuji reached out to snatch, he moved the Sheng Huo Ling in his left hand to hit Zhang Wuji’s wrist. Zhang Wuji flipped his wrist and grabbed Miaofeng Shi’s right arm and pulled it up so that two Sheng Huo Ling struck each other. ‘Clang’ the noise shook their hearts. Zhang Wuji transmitted his abundance internal energy to Miaofeng Shi’s arm.

Both of Miaofeng Shi’s arms were numb because of this attack, his whole body lost its strength as if he was paralyzed, so that the Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands fell onto the deck. Zhang Wuji took the four Sheng Huo Ling from his bosom first before taking the ones on the deck.

“Well?” he said, “Do you want to try it again?”

Miaofeng Shi’s face was ashen. “You are not a human,” he stammered, “You are the devil, you are the devil!” He took several steps backward and was about to jump into the small boat, but he staggered and tumbled down. Liuyun Shi leaped up to carry him down.

The small boat raised its sail. Gongde Wang pulled the towing rope. 'Snap!' the rope broke and the small boat was separated from the big ship. Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Please forgive us for the many offenses."

Gongde Wang and the others' eyes were full of hatred, they turned their heads around without answering. The big ship rode on the wind and sailed to the west, two boats were getting farther and farther away from each other.

Suddenly Taj-kis cursed, "Bastard! How dare you?" She jumped into the water.

Zhang Wuji was shocked and hastily turned the rudder. He saw blood bubbling up from the water, followed by another one some distant away. Altogether there were six bloody areas with bubbles up to the surface.

With a splash Taj-kis' head appeared from below the surface with a short dagger in between her teeth, her right hand was holding a Persian man's hair, which appeared above the water shortly.

Zhang Wuji turned the rudder quickly to meet them, but the hull of that ship was too big; because of the strong wind, instead of turning around, the ship slowly made a big circle on the water. In the water, Zi Shan Long Wang was as agile as a fish; without taking too much time, she had reached the ship. Her left hand reached the anchor and with one pull she flew up, taking the Persian along with her, to the deck.

Everybody realized now, that the Persians had concealed this disastrous thought. They waited until Gongde Wang and the others safely moved to the small boat, then they raised the sail to cover up some people who went underwater toward the big ship, with the intention of sinking Zhang Wuji

and the others to the bottom of the sea. Fortunately, Zi Shan Long Wang noticed the bubble in the water from these people's breathing, leaped into the sea, and managed to kill six of them while capturing one alive. She was about to interrogate this survivor when suddenly there was a loud explosion coming from the aft; followed by black smoke rising to the sky. The hull shook violently, as if it was hit by a cannon; the mast broke and the top part flew into the air.

Zhang Wuji and the others felt a searing heat; hastily they ducked down. "What a wicked scheme!" Taj-kis called out. She rushed to the mast and saw a big hole on the aft, while the rudder disappeared without any trace. Water rushed in from the hole. Taj-kis asked several questions in Persian to the man she captured, and then her palm struck down toward his skull, smashing his head altogether. She kicked his body to the ocean while saying, "I only knew they were trying to make some holes on the ship; I did not think they planted explosive on the aft."

By this time Gongde Wang and the others had sailed quite some distance away on their small boat; although Taj-kis' water skill was excellent, there was no way she could overtake them. Everybody looked at each other in blank dismay, not knowing what to do. Zhao Min gave Zhang Wuji a sorrowful look while thinking in her heart, "The enemy ships will be over very soon; all of us will certainly die without any burial place."

The ship was really big, so that it would not sink too quickly. Amidst that commotion, suddenly Taj-kis spoke to Xiao Zhao in Persians, to which Xiao Zhao also replied in Persian. Two people spoke back and forth, their expressions kept changing irregularly. They noticed Xiao Zhao glanced at Zhang Wuji with blushing cheeks, she looked bashful. Taj-kis kept talking to her with a stern voice. They talked for half a

day; apparently they were arguing over something. Afterwards, it sounded like Taj-kis was urging Xiao Zhao to do something, while Xiao Zhao kept shaking her head without saying anything. Finally, she suddenly looked toward Zhang Wuji, heaved a deep sigh, and said two sentences. Taj-kis stretched out her arms to embrace her and kept kissing her, tears streaming down from their eyes. Xiao Zhao was sobbing, while Taj-kis comforting her in gentle voice.

Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo looked at each other in bewilderment, not knowing what was happening. Zhao Min whispered in Zhang Wuji's ears, "Look, their faces look alike!"

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, he noticed Taj-kis and Xiao Zhao both had delicate and elegant melon-seed-shaped faces, high nose and snow-white complexion, graceful like rippling waves of autumn. Their facial features were about 60, 70% similar, only on Xiao Zhao, the Persian heritage was but a shadow, while Taj-kis looked more foreign than a Central Earth woman. Zhang Wuji recalled at the little wineshop in Dadou, when Ku Toutuo Fan Yao saw Xiao Zhao, he said, 'Looks alike, looks alike!' Turned out what he meant by 'look alike' was that Xiao Zhao looked very much like Zi Shan Long Wang. Was Xiao Zhao Taj-kis' younger sister, then? Or was she her daughter?

Zhang Wuji also remembered how Yang Xiao and Yang Buhui, father and daughter, had always been suspicious toward Xiao Zhao. Whenever he asked Yang Xiao why he seemed wary toward a young girl like Xiao Zhao, Yang Xiao only said that Xiao Zhao reminded him of his old enemy, yet he did not elaborate further. Only now did Zhang Wuji understand that Yang Xiao felt Xiao Zhao's appearance looked very much like Zi Shan Long Wang; only he did not have any other evidence. Besides, Zhang Wuji was

protective toward her, thus it was inconvenient for Yang Xiao to accuse her blatantly. Now it also became clear to him why Xiao Zhao deliberately twisted her mouth and made her nose crooked, painstakingly pretended to be an ugly girl.

Suddenly he recalled another matter, “Why did Xiao Zhao roam around the Brightness Peak? How did she know the entrance to the secret passage? I am sure it was Zi Shan Long Wang who ordered her to go there; obviously with the intention to steal the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual. She became my servant and has already been by my side for two years, and I have never suspected her. She had seen the manual; hereafter, if she want to write a copy, it would be as easy as taking something out of her own pocket. Aiyo! I only knew she was an innocent young girl; who would have expected that she is a shrewd schemer. These past two years were like a dream to me, I was constantly under her mercy without even realizing it. Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, in all your life you always believe others too easily, that was very stupid! Indeed, even a little girl like her was able to play with me on her palm.”

Thinking to this point, he could not help but feel angry. Right at that moment, Xiao Zhao’s eyes met with his. Zhang Wuji saw that her gaze was tender with unbounded passion, without any hint of pretense in it. His heart was shaken; he remembered how on the Brightness Peak, when he was battling the Six Major Sects, Xiao Zhao had protected him without any regard of her own safety, how during these two years she had ironed his clothes and taken good care of his daily needs. Could those actions be faked? Or could it be that he had accused her unjustly? While he was busy with his thoughts, the ship shook again and sank down quite a bit more.

“Zhang Jiaozhu,” Taj-kis said, “All of you do not need to

panic. When the Persian ships arrive, Xiao Zhao and I will deal with them. Zi Shan Long Wang is only a woman, but she knows how to be responsible of her own actions; in no way she would implicate others. Zhang Jiaozhu and Xie San Ge have shown kindness as heavy as a mountain to me; Taj-kis herewith expresses her gratitude to you.” While saying that, she gracefully bowed to the ground.

Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun hastily returned her respects; each of them thinking, “These Persians are evil and cruel; they are going to capture you and burn you to death, and will certainly not let us go.”

The ship gradually sank down; the water had reached the cabin. Zhang Wuji carried Yin Li, and Zhou Zhiruo carried Zhao Min, they all climbed up the mast. Suddenly Xiao Zhao pointed her finger to the east and broke into crying again. Everybody turned their eyes to follow her finger, and saw in the distant some sails on the surface of the ocean. Before long, the sails grew bigger and bigger; they were indeed a dozen or so big Persian ships coming to pursue them.

Zhang Wuji thought, “If I were Taj-kis, I’d rather jump into the ocean and die rather than suffering the pain of being burned alive.” But when he looked at her, her expression was calm, she hardly showed any anxiety or fear; he had to admit his admiration, “She was the chief of the Si Da Fa Wang [Four Great Judge – see my notes earlier on ‘hu jiao fa wang’]; she is truly an extraordinary lady. To think that in the past, Yi Wang, Shi Wang and Fu Wang [eagle, lion and bat kings] have already achieved fame as senior heroes, while she was just a teenage girl; for her to be ranked above the three kings, it could not be just because of one time merit she rendered. She must have had some other quality, which surpassed other people.”

Seeing the Persian ships gradually come near, he thought, "My offense toward the Bao Shu Wang [Precious Tree Kings] is not small, if I fall into their hands, I might as well forget about escaping alive. Only I have to find a way to save Yifu, Miss Zhao, Miss Zhou, and cousin. Xiao Zhao, oh, Xiao Zhao, you can betray me, but I cannot treat you unkindly."

By now, a dozen or so Persian ships were within sight; he could see that the cannons on those ships were aimed at the sunken ship's mast. The ships stopped within twenty some 'zhang's from the sunken ship, and they rolled the sail and dropped the anchor right away. He heard Zhihui Wang laugh heartily. He looked very smug when he called out, "Do thou surrender now?"

In a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji replied, "The warriors of the Central Earth would rather die unyielding; how can we surrender? True warriors would contend with martial arts to decide who's strong and who's weak."

Zhihui Wang laughed; "True warriors battle with wits and not with brute force. Hurry up, extend your hands to be bound!"

Taj-kis suddenly spoke several sentences in Persian; her demeanor was stern. Zhi Hui Wang was stunned; he also replied in Persian. Two people asking and answering for a while; Dasheng Wang also joined the conversation. After several more exchanges, the big ship released a small boat with eight sailors rowing it, coming near the sunken ship.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Taj-kis said, "Xiao Zhao and I will go over there first, please wait for us here for a moment."

"Mrs. Han," in a stern voice Xie Xun said, "The Central Earth Ming Cult's treatment to you was not bad. Our Cult's safety and danger, its prosperity or fall, is on Wuji's shoulder alone."

If you betray us, the Old Xie won't show any compassion. If you harm a single strand of Wuji's hair, even becoming a ghost the Old Xie will not spare you."

With a cold laugh Taj-kis said, "If your foster child is so precious, do you think my daughter is merely dirt?" While saying that she took Xiao Zhao's hand and lightly jumped into the small boat. The eight sailors immediately rowed; the small boat sailed as if it was flying toward the big ship.

Listening to her words, everybody was startled. "Xiao Zhao is indeed her daughter," Zhao Min said.

From a distance they saw Taj-kis and Xiao Zhao board the ship and talk with the Precious Tree Kings; while their own ship was sinking. The mast went into the water inch by inch. Xie Xun sighed and said, "Different people, different hearts. Wuji Child, I am mistaken about Mrs. Han, and you are mistaken about Xiao Zhao. Wuji, a real man can be bent and can be stretched; we will endure disgrace for a while, waiting for a good opportunity to escape. You bear a very heavy responsibility on your shoulders, millions of common people of the Central Plains place their hopes in our Ming Cult to lift the banner of righteousness high and to repel the Tartars. When the opportunity comes, you'll have to escape, you cannot think others. You are the leader of a great Cult, you must be able to distinguish the important from the trivial."

Zhang Wuji hesitated without answering. "Pei!" Zhao Min spat and said, "It is still questionable whether you will stay alive, yet you worry about Tartars. Tell me, which one is better, the Mongolians or the Persians?"

Zhou Zhiruo had always been silent, but now suddenly she opened her mouth, "Xiao Zhao loves Zhang Gongzi very

much, she won't betray him."

"Didn't you see Zi Shan Long Wang coercing her?" Zhao Min said, "Xiao Zhao was not willing, but later the pressure was getting unbearable that in the end she relented, but still pretended to cry loudly."

By this time, the mast was only about a 'zhang' [about 10 feet or 3 meters] away from the water, the waves splashed and made everybody's face wet. Zhao Min suddenly laughed and said, "Zhang Gongzi, it is so neat that we are going to die together. That traitor Xiao Zhao, on the contrary, cannot die with us."

These words were spoken jokingly, but the meaning was deep. Zhang Wuji was really touched; he said in his heart, "I cannot take them all as my wives, but if I can die together with them, then my life is not in vain." He looked at Zhao Min, then looked at Zhou Zhiruo, and also looked at Yin Li in his embrace. Yin Li was still unconscious, while Zhao and Zhou two girls were blushing, with drops of water on their faces. They looked as beautiful as fresh flowers; if the Zhao girl could be likened to a rose, then the Zhou girl was an orchid. His heart was filled with warm and fuzzy feelings.

Suddenly, the Persians on a dozen or so ships shouted together. Zhang Wuji and the others were startled; they focused their eyes to look. They saw the people on each ship were kneeling down on the decks; they were bowing toward the big ship. On the big ship, all the Precious Tree Kings were also bowing toward someone sitting on a chair, whose features looked like Xiao Zhao's. Only the distance was too far that they were not able to see clearly.

Zhang Wuji and the others were alarmed and unsure of what trick these Persians were about to do. After shouting for a

while, the Persians stood up, but the sound of shouting did not stop; however, the shout was obviously a shout of joy, as if they were happily celebrating something. A moment later, the small boat returned with Xiao Zhao on board, sitting majestically.

“Zhang Gongzi, everybody,” she waved, “Let us go to the big ship. The Persian Ming Cult will not dare to harm you.”

“Why?” Zhao Min asked.

“You will find out later,” Xiao Zhao replied, “How could Xiao Zhao answer Zhang Gongzi if they still have ill intention toward you?”

“Xiao Zhao,” suddenly Xie Xun asked, “Did you become the Persian Ming Cult’s Jiaozhu?”

Xiao Zhao lowered her head without answering, but a moment later two drops of crystal-clear tears suddenly hang from her eyes. All of a sudden Zhang Wuji’s ears buzzed, because he had guessed with 70, 80% certainty what was happening; his heart was grieved but also full of gratitude.

“Xiao Zhao,” he said, “You did this because of me!” Xiao Zhao turned her head to the side, she did not dare to meet his eyes.

Xie Xun sighed and said, “To have a daughter like you, Tajik is truly worthy to bear the illustrious name of Zi Shan Long Wang. Wuji, let’s go.”

He was the first to jump into the small boat, followed by Zhou Zhiruo carrying Yin Li and Zhang Wuji with Zhao Min in his arms. The eight sailors immediately rowed the boat toward the big ship.

When they were still more than ten 'zhang's away from the big ship, the Precious Tree Kings had already bowed to welcome their Cult Leader.

As they came aboard the big ship, Xiao Zhao gave her orders and immediately several people respectfully presented them with towels and food, and they were led to a cabin to change their wet clothes.

Zhang Wuji saw his cabin was very spacious. The room was illuminated by pearl and jewels; and it was furnished with countless precious objects. He was just about to dry his body with a towel when suddenly with a creaking noise the door was opened and somebody came in. It was Xiao Zhao, with a set of short shirt and pants, and a long robe in her hands.

"Gongzi," she said, "Let me help you change your clothes."

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. "Xiao Zhao," he said, "You are the Central Cult's Jiaozhu. Technically, I am your subordinate. How can you do this anymore?"

"Gongzi," Xiao Zhao begged him, "This is for the last time. Hereafter, we will be separated by tens of thousands 'li's from east to west. Our time is limited. After this time, even if I want to serve you, I cannot."

Zhang Wuji was heartbroken; he had no choice but to let her help him change his clothes, button his shirt, and tie his belt, just like she used to do. She also took a comb and combed his hair, all the while tears were streaming down her cheeks. Zhang Wuji could not restrain himself much longer; he turned around and hugged her petite stature in his bosom.

“Ah,” Xiao Zhao exclaimed softly, her body trembled slightly.

Zhang Wuji planted a deep kiss on her cherry lips. “Xiao Zhao,” he said, “At first I thought you were betraying me; I had never expected you to treat me this good.”

Xiao Zhao leaned her head on his broad chest. She whispered, “Gongzi, I did lie to you. My Mama was one of the Central Cult’s three Holy Maidens. She received an order to come to the Central Earth to set up a merit, so that when she returns to Persia, she would take over the Jiaozhu position. Unexpectedly, after meeting my Father her feelings were difficult to suppress, hence she had no choice but to commit apostasy and marry my Father. Mama knew she was guilty of a capital crime; thereupon she passed on the Holy Maiden’s seven-color gem ring to me, told me to go among the Brightness Peak people and try to steal the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual. Gongzi, I continuously concealed these things from you, but in my heart, I have never had any ill intention towards you. I would rather be your servant, serving you for the rest of my life, and never leave you, than being the Jiaozhu of the Persian Ming Cult. I have told you that haven’t I? And you have promised you would let me do that, haven’t you?”

Zhang Wuji nodded; he held her gentle body and sat her on his knees, and he kissed her again and again. Her warm and soft lips were wet with tears; they tasted sweet as honey, yet also bitter from pain.

Xiao Zhao continued, “I have memorized the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi manual, but that was not because I wanted to betray you. I would never have divulged this information if the mountains were not exhausted and the rivers used up ...”

“I know,” Zhang Wuji softly said, “I understand everything

now.”

As if she was talking to herself, Xiao Zhao said in a soft voice, “When I was little, I often saw Mama was restless and frightened, day and night. She covered up her fine appearance by pretending to be an old and ugly granny. She would not allow me to be seen with her; she let another family raise me up, and would only see me every one or two years. Only now do I understand that she braved this great danger just to be married with my Father. Gongzi, if not for the situation we were in today, I would not be willing to be the empress of this whole world, let alone be a cult leader.”

Speaking to this point, her cheeks were fiery red. Zhang Wuji felt the tender body in his embrace go warmer; his heart was moved, but suddenly Taj-kis’ voice was heard from outside the door, “Xiao Zhao, if you cannot restrain your passion, you are endangering Zhang Gongzi’s life.”

Xiao Zhao trembled and jumped up. “Gongzi,” she said, “You should forget me. Miss Yin has followed Mother [here the original word was ‘mu qin’, a formal term for ‘mother’, while before, she used the term ‘Mama’] for many years, she is also passionately devoted to you; she will be a good match to you.”

In a low voice Zhang Wuji said, “We’ll break out and kill, capture one or two Bao Shu Wang, and force them to take us to the Ling She Island.”

Xiao Zhao sadly shook her head, “This time they are ready; at this very moment, there are Persians with unsheathed blades standing by Xie Daxia, Miss Yin and the others. As soon as we make our move, they will be killed immediately.” While saying that she opened the cabin door. They saw Taj-kis was standing by the door, with two Persians wielding

swords standing behind her. Those two Persians bowed toward Xiao Zhao, but their swords did not leave Taj-kis' back.

Fearlessly Xiao Zhao walked up the deck, with Zhang Wuji following behind her. They saw Xie Xun and the others, each one with Persian warrior by their side, wielding a naked blade.

"Gongzi," Xiao Zhao said, "Here is some Persian medicine, effective to treat wounds; please apply it to Miss Yin." She then spoke several sentences in Persian. Gongde Wang took a bottle of medicine and handed it over to Zhang Wuji.

"I have ordered some people to take you back to the Central Earth; we'll part here," Xiao Zhao continued, "Xiao Zhao's body will be in Persia, but every day my prayer is that Gongzi will have happiness, good health, and peace; and that everything you do will be successful." Speaking to this point she choked and started crying.

"You will be living among the tigers and the wolves," Zhang Wuji said, "Please be careful." Xiao Zhao nodded and ordered her people to prepare a ship.

Xie Xun, Yin Li, Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo boarded the ship one by one. Xiao Zhao returned the Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword to Zhang Wuji. With a bitter smile she raised her hand to bid them farewell.

Zhang Wuji did not know what to say; he stared blankly at her for a moment before finally he leaped into the ship. The big ship Xiao Zhao was riding sounded its horn. Both ships set sail at the same time, the distance between them gradually increased. Xiao Zhao was standing on the bow, her eyes fixed on Zhang Wuji's ship. Two people looked at each

other while the sea between them got wider and wider. Finally, Xiao Zhao's ship was only a black dot on the dark blue sea. The strong wind from afar blew on the sail, faintly carrying the sound of soft crying.

End of Chapter 30.

Yi Tian Tu Long Ji

(Heavenly Sword Dragon Slaying Saber)

by Jin Yong

倚天屠龍記



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Table of Contents

[Chapter 31 – Saber and Sword Lost, People Perish](#)

[Chapter 32 – Ignorant Grievance, Vain Anxiety, Conceited Desire](#)

[\(Translated by Foxs, Edited by](#)

[Chapter 33 – Long Flute, Short Zither, Flowing Yellow Clothes](#)

[Chapter 34 – The Bride Tore the Red Dress Barehanded](#)

[Chapter 35 – Casualties of the Lion-slaying Assembly](#)

[Chapter 36 – The Three Withered Pine-trees Sprouting Green Leaves](#)

[Chapter 37 – No Hero Under the Heavens Able to Withstand](#)

[Chapter 38 – A Gentleman is Vulnerable to Deceit](#)

[Chapter 39 – The Hidden Military Strategy Manual](#)

[Chapter 40 – Didn't Know This Zhang Fellow was The Mr. Zhang](#)

Chapter 31 - Saber and Sword Lost, People Perish

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhou Zhiruo said, "What if I wrong you or offend you, will you hit me, scold me, kill me?"

Zhang Wuji kissed her left cheek gently while saying, "You are such a gentle and cultured lady, a dignified, worthy, warm and virtuous wife; how can you make a mistake?"

Even after the Persian medication was applied, Yin Li's high fever did not subside; she kept talking in her sleep incessantly. During these past several days on the sea, she had been exposed to cold weather on top of her sickness. The medication was only for external wound, it was not effective to treat internal injury, or even a common cold. Zhang Wuji was very anxious. Toward the afternoon of the third day, he saw a small island in the distant to their east. He instructed the sailor to take them to that island.

Once they were ashore, their spirits lifted up. The island's circumference was no more than several 'li's; and it was covered with shrubs and short trees. Zhang Wuji asked Zhou Zhiruo to look after Yin Li and Zhao Min, while he went around looking for some medicinal herbs. However, the flora on that island was greatly different from the one in the Central Earth that Zhang Wuji did not recognize most of them. He walked farther and farther away without any result until the sky gradually turned dark, he had no choice but to return to their original position. He mashed whatever herbs he could find and fed them to Yin Li.

Six people gathered around the fire, eating and drinking. The air was heavy with the fragrance of the flowers and the freshness of the grass and the forest. It was quite different surroundings from the cramped cabin.

Yin Li was also in good spirits. "Ah Niu Gege," she said, "Why don't we spend the night here, and not return to the ship?"

They discussed her proposal and decided that it was a wonderful idea. They saw the water on that small island was warm and clear, also, there were no wild beasts around; everyone went to sleep peacefully.

As Zhang Wuji woke up early the next morning, he got up and took a step, but he staggered and almost fell down. He felt his legs were weak, which was quite unusual. He rubbed his eyes and saw the Persian ship was gone. His heart skipped a beat. Rushing to the shore he looked around without seeing any trace of the ship. This time he was really shocked.

“Yifu,” he called out, “Are you all right?” But Xie Xun did not answer. Hastily Zhang Wuji ran to the place Xie Xun slept and saw he was still asleep peacefully, which took most of his anxiety away.

The previous night, Zhao Min, Zhou Zhiruo and Yin Li went to sleep behind a large rock some distance away. He rushed to take a look, and saw Zhou Zhiruo and Yin Li were still sleeping side by side; but Zhao Min was nowhere to be seen.

In a glance he noticed that Yin Li’s face was full of blood. Stooping down to look closer, Zhang Wuji saw there were more than a dozen sharp blade cuts on her face, but she stayed unconscious. Hastily he reached out to check her pulse and was relieved when he felt faint pulses. Turning his attention toward Zhou Zhiruo, he saw that a large clump of her beautiful hair was cut, along with a piece of her left ear. Her blood had not congealed yet, but her face was smiling, as if she was having a happy dream. Under the light of the dawn, she looked like a sleeping hypericum in the spring; extremely tender and beautiful. His heart was painful as he called out, “Miss Zhou, Miss Zhou, wake up!”

Zhou Zhiruo stirred, but did not wake up. Zhang Wuji gently shook her shoulder and finally Zhou Zhiruo yawned and turned around, but she was still asleep. Zhang Wuji knew she must be drugged. There were too many strange things that happened the previous night; he fell into a deep sleep and this morning he felt weak and tired. He was certain that they were drugged.

After calling Zhou Zhiruo for a while without any result, he rushed back to Xie Xun and called out, "Yifu, Yifu!"

Xie Xun sat up in daze, "What is it?" he asked.

"It's terrible!" Zhang Wuji said, "We have fallen into a sinister plot." Briefly he told him about the missing Persian ship and the cuts suffered by Yin Li and Zhou Zhiruo.

"What about Miss Zhao?" Xie Xun asked in alarm.

"I did not see her," Zhang Wuji grimly said. Taking a deep breath, he tried to circulate his internal energy, but felt that his limbs were devoid of any strength; he could not transmit his energy at all. "Yifu," he blurted out, "We are poisoned by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' [ten fragrance muscle softener powder]."

Xie Xun had heard Zhang Wuji's narration on how the masters of the Six Major Sects were poisoned by Zhao Min with 'shi xiang ruan jin san' and how they were held captive in the Wan An Temple. He stood up and felt as if he was floating; as his legs were devoid of any strength. Calming himself down, he asked, "Did she take away the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword as well?"

Zhang Wuji looked around and sure enough, he did not see either the Saber or the Sword. He was so enraged that he

almost cried. Never would he imagine that Zhao Min was capable of doing this, taking advantage when he was in grave danger and employed such a sinister plot when he was down.

He was lost in thought for a moment. Then he remembered Yin Li and hastily went back to where Yin and Zhou, two women were sleeping. He pushed Zhou Zhiruo aside, but she was still fast asleep. He thought, "My internal energy is the deepest, hence I was the first to wake up. Yifu was next. Miss Zhou's internal energy is far below ours. It looks like she won't wake up for a while yet." Immediately he ripped a piece of his clothes to wipe the blood from Yin Li's oval face. He saw seven horizontal and eight vertical thin cuts crisscrossing her cheeks. Apparently, she was cut by the Yitian Sword.

Yin Li had lost a lot of blood after being injured by Zi Shan Long Wang Jin Hua Popo. As a result, the poison of the thousand spiders accumulated in her blood was also dispersed along with her blood, causing the swelling on her face to subside considerably. Hence, for these last several days, her face had slightly returned to its former look; the pretty look Yin Li had when she was younger. But right now, with these dozen of cuts, her face looked severely fearsome.

Zhang Wuji was both grieved and angry. Gnashing his teeth he said, "Zhao Min, oh, Zhao Min, if you fall into my hand and I spare you, then Zhang Wuji has lived in vain." Calming himself down he went to the hillside to gather some medicinal herbs to stop the bleeding. He chewed the herbs and applied it on Yin Li's face, also on Zhou Zhiruo's scalp and ear.

Zhou Zhiruo yawned and opened her eyes. Suddenly she saw Zhang Wuji was reaching out and groping her head. Her face

turned red from shyness. Reaching up to shove his arm away, she angrily said, "You ... what are you ..." Before finished speaking, she had felt the pain on her ear. Immediately she touched her ear and cried out, "Ah!" and jumped to stand up. "What ...?" she said, but suddenly she felt her knees weaken and she fell into Zhang Wuji's bosom.

Zhang Wuji reached out to support her. "Miss Zhou," he comfortingly said, "Don't be afraid."

Seeing Yin Li's terrifying face, Zhou Zhiruo hastily lifted up her hand to touch her own face and asked in fear, "I ... Am I also ...?"

"No!" Zhang Wuji said, "You only suffer some minor wounds."

"Did those evil Persians do this? I ... Why didn't I feel anything?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji sighed and quietly said, "I am afraid ... I am afraid Miss Zhao did this. She poisoned our food and drink last night."

Zhou Zhiruo stared blankly for half a day. She stroked what remained of her ear and broke into tears. Zhang Wuji tried to console her, "You are lucky that the injury is not heavy. Your ear is damaged, but you can always put your hair down to cover it, others won't be able to see."

"Still talking about hair?" Zhou Zhiruo snapped, "My hair is also gone."

Zhang Wuji said, "You only lost some on top of your head; if you arrange the hair on both sides of your head ..."

"Why do I want to arrange the hair on both sides of my

head?” Zhou Zhiruo angrily said, “Up this moment you are still trying to protect your Miss Zhao.”

This time Zhang Wuji bumped into a wall; he did not know what to say, so he became defensive, “I am not trying to protect her! She is cruel and merciless, harming Miss Yin this way. I ... I am not going to forgive her.” Looking at Yin Li’s face, he could not hold tears from coming down his eyes.

Facing this situation Zhang Wuji was at a loss; he sat down and tried to circulate his internal energy, and he realized that the degree of his poisoning was not shallow. Actually, the ‘shi xiang ruan jin san’ could only be neutralized by the antidote from Zhao Min’s faction; but this time he tried to disperse the poison relying on his profound internal strength. Slowly he pushed the poison from his four limbs, condensed it into his ‘dan tian’, and then bit by bit he forced the poison out of his system.

After working hard for almost two hours, he felt that his effort had brought the desired effect. He was optimistic. Only, this technique required him to have the Jiu Yang Shen Gong foundation, which ruled out the possibility of him teaching it to Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo. He was hoping that after the poison in his system was flushed completely, he would be able to help Xie and Zhou two people driving the poison out of their systems.

This technique sounded simple, yet actually extremely complicated. Toward the afternoon of the seventh day, he only managed to drive out approximately 30% of the poison. Fortunately, this poison only prevent the victim from exerting their internal energy but harmless to their bodies.

For the first several days Zhou Zhiruo was angry, but afterwards she gradually got used to it. She helped Xie Xun

catching fish and shooting birds, boiling water and cooking their meals. At night she slept alone in a cave on the eastern end of the island, far away from where Zhang Wuji and the others lived.

Zhang Wuji was secretly ashamed, thinking that he was partly responsible for this disaster brought by Zhao Min. This Miss Zhao was obviously a Mongolian princess, an archenemy of his Ming Cult. Countless martial art experts of the Wulin world had fallen under her hands; yet surprisingly he did not guard against her at all. He felt he was so stupid.

Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo did not blame him; they did not even mention this problem to him, but he felt very bad in his heart. Sometimes when Zhou Zhiruo was looking at him, he felt as if she was saying, 'You are blinded by Miss Zhao's beauty, resulting in this great calamity.'

Yin Li's condition was getting worse. This little island was located on the Southern Sea [nan hai], most of the flora was not found in Hu Qingniu's medical manual. His medical knowledge might be profound, he did know perfectly well how to treat Yin Li's condition; but he did not have any medication in his hand. The trees on the island were short and small, barely enough to be used as firewood; otherwise, he would have had built a raft early on and braving the danger he would sail away to the sea. Alternatively, he would not be this anxious if he did not know any medical skill. This time he felt like tens of thousands sharp daggers gouging and cutting his heart day and night.

It was late in the evening one day; he chewed some medicinal herbs to be fed into Yin Li's mouth. This time the herbs entered Yin Li's throat with difficulty. His heart was broken; tears streaming down his face, dropped onto Yin Li's face.

Suddenly Yin Li opened her eyes, smiled faintly and said, "Ah Niu Gege, don't feel bad. I am going to the underworld to see that heartless, short-lived little rascal Zhang Wuji. I want to tell him that in this world there is an Ah Niu Gege who treats me this well; who is a thousand times, ten thousand times better than Zhang Wuji."

Zhang Wuji's throat choked; in that moment he was contemplating whether he should reveal to her that he was Zhang Wuji.

Yin Li grabbed his hand and said, "Ah Niu Gege, I have never agreed to marry you, do you hate me? I think you are lying to me because you only want to make me happy. I am ugly, my temperament is strange, why would you want to marry me?"

"No!" Zhang Wuji said, "I am not lying you. You are a good and kind-hearted girl. I consider myself lucky if I can take you as my wife. Why don't we wait until you are well, all things are settled, and then we can get married? What do you say?"

Yin Li reached out and gently caressed his cheek. Shaking her head she said, "Ah Niu Gege, I cannot marry you. I have given my heart early on to that ferocious heartless Zhang Wuji ... Ah Niu Gege, I am a little bit scared; will I meet him when I get to the underworld? Will he still be hateful towards me?"

Zhang Wuji realized she was speaking clearly, her cheeks were red; he was inwardly alarmed, "This is the symptom of the last ray of light, could it be that she is going to die today?" He was lost I thought that he did not hear what she said. Yin Li grabbed his hand and asked him again. Zhang Wuji tenderly said, "He will forever treat you well, as if you are his precious darling."

“Will he treat me half as good as you did?” Yin Li asked.

“Heaven is my witness,” Zhang Wuji said, “Zhang Wuji eagerly and sincerely loves you with all his heart. He has early on regretted that when he was little he treated you cruelly. He ... his feelings toward you are exactly the same as mine; there is not the least bit distinction.”

Yin Li sighed; a smile appeared on the corners of her mouth. “Then ...” she said, “Then I am happy ...” Her grip on his hand gradually loosened, her eyes slowly closed, finally she stopped breathing.

Zhang Wuji hugged her body tight, thinking that until the moment she died, she did not know that he was Zhang Wuji. All these times she had been losing her consciousness that he was unable to reveal the truth to her. Just before her death, when her consciousness was very clear, there was not enough time to talk. Actually, things had come this far, it really did not make any difference whether he revealed the truth or not. His heart was so much in pain that he cried without making any sound. He thought, “If Zhao Min did not cut her cheeks, her injury might not necessarily be incurable. If Zhao Min did not abandon us on this deserted island, we would have reached the Central Plains [zhong yuan] in a few days; surely I would have found a way to save her life.” Bitterly he muttered, “Zhao Min, your heart is like a serpent and scorpion. There will come a day when you will fall into my hand. Zhang Wuji will not spare your life in any way.”

Suddenly he heard a cold voice behind him, “When you see her beautiful, jade-like face, you won’t have a heart to do anything to her.” Turning around, he saw Zhou Zhiruo was standing in the breeze, her face showed contempt.

Zhang Wuji was grieved and ashamed at the same time; he

said, "I have made a vow by my cousin's body, if I do not punish that witch, Zhang Wuji won't have a face to live on this world."

"That would be the spirited pledge of a real man," Zhou Zhiruo said. She rushed a few steps forward and wept bitterly while stroking Yin Li's body.

Xie Xun also heard the noise of crying and went over. As he learned about Yin Li's death, he could not help but feel heartbroken.

Zhang Wuji went to a small hill to dig Yin Li's grave. The soil on that island was so shallow that he only dug for about two feet, and had already met hard rocks underneath. He did not have any shovel, so he had no choice but lay Yin Li's body in that shallow hole. He was about to heap dirt on her when he saw the blood traces on her swollen face; he thought, "Gravel and dirt piled on her face might scratch her." Thereupon he took some branches and weaved them above her body, then he carefully piled stones and rocks on top of the branches, as if she was still alive and he was afraid the stones might hurt her.

Finally, he cut a tree trunk, peeled the bark, and then using Yin Li's dagger he carved these words on it: 'The Tomb of my Beloved Wife, Zhu'Er Yin Li' and below it he wrote: 'Zhang Wuji Sincerely Stated'.

Everything was ready so at last he threw himself down and cried loudly. Zhou Zhiruo consoled him, "Miss Yin's feelings toward you were so deep and you also have showed her profound kindness. Only, do not forget what you have sworn today: you must kill Zhao Min to avenge her death; then Yin Jia Meizi [lit. (younger) sister of the Yin family] in the underworld will also smile."

Due to his intense grief, the poison that had been concentrated in Zhang Wuji's 'dan tian' [pubic region] was dispersed once again, wasting his several days' worth of effort. As a result, he had to work hard for more than ten days to gradually condense the poison and expel it out of his system.

The weather on that small island was sizzling hot; but it had plenty of wild fruits, which they could pick without any trouble to satisfy their hunger, so their lives were not terribly difficult. Zhou Zhiruo was aware that Zhang Wuji was grieved over Yin Li's death, angered over Zhao Min's craftiness, and regretted Xiao Zhao's departure; so she treated him gently with consideration.

After Zhang Wuji transferred his divine internal energy to help Xie Xun expel the poison in his body, he should have done the same to help Zhou Zhiruo driving the poison out of her body. But this method of transferring energy required him to put one palm on her lower waist, and the other palm on the navel above her lower abdomen; how could a young man and a young woman touch each other in such intimate places? Yet without transferring his Nine Yang Divine Energy, how could he help her? He contemplated for several days without being able to make any decision.

That particular evening Xie Xun suddenly said, "Wuji, how many more days do you think we are going to stay on this island?"

Zhang Wuji was startled. "That is hard to say," he said, "I just hope there will be a ship sailing by and rescue us and take us back to the Central Earth."

"We have been here for more than a month," Xie Xun said, "Have you seen any shadow of a ship even from a distant?"

"I have not," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Exactly," Xie Xun said, "Perhaps tomorrow there will be a ship coming by, but then again, perhaps there will never be any ship passing by in a hundred years."

Zhang Wuji sighed, "This uncultivated island is outside the sailing route of the ocean ships; whether or not we can return to the Central Earth, is extremely uncertain."

"Hmm," Xie Xun said, "The antidote is hard to come by. Other than weakening the four limbs, if the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' remains in the body, does it have any other adverse effect?"

"If it is not too long, then there is no adverse effect," Zhang Wuji said, "But this kind of poison invades the muscle and erodes the bones; if it stays in the body too long, all the internal organs would unavoidably receive some damages."

"That's so," Xie Xun said, "Then why don't you think of some way to expel the poison from Miss Zhou's body as soon as possible? You said Miss Zhou and you have known each other since your childhood. At that time 'xuan ming han du' [the cold poison of Xuan Ming palm] was still inside your body, and she had shown kindness to you. Where else would you find gentle and virtuous woman like her? Could it be that you don't like her because she is not beautiful enough?"

"No, no," Zhang Wuji said, "If Miss Zhou is not beautiful then there is no beautiful women in the world."

"Let me make the decision for you, then," Xie Xun said, "Marry her. Then you don't need to worry about this man-woman propriety anymore."

Zhou Zhiruo was around when they started talking; suddenly hearing her name being mentioned, she was shy and blushed. She stood up and walked away. Xie Xun leaped and opened up his arms, blocking her way. "Don't go, don't go!" he said with a laugh, "Today I am the matchmaker, and I have made my decision."

"Xie Laoye Zi," Zhou Zhiruo angrily said, "You do not act your age! We are seeking a way to return to the Central Earth; how can you speak such nonsense in time like this?"

Xie Xun laughed heartily. "The joining of a man and a woman is an important matter of a lifetime; why did you say it is nonsense talk? Wuji, your parents were also on a deserted island when they bowed to the heaven and to the earth to become man and wife. If at that time they did not strictly follow the secular propriety and tradition, how in the world would there be a young fellow: you? Much less today you have your Yifu presiding at the wedding for you. Don't you like Miss Zhou? Don't you want to repel the poison in her body?"

Zhou Zhiruo covered her face and was about to walk away. Xie Xun pulled her sleeve while laughing, "Where are you going? Don't you think we are going to see each other tomorrow or the next day? Ah, I know! You don't want to call a blind man as your father-in-law."

"No, no, it's not that," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "Xie Laoye Zi is a hero of this age ..."

"Do you agree, then?" Xie Xun asked.

Zhou Zhiruo simply replied, "No, no!"

"You think this Yizi [foster child] of mine is not a good husband material?" Xie Xun asked again.

Zhou Zhiruo was taken aback. “Zhang Gongzi’s martial art skill is unquestionably outstanding, his name is revered within the Jianghu,” she said, “To ... to have him as a husband, what else can I ask for? Only ... only ...”

“Only what?” Xie Xun asked.

Zhou Zhiruo cast a quick glance toward Zhang Wuji and said, “He ... in his heart he really likes Miss Zhao. I know that.”

Xie Xun clenched his teeth. “That lowly person Zhao Min has treated us this cruelly, how can Wuji still persist in his own wrong doing? Wuji, I want to hear it from your own mouth.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was torn; he remembered Zhao Min’s cheerful talks and her touching actions. He felt if he could take Zhao Min as his wife and be with her forever, then that would be his entire’s life happiness. But as he remembered the seven horizontal and eight vertical sword cuts on Yin Li’s face dripping-with-blood, he hastily said, “Miss Zhao is my archenemy. I want to kill her to avenge Biaomei’s [younger female cousin] blood.”

“That’s more like it,” Xie Xun said, “Miss Zhou, are you still jealous?”

In a low voice Zhou Zhiruo said, “I am not convinced, unless ... unless you tell him to make a vow. Otherwise, I’d rather die with poison in me than asking him to help me drive the poison away.”

“Wuji, quickly make a vow!” Xie Xun said.

Zhang Wuji dropped down on his knees and said, “I, Zhang Wuji, if I ever forget Biaomei’s deep hatred, let me not be

forgiven by the Heaven and the Earth.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “I want you to state clearly; what are you going to do to that Miss Zhao?”

“Wuji, state it clearly at once,” Xie Xun said, “What ‘forgiven by the Heaven and the Earth’? Too ambiguous.”

In a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji said, “That witch Zhao Min works for Tartars’ imperial family, makes our people’s live miserable, harms my fellow Wulin warriors, stole my Yifu’s precious Saber, and harmed my Biaomei Yin Li. As long as I live, Zhang Wuji will not dare to forget this deep enmity. If I violate my vow, let the Heaven loathe me, and the Earth curse me.”

Zhou Zhiruo smiled sweetly; she said, “I am afraid when the time comes, you won’t have a heart to make your move.”

“Listen to me,” Xie Xun said, “There is no particular day that is better than any other day. We are Jianghu’s warriors. We don’t fuss over detailed formalities and womenfolk’s mumbo-jumbo. As long as you, two young people, agree, then you can bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married today. The sooner you get rid of this ‘shi xiang ruan jin san’, the better.”

“No! Yifu, Zhiruo, please listen to me,” Zhang Wuji said, “Miss Yin had a very deep feeling toward me; she had always wanted me as her husband since she was young. In my heart I have also regarded her as my wife. Although there was no ceremony, we could be considered husband and wife. Now that her body and her bones are not yet cold, how can I tie another joyous relationship immediately?”

Xie Xun hesitated before saying, “That’s true. What do you

suggest, then?”

“In your child’s opinion,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Child will agree on an engagement with Miss Zhou today, and immediately help her repel the poison from her body; this will be much more convenient. Supposing the Heaven granted us returning to the Central Earth someday, Child will put Zhao Min to the blade and recapture the Tulong Saber, and return it to Yifu. At that time the marriage with Miss Zhou can be consummated. That way we satisfy both sides.”

Xie Xun laughed and said, “That sounds very good; but what if within ten years, eight years, we still are not able to return to the Central Earth?”

Zhang Wuji said, “After three years, no matter whether we can leave this island or not, Child will ask Yifu to preside over our marriage.”

Xie Xun nodded and asked Zhou Zhiruo, “Miss Zhou, what do you say?”

Zhou Zhiruo lowered her head without answering. After half a day she finally said, “I am a lone orphan, what idea do I have? I’ll leave everything on Laoye Zi’s hand.”

Xie Xun laughed heartily and said, “Very good! Very good! It’s settled. You two are engaged. No need to worry about custom and tradition. Wuji, drive the poison from my daughter-in-law away.” After saying this he walked toward the back of the hill in big strides.

“Zhiruo,” Zhang Wuji said, “That difficulty was caused by me, can you forgive me?”

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, “Because I am ugly, you tried

to refuse in every possible way. If it was Miss Zhao, I am afraid tonight you would have..." Speaking to this point, she turned her head around as she felt uncomfortable to continue.

Zhang Wuji's heart skipped a beat as he thought, "When we were adrift on that small boat, I was foolishly and presumptuously thinking of marrying four beauties. Actually the one my heart really loves is that won't-stop-at-any-crime, evil-and-sly little witch. People call me a hero in vain; in my heart I cannot differentiate good from evil, easily infatuated by a pretty face."

Zhou Zhiruo turned her head back. Seeing he was lost in thought as if in a trance, she stood up to walk away. Zhang Wuji reached out to grab her hand and pulled her down. Unexpectedly Zhou Zhiruo's internal energy was gone; her feet were weak. She staggered and stumbled back into Zhang Wuji's bosom. After struggling hopelessly, she angrily said, "Must you bully me for my whole life?"

Seeing her frowning and a bit angry, Zhang Wuji's heart was touched; he hugged her tender and soft body and said in a low voice, "Zhiruo, when we met on the River Han when we were both little, I have never imagined there will come a day like today. On the Brightness Peak I was alone facing four elders from Kunlun and Huashan, two sects; you gave me directions and saved my life. At that time I appreciated your loving care to me, but I did not dare to have any absurd thoughts."

Leaning on his bosom, Zhou Zhiruo said, "That day I stabbed you with a sword, don't you hate me?"
"You did not stab me on the chest," Zhang Wuji replied, "That's why I knew that you secretly have a feeling toward me."

“Pei!” Zhou Zhiruo spat, her cheeks blushed, she said, “If I knew early on that you are going to say that, I’d stab your chest, kill you neat and clean, so I’d avoid being bullied by you later on, listening to your nonsense.”

Zhang Wuji embraced her tighter and said, “Hereafter my love to you will be doubled or tripled, we are husband and wife, two people one body; how can I mistreat you?”

Zhou Zhiruo leaned some more to look at his face; she said, “What if I wrong you or offend you, will you hit me, scold me, kill me?”

Zhang Wuji’s face was only several inches apart from her egg shaped face, he felt her breath was like an orchid; he could not restrain from kissing her left cheek gently while saying, “You are such a gentle and cultured lady, a dignified, worthy, warm and virtuous wife; how can you make a mistake?”

Zhou Zhiruo gently caressed the back of his neck. “Even a saint erred,” she said, “Since I was little I had never had a father and a mother to instruct me. It would be difficult not to mess up sometimes.”

“Whatever your mistake is, I can advise you nicely,” Zhang Wuji said.

“Will you always be faithful to me?” Zhou Zhiruo asked, “Are you sure you won’t ever kill me?”

Zhang Wuji kissed her gently on her forehead; “Don’t have absurd ideas,” he said in a tender voice, “How can there be such thing?”

With a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, “I want you to

promise me with your own mouth.”

“All right!” Zhang Wuji laughed, “I will always be faithful to you. I won’t ever kill you.”

Staring at his eyes, Zhou Zhiruo said, “I don’t want you to joke around. I want you to take this seriously.”

Zhang Wuji laughed, “I wonder how many weird thoughts are in this small head of yours?” he said, while thinking in his heart, “Because I have shown feeling towards Zhao Min, Xiao Zhao and Biaomei that it is difficult for her to trust me. But from now on, how can there be this matter?” Thereupon he wiped the smile from his face and solemnly said, “Zhiruo, you are my beloved wife. Formerly I was double-minded [lit. three hearts two intentions]. I hope you won’t blame my past. From now on, I will always be faithful to you. Even if you make any mistake, I won’t blame you or scold you.”

“Wuji Gege [big brother Wuji],” Zhou Zhiruo said, “You are a real man; you must remember your own words to me tonight.” Looking at the rising bright moon she said, “The moon in the sky is our witness.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji said, “You are totally correct, the moon in the sky is our witness.” Still holding Zhou Zhiruo in his bosom, he looked at the bright moon on the horizon and said, “Zhiruo, all my life I have suffered a lot because of other people’s deceits, I don’t know the amount of pain I have endured since my childhood; I lost track already. It was only on the Binghuo [ice and fire] Island, when I was with Father, Mother and Yifu, that I enjoyed peace without falling into other people’s deceitful schemes. The first time I arrived at the Central Plains [zhong yuan], I met with a beggar with a snake. He deceived me into poking my head into his sack to take a closer look; unexpectedly he covered the sack over my

head and kidnapped me. How could I guess that after going through life and death situation together, sharing the same trials and tribulations; on the very first night we arrived on this little island, Zhao Min has put violent poison in our food?"

Forcing a smile Zhou Zhiruo said, "You are a 'will-not-stop-until-you-reach-the-Yellow-River' type of person; but by the time you reach the Yellow River, it is too late to regret." [Translator's note: I know that I translated this passage rather literally; but I believe the readers will appreciate the imagery of the original sentence.]

Suddenly Zhang Wuji's heart was overwhelmed with happiness. "Zhiruo," he said, "You are the only one who has always loved me. You always treated me kindly. Someday when we return to the Central Plains, you will stay by my side and help me guard against lowly people's craftiness and deceits. With a worthy wife like you to help me, I can be spared of many hardships."

Zhou Zhiruo shook her head. "I am the most useless woman," she said, "I am weak and incapable, plus I am dumb. Let's not talk about the extremely smart Miss Zhao, whose intelligence compared to mine is as far as the heaven from the earth; I don't have any chance against Xiao Zhao, who possesses such a profound understanding in her heart. Your Miss Zhou is a naïve and dim-witted little girl; don't you know it by now?"

"You are an honest and considerate, intelligent and virtuous girl," Zhang Wuji said, "You will not deceive me."

Zhou Zhiruo turned around and hid her face in his bosom. "Wuji Gege," she said in tender voice, "To be able to marry you, my delight is unspeakable. I only hope you won't belittle

me because I am stupid and useless, and bully me because I am unworthy. I ... I will do my best to take care of you.”

The next day Zhang Wuji used the Jiu Yang Shen Gong to help Zhou Zhiruo expel the poison. At first they made a good progress; perhaps because she did not eat too much, her level of poisoning was not as severe as Xie Xun. However, toward the seventh day, suddenly he felt a resistance, which was ‘yin’ [negative/female] and cold in nature, coming from her body, fighting his Jiu Yang energy. Although Zhou Zhiruo strived to control this resistance, it was difficult for the Jiu Yang energy to enter her body. In his astonishment Zhang Wuji went to consult Xie Xun.

Xie Xun pondered for half a day before saying, “I don’t know for sure, but most likely it was because her Emei Pai’s masters were always women, the internal energy they train is ‘yin rou’ [negative/female, and soft/flexible] in nature.”

Zhang Wuji nodded his agreement. Luckily Zhou Zhiruo’s internal energy level was far below his, so that he was able to suppress the resisting ‘yin’ energy in her body; but by doing this he was required to use up a lot more energy than when he was helping Xie Xun. Zhang Wuji secretly felt that although at this moment her ‘yin’ energy was still weak, but her achievement in the future would not be a small matter.

“Zhiruo,” he praised, “Zunshi [revered master] Miejue Shitai was truly an expert of her generation. The internal energy cultivation method she passed on to you is extremely profound; I can feel it even now. If you train diligently, your energy level may run neck to neck with my Jiu Yang Shen Gong; you may even surpass me.”

“Don’t mock me!” Zhou Zhiruo said, “How can Emei Pai’s martial art be compared to Zhang Da Jiaozhu’s [great cult

leader Zhang] Jiu Yang Shen Gong and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi?

“You have talent,” Zhang Wuji said, “Although you don’t know too many martial art forms and stances, your internal energy foundation is excellent. My Tai Shifu [grand master, he was referring to Zhang Sanfeng] once said, in the advance study of martial art, oftentimes the level of achievement each individual is closely related to one’s natural endowments. Furthermore, someone who is intelligent and possesses excellent comprehension may not necessarily capable of achieving the highest level of mastery. It was said that your sect’s founder, Zushi [ancestor master] Guo Nuxia’s [heroine Guo] father, Guo Jing Daxia [great hero] was slow, yet his martial art skill shook the world from the ancient time until today. Even Tai Shifu said that his energy level has not reached the level of Guo Daxia of the past. It seems to me that your Emei Pai’s internal energy cultivation technique is superior to the Wudang Pai’s; I’ll say that your future achievement may surpass Zunshi Mijue Shitai’s.”

Zhou Zhiruo rolled her eyes; faking anger she said, “If you want to flatter me, you don’t need to say my martial art is good. If I can master only 10 or 20% of Shifu’s ability, I would be satisfied. If you can teach me one or two techniques from your Jiu Yang Shen Gong and Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, I would be very grateful.”

Zhang Wuji hesitated without answering. Zhou Zhiruo continued, “Do you think I am not fit to become Zhang Da Jiaozhu’s disciple?”

“No!” Zhang Wuji said, “I only aware that your internal energy technique is entirely different than mine. I’ll say our techniques took opposite approach from the start. If you learn my internal energy technique, you are facing a difficult and dangerous problem.”

“It’s all right if you don’t want to teach me,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “The worst thing that can happen if I learn martial art skill is I fail; how can there be any danger?”

“No, no!” Zhang Wuji was serious, “My Jiu Yang Shen Gong is purely ‘yang gang’ [positive/male and hard/firm] in nature. Right now you are training in the Emei Pai’s internal energy, which takes the purely ‘yin rou’ approach. If you also train my internal energy technique, then the ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ would collide in your body. Unless it is a martial art genius like my Tai Shifu; he might be able to combine water and fire, harmonize the firm and the supple. Otherwise, if you miss a single step, you’ll face a terrible, terrible disaster. Mmm, let’s wait until your internal energy is strong enough, I’ll teach you the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi theory and you can start training it.”

Zhou Zhiruo laughed, “I was only joking,” she said, “Later on I will always be together with you; your martial art skill, my martial art skill, what difference does it make? I am too lazy, your Jiu Yang Shen Gong is very difficult to train, even if you force me to practice, I am afraid it will be too difficult for me.” Hearing her saying this, Zhang Wuji felt sweetness in his heart.

With love and happiness in their hearts, time was passing swiftly. Several months had passed in a flash. Zhou Zhiruo’s internal energy had been completely recovered; she did not feel anything unusual, hence she believed the poison had been completely expelled from her system.

One particular day, they saw the peach blossom trees on the eastern side of the island were blooming beautifully. Zhang Wuji picked several branches of the peach blossom and planted them in front of Yin Li’s grave. He saw the piece of

wood he carved with the characters 'The Tomb of my Beloved Wife, Zhu'Er Yin Li' was laying flat on the ground; perhaps it was knocked down by some wild animals. He picked it up and re-inserted it deeply to the ground. He remembered how his cousin lived a miserable life; perhaps she did not even have a single day of happiness.

While he was still reveling in sadness, suddenly he heard the clamoring noise of seagulls on the sea. Lifting his head up, he saw a ship in the distant sailing toward the island. He was overjoyed at this unexpected scene and loudly shouted, "Yifu, Zhiruo, there's a ship coming in, there's a ship coming in!"

Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo heard his shout and they rushed together to the shore. In a trembling voice Zhou Zhiruo said, "How can there be a ship coming to this desolate island?"

"It's strange indeed," Zhang Wuji said, "Could it be that they are pirates?"

In less than an hour that ship had dropped its anchor offshore, and sent a small boat to the island. Zhang Wuji, three people, waiting for them on the beach. They saw the sailors on that small boat wear Mongolian naval military uniforms. Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, "Could it be that Miss Zhao was pricked by her conscience and returned to this island?" Casting a sidelong glance toward Zhou Zhiruo, he saw that her beautiful eyebrows were slightly wrinkled, while her chest was heaving up and down; apparently she was very much concerned.

A short moment later the small boat landed. Five sailors stepped on to the beach. Their leader, a naval officer, bowed respectfully toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Are you Zhang Wuji, Zhang Gongzi [honorable master Zhang]?"

"I am," Zhang Wuji replied, "Who are you, Officer?"

As that officer heard Zhang Wuji answering in affirmative, he looked delighted and relieved. "Xiao Ren's [lit. little/lowly person, a subordinate addressing him/herself] humble name is Pastai. I truly am fortunate to be able to find Gongzi today. I have received order to find Zhang Gongzi and Xie Daxia and take you back to the Central Earth." He did mention Zhang and Xie, two people's names, but did not mention Zhou Zhiruo.

"Officer has toiled to come from afar, I wonder who has sent you?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Pastai replied, "Xiao Ren is a subordinate of Tawa-chelu, the local naval commander in charge of Fujian defense. We have received order from General Pordu to set sail and meet you. Altogether General Pordu dispatches eight ships to search for Zhang Gongzi and Xie Daxia on the water around Fujian, Zhejiang and Guangdong, three provinces. I can't believe in the end Xiao Ren is the one who render this great merit." His meaning was obvious; apparently his superior had promised promotion and great reward to whoever succeeded in finding Zhang Wuji.

Hearing that unfamiliar Mongolian general's name, Zhang Wuji thought the general must have received Zhao Min's order to find him at any cost. "How did your honorable superior find out about me?" he asked.

"According to General Pordu's instructions," Pastai replied, "Zhang Gongzi is a nobleman of high status, also a great hero of the present age. Xiao Ren was ordered that after we find you, we must serve Gongzi attentively. As for why we must find Gongzi, Xiao Ren's rank is too low for the

Mongolian General to explain the reason.”

“Is this Shaomin Junzhu’s idea?” Zhou Zhiruo interrupted.

Pastai was startled, “Shaomin Junzhu?” he asked, “Xiao Ren has not had any good fortune to see her.”

Zhou Zhiruo coldly said, “What good fortune or bad fortune?” “Shaomin Junzhu is our Mongolia’s most beautiful woman,” Pastai said, “No, she is the world’s most beautiful woman; well-versed in both pen and sword [wen wu quan cai – skilled in both literature and military], she is the Ruyang Wangye’s [prince of Ruyang] ‘qian jin’ [lit. thousand gold, the most valuable, honorable term for a daughter]. How can Xiao Ren have the good fortune of seeing her ‘jin mian’ [lit. golden face]?”

“Humph,” Zhou Zhiruo snorted, but didn’t say anything further.

“Yifu,” Zhang Wuji said to Xie Xun, “In that case, let us go aboard.”

“Let’s go back to our cave to fetch some things first before we embark the ship,” Xie Xun said, “Officer, please wait here for a moment.”

Pastai said, “Let Xiao Ren and the sailors get your luggage.”

Xie Xun laughed and said, “What luggage do we have? Please don’t bother.” Taking Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo’s hands, he went to the back of the hill and said, “Out of the blue Zhao Min sends a ship to take us back; she must have a sinister plan. How do you think we must deal with it?”

“Yifu,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Do you suppose ... do you suppose

Zhao Min ... she might be on board?"

"If this little witch is onboard, that would be better," Xie Xun said, "We must watch our food and drink; and not to fall into her trap again."

"That's right," Zhang Wuji said, "We'd better bring the salted fish and the dried fruit we have collected, also water from this island. We must not eat the food from the ship."

"I think Zhao Min is not onboard," Xie Xun said, "She wants to copy those Persians' plot; she lures us onboard, once we are on the open sea, then she'd send Mongolian navy ships to open fire and sink our ship."

Zhang Wuji's heart sank, with a trembling voice he said, "She ... is she that evil? She has left us stranded on this desolate island, let us live or die on our own, without any chance to return to the Central Earth, wasn't that enough? The three of us would not bother her anymore, would we?"

With a cold laugh Xie Xun said, "You have freed the masters of the Six Major Sects she held captive in the Wan An Temple; how could she not hate you to the bone? Besides, the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult is missing, at this moment, everybody in the Ming Cult, from the top to the bottom, is involved in the large scale search and rescue operation. There is no guarantee that they will not find this desolate island. Only by burying us in the bottom of the ocean floor would she be free of trouble forever."

"Firing their cannons?" Zhang Wuji said, "Wouldn't that mean Pastai and all these Mongolian sailors will deliver their lives in vain?"

Xie Xun laughed out loud, followed by a sigh, he said, "Wuji,

Child, those people wield power over the entire Mongolian armed forces; how can they value human lives? If they were like you, kind hearted and merciful, how can the Mongolians conquer four oceans, sweep hundreds of nations? From the ancient times, which great hero, who earned great honor, did not take the bull by its horns, if they must kill then they killed? Let's not talk about ordinary officers and soldiers, they would even kill their own father and mother, their sons and daughters."

Zhang Wuji was silent for half a day then grimly said, "Yifu is right." He had always known that the Mongolians were brutal and merciless toward their enemies, but surely they would cherish their own subordinates and people? At this moment, listening to Xie Xun, he felt as if his heart was torn in two: he wanted to return to the Central Earth, to hold command over the heroes and warriors in driving the Tartars away; but speaking about governing a country to maintain peace and security, he was convinced it was not in his power to do so.

"Yifu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "What shall we do?"

"What is in my daughter-in-law's mind?" Xie Xun asked.

"Can we not board the boat?" Zhou Zhiruo said, "Let's tell those Mongolian sailors that we enjoy living in this island and do not have any desire to return to the Central Plains."

Xie Xun smiled and said, "That is a naïve little girl's naïve idea. We do not want to go on board, do you think the enemy will let us go just like that? Let's say we kill everybody on this ship, officers and sailors alike, do you think they will not dispatch ten more, eight more ships to find us? Besides, there are a lot of important matters in the Central Plains, waiting for Wuji to attend to. How can we let him grow old and die on this deserted island?"

Zhou Zhiruo's pretty face blushed profusely. "Please give us instruction; we'll listen to Yifu's advice," she said in a low voice.

Xie Xun thought of a plan for a moment and then said, "Let's do it this way." Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo listened to his plan and agreed that it was a marvelous plan.

Zhang Wuji went to Yin Li's grave to pray and shed some farewell tears before embarking the ship. To fight boredom on the island, Zhou Zhiruo had carved many little wooden horses and wooden figurines. She wrapped everything in one big bundle and carried it on her back.

Zhang Wuji checked the cabin, inside and out, very carefully. Indeed Zhao Min was not onboard; he also made sure that there was nobody onboard who might do them harm. He noticed that the officers and sailors were not martial art practitioners.

After the ship had weighed the anchor, when they only set sail for dozens of 'zhang's, suddenly Zhang Wuji reached back and grabbed Pastai's right wrist, while his other hand snatched the saber hanging on Pastai's belt, and pressed the saber behind his neck. "Listen to my order," he shouted, "Tell the helmsman to turn eastward!"

Pastai was shocked, "Zhang Gong ... Gongzi," he trembled, "Xiao ... Xiao Ren does not dare to offend you."

"Listen to my orders," Zhang Wuji said, "If you disobey, I am going to chop your head."

"Yes, yes!" Pastai said, and shouted his order, "Helms ... helmsman! Quick ... turn the ship eastward!" The helmsman

turned the rudder to follow his command. The ship circled around the island and sailed to the east.

Zhang Wuji shouted, "You Mongolians are setting a trap to harm us. I have seen through your scheme. Quickly admit it! If you lie to me, I'll take your life." Having said that he raised his right palm and slapped the ship's edge. Wood debris flew everywhere, as a big chunk of wood came off from the ship's edge. The officers and sailors onboard watched with amazement.

Pastai said, "Gongzi, please understand: Xiao Ren received my superior's order to take Gongzi home; we don't have any other intention. Xiao Ren ... Xiao Ren only hoped to render a service and receive the rewards, we really do not have any ill-intention."

Zhang Wuji knew he was telling the truth; thereupon he released Pastai's wrist, walked to the bow, and lifted the iron anchor with his left hand, while his right hand also reached out and lifted another anchor. "Everybody, watch this!" he shouted, while throwing both anchors to the air. The Mongolians gasped and then cried out in alarm.

As the anchors fell back down, using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique, one hand snatched, the other pushed, Zhang Wuji threw the anchors back up to the air. He did this three times, before he finally caught the anchors and gently put them down on the bow. The Mongolians have always admired brave warriors; seeing this astonishing demonstration of prowess, they bowed down in respect and did not dare to disobey.

Following Zhang Wuji's instructions, the helmsman drove the ship to the east. They sailed on the open sea for three days, until the only thing they could see was mighty waves whose

heights reach the sky. Xie Xun anticipated that Zhao Min only dispatched battleships to search on the water around Fujian and Guangdong area; right now their ship had sailed deep into the ocean, so there was no way the battleships would find them.

After five days, they instructed the helmsman to turn northward. They continued heading north for more than twenty days, so that even if Zhao Min was ten times smarter, it would be difficult for her to guess the location of the ship correctly. Thereupon, they instructed the helmsman to turn the ship westward, towards the Central Earth. During their voyage of more than a month, Zhang Wuji and the others did not touch the food from the ship; they either ate the provisions brought from the island, or caught fish from the ocean.

Around the seventh hour one day [between 11am - 1pm], they saw land in the distance. The Mongolian officers and sailors had been on the sea too long; as they saw they were going home, everybody cheered in delight. By the nightfall, the ship had dropped its anchor by the shore.

The landscape of that area was mountainous and the seawater was really deep so the ship was able to moor right next to the stony shore.

“Wuji,” Xie Xun said, “Go ashore and find out what kind of place is this?” Zhang Wuji complied and flew ashore.

He explored for a while and everywhere he went, he saw green thick forest; with the snow that started to melt on the ground, turning the soil into deep mud. After walking for a while, the forest got darker. All around him were gigantic ancient pine trees, the trunks were so big that each one needed several people join hands to encircle it. He flew up a

tall tree to get a better view, and no matter which direction he looked he could not see the edge of the forest. Surprisingly, in this sea of trees, he did not see any sign of other human beings either. He thought even if he went further down the forest, he would see the same thing; therefore, he decided to return to the ship.

Before reaching the shore, he had already heard miserable shouts; and these extremely sad and shrill sounds were coming from the ship. He was shocked, rushed to the shore, and immediately flew to the bow.

He saw the deck was full of bodies scattered around; they were the Mongolian officers' and soldiers' corpses, from Pastai down to the last sailor. Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo were standing on the deck, but he did not see any trace of the enemy.

In shock he asked, "Yifu, Zhiruo, are you all right? Where is the enemy?"

"What enemy?" Xie Xun asked, "Did you see any trace of them?"

"No! But these Mongolians ..." Zhang Wuji said.

"Zhiruo and I killed them," Xie Xun said.

Zhang Wuji was even more stunned, "I did not expect these Mongolians would dare to harm us as soon as we return to the Central Earth," he said.

"They did not dare to harm us," Xie Xun explained, "I killed them to close their mouths. As they are dead, Zhao Min will not know that we have returned to the Central Earth. From now on, she is in the bright place while we stay in the dark. It will be easier for us to exact our revenge."

Zhang Wuji sucked a mouthful of cold air, and was speechless for half a day.

“What?” Xie Xun dryly said, “Are you blaming me for my cruelty? Tartars’ officers and soldiers are our enemies; are we supposed to treat them with the kindness of Bodhisattva?”

Zhang Wuji was silent; he remembered how these people had been taking care of them attentively, without the slightest degree of carelessness. Although they were enemies, he would not have the heart to kill them in cold blood like this.

“As the saying goes,” Xie Xun continued, “Those with small hearts are not people of noble characters, those who are not cruel are not real men. We don’t want to harm others, others want to harm us. That Zhao Min has treated us like this so we simply follow her way and do to her what she did to us.”

“Yifu is right,” Zhang Wuji said. But looking at Pastai and the others’ corpses, he could not hold tears from flowing down his cheeks.

“Make fire, burn the boat down,” Xie Xun said, “Zhiruo, search the bodies, take all gold and silver you can find. Also, get three swords or sabers for our self-defense.” Two people set the ship on fire then leaped to the shore.

The ship’s hull was really big hence it burned continuously until midnight before the fire gradually died down. The remnant of the ship, along with the bodies, slowly went down to the bottom of the ocean. It was a clean job, without the least bit of trace. Zhang Wuji had to admit that although his Yifu was merciless, he was a veteran of Jianghu, with experience far exceeding him.

Three people spent the night by the shore. They continued their journey southward early the next morning. It was not until the afternoon of the second day did they finally meet seven, eight ginseng pickers. As they asked the men, they found out that that place was Liaodong [East Liaoning], outside the great wall, not too far from Changbai Mountain.

When they left those men, Zhou Zhiruo asked, “Yifu, shall we kill those men to shut their mouths?”

“Zhiruo!” Zhang Wuji snapped, “What are you talking about? These ginseng pickers do not even know who we are. Must we kill everybody we meet along the way?”

Zhou Zhiruo was so ashamed that her face turned completely red. In all her life, Zhang Wuji had never spoken to her like that.

“If it were me,” Xie Xun said, “I’d kill those ginseng pickers. But since Jiaozhu is unwilling to shed too many blood, we must quickly find a way to change our clothes, to remove any trace of our identities.”

They immediately quickened their pace. After walking briskly for two days, they finally left the forest. But it was not after walking another day did they finally see a peasant family’s home. Zhang Wuji took out some silver coins to buy clothes from the peasant, but the family was so poor that they did not have any extra clothes to sell. After going to seven, eight different homes, finally they were able to collect three sets of totally filthy clothes. Zhou Zhiruo was used to cleanness; smelling the stench accumulated over several years, she almost threw up. But Xie Xun was delighted; he instructed his two companions to smear their faces with mud. When Zhang Wuji looked at his reflection in the water, he saw a Liaodong’s beggar. Zhao Min might not necessarily recognize him even if she was standing right in front of him.

As they continued walking southward, they entered the Great Wall. One day they arrived at the suburb of a big town. Three people went straight to a big restaurant.

Zhang Wuji took three 'liang's worth of silver from his pocket and gave it to the innkeeper; he said, "You can settle the bill after we are done eating." He was afraid that the innkeeper would not give them any food because of the way they dressed in ragged clothes.

Who would have thought that the innkeeper stood up respectfully and returned the silver with both hands, saying, "We thank Masters for patronizing our humble establishment; what is some insipid wine and crude rice? Please accept it as a compliment of our small inn."

Zhang Wuji was very surprised. As they were seated, he said in low voice to Zhou Zhiruo, "Has our masquerade been exposed? Why did the innkeeper refuse our money?"

Zhou Zhiruo examined their clothes and appearance carefully, they did look like three beggars; which movement or expression of theirs had given them away?

"From the way that innkeeper speaks, I can tell that he is afraid of something," Xie Xun said, "We must be careful."

They heard some footsteps on the stairway as seven men walked in. As chance had it, these men also dressed as beggars. These seven men went to sit on the table by the window; their manners were haughty. The waiter appeared and respectfully greeted them, calling them 'Master this' and 'Master that', as if they were people of nobility or some high-ranking officials.

Zhang Wuji noticed that some of these beggars carried five pouches on their backs, while some others carried six pouches. Apparently, they were some high-ranking disciples of the Beggar Clan.

The waiter took their order and went downstairs. Before he even returned with their wine and dishes, there were six, seven more Beggar Clan's disciples going up the stairs. In a short period of time, the restaurant upstairs were full with more than thirty Beggar Clan disciples; among whom there were three seven-pouch disciples.

Suddenly it dawned on Zhang Wuji that the Beggar Clan was having their assembly today, and the innkeeper misunderstood them as members of the Beggar Clan. With a low voice he said to better get out of here to avoid trouble. The Beggar Clan people in here are not a few."

But right at that moment the waiter came back to serve them a large dish of beef and another dish of roasted whole chicken, plus five catties [1 catty is approximately equal to 1 lb or 0.5kg] of white wine. Xie Xun was very hungry; he had gone through the last few months without any decent meals. Smelling the roasted chicken, his index finger twitched and he said, "We are just quietly eating and drinking; we are not on their way, are we?" While saying that he took the bowl and with 'glug, glug' noise he drank half bowl of the white wine, while saying in his heart, "Heaven have mercy on me. Xie Xun has wandered overseas for more than twenty years, and today is the first time I can taste wine again."

The white wine was actually rather strong, the way people in this area brew; but to him it was like the most refined wine. He took a deep sigh as if he was very content. After drinking one full bowl, he suddenly said in low voice, "Watch out, two people of high skill have just walked in!"

Zhang Wuji also heard footsteps on the stairs, and sure enough, two men with high level of martial art skill went up the stairs. As soon as they appeared on the entrance, a clamoring noise was heard as the beggars stood up simultaneously. Xie Xun made a hand signal, the three of them also stood up. These three actually sat inconspicuously by the wall near the corner, but if they stayed seated when everybody else was standing, they were afraid they would draw some unwanted attention.

Zhang Wuji saw the first man was of medium build and his face looked handsome with a triangular-shaped beard. Dressed in beggar's garments, he looked more like a failed scholar. The man behind him was muscular, with dragon-like whiskers; his face looked ferocious. If he did not have a three-pointed beard, he would look just like Zhou Cang, the warrior holding a broadsword who stood by Guan Gong. These two men were about fifty years of age, their beards had turned grey. On their back there were nine small pouches, which were too small to carry anything, so those pouches were only used to show their rank within the Beggar Clan.

Zhang Wuji mused, "The Beggar Clan is known as the biggest clan in Jianghu. Tai Shifu used to say that in the former days, the Beggar Clan Bangzhu [Clan Leader] Hong Qigong was a righteous hero, with a very profound martial art skill; there wasn't anyone in both orthodox and unorthodox paths who did not admire him. After him were Huang Bangzhu and Yelu Bangzhu, both were people of outstanding characters. But for the last several decades, the people who held leaderships over the Beggar Clan failed to bring the Clan's prestige to its former glory. The current Bangzhu, Shi Huolong, is very seldom making an appearance in Jianghu. I wonder what kind of person he is? These two men bear nine pouches on their backs, so other than the Bangzhu, they

hold the most revered position within the Clan. That day on the Lingshe Island, the Beggar Clan people came to take the Tulong Saber away from Yifu. I wonder if these two have any connection to them?"

The Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword had been stolen by Zhao Min, but the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling were still in Zhang Wuji's pocket. Apparently Zhao Min was afraid that his martial art skill was too strong that even after being poisoned by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' he would still possess an extraordinary ability, hence she did not dare to grope around his pocket. Seeing they were among these powerful Beggar Clan people, Zhang Wuji did not dare to be careless; he reached into his pocket, tracing the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling with his hand.

The two nine-pouch elders walked in and sat on the big table in the middle. The crowd of beggars returned to their seats one after another and continued eating and drinking, reaching out to get dishes or raising their bowl to drink the soup. They were as boisterous and uncouth as a pack of wolves.

Zhang Wuji and Xie Xun strained their ears, trying to hear the conversation between those two nine-pouch elders. Surprisingly, those two elders were only busy eating and drinking; other than saying something like 'Please take another bowl', or 'This beef smells so good', they did not talk about anything in particular.

After those two leader-elders [orig. text long2 tou2 zhang3 lao3 - lit. dragon head elders] finished eating and drinking and went down the stairs, and the crowd of beggars also had their fill of wine and food, they dispersed in random. Xie Xun waited until the last of the beggars had left before he said in low voice, "Wuji, what do you think?"

“With so many of their high ranking members gathered together in this place, I don’t think they simply want to have a party,” Zhang Wuji said. “My guess is, they are going to have another meeting tonight at a secluded place to discuss proper business matters.”

“Must be so,” Xie Xun nodded, “The Beggar Clan has always been the enemy of our Cult. They took part in the burning down of our Brightness Peak, they also sent people to seize my Tulong Saber. We have to investigate clearly to see whether they are planning some sinister plot against our Cult or not.”

Three people went down the stairs towards the counter to pay their bill. The innkeeper was flabbergasted, saying that he would not take their money, no matter what. Zhang Wuji thought, “The Beggar Clan is really showing off their power here, that the inn and restaurant around here are afraid of them; they must be used to eating and drinking without paying, and run amuck without any regard of the law.”

Three people went out to find a small inn where they could spend the night. Although the town was teeming with Beggar Clan people, they usually did not stay at any inn, hence there was a slim chance of them meeting any Beggar Clan people in the inn.

“Wuji,” Xie Xun said, “My eyes cannot see a thing, it is very inconvenient for me to go out spying around. Zhiruo’s martial art skill is not high. If she goes out with you, I am afraid she will be a burden to you, so I am asking you to go alone.”

“Certainly,” Zhang Wuji said. He took a rest for a while in the inn, then left.

He walked along the main street from south to north, but surprisingly did not see a single beggar on the street. Zhang Wuji mused, "It was less than an hour ago they left the restaurant and suddenly not a single beggar is in sight. They couldn't have gone too far."

Immediately he went to a dry goods store nearby. With menacing glance, he reached out over the counter, threatened to strike the shopkeeper while barking, "Hey, shopkeeper! Where did my brethrens go?"

Several shop attendants saw his ferocious and mean appearance; they thought he must be one of those loathsome beggars, they were all scared to death. One of them was braver than the other, he pointed north, and said with a smile, "Your noble clan friends are all heading north. Would you like to drink some tea, Master?"

"I don't drink!" Zhang Wuji barked, "What damn, stinking tea is that?" Turning around he walked to the north in big strides, while laughing hard inside.

He had not walked far from the town when he saw a moving shadow among the tall grass by the road on his left, a Beggar Clan disciple stood up; it looked like he was about to shout some questions. Zhang Wuji quickened his step and was gone in a flash. That beggar rubbed his own eyes, he was so sure he saw somebody, but that person disappeared in a blink of an eye.

Zhang Wuji thought the Beggar Clan set up checkpoints along the way, their meeting must be heavily guarded; therefore, utilizing his 'qing gong' [lightness kungfu] he sped up to the north. He saw the Beggar Clan checkpoints behind trees, among the grass, in between hills and by the rock side; but instead of being obstacles, they became his guide.

Rushing about four, five 'li's, Zhang Wuji saw there were roadblocks at every three steps and checkpoints at every five steps, the security got heavier and heavier. These people's martial art skills were not high, but it was actually not easy to evade their sight under the bright sunny day. In the end Zhang Wuji was forced to leave the main road and continue on the narrow winding back road. Right away he saw a large temple at the end of a mountain passage on the waist of the mountain. He figured that the Beggar Clan people must be having their meeting in that temple. Thereupon he rushed toward the northeast corner, and then bypassing another beggar checkpoint to the west, he went straight to the temple side.

He noticed a plaque at the front of the temple with 'Mi Lei Fo Miao' [Buddha Maitreya Temple] written in large characters. The temple looked majestic and grand. Zhang Wuji mused, "This time the Beggar Clan's important leaders are here in large numbers, it would be difficult to avoid being detected if I mingle among them."

Looking around, he saw a large ancient pine tree on the left of the courtyard in front of the main hall, while to the right there was an old cypress tree. Both trees stood upright and tall, their thick branches and leaves towered over the main hall, both were perfect for a hiding place. Going around the back of the temple, Zhang Wuji leaped up to the roof, and then crawled to the corner of the eaves and lightly jumped to the top of the pine tree. Positioning himself behind a large branch, he peeked outside and silently acclaimed, "Lucky!" because from among the thick leaves, he could see the entire main hall clearly.

He saw that the main hall floor was packed with beggars; he estimated their number to be more than three hundred.

These beggars sat facing the inside of the hall, and nobody seemed to notice him jumping to the pine tree. There were five empty round meditation mats in the hall; apparently they were still waiting for some people to arrive. What was strange, though, that there were three, four hundred people, but not a single sound was heard; it was a totally different situation from the chaotic, boisterous fight over food and wine in the restaurant earlier. Zhang Wuji thought, "The Beggar Clan has enjoyed several hundred years of reputation. Although their prestige is fading lately, the manner of the olden days is not gone. That scene at the restaurant was an ordinary day situation, hence the elders did not rein them the law enforcement is very strict otherwise."

There was a Buddha Maitreya idol sitting in the main hall, its bare chest exposed its big belly, its mouth frozen in an eternal smile, looking so kind and benevolent. Zhang Wuji was still assessing the situation when suddenly someone in the hall was shouting, "'Zhang Bo Longtou' [the leader in charge of the alms bowl (small earthenware bowl used by Buddhist monks to ask for alms)] has arrived!"

The beggars stood up at once. A nine-pouched elder who looked like a scholar with a broken bowl in his hands, slowly walked in and stood on the right side.

Another shout was heard, "'Zhang Bang Longtou' [the leader in charge of the (beggar) stick] has arrived!"

The nine-pouched elder who looked like Zhou Cang, lifting an iron stick high in his hands, walked in big strides, and stood on the left side.

That man shouted again, "Zhi Fa Zhenglao' [law enforcement elder] has arrived!"

A thin and small old beggar walked in, his hand holding a worn-out bamboo mat. His steps were light and he walked without raising a single speck of dust. Zhang Wuji thought, "This man's 'qing gong' is excellent; perhaps he is only a notch below Wei Fuwang [bat king Wei]."

Another shout was heard, "'Chuan Gong Zhanglao' [instructor/teacher/coach (someone who passes on skills) elder] has arrived!"

This time an old beggar with white hair and white beard appeared. He was empty handed, and his level of martial art skill could not be evaluated from either his stature or his footwork.

The four elders occupied the four meditation mats, but the mat in the middle was still empty. They all bowed down and shouted in one voice, "Inviting Bangzhu [clan leader] to preside!"

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred, "I heard the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu is called the 'Jin Yin Zhang' [Gold and Silver Palm], Shi Huolong [his given name means 'fiery dragon']," he mused, "But in the Wulin world, very few people have ever seen his real face. I wonder what kind of character is he?"

In the main hall, all the beggars bowed down together. A moment later, the sound of footsteps was heard from behind the screen, and a large man walked in big strides. He was more than six feet tall, looked healthy and strong, with a red face like a high-ranking government officer. He stopped at the middle of the main hall and stood with his hands on his waist.

The crowd of beggars chorused, "The disciples in attendance pay their respect to Bangzhu."

The Beggar Clan's Bangzhu Shi Huolong waved his right hand and said, "That's enough! You boys are well?"

"We wish Bangzhu well," the crowd chorused. They waited until Shi Huolong took his seat on the middle meditation mat before they all sat down.

Shi Huolong turned toward Zhang Bo Longtou and said, "Weng Xiongdi [brother Weng], please tell everybody here about Jin Mao Shi Wang and the Tulong Saber."

Zhang Wuji's heart beat faster when he heard the name Jin Mao Shi Wang and the Tulong Saber being mentioned, he focused his attention to listen attentively.

Zhang Bo Longtou stood up, bowed to the Clan Leader, and then turned around and said, "Brethrens, the Devil Cult has been in enmity with our Clan for sixty years, the grievance between us is very deep. In the resent years, the Ming Cult has set up a new Cult Leader, by the name of Zhang Wuji. From our members who were involved in the besieging of the Brightness Peak, we learned that this man is an ignorant youngster. A child who is still wet behind the ears, whose yellow feathers have not been shed; which important achievement can he accomplish? How can he resist our Clan's Shi Bangzhu's heroism, ability and great accomplishments?"

The crowd of beggars broke into thunderous cheers and applause, while Shi Huolong's face looked pleased and proud.

Zhang Bo Longtou continued, "Only, they were originally split up and disunited, and killing each other; the internal strife immediately ceased after the Devil Cult's new Cult

Leader was appointed. This has become a big misfortune to our Clan. Within the last year or so, the Devil Cult leaders are staging numerous rebellions everywhere. In the Huai Si River region, there are Han Shantong and Zhu Yuanzhang; in the Liang Hu [lit. two lakes – Hunan and Hubei provinces], there is Xu Shouhui and his company. They have repeatedly defeated the Yuan soldiers and occupied not a few of places. It can be said that they quite make the grade. If they succeed in this great undertaking by driving out the Tartars, then we are done. Our Clan's tens of thousands brethrens might die without any burial ground at that time."

The crowd of beggars angrily shouted, "Must not let them succeed!" "The Beggar Clan swears to fight to the death with the Devil Cult." "If the Devil Cult rules the world, can our Clan's brethrens live?" "Tartars must go, but there is no way we would let the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu ascend to the throne."

Zhang Wuji contemplated, "Who would have thought that while I was overseas for several months, the brethrens have done really great. The Beggar Clan is this apprehensive; apparently, it was not without any reason. The Beggar Clan people are numerous; there are many heroes and warriors among them; if we can join hands with them to fight the Yuan, then this important matter has a greater chance of success. Question is, how do I eradicate their suspicion, converting an enemy into a friend?"

Zhang Bo Longtou waited until the commotion somewhat subsided before continuing, "Shi Bangzhu has always lived peacefully in the 'Lian Hua Shan Zhuang' [Lotus Villa (a manor on the mountain)], and did not involve in the Jianghu for a long time; but with this kind of urgent matter, he does not have any choice but to preside over it personally. Also, with the Heaven's blessing, our Clan's eight-pouch Zhanglao [elder] Chen Youliang has made an acquaintance with a

Wudang disciple and has obtained extremely important information.” Raising his voice he called out, “Chen Zhanglao!”

“Here!” a voice from behind the wall responded.

Two men appeared, walking hand-in-hand. One of them was about thirty years of age, with a swift and fierce expression; he was none other than Chen Youliang whose life was spared by Xie Xun on the Lingshe Island. The other was a 27, 28 year-old handsome man; he was none other than Song Yuanqiao’s son, Song Qingshu.

When he heard ‘Chen Youliang has made an acquaintance with a Wudang disciple’, Zhang Wuji assumed it was some ordinary disciple under his martial uncles; who would have thought that it was a Wudang’s disciple who could be regarded as the first among the third generation disciples? “How can Song Shige [martial (older) brother] get mixed up with the Beggar Clan?” he thought. Following which, he thought, “Wudang Pai and the Beggar Clan are both chivalrous organizations, they have a good relationship with each other, so I should not wonder.”

Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu saluted Shi Huolong first, and then they greeted the Chuan Gong Zhanglao and Zhi Fa Zhanglao, Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou, before finally turning to face the crowd of beggars and cupped their fists.

“Chen Zhanglao,” Zhang Bo Longtou said, “Please tell the details of this matter to the brethrens here.”

Taking Song Qingshu’s hand, Chen Youliang said, “Brothers, this is Song Qingshu, Song Shaoxia [young hero Song], he is Wudang Pai’s Song Yuanqiao, Song Daxia’s [great hero Song]

son. In the future, Wudang Pai's Zhangmen [Sect Leader] position will no doubt fall into his hand. That Devil Cult's Jiaozhu, Zhang Wuji, can be considered Song Shaoxia's Shidi [martial (younger) brother], therefore, I can say with confidence that Song Shaoxia understands the internal matters inside the Devil Cult like the back of his hands. Several months ago, Shong Shaoxia informed me that the Devil Cult's big leader [da mo tou, lit. big devil-head] Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun has arrived on the Lingshe Island of the East China Sea ..."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao interrupted, "The Wulin world has exhausted all efforts in trying to find the Jin Mao Shi Wang, but for dozens of years nobody knows his whereabouts. How did Song Shaoxia suddenly found out? The Old Man here wants to know."

Zhang Wuji had always had this question lingered on his mind, "Zi Shan Long Wang has forced information from Wu Lie, father and daughter, on my Yifu's location before taking him south to the Lingshe Island. This is a top-secret information. How did the Beggar Clan find out and hence send some people to the island to seize the Saber?" Xie Xun and he had discussed this matter over several times, but all along they could not find a plausible answer. Now listening to Zhi Fa Zhanglao's question, he focused his attention even more.

He heard Chen Youliang say, "Due to Bangzhu's good fortune, we struck a coincidence. On the Eastern Sea there is someone by the name of Jin Hua Popo. I don't know how, but she knew Xie Xun's whereabouts. This old granny is highly skilled in maritime and navigational skill. Unexpectedly, she managed to find the desolate island of the far north where Xie Xun lived, and took him to the Lingshe Island. On that Lingshe Island, there were two people, father and daughter, being held captives. Their names were Wu Lie and Wu

Qingying; they are the descendants of Dali's Southern Emperor's school of martial arts. Taking advantage of Jin Hua Popo leaving the island to visit the Central Plains [zhong yuan], they killed the guard and escaped from the island. They met some danger in Shandong area; luckily Song Shaoxia saved them. After talking for some times, Song Shaoxia learned about Jin Mao Shi Wang's whereabouts."

"Hmm, so that's how it is," Zhi Fa Zhanglao nodded.

In his heart Zhang Wuji also said, "Hmm, so that's how it is." He further considered, "Wu Lie, father and daughter, are not upright people; in the past, along with Zhu Zhangling, they did a painstaking effort to cheat Yifu's whereabouts from my mouth. But as luck has it, the information was passed on to Zi Shan Long Wang. Speaking about water skill and navigation technique, I am afraid not many people in the world who can surpass Zi Shan Long Wang. If not her, who in the world could have found the Binghuo Island on the boundless North Sea? Even if my father and mother were resurrected from the dead, they might not necessarily be able to do that. It was divine intervention indeed."

Chen Youliang continued, "Xiongdi [brother, referring to himself] and Song Shaoxia have forged a life-and-death friendship. As soon as I learned this information, I coordinated with Ji and Zheng, two eighth-pouch zhanglao, accompanied by five seven-pouch disciples, we went to the Lingshe Island to capture Xie Xun and seize the Tulong Saber to be presented to Bangzhu. Unexpectedly, the Devil Cult also sent a large army of warriors to the Lingshe Island. Although we did our best to fight, in the end we were defeated; Ji Zhanglao and four of the seven-pouch disciples have fallen. On the detail of the battle on the Lingshe Island, I invite Zheng Zhanglao to report to Bangzhu."

The maimed Zheng Zhanglao stood up from among the crowd and narrated the battle between the Beggar Clan and the Ming Cult on the Lingshe Island. He did not say that the Beggar Clan people surrounded the lone Xie Xun, but he mentioned how numerous the Ming Cult people were, and how brave their own people fight the enemy, and finally he told about how Chen Youliang had placed his own life at stake to save him and to uphold justice. He was speaking fervently that his spittle flew everywhere. He said Xie Xun was very impressed with Chen Youliang's uprightness that he did not dare to fight him. As the crowd of beggars in the main hall listened to his story, they were excited, their countenances flushed and they cheered repeatedly.

"Chen Xiongdi is both brave and resourceful, as well as loyal [orig. 'yi4 qi4' - spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood]. A man like him is truly hard to come by," Chuan Gong Zhanglao commented.

Chen Youliang bowed and said, "For the sake of following Bangzhu and Zhanglao's instructions, for the sake of lifting our Clan's principle of righteousness high, I am willing to go through fire or water. It was a trivial matter. I feel unworthy to receive Zheng Zhanglao's compliments."

Seeing his modesty and unwillingness to receive credit, the crowd of beggars praised him even more. On top of the tree, the more Zhang Wuji heard, the angrier he was; thinking that this man was despicable and shameless, he unexpectedly dared to go this far. It was obvious that he betrayed a friend to save his own life, but he became the hero who saved his friend instead. Only, his scheme was flawless that even Zheng Zhanglao was deceived. He was indeed a great villain.

Thinking of this, his heart turned sour, "This traitor's deceit, even Yifu was deceived, even I was deceived," he mused, "Only Zi Shan Long Wang and Miss Zhao were not deceived.

Ay ... Miss Zhao is very intelligent; it's a pity her character is ..."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao stood up and coldly said, "Our Clan has this many brothers harmed by the Devil Cult, this blood debt is as deep as the ocean. Are we going to let it go?"

The crowd of beggars responded in such a clamor, "We must avenge Ji Zhanglao!" "Let's go to the Brightness Peak! Wipe out the Devil Cult!" "Slay Zhang Wuji, slay Xie Xun!" "Our Clan cannot coexist with the Devil Cult; we see one of them, we kill one of them, we see a pair of them, we kill a pair of them!" "Bangzhu, quickly issue an order to the Beggar Clan disciples under the heaven to raise our arms and fight the Devil Cult!"

"Bangzhu," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said to Shi Huolong, "Seeking revenge is an urgent matter, please give us direction on how to proceed."

Shi Huolong frowned and said, "This ... mmm, this is indeed our Clan's important matter. Hmm, hmm ... it needs further consideration. Tell the seven-pouch disciples and under to withdraw momentarily, let us discuss this matter carefully."

"Yes!" Zhi Fa Zhanglao complied. Turning around he shouted, "Hear Bangzhu's order: seven-pouch disciples and under to leave the main hall and wait outside the temple."

The crowd shouted their obedience; they bowed down to Shi Huolong, and went out the temple gate. Only eight-pouch elders and the leaders remained in the main hall.

Chen Youliang moved one step forward, bowed down and said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: this Song Qingshu, Song Xiongdi has rendered a great service to our Clan. I am asking

Bangzhu's benevolence to allow him be a part of our Clan, and to confer to him a position commensurate to his skill and status, so that he would be able to contribute even greater service to our Clan in the future."

"This, apparently, has not ..." Song Qingzhu said. He only said the word 'not' when Chen Youliang cast him a sharp glance. Song Qingshu noticed his expression and immediately lowered his head and did not continue.

"Very well," Shi Huolong said, "Song Qingshu is admitted into our Clan. For the time being, I give him the rank of six-pouch disciple, under the eight-pouch elder Chen Youliang's command. He must abide by our Clan's laws and regulations, doing his utmost for our Clan's benefit. His merit will be rewarded and his crime will be punished."

Song Qingshu's eyes showed resentment, but he strived to restrain himself. Moving forward he knelt down in front of Shi Huolong and said, "Disciple Song Qingshu pays his respect to Bangzhu. Many thanks for Bangzhu's kindness in bestowing the six-pouch disciple position to me." After that, he also paid his respect to the various elders.

"Song Xiongdi," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "Since you are part of our Clan, you are subjected to our Clan's rules and regulations. Someday, even though you become the Wudang Pai Zhang Men [Sect Leader of Wudang Sect], you will still have to follow our Clan's order. Do you understand this?" His manner of speaking was very serious.

"Yes," Song Qingshu replied.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao continued, "Although our Clan and Wudang Pai both follow the same chivalrous way, our approaches are not the same. Since someday the Wudang Sect Leader

position will certainly fall into your hands, why did you want to become part of our Clan? You must answer this question truthfully.”

Song Qingshu cast a sidelong glance toward Chen Youliang before answering, “Chen Zhanglao has shown an utmost benevolence toward me, I admire his conduct very much; therefore, I will be satisfied to follow his leadership.”

Cheng Youliang laughed and said, “There are no outsiders here, I don’t see any problem for you to say it. After the Sect Leader of Emei Pai, Mie jue Shitai passed away, the newly-appointed Sect Leader is a young and good-looking lady by the name of Zhou Zhiruo. This lady and Song Xiongdi are childhood friends; apparently they are betrothed to each other. Who would have thought that the Devil Cult’s big devil-head Zhang Wuji appeared and stole her heart away, and took her overseas? Obviously, Song Xiongdi was furious and came to me for advice. I vow to help my brother taking that Zhou girl back.”

The more Wuji heard it, the angrier he was; thinking in his heart, “This man spoke nonsense; when did such thing ever happen?” He wanted to jump down into the main hall to confront him, but in the end decided to restrain his rage and keep on listening.

Shi Huolong laughed aloud and said, “It’s always hard for a hero to resist a beauty. I am not surprised. One is the Wudang Sect Leader, the other is Emei Sect Leader; not only a match in social position and economic status, but also the man highly skilled, the woman beautiful. This is a perfect match indeed.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao asked again, “Since Song Xiongdi has this grievance, why don’t you ask Zhang Sanfeng Zhenren [lit.

true/real man – a respectable term to address a Taoist priest] and Song Daxia [great hero Song] to mediate?”

Chen Youliang replied, “Song Xiongdi told me: that little thief Zhang Wuji is Wudang Pai’s Zhang Cuishan’s son. Zhang Sanfeng has always been very fond of Zhang Cuishan. For that reason, Wudang Pai is in a good term with the Devil Cult lately. Zhang Sanfeng and Song Daxia are not willing to offend the Devil Cult. Presently, in the Wulin world of the Central Plains, our Clan is the only one who stands against the Devil Cult; furthermore, we are the only one who has enough power to resist those devils.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao nodded. “That’s true,” he said, “Only by destroying the Devil Cult and slaughtering that fellow Zhang Wuji Song Xiongdi’s desire will be satisfied and his grievance compensated only by destroying the Devil Cult and slaughtering that person Zhang Wuji.”

From his hiding place on the tree, Zhang Wuji recalled how in the Western Region’s desert and on the Brightness Peak, Song Qingshu’s treatment toward Zhou Zhiruo had always been rather strange. Only now did Zhang Wuji realize that Song Qingshu had a deep feeling toward her. Yet he was still astonished over what had happened, “A Wudang disciple wants to join the Beggar Clan; this is not right, especially without reporting to Tai Shifu and Song Shibo [martial (older) uncle] first. He is betraying his own school, betraying his own father, for a woman’s sake; wouldn’t he make a very big mistake? Besides, Zhiruo loves me very much, although Song Qingshu received the Beggar Clan’s help, how can he force her to follow him? Song Dage [big brother Song] has made a name for himself in the Jianghu, he holds the reputation as the up-and coming leader of Wudang Pai. How can he make such a blunder?”

He heard Chen Youliang say, "Reporting to Bangzhu: in Dadou [grand capital, modern day Beijing] disciple has captured an important figure from the Devil Cult. This man might be crucial to our Clan's great endeavor; asking Bangzhu to give your verdict."

Shi Huolong was delighted, "Bring him in," he said.

Chen Youliang clapped three times, "Bring that devil head in," he said.

From the back of the hall came four beggars with unsheathed weapons in their hands, dragging a man whose hands were tied behind his back. Zhang Wuji saw that he was a young man in his early twenties; his face looked very familiar. He remembered he had seen this man during the Ming Cult great assembly on the Butterfly Valley, but he did not remember that man's name. That man looked furious; when he walked passed Chen Youliang, he suddenly spat on his face. Chen Youliang quickly dodged while striking that man's cheek with the back of his palm, causing that man's cheek to immediately swell.

The beggar behind him pushed him down and shouted, "Kneel down and kowtow in Bangzhu's presence!"

That man coughed and spat thick spittle toward Shi Huolong's face.

The distance between that man and Shi Huolong was very close, to begin with, plus, he spat with all his might. Although Shi Huolong hastily ducked, he was not able to evade. 'Splat!' the spittle landed on his forehead.

Chen Youliang's leg swept away and kicked that man down, while he blocked in front of Shi Huolong. Pointing his finger

to him, Chen Youliang barked, "Daring crazy disciple! Are you bored of your life?"

That man shot back, "Since I have fallen into your hand, your master does not hope to go home alive!"

As Chen Youliang blocked, Shi Huolong had the opportunity to wipe the spittle from his forehead. Chen Youliang moved two steps backward and said, "Reporting to Bangzhu: this fellow is a top ranking expert within the Devil Cult; his martial art skill level appears to be above the four Protector Kings. We must not look down on him."

Listening to him, Zhang Wuji was astonished, but he immediately understood; Chen Youliang was deliberately exaggerating that man's martial art to give face to his Clan Leader. Shi Huolong was the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, but surprisingly he was not able to evade this spittle attack, which was highly unlikely. Furthermore, after receiving such insult, his face did not show any indignation, but he appeared to be somewhat frightened and was at a loss.

"Chen Xiongdi," Zhi Fa Zhanglao asked, "Who is this man?"
"His name is Han Lin'er," Chen Youliang replied, "The son of Han Shantong."

Zhang Wuji nodded his head silently, "That's right. During the general assembly in the Butterfly Valley, he was always following his father around and did not speak to me at all, no wonder I did not remember his name."

"Ah," Zhi Fa Zhanglao was delighted, "He is Han Shantong's son. Chen Xiongdi, your contribution is even greater. Reporting to Bangzhu: for the past several years, Han Shantong has repeatedly defeated the Yuan army, establishing for himself a great fame for his military prowess.

The generals under his command, Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, and the others, are all important leaders within the Devil Cult. By capturing this fellow, we can use him as hostage, so that we won't have to worry about Han Shantong not listening to our Clan."

Han Lin'er opened his mouth in swearing and cursing, "In your mother's dream! What kind of hero is my Father? How could he submit to your shameless coercing? My Father only listen to Zhang Jiaozhu's order. Your Beggar Clan wants to contend for supremacy against my Ming Cult? You are overestimating your own capabilities too much! Your stinky Beggar Clan Bangzhu is not even fit to carry our Zhang Jiaozhu."

Chen Youliang chuckled, "Han Xiongdi," he said, "You say your Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu is such a hero, all of us admire him very much and want to see his face. Why don't you take us to see him?"

"Zhang Jiaozhu is dealing with important matters," Han Lin'er said, "Even our own brethrens cannot easily see him. How can he have time to see you?" [Translator's note: in this exchange, both Chen Youliang and Han Lin'er referred to Zhang Wuji as 'lao ren jia' – Senior, a polite term for someone of higher status or simply older.]

Chen Youliang laughed, "Everybody in Jianghu said that Zhang Wuji has been captured by the Yuan army and has been beheaded at Dadou a while ago that his leadership in all levels has been taken over in various regions, yet you are still blowing your horn?"

"Pei!" Han Lin'er spat angrily, "Bullshit! Can Tartars capture our Zhang Jiaozhu? Even if he is surrounded by a thousand soldiers and ten thousands horses, our Jiaozhu can come and

go as he wishes. It is true that Zhang Jiaozhu has gone to Dadou, but he went there to rescue the Wulin characters of the Six Major Sects. What beheading? You are but sprouting nonsense!"

Chen Youliang was not angered, still chuckling he said, "That was what I heard from the Jianghu, it's hard for me not to believe. Why else would in the past half a year or so we only heard about Han Shantong, Xu Shouhui, and some Zhu Yuanzhang, Peng Yingyu Heshang [Buddhist monk], but we have never heard about Zhang Wuji? Surely it is because he is dead. I have no doubt about it."

Han Lin'er's face turned completely red, the blue vein on his forehead bulged out. "My Father, Xu Shouhui and the others are executing Zhang Jiaozhu's command; how can they be compared with Zhang Jiaozhu?"

Chen Youliang incredulously said, "This man Zhang Wuji's martial art skill cannot be considered bad, but he was destined not to live a long life and will die young. Somebody who has done some divination on him says that he won't live past the beginning of this year ..."

Right at this moment, suddenly a branch of the old cypress tree in the courtyard was shaking lightly, but nobody in the main hall knew about it. Zhang Wuji, however, was able to hear a faint excited breathing noise from behind the branch, but that person immediately controlled his breath that the noise stopped.

"Turn out there is someone hiding on that old cypress tree," Zhang Wuji thought, "This person must be here before I did. How come I am not aware of his presence for this long? His martial art skill must be not bad." Focusing his eyes, he saw a shadow among the branches and the leaves. He saw the

corner of that person's green clothes; he knew that person was well prepared, his outfit blended very well with the color of the cypress tree. If not for Zhang Wuji's astute vision, he would have had a difficult time seeing that person.

He heard Han Lin'er angrily said, "Zhang Jiaozhu has a big heart with a generous nature, the Heaven will most certainly bless him. He is still very young and I will not be surprised if he will live another hundred years.

Chen Youliang gasped and said, "But a man's fate is hard to predict! I heard that he was framed by a traitor and thus was captured and executed by the imperial government. I don't find that as a strange occurrence. People who have seen Zhang Wuji all said that he would not live past three times eight, twenty-four years of age ..."

Suddenly from the old cypress tree a green shadow flashed, someone jumped down and shouted, "Zhang Wuji is here! Who cursed me as a short-lived man?" The voice still lingered in the air, the person had already entered the main hall.

Zhang Bang Zhaglao, who was standing at the door, stretched out his hand to grab the back of that person's neck, trying to capture him. With a swift and nimble movement, that person evaded to the side. Now everyone could see that he was wearing a green robe with a rectangular headband, his manner was elegant, his face was like a jade, and his eyes were as clear as water. He was none other than Zhao Min wearing a man's clothes.

As he saw Zhao Min made an appearance, Zhang Wuji's heart was shaken; he was startled and angered at the same time, but also felt sweetness and delight in his heart, so that he could not refrain from softly exclaiming. By this time, all the beggars in the main hall had already surrounded Zhao Min,

hence nobody paid any attention to his exclamation.

The Beggar Clan people had never seen Zhang Wuji, they only knew that the Ming Cult's Cult Leader was a young man around twenty years of age with a superb martial art skill. Seeing Zhao Min's swiftness and agility in evading Zhang Bang Zhanglao's grab, they knew this person was a top quality martial art expert, hence they all believe the Ming Cult's Cult Leader had arrived, everybody shivered in fear.

Only Chen Youliang noticed that his face was too pretty, he looked too young, and there was a rather flirtatious tone in his voice. All in all, there was a difference with this man's appearance and the description of Zhang Wuji in the Jianghu. He shouted, "Zhang Wuji has been dead long ago, where did this impostor come from?"

Zhao Min indignantly said, "Zhang Wuji is alive and well, why did you keep cursing him as dead? Zhang Wuji is flooded with good fortune as vast as the sky, he will live a long life of over-a-hundred-years; he will live another eighty years even after everybody in here is dead."

Zhang Wuji could hear the sadness in these few sentences; it was as if after abandoning them on that desolate island, she was pricked by her own conscience. But then he thought, "How can this kind of cruel and mean person have any conscience? Zhang Wuji, oh Zhang Wuji, you simply are not willing to part with her. You are simply deceiving yourself with this kind of wishful thinking."

"Who are you, actually?" Chen Youliang asked.

Zhao Min replied, "I am the Ming Cult Jiaozhu, Zhang Wuji. Why do you hold my subordinate brother captive? Release him quickly. Whatever problem you have, I am here to deal

with you personally.”

“Huh, huh!” suddenly someone from the side sneered, “Miss Zhao, others may not recognize you; do you think I, Song Qingshu, don’t know you? Reporting to Bangzhu: this woman is the Ruyang Prince’s daughter, she has many martial art experts under her command, we must guard against them.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao pursed his lips and whistled loudly, “Zhang Bang Zhanglao, take our brothers go out the temple to seek the enemy. Watch for enemies coming in to attack,” he ordered.

Zhang Bang Zhanglao responded and went out the hall. In an instant from every direction came shouts and whistles from the Beggar Clan disciples. Seeing this situation, Zhao Min’s countenance changed slightly, she clapped her hands once, and from the top of the wall two men jumped down; they were the Xuanming Er Lao [Xuanming ‘two’ Elders], Lu Zhangke and He Biweng.

“Get them!” Zhi Fa Zhanglao barked his order. Immediately four seven-pouch disciples pounced on Lu and He, two elders.

Xuanming Elders’ martial arts were exceptionally strong, in just three stances all four seven-pouch disciples were injured. The white-haired, white-bearded Chuan Gong Zhanglao stood up. With a loud shout his palm struck straight to He Biweng, creating a loud gust of wind, a sign of overwhelming power behind that strike.

He Biweng used his ‘Xuan Ming Shen Zhang’ [mysterious and dark divine palm] to parry the attack. With a loud ‘Bang!’ two palms collided. Three palms exchanges later, it was evident that Chuan Gong Zhanglao was not He Biweng’s match.

On the other front, Lu Zhangke, with the deer antler staff in his hand, fought Zhi Fa Zhanglao and Zhang Bo Longtou, two people. For the time being, it was hard to decide which side had the upper hand.

Seeing Chuan Gong Zhanglao's face was flushed as red as blood, while retreating step-by-step, Zhang Bang Longtou could not help from feeling alarmed. He knew Chuan Gong Zhanglao's profound power, which could be considered as their Clan's number one martial art expert; how could he not be able to match this old man? By the fifth palm exchange, he saw Chuan Gong Zhanglao was gasping for breath, his white beard fluttered in the air; it was clear that he was in distress. Although he knew Chuan Gong Zhanglao had never liked to be helped in fight, seeing his dire condition, in the end Zhang Bang Longtou could not let him lose his life under the enemy's hand; Zhang Bang Longtou swept He Biweng's feet using his iron staff.

As the Xuanming Elders appeared, Zhao Min was about to retreat, but Chen Youliang blocked her way with a sword. In the Wan An Temple, Zhao Min had learned the essence of the Six Major Sects' martial art skill. With 'shua, shua, shua'sounds her sword moved. The first stance was Huashan's sword technique, the second was Kunlun's, and the last one was Kongtong's. For the fourth stance, she used the Emei Pai's 'jin ding jiu shi' [golden peak nine styles].

Chen Youliang was taken by surprise and was not able to fend off. Zhao Min's sword made a circle and stabbed straight toward his chest. 'Clang!' a sword was thrust horizontally from the left, diverting Zhao Min's sword; it was Song Qingshu.

While the battle was raging all over the main hall, Zhang Wuji watched from the top of the pine tree. He saw Song

Qingshu was able to fully utilize the Wudang sword technique. His movements were steady and fierce; apparently he had mastered the lessons imparted by his father, Song Yuanqiao. Chen Youliang also attacked from the side. Although Zhao Min possessed a vast knowledge of sword techniques, in the end diversity could not overcome purity. With one against two, already she was forced to defend herself more and attack less.

Zhang Wuji was secretly anxious, but also puzzled, "Why does she use an ordinary sword? If it was Yitian Sword, she would be able to cut her opponents' swords and break through their siege." He noticed that she was wearing tight clothes, showing off her slim figure; it was obvious that she was not concealing the Yitian Sword on her waist. After feeling anxious for a while, Zhang Wuji rebuked himself, "Zhang Wuji, this little witch killed your cousin; why are you anxious over her safety instead? You not only offend Biaomei [younger female cousin], but offend Yifu and Zhiruo as well."

After fighting for a while, several more martial art masters from the Beggar Clan joined the battle, while on Zhao Min's side no other people came in to help. Realizing the unfavorable situation, Lu Zhangke called out, "Jun Zhu Niang-niang [princess], Shi Di [martial (younger) brother], let's retreat to the courtyard and find an opportunity to leave."

"Very well," Miss Zhao said, "This man surnamed Chen slanders Zhang Gongzi [young master Zhang], saying he is short-lived and will die young. I am mad at him; you two deal with him well."

"Will do," Xuanming Elders replied, "Junzhu, please leave first. Leave this kid to us."

Zhao Min also said, "That Han Lin'er is very loyal to Zhang Gongzi, you must try to save him."

"Junzhu, please withdraw first," Lu Zhangke said, "Leave the rescuing business to us, two brothers." These three people were talking about rescuing people while under the siege of powerful enemies, as if they did not have any regard toward their opponents.

While the battle in the main hall was raging wild, the Beggar Clan's Clan Leader Shi Huolong was standing quietly on the corner of the main hall. As Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two Elders listened to Zhao Min's exchange with the Xuanming Elders, they ordered their people to intercept. Suddenly both Lu Zhangke and He Biweng left their opponents and charged toward Shi Huolong. Their movement was so fast that it was impossible for Shi Huolong to resist. Who would have thought that as Chen Youliang listened to Zhao Min and the Xuanming Elders planning their escape, he had already anticipated this tactic? He preceded everybody else by going around and was ready by Shi Huolong's side.

Before the Xuanming Elders' palm strikes arrived, Chen Youliang had already pushed Shi Huolong's shoulder down, and shoved him behind the Mi Le Fo image. 'Crack!' as the Xuanming Elders palms struck down, part of the idol broke with its debris flew everywhere, while the idol itself was swaying, ready to fall down. He Biweng moved another step forward and struck two more times with his palms. The large idol flew to the air and crashed down.

The crowd of beggars cried out in alarm and leaped away to evade. Zhao Min took advantage of this highly chaotic situation to leap out to the courtyard. Song Qingshu and Zhang Bang Longtou, one with a sword the other a staff, pursued together. As she was leaping over the temple gate,

three staves suddenly appeared lightning fast to sweep the lower part of Zhao Min's body. Zhao Min was already busy blocking Song Qingshu's sword and Zhang Bang Longtou's iron staff, now she had to evade these three incoming attacks. She managed to avoid two, but failed to evade the third. She felt pain on her left shin as a staff struck her, her feet faltered and she fell down forward. Song Qingshu flipped his sword to strike the back of Zhao Min's head with the handle, with the intention of knocking her down and capture her alive.

As the sword hilt was only less than half a foot away from her head, suddenly the iron staff in Zhang Bang Longtou's hand flicked the sword hilt up, diverting Song Qingshu's sword to the side. Right at that moment a shadow flew up and leaped over the wall.

Song Qingshu turned around and asked Zhang Bang Longtou, "Why did you let her go?"

Zhang Bang Longtuo was angry, "Why did you pull my iron staff up?"

"It was you who used your staff to divert my sword," Song Qingshu said, "And still ..."

"It's no use arguing," Zhang Bang Longtou shouted, "Let's pursue her!"

Immediately two people leaped over the wall, only to see nearby the corner a seven-pouch disciple was lying down; his leg was broken from the fall that he was unable to crawl back up.

"Where did that witch run away to?" Zhang Bang Longtou asked.

Several seven-pouch disciples who were on guard outside the wall replied, "Nobody was here; we did not see anybody."

Zhang Bang Longtou was angry, "Just a moment ago clearly somebody was leaping over the wall over here. Are you all blind?"

A six-pouch disciple stooped down to help the seven-pouch disciple whose leg was broken, he said, "Just now it was this brother who leaped over the wall, there was no other people."

Zhang Bang Longtou scratched his head and asked that seven-pouch disciple, "Why did you leap over the wall?"

"I ... ," the seven-pouch disciple mumbled indistinctly, "I was grabbed and thrown away. That witch used a weird technique."

Zhang Bang Longtou turned toward Song Qingshu and angrily shouted, "Just now you used your sword handle to pull up my iron staff, why did you do that? You have just joined our Clan, and already you pulled a stunt?"

Song Qingshu was shocked and angered, he said, "Disciple was just going to use the sword hilt to strike down that witch, it was Longtou Dage [big brother Longtou] who used the iron staff to divert my sword hilt, letting that witch escape."

"Ridiculous!" Zhang Bang Longtou roared, "Why would I divert your sword hilt? I have been in our Clan for several decades, and have achieved this high-ranking Zhang Bang Longtou position. Why would I help an outsider? Let me ask you this: why didn't you use the sword blade to stab her but use the sword hilt, pretending to strike her down instead?"

Hmm, hmm ... my old eyes are not blind yet; you cannot deceive me."

Although within the Wudang Pai Song Qingshu was only the third generation young disciple, everybody in Wudang was aware that he was the future Sect Leader, so even Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, and the other martial uncles treated him with respect, and had never uttered even half a sentence of harsh words. He was used to being arrogant. Although he knew Zhang Bang Longtou's position with the Beggar Clan was much higher than his, who had just joined the Clan, he felt he was being wrongly accused in this matter. Not willing to swallow an insult, he immediately retorted, "'Pulling up a stunt', these words were obviously carelessly said. If Longtou Dage wants to accuse me, you must have some people as witnesses. As Xiao Di [little brother, referring to himself] struck my sword hilt down, it was obvious that you used the staff to block. There are many people in here, I doubt it if nobody saw what had happened."

Hearing his words, Zhang Bang Longtou understood the table was turned; now he was accused of being pulling up a stunt, by letting Zhao Min escape. His anger blazed like a raging fire. "You, a mere kid, are being rude to your elder, are you flaunting Wudang's prestige in your background?" He said that while striking down his staff to smash Song Qingshu's head. Under his violent rage, the staff carried a tremendous amount of force.

Song Qingshu did not yield for even one breath; he lifted up his sword to block. The sword and the staff collided, 'Clang!' sparks flew everywhere. Song Qingshu felt searing pain on his palm.

"Surnamed Song," Zhang Bang Longtou roared, "You dare to defy your superior, did the enemy send you to spy on our

Clan?" While saying this, his staff struck for the second time.

Suddenly somebody rushed out of the temple gate, stretched out a sword to take the staff, followed it down and pushed it away, while saying, "Longtou Dage, please don't be angry." This man was none other than the eight-pouch elder Chen Youliang. "Where is that little witch, Zhao Min?" he asked.

Zhang Bang Longtou, still seething with anger, pointed his finger toward Song Qingshu and said, "He let her go."

"No," Song Qingshu hastily said, "It was Longtou Dage who let her go."

While the two of them were bickering, the Xuan Ming Elders had already whisked out of the temple. They looked everywhere and did not see Zhao Min, so they figured she had already escaped. Letting out a long laugh, their four palms struck together, immediately several Beggar Clan disciples fell down to the ground. By the time Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others came out, the Xuan Ming Elders, the sound of their long laughs had already dozens of 'zhang's away, so even if they wanted to pursue, they would not be able to overtake them.

What really happened was Zhang Wuji saw Song Qingshu flipping his sword to strike Zhao Min's head. He realized the strike could be light or could be heavy; if it was light, it would knock her unconscious, if it was heavy, it would take her life away. Almost without thinking he jumped down from the ancient pine tree and using the divine skill of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, from behind Zhang Bang Longtou he pushed the iron staff in his hand to divert Song Qingshu's sword. His mastery of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi had already reached unprecedented level, during the past several months on the desolated island, since he had nothing to do, he researched

and studied the secret Xiao Zhao translated from the Sheng Huo Ling tablets. By integrating these two techniques, his skill was ten times more ingenious than the Persian Three Emissaries' strange martial art. This time he darted out from his hiding place, although Zhang Bang Longtou and Song Qingshu were such martial art masters, they were incapable to detect his movement. Zhang Bang Longtou only knew Song Qingshu strike his iron staff, while Song Qingshu clearly see Zhang Bang Longtou stretch out his staff to divert his sword.

Taking advantage while those two people were startled, his left hand reached behind him to grab a seven-pouch disciple and toss him over the wall. Zhang Bang Longtou and Song Qingshu saw someone was leaping over the wall, they assumed it was Zhao Min escaping, so both of them pursued out. Zhang Wuji grabbed Zhao Min and took her to the top of the hall. It was the middle of the day under the sunny sky, so actually, nothing could disappear without anybody else noticing; but as Zhang Bang Longtou and Song Qingshu went out the temple gate, the crowd of beggars also noisily swarmed out the gate. Although there were many eyes, apparently nobody paid any attention to whatever was flying above their heads. Besides, as the Mi Le image collapsed in the main hall, dust and debris rose up, filling the air; everybody went out in confusion from the main hall via both front and rear doors. The martial art experts among them were busy besieging the Xuanming Elders, while those with weaker martial art skill were busy protecting themselves. Thus, it was not surprising that nobody knew what was going on.

As she was rescued in a critical condition, Zhao Min felt she was being carried by a pair of strong, powerful arms. She also felt as if they were soaring amidst the cloud or rising above the fog to the top of the main hall. Turning her head around,

under the dazzling sunlight she saw thick eyebrows and handsome eyes, it was Zhang Wuji. Not believing her own eyes, she gasped, "It's you!"

Zhang Wuji reached out to cover her mouth. His eyes scanned on all directions, and saw the front, the back, left and right of the Mi Le Temple were filled with the Beggar Clan disciples. It was not difficult for him if he wanted to escape even with Zhao Min in his arms; but since he knew the Beggar Clan was secretly conspiring to harm his Cult, and Song Shige [martial (older) brother] of Wudang Pai had now joined the Beggar Clan, it would be a pity if he did not investigate clearly and simply withdrew in light of these matters.

He saw Song Qingshu and Zhang Bang Longtou were still quarrelling. Zhang Bang Longtou's eyes revealed an ominous look, moreover, there were some malicious people within the Beggar Clan, Song Qingshu may fall into their treacherous hands. Besides, Han Lin'er was very loyal and devoted, he simply must be rescued.

Seeing the dust and debris were still hanging in the air in the main hall, he thought he might as well enter the hall and find someplace to hide. He darted forward toward the eaves, and then with both feet hooked to the eaves, he slowly pulled his legs and slid down toward the back of the idol from the left side. He saw in the room there were only several Beggar Clan disciples left, they were lying on the floor, groaning because of the injury they suffered when the idol fell down, but Han Lin'er was nowhere to be seen, and he wondered where they took him.

Zhang Wuji scanned around the room, but was not able to find a good hiding place. Zhao Min pointed toward a large leather drum, supported on a large and tall wooden

structure, about a 'zhang' away from the ground, with a large bell on its right flank. Zhang Wuji immediately realized it was a perfect hiding place. Creeping around the wall, he went behind the leather drum. He leaped up and his right-hand forefinger slit horizontally on the leather drum. With a light ripping sound there was a large split on the leather. Bracing his left foot on the beam of the wooden structure, his forefinger slit vertically, making a cross-shaped split on the drum. With Zhao Min in his arms he stepped into the large drum. Although the drum was big, there was not enough room to move with two people inside. Zhao Min leaned on Zhang Wuji, breathing tenderly.

The drum was very old, and inside was filled with dust. Amidst the bad smell of dust and dirt, Zhang Wuji could smell delicate fragrance coming out from Zhao Min's body. His heart was filled with love and hate, his mind was filled with countless words he would like to ask her, but with great difficulty he restrained himself from opening his mouth. He was conscious of Zhao Min's tender body leaning on his bosom, her soft and silky skin lightly rubbed against his face. Suddenly he was startled, "I should not even save her, how can I be this intimate with her in here?" Lifting up his hand, he pushed Zhao Min's head away, not letting her to lean against his shoulder.

In her anger Zhao Min elbowed his chest. Zhang Wuji used his internal energy to rebound the incoming force; Zhao Min felt the pain that she could not help but crying out. Zhang Wuji had already anticipated this, so he reached out to cover her mouth.

In the meantime, he heard Zhi Fa Zhanglao's voice rose up from below, "Reporting to Bangzhu: the enemy has escaped without leaving any trace, subordinate is incompetent and failed to capture them, waiting for Bangzhu's punishment."

"It's all right," Shi Huolong replied, "The enemy's martial art skill is very high, everybody has done his best. Damn it! It's just our bad luck, it has nothing to do with Zhanglao."

"Many thanks, Bangzhu," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said.

After that, Zhang bang Longtou brought the accusation that Song Qingshu has let the enemy escape. Song Qingshu refuted by explaining his own reasoning. Both sides were insistent on their own version, the main hall was filled with anger.

"Chen Xiongdi," Shi Huolong said, "What is your take on this?"

"Reporting to Bangzhu," Chen Youliang said, "Zhang Bang Longtou is a senior leader of our Clan, so what he said cannot be wrong. But Song Xiongdi joined our Clan in sincerity, that little witch surnamed Zhao is his adversary, so it would not be in his interest to let her escape. In my humble opinion, this witch surnamed Zhao possesses a strange martial art, she is able to borrow strength to fight strength, hence she pushed Longtou Dage's iron staff to divert Song Xiongdi's sword. In confusion, both sides did not realize it and thus this misunderstanding arose."

Zhang Wuji silently praised him, "This Chen Youliang is very good; he did not see what happened, but his guess is 80, 90% correct."

He heard Shi Huolong said, "It makes perfect sense. Both brothers, everybody is doing his best for our Clan's sake, please do not damage the friendship over this minor incident."

Zhang Bang Longtou furiously said, "Even if he ..."

Without waiting for him to finish, Chen Youliang interrupted, "Song Xiongdi, Longtou Dage is a person of good moral standing and reputation, even if he wrongly accused you, you will still benefit from his advice. Quickly apologize to Longtou Dage."

Song Qingshu had no choice but step forward and cup his fists. "Longtou Dage," he said, "Xiao Di [little brother, referring to himself] has offended you just now, please accept my apology."

That Zhang Bang Longtou was still furious, but he knew he could not lash it out, so he snorted and said, "It's all right!"

Chen Youliang's speech seemingly placed the blame on Song Qingshu, but actually by saying that Zhao Min 'pushed Longtou Dage's iron staff to divert Song Xiongdi's sword', and 'Longtou Dage is a person of good moral standing and reputation, even if he wrongly accused you, you will still benefit from his advice', he placed the blame on Zhang Bang Longtou; all elders of the Beggar Clan understood it clearly. However, Chen Youliang had recently become the Clan Leader's favorite, Shi Huolong always listened to his advice; what else can they say?

"Chen Xiongdi," Shi Huolong said, "The little witch that has caused disturbance just now, is the Ruyang Prince's beloved daughter. The Devil Cult is the imperial household's enemy, then why did that damned witch stand up for that little devil head Zhang Wuji?"

While Chen Youliang hesitated and did not answer, Zhang Bo Longtou said, "I noticed that that Tartar Junzhu was crying with an extremely angry look on her face. When Chen Xiongdi cursed the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu, that Tartar Junzhu

looked like someone was cursing her father or brother. It is indeed confusing.”

Song Qingshu said, “Reporting to Bangzhu: Subordinate has some knowledge about this matter.”

“Song Xiongdi, you may speak,” Shi Huolong said.

“Although the Devil Cult is opposing the imperial government, this little witch Junzhu is captivated by Zhang Wuji,” Song Qingshu said, “It seems to me that she wants to marry him very much. Consequently, she is always trying to protect him.”

“Ah!” as the crowd of beggars listen to this, they all exclaimed in surprise.

Inside the gigantic drum, Zhang Wuji also heard it clearly; his heart was thumping madly, but in his mind he had a question, “Is it true? Is it true?”

Zhao Min turned her head around and stared at him. Although the inside of the drum was dim, Zhang Wuji’s acute eyes were able to see that her eyes showed a boundless love. He could not restrain a warm feeling from overflowing his breast. His hands, which were holding her arms, tightened. He felt a strong urge to kiss her cherry lips, but suddenly Yin Li’s tragic death came into his mind; immediately the warm, tender feeling in his heart changed into deep hatred. His right hand grabbed her arm and crushed it. Although he did not use strength, but it was unbearable to Zhao Min nonetheless, so much so that her vision blackened and she almost passed out from the pain, making her want to echo Yin Li’s curse on him, ‘This heartless and short-lived little rascal.’ In the end Zhao Min did her best to control herself not to utter any sound, but big streams of tears flowed down

her cheeks and dropped onto the back of Zhang Wuji's hand, overflowing to the front of his clothes. Zhang Wuji simply hardened his heart and ignored her completely.

He heard Chen Youliang said, "How did you know? Did such a strange thing really happen?"

With hatred in his voice Song Qingshu replied, "This fellow Zhang Wuji's appearance is only so-so, he is not the least bit handsome nor possesses an outstanding ability, but he practices the Devil Cult's sorcery. He is good at captivating women's attractions that many young women are infatuated by him."

"That's right," Zhi Fa Zhanglao nodded, "The Devil Cult's lecherous and demonic disciples really did practice this kind of 'flower-picking' [cai3 hua1] method [Translator's note: again, I know I translated this phrase rather literally, but I am sure the readers can appreciate the Jin Yong's imagery], where males and females gather together. Emei Pai's disciple, Ji Xiaofu, also fell under the Devil Cult Yang Xiao's sorcery, in the end she lost her reputation and fell from grace. Zhang Wuji's father, Zhang Cuisan, also fell under the demonic charm of White-browed Eagle King's daughter. That Tartar Junzhu must have fallen under the little devil head's 'flower-picking' incantation and thus lost her chastity to him. The wood has become the boat, the (grain) rice has become (cooked) rice [Translator's note: for those of you who are not familiar with rice, in Chinese, the uncooked, grain rice is called 'mi3', while the cooked rice we eat is called 'fan4']; she is depraved and cannot extricate herself from disgrace." The crowd of beggars nodded their heads in agreement.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao was filled with righteous indignation, he said, "This kind of Jianghu's scum, everybody has the right to punish him; otherwise, countless innocent and

respectable young women will be harmed by this pervert little thief."

Shi Huolong stuck out his tongue and licked his lips. "Damn it!" he said with a laugh, "This pervert little thief Zhang Wuji's luck is not bad!"

Zhang Wuji was so angry that his body, from head to toe, shook. So far he was still a virgin, yet from Emei Pai's Miejue Shitai down to these people, for countless times he was cursed as a 'pervert little thief'. He truly suffered injustice and had nowhere to appeal. As for 'Zhao Min lost her chastity to him, the wood has become the boat' and so on, he wondered where did those things come from? Thinking to this point he was suddenly startled, "Miss Zhao and I are in each other arms here, they absolutely must not find out; otherwise they will have a confirmation of their slandering."

He heard Chuan Gong Zhanglao continue, "Emei Pai's Miss Zhou Zhiruo has fallen into this pervert thief's hand, whether or not she can protect her chastity, is difficult to say. Song Xiongdi, please don't worry, we will certainly help you recapture your beloved wife; we cannot let the matter of Ji Xiaofu be repeated today."

"What Dage [big brother] said was very true," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "Wudang Pai failed to take Yin Liting under their wings in the past, they are not able to shelter Song Qingshu today. Song Xiongdi invests his life in our Clan; if we fail to protect his interest by helping him accomplish his cherished desire, as the Wudang Pai's future Sect Leader, won't his agreement to become a six-pouch disciple of our Clan be in vain?" The crowd of beggars loudly responded, they all said an oath to kill the pervert thief Zhang Wuji and take Song Qingshu's wife back.

Zhao Min put his mouth next to Zhang Wuji's ears and

whispered, "You are a pervert little thief who deserves to die!" She sounded as if she was angered by them, but also mad at him; as if she was complaining and admiring him at the same time, yet her voice also carried a flirtatious tone. Listening to her, Zhang Wuji's heart was swayed; all of a sudden he was having mixed feelings. He thought in agony, "If only she wasn't this cruel and treacherous, and did not kill my cousin, I would be happy to be with her for the rest of my life; I wouldn't have anything to worry."

He heard Song Qingshu vaguely express his gratitude to the crowd of beggars. Zhi Fa Zhanglao asked again, "How did that pervert little thief charm the Tartar Junzhu? Do you know?"

"As an outsider I don't know the details," Song Qingshu replied, "I know that that little witch led the imperial warriors to the Wudang Mountain to capture my Tai Shifu [grand master], but when she saw that pervert thief's face, she quickly withdrew without a fuss, and the great calamity facing Wudang Pai was thwarted. About twenty years ago my San Shishu [third martial (younger) uncle] Yu Daiyan's limbs were broken by some people, and that little witch presented some medicine to that pervert thief, thus the broken bones were healed."

"That is so," Zhi Fa Zhanglo said, "The Wudang Pai was actually a thorn in the imperial government's eyes, if that Tartar Junzhu was not captivated by the deceitful lust and has forgotten her natural disposition, she would not have presented the medicine as a gift to help the enemy. That being said, although this pervert little thief's conduct was despicable, he still have some good feelings toward Tai Shifu and your various martial uncles."

"Mmm," Song Qingshu said, "I prefer to think that he has not

forgotten his roots.”

Chen Youliang said, “Reporting to Bangzhu: After listening to Song Xiongdi’s explanation, I have an idea which will make that pervert little thief, along with the Devil Cult, from top to bottom, to meekly obey our Clan’s order.”

Shi Huolong happily said, “Chen Xiongdi unexpectedly thought an ingenious plan, please explain it quickly.”

“There are too many eyes and ears in here,” Chen Youliang said, “Even though we are all brothers, I am still afraid someone might leak the secret.”

The murmurs in the main hall immediately stopped; some footsteps were heard, about a dozen or so people went out the hall, leaving only several highest-level leaders of the Beggar Clan.

“This matter is to be treated with the highest confidence,” Chen Youliang said, “Song Xiongdi, both Longtou Dage, let us search around this place to make sure nobody is eavesdropping.”

A couple of rustling noise was heard as Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou were jumping onto the roof, while Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu went inspecting around the hall. They looked behind the idol, behind the curtain, behind the inscribed overhead board, everywhere. Zhang Wuji secretly praised Zhao Min’s resourcefulness, as other than this big drum, there was no other hiding place in the main hall. Four people finished their inspection and returned to the hall.

In a low voice Chen Youliang said, “This matter is highly dependent on Song Xiongdi.”

“Me?” Song Qingshu asked in amazement.

“That’s right,” Chen Youliang said, “Zhang Bo Longtou Dage, please give some ‘wu du shi xin san’ [five-poison losing conscience powder] and have Song Xiongdi take it to Mount Wudang, let him secretly put it into Zhang Zhenren [a respectful term to address a Taoist priest] and various Wudang heroes’ food and drink. We are going to wait at the foot of the mountain. If everything goes well, we are going to capture Zhang Zhenren and various Wudang heroes. Won’t we then be able to coerce and disturb that pervert little thief Zhang Wuji so that he obeys our Clan?”

Shi Huolong was first to applaud and called out, “Marvelous, marvelous!”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao also said, “This plan is not bad. Our Clan’s ‘wu du shi xin san’ is very fierce, but if we want to put the poison on Zhang Wuji’s food and drink, I am afraid the Devil Cult guard on him is too tight, so it is very unlikely for us to succeed. Song Xiongdi is a Wudang disciple, so if we want to capture Wudang people, it will be like guarding against the thief who is already in the house, truly inconspicuous, a very cunning strategy, it will be very easy.”

“This ... this ...” Song Qingshu haltingly said, “It means I will have to poison my own father, absolutely impossible.”

Chen Youliang said, “Our Clan’s ‘wu du shi xin san’ is very effective to lose someone’s consciousness, but it is totally harmless to the body. Your honorable father, Song Daxia [great hero Song] is a righteous hero, we respect him very much, we certainly will not harm a single strand of his hair.”

Song Qingshu was still unwilling to comply, he said, “I join

our Clan without asking Tai Shifu and my father's permission first. When they find out in the future, they will certainly hold me accountable; I don't know what the best way to explain this to them would be. However, our Clan has always taken the path of chivalry, no different than Wudang Pai's objective, thus this is not considered a capital crime. But if I am asked to do this unfilial thing, defying my elders, I do not dare to accept."

"Xiongdi," Chen Youliang said, "You have not given this a careful thought. In order to accomplish a great undertaking, we should not be bothered by trivial matters. The people of old sacrificed their loved ones for the sake of great justice, it happened many times in history; let alone our objective is to deal with the Devil Cult. Capturing the various Wudang heroes is nothing more than a way to gain control over that pervert little thief Zhang Wuji. When the Six Major Sects besieged the Devil Cult, didn't Wudang Pai also come in full force?"

"If I do this," Song Qingshu said, "First, my conscience is uneasy. Second, tens of thousands Jianghu people will spit in contempt over me; how can I still have a face to stand on the earth?"

"Do you know why I asked the eight-pouch elders to withdraw from the hall just now?" Chen Youliang asked, "Why did we carefully search from top to bottom, from front to rear? It is exactly because I am afraid somebody might leak the secret. Song Xiongdi, after administering the drug, you also fake losing your consciousness. We will also tie you up along with your Tai Shifu, your honorable father, and your various martial uncles, nobody will suspect you. Other than the seven of us here, who else in this world knows? We will admire you as a hero and a real man who is capable of undertaking an important matter, who would laugh at you?"

Song Qingshu was silent for half a day before haltingly said, "Bangzhu and Chen Dage's [big brother Chen] order, Xiaodi [little brother] really does not dare to disobey. Furthermore, Xiaodi is a new member of our Clan, supposedly must seize every opportunity to obtain a merit; even go through fire or water, I should do it with all my might. Only, a man's life in this world must be based on being filial and righteous; so asking Xiaodi to scheme against my own father, I can't follow this order no matter what."

[Note: previously, Song Qingshu referred to himself as 'Xiongdi' - brother in general term, in this last sentence, he used the term 'Xiaodi' - little/younger brother; denoting a definite change of attitude.]

For the Beggar Clan people the word 'filial' was extremely revered; as the group of beggars heard his last words, they felt it was inappropriate to force him further. But suddenly Chen Youliang laughed coldly and said, "A junior to defy his senior is the big taboo of the Wulin world, I know it, Song Xiongdi does not need to remind me. But I wonder how does Song Xiongdi address Mo Qixia [Seventh Hero Mo]? Is he your senior, or are you his senior?"

Song Qingshu did not answer, after a long while he finally said, "Very well, since Bangzhu and gentlemen give me the order, Xiaodi will comply. But all of you must promise not to endanger my father not even half a part of him, also not to disgrace him in any way. Otherwise, Xiaodi would rather lose my reputation and fall into disgrace than committing this non filial shady business."

Shi Huolong, Chen Youliang and the others were exulted. Chen Youliang said, "That's a great answer. Song Xiongdi can work with us brothers very well. Song Daxia is everybody's

respected senior. Even if Song Xiongdi did not mention it, as his nephews we are going to show him our utmost respect.”

Zhang Wuji felt strange, “Song Shige was always unwilling to comply, but as soon as Chen Youliang mentioned Mo Qishu [seventh (younger) uncle Mo], Song Shige suddenly did not dare to refuse? There must be something fishy here. It seems like, to find out the details, I will have to ask Mo Qishu personally.”

He heard Zhi Fa Zhanglao and Chen Youliang discuss in a whisper about how the Beggar Clan group of warriors was going to go up the mountain after Zhang Sanfeng, Song Yuanqiao and the others were drugged. Each time Chen Youliang proposed something, Shi Huolong would always say, “Very good, wonderful!”

Zhang Bo Longtou said, “Today is still the middle of the winter, the five-poison bugs are still dormant under the surface of the earth, Xiaodi [little brother, referring to himself] must go to the foot of Changbai Mountain [a volcanic mountain in Jilin province] to do some digging. At most in a month, at least twenty days, I will be able to concoct the ‘wu du shi xin san’. The toxicity of the five-poison bugs dug from underneath the ice and snow is not too conspicuous; when it is mixed in the food, it won’t be easily detected. It is the best drug to be used against first-class martial art masters.”

Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, “In that case, Chen Xiongdi and Song Xiongdi better accompany Zhang Bo Longtou to Mount Changbai to get the drug, while the rest of us proceed southward. Within one month, we are going to reconvene in Laohekou [city in Hubei]. Today is the eighth of the twelfth month, let’s set our meeting date to be the eighth of the first month next year.” He also said, “Having Han Lin’er in our

hands is really useful. I am asking Zhang Bang Longtou to guard him well, don't let the Devil Cult take him back. We'd better leave separately to avoid the enemy's detection."

Thereupon, one after another, everybody bid their farewell to the Clan Leader. Zhang Bo Longtou, was the first to leave, heading north along with Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu. A moment later the rest of the beggars left the Mi Le Temple, going their separate ways.

End of Chapter 31 .

Chapter 32 - Ignorant Grievance, Vain Anxiety, Conceited Desire

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly Zhang Wuji's leg swept horizontally, scattering the snow on the ground toward the Four Heroes. It was one of ancient Persian martial art stances recorded on the Sheng Huo Ling. The Four Heroes of Wudang suddenly felt snow flying into their faces, rendering them blind for an instant, they leaped back immediately.

Zhang Wuji waited until the crowd of beggars had gone far and not the least bit of noise was to be heard in the temple before he leaped out of the big drum. Zhao Min followed behind him, brushing her clothes while looking at him with an expression that is a mixture of happiness and anger on her face.

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji angrily said, “You still have a face to see me?”

“What?” Zhao Min’s countenance dropped, “When did I offend Zhang Jiaozhu?”

It was as if Zhang Wuji’s face was covered with frost as he shouted angrily, “You wanted to steal that Yitian Sword and Tulong Saber, I won’t blame you! You abandoned me on that desolate island, I still won’t blame you! But Miss Yin was seriously injured, why did you still treat her ruthlessly? A vicious woman like you is truly rare in the world.” Speaking to this point he was unable to restrain his grief and indignation; moving one step forward, he slapped Zhao Min four times left and right.

Being enshrouded by his overwhelming power, how could Zhao Min evade? ‘Slap, slap, slap, slap,’ both of her cheeks were immediately swollen. Zhao Min was hurt and angered, beads of tears rolled down her cheeks. With a choking voice she said, “You said I stole the Yitian Sword and Tulong Saber, who has seen it? Who said I treated Miss Yin ruthlessly? Tell her to come and confront me directly.”

Zhang Wuji was even angrier, “All right!” he shouted, “I’ll send you to the netherworld to confront her directly.” His left hand circled and his right hand hooked across the back of her neck, while he exerted all his strength.

Zhao Min could not breathe, she stretched out her finger to pierce his chest, but her finger felt like a cotton wool, her strength vanished without a trace. In an instant her face turned purple and she passed out.

Remembering Yin Li's enmity, Zhang Wuji was about to strangle her to death, but looking at her face like that, his heart suddenly softened and he relaxed his grip. Zhao Min fell backward. 'Boom!' the back of her head struck the dark green flagstone of the temple's hall.

It was quite some time later that Zhao Min finally regained her consciousness. She saw Zhang Wuji was staring at her with an anxious look on his face. Seeing her opening her eyes, he let out a relieved breath. Zhao Min asked, "Did you say Miss Yin has passed away?"

Zhang Wuji's anger flared again, he snapped, "After you slashed her seventeen, eighteen times, she ... how could she stay alive?"

With a trembling voice Zhao Min said, "Who ... who said I slash her seventeen, eighteen times? It was Miss Zhou, wasn't it?"

"Miss Zhou will not say anything bad about anybody behind their backs," Zhang Wuji said, "She is not her relative, she won't bring a false charge against you."

"Was it Miss Yin, then?" Zhao Min asked.

Almost shouting Zhang Wuji said, "Miss Yin had already been unable to talk early on. There were only five of us on that desolate island; are you saying that Yifu did it? Or I did it? Or perhaps Miss Yin did it to herself? Humph, I know what's in your heart, you were afraid I might marry my

cousin hence you committed this violent treachery. Let me tell you: I don't care whether she is dead or alive, I have already considered her my wife."

Zhao Min hung her head without saying anything. After being silent for half an afternoon, she asked, "How did you return to the Central Plains?"

With a cold laugh Zhang Wuji said, "It was due to your generosity. You sent your navy to pick us up. Fortunately, my Yifu is not gullible and worthless like me; we have seen through your devious scheme. You dispatched some artillery ships to wait for us on the sea to sink our ship. Your plan has failed."

Zhao Min was gently stroking her red, swollen cheek; she looked at him with a shock, but after a moment her eyes gradually showed pity and affection toward him, and she heaved a long sigh.

Zhang Wuji was afraid his own heart would succumb to her beautiful face and her tempting tender affection; he turned his head around to avoid her eyes, stomped his foot and said, "I have made an oath to avenge Biaomei [female younger cousin]. Just consider me weak and worthless that I am not able to do that today. You committed all kinds of evil and there will come a day you will fall into my hand." As he said that, he walked toward the temple gate in big strides.

He had walked away for about a dozen 'zhang's when Zhao Min pursued and called out, "Zhang Wuji, where are you going?"

"What does it have to do with you?" Zhang Wuji replied.

"I want to speak to Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] and Miss

Zhou,” Zhao Min said, “Please take me to see them.”

“My Yifu will act without mercy, aren’t you going to deliver your life away?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min sneered and said, “Your Yifu may be cruel and merciless, but he is not muddle-headed like you. Besides, if Xie Daxia killed me, your Biaomei’s enmity would be avenged, wouldn’t your wish come true?”

“What do you mean I am muddle-headed?” Zhang Wuji asked, “I only don’t want you to see Yifu.”

Zhao Min smiled and said, “Zhang Wuji, you are muddle-headed. In your heart, you really do not want to lose me; you don’t want Xie Daxia to kill me. Am I right, or am I right?”

As his heart’s deepest secret was revealed, Zhang Wuji could not help but blush. “Don’t talk rubbish!” he snapped, “I let you get away with so many unrighteousness without killing you. It would be best if you stay far away from me, or else I would lose control over myself and kill you personally.”

Zhao Min slowly walked near and said, “I must clear something up with Xie Daxia and Miss Zhou; I do not dare to say anything bad behind anybody’s back, I need to talk clearly with them face to face.”

Zhang Wuji was curious, “About what do you want to talk to them?” he asked.

“Naturally you’ll know it when I see them,” Zhao Min said, “I am not afraid to take my chances; are you afraid?”

Zhang Wuji said rather doubtfully, “It is you who wanted to go, I will not save you if my Yifu do not show mercy on you.”

“You don’t have to worry for me,” Zhao Min said.

“Worry for you?” Zhang Wuji was angry, “Humph! I am looking forward to the day you die.”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “Kill me, then.”

“Pei,” Zhang Wuji spat, ignoring her remark. He quickly walked toward the town. Zhao Min followed him behind.

As they arrived in town, Zhang Wuji halted his steps, turned around and said, “Miss Zhao, I have given you my promise that I will do three things for you. The first was to find the Tulong Saber for you. We can consider this task accomplished. I still owe you two things. If you see my Yifu, you will certainly die. Please leave. Let me handle those two things for you. It won’t be too late to see my Yifu afterwards.

Zhao Min smiled sweetly and said, “I know the real reason you do not want to kill me is because you can’t bear to lose me.”

Zhang Wuji angrily said, “Granted, I don’t have a heart to kill you, so what?”

“I am very happy,” Zhao Min replied, “I’ve always wondered if you love me, but now I know.”

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, “Miss Zhao, I beseech you, please leave now.”

Zhao Min shook her head and said, “I definitely must see Xie Daxia.”

Since she was adamant, Zhang Wuji had no choice but

entered the inn and went to Xie Xun's room. He knocked twice on the door and called out, "Yifu!" while he positioned himself in front of Zhao Min.

He called out twice without receiving any answer from inside the room. Zhang Wuji tried to push the door open, but it was actually locked. He felt strange; his Yifu possessed a very keen pair of ears, as soon as he arrived at the door, his Yifu would most certainly be awakened. If he was somewhere else, why was the door bolted from the inside? He pushed the door exerting a little bit more force and 'crack!' the latch broke. The door swung wide open but Xie Xun was not inside. He saw that one of the window panes was half open; he thought his Yifu must have left from the window.

He went to Zhou Zhiruo's room and called out, "Zhiruo!" two times without receiving any answer. Pushing the door open, he also did not see Zhou Zhiruo inside, but her clothes were folded neatly on the 'kang' [heatable brick bed of northern China].

Zhang Wuji was alarmed, "Could it be that they met some enemies?" he mused. He called the innkeeper to inquire, but the innkeeper said he did not see those two people go out, he also did not hear any noise which would suggest there was some dispute or even fighting.

Zhang Wuji was somewhat relieved; he thought, "Most likely they heard some suspicious noise and went out to track down the enemy." He also thought that although Xie Xun's eyes were blind, his martial art skill was strong; it was a rarity to find someone who could be his match in the present age. Besides, he had the cautious and prudent Zhou Zhiruo as his company, so it was unlikely for them to meet any mishap. Leaping out from Xie Xun's window, he looked to all directions without seeing anything unusual, thereupon he

returned to the room.

Zhao Min said, "Why do you look relieved to see that Xie Daxia is not here?"

"Still talking nonsense," Zhang Wuji said, "When did I look relieved?"

Zhao Min smiled, "Can't I see it on your face?" she said, "As you open the door, you were tense, but now the skin on your face is relaxed."

Ignoring her, Zhang Wuji leaned against the 'kang'. With a chuckle Zhao Min sat on a chair and said, "I know you were afraid Xie Daxia might kill me, luckily he is not here so you are saved from a difficult situation. I know you really cannot bear to lose me."

"What if I really cannot bear to lose you?" Zhang Wuji angrily said.

"I am very happy," Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji bitterly said, "Then why are you repeatedly trying to harm me? Can you bear to lose me?"

Suddenly Zhao Min blushed, "You are right," she said quietly, "Previously I was determined to kill you, but after the Green Willow Manor incident, if I ever have the intention to harm you, let the Heaven punish and the Earth destroy me, Minmin Timur. After I die, let me perish forever in the eighteenth level of hell, never to be reincarnated for tens of thousands of years."

Listening to her speaking very seriously, Zhang Wuji interrupted, "Then why did you abandon me on that

deserted island for the sake of a sword and a saber?"

"Since you said so, I can't dispute it even if I have a hundred mouths," Zhao Min said, "Let us wait for Xie Daxia and Miss Zhou to come back, so that the four of us can sort things out clearly."

Zhang Wuji said, "Your mouth is full of sweet but insincere words. You have deceived me one person, must you also deceive my Yifu and Miss Zhou?"

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Why are you resigned on being deceived by me? Because in your heart you like me, do you not?"

"What if I do?" Zhang Wuji vehemently said.

"I am very happy," Zhao Min replied. Zhang Wuji saw her talking and laughing as sweet as a flower, moving the hearts of those who watch her. Noticing that her cheeks were still red and swollen from his four heavy slaps earlier, he could not restrain from feeling regret and pity; therefore, he turned his head around to avoid looking at her.

Zhao Min said, "We were delayed in the temple for half a day, I am starving." She called for the innkeeper. Producing a small ingot of gold, she told him to quickly prepare a set of the highest quality dish and wine. The innkeeper repeatedly obeyed, and in an instant he had some fruits and light appetizers delivered to their room, followed by the wine and the main course.

Zhang Wuji said, "Let's wait for Yifu to come back, then we'll eat together."

"My life might be gone as soon as Xia Daxia is back," Zhao

Min said, "I'd rather be a ghost with a full stomach." Zhang Wuji noticed that although she said such a thing, her manner and her face showed confidence. Zhao Min continued, "I still have plenty of gold here, we can always tell the innkeeper to prepare another set of banquet."

Zhang Wuji coldly said, "I do not dare to eat and drink together with you. Who knows when you are going to apply the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'."

Zhao Min's face sank as she heard that, "You don't want to eat, then don't eat," she said, "Otherwise you will be killed by my poison." Without waiting for an answer, she started to eat.

Zhang Wuji called for the kitchen to deliver some flatbread, and then staying as far as possible from her, he sat on the 'kang' to gobble his food.

There was a very sumptuous dish of broiled lamb and roasted chicken, fried beef and chopped fish, on Zhao Min's table. She ate for a while before tears starting to drip on her rice bowl. She managed to control herself and ate some more before she finally put the chopsticks down and she dropped her head on the table, sobbing.

After crying for half a day, she wiped off her tears, apparently she felt better. Looking out the window, she said to herself, "It will be dark in a couple of hours. I wonder how that Han Lin'er is. Once we lost his track, it would not be easy to rescue him."

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold. "That's right," he said while standing up, "I need to rescue Han Xiongdi first, and then I'll come back."

“Shameless,” Zhao Min said, “Nobody speaks to you, who wants you to interfere?”

Seeing her angry at one time and bashful at another, happy at one time and anxious at another, Zhang Wuji could not help to feel both hatred and affection toward her at the same time; truly he did not know how to deal with her. Hastily he finished the half flatbread in his hand in three mouthfuls, and then went out the door.

“I’ll go with you,” Zhao Min said.

“I don’t want to take you,” Zhang Wuji replied.

“Why?” Zhao Min asked.

“You are the murderer of my Biaomei,” Zhang Wuji replied, “How can I be together with an enemy?”

“All right,” Zhao Min said, “Go alone, then!”

Zhang Wuji went out the door, but suddenly he turned around and asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I am going to wait for your Yifu to come back,” Zhao Min said, “I’ll tell him that you are going out to rescue Han Lin’er.”

“My Yifu hates evil people as if they are his personal enemy,” Zhang Wuji said, “How can he spare your life?”

Zhao Min heaved a deep sigh. “Then that is my cruel fate,” she said, “What can I do?”

Zhang Wuji hesitated for a moment before saying, “You’d better avoid him for now, we’ll talk when I come back.”

Zhao Min shook her head, "I don't have any good hiding place."

"Very well!" Zhang Wuji said, "We'll go save Han Lin'er together, and come back here to face him together."

Zhao Min laughed and said, "This time it is you who wants me to accompany you; definitely it is not me who clings for dear life to you and insists on going out with you."

"You are my black star," Zhang Wuji said, "Just consider it my bad luck to bump into you."

Zhao Min gave him one of her captivating smiles, "Wait here for a moment," she said, as she slipped out the door.

Quite some time later, Zhao Min opened the door, now wearing woman's clothing, with mink fur coat and scarlet embroidered garment inside; she looked extremely stunning. Zhang Wuji did not expect she would bring such exquisite and expensive clothing inside her bundle; he thought, "This woman is very shrewd, her actions are beyond anybody's expectations."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Zhao Min asked, "Do these clothes look nice?"

"Face like a peach blossom, heart like a viper," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhao Min burst out in laughter and said, "Many thanks for Zhang Da Jiaozhu's [great cult leader] highest compliment. Zhang Jiaozhu, why don't you change into some nice clothing?"

Zhang Wuji sounded hurt, "I have always been wearing tattered clothes since I was little. If you don't like my ragged attire, you are free not to travel with me."

"Don't be overly sensitive," Zhao Min said, "I only want to see how you look wearing some nice clothes. Wait here, I am going out to buy some clothes. Those beggars must have entered the great wall anyway, with our speed, I am not afraid we cannot overtake them." Without waiting for his answer, she slipped out the door again.

Zhang Wuji sat on the 'kang', while secretly scolding himself for not able to stand firm and letting this girl play with him on her palms. "Obviously, she was my Biaomei's murderer, yet I talked and laughed with her. Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, what kind of man are you? How can you have a face to be the Ming Cult Jiaozhu, in command over all those warriors?"

He waited for a long time and Zhao Min had not returned, the sky gradually turned dark. "Why do I have to wait for her?" he thought, "I'd better go alone to rescue Han Lin'er." But as soon as he had that thought, he remembered something else. What if she returned, bringing all those clothing, and bump into Xie Xun? What if with one slap Xie Xun strikes the top of her head, bursting her skull open and scattering her brains, and she died a violent death? He saw it in his mind clothes and shoes scattered around the room. Thinking about this possibility, he broke into a cold sweat.

He sat down, and stood up, sat down, and stood back up, while letting his imagination run wild, until at last he heard dainty footsteps and delicate fragrance assaulting his nostrils as Zhao Min entered the room with two large packages on her hands.

"What took you so long?" Zhang Wuji said, "No need to

change, let us go pursue the enemy!”

Zhao Min smiled and said, “You have waited this long, what harm does it have to wait a little bit longer just to change you clothes? I have also bought a pair of horses, so we can pursue all night long.” While saying that she untied the packages and produced clothes, shoes and socks. “This is such a small town,” she said, “There is nothing nice to buy. You’ll have to make do with it. Wait till we get back to Dadou [grand capital, modern day Beijing], we’ll buy mink fur coat and some nice clothing.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart turned cold, “Miss Zhao,” he grimly said, “If you think I am after riches and honor by submitting to the royal government, you’d better give up that idea now. I, Zhang Wuji, am a descendant of Han people, even if conferred the title of prince, there is no way that I would surrender to the Mongols.”

Zhao Min sighed and said, “Zhang Da Jiaozhu, look closely, is this Mongolian clothing, or Han clothing?” While saying that she lifted up a set of gray leather-lined garment. As he saw that she had bought Han people’s attire, Zhang Wuji nodded his head. Zhao Min turned around and said, “Look carefully, am I wearing a Mongolian Princess’ attire, or a common Han woman clothing?”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was thumping madly, previously he only noticed that her clothes was exquisite and expensive, he did not pay attention whether it was Mongolian or Han clothing. Now that she mentioned it, he realized that she was dressed up as a Han girl. He saw her cheeks were blushing, while her eyes were moist. Suddenly he understood her heart clearly. “You ... you ...” he stammered.

In a low voice Zhao Min said, “Now that I know you don’t

want to lose me, I don't care about anything else. I don't care about Mongol or Han. You are a Han, I am also a Han. You are a Mongol, I am also a Mongol. In your mind you are always thinking about important matters such as army and country, the difference between Chinese and barbarians, and about their rise and fall, their influence and military prowess. Wuji Gege [big brother Wuji, term of endearment], in my heart I only have one thing: you. I don't care whether you are a good man or a scoundrel [lit. bad egg], to me it doesn't make any difference." [Translator's note: before I offend anybody, the dictionary gives the character 'yi' a definition of 'non-Han people, especially to the east of China, or barbarians.']

Zhang Wuji was touched listening to her expressing her infinitely tender feeling, he was dizzy with confusing thoughts and was dumbfounded for a long time before he finally able to speak, "Did you kill my Biaomei because you were afraid I was going to take her as my wife?"

Zhao Min said, nearly shouting, "I did not kill Miss Yin. You believe me, fine. You don't believe me, fine. I am telling you the truth."

Zhang Wuji sighed. "Miss Zhao," he said, "You love me this much; I am not a piece of wood nor am I a stone, how can I not appreciate it? But why is it that to this very day you are lying to me still?"

Zhao Min said, "I used to think that being intelligent and shrewd, I would gain an upper hand on everything; who would have thought that the things of the world are difficult to predict? Wuji Gege, let us not go out today, you wait for Xie Daxia here, I wait for Miss Zhou in her room."

"Why?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Don't ask me why," Zhao Min replied, "You don't have to worry over Han Lin'er, I assure you that we will rescue him alive." Finished speaking, she whisked out the door, walking toward Zhou Zhiruo's room, and closed the door.

Zhang Wuji did not immediately understand what she was saying. He sat on the 'kang', pondered deeply. Suddenly he a thought came into his mind "Is it possible that she found out that Zhou Zhiruo and I are engaged, and thus feeling that harming my Biaomei one person is not enough, is she thinking to harm Zhou Zhiruo as well? Could it be that after leaving the Mi Le Fo Temple, the Xuanming Elders came to this inn to deal with Yifu and Zhiruo?"

Once he remembered Xuanming Elders, he was panic-stricken. Lu Zhangke and He Biweng were very strong martial art-wise, even if Xie Xun's eyes were not blind, he might not necessarily be able to fight them one against two. He leaped up and briskly walked toward Zhao Min's door. "Miss Zhao," he called out, "Where did your subordinates, the Xuanming Er Lao, go?"

From behind the door Zhao Min replied, "Most likely they thought I managed to escape and withdraw inside the Wall, so they pursue to the south."

"Are you telling me the truth?" Zhang Wuji asked.

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, "Why do you ask? Since you don't believe what I say..."

Zhang Wuji was at a loss for words; he stared blankly at the door. Zhao Min said, "Supposing that I told you I sent the Xuanming Er Lao to this inn to kill Xie Daxia and your beloved Miss Zhou, would you believe me?"

Her last words had touched the most sensitive spot on Zhang Wuji's mind; immediately his foot flew up to kick the door open. With the veins on his forehead bulging out and a trembling voice he shouted, "You ... you ..."

"Seeing him like that, Zhao Min was scared; she regretted having said such things. "I was just scaring you," she hastily said, "There is no such thing. You must not take it seriously."

Staring hard at her, Zhang Wuji slowly said, "You are not afraid of coming to this inn to see my Yifu. You kept saying that you want to confront them directly. Could it be that it was because you knew they are no longer alive?" While saying that, he moved two steps forward until he was less than three feet away from her. He raised his palm high, ready to strike her to her death.

Looking directly into his eyes, Zhao Min gravely said, "Zhang Wuji, let me tell you this: in the matters on this earth, you cannot rashly believe what other says unless you witness it with your own eyes. Furthermore, you cannot let your own imagination run wild. You want to kill me, fine, just do it. But what if your Yifu comes back? How would you feel then?"

Listening to her reprimand, Zhang Wuji was somewhat ashamed; he said, "As long as my Yifu is safe and sound, I'll consider myself very fortunate. You must not joke about my Yifu's safety and well-being."

Zhao Min nodded. "I shouldn't say those things, I only have myself to blame; you should not feel bad."

Hearing her admitting her own mistake, Zhang Wuji's heart softened. Smiling slightly he said, "I was too rude and rash, and thus offended you." Finished speaking he returned to

Xie Xun's room.

He waited all night, but until dawn neither Xie Xun nor Zhou Zhiruo came back. Zhang Wuji was even more anxious. He took a quick breakfast then had a discussion with Zhao Min about where they would go next. Zhao Min creased her eyebrows and said, "This is really strange. I think we'd better try to overtake Shi Huolong and his company, and think of a way to eavesdrop."

Zhang Wuji nodded. "Let's do it." Immediately they settled their room bills, and left a message with the innkeeper that if Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo return, they were to wait in that inn. The inn helper led a pair of red steeds from the stable.

Zhang Wuji saw that the steeds' hides were smooth and shiny, with long legs and strong bodies, the signs of top quality horses. He could not restrain from clucking his tongue in admiration, thinking that these horses must belong to the people under her command who were trailing the Beggar Clan to this place. She must have fetched them when she went out to buy some clothes the previous day. Zhao Min showed a faint smile as she mounted the horse.

Two riders galloped side by side heading south. To the onlookers, their horses looked like dragons, the two riders, a man and a woman, were wearing exquisite and expensive-looking clothes, their appearances smart and beautiful, they must be a young couple from a rich, high-ranking government official's family who were out travelling.

That day they galloped for more than two hundred 'li's [1 li is approximately 0.5 km], and after spending the night en route, they continued their journey at daybreak the next morning. By midday, they felt the north wind was blowing stronger on their backs, with overcast clouds seemingly hanging over close to their heads. After twenty more 'li's,

big, goose down-like snowflakes started to fall. Along the way, Zhang Wuji did say almost nothing to Zhao Min. Seeing that the snow was getting heavier, he still did not utter a single word from his place in the front. That day, they were actually riding through a remote mountainous path. By nightfall the snow had reached over a foot deep, although their mounts were divine steeds, they could not go further. Zhang Wuji realized the sky was getting darker and darker. He stood on the saddle and looked around, but did not see a single building; he was indecisive.

“Miss Zhao,” he said, “What do you think? I am afraid our horses won’t be able to take it anymore if we hurry along.”

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “You only know the horses won’t be able to take it anymore, but you don’t care whether the people will live or die.”

Zhang Wuji was regretful; he thought, “I have Jiu Yang Shen Gong [divine energy from the Nine Yang Manual] in my body, I don’t feel weary or cold. In my eagerness to save people, I am being inconsiderate towards her.”

Traveling a little bit more, he suddenly heard a cracking noise, a roebuck fled from their left, running toward the mountain. “I’ll catch it for our dinner,” Zhang Wuji said.

Leaping down from his saddle, he followed the roebuck trail on the snow, chasing it straight down the mountain. After circling a small hill, under the dim evening fog he saw that roebuck was running straight into a cave. Exerting his strength, he flew like an arrow toward the roebuck, and caught it by the back of its neck before it entered the cave. The roebuck turned its head around trying to bite Zhang Wuji’s wrist. Zhang Wuji exerted all his strength to his fingers and ‘crack’ he snapped the roebuck’s neck.

He noticed that although the cave was not too big, it could easily give shelter to two of them for the night. Carrying the roebuck, he returned to Zhao Min and said, "There is a cave over on that side, let us spend the night here. What do you think?"

Zhao Min nodded, but suddenly she blushed. Raising the reins, she steered the horse toward the cave.

Zhang Wuji led the horses towards the slope and tied them underneath two big pine trees, to protect them from the snow, and then he looked for some dried branches to build a fire on the cave entrance. The cave was clean, with no trace of filthy animal excrement inside. Looking toward the inside, all he could see was impenetrable darkness. Thereupon he skinned the roebuck, washed it with snow, and roasted it on the fire.

Zhao Min took her mink fur coat and spread it on the ground. Under the blazing fire, the cave was as warm as springtime. Zhang Wuji happened to turn his head around. Under the flickering fire light, he saw her pretty face was even more stunning. They looked at each other and smiled; it was as if the hunger and cold of the day melted in that one smile.

When the roebuck was done, each of them ripped the hind leg and ate. Zhang Wuji heaped more firewood to the fire. Leaning against the wall of the cave he said, "Why don't you sleep?" Zhao Min smiled sweetly. Leaning against the opposite wall, she closed her eyes. Zhang Wuji's nose caught an intermittent whiff of fragrance coming from her body. He saw her cheeks were rosy, and he felt a strong urge to kiss her, but he held back the thought and closed his eyes to sleep.

They slept until midnight when suddenly they heard hoof beats from a distance. Zhang Wuji woke up with a start. Cocking his ears he could hear four horses coming from the south running to the north. The snow was still falling heavily outside the cave. He thought, "In the middle of the night, under a heavy snowfall, rushing along braving cold weather, they must have an extremely urgent matter to attend."

The sound hoof beats suddenly stopped as they came near to their place. A moment later the hoof beats started again, surprisingly, the sound turned toward their cave. Zhang Wuji was alarmed, "This cave is remotely located on the back of the mountain, if I did not chase that roebuck, I would not have found this place. How can they find their way over here?" But immediately he realized, "That's right, we left our tracks on the snow. The tracks must still be visible although it has been snowing heavily for half a night."

By now Zhao Min was awake; in a low voice she said, "Perhaps some enemy are coming. Let us hide and see what kind of people they are." As she was saying that, she grabbed some snow outside the cave and quenched out the fire with it.

By that time the sound of hoof beats ceased, but they heard four people walking on the snow toward the cave. In a short while they have came within a dozen 'zhang's away [1 zhang is approximately 10 ft or 3.3 meters] from the cave mouth.

In a low voice Zhang Wuji said, "These four people's movement is very agile, they must be very high skilled martial art masters." If they went out to cave to seek hiding place, they would definitely be detected by these four people. Without argument Zhao Min pulled his hand to enter

further into the cave.

The deeper they went, the narrower the cave became, but surprisingly the cave was very deep. About a 'zhang' later there was a bend on the passageway. Suddenly they heard one of the people outside say, "There is a cave here."

The voice sounded very familiar to Zhang Wuji, since it belonged to his Si Shishu [fourth martial (younger) uncle] Zhang Songxi. While he was pleasantly surprised, the other man said, "The hoof prints and footprints are indeed heading towards this cave." It was Yin Liting.

Zhang Wuji was about to call when Zhao Min reached out to cover his mouth. She whispered in his ear, "It would be very awkward if they saw you and I in this cave together."

Zhang Wuji realized she was right; Zhao Min and he did not do anything shameful, but if the various martial uncles saw a young man and young woman pair sleeping together in a cave, how could they explain? Moreover, Zhao Min was a Mongolian princess who had held Zhang Songxi, Yin Liting, and the others captive at the Wan An Temple, where they were disgraced. It would be extremely awkward if the enemies meet here. He thought, "I'll wait until Zhang Si Shu [fourth (younger) uncle Zhang, Yin Liu Shu [sixth (younger) uncle Yin] and the others leave the cave, and then I'll appear alone and meet them; and thus avoiding this awkward situation."

He heard Yu Lianzhou's voice saying, "Uh! There is a remnant of some firewood in here. Hmm, and some blood-soaked roebuck skin too."

Another voice responded, "My heart has always been disturbed. I hope nothing bad happened to Qidi [seventh (younger) brother]." It was Song Yuanqiao's voice.

Learning that his four martial uncles, Song, Yu, Zhang and Yin, were going out at together to find Mo Shenggu, and hearing from the tone of their voices, Zhang Wuji deduced that his Qi Shishu [seventh martial (younger) uncle] must have met some powerful enemy; he was somewhat anxious.

He heard Zhang Songxi laugh and say, “Da Shige [first martial (older) brother] always takes a good care of Qidi, just like when he was the inexperienced, teenage martial brother; while in fact, for the past few years Mo Qixia [seventh hero Mo] has earned an awe-inspiring fame for his fighting prowess. He has early on surpassed his own former prestige. Even if he met a powerful enemy, Qidi alone would not necessarily be unable to deal with it.”

Yin Liting said, “I do not worry over Qidi as much as I worry over that child Wuji. His whereabouts is unknown. Currently, he is the Ming Cult Jiaozhu. A tall tree invites strong wind. A lot of people want to deal with him. Although his martial art skill is high, he is too naïve, he does not understand the sinister crisis of the Jianghu. I am afraid he might fall into some villain’s wicked scheme.”

Zhang Wuji was touched, thinking that his martial uncles’ kindness to him was very deep; they kept thinking about his safety all the times. Zhao Min put her mouth on his ear and whispered, “I am a villain and at this moment you have fallen into my wicked scheme. Do you know it?”

He heard Song Yuanqiao say, “Qidi is heading north to look for Wuji. Apparently, he has picked up some scents on his whereabouts. Only, the eight-character message he left in a hurry in that Tianjin’s inn is confusing.”

Zhang Songxi said, “A change in our Sect, needs to be taken

care of urgently. [men2 hu4 you3 bian4, ji2 xu1 qing1 li3 – eight characters] Could it be that there is a scum in the community? Could it be that that child Wuji ...” Speaking to this point, he suddenly stopped. His voice was filled with deep anxiety.

Yin Liting said, “This child Wuji is not the kind who would corrupt his own Sect, I am sure of that.”

“I am afraid that little witch Zhao Min is too treacherous for him,” Zhang Songxi said, “Wuji is still too young and hot-blooded; he might be seduced by a pretty face like his father, who in the end brought ruin and shame upon himself ...”

Four men no longer talked; they all sighed deeply. A moment later, Zhang Wuji heard the sound of flint as they lighted the wood to build a fire and cook their meals.

The fire light reached the back of the cave. Although they were hidden behind the bend, Zhang Wuji was still able to see Zhao Min’s face vaguely. Her expression showed resentment and anger; he thought Zhang Songxi’s words earlier must have angered her very much. Zhang Wuji understood her resentment, yet he was also startled, “What Zhang Si Shu [fourth uncle] said is reasonable. My mother did not do anything evil, yet my father was implicated by her actions. This Miss Zhao has killed my Biaomei, disgraced my Tai Shifu [grand master] and my numerous martial uncles. But how can she be compared to my Mama?” Thinking to this point, his heart was thumping madly, he thought, “If they find out Miss Zhao and I are in here, the entire water of the Yellow River would not wash me clean.”

He heard Song Yuanqiao speak with a trembling voice, “Si Di [fourth brother], there is suspicion in my heart, but I feel

uncomfortable to say it out loud. I am afraid I am offending our own deceased Wu Di [fifth (younger) brother].”

Zhang Songxi slowly said, “Is Dage [first brother] afraid that Wuji might suddenly harm Qidi?”

Song Yuanqiao did not answer, but although Zhang Wuji could not see him, he thought that Song Yuanqiao must have nodded his head slowly.

He heard Zhang Songxi continue, “This child Wuji is honest and generous. Reasonably speaking, that is very unlikely. I only worry that Qidi is hot-tempered and acts rudely. He might force Wuji and put him into a difficult position. Add to the fact that little witch Zhao Min is very crafty, she might incite those two against each other. If that happens, then ... then ... Ay, a man’s heart is unfathomable, the matters of this world are difficult to predict. Till from the ancient times, it is difficult for a hero to resist a beautiful face. I only hope Wuji will be able to control his emotions well when facing important matters.”

“Dage, Si Ge,” Yin Liting said, “You are talking empty talk, isn’t that a groundless fear? [lit. the man of Qi fears the sky falling] Qidi might not necessarily face a grave danger.”

“But after seeing the sword Qidi used to carry, I cannot help but feel fearful and apprehensive; I can’t eat and sleep in peace,” Song Yuanqiao said.

“This matter is very unclear,” Yu Lianzhou said, “For people like us, martial arts practitioners, we can’t casually leave our weapon anywhere. Let alone this sword which was given by Shifu. The sword exists the person exists, the sword perished, the person ...” Speaking to this word ‘person’, he suddenly stopped; he could not endure to say the word

'perishes'.

Hearing that Mo Shenggu abandoned the sword given by his master and that his four martial uncles suspected he had something to do with it, Zhang Wuji was very concerned, but he was also angry.

A moment later, he faintly smelled a whiff of aroma coming from inside the cave, mixed with the smell of wild beast. Apparently, the cave was very deep and either at that moment there was a wild beast hiding inside, or the cave was actually some wild beasts' den. He was afraid that Song Yuanqiao and the others might also smell the aroma and investigate and then he would be found out. Without daring to open his mouth, he pulled Zhao Min's hand, quietly taking her deeper into the cave. He stretched out his left hand forward to guard against bumping into some protruding rocks.

They only walked for three steps when they rounded another turn. Suddenly Zhang Wuji's left hand bumped into something soft and smooth; seemingly it was a human body. He was shocked, as if a lightning stroke him, "It doesn't matter whether this person is a friend or foe, as soon as he makes the slightest noise, Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] and the others will know we are here."

Immediately his left hand moved downward to press the five vital acupoints on that person's chest and abdomen, followed by a grab towards that person's wrist. To his surprise, Zhang Wuji felt as if he was touching an ice-cold object. It turned out that person had given up his breath for a long time. Under the very dim light from outside, he focused his eyes to look at that man's face and vaguely recognized this lifeless body as his Qi Shishu [seventh martial uncle] Mo Shenggu. In his shock, without thinking whether Song Yuanqiao and the others might hear him, he

carried the corpse several steps toward the mouth of the cave. Under the brighter fire light, he could see clearly that it was indeed Mo Shenggu. He saw that Mo Shenggu's face was bloodless and his eyes had not been closed yet, as if he was afraid of what he saw before death. Zhang Wuji was shocked and grieved, and stared blankly for a moment.

As he was walking, Song Yuanqiao and the others heard the noise. "There is someone inside!" Yu Lianzhou shouted. Cold rays flashed as the Four Heroes of Wudang unsheathed their swords at the same instant.

Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly. "I am carrying Mo Qi Shu's [seventh uncle Mo] body while hiding in here. I cannot escape the accusation of being his murderer in any way." Recalling how Mo Shenggu had always treated him lovingly, and now he had lost his life in such a miserable state, Zhang Wuji's mind was extremely sorrowful. Within that short period of time, 1,100 thoughts flashed in his mind; he actually did not give any thought on how he was going to defend himself against Song Yuanqiao and the others.

Zhao Min was able to think a lot quicker than Zhang Wuji; brandishing her sword she dashed out toward the exit. 'Swish, swish, swish, swish!' four times, she executed Emei Pai's staking-it-all sword stances toward the Four Heroes of Wudang. While the Four Heroes raised their swords to parry, Zhao Min had already broken through the cave entrance, and leaped on one of the horses the Four Heroes rode. As Song Yuanqiao's sword arrived, she blocked it backhandedly while giving the horse's stomach a good kick. The horse neighed in pain and galloped away.

While Zhao Min was still basking in her successful attempt to escape, suddenly she felt so much pain on her back that she saw stars and was not able to breathe, as Yu Lianzhou

flew and struck his palm down. She heard the Four Heroes of Wudang utilizing their qing-gong [lightness kungfu] to pursue. She thought, "If I can escape farther, he'll have time to get away from the cave. Otherwise, how can we wash away this undeserving injustice? Luckily all these four people are pursuing me, they do not think that there is someone else in the cave." Yet she felt the pain on her chest was unbearable. Stretching the sword behind, she pricked the horse's butt; the horse let out a long neigh and ran even faster.

At first Zhang Wuji was startled to see Zhao Min break through, and then he realized she was luring the tiger out of the mountain to give him a chance to escape. Thereupon he hurriedly went out the cave carrying Mo Shenggu's body. He heard Zhao Min and the Four Heroes of Wudang were heading east; thus he ran to the west.

After running for about two 'li's, he hid the body behind a large rock, before returning to the main road, and then jumped to the top of a big tree. His heart was still beating madly even after a long time. He thought about Mo Shenggu's tragic death and could not restrain his tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"Our Wudang Pai has never experienced a disaster like this," he thought, "I wonder who might have killed Qi Shishu? The ribs on his back are broken, obviously he was killed by a palm strength."

About an hour later, he heard three horses coming from the east. By the light reflected from the snow, he could see Song Yuanqiao and Yu Lianzhou each riding a horse, while Yin Liting and Zhang Songxi shared a mount. He heard Yu Lianzhou said, "This witch has eaten my palm. Both the rider and the horse fell into a ravine, I don't think they are going

to live.”

“Only today can we pay back the disgrace of the imprisonment at the Wan An Temple,” Zhang Songxi said, “To think that she was unexpectedly hiding in that cave, human affairs are like a fantasy, totally beyond anybody’s guess.”

“Si Ge [fourth brother],” Yin Liting said, “What do you think she was doing, sneakily being alone in that cave?”

“That is hard to guess,” Zhang Songxi said, “Killing that witch is nothing. We will be really happy if we can find Qidi.”

Four people went farther and farther away, until their voices could not be heard anymore. Zhang Wuji waited until Song Yuanqiao and the others went far before he hastily jumped down the tree and rushed to the east, following the horse hoof prints on the snow. All along, his anxiety was unbearable, he thought, “Although she is crafty, this time she was risking her life to save me. If because of this she met her fate, I ... I ...” He ran faster and faster that in a short moment he had covered four, five ‘li’s until he finally reached the edge of a cliff.

He saw blotches of dark red blood on the snowy ground, with random footprints all around him. There was a large indentation, where a large rock was perched by the edge of the cliff. It seemed like when she reached this place, in her confusion Zhao Min could not see the way, and thus both she and her horse had fallen together into the ravine below.

“Miss Zhao, Miss Zhao!” Zhang Wuji called out. He repeated his call four, five times, but there was no answer. He was even more anxious. Looking down from the edge of the cliff, he saw a deep ravine, but in the dark of the night, he could

not see the bottom. The cliff wall was very steep; there was no place for him to set his feet on.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped over the edge with his face against the cliff wall, and then slid down. After sliding about three, four 'zhang's, he slipped even faster. Immediately he exerted his strength on his ten fingers, trying to grab the snowy cliff wall, and thus he manages to slow down before coasting down again.

By doing this five, six times, finally he reached the bottom of the ravine. He felt his feet were landing on a soft object. Hastily he leaped sideways. Turned out he was stepping on the horse's belly. He saw Zhao Min was still seated on the saddle, with her hands tightly grabbed the horse's neck. Zhang Wuji reached out to feel her breath, and to his relief he felt a slight breathing, but she was unconscious.

The bottom of the ravine was dark, the winter snow had not yet melted, and the accumulation of snow actually reached his waist. He presumed since Zhao Min was seated on the saddle, the horse took the full brunt of the falling momentum and died from the impact, but Zhao Min's life was saved, she only fainted. Zhang Wuji checked her pulse and found out that although she was heavily injured, her life was not in danger. Thereupon he embraced her in his bosom with their four palms holding each other, and he transmitted his internal energy to treat her internal injury.

Since the injury Zhao Min received was from his own Wudang Sect, treating it was not too difficult. In less than an hour she slowly squirmed and regained her consciousness. Zhang Wuji kept sending out the Jiu Yang energy steadily into her system.

In more than an hour later, the sky gradually brightened.

‘Wah!’ Zhao Min vomited a mouthful of blood. “Are they gone?” she said in a weak voice, “Did they see you?”

Zhang Wuji was very appreciative and grateful that her main concern was whether he could escape the undeserved accusation. “They did not see me,” he said, “You ... you have suffered a lot.” His mouth was speaking, but the stream of energy flowing out did not stop.

Zhao Min closed her eyes. Although her limbs were void of any strength, her chest and abdomen felt very warm and comfortable. After the Jiu Yang energy circled her system several times, she turned her head and smiled. “Take a rest, I feel much better,” she said.

Zhang Wuji’s arms encircled her waist and pressed his right cheek to her left cheek. “You have saved my reputation,” he said, “That is more important than saving my life ten times.”

Zhao Min giggled and said, “I am a treacherous, evil little witch. To me, reputation is nothing; life is more important.”

Right at that moment, they suddenly heard an angry voice from above the cliff, loud and clear, “Damn witch! So you have not died yet. How did you kill Mo Qixia [seventh hero Mo]? Quickly admit it!” It was Yu Lianzhou’s voice.

Zhang Wuji was very shocked; he did not expect his four martial uncles would return. Zhao Min said, “Turn your head around, don’t let them see your face.”

“Thief witch!” Zhang Songxi shouted, “If you don’t answer, we’ll smash you with big rocks!”

Zhao Min looked up and saw Song Yuanqiao and the others, four people, were all holding a big rock in their hands. They only need ready to throw the rocks down, and Zhang Wuji’s

and her own lives would be difficult to protect. She whispered into Zhang Wuji's ear, "Tear off your leather coat, cover your face, and carry me out of here."

Following her instruction, Zhang Wuji tore off a piece of his leather coat and covered his face by tying a knot behind his head; he also pushed down his fur hat on his forehead, until only his pair of eyes was exposed.

The Four Heroes of Wudang had been successful in chasing Zhao Min and forcing her to fall into the ravine, but these four men were veterans of the Jianghu; they were vastly experienced and well-informed. They knew with her honorable position as a princess, she would not wander alone without any bodyguard. Four people pretended they went far away on horsebacks, but after several 'li's, they tied the horses on a tree by the roadside, and then quietly came back. They returned to the cave first and lighted some torches to explore the inside. They saw the carcasses of two 'fragrant deer' [??, xiang1 zhang1 - I don't know what kind of animal this is], which were covered with blood after being bitten by some wild beast, the fragrance from their bodies was still lingering in the air. Four people continued exploring around the cave, and finally found Zhang Wuji's tracks. They followed the tracks and found Mo Shenggu's body, but saw his hands and feet were badly bitten by some wild animals. The Four Heroes' grief and indignation was indescribable; Yin Liting broke out in crying.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Yu Lianzhou said, "This witch Zhao Min's martial art is not weak, but she could not possibly kill Qidi based on her skill alone. Liu Di [sixth (younger) brother), don't be too sad. We will look for all the murderers, and kill them one by one to avenge Qidi's life."

Zhang Songxi said, "Let us wait in hiding around the cave.

Come daybreak, that witch's subordinates might come here looking for her." His thought was usually full of wisdom and strategy, Song Yuanqiao and the others had always listened to his counsel; therefore, suppressing their sadness, they looked for large rocks on either side of the cave and went hiding.

When dawn came and they still did not see anybody looking for Zhao Min, the Four Heroes returned to the cliff where Zhao Min fell to take a look. They faintly heard voices from down below, and when they looked down, they saw a man in brocade clothes was holding Zhao Min in his arms; turned out this witch had not died yet. The Four Heroes wanted to find out the cause of Mo Shenggu's death, hence they did not want to kill these two with the rocks.

This snow covered ravine was shaped like a deep well, with steep cliff all around it. The only way out was a narrow crevice on the northwest corner. Zhang Songxi shouted, "Yuan dogs! Hurry up and climb from that crevice. If you tarry, we'll throw the rocks down."

Zhang Wuji realized his Si Shibo [fourth martial (older) uncle] did not recognize him and thought he was a Mongolian, which was not surprising, considering he was wearing a fancy-looking clothes, also because he was with Zhao Min. But looking around, he did not see any place he could hide; if the Four Heroes threw the rocks down, he might be able to jump and escape, but Zhao Min's life would be difficult to protect. Therefore, his only choice right now was go up and take whatever comes one step at a time. Consequently, he carried Zhao Min and slowly crawled up via the narrow crevice.

He made deliberately made his martial art skill look weak, he would walk several steps, then slipped back down again. It turned out that this narrow crevice was really difficult to

climb, he pretended to be even weaker by loudly gasping for breath and looked to be in a very difficult situation. Within an hour he had fallen down seventeen, eighteen times, before he finally reached the level ground.

Initially he was thinking of running away with Zhao Min as soon as they were out of the snowy valley. He thought relying on his qing gong, although he carried one person, the Four Heroes might still not be able to catch up with him. But Zhang Songxi was very smart, he had already noticed that the way this man climbed up the mountain in a distressed manner was somewhat artificial; he then informed his three martial brothers to spread out on four corners; as soon as Zhang Wuji set his foot on the ground, the tip of four unsheathed swords were less than half a foot from his body.

“Thief Tartar,” Song Yuanqiao hatefully said, “Do you think you can escape alive by covering your face with fur? Who killed Wudang Pai’s Mo Qixia? Quickly tell us! If you lie even for half a word, I am going to cut your Tartar dog’s flesh a thousand slashes, ten thousand pieces; open up your belly and split open your chest.”

Actually, Song Yuanqiao was a calm and composed man, but seeing how Mo Shenggu died in such a wretched way, he could not bear not to use such hateful language; which did not happen too often in the last dozen of years.

Zhao Min sighed and said, “General Yalupuwa, things have come this far, you can just tell them!” And then she whispered in a low voice, “Use the martial art from the Sheng Huo Ling.”

Zhang Wuji did not want to fight his four martial uncles, but looking at their current state, he truly did not have any other way to escape this awkward situation. Thereupon he

gritted his teeth and rolled on the ground, while tossing Zhao Min toward Yin Liting. He shouted and grunted in a hoarse voice while leaping to the air, somersaulting, and stretched out his arm to grab Zhang Songxi. Yin Liting caught Zhao Min without any trouble. He hesitated for a moment before sealing her acupoint and put her down to the ground.

In this very short period of time, Zhang Wuji had unleashed the strange martial art from the Sheng Huo Ling; his fist struck Song Yuanqiao, while his leg kicked Yu Lianzhou. At the same time his head hammered toward Zhang Songxi, while his hand reached backward to snatch the sword in Yin Liting's hand. His movements were as swift as a falcon catching a rabbit, very fast and very strange.

The Four Heroes of Wudang's martial arts were refined and strong, they could be considered as first class fighters of the Wulin world; but facing these successive seven, eight strange attacks, they were thrown into confusion and were forced to defend themselves with difficulty. On the Lingshe Island, although Zhang Wuji's martial art skill was high, he could not hold up against the Persian's Liuyun, three emissaries' martial art from the Sheng Huo Ling. By this moment, he had already mastered the martial art from all six Sheng Huo Ling tablets; his skill was several levels higher compared to the Liuyun, three emissaries, how could the Four Heroes hold up against him?

Actually, the martial arts contained in the Sheng Huo Ling were not the most profound or even intricate martial art techniques, only, they were very strange and unpredictable. If they were fighting one on one under normal circumstance, it would not be a match for Wudang Pai's orthodox martial art based on strong inner power. But Zhang Wuji was using the Jiu Yang Shen Gong as his foundation, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi as the general scheme of his movements, on top of that

he possessed a profound knowledge of Wudang Pai's martial art; stance by stance, form by form, he attacked the weakest point on Four Heroes's defense.

After about twenty stances or so, the Sheng Huo Ling's martial art was getting more and more fantastical. Lying down on the snowy ground, Zhao Min called out, "General Yalupuwa, these Han people are always proud of their own ability; they did not know we, the Mongolians, have inherited this divine wrestling technique, let them taste it today!"

"Use Taiji fist technique for self defense!" Zhang Songxi called out, "This Tartar's fist technique is very strange." Immediately the four people's fist technique changed; they all used the Taiji fist technique to create a watertight defense.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji dropped down and sat on the ground, both of his fists fiercely pounding his own chest. During their entire lifetime, the Four Hero of Wudang had fought countless powerful enemies, and they had encountered countless strange stances. Zhang Wuji's Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi could be regarded as the pinnacle of martial art study, yet not only they had never seen something like this Tartar sitting down on the ground and beating his own chest, they had never heard about it as well.

The Four Heroes were using swords to form a tight defense line with the Taiji Fist technique. This time, with a sudden movement the three swords of Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou and Zhang Songxi were thrust into Zhang Wuji's torso. Yin Liting's sword was snatched by Zhang Wuji earlier, but he had Mo Shenggu's thin saber on his side, which he pulled out and thrust toward Zhang Wuji. Suddenly Zhang Wuji's leg swept horizontally, scattering the snow on the ground

toward the Four Heroes.

It was one of weird martial art stances recorded on the Sheng Huo Ling, which originated from the Old Man of the Mountain, Hassan-i-Sabah. Before founding his Hashhashin Sect, he used to rob and plunder merchants traveling along the Persian desert. Whenever he saw a caravan from the distant, he would sit on the ground and beat his on chest, while crying out to the Heaven. The passing caravan would then stop to inquire. Hassan would suddenly kick the sand toward their eyes, and immediately his long saber would kill dozens of merchants, spilling their blood on the yellow sand, scattering their corpses on the great desert. It was a truly malicious technique.

This time Zhang Wuji kicked the snow, but the efficiency was the same as if he was kicking sand. The Four Heroes of Wudang suddenly felt snow flying into their faces, rendering them blind for an instant. Four people reacted fast by leaping back immediately, but Zhang Wuji moved even faster; he rolled around and grabbed Yu Lianzhou's legs. His hand reached out and sealed three major acupoints on his legs. After that he somersaulted and while his body was still mid-air, his right knee knocked the top of Yin Liting's head, unexpectedly hitting the 'wu chu' [lit. five spots] and 'cheng guang' [lit. light receiver] acupoints on the top of his head. Yin Liting was dazed and fell to the ground.

Song Yuanqiao flew to the rescue, but Zhang Wuji stepped backward and bumped into his chest. Song Yuanqiao could not use his sword, his left hand withdrew the sword and his right palm struck out, but before his palm reached its target, his chest had already been numbed, as both of Zhang Wuji's elbows hit his acupoint.

Zhang Songxi was shocked; in a blink of an eye, from four

people, he was the only one still standing. He realized he was not this man's match, but his martial brothers were in distress, he determined not to escape alone. Raising his sword straight up, 'swish, swish, swish' he thrust it toward Zhang Wuji three times. Zhang Wuji noticed that although he was facing a difficult situation, his steps were unflustered, the sword stance was not in the least chaotic; these three attacks came swiftly and fiercely, but each stance strictly followed Wudang principle.

Zhang Wuji secretly acclaimed, "If I have not learned this strange martial art, resisting four martial uncles' converging attack would have been not an easy matter at all."

Suddenly Zhang Wuji moved his head randomly, swaying back and forth, and making circles. But Zhang Songxi remained unmoved; he was not affected by Zhang Wuji's attempt to distract his attention. With a 'chi' noise his sword was splitting the air, straight toward Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji lowered his head, aiming his skull toward the tip of the incoming sword. Suddenly he dropped to the ground and pounced forward; all acupoints on Zhang Songxi's lower abdomen and left leg were sealed and he fell down to the ground. The acupoints Zhang Wuji sealed could disable only the lower part of Zhang Songxi's limbs; he was about to reach the 'zhongshu' [lit. center or hub] acupoint on Zhang Songxi's back when suddenly Zhang Songxi cried out miserably, his eyes turned white and his upper body convulsed, and then he dropped down stiffly.

Zhang Wuji was scared out of his wits. He thought he did not use too much force in sealing the acupoints just now; certainly it was not a deadly attack, it would not even cause any minor injury. Could it be that Si Shibo [fourth martial (older) uncle] suffered an unmentionable illness, and the hit

he suffered just now had caused it to break out? He broke out in cold sweats and hastily reached out to check Zhang Songxi's breath. Suddenly Zhang Songxi's left hand moved and pulled the fur covering his face.

Two people looked at each other in blank dismay. After a long time Zhang Songxi said, "Good Wuji, turns out ... turns out ... it is you. We have treated you with love in vain." His voice broke, his face was full of anger, tears streaming down, but it was unclear whether he was angry or grieved.

It turned out that he realized he was not the enemy's match and thought that he would die without seeing the enemy's face. If the Four Heroes of Wudang were defeated by an unknown enemy, they would die with their eyes still open. Therefore, first he faked death, and then pulled the fur covering the enemy's face.

First of all, Zhang Wuji was naïve, secondly, he cared about his Si Shibo very much, hence he had never guarded against him. At this moment, he felt worse than if he were put to death by the sword; he felt as if his soul had left him, and he was completely dumbfounded. He only stammered, "Si Shibo, it wasn't me, it wasn't me ... Qi Shishu, it wasn't me ... I did not harm him ..."

Zhang Songxi laughed a bitter laugh and said, "Very good, very good. Hurry up and kill us all. Dage, Erge, Liu Di [first brother, second brother and sixth brother, respectively], look clearly: this Tartar dog is not an outsider, he is none other than our beloved child, Wuji." Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, and Yin Liting were immobilized; they only stared at Zhang Wuji in disbelief.

Zhang Wuji was completely at a loss; all he could think of was picking up a sword on the ground and slashing his own

neck. Zhao Min suddenly called out, "Zhang Wuji, a real man can endure a momentary injustice; what's the big deal about it? Nothing in this world can be kept secret forever. You must find the ominous criminal who killed Mo Qixia and avenge his death then the Wudang Heroes' love to you won't be in vain."

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he realized what she said was very reasonable. "What are we going to do now?" he asked, while walking toward her and massaged the acupoints on her back and waist to unseal them.

In a tender and consoling voice Zhao Min said, "Don't be so sad! You have so many experts within your Ming Cult; I am also not short of warriors with wisdom and ability. With our combined effort, we will capture the real criminal."

"Zhang Wuji!" Zhang Songxi called out, "If you still have any conscience, just kill us four people. I cannot bear to see you and this wicked witch showing affection to each other."

Zhang Wuji's face turned ashen, he had no idea how to respond. Zhao Min said, "We must save Han Lin'er first, then come back to find your Yifu, while investigating the real criminal who killed your Mo Qi Shu along the way, and looking for your Biaomei's murderer."

"Wh ... what?" Zhang Wuji was taken by surprise.

Zhao Min coldly said, "Did you kill Mo Qixia? Why do your four martial uncles insist it was you? Did I kill Yin Li? Why do you insist it was me? Don't tell me you have the right to treat others unjustly and won't allow others to do the same to you?"

These words were like a thunder in a broad daylight, shaking

Zhang Wuji's eardrums and straight into his heart. At this moment he realized, based on his personal experience that human affairs are often difficult to judge. Deep in his heart, he knew he was a victim of an ignorant grievance; he thought, "Could it be that Miss Zhao, she ... she ... is also going through the same thing that I do? Is she being wronged by others?"

"The acupoints you sealed on your four martial uncles; can they unseal them?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head, "I was using the strange technique from the Sheng Huo Ling; Shibo and Shishu will not be able to unseal the acupoints themselves. But after 24 hours, the sealed acupoints will loosen themselves."

"Hmm," Zhao Min said, "In that case, let us take them to the cave before we leave. You cannot see them again before the real criminal is found."

"There are some wild beasts in that cave," Zhang Wuji said, "They will be ripped badly just like the roebuck and Mo Qi Shu's body."

Zhao Min sighed, "I can see that you are muddle-headed and cannot think straight. If one of them can move his upper body, and he has a sword in his hand, what wild beast can bother them?"

Zhang Wuji could only say, "That's right, that's right." Immediately he carried the Four Heroes of Wudang and set them behind a big rock to shelter them from the wind and the snow. The Four Heroes continuously shot abusive words at him. Zhang Wuji could only keep his mouth shut with tears on his eyes.

Zhao Min said, "The four of you are the Wulin experts, but are completely ignorant. If Mo Qixia was killed by Zhang Wuji, at this time he only needs to pick up a sword and kill you all to shut your mouths; how difficult is that? If he has the heart to kill Mo Qixia, do you think he will not have a heart to harm you, four people? If you keep shouting malicious talks, I, Zhao Min, will give each of you a slap in your face. I am a treacherous wicked witch; I am capable of doing what I say. At the Wan An Temple, it was because I looked at Zhang Gongzi's face that I treated you with respect. I cut the fingers of the experts from Shaolin, Kunlun, Emei, Huashan, and Kongtong, five Sects; but have I ever shown even half of disrespect toward the heroes of Wudang?"

Song Yuanqiao and the others looked at each other. They still believed Zhang Wuji killed Mo Shenggu, but they were afraid Zhao Min would really slap them. Real men could be killed but could not be disgraced; if this little witch did indeed give them a slap in their faces, they would suffer the disgrace for the rest of their lives. Hence, they shut their mouths immediately.

Zhao Min smiled faintly and said to Zhang Wuji, "Go get our mounts to take them to the cave."

Zhang Wuji hesitated before answering, "I can carry them."

Something clicked in Zhao Min's mind; she knew what he was thinking. With a cold laugh she said, "Even if your martial art skill is higher, do you think you can carry four people simultaneously? You are afraid as soon as you are away, I would harm your four martial uncles. You have never believed me. Fine, I'll go get the horses; you stay here to guard them."

Zhang Wuji blushed as what she said was right on target, but he really did not dare to leave the fate of his four martial uncles' lives in the hands of this temperamental, unpredictable girl. He simply said, "I'll be obliged if you'll go get the animals. I will stay here to guard the four martial uncles. How is your injury? Are you sure you can walk without any problem?"

Zhao Min laughed coldly and said, "Even if you were more attentive and had more good intentions, others still don't believe you. You are baring your heart and intestines, other people still think you have a wolf's heart and a dog's lungs." With her speech over, she turned around to fetch the horses.

Zhang Wuji pondered on what she said. It was as if she was speaking about his martial uncles' suspicion towards him, but he also felt that she was speaking about his own suspicion towards her. He turned his gaze to her, and noticed that she was limping; her footsteps were slow and unsteady. Apparently, her injury had made her walk with difficulty. In his heart he took pity on her, also could not bear to let her go like that.

Zhao Min had not walked too far when suddenly they heard rapid hoof beats on the main road, coming from the north. There were three riders: one in the front and two at the back. Zhao Min quickly retreated as she heard the hoof beats. "Some people are coming!" she said.

Zhang Wuji beckoned to her. Zhao Min went to the back of the large rock in a hurry and crouched down next to him. She noticed that half of Yu Lianzhou's body was protruding outside the rock; she pulled him behind the rock.

Yu Lianzhou glowered and barked, "Don't touch me!"

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, "I want to touch you. What are you going to do with me?"

"Miss Zhao," Zhang Wuji snapped, "Don't be rude to my Shibo!" Zhao Min stuck out her tongue and made faces toward Yu Lianzhou.

By this time, the horse in the front was not too far away, while the two riders chasing behind him were flying close to him, perhaps about twenty, thirty 'zhang's away from him. As the first rider got closer, in a low voice Zhang Wuji said, "It is Song Qingshu, Song Dage [big brother]!"

"Stop him, quick!" Zhao Min said.

"What for?" Zhang Wuji was surprised.

"Don't ask too much," Zhao Min replied, "Have you forgotten what they said in the Mi Le Temple?"

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he picked a chunk of ice from the ground and flicked it out. 'Swish!' the chunk of ice flew straight to the front leg of Song Qingshu's mount. The horse neighed in pain and knelt down to the ground. Song Qingshu leaped up and tried to pull his horse back up, but as the horse fell, it broke its left leg.

Seeing the pursuers were getting closer, Song Qingshu hastily ran to the side. Zhang Wuji flicked another piece of ice and hit the acupoint on his right leg. Zhao Min reached out and successively sealed the Four Heroes' mute acupoints, to stop Song Yuanqiao from calling out.

"Ah!" they heard Song Qingshu cry out and tumble down on the snowy ground. Because of these two hindrances, the two riders quickly overtook him; they were none other than the

Beggar Clan's Chen Youliang and Zhang Bo Longtou.

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "The three of them are going to Mount Changbai together to get the necessary poison to make the drug; how come one was running away and the other pursued to this place?" he thought, but then he remembered, "That's right, it must be that Song Dage was pricked by his own conscience and was not willing to do this unfilial and unrighteous thing. Fortunately he came across me, so I can save him."

Chen Youliang and Zhang Bo Longtou dismounted their horses. They only knew that Song Qingshu had been riding the horse for a long time, perhaps he was exhausted, so that when the horse stumbled, Song Qingshu also fell down from his mount. But they also thought that Song Qingshu's martial art was not weak; even if he was injured, his injury must be light. Two people came close with their weapons pointed toward Song Qingshu's body.

Zhang Wuji had prepared another piece of ice in his hand, ready to be flicked toward Chen Youliang. Zhao Min touched his arm and shook his hand. Zhang Wuji turned around to look at her. Zhao Min placed her own left palm on her ear, and then pointed her finger toward Song Qingshu. Her meaning was clear, she wanted to listen to what they were going to say.

"Surnamed Song," they heard Zhang Bo Longtou indignantly said, "You sneaked out in the middle of the night, what is your intention? Are you going to leak our secret by telling your father?" In his hand was a purple-gold eight-trigram [ba gua] saber, which he brandished above Song Qingshu's head, ready to be chopped down.

Hearing the wind the Ba Gua saber produced, Song Yuanqiao was concerned over his beloved son's safety; he

grew exceedingly anxious. Zhang Wuji happened to turn his head around and saw the anxious look on his face, which very soon turned into a pleading look. Zhang Wuji nodded his head, meaning, "Don't worry, I will in no way let Song Dage suffer any harm." While thinking in his heart, "The love parents have for their children is very profound [lit. as high as the sky, as thick as the earth]. Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle] is very angry with me; if he could, he would chop me into thousand pieces, yet as he sees Song Dage is facing a danger, he immediately asks me for help. If it was Da Shibo himself who is facing a danger, as a brave warrior, he would never show any weakness by asking somebody else's help." Almost instantly he also thought that Song Qingshu was very fortunate to have people who cherished and showed loving care to him, while he was an orphan without any parents' love.

He heard Song Qingshu reply, "I am not about to tell my Father."

Zhang Bo Longtou said, "Bangzhu [Clan Leader] ordered you to come with me to Mount Changbai to pick some medicine, why are you disobeying the order by leaving?"

"You were also born from your parents," Song Qingshu said, "You want me to harm my own father, how can my heart endure it? I refuse to do this beastly act."

In a stern voice Zhang Bo Longtou said, "You have made up your mind to defy Bangzhu's order, then? Do you know what punishment we impart to those who revolt against the Clan?"

"I am a criminal in this world," Song Qingshu replied, "I do not hope to be alive. In these past few days, as soon as I closed my eyes, I saw Mo Qi Shu come to demand my life.

His ghost does not want to go away, it keeps entangling me. Zhang Bo Longtou, please just chop me dead, I will be very grateful to you.”

Zhang Bo Longtou lifted his Ba Gua Saber high, and shouted, “Very well! I will help you!”

“Longtou Dage,” Chen Youliang stopped him, “If Song Xiongdi is not willing, killing him won’t do us any good. Let’s just let him go.”

“Are you saying we should let him go in just like that?” Zhang Bo Longtou was surprised.

“That’s right,” Chen Youliang said, “He has killed his own martial uncle Mo Shenggu, there will be people from his own Sect who’d kill him. This kind of injustice involves a sinful disciple’s blood, do not defile our chivalrous weapons.”

At the Mi Le Temple, Zhang Wuji had heard Chen Youliang bringing up Mo Shenggu’s name to Song Qingshu, he said something about ‘a junior defying his senior’. At that time, Zhang Wuji suspected that Song Qingshu had offended his martial uncle, but never in his wildest imagination Zhang Wuji would guess that Mo Shenggu died under Song Qingshu’s hands. Although Song Yuanqiao and the others were hidden behind a large rock, they were able to hear Song Qingshu clearly; they were all greatly shocked. Zhao Min was the only one who had guessed about 30% of the story; a smile of disdain appeared on the corners of her mouth.

“Chen Dage,” they heard Song Qingshu’s trembling voice, “You have given me a heavy oath that you will never divulge this secret. How can my father find out as long as you do not say anything?”

Chen Youliang smiled dryly, "You only remember my oath, but you don't remember your own even heavier one. You said that from that day forward, you would obey what I say. Was it you who break your promise first, or was it I who did not keep my word?"

Song Qingshu hesitated for half a day before saying, "You wanted me to put poison in Tai Shifu and my father's food; I would rather die than obeying your word. Just get your sword and kill me."

"Song Xiongdi," Chen Youliang said, "There is a saying that to understand the directions of the age is an outstanding talent. We do not want to murder your father and elders, we only want to drug them so they will lose consciousness. Didn't you agree to it at the Mi Le Temple?"

"No, no!" Song Qingshu said, "I did agree to drug them, but the poison Zhang Bo Longtou gathered was from vipers and centipede; this is a poison to kill people, not a common drug to lose someone's consciousness."

Slowly and unenthusiastically Chen Youliang raised his sword, saying, "Emei Pai's Miss Zhou is as beautiful as a goddess, there is no other girl like her, yet you resign to the fact that she is going to fall into that guy Zhang Wuji. This is really strange. Song Xiongdi, that day, deep into the night, you went to peep into the room occupied by Emei Pai's female disciples. Your Qi Shishu caught you doing that, and he pursued you down. You fought him by the rocky ridge, and thus a nephew killed his uncle. Why did you do that? Wasn't it for the sake of this gentle and tender, good-looking Miss Zhou? This matter has come this far, once you have done it, you can't stop. Can the horse turn back once it enters a narrow pathway? I see that you have climbed the mountain 90% of the way, but fail for lack of a final effort.

It's a pity! It's a pity!"

Song Qingshu stood up shakily. "Chen Youliang," he angrily said, "Your words are sweet but insincere! You have forced me. That night I was defeated by Mo Qi Shu; I was not his match. I have brought disgrace to Wudang Pai. It would be a hundred times better if I died under his hands; who wanted you to interfere by giving me a hand? I have fallen into your scheme so deep that my reputation is swept away and I cannot free myself."

"Fine, fine!" Chen Youliang laughed, "Mo Shenggu died because of the 'zhen tian tie zhang' [iron palm shaking the heaven] on his back; was it you who hit him, or was it me, Chen Youliang who hit him? Isn't it your Wudang Pai's martial art? Certainly I cannot do that. That night I helped you, not only I saved your life, but protected your reputation as well; so you say I was wrong? Song Xiongdi, you and I came across each other, let's not raise the matters of the past up. About you killing your uncle, my mouth is as tight as a drum; I will never leak even for half a word. The mountain is far, the river is long, we will see each other again in the future."

In a trembling voice Song Qingshu said, "Chen ... Chen Dage, you ... what are you going to do to me?" His voice was full of doubt and uncertainty.

Chen Youliang laughed. "What am I going to do to you?" he said, "I am not going to do anything. Let me show you something. What is this?"

From their hiding place behind the rock, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min were dying to stick out their heads to see the thing Chen Youliang took out, but in the end they decided against doing so.

“Ah!” they heard Song Qingshu cried out in alarm, “This ... this is the iron ring of Emei Pai’s Sect Leader,” his voice was trembling, “It is Miss Zhou’s ... You ... you ... where did you get it from?”

In his heart, Zhang Wuji also shuddered, he thought, “When I left Zhiruo, I plainly saw her still wearing this Sect Leader iron ring; how did it fall into Chen Youliang’s hand? Most likely it is a fake one, he forged it to swindle other people.”

But he heard Chen Youliang laugh lightly and said, “Look carefully, whether this is the real thing or a fake one.”

A moment later Song Qingshu said, “In the Western Region I asked Mijue Shitai for some pointers in martial art, I saw this ring on her finger. I believe this is real.”

A ‘clang!’ noise was heard, a sound of metal striking against metal. Chen Youliang said, “If it was fake, this sword should cut it into two. Look here, there is an inscription inside the ring, ‘liu yi xiang nu’ [bestowed to daughter Xiang] four characters, it can’t be fake, can it? This is the Emei Pai founder, Guo Xiang Nuxia’s [heroine Guo Xiang] xuan tie [black/mysterious iron – Yang Guo’s heavy sword] ring.”

Song Qingshu said, “Chen Dage, you ... where did you get it from? Miss Zhou, she ... is she all right?”

Chen Youliang laughed again, he said, “Zhang Bo Longtou, let’s go. From now on, the Beggar Clan has nothing to do with this person.” Footsteps were heard, the two of them turned around and left.

“Chen Dage, come back!” Song Qingshu called out, “Has Miss Zhou fallen into your hands? Is she still alive, or is she dead?”

Chen Youliang came back. With a smile on his face he said, "That's right. Miss Zhou is in my hands. A beautiful woman like her, no man's heart in this world will not be moved upon seeing her. Until now I am still single. I am thinking of asking Bangzhu earnestly to grant me Miss Zhou as my wife, chances are, Bangzhu will grant my request."

Song Qingshu mumbled indistinctly, apparently, he was at a loss of what to say. Chen Youliang continued, "Actually, a gentleman should not take someone else's prized possession. In order to win this Miss Zhou, Song Xiongdi has braved a grave disaster; how could for the sake of a beauty Chen Youliang ruin the 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty and self-sacrifice/code of brotherhood] between brothers? But since you have revolted against the Clan, there is no more kindness and righteousness between us; nothing is out of question anymore, right?"

Song Qingshu mumbled some more. From the corner of his eye, Zhang Wuji noticed there were two streams of tears flowing down Song Yuanqiao's cheeks; it was obvious that the grief in his heart had reached its peak. Suddenly they heard Song Qingshu say, "Chen Dage, Longtou Dage, as your little brother, I was confused; I beg your forgiveness. I hereby admit my guilt."

Chen Youliang laughed out loud and said, "Right, right! Now, that is my good brother. I put my hand on my heart to guarantee you that you only need to take this drug [orig. 'meng1 han4 yao4 - a medicine to knock someone's consciousness] to Mount Wudang, and then quietly put it into everybody's cup of tea. Your honorable elders' lives will not be harmed; the beautiful Zhou Zhiruo will certainly be your wife. We only want to coerce Zhang Sanfeng, Zhang Zhenren [respectable term to address a Taoist priest] and

the Wudang heroes into forcing Zhang Wuji to listen to our command. Supposing that we harmed Zhang Zhenren and your honorable father's lives, Zhang Wuji will only come to the Beggar Clan to exact the revenge; what good will that do to us?"

"That's correct," Song Qingshu said.

Chen Youliang continued, "Wait till the Beggar Clan has subdued the Ming Cult, driven out the Tartars, and ruled the earth; our Bangzhu will ascend to the throne [orig. long2 wei4 – dragon position], you and I will render meritorious service to the founder of the kingdom, needless to say, not only our wives and descendants will enjoy titles and positions, but your honorable father will benefit from your bright face."

With a bitter smile Song Qingshu said, "My Father does not seek fame and fortune. I only hope he will not kill me; then I will be satisfied."

"How can your father know about the party before it is over?" Chen Youliang said with a smile, "Unless he is a deity who can predict the future. Song Xiongdi, is your foot injured from the fall? Come, we can share the ride. We'll buy another horse in the next town."

Song Qingshu said, "A chunk of ice has bumped my calf because I was in such haste. As bad luck has it, it hit right on my 'zhu bin' [lit. building visitor] acupoint. There is indeed such a coincidence in this world." Because he was so preoccupied by Zhang Bo Longtou and Chen Youliang who were pursuing him, he had never thought that there were people who were plotting against him behind the large rock ahead. He only knew that he was being careless and the piece of ice happened to strike him on his acupoint.

“What bad luck?” Chen Youliang laughed and said, “I’ll say it was Song Xiongdi’s lucky day, to marry a beautiful woman as your wife. If there was no such strike, we would not be able to overtake you, and then you would be lost in your own confusion. Not only your reputation would be swept away, but you would ruin our major undertaking. If this sweet smelling, tender Miss Zhou become Chen Youliang’s possession, wouldn’t it be like a phoenix married a crow, a fresh flower stuck into a pile of manure?”

“Hmm,” Song Qingshu said, “Chen Dage, it’s not that Xiongdi is unable to tell good from bad, and does not believe you ...”

Without waiting for him to finish, Chen Youliang cut him off, “You want to see Miss Zhou, don’t you? That’s easy. At this moment Bangzhu and the elders are in Lulong [a city in Hebei], Miss Zhou is with them. As soon as we get to Lulong, you can see her. When the Mount Wudang task is accomplished, your Gege [elder brother] will hold the wedding celebration for you, to fulfill your greatest desire; and then you will be grateful to your Chen Youliang Dage for the rest of your life. Ha ha, ha ha ...!”

“All right,” Song Qingshu said, “Let us go to Lulong. Chen Dage, how did Miss Zhou ... how did she join our Clan?”

Chen Youliang laughed and said, “That was to Longtou Dage’s credit. That day Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou went eating and drinking in a restaurant. They saw three strangers who dressed like our Clan disciples, mingled among us. Later, they sent some people to investigate, and unexpectedly found one of them is this lovable and charming Miss Zhou. Zhang Bo Longtou then sent someone to invite her to come with us. Don’t worry, Miss Zhou is

auspiciously well; not a single strand of her hair is injured.”

Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, “Turned out that we were already detected on the restaurant that day. If only Yifu were not blind, he would certainly raise the alarm. Ay, to think that all along Zhiruo and I were not aware. But I wonder if Yifu is also well?”

However, all throughout the conversation, Chen Youliang did not mention a single word about Xie Xun. He said, “Miss Zhou and you are engaged, Emei and Wudang two Sects will be under the Beggar Clan’s command, add to that the Ming Cult; just how powerful can we be? We only need to defeat the Mongolians, and then this beautiful country [orig. jiang1 shan1 – river and mountain], heh, heh, will change its master.”

His voice was full of smugness, as if not only the Beggar Clan had already conquered the world, but he, Chen Youliang, had already ascended to the throne, and was sitting comfortably in the imperial courtyard. Zhang Bo Longtou and Song Qingshu followed him laughing ‘heh, heh’, hollow laughs.

“Let’s go,” Chen Youliang said, “Song Xiongdi, Mo Qixia died around here; the cave where we hid his corpse is not far from this place, is it? You ran to this place and suddenly stumbled, could it be that Mo Qixia’s spirit showed up? Ha ha, ha ha!” Song Qingshu did not reply. The three of them walked toward the horses and then left that place.

Zhang Wuji waited until they had gone far before he quickly unsealed Song Yuanqiao and the others’ acupoints, and then he knelt to the ground and kowtowed over and over again. “Shibo, Shishu,” he said, “Nephew was under suspicion and could not explain myself. I have offended you heavily,

please punish me.”

Song Yuanqiao heaved a deep sigh, tears streaming down from his eyes; he looked up to the sky without saying anything. Yu Lianzhou busily raised Zhang Wuji up and said, “We all have wrongly accused you. It was our own fault. We are as close as a flesh and blood family, let’s not talk about this anymore. I just can’t believe Qingshu ... ay, if we did not hear it with our own ears, who could have believed it?”

Song Yuanqiao pulled his sword out and said, “Turned out Qidi came across Qingshu, that little animal ... when he was peeking into Emei heroines’ bedroom. We must put our school’s internal affair in order. Three Shidi’s, Child Wuji, let us pursue them; let me slay that animal with my own hand.” Finished speaking, he launched his qing gong and ran to the direction Song Qingshu went.

“Dage, come back!” Zhang Songxi called out, “Everything needs to be considered further.”

In his disturbed mind, Song Yuanqiao ignored his call; he kept running with the sword in his hand. Zhang Wuji lifted up his feet to give a chase. Several leaps later, he cut off in front of Song Yuanqiao. Bowing down he said, “Da Shibo, Si Shibo wants to talk to you. Currently, Song Dage is under other’s influence; someday, he will come to his senses. If Da Shibo wants to punish him, you don’t have to do it right away.”

Song Yuanqiao sobbed, “Qidi ... Qidi ... your big brother has done you wrong.” Suddenly he remembered how Zhang Cuishan had killed himself because he felt he had done Yu Daiyan wrong; right at this moment he suddenly understood the depth of his Wu Di’s [fifth brother] feeling. Raising up his sword, he slashed it across his own neck.

Zhang Wuji was startled; using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to the fullest, he snatched the sword from Song Yuanqiao's hand. But the blade had already cut the neck, creating a long strip of bloody cut. By this time Yu Lianzhou and the others had already caught up.

"Dage," Zhang Songxi persuaded, "Qingshu is going astray by committing this kind of treason and betraying his own Sect, Wudang people will hold him responsible; but cleaning up our school is a small matter, our country's safety is big. We can't lose sight on the big matter for the sake of a small one."

Song Yuanqiao's eyes grew big; he was angry. "You ... you said cleaning up our school is a small matter? I ... I fathered this disobedient son ..."

"Listening to that Chen Youliang," Zhang Songxi said, "The Beggar Clan wants to borrow Qingshu's hands, scheming to harm our En Shi [benevolent master] and gain control over the major Sects of Wulin world, and conspiring against our country. En Shi's safety and well-being is the number one priority of our Sect; whether the Wulin world and the common people will have disaster or good fortune is even more important. This child Qingshu has done too much injustice; he will get his retribution sooner or later. We still need to discuss important matters."

Song Yuanqiao realized Zhang Songxi was very reasonable, he bitterly put the sword back into its sheathe and said, "My mind is troubled, I'll hear what Si Di has to say."

Yin Liting took out some cut-wound medication and wrapped it around Song Yuanqiao's neck. Zhang Songxi said, "The Beggar Clan has already sought to cause En Shi harm, and

at this moment En Shi still does not know the facts. We must travel day and night to return to Wudang. Although that Chen Youliang is going to use Song Qingshu, we will never know; perhaps this devious villain will make his move sooner than what is planned. Right now our most urgent task is to protect En Shi. En Shi is advanced in years; if that fake-Shaolin-monk-pretending-to-be-a-news-bearer case is repeated, we can't redeem it as his disciples even if we were to die ten thousand times." While saying that, he cast a glance toward Zhao Min, who was standing some distance away; he still resented how she had sent someone to assassinate Zhang Sanfeng.

Song Yuanqiao broke in cold sweats. "That's right, that's right!" he said in a trembling voice, "In my eagerness to kill that disobedient child, I pushed En Shi's safety and well being to the back of my brain. I truly deserve to die to put the cart before the horse. Such a muddle-head." And then he called out, "Let's go, let's go!"

"Wuji," Zhang Songxi turned toward Zhang Wuji, "We'll leave the rescuing of Miss Zhou to you. Come to Wudang whenever you are finished, then we'll talk again."

"I receive and obey Shibo's instruction," Zhang Wuji said.

Zhang Songxi continued in low voice, "This Miss Zhao has a heart of the wolf, you must be very careful. Song Qingshu is a bad example of a real warrior who cannot resist a beauty. You should not follow his example." Zhang Wuji nodded with his face blushing.

Immediately the Four Heroes of Wudang and Zhang Wuji buried Mo Shenggu behind a large rock. The five of them kowtowed and cried bitterly in front of his grave. And then Song Yuanqiao and his martial brothers, four people, left.

Zhao Min slowly walked towards Zhang Wuji and said, “Your Si Shibo told you to be careful and do not get deceived by this witch, and that Song Qingshu is a bad example, didn’t he?”

Zhang Wuji’s face turned completely red and he bashfully asked, “How do you know? Do you a super ear?”

“Humph,” Zhao Min said, “Let me tell you this: After considering this matter, Song Daxia and the others will not blame Song Qingshu for having an animal heart, instead, they will blame Zhou Jiejie [older sister Zhou] as the source of trouble [lit. red face muddling the water], by destroying a Wudang young hero.”

In his heart Zhang Wuji silently agreed that she might be right, but his mouth said, “Song Shibo and the others are reasonable gentlemen; how could they recklessly blame others?”

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “The more they are gentlemen, the more they will blame others recklessly.” She was silent for a moment before laughing and saying, “Quickly go and save your Miss Zhou; it would be terrible for you if she fell into Song Qingshu’s hand.”

Zhang Wuji blushed again and asked, “Why would it be terrible?”

End of Chapter 32.

Chapter 33 - Long Flute, Short Zither, Flowing Yellow Clothes

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Four young women wearing white and four young women in black, each with a zither or a flute, stood on the eight directions. Amidst the sound of music, a woman entered the courtyard, wearing a soft yellow light robe; her left hand was taking along a twelve, thirteen years old girl.

Zhang Wuji went to fetch the horses, and then together with Zhao Min, they rode across the Great Wall. He thought his Yifu must have fallen into the Beggar Clan, but since the Beggar Clan wanted to use him to coerce the Ming Cult into submission, he supposed they would not do him any harm; although some humiliation would be unavoidable. However, Zhirou was as clear as crystal and as clean as jade; if the devious and cruel Chen Youliang and the shameless Song Qingshu forced her, her only option would be to die. Thinking to this point, he wished he would grow wings and fly to Lulong. Only, Zhao Min was still injured, they could not possibly travel without any sleep or rest.

That night, the two of them spent the night at a small inn. While lying down on the 'kang' [a heatable brick bed common in northern China] Zhang Wuji was deep in thought; the more he thought, the more anxious he got. He went outside Zhao Min's window; he heard her even breathing as she fell into a deep sleep, so he went to the front desk to get pen and ink. Tearing down a piece of paper from the registry book, he hastily wrote a letter, saying that because the matter was urgent, he made up his mind to continue the journey the very same night, and that he would find her after the matter is settled. He advised her to continue her journey home leisurely while she was still recuperating from her injury. He placed the paper on the table and put a piece of rock on it, and then he jumped out from the window and rushed southward.

By daybreak he managed to buy a horse, and kept changing horses along the way. After several days of traveling day and night like that, he finally arrived at Lulong. However, even by pursuing that fast, he did not see Chen, Song and Zhang Bo Longtou along the way. He figured that while he was traveling during the night, they were resting in an inn someplace, hence he missed them.

Lulong was a strategic city in Hebei province, where the Tang Dynasty's Jie Du Shi [provincial governor; in Tang times having military and civil authority, but only civil authority during Song] took his residence. It was attacked several times during the transition between the Songs and the Jins and suffered major damages. The city had never recovered all through the Yuan Dynasty, yet it had quite a large population.

Zhang Wuji went all over Lulong's main streets and small alleys, visited teahouses and wine shops, but surprisingly he did not see a single beggar. He felt very strange, "Such a big city, yet not a single beggar on the street; this is very unusual. Chen Youliang said that the Beggar Clan would have an assembly in here, certainly he was not lying. I think all beggars big and small within the city walls have gone to pay their respect to the Clan Leader. I must look for their meeting place, this way I can eavesdrop to find out whether Yifu and Zhiruo are really captured by the Beggar Clan."

He then visited all the temples, ancestral halls, abandoned gardens, and any open area around the city, but did not find a single clue. He even went to the villages on the outskirts of the city, but still did not see anything unusual. When evening came, he grew impatient, and could not help but thinking about Zhao Min. "I wouldn't be this clueless if she were here" he thought. Finally he decided on going to an inn.

After taking his dinner, he took a short nap, and then around the second hour [between 1 - 3 am], he flew out of the window and went everywhere to see if there was anything astir. But after looking to all directions, he saw the night was serene, without the least bit of sign that Jianghu characters were having a meeting.

He was disappointed; but suddenly he saw a light on a tall building toward southeast from where he was. He thought, "This building must belong to a high-ranking government official or some rich family; it has nothing to do with the Beggar Clan ...". He had not finished his train of thought when he saw a shadow flash; someone was leaping out from the window on the second floor. Only, he was quite some distance away from the building that he could not see clearly. He thought, "Can it be that there are some 'lu lin' [lit. green wood, a term usually refers to 'world of outlaws'] characters who are visiting this rich family house to commit a criminal act? Since I have nothing to do, I'd better check it out."

Utilizing his 'qing gong' [lightness skill], he immediately rushed towards that big building. As he was leaping over the enclosing wall, he heard someone say, "Chen Zhanglao [elder Chen] is really bothersome; it was decided that we are going to assemble on the eighth of the first month in Laohekou [city in Hubei], yet he dispatched an urgent message for us to hurry along and wait over here. He is not Bangzhu, why does he have a say anyway? Ridiculous."

The voice was loud and clear, the speaker was obviously indignant; it turned out that they were on a Beggar Clan's business. As Zhang Wuji heard this, he was delighted. The voice came from the main hall, so he quietly crept toward it.

He heard Shi Huolong's voice reply, "Chen Zhanglao is a

genius; that damn Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden-haired lion king] Xie Xun, who knows how many Jianghu people have been looking for him in these past twenty years, yet nobody has even caught the shadow of a lion hair's fart. But Chen Zhanglao managed to capture him just like that. Nobody in the Wulin world has ever accomplished that, let alone people within our own Clan ..."

Zhang Wuji was startled, but also glad that finally he heard something about his Yifu. He believed the Beggar Clan did not have any extraordinary masters and rescuing his Yifu would not be too difficult. He scanned the room pressing his eyes against a crack in the window. He saw that Shi Huolong was sitting inside, with Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two Elders, Zhang Bang Longtou and three eight-pouch elders sitting on the lower positions. There was another well-dressed middle-aged fat man; judging from his appearance, he looked like a rich government officer, but on his back he carried six pouches. Zhang Wuji quietly nodded his head, "No wonder" he thought, "Turns out that there is a rich Beggar Clan disciple in Lulong. Who would have thought a whole bunch of beggars will be having an assembly in a rich man's house?"

He heard Shi Huolong continue "Since Chen Zhanglao urgently wants us to wait in Lulong, he must have a valid reason. We are planning this important matter; his granny, this ... this ... we must be very cautious over this matter."

"Bangzhu," Zhang Bang Longtou said, "Please be informed that the reason the warriors in Jianghu are looking for Xie Xun is because they want to snatch the 'wu lin zhi zun' [the most revered in the martial art world], the precious Tulong Saber. Presently, this precious saber is not within Xie Xun's possession. No matter how much we persuade or threaten him, he is not willing to reveal the precious saber's location. We are wasting our time capturing this blind man; what use

do we have of him other than making him to drink our wine and eat our food? In my opinion, we'd better torture him harshly; I want to see if he'd keep his mouth shut."

"No, that would be inappropriate," Shi Huolong replied, "We might spoil something by using force. Let's just wait for Chen Zhanglao and then we can talk about it at length."

Zhang Bang Longtou's face showed discontent; he seemed to be upset that Bangzhu always wanted to hear what Chen Youliang had to say in everything.

Shi Huolong took out a letter and handed it over to Zhang Bang Longtou. "Feng Xiongdi [brother Feng]," he said, "I want you to go to Haozhou immediately and deliver this letter to Han Shantong. Tell him that his son is with us, he is safe and sound. We only want Han Shantong to submit under our Clan's authority, and then we will view his son in a new light."

"Delivering a letter is a minor matter," Zhang Bang Longtou said, "Do I need to personally take the trip to do it?"

Shi Huolong's countenance slightly dropped, he said, "Speaking of military accomplishment, Han Shantong and his comrades have created quite a stir within this last half a year or so. I hear his subordinates, that damn Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and the others, have raised up their arms and very much all of them have some stinking ability. This time I am asking Feng Xiongdi to personally deliver this letter, first, to make sure Han Shantong will submit under our Clan; and while you are hanging around them, make sure you find out what kind of plan he and his generals are cooking. Second, I want you to investigate what kind of strange secret those damn Ming Cult people are hiding. Feng Xiongdi, the task you are bearing on your shoulder is not light; how could

you say it is a minor matter?"

Zhang Bang Longtou did not dare to say anything anymore; he simply said, "I respectfully follow Bangzhu's instructions." He accepted the letter, saluted Shi Huolong, and then left the main hall.

Zhang Wuji kept on listening, but they were only talking about how in the future, after the Ming Cult, Shaolin, Wudang, Emei, and all other Sects were subdued, the Beggar Clan would flourish with awe-inspiring prestige. This Shi Huolong's wild ambitions were not as lofty as Chen Youliang's; if the Beggar Clan had a sole domination over the Jianghu and warriors in the Wulin world, he would be very satisfied. He was not thinking of ruling over the country [orig. jiang1 shan1 - river and mountain] by becoming the emperor. His language was vulgar, with a lot of dirty words.

After listening for a while, Zhang Wuji was fed up; he thought, "It seems like Yifu and Zhiruo are imprisoned here. I need to rescue them first then I'll give this big mouth, shameless beggar, a lesson."

His right foot moved slightly, he gently leaped toward a tall tree. Looking to all directions, he saw a dozen or so Beggar Clan disciples on the lower level. They had their weapons in their hands, going back and forth patrolling the area. Zhang Wuji thought that must be the place where they kept Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo prisoners. Slipping down the tree, he sneaked to the tall building nearby and hid behind a fake decorative hill. As soon as the two Beggar Clan disciples turned around and walked the other way, he leaped vertically up toward the second floor, where he saw bright light from lamps and candles. He stooped down underneath a window, trying to hear any sound of activity inside.

To his astonishment, after listening for a while, he did not hear anything inside. "How come there is nobody inside?" he thought, "Could it be that the person in here is a martial art master who is able to stop his breathing?" But after listening a moment longer and still did not hear any breathing noise, he stretched out his neck to peek into the room via a crack in the window.

He saw a pair of large candles on the table, which had been burned more than half of their original length, but there was not a single human shadow to be seen. There were three rooms on the second floor, located side by side. The one on the immediate east of him was unoccupied, so he peeked into the room on the west. This room was also brightly lit. He saw cups and bowls scattered on the table, about enough to be used by seven, eight people. The wine in the cup had not dried up, the vegetable and meat dishes had not been finished, but there was not a single human being inside the room. It looked like the people had not been eating and drinking too long when they had to leave the room in a hurry.

The room in the middle was pitch-black like a cave. He lightly pushed the door, but it was bolted from the inside. "Yifu, are you in there?" he called out in low voice. Nobody answered. Zhang Wuji thought, "Apparently, Yifu is not here. But why do the Beggar Clan people set up such a strict security? Could it be that they are running the 'real is fake, fake is real' tactic?"

Suddenly he caught a whiff of smell of reeking blood coming out from the middle room. He was alarmed. With his left hand pressed against the door, he exerted his internal energy and 'crack!' the bolt broke. Quick as a flash he darted inside to catch the broken bolt so that it would not fall on the floor and create some noise.

He only took one step forward when his foot stumbled on an

object on the floor. It felt soft like it was a human body. He stooped down to touch the object and indeed it was a lifeless human body. This person had ceased breathing, but his face was still a bit warm; looked like he died not too long ago. Zhang Wuji traced the corpse's head and found the head to be small with pointy chin, definitely it wasn't Xie Xun's head. He was relieved. Taking another step he bumped into two more bodies. He went to the western wooden partition and poked his finger to let the candlelight from the adjacent room passing through. He saw seven, eight Beggar Clan disciples scattered around the room, all dead. Obviously, they were killed because of heavy internal injury. He lifted a corpse up and tore the clothes off. He saw a deep fist imprint on that corpse's chest, breaking up his ribs; apparently, the power behind the fist was extraordinarily strong.

Zhang Wuji was delighted, "Turns out Yifu unleashed his mighty power and struck these guards dead." He looked around the room, and saw on a corner of the wall a picture of blazing fire, engraved with the tip of a sword; it was undoubtedly the symbol of the Ming Cult. He also noticed that the latch of the window was snapped off; the window was open. "That's right," Zhang Wuji thought, "The dark shadow I saw fleeing out the upstairs window a moment ago must be Yifu escaping. I wonder how was he captured by the Beggar Clan? It must be because his blindness made it difficult for him to guard against the Beggar Clan's deceit. If they did not use 'meng han yao' [drug, see Chapter 32], then they must have used some kind of trap [orig. ban4 ma3 suo3, dao3 gou1, yu2 wang3 - large rope to trip horses, hook to topple someone, fishnet] to capture him."

He went out the room in delight. Crouching by the door he looked downstairs and saw that the beggars were going back and forth on their patrol duty; they were completely oblivious of the accident happened on the second floor. Zhang Wuji

thought, “Yifu has not left too long, I can still overtake him. And then we, father and son, will come back and make an earth-shattering disturbance here, to teach these beggars the way we Ming Cult deal with our enemies.” Thinking to this point, his spirit rose. Remembering that the dark shadow he saw earlier went out from the west side, he jumped out to the enclosing wall using a tall tree as a stepping-stone, and then rushed to the west.

Following the main road, he ran for several ‘li’s before arriving on a fork on the road. He looked around looking for clue, and saw a blazing fire mark behind a rock, pointing to the road going southwest. Zhang Wuji was very happy thinking that now his Yifu’s whereabouts was clear and he would see him very soon.

Yang Xiao had explained the markings and signs used by the Ming Cult to communicate to each other to him in detail. He noticed that although this blazing fire sign had only several strokes the lines were bold; not many people within the Ming Cult were able to produce this kind of drawing other than people of Xie Xun’s caliber who was well-versed in both sword and pen [orig. wen² wu³ quan² cai²].

His doubts were gone. Hurriedly he took the small lane, straight to the relay station of Shahe [city in Hebei]. It was already dawn; he stopped by any restaurant along the way to buy some steamed buns and flatbreads to satisfy his hunger and then hurriedly continued his journey westward until he arrived at the small town of Bangzi. He saw another blazing fire symbol on the lower part of a wall on the corner of the street, pointing toward an abandoned ancestral hall. He was very happy thinking that his Yifu might be hiding in that hall.

As he got near the gate, he heard a clamoring noise of people talking and shouting as rowdy characters and people of

obscure background who gathered around the main hall, gambling. It turned out that this place was some kind of a gambling establishment.

The manager saw Zhang Wuji and noticed his fancy and expensive-looking attire, he knew a rich customer had arrived; busily he smiled and mumbling some welcoming words, "Gongziye [young master], come and roll the dice; your luck must be good, beat these three villagers." Turning his head he called out the crowd of gamblers, "Make room for Gongziye. Everybody, put your bet down, let Gongziye have his hands on the money!"

Zhang Wuji frowned, he knew these gamblers were not Jianghu characters. Raising his voice he called out, "Yifu, Yifu! Are you Senior in here?" He waited for a while, but nobody answered. He called out again several times.

Seeing he did not come to gamble, but shouting and creating disturbance instead, a ruffian called out, "Good child, your Senior is here, hurry up and roll the dice!" The main hall resounded with the sound of the ruffians' laughter.

Zhang Wuji asked the manager, "Did you see an elderly gentleman, big and tall, yellow hair, and blind eyes?"

As the manager realized this person did not come to gamble, but to look for someone, he was disappointed. He said with a laugh, "What a joke! You are saying that there is a blind man who came here to roll the dice? This blind man must be crazy!"

Zhang Wuji was not in a good mood as he failed to find his Yifu. Listening to the manager and that ruffian being rude and make fun of his Yifu, he took two steps forward, grabbed the manager and the ruffian, and casually flung them to the

roof. Although these two men were not injured, they were scared out of their wits and screamed like a pig being slaughtered.

Zhang Wuji pushed the crowd over and took two silver ingots from the gambling table. He said, "Gongziye is having his hands on the money." He put the silver into his pocket, and left the ancestral hall in big strides. The ruffians froze in fear; who would dare to chase him?

Zhang Wuji continued his journey westward. Not too long afterwards he saw another blazing fire sign. It was already evening, and he had arrived at Fengrun, another big city on the northern part of Hebei. Following the sign, he found a whitewashed wall with a black gate. The copper-ring door knockers were shiny, inside the wall plum blossoms were half-blooming; it was a quiet, elegant and clean house.

He picked the doorknockers and knocked three times. A short moment later he heard footsteps approaching. With a creaking noise the black door opened. A strong fragrance immediately attacked his nostrils. The one who answered the door was a girl wearing a pink leather jacket with a small knot on top of her head. She pursed her lips, laughed, and said, "Gongziye, long time no see. Jiejie [older sister] misses you very much. Come in and drink some tea." Her words were followed by another laugh, and then she threw a coquettish look at him.

Zhang Wuji was flabbergasted. "How did you know me? Who is your Jiejie?" he asked.

The girl laughed and said, "You still ask? Hurry up, don't let my Jiejie die of loneliness [orig. qian1 du3 gua4 chang2 - pulling the tripe, hanging the intestines]." Reaching out, she grabbed Zhang Wuji's right hand and pulled him in.

Zhang Wuji was greatly astonished, "Why does she act like she has known me for a long time?" he wondered. But then he remembered, "Ah, right, Zhiruo must be staying in here; she knew I was following the sign all day looking for them, so she told this girl to wait for me. Ay, we haven't seen each other for many days now, Zhiruo must be dying of loneliness because she misses me very much." He felt tenderness in his heart and without hesitation, followed the girl inside.

They walked through a small pathway of cobblestones, passed a courtyard, and entered a side room. He saw a parrot perched beneath the eaves, which said in throaty voice, "Qing Gege [big brother Qing, or lit. 'passionate brother'. I am not sure whether the character 'Qing' here is someone's name, or it refers to 'beloved brother'] is here. Jiejie, Qing Gege is here."

Zhang Wuji blushed profusely, "Even a parrot knew," he thought.

He saw the chairs in that room were padded with embroidered cushions; the charcoal fire was raging, warming the room so that it felt like spring. There was a small incense burner on the table. The girl turned around and left, but a short moment later returned with a tray of six different fruits and a pot of green tea. She slowly poured the tea and handed it over to Zhang Wuji; and she actually pinched his wrist gently.

Zhang Wuji frowned; "How could the girl be this frivolous?" he thought. If Zhou Zhiruo saw them, wouldn't she be offended? Thereupon he asked, "Where is Xie Laoye [old master Xie]? Where is Miss Zhou?"

The girl laughed, "Why are you looking for Xie Laoye? Are

you jealous? What if my Jiejie came in and saw your expression? Look at you, you don't have any conscience; you come to our place, yet in your heart you keep thinking about some Miss Zhou and Miss Wang."

Zhang Wuji was startled, "'What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" he asked. That girl only pursed her lips, smiled and left the room.

A moment later, he heard the tinkling noise of bracelets. The curtain was lifted open, the girl returned, holding the hand of a woman around twenty one or twenty two of age. Her skin was snowy white, her face was quite beautiful with arched eyebrows and a grain of mole on the right corner of her mouth. She glanced at him gracefully, and smiled before she said anything. Her figure was elegant, and she welcomed him in a charming manner. Zhang Wuji felt a rich fragrance assailing his nostrils; he was really uncomfortable.

That woman said, "Xiang Gong [honorable master], what is your precious surname? Today you have come to pay me a visit, Xiao Nuzi [little/lowly girl, referring to herself] feels very honored." As she was speaking, her left hand landed on Zhang Wuji's shoulder.

Zhang Wuji blushed profusely and tried to evade. "My humble surname is Zhang," he said, "Is there a gentleman by the surname of Xie and a lady by the surname of Zhou in here?"

The woman smiled and said, "This is the 'li xiang yuan' [fragrance peach courtyard]; if you are looking for Zhou Xianxian, she lives at 'bi tao ju' [jade-green peach residence]. Are you so infatuated by that girl that you lost your mind and looking for Zhou Xianxian at the 'li xiang yuan'? Hee hee ...!"

Suddenly it dawned on Zhang Wuji that this place was a brothel. "Please forgive me," he said. Quick as a flash he slipped out the door.

The girl pursued him and called out, "Gongzi, in what way my Jiejie is inferior to Zhou Xianxian? Aren't you going to sit down even for a moment?"

Zhang Wuji repeatedly shook his hand; he fished out the silver ingot he took from the casino and tossed it to the ground, while flying out the gate. His mind was so troubled that he was not able to calm himself for a long time.

By this time, it was already dark. He was afraid he might miss the blazing fire signs along the way; therefore, he decided to find an inn to spend the night, while his heart was filled with disquieting thoughts. "Why did Yifu go to the casino and to the brothel? There must be a profound meaning behind all these actions, but what is it?" Sleeping to the middle of the night, he suddenly awakened, "Yifu is blind, how could he leave so many clear markings along the way? Could it be that Zhiruo was by his side giving him directions? Or could it be that the enemy deliberately faking our Cult signs to play a trick on me? Are they trying to lure me into ambush? Humph, entering the dragon's pool or the tiger's lair, I'll have to get to the bottom of this good or bad."

Early the next morning, he saw another blazing fire outside Fengrun's city gate, the sign was still pointing to the west. By following the sign, he arrived at Yutian [still another city in Hebei] around noon. Now the sign pointed toward a large house of a rich family. There were lanterns hung on the gate; seemed like the family was celebrating a joyous occasion. The lanterns were adorned with red characters 'zhi zi yu gui' [???? - I don't know how to translate this, the dictionary

gives me 'marry/wedding']; apparently, their daughter was getting married. The sound of music and the noise of guests filled the air. Zhang Wuji had learned his lesson; he did not rush in to ask Xie Xun's whereabouts, instead, he mingled with the guests to observe. But since he did not see anything unusual, he went out to look for another sign, and he did indeed find one on the trunk of a big tree nearby.

The blazing fire sign took him from Yutian to Sanhe, and then he was directed to the south until he arrived at Xianghe. By this time he was starting to have a thought, "Most likely the Beggar Clan is already aware that I am on their trails, therefore, they play the 'luring the tiger from the mountain' trick to get me as far away as possible, so that they can proceed with their shady evil business."

Although he was anxious, he did not dare to stop following the blazing fire signs fearing that it was really Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo who left them. "Supposing they were running away from strong enemies, and left these signs along the way with the hope that I will find and save them, but because I think I am smart, I return to Lulong, what if Yifu and Zhiruo finally die? Things have come this far, I have no choice but keep following these signs until everything comes to light."

From Xianghe to Baocheng, toward Dabaizhuang, Panzhuang, and then turning to southeast, toward Ninghe [a city in Tianjin], from here the blazing fire vanished without any trace; Zhang Wuji could not find any more signs. He explored the city of Ninghe, but did not see anything unusual. "It was definitely the Beggar Clan who led me over here, causing me to lose several days running around in vain." Thereupon he bought a horse to return to Lulong, and then at the second hand clothing store he found a white long gown. Borrowing a pen and some red ink, he drew a large blazing fire on the white gown; having determined to face

the Beggar Clan head-on as the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult.

Wearing the white gown, he went to the rich man's mansion in big strides. The main gate was a pair of huge red double-doors, which were tightly closed at that time. The shiny copper nails on the doors were the size of the mouth of a cup. Zhang Wuji pushed with both of his palms. 'Crash!' the huge double-doors flew up and landed in the middle of the courtyard. A series of resounding 'Bing! Bing! Bang! Bang!' sounds were heard as two large goldfish vats were smashed.

On top of his concern over Xie Xun and Zhou Zhiruo's safety these past few days, he felt that he was a victim of some practical joke, which made him going in circles around the Hebei province; he needed to vent up his frustration. This time coming back to the Beggar Clan headquarters, he was determined to confront them once and for all. As he split the gate open, he walked in big strides and shouted in a thunderous voice, "Beggar Clan people, hear me: have Shi Huolong come out and see me."

There were around a dozen four and five-pouch Beggar Clan disciples standing in the courtyard; they were already shocked when the gate suddenly flew in, now they saw a young man wearing white robe breaking in, some seven, eight people immediately shouted almost simultaneously and blocked this unwelcome guest, "Who are you?" "What do you want?"

Zhang Wuji raised both of his arms, a successive 'slam, slam' noise was heard as he struck the seven, eight Beggar Clan disciples, sending them flying toward a row of windows. Passing the courtyard, he went straight to the main hall. 'Bang!' he smashed the door to the hall, and saw a banquet table in the middle of the room, with Shi Huolong sitting on the head of the table.

As soon as the leaders of the Beggar Clan heard the loud commotion on the entrance, they immediately sent someone to investigate. But Zhang Wuji was so fast that as that seven-pouch disciple was hurrying outside, he met him halfway. With one hack Zhang Wuji grabbed his chest and threw him toward Shi Huolong.

The rich-looking host was sitting a few seats away from the head of the table. As he saw the seven-pouch disciple flying towards the banquet table, he stretched out his arms and caught the flying man. He felt the incoming force was earth shattering so he immediately launched the 'qian jin zhui' [a thousand-catty drop] to steady himself. To his surprise, 'bang, bang, bang' he was forced to repeatedly take seven, eight steps backward and did not stop until his back was against a large pillar. Loosening up his grip, he let the seven-pouch disciple down on the floor. He panted heavily, his body weakened, and he dropped to the floor right in front of that large pillar.

The crowd of beggars witnessed this scene with amazement. Right at that moment, they heard Zhang Wuji exclaim; he was both astonished and delighted, because he saw sitting on that round table, to the left of the head of the table, was a young woman, who was none other than Zhou Zhiruo. And the man who was sitting next to her was Song Qingshu.

"Wuji Gege!" Zhou Zhiruo cried out in shock. She tried to stand up, but her body swayed and she fell to the floor.

Zhang Wuji was startled, he rushed forward to hold her. But before he straightened his back up, a 'Slap!' and a 'Bang!' were heard as his back were simultaneously struck by Song Qingshu's palm and a Beggar Clan master's fist. But Zhang Wuji had already protected his whole body with the Jiu Yang

Shen Gong so that the power of the palm and the fist was immediately neutralized.

Holding Zhou Zhiruo in his arms, he jumped out to the courtyard. "How is Yifu?" he asked.

"I ... I ...," Zhou Zhiruo's voice was shaky.

"Is he [orig. lao3 ren2 jia1 - senior] all right?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"My acupoint is sealed by them ..." Zhou Zhiruo said.

Zhang Wuji only cared about Xie Xun, "How is Yifu?" he asked again.

"I don't know," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "I was captured by them and brought here. I don't know Yifu's whereabouts."

Zhang Wuji laid her down on the ground and massaged several points on the joint of her leg. Who would have thought that Zhou Zhiruo's acupoint was sealed using a special technique and his massage did not show any result. Her feet were planted on the floor, yet she was unable to stand up; her knees bent and she sat back down.

All the beggars left their seats and stood on the steps in front of the courtyard. Shi Huolong cupped his fists and said, "Are you the Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult, Sire?"

Zhang Wuji knew he was facing a leader of a clan, so he must not fail to show courtesy; immediately he cupped his fists in return and said, "I don't dare. I beg Shi Bangzhu's forgiveness for breaking into your Clan's headquarters."

"Zhang Jiaozhu's name has shaken the Jianghu in the past

few years,” Shi Huolong said, “It’s like thunder ... ringing in my ear, and today seeing the old chap’s skill, which is really fierce, hey hey, my utmost admiration.”

Zhang Wuji said, “I come recklessly and have become Shi Bangzhu’s laughingstock. Where is my Yifu, Jin Mao Shi Wang [Golden-Haired Lion King]? Please let him, Senior, come out to see me.”

Shi Huolong’s face flushed, and then he laughed and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu is young, but your words are this bold. We invited Xie Shi Wang [Lion King Xie] with a good intention, to come ... to drink a cup of wine, but not only Xie Shi Wang left without bidding us farewell, he harmed our eight disciples with heavy hands; damn it [orig. ta nai nai, lit. his granny; a curse phrase], how are we going to settle this business? Why doesn’t Zhang Jiaozhu advise us on this?”

Zhang Wuji was startled, he thought, “Those eight Beggar Clan disciples were indeed the victims of Yifu’s heavy hands. It seems that he, Senior, is really not here. But where did he go?” Thereupon he said, “What about this Miss Zhou? Why did your Clan hold her captive here?”

“This ...,” Shi Huolong was startled.

Chen Youliang quickly interjected, “I hear people say that although Zhang Wuji of the Ming Cult possesses a strong martial art, he is a barbarian little devil head who does not have any regard of reason ... ha ha ...”

“Why?” Zhang Wuji’s face stayed calm and collected.

Chen Youliang said, “I have witnessed it today; hey hey, as sure as the shadow of a tree, as plain as your name.”

“Why did you call me barbarian without any regard of reason?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“This Miss Zhou is the Sect Leader of Emei Pai,” Chen Youliang replied, “She is the leading figure of an upright Sect; what relation does she have with your heretical Cult? This Song Qingshu Xiongdi is an up-and coming young leader of Wudang Pai, Miss Zhou and he are a perfect match [orig. lang2 cai2 nu3 mao4, lit. skilled young man, beautiful woman, and ‘zhu lian2 bi4 he2, lit. pearl matches with jade]; it is truly a harmony in social position and economic status, a pair of two-goodness. The two of them are passing by, and the Beggar Clan invited them to stay as our guests, to share a cup of wine with us. Why did the Ming Cult Jiaozhu unexpectedly come and intervene? That is funny, really funny!” Echoing what he just said, the crowd of beggars burst into loud laughter.

Zhang Wuji said, “If Miss Zhou is your guest, why did you seal her acupoints?”

“Miss Zhou was nicely sitting and drinking in here, talking and laughing. Who said her acupoints were sealed?” Chen Youliang said, “The relation between the Beggar Clan and Emei Pai is very deep; it goes for generations. The founder of Emei Pai, Shizu [martial ancestor] Guo Nuxia [heroine Guo] was our Clan’s previous leader, Huang Bangzhu’s beloved daughter. Our previous generation Yelu Bangzhu was Guo Nuxia’s brother-in-law. Unless you belong to the ignorant, wet-behind-the-ear generation, all Wulin people are aware about these historical facts. How can we, the Beggar Clan, offense the current Emai Pai’s Sect Leader? Zhang Jiaozhu’s accusation is unfounded, how can you prevent the heroes under the Heaven from sneering at you?”

Zhang Wuji laughed coldly and said, “So you are saying Miss

Zhou sealed her own acupoints?”

“That’s not necessarily true,” Chen Youliang said, “We have everybody here as our witness, Zhang Jiaozhu rushed in, snatched her by force without any propriety, and then took Miss Zhou out. Miss Zhou struggled to free herself, and then Sire sealed her acupoints. Zhang Jiaozhu, although it is difficult for heroes to resist beautiful face, and even though you are lecherous and want to have possession over her, this is a public place with numerous people; everybody’s eyes are on you. Zhang Jiaozhu, aren’t you degrading your own position by committing this reckless act?”

Zhang Wuji’s eloquence was far inferior to Chen Youliang, as he was receiving such a false countercharge, he was furious and it was even more difficult for him to refute. His countenance turned ashen and he shouted, “So you said you have decided not to tell me where my Yifu is?”

Chen Youliang also raised his voice, “Zhang Jiaozhu, your Cult’s Guang Ming Shi Zhe [emissary of the brightness] Yang Xiao has caused the death of Emei Pai’s Ji Xiaofu Nuxia. Everybody in the Wulin world knows about it, no need to point my finger. Now you are relying on your superior martial art to come over here and commit this kind of despicable, filthy shady business; I am afraid it will be difficult for you to escape justice.”

Zhang Wuji turned his head toward Zhou Zhiruo and said, “Zhiruo, tell me, how did they capture and take you here?”

“I ... I ... I ...” Zhou Zhiruo said the word ‘I’ three times, then suddenly her body went limp and she passed out.

The crowd of beggars broke into a commotion; they called out, “Ming Cult’s devil head killed her!” “Zhang Wuji could

not deny the charge and killed Emei Pai's Sect Leader!" "Kill the pervert thief Zhang Wuji, rid the world of trouble!"

Zhang Wuji was livid, he stepped forward in big strides toward Shi Huolong, thinking, "To subdue the criminals must capture the leader first; as long as I can catch Shi Huolong, good or bad is in his hands. I can force them to reveal my Yifu's whereabouts."

Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhi Fa Zhanglao blocked together. Zhang Bang Longtou brandished his iron stick, while Zhi Fa Zhanglao had a steel hook in his right hand and iron crutch in his left hand. Two men with three different weapons simultaneously attacked Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji let out a light whistling noise and launched Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. 'Clink! Clank!' Zhi Fa Zhanglao's right hand steel hook parried Zhang Bang Longtou's iron stick, his left hand's crutch threatened to smash his lower body.

On the side, Chuan Gong Zhanglao's sword was also thrust in; he called out, "This fellow's martial art is very weird, everybody must be careful." 'Swish, swish, swish!' three times, his sword curved like a rainbow, aiming Zhang Wuji's chest and lower abdomen.

"Good swordmanship!" Zhang Wuji praised his swift and fierce move. Evading sideways, his left forefinger pointed toward Chuan Gong Zhanglao's thigh.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao turned his sword over and the tip of the sword aimed toward Zhang Wuji's fingertip. This change happened so fast that the tips of the sword and the finger were only less than a hair-width apart. This sword move was a rarely seen masterpiece in the Wulin world. Zhang Wuji silently praised, "The Beggar Clan's name is revered in the

Jianghu, for a hundred of years did not decline. There are truly crouching tigers and hidden dragons within the Clan, such as this outstandingly capable man.”

That day in the Mi Le Temple he saw the battle between the Xuan Ming Elders and the Beggar Clan’s masters, but he was hidden on the tree and did not dare to expose himself to look closely. This time he experienced it first hand and found out that Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two elders were truly top ranking martial art experts of the present age. Zhang Bang Longtou was the weakest among them, but still, he was only a notch inferior to the other two.

In a flash, the Beggar Clan’s three elders and Zhang Wuji had exchanged more than twenty stances. Suddenly Chen Youliang loudly called out, “Arrange the Killing Dog Formation!”

The crowd of beggars shouted and yelled; their blades flickered with a snowy white ray of light. There were 21 Beggar Clan martial art masters, each with a curved saber in their hands; they quickly spread out, surrounding Zhang Wuji in the middle. These twenty-one beggars were singing the ‘lian hua luo’ [falling lotus (flower)]. Some of them were moaning and groaning as if they were in pain, while some others beat their own chests with their fists, and some called out in loud voices, “Laoye, Taitai [master, mistress (or madam)], have compassion! Share us your cold rice!”

At first Zhang Wuji was stunned, but then he understood; these weird shouts and actions were to disturb the enemy’s mind. He saw these beggars moved in a random pattern; they were advancing and retreating in haste, but upon a closer inspection, he found that actually they were following some strict pattern.

“Stop!” Chuan Gong Zhanglao shouted; he took two steps backward and lifted his sword horizontally across his chest. Zhi Fa Zhanglao and Zhang Bang Longtou also leaped backward, but the ‘killing dog formation’ was still jumping around here and there, their movements did not cease in the least bit.

“Zhang Jiaozhu,” Chuan Gong Zhanglao called out, “We are relying on large number to gain victory; it is improper. But within the Beggar Clan there is not a single person who is worthy to be Sire’s match. Other than using this cowardly act, we can never fight you following the way of chivalry.”

Zhang Wuji smiled slightly and said, “Well said, well said.”

Chuan Gong Zhanglao continued, “All of us are wielding some weapons, while Zhang Jiaozhu is bare-handed; the Beggar Clan should not take too much advantage over you. Whatever weapon Zhang Jiaozhu desires to use, we will respectfully offer that weapon to you.”

Zhang Wuji said in his heart, “This Chuan Gong Zhanglao not only possesses a high level of martial art, he is also chivalrous; he is totally different from that sly Chen Youliang.” He said, “Since I am playing around with you, why should I whirl a saber or sweep a staff? If I want to use weapon, can’t I fetch it myself?” As he was speaking, his shadow flashed to leave the ‘killing dog formation’. His hands moved and pressed both Chen Youliang’s and Song Qingshu’s shoulders. In a twinkling of an eye, he had already snatched their swords. His shadow flashed again and he returned to his original position.

The way he moved out and re-entered the formation was so fast that none of the moving twenty-one blades even touched the hem of his clothes. The crowd of beggars was frozen in amazement as they heard his loud and clear voice

say, "Your precious Clan's 'killing dog formation' has earned a very good reputation. Only, killing a dog is easy, but if you want to subdue a dragon or overcome a tiger, this formation is not of much use." While saying that, he raised the swords and transmitted his strength into the swords' blade. 'Crack, crack!' both the swords snapped into pieces.

"Everybody, move!" Zhang Bang Longtou shouted, his iron stick pointed toward Zhang Wuji's chest. Zhi Fa Zhanglao also brandished his hook and crutch into two circular snow flowers, sweeping toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji dashed to the left, but his body was slanted to the right, according to the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique. A series of white rays flashed by, followed by a series of 'pop, pop, pop' noise, as all the curved sabers in the hands of the beggars of the 'killing dog formation' were snatched by Zhang Wuji and thrown to the beam of the main hall. The twenty-one curved sabers were stuck neatly in one row, each saber entered the beam about one foot deep.

Suddenly Chen Youliang's voice was heard, "Zhang Wuji, aren't you going to stop?"

Zhang Wuji turned his head only to see Chen Youliang had a sword in his hand, with the tip pressed toward Zhou Zhiruo's back. With a cold laugh Zhang Wuji said, "For a hundred years the people of Jianghu say, 'the Ming Cult, the Beggar Clan, and the Shaolin Pai,' among the Jiao-Pai [cults and sects], the Ming Cult ranks first; among the Bang-Hui [clans and associations/societies] the Beggar Clan holds the highest honor. With your action, aren't you afraid of bringing disgrace on the prestige of Hong Qigong Laoxia [old hero]?"

"Chen Zhanglao," Chuan Gong Zhanglao angrily said, "Release Miss Zhou. We are fighting a life and death battle

with Zhang Jiaozhu. The Beggar Clan is pouring out the entire Clan's power to face Ming Cult Jiaozhu one man. If we do this despicable act, will any of us still have face to live an honorable life?"

Chen Youliang laughed. "Real men fight with wits and not with strength. Zhang Wuji, haven't you surrendered yet?"

"All right!" Zhang Wuji loudly laughed, "Today Zhang Wuji experienced the Beggar Clan's impressive power."

Abruptly he took two steps backward and flipped backward into the air; and when he fell back down, his legs landed on Shi Huolong's shoulders. His right palm laid flat on top of Shi Huolong's head, while his left palm grabbed the main artery on the back of Shi Huolong's neck. It was a stance from the martial art of Sheng Huo Ling, which was executed rather easily so that it surprised even Zhang Wuji himself.

His original intention was to take Shi Huolong by surprise with one of his weird moves. He had prepared three stances of the most difficult to be dealt with, combined with his lightning fast movement, to capture Shi Huolong. His only concern was that Chen Youliang would be truly cruel and merciless; perhaps he would really stab Zhou Zhiruo as soon as Zhang Wuji made his move. Who would have thought that he did not even need a single stance from the three fiercest stances he had already prepared, since Shi Huolong did not even attempt to resist and let himself be captured.

Zhang Wuji rode on Shi Huolong's shoulder just like a child riding on an adult. It was not the most elegant scene to behold, but since he had already gained control over the vital acupoints on the enemy's head, he was not willing to jump down and thus give the enemy a chance to take back control.

As they saw their Clan Leader was captured, the crowd of beggars cried out in alarm. Zhang Wuji's right palm laid flat on the 'bai hui xue' [hundred-meeting acupoint]; which was the intersection of the 'tai yang jing' [sun passage] and the 'du mai' [supervise artery]. It was the most important point on the human body. Zhang Wuji only need to tap it lightly, Shi Huolong's passages and arteries would be shaken and he would die violently; no medicine would be able to revive him.

Nobody within the Beggar Clan dared to move. From the clamoring noise of shouting and yelling, the main hall suddenly turned very quiet. All eyes were looking at Zhang Wuji and Shi Huolong; nobody knew what to do.

Right this moment, suddenly they heard the soft but clear sound of 'qin' [zither] and 'xiao' [flute, but not the modern traverse orchestral flute]. It sounded like there were several zithers and several flutes were being played together. The cheerful sound of music floated in the air, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, sometimes distinct, sometimes vague, but everybody was able to hear it clearly. Sometimes the music came from the east, another time it came from the west; nobody knew for certain from which part of the roof the sound of music came from.

Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised; he could not figure out the meaning of this zither-flute music.

In loud and clear voice Chen Youliang said, "Which Master has bestowed the Beggar Clan the honor of your arrival? If you are the devils from the Ming Cult, you might as well show yourselves; why would you play tricks on us?"

Suddenly the zither played three notes successively, 'zheng, zheng, zheng', and four young women wearing white

appeared on the east and west eaves, floating gently into the courtyard below; each woman had a zither in her hands. The zithers were half as long and half as wide as the ordinary seven-string zither of those days, yet they also have seven strings just like ordinary zithers. As the four women landed on the ground, they stood on the four corners of the courtyard.

Following them, from outside the door entered four young women in black, each with a black long flute in her hands. The flutes were twice as long as the commonly seen flutes of those days. These four women also took their positions on the four corners. Four women in white and four women in black, stood across from each other. Eight women forming a square, the four zithers played a happy tune, joined by the four flutes; together they made a beautiful instrumental ensemble. The music was very gentle and elegant. Zhang Wuji did not understand music, but it was as if the melody were dancing in the air, bringing a pleasant feeling to his ears. Although he was in a dangerous situation, he was willing to stop for a moment and listen to the music.

Amidst the sound of music, a woman entered the courtyard, wearing a soft yellow light robe; her left hand was taking along a twelve, thirteen years old girl. The woman appeared to be around twenty-seven, twenty-eight of age; her movements were graceful and her face was very beautiful, albeit looked a little pale, as if devoid of any blood.

On the contrary, the little girl was ugly; her nose curved upward, her mouth was wide, revealing two big front teeth, and she was carrying a mean and no-nonsense attitude. One of her hand was holding that beautiful lady's hand, while the other hand was holding a dark green bamboo stick. Ever since the crowd of beggars saw these two women walked in, their eyes had never stopped staring at that dark green bamboo stick.

Seeing these many women suddenly appear, Zhang Wuji was aware that he was still riding on Shi Huolong's shoulder and it looked like they were playing some kind of children's game; but Chen Youliang's sword had not left Zhou Zhiruo's back, certainly he could not easily release the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu. However, he also noticed that the eyes of everybody there were fixed on the bamboo stick on that little girl's hand, as if that bamboo stick was the most important object in the world. They did not even look at the women in white, the women in black, the beautiful lady in light yellow, or even looked at the ugly girl. Zhang Wuji was astonished. He silently examined the bamboo stick with his eyes, and saw the bamboo was very dark green, smooth and shiny; who knows how many hands this stick had passed on rubbed and stroked it. Other than that, he did not see anything unusual about it.

The beautiful lady in yellow scanned the hall; her eyes were as cold as lightning, gazing at everybody present. Finally, her eyes rested on Zhang Wuji's face. With an icy cold voice she said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, you are not a child anymore. Instead of acting properly, you are making a scene in here." She sounded like she was chiding Zhang Wuji, but her tone was friendly; it was as if an older sister was reprimanding her younger brother.

Zhang Wuji blushed. "The Beggar Clan's Chen Zhanglao used a dirty trick," he said in way of defense, "He holds my ... my companion hostage. In return, I captured their Bangzhu."

That beautiful lady showed a faint smile and said in gentle voice, "Don't you think riding on others' Bangzhu is a bit too much? I came from Chang'an [ancient name of Xi'an, the capital of China during the Tang Dynasty], and have heard along the way that the Ming Cult Jiaozhu is a young devil-

head. Today I see it with my own eyes. Ay, ay!" While saying that, she shook her pretty head, with a disapproving look on her face.

Suddenly Shi Huolong shouted, "Zhang Wuji, you pervert little thief, get down quickly!" He reached up to pull Zhang Wuji's legs, but since the main artery on the back of his neck, through which the vital energy flowed, was seized, he did not have the least bit of strength left.

Because he was cursed as 'pervert little thief' in front of these women, Zhang Wuji was furious and ashamed; he transmitted a whiff of internal energy through his left hand to the back of Shi Huolong's neck. Shi Huolong felt tingling sensation on his entire body, along with unbearable pain. "Aiyo! Aiyo! Aiyo!" he screamed.

The crowd of beggars were angry at seeing Zhang Wuji's rudeness, but also ashamed and upset at their Bangzhu's display of weakness. They felt that as Shi Huolong moaned and groaned under the enemy's hand, he was degrading his position as a hero and a warrior. Even an ordinary Beggar Clan disciple would not bow his head and show such weakness in front of the enemy, much less the leader of the number one clan in Jianghu.

"Zhang Wuji," Chen Youliang said, "Why don't you release our Shi Bangzhu while I pull my sword away?" Without waiting for a reply, he immediately put his sword back into its sheath. He knew Zhang Wuji would comply his request, and sure enough, Zhang Wuji replied, "Very well."

A shadow flashed, and Zhang Wuji was standing by Zhou Zhiruo again. He saw her eyes were deep and her expression weary; he could not help but feeling compassion and pity. Holding her hands, he helped her to sit down on a round rock

stool in the courtyard.

Chen Youliang turned toward that beautiful lady in yellow; he cupped his fists and said, "Your presence has honored our Clan. I wonder what instructions do you have for us? May we have the honor of learning your precious surname and your great given name?" To the ugly young girl he asked, "Young Miss, where did you get this bamboo stick?"

In a cold voice the beautiful lady in yellow said, "Where is Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou [Lightning Hand of the Originating Formation] Cheng Kun? Tell him to come out and see me."

Zhang Wuji felt strange as he heard the seven characters 'Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun'; he saw Chen Youliang's expression suddenly changed, but he recovered quickly, and then with an indifferent voice he said, "Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun? Isn't that Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun's shifu? You'd better ask Zhang Jiaozhu of Ming Cult."

"Who are you, Sire?" the beautiful lady in yellow asked.

"My surname is Chen, given name Youliang," Chen Youliang replied, "I am a Beggar Clan eight-pouch elder."

The beautiful lady in yellow cast a sidelong glance toward Shi Huolong, and asked, "And who is this fellow? He looks like a warrior with a valiant spirit, why is he so useless? [orig. nong2 bao1 - cloth used to wrap a boil wound with pus on it] He was only punished lightly by others, and already screaming and crying. Truly unfit of his image."

The crowd of beggars felt their faces were lost; they were inwardly ashamed. Some of them cast their glances toward Shi Huolong with 30% disdain and 20% anger.

"This is our Clan's Shi Bangzhu," Chen Youliang said, "The Senior has just recently recovered from a serious illness. His body is still not well. You are the guest; we are yielding 30% to you. Don't blame us for offending you if you speak anymore nonsense." The last two sentences were spoken in stern voice and expression.

The beautiful lady in yellow was unfazed; she turned toward one of the women in black and said, "Xiao Cui, return the letter to him."

"Yes!" the girl in black replied. Taking a letter from her bosom, she held it on her hand.

Zhang Wuji took a glance and saw these characters on the envelope, 'To Master Han Shan Tong of the Ming Cult. Confidential.' And a smaller row of four characters, 'Shi of the Beggar Clan.'

As Zhang Bang Longtou saw the letter, immediately his face turned purple. "Little [female] slave," he cursed, "Turned out the joker who stole the letter from the Old Man along the way is you, the dead slave girl." In his anger he raised his iron staff high, ready to stake his all and pounce on the girl.

The girl in black chuckled and said, "I am a slave girl indeed [Translator's note: the word ya1tou2 literally means 'slave' or 'servant girl', but can also be translated as 'little girl']; but I am not dead yet. Such a big man like you, but failed in a simple task of delivering a letter. What a shame." Finished speaking, she waved her delicate hand and the letter flew smoothly toward Zhang Bang Longtou. Immediately Zhang Bang Longtou lifted his hand to catch the letter.

That night Zhang Wuji witnessed how Shi Huolong ordered Zhang Bang Longtou to deliver a letter for Han Shantong,

while holding Han Lin'er hostage to coerce Han Shantong to surrender to the Beggar Clan. Listening to the above exchange, he presumed it was these girls in white and in black who played joke on Zhang Bang Longtou along the way by stealing the letter, and thus forcing Zhang Bang Longtou to return to Lulong. But Zhang Bang Longtou had a strong martial art; listening to his words, it seemed like until this moment he did not know who had played the joke on him. Therefore, either these eight women possessed an outstanding resourcefulness, or they possessed a very high martial art skill; or it could be that the beautiful lady in yellow was behind all this, deliberately throwing the masters from the Beggar Clan into confusion. Thinking to this point, he felt grateful toward that lady in yellow.

The beautiful lady in yellow said, "Han Shantong is fighting around the rivers Huai and Si to drive the Tartars away. Along the way, I heard that he is kindhearted and chivalrous; he has never disturbed common people. A hero of his caliber, how can he betray the Ming Cult and surrender to the Beggar Clan for the sake of his son? If this letter ever reach the hand of Han Da Ye [master Han], the joke will be on you. I saw this Longtou Dage [big brother Longtou] is muddle-headed and funny; furthermore, there is an important matter within the Beggar Clan that requires his presence, hence I intercepted the letter."

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Many thanks Dajie [big sister] for your assistance. Zhang Wuji pays his respect."

The lady in yellow returned the respect. "Don't be overly courteous," she said. And then she addressed the Beggar Clan again, "Do you really believe that by capturing Han Lin'er you can compel Han Shantong to surrender? Zhang Bang Longtou Dage, along the way your trip was hindered several times. Do you think by detouring to smaller pathways

you can evade the obstructions? Hey hey, even if you did evade the obstructions and deliver this letter to Han Shantong; your Beggar Clan will not enjoy any advantage at all.”

Chen Youliang’s heart sank; he took the letter and saw that the envelope was still intact. Ripping the envelope open, he took the letter and as he browsed it, his countenance changed greatly. Originally it was a letter compelling Han Shantong to surrender, now it became a letter from the Beggar Clan begging the Ming Cult to accept its surrender. The language was very humble, in which the Beggar Clan was bowing and bending its knees, assuming the lowest position by cursing its own past conducts and deeds, admitting that they were ten thousands of unpardonable evil. Furthermore, it declared that from that day onward, the Beggar Clan decided to rectify its wrongdoings and asking the Ming Cult’s benevolence by not holding them responsible of their former misdeeds. It also promised to submit under the Ming Cult’s authority and be willing to be the vanguard in the great undertaking of expelling the Yuan.

“That’s right,” the lady in yellow coldly said, “I have seen the letter, but it wasn’t me who changed it. As I saw this letter, I realized Zhang Bang Longtou had already been tricked by others. My parents had a close relationship with the previous generation of the Beggar Clan. I do not wish the awe-inspiring prestige of the biggest clan in the world, which has been built since the days passed, to be disgraced like this today; hence I decided to interfere. Just think, if Zhang Bang Longtou delivered this letter to the Ming Cult, do you think the Beggar Clan would still have a face to stand in the Jianghu?”

One by one Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao, Zhang Bo Longtou, Zhang Bang Longtou and the others read the

letter, and every single one of them was shocked and angered; in their hearts, they all cried out, "We've been shamed!" They realized the truth in what that lady in yellow was saying, if this letter did indeed fall into the Ming Cult's hands, the Beggar Clan would be so disgraced that it would be difficult for the Beggar Clan disciples to stand straight in front of other people. Speaking of which, by intercepting the letter, the lady in yellow was actually doing a big favor toward the Beggar Clan. The question was: who stole the letter in the first place?

Xiao Cui, the maiden in black, laughed and said, "You want to know who changed the letter, don't you?" No one in the Beggar Clan responded, but their faces revealed their anxious desire to know.

"Zhang Bang Longtou," Xiao Cui said, "Take your outer robe off; you'll find the answer."

Early on Zhang Bang Longtou's face had turned red, with his veins bulging on his neck. As soon as he heard Xiao Cui, he ripped his outer robe with both hands. A series of 'Snap, snap' noise was heard as his buttons were pulled. He tossed the robe backward and barked, "Then what?"

"Ah!" he heard the crowd of beggars behind him cry together in alarm; obviously they had seen something strange.

"What?" Zhang Bang Longtou asked, while turning his body around, only to see six, seven people pointing their fingers toward his back.

Zhang Bang Longtou had never been known for his patience. Again his hands grabbed the lapels of his inner robe and ripped it open, revealing his muscular body. Spreading the inner robe open, he saw a picture of large bat in dark green

ink, its wings spread wide; its face bore a ferocious and terrifying expression, with some red dots representing drips of blood on the corner of its mouth.

“Qing Yi Fu Wang [green-winged bat king] Wei Yixiao!” Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others exclaimed in unison.

Previously, Wei Yixiao very seldom visited the Central Plains [zhong yuan], only a few people knew his name; but over the past few years, he had made several mysterious appearances in the Jianghu, displaying his full capabilities. As a result, his fame soared and in a short period of time it was in par with the Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king].

Zhang Wuji rejoiced secretly, “Other than Wei Xiong [brother Wei] with his superb ‘qing gong’ [lightness kungfu], which enables him to come and go without leaving any trace, it would be difficult to play a joke on Zhang Bang Longtou and leave him senseless.”

Zhang Bang Longtou was startled, he raised his inner robe and threw it on Zhang Wuji’s face, while cursing, “Fine! Turns out it was one from your group of evil bastards who played a joke on the Old Man.”

Zhang Wuji flicked his sleeve up and that inner robe floated slowly upward and landed on a forked branch of a ginkgo tree on that courtyard. As the robe fluttered in the wind, the picture of blood-sucking bat appeared to be alive.

“Zhang Bang Longtou,” Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “My humble cult’s Wei Fu Wang [bat king Wei] has shown you mercy; don’t you understand? What if he decided to take your life?” As Zhang Bang Longtou thought about it, he could not help but shiver.

Chen Youliang realized that the longer he let this matter go on, the more disadvantageous it would be for them; the best plan would be to turn their attention someplace else. Thereupon he asked the lady in yellow, "May I ask Miss' honored surname? I wonder what relationship do you have with us?"

The lady in yellow laughed coldly and said, "What relationship do I have with you? I only have a relationship with this Dog Beating Stick." She pointed her finger to the dark green bamboo stick in the ugly girl's hand.

The crowd of beggars had early on recognized the stick to be the Dog Beating Stick [da gou bang], the symbol of authority of their own Clan's Clan Leader; however, they were not clear on how this stick could fall into someone else's hand. Everybody turned their attention toward Shi Huolong. They saw his face was deathly pale and looked desperate.

"Bangzhu," Chuan Gong Zhanglao asked, "Is the Dog Beating Stick in this girl's hand fake?"

"I ... I ..." Shi Huolong stammered, "I think it is a fake."

"Fine," the lady in yellow said, "Take the real Dog Beating Stick out so that we can compare the two sticks."

"The Dog Beating Stick is the Beggar Clan's most precious article, how can we casually show it to anybody?" Shi Huolong replied, "I don't have it with me, because if I lose it, won't it be terrible?"

As the crowd of beggars listened to him, they felt he did not make any sense; as the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, how could he be afraid to lose the Dog Beating Stick?

The little girl lifted high the bamboo stick and with a loud voice said, "Everybody, come and see. This Dog Beating Stick is our Clan's ... our Clan's heritage, which was passed on from the first generation to the next. How can it be a fake?"

As the crowd of beggars heard her saying 'Our Clan', they were astonished; so they came near to examine the stick. They saw the stick was as crystal-clear and smooth as jade, and as hard as iron; without any doubt this was the real Clan Leader's symbol of authority. They looked at each other in confusion.

The lady in yellow said, "It is widely known that the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms and the Dog Beating Stick technique are two of the Bangzhu of the Beggar Clan's most famous divine skills. Xiao Hong, go and ask Shi Bangzhu for some advice in the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms first, and then Xiao Ling, after Xiao Hong Jiejie [elder sister] has won, ask Shi Bangzhu for some advice in the Dog Beating Stick technique." Two flute-player young girls responded and jumped out; they stood side by side in the courtyard.

Chen Youliang indignantly said, "By not willing to reveal your name, Miss has already despised the Beggar Clan; and now you ordered two little maids to fight our Bangzhu. How can there be such logic in the Jianghu? Shi Bangzhu, let disciple deal with these two maids first, and then we can ask this Miss to show her expertise. In the end we will see what kind of master has showed such contempt toward the Beggar Clan."

"Damn it! [orig. ta1 nai3 nai5 - his granny]" Shi Huolong said, "Very well, Chen Zhanglao, please take care of this matter for me."

'Swish!' Chen Youliang unsheathed his sword, and slowly walked to the courtyard.

Xiao Hong said, "Miss told me to ask some advice in the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms. Do you know this palm technique? Does the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms technique use a sword?"

"What kind of position do you think Shi Bangzhu holds?" Chen Youliang shouted in response, "How can he fight a lowly servant like you? The Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms is a divine skill, how can a lowly servant like you see it that easily?" While saying that, he took another step forward.

The lady in yellow turned toward Zhang Wuji and said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, please do me a favor."

"Just say it," Zhang Wuji replied.

The lady in yellow said, "Could you get rid of this fellow surnamed Chen for me? And then, unmask that big fraud who pretends to be Shi Bangzhu."

When Zhang Wuji was successful in capturing Shi Huolong with only one move, he had thought that his martial art skill was only mediocre. He also recalled when Han Lin'er spat some phlegm to him, surprisingly Shi Huolong was not able to evade. Doubt started to rise in Zhang Wuji's heart; especially after witnessing that in everything he had always listened to Chen Youliang without any ideas of his own. Based on his martial art skill, knowledge and experience, he was unfit to become the leader of the Beggar Clan. This time he heard the lady in yellow say that he was a 'big fraud who pretends to be Shi Bangzhu', his suspicion was confirmed and thus he understood 60, 70%. He nodded and immediately went toward Shi Huolong.

Shi Huolong launched the 'chong tian pao' [shattering the sky cannon]. 'Bang!' his fist hit Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji laughed out loud and said, "Is the Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms this useless?" [again, the original word is 'nong bao', see above] Reaching out, he grabbed Shi Huolong's collar and lifted him up.

Chen Youliang realized he was not Zhang Wuji's match; he quietly withdrew into the crowd without waiting for Zhang Wuji to make his move.

The ugly girl suddenly wailed and pounced toward Shi Huolong, hitting and pulling his clothes like crazy, while crying out, "You killed my Father, killed my Father, wicked thief!"

The acupoints on Shi Huolong's back were grabbed by Zhang Wuji so he was not able to move. He was a burly man and the girl's little fists only reached his belly. Zhang Wuji bent his arm to push his head down. The girl grabbed and pulled his hair. Suddenly the entire hair on Shi Huolong's head fell off, revealing his shiny bald head. Turned out he was bald and was using a wig. The girl continued randomly grab, scratch and pull; and she pulled away his nose, but no blood gushing out. Everybody was astonished. They looked closely and saw that the fallen piece of nose was a fake; his high nose was also a fake.

The crowd of beggars broke into a commotion; they asked together, "Who are you?" "Why did you pretend to be Shi Bangzhu?"

Zhang Wuji raised him up and then with a jerk he tossed him to the ground. Shi Huolong was knocked out and was

speechless for half a day. Zhang Wuji smiled faintly and withdrew; thinking that this man was masquerading Shi Huolong, and now that the fact was known, the crowd of beggars would certainly deal with him.

Zhang Bang Longtou was hot-tempered; he stepped forward and slapped that man left and right, 'Slap, slap, slap, slap' seven, eight times.

The fake Shi Huolong's cheeks were red and swollen. "It wasn't me, it wasn't me," he cried out loudly, "It was Chen ... Chen Zhanglao who told me to do it."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao's heart was stirred, he shouted, "Where is Chen Youliang?" But Chen Youliang's shadow was nowhere to be seen. Apparently as Chen Youliang realized his plot was uncovered, he quickly escaped and was already gone for a long time.

"Quickly chase him!" Zhi Fa Zhanglao barked his order. Several seven-pouch disciples responded and ran out of the gate to pursue.

"Mother of a thief! [this is a literal translation]" Zhang Bang Zhanglao cursed, "Who do you think you are, telling the Old Man to kowtow to you and call you 'Bangzhu'?" Raising his palm, he was about to slap again.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao quickly reached out to grab his hand. "Feng Xiongdi [brother Feng]," he said, "Don't be reckless. If you kill him, we won't find out anything from him." Turning toward the lady in yellow, he cupped his fists and respectfully said, "If Miss did not expose this man's deceitful scheme, we would still be kept in the dark. By your illustrious name, Miss was able to see through this deception. My humble Clan, from the biggest to the smallest, all are

indebted to you.”

The lady in yellow only gave a slight smile and said, “Xiao Nuzi [lit. little/lowly girl – referring to herself] lives in the deep of the mountain, and has never had any contact with outsiders; so knowing my name would be quite useless. As for this little sister, could it be that nobody in your clan recognize her?”

The crowd of beggars looked at the little girl, but nobody recognized her. Something suddenly stirred in Chuan Gong Zhanglao’s heart; he took a step forward and said, “She ... she ... she looks a bit like Mrs. Shi ... could it be ... could it be ...”

“That’s right,” the lady in yellow said, “Her surname is Shi, given name Hongshi [lit. red rock; different character from her surname ‘Shi’]; she is the only daughter of Shi Huolong, Shi Bangzhu. When Shi Bangzhu was dying, he sent Mrs. Shi and this girl, with the Dog Beating Stick in their hands, to look for me, asking me to avenge his grievance.”

Chuan Gong Zhanglao was shocked, “Miss!” he said, “Did you say Shi Bangzhu has already returned to Heaven? He ... how did the Senior die?”

After Yelu Qi, none of the previous generations Clan Leaders had been successful in mastering the entire Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms; the most any Clan Leader had ever learned was fourteen stances. Shi Huolong had mastered twelve stances. About twenty years ago, even though his internal energy was not strong enough, he forced himself in training of this heritage palm technique of his Clan. As a result, the upper half of his body was paralyzed; he could not move his arms. Thereupon he took his wife and went wandering on remote mountains in search of efficacious treatment of his

illness, and left the Beggar Clan affairs to Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa two elders, and Zhang Bang and Zhang Bo two 'longtou' [leaders; lit. dragon head]. However, there was no clear coordination between the two elders and two leaders; everybody was taking care of his own business only. As a result, once again the Dirty Clothes and the Clean Clothes Factions were on bad terms with each other, and such a big clan gradually declined in power.

Before the sudden appearance of this fake Clan Leader, the younger Beggar Clan disciples had never seen their Bangzhu, plus Chuan Gong Zhanglao and the others had not seen Shi Huolong for more than twenty years, and so looking at this fake Bangzhu's appearance, which held a very close resemblance with the real Bangzhu, who would have thought that this one was only an impersonator?

The lady in yellow sighed and said, "Shi Bangzhu died under the hands of Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun."

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed; thinking that he had personally seen Cheng Kun's body lying on the ground at the Brightness Peak, how could he kill Shi Huolong? Or perhaps it must be before he was killed at the Brightness Peak.

"Can I ask you a question, Miss?" he asked, "How long has Shi Bangzhu passed away?"

"Last year, on the sixth of the tenth month," the lady in yellow replied, "So it's been more than two months now."

"That's strange," Zhang Wuji said, "I wonder how does Miss know that Shi Bangzhu died under Cheng Kun that old thief's treacherous hands?"

The lady in yellow replied, "Mrs. Shi told me that Shi

Bangzhu fought this old man for twelve stances before than old man vomited blood and ran away. But Shi Bangzhu was also injured by that old man's palm strength. Shi Bangzhu knew his injury was very serious, and he expected that the old man would recover within three days and would return to pick a fight with him again. Immediately he talked to Mrs. Shi, telling her that the enemy was Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun. By that time Shi Bangzhu's paralyzed arms were actually about 90% recovered. With his mastery of the twelve stances of the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, his martial art skill could be considered one of the top ranking masters in the Jianghu, yet after exhausting his entire skill and strength, after the twelve stances were launched, he still could not escape the enemy's treacherous hands."

Listening to this point, the little girl Shi Hongshi broke into a loud cry. Chuan Gong Zhanglao's face also showed grief and indignation; he wiped the tears from Shi Hongshi's face with his dirty sleeve while saying, "Little Sister, Bangzhu's grievance is our Clan tens of thousands disciples' grievance. We will certainly capture that Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou Cheng Kun and tear his body into ten thousand pieces to avenge Bangzhu's great hatred. I wonder where is your Mama?"

Shi Hongshi pointed at the lady in yellow. "My Mama is recuperating in Yang Jiejie's [elder sister Yang] home," she said. And that was when everybody knew the lady in yellow's surname was Yang, but as for what kind of person she was, nobody had the least bit of clue.

The lady in yellow sighed softly and said, "Mrs. Shi also suffered from Cheng Kun's palm. Her condition was not light. After making a long and wearisome journey, she arrived at my humble home totally exhausted. Whether she would recover, it's ... it's hard to say."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao hatefully said, "I wonder what kind of enmity this Cheng Kun has against our Lao Bangzhu [old/previous Clan Leader], that he dealt with him with such a treacherous hand?"

The lady in yellow said, "According to Mrs. Shi, who rephrased Shi Bangzhu's last words, Cheng Kun and he did not know each other personally, so there was no ground for enmity or revenge. Therefore, until the moment he died, Shi Bangzhu was unclear of the reason behind it. Mrs. Shi speculated that someone from the Beggar Clan somehow offended Cheng Kun that he exacted his revenge on Shi Bangzhu."

Zhi Fa Zhanglao was silent for a moment before saying, "To avoid Xie Xun, this Cheng Kun went into hiding from the Jianghu people dozens of years ago. How could a Beggar Clan disciple offend him? It seems like there is a misunderstanding involved here."

Zhang Bo Longtou had been listening quietly on the side without saying anything, but suddenly to grabbed a curved saber and placed it on Shi Huolong's impersonator's neck while shouting, "What's your name? Why did you impersonate Shi Bangzhu? Speak up! And if you lie, even half a word... humph, humph!" While saying that, his curved-saber hacked diagonally and split a nearby chair into two pieces, and then he immediately returned the saber on the bald-man's neck.

The bald man was so scared that he felt his soul was leaving his body. "I ... I ..." he stammered, "Xiao Ren [little/lowly person] is called 'lai tou yuan' [Scabies Turtle Head] Liu Ao. I was the chief of a mountain stronghold on the Jixian county of Shanxi province. That day I went down the mountain to do our business without any capital, when we met Chen

Youliang, Chen Zhanglao, and Chen Zhanglao's Shifu. With one kick Chen Zhanglao made Xiao Ren flip on the ground. He raised his sword ready to kill. Xiao Ren promptly kowtowed asking for mercy. Chen Zhanglao looked at Xiao Ren carefully. He suddenly said, 'Shifu, this little thief looks very much like the man we met the day before yesterday.' His shifu shook his head and said, 'Hey, hey, the age is not right, nose is too low, plus he is bald.' Chen Zhanglao laughed and said, 'Disciple has a way to fix that.' Thereupon he told Xiao Ren to follow them to Jiexian, and we went into an inn. Chen Zhanglao applied some plaster to make Xiao Ren's nose higher, and then he put a wig on Xiao Ren's head so that I assumed the appearance ... of that old gentleman. Even if Xiao Ren had a nerve as high as the sky, I would never have dared to play any trick on you. Only Chen Zhanglao said so, what could Xiao Ren do? Xiao Ren's dog life is in his hand, there ... there is no other way. Xiao Ren still has an eighty-year old Mother at home, please spare my life." While saying that, he bent his knees and kowtowed, knocking his head on the ground repeatedly.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao pondered for a while before saying, "Chen Youliang's school background is Shaolin Pai; his shifu must be a senior monk in the Shaolin Temple. He ... does he have any other shifu?"

His words reminded Zhang Wuji of something. "That's right," he interjected, "His shifu is Cheng Kun." Thereupon he told them briefly how Cheng Kun assumed the name Yuan Zhen and mingled among the Shaolin monks by becoming Kong Jian Shenseng's [divine monk] disciple. He also told Yuan Zhen's sneak attack of the Brightness Peak, and how in the end he was killed by Yin Yewang, but his body was suddenly missing.

Zhang Bo Longtou and Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "No doubt

about it. Cheng Kun faked his death on the Brightness Peak, and quietly slipped out amidst the confusion.”

Chuan Gong Zhanglao angrily said, “Turns out the mastermind behind this treachery is that traitor Chen Youliang. Those two, master and disciple, have a wild ambition; in their futile attempt to dominate the world, they have killed Shi Bangzhu and sent this impersonator to be their puppet. Not only they wanted to force the Ming Cult into submission, they also want to subdue Shaolin, Wudang and Emei, three major sects. This scheme is not only treacherous we very seldom hear something like this either. Where is Song Qingshu? Where did Song Qingshu go?”

Up to this time, everybody had been focusing their attention toward the Beggar Clan’s Bangzhu, the lady in yellow, Shi Hongshi, and the others; nobody knew when Song Qingshu unexpectedly slipped away right on Chen Youliang’s heel. His departure confirmed their confidence that Chen Youliang’s sinister plot had finally been thwarted.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao bowed deeply toward the lady in yellow and said, “Miss has truly shown a great kindness towards our humble Clan. The Beggar Clan does not know how to pay you back.”

The lady in yellow smiled slightly and said, “My ancestors had a deep relationship with your honorable Clan’s previous generation, this tiny deed does not worth mentioning. Please take a good care of this Shi little sister.” Bowing in respect, her yellow shadow flashed and she had already flown to the roof.

“Miss,” Chuan Gong Zhanglao called out, “Please stay for a while.”

The four girls in black and the four girls in white also jumped to the roof, accompanied by the tinkling sound of the zither and the mellow sound of the flute. In a short moment, the zither-flute ensemble drifted away, until finally their music vanished. As sudden as their arrival, their departure was also swift. Everybody felt as if something was lost from their lives.

Holding Shi Hongshi's hand, Chuan Gong Zhanglao said to Zhang Wuji, "Zhang Jiaozhu, would you please come into the inner hall to talk."

The crowd of beggars respectfully stood on the side, opening up a way for Zhang Wuji to walk in. Zhang Wuji went into the hall and was seated as Chuan Gong Zhanglao's honorable guest. Zhou Zhiruo sat next to him.

After asking the names of Chuan Gong Zhanglao, Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others, Zhang Wuji said, "Cao Zhanglao, if my Yifu Jin Mao Shi Wang is with your honorable Clan, would you please have him come out to see me; if he is not, would you please tell me his whereabouts?"

Chuan Gong Zhanglao heaved a deep sigh and said, "That traitor Chen Youliang has played a trick on us, making the Beggar Clan ashamed to face the heroes of this world. As Zhang Jiaozhu has mentioned, it was indeed we who invited Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] and this Miss Zhou outside the Great Wall. Xie Daxia was sick and lost his consciousness on the bed. Without any fight we brought them both to this place. Five days ago in the evening, Xie Daxia suddenly struck dead our humble Clan disciples who happened to guard him, and then he escaped. The coffins of Beggar Clan disciples who died violently are still on the rear courtyard. If Zhang Jiaozhu does not believe me, you can go to the rear courtyard and see for yourself."

Zhang Wuji could hear the sincerity in his words; besides, he had seen with his own eyes the corpses of the Beggar Clan disciples scattered around that second floor room the other night. Thereupon he said, "Cao Zhanglao has stated the fact, how can I dare not to believe?" And then he asked, "From Lulong going westward, there are signs used by my humble Cult people to communicate with each other, I thought they were left by our Cult brethren; I wonder if your Clan has anything to do with it?"

Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "I am not sure if it was that fellow Chen Youliang's doing, but to my shame, Xiongdi [brother] does not have any knowledge of it."

Zhang Wuji nodded. He pondered a while and then he understood. "At the Brightness Peak that Cheng Kun was able to come and go as he pleased; obviously he knew our Cult's signs. Since this man is not dead, the one who left the signs to deceive others must be him. But if my Yifu really fell into Cheng Kun's hands ..." Thinking to this point, sweats broke on his forehead. Calming himself down, he asked Shi Hongshi, "Little Sister, where does this Yang Jiejie live? Did you know her previously?"

Shi Hongshi shook her head, "I did not know her. After Father died, Mama took me, taking Father's bamboo stick along, riding on a cart for many days. And then we did not ride the cart anymore, but climbing the mountain instead. Mama could not walk anymore, she took a rest. And then she crawled on the ground. And then we got to the outside of a forest. Mama called out several times. And then Xiao Jiejie ['little' elder sister] wearing black came out. After that Yang Jiejie came out. She asked Mama many questions. And then she took the bamboo stick and left for half a day. Afterwards Mama passed out. And then Yang Jiejie took me, she also took eight Xiao Jiejie wearing black and wearing white. We rode on

a cart and came here.”

She was too young and did not understand much; when asked about the place, the day and the time, she could not give any answer, there was not the least bit of useful information came out of her mouth.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, “Your precious Cult’s Master Han Shantong’s young master is still with us.” Turning around he gave some orders to a Beggar Clan disciple, who then left in a hurry.

Not too long afterwards, they heard Han Lin’er’s loud voice from the rear hall, cursing and scolding, “You are a bunch of stinky no-good beggars, you still want to deceive your father? Our Zhang Jiaozhu holds a highly respected position; how can he come to your stinky beggars’ lair? Hurry up, send your father to the western sky. Your sneaky evil plan won’t work against me.”

As the elders heard him, they all had ashamed look on their faces. Zhang Wuji respected Han Lin’er’s guts and his unyielding character; he stood up and rushed several steps forward. In big strides Han Lin’er angrily walked in from behind the wall. Zhang Wuji met him and said, “Han Dage [big brother Han], I am here. I am sorry that you have suffered these past few days.”

Han Lin’er was startled; in his extreme delight he knelt down immediately and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu, you [orig. lao3ren2jia1 – Senior] are really here. Xiao Ren [little/lowly person – reference to self] is relieved. Please issue an order to wipe these stinky beggars out.”

With a smile on his face Zhang Wuji helped him up and said, “Han Dage, the Beggar Clan Elders have also fallen under

other people's sinister plot; there has been some misunderstanding. But everything is clear now, everybody becomes good friends. Looking at my face, I hope Han Xiongdi [brother Han] do not take any offense."

Han Lin'er stood up, while giving Chuan Gong Zhanglao and the others a glowering look. He wanted to shout some abusive words to vent his anger, but since the Cult Leader had already told him so, he had no choice but trying hard to repress his anger.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhi Fa Zhanglao said, "With your bright presence today, you have given our humble Clan the greatest honor. Quickly reset the banquet table! Everyone, first, we welcome Zhang Jiaozhu; second, we apologize to the Emei Pai's Zhou Zhangmen [Sect Leader Zhou]; third, we apologize to Han Dage." Before he even finished talking, several disciples had already carried out his order.

Zhang Wuji still had his Yifu's safety hanging in his mind, plus he had many questions he would like to ask Zhou Zhiruo, therefore, he was not in the mood to eat and drink. Cupping his fists he said, "Your good intentions are highly appreciated, but I am anxious to find out about my Yifu. I will have to come back in the future to disturb you. Please excuse me."

Chuan Gong Zhanglao and the others kept asking him to stay. Seeing their sincere invitation, Zhang Wuji thought that if he walked away, he would unavoidably offend the Beggar Clan. Therefore, he was obliged to stay and join the feast.

During the feast, the leaders of the Beggar Clan seriously reiterated their apology; they further promised to send the Beggar Clan disciples everywhere to inquire Xie Xun's whereabouts, and to let the Ming Cult know as soon as they

get any information. Zhang Wuji thanked them and from that day forward, he became friends with the 'Zhanglao's and 'Longtou's of the Beggar Clan. They drank to their hearts contents.

The Beggar Clan leaders noticed that Zhang Wuji was a young man highly skilled in martial arts, yet he was not arrogant, but generous and open-minded. Plus, he ardently made an effort to engage the Beggar Clan in the effort of driving the Tartars away. Everybody's hearts were won over with respect and admiration. When Zhang Wuji left, they sent him off ten 'li's outside the city of Lulong, before bidding him goodbye.

End of Chapter 33.

Chapter 34 - The Bride Tore the Red Dress Barehanded

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Suddenly a red shadow flashed by, someone had already reached Zhao Min's back. From inside the red sleeve came a bare hand, with its five fingers struck down on top of Zhao Min's head. This move was like a rabbit evading the falcon; it was unbelievably fast, and it was more surprising since it came from the bride, Zhou Zhiruo.

Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo and Han Lin'er three people went south along the main road, riding the steeds given to them by the rich men of the Beggar Clan. Han Lin'er was very respectful toward his Cult Leader, he did not dare to ride abreast, but followed some distance behind. Along the way he would serve tea and attend to Zhang and Zhou's needs, acting as their servant. Zhang Wuji felt uncomfortable and said, "Han Dage, although within the Cult you are my subordinate brother, I do respect your character. In business matters you listen to my command, but in day-to-day relationship, we are of the same generation, just like brothers or friends."

With a terrified look on his face Han Lin'er replied, "Subordinate holds Jiaozhu in the highest regard, how can I be worthy to be considered of the same generation with you? In normal time I am not fortunate enough to be close to Jiaozhu; today I can provide my insignificant service to Jiaozhu with all my heart and that is subordinate's lifelong good fortune."

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, "I am not your Jiaozhu, you don't have to be this respectful to me."

Han Lin'er replied, "Miss Zhou is like a deity. Xiao Ren [little/lowly person - referring to self] can speak with you, it is already the good karma of my previous life. I am asking Miss' forgiveness for my uncouth behavior."

Zhou Zhiruo could hear the sincerity in his voice, while his eyes showed utmost respect as if she were really a deity. She knew she was beautiful, enough to shake any man's heart and make them beat faster; but she had never met somebody like Han Lin'er, who admire her almost to the point of worshipping her. It made her young heart extremely happy.

Zhang Wuji asked her how they were captured by the Beggar Clan. Zhou Zhiruo told him that not long after he left the inn that day, suddenly Xie Xun started shivering and became delirious. She was so scared and did all she could to comfort him, but apparently Xie Xun did not recognize her. He jumped madly around the room for a while before he collapsed to the ground and fainted. Right at that moment six, seven masters from the Beggar Clan broke into the room. She did not have enough time to pull her sword, and in the end the two of them were brought to Lulong.

When he was little, Zhang Wuji had heard that because of the main artery injury when training the 'Qi Shang Quan' [Seven-injury Fist], combined with the fact that his entire family was decimated by Cheng Kun, his Yifu would occasionally fall into mental confusion. However, Zhang Wuji had never expected that his Yifu's illness would breakout suddenly in such an unfortunate time that he was unable to resist the Beggar Clan's attack. Thinking of this, he could not restrain himself from sighing.

The two of them mulled over Xie Xun's whereabouts, but neither of them had any clue. Zhang Wuji said, "The Capital is the meeting place of all kinds of people, it is in our way going south. Let us stop by Dadu [lit. grand capital, modern day Beijing] to find some information. I think the Green-winged Bat King Wei Xiong [brother Wei] might holds some clues in his hands."

Zhou Zhiruo pursed her lips then she laughed and said, "Do you really want to go to Dadu to see Wei Yixiao?"

Zhang Wuji understood very well what she was saying, he could not help blushing while replying, "We might not see Wei Xiong, but if we can see Yang Zuoshi [left emissary

Yang], Ku Toutuo, Peng Heshang [Buddhist monk] or the others, they might be able to give me some ideas.”

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, “I know someone with divine ability in strategy, plotting and scheming. If you go to Dadu to find her, she will help you find a good idea. Yang Zuoshi, Ku Toutuo, Peng Heshang and the others are simply not equal to this Miss in term of intelligence.”

Zhang Wuji did not dare to mention that he met with Zhao Min. This time she mentioned her name, he could not help but feeling bashful. “You always remember Miss Zhao,” he said, “And are always happy to make me feel awkward.”

Zhou Zhiruo laughed and said, “I am not the only one who always remembers her; there is someone else beside me. I wouldn't be able to see what is in your heart unless you have guilty feelings.”

Zhang Wuji thought that Zhou Zhiruo and he were engaged [orig. bai2tou2zhi1yue1 - arrangement/agreement to live together until their heads are white]. This time they were facing a life and death situation together, their feelings could not be divided and he could not conceal anything from her. Thereupon he said, “Zhiruo, there is something I want to tell you. Please don't be angry.”

“I will be angry if I deserve to be angry,” Zhou Zhiruo said.

Zhang Wuji's heart sank. He thought that he had made a heavy oath in her presence that he would kill Zhao Min to avenge his cousin Yin Li, but when he saw Zhao Min, not only he did not kill her, he spent the night in the wilderness and traveled side-by-side with her instead. This matter was really difficult to explain. He was not good in fabricating lies, and he was ashamed of his own conduct, his awkward expression easily revealed his feelings.

While he was still musing, their rides had reached a small town. Noticing that the day was almost spent, they decided to lodge for the night in a small inn. After dinner, he massaged the acupoints on Zhou Zhiruo's back. He was not familiar with the Beggar Clan's sealing acupoint technique, but a long time had passed; after massaging her arteries all around, finally the acupoints were unsealed. He said in his heart, "Although the Beggar Clan Elders' martial art skill was not extremely strong, their acupoint sealing technique is really marvelous. Zhiruo is too proud to ask them to unseal the acupoints during the banquet, and the man who sealed her acupoint pretended to forget. Hey, hey, these beggars wanted to save face at all cost; after suffering a crushing defeat from me, they wanted to show their superiority in acupoint sealing technique."

Zhou Zhiruo did not like the musty smell of that inn. "Let us go out for a walk," she said, "I need to work my blood circulation."

"All right!" Zhang Wuji said. Holding her hand, he took her outside the town.

By this time the sun was setting, the western sky was as red as blood. They leisurely wandered for a while before finally sitting down under a big tree. They watched as the sun slowly disappeared behind the mountain and the sky gradually turned dark. Zhang Wuji gathered his courage and told her how he met Zhao Min at the Mi Le Temple, how they found Mo Shenggu's corpse inside a cave, how he met Song Yuanqiao and the others, and how he followed the Ming Cult's blazing fire signs in circle around the Hebei province; he told her everything. Finally he grabbed Zhou Zhiruo's hands and said, "Zhiruo, you and I are not married yet, but we can be considered husband and wife already; I am not

going to conceal anything from you. Miss Zhao insists to see my Yifu face to face; she says she has some important matters to ask him. At that time, a suspicion started to rise in my heart. Now, the more I think about it, the more afraid I am.” As he was saying the last few sentences, his voice started to tremble.

“What are you afraid of?” Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji felt the pair of small hands in his palms was as cold as ice and slightly trembled. “I remember Yifu’s illness,” he said, “Whenever it breaks out, he would not recognize other people. In the past his madness suddenly flared-out, and he almost killed my Mama, thereupon Mama shot his eyes blind. When I was born, Yifu was about to kill my Papa and Mama, luckily he heard my cry and regained his consciousness. I am afraid ... I am really afraid ...”

“What are you afraid of?” Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji sighed and said, “Actually, I cannot bear to say it, but I am really worried that my cousin was ... was ... killed by Yifu.”

Zhou Zhiruo jumped up and with a shaky voice said, “Xie Daxia [great hero Xie] is a chivalrous hero who always upholds justice; he has always shown kindness and love toward us, his juniors. How can he kill Miss Yin?”

“It was a wild guess,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Totally unfounded. Even if my cousin were really killed by Yifu, it was because of his chronic illness breaking out suddenly, just like a nightmare; certainly it was not his [orig. lao3ren2jia1] true intention. Ay, come to think about it, it was all because of Cheng Kun that evil villain.”

Zhou Zhiruo was deep in thought for half a day before shaking her head and said, "Something is not right! Are you telling me that all of us being poisoned by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' was also because of him? Where did he get the poison from? Someone suddenly losing his sanity and killing people is not a strange occurrence, but how can he cautiously put poison in our food and drink?"

Zhang Wuji felt as if there was a thick fog hanging over his head, through which he could not see the least bit of bright light. He heard Zhou Zhiruo coldly say, "Wuji Gege [brother Wuji], you are doing your best to free Miss Zhao from any suspicion."

Zhang Wuji replied, "Supposing Miss Zhao was the real killer, it would be better for her to avoid Yifu. Why did she insist on seeing Yifu, saying that she had some important questions she'd like to ask him?"

With a cold laugh Zhou Zhiruo said, "This Miss' shrewdness is unparalleled. She wanted to clean herself from all charges. Don't you think she could not concoct some ingenious way?" All of a sudden her tone turned gentle and soft; she cuddled close to Zhang Wuji's body and said, "Wuji Gege, you are the most honest and upright person in the world. Speaking about shrewdness and resourcefulness, how can you be Miss Zhao's match?"

Zhang Wuji sighed, thinking that her words made perfect sense. He stretched out his arm to gently embrace her soft body; in a tender voice he said, "Zhiruo, I only feel that there are endless troubles in this world. Even someone close to me like Yifu cannot avoid my suspicion. I only wish we can accomplish our main task of driving out the Tartars, and then you and I will live in seclusion in some remote mountain, sharing a peaceful life and forget about the matters of this

mundane world.”

“You are the Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Supposing the Heaven blesses us that we can really drive the barbarians away, at that time, all important affairs of this world will fall into your Ming Cult’s hand, how can they let you live a peaceful life?”

“I am incompetent to be the Jiaozhu, and I don’t want to be the Jiaozhu,” Zhang Wuji said, “If the Ming Cult gains power, there must be a wise, righteous hero who would undertake the Jiaozhu position.”

“You are still young,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “Although your competence is currently lacking, can’t you learn? Besides, I am the Sect Leader of Emei Pai; there is a heavy burden on my shoulders. When Shifu bestowed this Sect Leader’s iron ring to me, she commanded me to work hard for the glory of our school. Even if you could live in seclusion in some remote mountain, I am afraid I would not have that luxury.”

Zhang Wuji gently stroked the iron ring on her finger and said, “When I saw this ring in Chen Youliang’s hand, I was extremely anxious; I was afraid you might have been disgraced by those villains. I was wishing that I had wings so I could fly to you. Zhiruo, I was not able to rescue you sooner that you had to suffer wrongdoings longer. When did they return this iron ring to you?”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “It was Wudang Pai’s Song Qingshu Shaoxia [young hero] who returned it to me.”

Hearing her mentioning Song Qingshu’s name, suddenly Zhang Wuji remembered seeing her sitting side by side with Song Qingshu on the banquet table, eating and drinking together in the hall full of Beggar Clan people. “Song

Qingshu treated you very well, didn't he?" he asked.

Zhou Zhiruo could hear the difference in his tone. "What do you mean by 'treat you very well'?" she asked.

"Nothing," Zhang Wuji replied, "I am just asking. Song Dage [big brother Song] is infatuated with you, so much so that he did not hesitate to betray his school and rebel against his father, killing his martial uncle and scheming against his grandmaster. But to you, he was very good."

Zhou Zhiruo looked up toward the crescent moon rising on the eastern horizon and quietly said, "I will be satisfied if you can be half as good to me as he did."

Zhang Wuji replied, "I definitely cannot show you the kind of feeling Song Shige [martial (older) brother] has for you; I cannot commit these unfilial and unrighteous acts for your sake."

"For my sake, you certainly cannot. For Miss Zhao's sake, you can," Zhou Zhiruo said, "On that little island you have made a heavy oath to kill this witch to avenge Miss Yin. However, as soon as you saw her face, you forgot your pledge completely."

"Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji replied, "If after careful investigation I find out that it was indeed Miss Zhao who stole the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword, and that my Biaomei [(female) cousin] did indeed perish under her hands, I definitely will not spare her. But if she is innocent, I certainly cannot kill her without any reason, can I? Perhaps I made a mistake when I made that heavy oath on the island that day."

Zhou Zhiruo was silent.

“Did I say anything wrong?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“No!” Zhou Zhiruo replied, “I only remember on the Wan An Temple’s pagoda, I also made a very heavy oath in Shifu’s presence. I hate myself for not telling you about this heavy oath when you proposed to me on that island.”

Zhang Wuji was alarmed. “You ... what heavy oath did you make?” he asked.

Zhou Zhiruo said, “I was repeating what Shifu said, that if I became your wife in the future, my departed parents in the ground would not rest in peace, that my Shifu would become a malicious spirit, haunting me night and day for the rest of my life; and if I give birth to sons and daughters with you, let our sons become slaves and our daughters prostitutes.”

As he heard this kind of heavy and ominous oath, Zhang Wuji could not help but shiver. He was silent for half a day before saying, “Zhiruo, that oath does not count. Definitely it does not count. It was because your Shifu thought that the Ming Cult is an evil-doer devil cult, and that I was crafty and evil, a shameless pervert thief, that she forced you to make that heavy oath. If she [orig. lao3ren2jia1 – Senior] knew the truth, she would definitely free you from this oath.”

With tears streaming down her face, Zhou Zhiruo sobbed, “But she ... Senior would not know this.” As she said that, she threw herself into his bosom, while crying uncontrollably.

Zhang Wuji gently stroked her soft hair and consoled her, “If your Shifu in the netherworld knew it, she would definitely not blame you for violating your oath. Tell me, do you think I am really crafty and evil, a shameless pervert thief?”

While embracing his waist, Zhou Zhiruo said, "Right now you are not. But if you are bewitched by Zhao Min later, maybe ... maybe you will turn into crafty, evil and shameless."

Zhang Wuji lightly nudged her cheek with his finger and said with a laugh, "You underrate me too much. Is your husband that kind of person?"

Zhou Zhiruo looked up, her cheeks were still wet with tears, but her eyes bore a happy expression. "You are shameless," she said, "You are not my husband yet. If later on you sneakily go out with that little witch Zhao Min, I won't want to be with you anymore. Who will guarantee that in the future you will not be like that Song Qingshu, who for the sake of a woman committed a lot of contemptible, shameless shady acts?"

Zhang Wuji lowered his head and planted a kiss on her cheek, before laughing and saying, "Who told you as an immortal to descend to the earth? We are mere mortals, how can we resist your charm? I'll say it was your father and mother's fault that they bore too beautiful of a woman, who has the power to kill us, men!"

Suddenly, from behind a large tree about two 'zhang's away came 'hey, hey', sound of cold laughter. Zhang Wuji was hugging Zhou Zhiruo in his bosom. He was startled and turned his head only to see a shadow dashing away and gone far in a short moment. Zhou Zhiruo jumped up immediately. Her face paled. "It's Zhao Min!" she said in a shaky voice, "She is following us."

As Zhang Wuji heard the cold laugh, he knew it was a female voice, but it was hard for him to say it was Zhao Min for sure. In the dark of the night he could not distinguish

whose shadow he had seen. 'Was it her?' he asked doubtfully, "What is she doing following us?"

"She likes you!" Zhou Zhiruo indignantly said, "Are you telling me that you didn't know it? Most likely the two of you have a secret rendezvous to deliberately make a fool out of me."

Zhang Wuji repeatedly denied the accusation. Zhou Zhiruo stood unmoving in the cold wind, thinking about her fate and could not restrain her tears from falling down. Zhang Wuji gently wrapped his left arm around her shoulder, while with right sleeve he wiped away the tears from her eyes. "Why are you crying while we are having a good time?" he said tenderly, "If I did have a rendezvous with Miss Zhao in here, let the Heaven punish me and the Earth swallow me. Just think, if in my heart I did like her, and I knew she was near, why was I so crazy about you and said those affectionate words? Wouldn't that mean I deliberately make her angry and put her in an awkward situation?" Zhou Zhiruo sighed, "That's true," she said, "Wuji Gege, my heart is troubled."

"What is it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"I can't forget my heavy oath in Shifu's presence," Zhou Zhiruo said, "I also think this Zhao Min will not let me go. I am too far inferior to her both in martial art and intelligence."

Zhang Wuji said, "I will do my best with all my strength to protect you all around. How can I allow her to harm even a strand of my beloved wife's hair?"

Zhou Zhiruo said, "If I die in her hand, so be it; I only have my own cruel fate to blame. My only fear is that she

manages to confuse you that you believe her sweet talk and fall into her trap and come to kill me. If that happens, I will die with my eyes open.”

Zhang Wuji said with a laugh, “That is truly a groundless fear [orig. ‘the man of Qi fears the sky falling’]. Who knows how many people in this world have harmed me, offended me, but I have not killed any of them; why would I kill you?” Unbuttoning his clothes, he showed her the sword scar on his chest and said with a smile, “You stabbed me with the sword here! The deeper the wound, the deeper my love for you.”

Zhou Zhiruo stretched out her tender hand to gently stroke the scar on his chest, with disquieting thoughts filling her heart. Suddenly her face paled, and she said, “An eye for an eye. In the future, you will stab me dead, I will not regret.”

Zhang Wuji opened up his arms and pulled her into his embrace, while softly said, “Wait till we find Yifu, we’ll ask him, Senior, to preside over our wedding. And then the two of us will never leave each other, we’ll grow old together. If you like, you can stab me a few more times, I will not say a single harsh word to you. Is that good enough for you?”

Zhou Zhiruo nuzzled her cheeks on his fiery warm chest and said in low voice, “I do hope you are a real man who will keep your word, and won’t forget what you have said today.”

The two of them cuddled with each other for a long time. It was almost midnight and the wind grew stronger when they finally returned to the inn and went their separate rooms to sleep.

The next morning, three people continued their journey south; they did not see any sign of Zhao Min along the way.

They reached Dadu in less than a day. By the time they entered the city gate, it was already evening. They saw the residents, men and women, were busy sprinkling water to the dusty streets and sweeping the streets and alleys clean. There was an incense-burning table in front of every home. Zhang Wuji and the others found an inn and asked the attendant what major event was going on in the city.

“Honored guests came from afar and did not know that you have come at the right moment,” the attendant replied, “You will enjoy a fine sight, for tomorrow is the ‘Great Tour of Imperial City’ day.”

“What is a ‘Great Tour of Imperial City’ day?” Zhang Wuji asked.

The attendant replied, “Tomorrow is one day of the year when the Emperor will travel through the Imperial City. The Emperor is going to offer sacrifice and burn incense in the Qing Shou Si [Celebrate Life Temple], tens of thousands men and women will dress up in a parade, from start to finish the route is about thirty, forty ‘li’s long. Now, that will be a remarkable sight. I suggest the honored guests turn in to bed earlier tonight, and as you wake up really early tomorrow, go to the Jade Virtue Gate of the Palace to watch. If you are lucky, you might be able to see the Emperor, the Empress, the Concubines, the Prince and the Princess. Just think, as a lowly common people, how could we have the good fortune of seeing the Emperor with our own eyes if we weren’t living in Beijing [orig, Jing Shi]?”

Listening to this, Han Lin’er anger rose up; “Shameless traitor! [Translator’s note: the literal translation of the original sentence is: ‘regarding the enemy as (one’s) father, shameless traitor to Han (people)]” he scolded, “What good is the Tartar Emperor?”

The attendant's eyes grew really big; pointing at him he said, "You ... you ... what you said is the word of a rebel. Aren't you afraid your head might be chopped off?"

"You are a Han," Han Lin'er said, "The Tartars have harmed us miserably, yet you keep saying the Emperor this and the Emperor that; don't you have the least bit of patriotic spirit?"

Seeing his ferocious and threatening expression, the attendant turned around and left; Zhou Zhiruo lifted up her finger and quickly sealed the acupoint on his back. "If this man went out," she said, "He would open his mouth; I am afraid very soon there will be soldiers coming in here to give us trouble." While saying that she kicked the attendant under the bed. "Let him starve for a few days," she said with a laugh, "We'll let him go when we leave the city."

Before long, they heard the innkeeper calling out from outside, "Ah Fu, Ah Fu! Are you still chatting incessantly again? Quickly fetch some face-washing water for the guest in room three!"

Han Lin'er was amused; he slapped the table and called out, "Quickly send us some food and wine, your masters are hungry!"

A moment later, another attendant came in delivering food and wine, while muttering to himself, "Ah Fu must have gone to the palace to watch the fireworks. This kid has never done anything proper; he wants to have fun all the time."

Early morning on the next day, Zhang Wuji was just getting out of bed when he heard a clamorous noise on the street. He went to the door and saw the street was packed with men

and women wearing bright colored and fancy clothes. Everybody was heading north, while laughing and joking; the atmosphere was livelier than the New Year celebration, with incessant sounds of firecrackers coming from all directions.

Zhou Zhiruo also came to the door; she said, "Let us also go and watch."

"I have fought the warriors from the Ruyang Palace," Zhang Wuji said, "They must not find out I am here. If we want to go, we must go in disguise."

Immediately, along with Zhou Zhiruo and Han Lin'er, they disguised themselves as farmers and villagers, by smearing yellow mud on their faces and hands; and then following the crowd on the street, they went to the Imperial Palace.

It was around the end of the fourth hour [between 5 - 7 am], and the beginning of the fifth hour [between 7 - 9 am], the ground around the Imperial Palace was like a sea of people; already they could not find a place to set their feet on. Zhang Wuji stretched out his arms to gently shoved people around to clear the way. Finally they stopped under the eave by the Yan Cun [lit. extended spring (season)] gate of a rich family home. The stairs rose several feet upward, which gave them an advantageous spot to watch the show.

They had not stood too long when they heard the banging noise of a gong. "They are here! They are here!" the crowd cried out. Everybody craned their necks to watch. The gong was getting nearer. They saw 108 big and tall men wearing dark green clothing. Their left hands lifting up big gongs, about three feet in diameter, and their right hands struck the gongs with mallets. When these 108 gongs were struck together, the noise was deafening.

The gong formation was followed by 360-man drum formation. After that it was people singing, blowing horn and beating the drum; followed by western region people playing 'pipa' [Chinese lute], and then Mongolian bugle horn. Each formation consisted of at least more than a hundred people, at most about four, five hundred people. After these marching ensembles, there were a couple of large red satin banners, flying high in the air. One banner carried these letters: 'An Bang Hu Guo' [peace to the nation, protecting the country], while the other said: 'Zhen Xie Fu Mo' [suppressing demonic influence, subduing the devil]. Other than these large letters, the banners were also full of bright golden Sanskrit characters. Before and after the banners each were two hundreds Mongolian elite troops, the imperial guards, with their long sabers glittering like snow, and their spears like the clouds; these four hundred men all rode on white horses. As the common people watched this display of formidable military prowess, they loudly cheered.

Zhang Wuji sighed inwardly, "In other places there aren't any common people who do not hate the Mongolian soldiers to the bones, but the people of Beijing have become shameless slaves of the government. To think that for decades day in and day out these people have seen Mongolian imperial household's impressive power, and thus have forgotten their own perished country."

As the two banners passed, suddenly from among the west crowd several white light flashed by; two rows of flying daggers flew straight toward the two flagpoles. Each row of flying daggers consisted of seven daggers. These seven daggers neatly pierced the flagpole. Although the flagpoles were thick, after receiving seven cuts, they swayed and finally broke; with a couple of whishing noises they fell down. People were yelling and screaming miserably, as

dozens of them were crushed by the flagpoles; while the rest of the people were also shouting and scrambling away. It was total chaos.

This change was so abrupt that even Zhang Wuji and the others were taken by surprise. Han Lin'er was very happy and was about to cheer when suddenly a soft palm reached out and cover his mouth; Zhou Zhiruo managed to curb his shout in time. The four hundred elite troops moved their weapons and charged into the crowd, randomly searched for the shooter.

Zhang Wuji noticed that whoever launched these fourteen flying daggers had a tremendous strength, obviously it was a martial art master of the Wulin world; only among those many onlookers, nobody could tell who the person was. If he could not see who did it, then how could the Mongolian soldiers? They blindly searched among the crowd and not too long afterwards dragged seven, eight men out, who called out miserably, "Injustice ..." But the Mongolian soldiers struck their blades and spears and killed those men on the spot.

Han Lin'er was very angry; "The flying daggers shooter has gone for long, what can this useless bunch do? They massacred innocent people to vent off their anger instead," he said.

"Han Dage, hold your voice!" Zhou Zhiruo hissed, "We are here to watch the 'Great Tour of Imperial City', not to create 'Great Trouble in the Imperial City'." [Translator's note: play of words here, 'Da You Huang Cheng' against 'Da Nao Huang Cheng']

"Yes," Han Lin'er said; he did not dare to open his mouth anymore.

The chaos only lasted a few moments; the sound of music quickly followed, other groups marched by one by one: acrobats who swallow knife and spit fire from their mouths, and various western region entertainers, which sent the crowd cheering and clapping again, quickly put the bloody incidents on the street out of their minds. Next came group by group of puppeteers, jugglers, performers balancing plates over sticks and all kinds of acrobatic acts. After these groups came large parade floats pulled by beautiful steeds. On each float there were handsome men and beautiful women dressed as characters of the classical stories, such as 'Journey to the West' [orig. Tang Sancang went to western sky to fetch the scripture], 'Emperor Tang Ming Touring the Moon Palace', 'Li Cunxiao Beat the Tiger', 'Liu Guanzhang Fought Lu Bu Three Times', 'Zhang Shengyue Gathered the Hawks', and so on; legendary battles and wonderful accomplishments, presented with the best of workmanship.

Zhang Wuji and the others, all three people, grew in poor rural environment; they had never seen this kind of bustling festive atmosphere. They sighed inwardly, thinking today their horizons were broadened.

On each float there was an embroidered silk banner, with inscriptions such as 'Humble Presentation of so-and-so, the Prefect of Hu Guang [Hubei and Hunan provinces]', or 'Respectfully Presented by so-and-so, the Governor of Jiangsu and Zhejiang'. As the procession passed by, the official who presented the float became progressively higher in rank; the float itself became progressively fancier, the men and women playing the characters were now wearing pearls and bright jewels, the hairpins and necklaces were also made of precious jadeite and precious stones. First, the Mongolian princes, dukes, and chancellors wanted to curry favor from the Emperor; second, they also wanted to flaunt

their prosperity; therefore, no expense was spared in the building and the adornment of the float.

Amidst the melodious sound of string and woodwind instruments, a float with the 'Liu Zhiyuan's Chronicle of the White Rabbit' theme passed by. Suddenly the cheerful melody changed into an awkward melody of old tune; the plain banner on the float read 'Zhou Gong banished Guan Cai'. On the float there was a middle-age man with a tablet in his hands [this is the tablet held by officials during imperial audience], he was playing the role of Zhou Gong. On his side sat a small child wearing an Emperor clothes, he was playing the part of the Emperor. Guan Shu and Cai Shu were standing on the side, whispering to each other and pointing their fingers to Zhou Gong. This float was followed by another float with 'Wang Mang's Hypocritical Act of Generosity'. The man on this float wore a very thick white face-powder, with gold and silver in his hands, pretending to give generously to poor people. Following these two floats was a cart with white banners on all four sides, with these writings on them, 'When Zhou Gong feared the days of rumor, Wang Mang enjoyed being praised as a polite and modest scholar. If both of them died at that time, their loyalty and talent would be hidden for eternity.'

Zhang Wuji's heart was stirred; he mused, "The right and wrong, black and white, in this world is really not easy to know. Zhou Gong was a great sage, but when he banished Guan Shu and Cai Shu, everyone said he was scheming to usurp the throne. Wang Mang was a great traitor, but when at first he bought the people's hearts, there wasn't anybody in this world who did not sing praises to him. I heard these two stories on the Bing Huo [ice and fire] Island from Yifu. This is the so-called 'the distant road tries the horse's strength, the course of time proves the man's heart'. A man's real character cannot be recognized in just a dawn-to-

dusk period.” Further, he thought, “These two floats are different than the rest of them. They obviously carry a profound meaning. The man who prepared them must have a character of scholarly knowledge.” And then he silently recited that poem twice in his mind.

Suddenly he heard sounds like broken gongs. A float came by, pulled by a pair of thin horses. The float was very plain and simple without any decoration. As the crowd saw the float, they roared in laughter. “This ragged float also joins the ‘Tour of the Imperial City’, won’t it be the laughingstock of the people?” they said. As the float got near, Zhang Wuji was able to see clearly and he was shocked! He saw a large man on the cart, with his long yellow hair reaching his shoulder. His eyes were closed, and he was sitting on a couch. What character did he play if not Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun? Next to him stood a good-looking young woman wearing green, she had a teacup in her hands, as if she was attentively serving the man. Although her appearance was inferior to Zhou Zhiruo’s beauty, her clothing and adornments were exactly the same as the ones she was wearing at the Wan An Temple Pagoda.

“Miss Zhou,” Han Lin’er said in a low voice, “That girl looks like you.”

“Hmmp,” Zhou Zhiruo snorted, but did not say anything. Zhang Wuji turned his head and saw her complexion went pale, while her chest was heaving; he knew she was enraged. Thereupon he reached out to hold her right hand; while not fully understanding the intention behind this float.

The next float was still depicting the Xie Xun – Zhou Zhiruo story. The actor playing Zhou Zhiruo giggled while walking around toward the corner, then ‘she’ stretched out two fingers and suddenly struck ‘Xie Xun’s back with all ‘her’

might. “Ah!” the fake ‘Xie Xun’ exclaimed loudly, then collapsed to the couch. ‘Zhou Zhiruo’ lifted her foot to step on him, and then raised her sword ready to kill. The spectators broke in loud cheer, “Good! Good! Kill him!”

The third float of this ‘Xie Xun – Zhou Zhiruo’ theme depicted six or seven men dressed as beggars capturing the ‘Xie Xun’ and ‘Zhou Zhiruo’.

By this time all doubts were gone from Zhang Wuji’s mind; he knew these three floats were built by Zhao Min. Expecting Zhou Zhiruo and him to come to Dadu, she arranged for these floats to humiliate Zhou Zhiruo. He stooped down to pick several small pebbles from the ground, and lightly flicked them with his middle finger. ‘Swish, swish!’ the right eyes of the pair of horses pulling the third float were blinded. The pebbles entered the horses’ brains. With long neigh, those horses fell down to the ground, dead. The float flipped over and the actors rolled down to the ground. The street was thrown into chaos.

Zhao Zhiruo bit her lower lip and said quietly, “This witch insulted me this way, I ... I ...” Speaking to this point, her voice turned into sobs.

Zhang Wuji felt her hand was ice-cold, her body trembled; hastily he tried to assure her, “Zhiruo, this little bitch [orig. ‘muddy egg’] can think of hundreds of weird tricks, don’t pay her any attention. As long as I know your sincerity, even if others sow dissension, how is it possible for me to believe them?”

“Ah, I remember,” Zhou Zhiruo suddenly said, “That day Yifu was fine, before he suddenly convulsed and fell down to the floor, and then he started talking deliriously. Could it be ... could it be that at that time this witch was hiding in that inn

and she shot a secret projectile toward Yifu's back?"

Zhang Wuji pondered for a moment before saying, "If she made her move then, she might still have enough time to make it to the Mi Le Temple in time. But based on her martial art skill, I don't think she could evade Yifu's detection. I am leaning more toward the Xuanming Elders who attacked him."

While they were talking, the Mongolian soldiers had already pushed the people back and cleared up the street from the dead horses, so that the procession of floats could continue. Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo's minds were still occupied by the recent events and they did not have any interest in watching the subsequent floats.

After the last float passed by, they heard intermittent sound of Buddhist monks chanting, followed by the appearance of row after row of foreign monks in red kasaya. After these monks, they heard the tinkling of iron armor, as two thousands 'Yu Lin Jun' [special force, the Emperor's personal bodyguards] troops, in full armor, each one with a lance in his hand, made their appearance, followed by three thousand archers.

After the archers, incense smoke rose up to the sky, as one by one the idols were carried on sedan chairs by porters wearing embroidered clothes; from the Tu Di [Earth God], Cheng Huang [deity in Chinese mythology], Ling Guan [lit. spirit of government official - don't know the exact translation], Wei Tuo [Celestial Guardian], Cai Shen [God of Wealth]. [Translator's note: there is one more idol mentioned, but my copy missed one character] A lot of people muttered their prayers, while some went down on their knees to worship.

These idols were followed by guards of honor, carrying ceremonial articles like golden gourd, golden hammer and so on. Next, came feathered fans and jeweled parasols in pairs. The crowd called out, "The Emperor is here! The Emperor is here!" as from a distant came a large sedan chair covered in yellow silk, carried by thirty-two 'shi wei' [This is also personal bodyguards of the Emperor. Perhaps someone out there can explain the difference between Shi Wei and Yu Lin Jun] wearing embroidered clothes.

Zhang Wuji focused his attention to see the Mongolian Emperor. He noticed that the Emperor's countenance was thin, pallid, and dispirited. In just one glance it was obvious that he indulged in wine. The Crown Prince rode a horse next to the sedan chair. Contrary to his expectations, the Crown Prince actually showed a heroic spirit. He had a gilded long bow, inlaid with jade, on his shoulder; truly fit the image of a Mongolian young hero.

"Jiaozhu," Han Lin'er whispered on Zhang Wuji's ear, "Let subordinate make an assault, with a stab of my blade I can assassinate the Tartar Emperor, and thus rid the common people of one big evil."

"No, you can't go!" Zhang Wuji said, "The Tartar Emperor is surrounded by martial art masters as his guards. If we are going to do it, I am the one who must go."

"That is inappropriate," suddenly the man standing on Zhang Wuji's left opened his mouth, "Replacing one tyrant with another, I have never seen it work."

Zhang Wuji, Han Lin'er and Zhou Zhiruo were startled; they turned to see this man, and saw he was about fifty years of age, dressed like a medicine peddler, carrying a medicine sack on his back, his right hand held a tiger-head stick. That

man turned his thumb up and put his hand in front of his chest, making a Ming Cult's blazing fire signal, and said in a low voice, "Peng Yingyu pays his respects to Jiaozhu. Jiaozhu is well, I am very happy."

"Ah, you are Peng ..." Zhang Wuji was very happy. It turned out that man was Peng Yingyu. His disguise was so ingenious that although he had been standing next to them for a long time, Zhang Wuji and the others did not have the slightest idea of his real identity.

In a low voice Peng Yingyu said, "This is not a good place to talk. The Tartar Emperor must not be killed." Zhang Wuji was aware of his wisdom and knowledge, therefore, he simply nodded and did not ask anymore questions. He only reached out to grab Peng Yingyu's left hand and gently shook it a few times.

In the meantime, the Emperor and the Crown Prince were followed by three thousand armored Yu Lin Jun. After them, the tens of thousands of crowds went down the street to watch the festivities. "Let us go see the Empress, let us go see the Princess," they said to each other while heading westward.

"Let us also go and see," Zhou Zhiruo said. The four of them mingled with the crowd until they arrived outside the 'Yu De Dian' [Jade Virtue Palace]. They saw that seven beautifully decorated raised platforms erected outside the Palace. The platforms were surrounded by the Yu Lin Jun holding rattan sticks to prevent the people from coming too close. Although it was very crowded, Zhang Wuji and the others, four people, managed to squeeze their way through by gently pushing forward and before long they had reached at the front of the platforms.

The Emperor sat on the highest platform, with the two Empresses on either side of him. The Empresses were middle-age fat women, bundled inside robes inlaid with pearls, jade and precious jewels. Needless to say, they glittered with brilliant lights. On their heads, they wore ridiculously strange-looking tall crowns. The Crown Prince sat on the platform to the left of the Emperor, while on the right platform sat a young woman about twenty or so, wearing embroidered gown. She must be the Princess.

Zhang Wuji's eyes scanned the rest of the platforms; he saw that on the second platform on the left sat a young woman wearing sable fur coat, with a pearl necklace on her neck. Her smile was captivating, her eyes dreamy. It was none other than Zhao Min. On this same platform sat a long-bearded Prince with a majestic expression. He was Zhao Min's father, the Ruyang Prince, Khakan Timur. Zhao Min's brother, Kuku Timur, was pacing back and forth on the platform, with eyes like an eagle and steps like a tiger. He looked particularly imposing.

By this time the foreign monks were performing the 'Tian Mo Da Zhen' [Heaven and Devil Great Formation]. Five hundred monks with Buddhist religious articles in their hands circled around, to the left and to the right, jumping high and stooping low; the changes and variations were marvelously strange. The crowd broke into cheers and applause; everybody sighed in admiration.

Zhou Zhiruo kept her gaze on Zhao Min for half a day. Finally, she sighed and said, "Let's go home!" The four of them squeezed their way out and returned to the inn.

Peng Yingyu paid his respects properly toward Zhang Wuji, and then they both recounted what happened since they parted. Zhang Wuji asked whether he heard any news about

Xie Xun. Peng Yingyu had just arrived at Dadu from the Huai Si River area; he did not even know that Xie Xun had returned to the Central Plains. He told the accomplishments of Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun and the others over the past year. They besieged and captured towns; they performed outstanding military successes and lifted the Ming Cult's prestige high.

"Peng Da Shi [lit. grand/great master, also used to refer a Buddhist Monk, Reverend]," Han Lin'er said, "Just now if we attacked the platform, with one knife we could chop that Tatar Emperor; why did you let him go?"

Peng Yingyu shook his head, "This Emperor is a stupid tyrant and he is precisely our biggest helper. How can we kill him?" he said.

Han Lin'er was baffled. "The Tatar Emperor is a stupid tyrant; he has caused endless misery to the common people. How can he be our biggest helper?" he asked.

"Han Xiongdi [brother Han], you don't understand," Peng Yingyu said, "The Tatar Emperor appointed foreign monks for official businesses, and thus muddling the government; he also ordered the people to build a new road by excavating the Yellow River, tiring the people and squandering the resources, making the people angry and causing them to resent him. In recent years we managed to route the Tatars completely. Do you think that was because our ragtag troop is really superior of the Mongolian crack troops? It was because this muddle-headed Emperor did not use good officers. The Ruyang Prince is very capable of leading the troops. He managed to take things under control in everywhere the Tatar Emperor sent him to quench rebellion. The Emperor is afraid that if he rendered too many services, he would usurp the throne. Therefore, he continually

reduces his authority, and dispatches some braggarts, good-for-nothing generals to lead the troops. As the Mongolian army fought the battle, these bastard generals can only lead them to defeat. Tell me, don't you think this Tatar Emperor is our biggest helper?"

Zhang Wuji and the others nodded their heads in agreement. Peng Yingyu continued, "If we killed this Tatar Emperor, the Crown Prince would rise to the throne. Looking at his appearance, the Crown Prince is not someone easy to deal with. Granted, as the new Emperor, he might lack experience, but he is certainly better than his muddle-headed father. It would be really bad if he appoints veteran generals seasoned in battles to fight us."

Zhang Wuji said, "It's good that Da Shi promptly warned us, otherwise, we might act rashly today and spoil an important matter."

Han Lin'er repeatedly slapped his own mouth while swearing, "I deserve to die! I deserve to die! Later on, don't you dare to talk rubbish and propose stupid ideas!" Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo and Peng Yingyu laughed at his silliness.

Peng Yingyu said, "Jiaozhu, you hold a very important role, you bear the heavy responsibility of driving the invaders away and recapture our land; you must not brave unnecessarily danger. Subordinate noticed that among the guards who surrounded the Emperor, the number of masters is truly not a few. Although Jiaozhu is divinely brave and skilled, ultimately you will be overwhelmed by sheer numbers. If you fail, what good will it bring?"

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "I receive Da Shi's invaluable advice."

Zhou Zhiruo sighed and said, "What Peng Da Shi said was absolutely right; how can you recklessly brave danger? Wait until our great undertaking is accomplished, then the one sits on this dragon-chair platform will be you, Zhang Jiaozhu."

Han Lin'er clapped his hands; he said, "That time, Jiaozhu will be the Emperor, Miss Zhou will be the Empress, Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary Yang] and Peng Da Shi [different 'shi'] will be the Left and Right Prime Ministers. Now, that will be good!"

Zhou Zhiruo's cheeks blushed, she bashfully lowered her head, but the corner of her eyes revealed that she was extremely happy.

Zhang Wuji repeatedly shook his hands. "Han Xiongdi," he said, "You cannot say such thing again. Our Cult's goal is to save the common people under the Heaven from the fire and the water. The goal accomplished, we retire. Don't be greedy of riches and honor. That is the character of upright and real men."

Peng Yingyu said, "Jiaozhu possesses a strong aspiration that not many people will be able to reach. It's just that by that time, you may not necessarily be able to refuse the yellow robe [Translator's note: only Emperor could wear yellow robe at that time]. During the Chen Qiao military revolt [960AD, the founding of Song Dynasty], did Zhao Kuangyin [given name of the first Emperor of the Song, the Song Taizu] think of becoming the Emperor?"

"No, no!" Zhang Wuji kept saying, "If I have the least bit of desire to be the Emperor, let the Heaven punish me and the Earth swallow me, let me die a wretched death."

Listening to his determination, Zhou Zhiruo's expression changed slightly, she turned her gaze outside the window and no longer said anything.

Four people talked a bit more, and then after dinner, Zhang Wuji said, "Peng Da Shi and I are going out to inquire information about Yifu." He thought that Han Lin'er was hot-tempered, if he saw any injustice, he would certainly not hesitate to let his fists do the talking and thus inviting some unwanted disaster; thereupon he said, "Han Xiongdi, you and Zhiruo better stay in the inn tonight. Have a good rest."

"Yes," Han Lin'er said, "Jiaozhu, please be careful!"

Zhang Wuji and Peng Yingyu made an agreement right away that one of them would go to the west, and the other to the east. They would meet again at the inn to discuss their findings.

Zhang Wuji went out the inn heading west. Along the way he heard the people were still talking about the 'Great Tour of the Imperial City' that morning. He heard somebody was saying, "The Ming Cult is staging a rebellion in the south. Today the Guardian Bodhisattva of the Emperor was brought out in front of the people. Looks like those rebels will be crushed soon." Another man argued, "The Ming Cult is under the blessing and protection of Mi Le Pu Sa [Maitreya Bodhisattva]; looks like the Guardian Bodhisattva of the Emperor will have a battle against the Mi Le Pu Sa." Yet another man commented, "The excavation of the Yellow River has unearthed a stone figure with one eye. There are two lines of characters on the back of that figure: 'Do not say that because the stone figure only has one eye, it is incapable of provoking the Yellow River world.' This has caused some speculations that some things simply cannot be forced." [Translator's note: I am not sure about the last

man's comment.]

Zhang Wuji paid no attention to all these unfounded comments by simple people; he wandered aimlessly until the path he took started to get quieter. Suddenly he looked up and realized that he had reached the small inn where he had a drink with Zhao Min the other day. He was startled and mused, "How did I get here? Could it be that in my heart I still cannot let her go?"

He saw that the door of the inn was ajar, and noticed that it was very quiet inside, apparently there was no guest drinking inside that night. He hesitated for a moment then he pushed the door open and walked in. He saw the attendant was dozing off on the counter table. On a table toward the corner, there was a lone candle flickering weakly in the dark. Next to the candle sat a guest. This table was precisely the table they used both times Zhao Min and he had a drink. Other than this single patron, there was nobody else in sight.

As that guest heard the footsteps approaching, the guest stood up. The candlelight swayed and shone on that person's face. To Zhang Wuji's surprise, that person was Zhao Min.

Neither of them expected to see the other. "Ah!" they both exclaimed in shock. "You ..." in a low voice Zhao Min said, "Why are you here?" Her voice trembled, revealing her exceedingly excited heart.

Zhang Wuji replied, "I was passing through, and came in to take a look. I don't expect ..." while talking, he walked toward her table, and saw that there was another set of cup and chopsticks on the seat opposite hers, thereupon he asked, "Are you expecting someone?"

Zhao Min blushed, "No," she said, "It was because twice we had a drink here; you were sitting over there, so ... so I told the attendant to set another set of cup and chopsticks."

Zhang Wuji's heart was touched. He also noticed that the four dishes of food and wine on the table was exactly the same as the food and wine Zhao Min prepared the first time she invited him over. From the bottom of his heart he knew the depth of Zhao Min's feeling; he could not stop himself from reaching out to grab her hands in his. "Miss Zhao!" he said, his voice shaky.

"I hate it," Zhao Min gloomily said, "I hate it that I was born to a Mongolian Prince family, and become your enemy ..."

Suddenly, from outside the window came two 'hey, hey' cold laugh sounds, followed by something flew in. 'Slap!' that thing extinguished the candle on the table, that the room suddenly turned dark.

As they heard the sneer, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min knew it was Zhou Zhiruo. While they were still at a loss, they heard indistinct footsteps on the roof and Zhou Zhiruo was gone like a wind.

"You are engaged to her, aren't you?" in a low voice Zhao Min asked.

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, "I shouldn't conceal the truth from you."

"I was hiding behind the tree that day," Zhao Min said, "I heard your sweet words to her. I wished I could die immediately, I wish I have never been born in this world. That day I laughed coldly twice, and today she paid me back by laughing coldly twice. But ... but you have not even said

half a word to make me happy yet.”

“Miss Zhao,” Zhang Wuji said apologetically, “I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t even see you. I have my people to think about, I shouldn’t make you upset. You are a golden-branch-and-jade-leaf kind of person, from now on you should forget this village kid, farm boy like me.”

Zhao Min lifted his hand up and gently ran her finger over the scar on his hand. “This is where I bit you,” she said in a tender voice, “Even if your martial art skill were higher, your medical skill were better, you would still not able to take this scar away. If you cannot get rid of the scar on your own hand, how can you take the scar in my heart away?” She wrapped her arms around Zhang Wuji’s neck, and then planted a deep kiss on his lips.

Zhang Wuji’s mind was chaotic to suddenly feel cherry soft lips on his, and sweet fragrance assaulting his nostrils. Suddenly Zhao Min bit his upper lip as hard as she could, until he was bleeding. And then she pushed his shoulder away from her as she turned around and escaped from the window, while calling out, “You are a pervert little thief! I hate you! I hate you ...!”

o0o

As Zhang Wuji and Peng Yingyu left the inn, Han Lin’er said to Zhou Zhiruo, “Miss Zhou, you’d better go to bed earlier tonight.” Without daring to say anything else, he stood up and left the room.

“Han Dage [big brother Han,” Zhou Zhiruo smiled, “Are you afraid of me? You are not willing to be alone with me even for a second.”

Han Lin'er blushed profusely. "No, no," he hastily said, but his steps were getting faster. He quickly entered his own room, closed the door behind him, and bolted it; while his heart was thumping madly. Trying to calm himself, he reclined on the 'kang' [heatable brick bed common in northern China], while thinking of Zhao Zhiruo's tender and beautiful, simple yet elegant, countenance, and her soft but warm voice. He mused, "In the future, Miss Zhou will become Madame Jiaozhu. I will diligently follow Jiaozhu's orders and will stake everything to set up a few merits. I will make Miss Zhou happy, and then she will say, 'Han Dage, really, you troubled yourself too much to do this!' When that happens, then my, Han Lin'er's, life will not be in vain." His daydream made him smile, and he drifted off to sleep.

He slept until midnight, and was awakened by some light tapping on his door. Han Lin'er sat up with a start and asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me," he heard Zhou Zhiruo's voice outside the door, "Please open the door, I need to talk to you."

"Yes, yes," Han Lin'er said. He went to the door barefooted, pulled the latch open, then quickly turned around to light the candle. He saw that Zhou Zhiruo's eyes were red and puffy, her expression looked greatly different. Han Lin'er was scared. "Miss Zhou, you ... you ..." he stammered, without able to continue whatever he was going to say. Suddenly he got an idea; he dashed out the room while saying, "I'll fetch some water for you to wash your face."

A short moment later, he returned with a washbasin in his hands, still barefooted. Zhou Zhiruo gave him a mournful smile. She sat on the table, supporting her chin with her hand, staring blankly at the candle.

“You ... please wash your face,” Han Lin’er said.

Zhou Zhiruo did not say a single word; she merely shook her head and suddenly tears start flowing down. In his fright, Han Lin’er was stumped. He relaxed his hands while still standing; wondering why she was so upset, and dying to know what it was she wanted to tell him.

The two of them maintained the silence for a long time. Suddenly a light ‘crack’ was heard as the wax snapped off the candle. Zhou Zhiruo trembled as if she had just awakened from a sleep. “Mmm,” she mumbled softly then she stood up to leave.

“Miss Zhou,” Han Lin’er said loudly, “Who offended you? I, the man surnamed Han will take my dagger to him. Even if I have to die, I will make a few holes on his body. Please tell me!” Zhou Zhiruo only shook her head sadly, and then returned to her room.

From the time she entered his room, Zhou Zhiruo only sat quietly for a long time. It appeared that she had wanted to unburden herself from her troubled mind; but all along she did not utter a single word, so that a hot tempered and rash man like Han Lin’er can only scratch his head in confusion. As she left, he stood absentmindedly, occasionally curling his fist to hit his own head. After thinking for a while without finding anything, he heard ‘bang, bang, bang!’ three times from a distance, and he thought, “Why haven’t Jiaozhu and Peng Da Shi come back yet?” Since there was nothing else he could do, he laid down on the ‘kang’ again to sleep.

While he was dozing off, suddenly he heard a couple of loud noises, as if a chair was knocked down to the floor, coming from the room to his east; it was the room where Zhou Zhiruo slept. In his anxiety, Han Lin’er leaped up from his

bed and ran toward that room.

Under the moonlight he saw a dark shadow inside that eastern room, swaying lightly, as if it was hanging in the air. Han Lin'er was shocked. "Miss Zhou, Miss Zhou!" he called out, while stretching out his hand to push the door, but it was bolted from inside. Using all his strength he pushed the door with his shoulder and the bolt snapped. Rushing into the room, he struck the flint to light the candle first, and then turned around to see Zhou Zhiruo's feet which were hanging in the air, while a rope was wrapped around her neck, and the other end of the rope was tied onto the beam.

Han Lin'er felt as if his soul was about to leave his body. Hastily he jumped up to pull the rope from the beam, and then laid Zhou Zhiruo on the bed. He felt for her breathe and luckily she was still breathing.

"Miss Zhou, Miss Zhou," he called in a very loud voice, "You ... why didn't you look at the bright side? Why did you ... why ..."

Suddenly he heard someone from outside the door calling out, "Han Dage, what is it?" A man walked in, it was Zhang Wuji.

As Zhang Wuji saw what happened, he felt as if a lightning bolt had just struck him. With trembling hands he broke off the rope around Zhou Zhiruo's neck, and then he felt her chest and found that her heart was still beating. "She is all right," he happily said, "I can save her." Reaching down toward her back and lower abdomen, he massaged her acupoints, while transmitting the Jiu Yang divine energy from the palms of his hands. After one round, 'Wah!' Zhou Zhiruo regained her consciousness and started to cry.

“Good, very good!” Han Lin’er exclaimed in exultation, “Miss Zhou is alive!”

Zhou Zhiruo opened her eyes and as she saw Zhang Wuji, she cried again, “Why do you care about me? Let me die in peace.” Suddenly she noticed Zhang Wuji’s upper lip was still bleeding, with some fine tooth marks on it. She could not suppress her fury; she raised her hand and heavily slapped Zhang Wuji’s face left and right.

Han Lin’er was flabbergasted; how could anybody beat the Cult Leader? But in his eyes, Zhou Zhiruo was like an immortal; so he was confused and did not know what to do. Right that moment, someone gently tapped his shoulder twice. Han Lin’er turned his head and saw Peng Yingyu. In his delight he said, “Peng Da Shi, you’re back! Quick, quickly advise Miss Zhou.”

Peng Yingyu laughed, “Advise what?” Toward Zhang Wuji he said, “Reporting to Jiaozhu: I did not find any information regarding Jin Mao Shi Wang [golden-haired lion king].”

“Hmm,” Zhang Wuji mumbled. He looked awkward.

“Han Xiongdi,” Peng Yingyu said, “Let’s go and take a walk outside.”

“No, no, we can’t,” Han Lin’er replied, “They are going to fight. Miss Zhou is certainly not Jiaozhu’s match.”

Peng Yingyu laughed out loud, “Silly brother!” he said, “Do you think even if the two of us are ganging up with Miss Zhou, we can beat Jiaozhu? I’ll say Jiaozhu is not Miss Zhou’s match.” He winked at Han Lin’er, and pulled his hand out of the room. Han Lin’er was still trying to turn his head, his face showed a deep concern. Zhou Zhiruo could not help but try

to stifle her laugh, and then threw herself on the bed and wept again.

Zhang Wuji sat on the edge of the bed, gently tapped her shoulder and said in a tender voice, "Zhiruo, I did not have any appointment to meet her; it was truly an incidental meeting."

Zhou Zhiruo randomly kicked her feet, while sobbing, "I don't believe you, I don't believe you. Whatever lies you are saying, don't tell me to believe you."

Zhang Wuji sighed, "'When Zhou Gong feared the days of rumor, Wang Mang enjoyed being praised as a polite and modest scholar,'" he quoted, "The matters of this world is so easy to be misunderstood ..."

Zhou Zhiruo snorted and sat up, "That Junzhu Niangniang [princess] uses those verses to insult me, yet you consider it so poetic that you memorize it in your heart. Look at your lip, aren't you ashamed? Where is your dignity?" Speaking to this point, she could not restrain her own cheeks from blushing.

Zhang Wuji thought that whatever he said, the incident today was very difficult to debate. Besides, he had determined to marry Zhou Zhiruo and grow old together. So the only thing he could do was suppress his emotions, and wish that this incident would eventually fade away from her memory as well. Under the candle light, he saw her pretty face was slightly red, with a deep rope mark around her neck, causing the neck swell on both sides. He thought that if Han Lin'er had been late in realizing what was going on and not rescued her, by the time he returned to the inn, she would have been dead, and no matter what kind of power he had, he would hate himself. Thinking of this, he was both ashamed and felt compassion toward her. He reached out to

embrace her and kissed her cherry-red lips.

Zhou Zhiruo turned her head to avoid his kiss, and indignantly said, "You have committed dirty things with others, and come here to annoy me. Do you think you can take advantage of me?"

Zhang Wuji tightened his embrace so that she was unable to free herself, and then he deeply kissed her lips again. Because she could not struggle free, in the end Zhou Zhiruo's heart softened. Zhang Wuji thought that although they were engaged, they were not married yet. Being together in a room deep into the night, unavoidably some people would find it unacceptable. Besides, it would not be good in the eyes of Peng Yingyu, Han Lin'er and the others. Thereupon he let her go and said, "Zhiruo, take a good rest. We'll talk about it tomorrow. If I lied to you and went to see Miss Zhao, although you chop me with a thousand knives and cut me into ten thousand pieces, I will die without any regret."

Zhou Zhiruo's face blushed, her chest was heaving. Taking a deep breath, she said, "What nonsense are you talking about? You know that I will never chop you with a thousand knives and cut you into ten thousand pieces."

Zhang Wuji laughed. "You can always chop my both legs, what do you think?" he said.

Zhou Zhiruo lowered her head, beads of tears streaming down like rain. Zhang Wuji felt bad to walk out the room, he returned to her side, wrapped his arms around her shoulder and gently said, "What makes you sad?"

Zhou Zhiruo did not answer, but she kept crying. Zhang Wuji asked her again and again, but to his surprise, the more

he asked, the sadder she was. Zhang Wuji cursed himself and swore, saying that he was a heartless and ungrateful man. Zhou Zhiruo covered her face with her hands and said, "I blame my own cruel fate; I am not blaming you."

"Everybody is suffering right now," Zhang Wuji said, "The Tatars suppress the people of the Central Plains; everybody lives in suffering and great difficulty. Later on, when we get married and also have driven out the Tatars, then we will live a happy life and not suffer anymore."

Zhou Zhiruo raised her head. "Wuji Gege," she said, "I know you are being sincere to me. It's just that that little witch Zhao Min is trying to seduce you, it's not that you are of a double-minded person [orig. 'three-heart two-intention']. Only ... only she is too smart, her martial art skill is superior, her beauty, her power, everything in her is ten times better than I am. After all is said and done, I simply cannot beat her. It is better for me to die than to live a broken-hearted life. Who would have thought that that fool Han Lin'er would revived me. I have tried to die once, I don't have the courage to try again. I ... I want to be like Shifu, I want to shave my head and become a Buddhist Nun. Ay, in the end, our Emei Pai's Zhang Men [Sect Leader] is not a family woman."

"You are always anxious," Zhang Wuji said, "Let's do this: tomorrow, we are leaving for the Huai Si River, we will get married over there."

"We haven't found Yifu," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "Besides, you haven't destroyed the Barbarians, how can you get married? In the end ... in the end we can't get married yet." While saying that, tears started to flow again.

"Naturally we must intensify the search for Yifu," Zhang Wuji

said, "But it will be a lot easier for us to find information if we are among our brethren. As for driving the Tatars away, nobody can tell when would that be. Are you saying that we should wait until we become 'lao gong gong' [old man or grandfather] and 'lao po po' [old woman, also grandmother] before we can bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married? A pair of an old man and an old woman getting married is not strange, but we certainly can't get any children, then the Zhang family of mine will die without any heir."

Zhou Zhiruo blushed and covered up her mouth. "An honest and naïve person like you, I wonder where did you learn to talk garrulously like that?" It was as if the anxiety clouds and the miserable fog in the sky were lifted up and scattered away with their laughter.

Early morning the next day, Zhang Wuji requested Peng Yingyu to stay in Dadu for three more days to inquire about any news on Xie Xun; while he took Zhou Zhiruo and Han Lin'er heading south toward the Huai Si River area. When they entered Shandong's border, they saw a large group of defeated Mongolian army, dragging their armor and losing their helmets, swarm in. Seeing the condition of these defeated soldiers, Zhang Wuji and the others avoided them by taking a detour. Later on, they saw a lone soldier fall behind, they captured and interrogated him, and found out that in Huaibei, Zhu Yuanzhang had repeatedly won several big battles and completely routed the Yuan army.

The three of them were unable to restrain their delight; they picked up their speed and reached the Lu Wan [Anhui province] boundary, which had fallen under the Ming Cult's rebel army [orig. 'yi4 jun1' - justice/righteous army] territory. Someone in the rebel army recognized Han Lin'er and quickly reported to the general mansion. As the three of

them approach Haozhou, Han Shantong, leading Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da, Chang Yuchun, Deng Yu, Tang He, all the senior generals, were already out welcoming them within thirty 'li's [about 15 km] of the city limit. It was their first meeting after a long separation, so everybody was very happy. As Han Shantong learned about Han Lin'er being captured by the Beggar Clan and how their Cult Leader battled his captors to rescue him, he did not cease from expressing his gratitude. Amidst the clamoring gongs and drums, and dazzling armored entourage, they entered the city of Haozhou.

Zhou Zhiruo rode a horse right behind Zhang Wuji. She looked to the left and glanced to the right, and thought that although this parade was not as glamorous as the Emperor and Empress' 'Tour of the Imperial City', she was quite pleased with it.

Zhang Wuji rested inside the city for a few days. As Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, Yin Yewang, Priest Tieguan ['iron hat'], Shuo Bude, Zhou Dian, and all leaders of the Five-Element Flags received the news about his arrival, they all came from all over the country. Zhang Wuji told them that Xie Xun had returned to the Central Plains; and how he was captured by the Beggar Clan but went missing later on. He told them everything related to this incident.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others discussed this matter over and over again, but nobody was able to offer any explanation. Fan Yao said, "The origin of that lady in yellow is unknown, but perhaps she holds the key to the information on Xie Xiong's [brother Xie] whereabouts."

Nobody had ever heard about that in the Wulin world there existed this lady in yellow. They could not offer anything

except exhorting Zhang Wuji not to worry. "Judging from her speech and conduct, this lady in yellow does not hold any ill intention," they said, "If Jin Mao Shi Wang has fallen into her hands surely he won't come into any harm. Perhaps all this woman wants is some information on the Tulong Saber."

Zhang Wuji was still feeling an inexplicable concern in his heart, but he could not do anything except dispatch the Five-Element Flags to go everywhere to find information.

The next day Peng Yingyu arrived from Dadu; he also said that he could not find any news about Xie Xun.

Although the Ming Cult's rebel army had achieved great victory everywhere, the casualties in their side were also very serious. Hereafter they would be busy in the next two, three months to reorganize their troops and recruit new soldiers; hence, they were unable to engage the Yuan army in a large-scale battle for the time being.

Peng Yingyu knew that Zhou Zhiruo attempted suicide that night. Although he was unclear of the real reason behind it, he speculated that it had something to do with jealousy between the two. Fan Yao and the others were also aware of Zhang Wuji's unusual relationship with Zhao Min. If the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult took a Mongolian princess as his wife, the threat facing their great undertaking of resisting the Yuan would not be small. Since currently there wasn't any important matter at hand, they all agreed to urge Zhang Wuji to conclude his marriage with Zhou Zhiruo. Since Zhang Wuji had had a talk with Zhou Zhiruo beforehand, he readily agreed. Yang Xiao immediately decided that the fifteenth day of the third month would be an auspicious day.

The entire Ming Cult was jubilant; straightaway they busied themselves making preparation for their Jiaozhu's wedding.

By this time, the Ming Cult's name had shaken the world. To the east, Han Shantong repeatedly scored major victories around the Huai Si River area. To the west, Xu Shouhui also defeated the Yuan army again and again around the northern Hubei and southern Henan. As the big news of the Cult Leader's marriage spread out, the Wulin world's figures' congratulatory gifts came flooding in like a tidal wave of the river.

Kunlun, Kongtong, and various other Sects were originally in enmity with the Ming Cult. However, first, Zhang Wuji had rescued them from the Dadu's Wan An Temple, and thus each Sect felt indebted to him; second, Zhou Zhiruo was the Sect Leader of Emei, so that each Sect Leader was obligated to send their representative to deliver their gift. Kongtong Five Elders' [Kongtong Wu Lao] gift was especially lavish.

The gift from Zhang Sanfeng consisted of calligraphy of four characters, 'Jia Er Jia Fu' [lit. excellent son (husband), excellent woman (wife)], and his own writing of the 'Tai Ji Quan Jing' [Taiji Fist Manual], which were delivered by Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, and Yin Liting, three of his chief disciples. By this time, Yin Liting had already married Yang Buhui, who also came to Haozhou.

Zhang Wuji welcomed her with a big smile on his face. "Liu Shi Shen [sixth martial aunt]!" he called out loudly. Yang Buhui blushed profusely. She pulled his hand away to reminisce about the past; with a heart full of joy and gratefulness.

Zhang Wuji was afraid Chen Youliang and Song Qingshu had not given up on their wicked scheme and would take this opportunity to strike. Thereupon he sent Wei Yixiao as his envoy to convey his gratitude to Wudang Mountain. He quietly told Wei Yixiao in detail how Song Qingshu had killed

Mo Shenggu, and how he had conspired to harm Zhang Sanfeng. He asked that after Wei Yixiao paid his respects to Zhang Sanfeng, to collaborate with Yu Daiyan and Zhang Songxi in guarding against Chen Youliang's evil plan; and that he should wait until Song Yuanqiao and the others return to Wudang before he leaves.

Wei Yixiao spitefully said, "Following Jiaozhu's order, Wei Yixiao does not dare to suck others' blood; but this time, if I ever come across those two traitors, I must suck their blood dry."

Zhang Wuji hastily said, "About that Chen Youliang, I don't care if Wei Xiong [brother Wei] get rid of him. But Song Qingshu is my Song Da Shibo's only beloved son, he is also Wudang Pai's future Sect Leader. Besides, we should let Wudang clean up their own school. We must avoid hurting my Song Da Shibo's feelings." Wei Yixiao complied and left immediately.

By the tenth of the third month, the heroines of Emei arrived at Haozhou bringing gifts. Ding Minjun sent her gift, but she did not personally come.

When the fifteenth of the third month came, everybody from the Ming Cult, from top to bottom, were wearing new clothes. The wedding ceremony was to be held at the mansion belonging to the richest man in Haozhou. The reception hall was adorned with hanging lanterns and colorful embroidered banners of congratulations. Zhang Sanfeng's calligraphy, 'Jia Er Jia Fu' was hung in the middle.

Yin Tianzheng presided over the groom's family, while Chang Yuchun presided over the bride's side. Priest Tieguan was in charge of Haozhou's security; he deployed the Cult disciples to patrol around town, to guard against the enemy

mingled in and caused trouble. Tang He stationed his army of elite troops to guard the city's perimeter.

That morning, the delegations from Shaolin Pai and Huashan Pai also arrived with their gifts.

When the ninth hour [between 3 – 5 pm] came, the wedding ceremony started. Cannons were fired repeatedly. The guests flooded the reception hall. Upon the command of Master of Ceremony, Song Yuanqiao and Yin Yewang walked Zhang Wuji into the hall. The string and woodwind ensemble started to play; the mood was bright.

Accompanied by eight of Emei Pai's young heroines, Zhou Zhiruo willowy and elegantly stepped into the hall. Zhou Zhiruo was wearing red embroidered dress, with phoenix crown and red-cloud cape on her head, and red veil covered her face. The male on the left and the female on the right, the bride and the groom stood side by side.

"Bow to the Heaven!" the Master of Ceremony shouted.

Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo were about to kneel down on the red-felt rug when suddenly from outside the main gate someone shouted, "Hold it!" A dark green shadow flashed, and a young woman in dark green clothes stood in the middle of the hall, smiling softly; it was none other than Zhao Min.

As the crowd saw that it was her, they exclaimed in surprise. Many masters from Ming Cult and various Sects had suffered under her hands; they did not expect her to be as bold as to enter this dangerous place alone. The hot-tempered among them were ready to pounce forward.

"Hold it!" Yang Xiao spread out his arms and shouted. To the

guests he said, "Today is our humble Cult's Jiaozhu and the Emei Pai's Zhang Men's [Sect Leader] day of happiness. Since Miss Zhao has come to join us in this celebration, she is also our honored guest. Therefore, I am asking everybody to look at Emei Pai and Ming Cult's humble faces and willing set aside the old grudges temporarily; and thus not to treat Miss Zhao impolitely."

He cast a meaningful glance toward Shuo Bude and Peng Yingyu. They understood his intention. Circling to the rear of the hall, they went outside to investigate, to observe how many martial art masters Zhao Min took with her.

To Zhao Min he said, "Miss Zhao, please have a seat over here and watch the ceremony. Later on I will salute you with three cups of insipid wine."

Zhao Min smiled slightly and said, "I have something I want to say to Zhang Jiaozhu. I will leave as soon as I am finished. I will come back later to accept your hospitality."

"Whatever it is that Miss Zhao wants to say, it won't be too late to wait after the ceremony is over," Yang Xiao said.

"After the ceremony, it will be too late," Zhao Min said.

Yang Xiao and Fan Yao exchanged a look, knowing that she had come today to deliberately create trouble. Whatever it was, they must prevent it at any cost, so as to avoid disruption of the ceremony, embarrassment, and to displease the guests.

Yang Xiao took two steps forward and said, "As your host today, we have exhausted our propriety. Miss Zhao is asking us to act harshly." He had decided that if Zhao Min kept making disturbance, he would swiftly seal her acupoints and

deal with her later.

“Ku Da Shi,” Zhao Min turned to Fan Yao, “Others are going to attack me, are you going to help me or not?”

Fan Yao knitted his brows and said, “Junzhu [princess], in the matters of this world, 80, 90% of them do not happen according to one’s wishes. Since we have come to this, you should not force me to do anything.”

Zhao Min said, “I want to force you.” Turning toward Zhang Wuji she said, “Zhang Wuji, you are the Ming Cult Jiaozhu, as a real man, will you or will you not do what you have promised?”

Ever since he saw Zhao Min arrive, Zhang Wuji’s heart had been beating faster; he had hoped Yang Xiao would be able to deal with her nicely and had her leave without any struggle. Now that she directly asked him, he had no choice but answered, “Of course I will do what I promised.”

Zhao Min continued, “When I saved your Yu Sanshu [third martial uncle] and Yin Liushu’s [sixth uncle] lives, you promised to do three things I would ask you to do, did you or did you not?”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji replied, “You wanted me to borrow the Tulong Saber for you to look at, and not only you have looked at it, you have even stolen the precious saber.”

For the last several decades, the Jianghu people had been concerned about this ‘wu lin zhi zun’ [the most revered in the Wulin world] Tulong Saber’s whereabouts. Now that they suddenly heard that the Saber had fallen into Zhao Min’s hands, they were in an uproar.

“Only Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia knows into whose hands the Tulong Saber has fallen” Zhao Min said, “You can go and ask him personally.”

Actually, not too many Wulin people aware that Xie Xun had returned to the Central Plains; hearing her mentioning ‘The Golden-Haired Lion King’, they were thrown into commotion again.

“I am most concerned about my Yifu’s whereabouts these days,” Zhang Wuji said, “I hope Miss could shed some light on this matter.”

Zhao Min smiled mysteriously and said, “I have asked you to do three things for me, and you have promised to comply as long as the matter does not violate the Wulin world code of brotherhood or the chivalrous way. As of borrowing the Tulong Saber to look at, although I did not really look at it, but I have seen it after all; I cannot blame you if the precious Saber was stolen later. Just consider you have accomplished the first matter. Right now I have the second matter I’d like you to do. Zhang Wuji, in front of these heroes and warriors of the world, you cannot back off on your word.”

“What do you want me to do?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“Miss Zhao,” Yang Xiao interrupted, “Whatever it is you want our humble Cult’s Jiaozhu to do, since he has made a promise, as long as it does not violate the Wulin world’s way of chivalry, not only Zhang Jiaozhu will do it, our entire Cult, from top to bottom, will do our utmost to accomplish it. However, now is the time Zhang Jiaozhu and his new bride to bow to the Heaven and the Earth, other matter can wait, so please do not say too much and disturb the ceremony.”

By the last sentence, his tone was rather stern. But Zhao Min looked as if she did not care much about this Ming Cult’s Left

Emissary of the Brightness, whose prestige had shaken the Jianghu.

“My business is even more important,” Zhao Min languidly said, “It cannot be delayed even for a second.” Suddenly she took several steps toward Zhang Wuji, stood on her toes, and whispered in Zhang Wuji’s ear, “My second request is that you do not marry Miss Zhou today.”

“What?” Zhang Wuji was stunned.

Zhao Min said, “That was my second request. I’ll think about the third and let you know later.”

Although she was speaking in a low voice, it was loud enough so that Zhou Zhiruo, as well as those who stood nearby, such as Song Yuanqiao, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the eight Emei female disciples, could hear her clearly. Everybody’s face was changed. The eight Emei disciples silently curled their fists inside their long sleeves; as soon as Zhao Min said anything else to disgrace the Emei Pai Sect Leader, they would make her suffer.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. “I can’t do it,” he said.

“So you decide not to honor your own word?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji replied, “We have stated explicitly that it cannot violate the ‘xia yi’ [code of brotherhood/chivalry]. Miss Zhou and I are engaged; if I do what you said, I will violate this ‘xia yi’.”

With a cold laugh Zhao Min said, “If you marry her today, then you are unfilial and doing an injustice. Didn’t you see how your Yifu fell into others’ wicked plot during the ‘Tour of

the Imperial City' at Dadu?"

Zhang Wuji felt anger rising in his breast. "Miss Zhao," he said in a loud voice, "Today I respect you as my guest, therefore, I yield to you 30%. If you keep talking rubbish, don't blame me for offending you."

Zhao Min was unfazed. "So you have decided not to comply with my second request?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji remembered that with the honor she had as a princess, she did not hesitate to show her face in public [this is a literal translation of 'pao1 tou2 lou4 mian4', but I am sure the readers will understand what Jin Yong was saying], and ask him earnestly in the presence of all these heroes and warriors not to get married. It must be because of her feelings toward him. He could not restrain his heart from softening. "Miss Zhao," he said gently, "Since we have come to this, I am asking you ... I am asking you to understand. I, Zhang Wuji, am only an uncouth peasant; I am not worthy ... not worthy ..."

"All right," Zhao Min said, "Why don't you look; what is this?" Extending her right arm, she held out her hand in front of Zhang Wuji's face.

As Zhang Wuji saw it, he was so shocked that his body shivered. "This ... this is my ..." he said in a shaky voice.

Zhao Min quickly withdrew her hand and put that thing back into her pocket. "It's up to you whether you want to comply with my second request or not," she said, and then turned straight toward the main gate.

Nobody knew what kind of object she showed to Zhang Wuji, which made him looked so frightened and at a loss. Zhou

Zhiruo's eyes were covered by the red veil, so although she heard the exchange between Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min, she was not able to see what it was.

"Miss ... Miss Zhao," Zhang Wuji anxiously called, "Please don't go."

"If you want to follow me, you must not bow to the Heaven and the Earth with your new bride too quickly," Zhao Min said, "A real man without a strong determination will suffer a lifelong regret." She was speaking in a loud and clear voice, but her steps were not hindered at all; quickly she had walked pass the main gate.

"Miss Zhao, please wait! We need to discuss it further," Zhang Wuji called out.

Instead of slowing down, she picked up her speed and called back, "All right, as long as you do not get married today," Zhao Min halted her steps, "Then you can come with me."

Zhang Wuji turned his head around and looked at Zhou Zhiruo; his heart full of regret and guilt. He wanted to say something to her, but Zhao Min had already out of his sight. The matter on hand was very urgent, he must take the bull by the horn. Thereupon he gritted his teeth and pursued after Zhao Min.

Zhang Wuji had just reached the main gate when a red shadow flashed by his side; someone had already reached Zhao Min's back. From the inside of the red sleeve came a bare hand, with its five fingers struck down on top of Zhao Min's head. This move was like a rabbit evading the falcon; it was unbelievably fast, and it was more surprising since it came from the bride, Zhou Zhiruo.

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "This move is so fierce! Where did Zhiruo learn this exquisite stance from?"

He saw Zhou Zhiruo's palm had already covered the top of Zhao Min's head; with her five fingers threatened to crush Zhao Min's brain. Almost without thinking Zhang Wuji flew forward and reached Zhou Zhiruo's main artery. In an abrupt movement, Zhou Zhiruo retracted her arm and 'bang', her elbow struck his chest. The Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside Zhang Wuji's body reacted automatically and neutralized this incoming force, but he felt his blood was bubbling up inside his chest, and his feet staggered slightly.

Fan Yao saw the dangerous situation and immediately stepped forward to help; stretching out his palm he pushed toward Zhou Zhiruo's shoulder. Zhou Zhiruo's left hand moved slightly and lightly brushed away. Fan Yao felt his wrist go numb and his push failed. But because of these hindrances, Zhao Min was able to move half a step backward and thus avoid the strike on her head; however, she felt a stabbing pain on her shoulder, as the five fingers of Zhou Zhiruo's right hand penetrated her shoulder near her neck.

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed, and pushed Zhou Zhiruo away.

Although the red veil on her head had not been removed, she could hear the wind to distinguish the movement. She turned her left palm around and hacked down on Zhang Wuji's wrist. Zhang Wuji did not want to fight her, but he saw her attacks to be extremely swift and fierce. Each one of those attacks could take Zhao Min's life. He had no choice but to fend her off.

Zhou Zhiruo's upper body did not move, her stance was steady, but her pair of hands successively launched eight dangerous attacks. Zhang Wuji was forced to use the Qian

Kun Da Nuo Yi just to ward her off.

Eight attacks, eight blocks, all movements happened lightning fast that it was over in just the blink of an eye. Everybody in the main hall held their breaths and stood still with a shock expression on their faces. Zhao Min's shoulder was seriously wounded. She fell down to the floor with blood gushing out from the five holes on her shoulder, and in a short moment dyed her clothes red.

Zhou Zhiruo held her hands and said, "Zhang Wuji, you have been so enchanted by this little witch that you really want to give me up?"

"Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji pleaded, "Please understand my difficulty. We are engaged. Zhang Wuji will not regret that. I only ask for a few days delay ..."

Zhou Zhiruo said coldly, "Once you leave, don't ever think to come back. I only hope you won't regret your decision."

Zhao Min gritted her teeth and stood up. Without saying anything she walked gingerly outside. Blood was still flowing out from her shoulder, drenching her clothes.

Although the crowd of heroes and warriors had seen almost everything in the Jianghu, they had never seen two women fighting over a husband, blood splashing all over the hall and the bride with red veil on her head injuring her rival with some mysterious martial art. There was not anyone who was not shocked and alarmed; nobody was able to utter anything.

Zhang Wuji stomped his foot and said, "Yifu's kindness to me is as heavy as the mountain. Zhiruo, Zhiruo, please forgive me." Having said that, he ran after Zhao Min. Yin

Tianzheng, Yang Xiao, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the others were not clear of what had happened; nobody dared to stop him.

Zhou Zhiruo reached up and tore the red veil from her face away; in a loud voice she said, "Everybody, you are my witnesses today: It was he who abandoned me, and not I who abandoned him. From this day on, Zhou Zhiruo and that surnamed Zhang have no relation whatsoever." Then she lifted up the phoenix crown from her head, grabbed a pearl from it and tossed the phoenix crown to the ground. As she rubbed the pearl in her palms, the pearl turned into powder, which then trickled down to the floor. She said, "If I, Zhou Zhiruo, do not wash away today's disgrace, let me be just like this pearl."

Yin Tianzheng, Song Yuanqiao, Yang Xiao, and the others wanted to console her, telling her to wait for Zhang Wuji to return, and then discuss it further; but they saw Zhou Zhiruo pulled her dress with her bare hands. 'Rip!' the red long embroidered gown was torn into two pieces, and then she tossed it to the ground. She kicked the ground and flew up, making a graceful somersault in the air, and landed on the roof. Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng and the others were taken by surprise; they saw her like a floating red cloud, flying to the east. Her 'qing gong' [lightness skill] was superb, looked like it was not inferior to the Green-winged Bat King Wei Yixiao.

Yang Xiao and the others knew it was useless to pursue her. They were at a loss and stood silently outside for half a day before finally returning to the main hall. In a blink of an eye, Zhao Min's disturbance had made a joyous celebration like a cloud dispersed by the wind. All the Ming Cult people felt a slap on their faces, while the guests who came to congratulate them were also disappointed. Everybody tried to guess what kind of object Zhao Min showed to Zhang

Wuji, which made him forget everything and pursue her. Listening to his words, obviously, this object had a very important relation to Xie Xun; but the truth was, nobody knew anything for sure.

The Emei heroines were talking among themselves in low voices, and then indignantly they took their leave. Yin Tianzheng repeatedly apologized to them, saying that he would make Zhang Wuji come to Emei to seriously apologize and conclude the matrimony, that he sure hoped the good relationship between two families would not be damaged. The Emei heroines declined to make any comment; they dispersed to look for Zhou Zhiruo, while muttering quietly that the man who should be blamed was not worthy to enjoy the good fortune.

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Actually, the object Zhao Min held in her palm and showed to Zhang Wuji was a lock of yellow hair. As soon as he saw it, Zhang Wuji recognized it as Xie Xun's hair. Xie Xun practiced an unusual type of internal energy cultivation, plus, he had a different innate characteristic, so that by the time he was middle-aged, the long hair on his head had turned light yellow, however, the color was not the same as the western region color-eyed people's blonde hair. Zhang Wuji thought that since Xie Xun's hair was cut by Zhao Min, then the person must have fallen into her hands as well. If Zhang Wuji had bowed to the Heaven and the Earth with Zhou Zhiruo, in her anger, Zhao Min might kill Xie Xun. He could not take that risk, but he also could not explain the real reason to Zhou Zhiruo in front of all the heroes and warriors. He knew that practically everybody present at the hall, other than people from the Ming Cult and Wudang Pai, would love to know Xie Xun's whereabouts. Some of them wanted to seek revenge of the killing spree Xie Xun

committed in his former days, but most of them had the real intention of snatching the precious Tulong Saber away.

As Zhang Wuji saw Zhao Min was leaving, he knew he would extremely offend Zhou Zhiruo, yet to him his Yifu's life was more important, therefore, he decided to run after Zhao Min. He saw Zhao Min running as fast as her feet could take her, with blood still dripping from her shoulder to the road along the way. Taking a deep breath, he flew several 'zhang's [1 zhang is approximately 10 feet or 3m] forward to cut her off.

"Miss Zhao," he said, "Please don't compel me to be an unrighteous person that I will be reviled by the heroes and warriors of the world."

Zhao Min's shoulder injury was rather serious. At first, driven by her anger, he made an effort to walk away. But now, listening to Zhang Wuji's words, she said, "You ... you ..." Her anger subsided and she collapsed to the ground. Zhang Wuji stooped down. "Tell me where my Yifu first," he said.

"Take me to rescue him," Zhao Min said, "I will ... I will ... give you directions."

"Is he [Senior] alive?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min had the will, but not the strength. "Your Yifu ... Yifu fell into Cheng Kun's hands," she said.

As he heard the name 'Cheng Kun', Zhang Wuji felt as if blood had been drained from his body; this man was not only an expert in martial art, he was also very crafty and cruel. There was a deep enmity, as deep as the ocean, between Xie Xun and him, so if Xie Xun fell into his hands, he would face an unspeakable danger indeed.

“You can’t do it alone,” Zhao Min said, “Call ... call Yang Xiao and the others to come with you.” As she saying that, she pointed her finger to the west, but suddenly her head limped backward and she passed out.

Zhang Wuji imagined all kind of sufferings his Yifu was subjected to right at this moment; he felt as if his five internal organs were burning. Immediately he embraced Zhao Min, hurriedly ripped her clothes and wrapped the wound. Seeing a Ming Cult disciple by the side of the road, he beckoned him to come, and gave his order, “Quickly report to Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary], tell him to lead everybody to the west at once, tell him that I have an important matter to attend.” The disciple complied and ran to report the order.

Zhang Wuji thought the sooner he leaves the better. Who knows? Perhaps this delay for few minutes would cost him the opportunity to save his Yifu’s life. He carried Zhao Min immediately, and walked quickly toward the city gate, where he ordered the soldier guarding the gate to fetch a steed. Flying up, he mounted the steed and galloped it westward.

After speeding up several ‘li’s, he felt Zhao Min’s body in his bosom gradually turn cold; checking her pulse, he found it to be weak. He was in panic. Stopping down to un-wrap the wound, he saw the five holes were very deep, reaching the shoulder bone, and the skin around the wound had turned blackish purple, an obvious sign of poisoning.

Zhang Wuji was startled, “Zhiruo is Emei disciple,” he mused, “How did she learn this kind of poisonous martial art? Her move was very fierce, even fiercer than Miejue Shitai’s; how is that possible?” He knew that if Zhao Min did not receive help immediately, she would die of poisoning.

But he was wearing the groom clothes, why would he bring any anti-poison drug?

He pondered for a moment then leaped down from the horse. Carrying Zhao Min in his arms, he jumped toward the mountain on his left. He looked around trying to find some herbs to treat poisoning, but after looking for a while he did not find even an ordinary herbal medicine.

With his heart thumping madly, he ran around the hills and the valleys, while muttering a silent prayer. Suddenly his eyes caught some bright color; he saw ahead of him, slightly to the right, there was a bush of about four, five little red flower trees. They were the 'fo zuo xiao hong lian' [little red lotus, seat base of Buddha], which had quite some effect of fighting poison. Although by this time it was the second month of spring, when hundreds of flowers were in full bloom, but to be able to find this red flower right then and there was truly a Heaven's blessing.

In his great delight he carried Zhao Min across two mountain streams toward the bushes. He took some red flowers, chewed them in his mouth, and then he fed half into Zhao Min's mouth, while applied the other half on her shoulder. Everything done, he carried Zhao Min again and continued westward.

Rushing about thirty 'li's, Zhao Min stirred and moaned, and then she awoke, "I ... am I still alive?" she asked in a low voice.

Knowing that the 'fo zuo xiao hong lian' was really effective, Zhang Wuji was very happy. He laughed and replied, "How do you feel?"

"My shoulder itches very much," Zhao Min said, "Ay, Miss

Zhou's hand this time was very fierce."

Zhang Wuji gently put her down, and looked at her shoulder again. He saw the black was not diminishing, but her pulse was not as weak as before. Zhang Wuji thought for a moment. He knew 'fo zuo xiao hong lian' was very slow and was not enough to neutralize the poison. Thereupon he stooped down to put his mouth on her shoulder, and sucked the poisonous blood from her wounds, which he then spat on the ground. The stench attacked his nose and he wanted to vomit.

Zhao Min looked at Zhang Wuji with the corner of her eyes then she reached up and gently stroke his head. "Wuji Gege," she sighed, "Have you figured out what was happening?"

Zhang Wuji had finished sucking the blood and was going to a small creek to rinse his mouth. He walked back and sat by her side. "What is happening?" he asked.

Zhao Min said, "Miss Zhou is a disciple of a famous upright sect. How did she learn this kind of poisonous, heretical martial art?"

"I myself also thought it strange," Zhang Wuji said, "I wonder who taught her that skill?"

Zhao Min laughed sweetly and said, "It must be the little thief from the heretical sect Devil Cult."

Zhang Wuji laughed, "Although the Devil Cult has many devil-heads, nobody knew this kind of martial art. Only Qing Yi Fu Wang's sucking-blood-from-people's-neck skill is similar to Zhang Wuji's sucking-blood-from-people's-shoulder skill." And then he asked, "How did my Yifu fall into

Cheng Kun's hands? Where is he right now?"

"I'll take you there and help you to think of a way to rescue him," Zhao Min said, "As for the exact location, that is Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk] Shuo Bude. [Zhao Min was playing with words here, Shuo Bude means 'can't say', he was one of the Five Wanderers, and his title was 'Bu Dai Heshang'. I guess for those of you who have not read the missing chapters, you will have to wait patiently to know a little bit more about him.] As soon as I tell you, you will dash ahead and drop me without giving me another thought."

Zhang Wuji sighed. "Surely I am not that heartless and without any sense of righteousness, am I?" he asked.

"For your Yifu's sake, you were willing to abandon your pretty-as-a-flower, precious-as-a-jade new bride; much less me?" Zhao Min said, while slowly leaning her body against his. "Today I disrupted your wedding [orig. dong4 fang2 hua1 zhu2 - lit. cave room flowery (or fancy) candle], are you blaming me?"

Without knowing the reason, right at this moment Zhang Wuji felt happy and content. Other than his concern over Xie Xun's safety, he was even more happy and content than when he was going to bow to the Heaven and the Earth with Zhou Zhiruo. But why he felt like that, he could not explain. However, he could not admit that he was happy because Zhao Min had disrupted his wedding ceremony; therefore, he said, "Of course I blame you. Next time, when you and that elegant hero who will become the 'jun ma ye' [princess' husband] are bowing to the Heaven and the Earth, I will also come and create a great disturbance; I will not let you be the new bride peacefully and easily."

A trace of blush arose on Zhao Min's pale face. "If you come

and disrupt, I am going to kill you,” she said with a laugh.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji heaved a sigh, he was silent and looked low-spirited.

“What is it?” Zhao Min asked.

“I wonder,” said Zhang Wuji, “That Jun Ma Ye must have done many good deeds in his previous life that he deserves such a good fortune.”

Zhao Min said with a smile, “It is not too late for you to do some good deeds right now.”

Zhang Wuji’s heart skipped a beat. “What?” he asked.

Zhao Min blushed, and suddenly went silent. At this point, the two of them felt uncomfortable to continue having an intimate talk, so after they rested for a moment, Zhang Wuji re-applied the medicine and carried her westward.

Zhao Min was carried on his back, her cheek were close to the left side of his face. Zhang Wuji’s nose caught the fragrance of her perfume, his hands were supporting the soft flesh her warm body; he could not help his heart from racing like a wild horse and his mind jumping around like an ape. If only he was not anxious to rescue Yifu, he was seriously contemplating of slowing down his pace to enjoy this once-in-a-life-time opportunity of strolling in the wilderness.

That evening they spent the night on the uncultivated hills at the western suburb of Haozhou. It was only the next day that they found a small town, where they bought two healthy horses. Zhao Min’s poisoned wounds were very difficult to heal that quickly, her body was still too weak to ride the horse alone; she had to lean on Zhang Wuji, riding

one horse together. Riding this way, after five days they arrived within the boundary of Henan.

They were riding along that day, when suddenly they saw the dust was raising ahead of them, as more than a hundred riders gallop their way. They heard the tinkling of iron armors, and saw that it was the Mongolian cavalry. Zhang Wuji held the rein and stopped by the side of the road to make way.

As this Mongolian cavalry group galloped past, dozens of 'zhang's behind them there was another group of riders. This latter group was not arranged in neat formation, some were riding ahead, some were lagging behind, in a very loose array.

Zhang Wuji took a glance and to his surprise saw that the 'shen jian ba xiong' [Eight Divine Archers] were among these riders. "Not good!" he silently groaned, and quickly turned his head away.

These twenty-odd riders saw Zhang Wuji's clothes to be expensive and fancy, with a young woman in his bosom, their faces were turned the other way, actually they did not give these two any thought. The Eight Divine Archers also did not recognize them.

As the riders past, Zhang Wuji was just about to pull the rein to continue forward, when suddenly they heard the sound of hooves beats again. Three riders flew by. The horse in the middle was white, the rider wore an embroidered robe and gold crown. On the either side of him was a chestnut horse. On their saddles Lu Zhangke and He Biweng, the Xuanming Elders, were sitting impressively.

Zhang Wuji was about to turn his head around when Lu

Zhangke saw these two and called out, “Jun Zhu Niang-niang [princess], don’t worry, help is on the way!” While He Biweng made a long whistle.

The Eight Divine Archers and their company heard his whistle and immediately turned around, encircling Zhang Wuji two people in the middle. Zhang Wuji was startled; he looked at Zhao Min in his bosom as if he was saying, “So you are secretly preparing an ambush here to attack me?” But then he noticed her anxious expression and realized he had wrongly accused her, so his heart was relieved.

“Gege [big brother],” he heard Zhao Min say, “I did not expect to see you here. Is Father well?”

It was only after hearing Zhao Min said ‘gege’ two characters did Zhang Wuji pay attention to the young man in embroidered robe; he recognized him as Zhao Min’s brother, Kuku Timur, who adopted a Han name of Wang Baobao. Zhang Wuji had seen him at Dadu twice, but this time his full attention was on Xuanming Elders, so he did not recognize the third person right away.

As Wang Baobao saw his beloved sister again, he was pleasantly surprised; but he did not know Zhang Wuji. Frowning, he said, “Meizi [younger sister, term of endearment], you ... you ...”

“Gege,” Zhao Min said, “I fell into the enemy’s evil plot and suffer a heavy poisoned wound. Luckily this Zhang Gongzi [young master] came to help me; otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to see Gege today.”

Lu Zhangke put his mouth next to Wang Baobao’s ear and said in a low voice, “Xiao Wangye [young prince], that man is the Devil Cult’s Cult Leader, Zhang Wuji.”

Wang Baobao had long heard Zhang Wuji's name; he believed Zhao Min was under his control and was forced to say such thing. He waved his right hand, and Xuanming Elders immediately came to within five feet to the left and to the right of Zhang Wuji. Four of the Eight Divine Archers also bent their bows, with the arrows aimed toward Zhang Wuji's back.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Wang Baobao said, "Sire is the leader of a cult, a renowned hero within the Wulin world, yet you are bullying my weak little sister; won't you be a laughingstock of the people? Quickly release her and I'll spare your life today."

"Gege," Zhao Min said, "Why did you say that? Zhang Gongzi definitely showed kindness to me, why did you say he was bullying me?"

Wang Baobao still believed that his sister was under the enemy's power that she did not have any choice but saying like she did. "Zhang Jiaozhu," he said loudly, "Although your martial art skill is strong, a pair of fists cannot match four hands; quickly put my sister down. Today we, both sides, are not going to fight each other. I, Wang Baobao, is true to my words, you don't have to be overly suspicious."

Zhang Wuji thought, "Miss Zhao's poisoned wound is serious; if she is busy running around with me for a thousand 'li's, she won't be easily recovered. Now that we meet her brother, she'd better go with him. The renowned doctors in the prince's palace will certainly do her good." Therefore, he said, "Miss Zhao, your honorable brother wants you to go back, let us part here then. Only, please tell me my Yifu's location, I'll think of some way to rescue him. We will meet again in the future."

While saying that, he could not help but feel heartbroken, knowing full well that they were of different tribes, a Han and a Mongolian, of different status, a royalty and a commoner; the enmity between two sides was very deep. But on the verge of this separation, he had to admit that he felt strong attachment to her. To his surprise, Zhao Min replied, "All along I was intentionally unwilling to tell you Xie Daxia's whereabouts. I only promised to take you there, but I can't tell you the place."

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. "Your heavy injury is not healed yet," he said, "It won't be beneficial for you to make a long and wearisome trip with me. I think you'd better follow your honorable brother to go back home."

Zhao Min's face bore a stubborn expression. "If you cast me away, you won't know Xie Daxia's whereabouts," she resolutely said, "My injury is getting better by the day. The longer we go, the faster I will heal. If I return to the palace, I will die of suffocation."

"Xiao Wangye," Zhang Wuji turned to Wang Baobao, "Please persuade your honorable sister."

Wang Baobao felt strange, he thought for a moment then said with a cold laugh, "Hey hey, your acting is not bad. What kind of trick are you playing? Your palm is on her vital acupoint, of course she will say whatever you want her to say. Such rubbish!"

Zhang Wuji dismounted the horse immediately. Two of the Eight Divine Archers assumed he was going to attack Wang Baobao. 'Swish, swish!' two arrows flew with a strong gust of wind toward him. Zhang Wuji's left hand pulled and pushed, utilizing the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi divine skill, two wolf-tooth

arrows turned around with an even stronger gust of wind. 'Bang, bang!' the arrows struck and broke the bows in their masters' hands. If those two archers did not move fast enough, they would have suffered serious injuries. Even after they struck the bow, the power of these arrows did not diminish; they continued their flight until they hit the ground, with the arrow tails sticking up, the eagle feather vibrated incessantly. Everybody was stunned.

Zhang Wuji stood some distance away from Zhao Min and said, "Miss Zhao, please return home to tend your injury, I will find a way to see you again."

Zhao Min shook her head. "Which palace doctor is better than you are?" she asked, "You are sending me to my death."

Wang Baobao saw that Zhang Wuji had left his sister's side, yet she still insisted on going together with him. He was surprised, but also angry. He said to the Xuanming Elders, "I will have to bother two gentlemen to protect my humble sister. Let us go!"

"Yes!" the Xuanming Elders replied, and went to Zhao Min's horse.

"Mr. Lu and Mr. He," Zhao Min said in loud voice, "I have an important matter I need to take care with Zhang Jiaozhu. Our power is not enough. The two of you better come with me."

The Xuanming Elders cast a glance toward Wang Baobao. Lu Zhangke said, "The Devil Cult's devil head is so crafty, it is inappropriate for Junzhu [princess] to be associated with him too much. We'd better come home with Xiao Wangye to the palace."

Zhao Min knitted her pretty brows, "So the two of you are listening to my brother's order, but not mine anymore?" she asked.

Lu Zhangke smiled and said, "Xiao Wangye has Junzhu's well-being in his mind."

"Humph," Zhao Min snorted. To Wang Baobao she said, "Gege, I have received Father's permission long ago to roam the Jianghu alone, you don't have to worry about me, I can take care of myself. When you see Father, please send my respects to him."

Wang Baobao knew their father had always doted on his beloved daughter, so he did not want to force his will too much; but if he let her go alone with the Devil Cult's Cult Leader, he would never be able to set his own mind at ease. He looked at Zhao Min who was crouching on the saddle, she looked so frail and tender; but as she was lifting the rein to go west, he spread out his arms to block her and said, "Good sister, Father will be here shortly. Why don't you wait for a little while? It won't be too late for you to go after reporting everything to him."

Zhao Min laughed, "As soon as Father comes, I can't leave," she said, "Gege, I don't meddle in your business, I ask you not to meddle in mine."

Again Wang Baobao looked at Zhang Wuji, sizing him up; he noticed that Zhang Wuji's body was like jade, his face handsome. It was obvious from his sister's manner of speaking that she had fallen in love with him. But the Ming Cult revolted against the government and caused lots of problem; thus this man was the enemy of the imperial government. If his sister was bewitched by this devil, the

disaster they were facing was not small. Thereupon he waved his left hand and shouted his order, "Arrest this devil head first!"

Lu Zhangke brandished his deer staff, He Biweng moved his crane pens; together they created one golden ray and two circular black shadows striking toward Zhang Wuji.

Zhao Min knew the Xuanming Elders' power very well. Even if Zhang Wuji were stronger, but with one against two, plus he did not have any weapon in his hand, Zhao Min was afraid he might be injured. "Xuanming Er Lao!" she called out, "If you harm Zhang Jiaozhu, I am going to report it to Father, and he will not spare you."

Wang Baobao was indignant. "Everybody has the right to punish a rebel," he said, "Xuanming Er Lao, kill this little devil head, Fu Wang [Father King] and I will reward you handsomely." And then he added, "Mr. Lu, Xiao Wang [young prince – referring to self] will add four beautiful women for you, I guarantee you will not be disappointed."

These brother and sister were giving them conflicting order; one wanted to kill him, the other said he must not be harmed. The Xuanming Elders were in a difficult position. Finally, Lu Zhangke winked at his martial brother and said in a low voice, "Seize him alive."

Suddenly Zhang Wuji launched the martial art from Sheng Huo Ling; his body slanted slightly, his right arm bent from the elbow, and then turned around from an unthinkable direction and 'Slap!' Lu Zhangke's ear was slapped heavily. "Try to seize me alive!" he shouted.

As he suddenly suffered a great setback, Lu Zhangke was startled and angry at the same time; but he was a top

ranking martial art expert, his mind was clear. He twirled his deer-head staff that even wind and rain would not penetrate it. Zhang Wuji wanted to continue with another sneak attack, but he was unable to do so because of this tight defense.

Zhao Min pulled her reins to make her horse jump forward, but Wang Baobao swept his whip. 'Crack!' it hit Zhao Min's horse right above its left eye. The horse made a long neigh in pain, and its front legs gave up.

Zhao Min was still weak from her injury, she was almost thrown away from her saddle. "Gege," she angrily said, "Must you stop me?"

"Good sister," Wang Baobao said, "Follow me home. Gege will apologize to you later."

"Gege," Zhao Min said, "If you stop me, someone is going to die a terrible death then Zhang Jiaozhu is going to hate me to the bone. It will be hard for your meizi ... your meizi to live."

"What are you talking about?" Wang Baobao said, "The martial art experts in the Ruyang Palace are as numerous as the clouds, they can protect you all around. Let's not talk about this little devil head trying to harm you; he cannot even see you even if he wants to."

Zhao Min sighed. "It's exactly because I am afraid I cannot see him again," she said, "If that happens, I ... I don't want to live anymore."

These two, brother and sister, were very close ever since their childhood; they always told each other everything. Therefore, she did not hesitate to tell him her true feelings

for Zhang Wuji.

Wang Baobao was angry. “Meizi,” he said, “You are confused. You are a Mongolian princess, you are like a tree with golden branch and jade leaves, how can you fall in love with a crude man, a lowly dog? If Father finds out, how can he, Senior, not be angry with you?”

He waved his left hand, and three of his warriors went forward to attack. By this time Zhang Wuji and the Xuanming Elders were competing internal energy. A few ‘zhang’s around them, the strong gust of wind was as sharp as the knife, how could these three warriors launch their attacks?

“Zhang Gongzi,” Zhao Min called out, “If you want to save Yifu, you must save me first.”

Seeing he could not change his sister’s mind, Wang Baobao was very anxious. He reached out and grabbed her. Putting her in front of him on the saddle, his legs squeezed and the horse jumped forward and ran.

Zhao Min’s martial art skill was actually higher than her brother, but her strength was gone because of the heavy injury; all she could do was crying out, “Zhang Gongzi, save me! Zhang Gongzi, save me!”

‘Whoosh! Whoosh!’ Zhang Wuji sent out two palm attacks with all his power, forcing the Xuanming Elders to withdraw three steps backward. Utilizing his ‘qing gong’ [lightness skill], he ran after Wang Baobao’s horse.

The Xuanming Elders and the three warriors were shocked; they also ran after him. Each time these five people were closing in, Zhang Wuji would launch a backward palm strike,

sending out the formidable power of his Jiu Yang Shen Gong [divine energy from Jiu Yang]. Each time his palm struck, the Xuanming Elders were forced to evade, since they did not dare to take his palm head on.

After three times of such strike, Zhang Wuji was able to take the speeding horse over. He leaped up and grabbed the back of Wang Baobao's neck. His grab was coupled with an acupoint sealing technique that Wang Baobao's upper body was immediately paralyzed and his embrace on Zhao Min loosened. Zhang Wuji lifted him up and threw him toward Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke hastily opened up his arms to catch him. Meanwhile, Zhang Wuji had caught Zhao Min, leaped down from the horseback, and dashed toward the hillside on their left. He Biweng and the rest of the warriors ran after them shouting and yelling. But the hill was several hundred 'zhang's tall, climbing it would really test their 'qing gong'. Although the Xuanming Elders possessed strong internal energy, their 'qing gong' was actually not top-ranking. Even four or five warriors were able to run ahead of He Biweng.

Zhang Wuji picked up some rocks and threw them down. Immediately some of the pursuers were hit and fell rolling down the hill. The rest of the pursuers were scared. Although they did not dare to stop because their young prince was watching, their steps were slowing down nonetheless. They saw Zhang Wuji carry Zhao Min higher up the hill and they did not dare to pursue farther.

Wang Baobao opened his mouth to curse, and then he called out, "Release the arrow, release the arrow!" While he also picked up his bow and shoot. 'Swish!' the arrow flew toward Zhang Wuji's back.

His shooting power was actually quite strong, but the distance was simply too far. The tip of the arrow was still a few 'zhang's away from Zhang Wuji's back when finally it fell down to the ground.

Zhao Min was holding tight on Zhang Wuji's neck. Knowing that the pursuers had stopped pursuing, finally she put her heart at rest. She said with a sigh, "Luckily I have known it all along and did not tell you Xie Daxia's whereabouts. Otherwise you, the heartless little devil head, will not be willing to save me with all your might."

Zhang Wuji was running around a depression on the mountain, his steps were not slowing down the least bit. "You tell me," he said, "Won't you be satisfying both sides if you are going home to tend to your injury? Why did you even bother to offend your brother and come with me facing the hardship?"

"I have decided to face hardship with you," Zhao Min said, "As for that brother of mine, I will offend him sooner or later anyway. My only fear is that you won't let me be with you. I don't care much of everything else."

Although Zhang Wuji knew that she loved him, he had always thought that it was a young girl's infatuation, which would pass in a moment. He had never thought that she loved him this much that she would consider riches and honor as dung and dirt, abandon royalty and honor like worn-out shoes. He looked down on her face, and saw the deep emotion on her thin and pale visage; her eyes were looking back at him with a passion similar to the flowing waves. He could not even describe the boundless charm she had on him. Unable to restrain himself, he lowered his head and kissed her slightly trembling cherry lips.

As soon as she was kissed, Zhao Min's face turned completely red. The excitement was too much for her and she unexpectedly passed out.

Zhang Wuji possessed enough medical knowledge to know that she was all right; actually, the appreciation in his heart was growing. But suddenly he remembered, "Even Zhiruo has never treated me this good!"

Zhao Min only lost her conscience for a moment; as she woke up, she saw his pensive look and asked, "What are you thinking? Are you thinking about Miss Zhou?"

Zhang Wuji did not try to lie; he simply nodded. "I am thinking that I have treated her badly," he said.

"Do you regret your decision?" Zhao Min asked.

"When I was about to bow to the Heaven and the Earth with her, I thought about you; and I could not help but feel sad," Zhang Wuji said, "This time I am thinking about her, I actually feel sorry for her."

Zhao Min smiled and said, "That means you love me a lot more, don't you?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "Honestly speaking: you, I love and I hate; Zhiruo, I respect and I fear."

"Ha ha!" Zhao Min laughed, "I would rather have you love and fear me, and respect and hate her."

Zhang Wuji smiled. "Well, it's different now. I hate you and I fear you. I hate you because you broke up my happy marriage, and I fear that you won't pay me back for the damage."

“How do I pay to you?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, “I want you to pay it with your own self, so that I can continue the wedding festivities [orig. dong4 fang2 hua1 zhu2 – see similar occurrence above].”

“No! No!” Zhao Min blushed profusely, “You’ll have to speak with my father [orig. die1 die1] first ... and I need to make amends to my Gege. Only then ... only then ...”

“And if your Papa wouldn’t let you?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min sighed. “Then marry the devil follow the devil. I have no choice but follow you, the little devil head, to become the little devil mother.”

With a straight face Zhang Wuji roared, “Audacious witch! You follow Zhang Wuji, the pervert thief who rebels and creates trouble. What punishment do you think you deserve?”

With the same straight face Zhao Min unflinchingly said, “As your punishment, the two of you are to be a happy couple, to live together to old age, and after you die, you are to be banished to the eighteenth level of the underworld, and will not be reincarnated for ten thousand years.”

Speaking to this point, they both broke out in laughter. Suddenly from ahead of them came a loud and clear voice, “Junzhu Niang-niang, Xiao Seng [lit. little/lowly or humble monk – referring to self] have been waiting here for a while.” About twenty something foreign monks appeared from behind the mountain. All of them were wearing red robes.

Zhang Wuji recognized these monks’ clothing and

adornment; that night, on the ground below the Wan An Temple Pagoda, these monks had tried to stop him. Their martial art skill was very strong; luckily Wei Yixiao had set the Ruyang Palace on fire thus forcing them to retreat. Otherwise, it would not be easy for him to rescue the warriors from the Six Major Sects.

One of the foreign monks clasped his palms and bowed, while saying, "Xiao Seng receives the Prince's order to accompany Junzhu return to the Palace."

"What are you doing here?" Zhao Min asked.

"Junzhu is injured," the foreign monk replied, "The Prince is very concerned, he ordered Xiao Seng to take Junzhu home." While speaking, he lifted up a white pigeon in his hand.

Zhao Min understood that her brother had sent a message to their father via a homing pigeon, and so their father must have dispatched these foreign monks to intercept them. "Where is my Father?" she asked.

The foreign monk replied, "The Prince is waiting at the foot of the mountain. He is anxious to see the condition of Junzhu's injury."

Zhang Wuji knew too much talking would not do them any good; he strode forward straight toward them, while shouting loudly, "If you want to live, quickly move aside. Otherwise, don't blame me for being merciless."

Two foreign monks stepped forward side by side, they both stretched out their right palms pushing against Zhang Wuji's chest. Zhang Wuji's left hand made a turn in a pulling and pushing action, he sent the two monks' palms strength back.

The two foreign monks cried out together, “Ami amihong, ami amihong!” It sounded like they were chanting an incantation, or it could be that they were cursing.

Zhao Min was not willing to be overdone; she also shouted, “Ami amihong yourself!”

‘Tap, tap, tap!’ the foreign monks took three steps back. Two other foreign monks behind them stretched out their right palms to stop the first two monks’ backs, and pushed them forward again. These two foreign monks kept using the same stance from the ‘pai shan zhang’ [‘row of mountains’ palm].

Zhang Wuji was not willing to fight them strength with strength and thus waste his energy; so he launched the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to divert the monks’ force away. To his surprise, as his fingers were barely touching the edge of those two monks’ palms, he felt just like iron pulled by magnet, his fingers stuck firmly onto the monks’ palms.

The two monks cried out again, ““Ami amihong, ami amihong!”

Twice Zhang Wuji tried to shake them off, but both times he failed. He had no choice but strike back with the Jiu Yang Shen Gong through his fingers. Surprisingly, he failed to push the two monks away. And then he saw that behind these two monks, the other twenty two monks arranged themselves in two rows, with each one’s right palm on the back of the monk in front of him. Twenty four foreign monks lined up neatly in two rows.

Zhang Wuji suddenly remembered, “I have heard Tai Shifu [great master – referring to Zhang Sanfeng] said that in the martial art world of India there is a technique to combine

power. These twenty four foreign monks are combining their strength to fight my palms. Even if my internal strength were stronger, I still cannot defeat the combined power of these twenty four men.”

He was afraid the pursuing soldiers would soon arrive, so letting out a long whistle, he added 30% more power to his palms and then abruptly pushed diagonally down, while he dodged to the left. He knew that these twenty four foreign monks could not possibly combine their strength in one straight line. The six foremost monks had already faltered from the direct impact of the push. Zhang Wuji immediately sent both his palms out, ‘Slap, slap, slap, slap, slap, slap!’ six times, the six foreign monks tumbled down on the ground with blood spurting out from their mouths. But the seventh and the eighth foreign monks continued their attacks forward.

“You want to follow your comrades?” Zhang Wuji thought. His right palm struck out to block these two monks’ palms. Focusing his strength, he was about to push diagonally again when suddenly he heard light footsteps from behind; somebody was sending him a palm attack. He swung his left palm backhandedly to parry this incoming palm attack, but his Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi was relying on his Jiu Yang Shen Gong, while right at that moment he was using his entire strength to deal with the combined power of the eighteen foreign monks in front of him; therefore, his strike backward only carried not more than 20% of his normal strength. He felt a blast of cold energy penetrating his palm and went straight into his body. His whole body shivered, he staggered, his body bent down and he fell. It was Lu Zhangke who launched a sneak attack on him with the Xuanming Shen Zhang [black/mysteriously dark divine palm].

“Mr. Lu, stop!” Zhao Min cried out in fear, throwing her own body on top of Zhang Wuji’s. “Who dares to make a move?” she shouted.

Actually, Lu Zhangke wanted to follow up with another palm strike, and thus take the life of the number one formidable enemy he had ever faced in his entire life. But seeing how the princess was protecting him, he had no choice but to hold his hand up and step back. He let out a long and loud whistle to signal his companions that everything went well so that it was safe for them to come over.

“Junzhu Niang-niang,” he said, “The Prince only wishes Junzhu Niang-niang to come home; no more than that. This man is the leader of the rebels; why does Junzhu care about him this much?”

Zhao Min was bitterly angry with him, and was thinking of scolding him badly, but she changed her mind as she did not want to incite his anger that he would harm Zhang Wuji’s life. Therefore, keeping her peace, she sat down, embracing Zhang Wuji in her arms.

A short moment later, they heard jingling bells, as three riders came up the mountain. One of them was He Biweng, the other as Wang Baobao, and the last one was the Ruyang Prince himself. As they came near, they jumped down from their horses. The Ruyang Prince frowned and said, “Minmin, what’s wrong with you? Why didn’t you obey your brother but deliberately create trouble in here instead?”

With tears flooding down her cheeks, Zhao Min cried out, “Father, you sent people to bully your daughter like this.”

The Ruyang Prince took several steps forward, putting out a hand to pull her up. Zhao Min flipped her right hand over, a

white ray flashed as she took a dagger from her bosom and pointed it toward her own abdomen. "Father," she called out, "If you don't let me go, your daughter will die in your presence today."

The Ruyang Prince was frightened that he retreated two steps backward. In a trembling voice he said, "We can talk, don't be like this! You ... what do you want?"

With her left hand Zhao Min pulled the clothes covering her right shoulder. She took off the bandage to reveal five finger holes. The poison had been taken away, but the wounds had not healed yet. Her flesh was vaguely exposed underneath traces of blood, making the wound looked even more ghastly.

Seeing her terrible wounds, Ruyang Prince's heart melted; she was, after all, the beloved daughter he dearly loved. "What happened? How did the wound become this bad?" he repeatedly asked.

Zhao Min pointed toward Lu Zhangke and said, "This man was having an ill intention; he was going to rape your daughter. Of course I resisted him to the death. He ... he ... then grabbed me like this. Please, Father ... Father must help me."

Lu Zhangke was so frightened that he felt as if his soul was fleeing out of his body. "Even to the death Xiao Ren will not dare. How can ... how can there be such thing?"

"Humph!" the Ruyang Prince stared at him angrily. "Such a nerve!" he said, "I was being lenient to you by not investigating the Han Ji affair, now you have the guts to offend my daughter. Seize him!"

By this time, one by one his personal bodyguards and warriors had caught up with them. Even though they knew the severity of Lu Zhangke's martial arts, upon hearing their prince shouting his order to seize the man, four of them stepped in to surround him.

Lu Zhangke was shocked and angered; thinking that the princess was taking advantage of their father-daughter relationship. Just because she was angry he had injured her boyfriend, she had unexpectedly framed him. Like the saying goes, 'blood is thicker than water'. The princess was exceptionally crafty. How could he retaliate to her? In the meantime, he swept away with his palm, forcing the four warriors to retreat. He sighed and said, "Shidi [martial (younger) brother], let's go!"

He Biweng hesitated. Zhao Min called out, "Mr. He, you are a good man, not a lecher like your Shixiong [martial brother]. Quickly arrest your Shixiong, my Father will bestow a high-ranking official position to you, and will reward you handsomely."

The Xuanming Elders' martial art skills might be outstanding, but they were greedy of rank, fame and fortune. Ignoring the dignity of their master, they threw themselves into the Palace for worldly gain. He Biweng knew very well his martial brother's excessive lascivious nature. Listening to what Zhao Min had said, he was 70, 80% convinced. The offer of promotion had made his heart racing. Only, Lu Zhangke and he were not only martial brothers, they were also best friends; how could he make his move against him? So for a moment he was unable to make a decision.

Lu Zhangke's face showed his grief; with a trembling voice he said, "Shidi, if you want promotion, come and arrest me."

He Biweng sighed. "Shige," he said, "Let's go!" Walking side-by-side, Lu Zhangke and He Biweng left.

The Xuanming Elders' prestige had shaken the capital [orig. Jing Shi - modern day Beijing]; the warriors of the Ruyang Palace respected them as immortals. Who would dare to step out and stop them?

The Ruyang Prince shouted his order over and over again, but the warriors only put on an act of shouting and moving around; they just looked on as the Xuanming Elders went down the mountain.

"Minmin," the Ruyang Prince said, "You are injured. Quickly come home with me to recuperate."

Zhao Min pointed toward Zhang Wuji and said, "This Zhang Gongzi saw me being bullied by Lu Zhangke. Seeing the injustice, he went out of his way to save me. But Gege did not know the real story, he accused him of being some leader of the rebels. Father, I have an important business I need to take care with Zhang Gongzi. As soon as we are done, I am going to take him to see you."

From her words, the Ruyang Prince deduced that his daughter wanted to marry this man, but his son had told him that this man was the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. Right at that moment, his leaving the capital heading south was to consolidate the troops, to deal with the Ming Cult rebels on the Huai Si and Henan-Hubei region. How could he let his daughter go with this man? He asked, "Your Gege said that this man is the Devil Cult's Jiaozhu. Is that true?"

"Gege loves to joke," Zhao Min said, "Father, take a look at him and tell me how old do you think he is? How can he be

the brain behind the rebellion?”

The Ruyang Prince sized Zhang Wuji up; he saw a young man, not more than 21 or 22 years old, his face pale from the injury, hence it was devoid of the heroic and valiant air he used to have, he looked even less like someone who was in charge of hundreds of thousands strong rebel army. But the Prince also knew that his daughter was very shrewd. In addition, the Ming Cult had caused the nation some major disasters. Perhaps this man was not the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, but he must be one of the important characters within the Ming Cult. Certainly he could not let him go. “Take him inside the city,” he finally decided, “We’ll examine him carefully. If he is not one of the Devil Cult people, I will grant him rewards.” He said that to save his daughter’s face, so that in front of all these people she would not look like a spoiled brat.

Four warriors immediately responded; they walked toward Zhao Min.

“Father,” Zhao Min cried, “Do you really want your daughter to die?” She pressed the dagger in her hand about half an inch [orig. ‘cun’ – thumb, approximately equal to an inch] into her stomach; immediately blood seeped out and dyed her clothes red.

The Ruyang Prince was shocked. “Minmin,” he said, “Please don’t make a scene here.”

Zhao Min cried even louder. “Father, your daughter is unfilial. I have secretly become man and wife with Zhang Gongzi. Please just consider you have never had any daughter. Let your daughter go. Otherwise, I’d rather die in your presence.”

The Ruyang Prince kept pulling his beard with his left hand; cold sweats started to form on his forehead. He had held command over generals and soldiers, he had battled and crushed enemies; he was used to make decision in split second. But today, confronted by his own beloved daughter's embarrassing affair, his hands were bound and he was unable to do anything.

"Meizi," Wang Baobao said, "Both you and Zhang Gongzi are injured. Let us all come home with Father. We will invite renowned doctors to treat you. Afterwards, we will have Father to preside over your wedding. Father will have an ideal son-in-law, and I will have a hero as my brother-in-law. Won't that be good?"

His words were pleasant to be heard, but Zhao Min had been aware early on that he was trying to buy time. If Zhang Wuji fell into their hands, how could he keep his life? He would be executed in less than an hour. Thereupon Zhao Min said, "Father, things have come to this, your daughter marries a chicken, she will follow the chicken; she marries a dog, she will follow the dog. In life or in death, I will follow Zhang Gongzi. Whatever trick you and Gege are playing, you can't hide it from me. I will not fall on it. Right now there are only two choices: if you are willing to spare your daughter's life, let me go. If you want your daughter's death, you won't have to waste any effort."

"Minmin," the Ruyang Prince was angry, "You may want to think it over. Once you follow this rebel thief, you can't be my daughter anymore."

Zhao Min felt as if her intestines were tied in hundreds knots. She did not want to part with her father and her big brother, remembering that they loved her dearly and had always pampered her. She felt as if her heart was sliced by a

knife; but she knew that if she hesitated even so slightly, Zhang Wuji's life will be gone immediately. Right now, the most important thing was saving her lover's life; she would seek her father and her brother's forgiveness later.

"Father, Gege," she said, "All this is Minmin's fault. You ... please forgive me."

Seeing he would not be able to change her daughter's mind, the Ruyang Prince regretted that he had spoiled her too much. He let her roam the Jianghu unrestrained to such an extent as to cause this kind of trouble. He knew she was strong-willed ever since her childhood, if he forced her, she would certainly commit suicide by stabbing herself. All he could do was heave a long sigh, with tears pouring down from his eyes. "Minmin," his voice was hoarse, "Take a good care of yourself. Father is leaving ... you ... you have to be careful in everything."

Zhao Min only nodded, she did not dare to look at her father anymore. The Ruyang Prince turned around and slowly walked down the mountain. His personal attendant followed him behind, leading his horse, but he seemed oblivious; he did not even remember to mount the horse.

After walking for a dozen of 'zhang's, he suddenly turned his head around and said, "Minmin, is your injury all right? Do you have enough money?"

Swallowing her tears, Zhao Min nodded.

To his personal attendant the Ruyang Prince said, "Give my two horses to Junzhu." The personal attendant warrior complied and led the horses to Zhao Min, and then he followed the Ruyang Prince and walked down the mountain.

The six foreign monks were still lying on the ground; they were incapable of standing up. The rest of the foreign monks, with two monks helping one, carried them follow behind. A short while later everybody had left, leaving only Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min two people.

End of Chapter 34.

Chapter 35 - Casualties of the Lion-slaying Assembly

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The fat Taoist slashed his sword toward Zhang Wuji's throat. His move was very swift and fierce. "Ah!" Zhang Wuji cried out in fear, and jumped out of bed, as if he was delivering his neck toward the blade of the sword.

Lu Zhangke's sneak attack came when Zhang Wuji was resisting the combined power of eighteen foreign monks. The internal energy protecting his body, which formed a barrier on his back, was removed. As a result, the Xuanming cold poison entered his body without resistance and hence his injury was really heavy. He sat cross-legged and circulated the Jiu Yang energy three times around his system. After vomiting two mouthfuls of blood, he felt the constriction in the pit of his stomach loosened somewhat. As he opened his eyes, he saw Zhao Min was looking at him with anxious expression on her face.

"Miss Zhao," Zhang Wuji said in tender voice, "You are suffering greatly."

"Are you still calling me 'Miss Zhao' after all this?" Zhao Min asked, "I am no longer a royalty, I am not a 'Junzhu' anymore. You ... are you still regarding me as a little witch in your heart?"

Zhang Wuji slowly stood up. "Let me ask you one question, please answer me truthfully" he said, "Did you or did you not cut the sword wounds on my cousin Yin Li's face?"

"I did not!" Zhao Min answered.

"Then whose malicious hand did it?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"I cannot tell you," Zhao Min said, "If you can find Xie Daxia, he can tell you all the details."

"My Yifu knows all the details?" Zhang Wuji wondered.

"Your internal injury has not been healed yet, asking too much question is harmful to your peace of mind," Zhao Min said, "Let me tell you one thing: if after your careful

investigation you can prove that it was I who harmed Miss Yin, you don't need to make any move. I will kill myself in your presence to make amends."

Listening to her speaking with confidence, Zhang Wuji had no choice but to believe her. He was silent for half a day before saying, "Looks like there was a martial art master hiding in the Persian Ming Cult ship. Using some kind of demonic method, he sneaked out in the middle of the night and drugged us all, harmed my cousin, and stole the Yitian Sword and the Tulong Saber. After rescuing Yifu, we need to go to Persia and inquire with Xiao Zhao."

Zhao Min pursed her lips and laughed. "You just want to see Xiao Zhao," she said, "Hence you fabricate some story to give you the reason to do so. Listen to me: don't indulge in fantasy, the sooner your injury is healed, the sooner we can go to the Shaolin Temple to pay them a visit."

"Shaolin Temple?" Zhang Wuji was surprised, "What do we do there?"

"Saving Xie Daxia, of course," Zhao Min replied.

"Is my Yifu in the Shaolin Temple?" Zhang Wuji was even more surprised, "How can he be in Shaolin Temple?"

"It's a complicated story, and I don't claim to know all the details," Zhao Min said, "But I am quite certain Xie Daxia is in the Shaolin Temple. Did I tell you one of my warriors became a monk in the Shaolin Temple? He sacrificed his life to bring me news."

"Why did he sacrifice his life?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhao Min said, "In order to bring me proof, my informant

tried to cut a bunch of Xie Daxia's yellow hair. But the Shaolin Temple guarded Xie Daxia very strictly. After cutting Xie Daxia's hair, my informant went out the temple, but in the end he was spotted and had to receive two palm strikes. He struggled to deliver the hair into my hand, and died not too long afterwards."

"Hey! How fierce!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed. It was not clear however, whether his 'how fierce' exclamation was praising Zhao Min's operation, or was referring to the danger of the situation.

Because his mind was upset, his internal condition was affected that he vomited another mouthful of blood. Zhao Min anxiously said, "If I knew the severity of your injury, I would have not continually vexed you like this. I am not going to talk to you anymore."

Zhang Wuji sat down with his back on a large mountain rock. He tried hard to focus his attention and calm his mind, but there was simply too much in his mind that he was unable to do so. "Shaolin Shen Seng [divine monk] Kong Jian was killed by my Yifu's 'qi shang quan' [seven-injury fist]," he said, "The Shaolin monks and disciples, from top to bottom, have been waiting for more than twenty years to seek vengeance. Furthermore, that Cheng Kun has become a monk in the Shaolin Temple. Since my Yifu has fallen into their hands, how can he keep his life?"

"Don't worry," Zhao Min said, "There is something that will keep Xie Daxia alive."

"What thing?" Zhang Wuji hastily asked.

"The precious Tulong saber," Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji's mind was stirred, and he understood. The Tulong Saber was known as the 'most revered in the Wulin world'. The Shaolin Pai had been leading the martial art world for the last several hundred years, of course they would want to get their hands on this valuable saber. For the sake of this saber, they would not easily harm Xie Xun's life, but disgrace and humiliation would be difficult to avoid.

Zhao Min continued, "I am thinking that the matter of rescuing Xie Daxia should be handled quietly by just the two of us. The Ming Cult is full of heroes, but if we carried out a large scale attack against Shaolin, the damage to both sides will be heavy. Supposing the Shaolin Pai is not able to defend against the Ming Cult's attack, they might not want to keep Xie Daxia, maybe they would resort to deceit and begin to harm him."

Listening to her thorough consideration, Zhang Wuji was very appreciative. "Min Mei [younger sister], you are right."

It was the first time Zhang Wuji had ever called her 'Min Mei'. Zhao Min felt unspeakable sweetness in her heart; but immediately her parents' kindness and her brother's love came into her mind, which, from this time on, were no longer hers. She could not stop the sweetness turn to bitter.

Zhang Wuji understood her feelings, but he felt inadequate to offer any consolation. He merely mused, "She had entrusted herself fully to me, how can I ever repay her affectionate kindness? Zhiruo is engaged to me, how can I let her down? Ay! Right now, the most important thing is trying to save Yifu; this kind of man-woman love relationship has to be set aside." He exerted his strength to stand up. "Let us go!" he said.

Zhao Min saw that his complexion was ash-grey, she knew

his injury was really not light. Slightly knitting her beautiful brows, she thought aloud, "My Father loves me very much; he won't give us any trouble. I am only afraid Gege will not let us go. As soon as he can have an excuse to leave Father, he would definitely send people to take us back within these next four hours [orig, two 'shichen's - 1 'shichen' is 2 hours]."

Zhang Wuji nodded. He had noticed how firm Wang Baobao handled his affairs; he was truly not an easy person to deal with, he certainly would not give up easily. Presently, both he and Zhao Min were injured; it looked like their journey west to Shaolin would be very slow and full of obstacles. Other than that, they did not have any plan.

"We must leave this dangerous place immediately," Zhao Min said, "We can stop again when we get to the foot of the mountain."

Zhang Wuji nodded and he walked toward the horses with faltering steps. But when he was going to mount the horse, he felt a severe pain in the pit of his stomach, and did not have enough strength to climb up. Zhao Min bit her lips and exerted her strength on her right arm to give him a boost. But as she was doing that, the knife stab wound on her abdomen opened up and quite a lot blood seeped out. She also struggled to climb up the horse and sat behind Zhang Wuji. At first it was Zhang Wuji who supported her, now she had to wrap up her arms around his to support him up. Both of them had to stop for half a day to catch their breaths before they finally let the horse went forward. The other horse followed behind them.

Two people sharing a ride went down the mountain. They traveled along the main road, turning slightly to the east to avoid meeting Wang Baobao. After walking for a while, they

turned toward a small pathway. They were feeling slightly relieved, since they thought that even if Wang Baobao dispatched some people to pursue, they would not easily find this small and remote pathway. They will have more chance of escaping when the sky turned dark and they entered deeper into the mountain.

While riding leisurely, suddenly they heard hoof beats from behind; a pair of riders galloped near. Zhao Min's countenance sank; she tightened her hold on Zhang Wuji's waist while saying, "My Gege comes very quick. It's just our cruel fate, in the end we can't escape from his cruel hands. Wuji Gege, let me go home with him. I am going to ask Father earnestly that we will see each other again later. As eternal and unchanging as the universe, let us not fail each other."

With a bitter smile Zhang Wuji said, "Your honorable brother might not necessarily be willing to let me go."

Just as he was saying that, the riders had come within several dozens 'zhang's behind them. Zhao Min held the rein to let the riders pass. She pulled her dagger out, thinking that if they had a chance, they would escape, but if her brother had made up his mind to kill Zhang Wuji, then the two of them would die together. However, when the two riders came near, they did not even slow down. They were wearing Mongolian soldiers' uniform. They galloped passed them, giving them only a quick glance, and continued forward.

Zhao Min had just mused, "Thank Heaven and thank the Earth. Turned out they are only two low-ranking soldiers, not our pursuers." When she saw those two Yuan soldiers held their reins to slow down their horses, talked to each other, and suddenly turned their horses around and returned

toward the two of them.

One of them, a full-bearded Yuan soldier, shouted, "Audacious barbarians! Where did you steal these two good horses from?"

As she heard the tone of his voice, Zhao Min understood that they coveted the pair of steeds given by her father. The horses of the Ruyang Prince were naturally divine steeds, with golden stirrups and silver reins, extraordinarily magnificent and expensive ornaments. The Mongolians loved horses like they loved life itself, so when they saw a pair of excellent horses, how could their hearts be not moved?

Zhao Min thought, "Although these two horses were given by Father, but if these two wicked thieves want to seize them by force, we'd better let them go." She spoke in Mongolian, "Which General's subordinates are you? Why do you dare to be so impolite to me?"

That Mongolian soldier was startled. "Who are you, Miss?" he asked. He saw that these two were wearing expensive looking clothes, the horses they were riding were no small matters either; and now she was speaking fluent Mongolian. He did not dare to be careless.

"I am General Waerl Puche's daughter," Zhao Min said, "This is my brother. We met some robbers along the way and are injured."

The two Mongolian soldiers exchanged a glance, suddenly they laughed loudly. The bearded soldier said in loud voice, "One can't escape, two will not live. We might as well kill these two babies." Unsheathing his saber, he charged forward.

Zhao Min was alarmed. "What are you doing?" she asked, "I'll tell the General and have the two of you pulled by four horses." Execution by pulling by four horses was Mongolian army's capital punishment, in which the lawbreaker's limbs were tied to four horses. As the signal was given, a long whip cracked, the four horses would run to different directions at once, tearing the convict into four parts. It was the cruelest punishment.

The full-bearded Mongolian soldier laughed menacingly. "Waerl Puche was unable to defeat the Ming Cult army," he said, "He randomly executed his subordinates, venting his anger to us, his soldiers. Yesterday the army revolted and chopped your father to be meat sauce. Nothing can be better than to bump into you, two puppies, in here." While saying that, he raised his saber, ready to chop down.

Zhao Min jerked the rein, her horse leaped forward to evade. The soldier pursued to kill. The other Yuan soldier called out, "Don't kill this young girl who is pretty-as-a-flower. We can have fun with her first."

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" the bearded soldier replied.

Zhao Mi had an idea so she jumped down the horse and ran to the side. The two Mongolian soldiers immediately dismounted their horses to chase her.

"Aiyo!" Zhao Min screamed, while falling down to the ground. The bearded soldier pounced on her, reaching out to grab her back. Zhao Min's elbow struck backward and hit the vital acupoint on his chest. The bearded soldier grunted and fell on the spot. The other Yuan soldier did not see clearly what had happened to him, he continued his pounce toward her. Zhao Min repeated her trick earlier and struck

his acupoint too.

Normally, she would be able to do these two strikes effortlessly, but this time she had to exert her entire strength that her head was soaked in cold sweat, and she felt as if all her strength was drained out. Propping herself against the ground, she stood up, and then helped Zhang Wuji dismount the horse. With the dagger in her hand she shouted, "Dog thieves! You have defied your superior. Do you want to live or not?"

Because their acupoints were sealed, the two Yuan soldiers felt their upper bodies were numb; they were unable to move their hands. Their lower parts still had feeling, but they were unbearably sore and ache all over. They expected Zhao Min to kill them, so they were surprised when they heard that she seemingly wanted to give them an opportunity to live. "Miss, have mercy!" they hastily said, "Xiao Ren really were not the ones who harmed General Waerl Puche."

"All right," Zhao Min said, "I will spare your lives as long as you do what I say."

The two Yuan soldiers did not care how difficult the matter she was going to tell them to do, they complied immediately, "We'll do it! We'll do it!"

Zhao Min pointed toward her own horses and said, "You two must ride these two horses quickly to the east. Within a day and a night, you must cover 300 'li's; the faster the better. You must not fail."

The two soldiers looked at each other in confusion. They did not expect her instruction to be this trivial. They thought she must mean the opposite of what she was saying.

“Miss,” the bearded soldier said, “Even if Xiao Ren have enormous courage, we will not dare to ride on Miss’ horses ...”

“This is important,” Zhao Min cut him off, “If anybody asks you along the way, you must say that you bought these pair of steeds at the market. You must never mention us two people’s appearances. Do you understand?”

The two Mongolian soldiers were still half believing and half doubting, but Zhao Min repeatedly urged them. They thought that even if she was playing a trick, going away was certainly better than being killed by her dagger. Therefore, step-by-step they slowly walked away from her, and then turned around and jumped onto the saddles.

The Mongolians grew up on horseback. For them, riding a horse was as easy as walking. Although their limbs were still stiff, they were able to drive the horses forward. They were afraid Zhao Min gave them the order out of temporary confusion and would regret her decision, so after a few dozens of ‘zhang’s, they squeezed the horse with their legs and they sped away as fast as they could.

“This is a very good idea,” Zhang Wuji said, “If your Gege’s men see these horses, they must think that we are going east. Where are we going actually?”

“We are going southwest,” Zhao Min replied.

They took the horses the Mongolian soldiers left behind, and leaving the main road, they walked toward the southwest on the wilderness. It was actually a rugged rocky path, full of brambles, which pricked their horses’ legs so that they were dripping with blood. Stumbling and limping, they only

managed to cover twenty some 'li's within two hours of travel.

The sky turned dark. Suddenly they saw a wisp of smoke coming from a chimney of some building in the valley ahead. Zhang Wuji was delighted. "There are houses ahead, we can lodge in someone's home," he said.

When they got near, under the shadow of a big tree they saw the corner of a yellow wall. Turned out it was a temple. Zhao Min helped Zhang Wuji dismount the horse, and then she turned the horses' heads toward the west. Picking up a thorny branch from the ground, she whipped the horses' buttocks several times. The horses let a long neigh, and leaped away to the west.

By what she did, Zhao Min was trying to create yet another diversion to Wang Baobao's pursuing soldiers. By losing their rides, the journey would be more difficult; but she did not give it too much thought. Right now, she was taking their journey one step at a time.

Two people supporting each other walked toward the front of the temple. They saw the tablet by the door had a four-character inscription, 'zhong yue shen miao' [Mount Song (in Henan, one of Five Sacred Mountains) divine temple].

Zhao Min lifted the ring of the gate and knocked three times. She waited for half a day without anybody answering the door, so she knocked three more times. Suddenly from behind the door came a grim voice, "Is it a man or a ghost? Or is it a living corpse?"

The wooden gate opened with a creaking noise. Behind it they saw a shadow. It was dusk, the dark was deepening. That man's back was against the light, so they could not see

his face clearly. But from his bald head and the monk robe he was wearing, he was obviously a Buddhist monk.

Zhang Wuji said, “We [orig. ‘zai4 xia4’ – ‘under’] brother and sister, were robbed and injured during our journey. We hope we can spend the night in your precious monastery, we are asking Da Shi [‘great master’, reverend] to show mercy.”

“Humph,” the man snorted, and then with a cold voice said, “Those who leave home [meaning, becoming Buddhist monks or nuns] do not usually provide convenience to others. You better go.” Immediately he closed the door.

“Helping others is helping self,” Zhao Min hastily said, “By helping us, you might not necessarily be without any benefit.”

“What benefit?” that man asked.

Zhao Min reached up to her ears to take her pair of pearl earrings out, and handed them over to him. The monk saw that each earring had a bead of pearl as big as the tip of his little finger. He sized the two people up, and then said, “All right, helping others is helping self.” He moved aside to let them in.

Holding up Zhang Wuji, Zhao Min led him entered in. The monk took them pass through the main hall and a courtyard, to a room on the eastern side of the temple. “You can sleep here,” he said.

There was neither light nor fire inside the room, it was as dark as a cave. Zhao Min groped around on the bed. There was nothing else on the bed other than a sheet of straw woven mat. They heard a loud and clear voice calling out from outside, “Hao Si Di [fourth younger brother Hao], whom

did you let in?"

"A couple of guests seeking lodging for the night," the monk replied, while stepping out of the room.

"Reverend," Zhao Min called, "Could you please donate two bowl of rice and some plain vegetable dish?"

"Those who left homes receive alms; we do not give to charity," the monk said in haughty tone while striding away.

"This monk is terrible!" Zhao Min bitterly said, "Wuji Gege, you must be very hungry. We must find something to eat tonight."

Suddenly they heard several footsteps coming from the courtyard, as seven, eight men came in. Flame flickered, the door was pushed open and two monks lifted up candlesticks in their hands to illuminate the faces of Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min. In a glimpse Zhang Wuji saw eight monks, short and tall, one had thick eyebrows and huge bulging eyes, the other had face full of wrinkles; none of them had a friendly face.

The old monk with wrinkles said, "Whatever money and jewelry you have, take them all out."

"What for?" Zhao Min asked.

The old monk laughed and said, "Because of fate two benefactors have come over here, just happened to visit this little temple, which is about to carry out a great undertaking: reconstructing the main gate, and repairing the inlay of the golden idol. The benefactors' money and jewelry must be donated. If not, you are offending the Buddha; and then you will be in great trouble."

Zhao Min was indignant. "Isn't that the misdeed of the robbers?" she asked.

"It's sin! It's sin!" the old monk said, "We, eight brothers, used to kill people and burn their houses; we robbed and did all kinds of shady businesses. But recently we laid down our sabers to follow the teachings of Buddha, and so we became casual Buddhist monks. Benefactors have been brought here by karma; the fat sheep has arrived to our door on its own account. Ay, you have made things difficult for us who have left our homes; we are no longer able to keep our purity."

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min were very shocked; they did not expect these eight monks were former big bandits. This old monk had been speaking quite bluntly. It sounded like he was going to kill them; he did not even try to keep it a secret, neither did he show any intention to let them go.

Another fierce looking monk said with a laugh, "Miss Benefactor need not be afraid; while we eight monks are robbing and plundering, we lack a mistress to take care of the temple. You have such a beautiful face, truly as if the 'Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa' [Guanyin Bodhisattva, the Goddess of Mercy] descends to the earth. Even if Buddha himself saw you, his heart would have been moved. Wonderful! Wonderful!"

From her pocket Zhao Min pulled out some seven, eight golden ingots and a string of pearls, and placed them all on the table. "All I have is here," she said, "We, brother and sister, are also Wulin people. Gentlemen must respect the Jianghu's 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty, code of brotherhood]."

The old monk laughed and said, "So you two are Wulin people, nothing can be better than that. I wonder which

school do you belong to?"

"We are Shaolin disciple," Zhao Min said. Shaolin Pai was the number one major sect in the Wulin world. Zhao Min was hoping that these if eight men were not Shaolin disciples, perhaps one of their friends or relatives were somewhat related to Shaolin.

The old monk was startled, his eyes suddenly shone with murderous look. "Shaolin disciples?" he said, "That's truly unfortunate! You two babies should really blame yourself for belonging to the wrong school."

He reached out to pull Zhao Min's wrist. Zhao Min quickly withdrew her hand so the old monk ended up grabbing empty air. Zhang Wuji realized the critical situation they were in. Both Zhao Min and he were heavily injured; it was extremely difficult to fight the enemy. They had battled countless well-known Wulin characters these past several years; would they lose their lives today in the hands of eight nameless lowly robbers? No matter what, he could not let Zhao Min being disgraced without him doing something. Thereupon he said, "Min Mei, hide behind me. I have a way to deal with these eight lowly thieves."

Zhao Min's brain was usually full of bright ideas and clever tricks, but this moment her hands were bound and she was unable to do anything about it. "What kind of people are you?" she asked.

The old monk replied, "We are renegades that the Shaolin Temple chased away. To come across other Sect's Jianghu people, we can still show mercy and not make our moves; but to come across Shaolin disciples, we cannot do anything but kill you. Little Miss, this brother actually wanted you to be the custodian of the temple, but after finding out that you

are a Shaolin disciple, we have no other choice but to kill you first, so that we will not leave any witness behind.”

With a low and deep throaty voice Zhang Wuji said, “Good, huh! You are Yuan Zhen’s disciples, aren’t you?”

“Ah!” the old monk exclaimed in surprise, “That’s strange! How did you know?”

Zhao Min interrupted, “Actually, we are on our way to Shaolin Temple to see Chen Youliang Dage [big brother], to support Yuan Zhen Da Shi [‘great master’ – reverend] to become the Shaolin Temple Fangzhang [abbot].”

“Shan zai! Shan zai! [exclamatory remark used by Buddhist monks, means ‘good, peace’]” the old monk said, “Our Buddha reaching perfection, restoring all living beings.”

“That’s right,” Zhao Min said, “We must join our hearts and minds, accomplishing virtuous acts together.” As she said that, all eight monks broke out in laughter.

Turned out these eight monks belong to the same party as Yuan Zhen and Chen Youliang; they were inducted by Chen Youliang to be Yuan Zhen’s disciples. For the past few years, Yuan Zhen had coveted the Abbot position and thus recruited capable people from everywhere. However, Shaolin Temple monastic discipline was strict, each time they accepted a disciple, the disciple must undergo a rigorous examination by the monastic authorities, a detailed verification of their family background and origins, so that Yuan Zhen found it difficult to do whatever he pleased. Consequently, he cooked up a plan with Chen Youliang, to recruit the warriors of underworld organizations, pirates and bandits, and gathered them outside the Temple as Yuan Zhen’s disciples, yet they were not Shaolin disciples. They

were waiting for an opportunity then together they would take this great undertaking.

Yuan Zhen's martial art skill was very profound and he was able to defeat the Jianghu warriors into submission as soon as he put his hands into it. These Wulin characters had always been admiring Shaolin's fame as the prestigious upright Sect; they had also seen Yuan Zhen's divine martial art skill, therefore, they willingly submit under his tutelage. There were a small number of disciples who were not willing to betray their own original school. Yuan Zhen immediately removed these people. That was the reason they had not been exposed even though they had been engaged in this deceitful scheme for a long time.

When that old monk said 'Our Buddha reaching perfection, restoring all living beings' he actually was saying their secret code. If the other party replied with 'the blooming flower meets Buddha, the heart draws near to Lingshan [a mountain in Guangxi]'; then they would know that they belonged to the same school.

As Zhao Min heard the undertone of the old monk's words, she knew they were Yuan Zhen's disciples, and she deduced that Yuan Zhen had his eyes on the Abbot position; but how would she know they had agreed on some secret code to communicate to each other?

"Fu Dage [big brother Fu]," a short and stout monk said, "This little girl says something about supporting our master to become Shaolin Temple Fangzhang; where did she learn it from? This is a very important matter, we must inquire clearly." Although these eight people had become monks, they still addressed each other as 'Dage', 'Erge' [second brother], and so on; the habit they acquired when they were still involved in the 'lu lin' world. ['lu lin' means 'green

forest', usually refers to the criminal world]

As soon as Zhang Wuji heard these eight men laugh, he knew something had gone wrong. He regretted that his back was seriously injured so he was unable to concentrate his internal energy [see note below]. He had no choice but to painstakingly focus his attention, trying hard to force the 'chi' to break free. He felt the warm energy gathered in a clump in the east, and formed together in a block on the west, but the 'chi' did not want to flow along in the blood vessels.

[orig, 'zhen qi' - true 'chi'. Translator's note: previously, I translated 'qi' as simply 'energy' or internal energy. When reading some martial art related publication, I realized that 'chi' has become an English word. Here are two examples I found:

Ch'i or qi (pronounced "chee" and henceforth spelled "chi") is the Chinese word used to describe "the natural energy of the Universe." (Skeptic Dictionary)

In Chinese culture, Qi (spelled in Mandarin Pinyin romanization), pronounced IPA: [tchi], also ch'i (in Wade-Giles romanization) or ki (in Japanese romanization) is a kind of "life force" or "spiritual energy" that is part of every living thing. It is frequently translated as "energy flow", or literally as "air", "breath", or "gas". (For example, "ti'enqi", literally "sky breath", is the ordinary Chinese word for "weather"). (Wikipedia)

Hereafter, I will leave the word 'qi' as it is, or translate it as 'internal energy'.]

Zhang Wuji saw the old monk's five fingers striking toward Zhao Min like a bird's claw. Zhao Min was powerless to ward it off; she eluded by withdrawing into the bed. Zhang Wuji's mind was very anxious, but he kept sitting cross-legged,

hoping that he could restore 20, 30% of his strength, which would be enough to drive these eight wicked thieves away.

Seeing that Zhang Wuji was still arrogantly sitting in meditation in a time like this, the short and stout monk angrily roared, "This kid is so arrogant; let the old man [referring to self] send him to the western sky first, so that he won't be in the way here!"

When saying that, he raised his right arm while his bones made cracking noise. With a 'whoosh' he sent a fist toward Zhang Wuji's chest. Seeing this desperate situation, Zhao Min's shrill voice cried out in fear; but she saw that as the stout monk's fist landed on its target, his right arm went limp, his eyes rolled until only the whites were visible, and he stood motionless.

The old monk was shocked; he stretched his hand to pull his comrade's hand. The plump monk's hand did not give any resistance, as he had already died. The rest of the monks were startled and angered. They cried out one after another, "This kid uses witchcraft! He is a sorcerer!"

What happened was: when the plump monk used his entire strength to strike Zhang Wuji's chest, he inadvertently hit the 'shan zhong xue' [lit. sheep odor acupoint]. Zhang Wuji's 'Jiu Yang Shen Gong' was not enough to attack the enemy, but it was more than sufficient to protect his own body. Not only did it rebound the fist strength of the enemy's strike, but also because the incoming strike was powerful, it spurred the Jiu Yang 'zhen qi' [real/true/genuine 'chi' - see above] inside his system, increasing the rebound force, adding strength behind the strength, so that the plump monk was killed instantly.

The old monk thought that Zhang Wuji's pocket must be loaded with poison-tipped arrows or some other venomous

stingers, so that the plump monk died of severe poisoning. Stretching out his palm, he struck Zhang Wuji's right arm, which was exposed outside his sleeve, thinking that he had better break Zhang Wuji's arm first before dealing with him further.

As the powerful palm struck Zhang Wuji's arm, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi inside his body was incited again. The old monk was thrown outside immediately; he flew like an arrow and 'crack!', breaking through the window lattice, he struck the big locust tree in the courtyard, his skull was smashed and his brain burst forth.

The rest of the monks were shouting and screaming. One monk used both of his hands to attack Zhang Wuji's 'tai yang xue' [sun acupoint]. Another monk used the 'shuang long qiang zhu' [a pair of dragons fought over the pearl], stretching out his fingers to dig into Zhang Wuji's eyeballs. Yet another monk flew up and kicked Zhang Wuji's 'dan tian' [pubic area].

Zhang Wuji lowered his head to evade the attack to his eyes, letting the attacker's two fingers to hit his forehead. A series of 'Bang! Bang!', 'Aiyo!', 'Crack! Crack!' was heard; all three monks were shaken to their death one after another. The third monk's flying kick was so powerful that his right leg was broken on the spot. As Zhang Wuji's 'dan tian' received the kick, the 'zhen qi' in his body was aroused; unexpectedly the arteries and veins on the right half of his body were open. He mused, "It's a pity this wicked monk died too early. If he had kicked my dan tian several times, he might have helped me restoring my internal energy sooner. Apparently, although my injury is heavy, the recovery is not as difficult as I thought. I think I will need about ten days to half a month of recuperation to recover 100%."

Out of eight monks, five had died miserably. The remaining three wicked monks were frightened out of their wits; they raced against each other to get out of the room, and went straight out of the temple gate. After they were sure that Zhang Wuji did not run after them, they stopped and discussed among themselves. One monk said, "This kid must have used some witchcraft." The other monk said, "I think it was not witchcraft; this kid's internal energy is very strong, he could rebound the strike to injure the enemy." The third monk said, "That's right. In any case we must avenge our brothers' death."

The three of them talked for half a day. One monk suddenly said, "This kid must be suffering a heavy injury. Otherwise, why didn't he run after us?"

"That's right!" the other monk happily said, "Most likely he can't walk. When our five brothers hit him by fist and kick, he fought them by inciting his internal strength. If we use blades to chop him or pierce him, I don't think he has copper muscles or iron bones to resist us."

As the three monks made a decision, one of them got a lance, the other unsheathed his saber, and the third wielded a sword; together they returned to the courtyard. They noticed that the eastern room was extremely quiet, as if it was unoccupied. They peeked over the broken window lattice, and saw that young man was still sitting cross-legged on the bed; his face looked weary, his body was shaky, as if he would fall down any minute. The young girl was wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. The three monks looked at each other; they did not dare to rush in.

One of the monks called out, "Stinky kid, if you have some skills, get out and fight your master for three hundred stances."

Another monk cursed, "What skill does this kid have? All he has is some witchcraft to harm others. That is such a cheap trick, despicable to the lowest end, totally without any sense of shame."

The three monks saw that Zhang Wuji did not reply and he did not get down from the bed either, so they became bolder and bolder, their cursing and swearing were getting dirtier and dirtier. In term of dirty talk, perhaps among the disciples of Buddhism there was nobody who could surpass these three monks.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min were not angry at all. They were more afraid of these three monks leave and not return, rather than being annoyed by their coming back to seek revenge. That place was not too far from the Shaolin Temple of the Song Shan [Mount Song in Henan]. If those three monks went to inform Cheng Kun, they would face an even graver problem. It would be almost impossible for Zhang Wuji to treat his injury in less than ten days. Within that period, it would not take as much as Cheng Kun to personally come, one or two martial experts of Chen Youliang's caliber would be difficult for him to resist. Thus, Zhang Wuji was secretly delighted to see these three monks return.

After receiving the five monks' attacks, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi inside Zhang Wuji's body had been somewhat more controllable, so although he still could not use it to attack the enemy, his heart was not as frightened as it was before.

Suddenly a loud 'Bang!' was heard as a monk kicked the door open and rushed in. A dark green light flashed by, the red tassel trembled, as the lance in his hand came straight toward Zhang Wuji.

“Aiyo!” Zhao Min cried out. Hastily she handed over the dagger in her hand to Zhang Wuji.

Zhang Wuji shook his head without moving his hand. He groaned inwardly, “I don’t have the least bit of strength on my hand; how would I resist the enemy even though I have a weapon? My flesh and blood won’t withstand the enemy’s weapon.” He had not finished musing when the tip of enemy’s lance formed a circle, with its red tassel blooming like a flower, had already reached in front of Zhang Wuji’s chest.

The lance strike was fast, Zhao Min’s mind worked even faster. She reached into Zhang Wuji’s pocket to take a Sheng Huo Ling tablet out, and placed it on Zhang Wuji’s chest to shield it against the spearhead. ‘Bang!’ the tip of the lance struck the Sheng Huo Ling.

Even an extremely sharp weapon like the Yitian Sword was not able to scratch the Sheng Huo Ling, much less an ordinary spearhead. Again, this strike had aroused the Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside Zhang Wuji’s body, which reacted naturally. “Aahhhhh ...” a long and miserable cry was heard as the lance’s pole penetrated the monk’s chest.

This monk had not fallen down when the second monk’s saber was hacking down on the top of Zhang Wuji’s head. Zhao Min was afraid one Sheng Huo Ling would not suffice to block the saber, so grabbing a Sheng Huo Ling in either hand, she swiftly placed them on Zhang Wuji’s head.

Her action was truly effective. With another ‘bang!’ the saber bounced, its back crashed into that wicked monk’s forehead, smashing his skull; but the tip of Zhao Min’s left little finger was also sliced off. In the excitement of the

moment, she did not feel the pain.

The third monk, wielding a sword in his hand, was just about to enter the door; seeing his two companions meet their cruel fate, he screamed in terror and ran out the door.

“We can’t let him escape!” Zhao Min called out, while throwing one Sheng Huo Ling tablet over the window. Her throw was accurate, but she lacked the strength, so it fell down even before touching that monk’s body.

Zhang Wuji wrapped his arms around her and called out, “Throw again!” He concentrated his internal energy in his chest and transmitted it to Zhao Min’s back. Zhao Min threw the Sheng Huo Ling in her left hand. Two more steps, then that monk would have stepped over behind the wall; but the Sheng Huo Ling was so fast that it struck his back. Immediately blood spurted from his mouth and he died on the spot. As soon as the Sheng Huo Ling left their hands, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min fainted and fell on the bed.

At this moment, there were six dead monks in the room, with two more dead monks in the courtyard, so Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min had fainted in the pool of blood. The temple was so small and it was located on a remote hill. Under the cold moon and cool breeze, there was not a sound to be heard.

After a long while, Zhao Min gained her consciousness first. Still in daze, she reached out to feel Zhang Wuji’s breathing. She felt that the breathing was weak, but it was long and steady. Propping up herself she arose slowly. Because she was too weak to get him out of bed, she had no alternative but pulling him down, and then rested his head on one of the dead monk bodies. Just this little exertion forced her to sit among the dead bodies, gasping for breath.

After half a day, Zhang Wuji opened his eyes. “Min Mei,” he called out, “You ... where are you?”

Zhao Min gave him one of her captivating smiles. The bright and cold moonlight streamed in from the window. They both saw the other’s face was full of blood, so they’ll know their own faces must be frightening. But after going through a life and death situation together, they felt that the other’s face was very handsome and beautiful. Without realizing it, they both reached out and embraced each other tightly.

In this dramatic battle, Zhang Wuji was able to kill the first seven monks without the least bit of strength on his part; he simply borrowed strength to fight strength, and contrary to his expectation, he did not suffer any harm. However, when throwing the Sheng Huo Ling to kill the eighth wicked monk, both Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min had exhausted the remainder of the strength they had after the injury. Right now, the two of them were incapable of moving; all they could do was leaning on dead people’s bodies and quietly wait for their strength to return. Zhao Min wrapped her cut left-hand little finger, and then, still in daze, she went back to sleep.

Around noon the next day, they started to awake. Zhang Wuji sat up and circulated his ‘chi’, trying to harmonize the flow. After meditation for more than an hour, he felt his spirit return. He stood up by pushing himself against the floor, and suddenly heard his tummy was growling. He went to the kitchen by leaning on the wall. He saw a pot of rice, where half of the rice had already turned black, and the other half was also burned that it carried a strong burning smell. He filled a bowl full of burnt rice and returned to their room.

Zhao Min said with a laugh, “You and I are in such a distressed situation today. The Heaven knows, the Earth

knows, you and I know, but nobody else knew about it.”

They both laughed heartily, and then ate the rice with their bare hands. To them, the burnt rice tasted so good that it was better than any exotic delicacies they had ever had.

They had not finished this bowl of rice, when suddenly from the distant came the muffled noise of hooves against mountain rocks. ‘Crash!’ the bowl in their hands crashed down on the tiled floor. Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji looked at each other. Their hearts were beating rapidly. They heard two horses were coming their way, and stopped in the front of the temple’s main gate. They heard the brass ring on the door was knocked four times, and then someone banged the door. The noise stopped for a moment then the knocker banged four more times.

“What should we do?” Zhang Wuji asked in low voice.

They heard someone outside the door calling out, “Shangguan San’ge [third (older) brother Shangguan], it is me, Qin Laowu [old fifth Qin]!”

“They are going to break in,” Zhao Min said, “Let’s pretend we are dead; we’ll act according to the circumstance.” The two of them lied down among the corpses, with their faces on the floor.

They had just lied down when with a loud crash the door was pushed open. From the noise generated by the broken door, it was obvious that the newcomers had quite a bit of strength. Zhao Min had an idea. “Go lie down near the door,” she said, “Don’t let these people escape.”

Zhang Wuji nodded and crawled toward the entrance. Right at that moment, they heard two people cry out in fear,

followed by 'swish, swish!' as the two people who entered the temple were pulling their weapons out. Obviously they had seen the two corpses in the courtyard.

"Careful!" one of them said in low voice, "Watch for the enemy's ambush."

The other man loudly shouted, "Friends, sneaking and hiding in the dark, what kind of heroes are you? Come out and fight Laozi [the Old Man - referring to self] to the death if you have the nerve." This man's voice was strong and heroic, a sign of his abundant internal energy. He must be the one who pushed the gate open.

He shouted several times, but did not hear the least bit of voice answering his call. "The thieves must have left far away," he said.

The other man said in a hoarse voice, "We must look up everywhere, make sure the enemy is not setting up an ambush."

"Shou Laodi [lit. 'old' (younger brother) Shou]," the one who called himself Qin Lauwu said, "You look to the east and I'll search to the west."

Apparently, the one surnamed Shou was a coward; he said, "I am afraid the enemies are numerous. We'd better go together." Qin Laowu did not say anything.

Suddenly the one surnamed Shou exclaimed in terror while pointing his finger toward the room on the east, "There ... there are more dead people inside!"

The two of them went to the door and saw that in that small room there were about seven, eight corpses lying around on

the floor.

Qin Laowu said, “This temple ... this temple’s eight brethren have lost their lives at the same time. I wonder whose treacherous hands have done it!”

“Qin Wuge [fifth (older) brother Qin],” the surnamed Shou said, “We must return to the Temple immediately, to report ... report ... report this to Shifu.”

Qin Laowu hesitantly said, “Shifu has urgently ordered us to deliver these invitations promptly, since the guests are expected by the fifth day of the fifth month [orig. ‘duan1 wu3 jie2’ – Dragon Boat (or Duanwu) Festival day] for the Lion-slaying Heroes’ Assembly [orig, tu2 shi1 ying1 xiong2 hui4]. If we fail, I am afraid we will be punished.”

As he heard the words ‘Lion-slaying Heroes’ Assembly’, Zhang Wuji was slightly taken aback; and then he was shocked, delighted, ashamed and angry, as a hundred feelings filled up his heart. He mused, “His Shifu issued invitations for some ‘Lion-slaying Heroes’ Assembly’, his intention must be to gather the heroes and warriors under the Heaven, and then to kill Yifu publicly. From what he said, it seems like before the Duanwu, Yifu’s life will not be harmed. I cannot protect Yifu completely; I let him down by letting him fall into others’ hands that he has to suffer this disgrace. I am unfilial and unworthy; there is nothing worse than this.”

The more he thought, the angrier he got; he wished he had a weapon in his hand and kill these two villains, but he was afraid they might escape while he was powerless to pursue them. Therefore, all he could do was to wait for these two men to enter the room and then cut their way out. Just like before, he hoped the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in his body would get

rid of these two traitors. Unexpectedly, because these two saw the room was full of dead bodies, they did not dare to enter, but simply stood and talked in the courtyard

“This is most important,” the one surnamed Shou said, “The sooner we report to Shifu the better.”

“Let’s do this then,” Qin Laowu said, “We take our separate ways; I deliver the invitation, you go back to the Temple to report to Shifu.”

The surnamed Shou was afraid he might run into the enemies on the road; thereupon he did not answer immediately. Qin Laowu was angry, “Take your pick, then. Would you rather deliver the invitations? It is up to you.”

The surnamed Shou contemplated the options in his mind. In the end he decided that returning to their mountain was safer; thereupon he said, “I will follow Qin Wuge’s instruction; let me return to the mountain and give report to Shifu.” Straightaway both of them turned around to leave.

Zhao Min moved slightly and groaned lightly twice. Qin and Shou two people were startled. Turning their heads around they saw Zhao Min were moving. This time they looked carefully and saw that she was a woman.

“Who is this woman?” Qin Laowu was surprised. He walked into the room. Although the one surnamed Shou was a coward, seeing that it was a woman, a seriously wounded woman, he gathered up his courage and followed in.

Qin Laowu reached down to pull Zhao Min’s shoulder. Zhang Wuji coughed and sat up. He took a meditation position with his eyes half open. Qin and Shou two people were extremely shocked to see him suddenly sit up, with his face full of

blood and a terrifying appearance.

“Not good!” the surnamed Shou cried out, “It’s a zombie. This corpse ... this corpse is haunted by a ghost. Qin Wuge must ... must be careful.” He hastily jumped on top of the bed.

“Bad zombie!” Qin Laowu called out, “The one surnamed Qin is not afraid of you.” Lifting up his saber, he ferociously hacked it down on the top of Zhang Wuji’s head.

Zhanh Wuji had been ready with two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands. As soon as the saber hacked down, he raised his tablets and placed them on top of his head. ‘Bang!’ the saber hacked the Sheng Huo Ling and immediately bounced back and smashed Qin Laowu’s brain that he died immediately.

The one surnamed Shou was holding a saber in his hand, but he was trembling all over; how could he dare to slash it on Zhang Wuji’s body? Zhang Wuji was waiting for him to attack, so that his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi might strike him dead. Zhao Min saw that the surnamed Shou was not moving for a long time; she was getting anxious, “This coward is scared out of his wits and does not dare to make his move. If he throws his saber away and run out, how can we stop him?” She saw his teeth were chattering, and then ‘clank!’ his saber fell down from his grip.

“Chop me if you dare,” Zhang Wuji said, “Strike me with your fist.”

“Xiao ... Xiao De [little/lowly one] don’t have any guts,” he replied, “Don’t ... don’t dare to fight Laoye [old master].”

“Kick me, then,” Zhang Wuji said.

The man replied, "Xiao De ... Xiao De do not dare even more."

"You are such a useless man [orig. 'nong2 bao1' - wrapping cloth of boiled wound], you'd better be dead," Zhang Wuji indignantly said, "Quickly chop me once or twice. If I see that your strength is not bad, I might spare your life."

"Yes, yes!" the man scrambled to pick up his saber. He took a glance on the wretched condition of the smashed skull of Qin Laowu, and thought that this zombie's magical power was superior, so it would be better for him to ask for mercy. Hence, he knelt down immediately and knocked his head on the floor, "Laoye have mercy! You have died an unjust death. It has nothing to do ... nothing to do with Xiao Ren [little/lowly man]. Please don't ... don't take revenge on Xiao Ren's life."

Listening to him addressing Zhang Wuji as a dead man, Zhao Min was angry. "Humph," she snorted, "I am surprised in the Wulin world there is this kind of peon with no future."

"Yes, yes!" that man said, "Xiao De has no future, no future. I am only a peon, only a peon."

The more he did not dare to act, the more Zhang Wuji was baffled. Suddenly he had an idea. "Come here!" he barked.

"Yes!" that man hastily replied. He crawled several steps forward, still in kneeling position.

Zhang Wuji stretched out his arms and placed his thumbs on that man's eyeballs. "I'll dig out your eyeballs first!" he roared.

In his great shock, without thinking that man raised his hands to ward off Zhang Wuji's arms with all his strength. Zhang Wuji was expecting this push; borrowing this strength, he slid his arms downward and sealed the 'shen feng' [lit. divine seal ('seal' as in official 'seal' on a letter)] and 'bu lang' [lit. walking/pacing porch] acupoints on his chest.

The man's entire body went numb and he slid down to the floor. "Laoye have mercy! Laoye have mercy!" he loudly cried, "Turns out Laoye is not a zombie. That's very good! Then ... then you have even more reasons to spare my life." By now he was prostrating right in front of Zhang Wuji, after looking clearly that the other party was a living person.

Zhao Min realized that Zhang Wuji sealed the acupoints using a borrowed strength, but the sealing force was really too small. He could only immobilize that man's limbs for a short time; that man's strength was not completely gone. In less than an hour, the sealed acupoints would be opened; and then they would be in trouble. She also knew that there were so many questions she would like to ask him, so obviously they could not kill him yet.

"Your fatal acupoints have been sealed by this Master," she said, "When you take a deep breath, you feel a dull pain deep in the side of your left chest, don't you?"

Following her words, he took a deep breath and did feel pain on the muscle and bones of his left chest. Actually, it was the natural reaction when the flow of 'qi' and the blood was stopped momentarily; but that man did not know, so he wailed and cried for mercy even louder.

"Do you want to save your life?" Zhao Min asked, "I must use a golden needle to unseal the fatal acupoints. But it won't

be easy.”

The man kowtowed and said, “Miss, no matter the difficulty, you must save me. Even if Xiao Ren has to become an ox or a horse, I will still implore you.”

Zhao Min smiled sweetly and said, “This is the first time I ever see a Jianghu character like you. All right, go find a brick and come back here.”

“Yes, yes!” that man busily said. Stumbling out to the courtyard, he picked a brick and walked back.

“What do you need the brick for?” Zhang Wuji said in a low voice.

Zhao Min smiled mysteriously, “I have an ingenious idea.”

With a brick in his hand, that man respectfully walked in. Zhao Min pulled a golden hairpin from her hair and placed the hairpin on that man’s ‘que pen xue’ [lit. empty basin acupoint] on his shoulder. She said, “I am going to use this golden needle to unseal the blood vessels on the upper part of your body first, so that the deathly ‘qi’ from the fatal acupoint will not flow into your brain. If that happens, you are beyond help. But I don’t know whether this Master is willing to spare your life or not.”

That man looked at Zhang Wuji with a piteous face. Zhang Wuji nodded. That man jubilantly said, “This Daye [grand master] has agreed. Miss, please start immediately.”

“Hmm, are you afraid of pain?” Zhao Min said.

“Xiao Ren only fears death, I don’t fear pain,” the man replied.

“Very well!” Zhao Min said, “Use the brick to tap this golden needle in.”

That man knew that inserting the golden needle into his shoulder would mean his skin and flesh would be injured. But without wrinkling his brows, he lifted up the brick and struck the tail of the hairpin.

As the brick went down, the golden hairpin pierced the ‘que pen xue’. That man did not feel pain at all, on the contrary, he felt comfortable, so his confidence in Zhao Min grew and he did not stop expressing his thanks to her. Zhao Min told him to draw the pin out, and then pierced his ‘hun men’ [soul gate], ‘po hu’ [spirit entrance], ‘tian zhu’ [pillar of the Heaven], ‘ku fang’ [storage room], and other acupoints, seven or eight in total.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “That’s enough! That’s enough!” He stood up, knowing that with these acupoints pierced, if that man wanted to escape, as soon as he exerted his strength to run, these acupoints would flare-up, and he would meet his doom.

“Go fetch two buckets of water,” Zhao Min told him, “We want to wash our faces. And then you can cook some rice. If you want to die, go ahead and put some poison in the food, and then the three of us will become ghosts together.”

“Xiao De does not dare, Xiao De does not dare,” that man said. And thus Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min had a servant to attend to their needs.

Zhao Min asked his name. Turned out his surname was Shou [long life], given name Nanshan [southern mountain]; he was known in Jianghu as ‘wan shou wu jiang’ [ten thousand

long life without limit]. Actually, his friends were making fun of him since he had always shrunk from battle, so they said that he would have a long life because he would never be killed in a battle.

Although he belonged to the group of 'lu lin' [lit. green forest, outlaws – see similar occurrence above] warriors who joined Yuan Zhen's school, Yuan Zhen regarded his talent as lacking, his intelligence low, so Yuan Zhen only used him to do the leg work but had never imparted any martial art skill to him.

Even after his acupoints were sealed, Shou Nanshan did not lose his physical strength; he carried out Zhao Min's instructions diligently. He was the one who dragged all nine corpses and buried them in the rear yard, and he also fetched water to clean the temple from all the bloodstains. His martial art skill might be mediocre, but his culinary skill could be considered first class. As Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min enjoyed the meat and vegetable dishes he prepared, they heaped him with praises.

After everything was settled, Zhang and Zhao two people began interrogating him about the 'Lion-slaying Heroes' Assembly'. Contrary to their expectation, Shou Nanshan did not even try to conceal anything from them, but too bad his companions did not regard him too highly, so that in many things nobody had ever told him anything. He only knew that the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Reverend Kong Wen, had assigned Yuan Zhen to preside over this assembly. Yuan Zhen, acting on behalf of Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two divine monks, had broadcasted invitations to all heroes and warriors from all schools and sects, clans and societies around the world, to gather at the Shaolin Temple on the Duanwu day, to discuss a very important matter.

Zhang Wuji asked to see the invitation. It was addressed to Fu Chenzi, Gu Songzi, Gui Zangci, and other sword masters of Diancang Pai of Yunnan. The sword masters of Diancang had been famous for quite a while, but they were living way down south in Yunnan, and had never had any contact with the Wulin characters of the Central Plains. This time even Shaolin Pai invited them to come. It was clear that the scale of this assembly was to be magnificent. Shaolin Pai was the Wulin leader. When Kong Wen and Kong Zhi personally issued an invitation, no matter what important matter the addressee was facing, they would lay it aside and come to attend the meeting.

Zhang Wuji noticed that the invitation did not have too many characters on it; it simply said, 'Respectfully inviting (you) on the Duan Yang festival, to get together at Shaolin, to enjoy goblets of wine and be merry with the heroes of the world.' There was no reference on 'lion-slaying' at all.

"Why did that Qin Laowu say this meeting was called 'Lion-slaying Heroes' Assembly'?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Shou Nanshan, with a smug look on his face, said, "Zhangye [Master Zhang] did not know it, but my Shifu has captured a very important character who is called Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun. For this kind of accomplishment, our Shaolin Pai wants to show our face in front of all the world's heroes. We are going to kill this Jin Mao Shi Wang in public, that is why this meeting is called the 'Lion-slaying Heroes' Assembly'."

Suppressing his anger Zhang Wuji asked again, "What kind of character is this Jin Mao Shi Wang? Have you seen him? How did your Shifu capture him? Currently, where is this person being detained at?"

"This fellow Jin Mao Shi Wang," Shou Nanshan said, "Hey,

hey, he is truly magnificent. He is twice as tall as Xiao Ren, his upper arm is thicker than Xiao Ren's thigh. Apart from everything else, whenever he is staring at you with that pair of sparkling bright eyes of his, you would feel that your soul is flying out of your body. Even without fighting, you would kowtow and beg for mercy ..."

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min exchanged a glance, while Shou Nanshan continued, "My Shifu battled him for seven days and seven nights without clear decision of victory and defeat. Later on, my Shifu has gotten angry and launched his earth-shattering 'qin long fu hu gong' [capturing dragon, subduing tiger skill]; finally he was able to defeat him. Right now, this Jin Mao Shi Wang is detained in a large iron cage inside our Temple's Da Xiong Bao Dian [lit. great heroism precious hall]; with seven or eight pure steel chain links bound around his body ..."

The more Zhang Wuji listened, the angrier he got. "I told you to tell me the truth, and not such rubbish!" he roared, "Do you want me to take your life? Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia has lost his vision, how can you say he has a pair of sparkling bright eyes?"

As his lies were exposed on the spot, Shou Nanshan busily said, "Yes! Yes! Xiao Ren must be mistaken."

"Now tell me, have you or have you not seen him [orig. lao3 ren2 jia1 - senior]?" Zhang Wuji asked, "What does Xie Daxia look like? Tell me."

In reality, Shou Nanshan had not seen Xie Xun at all. Knowing that he could no longer lie, he was afraid of his life, so he hastily said, "Xiao Ren does not dare to lie. Actually, I only heard what other brothers have said."

All Zhang Wuji wanted was the exact location of Xie Xun's imprisonment; but after repeated interrogation, Shou Nanshan still was not able to give him any new information. He thought this matter must be of great importance and was held in the strictest confidence, so of course a small peon like Shou Nanshan did not have any access to the information. Therefore, Zhang Wuji had no choice but to let it go. Luckily, the Duanyang festival was still some times away, since it was only the second month, so he still had time to wait until they were fully recovered from their injuries.

The three of them stayed in the Divine Temple of Mount Zhong ['zhong yue shen miao'] for several days. They spent their days in peace and quiet, since Shaolin Temple did not send anybody to establish any contact with the former occupants. Toward the eighth day, Zhao Min's injury had been 70, 80% healed, while Zhang Wuji's internal energy was flowing better progressively. He gradually regained the strength of his four limbs, so now it would not be difficult for them to escape even if the enemies arrived.

Shou Nanshan was waiting on them with all his heart, he did not dare to have the slightest idea of rebelling. Zhao Min said with a laugh, "'Wan Shou Wu Jiang', your mediocre martial art skill is nothing to be talked about, but your talent to be a 'guan jia' [housekeeper/butler] is actually top-notch."

"Well said, Miss," Shou Nanshan answered bitterly.

Everyday Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min enjoyed the delicacies Shou Nanshan meticulously prepared for them, making their stay at the Zhong Yue Shen Miao a comfortable and enjoyable experience.

After about ten more days, the two of them were fully

recovered. Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min began to discuss their plan on rescuing Xie Xun.

“Actually, the best way would be to seal Wan Shou Wu Jiang’s fatal acupoints, and then we can send him to Shaolin Temple as our spy,” Zhao Min said, “But this man is so useless [orig. nong2 bao1], that he would most likely give himself away and spoil the important matters. Let’s do this: right now, let us go to the foot of Shaoshi [the western peak of Mount Song, where Shaolin Temple is located]; we will act as the opportunity arises. Only we must change our appearances first.”

“What should we disguise ourselves into?” Zhang Wuji asked, “Shall we shave our heads clean and become a monk and a nun?”

Zhao Min’s face slightly blushed. “Pei!” she spat, “Only you can think of such thing! A young monk hanging around with a young nun all day; what would people think?”

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, “Well then, let’s become husband and wife, a couple of villagers who go to the foot of Shaoshi Peak to open up rice field and gather firewood.”

“Can’t we be brother and sister?” Zhao Min laughed, “If we become husband and wife, I am afraid if Miss Zhou sees it, I would have five more finger holes on my left shoulder.”

Zhang Wuji also laughed, but he felt uncomfortable in continuing their conversation. After asking about the situation and the layout of the Shaolin Temple in details from Shou Nanshan, he said, “The sealed fatal acupoints in your body have been loosened. You can go.”

“However,” Zhao Min added sternly, “For the rest of your life,

you must live in the southern area. As soon as you see snow and ice, you will lose your life. I suggest you move to the south as soon as possible; you must live in a warm climate; the hotter the better. See to it that you do not subject yourself to cold wind; if you ever catch a cold or cough, your life will be in grave danger.”

Shou Nanshan took her advice seriously; he took his leave from the two people, and left the temple heading south that very same day. He spent the rest of his life on the hilly area of the south, being careful not to catch any cold or cough. He died during the years of Yong Le [the third Ming Emperor, 1403 – 1424], of the Ming Dynasty. Although he did not actually live an unlimited life for ten thousands of years [wan shou wu jiang], he did live a long and enjoyable life.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min waited for him to walk far before they carefully cleared up any evidence of their presence from the temple. They went for more than 20 ‘li’s before stopping by at a farmer house to buy two sets of male and female farmer clothes. They changed their clothes in the wilderness, and buried the clothing they were formerly wearing in the ground, before continuing their journey to the foot of Shaoshi Peak in a leisurely pace.

Before they were within seven, eight ‘li’s of the Shaolin Temple, they had already met monks from the Temple three times. “We cannot get any further,” Zhao Min said.

They saw there was a thatched hut by the mountain path, with a patch of vegetable garden in front of it. An old farmer was busy watering the plants.

“Let’s ask for lodging here,” Zhao Min said.

Zhang Wuji went forward, cupped his fists in respect, and

said, "Excuse me, Uncle. We, brother and sister, are traveling. We are tired and wondering if you could give us a bowl of water to quench our thirst."

It was as if the old farmer did not hear him at all, or he ignored him; he kept scooping manure mixed with water with a ladle and splashed it on the root of his vegetables. Zhang Wuji repeated his words, but the old farmer was still ignoring him. Suddenly the wooden door of the hut opened with a creaking noise, a white-haired granny came out. She laughed and said, "My husband is deaf and mute. What do you [orig. ke4 guan1 - honorable guest] need?"

"My sister is too tired to walk," Zhang Wuji said, "May I ask for a bowl of water for her?"

"Please come in," the old granny said.

They followed her in, and saw that the hut was very clean and tidy. The wooden table and stools were spotless. Although her clothes were made of coarse homespun fabric, they were very clean. Zhao Min was very happy; after drinking a bowl of water, she took out an ingot of silver and said with a smile, "Popo [granny], my Gege is taking me to see our maternal grandmother. My legs gave up along the way. I was wondering if we can spend the night here and continue our journey tomorrow early in the morning."

"I don't have any problem with you staying overnight in here, and I don't need your money," the old granny said, "But we only have one bedroom with a single bed in it. Granted that my husband and I can spend the night outside, but you, brother and sister, cannot possibly sleep in one bed, can you? Hey, hey, little Miss, you'd better tell Popo the truth, didn't you run away from home to be with your beloved Gege here?"

As the secret of her heart was revealed, Zhao Min blushed, thinking that this granny had very keen eyesight. She also thought that she did not speak like an old woman of an ordinary peasant family. Thereupon she took a second look at her and noticed that although her back was hunched, her eyes were mysteriously bright; perhaps she was a martial art expert in hiding. Zhao Min also realized that Zhang Wuji did not look like an ordinary farmer either, while her own appearance and mannerisms were certainly not those of farmer women's.

"Popo," she said quietly, "Since you have already guessed correctly, I can't lie to you. This Zeng Gege [big brother Zeng] is my childhood friend. My Father does not like him because his family is poor; he won't let me marry him. My Mama was aware I would rather die than not to be with him, so she told me to go ... to go with him. Mama said that after two, three years, when we ... we get a baby, we may come home. By that time, Father will have no choice but to let us marry each other."

While she was speaking, her face turned deep red, while she often stole a glance toward Zhang Wuji, with eyes full of love. She continued, "My family is quite respectable [orig. you3 mian4 zi5 - have a face] in Dadu. Father is a government official. If we were ever caught, Father would certainly beat Ah Niu Gege to his death. Popo, I have told you everything, you must not tell anybody."

The granny laughed out loud and said, "When I was young, I also belonged to a respectable family. Don't worry, I will let you, two young married, to use our room. This is a remote place, your family certainly won't look for you this far. Even if there is someone who will give you trouble, Popo will not stand on the side doing nothing."

She saw that Zhao Min was tender and beautiful, and she had entrusted her secret with her; so in her heart she regarded Zhao Min favorably. Thereupon she decided to do her best to help this young couple and to see a successful conclusion to their good deed.

Listening to her last words, Zhao Min was convinced that she was a Wulin character. Only this place was so close to the Shaolin Temple, she wondered whether this granny was related to Cheng Kun or not. She decided they must be very careful and must not reveal the least bit of flaw. Thereupon she gracefully knelt down and bowed while saying, "Popo is willing to take care of us, we are very grateful. Ah Niu Gege, come quickly and say thank you to Popo."

Zhang Wuji came following her instruction; he bowed in respect to express his gratitude. The granny smiled and nodded; immediately she let them use her room, while she built another bed in the main room with a plank, padded with some straw, and spread out a woven straw mat on it.

As they entered the room, in a low voice Zhang Wuji said, "The old farmer watering his garden has an even higher martial art skill, did you see that?"

"Ah, I did not see that," Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji said, "He was carrying buckets of manure mixture using a shoulder pole, and he walked very slowly, but surprisingly the two buckets were very steady. That is a sign of a very high internal energy skill."

"How is he compared with you?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "Let me try it, and we'll see." He lifted her up and carried her on his shoulder just like

someone carries something with a shoulder pole.

“Aiyo!” Zhao Min giggled, “You think I am a bucket of manure mixture?”

From outside the room the granny heard these two people were affectionately laughing and joking; any remnant of suspicions she previously had in her heart immediately vanished.

That evening, the two of them sat for dinner together with the old farmers, husband and wife. To their surprise, they had some chicken and meat dishes. Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min deliberately made a show of pinching each other hands under the table, or bumping each other with their elbows, just like a pair of eloping lovers, or like honey mixed with oil, neither one was willing to part with the other even for a moment. At first they were just acting, but later it became quite natural for them to show affection to each other. The granny saw everything, but she simply smiled. It seemed like the old farmer did not see anything; he just looked down and ate his meal quietly.

After dinner, Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min went into their room and bolted the door. After teasing each other on the dining table, part pretending and part real, they could not help but feel excited.

Zhao Min whispered, her pretty face blushing, “We are only pretending, we are not doing it for real.”

Zhang Wuji embraced her in his bosom, kissed her mouth and replied in low voice, “If we are only pretending, how can we have a baby in two, three years, and return home so that your Father can see the baby?”

“Pei!” Zhao Min bashfully spat, “Turns out you were eavesdropping on the side and heard everything I said.”

Although Zhang Wuji seemed unrestrained in talking and joking with Zhao Min, in his heart he always remembered that he was engaged to be married to Zhou Zhiruo. Although he hoped that he would live a happy life, he also hoped that after his marriage with Zhou Zhiruo he would be able to sort things out with Zhao Min. At this moment, with a warm and tender body in his embrace, he could not help but feel confused. But finally he restrained himself and only kissed her cherry lips and tender cheeks; and then he carried her to the bed, while he lied down on a wooden bench in front of the bed. He finally fell asleep after circulating his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi for twelve rounds along his entire body.

In the meantime, Zhao Min felt her face flush and her heart beat faster; she tossed and turned on the bed until deep into the night, unable to sleep at all. When she finally drifted off to sleep, suddenly, she heard footsteps from a distance. Someone was coming with great speed and had arrived at the door. She reached out to wake Zhang Wuji up. Coincidentally, Zhang Wuji had also heard the noise and was reaching out to wake her up; so two hands touched and they held each other tight.

They heard a clear and bright voice from the outside, “The virtuous husband and wife of the Du family, we meet again. Old friends come to visit in the night, we hope that we are not being rude”

After half a day, the granny replied from inside the hut, “Is it the ‘Qinghai San Jian’ [Qinghai (or Tsinghai – a province in western China) three swords]? From Chuanxi [western Sichuan] we, husband and wife, have exiled ourselves to this place, out of fear of your Yuzhen Guan [genuine jade Taoist

monastery]. Our dispute was over a small misunderstanding, there is no deep animosity or a major offense between us. Why is it that after so many years Yuzhen Guan has not let it go and force us into hardship? As the saying goes, 'killing the man does not necessarily mean to snatch his land.'"

The man outside laughed and said, "If the two of you are really afraid, kowtow to us three times, then Yuzhen Guan will forget the past and forgive your previous offense."

With a creaking noise the wooden door opened. The granny said, "You are able to pursue to this place, your source of information is quick."

The full moon had just risen, its silver light flooding the earth. Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min peeked from a crack on the wooden partition. They saw three Taoist priests wearing yellow crowns stand outside. The one in the middle was short and plump, the tip of his short beard was branched into two points.

"Will the virtuous husband and wife kowtow to apologize, or should we decide life and death with a pair of hooks and a spear?" the short Taoist priest asked.

The granny had not answered him yet when the deaf old man came out in big strides and stood in front of the door. With hands on his waist, he gave the three Taoist priests a cold look. The granny followed him out and stood by her husband's side.

The short-bearded priest said, "Why hasn't the Venerable Du uttered a single word? Do you think it's beneath your dignity to talk to the Qinghai Three Swords?"

"My humble husband is deaf," the granny said, "He could

not hear anything you say.”

“Ah,” the short-bearded priest exclaimed, “Venerable Du’s technique in listening to the wind to distinguish the secret projectile was Wulin’s unique skill; how did he become deaf? Pity, it’s a pity.”

The priest next to him was even fatter than him. ‘Swish’ this priest unsheathed his sword and said, “Du Baidang, Yi Sanniang, are you sure you are not going to use any weapon?”

The granny, Yi Sanniang, replied, “Ma Daozhang [Taoist priest Ma], you are still this impatient? Shao Daozhang, we haven’t seen each other for several years, the hair on your heads have turned gray. Hey, hey, you can’t even let go of a small childish matter, why should we bother talking to you?”

Swiftly she raised both her hands. Bright rays of light flickered from her palms, as each palm held three short blades, less than half a foot each; so she had a total of six blades. The old man Du Baidang followed her lead; his palms also hold six short blades. He swiftly switched the blades in his left hand to his right and the ones in his right hand to his left. It was as if his fingers were crossing each other with matchless dexterity.

The three priests were startled. They had never seen this kind of weapon in the Wulin world. It looked like a flying dagger, but there was no such technique among the flying dagger users. Du Baidang’s pair of hooks had shaken the Western Sichuan, while his wife, Yi Sanniang, was very adept at using a spear. But this time both husband and wife had unexpectedly discarded the weapons they had trained for dozens of years; so these twelve short blades must have extremely fierce and strange stances.

The fat priest raised his sword and he recited with deep veneration in his voice, "Three element-sword formation, heaven, earth and mankind [San Cai Jian Zhen Tian Di Ren]."

The short-bearded priest, Shao He, continued, "Lightning rapidly comes out of Yu Zhen, pursuing the star [dian zhu xing chi chu yu zhen - remember that their monastery was called 'Yuzhen Guan']."

The three priests moved around in a circle, always keeping the Du husband and wife in the center.

Zhang Wuji saw that the priests were moving to the left and all of a sudden to the right and vice versa. It looked like a three-element formation, but not quite a three-element formation. Their three swords were weaved into one bright net, but they did not attack the enemy.

After the three priests had moved for seven, eight steps, Zhang Wuji started to understand the principle behind the formation. He mused, "These three priests are very sly; they said it was a three-element sword formation, but it actually has the five-element principle hidden in it. If the enemy believes it was a three-element formation and fights the heaven, the earth and the mankind, three positions, they would be devoured by the five elements. Then it would be difficult for them to escape, and they would be either killed or injured. They are only three people, but launching a five-element formation; each one has to occupy more than one position and overcome their many variations. Their 'qing gong' and their sword techniques must be extraordinary."

The Du couple stood with their backs against each other. Four hands flickered with silver rays, twelve short blades

were constantly exchanged. Not only they switched the blades from their left to right hands and vice versa, but Du Baidang's blades moved to Yi Sanniang's hand, and Yi Sanniang handed over her blades to Du Baidang's hands. All along not a single blade fell down, the short blades exchanged hands smoothly.

Zhao Min was baffled by their movement. "What kind of magic trick they are playing?" she asked in low voice.

Zhang Wuji knitted his brows without answering. He watched intently for a moment and suddenly said, "Ah, I understand. He is afraid of my Yifu's lion's roar."

"What lion's roar?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji kept nodding his head, and suddenly sneered, "Humph, based on their skill, they want to slaughter a lion and subdue a tiger?"

Zhao Min was more confused than ever, "Are you talking in a riddle?" she asked, "Why are you talking to yourself and leave the listener in bewilderment?"

"These five are my Yifu's enemies," Zhang Wuji said in low voice, "That old man is afraid of Yifu's lion's roar, hence he punctured his own ear to deafness ..."

'Dang, dang, dang, dang, dang ...' Suddenly they heard a series of clanging noises close to each other, just like a string of pearls; the five of them had begun fighting. Three Swords of Qinghai sent out five attacks in succession, all of which were parried by the Du couple. The twelve short blades in their hands went back and forth between the two of them. Under the moonlight the blades looked like three rings around the body, their defense was very tight.

The Qinghai Three Swords tried to penetrate their defense for a long time without any outcome and they immediately changed their tactic into defense. Du Baidang took the opportunity to enter their defense line; his short blade attacked the small and thin Taoist priest, Shao Yan's abdomen.

There was a saying within the martial art practitioners, 'an inch longer, an inch stronger; an inch shorter, an inch more dangerous.' The short blades were less than five inches long, so they were extremely dangerous. 'Swish, swish, swish!' Du Baidang launched three blades which all were meant to kill without any regard for his own safety.

Ma Fatong and Shao Yan immediately launched a double attack, which was fended off by Yi Sanniang's blades. Now they know that the blade technique this couple trained was based on close coordination between the two; one attacks the other defends. The one who attacks focused his/her attention only on the attack. Likewise, the one who defends only care about the defense. Neither one needs to divert his/her attention.

As Shao Yan received three successive attacks, he was forced to block frantically, and retreated several steps back. Du Baidang pounced on his chest, all his blades were aimed to Shao Yan's vital points. Shao Yan's condition was getting more and more critical.

Shao He let out a long whistle, and his sword movements changed. Together with Ma Fatong, the two swords formed a sword net between Du Baidang and Shao Yan, keeping Du Baidang three feet away from them. Now three swords joined together in a very tight defense, so tight that even water would not be able to penetrate.

Zhang Wuji let out another cold laugh and whispered in Zhao Min's ear, "Both of the sword and the blade techniques are meant to battle my Yifu. Look at them, they all concentrate on defense and do not attack too often. More defense less offense; we won't find the outcome of the battle even if they fight for another day and night."

Indeed, after several failed offensive attempts, Du Baidang also changed his tactic into defensive. In low voice Zhao Min said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang's martial art skill is outstanding. These five fellows only concentrate on defense, how can they score a victory?"

They saw the five people exchange blade and swords stances, and successively use seven, eight different moves, but victory or defeat was still difficult to be seen.

"Hold it!" Ma Fatong suddenly shouted, while leaping out of the circle.

Du Baidang also withdrew. His silver beard fluttered, showing off his might and power.

Ma Fatong said, "The blade technique virtuous husband and wife employed, was it trained to slay the lion?"

"Ah!" Yi Sanniang exclaimed, "Your vision is very good."

"Virtuous husband and wife's son was killed by Xie Xun, of course this great enmity must be avenged," Ma Fatong said, "Since you have scouted the enemy's whereabouts at the Shaolin Temple, why didn't you make your move at the earliest convenience?"

Yi Sanniang cast him a sidelong glance. "This is our husband and wife's personal affair," she said, "We don't see any need

to trouble Daozhang [respectable term to address a Taoist priest] over it.”

Ma Fatong replied, “Yuzhen Guan and virtuous husband and wife’s dispute, as Yi Sanniang said, was over a small matter. It certainly does not worth fighting with our lives at stake, does it? How about we turn the enemy into friend by working together to find Xie Xun?”

“What kind of enmity does Yuzhen Guan have against Xie Xun?” Yi Sanniang asked.

“There is no enmity, hey hey,” Ma Fatong said.

Yi Sanniang said, “If you don’t have anything against Xie Xun, why would you painstakingly train this set of sword technique? We both train different techniques to achieve the same goal, which is to fight the Seven-Injury Fist.”

“Yi Sanniang’s vision is also very good!” Ma Fatong said, “In front of a sage we do not tell a lie; Yuzhen Guan only wants to borrow the Tulong Saber.”

Yi Sanniang nodded. She rapidly wrote several characters on Du Baidang’s palm. Du Baidang replied by writing several characters on her palm. Both husband and wife communicated using their fingers instead of their tongues. Using such technique, they were having a discussion for a while.

Yi Sanniang said, “We, husband and wife, only want to seek revenge. For that, we are willing to shed our lives. We have no interest in Tulong Saber whatsoever.”

“That’s great!” Ma Fatong happily said, “The five of us work together to break into Shaolin. Virtuous husband and wife

get your revenge, Yuzhen Guan get the precious saber. By combining our minds and strengths, we can accomplish a great merit. Both sides obtain their desire, friendship will not be harmed.”

Five people struck each other's palms to seal their oath straightaway. Then the Du couple invited the three priests to come into their house to have a detailed discussion on their plan to seek revenge and snatch the Saber away.

As the Three Swords of Qinghai were seated, they saw that the wooden door of the bedroom was closed; unavoidably they eyed it suspiciously. Yi Sanniang said with a laugh, “Don't worry, they are a young couple from Dadu, running away from their homes. The girl is as pretty as jade, the boy is an uncouth fellow; both do not know the least bit of martial art.”

“Sanniang please don't blame us,” Ma Fatong said, “It's not that we don't believe virtuous husband and wife's explanation, it's just that what we are about to accomplish is of the greatest importance, involving the life and death of the word's heroes; if our secret is leaked, I am afraid ...”

Yi Sanniang laughed, “We have fought for half a day, yet this young couple is still sleeping like a dead pig. It's very prudent of Ma Daozhang to be cautious. You'd better see it with your own eyes.”

While saying that, she pushed the door, but the door was bolted from the inside. Zhang Wuji thought that it would be better for him to learn whatever information he could get from these five people before trying to find a way to rescue his Yifu, so he did not want to get rid of these people so soon. He immediately carried Zhao Min and put her on the bed. Quickly he removed his shoes and pulled the blanket

over their bodies.

‘Snap!’ the latch broke by Shao He’s internal energy exertion. With a candlestick in her hand, Yi Sanniang walked in, with the Three Swords of Qinghai followed behind her. Seeing the candlelight, Zhang Wuji turned his eyes toward Yi Sanniang with a blank expression on his face. ‘Swish’ Ma Fatong slashed his sword toward his throat. His action was very swift and fierce.

“Ah!” Zhang Wuji cried out in fear, and jumped out of bed, as if he was delivering his neck toward the blade of the sword. Ma Fatong immediately held his sword, thinking that this man truly did not know any martial art, because no matter how brave, a martial art practitioner would not dare not to evade the sword.

Zhao Min mumbled and turned her body around as if she was still deep in slumber. Under the candlelight, her face looked captivatingly beautiful and tender.

“Yi Sanniang was right,” Shao He said, “Let’s get out of here!” The five of them returned to the living room.

Zhang Wuji jumped down the bed and put on his shoes. He heard Ma Fatong say, “Have virtuous husband and wife confirmed that Xie Xun is really at the Shaolin Temple?”

“We are absolutely certain,” Yi Sanniang replied, “Shaolin Temple has already sent out invitations to invite all heroes for a ‘Lion-slaying Assembly’ on the Duan Yang Festival. If they had not captured Xie Xun, they would certainly lose face in front of the world’s heroes. How could they do that?”

“Hmm,” Ma Fatong was silent for a moment before continuing, “Kong Jian Shen Seng [divine monk] of Shaolin

Pai died under Xie Xun's fist; of course Shaolin monks and disciples would want to avenge him. Actually, all virtuous husband and wife need to do is enter the Temple on the Duan Yang Festival, and open your eyes to see your enemy stretch out his neck to die. Without uttering any word or exerting the least bit of strength, your enmity will be avenged. Why did Mr. Du sacrifice his ears and risk the danger of offending the Shaolin Pai?"

With a cold laugh Yi Sanniang said, "My humble husband destroyed his ears five years ago. Besides, without any reason our only beloved son was murdered by that wicked thief Xie Xun. Our hatred toward him is as deep as the ocean. With this kind of enmity, would we leave the revenge in other people's hands? In order to deal with this wicked thief surnamed Xie, our first step was to pierce his pair of ears deaf. We, husband and wife, will strive to die together with him. Hey, hey, ever since our beloved child was killed by him, we don't have anybody to love in this world anymore. We don't care if we offend Shaolin or Wudang, or die under thousand blades and ten thousand cuts."

In the adjacent room, Zhang Wuji could hear a very deep hatred in her voice; he shivered involuntarily while musing, "Because of his suffering under Cheng Kun's hands, Yifu has vented off his anger to many innocent people in the past. This Du couple does not look like bad people, yet because they are heartbroken over their son's tragic death, they endured pain and suffering just to kill my Yifu. This kind of enmity will not be easily resolved. As soon as I rescue Yifu, I will have to take him far away to avoid further shedding of innocent blood."

By this time, Zhang Wuji did not hear the least bit of noise from the five people on the other side of the door. He took a peak from a crack on the wooden partition and saw the Du

couple and Ma Fatong, three people, were dipping their fingers on the teacups and writing on the table. "These five people are truly cautious," he thought, "Although they are convinced that Zhao Min and I are not Jianghu characters, they are still afraid we might leak their plan. Ay, too many families in Jianghu want to seek revenge on Yifu. There are even more people who covet the Tulong Saber. I am afraid there are countless people who want to get their hands on him even before the Duan Yang Festival. These people not only made extraordinary painstaking effort, they are also martial art experts. Yifu would certainly face a catastrophic suffering if Shaolin Temple is somewhat negligent. Looks like the sooner I can save him the better."

As five people continued their silent, secret discussion, Zhang Wuji lied down on the wooden bench and slept. They woke up at dawn the next day, and saw the Three Swords of Qinghai had already left.

"Popo," Zhang Wuji asked Yi Sanniang, "Why did those three Taoist masters come here last night with shining knives in their hands? At first, I thought they came here to capture us that I was scared out of my wits. Only later I found out that it wasn't the case."

Yi Sanniang was secretly amused to hear him calling the sword a 'knife'; but keeping a straight face she said, "They were astray travelers; they left after drinking a bowl of tea. Zeng Xiaoge [young big brother Zeng], after lunch we are going to take three bunches of firewood for sale in the Shaolin Temple. Would you help us carry a bunch? If the monks in the Temple ask, I will say that you are our son. This might inconvenience you a bit, but I just want to avoid making them suspicious. Your wife who is as-pretty-as-a-flower, must not go out to take a walk on her own."

Although she talked as if she was asking Zhang Wuji's opinion, her tone carried an authority, which did not give Zhang Wuji any chance to say otherwise. As soon as Zhang Wuji heard her, he understood her intention. "She thinks I really am a farmer boy," he thought, "And she wants me to accompany her scouting the Temple. Nothing can be better than that!" Therefore, he immediately agreed.

"Whatever Popo said, Xiaozi [little child - referring to self] will obey," he said, "All I ask is that Popo will give the two of us shelter. We have been running to the east and fleeing to the west with fear and trepidation, without a day of peace."

Right after the seventh hour [between 11am - 1pm], Zhang Wuji followed behind the Du couple, each one carried a pile of firewood on their shoulder pole, walking toward the Shaolin Temple. He wore a wide bamboo hat on his head, a short hatchet on his waist, and a pair of straw shoes on his feet. Among the three, he carried the largest bunch of firewood. With a smile on her face, Zhao Min stood by the door, sending him off with her gaze.

The Du couple deliberately walked slow, huffing and puffing along the way, until at last they arrived at a pavilion just outside the Shaolin Temple, where they put down their loads and took a rest. There were two monks chatting idly in the pavilion. They did not think much of seeing these three people.

Yi Sanniang took off her head scarf to wipe her perspiration. She also reached out to wipe the sweats on Zhang Wuji's head while asking, "Child, are you tired?"

At first Zhang Wuji was embarrassed, but then he realized that she said those words with genuine affection; he could not help but look in her eyes. He saw tears were forming on

her eyes, so he knew she must be thinking of the son Xie Xun had killed. He saw she was looking at him with lingering emotion, apparently she was expecting a reply. He was touched, and said, "Ma, I am not tired. You are tired."

When he said, 'Ma,' he was remembering his own mother, hence, his voice was full of emotion too. As Yi Sanniang heard him call her 'Ma,' the dam broke and tears streamed down her cheeks. Instead of wiping the sweat off her head, she used the head scarf to wipe her tears away.

Du Baidang stood up, heaved the firewood and waved his left hand while walking out of the pavilion. Even though he could not hear the two people's conversation, he knew that his wife was overwhelmed with the memory of their perished child. He was afraid she would expose some weakness and the two monks would see through their scheme.

Zhang Wuji went to Yi Sanniang's pile of firewood, took two bunches and added them to his own pile, and said, "Ma, let us go."

Seeing him showing this much consideration, Yi Sanniang thought, "If my child were still alive today, he would be several years older than this young man, and I would have had several grandchildren." For a moment she was only staring blankly and unable to move. Then, seeing Zhang Wuji walking out of the pavilion carrying his load, she stood up to follow. But because she was still excited, she slightly staggered.

Zhang Wuji turned around to help her, thinking, "If my Mama were still in this world, I would hold her like this ..."

One of the monks said, "This young man is actually very filial, which is rare nowadays."

The other monk said, "Popo, are you going to sell this bunch of firewood to the Temple? These past several days Fangzhang [abbot] has issued an order that no outsiders will be allowed to enter the Temple. You'd better come back."

Yi Sanniang was quite disappointed; she thought, "Shaolin Temple has indeed elevated their security, then it won't be easy to go in."

Du Baidang had already proceeded several 'zhang's ahead, but realizing the other two did not follow, he stopped and wait.

The first monk said, "This village family's mother is a loving mother, the son is filial, we must help them. Shidi [younger martial brother], take them through the back door to the kitchen. If anybody asks, just tell them they are the villagers who used to sell firewood. I don't think there will be any problem."

"Yes," the second monk said, "The Supervisor forbid the outsiders to enter the Temple to avoid casual onlookers. These people are honest and upright villagers, why would we hurt their livelihood?" Thereupon he led the Du couple and Zhang Wuji to enter the Temple through the back door. They dropped the firewood in the kitchen and the monk in charge of the kitchen counted some coins to pay them.

Yi Sanniang said, "We have some nice 'da bai cai' [bokchoy, Chinese cabbage], I will send Ah Niu to deliver several catties tomorrow. You don't have to pay, just consider it our gift to all the Shifus to taste something new."

The monk who took her there laughed and said, "Starting tomorrow, you can't come in anymore. If the Supervisor finds out, the blame we have to endure will not end for a lifetime."

The kitchen manager looked at Zhang Wuji, sizing him up, and then suddenly said, "Around the Duan Yang Festival, we are going to have more than a thousand guests in the Temple. We are going to be too busy to fetch water and chop the firewood. This Xiongdi [brother (general term)] looks healthy and strong. How about you come and help us for a couple of months, and I'll give you five silver coins per month for your wages?"

Yi Sanniang was delighted. "That's great," she hastily said, "Ah Niu does not have anything important at home to do. It will be better for him to stay and do errands for all Shifus, while earning one or two coins of silver to help the family out financially."

Zhang Wuji hesitated, he thought, "Many people in the Shaolin Temple know me. Once in a while they are bound to wander into the kitchen then I would be in trouble. If I have to live in the Temple for two months, I must avoid going out to prevent being recognized." Thereupon he said, "Ma, my wife ..."

Yi Sanniang thought it was a heaven-sent opportunity, which could never be expected but could only be accepted. "Your wife is fine at home," she hastily said, "Are you afraid your Mama will mistreat her? You just stay here and listen to the Shifu's words, don't be lazy. After several days, Mama and your wife will come to visit you here. You are a big boy now; can't you get away from Mama for even a day? Do you still want Mama to nurse you and help you urinate?" As she said that, she tussle his hair, with eyes brimming with love.

Actually, the monk in charge of the kitchen had been upset for many days. Around the Duan Yang Great Assembly, heroes from all over the world would gather there; providing

rice and vegetable dishes, and preparing tea were the most difficult parts to be dealt with. Although the Temple Supervisor had allocated more manpower to help in the kitchen, these monks were not in the habit of practicing meditation and Buddhism dharma; they were more interested in training martial arts. Therefore, they were not willing to do menial kitchen works. They went to the kitchen just because the Temple Supervisor told them to; but they carried their haughty attitude in the kitchen, staring a lot at the other kitchen workers, but did not do too much work. By this time, it was still all right, but as soon as they guests arrived, they would be in big trouble. He saw Zhang Wuji was an honest, simple, hardworking villager, so he was determined to retain his service; thereupon he constantly persuaded Zhang Wuji to stay.

Zhang Wuji considered, "I can stay in the kitchen during the day to avoid seeing the Temple masters, while leisurely looking for Yifu's whereabouts in the evening." But he was still pretending to drag his feet, until the monk who took him inside also persuaded him, then he reluctantly complied by saying, "Shifu, I want to get six coins of silver per month from you; five silver coins for my Ma, and one silver coin for my wife to buy some clothes ..."

The monk in charge of the kitchen laughed and said, "It's a deal! Six silver coins a month it is."

After repeatedly exhorting Zhang Wuji to work diligently, Yi Sanniang slowly went down the mountain with Du Baidang. Zhang Wuji ran after them and said, "Ma, please take a good care of my wife."

"I know," Yi Sanniang replied, "Don't you worry."

In the kitchen, Zhang Wuji was extremely busy with

chopping firewood and removing the ashes, lighting fire and fetching water. He deliberately let the ashes smeared onto his face, and let the ashes fell on his hair, so that when he looked at his own reflection in the water jar, he could not recognize his own face. That night he slept with numerous kitchen helpers in a little cabin next to the kitchen. He knew the Shaolin Temple was full of crouching tigers and hidden dragons. Oftentimes there were martial art masters hidden among the kitchen helpers. Thereupon, he was very cautious in all aspects, he did not even dare to speak half a sentence more than necessary.

In this way he passed seven, eight days already, during which time Yi Sanniang took Zhao Min to visit him twice. He worked hard from morning till night, and had never refused any task given to him. The kitchen manager monk was very happy. He also got along well with the other kitchen helpers. He did not dare to ask any question, but he opened his eyes and ears wide, trying to find any clues within the idle talks around him. He expected someone would be sent to deliver food to his Yifu, and then he would follow and try to find where his Yifu was imprisoned. Who would have thought that after waiting patiently for several days, he neither found any clues nor heard any news.

By the evening of the ninth day, he was sleeping on his bed, when suddenly around midnight he heard some faint shouting from about half a 'li' [1 li is approximately 0.5km] away. He arose quietly, and after making sure nobody else was awake, he launched his 'qing gong' towards the direction of the noise.

It seemed like the noise came from the wooded area to the west of the Temple. Leaping up to a big tree, he crouched to look around. After making sure nobody was hiding among the grass around him, he leaped from tree to tree toward the

noise. By this time he started to hear clashing weapons; and then he saw several people who were engaged in a fierce battle.

Hiding behind a tree, he saw flickering light from sabers and swords, as six people, divided into two sides, were fighting each other. The three men wielding swords were none other than the Three Swords of Qinghai, who arranged themselves in the fake 'three-element' formation, which was actually a five-element formation. Their defense was very tight. Their opponents were three monks, each with a saber in his hand, trying hard to penetrate the defense.

After about twenty, thirty stances; 'stab!' one of the Qinghai Three Swords fell by the saber. The fake three-element formation was broken. The other Two Swords of Qinghai were not able to hold much longer. Several stances later, with a miserable 'Ah!' one of them was chopped by the saber. Judging from his voice, it was the short and fat Ma Fatong.

The last man's arm was already injured, but he kept fighting to the death. One of the monks shouted in a low voice, "Hold it!" Three monks with sabers in their hands surrounded him, but did not continue their attacks.

An old-sounding monk said, "Your Yuzhen Guan of Qinghai has never had any enmity or hatred toward our Shaolin Pai; why did you trespass our territory in the middle of the night?"

The last of the Three Swords of Qinghai was Shao He; with grief in his voice he said, "Since the three of us martial brothers have already been defeated, we can only blame our own inadequacy; why do you ask any questions?"

The old-sounding monk said with a cold laugh, "You came for

Xie Xun, and wanted to get the Tulong Saber, didn't you? Hey hey, I have never heard Xie Xun killed anybody from the Yuzhen Guan; so you must be after the Tulong Saber. Based on your child's play skill, do you think you can wander around the Shaolin Temple? The Shaolin Temple has been the leader of the Wulin world for more than a thousand years; it never occurred to me that some people actually look down on us like this."

'Swish!' Shao He took advantage while the monk was talking happily to thrust his sword straight forward. The monk hastily evaded, but he was one step too slow and the sword pierced his left shoulder. The other two monks from either side of him slashed together with their sabers, Shao He's head was immediately separated from his body.

Without saying anything, the three monks picked up the bodies of the Three Swords of Qinghai and walked toward the Temple. Zhang Wuji was just thinking of following them to know the outcome of this affair, when suddenly he heard faint breathing from among the tall grass ahead of him and slightly to the right.

"What a close call!" he silently sighed, "Turns out they set up an ambush here." Immediately he crouched back and remained motionless.

About almost an hour later, he heard from among the grass someone softly clap twice. And then from some distant away someone else also clapped in response. Zhang Wuji saw six monks arose from all around him, each with a weapon in his hand, either a monk's staff, a saber, or a sword. They walked in a fan-shaped formation toward the temple.

Zhang Wuji waited until those six monks were far away before he returned to the cabin. The rest of the kitchen helpers were still sleeping soundly; nobody knew he was

away. He sighed inwardly. "If I did not see it with my own eyes, I would not believe three warriors have just lost their lives in a very short moment." From what he had just experienced, he knew that the Shaolin Temple has set up a thorough security system, far tighter than usual, so he had to be even more careful.

A few more days passed; it was the middle of the fourth month already. The weather gradually turned warm. They were a day closer to the Duanyang Festival with each passing day. Zhang Wuji mused, "If I keep doing this heavy manual labor in the kitchen, in the end it would be difficult for me to find out Yifu's whereabouts. Tonight I must take a risk by going everywhere to investigate."

That night he slept until the third hour [between 3 – 5 am]. He quietly got up and jumped to the roof, crouching behind the stony roof ridge. He had just settled down into position when he saw two shadows from the south, light as a feather, swept passing to the north; their monks' robes floating in the air, the sabers in their hands flicker under the moonlight. They were patrolling monks of the Temple.

After these two monks passed, Zhang Wuji quickly moved several 'zhang's forward. He heard footsteps on the tile floor ahead, as two more monks leaped up. He saw shadows of monks going back and forth everywhere. The security was very tight; he thought that even the security inside the imperial palace was not this strict. Seeing this kind of situation, he knew that if he proceeds, he would be unavoidably detected. Therefore, he decided to return in disappointment.

Toward the third evening, a storm was brewing; thunderclaps boomed and heavy rain poured down from the sky. Zhang Wuji was delighted. "Heaven helps me!" he thought. He saw

the rain was getting heavier, everywhere he looked all he saw was total darkness.

Quick as a lightning, he moved toward the main hall, thinking, “The Luohan Hall, the Damo Hall, the Banruo [lit. great wisdom] Court, the Abbot’s lecture hall, are all Shaolin Temple’s most strategic places. I will explore them all one by one.” However, there were so many buildings and rooms in the Shaolin Temple; in reality, he did not know which way was the Luohan Hall, which way was the Banrou Court.

Trying to hide from the flashes of lightning, he wandered aimlessly until he arrived at a small bamboo grove. He saw ahead of him was a small cottage, and a flicker of light coming through the window. By this time his body was totally soaked; raindrops as big as soybeans hit his hands and face, and bounced back from his skin. Stealthily he crept toward the window, and he heard someone speaking inside; the voice belonged to Reverend Kong Wen, the Abbot of the Shaolin Temple.

Zhang Wuji heard him say, “Because of this Jin Mao Shi Wang, the Shaolin Temple has killed twenty-three people in one month. We are heaping sins on ourselves, contrary to the teaching of Buddha about showing mercy. The Ming Cult’s Guangming Zuo Shi [left emissary of the brightness] Yang Xiao, You Shi [right emissary] Fan Yao, Bai Mei Mo Wang [white-browed devil king] Yin Tianzheng, Qing Yi Fu Wang [green-winged bat king] Wei Yixiao, one after another sent their envoys to the Temple, asking me to release Xie Xun ...”

Hearing this, Zhang Wuji’s heart was reassured, thinking, “Turns out my grandfather [orig. wai4 gong1 – maternal grandfather], Yang Zuoshi, and the others have learned this information and have already sent people to come over here.”

He heard Kong Wen continue, "Of course our Temple refused, but how can the Ming Cult let the matter drop? That Zhang Jiaozhu has reached the pinnacle of the martial art mastery, until now he has not appeared. I am afraid he is operating surreptitiously. Kong Zhi Shidi [younger martial brother] and I owe him for saving our lives. If he personally came and asked for favor, how can we answer him? This is a serious problem. Shidi, Shizhi [martial nephew], do you have any honorable idea?"

An old and deep voice coughed lightly. As Zhang Wuji heard this cough, his heart was shaken, for he recognized this person as Cheng Kun, who changed his name to Yuan Zhen. Zhang Wuji had never spoken with him face to face, but at the Brightness Peak, when Zhang Wuji was inside the cloth-sack, he heard him recounting the past events, and then from behind the rock, he heard him shouting; he was very familiar with Cheng Kun's voice. In a flash, suddenly Xiao Zhao came into his mind. One part of his heart was sweet, the other part was bitter.

He heard Yuan Zhen say, "Xie Xun is being guarded by three Tai Shishu [martial granduncle], so nothing will happen to him. The heroes' assembly this time concerns our Shaolin Pai's thousands of years' prosperity and decline, our glory or disgrace. Some small kindness or resentment from the Ming Cult should not worry Fangzhang Shishu [abbot martial uncle] too much. Besides, the Wan An Temple affair was a collusion between the Ming Cult and the imperial government to make things difficult for the Six Major Sects, doesn't Fangzhang Shishu know it?"

"How can the Ming Cult collude with the imperial government?" Kong Wen was surprised.

Yuan Zhen said, "The Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu was engaged to the Emei Pai Zhangmen [sect leader], Miss Zhou. On their wedding day, the Ruyang Prince's Junzhu Niangniang [princess] suddenly took that fellow surnamed Zhang away. This matter has shaken the Jianghu; Fangzhang Shishu must have heard about it."

"That's right," Kong Wen said, "I heard it was so."

"One of that Junzhu Niangniang's subordinate is a very capable warrior, called Ku Toutuo," Yuan Zhen continued, "Both Shishu must have seen him at the Wan An Temple."

At the Wan An Temple, Kong Zhi was forced by Zhao Min to demonstrate his martial art. Once he was humiliated by Ku Toutuo, because at that time his internal strength was gone, and thus he was not able to resist. He still bore some resentment until this moment. "Humph," he said, "Once this important business is finished, I am going to Dadu to find Ku Toutuo and challenge him."

"Shishu [plural], do you know who this Toutuo really is?" Yuan Zhen asked.

"This Ku Toutuo's knowledge is very vast," Kong Zhi replied, "He seems to know the martial art skill of every school and every sect. In all honesty, I can't pinpoint his school origin."

"Ku Toutuo is actually the Ming Cult's Guangming You Shi Fan Yao," Yuan Zhen said.

"Is that so?" Kong Wen and Kong Zhi exclaimed together. They sounded very surprised.

"How can Yuan Zhen dare to deceive Shishu?" Yuan Zhen said, "If he has the guts to appear on the Duan Yang Festival, once Shishu sees it, you will know."

Kong Wen was deep in thought. "If that's the case, then Zhang Wuji definitely collaborates secretly with that Junzhu. As the Junzhu captured the leaders of the Six Major Sects, Zhang Wuji sold his kindness by rescuing us."

"I am 80, 90% sure that was what really happened," Yuan Zhen said.

"But I still think that Zhang Jiaozhu looks honest, considerate and upright," Kong Wen said, "It's hard to imagine he is that kind of man. We must not wrongly accuse a good person."

Yuan Zhen said, "I am sure Fangzhang Shishu remember the saying, 'knowing a man by his face, not knowing his heart' [zhi1 ren2 zhi1 mian4 bu4 zhi1 xin1]. That Xie Xun is Zhang Wuji's Yifu, he is also one of the four Great Protector Kings [hu jiao fa wang - see my note in Chapter 30] of the Devil Cult. The Devil Cult will disregard everything to save its own people. In the upcoming Lion-slaying Assembly, everything will become apparent."

Thereupon the three of them continued their discussion on how to welcome the guests, and how to stop the enemies who wanted to abduct Xie Xun; they also estimated how many masters from each school and sect would attend the assembly. Yuan Zhen strived to provoke all schools to fight each other. Then, after they had been defeated and suffered some injuries, Shaolin Pai would take advantage by killing the tiger inside the village, subduing all sects, so by right they would obtain the Tulong Saber and kill Xie Xun as a sacrifice for Kong Jian.

Kong Wen strongly emphasized that they should not shed too much blood and offended the Wulin people of the same

principle; also, it seemed like he did not want to insult the Ming Cult.

Kong Zhi, however, wanted to embrace both ideas. He said, "When all is said and done, the most important matter is forcing Xie Xun to reveal the Tulong Saber's whereabouts before the Duan Yang Festival. Otherwise, this 'lion-slaying assembly' will be meaningless and in turn will degrade our Sect's prestige.

"Shidi has stated it well," Kong Wen said, "We must show the Saber without fail at the meeting to set up our prestige. We'll say that this 'most revered in the Wulin world' [wu3 lin2 zhi4 zun1], the precious Tulong Saber has returned under our Sect's control. Then our Sect will rule the world, and nobody would dare to disobey."

"All right," Kong Zhi said, "Let it be so. Yuan Zhen, go and talk with Xie Xun again. Persuade him to hand over the precious Saber and we'll spare his life."

"Yes!" Yuan Zhen replied, "I respectfully follow Shishu's instruction." Footsteps were heard as Yuan Zhen went out the room.

Zhang Wuji was delighted, but he knew that these three Shaolin monks possessed extremely high martial art skill; if he made the slightest noise, he would be immediately detected. If he had to fight the three of them together, he was afraid it would be difficult for him to score a victory. The best he could do would be escape, but then his efforts to save his Yifu would be a thousand times, ten thousand times more difficult. Thereupon he held his breath and stayed perfectly still.

He saw that Yuan Zhen's slim figure was moving to the

north. A loud pitter-patter noise was heard as the heavy rain struck the oilpaper umbrella in his hand. Zhang Wuji waited until he was more than a dozen of 'zhang's away before he lightly slipped out to follow him.

End of Chapter 35.

Chapter 36 - The Three Withered Pine-trees Sprouting Green Leaves

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



As he saw the three black ropes curling toward the upper part of his body, Zhang Wuji pushed to the left and reached to the right. One hand swept, the other tangled as he borrowed these three monks' forces to wind the three black ropes together. Zhang Wuji made several somersaults midair, before his left foot landed on a pine-tree branch, and he steadied his footing.

Under the heavy rain, the patrols on rooftops and everywhere else were considerably slackened off. Zhang Wuji followed close after Yuanzhen by hiding behind the building corners and behind big trees. He saw Yuan Zhen leap over the back wall of the Temple. "Turns out Yifu is imprisoned outside the Temple," he thought, "No wonder I can't find any clues inside the Temple."

He did not dare to jump openly over the wall; creeping along the wall, he climbed up slowly to the top of the wall, and then after the patrolling monks passed by, he jumped down to the ground. In the rain, he saw that the top of Yuan Zhen's umbrella was already more than a hundred 'zhang's to the north of the Temple, and then it turned to the left toward a small hill. Yuan Zhen climbed to the top of the hill with an exceptional speed.

By this time Yuan Zhen was already around seventy years of age, but his agility was still extraordinary; during the ascend to the peak, the umbrella in his hand did not seem to sway at all. His movements were so smooth that it was as if someone was pulling him up with a rope.

Zhang Wuji quickly ran toward the foot of the hill. He was about to climb up when suddenly his eyes caught a glittering light by the mountain path; there was someone with open blade lying in ambush by the roadside, hastily he halted his

step. After waiting for only a short moment, he saw from the cluster of trees four people, three in the front and one in the back, came out and ran toward the peak. From a distant, Zhang Wuji saw there were several pine trees on the peak, but he did not see any buildings. He wondered where Xie Xun could be imprisoned.

After looking around for and not coming across any other people, he followed to the peak. The 'qing gong'skills of the four people ahead of him were excellent. He picked up speed until he was only about twenty 'zhang's behind them. In the darkness he could still see that among the four, one was a woman, the other three were men, all of them wearing regular clothes. He thought, "Most likely these four came to give my Yifu some trouble. I'll let them fight a life and death battle against Yuan Zhen first. There is no hurry for me to interfere."

Arriving at the peak, the four people picked up their speed. Suddenly Zhang Wuji recognized two of them, "Ah, those two are Kunlun Pai's He Taichong and Ban Shuxian, husband and wife."

He heard Yuan Zhen let out a long and fierce cry, turn around abruptly, and dash back down the hill. Immediately Zhang Wuji dove down and hid among the grass by the roadside. He crawled several 'zhang's to the left and heard the ringing noise of clashing weapons, as Yuan Zhen and the newcomers had begun to fight.

From the sound of the clashing weapons, it sounded like only two people were fighting Yuan Zhen. "The other two are not fighting," he mused, "Obviously, they proceed to the peak to find Yifu." Right away he crept faster among the thick patch of grass to the peak of the hill.

As he arrived at the peak, he only saw a bare stretch of flat land; there was no building, only three tall pine trees arranged in triangle, their branches looked like soaring dragon, reaching up to the sky. He felt strange, "Could it be that Yifu is not being held here?" he thought.

He heard some rustling noise coming from the underbrush on his right, as someone was creeping along; followed by Ban Shuxian's voice, "Move quickly, our two Shidi's may not necessarily able to hold that Shaolin monk."

"That's right," He Taichong replied. Two people rose up and charged toward the three pine trees.

Zhang Wuji was afraid Xie Xun was really around here, so he did not dare to act rashly; he crawled forward among the thick grass. Suddenly he heard He Taichong exclaim, 'Hey!', as if he was hurt. Raising his head, he saw that He Taichong was standing among the pine trees, brandishing his sword fiercely like he was fighting with somebody, but actually no one else was visible. He only heard occasional 'bang, bang, bang', as if He Taichong's sword was colliding with some strange weapon. Zhang Wuji was even more perplexed. He crawled several steps forward and focused his eyes to have a closer look; he could not help but gasp in shock.

It turned out that the trunks of the two pine trees diametrically opposite to him were hollow. The cavities' size was just enough to accommodate one person. In each cavity sat an old monk, each monk held a black long rope in his hand, with which they were attacking He Taichong, husband and wife. The third tree was right in front of Zhang Wuji. A black long rope also came out from this tree, so he knew that this tree also had an old monk inside its trunk.

In the dark night, the three black ropes did not reflect any

light, hence, they were almost invisible in their movements. He Taichong, husband and wife, anxiously brandished their swords in tight defense. But because they could not see the direction of the enemies' weapons, they did not have the leeway to launch any counterattack. These three long ropes appeared to move slowly, but in reality they were very fast, yet they did not create any wind at all. Under the heavy rain, in the middle of the night, on a lone hill peak, the three ropes moved like ghosts or as if by magic; it was unspeakably weird.

Mr. and Mrs. He repeatedly shouted their frustrations. They tried to get away from the encirclement of these trees, but each time they charged outward, the ropes would always push them back in. Zhang Wuji was secretly amazed; these ropes moved noiselessly, the people who drove them must have had profound internal energy, clear, pure and without any ruggedness in its utilization, might not be inferior to his own. He was astonished. "Yuan Zhen said that Yifu is being guarded by his three Tai Shishu [grand martial uncles]; obviously, they are these three old monks. Their power is extremely profound!"

"Ah!" suddenly he heard a miserable cry, as He Taichong's back was hit by the rope and was thrown out from the encirclement; his life was gone right away.

Ban Shuxian was shocked and saddened. While she is losing her concentration ever so slightly, the three ropes struck together to burst her skull and break her four limbs, making her lose her human form. One of the black ropes shook and threw Ban Shuxian's corpse out from the encirclement.

Yuan Zhen was fighting and stepping backwards, luring his opponents toward the peak. "Come!" he called out, "You dare to come here, receive your death."

Although his two opponents were Kunlun Pai's masters, with his level of martial art skill, Yuan Zhen would not necessarily lose, but it would be difficult to kill both of them at once. At best he would be able to injure only one of them, and then the other one would unavoidably escape. Therefore, he led them toward the pine trees.

The two of them were still several 'zhang's away from the trees, when suddenly they saw He Taichong's body. They both halted their steps, and in that split second, two long ropes came noiselessly from behind their heads and wound around their waists. The ropes jerked, and two people were thrown down from the peak, which was more than a hundred 'zhang's tall. Needless to say, they died as soon as their bodies struck the foot of the hill, but they cried out wretchedly when they were still midair, and the echo of their cry was still heard even after they were dead.

In a short moment the three old monks had killed four masters of Kunlun Pai. They were able to lift heavy objects as if they were very light, and accomplished the task with ease; the level of their martial art skill was rarely seen. Zhang Wuji believed they were superior to Lu Zhangke and He Biweng, although not as good as Tai Shifu [grand master] Zhang Sanfeng, whose skill was immeasurably deep; but they had definitely reached the boundary of divinity. Shaolin Pai unexpectedly still had this kind of old expert, perhaps even Tai Shifu and Yang Xiao were not aware of it. His heart was beating fast; he crouched down in the thick grass and did not dare to make the slightest movement.

He saw Yuan Zhen kick twice in succession, sending the bodies of He Taichong and Ban Shuxian into the deep valley below. As the corpses fell, it was a moment later that they heard two dull thuds as the bodies crashed into the bottom of

the valley. Zhang Wuji mused, "He Taichong repaid my kindness with evil. Today he came here to harm my Yifu and steal the precious saber away; his conduct was despicable. But he was a martial art master, truly an expert in the martial art study, and a leader of his school. I did not expect for him to end his life this way."

He heard Yuan Zhen respectfully say, "Three Tai Shishu's divine skill is truly matchless; just by raising your hands, you have killed four masters of the Kunlun Pai. Yuan Zhen's respect is endless. Words truly cannot express it."

"Humph," one of the old monks snorted, but did not say anything.

Yuan Zhen continued, "Yuan Zhen received Fangzhang Shishu's [abbot martial uncle] order to come and wish three Tai Shishu well, and also to talk with the prisoner."

One raspy voice said, "Kong Jian Shizhi [martial nephew] was very virtuous and highly skilled. The three of us are very fond of him. We were hoping he would develop Shaolin's martial art study. It was unfortunate that his life was lost in this villain's hands. The three of us have lived in seclusion for decades and for a long time did not encumber ourselves with the mundane affairs of this world; yet because of Kong Jian Shizhi we came to this hill peak. This criminal is worthy of death for his many sins. One chop of the blade will take his life away. Why should you waste your breath and disturb our peaceful meditation?"

Yuan Zhen bowed respectfully and said, "Tai Shishu's instruction is right. However, Fangzhang Shishu also said, my En Shi [benevolent master] was harmed by this villain, but what kind of martial art my En Shi possessed? How could this villain, alone, have the power to injure him? For that reason,

we imprison him here and trouble three Tai Shishu to guard him. First, to lure his comrades to come and save him; we hope to destroy the enemies who help him harm my En Shi one by one. Second, we want him to hand over the precious Tulong Saber, so it won't fall into other sect's hands, and thus usurp our position as the most revered in the Wulin world, which we have held for thousands of years."

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji could not help but gnash his teeth in anger. He mused, "This evil thief Yuan Zhen truly deserves to be cut in pieces for all his crimes. His words are sweet but poisonous. He persuaded these three monks, who have lived in seclusion for decades, to come out, and borrow their hands to slaughter the martial art masters of the Wulin world."

"Hmm," he heard one of the old monk said, "You can speak with him."

By this time, the heavy rain had not stopped, thunders were still rumbling incessantly. Yuan Zhen walked toward the center of the triangle and kneeled on the ground. "Xie Xun," he said toward the ground, "Have you thought about it? You only need to say where you keep the Tulong Saber, I will let you go."

Zhang Wuji felt strange, "Why did he speak to the ground?" he thought, "Could it be there is some kind of dungeon down there, and my Yifu is held captive in it?"

Suddenly, with a loud and clear voice one of the old monks said angrily, "Yuan Zhen, Buddhist monks [orig. chu1 jia1 ren2 - people who leave their homes] do not tell lies. Why do you deceive him? If he did tell you the place where he hid the Saber, would you really let him go?"

“Tai Shishu, please understand,” Yuan Zhen replied, “Disciple thinks that my En Shi’s enmity is deep, yet if we consider it carefully, our Sect’s prestige is more important. If he would tell us the precious Saber’s whereabouts for our Sect to obtain it, then we would let him go. After three years, disciple will find him to avenge my En Shi.”

“So be it,” the old monk said, “In the Wulin world, good faith is of priority. Our words are like arrows. Even toward big criminals or the most evil people, Shaolin disciples should not break our promise.”

“Respectfully received Tai Shishu’s instruction,” Yuan Zhen said.

Zhang Wuji thought, “These three Shaolin monks not only possess outstanding martial art skill, they are also virtuous eminent monks; too bad they unconsciously fell into Yuan Zhen’s sinister plot.”

He heard Yuan Zhen shout to the ground again, “Xie Xun, did you hear my Tai Shishu? Three Seniors have agreed to let you go.”

Suddenly from underground came the reply, “Cheng Kun, do you still have a face to talk to me?”

As Zhang Wuji heard this heroic, but bleak voice, which he recognized as his Yifu’s voice, his heart was shaken. He fought the strong urge to dash forward, kill Cheng Kun and rescue Xie Xun, knowing that as soon as his presence was detected, three Shaolin eminent monks’ black ropes would immediately strike him. Even without Cheng Kun joining the fight, he knew he could not match the collaboration of these three monks. He thought, “I will wait for that evil monk Yuan Zhen to go, then I will step forward to pay my respect to the

three monks. Then I will explain the entire complicated story. They are enlightened Buddhists, they must know how to tell right from wrong.”

“Xie Xun,” he heard Yuan Zhen say with a sigh, “You and I are old, why do you still painfully hang on to those past events? At most in twenty more years, you and I both will return to the yellow earth. I know I have wronged you, but I have also done you some good. Let the matter of the past go.”

As he was rambling on, Xie Xun did not pay him any attention. He simply waited until he was done speaking, then he said, “Cheng Kun, do you still have a face to talk to me?”

Yuan Zhen talked repeatedly for half a day, but the answer was always, “Cheng Kun, do you still have a face to talk to me?”

Yuan Zhen coldly laughed and said, “I give you three days to think it over. After three days, if you still do not want to tell the Tulong Saber’s whereabouts, you know with what method I will deal with you.” As he said that, he stood up, paid his respect to the three monks, and walked down the hill.

Zhang Wuji waited until he walked far. He was about to arise to greet the three monks when suddenly he felt something different on the air around him. This sneak attack did not have the least bit of forewarning. He was shocked and immediately rolled away, while feeling two long objects from above of his face coming horizontally across, perhaps no more than half a foot in front of his face. It was a swift and marvelous attack, but did not carry the least bit of wind. These objects were precisely the long black ropes.

As he rolled a little more than a ‘zhang’ away, another black rope was pointing toward his chest. This black rope was as

straight as a lance or a staff, coming fast to pierce his body. At the same time, the other two ropes wound around from behind him.

Only a moment ago he had seen four masters of Kunlun Pai, in short succession, lost their lives under these three black ropes. So he knew that these strange weapons were very fierce. Feeling the danger he was facing at this precise moment, he was even more shocked.

Flipping his left hand, he caught the black rope piercing his chest, thinking he would fling it to the side. But suddenly the rope shook and a whiff of mountain-moving, ocean-stirring internal energy attacked the pit of his stomach. If this attack hit its target, all his ribs would be broken and his five internal organs would be crushed.

In the time of split seconds, Zhang Wuji moved his right hand to the back, warding off the two black ropes threatening his back, while his left hand launched the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, backed by Jiu Yang Shen Gong. One hand pulled the other pushed and he let his body follow the force. With a 'whiz!' he flew up to the sky.

Right that moment, three, four flashes of lightning lit up the sky. Two of the eminent monks grunted, as if they were amazed at his martial art skill. These lightning illuminated Zhang Wuji. Three eminent monks lifted up their heads, only to see that the martial art master whose skill had reached the pinnacle of perfection was actually a peasant young man with a filthy face. They were even more surprised.

Three black ropes flew up menacingly like three black dragons, aiming Zhang Wuji from three different directions. Taking advantage of the lightning, Zhang Wuji looked down to see clearly the three monks' appearances. The one sitting

on the northeast corner had a black face, as black as the bottom of a wok. The one on the northeast corner had a sickly yellowish face, the same color of a dry wood. The monk sitting on the south had a deathly pale, paper-white face. All three monks had deep cheeks. They were so thin that it looked as if they did not have any flesh on their bodies. The yellow-faced monk only had one eye. The five eyes of the three old monks sparkled under the lightning so that they looked even more mysterious.

As he saw the three black ropes curling toward the upper part of his body, Zhang Wuji pushed to the left and reached to the right. One hand swept, the other tangled as he borrowed these three monks' forces to wind the three black ropes together. This move was based on Wudang Pai's Taiji technique, which he learned from Zhang Sanfeng. The force was like a vortex, the three black ropes were wound into one.

The lightning flashed, the thunder rumbled continuously; the Heaven was showing off its soul-shaking power. Zhang Wuji made several somersaults midair, before his left foot landed on a pine-tree branch. As he steadied his footing, in between the crashing thunder he said in a clear voice, "Junior [orig. *hou4 xue2 wan3 bei4* – younger generation who studied later] Ming Jiao Jiao Zhu [the Ming Cult's Cult Leader] Zhang Wuji, pays his respect to three eminent monks."

His left foot was treading on the tree branch, his right foot high up in the sky, while he bowed in respect. As he bowed down, the pine-tree branch followed his movement, bobbing up and down slightly like a wave. Zhang Wuji stood steadily, his body appeared graceful. Although he was bowing down, he was up on the tree looking down, so he did not degrade his position.

As the three monks felt their ropes were wound up by Zhang

Wuji's internal energy, they shook their hands and the ropes separated. In this short exchange, the three monks had used the three different stances of nine different styles [san1 zhao1 jiu4 shi4]; each style concealed dozens of variations, dozens of killer moves. Who would have thought that each one of these three stances of nine styles was warded off by the opponent? Each style was extremely dangerous. If the opponent missed even a fraction of a hair width, his flesh would be crushed and his bones broken, he would die a violent death. However, Zhang Wuji appeared to stay composed, as if he was crossing a ravine like flat ground. The three eminent monks had never faced this kind of superior opponent. No wonder they were very amazed.

They actually did not know that to neutralize these three stances of nine styles, Zhang Wuji was forced to exhaust his entire strength. So as he was standing on the fluctuating pine-tree branch, he took the opportunity to regulate the troubled internal energy [orig. zhen1 qi4 - genuine breath] in his 'dan tian' [pubic region].

The martial arts Zhang Wuji used just now consisted of Jiu Yang Shen Gong, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, and Taiji Quan, three major divine skills, but for the final somersault in midair, he used the technique he learned from the engraving of the Sheng Huo Ling.

Although the three Shaolin eminent monks possessed unique skill in martial arts, they had been living in seclusion for decades; they did not follow the human affairs. Obviously, they had never seen even one of these four martial arts. They vaguely felt, however, that his internal energy was somewhat similar to Shaolin Jiu Yang energy, yet it also felt far superior to Shaolin's divine energy in a subtle way. As they heard him introducing his own name, who was unexpectedly the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult, the admiration and surprise they felt

earlier immediately turned into rage.

The old monk with deathly-pale face spitefully said, "Lao Na [lit. old cassock - referring to self] was wondering which martial art expert descended down to pay us a visit; turns out it is the big devil head of the Devil Cult. Lao Na, three brothers, have shut ourselves up for dozens of years, ignoring the mundane affairs of this world. Even our own Sect's important business usually eludes our attention. Today by chance we get to meet the Devil Cult's leader; that is truly the good fortune we couldn't even hope for in our lifetimes."

To hear him mentioning the words 'devil head' and 'Devil Cult' left and right, it was obvious to Zhang Wuji that they bore a very deep grievance against his Cult; he could not help hesitate greatly, and was at a loss as how to reply.

He heard the yellow-faced monk with one eye say, "The Jiaozhu of the Devil Cult is Yang Dingtian! How can it be Sire?"

"Yang Jiaozhu has passed away almost thirty years ago," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Ah!" the yellow-faced old monk exclaimed, but did not say anything. He sounded shocked, as if he was utterly crushed and broken-hearted.

Zhang Wuji thought, "He looks exceedingly grieved to hear about Yang Jiaozhu's death. His friendship with Yang Jiaozhu in the past must be very deep. Yifu was Yang Jiaozhu's subordinate. Perhaps I can bring up the old friendship and then tell them how Yuan Zhen bore a deep hatred toward Yang Jiaozhu, and I'll see what happen." Thereupon he said, "Da Shi [reverend - grand master] must have known Yang Jiaozhu then?"

"Of course I do," the yellow-faced old monk replied, "If Lao Na did not know the great hero [the word here is 'da ying xiong'] Yang Dingtian, how could I turn into a one-eyed man? Why would we, three martial brothers, have to sit in suffering for more than thirty years?"

He said those words matter-of-factly, but the extreme pain and deep hatred behind those words were obvious. Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, "Bad! It's bad!" He understood that this old monk's eye went bad under Yang Dingtian's hands, so the three martial brothers lived in seclusion for the last thirty years of their lives, making a painstaking effort, was to avenge this enmity. No wonder they were greatly disappointed to hear the death of their archenemy.

The yellow-faced old monk suddenly let out a clear whistle and said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, Lao Na's Buddhist name is Du E [lit. crossing distress]. This white-faced Shidi [younger martial brother] is Du Jie [lit. crossing calamity]. This black-faced Shidi is Du Nan [lit. crossing difficulty]. Since Yang Dingtian [his given name means 'top of the sky'] has died, our three people's deep hatred and great resentment must fall into the current Jiaozhu. Our martial nephews, Kong Jian and Kong Xing have died under your honorable Cult's hands. Since you dare to come over here, you must be a fearless man. As for the dozens of years gratitude and grudges, let our martial art skills be the judge."

Zhang Wuji said, "Junior [wan3 bei4] does not have any enmity against your precious Sect. I come here to rescue Yifu, Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia. Although Kong Jian Shen Seng [divine monk] accidentally perished under my Yifu's hands, the background story is rather complicated. As for Kong Xing Shen Seng's death, it has nothing to do with my humble Cult. The three of you cannot listen only to one side of the story. You must be able to discern right from wrong."

The white-faced old monk, Du Jie, said, "So according to you, who harmed Kong Xing?"

Zhang Wuji frowned and said, "According to Junior's understanding, Kong Xing Shen Seng died under the imperial family's Ruyang Palace's warrior."

"Who is the leader of the Ruyang Palace's warriors?" Du Jie asked.

"The daughter of the Ruyang Prince," Zhang Wuji replied, "Her Han name is Zhao Min."

"I heard from Yuan Zhen," Du Jie continued, "That this girl has joined hands with your honorable Cult. She has abandoned her royalty, abandoned her father, and defected to the Ming Cult. Is it true?" He was aggressively pressing on step by step.

Zhang Wuji did not have any choice but said, "That's right, she ... right now, she ... she has crossed from darkness to light."

In a loud voice Du Jie said, "The killer of Kong Jian is the Ming Cult's Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun. The killer of Kong Xing is the Ming Cult's Zhao Min. This same Zhao Min has also broken into the Shaolin Temple, captured our Temple's disciples. The worst of it all, she went as far as engraving insulting words on our revered sixteen Luohan idols. If we add my Shixiong's [older martial brother] eyeball to those offenses, the three of us bear a hundred years of grievance. Zhang Jiaozhu, if we do not settle this debt with you, then with whom?"

Zhang Wuji heaved a deep sigh, thinking that since he had

decided to shelter Zhao Min, her previous excessively wicked deeds could only be heaped on his head. In that blink of an eye, he suddenly understood his father's feelings when he committed suicide when confronted with his beloved wife's former crimes. He thought that as the settlement of Yang Jiaozhu and Yifu's enmity from the past until today, "Du Jie is right: If I do not undertake it, who would?" He stood straight up, sending his strength to his foot, and the bobbing tree branch he was standing up suddenly stayed still. In a loud voice he said, "Since the three honorable masters say so, Wanbei cannot run away from this responsibility. Then only Wanbei, one person, can accept all offenses. But as Yifu harming Kong Jian Shen Seng, there were innumerable difficulties surrounding that event. I am asking three honorable masters not to hold him accountable."

Du E said, "What do you depend on that you dare to plead for Xie Xun? Do you think we, three martial brothers, will not kill you?"

Zhang Wuji thought that as things had come this far, he must fight to the end; he said, "With one against three, Wanbei is definitely not your match. Which one of the three honorable masters will grant instruction to me?"

Du Jie said, "Fighting one to one, we cannot defeat you. This is about an enmity as deep as the sea, we don't have to follow Jianghu custom. Good devil head, come to receive your death. Amitabha Buddha!"

As he invoked the name of Buddha, Du E and Du Nan spoke in chorus, "May Buddha shows mercy!" Three black ropes flew in a flash to coil around his body.

Zhang Wuji dropped down to evade the ropes, but before his feet touch the ground, he flipped midair and charged toward

Du Nan. Du Nan raised his left palm; with an abrupt turn of his palm, a strong gust of wind attacked Zhang Wuji's lower abdomen. Zhang Wuji turned sideways to evade; using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi on his palm he ward off the attack. In the meantime, Du E and Du Jie's pair of black ropes curled down on him. Zhang Wuji smoothly skated half a circle. Du Jie waved his left palm and launched a noiseless attack.

Zhang Wuji moved from tree to tree, sending attack after attack. Suddenly his palm hacked down, several hundred raindrops, as big as soybeans, flew toward Du E, carrying a strong gale of wind. Du E leaned his head sideways to evade, but dozens of raindrops still hit his face so he felt pain nonetheless. "Good kid!" he shouted. The black rope shook. It made two circles in the air and struck down toward the top of Zhang Wuji's head. Zhang Wuji flew like an arrow to avoid the circle of rope and attack Du Jie at the same time.

The more he fought, the more alarmed he became, as he felt his body was surrounded by the airstream from the three black ropes and the gust of wind generated by the three palms, which gradually tightened around him like glue. Ever since he started teaching himself martial art, he had never met such superior opponents like these three monks. Not only their stances very complicated, the abundance of their internal energy was matchless.

At first, Zhang Wuji was still able to use 70% of his strength in defense and 30% for offense. More than 200 stances, however, he started to feel that his pure and clear internal energy gradually turned muddy that in order to survive he could only defend and not attack at all. His Jiu Yang Shen Gong was actually unlimited; the more he used it, the stronger he was. But right now, every move he made consumed enormous internal energy that little by little he felt his stamina decrease. Actually, it was also because he

had never had this kind of experience ever since he trained the Shen Gong [divine skill/strength].

After several dozens more stances, Zhang Wuji thought, "If I keep fighting, I will only deliver my life in vain. I'd better escape today, and come back with Grandfather [orig. wai4 gong1 - maternal grandfather], Yang Zuo Shi [left emissary], Fan You Shi [right emissary], and Wei Fu Wang [bat king]. With five of us joining forces, I am sure we will defeat these three monks. At that time we will be able to rescue Yifu."

Immediately he sent three stances attack toward Du E in his attempt to break out of the encirclement. Unexpectedly, the circle of three long black ropes was as tight as copper wall or iron rampart. Several times he attacked, each time he was pushed back and was unable to get out. He was greatly shocked. "Turns out these three monks collaborate as one individual," he thought, "Can anyone in the world really achieve this kind of interlinked minds?"

He did not know that Du E, Du Jie and Du Nan, three monks had spent more than thirty years sitting in meditation together. Their biggest skill was in using the 'interlinked minds'. As one person moved, the other two understood his intention immediately. This 'telepathic' skill sounded mysterious, but these three men had been together in one room for more than thirty years; concentrating in interaction with each other in training, so it was not surprising that their minds could react as one person.

Zhang Wuji further thought, "If that is the case, then although Grandfather and the others come together, we might still be unable to breakthrough these three men's interlinked minds. Could it be that in the end my Yifu is beyond deliverance? That I will lose my life today?"

As he was anxious, his focus was slightly dispersed, his shoulder was swept by Du Jie's five fingers, and the pain entered the bones and marrows. He mused, "My own death is nothing to be regretted, but Yifu's injustice must be washed clean. Yifu has always been a proud man. Since he has fallen into others' hands, he will not utter half a word to defend himself." Thereupon, in a clear voice he said, "Three Old Honorable Masters, since Wanbei has stranded over here today, my life is difficult to protect. A real man is not afraid of death. What else can I say? There is one matter I need to clarify, though ..."

'Whoosh! Whoosh!' two black ropes came from left and right. Zhang Wuji pushed to the left and pull to the right, warding off the incoming force away, while continuing, "That Yuan Zhen's real civilian name was Cheng Kun, his title was Hun Yuan Pi Li Shou [Lightning Hands of the Originating Formation]. He was my Yifu, Xie Xun's master ..."

The three Shaolin eminent monks noticed how he warded off their forces while spitting out words at the same time. It was a kind of internal energy cultivation they themselves were not able to master. They could not help but feel more alarmed. The three monks recognized the Ming Cult was the 'stop-at-no-evil' Devil Cult. The higher the Jiaozhu's martial art skill, the higher their capacity to harm others would be. Seeing that currently he fell into the tight encirclement and unable to escape, they decided to seize the opportunity. Only, their endeavor would need unlimited efforts. Therefore, without saying anything, they intensified the black ropes and their palms attacks.

Zhang Wuji continued talking, "Three Old Honorable Masters must understand, this Cheng Kun's Shimei [younger martial sister] was the Ming Cult's Jiaozhu Yang Dingtian's wife. Cheng Kun had some feeling toward his Shimei, thus he

became jealous and eventually his jealousy turned into deep hatred toward the Ming Cult ...”

Thereupon as his hands were busy fending off the three monks’ stances, his mouth did not stop recounting, from the beginning to the end, how Cheng Kun schemed to destroy the Ming Cult, how he made illicit rendezvous with Mrs. Yang, which finally caused Yang Ding Tian’s demise, how he faked drunkenness and molested Xie Xun’s wife and killed his entire family, how he compelled Xie Xun to randomly massacre Wulin people, how he took Kong Jian Shen Seng as his master and deliberately lured him to take thirteen fists from Xie Xun, but he did not appear and in the end Kong Jian died with unsatisfied regret.

The more Du E, three monks heard, the more troubled their hearts were; the story appeared as it was cooked up by some criminals or barbarians, yet everything was logical and reasonable, everything fitted together perfectly. Du E was the first to relax his black rope.

Zhang Wuji also said, “Wanbei does not know how Yang Jiaozhu became enemies with Du E Dashi, but I am not surprised if there was a third party who incited disharmony between the two of you. Most likely this man was Yuan Zhen. There is no harm in Du E Dashi trying to recall past events. See if what Wanbei has said has some merit in it.”

“Hm,” Du E stopped his rope altogether. He lowered his head and pondered a moment. “That makes sense,” he finally said, “In Lao Na’s feud with Yang Dingtian, Cheng Kun did indeed play an important role. Afterwards, he wanted to take Lao Na as his master, but Lao Na had never taken any disciple, so I recommended him to Kong Jian Shizhi to be his disciple. Come to think about it, did he intentionally arrange all this?”

“Not only that,” Zhang Wuji said, “Currently, he is coveting over the Shaolin Temple Abbot position, gathering supporters outside the Temple, and cooking up a secret conspiracy to usurp Kong Wen Shen Seng ...”

He had not finished speaking when there was a loud rumbling noise as a giant boulder on the sloping hill toward their left tumbled down toward the three pine trees.

“Who’s there?” Du E shouted. The back rope in his hand flew. ‘Bang! Bang!’ it struck the boulder right on, but it only caused several chips to fly away. From behind the boulder a shadow suddenly pounced toward Zhang Wuji with an exceptional speed. A cold ray flashed as a short blade was thrust into his throat.

This attack was so sudden, and it came when Zhang Wuji was using his full-strength to block Du Jie and Du Nan, two monks’ black ropes and palm strikes. He was totally caught off guard against this sneak attack. He only felt a sharp wind in the darkness and the short blade had already reached his throat. In this critical situation he threw himself sideways, and with a ‘rip’ noise the sharp of the blade made a big cut on his clothes right on his chest. If he was a fraction of a second late, his chest and abdomen would be cut open.

As his attack failed, the attacker broke out of the three monks’ black ropes encirclement by rolling behind the giant boulder.

“Close shave!” Zhang Wuji silently cursed. He shouted, “Wicked thief Cheng Kun! Come and deal with me personally if you dare! You want to kill me to close my mouth?”

Actually, he did not see clearly the assassin who attacked him with the blade, but he knew that person’s movements

were quick, his stance was fierce, his internal energy was strong, and his martial art was somewhat similar to Xie Xun, so he presumed it was none other than Cheng Kun.

Just like three great hands, the three black ropes of the Shaolin three monks reached out toward the boulder. Wrapping and heaving, they lifted the thousand-catty giant boulder and hurled it away. But Cheng Kun had already gone down the mountain far away.

“Was it really Yuan Zhen?” Du E asked.

“Of course that was him,” Du Nan said.

Du E said, “If he did not have any guilty conscience, why would he ...”

Suddenly from all directions came repeated shouts, as seven, eight shadows arrived. The first one shouted, “Shaolin monks became Buddha disciples in vain, you have killed too many people. Aren’t you afraid the consequences of your sins? Everybody, let’s go together.”

Eight people, each with a weapon in their hands, charged toward the three monks. Zhang Wuji was still standing in the middle of the three monks. He saw that among these eight people, three wielded swords, each of the other five wielded either a saber or a whip. Each one of them possessed a high level or martial art skill. Immediately they fought the three monks’ black ropes.

After watching for a while, Zhang Wuji recognized the stances of the three people wielding swords were similar to the Qinghai Three Swords, who were killed by the Shaolin monks several days earlier. Only their changes were more subtle and their forces stronger, far above the Qinghai Three

Swords. These people must be Qinghai school's senior characters. These three people attacked Du E. The other three people fought Du Nan, and the remaining two joined hands in battling Du Jie.

Although Du Jie only fought two people, these two's martial art skill was a notch higher than the rest of the attackers. After fighting for half a day, Zhang Wuji could tell that Du Jie gradually fell under his enemies' control; while although fighting one against three, Du E seemed to be in control with his abundance internal strength.

About a dozen or so stances later, Du E was aware of the difficulty Du Jie was facing. His black rope shook, and flew toward the two men attacking Du Jie. The two men were tall and powerfully built. Their black beards floating, their movements were extremely agile. One of them held a pair of judge brushes, the other held a short pole to seal acupoints. Du E and Du Jie were several 'zhang's apart, yet Du E could feel the wind generated by these two people's weapons as if they were closed to him, proving that short weapons were inevitably more fierce than the long ones.

On the other front, the power carried by the three swords of Qinghai people was getting weaker, and they slowly fell under Du Nan's control. As it happened, Du Nan was fighting three enemies, while Du E and Du Jie two monks were fighting five enemies. For the time being, both parties were in a stalemate.

Zhang Wuji wondered in his heart, "These eight people are all martial art experts and they are not necessarily inferior to He Taichong, husband and wife. Other than the three Qinghai Pai people, I cannot figure out the school origin of the other five. Truly in this wide world, there are crouching tigers and hidden dragons among the tall grasses and thick weeds. I

wonder how many heroes and warriors are hiding quietly, whose names I have never heard of.”

After these eleven people fought for more than a hundred moves, the black ropes in the three monks of Shaolin’s hands were getting shorter. The shorter ropes required less internal energy to operate, but their agility and attacking power were also reduced several degrees. Several dozens of moves later, the three monks’ black ropes were shortened six, seven feet more. The two black-bearded old men fought closer and closer. The power behind their weapons was getting stronger and stronger. As soon as they saw a hole in their enemies’ defense, they would do their utmost to advance step-by-step, to be as close as possible to the three monks. But as their black ropes were shorter, the three monks’ defense was also tighter. The three ropes were like a circle with infinite elasticity. Each time the two black-bearded old men pressed on, they would be pushed back by the ropes.

By this time the three monks had already joined their ‘qi’ that the battle turned into three against eight. The three Shaolin monks spared no effort in fighting the enemies, but they were groaning inside. They knew that although the battle with these eight people was prolonged, they would not suffer defeat. If they used the ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan’ [Buddha’s warrior’ devil subduing ring/loop], not only eight enemies, even sixteen or thirty-two people would not be able to penetrate their defense. However, inside this ring hides a powerful enemy who would endanger them internally. If Zhang Wuji ever decided to make his move, they would be crushed from inside and outside, then the Shaolin three monks’ lives would be gone.

The three monks saw him quietly sit on the ground; apparently he was waiting for a good opportunity to strike. Perhaps he was waiting for the three monks and their

enemies to exhaust their strengths, and then gain advantage at their expense. By this time the three monks had used their internal energy to its fullest potential. They were thinking of letting a long whistle down the hill to call for help from the Shaolin Temple, but they could not open their mouths. If they uttered even a single word, the flow of their blood and 'qi' would reverse, and then if they were lucky enough not to die, they would certainly suffer internal injury and would be crippled.

In their hearts, they were scolding themselves for being too proud. If, at the first sign of powerful enemy's arrival they had raised the alarm asking reinforcement from the Temple, their victory would have been assured as soon as several masters of Damo Hall and Luohan Hall came to help.

This dire circumstance was also clearly seen by Zhang Wuji. If he wanted to take these three monks' lives at this time, it would be as easy as lifting his finger. But he thought as a real man, he should not take advantage when others were in danger. Let alone the fact that these three monks were the victims of Yuan Zhen's evil plot. Besides, if he killed them, he would still have to deal with the eight powerful enemies, which would not make his job any easier.

Knowing that victory or defeat between the two parties would not be decided for a while, he looked down to see that there was a dungeon in the ground, covered with a very big rock. All he could see was a small gap, supposedly it was the air passage for Xie Xun to breathe, and to deliver food for him. He thought that his time was limited. By the time victory and defeat between the combatants was decided, some people from the Shaolin Temple might have arrived; and then he would lost the opportunity to rescue Yifu. Thereupon he knelt down by the rock and pushed with both hands. He was able to push the giant stone slowly aside by

exerting his strength using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique.

He had not pushed the rock one foot when suddenly a strong wind came from behind, as Du Nan sent a palm strike toward his back. Zhang Wuji used the 'take off force to borrow strength'. 'Bang!' a large part of the clothes on his back tore to pieces. In the fierce wind and rainstorm, the pieces of clothes flutter in the air like butterflies; but actually he transferred Du Nan's palm strength to the giant stone. With a loud rumbling noise the stone slid about a foot. He unloaded the palm strength to the rock so that he was not injured internally, but when he took the force, his own internal energy was focused on the stone in front of him; therefore, he felt severe pain on his back.

As Du Nan launched a palm strike, he revealed a gap in the black ropes defense. One of the black-bearded old man immediately penetrated the loop. The short pole in his right hand struck toward Du Nan's left breast.

The Shaolin Three Monks' flexible rope formation was very effective for a long distance attack, but not for a close combat. Du Nan raised his left palm to ward off the attack threatening the acupoint on his chest. The black-bearded old man stretched out his left-hand index finger to pierce Du Nan's 'shan zhong xue' [lit. 'in the flock (of sheep or goats)' acupoint].

"Not good!" Du Nan cried out inwardly. He did not expect the enemy's 'yi zhi chan' [sacrificing finger] acupoint sealing technique was fiercer than his sealing acupoint pole. In this critical situation, he did not have any choice but to let go the rope in his right hand and sweep it across his chest with a strong gust of wind, and immediately launched a counterattack with his thumb, index finger and middle finger

shaped like a fan.

Although he succeeded in warding off the enemy's attack, with the black rope no longer in his hand, the old man wielding judge-pens immediately entered in his line of defense. The Shaolin Three Monks' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was broken.

Suddenly, the end of the black rope, which was lying on the ground, rose up just like the head of a viper ready to strike its victim. With a loud scream the rope went toward the acupoint on the face of the old man wielding the judge pens. Even before the rope arrived, the strong wind generated was enough to stop the enemy. The old man hastily raised both of his judge pens to block. As the rope and the pens collided, he was shaken and his arms went numb, the pen in his left hand almost fell off, while the pen in his right hand was diverted to strike the rock underneath. Rock chips flew as sparks splashed everywhere.

The black rope continued toward the Qinghai Pai' three swordsmen, forcing them to withdraw about a 'zhang' backwards. The 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was not only restored, the power was even greater than the original formation. The Shaolin Three Monks were pleasantly surprised, especially since they saw the other end of the rope was unexpectedly in Zhang Wuji's hand. He had never practiced the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' with them, so in term of 'interlinked minds' and moving in seamless coordination with the others, he was far inferior to Du Nan. However, his unequalled abundance internal energy was more than enough to generate an earth-shattering force to drive the enemies to withdraw in all directions.

Du E and Du Jie's black ropes also moved that together they drove the remaining seven people to fall back. In the

meantime, Du Nan focused his attention to deal with the black-bearded old man, which was a notch inferior to him both in terms of martial art and internal strength. He fought sitting inside the pine tree, and did not stand up at all. His ten fingers slapped, pierced, plucked, hooked, pointed, brushed, captured and seized, so that after several moves, the black-bearded old man repeatedly fell into dangerous situations. Seeing his seven companions were not in a better situation than what he was facing, the old man bellowed and leaped out from the loop.

Zhang Wuji handed the black rope back to Du Nan, and then bending down, he used the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi again to push the giant rock another foot. He looked down into the exposed underground cave and called out, "Yifu, Child Wuji is late in rescuing you. Can you come out?"

"I am not going out," Xie Xun replied, "Good Child, get out of here, quick!"

Zhang Wuji was surprised. "Yifu," he said, "Is your acupoint sealed? Or are you bound in shackles?"

Without waiting for Xie Xun to reply, he jumped down the dungeon. 'Splash!' water splashed out. Turned out the several hours of heavy downpour had flooded the dungeon that the water reached his waist. Half of Xie Xun's body was submerged in water.

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. He reached out to carry Xie Xun up. His hands groped around Xie Xun's hands and feet, but did not feel any shackles. He then massaged Xie Xun's several main acupoints, but again, he did not find any signs of anybody sealed his acupoints. Hence, he wrapped his arms around Xie Xun's body, leaped up and out of the dungeon, and sat Xie Xun on top of the giant rock by the cave opening.

"This is the best time to escape," Zhang Wuji said, "Yifu, let us leave." As he said that, he pulled Xie Xun's arm, with the intention to leave immediately. But Xie Xun kept sitting on the rock, refusing to move. Hugging his own knees he said, "Child, the gravest sin I have ever committed in my life was killing Kong Jian Dashi. If your Yifu fall into other people's hands, I would certainly fight bravely to the end. But today I become a prisoner of the Shaolin Temple, I am willing to receive the harshest punishment to pay for Kong Jian Dashi's life."

Zhang Wuji anxiously said, "But you killed Kong Jian Dashi by mistake. It was Cheng Kun, that wicked thief, who engineered such a sinister plot. Besides, Yifu's entire family's blood debt has not been restituted, how can you die under Cheng Kun's hands?"

Xie Xun sighed and said, "Everyday for more than a month, in this dungeon, I heard the three eminent monks chant their prayers, I heard the morning bell and the evening drum from the temple at the bottom of this hill, which has made me think about my past. Your Yifu's hands reek with too much innocent blood that even a hundred deaths cannot redeem it. Ay, all sorts of wickedness caused too much sin. I am more sinful than Cheng Kun. Good Child, don't mind me, just quickly go down the hill."

The more Zhang Wuji listened to him, the more anxious he was. "Yifu," he shouted, "If you don't want to go, I will force you." As he said that, he turned around and grabbed both of Xie Xun's hands; he was going to carry him on his back.

They heard clamoring noise of people coming up the mountain path, there were several people shouting, "Who dare to cause trouble at Shaolin Temple?" A dozen or so people were coming up the hill, amidst the noise of feet

splashing in the water.

Zhang Wuji was just about to grab Xie Xun's legs, ready to take him go; but suddenly the 'da zhui xue' [big spine acupoint] on his back went numb. It was Xie Xun. Zhang Wuji's hands lost their strength and he did not have any choice but to relax his grip. In his anxiety he almost cried. "Yifu," he called out, "You ... why are you being this difficult?"

"Good Child," Xie Xun replied, "The wrong I have received, you have already explained it clearly to the three eminent monks. The sins I have committed, I have to pay the retribution myself. If you are not leaving, who will avenge my grievances for me?"

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold; but he saw the dozen or so Shaolin monks wielding Buddhist staff or saber had already attacked the eight people. 'Bing, bing, bang, bang!' the noise of the close combat can be heard.

The black-bearded old man with judge pens realized that if the battle was prolonged, not only they would fail their mission at the last minute; they may find it difficult to escape alive. He was enraged that a nameless young man had spoiled their important business. With a clear voice he shouted, "I beg to know the honorable surname and the great given name of the young man in the middle of the pine trees. Hao Mi and Bo Tai of Hejian [a city in Hebei province] want to know which expert has interfered with our business today."

Raising his black rope up, Du E said, "The Ming Cult's Zhang Jiaozhu, the number one martial art expert in the world; how can the Hejian Shuang Sha [twin evils of Hejian] not know?"

“Ah!” the judge pen wielding Hao Mi exclaimed. He raised his pair of pens up and then walked out of the loop. The other seven followed him. The Shaolin monks were about to stop them, but those eight’s martial art skill was considerably higher than the monks; side by side they proceeded going down the hill.

Du E and the others, three monks, had heard everything Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji said. They also knew that Zhang Wuji did not take advantage of their precarious situation, he simply stood on the side, did not help either side. When Bo Tai broke through their ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan’ defensive line, based on the Twin Evils of Hejian’s cruelty, the three monks would have lost their lives by now. The three monks laid down their black ropes, stood up, and put their palms together in respect. “Many thanks for Zhang Jiaozhu’s benevolence,” they said in chorus.

Zhang Wuji hastily returned the propriety and said, “Such an insignificant deed; is it worth mentioning?”

Du E said, “In today’s business, although Lao Na would not allow Xie Xun to accompany Zhang Jiaozhu, but Zhang Jiaozhu has just saved our lives, Lao Na would be powerless to stop you from leaving. Only Lao Na, three martial brothers, have received order from our temple’s Abbot to watch over Xie Xun. We have established a heavy oath before Buddha’s presence, unless the three of us lose our lives, we will never let Xie Xun escape. This matter concerns our Sect’s thousand years of glory or disgrace; we beg Zhang Jiaozhu to understand of our difficulty.”

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji snorted, but did not say anything.

Du E continued, “About the animosity of Lao Na losing an eye, we can consider it over today. If Zhang Jiaozhu wishes to rescue Xie Xun, you may come back anytime. As long as you

can break Lao Na, three martial brothers' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan', you can take Shi Wang [lion king] go. Zhang Jiaozhu may bring as many helpers as you wish. You can take turn fighting us, or you can fight us as a group; we, three martial brothers, will accept the challenge by ourselves. Before Zhang Jiaozhu's return, Lao Na, three brothers, will guard Xie Xun carefully. We will not let Yuan Zhen to insult him even for half a sentence, or harm a single strand of his hair."

Zhang Wuji cast a glance toward Xie Xun; in the dark night he saw the silhouette of his well-built form, his long hair draped over his neck and shoulders; he was standing with lowered head, as if his heart was full of remorse over the transgressions he committed in the past. He looked totally different from his impressive, invincible former self. Zhang Wuji felt tears forming in his eyes as he considered, "I can't defeat them today, and Yifu does not want to leave. I must bring [maternal] Grandfather, Yang Zuo Shi, Fan You Shi, and the others to help me fight. This three black rope formation is as impregnable as a copper wall or iron rampart. If Du Nan Dashi did not send me a palm attack, that Bo Tai would definitely not be able to break through their defense line. Even with the help of Grandfather and the Left and Right Brightness Emissaries, there is no guarantee that we can break their formation. Ay, right now, all I can do is to deal with whatever comes my way using one step at a time." Thereupon he said, "Since that is the case, I will return to receive instructions from the Three Reverends." Turning around to embrace Xie Xun's waist he said, "Yifu, your child is leaving."

Xie Xun nodded. Gently stroking Zhang Wuji's hair he said, "You don't have to come back. I have made up my mind not to leave. Good Child, I hope in everything you will turn bad luck into good fortune. Don't let the hopes of your Father and Mother and myself down. Follow your Father's example; don't

follow your Yifu's."

Zhang Wuji replied, "Both Father and Yifu are heroes and real men; upright warriors who do everything in the open. Both are Child's role models." As he said that, he bowed in respect. His shadow swayed and he flew out of the three pine trees circle. Raising his hands toward the Shaolin Temple's three monks, he launched his 'qing gong' and suddenly disappeared. They only heard his clear whistle, which in a very short time had reached about a 'li' [approx. 0.5 km] away.

The Shaolin monks standing on the peak of that hill looked at each other in astonishment. They had heard that the Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult possessed an outstanding martial art skill, but they had never expected his skill to be this divine.

Since his presence was no longer a secret, Zhang Wuji thought he might as well show his martial art skill. Perhaps the Shaolin monks would be scared and would treat Xie Xun nicely.

His whistle sound came out of his abundant 'qi'; it was a continuous whistle, which rose up above the noise of the thunderstorm. It sounded like a dragon roar as it flew through the sky. Putting his entire strength on his feet, he ran faster and faster, while his whistling was also getting louder and louder. Thousands of Shaolin monks were startled awake from their dreams. It was not until the whistle was far away they started to talk to one another. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the others knew Zhang Wuji had arrived; which only served to increase their anxiety.

Zhang Wuji ran for several 'li's. Suddenly from behind a willow tree by the road side someone was calling out, "Hey!" Someone leaped out. It was Zhao Min.

Zhang Wuji stopped his whistle and halted his steps. Reaching out, he pulled her over, only to see that her whole body was dripping wet from the heavy rain; as she looked up, water streaming down from her face.

“Did you fight with the Shaolin Temple baldies?” Zhao Min asked.

“Yes,” Zhang Wuji replied.

“How is Xie Daxia?” Zhao Min asked, “Did you see him?”

Zhang Wuji pulled her arm along, and while they were strolling in the heavy rain, he told her briefly what had happened just now.

Zhao Min hesitantly asked, “Did you ask him how he got captured?”

“I was only thinking of how to help him escape,” Zhang Wuji replied, “I did not have time to mind other people’s business.”

Zhao Min sighed and no longer made any noise.

“You are not happy?” Zhang Wuji asked.

“To you, it is other people’s business, to me, it is a very serious matter,” Zhao Min replied, “All right, I’ll wait for Xie Daxia to be rescued. I don’t think it will be too late to ask him then. I am only afraid ...”

“What are you afraid of?” Zhang Wuji asked, “Are you afraid we cannot save Yifu?”

“The Ming Cult is a lot stronger than the Shaolin Pai,” Zhao Min said, “If you really want to rescue Xie Daxia, I am sure you will eventually succeed. I am only afraid that Xie Daxia is determined to die because of Kong Jian Shen Seng.”

It was exactly what had been burdening Zhang Wuji’s heart. “Do you think he is?” he asked.

“I hope he isn’t,” Zhao Min replied.

Two people walking and talking until they arrived at the Du couple’s hut. Zhao Min laughed and said, “Your real identity has been exposed, you cannot hide from these two people anymore.”

Zhang Wuji noticed that the door of the hut was half closed, so he reached out to open it. After shaking the rain water from his head and body he went in, but suddenly smelled a burst of blood. He was shocked and immediately pushed Zhao Min back out of the door with his left hand. From the dark someone’s claw was reaching out. This claw was noiseless, without creating any wind, but it was shockingly fast. In a flash the fingers had reached Zhang Wuji’s cheek. He did not have enough time to evade. His left foot flew up toward that person’s chest. The attacker pulled back his hand and his elbow struck the ‘huan tiao xue’ [lit. ‘jump-the-loop’] acupoint on Zhang Wuji’s leg with an extremely fierce and ruthless move.

Zhang Wuji knew that as soon as pulled back his leg slightly, the enemy’s left hand would immediately scoop out his pair of eyeballs. Therefore, he feigned a grab toward the enemy’s hand, expecting the enemy to pull back his elbow, but unexpectedly his grab was successful. He took the enemy’s left hand in his palm, but right at that moment, his ‘huan tiao xue’ went numb; he could not stand and was forced to kneel

down on his right leg.

He was about to seize the opportunity by wrenching the enemy's wrist when he suddenly realized the hand in his palm was soft, warm and smooth. It was a woman's hand. His heart was stirred and he did not have the heart to treat her with a heavy hand. He lifted that person up and flung her outside. 'Stab', he felt a severe pain on his right shoulder as it was pierced by a knife.

As the enemy leaped out of the room, her palm struck toward Zhao Min's face. Zhang Wuji knew Zhao Min would not be able to block it and would be killed on the spot. Thereupon, enduring the pain, he leaped up and sent out his palm to parry. 'Bang' two palms collided. That person's body swayed, her feet staggered; but borrowing the momentum, she continued moving backward and ran several 'zhang's out, and then disappeared into the darkness.

"Who was that?" Zhao Min was still in shock.

"Hey," Zhang Wuji mumbled. He tried to light a fire, but the flint inside his pocket was soaked wet from the heavy rain; he could not start the fire. Afraid that the enemy's knife on his right shoulder was poisonous, he did not dare to pull it up.

"Light up the lamp," he said.

Zhao Min went to the kitchen to get a flint and lighted the oil lamp. She was shocked to see the short knife on his shoulder. Zhang Wuji saw that the blade of the knife was without poison.

"Only a flesh wound," he laughed, "Nothing to worry about."

As he turned his head and pulled the knife out, he saw Du

Baidang and Yi Sanniang curled up on the corner of the room. Ignoring the blood oozing out of his wound, he rushed to look; the couple had died for a while.

Zhao Min was scared. "They were still fine when I went out," she said.

Zhang Wuji nodded. As Zhao Min wrapped his wound, he took up the short knife and examined it. It was precisely the weapon the Du couple used. He looked around the room, and saw on the beam, on the pillars, on the table, on the ground, everywhere, there were short blades scattered around. Apparently, the enemy engaged the Du couple in fierce battle, forcing them to use up their blades one by one, and then began to injure them.

"This person's martial art is very fierce," Zhao Min said in amazement.

If Zhang Wuji was not quick enough in the battle in the dark just now, that person would have had gouged his eyes. Not only he would have been a blind man, but most likely Zhao Min and he would be lying on the ground, dead. He looked back at the bodies of the Du couple. Dozens of ribs on their chests were broken, as were ribs on their backs. It was obvious that the martial art which killed them was very cruel, with a very powerful palm strength behind it. He had fought countless archenemies, undergone many dangerous situations, yet thinking back about the quick-paced, three-stance close combat in the dark room, he could not restrain from shivering in fear. He had fought two vicious battles tonight; the first was one against three, which lasted for a long time. But speaking of soul-stirring and hair-rising battle, it was nothing compared to the second one, which lasted for a twinkling of the eye.

“Who was that?” Zhao Min asked again.

Zhang Wuji shook his head without answering. Suddenly Zhao Min understood. Her eyes grew big in fright. After staring blankly for half a day, she threw herself into Zhang Wuji’s bosom and wept in fear. They both knew that if Zhao Min did not hear Zhang Wuji’s whistle and came out amidst the heavy rain to welcome him, and thus escape the great catastrophe, right now on the corner of the room there would not only be two corpses, but three.

Zhang Wuji gently patted her back and consoled her in gentle voice. Zhao Min said, “That person’s target must be me; she killed the Du couple first, and then hid to set up an ambush against me. She simply did not mean to harm you.”

“You must not leave my side these next several days,” Zhang Wuji said. After thinking for a while he muttered, “How could her internal energy and martial art skill advance so rapidly in less than a year? I am afraid nobody in this world other than myself will be able to protect you.”

The next morning, Zhang Wuji took Du Baidang’s hoe and dug a deep hole to bury the Du couple. Together with Zhao Min they kneeled and bowed to express their respect. Recalling how Yi Sanniang had treated the two of them with loving care, they could not help but feel grief.

Suddenly from far away, from the direction of Shaolin Temple they heard a faint continuous ‘dang, dang’ sound. It sounded very urgent. At the same moment, from the east a blue-green rocket shot to the sky; from the south a red rocket, from the west white, and from the north black, while from several ‘li’s away they saw yellow smoke rise up. These five rockets and smoke encircled the Shaolin Temple in the middle.

“The Ming Cult’s Five-element Flags have arrived!” Zhang Wuji called out, “And they are going to deal with the Shaolin Pai frontally. Let’s go quickly.” Hurriedly they changed their clothes, washed the mud from their hands and faces, and walked quickly toward the Shaolin Temple.

Walking for only a few ‘li’s, they saw a company of white-clothed Ming Cult army, with small yellow banners in their hands, going up the mountain.

“Is Yan Qi Shi [Flag leader Yan] here?” Zhang Wuji called out.

As the leader of the Hou-tu Qi [thick earth flag/banner], Yan Yuan heard the call, he turned around and saw his Jiaozhu. In his delight, he quickly came forward to pay his respects. The people serving under him were also expressed their delights in thunderous voices and bowed down together.

Yan Yuan reported: As the leaderships of the Ming Cult learned about Xie Xun’s whereabouts, they held a discussion and decided that if they waited for the Duan Yang Festival to ask for Xie Xun, all the heroes under the Heaven would have flocked to the Shaolin Temple, then the Ming Cult would have to face the world’s heroes as their enemies. Since they were not able to report to their Cult Leader, they were forced to take the matter into their own hands. Thereupon, ten days before the Duan Yang Festival, Yang Xiao and Fan Yao led the masters of the Cult to the Shaolin Temple to ask for Xie Xun. They expected an open war would be unavoidable, but after looking everywhere, they could not find their Cult Leader, so the group of warriors felt like a dragon without a head.

The Ming Cult people blew the bugle, announcing the arrival of their Cult Leader; so not too long afterwards, Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, Yin Yewang, Zhou Dian, Peng Yingyu, Shou Bude, Priest Tie Guan, and the others

came one after another, while the Rui Jin [acute gold/metal], Ju Mu [gigantic tree], Hong Shui [flooding water], and Lie Huo [blazing fire], four banners were surrounding the Shaolin Temple on all sides. As they saw each other, everybody broke into delightful chatter.

Yang Xiao and Fan Yao admitted their guilt for acting without authorization. Zhang Wuji said, "You don't have to be too modest. Everybody with one mind join forces to rescue Xie Fa Wang. That shows our Cult's brethrens have a strong spirit of brotherhood [yi4qi4]. Everybody appreciates what we are doing, why do you feel guilty?"

He told everybody briefly how he went undercover and mingled among the Shaolin Temple's workers, and how last night he battled with Du E three monks. As they heard Cheng Kun was behind everything, plotting and scheming, they were all furious. Zhou Dian and Priest Tie Guan shouted some curse words.

Zhang Wuji said, "Today our Cult is paying a formal visit to ask Shaolin Fangzhang [Abbot] to release the prisoner. It is best if we do not injure our friendship. We will fight only out of absolute necessity. Our goal first and foremost is saving Xie Fa Wang, next, we want to apprehend Cheng Kun. Other than that we should not harm the innocents." The people acknowledged the order in one voice.

"Min Mei," to Zhao Min Zhang Wuji said, "In order to avoid more trouble, it will be best if you would be in disguise, don't let the Shaolin Temple monks to recognize your true identity." Since she took the Shaolin monks prisoners to Dadu, she had sowed an extremely deep enmity with Shaolin Pai.

Zhao Min laughed and said, "Yan Dage [big brother Yan], let

me pose as one of the brothers under your command!”

Yan Yuan immediately ordered one of his men to get the uniform for Zhao Min to wear. She quickly went to the woods behind the mountain and hurriedly put on the uniform and applied black grease onto her face. When she went out of the woods, she turned into a mean and ferocious thin man with a black face.

The bugle sounded again, the Ming Cult warriors went up the mountain in neat formation. Earlier that day, the Shaolin Temple had received the Ming Cult’s visiting card. Eminent Monk Kong Zhi, leading a group of monks, had been waiting at the pavilion in front of the Temple.

Because of Yuan Zhen, Kong Zhi was convinced that when the Shaolin monks were captured by deceit and brought to Dadu as prisoners, when their fingers were broken after they were forced to show their martial art skills, it was all part of the conspiracy between the Ming Cult and the Ruyang Palace. Later on, when Zhang Wuji came and rescued them, it was also part of the sinister plot to curry their favors. Therefore, he received the guests with a gloomy look. He put his palms together in respect, but did not say anything.

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, “Our humble Cult has a favor we’d like to ask in earnest from your precious Sect. For that reason, we are going up the mountain to pay our respect to the Fangzhang Shen Seng [Abbot Divine Monk].”

Kong Zhi nodded. “Please!” he said, and he led the Ming Cult warriors walk toward the gate.

Abbot Kong Wen, accompanied by the Damo Hall, Luohan Hall, Banruo [great wisdom] Hall, and Jielu [monastic discipline] Courtyard, all senior monks, was waiting outside the door to greet the guests. He took the warriors into the Da

Xiong Bao Dian [great hero precious hall] and invited them to sit down. Immediately several young monks appeared to serve them tea. After exchanging some pleasantries with Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao, Yin Tianzheng, and the others, Kong Wen was silent.

“Fangzhang Shen Seng,” Zhang Wuji said, “We would not go up to the San Bao Dian [three-treasure hall] if this wasn’t an important matter. We come here to ask earnestly that Fangzhang would honor the Wulin way by releasing our humble Cult’s Xie Fa Wang. We will certainly repay this great kindness and great benevolence someday.”

“Amitufo,” Kong Wen said, “Those who left homes [Buddhist monk or nun] must have mercy as their life principle. We must shun anger and avoid murder; actually, we should not make things difficult for Xie Fa Wang. However, Lao Na Shixiong [martial brother] Kong Jian perished under Xie Shizhu’s [benefactor Xie] hands. Zhang Jiaozhu is the leader of a cult, you must understand the custom of the Wulin world.”

Zhang Wuji said, “There was another reason behind it, we must not blame Xie Fa Wang.” Thereupon he narrated how Kong Jian willingly received some beatings in his attempt to reconcile a great enmity in the Wulin world.

As Kong Wen and the others heard to the middle of the story, he exclaimed praises to Buddha, and stood up at once to show his respect.

With tears in his eyes, Kong Wen said in a trembling voice, “Shanzai, Shanzai! Kong Jian Shixiong willingly put this benevolent and self-sacrificing principle into practice; his virtue was not small.”

The rest of the monks chanted scripture verses in low voice, praising Kong Jian's chivalry and righteousness; there wasn't anybody who did not admire him. The Ming Cult warriors also stood up to show their respects.

Zhang Wuji narrated in detail what had happened that day, and said, "Xie Fa Wang injured Kong Jian Shen Seng by mistake; he deeply regretted it. But if we think over it carefully, the real master mind behind this crime was your precious Temple's Yuan Zhen Dashi." Noticing that Yuan Zhen was not in the Hall, he said, "Would you ask Yuan Zhen Dashi to come out? Let us meet face to face and resolve right from wrong."

"That's right!" Zhou Dian opened his mouth, "This bald donkey [derogatory term for Buddhist monks] feigned death on the Brightness Peak, but actually he is alive and well. What is he up to, being sneaky like that? Quickly tell him to roll out." He had suffered a great setback from Yuan Zhen on the Brightness Peak, so he still bore a grudge against him.

"Mr. Zhou," Zhang Wuji busily said, "You shouldn't be rude in front of Fangzhang Dashi."

Zhou Dian said, "I was cursing that bald donkey Yuan Zhen, not cursing the bald Fangzhang ..." As the word 'bald' came out of his mouth, he knew something was wrong; hastily he put his hands on his mouth.

As Kong Zhi listened to Zhou Dian's rude remarks, he was even more indignant. "In that case, how would Zhang Jiaozhu explain the death of my Kong Xing Shidi?" he asked.

Zhang Wuji replied, "Kong Xing Shen Seng was a frank and upright hero; I [orig. zai4xia4 – under] had the privilege of visiting with him on the Brightness Peak. I admired him very

much. Kong Xing Dashi had agreed to meet with me again in the future to discuss martial art. Who would have thought that the unfortunate Master had met a terrible fate? I deeply regret his passing. It was a sinister plot of some traitors; it has nothing to do with our humble Cult.”

Kong Zhi laughed coldly and said, “Zhang Jiaozhu, it seems like you are washing your hands really clean. Then the news that the Ruyang Prince’s Junzhu has joined hands with the Ming Cult is also a false rumor?”

Zhang Wuji blushed and said, “Junzhu has had some disagreement with her Father and Brother, and has joined our humble Cult. In her former days, Junzhu has done a great deal of irreverence toward your precious Temple. I will ask her to go up the mountain to pay her respect to Buddha and seriously apologize.”

“Zhang Jiaozhu,” Kong Zhi was shouting, “Your words are sweet but insincere; how can it be that easy? You are a leader of a Cult, yet you are talking nonsense. Aren’t you afraid you will be the laughingstock of the heroes all over the world?”

Zhang Wuji realized that the murder of Kong Xing and the captured of numerous monks were certainly Zhao Min gravest offense. Although she had done it without the Ming Cult’s knowledge, presently she entrusted herself to him. Apparently, he could not make any excuses that he had nothing to do with her.

While he was in an awkward situation, Priest Tie Guan said with a stern voice, “Kong Zhi Dashi, our Jiaozhu respects you as a senior eminent monk, he is giving you a face; therefore, you should not press too hard. Our Jiaozhu always keep his promises and holds justice in high regard, how can he tell any lie? Your insult to our Jiaozhu means insult to our million

Ming Cult disciples. Our Jiaozhu is broad-minded and generous; he might not want to argue, but we, his subordinates, may not want to let it go.”

By that time, the Ming Cult army had besieged towns and occupied lands around the Huai Si and Henan, Hubei area. They recruited soldiers and built up cavalries, so when he said ‘a million disciples’, he was not exaggerating.

With a cold laugh Kong Zhi said, “So what if you have a million disciples? Are you going to destroy Shaolin Temple to the ground? The Devil Cult has insulted our Shaolin and we have not repaid that disgrace until today. We were captured, and then held captives at the Wan An Temple; we can only blame our own negligence. Evil and righteous do not coexist; that fact we understand well. But you came to our Shaolin Temple and on the back of our sixteen revered Luohan idols you carved sixteen large characters. Hey, hey, ‘Destroy Shaolin first, then overthrow Wudang, only our Ming Cult fits to rule the Wulin world!’ How impressive! Such a fart!”

Those sixteen characters were carved on the back of the sixteen revered Luohan images with some kind of sharp tool by Zhao Min’s warriors after the captured Shaolin monks had been taken away. Afterwards, Fan Yao waited until everybody had left, and flew back to the Luohan Hall. He turned the sixteen revered Luohan images back, so that their backs were against the wall. His goal was to thwart Zhao Min’s plan of shifting the blame to the Ming Cult. Later on, Yang Xiao and the others knew something was amiss and they saw the carving on the backs of the Luohan images, but they had never expected the Shaolin monks would also find out about it.

Zhang Wuji had never been known as an eloquent man. Besides, he thought that it was Zhao Min who deliberately

stirred up trouble; he was inwardly ashamed and did not know how to answer. It was Yang Xiao who answered Kong Zhi.

“We don’t understand what Kong Zhi Dashi was saying,” he said, “Our humble Cult’s Zhang Jiaozhu is the son of Wudang disciple, Zhang Wuxia [fifth hero Zhang]. It is not a secret in the Jianghu. Even if we were ten thousand times more arrogant than we are, we would never dare to insult Jiaozhu’s elders. How can our Zhang Jiaozhu himself make the ‘overthrow Wudang’ inscription? Fangzhang Dashi and Kong Zhi Dashi are highly virtuous eminent monks, how can you not understand such a simple logic like this? I am [orig. zai4xia4] convinced that there is no such thing.” His words were refined and thought provoking, rendering Kong Zhi speechless.

Abbot Kong Wen was a man of learning and wisdom; his disposition was also kind. He realized that in the end, the situation was not advantageous for them. He knew the Ming Cult had great influence; if both sides engaged in serious battle, he was afraid the thousand years of Shaolin history, which was passed on from generation to generation, would unavoidably end in his hand. Therefore, he said, “It’s useless for us to debate endlessly; please follow Lao Na to visit the Luohan Hall. We’ll look at the Luohan images reverently, and then we’ll know who’s right and who’s wrong.”

Zhang Wuji mused, “As soon as we enter the Luohan Hall, the truth will be revealed.” Hence, he hesitated and did not immediately give his consent.

“That is a good idea,” Yang Xiao replied.

Zhang Wuji did not understand Yang Xiao’s intention, but seeing Zhao Min stayed with the ‘Hou Tu’ Flag members and

did not enter the Temple at all, he thought that there was little chance she would be found out by the Shaolin monks, so he had nothing to worry about.

The monk in charge of receiving the guests led the way, and everybody followed him in single file, walking toward the Luohan Hall. Kong Wen bowed down in front of the Luohan images and said, "Disciple is disturbing the revered Luohan, please forgive me." Then he stood up and ordered six disciples to respectfully turn an idol around.

The six disciples went forward as instructed. After they clasped their palms together and uttered a silent prayer, with three men on each side, they lifted the first Luohan idol and turned it around. But not even a scratch was found on the back of this Luohan. Formerly, there was a large 'xian' character ['first '] on the golden lacquer, but right now there was not the least bit of trace of the character. Not only Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the others were surprised, even Zhang Wuji himself was stunned.

Shaolin disciples moved together, they turned the Luohan over one by one, but there was not even a half stroke of character on the back of these Luohans. The Shaolin disciples were speechless; they looked at each other in astonishment. They had clearly seen there was a large character engraved on the back of each Luohan, which together, they read 'xian zhu Shaolin, zai mie Wudang, wei wo Mingjiao, wulin chen wang' [Destroy Shaolin first, then overthrow Wudang, only our Ming Cult fits to rule the Wulin world]. But were did those sixteen characters go?

The golden lacquer on the back of these Luohans looked new; it was obvious that the lacquer had just been applied. But for the last several months, the security in and around Shaolin Temple was very tight. To fix the writing on the back

of these sixteen Luohans, and then re-apply the golden lacquer, was indeed not a simple thing to do. How could no monk in the Temple know about it?

Zhang Wuji turned his head around and saw Wei Yixiao and Fan Yao looked at each other with suppressed smile on their faces. His heart was stirred; he realized it must be his fellow Cult brothers who went into action. "Whoever is doing this must be very resourceful and have a vast knowledge," he mused.

Seeing the bewildered looks on the monks' faces, Yang Xiao said, "Your precious Temple's good fortune is very deep; there is no end to your virtuous beneficence. Sixteen revered golden images are in perfect condition. As Kong Zhi Dashi said, these idols suffered some vandalism, but the sixteen Luohans are obviously divine, their virtue boundless, they are able to fix themselves. It truly is a reason for us to celebrate."

As he said that, he bent his knees and kowtowed toward the Luohans. Zhang Wuji and the others also followed his example and kowtowed.

Kong Wen, Kong Zhi and the others did not believe such nonsense as the Luohans were divine, having boundless virtue that they were able to fix themselves up. They guessed it must be the Ming Cult who surreptitiously did this. Regardless of what happened, however, it showed that the Ming Cult was trying to make amends to their Temple; knowing this, they could not restrain a third of the anger in their hearts from melting away. But, thinking about how these devil heads were able to come and go like ghosts, they felt 30% admirations and 30% fears.

"Since the Luohan idols are as good as new, we should not mention this matter again," Kong Wen said. Waving his hand,

he ordered Shaolin disciples to turn those Luohan back to their original positions.

“Last night, Zhang Jiaozhu has visited us and has made an acquaintance with Lao Na’s three martial uncles,” Kong Wen continued, “I heard Du E Shishu and Zhang Jiaozhu have come to an agreement; as long as Zhang Jiaozhu is able to break my three Shishu’s ‘Jin Gang Fu Mo Juan’, you can take Xie Shizhu away.”

“That’s right,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Du E Dashi did say that. But I [orig, zai4xia4] have a deep admiration to the three eminent monks’ profound martial art skill. In all honesty, I know I am their match. I had suffered defeat under three eminent monks’ hands last night. How can the general of a defeated army dare to speak bravely?”

“Amitufo,” Kong Wen said, “Zhang Jiaozhu’s words are too heavy. Victory or defeat of last night has not been decided yet. Furthermore, Jiaozhu’s kindness and chivalry in helping them have left a deep impression on the three Shishu’s hearts.”

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, and the others had heard from Zhang Wuji how Du E and the other two monks possessed such an amazing martial art skill. Naturally, they wanted to see it with their own eyes.

Yin Tianzheng said, “Since the Shaolin eminent monks insist on seeing who is superior in the martial art study, Jiaozhu, I think forgetting our own inadequacy, we should follow their request and we ask instruction from the Shaolin Pai. Besides, that is the only way we can save Xie Xiongdi [brother Xie]. We are compelled to do this. It’s not like we deliberately want to challenge Shaolin Temple’s supremacy in the Wulin world.”

Zhang Wuji had always held his grandfather's opinion in high regards; besides, Yin Tianzheng was right, they had no other choice. Thereupon he said, "My brothers have heard how I praised the three eminent monks' divine skill as unrivalled; they said the three eminent monks have been living in seclusion for decades that nobody in the Wulin world knew about them. Now that we are fortunate enough to pay a visit, it would be our lifelong happiness to be able to meet with them."

"Please!" Kong Zhi raised his hand and led the group of warriors toward the hill behind the Temple.

The 'Hong Shui' Flag of the Ming Cult, under the leadership of Tang Yang, had arranged themselves, forming a formidable wall around the hill. But Kong Wen and the others seemed oblivious to their presence; they kept walking toward the peak. Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, with clasped palms, walked toward the three pine trees, bowed and reported to their elders.

Du E said, "The enmity against Yang Dingtian has been resolved last night. The affair of the Luohan idols has also been resolved today. Very good, very good. Zhang Jiaozhu, are you all coming here to fight?"

Yang Xiao and the others noticed the three monks' were short and skinny. Sitting inside the hollow trunks, they looked like corpses. Yet as he spoke, Du E's voice resounded in the mountain and valley. It was obvious that his internal strength was very deep. They could not help their faces from changing.

Zhang Wuji pondered in his heart, "Last night I was alone, hence I could not defeat them. Today I have many people with me. If we rely on number in fighting them, first, I might

not be able to unleash my skill to the fullest, second, even if we won, we will demean our own Cult's prestige. Too many people won't look good, too few people won't achieve anything. I think the best way would be three of us against three of them. Fair and square." Thereupon he said, "I have experience three eminent monks' divine skill last night; my heart is full of admiration. I do not dare to show off my shameful skill in front of the three of you. But Xie Fa Wang has shown me fatherly love; he is also a good friend and a brother to my brethrens here. Even if we have to overestimate our own strength, we must try to save him. I am thinking of asking two of my Cult brethrens to help, so that we will fight three against three; that way, we are receiving instruction on a level ground."

"Zhang Jiaozhu does not need to be modest," Du E dryly said, "If in your precious Cult you have someone whose seniority in martial art comprehension second only to Jiaozhu, then you need only one more person to kill us, the three old baldies. But if Lao Na's presumption is correct, there will not be any second person with skills as high as Jiaozhu's to be found in the world. In that case, it doesn't matter if you have more people or less people; all of you can come up together."

Zhou Dian, Priest Tie Guan, and the others looked at each other. They all thought this old bald donkey was very arrogant, by going as far as regarding the world's heroes as nothing. However, they also realized that they were praising Zhang Jiaozhu by saying that nobody in the world could be considered on par with him; so they were being polite after all. Zhou Dian was about to open his mouth to speak, but Shuo Bude's hand was quicker; it reached out to cover Zhou Dian's mouth.

Zhang Wuji said, "Our humble Cult is considered heretical [orig. pang2 men2 zuo3 dao4 - lit. side door, left way] and

not worthy to be compared to your precious Sect's prestigious name, but with our several hundred years of establishment, we do have some talented people. It was by chance that I am appointed the interim Cult Leader. In reality, in term of ability, insight and martial art skill, within my humble Cult, we do not lack people who are superior to me. Wei Fu Wang [bat king Wei], please deliver this visiting card to the three eminent monks." As he said that, he took out a piece of visiting card, which listed Zhang Wuji's name on the top, and then Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yin Tianzheng, Wei Yixiao, down to everybody who came to pay a visit.

Wei Yixiao knew the Cult Leader wanted him to demonstrate his unparalleled-in-the-present-age 'qing gong', to show the Shaolin monks that they should not belittle the Ming Cult characters. Immediately he bowed to accept the order. After taking the visiting card, without straightening up his back or even turning around, his body flew backward, as smooth as floating smoke. He covered the several 'zhang's distance as if he was skating on ice. As he got to the pine tree, he handed over the visiting card to Du E with both hands.

Du E and the others only saw his shadow sway, and Wei Yixiao had suddenly appeared in their presence. They had never seen 'qing gong' this exquisite; much less he was flying backwards, which was even unthinkable to them. They could not help but praised, "Good 'qing gong'!"

The crowd of Shaolin monks also knew a good thing when they see one, so they broke out in applause. Although the crowd of Ming Cult warriors had already aware of Wei Yixiao's excellent 'qing gong', it was the first time for them to see he fly backwards like that. Only, they felt uncomfortable to praise their own people openly, so even though their hearts were full of admiration, they restrained themselves from saying anything. Only Zhou Dian applauded noisily.

Du E slightly leaned his body forward and stretched out his hand to receive the visiting card. The five fingers of his right hand grabbed the card, and Wei Yixiao felt tingling sensation in his entire body, as if he was stricken by a thunder; his chest was burning, suddenly he felt weak. In his shock, he hastily circulated his energy trying to dissipate the attack.

At the same time, Du E took away the visiting card, and the whiff of internal energy transmitted through this card disappeared. Wei Yixiao's countenance changed, thinking that this one-eyed old monk's profound internal energy was truly immeasurable. He did not dare to linger any longer; leaning his body sideways, he skate on a layer of long grass on the ground, back to Zhang Wuji's side.

It was his infamous 'cao shang fei' [flying on the grass] 'qing gong'. Although it was not exceptionally good, but to train until he was able float like that, that could be considered brilliant. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the others thought, "This man can achieve this level of 'qing gong', he undoubtedly has received training from a master, but obviously because he has talent. It seems that he was born with different trait that other people would not necessarily reach this kind of level even though they train painstakingly."

Du E said, "Zhang Jiaozhu said on your precious Cult there will be three people joining our exchange of pointers. Other than Jiaozhu and this gentleman Wei Fu Wang, who will the other person be?"

Zhang Wuji replied, "Wei Fu Wang had received instructions from Dashi's divine internal energy. I am thinking of inviting the Ming Cult's Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness to help me."

Du E was surprised, "This young man has a very sharp vision," he mused, "I sent the internal energy via the visiting card for only a split second, yet unexpectedly it did not elude his eyes. Now, what kind of people are these Left and Right Emissaries of the Brightness? Could their martial art skills be better than this person surnamed Wei's?"

He had lived in seclusion for too long, hence he had never heard about Yang Xiao's reputation. As for Fan Yao, he had been living incognito for the last several years so not everybody knew about him.

As Yang and Fan two people heard Jiaozhu mentioning their names, they stepped forward at once and bowed down. "Respectfully accept Jiaozhu's command," they said.

"The Three Eminent Monks use flexible weapons, what will be a good weapon for us to use?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhang, Yang and Fan, three people usually fought their enemies barehanded. Today they were facing formidable opponents, so they could not hold on to their habit of not wielding any weapon. For these three people, they knew ten-thousand different techniques as well as one; for them, any weapons would do. Zhang Wuji asked this question just for the convenience of the other two.

"We'll follow Jiaozhu's instruction," Yang Xiao replied.

Zhang Wuji hesitated a moment; he thought, "Last night, the Twin Evils of Hejian were using short weapons to attack long ones; and they seemed to gain quite a few advantages from it." Thereupon he took the six tablets of Sheng Huo Ling from his bosom and handed over four of them to Yang Xiao and Fan Yao, while saying, "This time, we are going up the mountain to pay a visit to the Shaolin Temple, we do not dare to bring any weapons. This is our own Cult's treasure; let us

just use these tablets then.”

Yang and Fan two people bowed down and received the tablets. They were asking for further instructions when suddenly Kong Zhi shouted, “Ku Toutuo, we still have an unfinished business from the Wan An Temple; how can I let you go? Come, come, come! Let Lao Na ask for your advice first. Lao Na did not take the ‘Shi Xiang Ruan Jin San’ today; we are going to see our true power.”

He had never forgotten the resentment of being held captive at the Wan An Temple; upon seeing Fan Yao today, he had tried his best to suppress his rage, but at this time he could not hold his patience any longer.

Fan Yao laughed dryly and said, “I [orig. zai4xia4] received Jiaozhu’s order to ask instructions from the Three Eminent Monks. If Dashi wants to avenge the enmity of the former days, you’ll have to wait until this matter is closed, then I will be able to accompany you.”

From the hand of a Shaolin disciple standing next to him, Kong Zhi took a sword and shouted, “You are overestimating your own ability. You want to fight my three Shishu; if you don’t die, you will be seriously injured and then I can’t extract my revenge on you.”

Fan Yao laughed, “If I die under your honorable Shishu’s hand, won’t that be the same?”

Kong Zhi laughed coldly, “Looks to me there is no other master in your Ming Cult. What can I say?”

How could the Ming Cult warriors not know that he was provoking them? But if they ignored his remarks, would not the Shaolin Pai look down on the Ming Cult? In terms of rank,

Yin Tianzheng was right after Fan Yao. Zhang Wuji thought that his grandfather was old, it was inconvenient for him to ask Grandfather to fight. Therefore, he was thinking of asking his uncle [orig, Jiujiu – maternal uncle] Yin Yewang to take his father's place.

Yin Tianzheng took a step forward and said, "Jiaozhu, subordinate Yin Tianzheng is ready to accept instructions."

"Waigong is advanced in years, let me ask Uncle ..." Zhang Wuji said.

Yian Tianzheng cut him off, "I am old, but not as old as these Three Eminent Monks. Shaolin Pai can have their senior warriors; can't our Ming Cult have our own veteran?"

Zhang Wuji was aware that his grandfather's martial art skill was very deep; not beneath Yang Xiao or Fan Yao's, and a lot higher than his uncle's. If he joined this battle, their chance of victory was several degrees better. "All right," he said, "Fan You Shi can conserve your strength to accept instructions from Kong Zhi Shen Seng later. I am asking Grandfather to help me."

"I follow the order!" Yin Tianzheng replied, and took the Sheng Huo Ling tablets from Fan Yao's hands.

In a clear voice Abbot Kong Wen said, "Martial Uncles, this gentleman is Yin Lao Yingxiong [old hero Yin], Bai Mei Ying Wang [white-browed eagle king]. He is the founder of Tian Ying Jiao [heavenly eagle cult] of the former days, and its prestige was comparable to the Six major Sects. He is an extraordinary warrior. This gentleman is Mr. Yang; his inner and outer power has reached perfection. He is the Ming Cult's first class character. Numerous masters of Kunlun and Emei Pai have been defeated under his hands."

With a dry laugh Du Jie said, "Fortunate meeting, fortunate meeting! Let's see how well Shaolin disciples compete against them." The three black ropes shook; they soared like three China-ink black dragons and formed three layers of loops around their opponents.

Last night, when Zhang Wuji battled these three monks, he could not even see his own fingers, so he had to rely on the aura of the black ropes to determine the direction of the incoming weapons. This time, it was the beginning of the seventh hour [between 11am - 1pm]; the sun was shining brightly in the sky that he was able to see clearly every wrinkle on the faces of the three monks. Reversing the Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands, he cupped his fists and bowed. "Please forgive my offense," he said, and immediately attacked sideways.

Yang Xiao flew toward his left. With a loud shout Yin Tianzheng raised the Sheng Huoling in his right hand to strike the black rope in Du Nan's hand. A dull clanking noise was heard as the rope and the tablet collided. These two weapons were so strange that the noise generated when they struck each other also sounded weird. Both men's hands were shaken, and both exclaimed inwardly, "Very fierce!" They both realized that they were facing a formidable opponent, which they seldom meet in their lifetimes.

Zhang Wuji thought, "The three monks' black ropes are connected together to form a loop. Their defense is very tight. Although the three of us join hands, we might not necessarily be able to make a breakthrough within three to five hundred stances. We'd better try to exhaust the three monks' energy, then slowly look for a flaw." Seeing the black rope coil over his way, he used the Sheng Huo Ling to take the brute force head on with brute force.

Fighting for the time needed to cook rice, Zhang Wuji, three people managed to press forward and reduce the loop diameter a 'zhang' or so. However, as the three monks' loop was getting smaller, their defensive power increased. Each step the three attackers took required several folds of effort from the previous ones. As the battle progressed, Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng were more astonished than ever.

At first, the battle was three against three, but after about an hour, Yang and Yin, two people gradually could not hold their ground. In the end, the two of them fought Du Nan; while Zhang Wuji had to deal with Du E and Du Jie, two monks, alone.

Yin Tianzheng always took the 'hard' and 'ferocious' approach. Yang Xiao, on the other hand, sometimes used 'soft', sometimes 'hard'; his fighting style kept changing. Among these six combatants, Yang Xiao's martial art was the most attractive to look at. The two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands circled around and danced in the air; sometimes it became a sword, suddenly it changed into a saber. Sometimes he thrust it forward like a short spear, next time it struck, coiled, slapped, and then changed into a judge's pen; poking, pressing down, jerking up, and then the one in his left hand changed into a dagger, while the one in his right changed into an awl [(?) Translator's note: I don't know what kind of weapon this is. The original was 'shui3 ci4' ?? - 'water thorn']. Suddenly the one in his right hand changed into a steel whip, while the one in his left a crowbar. Within these hundreds of changes, he struck the two tablets to each other, creating a 'ya ya' [This is the transliteration of the Chinese characters, don't ask me what kind of noise is this.] sound, disturbing the enemy's concentration. Before they even fought for four hundred stances, the tablets had changed into twenty-two different weapons; with each weapon

incorporating two sets of styles, so altogether he had used forty-four different sets of styles.

Kong Zhi had mastered eleven out of Shaolin Pai's seventy-two unique skills; while almost no martial art skills in the world eluded Fan Yao's knowledge, but at this moment watching Yang Xiao deftly launch his divine skills, both of them could not help but inwardly sigh with admiration.

Zhou Dian had never been in good terms with Yang Xiao. The two of them had fought each other several times. But this moment, the longer Zhou Dian watched, the more ashamed he was. "Turn out this son of a turtle Yang Xiao has always yielded to me," he mused, "I knew his martial art skill was somewhat higher than mine, and I thought each time we fought, he was just lucky that he won by one stance or half a style. Who would have thought that I, Zhou Dian, actually inferior by one big peg to this son of a turtle."

However, no matter how many changes Yang Xiao launched, Du Nan's black rope still parry the two people's attack without showing any slackness. Everybody started to see white mist rising on top of Yin Tianzheng's head. They knew he was using his entire internal energy. The white robe he wore slowly ballooned up, and it was soaked with his perspiration. Each step he took left a deep mark on the ground. In an hour, the area around the three pine trees was full of his footprints.

Suddenly, Yin Tianzheng moved the Sheng Huo Ling tablet in his right hand to his left. With this pair of tablets he pushed Du Nan's black rope down; while with 'pi kong zhang' [splitting air palm] his right hand hack down toward Du Nan. Du Nan raised his left hand up with five fingers forming a claw, like a hollow fist, also hacking toward the incoming palm.

“Ah!” Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the other Shaolin monks exclaimed together; their voices were full of amazement and admiration. Turned out the technique Du Nan used was one of the seventy-two special skills of Shaolin, which was called the ‘xu mi shan zhang’ [overflowing mountain palm; ‘xu mi shan’ also means ‘Sumeru Mountain’, which is the central ‘world mountain’ of the Buddhist universe – courtesy of Ren Wo Xing]. Needless to say, this special skill was very difficult to train. But even if someone did master the technique, each time it was launched, the practitioner must assumed the horse stance, and concentrated his ‘qi’ for a long time; only then would he be able to gather his internal energy in his ‘dantian’. Who would have expected that Du Nan had a perfect control and was able to launch the ‘xu mi shan zhang’ at will?

‘Slap!’ as his hand blocked Yin Tianzheng’s palm, the black rope in his hand shook and struck toward Yang Xiao. But because the ‘xu mi shan zhang’ consumed a lot of energy, the power behind the black rope was diminished by more than a half. Du Nan quickly covered up his weakness by rolling, fluttering, and coiling the black rope as if it was a spirit snake randomly quivering in the air. Yang Xiao’s pair of Sheng Huoling tablets was also making countless changes. The eyes of most of the spectators were watching the battle between these two people.

Yin Tianzheng focused all his strength on his palms, sending strike after strike toward Du Nan. Sometimes he took two steps forward, another time he took two steps back.

On the other front, Zhang Wuji was engaged in a fierce battle against two formidable opponents. These three people’s style looked ordinary and bland, because their true battle was internal. This kind of staking-it-all internal energy match was

actually a lot more dangerous than Yin Tianzheng's battle of strength and Yang Xiao's battle of style against Du Nan. As soon as one of the parties' internal energy was overcome by the opponent, if he did not die instantly, then suffering fire-deviation, losing his sanity or being crippled was a common occurrence. However, only the combatants knew their own situations. To the spectators, even though their martial art skill was higher, they would never be able to predict the outcome of the battle by observing the three combatants' outward appearance.

Slowly the sun rose from the east, then it was exactly on top of their heads, before gradually moving to the west. By this time, the battle situation was clear for Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, and the other masters. They saw the mist coming out from the top of Yin Tianzheng's head was getting thicker; on the other hand, the trunk, the branches and the needle-leaves of the big pine tree in which Du Jie was sitting were shaking constantly. From this fact, they knew the difference in level of power of the two monks, Du E and Du Jie. At this stage of the battle, Du Jie's back was leaning against the tree to borrow its strength in blocking Zhang Wuji's Jiu Yang Shen Gong. If Yin Tianzheng fell, the Ming Cult lost; but if Du Jie gave up first, then the Shaolin Pai was defeated.

The six combatants also understood they had reached the crucial point of the battle. Yin Tianzheng was staking it all in sending out his palm attacks toward Du Nan, but after more than thirty stances, he realized he was not Du Nan's match. "Our priority today is saving Xie Xiongdi," he said in his heart, "My own victory or defeat, glory or disgrace, why should I care? Much less I lost under the hand of Shaolin Pai's senior master's hand, so nobody can say that the Bai Mei Ying Wang's prestige is damaged."

Thereupon, with all his might he blocked the enemy's attack, while he was forced to retreat half a step back. Successively he blocked more than ten strikes, and was forced to fall back more than a 'zhang'. He did not know, however, that Du Nan had trained the 'xu mi shan zhang', one of the seventy-two Shaolin Pai's special techniques for dozens of years, so that the power of his palm was not a small matter. As Yin Tianzheng withdrew one step, Du Nan's palm strength also advanced one step. Surprisingly, the power did not diminish ever so slightly with the increasing distance.

Yang Xiao thought, "This Shaolin monk is formidable indeed. No matter how much change my Sheng Huo Ling make, in the end I still fail to make him budge. Yin Bai Mei [white-browed Yin] only attacks with his strength, I am afraid he won't survive a prolonged battle."

He combined the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets and struck them toward the black rope. It looked like he was going to fight force with force head-on in order to help Yin Tianzheng. As the Sheng Huo Ling just about to strike the black rope, Du Nan shook his wrist, and the black rope rose up toward Yang Xiao's face. Yang Xiao's mind was as quick as lightning; he threw the Sheng Huo Ling tablets toward Du Nan's chest, while his palms turned over to grab the end of the rope. It was the stance called 'dao ye jiu niu wei' [pulling back nine ox tails], in which a sudden force was pulling outward.

Du Nan saw Yang Xiao throw his weapons like secret projectiles with an extremely strong force; he raised his left hand with a bent elbow to press down the Sheng Huo Ling threatening his left chest. To his surprise, the other Sheng Huo Ling suddenly changed its course midair and 'whoosh!' it flew toward Du Jie.

Yang Xiao was the most resourceful among these six

combatants. His attack with these two Sheng Huo Ling tablets toward Du Nan was a fake; his real target was Du Jie, in which he sent out his entire internal strength.

Du Jie was using his entire strength to fight Zhang Wuji. He noticed that in dealing with Yang and Yin, two people, Du Nan seemed to gain an upper hand. He had never expected that Yang Xiao was able to launch this extraordinary sneak attack with such a weird technique. In his shock, he saw the Sheng Huo Ling was already in front of his face. Du Jie's concentration was slightly broken. He lightly stretched his hand with two fingers up to catch the Sheng Huo Ling. But his entire strength and attention was focused on blocking Zhang Wuji's attack; as he was disturbed, the pine tree he was sitting on shook violently, pine-needles fell down like rain.

As he saw a big break in his opponent's line of defense, Zhang Wuji launched the highest technique of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to penetrate this opening. It was unstoppable even when the enemy used a hundred different techniques to block; much less Du Jie was in a disadvantageous situation. Zhang Wuji sent his internal energy toward his five fingers. With a 'zip, zip' noise, his hand struck down. 'Crack, crack!' In an instant, the branches on Du Jie's tree were shaken and fell down one by one.

Du E realized their precarious situation. 'Whoosh!' He stood up suddenly. His shadow swayed and he flew toward Du Jie's side. Stretching his left hand, he grabbed Du Jie's shoulder. With the help of his martial brother Du E, Du Jie was able to steady himself.

On the other front, Du Nan's fight against Yin Tianzheng and Yang Xiao also reached a critical moment, where both sides were staking all they have in a life and death battle. Yang

Xiao was grabbing the rope and trying to pull it away. With a 'splitting mountain, crushing stone' kind of palm power, Yin Tianzheng kept pressing down the enemy. Two masters, one pulled, the other pushed. Du Nan was attacked with two exact opposite forces; even though he was extremely strained, he did not seem to be in danger of losing.

The spectators on the side, both the Ming Cult warriors and the Shaolin monks, also saw this critical situation. They knew that if the battle went on, not only the victory or defeat was difficult to decide, perhaps from among these six masters, more than half would be either dead or seriously injured. The hill peak was awfully quiet, with the backs of most of the spectators wet with sweats. They were all very tense; everybody was concerned about their own side.

The silence was suddenly broken by a low and deep voice, coming from the ground in the middle of the three pine trees, "Yang Zuo Shi, Yin Dage, Wuji Hai'er [left emissary Yang, big brother Yin, child Wuji], I, Xie Xun, have a pair of bloodstained hands. I deserved to be condemned. Today, in order to save me, you are battling the Shaolin Temple's three eminent monks. If either side is harmed, Xie Xun, cannot bear the additional guilt. Child Wuji, quickly take our Cult brethren out of the Shaolin Temple. If you don't, I am going to cut my own main artery to avoid adding my own sin."

Xie Xun spoke with his divine skill 'lion roar', with which, on the Wang Pan Island in the past, he had shaken the soul of countless warriors from various clans and sects ['bang' and 'pai']. This time, although he did not use it to harm anybody, he still managed to shake everybody's soul that their eardrums were buzzing, and they looked at each other with changed countenances.

Zhang Wuji knew his Yifu's words were as strong as a

mountain; and his Yifu was not willing for anybody to be injured to get himself out of this trouble. Zhang Wuji considered the present situation carefully; supposing both sides fought with all their strengths, although he himself might be all right, but it was possible that Grandfather, Yang Xiao, Du Jie and Du Nan, four people could not avoid injuries.

While he was hesitating, Xie Xun loudly shouted, "Wuji, you are not leaving yet?"

"Yes!" Zhang Wuji said, "I will follow Yifu's order." He took a step backward, and in a clear voice he said, "The Three Eminent Monks' martial art skill is really marvelous. Today the Ming Cult is not able to break it. We will return some other day to ask more advice. Grandfather, Yang Zuo Shi, we stop fighting!" As he said that, he gathered his 'qi' and flicked Du E and Du Jie's black ropes that the ropes returned to their master.

Yang Xiao and Yin Tianzheng heard his order, but they were still engaged in an internal energy battle with Du Nan, and were incapable of stopping the fight, because if they pulled back their strengths, Du Nan's force would injure them. For the same reason, Du Nan was also incapable of stopping the fight.

Zhang Wuji walked in front of Yin Tianzheng. Waving both of his palms, he took and neutralized the palm power of Du Nan and Yin Tianzheng from left and right. And then reaching out with a Sheng Huo Ling, he pressed down on the black rope near the end held by Du Nan's hand. This black rope was held at either end by Du Nan and Yang Xiao, it was stretched very tight just like a bowstring. As Zhang Wuji's Sheng Huo Ling pressed down, Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi's divine power immediately dissolved the pulling forces. The black rope loosened and fell down to the ground.

Yang Xiao deftly reached down and caught the rope. Du Nan's countenance changed; he was just about to speak when Yang Xiao, holding the black rope with both hands, took several steps forward and said, "Respectfully presenting Dashi's weapon." Du Jie understood Yang Xiao's intention. He picked the Sheng Huo Ling tablets by his side and returned them to Yang Xiao.

After going through this battle, the three Shaolin eminent monks lost their previous haughtiness. They knew that if this staking-it-all battle continued, both sides would suffer losses, while the three of them would not necessarily achieve victory.

"Lao Na has lived in seclusion for decades," Du E said, "To be able to make acquaintance with worthy warriors of the present time, we feel very happy and fortunate. Zhang Jiaozhu, you have people with outstanding ability in your precious Cult. You yourself are even more excelling above the others. I hope you will use this excellent capability to benefit common people and do not use it for dishonorable businesses."

Zhang Wuji bowed and said, "Thank you very much for Dashi's advice. Our humble Cult does not dare to commit evil acts."

Du E continued, "We, three martial brothers, will respectfully await here for Zhang Jiaozhu's third visit."

"I do not dare," Zhang Wuji replied, "However, I will have to ask for some more advice. Xie Fa Wang is my Yifu. His kindness is more than a family to me."

Du E heaved a deep sigh, closed his eyes, and did not say anything anymore.

Leading Yang Xiao and the others, Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and took his leave from Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, and the other Shaolin monks; then they went down the mountain. Peng Yingyu sent out a signal, instructing the Five-element Flags to withdraw. Five 'li's outside the Temple, the Cult disciples from Jumu [gigantic tree/wood] and Houtu [thick earth] Flags built more than a dozen wooden shacks on a hillside for their leaders lodgings.

Zhang Wuji was despressed, as he thought that within their Cult, nobody possessed martial art skills higher than Yang Xiao and his grandfather. Even if he took Fan Yao and Wei Yixiao, he doubt if the result would be different than today's battle. Where in the world can I find one or two masters who are superior to them, who can help me break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'?

Peng Yingyu guessed correctly what was in his mind. "Jiaozhu," he said, "Have you forgotten about Zhang Zhenren?"

Zhang Wuji hesitantly said, "Supposing my Tai Shifu is willing to go down the mountain and help us, the two of us join hands, we would certainly break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'. However, by doing this, Tai Shifu would damage the friendship between the Shaolin Pai and Wudang Pai; so Tai Shifu might not want to do it. Besides, Tai Shifu is over a hundred years old. Although his martial art skill has reached a high degree of proficiency, his physique is, after all, declining. If there is any accident, wouldn't that be very bad?"

Yin Tianzheng suddenly rose on his feet, with a laughter he said, "If Zhang Zhenren is willing to go down the mountain, our success is guaranteed. Marvelous! Marvelous!" After

several hollow laughs, the laughing voice suddenly stopped, but his mouth was still wide open.

Seeing he froze in standing position with a laughing face, the group of warriors felt strange. "Yin Xiong," Yang Xiao said, "Do you think Zhang Zhenren will go down the mountain to help us?"

He asked twice, but Yin Tianzheng did not reply, he did not even move. Zhang Wuji was startled, he reached out to feel his pulse, and found that Yin Tianzheng's pulse had already stopped; he had unexpectedly passed away.

Turned out when Yin Tianzheng was the only one left to fight the warriors of the Six Major Sects on the Brightness Peak, he had strained himself, and his physique had suffered a great damage. His recent 'staking-it-all' battle with Du Nan had further depleted his strength, plus he was also quite advanced in years, so his condition was like a dried up oil lamp.

Crying, Zhang Wuji embraced his body. Yin Yewang rushed forward and cried his heart out. The group of warriors also remembered their comradeship and spirit of loyalty and brotherhood ['yi qi']; there wasn't anybody who did not shed tears. The news travelled fast; there were a lot of Heavenly Eagle Cult disciples who now served under the Ming Cult banner, their sound of crying shook the hill and valley.

For the next several days the group of warriors was busy attending to Yin Tianzheng's funeral. Wulin leaders and masters from various sects and clans and societies also went up the mountain. These people admired Yin Tianzheng's prestige, and came in front of his coffin in the wooden shack to offer their condolences.

Later on, Shaolin Pai also sent thirty-six monks to offer prayers for Yin Tianzheng's departing soul. But they had only read several verses from the scripture when Yin Yewang, with a 'ku sang' staff [from MDBG dictionary: a mourning staff draped in white, held at a funeral to show filial piety] in his hand, exploded in anger and chased these thirty-six monks out.

From the side, Zhou Dian shouted his curse, "Hypocritical Shaolin bald donkeys!"

Zhang Wuji's heart was still burdened with their rescue effort; several times he consulted Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu, Zhao Min, and the others, but nobody was able to offer a good solution. Zhao Min wanted to try the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' in Du E's, three monks, diet. She also wanted to summon Lu Zhangke and He Biweng to collaborate with Zhang Wuji. But on both accounts Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao and the others thought it was inappropriate.

End of Chapter 36.

Chapter 37 - No Hero Under the Heavens Able to Withstand

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



A hundred Hong Shui Flag men pumped their spray guns and a hundred streams of water were shot out. The crowd of heroes smelled a peal of acid stench , as the twenty hungry wolves were hit by the water, they tumbled down at once, yelping madly and howling miserably. In an instant, their skin split open and their flesh rot, they turned into coal-black piles.

Very soon it was the Duan Yang Festival. Zhang Wuji led the Ming Cult warriors to Shaolin Temple. The Shaolin Temple's front hall, rear hall, left and right side rooms, everywhere was overflowing with heroes and warriors from all kinds of martial art schools. Among these Wulin characters, some had enmity toward Xie Xun, so they anxiously came to kill him to avenge their grievance. Some others were there for the Tulong Saber, so they were dreaming of snatching the precious saber away and becoming the 'most revered in the Wulin world' [wulin zhi zun]. Yet some others were having a grudge against each other, so they came to seize the opportunity to avenge their grievances. But the majority came just because they loved the festivities bustling with noise and excitement.

The Shaolin Temple prepared more than a hundred monks as ushers; they directed the guests to their respective places. Wudang Pai had sent Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting as their representatives. Zhang Wuji quickly stepped forward to welcome them and inquired about Zhang Sanfeng's well-being.

Yu Lianzhou quietly said, "Did you hear anything about Qingshu and Chen Youliang?"

Zhang Wuji briefly told him what happened since they parted, and was relieved to learn Song and Chen, two men, had not stirred up any trouble on Mount Wudang, and that at

this moment, Song Yuanqiao and Zhang Songxi did not come because they were guarding their Shifu and their monastery against the traitors' evil plot. Yu Lianzhou also mentioned that ever since Song Yuanqiao heard with his own ears how his own only son was plotting against him, he was heart-broken and did not have any appetite for food and drink. Right now, he was half as thin as he was. They did not dare to tell their Shifu anything, for fear that Shifu would be grieved.

Zhang Wuji said, "I do hope Song Shige [martial (older) brother] realizes his wrong path very soon and repents, so that he can be reunited with Song Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle]."

"That is so," Yu Lianzhou said, "But this renegade has killed Mo Qidi [seventh (younger) brother], we cannot let him off lightly." His voice was full of bitter hatred.

Within the next two hours, more and more Wulin characters arrived. The Twin Evil of Hejian and the Qinghai Pai swordsmen who fought the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan the other day had also arrived. Huashan Pai, Kongtong Pai and Kunlun Pai also sent out their masters to attend the meeting. Only nobody from Emei Pai went up the mountain.

Zhang Wuji was hoping he would see Zhou Zhiruo; he wanted to explain to her why he did what he did the other day. However, as he imagined her face and her gaze, he became anxious from a mixture of fear and shame.

The Ming Cult warriors were assigned the west side room. They did not mingle with the other heroes, because they simply had too many enemies. They were afraid that as personal enemies meet, a big fight would ensue even before the Great Assembly was officially opened.

As the seventh hour [between 11am - 1 pm] arrived, the usher monks invited the guests to gather on a large open space to the right of the Temple. It was actually a several hundred 'mu' [1 mu is approximately one fifteenth of a hectare] vegetable garden on which the monks grew their food. But this time the field was leveled, and several dozens wooden shelters were erected on it.

The warriors sat on their assigned seats as directed by the monks. Any school, sect, clan or society with a large group of warriors occupied one shelter; while those with fewer numbers of delegates shared the shelter with other warriors. Peng Yingyu reported the name and origin of each and every warrior on the field for Zhang Wuji's benefit.

When all the warriors had gathered, it was obvious that this meeting would be a grand occasion. Many characters who normally did not roam the Jianghu too often, who had lived in the privacy of the remote mountains and forests, also made their appearance one after another. Peng Yingyu estimated that not including the Ming Cult, there were about 4,600 people on the field that day. Seeing these numerous assembly participants, most of them were not friendly toward the Ming Cult, Zhang Wuji, Yang Xiao, and the others were anxious.

After the audience had been seated, the Shaolin monks began to appear. Beginning with the Yuan generation, followed by Hui, Fa, Xiang, and Zhuang, they bowed toward the audience. Finally Kong Zhi Shen Seng appeared, followed by nine senior monks from the Damo Hall. Kong Zhi walked toward the middle of the field, clasped his palms in respect, uttered some praises to Buddha, and then said, "The arrival of the world's heroes in acceptance to our invitation today has brought great honor to Shaolin Pai. However, Fangzhang Shixiong is suddenly ill that he does not have the good fortune of seeing the virtuous guests. He therefore, asked Lao

Na to convey his deepest regret.”

Zhang Wuji felt little bit strange, “When Kong Wen Dashi attended Grandfather’s funeral the other day, he did not look sick at all; he looked spirited and bright. With the kind of internal energy he has, how can he fall sick so suddenly? Could he be injured?” He looked around but saw neither Yuan Zhen nor Chen Youliang; he thought, “That night I exposed Yuan Zhen’s treachery to Du E, three eminent monks; I wonder if Shaolin has taken care of him or not. I wonder if Kong Wen Dashi’s sudden illness has anything to do with it.”

At the end of the Southern Song Dynasty, after Guo Jing and Huang Rong, husband and wife, had scored several major victories, they invited the world’s heroes and warriors to Xiangyang to discuss plans and strategies to withstand the Mongolian invasion. And now, almost a hundred years later, another great assembly of world’s heroes and warriors, the biggest grand occasion in the Jianghu, was being held; but all of a sudden the host was ill. It is no wonder the crowd of warriors could not help but feel disappointed.

They heard Kong Zhi continue, “Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun has wreaked havoc in the Wulin; he has committed a very serious crime. Luckily, our humble Temple has captured him. Shaolin Pai does not dare to make the decision on our own. Therefore, we respectfully invite all honorable Wulin warriors to discuss how we are going to handle this matter.”

His face was long ever since he made his appearance; by now, he sounded lethargic. As soon as he finished speaking, he clasped his palms again and withdrew.

A man stood up on the southeast corner, his stature was big and tall, the black beard on his face was interspersed with white, and it was fluttering in the breeze, he swept his gaze

on the warriors with a bright and fiery pair of eyes; in short, he looked imposing. Peng Yingyu quietly informed Zhang Wuji that this person was Shandong's old pugilist master, Xia Zhou. They heard his thunderous voice say, "This Xie Xun has done too much evil. Your precious Sect unexpectedly able to capture him, the benefit you bring to the Wulin world is not small. Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, two Shen Seng [divine monks] are too modest. This kind of evil person deserves to be executed immediately with a blade. End of story. Why do you have to ask others? Today, the heroes from all over the world are gathered here, and we call this assembly 'tu shi da hui' [lion-slaying great assembly]. Let us put this Xie Xun to death, and then everybody eat his flesh and drink his blood, as a revenge for our innocent friends and relatives who died under his hands. Won't we all be happy?"

His own older brother was killed by Xie Xun, so for the last dozens of years he always wanted revenge. As his words, several hundred people around the field echoed his sentiment; they all wanted to kill Xie Xun as soon as possible.

Amidst the commotion, suddenly a sad sounding voice was heard. "Xie Xun is the Ming Cult's 'hu jiao fa wang' [see my note in Chapter 30 earlier]. If Shaolin Pai were not afraid to offend the Ming Cult, they would already have put Xie Xun to the sword early on; why would they invite everybody here to share the blame? I think, Xia Dage [big brother Xia], you are a bit muddle-headed. Let your brother here tell you something: you'd better watch out for your own life."

His voice might be sad and high-pitched, sounded like a man, but also like a woman, but as it reached everybody's ears, the words were very clear. Everybody turned their heads toward the voice, but they could not see who it was. Apparently, that speaker was short, and when he talked, he did not stand up. Sitting among the crowd, nobody could see

him.

Xia Zhou loudly said, "Is that 'zui bu si' [drunken but not dead] Brother Situ? I have an enmity with that Xie Xun for killing my brother. A real man is not afraid of his own actions. I can ask the Shaolin eminent monks to take him out; I will kill him personally. If the devil heads of the Devil Cult want revenge, they can come to look for the man surnamed Xia of Shandong."

The man with the sad voice laughed and said, "Xia Dage, everybody in Jianghu knows that the 'most revered in the Wulin world', the precious Tulong Saber, has fallen into Xie Xun's hand. Since Shaolin Pai has acquired Xie Xun, how can they not be interested in the treasured Saber? Killing Xie Xun is secondary; lifting up the Saber to show their prestige is the priority. I'll say: Kong Zhi Dashi, you don't need to put an act; just take that precious Tulong Saber and hold it high in your hands, let us broaden our horizons. For thousand of years, you, Shaolin Pai, have been the head and brain of the Wulin world. With the Saber you won't achieve much, without the Saber you won't lose much; you will always be the 'most revered in the Wulin world'."

In a low voice Peng Yingyu said to Zhang Wuji, "The speaker is 'Zui Bu Si', Situ Qianzhong. This person is carefree; I heard he doesn't have any master, does not take any disciple, does not belong to any school or society, and very seldom engage in battle. Nobody knows the detail of his martial art skill. His tone is always cold and condescending, but oftentimes right on target."

They heard about seven, eight people in the audience say, "His words make sense. Would Shaolin Pai please take the Tulong Saber out for everybody to see?"

“The Tulong Saber is not in our humble Temple,” Kong Zhi slowly said, “In all my life, Lao Na has never seen it. I am not even sure if such saber indeed exists in the world.”

As soon as the crowd of heroes heard this, they broke into murmurs; the field was suddenly bustling with noise. The attendees were originally thinking that other than about Tulong Saber, this assembly did not have anything else of great importance. Who would have thought that Kong Zhi would flatly deny the possession of the Saber? Everybody felt strange.

The nine old monks standing behind Kong Zhi were all wearing red kasayas. After the commotion in the audience subsided, one of the nine monks took two steps forward and with a loud voice said, “The Tulong Saber was originally in Xie Xuns hands; however, when our humble Sect captured him, the Saber was no longer in his possession. Our temple’s Fangzhang realizes that this is an important matter of the Wulin world; therefore, he immediately launched an investigation. Xie Xun is stubborn and arrogant; he is unwilling to tell us the truth. Today’s great assembly of heroes, first of all, is to discuss how we are going to handle Xie Xun. Secondly, we want to inquire if any of the heroes has heard anything about the Tulong Saber’s whereabouts. Whoever has any information is invited to speak up.”

The crowd of heroes looked at each other; nobody opened his mouth. Again, the ‘Zui Bu Si’ Situ Qianzhong, with his sad and high-pitched voice said, “For the last hundred of years, there is a saying in the martial art world, ‘the most revered in the Wulin world, precious Saber slaughtering the dragon (Tu Long), ruling under the heavens, nobody dares to disobey. Yitian (relying on Heaven) does not appear, who can match its sharpness?’ Other than the Tulong Saber, there is the Yitian Sword. I heard this Yitian Sword was originally in the

hands of Emei Pai, but after the battle of the western region's Brightness Peak, nobody knew its whereabouts. Just because today's meeting is called the Heroes' Assembly, could it be that the Emei Pai's heroines refuse to come?" As the people heard his last sentence they broke into boisterous laughter.

[Translator's note: 'ying xiong' - hero, where the 'xiong' character can also mean 'male' (mostly used to refer to male animal), so literally, 'ying xiong' means 'brave male'. Situ Qianzhong used the characters 'ying ci' - 'brave female (animal)'. By calling the Emei Pai heroines as 'ying ci', he was not being complimentary (He would have used 'nu-xia' if he wanted to be courteous).]

Amidst the loud laughter, a monk in charge of guest reception made an announcement in loud voice, "The Beggar Clan's Shi Bangzhu, has arrived accompanied by various Zhanglao and various disciples."

As he heard the word 'Shi Bangzhu' three characters, Zhang Wuji was greatly surprised. "The Beggar Clan's Shi Huolong had died long ago under Yuan Zhen's hands," he thought, "How come there is another Shi Bangzhu?"

"Please!" Kong Zhi responded. The Beggar Clan was the biggest clan in Jianghu, so it was only proper for him to welcome them personally.

They saw a large group of people walk towards the open field in quick pace. There were approximately 150 men, all in rags and tattered clothes. The Beggar Clan's prestige has been in decline in the last several years, but just like a centipede that moves even after it dies, it had not become placid; the Beggar Clan still has an enormous power in the Jianghu. The crowd of heroes did not dare to despise them; most of them stood up to show their respect.

The ones in the front were two elderly beggars. Zhang Wuji recognized them as Chuan Gong Zhanglao and Zhi Fa Zhanglao. Behind these two old beggars was an ugly girl of twelve, thirteen years; her nose curved upward, her mouth was wide, revealing two big front teeth. She was none other than Shi Huolong's daughter, Shi Hongshi. In her hand was the Beggar Clan's symbol of authority, the Dog Beating Stick. Behind Shi Hongshi walked Zhang Bang Longtou and Zhang Bo Longtou, followed by eight-pouch elders, seven-pouch disciples, and six-pouch disciples. It looked like the lowest ranking disciples within the Beggar Clan contingent this time were the six-pouch disciples.

As Kong Zhi saw the one holding the Dog Beating Stick was a little girl, he hesitated; he was not sure which one was the Clan Leader and thus was not sure to whom he should speak, but he was obliged to respond. Therefore, clasping his palms, he said without addressing anybody in particular, "The monks of Shaolin respectfully welcome the warriors of the Beggar Clan."

Together, the Beggar Clan warriors cupped their fists to return the propriety. Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "Our humble Clan's former Shi Bangzhu was unfortunate and has return to Heaven. The elders have voted to elect Shi Bangzhu's daughter, Miss Shi Hongshi to be Bangzhu. This lady is therefore our Clan's new Bangzhu." He pointed toward Shi Hongshi.

Kong Zhi and the crowd of warriors were taken aback. They remembered the saying in the Jianghu, 'Ming Jiao, Gai Bang, Shaolin Pai'. Within the 'jiao' [cults, religions], Ming Cult was the leader; within the world's 'bang hui' [clans and societies], the Beggar Clan held the place of honor; within the 'men pai' [martial art schools and sects], Shaolin Pai was the number

one. The Ming Cult had elected a twenty-year-old young man, Zhang Wuji as their Jiaozhu; already people were clucking their tongues in amazement. And now the Beggar Clan pushed this little girl to be their Bangzhu? If it did not come from a Zhanglao's [elder] mouth, nobody would believe it. In the past, Huang Rong was also a young girl when she took over the Beggar Clan's Bangzhu position. Although it was a good precedent, at that time Huang Rong was several years older compared to this little girl.

Kong Zhi did not lack any courtesy in his surprise. He clasped his palms and said, "Shaolin disciple Kong Zhi pays his respect to Shi Bangzhu."

Shi Hongshi bowed down to return the propriety; she seemed to mumble something, but nothing came out of her mouth. Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "Our humble Clan's Bangzhu is young. All businesses of the Clan are temporarily being handled by Xiongdi [brother, referring to self] and Zhi Fa Zhanglao, two people. Kong Zhi Shen Seng is more senior by far so you do not need to be overly courteous."

After the two of them exchanged some modest pleasantries, the usher monk directed the Beggar Clan warriors to take their seats in one of the wooden shelters.

The Beggar Clan contingent was big, so it took half a day for all of them to be seated. Zhang Wuji noticed that the group of beggars was wearing mourning clothes; their faces carried grief and an indignation expression. The pouches on some of the disciples had things inside that were seemingly wriggling and moving. It was obvious that they came with some purpose in mind. Zhang Wuji smirked inwardly; he whispered to Yang Xiao, "We have some helpers."

He saw Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa, two elders were escorting

Shi Hongshi walk toward the Ming Cult's shelter. Chuan Gong Zhanglao cupped his fists in salute and said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, our humble Clan shares a large part of responsibility in Jin Mao Shi Wang falling into the enemy. Even if we have to lose our lives today, we must redeem our offense. Furthermore, we want to avenge our Shi Bangzhu's death. The Beggar Clan, from top to bottom, is under Zhang Jiaozhu's command."

"I do not dare," Zhang Wuji hastily returned the propriety.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao was speaking with his strong internal power that his words were loud and clear; obviously, he deliberately wanted everybody in that open field to hear. As he finished speaking, the numerous Beggar Clan disciples stood up together and said in loud voices, "Respectfully waiting for the Ming Cult Zhang Jiaozhu's command; we will not refuse to go through the water or tread on the fire."

The warriors were baffled, "Since when the Beggar Clan formed a life and death alliance with the Ming Cult?"

Other than very few people who seldom roamed the Jianghu, everybody knew that for the past many years, the Beggar Clan and the Ming Cult were always at each other's throat. A few years ago, the Beggar Clan participated in the siege of the Brightness Peak. The casualties from both sides were very heavy in that one bloody battle alone. On their last attack against the Brightness Peak, almost all Beggar Clan warriors were annihilated. And now, Chuan Gong Zhanglao had openly declared that the entire Beggar Clan force was under Zhang Wuji's command, and that they wanted to avenge their former Shi Bangzhu, everyone scratched their heads in confusion.

Chuan Gong Zhanglao turned around and said in a loud

voice, "Our Beggar Clan and Shaolin Pai never had neither enmity nor grudge. Our humble Clan has always regarded Shaolin Pai as the Wulin's number one major sect. In case of any small misunderstanding, we have always exercised self-restraint as much as we possibly can, and have never dared to offend Shaolin Pai openly. As our humble Clan's Shi Qian Bangzhu's [former Shi Bangzhu] subordinates, we have always admired the Four Divine Monks of Shaolin as persons of virtue and prestige; as the model warriors of the martial art study we should imitate. Shi Qian Bangzhu had long ago lived in seclusion to recuperate from his injury in peace and quiet; for dozens of years he had not made any contacts with other Jianghu characters. But somehow, he had fallen under a Shaolin senior monk's evil hands ..."

"Ah!" as he spoke to this point, the people around the field called out in shock. Even Kong Zhi was taken by surprise.

In the meantime, Chuan Gong Zhanglao continued, "We come here today to ask, in the presence of the heroes of the world, Kong Wen Fangzhang to give us directions in treading this confusing path. What did our Shi Qian Bangzhu do to offend Shaolin that that Shaolin senior monk, even after he killed Shi Qian Bangzhu, had to be so merciless toward his widow, a lone helpless woman that in the end Mrs. Shi was not able to defend her own life?"

"Amitufo," Kong Zhi clasped his palms, "Only at this moment Lao Na learned of Shi Bangzhu's misfortune and that he passed away. Zhanglao keeps proclaiming that it was our humble Sect's disciple who has done it; I am afraid there is a big misunderstanding in this case. Would Zhanglao please tell us the details?"

Chuan Gong Zhanglao said, "For thousands of years Shaolin Pai has been the 'tai shan bei dou' [Mount Tai (Taishan) Big

Dipper Constellation, 'as weighty as Mt. Tai, as brilliant as the Big Dipper', meaning the ultimate] of the Wulin world; how can we dare to make a false accusation? Your precious Temple has an eminent monk and a secular disciple; we request that they come out and confront us."

"Zhanglao please tell us what to do, we will comply," Kong Zhi replied, "I wonder which two people Zhanglao wants to come out?"

"They are ..." Chuan Gong Zhanglao only uttered the 'are' word, and suddenly he was tongue-tied with his mouth open, unable to continue.

Kong Zhi was shocked. He hastily stepped forward and grabbed his right wrist, feeling for pulse, which, unexpectedly, had stopped. Kong Zhi was even more shocked. "Zhanglao! Zhanglao!" he called. Looking at Chuan Gong Zhanglao's face, Kong Zhi saw a small black dot the size of the head of an incense stick between his eyebrows; apparently his fatal point was hit by some poisonous secret projectile.

With a loud voice Kong Zhi shouted, "Fellow Heroes and Warriors, please understand. This Beggar Clan elder was hit by a poisonous secret projectile and unfortunately lost his life. Our Shaolin Pai has never used this kind of evil secret projectile."

The Beggar Clan people immediately broke into clamor; several dozen people rushed toward Chuan Gong Zhanglao's body. Zhang Bo Longtou took a piece of magnet from his pocket and put it in between Chuan Gong Zhanglao's eyebrows. He pulled a steel needle, as fine as an ox hair, only about an inch long. The Beggar Clan elders realized that Kong Zhi was not lying; an upright and prestigious sect like

Shaolin Pai certainly would not use this kind of evil secret projectile. However, someone had sneakily and unexpectedly launched a secret projectile, under broad daylight, under the gaze of thousands of eyes without anybody seeing it, and this was certainly strange beyond anybody's imagination.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao and the others thought that Chuan Gong Zhanglao was standing with his face to the south, so the secret projectile must come from the south. At this time, the sun was shining dazzlingly, Chuan Gong Zhanglao was indignant and excited so he must have been unguarded against this kind of fine secret projectile. With angry glare the elders looked at the people behind Kong Zhi. They saw that the eyes of the nine old monks wearing red kasaya were half-closed with their eyebrows drooping down. Behind these nine monks stood a row of monks wearing yellow robes, followed by monks in gray robes. However, although they had no doubt that the murderer was one of these Shaolin monks, they could not tell which one was the villain.

Zhi Fa Zhanglao let out a loud and long laugh, while tears rolling down like rain from his eyes. "Kong Zhi Dashi," he said, "Are you still thinking that we have brought false accusation towards Shaolin Pai? How will you explain what has just happened?"

Zhang Bang Longtou was the most hot-tempered among the beggars; brandishing the iron staff in his hand, he roared, "We will fight to the death with Shaolin Pai today!"

'Clang, clang, clang!' a chaotic noise was heard as the Beggar Clan people took out their weapons and charged toward the middle of the field.

With a grieved countenance Kong Zhi turned around toward the group of Shaolin monks. "Ever since our ancestor Damo arrived from the west, for thousands of years our Temple has

established a strong foundation in diligent cultivation of the teachings of Buddha and the most refined in maintaining monastic discipline. Although we train martial arts for self-defense and have been interacting with the brave warriors of the Jianghu, we have never dared to perform dishonorable deeds. Fangzhang Shixiong [martial brother Abbot] and I have long ago given up the worldly matters. How can we still feel any attachment to this red dust ...” His gaze swept the faces of the monks. “This poisonous needle,” he continued, “Who shot it out? A real man who dares to do it, must also have the courage to accept responsibility. Stand up and face me.”

None of the several hundred monks opened his mouth; some of them muttered, “Amitufo, sin, sin!”

Zhang Wuji’s heart was stirred, he recalled his parents’ story how his mother Yin Susu had posed as his father, Zhang Cuishan, and used poisonous needles to kill Shaolin monks, and thus had caused his father to bear the grudge despite his innocence. But the silver needles of Tian Ying Jiao [Heavenly Eagle Cult] differed greatly from this steel needle, both in shape and in toxicity. The poison of the one taken from Chuan Gong Zhanglao’s dead body looked like that of the western region’s venomous insect ‘xin yi tiao’ [one heart beat]. It was called the ‘xin yi tiao’ because as the poison from the insect contacted the warm blood, the heart would beat only once, and then it would stop beating altogether.

Zhang Wuji knew that Shi Huolong was killed by Yuan Zhen; he also knew that hidden among the Shaolin monks were Yuan Zhen’s henchmen. Consequently, the reason Chuan Gong Zhanglao was shot with the needle must be to close his mouth from mentioning Yuan Zhen’s name. Only at that time everybody was looking at Chuan Gong Zhanglao, so nobody paid any attention on who shot the needle.

Zhang Bang Longtou shouted, "Tens of thousands Beggar Clan disciples all know who Shi Bangzhu's killer is. You want to kill others to close their mouths? Humph, humph! Only if you kill all Beggar Clan disciples under the heavens! The murderer is a Buddhist monk, his name is Yuan Zhen ..."

Zhang Bo Longtou suddenly leaped in front of his comrade; his iron bowl moved. 'Ding!' he caught a steel needle with the bowl. It was still unclear from which direction the steel needle was shot, but Zhang Bo Longtou had put all his concentration guarding from the side. As soon as he saw a bluish streak of light flickered under the sun, he lifted his iron bowl to catch it. If he was half a step late, Zhang Bang Longtou would certainly meet his violent death.

Kong Zhi's shadow circled around to the back of the nine Damo Hall monks. 'Bang!' He kicked the fourth old monk down, followed by a grab on that monk's collar. "Kong Ru," he said while lifting that monk up, "It turns out that it is you! You are also ganging up with Yuan Zhen?" His right hand pulled down the front lapel of Kong Ru's Buddhist robe. 'Rip!' the robe tore, revealing a small steel tube, with a small hole on the head of the tube, on his waist.

Suddenly it became clear to everybody: there must be a powerful spring inside this steel tube. That monk only needed to reach into his pocket, press the trigger and the poisonous needle would shoot out of the hole. He did not need to raise his hand or wave his arm to do this; therefore, even if one was facing him only a few feet apart, one would not necessarily be able to see him shooting the secret projectile.

In his grief and anger, Zhang Bang Longtou raised his iron staff and swept it down, crushing Kong Ru's brain out. Kong

Ru was a peer of the Four Divine Monks; his martial art skill was on par with them, but he was seized by Kong Zhi and the acupoint on his back was sealed, so he could not move. As Zhang Bang Longtou's iron staff swept down, he was unable to evade. The crowd of warriors cried out in alarm together.

Kong Zhi was taken by surprise; he glowered at Zhang Bang Longtou, thinking, "You are too hot-headed; you did not even investigate clearly."

Amidst this confusion, suddenly from outside the field four Buddhist nuns wearing black robes walked in quick steps, each one had a whisk in her hand. In loud and clear voices they announced, "Emei Pai Zhangmen [sect leader] Zhou Zhiruo, leading the Emei disciples, pays her respect to Shaolin Temple's Kong Wen Fangzhang."

Kong Zhi laid down Kong Ru's body and replied, "Please come in." He welcomed the guests in a calm and composed manner. The remaining eight old monks of the Damo Hall followed behind him. It was as if they completely ignored the recent tragedy and it did not weigh on their mind at all.

After the four nuns paid their respects, they withdrew, turned around and left as swiftly as they came. The extraordinary thing about them was that these four women came and went as if they were one person; their footwork was light and graceful, as if they were floating leisurely, like passing clouds or flowing river, surging waves devoid of discreet steps.

As Zhang Wuji heard Zhou Zhiruo was coming, his face immediately turned red, and he stole a glance toward Zhao Min. At that exact same time, Zhao Min was also looking at him. Two people's gaze met. Zhao Min winked, it was as if she was smiling, but actually she was not. The corner of her mouth slanted down, as if in contempt; although it was not

clear whether she was mocking Zhang Wuji, who was at a loss, or she was looking at Emei Pai' bluff with disdain.

Unlike the Beggar Clan warriors who walked into the field on their own, the Emei Pai heroines waited for Kong Zhi and the Shaolin monks to go out and welcome them, and only then did they enter the field in neat formation. There were about eighty, ninety female disciples wearing black robes; most of them were bald Buddhist nuns of all ages, elderly, middle-aged and young, even teenaged nuns. Behind these female disciples, more than a 'zhang' away, walked a very beautiful young woman wearing dark green ordinary [Translator's note: by 'ordinary' here, I mean secular, not a Buddhist nun clothes] clothes in slow steps. She was the Emei Pai Sect Leader, Zhou Zhiruo. As Zhang Wuji saw her slim figure, with a rather thin and pallid face, he felt sorry for her, but also ashamed of himself.

Several 'zhang's behind Zhou Zhiruo, there were about twenty male disciples; they also wore black robes. Most of them had refined scholar-like features, unlike the masculine and imposing features common to those of Wulin characters. Each man's hands carried a wooden case of varying sizes, long and short. These hundred or so Emei disciples did not carry any weapon either on their bodies or their hands, obviously, the weapons were inside those boxes.

The crowd of warriors secretly praised, "The Emei Pai truly knows propriety; by not carrying weapons openly, they are showing deep respect toward the Shaolin Pai."

Zhang Wuji waited until they were seated before he walk toward Emei Pai's shelter and greet Zhou Zhiruo by cupping his fists. In bashful and ashamed voice he said, "Zhou Jiejie [elder sister Zhou], Zhang Wuji comes to apologize humbly."

More than ten Emei Pai female disciples stood up suddenly; their eyebrows were raised, their faces looked angry.

"I do not dare," Zhou Zhiruo returned the propriety. "Zhang Jiaozhu, why must you overly courteous? I am sure you are well since we part?" She looked completely calm, without any sign of either delight or anger.

Zhang Wuji's heart was thumping erratically. "Zhiruo," he said, "Because I was eager to save Yifu, I was being rude to you. I feel endless regret in my heart."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "I heard Xie Laoye [old master Xie] has fallen into Shaolin Temple's hands. Zhang Jiaozhu is an unrivalled hero, I am sure you have already rescued him."

Zhang Wuji blushed and said, "Shaolin Pai's eminent monks possess profound martial art skill. The Ming Cult has lost a battle. My (maternal) Grandfather was unfortunate and has passed away."

"Yin Laoye Zi [old master] was a hero of this age," Zhou Zhiruo said, "What a pity, what a pity!"

She did not show any emotion whether happy or angry. Zhang Wuji could not read her true feelings; he only felt that his words seem like bumping on her flexible nail, always bounce back without generating any interest on her part. However, thinking that compared to how bad he had hurt her by leaving her for Zhao Min in front of multitude of guests, the cold reception he received today was a thousand times, ten thousand times better. Thereupon he said, "Later, when we try to save Yifu, I wish you would lend your hands for old times' sake."

His heart stirred as soon as he said those words. "In the past

half a year, her skill has advanced greatly," he mused, "At the wedding hall the other day, Fan You Shi was forced to retreat by her in just one stance even with the kind of skill he has. Min Mei has learned the special skills of various sects' leaders, yet she was almost killed instantly by her; not to mention Du Baidang and Yi Sanniang, husband and wife just a few days ago. Perhaps ... perhaps as she took over the Emei Zhangmen [sect leader] position, she trained some secret martial art from some secret manual reserved exclusively for Sect Leader. Her comprehension is better than Mijue Shitai to the extent of although green was born of blue, it surpasses the blue [Translator's note: a Chinese saying, means 'student (or children) become superior to the master (or parents)']. If she is willing to collaborate with me, we might be able to break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'."

Thinking to this point, he was excited and said, "Zhiruo, I want to ask you a favor."

Zhou Zhiruo's countenance suddenly stiffened. "Zhang Jiaozhu," she said, "Please exercise self-control. At this point, how can you address me like in the former days?" Beckoning to someone behind her she said, "Qingshu, come over here. Tell Zhang Jiaozhu about us."

Zhang Wuji saw a man with face full of spiky beard step forward, cupping his fists and say, "Zhang Jiaozhu, how are you?"

Zhang Wuji recognized the voice as belonging to Song Qingshu; he took a closer look and recognized him as Song Qingshu; only he disguised himself as an older and uglier man to hide his original features. Thus Zhang Wuji also cupped his fists and said, "Turns out it is Song Shige [martial (older) brother]; I am well, thank you."

Song Qingshu showed a faint smile and said, "Actually, I

should thank Zhang Jiaozhu. That day when you were about to marry my wife you had a second thought and regret ...”

“What?!?” Zhang Wuji was shocked; his voice trembled.

“I have Zhang Jiaozhu to thank for my happy and blissful marriage,” Song Qingshu said.

It was as if five thunderbolts had struck Zhang Wuji at once. He stood with a blank expression on his face; his eyes glazed over like he was looking at a vast expanse of whiteness, his ears were buzzing with indistinct noise that he could not hear what people were saying around him. After a long time, he felt someone was tugging his arm.

“Jiaozhu, let us go back!” that person said.

Zhang Wuji calmed himself down and took a sidelong glance. He saw his arm was pulled by Han Lin’er. Han Lin’er’s face was full of anxiety, grief and anger.

“Miss Zhou,” Han Lin’er said to Zhou Zhiruo, “My Jiaozhu is a righteous hero; just because of a small misunderstanding you married this ... this ... humph, humph!” Actually, he wanted to scold Song Qingshu, but out of respect to Zhou Zhiruo, he swallowed back the word that was on the tip of his tongue.

Although Zhang Wuji had deep feelings toward Zhao Min, he had always thought that he was engaged with Zhou Zhiruo. That day, because he wanted to rescue Yifu, he had no choice but follow Zhao Min. He thought as a sweet and gentle girl, Zhou Zhiruo would understand and would not blame him as long as he honestly told her the reason. Who would have thought that in her rage she married Song Qingshu? The pain in his heart right now far exceeded the pain on his chest when Zhou Zhiruo stabbed him at the

Brightness Peak.

Turning his head, he saw Zhou Zhiruo stretch out her delicate hand, as white as jade, to beckon Song Qingshu. With a very smug expression Song Qingshu walked back to her side, and sat next to her. With a faint smile on the corners of his mouth he said to Zhang Wuji, "When we get married, we did not throw any invitations and thus announced it publicly. Someday, we will invite Sire to enjoy our 'wine of happiness' [orig. xi3jiu3 - wine drunk at a wedding feast]."

Zhang Wuji wanted to say 'thank you' [orig. duo1xie4le5], but his throat was dry; unexpectedly he could not utter these three characters. Han Lin'er pulled his arm and said, "Jiaozhu, don't pay any attention to this kind of person."

Song Qingshu laughed and said, "Han Dage [big brother Han], when the time comes, you also have to enjoy this 'wine of happiness'."

Han Lin'er spat and hatefully said, "I'd rather drink three jars of horse urine than your bad-luck, dead-people's wine." Zhang Wuji sighed; he pulled Han Lin'er's arm and took him away sadly.

In the meantime, the Beggar Clan's Zhang Bang Longtou was engaged in a fiery argument with a Shaolin monk. The exchange among Zhang Wuji, Zhou Zhiruo, Song Qingshu and Han Lin'er took place at the Emei Pai shelter, on the northwest corner of the field, so it did not attract anybody's attention; the crowd of warriors was busy listening to the dispute between the Beggar Clan and Shaolin Pai.

Zhang Wuji returned to the Ming Cult's shelter and sat down with a troubled mind. He vaguely heard that old Shaolin monk in red kasaya say, "I told you Yuan Zhen Shixiong [martial brother] and Chen Youliang are not in our Temple,

but your precious Clan did not believe me. Your precious Clan's Chuan Gong Zhanglao was unfortunate to meet his death, but our Sect's Kong Ru Shishu [martial uncle] had paid it with his own life. What else do you want?"

Zhang Bang Longtou said, "You said Yuan Zhen and Chen Youliang are not here? I don't believe you! You must let us search Shaolin Temple."

That Shaolin monk sneered and said, "Sire, you want to search Shaolin Temple? Don't you think you are a bit too arrogant? The puny Beggar Clan might not necessarily have the ability to do so."

"You are looking down on the Beggar Clan?" Zhang Bang Longtou said angrily. "Fine, I'll ask you for advice first."

The Shaolin monk replied, "For thousands of years, there have been countless heroes and warriors paying a visit to Shaolin. But because of our founder's mercy, Shaolin has never burned anybody."

The argument of these two was getting hotter by the minute; it looked like they were about to fight soon. Kong Zhi was standing quietly on the side; he did not even try to intervene. Suddenly Situ Qianzhong's weird voice was heard again, "The world's heroes are gathered together at Shaolin today. Some of us had to cover a distance of thousands of 'li's. Are we here to watch the Beggar Clan seeking a revenge?"

"That's right," Xia Zhou said, "The enmity between the Beggar Clan and Shaolin Pai can be temporarily set aside. It will not be too late for the two of you to settle your account later. We'd better talk about how we are going to handle that villain Xie Xun first."

“Don’t be foul-mouthed,” Zhang Bang Longtou was indignant. “Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Daxia is one of the Ming Cult’s Protector Kings; what villain are you talking about?”

Xia Zhou thundered, “You are scared of the Ming Cult, I am not scared of them! A villain with a wolf heart and dog lung like Xie Xun and you still honor him as a hero?”

Yang Xiao walked toward the center of the field, cupped his fists around and said, “I am [orig. zai4xia4] the Ming Cult’s Guangming Zuo Shi [left emissary of the brightness]. I have something I’d like to say in front of the world’s heroes. My humble Cult’s Xie Shi Wang has killed innocent people in the past, but actually, he can’t be blamed ...”

“Humph,” Xia Zhou snorted, “Those people he killed are already dead. Do you think you can resurrect them with several sentences of your superficial words?”

Yang Xiao was unfazed; he said, “We are roaming the Jianghu; we lick the blood on our blades on a daily basis. Which one among us has never taken anybody’s life to be able to stay alive until today? One with stronger martial art skill might kill more people. One with inept skill might lose one’s life. If for every life we take we must pay with our own lives, hey, hey, I wonder how many of us, among these several thousands of heroes and warriors in this field, would remain. Xia Lao Yingxiong [old hero Xia], you have never killed people in your whole life?”

The Mongolian occupation of China was a time of chaos; there was trouble and confusion everywhere. As the Wulin characters roamed the Jianghu, they would either kill or be killed. It was quite difficult to cultivate one’s own moral worth. Other than a small number of monks and nuns from

Shaolin Pai and Emei Pai, perhaps it was rare to find anybody whose hands were free from bloodstain.

This Shandong's warrior Xia Zhou was a hot-tempered man; he had injured countless people. Yang Xiao's words had rendered him speechless.

After being dumbfounded for a while, he said, "Bad people we can kill, good people we should not kill. This Xie Xun and the devil heads of the Ming Cult are entirely alike; always do dishonorable deeds. I wish I could cut you in thousands pieces, eat your flesh and sleep on your skin. Humph, humph, the one surnamed Yang, I think you are not a good 'thing'."

He understood that there were many highly skilled people within the Ming Cult, but today he wanted to kill Xie Xun to avenge his brother's death, so a bloody battle against the Ming Cult was unavoidable. Therefore, he spoke boldly without showing any restraint.

A piercing voice came from the Ming Cult shelter, "Xia Zhou, do you think I am a good 'thing'?"

Xia Zhou turned to look at the speaker; he saw a thin-cheeked and sharp-mouthed, pale-faced man; so pale that his face looked gray. Xia Zhou did not know what kind of person this speaker was; he shouted, "I don't know who you are, but since you are one of the Devil Cult's devil heads, I am sure you are not a good 'thing'."

"Xia Xiong [brother Xia]," Situ Qianzhong said, "Don't you know this gentleman? He is one of the Four Protector Kings of the Ming Cult, the Qing Yi Fu Wang."

"Pei, pei!" Xia Zhou spat, "The Blood Sucking Devil!"

Suddenly, while the crowd of warriors was still talking among themselves, Wei Yixiao had arrived in front of Xia Zhou. They were actually more than ten 'zhang's apart, but somehow Wei Yixiao managed to cover that distance in split seconds.

Wei Yixiao raised his hand and 'slap, slap, slap, slap!' he gave Xia Zhou four slaps on his face, followed by an elbow strike toward the acupoint on Xia Zhou's lower abdomen. Actually, Xia Zhou's martial art skill was not so bad. Based on their actual skill levels, Wei Yixiao would need at least fifty stances before he could beat Xia Zhou. However, Wei Yixiao's 'qing gong' skill was too strange for Xia Zhou. He moved like a ghost, like a demon; so because of this element of surprise, by the time Xia Zhou realized the attack and was about to parry, the strike had already arrived.

While the crowd of warriors was crying out in shock, a white shadow flew from the Ming Cult's shelter. It was inferior to Wei Yixiao's lightning speed, yet the shadow was faster than a galloping horse. As the shadow reached Xia Zhou, a large cloth sack opened, went down on his head, and scooped him inside the sack. It was not until the shadow slung the sack on his shoulder did the crowd of warriors finally see that the shadow was a giggling Buddhist monk, the Bu Dai Heshang [cloth sack monk] Shuo Bude.

Shuo Bude laughed and said, "A good thing, you are a good thing! The monk will take you home and cook you slowly for my dinner!" Carrying Xia Zhou along, light as a feather he swiftly returned to the wooden shelter.

This attack on Xia Zhou happened very quickly and ended just as quick. Although he was surrounded by a dozen friends and fellow martial brothers, the two men from the enemy side were too fast that nobody was able to render their assistance. Only after Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude were back to

their seats that these dozen or so people unsheathed their weapons and charged toward the Ming Cult's shelter with loud shouting and cursing.

Shuo Bude pulled open the sack's mouth and said with a laugh, "Just return to your seats nicely and sit down quietly. After the meeting is over, I will let him go. If you are not obedient, the old monk will urinate into this cloth sack, or put some dung inside, or the best I can do is farting into the sack. Do you believe me or not?" As he said that, he put his hand onto his belt, as if he was ready to take his pants off.

These dozen or so people were so angry that their faces turned green and yellow, but remembering that these Ming Cult people would not stop at anything, they believed that he would do what he said he would do. They also realized that their skills were insufficient to help Xia Zhou. If this bald thief really urinated on his head, Xia Lao Yingxiong would certainly kill himself. They looked at each other, and then they returned to their seats with a dejected look on their faces.

Watching this affair, the crowd of heroes was startled and amused at the same time. When they went up the mountain, they were in high spirits, thinking that they were going to witness the execution of Xie Xun. But as they saw the skills of these two Ming Cult warriors, they realized that this assembly could turn dangerous. Even if they were successful in killing Xie Xun, the field would unavoidably be soaked with blood, and corpses would be scattered everywhere. They could not restrain trepidation from creeping into their hearts.

They saw Situ Qianzhong, with a wine cup in his left hand and a wine gourd in his right, walk toward the center of the field while shaking his head. "There is indeed a lively event worthy to be watched today," he said, "Some want to kill Xie

Xun, some want to save him. But after going back and forth, whether Xie Xun is really at the Shaolin Temple or not, is still left to our own speculation. I'll say: Kong Zhi Dashi, why don't you invite Jin Mao Shi Wang to come out so that everybody can see him first. And then, those of want to kill and those who want to save, can show their true ability by competing against each other. Don't you think it will be interesting?"

At his words, most of the warriors around the field applauded and cheered loudly. Yang Xiao thought, "Xie Shi Wang [lion king Xie] has too many enemies. Even with Ming Cult and the Beggar Clan's combined forces, we simply cannot fight the heroes from all over the world. It will be better to divert their attention to the Tulong Saber and stir up these warriors to fight each other." Thereupon with a loud and clear voice he said, "All the warriors under the heavens are gathered here at the Shaolin Temple today, first, to settle the unfinished business of gratitude and grudges with Xie Shi Wang; second ... hey hey! I am afraid everybody wants to get their hands on this treasured Tulong Saber. If we follow Mr. Situ's suggestion, everybody will fight everybody else and then after when all is said and done, I wonder who will get the precious Saber?"

As the crowd heard him, they thought he was speaking reasonably. Besides, among these several thousand people, perhaps only a little over a hundred people who truly had intense and deep-hatred toward Xie Xun. Without realizing it, their hearts were beating faster as soon as they thought about the 'most revered in the Wulin world' [wulin zhi zun], four characters.

A black-bearded old man stood up and said, "I wonder what kind of person is in possession of the Tulong Saber, would Yang Zuo Shi inform us?"

“This matter is also unclear to me,” Yang Xiao replied, “I am afraid we must consult Kong Zhi Chanshi [honorific title for a Buddhist monk].”

Kong Zhi shook his head without saying anything. The crowd of heroes was secretly dissatisfied, they all thought, “Shaolin Pai is the host and initiator of this assembly, but Kong Wen Fangzhang is suddenly ill and cannot come out; this Kong Zhi Chanshi is so lethargic that it looks like he is half dead. I wonder what kind of trick they are playing.”

A middle-aged man in dark-green coarse long robe stood up and said, “Although Kong Zhi Chanshi does not know, Xie Shi Wang certainly does. Let us invite him to come out and inquire of him. Afterwards, each one of us can play around with our true skills. Whose martial art skill is number one under the heavens will be clear to us; naturally, he is worthy to bear the ‘wulin zhi zun’ title. No matter in whose hands the Saber is, he should hand it over to the ‘wulin zhi zun’. If you ask me, I’ll say we must agree to this first to avoid any dispute in the future. If he refuses to hand it over, all the heroes under the heavens will rally together to attack him. Gentlemen, what do you think?”

Zhang Wuji recognized the speaker as one of the three Qinghai Pai sword masters who joined the attack to the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan the other night.

Situ Qianzhong said, “Won’t that be a martial art competition? [orig. da2 lei4 tai2 – beating drum on the platform; as martial art competition on those days was usually held on a raised platform, with people beating drums on the side] I think it is completely inappropriate.”

“Any why not?” that man in the dark-green robe coldly asked, “Are you saying that we should not compete in a martial art,

but compete on liquor capacity? If that's the case, then which thousand bells [Situ Qianzhong means Situ (surname) 'thousand bells'] is not drunk, whoever gets drunk but does not die [Situ Qianzhong's title was 'zui bu si' (drunk but did not die)], will be crowned the 'wulin zhi zun'."

The crowd broke up in laughter. Some in the crowd said with a strange voice, "Why do we have to compete then? This 'wulin zhi zun' title would certainly belong to the 'zui bu si', Mr. Situ!"

Situ Qianzhong tipped his wine gourd to pour a cup of wine, and then tilting his head backwards he drank it in one gulp. "I don't dare, I don't dare!" he said earnestly, "To win the title 'jiu lin zhi zun' [the most revered in the wine world], I, 'zui bu si' might have a thirty percent chance; but 'wulin zhi zun', ha ha .. I don't dare to accept the challenge; I don't dare ..." To the man in the dark-green robe he said, "Since Sire has raised this issue, your martial art knowledge must have transcended the mortal world attainment. Under my faulty vision, I actually do not know Sire's illustrious name."

That man coldly said, "I am Ye Changqing of Qinghai Pai; both my drinking capacity and my clowning skills are inferior to Sire's." He implied that 'in martial art skill, I am much stronger than Sire.'

Situ Qianzhong tilted his head sideways and thought for half a day. "Qinghai Pai?" he said, "Never heard. Ye Changqing? Hm, hm ... never heard either."

Everybody thought, "This Old Situ has such a nerve. Insulting Ye Changqing one man is all right, but he dares to insult the entire Qingjai Pai; wonder if he has a formidable backer behind him? Or did he have an unresolved enmity against Qinghai Pai? Just based on these few words, I am

afraid Qinghai Pai would not let him go easily.” Only those who knew Situ Qianzhong well realized that he was always alone, without anybody to back him up. He also did not have any enmity against the Qinghai Pai. He simply was a brassy man, who loved to argue and did not exercise control over his own tongue. Although he had suffered countless troubles in his life, his behavior did not change.

Murderous intent started to grow in Ye Changqing’s heart, but his face remained calm when he said, “Qinghai Pai and the Ol’ Ye are indeed obscure names, no wonder Sire did not know. But since Sire said martial art competition was inappropriate, while in drinking wine [orig. ‘pouring yellow soup’] competition Sire’s skill is unequalled under the heavens, then how would we resolve this problem? Please advice.”

“ ‘Unequalled under the heavens’ is truly much easier said than done,” Situ Qianzhong said, “Truly much easier said than done. Back then, when I was at Jinan Prefecture [capital of Shandong, northeastern China] ...”

“Zui Bu Si,” he was about to prattle along when someone in the crowd shouted, “Don’t get drunk in here! We don’t have time to listen to your nonsense.” Another man shouted, “What about Xie Xun? What about the Tulong Saber?” Yet another man shouted, “Kong Zhi Chanshi, you are the host of this hero’s assembly, are you inviting us here to listen to this empty talk? What kind of assembly is this?” In short, the people wanted Situ Qianzhong to shut up, and for Kong Zhi to take charge of the situation. These people were shouting from among the crowd, some far, some near, they were from all directions.

Situ Qianzhong said, “Shi Laoda [old (big) man Shi] from Jiangling [a place in Hubei] prefecture’s Hei Feng Zhai [black

wind fort], you don't have to worry. Although your Hei Sha Zhang [black sand palm] is fierce, you will not necessarily be able to defeat the 'Unequaled under the heavens'. Poyang Lake's 'shui di jin ao' [mythological golden turtle from the bottom of Poyang Lake] Hou Xiongdi [brother Hou], that Xie Shi Wang [lion king Xie] possesses an excellent water skill; you won't be able to take advantage of him with your underwater skill. Much less they still have one 'Zi Shan Long Wang' [purple-robed dragon king] who has not made her appearance yet. Hey, hey, how can turtle and fish compete against the dragon king? Mount Qingyang's [a place in Anhui] Wu San Lang [third lad surnamed Wu], if you are dreaming of snatching the Tulong Saber with your sword, you must be blind ..."

This man might talk like a madman, but he had a skill that surpassed others; his network of acquaintances was broad, his hearing was keen. From a bustling and random noise of the people shouting, he was able to call the surname and special skill of each speaker, one by one, without any mistake. The crowd of warriors realized this special skill of his; they could not help but break out in cheers.

An old monk behind Kong Zhi stood up and said, "Shaolin Pai is ashamed to be the host; as luck would have it, our Fangzhang [Abbot] has suddenly fallen ill. Nobody is in charge of this grand assembly, and in the end we become the laughingstock of everybody present. Xie Xun and the Tulong Saber are two separate matters, but they are two in one and one in two, which can be handled together. According to Lao Na, what this Ye Shizhu [benefactor] of Qinghai Pai said is very reasonable. There are countless brave people with outstanding ability among the attending heroes. We only need everybody to demonstrate each one's skill. Whoever stays standing at the end will have the right to handle Xie Xun; the Tulong Saber will also be his. Let the heroes

consider; isn't it a good idea?"

Zhang Wuji asked Peng Yingyu, "Who is this monk?"

Peng Yingyu shook his head. "Subordinate does not know," he said, "This monk did not participate in the besieging of the Brightness Peak. He also was not one of those held captive by Junzhu Niangniang at the Wanan Temple. But since he repeatedly speaks in front of Kong Zhi Dashi, his position in the Temple must not be low."

Zhao Min said in a low voice, "Nine out of ten, this man belongs to Yuan Zhen gang. I am guessing that Kong Wen Fangzhang has fallen into Yuan Zhen's hands. Kong Zhi Dashi thereupon is forced to comply with these rebels' wish. That's why he looks so gloomy and dispirited."

Zhang Wuji's heart sank; "Peng Dashi, what do you think?" he asked.

"Junzhu's guess makes sense," Peng Yingyu replied, "Only Shaolin Temple is full of martial art masters. Yuan Zhen's his nerves must be too big to have the courage to openly defy his superior and create trouble."

"Yuan Zhen has made preparations long time ago," Zhang Wuji said, "First, he wants to destroy our Cult; second, he wants to gain control over the Beggar Clan. Both deceitful attempts failed when success was just in sight. This time, I believe he wants to be the Shaolin Pai's Zhang Men Fangzhang [sect leader, abbot]."

"To be Zhang Men Fangzhang might not be enough," Zhao Min said.

"Shaolin Pai is the number one Sect in the Wulin world,"

Zhang Wuji said, "Being the Zhang Men Fangzhang is the pinnacle of achievement; nothing can be higher than that."

"How about 'wulin zhi zun'?" Zhao Min asked, "Isn't 'the most revered in the Wulin world' higher than Shaolin Pai's Zhang Men Fangzhang?"

"He wants to be the 'wulin zhi zun'?" Zhang Wuji asked absentmindedly.

"Wuji Gege," Zhao Min said, "Just because Zhou Jiejie [elder sister] married another man, you become muddle-headed, and cannot think about anything else clearly."

As the secret of his heart was exposed, Zhang Wuji blushed. "Zhang Wuji," he silently scolded himself, "You must not be engrossed in one thing and care about man-woman relationship only, and thus setting the important matter of rescuing Yifu aside." Calming himself down, he thought about how Yuan Zhen was really farsighted; today's great assembly was part of his grand schemes, so there must be something greater than what meets the eye. "Min Mei," he said, "What do you think Yuan Zhen's real intention is?"

Zhao Min said, "This man Yuan Zhen is very cunning; extremely intelligent ..."

Zhou Dian, who had been listening on the side this conversation in low voice, finally could not restrain himself from cut in, "Junzhu Niangniang, you are also very cunning and extremely intelligent. I'll say you are not the least bit inferior to Yuan Zhen."

Zhao Min laughed, "You flatter me too much," she said.

Zhou Dian said, "Not too much ..."

“Dian Xiong,” Peng Yingyu cut him off, “Do not interrupt Junzhu Niangniang.”

Zhou Dian was indignant. “You interrupted me first ...” he said.

Peng Yingyu smiled without saying anything. He was well aware that bickering with Zhou Dian for two to four hours [orig. one or two ‘sichen’, 1 sichen = 2-hour] was not unusual; therefore, he would rather not respond.

“Why don’t you say anything?” Zhou Dian asked.

“You told me not to interrupt you; I won’t interrupt you,” Peng Yingyu replied.

“But you have already interrupted me,” Zhou Dian said.

“Then please continue whatever you were going to say,” Peng Yingyu said.

“I’ve forgotten already, I don’t remember what I was going to say,” Zhou Dian said.

Zhao Min laughed and continued, “I thought that if Yuan Zhen’s sole objective was to be Shaolin Temple Abbot, he did not need to gather all the heroes under the heavens here. Xia Daxia has already fallen into his hands, why would he want the heroes to fight over him? Wuji Gege, speaking about martial art skill, I am afraid nobody in the world is superior to you. It’s impossible that Yuan Zhen did not know this fact. I don’t think he is being nice by arranging all heroes under the heavens to gather here so that you can defeat them all and become the ‘wulin zhi zun’. It is like he is offering Xie Daxia and the Tulong Saber to you for free.”

Zhang Wuji, Peng Yingyu and Zhou Dian nodded and asked, "What do you think is his real plot?"

At this time Yang Xiao walked over toward Zhang Wuji and joined the discussion, "I have been thinking, this traitor Yuan Zhen's evil scheme must not be a simple one ..."

Zhou Dian could not bear not to comment, "Yuan Zhen is our Cult's archenemy. Junzhu Niangniang, you were once also our Cult's archenemy. This traitor Yuan Zhen is very cunning and extremely intelligent, Junzhu Niangniang, you are also very cunning and extremely intelligent. I say the two of you are on par with each other."

"You are talking rubbish!" Yang Xiao scolded him.

With a faint smile Zhao Min continued, "What Mr. Zhou said makes sense. If I were Yuan Zhen, how would I carry out my conspiracy? Mmm ... first, I would persuade Kong Wen Fangzhang to send out mass invitation to all heroes under the heavens, requesting them to come to Shaolin Temple. Kong Wen Fangzhang is a devout Buddhist; a person of mercy and peace. Naturally, he did not want to be meddlesome in other people's business; but all I need to do is mention the names of Kong Jian and Kong Xing, two Shen Seng. Kong Wen Fangzhang loves his martial brothers very much, so, he gave his permission. Furthermore, if Shaolin Temple wanted to kill Xie Daxia, the enmity with the Ming Cult would be as deep as the ocean. Based on one Sect's power alone, Shaolin might not necessarily be able to resist Ming Cult's full-force attack; but if Shaolin shifted the blame to the heroes from all over the world, certainly the Ming Cult could not massacre several thousand attending warriors, could it?"

Everybody nodded their heads in agreement. Zhao Min continued, "Once the great assembly is in progress, I would not show my own face; I'll let others use Xie Daxia and the Tulong Saber as a bait to provoke the heroes and warriors to kill each other. Inevitably, The Ming Cult would have to fight countless enemies. After the battle is over, it doesn't matter who win or lose, the Ming Cult force would be decreased by half and its power would diminish considerably."

"Exactly," Zhang Wuji said, "I have had the same concern, but Yifu's kindness to me was as heavy as the mountain. He also has dozens of years of friendship with our brethrens. How can we sit down without trying to save him? Ay, we have been on this mountain only for several days, Grandfather had already died. That traitor Yuan Zhen must be clapping and cheering in his hiding place."

Zhao Min continued, "At the end of the battle, most likely Zhang Jiaozhu will be crowned the number one martial artist; so the Shaolin monks would say, 'Zhang Jiaozhu's skill surpasses all the heroes. You are worthy of the honor and the accolades. Our Temple sincerely hands over Xie Daxia to Zhang Jiaozhu. Would Zhang Jiaozhu please go to the hill peak behind the Temple to welcome him?' Thereupon everybody would climb the peak together; Zhang Jiaozhu must break the 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan'. If anybody stepped forward to assist him, Yuan Zhen's crony would say, 'The one defeating all the warriors was Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult; it has nothing to do with anybody else. It would be better for Sire to stand on the side and watch.' In his effort to win the title of number one martial artist in the world, even if Zhang Jiaozhu did not suffer any injury, his internal energy would be consumed I don't know how much; by that time, how can he be the three monks' match? In the end, not only Xie Daxia could not be rescued, he would die among the three green pines instead. Only the cold moon and the bitter wind would

accompany the body of the great hero of this generation, Zhang Wuji. Tell me, isn't my scheme wonderful?"

Listening to this point, the group of warriors' countenances changed; they believed Zhao Min's words were not meant to frighten anybody. Zhang Wuji's courage and uprightness was outstanding; he would not care how much suffering and calamity he had to endure, he would definitely try to rescue Xie Xun. Even if he had to lose his life, he would never regret his decision. Yuan Zhen had accurately seen these traits on Zhang Wuji; he knew that Zhang Wuji would jump into a mountain of blades or pot of oil.

Zhao Min sighed and said, "This way, the Ming Cult's demise is guaranteed. Yuan Zhen would carry out his evil plot further. He would poison Kong Wen, and put the blame on Kong Zhi Dashi. This scheme would be very easy to do, he would only need to fabricate false evidence, and the Shaolin monks would believe him. Consequently, his cronies would unanimously recommend him as the logical candidate to take over Fangzhang position. He, Senior, would issue a decree for the warriors to besiege the Ming Cult. Relying on numbers to achieve victory, he would annihilate the Ming Cult. At that time, the title number one martial artist in the world, I am afraid other people would be unable to take it away from him. If Tulong Saber did not appear, so be it. But if in the Jianghu the trail of this precious Saber reappeared, everybody would know that the rightful owner of this Saber would be the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Yuan Zhen Shen Seng. If the owner of the Saber was unwilling to hand this Saber away, I am afraid he would be in a precarious position!"

Although Zhao Min was speaking in a low voice, several people in the wooden shelter were intently listening to her. As she finished speaking, Zhou Dian slapped his own thigh and called out, "Exactly, exactly! What an excellent evil

plan!" Unconsciously, his voice grew loud that most of the people around the field heard him. Everybody turned their eyes toward the Ming Cult's shelter.

"What kind of excellent evil plan?" Situ Qianzhong asked, "Can you tell it to this old man?"

"Definitely not!" Zhou Dian said, "The Old Man [referring to himself] wants to sow dissension so that the heroes from all over the world would kill each other, to the point that you die, I live. If I tell you, won't the evil plan lose its effectiveness?"

"Wonderful, wonderful!" Situ Qianzhong laughed, "But how are you going to sow dissension? Would you elaborate?"

Zhou Dian loudly said, "I am thinking of an ingenious evil plan; I would tell a lie by saying that the Old Man has the Tulong Saber in his possession. Whoever possesses the strongest martial art, the Old Man would hand over the Tulong Saber to him ..."

"What a plan! What a conspiracy!" Situ Qianzhong called out, "And then what?"

Zhao Min and Zhang Wuji exchanged a glance, they both thought, "This drunkard is neither our relative nor our friend, but he is a great help to us."

Zhou Dian loudly said, "Just think, this precious Saber is known as the 'wulin zhi zun'; who won't fight with his all might to get hold of it? Thereupon, the lunatic would be killed by the drunkard, the drunkard would be killed by the monk, the monk would be killed by the priest, the priest would be killed by the young lady ... the killing would continue, the field would be littered with dead bodies, blood would flow like a river. Woohoo! What a pity! What an awful

sight!”

As soon as the crowd of heroes heard him, they shivered in fear; thinking that although this man acted like a lunatic, his words actually made a perfect sense. Kongtong Pai's Er Lao [second elder] Zong Weixia stood up and said, “This gentleman, Mr. Zhou, actually has a point. We are honest and upright people, we do not speak in riddles; it is unavoidable that every school and every sect has an interest in the Tulong Saber. However, I think it is not worthwhile to lose our reputation just for the sake of the Saber, or even go as far as the destruction of the entire sect. I wish everybody will not bicker over it, to honor our martial art code of brotherhood, to the point that our friendship will not be harmed regardless of victory or defeat. What do you think?”

At the Brightness Peak, Zhang Wuji had shown him kindness by healing his internal injury due to the ‘Qi Shang Quan’ [seven-injury fist] training. Afterwards, Zhang Wuji also saved him from the Wan An Temple Pagoda. This time Kongtong Pai came to Shaolin Temple with the intention of providing assistance to the Ming Cult.

Situ Qianzhong said with a laugh, “I see you are a big fellow, but you are afraid of death. If nobody spills any blood and nobody loses his life, the martial art contest will not be worth seeing.”

Kongtong Pai's Si Lao [fourth elder], Chang Jingzhi angrily said, “To hurt a drunkard like you, I don't need to spill your blood.”

“The drunkard is only joking,” Situ Qianzhong said, “Why should Mr. Chang the Fourth be this angry? Everybody knows Kongtong Pai's Qi Shang Quan can kill anybody without spilling any blood. Didn't Kong Jian Shen Seng of Shaolin

Temple die under the Qi Shang Quan? How can my old bones, the drunkard surnamed Situ, be compared to Kong Jian Shen Seng?"

The crowd of heroes thought, "This drunkard is offending both the Kongtong Pai and Shaolin Pai. It's a wonder that he can survive this long roaming in the Jianghu the way he is."

Zong Weixia ignored his remarks and said in a loud voice, "In my opinion, each school, sect, clan or society is to nominate two of their masters. These masters will compete in martial art skill, and whoever has the highest martial art skill will have the right to handle Xie Daxia and the Tulong Saber."

The crowd of heroes applauded loudly; they all said that this is the best proposal ever.

Zhang Wuji carefully looked at the monks behind Kong Zhi; most of them frowned, as if they were displeased with this turn of events. He knew Zhao Min's speculation on Yuan Zhen's evil plot was correct; he indeed wanted to provoke the crowd of heroes to kill each other.

A white faced middle-aged man with little moustache stood up; his hand waved a folding fan with golden spine, his face was rather good-looking. He said, "I believe Zong Er Xia's [second hero Zong] proposal is very good. When we compete in martial art, although we will stop at touching the opponent, we must remember that weapons, fists and legs do not have eyes. If anybody slips, that can be considered a fate. Martial brothers and friends shall not come out to seek revenge. Otherwise, the fight will continue without conclusion."

"That's right," the crowd of heroes replied, "Let it be so."

With a shrill voice Situ Qianzhong said, "This brother, the good-looking gentleman with laughter in his speech, could you be Ouyang Xiongtai ['xiongtai' is yet another way of saying 'brother'] of Hengyang prefecture in Xiang Nan [southern Hunan]?"

That man shook his folding fan twice and laughed. "I do not dare. Such a humble name," he said, "You flattered me in one sentence and insulted with me the next."

Situ Qianzhong said, "It seems like Ouyang Xiong and I are loners [orig. 'gu1hun2ye3gui' - lonely soul, wild ghost]; we do not belong to any clan, society, school or sect. I like wine, you like women. How about the two of us found the 'jiu se pai' [wine and sex sect, or drunkard and lecher sect]? Then our Jiuse Pai's two masters will stand hand in hand to face the world's masters together."

The crowd of heroes broke out in laughter again, thinking that this Situ Qianzhong repeatedly blurting jokes, creating happy atmosphere, inciting not a few laughter around the meeting place; and thus reducing the hostility inside the hearts of many people.

Peng Yingyu informed Zhang Wuji that this white-faced man was Ouyang Muzhi, altogether, he had twelve concubines. Although his martial art was strong, very seldom did he roam around the Jianghu. He spent his days snuggling with his women, enjoying the soft and tender happiness.

Ouyang Muzhi laughed and said, "If we join hands to found a sect, I am afraid my family heritage will not be enough to buy you the wine. Ladies and Gentlemen, speaking of martial art competition, we may want to elect several venerable seniors to act as referees and arbitrators. Otherwise, you say 'I win', and I say 'I win', and thus the dispute continues."

Situ Qianzhong laughed, "Won't we know it if we win or we lose? Who would be as shameless as you are?"

Zong Weixia said, "Electing several arbitrators is good. Shaolin Pai is the host, naturally Kong Zhi Dashi will be one."

Situ Qianzhong pointed his finger to Shou Bude's sack and said, "I nominate Shandong Daxia [great hero of Shandong], Xia Zhou, Xia Lao Yingxiong."

Shou Bude lifted up his sack and tossed it toward Situ Qianzhong. "One arbitrator coming up!" he said with a laugh.

Situ Qianzhong put down his wine gourd and wine cup. Carrying the cloth sack, he tried to loosen up the cord tied around the sack mouth. Unexpectedly, the knot and the thread were the result of Shou Bude's special skill; the thread was braided from golden silk and fish bladder strands. Situ Qianzhong struggled with all his might, but was unable to untie the knot. Shou Bude laughed out loud and leaped forward. His left hand picked the sack and slung it behind his back. His right hand reached up, his ten fingers twisted and turned; then he heaved the sack to the front again. After heaving the sack back and forth, the knot on the sack mouth was loosened. Turning the sack over and shaking it, Xia Zhou rolled out the sack. Situ Qianzhong hastily reached out to unseal Xia Zhou's acupoint.

After being kept inside the dark cloth sack for half a day and now suddenly he was let out, Xia Zhou found the bright sunlight dazzled his eyes. And then he realized that thousands pairs of eyes were looking at him. He could not bear the shame and wanted to die. Turning around, he pulled the dagger on his waist and stabbed it into the pit of his own stomach.

Situ Qianzhong quickly reached out to grab him with both hands and laughed while saying, "Victory and defeat is common within the martial art practitioners. Xia Dage, why is your heart so dull?"

From among the crowd, a short and plump man shouted loudly, "I am afraid the hero inside the cloth sack is not qualified to be an arbitrator. I nominate Sun Laoyezi [old master Sun] of Mount Changbai." A middle-aged woman also said, "Zhe Dong Shuang Yi's [pair of righteous from eastern Zhejiang] prestige shakes the Jiangnan; these two brothers are upright and selfless. They are perfect candidates for the arbitrators." From here and there the crowd of heroes shouted names and very quick there were more than a dozen arbitrators; all were prestigious and respectable heroes of the Jianghu.

Suddenly from within the Emei Pai crowd an old nun coldly said, "What's the use of electing arbitrators? There is no need of them from the start." Her voice was not loud at all, but it went straight into everybody's eardrums. Apparently her internal energy cultivation was quite deep.

Situ Qianzhong laughed. "I beg Shitai's pardon; why don't we need arbitrators?" he asked.

The old nun replied, "Two people fight, the victor lives, the loser dies. Let Yanwu Ye [the ruler of the netherworld] be the arbitrator."

Listening to these cold and cruel words, everybody felt chill creeping up their backs.

Situ Qianzhong said, "We are friends in the martial art world, we also do not have any grudges or enmity against each

other; why should we fight a live and death battle against each other? Those who left their homes should practice mercy. By saying those words, isn't Shitai afraid of Buddha's rebuke?"

The old nun coldly replied, "You can talk nonsense in front of other people, but you should watch your manners in front of Emei Pai disciples."

Situ Qianzhong raised his wine gourd and poured a cup. 'Tsk, tsk, tsk! What a fierce Emei Pai!' he said, "There is a saying that a good man would not fight a woman, good drunkard would not fight a nun!" Raising his hand, the cup was just about to touch his lips when suddenly two 'whiz! whiz!' noise split the air, as two tiny objects, as small as a prayer bead, were shot. One flew toward the wine cup, the other flew toward the wine gourd. These two projectiles were immediately followed by another one, aimed at Situ Qianzhong's chest.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!' three loud explosions were heard successively, as the three prayer beads exploded. The gourd and the wine cup were smashed at once, while a large hole appeared on Situ Qianzhong's chest. He was thrown several 'zhang's backward from the explosion, while his clothes were burning.

Xia Zhou immediately rushed forward, but Situ Qianzhong had already died, with a frozen smile on his face. Apparently, because the prayer beads were coming and exploding so fast, he did not even realize that death was at the door. It was just like a sudden thunder in a clear blue sky. There were plenty of experienced warriors with vast knowledge among the crowd, yet nobody had ever seen this kind of fast and deadly secret projectile.

“The nun is serious!” Zhou Dian called out, “What kind of secret projectile was that?”

In low voice Yang Xiao said, “I heard there is a big country in the western region where someone is perfecting technique to manufacture gunpowder into some kind of secret projectiles. It is called ‘pi li lei huo dan’ [Translator’s note: ‘pi li’ – thunderbolt, ‘lei’ is also thunder, ‘huo’ – fire, ‘dan’ bullet. Shall we call it ‘thunderbolt bullet’ for short? Actually, it was closer to modern day grenade, but the original says it was a ‘bullet’]. The gunpowder is concealed inside, and it is shot out using a powerful spring mechanism. It seems to me this old nun is using that fellow’s invention.”

Carrying Situ Qianzhong’s black burning body, Xia Zhou said in loud voice, “Although this Situ Xiongdi often said harsh and sometimes mean words, it was because he loved to fool around, his character was actually kind. He had never harmed anybody nor committed any dishonorable acts in his life. Today, the heroes from all over the world are gathered here, which one of you can say that he had done any evil conduct?”

The crowd of heroes was completely silent. Xia Zhou pointed his finger toward the old nun and angrily said, “Emei Pai has always been known as upright and chivalrous school; who would have thought that they are capable of using such an evil and ruthless secret projectile? Even the strong in the Wulin world will not overstep the ‘appropriateness’ of character. [orig. ‘li’ – reason, logic, truth] May I know Shitai’s title?”

The old nun replied, “I am called Jing Jia. The ‘hero inside the sack’, what do you want by talking and gesticulating like that?”

Xia Zhou mournfully said, "The one surnamed Xia's skill is inadequate, thus falling miserably under the Ming Cult's devil head's insult. That was the surnamed Xia's own weakness; yet I did not damage my lifelong reputation of the way of chivalry. Jing Jia Shitai, you are this vicious; aren't you doing a great disservice to your precious sect's founder, Guo Xiang, Gu Nuxia [heroine Guo]?"

Hearing him bring up the venerated name of their founder, the Emei disciples sprang up on their feet. Jing Jia's eyebrows rose up. "Can a bastard like you casually mention our founder's revered name?" she roared.

"You have disgraced your founder's revered name by doing many unrighteous acts," Xia Zhou retorted, "Not to mention Guo Nuxia, even Miejue Shitai, when she was alive, she was cruel and merciless but her sword had never taken innocent people's lives. You have killed an innocent man like this and your Zhangmen [sect leader] surprisingly did not care. Hey, hey, after today, can Emei Pai take its stand in the Jianghu?"

"If you carry on talking half a sentence more of those nonsense talk, this drunkard will be your example," Jiang Jia said.

Xia Zhou's anger welled up in his chest, he courageously took two big strides forward and said, "If the Emei Pai Zhangmen will not clean up her own school, Emei Pai will be held in contempt by the world's heroes from now on."

The crowd of warriors, as well as the Emei Pai disciples, turned their gaze toward Zhou Zhiruo. They saw her nodding slowly to Jing Jia. 'Bang! Bang!' two loud explosions followed as Jing Jia shot out two 'thunderbolt bullets'. Two large holes appeared on Xia Zhou's chest and lower abdomen; his clothes were burning. But in his unyielding spirit, although

his breathing had ceased, he was still standing, with his arms still around Situ Qianzhong's body.

The crowd of heroes looked at each other in utter shock. After a moment, several hundred people raised a clamor, condemning Emei Pai's ruthlessness. Wei Yixiao and Shuo Bude exchanged a glance, nodded at each other, and then rushed toward Xia Zhou's remains. They knelt down in front of the corpse.

"Xia Lao Yingxiong," Shuo Bude said, "The two of us did not know your chivalry and uprightness, and thus have offended you much. We are very ashamed of our conducts."

They both raised their palms and then 'slap, slap, slap, slap' they slapped their own faces that their cheeks turned red and swollen immediately. They extinguished the fire still burning on the two corpses, and then carried the bodies into Ming Cult's wooden shelter.

Zhang Wuji was deeply grieved seeing Zhou Zhiruo suddenly become so cruel and heartless.

Amidst the clamor of the crowd, Zhou Zhiruo was seen whispering into Song Qingshu's ear. Song Qingshu nodded, and then in deliberate steps he walked toward the center of the field. In a loud and clear voice he said, "The heroes and warriors assembled here today, not to drink wine and discuss poetry, to play the zither, beat the drum or pluck the harp; nor do we come here to compose a poem by each one contributing a line. This is the place where we clash our weapons, our fists and feet. That being the case, most likely there will be casualties. This Xia Lao Yingxiong had just said that in all his life, Mr. Situ had never done anything evil, and blamed our Sect's Jing Jia Shitai for indiscriminately killed an innocent. The honorable heroes raised up a clamor,

seemingly discontent of our Sect. Xiongdi [brother, referring to self] wants to ask something: do we have to verify moral character and virtuosity of each other first before we contend in martial art today? A sage or a saint must never, ever be harmed; while the poor, ominous, extremely evil people can be killed at will?" The crowd was taken aback and was at a loss momentarily; they thought that what he said was not totally without any reason.

Song Qingshu continued, "If we say that only a virtuous person can own the Tulong Saber, why should we hold a 'martial art competition'? Why don't we all go visit the Confucius temple inside the great city of Qufu in Shandong, and respectfully present the Saber to Confucius' descendant over there? If we are still speaking about this 'wu' [martial art] character, then what we concern about most is life or death, victory or defeat. I am afraid we won't be able to deal with other people's 'innocence' or 'guilt'."

"That's right," several people responded from among the crowd, "Saber and spear do not have eyes. We have agreed that we must not seek revenge."

The more they listened to Song Qingshu, the more Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting felt that this person's accent was somewhat familiar. However, with the short beard, this man looked different; besides, he kept saying 'our sect this' and 'our sect that'. Consequently, he must be an Emei Pai male disciple. Therefore, they could not help but feeling doubtful.

Yu Lianzhou stood up and said, "May I know Sire's honorable surname and great given name?"

Seeing his Er Shishu [second martial (younger) uncle], Song Qingshu was rather afraid of Yu Lianzhou's longstanding prestige; he stammered for a while before answering, "I am a

nameless younger generation, not worth Yu Er Xia's [second hero Yu] inquiry."

In stern voice Yu Lianzhou said, "Sire did not stop talking about 'martial art competition'. I presume your martial art study must have reached excellence. My Shifu had received great kindness from your precious sect's Guo Nuxia in his childhood; thereupon he instructed Wudang disciples not to fight with Emei Pai. I [orig. zai4xia4] must understand clearly, whether Sire is truly Emei disciple or not. What is your name? Real men should be straightforward and upright; why would you conceal your own identity?"

Brushing away the dust from her clothes, Zhou Zhiruo said, "Yu Er Xia, I don't have to conceal anything from you. This man is my husband; surname Song, given name Qingshu. He was related to Wudang, but this time he has entered the Emei's school. If Yu Er Xia has anything to say, you can tell it to me."

She spoke those words with a clear, but cold voice, as cold as a torrential river and frozen ice. Her manner and movements were as exquisite as a jade, her countenance was clear and beautiful; indeed she looked like an immortal rising from among the dust. There were thousands of heroes around the field, yet nobody made any noise, they all held their breath, trying to listen with full attention.

Song Qingshu reached up to rub his face, peeling the short beard from his chin and taking his hat off; immediately he emerged as a young man as handsome as a jade crown.

As the crowd of heroes saw him, they could not restrain from praising in their hearts, "What a beautiful pair of immortals!"

Remembering Song Qingshu's offense in killing his Qidi

[seventh (younger) brother] Mo Shenggu, anger rose up in Yu Lianzhou's breast. However, his character had always been calm; in the last few years, the older he got, the deeper was his self-control. Although he was furious, he managed to keep a calm face; only his eyes flickered like lightning, sweeping Song Qingshu's face.

Song Qingshu hung his head down in shame. Zhou Zhiruo said, "My husband has left Wudang and joined Emei. Hereby I am making it official today in the presence of these world's heroes. Yu Er Xia, Zhang Zhenren does not allow Wudang disciples to fight our Sect's disciples for the sake of friendship of the former days. It shows the Senior's 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty, code of brotherhood]; but it might also show how smart the Senior is in preserving Wudang's prestige."

Yin Liting could not hold his patience much longer; leaping forward, he pointed his finger toward Zhou Zhiruo and said, "Miss Zhou, when you faced calamity in your childhood, it was my Shifu who held out his hands to save you, and brought you to the Emei Pai. My Shifu has never wished for you to repay his kindness, yet in what you've just said today, you obviously accuse our Wudang Pai of earning false reputation, of being far inferior to the heroines of Emei Pai. This ... you ... aren't you doing my Shifu wrong?"

Zhou Zhiruo laughed indifferently and said, "Wudang's heroes have shaken the Jianghu; obviously you have real ability. Song Daxia is my father-in-law. How can I dare to accuse my in-law of earning false reputation? However, Wudang and Emei two schools have their own history, each developed its own martial art; so it is difficult to say who is superior and who is inferior. In the past, our Sect's Guo Shizu [ancestor, founder] has shown kindness toward Zhang Zhenren, later on, Zhang Zhenren has shown kindness to me. We are even. Nobody owes anybody kindness. Yu Er Xia, Yin

Liu Xia, let us hereby discard the custom that says Wudang disciples must not fight Emei disciples.”

All around the field, the crowd of warriors under their wooden shelters talked among themselves in low voices, “This young Zhangmen is very arrogant; listening to her words, it sounded as if Emei Pai has a high confidence in exceeding the Wudang Pai. Yu Er Xia has reached the pinnacle in term of internal and external power. Extremely few people in the world today can be his match. Could it be that Emei Pai relies on the fierce and evil secret projectiles to dominate the Jianghu?”

Yin Liting was very emotional thinking about Qidi Mo Shenggu’s tragic death; tears flowing down on his face and he cried out, “Qingshu ... Qingshu! You ... why did you kill your ... your Qishu [seventh (younger) martial uncle] ...” As he said the word ‘Qishu’, suddenly he broke into a loud weeping.

The crowd of heroes was surprised; they looked at each other, thinking, “Wudang’s Yin Liu Xia has such a reputation, how can he cry in public?”

Yu Lianzhou stepped forward and pulled Yin Liting’s right arm. With a loud and clear voice he said, “The world’s heroes, please hear this: Wudang is very unfortunate to have a renegade disciple like this Song Qingshu. Our Qidi, Mo Shenggu, was killed by this disciple ...”

Suddenly two ‘whiz! whiz!’ noise split the air. Again, two ‘thunderbolt bullets’ flew toward Yu Lianzhou’s chest.

“Aiyo!” Zhang Wuji called out in alarm and was about to rush forward to save his uncle; but the thunderbolt bullets were simply too fast; while listening to the conversation, he had

never expected Emei Pai would to launch this kind of sneak attack, even if he could move faster, he would still be too late.

This attack was actually also beyond Yu Lianzhou's expectations; his first reaction was to evade, but the bullets would certainly hit the numerous Beggar Clan disciples standing behind him. He surmised that these bullets were meant to deal with him, to close his mouth so that he would not expose publicly Song Qingshu's crime in offending his superior and rebelling against his own father. If he evaded, unavoidably, some innocents would be killed. In the split seconds this thought was flashing through his mind, the two thunderbolt bullets, one after another, had already arrived in front of his chest.

Yu Lianzhou turned his palms around in the 'yun shou' [cloudy hand] stance of the Taiji Fist. With the utmost 'softness', as if his palms were pressing empty air, he dissipated the incoming power with which the 'thunderbolt bullets' were shot, by lightly catching the bullets in the middle of his palms. He was seen standing with his arms outstretched in front of his chest, palms facing the sky, with the two thunderbolt bullets spinning with unfathomable speed in the middle of his palms. The crowd of heroes stood up at once, several thousand pairs of eyes stared at his hands. It was as if their hearts had stopped beating, extremely anxious to see whether these spinning bullets would explode at any moment.

This Taijiquan's special skill of incorporating softness was the softest martial art skill in the world; it was called 'a feather cannot add (to the weight), a fly cannot drop (the weight)'. The main principle was 'sticking' and 'sucking' [create a vacuum], using 'bent' to overcome 'straight', the 'feeble geriatric to defend the crowd', as well as 'hero aiming for the

invincibility'. [Translator's note: I do not know Taiji, so the translation might be inaccurate.]

For the past several years, Yu Lianzhou had diligently and painstakingly trained hard in Zhang Sanfeng's special skill. Seeing Situ Qianzhong and Xia Zhou lose their lives just now, he understood that these bullets would explode as soon as they contacted any hard object; the bullets were very difficult to be dealt with, and in this desperate situation, he had no choice but risking this skill, backed by his entire life's cultivation of power. Sure enough, the soft was able to overcome the hard; the softness of his palms controlled the two thunderbolt bullets that they were spinning just like a drill trying to bore through a thick object, but did not explode.

Suddenly two other 'whiz! whiz!' noises were heard, Emei Pai shot two more thunderbolt bullets toward Yu Lianzhou. Yin Liting was standing next to his Shixiong; immediately both of his palms rose up to meet the thunderbolt bullets in the air. As soon as his palms made contact with the thunderbolt bullets, he executed the 'lan qiao we shi' ['seizing a bird's tail' style] from Taijiquan, by gently catching the thunderbolt bullets, while with the 'jin ji du li shi' ['golden rooster standing' style], his left foot strongly grounded, his right foot in the air, his entire body spin fast, just like a top.

Yin Liting was very skilled in swordsmanship, but his mastery of Taijiquan was not as deep as his Shixiong's. He saw that Yu Lianzhou was straining in catching the two thunderbolt bullets; he was completely aware that if there was the slightest bit of 'hardness' in the palms, the evil and ruthless secret projectiles would explode immediately. Therefore, he dissipated the shooting force by spinning his body and took the thunderbolt bullets spinning along in his palms.

In terms of martial art skill, Yin Liting's way of dissipating the incoming force by catching them midair was slightly inferior compared to Yu Lianzhou using his palm power to neutralize the bullets; however, the way he spun his body rapidly was a lot more attractive. After he spun for more than thirty revolutions, all around the field the crowd broke into thunderous applause, while the thunderbolt bullets also failed to explode.

To everybody's surprise, a series of 'whiz! whiz!' noises were heard again as eight thunderbolt bullets came their way. Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting shouted together and threw the thunderbolt bullets in their hands. Wudang disciples did not use secret projectiles, but they were trained in striking projectiles with projectiles. After catching the enemy's secret projectile, they were able to return the projectile, one projectile striking two, two projectiles striking three. As these two shot the four thunderbolt bullets in their hands, the bullets struck the incoming eight enemy's thunderbolt bullets. 'Bang! Bang!' In the field, the explosion was deafening, black smoke filled the air, and burning sulfur smells attacked everybody's nostrils.

As soon as they shot the thunderbolt bullets, Yu and Yin two people immediately leaped more than ten 'zhang's back, to guard against the successive attacks of Emei Pai. If they were shot again and again, they knew that eventually they would not be able to stand.

There wasn't anyone among the crowd of heroes who was not stunned to see that the thunderbolt bullets were this deadly. They thought that in the present age, other than these two Wudang Pai masters, perhaps not too many people would be able to escape these thunderbolt bullets. Those with superior 'qing gong' might be able to evade, but if the bullets were scattered with 'man tian hua yu' [blossoming rain filling the

sky] technique, several thunderbolt bullets would collide with each other midair, as soon as these bullets exploded, they would not escape alive even if they were able to move faster.

A big and tall man in the Huashan Pai wooden shelter stood up; with a loud voice he said, "Will Emei Pai rely on numbers to achieve victory in this martial art competition?" This man was one of the Huashan Er Lao [two elders], who joined hands with He Taichong, husband and wife, to fight Zhang Wuji at the Brightness Peak.

Jing Jia of Emei Pai replied, "The study martial art has thousands of change and ten thousand of variations. Those who are strong, win. Those who are weak, lose. We are not pedantic intellectuals who always insist that everything should adhere to meticulous principles. Besides, in this world, there are not too many meticulous principles worth talking about."

The crowd of heroes was astonished that although Emei Pai was dominated by women, they were actually persistently unreasonable; surprisingly more so than the men were. When the old master of Huashan was arguing with the women, he did not dare to walk close to the Emei Pai shelter; he stayed at his own shelter and argued from a distant, for fear that in their unparalleled aggressive spirit, the opposite party would shoot their thunderbolt bullets away.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Zhiruo must have married Song Shige against her heart. Wasn't she so kind and loving toward me when we were stranded on that desolate island over the sea? The two of us have pledged our undying love and taken an oath not to fail the other. The words are still ringing in our ears, how can we destroy our own oath? It's all because I have done her wrong. On the day we were about to bow to

the Heaven and the Earth, in the presence of guests filling the wedding hall, I fled with Min Mei. Zhiruo is a Zhangmen of a Sect; she is worth a thousand gold, and I have disgraced her that bad. Is it any wonder that she is that angry and full of resentments toward me? Today the Emei Pai is going against the tide, and it is all because of me."

The more he thought, the more restless he was. Leaving his own wooden shelter, he walked toward the Emei Pai's shelter. "Zhiruo, in everything, I have done you wrong," he said to Zhou Zhiruo, "Song Shige has killed Mo Qishu; ultimately we must resolve this matter. I say, let Song Shige return to Wudang with Yu Erbo and Yin Liushu; let Song Dabo decide on how he has to pay for his crime."

"Zhang Jiaozu," Zhou Zhiruo coldly laughed, "At first I thought you were a real man, only a little bit muddle-headed; to my surprise, turns out that you are a lowly man. A real man will bear the consequences of what he has done. You have killed Mo Qi Xia; why do you put the blame on my husband's head?"

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "You ... you said I killed Mo Qishu?" he stammered, "I ... how can there be such thing?"

Zhou Zhiruo said, "The murder of Mo Qi Xia was arranged under the scheming of the imperial household's Ruyang Junzhu. Why don't you tell her to come out and confront her directly in front of the world's heroes?"

Zhang Wuji thought, "Min Mei has offended the Six Major Sects. I am afraid she has more enemies than Yifu. How can I have her make an appearance here? Zhiruo deliberately brought this point up to put Min Mei and me in danger. Ay, a thousand errors, ten thousand blunders, I should have not left her on our wedding day."

Biting his own lower lip, he turned around and walked away. Suddenly someone from the Emei Pai crowd shouted, "I am surprised that Zhang Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult is such a despicable coward. Seeing the fierceness of our thunderbolt bullet, he ran away with his tail between his legs."

Zhang Wuji halted his steps, but did not turn his head. "I don't need to see who was talking," he mused, "Whatever insult the Emei Pai people hurl at me, I deserve the punishment."

The jeering and mocking behind him was getting louder, yet Zhang Wuji ignored them all and walked straight to the Ming Cult's wooden shelter.

Yang Xiao let out a cold laugh and said, "The thunderbolt bullet is such an insignificant thing; it's not even worth mentioning. Since it was useless against Wudang's Second Hero, it is also useless against Wudang's direct descendant Zhang Jiaozhu. You, Emei Pai people, are boasting on your special apparatus. Let's see what you can do against our Ming Cult's special apparatus."

As soon as he waved his left hand, a boy dressed in white came forward carrying a small wooden tray on his hands. There were more than a dozen small flags of five different colors inserted on the tray. Yang Xiao grabbed a white flag and tossed it to the center of the field. The flag fell down with its pole sticking out of the ground. The crowd of heroes could see that the flagpole was not even two feet long. The Ming Cult's flaming fire insignia was embroidered on the flag. The crowd wondered what kind of a trick Yang Xiao was playing. At this moment, someone behind Yang Xiao launched a rocket, which flew fast to the sky, and dispersed white smoke in the air.

Footsteps were heard as a team of Ming Cult disciples, with white cloths wrapped around their heads, rushed to the field. There were altogether five hundred men; they all bent their bows and 'Swish! Swish!' Five hundred arrows made a neat circle around the white flag. Then the team arranged themselves in a circle formation. They were the Rui Jin [acute metal] Flag under the command of Wu Jingcao.

The crowd broke into cheers and applause. Each one of the Rui Jin Flag grabbed a javelin from his back. They rushed a dozen of steps forward, and hurled the javelins. Five hundred javelins made a neat fence inside the circle of arrows. Then they rushed another dozen of steps forward, and drew the short hatchets from their waists. The crowd of heroes saw flickering rays of light as five hundred short hatchets whizzed through the air and landed neatly in a circle on the ground. The short hatchets, the javelins and the arrows formed three concentric rings, with no weapon touching another. Even if one's martial art skills were as high as the sky, under these 1,500 long and short weapons' converging attack, one would definitely become minced meat.

The Rui Jin Flag suffered an extremely heavy loss when fought a fierce battle against the Emei Pai in the western region. Even their flag leader, Zhuang Zheng, died under Mijue Shitai's Yitian Sword. Later, learning from this painful experience, they developed this battle formation to destroy even the enemy's strongest defense. During the last several years, the Ming Cult's prestige rapidly rose up; the Five-Element Flags also grew at a tremendous rate. The Rui Jin Flag now had more than twenty thousand men under its banner. This team of five hundred men with javelins, hatchets and arrows was handpicked from among the twenty-thousand members. Their martial art skills were not weak to begin with and after undergoing a rigorous training under

the direction of the masters within the Ming Cult, they became a squadron of fighting force, which could be used to support the Ming Cult army in the battlefield or could be deployed as an elite squad in special assignments.

As they watched this demonstration, the crowd of heroes' faces changed; they thought, 'Wherever Ming Cult's Yang Zuoshi tosses the white flag, these one thousand five hundred weapons will also follow. Although Emei Pai's thunderbolt bullets are fierce, their destroying capability is limited; when they shoot ten bullets, even if each one of them hit the target, they could at most harm only ten people. How can they match the Ming Cult's Rui Jin Flag?' They also thought, "If the Ming Cult suddenly turned hostile and wanted to destroy us, then what? Although the attendees of this great assembly today are all martial art masters, we are actually no more than a mob; certainly we are no match for the refined formation of Rui Jin Flag who are well-trained for a long time and can move together as one unit."

Although their hearts were full of disconcerting thoughts, the crowd of heroes could not help but cheer at the amazing display of the Rui Jin Flag's special skill.

Yang Xiao lifted the white flag in his hand and waved it several times behind his back. The five hundred Rui Jin Flag men pulled out their feathered arrows, javelins and hatchets, walked toward the Ming Cult's wooden shelter, bowed in respect to Zhang Wuji, and then turned around and left the field.

Yang Xiao took a dark green flag and tossed it next to the white flag. Again, heavy footsteps were heard as five hundred Ju Mu [gigantic wood] Flag people, with dark green cloth wrapped around their heads, walked quickly into the field. Every ten men carried a large wooden log. The gigantic

logs weighed around a thousand 'jin' [catty, 1 catty is approximately 0.5kg] each. Each log was fitted with iron hooks. Each man pulled one iron hook. They marched in even steps.

Suddenly they all shouted in one voice and the fifty gigantic logs flew out from their hands. Some flew high, some flew low; some to the left, some to the right; but as each one flew out, it would at least strike another log. All fifty logs and amazingly not a single log was missed. A continuous series of 'Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!' sounds were heard as the fifty logs, divided into twenty-five pairs, struck each other. With fifty logs, each weighed over a thousand catties, struck each other, the momentum was really astonishing. If there were people standing next to the dark green flag, no matter how high they jumped, or evaded to the left and escaped to the right, they would unavoidably be struck by these gigantic logs.

The Ju Mu Flag developed this flying-log formation from military tactics on breaking the defense of a besiege city. The troops would usually utilize wooden logs to ram down the city gate. With logs of this size, even a strong city gate would be struck open. If flesh and blood were subjected to the impact of these big logs, wouldn't they be smashed into pulp?

As these gigantic logs fell back down, the five hundred men caught the iron hooks, and then they turned around and rushed for about a dozen 'zhang' out, waiting for the next order in the shape of another dark green flag, before they tossed the gigantic logs up for the second time.

Yang Xiao waved the dark green flag, ordering the Ju Mu Flag to withdraw. And then his right hand picked a red flag and tossed it to the center of the field.

As the Ming Cult men with dark green headbands withdrew,

five hundred men from Lie Huo [raging inferno] Flag, with red cloth wrapped around their heads, marched into the field. Each man had a spray gun in his hand. As they pumped the gun, they spurted thick and blackish oil to the center of the field. The Lie Huo Flag leader waved his hand to toss a blazing sulfur ball. The oil met the fire and the field was ablaze with wave after wave of raging fire.

The neighboring area of the Ming Cult headquarters on the Brightness Peak was very rich with petroleum. Day and night crude oil spouted out from among the rocks, which would burn as soon as it met with fire. Each one of the Lie Huo Flag men carried an iron tank on his back. Each tank was full of petroleum. With them spraying more oil to the burning fire, nobody would be able to withstand it.

After the Lie Huo Flag withdrew from the field, Yang Xiao tossed a black flag into the field. Five hundred Hong Shui [flooding water] Flag men, with black cloth wrapped around their heads, rushed into the field. These Hong Shui Flag men carried household items. Altogether, there were twenty water hoses, some spray guns and buckets. Ten men at the front pushed ten wooden carts.

The Flag Leader, Tang Yang, shouted his command. The carts opened to release twenty hungry wolves. The wolves made threatening gestures and growled in the field then they charged to the crowd, trying to bite people. The heroes were shocked; they wondered what did these hungry wolves have to do with the words 'flooding water'?

They heard Tang Yang shout his order again "Spray the water!" A hundred men pumped their spray guns and a hundred streams of water were shot at these hungry wolves. The crowd of heroes smelled a peal of acid stench. They saw that as soon as the wolves were hit by the water, they

tumbled down at once, yelping madly and howling miserably. In an instant, their skin split open and their flesh rot, they turned into coal-black piles. It turned out that the water sprayed by the Hong Shui Flag was a deadly poison to dissolve flesh in liquid form. It was concocted from sulfur, potassium nitrate and other chemicals.

Watching this extremely disturbing demonstration, the crowd of heroes could not help but be absolutely horrified; each of them thought, "If this poisonous water was not sprayed to the wolves but were aimed on me, what would happen?"

The Hong Shui Flag carried twenty water hoses with the spray guns. They assumed a standby position, and then squirted the water towards the wolves. Obviously, they carried more poisonous water than what was needed to kill the wolves. If a little more pressure was added, not only the spray would be stronger, it could also reach farther.

Yang Xiao waved the black flag to withdraw the troops. The Hong Shui Flag pulled their water hoses away from the field. As they turned the spray guns around, the heroes who stood in the direction the spray gun was turned at, couldn't restrain their faces from cringing.

Meanwhile, Yang Xiao had tossed a small yellow flag. A group of men wearing yellow headbands marched into the field. Each man carried an iron shovel in his hand and pushed a wheelbarrow full of dirt. Compared to the other four flags, Jin, Mu, Shui, Huo [metal, wood, water and fire], their numbers were a lot smaller; they had only a hundred people in their team.

These hundred men formed a circle around the field. Then they simultaneously started to dig vigorously. Suddenly there was a loud booming noise. The dust rose. The center of the

field collapsed, revealing a large hole, about three, four 'zhang's in diameter. Next, the ground all around the hole was moving, followed by the appearance of men, each wearing a metal helmet on his head and holding an iron shovel in his hand. Four hundred men bored through the surface of the ground. The heroes were greatly shocked and cried out in unison.

Turned out these four hundred men had dug a tunnel from some distant away to the center of the field, where they excavated a large hole underground and supported the ground overhead with planks of wood. They waited, hidden underground, until the Hou Tu [thick earth] Flag Leader, Yan Yuan, gave his command and the four hundred men simultaneously pulled the planks so that the entire layer of ground fell down. Then the Ming Cult people underground emerged to the surface. This way, the wolves' carcasses, oil, scorched earth, everything fell down into the hole below.

The hundred men brandished their iron shovels and struck the air above the holes three times. If there were any people who fell into the hole and wanted to escape by jumping up, they were bound to be struck down by these hundred shovels.

One by one the wheel barrows poured their loads of dirt, black sands and pebbles into the hole. In a short period of time, the big holes, along with hundreds small holes around it, were filled and the ground was level again. The five hundred iron shovels rose and fell continuously, making an attractive scene.

The Flag Leader shouted his command and the five hundred men saluted toward Zhang Wuji. The center of the field was now filled with dirt and sand, as flat and smooth as a mirror, a lot more firm and solid than it was previously.

The crowd of heroes understood. "If I stood at the center of the field and spoke condescendingly against the Ming Cult, I would have been buried under the ground by now."

In a way, this little demonstration had showcased the invincible might of the Ming Cult's Five-Element Flags. There weren't any one among the spectators, from heroes all around the world who was not amazed by it. They were aware that for the last several years, the Ming Cult had staged a rebellion in Huai Si, Henan, Hubei, and other area. They had besieged towns and seized territories; successively defeated Yuan army. This moment they displayed the military skill and tactics they had mastered for the benefit of the gathering of Wulin heroes and warriors. They were large in numbers, organized and followed strict discipline, plus they were highly trained. No Jianghu sect or school under the Heavens would be able to withstand.

After withdrawing the troops, Yang Xiao returned the small flags to the wooden tray, which was then carried back by the young boy. With cold eyes he looked at Zhou Zhiruo. He did not say anything, but his meaning was very clear: 'With only a little more than a hundred male and female Emei disciples, can you match our strong Ming Cult of several thousand?'

Around the field, each of the heroes was immersed in their own thoughts. For a moment, the field was quiet. After a while, the old monk behind Kong Zhi stood up and said, "The Ming Cult demonstration of troop movements and military tactics we have witnessed just now looked impressive. However, when all is said and done, whether it can be really used, whether it can really subdue the enemy, we are not military generals; we have not studied the Sun Wu's art of war. I am afraid none of us can really tell ..."

Everybody knew he was speaking contrary to his convictions; it was just that the Ming Cult's prestige was truly awe-inspiring, so he played down the fierceness of the Five-Element Flags.

Zhou Dian called out, "You want to know whether it can be really used? That is very easy. All Shaolin Pai needs to do is send some monks to try and then the result will be apparent."

The old monk pretended not to hear, he continued his speech, "Today is the great assembly of the heroes from all over the world. Every school and every sect's aspirations are to observe and emulate, to compare and deliberate the study of martial art skills. Still, as highlighted by several Shizhu [benefactor] earlier, everybody will compete in martial arts and the one with the highest skill will win. What we are interested in doing is a one on one competition; relying on numbers to achieve victory, is actually an unheard custom in the Wulin world."

Ouyang Muzhi said, "Relying on numbers to achieve victory is an unheard custom in the Wulin world, but what about 'pi li lei huo dan'? This poisonous and malicious trick, is it allowed?"

The old monk was silent for a moment before saying, "If a contestant wants to use secret projectiles, of course it is allowed. If some friends put some poison on their secret projectiles, we have no way of forbidding them. But if somebody launches a sneak attack, he is breaking a major rule of this assembly; then everybody else has the right to attack him together. Gentlemen, what do you think?"

Most of the heroes in attendance gave their consent by applauding loudly. Tang Wenliang of Kongtong Pai said, "I

have one thing I'd like to say: whoever has won two fights in a row must be allowed to take a rest, so that he can restore his internal energy and take a breather. Otherwise, if one is forced to fight a series of capable people, one cannot fight them all in one breath regardless of how high one's skill is. Furthermore, from each school, each sect, each clan and each society, if there are two people already defeated, they must not send anybody to the stage anymore. Otherwise, there are thousands of heroes in here; if for every hero defeated another one takes his place, I am afraid even three months will not be sufficient to accommodate everybody. Although Shaolin Temple has abundant provisions [orig. 'liang2cao3' - food and grass], they will go broke if they have to feed us all; and I doubt if they would recover within a hundred years."

The audience broke out in laughter; they agreed that these two propositions made a lot of sense.

The Ming Cult warriors knew that Tang Wenliang was indebted to Zhang Wuji because he set his broken bone at the Brightness Peak; and then again when he saved him from the Wan An Temple. He was hoping Zhang Wuji would triumph over the opponents. By proposing these two rules to the crowd of heroes, he was helping Zhang Wuji to conserve his energy.

Peng Yingyu said with a smile, "Tang Lao San [Ol' Tang the third] is doing us a favor. It seems like we can count on Kongtong Pai to be on our side today. All right, other than Jiaozhu, who will compete for us?"

All of the Ming Cult masters were eager to try, but they all realized that the battle today was of a very great importance; it was necessary for them to spare no effort. They would have to try to defeat as many opponents as possible, and thus leave as little powerful opponents as possible to their Jiaozhu, so that he could conserve his energy to face the

unexpected. If they only managed to defeat a few people, and then got defeated, not only they would leave a heavy burden for Jiaozhu to bear alone, the damage to their own prestige would not be small, but also the burden to the Cult would be great; Xie Xun and their Cult Leader were too important. Furthermore, if they volunteered rashly, they would inevitably give the impression that after the Cult Leader, their martial art skills were better than everybody else's, and thus they risked damaging the 'yi qi' [spirit of loyalty and self sacrifice/code of brotherhood] among the brethren. For these reasons, they were all silent; nobody dared to make any noise.

"Jiaozhu," Zhou Dian said, "It's not that Zhou Dian is scared of death. It's just that my martial art has not reached perfection. If I volunteer, I would only expose my own disgrace."

Zhang Wuji looked at his subordinates one by one. He thought, "Yang Zuo Shi, Fan You Shi, Wei Fu Wang, Bu Dai Shifu, Tie Guan Daozhang [Taoist priest]; everybody possesses an unsurpassed quality. Any one of them may go. Among them, Fan You Shi's martial art knowledge is the broadest. No matter what school the opponent came from, he has a greater chance to score a victory. I'd better ask Fan You Shi to go into action with me." Thereupon he said, "Actually, any one of the brethren going is the same to me. But Yang Zuo Shi had helped me fighting the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan. Wei Fu Wang and Bu Dai Dashi have just captured Xia Zhou, so they have used up some strength. This time, I am thinking of asking Fan You Shi to come with me."

Fan Yao was delighted. "I accept the order!" he bowed and said, "Many thanks Jiaozhu, for your high regards!"

The Ming Cult warriors all knew that Fan Yao's martial art skill

was superb; nobody raised any objections.

“Fan Dashi,” Zhao Min suddenly said, “I am going to ask you something. Would you be willing to indulge me?”

“Whatever instruction Junzhu has, I will comply,” Fan Yao replied.

Zhao Min said, “Kong Zhi Dashi of Shaolin Pai has not resolved his enmity against you. If you fight him first, victory or defeat between the two of you will be hard to predict. Even if you gain victory, your strength would be depleted.”

Fan Yao nodded. He understood that Kong Zhi Shen Seng had been famous for dozens of years. Kong Zhi’s face looked long as if he was in constant anxiety; he looked like someone who would not reach old age, but actually, his internal and external skills had reached perfection.

Zhao Min said, “There is no harm in making an appointment with him; state it explicitly that you want to fight him one on one at the Wan An Temple in Dadu. One fight to decide victory and defeat.”

“Marvelous plan, marvelous plan!” Yang Xiao and Fan Yao exclaimed. They knew that if Kong Zhi agreed to fight Fan Yao at a later date, then they could not fight today. With her idea, Zhao Min eliminated one powerful enemy to the Ming Cult.

In the mean time, the heroes and warriors of every sect and every school were whispering among themselves in their respective wooden shelters to choose their champions. From several wooden shelters came loud noises of people bickering; apparently, they have some disagreement in the selection process.

Fan Yao went to the host's shelter. He saluted Kong Zhi and said, "Kong Zhi Dashi, I wonder if you have guts? Do you dare to meet me at the Wan An Temple?"

Hearing the word 'Wan An Temple', which was the only disgrace he had ever experienced in his entire life, the lines on Kong Zhi's forehead went even deeper. His thin eyes were gleaming as he asked, "What is it?"

Fan Yao said, "We tied our enmity at Wan An Temple, we must resolve it at Wan An Temple. You, Kong Zhi Dashi, are a man of virtue and prestige. Unfortunately, I also have some insignificant reputation. In today's battle, if you defeated me, Jianghu people would say that a strong dragon cannot repress a snake in its lair; you, a Dashi [great master], take advantage of your home turf. If by luck I gained half a style advantage, ignorant people would add fuel to the fire by saying Ku Toutuo came to Shaolin Temple to overpower Shaolin's number one master. If Dashi is not afraid, I will be asking for Dashi's unsurpassed artistries at the Wan An Temple, in the evening of the full moon, on the Mid-autumn festival of this year [orig. 'ba yue zhong qiu' - 15th day of the eighth month of lunar calendar]."

Actually, Kong Zhi was rather afraid of Fan Yao's martial art. Besides, there was a big change in the Temple right now; he was not in a good mood to fight Fan Yao. Therefore, although he knew Fan Yao was provoking him, he agreed immediately. "Very well, the Mid-autumn festival of this year, we will meet at the Wan An Temple. I will not leave until we meet."

Fan Yao cupped his fists to salute, and then turned around and left. He had just walked for seven, eight paces when he heard Kong Zhi unhurriedly say, "Fan Shizhu [benefactor], you wholeheartedly want to save Jin Mao Shi Wang today.

That's why you do not dare to fight with me. Am I right?"

Fan Yao was startled; he halted his steps while thinking, "This monk sees through our intention after all." Turning his head, he laughed and said, "I don't have the confidence I would defeat you."

Kong Zhi smiled and replied, "Lao Na also do not have the confidence to defeat Shizhu."

The two of them nodded. In that moment, in their hearts grew a fondness toward each other; hero admired another hero, a real man cared for another real man.

End of Chapter 37.

Chapter 38 - A Gentleman is Vulnerable to Deceit

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhou Zhiruo's flexible whip coiled back and stormed toward Yin Liting. Yin Liting's Taiji Sword going back and forth, opening and closing, the 'yin' and 'yang' elements intertwined with each other. He was unleashing the instructions given by Zhang Sanfeng to the fullest. While facing a life and death situation, he was able to display the most refined of their school's sword technique.

Gradually, the noise around the field died down. The old monk from Damo Hall who sat behind Kong Zhi stood up and said, "We have agreed to the rules set by the heroes to govern our martial art competition today. Saber and spear, fists and legs, do not have eyes. Death will not be discussed further, alive and well will be the Heaven's fate. Whichever school, sect, clan or society has the strongest martial art, will have control over Xie Xun and the Tulong Saber."

Zhang Wuji frowned slightly. He thought, "It seems like this monk is afraid the battle will not be fierce enough, the enmity among schools will not be deep enough. Don't they have mercy as displayed by Shen Seng like Kong Jian and Kong Wen anymore?"

The crowd further agreed that as soon as one had defeated two opponents in a row, one must be given an opportunity to rest. Other than that, there was not much difference than the previously agreed rule.

Immediately some people went down the field and called out their challenges, which were answered at once. A moment later, there were six people fighting in three pairs.

Zhao Min had learned the essence of each unique skill belonging to the Six Major Sects' masters when she detained them in the Wan An Temple. Although her comprehension

was still shallow, her knowledge and experience were not ordinary at all. Standing in between Zhang Wuji and Fan Yao, they discussed the martial arts of those six people. She made predictions on who would win and who would lose. Surprisingly, her analysis was very clear and logical.

About the time needed to drink a cup of tea later, among the three pairs, two had reached conclusion, and only one pair was still engaged in a fierce battle. Two more people immediately went down the field to challenge the victors. Hence, it was still six people fought in three pairs. The newcomers were using weapons, so their opponents also unsheathed their weapons. As the competition proceeded this way, it was only natural that eight or nine fights out of ten were decided with some shedding of blood.

Zhang Wuji mused, "This way, the friendship between each clan and sect will definitely suffer some damage. As soon as one school defeats another, although nobody loses his life or suffer injury, the loser will unavoidably try to retaliate in the future. I will be greatly surprised if this event will not breed an enormous disaster in which everybody kills each other."

In the meantime, the Beggar Clan's Zhi Fa Zhanglao's palm hacked down on the short elder of Huashan Pai that the latter spurted blood from his mouth. The tall elder of Huashan Pai cursed, "Stinky Beggar! Rotten Beggar!" while jumping out to challenge the Beggar Clan's Zhi Fa Zhanglao.

The short elder quickly grabbed his arm and said in low voice, "Shidi [younger martial brother], you are not his match. We'll have to swallow this defeat for the time being."

The tall elder angrily said, "I don't care, I must fight him!" Although his mouth said those words, deep down in his heart he realized that his Shixiong's [martial brother] martial art

skill was comparable to his own; their energy cultivation was identical. If Shixiong was beaten, then he had no chance of victory. As he was being pulled by his senior, his mouth did not stop shouting abusive words, but his feet actually moved toward their wooden shelter.

After that, Zhi Fa Zhanglao scored another victory over the Sect Leader of the 'Mei Hua Dao' [Plum Blossom Blade]. Since he had defeated two people in a row, amidst the thunderous applause from the Beggar Clan crowd, he returned to their shelter, feeling very pleased with himself.

And thus, one come the other go, the competition in the field had been going on for more than four hours. The red glowing sun was slowly moving to the west. The martial art skill of the people going down into the battle was increasingly higher. At first, a lot of people were having lofty aspirations; their hearts were filled with desire to show off their skills in this general assembly of the world heroes. However after seeing other people's martial art skills, and only then did they realize that they were no more than a frog in the well. Without ascending the Mount Tai, one would not know the vastness of the earth. Therefore, they did not dare to enter the competition.

By the ninth hour (between 3 to 5 pm), the Beggar Clan's Zhang Bo Longtou entered the arena to challenge Peng Siniang [fourth lady Peng] of Xiang Si Pai Jiao [lit. 'Four-Row Cult' (?) of Hunan province], which he struck until she tumbled down. The clothes on Siniang's back were torn. It was such a big tear that she withdrew from the fight in her embarrassment.

Zhang Bo Longtou turned his eyes toward the Emei Pai people and with a cold laugh said, "What kind of real ability can womenfolk have? If they do not depend on their sharp

weapons, then they would depend on strange secret projectiles. This lady Peng Siniang is able to train to this level, it truly is not easy.”

Zhou Zhiruo spoke in low voice to Song Qingshu. Song Qingshu nodded, and then unhurriedly went down the arena. He cupped his fists to Zhang Bo Longtou and said, “Longtou Dage; let me receive pointers from your masterful strikes.”

Zhang Bo Longtou was furious to see Song Qingshu. “The one surnamed Song,” he angrily shouted, “You are in collusion with that traitor Chen Youliang in penetrating our Beggar Clan. You, the traitor, must have played a part in the death of our Shi Bangzhu. Do you still have a face to see me today?”

Song Qingshu coldly replied, “Penetrating the enemy’s nest and stealing secrets are common occurrences in Jianghu. You only have your own bunch of blind beggars to blame that you failed to see Song Daye’s [‘big master’ Song] true identity.”

Zhang Bo Longtou cursed, “You are capable of betraying your own old man’s Wudang Pai; you are capable of doing anything. You are not being filial to your father, later you will not be faithful to your wife. Emei Pai will certainly meet its destruction in your hands.”

Song Qingshu was so angry that his face turned pale. “Are you done farting?” he said.

Zhang Bo Longtou did not respond. With a loud grunt his palm hacked down. Song Qingshu turned around to evade. His hand lightly swept backhandedly, using Emei Pai’s ‘Jin Ding Mian Zhang’ [lit. golden peak soft/supple palm] to parry the attack.

Zhang Bo Longtou was angry with Song Qingshu for penetrating the Beggar Clan and deceiving them, so his move was intended to kill; it was exceptionally fierce. Unfortunately, his opponent this time was not an ordinary martial artist. Within the Beggar Clan, Zhang Bo Longtou's martial art skill was inferior only to their late Bangzhu, and Chuan Gong and Zhi Fa, two elders. His palm technique had reached an unordinary level.

Song Qingshu was chief among the Wudang Pai's third generation disciples; but after all, his comprehension of Emei Pai's 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang' was not deep enough. He had not yet able to unleash the full potential of exquisite and subtle variations within the palm technique. After fighting for about forty, fifty stances, he repeatedly fell into dangerous situations. Automatically his 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang' turned into Wudang Pai's 'Mian Zhang' [cotton palm]. It was the martial art he was most familiar since his childhood. He had trained it for more than twenty years. He was able to launch this martial art at will; it was very powerful. The outward appearance was similar to Emei Pai's 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang', but the method of transmitting energy to the moves was actually entirely different. The spectators did not know this fact. They only saw Song Qingshu gradually turned the situation over in his favor.

The more he watched, the angrier Yin Liting was. 'Song Qingshu,' he called out, "You, the kid, have no shame at all! You have left Wudang, why do you still use Wudang skill to save your life? You betrayed your father, but why do you use the martial art your father taught you?"

Song Qingshu's face turned red. "What's so special about Wudang Pai's martial art?" he called out, "Look carefully!" Suddenly his left hand turned into a hook in front of Zhang

Bo Longtou's eyes. Revolving to the left and turning to the right, he launched seven, eight different styles. In a surprise movement, his right hand thrust forward and 'stab!' His five fingers pierced Zhang Bo Longtou's forehead.

The spectators were stunned. They only see Song Qingshu's fingers dripping with blood, while Zhang Bo Longtou fell backwards. It was obvious that he was dead.

With a cold laugh Song Qingshu said, "Does Wudang Pai have this kind of martial art?"

The crowd of heroes called out in alarm. Eight people from the Beggar Clan rushed forward. Two quickly grabbed Zhang Bo Longtou's body, while the other six attacked Song Qingshu. These six were Beggar Clan's masters; among them, four were brandishing their weapons, so that in a short moment Song Qingshu was surrounded by dangers.

A big and fat monk behind Reverend Kong Zhi loudly shouted, "The Beggar Clan's gentlemen take advantage of a solitary man; aren't you breaching today's heroes assembly rule?"

Zhi Fa Zhanglao called out, "Brothers, get back. Let me avenge Zhang Bo Longtou."

The Beggar Clan disciples leaped backward. They took Zhang Bo Longtou's body back to their wooden shelter. With angry look on their faces, they stared at Song Qingshu menacingly.

The heroes watching on the side thought, "Although it was agreed that in this martial art competition death is not a big deal, but this surname Song's hands are too heavy and ruthless."

At this moment, Zhang Wuji was recalling the injury on Zhao Min's shoulder, which was from a five-finger claw; and then that night at the thatched hut, the way Du Baidang and Yi Sanniang's corpses lying on the floor. With a trembling voice he asked, "Yang Zuo Shi, where did Emei Pai get this evil martial art from?"

Yang Xiao shook his head. "Subordinate has never seen this kind of martial art," he said, "However, Emei Pai's founder Guo Nuxia was known as 'Xiao Dong Xie' [young eastern heretic] so I wouldn't be surprised if 30% of her martial art skill was heretical."

While the two of them were talking, Song Qingshu has started fighting Zhi Fa Zhanglao. Zhi Fa Zhanglao was a thin and small man, and extremely agile. His ten fingers were like a hook or an awl, attacking Song Qingshu with 'mo zhua gong' [devil claw skill]. It looked like he was very adept in using his fingers, and wanted to poke five holes on top of Song Qingshu's head to avenge Zhang Bo Longtou's death.

At first, Song Qingshu was still using the 'Jin Ding Mian Zhang' to parry the opponent. After fighting for a while, Zhi Fa Zhanglao roared, "Little dog thief!" The five fingers of his left hand had already touched Song Qingshu's forehead. Just a little bit more strength, the fingers would have pierced Song Qingshu. Song Qingshu stretched out his right hand, and 'stab!' his five fingers entered Zhi Fa Zhanglao's throat. Zhi Fa Zhanglao fell forward. His left hand had not lost its strength that it penetrated the surface of the earth. Blood spread out on the ground. He stopped breathing at once.

Zhou Zhiruo made a signal with her hand. Eight Emei Pai female disciples, each with a sword in her hand, jumped forward and with two on each side, they stood with their backs facing in, on the front, rear, left and right, around Song

Qingshu. There would be a chaotic battle if the Beggar Clan people rushed forward to attack again.

With a loud and clear voice, one of the old monks of Damo Hall said, "Luohan Hall's thirty-six disciples, obey the order!" His palms clapped three times, thirty six Shaolin monks wearing yellow robes came out. Eighteen of them held Buddhist staves, while the other eighteen brandished sabers. They quickly spread out around the field. They stood in what looked like a formation, yet it was not exactly a formation. However, all strategic places were guarded.

The old monk said, "Receive Kong Zhi Shishu's [martial (younger) uncle] order: the thirty six Luohan Hall disciples are to enforce the great hero assembly's rules. If there are some people who rely on number to bully an individual, they are to be treated as Wulin world's public enemy. We, Shaolin Temple, must not shame ourselves as the host. We must maintain the justice. Thirty six disciples to look carefully; regardless who break the rules, kill him on the spot. Do not show any mercy."

The thirty six disciples loudly voiced their compliance. With ferocious stare they fixed their gaze to the center of the field. With the Emei Pai guarding Song Qingshu, and Shaolin Pai guarding on the side, the Beggar Clan disciples did not dare to make any rash moves even though they were grieved and furious. They only shouted and cursed while taking Zhi Fa Zhanglao's body back to their shelter.

"Ku Dashi," in a low voice Zhao Min said to Fan Yao, "I didn't expect Emei Pai still have this deadly stance. At the Wan An Temple, Mie Jue Shitai would rather die than showing off her martial art. Perhaps this is the reason."

Fan Yao shook his head without saying anything. He was

deep in thought to find a way to break this particular stance. After staring blankly for half a day, he suddenly approached Zhang Wuji.

“Jiaozhu,” he said, “Subordinate wants to consult with you a martial art stance.” With his palms pressed on the table, he stretched out his left hand index finger, and then his right hand index finger, one after another. With an incredible nimbleness he moved the fingers continuously seven times. And then with a low voice said, “My arms will attack successively this way. I only need to coil around this boy’s arm, and exert my internal energy to break his arm joint. With a broken arm, even if his fingers were fiercer, he would not be able to execute his move.”

Zhang Wuji also moved around his fingers on the table. Left hooked, right lifted. “Be careful not to let his fingers pierce your arms,” he said.

Fan Yao nodded his agreement. He said, “I will use ‘qin na shou’ [grab and seize, grappling technique] to grab his wrist, and then ‘shiba lu yuanyang lian huan tui’ [eighteen way/method mandarin ducks chain legs (continuous kicking)] to kick the lower part of his body].”

Zhang Wuji said, “Attack him ferociously with eighty one stances, don’t give him any opportunity to take a breather.” These two people’s four fingers moved backward and forward, attacked and defended with exceptional speed. Fan Yao suddenly smiled, “Jiaozhu’s attacks are too marvelous. I don’t think this boy has this kind of power. His martial art is limited. He won’t be able to unleash the full potential of these several stances.”

Zhang Wuji also showed a faint smile and said, “If he cannot unleash the full potential of these three stances, then Fan

You Shi, you have already won.” His left index finger made two circles, right index fingers suddenly thrust out from within the circles and hooked Fan Yao’s finger. He smiled slightly without saying anything.

Fan Yao was startled. “Many thanks for Jiaozhu’s directions,” he delightedly said, “The admiration of your subordinate reaches the highest level. These four stances are unthinkable. They truly enlightened subordinate’s dark mind. I really wish I could bow to you and take you as my master.”

Zhang Wuji replied, “These are part of Taijiquan technique bestowed to me by my Tai Shifu, the ‘luan huan jue’ [secret of the random circles]. The main point is the circles made by the left hand. Although this man surnamed Song came from Wudang, I don’t think he has mastery over the most refined of these principles.”

With this new idea in his mind, Fan Yao was confident he could defeat Song Qingshu. However, after two streak victories, Song Qingshu was entitled to take a rest according to the competition rules. Therefore, Fan Yao must wait for him to reenter the stage before he could come forward and challenge him.

All this time Zhao Min was standing close to them. With a faint smile on her face, she looks extremely delighted. Zhang Wuji shifted to get closer to her and asked in low voice, “Min Mei, what is it? Why do you look so happy?”

Zhao Min’s jade-like cheeks blushed. Hanging her head low, she whispered, “You taught Fan You Shi these several martial art techniques only to break Song Qingshu’s arm. Why didn’t you teach him something to take the life of that person surnamed Song?”

Zhang Wuji replied, "Although Song Qingshu has done much evil, he is, after all, my Da Shibo's [first martial (older) uncle] only beloved child. It will be up to Da Shibo to discipline him. If I told Fan You Shi to take his life, I would have been unfair to Da Shibo."

Zhao Min said with a laugh, "If you have him killed, Zhou Jia Jiejie [older sister from Zhou family] would become a widow. Then you can rekindle the old flame. Wouldn't that be marvelous?"

Zhang Wuji laughed. "Would you allow me to do that?" he asked.

Zhao Min smiled and replied, "I wouldn't think of not allowing you. I'll just wait till you turn double-minded again [orig. 'san xin liang yi' - three hearts, two intentions], then she'd use her fingers to poke five holes on your chest."

While Zhang Wuji was discussing counterattack measure with Fan Yao, and talking and joking with Zhao Min, Song Qingshu had retreated to his wooden shelter under the protection of the eight Emei female disciples. The crowd of heroes saw how hair-raising and ruthlessly he killed his two opponents just now. They could not help but feeling frightened; they were not willing to go down the arena and thus subjected themselves to the danger.

A moment later, in a leisure manner Song Qingshu returned to the arena. Cupping his fists he said, "I [orig. zai4xia4 - under] have had enough rest. I am ready to take any hero who would like to give me some instructions."

Fan Yao called out, "Let me ask for some advice from Emei Pai's marvelous skill." He was just about to jump into the arena when suddenly a grey shadow flashed by and stopped

right in front of Song Qingshu. He turned toward Fan Yao and said, "Fan Dashi, please let me try first." This person's manner was very dignified. He stood with his feet sturdily grounded. His attitude was guarded. He was the Wudang Er Xia [second hero], Yu Lianzhou.

Seeing that Yu Lianzhou rushed over, and realizing he was Jiaozhu's martial uncle, Fan Yao felt it was inappropriate to argue with him. He said, "The Ol' Fan is lucky today to be able to see Yu Er Xia's Wudang divine skill."

"I do not dare," Yu Lianzhou replied.

Since he was little, Song Qingshu had always a bit scared of this particular Shishu. Right now, seeing him with an imposing aura and stern look, he knew today's battle was no longer a sparring while he was training on Mount Wudang, but it would be a life and death combat. Although he had learned amazing martial art from a different school, he still cowered in the end.

Yu Lianzhou cupped his fists and said, "Song Shaoxia [young hero], please!" This salute, and also the way he addressed Song Qingshu, showed clearly that he did not dare to show the slightest degree of contempt toward Song Qingshu, but also showed that he considered Song Qingshu as a total outsider.

Song Qingshu did not say anything. He simply bowed in respect. Yu Lianzhou shouted and his palm hacked down on Song Qingshu's face.

Yu Lianzhou had been famous in the Wulin world for the last thirty years or so, but the number of people who had actually seen him displaying his true capability was actually very few. Until today, when they saw him with soft power in his palms

he rendered the strong, ruthless, explosive power of the 'pi li lei huo dan' [thunderbolt bullet] useless. His skill was so refined that the spectators felt ashamed of their own inadequacy. The Jianghu people had known for some time that the essence of Wudang Pai's martial art was 'soft subduing hard', the style was slow moving but also very rich with subtle changes. Who would have thought that Yu Lianzhou's palms stormed like the wind, his style was amazingly swift, that Song Qingshu's lower part, between his legs and his waist, was successively hit by a kick and a palm.

Song Qingshu was very shocked. "Tai Shifu and Father both prepared me to be the Wudang Pai's third generation Zhangmen [sect leader], they would not hold any martial art secret from me. Yu Ershu's [second uncle] swift fist and quick leg were in the style I had already learned, but how could he launch the stances with such a speed? Didn't the way he use it is contrary to our school's main principle? Whatever it is, the result is this fierce!"

He wanted to use the finger skill Zhou Zhiruo taught him, but Yu Lianzhou did not give him even a chance to catch his breath. Thereupon he had no choice but kept stepping back and did his best to hold his position.

The crowd of heroes watched the fight between these two men with rapt attention. Presently, Yu Lianzhou was gaining an upper hand. However, in the two previous battles, Song Qingshu was also at a disadvantage before he was able to turn defeat into victory by stretching out his fingers and killing his opponents. He might be able to repeat it this time. They saw Yu Lianzhou moved faster and faster, but every style and every stance was very clear. It was just like an expert singer, although the singer sang a fast-tempo song, the enunciation of every syllable was very clear, without the slightest degree of fuzziness.

The crowd of heroes started to stand up one by one. Those who sat on the back climbed the tables and chairs. In their hearts, they were all praising, "Wudang's Yu Er Xia truly deserves his reputation. He does not stop pressing his opponent, yet not a single stance was used twice."

Lucky for Song Qingshu that he was a direct-line disciple of Wudang; he knew all the subtle changes of Yu Lianzhou's hands and feet movements. However, fighting in such a pace was actually the first time for him.

The yellow dust on the field rose upward, becoming a thick fog enveloping these two men. Suddenly there was a loud bang as two palms collided. Both Yu Lianzhou and Song Qingshu leaped backward at the same time. The cloud of dust was divided. Before he was even standing firmly, with a monkey-like agility Yu Lianzhou had jumped forward again.

Yin Liting was concerned over his Shixiong's safety. He could not help standing by the field with his hand on the hilt of his sword and his unblinking eyes trained on the battle in the field.

By now, Song Qingshu felt as if he was treading on the fine line between life and death. He fought with everything he had. He did not even think of using other school's martial art any longer; all he could use was Wudang Pai martial art, which he trained since his childhood.

Yin Liting was very familiar with these two men's punching and kicking style; he knew that each stance was meant to take the opponent's life. Hence, his anxiety far surpassed of those who were merely spectators. Fortunately, he noticed that Yu Lianzhou gradually gained the upper hand. He would have hacked him dead early on if he did not guard against

Song Qingshu's malicious and ruthless five-finger piercing stance, hence being somewhat cautious.

Zhang Wuji was also quite worried. Secretly he grabbed two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his pocket. If Yu Lianzhou's life will be in danger, he would disregard the general assembly's rule by dashing out and save him.

The cloud of dust was growing higher. Suddenly Song Qingshu stretched out his left hand with his five fingers spread out to claw Yu Lianzhou's right shoulder. For the last hundred stances or so, Yu Lianzhou had been waiting for Song Qingshu to launch this stance.

Yu Lianzhou had clearly seen the way Song Qingshu used his claw to kill the two elders of the Beggar Clan. If there were no previous fatal example, Yu Lianzhou would have been taken by surprise by this kind of fierce and killer stance. Although he might not die, but he would certainly be seriously injured. However, since he had seen this stance, he had prepared beforehand how to deal with it. On the other hand, Song Qingshu had not practiced this claw technique long enough; his movement did not have too many variations. His movement this time was almost the same to the previous ones.

Yu Lianzhou made a slight shoulder movement to evade. His left hand made several circles in the air.

"Ah!" Zhao Min and Fan Yao could not bear not to exclaim together, because Yu Lianzhou's circles were exactly the 'luan huan jue' of Taijiquan Zhang Wuji taught Fan Yao earlier.

As Zhao Min and Fan Yao watched this, they knew Song Qingshu was in a very bad moment. Before their 'ah!'

exclaim was even finished, the five fingers of Song Qingshu's right hand had arrived at Yu Lianzhou's throat.

Zhang Wuji was enraged. "He deserves to die! He deserves to die!" he muttered under his breath. The Beggar Clan's Zhi Fa Zhanglao lost his life under this claw. Unexpectedly Song Qingshu was brazen enough to use this malicious hand toward his own martial uncle.

But he saw that one of Yu Lianzhou's arms made a circle, while the other arm revolved in the 'zuan fan' [drilling/boring movement] and 'luo xuan' [corkscrew turn] stances from the 'liu he jin' [six gathering strengths] style. Yu Lianzhou's arms coiled around Song Qingshu's arms. 'Crack! Crack!' Song Qingshu's arm joints broke.

"Qidi [seventh (younger) brother] is avenged today!" Yu Lianzhou roared.

Joining his arms together, Yu Lianzhou continued striking both of Song Qingshu's ears with the 'shuang feng guan er' [a pair of wind piercing the ears]. It was an attack where the 'soft' power was focused into one target. Song Qingshu's skull disintegrated immediately. But before his body even fell to the ground, Yu Lianzhou gave him a powerful kick. Obviously, he wanted to finish Song Qingshu on the spot.

Suddenly a dark green shadow flashed by; a long whip threatened Yu Lianzhou's face. Hastily he leaped back to evade. But with an unimaginable speed the long whip kept threatening his face. It was none other than the Emei Pai's Sect Leader seeking revenge for her husband.

Yu Lianzhou hurriedly took three steps backward. Zhou Zhiruo's whip technique was truly out of this world; in just three stances Yu Lianzhou was surrounded by the whip. Suddenly the flexible whip shook and coiled back. Zhou

Zhiruo caught the tip of the whip with her left hand and coldly said, "If I take your life right now, you will be dissatisfied. Unsheathe your weapon!"

'Shua!' Yin Liting drew his sword out. He stepped forward and said, "Let me receive Miss Zhou's instruction."

Zhou Zhiruo stared at him with cold eyes; she turned around to look at Song Qingshu's injury. His eyes were closed, blood flowed out from his seven orifices, he laid down on the ground, paralyzed. It looked like his life could not be saved. Three male disciples from Emei Pai rushed forward and took him back to their shelter.

Zhou Zhiruo turned back and pointed at Yu Lianzhou and said, "I'll kill you first. Killing the one surnamed Yin later will not be too late."

Yu Lianzhou had exhausted his entire strength just now yet he was unable to escape from her whip's encirclement. He was inwardly shocked. He loved his younger martial brother. He thought, "If I fight her, even though I might die under her whip, at least Liudi [sixth (younger) brother] would have a chance to see her whip technique. My only hope is that his chance of survival will be increased by several points."

Reaching behind his back, he wanted to take over Yin Liting's sword. Yin Liting also realized the mortal danger they were facing. Even with the two martial brothers' level of martial art skills, the chance of them escaping her long whip's strike seemed very remote. Both he and his Shixiong had the same intention; he also wanted to fight her first, so that Shixiong would have a chance to find the gist of her whip technique. Thereupon, he was unwilling to hand his sword over.

"Shige [martial (older) brother]," he said, "Let me have a go

first.”

Yu Lianzhou turned his gaze to him. They had been training in the same school for dozens of years. They had a very close relationship with each other; as close as blood brothers. That moment, deep emotion surged up his breast; his thought flashed back and forth like lightning. He remembered Yu Daiyan was crippled, Zhang Cuishan killed himself, Mo Shenggu died a tragic death. From the Wudang Seven Heroes, only four left. It seemed like two more heroes would lost their lives in this place. Although Yin Liudi was strong in martial art, emotionally he was very weak. If he died first, Yin Liudi’s mind would take such a blow that he might be unable to fight an all out battle.

“If I died first,” he carefully considered, “Liudi would have to go through countless difficulties to avenge me, while he himself would not want to escape alive alone. In the end, the two of us, martial brothers, would unavoidably die together in vain. If he died first, I would have a chance to understand the essence of this woman’s whip technique, and then perhaps I could fight her with all I have and die together with her.” Thereupon he nodded and said, “Liudi, try to hold your ground as long as possible.”

Remembering his pregnant wife, Yang Buhui, Yin Liting could not help but taking a glance toward Yang Xiao and Zhang Wuji. But immediately he rebuked himself, “After I die, other people will certainly take a good care of Buhui and the child; why would I act like a weak woman by asking others to help?” Thereupon he raised his sword, his eyes focused on the sword, his mind cleared of other matters, his back straightened, his chest puffed out, his shoulder relaxed and his elbows hang loosely.

“Zhang Men Ren [sect leader], please grant your

instructions!" he said. Although he was a lot older than Zhou Zhiruo, at this moment, Zhou Zhiruo was the Sect Leader of Emei Pai. He did not want to show the least bit of disrespect.

Noticing that Yin Liting was using the 'Taijijian' [Taiji Sword] to face the opponent; Yu Lianzhou knew that his sixth brother was prepared to unleash the full potential of their school's most powerful skill to contend with the most powerful enemy. He slowly retreated from the arena.

"You may start!" Zhou Zhiruo said.

Yin Liting thought that the opponent's movement was lightning fast. If he let her took the initiative, he might never be able to regain his momentum. Thereupon as his left foot took a step, he switched the sword to his left hand, and launched the 'san huan tao yue' [three rings around the moon]. This first stance was a mixture of truth and deceit; the sword in his left hand lunged toward the enemy, the blade flickered with rays of light, 'swish, swish, swish', the sword produced light swishing noise. The crowd of heroes broke into an earth-shattering applause.

Zhou Zhiruo turned her body sideways to evade; Yin Liting followed with 'da kui xing' [the Great Bear Constellation] and 'yan zi chao shui' [swallow hunts over the water]. His sword drew a big circle in the air, his right hand pierced straight forward, surprisingly, it also carried light 'swish, swish, swish' noise.

Zhou Zhiruo swung her slender waist like a pendulum, dodging the attacks one by one. "Yin Liu Xia," she said, "I gave you three stances to repay your kindness on Mount Wudang in the old days." As the last word came out of her mouth, the flexible whip in her hand shook like a cobra and struck directly into Yin Liting's chest.

Yin Liting quickly evaded to the left; but the whip changed its course midway and curved toward him. Yin Liting countered with 'feng bai he ye' [the wind sweeps lotus leaves]. His sword pared down. The whip and the sword collided, creating a light scratching noise. Yin Liting felt a burning sensation on the palm of his hand; the sword nearly fell off.

He was greatly shocked. "I thought her stances were strange but her internal energy was in par with mine," he mused, "Who would have thought that her internal energy is also strange beyond measures." Refocusing his attention, he launched the Taiji Sword by creating random circles, generating an extremely tight defense around his body.

The flexible whip in Zhou Zhiruo's hand was like a string of soft silk thread, like a weightless object. Her body flashed to the east and to the west, dashed forward and backward, yet the whip was always fluttering around Yin Liting.

Zhang Wuji's amazement grew as he watched the battle. "The way she moves the whip is entirely different from Du E, Du Nan and Du Jie, three eminent monks." At first, he thought that Emei Pai still had some heretical martial art that he was unaware of, but as he watched she move with demon-like agility, which differed greatly from Mie Jue Shitai's movements, against his will, a vague feeling of fear crept into his heart.

Suddenly Fan Yao exclaimed, "She is a ghost, she is not a human!"

His words echoed what was in Zhang Wuji's mind that he shivered involuntarily. If he were not in the field where the sun was still shining brightly and people were standing all

around him he would have thought that Zhou Zhiruo had died and her ghost picked up a whip and fought with Yin Liting.

In all his life, he had seen countless of strange martial arts, but Zhou Zhiruo's footwork and whip technique, which was like the wind blowing willow branch, or the water floating duckweed, was truly beyond anybody's imagination. In that moment, he felt as if he was awakened from a nightmare and was shivering from fear, "Could it be that she practices some kind of demonic skill? Or she is being possessed by some monster?"

Zhou Zhiruo's movements were strange, but Taiji Sword was developed from Zhang Sanfeng's Taijiquan [Taiji fist], which he created in his later years. It was the pinnacle of the sword technique, which came from the culmination of his life-long comprehension of martial art theory. Yin Liting unleashed his entire strength and skill into his continuous sword movements. Although he was unable to injure the opponent, his defense was flawless, enough to hold his ground.

Suddenly, someone called out with a strange voice and strange intonation, "Aiyo! Song Qingshu is about to breathe his last. Zhou Da Zhangmen [great sect leader], if you don't pay your last respect to your husband, you will be considered a dishonorable widow!"

Everybody turned their eyes toward the voice. It was Zhou Dian. He knew that in their entire lives, Wudang disciples put great emphasis to the internal energy cultivation to control their breathing. In facing the enemy, they were like 'the Mount Tai collapsed in front of their eyes, their countenances would not change; an elk hit their left ears, their eyes did not blink.' So he intended to help Yin Liting by disrupting Zhou Zhiruo's attention.

“Hey, hey, Miss Zhou Zhiruo of the Emei Pai,” he called again, “Your husband is about to die, he has some last words for you. He says he has three times seven, twenty-one, and four times seven, twenty-eight, illegitimate children outside. He wants that after he dies, you will take a good care of them, so that he won’t die with open eyes. Will you or will you not consent to his request?”

As the crowd of heroes heard him blabber such nonsense, some of them could not help but snicker. But Zhou Zhiruo acted as if she did not hear anything.

“Aiyo,” Zhou Dian called out, “It’s too bad! Miejue Lao Shitai, how have you, Senior, been doing? Long time no see. You, Senior, has never looked better. Your spirit must have possessed Miss Zhou; the way she plays this flexible whip is indeed very attractive!”

Suddenly, Zhou Zhiruo’s shadow flashed several ‘zhang’s backward. She lashed her long whip over her right shoulder. The tip of the whip curved up from the ground toward Zhou Dian’s face. Initially she was more than a dozen ‘zhang’s away from the Ming Cult’s thatched shelter, but just like a dragon swooping down from the sky, the flexible whip suddenly arrived at his face like an arrow.

Zhou Dian was happily blabbering with spittle coming out of his mouth. He did not expect in the middle of a fierce battle, Zhou Zhiruo was able to launch a sudden attack with her whip. As he was stunned, the long whip had already arrived at his face. Zhou Zhiruo did not even turn her head, but it was as if the back of her head grew a pair of eyes; the tip of the whip was pointing right at his nose.

As Zhou Zhiruo flung the long whip backward, two of her left-

hand fingers repeatedly pierced toward Yin Liting. Within seven of such attacks, she had covered the entire vital acupoints on Yin Liting's head, face and the front of his chest.

Yin Liting was unable to attack the opponent. He also could not turn back his sword to pare her arm. With no other choice, he launched the 'feng dian tou' [nodding phoenix] by bending his knees to dodge the attacks.

In the meantime, from the Ming Cult's thatched shelter came a loud 'bang!' followed by a series of crashing noises. Turned out Yang Xiao, who was standing on the side, and had keen eyes and quick hands, hurled the wooden table in front of him to block Zhou Zhiruo's whip. As the whip struck the table, wooden splinters flew all over the place. The teapots and teacups on the table were also thrown to all directions, splashing hot tea to numerous people around them.

As her attack missed, Zhou Zhiruo no longer paid Zhou Dian any attention. Her flexible whip coiled back and stormed toward Yin Liting.

Holding the hilt of a sword in his hand, Yu Lianzhou had been standing on the side. But after watching for half an afternoon, he still could not predict the essence of her whip technique. "Even if I have to fight, in Taiji Sword technique I am not any better than Liudi [sixth younger brother]. But if the fight is prolonged, this woman's internal energy might be insufficient, and then relying on our resilience, we might score a victory."

He saw Yin Liting's sword going back and forth, opening and closing, the 'yin' and 'yang' elements intertwined with each other. Yin Liting was unleashing the instructions given by their benevolent master, Zhang Sanfeng to the fullest. He thought that in all his life he had never seen his Shidi

[younger martial brother] unleash this kind of brilliant swordsmanship. Today, while facing a life and death situation, he was able to display the most refined of their school's sword technique. Wudang Pai's martial art paid particular attention to resiliency; the longer the fight, the stronger they were. The longer they were able to hold their ground, the greater the chance they would not get defeated.

Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo's long whip vibrated, creating circles, big and small circles, surrounding Yin Liting's entire body with these circles. Taiji Fist and Taiji Sword also based on transmitting strength through circles. Surprisingly, Zhou Zhiruo's long whip was also vibrating strength through circles. The rotational direction of the whip and Yin Liting's sword were the same, but the whip was several times faster.

As Yin Liting's sword was entangled by her whip, it lost its strength and did not want to follow its master's command. The sword was swirled several times and then a blue ray flickered as the sword was thrown upward. Zhou Zhiruo's long whip coiled down to smash the crown of Yin Liting's head.

Yu Lianzhou immediately jumped forward. His right hand caught the tip of the flexible whip. From inside her gown, Zhou Zhiruo's leg flew out, threatening Yu Lianzhou's waist.

From the start, Yu Lianzhou had always had difficulty predicting the direction of Zhou Zhiruo's whip strange movements. However, when he saw her shook the whip to create the circles and snatch Yin Liting's sword, it suddenly it dawned on him, "Turns out her skill is only mediocre. Her technique in vibrating the whip to make circles is far inferior to our Taiji Fist."

As he grabbed the tip of the whip, ignoring the attack toward

his waist, his left hand struck Zhou Zhiruo's lower abdomen using the 'hu zhua jue hu shou' ['Tiger Claws Destroying Procreation Skill' - See Chapter 10, translated by Faerie Queenie].

Zhou Zhiruo was unable to block. Like a lightning, this thought came into her mind, "I'll die under Yu Er Shu's [second (younger) uncle] hands today." Releasing the whip handle, the five fingers of her right hand came down on top of Yu Lianzhou's head, hoping that in her death, she would take Yu Lianzhou along.

Yu Lianzhou wanted to lean his head sideways to evade, but unfortunately, the 'tui hou xue' [lit. 'behind the leg' acupoint] on his waist was sealed by Zhou Zhiruo's kick that his neck stiffened and he could not turn his head. However, the strength of his left hand did not diminish.

At the time when both people's lives were hanging by a thread, someone suddenly darted in from the side; his right hand blocked Yu Lianzhou's 'hu zhua jue hu shou', his left hand stopped Zhou Zhiruo's fingers, which were about to pierce Yu Lianzhou's skull. It was Zhang Wuji who decided to save them.

Zhou Zhiruo combined the forces of her palms to strike Zhang Wuji's chest. If Zhang Wuji dodged the attack, this pair of palms would strike Yin Liting's face, therefore, he had no choice but parry her palms with his left palm.

As these two people's three palms struck each other, Zhang Wuji suddenly felt that Zhou Zhiruo's palms were void of any strength. Zhang Wuji was stunned. "Aiyo, not good!" he thought, "After fighting ferociously with Liu Shu [sixth uncle] for more than 200 stances, she is like a lamp which oil has dried up. If I continued sending out my strength, she would

certainly die on the spot.” In desperation, he hastily pulled back his strength.

When he sent out his left palm, he only knew that Zhou Zhiruo’s martial art did not differ too much from his own, that she was a powerful opponent; therefore, he did not dare to be negligent. With one palm blocking two, he had sent his entire strength. As the force was just about to come out, he realized the opponent was devoid of any strength, so he hurriedly pulled back his power. He was well aware that by doing so, he had violated an important principle of the martial art theory. It was equal to attacking his own body with his entire strength. In addition, he needed to use more strength in order to pull back the outgoing power. Fortunately, he had reached a level where he could send out or pull back his power at will. This sudden withdrawal of his strength would only stop the flow of his ‘chi’ momentarily, but would not greatly harm him.

Unexpectedly, as he pulled his strength, he suddenly felt like a burst of flooding water breaking a dam, the opponent’s strength surged into his body with an irresistible force. Zhang Wuji was greatly shocked; realizing that he had fallen into the enemy’s trap. ‘Bang!’ his chest was squarely hit by Zhou Zhiruo’s palms.

Zhang Wuji was stricken by his own strength plus Zhou Zhiruo’s palm power. It was as if two martial art masters joined hands to attack him. Although his Jiu Yang Shen Gong protecting his body was profound, it was simply too much for him to bear. Much less, the power of Zhou Zhiruo’s palms seized the opportunity to burst in when his defense line was wide open; right when his previous strength was pulled back and before the new strength was generated.

This technique was actually Emei Pai’s specialty. In the past,

Miejue Shitai had used it to strike him until he spurted blood and fell down to the ground. It was just that in the past, he was completely ignorant on how to withstand the attack. This time however, he misread Zhou Zhiruo's intentions and thus had fallen under the deceit.

Zhang Wuji was thrown backwards. His vision blackened and he spurted a mouthful of blood.

As Zhou Zhiruo's sneak attack succeeded, her left hand followed with five fingers aimed at the pit of his stomach. Zhang Wuji was heavily injured, but he had not lost consciousness. Seeing the claw was about to rip his throat and chest open, he strained himself to inch backward some more. 'Rip!' Zhou Zhiruo's claw scratched the front part of his clothes open, revealing Zhang Wuji's bare chest. Zhou Zhiruo's right hand claw swiftly followed.

At this moment, Yu Lianzhou's acupoint was sealed by her kick so he was unable to move. Yin Liting was some distance away so even though he pounced forward, he would be too late to save him. It looked like Zhang Wuji would not be able to escape this calamity.

As she was glancing down, Zhou Zhiruo suddenly saw a deep scar on his chest. It was the scar when she stabbed him with the Yitian Sword at the Brightness Peak. Her five fingers were less than half a foot from his chest, but mixed emotions suddenly surged up in her breast. Her eyes turned red and her claw stopped midair.

While she was hesitating, Wei Yixiao, Yin Liting, Yang Xiao, and Fan Yao, four people had already arrived. Wei Yixiao flew and blocked in front of Zhang Wuji. Yang and Fan, two people launched a converging attack from left and right. Yin Liting quickly grabbed Zhang Wuji and took him away.

The crowd around the field was thrown into chaos. Emei Pai disciples and Shaolin monks shouted and grabbing their weapons, they rushed into the arena. Yang Xiao and Fan Yao only fought Zhou Zhiruo for several stances before they stopped. Wei Yixiao helped up Yu Lianzhou, taking him back to their shelter. Emei Pai and Shaolin Pai also returned to their positions as they saw that the fight has ceased.

Zhao Min was actually also rushing into the arena, but her speed was inferior to that of Wei Yixiao, Yang Xiao, and the others. By the time she was halfway, Zhang Wuji was already carried back. As she saw blood seeping out from his mouth, she was so frightened that her face turned sheet-white.

Forcing a smile, Zhang Wuji said, "I am all right. I only need to circulate my 'chi' for a while."

Everybody helped him to sit in the shelter. At once Zhang Wuji slowly circulated his Jiu Yang Shen Gong to treat his internal injury.

Zhou Zhiruo called out, "Which hero will come up to grant me instruction?" Tightening his belt, Fan Yao went out in big strides.

"Fan You Shi," Zhang Wuji quickly called out, "Listen to my order: you must not fight. We ... we admit defeat ..." As he opened his mouth, he vomited two more mouthful of blood.

Fan Yao did not dare to defy his Jiaozhu's order. Supposing he insisted on fighting, he would inevitably make Zhang Wuji's injury worse. Besides, even if he fought with everything he had, he might only deliver his life in vain, without any advantage to their own Cult.

Standing in the middle of the field, Zhou Zhiruo asked two more times.

The fact that Zhang Wuji was injured by his own pulled-back strength was known to him and Zhou Zhiruo only. Others believed that Zhou Zhiruo's power was so strange that Zhang Wuji was not her match. The spectators only saw that Zhou Zhiruo did not continue her claw and thus they believed that she spared Zhang Wuji's life. As a young woman, she successfully defeated Yin Liting, Yu Lianzhou and Zhang Wuji; three prominent martial art masters of this age. Everybody believed that her martial art was simply too strange; totally beyond anybody's comprehension.

Although there were more than a handful warriors among the crowd of heroes who were quite skillful in martial arts, upon self-introspection, these people realized they could not be compared to Yin, Yu and Zhang, three people; therefore, they decided there was no need for them to lose their lives for nothing.

Standing in the field, Zhou Zhiruo's gown was blown by the mountain breeze, giving the impression that her gentle and frail figure was swaying by the wind. All around the field there were several thousand heroes and warriors from all over the world [orig. 'san shan wu yue, si mian ba fang' - three hills and five mountains, four faces and eight directions. Five sacred mountains of the Taoism are: Tai Shan, Hua Shan, Heng Shan, Heng Shan (different characters) and Song Shan.], yet not a single one dared to come down and challenge her.

Zhou Zhiruo waited a while longer, still nobody stepped forward. The old monk from Damo Hall walked into the field. Joining his palms together he said, "The skill of Emei Pai Zhang Men Ren [sect leader], Mrs. Song surpasses the crowd

of heroes. Her martial art skill is number one in the world. Is there any hero who disagrees?”

Zhou Dian called out, “I, Zhou Dian, disagree.”

“In that case,” the old monk said, “I invite Zhou Yingxiong [hero Zhou] to come down and have a competition with her.”

“I am not her match,” Zhou Dian replied, “What can I compete with her?”

“Zhou Yingxiong,” the old monk replied, “Since you are aware you are not her match, aren’t you submitting to her?”

“I know that I am not her match,” Zhou Dian said, “But I do not submit to her. What’s wrong with that?”

The old monk no longer argued with his twisted logic. He asked, “Aside from this gentleman, Zhou Yingxiong, is there anybody else who do not submit to her?”

He repeated the question three times. Zhou Dian also voiced his disagreement three times. But nobody else made any noise to challenge the decision.

“Since nobody is going to challenge her,” the old monk said, “Then according to the prior agreement of this great assembly, Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun will be handed over to Emei Pai Zhang Men Ren, Mrs. Song. Whoever has the precious Tulong Saber in his possession should also hand over the control of the said Saber to Mrs. Song. This is the agreement reached by the heroes present and nobody will be allowed to dissent.”

Zhang Wuji was in the middle of treating his heavy injury by dispersing his internal energy and activating his Jiu Yang

Zhen Qi. He was slowly entering the 'clear' and 'void' state of mind. But as he suddenly heard the old monk say 'Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun will be handed over to Emei Pai Zhang Men Ren, Mrs. Song', his mind was shaken and he nearly threw up another mouthful of blood.

Zhao Min was sitting close to him, caring for him with complete attention. Seeing Zhang Wuji suddenly shiver and his face greatly change, she understood his concern.

"Wuji Gege," she said in a soft voice, "Nothing could be better than that Yifu falling into Zhou Jiejie's hands. She did not have a heart to kill you just now; obviously, she still has deep feelings for you. I am sure she will not harm Yifu. Please set your heart at ease and just concentrate on treating your injury."

Zhang Wuji thought she was right. He was relieved.

In the meantime, the sun was slowly setting behind the western mountain. The field gradually turned dark. The old monk said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun is confined somewhere in the back of the mountain. Right now, the sky has turned dark, Gentlemen and Ladies must be hungry. We will gather here again tomorrow afternoon. Lao Seng [old monk, referring to himself] will lead Mrs. Song to release the prisoner. That time we will witness Mrs. Song's unparalleled martial art skill once again."

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, and the others cast their glances toward Zhao Min. They all thought, "Exactly as you predicted. Shaolin Pai indeed has another plot. Even if Zhou Zhiruo possessed stronger martial art skill, there is no way she would be able to defeat Du E and the others, three eminent monks. I am afraid she would lose her life on top of that small hill. By showing off their power, Shaolin Pai will still dominate

over the Wulin world.”

By this time Zhou Zhiruo had already returned to her thatched shelter. By defeating the heroes that day, Emei Pai's prestige soared high. Seeing their Sect Leader return, there was not a single Emei disciple who did not show profound respect.

Although the crowd of heroes had seen Zhou Zhiruo win the title 'Number One Martial Artist under the Heavens', the most important matter had not been brought to completion yet, its conclusion was still left to everybody's guess. Therefore, nobody went down the mountain that day.

The old monk said, “By visiting our Temple, all heroes are Shaolin Pai's esteemed guests. If there is any resentment in your midst, we respectfully request for our sake that you do not settle it up on the Shaoshi Mountain. Otherwise, we will consider you as looking down on Shaolin Pai. After dinner tonight, you may visit the front part of the mountain as you wish. The rear part of the mountain, however, is where our Sect keeps our scriptures and manuals. We ask you to stay away from that part.”

Immediately Fan Yao took Zhang Wuji and carried him back to the Ming Cult camp. Although Zhang Wuji's injury was very heavy, after taking nine of his own 'miracle pills' plus circulating his Jiu Yang Shen Qi, deep into the night, around the second hour [between 1 - 3am], he vomited three mouthfuls of blood and his internal injury was completely healed.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the others were pleasantly surprised. They all praised his internal energy cultivation as unparalleled in the world. If someone else suffered such a heavy injury, even if he was under a

master physician's care, he would need at least one or two months before he could comfortably circulate his 'chi' again. The fact that Zhang Wuji was able to recuperate in a matter of hours was simply too incredible. It would be hard for them to believe if they did not witness it with their own eyes.

Zhang Wuji ate two bowls of rice. After resting for a moment, he stood up and said, "I need to get some air."

He was the Cult Leader. Even though he did not tell them what he was going to do, nobody dared to inquire. Yin Liting only said, "You have just recovered from a serious injury; you must be very careful."

"I will!" Zhang Wuji replied. Noticing a great concern on Zhao Min's face, he gave her a faint smile as if he was saying, "Don't worry!"

As Zhang Wuji walked out the shed and looked up, he saw the bright moon and sparse stars in the sky. He took a deep breath and felt that his 'zhen qi' [real/genuine 'chi'] was flowing freely around his body. His spirit rose as he walked toward the Temple gate.

"I [orig. zai4xia4 - 'under'] have something I'd like to discuss with Emei Pai Zhang Men [sect leader]; would you please show me the way?" he said to the monk in charge of the reception of the visitors.

The monk on duty knew he was the Ming Cult Jiaozhu. "Yes! Yes!" he said, full of respect, "Xiao Seng [humble monk - referring to self] will show the way. Zhang Jiaozhu, this way, please."

Leading Zhang Wuji to the west, they walked for approximately a 'li' [0.5km] before he pointed toward several

little huts some distance away.

The monk said, "Emei Pai stays over there. Monks and nuns are not supposed to mingle. Xiao Seng feels uncomfortable to get too close this late at night." Actually, he was afraid Zhang Wuji might fight with Zhou Zhiruo again. If two masters of the present age involved in a battle, he might get unlucky and would be hurt as an innocent bystander.

With a smile Zhang Wuji said, "If you returned and mentioned this matter, you would unavoidably alarm the others. I'd better seal your acupoint. What do you say?"

The monk hastily said, "Xiao Seng will not dare to open my mouth. Jiaozhu, don't worry." Hurriedly he turned around and left.

Zhang Wuji strolled leisurely toward the huts. He stopped about a dozen of 'zhang's away from the huts. Two nuns immediately flew in. Holding their swords horizontally across their bodies they shouted, "Who's there?"

Zhang Wuji cupped his fists and said, "Ming Cult's Zhang Wuji wishes to have an audience with your precious Sect's Sect Leader, Mrs. Song."

The two nuns were very apprehensive; the more senior of the two haltingly said, "Zhang ... Zhang Jiaozhu, please wait here, I ... I have to report it first." Although she tried to act calm, her voice trembled. She turned around and started to walk. But only several steps later she took out a bamboo whistle and blew it.

Emei Pai was very happy and proud that day. Their Sect Leader had defeated three of the great masters of the present age in front of the world heroes. She had scared the several thousand fierce warriors so that none dared to

challenge her. That was indeed an unprecedented grand occasion in the history of their Sect. However, the Emei Pai had killed two Elders of the Beggar Clan, defeated two heroes of Wudang, and injured the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult. The number of people they had offended today was truly not a few. In addition, with Zhou Zhiruo winning the 'Number One Martial Artist in the World' title, there would be many heroes who were angry or envious. Thus, that night they set up tight sentries and patrols around their camp to guard against any threat from the outside.

As the nun blew the whistle, more than twenty people rushed in immediately from all directions. Their blades flickered under the moonlight. Zhang Wuji ignored their presence. He stood still with his hands behind his back.

The nun disappeared into a small hut. She reappeared a moment later and said, "Our humble Sect's Zhang Men Ren says: Men and women are not supposed to mingle, especially this late at night. Zhang Jiaozhu, please return."

"I have a rather acceptable medical skill," Zhang Wuji said, "I only wish to treat Song Qingshu Shaoxia's [young hero] injury; nothing more."

The nun was startled. She went back into the hut to convey the message. After a long time, she returned and said, "Zhang Men Ren invites you to come in."

Zhang Wuji patted his waist to show that he did not carry any weapon before walking behind the nun to enter the hut. He saw Zhou Zhiruo sitting by a table on the side; her cheek rested on her palm. She was lost in thought so that she did not turn her head although she heard him. The nun poured a cup of green tea and set it on the table then she retreated and gently closed the door. There were no other people in the

room. A flickering white candle on the table illuminated Zhou Zhiruo's plain dark green attire. The overall scene was sad and gloomy.

Zhang Wuji's heart ached. In a low voice he said, "How is Song Shige's condition? Let me take a look at him."

Without turning her head, Zhou Zhiruo coldly said, "His skull is smashed, his injury is very heavy. Most likely he won't survive. I don't even know if he would survive the night."

"You know my medical skill is not too bad," Zhang Wuji said, "I will do my best to save him."

"Why do you want to save him?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji was startled. "I did you wrong," he said, "In my heart, I am very ashamed. Moreover, you have showed me mercy today by letting me live. Song Shige is injured; I want to make it up to you somehow."

"You showed me mercy first, do you think I did not know it?" Zhou Zhiruo replied, "If you can bring Song Dage back to life, how do you want me to repay?"

"A life for a life," Zhang Wuji replied, "I am asking you to show mercy on my Yifu."

Pointing toward the inner chamber Zhou Zhiruo indifferently said, "He is inside."

Zhang Wuji walked toward the inside chamber. But as he saw the room was pitch-black without any light, he took the candlestick and went in. Zhou Zhiruo did not move; she was still sitting motionless with her cheek on her palm.

Zhang Wuji raised the dark green mosquito net up. Under the candlelight, he saw that Song Qingshu's eyes were bulging, his facial features [orig. 'wu3guan1' - five sensory organs: nose, eyes, lips, tongue, ears] were distorted, making his countenance hideous. His breathing was very weak and he had lost consciousness long ago. Zhang Wuji held his wrist only to find his pulse was chaotic; sometimes fast, sometimes slow. His skin felt ice-cold. If he was not treated immediately, indeed he would not survive the night. Zhang Wuji lightly touched his skull and felt that four pieces of Song Qingshu's skull, the forehead and the back of his head, were disintegrated. Zhang Wuji thought about the fierceness of his Yu Er Bo's [second (older) uncle] pair of fists. This 'shuang feng guan er' stance was backed by a hundred percent internal energy. If Song Qingshu did not have a very strong foundation in internal energy cultivation, he would have died on the spot.

Zhang Wuji let down the mosquito net. He put down the candlestick on the table, sat on a bamboo chair by the table, and was deep in thought, thinking how he was going to treat the injury. Song Qingshu's injury was fatal; even with all his might, Zhang Wuji's confidence only reached 30%.

It took him about the time to cook rice to consider all options carefully; and then he stood up and went out the room. "Mrs. Song," he said, "Whether or not Song Shige's life would be saved, I find it very difficult to assert. Would you let me give it a try?"

"If you can't save him, nobody else in this world can," Zhou Zhiruo answered.

Zhang Wuji said, "Even if his life is spared, I am afraid his face, his martial art will not return to his former days. His brain was also shaken badly. I am afraid ... I am afraid even

speaking will not be easy for him.”

“You are not a deity,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “I know you will do your utmost to bring him back to life, so that you can be the imperial court’s consort with a clear conscience.”

Zhang Wuji was stumped; he thought it was inappropriate for him to respond, so he simply went back to the inner chamber and uncovered the quilt covering Song Qingshu’s body. After sealing Song Qingshu’s eight major acupoints, with an extreme care and very light pressure, which was neither here nor there, his ten fingers started to mend Song Qingshu’s broken skull, piece by piece. And then he took out a golden case from his bosom. With his little finger he picked a bead of blackish paste, which he then rubbed evenly with both hands on Song Qingshu’s broken skull.

This black paste was the ‘hei yu duan xu gao’ [black jade bone mending ointment], which was the supreme panacea of broken bones, developed by the Shaolin Pai of the Western Region. It was what remained from the ointment he begged from Zhao Min to treat Yu Daiyan and Yin Liting’s broken limbs. He also sent out his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi in steady stream through his palm to help the medicine penetrate Song Qingshu’s broken bones.

About the time needed to burn an incense stick later, Zhang Wuji had finished applying his energy. Seeing Song Qingshu’s face did not worsen, he was delighted; knowing that his chance of saving Song Qingshu’s life had been increased by several points.

He had just recovered from a heavy injury so that after exerting that much energy, his heart was beating faster and his breath was labored. After standing next to the bed while regulating his ‘chi’ for half a day, he walked back to the outer

chamber and put the candlestick back on the table.

Under the flickering candlelight, he saw Zhou Zhiruo's face was unusually pale. Hearing light footsteps outside the room, he knew that the Emei disciples were still patrolling around their camp.

"I think Song Shige will live. Set your heart at ease," he said.

"You don't have the confidence of saving his life, I also don't have the confidence of saving Xie Daxia's life," Zhou Zhiruo said.

"She is going to attack the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan tomorrow," Zhang Wuji thought, "Even if there is one or two masters within the Emei Pai to give her a hand, nine out of ten it would be difficult for her to succeed. Perhaps she might deliver her life instead." Thereupon he said, "Do you know the situation of the place where they hold Yifu captive?"

"I don't," Zhou Zhiruo replied, "What kind of fierce ambush Shaolin Pai is preparing?"

And thus Zhang Wuji explained briefly how Xie Xun was held prisoner in a dungeon on top of a small hill, and that he was guarded by Shaolin's three old monks; how he himself had failed to break the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan twice, resulted in the death of Yin Tianzheng.

Zhou Zhiruo was listening quietly until he was finished, and then she said, "That being the case, if you failed to break their defense, what hope do I have?"

Suddenly Zhang Wuji got an idea. "Zhiruo," he happily said, "If the two of us join hands, we can accomplish greater merits. With my pure 'yang' and 'hard' power, I can entangle

the three eminent monks' long whips. With your 'yin' and 'soft' power, you seize the opportunity to enter. Once you are inside the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan defense line, with converging attack from outside and inside, we could score a victory."

With a cold laugh Zhou Zhiruo said, "We were once engaged to each other. Right now, my husband is hovering between life and death. On top of that, I did not take your life today. Other people would say that I still have a feeling toward you. If I took your advice by asking you to help me, the heroes of the world would scold me as one without any sense of honor, indecisive and capricious."

Zhang Wuji anxiously said, "We only need to have clear conscience. Why would we give any regard to whatever other people might say?"

"And if I do have a guilty conscience?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji was taken aback; he could only say, "You ... You ..."

"Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "You are a single man and I am a widow. With us being together this late of night, it's hard for us to avoid public criticism. Please leave immediately!"

Zhang Wuji stood up and bowed deeply. "Mrs. Song," he said, "You have been very good to me since we were very young. I wish you would bestow kindness to me one more time. For the rest of his life, Zhang Wuji will not dare to forget your kindness."

Zhou Zhiruo met his request with silence; she neither agreed nor disagreed. All along, she did not even turn her head so that Zhang Wuji was unable to see her expression. While he

was just about to repeat his request, in a loud voice Zhou Zhiruo called, "Jinghui Shijie [martial (older) sister], see the visitor out!"

With a creaking noise, the outer door opened. Jinghui stood outside with a sword in her hand. She stared at Zhang Wuji with an angry look.

Zhang Wuji thought that at this moment, his Yifu's life was at stake; his own reputation was of no importance. Thereupon, he knelt down in front of Zhou Zhiruo and kowtowed four times. "Mrs. Song," he said, "I am asking for your mercy."

Zhou Zhiruo sat motionless like a statue.

"Zhang Wuji," Jinghui shouted, "Zhang Men Ren [sect leader] told you to get out. Why are you still pestering her? You are indeed a scum of the Wulin community. There is no one this shameless!" She thought that Song Qingshu had died and thus Zhang Wuji was begging Zhou Zhiruo to marry him.

Zhang Wuji sighed and jumped out the door.

Before even reaching the Ming Cult camp, Zhao Min had already met him. "Song Qingshu's life is saved, isn't it?" she said, "And you have used my 'hei yu duan xu gao' to be a good man."

"Ah!" Zhang Wuji exclaimed, "You truly have a deity's foresight. At this time, it's still hard to say whether he will be alive or not."

Zhao Min heaved a deep sigh and said, "You wanted to save Song Qingshu's life as an exchange for Xie Daxia. Wuji Gege, you are growing more and more muddleheaded; you do not have the least bit of understanding of other people's hearts."

“Why?” Zhang Wuji wondered, “I don’t understand what you were saying.”

“You saved Song Qingshu with all your strength, your blood, your sweat. That means you did not care about Zhou Jiejie’s feeling to you the least bit,” Zhao Min said, “Tell me, do you think she is or she isn’t angry?”

Zhang Wuji was startled; he was at a loss for words. He thought it would defy any logic if Zhou Zhiruo did not want her husband to be healed. However, she did say, ‘I know you will do your utmost to bring him back to life, so that you can be the imperial court’s consort with a clear conscience’. Clearly, this sentence carried the idea that Zhou Zhiruo resented him. Moreover, she also said, ‘what if I do have a guilty conscience?’

“You have saved Song Qingshu’s life, and now you regret it, don’t you?” Zhao Min asked. Without waiting for Zhang Wuji’s answer, she smiled slightly and then flew back into the shed.

Zhang Wuji sat on a large rock. He raised his head to look at the cold crescent moon, and was lost in thought. His mind wandered back to the events that followed the first time he met Zhou Ziruo, especially her tone of speaking and her body language just now. He lowered his head, while myriads of indiscernible thoughts raced back and forth in his mind.

Early morning on the sixth day of the fifth month, the bells inside the Shaolin Temple rang, calling the crowd of heroes to gather again in the field. This time, the old monk of the Damo Hall did not even ask for Kong Zhi’s permission. He stood in the middle of the field and said in a loud and clear voice, “All heroes, greetings! In the martial art competition

yesterday, the Emei Pai Sect Leader, Mrs. Song's skill was proven to surpass everybody else's. We invite Mrs. Song to the back of the mountain to break the guard and get Jin Mao Shi Wang Xie Xun out. Lao Seng [old monk - referring to self] will show the way." Finished speaking, he proceeded walking toward the back of the mountain.

Emei Pai's eight senior female disciples promptly followed him, with Zhou Zhiruo and the rest of Emei disciples close on their heels. The rest of the heroes followed after them. Zhang Wuji noticed that Zhou Zhiruo wore similar clothes to the ones she wore the previous day, not mourning clothes, so he knew Song Qingshu had not died yet.

"Critical moment has passed," Zhang Wuji thought, "He will live."

As the crowd of heroes went up to the peak of the hill, they saw that the three eminent monks were still sitting cross-legged under the pine trees.

The old monk of the Damo Hall said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang is held captive in the underground dungeon in between the three green pine trees. Guarding the dungeon are our Sect's three elders. Mrs. Song's martial art skill is unrivalled under the heavens. She only needs to defeat our Sect's three elders then she can open the dungeon and take the prisoner away. The rest of us will have the opportunity to admire Mrs. Song's skill once again."

Seeing Zhang Wuji's indeterminate expression, Yang Xiao said quietly by his ear, "Jiaozhu, don't worry. Wei Fu Wang and Shuo Bude are leading the Five-Element Banners to surround the peak. If Emei Pai is unwilling to hand Xie Shi Wang over, we will have to use force."

Frowning, Zhang Wuji said, "That means we are breaking the

general assembly's rules and breaking good faith."

"I am only afraid Mrs. Song would place a sword on Xie Shi Wang's neck," Yang Xiao said, "And then many innocent bystanders would be hurt. Breaking good faith or not, we simply can't deal with this crowd alone."

Zhao Min quietly said, "Xie Shi Wang's enemies are numerous. We must guard against sneak attacks, someone launching secret projectile from among the crowd."

Yang Xiao said, "Fan You Shi, Priest Tie Guan, Zhou Xiong [brother Zhou] Peng Dashi [reverend Peng], four people are taking their positions on the four corners, guarding against sneak attacks."

In a low voice Zhao Min said, "It would be better if someone launched a secret projectile. We may seize the opportunity amidst the chaos to snatch Xie Shi Wang. The world heroes could not blame us for breaking good faith. However, if all is quiet ... something has to happen ... Hmm, Yang Zuo Shi, have someone in disguise secretly launch an attack toward Xie Shi Wang to stir up the water, and then in the midst of trouble we snatch him away."

Yang Xiao laughed. "This is a wonderful idea," he said, and then immediately left to find someone to execute the plan.

Zhang Wuji realized they were not being straightforward and upright; but in order to save his Yifu, they were left with no other choice but to act decisively. In his heart, he could not stop feeling grateful toward Zhao Min. He thought, "In the face of critical situation, Min Mei and Yang Zuo Shi both have the ability to act decisive. It is very seldom that they had to stop and discuss matters at length, and lose a good opportunity. I don't have that ability."

In the meantime, he heard that Zhou Zhiruo was saying, "Since the three eminent monks are Shaolin Pai's elders, your martial art skill must be very profound. If I fought you with one against three, not only it will be unfair, it will also be disrespectful of me."

The Damo Hall's old monk said, "If Mrs. Song must have one or two people to help, you may do so."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "Because all the heroes under the heavens yielded to me, I was fortunate to win the competition. I was using our Sect's special skill, secretly passed on by Xian Shi [late/departed master], Miejue Shitai. Supposing we fought three against three, even if we scored a victory, I would fail to display the instructions my Xian Shi painstakingly taught me. But if I fought one against three, I would show disrespect toward the host. Therefore, let us do this: I am going to call someone who was injured under my hands yesterday, whose injury has not completely recovered, a kid to lend me a hand. This kid was once struck by my Xian Shi three times that he spurted blood. Let all the heroes under the heavens know. That way, my Xian Shi's prestige will not be damaged."

As Zhang Wuji heard this, he was utterly delighted. "Thanks the Heaven and thanks the Earth! She indeed allows me to come forward."

"Zhang Wuji," he heard Zhou Zhiruo call out, "Come out."

Aside from Yang Xiao and a few other people, the Ming Cult warriors did not know the background story; but all of them were angry to hear Zhou Zhiruo saying 'this kid this' and 'this kid that' in total disrespect of their Cult Leader. To their surprise, however, they saw that Zhang Wuji looked so happy. He stepped forward, bowed with cupped fists and

said, "Many thanks Mrs. Song, for showing mercy and sparing this kid's life yesterday."

Zhang Wuji had already decided in his heart, "She is humiliating me publicly not only to gain face to the Emei Pai, but also to retaliate for the disgrace that day, when the groom fled in the middle of the wedding ceremony. For Yifu's sake, I must set aside everything else."

Zhou Zhiruo said, "You were heavily injured that you vomited some blood yesterday. I don't really need any help today, but we must show some manners."

"Yes," Zhang Wuji replied, "I will follow your orders, I will not dare to disobey."

Zhou Zhiruo took out her whip. As she shook her right hand, the whip immediately created more than a dozen big and small circles in the air. It was a very beautiful sight. Her left hand flipped over. A blue ray flashed. A short blade appeared in her hand. The crowd of heroes had seen the formidable power of her flexible whip yesterday; they did not expect that she was able to use a blade at the same time. One long, the other short, one flexible, the other stiff; these two weapons were exact opposite of each other. The crowd of heroes gasped in admiration; their spirits were aroused.

Zhang Wuji fetched a couple of Sheng Huo Ling tablets from his pocket. He took two steps forward. Suddenly he staggered and deliberately let out several coughs, as if he had not fully recovered and was having difficulty even to protect himself, so that if they defeat the three Shaolin monks, the crowd of heroes would think that all credits belong to Zhou Zhiruo.

Zhou Zhiruo came near to him and said in a low voice, "You

have sworn an oath to avenge your 'biaomei' [younger maternal female cousin]. But if the murderer who harmed her was your Yifu, do you still want to save him?"

Zhang Wuji was taken aback. "Yifu suffers from some mental illness, he cannot be held responsible for his own actions," he finally said.

Du E said, "Zhang Jiaozhu come here to grant some more instructions today."

"I beg the forgiveness of the three Eminent Monks," Zhang Wuji replied.

"Well said, well said!" Du E said, "This Emei Pai Zhang Men; I heard she defeated all heroes under the heavens yesterday. Could it be that her martial art is superior to Zhang Jiaozhu's?"

"Certainly," Zhang Wuji replied, "Wan bei [younger generation - referring to self] suffered a severe injury and I vomited blood under Zhou Zhang Men's hands yesterday."

"That's strange," Du Nan said.

The three old monks' long whip slowly shook and came out. Right at this moment, from the waist of the hill suddenly came a gentle sound of 'qin' [zither] and flute ensemble, intermingled with the cry of the birds.

Zhang Wuji was very happy. As the 'yao qin' [jade or mother-of-pearl zither] made three 'zheng, zheng, zheng' noise, four young woman wearing white clothes floating onto the peak, each one had a short zither in her hands. Next, amidst the rising and falling flute sound, four young women in black, each blowing a long flute, walked up the peak. The black and white intermingled, eight young women stood on eight

directions. The zither and flute ensemble played a gentle, yet elegant music.

Accompanied by this beautiful music, a beautiful woman draped in light yellow soft cotton clothing strolled leisurely toward the peak. She was the woman Zhang Wuji met during the Beggar Clan meeting at Lulong the other day.

As soon as the little girl, the Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, Shi Hongshi saw her, she rushed forward, threw herself in that woman's bosom and cried out, "Yang Jiejie, Yang Jijie! Our Zhanglao and Longtou have been killed!" She pointed toward Zhou Zhiruo and said, "They were killed under Emei Pai and Shaolin Pai's malicious hands."

The woman in yellow nodded and said, "I know. Humph! Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua is not necessarily the strongest martial art in the world."

Ever since she arrived at the peak, her entourage, her beautiful face and her elegant manners have captivated the attention of everybody present. These few words of her were clearly heard by everyone. The crowd of heroes was astonished. The older ones among them thought, "Could it be that Emei Pai's claw technique is the sinister and ruthless skill, 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua', which shook the Jianghu over a hundred years ago?" They had heard the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua's name, and they knew this martial art was evil and brutal to the extreme; but since it had been lost for a long time, nobody had ever seen it.

The woman in yellow took Shi Hongshi by the hand and led her back to the Beggar Clan crowd. Then she sat on a piece of mountain rock.

Zhou Zhiruo's countenance slightly changed as in a low

voice she asked, "Who is this woman?"

"I only met her once," Zhang Wuji replied, "I don't know her name, I don't know her origin; I only know she has some relation with the Beggar Clan."

"Humph!" Zhou Zhiruo snorted, and then said, "Let's start!" Her long whip shook and coiled toward Du Nan's long rope, while grasping this opportunity to occupy the space in between the three deep green pine trees. Her first move in attacking the center of the enemies was very ruthless and swift, with lots of guts; even first-class Jianghu masters might be unable to do what she did.

The crowd of heroes only saw her shadow in the air, just like a giant dark green crane sweeping down from the sky; her movements were incomparably graceful.

The flexible whip in her right hand entangled Du Nan's long rope. Both of them exerted their strength trying to pull their respective weapons that Du Nan's weapon was rendered useless temporarily. Du E and Du Jie's pair of whips made a converging attack from left and right.

Zhang Wuji immediately stepped forward, but his step faltered and he tumbled down to the ground. The crowd of heroes gasped; they thought that after his injury, Zhang Wuji's steps were weakened. They did not know that Zhang Wuji was using the ancient Persian martial art he learned from the Sheng Huo Ling tablets. His movements were weird, totally unpredictable. As he seemed to be falling forward, the Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands actually struck toward the pit of Du Nan's stomach.

Du Nan's long rope was still entangled by Zhou Zhiruo's whip that he was unable to use his weapon to block the attack. Du E and Du Jie saw the danger. Their ropes left Zhou Zhiruo to

assault Zhang Wuji. Two long strips of black ropes, with overwhelming power swiftly struck toward Zhang Wuji like a pair of black dragons so that he would be hard pressed to block. Who would have thought that Zhang Wuji rolled around on the ground to escape the attack while rolling toward Du E.

Du E thrust his left hand toward Zhang Wuji's shoulder. Zhang Wuji parried with his left palm using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. His body shook and his shoulder bumped toward Du Jie. He resolutely wanted to make Zhou Zhiruo famous today by giving up the credit of defeating the Shaolin three eminent monks entirely to Emei Pai Zhang Men. His only wish was that he would be able to save Xie Xun. By using the ancient Persian martial art, he rolled and circled to the east, and stumbled and turned to the west. His movements were totally unattractive; he seemed to be in a very distressing situation.

There were many outstandingly experienced warriors with vast knowledge among the spectators, but this special ancient Persian martial art was simply too strange. In addition, there had never been anybody from the Central Plains using it. Much less, the fact that Zhang Wuji was heavily injured the previous day was a public knowledge. Consequently, no one realized that he was only pretending. There wasn't any one among the enemies of the Ming Cult who was not secretly delighted, while all the friends of the Ming Cult were deeply troubled; thinking that Zhang Wuji might lose his life over this matter today.

Over several dozens of stances later, they saw that Zhou Zhiruo's shadow abruptly flashed up and down, swiftly swaying in an unpredictable manner. In the meantime, Zhang Wuji seemed to be losing his ground. His hands and feet moved in a frantic manner, not any better than a fool

who had just started training martial arts. However, no matter how dangerous his situation was, he always managed to escape the opponent's fatal blow at the last moment.

The experienced heroes among the crowd started to realize that Zhang Wuji must have followed some type of footwork; perhaps something similar to 'zui ba xian' [drunken eight immortals], where the movements seemed disorderly, but actually contained strange and subtle variations within it. This type of martial art skill was much more difficult to master than the orthodox martial art commonly practiced in that era.

If this ancient Persian martial art were used to fight one of the three eminent monks, regardless of which monk, he would certainly be confused and put at a disadvantage; just as Zhang Wuji was battered and exhausted when he was dealing with the Wind and Cloud Emissaries for the first time. However, these three Shaolin eminent monks had been in meditation together for several decades; their minds were interlinked. As soon as one of the monks showed a small opening in his defense line, the other two monks would immediately close that gap.

Zhang Wuji executed all kinds of strange movements. Each one was designed to confuse enemy's vision. He would move to the left, but actually attack to the right; he seemed to attack to the front, but actually aim to the back; his movements were very difficult to predict. However, the three monks' whips were as steady as their heartbeat, totally immune to his tricks.

Toward the seventieth, eightieth stance, Zhang Wuji's strange movements continuously emerged one after another, but all along he failed to harm even a strand of these three monks' hair. After nearly a hundred stances, he felt the three

monks' whips were getting stronger, while his own movements were getting sluggish; he was unable to move as quick as when they started fighting. He did not realize that the martial art he used was somewhat demonic, while the three monks' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was based on Buddhism power utilization technique to subdue evil spirit.

The spectators only saw as if he was fighting with renewed vigor, while actually it was because the demonic influence in his mind was growing stronger. If he fought for another hundred stances, unavoidably he would completely fall under the control of the three monks' Buddhist influence and would continuously dance crazily beyond his control. Without any attack from the three eminent monks, he would condemn himself to his doom.

The common people called the Ming Cult as the Devil Cult not without any reason. This ancient Persian martial art was developed by 'the Old Man of the Mountain', the big devil that killed without batting his eyes. When Zhang Wuji first trained this martial art, he was unconscious of this demonic character; however, now that he was battling formidable opponents, he had to bring out the essence of this demonic martial art to its fullest potential, and thus his mind was gradually stimulated.

Suddenly he looked up to the sky and let out a hysterical and devilish 'ha, ha, ha' laughter. As he stopped laughing, from inside the dungeon among the three green pine trees came a voice; it was his Yifu, Xie Xun's voice. Zhang Wuji heard Xie Xun's old voice slowly recite the 'Jin Gang Jing' [Vajracchedika Sutra or Diamond Sutra], "Upon the occasion of hearing this Discourse Subhuti had an interior realization of its meaning and was moved to tears. Whereupon he addressed the Buddha thus: It is a most precious thing, World-honored One, that you should deliver this supremely

profound Discourse. Never have I heard such an exposition since of old my eye of wisdom first opened. World-honored One, if anyone listens to this Discourse in faith with a pure, lucid mind, he will thereupon conceive an idea of Fundamental Reality ...” [Translator’s note: I was about to give up translating this passage, fortunately, I found the English translation by A.F. Price, <http://personal.palouse.net/lotus/diamondsutra.htm> The passage Xie Xun recited was from Section XIV.]

Zhang Wuji was listening and fighting at the same time. As Xie Xun’s chanting rose up, he felt that he was able to resist the power of the whips of the three Shaolin monks. He heard Xie Xun continue, “World-honored One, having listened to this Discourse, I receive and retain it with faith and understanding. This is not difficult for me, but in ages to come - in the last five-hundred years, if there be men coming to hear this Discourse who receive and retain it with faith and understanding, they will be persons of most remarkable achievement. Wherefore? Because they will be free from the idea of an ego-entity, free from the idea of a personality, free from the idea of a being, and free from the idea of a separated individuality...”

Listening to this point, Zhang Wuji’s heart became troubled. He knew that as his Yifu was being imprisoned in the dungeon on this peak, he listened to the three Shaolin eminent monks reciting the sutra every day. He was definitely able to escape the other day, but realizing he had committed grave offenses in the past, he was adamantly not willing to leave. Could it be that after listening to the teachings of Buddha for several months, he finally had a change of heart? The sutra said, ‘in ages to come - in the last five-hundred years, if there be men coming to hear this Discourse who receive and retain it with faith and understanding.’ At this moment, in Yifu’s heart, the ‘latter

man of the five-hundred years' must be a reference to Zhang Wuji. Only, the meaning of the scripture was very deep; Zhang Wuji was in the middle of a heated battle, he could not stop to ponder. Naturally, he did not know that Subhuti was an elder who listened to Sakyamuni Buddha's discourse of the Diamond Sutra. Therefore, his understanding of what Xie Xun was reciting was next to nothing.

He heard Xie Xun continue, "Buddha said to Subhuti: Just as you say! If anyone listens to this Discourse and is neither filled with alarm nor awe nor dread, be it known that such a one is of remarkable achievement ... When the Rajah of Kalinga mutilated my body, I was at that time free from the idea of an ego-entity, a personality, a being, and a separated individuality. Wherefore? Because then when my limbs were cut away piece by piece, had I been bound by the aforesaid distinctions, feelings of anger and hatred would have been aroused in me ... Bodhisattvas should leave behind all phenomenal distinctions."

Zhang Wuji understood this passage of scripture. It was clear that everything in this world was illusionary. In regard to my own body, my life, my mind, everything was temporal. Even if others cut my flesh into pieces, I simply need to disregard my own body, naturally all hatred and resentments would vanish. "Yifu lives in a dungeon, yet he seems to be at peace. Could it be that he has reached the realm of freedom from shock, intimidation, and fear?" As he pondered about this, he had another thought, "Is Yifu trying to tell me not to agonize over his well-being? That I don't have to exert myself in rescuing him?"

Xie Xun had been imprisoned in the dungeon for several months. Every evening he heard the three monks in the pine trees reciting the 'Diamond Sutra'. He was slowly enlightened by the meaning of the scripture. This time, as he heard

Zhang Wuji's devilish laughter, he realized the demonic influence was already growing in his heart; Zhang Wuji gradually entered into a dangerous situation. Immediately Xie Xun recited the 'Diamond Sutra' with the hope of driving the demonic influence out of Zhang Wuji's heart.

While listening to the Buddhist scripture, Zhang Wuji's hands did not stop moving. In his heart, he pondered upon the meaning of the text he was hearing. The demonic influence in his heart gradually diminished. Consequently, his ancient Persian martial art lost its effectiveness.

'Swish!' Du Jie's long rope struck toward his left shoulder. Zhang Wuji shrank his shoulder to dodge. Without realizing it, he was using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, supported by his Jiu Yang Shen Gong. At once he was able to neutralize the power of the incoming attack. His mind was moved, "It's hard for me to score a victory using this ancient Persian martial art."

Casting a sidelong glance toward Zhou Zhiruo, Zhang Wuji saw that she was struggling just to hold her ground, to the point that she was in the brink of defeat. He thought, "Today's business is difficult to be resolved in a manner that will satisfy both sides." I can forget about saving Yifu, if I don't go all out and Zhiruo is defeated." Letting out a clear whistle, he used the Sheng Huo Ling tablets to attack bit by bit.

Meanwhile, Xie Xun did not stop reciting the sutra, but Zhang Wuji focused his entire attention on the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi so he closed his ears to the chanting. He tried to take the three monks' long ropes as much as possible with the hope of Zhou Zhiruo finding an opening so that she might enter the circle.

As Zhang Wuji fought with all his might, the three monks felt the pressure on their ropes was gradually getting heavier

that they were forced to increase their internal energies to resist it. The three monks' 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' was based on 'Jin Gang Jing's [Diamond Sutra] highest essence; namely, it aimed to achieve the realm of 'free from the idea of an ego-entity, free from the idea of a personality, free from the idea of a being, and free from the idea of a separated individuality'. There was no difference between me and you, no separation of life and death, completely regarded everything as illusory. Only, although the three monks' cultivation was high, as they fought, they were still unable to overcome the desire to win. Although they had disregarded life and death, their human ego had not disappeared. Therefore, the power of their 'Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan' could not reach its pinnacle.

Among the three monks, Du E's cultivation was the highest that he had gotten rid of the 'four freedoms from individuality'. However, the other two monks, Du Nan and Du Jie were still burning with the desire to achieve victory. This mixture of different inner desires had taken its toll in that Du E's long whip movements did not seamlessly match with those of his two colleagues.

The crowd of heroes watching from the side had seen the changes in Zhang Wuji's martial art. The battle in the middle of the green pine trees were growing in intensity. Thin mist started to rise from the top of the three monks' heads. The spectators knew the mist came from the perspiration on the monks' foreheads, which was turned into vapor by the heat generated from the exertion of their internal energy. It was clear that these five people had reached the stage of all out internal energy battle. Thin mist also appeared on top of Zhang Wuji's head. But the mist rose like a long, thin straight line; it did not disperse like regular steam. Obviously, his internal energy cultivation was very deep, deeper than the three monks'. Just the previous day the crowd of heroes saw

that he had received a severe injury. Who would have thought that he completely recovered in only one night? The depth of his internal energy really amazed others.

Zhou Zhiruo, on the other hand, did not dare to engage the three monks in direct confrontation; she only wandered outside the circle. As soon as the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan revealed a crack in their defense line, she would jump in the opportunity. But as one of the whips intercepted her, her graceful figure would lithely turn back to evade. Because of this, the difference in martial art cultivation between Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo became apparent to the spectators. Many among the crowd of heroes could not restrain from voicing their opinions in whispers.

“For the last several years there is a rumor in the Wulin world that the Ming Cult’s Zhang Jiaozhu’s martial art skill is without equal. Sure enough, his reputation is well-deserved. Apparently, he was deliberately yielding to this Mrs. Song yesterday. It is called a gentleman will not fight a woman.”

“What do you mean a gentleman will not fight a woman? Don’t you know Mrs. Song was about to become Zhang Jiaozhu’s wife? It is called ‘old ruler’s affection is deep’!”
[Translator’s note: I know it sounds weird in English, but perhaps someone will explain this saying for us?]

“Pei! It is ‘old sword’s affection is deep’, not ‘old ruler’s affection is deep’!”

“Don’t you see those two iron rulers in Zhang Jiaozhu’s hands?”

“After that, Mrs. Song did not have a heart to kill Zhang Jiaozhu with a vicious blow. Won’t it be ‘the old hand’s affection is deep’?”

Meanwhile, the stances launched by the three monks and Zhang Wuji were getting slower; the changes were also getting more subtle.

Zhou Zhiruo's martial art skill grew at a fantastical rate; her victory over Wudang's Second Hero was the peak of her achievement. However, speaking about internal energy cultivation, compared to Yu Lianzhou and Yin Liting, she actually fell far behind. This moment, Zhang Wuji's battle with the three Shaolin monks had reached an all-out, real-skill stage; there was no leeway for a shortcut, no opening for Zhou Zhiruo to attack. Now and then her flexible whip would sweep and strike forward, but as soon as it bumped into the four people's internal energy, it would bounce back immediately.

Less than an hour later, the Jiu Yang Shen Gong inside Zhang Wuji's body flowed out rapidly. The Sheng Huo Ling in his hands created 'swish, swish, swish' noise. Originally, the three monks' countenances were different from each other, but at this time their faces were dark red, their Buddhist robes bubbled up as if they were blown by a strong gale. On the other hand, there were not any visible changes in Zhang Wuji's clothes. His superiority had been established by this fact alone. If he fought them one-on-one, or even one-on-two, he would have scored a victory early on.

Zhang Wuji's cultivation of Jiu Yang Zhen Qi was immeasurably deep to begin with. After receiving instructions from Zhang Sanfeng, he further developed his 'chi' with cultivation technique of Taijiquan. Right now, the longer he fought, the stronger he was. He would win an endurance race, since he could fight an all-out battle for one or two 'sichen' [1 sichen = 2 hours] more, waiting for the opponents to exhaust their own strength.

The three Shaolin also realized that a prolonged battle would be detrimental to their side. Suddenly they let out a high-pitched shout together. Three long whips rotated rapidly, the whips turned into blur shadows that it was difficult to see which one was real and which one was a mere shadow.

Zhang Wuji focused his gaze on the incoming whip; he blocked them one by one, while anxiety started to grow in his heart. "Although Zhiruo's martial art is marvelous, her days of training were, after all, not too many. Our joint power cannot be compared to [maternal] grandfather and Yang Zuo Zhi. I can't do it based on my strength alone. It looks like we are going to be defeated again today. If I can't save Yifu this time, what do I do?" As his heart was anxious, his internal energy was somewhat reduced. The three monks seized this opportunity to press on; their attacks grew more dangerous, surrounding Zhang Wuji from all sides.

Suddenly, like a flash of lightning a thought came into Zhang Wuji's mind. He recalled Xie Xun's affection toward him when he was little on the Bing Huo [ice and fire] Island. He also remembered although Xie Xun was blind, he braved the danger by re-entering the Jianghu, all because of him. If he could not save him today, he definitely did not want to live alone.

He saw that Du Nan's long whip was threatening his back. Disregarding his own safety, his left hand reached up to let the whip strike his arm, but he dissipated the incoming force using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi. The Sheng Huo Ling tablet in his right hand blocked the pair of whips of Du E and Du Jie. Like a giant bird he suddenly pounced to the left, but his body turned around midair and suddenly he grabbed Du Nan's long whip, and wound it once around the trunk of the green pine tree in which Du Nan was sitting.

This maneuver was truly unthinkable; Zhang Wuji raised his left arm, pulled the whip and wound it around the tree trunk. Du Nan was greatly shocked; he hastily pulled back. Zhang Wuji's change of movements were amazingly fast; he also pulled the rope to counter Du Nan's force. Although the bough of the pine tree was thick, almost half of it had already scooped out hollow by the three monks to protect them from the wind and the rain. This time, a very tough and durable long rope wound around it, and Zhang Wuji and Du Nan's internal energy pulled it at the same time, a loud crashing sound was heard as the pine tree broke right at the hollow part, with the top portion of the tree came crashing down from the sky.

Seizing the opportunity when Du E and Du Jie, two monks were still stunned by this turn of events, Zhang Wuji struck with both palms, with a loud shout he pushed the pine tree where Du E was sitting. In this strike he put the entire life-long cultivated strength into his palms. The pine tree could not stand and snapped off at once.

The two broken pine trees, along with their branches and leaves, fell down on the tree where Du Jie was sitting. These two trees carried the momentum of several thousand catties. Zhang Wuji flew up and landed on the third tree. His feet pushed down and the tree broke. It swayed in the air and slowly fell down. The noise of the broken trees intermingled with the cry and shouts of the crowd of heroes.

Zhang Wuji threw the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets in his hands toward Du E and Du Jie. The two monks were busy dodging the falling trees, and now they had to deal with the incoming Sheng Huo Ling tablets; the movements of their hands and feet became chaotic. Zhang Wuji bent his knees and rolled underneath the falling trees, which had not

reached the ground yet. He had entered the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan's center. Using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi technique, his palms pushed and turned, and the boulder covering the dungeon was shoved open.

"Yifu, come out, quick!" he called out. Afraid that Xie Xun was unwilling to come out, without waiting for a reply, Zhang Wuji put one hand down the hole and grabbed the back of Xie Xun's collar and lifted him up.

Right this moment, Du E and Du Jie's whips arrived. Zhang Wuji was forced to let Xie Xun down. He took out two more Sheng Huo Ling tablets from his bosom and threw the tablets toward the two monks. Quick as lightning his hands grabbed the tip of the whips. Du E and Du Jie were about to exert their internal energy to pull the whips back, but the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets had already arrived in front of their faces with speed that did not give them any leeway. The two monks did not have any choice but let their whips go as they hastily jumped back. It was the only way they could evade the Sheng Huo Ling attack.

In the meantime, Du Nan's left palm was threatening Zhang Wuji's chest. "Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji called out, "Stop him!" Slanting his body sideways to evade, he carried Xie Xun in his arms. As soon as he managed to get Xie Xun out of the three pine trees encirclement, Shaolin Pai would not have anything to say.

"Humph," Zhou Zhiruo snorted, but she hesitated, while Du Nan's right palm followed his left. Zhang Wuji turned his body around to avoid the vital acupoint on his back from being hit, letting the palm to land on his shoulder instead.

Carrying Xie Xun, Zhang Wuji wanted to break out from the pine trees. "Child Wuji," Xie Xun said, "In all my life I have

committed grave sins. In this place I am listening to the scripture about repentance, my heart is at peace. Why do you insist on taking me out?" While saying that, he tried to struggle free.

Zhang Wuji knew Yifu's martial art skill was very high; if he stubbornly refused to go, he could be very difficult to be dealt with. "Yifu," he said, "Please forgive Child's offense!" The five fingers of his right hand moved lightning fast, sealing several acupoints on Xie Xun's thigh, chest and abdomen, rendering Xie Xun immobile temporarily.

Because of this slight delay, the palms of the three Shaolin monks had struck by. "Leave him!" they barked.

Zhang Wuji was aware that the palms of these three monks had surrounded him from all directions. Before the palms arrived, the wind generated by these palms had already pressing him. He had no other choice but put Xie Xun down on the ground, and then lifted his palms to block.

"Zhiruo," he called out, "Quickly take Yifu out!" His palms shook, forming a circle, and he sent his palm strengths to engage the palms of the three monks so that none of them could leave to stop Zhou Zhiruo. It was the highest technique of the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; his palms moved randomly, making it hard to tell which one was real, holding the three monks' palm strengths together like glue.

Zhou Zhiruo leaped into the circle toward Xie Xun. "Pei!" Xie Xun spat, "Lowly woman ..."

Zhou Zhiruo reached out and sealed his mute acupoint. "Surnamed Xie," she scolded, "I have come to rescue you with good intentions. Why do you insult me? Your crimes have reached the heavens; your life is hanging by the thread

in my hand. Do you think I cannot kill you?" While saying that, she raised her right hand with her five fingers forming a claw, ready to strike the top of Xie Xun's head.

Zhang Wuji was very anxious to see this. "Zhiruo, no ...!" he hastily said.

At this moment, he was engaged in a stake-it-all battle with the three monks, in which everybody was exerting the internal energy cultivation of their entire life. The three monks did not have any intention to kill him, but in this kind of battle, they had reached the critical moment; where either they injured the enemy, or they themselves would perish. There was simply no room for either side to yield to the opponent.

As Zhang Wuji opened his mouth, his 'chi' was decreased slightly. The three monks' 'topple-the-mountain-and-overturn-the-sea' kind of palm strength immediately surged in. Zhang Wuji had no choice but increase his own strength in defense. Both sides were in a stalemate situation. Their strengths were interlocking each other. They had to continue until victory or defeat was decided, without any chance to escape midway.

Zhou Zhiruo's claw was hung midair, but she did not continue her strike. Casting a cold sidelong glance toward Zhang Wuji she said with a cold laugh, "Zhang Wuji, when you abandoned me during the wedding ceremony in Haozhou that day, did you ever imagine there will be a day like today?"

Zhang Wuji's mind was divided into three parts: he was anxious over Xie Xun's safety, he was angry that she chose this critical moment to settle an old score, and he was busy fending off the three monks' palm strength, which was

flooding in towards him. Even if he was completely focused, he would most likely still lose in the end. Much less now that his mind was in confusion, he was facing a more imminent catastrophe. Cold beads of sweat were forming on his forehead, streaming down to his chest and back, soaking his clothes.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, Shuo Bude, Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, and the others were all shocked to see this critical situation. They all had the same thought, namely, they wanted to save Zhang Wuji. Even if they had to lose their lives in the process, they would not regret it. However, they all realized that their own strength was inadequate. Not only they could not break the fight, even if they did attack the Shaolin three monks, the three monks would easily divert the external force toward Zhang Wuji, adding to the force he had to withstand. In the end, instead of helping him, they would harm him.

Raising his voice, Kong Zhi called out, "Three Shishu [martial (younger) uncle], Zhang Jiaozhu has shown kindness to our Sect; please be lenient to him."

But the battle between these four people had reached the stage where they could not back off. Zhang Wuji had never had any intention to harm the three monks. The three monks remembered Zhang Wuji had helped them out of trouble the other day, they were also waiting for an opportunity to stop the battle. Only, both sides were in the 'qi hu nan xia' [riding a tiger, hard to get off] predicament. The spirituality of the three monks had transcended the material world. It was not that they turned a deaf ear to Kong Zhi's cry; they did want to acknowledge him, but they were unable to do so.

Wei Yixiao's shadow flashed by. Like a floating blue smoke, he slipped into the middle of the broken pine trees. He

wanted to pounce on Zhou Zhiruo, but he saw Zhou Zhiruo's right hand was still suspended in the air. If he pounced on her, her claw would certainly strike down on top of Xie Xun's head. If Xie Xun died, Zhang Wuji's heart would be greatly grieved and he would die immediately under the three monks' hands. Thereupon, when Wei Yixiao was less than a 'zhang' away from Zhou Zhiruo, he halted his steps in hesitation and did not dare to make a further move.

That moment, everybody on the peak looked like a statue; nobody dared to neither move nor make any noise. Suddenly Zhou Dian laughed and strode forward.

Yang Xiao was startled. "Dian Xiong," he shouted, "Don't be reckless."

Zhou Dian ignored him; he walked toward the three Shaolin monks and with a smiling face said, "Three great monks, do you eat dog meat?" Reaching into his pocket, he produced a boiled dog leg and waved it in front of Du E's face.

These past two days, Shaolin Temple only served vegetarian dishes to its guests. Zhou Dian loved to drink wine and eat meat; how could he stand eating green vegetables and tofu every day? He went out the previous night to steal a dog and cooked it. After eating his fill, he still had a dog leg, which in this critical moment he used to disturb the Shaolin three monks' concentration.

As soon as they saw it, Yang Xiao and the others were delighted; they thought, "Zhou Dian usually acts like a lunatic, but this time his move is brilliant." They knew that in an internal energy battle, the key was the combatant's concentration. As Zhou Dian stepped forward to create trouble, even if only one of the monks got angry, his concentration might be broken and Zhang Wuji would be

victorious.

The three monks turned a blind eye to him; they completely ignored Zhou Dian. Zhou Dian took the dog leg to his open mouth and took a bite. "Smells good, tastes good!" he said, "Three great monks, why don't you take a bite?" Seeing the monks did not even blink, he brought the dog leg closer to Du E's mouth.

As he was about to shove the dog leg into Du E's mouth, several monks watching from the side shouted, "Baldy Dian, back off quickly!"

As soon as the dog leg touched Du E's lips, suddenly Zhou Dian's arm shook, half of his body turned numb. 'Bang!' the dog leg fell to the ground.

Turned out at this moment Du E's entire body was covered with his internal energy that he was in the 'fly cannot penetrate' realm. As soon as his four limbs and hundreds of bones met with an external force, the force would bounce back.

"Aiyo! Aiyo! Terrible, terrible!" Zhou Dian cried out, "You don't want to eat my dog meat, that's all right. Why did you have to snap it out to the ground? Now it is dirty and wasted. I want compensation, I want compensation!" His hands and feet were flailing all over the place; he raised a clamor.

Unexpectedly, the three monks' concentration was so deep that they were not disturbed by any external demonic influence. Zhou Dian flipped his right hand and fished a short blade from his bosom. "Since you don't appreciate my kindness by eating my dog leg, Laozi [old man - referring to self] will risk everything to fight you." His blade slashed his own face that immediately he was dripping with blood.

The crowd of heroes shouted in shock. Zhou Dian used the short blade to make another slash. His face was covered with blood; he looked terrifyingly fearsome. Regardless of who saw this kind of scene, their hearts would be shocked and disturbed. But in their deep concentration, the Shaolin three monks' eyes, ears, nose and tongue seemed to be closed to the world outside. Not only they did not see the scene Zhou Dian was making, they even seemed unaware of his presence, which was very closed to their bodies.

"Good monk," Zhou Dian loudly called out, "If you don't compensate my dog leg, I'll die in front of you!" Lifting his short blade, he thrust it into his own heart. Because his Cult Leader was in such a dire situation, he was determined to kill himself to disturb the concentration of the three monks.

Suddenly a yellow shadow flashed by; someone flew in and snatched the short blade away from his hand. The yellow shadow then continued sideways, with five fingers striking toward the top of Zhou Zhiruo's head. The technique used was exactly the same as the one Song Qingshu used to kill the Beggar Clan's elders. Zhou Zhiruo's five fingers were less than a foot away from Xie Xun's head, but the enemy's movement was simply too fast; she had no alternative but to turn her hand over to block this attack.

Zhang Wuji's internal energy level was very strong; it was not inferior to the combined energy of the three monks. However, in terms of 'forgetting everything', his meditation skill fell short. He could not reach the stage of 'looking without seeing, hearing without listening' of the outside influence. Seeing that Zhou Zhiruo's hand was threatening Xie Xun, his mind was immediately thrown into confusion. He also saw Zhou Dian stepping forward to create trouble, and then drawing his blade to commit suicide. He saw everything

clearly and was even more anxious.

Currently, his internal breathing was boiling, he was about to spurt out some blood and perish. To suddenly see that woman in yellow gown leaping forward into the circle, snatching the short blade from Zhou Dian's hand, and attacking Zhou Zhiruo, Zhang Wuji knew that Xie Xun was out of danger. His heart was delighted and his internal energy was growing so that he was able to neutralize the three monks' internal energy attacks one by one. As a result, now the four of them were back into the stalemate situation.

Although Du E and the others were not affected by outside disturbance, they were able to differentiate the subtle decrease and increase of either side's strength. They realized the sudden increase of the opponent force, but the force did not change from defensive to offensive; which was precisely the best opportunity to withdraw without endangering either side. The three monks' minds were interlinked; they concurrently reduced their own power. Zhang Wuji followed by reducing his own power one notch. The three monks then reduced their power another notch. By 'you reduce one notch, I reduce one notch', in a short time both sides had withdrew their power completely.

Four men laughed together and stood up at the same time. Zhang Wuji cupped his hands and bowed low. Du E, Du Jie and Du Nan also clasped their palms to return the propriety. Almost together they said, "My utmost admiration!"

Zhang Wuji turned his head and saw that lady in yellow had already fought Zhou Zhiruo. The lady in yellow was barehanded, while Zhou Zhiruo still had the whip in her right hand and the dagger in her left, yet the lady in yellow did not show the least sign of defeat. The lady in yellow's martial art seemed to have the same source as Zhou Zhiruo's. They both

moved swiftly with seemingly infinite variations, yet her hands and feet looked upright without any sign of demonical influence. If Zhou Zhiruo moved like a ghost, then the lady in yellow moved like an immortal.

Zhang Wuji took a second look and knew that the lady in yellow would certainly win without any chance of defeat, and that his Yifu was completely out of danger. But he had a feeling that the lady in yellow was tantalizing Zhou Zhiruo; it seemed like she was trying to find out the ins and outs of Zhou Zhiruo's martial art. She would have had flattened Zhou Zhiruo early on if she took the fight seriously.

"Shanzai, shanzai!" Du E said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, although you cannot defeat us three brothers, we three brothers also cannot defeat you. Xie Juzhi [warrior Xie], you are free to go!" Having said that, he stepped forward and unsealed Xie Xun's acupoints, while saying, "Xie Juzhi, lay down your saber and follow the teachings of Buddha. The gateway to our Buddha is wide open, there is no one in this world who cannot be brought to cross over. You and I have spent many days together on this peak. That is also destiny."

Xie Xun stood up and said, "Merciful Buddha. The three Dashi [reverend, grandmaster] have shown the direction to the bright road. Xie Xun cannot thank you enough."

Suddenly they heard the lady in yellow shouted in clear voice. She flipped her left hand to grab Zhou Zhiruo's long whip, followed by her elbow striking the acupoint on her chest. Her right hand opened up, her five fingers were hanging on top of Zhou Zhiruo's head.

"Do you want to taste the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua' [nine yin white bone claw]?" she asked. Zhou Zhiruo was unable to move; she closed her eyes, waiting for death.

Although Xie Xun's eyes could not see anything, he could hear clearly what had been going on around him. He stepped forward and bowed with cupped hands while saying, "Miss has saved this father and son's lives. We feel greatly indebted. There will come a day when this Miss Zhou will meet her just retribution, if she does not repent from her unrighteous ways. I am asking earnestly that Miss would spare her life today."

The lady in yellow said, "Jin Mao Shi Wang turned from your ways really quickly." Her shadow swayed as she withdrew.

End of Chapter 38.

Chapter 39 - The Hidden Military Strategy Manual

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



The two men fought faster and faster that they had exchanged seventy, eighty stances in a very short period of time. Xie Xun was more than ten years younger than Cheng Kun; his physique was considerably stronger. The many years he spent on the extraordinarily cold and extremely hot Bing Huo Island had given his internal energy cultivation a tremendous advantage. He did not show the slightest sign of defeat even after fighting for more than a hundred stances.

Taking Xie Xun by the hand, Zhang Wuji was about to walk away when suddenly Xie Xun said, "Hold on!" Pointing to an old monk among the Shaolin crowd he called out, "Cheng Kun! Come out! In the presence of the heroes from all over the world, I want you to clearly explain all kinds of gratitude and grudges of the past."

The crowd of heroes was startled; they only saw a hunchback old monk with a nondescript face. Definitely he did not look like Cheng Kun. Zhang Wuji was about to say, "He is not Cheng Kun." But he heard Xie Xun say, "Cheng Kun, you might change your appearance, but you can't change your voice. I only heard your cough, but I know who you are."

The old monk grinned fiendishly and said, "Who would listen to such nonsense from a blind man like you?"

As soon as he opened his mouth, Zhang Wuji recognized him immediately. That day on the Brightness Peak, when he was held captive inside the cloth sack, he had heard Cheng Kun's lengthy speech. He clearly remembered his voice. This time Cheng Kun deliberately made his voice sound throaty and his disguise was perfect, but in the end he could not change his voice.

Zhang Wuji leaped up to cut Cheng Kun's escape route. "Yuan Zhen Dashi, Cheng Kun Qianbei [senior, older generation]," he said, "A real man is straightforward and upright. Why don't you show your true face?"

Turned out Cheng Kun had disguised himself and mingled among the crowd. All along he managed to hide his true identity. But when the lady in yellow subdued Zhou Zhiruo, which he did not anticipate, he could not restrain from coughing lightly. Ever since he turned blind, Xie Xun's ability to distinguish sound grew. Besides, he harbored a deep hatred toward Cheng Kun; naturally, he would remember Cheng Kun with an 'inscribed in the heart, engraved on the bone' kind of memory. To Xie Xun's ears, this light cough was no less than a thunder in the midst of a clear blue sky; he recognized him immediately.

Cheng Kun realized his plot had fallen through and he had been exposed. Straightening his back up he shouted, "Shaolin monks, listen to this: The Devil Cult has come to disturb the holy place of Buddha. They are here to despise our Sect. Everybody must fight together. Show them no mercy."

His followers immediately responded; they unsheathed their weapons and charged forward to fight.

Because his martial brother, Abbot Kong Wen, had fallen into the hands of the Temple's rebels, Kong Zhi was forced to suppress his anger for quite a long time. This time, hearing Yuan Zhen issue an order to fight against the Ming Cult, he knew that his temple's monks would suffer countless damage if a tangled battle ensued. Taking everything into consideration, in the end, the lives of the monks in his temple were more important. Thereupon he shouted, "Kong Wen Fangzhang has fallen into this rebel Yuan Zhen's hands.

All disciples must capture this traitor first then we'll save Fangzhang." All of a sudden there was great confusion on the peak.

Zhang Wuji saw that Zhou Zhiruo was still kneeling on the ground; she looked utterly dejected, he felt sorry for her. Zhang Wuji came to her, unsealed her acupoints, and helped her get up. Zhou Zhiruo pushed his arm away and leaped toward the crowd of Emei disciples.

They heard Xie Xun say in loud and clear voice, "Everything that happens today is between Cheng Kun and I, two people only. All kinds of gratitude and grudges ought to be concluded by us, two people, alone. Shifu, my entire skill came from you; Cheng Kun, my whole family was murdered by you. Your great kindness and deep animosity, we will settle it between us today."

Cheng Kun realized that Kong Zhi had disregarded everything by giving the order; he also knew that the honest Shaolin Temple monks were simply too numerous compared to his followers, which were only about a tenth of the entire Shaolin disciples. It looked like his ambition to become the Shaolin Abbot had also turned into an illusion. He thought, "Xie Xun has committed all kinds of evil deeds. If I subdue him, I can push all the blame on him. His martial art came from me, plus he is blind; I don't see any reason why I cannot defeat him." Therefore, he said, "Xie Xun, I don't know how many heroes and warriors of Jianghu lost their lives in your hands. Today, you are taking the bunch of Devil Cult's devil heads to come to Shaolin and create trouble in Buddhist paradise, going against the heroes of the world. I regret teaching you martial art in the past. Now I have to clean up my own school; I have to punish you, a renegade disciple who betrayed his school's forefathers." He then strode toward Xie Xun.

Xie Xun raised his voice, "All heroes hear me: Xie Xun's martial art was taught by this gentleman Cheng Kun. But because he failed to defile my wife, he murdered my father and mother, my wife and my son. Although I must love and honor my master, I must love and honor my parents more. I want to seek revenge on him, do you think I deserve to do it?"

All around the heroes thundered their response, "You deserve to seek revenge, you deserve to seek revenge!"

Without saying anything, Cheng Kun sent out his palm to hack Xie Xun's head. Xie Xun leaned his head sideways to avoid the strike on his vital point. 'Bang!' the palm hit his shoulder.

Xie Xun grunted, but did not hit back. "Cheng Kun," he said, "When you passed on this move, 'chang hong jing tian' [long rainbow traverse the sky], you said that as soon as you hit the opponent's body, you must immediately send out the 'hun yuan' [originating formation] chi to injure the enemy; why didn't you send out any strength? Are you getting old that your strength is gone?"

Actually, Cheng Kun's first move was a fake one; he did not anticipate that the opponent did not even make any effort to evade so his strike was on target. But he did not send any power with this move therefore Xie Xun was not injured at all.

Cheng Kun's right palm followed his fake left hand strike. Xie Xun leaned his head sideways again, but still he did not hit back. Cheng Kun sent out a chain-kick attack with his both legs. 'Bang, bang!' Xie Xun received these two kicks on the side of his body. These two kicks carried an extremely fierce force that even though Xie Xun's physique was sturdy, he

could not withstand it. 'Wah!' he spurted out a mouthful of blood.

"Yifu!" Zhang Wuji anxiously called, "Fight back! Why do you take a beating without retaliating?"

Xie Xun's body swayed several times. With a bitter laugh he said, "He was my Shifu, I ought to take a couple of kicks and a palm from him." With a sudden long whistle, Xie Xun flipped his palm and hack down on Cheng Kun.

"Bad luck! Bad luck!" Cheng Kun silently cried out, "I only knew that his hatred to me was as deep as the ocean, and that he would stake everything he has as soon as he sees me. If I had known that he was willing to take my first three moves, I would have strike him with killer strike and thus I would not have missed this good opportunity."

Seeing the swiftness and fierceness of Xie Xun's palm, Cheng Kun immediately swept his left hand diagonally to fend off Xie Xun's palm power, while he moved a half turn toward Xie Xun's back. Taking advantage of Xie Xun's blindness, Cheng Kun's palm silently pressed on Xie Xun's back. But it was as if Xie Xun could see; he sent a kick backward. Cheng Kun leaped up gently. Like a big predatory bird, he swooped down from the sky. He was more than seventy years old, but his agility was not inferior to those of the younger people.

Xie Xun raised both of his hands to block. Cheng Kun's downward strike met Xie Xun's palms. Borrowing the momentum from the impact, Cheng Kun's body shot up once again. He made a gentle maneuver in the air and struck down again.

The two men exchanged blow after blow. They fought faster and faster that they had exchanged seventy, eighty stances

in a very short period of time. Although Xie Xun's pair of eyes could not see a thing, his martial art skill came from Cheng Kun, so he knew Cheng Kun's fists and kicks by heart. No matter how many times Cheng Kun changed his style, Xie Xun was able to anticipate his movements without difficulty. After decades of separation, both men had enjoyed tremendous advancement in terms of their internal energy cultivation, but the styles and stances were still their martial art school's techniques.

Xie Xun did not need to use his eyes; as he launched a strike, he knew exactly how the opponent would react, as well as by which stance, or at least the most likely variation, the opponent would counterattack. In addition, he was more than ten years younger than Cheng Kun; his physique was considerably stronger. The many years he spent on the extraordinarily cold and extremely hot Bing Huo Island had given his internal energy cultivation a tremendous advantage. For these reasons, he did not show the slightest sign of defeat even after fighting for more than a hundred stances.

Xie Xun's animosity toward Cheng Kun was as deep as the ocean. He had waited bitterly for several decades. This time as he met his archenemy, at first Zhang Wuji thought that Xie Xun would disregard everything and fought Cheng Kun with all he had so that both sides would perish together. Contrary to his expectation, each style and every stance Xie Xun launched was exceptionally steady and calm, his line of defense was also very tight. Initially Zhang Wuji was astonished, but after watching the battle progress for dozens of moves, he finally understood.

Cheng Kun's martial art skill was not inferior to Du E, Du Nan, three monks. If Xie Xun brazenly attacked with all he had, he might not be able to last more than three hundred moves. It

was evident that the deeper Xie Xun's hatred toward Cheng Kun, the more cautious he was in his movements. He was afraid that he would be destroyed under Cheng Kun's hands before he was able to avenge his father, mother, wife and son's blood debt.

After about two hundred moves, Xie Xun gave a loud shout. His fist struck out with a strong gust of wind.

"Qi Shang Quan! [seven-injury fist]" Guan Neng of Kongtong Pai called out. He saw Xie Xun's left and right fists continuously move with matchless overwhelming power. The elders of Kongtong Pai looked at each other with amazement; they could not help but feel ashamed of their own inferiority.

Cheng Kun subsequently evaded three fists. As Xie Xun's forth fist arrived, Cheng Kun swept his right palm horizontally. 'Bang!' The fist and the palm collided. With loose hair and beard, Xie Xun stood motionless; while Cheng Kun was forced to withdraw three steps back.

Many of the heroes watching the fight were cheering inwardly. By this time, it was already clear to the Jianghu people how the enmity between Xie Xun and Cheng Kun started, and how it escalated. Although the people were angry with Xie Xun because he was too ruthless, excessively harming the innocents, they understood the cruel fate Xie Xun met. On the other hand, they thought Cheng Kun was too malicious and evil. Therefore, other than a few people whose close friends and family were killed by Xie Xun, most of the people present hoped he would triumph.

Xie Xun rushed three steps forward. Again, with strong gusts of wind his fists punched left and right. Cheng Kun parried with his pair of palms, while he took three more steps backward.

“Not good!” Zhang Wuji cried out silently, “Cheng Kun is using the Jiu Yang Gong [nine ‘yang’ energy], which he learned after he entered Kong Jian Shen Seng’s [divine monk] tutelage. He did not pass it on to Yifu.”

Xie Xun trained the Qi Shang Quan in a rush. As a result, he had suffered internal injury. His fist strength was actually flawed. Cheng Kun had a deep knowledge of this fist technique’s crucial keys; therefore, he deliberately showed weakness, but in actuality, he was sending out his Jiu Yang Gong to counterattack the opponent. With each fist Xie Xun sent, Cheng Kun received about 70% of the force and neutralized it with his Jiu Yang Gong, while he sent the remaining 30% back to Xie Xun.

‘Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!’ Xie Xun sent out twelve punches. Cheng Kun took a dozen or so steps backward. It appeared that Xie Xun was gaining the upper hand; however, the internal injury he suffered was actually getting heavier. Zhang Wuji was extremely anxious, but he knew this was his Yifu’s lifelong dream to finally have the opportunity to exact his revenge; obviously, he could not meddle by giving him a hand. Yet if Xie Xun continued fighting like this, in a few dozen moves he would inevitably vomit blood and die.

“Yuan Zhen,” with a cold voice Kong Zhi suddenly said, “Did my Shixiong [martial brother] teach you this Shaolin Jiu Yang Gong to harm others?”

Cheng Kun sneered and said, “My En Shi [benevolent master] lost his life under the Qi Shang Quan. I am avenging En Shi today to wipe out a disgrace.”

Suddenly Zhao Min called out, “Kong Jian Shen Seng’s Jiu Yang Gong cultivation was far above yours. How come he

could not withstand the Qi Shang Quan? Kong Jian Dashi was harmed by your traitorous hands. You deceived the Senior to come forward and resolve your enmity; you deceived him to take a beating without hitting back. Hey, hey, look, look! Who's that standing behind you? His face is full of blood; he looks at your back with angry glare. Isn't that Kong Jian Shen Seng?"

Cheng Kun knew perfectly well that she was blabbering nonsense, but what he had done had been weighing his conscience down, so he did feel guilty and he shivered involuntarily.

Right this moment, Xie Xun sent another punch. Cheng Kun used his palm to block. Surprisingly, he did not retreat. Because of Zhao Min's distraction, his concentration was divided and his 'chi' did not flow properly. Xie Xun's punch made the 'chi' and blood in Cheng Kun's breast turned upside down. He was forced to use his 'qing gong' to run around Xie Xun for a while until he could regulate his breathing.

"Kong Jian Shen Seng," Zhao Min called out, "Nail him! That's right! Just like that! Blow your breath on the back of his neck! You died under your disciple's hands, he must also die under his disciple's hands. It is called 'karma'. Lao Tian Ye [lit. old master of the sky – a reference to God or the Heaven] has eyes, the just retribution is coming."

The hair on Cheng Kun's back stood up. He did not believe in ghosts, but at that time he indeed felt a puff of cold wind on the back of his neck. He was flustered. He did not remember that the wind had always been blowing on that peak all year long. Besides, Xie Xun and he were leaping up and down in their fight; naturally his back was blown by the wind.

Zhao Min could see doubt was starting to grow in Cheng Kun's mind, she shouted, "Aiyo! Cheng Kun, watch your back! You don't dare to turn your head? Look down to the shadow on ground. There are only two people fighting, where did the third shadow come from?"

Cheng Kun could not help but look down. He did see that between the two shadows, there was another dark shadow. His heart skipped a beat. Xie Xun's punch arrived. Cheng Kun did not have enough time to evade; he was forced to use his fist to meet the incoming fist head-on. 'Bang!' Two enormous forces collided. They were both shaken and they were both pushed one step backward. Then Cheng Kun could see clearly that the extra shadow was actually a broken pine tree trunk.

When the battle dragged on with him unable to achieve the victory, Cheng Kun had already been impatient. "He is my disciple," he thought, "And he is blind; yet I still cannot deal with him. My followers watching from the side won't accept it. Too bad my special skill 'huan yin zhi' [lit. fantasy 'yin' finger] was broken by the pure 'yang' energy of that extremely loathsome little thief, Zhang Wuji, that night; otherwise, how could I fight such a long fight with Xie Xun right now? Currently the situation is dangerous. I must subdue this renegade disciple as quickly as possible. Only then can I hold the Ming Cult at bay and also provoke those people who have grudges against him. At least I can still escape with my life." As he made this decision, his footwork changed. Making his steps as quiet as possible, he took two steps backward toward the broken pine tree.

Xie Xun sent three punches in succession while he took two steps forward. Cheng Kun retreated two steps. He wanted to entice Xie Xun so that he would stumble on the broken pine tree. Xie Xun was about to chase Cheng Kun forward when

Zhang Wuji called out, "Yifu, watch your steps!"

Xie Xun shivered; he stepped sideways to avoid the obstacle. But as he was hesitating, Cheng Kun seized the opportunity to launch his silent punch, aimed at Xie Xun's chest. Cheng Kun suddenly sent out his force and Xie Xun fell backward. Cheng Kun raised his foot to kick Xie Xun's skull. Xie Xun rolled away and quickly stood up. Blood trickled down from the corner of his mouth.

Cheng Kun stood motionless. His right palm stretched out slowly.

When Xie Xun fought Cheng Kun, he relied on his knowledge of Cheng Kun's techniques, but also by listening to the wind to distinguish the direction. This time Cheng Kun stretched out his palm without using any particular technique, slowly reaching out toward Xie Xun's face. Suddenly his palm struck Xie Xun's shoulder. Xie Xun staggered a few steps and braced himself to stop.

A lot of the heroes on the side were not happy; they shouted one after another, "A sighted person fighting a blind, and still using this despicable trick!"

Cheng Kun paid no attention; he slowly raised his palm to strike again. Xie Xun focused his attention to listen. As he felt the enemy palm was coming, he raised his hand to block.

Seeing the yellow hair on Xie Xun's head flutter, the corner of his mouth was daubed in blood, Zhang Wuji was very angry and anxious at the same time. He knew that if this kind of fight continued, Xie Xun would undoubtedly die under Cheng Kun's hands. Yet if he stepped forward to lend a hand in this situation, even if he managed to kill Cheng Kun, his Yifu would certainly regret it for the rest of his life. Grabbing Zhao

Min's hand, he anxiously said, "Quickly think of a good way to help him."

"Can you stealthily launch secret projectiles to blind that old thief's eyes?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. "Yifu will not let me do such thing even if he has to die!" he said.

Meanwhile, he that saw Cheng Kun was slowly raising his palm again. Zhao Min suddenly shouted, "Chest!"

Xie Xun sent a jab straight out. Cheng Kun pulled back his palm without making any contact. Again and again he launched several slow attacks, but each time Zhao Min foiled his attacks by shouting his target. Seeing his tactic fail, Cheng Kun changed plan. He raised his palm slowly toward Xie Xun's right shoulder.

"Right shoulder!" Zhao Min called out.

Cheng Kun's left shoulder moved slightly. Zhang Wuji immediately understood his intention. "Back!" he shouted.

When Xie Xun heard Zhao Min's shout, he waved his right arm to block the palm threatening his right shoulder. To his surprise, Cheng Kun's palm was an empty move; when he followed Zhao Min's warning by moving his right arm, Cheng Kun's left palm entered Xie Xun's open defense. 'Slap!' His palm heavily struck Xie Xun's back. Although Zhang Wuji's warning came in time, Cheng Kun's palm was simply too swift. By the time Xie Xun heard the warning, it was already too late to change his move.

The crowd shouted in alarm. Xie Xun vomited a mouthful of blood, most of it sprayed onto Cheng Kun's face.

“Ah!” Cheng Kun cried out while reaching up to wipe his face. Xie Xun rolled down on the ground. Suddenly they both screamed and disappeared together.

Turned out as soon as Xie Xun rolled down, he grabbed both of Cheng Kun’s legs and furiously pulled him down that both of them fell into the underground dungeon together.

The dungeon was filled with water reaching to their necks. It was also pitch black inside that Cheng Kun immediately became like a blind person. Hastily he leaped back to get away from the enemy, but the dungeon was very narrow that as he leaped, his back crashed heavily onto the rock wall. He wanted to jump up, but his lower abdomen was struck by Xie Xun’s Qi Shang Quan. Severe pain rushed into his heart instantly.

Cheng Kun realized his injury was not light. If he continued leaping, he would be hit again. Thereupon he changed his tactic. He used the ‘xiao qin na shou’ [lit. little ‘grab and capture’ or grappling technique] to fight the enemy.

This ‘xiao qin na shou’ was very effective to use in close combat in the darkness. It possessed an exquisite ability to adapt to changes in a marvelous and rapid way. Although the eyes could not see, the fingers, palms, arms and elbows could be used to detect the enemy, and then grabbed, clawed, hit, tore, poked, hooked or struck the enemy’s body.

Xie Xun gave a loud shout and also used the ‘xiao qin na shou’ to fight back.

The crowd only heard shouts coming out of the dungeon again and again, mixed with rapid noise of fists and palms collided with each other or with the opponent’s body, just

like the noise of firecrackers. Large sheets of water splashed out of the dungeon. It appeared that the two men were attacking each other at full speed.

Zhang Wuji's heart was thumping madly as he thought that if right this moment his Yifu met a dangerous situation, he would be helpless to render his assistance, since he obviously could not jump into the dungeon to save his Yifu. In his anxiety, his back was wet with cold sweat.

Xie Xun had been blind for more than twenty years; his ability to distinguish shape from listening to the noise was very well trained. He was accustomed to rely on his ears instead of his eyes. On the other hand, Cheng Kun fought like a blind person amidst the splashing water; he hit and grabbed randomly, so the table was turned in that now he was at a disadvantage.

Cheng Kun panicked. He could not think of anything else except moving his arm rapidly like a gust of wind under a sudden downpour. He increased the speed of his 'xiao qin na shou' while using only killer moves with this thought in his mind, "I am going to stake everything I have; whatever happens, we must return to fighting above the ground."

Step by step the crowd of heroes approached the dungeon. Their palms were wet with cold sweats, while their ears heard continuous shouting of Cheng Kun and Xie Xun from underground. It seemed like victory and defeat had not been decided yet.

Suddenly Cheng Kun's scream was heard from underground, followed by the two men jumping out of the dungeon together. Under the sunlight, everybody could see that both Cheng Kun and Xie Xun's eyes were bleeding. The two men stood still, facing each other.

What happened was: during the fierce battle, with open arms Xie Xun's palms struck down toward Cheng Kun. Cheng Kun was delighted. "Got you!" he shouted, while the two fingers of his right hand struck Xie Xun's eyes. It was the move 'shuang long qiang zhu' [a pair of dragons fight over a pearl], which was quite common. However, because it was launched in the midst of 'xiao qin na shou', it carried an enormous power. He expected the opponent to lean sideways to evade, and then his left hand would sweep across the opponent head. He was certain the opponent's vital 'tai yang xue' [sun acupoint, located on the temples] would be hit. Contrary to his expectation, Xie Xun neither evaded nor blocked his strike; he also shouted, "Got you!" with the same 'shuang long qiang zhu', his two fingers poked Cheng Kun's eyes.

As soon as Cheng Kun's fingers pierced Xie Xun's eyes, like a flash of lightning a thought came into his mind, "Bad!" followed by stabbing pain as his own eyes were pierced by Xie Xun's two fingers.

Both men suffered the same injury. However, Xie Xun had been blind for a long time. As he was pierced by Cheng Kun's fingers, he only suffered some superficial wound. Cheng Kun, on the other hand, had turned blind.

With a cold laugh Xie Xun said, "Does it feel good, being a blind man?" With a loud shout he launched another punch.

Cheng Kun could not see anything; he was unable to evade. The 'Qi Shang Quan' hit him squarely on the chest. Xie Xun followed with a left hand punch. Cheng Kun staggered several steps backward until his back was against the broken pine tree; blood gushing out from his mouth.

Suddenly Du E opened his mouth, "Just retribution! Shanzai,

shanzai!”

Xie Xun stopped dead on his track; he had concentrated his power on the third punch, but right now it stopped midway. “I should have punched you thirteen times with the ‘Qi Shang Quan’; but your martial art skill is gone and you are blind, henceforth you have become a handicapped person and thus will not do wicked things on the earth anymore. You need not receive the remaining eleven punches.”

Seeing that Xie Xun achieved a total victory, Zhang Wuji and the others cheered. But suddenly Xie Xun sat on the ground; the bones on his entire body were cracking.

Zhang Wuji was shocked, knowing that Xie Xun was using his own internal energy to destroy his own martial art skill. “Yifu,” he hastily said, “Don’t!” He rushed forward and stretching out his hand, using the Jiu Yang Shen Gong, he pressed Xie Xun’s back to stop him.

Xie Xun suddenly leaped up and fiercely punched his own chest; blood gushing out from his mouth.

Zhang Wuji busily reached out to support him, but he felt that Xie Xun’s hand was feeble. His martial art skill had definitely gone, and would be very difficult to recover.

Xie Xun pointed his finger toward Cheng Kun and said, “Cheng Kun, you murdered my entire family. Today I destroyed your eyes and wiped out your martial art skill. We are even now. Shifu, my martial art skill was taught by you. Today I willingly destroyed it; I am giving it back to you. From now on, there is no gratitude nor grudges between me and you. You will never see my face again and I also will never see your face.”

Cheng Kun pressed his hands on his eyes. He was groaning from the pain, but did not say anything. The crowd of heroes looked at each other; who would have thought that this battle between master and disciple would end up like this?

In a loud and clear voice Xie Xun said, "I, Xie Xun, have done much wickedness; I have never hoped I would live until today. If there is anyone among the heroes of the world whose family or martial brother died under the Old Xie's hands, you are free to take the Old Xie's life. Wuji, you must not stop them, nor you must avenge me in the future and thus adding to your Yifu's guilt."

Zhang Wuji consented with tears in his eyes.

Although there were quite a number of heroes who harbored deep enmity with Xie Xun, they all saw how Xie Xun had avenged his entire family only by destroying Cheng Kun's martial art skill. However, Xie Xun's own martial art was also gone. Therefore, if anybody went forward and stabbed him with a sword, or punched him with a fist, his action would be considered a hero or a warrior's bad deed.

Suddenly a man stepped out from among the crowd. "Xie Xun," he said, "My father, 'Yan Ling Fei Tian Dao' [The Wild-Goose-Plume-Flying-to-the-sky Saber] Qiu Lao Yingxiong [old hero Qiu] lost his life under your hands. I am here to avenge my Xian Fu [deceased father]!" Finished speaking, he walked toward Xie Xun.

"That's right," Xie Xun sadly said, "Your honorable father died under my hands. Qiu Xiong [brother Qiu], you may proceed."

The man surnamed Qiu drew his saber and took two more steps closer.

Zhang Wuji could not think straight; if he did not act, his Yifu would lose his life under this man's saber, but if he stopped this man, he was afraid that he would add to the agony his Yifu had to endure for the rest of his life. Much less, Yifu was blind and had lost his martial art skill; it was difficult to say whether Yifu would live a happy life or not. His body shook; he took two steps forward without intending to do so.

"Wuji," Xie Xun roared, "If you stop anybody from exacting their revenge, you are being greatly unfilial to me. After I die, go down into the dungeon and take a look. You will understand everything."

The man surnamed Qiu lifted his saber in front of his chest. Suddenly tears started to flow down from his eyes. He spat on Xie Xun's face and said with a choking voice, "My Xian Fu was a hero. If his spirit in Heaven saw me killing a blind man whose martial art skill has gone, he would be angry with me for being unworthy ..." 'Clang!' his saber fell to the ground. Covering up his face, he rushed back into the crowd.

Next, a middle-aged woman came out and said, "Xie Xun, I am here to avenge my husband, 'Yin Yang Pan Guan' ['pan guan' is a mythological judge of the underworld], Yin Dapeng." Walking toward Xie Xun, she also spat on his face; then she walked away while crying loudly.

Seeing his Yifu was being humiliated in succession, outwardly, Zhang Wuji was standing unperturbed, but inwardly, his heart was like being sheared by a knife. The heroes and warriors of the Wulin world considered death lightly, but they would never take any insult. It was called 'a warrior can be killed, but not disgraced.' These two people's spittle on Xie Xun's face was the greatest insult, but he endured it patiently. It was clear that he acknowledged his

sins in the past and that he was pained with regret, and thus he took the repentance seriously.

One by one people were coming out from the crowd; some slapped Xie Xun on the face, some kicked him, some opened their mouths in curses, but Xie Xun only sit with bowed head, enduring everything in silence. He did not withdraw, he did not even try to talk back.

In this manner, more than thirty people came out one by one to humiliate Xie Xun. Finally, a Taoist priest with long beard stepped out. He bowed and said, "Pin Dao [lit. impoverished Daoist - referring to self] Taixu Zi [Translator's note: I am not an expert in Daoism, but it seems to me that many Taoist priest used 'Zi' (lit. son or male child) as the last part (suffix?) of their title. Remember the Seven Quanzhen priests? Anyway, this priest's name means 'great emptiness']. My two Shixiong lost their lives under Xie Daxia's fists. Looking at Xie Daxia's character today, Pin Dao is deeply ashamed. Pin Dao's sword has also killed innumerable warriors, both from the black and white worlds. If I came to you to seek revenge, other people would also come to me to seek revenge." Having said that, he drew his sword, his left hand reached up and plucked the blade of the sword with his fingers. 'Clang!' the sword broke into two. He tossed the broken sword to the ground, saluted Xie Xun, turned around and left.

The crowd of heroes broke into soft murmurs. This Taixu Zi was not very well known in the Jianghu, yet his martial art skill was actually superb. However, what was harder to come by was his broadmindedness; his ability to rebuke himself.

After he left, it seemed like no one else would come out to make things difficult for Xie Xun. To everybody's surprise, while they were still talking among themselves, a middle-aged nun stepped out from among the Emei Pai's crowd. She

walked toward Xie Xun and said, "To avenge my husband's murder, I also will resolve it by spitting on you!" As soon as she said that, she opened her mouth and spat toward Xie Xun's forehead. Who would have thought that this spittle carried a strong gust of wind? Turned out it was not spittle, but a date stone steel nail.

Xie Xun heard the difference in the sound of the wind. He smiled bitterly, but did not evade at all. He thought, "If I die right now, it can be considered already too late."

Suddenly a yellow shadow flashed by. The lady in yellow dashed forward. Her sleeve swished, and the date stone nail was rolled inside the sleeve. "How must we address Shitai by your Buddhist title?" she asked sternly.

As the nun saw her attack fail, a slightly frightened expression appeared on her face. "I am called Jing Zhao [lit. still/calm/quiet illumination]," she said.

"Hmm, Jing Zhao, Jing Zhao ..." the lady in yellow said, "Before you left home to become a nun, what was your husband's name? How did he die under Xie Daxia's hands?"

Jing Zhao angrily said, "What does it have to do with you? Why do you meddle in other people's business?"

The lady in yellow replied, "Xie Daxia repents from his former sins. If anybody wanted to avenge his father, brother, martial family or friends, even if he is cut into thousand pieces, Xie Daxia would accept his fate willingly; other people have no right to interfere. But if there are people with malicious intention, trying to fish in the muddled water, trying to kill him to shut his mouth, then it becomes everybody's business."

Jing Zhao said, "Between Xie Xun and I, there are no grudges

and no enmity; why would I want to kill him to shut his ...” The last word ‘mouth’ had not come out of her mouth when she suddenly realized she had blundered. She stopped abruptly. Her face turned deathly pale; and she could not help but cast a glance toward Zhou Zhiruo.

“That’s right,” the lady in yellow said, “You have no grudges and no enmity with Xie Daxia, then why did you want to kill him to shut his mouth? Humph, among the twelve Emei Pai’s ‘Jing’ generation nuns, Jing Xuan, Jing Xu, Jing Kong, Jing Hui, Jing Jia, and Jing Zhao, are all virgins when they left home. Where did the husband come from?”

Without saying anything, Jing Zhao turned around and walked away.

“Do you think it’s this easy to walk away just like that?” the lady in yellow barked.

Rushing two steps forward, her palm reached out to grab her shoulder. Jing Zhao turned her shoulder to evade. The lady in yellow’s right index finger pierced toward her waist, followed by a kick to hit the ‘huan tiao xue’ [‘hop the loop’ acupoint] on her thigh. Jing Zhao grunted and fell down to the ground.

“Miss Zhou,” in a cold voice the lady in yellow said, “This ploy of killing someone to shut his mouth is very cruel.”

In the same cold voice Zhou Zhiruo replied, “Jing Zhao Shijie is seeking revenge against Xie Xun. What ‘killing someone to shut his mouth’?” Waving her left hand she said, “There are countless disciples from prestigious upright sects in here who fail to distinguish the just from the evil, willingly associate themselves with unorthodox demonic sects. It’s not worthwhile for Emei Pai to be involved with the murky water. Let’s go.”

The Emei Pai crowd responded together and stood up immediately. Two female disciples helped Jing Zhao. The lady in yellow did not stop them. Zhou Zhiruo led her fellow disciples going down the peak.

Zhang Wuji walked toward the lady in yellow. Cupping his fists, he said, "I have received many help from Jiejie; my gratitude is beyond words. I wish to know your illustrious name, so that Zhang Wuji can cherish it in his heart day and night."

The lady in yellow showed a faint smile. She said, "Behind the Mount Zhong Nan, the Tomb of the Living Dead, the Divine Eagle and Gallant Knights vanished from the Jianghu." [Translator's note: it was like a poem of four characters each: Zhong Nan Shan Hou, Huo Si Ren Mu, Shen Diao Xia Lu, Jue Ji Jiang Hu.] Finished speaking, she tucked her gown and returned the salute. Her hand beckoned, the eight young maidens wearing black and white followed her floating away.

Zhang Wuji took a step forward and said, "Jiejie, please stay."

Unexpectedly, the lady in yellow did not pay him any attention; she continued going down the peak.

"Yang Jiejie, Yang Jiejie!" the young Clan Leader of the Beggar Clan, Shi Hongshi called out.

From the waist of the hill came the lady in yellow's reply, "I am asking Zhang Jiaozhu's unreserved involvement in helping the Beggar Clan solving their important matters."

"Wuji accepts the order," Zhang Wuji replied in loud and clear voice.

“Many thanks, then!” the lady said. These three words ‘duo xie le’ came from a distant, since she had been far away, but her voice was still very clear. Zhang Wuji could not help but feel a sudden emptiness in his heart.

Kong Zhi went to Cheng Kun and sternly shouted, “Yuan Zhen, quickly tell your followers to release the Fangzhang. If there is any unexpected misfortune to the old Fangzhang, you will heap more sin to your head.”

Forcing a smile, Cheng Kun said, “Since things have come this far, everybody will perish together. Even if I want to release Kong Wen He Shang [monk Kong Wen] now, I am afraid we are already too late. You are not blind, are you? Can’t you see the blazing flame?”

Kong Zhi was taken aback, he turned his head to look down from the peak and saw black smoke and tongues of fire rising up from the Temple complex. Startled, he said, “The Damo Hall is on fire! Quickly put out the fire!”

The crowd of monks was thrown into confusion; they scrambled down the hill at once. Suddenly they saw from all around the Damo Hall columns of water like white dragons rose up and poured down on the blaze, suppressing the flame.

“Amitufo,” Kong Zhi joined his palms and chanted the name of Buddha, “The ancient Shaolin Temple has once again escape disaster.”

Not too long afterwards, two monks rushed up the peak to give their report, “Reporting to Shishu [martial (younger) uncle], the rebel followers of Yuan Zhen set fire to burn down the Damo Hall. Fortunately, for the sake of justice and loyalty, the heroes under the Hong Shui Flag of the Ming Cult

have extinguished the raging fire.”

Kong Zhi went toward Zhang Wuji, joined his palms and said, “The thousand years old ancient temple Shaolin is spared from the fire, all thanks to Zhang Jiaozhu’s great kindness and virtue; one the old monk will never be able to repay even if my body is ground to powder.”

Zhang Wuji returned the salute and answered modestly, “We only did what we ought to do; Da Shi need not be overly courteous.”

Kong Zhi said, “Kong Wen Shixiong is being held prisoner in the Damo Hall by this traitor. Although the fire is out, I do not know Shixiong’s safety yet. Zhang Jiaozhu and the other heroes please wait here for a moment, Laodi [lit. old younger brother – referring to self] must go and see.”

Cheng Kun laughed out loud and said, “Kong Wen’s entire body is smeared with butter and lard, as soon as he met the fire, he would turn into charcoal immediately. Hong Shui Flag can save the Damo Hall, they cannot save the Old Fangzhang.”

From the waist of the hill suddenly came a voice, “If Hong Shui Flag failed, there is still Hou Tu Flag.” It was Fan Yao’s voice. He had just finished speaking when he appeared with Hou Tu Flag Leader, Yan Yuan, on the peak, each holding the hand of an old monk walking between them. It was none other than the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Kong Wen. However, the three men’s clothes were scorched; their eyebrows were partially burned. They looked battered and exhausted.

Kong Zhi rushed forward to embrace Kong Wen. “Shixiong,” he called out, “Are you well? Shidi is incompetent, I am guilty and deserve ten thousand deaths.”

Kong Wen smiled and said, "If not because of these Fan Shizhu [benevolent master, donor] and Yan Shizhu came out from the tunnel, you and I would have to say goodbye to each other today."

Kong Zhi was astonished. "The Ming Cult's Hou Tu Flag's ability to dig tunnels is divine." He bowed deeply to Fan Yao and Yan Yuan to express his gratitude, and then said, "Fan Shizhu, Laoseng [old monk - referring to self] was rude and offensive to you; please forgive me. Laoseng does not dare to go to the appointment at the Wan An Temple of Dadu."

When a Wulin character made an appointment for a martial art competition and ate his own words by not showing up, the loss of face he would experience would be ten thousand times worse than if he lost because of inferior skill. Kong Zhi was endlessly grateful toward Fan Yao for risking his life in saving his Shixiong's life; hence he was willing to break his own promise. These two men admired each other to begin with. After this incident, their respect for each other grew. From now on, they became the very best of friends.

Turned out Cheng Kun had made a comprehensive arrangement in advance. On the eve of the Great Heroes Assembly, he caught Kong Wen off guard and sealed his acupoint, and held him prisoner inside the Damo Hall. The Hall was filled with sulfur, firewood and other flammable material. Then he assigned his trusted aides to stand guard. He coerced Kong Zhi to do everything he commanded, or else he would set the fire and burn Kong Wen to his death. When things did not turn out the way he planned later, when everything did not happen as he anticipated, when he believed his plan had failed completely, he issued an order to his cronies to set the fire as his last gambit to 'break the cauldrons and sink the boats'. He was hoping that when the

crowd of heroes and monks were busy putting off the fire, his cronies might have a chance to help him escape down the mountain.

Unexpectedly, Yang Xiao and the Ming Cult army arrived at the Shaoshi Peak a few days early. The Hou Tu Flag was immediately ordered to dig a tunnel toward the Shaolin Temple, originally, it was to rescue Xie Xun, but Xie Xun was not imprisoned inside the Temple at all.

As the Hou Tu Flag people looked everywhere with no avail, they took the opportunity to erase the writing on the back of the sixteen Luohan images. Later on, after Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo battled the Jin Gang Fu Mo Quan, and Cheng Kun's real identity was revealed and he was confronted in front of Kong Zhi and everybody else, Zhao Min and Yang Xiao immediately guessed thru his plan.

After a short discussion, they asked Fan Yao to lead Hong Shui and Hou Tu, two Flags, to infiltrate the Temple and find Kong Wen. However, Cheng Kun's arrangement was extremely thorough and ominous; sulfur and firewood were piled high inside and outside the Damo Hall. As soon as a fire was ignited, the Hall caught in a blazing inferno, burning five Hou Tu Flag disciples to their deaths. Fan Yao and Yan Yuan moved quickly through the smoke and fire to rescue Kong Wen. Still, the three of them suffered some burns on their clothes, hair and eyebrows. If not for the tunnel, they would not escape and would be buried under the burning hall.

Damo Hall, as well as several adjacent buildings, suffered heavy damages from the fire. Fortunately the fire did not spread further, the Da Xiong Bao Dian [great heroic precious hall], the library, the Luohan Hall, and other important places did not suffer any damage.

After a short discussion, Kong Wen and Kong Zhi issued an order for Cheng Kun and his followers to be detained in the rear hall, waiting for further instructions. Cheng Kun had been staying in the Shaolin Temple for quite a long time, he had made a lot of friends and gathered quite a bit of followers, but as the leader was apprehended and the Abbot escaped from danger, Cheng Kun's supporters realized their cause was lost. They did not offer any resistance and were led down the peak by the monks, under the leadership of the Luohan Hall's chief monk, with their head hung low in dejection.

Zhang Wuji came near Xie Xun and could only call out, "Yifu!" while tears streaming down his face like rain.

"Silly Child!" Xie Xun laughed, "Your Yifu is enlightened by the three eminent monks and has passed through to great awakenings. My lifetime of crimes have been resolved, every single one of them. You should be very happy for me, why would you be grieving? Why would you feel sorry that I lost my martial art skill? Do you want me to use it to do evil again in the future?"

Zhang Wuji could not think of anything to answer, but there was pain in his heart; he called out again, "Yifu!"

Xie Xun went toward Kong Wen and kneeled down saying, "Disciple's sin is grave, I hope for Fangzhang to offer a shelter by taking me under your discipleship."

Kong Wen had not answered when Du E said, "Come, let Laoseng take you as my disciple."

Xie Xun said, "Disciple does not dare to hope for such good fortune." He asked Kong Wen to be his master, because then he would be a 'Yuan' generation disciple. If he entered Du E

tutelage, then he would have a 'Kong' generation rank, which was at the same level of seniority with Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two martial brothers.

"Rubbish!" Du E barked, "'Kong' is empty, 'Yuan' is also empty. I would have thought that you'd understand it by now!"

Xie Xun was startled, but he understood immediately. Master-disciple relationship was a mere distinction of the Buddhist title; it was all illusory for Buddhist followers. Thereupon, he recited a Buddhist verse, "Master is empty, disciple is empty, no guilt no responsibility, no virtue no merit!"

Du E laughed out loud and said, "Shanzai, shanzai! You have become a disciple of our school, yet you are still called Xie Xun. Do you understand?"

"Disciple understands," Xie Xun replied, "Xie Xun is ox dung. Everything is but a shadow, the body does not exist, let alone a name?"

Xie Xun was skilled in both pen and sword [orig. 'wen wu cuan cai'], there wasn't any 'zhu zi bai jia' [lit. many sages, hundred schools, a general term for all the pre-Han schools of thought] he did not pry into. With a little enlightenment from Du E, he became aware of the essential meaning of Buddhism. Henceforth he entered Buddhism and eventually became an eminent monk himself.

"Enter the rest, enter the rest!" Du E said, "Only by comprehending the way one will avoid devil's traps!" Taking Xie Xun by the hand, he went down the peak unhurriedly with Du Jie and Du Nan following behind.

Kong Wen, Kong Zhi, Zhang Wuji, and the others bowed to

send them off. The Golden-Haired Lion King's name shook the Jianghu thirty years ago by doing countless deeds which offended the whole society. Today he entered the empty gate, there wasn't anyone among the crowd of heroes who did not sigh with mixed feelings. Zhang Wuji's heart was filled with joy mixed with sorrow.

Kong Wen said, "The presence of the heroes has brightened our humble Temple. We are ashamed that there was a sudden change in the Temple that we have offended many people and were not able to perform our duty as the host. The heroes from all over the world have gathered here. We do not know when we will meet again. Therefore, we would like to invite you all to stay in our Temple for a few more days."

The crowd of heroes went down the peak to enter the Temple. Shaolin Temple prepared vegetarian banquet for the guests. The monks immediately performed a religious ceremony on behalf of the heroes who were unfortunate to lose their lives during the great assembly. One by one the crowd of heroes also offered sacrifices to express their condolences.

As the important matters were resolved, there remained many unclear businesses in Zhang Wuji's heart. Since Xie Xun left in a hurry, he did not have time to inquire about doubts and suspicions troubling his heart. He only had a feeling that the key to this mystery was somewhat related to Zhou Zhiruo. Thinking about their former relationship, he felt that he did not need to scrutinize everything and thus damage her reputation.

After dinner, Zhang Wuji visited Shi Hongshi and the Beggar Clan elders at the western chambers to discuss important matters within the Beggar Clan. Suddenly a Ming Cult disciple rushed in with a report, "Jiaozhu, the Wudang Zhang Si Xia [fourth hero Zhang] has arrived. He has an important

matter to discuss with you.”

Zhang Wuji was startled, “Could it be that Tai Shifu has met some mishaps?” He quickly went out and walked toward the main hall.

He knelt down in front of Zhang Songxi, but did not see anything different on his expression, thereupon he felt relieved. “Is Tai Shifu well?” he asked.

“Shifu is well,” Zhang Songxi replied, “At Mount Wudang I received information that the Yuan cavalry, twenty thousand strong, is heading to the direction of Shaolin Temple. Obviously, they do not have good intentions toward the Heroes Assembly. Therefore, I come here in the middle of the night to inform you.”

“We must let Fangzhang know as soon as possible,” Zhang Wuji said. Two men immediately went to the rear courtyard and informed Kong Wen.

Kong Wen thought for a moment. “This matter implicates a lot of things; we must discuss it with the crowd of heroes.” Thereupon he ordered a monk to sound the alarm, inviting everybody to the Da Xiong Bao Dian.

As soon as they were alerted, the crowd of heroes discussed the matter at hand. The hot-blooded among them said, “While the heroes from all over the world gather here, let us go down the mountain to catch them off guard and slaughter them.”

The more experienced among them said, “The Yuan army is always on the move. Perhaps this is one of their routine relocation operations. They might not necessarily come to give us trouble.”

Zhang Songxi said, "I understand Mongolians; I heard it with my own ears the Tatar officer ordering his troops to attack the Shaolin Temple."

By that time, the Mongolians had been occupying the Central Plains for more than a hundred years; the number of Han people who understand Mongolian language was not small. Zhang Songxi was intelligent and experienced; he understood a considerable number of dialects from different towns and villages, and was quite fluent in Mongolian.

"Gentlemen Heroes," Kong Wen said, "It appears that the imperial court has found out about our assembly in here, and they decided our meeting is not beneficial to the imperial court, and thus they dispatch an army to suppress us. We are all martial art practitioners, and we are not afraid of the Tatars. We are ready to cope with anything, we will resist by whatever means available, we ..." He had not finished his speech when some people started cheering and clapping.

Kong Wen continued, "However, we are Jianghu's warriors who are accustomed to fight one on one; if not using a blade or fists and kicks, then using internal energy and secret projectiles. We are not experts in fighting on horseback or using long spear and double-ended lance. In Laoseng's opinion; how about the heroes go down the mountain and disband?"

The crowd of heroes looked at each other in silence. Zhang Wuji said, "If we go down and disband, first, the Tatars would think we are afraid of them and we will unavoidably crush the spirit of the people. Second, what will happen to the masters in the Shaolin Temple?"

Kong Wen smiled and said, "If the Yuan army come to the

Temple and only see a bunch of monks and not Jianghu warriors, they would certainly leave us alone. This is called 'arrive in high spirit, return in disappointment.'"

The crowd of warriors knew that Kong Wen said this out of his good intention. The crowd of heroes was invited by Shaolin Pai; of course they did not want their guests to face disaster and shed their blood on the Shaoshi Peak. But this crowd of heroes was all people of courage and uprightness; they would not flinch in front of the enemy, naturally, they were unwilling to leave. Besides, the imperial government had already dispatched their troops. They simply would not return empty-handed. They would definitely trouble the Shaolin Temple. Most likely, they would kill most monks and capture the rest, and then they would probably burn the Temple down. The Mongolian soldiers were well known of their brutality; killing and burning were not foreign to them.

Yang Xiao said, "The Tatars kill without mercy. It is the duty of all Han people to fight the enemy. In my humble opinion, we have no other choice but to fight. We must battle them someplace else so that this thousand-year ancient Temple will be spared of the catastrophe of war."

The crowd of heroes applauded in agreement. "Let it be so," they said.

When they were still talking, from outside the gate suddenly came the sound of hoof beats; two riders galloped near. The horses stopped with a neigh outside the door. Two men, ushered by the monk in charge of visitor reception entered the hall in a hurry. As soon as the crowd of heroes saw the riders' clothes, they knew these men were Ming Cult disciples.

The two men walked before Zhang Wuji, bowed in salute and one of them reported, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: Tatar vanguard

army of five thousand troops has arrived to attack Shaolin Temple. They say the Shifus in the Temple are gathering a crowd to rebel, so they are here to flatten Shaolin. All shiny ... shiny ...”

Kong Wen smiled and said, “You were about to say ‘shiny head monks’, weren’t you? Those words are not taboo. Please continue.”

The man said, “Along the way, the Tatars have killed many monks. The Tatars say: ‘Shiny heads are not good people, those with hair are also not good people; they all deserved to be put to death by the blade.’”

A lot of people raised their voices, they all said, “If we don’t fight a life and death battle against the Tatars, we are ashamed to be the descendants of the Yellow Emperor.”

Although by that time the Song dynasty had been subjugated by foreign power for almost a hundred years, the mainstream heroes and warriors had always considered Mongolians soldiers and officers as barbarians. They were unwilling to be the foreigners’ subjects. This time hearing how the Mongolian troops went on a killing spree, their blood boiled and everybody wanted to go to battle.

“Gentlemen, the heroes,” in a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji said, “Today is the day we, the Han men, kill the enemy to serve our country. The name of the Great Assembly of Shaolin Temple will go down the history for thousands of years!”

The Great Hall shook with the deafening cheers of the people.

Zhang Wuji continued, “We can’t go back now even if we

want to. I am asking Kong Wen Fangzhang to give us the order. We, the Ming Cult, from top to bottom will follow with all our hearts.”

“Zhang Jiaozhu, what are you talking about?” Kong Wen said, “Although our humble Sect’s monks have learned a little bit punching and kicking, we know nothing about marching in the army and going to war. In the last several years the Ming Cult has initiated such a great undertaking; who in the Jianghu has not heard about it? Only the Ming Cult has the resources to fight Tatars’ large army. We nominate Zhang Jiaozhu to hold the commander position and lead the heroes from all over the world to fight the Tatars.”

Zhang Wuji tried to decline modestly, but the crowd of heroes had already cheered loudly. It was true that Zhang Wuji was young and inexperienced, but his martial art skill was strong. His power in fighting the three Shaolin monks had been witnessed by everybody present. In addition, the success of Han Shantong, Xu Shouhui, Zhu Yuanzhang and the other Ming Cult generals in staging rebellions, attacking cities and capturing territories in such places as Huai Si River, Hunan and Hubei, and other areas had shaken the world. Earlier, the people had also seen the Five-Element Flags displaying their full capabilities in the arena. No other school or sect possessed these kinds of skills. The warriors from various sects and clans all agreed that nobody else fit to take such a big responsibility other than the Ming Cult.

Zhang Wuji said, “I [orig. zai4xia4] have never learned how to manage soldiers. Please elect other capable person to be in charge.”

While he was still declining modestly, from the foot of the mountain came the rumbling noise of people shouting and fighting. Two Shaolin monks rushed into the Hall and

reported, "Reporting to Fangzhang: the Mongolian army has attacked our mountain."

Zhang Wuji said, "Rui Jin, Hong Shui, two Flags, are going to be the first to engage the enemy. Mr. Zhou Dian, Tie Guan Daozhang [Priest Tie Guan ('hard hat')], you are to assist these two flags." Zhou Dian and Priest Tie Guan complied and quickly left.

The situation this time was so urgent that it did not allow Zhang Wuji to decline anymore. He had no choice but issue his orders: "Shuo Bude Shifu, please take my Sheng Huo Ling and go to our Cult's encampments in the surrounding area. Tell them to go up the mountain to lend their assistance." Shou Bude took the tablet and left.

As the crowd of heroes in the Great Hall heard about the Yuan's army arrival to destroy them, they drew their weapons and rushed out.

"Jiaozhu," in a low voice Yang Xiao said, "If you don't take command, these people will fight randomly, and they will certainly be defeated."

Zhang Wuji nodded and ran out the Hall. He went to the pavilion halfway down the mountain and saw thousands of the Mongolian vanguard troops had arrived at the waist of the mountain. The Rui Jin Flag drove them back down by a salvo of arrows and javelins.

As far as eyes could see, the Mongolian troops were creeping up; their power looked so intimidating. Although their prestige was far below Genghis Khan's army, whose power overawed foreign lands, the Mongolian cavalry, after all, was very well trained and was still holding their reputation as unmatched elite troops.

Suddenly from the left came loud shouts as a large number of nuns, men and women ran up the mountain. They were the Emei Pai contingent, which was on their way down the mountain when they met the Mongolian army and was driven back up. About a dozen or so men were carrying stretchers and other things. They were surrounded by the Mongolian soldiers.

Leading Jing Xuan, Jing Zhao, and several other senior disciples, Zhou Zhiruo charged and killed the enemy. But although they had killed dozens of Mongolian officers and soldiers, they still could not penetrate the enemy's siege and save their fellow disciples.

"Not good!" Zhang Wuji groaned inwardly, "One of the stretchers must be carrying Song Shige!"

"Hong Shui, Lie Huo, two flags, cover us!" he shouted, "Fan and Yang two Emissaries, Wei Xiong [brother Wei], follow me to save people!" He jumped and rushed down.

Two Mongolian soldiers thrust their lances straight toward him. With one hand Zhang Wuji grabbed one lance; exerting his strength he shook the lance and the two Yuan soldiers were thrown down the mountain. He turned the lance over and like a pair of dragons diving into the sea, the pair of lances plunged into the crowd.

Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, Peng Yingyu, and the others followed. The Mongolian soldiers scattered and a passageway has opened behind Zhou Zhiruo's group.

Fan Yao threw a punch, crushing the face of a Yuan army's Shi Fu Zhang [leader of a ten-man unit]. He then snatched the person on the stretcher and turned around to leave.

Zhang Wuji saw that Zhou Zhiruo's body and face were covered in blood; he charged back into the Yuan soldiers' encirclement. "Zhiruo, Zhiruo!" he called out, "Song Dage is saved!"

Zhou Zhiruo did not pay him any attention; she kept wielding her whip and charged ahead, but the mountain pathway was too narrow. Moreover, it was crammed full of soldiers so that after a while she could not charge anywhere anymore. Zhang Wuji saw two more Emei disciples carrying another stretcher were being caught up in the encirclement; they were brandishing their swords in a desperate struggle against the Yuan army.

"Looks like Song Shige is on that stretcher," Zhang Wuji thought. Dodging an attack, he jumped into the encirclement. He pulled two spears, which hit the rock wall and stuck, and then moving his hands and feet, he used the spears as stilts. When he was still a little more than a 'zhang' away, he saw the two Emei disciples were hit one after another by a saber and an arrow. They fell and both disciple and the stretcher rolled down the mountain. Zhang Wuji flew in; with the spear in his left hand he stopped the stretcher. He saw the person on the stretcher was wrapped in plain cloth from head to toe; only the face was exposed. It was indeed Song Qingshu.

Zhang Wuji threw the spears and carried Song Qingshu horizontally in his arms. He was surprised to feel Song Qingshu was exceptionally heavy. Apparently, there was a hard and stiff object inside the plain cloth wrap. Zhang Wuji did not have time to think about it, he was afraid that all this twisting and turning would break Song Qingshu's skull. Dodging to the left and evading to the right, he tried to stay away from the rain of sabers and spears of the Yuan cavalry, while keeping his steps exceptionally smooth and stable.

Tang Wenliang and Zong Weixia of Kongtong Pai charged together, protecting Zhang Wuji on either side. Their pair of swords stabbed and blocked, the Yuan troops fell one by one under their swords. Carrying Song Qingshu in his arms, Zhang Wuji made a steady progress going up the mountain. Several hundreds of Yuan soldiers arranged themselves in formation.

“Lie Huo Flag, move to action!” Peng Yingyu called out.

The Lie Huo Flag men sputtered oil from their spray guns, followed by shooting the rockets one by one. Raging flames rolled in waves, burning more than two hundred Yuan soldiers. Their burning bodies rolled down the mountain like balls of fire.

On the other side, the Hong Shui Flag’s hoses belched out poisonous water, spraying several hundred Yuan troops. The dead and the injured scattered on the mountainside. The Yuan army’s Wan Fu Zhang [leader of ten-thousand-man unit] ordered his troops to retreat. The front end of the formation changed into the rear. Shooting the arrows to prevent the enemy from pursuing, the army drew back slowly.

Peng Yingyu sighed and said, “Although they are defeated, the Tatars army does not get chaotic. They are truly world caliber elite troops.”

The Yuan army withdrew to the base of the mountain, and then spread out in a fan-shaped formation. It appeared they were not going to attack again, at least for the time being.

Zhang Wuji issued his order, “Rui Jin, Hong Shui and Lie Huo, three flags to defend the major road going up the mountain.

Ju Mu and Hou Tu, two flags to quickly cut lumber and construct barriers to guard against the enemy attack.”

All the Five-Element Flags leaders accepted the order in one voice, and then went separate ways to lead their people laying out a defense.

Previously, the crowd of heroes thought that although they might not be able to completely kill Tatars troops, defending themselves certainly would not be too difficult, would it? However, in the battle just now they experienced the power of the Yuan army first hand. Now they realized that large-scale battle was substantially different than fighting one-on-one in a martial art competition. With thousands upon thousands soldiers surging in like a tide of people, even someone excelled in martial art like Zhou Zhiruo would not have the opportunity to unleash her full potential. In a forest of sabers, spears, swords and lances, where everybody was chopping and killing everybody else, the skill they learned in normal time, be it weaponry or bare fist bare foot, internal or external strength, everything lost its usefulness. If the Ming Cult's Five Element Flags did not use troops formation to fight troops formation, at this moment there would be wretched mourning on the Shaoshi Peak; while the Shaolin Temple would turn into charred rubble under the raging fire.

Actually, Shaolin monks were also following some kind of discipline. They were divided into teams of younger monks, armed with monk staves and sabers, under the leadership of more senior monks. These teams spread out all around the Temple to guard all strategic locations. However, their number was simply too small; it was impossible for them to withstand the attack of twenty-thousand Mongolian elite troops.

The crowd of heroes broke into discussion with one another

as they saw Yuan army retreat. Now they understood why the previous dynasty, which was defended by a large number of heroes and warriors with superior martial art skill, was still unable to prevent their 'river and mountain' ['jiang shan' - country] from falling into the Tatars' hands.

Zhang Wuji gently placed Song Qingshu on the floor and looked for his breath. Luckily, he was still breathing. Turning his head, he wanted to talk to Zhou Zhiruo, but he did not see her anywhere.

"Where is Mrs. Song?" he asked. But everybody was busy fighting the Yuan force; nobody paid any attention to where Zhou Zhiruo was going. By this time, Emei Pai disciples' hostility toward the Ming Cult had been reduced substantially, yet they also said that they had not seen their Sect Leader.

Zhang Wuji was afraid that Song Qingshu's injury had worsened in the confusion of the battle just now; he decided to take off the wrapping on Song Qingshu's body and examine him carefully.

There were three layers of wrapping cloth on Song Qingshu's body. By the time Zhang Wuji had loosened the second layer, 'clang, clang, clang,' four pieces of broken weapon fell down. Zhang Wuji was startled. "Tulong Saber, Yitian Sword!" he called out.

One after another the crowd of heroes came near and stood around him. They saw the blades of both the Tulong Saber and the Yitian Sword were broken into two parts each. Zhang Wuji picked the half Tulong Saber, which still felt rather heavy in his hand. At that moment, all sorts of feeling welled up in his heart. He remembered his own parents lost their lives because of this Saber. For the last twenty years or so the

Jianghu was in continuous trouble, all because of this Saber. The primary intention of the crowd of heroes gathered in Shaolin was also for this treasured saber. He could not imagine that this Saber suddenly reappeared broken and turned into a useless thing.

As he lifted the Saber closer, he noticed that the broken part was hollow; large enough to conceal something. The Yitian Sword was also hollow. However, both holes were empty. Someone must have taken whatever object that was previously hidden inside.

Yang Xiao sighed, "Turned out Miss Zhou's astounding martial art skill came from these Saber and Sword."

Looking at the appearance of the broken sections of the Saber and the Sword, Zhang Wuji suddenly realized that when the Saber and the Sword went missing on that little island, they were taken by Zhou Zhiruo. Somehow she managed to banish Zhao Min, kill Yin Li, and strike the Saber and the Sword to each other, and thus two sharpest weapons in the world gave up and broke. She then took the concealed secret martial art manual and trained surreptitiously.

"That's right," he thought. The more Zhang Wuji thought, his mind grew clearer, "On that island, when I tried to use the Jiu Yang Shen Gong to drive the poison out from her body, I felt a strange internal energy vaguely resisting my strength. Later, this strange energy grew stronger. Obviously her internal energy cultivation has made some advancement. Ay! Because of her impatience to get a quick result, she did not cultivate a strong internal energy foundation, but took a shortcut by training a ruthless and evil martial art skill. In the end, she will not be able to reach the perfection of the martial art study. She had defeated Yu Er Bo and Yin Liu Shu, but it was because she was relying on strange moves, thus

gaining the advantage of surprise, just like when I was defeated under the Central Cult's Wind and Cloud, three Emissaries' hands in the past. Zhiruo's real skill is still far inferior to Yu and Yin, two uncles. If they fight again in the future, she will certainly die under the hands of Wudang Heroes ..."

When he was still deep in thought, the Rui Jin Flag Leader, Wu Jingcao stepped forward and said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: your subordinate came from a blacksmith family. I have learned how to forge metal into saber and sword. Let subordinate give it a try. Perhaps I can fix these treasured Saber and Sword."

Yang Xiao was delighted. "Wu Qishi's [flag leader Wu] skill as a swordsmith is unparalleled in the world. Jiaozhu, there is no harm in letting him try."

Zhang Wuji nodded. "It is indeed a pity that these sharp weapons are broken like this. Wu Qishi, you might as well give it a try."

Wu Jingcao turned toward the Lie Huo Flag Leader, Xin Ran, and said, "The most important ingredient in sword making is the fire. I will need Xin Xiong's wholehearted assistance. From the look of it, the Tatars will not going to attack the mountain for a while; what do you say we two brothers start working together rightaway?"

Xin Ran said with a laugh, "Making fire is actually Xiongdi's [brother, general term] expertise."

Thereupon the two of them ordered their subordinates to build a blast furnace, with an opening not more than one foot wide. Laying bricks, Wu Jingcao firmly clamped the top section of the Tulong Saber inside the furnace with the

broken end toward the fire. There were all kinds of fuel and flammable materials in the Lie Huo Flag that in an instant the furnace was blazing hot with raging fire.

Wu Jingcao had lost his right arm, only his left arm was left. He arranged a dozen or so swords and sabers by his side. His eyes were fixed on the fire. Each time the fire changed color, he put a blade inside the furnace to test the strength of the fire. When the fire turned from blue to white, his left hand quickly grabbed a pair of steel pliers and pinching the other half section of the Tulong Saber, he joined it with the top section, and held it in the fire. He was bare-chested; sparks landed on his body, but he seemed oblivious, his attention was focused completely on the task at hand.

Zhang Wuji thought, "Although being a swordsmith is a humble occupation, it actually requires great knowledge and great ability. An ordinary blacksmith would not be able to endure even this blistering hot furnace."

Suddenly, 'bonk, bonk', the two Lie Huo Flag men who were pumping the bellows fainted and fell on the floor. Xin Ran and the Lie Huo Flag's Vice Flag Leader quickly stepped in. They pulled their two fainted men and then took their place in pumping the bellows. These two men's internal energy cultivation was not bad; as they exerted their strength, blast of air made the fire inside the stove blazing high, reaching about a 'zhang' above the smokestack, creating quite a spectacle.

About half the time to burn an incense-stick later, Wu Jingcao suddenly cried out, "Aiyo!" and jumped backwards with disappointment on his face. Everybody was stunned; when they looked at his hand, they saw the steel pliers in his hand had melted and deformed beyond recognition, while the Tulong Saber did not show the slightest bit of melting.

Wu Jingcao shook his head and said, "Subordinate is incompetent; this treasured Tulong Saber's reputation is truly justified."

Xin Ran and his second in command stopped pumping and stepped aside. Their clothes were soaking wet with perspiration, as if they had just swam in the water fully clothed.

"Wuji Gege," Zhao Min suddenly said, "Wasn't even the Tulong Saber not able to chop the Sheng Huo Ling tablets?"

"Ah, that's right!" Zhang Wuji said.

Out of six Sheng Huo Ling tablets, one was taken by Shuo Bude going down the mountain to call for reinforcement; there were still five tablets left. Zhang Wuji took these five tablets and handed them over to Wu Jingcao, while saying, "If the Saber and the Sword cannot be fixed, that's all right. Sheng Huo Ling is our Cult's most precious object. We simply must not damage it."

"Yes!" Wu Jingcao replied, while bowing down to receive the tablets. He looked at the five tablets and noticed that the tablets were made neither of steel nor iron; they were hard like nothing he had seen. He estimated the weight to be about more or less a catty [approx. 1 lb or 0.5kg]. Lowering his head, he pondered deeply.

"If you are unsure, you don't have to take a risk," Zhang Wuji said.

Wu Jingcao did not reply. After a while, he awoke from his deep thought and said, "Subordinate did not promptly reply, begging Jiaozhu's pardon. This Sheng Huo Ling was cast

using ‘bai jin, xuan tie’ [lit. white gold – platinum, black/mysterious iron (same material as Yang Guo’s heavy sword)], blended with ‘jin gang sha’ [lit. very hard steel (or diamond) powder/granule] and other materials; ordinary blaze would not smelt it. Subordinate was pondering deeply how it was made in the past. It was truly unthinkable; thereupon I was lost in thought for a while.”

Zhao Min cast a sidelong glance toward Zhang Wuji. Pursing her mouth, she laughed and said, “When Jiaozhu needs to go to Persia to meet with a certain important character in the future, you can go with him to consult their master artisan.”

Zhang Wuji was bashful. “Why would I want to go to Persia?” he asked.

Zhao Min smiled and said, “Do I have to spell it out in front of everybody?” To Wu Jingcao she said, “Have you looked? There are engravings of characters on the Sheng Huo Ling. If sharp weapons like Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword cannot damage it the least bit, what kind of tool did they engrave the characters with?”

“Actually, to engrave the characters is not difficult,” Wu Jingcao replied, “You can apply a layer of white wax [here’s from the dictionary: white wax from Chinese white wax bug] to the Sheng Huo Ling; and then engrave the characters on the wax. Next, apply a strong acid. Within several months, the acid will corrode the tablets. When the white wax is scraped, the characters stay on the tablets. What Xiao Ren [humble one, lowly one – referring to self] do not understand is how the metal was cast.”

“Hey,” Xin Ran called out, “Are we going to do it or not?”

“Jiaozhu, set your mind at ease,” Wu Jingcao said to Zhang

Wuji, “Although Xin Xiongdi’s raging fire is fierce, it will not damage the Sheng Huo Ling the least bit.”

Xin Ran, however, was apprehensive, “I will make every effort to fan the fire, but if it burns our Cult’s most precious object, I may take the blame.”

Wu Jingcao smiled and said, “I don’t think you have the ability to do so. But even if you do, I will take the blame.” Thereupon he used two Sheng Huo Ling tablets to clamp the half section of the Tulong Saber, and then took a new pair of pliers to grip the Sheng Huo Ling tablets and returned the treasured Saber into the furnace.

The fire was blazing hotter and higher. After burning continuously for more than an hour, Wu Jingcao, Xin Ran and the Lie Huo Flag’s Vice Flag Leader seemed to be beaten down by the heat; their faces showed signs of weariness, it looked like they would not be able to hold much longer. Priest Tie Guan signaled Zhou Dian with his eyes, while his left hand made a circle in the air. The two of them rushed forward to take Xin Ran and Lie Huo Flag’s Vice Flag Leader’s place in pumping the bellows. These two men’s internal energy was much higher than those two they were replacing; inside the furnace, a white flame rose straight up.

Suddenly Wu Jingcao shouted, “Gu Xiongdi [brother Gu], do it!” The Rui Jin Flag’s Vice Flag Leader rushed toward the furnace with a naked blade in his hand. A white ray flashed, the blade stabbed Wu Jingcao in the chest. The multitude faces of heroes watching from the side changed, they all cried out in shock. Blood spurted out from Wu Jingcao’s naked chest toward the Tulong Saber. As the blood met the fire, blue smoke rose gracefully.

“It’s finished!” Wu Jingcao shouted. He retreated several

steps and fell sitting down on the ground. There was a deep black big saber in his right hand. The two broken pieces of the Tulong Saber had been fused together into one piece.

Now everybody understood. Turned out when a swordsmith failed to forge a saber or a sword, they would drip blood on the blade. There was an old legend about a certain husband and wife, Gan Jiang and Mo Xie, who had to jump into the furnace before an extremely sharp weapon could be forged. With his action, Wu Jingcao might have followed a master artisanship custom handed down from the ancient times.

Zhang Wuji rushed toward Wu Jingcao; he looked carefully at the wound, and saw that the saber only entered the flesh shallowly, the injury was not life threatening. Immediately he applied cut wound medicine and wrapped up the wound, while saying, “Wu Xiong, why did you do this? It’s not important whether this Saber can be fixed or not. Why did Wu Xiong have to suffer such pain?”

“What’s the big deal about this superficial wound that it has caused Jiaozhu anxiety?” Wu Jingcao replied. He stood up and raised the Tulong Saber to take a closer look. Upon seeing that the broken part was mended flawlessly with only a faint trace of blood on it, he could not help but feel very proud.

Zhang Wuji examined the two Sheng Huo Ling tablets, which were used inside the furnace and as expected, he did not see the slightest sign of damage. Receiving the Tulong Saber, he chopped it on two spears, which were snatched from Yuan troops earlier. With a light ‘Swish!’ sound, the two spears were cut smoothly, as if they were made of mud, cut by ordinary iron.

The crowd of heroes applauded loudly. “Excellent Saber!

Excellent Saber!" they praised.

Wu Jingcao took the two-piece Yitian Sword in his hands. His mind wandered to the moment when the former Rui Jin Flag Leader, Zhuang Zheng, as well as dozens of his brethrens of the Rui Jin Flag, lost their lives under this Sword. He could not restrain tears from flowing down his eyes.

"Jiaozhu," he said, "This Sword has killed my Zhuang Dage. It has killed not a few of my good brothers. Wu Jingcao hates this Sword to the bone. I can't fix it. I am ready to accept responsibility for this offense." While saying that, his tears poured down like rain.

"That only shows Wu Xiong's 'yi qi' [loyalty, code of brotherhood]," Zhang Wuji said, "What offense are you talking about?" Taking the two pieces of the Sword, he walked toward Jing Xuan of Emei Pai and said, "This Sword originally belonged to your precious Sect. I would like to ask Shitai to pass this on to Miss ... to Mrs. Song." Jing Xuan did not say anything, but she accepted the two pieces of broken sword.

Zhang Wuji held the Tulong Saber in his hand; he thought for a moment and then brought the Saber to Kong Wen.

"Fangzhang," he said, "This Saber was my Yifu's. Now that Yifu has entered the 'three precious' [orig. 'san bao' - Buddha, Dharma (his teaching) and Sangha (his monastic order)] and joined Shaolin, it is only fit that this Saber should be under Shaolin Pai's power."

Kong Wen shook both of his hands and said, "This Saber has already exchanged hands many times over. Last time it was Zhang Jiaozhu who snatched it away from among the thousand troops and ten thousand horses; everybody can

bear witness to it. And then it was Wu Dage from your precious Cult who mended it. In addition, today the heroes from all over the world have agreed to elect Zhang Jiaozhu to preside over the honorable position. Therefore, it is a question of ability and virtue, of origin and relationship, of prestige and position, this Saber should be under Zhang Jiaozhu's control. This is perfectly justified."

The crowd of heroes echoed in chorus; they said, "This is the will of the people, Zhang Jiaozhu does not need to decline."

Zhang Wuji had no choice but to accept; he thought, "If I can command the heroes of the Wulin world with this treasured Saber, we can drive the invaders together and complete the big current task."

He heard somebody started to recite, followed by the multitude of heroes, "The most revered in the Wulin world, treasured Saber slaying the dragon, ruling everything under the heavens, no one dares to disobey!" The next line was 'Yitian [relying on Heaven] does not appear, who can match its sharpness?' but since everybody had seen the Yitian Sword was broken and was not going to be mended, nobody recited these last two sentences.

The Rui Jin Flag of the Ming Cult harbored a deep hatred toward the Yitian Sword. Today, seeing the Tulong Saber was restored to its original form while the two pieces of Yitian Sword stayed broken, they all expressed their delight.

Everybody had been busy for half a day; their stomachs were growling. The Ming Cult's Five Element Flags and half of the Shaolin Temple monks were dispatched to guard all vital points. The rest of the people followed the monks to enjoy vegetarian dishes inside the Temple.

As the sky turned dark, Zhang Wuji leaped onto a tall tree to scout the enemy's movements at the bottom of the mountain. He noticed a cluster of encampments to the west, where smoke was rising up everywhere; it looked like they were cooking their dinner on the fire pits dug on the ground.

Zhang Wuji leaped down the tree and said to Wei Yixiao, "Wei Xiong, as soon as it is dark enough, go down and spy around the enemy's camp. Find out whether they are going to attack tonight or not." Wei Yixiao received the order and left.

"Jiaozhu," Yang Xiao said, "After being defeated at the front of the mountain today, I think the Tatars will not attack again tonight. What we must guard against is their sneak attack from the back of the mountain."

"That's right," Zhang Wuji said, "I am asking Yang Zuo Shi and Fan You Shi to stay and take charge in here, while I am going to the other side of the mountain to look around."

"I am coming with you," Zhao Min said.

The two of them went to the peak where Xie Xun was held captive; they looked far toward the back of the mountain, but did not see anything astir. Zhang Wuji ran his fingers gently on the three broken pine trees, and then he looked at the dark mouth of the dungeon, while in his mind he replayed the fierce fight earlier that day. He shivered at the thought of extremely dangerous situation he was in. Suddenly he remembered something, "Yifu told me to look at the rock wall of the dungeon. I almost forgot."

"Min Mei," he said, "Stay up here and stand watch; I am going down to take a look."

Jumping down into the hole, he took a torch [orig. 'huo zhe' (lit. fire folded document) - folded paper used as torch] and lit a fire. By this time, the water inside the dungeon had receded, but the wall and the ground were still wet. He saw on all sides, the wall was full of pictures. The pictures were apparently engraved on the rock wall using a sharp rock. The lines were simple, yet graceful and rather vivid.

On the eastern wall, the drawing depicted three women. One was lying on the ground; one was kneeling next to her as if she was tending to the woman on the ground. The third woman's right hand was at the kneeling woman's bosom. Next to the picture were two characters 'qu yao' [fetching the medicine].

On the south side, there was a picture of a big ship. One woman was throwing another woman into the ship. The caption said 'fang zhu' [banish].

Cold sweats broke out on Zhang Wuji's forehead. "Turn out it really happened this way," he thought, "When Min Mei was attending to my Biaomei [younger female cousin], Zhiruo stole the 'shi xiang ruan jin san' from her pocket to be mixed in our food and drink. And then she threw Min Mei into the Persian ship and forced them to leave immediately. But why didn't she simply kill Min Mei? Hmm, perhaps if she left Min Mei's body behind, she would not be able to cover up her track, plus she could not shift the blame to her. That being the case, then Biaomei was also killed under her ruthless hands."

Just below the picture, a bit to the left, was another picture of two men. One was sleeping, the other, with a head full of long hair, was inclining his head to listen. Zhang Wuji was startled, "Turn out when Zhiruo was performing this bloody atrocities that cry out to Heaven, Yifu heard everything. The

Senior's self-control was indeed very strong; he did not reveal anything on the island. Ah, right. At that time Yifu and I were already drugged by the 'shi xiang ruan jin san'; our internal strength were gone. Our lives were in Zhiruo's hands. No wonder at that time Yifu adamantly said that it must be Min mei's doing, and that he was very indignant toward her. He knew I was naive and muddle-headed; if he told me the secret, I would inadvertently divulge it through my speech or my demeanor."

He saw the pictures were splattered with blood, a reminder of the bloody battle between Xie Xun and Cheng Kun during the day, making the pictures more forlorn and terrifying.

Looking at the third picture on the western wall, he saw Xie Xun was sitting, and Zhou Zhiruo was attacking him from the back. There was a crowd of beggars of the Beggar Clan lurking outside the room. This scene was exactly the same as was depicted in the tableau sponsored by Zhao Min during the 'Tour of the Imperial City' at Dadu.

When he was about to look at the fourth picture, the torch in his hand suddenly went out. "Min Mei," he called out, "Could you come down and let me use your fire?"

Zhao Min lighted her torch and jumped down. As she saw the drawings, she understood immediately. The fourth picture depicted Xie Xun was being taken by several men. There was a woman peering from behind a tree in a distant. The stroke of these drawing was excellent; however, other than Xie Xun's own face, the other people's faces were indistinct, Zhang Wuji could not tell who the woman was.

He pondered about it for a moment and then he understood, "When Yifu became blind, I have not even been born yet. He recognizes Min Mei, Zhiruo, Biaomei, and me by our voices,

but actually he does not know what we look like. Naturally he could not draw our faces.” Pointing to the young woman, he asked, “Was it you, or Miss Zhou?”

“It was me,” Zhao Min replied, “When Cheng Kun snatched Xie Daxia away from the Beggar Clan, he had someone else to take Xie Daxia to be imprisoned in the Shaolin Temple. He himself went around leaving the Ming Cult’s mark along the way, leading you on a wild goose chase around a big circle. I did try to seize Xie Daxia by force several times, but I failed every time. In the end I had to stop you from being the bridegroom. I am truly sorry.”

At that time, Zhang Wuji’s heart was filled with extreme remorse. He stared blankly at Zhao Min, looking at her wan and sallow countenance, and her thin cheeks; knowing that in the last several months she had endured suffering beyond any normal person can bear. Overwhelmed by compassion, he reached out to embrace her, and said in a trembling voice, “Min Mei, I ... I have wronged you.” As soon as he embraced her, the fire went out and the dungeon turned into a pitch-black cave.

He continued, “If not because of your intelligence and quick-thinking, the muddle-headed Zhang Wuji would have killed you; wouldn’t that be terrible?”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “Do you have a heart to kill me? You insisted that I was the murderer, yet when you saw me, why didn’t you kill me?”

Zhang Wuji was silent with a blank expression on his face. After a moment, he sighed and said, “Min Mei, my feelings toward you have made me lose control over my own actions. Supposing you did kill my Biaomei, I still do not know what I should do. Now that the truth is being gradually revealed,

even though I feel sorry for Zhiruo, I must say that deep in my heart I am happy.”

Zhao Min could hear the sincerity in his voice; she leaned on his bosom. For a long time nobody said anything. When she looked up, she saw that the crescent moon was hanging low on the eastern horizon, while all around them nothing was astir.

“Wuji Gege,” Zhao Min said in a tender voice, “When we first met at the Green Willow Manor, we fell into the dungeon together. Don’t you think our circumstance today is more or less the same as the one we were then?”

Zhang Wuji snickered. He reached down to grab her left foot and then took her shoe off.

Zhao Min laughed. “A big man like you bullying a weak girl like me,” she said.

“You, a weak girl?” Zhang Wuji replied, “You are so crafty that even ten grown men are not your match.”

“Thank you for your praise, Zhang Da Jiaozhu [Big Cult Leader Zhang]!” Zhao Min laughed, “Little girl does not dare to accept.”

Speaking to this point, both of them broke out in laughter. The exchange between them was exactly what they were saying when they were trapped in the Green Willow Manor’s dungeon together a few years ago. Only, the first time they said that, the words were filled with hostility, while this evening, the words were full of unbounded tender love.

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “Aren’t you afraid I might scratch the bottom of your foot again?”

Zhao Min laughed and said, “No, I am not!”

Zhang Wuji grabbed her foot again, but suddenly they heard faint shouts from the direction of northwest. Leaning their heads to listen, they heard clashing gusts of wind; obviously, there were people fighting in the distance.

“Let’s go take a look!” they said to each other.

Taking Zhao Min’s hand, Zhang Wuji leaped up from the dungeon. Following the direction of the noise, they saw three shadows speeding away to the west. Their feet were exceptionally swift; they were definitely first class martial art masters. Zhang Wuji held out his arm to grab Zhao Min’s waist, and then unleashing his ‘qing gong’ he dashed on a chase. From the distant he noticed that the one in the front was running away, while the other two in the back were pursuing vigorously.

Zhang Wuji picked up his speed trying to close the distance. Under the moonlight he saw that the pursuers were two old men. They were none other than Lu Zhangke and He Biweng. He saw He Biweng wave his left hand, throwing a crane-beak pen forward toward the one in the front. The one in the front swept a sword backward to parry. ‘Bang!’ the crane-beak pen was thrown to the sky.

Because of this slight delay, Lu Zhangke was able to leap nearby that person, and immediately thrust his deer-antler staff forward. That person leaned sideways to evade and counterattacked with a palm. The moon shone onto that person’s face. Her face was pale, her loose long hair fluttered in the wind. Turned out she was Zhou Zhiruo. Zhang Wuji was startled. Hastily he took Zhao Min and hid behind a tree.

He Biweng caught the crane-beak pen as it fell from the sky. He circled toward Zhou Zhiruo's left and launched a converging attack together with Lu Zhangke.

Clenching her teeth, Zhou Zhiruo said, "Why do you, two old ghosts, painstakingly chase me?"

Lu Zhangke replied, "Today we have seen it with our own eyes; Zhang Wuji of the Ming Cult managed to seize the Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword, but the secret martial art manual inside the Saber and the Sword was already gone. It must be in Mrs. Song's possession."

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "Turned out when I was snatching the blades and saving others, these two old chaps were close by. But why couldn't I know their presence?"

He heard Zhou Zhiruo say, "There is indeed a secret martial art manual, but I destroyed it as soon as I finished training."

With a cold laugh Lu Zhangke said, "Did you say 'finished training'? That easy, huh? These Tulong Saber and Yitian Sword were known as 'the most treasured in Wulin world'; how can the secret hidden inside them be that superficial? Although Mrs. Song's martial art skill stands out above the others, I don't think you have reached the pinnacle yet. Otherwise, with one wave of your hand you would have killed us, two brothers. Why would you run away?"

"If I said I have destroyed it then I have destroyed it," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Who has so much spare time to chat with you? I am taking my leave now!"

"Hold it!" Lu Zhangke and He Biweng shouted together. They raised their hands at the same time and attacked Zhou Zhiruo from left and right.

Zhou Zhiruo brandished her sword; it looked like a silver snake dancing wildly under the moonlight. The Xuan Ming Elders parried her attacks with a staff and a pair of pens.

Zhang Wuji had seen Zhou Zhiruo's whip technique. This time he saw that her sword emits a mysterious ray, moving in and out in defense and offense in the midst of two martial art masters' converging attack. Her stances irregularly varied between fake and real; it seemed like her movements were full of tricks.

After fighting for more than several dozens stances, Zhou Zhiruo's sword moves were growing even stranger. At least seven of the ten stances were swift and fierce offensive strikes. Zhang Wuji knew that she wanted to get away from the enemies, but her internal energy would actually deplete faster by fighting like this. If she were a bit careless, she would face a mortal danger. Zhang Wuji was deeply concerned. He stepped out from behind the tree and quietly walked several steps closer.

Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo let out a shout and swiftly stabbed Lu Zhangke three times. Lu Zhangke stepped sideways to evade. Right this moment, He Biweng threw his pair of pens toward her back with a full force. The pens clashing with each other midair and changed course; one flew towards the back of her head, the other flew towards the back of her waist.

Zhou Zhiruo heard the wind of the weapons behind her back and ducked; but she did not expect the pens would collide in midair and change their courses. As she ducked, one pen struck her forehead. Needless to say, she could not avoid the crane-beak pen threatening her waist.

Hastily Zhang Wuji leaped to catch the crane-beak pen, while sweeping his palm horizontally toward He Biweng. In her shock, Zhou Zhiruo was at a loss for a split second, and Lu Zhangke's palm came floating lightly toward her lower abdomen. It was not a small matter, as it was the 'xuan ming shen zhang' [black/mysterious divine palm]. Zhou Zhiruo stopped breathing and fainted at once.

Zhang Wuji was greatly shocked; throwing the crane-beak pen in his hand, he reached backward to catch Zhou Zhiruo, and then leaped more than a 'zhang' backwards.

"Xuan Ming Er Lao!" he roared, "Don't you have any face?"

Lu Zhangke laughed out loud and said, "I was wondering who dares to come and meddle with our business; turns out it is Zhang Da Jiaozhu [great cult leader]. Where is our Junzhu Niangniang [princess]? Where did you take her after kidnapping her?"

Zhao Min stepped out from behind the tree; taking Zhou Zhiruo from Zhang Wuji's arms, she softly laughed and said, "Mr. Lu, you are head over heels longing after me; aren't you afraid Father might be angry with you?"

"Little witch," Lu Zhangke angrily said, "You sowed dissension between us, brothers. We have severed any relationship with your father early on. Why would Ruyang Prince being angry or not concern me?"

Seeing how Lu Zhangku struck a vicious blow to injure Zhou Zhiruo, and then spoke rudely to Zhao Min, Zhang Wuji also recalled how these two men had caused him countless sufferings with their 'xuan ming shen zhang' when he was a child; his old hatred was rekindled. In that moment, his blood was boiling inside his chest. "Min Mei, back off," he said, "Just looking at these two old chaps is making me angry. I must

fight them well today.”

Seeing that Zhang Wuji was barehanded, the two elders laid down their weapons and waited with focused attention.

“On guard!” Zhang Wuji shouted and launched the ‘lan qiao wei’ [seizing the bird’s tail] stance; his palms struck out together. This stance was part of the Taiji Fist technique, the movement was very slow, but the power behind it was from his Jiu Yang Shen Gong.

Although Taiji Fist is common for the later generations, not too many Wulin people were even aware of its existence at the time right after Zhang Sanfeng developed it. Lu Zhangke had never seen this kind of soft, seemingly powerless palm technique; naturally, he did not know what kind of trick was hidden in this palm attack. He was extremely afraid of Zhang Wuji, hence he did not dare to meet his palm and leaned sideways to evade.

Zhang Wuji turned around and with ‘bai she tu yan’ [white snake spitting words] his left palm struck He Biweng, while his right palm shook in and out randomly. He Biweng pointed his left hand index finger to the center of Zhang Wuji’s palm, his right palm swept diagonally down toward Zhang Wuji’s lower abdomen.

Zhang Wuji had fought the Xuan Ming Elders several times; he knew these two men were not his match. Compared to Du E and the other, the three monks whom he encountered in his most recent three battles, these two were a level below in terms of their depth in martial art skills. So if he wanted to defeat these two, he should have more than enough to spare. However, these two’s skill was, after all, not superficial. Therefore, Zhang Wuji did not dare to be reckless. He launched Taiji Fist to its fullest potential; creating circle after

circle, with Jiu Yang Shen Gong struck out from sometimes straight, sometime slanting circles.

The Xuanming Elders gradually felt the 'yang' energy burning fiercely; while the 'yin' and cold energy of their own 'Xuan Ming Shen Zhang' was frequently forced back by the opponent.

After fighting for more than a hundred stances, by chance Zhang Wuji turned around and saw two dark shadows shiver on the ground. The moon had cast its shadow on Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo. His heart skipped a beat. Zhao Min appeared to be shaking uncontrollably while she was fighting to keep Zhou Zhiruo in her arms.

"Not good!" Zhang Wuji was secretly alarmed, "After taking Old Lu's 'xuan ming shen zhang', I am afraid Zhou Zhiruo cannot withstand it. The energy cultivation she trained was 'yin' and cold in nature. Now that she received Xuan Ming Shen Zhang which is the world's coldest and most poisonous energy, cold on top of cold, apparently even Min Mei is not able to endure it." Thereupon he increased his effort to press Lu Zhangke.

Lu Zhangke noticed the change in Zhang Wuji's fist technique; he guessed Zhang Wuji's intentions correctly. Leaping sideways to evade, he called out, "Shidi, surround him; that woman surnamed Zhou is having a cold-poison attack. Don't let him help her."

"Certainly," He Biweng replied. Leaping out of the circle, he picked up his pair of crane-beak pens and with the 'tong tian che di' [going through the sky and penetrating the earth], his pens smashed in from top and bottom.

Zhang Wuji smiled slightly and said, "With or without

weapons, it's all the same!" With a shout his palm struck; the gust of wind generated was so strong that He Biweng was gasping for breath.

Lu Zhangke reached back for his deer-antler staff and swept it toward Zhang Wuji's waist. Zhang Wuji successively changed his fist techniques; now he launched the thirty-six style (or form) 'long zhua qin na shou' [dragon claw 'grab and capture' or grappling technique] he learned from Shaolin Divine Monk Kong Xing, the 'fu qin shi' [zither playing form], 'gu se shi' [drum beating form], 'bu feng shi' [wind grasping form], and 'bao can shi' [destruction carrying form], all with very strong offensive power.

"This Dragon Claw skill is very well trained," Lu Zhangke called out, "Later on it will be very useful to dig a hole in the ground; no mistake about it."

"Shige," He Biweng replied, "Why do we need a hole in the ground?"

Lu Zhangke laughed, "That Miss Zhou is going to die; of course we need a hole to bury her!"

As he spoke, his attention was slightly divided; Zhang Wuji flew in and kicked his left leg. Lu Zhangke staggered. He quickly braced himself and brandished his deer-antler staff, creating a defense so tight that even the wind and the rain would not be able to penetrate.

Zhang Wuji turned his head to see Zhao Min and Zhou Zhiruo; he saw these two women were shaking even more violently. "Min Mei," he asked, "How do you feel?"

"Very bad!" Zhao Min replied, "I feel very cold!"

Zhang Wuji was shocked. He thought for a moment and then understood. When Zhou Zhiruo was hit by the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang, as fierce as the 'yin' and cold energy was, it only attacked her, one person. But now even Zhao Min was feeling cold. He thought it must be because of Zhao Min's good intention that she transmitted her own energy to help Zhou Zhiruo resisting the cold. However, these two women's strengths differed considerably; Zhou Zhiruo's internal energy was also very strange, so strange that instead of helping her, Zhao Min's own energy was depleted.

Zhang Wuji moved his fists furiously, hoping that he would force these two Elders as quickly as possible. But the two Elders kept their distance; they moved to his front and to his back, but did not dare to fight him directly, as their intention was only to prolong the battle.

Zhang Wuji was getting impatient. "Min Mei," he called out, "Lay Miss Zhou on the ground, and do not hold her."

"I ... I can't," Zhao Min replied.

"What?" Zhang Wuji was puzzled.

"She ... her back ... is stuck to my palm," Zhao Min said. Her teeth chattered and her body swayed as if she was going to fall down any minute. Zhang Wuji was even more shocked.

"Zhang Jiaozhu," he heard Lu Zhangke say, "This Miss Zhou is very cruel; she is passing on the cold poison in her body into Junzhu Niangniang that Junzhu Niangniang is almost dead. What do you say we make an agreement?"

"What agreement?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Lu Zhangke said, "We stop fighting. We get the two books

from Miss Zhou, you get to save Junzhu Niangniang.”

“Humph,” Zhang Wuji snorted. He thought, “These Xuan Ming Elders’ martial art is already this good; if they also train Zhiruo’s sinister martial art and then they do much evil, nobody will be able to control them.”

While still thinking, he turned his head to look at Zhao Min again and saw that a shade of greenish blue had already appeared on her jade-like beautiful white cheeks, while her face showed an extreme pain. Zhang Wuji took two steps backward and grabbed her right palm with his left hand. Immediately he transferred his Jiu Yang Shen Qi in steady stream via his palm.

“Attack together from the front!” Lu Zhangke called out. With a staff and a pair of pens, like a flurry of torrential rain the Xuan Ming Elders charged together.

Zhang Wuji was using most of his energy to save Zhao and Zhou, two women; he was unable to move his body, he only had one palm with which to block the enemy’s attack, so in an instant he found himself in a very precarious situation.

‘Rip’, He Biweng’s crane-beak pen cut a long slit on the pants on his left leg; blood immediately dripped out of his leg.

At first, Zhao Min was almost frozen stiff by the cold ‘yin’ chi from Zhou Zhiruo’s body; she felt as if her blood was slowly coagulating. As soon as the Jiu Yang Shen Qi flushed in, gradually her body warmed up. But as Zhang Wuji used his other palm to fight Xuan Ming Elders, he was straining just to make ends meet; consequently, his transfer of Jiu Yang Zhen Qi toward Zhao Min weakened. Zhao Min started to feel cold again.

‘Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!’ Lu Zhangke struck three times with his deer-antler staff, with the tip of the antler aiming toward Zhang Wuji’s eyes. Zhang Wuji raised his palm to parry, deflecting the head of the staff away. He Biweng rolled on the ground. The pen in his left hand launched the ‘cong xin suo yu’ [lit. ‘whatever you like’ or ‘do as you please’] toward Zhang Wuji’s waist.

Zhang Wuji was unable to evade; he had no choice but to use the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi trying to neutralize the pen’s strength. But He Biweng’s pen carried a tremendous force and Zhang Wuji did not have the confidence that he would be able to neutralize the incoming force. Suddenly a loud ‘Dang!’ was heard; his waist shook, but he did not feel any pain. Turned out by chance He Biweng’s pen hit the Tulong Saber hanging on his waist.

Zhang Wuji did not normally fight his opponent using any weapon. Even battling Du E, three monks, he only used Sheng Huo Ling tablets, which were not real weapons. He had never used a sword or a saber, and thus although the Tulong Saber was hanging on his waist, he had not thought of using it to fight the enemy.

This pen strike by He Biweng awakened him; with a loud shout his left leg kicked, forcing He Biweng to withdraw three steps back. He pulled the Saber out right when the deer-antler staff was stabbing again. Zhang Wuji swept his Tulong Saber. With a light swishing noise the antler from the staff fell down. Lu Zhangke was stunned. “Aiyo!” he cried out.

He Biweng’s pair of pens rolled in. Zhang Wuji swept the treasured Saber again. ‘Swish, swish!’ Two crane-beak pens broke into four pieces. Zhang Wuji turned the Saber around, creating a circle of black light. The Xuan Ming Elders did not dare to get close anymore; finally Zhang Wuji was able to

transmit his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi into Zhao Min's body.

With this infusion of full-strength energy, the critical condition of the cold Xuan Ming poison attack on Zhou Zhiruo has finally passed. However, when two different types of energy, yin and yang, intersect inside the body, especially if they were of different strength level, the strong would subdue the weak. After the cold Xuan Ming poison was repelled, Jiu Yang Zhen Qi also offset the internal Jiu Yin energy, which Zhou Zhiruo trained for.

After Zhou Zhiruo acquired the Jiu Yin Zhen Jing [Nine Yin Manual] hidden inside the Yitian Sword, she only trained surreptitiously in the night because she was afraid Xie Xun and Zhang Wuji might find out. But time was running out. Since she was unable to build a strong foundation by training the manual step-by-step, her internal energy cultivation was not too deep. Actually, she only trained the lower and easier-to-train sinister martial art from the Manual. When she was hit by the Xuan Ming Shen Zhang, she was thinking of transmitting the cold 'yin' chi to Zhao Min. When Zhang Wuji interfered, she only felt her entire body was enveloped with a warm and cozy feeling. As she felt the incoming energy grow, she wanted to take her body out of Zhao Min's palm; unexpectedly, as she struggled, she felt as if a whiff of very strong sucking force was holding her so that she was not able to escape. Before, she was sucking Zhao Min's palm with her back; now, her back was stuck on Zhao Min's palm. It was because of the difference in internal energy strengths. Zhou Zhiruo could not help but feel utterly shocked.

As Zhang Wuji was driving the cold poison out, he felt his Jiu Yang Zhen Qi was flowing out, while from Zhao Min's palm continuously came an opposing cold chi. He thought the cold poison of Xuan Ming Shen Zhang had not been completely neutralized, so he kept increasing his power. He did not know

that with each part of Jiu Yang Zhen Qi he sent out, he neutralized one part of the Jiu Yin Zhen Qi Zhou Zhiruo had painstakingly cultivated.

Zhou Zhirou was groaning inwardly, but she must not say anything, since she knew that as soon as she opened her mouth, blood would immediately spurt out like crazy, her chi would be drained and she would die.

Zhao Min felt warm and comfortable; she laughed and said, "Wuji Gege, I am all right now. You can focus your attention to fight the Xuan Ming Elders!"

"Very well!" Zhang Wuji replied, and withdrew his internal energy.

Zhou Zhiruo felt as if she had just received pardon; she quickly pulled away from Zhao Min's palm. She realized that although the cold poison of Xuan Ming Shen Zhang had been completely repelled, her own Jiu Yin internal energy had also suffered a heavy damage. As soon as Zhang Wuji brandished the Tulong Saber to attack the enemy, she stretched out her five fingers to strike the crown of Zhao Min's head.

"Aiyo!" Zhao Min cried out loudly. She felt a severe pain on the top of her head, and thought that she was going to die this time. But she heard 'crack, crack' noise instead, as Zhou Zhiruo was groaning in pain and hurriedly retreated.

Zhang Wuji was shocked; hastily he turned his head and asked, "What is it?"

Zhao Min reached up to touch her forehead and was so scared that she felt her soul had left her and flown to the heavens that she was unable to say anything. Zhang Wuji only knew that she was hit by the 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua'; he

was also scared out of his wits. With his right hand he brandished to Saber to block the two elders, with his left hand he felt the top of her head. He felt the stickiness of blood, but luckily did not find any broken bone. He felt as if a large boulder burdening his heart had just fallen down.

“It’s all right,” he said, consolingly, “Your wound is only skin deep.” While in his heart he mused, “Strange, very strange!”

He did not know that when Zhou Zhiruo attacked, the Jiu Yang Zhen Qi he sent out earlier had not completely left Zhao Min’s body. Moreover, Zhou Zhiruo’s own internal energy had suffered substantial damage. When she attacked, not only she failed to harm the opponent, her own fingers experienced quite a shock.

As Zhang Wuji’s attention was diverted, the Xuan Ming Elders’ attack came by, but this time Zhang Wuji had the world’s sharpest weapon in his hand. Aware of the outstanding character of this weapon, he did not want to take advantage over the opponent, so he handed the precious saber over to Zhao Min instead. Quickly he circulated his breathing one round and focused his attention. Then, retracting his left hand, he thrust out his palm using the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to divert He Biweng’s incoming palm.

This ‘pull and push’ was the most profound technique of the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi; backed by concentrated power of the Jiu Yang Shen Gong. This technique required the most amount of internal energy and could not have the slightest degree of negligence in its execution. If he failed, he would suffer fire deviation. For this reason he did not dare to use it earlier even though when faced with a desperate situation, because his mind was still occupied by trying to repel the cold poison from Zhao and Zhou, two women.

The Xuan Ming Elders were first class martial art masters; if he had used the fifth or the sixth level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, he might not be able to deal with them. As He Biweng's right palm struck by, 'whoosh!' it changed course to strike Lu Zhangke's shoulder.

Lu Zhangke was startled and angrily said, "Shidi, what are you doing?"

Although He Biweng's martial art skill was high, his natural disposition was rather slow; he had to think for quite a while before he could understand anything. This time, things happened so quickly that he himself was baffled. In his shock, he was unable to give Lu Zhangke any explanation. He only knew that Zhang Wuji had played a trick on him. He thought that if he increased his effort in attacking the enemy, he might appease his Shixiong; therefore, sending out his strength to his right leg, he kicked Zhang Wuji, hard. Zhang Wuji's left hand whisked this kick, hooked He Biweng's leg and directed it toward Lu Zhangke's lower abdomen. Lu Zhangke was shocked and angered. "Are you insane?" he roared.

"That's right!" Zhao Min called out, "Mr. He, quickly capture this rebellious, lecherous, greedy and kinky Shixiong of yours, my Father will certainly reward you heavily."

Zhang Wuji secretly laughed. "This 'driving-a-wedge-between-them' idea is really marvelous," he mused. Originally, he wanted to use Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi to divert He Biweng's attack toward Lu Zhangke, and redirect Lu Zhangke's strike toward He Biweng. But as he listened to Zhao Min, he only diverted He Biweng's fists and legs, but used Taiji Fist to deal with Lu Zhangke.

"Mr. He, don't worry," he called out, "With our combined

effort, we will certainly be able to butcher this pervert deer [‘Lu’ of Lu Zhangke means ‘deer’]. The Ruyang Prince has already bestowed to you ... bestowed to you ...” In that instant, he could not think of an appropriate government position for him.

“Mr. He,” Zhao Min called out, “The official letter of your appointment to a high official position is here.” While saying that she took a bundle of paper from her bosom and waved it up, reading, “Hmm, it is ‘Da Yuan Hu Guo Yang Wei Da Jiang Jun’ [the Great Yuan’s Protector of the Country, Great General with Rising Power]. Hurry up, you must try harder!”

Zhang Wuji struck with his right palm, forcing Lu Zhangke to lean to the left; right at this moment, he diverted He Biweng’s left palm from attacking Zhang Wuji’s left to Lu Zhangke’s right, so that Lu Zhangke was attacked from left and right.

Lu Zhangke and He Biweng had been together for several decades; their love to each other was like blood brothers. At first Lu Zhangke did not believe that He Biweng would betray him, but at this moment he had seen it with his own eyes how He Biweng successively attacked him for five stances; all aimed at his vital points, all with full-powered punches or kicks, apparently with the desire to take his life, without the least bit of friendship. His resentment had reached its peak. He roared, “You are after riches and honor, and do not have any regard about ‘yi qi’?”

“I ... I am ...” He Biweng hurriedly said.

“That’s right,” Zhao Min cut him off, “You have no choice because you are going to be the ‘Da Yuan Hu Guo Yang Wei Da Jiang Jun’; therefore, you cannot say anything about offending your Shixiong.”

Zhang Wuji put his entire strength in his right hand and focused his entire attention to lead He Biweng's palm strike toward Lu Zhangke. 'Bang!' Lu Zhangke's shoulder was squarely hit. In his anger Lu Zhangke slapped backward, striking He Biweng's left side of his jaw that several of his teeth fell down.

He Biweng was already old; he only had several teeth left inside his mouth. Naturally, he cherished these remaining few teeth on his left cheek. Unable to restrain his anger, he shouted, "Shige, you really can't tell the good from the bad. I did not hit you on purpose."

Lu Zhangke was also angry. "Who started the fight?" he said. Although his knowledge was vast, he did not know that in this world there existed the seventh level of Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi with such a formidable power. He thought that based on the level of martial art skill He Biweng and he possessed, Zhang Wuji might be able to defeat them or even kill them, but never in his wildest dream would he expect Zhang Wuji to use such technique as 'borrowing strength to fight strength', reversing his partner's palm force to strike him. Therefore, he had never suspected he had fallen into Zhang Wuji's trick.

Venting up his frustration, He Biweng cursed, "Little bastard, you have played trick on me!"

"That's right!" Zhao Min called out, "You don't need to call him 'Shige', just call him 'Little bastard'."

As Zhang Wuji's left palm was pressing Lu Zhangke's palm power, his right hand diverted He Biweng's palm to hit Lu Zhangke's right cheek that his cheek was swollen immediately.

Noticing that Lu Zhangke was fuming; his eyes were red and his palm attacked He Biweng like crazy, Zhang Wuji knew his plan worked. “Mr. He,” he shouted, “I’ll leave this pervert deer into your hands.” His left foot kicked, he flew out of and took Zhao Min to leave. He saw the Xuan Ming Elders were still intensely fighting ‘you punch me, I kick you’ each other.

“Mr. He,” Zhao Min called out, “After you arrest your Shige, you may borrow the secret martial art manual from the Tulong Saber for a month. Quickly set up a great merit; don’t miss this good opportunity.”

Lu Zhangke was getting angrier; he attacked He Biweng without showing any mercy. These two men were of the same school; there was not much difference in their martial skill level [orig. ‘ban jin ba liang’ – half a pound is eight ounces]. It was hard to say when this kind of fierce battle would end.

Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min returned to the Shaolin Temple. Examining the top of Zhao Min’s head, Zhang Wuji saw that the injury was superficial. Suddenly he remembered something. “Min Mei,” he said, “Luckily you bring that bundle of paper; otherwise, Lu Zhangke would not believe.”

With a chuckle, Zhao Min took two bundles of thin papers from her bosom. She waved it in front of Zhang Wuji’s face and said with a laugh, “Can you guess what this is?”

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, “If you tell me to guess, I will never guess correctly in my lifetime. So, why would I want to take the trouble?”

Zhao Min placed the two bundles of paper in his hand. Zhang Wuji took a candle to examine the paper. He found out that it was not paper, but thin sheets of silk, as thin as cicada’s

wings. The sheets were densely populated with tiny characters, with each character as small as the head of a fly. The first bundle began with this line of four characters, 'wu mu yi shu' [Wumu Legacy; lit. 'the book (or letter) left behind by Wumu']. It explained the key in deployment of troops in a war, battle formation, and other fine points of military strategy.

Looking at the second bundle, he saw it started with these four characters, 'Jiu Yin Zhen Jing' [Nine Yin Manual; lit. 'nine yin (negative/feminine/moon) true/real scripture']. Inside were all kinds of mystical and strange martial arts. Flipping toward the end of the bundle, he found 'Jiu Yin Bai Gu Zhua' [Nine Yin White Bone Claw] and 'Cui Xin Zhang' [heart destroying palm] among other things.

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold. "You ... did you take all this from Miss Zhou?" he asked.

Zhao Min laughed. "When she was immobile, why can't I take advantage of her [orig. shun shou qian yang' - lead away a goat in passing']?" she said, "This kind of malicious martial art, I don't want to learn, but I do want to destroy it, since left in her hands it might be used to harm others."

Zhang Wuji browsed through the Jiu Yin Zhen Jing. A few pages later, he realized that the lesson inside was very profound and difficult to decipher in a short while. He also knew that the martial art skill toward the end of the book was not malicious, he said, "The martial art in this manual is actually very deep. If trained properly, I believe ten, twenty years later, the result will not be a small matter. But if it is trained rashly, the result will be superficial. Not only it will harm others, but will inflict self injury as well." After pausing for a moment, he continued, "That Jiejie wearing yellow gown's martial art is obviously of the same school, yet her

movements were upright without any sign of maliciousness, very pure and honorable. It seems that her skill also came from this Nine Yin Manual.”

“She said something like ‘Behind the Mount Zhong Nan, the Tomb of the Living Dead, the Divine Eagle and Gallant Knights vanished from the Jianghu’, what do these four lines mean?” Zhao Min asked.

Zhang Wuji shook his head. “When we see Tai Shifu in the future, we will ask the Senior. Perhaps he could shed some light on this affair.”

They chatted for some time. After making sure that there was no change in troop activity at the bottom of the mountain, they went their separate ways to take a rest.

End of Chapter 39.

Chapter 40 - Didn't Know This Zhang Fellow was The Mr. Zhang

(Translated by Foxs, Edited by Eliza Bennet)



Zhou Zhiruo drew out her sword and pointed it toward Zhang Wuji's chest. "I am going to take your life today," she shouted sternly, "Yin Li's ghost is entangling me anyway. I will eventually get killed. I'd rather die together with you." While saying that, she raised her sword high, ready to stab it down into Zhang Wuji's chest.

Zhang Wuji woke up at daybreak the next morning, and immediately jumped up a tall tree to scout the enemy movement. The enemy camp was bustling with activity; it seemed that they were going to launch an attack.

"Min Mei!" Zhang Wuji called.

"Mmm ... what is it?" Zhao Min replied.

Zhang Wuji hesitated before saying, "Nothing, I just love to call your name." Actually, he wanted to consult Zhao Min on how to repel the Yuan army, knowing full well that she was very resourceful; certainly she had some brilliant ideas. But then he thought, "She was a princess of the imperial court; she betrayed her father and brother to follow me. I think it is just too much to ask her to help me killing her fellow Mongolians." Hence, he stopped himself when the words were just on the tip of his tongue.

Zhao Min noticed the change in his countenance; she knew what he was going to say. She sighed and said, "Wuji Gege, you are able to empathize with my painful predicament; I don't have to say anything."

Zhang Wuji went back to his room with a troubled mind of not knowing what to do. Absentmindedly he took the two bundles of book Zhao Min brought last night. He read several pages of the Nine Yin Manual; he also took a glance on the

Wumu Legacy. Again, after reading several pages, he came across a title 'bing kun niu tou shan' five small characters [troops trapped on the Ox-head Hill]. His heart was moved. He read on and found that in this section, Yue Fei recounted his experience when his outnumbered troops were surrounded by the Jin army; how he escaped from the entrapment, how he deployed special force soldiers, how he launched a converging attack and seized an overwhelming victory, all kinds of plan explained in great details.

Zhang Wuji slapped the table, "The Heaven helps me!" he exclaimed. Slapping the book down, he started to think. The situation of this Shaoshi Peak was entirely different to the Niutou Hill where Yue Fei was trapped in the past; however, if he used the same tactics, there was no reason why he could not win by a surprise move.

His admiration grew as he pondered deeper; he thought that Yue Wumu was a Heaven-sent genius. Faced with such danger, an ordinary man would not think of such strategy. He also thought that troop's deployment was just like martial arts; if there wasn't any expert giving guidance, no matter how smart or how dull, one would not think of such plan.

Dipping his finger into the tea cup, he drew the Temple map on the table. Even though he was aware of the dangerous situation they were in, who can say that they would not be lucky and prevail against the enemy? Their side was few, the enemy was many; they would not be able to score victory by marching out in a neat formation and engage the enemy in an open battle.

Once his mind was set, he went to the Da Xiong Bao Dian [Precious Hall of Great Heroes] and asked Abbot Kong Wen to summon the heroes. In a short moment everybody had arrived.

Zhang Wuji stood up and said, "Presently, Tatar cavalry has gathered at the base of the mountain. Presumably, they will carry out a large scale attack soon. Although we have scored a small victory yesterday and have dampened their spirit, we will be hard pressed to withstand them if the Tatars pay no regards to their own lives and throng up the mountain. Zaixia [lit. under, the humble one] has no talent; it was by the heroes' graciousness that I am elected to hold this temporary position as the commander in chief. Today we are united against a common enemy. I am asking everybody to obey my command."

The multitude of heroes replied in one voice, "Please issue the order, we will follow, no one will dare to disobey."

"Very well!" Zhang Wuji said, "Wu Qishi [Flag Leader Wu], receive my order!"

Rui Jin's Flag Leader, Wu Jingcao stepped forward, bowed and said, "Subordinate is ready to receive the order." While he was thinking in his heart, "Jiaozhu issues his first order to me. It is truly a great honor. No matter what kind of danger I will have to face, I will risk my life in doing it."

Zhang Wuji said, "I assign you to lead your Flag brethren to uphold the martial law. Whichever hero or warrior does not obey my order, the Rui Jin Flag's lances and hatchets will be thrown into his body. This law applies both to seniors and elders of our own Cult, and other Wulin masters and seniors. No exception."

"Accept the order!" with a loud voice Wu Jingcao complied. He took a small white flag from his bosom and held it tight with both hands.

Both in terms of name and martial art skill, Wu Jingcao was

not considered a first class Jianghu warrior, so previously, nobody regarded him too highly. But since the Five-Element Flags demonstrated their invincible might the other day, the multitude of heroes all knew that wherever this small white flag in his hand landed, it will immediately followed by the 500 feathered arrows, 500 javelins, and 500 short hatchets. Even if your skill is as high as the heavens, you will become mincemeat instantly. Therefore, seeing him unfold the white flag, everybody's hearts shivered.

The reason behind this order was because when Zhang Wuji browsed through the Wumu Legacy, the first chapter started with, 'The way to the successful training of troops starts with strict discipline.' He knew these Jianghu warriors were proud people; each one was used to do what one thought right. Although individually they possessed strong martial art skills, fighting together, they were no different than a motley crowd. Without someone giving order to organize and restrain, forcing them to follow orders, there was no way they could resist the Mongolian elite troops. Therefore, his first order was to assign the Rui Jin Flag as the law enforcers.

Pointing his finger to the tall wall in front of the hall, Zhang Wuji said, "Gentlemen, Heroes, whoever excels in 'qing gong' and able to jump over that wall, please show your skill."

Among the crowd of heroes, there were not a few whose face appeared dissatisfied; they thought, "What is this immaterial talk about telling us to show off our jumping ability?" Some senior masters felt that he was showing contempt toward others; they were not pleased at all.

Zhang Songxi stepped out from among the crowd and said, "I can." And then he leaped over the wall and lightly landed on the other side of the wall. Wudang Pai's 'ti yun zong' [cloud stairs] 'qing gong' enjoyed quite a reputation throughout the

world. For someone with Zhang Songxi's ability, leaping this wall was as easy as blowing off dust. However, he was not showing off at all, it was only an honest demonstration because he was following order. Thereupon Yu Lianzhou, Yin Liting, Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Wei Yixiao, Yin Yewang and the other experts followed suit one by one.

Like butterflies flying over flowers the heroes jumped over the wall one after another. Some were showing off their 'qing gong' by performing all kinds of flowery styles midair. After more than four hundred people had leaped, it looked like nobody else would try.

This wall was indeed not low; without a good 'qing gong' it was not easy to leap over it. The multitude of heroes did not train the same martial art skill. Oftentimes they trained themselves well in fists and kicks or weaponry, so their 'qing gong' was ordinary. There were quite a number of Jianghu characters who made their names this way; naturally, they were not willing to show off their shortcomings.

Noticing that among these four hundred people there were about eighty to ninety Shaolin monks, Zhang Wuji thought, "Shaolin Pai truly lives up to its reputation as the number one school in Wulin. Just in 'qing gong' alone, they have many more masters than any other schools." Thereupon he issued his next order, "Yu Er Bo, Zhang Si Bo, Yin Liu Shu, the three Uncles are to lead these heroes excel in 'qing gong' to bluff the enemy. You are to pretend to be escapees from the Temple, make the enemy troops to pursue you, and when you get to the back of the mountain ..." And he detailed the next steps.

Wudang Pai's Yu, Zhang and Yin, three heroes accepted the orders. Zhang Wuji made further assignments: who would set up ambush, who would cut the enemy's rear flank, who

would engage them frontally, who would make flank attack, and so on; all in detailed arrangement.

Yang Xiao and the others noticed how he planned this ingenious tactic and deployed troop's formation to engage the enemy; everything was so clear and orderly as if it was all premeditated. They were all utterly impressed; nobody knew that he had used the military tactic legacy of Yue Wumu. Only, he modified it slightly because of different terrain and different troops.

Finished assigning tasks, Zhang Wuji finally said, "I am asking Kong Wen Fangzhang and Kong Zhi Shen Seng to lead gentlemen and ladies of the Emei Pai to take care of the injured and the dead." Since Zhou Zhiruo was not present, Emei Pai had no one to give leadership. Zhang Wuji was aware Emei Pai had deep resentment against him, so he felt it was inappropriate for him to give them direction. For this reason he asked Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two divine monks; both men of good moral standing and reputation to act as their leaders. Presumably, Emei Pai people would not refuse to be under their leaderships. Sure enough, hearing his order, male and female disciples of Emei Pai silently accepted it; no one open his or her mouth in dissent.

In a loud and clear voice Zhang Wuji said, "Today, the warriors of the Central Plains are united to fight the Tatar invasion. Masters in charge of bells and drums of the Shaolin Pai, please beat the drums and ring the bells." The multitude of heroes responded with an earth-shattering cheers; they unsheathed their weapons in high spirit.

The Lie Huo Flag had transported the firewood amassed in the Temple out from its storehouses and piled it up in front of the Temple. They lighted it up and very soon flames and thick smoke rose up to the sky. The Hou Tu Flag had spread

silt on top of various halls in the Temple, where the Lie Huo Flag then stacked firewood on it. This way, when they lighted the firewood, the fire would not spread to the building below. Yet from a distant, the several hundred buildings in the Temple complex appeared to be burning.

From the base of the mountain, the Yuan army heard the bells and drums first, which sounded like emergency alarm; then they saw the raging fire up the mountain. "Not good!" they said to each other, "The 'man zi' [insulting term for south Chinese/southern barbarian] set the Temple on fire; they must be running away."

Leading more than 150 warriors excelled in 'qing gong', Yu Lianzhou rushed down the mountain from the left side of Shaoshi Peak. Before they even reached the waist of the mountain, Yuan troops had already made loud ruckus and lined up in formation to pursue. The crowd of warriors scattered in all directions, making it hard for the Yuan army to shoot them with arrows.

Zhang Songxi led the second group. Yin Liting led the third group. Each of them carried a large bundle on his back. The bundles contained either wooden planks or bundles of clothes. In the eyes of the Yuan troops, it appeared that they were abandoning the Temple, escaping with difficulty carrying valuables; but the bundles were actually shields against the Mongolians' arrows.

Because of the heavy smoke, the Yuan troops could not see clearly how many people were escaping. Thereupon they divided their forces into two groups; ten thousand soldiers pursued the escapees immediately, while the other ten thousand stayed in their original defensive position.

"Yang Zuo Shi," Zhang Wuji turned toward Yang Xiao, "The

Tatar General is quite knowledgeable of military tactic; he did not order the entire army to pursue. This might give us trouble."

"Yes," Yang Xiao replied, "They do give us reason to be concerned."

They heard bugles sound from the bottom of the mountain. Two thousand strong Yuan cavalry divided itself into two groups and advanced to the top of the mountain from left and right. The mountain roads were rugged, but Mongolian ponies were able to gallop fast, as if they were flying. With their long spears and iron armors, the troops' appearance was very impressive.

When the vanguard of the Yuan cavalry arrived at the pavilion halfway up the mountain, Zhang Wuji gave his signal. From either side of the road, Lie Huo Flag people closing in, crouching among the tall grass. As the two-thousand strong cavalry advanced about another hundred 'zhang's, Xin Ran let out a whistle; his troops immediately sprayed oil toward the enemy, followed by balls of fire, burning both horses and their riders. The horses neighed in fear and pain; most of them rolled down the mountain, creating a great chaos.

The Yuan troops discipline was very strict. As the front group was being defeated, the rear group did not budge. Under the command of their general, three thousand soldiers got down from their horses and marched forward to attack. Again the Lie Huo Flag shot their fire, burning several hundred troops. But with extreme force of will, the remaining troops were still marching on.

Tang Yang, the Flag Leader of the Hong Shui Flag waved a black flag; poisonous water spurted out. Next, the Hou Tu

Flag also shot poisonous sand, throwing the Yuan army into total disorder. Several hundred troops managed to advance toward the mountain peak. These soldiers were completely wiped out by the Rui Jin Flag and Ju Mu Flag.

From the bottom of the mountain suddenly came the sound of beating drums. Five thousand troops marched forward with large shields lined up in front of their bodies, creating a slowly advancing wall. This way, the fire, poisonous water and poisonous sand lost their effectiveness. Even gigantic logs rolled down by the Ju Mu Flag only managed to create a few gaps, which were quickly closed again.

Seeing this desperate situation, Abbot Kong Wen said, "Zhang Jiaozhu, please have everybody retreat quickly. We must preserve the vitality of the Wulin world of the Central Plains. Although we are defeated today, we will stage a comeback in the future."

In the midst of this anxiety, suddenly they heard rousing sound of metal drums from the foot of the mountain, followed by a rocket shot up to the sky. Battle cries rose up from all directions.

Yang Xiao was delighted. "Jiaozhu," he said, "Our reinforcement arrives!"

From the top of the mountain looking down, they could not see the situation at the foot of the mountain; but they saw the dust rose and they heard the shouts of the people and the neigh of the horses. Obviously, the incoming troops were numerous.

Zhang Wuji loudly called out, "The reinforcement has arrived; everybody, charge!" From the top of the mountain, the multitude of heroes charged downward with weapons in

their hands.

Zhang Wuji cried out again, “Gentlemen Heroes, kill officers first before killing the soldiers.”

The crowd of heroes echoed his cry, “Kill officers first before killing the soldiers!”

The Mongolian armed force was organized into teams. Every ten soldiers formed a ten-man unit. Every ten-man units formed a hundred-man unit. Likewise, they formed thousand-man unit and subsequently ten-thousand-man unit, following a layered chain of command. When they go to battle, it was just like the mind giving order to the arm, the arm giving order to the hand, the hand giving order to the fingers. If the two forces were battling against each other arrayed in formation, Zhang Wuji’s order to kill the officers first would be difficult to follow; but at this moment the Yuan army was scattered on the hillside. Although the Yuan army could be considered elite troops, the martial art skill of their officers, after all, was inferior to the heroes and warriors of the Central Plains. Soon several ‘qian fu zhang’ [leader of a thousand-man unit] and ‘bai fu zhang’ [leader of a hundred-man unit] were killed. The Mongolian troops were thrown into confusion.

Charging down the mountain, Zhang Wuji and the others saw fluttering flags at the base of the mountain. The one on the south carried a ‘Xu’ character, while the one on the north had a ‘Chang’ character. So they know that Xu Da and Chang Yuchun had arrived.

Xu and Chang, two men were originally stationed around the Huai Si River. This time they were just moving their troops to Henan when Budai Heshang [cloth sack monk] Shuo Bude arrived with the call for help. As soon as they learned about

their Cult Leader was besieged by the enemy at the Shaoshi Peak, they deployed their troops night and day. By that time, around the Henan and Hubei, the Ming Cult army had fought the Yuan army for several years; with both sides occupying overlapping regions. Since they were not too far away and left as soon as they received the news, they managed to arrive in less than two days.

Xu Da and Chang Yuchun had been in command over the Ming Cult army for a long time; moreover, their troops were large, so they were able to drive the Yuan army to the west in no time.

The other force of ten-thousand Yuan soldiers was pursuing the heroes who pretended to escape from the Temple toward the western valley. Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi and Yin Liting led several hundred warriors with outstanding 'qing gong' fighting and retreating into the valley. The Yuan army's 'wan fu zhang' [leader of ten-thousand-man unit] saw that the three sides of the valley were all steep cliffs; the valley looked dangerous. However, seeing the number of the enemy was small, he thought that even if the enemy prepared an ambush there, they should be able to deal with it. Thereupon he signaled with his hand to order his troops to pursue closely into the valley.

As Yu Lianzhou and the others arrived at the bottom of the cliff, they climbed on several dozens long ropes, which were prepared in advance. As the 'wan fu zhang' realized they had fallen into the enemy's trap, he quickly ordered his men to withdraw. To his shock, however, at the mouth of the valley they were driven back by volleys of fire, poisonous sand, arrows, and poisonous water; while the Ju Mu Flag dropped logs in abundance to seal up the entrance of the valley.

Meanwhile, the second defeated army was also driven to the

valley. As they saw there was no way out, they ran all over the mountain and valley, scattered to all direction. Zhang Wuji and Xu Da arrived in close succession. "What a pity!" they cried; if they had planned it properly in advance, the second ten thousand strong troops would also be driven into the valley and destroyed completely.

Zhang Wuji did not anticipate the Yuan army would divide themselves into two groups, he also did not expect the reinforcement would arrive amazingly quickly. After all, commanding troops in the battlefield was not the same as being a Cult Leader. Although the Wumu Legacy contained marvelous military strategy, in the end, it was not easy to reconcile between the theory and practice. If Xu Da and Chang Yuchun did not arrive on time, the Shaolin Temple would inadvertently meet its doom. The first ten-thousand strong Yuan army, which was trapped inside the valley, would also be eventually rescued by their allies.

Xu Da immediately ordered his troops to move dirt and rocks to seal the mouth of the valley. He also sent his archers to climb up the cliff. Occupying the higher position their arrows shot down like rain into the Yuan army below. The Yuan troops were surrounded by the valley walls, they were powerless to retaliate and could only hide underneath the mountain rocks.

Not too long afterwards, Chang Yuchun's troops arrived. He was extremely delighted to see Zhang Wuji after a long period of separation.

"Remove the dirt and the rocks," Chang Yuchun yelled, "We are going in to wipe out the Tatars."

Xu Da laughed and said, "There are no food and no water in the valley. Give them seven, eight days; the Tatars will die of

thirst and starvation. Why must we, brothers, painstakingly fight with them?"

Chang Yuchun also laughed, "I always prefer to kill them with my own hands."

Although Chang Yuchun was older than Xu Da, he usually submitted to Xu Da's intelligence; also, he noticed that Zhang Wuji did not contradict Xu Da, so he did not press on.

Xu and Chang, two men were battlefield-trained; their orders were appropriate and to the point. Zhang Wuji realized his battle experience was inferior to these two, therefore, he asked Xu and Chang to be in charge in pursuing and killing the runaway Yuan soldiers.

That evening, joyous noise shook the Shaoshi Peak, as the Ming Cult rebel army [orig. 'yi jun' - righteous army, or militia] and the heroes from all schools and sects celebrate their victory. After several days in a row always eating vegetarian dishes in the Shaolin Temple, they grew tired of the food. Tonight, wine and meat were overflowing; everybody could eat to their heart's content.

During the banquet, Zhang Wuji asked Chang Yuchun about his health; he wanted to know if Chang Yuchun diligently took the medicine he prescribed to nurse Chang Yuchun's health. Chang Yuchun laughed aloud and said, "Jiaozhu, don't worry. Lao Chang [the Ol' Chang] is as healthy as an ox, on one meal I can eat three catties of meat and six big bowls of rice. During the battle, lack of sleep for three days and three nights will not harm me a bit." His implication was that he did not need any medication. However, Zhang Wuji remembered what Hu Qingniu had told him; therefore, he earnestly implored him to take the medicine for his health. Chang Yuchun only gave him a non-committal answer,

because in his heart he greatly disapproved Zhang Wuji's advice.

Xu Da poured a cup full of wine to toast Zhang Wuji. "Congratulations, Jiaozhu," he said, "Please accept this toast!" Zhang Wuji received the cup and drank the wine.

Xu Da said, "Subordinate has always admired Jiaozhu's courage and wisdom in dealing with others, admired your peerless martial art skill. To my surprise, your military tactic is also marvelous. This is the great fortune of our Cult to the benefit of common people everywhere."

Zhang Wuji laughed out loud and said, "Xu Dage, no need to flatter me. Our great victory today was first, due to the amazingly speedy arrival of Xu Dage and Chang Dage; and second, due to the Yue Wumu's Legacy. Xiao Di [little brother] truly cannot take even a half part of credit."

"What is the Yue Wumu's Legacy?" Xu Da wondered, "I beg for Jiaozhu's explanation."

Zhang Wuji took a bundle of yellowish thin paper from his bosom. It was the Wumu Legacy, which was concealed inside the Tulong Saber. He turned the page to the 'Troops Trapped on the Ox-head Mountain' section and handed it over to Xu Da.

Xu Da received the book with both hands and read attentively for a moment. He could not help but be stunned and impressed at the same time. "Wumu's ability in managing the troops was truly divine, truly unachievable by the later generation," he sighed, "If Yue Wumu was still alive today, leading the warriors of the Central Plains, we would not worry about driving the Tatars back to the northern desert."

While saying that, he respectfully returned the book. But Zhang Wuji did not want to receive it. He said, “‘The most revered in the Wulin world, treasured Saber slaughtering the dragon; ruling everything under the heavens, no one dares to disobey.’ The real meaning of these sixteen characters, only today did I finally understand. The so-called ‘the most revered in the Wulin world’ is not the Saber itself, but it is the Legacy concealed inside the Saber. When this military strategy is used to face the enemy, fighting a battle will result in victory, attacking will result in subduing the enemy. Ultimately, ‘ruling everything under the heavens, no one dared to disobey.’ Otherwise, how can one rule everything under the heavens with just a single treasured saber? Xu Dage, I am passing this military strategy book to you. I hope you will use the notes Yue Wumu left behind to take our country [orig. ‘he shan’ – river and mountain] back and set up a new emperor [orig. ‘huang long – yellow dragon].”

Xu Da was taken aback. “What kind of virtue or ability does Subordinate have?” he hastily said, “How can I be worthy to accept such a generous gift from Jiaozhu?”

“Xu Dage,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Please do not decline. I am giving this book on military strategy to you on behalf of the common people.”

Xu Da held the book with trembling hands. Zhang Wuji continued, “There were two more lines in the saying circulating within the Wulin world: ‘Yitian [relying on Heaven] does not appear, who can match its sharpness?’ Presently, the Yitian Sword is broken into two; but someday someone will mend it. Hidden inside the Sword was a very fierce secret martial art manual. I also know the meaning of these last two lines. The Military Manual is to be used to drive the Tatars away. Somebody will seize the power. If it happens that the

new ruler is abusing his newfound power, that he is simply replacing one tyrant with another, so that the common people are oppressed with great suffering, then there will come a day when a hero, wielding the Yitian Sword, will sever the head of that tyrant. Although by commanding millions of warriors the tyrant is able to overturn the world, he might not necessarily be able to withstand one strike of the Yitian Sword. Xu Dage, I want you to remember what I said today.”

Xu Da’s back was streaming with cold sweats; he did not dare to decline anymore. “Subordinate will cautiously observe Jiaozhu’s instructions today,” he said. With full respect he placed the Wumu Legacy on the table, knelt down and kowtowed to it four times before respectfully thanking Zhang Wuji again for bestowing the book to him.

Hereafter, Xu Da did indeed command his troops with a divine skill; consecutively defeated the Yuan army, until finally he held the commander-in-chief position in the expedition to the north, driving away the Mongolians beyond the Great Wall. His prestige shook the northern desert, establishing meritorious achievement of his generation. Henceforth the Ming Cult was admired by the heroes of the Central Plains. Everywhere Zhang Wuji issued his order, nobody dared to disobey. For the last several hundred years the Ming Cult was held in contempt by the common people; they were considered demonic and heretical. After this heaven-turning-and-earth-shaking huge change, the Ming Cult became the leader of the heroes and warriors of the Central Plains, became the driving force behind the resurgence’s great mission. Later on, Zhu Yuanzhang turned double-minded and repeatedly schemed to ascend the throne. Even so, the Ming Cult people were the ones helping him to take back the country [here, the word is ‘jiang shan’ – river and mountain]; therefore, he could not help but choose

the character 'Ming' [bright] as his dynasty name. From the first year of Ming Dynasty's Emperor Hongwu [reign name of Zhu Yuanzhang] to the seventeenth year of Emperor Chongzhen [the last emperor of Ming Dynasty], 277 years of ruling the land under the heavens [i.e.China], it was because of the Ming Cult.

[Translator's note: Jin Yong original text says the first year of Hongwu was 'wu shen', the forty-fifth year of the 60-year cycle. History of China (J.A.G. Roberts) says Zhu Yuanzhang declared his new dynasty in January of the year 1368. The last year of Chongzhen was 'jia shen' - the twenty-first year of the 60-year cycle, or 1644. Roberts did say that Chongzhen committed suicide in 1644; however, $1368 + 277 = 1645$. The same book also says that Chongzhen reigned from 1628 to 1645 (seventeen years). One possible explanation I can think of is that according to Chinese calendar, January of 1368 was still considered the previous year.]

That evening, the multitude of heroes ate and drank until dawn; it was not until they were drunk did they go to their rooms to rest. Toward the afternoon, one by one they took their leave from Kong Wen and Kong Zhi. Zhang Wuji saw that the Emei disciples were like sheep without a shepherd, his heart was sorrowful. He also saw Song Qingshu was still lying on the stretcher; it was unclear whether he was still alive or had already died. Thereupon he went near them and said to Jing Hui, "Let me examine Song Dage's injury."

Jing Hui coldly said, "The cat weeps for the dead mouse. You don't need to shed crocodile tears."

Zhou Dian happened to be nearby; he could not restrain himself from cursing, "For the sake of old friendship with your Zhang Men [Sect Leader], our Jiaozhu is willing to treat this

surname Song's injury. Actually, everybody has the right to kill this kind of renegade and betrayer-of-father disciple. What is a wicked nun like you prattling about?"

Jing Hui was about to retort; but then she saw Zhou Dian's rogue looking ugly countenance, she was afraid he might be persistently unreasonable. If a fight broke, she would unavoidably be at a disadvantage; therefore, suppressing her anger she laughed coldly and said, "From generation to generation, our Emei Pai's Zhang Men has always be 'clear-as-ice-and-clean-as-jade' virgin. If Zhou Zhang Men did not maintain her moral integrity and chastity, how can she be our school's Zhang Men? Humph, if this kind of traitor Song Qingshu stayed with our Sect, he might smear Zhou Zhang Men's reputation. Li Shizhi [martial nephew], Long Shizhi, please return this fellow to Wudang Pai!"

The two Emei disciples carrying Song Qingshu complied. Lifting up the stretcher, they brought it to Yu Lianzhou and set it down in front of him before promptly returning to their group. Everybody was stunned.

"Wh ... what?" Yu Lianzhou asked, "He is not your Zhang Men's husband?"

"Humph," Jing Hui hatefully said, "How could our Zhang Men even look at a man like that? She was unbearably angry to that kid Zhang Wuji for breaking faith and running away from their wedding; humiliating our Sect in front of the heroes from all over the world. It was then that she deceived this kid to come and pretend to be her husband. Who would have thought ... humph, humph, if we had only known, why should our Zhang Men endure this notoriety? Presently, she ... she ..."

Zhang Wuji had been listening from the side with a dull

expression on his face; he could not restrain himself from stepping forward and asking, “You said Mrs. Song ... she ... she is not really Mrs. Song?”

Jing Hui turned her head and hatefully said, “I am not talking to you.”

Right this moment, Song Qingshu, who was still lying on the stretcher, stirred and moaned, “Is ... is Zhang Wuji killed?”

“On your dream!” Jing Hui sneered, “Death is at your door, you are still thinking about pretty face.”

Seeing Jing Hui was emotional and her speech was incoherent, in low voice Yin Liting asked another female disciple of Emei, Bei Jinyi, “Bei Shimei [martial (younger) sister), what had actually happened?”

Bei Jinyi was a good friend of Ji Xiaofu. As Yin Liting asked her, she hesitated for a long time before saying, “Jing Hui Shijie [martial (older) sister), Yin Liu Xia is not an outsider. Let Xiao Mei [little sister – referring to self] explain to him, alright?”

“What outsider or not outsider?” Jing Hui replied, “He is not an outsider, we must explain it to him. He is an outsider, we must explain it to him even more. Our Zhou Zhang Men is clean and pure; she has nothing to do with this crafty villain surnamed Song. All of you have seen the ‘shou gong sha’ [lit. gecko/house lizard sand, ‘chastity mark’?] on Zhang Men’s arm with your own eyes. We must make this fact known to the Wulin people all over the world, so that our Emei Pai’s hundred years of uprightness will not be blemished ...”

Yin Liting thought, “This Jing Hui Shitai’s mind is jumbled; her speech is somewhat confusing.” Thereupon he said to Bei

Jinyi, "Bei Shimei, since that is the case, could you elaborate more? How did my Song Shizhi get involved with your precious Pai? What relationship did he have with your precious Pai's Zhang Men? Someday Xiao Xiong [lit. little/humble elder brother] must report to our Shifu. This matter concerns both of our Sects; I think it will be better not to damage the friendship between the two parties."

Bei Jinyi sighed and said, "Speaking about both behavior and martial art skill, this Song Shao Xia [young hero] could actually be considered a rare talent within the Wulin world. Only because of one silly youthful lust, he has fallen into such sin. Apparently our Zhang Men promised him that as soon as Zhang Wuji is killed to wash away the humiliation she experienced in her wedding day, she would marry him. Thereupon he agreed to join our Sect and asked our Zhang Men for advice in the marvelous martial art. During the Heroes Assembly the day before yesterday, Zhang Men suddenly declared herself as 'Mrs. Song'; by saying that she was the wife of this Song Shao Xia. At that time, all our Sect's disciples were utterly astonished. That same day our Zhang Men's prestige shook the crowd of heroes by subduing all Sects ..."

Zhou Dian interrupted, "It was because our Jiaozhu was yielding to her intentionally; what a loud horn you are blowing!"

Bei Jinyi ignored him, she continued, "Although our Sect's disciples were very happy, when evening came, we still asked her where the 'Mrs. Song', three characters [Song Fu Ren] came from. Zhang Men exposed her right arm and sternly said, 'Everybody, come and see!' All of us saw with our own eyes the scarlet 'shou gong sha' on her arm, so we know that she has kept her chastity. Zhang Men said, 'It was expedient that I call myself Mrs Song for the time being. I

need to make that kid Zhang Wuji angry, to disturb his mind so that I may seize victory over him. This kid's martial art is simply too remarkable, I definitely cannot defeat him. For the sake of our Sect's reputation, why should I care about my own?' She said that with determination and in loud voice as if she wanted everybody to hear it clearly. She also said, 'The disciples of this Sect, male or female, unless they are 'chu jia xiu dao' [those who leave home (to become Buddhist monks or nuns), and those who practice Daoism], are never forbidden from getting married. However, since our founder Guo Zu Shi's [lit. ancestor master], all highest and deepest martial art skills are imparted only to virgins who keep themselves pure. Each time a female disciple bows down to enter our school, Shifu will always plant 'shou gong sha' on our arms. Every year, on Guo Zu Shi birthday, Xian Shi [departed master] would perform inspection. That year Ji Shijie ... it was ..." Speaking to this point, she stammered and then stopped altogether.

Yin Liting and the others understood clearly, however, that Bei Jinyi was going to say that when Ji Xiaofu was violated by Yang Xiao, her 'shou gong sha' disappeared and that was how her disgrace was discovered by Mijue Shitai. Yin Liting and Yang Buhui were happily married, yet as he remembered Ji Xiaofu this time, he could not help from feeling deep sorrow in his heart. Involuntarily he cast a sidelong glance toward Yang Xiao and saw that Yang Xiao's eyes were brimming with tears as he turned his head away.

"Yin Liu Xia," Bei Jinyi said, "Our Zhang Men deliberately wanted to anger the Ming Cult's Zhang Wuji by taking advantage of this Song Shao Xia's endless infatuation toward our Zhang Men, in the end, it gave birth to many problems. I wish for Song Shao Xia's recovery, also for Yin Liu Xia to talk to Zhang Zhenren and Song Da Xia, so as to avoid further hostility between your precious Sect and ours."

Yin Liting nodded. "So that's how it is. My Shizhi was disobedient and he defied his superior, his death will not be regretted. He truly did bring shame to our humble Sect. I only wish he would die cleanly sooner." Yin Liting was softhearted by nature, but recalling Song Qingshu's grave offense by murdering Mo Shenggu, he was really repulsed by him.

While they were still talking, suddenly from a distant came a shrill scream; it sounded like Zhou Zhiruo's voice, full of shock and fear, as if she had met some extremely dangerous misfortune. Everybody was horrified; especially since it was in the middle of the day, the sun was shining brightly, with people everywhere all around them. Yet this scream was so hair rising, as if the person screaming suddenly saw an evil spirit appear before her very eyes. Almost like on cue, everybody turned their heads to the direction of the noise.

Zhang Wuji, Jing Hui, Bei Jinyi and the others rushed forward. Zhang Wuji was afraid Zhou Zhiruo might meet a powerful enemy, so he ran full speed ahead. After several jumps, he had already entered the forest. He saw a dark green shadow running wildly towards him, it was none other than Zhou Zhiruo.

Quickly Zhang Wuji met her and asked, "Zhiruo, what is it?"

Zhou Zhiruo cried out with a face full of terror, "Ghost, ghost! There's a ghost chasing me!" She threw herself to Zhang Wuji's chest, while trembling uncontrollably.

Seeing her so frightened as if her soul was leaving her, Zhang Wuji patted her shoulder gently. "Don't be afraid, don't be afraid; there is no ghost," he said consolingly, "What did you see?" He noticed that her clothes were tattered from

running through the thick briar and her face was full of bloodstains. Half of the sleeve on her left arm was torn, exposing a snow-white, lotus-root colored arm. Sure enough, there was a red dot, as red as a coral or a red jade, the 'shou gong sha'.

Zhang Wuji was proficient in medicine. He knew that once this 'shou gong sha' was implanted under the skin, it would stay forever, unless the woman marries or loses her chastity. When listening to Jing Hui and Bei Jinyi previously, he was still half-believing and half-doubting. Now as he saw it with his own eyes, not even half a suspicion remained in his heart.

In that moment, myriads of thoughts filled his mind. "So her marriage with Song Qingshu was a fake. Why did she deceive me? Why did she deliberately want to anger me? Was it truly because of that 'Number One Martial Artist of the Present Age' title? Was it because she wanted to test my heart, whether I still have feelings toward her?" Just as quick, he remembered, "Zhang Wuji, oh, Zhang Wuji, Miss Zhou is the enemy who murdered your Biaomei. Whether she is a virgin or already married to someone else, what do you have to do with it?" Yet seeing how terrified Zhou Zhiruo was, he did not have a heart to push her away.

Zhou Zhiruo buried her face in Zhang Wuji's chest. She was aware of Zhang Wuji's broad and muscular body and smelled his masculine breath; gradually her fear subsided. "Wuji Gege," she said, "Is it you?"

"It is I," Zhang Wuji replied, "What did you see? Why were you terrified like that?"

Zhou Zhiruo was suddenly enveloped by fear again. 'Wah!' she broke into crying again; she sobbed uncontrollably on Zhang Wuji's shoulder with hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

By this time, Yang Xiao, Wei Yixiao, Jing Hui, Yin Liting and the others arrived one after another. Seeing this scene, they signaled each other with their eyes and withdrew quietly. Ming Cult, Wudang Pai and Emei Pai people were all still hoping in their hearts that Zhou Zhiruo will be reconciled with Zhang Wuji and they will become husband and wife. Admittedly, it was difficult for all these people to forget Zhao Min's offense in the past. In addition, Zhao Min was a Mongolian woman; if Zhang Wuji took her as his wife, they were afraid it would hinder their great mission.

After crying for a while, Zhou Zhiruo suddenly said, "Wuji Gege, is there somebody chasing me?"

"No," Zhang Wuji replied, "Who is chasing you? Is it the Xuanming Elders?"

"No! Not them!" Zhou Zhiruo said, "Have you looked clearly? Are you sure nobody ... no, it was not a human ... Are you sure nothing, whatever it is, pursuing me?"

Zhang Wuji smiled and said, "The sun is shining brightly, I can see everything clearly." His voice turned gentle; "Zhiruo," he said, "You have spent too much energy these past few days; you must be really tired. Perhaps you hallucinated and thought you saw something."

"Can't be! Can't possibly be!" Zhou Zhiruo insisted, "I saw it three times; three consecutive times." Her voice trembled; obviously she was terrified.

"What is it that you saw three consecutive times?" Zhang Wuji asked.

With one hand on his shoulder, Zhou Zhiruo tried to stand up

on her trembling feet. And then, mustering all her courage and strength she turned around to look back. Just an instant she quickly turned her eyes toward Zhang Wuji again and seeing his gentle and soft expression, full of concern, her heart ached; suddenly she felt weary and dropped down on the ground.

“Wuji Gege,” she said, “I ... I have deceived you. I was the one who took Yitian Sword and Tulong Saber, I was the one who killed ... killed Yin ... Miss Yin ... I was the one who sealed Xie Da Xia’s acupoint. I ... I did not marry Song Qingshu. In my heart I always have only ... only you alone.” Zhang Wuji sighed. “Actually, I have already known everything. But ... but why did you do it?”

Crying, Zhou Zhiruo said, “You don’t know what my Shifu told me on the Wan An Temple Pagoda. She told me the secret of the Yitian Sword and the Tulong Saber. She wanted me to obtain the treasured Sword and Saber at all costs, to brighten the name of Emei Pai. She made me swear a heavy oath to pretend that I like you, but she would not allow me to fall in love with you ...”

Zhang Wuji gently stroked her arm, remembering how he had witnessed Miejue Shitai struck Ji Xiaofu dead with her palm, how in the great desert Miejue Shitai swore to destroy the Ming Cult, how he saw her massacre the Cult disciples under the Rui Jin Flag with Yitian Sword in her hand. Afterwards, soaring down from the Wan An Temple Pagoda, she preferred death to being help by him. It all showed how deep her hatred toward the Ming Cult was. Since Zhou Zhiruo was appointed her successor and had received her last words, all kinds of malicious and cruel acts she did must be because of her Shifu’s instructions.

By his nature, Zhang Wuji had always been very easy to

forgive other people's offense. He had never held any grudge against anybody. Moreover, he remembered her kindness when they were little on the boat floating along the Hanshui River, how she helped him eat and took a good care of him. Also, during the fierce battle on the Brightness Peak, when he was fighting He Taichong, husband and wife, and the two tall and short elders of Huashan Pai, perhaps he would have been dead right then and there if she did not give him directions from the side. On top of that, he remembered that although she was malicious, cruel and crafty, all her actions were caused by her deep feelings toward him.

This moment, as her delicate and frail body was leaning against his bosom, Zhang Wuji could not help from having a tender feeling toward her. "Zhiruo," he called in a soft voice, "What did you actually see, which made you that scared?"

Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo jumped up and said, "I am not going to say. It must be one of those restless spirit came back to entangle me. I have done too much evil. I deserve this revenge. I have explained to you everything, I ... I won't live long ..." Covering her face, she scurried down the mountain.

Zhang Wuji felt as if his mind was enveloped in fog. "What restless ghost entangled her? Was it the Beggar Clan's people seeking revenge on her and dressed up as a ghost to frighten her?" Slowly he turned around and walked back to the Temple.

He saw Zhou Zhiruo go toward the Emei Pai crowd. Bei Jinyi took a coat and wrapped it around her shoulder. Zhou Zhiruo said something in low voice and the Emei Pai disciples bowed together.

By this time, most of the multitude of heroes had left the mountain, Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, two monks were busy

sending them off. Yang Xiao, Fan Yao and the others congregated around Zhang Wuji. "We'd better take our leave too," Zhang Wuji said.

He saw Zhou Zhiruo walk toward Kong Wen and speak in a low voice. Kong Wen's countenance changed; he looked startled. Then Kong Wen shook his head. Whatever it was, it looked like Kong Wen had just refused her request. Zhou Zhiruo talked some more, and then suddenly she knelt down in front of him. Claspng her palms together, she mumbled something that looked like she was praying. Kong Wen looked somber, his mouth muttered praises to Buddha.

"Jiaozhu," Zhou Dian said, "You must quickly stop her, don't let her do it."

"Don't let her do what?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Zhou Dian replied, "Miss Zhou is going to leave home [orig. chu jia] to become a monk. She ... she is going to enter the gate of emptiness. It will be bad for you."

Yang Xiao snickered and said, "Even if Miss Zhou is going to leave home, she will become a nun, not a monk. Why would she take a Shaolin Pai monk to be her master?"

Zhou Dian slapped his forehead loudly. "Right, right!" he said, "I was muddleheaded. But what is Miss Zhou asking Kong Wen Dashi to do? One is Shaolin Pai Zhang Men, the other is Emei Pai Zhang Men, they are equal, nobody needs to kneel down in front of the other."

They saw Zhou Zhiruo standing up; her face showed she was somewhat comforted. Zhang Wuji sighed and said, "We don't need to meddle into someone else's business." Turning his head, he said, "Min Mei, let us leave." Who would have thought that as he turned his head, he did not see Zhao Min.

For the last several days, Zhao Min had never left his side; she always shadowed Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji was slightly stunned. "Where is Miss Zhao?" he asked, while in his heart he silently cursed, "Bad! I am sure Min Mei saw me when Zhiruo leaned against my chest. Could it be that she thinks I cannot forget my old flame and considers me as hopeless?" Hastily he ordered everybody to look for her.

Xin Ran, the Flag Leader of Lie Huo Flag said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: subordinate saw Miss Zhao walking down the mountain!"

Zhang Wuji was grieved. "Min Mei has abandoned everything to follow me," he mused, "She has gone through I don't know how many adversities. How can I give up on her?" Thereupon, he turned to Yang Xiao and said, "Yang Xiong, I am asking you to take care of our business here. I am going to leave first."

He bid his farewell to Kong Wen and Kong Zhi, also to Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi, Yin Liting and the others. Last of all, he said to Zhou Zhiruo, "Zhiruo, take a good care of yourself. We'll meet again some day soon." Zhou Zhiruo hung her head low; she did not reply, only nodded slightly. Beads of silver tears fell down from her face to the dusty ground.

Unleashing his 'qing gong', Zhang Wuji dashed down the mountain. For the next several 'li's, the mountain path was full with the heroes returning home from Shaolin Temple. He was not willing to greet the heroes one by one, so he simply flew past them from the side, yet along the way he did not see any trace of Zhao Min at all. In one breath he had pursued for more than thirty 'li's. The sky was turning dark, the people walking along the road was thinning. Suddenly he remembered, "Min Mei is best in planning and scheming. If

she has a mind to avoid me, then most likely she will avoid the main road. Otherwise, with my speed, I should have caught up with her long ago. Could it be that she is still hiding around the Shaoshi Peak, waiting for me to leave before she comes out and walk away?"

Burning with anxiety and he forgetting his own hunger and thirst, he ran back around the hills and valleys. Oftentimes he leaped up a tall tree, a hill peak or steep slope, looking to all directions. The empty mountain was quiet, the only noise came from the crows flying home for the night. Circling around toward the back of the Shaoshi Peak, he still did not see Zhao Min. "Whatever happens," he mused, "I will always be faithful to you. Even if I have to go to the end of the earth or the corner of the ocean, I will find you."

Once he made this decision, his mind calmed down. Looking toward the northeast he saw two large locust trees grew side by side, towering high from a crevasse on the side of the mountain. Leaping up the tree, he found a large branch extended horizontally and lied down on this branch. After toiling for the whole day and facing many unforeseen incidents, he fell asleep not too long after he lied down.

Toward the middle of the night, in his sleep he suddenly heard gentle footsteps from several dozens 'zhang's away, which made him wake up with a start. By this time, the round bright moon had already slanting toward the western sky. Under the moonlight, he saw on the hillside, there was a shadow floating speedily to the south. That person's figure was slender with a slim waist; obviously, the shadow belonged to a woman.

In his great delight, he nearly called 'Min Mei'; but he immediately realized something was not right. The woman's figure was taller than Zhao Min, her 'qing gong' was entirely

different from Zhao Min's, although her speed was inferior to Zhou Zhiruo's, her steps were lighter and livelier. His curiosity was piqued. "This woman wanders alone in the deep of the night, I wonder what is it she is doing?" he mused.

At first he thought that he did not have any business to meddle with whatever this woman was doing, but then he thought, "Who knows? Perhaps I will find Min Mei's whereabouts from this woman. If she has nothing to do with Min Mei, then I will slip out quietly, no harm done. I must not let any clue off easily." Thereupon he got up from the tree branch and quietly slipped down.

Afraid that the woman might detect his presence, he did not dare to get too close. Besides, by stalking a young girl - a total stranger for that matter - in the middle of the night, it might be difficult for him to avoid frivolous suspicions from others.

He noticed that the woman was wearing black clothes, and she indeed was heading toward the Shaolin Temple. "Although she has nothing to do with Min Mei, she must be doing some clandestine activity related to the Wulin world," he thought, "If her intention is not beneficial to Shaolin, I must interfere." He halted his steps to listen, and did not hear any other people nearby, so he knew that this woman did not have anybody supporting her.

Walking for about the time needed to eat a bowl of rice, that woman had never turned her head around. Zhang Wuji had a vague feeling that this woman looked somewhat familiar, as if he had seen her somewhere before. "Is she Miss Wu Qingying? Or one of the Emei Pai female disciples?"

Several 'li's later, Shaolin Temple was already in sight. The

woman turned toward the side of the hill, approaching the Temple from the side. Suddenly she slowed down her steps and moved surreptitiously among the trees and the mountain rocks. It was obvious that she was afraid someone might see her.

Suddenly he heard clear ringing noise coming from the main hall of the Shaolin Temple, followed by the sound of chanting of several hundred Buddhist monks. Zhang Wuji was greatly puzzled, "Shaolin monks are still chanting sutra deep into the night, and there are hundreds of them. Is there an important ceremony going on?" he mused.

The woman in front of him proceeded even more stealthily. Several dozens 'zhang's more, she would have reached the side of the main hall. Suddenly there were light footsteps. The woman quickly ducked among the thick patch of grass. Four Shaolin monks with sabers and Buddhist staffs were patrolling around the Temple. The woman waited for the four monks to pass before standing up, and leaped toward the shutter by the main hall. Her leap was as light as flying cotton wool; her 'qing gong' was truly top-notch among the Wulin characters. Zhang Wuji noticed that she did not carry any weapon, plus she was alone; hence he believed it was unlikely that she came to Shaolin Temple to create trouble. He wanted to know who the woman was, whether she was a friend or a foe; therefore, crouching behind her, he crept toward the northwest corner of the main hall.

He realized that he was in a very awkward situation. Someone of his position snooping around the Temple in the middle of the night, if he was detected by a Shaolin monk, although the other party might feign ignorance, he will not be able to avoid losing a great deal of face. And thus he was twice more careful; each step he took and each movement was as nimble as a cat stalking a mouse.

By this time, the chanting inside the hall was getting louder. Peeking from a crack on the window, he saw hundreds of monks arranged in neat rows, all sitting on round meditation mats, all wearing yellow Buddhist robes, draped in scarlet and gold kasayas. Some of them were holding ceremonial articles in their hands; the rest of them clasped their palms together with heads hung low, loudly chanting the sutras. It sounded like they were offering prayers to send departing souls crossing into the netherworld. Zhang Wuji understood immediately. "In the Great Hero Assembly this time, there were not a few people lost their lives. During the Yuan army attack up the mountain, even more people from both sides perished. Therefore, the Temple monks are holding this ceremony tonight so that the dead will be reborn happily."

He saw that Reverend Kong Wen was standing in front of the sacrificial table. There was a young woman standing on his right. As soon as Zhang Wuji saw her, he was slightly stunned, since that young woman was none other than Zhou Zhiruo. Although he could only see her from the side, he could tell that her expression definitely showed grieve and distress; her pretty eyebrows were deeply wrinkled, as if she was harboring a deep sorrow.

"That must be it," Zhang Wuji thought, "The reason Zhiruo kneeled down in front of Kong Wen Dashi this afternoon must be to ask him to hold this Buddhist ceremony. I suppose she is repenting from her conduct and deeds. The innocents who lose their lives under her claw and her sword are simply too many."

Focusing his eyes, he tried to read the memorial tablets arranged on the sacrificial table. To his great surprise, one of the tablets read 'nu xia Yin Li zhi ling wei', seven characters [the memorial tablet of Heroine Yin Li]. Zhang Wuji felt a stab

of pain in his heart, remembering how during her short and miserable life his cousin had always passionately devoted to him; he could not help from shedding some tears.

Amidst the ringing of chime stones and the tapping of wooden fish, Zhou Zhiruo gracefully knelt down and bowed to the ground, while her lips were moving in quiet prayer. Zhang Wuji raised up his 'shen gong' [divine strength] trying to listen to what she said. This was what he heard, "Miss Yin ... your spirit in Heaven ... rest in peace ... do not come to harass me ..."

Zhang Wuji tightened his grip on the wall while disquieting thoughts filled his mind. "Biaomei lost her life under her sword, no doubt it was a cruel fate; but the torment inside Zhiruo's heart, the pain she is suffering, might not necessarily be lighter than Biaomei's. Suddenly from the ocean of thoughts in his mind a song surged up, the song he heard on the Brightness Peak, sung by the Ming Cult people, "What joy is in life, what pain in death? I pity the mankind, with their many sufferings! I pity the mankind, with their many sufferings!"

Zhou Zhiruo stood up slowly with her body slightly facing the east. Suddenly her countenance greatly changed, while she called out, "You ... you ... you have come again!" Her voice was shrill, suppressing all other noises in the main hall.

Zhang Wuji followed the direction of her eyes and saw the paper pasted on the window was somehow torn, and the hole revealed a young woman's face. The face was full of scars. Zhang Wuji was so shocked that he shivered and could not stop from crying out. Although that young woman's face was full of scars and the bumps of the former days were gone, he was very sure the face belonged to his dead cousin, Yin Li!

He wanted to rush forward and call her, but his legs did not obey their master's bidding; it was as if his feet were planted on the ground.

As the face appeared suddenly on the window, there was a loud crash in the main hall as Zhou Zhiruo fainted and fell to the floor. Zhang Wuji no longer cared whatever Shaolin Pai might think of him; he called out loudly, "Zhu'er, Zhu'er! [spider kid] is that you?" But no one answered him.

After calming himself down, he flew to the back of the hall to pursue, but all he saw was the moon hanging low on the horizon, casting its cold shadow on the trees; the young woman in black was nowhere to be seen. Normally he did not believe in deities and demons, but faced with these kinds of images and scenes, he could not restrain cold sweats from wetting his body and hairs from rising on the back of his neck. Bracing himself, he said to himself, "It is she, it is she! No wonder her back looked so familiar, turns out it is Zhu'er. Did her ghost know that the eminent Shaolin monks are offering prayers to help her crossover to the netherworld, so she came here to receive the prayers? Could it be that because she died an unjust death her spirit did not find peace?"

As the Shaolin monks heard some noise, several people came over to investigate. As they saw Zhang Wuji, they could not help but be startled. A senior monk stepped forward, saluted him and said, "We did not know Zhang Jiaozhu came to visit this late at night, otherwise we would have welcomed you properly. Please accept our apology."

"I do not dare," Zhang Wuji replied, cupping his fists to return the propriety. Stepping aside, he entered the main hall.

He saw Zhou Zhiruo's eyes were shut tight; her face was without any sign of blood. Apparently, she had not regained her consciousness. Walking toward her, he put forth his strength to massage her and knead [orig. 'tui na' – a form of Chinese manual therapy] her back for some time. Zhou Zhiruo slowly awakened.

As she saw Zhang Wuji and realized she was in his embrace, Zhou Zhiruo hugged him and called out, "Ghost, there is a ghost!"

Zhang Wuji said, "This is indeed strange, but you don't need to be afraid. There are so many eminent monks in here. I am sure they will be able to solve this mystery."

Zhou Zhiruo had always been a dignified and staid woman. This time she was scared out of her wits, and right now she was embracing him in public; hearing him say these words, her face blushed and she busily pried herself away from him. She stood up, but could not stop herself from shivering. Quickly she grabbed his hand and even if she had to die, she would not dare to let him go.

Zhang Wuji exchanged some propriety with Kong Wen; he mentioned that someone was spying on them outside the window just now. Neither Kong Wen nor any of the monks had seen it, but the fact remained that it was a new torn on the paper, and the hole was still there.

"Wuji Ge ... Zhang Jiaozhu," Zhou Zhiruo said, "That was what I saw earlier." Zhang Wuji nodded.

"You ... you ..." Zhou Zhiruo's voice was trembling, "Who did you say she was?"

"She is Miss Yin, my Biaomei Yin Li," Zhang Wuji replied. Zhou Zhiruo cried out in fear and fainted again.

This time Zhang Wuji pulled her hand that she did not fall to the floor. She was unconscious for a moment but quickly recovered. Zhang Wuji said, "I did see Biaomei, but ... she is a human, not a ghost!"

"She is not a ghost?" Zhou Zhiruo was still trembling.

Zhang Wuji said, "I followed her all the way to Shaolin Temple. She walked like a human, not like a ghost." He had said that to comfort Zhou Zhiruo, but deep in his heart, he was unsure.

"So you saw her walking like a human and not like a ghost?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

Zhang Wuji then recounted how he saw that black-dressed young woman and followed her all the way to Shaolin Temple; also how he saw her hiding outside the long window and spying inside the main hall. Every action and every movement was of a young woman who was adept in martial arts, not at all peculiar in any way.

"Fangzhang," he asked Kong Wen, "I [orig. 'zaixia' - the humble one] have one thing I am not sure I understand, I beg Fangzhang's advice. When someone dies, will he really become a ghost?"

Kong Wen pondered about it deeply for half a day before answering, "The matter of the netherworld is difficult to assert."

Zhang Wuji said, "That being the case, why did Fangzhang hold a ceremony to cross the departing soul to the netherworld?"

“Shanzai, zhanzai!” Kong Wen said, “The departing soul need not be helped to cross over. In the matter of live and death, virtue has its reward, evil has its retribution. The way of Buddha seeks to help living people achieving peace; the ones need help to cross over are the living ones.”

Zhang Wuji understood immediately. Cupping his fists he said, “Many thanks for the direction. I have stirred up trouble and caused disturbance this late at night. I only wish for Fangzhang’s forgiveness.”

Kong Wen smiled and said, “Jiaozhu is our humble Sect’s great benefactor. You have saved us several times, enabling Shaolin Pai to avoid disaster; why be overly courteous?”

Immediately Zhang Wuji took his leave from the crowd of monks. To Zhou Zhiruo he said, “Let us leave!”

Zhou Zhiruo seemed reluctant, she was afraid to leave the security of the Buddhist hall. Zhang Wuji did not feel comfortable to urge her strongly; he simply cupped his fists again and said, “In that case, we will say goodbye here.” Finished speaking, he turned around toward the hall gate.

Watching his back, suddenly Zhou Zhiruo called out, “Wuji Gege, will you see me again? I ... let me go with you.” She jumped to catch up with him, and then side-by-side they walked out the Temple gate.

After they were far away from the Shaolin Temple, Zhou Zhiruo leaned on Zhang Wuji’s side and held on to his hand. Zhang Wuji knew she was still afraid. With her soft and smooth palm in his hand, and catching a whiff of fragrance coming from her body, it was not possible for his heart to remain unmoved.

The two of them walked silently for quite some time. Zhou Zhiruo slowly heaved a deep sigh and said, "Wuji Gege, when you and I met for the first time at Hanshui River that day, I was saved by Zhang Zhenren. If only I knew that I would suffer so much pain in the later days, my death in Hanshui River that day would be a lot cleaner."

Zhang Wuji did not answer; in his heart he remembered the song the Ming Cult people, and without realizing it, he was humming softly, "What joy is in life, what pain in death? I pity the mankind, with their many sufferings!"

Listening to the lyrics of this song, Zhou Zhiruo's hand, which held his slightly trembled. In a low voice she said, "Zhang Zhenren brought me to Emei Pai. He had my well-being in his mind. But if he, Senior, took me under his wings on the Wudang Mountain, letting me be a disciple of Wudang, everything today would be entirely different. Ay, it is not that En Shi [benevolent master] was not good to me, but ... but she forced me to make that evil oath, wanted me to abhor the Ming Cult, wanted me to hate you and harm you, while in my heart ... in all honesty ..."

Zhang Wuji was rather touched to hear the sincerity in her voice; he understood she indeed have many difficulties, all sorts of vicious matters, mostly because she honored Miejue Shitai's last words. Seeing that she was also very scared, his compassion to her grew one layer deeper.

The night breeze blew gently on the mountain road, transmitting faint fragrance of wild flowers around them. It was early summer, the night was clear. With a beautiful girl pouring out her heart so close to him, Zhang Wuji could not stop his heart from beating faster. Moreover, when he helped her driving out the poison on that little island, they were flesh-and-skin close. She had shown him kindness in the

past, and she was engaged to him once. All of these had made his heart confused and he was at a loss.

“Wuji Gege,” Zhou Zhiruo continued, “In Haozhou that day, when you were just about to get married to me, why did as soon as Miss Zhao bid you, you immediately come with her? Do you really love her with all your heart?”

“I was just about to tell you what happened that day,” Zhang Wuji replied, “Why don’t we stop and sit for a while?” He pointed to a big rock by the side of the road.

“No,” Zhou Zhiruo said, “At this moment, my heart is in turmoil, I won’t be able to listen to you. Let us walk quietly for a moment longer before talking about that.”

Zhang Wuji nodded. He followed her wander around, seemingly aimlessly. Zhou Zhiruo led him through a small path and walked for four, five ‘li’s before she finally said, “All right, you can tell me.” She walked toward a large mountain rock in front of a clump of bushes. The two of them sat side by side.

Thereupon Zhang Wuji told her how Zhao Min had in her hand a bunch of Xie Xun’s golden hair, which leave him no choice but to walk away, and everything else that happened afterwards. Zhou Zhiruo listened from start to finish, and then for half a day she did not say anything.

“Zhiruo, do you blame me?” Zhang Wuji asked.

Choking, Zhou Zhiruo said, “I have done so many wrong things, I can only blame myself, why would I blame you?”

Zhang Wuji gently stroked her shoulder and said in a tender voice, “In this world, mistakes arise out of circumstances.

Things are difficult to anticipate. You must not be excessively heartbroken.”

“Wuji Gege,” Zhou Zhiruo raised her head to look at him, “I have something I want to ask you, I want you to answer me sincerely, you must not have the slightest degree of concealment.”

“All right,” Zhang Wuji said, “I will not conceal anything from you.”

Zhou Zhiruo said, “I know on this world there are four women who love you with all their hearts. One has gone away to Persia, Xiao Zhao. One is Miss Zhao, the other is ... she ...” She was going to say ‘Miss Yin’, but she did not have the courage to utter that name out of her mouth. After pausing for a moment, she continued, “If all four of us all alive and well, and right now we are by your side, which one of us do you really love?”

Zhang Wuji felt a burst of confusion rising in his heart. “This ... mm ... this ...” he stuttered.

Even since that day, when he was on the boat floating aimlessly on the ocean with Zhou Zhiruo, Zhao Min, Yin Li and Xiao Zhao, certainly more than once he had thought about this matter. “Each of these four women loves me very much, what should I do? No matter which one I marry, I will deeply hurt the other three’s hearts. But in the end, in the deepest part of my heart, which one do I really love?”

Since it had always been difficult for him to decide, he told himself to just evade the question altogether. Sometimes he thought, “The Tatars are not driven out yet, our country [orig. ‘he shan’ – river and mountain] is not being recovered yet, the barbarians [orig. ‘xiong nu’ – a general term for nomadic

people] are not destroyed yet; how can I build a family? In the end, what reason do I have for having sons and daughters?"

Another times he thought, "I am the Jiaozhu of the Ming Cult. Anything I say, goes. I am responsible for the prosperity and decline of not only our Cult, but the Wulin world as well. I am confident that in all my life, I had done nothing to be ashamed of. Yet, if I let myself indulge in female charms, not only I will invite the ridicule of the heroes of the world, I will also spoil our Cult's reputation."

Yet another time he thought, "Just before she died, my Mama earnestly exhorted me that beautiful women are most capable of deceiving people, warned me to be extremely careful all of my life. How can I not heed Mama's last words to me?"

Actually, arguing every way he liked, in the end he was no more than deceiving himself. Deciding which young woman he loved most would not necessarily hinder the great undertaking of recovering his country. It would not in any way affect Ming Cult's reputation. He only thought that this one was very nice, that one was also good, and thus he did not dare to think about them too much. His martial art skill might be strong, but his natural disposition was actually indecisive; all things considered, he preferred to let nature take its own course. When forced to make decision, he would rather sacrifice his own desire than disagree with other people's wishes. Take the Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi, for example. He trained it because of Xiao Zhao's encouragement. By right, he had held the authority to become the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult; yet he needed Yin Tianzheng, Yin Yewang and the others to push him before he agreed to them. His engagement with Zhou Zhiruo was because he was honoring Xie Xun's request. He did not bow to the Heaven and the

Earth with Zhou Zhiruo because Zhao Min compelled him. That day, if Jin Hua Popo and Yin Li did not use force, but persuaded him nicely to come with them to the Lingshe Island, he would most likely go with them.

Every once in a while, though, he could not help but think, "If I can spend the rest of my life with these four women, living together harmoniously, won't I have a happy and carefree life?" After all, it was the end of the Yuan Dynasty; whether it was a scholar, a merchant, a Jianghu warrior or an outlaw, it was not uncommon for a man to have three wives and four concubines. On the contrary it was extremely rare for a man to have only one wife. It was just that the Ming Cult originated from Persia, where the followers were encouraged to live a frugal and hard-working life, so that taking a concubine in addition to a single wife was unusual.

Zhang Wuji was a mild-natured man. He had this idea that no matter which girl he married, it was to his greatest good fortune. Supposing he took more than one wife, he felt he would be unfair to the other. Consequently, as this thought keep flashing in and out of his head, he always tried to suppress it. Whenever he remembered it, he would immediately rebuke himself, "One must always be content with whatever one has; yet I always indulge in this kind of thought. Won't that mean I am a despicable man? Shame on me!"

Later on, Xiao Zhao went to Persia, Yin Li died, and supposedly, Zhao Min was the one who murdered her. Logically speaking, the only option left for him was to marry Zhou Zhiruo. However, through some unexpected mishaps, some bizarre twists and turns, the truth was gradually being revealed. Zhou Zhiruo and Zhao Min switched places as the good and the evil. He felt so fortunate for not marrying Zhou Zhiruo and thus cast his blunder in stone. In addition, the

fact that Zhao Min broke her relationship with her father and brother was publicly known; therefore, he should not have any difficulty in making up his mind, should he? Against all his thoughts and expectations, Zhao Min suddenly disappeared without telling him anything; and right now Zhou Zhiruo was forcing him into a corner with her question.

Seeing him hesitate without answering, Zhou Zhiruo said, "My question is hypothetical, of course. Xiao Zhao has become the Persian Ming Cult's virgin Cult Leader, I have ... have killed Miss Yin. Out of these four women, Miss Zhao is your only choice. I just want to know, supposing that all four of us are alive and well, we are all by your side, then what would you do?"

"Zhiruo," Zhang Wuji finally said, "This matter has been burdening my heart for too long. Obviously, it was very difficult for me to make up my mind, until today ... I know now who my true love is."

"Who is it?" Zhou Zhiruo asked, "Is it ... is it Miss Zhao?"

"That's right," Zhang Wuji replied, "Today, when I looked for her and could not find her, I wish I was dead. If I henceforth cannot see her again, I do not wish to live longer. When Xiao Zhao left me, I was extremely heart-broken. When my Biaomei died, I was even more grieved. You ... you came back like this, I was not only pained, but feeling deep regret as well. But, Zhiruo, I won't lie to you, if for the rest of my life I cannot see Miss Zhao anymore, I'd rather die. This is my deepest feeling, which I have never made known to anybody else." At first, all four women: Yin Li, Zhou Zhiruo, Xiao Zhao and Zhao Min were equal in Zhang Wuji's eyes. But as Zhao Min walked away from him today, he suddenly realized Zhao Min's true place in his heart; she was not on the same position as the other three women.

As Zhou Zhiruo heard him say so, she quietly said, "That day at Dadu, I saw you go to that small wine shop to meet her, I knew exactly where your heart really was. It was just wishful thinking in my heart; if you and I get married perhaps ... perhaps I can pull you back to love me. In all honesty ... really ... I know that is of course impossible."

Zhang Wuji said apologetically, "Zhiruo, toward you, I have always had respect. Toward Yin Jia Biaomei [younger female cousin of Yin family], my heart will always be grateful. Toward Xiao Zhao, I have always had a soft spot in my heart for her. But toward Miss Zhao, actually ... actually I have an engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love."

"Engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love, engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love," Zhou Zhiruo muttered. After pausing a moment, she said in low voice, "Wuji Gege ... my love to you is also engraved-in-my-heart-carved-in-my-bones kind of love. Don't you ... don't you know it?"

Zhang Wuji was extremely touched; grabbing her hand, he said in a tender voice, "Zhiruo, I know. What I do not know is how am I going to repay you for your great love in my lifetime. I ... I really have wronged you."

"You have not wronged me; you have always treated me very well, do you think I do not know it?" Zhou Zhiruo said. "Let me ask you this: Supposing Miss Zhao this time left you and not came back, you would not see her again forever; supposing she was killed by a wicked man, supposing she had a change of heart toward you, then you ... what would you do?"

Zhang Wuji's heart had been grieving for too long. As he

heard her say those words, he could not bear it anymore. His dam broke and with a choking voice he said, "I ... I don't know! Whatever happens; to the heavens above or to the earth below, I must find her."

Zhou Zhiruo sighed and said, "She won't have a change of heart toward you. If you really want to find her; nothing could be easier."

Zhang Wuji was both surprised and delighted. "Where is she?" he stood up and said, "Zhiruo, tell me, quick!"

Zhou Zhiruo's pair of beautiful eyes stared at Zhang Wuji intently; seeing his face was wild with joy, she said softly, "You have never shown this kind of emotion toward me. If you want to find Miss Zhao, you must agree to do something for me. Otherwise, you can forget of finding her, ever."

"What do you want me to do?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"I have not thought about it yet," Zhou Zhiruo said, "Later, when I think of it, I will let you know. I can promise you that this matter will not violate the way of chivalry; it will not hinder the great undertaking of recovering our country, and will not damage your name as well as the Ming Cult's reputation. Only, it won't necessarily be easy to do."

Zhang Wuji's expression went blank. He thought, "Min Mei has also asked me to do three things for her; she has also said that it won't violate the way of chivalry and so on, but so far, I have done only two things for her, and those two things were really not easy to manage. Why does Zhiruo have to copy her?"

"Whether you want to do it or not, it is entirely up to you," Zhou Zhiruo said, "But a real man is as good as his word. If

you agree, you simply cannot shrink back at the last moment.”

Zhang Wuji hesitantly said, “You said that this matter will not violate the way of chivalry; it will not hinder the great undertaking of recovering our country, and will not damage my name as well as the Ming Cult’s reputation?”

“That’s right!” Zhou Zhiruo replied.

“Very well,” Zhang Wuji said, “If it indeed will not violate the way of chivalry and will not damage the great undertaking of recovering our country, then I give you my promise now.”

“Let’s strike our palms to seal the deal,” Zhou Zhiruo said. Extending her arm, she was ready to strike his palm.

Zhang Wuji understood that as soon as he struck her palm, he would place himself under extremely heavy shackles. Outwardly, this Miss Zhou was gentle, soft, and polite; but her mind was shrewd, her actions cruel. She was not the least bit inferior to Zhao Min. Therefore, as he raised his palm, he did not immediately strike her palm.

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, “As soon as you give me your word, I am going to tell you, and you will meet your beloved very soon.”

Zhang Wuji’s chest boiled up. He no longer had any regard for anything else and struck Zhou Zhiruo’s palm three times.

Zhou Zhiruo laughed and said, “Look who’s here.” She reached down to pull and open up the bushes behind her. There it was, behind the clump of leaves sat a young woman whose face appeared smiling yet she was not exactly smiling, and who was she if not Zhao Min?

Surprised and delighted, Zhang Wuji loudly called out, “Min Mei!”

“Ah!” suddenly, from several ‘zhang’s behind him, he heard a female voice exclaimed, as if that woman could not restrain from being shocked when she saw Zhao Min appeared in the flesh. The voice was actually very soft, but Zhang Wuji was able to hear her clearly.

Zhang Wuji was staring blankly for a moment, loss in countless thoughts going through his mind. Slowly he reached out to pull Zhao Min up. When their palms met, he felt Zhao Min’s palm was rather stiff. Immediately he realized that when she left without telling anybody during the day, and then he looked for her everywhere without finding her, she was actually captured by Zhou Zhiruo. Her acupoint was sealed and she was hidden in here. Zhou Zhiruo then intentionally led him and said all those words in this place so that Zhao Min could hear him. If he could not bear to see Zhou Zhiruo sad and spoke thoughtless flattery to her, if his words were full of feeling to her, even acting passionately toward her, then he would fall into her scheme. If that happened, Zhao Min would have left without any question. As he thought about this, he could not help but groan secretly, “Shame on me!” while his back was wet with cold sweats.

Checking Zhao Min’s pulse, he found out that her ‘chi’ and blood were flowing normally, so she did not sustain any injury. Under the moonlight he saw her forehead and the corner of her eyes bore a happy expression; she looked so cute and flirtatious. He believed she heard everything he had just talked with Zhou Zhiruo. Although her body could not move and her mouth could not say anything, her ears could hear very well how he revealed the contents of his heart, that unexpectedly he loved her with engraved-in-his-heart-

carved-in-his-bones kind of love. Zhao Min could hear the earnestness in his voice and she was ecstatic beyond her own control.

Zhou Zhiruo bent her waist and whispered something in Zhang Wuji's ear. Zhang Wuji also replied in low voice. Suddenly Zhou Zhiruo shouted angrily, "Zhang Wuji, you really have no regard of me! Look carefully, after Miss Zhao is poisoned, do you think she can live?"

Zhang Wuji was shocked. "She ... she is poisoned?" he asked, "Did you poison her?" Stooping down to examine Zhao Min, he had just opened Zhao Min's left eye when he felt his back go numb as the acupoint on his back was sealed.

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried out. His body swayed.

Zhou Zhiruo's movements were as swift as the wind. With her delicate fingers full of strength, she quickly sealed five major acupoints on his left shoulder, the side of his lower back, and the center of his back. Zhang Wuji fell backwards. He saw a dark green flash as Zhou Zhiruo drew out her sword and pointed it toward his chest.

"You cannot run, you cannot hide," she shouted sternly, "I am going to take your life today. Yin Li's ghost is entangling me anyway. I will eventually get killed. I'd rather die together with you." While saying that, she raised her sword high, ready to stab it down into Zhang Wuji's chest.

Suddenly a female voice shouted from behind her, "Hold on! Zhou Zhiruo, Yin Li has not died yet!"

Turning her head around, Zhou Zhiruo saw a woman dressed in black dash from among the thick underbrush, with fingers extended to pierce her. Zhou Zhiruo leaned sideways to

evade. The woman turned around. The moon shone its light on the side of her pretty face, albeit full of faint scars.

Zhang Wuji saw her clearly; she was none other than his cousin Yin Li, only the bumps on her face had faded. Although her face was crisscrossed with scars, the scars could not cover her beauty. She vaguely looked like the delicate and pretty young girl standing by Jin Hua Popo he met in the Butterfly Valley many years ago.

Zhou Zhiruo withdrew two steps backward, her left palm in front of her chest, the sword in her right hand was still pointing toward Zhang Wuji's chest. "You move one step forward, my sword will kill him first," she barked.

Yin Li did not dare to move, she anxiously said, "You ... have you not done enough wickedness already?"

"Are you a ghost or a human?" Zhou Zhiruo asked.

"Naturally I am a human," Yin Li replied.

"Zhu'er!" suddenly Zhang Wuji cried out, sprang up and embraced Yin Li. "Zhu'er ..." he called out again, "You ... I miss you so much that it hurts!"

Yin Li shrieked as she was taken by surprise; she was unable to move because Zhang Wuji's arms were wound around her.

Zhou Zhiruo giggled and said, "If we did not do this, you won't want to come out." Turning around, she unsealed Zhao Min's acupoints and massaged her veins and muscles.

Zhao Min had been under Zhou Zhiruo's control for most of the day and was left alone after being thrown in here; she was seething with anger. Luckily, afterward she heard Zhang

Wuji pouring out his heart, which turned her anger into joy. However, Yin Li's sudden appearance had increased the countless loads she already bore in her mind. The old hatred had just gone away, new anxiety arose.

Yin Li angrily said, "What are you flattering and sweet talking to me for? Both Miss Zhao and Miss Zhou are here, watch your manners."

"Humph," Zhao Min sneered, "So he only needs to watch his manners when Miss Zhou and I are here?"

Zhang Wuji said, "I was overjoyed beyond words when I saw you arise from the dead. Biaomei, you ... how are you?"

Yin Li pulled his hand and held his face toward the moon. After staring at him for half a day, suddenly she reached out to grab his left ear and twisted it forcefully.

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried out in pain, "Why did you do that?"

"You are one ugly freak deserving to be cut in thousand pieces!" Yin Li said, "You ... you buried me alive under the ground, you made me suffer countless pain." While saying that, she punched his chest three times, 'Bang! Bang! Bang!'

Zhang Wuji did not dare to protect himself with the Jiu Yang Shen Gong. He endured her three punches with a smile, saying, "Zhu'er, I really thought you were ... you were dead. I cried myself to exhaustion several times. You are not dead. That is wonderful. Laotianye [lit. 'old master of the sky' - Heaven, God] truly has eyes."

"Laotianye has eyes alright, but you, this ugly freak, do not have eyes," Yin Li angrily retorted, "You did not even know whether someone died or was still alive. I just can't believe it.

You hated my swollen ugly face; you simply buried me without waiting for my breathing to stop. You don't have any conscience. You are a heartless and short-lived little rascal!"

As she constantly spitting up curses, her expression, voice and attitude were just like the Yin Li he knew. Zhang Wuji chuckled. Scratching his head, he said, "Your scolding is right on target. You are totally right. I was such a muddle-head; I saw your face was full of blood and you were not breathing, your heart was not beating. I thought you were beyond help ..."

Yin Li leaped forward to twist his right ear. Zhang Wuji chuckled and moved aside to evade. He bowed and cupped his fists. "Good Zhu'er, please forgive me!"

"I won't forgive you!" Yin Li said, "That day I woke up somehow, and felt cold all around me. Turned out I was surrounded by stones. If you wanted to bury me alive, why did you put twigs and stones on me? Why didn't you pile up dirt on me so that I could not breathe and died for real?"

"Thank the Heaven and thank the Earth that I only piled up twigs and stones on your body," Zhang Wuji said. He could not restrain from casting a sidelong glance toward Zhou Zhiruo.

Yin Li was angry. "This woman is completely wicked; I forbid you to look at her," she said.

"Why?" Zhang Wuji asked.

"She is the murderer who killed me," Yin Li replied, "Why do you still care about her?"

"But you are not dead," Zhao Min interrupted, "How can she

be your murderer?"

"I have died once," Yin Li said, "That makes her the murderer!"

"Good Zhu'er," Zhang Wuji tried to persuade her, "You have escaped danger and returned to live. We are all very happy. Why don't you sit nicely over here and tell us how did you cheat death and escaped alive?"

Yin Li said, "What do you mean 'we'? Let me ask you this: when you said 'we', who is 'we'?"

Zhang Wuji said with a laugh, "There are only four people in here. Naturally 'we' refers to Miss Zhou, Miss Zhao and me."

"Humph!" with a cold laugh Yin Li said, "I am not dead. Granted that you might be somewhat happy, but what about Miss Zhou and Miss Zhao? Are they also happy?"

"Miss Yin," Zhou Zhiruo said, "I was so evil in those days; I have harmed you. But later, not only I deeply regretted my actions but also I have never had peace in my sleep. Otherwise, when I suddenly saw you in the woods, I would not be frightened like this. Now that I see you alive and well, my burden has been lifted off. The Heaven above is my witness that my joy is unbounded."

Yin Li leaned her head sideways and thought for a moment. She nodded and said, "That makes sense. Actually, I was going to settle the score with you, but since you have apologized, I'll let it go."

Zhou Zhiruo kneeled down and sobbed, "I ... I truly have committed the gravest offense toward you."

Yin Li had always been hot-tempered; but seeing Zhou Zhiruo sincerely admit her guilt, her heart melted. She quickly helped her up and said, "Zhou Jiejie, let bygone be bygone, let us forget it. After all, I am not dead." Holding Zhou Zhiruo's hand, she took her to sit on her side.

Brushing her stray hair aside, Yin Li said, "You crisscrossed my face with the swords, it was also not entirely without any benefit. My face was originally bumpy, after the sword cut, the poisonous blood was drained away, the bumps slowly subsided."

Zhou Zhiruo was overwhelmed with regret; she did not know what to say.

Zhang Wuji said, "Afterwards, Yifu, Zhiruo and I lived on that island for a long time. Zhu'er, after you came out of the grave, why didn't you see us?"

"I was not willing to see you," Yin Li angrily said, "You and Miss Zhou kept whispering sweet nothings to one another; how can I not be angry listening to those crap? Humph! 'Hereafter my love to you will be doubled or tripled! We are husband and wife, two people one body; how can I mistreat you?'" In the last several sentences, she was mimicking Zhang Wuji's manner of speech. And then, she continued with Zhou Zhiruo's voice, "'What if I wrong you or offend you, will you hit me, scold me, kill me? Since I was little, I had never had a father and a mother to instruct me. It would be difficult not to mess up sometimes'." She coughed once and changed her voice to a throaty male voice, "'Zhiruo, you are my beloved wife. Even if you make any mistake, I won't blame you or scold you.'" Pointing her finger toward the moon on the western horizon, she said, "'The moon in the sky is our witness.'"

Turned out when Zhang Wuji and Zhou Zhiruo were pouring their hearts to each other that night, Yin Li had heard everything. As she now repeated their words one by one, Zhou Zhiruo's entire face reddened, while Zhang Wuji looked bashful and restless. He stole a glance toward Zhao Min and saw that her face was deathly pale; thus he reached out to hold her hand. To his surprise, Zhao Min turned her palm around and pricked his arm with her two long fingernails. Zhang Wuji winced from the pain, but did not dare to make any noise; he did not even dare to move.

Yin Li reached into her bosom and took out a wooden strip. She shoved it in front of Zhang Wuji's face. "Look clearly. What is this?" she asked.

Zhang Wuji looked closer and saw a line of characters engraved on the wooden strip; it read 'The Tomb of my Beloved Wife, Zhu'Er Yin Li. Zhang Wuji Sincerely Stated'. It was exactly the grave marker he erected in front of Yin Li's grave.

Yin Li bitterly said, "As I crawled out of the grave, I saw this wooden strip, and I was confused. What is this? Where is that heartless and short-lived little rascal Zhang Wuji? I thought about it a hundred times without figuring out what happened, until later on I eavesdropped the two of you calling 'Wuji Gege this' and 'Wuji Gege' that. It suddenly dawned on me that Zhang Wuji is Zeng Aniu, and Zheng Aniu is Zhang Wuji. You, the heartless scoundrel, you have deceived me really bad!" She raised the wooden strip and smashed it with all her might onto Zhang Wuji's head. 'Bang!' the wooden strip broke, wooden shards flew out in all directions.

Zhao Min was angry. "Why do you keep hitting people?" she said.

Yin Li laughed aloud and said, "I love to hit him, what does it have to do with you? Your heart hurts, doesn't it?"

Zhao Min blushed and said, "He is yielding to you. You do not know good from bad."

Yin Li laughed. "Why did you say I do not know good from bad?" she asked, "Don't you worry, I will not fight with you over this freak. I have given my heart to only one person, one who bit the back of my hand in the Butterfly Valley, Zhang Wuji. About this freak, I don't care if he is called Zeng Aniu or Zhang Wuji, I don't like him the least bit."

Turning toward Zhang Wuji, she said in a gentle voice, "Aniu Gege, you have always treated me very well, I am very grateful to you. But since a long time ago, I have given my heart to that heartless, ferocious little Zhang Wuji. You are not him, no, you are not him ..."

Zhang Wuji was confounded. "I am definitely Zhang Wuji," he said, "Why ... what ..."

Yin Li looked at him with a tender expression for a long, long time. Her eyes changed irregularly. Finally, she shook her head and said, "Aniu Gege, you don't understand. In the western region desert, you and I have gone through live and death situation together. On that small island, you were extremely good to me. You are a good man. But I have already told you, I have given my heart to that Zhang Wuji for a long time. I am going to find him. Tell me, do you think if I find him, he would still beat me, scold me or bite me?"

Without waiting for Zhang Wuji to answer, she turned around and slowly walked away.

Suddenly Zhang Wuji understood. Turned out the one she truly loved was the Zhang Wuji who lived in her memory, the Zhang Wuji she met in the Butterfly Valley, the one who beat her and bite her, the obstinate Zhang Wuji who refused to follow her; not the real Zhang Wuji, the grown up Zhang Wuji who was extremely tolerant and always treated people with kindness. One third part of his heart was wounded, one third of it was reluctant to let her go, yet the other third part was relieved. He followed her with his gaze until her shadow disappeared into the darkness. He knew that for the rest of her life, Yin Li would always remember the very strong teenage boy of the Butterfly Valley, and that she would always want to find him. He realized that she would never find the one she was looking for, but then again, he could say that she had already found him, because that boy had always lived in her heart. Isn't it true that oftentimes, the real person, the actual matter, is not as good as the one inside one's memory?

Zhou Zhiruo sighed and said, "It's all my fault. I harmed her so bad that she turns crazy."

Yet Zhang Wuji thought, "She might be a little confused, and that was because of me. But compared to a clear-minded person, she is not necessarily less happy."

Zhao Min, however, had another matter in her mind. Yin Li had gone, but what about Zhou Zhiruo? Yin Li had not died, Xie Xun had been found, safe and well, the martial art manual concealed inside the Yitian Sword, as well as the military strategy manual inside the Tulong Saber, along with the Saber itself, had been recovered and returned to Zhang Wuji. In short, it appeared that Zhou Zhiruo's offenses and mistakes had not turned to the worst. While it was true that Song Qingshu had killed Mo Shenggu because of her, but it was Song Qingshu's own crime; Zhou Zhiruo actually did not

have any foreknowledge of the matter, also, she certainly did not instigate the incident. Zhang Wuji had had an engagement with her before, and he was not the kind of man who would abandon trust and uprightness.

Zhou Zhiruo stood up. "Let's go!" she said.

"Where?" Zhao Min asked.

Zhou Zhiruo replied, "When I was at the Shaolin Temple just now, I saw monk Peng Yingyu came in a hurry to look for him," she gestured toward Zhang Wuji. "Apparently, there is some important matter within the Ming Cult."

Zhang Wuji's heart turned cold. "I must not neglect important Cult business for the sake of my feelings toward women," he mused, and then hastily said, "Let us quickly find out what happened."

They set off at once, and after walking quickly for a short while, they arrived at the Ming Cult's encampments. Yang Xiao, Fan Yao, Peng Yingyu, and the others were just about to dispatch their subordinates to look for their Cult Leader. Everybody expressed their delight and relief to see him come back, but when they saw Zhou and Zhao, two women returning with him, their faces all showed surprised looks.

Zhang Wuji noticed that everybody looked dejected, immediately he knew something was amiss. "Peng Dashi," he asked, "Were you looking for me?"

Before Peng Yingyu even answered, Zhou Zhiruo dragged Zhao Min away by the hand while saying, "Let us go and sit over there."

Zhao Min understood Zhou Zhiruo was trying to avoid any

suspicion; she was not willing to listen to the Ming Cult discussing their internal affairs. Thereupon Zhao Min accompanied her going out the room. Yang Xiao, Fan Yao and the others were even more amazed. They all thought, "In Jiaozhu's wedding day in Haozhou that day, these two young ladies fought ferociously one against the other; but now they look as close as sisters. I wonder how Jiaozhu reconciled them. He is indeed able to achieve the impossible. The 'Qian Kun Da Nuo Yi' skill truly deserves other people's admiration."

Peng Yingyu waited until Zhou and Zhao, two women left before saying, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: We suffered a major defeat in Haozhou; Han Shantong, Han Xiong has fallen."

"Aiyo!" Zhang Wuji cried. He was deeply grieved.

Peng Yingyu continued, "Presently, the military affair around the Huai Si River is under Zhu Yuanzhang Xiongdi's control. As soon as Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, two brothers learned about the news, they deployed their troops to render their assistance. Han Lin'er Xiongdi is also coming with them. The situation is urgent; we did not wait for Jiaozhu's order."

"That's how it should be done," Zhang Wuji replied. While they were in the middle of discussing military situation, Yin Yewang rushed in and said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: The Beggar Clan is sending their people to inform us that Chen Youliang, that traitor's whereabouts has been discovered."

"Where is he?" Zhang Wuji asked.

Yin Yewang said, "Unexpectedly, that traitor mingles in the midst of our Cult as a subordinate of Xu Shouhui Xiongdi. I heard he has won Xu Shouhui Xiongdi's favor and trust."

Zhang Wuji pondered for a moment and said, "If that's the case, it is inappropriate for us to act rashly. Jiujiu [maternal uncle], I must bother you to send someone to warn Xu Xiong: this traitor Chen Youliang is extremely treacherous and crafty. By letting him staying by his side, Xu Xiong is just waiting for a great disaster to happen; he must by all means not let Chen Youliang stay close to him."

Yin Yewang complied, but then he continued, "It would be better to eliminate him completely with a blade. Please assign me to handle him!"

Zhang Wuji was still contemplating the proposal when a Ming Cult disciple came in to deliver an urgent letter from Xu Shouhui.

Yang Xiao knitted his brows and exclaimed, "Terrible! It's terrible! He has beaten us by taking the initiative."

Zhang Wuji unsealed the letter and read. Turned out it was a long report Xu Shouhui submitted to his superior. In it he explained how Chen Youliang admitted his offense to the Cult Leader, how he understood that he had committed a serious crime, how he deeply regretted his sins and wanted to repent. Right now he sincerely wanted to join the Ming Cult and was determined to completely turn from his wicked ways. He was asking the Cult Leader to give him an opportunity to tread the new way.

Zhang Wuji handed the letter over to Yang Xiao, Yin Yewang and the others so that they could read it themselves. Yin Yewang said, "Xu Xiongdi has fallen under this man's spell; he will certainly suffer misfortune in the future."

Yang Xiao sighed and said, "This traitor Chen Youliang is

extremely wicked, but if we kill him at this moment, the public is bound to find out. It would appear that we are only settling a long-standing grudge without giving any consideration to other people's qualities. We will inevitably turn the hearts of the world's heroes cold."

"What Yang Zuo Shi said is correct," Zhang Wuji said, "Peng Dashi, you are a good friend of Xu Xiong. Why don't you advise him to be careful and rise up his guard against Chen Youliang? He must not let the authority over the troops to fall into his hand." Peng Yingyu gave him his consent.

Unfortunately, Xu Shouhui dismissed Peng Yingyu's advice. Chen Youliang had won his full confidence and in the end he lost his life under Chen Youliang's hands. Afterwards, Chen Youliang seized control of Ming Cult's western rebel army. He declared himself 'Han Wang' [King of Han], and fought for control over the land under the heavens [i.e. China] against the eastern Ming Cult rebel army. They fought great battles as far as Lake Poyang, until finally his troops were defeated and he lost his life in battle. During the dozens of year's fierce civil war, the heroes and warriors of the Ming Cult suffered very heavy casualties.

That very evening, Zhang Wuji had a discussion with Yang Xiao, Peng Yingyu and the others. They agreed to dispatch Ming Cult disciples to various army units to coordinate their movements. By the time they finished their meeting, it was already very late at night.

Early next morning, Zhao Min said, "Zhou Jiejie left last night. She said she did not wait to take her leave from you."

Zhang Wuji was depressed for half a day. Then he remembered that the number of days he had been separated from Zhang Sanfeng was simply too great and he missed

him. Therefore, taking Zhao Min and Song Qingshu along, he decided to come to Mount Wudang with Yu Lianzhou and the others.

The distance between Shaoshi Peak and Mount Wudang was not too far; in just a few days they have reached the mountain. Zhang Wuji accompanied Yu Lianzhou, Zhang Songxi and Yin Liting as they entered the inside hall to pay their respects to Zhang Sanfeng, also to see Song Yuanqiao and Yu Daiyan.

When Song Yuanqiao learned that his son was outside, his face paled; with a sword in his hand, he stormed outside. Zhang Wuji and the others were in quandary; they felt they must persuade him, yet they realized it was not their place to interfere. Left with no other choice, they went to the main hall in his wake. Zhang Sanfeng also followed them out.

“Where is that disobedient, rebelling animal?” Song Yuanqiao roared. His glance caught Song Qingshu, who was still lying down on the stretcher. Song Qingshu’s head was covered in plain wrap cloth, even his eyes were covered. The sword in Song Yuanqiao’s hand was aimed straight at Song Qingshu’s body, but Song Yuanqiao’s hand went weak and the sword did not continue piercing down. In that instant, he remembered the love between a father and his son, the loyalty among disciples of the same school; all sorts of feeling welled up in his heart. Turning the sword around, he stabbed it into his own lower abdomen.

Zhang Wuji hastily reached out to snatch the sword away, while urging, “Da Shibo [first martial (older) uncle], you must not do this. Let us leave it to Tai Shifu [grandmaster] to handle this matter properly.”

Zhang Sanfeng sighed and said, “That our Wudang School

has produced this kind of unfilial disciple, Yuanqiao, it is not the misfortune of you, one man, alone. It is better for us all not to have this kind of unfilial son!" His right hand waved and 'Bang!' it landed on Song Qingshu's chest. Song Qingshu's internal organs shattered and he stopped breathing instantly.

Song Yuanqiao knelt down and sobbed, "Shifu, disciple was negligent in teaching disciple, resulting in Qi Di's [seventh (younger) brother] life lost in that animal's hands. How can disciple be worthy of you, Senior, and Qi Di?"

Zhang Sanfeng reached down to help him up, saying, "You do have some part in this transgression. Lianzhou will take over the Zhang Men disciple position from you starting today. You may devote your attention to study and refine the Taiji Fist technique. The day-to-day affair of Zhang Men, you do not need to manage anymore."

Song Yuanqiao bowed to thank him and receive the order. Yu Lianzhou tried to decline, but Zhang Sanfeng firmly refused to dismiss him, thereupon he had to accept the order.

Witnessing how Zhang Sanfeng executed Song Qingshu, removed Song Yuanqiao from his position, and thus managing his school with a firm hand, there was not anyone present who did not shiver with astonishment.

Zhang Sanfeng asked about the Great Assembly of Heroes and the rebel army's fight against the Yuan, he was very warm toward Zhang Wuji. Zhao Min knelt and kowtowed in front of Zhang Sanfeng, asking forgiveness of her previous rudeness and offenses. Zhang Sanfeng laughed and said that he had never kept it in his heart. While it was true that Yu Daiyan's lifelong disability, Zhang Cuishan's lost of life, were related to her subordinate, Ah Da, Ah Er, and the others, Zhao Min had not even been born yet at that time, so when

all is said and done, he could not put the blame on her.

When Zhang Sanfeng heard that she willingly forsook her father and brother to follow Zhang Wuji, he said, "Very good! Very good! A woman like you is hard to come by!"

After several days of good visit with Zhang Sanfeng and the others at the Wudang Mountain, Zhang Wuji proceeded toward Haozhou accompanied by Zhao Min. Along the way he repeatedly heard reports of their Cult's victories. He also heard that the rebel army had swarmed various places; Zhang Shicheng at Gusu and Fang Guozhen at Taizhou, for instance. Although they were not affiliated with the Ming Cult, they were friendly forces who fought the Yuan together. Zhang Wuji's heart was overjoyed; he continued riding with Zhao Min toward the east, envisioning that the days until country's [orig. 'he shan'] recovery were close. He only hoped that henceforth peace and security would reign over the world, the common people would enjoy a good and prosperous life. If that happened, then the hovering between live and dead, the undergoing of many sufferings in the past several years would not be in vain.

Zhang Wuji was not willing to create too much disturbance, hence, along the way he avoided meeting the Ming Cult rebel army's officers and generals. He simply observed them in secret and was pleased to find the rebel army's troops were following strict discipline; they did not harass the common people and everywhere he heard praises to Marshal Zhu Yuanzhang and Senior General Xu Da.

One day he arrived at the outskirts of Haozhou. Zhu Yuanzhang had heard about his arrival and sent Tang He and Deng Yu, two generals to lead troops waiting to welcome him and take him to the guesthouse. Tang He reported, "Marshal Zhu, along with Senior General Xu Da and General Chang are

in the middle of urgent military intelligence meeting. They cannot contain their delight as they learned about Jiaozhu's arrival; only they are being bound by military affairs and are not able to welcome Jiaozhu personally. For this disrespectful offense, they are asking Jiaozhu's forgiveness."

Zhang Wuji laughed and said, "We are all brothers, why bother with all these empty talks about welcoming and sending off? Military intelligence matter is more important."

That evening, a large banquet was prepared in the guesthouse. Tang He and Deng Yu, two generals acted as hosts. After three rounds of wine, Zhu Yuanzhang, accompanied by his senior generals, hurriedly rushed in and bowed to the ground in front of the banquet table. Zhang Wuji hastily helped him up. Zhu Yuanzhang personally poured some wine and respectfully presented three cups of wine to Zhang Wuji. Zhang Wuji took the cups and dried them up in one gulp. Zhu Yuanzhang also presented some wine to honor Zhao Min, and Zhao Min drank it.

During the banquet, they talked about the military situation in various fronts. When talking about their achievements in besieging towns and seizing territories, Zhu Yuanzhang looked rather proud of himself. Zhang Wuji heaped him with praises.

While they were still taking, suddenly the Senior General Liao Yongzhong entered the reception hall in big strides. After paying his respects to their Cult Leader, he whispered in Zhu Yuanzhang's ear, "He is captured!"
"Very good!" Zhu Yuanzhang replied.

Suddenly, from outside the door someone was shouting loudly, "Injustice! Injustice!"

Zhang Wuji recognized the voice crying 'injustice' was Han Lin'er's. "Is that Han Xiongdi?" he was astonished, "What happened?"

Zhu Yuanzhang said, "Reporting to Jiaozhu: This traitor Han Lin'er is conspiring with the Tatars, he is scheming to topple our Cult by responding from the inside to their attack from outside."

Zhang Wuji was even more shocked, "Han Xiongdi is a very loyal and upright person, how can this happen? Take him in quickly, let me ask him personally ..." His words were not finished when he suddenly felt dizzy; the sky became fuzzy and the earth blackened as he lost consciousness.

When he came around, he felt his limbs were bound with rough and heavy ropes. Looking around him, all he could see was darkness. His shock was not exactly 'mild'. Fortunately, he felt a soft body leaning against his chest. Turned out Zhao Min and he were bound together, only Zhao Min had not regained consciousness yet.

Upon thinking it over, Zhang Wuji realized that Zhu Yuanzhang was behind all this. Most likely he expected the Ming Cult to be successful in the future; then logically and rightfully, Zhang Wuji should become the new emperor. Therefore, he put an extremely strong drug in Zhang Wuji's wine with the intention of killing him secretly later.

Zhang Wuji circulated his 'chi' around once, and did not find anything unusual in his chest and abdomen; his strength was still intact. He sneered inwardly and thought, "So they think they can bind me with this rope? I don't think it's that easy. Right now Min Mei has not awakened yet; there's no hurry in leaving. As soon as it is dawn, I am going to expose his traitorous scheme in front of our Cult's people." Thereupon

he rested quietly to regain his strength.

About two hours later, he suddenly heard some people enter the room next door. As he listened to them talking, he recognized the voices of Zhu Yuanzhang, Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, three people.

He heard that Zhu Yuanzhang was saying, "This man betrays our Cult, surrenders to the Yuan Dynasty. The evidence is conclusive; there is no doubt about it. It pained me just to think about it. Brothers, what do you think we must do?" Without waiting for Xu Da and Chang Yuchun to answer, he continued, "This man's ears and eyes are numerous; he has trusted comrades everywhere in the army. We'd better not to mention his name."

Xu Da was heard replying, "Zhu Dage [big brother Zhu], to succeed in an important matter, we must not concern ourselves with trivial matters; we must cut the grass and pull the roots, do not leave any potential problem in the future."

"But this little thief has always been our superior," Zhu Yuanzhang said, "We must not forget kindness and violate justice. This is our basic principle."

Chang Yuchun said, "If Dage is afraid that by killing him the army would revolt, there is no harm in us making our move quietly, so that Dage's reputation will not be implicated."

Zhu Yuanzhang was quiet for a moment before saying, "Since Xu and Chang, two brothers have already said so, we will deal with him as such, then. Only, this little thief has sown quite some kindness to the people of our Cult, also, two brothers were usually on good terms with him; we must keep this matter from leaking out. Ay, the thought of killing him today is truly unbearable for me."

Xu and Chang both said, "We cannot give friends and personal relations more consideration than the great undertaking of recovering the nation." As the three men finished talking, they went out the room.

Zhang Wuji sucked a mouthful of cold air. Immediately he exerted his 'shen gong' [divine power/strength] to break the rope binding his body. Carrying Zhao Min in his arms, he quietly climbed over the wall and went out.

Leaning against the wall, he could not stop all sorts of feelings from bubbling up in his heart. "That traitor Zhu Yuanzhang forgets kindness and violates justice, I am fine with it. But Xu Dage and Chang Dage have special friendship with me, yet for the sake of riches and honor they are unexpectedly able to betray me. The three of them bear heavy responsibility within the rebel army. If I strike them dead with my palm, I am afraid the army's unity would disintegrate. I, Zhang Wuji, have never coveted name or position. Xu Dage, Chang Dage, you are looking down on me too much." After thinking deeply for half a day, he quietly took Zhao Min to leave the area.

When he was safe outside the city, he wrote a letter, appointing Yang Xiao as the new Cult Leader, but he did not write even a single character about what had happened in Haozhou.

It never occurred to Zhang Wuji that when Xu Da and Chang Yuchun talked about 'the little thief', they were actually referring to Han Lin'er. They did not even know that Zhang Wuji was in Haozhou. Everything was secretly arranged by Zhu Yuanzhang. He wanted to make Zhang Wuji downhearted so that Zhang Wuji would retire voluntarily. First, Zhu Yuanzhang was dreadful of Zhang Wuji's divine

bravery. Second, Zhang Wuji was their Cult's Jiaozhu who was highly esteemed by everybody in their Cult. Let's say he wanted to kill him; not only Zhu Yuanzhang did not have the courage to do so, even if he did succeed in killing him, but if there was the slightest chance of his plot being exposed, the consequences would be too detrimental for him.

Zhu Yuanzhang understood very well that Zhang Wuji placed the important matter of recovering the country above all else, moreover, he loved Xu Da and Chang Yuchun like brothers. As soon as Zhang Wuji heard their discussion, he would quietly go away.

As expected, everything happened according to Zhu Yuanzhang's anticipation. Although Zhang Wuji's martial art skill was unequalled in the present age, in term of scheming and resourcefulness, he was too far below Zhu Yuanzhang. In the end, he had fallen into the treacherous scheme of the most ambitious and ruthless character of their generation.

Although Zhang Wuji had never wanted to be an emperor, he would feel saddened for the rest of his life whenever Xu Da and Chang Yuchun, which he thought were without kindness and loyalty, came into his mind.

As for the accusation that Han Lin'er was colluding with the Tatars and betraying his country, it was actually Zhu Yuanzhang who planted false evidence against him. It was because after Han Shantong's death, the army appointed Han Lin'er as their commander; consequently, Zhu, Xu, Chang, and the other generals became his subordinates.

Zhu Yuanzhang forged a letter from Han Lin'er to the enemy as if it was Han Lin'er's own handwriting; with a large sum of money, he also bribed Han Lin'er's trusted aide to leak the secret to Xu Da and Chang Yuchun. Xu and Chang, two men,

believed without any reservation. As a result, they insisted on Han Lin'er's elimination. Zhu Yuanzhang pretended to uphold righteousness and benevolence by refusing to allow the execution. It was not until Xu Da and Chang Yuchun urged him repeatedly that he reluctantly agreed.

He held Zhang Wuji and Zhao Min in the adjacent room, knowing that with his martial art skill, for Zhang Wuji to break the rope binding his body was as easy as lifting his finger. He was only afraid that as soon as Zhang Wuji was free, he would find him to exact revenge. Therefore, as soon as he finished talking with Xu and Chang, two men, he immediately went into hiding.

Soon after Zhang Wuji left, he ordered Liao Yongzhong to throw Han Lin'er into the river and let him sink into the bottom. This way, he killed two birds with one stone. His plan was truly flawless.

Later, Yang Xiao became the Cult Leader of the Ming Cult; but by this time Zhu Yuanzhang had grown wings, the troops under his command numbered in millions. Yang Xiao was aging and less ambitious than before, he lost any desire to fight over the throne with him.

After Zhu Yuanzhang ascended the throne, he opposed the Ming Cult by issuing an order to strictly prohibit its movement and massacred the brethrens who had once rendered great merit to him. Chang Yuchun died early because of sickness. Xu Da eventually was not able to escape disaster.

When Zhang Wuji finished writing the letter to Yang Xiao, Zhao Min saw he did not immediately put down the writing brush in his hand; he had quite an unhappy expression on his face. Zhao Min interrupted his thoughts by saying, "Wuji Gege, once you agreed to do three things for me. The first

thing was to let me look at the Tulong Saber; the second thing was not to marry Zhou Jiejie back at Haozhou, so the first two matters are already accomplished. I still have the third request to you, you must not fail to keep your own word."

Zhang Wuji was startled. "You ... you ..." he stammered, "What kind of strange demonic witchcraft do you want me to do this time ...?"

Zhao Min smiled sweetly and said, "My eyebrows are too thin. I want you to thicken it with your brush. This matter certainly does not violate the Wulin's way of chivalry, does it?"

Zhang Wuji raised his brush up; he laughed and said, "From now on I am going to draw your eyebrows every day."

Suddenly from outside the window came a soft giggle and someone said, "Wuji Gege, you also promised to do something for me." It was Zhou Zhiruo's voice.

Zhang Wuji was so engrossed in writing the letter that he did not know when she arrived outside the window. The shutters slowly opened and Zhou Zhiruo's beautiful face appeared. Under the candlelight, she looked smiling, yet she was not exactly smiling.

Zhang Wuji was startled again. "You ... what do you want me to do?" he asked.

Zhou Zhiruo smiled and said, "I haven't thought about it now, but when you and Zhao Jia Meizi [little sister of Zhao family] are ready to bow to the Heaven and the Earth to get married, I am sure I will think of something by then."

Zhang Wuji turned to look at Zhao Min, and then he turned

again to look at Zhou Zhiruo. In that instant, a myriad of thoughts raced around in his mind. He was unsure if he should be happy or if he should be worried. His hand trembled and the brush fell on the table ...

THE END